Playing with Fire
by Norsebard

contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

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This story depicts graphic sexual relationships between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

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LucRen and Znarls - Thank you very much for giving me a helping hand :)

As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

Description: Detective Joanna Powell's twelve years on the police force hasn't prepared her for the elegant - yet fiery - Liliana Zinovia, a woman she meets during a homicide investigation. The attraction is undeniable and sparks fly... but Joanna soon learns the hard way that when you're Playing With Fire, someone is bound to get burned.

CHAPTER 1

*Brrrrrrinnennggg*
"Mmmmmmm—oh fer cryin' out loud," Joanna Powell said as she began to dig herself out of her heavy down blanket. Once she had found the corner of the blanket, she cast a bleary-eyed glance at the digital clock on her nightstand - twelve to five a.m. on Tuesday, April 12th.

*Brrrrrrinnngggg*

"Urgggh," she said and reached for the telephone. "Mmmmyeah...?"

'Good morning, Jo, it's Vernon Kransky.'

"Whaddahell you want at this ungodly hour?"

'There's been a homicide, Jo. You're needed.'

'It's ten to five in the morning, Vern!"

'I know.'

"Well, can't the night shift deal with it...?"

'They're already here. It's one of those all-hands-on-deck situations, Jo.'

"Who got bumped off? The Mayor?"

'Not quite. The Lou is adamant that you show up.'

"Don't worry, I'll be there. What, where, who?"

'It's a nasty one. Male vic at the Jeremy Malone Boarding School, fifteen Locklin Park Lane, Granford Heights.'

Joanna's face turned dark and she ran a hand through her mahogany brown hair. "Shit... please tell me it's not a young child...?"

'It's a teenager. Eighteen, I believe.'

"Mmmm. Still not good."

'No.'

"All right, I won't be long. Vern, you better have some coffee ready when I get there."'

'Will do, Jo. See ya.'

"Shortly," Joanna said and put down the receiver. After rubbing her face a couple of times, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and began to scratch her entire body in an attempt at getting rid of the sleepiness.

Almost as an afterthought, she turned around and looked at the female form lying on the other side of the double bed. Betty Johansen, Joanna's partner of three years, was still sleeping soundly, and Joanna knew from experience that it would take a minor explosion to stir Betty from her sleep before she was ready.
Chuckling, Joanna got off the bed and began to get dressed for work - dark shoes, dark slacks and a dark blazer over a tan V-neck blouse.

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After scribbling a brief note and pinning it to the pillow, Joanna sneaked out of the house, locked the front door behind her and began the short walk down the garden path to her unmarked police car, a dark blue Ford Crown Victoria. Even though it was April, and therefore technically spring, a plume of vapor exuded from her mouth with each breath.

Turning on the car's interior lights, she looked at herself in the rear view mirror, quickly establishing that she looked like...

"Shit," Joanna said out loud, trying to get the strands of brown hair she had missed folded back into the ponytail. Her eyes were usually baby blue, but now they were a very unhealthy red, due to the long hours she'd had in the last few weeks, and the lines around them seemed to be even deeper than usual.

"Thirty-nine years old going on eighty. Great. And now I have to get up at five flippin' o'clock in the Goddamned morning," she said out loud as she turned on the engine and backed out of the short driveway.

Holding the Crown Victoria on the brakes, Joanna looked longingly at the dark house, wondering why the hell this investigation couldn't wait until daylight. With a sigh, she shook her head, turned on the flashing red light mounted on the dashboard and drove away.

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The drive to Granford Heights from her house in the suburbs was mercifully free of hassle - the main freeway wasn't yet congested like it would be later on in the morning.

As Joanna turned off the wide Nadine Boulevard and onto Locklin Park Lane, she couldn't help but feel just the teeniest bit annoyed that her plans for the morning had been scuppered. She had spent so little time with Betty lately that she was worried they were drifting apart, and she was too fond of the kind, loving woman to allow that to happen.

The parking lot in front of the boarding school was awash with police vehicles of all shapes and sizes, and Joanna had real trouble finding a place to park so she wouldn't accidentally get in the way of anyone.

Once she got out of the car, a light drizzle assaulted her from above and she flicked up the collar of her overcoat to at least try to stay dry. After placing the small leather-clip with her badge in her top coat pocket, identifying her as Detective Second-Grade Joanna Powell, she ran across the gravelly lot and into the administrative building of the boarding school.

The glass windbreaker opened up into a hall held in white tiles, chrome and glass, and Joanna alternated between being impressed by the decor and scoffing at the ridiculous amount of money it must have cost.

"Vern?" she said at once, flipping down the collar.

"Over here, Jo," Vernon Kransky said, leaning against a wall while writing something down in his notepad.

"Where's my coffee?"
"Right here." Vernon handed Joanna a Styrofoam cup filled to the brim with steaming hot coffee.

At first glance, the two detectives didn't seem to be well matched - Where Vernon was in his late forties, five foot six with an angular face, bushy eyebrows above horn-rimmed reading glasses and a crew cut to hide the first strands of gray, Joanna was six foot even with a soft, friendly face and shoulder-length mahogany brown hair that she had usually tied into a ponytail - but their results spoke for themselves: in the four years they had worked together, they had closed more cases than the rest of their squad combined.

"Black, two sugars?" Joanna said as she took the Styrofoam cup.

"But of course."

"Thanks, Vern... Now... what the hell is going on here? I've never seen so much brass in one place before," Joanna said, looking at the vast number of uniformed police running around - several of them wearing all kinds of fruit salad on their blues.

"The vic used to be the son of a wealthy industrialist... uh, let me see... his name was Mark Gerlach."

Joanna whistled and nodded in an impressed fashion. "Wow, the son of Aaron Gerlach, the steel magnate?"

"Yep. The principal called the police and Gerlach the elder... who called the commish, who called the Chief of D's, who called the Lou who went into a frenzy and sent out a scramble call to all of us. This is top priority, Jo."

"Sounds like it. Well, where's the body?" Joanna said and took a long swig from her coffee.

"Upstairs."

"Then what the hell are we doing down here?"

"Brass wanted to take a look first."

"Figures. Who found the body?"

"The principal, a Miss... I had to write down her name. It took more than a line in my notepad. Oh, yeah, Liliana Elena Anastacia Zinovia. With a Z," Vernon said, moving his reading glasses down to read his notes.

"Come again?"

"You heard me. With a Z."

"That's quite a mouthful. Is she upstairs, too?"

"Naw, just saw her. Where did she go... there, the woman with the ash-blonde hair. See her?" Vern said, pointing at a woman wrapped in a warm blanket that was standing at a hot drink vending machine.

"Yep. I think I'll go talk to her while we wait."

"Good luck. Once she had given me her name, she clammed up," Vern said with a chuckle.
"I'll just use my natural charm," Joanna said and reached into her coat pocket to find her own notepad.

On her way over to the principal, she emptied the cup and threw it into a garbage bin. It was difficult to overlook that the woman with the weird name was extraordinarily pretty. 'Hell, not just pretty, more like drop-dead gorgeous,' Joanna thought to herself.

The other woman wasn't particularly tall, probably five foot five or six, with long, wavy, ash-blonde hair that disappeared down underneath the blanket she had been wrapped in. A pair of titanium-colored wire-rim designer glasses sat astride the bridge of her regal-looking nose, and Joanna thought they complemented the other woman's face so much that they had to have been custom-made for her.

The woman shuddered and pulled the blanket closer. She took a long swig from a cup she was holding and studied everything that was going on in the hall with large, slightly disbelieving eyes.

"Miss Zenobia? I'm detective Joanna Powell," Joanna said, holding out the clip with her badge.

"It's Zinovia, actually," the woman said in a voice that was far richer than her petite frame hinted at. An excited little shiver raced down Joanna's back at the sound of the woman's voice. Up close, she could see that the ash-blonde's eyes were spring green with little flecks of hazel in them.

"Pardon me. I've been told you're the one who found the body?"

"Am I being questioned?"

"Oh, no, this is just a little preliminary thing to get a feel for what's happened here."

"Oh. Well, yes, I found the body."

"Were you able to identify Mr. Gerlach at once?"

"Yes... I had only just spoken to him."

"Really? At what...? A quarter past four in the morning?" Joanna said; her blue eyes gaining a sharper look.

"I know it sounds strange, but yes. Maybe twenty minutes prior to finding him, we had a brief conversation in my office. It was four a.m. I'm usually not up that early, but this was an urgent matter."

"Mmmm, it must've been," Joanna said and made a note in her notepad. "The conversation... what was it about?"

"He'd had a visitor in his room after lights-out. I called him in and he admitted to it."

"Oh. And that's a big no-no?"

The ash-blonde woman turned her face towards Joanna and furrowed her brow. "Well... yes, of course it is. We have rules, and the rules must be adhered to."

The woman spoke with just the faintest hint of a foreign accent, but Joanna couldn't quite place it. It didn't sound Spanish, German, French or Italian or any of the other major accents one would run into in the Great Melting Pot, but the voice had a melodic trill that Joanna thought was quite sexy - especially when combined with the rich timbre.
"Did you sanction him for breaking the rules?" Joanna said, looking into her notepad.

"Yes... Detective, I didn't kill him, if that's what you're getting at."

"No, of course not, Miss Zin..."

"Ahem!" a gruff voice said next to Joanna. The voice belonged to Lieutenant Nicholas Barnes, a hard, strict officer whose face was rarely less than thunderous. "Detective Powell, you and Detective Kransky are needed upstairs," he continued, making sure that Joanna got the message.

"Yes, Lou," Joanna said and waved at Vernon. "Miss Zinovia," Joanna continued, wearing a professional, but courteous smile. The principal offered a faint smile in return that soon faded from her face.

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Joanna and Vernon took the stairs one flight up and turned right, walked through the double doors and entered the hall where the body was located.

The victim was naked and lying on his right side with his arms on the ground in front of him. The body was placed diagonally across the hall with the legs pointing at a door to one of the offices. As Joanna put on a pair of blue latex examination gloves, she noted there wasn't any blood.

Two detectives from the night shift stood above the body, drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups and - judging by their grins - apparently swapping humorous anecdotes.

"Mornin', fellas," Joanna said, nodding at her colleagues.

"Hey, Jo. Vern," Detective Corbin Thomas said. Like so many others in the police force, he was a square-built, beefy man in his late thirties. His regular partner, Detective William 'Bill' Larsen, was of a very similar build, except that he had a few extra pounds of lard around his hips.

Joanna fiddled with the thumb of her left glove that she couldn't get to line up properly. Studying the body on the floor closely, she stored all the information in her brain.

"So... what's going on here?" Joanna said, kneeling down next to the dead body.

"Male vic, as you can see. Mark Gerlach, eighteen. He has a fresh bruise on his solar plexus, ligature burns all around his throat and neck, and petechial hemorrhaging in the eyes, indicating that the cause of death was strangulation," William Larsen said, reading from his notepad.

"Fresh bruise on the solar plexus...?" Joanna said and tried to crane her neck so she could see for herself.

"Our preliminary theory is that the perpetrator must've given the victim a hard blow there to wind or stun him, then wrapped a wire or some such around his neck."

"Sounds about right. Nasty."

"Yep. Most likely indicating a male perp. No further cuts, bruises or abrasions on the body. Naw, scratch that, he has two broken fingernails on his right hand. Doesn't look like there's any tissue under his nails, though, so no DNA."
"Oh yeah, I see it," Joanna said, picking up the victim's right arm.

"There are no scuff marks on the floor and no indications of a fight here, so I think it's a fair bet to say that he was killed elsewhere and then carried here," Corbin Thomas said.

"Where does this door lead to?" Joanna said, pointing at the door behind the victim. The door had '28' written on it in self-adhesive letters.

"That's the office of the principal's secretary."

"Oh, really? Interesting," Joanna said and made a note in her notepad. "And the principal's office is...?"

"Number twenty-seven, the next one up the hall," William Larsen said, pointing his thumb backwards over his shoulder. "Actually, it looks like the two offices are connected on the inside as well."

"Right. That can't be a coincidence."

"No valuable items on the body, but he doesn't have any marks or indents after piercings, jewelry or finger rings either, so I'm guessing he wasn't wearing any," Corbin Thomas said.

"He's circumcised, but that didn't help him either," William Larsen said with a grin.

"He's tall. The perp must've been a big guy," Vernon said, walking behind the victim to get a look at the back.

"Did you find his clothes?" Joanna said, looking at William Larsen.

"No, we haven't, but we haven't been in the vic's dorm yet... it's further down the park. That's a bit of a weird thing, by the way. This is only the administrative wing, and as far as we can tell, he didn't have any business here."

"The principal has just told me that she and the vic had a conversation roughly twenty minutes prior to her finding the body," Joanna said and got back up.

"Oh, really?"

"Did you talk to her when you arrived?"

"No, she was all hysterical when we got here. You know, woman-like," Detective Larsen said and winked in Joanna's direction.

"Cute."

"All right, the conversation gives him a reason to be here, but that doesn't explain why he's naked as a jaybird," Corbin Thomas said, closing his notepad.

"Would it be possible that he and the principal had a little fling? You know, some kind of kinky business where they were playing tag around the admin wing after dark in their birthday suits? I mean, she had plenty of time to get dressed afterwards," William Larsen said, taking a swig from his coffee.

When the three other detectives all stared at him, he shrugged and cleared his throat. "ANYway," he said and looked down into his cup.
"I very much doubt the principal did it, Bill. For starters, she's at least five inches shorter than the vic. She would've needed a footstool to reach his neck," Joanna said, still fiddling with the reluctant thumb of her glove.

"Maybe he was on his knees," William Larsen said with a small grin.

"Fact is that the vic didn't have any business here after the conversation he'd had with the principal... especially not in the buff," Vern said.

"Yeah," Joanna said and started rubbing her chin.

"All right, I think we need to move away from the administrative building. Who wants to search the dorms and who wants to talk to the principal?" Vern said, putting his hands in his coat pockets.

Corbin Thomas and William Larsen looked at each other, performing identical shrugs. "We'll take the dorms," Corbin said after a brief pause.

"Then we'll go back to the principal. Jo, would you mind..."

Vernon was interrupted by a couple of knocks on the double doors behind them. When the detectives turned around and looked, they could see the coroner's team waiting outside, tripping impatiently on the spot to get on with their business.

"Oh great, the ghoul squad is here to tag, bag and stack the poor schmuck," William Larsen said and drained the last drops out of his coffee cup.

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On their way back down the stairs, Joanna took off her latex gloves and put them in her pocket. "Vern, when we speak to the principal, would you mind if I took the lead? We seemed to have a good rapport before."

"You're welcome, Jo. You'll do the talking, I'll do the listening," Vern said with a chuckle.

"All right."

The two detectives walked out of the stairwell and into the hall that was just as crowded with brass as it had been before. The Lieutenant was still talking to the principal, and outside, several television crews had begun to line up their lights and cameras.

When Lieutenant Barnes spotted Joanna and Vern, he waved them over to him and they duly complied.

"Lou?" Joanna said once they were standing next to the uniformed man.

"Detective Powell, once the news teams are ready to go live, I want you to lead the press conference."

"Uhhhh, okay. Shouldn't we follow the chain of command and have one of the first-grade detectives be the spokesperson?" Joanna said, scrunching up her face.
"Perhaps so... but I want you to do it, Detective Powell. Right, I'm needed elsewhere. This nasty business has really stirred up a hornet's nest, so I'll most likely be in meetings all day. Detective Powell, Detective Kransky," Lieutenant Barnes said, nodding at the two detectives.

"Lou," Vernon said, tracking the uniformed officer with his eyes.

"Bah, I know exactly why he wants me to lead the press conference," Joanna said, running a hand through her hair. "It's because he wants to use me as a poster girl for the progressiveness of the police force."

Joanna dug her hands into her coat pockets with a dour expression on her face, already imagining the whispers from some of her colleagues about 'hogging the limelight' - or worse.

"Jo, we'll deal with that later. Right now, I think we should talk to the principal," Vernon said, patting Joanna's shoulder.

"You're right," Joanna said, clearing her throat. "But not out here. Look at her, she's on the brink of breaking down."

Vernon turned his head to look at the principal who was still standing next to the vending machine. She had grown paler since they had spoken to her last, and she looked quite lost in the hectic activity in the main hall. She was just standing there, staring blankly into space and looking very much like she was about to burst into tears.

In two steps, Joanna was at the principal's side, wrapping a comforting arm around the petite woman's shoulders. Initially, the principal appeared to be surprised over the consolatory gesture, but she soon relaxed and leaned into Joanna's touch.

A few tears began to trickle down the principal's cheeks and Joanna knew that they had to get her somewhere private in a hurry before she would lose it completely.

"We have a few questions for you, Miss Zinovia. Is there a conference room or something we could use down here?"

"Y-yes. Th-through the double doors... into the next h-hall," Liliana Zinovia said in a frail voice, sniffing hard to stop the tears.

Joanna looked over her shoulder and into the hall behind them. It was identical to the one upstairs.

"Vern...?" she said, nodding at her partner.

"I'm on it," Vernon said and opened the double doors to let Joanna and the principal through.

The three of them walked slowly down the hall with Liliana Zinovia's entire body leaning against Joanna's.

After walking past three locked doors, they finally found an unlocked one and stepped inside. Vernon hit the light switch, activating several rows of strip lights in the ceiling.

It turned out to be a small conference room with a rectangular table in the center and eight chairs around the edge of the table. Joanna carefully placed the principal on one of them and then dug into her coat pockets to find some paper tissues for the sobbing woman.
Liliana Zinovia took off her glasses and put them on the table. Even in the midst of such a tragic situation, Joanna couldn't help but notice that the principal looked even better without the glasses than she did wearing them.

The principal wiped her spring green eyes and blew her nose hard, and then looked for a garbage bin for the spent tissues. Vernon found one and held it up.

"Thank you," Liliana said in a hoarse voice.

"You're welcome, Miss Zinovia," Vernon said and took off his overcoat.

Joanna did the same and then sat down on a chair facing the principal. Vernon flipped open his notepad and worked his ball point pen so it was ready to write.

"Miss Zinovia... first of all, I know this must be very hard for you, but we need to talk about what happened here tonight. I'm sure you want Mr. Gerlach's killer found."

"Y-yes."

"If you can, please give us a detailed description of the evening and night."

"Well, I... we had lights-out at eleven o'clock as always. At eleven fifteen, the dorm masters and mistresses called in and said that everything was quiet. I was doing some paperwork in my office at the time, you understand," Liliana said, looking at Joanna.

"I do. Please go on."

"I retired to my apartment on the top floor of the admin wing just after midnight."

"Do you always work this late, Miss Zinovia?" Vernon said, looking over the top of his reading glasses.

"Unfortunately, yes. The paperwork is massive, especially here in the Spring. Well, I fell asleep until, oh, quarter to four a.m. where one of the dorm masters called me to say that he had caught an intruder in the Kentucky house."

"In the what?" Joanna said, furrowing her brow.

"Oh, I'm sorry... all of our nine dorms have been named after States. Sorry, Detective, I should have told you that earlier," Liliana said and put on her glasses.

"Don't worry about it. The dorm master called you...?"

"Yes, to say he had found an intruder outside of Mark Gerlach's room. Detective, this isn't unusual. They're teenagers, you know."

"Say no more," Joanna said with a chuckle.

"Quite. Well, the dorm master escorted the intruder, who was a young woman, by the way, out of the dorm and then brought Mark Gerlach over to see me in my office. We talked, I sanctioned him and he left. Then I went back upstairs to my apartment."

"What was the sanction and how did he react to it?"
"Oh, it was just additional kitchen duty. He accepted it without drama. This wasn't the first time he'd been busted."

"Why did you come back down, Miss Zinovia? Did you hear anything?"

"No. The talk had given me a headache so I couldn't fall asleep. Then I discovered I was all out of Aspirin so I put my work clothes back on and went down to get one from the vial I keep in my office. This was just after twenty past four, a.m. I entered the hall, minding my own business when..." Liliana's voice trailed off and she visibly got the shivers.

"All right, let's not go any further tonight. Miss Zinovia, thank you for your time. A female police officer will be assigned to you. She'll spend the rest of the night and all of tomorrow with you in your apartment and at work," Joanna said and got up from the chair.

"Oh, but that's very impractical. It won't be necessary, Detective..."

"Standard procedure, I'm afraid."

"Oh... what about the blanket?" Liliana said and held out the corner of the protective blanket she was wearing.

"Keep it for now. We have a million of those things. Miss Zinovia, we need to talk to the dorm master who called you. May we have his name, please?"

"Charles Buford Smith. He goes by Buford," Liliana said and got up from the chair.

"Buford?"

"Ah, yes. He's an old-fashioned fellow. I'm sure he's still over at the Kentucky House. He doesn't like leaving his post before his shift is over, come hell or high water."

"I see. All right, we'll go talk to him now. Have a calm morning, Miss Zinovia."

Liliana chuckled dryly and ran a trembling hand across her forehead. She let out a sigh and looked Joanna directly in the eye. "Thank you, Detective Powell."

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After Liliana Zinovia had been escorted away by a female officer, Joanna and Vernon got together to compare notes.

"So...?" Joanna said, looking expectantly at her partner.

"Hmmm, it appears they're running a tight ship, but we can't say for sure until we've talked to this Buford fella."

"What I'm wondering is why the body was dumped in front of, or rather, near the principal's office. Makes it seem personal, almost like a crime of passion," Joanna said, tapping her index finger against her lips.

"With these things, it usually is."
"Yeah. I think we can cross the principal off the list of suspects, though. I can't see her strangulating a man six inches taller than her. But then again, her hands were strong, did you notice that?" Joanna said as the two of them left the conference room to go to the Kentucky House.

"I did, yeah. She probably does that... what's it called...? Pellets?"

"Pilates. I wouldn't be surprised if she did, Vern. That or Yoga. All women in our age bracket do. It suspends the pull of gravity... for a little while, at least." Joanna said with a throaty chuckle.

"I wouldn't know, Jo."

The moment Joanna opened the door to the gravelly parking lot, she and Vernon were assaulted by a barrage of flashes from the journalists and the news teams.

"Aw, Jeez!" Joanna croaked, covering her eyes with her hand.

"Detective!" "Detective, over here!" "Can we have a statement, please...?" "Detective! When will the press conference be held?" "We're wasting live time, you know!" all the reporters said over each other.

"Yeah, yeah. I don't know any more than you do. From what I've heard, the press conference will be held later," Joanna said out loud. "Preferably some time next year," she mumbled to herself, making Vernon chuckle.

The rain was still a steady drizzle so the two detectives wrapped their overcoats tightly around themselves and increased their speed to get to the dorm faster. Just as they went past the dorm called Ohio, Corbin Thomas came out of a door and waved at them.

"We better check it out," Joanna said and changed course, quickly followed by a grumbling Vernon.

All the dorms were three-story buildings that had clearly been designed in a classic Americana-style to invoke a sense of nostalgia in the beholder, and all of them were pulled back thirty feet from the main path that went through the campus inside Locklin Park.

The entrance grafted onto the front of the dorm was identical to the one in the admin wing, a pair of glass double-doors. On either side of the doors, small bronze plaques had been bolted onto the red brick wall proudly displaying the names of famous alumni who had once graced the hallowed halls of that particular dorm.

Joanna stopped briefly to take a look at the names, but none of them rang any bells. She had to chuckle when she read a short graffiti that had been smeared on the wall next to one of the plaques: 'Not Ohio, Oh-My-O!'

"What's up, Corbin?" Joanna said once they were inside.

"Nothing, I just wanted to hear what you got from the principal."

"Did you lose Bill somewhere along the way?" Vernon said.

"He's on the can."

"Hmmm. Well, we didn't get much. She told us that the dorm master in the Kentucky house called her on the phone regarding an intruder in the." Joanna said.
"An intruder?" Corbin said, his ears picking up instantly.

"Not that kind of intruder. Apparently, that's their lingo for when one of the boarders has a visitor after the curfew," Vernon explained.

"Oh... never mind."

"Yeah, well, we're going over there to talk to him. Did you get anything?" Joanna said.

"Not much yet. Ohio is an all-girl dorm, and the dorm mistress didn't want to let us talk to any of the boarders without a chaperone... but the young ladies are reluctant to speak to us with the mistress present. So far, it doesn't seem like the girls here knew much about Mark Gerlach."

"Mmmm."

"Hey, Powell, do you want to swap assignments?" Corbin suddenly said, wearing a cheeky grin.

"Nah, they're twenty years too young for my tastes. We better stick to the original plan."

"Okay."

Behind them, the sound of a flushing toilet was heard and William Larsen soon stepped out into the hall, wiping his hands on some tissues.

"Damn, that's a nice crapper," he said, wadded up the tissues into a ball and threw it back into the bathroom. "Did you get anything?" he continued, shutting the door behind him.

"Not really, Bill. We're about to talk to the dorm master over in Kentucky," Joanna said.

"If he's anything like the dorm mistress here, you better watch your asses."

"Thanks, Bill. We will."

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Five minutes later, Joanna and Vernon entered the Kentucky house. Much like Ohio, the names on the bronze plaques didn't mean a thing to either detective.

"I'd like to know if it's just me who's out of the loop or if these people aren't really prominent at all. I've never heard of any of 'em," Joanna said as she held the door open to Vernon.

"Oh, they're prominent people all right," a booming voice said from inside the hall. A rotund, slightly flushed man stepped up to the door and put out his hand.

"Buford Smith, how are ya?" he said, shaking hands with both detectives.

"We're fine, thank you. I'm Detective Powell and this is my partner, Detective Kransky. I'm sure you've been updated as to what's been going on."
"Yes, I have. A tragedy," Buford Smith said. Studying him closely, Joanna wasn't really sure if he meant it or not.

Buford Smith was in his early fifties with a balding head and an impressive salt-and-pepper walrus-like mustache - to compensate, Joanna thought - and he was dressed in a dark blue sweatsuit similar to the ones used at the police academy. Looking down, she noticed that he was wearing trainers, no doubt so he'd be able to sneak through the halls unnoticed.

"We need to ask you a few questions, Mr. Smith," Vernon said and flipped open his notepad.

"Oh, please... call me Buford."

"All right. Buford, please give us a few details on this intruder you caught earlier this morning," Vernon said, looking over the rim of his glasses.

"Well, there's not much to say, actually. It was a young woman, oh, nineteen or so. Regular clothes, quite pretty with short, spiky hair and a whole row of ear rings in her right ear... you know the type," Buford said with a shrug. "I caught her sneaking out of Mark Gerlach's room. It was just a coincidence, really. If I'd gotten there thirty seconds later, I'd never have caught her."

"Was she one of the boarders or someone not connected to the school?"

"I honestly don't know, Detective. I haven't seen her before, but then I'm not that familiar with our female boarders."

"Right. Did she try to resist?"

"Oh, no. They almost never do. At least, not when they're not hippies or something."

Joanna stifled a chuckle. She was quite sure that the Jeremy Malone Boarding School had never even seen a hippie, not even back in their heyday.

"Why was it Mr. Gerlach who was brought to the principal and not the intruder?"

"That's just the way we do it here, Detective."

"How well did you know Mark Gerlach, Buford?" Joanna said.

"Well, I knew him like I know all the others, I suppose. He wasn't on our soccer team so I only talked to him now and then. Nothing apart from that, really. He never made much trouble, except that he had a tendency to have a visitor every once in a while. That's why I didn't make much of last night's incident."

"Was it the same girl every time?"

"No, they were different girls. Sometimes, it was some of the other male boarders from the dorm sneaking over for a beer, you know. Nothing major."

"Did you notice a fight, a struggle, or anything? Did you hear anything unusual?" Vernon said.

"No, nothing. Nothing at all, and that's what I just can't figure out. I mean, at night, this house is quiet as the grave... uh, bad choice of words... anyway, really quiet. I'd be able to hear a mouse farting down the other end of the hall," Buford said, nodding to himself.
"All right. Do you have any further questions, Vernon?" Joanna said.

"Not at this moment, no," Vernon said and closed his notepad.

"Detectives, do you know what's going to happen this morning? I mean, we can't keep the boarders locked up in their quarters all day," Buford said.

"We don't have an answer to that, but there's to be a press conference later on. Perhaps principal Zinovia will address it," Vernon said.

The mention of the principal's name made Buford Smith lick his lips and look from one detective to the other, clearly going over something in his mind.

Joanna picked up on it at once. She didn't want to pressure the dorm master into anything so she kept her mouth closed, hoping that he would come forth himself. When the moment passed, Joanna made a mental note to make further inquiries later on.

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On legs that felt slightly wobbly, Joanna stepped up on a small dais and faced the camera teams and their many powerful, burning hot spotlights. Liliana Zinovia was standing somewhere behind the detective, looking less out of it than before, but still quite pale.

Joanna looked at her wristwatch which read six-thirty a.m. The news teams had asked for the press conference to be delayed until they were all broadcasting live in their various morning shows, and Joanna had agreed. Wishing it was all over, she began to adjust her hair, her overcoat, the leather clip with her badge, her eyebrows, the skin under her eyes to probe if she had any bags - she didn't - and finally her hair again.

A small drop of sweat annoyed her tremendously by trickling down from her hairline and into the collar of her blouse, but just as she wanted to do something about it, all the reporters were cued, soon talking over each other in a cacophony of voices, all introducing their pieces to their producers in the vans parked outside the park.

Without warning, a vast number of boom mikes were thrust forward at Joanna, some from below, but most from above. She felt cornered and boxed in, but instead of bolting, she applied her best game-face and resigned herself to answering the questions.

A barrage of questions were flung at Joanna, but she kept calm and cut through the chatter by pointing at a blonde reporter from one of the nationwide TV stations.

"Detective, can you confirm that the victim is Mark Gerlach, son of the steel magnate Aaron Gerlach?" the reporter said.

"Yes, the victim is Mark Gerlach." Looking around, Joanna picked a man for the next question to keep everything balanced.

"Can you give us the cause of death, Detective?"

"The victim was garrotted with a wire or a similar tool."

"When?"
"Roughly four o'clock this morning."

"Why?" The question raised a few snickers among the reporters and Joanna arced an eyebrow in the man's direction.

"I do not have that information at this time, Sir."

"Is it true the body is naked?" a female reporter shouted out of turn. Joanna knew that if she answered the question, it would appear that she had lost control over the press conference so she chose to ignore the reporter. Instead, she pointed at a young man holding an electronic recorder in the air.

"Lee Cross from youngamerica.com... Detective, was this a random or a targeted killing?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cross, we don't have that information at this time."

"Are you saying that the other boarders might be at risk?" Lee Cross said, making the other reporters shut up and stare at Joanna, creating a tension that was almost unbearable.

In her mind, Joanna started counting down from three, the amount of time she knew would be allotted to her to come up with a satisfactory answer.

"Mr. Cross, we believe the boarders at random are not at risk. At no point during our investigation have we come across evidence that suggests that this tragic event is the work of a madman."

The answer seemed to be enough to keep the reporters at bay, but Joanna started biting the inside of her bottom lip.

A few more questions followed, but it was soon clear to everyone that Joanna was running out of answers. She felt someone tug her jacket, and when she looked down, Liliana Zinovia put on her glasses and nodded at her.

"Uh, I now give the word to principal Zinovia," Joanna said and stepped aside to let Liliana through.

The barrage of questions returned at full strength, but Liliana just brushed them off. After confirming that she was the one who had found the body, she unfolded a piece of paper and began to read a statement aloud.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the staff of the Jeremy Malone Boarding School is deeply affected by the terrible tragedy that has taken place tonight, and we wish to extend our heartfelt condolences to the Gerlach family," Liliana said in a far stronger voice than Joanna had expected her to have.

"I would like to use the moment to send out a reassurance to all the parents of our boarders that your children are safe here, or at least as safe as anyone can be in our modern, violent world.

We have arranged a plenary meeting for the staff and the boarders at a quarter past seven in the central dining hall where we'll hold a vigil for their lost friend and a Q and A-session for the questions they'll undoubtedly have. Parents are welcome at the plenary meeting," Liliana continued, adjusting her designer glasses.

In the brief pause, the reporters all started shouting again, but Liliana just put up her hands.
"I will not take any questions now. Mr. Gerlach's parents are on their way here. I'm sure they'll organize another press conference once they arrive. Thank you," she said and stepped off the dais.

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CHAPTER 2

Two days later, Thursday April 14th.

At a quarter past ten in the morning, a yellow taxicab pulled up in front of the five-story concrete building that was the stationhouse for the Fourteenth Precinct. The back door of the taxicab opened and Liliana Zinovia stepped out.

After looking around briefly, she crossed the sidewalk and went up a short flight of stairs that would take her to the main entrance of the police station.

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Joanna sat behind a mountain of paperwork when the phone on her desk rang. She reached around the smallest pile and picked it up.

"Detective Powell," she said, pinning down the receiver between her cheek and her shoulder.

'Detective, there's a woman here to see you. A Miss Zinovia,' the front desk Sergeant said.

"Oh, really? Uh, tell her to go into the waiting room. I'll be around in a flash."

'Will do, Detective,' the Sergeant said before hanging up.

Joanna leaned forward on her swivel-chair and put her elbows on the desk. 'Hmmm, interesting,' she thought. For some reason, she wanted to look her best for the principal, so she tucked a few strands of unruly hair behind her ears and adjusted her V-neck blouse so her bra strap wasn't showing.

After tapping a brief tattoo on the only free space left on the table top, Joanna got up and walked out of the office.

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Liliana Zinovia stuck out like a sore thumb in the waiting room across the hall from the front desk. She was exquisitely dressed in a skirt suit that was such a dark shade of blue it was almost black under the strip lights, with matching high-heeled shoes that were equipped with little, golden buckles. Her hair and makeup were picture perfect and her posture was borderline regal.

A closer look revealed that her spring green eyes were reddish and puffy and that she had tried to conceal it with an eyeliner, but all in all, she looked like a finely cut diamond, and Joanna began to suspect that she was a very special lady indeed.
"Miss Zinovia?" Joanna said after opening the glass door to the waiting room.

As Liliana looked up, she sent Joanna such a dazzling smile that the detective's knees almost started knocking.

"If you will come with me, please?" Joanna continued.

Liliana picked up a short jacket and put it over her arm. Joanna noticed a rather wide gold bracelet on Liliana's left wrist that she hadn't seen the other morning. At once, she felt that the wide bracelet was out of place on the petite, delicate woman's body.

"This way, Miss Zinovia," Joanna said, holding the door open for the principal. As Liliana walked past her, her nostrils caught a whiff of a fancy perfume and she hurriedly checked her own pits for traces of Eau de Sweat.

The walk back to Joanna's office was educational - she had expected the principal to take short, frantic lady steps, but she was taken thoroughly by surprise when Liliana strode through the hall using long, forceful steps, aided by a slit in the skirt that revealed quite a lot of her legs when they moved past each other.

"It's the next door left, Miss Zinovia," Joanna said, trying not to stare too much at the principal's rear end as it wiggled its way along the hall. Her high heels clicked and clacked on the linoleum floor, creating quite a spectacle.

Following Joanna's directions, Liliana turned left at the next frosted glass door. As soon as she had gone through the doorframe, she stopped dead in her tracks and stared wide-eyed at the many piles on the desk. "Are all of those from my case?"

"Oh, no. Some of them are, but not all," Joanna said and closed the door behind her.

"Isn't it... I don't know... dangerous to keep the door open like that? Even though it's a police station, there are plenty of shady types around."

"That's very true, but on the other hand, if we can't feel safe inside a police station, where can we feel safe? And besides, the ventilation is on the blink. With all the paper, it gets really stuffy in here if the door is closed for too long."

"Oh. Smart," Liliana said and hung her jacket over the backrest of a swivel-chair, revealing an ivory-colored shirt where the top two buttons had been undone.

"Please have a seat, Miss Zinovia. Do you want some coffee or something? A soda pop?" The split second the words left Joanna's mouth, she felt stupid. 'Of course a woman like that isn't gonna say yes to a soda pop. Jeez, Jo!' she thought, wanting to slap herself silly.

Liliana turned to look at the coffee maker that looked like it had been simmering for most of the morning.

"No, thank you. I'm fine," she said with a polite smile.

"All right. Well. What can I do for you?"

"I was just wondering if you've had a breakthrough in the case yet...?"
"I'm afraid not, Miss Zinovia. We're still wading through the statements," Joanna said as she sat down in her chair.

Liliana nodded and looked down. She leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs which revealed more high-quality thigh than Joanna had seen for months. The detective found herself gripping the armrests of her swivel-chair.

"Is there anything I can do or say that would help you?" Liliana said. "Detective?" she continued when Joanna didn't answer at once.

"Uhhh, yes... yes. Ah, has your school ever received any death threats or anything like that against any of the boarders?"

When Liliana realized what the detective's eyes were trained on, a small smirk played on her lips and she hastily smoothed down her skirt.

"Well, not death threats as such, but we've received a few angry, even aggressive letters over the years."

"Oh, really?" Joanna said, snapping out of the carnal thoughts that had invaded her mind.

"Yes, but we've never acted upon them... well, apart from sending them to the law firm who represents us."

"Miss Zinovia, in my professional opinion, you should have contacted the police. In this day and age, we need to be made aware of every single incident. Take it from me, none of us wants to experience a school shooting," Joanna said, tapping a pencil against the desktop.

"You're right, Detective. The originals are with our lawyers, but we still have copies of them. If you want to take a look at them, perhaps you could do so the next time you're at the school...?" Liliana said, cocking her head.

"Yes. Now, have you ever received any threats against Mark Gerlach specifically?"

"I'm quite sure we haven't."

"Tell me about Mark Gerlach. In your own words, if you please."

"Well... I, uh... I hardly knew him, Detective. I only bumped into him once in a while. At one point, it seemed like he was in my office every other day for breaking one of our rules, but it turned out that he was just going through a rebellious phase. His parents are quite strict, I believe."

Joanna nodded with a grunt. She remembered seeing Aaron and Annabelle Gerlach's faces in the business papers, and they definitely didn't look like people you'd want to go to a ball game with.

"But since then, he's been on his best behavior. Of course, with the exception of having a visitor on the night in question," Liliana said and took off her glasses. She pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a short sigh.

"How are you holding up, Miss Zinovia?" Joanna said, wishing she could offer something that would give the knockout blonde some solace. She pulled out her desk drawer but could only find an empty bag of sweets and a coffee mug she had forgotten to clean. Grimacing, she shut the drawer again.

"Oh, I'm... I'm fine, thank you. It's been rough, I won't lie about that."
"I understand."

Liliana nodded and started wiping off the lenses of her glasses. When she was satisfied, she put them back on and looked directly at Joanna.

Joanna could sense that the principal was trying to tell her something, but before the blonde woman had time to overcome her doubts, someone knocked on the door. Inwardly cursing a blue streak, Joanna turned her head towards it and shouted "It's open!"

Vernon Kransky stepped inside, carrying yet another pile of files. "Oh, hello, Miss Zinovia," he said, looking over the rim of his reading glasses.

"Good morning, Detective."

Joanna studied the principal's body language intently, searching for any kind of clue as to what it was she had wanted to say. When she couldn't really deduce anything, she felt rather annoyed over the fact that this had been the second time someone had been interrupted when they were trying to tell her something.

"I better leave," Liliana said and picked up her jacket. "It was nice talking to you, Detective Powell. Would you mind keeping me informed of your progress?"

"Of course not. Come on, let me help you out," Joanna said and got up from her chair.

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Three minutes later, Joanna closed the frosted glass door behind her and folded her arms across her chest.

"Vern, you gotta work on your timing. She was about to tell me something when you came."

"Sorry. Buford Smith was trying to tell us something as well, but he clammed up," Vernon said as he signed off a report.

"Yeah."

"If you think about it, it sounded like he wanted to tell us something about the principal, actually."

"Yeah."

Scratching her hair, Joanna walked back to her swivel-chair and picked up the top file from one of the piles. Before she opened the folder, she leaned back in her chair and began to hum.

"I don't think we know everything that's going on at that boarding school, Vern," she said after humming a few bars of an unidentified tune.

"Brutal initiation rituals, sex, dope. It's always one of those three," Vernon said with a chuckle.

"With all those teenagers, there's bound to be some dope around, but this is way more than just a couple of joints being passed around. Initiation rituals ...? Hmmm, doesn't feel like something of that sort. That leaves sex. After all, Mark Gerlach was naked when he was found. When *she* found him," Joanna said, putting the unopened file down on her desk.
"It's worth looking into. Online porn, perhaps?"

"Could be. Anything is possible these days." Sighing, she put her arms behind her head.

"True. Of course, if we were still young and spry, one of us could go undercover at the school to try to flush out the rats," Vernon said with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, ha, ha. Very funny," Joanna said and threw a paper clip at the other detective.

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As the end of Joanna's shift approached, she had just about given up ever finding an opening in the Gerlach case. Yawning widely, she put yet another file on top of the tallest pile. The stack of files was placed near the edge of the table and it had a nasty look to it, almost like it was planning on tipping over at any moment.

With a grumble, Joanna got up from her chair and began to distribute the tall pile into several shorter ones to stop it from falling over.

"Hey, Jo. Get anywhere today?" Detective William Larsen said from the doorway. As usual, he was holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

"Nah. It's been slow going. The truth is in here somewhere," Joanna said, patting one of the smaller piles.

"You know, sometimes I think we're actually archaeologists instead of cops."

"Heh, I agree. Or possibly even librarians."

"Yeah," Bill Larsen said and took a long swig from his coffee.

"Well, anyway. See ya 'round, Bill," Joanna said and grabbed her overcoat from the coat hanger.

"See ya."

---

Half an hour later, a quarter past eight p.m., Joanna parked her Crown Victoria in her driveway and jumped out of it almost like she didn't want to spent another moment in it. On her way up the garden path, she noticed that Betty's pride and joy, a fair-sized flower bed filled with all sorts of colorful flowers, was looking great.

Pausing briefly, Joanna looked around their garden. It wasn't much, just an eight by ten yard patch of grass with the flower bed in the center and a few bushes around the edges, but Betty really put her heart and soul into it and everything looked spot-on perfect.

Looking at the garden, Joanna felt a pang of irrational, almost childish jealousy inside her. Growling at herself for even thinking in such a way, she shook her head angrily and stomped up the rest of the garden path until she reached the front door.

"Hey, hon, I'm home!" Joanna said, slamming the front door shut with the heel of her shoe.
"I'm in the kitchen gettin' ready to feed the horde!" Betty Johansen said from around the corner.

"Great! I'm starving," Joanna said and hung her overcoat on a hallstand. "I'm just gonna lock up my gun," she shouted and bounded up the stairs to the first floor, taking two steps at a time.

Flying into their bedroom, she sat down on the bed and took her shoes off. Then she got up and unclipped her sidearm and its holster, and put those items and her badge into a metal gun cabinet.

After looking into the full-size mirror on the closet, she realized she needed to fix her hair again, so she did - then she flew back down the stairs and went into the kitchen.

Betty was busy pouring the water from the potatoes and Joanna stood back and let her finish. As Betty put the potatoes into a dish, Joanna observed her silently.

'Betty is a good woman. Warm, friendly, loving... but everything about her is average. She's of average build, she has average looks... not pretty or plain, just average... and she has average tastes in food, music and TV: she has an average sense of humor and she likes to dress in average clothes. Her eyes and her hair are in an average shade of brown... and she's average in bed,' Joanna thought.

As usual when she thought badly of her lover, she was immediately struck by a strong sense of guilt. Betty had been a rock-solid support for her when she had been involved in an unjustified shooting incident three years previously, and Joanna knew that the warm, if average, woman didn't deserve such crap. Betty could have anyone she wanted, but she had chosen her, the big, dumb cop.

Pushing the negative thoughts away, Joanna walked up stand behind her lover and pulled her brown hair free of her neck.

"Hey, Bets," Joanna purred, leaning down to give Betty a sloppy kiss on the neck.

"Hey, baby," Betty said. She put down a spoon, turned around and wrapped her arms around Joanna's torso.

Joanna looked at Betty's sparkling brown eyes and got another guilt-driven kick in the rear end. The two women inched closer and exchanged a loving, little kiss on the lips.

"How was your day, hon?" Joanna said, placing her hands on Betty's rear end.

"Eh, so-so. Nothing much happened at the General. We were introduced to a new Doctor who'll be starting her rotation soon. I think she's a bit of a slave driver. She's got that look in her eye, know what I mean?"

"Oh yeah."

"The other nurses I spoke to all agreed. Ah, she's only going to be there for a while. I'll manage," Betty said, kissing Joanna again before moving away from her grip to tend to the frying pan sizzling on the stove.

"What are we having?"

"Pork chops, cream gravy and potatoes."

"Great. I could eat a cow."

"How about a pig instead? They're pork chops after all."
"Sounds good to me," Joanna said and pinched Betty's rear end, earning herself a 'Yeow!' and an evil glare.

"Just for that, you get to do the dishes today!" Betty said in a mock growl.

"Yes, dear. It's my turn, anyway."

"Oh... I forgot. Anyway, are you still working on that boarding school case? Ten minutes ago, Channel 11 was running a clip from the press conference the other day."

Just hearing the words 'boarding school' made Joanna think of Liliana Zinovia, of the way she had walked through the hall at the precinct house, of the way her skirt had revealed so much of her thigh, and of the way traces of her perfume had lingered in the air even hours after she had left.

"Uh... yeah. Yeah, I am," Joanna said, snapping back to reality. She cast a quick glance at Betty and was relieved to see that she hadn't noticed her zoning out. "It's the weirdest case I've worked on for a long time. We've got no perpetrator, no motive, no witnesses... hell, we're not even sure we have a crime scene."

"Gives me the creeps," Betty said, shivering to underline her words.

"It's just... I don't know... weird."

"Anyway, dinner is served. Wouldya mind grabbing the water from the fridge?" Betty said, picking up the dish with the potatoes and the frying pan with the chops.

"I'm on it."

---

After eating dinner and doing the dishes, Joanna took advantage of Betty going into the bathroom by shuffling over to stand at the window overlooking the garden.

In her heart, she knew that her relationship with Betty was slowly coming to an end, but she couldn't find the right moment nor the right words to say it out loud.

'You're a coward, Joanna Powell. Plain and simple,' she thought to herself. Shaking her head, she moved away from the window and walked back into the kitchen to turn on the coffee maker.

"You're really quiet tonight, hon," Betty said as she came out of the bathroom.

"I have a lot on my mind, Bets."

"Do I want to hear about it?"

"Well... not unless you want to be creeped out."

"No, thanks."

"Go sit down, the coffee is already on," Joanna said with a smile that faded as soon as Betty had turned around.
A few minutes later, Joanna came into the living room carrying two mugs of coffee. She put both down on the low table and then sat down next to Betty.

"Let's see what the news guys have to say," Betty said and picked up the remote.

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"Wanna watch a movie tonight, hon?" Betty said and began to run her fingers across Joanna's neck.

"Oh, I... wouldya mind if we didn't? I'm kinda wasted right now."

"I can fix that. I have magic fingers," Betty said and turned off the dull talk show they had been watching since the news had ended. In a flash, she moved over to sit behind Joanna, stretching her legs out on either side of Joanna's much longer limbs.

"Just relax, baby. Let my fingers take you to heaven," Betty purred in Joanna's ear. When Joanna's only reply was a throaty chuckle, Betty began molding the muscles in the detective's neck and shoulders.

A bit later on, Joanna felt Betty's hands move down her torso and around her front. Finding two perfect peaks there, Betty's experienced hands soon picked up where they had left off.

Joanna leaned back into her lover's touch and let out a sensuous sigh. Her nipples were already hardening and she felt a sorely needed buzz racing through her system.

Betty's hands soon lifted up Joanna's blouse and began to caress the soft skin on her belly. Even though Joanna's body reacted to Betty's touch, she couldn't help but wonder how it would feel to have Liliana's hands on her instead.

Growling in frustration, she tried to push all thoughts of the beautiful, petite blonde out of her head, but she wasn't entirely successful.

Betty misinterpreted the growl and stopped caressing Joanna's skin. "Baby, is something wrong?"

"No... only that... only that we're going too slowly," Joanna said to save the situation.

"Oh... tee-hee. Well, just watch this, baby," Betty purred into Joanna's ear as she let her fingers glide down underneath the waistline of Joanna's slacks.

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The next morning saw Betty shimmy around with a smile on her face and a jaunty little tune on her lips. Humming merrily, she was so focused on preparing breakfast that she didn't even notice Joanna standing in the doorway with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Thanks for last night, baby," Joanna said once Betty had sensed her presence.

"No, thank you, baby. We had a great time, didn't we?"

Grinning, Joanna nodded and quickly closed the distance between them. She pulled Betty into an embrace and gave her a loving squeeze. "It was really nice," Joanna whispered.
"You've been so busy with all these late nights and everything. A woman has needs, you know!" Betty said, pointing at Joanna with a plastic spoon. When that didn't have the desired effect, she poked the tall Detective in the ribs instead.

"I know, I know. Ouch!" Joanna said and rubbed the spot where she had been poked. She retaliated by diving down and giving Betty another kiss, this time on the tip of her nose.

"I put your bowl of Cornflakes on the dinner table. The milk is on the top shelf in the fridge. Do you think you can find it yourself, Detective?"

"I'll manage. Boy, you're feisty this morning," Joanna said with a chuckle.

"That's what gettin' the big O does to a woman."

"Mmmm. I need to remember that," Joanna said, not wanting to mention that even though she had been so needy the night before, their lovemaking hadn't been enough to make her climax.

She quickly found the milk in the fridge and poured some of it over the cereal. As she was closing the carton, she cast a glance at Betty who was busy putting two slices of bread in the toaster. Sighing, Joanna put the milk back in the fridge.

---

"Drive safely, honey," Betty said and gave Joanna a big kiss right on the lips.

"You Bets."

"Ohhhhh!" Betty said, groaning loudly over the ancient joke.

Holding a Driver's Mug full of freshly brewed coffee, Joanna winked at her lover as she went past her, quickly ducking out of the way before Betty thought of slapping her rear end with the newspaper she was wielding.

"See you tonight, Jo."

"See ya, babe," Joanna said and offered a wave with her free hand.

A short while later, she unlocked the Crown Victoria and got into it. After putting the Driver's Mug into one of the cup holders, she turned on the engine and reversed out of the driveway.

Joanna looked up at the house but Betty had already gone inside. With a sigh, she turned on the radio to drown out the suddenly deafening silence.

'... gang-related shootings Downtown. At a press conference last night, senior detective Sean Duffy from the First Precinct said that there was no need for the public at large to be concerned, and that the police force expect the perpetrators to be brought to justice within the next few days. In other news, yesterday's air traffic controller strike still...'

"Yeah, right. 'Bring them to justice within the next few days'. Yeah, right," Joanna said, taking a couple of large swigs of her coffee.
After driving up the on-ramp to the freeway, Joanna suddenly found herself at the tail end of an endless queue of cars. In the far distance, reflections of flashing red and blue lights could be seen, giving away the reason for the unexpected traffic jam.


Realizing that she wouldn't be going anywhere fast, she turned off the engine, leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. It wasn't long before images of a certain blonde principal invaded her mind. She thought of how Liliana might look when she danced, of how she might behave when she was at home; of how it might feel to hold her hand or to kiss her lips - and how it might feel to make love with her.

As the images in her mind became increasingly explicit, Joanna opened her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

"You've got it bad, Jo. You've got it so bad you're gonna turn into a wreck pretty soon if ya don't snap out of it and keep an eye on the life you already have," she said to her own reflection in the rear view mirror.

When the traffic jam didn't seem to be going anywhere, she reached into her overcoat and dug out her cell phone. After a few rings, Vernon finally picked it up.

'Detective Kransky. Jo, is that you?'

"That's right, Vern. I'm stuck in the traffic jam from hell up here on the freeway... I'm gonna be late."

'Okay. I tried to call you last night.'

"Oh?"

'Your phone was off.'

"I was busy."

'Right. Well, yesterday, I took home a couple of the files to try to look at them with fresh eyes, you know-'

"You're married to the job, Vern."

'Beats both my ex-wives, lemme tell you. Anyway, I studied the statement Charles Buford Smith gave us, and I think we should lean on him a little bit. He didn't tell us everything.'

"I agree. Tell you what, if I get out of this God-awful traffic jam before I retire, I'll head straight for the..." Joanna's voice trailed off as she suddenly went from A to L to Z in her mind, specifically where the trip would end up and who would be there.

'Jo? You still there?'

"Oh, yeah, I'm here. Uh, must be a bad connection. Anyway, I'll drive to the boarding school and give Mr. Buford a little squeeze."

'That's a good idea, Jo. You want me to call ahead?'

"No. I want it to be a surprise to him."
'All right. Come in when you're done, okay?'

"That's the plan. Talk to you later, Vern."

'Later, Jo.'

Joanna hung up and put the phone back in her pocket. She looked at herself in the rear view mirror again. 'Oh, shit... was this such a good idea...?' she thought, unable to come up with an answer.

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An hour and ten minutes later, Joanna drove through the gates and up the gravelly drive that would take her to the admin wing of the Jeremy Malone Boarding School. After she had parked, she checked her wristwatch which read ten past nine, a.m.

For once, April showed the friendly side of itself with clear blue skies and a strong sun prompting Joanna to take off her overcoat and leave it in the cruiser.

She looked down at herself, once again feeling the need to present herself in the best possible way to the principal. She was wearing a pair of black cotton jeans, a chocolate brown turtleneck and a black blazer. 'I'll have to do,' she thought, making sure that her fly was zipped.

On her way across the gravelly parking lot, she clipped her badge onto her belt and buttoned the blazer so the service pistol on her hip wouldn't stand out so much.

Suddenly realizing that she didn't actually know if Charles Buford Smith was even in the admin wing, she came to an abrupt stop and looked at the path snaking its way through the park. The nearest dorm, Ohio, was just barely visible through the leafless trees.

"Hmmm..." she said and looked through the glass double-doors at the hall of the admin building.

'If I ask someone here where Buford is, they might call him and tell him before I can reach him... on the other hand, if I go to Kentucky and he's not there, someone there might tell him. All right... Kentucky it is.'

---

Ten minutes later, Joanna came back up the path, grumbling under her breath. Taking a firm grip on the bars on the double doors, she swung the glass door open and stepped inside.

She quickly spotted an office directory hanging on a wall and began to go down the list, looking for the office of 'Smith, Charles Buford'.

"Bingo," she said out loud, thumping her index finger down on the line that showed Buford's name. "Office 3-22," she continued, already on her way over to the same staircase she and Vernon Kransky had used on the morning of the murder.

---
Knock, knock.

No reply.

Knock, knock, **KNOCK!**

Still nothing.

When Joanna tried to turn the door handle, she discovered that it was locked. "Jeez, this isn't my day," she said out loud and spun around on her heel.

Instead of wasting time chasing after the elusive dorm master, Joanna went down to the second floor and found the door to the secretary's office. After knocking briefly, she opened it and stepped inside.

It looked like any other office - bare floors save for the protective underlay under the swivel-chairs, strip lights in the ceiling, large windows with net curtains, a few plants here and there and a few colorful prints on the rare sections of the walls that weren't covered in bookshelves.

A woman in her late fifties was sitting behind a computer, typing furiously. As Joanna walked into the office, the woman looked up and rolled her chair back.

"Good morning," the woman said with a smile.

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm Detective Powell from the Fourteenth Precinct. I'm here to talk to one of your dorm masters, Mr. Charles Buford Smith. I can't find him and I was wondering if you knew where he was?" Joanna said, showing the other woman her badge.

"Buford Smith...? Well, at this time of the day, he should be in the gym," the woman said, turning around to pick out a ring binder from one of the shelves.

"The gym?" Joanna echoed, having a hard time picturing the portly man anywhere near a gym.

"Yes, he's one of our coaches. Ummm, let me see, Sanford, Shinz, Smith... there he is, Smith, Charles Buford. Nine to eleven, a.m... yes, he's at the gym like I presumed. With the weather being so fine today, perhaps he's out at the courts or on the soccer pitch."

"Do you have a guide so I can find the gym or the courts?" Joanna said, wearing her most charming smile.

"But of course, Detective. Hang on, it's here somewhere... Oh, if you go over to the windows and look to the left, you might be able to see if someone is down on the soccer pitch," the secretary said, pointing at the windows.

"Thanks. I guess I could try that," Joanna said and walked over to the left of the two windows. After pulling the net curtains aside, she leaned forward and looked left, almost pressing her face against the glass to see better.
Roughly one hundred yards away from the admin building, several men were playing soccer on a grassy field. One of them was decidedly less agile than the others and when the figure took off a blue baseball cap, Joanna soon recognized Buford Smith's rotund shape and his balding head. "Yep, he's down there. Thank you," Joanna said, nodding.

"You're welcome. Do you want me to call ahead, Detective?"

"No. That's quite all right, thank you."

The sound of a door creaking softly reached Joanna's ears. Before even a single word had been spoken, she knew exactly who it was that had joined the room.

"Oh, hello, Detective Powell. Is this a social call?" Liliana Zinovia said in a rich timbre that immediately sent a shiver racing down Joanna's spine.

"Principal Zinovia," Joanna said, trying to act as business-like as possible to stop herself from looking like she was about to drool all over the floor.

An amused expression flashed across Liliana's lips, and she cocked her head and shot the detective a curious look. Walking further into the office, she put three pages of handwritten notes down on the corner of the secretary's desk. "Mrs. Weidemann, would you mind typing these up for me? Thank you."

Trying to look everywhere but at Liliana's legs that were swept in a loose pair of royal blue capris that came to just below her knees, Joanna realized too late that she was still standing in the exact same spot she had been in when the principal had entered the office. Her eyes slowly glided up towards Liliana's face, past a dark blue indoor blazer that covered a white, frilly blouse.

"You didn't answer my question. Are you here to see me, Detective?"

"Uh... no, I'm not, Miss Zinovia. I'm here to talk to Mr. Buford Smith."

"Buford? Do you think he can help you with the case?"

"That's what we're hoping, yes."

"Detective, I can't believe Buford has anything to do with that horrible event," Liliana said, losing the cool facade for a moment.

Joanna took that as a cue and began to move towards the door. "I'm afraid I can't divulge too much information at this time, Miss Zinovia."

Inches before Joanna had made it to safety - she had already put her hand on the door handle - Liliana Zinovia threw her a curve ball.

"Would you like to go for a coffee or something after you've talked to Buford, Detective?" Liliana said, wearing a perfectly angelic smile.

Joanna licked her lips; first once, then twice. After wiping off her suddenly clammy palms on her cotton jeans, she cleared her throat and returned the smile. "That would be... beneficial, Miss Zinovia. I have a few questions for you as well. We might as well, uh..." Joanna said, mentally slapping herself on the back of her head for being so illiterate. "Uh, get some coffee while we... talk."
"All right. I'll be in my office for the rest of the day, so you know where to find me."

"Good day, Miss Zinovia. Mrs. Heidemann," Joanna said and quickly removed herself from the office.

"Weidemann, dear!" the secretary said loudly, but Joanna had already left.

On her way down the stairs, Joanna pulled out in her turtleneck hoping to get some fresh air down her front. At first, her face was a curious mixture of giddiness and confusion, but confusion eventually won out.

She had only just reached the hall when she came to a screeching halt. "The guide! I didn't get the damn campus guide!" she said and slapped her forehead. "Jeez, what am I... fifteen years old? Hell, I wasn't this befuddled when I really was fifteen..." she mumbled to herself on her way outside.

---

A few minutes later, she walked through a gate in a mesh fence and onto the grassy field she had seen from the office window. Buford Smith was still on the field, but some of the players had left.

When Joanna approached Buford, he was busy putting several white-and-black-checkered soccer balls into a big net, and he didn't notice the detective until she was standing next to him.

"Good morning, Mr. Smith," Joanna said in a steely voice.

"Detective? Oh, I... I didn't hear you coming."

"Mr. Smith, I need a word with you."

"Hey, that sounds official... and please call me Buford," the man said with a grin. When he noticed that Joanna's face was set in stone, he sobered up and put down the net.

"On the morning of the murder, when we were talking, you reacted strangely when I mentioned the principal's name. Why?"

"Oh, you know, it's..." Buford said and waved his hand.

"No, I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

Buford looked at some of the young men playing soccer. He licked his lips and leaned in towards Joanna.

"Not here, okay? Over by the benches."

"All right. But it's time to tell me."

"I know, Detective. Boys! Go practice some penalties. I'll be there in a short while!" Buford said to the remaining players who all nodded or gave him a thumbs-up in return.

---
Pushing someone's sweatshirt aside, Buford sat down on one of the benches that had been placed at the sidelines of the soccer pitch.

Joanna kept standing with her arms folded across her chest and her legs slightly apart - a pose she knew had the ability to intimidate anyone save for hardened criminals.

"Well, Buford, I'm listening."

"Look, Detective... I don't have first-hand knowledge of this. It's just a nasty rumor floating around the faculty," Buford said, looking at Joanna. A few beads of sweat had formed on his forehead and he took off his baseball cap and wiped his brow with his sleeve.

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, I... oh, shit. Scuttlebutt has it that principal Zinovia holds certain private parties every once in a while."

"Certain private parties? You need to be a bit more specific than that."

"Dammit, Detective... I don't know anything more than that! I don't know what's going on at those parties, but... but the principal is popular among the boarders because she's young and... and good looking, and I wouldn't be surprised if they were experimenting with... with, uh, recreational drugs or something like that."

"Come on, Buford. Principal Zinovia is hardly a dopehead."

"No, but... I don't know, Detective, and that's the truth. There's no way in hell I'll ever be invited to one of those parties so I'll never know for sure. If you want to get to the bottom of it, you'll need to ask someone who's attended one of 'em."

"Like who?"

"Like some of the boarders. I know that one or two from 'Kentucky' have been there. I accidentally overheard a conversation where they talked about it, but they clammed up as soon as they saw me."

Joanna furrowed her brow. "Was Mark Gerlach ever at one of those parties?" she said, smoothing down her right eyebrow.

"He might have been. I can't say for sure... but I suspect it."

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CHAPTER 3

A few minutes later, Joanna walked away from the soccer pitch and back towards the admin building. On her way there, she unclipped her cell phone from her belt and dialed Vernon's number.

'Vernon Kransky.'
"Vern, it's Jo. I'm at the boarding school. I just got some interesting facts from Buford. The local scuttlebutt has it that the principal has been organizing something referred to as private parties."

'Drugs?'

"That's what Buford said, but I don't think so. I think it's the other thing."

'Sex parties?'

"Yep."

Vernon whistled at the other end of the connection. 'Now we only need the rock'n'roll. Anyway, how do we take it from here? There are several children of influential people staying at that school. If this gets out, it could get messy."

"Influential people's children have sex, too, Vern. I guess that's common knowledge."

'That's obviously a non-parent speaking.'

"Heh, yeah. The principal asked me out for coffee earlier on. I think I'll take her up on it and see if I can get a few answers out of her."

'If you're not back by nightfall, I'll send out an APB on you.'

"Oh, ha, ha. You're killing me, Vern."

'Later, Jo.'

"Later."

_*_*_*_*_*

When Joanna returned to the secretary's office, she felt more prepared and less confused than when she had been there the first time, slightly more than thirty minutes earlier - unfortunately, her state of perfect Zen evaporated into thin air the second she saw Liliana Zinovia sitting on a chair by the windows.

The principal had crossed her legs in a very ladylike manner and she was holding a dusty blue summer jacket and wearing a broad, if enigmatic, smile.

Joanna's left eyebrow slowly arced up her forehead at the sight, a gesture that was rather comically mirrored by Liliana lifting her foot.

"Did you find Buford Smith, Detective Powell?"

"I certainly did, Miss Zinovia."

"Good." Liliana's foot resumed its wiggling motion. "I take it you're ready for the coffee now...?"

"Uh... certainly," Joanna said, once again mentally slapping herself over the head for using the same words too often.
"Detective, I..."

"Please, call me Joanna. Or Jo... all right?"

"Only if you'll call me Liliana," the principal said with a wink.

"Certainly... yes, Liliana."

Liliana got up from the chair and walked closer to Joanna.

"Jo, I think it would be a wrong signal to send to the boarders if we left in your squad car. How about we took my car instead?"

"Left? I thought we were going to have the coffee here?"

"No, I know a fantastic little coffee house not far from here. It's only a few blocks away."

"Okay...?"

"So?"

"Uh, yes, all right. We can do that, sure, no problem," Joanna said, suddenly feeling the need to pull out in her turtleneck all over again.

"Excellent."

---

"That's your car?" Joanna said, pointing at a charcoal gray Ford Taurus.

"Yes, it is. Were you expecting something else?" Liliana said and pressed a small button on the key fob to unlock the car.

"A Lexus at least. Or a Porsche Convertible. I don't know... something luxurious that would match the owner."

"My, my, Jo. I do believe you're trying to flirt with me," Liliana said with a laugh as she got behind the wheel.

Liliana turned on the engine and put the shifter in Reverse. Pausing, she turned her head to look directly into Joanna's eyes.

When Liliana didn't speak for several seconds, Joanna began to feel scrutinized and she scrunched up her face and looked away. "Is there something wrong, Liliana?"

"No, I'm just trying to gauge your intentions."

"My inten... uh... buh... I can assure you I'm only looking for some coffee and a few answers to a f... uh, some questions I have," Joanna said, blushing furiously.
"Mmmm," Liliana said and released the brake. After reversing out of her parking space, she drove slowly around the admin wing until they had reached Locklin Park Lane.

The silence inside the Taurus was deafening as Liliana turned right onto Nadine Boulevard, headed for Midtown West. As they pulled up to a red light, Liliana activated the turning signal and looked at Joanna again.

"Jo, what I'm about to say may shock you."

"Well, I've been a homicide detective for four years and a beat cop for eight before that. I doubt a boarding school principal could say anything that would shock me," Joanna said with a nervous chuckle.

"Let's see." Before Liliana had time to speak her mind, the traffic lights turned green and they went around the intersection and up the crossing boulevard.

A block and a half later, Liliana pulled over and entered a car park belonging to the 'Heaven In A Cup' coffee shop.

"You never said what it was," Joanna said once Liliana had turned off the engine.


Once Joanna remembered how to breathe again, she felt two raging fires inside her body: one was her face and her neck being flooded with the warmest blush she had ever experienced. The other was her libido grabbing her by the scruff of her neck, screaming in her ear to accept the unusual offer. While all that was going on, her mind was mentally slapping her cheeks repeatedly to get her to walk away from it.

"O... kay, that's... look, this isn't..." she stuttered, not sure what she actually wanted to say.

"Are you afraid?"

"No, but... I'm with someone."

"Is she here?"

"Look, Liliana, I'm flattered, but this just..."

"We're both adults, Jo. It's all right for us to feel an instant attraction. To want an instant gratification. We're both playing for the same team, aren't we?"

"Yeah, but..."

"I want you, and I know you want me. I can feel your pheromones way over here," Liliana said, holding up her hands in a jokey gesture.

Initially, Joanna had wanted her mind to win the battle over her libido, but all those ethical thoughts flew straight out of her head when Liliana put a warm hand on her thigh. The sensations successfully bodyslammed the ethics, and all she could do was to nod - or rather, that's what she thought she did. In reality, her head jerked forward a few times to match the explosive nature of her breath.

"Let's skip the coffee," Liliana said and reversed out of the parking space.
Ten minutes later, Joan found herself being pulled up a flight of stairs in an apartment building further up Fillmore Boulevard. Liliana led her by the hand, using such a strong grip that Joanna couldn't have run even if she had wanted to.

Even though she had said she wasn't afraid, she felt petrified to the core - not for what they were about to do, but for what she was going to say to Betty afterwards.

Her mind was completely blank. All she could do was breathe and walk; walk behind the principal that she had read all wrong.

Once they reached the landing on the second floor, Liliana dug into her pocket to find her keys. After unlocking the front door to her apartment, she pushed it open and gave Joanna a come-hither look of such intensity that she felt her vaginal muscles clench briefly.

The apartment was quite neatly furnished, but none of the women had time to comment on the shade of the curtains. Liliana pulled the detective through a hall and into a bedroom that was dominated by a queen-sized bed.

With trembling hands, Joanna began to pull her turtleneck out of her cotton jeans; watching wide-eyed as Liliana took off her designer glasses and the dusty blue summer jacket with gestures designed to drive the detective wild.

Joanna completely stopped what she was doing when Liliana began to move her hands up her own body, pulling her frilly shirt up and squeezing, fondling, caressing her breasts through her lacy bra.

The principal locked eyes with Joanna and began to move towards her, shedding her blouse and her bra, slowly gyrating her hips left and right in a lazy, seductive dance. Sighing sensuously, she put her hand between her legs and threw her head back in exaggerated ecstasy.

Joanna was frozen in place, still staring wide-eyed at the ash-blonde being in front of her who may have looked like a boarding school principal but who acted like Aphrodite incarnate. Snapping out of her trance, she stepped out of her boots and pulled the brown turtleneck over her head, shivering from the rush of cool air on her superheated skin.

By the time Liliana put her hands on Joanna's hips - still swaying to a rhythm only she could hear - she was only wearing the pair of royal blue capris. Unsurprisingly, Joanna's eyes were trained on the pair of gently wiggling breasts not far from her.

"Do you want to go all the way?" Liliana whispered, reaching up to fondle her pert breasts again.

"Y-you mean this isn't all the way now?"

Liliana closed the distance between them. "This is just the beginning," she whispered seductively. Looking briefly at Joanna's lush lips, she leaned in and claimed those very lips in a fiery, all-consuming kiss that merely fanned the flames already burning brightly in both women.
Joanna began to fumble with the latch on her bra, but Liliana calmly put her hands on the detective's shoulders and pushed her backwards onto the bed. Once she was down, she bounced back slightly from the soft mattress.

"Let me," Liliana whispered and straddled Joanna's hips. With ease, she unhooked the recalcitrant latch and pulled the bra aside.

She broke out in a wolfish grin when Joanna's breasts were liberated from their confines, and she took the two mounds and gave them a firm, but not unpleasant, squeeze.

"Ohhhhhh, baby," Joanna said, unable to do anything but feel.

Liliana got off Joanna's hips and knelt down on the floor between the detective's long legs. After working the zipper on Joanna's cotton jeans, she began to pull them off, but the service pistol dug itself into the mattress.

"Jo, your gun... take it off."

Joanna complied by reaching down and removing the holster from her belt. Her hands were so limp that she wasn't able to hold onto the holster, and it landed on the carpet with a bump.

"Raise your hips," Liliana whispered. The moment Joanna lifted her rear end, Liliana pulled the cotton jeans down past her hipbones; grinning broadly when a pair of black panties saw the light of day.

Quickly disposing of the jeans, Liliana reached down and pulled off her capris and her own panties - then she hooked her thumbs inside Joanna's panties and began to slide them off, careful not to do it too fast despite the needy whimpers emanating from the detective.

When they were both naked, Liliana took Joanna's mile-long thighs and pushed them outward and upwards, fully exposing Joanna's glistening sex. Instead of going down on her, Liliana slid upwards between the long legs, rubbing the full length of her body against Joanna's sensitive, flushing skin, feeling the detective's juices coat her throat, chest and stomach.

Joanna's rock hard nipples were too tempting to pass up on so Liliana began to suckle one of them; taking the hard nub in her mouth, she let her tongue sweep across the tip, causing Joanna to groan and arc her back off the mattress.

Joanna looked down, just catching a glimpse of Liliana's tongue flicking across the tips of her nipples. She groaned again, unable to fathom that she was being screwed so comprehensively by a woman she hardly even knew.

Sighing, Liliana continued her little trek upwards, coming to a stop when her thigh was resting against Joanna's slick sex.

Even the faintest touch of the silky smooth thigh sent a wave of pleasure through Joanna's system and she couldn't stop a throaty moan from escaping her lips.

Because of the difference in height, Liliana's face was only at the upper part of Joanna's breasts, but she wasn't slow in using that to her advantage by nibbling on the soft, tender skin she found there.

"Jo, how far do you want me to go?" she whispered, hoping to hear the right answer.
"Gawd... do it... I'm ready... do it," Joanna croaked, wrapping her arms around the body on top of her.

Liliana grinned and moved her forearms under Joanna's upper body, ending up with a firm grip on the tall woman's shoulders so she had something to drive against.

She slowly began to rock her hips in a rhythm that would ensure that her thigh would grind against Joanna's dripping wet center. The moment she started, Joanna tightened the grip she had around Liliana's body and began to moan loudly.

Liliana soon picked up the pace, and before long, their bodies moved as one in the ancient, carnal dance.

Joanna felt her body responding to each of Liliana's moves with one of its own; thrusting, pushing, grinding over and over again into Liliana's thigh that had turned quite slick from the copious amounts of fluids emanating from Joanna's center. The lack of friction slowly began to frustrate her and she started to whimper, hoping that her lover would do something about it.

Liliana did, by changing position. Soon, the two women were back at full speed, getting the maximum out of their unexpected joining.

Joanna's climax came closer and closer, and near the end, all she was able to do was to hold on to Liliana's body as a powerful tidal wave threatened to drown her from the inside out.

When her orgasm finally came, a burning hot wave swept through her body, sending her crashing over the edge so decisively that she felt she was falling from the top of the Empire State Building. Bucking repeatedly into Liliana's thigh, she allowed the orgasm to work its way through her system by letting out a strangled, choked up cry that eventually turned into an all-out moan.

To allow Joanna to come down gently, Liliana continued the rhythmic motion for a few more thrusts, but then slowed down and stopped. Chuckling quietly to herself, she climbed up Joanna's body and placed a kiss on her lips.

"I guess I don't have to ask if you liked that...?" she whispered, laying down a line of little kisses on Joanna's jaw and throat.

"I... I c... I can't b-believe we j-just did that. I..."

"Shhh. We did. We both wanted it, and we did it. Like it should be."

As Joanna's breath slowly came down to regular levels, she opened her eyes and looked around the bedroom. The room was tastefully decorated with abstract paintings on two of the walls, a full-size mirror and several closets. From her position on the bed, she was looking straight up at a ceiling lamp that resembled origami, and to her right, a window was covered by a set of venetian blinds.

Liliana was still on top of her, but the nudity and the intimacy suddenly felt invasive for Joanna so she gently pushed the naked woman away.

Realizing what she had done, Joanna sat up on the edge of the bed, buried her face in her hands and let out a long, trembling sigh.

Liliana rolled over onto her right side and propped her head up on her arm. "What's wrong, Jo?"
"Gawd, I... I can't believe I just cheated on my girlfriend. Jesus!" Joanna said, rubbing her forehead over and over again.

"Well, you did. You saw something you wanted and you went for it," Liliana said with a shrug. With her free hand, she began to draw a doodle on Joanna's naked back, but her hand was brushed away.

"Is that all you have to say?" Joanna said, turning around to look at the naked principal.

"Well... yes."

"Jesus!"

"Jo, the way you're acting makes me think this was your first spontaneous fuck. That can't be right...? Not the way you look," Liliana said and resumed her doodling on Joanna's strong back.

The tender touch made Joanna shiver and she jumped off the bed to get away from it. "Yes, it was!" she said, angrily running her hand through her hair that had broken loose from the ponytail.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't think someone like you would be willing to live in a box your whole life."

"In a box? What the hell are you talking about?" Joanna said and began to scoop up her clothes.

"The little box labeled Women's Place in Society."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it! I just cheated on my girlfriend!"

"Well, just invite her over the next time," Liliana said, rolling over onto her back and putting her arms behind her head.

"Yeah, right. Besides, there's not gonna be a next time. Can I use your shower? I don't want to go to work smelling like... this."

"Sure. First door on the left out in the hall."

Joanna bent down to pick up her service pistol. A glance at Liliana's naked body gave her a small, but quite pleasant, jolt and she quickly left the bedroom before she succumbed to her libido again.

---

Ten minutes later, Joanna came out of the bathroom fully dressed. Sighing, she clipped the holster onto her belt and tucked her hair into a ponytail.

"Jo, you never asked me the questions you said you had for me...?" Liliana said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

"One or two of 'em have been answered now," Joanna said and walked over to stand in the doorway to the bedroom.

"Really?"
"Yeah. Liliana, you're hosting sex parties over at the school, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"With the boarders?"

"Yes. Nothing wrong in that, Detective. They're all above the legal age."

"Has Mark Gerlach ever been to one of them?"

Liliana licked her lips and looked down. She nodded.

"I need the names of the other participants. They might know something," Joanna said.

"All right, I'll make you a list, but... Jo, you must promise me to keep everything low-key."

"I can't give you any promises, Liliana. We're chasing a killer."

"It's not for my sake, it's for the boarders."

"No promises," Joanna said in a steely voice. A sudden suspicion entered her mind and she cocked her head. "This list... there'll be both men and women on it, right?"

"No, only men."

Joanna scrunched up her face and started tapping her index finger against her lips. "In that case, I guess you're only the organizer and not a participant?"

Liliana let out a saucy chuckle and got off the bed.

"I don't believe in labels, only in fluidity, Jo. If you insist on slapping a label on my sexuality, 'Bi' is the one that comes closest."

"Oh... I didn't know."

"There are thousands of things you don't know about me, Detective," Liliana said as she began to pick up her clothes. Soon holding an armful of garments, she walked over to the window and opened the venetian blinds, allowing the sunlight to stream into the bedroom and to illuminate every square inch of her near-perfect physique.

Joanna had to swallow several times at the sight of Liliana's planes and curves being illuminated by the sun. When the principal insisted on staying at the window, Joanna spun around in a sudden fit of shyness. "I'm beginning to realize that now."

"Well, go ahead and ask me. Ask me anything, I'll answer it, I promise."

"Liliana Zinovia, who *are* you?" Joanna said with her back turned towards the principal.

Liliana chuckled and closed the blinds. "My birth name was Liliana Elena Anastasia Zinovia Apostolidis, but since that's such a bitch to write on forms, I legally changed it to Liliana Zinovia when I turned eighteen. My parents were immigrants from Greece, they arrived just after the Second World War. I've
lived in the Big City all my life, save for a few years where I lived upstate with my ex-husband. I turned forty late last year, and I've been the principal of the Jeremy Malone Boarding School for two years, nine months, uh, seventeen days and probably a few hours. Anything else you need to know?"

"Maybe later," Joanna said, still digesting all that information.

"Give me ten minutes to shower and then I'll drive you back to your-"

"No, thanks. I'll catch a cab," Joanna said, walking past the naked Liliana to grab her blazer.

"You run hot and cold, you know that?"

"You said it wouldn't look good if you left the school in a cruiser... well, I say it won't look good if I return with you. Might get people talking."

"Who cares?"

"I care." Joanna put on her blazer and patted her pocket to check if she had her wallet. Suddenly overcome by the worst mixed emotions she'd ever felt, she began to blush. "Thanks for... for today, Liliana. I'll talk to you later," she said quietly before she left the apartment in a hurry.

_*_*_*_*_

A while later, Joanna paid the driver and stepped out of the yellow taxicab. As she was walking the brief distance to her Crown Victoria, her head was buzzing with what she had just done and the possible implications and results of her actions.

Her body was still humming from the afterglow; the best one she'd had in years. 'The best one I've had since hooking up with Betty,' Joanna thought, feeling her guilty conscience weigh down on her shoulders like a ton of bricks.

The sun was even stronger now so she took off her blazer and put it on the back seat next to the long-forgotten overcoat. Just as she got into the hot Crown Victoria, Liliana's charcoal gray Taurus came up Locklin Park Lane and crossed over the gravelly parking lot, disappearing around the corner of the admin wing to get to the private parking on the other side.

Joanna tracked the car with her eyes, unsure of what she was supposed to do now. With a sigh, she reached for the ignition key.

---

Once Joanna reached Nadine Boulevard, she realized that Vernon Kransky would notice at once that something was wrong, so she decided to stall going to work.

'I'm several hours late, anyway. What's another thirty minutes?' she thought, looking at her wristwatch which read twenty past eleven a.m.
To take her mind off what she had done, she tried to turn on the radio, but the entire dial played nothing but rock'n'roll oldies, dreary talk radio or religious broadcasts. Growling to herself, she turned off the radio and rolled down the driver's side window instead to get a blast of Big City air.

At the end of Nadine Boulevard, she turned right onto Third Street, intent on drowning her sorrows in a small bar she had often frequented - Unfortunately, the street was blocked by a large semi-truck unloading goods to one of the other bars.

"Aw, crap... crap!" she said out loud and engaged in a three-point turn. Once she had completed the maneuver, she rolled back to the red light at Nadine and Third.

Joanna rolled her eyes and stuck her head out of the window, looking at the skies. "You're punishing me, right? Whoever you are, you're punishing me. Crap, I might as well go to work."

When the red lights turned green, Joanna mashed the gas which made the heavy V8 engine in the front of the Crown Victoria roar to life. She took the intersection on two wheels, but slowed down as soon as she had made it into the inside lane.

Settling down to a steady cruise, she put her arm on the window sill and let out a long sigh. 'From now on, it'll be going from bad to worse. God, what the hell am I going to say to Betty? "Hi, sweetie pie, guess what? I had my brains fucked out today by a spicy little doll!" Jesus, what am I going to say to Betty...?'

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Without really thinking, Joanna turned onto Fillmore Boulevard and started to look for the apartment building she had just left. When she found it, she pulled over at the curb in a no-parking zone. To be safe from any nosy beat cops, she turned on the red emergency light on the dashboard.

Looking at Liliana's fifteen-story apartment building, Joanna could see that it was solid middle class rather than upper-class. On the right side of the unmanned main entrance, a ramp sloped downwards to the attached parking garage, and on the left side, a small, temporary newspaper stand had been erected.

The newspaper stand appeared to be selling paperbacks as well and Joanna's buzzing mind came to the conclusion that if she found a little gift for Betty, her own guilty conscience would be eased.

She turned off the red emergency light and moved away from the curb, looking for an opportunity to make a U-turn. When it finally came, she quickly swung the Crown Victoria around and parked in front of the newspaper stand.

"Hello, Detective, how may I help you?" the owner of the stand said. He was an elderly African-American man that appeared quite frail at first glance but whose eyes didn't miss a beat.

"You're selling paperbacks as well?" Joanna said, looking at the vast selection of newspapers.

"That's right. Only second-hand, though, but I've got a lot of great titles. Looking for anything in particular, Detective? Crime dramas, romance, sci-fi, biographies..." the man said, pointing at various piles of books.

"Biographies... would you happen to have the recent one on the actress Laurie McCanless?"

"Shoot, don't think I have, no."
"Oh. Darn..."

"You were here earlier today, weren't you? Not too many six-footers like yourself running around these parts."

"Uh... yeah. I was here."

"On official business?" the man said, leaning forward on his little chair.

Joanna could tell that he was fishing for some juicy gossip, but she simply put on her game face and shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't divulge any information at this point, Sir."

The man chuckled and leaned back. "All right. Sorry I couldn't help you with the biography."

"Ah, it was a long shot, anyway. I'll just buy the Tribune instead," Joanna said and dug into her pocket to find a few coins for the newspaper.

"Thank you, Detective. Have a nice day."

"Same to you, Sir," Joanna said and walked back to her cruiser.

---

Twenty minutes later, Joanna stepped into her office and put the newspaper down on her desk. She hung her overcoat and her blazer on the hallstand and then sat down in her chair. As her rear end made contact with the wooden surface, a brief, stinging pain shot up from her privates that had been given quite a workout in the rendezvous at Liliana's apartment.

A new wave of guilt swept over her and she pinched the bridge of her nose to get away from it. When it had receded, she started shuffling around to find a spot that wouldn't give her a constant reminder of her dirty little secret.

Moments later, Vernon came into the office carrying an armful of files. Stopping in the doorway, he shot Joanna a pointed look and arced his bushy eyebrow.

"I know, I know. Good morning, Vern," Joanna said, unable to hold her partner's look. Instead, she grabbed a folder and opened it, pretending to be reading the print on the inside of the cover. She was sure Vernon could tell exactly what she had been doing, but she couldn't take the conflict at that time.

"Mornin', Jo. Did you get anything from Buford? Apart from what you already told me over the phone?"

Joanna licked her lips and leaned back in her chair. The movement created another brief stab of pain and she quickly shuffled forward again. "Not really. He's further out of the loop than he thinks he is."

"Mmmm. What about the principal? Did you get anything out of her?"

Joanna dropped the ball point pen she had just picked up and it clattered noisily to the floor. As she was ducking down to hide her acute blush, she took a deep breath and shook her head. 'This is not going to work. This isn't going to work at all...'
"Yeah. She admitted to hosting sex parties at the school, and she said that Mark Gerlach had visited at least one of them," Joanna said when she came back up, clutching the ball point pen in her hand.

"Whoa, really? Well, that points the spotlight at a scorned lover or a sex game that went wrong. Hell, if that turns out to be the case, Bill Larsen will never let us forget that he called it first."

"And she's preparing a list of the, uh... participants."

"Excellent work, Jo. That should bring us a bit closer."

"Thank you. In addition to that, I got a little background info on her, but nothing that'll help us move on, I don't think," Joanna said and took the top folder from the nearest pile.

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As the day wore on, Joanna's guilty conscience took a heavy toll on her social skills. By the time her shift was ending, she snapped, barked and growled at anyone brave enough to go near her.

Outside their office, Vernon stood next to William Larsen, speaking with him in hushed tones. They were both observing Joanna who was hunched over her desk, writing a report by hand while wearing a sneer that said 'stay away' in no uncertain terms.

Even though the two detectives tried to speak quietly, Joanna's ears picked up everything they were saying.

"It's been getting worse and worse all day. Don't know what's bugging her and I'm too scared to ask!" Vernon said, chuckling.

"Probably her time of the month. Happens to even the best of 'em. You should've seen one of my exes, Vern. Man, she turned into Godzilla on a regular basis. No matter what I did or didn't do, what I said or didn't say, nothing was ever right or enough for her. Drove me nuts, that."

'She would have to be Godzilla from the get go to spend more than ten minutes with you, Bill,' Joanna thought.

"Nah, I don't think it's Jo's time of the month. She doesn't usually act that way when it is. Although, she did commandeer one of my cushions, so I guess you could be right."

'If I told you the real reason, you'd both go into cardiac arrest, you big sissies.'

"Maybe she's discovered she's pregnant," William said and took a long swig from his indispensable cup of coffee.

"Jo Powell pregnant? How? By immaculate conception?"

"Hey, stranger things have happened in the police force."

"True."

'Are you quite done talking about me like I'm not here...?' Joanna thought, turning her head towards the two detectives.
"Women. Can't live with 'em, can't chain 'em to the... Evening, Jo," William said when he noticed that Joanna was looking at him. He waved at her but she just sneered and went back to work.


'You big chicken!' Joanna thought.

After giving William Larsen a thumbs-up, Vernon moved over to stand in the doorway. "Are you gonna work late tonight, Jo?"

"Yeah. I have a ton of paperwork to go through and because I got here so late, there's a lot of it left."

"It can wait until tomorrow, it's eight thirty in the evening."

"I'd rather do it now, thanks. Go home, Vern. I'll... uh, I'll lock up when I'm done."

"Did you call Betty yet and tell her?"

Once more, Joanna dropped the ball point pen she was using, and once more, she let out an impressive series of cusswords when she ducked under the table to pick it up.

"You oughtta. You know how nervous the wives can get. She's a good woman, Jo. She doesn't deserve that kind of aggro. Call her. See ya tomorrow," Vernon said and tapped his knuckles on the doorjamb. "Yeah... you're right. I'll call her. See ya, Vernon."

As soon as Vernon had left the doorway, Joanna leaned forward and buried her face in her hands. She sat like that for several minutes before she got up and closed the door to the corridor.

On her way back, she picked up the old-fashioned landline phone and carried it back to her desk. After sitting down carefully, she stared hard at the telephone, almost like she was trying to establish a connection with her eyes alone.

Finally making the decision, she picked up the receiver and began dialing her own number. When she reached the second to last digit, her courage deserted her and she slammed the receiver down onto the hook again.

On the second attempt, she only made it as far as the third digit.

"Oh, Goddammit!" she said out loud and threw her hands in the air.

On the third attempt, her fingers dialed Liliana's number instead on their own accord. When Joanna realized what was happening, she put down the receiver with such force that several pieces of paper fell off the desk and fluttered to the floor.

Growling, Joanna got up and began to pace her office. In her mind, the telephone was taunting her quite severely. Even though it looked perfectly innocent, she knew that it had been possessed by an evil spirit that prevented her from reaching out to anyone.
She stopped pacing, hunched over and let her shoulders and arms shake loose, like she'd been taught in the department's anti-stress classes. It seemed to do the trick because she went straight back to the phone, picked up the receiver and dialed her home number.

'Betty Johansen speaking.'

"Hey, babe, it's me," Joanna said. To her own ears, her voice trembled quite badly, but she hoped that it was only her imagination.

'Hey, Jo. Are you working late tonight?'

"Yeah, it's been one hell of a day. I won't be much longer, though. Did you plan dinner yet?"

'Uh, well, I've brought some sausages out of the deep freeze, yeah.'

"Put 'em back in. We're going out to eat tonight."

'Oh yeah?'

"Yep."

'Super, Jo. What's the occasion?'

"Oh, just that... just that I love you. And I've been working late so often recently, sooooo... you know."

At the other end of the connection, Betty fell silent, and for a split second, Joanna felt an irrational fear that her lover had already heard some rumors, knowing that nurses were second to none when it came to gossip.

'Awwww, I love you too, hon. Great! What time will you be here?'

"Forty-five minutes, roughly... is that okay?"

'Sure! Where are we going?'

"Anywhere you want to go, babe. Uh, provided that we can pay for it."

'I'll think of something. Neato! Talk to ya later, Jo. Love ya!'

"Love you, too," Joanna said and hung up. The words grated on her ears - and her soul - and she suddenly realized with alarming clarity that the whole deal would end badly, no matter how hard she tried to smooth out the bumps.

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Joanna walked up the garden path to her house with a niggling, stinging pain in her crotch and a throbbing one in her heart. The evening had turned chilly so she was wearing both her blazer and her overcoat, wishing that they would turn carnivorous and swallow her whole.

When she reached the door, she didn't even have time to put the key into the lock before Betty had opened it, wearing a very nice white button-down shirt and a pair of blue jeans that Joanna had given her for her birthday.
"Hi, baby!" she said, pulling Joanna into an embrace. "I dressed up for you. Like it?"

"Yeah, you look good tonight. Not that you're ever not... you know, looking good, ha ha."

"That's easy for you to say, Mizzy smooth talker," Betty said and stood up on tiptoes to place a loving kiss on Joanna's lips.

When their lips met, Joanna felt like the biggest S.O.B. to ever walk the earth and she was unable to respond much to Betty's kiss.

"I've made up my mind. I think we should try out the Santa Domingo Steakhouse downtown. That's the new Argentinean place. It got great reviews in the Sunday papers. Is that all right with you?"

"Oh, sure. Anything for you, babe."

"Oh... well, in that case, perhaps we should stay at home instead? That seemed to work a treat yesterday," Betty said, sliding her hands into Joanna's rear pockets.

Joanna's heart skipped several beats and she could only manage a strangled, little squeak. "Oh, uh... uh, I'm really hungry. So, Santa Domingo Steakhouse sounds fine," she croaked.

"All right. Let me get my jacket. I'll lock up, you can go down and start my car, okay?"

"Sure."

Betty shimmied away from the doorway and back into their house, leaving Joanna standing all alone. The detective nodded to herself and began to shuffle back down the garden path, turning left when she reached the grass to go to the garage where Betty's forest green Mazda was parked.

---

Ten minutes later, the two women drove through the busy streets of the Big City. Where Betty talked nonstop about the restaurant's reviews in the Sunday papers and what she wanted to order, Joanna was quiet as a mouse, sitting with her hands in her lap in the passenger seat and thinking about the other car ride she'd had earlier in the day.

When Betty noticed that Joanna was unusually quiet, she put a hand on the tall woman's thigh, a gesture that spooked Joanna far more than it should have.

"Hey, Jo, are you all right? Did something bad happen today? If it did, you know I'm willing to listen."

"I'm... I'm fine, Bets. Really. It's just this, uh... the murder case out at the boarding school. It's scrambling my brains. We just can't seem to get a damn break. We've spoken to dozens of people, but none of them can give us any leads."

"Oh, yeah. I figured it might be that boarding school thing. Can you believe that the victim... what was his name?"

"Mark Gerlach."
"Gerlach, yeah. Can you believe that he's been forgotten already? His parents must be beside themselves with grief, yet there wasn't anything in the papers today, not even a paragraph."

"I guess that's how it goes. There's always something new that grabs the front page," Joanna said quietly.

"It's tragic, in my opinion. Anyway, did you hear about the gang-related shootings downtown? It sounded scary. I hope they won't show up while we're there."

"I caught some of it. I think it's just a couple of gangs fighting a turf war. Nothing unusual over in downtown, I'm afraid. Happens more than you think."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad I'm not working at the Community Hospital. Oh boy, they must get a lot of poor, miserable people there, being down on Jefferson and everything."

"I s'pose."

Betty turned her head to look at Joanna's curiously stony face. "Listen, Jo, are you still good for going out to eat? If you're not, we can-"

"Hell, yes. I invited you out, didn't I? No, let's go and eat. If I get drunk on some strong Argentinean beer, the world we live in might actually make some sense for a change," Joanna said, only partially joking.

Betty chuckled and turned left onto the Twelfth Street bridge that would take them across the Monroe river. "All right... but I'm not carrying you up the stairs and into bed tonight. You're on your own there, pal."

"Yes, dear. I'll behave... or sleep on the couch." 'That's where I'm headed anyhow,' Joanna thought.

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CHAPTER 4

One week later, Thursday, April 21st.

Joanna's Crown Victoria sped through the congested streets, ducking and diving between seemingly the entire City's fleet of cars, vans and trucks. The siren was going at full blast and the red emergency light on the dashboard and in the headlights were flashing away furiously.

When she finally reached the entrance to Locklin Park Lane, she took the turn on two wheels, wrestling the heavy Ford around the corner. Almost at once, she had to pull over for an ambulance going the other way with full lights and sirens.

Once the ambulance had passed her, she stepped on the gas and entered the gravelly parking lot where patrolmen were cordonning off the path to the dorms to stop a horde of camera crews from gaining access.

After stopping in a cloud of dust and gravel, Joanna jumped from the car and hurried into the admin building, ignoring the shouts from the reporters.
She ran up the stairs taking two steps at a time, barging past a couple of uniformed policemen who were going the other way. After she had gone through the glass double doors and entered the hall where Liliana Zinovia's office was located, the first thing she saw was a pair of bare legs sticking out of the door to the secretary's office.

"Hey, Jo," Vern said calmly, holding his indispensable notepad.

Finally arriving at the grisly scene, Joanna could see that the new victim was another naked young man. She breathed a sigh of relief, trying to camouflage it by pretending to be winded from the run.

"His name is Brian Roper. He's nineteen. Cause of death is manual strangulation, as you can see. He's got petechial hemorrhaging in the eyes and his tracheal bone appears to be broken. It's fairly similar to Mark Gerlach," Vernon said and pointed at the young man's neck.

Joanna nodded, putting on her blue latex examination gloves and kneeling down next to the dead body. She gave the torso a gentle push to look at the black line around its throat.

"Is he from the Kentucky dorm as well?" Joanna said in a slightly croaky voice.

"No, he's from the one called North Dakota."

"Where's the principal, and who was in the ambulance?"

"Principal Zinovia is downstairs in the same conference room we used last week. She's being debriefed by a crisis counselor. It was her secretary... uh, Nancy Weidemann, who found the body. She had one hell of a shock, as you might imagine."

"Yeah. Poor woman. Vern, I need a blow-by-blow."

"All right. Here's what went down according to principal Zinovia. She told me that before the ambulance arrived, she had a brief moment alone with her secretary. When Nancy Weidemann came to the office to open for the day, at ten to eight, she thought she saw a man dressed in dark clothes loitering outside the admin wing. Apparently, she didn't think much of it at the time."

"'A man'... Jesus, there are hundreds of men here. Was Lil... I mean, was principal Zinovia able to add to that description?"

"I'm afraid not, Jo. Anyway, after Nancy Weidemann had unlocked the door to the office, she began to make some coffee. At a few minutes past eight, she heard a weird sound from the hall."

"What kind of weird?"

"I don't know. She went to check, but she only made it to the door. When she turned the handle, the body tipped over and fell into the office."

"It must have been resting against the door."

"Probably. And poor Mrs. Weidemann spent the next fifteen minutes screaming her lungs out. Principal Zinovia was able to hear it way up in her apartment. She ran down here at once and then called us."

"And she didn't see anyone on her way here?"
"Well, when she heard that Mrs. Weidemann had seen a man dressed in dark clothes, she remembered that she had seen someone matching that just outside the admin building, but she told me that she wasn't entirely sure if it was real or if she had imagined it."

"I need to speak with her," Joanna said and spun around, but Vernon grabbed her arm.

"Jo, we're not done here. First things first. Just before you got here, I arranged with the first officer on site to come and brief us. You need to be present for that or else I have to relay everything to you afterwards."

"Of course. Yeah. Sorry," Joanna said rubbed her forehead. She looked up and down the hall for the uniformed cop, but he wasn't anywhere in sight. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to focus on the task at hand. "Wow, the school is gonna get hammered by the press and the parents. So are we, for that matter," she said, discreetly wiping a bead of sweat off her brow.

"Yeah, that's going to be so much fun. I can hardly wait. Anyway... two things of note here. One, Brian Roper doesn't have a bruise on his solar plexus like Mark Gerlach did. Two, unlike Mark Gerlach, Brian Roper's tracheal bone is broken which means the killer had to apply extreme force to get him down. Also, he has a visible indent after a finger ring, appropriately enough on the ring finger of his left hand," Vernon said, pointing at the victim's left arm.

"Hmmm?" Joanna said and knelt down again. As she picked up the arm, she could clearly see where the ring had been. "Yeah, I see it. Where does that fit in?"

"On the surface, it doesn't. But I'm thinking the perpetrator might have taken it as a souvenir or a trophy," Vernon said over the rim of his reading glasses.

"A trophy? Good theory," Joanna said and let go of the victim's arm. "Brian Roper. I remember his name from the list Miss Zinovia gave us. He was one of the party-goers," she continued.

"I don't think there's much doubt anymore, Jo. It's someone who's pissed off at those parties. Maybe at the moral decay... maybe because he wasn't allowed to take part, that's hard to say, but it's definitely someone who's angry and upset that something like that is taking place here."

"Charles Buford Smith," Joanna said somberly.

"Could be. We need to take him in for questioning."

"I agree."

She went back to checking Brian Roper's body, uncovering a few interesting little facts. "He's a different type than Mark Gerlach. Beefier and with broader shoulders. Got a tattoo on his back near his shoulder blade... the usual, a tribal pattern of some kind," Joanna said.

"Yeah, he's one of the athletes... a real all-American," Vernon interjected.

"Another connection to Buford. You know, I think I may have seen this guy the other day. I think he was one of the young men playing soccer when I spoke to Buford down at the soccer pitch."

"Nasty."

"And he hasn't been circumcised," Joanna said, looking at the victim's genitals.
"Is that important?" Vernon said with a chuckle, tapping the butt of his pencil down onto the notepad.

"Probably not." Joanna started biting her cheek. Looking at the victim gave her a strong pang of jealousy; images of Liliana being with Brian Roper at one of the parties ran through her mind and she had to shake her head to get rid of them.

"He looks like he was a strong fella. Jo, can you see Buford taking him down?"

"Well... not really, I'll admit to that. The toxicology report on Mark Gerlach didn't show any signs of sedatives in his blood, but he was less brawny than Brian Roper so Buford might not have needed it. Hence the bruise on Mark's solar plexus." Joanna leaned across the body and moved her hands around the back of the skull. "He doesn't have any bumps or abrasions on his skull," she continued.

"I'll tell the coroner's to rush the toxi report," Vernon said and made a note on his notepad.

"Detectives?" a female voice said behind them. When Joanna glanced in that direction, she saw that the voice belonged to a uniformed officer who looked like she was fresh out of the academy.

"Yes?" Joanna said, still holding the victim's head in her hands.

"I'm officer Teri Warren. I was told to report to you."

"Right. You were first officer on site?" Vernon said, pushing his reading glasses further up his nose.

"That's right, Detective. When my partner and I arrived, we quickly established that the reported dead body was indeed that. The secretary who had found him was completely hysterical, so we requested an ambulance for her. The principal was calmer and she informed us that she might have seen a man dressed in dark clothes at the stairs down the other end of the hall. We quickly set off in pursuit, but we never saw anyone anywhere. We returned to the principal, and... I guess you know the rest."

The first thing through Joanna's mind when officer Warren had finished giving her report was the surprising fact that Liliana had been alone with the body while both police officers had pursued the suspected perpetrator. 'Why would she do that?' she thought. Her eyes moved to the indent on Brian Roper's finger. 'Did she take the ring? Did it incriminate her somehow?'

Joanna got up and took off her latex gloves. Wearing a deep frown, she began to go over the permutations in her head. "Officer, how long were you pursuing the man the principal mentioned?"

"How long...? Oh, not more than three-four minutes. Maybe five. The parking lot was deserted when we came out of the door a floor down, but it was possible to see quite far around the campus. Nothing moved anywhere," the officer said. After a brief pause, she continued: "We didn't have access to a K9 unit, so we couldn't do much more, Detective."

"I wasn't accusing you of anything, officer," Joanna said pensively. She looked down at the missing ring again and began to rub her forehead.

"Will that be all, Detectives?"

Joanna looked at Vernon who nodded an affirmative reply.

"Yes, you can go back to... no, wait," Joanna said and set off after the young officer.
"Yes, Detective?"

"When you arrived, were there any cars down in the public parking lot? That's the one in front of this building."

"Hmmm, let me see... yes, there was one car. A dark late-model sedan. Why?"

"Because there are no civilian cars down there now."

"Oh... shit. We should've performed a more thorough check," Officer Warren said sheepishly.

"You didn't happen to catch the license plate, did ya?" Joanna said with a wistful smile.

"No. Sorry."

"All right. Go back to your partner."

"Thank you, Detective," Officer Warren said, thankful that she didn't have to suffer a chewing-out.

"Now what?" Vernon said as he watched the young policewomen exit the hall.

"Now we pick up Buford and make him squeal," Joanna said in a steely voice.

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Three hours later, Jo stepped out of interrogation room #3 to get a mouthful of fresh air and a respite from Charles Buford Smith's incessant whining.

The air inside the small room was stale and stinking of sweat which was coming off the portly gym teacher by the bucket-load, partly because of the high temperatures and partly because of the things he'd had to reveal to the detectives.

Joanna undid the two top buttons of her button-down shirt to get some fresh air down her front. April had turned quite summery and the air-conditioning was already running on maximum everywhere, except in the interrogation rooms that were deliberately kept warm and stuffy.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Lieutenant Nicholas Barnes come towards her with determined steps, making her groan inwardly.

"Detective Powell, I've been told that you have a suspect in the boarding school homicides?"

"A possible suspect, Lou. But, yes. He's in I-R three as we speak," Joanna said, pointing behind her with her thumb.

"Excellent. Is he connected to the school?"

"Yes, he's a dorm master and the gym teacher."

"Oh... how long have you had him in there?" Barnes said, looking with glee at the closed door.

"Just about an hour now, Lou."
"Do you think you'll get a full confession today, Detective? The press is really on our backs for allowing the killer to run free for so long."

Joanna chuckled dryly and closed the buttons of her shirt. "Well, we might, but it'll take a while. In the mean time, we -"

"So you don't like him for the two homicides?" Barnes said, clearly surprised by Joanna's statement.

"I didn't say that, Lou. These things aren't always straightforward. In the mean time, we can nail him for aiding and abetting a fugitive. Turns out that Buford is hiding his half-brother who is wanted for parole violations. Buford gave up that information hoping that we might use it to cut a deal with him."

"On two homicides? Hardly. Hmmm. Hmmm!" Barnes said, nervously rubbing his chin. "We need to get some kind of results today, Detective. It's imperative we do. I have the Chief of D's breathing down my neck. We need some results!"

"We'll get some results, Lou, but it might not be today. Like I said, these things aren't always straightforward."

"Today, Powell," Nicholas Barnes said, pointing his index finger at Joanna. Once he had made his point, the Lieutenant turned around and walked back up the hall.

Joanna kept standing at the door for a few moments, grumbling severely under her breath. Just as she was about to go back inside the interrogation room, one of the phone operators came out into the hallway, holding a note in her hand.

"Detective Powell, just in time. There's a caller for you on line three," the operator said.

"All right. Thanks. I'll be there in a flash," Joanna said and knocked on the door to the interrogation room. After opening it, she shot Buford a steely, no-nonsense look that made him squirm in his seat. "Vern, let's take five. I have a phone call waiting."

A few moments later, Joanna threw herself into her swivel-chair and pressed the flashing knob on the phone. "Detective Joanna Powell speaking."

'Are you in charge of the Jeremy Malone murders?' a male voice said.

"That's right."

'I have some information for you."

"Oh? And your name is?" Joanna leaned forward on her swivel-chair and rummaged around her busy desk for her trusty notepad. Finally finding it, she picked up a ball point pen and got ready to write.

'I'm the Caped Crusader.'

"Oh, ha, ha. If you're bullshitting me, you'll be sorry."

'I'm not. Can you meet me at the playground across from the precinct house in, say, five minutes?"

"Why not come here?"
'Don't want my face all over the news, thanks.'

"All right."

'And trust me, I'm not bullshitting you.'

"Good. Five minutes," Joanna said and hung up. She looked at Vernon who was leaning against the doorframe. "I'm just gonna pop out for a few minutes, Vern. Someone may have some info for us on the boarding school case."

Getting up, she made sure her service pistol was firmly in place and then she grabbed her blazer from the backrest of her chair.

Vernon looked above the rim of his reading glasses and made a sound that resembled a harrumph. "You need some backup?"

"Nope."

"Stay safe, Jo. You know how many nuts there are out there."

"I will."

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Four minutes and forty seconds later, Joanna crossed the street in front of the precinct house and entered the park, headed for the small playground. Even against the very colorful, noisy background of what seemed to be a battalion of small children playing, she easily spotted a young man sitting at a park bench, sipping a can of Diet Coke.

Walking towards him, she put her hand near her service pistol so she could draw it quickly if the need arose. The man was white, roughly twenty and he had an effeminate air about him. His hair was white-blond and very short, and he wore blue jeans and a black Rokkstarr sweatshirt with the hood folded down.

"Let me guess, you must be Detective Powell?" he said once Joanna was close to him.

"That's right. And you're the Caped Crusader."

"Actually, my name is Maurice Jerrod. Everybody calls me Mo. I just didn't want to tell you over the phone in case you recorded it."

'Maurice Jerrod. I remember that name from the list Liliana gave me. So Mo Jerrod has been to the parties, too...'' Joanna thought, studying the young man intently. "All right. Hi, Mo. What brings you here?" she said, still standing on the opposite side of the park bench.

"Please, Detective... have a seat. You're making me nervous."

Joanna quickly scanned the area. When she found nothing unusual, she sat down and put her left hand on the tabletop - the right was still near her gun.
"I have some info on Mark Gerlach, on Brian Roper, on Liliana Zinovia... and on what they were doing together in principal Zinovia's apartment after dark," Mo said conspiratorially.

Joanna looked the young man straight in the eye, debating with herself if she should tell him that they already knew most of what he was about to say. "Oh?"

"First of all, Mark was gay but Brian was straight."

"Is that relevant for the case?" Joanna said, reaching into her pocket for her notepad.

"Yes and no. Anyway, in the daytime, the dear principal exudes class, right? Well, let me tell you... nights, when the mood hits her and the crowd is the right one, Liliana the principal turns into Mistress Liliana... and boy, oh boy does she know how to throw a party."

Joanna began to grind her teeth; her mind was rapidly flooded with images that very much confirmed Mo's statement of 'when the mood hits her'. "'Mistress'...? Like a dominatrix?"

"She doesn't do the stuff with latex and the chains and whips, no. Her tools are acres of black leather, elbow-length gloves, high heels, a black half-mask that covers her eyes... and..." Mo leaned in towards Joanna and lowered his voice. "...a ten-inch ivory strap-on dildo that she wears on a harness underneath her leather outfit."

Joanna's heart skipped several beats and she stared blankly at Mo's face. The Mistress part had been surprising enough to her, but this latest tidbit almost blew her mind. Her eyebrows went down, then up, then down again. As she processed the new information, she started chewing on her cheek to try to get the images of a fully equipped Liliana out of her head.

"Where do Mark Gerlach and Brian Roper fit in?"

"Oh..." Maurice went into a snicker that made Joanna narrow her eyes. "Well, Mark was mostly on his knees... from what I've heard," he continued, snickering again.

"Very funny. You said he was gay...? What's a gay man doing having sex with a woman?"

"Once they got started, they apparently didn't look at each other. Mark was on his hands and knees and Mistress Liliana was behind him... do I have to spell it out for you?"

"No, I guess you don't," Joanna said and made a few more notes.

"Word has it that Liliana scared off her first husband because she got her kicks from ramming him doggie-style... take it from me, Detective, any straight guy would run away from that."

"That's definitely hearsay, Mo, let's stick to the facts. You know, I can't see a buff fella like Brian Roper accepting such a... uh, such an approach."

"He didn't. From what I know, he and Mistress Liliana did it the old-fashioned way. The Mistress is quite flexible. Uh... no pun intended, but quite apt in this case," Maurice said, snickering loudly.

Hearing that, Joanna really started grinding her teeth. 'I knew it. I knew it from the minute I saw those broad shoulders and those strong arms. I damn well knew he and Liliana had done it!' she thought, swallowing angrily.
Another thought flashed through her mind and she cocked her head. "Mo, have you had sex with Miss Zinovia?"

"Oh, no, no, no. I've never been to any of those parties."

"Then how do you know all these details?"

"People talk."

"Look, Mo, I need to be frank with you. I've seen your name on a list of the people attending the parties. Principal Zinovia has supplied the list to help us with the investigation."

Maurice grimaced and started drawing a random pattern on the top of the wooden bench. "Oh... well... all right. I didn't know that. Will the list be made public?" he said, suddenly a lot paler than before.

"We'll do what we can to keep it hidden, but we can't give you any promises."

"Shit. I've been at the parties, but I haven't had sex with Mistress Liliana. I'm a bit of a voyeur, but not really a... do-er, if you know what I mean."

"So you were watching her having sex with some of the boarders?"

"Yep. Several times. The incident I talked about with Mark Gerlach happened at the first party I attended. I saw Brian, uh... taking her at the second party."

"Mmmm," Joanna said as she made a final note and closed the notepad.

"Does that count against me, Detective?"

"What I'd like to know is why you're telling me these things?"

"Oh, only to show you that there's more to Miss Zinovia than meets the eye. Literally," Maurice said, winking.

"Mo, who do you think killed Mark and Brian?" Joanna said, looking the young man squarely in the eye.

"Well... don't you have Buford Smith in for ques-"

"Forget Buford, who do you think killed those two men?"

The direct question made Maurice's face take on a serious note that hadn't been there earlier in the conversation. He shrugged and started fiddling with his fingernails. "I honestly don't know, Detective. I'm sure principal Zinovia didn't have anything to do with it. She was too fond of both of them, Mark in particular."

"Even if he wanted to end their relationship or something similar?"

"They never had one, they were only fuck-buddies, Detective. And let me tell you, there are plenty of other fish in that sea. Plenty. All principal Zinovia has to do is to bat an eyelid and they'll be lining up outside her office. Even though she's an older woman, she's still got it."
Joanna's left eyebrow twitched at the notion of a forty-year old being called 'an older woman', but she chose not to make a comment. "Mo, how many parties have you been to?"

"Three."

"You said Mark and then Brian were the principal's sexual partners at the first two parties... who was she with during the third?"

"No one. She performed an erotic dance for us. Didn't do anything for me, but the straight guys loved it."

'I'll bet,' Joanna thought. "When was this?"

"Two weeks ago, a couple of days before Mark's murder. The parties are held every three weeks. Well, I guess they won't be, now."

"Was Mark at the party where the principal danced for you?"

"Yes, I believe he was. Brian wasn't there, I think he had a cold or something. Maybe he was still sore... he and the principal really went at it!" Maurice said with a snicker, prompting Joanna to remember her own soreness from the other day.

"Mo, do you know how long principal Zinovia has been organizing the parties?"

"No, sorry."

"Did you ever see anyone there who looked like he or she didn't belong? Perhaps someone older...?"

"Hmmm... no. Mistress Liliana was the only one there over twenty-five. Oh, wait a minute, that's not right. In the third party I went to, there was a man as well. I guess he was in his late twenties or so. Kinda rough looking, a bit of a bruiser. I remember wondering what the hell he was doing there."

"Did he participate in the... uh...?"

"No, but he got most of Mistress Liliana's attention during her dance. When I asked around, people thought the principal had invited him. Actually, he looked like he had taken a wrong turn at a monster truck event somewhere," Maurice said with a snicker. Moments later, the smile faded from his face. "Gawd, could he be the killer?"

"Right now, we're keeping all possibilities open, Mo. Who knows, it might even be Mrs. Weidemann," Joanna said and got up.

Maurice laughed nervously and followed Joanna away from the bench. "Detective, please try to keep my name out of the headlines. Okay?" he said, folding up the hood.

"I'll try, Mo. But like I said before, no promises."

"That's good enough for me. Later."

_**_..._*_*_

When Joanna returned to the stationhouse, she needed a few moments for herself before she could resume interrogating Buford Smith, so she went into the ladies' room and stepped into the first available stall.
After locking the stall-door, she closed the lid on the toilet, sat down on the bowl and buried her face in her hands.

The powerful memory of Liliana Zinovia dancing for her in the apartment mixed with what Maurice Jerrod had told her about the things happening at the parties, and pretty soon, she had quite a buzz going - a buzz she knew only one thing could quell.

Someone else entered the ladies' room and Joanna quickly flushed the toilet so she didn't have to come up with any sort of excuse. Exiting the stall, she washed her hands and splashed some water in her heated face. She could feel her nipples straining against the fabric of her bra and she briefly considered going back into the stall to take care of business herself.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror to gauge how badly she was flushing. Satisfied that it wasn't too bad, she wiped her hands and her face on a paper towel and exited the ladies' room.

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"Joanna Powell, that has got to be *the* longest five minutes I've ever experienced," Vernon growled the instant she met him in the hall.

"I'm here now, ain't I?"

"Buford Smith has lawyered up."

"He's what?!"

"Not long after you left, Buford demanded a lawyer, and just now, a court-appointed attorney showed up, claiming one C.B. Smith as his client."

"Son of a bitch..." Joanna said and punched her fist into her open palm. "Buford must be keeping something else from us. This can't be about his fugitive brother. Do we have anything on him? Anything at all?"

"Not in my opinion, no. We need to let him go. For now."

"Shit. Perhaps it's for the better. He isn't a killer, Vern," Joanna said and ran a hand across her brow.

"I agree. He's a big-time sleazeball, but not a killer."

Joanna scrunched up her face and put a finger across her lips. "Just out of curiosity, I think I'll take a look at his half-brother. Who knows, we might get him to shovel some dirt on Buford. After all, he doesn't owe him anything."

"Good idea."

---

Ten minutes later, Joanna put the receiver back down on the telephone and leaned back in her swivel-chair.
"Anything?" Vern said, adjusting his glasses.

"Buford's half-brother is an electronics wizard. In a drunken stupor, he gave one of the salesmen in an electronics store downtown a bloody nose. That's how he violated his parole."

"So?"

"The original sentence was for setting up unauthorized surveillance equipment. Basically, he had set up a concealed camera in a nightclub's restroom. The images were transmitted to his home computer and then he distributed the best shots on the Net."

"Oh, what a charming fellow."

Joanna turned around in her chair and began to massage her temples with her index fingers. "Vern, I have a theory, but it's a wild one, so you might wanna throw one of your loafers at me."

"Go on," Vern said, chuckling.

"What if, in exchange for his silence, Buford forced his half-brother to set up a concealed camera or two somewhere in the boarding school...?"

Vern whistled and leaned back in his chair. "The showers?"

"The showers, the conference rooms, Mrs. Weidemann's office... the principal's apartment up on the sixth floor...?"

"That's certainly a wild theory, all right."

"While I was away, I spoke to one of the people on the list Miss Zinovia gave us, Maurice Jerrod. He was one of the party-goers and he told me a few, uh, juicy details. The parties all took place in Liliana Zinovia's apartment."

"Wow, and if Buford caught that on tape or disc or whatever, that would be one hell of a motherlode."

"Exactly."

"For blackmail, though. Not murder. And it's a pretty big 'if'."

"I know. But it's a start. Tell you what, since we lost Buford to the lawyers, I think I'll get one of the tech guys, go out to the boarding school and scan for gizmos," Joanna said, got up from her chair and grabbed her blazer.

_*._*_.

After stepping out of her Crown Victoria, Joanna got a flashback to her days directing traffic as she helped the driver of a large, ungainly police van into a parking space that was really too small for it.

"C'mon... c'mon... stop!" she said, giving the driver a thumbs-up.

Once the engine had been turned off, she and the driver went around the back of the van to open the rear doors, revealing that the van was packed to the roof with all kinds of electronic equipment. Joanna
chuckled as she looked at the terrifying amount of knobs, dials and little flashing lights that were everywhere inside the van.

The driver, Miguel Ammanato, put a few devices into a holdall which he proceeded to throw over his shoulder.

"Ready when you are, Detective," Miguel said.

"Right. It's over here."

A few minutes later, Miguel put down the holdall in the center of the main hall and began to sweep the walls, the floor and the roof with a hand-held device.

"Nothing here so far. Nope, it's clean," he said after checking the readout on the device.

"And you can see it just like that?" Joanna said, looking over the technician's shoulder.

"Yes. It's fairly simple to use, actually."

"For you, perhaps."

Miguel chuckled and hoisted up in the heavy holdall.

"Hey, let me get that. I'll carry the luggage, you can sweep the rooms," Joanna said, taking the holdall off Miguel's shoulder.

"Thanks, Detective. All right, where to next?"

"Hmmm. Through here. There's a conference room right down the hall."

---

"Still nothing?" Joanna said. When the conference room and the secretary's office had both come up clean, she had begun to doubt her idea. Now, they were standing outside Liliana Zinovia's private apartment on the sixth floor, but the device still couldn't pick up anything.

"Still nothing, Detective."

"We need to go inside. I hope Lil... I mean, principal Zinovia is up for it," Joanna said and knocked on the door.

A minute went past and Joanna was about to call it off when the door to the apartment opened. Liliana was standing in the doorway, looking a wreck with red, puffy eyes and an ashen face. She was wearing a red silk kimono and slippers, and she was looking so fragile that Joanna was afraid she might keel over.

"Jo? What are you doing here?"
Once Joanna recovered her voice, she cleared her throat and pushed Miguel into view. "Hi, Liliana. This is Officer Miguel Ammanato, he's a computer specialist. We're here to perform a sweep for electronic surveillance equipment."

"Surveillance equipment...? In my apartment? Where the hell would that come from?"

"It's a long story, I'm afraid. May we come in?"

"Now? Look, I'm..."

"Liliana, I need a word in private," Joanna said quietly.

"... Okay."

"Miguel, would you mind? It'll only be a minute," Joanna said, putting her hand on Miguel's shoulder.

"Of course not. I'll be down the hall. Just call me."

"Yep." Joanna watched him walk down the hall and then she stepped into the apartment. "Liliana, we believe that there's a risk someone has planted one or more hidden cameras in here. To record the parties."

"A c-... a camera... who?" Liliana said, unable to hold Joanna's gaze.

"Someone associated with Charles Buford Smith."

"I... can't believe that, Jo. I just can't," Liliana said, putting her hand across her forehead.

"For your sake, I hope it's a wrong hunch, but we need to check. All right?"

"How long will it take? I'm... I'm so very tired."

"I don't know. A few minutes."

"I... all right," Liliana said, sighing deeply. Nodding, she stepped aside to make way. Joanna stepped back out into the hall and whistled after Miguel who came at once.

As the technician started performing a thorough sweep of the apartment, Joanna let her trained eye roam over the items found there. Much like Liliana's other place, the apartment was tastefully decorated with a tan wall-to-wall carpet, a couple of abstract paintings on the walls and fairly modern furniture. There didn't seem to be much in the way of personal effects, and Joanna made a mental note to ask Liliana about it later.

The apartment was divided into five rooms: a bedroom with an attached bathroom, a fully equipped kitchen, a medium-sized living room and a large, elegant lounge partially hidden behind a semi-closed folding door.

Liliana was sitting on a couch, looking quite frail. Her hands were folded in her lap, a posture that almost made it look like she was praying.

"I haven't found anything so far. I only need to check in there, and then I'm done," Miguel said, pointing at the semi-closed folding door.
"Go ahead," Liliana said in a thin voice.

Joanna licked her lips and furrowed her brow, wondering why the normally so vibrant principal had been affected quite so badly by Brian Roper's murder compared to Mark Gerlach's.

"Detective?" Miguel soon said from inside the lounge. Joanna offered Liliana a quick smile and then she set off after the technician.

"Yeah?" she said, closing the folding door fully shut behind her.

"You were partially right. It looks like there's been a camera here, but it's gone now," Miguel said. The technician was balancing precariously on top of a chair he had pulled over, holding the shell of a smoke detector in his hand.

"Then how the hell can you see there's been a camera there?"

"Because the smoke detector has been gutted and four of the little plastic ribbons have been broken off. Look," Miguel said, pointing at a hole in the plastic casing.

"Yeah? I don't get it."

"I guess you had to know where to look to see it. The side with the hole was turned towards the couches and the section of the room that looks like it's been raised, right there," Miguel said, nodding at the far end of the room. "With a wide-angle lens, they would've been able to get both couches, the floor in between and that raised area."

Getting a sneaking suspicion that Liliana's reaction had more to do with the camera than with the murders, Joanna nodded and punched Miguel's hip. "Excellent work, Miguel. Do you think you can get out of the parking space yourself?"

"Sure. What do you want me to do with the empty casing?"

"Give it to me. I know exactly what to do with it," Joanna said and scooped up the plastic smoke detector.

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A few minutes later, Joanna shut the door to Liliana's apartment from the inside and went over to sit a small distance away from the frail-looking woman.

"Here," she said, putting the empty casing down on the cushion. "This used to be a camera casing. You're being blackmailed, aren't you?"

Liliana blinked a few times while she digested Joanna's words. After a brief pause, she nodded.

"I need the details, Liliana."

"After the police had left around lunch time, a small envelope was delivered to me by a messenger. It contained a DVD and a small note advising me not to contact the police," Liliana said. She sighed deeply and reached out for Joanna.
Joanna quickly swept the empty casing off the cushion and moved over to sit next to the stricken woman. She didn't hesitate for a second but immediately wrapped her arms around the principal and gave her a strong squeeze.

Liliana leaned her head against Joanna's shoulder and let out a trembling sigh. "Well, I couldn't contact the police. If I did, my life would be ruined."

"What's on the DVD?" Joanna asked, even though she already knew the answer.

"A ten-minute highlights show from the parties. Jo... I h-haven't told you every-"

"Shhh, Liliana. I already know about your... uh, special outfit."

"You do? How?" Liliana said, turning her head to look at the Detective.

"Maurice Jerrod told me earlier today."

"Oh..."

"How much money did the blackmailer want?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"Do you have it?"

Liliana shook her head and let out another trembling sigh. "No. Not even close. Not even if I sell my car."

"What did you do with the note and the DVD?"

"It actually said I should burn it after reading, but I didn't. It's in an envelope in the drawer in my nightstand."

"I'll get it. I need to see it," Joanna said and got up from the couch.

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"Vern, it's Jo. I have some interesting news. I was right, there was a camera here. Turns out that principal Zinovia has been the victim of an extortion attempt," Joanna said, standing in the bedroom and holding a slimline case containing a recordable DVD.

'Oh, really? Photos?'

"No, a DVD. They used a wide-angle lens in a smoke detector. It's fairly good quality; faces and... uh... other body parts are recognizable."

'Hm!'

"There's a note as well, but it's been printed on a common ink jet printer on common copy paper. Won't do us much good. Principal Zinovia was warned not to go to the police, but I-"
'But we got there first.'

"That's right. It's gotta be Buford and his half-brother. Do you think we have enough to get a search warrant?"

'I think we do, Jo. Let me handle that. I'll call you when I know more.'

"All right, Vern. Talk to you later," Joanna said and terminated the connection.

"Jo?" Liliana said in a weak voice.

"Yeah?" Joanna put her cell phone in her pocket and went into the living room. She sat down on the couch and took Liliana's hands in her own.

"Stay with me... please. I'll let you go home to your girlfriend tonight... but I need you here right now."

"I'll stay. By the way, my partner will call me later with the details, but I think we have a good shot at getting a search warrant for Buford's house."

"Is that good news?"

"Too early to tell, but hopefully it will be."

Liliana nodded and got off the couch. "Please help me to bed," she said, putting a hand on Joanna's shoulder.

When Joanna's jaw fell down to her chest, Liliana got a brief sparkle in her eyes but she quickly sobered up again. "So I can get some rest, silly."

"Oh... I can do that," Joanna said and rose from the couch.

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CHAPTER 5

Friday, April 22nd.

Two unmarked police cars were parked at the curb on a sleepy street in a sleepy part of the Big City. A third official vehicle, the ungainly van with all the electronics, was parked a further hundred yards back to be out of the line of sight from the house they were watching.

"What time is it?" Joanna said as she re-tightened the Velcro straps on her bulletproof vest. She and Vernon were sharing Joanna's Crown Victoria and the car behind them was driven by two detectives from the local precinct, Harry Karpac and Nick Moore, there to actually deliver the search warrant.

"Six fifty-eight a.m., Jo."

Joanna flipped her hair out of her vest and looked casually out of the windscreen at Charles Buford Smith's house, located roughly one hundred yards away.
"One-four-William-oh-one to one-four-William-oh-two. Miguel, are you ready?"

'I'm ready, Detective.'

"Good. We roll in two minutes. Once we're in, we'll call you."

'Copy.'

"One-four-William-oh-one to two-three-William-oh-one. Are you boys ready as well?" Joanna said, looking in the rear view mirror at the car behind her. The driver of the second car raised his thumb and Joanna waved in return.

'We're ready, Detective,' Harry Karpac said in a velvety voice.

"They're all ready, Vern," Joanna said and turned the ignition key.

"Let's do it," Vernon said, holding his service pistol between his legs.

Joanna stepped on the gas and raced around the corner, parking at an oblique angle in front of a dark late-model sedan that was parked outside the house. In a flash, she and Vernon were out of the car and secured the narrow path up to the house.

Joanna knelt down and made a sweep of the area, looking down the barrel of her pistol. When she couldn't see any threats, she shouted at the second team who came out of the other squad car carrying a Door Buster.

In the next house, two dogs began to bark like crazy, and Joanna cursed loudly. The barking soon drowned out any sounds that might come from the house, making the operation more dangerous than it needed to be.

The two detectives from the Twenty-Third Precinct arrived at the house and knocked on the front door. "Mr. Ronald James Wayne, this is the Metro Police Department! We have a warrant for your arrest and a warrant to search these premises issued by justice of the law, Lance Avery! You're advised to open the door at once! We shall break it down if the door is not opened within ten seconds!"

When the ten seconds ran out, the detective holding the heavy Door Buster swung it at the lock, forcing the door open in a shower of splinters. Once the door was fully opened, the detective let go of the tool and ran into the house with his colleague, their pistols drawn and ready.

"This is the Metro Police Department! Mr. Ronald James Wayne, we have a warrant for your arrest and a warrant to search these premises. We strongly suggest you give yourself up immediately!" Harry Karpac shouted.

Joanna and Vernon quickly followed their colleagues into the house, keeping their weapons drawn to act quickly in case a fire fight broke out.

The two detectives from the Twenty-Third Precinct went through the house, repeating their warning. When they had been through all the rooms, Nick Moore came out into the living room, shaking his head. "The nest is empty, Detective Kransky."

"Did you find any electronic equipment?"

"No, not even a television set."
"That can't be right. Look for a hidden door or a hatch or something. Maybe Ronald James Wayne keeps his stuff in the basement?" Joanna said, holstering her service pistol.

"Good idea. Call in Miguel, he might be able to help," Vernon said and went into the bedroom where he went to work on the closets.

Joanna unhooked the walkie-talkie and keyed the mic. "One-four-William-oh-one to one-four-William-oh-two. Miguel, we need you to come and perform your magic."

'I'll be there in a couple of secs, Detective.'

"Copy that. Powell out," Joanna said and shut off the walkie-talkie. She looked around the living room. It was clear to her that it had been a few years since the house had seen a cleaning maid.

At first glance the carpet looked all right, but a closer look revealed a myriad of stains; some easily identifiable, some less so. There were no flowers or plants anywhere in the living room and the walls were mostly covered in non-descript wallpaper held in a tone that had been all the rage in the 1970s.

"Detective Powell," Miguel said, standing in the doorway, carrying his heavy holdall.

"Miguel. Let me help you with that," Joanna said and took the holdall from his grip.

"Thanks. Well, this looks... hmmm. Like my cousin's dump. No, on second thoughts, his is nicer," Miguel said, looking around the house.

"Interesting to know. Listen, we can't find any electronic equipment anywhere. We need you to sweep the house for gizmos, like last night."

"Will do, Detective. Won't take me long, I don't think," Miguel said and dug into the holdall. Seconds later, he booted the hand-held device and began to scan the floor and the walls.

A small bookshelf behind a stained couch caught Joanna's eye and she went over to it to see which titles such a household would have. When she came closer, she immediately recognized the colorful spines as being DVDs and a further study revealed that they were all porn.

She turned around and looked at the far wall of the living room. When the room didn't offer any logical place to put a television set, she scrunched up her face and tapped her index finger against her chin. After a brief pause, she dug into her blazer pocket, found her blue latex examination gloves and put them on.

She picked out the first of the DVDs and turned it over to look at the pictures on the cover. The porn itself was fairly benign, but the sound the box produced was a curious rattling one, prompting Joanna to open it to see what was wrong.

The disc had broken free of its lock, breaking off a few of the little teeth in the process. More interestingly, it was a regular recordable DVD, not a store-bought disc.

Licking her lips, Joanna scooped up all the DVDs, opening them one at a time - they were all home-made.

"Vern!" she shouted, putting the discs back into the proper boxes, and then the boxes into a plastic bag marked EVIDENCE.

"Yeah?" Vernon said, peeking around the doorway.
"They must have some electronic equipment somewhere. They've got a shelf full of DVDs, but no TV. They're all home-made and all the discs are the same brand, so I'm guessing they have a DVD burner somewhere."

"You know, a regular laptop could do all those things."

"Yeah. Any luck?"

"No. Miguel can't find anything."

"Damn."

'Got something!' a voice said from the other end of the house. Joanna and Vernon briefly looked at each other and then moved quickly through the living room and into the kitchen.

Harry Karpac was standing hunched over with half of his body inside a small alcove that acted as a storage room. Grunting, he pulled out a cardboard box filled to the brim with DVDs in clear jewel cases, in black plastic boxes and in 100-piece spindle cases.

The detective took the items out of the cardboard box and built three piles on the kitchen floor.

"The spindle cases are still wrapped, so they're obviously new," the detective said. "Those in the jewel cases and the black plastic boxes appear to be used. Look, they have visible data on them," Harry said, showing Joanna and Vernon that one of the DVDs had clearly been used.

"Excellent. We need to get all of them bagged and tagged, including the unopened spindle cases," Vernon said, patting the detective on the shoulder.

Joanna began to bite her lips. 'If I was the one planning an extortion, especially one with so sensitive recordings, I wouldn't keep them where they could be so easily found. Hmmm...' she thought, moving away from the kitchen.

Going into the narrow hall connecting the living room and the bedroom, she began to turn every single closet and drawer upside down, searching for an envelope similar to the one she had seen in Liliana's apartment. On a shelf in one of the closets, she discovered several car radios that she suspected had been stolen, and she promptly took them out and put them on the floor so they could be tagged.

When the search yielded no other results, she mopped her brow and let out a long sigh.

She shuffled into the bedroom and began to pace back and forth between a large bed and a smaller, narrower bunk that she presumed was for Buford and Ronald James Wayne, respectively. When she realized she wasn't going to find the missing master DVD, she sat down on Buford's bed and buried her face in her hands.

"Think, for Chrissakes, Jo... Think! Where would you hide material of such value? It's twenty grand, you wouldn't put it with the common porn,' she said out loud, looking around the bedroom.

Her eye caught something out of place, and at first, she wasn't sure what she was looking at. Then she realized that the carpet at the foot of the only closet had a small fold in it that indicated that the closet had recently been moved.
The closet had already been searched by one of the other detectives, but he had apparently not paid attention to the carpet. Joanna cocked her head, got off the bed and walked over to the closet. The far side of it was resting against the wall, but it wasn't a snug fit, there was a narrow crevice.

Joanna grabbed hold of the closet with both hands and really put her back into moving it. Pushing it in the direction of the fold in the carpet revealed more and more of the wall behind it - and eventually a white envelope that had been scotch-taped to the wall.

Baring her teeth in a triumphant grin, she ripped the envelope off the wall and opened it at once. Inside, she could see a slimcase containing a DVD and a copy of the extortion note she had read at Liliana's apartment.

"Got it! Got it for Chrissakes!" she shouted, punching the air.

Vernon, Miguel and the two detectives from the Twenty-Third quickly came into the bedroom, staring at the jubilant detective. Joanna soon realized that she was behaving out of character and she settled down at once, feeling the beginnings of a blush tinting her cheeks.

"Uh, I got it," she continued, showing the envelope to her colleagues.

"Great work, Jo. When it's bagged, we're done here. We need to get back home so the tech-heads can examine the disc," Vernon said.

"Miguel, did you find a laptop or anything like that?" Joanna said, putting the envelope into a clear plastic bag.

"No, all the rooms are clean. I suspect he's using a wireless modem on the laptop. I did find a few cables in a trashcan that looked like they had been cut recently. Probably from when he was preparing the smoke-detector-cam. I guess I'm done here...?" Miguel said, pulling the holdall up his shoulder.

"Yeah, you can go back to the station, Miguel. Thanks a lot," Vernon said.

"You're welcome. You know, one of these assignments, I'd like to actually find something," the technician said, chuckling.

Carrying the plastic bag with the envelope, Joanna followed Miguel out onto the front porch and then veered off to the right, walking over to the Crown Victoria.

A small crowd of neighborhood kids and a few adults had gathered outside, eagerly waiting to see if any dead bodies were carried out of the house, but they separated like the Red Sea for Moses when Joanna approached them to go to the car.

After putting the bag of evidence in the trunk of the squad car, her eye caught a man standing at the edge of the small crowd. There was something familiar about his build and his posture, Joanna thought. He was wearing black jeans, a black Metallica t-shirt and a baseball cap pulled down so far that his eyes were hidden.

His face was mostly obscured by the shadow created by the brim of the cap, but one thing did stand out like a sore thumb - a walrus-like salt-and-pepper mustache.

Joanna immediately made the connection and began to edge her way around the back of the crowd. Unfortunately, a couple of the children began to squeal at the sight of her service pistol, blowing her cover.
The man with the mustache turned his head to look at what had caused the kids to squeal - a split second later, he set off running down the street.

"Aw, hell!" Joanna shouted and set off after him. Behind them, the children started squealing for real, alerting Vernon and the other detectives who came out onto the porch to see what was going on.

Unlike his rotund half-brother, Ronald James Wayne was fit and athletic and Joanna had trouble keeping up with him. She ran as fast as she could, but the suspect was slowly escaping her.

"Halt! Metro Police!" she shouted, but her words had no effect.

After sprinting down the sidewalk for more than a block, Ronald James turned sharp right in a T-junction, headed onto a street where the houses were even more run down than those on the street they had just left behind. At once, Joanna knew she had run into a bad neighborhood - the faces of the people running out to watch the chase were unfriendly at best, hostile at worst, and some of them began to shout obscenities at her.

Behind her, she could hear at least one of the squad cars turn the corner on two wheels, and moments later, Vernon roared past her to cut off the running man.

Ronald James was running too fast to stop, so he bumped into the fender of the police car with full force and fell on top of the hood. Before he could roll down from it, Joanna was at his side and reached behind her to take her handcuffs off her belt.

The fugitive struggled like mad but Joanna managed to pacify him and then to slap the cuffs on him. Badly winded, she opened the back door of the Crown Victoria and threw Ronald James head-first onto the back seat.

"Ronald James Wayne, you have the right-"

"Read him his rights later, Jo. We need to get the hell outta here!" Vernon said, putting the car into Reverse.

"I kn-"

Moments later, an opened can of beer came sailing through the air and struck the car's windscreen. When the beer splattered all over the front of the car, Joanna jumped in and Vernon gunned the engine, making the squad car shoot backwards.

Several angry young men wearing the colors of one of the local gangs, white trainers, black oversized pants, a white sleeveless T-shirt and a red bandanna, came out onto the street and began to hurl insults at the police car and the people inside.

Another can of beer soon followed the first one, but it missed the car, instead cracking wide open as it hit the pavement.

Vernon had his foot on the floor, still in Reverse. Once they reached the T-junction, he turned left to make the car go up the left street. After it had righted itself, he slammed on the brakes and yanked the shifter on the steering column into Drive.

As the car raced back past the street they had just left, several more cans of beer sailed through the air, but the car was going too fast to hit.
"Jesus, this is a friendly neighborhood!" Joanna croaked, pulling out in the collar of her dusty yellow blouse. "I'm glad I don't work the Two-Three on a permanent basis."

"Yeah, no kidding." Vernon said, constantly checking the rear view mirror. "We're clear. They're not following us," he said and slowed down to the speed limit.

Upon returning to Ronald James' house, Vernon pulled over at the curb and activated the windshield washers and the wipers to get the beer off it. Soon, the familiar smell of beer spread through the car, making both Vernon and Joanna wave their hands in front of their noses.

"Pheeeew!" Joanna said with a dry chuckle. She turned around to look at the man on the back seat. He had lost his baseball cap in the confusion, and his balding head made the resemblance between him and his half-brother even more obvious.

"Must be bad genes, huh, Ronald?" she said before stepping out of the Crown Victoria and opening the back door so she could talk unhindered to the prisoner.

"Ronald James Wayne, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be held against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?"

"Suck my dick, bitch!"

"Aggressiveness will not help your case. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?"

"Yeah, yeah..."

"I need a firm yes or no, Mr. Wayne."

"Yes, for fuck's sake! Yes!"

"Excellent. Stay," Joanna said and shut the car door.

Moments later, the two detectives from the Twenty-Third Precinct came out of the house and crossed the street to take a look at the catch of the day.

"Well done, Powell. Wow, I can't believe you went up Pearson Street. That's the worst hellhole in this entire 'hood... you were lucky to get out of there in one piece. I see you got a baptism of beer, though," Harry Karpac said.

"Yeah, it got a little hairy there, I'll admit. Anyway, we got what we came for. We have the envelope and the man sending it," Joanna said.

"You know, I don't quite understand how this is connected to the two homicides?"

"Well, we're not quite there yet. But we're working on it," Joanna said with a chuckle.

"All right. Well, now it's back to the stationhouse to fill out the paperwork," Detective Karpac said, earning himself identical groans from all the present police officers.
An hour and a half later, Joanna pushed Ronald James Wayne down on the same chair in interrogation room three his half-brother had used the day before. After unlocking the handcuffs, she put them in the holster on her belt and sat down facing the suspect. A moment later, she leaned in towards Vernon and whispered a few words in his ear, making the older detective nod in agreement.

Ronald James leaned back in his chair and rubbed his wrists. His face was the definition of pissed off, and he looked like he wanted nothing more than to see the two detectives sitting opposite him drop dead.

"Mr. Wayne, you have been arrested for not stopping when instructed to by an officer of the law," Joanna said, looking at a pile of papers on the table top.

"What bullshit."

"In addition to that, at three minutes past seven a.m., four Metro police officers entered your house on grounds of a warrant for your arrest concerning various violations of your parole, and also on grounds of a search warrant issued by justice of the law Lance Avery. In the resulting search, we uncovered a large amount of pirated pornographic DVDs."

"So fuckin' what? It's not kiddie porn. Who gives a fuck about pirated skin flicks these days?"

"We do, Mr. Wayne," Joanna reached into a small bag that stood at her side and pulled out the plastic bag with the envelope and the slimcase containing the DVD.

"Mr. Wayne, do you recognize these items?" she said and put the plastic bag on the table.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I said no, didn't I?"

"We have a positive match, Mr. Wayne. Your fingerprints match those found on the envelope and the DVD case."

"Phoney."

"Scientific evidence, Mr. Wayne."

Ronald James leaned back in his seat and shot the two detectives the Evil Eye. "Can we cut a deal?" he said after a brief pause.

"Depends. Remember that you can request an attorney at all times, Mr. Wayne."

"Don't want no fuckin' attorney. Buncha fuckin' Jews the lot of 'em," Ronald James said and crossed his arms over his chest.

"What do you have for us?" Vernon said, leaning in towards the table.

"My half-brother Buford is the brains behind it."
"Is that a fact?" Vernon said, making a few notes in his notepad.

"Yeah! At least that's what he thinks. Fuck him, he ain't got no brains. He's as dumb as shit, the fat fuck. Told me he had an idea that might give us some dough and all I had to do was to go into an apartment and set up a hidden camera."

"Where?" Joanna said.

"What do you mean where? How many cameras do you think I've put up, anyway?"

"Answer the question, Mr. Wayne."

"Well, in the blonde babe's apartment, of course. Up on the sixth floor of the school. Buford gave me the keys for it an' told me I couldn't make a mess."

"Would this person you're referring to as the 'blonde babe' be principal Liliana Zinovia from the Jeremy Malone Boarding School?"

"Only heard her name once, but it sounds about right."

"What was the purpose of installing that concealed camera?"

"Buford told me that the blonde babe invited a few friends over for a fuckfest now and then, and I thought, hey, might be a good deal. You can never get too much pussy on the TV, you know?" Ronald James said and broke out into a nasty little laugh.

Joanna bit her tongue hard to stop herself from going across the room and slapping the suspect silly. Vernon noticed and took over.

"Mr. Wayne, I strongly advise you not to use such vulgar language when your case is taken to court. It will not impress the judge."

"Whatever."

"And the recordings?" Joanna said, finally calming down enough to get her voice under control.

"Fuckin'-A, baby! Buford was right. Jesus fuckin' Christ, that little blonde babe was fucked to the core by a big stud with a buzz cut. Oh, yeah, baby, she was nailed to the floor. I've watched enough porn to know that it wasn't simulated. Turned me on but good that did!" Ronald James said and groped his crotch to show his excitement.

This time, Joanna almost had to swallow her tongue to stop herself. The corners of her mouth twitched and her nostrils flared, almost like a tigress smelling blood. She clenched her teeth hard together to get her blood pressure down to human levels and put her hands flat down on the table top.

"How often did you record from the... uh, events?" Vernon said, putting a hand on Joanna's thigh underneath the table to get her to calm down.

"A couple of times. Four times, I think. I've only watched that one time with the babe and the stud, though. Buford wouldn't let me see the other ones. No idea why."

"What were you originally planning to do with the recordings, Mr. Wayne?" Joanna said in a hoarse voice.
"You have to talk to Buford about that. I was only in it for the pussy."

"How did it turn into an attempt at extortion?"

"Well. This is where we talk about that deal, okay? Setting up the camera, no big deal. Recording some people fuckin' their brains out, no big deal. But blackmail is a whole 'nother thing altogether, ain't it?" Ronald James said, leaning forward on his chair.

"That's right, Mr. Wayne. Extortion is another thing altogether," Vernon said.

"Yeah, figured as much. Uh... can I get a Coke or something? My throat's real dry."

"Regular or Diet?"

"Regular. Don't drink no Diet shit."

Two minutes later, Joanna put the unopened can down on the table. Ronald James reached for it at once and cracked it open with his fingernails. He drained half of it a single gulp and let out a resounding belch that almost made the lamp above the table sway.

"Charming, Mr. Wayne," Joanna said icily.

"Hey, ain't that what Coke is for? What about that deal?"

"Well, if you can prove without doubt that your half-brother, Charles Buford Smith, was the driving force behind the attempt at extorting Miss Zinovia, we will consider letting you off the hook for the unlawful access and the illicit recordings," Vernon said, tapping the tip of the pencil down onto his notepad.

"Consider letting me off the hook? Fuck it, man, I want a total pardon. I wanna walk outta here like a freebird. Or fly, or whatever," Ronald James said and emptied the can of Coke. After belching loudly, he chucked the can into the corner of the interrogation room.

"Mr. Wayne," Joanna said in a voice that dripped of saccharine. "I'm afraid you got it all wrong. If you aren't more cooperative and forthcoming with certain items and facts, there's a risk we might pin the entire extortion attempt on you. What do you think Buford is going to say if we present a similar deal to him?"

Ronald James's jaw became slack and he turned just a little bit paler.

"Well, I... Aw, fuck it, I was just in it for the porn! You gotta believe that! I didn't know anything about no blackmail shit before Buford told me that he thought we could make a quick buck on the recordings. And even then I thought he meant selling the clips to the triple-X traders or something. Never blackmail!"

"Mr. Wayne, please give us a detailed description of what went down between yourself and your half-brother. From the beginning, please," Joanna said.

"I... uh, got into a fist fight with a salesman in the HomeTech shop down on Eighth Street. I managed to escape the cops and then I went straight to Buford, the dumb fuck. After a couple of days, he asked me if I could install a hidden camera for him. I said sure, he gave me the keys, and I did it. I already told you all this...?"

"It's just for the record. Go on."
"I rigged the camera with a very small wireless transmitter. The camera didn't have any recording device, it was far too small for that, but it sent whatever it picked up via the Net to an anonymous video hosting service. Then Buford used my laptop to download it and burn it onto DVDs."

"And...?"

"Well, like I said before, I guess Buford created four DVDs, one of each of the fuckfests the camera recorded. They were an hour and a half each, sorta. Well, when he saw the clarity of the images... he should've known, my work is always the best... anyway, when he saw the clarity, he got dollar signs in his eyes, man. That's when the, uh... the extortion thing came into play."

"And he created a highlights package of the four events and sent it to the victim?"

"I don't know if he used material from all four fuckfests. I only saw the one with the stud. Anyway, he sent it to the blonde babe, yes, and someone else as well."

Joanna looked up and arced an eyebrow. "Someone else...?"

"Buford told me he sent it to the blonde babe's ex-husband. Can you believe that shit? I mean, the way that foxy chick was doing the horizontal mambo, I'd never, ever let her go. He must be a fruit to let someone like that go. God, could she fuck!" Ronald James said and let out yet another of his trademark nasty laughs.

"Principal Zinovia's ex-husband received a copy of the extortion DVD?" Joanna said, not quite believing her ears.

"Yeah, man, are you deaf or somethin'?"

"When was this?"

"Oh, ten-twelve days ago... naw, it may have been closer to two weeks... dunno, but no more than that."

Joanna looked pointedly at Vernon. They both arrived at the same conclusion: Mark Gerlach had been murdered only days after Liliana's ex-husband had received the DVD.

"Liliana? It's me, Jo. I have some good news and some bad news," Joanna said, putting her legs up on the desk. She picked up the cord for the phone and started twisting it between her fingers.

'Hi... I'd like the good news first, please,' Liliana said in a voice that was still quite frail. Joanna furrowed her brow and took her legs off the desk.

"Are you all right? Do you want me to come over and..." she looked around, checking if anyone was close enough to hear what she was about to say "$...tuck you in again?"

'No... no, not tonight. Thank you, but it won't be necessary. What was the good news?'

"Well, we've busted the extortionists, so you don't have to worry about that anymore. It was Buford and his half-brother, Ronald. He admitted to recording the parties. They got four of them."

'Ohhhh, that's... that's pretty good news, Jo!'
Joanna could clearly hear the elation in Liliana's voice and that gave her a sinking feeling in her stomach. She began to rub her brow, rueing the decision to tell Liliana the good news first, regardless of what the principal had wanted.

"There is a problem, though. You weren't the only one who received a copy of the DVD with the highlights from the parties."

'Wh-what are you saying? Someone else has it? Someone else has s-seen me...?'

"I'm afraid so, Liliana. The DVD was also sent to your ex-husband."

The connection was silent for so long that Joanna was worried that Liliana had fainted. When the principal finally spoke, her voice had been reduced to a hoarse croak. 'He's going to kill me, Jo.'

"No, Liliana, listen to me. There's no way we'll allow that to happen. Tomorrow morning bright and early, Vern and I will call him in for a chat. If he as much as looks at me funny, I'm gonna bust his ass!"

'God, he killed Mark and Brian... You couldn't stop that, could you? He's going to kill me, Jo, I know it.'

"Liliana..."

'Jo, I... I thought everything would b-be all right... but now...'

Through the connection, Joanna could hear Liliana begin to cry, and she jumped up from the chair and grabbed her blazer. "Liliana, I'm coming out to you. Please don't do anything stupid. I can be there in fifteen-"

'No! No, I don't want you to come here!'

"Jesus, Liliana...!"

'I don't want you here, Jo.'

"But..."

'Goodbye,' Liliana said flatly and hung up, leaving Joanna to stare dumbly at the dead receiver in her hand. With a groan, she put the receiver back on the phone and sat down with a bump in her swivel-chair.

Sighing, she leaned forward and buried her face in her hands.

_*_*_*_*_*

Feeling utterly miserable, Joanna dragged herself up the garden path to her house.

The weather had changed yet again; a cold front had entered from the north, making the evenings windy and chilly. The night before had even seen some ground frost that had hurt several of Betty's precious flowers. Their drooping heads matched Joanna's mood perfectly.

She looked up at the cobalt blue sky, wishing the damn boarding school case would blow over with the same speed as the gray clouds that were racing across the heavens. Beyond the clouds, the first few stars had broken through the blue and were twinkling at her.
"Jo? Is that you?" Betty said, standing in the open front door, looking down the garden path.

"Yeah, it's me."

"I heard a car door slam, but when you didn't come in, I kinda got a little worried."

"No need, Bets. I was just looking at the sky," Joanna said, walking up the final stretch of the garden path. Once she reached Betty, she gave her a nice, if bland, kiss on the lips.

"Hey, hon," Betty said, brushing her nose against Joanna's. "Rough day?"

"Boy, you have no idea," Joanna said and hung her blazer on the hallstand.

"Do you want to bump going to the Cineplex until tomorrow, then?"

"The Cineplex...? Aw shit, Bets, the new Laurie McCanless movie... I'm sorry, I completely forgot," Joanna said, slapping her forehead.

"It's all right, Raw Bounty will still be playing tomorrow. Naw, let's have some home entertainment tonight instead. You look really beat up," Betty said, tracing the side of Joanna's face with her index finger.

"Are you saying I'm old and wrinkled?" Joanna took Betty's fingers and gave them a little kiss.

"I plead the Fifth, Detective."

"You should! What's for dinner?"

Betty leaned her head back and let out a loud belly laugh. "You still have your priorities straight. Meatloaf, lingonberry jam and sweet potatoes."

"Mmmm, sounds great. Do I have time for a shower first?"

"Sure," Betty said and placed a kiss on Joanna's lips.

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At bedtime, Joanna studied her reflection in the mirror while she was brushing her teeth. She thought she had 'fraud' written all over her face and she wondered why Betty couldn't see it.

She took a step back to look at Betty who was already in bed, reading a novel. Betty sensed Joanna's eyes on her and she turned her head and smiled broadly.

Joanna winked back at her, feeling even worse than before.

After rinsing her mouth, Joanna clicked off the light in the bathroom and padded over to the bed where she sat down on the empty side. Reaching behind her, she pulled off the band that held her ponytail in place and shook her head several times to get her hair to spread out over her shoulders.

"Mmmm, baby, that gives me a great idea," Betty said, putting the book away.
Joanna was still facing away from her lover of three years, not wanting to show Betty the emotions that were plainly visible on her face.

"C'mon, Jo, get over here," Betty said, patting the empty place next to her.

Joanna nodded and got into bed. When she was settled, Betty rolled over to her right side and began to trace her fingers down Joanna's face and throat.

Making love to Betty was the absolute last thing on Joanna's mind and she was trying desperately to come up with a valid excuse not to go ahead with it. Several times, she thought she had found one, only to realize that it was as lame as all the others.

"What's wrong, Jo? You're acting like a marble statue," Betty whispered in Joanna's ear.

"I'm just not in the mood tonight, Bets."

"That's a first."

"I just... not tonight, okay?" Joanna said with a sigh.

"Sure. But you owe me," Betty said, brushing her lips against Joanna's cheek and giving her a little love-nibble in the process.

"I'll make it up to you, I promise. Hey, tomorrow, perhaps we can act out a scene from Raw Bounty?" Joanna said with a weak smile.

"Oooh, now you're talking! You sure know how to spoil a girl. That's a deal, Jo. Can't wait!"

"Great. Now let's get some sleep. I'm beat. Love you, Bets."

"Love you, too, doll," Betty said, tickling Joanna's earlobe.

They both turned off their reading lamps at the same time, leaving the bedroom in darkness. After a few minutes, Joanna turned over onto her right side, staring blindly into the dark room.

'He's going to kill me. He killed Mark and Brian... You couldn't stop that, could you? He's going to kill me, Jo, I know it.'

'No, I don't want you to come here!'

'I don't want you here, Jo.'

Liliana's earlier words echoed through Joanna's mind, creating a deafening cacophony of sound inside her head. She felt she didn't know left from right anymore - or even wrong from right - but she equally didn't know how to get back to normal.
Behind her, Betty moved closer and spooned her body up against Joanna's. The nurse was already sound asleep, and with a grunt, she wrapped an arm around Joanna's chest just below her breasts.

As she felt Betty's touch, a brief smile fluttered across Joanna's lips but it soon faded away into nothing.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Joanna Powell? Look at you... look at what you have... why do you want to throw all this away just to chase something as temperamental and elusive as Liliana...?" Joanna thought.

She tried closing her eyes, but as soon as she did, Liliana's upset voice returned to ring in her ears -

'No, I don't want you to come here!'

'I don't want you here, Jo.'

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CHAPTER 6

Saturday, April 23rd.

"We appreciate you coming in on a Saturday afternoon, Mr. Caulfield," Joanna said, opened the door to interrogation room two and turned on the strip lights.

David Caulfield stepped inside the smallish room and put his sports jacket across the back rest of one of the chairs. He looked around, nodding appreciatively.

Chuckling inwardly, Joanna thought that it was a good thing she had chosen the recently renovated room two instead of the far more grotty room three.

"Mr. Caulfield, do you want some coffee?"

"Yes, please. Black, two sugars."

"I'll be right back," Joanna said and left Liliana's ex-husband with Vernon.

A few minutes later, she put a Styrofoam cup of coffee, a stirrer and two sticks of sugar down on the table. "We don't have any sugar cubes, only these things," she said.

"It's all right. I'll experiment," David Caulfield said and ripped open one of the sticks.

Joanna sat down and began to study the man sitting opposite her. He was in his late thirties and he had a certain distinguished air about him, but he wasn't as slick as she had thought he would be.

He was fairly handsome with delicate facial features, dirty-blond hair, grayish eyes and a well-groomed full beard cut in the fashion so popular with the intellectuals. He was fit and slim, and he had narrow shoulders and hips.
When Joanna looked at David Caulfield's hands, she started fearing they were headed down a wrong path yet again - the hands were those of a teacher or a white collar worker and definitely not hands that could be used for punching someone so hard in the solar plexus that they would be rendered defenseless.

She began to chew on the inside of her cheek, but hid it by looking down into her notepad.

"Mr. Caulfield, I presume you have a suspicion why you're here today?" she said, shooting him a steely gaze.

"Yes, Detective. The attempt at extorting me."

"Indeed. When did you receive it, what was your reaction and what did you do with the material sent to you?"

"Oh, that's a lot at once. Mind if I split that up in several answers?" David Caulfield said with a smile. When he noticed that neither of the two Detectives were returning the smile, it faded from his face.

"Right. Ahem. Well, I received an envelope with a printed note and a DVD in a slimcase sometime before lunch on Friday, April Eighth. I didn't understand what it was so I opened it at once."

"It didn't arrive by mail?" Vernon said.

"No, I'm guessing it had simply been pushed through my letterbox. I work very early in the mornings, you understand."

'He's trying to set up an alibi,' Joanna thought at once and made a note of it.

"Where was I...? Oh, yes. I opened it at once but didn't understand a bit of what it said. Well, I could read it, of course, but it was completely irrelevant to me."

"Did you keep the note?" Joanna said.

"No. I burned it. It said I should, so I did."

"You don't think that was overkill?"

"No, I didn't want my wife or my kids to find it."

"Sounds reasonable enough. Did the note mention anything about the amount of money the extortionist wanted out of you?"

"Yes, it was twenty thousand dollars. I don't have that kind of money. Frankly, it might as well have been a million dollars."

"Did you watch the DVD?"

David Caulfield shrugged and looked down at his hands clutching the cup of coffee. "Yes. Thank God I used my laptop instead of the DVD player in the living room. If my wife or my kids had walked in on me, I would've been divorced for the second time by now."

"What did you do with it? Did you burn that as well?"
"No, I put it in a private drawer in my desk."

"Were you shocked by the contents of the DVD?"

"Look, Detective... shocked isn't the right word. I was... oh, I'm not sure what the right word actually is," David Caulfield said and leaned back in the chair. "Gobsmacked... caught by surprise... perhaps even slightly disgusted."

"Disgusted?"

"The reason why Liliana and I divorced was that I simply couldn't handle her infidelity anymore. From the start, she insisted that we kept our marriage open, meaning that we were free to pursue other, uh, interests."

"Disgusted?"

"The reason why Liliana and I divorced was that I simply couldn't handle her infidelity anymore. From the start, she insisted that we kept our marriage open, meaning that we were free to pursue other, uh, interests."

"Meaning that you were allowed to screw around if you met someone who turned you on?" Vernon said, looking above the rim of his reading glasses.

"Well, if you want to be vulgar about it, yes. And just for the record, I never did. Liliana... well, that was another story. After two years, I just couldn't cope with her insatiable lust anymore. We were living together in a really nice cottage up in Maughan County, but Liliana was spending more time in the Big City than she was at our home. In the end, I just threw in the towel. So, no, Detective, I wasn't shocked when I discovered what was on the DVD."

"Mmmm," Joanna said, making a new note. She remembered what Maurice Jerrod had told her about Liliana's alter ego, the Mistress, and she considered asking David Caulfield what he knew about it. Before she had time to do so, he leaned forward and spoke again.

"I do feel sorry for her, though. She's a good woman at heart, if a little wild," he said quietly.

"Mr. Caulfield, pardon me for being so insensitive, but how did you meet in the first place? You seem like very different types," Joanna said.

"I just fell head over heels for her. Have you met her, Detective? Well, stupid question. Of course you have. Liliana Zinovia is a woman unlike any I've ever encountered. She has the ability to... to snare you in with her charms and her charismatic personality. She's almost like one of those carnivorous plants," David Caulfield said and chuckled over his own joke.

"Oh, boy, don't I know it. I wonder what David Caulfield would say if he knew that I've had a taste of his ex-wife's charms and charismatic personality,' Joanna thought.

"Mr. Caulfield, just to be on the safe side, we need to establish where you were on the mornings of Tuesday, April twelfth and Thursday, April twenty-first?" Vernon said.

"Why? What do you need that for...? Wait a minute, the murders at the school! Jesus Christ, you can't believe that I had anything to do with the murders at the school!" David Caulfield shouted and got up from his chair. In an instant, Joanna shot up from her chair and put her hand near her service pistol.

"Sit down, Mr. Caulfield. This was just a simple question. There's no need to get agitated," Joanna said calmly.

Reluctantly, David Caulfield sat down, but he began to tear his hands through his hair almost at once. "That's easy for you to say! I can't believe you're accusing me of having anything to do with those murders!"
"We're not, Mr. Caulfield. We just need to establish where you were on those two dates."

"I was at work! Both days. I work at the McMahon Produce Auctions down on West Nineteenth Street. I work from two a.m. to ten a.m. every morning. There must be three hundred people there you can ask. Trucks haul in fresh produce from upstate and then we hold auctions. I'm one of the accountants helping the auctioneers. My direct superior is Andrew Finch and he can verify what I've just told you. I...!"

"All right, all right, Mr. Caulfield. That was all we needed," Joanna said, jotting down the information in her notepad. "Detective Kransky, do you have any further questions?"

"No, I think we're done for today."

"For today?!" David Caulfield whined. He was about to get up from his chair again but a steely glare by Joanna convinced him to stay seated.

"Just a figure of speech, Mr. Caulfield. We're done," Vernon said and closed his notepad.

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"What do you think, Vern?" Joanna said after they had escorted David Caulfield to his car.

"He didn't do it. His reaction was genuine."

"That's how I feel, too. I'm going to call to confirm his alibi anyway, but it's gonna check out, I'm sure. Shit."

"My sentiment exactly."

On the way back to their office, Joanna was so deep in thought that she almost missed the door. _Why did Liliana say that 'he' was going to kill her...? David Caulfield didn't show signs of having a temper apart from getting up from the chair, and that was a perfectly reasonable reaction given the circumstances. Hmmm. There's something she's been holding back from me... but what?_ Absentmindedly, Joanna sat down on her chair and found the local directory in one of her drawers. When she had it, she picked up the receiver and called the number listed for McMahon Produce Auctions. After letting it ring eight times, she put the receiver back down on the phone.

"No luck?" Vernon said, putting on his jacket.

"No. They're not open at this time of day. I need to call them tomorrow morning. There's almost no point to it, but I guess we need to do it."

"Yeah. Are you going home now?"

"I think so. I promised Betty a trip to the Cineplex and she'll use my hide for a trampoline if I don't keep that deal," Joanna said and grabbed her blazer from the back of the swivel-chair.

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* * * * *

_Monday, April 25th._
Joanna rolled up the sleeves of her shirt, wishing that she had gone for less warm clothing. Vernon sat behind his desk, grinning at her and showing her his short-sleeved shirt.

"Ha, ha, very funny, Vern. Just so you know, it was in the low fifties when I left this morning."

"That's what the blazer is for, Jo."

"Like I said, ha, ha."

A knock on the door to their office made the two detectives turn their heads as one.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Lieutenant Barnes said. Like always, Barnes was in full uniform with black shoes, black pants, white shirt and a black tie - Joanna wondered how he didn't melt from the inside.

"Not at all, Lou. What's up?" Vernon said.

"I need a status update on the boarding school homicides."

"All right."

"In my office, if you please," Barnes said and walked back out of the door before he'd heard an answer.

Joanna and Vernon looked at each other and let out matching groans. Sighing, Joanna began rolling down her sleeves again.

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Three minutes later, Joanna knocked on the door to the Lieutenant's office which was located in a corner of the main squad room.

"Enter!" Barnes said, putting away a file.

After getting in and closing the frosted glass door behind them, Joanna and Vernon sat down on two rather uncomfortable chairs that had been placed in front of a mahogany desk. In case anyone in the squad had forgotten the name of their Lieutenant, Barnes had a rectangular plaque on the desk that said 'Lieutenant Nicholas Barnes.'

"So, where do we stand on the boarding school case?" Barnes said, leaning back in his chair and twiddling his thumbs in his lap.

For once, Joanna was grateful that she was only a second-grader - she didn't have to deliver the bad news. She glanced expectantly at Vernon who was looking somewhat resigned.

"It looks like we're at a dead end, Lou. The case is not a complete loss, though. We've pinned the attempted extortion of principal Liliana Zinovia and her ex-husband David Caulfield on Charles Buford Smith and his half-brother Ronald James Wayne. Both men have admitted to various crimes, including unlawful access, installing a concealed camera, illicit recordings and planning an extortion."

"But the two homicides?" Barnes said, cocking his head.
"Not much luck there, Lou. Smith and Wayne didn't have anything to do with that. Buford Smith has a solid alibi for both murders and Wayne is a data thief, not a murderer."

"People can change, Detective Kransky. And besides, I read in your report that Ronald James Wayne physically injured a salesman and that he has a foul mouth. In my opinion, he fits the typical profile of a killer."

"Well, that's true to a certain extent, Lou, but we're pretty sure he didn't perform the actual homicides."

"What of Miss Zinovia's ex-husband?"

"A similar story, I'm afraid. He has a solid alibi, confirmed by his employer and several people at his workplace."

"But he did see the DVD. That must have made him angry and upset, perhaps upset enough to murder the two people seen to have sex with his ex-wife. It's worth digging into," Barnes said, resuming his twiddling.

"Lou, there's no connection whatsoever between David Caulfield and the two victims, Mark Gerlach and Brian Roper," Joanna said, crossing her legs at the knee. "He couldn't even know their names without doing a lot of detective work. I mean, he couldn't very well print out a screen capture of the DVD and show it around the campus, could he?"

"No, but... I'm not sure what you're getting at, Detective?"

"The only way to get that info is to get the paperwork from Mrs. Nancy Weidemann, principal Zinovia's secretary. Mrs. Weidemann is still admitted to the Killarney-Hayes Sanitarium after her shocking experience, but her replacement, a Miss Karen Stephens, is adamant that such information is strictly off-limits for anyone not directly connected to the boarding school."

"Well, the fact is that they're dead. And since they didn't kill themselves, somebody else did."

Faced with that kind of logic, Joanna could only nod. In her mind, she began to tie together a few loose ends. What Karen Stephens had actually said over the phone was that no one outside the faculty could get a list of the boarders - but one of the people they had been looking at had very much been a part of the faculty at the time.

"Charles Buford Smith," Joanna said out loud.

"I'm sorry, Detective?" Barnes said, putting his elbows on the mahogany desk. "Didn't Detective Kransky say three minutes ago that you had rejected the notion that Mr. Smith was the killer?"

"Yes, he did, Lou. But I've just realized there's one thread we haven't tried to unravel yet," Joanna said excitedly. She turned her head to look at Vernon, but he appeared to be as puzzled as Lieutenant Barnes was.

"Well, in that case, I won't hold you up any longer. Go back to work," Barnes said and began to shuffle a few files around.

Vernon and Joanna quickly got out of the uncomfortable chairs and exited the office.

"What was that all about? Which thread didn't we unravel yet?" Vernon said.
"I'll tell you in a few minutes. First, I need to make a phone call."

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"Hello, Miss Stephens, it's Detective Powell again," Joanna said, looking out of the window with the telephone in her hand.

'Hello, Detective. Did you forget something before?'

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I need to speak with principal Zinovia, but the direct number doesn't seem to be working right now. Would you mind patching me through to her office?"

'I'd love to, but principal Zinovia was not feeling well today so she has gone back up to her apartment.'

"Oh... I don't have the number for that."

'There's no phone up there, Detective.'

"Oh. Right. Thanks, Miss Stephens," Joanna said and hung up.

After putting the phone back down on the desk, Joanna began to smooth out her eyebrows with her index finger. "Vern, I'm just gonna pop out to the school. I'll be back in a couple of hours," she said and grabbed her blazer.

"Hang on, hang on, Jo. You need to tell me which thread we haven't unraveled yet," Vernon said, putting his hands in the air.

"Yeah, you're right. Well, here it is: I was thinking that Buford may be the link between David Caulfield and the two victims. If Caulfield really did get disgusted by the video clip, there's a possibility he contacted the one who sent him the extortion note, namely Buford. Buford could easily have provided Caulfield with the names of the victims."

"Well... all right. But why?"

"Maybe Caulfield saw this as an opportunity to get even with Lil... I mean, principal Zinovia. After all, it must've hurt his feelings and his male pride that he wasn't man enough to curb her wanderlust."

"Mmmmmm, I'm not convinced, Jo. In my professional opinion, David Caulfield doesn't have enough chutzpah to kill anyone."

"True, but you know how easy it is to rent some muscle these days. Anyway, it's just a theory for now. I'm hoping to get principal Zinovia to talk about her ex-husband. 'And why she said that he was going to kill her.'"

"Okay. But please keep me up to date in the future."

"I will, Vern. See ya."

*=*=*=*=*
Thirty minutes later, Joanna knocked on the door to Liliana Zinovia's apartment on the sixth floor of the admin building. Once she had knocked, she took a few steps back so she wouldn't spook Liliana when she opened the door.

When the door remained firmly shut, Joanna tried knocking again. "Liliana, are you in there? It's me, Jo. We need to talk."

Even as Joanna was speaking the sentence, Liliana opened the door with a whoosh. Her face held a thunderous expression for the first few seconds, but then it softened and she stepped aside to let Joanna in.

"Hi, Liliana. You look much better now than you did the other day," Joanna said, wondering why she felt so nervous. She stepped inside the apartment and took a coat hanger off a hallstand. Looking around, she put her blazer on the coat hanger and then put both items back on the hallstand. "You know, I didn't really get to see much of the pad when I was here the first time. It's really a nice place you have here."

Joanna noticed that Liliana still hadn't said a word and she turned around to shoot the blonde woman a puzzled look. Liliana was barefoot and wearing the same red silk kimono she had been wearing the other day, and all in all, Joanna thought the ash-blond woman looked fantastic. "Is something wrong?"

"Did you catch the killer yet?"

"Uh, no, but..."

"Then I'd say something is very, very wrong," Liliana said and stomped into the kitchen.

Joanna furrowed her brow as she tracked the principal with her eyes. She scratched her hair and decided to follow Liliana into the kitchen. "Yeah, sure, but... how are you feeling?"

"Oh, super. Considering I have a bullseye on my back, everything is hunky-dory. You want some instant coffee?" Liliana said sharply, holding up a glass of coffee beans.

"Yes, please. Liliana, you need to tell me why you think you have a bullseye on your back. We've spoken to David Caulfield and, frankly, apart from a few very farfetched theories, I can't see that he's the one doing this. So far, the--"

"You've spoken to David? Why did you do that?" Liliana said, turning around so fast that a few coffee beans spilled from the glass.

Joanna narrowed her eyes. "Now you've lost me completely. Of course we were going to talk to David Caulfield. Why on earth shouldn't we? Not only did he also receive the DVD, you told me yourself that 'he' was going to kill you. Who could you mean if not your ex-husband...?"

"You. Don't. Understand. Anything!" Liliana hissed, slamming the glass of coffee down on the kitchen table.

"Then give me some Goddamned clues, Liliana! Everything about you is smoke and mirrors! Jesus... you said I blew hot and cold, but you flip-flop so much you're barely comprehensible sometimes!"

"That's because it's my ass on the line here, Detective. Once this case is done and dusted, you move on to the next one. But me, I'll be crucified once this comes out. And trust me, it will come out."
"You're doing it again, Liliana! It's almost like there's a huge chasm between us whenever we talk... it's almost like we're not speaking the same language. If you have any information that will lead us to the killer, then it's high time you hand it over," Joanna said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I have three words for you, Detective. You have spoken to The Wrong Caulfield!"

"What?!"

"David Caulfield is a wuss, a... a... a kitten without claws. He couldn't even hurt a fly unless you push him very, very far, and you can take that completely literally. His brother is another story."

"David Caulfield's brother?"

"Yes! Roger Caulfield. His nickname is Rocky and he does everything he can to live up to it. With Mark Gerlach, it could've been anything, but when Brian turned up dead as well, on my doorstep no less, I knew it couldn't be a coincidence... I just couldn't connect the two in my mind. When you told me David had also received the DVD, everything fell into place."

"Did you screw around with Rocky while you were married to his brother?" Joanna said in a steely voice.

"Yes."

Joanna pinched the bridge of her nose to stop a sudden, explosive headache. "And you admit to adultery just like that?"

"David and I had an agreement. We were free to chase anyone we wanted to," Liliana said, waving her hand dismissively.

"I'm guessing he didn't count on it being his own brother...?"

"I wouldn't know. But here's the clincher: Rocky is nuts. He's a possessive freak. When I'd had my fun, I drove back to David, but Rocky followed me and forced my car off the road. He slapped me around and told me that I was his," Liliana said, absentmindedly touching the side of her face where Roger had hit her.

"When did all this happen?"

"Close to two years ago."

Joanna walked up to Liliana and put her hands on the shorter woman's shoulders. "Liliana, in your opinion, did Rocky Caulfield kill Mark Gerlach and Brian Roper?"

"I'm sure of it, Jo. He must have stumbled over the DVD somehow and worked his way from there."

In Joanna's mind, the pieces of the puzzle snapped together. David Caulfield had received the DVD. Roger Caulfield had found it and, not knowing what was on it, had watched it out of sheer curiosity. Then Roger had found a way to contact Buford to get the names, promising the portly gym teacher a sum of money or possible a larger slice of the pie. With the names, it would have been no task for Roger to go to the school, find either Mark or Brian and kill them.

"I'm glad you finally told me, Liliana. I wish you had done it sooner, though."
Joanna leaned down, intending to pull Liliana into a hug, but a female voice cutting through the silence stopped her.

"Baby, what's taking you so long?"

Joanna spun around like a greased lightning and stared wide-eyed at a pretty thirtysomething brunette standing in the doorway to the bedroom. The woman was naked, save for a sheet that covered her assets, but it was sheer enough for Joanna to see that she was very well put together indeed.

Joanna stared so long at the other woman that her eyes started hurting from the lack of blinking. She wanted to speak, but her throat had contracted itself so badly she could hardly breathe.

Instead, she turned her head to look at Liliana. The principal was standing with a neutral expression on her face and her hands on her hips.

"So?" Liliana said to Joanna.

Joanna felt the floor underneath her feet begin to wobble. She was hoping it was an earthquake, but she knew better. She briefly looked back at the other woman and then stomped out of the kitchen before she did something she would regret.

She grabbed her blazer from the hallstand and left the apartment, slamming the front door so hard that dust fluttered to the ground in her wake.

_**_

Feeling lightheaded and unsteady on her feet, Joanna walked into her office and sat down with a bump in her swivel-chair. Vernon looked up in surprise, grimacing when he noticed that Joanna hadn't even bothered to take off her blazer despite the stuffy conditions in the office.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Jo...?"

Without speaking, Joanna rose from the chair and went over to the coffee maker. Taking the glass pot, she poured herself a cup of coffee and chugged it down in one gulp.

"Two ghosts? Maybe a whole pack of 'em...?" Vernon prodded impatiently.

"Nothing like that," Joanna croaked.

"You went out to see the principal. Is she all right?"

Joanna nodded.

"Well, what came out of it?"

"She gave me the name of the killer."

"She what?" Vernon said, spinning around so fast that his elbow bumped into a pile of folders sending them flying onto the ground.

"We spoke to the wrong Caulfield, Vern. The killer is David's brother, Roger a.k.a. Rocky Caulfield."
"I'll be a sonofabitch... what's his last known address? Sounds like we need to move quickly." Rolling his eyes, Vernon leaned down and began to scoop up the folders.

"I don't have it. We need to find him the old-fashioned way. I only know that he used to live upstate somewhere," Joanna said with a sigh. She took off her blazer and threw it onto the backrest of her chair.

"Upstate... didn't David say he and the principal lived in Maughan County?"

"Yeah. And from speaking with Liliana, I'd hazard a guess and say that Roger did, too."

"All right, that's a start," Vernon said and picked up the directory. After finding the number for the Sheriff's Office in Maughan County, he took the receiver off the hook and dialed the number. While he waited for the connection to be established, Joanna sat down in her chair and rubbed her face repeatedly.

"Jo, you should be doing a song-and-dance act, but you look like something the cat dragged in. What's wrong?"

"Ah, it's nothing. I just caught the principal in the act with someone. I wasn't expecting that, so..."

"It shouldn't have been too big a surprise, Jo. After all, that's what David... oh, good afternoon, deputy, this is Detective Vernon Kransky from the Fourteenth Precinct. We're on the lookout for someone and we've been told that he lives in your County. We need a current address for him ... Yes. The name is Roger Caulfield a.k.a. Rocky Caulfield ... that's C-a-u-l-f-i-e-l-d ... Yeah, I'll hold."

Vernon looked up and gave Joanna a thumbs-up. She nodded and went back to playing with one of the buttons on her shirt.

"Hello? Sheriff McCrawley? How do you do, Sir ... yes, that's right. We need the address of ... he doesn't live there anymore? When did he move? ... Four months ago?"

Joanna threw her hands in the air and growled loudly.

"Do you know his current whereabouts? ... We need to speak with him regarding the homicides at the Jeremy Malone Boarding School ... No? ... All right, thank you, Sheriff," Vernon said and hung up.

"Back to Goddamned square one!" Joanna said and slammed her fist down onto the armrest of her swivel-chair.

"We'll put out a nation-wide APB on him. Don't worry, he can't disappear completely."

"Unless he's a latter-day D.B. Cooper."

"Don't even think that, Jo. All right, we need to contact David Caulfield and get a recent photo of his brother. No, better yet, ask David to come in again. He could've told us this info the other day. Now we have to give him a good squeeze," Vernon said and put the directory back in his drawer.

"I'll do it. I feel like breaking some balls right now," Joanna said and shot up from her chair.

"Jo, before you do... what's going on between you and the principal? And don't lie to me, we're too good friends for that."
"I... okay." With a sigh, Joanna let herself fall back in the chair. She put her elbow on the armrest and started rubbing her face.

"Have you sampled the forbidden fruit?"

When Joanna just pinched the bridge of her nose instead of replying, Vernon got up and walked around the desks. After clearing a corner of Joanna's desk, he pulled up in his pant leg and sat down.

"Jo, if you were a guy, I'd say you'd been thinking with your dick... you know what, I'm still gonna say that. It was a stupid thing to do."

"Vern, I hear ya for Chrissakes! It... it just happened. I didn't plan it, neither did she... I don't think... anyway, it just happened... it was a spur of the moment kinda deal."

"Doesn't make it any better, Jo. You should've put your foot down."

"I didn't get the opportunity."

"So you're saying she raped you?"

"Of course not! Aw, Jeez, Vern, you read too many pulp novels. If I hadn't liked the things that went on, I would have left. I would've stopped it dead."

"But you didn't. You stayed for the whole show and probably the encore as well."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Joanna chuckled dryly over Vernon's words. "Just for the record, I didn't stay for the encore."

"Hmm! Jo, I can't stress enough how lucky you are that the Zinovia woman didn't turn out to be directly involved with the homicides. If she had been, you might as well have bent over and kissed your ass and your career goodbye."

"I know."

"And then we have Betty."

"Yeah. She's going to kill me."

"Let's hope not... Jo, what are you going to do about it?"

"Well, I..."

"Wrong answer, Jo. Here's what you're gonna do: You stay away from principal Zinovia. Far away. You probably need to talk to her on the job, but stay far away from her on any other level. You hear me?"

"Yeah."

"Jo, do you understand?"

"Yeah, I understand."
"Okay. You're too good a detective to throw it all away just because of some skirt. And besides, you just told me you caught her with someone else. I'd say that she's already over you, right?"

"I guess."

"Then there's no problem in you forgetting all about her, Jo," Vernon said and got off the desk. As he walked past Joanna, he gave her shoulder a little squeeze.

* * *

After her shift was over, Joanna left the police station and drove randomly through the Big City, going up streets and down boulevards, turning left and right until she only had a vague idea of where she was.

The Crown Victoria seemed to decide for her where she should go. After a long drive that didn't clear her mind like she had hoped it would, she pulled over at the curb in a no-parking zone in front of a mom-and-pop grocery store.

She turned off the engine and looked to her left.

Liliana's apartment building was brilliantly illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun, making an image of Liliana standing naked in front of the venetian blinds flash through Joanna's mind.

Feeling terribly guilty and strangely excited at the same time, she reached into her pocket to find her cell phone. After finding her own number in the registry, she put the phone to her ear.

'Betty Johansen speaking.'

"Hey, baby, it's me."

'Oh no, don't tell me you have to work late again!'

"I'm afraid so, hon."

'Shit.'

"I know. I'm really, really sorry, but... but there's no way around it."

'Damn, and here I was, preparing some Mexican meatballs and devil rice...!'

"Save some for me, okay?"

'Sure, but they won't taste nearly as good cold.'

"We can always nuke 'em. Baby, I have to go. I know you're upset, but I promise to make it up to you somehow."

'You better. This is starting to get really annoying, Jo.'

"I know. It can't be helped."

'Love you.'
"Love you, too, Bets."

As she closed the phone and put it back in her pocket, Joanna looked at herself in the rear view mirror. A few moments later, she had to look away.

A flash from a headlight in the left hand side mirror made Joanna look to her left. A very familiar charcoal gray Ford Taurus came up in the outside lane, activating its turning signal when it was fifteen feet behind the police car.

Joanna observed Liliana waiting for a gap in the traffic so she could turn into the parking garage. Much to Joanna's relief, the ash-blonde woman was alone in the car.

When a car going in the opposite direction flashed its headlights at the Taurus, Liliana quickly took advantage. A few seconds later, she was going down the ramp to the parking garage, moving out of Joanna's line of sight.

Joanna grabbed hold of the lever for the car door, but stopped at the very last moment. She closed her eyes, thinking hard about what she was about to do.

With a sigh, she opened the door and climbed out of the Crown Victoria. She soon found a gap in the traffic and ran across the busy boulevard. The temporary newspaper stand wasn't there anymore, replaced by a street hustler with a small table who was trying to trick the pedestrians into playing Diamonds.

While Joanna was running across the lanes, she noticed that the hustler packed up his stuff and sprinted up the boulevard like the devil himself was on his tail.

Slightly winded, Joanna arrived at the main entrance and immediately began to search for the right button. When she found 'L.E. Zinovia', she pressed the small knob and prayed that Liliana wanted to talk with her.

'Yes? Who is it?' Liliana's voice said from a small loudspeaker on a panel next to the door.

"Liliana, it's Jo. I've come to... uh, I've come to apologize for my behavior."

No reply was forthcoming, and at first, Joanna didn't know if that was a good or a bad sign. After a brief pause, the door was buzzed open, and she quickly stepped inside.

She took the stairs up to the second floor two steps at a time and she was soon standing at the door to Liliana's apartment. Just as she raised her hand to knock, Liliana opened it.

The two women watched each other silently for nearly a minute. The tension that built up between them was so thick that Joanna started to worry that Liliana would never speak to her again. Mentally grabbing herself by the scruff of her neck, Joanna cleared her throat

"Liliana... I've come to apologize. I behaved like a... like a..." she mumbled.

"Spoiled brat?" Liliana said, cocking her head.

"You took the words right out of my mouth, ha ha. May I come in?"

The silence returned, but mercifully for Joanna's peace of mind, it didn't last as long as the first time.

"Well... why not. Come in," Liliana said and stepped aside.
"Thank you."

For the second time that day, Joanna stepped into one of Liliana's apartments. For a moment, she was worried that some naked chick would surprise them there as well, but she told herself to get a grip.

"The living room is to the right," Liliana said, putting a warm hand on the small of Joanna's back.

Feeling very self-conscious for some reason, Joanna turned right and went into the living room. Like the bedroom had been, the living room was furnished in a simple, yet elegant fashion, with a steel gray wall-to-wall carpet, several white bookcases lining the walls, a futon arrangement made of black velvet and a white sideboard with a medium sized television set on it.

Joanna took off her blazer and threw it over the back of the couch. "You have a very nice apartment, Liliana."

"Thank you."

Liliana moved over to a desk that had been placed against the wall opposite from the TV. On the desk, a laptop was in the last stages of booting, but as soon as it was done, Liliana turned it off again and closed its lid.

"Please, Jo, have a seat."

Joanna tried to smile, but the corners of her mouth didn't want to play along. She walked around the couch and sat down, crossing her legs at the knee. Moments later, she leaned forward and placed her elbows on her knees instead, thinking that it looked more sincere.

"Well, I... I'm really sorry for behaving in such a juvenile fashion out at the school, Liliana. That woman just caught me by surprise."

"I understand. Apology accepted, Jo," Liliana said, sitting down in a leather armchair opposite Joanna so she could look the detective in the eye.

"Who was she?" Joanna said, looking down at her shoes.

"Just someone I met."

"Oh. Well, it's not my business, anyway."

"You're right, it isn't. But let's not talk about that anymore. Today, I've requested a leave of absence from the school."

"Really? Why?"

Sighing, Liliana leaned back in the chair and began to play with her fingers.

The principal was wearing a pale gray business suit Joanna hadn't seen her in before but that she really liked. *The color is a perfect offset for her eyes and her hair,* she thought.

"Well, I needed to move faster than the board of directors," Liliana said after a long pause.

"Did they give you an offer you couldn't refuse?"
"Not yet, but they were going to," Liliana said with a shrug.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Ah, I'll... I'll find something else. The board of directors is worried that it could get scandalous. They've probably heard some rumors about the parties," Liliana said and began to unbutton her short jacket. Once she was done, she took it off, revealing an off-white V-neck blouse that clung to her like a second skin.

Joanna's eyes narrowed and she had to swallow several times at the sight.

Liliana got up from the chair, turned around and walked out of the living room. As she did so, Joanna's eyes were firmly trained on the principal's rear end that was wonderfully accentuated by the form-fitting skirt.

Joanna sighed and mopped her brow, wiping off the beads of sweat that had suddenly appeared on it. Liliana came back in and sat down again, crossing her legs in a very lady-like fashion.

"Liliana, there's something I've been meaning to ask you... Buford and his half-brother recorded four of the parties. Maurice Jerrod told me that in the three he visited, he saw you, ummm... uh..."

"Fuck Mark Gerlach and Brian Roper."

"... have sex with Mark and Brian, yes. And in the last one, you performed a dance."

"That's right. And?" Liliana said slightly defensively.

"Well, I was wondering what you were doing in the first of the shows that was recorded?"

Liliana licked her lips and looked up at the ceiling. "Well, I did a floor show with a young French-Canadian who was visiting us in an exchange program. His name was Yannick... something."

"A French-Canadian?"

"The only reason he's still alive is that he went back to Montreal a couple of days after the party," Liliana said matter-of-factly.

"Oh... it was too much for him?" Joanna said with a cheeky grin.

"No, that was the plan all along. The party doubled as his farewell-bash. Joanna, why are you here?"

The question completely knocked the wind out of Joanna's sails and she felt her face and neck turn red in an instant. Reaching up, she put a finger inside her collar to get some air, but when that didn't work, she undid the top two buttons instead. "I c-came to apo-""

"B.S, Jo. You could have done that over the phone."

"I c-came to tell you that we couldn't see each other anymore."

"I didn't know that we *were* seeing each other...?" Liliana said, flicking her hair out of her collar, a move designed to exacerbate Joanna's blush.

"N-no, but..."
"You came here looking for sex, didn't you? You were hoping we'd end up in bed."

Joanna simultaneously shrugged, nodded and shook her head. "Oh, hell, I don't know what I was doing. I just drove around town... and then I ended up here."

Liliana got up and walked over to stand in front of Joanna. Reaching down, she took the detective by the hands and pulled her to her feet. "I think it's time for you-"

"For me to leave, I know," Joanna said and began to move away, but Liliana kept her firm grip on Joanna's hands.

"No. I think it's time for you to act on your instincts, Detective."

Liliana moved Joanna's hands over to rest on her snug blouse. When Joanna still seemed conflicted about the whole deal, Liliana pulled the detective down and claimed her lips in a ferocious kiss.

While she was being kissed senseless, Joanna heard a voice in her ear screaming that what she did was wrong, wrong, wrong - but she didn't care one little bit. Instead, she grabbed hold of Liliana's blouse and pulled it clear of the tight skirt. When her probing fingers ran across the silky smooth skin she found there, Liliana reacted by pushing her hips against Joanna's thighs and letting out a prolonged moan.

Moments later, Joanna pulled Liliana Zinovia towards the bedroom, intent on devouring every last inch of her lithe body.

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Part 2

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CHAPTER 7

One month later - Saturday, June 4th.

"Do you have your keys, Bets?" Joanna said as she put on her blazer.

"Right here, hon," Betty said, patting the pocket of her jeans.

"Well, let's get the show on the road, then."

"I'm really excited! This is the first time I've been to one of those Meet The Police-bashes."

"There isn't much to get excited about. It's mostly just a bunch of law enforcement people chewing the fat," Joanna said and wrapped her arm around Betty's shoulder.
"And then there's the cotton candy, the amusements, the police big band... can't wait!"

On their way down the garden path, Betty suddenly ran ahead and flung herself against the side of the Crown Victoria.

"Oooh, I'm yours to frisk, officer," Betty said and put her hands behind her back to show that she was ready for the handcuffs.

Joanna's only reply was a grunt and a playful shove. Instead of speaking, she reached past Betty and opened the front door of the squad car.

"Are we going somewhere secluded so you can have your way with me, officer?" Betty said as she sat down on the front seat.

"You wish!"

---

Twenty-five minutes later, after safely navigating the ever-busy streets of the Big City, they entered a grassy lot the police force had rented for the weekend.

All the concession stands and the mesh fence surrounding the lot were covered by so many red, white and blue balloons that Joanna briefly wondered why they didn't lift off, but she was soon too busy maneuvering the large squad car into a tightly packed parking lot to have time to think about anything else.

"Sheesh, wouldya look at this lot. Cop cars everywhere," Betty said with a snicker.

"Just remember who brought you here, okay? I don't want to come back to the car and realize that you've left with one of the foxy ladies from the SWAT team or something," Joanna said in a sincere voice that soon made Betty snicker even louder.

"Sure thing, hon. You know where my heart lies," Betty said and leaned over to give Joanna a loving peck on the cheek.

A flash of guilt swept across Joanna's face as she watched Betty climb out of the car and close the door behind her. Joanna briefly looked at herself in the rear view mirror, but soon reached for the lever to open her own door.

---

A while later, Betty and Joanna waved goodbye to a young widow they had spoken to and continued walking around the colorful concession stands.

"Wow, it was really sobering to listen to her story," Betty said after a long pause.

"Yeah. In our line of work, we never know who we'll meet next or what's going to happen when we do. Appearances can be deceptive as well. I remember one time where I stopped a luxury car driven by a clean-cut man looking very much like a stockbroker. Next thing I knew, he drew a gun on me. Turned out he was a lawyer who'd been embezzling his company to cover a gambling debt and now he had come to a literal dead end. I still don't know if he hoped I'd do it for him, or what his intentions were."
"Jo, please stay out of the firing line if you can... okay?" Betty said and put her hand on Joanna's elbow. The two women stopped and turned around to look at each other.

'I'll try, but there are no guarantees in the police force. You never know where the next threat will come from. Like I said, something completely innocuous could jump up and bite you in the-"

"Oh, hello, Detective Powell," a very familiar, rich female voice said right behind Joanna. Even before she turned around, she had recognized the voice. Her blood froze over and she could almost feel her teeth begin to chatter in her mouth. Moments later, a superheated wave swept over her and she felt like she was burning up from the inside. All of this had only lasted a few seconds, but Joanna had seen her entire love life flash by before her eyes.

Licking her lips nervously, she turned around and prepared to face the one person she hadn't expected to see.

"Hello, Miss Zinovia," Joanna said in a shaky voice. She cleared her throat a couple of times to get it under control, but Liliana had already picked up on it, leading to a cheeky smirk flashing across her lips. The former principal definitely attracted attention to herself by wearing a bright white, breezy pantsuit with a pale yellow scarf around her neck and a pair of sunglasses with smoke-tinted lenses.

"And you must be Joanna's girlfriend. I'm so pleased to meet you. My name is Liliana Zinovia," Liliana said, raising her sunglasses and putting out her hand.

"That's right, I'm Betty Johansen. Nice to meet you, Miss Zinovia," Betty said with a smile. As the two women shook hands, Joanna stared at both her lovers in a state of shock.

"What... uh... what are you doing here?" Joanna said, fidgeting with the sleeves of her blazer.

"I was invited by Lieutenant Barnes."

'Sweet Jesus, she's been screwing the Lou!' Joanna thought and was once again assaulted by the hot and cold sensations.

"Well, I won't take too much of your time. It was nice meeting you, Betty," Liliana said and reached out to touch Betty's arm.

"Likewise, Liliana."

"Perhaps we'll bump into each other again later?" Liliana said, looking directly at Joanna.

"Perh... *cough, cough* ... perhaps we will, Miss Zinovia," Joanna said and wrapped her arm around Betty's shoulders. "Bets, I need a Coke... you want some cotton candy?" she continued, pulling the amused Betty further down the lane.

"No, a Coke will do fine, thanks," Betty said, glancing over her shoulder at the striking figure they had just left behind.

---

As they were standing in line for the soft drinks vendor, Betty tugged at Joanna's sleeve to make the taller woman lean down towards her.
"That Liliana Zinovia, she's definitely a looker, huh?"

"Uh, yes. Yes, she is."

"Just for fun, Jo... could you go for someone like her?"

Joanna's head snapped around and she stared gap-mouthed at her partner. "Well, I... I guess. But I don't have to because I already have one hell of a cutie pie right here," she added hurriedly.

Betty chuckled and snuck her hand down Joanna's rear pocket. "Nice save, Detective. I know what you mean, though. She looks good, but it's not always the flashy shell that matters... right? I mean, you have to look at the core as well. The heart."

"Absolutely. Good thing you have plenty of both, Bets," Joanna said and bumped shoulders with her partner.

"Awwww!"

Joanna tried to keep a smile on her face but it insisted on fading away. Even if it had been a coincidence that they had run into Liliana Zinovia, she knew that the inevitable showdown had moved a great deal closer.

After they had received their soft drinks, they continued roaming the fair, eventually ending up at a small stage where an emcee and a stand-up comedian were trying to keep the crowd entertained by firing off a barrage of jokes that ranged from faintly amusing to toe-curlingly unfunny.

Joanna could only stomach a handful of the jokes so it didn't take long for her to hook her arm inside Betty's and continue onto the BBQ tent.

"Time for lunch, Bets. What do you fancy today?" she said as they entered the tent.

Shaped like a circus big-top, the marquee had tons of balloons and wide, red-and-white festoons hanging from the rafters. Just inside the entrance, a large tri-pod billboard was prominently placed, carrying a promotional image of the Chief of Detectives dressed like a Chef. Snickering, Joanna approved of the impressive handlebar mustache some joker had drawn under the Chief's nose.

"Spare ribs if they have 'em, wings if they don't."

"Right. Go find a seat. I'll get the food and the drinks. Coke again?"

"Yes, please, hon," Betty said with a dazzling smile.

---

On her way back from the counter, Joanna came to such a hard stop that she almost dropped the two plates and two cans she was carrying on a tray. Down at the table, Betty was having an animated conversation with Liliana Zinovia.

Both women were smiling and laughing, and somehow, Joanna couldn't help but think that they were talking about her - maybe even comparing notes.

"Hey, would you mind gettin' a move on?" a man said behind Joanna.
"Huh? Oh, yeah... sorry." Reluctantly, Joanna began to walk again. Her legs wouldn't really obey, but she managed to move one ahead of the other in the traditional, rhythmic motion.

"Hi again, Detective Powell," Liliana said, moving her sunglasses away so Joanna could put down the tray.

"Hi," Joanna said, deliberately not looking at Liliana. Instead, she concentrated on placing a can of Coke and a plate of spare ribs in front of Betty. When she moved to sit down, she realized that Liliana had chosen the seat next to hers. Looking to her right and then across the table to the free chair next to Betty, Joanna realized that she would have to go around the entire table to get to the other side - but that would just be too obvious.

Sighing, she pulled out the chair and sat down next to Liliana. As she put her backside in the seat, she caught a whiff of the former principal's perfume. 'I wonder what she's wearing? Gotta be something exotic and extravagant. Maybe Tigress... no, I know... it's gotta be Goddess Of The Hunt by Karl L.'

Liliana was nursing a bottled mineral water, and as she took a small swig, Joanna looked at the way her head was leaned back, revealing her smooth throat.

"Sorry I didn't get anything for you, Miss Zinovia. I didn't know you'd be here," Joanna offered, stabbing a rib with her fork.

"Oh, that's all right, Joanna. Mind if I call you Joanna?" Liliana said with an unmistakable sparkle in her eye.

"Uh, no, I don't mind. It's my name after all."

"Joanna Powell. It really suits her, don't you think, Betty? It's sharp, it's to the point... it delivers," Liliana said, clenching her fists in a humorous fashion.

Betty chuckled and took a bite out of her first rib. After she had finished chewing, she grinned and nodded. "That's right. She definitely delivers."

"Okay, now you're freaking me out," Joanna said around a mouthful of rib, pointing her fork at Betty. The gleam in her eye took the sting out of the words, but in reality, she meant it more than she was letting on.

"Sorry, Joanna. Anyway, I promised Nick to meet him at the shooting gallery in a little while so I better get going," Liliana said and moved her chair back.

"Nick?" Joanna said.

"Nicholas Barnes, your Lieutenant."

"Oh... I don't think I've ever heard anyone calling him 'Nick' before."

"Now you have. Joanna, please give me a call if you hear something on Rocky Caulfield... okay?" Liliana said and put a warm hand on Joanna's shoulder.

Joanna could feel Liliana's body heat radiate through the blazer and the shirt she was wearing underneath. Although the touch wasn't uncomfortable by any stretch of the imagination, it sent her into an acute state of panic. "I will, Miss Zinovia. You have my word."

"Thank you. See ya, Betty," Liliana said and waved at Joanna's partner.
"See ya!" Betty said, digging into the last of the ribs.

At the same time, Joanna pushed her nearly untouched food away and leaned back in her seat.

"Who's Rocky Caulfield?" Betty said, taking a long swig from her can of Coke.

"The prime suspect in the boarding school homicides. He's vanished without a trace."

"Don't worry, you'll find him," Betty said and reached across the table to pat Joanna's hand.

"I wish I had your confidence," Joanna said, looking towards the main entrance of the BBQ tent where she just caught a glimpse of Liliana as she made her exit.

"Have no fear, the One-Four is here!" a man shouted from his position at one of the other entrances, earning himself a loud chorus of jeers, boos and whistles from the assembled officers.

"I think I know who that is," Joanna said and got up from her chair. With a wave, she caught the attention of Corbin Thomas and the ever-loud William Larsen who both waved back and began to stride their way around the tables.

"Are they some of your colleagues?" Betty said, wiping her lips and her fingers in a napkin.

"Yeah, they work the night shift. They're both smart, even if you can't always see it in the way they dress," Joanna said and waved again. William Larsen was wearing the same suit he always wore and he had the tie crooked and the top button of his shirt undone like always.

The two detectives sat down on opposite sides of the table, Corbin next to Joanna and William next to Betty.

"So, what's up, fellas?" William said.

"Not much," Joanna said.

"Are you done with those ribs?"

Joanna looked down at her half-full plate. Shrugging, she pushed that and an unused napkin across the table. "Sure. Knock yourself out, Bill."

"Thanks!" At once, William went to work on one of the ribs. It didn't take him much more than ten seconds to have barbecue sauce dripping from his chin.

"Last night, we managed to close the Sorranto Street case," Corbin Thomas said.

"I heard. Great work. So it was a crime of passion after all, huh?"

"Yeah. The husband was doing it with both his female neighbors. Initially, his wife said that burglars had done him in, but we found blood and skin tissue on her weapon of choice, a frying pan. A cast iron frying pan, I might add," Corbin said, looking at Betty.

"Ouch. Did he make it?" Betty said.
"Uhhh... no."

"Oh..."

"Messy business, that passion," Corbin said reflectively.

The others all nodded in agreement.

"Anyway, how are things going with the armed assaults on the bus drivers?" he said to Joanna.

"Okay. We got one of them, but he won't roll over on his associates. By the looks of things, it's gang-related," Joanna said, stealing half a rib back from the plate William was eating from.

"Really? Even over here, west of the Monroe?"

"Yeah. They're everywhere these days." Joanna looked up and noticed that Betty was practicing her thousand-mile stare. "No more talking shop for me, guys. I think my girl here is bored to tears," she said and tickled Betty's hand.

"I need to get some more chow, anyway. You want some, Corbin?" William Larsen said and got up from his chair.

"A Double Cheesy Deluxe if you're buying...?" Corbin said.

"I'm not."

"Then I'm good."

"Cheapskate," William said out of the corner of his mouth, making Joanna and Betty chuckle at him.

"Look who's talking. You're always first out of the taxi and last into the bar!" Corbin said loudly, but William just waved his hand at him.

"Do you want some more food, hon?" Joanna said, swallowing the last of the rib.

"No, thank you. I'm quite full. They were great ribs, I can't understand why you only had one and a half...?"

"Ah, I wasn't that hungry. Anyway, see ya, Corbin. Meet you back at the precinct," Joanna said and got up from her chair.

Once they were outside, Joanna knew exactly where she didn't want to go - the shooting gallery - and she dearly hoped that it wouldn't be of any interest to Betty, either.

From the other end of the fair, the first strains of a big band standard could be heard and Betty quickly turned around and put her hands around Joanna's waist. "That's gotta be the Boys In Blue police big band. D'ya want to go and listen to them? I watched them on TV the other week and they're really good."

"A big band? Well, why not. Let's go listen to the big band," Joanna said and took Betty's hands in her own. Swinging their hands back and forth between them, the two women hurried down the lane to join the hundreds of people already standing in front of the open stage.
Monday, June 6th.

"Damn, Vern, couldn't you have found a better day to have a sore throat?" Joanna growled as the telephone rang for the umpteenth time that day. As it rang and rang, she looked left and right, desperately trying to find a place to dump the heavy pile of folders she was carrying.

Finally deciding on the seat of her chair, she let go of the files and reached over the table to pick up the receiver.

"Detective Powell," she said, holding the receiver between her neck and her shoulder as she was sorting the files.

'Joanna Powell?' a male voice said.

"That's right, Detective Joanna Powell. Who is this?"

'I have some information for you.'

"Oh? On what?"

'I'd like to report a dead body.'

Joanna put down the files and took the receiver in her hand. She swiftly cleared a corner of the desk and sat down. "All right. Give me the details," she said and held her notepad ready.

'It's a woman. Mid-thirties I reckon. A tall brunette. She's been strangled.'

The caller's voice was so cold and detached that Joanna's finely honed instincts started screaming in her ear. She had heard her fair share of pranks over the years but a nagging thought at the back of her mind told her that this wasn't one of those instances - this guy was the real deal.

"Where is it, Sir?"

'Just beyond the main entrance to Beauregard Park.'

'Beauregard Park? That's not in our jurisdiction. You need to call the Nineteenth Prec-"

'I'm calling you, Powell!' The voice put so much emphasis on the P in Powell that the connection was momentarily distorted.

Grimacing darkly, Joanna ground her jaw to calm herself down so she wouldn't yell at the caller. "What did you say your name was?"

Click.

Joanna shook her head and put the receiver back down on the telephone. She began tapping her index finger against her lips, pondering the unknown man's words and actions.
Grunting, she got off the table and headed for her chair. When she noticed that the pile of folders hadn't moved itself in the mean time, she spun around and went over to Vernon's chair.

Picking up the other phone, she quickly dialed the number for the watch commander of the Nineteenth Precinct.

'Nineteenth Precinct, this is Sergeant Harris,' a female voice said.

"Good afternoon, Sergeant, this is Detective Powell from the Fourteenth. I've just been informed over the telephone that you may have a vic just beyond the main entrance to Beauregard Park. Is it possible for you to send a black-and-white to check?"

'Will do, Detective. Stand by.'

"Standing by, Sergeant," Joanna said with a chuckle.

Six and a half minutes went by and then the connection came alive again. 'Detective?'

"I'm here, Sergeant. Did they find anything?"

'No. There is no victim anywhere near there. Sounds like you got some bum info. Who told you?'

"Some joker, apparently."

'Well, there's nothing there. Just someone wasting our time."

"Seems like it. Thank you for your time, Sergeant," Joanna said and hung up. Noticing the lateness of the hour, she went to work sorting the pile of folders so she wouldn't be late home for the sixth time in ten days.

---

Thirty minutes of hard labor later, Joanna exited the police station and walked over to her Crown Victoria. The parking lot was still fairly busy with some of the people working the nightshift coming in early. She tried looking around for Corbin Thomas or William Larsen's cars but couldn't see them anywhere.

The evening had turned slightly chilly so she put on her blazer and closed the two lower buttons. In the far distance, she could hear a police cruiser's siren as it moved through traffic, and she started thinking that yet another family would have their evening - or even their life - ruined.

As she was standing at the car door, she felt her sixth sense kick in and she began to scan the area for things that were out of place. When she couldn't find anything, she looked down to insert the key into the lock.

A split second later, she heard footsteps behind her, crunching on the loose gravel. Without warning, the world exploded in a bright flash that was accompanied by a terrible stab of pain from the back of her head.

Then everything faded away; first to gray, then to black.

---
Some time later, Joanna slowly came to; stirred awake by being bumped around in a very dark, very cramped space. When she tried to move, she could feel that her hands were cuffed behind her back and that her legs had been pulled up to her chest.

An attempt to stretch her legs was unsuccessful, and by collecting the evidence - it reeked of gasoline and exhaust fumes and she had several metallic tools poking her in the ribs - she soon came to the conclusion that she was trapped in the trunk of a moving car.

"Hey! HEY!"

When no answer was forthcoming, Joanna launched a blue streak that threatened to peel off the upholstery.

A few minutes later, the car felt like it went off the road, throwing her around quite severely. Her knee connected with something with a sharp edge that tore a hole in her slacks, and she bumped her head twice against the inside of the wheel well, exacerbating her already throbbing headache.

"GodDAMN!" she bellowed, hoping to get the driver to stop.

She could feel the car turning again, and suddenly, the noise level grew exponentially as loose gravel rattled off the bottom of the car and the wheel wells, creating a deafening clatter.

Clenching her teeth, Joanna tried to duck her head down between her shoulders to protect her ears, but the car was bumping about too much for it to do her any good.

After driving on the gravel for what seemed like an eternity, the car finally came to a stop and the engine was shut off. Joanna took a few deep breaths of the stinking air to prepare herself for whatever was to come for her.

After a long wait, the trunk was opened, revealing a tall, broad person dressed in black clothes. Joanna tried to turn her head away from the beaming sunlight that fell directly into her eyes, but she couldn't get far enough into the trunk to do so.

Wordlessly, the man in black reached in and grabbed Joanna around her waist. Despite her vocal protests, he heaved her out of the trunk and dumped her onto her knees on what looked to be a gravel road.

"You crazy son of a bitch! Don't you understand that abducting an officer of the law is just fuckin' nuts!" Joanna shouted, looking angrily at the man. He was dressed in black from head to toe: a ski mask, a commando-style sweater, leather gloves, jeans, and boots - all black.

"Oh, shut the fuck up. I'll let you know when you can talk," the man growled.

In the vain hope that she would get out of the miserable situation in one piece, Joanna began to study the man. She quickly noted that his eyes were grayish blue and she could see traces of a dirty-blond full beard or a goatee through the mask's mouth-hole.

The man appeared to be as tall as she was, perhaps even a few inches taller. He was beefy and broad-shouldered and his stance led Joanna to think that he might've served in the military.

The man began to pace back and forth and Joanna thought that he was psyching himself up for something. Swallowing nervously, she looked down at the holster for her pistol, noting that it was as empty as she had feared it would be.
The abrasion on her knee caused by the impact with the sharp object inside the trunk stung like crazy and she shuffled around to take the weight off it.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" the man said and gave her such a hard shove that she keeled over and fell against the side of the car - a dark sedan.

"My knee fuckin' hurts, dickhead!" Joanna growled. Looking down, she could see a small pool of blood where her knee had rested against the gravel, and she began cursing again.

'I'll make you forget your knee,' the man said calmly, picking Joanna off the ground and slamming her against the car doors.

In a very deliberate maneuver, he moved in close and punched her so hard in the solar plexus that all the air rushed out of her. Gasping, wheezing and seeing stars, Joanna couldn't stop herself from doubling over, falling forward into the man's grasp.

The man grabbed hold of her lapels and pushed her back up against the doors. When Joanna's knees buckled and she started sliding downwards, he held her erect by wrapping his gloved hands around her throat.

Joanna's eyes popped wide open when she realized what was happening, and at once, she tried to wiggle free of the man's grip. The fact that her hands were tied behind her back limited her possibilities, but the big issue was that she hadn't had time to recapture her breath before the man had put his hands around her neck.

In the first few seconds, the man didn't apply any pressure on Joanna's neck, creating a spark of hope in her that he was only out to scare her, but her hopes were dashed as the man's thumbs began to squeeze against her windpipe.

Small dots of bright light invaded her vision, growing stronger and stronger until they drowned out the natural light. With alarming clarity, she realized that if she didn't at least try to break free, she'd soon have to explain to St. Peter why she had allowed herself to be killed so easily.

Her strength was fading fast, but she summoned all she had left and began to kick out with both her legs. It was ineffective at first, but suddenly, she hit the side of the man's knee, producing a nasty crunching sound in the process.

The man roared and partially released his grip - not much, but just enough for Joanna to get a breath of air. Her vision was still blurry, but she could see the outline of the man's legs as he was leaning towards her.

Sneering, she aimed at the center and kicked out with both legs, scoring a full-on strike squarely in the man's crotch. At once, the man squealed like a pig and let Joanna go to cup his abused family jewels.

Moments later, he wobbled badly and fell down onto his knees.

As the man let her go, Joanna slid down onto the gravel and began to greedily gulp air down into her lungs. Her vision slowly came back to her and she arrived at the obvious conclusion that she needed to make a run for it while the man was incapacitated.

She staggered to her feet and began to move away from the scene of the crime, but she had only made it a few feet when the man grabbed hold of her leg, tripping her up.

Once again she fell down, ending up with a mouthful of gravel and dirt that she spat out angrily. Kicking backwards, she could feel that the heel of her shoe connected with the man's arm, but it wasn't enough to make him let go.
Trying a new tactic, Joanna rolled over onto her back. Even though her hands and arms began to throb almost at once, she had a better angle to respond to the attacker. A well-timed kick at the man's face made contact just above the bridge of his nose and he squealed again and fell backwards.

Joanna immediately rolled over and stumbled to her feet. This time she was more successful, managing to get out of the attacker's reach before he could come back at her.

Behind her, the man started cursing loudly and then did something that sent a cold shiver down her back - she had heard the easily recognizable sound of her own service pistol being cocked.

Every instinct in her screamed at her to run away at once, but she didn't know which way she should go. She frantically looked left and right, but couldn't see any natural shelter anywhere, apart from a cluster of trees some distance away. Deciding on the spot that it would be as good a place to hide as any, she decided to make a run for it.

Then the first shot rang out, zinging past her.

Joanna clenched her teeth and picked up the pace as she heard the warm lead fly past her. 'Forty yards! Forty yards, come on!' she thought, egging herself on. The awkward position her hands were in made running difficult, but she ignored the pain and carried on.

When she was a mere fifteen feet from the safety of the trees, two things happened at once: first she felt a mule kick her on the back of her left shoulder, and then the ground beneath her feet disappeared, turning into an unsighted four-foot deep ditch.

As she fell down, she couldn't stop a short scream from escaping her lips, but it was firmly and decisively silenced when she landed hard on her side, banging her ribs against some rocks.

The rough treatment made her already throbbing head feel like it was going to explode, her shoulder was killing her, her hands were numb from being cuffed for so long and now most of her ribs on her right side were poking inward, resting against her lung and making it increasingly difficult for her to breathe.

Keeping completely still, Joanna tried to listen for any footsteps that would give the attacker away, but the blood coursing through her veins drowned out everything else.

She thought she could hear a woman screaming, and in her foggy state, she thought it was herself. Feeling embarrassed for not being able to keep her emotions in check, she held her breath and bit her teeth together.

When the screaming continued even with her mouth firmly shut, she understood that it had to come from someone else. Since she hadn't seen a woman anywhere, she reckoned that an innocent bystander must have come across the drama and had flipped out.

Suddenly the sound of a car door slamming shut reached her ears. Moments later, an engine was started and then she could hear gravel being flung up from the spinning wheels.

The car seemed to be moving away and Joanna risked adding to her injuries by stretching up to try to peek over the edge of the ditch. When she couldn't see over it, she let herself fall back down with a grunt.

'Turning into a snack bar for flies in a soggy ditch wasn't exactly what I had in mind for the rest of my life... man, I need to get out of here,' she thought, trying to wiggle her arms around her rear end so she could get to the cuffs - unfortunately, every time she tried moving her left arm, a terrible pain shot out from her shoulder.
With a sigh, she gave up and rested her head against the side of the ditch.

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The loss of blood from the bullet wound in her shoulder made her weak, but her ears were still able to pick up a set of footsteps crunching on the gravel. The footsteps came from the top of the ditch and were seemingly coming towards her.

'Great, now he's back to finish me off.' Joanna thought, shaking her head.

"Hello?" A female voice said. "A-are you still alive?"

Joanna turned her head to her left and looked at the figure standing close to the edge. It seemed to be a woman in her late sixties, wearing clothes typical for a cyclist.

"Barely," Joanna croaked.

"Don't try to move, I'll call for help!" the woman said, turning away from the edge of the ditch.

"Wait! Please!" Joanna said. When she tried to speak loudly her throat hurt like hell, but she swallowed a couple of times to try to coat it.

"Y-yes?"

"They must be looking for me already. They'll get he-" Joanna gasped for air; her abused ribs poking into her lungs. "... here quicker if you t-tell them that I'm homicide detective Joanna Powell from the f-fourteenth precinct."

"I... I don't und-"

"Please! Just tell them..."

"Okay. Uh, don't move, I'll be right back," the woman said and disappeared.

If the situation had been less depressing, Joanna would've chuckled over the lady's words, but she didn't feel much like laughing. She rested her head against the side of the ditch and hoped that the lady wouldn't be too long.

A few minutes later, the other woman came back, holding a cell phone. "I've called them. They said they'll be here shortly."

"Thank you. Where are we, ex... exactly?"

"Beauregard Park."

"Beauregard Park..." Joanna echoed, shaking her head. "Of course. That motherfucker..."

When the pieces of the puzzle fell into place in her head, Joanna nodded to herself. 'Rocky Caulfield. Of course. Who else? Hitting my solar plexus, the strangulation... Rocky fuckin' Caulfield. This was his way of making me pay for screwing Liliana...!'
One thought led to the next, and Joanna suddenly realized that if Rocky was in town, Liliana could be in grave danger. She licked her lips and turned her head back towards the other woman.

"Hey, lady...?"

"Y-yes?"

"I n-need you to do something for me... please call Lil..."

At that exact moment, two police cars entered the park with full sirens, drowning out Joanna's faint words. Car doors were slammed and several sets of footsteps could be heard running towards her.

The first man to jump into the ditch was Corbin Thomas. His face was pale and drawn, and he began to fumble for the keys to the cuffs when he saw that Joanna's hands were tied behind her back.

"Damn, Joanna... you have the entire precinct up in arms. What the hell happened to you?"

"I got... bushwhacked. Get these... damn things off... me, Corbin!" Joanna croaked, taking a weak breath between every other word.

As soon as the cuffs were off, Joanna moved her hands in front of her and began to clench her fists repeatedly. Her left arm was coated in blood and it had grown numb all the way up to her armpit.

"I caught one in the back... left shoulder," she croaked.

"I see it. Upper part, above the shoulderblade."

"No exit... wound. It's still... in there."

"Shit. Sounds like your ribs are busted, too," Corbin said, helping Joanna into a sitting position.

"Yeah."

"Did you have a chance to see who it was?"

"Rocky Caul... Caulfield."

"From the boarding school homicides?"

Joanna nodded. "Where's... Vern?"

"Back at the stationhouse. He's sick as a dog, but he insisted on coming in."

"What time... is it...?"

"A quarter to ten. Why?"

"Jeez, he must've... given me... the... grand tour. Be... Betty needs... to be... told. I d- don't want... her to... hear it on... the news."

"I'll call her in a minute, Jo."
Above them, an ambulance arrived at the scene; its red emergency lights casting creepy shadows on the nearby trees. Two paramedics jumped out and lowered the lift at the rear end.

"The medics are here, Jo. Hang on, they'll get you fixed in no time."

"Did you... find my... gun and my... phone?"

"Your cell is up there, in two pieces. Your gun is gone, Jo. Did Caulfield shoot you with your own gun?"

"Yeah. Need to... call Betty... tell her..."

"I'll do it, Jo. I'll tell her you're pretty much... JESUS, JO!" Corbin said, jumping forward to grab Joanna's lolling head before it could slam into the side of the ditch.

The last thing Joanna saw in her mind's eye before the world went black again was Betty's smiling face.

*

*

CHAPTER 8

Wednesday, June 8th.

The first thing Joanna saw when her eyes fluttered open was Betty's hand reaching down to move a lock of dark hair away from her forehead.

"Welcome back, baby," Betty whispered in a shaky voice.

"I was away?" Joanna said in a croaky voice. Her brain simply consisted of one, large wad of cotton wool and no matter how hard she tried, she wasn't able to penetrate the fuzziness.

"You got shot, remember?"

"Vaguely. Where am I?"

"The General. You're in the ward I work in, actually."

"Oh... you better see to your other patients, then..."

Betty let out a cry that was a mix of a sob and a laugh and she leaned down to place a tender kiss on Joanna's forehead. She took Joanna's right hand in her own and gave it a little squeeze. "No, silly, I'm not working now. I'm here to help you."

"Oh... thank you."

"You're welcome. You've been unconscious for two full days. The doctors began to get worried, but I told them that you were too damned stubborn not to put up a fight. Besides, I never got to say I love you," Betty said and gave Joanna another kiss. When they separated, she caressed Joanna's cheek over and over again, almost like she was afraid to let go.
"I love you, too, Betty."

"You've just been through a second round of surgery to remove a fragment from the bullet in your shoulder. The doctors say that everything will be all right, darling," Betty said and sat down on the hospital bed.

"That's great news. Did they catch the man who did it yet?"

"No, not from what I've heard. Detective Kransky has called me ten times asking about you. He would've told me if they had arrested him."

"Probably."

"Baby, you were so banged up, it's a miracle you're even here. You had four sprained ribs, a bullet in the shoulder, a mild concussion and a nasty cut in your knee, just below the cap."

"All in a day's work," Joanna said and began to cough dryly.

"Here's some water." Betty held a plastic cup of water near Joanna's good arm and she promptly took it and drank greedily.

"The doctors told me it would be good therapy to talk about what happened, so... what happened?" Betty said, going back to caressing Joanna's cheek.

"Well... I can't remember everything yet, but I woke up in the trunk of a car. I have no idea how I got there."

"That's probably the concussion, hon. Detective Kransky told me that they had found some blood on the driver's side door of the Ford."

"Oh... well, the fuck... uh, bad guy took me out of the trunk and began to beat me up," Joanna said, biting her bottom lip. A few more memories had returned to her, including the reason why the incident had taken place at all - Liliana.

"Oh, honey, he didn't try to rape you, did he?"

"No, no, that wasn't his plan. He just wanted to kill me."

"Buy why, for God's sake!"

"I don't know," Joanna fibbed, feeling a strong pang of guilt for lying to Betty while she was in such a vulnerable state. "But it's all connected to the murders at the boarding school. I'm pretty certain it was the same guy."

"Well, whoever it was, I'm just glad you're still in one piece, more or less. When Detective Kransky called me the other night... God, I just freaked out. It didn't help that his voice was so hoarse I could hardly understand what he was saying."

"Oh yeah, he had a sore throat, that's right. Weird, it was Vern's first sick day this year... if he had been there, none of this would've happened," Joanna said, rubbing her brow.

"No, but... perhaps the killer would've tried at our home instead," Betty said and visibly got the shivers. "Oh... oh, God, do you think there's a risk he'll come for you again?" she continued in a frail voice.
"I don't know, Bets, I honestly don't. We should speak with the Lou. He can give you an attack alarm. Just one click on the little button and they'll send a black-and-white within a few minutes."

"A few minutes might be too long..."

Suddenly overcome by a wave of drowsiness, Joanna's eyes began to lose focus and her eyelids gradually slid down to half mast - then she had to surrender to a yawn so wide that it made Betty chuckle.

"Get some sleep, baby. I'll be back later today. Okay?" Betty said and leaned down to place a careful kiss on Joanna's lips.

"Sure. I love you, Bets-ZZzzzzzzzzz..."

_*_*_*_*_*

One week later - Tuesday, June 14th.

"Ow! Ow, for cryin' out loud, that hurts!" Joanna hissed through clenched teeth.

She was standing in the middle of her own bedroom, barefoot and in a Tweetie Bird tank top and a pair of pale blue shorts, while a physiotherapist was trying to manhandle her left arm into an unnatural angle to see if there was any lasting damage. "Owwww!"

"Sorry, Detective. We need to see how your ligaments are coping with the stress," the physio said, secretly rolling her eyes.

"But what about how I'm coping? Ow! Where did you learn that technique? In Sing-Sing?"

"Just one more, Detective, and then I'll let you go. For today, that is."

"Sheesh!"

When the physio was done, she took off a pair of latex gloves and put them into a medical bag. "Looks good, all in all. It's safe for you to resume a light workout. Nothing heavy for the first few weeks, though."

"All right," Joanna said, clenching her left fist several times.

"Did you regain full strength in your hand yet?"

"Mostly. It's working good so far. I guess I need to thank you for that," Joanna said sheepishly.

"You're welcome, Detective. See you in two days."

"Oh, I can't wait," Joanna said with a chuckle. She put her hand on the small of the physio's back and helped her out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

After Joanna had let the physio out, she returned to the kitchen where Betty was busy making pancakes. She had the radio on and was shimmying left and right to some rock'n'roll oldie, making the oversize T-shirt she was wearing flap in the breeze.
Joanna kept standing in the door, observing her girlfriend. 'God, I'm more conflicted than ever. I have no idea what the hell I'm going to do now,' she thought. 'I still love Betty, but she doesn't hold a candle to Liliana's fire and raw sexiness. I have NO idea what I'm going to do.'

Sighing, she moved up to stand behind Betty and put her hands on the brunette's swaying hips. Betty began to giggle, a sound that warmed Joanna's heart but also one that made her even more unsure of how to go about her business.

Behind the two women, the telephone started ringing in the living room.

"Wouldya mind getting that, hon? I'm kinda busy," Betty said, juggling the tools needed to make the pancakes.

"No problem. It's probably Vern calling me to remind me of the psych evaluation," Joanna said and gave Betty's rear end a little squeeze, making the woman it belonged to squirm and giggle.

Joanna sat down on the chair next to the telephone and picked up the receiver. "Joanna Powell speaking," she said, fully expecting to hear Vernon's characteristic voice.

'Hi, Jo, it's Liliana.'

Joanna stared at the receiver, most of all wanting to put it back down. "Uh, hi."

'How are you?'

"Oh, I'm fine. As fine as I can be with a sore shoulder and an aching knee."

'I've spoken to your Lieutenant. Are you sure it was Rocky Caulfield?" As Liliana spoke the sentence, her voice trailed off into a faint whisper.

"Yeah, I'm sure. It all fits. He had his brother's grayish eyes and dirty-blond beard. It was him. Liliana, are you all right?"

'I've had to move again. I've kept the flat, but you might say I've gone undercover."

"Oh... I'm sorry to hear that. Where did you move to?" Joanna said and pulled her legs up in the chair. Without paying attention to it, she began to play with the telephone's cord, wrapping it around her little finger.

'I... well, I'd rather not say that over the phone, if you don't mind."

"Of course not. That was stupid, sorry."

'Would you like to go out for dinner and a drink tonight? Afterwards, I could show you my new, temporary, apartment...?"

Joanna's legs fell back down to the floor with a bump and she shot up into an upright position. "No... no, I'm sorry... that wouldn't be... that w-wouldn't be... uh, that just wouldn't work, Liliana."

'Your girlfriend?"

"Yeah."
'You know, the offer still stands. You're more than welcome to bring her along.'

"Huh, to a..." Joanna looked up, making sure that Betty couldn't hear her. "...to a threesome? I don't think so."

'To dinner and a drink, Jo. What would happen afterwards is up to you... and her.'

"No, Liliana. Just... no," Joanna said, rubbing her forehead.

'All right. Well. I just wanted to ask how you felt, anyway.'

"Thanks. Like I said, I'm okay. Not tip-top, but okay."

The line fell silent for so long that Joanna thought Liliana had hung up, but then her voice came back through the connection.

'I miss you, Jo. I miss your touch.'

Joanna stared wide-eyed at the receiver. For each time she spoke with Liliana, she felt less equipped to deal with the things that came out of the conversations. "Uh... I..."

At the exact same moment, Betty entered the living room carrying a full plate of pancakes and a bottle of maple leaf syrup. Joanna's face instantly flushed red, worried that Betty had heard too much.

"Uh, listen, Liliana, I gotta go. Lunch has just been served, so... you know. I gotta go."

'No, wait, Jo-'

"Talk you to later," Joanna said and hung up. For the first few heartbeats, she stared blankly into space, thinking about what had just happened and what she had done.

"That was Liliana?" Betty said, opening the bottle of syrup.

Joanna nodded, almost feeling like she was having an out-of-body experience.

"How is she?"

"She's fine. She's had to move from her flat."

"Oh, that's too bad. Because of that psycho?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. It shouldn't have to be that way. Well, come and get some while they're hot," Betty said and pulled out a chair for Joanna.

Joanna stared at the pile of pancakes and at her girlfriend. Nodding, she got out of the chair and moved over to the table.

-*.*-.*-
One week later - Monday, June 20th.

"Welcome back, Jo," Vernon said, offering Joanna a Styrofoam cup of coffee the second she walked through the door to her office in the stationhouse.

"Thanks, Vern," Joanna said and gave Vernon's shoulder a soft thump. After putting her blazer across the backrest of her swivel-chair, she took the offered cup and began to drink from it.

"By the way, the Lou told me that he wanted to see you as soon as you came in."

"Mmmmm. I need to catch my breath first," Joanna said and sat down in her chair.

"How did your psych evaluation go?"

Joanna shot Vernon an Evil Eye, but then began to chuckle. "All right. I passed with flying colors."

"Good. Did you get a new sidearm yet?"

"No, I need to go down to acquisitions and fill out half a dozen forms in triplicate first. That's probably what bothers me the most, Vern. Jeez, we learned that on day one back in the Academy. Never lose your gun."

"Yeah, but this is an unusual case."

"It's no excuse," Joanna said and took a long swig from the cup. "Thanks for the coffee, I better go and see what the Lou wants."

---

Twenty minutes later, Joanna returned to her office and sat down with a bump. Without paying attention to it, she began massaging the outside of her knee through her gun metal gray slacks.

To get some much-needed fresh air down her front, she undid the top two buttons of her off-white shirt and began to flap the lapels back and forth.

"Did the Lieutenant rip you a new one?" Vernon said, busy sorting a pile of files.

"Something like that, yeah. Like I expected, he wasn't too pleased that I lost my gun. Anyway, what's the status on our cases?"

"Well, we're almost through the assaults on the bus drivers. The gangbanger we have in custody has finally rolled over on his crew mates."

"That's going to make him popular."

"Yeah. He's been offered a spot in the witness protection program. Don't know if he'll accept it, though. The gang is a fairly local one and it isn't connected to any of the bigger organizations."

"Mmm. And the school homicides? Do we have a lead on Rocky Caulfield's whereabouts?"

Vernon leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "Nope."
"Shit. When I could get a word in edgewise, I asked the Lou for an attack alarm for Betty. I think he agreed to it. It was kinda hard to tell with all the steam coming out of his ears," Joanna said with a dry chuckle.

"Joanna, why did Rocky target you? Of all people, why you? We all worked that case, but he hasn't come after us."

Joanna mopped her brow and got up from her chair. "Probably because I... uh, sampled the forbidden fruit. Wasn't that what you called it?"

"I think it was, yeah. And now, Rocky is jealous."

"Jealous, possessive, nuts..."

"He's going to try again, you know. Once somebody like that gets a notion into his skull, he won't let go until he's dealt with it."

"I know, dammit," Joanna said, slamming her fist into the palm of her hand.

Behind her, her phone started ringing, and she spun around and picked it up. "Detective Powell!" she barked.

'It's Liliana Zinovia. Any news?'

Joanna was struck by the business-like tone to Liliana's voice, but she knew it was understandable after the stunt she had pulled the last time they had spoken.

'I'm afraid not, Miss Zinovia. We are... we still haven't located Mr. Caulfield."

When Vernon heard Liliana's name, a big smirk formed on his lips and both his eyebrows arced upwards. Joanna waved her hand at him and turned away so she didn't have to look him in the eye.

'All right. I hope you'll find him soon as I'm quite tired of playing hide and seek with a psychopath.'

'I understand.'

'Detective Powell, I need to see you in person. The sooner the better.'

Joanna took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. She sneaked a glance at Vernon who had gone back to filling out some form. "Okay. Where and when?"

'In the coffee shop down on McKinley in Midtown West, Heaven In A Cup. Remember it?'

"Uh... yeah. I remember the parking lot, anyway."

'In an hour? Is that too soon?'

"I'm afraid it is. We better make it two. Okay?" Joanna said, checking her wristwatch - it was nearly eleven thirty a.m.

'Two hours? Works for me... talk to you then. Goodbye, Detective.'
"Goodbye, Miss Zinovia."

For several seconds, Joanna made like a statue, holding the receiver in her hand. Then she snapped out of the sizzling thoughts that had invaded her mind and put it down on the telephone.

Sitting down, she began smoothing out her eyebrows, trying to think nothing but boring thoughts to get her mind back on track.

"That was Miss Zinovia?"

"Yeah."

"She wants to meet you?"

"Yeah."

"Remember what we just talked about, Jo."

"Oh, yes, we'll behave in a very adult, mature fashion. We're to meet in a coffee shop down on McKinley. That's a very public place, Vern. I doubt she'll try anything there," Joanna said with a forced chuckle.

"Even the most public place has a rest room."

"Vern! There you go with the pulp novels again! You know just as well as I do that public rest rooms are too icky to even think of sex. Jeez, just the smell... icky."

Joanna opened a file, picked up a ball point pen and began to make a few notes in her notepad. After a few seconds, she looked at Vernon and shook her head. "Icky!" she said again, mostly to convince herself instead of her colleague.

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Two minutes past the bottom of the hour, Joanna bumped over the curb and drove the Crown Victoria into Heaven In A Cup's parking lot. She noted with morbid fascination that the only available space was the one she and Liliana had used in their aborted attempt at getting some coffee back in April.

When she had parked, she looked at herself in the rear view mirror. She couldn't decide if she was excited to see Liliana again or scared witless that they would end up in bed again.

Eventually deciding that she was excited to see Liliana, she got out of the car and crossed the small lot.

Heaven In A Cup was a very cozy coffee shop, open and clean, and held in pale tan and creamy white colors - to make the customers think of coffee, Joanna thought. The tables and chairs were made of steel and dark brown hardwood as was the long counter that stretched nearly the entire length of the shop. A strong, but not unpleasant, scent of ground coffee beans hung in the air, adding to the cozy atmosphere.

Because of the hour, the place was pretty full with most of the customers being well-dressed businesswomen of all ages and ethnicities. One or two of them looked up at Joanna as she was standing in the doorway, but most of them looked back at their newspapers or Smartphones when the tall cop walked between the tables and up to the shiny counter.
Feeling out of place in her regular shirt and slacks, Joanna unbuttoned her blazer as she sat down on one of the six bar stools that lined the counter. A female barista, a very pretty Latina with delicate facial features, came out from behind a curtain and offered Joanna a broad smile and a menu.

"Don't need it, thanks. Regular coffee, black," Joanna said and put the menu down on the counter.

"Oh, not even a spoonful of whipped cream on top?"

"No, thanks."

"Or a shot of Cognac?"

"I'm on duty, thanks."

"When you say regular, do you mean caff or decaff?"

"Caff."

"How about a-

"Regular caffeinated coffee, please. Black. Like in no sugar, no milk or anything else," Joanna said in a friendly but decisive tone.

"Gotcha. Which cup size do you want, Miss?"

Joanna sighed and scrunched up her face. "A regular cup."

"Ah, okay. One pure black coming right up. That'll be $7.98, please."

Joanna blinked a couple of times in wide-eyed shock. With an exaggerated sigh, she dug into her pocket, found eight dollars and put them on the counter.

A person slid up next to Joanna and put a small purse on the counter. "Don't be too hard on Rita. She loves her job and she makes one hell of a Mocha Oscuro."

The sound of Liliana's rich voice sent a cold trickle racing up and down Joanna's back before it focused squarely on hardening her nipples. There was no doubt in her mind anymore; they'd end up in bed before the hour was over. She looked to her left and saw that Liliana was wearing the smoke-tinted sunglasses and the royal blue skirt suit she'd had on one of the first times they had met.

"Thank you, Miss Zinovia," the barista said, flashing a perfect set of pearly whites. She turned to Joanna and poured black coffee into a regular sized cup.

"I'll have a large Café Macchiato with a small spoonful of whipped cream and a sprinkling of chocolate on top, please," Liliana said and found her credit card in her purse.

"Yes, Miss Zinovia. Will you be drinking it here?" Rita said as she processed the card.

"Well, if we can find a table, yes," Liliana said and turned around to survey the shop. "Oh, there's a free one over in the corner. Would you mind...?"
"I'll come over with it."

"Thank you," Liliana said, putting the card back in her purse. "Come on, Detective. You can nurse your pure black over here."

---

A few minutes later, Rita came down to the table carrying a large cup. "Café Macchiato with a touch of cream and a sprinkling of chocolate on top, Miss Zinovia."

"Thanks, smells fantastic. Here's something for your bother," Liliana said and slipped the barista a ten dollar tip.

Joanna noted the exchange with some interest. She knew it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that Liliana and the pretty Latina had been intimate, but she preferred to push such thoughts out of her mind.

Liliana picked up a stirrer and began to distribute the whipped cream all over the surface of the coffee.

"So...?" she said, looking expectantly at Joanna.

"I'm sorry it's taking us so long to find Rocky Caulfield."

"I am, too. Just the other day, I thought he had found me... I saw a big, burly man on the street while I was at the hair salon. Turned out to be a mover. He was waiting for his partner to come down from an apartment with a packing case or something.

"Liliana, I'm not sure he actually wants to harm you. I know you said that he slapped you when you left him, but that's really it so far. I know that's plenty, don't misunderstand me, but he had several opportunities to get to you while you were at the school."

"That's true," Liliana said and took a swig from her Macchiato.

"He knew about the apartment from the recordings, and Charles Buford Smith had probably told him a few things about your daily routines."

"I'm just sorry I got you involved. How are you feeling, Jo?"

"Oh, you know. I've been better, but I'm much sharper now than I was this time last week," Joanna said, creating a little doodle on the tabletop with her fingernail.

Liliana moved her hand over and put it down on top of Joanna's. Wearing an enigmatic smile, she began to caress the skin with her fingers. "But how are you feeling?"

Joanna locked eyes with Liliana and saw a look in the spring green orbs that took her breath away. 'The Mistress is out to play,' she thought, gulping nervously. "I'm... I'm not sure how I'm feeling, to be honest."

"Like I told you on the phone... before you hung up on me... I miss your touch." Liliana stopped caressing Joanna's hand and gave her fingers a squeeze instead. "I think I've committed the ultimate sin."

"And what's that?" Joanna said, furrowing her brow.

"I think I've fallen in love with you."
The reply stunned Joanna so much that she fell back in her chair, staring wide-eyed at the ash-blonde woman sitting at the opposite side of the table. She started licking her lips to have something to do while her brain rebooted itself.

"Well, I... don't know what to say to that, Liliana."

"I know you love Betty, but that's all right with me. I believe in open relationships."

"I don't know if I do."

Liliana cocked her head. "Which part of it, Joanna? You don't believe in open relationships, or you don't love Betty?"

"Both... or maybe... no. Aw, Jeez, I don't know what to think or do anymore," Joanna said in a voice thick with frustration.

"When we've had our coffee, would you like to come over and look at my new apartment?"

It didn't take Joanna but two heartbeats to make up her mind. "God, yes," she breathed.

---

Thirty minutes later, Joanna flopped backwards onto the creaky, old bed in Liliana's new apartment. Every single part of her naked body was tingling with the orgasm that had just rushed through her. She closed her eyes, relishing the afterglow as it slowly rolled over her like an old, comfortable blanket.

When she finally dared to open her eyes again, Liliana's smiling face was mere inches from her own. The ash-blonde woman winked and began to kiss Joanna's cheekbones and nose. "That didn't take you long," Liliana whispered.

"Baby..." Joanna croaked.

"Shhh. Just get the most out of it while its there... when you're ready, I... I have a little request," Liliana whispered, snuggling down next to Joanna's arm.

"Mmmm?"

"If you don't want to, you can say no."

Images of Liliana wearing her Mistress outfit suddenly flooded Joanna's mind and she rolled over onto her left side to study the naked woman lying next to her.

"Listen, Liliana. I'm not... I'm not ready for the... you know. The thing. I don't like."

Liliana effectively cut off Joanna's words by putting her fingers across her lips. "That's not what I meant. Well, it was, but not for you. I want you to wear it while you're doing me."

"Oh, Liliana... I'm... I'm a very traditional girl. I'm not sure it would work. I don't know how to move, or... Would you be very disappointed if I said no?"

Liliana leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on Joanna's lips. "No. But I do expect you to..." Kiss "... take me..." Kiss, kiss "... the old-fashioned way instead..." Kiss, kiss, kiss.
"Oh, that shouldn't be a problem. I think I'll be able to do that," Joanna purred and rose up on her elbows. After shuffling around on the bed, she put her hands under Liliana's back and moved the petite woman two feet further into the center of the bed.

The springs in the old bed gave off a few squeaking protests, but it seemed to hold up nicely.

"Good thing you live on the first floor. We'd have a patrol beating down the doors from all the squeaks we're making if you didn't," Joanna said as she was climbing up Liliana's body.

"I love squeaks," Liliana breathed, closing her eyes and flinging her head backwards as she felt Joanna's hands on her body.

Joanna lowered herself down onto Liliana to make their bodies touch from their noses to their toes. Joanna's superheated skin immediately sent off signals to her brain that she couldn't ignore, and she began showering Liliana's face, lips and throat with an endless line of kisses.

Slowly, inch by delicious inch, Joanna moved down Liliana's writhing body, using her tongue to draw a wet line from the throat to the cleavage. When her tongue made contact with the swells of Liliana's breasts, she cupped the two mounds and suckled the already erect nipples.

Joanna let her tongue move around in lazy circles over the row of little nubs at the base of the nipples; around and around until Liliana whimpered and arced her back off the mattress, pushing her chest towards Joanna.

This prompted Joanna to reach behind Liliana and lift her upper body off the mattress. While her hands were roaming freely all over Liliana's back, her mouth left the nipples behind and moved down the side of the right breast. From previous experience, Joanna knew that Liliana was particularly sensitive there, so she made sure that every last inch of the flesh was well-loved.

Liliana began to sigh and sought out Joanna's mouth for a deep, loving kiss that left both women ready for more. With a grin, Joanna lowered Liliana back down onto the bed and continued her journey downwards.

When Joanna reached the upper part of Liliana's patch of golden hair, she began to run her fingertips from the sides of Liliana's stomach down towards her center, creating a small, winged arrow with her fingers. She did this several times, each time rewarded by a moan stronger than the one before.

Instinctively, Liliana spread her legs to ease Joanna's access and the detective wasn't slow in complying. Moving under Liliana's thighs so they rested on her shoulders, Joanna leaned in and placed a line of gentle kisses on the inside of Liliana's thighs, using her tongue to cross the T's and dot the I's.

This made Liliana moan even harder and she soon thrust her pelvis up towards Joanna's face to show that she was more than ready to go all the way.

With a grin, Joanna looked at the love juices oozing out between Liliana's pink folds. Licking her lips in anticipation, she leaned down and claimed Liliana's soaked center with her mouth, relishing the taste of the salty liquid.

"God..." Liliana groaned, pressing her abdomen against Joanna's mouth that still hadn't moved from its original position.

Joanna extended her tongue and moved it between Liliana's folds, stretching it as far in as it would go. When she began to move it left and right, up and down in slow, gentle motions, Liliana rewarded her by moaning throatily and grabbing hold of the back of Joanna's head to push her even further inside.
Moving her free hand up to rest on Liliana's patch of hair, Joanna sought out Liliana's enlarged clit and began to stimulate it with her thumb. Making sure that she wasn't rushing things, she let her thumb move back and forth in a very lazy fashion, going for long-term pleasure rather than a short-term release.

After a little while, Joanna changed position and began to stroke Liliana's clit with her tongue. Alternating between clenching and relaxing the strong muscle, she soon had Liliana surfing the crest of a wave that only intensified when Joanna inserted two fingers into the slick, burning hot opening and began to ride it.

Each time Joanna thrust into her, Liliana groaned harder and harder until the sounds coming from her were reduced to a single, prolonged moan. When Joanna began to flick the tip of her tongue across Liliana's clit, there was no way back - the orgasm came screaming down on her, sending her crashing over the crest of the wave and into Joanna's waiting arms.

Liliana let out a strong groan that made Joanna's nape hairs stand erect and she soon followed her lover over the edge. Bucking in unison, the two women came as one; their bodies racked by the most primal of forces.

The afterglow soon enveloped Joanna and Liliana, and as Joanna climbed up to lie next to her lover, she felt the best she ever had. Once again her body felt warm and tingly and she wished she could stay in that zone forever.

One look at the dreamy expression on Liliana's face told her that she wasn't the only one wishing that. Snickering, she wiped her mouth on the sheet and leaned in to place a loving kiss on her lover's lips.

"Thank you, baby. That was extraordinary," Liliana whispered, taking Joanna's hands in her own.

"No, thank you. I don't know how you do it, but whenever I'm making love to you, you make me feel like a real, whole woman."

"Well, I'm definitely glad about that," Liliana said, brushing her nose against Joanna's.

"I have to go back to work now," Joanna said with a sigh.

"I know. Before you go, there's something I want to give you."

"Oh?"

"It's a little memento of our... of our..."

"Joinings?"

"You could call it that. It's a ring. I know you won't be able-"

"A ring?" Joanna said, suddenly remembering the indent on Brian Roper's finger and the fact that they had never found a ring that matched it.

"Yes, it's nothing special, just a-"

"A memento."

"Yes... Jo, is something wrong?" Liliana said and propped herself up on her elbow.
"Liliana, did Brian Roper wear such a ring when Mrs. Weidemann found his body?"

Realizing where the conversation was headed, Liliana flopped backwards onto the bed and covered her eyes with her arm. She nodded.

"And you took it off his finger...?"

Liliana nodded again.

"Jesus, baby... technically speaking, that's immoral conduct with a deceased!"

"Are you going to book me for it?"

Joanna sat up and ran a hand through her loose hair. She sighed deeply and looked at the naked woman next to her. "No. Of course I'm not. Did you take it off Mark Gerlach as well?"

"No. Mark didn't want to wear it. He said his regular boyfriend wouldn't be too pleased about it."

"Gee, I wonder why," Joanna said and got off the bed. "I need to shower. Then we'll talk. Okay?"

"Sure," Liliana said, watching Joanna's two near-perfect rear cheeks walk out of the bedroom and into the small bathroom in the hall.

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Some time later, Joanna turned the small ring over in her hands, pondering whether she should take it or not. "Hey, this isn't the one you took off Brian, is it?"

"No, this is a new one," Liliana said as she zipped and buttoned her skirt. "They're just $10 trinkets, really, but I like the design of it."

"I agree, it's... quite classy." The ring was made of polished steel and it had an elongated version of the infinity-symbol carved into it all around the outside.

"Will you take it?"

"Liliana, I..."

"You don't have to."

"No, I think I want to take it, but I can't wear it. I hope you understand."

"You better be careful. Your girlfriend might find it in your jewelry box and think it's for her," Liliana said and muzzled up next to Joanna.

"My jewelry box? Ha, ha. That'll be the day. My gun cabinet is more like it," Joanna said and put the ring into her trouser pocket.

"Excellent," Liliana said and stood up on tip-toes so she could give Joanna a kiss.
"Liliana, earlier today, I spoke to my Lou... uh, Lieutenant. He said that I should contact you to let you know that we need you to come to the stationhouse to give us a statement on Rocky Caulfield. To make it official," Joanna said as she put on her blazer.

"All right, I hereby consider myself contacted. I'll call him later today and sort out the details. Jeez, Nick Barnes. Talk about your plain vanilla."

"I. Don't. Wanna. Hear. It!" Joanna hissed, sticking her fingers in her ears.

"On the Zinovia scale of Great Fucks, you out-class him by a factor of thirty-five to one," Liliana said and grabbed hold of Joanna's lapels to pull her down for yet another kiss.

"Don't wanna hear it! Don't wanna hear-MMPHFF!"

_*_*_*_*_*

Wednesday, June 22nd.

"We're glad you're here, Miss Zinovia. Do you want some coffee? Do you need a cushion? If you think it's too hot in here, just let us know," Lieutenant Nicholas Barnes said, making sure that Liliana was seated comfortably in a chair in his office.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Barnes, I'm fine. And you're welcome," Liliana said, pulling down in the jacket of her gray business suit.

The Lieutenant walked around his desk, completely ignoring Joanna who was leaning against one of the filing cabinets with her indispensable notepad in her hand.

Even though a chair was available next to Liliana, Joanna thought it was safest for all of them if she wasn't too close to the fiery woman - and also that she wouldn't be in a position to look Nicholas Barnes in the eye.

Grinning knowingly, Vernon sat down in the free chair, crossing his legs almost at once.

"Miss Zinovia, you would be most helpful if you could give us a clue... any clue whatsoever, in fact... on Roger Caulfield's whereabouts. With the severity of the pre-meditated and deliberate attack on Detective Powell, he showed that he's one not to be messed with," Barnes said.

Liliana sighed and looked down at her hands that were resting in her lap. "I only know of the house he had in Maughan County. I can't understand that he left it behind... it was a large and very expensive house."

"Well, he has. The local Sheriff's office has confirmed that it's vacant," Vernon said.

"Hmmm. He's a large fellow, but even so, he has the ability to blend in. He, uh... he followed me once after I had broken up with him," Nicholas Barnes shuffled in his seat - "And I didn't notice him until he had come too close."

"You might say he's a very stealthy man?" Joanna said.

"Yes. He can be a brute, but he can also be... I don't know. Almost like a spy. If that makes any sense," Liliana said with a wistful smile.
"Oh, certainly. It certainly does, Miss Zinovia," Barnes said, grinning from ear to ear.

Joanna’s mind was suddenly filled with an image of the Lieutenant and Liliana playing some kind of role-playing game, and she felt a creepy shiver run down her entire body. She blinked a few times to get over it and then shuffled around to find a better position against the cabinet.

"Actually, something has just occurred to me," Liliana said, sitting up straight in her chair. "After I had divorced David Caulfield, I heard through a mutual acquaintance that he had bought an apartment here in the Big City. I didn't think much of it at the time, that's why I had forgotten about it."

"An apartment? Where?" Joanna said.

"I'm sorry, Detective Powell, I don't know."

"Under his own name?"

"I don't know that, either," Liliana said, looking sincere.

"We'll check it at once. Detective Kransky?" Barnes said.

"I'll give him a call," Vernon said, got up from the chair and left the office.

The silence grew increasingly uncomfortable. It was clear to Joanna that the Lieutenant wanted her to leave as well so he could talk privately to Liliana, and it was equally clear to her – judging by the look on Liliana’s face – that Liliana didn't want any part of it.

Joanna wet her lips, embarrassed by the awkward situation. She found herself wishing that she hadn't been told about the Lieutenant and Liliana.

Just to have something to do, she began flipping through the old pages of the notepad, stopping at a page that contained a few thoughts she had written down during her convalescence. As she read her own words, she narrowed her eyes and furrowed her brow.

"Miss Zinovia, have you met Rocky Caulfield in person since you left him? I don't mean the time where he was abusive to you, but now... in the period after the homicides were committed?"

Liliana’s spring green eyes briefly glazed over and a nervous tic flashed across her pretty mouth. The strong emotions were gone as fast as they had come, but Joanna’s keen eye had noticed them, and she made a mental note to make further inquiries later on.

Liliana opened her mouth to speak, but before she had time to, Lieutenant Barnes shot up from his chair and put his fists on the desktop. "Detective Powell, that's outrageous! Are you really accusing Miss Zinovia of harboring a dangerous criminal? You can't be serious!"

"Not harboring him, no. I'm just asking if Miss Zinovia has met him or spoken to him," Joanna said, looking directly at Liliana.

"No, Detective Powell, I have not spoken with Rocky Caulfield. Nor have I met him. I do believe it would be detrimental to my health if I did so," Liliana said icily.

"No doubt. I beg your pardon, Miss Zinovia. It was a question that needed to be asked."
Lieutenant Barnes tapped his fingers repeatedly against the desktop. After a few seconds, he sat down and pulled out in his collar.

Liliana put her hands back in her lap, unable to hold Joanna's gaze. "Am I done here, Lieutenant Barnes?"

"Of course, Miss Zinovia. Once Detective Kransky returns, I'll walk you to your car."

"Thank you."

Moments later, Vernon came back into the office, shaking his head. "David Caulfield sold that apartment almost at once. Turns out it was a fungus-infested dump."

"Back to square one... again," Joanna said and closed her notepad with a soft phlum.

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CHAPTER 9

Sunday, June 26th.

"Ten more steps and we're there," Joanna said, pushing a blindfolded Betty ahead of her.

"Wait a minute, we're in the bedroom...?"

"That's right. That's not the secret. The secret is what's in here."

"Ooooh, can't wait," Betty said and made a wrong turn, prompting Joanna to put her hands on her lover's shoulders and turn her in the right direction.

"Not that way... this way," Joanna whispered into Betty's ear.

"Oooookay."

"Over to the bed."

"Ooooh!" Betty said, snickering loudly.

"Four more steps and we're there... three... two... one. Aaaaand we've arrived."

"The eagle has landed," Betty said with a new snicker.

After Joanna had placed a little kiss on Betty's neck, she reached up and pulled the knot for the blindfold, making the white scarf flutter to the floor.

"God... what's this...?" Betty exclaimed in total surprise when she saw the large, gift-wrapped envelope marked 'Fragile: Photographs' on her pillow.
While Betty opened the envelope with great care, Joanna walked over to lean against the doorjamb to the bathroom. She hoped that the latest gift would buy her some peace of mind, but at the same time, she knew that even if it did, it would only be temporary.

"Oh, it's just a little something I found online."

When Betty pulled two hi-gloss 8-by-10-inch promotional photos of Laurie McCanless out of the envelope, she seemingly lost the ability to speak. A split second later, she stared wide-eyed at the hand-signed autographs on both photos and let out a howl that almost freaked Joanna out.

After putting the photos carefully down on the blanket, Betty clutched the envelope to her bosom and began to dance around in the bedroom, laughing and cheering for all she was worth.

Once again, Joanna made like a statue, feeling like the world's worst S.O.B. As she looked at Betty's jubilant face, she could feel tears sting her eyes, but she quickly, and discreetly, wiped them away before any teardrops could betray her emotional state.

"OH, BABY!" Betty howled, hooking her arm inside Joanna's elbow and dragging her into an impromptu dance on the bedroom floor. "Oh, baby, I'm so happy! This is $190! GOD! We can't afford that!"

"We can afford anything when it comes to pleasing my honey," Joanna said, trying to keep up with her girlfriend as she was performing some sort of home-made jig.

"Ohhhhh, baby," Betty said again, wrapping her arms around Joanna's waist and pulling her into an embrace that quickly turned into a kiss.

"All these gifts... I don't deserve them. The concert tickets, the biography, the DVD boxset... now this...? Baby, what did you do?"

The words made Joanna's heart freeze over and her eyes darted nervously around their sockets, trying to come up with something intelligent to say. "Uh..."

"Hey..." Betty said thoughtfully, pointing an index finger at Joanna's chest.

'Here it comes,' Joanna thought.

"Are you on the take? Are you using Laurie McCanless to launder some filthy money?"

"Aw, Jeez, Bets. You've been watching too many cop shows. Of course I'm not on the take. And it's called dirty money," Joanna said and wrapped her arms around Betty.

"Filthy, dirty, what's the difference?" Betty said, looking at the two photos that were lying on the bed. They were both promotional shots from Raw Bounty; one of them was of Laurie McCanless in the navy uniform she was wearing at the beginning of the movie, and the other was of her in a black tank top and urban camouflage pants, wearing a pair of dog-tags around her neck and posing with a shotgun in a way that really accentuated her toned arms.

"Anyway, I hope you like them," Joanna said.

"Like 'em? Are you kidding, I friggin' love 'em!"

"I'm glad."
Downstairs, the phone started ringing and Joanna wasn't slow in leaving the bedroom. "It's probably the Lou with an update on the attack alarm," she said as she breezed out of the room, leaving Betty to admire her new photos.

Running down the stairs, Joanna hoped and prayed that the caller wasn't Liliana. Once she reached the telephone, she picked it up and flung herself onto the couch.

"Joanna Powell speaking."

'Detective Powell, have you lost your mind? Did the concussion give you a screw loose?'

"Huh? Lieutenant Barnes, I..."

'I took some paperwork home for the weekend and I've just read something that made the hairs on my back stand up straight. You're requesting taps on Liliana Zinovia's phone lines? On what grounds, Powell? Especially considering she's not even a suspect in the boarding school homicides. I hope you have a good excuse for requesting it. Mmmm?'

"Well, you see..."

'It has to be a really, really good one, Powell. '

"It was because of the way she reacted when I asked the question the other day... about her meeting Rocky Caulfield."

'I was there... and I didn't see anything. What did *you* see, Powell? ' Barnes said in a voice that dripped with sarcasm.

"I saw a hesitation. A quick, nervous look in her eye that told me, as a police officer with nearly twelve years of experience, that she wasn't telling us everything."'And that's it?"

"Yes."

'Have you asked Detective Kransky about his opinion?'

"Not yet, Lou."

'You should have... before you wasted your time typing the request. It's denied. ' 

"Look..." Joanna said, rubbing her forehead.

'If you can give me some hard evidence that suggests that she's involved, I'll reconsider. Good day, Detective. '

"Good day, Lou," Joanna said and hung up.

Rolling her eyes, she started walking away from the telephone. Three steps further on, she came to an abrupt stop and slapped her forehead. "I forgot to ask about the alarm! Sheesh!"
Upstairs, the bedroom had gone suspiciously quiet and Joanna felt the need to go back up to see if everything was all right. She looked at the telephone for a couple of seconds, but then shrugged and went into the hall.

When she returned to the bedroom, she found Betty kneeling on the bed, wearing a sheer, deep purple negligee and nothing else. The two photos had been moved to Betty's nightstand where they took center stage next to the reading lamp.

A warm smile spread out over Betty's features, and she stretched her hand out towards Joanna, almost like a latter-day siren luring innocent sailors into her grasp. "You've given me so much lately, baby. I want to pay some of it back. Come on, let's make love," she husked.

Joanna licked her lips, trying to think of a way to get out of the situation without stabbing Betty in the heart, figuratively speaking. When she realized she was out of options, she took off the sweatshirt she was wearing and closed the bedroom door with her heel.

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Very early Monday morning, Joanna couldn't understand why the windmills she was fighting in her dreams changed into cell phones of gigantic proportions until she realized that someone was actually calling her.

The first time she tried to find the phone, she knocked her lip balm down onto the carpet - the second time, it was the book she was reading. Grumbling under her breath, she finally found her cell and dragged it under the blanket.

"Powell," she croaked.

'Jo, it's Corbin Thomas. There's been an incident out here at Liliana Zinovia's apartment. I just thought you'd want to know.'

Joanna's eyes popped wide open and she scrambled to find the corner of the blanket. When she found it, she flung it aside and sat up at once, putting her bare legs down onto the carpet. Her big toe collected the lip balm and sent the little tube spinning across the floor.

Joanna rubbed her face, fearing the worst. "God... how is she?" she said in a shaky voice. She closed her eyes while she waited for the answer.

'Banged up, but basically all right. She's got a black eye and a couple of bumps and bruises but no more than that.'

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Joanna let out a heartfelt sigh of relief.

'Jo?'

"I'm still here. What kind of incident are we talking about?"

'Half an hour ago, we got a call for a two-eleven in progress that was upgraded to a home invasion shortly after. When we got here, it didn't appear to be connected to Roger Caulfield... however, there's something fishy here. It looks like a fairly standard, random mug-and-run, but I was hoping you'd be able to sort it out.'
"All right. I'll be there as soon as I can. Thanks for calling, Corbin. Wait, which apartment is it? The one on Loughton Street?"

'That's right. 1537 Loughton Street, apartment one-C.'

"Okay. Thanks, buddy."

'You're welcome, Jo.'

Joanna terminated the connection and buried her face in her hands. "A mug-and-run? Mug-and-run, my ass!" she said out loud.

Trying to get just a single, logical thought through her scrambling brain proved to be a greater challenge for Joanna than she had expected, and in the first three minutes after getting out of bed, all she could do was to run around like a headless chicken - then she forced herself to think clearly and began to get dressed.

As Joanna put on her blazer, Betty stirred and rolled over onto her back.

"Mmmmmhhh... what's up, darling?"

"I gotta go. Something's come up on the job," Joanna said as she put her new service pistol into the holster. Once it was secure, she fastened the little flap that held the gun in place.

"What time is it?"

"A quarter past one in the morning."

"Jeez! Do you want me to make you some coffee...?"

"No time. I gotta go at once," Joanna said and moved over to Betty's side of the bed. She knelt down and gave Betty a little kiss on the forehead. "I'll be home before you leave for work."

"Okay. It's Monday, right?"

"Yeah."

"Don't forget I leave at a quarter past five. If you're not here, I'll put some buns on the kitchen table and then you can toast 'em yourself once you get back," Betty said, breaking out into a wide yawn.

"Thanks, Bets. Let's hope it won't be that long," Joanna said and moved away from the bed.

"Hey! Love ya!"

"Love ya, too, hon."

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A few minutes later, Joanna reversed out of their parking space and roared off down the quiet suburban street with the red emergency lights on the dashboard and in the headlights blinking away like mad.
Like always, the Big City was completely different after dark. The neon signs were all shining brightly and the family sedans were gone, replaced by dozens of souped-up sportscars and custom specials filled with young people - quite often hanging out of the windows.

Joanna knew that the cruising scene was even stronger on the other side of the Monroe, but she had very little interest in finding out how badly congested the streets over there actually were.

She ducked and dived through the traffic until she reached McKinley Boulevard where she made a sharp left, headed for Loughton Street. To her right, the Monroe river disguised itself as a pitch black, hostile void, but she had no time to look at it or even at the tens of thousands of multi-colored lights coming from the high-rises on the other side of the river.

It wasn't hard to spot where Liliana's apartment building was on Loughton Street - no less than two police cruisers and an unmarked squad car were parked outside, all with their lights flashing, creating quite a show for the people who hadn't gone to bed yet.

Joanna brought the Crown Victoria to a screeching halt in front of the other cars and jumped from it before she'd even had time to fully open the door.

She practically flew through the marker tape and up a short flight of stairs where her progress was halted by a uniformed officer. Once she had showed the man her badge, he allowed her inside.

With shaking hands, Joanna peeked through the door to the kitchen. Two uniformed officers were kneeling next to a small pool of blood; one of them had just used a pincer to pick up a bloodied black ski mask. On the linoleum floor, a few bloody bootprints could be seen, along with several drops of blood.

One of the walls of the narrow hall had a two-foot long smear of blood on it, ending in a bloody handprint on the wallpaper. A small purse was lying on the floor and Joanna immediately recognized it as being Liliana's.

On her way to the living room, Joanna hurried past the entrance to the bedroom, but she stopped dead in her tracks and spun around on her heel when she caught a glimpse of a very frail, very vulnerable-looking Liliana sitting on the bed, holding a handkerchief up to her left eye.

A female police officer was sitting next to her, holding an arm and a blanket around her body. Corbin was on the other side of the bed and he gave Joanna a small wave once he spotted her.

Feeling numb all over, Joanna hurriedly closed the distance between herself and Liliana. She fell down onto her knees and took the former principal's hands in her own. The two lovers looked at each other, exchanging a silent prayer of gratitude that nothing major had happened.

"Liliana, I..." Joanna croaked. Her throat contracted itself too much for her to continue to speak, but Liliana smiled wistfully, apparently understanding Joanna's predicament.

When Joanna looked down, she noticed that Liliana was only wearing a shoe on her right foot. Her left foot had a small abrasion across the ankle, and the left leg of the familiar pair of blue capris had a long tear in it from the knee downwards - so much so that it was only hanging on by the proverbial thread.

One of the two uniformed officers who had been in the kitchen came into the bedroom holding several mangled pieces of metal in his hand. After he had placed it on the bed next to Liliana, Joanna could see that the metal was Liliana's expensive pair of titanium-colored designer glasses. The frame was all twisted and broken and both lenses had been knocked out.
Liliana sighed and removed the handkerchief to look at the amount of blood on it. When Joanna saw Liliana's black eye for the first time, the corners of her mouth twitched and she bared her teeth in a sneer.

"Thanks for your help, officer. I'm okay now," Liliana said in a shaky voice to the female officer sitting next to her.

"You're welcome, Miss. I'll be close by if you need me again," the officer said and rose from the bed.

"All right."

Once the officer had moved away from the bed, Joanna got up and moved close to Liliana, wrapping her arm around the petite woman's shoulder. After a few seconds, Liliana began to sob and she leaned her head against the side of Joanna's chest.

Feeling close to tears herself, Joanna pulled her lover into a warm embrace that quickly became so heartfelt that the other officers in the bedroom began to feel uncomfortable.

"Come on, guys, let's give them some breathing space," Corbin said, ushering the other officers out of the bedroom. As he closed the door behind him, he gave Joanna a thumbs-up that she responded to by nodding.

"God, Liliana... what happened? Corbin told me over the phone that it wasn't Rocky Caulfield?" Joanna said in a half-whisper. She reached into her pants pocket and found a fresh handkerchief that she gave to Liliana.

"It wasn't. It was some random mugger. I guess he thought he had found a juicy victim," Liliana said, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose. She offered the hankie back to Joanna but the detective just shook her head.

"I... well, I'm sorry, but I find that hard to believe."

"It's true, Jo."

"What were you doing out so late?"

"I wanted a special soft drink that I can only get down at the Korean grocery store..."

Joanna's mind went blank for a few seconds; then a single word stood loud and clear in her mind's eye: Lie.

"A soft drink? You ventured outside at one in the morning to get a soft drink? Jesus, Liliana!"

"Yes, but the worst thing is that on my way there, I remembered that the store doesn't take credit cards after ten p.m. and I wasn't carrying any cash. I turned around and hurried home but when I was almost here, I noticed that I was being followed. It was a young Latino, a tall, skinny guy, dressed in hip-hop clothes, you know."

"How did he look?"

"I c-can't really say. He had a goatee and a small mustache...."

"He wasn't wearing the black ski mask that's in your kitchen, then?"

"He pulled it off in the struggle. Are you saying I'm lying?" Liliana said defiantly.
"Of course not. Go on."

"Well, he was wearing dark sportswear with gold stripes on his pants and his T-shirt, a tan bandanna around his neck and white trainers and... you know, the usual," Liliana said, pressing the bloody handkerchief against her eye.

"Mmmm," Joanna said, knowing from years of experience that they had to go through a small charade before they could get to the real answers.

"He came closer and closer, but I thought I had lost him when I turned into the alley. He jumped me just as I was unlocking the door."

"One of your neighbors watched the struggle. She called the police and said it was a mugging. I understand he took your purse?"

"He grabbed it, but I didn't want to let it go. I had my credit cards and my car keys and everything in there..."

"That was foolish, Liliana. Credit cards can be blocked. A bullet or a knife in the chest can't be fixed as easily," Joanna said and gave Liliana a little squeeze.

"I know, but... I just didn't want to... well."

"And that's when it changed from a two-eleven to a home invasion...?"

"From a what?"

"A robbery."

"Oh... yes. I tried to break free of his grip, but in the struggle, the door had opened itself and we both fell into the hall. He grabbed my leg quite roughly and I was afraid... afraid that since he couldn't get the purse, he was going to... you know."

"I know. Go on."

"He tore my capris, but I managed to kick him on the chin. He didn't take it too well. He slammed my face into the wall and then chased me into the kitchen. I grabbed my small espresso machine and whacked him across the face."

"And you're sure it wasn't Rocky Caulfield?"

"It was a young Latino. I saw him as clearly as I see you now. He tore off the mask and staggered out of the kitchen, bleeding all over the floor. Then he left and I locked the door behind him."

"Where's your shoe?"

"I d-don't know...? Out in the hall, I guess... or maybe outside. It came off when he grabbed my leg."

Joanna began to look around the bedroom where she and Liliana had spent a wonderful, if angst-creating, afternoon only two weeks earlier. She sensed that something about the room had changed, but she couldn't quite work out what it could be.
She let her experienced eyes trail slowly over the closets, the walls and the various items in the bedroom - everything was roughly the same, allowing for the natural changes that would take place in a two week period. Still, there was something nagging at the back of her mind.

"So, you wanna come down to the stationhouse and look at our profile books?"

"Profile books?"

"Mug shots, in layman's terms. Going by the way you described the mugging and the assault, your Latino guy is an experienced one. I'm sure you'd be able to find him there."

Liliana looked away and wiped her bottom lip with the back of her hand. "No. I have a headache. I'll take some pills and try to get some sleep."

"All right," Joanna said and removed her arm from Liliana's shoulder.

Moments later, Liliana shrugged off the protective blanket and got off the bed. She walked over to one of the closets and pulled a folding door aside to take a look at the clothes inside. After picking out a gray Rokkstarr sweatsuit, she reached down into the bottom of the closet to find a pair of sandals.

As she turned around again, she held the sweatsuit up against her body. "Umm, Jo... I know it sounds stupid considering what we've done in here, but would you mind turning around while I change my pants? I'm feeling really vulnerable right now."

"No, of course not. Tell you what, I'll go outside while you change," Joanna said and got off the bed. With a wave, she left the bedroom.

Once Joanna stepped out into the hall, closing the bedroom door behind her, Corbin came over to her. "Hey, Jo. I hope it was all right that I called you?"

"Yeah, it was. Thanks, buddy," Joanna said and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Do you buy her story?" Corbin said, looking Joanna directly in the eye.

"You don't?"

"Not exactly, no."

"Mmmm," Joanna said, nodding. "That's pretty much how I feel, too."

Corbin wet his lips and leaned in towards Joanna. When he spoke, it was in hushed tones so it wouldn't carry through the bedroom door. "I've just called the First Precinct and asked to have a Detective from the Gangs and Organized Crime unit come over tomorrow to give us a low-down on the local factions."

"Why?" Joanna said in a similar hushed voice, looking puzzled.

"Well, the way Miss Zinovia described the attacker's clothing indicates that he belongs to a crew called the 'E-Fourteen Kingz'."

"From East Fourteenth Street? What the hell would one of those people be doing on this side of the Monroe? Visiting his sick aunt?"
"Yeah, exactly." Corbin looked towards the bedroom door to make sure that they couldn't be overheard. "Just the other night, there was a feature on the Kingz in a half-hour special report on Channel Four. They interviewed a couple of the leaders and their colors were quite prominent."

"I see what you're getting at," Joanna said, nodding.

"Good. My theory is that Miss Zinovia described her so-called attacker from the things she saw in that report. If the report had been on a different gang, Miss Zinovia's description would've been different, too... for whatever reason," Corbin said, finishing off with a shrug.

"Well, that part of it is fairly obvious. She's trying to protect Rocky Caulfield."

"But why the hell would she want to do that?"

"Beats me, Corbin. Perhaps he's got some kind of squeeze on her. Hmmm," Joanna said and began to smooth out her eyebrows with her index finger.

Behind them, William Larsen came in through the front door, whistling loudly when he saw the bloody smear on the wall. "Holy shit, wouldya look at that!"

"Where have you been, Bill?" Joanna said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Ah, we had another little thing going on that I needed to take care of first. But I'm here now, ain't I?"

"That's undeniable. Corbin, did you take a statement from the neighbor who called it in?"

"Yeah, I have it right here," Corbin said, showing Joanna his notepad.

"Good. Bill, would you mind going over to the neighbor to ask her again about the clothes the mugger was wearing? You might lead her on in saying that it was gang-wear with gold stripes on the pants and the T and a tan bandanna around his neck... like an ascot," Joanna said.

"Uh, sure. But why, if we already have it?" William Larsen said, scratching his hair.

"Well, we're trying to sort out a few discrepancies. Okay?"

"Sure. I can do that. I do a great doofus. They never know what hits 'em," William said and left the apartment.

Before Joanna had time to make a cheeky comment, the door to the bedroom opened softly and Liliana stepped outside into the hall. Joanna picked up at once that she was walking very stiffly, almost like she was nursing a few hidden bruises she hadn't mentioned before.

"Liliana...?"

"Jo, I was wondering if you'd help me to check if something was stolen from my purse?" Liliana said, looking down at the aforementioned item that hadn't been moved from its position on the floor.

"Oh, you better believe it. Come on, let's go into the living room," Joanna said and put on her latex examination gloves.
Once they had sat down on a couch that looked like it was the better part of fifty years old, Liliana crossed her legs at the knees and looked worried.

Wearing her latex gloves, Joanna opened the purse, took the items out one at a time and put them on an old coffee table that matched the couch in appearance. "Let's see... credit card, mouth freshener, paper tissues, two paper clips, a lighter... I didn't think you smoked?"

"I used to. I keep forgetting to throw it out. It's so old it probably doesn't even work."

"Okay. A ball point pen, a small notepad, a pocket scissor, a nail file, lip balm, car keys... where's your Taurus, anyway?"

"It's down in the parking garage over at the other apartment. No spaces here."

"All right. Can you see if there's anything missing?" Joanna said, spreading the items out on the table.

"Everything looks to be there. Thanks, Jo. You've been a great help tonight," Liliana said and hooked her arm inside Joanna's elbow.

"You're welcome, Liliana," Joanna said and bumped shoulders with the shorter woman. Even though the impact wasn't particularly hard, Liliana gave off a pained moan that she tried to hide by coughing.

"I'm really tired now. I hope this mess won't take too long...?" Liliana said, stifling a yawn.

"It shouldn't. Do you want me to wait here so I can tuck you in once the rest of the police force has left?"

A very brief flash of something unidentifiable raced across Liliana's face and she hurriedly leaned forward to collect the items from the table top. "No, thanks, Jo. I appreciate the offer, but it won't be necessary. I'm sure you want to go home to Betty...?"

"Yeah," Joanna said with a grin. Over Liliana's shoulder, she could see William Larsen standing in the doorway, pointing first at her and then at himself.

"Listen, Liliana, I have to speak with one of my colleagues now. Are you all right?"

"Sure, Jo. Thanks."

As Joanna walked into the hall, William Larsen gave her a thumbs-up. "Bingo, Jo. The old lady... hey, she made some killer chocolate chip cookies, by the way..."

"Uh-huh? You have some on your chin and tie, Bill."

"Oh...?" William said, trying to wipe it off with the back of his hand but only succeeding in making the chocolate stain even worse. "Anyway, the old lady was one-hundred percent certain that the mugger wasn't wearing the clothes I described for her. She said he was wearing black pants, black boots and a black sweater. No logos or anything... everything was black. And no bandanna."

"Excellent work, Bill. Thanks," Joanna said and turned around to cast a glance at Liliana who was still sitting in the couch, looking down into her purse.

_*_*_*_*_*
After accidentally sleeping in, Joanna tore around her kitchen, wolfing down the buns Betty had saved for her and hurredly slapping her Driver's Mug into their coffee maker. Once she had all the details in place, she ran back upstairs to jump into her work clothes.

While she was jumping around on one leg trying to get her left foot into her ankle boot, she picked up her cell phone and dialed Vernon's number at the stationhouse. To make it a bit easier for herself, she pinned the phone down between her shoulder and her ear so she could pull at the reluctant boot with both hands.

'Detective Vernon Kransky.'

"Vernon, it's me, Joanna. I've slept in, sorry 'bout that. Listen, I'm going to run a little errand before I come in. Is there anything urgent on the agenda?"

"I'll say. The Lou is in here every five minutes looking for you and his face grows redder by the moment. What did you do to him?"

"I didn't do anything. It must be about the surveillance request. Hmmm. The next time he swings by, tell him I'll be in his office as soon as I get there."

'All right. Are you really still considering putting a tap on Miss Zinovia's phones, even after what happened last night?'

"Now more than ever, Vern. Did you speak with Corbin or William when you came to work this morning?"

'No, but Corbin left me a note telling me about the description that wasn't.'

Joanna chuckled and gave up the unequal struggle with the boot. Instead of bopping around on one leg, she sat down on the bed to pull it up.

"Corbin told me he had asked an expert on gangs from the First to come over and talk to us about it, but you know... it would be a waste of time for all of us. It was Rocky, we all know that. Would you mind giving them a call to cancel the meeting?"

'No problem. Oh, here's the Lou now if you want to talk to him in person...?'

"Bye, Vern," Joanna said hurriedly and hung up.

Grinning, Joanna buttoned her blazer and went downstairs to grab her Driver's Mug of coffee.

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Thirty minutes later, Joanna parked at the curb on Fillmore Boulevard outside the apartment building where Liliana's original apartment was located.

She noticed with some satisfaction that the temporary newspaper stand had returned and that the same African-American man she had spoken to earlier was still manning it.

After stepping out of the Crown Victoria, she walked across the sidewalk holding her badge ready, but before she'd even made it halfway there, the newspaper seller grinned and waved at her from his position on a tall leather stool. "Hello again, Detective."

"I'm flattered. I can't even remember when I spoke to you last," Joanna said, returning the grin.
"I reckon it was two months or so ago. But I never forget a face. Especially not one that belongs to a six-foo woman with a badge and a gun."

"Mmmm?"

"What can I do for you, Detective?"

"Since you never forget a face, you shouldn't have a problem identifying the man I'm looking for. He's Caucasian, six-foot plus, two-hundred thirty pounds or so, beefy fella. He has a dirty-blonde full beard or a goatee and he has grayish-blue eyes."

"What's he wanted for?" The newspaper man said excitedly, moving to the edge of his seat.

"Did you see him?"

"Sure I've seen him. Not too long ago, actually. It's funny, though, I've seen two men with dirty-blonde hair and beards recently. Both went into the apartment building. The two men were quite different, yet alike, if you know what I mean?"

"If it's the people I think it is, they're brothers."

"Ah, makes perfect sense. All right, let's see... I saw the skinnier of the two, oh... a couple of weeks ago, but the beefier one came by earlier today. Twenty minutes after I got here at eight a.m., so that's..." the newspaper man looked down to check his wristwatch "... just over two hours ago, now."

Joanna nodded and clenched her fists. "How did the beefier one get here?"

"This time he was on foot, but I've seen him drive a gray Taurus a couple of times."

"Did you notice anything unusual about him when you saw him this morning?"

"Nah... not really. I wasn't really looking at him. He did walk by me kinda fast, though."

"All right. Thank you, Sir." Joanna took a deep breath and moved towards the apartment building's unmanned windbreak. When she tried to move the doorknob, she found it to be locked. Growling, she suddenly remembered that the door had a buzzer and she quickly moved over to the panel to scan the list of names of the people living there.

It took four tries to get someone to buzz the door open, but as soon as it was, Joanna ran inside and bounded up the stairs. When she reached Liliana's apartment, she held her breath and put her ear to the door.

A few moments later, she realized that the door was too thick for any sounds to travel through it, and she bared her teeth in a disappointed grimace. She slowly came to the conclusion that she needed to call for backup.

'On a hunch and the word of a newspaper seller. Sheesh. But if Rocky Caulfield really is in there, he'll most likely have my service pistol... and he's desperate,' Joanna thought and mopped her brow. 'Barnes is going to whip my butt if it ends up as a wild goose chase, but I can't risk going in alone. Betty would never forgive me...!'
For good measure, she tried putting her ear to the door again, but the result was the same. Grunting, she went back down the stairs and out to her Crown Victoria.

After waving to the newspaper guy, she got into her car and took the mic. "Dispatch, this is One-four-William-oh-six."

'Go ahead one-four-William-oh-six.'

"This is Detective Joanna Powell. I..." she looked at herself in the rear view mirror, deciding to take the leap of faith even if there was a huge risk it would come back to bite her in the rear end. "I believe I have located the wanted fugitive Roger a.k.a. Rocky Caulfield at 1116 Fillmore Boulevard. I need uniformed backup for an insertion. The suspect is most likely armed and desperate so the unit needs to be dark and quiet, over."

'That's a copy, Detective Powell. 1116 Fillmore Boulevard, uniformed backup for an insertion, dark and quiet.'

"Roger that, dispatch. One-four-William-oh-six out." As Joanna put the mic away, she took a deep breath and reached for her cell phone.

'Vernon Kransky.'

"This is Jo. I think we got Rocky. 1116 Fillmore Boulevard. We got the point this time, buddy."

'All right, I'm on my way. Don't do anything before we get there. Did you request backup yet?'

"Yes, before I called you."

'Good. Do you have a vest and a Door Buster with you?'

"Yeah."

'By the way, the Lou is steaming, hopping, spit-flyin' mad at you right now. You must've done something really nasty to him. Did ya kick his pet hamster?'

"I don't know what the hell's going on there. I'll have to deal with that later. Tell him that..."

Out of the corner of her eye, Joanna suddenly saw a beefy guy come out of the windbreak and walk up the sidewalk towards her car. He was wearing black jeans, a blue letterman jacket and a dark blue baseball cap. His face was mostly obscured by the shadow of the peak, but the bridge of his nose and parts of his left eyebrow stood out by being red and swollen.

The blue-gray eyes and the dirty-blond goatee gave him away. It was Rocky Caulfield.

Movement to her right made Joanna turn her head - the newspaper seller waved his arms like mad, pointing at the beefy guy.

Joanna's eyes grew wider and wider as it dawned on her that she didn't have time to wait for the backup to arrive. At the exact same moment, Rocky Caulfield spotted the squad car parked at the curb and came to an abrupt stop.
'Jo? What's going on? Jo? Don't do anything before we get there!' Vernon said from the other end of the connection.

A second later, Joanna and Rocky locked eyes with each other through the windscreen.

Another second later, Rocky reached underneath his letterman jacket, making the blood in Joanna's veins freeze over.

Rocky seemed to come to his senses as he didn't pull his gun but rather spun around and took off down the sidewalk, running flat out towards the parking garage. The wind soon caught his baseball cap and blew it off his head, revealing his dirty-blond hair.

Cursing and swearing, Joanna let go of her cell phone, jumped out of the Crown Victoria, drew her pistol and ducked down behind the fender. "Rocky Caulfield, this is the Metro Police Department! Stop at once and put your hands in the air!"

Predictably, Rocky didn't listen but instead continued running towards the parking garage.

Making a split decision, Joanna got up from her safe spot behind the fender and began to run after him. Behind her, she could hear the newspaper guy call 9-1-1, but she didn't have time to explain to him that she had already called for backup.

Rocky Caulfield turned right and began to run down the slope. Just as Joanna reached the top of the slope, Rocky lost his balance and slid the last ten feet down to the floor of the garage.

"Halt! Metro P.D.!" Joanna shouted, aiming her gun directly at the fugitive. At the foot of the slope, Rocky clambered to his knees, nursing his left elbow. While he was looking up at the Detective, the wound above his eye opened up and blood began to seep down his cheek and onto his clothes.

Keeping her eyes on Rocky, Joanna began to walk down the steep descent, taking it very easy on the slippery surface. Unfortunately, the slope was even slipperier than she had predicted, and she lost her footing and slid down the last ten feet exactly like Rocky had done just moments earlier.

Rocky wasn't slow in exploiting Joanna's mishap - at once, he jumped to his feet and ran towards a part of the parking garage where several of the strip lights had gone out, leaving it bathed in darkness.

Joanna ran to her right, ducking behind a concrete pillar. As she looked around it, she could hear a pair of roaring engines up on the street. Moments later, a black-and-white with the emergency lights flashing drove down the slope, coming to a screeching halt next to Joanna.

Behind the black-and-white, Vernon flew down the slope as well, just barely avoiding slamming into the back of the patrol car when he was taken by surprise by the slipperiness of the surface.

In two seconds flat, Vernon and the two patrolmen jumped from their cars and ran over to Joanna.

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CHAPTER 10
"Boy, am I glad to see you, Vern," Joanna said with a nervous chuckle, staying well behind the concrete pillar.

"Well, I'm glad to see you, too, Jo... which part of 'don't do anything before we get there' didn't you understand?"

"I understood all right, but Rocky didn't."

"Where's your vest?"

"No time to put it on."

"Jeez!"

"Where did he go?" the first of the two patrolmen said.

"Over in the area where the lights are low. Let's try to out-flank him. On three, I'll run up to the next pillar. Okay?" Joanna said.

Vernon nodded. "Works for me. But stay well away from the bullets, Jo!"

When both patrolmen nodded, Joanna took a deep breath and counted off silently. On three, she sprinted from the first pillar to the next, arriving there without any difficulty.

Just when she started thinking about looking for fire escapes or other means for Rocky Caulfield to escape from the garage, the first of the patrolmen came out from behind the pillar and ran towards her.

Inches before he had made it, Rocky fired twice from his hiding place on the other side of the parking garage. Both shots missed, but the first one ricocheted around the concrete walls for a few seconds, creating an even greater danger than the original shot.

Joanna swiftly moved around the corner of the pillar and held her weapon ready but she didn't want to fire without a clear indication of where Rocky was. Two seconds later, she jumped back behind the pillar, shaking her head.

"Jeez!" The patrolman said as he slid to a halt next to Joanna. "This guy is serious!"

"He's already killed twice. He knows he'll get the chair when we catch him," Joanna added dryly.

"A cold chair or hot lead, what's the difference?" the patrolman said, adjusting the grip on his revolver.

"Yeah. Stay here, I'll move on to the next one," Joanna said, nodding in the direction of the third concrete pillar. Moments after she had said that, she noticed Liliana's charcoal gray Ford Taurus parked behind it.

Taking a deep breath, she briefly closed her eyes and sprinted towards the third pillar.

While she was on her way there, Rocky came out of his hiding place and fired off two rounds in quick succession, but he soon had to duck back into the shadows as Vernon and both patrolmen returned fire.

Joanna slid behind the third pillar, peeking around it at once. From her vantage point, she had a better look at the shadowy side of the parking garage, and she thought she could see Rocky's blue letterman jacket between two cars.
Looking around, she noticed that beyond the third pillar, the garage was much narrower compared to up at the entrance, so she would only have to run thirty feet in the open to get to the other side where it would be more difficult for Rocky to get a fix on her.

While she was still weighing her options, she looked over her shoulder, noticing that the second patrolman had reached the second pillar, and also that Vernon had stayed at the first. Nodding to herself, she rolled her shoulders to get herself psyched up for the task at hand.

The next time she peeked around the pillar, she could clearly see Rocky's letterman jacket behind a metallic blue car, and she made up her mind to go for it. After making sure she had a firm two-hand grip on her service pistol, she left the safety of the pillar and ran out into the open.

When Rocky noticed that Joanna was running, he took a pot shot at her, but the bullet never got anywhere near her. He fired again when she had reached halfway, and this time, she could hear the bullet zing past, flying dangerously close to her ear.

Putting her long legs to good use, she rapidly closed the distance between herself and the safety of the pillar on the other side, almost jumping in behind it like a touchdown pass in the Superbowl.

Moments later, Rocky fired again. This time, his aim was better as the bullet struck the pillar Joanna was hiding behind, sending a cloud of concrete dust and sharp fragments into the air. Several of the fragments slapped so hard against Joanna's cheek that she instinctively turned her head and took an involuntary step back.

Joanna's cheek began to sting almost at once and when she reached up to touch it, her fingers became coated in blood and concrete dust. "Sonovabitch," she growled, reaching into her pocket to find her hankie - a split second later, she remembered that Liliana had taken it during the night's events.

"Ah, that's just great. Just what I needed," Joanna said out loud as she looked at her bloody fingers. Rolling her eyes, she wiped them off on her dark blue V-neck blouse to make sure that the blood wouldn't cause her to lose the grip on the gun's handle.

Joanna looked over at Vernon who was gesticulating wildly, pointing at the dark part of the garage. She nodded and peeked around the corner of the pillar. When Rocky didn't fire at her, she jumped out and sprinted towards the first of the cars.

She went into a forward roll and dove down next to a metallic blue Pontiac, ending up taking shelter behind the car's fender. Licking her lips nervously, she jumped up and moved her arms in a sweeping arc, constantly looking down the barrel of the gun. A flickering shadow on the other side of the car made her look in that direction, catching a brief flash of a blue letterman jacket moving away.

Taking a deep breath, Joanna ran around the front of the Pontiac, still holding the gun straight out ahead of her in a two-handed grip. In a heartbeat, she was at the car's rear fender. On her left, a white GMC minibus restricted her line of sight, but she crouched down and dared a quick peek around its rear.

No more than three feet away from her, Rocky Caulfield had his left side turned towards her while he was focusing intently on the ejected clip of his gun. Before Joanna had time to do anything, Rocky slapped the clip back in and worked the action on the weapon.

Time slowed down to a crawl for Joanna. She could feel her heart thundering away in her chest and she suddenly realized that she was sweating like a pig.
Deciding to go for it before Rocky moved again, she jumped out from behind the minibus and aimed the gun directly at the man's chest.

"Freeze, Rocky! Metro P.D.! Drop your gun and go out into the light! NOW!"

Joanna could hear Vernon and the two patrolmen come running towards her from the other side of the parking garage; the bare walls meant that their footsteps echoed wildly.

Rocky didn't drop the gun - in fact, he began to move it slowly towards Joanna.

"Drop your gun, Rocky! I won't tell you again! I will shoot if you don't drop it!"

A flash of something dangerous and animal-like raced across Rocky Caulfield's eyes. A split second later, he roared crazily and swung his arm and the pistol up towards Joanna.

Earlier, Joanna had experienced that time had slowed down to a crawl, but now she felt it come to a complete stop.

Staring wide-eyed at the muzzle of the gun that was pointed at her - the gun that Rocky had stolen from her in the attack - she could almost see the burning hot lead come out of the little hole and fly towards her. She knew what a bullet from a police sidearm could do to a human body at point blank range, and she had no interest in being on the receiving end of one.

The only way to stop that would be to shoot first.

She squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession, feeling the powerful recoil of the gun as it tried to jump out of her hand.

The two bullets struck Rocky Caulfield in the chest; one above and one below his heart. As he was thrown backwards, his index finger jerked, pulling the trigger of his stolen gun.

Fortunately for Joanna, Rocky was no longer in a position to aim, so the shot went through the rear window of the GMC minibus, breaking it into a million pieces.

After Rocky's body had landed with a hard thud on the concrete floor, time resumed its normal rhythm for Joanna and she leaned against the wall, completely out of breath and feeling lightheaded. She looked down at the smoking gun in her hand and grunted.

A heartbeat later, Vernon came tearing around the corner of the minibus and grabbed hold of Joanna's arm.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Vern."

Joanna pulled her blazer back and put the gun back in its holster. When she reached down to secure the little flap, her fingers trembled so much she could hardly do it.

"Well done," he said and thumped her shoulder.

"Thanks. Phew," Joanna said and hunched over to put her hands on her knees. As the adrenaline slowly left her system, she was assaulted by a wave of fatigue and her throat became as dry as parchment.

"Battle shock?"
"Yeah."

"Crouch down, it'll lessen the effects. I'll take care of business here."

With her throat too dry to speak, Joanna settled for nodding. Sliding down the filthy concrete wall, she went into a crouch and buried her head in her hands.

-.-.-.-.-

An hour and twenty minutes later, Lieutenant Nicholas Barnes walked up to stand on the top step of the staircase leading to the stationhouse of the Fourteenth Precinct. After he had straightened his tie and cleared his throat, he tapped the microphone in front of him to see if it worked.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, we welcome you to this press conference to mark the closing of the Jeremy Malone Boarding School homicides."

The masses of photographers below him all used their cameras at once, showering him in a barrage of flashes and powerful spotlights from the TV crews.

"Ahem. Today, Monday, June 27th, after more than two and a half months of intensive, thorough investigation and hundreds, if not thousands, of man-hours, Officers and Detectives from the Metro Police Department were able to corner the dangerous fugitive Roger, a.k.a. Rocky, Caulfield in a parking garage on Fillmore Boulevard.

Mr. Caulfield chose to engage our Officers and Detectives in a firefight in which he was fatally wounded. The point Detective was Joanna Powell. Joanna, please come up here," Barnes said, reaching out after Joanna who was standing off to the side, looking utterly miserable.

Joanna hadn't had time to change clothes so her blazer was still peppered with concrete dust and her dark blue V-neck blouse still showed the blood smear she had wiped off her fingers. All she'd had time to do was to get a small Band-Aid on her cheek, but the tan fabric stood out against her pale skin like a sore thumb.

Once she was in front of the cameras, a dozen reporters all shouted her name, creating a cacophony of voices that threatened to bowl her over. For several seconds, she stared blankly at the blurry faces below her before finally pointing at a blonde reporter from Channel Eleven.

"Detective Powell, what made you go to Fillmore Boulevard this morning?"

"We... we had discovered some discrepancies in the case and I wanted to follow up on a hunch I'd had earlier."

"Roger Caulfield was staying at Liliana Zinovia's apartment. Has she been arrested?"

"I don't have an answer to that question."

"Did you engage Roger Caulfield inside the apartment?"

"No, I had been at the apartment, but did not meet him. I saw him a few minutes later out on the street."

"Detective, is the rumor true that you weren't wearing your regulated bulletproof vest?"
Joanna scrunched up her face. 'Who the hell told them that?' she thought. "Well... that's right. I didn't have time to put it on. I didn't expect to bump into him on the street. I-
"
"Had you called for backup at that point?"
"Yes. They arrived a few minutes later. Very efficient as usual." Joanna sneaked a glance at the Lieutenant who was beaming over her words.

When the blonde reporter sat down, a man from one the major tabloids shot up from his chair, holding a recorder in his hand.
"Detective Powell, three years ago you were involved in an unjustified shooting. Are you sure that this one was jus-"
"That's neither here nor there. Next question!" Lieutenant Barnes said, having snatched the microphone out of Joanna's hands.
"I'm Maria Lorenz from the Tribune. Lieutenant Barnes, did Roger Caulfield confess to the two homicides?" a female reporter said.
"No, but we have enough evidence to pin both..."

While Barnes kept talking, Joanna stepped away from the microphones and went over to stand next to the glass doors at the entrance, thoroughly fed up with the whole situation.

A minute or so later, Vernon tapped on the inside of the glass, holding up a cup of coffee. Joanna sighed in relief and went inside. She quickly took the cup from Vernon's hand and gulped down half of it in one go.
"Ahh. Jeez, I needed that," she said and wiped a few drops of coffee off her top lip.
"I though you might. By the way, the crisis counselor is in if you need to talk to a pro."
"Thanks, Vern. Nah, I'm good."
"You didn't look so good out there... or in the garage for that matter."
"I know. It was the timing of the deal that threw me off. I got lucky, I pulled the trigger first. If I had hesitated two heartbeats more, I might've been on a metal slab down at the morgue right now, keeping Rocky company."
"A lot of things can happen in two heartbeats, Jo. Anyway, go down to the cribs and take a hot shower. You look like something the cat dragged in!"
"Yes, boss," Joanna said and drained her coffee.
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After showering and cleaning her clothes to the best of her abilities, Joanna walked back up the stairs and through the corridors to get to her office. On her way there, she peeked into the main squad room to see if Barnes had returned to his office.
Instead of the Lieutenant, she spotted a large banner hanging on the wall that read 'ACE WORK, JOANA!'. Chuckling, she greeted those of her colleagues that were in there, moved between the desks, grabbed one of the felt-tip permanent marker pens they had used to create the banner and inserted another N in her name.

"Two N's, guys. Two N's," she said and put away the pen.

"Detective Powell, may I have a word?" Lieutenant Barnes said as soon as he saw Joanna in the main squad room.

"Of course, Lou," Joanna said. She tried to read his face, but it was even more one-note than usual.

After closing the glass door to his office, Nicholas Barnes sat down in his chair and began twiddling his thumbs. "It was excellent work in the press conference, but I'm sorry you had to listen to that crap about the unjustified shooting."

"Thank you. Ah, doesn't bother me these days," Joanna said and sat down in one of the two chairs placed in front of the desk.

Barnes leaned forward and scrunched up his face. Joanna suddenly remembered that Vernon had warned her that the Lieutenant was spit-flying mad at her for something, and she gulped nervously.

"Detective Powell... Joanna. I... I have to give you an apology."

"Apo... an apology? What for?" Joanna said, leaning forward in her seat.

"Earlier today, I was quite mad at you. I don't know if Detective Kransky told you...?"

"Uh, yes he did."

"Well, the reason was that Miss Zinovia called me late last night, after the ordeal."

"Oh?"

"She told me that she had felt cornered by you when you interviewed her. That you hadn't believed her when she told you about her mugger."

"Frankly, I didn't believe her, Lou, but I never cornered her."

"I understand. Well, after the shooting became breaking news on the TV stations, Miss Zinovia called me again, claiming that she had been under severe duress when she had spoken to me earlier. That it had indeed been Rocky Caulfield who had attacked her, and that he had threatened her with physical harm if she told the police that he had moved into her old apartment."

"All right." This all worked out perfectly for Liliana. With Rocky dead, there's no one to contradict her story... but Sweet Jesus, if it turns out she really was involved in the murders somehow, my career is dead and buried. Joanne thought, briefly getting the shivers.

"I've called Miss Zinovia and asked her to come over as soon as possible. She understands that we have to do something about her obstruction of justice. Thank God we hadn't already found some random Latino punk on the street who matched the description she gave us. Can you imagine the reaction in the liberal press?"
"Fairly well, yes."

"She should be here shortly. Please... uh, negate this little misunderstanding between you. Like she told me, she was under severe duress. With Liliana being such a petite woman, she wouldn't have stood a chance against Rocky Caulfield, that big brute."

Joanna nodded, still trying to make the final pieces of the puzzle fit together.

"Well, that's it. Get back to work. I'm sure you have a mountain of paperwork to go through," Nicholas Barnes said and opened a file, giving Joanna the cue to leave the office.

---

Ten minutes later, Joanna was typing so furiously on her computer that she didn't hear a faint knock on the doorjamb behind her.

"Jo, there's someone here to see you," Vernon said, closing a file.

When Joanna turned her swivel-chair around, she found herself looking into Liliana Zinovia's sparkling green eyes.

The former principal's left eye had developed such a shiner that she looked like she had gone a few rounds against the world heavyweight champion. Compared to the rainbow of colors surrounding her eye, her face seemed pale and drawn and she was dressed in the familiar gray business suit which seemed appropriate for the occasion.

Neither of the two women spoke, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

"Tell you what, I'll go make a few photocopies. It should take me about ten minutes," Vernon said and grabbed a stack of folders.

Once Vernon had closed the door behind him, Joanna got up from her chair and wiped her suddenly sweaty palms on the back of her pants. "Hi."

"Hello, Joanna."

Joanna came a few steps closer, realizing that they'd never get anywhere unless she took the lead.

"Look-" - "I'm sor-" they said at the same time.

"You first," Joanna said with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry that I lied to you last night. I didn't like it, but I had to. Rocky had a squeeze on me," Liliana said and moved closer to Joanna. She put out her hands and Joanna wasn't slow in taking them in her own.

"I understand, Liliana. The Lou has already told me a few things."

"Oh... I really hope you do understand... I had to do it. He came to my doorstep one evening and forced his way in. Two days later, I was lucky enough to find the other apartment over on Loughton Street and I moved at once."

'But what did they do in the mean time...?" Joanna thought. "Did he beat you up?"
"Yeah. More than once. Underneath my clothes, I'm still black and blue in places."

"I suspected as much. Why did he come to you last night?"

"He wanted money but I didn't have any for him. Then he got angry and started slapping me around," Liliana said, looking down.

"You don't have to be afraid of Rocky anymore. He's dead. You're safe now," Joanna said, putting a finger under Liliana's chin.

"I know. Thank you for killing him."

The two women locked eyes, re-establishing their connection almost immediately. Joanna felt her mouth go dry for the second time that day, but for a wildly different reason compared to the first time.

Liliana smiled, making her lips curve upward in a graceful gesture. At once, Joanna's eyes flicked down to Liliana's enticing lips, thinking that the two pink lines were just begging to be kissed.

The temptation proved to be too great to resist and she soon leaned down to claim Liliana's lips in a searing kiss. Almost at once, their tongues began to dance against each other, performing an act that was a precursor of things to come.

Behind them, someone knocked on the door. When no one answered, the door was opened and a person entered the office.

"Hey, baby, I watched you... on... television..." Betty Johansen said in a voice that slowly trailed off as she digested the event that was taking place in front of her.

The ice cold hand of panic reached into Joanna's body and took a firm grip on her heart. The hand squeezed and squeezed until she thought it would crush her heart completely.

Since they had been caught red-handed, it wasn't any use to deny what had happened. Pulling back from Liliana, she turned to look at Betty with guilt, fear and embarrassment etched into her face.

Betty was wearing an off-white windbreaker over her nurse's uniform. Her face was ashen save for a few dark red blotches on her cheeks and her forehead. Two wet lines ran down from her eyes, sending large, salty tears dripping off her chin.

The terribly upset look on Betty's face sent Joanna's soul plunging out of her body and down into the ground below her feet, and a tidal wave of white heat rolled over her, making her break out into a sweat. No sooner had that receded before she felt so cold she shivered. In the end, she just felt empty - and like a complete bastard.

Liliana picked up her purse and stepped away from Joanna. "I better go. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about," she said quietly.

When Liliana walked past her, Betty didn't even acknowledge her presence - instead she just nodded to herself and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

"Betty... I'm... I'm s-sorry... I..." Joanna croaked in a voice so dry that she had trouble articulating the letters.
"Have you had sex with her?" Betty said in a shaky voice. When Joanna nodded, Betty sighed deeply and reached up to run a hand through her hair. "How long has it been going on?"

Joanna opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn't get a sound across her lips.

"That long? Ever since you first met her...?"

Joanna shrugged.

Betty wiped her eyes again. "There's nothing left to say, Joanna. I want you gone from my house. Today. When I get home from work tonight, I don't want to find even a single thing of yours there. Goodbye."

With those words, Betty spun around on her heel and exited the office.

Feeling lightheaded to the point of being dizzy, Joanna buried her face in her hands and let out a long, frustrated groan. She had known from the start that it would come to this, but she had never expected to hand-deliver the evidence on a silver platter.

"Jesus, Betty..." she said and set off after her fleeing girlfriend. Catching her at the double doors, she put a hand on Betty's shoulder and tried to turn her around, but Betty resisted.

"Betty, please listen to me..."

"Why should I? All those gifts... I should've known," Betty said, tearing the glass door open. Without stopping for even a second, she flew down the stairs and ran towards the parking lot.

"No, baby, come on... don't make a sce..." The irony of the situation slapped Joanna across the face. She was going to say to Betty that she shouldn't make a scene, but she realized that she had already made it herself.

"I don't want to listen to you, Joanna. I don't want to be anywhere near you. Like I said before... goodbye!"

Betty said and unlocked her Mazda.

"Betty, for Chrissakes!" Joanna said and grabbed hold of the driver's side door before Betty could slam it. "We have to talk... we need to talk about it!"

"Let go of my fuckin' door!" Betty said, jerking it out of Joanna's grip. Once the door was closed, it was all over. Betty turned on the engine and reversed out of the parking space in a shower of gravel.

"But, Betty, I love you...!" Joanna said, grabbing her head as a tide of panic threatened to drown her. Betty simply floored the throttle and disappeared out of the parking lot.

"FUCK! FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK!" Joanna roared in the middle of the parking lot, drawing attention to herself from each and everyone there. Groaning, she hunched over and put her hands on her knees.

"Jesus, this is the worst day in the history of mankind..." she croaked, shaking her head repeatedly.

Liliana slowly drove her Ford Taurus up behind Joanna, rolling the window down when she reached her.

"You need a lift somewhere, Jo?"

When Joanna turned to speak with Liliana, she felt so weak that she was surprised she hadn't already keeled over in the middle of the parking lot.
"No... I need to go rent a U-haul or something. And some storage space. And a place to spend the night for the next twenty years until I retire," Joanna said, leaning against the window sill.

"Can't help you with the first two, but you're more than welcome to come over to my apartment on Fillmore. Rocky made a bit of a mess, but... hey, perhaps you could help me clean up?"

"Well, thanks for the offer, but... I just don't have time today, Liliana. I need to do ten thousand things and I need to do them within the next..." she checked her wristwatch "...three hours."

"All right. You've had the offer. If things don't work out for you, you know my number."

"Yeah. Thanks. Oh... what about the apartment on Loughton Street? Is that available?"

"I don't think so. The landlady hated all that hassle. I only got half of my deposit back."

"Figures. Well, anyway... see you some time, Liliana," Joanna said and began to move away from the Taurus.

"Jo, remember what I said about falling in love with you?"

"Yeah?"

"I wasn't under severe duress then. That part of it was true," Liliana said with a coquettish wink - then she rolled up the window and drove off.

Joanna looked after the Ford as it left the parking lot. She cocked her head, not sure if another piece of the puzzle had just fallen into place or if one had been taken out. 'Why is she so unaffected? It's almost like she doesn't care that Rocky is dead. All right, he abused her and now she's glad the S.O.B. is gone, but... there's still more here than meets the eye.'

Soon after, the moment of professionalism faded and all her thoughts returned to the fact that she was now alone. She buried her face in her hands, unable to stop a strangled sob from escaping her lips. When she realized what she was doing, she only grew more angry with herself, and she clenched her fists and forced herself not to show any emotions in public.

After wiping her eyes, she stomped back into the police station to make a few phone calls.

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An hour and fifteen minutes later, Joanna drove up in front of the house she and Betty had shared for so long. The van she had rented was too big to fit into the space where she usually parked the Crown Victoria, so she left it at the curb.

Walking around the back, she opened the rear doors and stared despondently at the ten brand new pieces of folded cardboard that would eventually turn into packing cases once she got them beaten into the right shape. With a sigh, she picked up an armful of them and began the trek up the garden path.

After depositing them on the floor in the living room, she went to work on unfolding the first one.

A little while later, with four cases ready, she started looking around for the things that belonged to her. She had no illusions about what Betty would do to the things she hadn't packed, so she went around and scooped up everything she could find.
After fifteen minutes, she realized that she didn't really have very much at all. Apart from a few books, a few DVDs, her clothes, her police equipment and the things for her laptop, the rest was all Betty's. It was Betty's furniture, Betty's kitchen utensils, Betty's TV and stereo, Betty's paintings and posters, Betty's flowers, Betty's everything.

"Betty's house," Joanna said out loud, putting her hands on her hips. "It's almost like I was never anything more than just a guest here..."

When the silent house didn't offer any consolatory reply, Joanna shrugged and began to haul the loaded package cases down to the van.

The last things she packed were her clothes and her spare police equipment, including the things inside her gun cabinet. Since she didn't give a toss about what Betty would do to the heavy cabinet, she let it stay in the bedroom.

After she had stored the final three package cases in the van, she went back to give her home of the last three years a thorough check. She briefly considered writing a note explaining the situation to Betty, but she knew it would be a waste of time. Once she was satisfied that she hadn't overlooked anything of value or importance, she locked the door behind her and threw both her sets of keys in through the letterbox.

On Joanna's way down to the van, she could feel tears sting her eyes. As she closed the little garden fence behind her and turned to look at the house, at the garden and at Betty's pride and joy, her prized flower bed, the tears spilled over and began to stream down her cheeks. She didn't do anything to stop them.

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Thursday, June 30th.

Groaning, Joanna swung her legs over the side of her temporary sleeping arrangement in the stationhouse's basement quarters affectionately dubbed 'the cribs' and began to shuffle around on the bunk to try to find a place that wouldn't poke her in the rear end.

Detectives and officers were allowed to spend a few nights there while they were working on major cases - or if they had been thrown out of their homes - but they were strictly co-ed, so Joanna had to share the ten-bunk room with a male Detective whose apartment building had suffered a fire and a uniformed patrolman who was there for a similar reason to Joanna.

Sitting with her elbows on her knees, Joanna felt miserable beyond belief. The lines next to and under her eyes resembled a road map of Death Valley and she hadn't even bothered to comb her hair. The mattress was lumpy and uncomfortable and she was sure her back and rear end were dotted with red puncture wounds from all the broken springs. If that wasn't bad enough already, both of her crib-mates were snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

As she looked to her left at the filled package cases that were lined up next to her bunk, she once again grumbled under her breath; complaining vociferously about her lack of judgment and her world record levels of stupidity.

Joanna sighed and checked her wristwatch which read 5:42 a.m. Since there was no point in trying to go back to sleep, and she didn't have anything better to do, she grabbed the plastic bag with her towel and her shampoo and went into the showers to freshen up before the stationhouse came alive.
Five hours later, Joanna fell down on the swivel-chair in her office, dead-tired from spending nearly all morning with the district attorney working on wrapping up the Jeremy Malone homicides and all the mess surrounding them.

She took a swig from the coffee she had just made, hoping that it would give her a much needed boost. Moments later, she made a horrified face when she discovered that it tasted like dishwater.

Scrambling to her feet, she moved over to the coffee maker to check the mix. Once she saw what she had done, she slapped her forehead and poured the entire pot out into the sink.

"Coffee trouble?" a very familiar, rich voice said from the door. Joanna sighed and turned to look at Liliana Zinovia.

"You might say that. Vern has bought a new bag of ground beans without telling me. This one needs twice as much as the old one did. I just made it on autopilot," Joanna said and rinsed out the pot.

"You look like shit, Joanna."

"I know. You look great."

Even in her depressed state, Joanna couldn't help but shoot the former principal an admiring glance. Liliana was wearing a pair of dark green jeans and a matching vest over a white T-shirt. Perched on her regal nose, she had a new pair of designer glasses that were slightly less flashy than the old pair but still far more stylish than regular glasses.

"Thank you. Listen, do you think you could get a sick day, or something? You look like you could need some of Rita's coffee," Liliana said, sticking her hands into her back pockets.

"Rita...?"

"The barista down at Heaven In A Cup."

"Oh... Liliana, I don't know if that's such a good idea. We always end up in the sack when we're there..."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Liliana said with a throaty chuckle.

"It's what got me into this mess."

"No, what got you into this mess was your lust for adventure... and believe me, Joanna, I know that feeling very well," Liliana said, slithering closer to Joanna. "You're feeling it right now, aren't you?" she continued in a honeyed voice.

Joanna sighed deeply and ran a hand through her unruly hair. "Yeah. Yeah, I feel it. But for once I have to stand firm. I can't right now, Liliana. Last night, we got called out to a murder-suicide... a real stinker of a case. I have so much paperwork... and then there's all the nonsense with Rocky..."

"All right, fair enough. I understand."

Joanna looked at the ash-blonde woman and narrowed her eyes. "But, uh..."

"Yes?" Liliana said, cocking her head. A sly little smile flashed across her lips and she moved even closer to Joanna.
"What if I invited myself over to dinner at your place tomorrow evening? Would that be inappropriate?"

"Dinner tomorrow evening would be very appropriate, indeed. I'll organize the food and the entertainment. Perhaps you could bring the wine?"

"Uh... I'm not really a wine-drinker, Liliana. I'm more of a beer-kinda gal."

"Okay. I'll make some food that goes with beer. Not that we'll have much time to eat it," Liliana said, grinning.

"Nah, I guess we won't," Joanna said, returning the grin. "I'll swing by at eight or so...? Would that be-"

"How about nine-thirty instead? We could turn it into a little midnight seance?"

"A midnight seance sounds good. I definitely need one of those right now. Not that I know what it is, exactly...?"

"Well, I know, but I'm not going to tell you. That would spoil the surprise," Liliana said, standing up on tip-toes to give Joanna a nice, little kiss on the cheek. "Wouldn't it?" she continued in a hoarse whisper.

Joanna grinned, not knowing whether she should be excited or terrified about what the word 'surprise' might imply. One thought kept echoing through her mind: she might finally get to meet the Mistress.

Vernon suddenly entered the office, holding his indispensable notepad and an equally indispensable cup of coffee.

"Well, I better get going. See you tomorrow evening, Joanna," Liliana said, blowing Joanna a finger kiss as she left the office.

"Tomorrow evening. Can't wait," Joanna said, meaning it from the bottom of her heart - or at least the bottom of her libido.

Wearing a silly grin, Joanna spun around on her heel and walked back to her swivel-chair.

"Careful, Jo. I know that look on your face," Vernon said, looking at Joanna over the rim of his glasses.

"Yeah, yeah... I'm careful."

"By the way, you look like shit."

"Why, thank you, Vern. You're the second person to tell me that today," Joanna said with a dry chuckle. When she reached for her coffee mug, she realized that she had forgotten to turn on the coffee maker after she had thrown out the old pot. With a loud groan, she rose from her chair to get it done.

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CHAPTER 11

Friday, July 1st.
Twenty-two minutes past nine in the evening, Joanna drove the Crown Victoria down the slope in the parking garage next to Liliana's apartment building, noting that the concrete surface was still as treacherous as it had been when the shoot-out had taken place.

After parking next to the familiar charcoal gray Taurus, she turned off the engine, but instead of getting out of the car, she kept sitting, turning her head to look at herself in the rear view mirror.

'Joanna Powell, didn't you want a quiet, steady life? Liliana can't provide that, she's much too wild. Didn't you want to experience true love? Liliana can't provide that, either... she's said more than once that she insists on having open relationships. If all you're looking for is someone to do the wild monkey dance with, you might as well have called an escort service.'

Joanna looked down at the six pack of beer and the bouquet of roses lying on the passenger seat. Picking up the bouquet, she sniffed the flowers and then broke out into a wide grin. "Sometimes, you just have to live in the moment," she said out loud, took the two items and got out of the car.

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Three minutes later, Joanna pressed the little buzzer next to 'L.E. Zinovia' on the panel at the main entrance.

'Yes?'

"Hey, Liliana, it's me. I have the imported beer you asked me to buy... and a little surprise as well."

'Ohhhh, I love surprises. One moment.'

Joanna already had her hand on the doorknob and as soon as the buzzing sound was heard, she flung the door open and sprinted up the stairs to Liliana's apartment.

A small note pinned to the apartment's door said that Joanna should use the doorbell when she arrived. When Joanna read it, she grinned and put the six pack and the bouquet down on the carpet.

Beginning with her footwear, she gave her appearance a very thorough quality check - she checked the luster on the tips of her boots, she checked that her dark blue pair of jeans was zipped, she checked that her brass belt buckle was lined up straight, she checked that all the little, shiny brass buttons on her black shirt had been closed properly and she checked that the white T-shirt she was wearing underneath was showing just the right amount above her shirt.

She suddenly felt unsure whether or not she should roll up her shirt sleeves so her wristwatch was showing, but decided to go ahead with it. 'I have a pretty good tan going right now and it would be a waste not to flaunt it,' she thought, leaning down to pick up the beer and the flowers.

After clearing her throat and puckering up her lips a couple of times so they were ready to kiss Liliana at the first opportunity, she pressed the little button for the door bell.

A short while later, light footsteps were heard from the other side of the door. Once a few locks had been worked, the door opened to reveal Liliana Žinovia wearing something that made Joanna's jaw fall down to her belt buckle.

"Ho-ly shit," Joanna said, practically unable to control her tongue.
Liliana was wearing beach sandals, a pair of tight, blue shorts that came to mid-thigh, a multi-colored Copacabana-style bikini top and a sheer yellow, green and blue tunic she had wrapped around the upper part of her body. Her eyes were covered by a pair of pitch black sunglasses and she was holding a Panama hat in her hand. Grinning, she put the hat on, making sure it sat in just the right, crooked angle.

"Oh... my... God...!!" Joanna breathed, lapping up every visible square inch of Liliana's body - at the same time, her imagination was working flat out on the inches that were hidden.

"You like?" Liliana purred, running her fingers down the brim of the hat.

"Me like. Me need a cold drink... no, me need a cold shower," Joanna said and stumbled into the apartment.

"Silly. You look great, too," Liliana said and pulled Joanna down for a kiss that spelled out pretty clearly what her intentions were for the evening.

When they separated, Joanna licked her lips and broke out into a grin. "Thanks for the compliment... and thanks for having me. I do believe these are for you," she said and held up the bouquet.

Liliana took them and immediately put them to her nose, breathing in the sweet scent of the red roses. "Oh, thank you, Jo, they're wonderful. You know, a girl can still be charmed by a bouquet of red roses. That's one thing that'll never go out of fashion," she said, raising her sunglasses so she could look Joanna in the eye.

Joanna noticed that the skin around Liliana's left eye was still a bit discolored after the shiner, but it was looking a lot better than it had been. "Glad you like 'em. Hey, I got the imported beer you wanted," Joanna said and held up the six pack of Brahma Pale Lager.

"Great. We're having a Brazilian party tonight. The dish is already in the oven. It's called Arroz e feijão."

"Oooh, sounds exotic. What it is?"

"Rice, black beans and marinated chicken."

"Yums," Joanna said and tried to pinch Liliana's rear end, but she moved away too quickly for Joanna's fingers to make contact.

"Nuh, nuh, we'll save that for later. Oh, and we're going to dine on the beach... well, the living room floor, but you get the picture."

"Uhhh, oh, yeah, I certainly do," Joanna said, staring at the multi-colored bikini top.

"Why don't you go into the living room and make yourself comfortable?"

"Into the beach pad?"

"The beach pad, yeah. I'll just find a vase for these beautiful flowers and then I'll put the Brahma in the fridge so they're nice and chilly. Dinner's ready in twenty minutes or so," Liliana said and sought out Joanna's left hand. "Oh... you're wearing the ring I gave you...?" she said surprised when she noticed the polished steel band with the infinity-symbol on Joanna's ring finger.

"Yeah. I thought it would be... you know... fun. Anyway, I never wear finger rings, so it feels a bit odd, but I really like the design."
Smiling, Liliana began to play with Joanna's long digits, alternating between tickling and caressing them and giving them little squeezes that made Joanna think of something else entirely.

"Just yell if you need me... um, in the kitchen... oh, you know what I mean," Joanna said, gulping nervously.

"Oh, believe me, I do," Liliana said saucily. With a coquettish little grin, she waltzed into the kitchen with her hips swaying so much that Joanna almost got dizzy from watching them.

Joanna felt her libido give her a strong kick in the pants but she didn't want to ruin all the things Liliana had prepared by moving too quickly. Instead of acting on her favorite basic instinct, she forced herself to turn around and go into the living room to check out the decorations.

"Wow..." Joanna said as she looked around the living room that had been completely transformed into a mini-Rio de Janeiro. Festoons in the Brazilian national colors - green, blue and yellow - were hanging everywhere, draped over all the lamps and the backs of the chairs.

The table that was usually standing in the center of the room had been moved over to the far wall to create a perfect space for a square, red beach blanket. The blanket had already been set for two, with the cutest matching plastic plates, glasses, knives and forks Joanna had ever seen - one set was green, the other blue.

The blanket's backdrop was a twenty five by fifty inch cardboard vista of a genuine Brazilian beach, complete with white sand, blue waves and dozens of scantily-clad, dark-skinned, droplet-covered beach bunnies in bikinis that left very little to the imagination.

"Is it okay?" Liliana said, sneaking up behind Joanna.

"Okay? Are you kiddin'? This is sensational, Liliana."

"Good. Thank you so much for these roses, I really appreciate them," Liliana said, once again sniffling the bouquet.

"You're welcome. It's the least I could do... considering all the shit you've been through," Joanna said, looking longingly at the sheer tunic as Liliana walked past her to put the vase onto one of the sideboards.

"I've burned a CD with some mood music. I hope you like salsa and samba," Liliana said as she put a compact disc into the player in her stereo. Soon, the living room was filled with enticing South American rhythms.

After turning the volume down a notch so it was less intrusive, Liliana began to sway to the music. At first, she moved in a fast dance beat, but her movements soon slowed down and became more exotic and passionate. She seemed to be lost in the music, not sensing any of the things that went on around her.

Joanna watched the display with great interest. Gradually, her lips were pulled back until her mouth was showing a wolfish grin. Her mind went blank at the sight of the dancing Liliana and she couldn't have spoken a word even if she had wanted to. A vein started thumping so hard on the side of her neck that she had to put a finger inside her collar and move it out, even though the top buttons were already undone.

When the first tune ended, Liliana seemed to snap out of her trance and she eventually came to a halt. When she noticed the look on Joanna's face, she grinned and lifted her hat and bowed. "There's plenty more where that came from," she husked.
Joanna just nodded. The speech center of her brain hadn't come back online yet.

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"Dinner's served!" Liliana shouted as she carried the tray with the rice, the black beans and the marinated chicken into the living room and put it down on a heat-resistant mat on the blanket.

Joanna quickly moved away from Liliana's bookshelves - where she had been studying the titles with great interest - and sat down on the floor, folding her legs up underneath her. "Smells fantastic. What did you call it again?"

"Arroz e feijão. Literally rice and beans. A simple dish that tastes great."

"Oh... right. I can't say that I've ever tried it."

"Let's see if you like it, then."

"How can I not? After all, you made it," Joanna said, flashing Liliana her most winning smile.

"Charmer."

Liliana soon returned to the make-believe beach pad with two cold Brahmas. After removing the caps with a bottle opener, she handed one to Joanna and poured half of her own into the little plastic cup.

"To us," she said, holding the cup high.

"I can drink to that. To us," Joanna echoed, taking a probing sip from the foreign beer. "Hey, this isn't too bad. How did you know about it?" she continued, taking a slice of marinated chicken with her fork and transporting it over to her plastic plate.

"I know a lot of things, Jo."

Joanna stopped cutting up her marinated chicken and looked at the ash-blonde woman before her. Cocking her head and lifting her left eyebrow, she let out a throaty chuckle. "That's a fact, Liliana. That's definitely a fact."

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"Wow, that was great. Thank you very much for dinner," Joanna said, wiping her mouth in a blue napkin that she proceeded to put down on the empty plastic plate.

"You're welcome."

Joanna began to get up from the floor. "Come on, let me help you with the dishes," she said and began to scoop up the various items on the blanket.

"No, no, I got it. Don't worry, I'll just put 'em on the kitchen table. I never do the dishes while I have visitors," Liliana said and put a warm hand on Joanna's shoulder. "... dishwater just kills the mood," she husked.

"Right. Well, if you need my help with anything, just say the word," Joanna said and stretched out her legs.
"Sure. Just keep sitting for now."

Once Liliana returned to the beach pad, she turned off two of the lamps, allowing a veil of duskiness to drape itself over the living room. Looking directly into Joanna's eyes, Liliana went over to the stereo and turned the volume down a few more notches, creating a very cozy, warm atmosphere.

"Time to move over to the hammock," Liliana husked, pointing at the futon that had been pulled back slightly to make way for the blanket on the floor.

"The hammock...? Right... loving it already," Joanna said and slipped up into the futon. She patted the seat next to her, but Liliana had other plans.

"No, move up into the corner and lie down. It's wide enough for both of us."

"Yes, ma'am!" Joanna said and quickly took off her boots. Then she flung herself into the top corner of the futon, scooting up against the backrest to leave plenty of room for Liliana to lie down next to her.

Once Joanna was in place, Liliana joined her. She knelt down on the futon, swung her legs up and moved around so their bodies were touching each other all the way down.

"Mmmmmm... nice," Joanna whispered, looking into Liliana's spring green orbs that were only a few inches away from her own.

"Very nice," Liliana replied, leaning forward to place a little kiss on Joanna's lips.

Of their own accord, Joanna's hands began to move upwards, past Liliana's tight shorts and up to the little bow tie that held the bikini top in place. When she started toying with it, Liliana reached behind herself to still Joanna's hands.

"Not yet," she whispered and moved Joanna's hand down to rest on her hip.

"This is a good place, anyhow," Joanna said and clawed Liliana's hip a couple of times, earning herself another little kiss.

"It's a quarter to eleven so it's not quite a midnight seance yet. I'm saving the good stuff for the witching hour," Liliana said quietly.

"Gotcha."

"Let's talk a little first."

"Okay...?"

"I sense that you're still a bit confused about my role in the two murders out at the school."

Joanna froze slightly, not quite believing her ears. Several thoughts and doubts flashed through her mind - all bad. Narrowing her eyes, she forced herself not to jump to any conclusions. "Your role...? You need to explain that a bit better, Liliana."

"I got them killed... wait, wait, I didn't do it myself!" Liliana said off Joanna's wide-eyed stare. "Rocky did the physical part. But by organizing those parties, I put them in a position where they... well, exposed themselves. Literally. Where they put themselves in the spotlight, to their families as well as the public."
"I understand."

"Mark Gerlach's family hated the fact that he was homosexual and they never wasted any opportunity telling him. Or telling me, for that matter. Perhaps that was why he and I ended up having sex. The act worked as a quiet rebellion."

"What about the Canadian fella and Brian Roper?"

Liliana chuckled dryly and began to move her index finger across Joanna's forehead. "I just thought they were hot," she said, shrugging.

"Liliana, I... there's something I've been meaning to ask you for a very long time. Weeks ago, Maurice Jerrod told me that the boarding school's scuttlebutt had it that your husband had divorced you because you... uh, because you..."

"I know what you're talking about. It's mostly true."

"David told us differently. Or rather, he didn't tell us that part, specifically."

"He hated it. I asked him if he wanted to try and he said yes. We tried it, he hated it and we never did it again."

"Hmmmm?"

"Cross my heart, hope to die." To underline her sincerity, Liliana took Joanna's fingers and let them make a little sign of the cross over her heart.

Joanna wanted to make a cheeky comment but she kept silent when she could see from the look on Liliana's face that she wasn't done speaking. Instead, she just smiled and waited for Liliana to finish sorting her thoughts.

"Joanna...?"

"Yeah?"

"I have something to ask you, too," Liliana whispered, running her hand up to rest on Joanna's neck.

"Go on."

"Would you like to try it? I know you've already said no once, but I thought that since your old girlfriend is out of the way, it couldn't hurt to ask again...?"

"Oh, baby, I... I don't really..."

"It's okay. I don't want to push you into anything you're not ready for."

"No, no, wait. I... the fact is that I'd love to meet the Mistress... but I don't think I'd enjoy being sodomized. Actually, I know I wouldn't."

"Jo, I never talked about sodomy. That's not my thing, either."
"But...? Okay, now I'm confused. Didn't you just say that your ex-husband hated it?" Joanna said; her face one, large question mark.

Liliana leaned her head back and laughed out loud. "Anybody home, Jo? Yes, he hated it, but what do guys lack that we women have?"

"Ohhhh... so it's just...?"

"Don't tell me you've never owned a vibrator?"

"Well, of course I have."

"And that's all there is to it. Well, it's on a harness, but apart from that, it's the same."

"Aw, Jeez," Joanna said and slapped her forehead. "I've had too much Brahma."

"You had one bottle."

"It's much stronger than what I'm used to."

"Must be. So is that a yes?"

Joanna licked her lips nodded her head enthusiastically.

"Excellent. But that's for later. That's for the witching hour," Liliana said and kissed the tip of Joanna's nose.

"What should we do 'till then...?" Joanna said, winking cheekily.

"Oh, I'm sure we can think of something," Liliana said and moved her mouth a lot closer to Joanna's neck. Extending her tongue, she began to play with Joanna's earlobe, flicking it back and forth, suckling it, nibbling on it and even giving it a few gentle tugs.

"Mmmmmmm, oh yeah, I like your thinking," Joanna breathed, feeling her libido kick into gear almost at once. A warm, pleasant wave radiated out from her ear and down her throat and chest, making her nipples and her center respond in a similar fashion.

Joanna reached around Liliana and pulled her even closer, giving her an even better opportunity to play with the earlobe. Liliana's bare back proved to be irresistible for Joanna's hands and they were soon on the prowl, ceaselessly moving up, down and across the smooth skin.

When Liliana's leg accidentally slipped between Joanna's and applied pressure to her already heated center, her eyes popped wide open from the sensation it created. Every fiber of her being wanted to rip their clothes off and finish the job right there on the futon, but before she had opportunity to do so, Liliana pulled back slightly, removing her leg from its exquisite resting place.

"Ohhhh..." Joanna whined, feeling like her toys had been snatched away from her.

"Not yet, Jo. Not..." Kiss "... yet." Kiss, kiss.

"Oh, darn. I was all good and ready now."
"I noticed," Liliana said and leaned in to give Joanna a final kiss on the lips. After they separated, Liliana swung her legs over the side of the futon and waltzed her way towards the kitchen; her hips once again swaying like mad behind the sheer tunic.

"Oh, but where are you going? It was just getting fun," Joanna whined, rolling over onto her back and putting her hands behind her head.

"I've bought some natural aphrodisiacs. Wanna try?"

"Baby, you are an aphrodisiac. No, don't laugh, I'm serious!"

Despite the warning, Liliana still chuckled in a husky way that made Joanna's nape hairs - and her nipples - stand on edge.

"I'll remember that," Liliana said and walked into the kitchen. When she returned a few seconds later, she was holding six incense sticks in her hand. "These things are called the Essence of Aphrodite. They're supposedly made exactly like the original sticks that lovers ignited in Aphrodite's temples to get the Goddess' attention back in ancient Greece."

"Well, that's an easy sell 'cos nobody can verify it... so the smoke is the aphrodisiac?" Joanna said and sat up on the futon.

"Not the smoke itself, the scent that emanates from them. I think we should try them. Or at least some of them."

"Well... why not? I mean, it's not that we need it, but it can't hurt to try. I'll help you," Joanna said and quickly got off the futon.

"They even come with their own matches," Liliana said, showing Joanna the package the incense sticks came in.

"Nifty."

A few minutes later, a column of faintly pink smoke rose from the three incense sticks they had lit. A romantic smell filled the room, rolling over the furniture and the two women like a comfortable blanket.

"Wow, that's not bad at all. Not heavy or cloying or anything. I thought they were gonna stink everything up," Joanna said and took a deep breath of the scented air.

"But can you feel any difference?" Liliana said, putting down the plastic bag the sticks had come in.

"Ummm, not yet. Maybe if you come just a teeny-weeny bit closer I will."

"Perhaps we need some background music," Liliana said and turned around to put a new disc in the player.

"Baby, you're all the music I need," Joanna said in a mock deep voice. She grabbed Liliana's waist and pulled her so close that their bodies were touching from top to toe.

Joanna put her hands on Liliana's rear end and began to sway to a non-existent rhythm. Liliana wasn't slow in joining in, and soon, the two women were dancing so close they could feel each other's body heat.
"Mmmm... this is nice. I think the sticks are working. I do feel very romantic right now," Joanna said and leaned down to claim Liliana's lips in a searing kiss.

As the kiss deepened, the dancing slowly came to an end. It wasn't long before their tongues took over where their bodies had left off; writhing, snaking and wrestling against each other, the two muscles seemed to have gained a life on their own.

Once again, Liliana pulled back, grinning mischievously. "No, no, no... we're not going there. Not yet, Jo."

"Ohhhh!" Joanna whined, stomping her foot into the carpet in a very juvenile fashion. "You know what's gonna happen, don't you? I'm gonna explode and then you'll have to use a spatula to scrape me off the ceiling!"

"I'll have to chance that. Come on, let's go back to the beach pad. There's something I want to show you."

"But we are going to make love tonight... aren't we?" Joanna said, making the cutest puppy dog look she could come up with.

"Yes, but we're going to go far beyond that. I promise that I'll take you to a whole new level... introduce you to a whole new dimension," Liliana said, slithering closer and closer to Joanna. "I'm going to share some of my secrets and preferences with you. I'm going to teach you a few things that will show you that there is more to sexuality than merely the physical stuff."

As Liliana spoke the words, she pushed Joanna down onto the red blanket and climbed on top of her, straddling her hips. A short while later, Liliana leaned forward and pinned Joanna's long arms to the carpet.

"I'll show you that the woman is the world's most powerful creature," Liliana continued, moving her hands down to cup Joanna's breasts through the shirt. Flinging her head back, she let out a sensual groan and ground her hips twice against Joanna's in a preview of what was to come.

"I'll do a few things that may shock you..." Liliana said, reaching down and cupping Joanna's center with her hand, stroking the already damp jeans.

All this sweet torture really got Joanna's attention. She could feel her body respond to the seduction in ways she didn't even think were possible. Every time Liliana touched her, her nerves seemed to catch fire, and when Liliana had stroked her center, she had felt her vaginal muscles clench just like they had done the first time they had made love.

"... but most important of all, I'll show you that there is no upper limit when it comes to pleasure," Liliana whispered, leaning down to give Joanna a kiss and to nibble at her lips.

With her heart hammering away in her chest, all Joanna wanted to do was to get naked and throw herself at the wildcat sitting astride her. "Ughh... God, I need... I need you," she croaked, reaching up to see if she could remove Liliana's bikini top.

"Turn around and get on your knees," Liliana said, swatting Joanna's hands away. She climbed off Joanna's hips and stepped away so the taller woman had space to turn over.

"Ohhh!"

"Do it. Turn around... yeah, that's right. Now lean down so your elbows are on the floor."
"Like this?"

"Yeah. Arch your back down, not up."

"Huh?"

"Strut your booty, baby," Liliana said, stroking Joanna's aforementioned body part.

"I'm overdressed, Liliana. Way, way, way overdressed," Joanna said from her slightly precarious position on the floor.

"I'll deal with that in a little while. Okay, you can sit up on your knees now. I just wanted to see how flexible you are."

Joanna leaned back to rest her weight on her thighs. After dusting off her hands, she began to unbutton her shirt, but a quick swat by Liliana made her stop.

"No. Like I said, I'll deal with that. Now you just wait here. I won't be long. When I return, we'll begin the lessons," Liliana said and backed out of the living room. When she reached the door to her bedroom, she reached up and untied the sheer tunic, making Joanna grin broadly.

The flighty material fluttered harmlessly to the ground and Liliana kicked it to the side so it wouldn't be in the way. With a slight tug on the bow tie, she undid the bikini top but kept the fabric in place by holding her arms in a big X in front of her chest.

"Tease!" Joanna said, laughing.

Liliana slowly backed into her bedroom. As soon as she was out of sight from the living room, the bikini top came flying through the air, landing next to the tunic. Moments later, the pair of tight, blue shorts followed.

Joanna wiped a few beads of sweat off her brow. She knew exactly what was going to happen now, but she didn't know if she had the nerves to go through with it. She had a feeling that meeting the Mistress would be one of the defining moments in her life, but she couldn't put her finger on why she felt that way.

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"Joanna Powell," Liliana said in a pathos-laden voice from somewhere inside her bedroom. "Behold the Mistress of the Night."

As Liliana stepped out into the hall and slithered into the living room, Joanna's eyes grew wider and wider until they were almost popping out of her head. Liliana wore high, pointy leather boots with four-inch high heels, a pair of pants and a vest both made of black leather, black elbow-length gloves seemingly made of very smooth silk and a black half-mask that framed her eyes.

Joanna let her eyes glide down Liliana's lithe, petite body that had suddenly been transformed into an imposing figure by the acres of black leather she was wearing. When Joanna spotted the central piece of the ensemble, she could feel her heart rate picking up dramatically and her mouth go bone dry in anticipation.

Hanging low around the hips, Liliana was wearing a ten-inch ivory strap-on phallus on a harness that was attached somewhere under her leather pants. As Liliana came closer, she started stroking the phallus, sending a barrage of conflicted emotions scrambling through Joanna's brain.
"Pull your shirt out of your pants and unbutton it," the Mistress said huskily, kneeling down behind Joanna.

Joanna obeyed at once, tugging like a madman to get the fabric free of the jeans. Once it was loose, she began to undo the brass buttons.

"Good. Now take it off. And the undershirt."

Soon, the two clothing items flew through the air, landing in an unruly pile on the floor next to the vista from Rio de Janeiro.

The Mistress reached ahead of Joanna and ran her fingers across the smooth skin she found there. Her gloved fingers caressed Joanna's breasts through the bra, circling the boundaries of the fabric; cupping, squeezing and gently kneading the two mounds.

"Lose the bra," the Mistress whispered.

A split second later, the lacy bra flew through the air, joining the shirt on the pile.

The Mistress leaned forward again, letting her hands roam over Joanna's liberated breasts. She moved her fingers in two identical circles that narrowed until they were only just skimming the nubby areas at the base of the erect nipples.

Joanna began to pant heavily and to writhe under the Mistress' touch. The circular movements threatened to send her over the edge even before they had made it past first base, but when she reached for the Mistress' gloved hands to beg for a pause, she felt her hands being slapped and moved away.

"I'm in control," the Mistress whispered into Joanna's ear. "And don't you forget it."

Joanna nodded eagerly, frantic to get on with it, but understanding that Liliana wanted to put on the best show she possibly could.

"Now undo your pants... but don't take them off."

At once, Joanna reached down and undid her belt buckle and the button of her jeans. Raising herself up, she pulled the zipper down and made the jeans loose around her hips. When the Mistress didn't offer any further instructions, she looked over her shoulder to see what she should do next.

"Excellent, Joanna. You're a quick study. This is one of the keys in getting the most out of this experience. If you do as I tell you, I'll reward you... if you don't, I'll punish you... by stopping."

As the Mistress was speaking the words, she let her gloved hand slide down into the pants from the back, gliding past Joanna's butt until she cupped her thoroughly soaked center through the panties. Just to underline her words, she applied a bit of pressure to the outer folds.

It wasn't much, but it was enough to make an electrical current race through Joanna's entire system. Arcing her back, she let out a sighing groan that didn't sound like it came from her own throat.

"You don't want me to stop, do you?"

"No..."

"If you do, just say the word."
The Mistress suddenly tightened her fingers and tried to poke them through the fabric of the panties and in between Joanna's folds. The unexpected sensation was enough for Joanna to buck into the gloved hand and she let out a short scream. "God, no! Don't stop! Don't ever stop!" she croaked, panting heavily.

"You're ready. The Mistress is satisfied," Liliana whispered and removed her hand from Joanna's center, earning herself a long, howling whimper in the process. "It's time to get naked."

Joanna quickly shed her socks, her jeans and her soaked panties, and went back to resting on her knees.

"Now lean forward. Elbows on the ground, like before," the Mistress whispered, pushing on Joanna's back until she was flat on the floor.

Joanna's heart rate increased again. Every single part of her was humming or throbbing and she couldn't fathom how darkly exciting it felt to finally be subjected to the Mistress. Breathing heavily, her mind had gone blank, completely devoid of any thought whatsoever. Her entire system had reverted to running on the basic instincts, and all she could do was feel.

When she suddenly felt the tip of the phallus play around her outer folds, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, knowing that she was about to step into the unknown.

With her gloved fingers, the Mistress gently spread Joanna's folds and then inserted the tip of the phallus into her dripping wet vagina. Once Joanna had adapted to the foreign object inside her, the Mistress slowly moved her hips forward to make the full length of the shaft slip inside.

Feeling the entire phallus inside her, Joanna arced her back and let out a strangled groan that left her throat quite sore. She panted heavily, wanting to have the Mistress start the rhythmic motion, but not daring to demand it.

"Are you all right with it?" Liliana whispered, giving Joanna a slight thrust.

"C-come on..." Joanna croaked.

Liliana laughed saucily and began to thrust into Joanna in a slow, grinding rhythm. After half a dozen strokes, she gradually increased the pace until she had found the cadence that suited her best.

Once again, Joanna found herself unable to fathom that she was doing something so far removed from her comfort zone and that she was enjoying it so much - or even that she was willingly allowing someone else to take the lead.

As the act went on, Joanna was just hanging on for dear life, moaning and groaning harder and harder with every thrust. Each time Liliana thrust the phallus forward to go deep inside her, her center sent out a wave of pleasure that spread to all her other body parts, making them scream for equal attention.

Eventually, her body was practically on fire and she damned the fact that she was unable to attend to her needs apart from what was going on in her burning hot center. Just when she thought she couldn't cope any longer, the Mistress slowed down, eventually coming to a stop and pulling the phallus out of her.

Liliana positioned herself so her legs were directly behind Joanna's. She took a firm grip on the taller woman's hips and leaned in towards her.

"Jo, let's get back to the futon. I'm about to show you lesson number two."
"God..." Joanna croaked, quickly doing as she was told.

Liliana got up and moved over the futon, holding the phallus ready as she sat down on the center cushion. "Come on... fold up your legs and turn your back towards me."

Grinning, Joanna hurried up onto the futon. Reaching down, she helped insert the phallus and made sure it wasn't hurting her.

"Are you still all right?" Liliana whispered.

Joanna nodded, eager to get back to the serious part.

"Good. Now ride me," Liliana said, reaching up to caress Joanna's sorely neglected stomach and breasts.

As Joanna resumed the rhythmic motion, she let out a long moan and grabbed Liliana's hands to guide them to where she needed it the most. Liliana quickly caught on and went to work on Joanna's breasts, fondling them, squeezing them and rolling the nipples between her gloved fingers.

With all the important parts of Joanna finally being serviced, she grew bolder and added a little twist to her hips that increased her pleasure tenfold when the phallus was in the deepest.

Spurred on by her own boldness, she tried twisting her hips a bit more and found that it worked even better. Sighing with joy, she increased the cadence, slamming hard down onto the ivory dildo that was perched between her legs.

A handful of thrusts later, she felt an orgasm building inside her and her movements grew ever more frantic. She began moaning louder and louder for each thrust and soon, she voice was quite hoarse, adding a husky quality to it.

A tell-tale tingle emanated from between her legs and soon spread out through her body. As she felt the orgasm roll over her, she jerked her hips back and forth to get the most out of the climax and leaned her head back to let out a husky groan.

What began as a simple orgasm soon turned into something far more for Joanna. Her vaginal muscles clamped down on the phallus, creating so much friction that the sensations threatened to blow her mind. Her eyes popped wide open when she felt not only a second orgasm but a third one as well scream through her, making her brain so befuddled that she could hardly even breathe.

Even though she wanted to stop to save her sanity, her hips kept jerking on their own accord, thoroughly milking the phallus. Her breath came in explosive bursts; her moaning rising in pitch until it was transformed into a series of short screams.

She grabbed Liliana's hands that were still fondling her breasts, giving them such a hard squeeze that she nearly pulled the black gloves off. Her features were contorted by the pleasure, drawn back into an almost satyr-like mask that only grew more extreme as a wave of warmth followed hot on the heels of her orgasms.

When her inner muscles finally relented and released the phallus, she raised herself up to get it out of her. With a long sigh, she flopped over to the side, landing on the futon with a soft bump, completely out of breath and utterly satisfied.
Liliana chuckled and got up. After unhooking the phallus from the harness, she knelt down next to the futon and wrapped her arms around Joanna's naked torso.

"Did you like it?" she whispered, already knowing the answer.

Joanna was so far into her afterglow that she couldn't speak. Instead, she just nodded with the goofiest grin imaginable on her face.

"I'm glad," Liliana continued, giving Joanna a hug. "No more lessons for today. Even the female body has its limits."

"No... but... unf... that's unfair. I w-want to pay back your favors..." Joanna said in a horse voice.

Liliana chuckled and stroked Joanna's cheek. "Let's see in a few minutes. If you're up for it, we can talk about it."

"I've... I've never had three in a row before... are you sure you're human?"

"I'm not human, I'm the Mistress of the Night. My touch creates unbound pleasure," Liliana said, trailing her index finger down Joanna's throat and onto her chest.

"God, I need a minute..." Joanna said with a tired laugh, grabbing hold of Liliana's hand.

"In that case, the Mistress bids you farewell. In her place, you'll meet Liliana. I hope you'll treat her well," Liliana said with a smile and a wink.

Rising from the floor, the Mistress made a grand exit into the bedroom, leaving a chuckling, well-loved Joanna behind.

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CHAPTER 12

Five minutes later, Liliana returned to the living room, as naked as the day she was born.

Joanna looked up with a grin, hoping for an encore - but when she saw the extremely vulnerable look on Liliana's face, the smile melted away and she shot up into a sitting position. "Baby, what's wrong?" she said hoarsely, staring at the uncharacteristic display of emotions.

"I... I'm just happy..."

"Well, you don't look particularly happy to me," Joanna said, scratching her hair.

"But I am happy, Joanna. I'm happy that we met, even if it was under bad circumstances. I'm happy that we're still seeing each other, even after I treated you badly... several times."

"Ah, I'll live. I'm a big girl."
"And I'm happy that I've found someone to love. That's a new experience for me. I've had countless lovers, but I've never connected with any of them the way I do with you."

Liliana's heartfelt words went straight to Joanna's soul. She felt her heart swell to twice its regular size and she felt a new wave of warmth course through her body - only this time, it wasn't lust, but love.

"Come here," Joanna said, jumping up from the couch and reaching out with her arms.

Without thinking, Liliana moved over to the futon and fell into Joanna's waiting arms. The two women hugged each other fiercely; their nakedness only adding to the intimacy. Smiling, Joanna ran her hands up and down Liliana's back and whispered soothing, nonsensical words in her ears.

After a little while, they moved over to the futon and sat down next to each other. Liliana wrapped her arms around Joanna's waist and pulled herself really close to the taller woman.

When Joanna's eyes flicked down to the fading bruises on Liliana's body, she shook her head and actually felt glad that she had stopped Rocky Caulfield.

"Jo, I want you to make love with me," Liliana whispered.

"Uh, I can do that."

"... If you don't mind, I'd like you to wear the phallus."

"Oh... I'm... uh..."

"Please...?"

"All right," Joanna said, caressing Liliana's face. "I s'pose I could work it out. I mean, how tough can it be, right?"

"I find it to be just as rewarding, only in a different way," Liliana whispered, drawing little patterns on Joanna's thighs.

Liliana's touch set the wheels in motion all over again for Joanna. Soon, she felt a pleasant wave of warmth flush over her, and she nodded enthusiastically.

"Let me get the harness. I'll show you how to wear it," Liliana said, getting off the futon.

While Liliana was away, Joanna picked up the phallus. Staring at it, she turned it over in her hand several times, trying to see it from all angles. Chuckling, she put it away and wiped her hands on her thighs.

Liliana soon returned with the nylon harness. "Stand up. I'll put it on you," she said with a cheeky smile.

Joanna did as told, handing the phallus to Liliana who effortlessly clicked it onto the harness.

When Joanna got a good look at the harness, she noted with some degree of fascination that it had a small, companion dildo that was designed to go inside herself while she was servicing her partner with the larger one.

"Ohhh, that's, uh... interesting. I've read about 'em, but I've never tried one of these things before," Joanna said as Liliana wrapped the nylon straps around her rear end and clicked the plastic locks into place.
"And there we have it," Liliana said and took a step back.

Joanna looked down at the ten-inch shaft protruding from her crotch. She shook her head several times and laughed out loud at the unusual sight. "Wow, this is going to take some getting used to... I almost feel like I need to guzzle a couple of beers and watch some football," she said, mussing Liliana's hair.

Liliana just smiled in her customary enigmatic way and moved herself down onto the red blanket on the floor. Grabbing a cushion from the futon, she placed it under her rear end and shuffled around to get comfortable.

When Joanna didn't follow her, she shot the taller woman a sizzling come-hither look that left no room for misinterpretation.

Joanna gulped and knelt down on the blanket. When Liliana spread her legs and lifted them off the floor, Joanna moved in close and put the tip of the phallus near Liliana's opening.

When Liliana nodded, Joanna slowly moved forward and let the shaft glide in an inch past Liliana's outer folds.

"Am I doing it right?" Joanna said.

"Yeah... come... come on. All the way... please."

Joanna did as told and moved forward again until their skin touched. The sensation was unlike anything she had ever experienced. The small companion dildo was doing its job, but it was the look on Liliana's face that really sent her libido into orbit. Deciding to stop thinking and to just follow her basic instincts instead, Joanna began to grind her hips and thrust into Liliana's writhing body.

After a few thrusts, Liliana moved her legs up and crossed them behind Joanna's back. Using her muscles, she pulled Joanna forward to let her know that she wanted her to be a bit closer.

Joanna quickly caught on and leaned forward, placing her hands on the blanket on either side of Liliana's chest. When she discovered that she was able to move her hips more freely in that position, she grinned and went to work on pleasuring Liliana.

Closing her eyes, Joanna concentrated on keeping a solid rhythm going to give Liliana the best ride she possibly could. After a few minutes, Liliana suddenly gasped loudly and began to whimper and move around underneath her, but Joanna thought it was all part of the thrill.

The next moment, Joanna's world exploded in a bright flash when the rubber sole of a size ten boot was slammed against her cheekbone, sending her flying towards the futon.

"YOU FILTHY, DISGUSTING WOMEN!" a male voice shouted hysterically.

Joanna's head was swimming and she was seeing stars of all shapes and colors. She shook her head to try to get them out of her vision, but the movement only made it worse. She could hear that Liliana complained vociferously, almost like she was being manhandled around the room.

Then Joanna heard the easily recognizable sound of a hard slap connecting with soft tissue, quickly followed by a thump and by a woman weeping.
"GET UP! GET UP, YOU DISGUSTING CREATURE!!" the man shouted, grabbing hold of Joanna's arm. Despite her foggy state, she could see the man holding a metal blade that glinted in the faint light.

The man held her arm like in a vice and she had no choice but to follow his orders. She rose to her feet but was soon pushed down onto the futon in a very harsh fashion. Feeling acutely embarrassed over the protruding phallus, she reached down and took off the harness.

As Joanna's sight returned, she could see a large man dressed in dark clothes moving back to Liliana who was still lying where she had fallen. The man's face was partly obscured by the shadows, but she could see that he had a dirty-blonde full beard.

The man growled, moved over to the wall and flicked the light switch, bathing everything in a strong, unpleasant light.

When the light assaulted her, Joanna had to shield her already aching eyes, but she'd had time to see that the man was holding a very long kitchen knife in his hand.

"God, no, David, please don't hurt us!" Liliana said from the floor.

"David? David Caulfield?!" Joanna roared, clenching her fists.

"That's right, bitch." David reached down and grabbed Liliana's hair and jerked her head back. At once, Joanna shot up from the futon, but David just shook his head and put the knife against Liliana's throat.

"Go on. I dare you," he said, winking at Joanna who fell back down on the futon and let out a long, slow sigh.

"Nice. Now get over there, you filthy bitch," David said and yanked Liliana upright. When she was standing, he gave her such a hard shove on the back that she flew forward, tripped over the edge of the blanket and fell down onto the futon with such force that it creaked.

"If you do that again, I'm fuckin' gonna kill ya with my bare hands!" Joanna roared, helping the whimpering Liliana up into the futon.

"Sure you will. Why stop at my brother? Why not kill my whole family as well while you're at it?"

Joanna grumbled a few choice words but concentrated on comforting the weeping Liliana.

"Cover yourselves up, bitches. You make me sick," David said and kicked Joanna's clothes over to them.

Joanna quickly put on her jeans and her white undershirt, but when she got up to snatch Liliana's tunic and her blue shorts, David shook his head and started waving the knife in the air.

"No! No, no, no, bitch. Give my wife the black shirt."

"She's not your wife anymore, sicko. She divorced you!" Joanna grumbled, but she was only successful in making David Caulfield laugh.

Liliana quickly put on Joanna's black shirt and buttoned it. It was much too big for her and hung on her like a tent. The sleeves were too long as well and she used them to cover her modesty.
"Ah, yes... the divorce. Actually I divorced her, but I digress. I couldn't stand all her... all her filthy carnal activities!"

"Just admit it, wimp! You weren't man enough to keep her happy!" Joanna barked.

David began to laugh, a weird little cackling sound that sent a cold shiver down Joanna's back. "I'll kill her for what you just said," David said, pointing at Liliana with the tip of the knife. "And I'm going to make you watch, stupid cop."

"Why are you doing this, David? What happened? We had a great time last week... why now?" Liliana said quietly.

Joanna narrowed her eyes down into blue slits when her mind processed Liliana's words. 'A great time last week...?' she thought, feeling a strong pang of jealousy race through her.

"That's right, we were okay last week. But last week, I didn't catch you having your brains fucked out by some... some... filthy, disgusting woman. Wearing a cock, no less." Turning to face Joanna, David began to inch closer to both of them. "Hey, bitch, how dare you fuck my wife?"

Joanna opened her mouth to shoot David an appropriate response, but when she felt Liliana grab her hand and give it a big squeeze, she kept quiet.

"In my world view, adultery is a capital offence ... and I have the right tool for the job right here," David continued, wielding the knife.

"David... please put the knife away. Can't we talk about it?" Liliana said.

"The time for talking is long gone. The time for killing is now..." David said. Stopping suddenly, his face looked like he'd had a brilliant idea. A smile briefly flashed across his face, but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

With a roar, he jumped forward, holding the kitchen knife straight out ahead of him.

Both Liliana and Joanna screamed and tried to fend off the madman, but David was moving too fast to stop.

With a sickening sound, the knife plunged into Liliana, not stopping before half the blade was buried inside her.

Time seemed to come to a standstill for Joanna as she watched Liliana try in vain to grab the knife sticking out of her chest.

Liliana let out a strangled, pained cry that trailed off before it had even got going. With a sigh, she slipped off the futon and onto the floor, at first leaning against the edge of the seat, but soon keeling over without being able to stop herself from falling. Within a few moments, blood seeped through the black shirt and pooled on the red blanket that had doubled as the beach pad.

David took a few steps back, cackling insanely and clutching his dirty-blonde hair.

Frozen solid, Joanna stared at her lover in wide-eyed horror, unable to grasp that what she was seeing was actually happening and not part of some horrible nightmare. Then she turned her head to stare at David who seemed to be lost to insanity.
Roaring, Joanna jumped forward and swung her fist at David's face. The fist made a direct hit on his cheekbone with a resounding, satisfying thud.

The blow seemed to bring David back from wherever he had been - the next time Joanna swung at him, he was ready for her and blocked it, eventually matching the swing with one of his own. Even though he missed the punch, he still managed to grab hold of Joanna's arm which tripped her up.

Landing on her knees with a hard thump, Joanna cursed loudly and kicked out behind her, landing a hit on David's leg. When she could hear from David's squealing that the kick had been successful, she jumped up and spun around.

Even as she was still spinning, she put out her fist and aimed directly at his head. If the punch had connected cleanly, she would've taken his head off, but he managed to evade it by stepping back at the very last moment.

Joanna's fist still made some impact with his shoulder, but it wasn't enough to unsettle him. Almost at once, he came back at Joanna with a sissy-punch to her gut that only made her angrier.

With the first exchange over, the two combatants separated, almost appearing to move into their respective corners of a boxing ring.

Bopping up and down on the soles of her bare feet, Joanna waited for the right opportunity to make a strike. It came sooner than she had hoped for. A pained whimper from Liliana made David turn his head towards his ex-wife - this was the opening Joanna needed.

Flying forward, she rammed her shoulder so hard into David's gut that he threw up on the carpet. The stench mixed with the tangy smell of the blood seeping out of Liliana and the burning incense sticks, creating an environment that was completely unsuitable for humans, and Joanna had to clench her nostrils together to concentrate.

David was staggering badly; the last hit had taken nearly all the fighting spirit out of him. His legs wobbled and he fell down onto his knees. With a pitiful groan, he began to rock back and forth, nursing his gut.

Joanna looked down at Liliana who was lying far too still for the experienced police officer's liking. She licked her lips nervously, trying to figure out where her cell phone might have gone to. She knew that with stab wounds, time was always of the essence, and she knew that she had lost too much of it already in the fight against David.

David Caulfield wiped some vomit off his chin with the back of his hand and began to cackle again, even more insanely than before. "You can't save her! Ha! You can't save her, bitch! Now you get to watch her die!" he shouted, cackling like a madman.

Joanna's nerves snapped and she clenched her fists and let out a terrifying, primordial scream that penetrated even David's foggy insanity, making him stop his cackling and stare at her with wide, confused eyes.

A split second later, Joanna kicked him in the face with such force that his nose was crushed, sending a cascade of blood out into the room. He was thrown backwards, stumbling over the armrest of the futon which sent him sprawling head-first onto the floor.

Joanna stormed through the room and jumped the futon to get to David Caulfield. Reaching down, she grabbed his hair and yanked his head upwards. She raised her fist, ready and willing to pounce him into
next week, but she discovered that he was already out cold. Grunting, she dropped David's head like a rotten potato and ran back to her lover.

Liliana was still breathing, but in a very labored fashion. At once, Joanna knelt down and put a hand on Liliana's forehead to feel her temperature - she was clammy and her skin was waxen, save for a few red splotches on her cheeks. The pulse in Liliana's wrists wasn't too good either, and Joanna felt herself slowly going into a panic.

Liliana's arms had fallen to her sides, and she didn't respond at all when Joanna tried to squeeze them. Joanna knew that it would be a wrong move to try to pull the knife out, so instead, she unbuttoned the black shirt and gently pulled it apart to see the condition of Liliana's skin.

The wound was located a hand's width below Liliana's left breast. It had a clean edge that was pointing inward around the blade, and it was still bleeding profusely. From the amount of metal that was left on the outside of the wound, Joanna calculated that the blade had gone in at least three inches.

Joanna got up and wiped some sweat off her forehead even though her fingers were covered in Liliana's blood. She looked around frantically, searching for her own cell or the apartment's telephone.

She quickly located a Skype handset but she didn't have time to figure out how it worked. After putting it down again, she ran into the bedroom, hoping to find a phone on the nightstand, but again she came up short.

When Joanna returned to the living room, she could see at once that Liliana was trying to move, and she tore over to the injured woman, fell down onto her knees and grabbed Liliana's hand.

Liliana began to cough slightly, and when she did, blood started trickling out of the corners of her mouth. Joanna's eyes grew wider and wider when she realized that she was losing Liliana and that there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

Joanna suddenly caught a glimpse of her cell phone under one of the chairs. Letting go of Liliana's unresponsive hand, she jumped over to her phone and turned it on. Once it had come alive, she dialed 9-1-1 and waited with bated breath for the connection to come through.

After the dispatcher had said her customary greeting, Joanna felt her own professionalism kick in and take over. She had been in many crises and dramas over the years, and she knew she had to let her accumulated experience assume control over her emotions for the time being.

"This is Detective Joanna Powell from the Fourteenth Precinct. I urgently need an EMT at 1116 Fillmore Boulevard. I have a level three stabbing trauma, the object is still in place. The victim is unresponsive with severe blood loss and a weak pulse."

'Copy that, Detective. EMT to 1116 Fillmore Boulevard. They're on their way, ETA three to five minutes.'

"Good. Thank you," Joanna said and terminated the connection. She heard someone cough, but she knew it couldn't have been Liliana. Growling, she went over to check up on David Caulfield, but he was still out cold. The blood from his crushed nose had coagulated and was caking on his mouth, but she wasn't inclined to give him a helping hand.

She hurried back to Liliana but quickly established that her condition hadn't deteriorated while the phone call had been made. Taking a deep breath, Joanna dialed the number to her own precinct, hoping that Corbin was present.
'Metro Police Department, this is the Fourteenth Precinct, how may we help you?' the phone operator said.

"Hi, this is Detective Joanna Powell. I need to speak with Detectives Corbin Thomas or William Larsen, please. It's really urgent," Joanna said into the cell phone. When something tickled her hand all of a sudden, she gasped and looked down.

Liliana had managed to seek out Joanna's hand and give it a little squeeze. A very faint smile flashed across her pale lips, but it was only there for a short while.

"Baby, don't leave me... hang on... please, Liliana. I d-don't know what I'll do without you," Joanna whispered, suddenly feeling in her heart that Liliana's struggle had moved into the endgame.

'Hello?' Corbin said from the other end of the connection, but Joanna was too pre-occupied holding onto Liliana's hand to notice.

The familiar sound of an ambulance was heard from the street and Joanna knew that she had to get down to the door and open it for the paramedics, but she couldn't get herself to let go of Liliana's hand.

'Hello? Jo?'

Snapping out of her trance-like state, Joanna stared at the telephone and quickly brought it up to her ear. "Yeah, Corbin, it's me. I'm at Liliana's apartment at 1116 Fillmore. She's been stabbed. Badly. The medics are here, but I need some backup from the local precinct for an arrest. C-can you handle it?"

'Arrest who?'

"Later, Corbin. Can you handle it?"

'I'm on it, Jo. Stand by.'

"No time, I gotta go."

'All right. I'll take care of it,' Corbin said and hung up.

Joanna carefully put Liliana's hand down on the red blanket, got up, and hurried out of the door and down the stairs to open the main entrance for the medics.

She arrived at the windbreak at the very last moment. The medics were already on their way back to the ambulance, but they responded quickly when Joanna opened the door and shouted at them.

"It's up on the second floor. The door is open. The victim is a woman, forty years old and generally in good physical condition. She has been stabbed in the left side of the chest with a clean-edged kitchen knife, and..." Joanna said, rambling off the information almost like it was a single sentence.

"We're on it. Are you all right?" the first paramedic said, looking at the blood on Joanna's undershirt and on her forehead.

"Yes, yes, this is all her blood. I'm fine." Even as Joanna spoke the words, she could feel that the toes on her right foot were hurting like hell, but she didn't have time to do anything about it.
The next five minutes went by in a blur for Joanna. Medical terms flew back and forth between the two paramedics, sending Joanna into such a confused state that she could hardly even remember her own name.

All she could do was to clutch her head and watch the medics work on saving Liliana's life. She felt so cold that she was shivering, but she refused to leave Liliana in case something happened while she was away finding something to wrap herself in.

"Jo?" Corbin said from the door.

"In here... the living room," Joanna croaked, rubbing her hands on her upper arms.

"Joanna, this is Detective Franco Santini from the one-five," Corbin said as he entered the living room.

Joanna turned to look at the new man. Detective Santini was in his early thirties with black hair and a narrow, black mustache. All in all, he looked like a typical cop: tall, buff and wearing a slightly worn pale brown suit over a white shirt.

"Detective Santini, this is Detective Joanna Powell," Corbin said, pointing at Joanna.

"Pleased to meet you, Detective," Santini said, putting out his hand. When Joanna smiled apologetically and showed him her own, bloody hands, he hurriedly pulled his arm back.

"What in Sam Hill is going on here?" Corbin said, waving his hand under his nose to get rid of the stench of the vomit, the blood and the incense sticks.

Joanna nodded down at Liliana's body. "She was stabbed."

"By whom?"

"David Caulfield. He's over behind the futon. I kicked him in the face. He's still out cold."

Franco Santini grunted, put on a pair of blue latex examination gloves and went over to check up on David Caulfield.

"Speaking of cold, you're almost turning purple," Corbin said, took off his blazer and put it over Joanna's shoulders.

"Thanks... it's gonna get bloody."

"It'll wash off." Corbin eyed Liliana's nudity under the tattered remains of the black shirt and coughed in a bout of embarrassment. "Joanna... I'm sorry, but Detective Santini needs to know what happened here tonight," he continued.

"I understand."

"Well, he won't be whistlin' Dixie in a hurry," Detective Santini said as he came back from checking on David. "Detective Powell, like your colleague just told you, I need to know everything. Let's step into the kitchen so we won't disturb the medics."

"No. I'm not moving an inch," Joanna said vehemently.

"All right...?" Santini said, looking first at Joanna and then at Corbin Thomas.
"I don't keep secrets from Detective Thomas. We've known each other for nearly three years. He knows all there is to know."

"I see. Well...?" Franco Santini said, finding his notepad and a ball point pen.

"I arrived just before nine thirty for a date with the owner of the apartment, Miss Liliana Zinovia," Joanna said, staring almost without blinking at the two medics who were still working on Liliana. "After dinner, we retired to the futon."

When Franco Santini's mind connected the dots, he pressed the ball point pen so hard down onto the notepad that it ripped the paper. With an 'ahem', he tore the ruined page off the notepad and started over.

Corbin stifled a laugh, but Joanna just rolled her eyes.

"At roughly twelve thirty, Mr. David Caulfield entered the apartment. He probably used his own set of keys as the door isn't forced open. Obviously."

"Ah, yes. Why did Mr. Caulfield have a set of keys to this apartment?"

"He is Miss Zinovia's ex-husband."

"Oh. Ohhh..." Santini said, connecting a few more dots in his mind. "And you and Miss Zinovia...?"

"Were quite busy at the time," Joanna said dryly.

"I get the picture. Then what happened?"

"He was wielding a kitchen knife. I haven't had time to check if he took it from here or if he had brought it with him. He threatened us repeatedly with the knife. Finally, he snapped and attacked us."

"And stabbed Miss Zinovia...?"

"Yes. After that, I wrestled with him briefly, finally managing to bring him down without further injury to myself or Miss Zinovia."

"By kicking him in the face...?" Santini said, making a lot of notes.

"Yes. Once Mr. Caulfield was no longer a threat, I called 9-1-1... and my friend, Detective Thomas."

"Hmmm," Franco Santini said, chewing on his cheek.

With her patience running low already, Joanna turned away from the Detective and looked at Liliana's prone body that had been placed in an inflatable survival cell. The knife had been removed and the bleeding had finally been stopped, but it hadn't improved on her skin color which was still quite waxy. She appeared to be breathing a little easier, but the oxygen mask she was wearing obscured her face too much for Joanna to know for sure.

"Boy, the paperwork on this one is gonna be a killer," Santini said and went over to David Caulfield. He unclipped the handcuffs from the back of his belt and slapped them around David's wrists. "David Caulfield, you are being arrested for assault with a deadly weapon. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say..."
Joanna had heard the words so often that she didn't pay any attention to them. When Franco Santini eventually hauled David Caulfield out of the apartment, it felt so unreal to her that she was sure she was watching a cop drama on television.

Concentrating solely on Liliana, she blocked everything else out, even Corbin trying to offer her a few consolatory words.

One of the medics pulled up the zipper on the survival cell to shield Liliana's bare legs and abdomen. Joanna didn't know whether that was a good sign or not, but she couldn't get her throat to work long enough to ask about it.

Corbin seemed to understand and he went forward and talked to the medics. They spoke in hushed tones, adding to the unrest that was festering in Joanna's stomach.

A minute later, Corbin came back to Joanna and put a hand on her shoulder. "Jo, they can't do more for Liliana here. They're taking her to the General so she can go into emergency surgery. The lead EMT says that the blade missed her lung by a hair but that it will have done some damage to her abdominal cavity and muscles, and maybe even her intestines.

Joanna sighed and began to chew on her lips.

"Clear the path, please," the lead EMT said and waved his arms. At once, the two detectives moved aside to make way for the paramedics who were carrying Liliana between them.

The survival cell had been zipped up to Liliana's neck leaving only her face out in the open, but even that was mostly covered by the oxygen mask. Joanna wanted nothing more than to give her lover a hug, but she knew it was impossible.

Liliana's face was at peace and free from the pain it had held earlier, but seeing it gave Joanna a kick in the gut. Her heart suddenly started hammering away in her chest and she began to pant so hard that she had to hunch over and put her hands on her knees.

Corbin was at her side at once, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulder. "Jo, it's all right. Just let go," he said quietly.

Joanna shook her head and wiped her aching eyes. "No. No, I won't cry as long as she's alive." Standing up straight, she put her hands behind her head to draw several deep gulps of air. "Where did you say they were taking her?" she said in a croaky voice.

"To the General."

"That's where Betty works..." Joanna said, shaking her head over the awful irony.

"Come on, Jo, get your gear on. You're coming with me... we'll follow them there."

"I have my Crown Vic parked down in the garage..."

"Oh, I'm sure you do, but you're not driving anywhere tonight. Come on."

Sighing, Joanna began to look for her socks and her boots.

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"No, she's been in surgery for nearly an hour and a half now, Vern ... No ... I don't know, nobody is telling me anything," Joanna said and ran a hand through her bloodstained hair. She looked up at the large clock on the wall and let out a long sigh when she realized that it was ten to three in the morning. "Yeah, but... No, there's no point in you coming over right now ... we're just sitting here, Corbin and I ... Yeah ... Yeah, all right, talk to you later, Vern."

Sighing again, Joanna terminated the connection and put the phone in her jeans pocket. She started shuffling around on the uncomfortable plastic chair to try to find a good spot, but she gave up when she realized that it was equally hard all over. Leaning forward, she yawned so widely that her jaw almost broke off.

The hospital people had told her to stay in a waiting room, but she cringed when she noticed how impersonal the white room actually was. The walls were adorned by a few posters that urged people to quit smoking, drinking and eating unhealthy foods and by a bookcase where one could read the latest guidelines on pregnancies or how to avoid them, on donating blood, on patients' rights and a dozen other things related to health issues.

The only way out of the room was a glass door on the wall opposite the bookcase, but it had been shielded off very effectively by a Venetian blind where the wires had been removed so it couldn't be opened - Joanna had already tried. In the ceiling, two powerful strip lights were shining so brightly that she wished she could find the light switch to turn them off.

She had a throbbing headache, a sticky feeling all over from not showering, a stinging pain in her crotch from the unusual positions she and Liliana had tried, and she reckoned she had sprained most of the toes on her right foot from when she kicked David Caulfield in the face. All in all, she was feeling miserable.

To get away from the strip lights, Joanna covered her eyes with her hands and began to think about all the things that had happened since the day in April where she had been called out to the Jeremy Malone Boarding School.

'That was the day where my life began to fall apart... one brick at a time. Jeez, getting to know Liliana was the best and the worst thing that ever happened to me. What would have happened if we hadn't clicked...? I would still have a nice home to live in instead of sleeping in a bunk in a basement. Betty and I would still be together... probably. I wouldn't have been pistol-whipped, beaten, shot in the back, left for dead in a ditch, beaten again... Sheesh.'

When the glass door creaked open, Joanna looked up at once - and sighed when she realized it was only Corbin, returning with two Styrofoam cups.

"The coffee machine was on the fritz. I didn't know if you liked tea so I bought you some hot cocoa instead. I hope that's all right?" Corbin said, putting the cup of cocoa down on a low table in front of the row of plastic chairs.

"That's great, Corbin. Thanks."

"Careful, it's hot as hell. Here's a stirrer and some sugar if you need it," he said, putting a few assorted items down on the table.

Absentmindedly, Joanna picked up one of the sticks of sugar, tore the top off it and poured the contents into the Styrofoam cup. After watching the sugar disappear down into the thick, brown liquid, she took the stirrer and put it to good use.
When the clock hit twenty past three, Joanna rose from the plastic chair and stretched her back, making her joints pop loudly.

"For cryin' out loud, Jo...!" Corbin said with a chuckle.

"What the hell are they doing in there? Playing Poker? How can it take them so long? Two hours! I mean... I could drive halfway across the state in two hours!" Joanna said, running her fingers through her stubborn hair as she was pacing back and forth in the relatively small waiting room.

"Not at fifty-five you couldn't," Corbin said under his breath.

"Yeah, all right... but two hours!"

Joanna's prayers were answered when the glass door suddenly opened to reveal a doctor. At first, Joanna thought he might bring bad news because of the way his face was set, but then she realized that he was probably as tired as she was.

"Miss Powell, I'm doctor Benjamin Curtis, Miss Zinovia's surgeon. The opera-"

"How is she, Doctor?" Joanna said in a voice so choked up she could hardly recognize it herself.

"Well, given the circumstances, she's all right. The operation was a success and we've just wheeled her over to-"

"Thank God," Joanna said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Her lung, intestines and her left ovary were untouched, but there was a great deal of tissue damage, in particular to her abdominal musculature. We've patched it up the best we could by performing reconstructive surgery. Miss Zinovia will be weak on that side for a while, but she should make a full recovery."

"Oh..."

"The knife had glanced off the lower rib on the left side which was good and bad. Good because it meant it missed her lung completely, but bad because the odd angle meant that when it went down into her abdominal cavity, it snagged on the muscle tissue, like I've already explained. That's why we need to keep her here under observation for several days, maybe even a week. For infections, you see."

"I understand."

"There was one blessing in disguise, though. If the knife had had a jagged edge, the resulting wound would have been far worse... well, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. In short, Miss Zinovia was lucky that the attacker used a knife with a smooth edge."

"When can I see her?"

"Oh, not yet. She's still under the influence of the anesthetic and she will be for several more hours, I'm afraid. If you return at ten or eleven, there's a chance she will have woken up in the mean time."

"Return? I'm staying right here!" Joanna said and sat down with a bump, crossing her arms over her chest.
"Well... do what you feel is best, Miss Powell. If you will excuse me, I have other patients to attend to," the Doctor said and grabbed the doorknob.

"Of course. Thank you for the news, Doc."

"You're welcome," the Doctor said and left the waiting room.

"At ten or eleven...? Shit," Joanna said and buried her face in her hands.

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Many, many hours later, Joanna - wearing a hair net and a pale green protective suit - stepped through a door and entered the recovery room. The unmistakable smell of antiseptics lingering in the air only added to her headache and made her crinkle her nose in disgust.

The recovery room had space for four beds, but three of them were lying dormant, leaving only one in use. Liliana appeared to be breathing unassisted, but she had tubes sticking out of her arms and she was hooked up to several machines and monitors that made all sorts of beeping noises. On her left wrist, the tube with the IV-drip had been inserted through a skin-colored glove-like contraption that made her wrist look like it was swollen to twice its usual size.

The nurse who had helped Joanna into the recovery room patted her shoulder and left to allow Joanna and Liliana to have some privacy.

Joanna gulped nervously and took a hesitant step forward. Despite having lived with a nurse for three years, she had to admit to herself that she had a bit of a phobia when it came to hospitals, but she forced herself to stand firm and not freak out like a big chicken.

When Liliana suddenly stirred, Joanna forgot all about her phobia and jumped forward to be at her lover's side. Unsure of what to do, she put her fingers very carefully onto the back of Liliana's left hand and gently stroked the smooth skin in front of the contraption for the IV-drip.

"Oh, baby... I hope you'll be fine," she whispered.

Liliana's eyelids fluttered open and she began to look around the room, finally focusing on Joanna. A faint smile spread out over Liliana's features and she opened her mouth like she wanted to speak - unfortunately, it was soon evident that she wasn't able to get a word across her bone dry lips.

"Oh...!" Joanna said, feeling her insides performing a series of flip-flops when she locked eyes with Liliana's spring green orbs.

When Liliana's pink tongue moved out of her mouth and tried to wet her lips, it finally dawned on Joanna that Liliana needed some water.

"Uh, water... of course," Joanna said and looked around the room. A small trolley stood at the far wall with a jug of water and several plastic cups on it, and Joanna hurried over to it and filled a cup of water from the jug. Remembering to grab a drinking straw, she hurried back to Liliana's side and held it up to her mouth.

Liliana sucked greedily on the straw, ending up almost emptying the cup. When she pushed the straw out of her mouth, a few drops fell out of the tip and dribbled down onto her chin.
Smiling, Joanna leaned forward and wiped the droplets away with her thumb. "How are you feeling?" she whispered.


"Do you remember what happened?"

"Yeah. What's happened to David?"

"He was arrested."

"Good..."

"Yeah. Oh, are there any more Caulfield brothers you forgot to tell me about...ha ha?" Joanna said, chuckling nervously.

"I only know of the two."

"Great." Joanna reached down to move a few stray hairs away from Liliana's eyes and was rewarded by a faint smile.

"Boy, am I tired. I think I need to go back to sleep now. Thank you for being here with me, Jo."

"Are you kiddin'? There's no place on earth I'd rather be," Joanna said and took Liliana's free hand in her own. She gave it a little squeeze and was relieved beyond belief when she felt Liliana match it with one of her own.

"Hey, baby, you know what? I think I love you," Joanna said. Unable to cope with the pressure any longer, she finally allowed herself to let go. Tears began to stream down her cheeks and onto the pale green protective suit, but she didn't care one bit.

"I love you, too, Jo," Liliana said, yawning widely.

"Go back to sleep. We have all the time in the world," Joanna whispered, lovingly caressing Liliana's cheek.

The smile Liliana offered in return was faint, but it was enough to warm Joanna's soul. She grinned through the veil of tears, realizing that even though the last two and a half months had been hell in so many ways, they had given her something, and someone, very special indeed.

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THE END.