DAISY-BELLE'S LAST HURRAH

by Norsebard

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This story contains some profanity. Readers who are easily offended by bad language may wish to read something other than this story.

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

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As always, thank you for your help and advice, Wendy Arthur *Flower*

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: The ol' hippie bird Daisy-Belle Cosmick wants to record a greatest hits album with her band, the Butterflies, simply to see if they still have what it takes. They get help from an ace guitarist by the name of Rebecca 'Rebel' Tunney who's playing in a blues bar in downtown Coulson. Unfortunately, Daisy-Belle's partner, newly appointed police sergeant Erica Wayne, is investigating the blues bar in connection with a spate of drug problems that has struck the city…
PROLOGUE

On the heels of Daisy-Belle Cosmick's serious illness at the new year, she and Erica Wayne moved in together on a permanent basis in Belle's home in Coulson, northern California. At first, it was difficult to find a compromise between the lifestyles of the self-proclaimed, free-flowing hippie Belle and the stricter, by-the-book police sergeant Erica, but their love for each other made it work.

It dawned on them pretty quickly that they would risk breaking down the very thing that had formed their mutual attraction if they tried to change their partner too much, so they decided to live and let live and allow their significant other to keep her traits, quirks and preferences. After all, isn't that what true love is all about?

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CHAPTER 1

The crisp sounds of an acoustic guitar being played by someone who knew what she was doing formed the perfect backing score to the scene that played out in Daisy-Belle Cosmick and Erica Wayne's home in Coulson, California.

While Erica - the newly appointed Sergeant of the Coulson Police Department - put her long arms to good use dusting off the many colorful posters and pieces of folk art they had adorning the walls, Belle kept her eyes firmly trained on her partner's fit frame. Now and then, the sleeves and mid-section of Erica's Coulson PD We're There When You Need Us sweatsuit slipped back to reveal her pale-ocher skin that came from her mother's side of the family tree.

Belle - recently turned sixty-three and feeling every last day of those years because of her flower child past - smirked when she thought of how the tall, thirty-eight year old Native American looked with no clothes at all. Smiling, she leaned her head back on the top of the backrest of the couch and let her bluesy pipes do the talking. "Oh, Lawrd, I ain't no evil woman," she sang in her typical throaty style while picking a fitting blues on her guitar, "I just lurve to watch. Oh, Lawrd, I ain't no eeeeeeervile woman, I just lurrrve to watch. That don't make me no sinner, Lawrd, that make me a fooool for lurrrve!"

Erica chuckled and wiggled her rear end just to give her audience something to look at. A metallic clatter and a soft phlum from the front door heralded the arrival of the delayed morning paper, but even though Erica tore over to the door in a matter of seconds, the paperboy was long gone when she stuck her head outside. "Damn," she said, shielding her eyes from the mid-morning sun, "he's fast… except when he needs to be. At least we got our newspaper. Better late than never. It's even the right one, March 29th."

"Whassat, honey?" Belle said, peeking over the top of the couch.

Erica closed the front door and shuffled back to the couch arrangement at the center of the living room. Although they owned a big, black, flat TV just like everyone else, the art of talking to each other had always been deemed more important than watching the tube in the Cosmick-Wayne household, so the couch and the satellite chairs were facing each other to help the conversations along.

"Nothing. Listen, would you like another mug of herbal tea now that we've got the so-called morning paper?"

"Oh… eh. No, thank you," Belle said and put down her beloved acoustic guitar. Sitting up straight, she pulled down in her yellow t-shirt with the home-made peace symbol that had ridden up to show her belly button. "But you can pass me the entertainment section of the Herald if ya don't mind."
After chucking the second section onto the coffee table, Erica shuffled over to the swinging door to the kitchen. "Ya sure about the herbal tea? I'm going to nuke myself a mug of instant, so..."

"Naw, naw, I'm just fine, sweetie. Thanks," Belle said with a grin as she reached for the newspaper. Once her younger partner had gone into the kitchen, Belle unfolded the second section but kept staring at the door. "I wonder why they insist on puttin' the logos on the back pocket of those sweats?" she mumbled to herself, "I mean, doesn't it just draw the eye to the ass? Not that I'm complainin'..."

As if on cue, Erica poked her head back inside the living room. "Are you talking to me, Belle? 'Cos if you are, I didn't catch a word of it."

"Oh! No no, just makin' a random comment 'bout nothin' in particular," Belle said with a crooked grin.

Erica narrowed her eyes and offered her partner a knowing wink. "Uh-huh?" she said before she pulled back out of the living room.

"She knows me too well," Belle said and concentrated on what it said in the newspaper. "Shoot, the Cruisin' USA documentary got a bad review... I wanted to catch that... mmmm... might as well wait for it to come on Netflix."

Belle skimmed the entertainment section for anything of value, but she didn't stop to read any of the articles until her eyes caught a name from her past. "Wohaaaaa..." she said and folded the newspaper twice to get a better view of the piece. "Holy shit... C.C. Burdette has just gone number one on the streaming charts! Dude... C.C. Burdette... that old cat... I can't believe it..."

Leaning back on the couch, she started toying with a loose thread on her denim cut-offs while she looked at some of the colorful posters advertising old rock concerts that she and Erica had hanging on the walls. One poster in particular caught her eye, a loud affair in neon green and bright orange that proclaimed 'This Friday and Saturday at the RobsonSixtyFour Club! Two nights only! The Green Tambourines, The New Five Guys, Daisy-Belle's Butterflies, C.C. Burdette, Loretta Jackson, Billy Walker & Band. Admittance $10 at the door.'

"Huh. That was April 1975. What in the world is C.C. doing at the top of the charts now?" Belle said and returned to the article. "Oh, he's got a greatest hits album out... I didn't even know he had enough songs to make a-"

"Are you talking to yourself again?" Erica suddenly said, standing in the swinging door holding a steaming hot mug of coffee.

Belle chuckled and patted the seat next to her on the couch. "I guess I am. Mosey on over, kiddo. The old bird got some stories from the past to tell ya if ya interested."

"Always," Erica said and shuffled over to the couch. After putting down the mug, she hopped up next to Belle and folded her long legs up underneath her. She took the opportunity to lean in and kiss her partner's neck simply because the tender skin was too good to miss.

Belle smiled and returned the kiss before she leaned back and snuggled down into Erica's strong arms. "So... okay... cast your mind back to 1975. We were on the cusp of going places with the Butterflies, but we were still stuck playing the smaller clubs and venues. One of our contemporaries was a dapper Dan by the name of Cody Burdette. He was always so darn cool his nickname couldn't be anything but Cody Cool. After a while, it stuck and he changed his stage name to C.C. Burdette. You with me?"

"Sure," Erica said and took a sip of her instant coffee.
"Well, C.C. crossed paths with us a couple of times, you know... here and there... the same clubs and stuff. He was a good ten years older than us at the time... uh, I guess he still is. He'd been a big name in '67 in the San Fran scene, but he had faded away because of drug problems. Like most of us, I guess."

"Yeah. There were many who didn't make it."

"Yeah, we lost way too many good people..." Belle said and became distant for a short while. "Anyhow, C.C. came back with a new style and tried to go for a more folksy image. He cut a couple of singles and phone-raided the local radio stations to get some airtime, but he was never really successful. At the RobsonSixtyFour."

"At the what?"

"It was down on Robson Street. Number-"

"Let me guess... sixty-four?"

"Yep!" Belle said and tickled Erica's stomach.

"Uh-huh?"

Belle chuckled and took the opportunity to snuggle down even further into Erica's grip though her hip that she had injured in a motorcycle accident many years earlier had begun to make its presence felt. "At the club that night, he was on just after our set so he was loitering in the wings while me and Stephanie and the gang came off. He had dropped some blue acid so he wasn't exactly on top of things. In short, he had no idea where he was or what he was doing."

"I'm not good with people like that," Erica rumbled into her mug.

"I know. And in this case, he only hurt himself. He fumbled around the stage until he fell down... busted his nose and his brow. He didn't come back the following night. And now he's number one on the charts!" Belle said and tapped an index finger on the newspaper.

Erica had been about to take a sip, but she stopped the mug halfway to her mouth to look at the article's headline. "He's what? Do they even have charts anymore?"

"Sure they do. Streaming and download charts... and C.C. Burdette is number one this week on the Oldies Albums chart... nationwide! Wow. Food for thought," Belle said and fell quiet. Her eyes once again drifted onto the article, but she didn't see it beyond the headline. Instead, she cocked her head to look at the curtain of beads with the large peace symbol that separated the living room from her den.

In there, she kept her record collection that included the five albums she and the Butterflies had made when they were young, beautiful and very much on the way up. "Hmmm..." she said, scrunching up her face into a mask of thoughtfulness.

The shrill ringing of Erica's cell phone interrupted the quiet moment. Clawing Belle's bare knee, she rose from the couch and shuffled over to the telephone that she had left on the sideboard on an antique Native American quilt she and Belle had found at a swap meet. The caller ID proved it was the stationhouse, so she cleared her throat to find her on-duty voice. "Sergeant Wayne speaking," she said with all the gravitas provided by her many years on the police force.
‘Sergeant, it's Kaye Bradley with a status update,’ Officer Bradley's distinct voice said at the other end of the line. Following the embarrassing introduction where Erica had caught the entire squad on the wrong foot twice in rapid succession, they had shaped up considerably and had turned into a strongly knit unit.

"Go ahead, Officer Bradley," Erica said, resting her rear against the sideboard while she looked at Belle who was still sitting in the couch with an unreadable expression on her face.

"It's been a quiet night though we had a DUI who was pulled over by Officer Lechner at a quarter past midnight following a red light infraction at the intersection of Main and Chesney. The DUI resisted arrest so Officer Lechner used his handcuffs to pacify the man in question. He was brought in and is presently cooling off in holding cell One.'

"Very well. You are monitoring him frequently?"

"We are, Sergeant, every fifteen minutes. Also, Officer Lechner has filled out the appropriate report sheet on the use of the handcuffs.'

"Excellent."

‘Later, at ten to two AM, an ambulance was called to a bar on Main, but the situation had been resolved by the time it got there. Apparently, a youth had fallen ill from excessive drinking. No Officers were involved.'

"Excessive drinking on a Wednesday evening? Sounds like something we may need to keep an eye on. Which bar, Officer?"

‘Uh… stand by.' - shuffle, shuffle - 'Barney's Barmy Blues Bar, Sergeant Wayne. It's a bar with live performances. It's quite popular.'

"Oh yes, I'm familiar with that name. Very well, Officer. Thank you for the update. I'll be in at three to begin my shift. If anything arises, call me at once," Erica said and moved away from the sideboard.

‘Yes, Sergeant.'

"Goodbye, Officer Bradley," Erica said and terminated the connection. Once she had put the phone back on the sideboard, she shuffled back to Belle who still hadn't changed her expression.

Erica sat down and snuggled up next to her older partner while she took her mug of instant. "What's on your mind, Belle? You're really distant this morning…” she said and took a sip.

"I'm just thinking about Cody Cool and that greatest hits album," Belle said with a look in her green eyes that proved that on the inside, she was back in the crazy years of the early 1970s where the Vietnam war, drugs, rock'n'roll and free love set the agenda. "Erica… please… I need an honest answer now."

"That sounds serious," Erica said and turned around so she could look Belle in the eye.

"It could be. Tell me… do you think it would be nuts of me if I considered getting the band back together so we could… you know, cut a greatest hits album for ourselves…?"

The first few seconds went by without a reply, but then Erica reached up and helped a stray lock of Belle's graying hair behind her ear. "Hmmm… I don't know. I honestly don't know. Your blood pressure."
"Is much better now, hon. The pills the Doc gave me work swell. The only times I've been dizzy since the New Year came when you… ahem… drove me wild. But I'm pretty sure that was intentional," Belle said and clawed Erica's long thigh through the sweatpants.

"Yeah, huh?"

"O-yeah."

The moment was too good to ignore, so Erica leaned in and claimed her partner's lips in a little kiss that soon grew to something bigger. "Glad to hear it," she said once they separated. "But an album… you'll need a recording studio… sound technicians or whatever they're called… and plenty of other things. Won't that be really expensive?"

Belle grinned and offered Erica a casual half-shrug. "I suppose. But I have some greenbacks saved for a rainy day. Hey… gimme your hand. Put it on my heart… tell me what you feel?"

Erica did as asked and placed her hand flat against Belle's chest. "A strong heartbeat… thankfully. Really strong, now you mention it."

" 'Cos I'm excited, hon. You know… I think… yeah. I think it could work," Belle said and once again gained the distant look in her eyes. Unlike the last time, it only lasted for a brief moment before she returned to the present. "I know there's gonna be a few hurdles along the way, but… and I need to persuade Leaf and the Walrus… and we may need to get one or two studio musicians, but…"

Erica had reached for her mug, but she put it down without sipping the coffee when she recognized the look in Belle's eyes. "Baby, are you sure you're up to it? I love you, you know. I'd rather not see you work yourself into a bad state like at the New Year's concert… you gave all of us a real bad fright there. Honestly, I don't want to find you collapsed again, like that time at the community center parking lot."

"This would be different, hon. This time, I'd be on top of it from the get-go. We wouldn't have any deadlines… or anyone breathing down my neck. Shit, I…" Belle said and fell quiet again. "I think it could work," she eventually said in a half-whisper that proved she had made up her mind.

Erica recognized the look of finality on her partner's face, and she was unable to stop a smile from spreading over her features at the prospect of seeing Belle involved in something that was so close to her heart. "And I'll be right there to back you up, Belle. I'll be right with you every step of the way," she said and shut down the conversation by claiming Belle's lips.

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Two minutes to three in the afternoon, Erica parked the unmarked Dodge Charger squad car on Main Street behind the two plain white Durangos and the other Charger, the black-and-white.

As she stepped out of the vehicle, she put on her cap and adjusted her new uniform to make it sit just right. Gone were the quaint khaki fatigues that Conrad Gallagher, the previous Sergeant, had insisted on wearing, replaced by a black uniform in a far more modern cut.

Black ankle boots, black socks, high-waisted black pants with sharp creases, a Nylon utility belt with all the regular features needed for the job - like pouches for handcuffs and the can of pepper spray, and a built-in holster for their service pistol - a black, long-sleeved, two-pocket shirt with brass buttons and a brass name tag across her left breast, and finally a black baseball cap with Coulson P.D. in white on the front.
She nodded a brief hello to two passers-by before she bolted up the four-step concrete staircase to get to the old-fashioned brick stationhouse’s glass windbreak. The Stars & Stripes and the California Bear hung limply on either side of the doorway, unable to do much in the light breeze.

Inside the sterile and slightly non-descript lobby, Erica’s trained eye immediately caught the fact that the cleaning team hadn’t done a particularly good job of sweeping or washing the linoleum floor. She made a mental note to call the service later.

The rest of the lobby appeared as usual with the elevated watch desk on the left and a row of chairs up against the wall on the opposite side. The wooden staircase at the far end of the lobby went upwards like it had done for seven decades, and it was still exuding the familiar smell of old woodwork that mixed with the faint whiff of vomit from the linoleum floor that no amount of chemical warfare could eradicate.

The posters from various anti-crime campaigns that adorned the wall above the chairs were getting old and needed to be replaced, Erica thought, as she went past them on her way to the seemingly empty watch desk.

Moving completely silently, she was about to ding the small bell on the watch desk to alert her officers that - once again - they had left the desk vacant, when she heard Stuart Burton’s familiar voice mumbling a selection of phrases that were typically heard on the other side of the watch desk.

Erica smirked when she realized the ever-so-persnickety Stuart was mopping up what had to be a spilled beverage of some sort. "Do you need a hand, Stu?" she said with a smile playing on her lips.

From somewhere down below, Stuart grunted out his frustration at being caught by his Sergeant, but soon overcame the embarrassment and rose to his full height. He carried a huge wad of coffee-colored tissues that he promptly dumped on the desk itself. "No, Sergeant. The plastic cup was far hotter than I had anticipated and my nerves involuntarily released my grip on the handle, leading to a catastrophic tidal wave of steaming hot coffee that splashed onto my ankle boots and pantlegs."

"In other words, you dropped your coffee. How bad is it?"

"Quite bad, Sergeant."

"Did you drown any of the paperwork?"

"No, Sergeant… just my boots and my pants!"

Erica grunted and strode down to the door to the guardroom in her regular military gait. "All right. I'll sub for you while you change your uniform. Can't have coffee stains on the watch officer," she said while she stepped into the connecting hallway.

The guardroom itself consisted of a larger recreational room with windows overlooking Main Street and a porthole to the narrow alley between the stationhouse and the next building. A three-seater couch, a coffee table and an armchair on wheels made up the furniture. In addition to the recreational facilities, the guardroom had a kitchen and a restroom where the lockers and the showers were located.

Erica bit her cheek so she wouldn't chuckle at the sight of Stuart's pants as he crabbed his way past her to get to the lockers. Taking off her cap and hanging it on the wall by the uniform jackets and the portable radios, she peeked through the doorway to the watch desk to investigate whether or not she needed a new wad of tissues, but Stuart had managed to get the last of the coffee mopped up.

She had barely sat down on the swivel-chair before the phone rang. Clearing her throat, she reached for the receiver at once while she pulled the laptop closer to her so she could enter a report if need be. "Coulson Police Department,
this is the watch desk. How may we help you?” she said, finding a notepad and a ball point pen so she had something in backup in case the electronics failed.

‘Good afternoon, I'm Loree Malone. I'm calling from the Night Angels office over on Valentine. I need to speak with Sergeant Wayne about an incident connected to illegal substances that occurred this past night.’

"This is Sergeant Wayne, actually. Hello, Miss Malone. A drugs-related incident?" Erica said and pushed away the laptop. Instead, she clicked the ball point pen on and held the tip ready at the notepad.

'Yes, one of our Angel teams helped a young woman down at a blues bar on Main. She was tripping on a substance that we could not identify.'

"Oh…” Erica said and made a few scribbles on her notepad, "I've heard about that. The police weren't involved because we were told it was merely alcohol abuse."

'It wasn't. She was tripping quite severely. While our team stayed with the young woman until she came down, she wasn't in any condition to give us info on where she had bought the drugs, nor of their nature. All we know is that it was a purple pill of some kind.'

"Mmmm," Erica grumbled, drawing a fat box around the words 'full scale effort, ASAP' that she had written on her pad.

'This unfortunate young woman is the first to be negatively affected by these pills, and the first to be actively helped by one of our Angel teams, but we've heard on the grapevine they're available for anyone interested, and they're going cheap. The rumors started this past weekend.'

"All right. We'll look into it… we'll also send everyone out on foot tomorrow and Saturday so we're close by at all times. Thank you for the heads-up, Miss Malone," Erica said and tapped the butt of the ball point pen down onto the notepad.

'You're welcome, Sergeant. Goodbye.'

"Goodbye, Miss Malone," Erica said and hung up. Scrunching up her face, she leaned back in the swivel-chair and tapped the notepad against her knee. "Dammit, that's the last thing we needed," she said, slapping the notepad onto the desk.

Even though Stuart hadn't returned yet, she got up in a hurry and strode away from the watch desk. "Stu! You still in there?" she shouted at the door to the restroom.

'Yes, Sergeant! I thought I had my spare uniform pants here, but they're back home so I'm attempting to perform a manual dry cleaning of.'

"Hurry up. I'll be downstairs at the dispatcher to call in Officer Van Eyck from his afternoon patrol. Something's come up that we need to discuss!"

‘Oh… yes, Sergeant! Uh… I'm almost done…’ Stuart said, but by then, Erica had already left the guardroom.

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Daisy-Belle Cosmick was in heaven. Not only was she sitting cross-legged on the floor flicking through her record collection, Janis Joplin's legendary Pearl album was playing on her vintage turntable with the volume knob turned up to '11'. 
Though Belle had heard that album a hundred times or more, she still sang along to the bluesy tunes that always gave her severe flashbacks to her younger years. "The white album, the other white album, the brown album, the blue album, the red album… shit… what's up with all these colors? It's not like we lacked imagination back then…" she mumbled as she flipped through the stack of albums she had dug out of the rack in the bottom part of the turntable.

The one she was looking for, an EP from 1973 with a mostly neutral cover, finally showed up in the stack. It contained eight three-minute tracks that all carried titles fitting for the debut album of a rock band who hadn't yet found its niche. Belle flipped the album over and looked at the artistic black-and-white photo on the back of five fresh-faced men and women in various poses.

She chuckled at the sight of her far younger self decked out in torn blue jeans and a denim jacket where the sleeves were too long for her arms. Her long hair was fashionably unruly and the home of two daisies that were stuck over her right ear.

The older Belle's eyes slid across the other people in the line-up until they came to rest on a tall blonde who appeared older and wiser than the others. Belle's lips creased into a wistful smile as the memories of the good times she and Stephanie Lorenz had shared flooded her mind. "Thank God an old bird like me could find a new nestmate," she whispered, looking across the den at her desk where a print-out of a snapshot of herself and Erica mugging for the camera was prominently displayed.

Right on cue, the last song on the Pearl album faded out with Janis roaring to the world at large that everybody should get it while they could. Belle grinned from ear to ear as she staggered to her feet to change the record. Once upright, she needed a moment to get her hip to comply with her wishes, but she eventually made it over to the turntable with the EP she had found. "Okay… lessee if this old thing can still be played," she said and put the needle on the record.

She waited at the turntable in case the EP was too scratchy, but the growling countdown in the intro to the first song convinced her it was all right. On her way back to the bamboo couch in her den, she checked out the cover of the We're The Butterflies EP. "We Own The Night… Stay Off Our Street… Band Together… Butterflies Will Fly… sheesh," she said, shaking her head at the simplicity of the titles.

The fair, mostly unschooled voice of the young Belle - or Valerie Clark as she was still known then - filled the den and the rest of the Cosmick-Wayne home as she tore through the blues-inspired One, Two, Three! that opened the EP.

"Wa-hey, that song still got some balls," Belle mumbled on her way to the couch. At the last moment, she changed her mind and shuffled over to the desk to get her bag of premium grade weed. Fully equipped, she sat down on the bamboo couch and rolled herself a joint.

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As the last song on the B-side ended with a stirring violin solo by Oswald Jones - before growing the walrus mustache that would give him his nickname - Belle exhaled a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke that slowly drifted toward the ceiling. The tendrils of the pale blue cloud swirled into shaping a unicorn, a rainbow, a pair of white rabbits and finally a ship that resembled either the Titanic or the Andrea Doria - Belle wasn't sure which.

The music kept playing in her mind, and at first, she wasn't sure if she had already put on the next record. She decided she hadn't, so she got up to find the Butterflies' next EP, Still Flying High from 1974.

In her buzz, it wasn't easy to read the covers, but she found it and held it ready above the turntable. At the last moment, she realized it might work best if she removed the record that was already there. She grunted and slipped the second EP back into the sleeve before removing the We're The Butterflies album from the record player.
The procedure was almost too much for her, but she managed to do everything in the right sequence and shuffled back to the couch after putting the needle on the record. When the music started playing, she realized she had put the B-side on, but it didn't matter.

The strong, anti-Nixon lyrics of the first song, *You Better Leave*, penetrated her foggy mind and made her sit up straight and pay attention. She listened to herself blowing off steam against the President and all his shady business, and remembered writing that song on the back of a coffee shop napkin while watching one of the many congressional hearings that were held following the mess. "We ain't got Tricky Dick no more, but hot dang, that song's still valid," she said into empty air. "And that other song… The People Versus The Government! Holy shit, the Butterflies still got something to offer the world," she continued, getting up from the couch.

"Hell yeah… we got a message that the world still needs to hear… I swear to the old guy above, we're gonna make that greatest hits album if it kills us… gotta call Leaf. She's gotta hear about it! My phone… where's my iPhone…?"

The phone was on the desk being charged, but Belle didn't have time for little things like that. She took it and immediately held it to her ear. "Leaf? Leaf, can you hear me…? Shit, gotta find the number first," she said and punched in the digits that would connect her to her old friend.

'What up, Belle? It's the Walrus,' the familiar male voice said at the other end of the line.

"Whassup, Walrus… say, ya wouldn't happen to have your charming wife anywhere near ya, wouldya?"

'Yeah, just a mo, Belle. Here she is.'

A few fumbling sounds were heard through the line before Autumn Leaf took the telephone. 'It's Leaf, Belle?'

"Hi, honey! Tell ya what, ya got time to come over and talk? I mean right now. I got the best… and I mean THE best ever idea I wanna share with you."

'Uh… sure. I'll be right over. Do you want me to bring anything?'

"Just yourself, hon. I already have everything else," Belle said and broke out in a giggle fit that left no doubt as to her present state. "Hey, love ya. See ya in a few, okay?"

'Okay, Belle,' Leaf said, snickering over Belle's apparent buzz.

"Neat," Belle said, but the connection had already been lost. She put away the iPhone and smacked her lips several times. "Yeah, that's gonna be so good. Munchies… I got the munchies… cookies. Now."

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Ten minutes later, a soft knocking on the kitchen door prompted Belle to tear herself away from her oatmeal cookies and stagger through the swinging doors. In the kitchen, she needed to hear the knocking again to remember what it was she was there for, but by then, her feet had already taken her to the door though no connection had been established with her brain.

The sixty-seven year old Autumn Leaf stood outside in sandals, a pair of forest green Bermuda shorts, a multi-colored batik t-shirt and a home-made denim vest that was fashionably frilly at the sleeves. As always, she wore several leather bands on her wrists, and her finger and toenails were painted in all the colors of the rainbow.
Her white hair was back to its normal length and thickness after the strenuous chemotherapy she had been through following her bout with breast cancer, but her fair, honest face had a haggard edge to it that hadn't been there since the darkest days of her illness.

"Hi, Leaf! Oh, I'm so glad to see you! Dude, I have some sensational news for you!" Belle said as she opened both parts of the barn-like door and practically pulled her old friend inside.

"Hi, Belle!" Leaf said with a snicker. Once inside, she put out her arms and wrapped them around the shorter woman. The two old friends gave each other a strong hug like they hadn't seen the other for months though it had only been a week. "Well, what is it? Young lady, are you pregnant?" Leaf said in a mock-maternal tone, sticking her tongue so far out she nearly tickled Belle's upper lip.

"Naw, silly! Naw, we're gonna go back in the studio and cut an album! Hell yeah, you, me, the Walrus, maybe a couple o' extra musicians like a drummer and maybe a guitar player or a bass player and a drummer and maybe an extra backing singer and we're gonna cut an album!"

Leaf pulled back at an arm's length while she stared wide-eyed at her friend. The stream of words that spewed from Belle's mouth was highly unusual, even when she was deeply buzzed, so it had to be something precious to her. "Uh… as the Butterflies?"

"Well, duh," Belle said and clawed Leaf's side through the vest.

"Okay. An album? But the songs… have you written new ones, or…?"

Belle nodded excitedly, but when she remembered that she hadn't actually written any new material, she changed her approach and shook her head excitedly instead.

"Okay," Leaf said with a snicker. "C'mon, let's go into the den. We need to talk. And you need to sit down… you're gonna flake out pretty soon."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah! Hey… hon, wait a minute," Belle said and reached up to gently run a thumb across Leaf's left cheek. The paleness of Leaf's skin seemed to make Belle fall out of her buzz, and she took her old friend's hands in her own to give them a squeeze. "Hon, you have dark circles under your eyes… ain't you been sleeping well?"

Leaf shrugged and put her arm around Belle's shoulder on their way through the swinging door. "No. I guess I haven't."

"What's wrong? Can I help?"

"Noooo…" Leaf said with a new snicker.

"'Noooo'…? Spill it, girl!"

"I went down to the public library the other day and found a book called The Tantric G-spot And How To Exploit It. I guess the Walrus and me… sorta… kinda…"

"Used it as an instruction manual?" Belle said and swept aside the bead curtain so they could fit through side by side.

Shimmying, Leaf ducked through the bead curtain and jumped over onto the bamboo couch. "Cover to cover!" she cried, holding up her arms and legs in a decidedly Tantric pose before she broke down in a giggle fit worthy of the
one Belle had had before. "We've been married for nearly forty years but we've never had it so good in bed! It's so wonderful… I just can't stop once we get going!"

"Oooooh, you… cool, Leaf. Way cool! Gotta grab it while it's there!"

"And I do!"

"Girl!" Belle cried, sticking out her tongue at her old friend's cheekiness.

"Enough about my sex life, okay?! So you wanna make a new album?" Leaf said and kicked off her sandals so she could fold her legs up underneath her.

Belle nodded and shuffled over to the vintage turntable. She ran her fingers over the aged wood and the many knobs and dials that she had used hundreds, if not thousands, of times over the years. Smiling, she opened the top cover and put the needle on the record that she had readied in advance. Soon, her own voice singing the first song from A Whale Of A Time was heard through the speakers. "Yeah," she said quietly as she listened to herself singing Hot Little Number, the opening song on the A-side. "A greatest hits album. Like C.C. Burdette's. Did you read about him in the Herald?"

"No, we get the Chronicle. Cody Cool? What about him?"

"He's just gone number one on the charts with the compilation. Imagine that, huh? C.C. Burdette, that pothead."

Leaf cocked her head and looked at her old friend to see if she was still buzzed. "Number one? I can't believe it…"

"Believe it!"

"Wow… I didn't even know they still had charts."

"Well, they do. Streaming charts," Belle said and rubbed the side of her nose. Nodding like she had just made one hell of a decision, she turned down the volume and took the arm off the record. "Instead of listening to ourselves, how about we jam a while? Y'know, to see if we can still do it?"

"Sure, Belle… aw, I can tell you that your pipes are just fine. I think I'm kinda rusty, though. I haven't been using my voice since our big New Year's celebration."

Belle quickly popped out of the den to get her beloved acoustic guitar that she had left on the couch earlier. Slipping the colorful carrying strap over her shoulder, she went back into the coziest area of the house and sat down on the floor in front of Leaf. She played a bar or two until she stopped and looked up at her old friend with a cheeky expression on her face. "Aw, I'll bet you've been hittin' the high notes when you and the Walrus have gone through that book, huh?"

"True, true," Leaf said and broke out in a snicker. "And they're kinda harmonic, too!"

"There you go, girl… you have any requests?" Belle said and began to play a few bars. Without even thinking about it, she started playing Merrilee Rush's Angel Of The Morning and pursued it across the board. The old song was a good fit for both of them, and soon, Leaf's crystal clear harmonies were acting as the perfect counterpoint to Belle's throatier pipes - in short, magic was created with their voices like they had done since the first time they met in late 1970.

The song came to its natural end but Belle kept picking random chords and notes on her guitar. "That didn't sound too bad… you were great, hon."
"Thank you. Eh. It could have been worse, it could have been better," Leaf said and snuggled down on one end of the bamboo couch. "Belle, how would we actually go about cutting a record? Are the old master tapes still in the bank vault?"

"I think they must be, yeah. I know I'm payin' through the nose to keep that damn safety deposit box so they better be there!"

"So… should we mix it here in your den?"

"Oh no," Belle said and put down the guitar. "No, I was thinking about renting a studio and a couple of sound guys. Professionals. I don't know for sure, but I think there's one right here in Coulson. I recall reading about one in the free community newsletter down at the center. Oh… I ain't quite got that part figured out yet, hon," she said with a lopsided grin.

"Okay. It was so much fun back in the old days, though. We let it all hang out in the studio. We had smoke-ins, nude-ins… remember when we did our original albums?" Leaf said and shuffled around so she leaned her head on the armrest of the couch.

"Yeah, I do… wait a minute, thanks for reminding me," Belle said and staggered to her feet. After putting down the guitar, she shuffled over to the closet and rummaged through it to find her old scrapbooks. "I wanted to check out our old reviews… I know I kept them somewhere… somewhere… somewh- o-yeah, here they are," she said and pulled out a dusty tome.

"Ooooh! Lemme see," Leaf said and bolted upright on the couch.

Grinning, Belle hopped over to her old friend, sat down and opened the dusty book on the first page where an ancient and badly yellowed newspaper clipping was pinned onto the cardboard page with two pieces of adhesive tape that had nearly dried out.

1973 - We're The Butterflies EP

(Keeley's Korner Records - sold locally)

A1. One, Two, Three!
A2. We Own The Night
A3. Stay Off Our Street
A4. Acid Jam

-

B1. Band Together
B2. Stay And Fight
B3. Raw
B4. Butterflies Will Fly
- A strong debut EP by a local band. A sense of the raw, merciless mean streets bursts out of the songs that all have genuine presence despite the occasional crude production. The 22-yr Valerie Clark will probably remind older listeners of Janis Joplin though with a softer expression overall. In short, a worthwhile debut album -- The Independent Voice, 8/16 1973.

"Gawd, the Independent Voice," Leaf said reverently. "Remember that? Aw, that was the newspaper back then for the anti-establishment crowd."

"Yeah… it got swallowed whole by one of the damn conglomerates," Belle said somberly. "Heh, Keeley's Korner Records. Francois Keeley, that crook. Only good thing he ever did for us was to put up the cash so we could produce the two albums. Then he took off with the rest of our money, that son of a…"

Leaf ran an index finger over the yellow paper before she pulled her arm back and hooked it inside Belle's. "Do you have the other reviews in there as well?"

"Sure do," Belle said and flipped the page.

1974 - Still Flying High

(Keeley's Korner Records - sold locally)

A1. Still Flying High
A2. Hey, Man
A3. Railroad Blues
A4. Sun Gonna Shine
A5. Love My Little Jam (Live at Donny's, 5/24-74)

- B1. You Better Leave
B2. It's An Injustice
B3. The People Vs. The Government
B4. Equality?
B5. Change Today (Or Just Go Away)

- Almost as expected, The Butterflies aren't able to beat the feared Sequel Blues though we have to give them credit for trying. Still Flying High is more polished than their debut EP from last year which allows the strength of the
compositions to shine through, but the tracks on the A-side are less daring on the whole compared to their predecessors. That, however, cannot be said of the five songs on the B-side that all drive a stake into the recently disgraced Commander in Chief (Yes, we're lookin' at you, Dick). Daisy-Belle Cosmick (nee Valerie Clark) really comes into her own as she growls, snarls and barks out the edgy lyrics, elevating the simple material to heights it wouldn't have reached without her -- The Independent Voice, 7/22 1974.

Leaf smiled and bumped shoulders with her old friend. "Remember how excited we got over that review? How excited you got? I remember that you treated us all to a laced banana split to celebrate. I've never been so high in my life. A good high, though."

"Yeah, that banana split was devious, awright. Sun Gonna Shine, that was your song. You did that so beautifully, hon. I heard it just now before you came over… it still holds up so well. I'd… uh, I won't do it if you don't want to, of course, but I'd love to include that on our greatest hits."

"I'd be so honored, Belle. I loved that song… best song I ever wrote," Leaf said and reached over to place a tender kiss on Belle's temple.

Belle smiled at her old friend and pulled her closer for a little cuddle. "And then we had the phone call from the talent scout dude at Polyphonic," she said and turned the page of the scrapbook.

1975 - A Whale Of A Time

(Polyphonic)

(1975 Album Hot 100, #31)

A1. Hot Little Number
A2. Dusty Roads
A3. One Chance
A4. Will She Look At Me Today?
A5. I Sent Her A Letter

B1. A Whale Of A Time
B2. My Life My Choice
B3. Biding My Time
B4. Slow River Blues
B5. Keep It High, Ride The Sky (Live)
- Like several other recent bands, Daisy-Belle's Butterflies have seemingly popped up out of nowhere, but they have been paying their dues for the past two years with a pair of independently produced albums and a long, hard slog playing smoky bars and clubs all over the SF area. Earlier this year, they were offered a nurturing contract with Polyphonic, and here's the result: a first class folk rock album that stays true to the genre's surprisingly conservative roots while playing fast and loose with a few of its somewhat rigid conventions like celebrating the Women's Lib or even making a wry comment on the alleged homosexuality of the lead singer. The highlight is the uptempo boogie rock track Dusty Roads that has a good shot at becoming a radio hit if the right disc jockeys pick it up -- San Francisco Bugle, 9/5 1975.

"Repeat after me," Belle said, pointing at the closing words, "The San Francisco Bugle. We got a good review in the Bugle, hon! The only one we ever got…"

"And then you and Stephanie locked yourselves in a hotel room for two full days to celebrate. Remember that, huh? Huh?" Leaf said, nudging herself into Belle's shoulder.

Belle grinned, remembering the two days that consisted of nothing but eating fresh fruit and making love in every possible manner. "Those were the days, hon. The good, old days…"

"These are the good old days, Belle. Have you ever tried that with Erica?"

"Naw, but maybe we should… on second thoughts, she'd just wear me down! I'm too old for a forty-eight hour humping session!" Belle said and leaned her head back to release a braying laugh so contagious that Leaf joined her within seconds.

"I don't believe that, Belle… not a word of it. Perhaps you need to get the Tantric book." The conversation was interrupted by Belle's iPhone ringing on the desk. Patting Leaf's knee, Belle rose from the bamboo couch and shuffled over to the phone. When the ID proved the call came from the Coulson PD stationhouse, a brief, cold trickle ran down her back, but she shook it off with a muted "Sheesh…" - "Hello, this is the one and only Daisy-Belle Cosmick speakin'."

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"Hi, honey… it's me," Erica said and rolled back from her desk on the first floor of the stationhouse. With the phone pinned down between her ear and her shoulder, she strolled over to the windows at the other side of the wide, open office and looked down upon Main Street.

"Hi, honey-bunny! Love to hear your sweet, sexy voice at this time of the day!' Belle said cheerily at the other end of the line.

Erica chuckled, knowing that her partner would most likely be buzzing. "Listen, I just wanted to let you know that I need to pull an all-nighter here," she said, moving the phone down to hold it the ordinary way. "Something's come up that needs our full attention. I'm really sorry."

'Oh… okay. We had a little thing planned for tonight…'

"Yeah, I know. I'm really sorry," Erica said and rubbed her brow. "It can't be helped. I'll grab a couple of hours of sleep here. I'll buy some bagels or something for breakfast tomorrow to make up for it. I promise I'll be home at nine tomorrow morning at the latest."

'Oh, you don't have to feel bad about it, baby. I'm sure it must be really important… with my Big Bad Bear there, you simply can't lose! Uh… what's it about, anyway?"
Erica turned around and looked down at the regular, casual activity on the street. Plenty of people were walking in both directions; most coming home from work, but a few were out for a late afternoon stroll as well. "We have someone pushing pills to the young crowd. We want to nip it in the bud before it can grow into a real problem. We'll be patrolling the streets all night."

'Aw, I can definitely understand that, baby. No worries. Uh, okay, so…hey, I have Leaf here. She wants to say hi.' - fumble, fumble - 'Hi, Erica! Bye, Erica!' - fumble - 'Yeah, that was Leaf.'

"I kinda figured as much, Belle," Erica said with a much-needed chuckle. "Hold the fort for me while I'm away… yeah?"

'Will do, pardner! If your plans change and you can get home earlier, you know where our bed is… love ya way too much, baby, mmmua!'

"Love you too, Belle. Bye." After sending a few kisses Belle's way, Erica closed the connection and slid the warm phone back into her pants pocket.

She allowed herself the luxury of being content with life for a few moments before she let out a deep sigh and checked her wristwatch - it was time for a pre-patrol briefing downstairs. "I thought I was done prowling the mean streets after midnight… guess some things never change," she said and closed the top button of her shirt to honor her rank.

* *

CHAPTER 2

Twenty past eight the next morning, Josh van Eyck pulled the black-and-white Charger up in front of Erica's home and killed the engine. "Well, that was a waste of everyone's time," he said to his front seat passenger.

Erica chuckled quietly and raised her black shades to rub her tired eyes that didn't like the harsh rays of the early morning sun. "Yeah. Let's hope our presence made the dealer rethink his plans. We gotta do it all over again tonight… and tomorrow night. We'll evaluate our efforts on Sunday."

"Okay. I better put the flower shop on speed dial 'cos I know my boyfriend will be mighty peeved with me," Josh said and turned toward his superior. "Speaking of which, how is Belle these days? Staying healthy?"

"Aw… shit…" Groaning, Erica rolled her eyes like she had just remembered something really important.

"Oh… she isn't?"

"No, I forgot the damn breakfast! I promised I'd bring some bagels or something… shit," Erica said and rubbed the rest of her face.

"Well, it won't take us-"

"Nah. Not now. Thanks anyway, Josh. Belle? Well, she's as sharp as ever. She's taking some new medication that keeps her blood pressure down. So, yeah… she's good."

"I'm glad to hear it, Sergeant. So…" Josh said and put his hand on the steering wheel.
"Was that a 'get your lazy butt out of my squad car so I can get home to some much-needed cuddling, Sarge'-kinda comment, Officer van Eyck?" Erica said with a tired grin.

Josh grinned back and appeared to be polishing the top of the steering wheel. "It may have been, Sergeant."

"I hear ya," Erica said and pulled the little lever for the door. When she set foot on the pavement, the hours she had spent on a lumpy mattress next to her desk in the open office made their presence felt by a fiery stab of pain that trickled up her back. "All right, pick me up at four or so this afternoon. Okay?" she said, poking her head through the door.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Have a good day's sleep, Officer," Erica said and closed the door. Josh started the car and soon drove off down the deathly quiet residential street. Erica watched him drive away for a few moments before she yawned and shuffled up to the front door. She didn't want to disturb Belle in case she was still sleeping, so she worked the lock as quietly as she could.

Inside the living room, she could hear distant, faint voices that appeared to come from the kitchen. It didn't take her long to realize it had to be the small radio in a retro design that Belle had bought for herself for her birthday in February. She tiptoed across the carpet until she was at the swinging door. She didn't want to spook Belle if she held a mug of hot herbal tea, so she swung the door open with all the stealth in the world.

Belle was sitting at the breakfast table with a hill of medicine in front of her, the radio, a bowl of lactose-free yogurt and a mug of steaming herbal tea next to her, and the virginal Coulson Herald on the table at Erica's usual spot.

The older woman appeared gray and frail, but when she looked up and locked eyes with her younger partner, her face lit up in a smile. She hurriedly turned off the radio before she pushed her chair back. Her hip gave her a little bother, but once she got going, she was in Erica's arms in no time. "Oh, baby! Good morning… it's so good to see you. Did you catch the bad guy?"

Erica chose to answer wordlessly and leaned down to claim Belle's lips in a sweet good-morning-how-are-you kiss. Once they separated, she furrowed her brow at Belle's haggard appearance. "Good morning, love. Are you unwell? You're really gray and-"

"Ah, I had a shitty night 'cos my Big Bad Bear wasn't by my side. Ain't that pathetic? I tossed and turned and tossed again. I tried this, that and everything… but… but it wasn't until I took your pillow that I fell asleep. Damn, huh? You got me whipped, girl," Belle said with a tired grin as she slapped playfully at Erica's tummy.

She reached out and pulled her woman in for a fair-sized hug. Sighing, she rested her head against Erica's bosom and got comfortable. "But now you're here. I love ya."

"Love ya too, Belle," Erica said and kissed the top of Belle's head.

"Where's the breakfast?"

Erica chuckled at Belle's priorities and leaned down to give her yet another little kiss. "Oh, I knew you'd notice. I'm really sorry, baby… I forgot all about it," she said with a half-shrug,

"Aw, that's all right. We can have toast and jam."

"Sounds good. Listen, first of all, I need a shower, but then I have a proposition for you."
"Yeah? Shoot."

"I'm beat. Let's spend the day in bed."

"Wa-hey, that's what this old bird likes to hear! Yessirree!" Belle said with a broad smile on her face. Not wasting a second, she grabbed hold of Erica's sides and began the overture by pulling her down for a real kiss.

"Thought you might appreciate the proposition," Erica said and began to unbutton her shirt. "Oh, don't forget your medicine, dear. I know you think all those pills suck but they help you."

Belle turned around and gave the small hill of medicine the Evil Eye. Unfortunately, the seven pills didn't vanish like the morning dew like she had hoped they would. "Yeah. I guess I better, huh? Anti-blood pressure, anti-indigestion, painkillers to combat the anti-indigestion gunk… Gawd."

"I'll grab a quick shower and join you for some toast in a little while. I think I need a painkiller or two of my own," Erica said and pressed a hand to her lower back. "I tried to get a couple of hours of rest on a mattress we have in the squad room, but the damn thing was so lumpy I couldn't settle down at all."

"Oh! Oh hell no, no chemicals for that, baby! No way, not with the special herbal cremes we got in the bathroom… all organic, all natural ingredients… have you ever had a Thai massage?"

Erica stopped from one button to the next to stare at Belle. "Uh… no… no, I haven't. You wanna fill me in on what that's got to do with the other thing?"

"Well," Belle said and snuggled up against the taller woman, "first you take your clothes off and get down on the bed. Then I take my clothes off and get down next to you… or on top of you… or whatever we decide on. Then I get a notion of applying the potion of magic lotion allll over your gorgeous back and bee-hind."

"Uh-huh? And that's a Thai massage?"

"O-yeah. I mean, they do it all the time over there," Belle said and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

Erica chuckled and resumed unbuttoning her shirt. "I'll have to take your word for it. I've never been to Thailand," she said as she pulled it out of her uniform pants.

"Oh, me neither. I was talking about the Thai parlor downtown."

Erica stopped abruptly and shot her partner a hooded glare. "You are too cheeky for your own good, Belle Cosmick. But all right… if you're up to it…?"

"Aw! Up to it? Kiddo, it's me! I'm always up for gettin' down!"

"Uh-huh?"

"Sure! C'mon, let me help you with that uniform," Belle said and reached down to unbuckle the belt.

* * *

The cold shower was soon over and done with, and it wasn't long before Erica stepped back into the bedroom, wrapping her dark red kimono around her nude self as she did so. A moment later, she took it off again and let it pool at her feet since Belle was already sitting on the bed wearing nothing but a smile.
The older woman rolled a tube of scented muscle oil between her hands to warm it up, but put it aside when Erica shuffled over to the bed. "Hey. Oh baby, I've said it before and I'll say it again. You're the beautifullest woman on the planet."

"No I'm not," Erica said and crawled up into bed. She scooted over next to her partner and leaned in to kiss the aged skin on her neck. "You are. And we're just the luckiest women around."

"I'm just an old bird, honey… I got flabs and… my arms are, ugh…"

"Oh, hush."

"Yes Ma'am, Sergeant Ma'am!" Belle said and offered her partner a salute.

Erica grinned and moved her lips around from Belle's neck to her lips. They kissed for a while before the need to breathe became too strong to ignore. "Have you taken your special pill?" she whispered, tracing Belle's eyebrow and cheek with a finger.

Belle's good mood faded from her face at the unwelcome memory of needing to take medicine to be able to make love to her partner. Though the pills worked just fine most of the time, being unable to have spontaneous sex when the moment called for it bothered her more than she let on. "Yeah… but it always needs a while to work. I'm a little tight now, but I'll be fine. Vaginal dryness sucks, baby!"

"If you feel the slightest discomfort, just let me know, okay?"

"Okay. Love you," Belle said and gave Erica a tender kiss on the lips. "I'll be fine. Sometimes it's just a little slow in coming through. C'mon, lie down on your stomach. The oil's almost ready."

Erica scooted up on the bed and did as asked. She pulled down her pillow, fluffed it and put her arms under it. Once she was comfortable, she rested her head on the pillow and looked left so she could keep eye contact with Belle while the massage was administered.

"I'll just move your hair aside so it won't get in the way, baby," Belle said and swept Erica's pitch black locks over her shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"Fully."

"Okie-dokie. Here it comes," Belle said and squeezed a glob of oil out onto Erica's pale-ocher skin. The contented sigh that came from the younger woman proved that it hadn't been too cold, so Belle began distributing the oil all over the middle and lower back like she had promised. Her hands roamed freely over the acres of skin from Erica's shoulder blades to her perfectly round buttocks, feeding the oil into the pores and massaging the rippling muscles underneath.

Now and then, Belle squeezed out another glob that she carefully massaged into the skin. The quiet moans that emanated from Erica told her that she was doing a good job of it, but they also gave her an unfortunate twinge down south. When she discreetly tried to probe herself, she discovered the special pill wasn't working like it should, and she could feel she was growing too hot too fast.

'Fuck… I'm old and frail… I can't even make love anymore. Jesus, I'm ready for the fuckin' scrapheap,' she thought, rubbing her brow in frustration. She shuffled around on the bed to find a spot that didn't stress her sensitive parts too much, but she knew in her heart that it was a lost cause. A brief tendril of stinging pain confirmed it, and she was unable to stop a hiss from escaping her lips.
Erica heard the exclamation and raised her head off the pillow to glance back at her partner. The look of pure frustration on the older woman's face told her everything she needed to know, and she moved up to rest on her thighs. "Belle, let's talk for a while until it kicks in," she said, reaching for Belle's hand.

"I don't think it will today, honey," Belle said in a despondent voice. She twisted the cap back onto the tube of oil and put it on the bedside table. "I'm just a dry piece of -"

"Gorgeousness," Erica said and took Belle's hand without waiting for a reply. "Come on, let's trade knitting tips or something. The oil was really lovely. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Knitting tips? I can't knit! And neither can you for that matter," Belle said, squeezing Erica's hand. Sighing, she scooted up on the bed and got comfortable on her back.

Erica moved back down on her stomach so she wouldn't smear the oil onto the sheets. She shuffled over to Belle's side and wrapped an arm across the shorter woman's chest just below her breasts. "You're so beautiful," she whispered, leaning in to place a tender kiss on the side of Belle's lips.

"Liar. But thank you."

"I never lie."

"My throat looks like shit. My arms are even worse. My boobs are tryin' to reach for my toes, hon."

"All those things just prove you've lived one hell of a life. And they won't stop me from loving you, Belle."

Belle chuckled and turned her head to lock eyes with Erica. "You're supposed to say I look like a super-sexy-seventeen year old, hon… not confirm my worst physical hang-ups."

"Ooops. Ah, who wants a shrill seventeen year-old when they could have you? And you're still beautiful, Belle… no matter what it says on your birth certificate."

"Charmer. No, flatterer."

Smiling, Erica tightened the muscles in her arm that lay across Belle's chest. She snuggled down even closer and buried her face in the crook of Belle's neck in a perfect mirror of their regular sleeping position. "When I was seventeen, I had given up on women," she whispered, extending her tongue to lick a wet path up the side of Belle's neck right at her pulse point.

Belle's breath hitched and she closed her eyes to enjoy the sweet sensations that shot up from her neck. "Oh, I'm glad you changed your mind about that," she whispered back. Her heart went into a gallop from having the full attention of the gal next to her, not to mention the hot breath and the wet tongue that tickled her skin, but when she discreetly reached down to feel if her tender zone had become lubricated yet, the fiery soreness that shot back from even a simple touch confirmed what she already knew. "Oh, baby… I'm… I'm so sorry, but… but you need to stop. I c- just can't do it today…" she croaked, reaching up to caress the back of Erica's smooth, toned arm.

Erica pulled back at once with a concerned look on her face. "Are you in that much pain?" she whispered, removing her arm at once so it wouldn't add to Belle's condition.

"Not real pain, but it stings like crazy. Imagine going all night and then some… it's that sore-in-the-morning-kinda feeling, you know. Only it's all the fuckin' time."

"Ew…"
"Yeah. I can't tell you how much this is... fuckin' killing me!" Belle growled, thumping her free fist into the sheets. "That fuckin' pill doesn't work at all today."

"Have you opened a new pill bottle recently?"

"No, it was one of the last pills from the old bottle."

"Maybe it's gone past its sell-by date or something...?"

Belle snorted and rolled her eyes. "Maybe I have. Yeah, I think that's it. Hon, you have my permission to stuff me into a cardboard box and haul me off to the retirement home for pathetic old birds. Goddammit, that's right, what a pathetic old fool I am," she said and swept her legs over the side of the bed. She sat still on the edge for a few seconds to get her hip to cooperate before she rose and shuffled over to take the bathrobe that she had put over a chair. With her back turned to Erica, she swept it around herself and tied a firm knot on the belt.

"Listen," Erica said and moved off the bed on her own side, "how about we tried the shower like the first-"

"No. No, I've killed the mood. I'm sorry." Belle sighed and looked up at the decorative shelf where the little teddy bear in the kitschy Native American outfit that Erica had given her way back in Cape Whitnell was leaning against a few books. "I've invited Leaf and the Walrus over for a late lunch. I'll be in the kitchen. You should get some rest, hon. That's all our bed is good for now," she eventually said and made to leave the bedroom.

Erica was at Belle's side in an instant and put her nude body in the way so the escape path was well and truly blocked. "Listen, I know you must be upset and maybe even angry with yourself, but... please... you didn't sleep well, either. Let's put on our PJs and call it a slumber party. It's only five to nine... we can catch two hours-worth of shuteye. How about it...?"

"I promised I'd make lunch..."

"We'll order in from d'Ambrosio's. Leaf and the Walrus love that vegetarian stuff."

The sigh that came from Belle was so deep it seemed to come from a much larger creature. Grimacing, she studied the honest face of her younger lover before she reached up and put a hand on Erica's cheek. "Yeah, okay. I can feel in my bones that I need some sleep," she said and ran her thumb over the prominent cheekbone. "Damn. Old and weak. How you put up with me, I'll never know," she continued as she reached down to undo the knot on her bathrobe.

"Oh, that's easy-peasy," Erica said and padded over to the closet to find her nightwear. "I just happen to love the hell out of ya."

Belle chuckled as she took off the bathrobe and grabbed an oversized t-shirt. "Careful, Sergeant... you're beginning to sound like a hippie. But just so you know," she said and stopped what she was doing. "I love the hell out of you, too."

"Groovy. This is one, big, sparkly love-in, huh?" Erica said and sent a whole series of winks in Belle's direction.

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An excited drum solo on the kitchen door heralded the arrival of half of the sadly defunct Butterflies. Belle, whose mood hadn't improved much despite sleeping in Erica's arms all morning, shuffled over to the barn door and opened the top part.
The sight of Leaf wearing a rainbow-colored hairband around her white hair, and her sixty-six year old husband Oswald 'the Walrus' Jones in his trademark battered leather cowboy hat melted away a great deal of her frustrations, and she leaned forward and put her arm on the sill. "Sorry. No hippies allowed," she said in a mock southern drawl.

"We got brownies! Special, goodie-goodie brownies!" Leaf said and held up a carrier bag that sported a caricature of a cannabis plant and the words PUFF PUFF MAGIC PUFF in a stylized script.

"Awesome, you may enter," Belle said and hurriedly unlocked the bottom part of the barn door. When Leaf and the Walrus entered the kitchen, Belle pulled Leaf into a hug like she always did. "Hey, girl. You look better today. Are you taking a break from the you-know-what?" she said, taking a short step back to look at Leaf's breezy, purple dress and sandals. As always, the white-haired woman had painted her fingernails in multiple colors to mark the occasion of living another day.

"We are," Leaf said and broke out in a snicker as she put down the carrier bag with the special brownies. "The Walrus needs to recuperate," she whispered, pointing her thumb at her husband. Oswald guffawed and took off his leather cowboy hat to fluff his gray locks. He kept to the cowboy theme by wearing boots, blue jeans and a ZZ Top Tres Hombres t-shirt. "Yeah, yeah… so we tried one wacko position too many… and now I walk funny," he said, pointing at his crotch.

Leaf duly snickered, but Belle didn't - instead, she looked down at her feet. Leaf cocked her head when she realized that today, it was Belle who was looking a bit under the weather despite her cheery, sun-yellow t-shirt and jeans shorts. Before she had time to inquire about it, the swinging door creaked open to reveal Erica in her customary dark blue Coulson PD sweatsuit.


"Rikka! Hug!" Leaf cried, stretching out her arms and rushing forward.

"Oof!" Erica said as she was practically assaulted by the other woman. A pair of surprisingly strong arms was wrapped around her torso to give her a good squeeze, but although she returned the favor, she held back so she wouldn't crush the older woman too much. "Well, all right… just a little hug, then," she said with a grin.

"I love you, Rikka. May I kiss you on the lips?" Leaf said with an angelic look on her face.

"Oh, g'wan, then," Erica said, glancing over at Belle who was smirking.

Leaf smiled and stood up on tip-toes to place a soft kiss on Erica's lips. "Thank you. Your soul is luminous, Sister."

As always, Erica didn't know how to respond to that, so she just smiled and smirked and smiled some more. "Listen, guys… I'll be outside cleaning up in the garage," she said and pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "We got a yard sale coming up in a couple of weekends' time, and we agreed on at least trying to get rid of some of the old junk we have in there. Right, Belle?"

"Right, baby," Belle said with a broad grin.

"Yeah. Also, with me out of the house, you can smoke whatever you wish."

Beaming with pride, Leaf went over to Belle and pulled the shorter woman into a sideways hug. "Oh, but my angel here is still keeping an eye on me, Rikka. Right now, I'm only smoking weed every fourth day. That's not until the day after tomorrow. After that, it'll only be once a week and then, who knows."
"Wow, congratulations, Leaf. That's great news," Erica said and moved over to put a supportive hand on Leaf's shoulder. "Anyway, I'll be outside. Okay?"

"Sure, baby," Belle said and quickly poked her partner in the gut. "We'll listen to some music and stuff."

"Oh, feel free to listen to any of my CDs. You know where they are."

Belle smirked, thinking about Erica's three-hundred strong collection of all kinds of music - though no folk rock of any kind. "Mmmm-yeah, thanks. We may do that..."

Erica duly waved goodbye and left the kitchen.

"Which reminds me, guys..." Belle said, making a sweeping gesture across the empty kitchen table. "Something came up and we didn't have time to fix lunch. Instead, we called d'Ambrosio's and ordered a Mix 'Em Up special for the three of us. I hope that's okie-dokie?"

"Works for me, Belle," Walrus said.

"Me, too. I love d'Ambrosio's," Leaf said and leaned down to kiss the side of Belle's head. "So... music... Lynyrd?"

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With Lynyrd Skynyrd's debut album blasting away on the vintage turntable, the Walrus, Leaf and Belle lounged lazily on the couch and the armchair, respectively. All three played along to the music on imaginary instruments that were given a good workout to follow the rocking beats.

"Dude, that's so groovy," the Walrus said during the endless guitar solo in the latter half of Free Bird. "Real music, man! I don't care how fuckin' old that song is, it's still magical."

"Yeah," Belle said, nodding her head to the beat.

Leaf grew tired of bouncing around on the couch like a manic go-go dancer and kicked off her sandals so she could sweep up her legs. After fluffing the Walrus' lap, she rested her head on his jeans-clad legs and got comfortable. "Belle, have you thought any more about your idea...?"

"Yeah, I have."

"Oh, for the greatest hits album?" the Walrus said, gently scratching his wife's white hair.

Belle nodded and sat up straight in the armchair. "Yeah. Guys, I have spent a lot of time thinking about it, and... shit, you may not like it, but..."

"Oh... are you giving up before we've even tried it?" Leaf said.

"Me?" Belle said and pressed her hands to her chest in a display of mock horror. "Give up? Girl, when have I ever given up on anything? Naw, naw, I've been... aw, I might as well tell you straight."

"Get on with it, whydontcha," Leaf said and poked out her tongue.

"Hey! Girl, I can see that gettin' some is messin' with ya manners! I was about to! Okay, I've been thinking that we should re-record the songs, not just use the old master tapes," Belle said and went out to sit on the very edge of the
armchair. When her friends kept uncharacteristically quiet, she began to fiddle with her hands. "You hate the idea, huh? Yeah, I can understand why. Let's forget-

"No, no, no… it's just…" Leaf said and sat up straight. "Wow. That's a big step, Belle. A real big step. That's gonna cost us money… lotsa money. I don't have any figures or anything, but studio time's gotta be insanely expensive nowadays…"

"I know, Leaf. I haven't checked it yet. But I will."

The Walrus scratched his impressive mustache that had given him his nickname. With a worried glance at his wife, he licked his lips and focused on his old friend on the opposite side of the coffee table. "Belle, we love ya, you know that… but I gotta confess bein' little worried about this idea. What if we sound like shit? It'll just be money down the drain. I know this ain't a vote, but if it was, my vote would be on usin' the old masters."

"I hear what ya sayin', Walrus, but I'm not sure the old masters sound any better. They were recorded on pretty low-grade equipment back then. That's all Keeley wanted to spend on us."

"I s'pose that's true…"

"Belle," Leaf said, "honestly… will anyone actually listen to those ancient songs these days…? I mean, why is cutting a greatest hits album suddenly so important?"

A pang deep inside Belle's heart proved the question had hit the nail directly on the head. Even as she composed the answer, she knew the singular reason for recording the songs was to show that the Butterflies were still alive. 'But Leaf is right… will anyone listen? And even beyond that, wouldn't it simply be a juvenile reaction to Cody Cool's success…?" - "Leaf, I- shit, you're right. The goal was so clear to me," she said and rubbed her brow. "I just wanted to do something that could equal C.C.'s number one. And it would be so beautiful to see the Butterflies back where we belong. Hell, we weren't even that high up the charts when we were hot and current."

Belle sighed deeply and leaned back in the armchair. "That's all, really. All right, you can tell me I'm a delirious old bird who's had a doobie too many now."

Leaf chuckled and leaned back down on the Walrus' lap. "We don't wanna do that. Do we, Walrus?"

"No, but… wouldya mind explainin' to me how we'd get from A to B here, Belle? Okay, so let's say we have an album ready, yeah? How do we sell it? There ain't no record shops anymore, ya know. Even the CD's gone bye-bye now."

Nodding, Belle pointed at her iPhone that was on the table. "Streaming and downloads, Walrus. That's where it's happening now."

"I've heard about it… but don't understand Word One of it, to be honest. Is there really any money in that?"

"Walrus!" Leaf said strongly, "Dontchaknow music is art! We're not doing it for the money!"

"Naw, hon, but we got bills to pay, ya know. Royalties don't stink," Oswald said, mussing his wife's hair.

Belle watched the tender scene and allowed herself a brief smile though she was still upset about her inability to make love to Erica earlier in the day. She promised herself that she would use two pills the next time they were getting intimate, though it still irked her that it needed to be on schedule instead of by nature. "Well, I can't claim that I know everything about it, Walrus, but like in the old days where the record company paid us for the units sold, the hosting company will pay us for the number of downloads and streams… streamings… whatever… of the
material. Provided there are any, o’ course, but oldies are in. That much I do know… there’s even an oldie Top Forty on the radio on Sunday afternoons. I’ve heard several of our contemporaries there.”

The Walrus was quiet for a little while, but it was clear by his scrunched-up face that he was hard at work weighing the options on whether or not this was a good idea. "Leaf, what do you think?" he eventually said.

Leaf looked across the room and locked eyes with her old friend. A silent message of support flashed between her and Belle which was quickly followed by a growing smile. "You know, Walrus… I think we should do it. Remember how big a deal it was for us to put our names on the first contract back when the world was still right side up? It’s like that all over again… isn’t it, Belle?"

"I think so, yeah. But I don’t want you influence you, Walrus. Why don’t we all think about it for a couple of days and then we can… well… get back to it," Belle said and began to get up from the armchair.

"All right, Belle. Deal," the Walrus said and tweaked his wife’s nose. "Leaf?"

"Works for me!"

"Great! Great," Belle said and moved around the armchair to put on a new record, but before she made it to the turntable, she happened to look at the Walrus’ face - it was clear he had more on his mind. While she waited for him to make a move, she removed the Lynyrd album and put on a Creedence Clearwater Revival album instead. With the needle down on the record, she dusted off her hands and put them on her hips. "Walrus, there’s something you’re dying to tell me… spit it out," she said as the first notes of *Fortunate Son* started playing.

The Walrus opened his mouth to pour out the contents of his mind, but he only had time to say "Have you thought about Pa-"

Erica interrupted him unwittingly by opening the front door and poking her head inside. "Listen, the delivery van from d’Ambrosio’s has just driven onto the street… two minutes tops and it’ll be here," she said from the doorway.

"Superneat, Rikka!" Leaf said and bounded from the couch. In two heartbeats, she had gone through the swinging door to the kitchen.

Erica’s pale-ocher skin was covered by a sheen of perspiration from the hard work she had been doing in the garage, and she reached up to wipe the worst beads of sweat off her brow. "So, I’m almost done out there, but, uh… save a Miller Lite for me, okay?" she said and winked at Belle whose reply was a thumbs-up.

After Erica had closed the door behind her, Belle cocked her head and looked at the Walrus who still hadn’t uttered whatever it was that was clearly churning on in his mind. A bump and a groan from beyond the swinging doors convinced her that Leaf needed urgent help, so she settled for waggling an index finger at the Walrus before she shuffled off into the kitchen.

At the same time, Leaf came the other way balancing a stack of plates with four tumblers, eating utensils for everyone and plenty of napkins on top. The load was visibly too heavy for her, and she staggered through the swinging door trying to keep everything balanced. "Oooof… glad you’re here, Belle… I may have… may have… overestimated my strength a little…”

"Holy shit, girl! Put ‘em down here…” Belle said and guided the wobbling, white-haired woman over to the nearest sideboard where they deposited the stack of ceramic plates next to an immortelle. "Man, you’re our guest, not our slave! You don’t work your cute little ass off unless I ask ya to!"

Leaf snickered and pulled Belle into a hug. "I know, but you’ve looked so tired the whole time we’ve talked… I just wanted to help. Are you okay?"
Belle shrugged and cast a sideways glance at the bedroom door that seemed to mock her in all its stony silence. "Not really, Leaf. Erica and me were gonna have some quality time this morning, but… but I couldn't. That old thing again."

"But the pills?"

"Didn't work."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, Belle," Leaf said and caressed the side of Belle's face. "You need to see a Doc at once. We old birds can't function without an honest sex life."

Belle chuckled darkly as she took half of the plates and the tumblers. "Well, I didn't have one for… shit, longer than I care to remember. I didn't wither away or anything."

"Yes you did, and I'm saying that 'cos I love you. You're a different woman now that Rikka is in your life. Belle… hey," Leaf said and put a tender hand on her old friend's elbow, "I'm serious. Bedroom trouble is the direct route to an early headstone."

"Leaf, Jesus! Where do you get that stuff?" Belle said with an even darker chuckle. "Come on, let's eat. I'm starving."

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Like Erica had predicted, the food delivery service was only minutes away and it didn't take long for the coffee table to resemble a Styrofoam packing plant with no less than sixteen boxes of various sizes taking up the space alongside the six-pack of cold Miller Lites that the Walrus had taken from the fridge.

"This one's got your name on it, Walrus… and here's one of yours, Leaf," Belle said, distributing the boxes to her friends. "This one's mine and here's one for you, baby. That must be the…" - she unzipped the adhesive tape and opened the lid - "no, it wasn't," she said, looking down into the box.

Sitting in a sleeveless Coulson PD undershirt and a pair of cut-off sweat pants shorts to cool off, Erica threw the towel she had used to wipe her arms and her neck behind the couch and snatched the box from Belle's hands. "I'll figure it out," she said and peeked into it. It turned out the box contained the steam cooked rice that she had come to enjoy a great deal, despite her initial reluctance to try anything other than her favorite huge steaks, fries and oceans of sauce.

Another box held her Pomodoro Special - tomato sauce spiced with oregano and other Italian specialties - and the final box held a selection of shredded fungi. Grinning, she poured the fungi and the rice out onto her plate and mixed it vigorously. The tomato sauce came on top at the end and flooded everything.

Leaf opened her four boxes and retrieved her eggplant-based dish with various fixings, the Walrus poured out a pile of couscous with chickpeas, and Belle had her favorite from d'Ambrosio's: baked beetroot in herbal sauce.

Once Erica had cracked open the beers for everyone, she took her fork and went to work on her vegetarian dish. She still needed a steak or a hamburger from time to time, but she - reluctantly - had to admit that some of the dishes at d'Ambrosio's were quite tasty.

"Dudes… look at that huge pile of junk right there!" the Walrus said, pointing his fork at the Styrofoam boxes.
"Yeah. Don't worry, we'll throw 'em out for ya," Erica said matter-of-factly. The three others all gasped and stared at her like she had volunteered to skin a cat. "What?" she said with a puzzled expression on her face while she held a forklift of fungi.

"We can't simply throw them out, Rikka! They must be recycled!" Leaf said and nearly made the sign of the cross though she was the least religious of the bunch.

"Won't work when they've had foodstuff on 'em, Leaf," Erica said and munched on her rice and fungi. A droplet of Pomodoro trickled down her chin, but she stopped it with her napkin. "The recycling center won't accept them. I know that for a fact because I just assisted the Health and Safety inspectors on their annual tour of the recycling plant. I was given a hefty tome on correct recycling, so… it's this thick," she said and held a thumb and index finger two inches apart.

"Well, then we'll just have to wash them clean before we take them to the recycling center, won't we?" Leaf said, nodding firmly.

Erica's eating slowed down when she realized just who would be doing the cleaning. "Uh-huh? Well, all right. But they still won't accept them and then they'll throw 'em in the trash instead of us."

"Oh, enough of that!" Belle said and carved a slice off her baked beetroot.

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Later, with a Fleetwood Mac album blasting from the turntable, Erica strode into the kitchen with an armful of empty Miller Lites. After dumping them into the recyclables bag, she turned around to take the next six-pack from the fridge when her eye caught a plate loaded with chocolate brownies on the kitchen table. "Oooh… brownies," she said, closing the door to keep in the cool.

Shuffling over to the table, she put the beer down absentmindedly and leaned down to sniff the pastry just to be sure that Leaf hadn't spiked them with cannabis. They appeared to be clean, so she snatched one and chewed on it with great relish. The brownies had been made with a hint of orange and another type of fruity seasoning that Erica couldn't recognize but that she thought could have been passion fruit. The first was so good she couldn't just stop at one - she had to have another right away.

Even as she was chewing on that, the wall-mounted telephone rang and she had to gulp down the rest of the brownie. "You've reached the Cosmick-Wayne residence, this is Erica Wayne speaking," she said, pinning the phone down between her cheek and her shoulder while she licked her fingers.

'Sergeant, it's Josh. Pardon me for calling on the landline, but your cell is off. I just wanted to check if it's all right that Officer Bradley and I pick you up at five o'clock instead of at four?'

"Sure I'm sure… I mean, sure, that's all right. The man we're looking for won't be out that early, anyway," Erica said, rubbing her eyes that suddenly seemed to glaze over. The rubbing helped and she was able to see clearly again, though she did wonder why a purple bunny was hopping around on the kitchen table. When she looked again, the bunny was gone and she put it down to working too hard in the garage.

'Thank you, Sergeant. We've had a number of calls on our tip line, so I guess the cards we distributed last night have made the rounds. Nothing solid yet, though. Some pranks and silliness, like always. Apparently, the dealer could be Elvis Presley.'

"That's good news, Stu."
Silence filled the airwaves for a couple of seconds before the Officer at the other end of the line let out a chuckle at the error. 'No, it's Josh, Sergeant.'

"Uh... yeah. What did I say?"

'You called me Stu.'

"Oh. Sorry. I've had a couple of beers for lunch, so... you know. Ha ha. I promise I'll be sober once you and Stu come around at five."

Another period of dead silence followed. 'No, it's going to be myself and Kaye Bradley, Sergeant. What kind of beers did you have? Extra-extra-extra strong?'

"Miller Lites, my favorites... huh. Sorry."

'Think nothing of it, Sergeant. Oh, I better get back to traffic duty. See you at five, then.'

"Yeah, talk to you later, Robby," Erica said and hung up. Grunting, she opened the door to the fridge and took the next six-pack, not noticing that one was already sitting pretty on the kitchen table right next to where the purple bunny had been. "Robby sure sounded funny today... maybe he had a sore throat or something," she said and moved aside the swinging doors to go into the living room.

"Beer for ev'rybody!" she cried, holding up the six-pack.

The others stopped talking and stared wide-eyed at Erica. The staring became even more pronounced when the usually so stoic woman took hold of Belle's shoulders, turned her around and proceeded to give her a wet, noisy kiss with so much tongue that even Leaf had to do a double-take.

"Oh..." Leaf croaked when the only reason for Erica's strange behavior dawned on her, "the brownies... oh, Gawd, the brownies... oh, Gawd, the spiked brownies! Rikka! How many did you eat?!"

"Two," Erica said and held up three fingers. Grinning, she stepped over the coffee table and bounced onto the couch next to Leaf. When the older woman seemed somewhat shocked at the remarkable change of personality, Erica snuggled up next to her and wrapped an arm around her to pull her into a tender hug.

Belle groaned out loud at the sight - not to mention the fact that her Big Bad Bear had turned into a Big Stoned Bear.

"Two or three, baby?"

"Two," Erica said and held up four fingers.

"Aw, hell..." the Walrus said and rubbed his face that had suddenly turned ruddy. "The saryani seeds..."

"The saryani seeds," Leaf echoed in a whisper. "Rikka isn't used to those... us old fools are, but not her! And they weren't meant to be gulped down! Belle... do you think it's... what kind of... how many years in prison are we looking at for drugging a cop?"

Belle smirked at the odd sight of Erica getting rather high - not to mention frisky with Leaf. "Aw, fifteen to life, I'd say," she said, nodding somberly.

"Listen," Erica husked while she moved her face so deeply into Leaf's personal space it was almost comical, "have I ever told you you're really pretty?"
"Uh, this is Leaf, Rikka… your Belle is over there," Leaf croaked, pointing across the coffee table with a certain degree of embarrassment on her fair face.

"She is? You are?"

"Mmmm-yeah…"


"Oh, Gaaaaawd," Leaf croaked, burying her face in her hands.

"Duluth!" Erica cried, slapping her hands together in glee.

Belle took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Okay. Uh… okay. Walrus, I think we need to… uh… get the walking encyclopedia here into the bedroom to cool off…"

"Good idea, Belle," the Walrus said and got up from the couch.

"Wait!" Erica cried, making everyone jump to a stop. "Omahaaaaaaaaaw! Schwing!"

The crazed giggle fit that followed was so contagious that everyone joined in, even while Belle, Leaf and the Walrus dragged the stoned and utterly uncooperative Sergeant into the master bedroom one inch at a time.

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Several hours later, the dinner party was still in full swing with an early Bruce Springsteen album on the turntable and three happy hippies sitting at the coffee table feeling no pain. The empty plate that used to hold Leaf's saryani-laced chocolate brownies proved that it had been a pleasant afternoon indeed.

To underline the point of peace and love for all mankind, Belle was lounging on the couch with her arms firmly wrapped around Leaf's stomach. The two old friends were laughing themselves silly as they watched the Walrus dance around to the rockin' beat - or trying to, at least.

Laughing at the comical sight, Belle leaned her head tenderly against Leaf's shoulder and inhaled her best friend's unique scent that she knew so well from the countless years they had spent in each other's close company.

The saryani seeds drew pretty pictures in the mind but it also intensified every part of the thought process, so although the woman in Belle's arms was warm and lively, her thoughts invariably drifted back to the darkest days where Leaf had been rushed to intensive care from the cancer ward when she had been struck by a dangerous build-up of fluids in her lungs. Her chemotherapy had left her too weak to fight it herself so she had needed the help of grotesque, blue tubes that had been inserted down her throat.

On the floor, the old, pot-bellied man twisted like a latter-day Nureyev, but Belle's laughter died down and she didn't see him anymore. Shaking her head in misery, she squeezed Leaf even stronger and kissed her on the neck. "Hey, old girl… I love you," she said in a shaky voice.

"Are you dipping?" Leaf asked over her shoulder.

Belle couldn't speak so she had to settle for nodding.
"I love you, too... wanna dance? Hey, let's dance, that'll help you," Leaf said and dragged a reluctant Belle to her feet. The two women walked hand in hand over to the dance floor where the Walrus was visibly growing tired.

He was happy for the reprieve and staggered over to the armchair where he grunted and collapsed in an unruly heap. Once sitting, he reached for the last can of Miller Lite and emptied it in a single gulp - quickly followed by a resounding burp.

Belle and Leaf wiggled back and forth on the spot, the only kind of dancing Belle's aching hip would allow. The two old friends held onto each other and shared the occasional good-natured platonic kiss in the spirit of free love. The contact and the pure rock'n'roll played by The Boss boosted Belle's mood until she had cleared the hurdle and was back on top. A genuine smile graced her features and she pulled Leaf in for a tender hug to celebrate her new high. "Thanks, hon. I needed to dance," she whispered into her friend's ear.

"I knew you did. Anytime, Belle. Do you want me to check up on Rikka for you?"

"No, I'll do that in a little while. She snored the last time I checked. Holy shit... I mean, can you believe that we got the Sarge stoned?" Belle said and broke out in an unrestrained snicker that soon claimed Leaf as well.

The snicker-fest was interrupted by the doorbell ringing.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming!" Belle said loudly, turning down the volume of the Springsteen album before she shuffled over to the front door. As she opened it, her old reflexes nearly made her slam it shut again when she realized two uniformed police officers were standing outside.

"Hello, Miss Cosmick," one of them said.

Like with every other person wearing a uniform, the clothes made the individual disappear and turn into the Incredible Hulk who towered menacingly over the far shorter Belle.

Her hazy state made it difficult for her to remember their names, but she recognized the officers as belonging to Erica's squad. "Whoa... the neighbors complain about the noise already? Come in, come in, of'cers," she said and screwed a smile on her face before she stepped aside for their new guests.

As the officers walked inside, Leaf gasped loudly and dove for cover in the kitchen.

Josh van Eyck had to stifle a snicker at the welcome, but as he sniffed the air, he was surprised not to find the tell-tale sweet whiff of cannabis. Kaye Bradley simply smirked. The buff woman with the broad shoulders and the ponytail put her hands on her utility belt and observed everything that went on around her.

"So, Miss Cosmick," Josh said, stepping forward with his hand ahead of him in an invitation to a handshake, "we have an appointment with Sergeant Wayne. Uh... you wouldn't happen to know where we can find her, would you?"

Belle shimmied a little before she put out her hand and shook Josh's. "Uh, yeah I do, of'cer. I'm really sorry, the Sarge has been in an incident. Not a big one, and it was comp-LETE-ly unintentional, but it was definitely an incident. She kinda ate a brownie. Well, two."

"A brownie?" Josh said and looked at the empty plate on the coffee table where several brownie crumbs were still visible. "Is Sergeant Wayne allergic to brownies?"

"Betcha ten bucks they were laced," Kaye Bradley said out of the corner of her mouth.
Belle nodded. "Uh, that's exactly what they were, of'cer. Saryani seeds. Now, of'cers, before ya get ya panties in a wad, saryani seeds ain't an illegal substance or nothing… it's a perfectly valid ingredient in certain cooks and cakkies- no… cakes and cookies, but you're just not meant to use the whole seed. And we did. In the brownies."

"In the brownies, yeah," Josh echoed, looking around. He studied the Walrus' ruddy face, the pile of Styrofoam boxes, the colorful folk posters and artwork and finally the bead curtain with the large peace symbol. "And Sergeant Wayne is stoned," he said as a simple statement of fact.

"Think the heads on Easter Island. Or Mount Rushmore. Or the Himalayas. Your choice. She's stoned like a… stone," Belle said with a snicker. "She's sleeping it off in the bedroom over yonder," she continued, pointing at the bedroom door.

"Okay," Josh said and looked at Kaye who could hardly hold back a smirk. "Officer Bradley, perhaps we should simply file an illness form for the Sergeant and proceed with our patrol?"

"That would probably be best, Officer van Eyck… I agree," Kaye said, nodding hard.

* * * *

Once the officers had left, and Leaf and the Walrus had gone home, Belle tiptoed into the master bedroom to make sure Erica was still all right. To be on the safe side, she had put what she lovingly referred to as a barf bucket next to the bed, but she was happy to see that it hadn't been used.

Erica was flat on her back with her mouth all agape, snoring merrily. They hadn't been able to pull her sweat gear off when they had dumped her on the bed, so she was sleeping in her sleeveless undershirt and her cut-offs. She had a snippet of the blanket across her tummy so she had to have been coherent for long enough to do that.

Belle sat down on the edge of the bed and trailed a finger up Erica's endless pale-ocher leg. "Baby, I'm sorry this had to happen… what a crazy day we've had, huh? I'll bet your dreams are vivid and colorful right now. I hope they're sweet dreams, though. Oh, I wish you hadn't eaten two brownies… but how could you have known, huh? Girl, I love you," Belle said, leaning down to place a tender kiss on Erica's parted lips.

With a wistful smile, Belle withdrew from the bed and tiptoed back out of the bedroom. "I'll be back in a little while," she whispered before she closed the door behind her.

On the bed, Erica groaned and tried to reach for the grayish-golden bunny who had just been bedside. "Connetty-cut…" she croaked before she went back to sleep.

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CHAPTER 3

By the time Monday morning rolled around, Erica had been through a twelve-step purification process that included hard physical labor, steam baths, copious consumption of high-caffeine energy drinks and a hundred and ten sit-ups so every last saryani seed had been purged from her system.

She had believed she was ready to go back to work on Saturday afternoon, but a wildlife program on the National Geographic Channel detailing the mating rituals of the South American Kou-Kou bunny had sent her into such a whacked-out, unrestrained giggle-fit that Belle had been forced to call the stationhouse and apologize for the Sergeant's extended absence.
As she buttoned her black uniform shirt by the bathroom mirror, she was ready to face the music that she knew would be disharmonic to say the least. "Oh well," she said and fixed her black locks with a no-nonsense brush that looked wildly out of place next to Belle's set of hot purple brushes and combs, "I guess I brought it upon myself. The next time, I'll make my own damn brownies."

She clicked off the bathroom lights and strode over to her gun cabinet in the adjacent guest bedroom to get her utility belt with her service pistol, the spare clips and the pepper spray. Once she was fully dressed, she straightened her cuffs and her lapels before she strode back out.

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Belle - wearing a Save The Dolphins t-shirt and a pair of sandy, cotton shorts - lounged on the couch hard at work on her iPhone. Her nimble fingers flew across the virtual keyboard to punch in enough parameters to perform a productive web search for 'recording studios Coulson, Ca.'

She received forty hits but she could see with half a glance that many, if not most, were useless to her. She started going through them from the top, but discarded every single one until she found a link to the Ruff Diamond Studio.

The website looked okay and so did the list of records that had been produced there. Most were of the amateur-garage band kind, but one or two names popped up that Belle recognized from elsewhere.

The contact info was kept in a scroll-down band at the top of the web site, and when she had the telephone number, she called it at once to get a feel for the kind of people working at the studio.

'Hello!' a cheery female voice said, 'You have reached the Ruff Diamond Recording Studio's answering service. The studio opens at ten AM Monday through Friday, Satur-

"Okay, that's for a little later," Belle said and closed the connection. A quick glance at the clock proved it was only twenty past nine so she needed to find something to kill time until she could try again.

Action at the swinging door made her look up at Erica who stepped into the living room wearing her pristine black uniform and her game face, that steely mask of authority and decisiveness that always tickled Belle pink. "Oooh, have ya come to take me in, of'cer?" Belle said with a cheesy grin. "You can cuff and frisk me anytime… I won't resist… maybe moan a little…"

Erica's mask of steel melted into a lopsided smile, and she reached for her handcuffs just to see what kind of reaction she could get out of Belle - promptly, the older woman's eyes popped wide open, but it only lasted for a brief moment. "No, I love you too much to use force on you," Erica said and blew Belle a kiss instead.

"Haw, I sure be thankful, of'cer," Belle said with a grin.

Erica strode over to a wooden clam shell on the sideboard to get her wristwatch. With her watch on her arm and her wallet in her front pants pocket, she smoothed down her hair and turned back to Belle. "Did you get anywhere with your project, hon?"

"Some of the way, yeah, but I have to wait until ten. The Ruff Diamond studio. Ever heard of it?" Belle said and put her hands behind her head. She leaned back on the couch to relax, but her shoulders complained too much and she had to move her arms down again almost at once.

"Can't say that I have. Where is it?" Erica said and strode over to the armchair where she rested a buttock on the armrest so she wouldn't crease her uniforms pants too much.
"In an alley off Chesney right here in Coulson."

"Okay, that's..." - Erica leaned her back to draw a mental picture of the inner city areas of Coulson - "hmmmm... yeah, I know where that is. That's a block or two further north from Main Street, depending. It's the commercial district for small, independent businesses. Not necessarily the best neighborhood."

"Sounds about right. I've inquired about that studio before, years ago. It had different ownership then, though. I was hoping to cut a solo album... this must have been, oh, 1978 or so, but nothing ever came out of it."

"Oh? Was it too expensive?"

"Naw, I was too stoned back then to care about anything."

"Oh... yeah," Erica said and scratched her neck, "I sorta know that feeling now. Didn't think I'd ever say that."

Belle leaned forward and made an angel with her hands that she sent on its way to her partner. "Leaf has called ten times Saturday and Sunday. She's really, really sorry about what happened. She's even sent a formal letter to apologize. I'm guessing it'll show up today."

"Shucks, that wasn't her fault. I should have paid more attention to the brownies... and the small seeds in them. I thought they were passion fruit seeds."

"Ah, no."

"No. I figured that out when I tried to slip my tongue into Leaf's ear thinking she was you."

"Oh, you remember that?"

"Uh-huh!"

Belle grinned and got to her feet. After pausing for a few seconds to get her hip to comply with her requests, she shuffled over to her Big Bad Bear and put a warm hand on Erica's tummy just below her belt. "Now that's definitely goin' into the party song I'm writing for your fortieth, honey-girl! I need a kiss."

No words were necessary as Erica leaned down and claimed Belle's lips in a sweet one. "Was that good enough?" she husked when they separated. To add a little spice, she ran her tongue across Belle's upper lip and sucked it in between her own.

"Uggn... no," Belle mumbled, "but this one will be." Another kiss followed that was just that bit deeper and more sensual.

When they pulled apart to breathe, they rested their foreheads against each other with similar, goofy grins on their faces that told stories of what they would have liked to do if they'd had an hour or two... or three.

"Hey, girl," Belle said around nibbling at Erica's succulent lips. "I got a great little idea. If we're able to book that studio, I'd like to invite you along to play an instrument... maybe the tambourine?"

"The tambourine... shoot, Belle, I don't have a rhythmic bone in my body. You know that," Erica said with a modest shrug.

"Pah! The tambourine is the easiest of all instruments to play. You just gotta slap it to the beat... and I know you can do that. Wouldn't it be fun? I'd give you a credit and everything. If you don't want the world to know that Sergeant"
Wayne has played with a buncha hippies, we could call you Rikka Walking Bear. Right? Don't tell me that wouldn't be fun."

Erica shrugged again. "I guess it might be. I dunno."

"You don't know? Well, let me tell you something," Belle said and strode into her den. After half a minute of rummaging around for something, she came back out with her beloved acoustic guitar and an old-fashioned tambourine that she had dug out of the closet. "Guitar for me, tambourine for you. Now play."

"Aw, I don't really have time, Belle…"

"It'll only take a moment. Just follow my lead. Okay," Belle said and put the guitar's carrying strap over her shoulder. She sat down on the couch and began to play a steady three-note beat. "Blues, yeah? Can you feel the rhythm? Dam-ba-dam-ba-DAM-ba-DAM-ba… on and on. Now hit the tambourine at where the snare drum would be if we had a drummer. You know what a snare drum is, dontcha?"

"Yes, Belle, I'm not quite that dumb. I'll try."

Although Erica tried her hardest, she was unable to keep the beat for more than two or three bars. "Are you picking up speed?" she said, pulling her lips back in a grimace brought on by the level of concentration needed for the exercise.

"No. You're slacking off."

"No…"

"Yup," Belle said with a firm nod. "Okay, maybe it's too slow for you. How about a little… huh… uptempo boogie rock. Bee-da-cha-uhn-bee-da-cha-uhn… can't you hear the snare? On the cha's?"

"No."

"Well, try anyhow. I'll nod my head when you need to come on."

Erica did her best but was once again stumped by the skills required to keep a steady beat. Her first bar was okay, the second less so, she dropped behind the beat in the third bar, and in the fourth, she was precisely one beat behind.

Belle eventually stopped playing the fast beat and simply stared at her partner. The silence evolved until it reached the region commonly known as embarrassing and awkward for all involved. "Right," she said, licking her lips. "So… how about we tried something different instead? Like the basics."

"How about we just gave up? I'm getting really close to running late, Belle," Erica said and got up from the armrest. She stared at the tambourine for a few seconds but eventually put it down in the armchair where it jingled and jangled from the built-in brass chimes. "And I need to call the stationhouse so someone can pick me up. Next week, I really need to arrange having my Cruze shipped over from Cape Whitnell… it would give us a lot of freedom that your old Microbus can't."

"I beg your pardon!" Belle said and drew a dramatic minor key chord on her guitar. "That old bus must have driven me halfway around the world by now!"

"And it isn't showing in the least…"
Belle scrunched up her face and pouted big time over the dissing of her favorite pair of wheels until she got a spark of inspiration and went to work on her guitar. "Oh! Looooooooolllllloooove! Peeeeeeeeeeace! Love! Peace! And freedoooooooom for all Vee-Dub Microbussssssssseses," she sang, playing a suitably upbeet tune to the age-old protest song.

"Haw, haw," Erica said and mussed Belle's hair. Stepping out of range of the butt swat she knew would be coming, she reached into her pocket to find her telephone. She found the number in the registry and put the phone to her ear. "Dispatch, this is Sergeant Wayne. I need a ride from my home. Yeah. ETA five minutes? Works for me."

Once she had closed the connection, she folded up the phone and stuffed it back down her pants pocket. "Five minutes and Officer Lechner will be here."

"I guessed as much. Lechner? That's the big fella, right?"

"Yep."

"Not sure I like him as much as the others, to be honest," Belle said and put away her guitar. "The two officers who were here Friday evening were sorta cool-"

"Josh van Eyck and Kaye Bradley."

"Right. They're sorta cool. Stu Burton I already knew from down at the community center. He and his Dad helped us with a couple of things about three years ago, but the big fella… well, he spooks me 'cos he looks so much like the sons of bitches who just loved to beat up hippies back in the old days… no offence. Uh, to you. The sons of bitches can go screw themselves," Belle said with a decisive nod.

"Point taken. He's a friendly man once you get to know him, but I'll admit he's too buff. He used to be a defensive lineman in college and the size stuck."

"Yeah well… the rebel within me is knockin' on the door to tell you an anti-cop joke that made the rounds back then," Belle said and wrapped her arms around Erica's waist, "but I love ya so I won't."

"Oh, you know… I think I've heard them all. Shoot."

"Okay… how can you tell the difference between the bikers and the cops?"

"No idea."

"The bikers wear their gang colors on the back… the cops wear theirs on the front," Belle said and tapped a fingernail against Erica's brass badge.

"Oh," Erica said and leaned down to kiss Belle's forehead. "That wasn't particularly funny."

"I know. But it was the nature of the conflict back then… unfortunately."

A series of honks from the street curtailed their conversation. Smiling, Erica quickly kissed Belle on the lips and caressed her aged cheek. "I've said it before and I'll say it again… I can't tell you how glad I am that this fantastic adventure we're living is happening now instead of back then. Love you and catch you later."

"Love ya, too… take care out there, my Big Bad Bear… yep, you may call me a wordsmith," Belle said with a loud guffaw at the unintentional rhyme.
Grumbling, Belle looked up at the wall-mounted clock above the swinging door to the kitchen. The hands of time proved that she had been waiting for more than fifteen minutes to get in touch with the Ruff Diamond studio. They had taken down the answering service at ten, but for some reason, they refused to pick up the phone afterwards.

She was growing impatient - not to mention getting severely ticked off - and kept a running score of the number of rings she was forced to listen to. Just when she was about to hang up, a fumble was heard at the other end of the line.

'This here's the Ruff Diamond studio. Whassup, bro?' a spaced-out male voice said at the other end of the connection. He sounded like he had inhaled once too many over the years, but that obviously didn't bother Belle.

"Yo, whassup, dude? This is Daisy-Belle Cosmick," she said, folding her legs up underneath her in the couch. Out of sheer reflex from hearing the man's lazy voice, she slipped into her old hippie persona and nodded her head at the telephone though she knew perfectly well the man at the other end wouldn't be able to see her. "Can ya tell me if the bossman is in or something? I need a word with the bossman 'bout rentin' the studio."

'The bossman is me, bro. I'm the only one here 'xcept when my cuz helps me with the buttons and shit. Rentin' the studio? That's a can-do.'

"Groovy!"

'Yeah, we sorta don't have too much on our dance cards, know what'm saying? We ain't exactly at the cuttin' edge of technology but we're running a clean operation. Yeah. We got a thirty-two track mixing console and a sixty-four beer fridge, yeah. We got a couch and shit for the groupies to flake out on if ya got any. We got a satellite dish and a fuckin' huge TV, man. The only things we don't got are the instruments."

"We already got those, dude."

'Far out."

"And then some. Tell me, dude... do you have equipment to record digitally?"

'We sure do. We got twenty-bit super hi-def and shit. We got a DVD burner hooked up to the mixing console so you can save each track and shit. MIDI exports and shit. Yeah, we got digital."

"Hey, I thought you said you ain't at the cuttin' edge of technology? Sounds mighty like cuttin' edge to me!"

'Aw, that ain't nothing compared to the real recording studios these days, bro. We're just small fry.'

"Everything sounds mighty fine to me. How many bills do I need to print out for a, say, ten-day contract?"

'Bro! Ten days!? Who ya with, the fuckin' Rolling Stones or somebody?'

"Naw, those beautiful, beautiful Butterflies. So... ten days?"

'Bro, we ain't never signed no ten day contract with nobody before... I got no fuckin' clue what to tell you."

"Well, what's the goin' price for a single day, then?"

'Ninety bucks, bro.'
"So that would be nine hundred dollars for ten days?"

'Naw… that sounds like highway fuckin' robbery, bro. How 'about seven fifty?'

Belle put a finger on the speaking hole in the telephone and let out a chuckle at the stoner's odd sense of logic - in a negotiation, the interested party was usually the one who tried to get the price down, not the one who held all the cards. "Seven fifty? Dude, I can agree to that. Ya got yerself a deal. Can we start this coming Friday?"

'Sweet deal, Sister Sunshine. Yeah, you can start tomorrow if ya wish.'

"Neato. It'll be Friday 'cos I have to tell my guys and stuff. You know, get my shit organized and stuff."

'Sure thing. Hey, can ya swing by this afternoon and sign the shit, ya know? I mean, people could be linin' up outside as we speak and I wouldn't know about it 'cos I was flappin' my gums with you. We could be under siege by some of them rabid management people of whatshername… Roxanna?'

"Would that perchance be Rhianna?"

'Her, too.'

"Yeah, huh?" Belle said and rubbed her mouth so she wouldn't laugh out loud at the man. "You caught me on a good day, dude. I can swing past A-OK. Right now?"

'Naw, this afternoon. I got someone lined up at eleven. A garage band who plays country punk. They play so fuckin' loud and out of tune I need earplugs when I twist them knobs, bro. Can't hear the music but I can't tell no difference either way, ya know."

"Yeah, I know that feelin'…"

'ANYhow… I'm gonna write up the initial paperwork and then you gonna sign the shit when you come. Okay?'

"Sounds fine by me," Belle said and swung her legs down from her couch. "Hey, hang on… wait a minute… I didn't catch your name, dude…?"

'Irwin B. Seacombe. B for Buster but it sounds shitty so nobody ever calls me that."

"Irwin Seacombe it is, then. I got that logged into the confuser, dude. See ya at three or so."

'Groovy! Peace, Sister.'

"Peace, Brother," Belle said and closed the connection. Leaning back in the couch, she tapped the warm iPhone against her nose a couple of times while she digested the slightly warbled conversation. "Seven hundred fifty dollars. We can handle that… ten days… should be enough to record fifteen or so songs. Jesus, I've done it… I've actually booked a studio!"

Shaking her head in disbelief, she flipped through the registry to find Leaf's number but changed her mind when she realized it would still be too early for her and the Walrus. "Naw, they're probably still too bombed out from their Tantric sessions… I guess I could vacuum instead," she mumbled, casting a brief glance at her upright vacuum cleaner that stood in the far corner of the room. "Nope, too far away. I better practice my guitar pickin' instead," she said and took her beloved acoustic guitar.

* * *
When Erica stepped into the guardroom at the stationhouse with the broad-shouldered Robby Lechner in tow, Josh and Kaye - who were sitting on the couch chatting and drinking coffee - fell silent and looked everywhere but at their Sergeant.

"Good morning, everybody. Donuts?" Erica said, holding up a box of Quality Selection that she had bought at Coulson's best bakery on their way through the small town. "I didn't... and I stress, I did not make 'em myself," she added with a wink, for once allowing her officers to see the gentler side of their tall, steely Sergeant.

"In that case, I guess we're not at risk," Josh said and rose from the couch. He snatched a donut with chocolate frosting and took a small bite out of it just to make sure it wasn't funny in any way. "Kaye? You want one?"

"No thanks, Josh. I had a full breakfast before I started my shift," Kaye said, putting down a magazine on the low table they had in front of the couch.

Robby Lechner grunted and reached for the box. "Well, I've never said no to a donut in my life... and I'm not about to start now." He couldn't make up his mind at first but eventually took one with pink, raspberry frosting. Chewing on it, he shuffled over to the armchair on wheels and flung his large frame into it.

"I'll put them here for your disposal," Erica said and strode over to a sideboard next to the doorway to the watch desk where she pushed aside a stapler and a tape dispenser to make room for the box. "All right. Listen up, everybody," she said and went back into the center of the room. There, she put her hands on her utility belt and assumed her trademark no-nonsense stance and expression.

When she had everyone's attention, she cleared her throat and prepared to make a short speech. Right on cue, Stu Burton came out of the bathroom - where he seemed to spend far more time than anyone else at the squad - and ran over to the others who had all risen.

"Good morning, Stu," Erica said, displaying a brief smile that soon faded. "All right, as some of you learned firsthand, and some of you undoubtedly heard on the grapevine later, I was caught in an unfortunate case of mistaken identity on Friday afternoon and evening. My partner had invited a few friends over for a hot lunch. One of my partner's friends had made a plate of chocolate brownies. I ate two. This is where the case of mistaken identity comes into play, because they weren't simply chocolate brownies, they were laced with saryani seeds to function as mind-expanding... uh, finger food."

Stu snickered but was quickly shushed by Kaye.

"Indeed. Like I said, I ate two where the regular dose is merely one half of one. As you may expect, I cannot recall much from this period nor from the night that followed. All in all, the experience is not one I seek to repeat anytime soon, though I have no lasting effects from the intoxication. There, I've said my piece. Let's get back to work," Erica said and took her hands off her utility belt.

A variation of "Yes, Sergeant," was uttered by the four officers.

"Officer van Eyck, I need to see the weekend report sheets upstairs in my office in fifteen minutes. No, better make it twenty, I have a few calls to make. Officer Bradley, it's your turn to sit at the watch desk. I'll relieve you in two hours' time. Officer Lechner, I want you to take one of the Durangos and keep a presence at the youth hot spots on Main Street and elsewhere. Maybe we can entice one of them into giving us some information on the dealer we're after. Officer Burton."

"I already have an assignment, Sergeant," Stu Burton said with plenty of pride in his voice. "I was called out to a break-in earlier this morning. Someone had gained access to a garage over in Coulson West. Nothing was stolen but the door was busted. I secured a good thumbprint that I'm running through the database. I need to finish the paperwork."
"Very well," Erica said and looked at her four assistants. Though they had different personalities and levels of experience, they were all good police officers who usually closed the cases they were working on despite the lax reign of the previous station Chief. Stu Burton in particular defied his foppish appearance by being able to think fast and act cleverly at crime scenes or out in the field. "Keep me posted on the results. All right, I'll be upstairs catching up."

"Yes, Sergeant," all four said.

As Erica stepped into the connecting hallway that led off from the guardroom, she stopped just out of sight of her officers to listen to what they had to say. She knew they would most likely make fun of her predicament, which would be all right considering the weird circumstances, but if her authority was under threat, she would need to address it at once.

'Wow, saryani seeds,' she heard Kaye Bradley say. 'I've heard they're like shrooms. Glad it wasn't me, that's all I'm saying. I guess it's inevitable, though… I mean, the Sarge is living with a hippie. Jesus, I'm telling you guys… the other two hippies that Josh and I saw… I mean, whoa. Right out of the old photos!'

'My aunt Elsie used to be a hippie… she couldn't hurt a fly. There's nothing wrong with identifying with that group, Kaye,' Erica heard Robby Lechner say.

'Stil…'

'No 'still' about it. Get out to the watch desk, rookie.'

'Yeah, yeah… meathead.'

Erica continued down the hallway and was soon out into the sterile and slightly non-descript lobby. Grunting, she walked down to the staircase and climbed it, thinking all the way up to the first floor how odd it was that the person Belle had been wary about had been the one defending her.

...*...

Some time later, Erica put down the paperwork and leaned back in her swivel-chair with a vacant glare in her ice-blue eyes. The reports were so depressing she needed a moment away from them, though the open office with the strip lights, the greenish-gray linoleum floor, the tarnished metal desks and the old-fashioned wooden swivel-chairs didn't offer much of a reprieve.

Sighing, she rose from her chair and strode over to the coffee machine she had inherited from Conrad Gallagher, the recently retired Chief who had insisted on controlling his troops from an enclosure created by scaffolding pipes and cheap plastic panels. On the second day of her tenure, Erica had thrown out the whole thing and had chosen to sit at a desk in the center of the office landscape so she would be accessible at all times.

The stationhouse had been built in a time where the police force had more than triple the number of officers at their disposal than she did, and it was nowhere as evident as the open office on the first floor. Hardly any of the desks were in use, and dust had settled on a great deal of the surfaces.

The old-fashioned, brown pinboard on wheels at the far end of the office was a good example of the deep-rooted tardiness that had existed through Chief Gallagher's years in the hot seat. It hadn't been used for decades - it was simply hopelessly outdated and replaced by newer technology like whiteboards - but nobody had bothered to spend a quarter of an hour wheeling the old thing down into the storage room in the basement next to the dispatch central.
The coffee was stale but Erica still poured some of it into her favorite mug, a white one decorated with stylistic, purple butterflies in flight. Although Belle had teased her for harboring hippie-like tendencies when they had bought it in a thrift store downtown, she liked it because it reminded her of her partner - it really was as simple as that.

Her feet wanted to take her over to the windows overlooking Main Street for a breather, but she knew she couldn't stall any longer and strode back to the desk. Sitting down, she took the report sheets and re-read the passages that said that altogether six young people, a teenager among them, had come to the attention of the police on Friday and Saturday evenings.

Four had been issued written reprimands for being under the influence of drugs in public, one had received a second fine and a stern warning for mouthing off to the Officer in Charge - which had been Josh - and finally, one had been taken to the Methodist Hospital to be put under observation for a suspected drug overdose.

"Hell's bells," Erica growled, thumping her fist down onto the paperwork. She took a long swig of the coffee but scrunched up her face into a mask of disgust when the bottom half of the mug turned out to be grounds rather than the warm, brown liquid she had hoped for.

"Blergh… Goddammit, we need a new coffee machine..." she said and strode over to a small wash basin outside the upstairs restroom where she dumped the whole thing down the drain. The remains of the pot went the same way moments later.

After rinsing her mouth - and spitting out grounds that stuck to her teeth - she strode back to her desk and pressed one of the buttons on the intercom. "Officer Bradley, has Officer Burton returned from his assignment yet?"

'No, Sergeant,' Kaye said from her spot at the watch desk.

"All right. Would you mind telling Officer van Eyck to get up here at once?"

'Will do, Sergeant Wayne.'

"Thank you," Erica said and removed her finger from the button.

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Two minutes later, Josh van Eyck came up the staircase and walked purposefully over to Erica's desk. "Sergeant, you wanted to speak with me?" he said, putting his hands behind his back like he had never left the Academy.

"Yeah, I have two things I need to discuss with you," Erica said and put down a ball point pen. "Have a seat. So…"

Josh took a swivel-chair from another desk and wheeled it over to Erica's. As he sat down, he looked very much like a schoolboy waiting to be punished by the headmistress.

Erica chuckled and offered the younger man one of her rare on-duty smiles. "Relax, Josh, you're not here to get chewed out. As a matter of fact, I need to commend you on your reports. They're expertly made."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Josh said, discretely letting out the breath he had been holding.

"So… here's the business. Six youngsters were so high Friday and Saturday evening they needed warnings for being under the influence in public. What the hell is this, Josh?" Erica said and thumped her fist down onto the desktop. She picked up the ball point pen and started toying with it to have something to do with her hands. "I've checked Chief Gallagher's stats going back four years and there's nothing there that indicates this is an inherited problem."
"Well, we've had problems of this kind before, Sergeant, but never on this scale. As recently as the run-up to last Christmas, a teen needed to be put into medical custody because he raved around on Main Street. He had snorted lighter fluid, and that was a huge deal then. Now, sheesh… that wouldn't even rate a mention."

"No. There's definitely a new player in town… someone who targets youngsters. Josh, although I've read your reports, I'd like you to give me an insight into the inebriated people you and Officer Bradley encountered this weekend."

Josh took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Anything specific, Sergeant?"

"No, just the headlines, if you will."

"All right. Three women, three men. Most were regular youngsters out for a good time, you know. All three women were together on Friday evening, dancing outside the blues bar Barney's. They weren't aggressive, but they were sluggish in their responses and appeared to be quite far gone. One young man was with them but he didn't pose a threat, either. They were all given a written reprimand. On Saturday-"

"Josh, considering the four young people appeared to be quite far gone, as you said, are you certain they understood they were given a reprimand?" Erica said, shooting the Officer a pointed glance across the desk.

Josh's eyes became panicky for the briefest of moments, but his experience took over and allowed him to remember what had actually happened. "Officer Bradley and I discussed if we needed to do more, but we chose to let them be. Like I said, they weren't aggressive. After the intervention, all four shuffled off fairly downcast."

"All right. Go on."

Josh shifted uncomfortably on the swivel-chair before he licked his lips. "On Saturday, the mood in the street had changed. People were more aggressive and one intoxicated teen in particular mouthed off at us to such an extent we issued him a fine for aggressiveness to give him a clue that it was his last chance before an arrest. He got the message. But honestly, Sergeant, I don't think he was involved with the new dealer. He was just an obnoxious teen who had popped a few pills. His clothing seemed to suggest similarly. Where the four young people on Friday were well-dressed, the man on Saturday wore clothes I would characterize as grungy."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Greasy hair, torn jeans et cetera. Incidentally, the same applies to the individual who was sent to the Methodist Hospital for observation. Like I wrote in the report, these two men were aggressive unlike the young people on Friday evening."

"Hmmm. Very well. To draw a sketch of what's going on, this new dealer appears to be targeting regular, clean-cut youngsters in general and young women in particular. I do not like that. I do not like that at all… and I will not allow it on my watch," Erica said and tapped the tip of the ball point pen down onto the desktop three times in rapid succession to underscore her message. "The young man who was with the three could have borrowed the drug from one of them… perhaps they were on a date."

"I hear you, Sergeant."

"Barney's," Erica said, briefly staring into empty space before she once again concentrated on her colleague. "That's where the trouble has been all along. Looks like we need to pay close attention to that establishment. All right, I'll swing by this afternoon and take a peek. Thank you, Josh, that'll be all for now."

Josh moved to get up when he realized they had only touched upon one of the two topics the Sergeant had for him. "Oh… what was the other thing, Sergeant Wayne?"
Erica chuckled and threw down the ball point pen for good. "You wouldn't happen to know where we could buy a new coffee machine, would you? One that actually makes decent coffee… 'cos that one over there is ripe for the crapper."

Later, Erica did her promised stint at the watch desk while Kaye and Josh were out on patrol. With Stu still working on the burglary case and Robby cruising the youth hot spots around town, she had the entire stationhouse to herself.

The peace and quiet gave her an opportunity to finish the mountain of paperwork that had built up in the two days she had been orbiting Jupiter, and her trusty ball point pen was given a strenuous workout as it flew across the report sheets to add her signature so they could be processed further in the system.

The watch desk wasn't particularly large - and still smelled of the coffee Stu had spilled on it the other day - but she had sorted everything into orderly piles that helped her get through the stacks in record time.

On the desk, she had the portable radio turned on so she could pick up incoming communications from the field if any were made, she had the laptop open and ready so she could type in reports in case any came, and finally she had the old-fashioned black Bakelite landline telephone that had been there in the same spot on the watch desk since the days of President Eisenhower.

With everything nice and tranquil, she was able to finish the paperwork without being interrupted, and eventually strode back into the guardroom to put the stack into the out-tray on the sideboard next to the empty box of Quality Selection donuts. Grunting, she tore the box open and stuffed it down the nearest trash can.

A quick glance at her wristwatch proved it was half past one, so she reached into her pocket to find her own telephone - it was time to get on with the program. The number for the Night Angels was found and the appropriate buttons pressed.

'The Night Angels office, this is Loree Malone,' the familiar female voice said at the other end of the line.

"Good afternoon, Miss Malone, this is Sergeant Wayne from the Coulson P.D.," Erica said and strode back out to the watch desk. As she spoke, she turned the swivel-chair around and sat down. "I am calling to hear if you have a preliminary status on this past weekend."

'The weekend from hell, Sergeant! I presume you know of the six young people who were involved in various incidents?"

"I do."

'In addition to those, at least four more were helped by our Angel teams. Two of the four were spotted walking around the Bridge Street, Grocelyn Street area feeling no pain and having no clue whatsoever where they were.'

"Damn…" Erica said and rubbed her brow. Although the neighborhoods weren't quite as bad as those she had seen in her days patrolling the violent inner-city streets of the Big City back East, they weren't places anyone would want to visit after dark, especially not youngsters on a bender.

'Just about covers it, yes. Our team was able to escort them away from the hot neighborhood without drama… well, further drama.'

"And like the others, I presume those four were ordinary, average young people out for a fun night in town? And they were all women?"
'Yes on both counts, Sergeant. It's obvious the new dealer got his sights set on the young, impressionable middle-class girls. From personal experience, they may not possess the same kind of defensive attitudes other groups of youngsters would, but I'm positive they would never allow a scruffy, junkie-type individual to get anywhere near them. Whoever this guy is, he must be... well... like them.'

"That's a very good observation, Miss Malone. Unfortunately, that doesn't make our job any easier. I fear we need to lean on the young women to give us a better description. Listen, would it be possible for you to meet me at Barney's on Main Street at three? That establishment seems to be the hotbed for many, if not most, of the cases."

'Oh... at three? Uh... let me see... yes, that'll work.'

"Good. Very well, we'll continue our conversation then. Goodbye, Miss Malone."

'Goodbye, Sergeant,' Loree Malone said and hung up.

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At five to three, Erica hopped in behind the wheel of one of the black-and-white Chargers and opened the passenger side door for Officer Burton. Before he got in, the ever-persnickety Stu immediately tore off a moist towelette from a cardboard box that stood between the seats and wiped down the seat belt and the metal brace at the end.

"Hygiene is paramount, Sergeant. Last year, more people died of disease than war," he said and put the spent tissue into a plastic bag on the floor below the passenger seat.

Erica knew she wasn't expected to answer, so she didn't. Once there was a gap in traffic, she turned out into the inner lane on Main Street. The traffic lights at the intersection of Main and Valentine Avenue were red as they invariably were, so she pulled to a halt at the line. While they waited, she performed a constant sweep of her surroundings - and she had to chuckle inwardly when she realized that Stu was doing the same.

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The rush hour traffic wasn't too bad yet, so they were able to park at the curb in front of Barney's Blues Bar. The establishment appeared non-descript from the outside; simply consisting of a large storefront window, a glass door and two further large windows through which a few tables were visible. Neon signs advertising various beer brands hung dark and impotent in the windows since the bar wasn't yet open for business.

A marquee that ran the length of the establishment proved they had indeed arrived at Barney's Barmy Blues Bar. Other signs in the windows claimed they had live music every Friday and Saturday night, and that during Happy Hour from nine to eleven, beer on tap was half price.

A dark-skinned African American woman wearing dark slacks and a bright yellow jacket with the words Night Angels emblazoned on the front in fluorescent letters came hurrying along the sidewalk toward the bar.

"That must be Loree Malone," Erica said and opened the door without waiting for an answer from Stu. Stepping out, she waved at the running woman who slowed down at once. "Miss Malone?" Erica said, stepping up on the sidewalk in front of the bar.

"That's right. I'm guessing from the stripes on your arm you're Sergeant Wayne," Loree said and put out her hand.

Erica shook it at once while she studied the other woman. Loree was in her mid-thirties and had a full figure though she wasn't overweight as such. Her neck was hidden by the jacket's collar and her hair, but Erica thought she could see a healed scar snaking up the woman's neck to the rear part of her cheek by her ear.
"I must say," Loree said, giving Erica a long glance from boot to eyebrow, "times sure have changed since Chief Gallagher ruled the roost, huh? With that coloring, you must be a Native American."

"Yes, one half Abenaki. It's a tribe over in the northeast."

"That's fascinating, Sergeant Wayne. You know, there's another way totell the changing of the times... I don't think I ever saw Chief Gallagher outside of the stationhouse..."

Erica chuckled at that undeniable fact but mostly kept it to herself. "Miss Malone, this is Officer Burton," she said and made a gesture at Stu who had opened the door after giving the little lever a swipe with the moist towelette.

"Oh, I know Stu well. Hi!" Loree said and waved at the other officer.

Stu came over to the two women and briefly shook hands with the Night Angel. "Hello, Miss Malone. Yes, we've worked together quite often."

"That's good," Erica said and strode over to the blues bar. Inside, a thirty-something man in urban camouflage pants and a black t-shirt was busy vacuuming the carpets - except when he gawked at the scene out on the street, which was often. Erica grunted and knocked on the door.

It only took the man a few seconds to realize he better shut off the vacuum, but another few seconds to get the door unlocked. "Uh... yes? We're not actually open yet," he said, looking at the three people outside. In person, it was revealed he was closer to forty than thirty, and that his fashionable shaved head and ten-day stubble didn't do him any favors.

"We know. I'm Sergeant Wayne, this is Officer Burton and Miss Malone from the Night Angels. We need a word with you about the spate of-

"The drugs... yeah, okay... come in," the man said and stepped aside to let his visitors come into the bar.

The interior of Barney's Barmy Blues Bar seemed to follow the instruction manual on how to decorate a bar to the letter. It was divided into three distinct sections; first up, the tables and chairs that were made of untreated wood to give them a coarse, authentic feel. Off to the side with access to the back, the wooden bar counter reigned supreme with four shiny brass beer taps and all the regular paraphernalia like stacks of napkins and bowls of peanuts, and in the center of the room, the stage stood proud with a couple of chairs, two microphone stands and a huge amplifier from Shockwave! at the back.

The bearded man came into the center of the room and sat down on the edge of the stage. "So... hey, I'm Moore Bracken. I own this joint."

"Who's Barney, then?" Stu said, shooting the bar owner a glare like he had just confessed to the Lindbergh kidnapping.

"Eh. It was a funny name, that's all," Moore said with a shrug.

"Tell me," Stu continued, moving closer to the sitting man. "What does 'barmy' actually mean?"

"It's a British thing. I think it means crazy or nutty or something like that. Eccentric. You know?"

Stu looked like he had just been told his favorite puppy had run away, or if he was debating with himself that Moore should be busted for false advertising.
"Mr. Bracken," Erica said to get back on track. While Stu had asked his burning question, she had found an old-fashioned notepad that she flipped open to the first clear page. "Over the course of a short week, ten or more youngsters have been under the influence of a strong drug after visiting your bar."

"Whoa, I don't have nothing to do with that, General!" Moore said with his hands in the air.

"That's Sergeant, Mr. Bracken," Erica said darkly, pointing at the chevrons on the sleeves of her uniform. "We're not accusing you of anything. We're asking for information that will lead us to the dealer and we believe you can provide that."

Moore seemed to calm down somewhat though his eyes rarely stood still - they were constantly darting between the three people. "I don't know anything, Sarge. What happened Saturday night didn't have nothin' to do with those four chicks."

Erica cast him a steely glare.

"-uh, girls… women on Friday night. Isn't that right, Angel? You guys were here both nights… Saturdays are always wild. The rough kids come out. It's been that way ever since I bought this joint."

Loree nodded at the man's words. "That's right, Sergeant. Lately, more regular young people have visited the bar on Saturday nights but they usually shy away from confrontations. Fridays are when the middle-class go out, like I told you over the phone," she said and turned to the owner of the bar. "But I do find it remarkable that there's been so many recently. It started, what, four weekends ago, Mr. Bracken? Suddenly, from one Friday to the next, we had an influx of young people, especially girls."

"Yeah… yeah, that's true," Moore said and ran a hand across his shaved head.

The movement created a scratching sound that immediately got on Stu's sensitive nerves, and he shot the bar owner a dark look to get him to stop.

Ultimately, the scratching was interrupted through other means. The portable radios that Erica and Stu carried on their shoulders began squawking, and Stu stepped outside to answer the call following a brief gesture to Erica.

"And you have no knowledge of how the drugs are distributed, Mr. Bracken?" Erica said and scribbled on her notepad. "You look like a hands-on kind of man. I'll bet you're here all night."

"Yeah, I'm the bartender and emcee for the live bands… but no, I don't know anything."

"No strangers? No unusual, shielded behavior in the corners? No sly glances at the door to see when the special person arrives?"

"Look, Sarge," Moore said and shifted his weight to his other foot, "I want this shit to stop, just like you. If word gets out that drugs can be bought here, not only do I get you guys breathing down my neck, the holier-than-thou crowd will come and swing their pitchforks. Not to mention the parents will stop their kids from coming here. I depend on the youngster crowd."

Erica made a series of notes before she looked up and locked eyes with the man. "I've been wondering about that. Young twenty-something people at a blues bar, Mr. Bracken? I would have thought they wouldn't be too interested in that kind of music."

"Well, we play other kinds of music as well, so… and the Happy Hour is the cheapest on Main Street. Cheap beer, cute boys, sexy girls, live music, you know how it goes..."
"Mmm-hmmm," Erica said and scribbled a few more words.

A few seconds of silence followed before Loree cocked her head and shot Moore a pointed look. "I've been in this business for four and a half years, and I know that when a bar suddenly becomes a hot spot, it's because someone's been made aware of it. Have you been advertising at the college, Mr. Bracken? I do believe that's against the code of conduct created by the local chamber of commerce."

"Whoa… just you hold on a damn minute," Moore said with his hands way high in the air. "The hell I have! I know better than that, Angel. Word of mouth can't be controlled, I'll bet you know that. Hey, we got a new band about a month ago. They've been playing most weekends since… I'll bet that's what the chicks are reacting to. You know how girls dig hot musicians... and where chicks come, boys who want to impress the chicks follow. Law of nature."

Erica grunted and closed her notepad. "All right. If you would kindly provide us with the names, addresses or other contact information for those musicians, Mr. Bracken, we can all get on with our lives."

"Contact info?" Moore whined with a groan clearly heard in his voice. When he realized the steely Sergeant wouldn't budge until she had it in her hands, he shrugged and shuffled over behind the bar counter to get to his office at the back.

When they were alone, Erica keyed the mic on her portable radio. "Stu, do you read me?"

'Loud and clear, Sergeant.'

"What was the earlier call about?"

'Officer Lechner reported back from the Golden Arches Drive Thru that he got a flat on the Durango. He drove over a bent nail when he checked out the construction site for the new gas station.'

"Typical. Very well. We're almost finished here, but I would like you to go round the back and scout out the alley behind the bar. I'll meet you by the Charger when we're done."

'Will do, Sergeant. Officer Burton out.'

"Yep," Erica said and put her hands on her utility belt while she waited for Moore Bracken to come back with the information they had asked him to find.

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CHAPTER 4

Down the other end of Main Street, a psychedelically-colored 1966 Volkswagen Microbus decorated with every single kind of hippie symbol imaginable held up the traffic in the inner lane. Metallic noises of the crunching, grinding kind came from the back of the old bus as the driver was fishing for a gear.

"Fuckin' piece of..." Belle cried as she depressed the clutch again to find a gear - any gear - in the old, worn-out gearbox. "I swear to the old guy above I'm gonna... I'm gonna... aw, hell!"

Third gear didn't give her anything, nor did second. By then, the bus had lost so much momentum that she could use first if she wanted to - or rather, if she could find it. She jammed the stick into first and released the clutch hoping
that it would connect. At once, the gear caught and made the engine cough, pop and splutter. A cloud of vile, black smoke shot out of the tailpipe which scared off the SUV that had been tailgating her for the last thirty yards.

"Thank you!" Belle cried and continued down Main Street, spluttering along in first gear. An attempt at changing up into second yielded nothing so she went for third at once. Much to her surprise, third caught and she gained a fair head of steam as she rolled up to the turning lane at the intersection of Main and Chesney. Almost as expected, the lights changed to red before she made it there, and she had to pull the stick into neutral and apply the ancient brakes that squealed nearly as loudly as she had done herself earlier.

While Belle waited for the traffic lights to change, she glanced around without finding anything worthwhile to look at - that is, until she caught a glimpse of a very familiar tall woman in a black uniform some one hundred yards ahead. She appeared to shake hands with an African American woman who walked off down Main Street. The uniformed woman kept standing on the sidewalk next to a police cruiser.

"Unless my eyes deceive me," Belle said and checked the right-side door mirror to see if the other lanes were clear, which they weren't, "that's my Big, Bad Bear. I wonder what she's up to… aw, the studio can wait. I'm going to see my honey!" she said and moved the arm for the turning signal to the right instead.

When the lights turned green, she fished for a gear and found first at once. She flew forward like a shot from a gun and was able to slip out of the turning lane and into the fast lane without much drama apart from a disharmonic concert of honks from several different cars behind her. "Love you too! Make way for the old bird!" Belle said, waving her hand at the other cars.

By the time she had made it to the police cruiser, there was no doubt she had run across Erica - the powerful stance alone proved it was her. Belle whooped out loud and pulled over to the curb to wait for a gap in the traffic. When it came, she couldn't find a gear and had to wait for the next gap. While she waited, she fished through every gear she had until she found one that worked, namely second. The next gap came sooner than she had feared, and she was able to get the old Microbus to do a U-turn across the four lanes of Main Street with nary a hitch except plenty of coughing and spluttering from starting in second gear.

"Hi, honey!" she cried through the open window as she pulled in front of the Dodge Charger police car. She made sure the Microbus was parked according to every rule and regulation in the book so she wouldn't risk getting a citation.

Erica strode over to the colorful Microbus and opened the passenger side door. "Hi, Belle… what are you doing downtown at this hour?" she said, leaning against the seat.

"Aw, you know… just lookin' for a good time as always. Gotta visit the studio and stuff. So… you're a pretty girl. Ya wanna come home and see my record collection?" Belle said with a wink.

Erica duly grinned but it soon faded from her face. "I gotta take a rain check, Belle. We've got something we need to take care of here. A real mess."

"Oh," Belle said, sobering. "Is it something you can share with me, or is it too grisly?"

"Nobody's been murdered, no. Like I told you, we've run into a little drug problem down here. Somebody's dealing pills to young people. Young women in particular. Nobody knows anything… of course, even if they did, they'd never share it with us. Not even the girls themselves are talking."

"Figures. They're probably too shocked, or embarrassed, or both," Belle said and turned off the engine. She briefly tapped her fingers on the thin, white steering wheel before she opened the door and hopped down from the Microbus. "You know, honey… I have plenty of experience with pills of every kind, legal or otherwise. Perhaps I
could help?" she said as she walked around the front of her colorful vehicle where even the chrome VW symbol on
the front had been replaced by a large peace symbol.

"Yeah well… I suppose it couldn't hurt," Erica said with a shrug. "Oh… you changed your clothes. You look great,
on," she said, looking at Belle's ensemble of bare feet in sandals, faded blue jeans and a teal, long-sleeved t-shirt.

"Thank you. I had a little accident… I spilled a full mug of herbal tea ALL over my T-shirt and my shorts 'cos I
slipped off the doorstep. Damn thing got everywhere," Belle said and rolled her eyes at her clumsiness.

"I hope you didn't burn yourself…?"

"Nah. But thank you for the concern. Love ya for it," Belle said with a cheeky wink.

Stepping up onto the sidewalk, she looked at the blues bar where the owner had already closed the front door and
had resumed his vacuuming. She glanced at his efforts with the stainless steel pipe and snorted at his inefficiency.
"Anyway, back on topic. There's a ton of stuff to be done with pills, hon. It depends on how they're made and what
type of active components they contain. You can obviously swallow them whole, or you can break them in your
mouth and chew on them like an Antacid, or you can mash them into grounds that you can put into your drink."

"We don't have any details yet, Belle… if we could only find one of the damn things, we could put it through the
toxicology tests and get some answers," Erica said with her hands on her utility belt.

"Mmmm-yeah, but that probably wouldn't give you the alchemist who created them. I mean, it's not even a given
that you're looking for someone with a roll of funny pills up his sleeve… he may have prepared them in advance and
sold them in little vials mixed with vodka or some other booze. Or perhaps tap water and a sugar cube in each to
remove the bitter taste of the chemicals."

Belle suddenly noticed that she had an interested listener behind her back. Turning around, she had to stifle a loud
snicker at the way Stu Burton was standing with a slack jaw and a perplexed expression on his face. "Oh… hi, Stu. I
didn't hear you sneak up on me…"

"Hello, Miss Cosmick," Stu said and seemed to snap out of his stupor. "Tell me… how come you know so much
about-"

"Been there, done that. All of 'em. Sometimes more than one at a time. Prepared every which way you can think of,"
Belle said with a shrug.

"Uh… buh. Okay," Stu said and cast a worried glance at his Sergeant like he was afraid that she too would turn into
a hippie and begin to hand out recipes for saryani-laced chocolate brownies.

The moment was broken by Stu and Erica's radios crackling to life. 'Sergeant Wayne, dispatch,' a male voice said.

"Sergeant Wayne, go on, Dispatch," Erica said, keying the mic. 'We have received a nine-one-one for an eleven-eighty three at one-three-seven Valentine. Possible eleven-eighty, ambulance crew requesting urgent traffic control, over.'

"Dispatch, Sergeant Wayne copy. ETA two minutes, over," Erica said into the microphone she carried on her
shoulder. "Honey, we gotta go," she continued, briefly touching Belle's arm before running around the front of the
Charger.
"Aw, no problem! Catch ya later!" Belle said, but by then, Stu and Erica were already sitting in the cruiser. Erica quickly reversed away from the Microbus and turned on the multi-colored roof lights; then she swung out into the traffic and hustled the other way towards Valentine Avenue.

Not long after, Belle drove the old, tired VW Microbus into the alley off Chesney Avenue that was the home of the Ruff Diamond Recording Studio. The old bus needed some persuasion to get up over the curb despite the fact there was a small ramp to help it along, but it got there eventually.

Creaking and groaning, the Microbus righted itself and put-put-puttered along the alley that turned out to be wider and more welcoming than Belle had anticipated.

The alley was in the center of the commercial district for small, independent businesses of every kind, but it was surprisingly clean and uncluttered. Here and there, carriers had delivered pallets of goods wrapped in plastic, and here and there, empty cardboard boxes proved that someone had been hard at work.

She came across the ubiquitous open oil drums and abandoned shopping carts, but that was to be expected. All in all, Belle was impressed by the state of the alley - it was a good sign for the state of the studio. The only thing she found a little disconcerting was the lack of street lights. It didn't take an expert to see that the alley would be dark and scary once the sun set. "Ah, whatever. I'm never gonna be here at night anyhow," she said, glancing ahead to keep track of where she was going.

A large, handwritten sign pointed the way to the Ruff Diamond Recording Studio, and she was able to drive into a parking bay outside a pale gray, one-and-a-half storey concrete building without any problems at all.

Another handwritten sign proclaiming it to be the Ruff Diamond Studio hung above a steel door that had been painted brown to resemble wood. A window with sturdy steel bars across it was next to the door, but when Belle tried to peek through it, she found it so badly misted up - or filthy, it was hard to tell - that it was impossible to see anything.

Someone had painted a red arrow on the pale gray concrete wall that pointed down to a door bell next to the steel door, and Belle duly put a finger on the little button. Although she could hear the bell ringing somewhere inside, nothing happened at first so she stepped back to try to get a feel for the building. She only had time to check out what appeared to be a pigeon nest on the flat top before the steel door was opened.

"And you must be Irwin Seacombe. Peace, dude," Belle said and put out her hand. She was surprised to see how young the man was, but she kept it to herself out of fear of looking like a stuffy old bird.

"Peace, bro," Irwin said and shook Belle's hand with the old hippie handshake that ended in a slap, a hook and finally a thump. "Yeah, I got the paperwork and shit lined up and ready to go. Ya want a tour of the studio first or something?"

"That's why I'm here," Belle said and stepped over the threshold. The first hallway was bare save for an old soft drink vending machine that sounded like it needed a new component or two. A thick, insulated power cable ran across the floor from the vending machine and under a door on the right onto which someone had pinned a
handwritten note that said Utility Room. A steady hum could be heard from the room, and Belle guessed it kept the vast power generators needed to run a studio.

A pair of steel doors marked the end of the hallway; the one on the left was labeled Lounge, and the other carried a sign that said Mixing Room. Below the sign, the message *Red Light Means STAY OUT!* was written directly onto the steel door in bright red paint. Belle looked above the door and saw a red light bulb similar to those found in the old days in television studios and the like.

"Yeah, I know," Irwin said, "it's kinda uncool to be so forceful, bro, but we've had a couple-a really nasty incidents in the past where some pothead has ruined a recording session 'cos he didn't pay attention to the light. So, ya know…"

"Naw, that's way cool, Irwin," Belle said and stepped aside to let the young man go in first. "Ya gotta respect the individual who's putting her heart on the line playing in there, yeah?"

"Aw, we gonna work together just fine," Irwin said with a chuckle. He kept standing in the doorway and pointed at the door labeled Lounge. "Over there, you'll find the huge, industrial size fridge, the frickin' massive TV and the flake-out couch. You wanna see that first?"

Belle smiled but shook her head. "No, your recording gear is more important."

As Irwin opened the door fully and stepped into the mixing room, Belle could see at once that everything was as familiar to her as a pair of old, well-worn jeans - she even recognized the smell from the old days, that peculiar mix of wood, carpets, warm electronics, a whiff of sweat and perhaps even the last traces of sweet-smelling pot smoke.

The mixing room was separated from the main recording room by a thick pane of glass. A vintage - though high-tech for the time - thirty-two track console was lined up so the producers could keep a close eye on the musicians in the next room. Next to a blacked-out computer monitor, a pair of loudspeakers had been built directly into the console to provide the sound, and at the far end of the room, an old-fashioned magnet-tape recorder was stowed away on a table by itself looking dusty and quite forlorn.

Below the mixing console, a tower PC had been hooked up through a bird's nest of black and gray cables that ran crisscross over the floor behind it. The PC appeared to have a DVD burner and three or four extractable hard drives in a rack.

"Irwin, dude, this is really impressive!" Belle said, sitting down on one of the two swivel-chairs that had been placed in front of the mixing console. "Just like the good old days. Ya know, when we made a handful of albums as The Butterflies back in the early seventies, we would have killed for equipment like this… fa-buh-licious, dude."

Irwin grinned so broadly his fillings became visible. "Yeah, huh? Aw, I'm gonna sound so stupid now… I really don't have a clue who The Butterflies were… or are."

"Well," Belle said and made a full turn on the swivel-chair, "we were a folk rock group. We had a lot of good stuff going on, but then we got caught up in drugs and shit. Lost a band member to smack, you know… ah, it was a different time, then."

"Yeah. My gramps was at Woodstock," Irwin said and scratched his long hair. "I lived with him for a number of years. He taught me everything I know 'cos my Mom couldn't handle me. I guess that's why I look this way now."

"Groovy," Belle said and rose from the chair.

"So, you wanna hear something that's been recorded here… you know, to get a feel for what I can do behind the knobs?"
"Ya know," Belle said and briefly put her hand on the younger man's elbow, "I got a suggestion for ya… instead of listening to other people's work, I was wonderin' if I could, you know, perhaps cut a quick demo now that I'm here? I'm willing to pay for it, o' course. To tell you the truth, Irwin, I ain't really sure I still got what it takes to get pressed."

"Or burned," Irwin said with a grin, pointing at the tower PC.

"Burn, baby, burn," Belle said, matching the grin with one of her own.

Irwin grinned back, taking off his stonewashed denim jacket to show he was ready to produce whatever Belle could come up with. "Hell yeah, you can cut a demo. No sweat, Sister Sunshine. And it ain't gonna cost you a dime… that's not how we do things here at Ruff Diamond."

"Neato!"

"Yeah. Just head into the studio. I need to boot this shit before we can do anything, but I'll tell you over the speakers when I'm ready."

Belle hopped off the swivel-chair and shuffled past Irwin who had already pressed a few Power On buttons. She turned right and walked through the door to the recording studio itself. As she stood in the doorway and looked at the familiar equipment inside, a strong feeling of doubt swept over her.

It wasn't 1973 and she wasn't a fresh-faced twenty-two-year old kid anymore whose go-get-'em attitude could blow any naysayers out of the water. It was four decades down the road, and she had turned into an old, wrinkled woman who could slip into any role on a Golden Girls remake without additional makeup. Her wrinkles may only have been skin deep, but she wondered if her soul and her musical skills hadn't also been wrinkled beyond salvation along with all the other little imperfections that had crept up on her over the years.

It was one thing to court Erica through a song now and then, that was all made in jest, but it would be a severe test of her heart, soul and vocal cords to stand in a recording studio under a microphone singing acapella or to a backing track. She didn't need to reach one hundred percent perfection, but anything below ninety-eight percent would be a soul-shattering disappointment.

She sighed as the knot of tension that had festered in her gut all afternoon was tightened yet another turn. 'Can I still do it? Jesus, I'm about to find out… if I sound like crusty, old shit, I'm gonna call the whole thing off,' she thought as she looked around the interior of the studio.

The room was roughly forty by sixty feet, and three of the four walls as well as the ceiling were covered by dark brown ceramic tiles that had been laid out in a strange, asymmetrical pattern to create the perfect acoustic for the microphones.

Three microphone stands had been placed at random in the room, but only one of them carried an electronic mic fully equipped with a spit-shield. A row of barstools and regular chairs were lined up at the far wall, and a pile of various electronic equipment including cable drums, headsets and spare mics were lying in wait underneath the window to the mixing room. An acoustic guitar with plenty of wear on the frame was leaning against one of the barstools.

With another sigh, Belle closed the door behind her and shuffled further into the room that could turn into a piece of heaven or a torture chamber depending on how rusty she was when she went into the proverbial spotlight.

She went over to the microphone stand and loosened the knob on the metal bar so she could slide the mic itself closer to her mouth. She glanced over at the barstools but decided against sitting on one of them. The acoustic guitar was another matter, but she didn't know if she could use it.
'Ready when you are, Miss Cosmick,' Irwin said, flashing Belle a thumbs-up through the window. His voice came from a pair of speakers that had been fastened high on the wall above the window to the mixing room.

"Please, call me Belle," Belle said into the microphone.

Irwin waved at her and gave her another thumbs-up. 'Sure thing, Belle. Hey… you want a headset? There's one lying just below the window down there… somewhere.'

"No, I'm doing it old-school, Irwin. Just me and the mic. But now you're asking, would it be possible to borrow the guitar for the demo?" Belle said, pointing at the vintage-looking acoustic guitar.

'Sure, sure… do you want me to rig a second mic for it?'

"Naw, too much work for a demo," Belle said and went for the old guitar. "Almost there. Are you rolling?"

'No, I'm lookin' at an empty waveform on the recorder monitor…'

"Oh… okay. Brave new world, huh? Well, here goes… if I suck, please be gentle. I'm a sensitive old bird."

'Sure thing, Belle,' Irwin said with a grin.

Belle took a few deep breaths to control her breathing. When she had everything under control - except for her rebelling stomach and her wildly beating heart - she put the guitar's carrying strap over her shoulder and checked the old instrument's tuning.

She realized she was wasting everyone's time if she didn't quit stalling, so she decided to take the leap into the unknown. Moving up to the microphone, she began strumming a steady rhythm in the hope it would appease her galloping mind. When her cue came, she began belting out the lyrics to *Chrome Wheels*, one of her own songs that she had written for their fourth album.

Her decades of experience soon took over and she was able to allow her throaty pipes to come alive. She couldn't remember all the lyrics, but after the first verse, it became irrelevant. It didn't take long for her to loosen up and simply create a new version of the old, uptempo highway rock song about a cool blonde whose good looks and sexy curves were reflected in the chrome wheels of her red Cadillac Convertible.

Almost unnoticeably, she began to wiggle around like she had done countless times at the live shows although she made sure to stay within the microphone's range. After the second verse, she didn't need the guitar to keep the beat any longer and let it hang loose around her shoulders. As the song progressed, she abandoned the original lyrics completely and improvised a new verse about a hot Native American babe in a cop car who offered an old bird a ride-along to Lookout Point where they had their way with each other on the back seat and elsewhere.

She grabbed the guitar again to accompany herself for the third chorus that cross-faded into a distorted guitar solo on the album. She didn't have access to that now, but she played a few bars with great vigor to emulate the original sound.

By the time the song was finished, Belle was too. Panting, she leaned over and put her hands on her knees. She had burned off so much energy to keep her adrenaline going that she felt like a quivering glob of goo on the inside.

'Far out, bro…' Irwin said in a dazed voice from inside the mixing room.

Belle wiped her sweaty brow on the sleeve of her teal t-shirt and staggered over to the row of barstools to deposit the borrowed guitar. "Was it okay?" she said, wishing she had a gallon of ice water at her disposal.
'Okay? It was fuckin' sensational, Belle! Sensational! Hey, you gotta come in here at once and listen to yourself… bro, that was sweetums personified!'

Belle chuckled at the young man's enthusiasm. She knew she had done a good job, but perhaps not quite as good as Irwin's bubbly mood hinted at. "Yeah, all right… ya wouldn't happen to have an iced tea or something I could chug down, would ya?"

'Iced tea? Sure, we got iced tea. Peach or original flavor?'

"Anything!" Belle said and wobbled over to the door. While Irwin hurried across the hallway to the big refrigerator in the lounge, Belle went the other way and bumped her rear end down on a swivel-chair.

Irwin was soon back with a can of peach-flavored iced tea that he cracked open for his illustrious guest. "Here ya go… man… that was an eargasm, bro."

"Always happy to deliver the goods," Belle said and did what she had said she would - she chugged the iced tea down like there was no tomorrow.

Grinning, Irwin sat down on his own chair and tapped away on a keyboard that was connected to the PC. Soon, a waveform was loaded and began to play.

Belle stared at the monitor, watching the squiggly green lines that made up the recorded waveform with great interest. She heard herself speaking to Irwin about calling her Belle and the following conversation about the guitar, but it didn't take long before she started singing.

The first few stanzas were perhaps a bit rusty and it made her cringe at her feeble attempts, but the uneasiness didn't last long. No more than thirty seconds into listening to the recording, a shower of goosebumps washed down her body when she realized that she could still do it - she still had what it took to deliver a song like Chrome Wheels to an audience. She was on key, on the beat and just plain on it. The new verse she had made up on the spot was icing on the cake, because it proved that she had the mental capacity to think ahead while she was singing without it impacting her performance.

When the song faded out, Belle scrunched up her face and fell silent like she was in a trance. 'My voice is different from what it was when we recorded the original albums… and I couldn't remember the proper lyrics… but… but Gawd almighty, it rocked! I rocked! Holy shit, I really rocked… Gawd, we can do it… we can make this thing… this greatest hits album… we can actually make it…'

She suddenly realized that Irwin had spoken to her. "Huh? I'm sorry, I was kinda spaced out there…" she said, shaking her head to get back to reality.

"No wonder, bro! Doesn't that just sound fan-frickin'-tastic, Belle?"

"Yeah…"

Irwin wheeled his chair over to the back wall of the mixing room where he took a brand new CD jewel case that was still wrapped in plastic. "I asked you if you wanted me to burn the demo as an audio CD?"

"Uh… yeah. Sure!"

"Groovy," Irwin said and tore the plastic wrapping off the jewel case. He inserted the empty CD into the burner and performed a quick polishing of the recording in the wave editor he used. Then he clicked on a few buttons and a small LED on the burner began to blink. Half a minute later, the disc was ejected and ready to be played. "Here ya
go... I usually charge three bucks for a CD, but since you talked about booking the studio for ten days, I guess I could-

"Oh, hell no, Irwin," Belle said and reached for her wallet. She quickly found a five dollar note that she held up. "I always pay my dues... and you can keep the change. Okay... where did you say you had the paperwork? I do believe we have a contract to sign, Mista."

"Far out!" Irwin said and snatched the bill in exchange for the CD case. "I got it in my office."

Belle grinned and hopped off the swivel-chair. After emptying the can of iced tea, she dumped it into a trash can and shuffled through the mixing room. "Hey, before I forget... do you have any session musicians attached to the studio? My band and I need a drummer, a bass player and a good axeman... or woman, of course."

"Naw, I don't. Sorry," Irwin said and closed the door to the mixing room. "Most gals and guys who come through here are amateurs. You cats need professionals, so... sorry. From what I know, the best people work in the bars over on Main Street. Dunno if they'd be interested, though."

"Yeah? I need to check them out. Okay... the contract?"

"Right over here," Irwin said and opened the door to the lounge.

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Belle stepped out into the alley and let the heavy steel door click shut behind her. Although the alley looked the same as it had before, somehow everything had changed for the better and she took a moment to take a deep breath of relatively fresh air. The contract and her demo CD were kept in a bright orange plastic binder that she deposited on the passenger seat after unlocking the Microbus.

As she got behind the thin, white steering wheel, she stared straight ahead with a dazed look on her face. Since the pale gray concrete building directly in front of her wasn't much of an attraction, she never even focused on it - instead, she had her eyes firmly fixed on the immediate future of The Butterflies.

"Holy shit," she mumbled as she reached for her iPhone. "I can't believe I actually did it. I actually booked us studio time... either I'm a genius or I'm mad as a Krazy Kat on a triple dose of acid."

Working on autopilot, she found Leaf's number in the registry, but remembered to check the time of day before she made the call. It was ten past four which meant they could be hard at work in their Tao of Tantric Zen downstairs.

'Hi! This is Autumn Leaf!' Leaf's familiar voice said at the other end of the line, and it didn't seem to be their answering service.

"Hey, hon, it's Belle... are you busy?"

'No, we've already had our fun for the day.'

"You go, girl! Anyhow, guess what I've just done?"

'Won a bazillion in the state lottery?'

"No!"

'Uh... robbed a bank?'
"Nooooo, silly!"

'Uh… dropped acid?'

"No, but it was almost as good."

'I give up,' Leaf said with a chuckle.

"I've booked us ten days of studio time right here in Coulson. At the Ruff Diamond Recording Studio in an alley off Chesney. It's a-

'Oh, Belle!'

'-great place, and… what?"

'I love you, you know that, but don't you think we should have talked about it a little more first? It's such a big step.'

"I know it is, but, girl… we can still do it," Belle said and looked at the concrete building. "I just cut a demo in there and it sounded a hundred percent like the good old days."

A few seconds of silence followed, and Belle looked at the iPhone to see if the connection had been lost.

'Belle, I could have told you that yesterday. You haven't lost anything… but… I'm not the same harmony singer I used to be. My voice is nowhere near as sharp these days.'

"That's not true, honey. You still sing like a pack of angels… hey, come on," Belle said and sat up straight, "it's not that long ago we performed at the Lyndonville Folk Festival, remember? And just before that, we had that fabulous mini-concert in front of the police station in Cape Whitnell… back then, you were feeling much, much worse than you do today but you still sang like a dream. And I'll bet you sing to the Walrus every day like I do to Erica, so it's not like you're too rusty."

'Performing live is different, Belle… the inner energy of the music just takes over and it doesn't matter if you hit a bum note or five… in a recording session, you'll just waste everyone's time and money if you're not on top form. Belle, I… I'm a little bit scared about this. It's going too fast for me.'

Belle scrunched up her face in disappointment and perhaps even a little guilt - the absolute last thing she wanted was to stress her old friend. "I was scared too, honey, but when I got the cue, I just let my instincts take over and carry me off on the wings of the music. I promise the same will happen to you. We can do it, Leaf. We can come together and create magic like we used to. I promise."

'I'd… a part of me would like to give it a shot… but… but I'm worried you'll get mad at me if I can't do it.'

"I'll never, ever get mad at you, Leaf. I love you way too much, and I owe you way too much to ever get mad at you. The producer is a great kid and he made me a CD of my singing. I promise that when you listen to it, your fears will just fade away. How about it?"

'I'd love to try, but…'

"Hey, no buts except those we sit on. And I'm tellin' you, there won't be much sitting once The Butterflies take flight," Belle said with a cheeky grin.
'Well… I'm torn, Belle. It would be exciting to try… but… just thinking about it scares me so badly. Oh… my head says no, but my heart says that I should do it.'

"So… we're all right?"

'We're all right, but I can't offer any guarantees on the quality of my singing.'

"Everything's gonna be just fine, Leaf. I promise 'cos I love you so much. Everything's gonna be fine. Girl, I'm gonna hang up now 'cos I want to visit Erica over at the stationhouse, but I'll come over tonight with the CD and then you and the Walrus can listen to yours truly."

'Okay… I guess. You have a deal. At nine or so?'

"Yeppers. See you at nine. Love ya, honey."

'Love ya too, Belle! Bye, bye.'

Belle closed the connection and slipped the warm iPhone into her jeans pocket. Nodding solemnly, she turned the ignition key and began fishing in the bottomless marl-pit of gears for anything resembling reverse.

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Five minutes later, the colorful VW Microbus performed a tire-screeching turn across Main Street to drop into the only remaining parking spot behind the two police cars there, a Durango and one of the black-and-white Chargers.

Once the vehicle came to a creaking, groaning stop, Belle checked the side mirror and thumbed her nose at the driver of a car that had been aiming for the same spot. "Ha! Gotcha!" she said as she watched the SUV trickle past and the driver give her the Evil Eye. "Dontcha go lookin' at an old bird like that, son! It's like playing with matches… you'll only end up wettin' your bed."

Chuckling, she hopped out and walked around the front of the old but faithful bus. Opening the passenger side door, she reached in towards the windshield and set the parking disc so every last rule and regulation was upheld. "And now for some Big Bad Bear," she said as she locked the Microbus and climbed the four concrete steps up to the stationhouse.

She kept standing at the glass door, thinking about the odd places she had visited in the last hour - first a recording studio for the first time in decades, and now she was walking into a police station unassisted and of her own free will. A short year earlier, none of the two could have happened, especially not the latter. "Sheesh," she said with a chuckle as she pulled the glass door open.

It didn't take her more than a second to see that it was Erica herself who was sitting at the watch desk. Although the Sergeant was looking down at the laptop, her dark hair, pale-ocher skin and pronounced bone structure was unmistakable.

Belle tip-toed silently over to the desk and put her hands out ahead of her with her wrists together like she was looking to be handcuffed. "I've come to turn myself in… I've been thinking naughty thoughts about a police Sergeant," she said in a creaky voice.

Erica laughed out loud and rose to her full, impressive height. Including the two feet the watch desk was elevated over the linoleum floor, she appeared ten feet tall, and Belle almost got a crimp in her neck from taking in the sights. "Oh, is that a fact, Miss? That's a serious offence. We better process you right away."
"Ohhhh… I'm gonna be a jailbird for sure!" Belle said and shimmied around on the spot.

"Or," Erica said with a wink, "we could invite you into the guardroom for some bagels and tea. Stu has just bought an economy-size box of Earl Grey that I'm sure he wouldn't mind you sampling."

"Now you're talking! Just through the door?" Belle said and pointed at the next door down the lobby.

"Yep. I'll meet you there. I need a break, anyhow," Erica said and left the watch desk.

Belle shuffled farther down the lobby until she came to the door in question. Out of politeness, she knocked on it twice before she opened it and stuck her head inside. When she didn't come across a SWAT team ready to pounce on her for trespassing, she stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind her.

Erica soon met her and draped a uniformed arm around the shorter woman's shoulders. "So… to what do I owe the honor?"

"Sarge," Belle said and looked at the arm, "are you allowed to do that? I mean, some of your colleagues may think you've fallen in with the enemy…"

"No, they know me. You look excited, Belle. Did something exciting happen?"

"Sure did, baby," Belle said and stepped into the guardroom itself. She cast a brief glance at the various things on offer before her eyes fell on a tray of freshly nuked and still steaming hot bagels. "I just booked the Ruff Diamond studio! For ten whole days… oh, the Butterflies are gonna fly again, I can feel it in my bones. I just cut a demo and it sounded so good… so good, baby!"

"Wow, really?"

"Cross my heart!"

Erica mussed her partner's neck before she strode over to the table with the bagels. "That's great… I hope you didn't have to raid your piggy bank to pay for it? I'd love to chip in-"

"Whoa," Belle said with her hands in the air. "No chipping in required. This is my dream. It may yet turn out to be a pipe dream so I prefer to risk my own dough first. It wasn't too bad. Eight hundred bucks including free use of their massive fridge and a promise of super-hi-definition files at the end of it… y'know, if we actually manage to record anything."

"A half or a whole bagel?" Erica said, wielding a fearsome-looking bread knife.

"Just the top half, thank you. The tea?"

Erica quickly halved the bagel and took a small plastic jar with jam. "In the kitchen," she said, pointing at the next door. "Listen, we don't have any lactose-free butter so will strawberry jam on its own be okay?"

Chuckling, Belle shuffled across the linoleum floor until she reached the door to the kitchenette. "Strawberry jam is just fine, baby. The kitchen, huh? Now why didn't I think of that?" she said and went inside.

It didn't take long for her to make hot water in the electric kettle, and she soon poured it into a neutral mug that she had found in a cabinet above the kitchen sink. The bag of Earl Grey soon followed - Stu had bought a box with three hundred bags which made Belle rub her eyes in surprise - and she bobbed the tea bag up and down in the mug as she shuffled back into the guardroom.
Erica had put down the halved bagel on a plate on the low table but was presently up at the watch desk speaking into an old-fashioned telephone. When she came back, her good mood had clearly vanished.

"Trouble?" Belle said as she sat down with her tea.

"It was the Methodist Hospital. They're required to call in fatalities."

"Shit, the traffic accident you and Stu were called out to?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"No. Not now," Erica said and sat down next to her partner.

Belle didn't press the issue. She and Erica had an unwritten agreement that all the bad things that Erica was exposed to during her work day wouldn't be talked about until she had collected her thoughts and was ready to share her emotions. Sometimes, that would be at dinner or at bedtime, and then they'd talk for hours. If it was a bad case, it would sometimes be days later. With the dark pasts they both had, they understood the importance of sharing the bad times as well as the good times so they wouldn't accumulate and turn into real issues.

Smiling, Belle leaned in to kiss her partner on the temple to show her support.

"Hello, Miss Cosmick," a male voice suddenly said from the hallway. Josh van Eyck stepped into the guardroom with a broad smirk on his face from catching his Sergeant kissing while on duty.

Kaye Bradley came in behind him with a slightly less enthusiastic look on her face at the sight of their visitor.

"Hey, Officer van Eyck. Officer Bradley," Belle said very formally. She grinned at the way Erica's skin flushed at being caught in the act by her colleagues, but decided to lay off the cheekiness and sample the tea instead.

Josh went over to the table with the electronic equipment and unhooked his portable radio. "Sergeant, Stu called in to say that he was helping Robby with the flat out at the Golden Arches. The lug nuts were rusted stuck, that's why it's taking so long."

"Very well, Josh," Erica said in her no-nonsense business voice. "Oh, I better get back to work. Belle?" she said and patted Belle's knee before she rose from the couch and strode out to the watch desk.

"Of course, of course... thanks for the bagel, baby," Belle said, holding up the remains of her early dinner.

After depositing her own portable radio, Kaye Bradley went into the kitchen to make herself some coffee, but didn't miss the opportunity to cast a slightly disdainful glare at Belle on her way across the linoleum floor.

Belle picked it up but couldn't care less.

Snatching the other half of the bagel that Erica had prepared for Belle, Josh smeared a load of butter on it and sat down next to the older woman. "So," he said around a bite, "how are you feeling these days, Miss Cosmick?"

"Oh, I'm as peachy as can be, thank you. I've just signed a contract to get back into the music scene," Belle said, beaming with pride. "A recording contract over at Ruff Diamond. It's kinda excitin'!"

"Oh, with your band? The Sergeant has told me a few things about your old friends."
The smile didn't leave Belle's face, even while she sipped her tea. "Yeah, The Butterflies. We used to have a pretty good thing going back in the day."

Kaye clicked off the light in the kitchenette and came back into the guardroom balancing a mug of coffee and a pair of vanilla cookies. "Back when the world was still in black and white, Miss Cosmick?" she said as she sat down in the armchair on wheels and took a sip from her mug.

This time, Belle did actually care about the female officer's barb, but she swallowed a stinging reply that wouldn't have helped in the given situation. "No," she said coolly, "the world was quite colorful back then, thank you."

'What the hell is wrong with her? I thought she was cool… is it her time of the month or something? ' Belle thought, eyeing the buff woman who just sat there with her coffee and her vanilla cookie. 'There's no need for that kind of attitude… she would have fit in just fine with the assholes back then…'

Kaye shrugged and concentrated on her coffee.

Josh noted the rising tension and decided to defuse it at once before it could turn into something far more embarrassing. "What kind of music are you playing, Miss Cosmick?" he said and turned towards their guest. "I believe the Sergeant has mentioned it's folk rock?"

"Folk rock, yeah. We also play the occasional blues and sometimes even a few pop oldies. Depends on the audience we're playing for and where our mood takes us. We decided to retire from the road at the end of last year… too many nights cooped up in the back of a Microbus, you know. We were touring the retro festivals right up to that point. That's how Erica and I met, actually."

Josh duly smiled but the sour look on Kaye's face proved she couldn't see the hilarity in Belle's comments.

"Yeah," Belle continued, purposely ignoring the surly officer, "at the end of our touring days, we were two gals and two guys. One of the guys has retired for good now, but the other guy and his wife are still my best friends. They're gonna help me on the album."

"Folk rock," Kaye said, pinning Belle to the spot. "Is that like the Jacksons or something?"

"The Jacksons? You mean the Jackson Five?" Belle said with a furrowed brow. When Kaye answered with a curt nod, Belle smirked but managed to keep most of it back. "Ah… no. No, it's not. Have you ever heard of bands and artists like Creedence, Lynyrd Skynyrd, The Byrds, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan… uh, Scott McKenzie, Donovan, The Lovin' Spoonful, Bachman-Turner Overdrive, the Mamas and the Papas, Joan Baez, Patti Smith, maybe even Jefferson Airplane…?"

"Dylan and Seeger… Joan Baez… the anti-war, anti-establishment, anti-authority people?"

'Ding! Ding! Conservative!' Belle thought and tried to find the most neutral facial expression she could muster. Licking her lips, she took a swig of her tea and looked at Josh who didn't seem too impressed with his colleague's attitude either. "Yeah. Yeah, those guys," she eventually said.

The awkward moment was broken by commotion out in the lobby, and Kaye rose from the armchair to go up to the watch desk to check it out - presumably so she didn't have to spend more time with the aging hippie than absolutely necessary.

Belle considered asking Josh if he knew what had crawled up Kaye Bradley's ass, Conservative or not, but she decided against it. A resounding "Goddammit!" from the hallway made everyone look in that direction.
The buzz-cut, hulking Robby Lechner came into the guardroom sweating like a pig and with his uniform shirt soiled and pulled out of his pants. He had smudges of oil, grease and general muck all over his nose, forehead and even up into his hair. "Piece of shit… needed a whole can of WD40 just to get one mofo lugnut loose," he growled, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. The hand was no less filthy than the rest of him so he only added another smudge to his already impressive collection. "Oh… hi, Miss… uh, Cosmick, right?" he said when he spotted their visitor.

Belle once again did her best to maintain a neutral expression, but she offered the large man a brief smile out of politeness despite her inherent dislike of him. "Yes it is, Officer. Hello."

"Sergeant Wayne has told me a lot of great stuff about you and your career," Robby Lechner continued in a far calmer, velvety voice that didn't seem to fit with the rest of his hulking frame. "Kinda cool to finally meet you… naw, I gotta get a shower before this shit digs into my skin and gives me a permanent tattoo… see ya, Miss Cosmick."

"See ya, Officer," Belle said with a grin as she watched Robby pull up in his drooping, filthy pants and shuffle off into the restroom. 'My my… that just turned my world upside down. The buff woman is the asshole and the Incredible Hulk with the buzz-cut and the cold eyes is the friendly one. Huh.'

Right on cue, Erica came down from the watch desk wearing her trademark stoic, closed mask of steely decisiveness. Belle used the opportunity to get up from the couch with her empty mug, but when she wanted to go into the kitchenette to wash it off, she was told otherwise by not only Erica but Josh as well:

"Don't bother, hon," Erica said, "we'll just put it into the dishwasher at the end of the shift. You're a guest here."

"That's right, Miss Cosmick," Josh said. "Nobody cares about the dirty dishes. Well, except Stu, but he isn't here."

Belle grinned and put the mug into the tray labeled 'To go!'. "I get it. What Stu doesn't know doesn't put his undies in a wad. Well, guys, I've had a ball, but I think it's time for me to skedaddle before I outstay my welcome. So… take care the rest of the day, Josh… Sarge," Belle said and winked at her partner.

"We will. Do you need a personal escort out to the Microbus? It's a long way out there," Erica said with a grin.

"Y'know, I think I do, yeah," Belle said and put out her arm like she was an old, old bird and not a spry sixty-three year old.

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Getting into the Microbus, Belle rolled down the window and looked left, then right, then left again. "Oh, Sergeant… is there a kiss involved anywhere in this deal? I mean, like, right now?"

"Oh, why not," Erica said and leaned in through the opened window to claim Belle's lips in a loving smooch. They stayed close for a little while until the need for a further kiss made the excess distance between them troublesome.

"Gee, thanks, Sergeant Wayne!" Belle said and put her fingers on the ignition key. She gave it a twist but nothing happened apart from an asthmatic cough from the engine. It wasn't unusual, so she waited for a few seconds before trying again. "Gawd, wait 'til I get home and tell-" - twist: cough, cough - "all my friends I wuz kissed by a-" - twist: splutter, splutter - "-tall, hunky, handsome, super-sexy…" - twist: cough, splutter - "Aw, shit!"

Erica took a step back and looked at the reluctant Microbus. "It won't start?"
"It won't start," Belle said and buried her face in her hands. "Now what? It's been starting A-OK all day long… of course, I can never find a gear when I need one, but at least it's been starting. It ain't starting," she groaned.

Three further attempts yielded nothing except a sore pinkie that came from Belle whacking the steering wheel. "Naw. It's fucked," she said, licking her pinkie to make the pain go away.

"Hop over in one of the cruisers… I'll give you a ride. We can call the mechanic once we get home," Erica said and opened the driver's side door.

Belle sighed and reached in under the passenger seat where she took the neon orange plastic binder with the CD and the contract. She bared her teeth in a grimace just thinking about what it could cost to fix whatever was wrong with the Microbus.

With eight hundred dollars tied up in the deal at Ruff Diamond, she didn't exactly have a heap of cash left. She remembered Erica offering to chip in, but the Microbus was her own responsibility and she'd never ask for a handout from her partner. "Yeah, thanks, baby," she said and climbed down from the colorful but oh-so temperamental vehicle.

With a grunt and a final glance at the recalcitrant VW, she and Erica walked over to the nearest black-and-white Charger and got in.

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CHAPTER 5

Thursday arrived so fast that Belle thought they had printed a wrong date on the Coulson Herald - that is, until Erica pointed out to her that it actually was Thursday, not Wednesday. Chuckling, Belle settled on getting through the small hill of pills that she needed to take each day, regardless of the name.

After digging her spoon into the lactose-free yogurt, she stopped and looked up at Erica who was busy with the sports section of the Herald. "Hon, you need to buy some groceries and the milk today. I can't leave the telephone. I've written a shopping list for you… I've pinned it to the inside of the front door so you won't forget it."

"Okay? Sure," Erica said while reading about the local baseball team that had suffered a humiliating defeat against their arch rivals from the next city. "Is anything wrong with your iPhone?"

"No, no… I'm just hoping to get at least half a dozen calls and I need all my paperwork and stuff to keep track of everything. Oh yeah, and the mechanic better call or else I'm gonna go down there and pester him all day."

"That'll work for sure," Erica mumbled out of the corner of her mouth.

"Not to mention the wanted ads 'searching for skilled musicians' I put up down at the supermarket… the bars… the Laundromat… you know, all the strategic places. Do you think I'll get any feedback, hon? Please say yes," Belle said, balancing the next spoonful of yogurt.

Erica lowered the newspaper and shot her partner a dazzling smile. "Oh, you'll get so many calls from musicians you won't know what to do with them. You can start a symphony orchestra."

"Maybe I should hold auditions, huh?"
"Maybe you should."

Belle chuckled and pushed her empty yogurt bowl away. Even while she was composing a suitable answer, her iPhone started ringing. When she realized she had forgotten it in the living room, she howled and jumped up from the kitchen chair. Her bones didn't care one bit about her urgency so she needed a brief moment to get her hip bone lined up with her pelvis.

A few choice words escaped her lips as she hobbled through the swinging door to get to the phone before whoever was calling gave up. "This is Daisy-Belle Cosmick, talk to me," she panted into the mouthpiece.

'Yeah, umm, hi…' a male voice said.

'This is Troy Tunney… I read your note down at the Laundromat. Says you need a bass player and a couple other musicians for a rock'n'roll recording project at Ruff Diamond?'

"That's right, Mr. Tunney," Belle said and hobbled over to the couch where she sat down with such caution that it looked she was trying to sit on a box of eggs without breaking any shells.

'Oh, I'm Troy.'

"Troy, okay. I'm Belle. So are you a bass player, a guitar man or a drummer?"

'Bass player. I got six years of experience doing garage bands and stuff. Rock and roll, heavy, punk, hard rock, classic rock and stuff. Right now I'm playing at Barney's with my little sister. She can pick a mean axe, and I think ya might be interested in that? She also sings pretty decent.'

"Oh, hell yeah… that's just what we need," Belle said and rubbed her aching hip. Cursing inwardly, she pulled up in her oversized sleeping t-shirt to look at the discoloration of her skin that never went away after her motorcycle accident in 1981. "Well, we don't need a singer except maybe as background, but we sure as shit need a drummer, a bass player and someone who knows their way around an amped guitar."

'We don't have a drummer, but you ain't never heard hard rock like my sister plays it, I'm tellin' ya.'

"Sounds mighty fine, Troy. Okay, I need to tell you up front that it's not gonna be a golden goose. We can only offer you three hundred bucks each for participating on the album, but you'll both get a credit."

'Three hundred bucks each? Mmmm…'

Belle smirked, knowing from the start the payment would be a problem. She had indeed squeezed her piggy bank to get the additional money needed to lure in the musicians who had the skills they would need for the project. Cheap hacks could be found under any rock, but she had enough experience with cheap hacks to know that they would only ruin everything around them. "Yeah, three hundred, Troy," Belle said, nodding slowly.

'Well, we were hopin' for a bit more, to be honest.'

"I understand, but it's just a little independent project, you know. We're not attached to a major label or anything," Belle said and folded down the t-shirt. The ugly section of her skin always made her realize she was getting old.

'Yeah…'

"You said you were working at Barney's? You'll still have plenty of time to go over there in the evenings and do your regular gigs. Ruff Diamond is in an alley off Chesney… just a couple of hundred yards from Main Street."
Erica came into the living room carrying a mug of coffee. She leaned against one of the sideboards and watched the
corner with great interest. Now and then, she took a sip of the coffee, but she never took her eyes off Belle's
face.

'And it wouldn't be possible to get five hundred each?'

"Five hundred bucks each?" Belle said and ran a hand through her graying hair. "No. No, I'm sorry."

Erica put down the mug in a hurry, strode across the living room carpet and into the master bedroom. Moments later,
she came back with her wallet and waved her bank card under Belle's nose.

Belle scrunched up her face in a mask of negative surprise, like someone had promised her a diamond ring only to
give her a smelly cheese instead. "Hell! No!" she mouthed, but Erica wasn't so easily defeated.

Sergeant Wayne proved her steely core by mouthing "Hell yes!" at Belle and smacking the plastic bank card down
onto the coffee table. Once her message had been delivered, she took a step back and crossed her arms over her
Coulson PD We're There When You Need Us -sweatshirt.

The money was too good to ignore, so Belle cleared her throat and held the telephone closer to her ear. "Uh, Troy…
I got my financial advisor on the other line and she says okay to five hundred dollars each for you and your sister."

'Cool! Uh… okay. Thank you. We're definitely interested, Miss Cosmick. When do you need us?'

Belle released the breath she had been holding and fell back against the backrest of the couch. "We'll be starting the
rehearsals at Ruff Diamond tomorrow at noon. At first, we're just gonna do a couple of our old songs so you can get
a feel for 'em. We have sheet mus
ic for everything. Tons and tons of sheet music," she said, glancing at the wooden
boxes that were lined up in a corner of the living room.

'Noon at the Ruff Diamond. Okay. My sister and I will be there. Oh, her name is Rebeccah but she'll only answer to
Rebel.'

"Rebel, huh?" Belle said with a chuckle.

'It's a woman thing.'

"Yeah, huh? Sounds mighty fine to me."

'Yeah. Hey, if you want to check us out, why don't you drop by Barney's tonight? Thursday's always a quiet evening
so we try a lot of different stuff.'

"I might do that, Troy. All right. See you then… you won't be able to miss us," Belle said with a knowing chuckle.

'Okay?'

"Yeah, yeah, you'll know what I mean when you see us. Bye for now," Belle said and closed the connection.

She put the phone away and locked eyes with Erica who was still standing with her arms across her ample chest.
They kept eye contact for a little while before Belle staggered to her feet and shuffled over to her partner. "Thank
you, baby. I owe you big time. I owe you four hundred bucks… I'll pay 'em back, you have my word."

"You can pay me back by A, giving me a kiss now, and B, kicking ass on that album. The Butterflies gonna fly,
dontchaknow," Erica said and pulled Belle into a hug.
"Yes, ma'am, Sergeant ma'am!" Belle said and immediately began paying back her loan by gnawing on Erica's mouth with the intensity of a desert sunburn.

Five seconds later, the iPhone rang again, and Belle rolled her eyes repeatedly. Sighing, she kissed Erica gently on the lips before she hobbled back to the table and picked up the phone. "Daisy-Belle Cos- oh, hi, Mr. Scott! Tell me, how's my beautiful, old Microbus?"

Later, Belle sat cross-legged on the floor in her den bopping to The Jimi Hendrix Experience's *Axis Bold As Love* that blasted from the vintage turntable. She had pulled over one of the wooden boxes - much to her back's outspoken annoyance - and was sorting through the sheet music.

She had created five piles for each of their old albums though she was in two minds whether or not to include songs from the last two. *Back On The Road* from 1977 had been riding the coattails of their biggest hit, *A Whale Of A Time*, and had done okay, but their last album, *Mirror Of The Future* from 1979 was still a sore spot with her.

When she had put the last piece of sheet music onto the pile belonging to *A Whale Of A Time*, she propped her head up on her arms and stared at the five stacks of music.

"Shit, we haven't even discussed which songs should go on the album," Belle mumbled to herself. She eyed a notepad on her desk behind her, but decided against drawing up a few titles on her own. "Naw, that can't be my decision alone. That's gotta be a democratic process or else it's uncool… but what about Mirror… that damn thing. Jeez, so much potential… so much fuckery. I still remember the review… I got stoned outta my skull that night to drown the disappointment…"

She looked up at the closet where she kept the scrapbook with the reviews. While Jimi Hendrix blasted away on the turntable reminding her that she was in fact one of the lucky ones when it came to drugs and overdoses, she inched over to the closet and quickly located the book that was still at the top of a pile from when she had showed it to Leaf.

The first few pages contained the good reviews; then the less good, then the final, horrible one. Belle stuck in her thumb between the pages while she practiced her thousand-mile stare. "Naw, I gotta torture myself some more," she continued and opened the book on the review of their 1977 album.

*1977 - Back On The Road*

*(Polyphonic)*

*(1977 Album Hot 100, #79)*

*A1. Back On The Road*

*A2. Chrome Wheels*

*A3. Mountain Man*

*A4. The Gospel According To Me*

*A5. Two Minutes Fifty Seconds*
B1. I Got It Bad This Time, Girl
B2. Jealous Heart
B3. White Line Blues
B4. Big Black Diesel
B5. This Ain't The End, She Said (And Then She Walked Away)

- "Daisy-Belle's Butterflies have been busy over the past two years since their surprise hit album A Whale Of A Time (it peaked at #31 on the 1975 Hot 100 album charts). They've toured extensively since then but have also found time to write and produce ten new songs that form this album, their fourth. Realizing that traditional folk rock has become far less popular now than two years ago, Daisy-Belle Cosmick and the other songwriters have turned to a style that's more reminiscent of Outlaw Country than pure rock, but the experiment has only been a partial success. The best songs ("Chrome Wheels", "Two Minutes Fifty Seconds", "Jealous Heart" and "White Line Blues") are made very much in the traditional style, with Two Minutes… being the highlight. Ms. Cosmick cleverly pokes fun at herself with the lyrics that say, "Gotta write this song. Can't be too long. The bodega beckons. Let's make it two minutes fifty seconds." Unfortunately, her characteristic voice isn't a good match with the softer, sappier songs and lyrics on this album ("Mountain Man", "The Gospel According To Me" and "I Got It Bad This Time, Girl"). A good album (not as strong as Whale) that, all in all, deserves to enter your record collection -- Bay City Observer, 9/25 1977."

Belle smiled wistfully at the mention of the jokey lyrics to Two Minutes Fifty Seconds. She had nearly torn out her hair because of that song. She and the Walrus had composed the basic melody structure in only a day, but the lyrics kept her up all night for a full week. In the end, she decided during a fierce, weed-laced brainstorming session to scrap what she had and start over as a satire on herself and her grotesque lack of skills.

Like the reviewer at the Bay City Observer had pointed out, her voice hadn't been a good match with the softer songs that had been written to avoid being called a Xerox band - one that could only copy what they had already done - but she had rock-solid proof in the shape of the demo CD that Chrome Wheels was as hot and strong as ever. That meant that Big Black Diesel and the title song Back On The Road would still work as well.

A knot formed in her stomach when she put an index finger onto the next page. Gulping down a bitter surge, she flipped the page and prepared herself for the scathing words she knew were coming.

1979 - Mirror Of The Future

(Polyphonic)

(Did not chart)

A1. Mirror, Mirror On The Wall
A2. Old-Fashioned Jukebox
"Ouch. Daisy-Belle's Butterflies reappear after a one-year hiatus that tragically saw a bandmember succumb to illness. What they fail to understand, or apparently even see, is that popular music has moved on quite severely in the time they've been away. Now, this isn't a rotten album as such, but the appeal will lie squarely with folk rock aficionados who have a hard time accepting that it isn't 1974 anymore - or even 1969, for that matter. I suppose the songs are well-produced, but they feel so out of date you might think the songwriters haven't discovered we're on the cusp of a new decade. Disco rules the pop world now, and on the B-side, they've tried to emulate current sounds and trends by adding their first ever synthesizer to their traditional bedrock-like sound mix. The result is an esoteric three-track mini-symphony that seems so out of character for the Butterflies that I have a strong feeling they weren't even involved in the production. They shouldn't have bothered. Two small stars out of six -- West Coast Chronicle, 10/2 1979."

"It still fuckin' hurts 'cos we put so much effort into the fuckin' thing… the first without Stephanie… we spent fuckin' days and nights in the studio to get the shit to sound right…" Belle mumbled as she read the page, "but the worst part is that the reviewer was right. That synthesizer shit blew chunks big time… how the hell we go suckered into adding it to the album, I'll never know. Fuck almighty, I need a friendly voice in my ear," she said and slammed the scrapbook shut.

Clambering to her feet, she sat down in the bamboo couch and took her iPhone. Leaf's number was quickly found, but it went to their answering service at once.

"Aw, shit," Belle mumbled. While she waited for the pre-recorded message to end, she leaned back to flake out on the couch. "Hi, Leaf, it's Belle. You guys need to find your best gear 'cos we're gonna have a night on the town. There's a pair of blues cats waiting for us at Barney's. I'll pick you up just before eight… in my fully-fixed Microbus, yessirree! See ya then."

Once the message had been delivered, she slipped the phone into her jeans pocket and draped an arm across her forehead. Her tranquil state only lasted for a few heartbeats, then her need to hear a friendly voice became too strong. "Maybe Erica's got time to talk," she said and immediately dug out the phone again.

'Hi, honey… you're calling early today. Is something wrong?' Erica's warm, friendly voice said at the other end of the line.

At once, Belle's mood improved and the knot that had formed in her stomach from reading the bad review unraveled and disappeared like the morning dew. She snuggled down and let her free hand play up under her loose t-shirt and across the aged skin of her tummy. "Hi, baby. No, nothing's wrong. I just wanted to hear your voice. What are you doing?"
'Paperwork.'

"Again? Didn't you do that, like, yesterday?"

'I have to do it every day, Belle.'

"Glad I'm not a cop… can you imagine the roll call in the morning?"

'Yes I can, actually. Listen, ah…'

"I know, I know… I'll get to the point. I got a suggestion for you and your officers, actually," Belle said and ran an index finger along the underside of her left breast. "I just phoned Leaf and the Walrus and invited them down to Barney's tonight at eight. How about you guys came down there like Starsky, Hutch and Huggy Bear? I mean, undercover, incognito, out of sight, disguised."

'I get the picture. Mmmm. That's not a bad suggestion, hon.'

"I know it's only Thursday, but…"

'No, it's a great suggestion. All right, we'll… uh… we'll definitely do that. Hey… are you trying to steal my job?'

Erica said in a voice that ran into the deepest register she could muster.

A wave of thrills splashed across Belle's chest at the sound of Erica's husky voice, and she needed a moment with her eyes closed to recuperate. "Oh my, Sergeant… will you please use that tone of voice one evening when we're wearing less than we are now?"

'I'll make a note of it. Listen, baby, I gotta go. Okay? I'll run your suggestion by my officers and then we'll hammer out the details. Love you.'

"Love you too… allllll over, baby. Mmmmuuu!"

Smiling from ear to ear, Belle put away the telephone and decided on the spot that she needed an itty-bitty nap where she would hopefully dream of husky police Sergeants and horny old hippie birds.

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At the exact same time in the open office of the Coulson PD stationhouse on Main Street, Erica leaned back on her swivel-chair to think long and hard about Belle's suggestion.

Chuckling, she swept aside a few pieces of paper of the response time statistics she was working on to look at her trusty notepad. On the page it was flipped open to, she had written 'On-site surveillance? - Plain clothes?' with her favorite ball point pen. She had even drawn a box around the words to give them extra weight.

"Great minds think alike… but I better not tell Belle she's thinking like a cop. Might give her a heart attack," she said and took the notepad - working out the statistics would have to wait.

As always, she was all alone on the first floor of the stationhouse, so she took the mug of coffee she had just brewed on their brand new machine and strode over to the staircase to inform her officers of the latest development.

Downstairs in the lobby, Josh van Eyck sat at the watch desk while Robby Lechner replaced one of the ancient anti-crime posters with one that came from a current campaign, a push to promote the neighborhood watch concept. The poster was designed with bright red text on a black background, and it contained an optical illusion that only became
visible when it was viewed from a certain distance: a pair of eyes concealed by a half-mask that were hiding in the double-O's in 'hood.'

"Sergeant, it's up… as you can see," Robby said, dusting off his hands. "Now that you're here, I need your advice on something."

Erica came to a stop and took a swig of her coffee. "Anything, Robby…?"

"Tell me… the font they used, the crooked text and those eyes… doesn't it look like we're trying to promote it rather than stop it? I mean, it's drawn to make the half-mask look cool, right?"

"Heh… you may have a point," Erica said and cocked her head to make it line up with the text.

"Yeah… well, it beats the old one. That was from 1992."

Erica chuckled and took another sip of her coffee. It was a running gag in the stationhouse that the former Chief Conrad Gallagher wasn't the world's most progressive man - many of the daily procedures and routines that he had insisted his officers carried out were outdated at best, and at worst directly opposing the current interpretations of the various laws and regulations.

"Hmm," she said and assumed her trademark look of steely authority. "Officers, I'm afraid I have to ruin your evenings tonight. We need to do some plain clothes surveillance. It's an all hands on deck operation."

The disappointment in the lobby was tangible, especially the long groan that emanated from Josh though he tried to hide it.

"Come inside and I'll present you with the details," Erica said and strode down towards the door to the guardroom without looking behind her.

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Robby, Josh and Stu sat side by side in the couch with Robby in the center so it wouldn't tip to either side. They glanced at each other wearing identical looks of 'ugh, this has all the signs of being an all-nighter.'

Erica stepped into the center of the guardroom and put her hands on her utility belt. She eyed her three officers warily but saw nothing but commitment to her and the force. That pleased her, but at the same time, she was annoyed that she would have to tell everything all over again when Kaye Bradley returned. She glanced at the clock which read a quarter to four. "When is Officer Bradley's patrol over?" she said in a no-nonsense tone.

"At five, Sergeant," Stu Burton said.

"All right, we obviously can't wait for that. I'll have to fill her in later. Very well. To recap, the establishment Barney's on Main Street has been the hotbed for most of the drug-related incidents the past two weekends. We suspect the owner, a Mr. Moore Bracken, is involved somehow, although he denies it. He has no priors and nothing on his rap sheet apart from a few parking offenses. In any case, tonight, we'll be visiting the bar in plain clothes to keep a firm eye on the wheelings and dealings that go on there."

An excited murmur rose from the three officers, but Erica put her hands in the air to quell the excitement before it could build too strongly. "Simmer down, men. We're not going there to drink beer and check out the hot stuff. We'll be alert and on the lookout for anyone who fits the general description we've been given. In other words, not the comic-book ruffian with scars and missing teeth, or even the stereotypical junkie. We'll be looking for someone who would instill confidence in the people he's selling to through his looks and manners. Although we do not have
specific info, my hunch is that he'll be well-dressed, well-mannered and generally a well-rounded individual. Also, he'll be by himself... no date. Any questions?"

"I have one, Sergeant," Josh said, holding his hand in the air. "Are you sure the bar is large enough for all of us? I mean, if we're too many, we may be spotted before."

"I'm sorry, Josh. If you want me to call your boyfriend so he can yell at me for being the big, bad Sergeant who keeps away his squeeze, I will. But we're all going," Erica said decisively.

Josh bared his teeth in a grimace but kept quiet.

"I have another question, Sergeant," Stu said and held up his hand.

"Stu?"

"Well, what if we're inundated with suspects? Well-dressed, well-mannered, well-rounded young men... that's true for a great deal of the college kids, in my opinion. Or at least, that was true during my time there. Also, should we extend the surveillance to beyond the bar if the suspect, or one of the suspects, leaves?"

"To the latter, yes," Erica said and shifted the weight to the other foot though she never took her hands off her belt. "If we spot someone who could be a good fit, the officer closest to the person should act like glue regardless of the suspect's position in or out of the bar. We may catch him in the act, or we may not, but if someone fits the description and behavior, we need to tail him to get the facts straight."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"Stu," Robby said, bumping shoulders with his foppish colleague. "Just because you wore horn-rimmed glasses, corduroy pants and tweed blazers in high school don't mean everybody did or do... ya know?"

"I'm well aware of that, Officer Lechner. I encountered plenty of sports jocks and other sorts of troublemakers during my school years," Stu said coolly.

Josh looked at them both and offered each a smirk, but it was wiped from his face when he realized that Erica had zoomed in on him with a stern look on her face.

"Very well," she said, looking at her men. "The operation begins at, oh, ten past eight this evening. By then, we'll be waiting outside the blues bar like any other interested patron. Once we're let in, we'll scatter and look like civilians out on a fun night. I hope you have sufficient plain clothes here, because we won't have time to go home and restock."

"Well, I do," Stu said and turned towards Robby to give him a pointed look. "A tweed jacket and a pair of corduroy pants to be exact. And a flannel shirt. And a black leather tie."

"Oh... okay," Robby said, rubbing his nose. "Uh, yeah... I got a sweatsuit... uh, from the Muscle Man Gym. I'll wear that."

Erica nodded and turned to the last of the three men. "Good. Josh?"

"Eh... jeans and a t-shirt... a kinda loud t-shirt advertising a pop group I'm sure you guys have never heard of. Oh yeah, I also got a windbreaker here, that's right. So... uh, yeah. I should be fine."
"Very well. Let's adjourn and resume our regular routines. Once Officer Bradley comes back, send her upstairs at once so she can be filled in," Erica said and turned around to leave.

"Yes, Sergeant. Oh… Sergeant Wayne?" Robby said, getting up from the couch. "What are you gonna wear?"

Erica turned back around and smiled at her colleague. "Now, that's on a need to know basis, Officer Lechner… and right now, you don't need to know. You'll see it when you see it."

As Erica walked out, she could hear the three men stick their heads together to come up with the wildest, most outrageous suggestion for her clothing: 'How about a business suit?' - 'No, a pant suit… gotta be a pant suit… maybe a skirt suit?' - 'Hell, no. The Sarge in a skirt? Get real. It's gonna be a go-go dress!' - 'Jesus, Robby! A go-go dress? We'd have to call in the SWAT guys to keep the wolves at bay!'

Chuckling to herself, Erica closed the door to the guardroom and strode up the staircase. She had just the right thing to wear, but it wouldn't fall into any of the mentioned categories - not by a long shot.

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At eight that same evening, Erica drove the repaired Microbus in from the suburbs and onto the first part of Coulson's central artery. Being a Thursday, Main Street wasn't exactly bustling with activity so they pretty much had the four-lane street to themselves; the only other traffic came in the shape of an SUV or two and the odd family station wagon.

She checked the rear view mirror and noted that Autumn Leaf and Oswald 'the Walrus' Jones were holding hands on the back seat looking perhaps a little uncomfortable about spending the entire evening with a herd of fuzz, blues bar or not.

Instead of making an illegal U-turn across the double lines, Erica drove down to the intersection at Main and Valentine and waited for the lights to change so she could begin the return leg. A parking spot presented itself fifty yards further down from Barney's Barmy Blues Bar that already saw a decent crowd waiting in line outside.

After she had switched off the engine, Erica turned around in the seat and mussed Belle's jeans-clad knee. "This is it… doesn't happen too often we go out like this, does it?" she said, looking at her partner's cool windbreaker and her cute, expectant face.

"No," Belle said, eyeing Erica's undercover outfit. "But if you wore that a bit more often, I think we would… hubba hubba," she said, finding it irresistible to run her fingers up and down Erica's endless thighs.

"Oh, don't be silly," Erica said and looked down at her pale green, flared jeans, her dark blue Un-Da-Co-Vah Poh-Leese Of-Fi-Cer t-shirt and her dark green Levi's denim jacket that carried a large, colorful American Eagle patch on the back.

If anyone had told her a short year earlier that she would be wearing hippie duds - and loving it for its comfortable fit - she would have arrested that person for making slanderous remarks. She and Belle had been in a thrift shop to find a vintage product that Belle had been looking for when the jeans and the jacket had practically begged Erica to buy them. The t-shirt was bought new at a later date because it was simply too good to skip over.

"Are you guys okay back there?" Erica said, putting her arm over the backrest of the first row of seats.

Leaf nodded, but the smile on her face wasn't as strong as usual. She wore a subdued, purple dress with a silver belt that accentuated her slim waist. As always, her fingernails were painted in the colors of the rainbow, and she wore a peace symbol stud in her left ear.
The Walrus had put on his good boots and his almost new pair of black jeans that went well with his black and red ZZ Top Afterburner t-shirt. His battered leather cowboy hat was still firmly perched on top of his gray locks. "Hey, girl," he said, snuggling up next to his wife, "just stick close to the Walrus tonight and no harm will come to you. Okay? I know it's kinda weird to share space with the fuzz, but they're sorta cool people. And we're definitely cool people. Right? There won't be no negative waves tonight, honey, I promise."

"I hope so. Love ya," Leaf said and reached across the bench seat to kiss her husband on the lips.

"Awww!" Belle said, hurriedly pulling Erica close so everybody could share the loving. "Com'over here, my Big Bad Bear, it's kissin' time!"

Once she had been thoroughly kissed, Erica hopped out of the Microbus and strolled around the front to open the center door. She casually glanced up and down Main Street to check out the other people there while Leaf and the Walrus climbed out. Although several young men were present, nobody pinged her radar the way she expected the dealer to do.

From the other side, a group of three men and a woman came strolling towards the Microbus, looking like they were just out for a fun night on the town.

Or rather, that had been the plan, but when Erica glanced at her colleagues, she had to stifle a groan at the sight of the four people who were striding along like they had just been transferred over from the Police Academy.

Robby's large frame and square head in particular stuck out among the far more casual partygoers like a pair of sore thumbs, but Josh and Stu weren't much better in their Frankie Goes To Hollywood t-shirt and tweed jacket, respectively. The only one of the four who looked the part was Kaye Bradley who wore a surprisingly classy ensemble of black slacks, a black spaghetti-strap top and a white bolero jacket that tempered her natural buffness. Her regular ponytail remained, but she was wearing just the right amount of makeup to look different.

Leaf only needed a single glimpse of their escort before she began to snicker. The tension melted from her face when she realized just how silly the fuzz looked out of uniform, and she had to put a hand across her mouth in order not to laugh out loud. "I'm sorry, Rikka… but your crew is looking a little… a little…"

"Like a buncha damn goofballs," Erica said with a nod. "Yeah. Had a hunch they would."

The two groups met in the middle and checked each other out like the Sharks and the Jets would have. Unseen by most - except Erica - Robby Lechner dug into his pocket to find a ten dollar bill that he slipped into Josh's hand as a result of the bet he had lost regarding Erica's outfit.

"Loosen up, guys," Erica said, hooking her arm inside Belle's. "We're here for the party, right?"

"Right, Ser… Erica," Josh said, receiving a nudge in the back by Robby for nearly slipping up.

Kaye grunted, Stu adjusted his black leather tie and Erica rolled her eyes. "All right, then. Let's go. There's a line building already and we don't want to be late."

The entire group strolled back along the sidewalk to join the tail end of the line going up to the main entrance of Barney's. From inside the bar, the music was already playing, and Belle's experienced ears knew at once it was live. A bass guitar solo dum-dam-dummed up and down the board showing off the player's skills.

"Dude," the Walrus said, leaning in towards Belle's ear, "that's a pro. Listen to that!"
"I'm listenin', I'm listenin'! Holy shit, I hope that's Troy… the guy I hired," Belle said, nodding her head to the beat. A wah-wah guitar joined in and followed the bass solo perfectly like the musicians had played together for years. "Aw hell, and that better be his sister…” she said, craning her neck to try to look beyond the row of people ahead of her.

The line was going too slowly for Belle's tastes, but she knew the best way to get kicked off it by the bouncers was to make herself a nuisance, so she stayed under Erica's wing.

Erica eyed the many young women ahead of, and behind her own group. Most of them were busy with their smartphones or snickering wildly, but a few were more serious. The cheery ones all wore pale clothing and the serious ones all wore dark clothing. No news there, Erica thought and cast a thought back to her own days in high school where the pattern had been repeated ad nauseam.

Using her superior height, she kept a watchful eye on the young men in the line. Some had the right age, some had the right looks, some had both, but most of those were with a girl. One neatly-combed young man in a neutral windbreaker had the look of being an Ivy League kid among the middle-class people. He was ten spots ahead of her, and she decided to give him a closer inspection once they were inside.

Several of the young men eyed her right back, and a large percentage of those either winked at her or mouthed something that she had very little use for.

On the street, two cars nearly collided though they had the abandoned Main Street to themselves. A symphony of honks followed that made everyone in the line turn to gawk. When Erica looked back at the head of the line, the young man in the windbreaker was gone. Grunting, she performed a thorough sweep of the surrounding area and eventually came to the conclusion the young man had slipped in out of turn.

The bouncer taking care of business at the door was a meatloaf of a man. His shaven, tattooed head seemed to run directly into his upper body without a visible neck, and his considerable belly that stretched his black t-shirt almost beyond the breaking point acted as an effective roadblock. He only spoke in a growly monotone as he took the money from the people in line and gave them a small slip of paper and a stamp on the back of their left hand in return.

By the time it was Erica and Belle's turn, the bouncer eyed the aging hippies cautiously. His meaty lips were already on their way back into forming a "Get lost" when he noticed Sergeant Wayne standing tall in the middle of the group giving him a steely glare. With his suspended parole violation weighing heavily on his mind, his demeanor changed to that of a lapdog and he hurriedly stamped the entire group's hands and gave them a drinks coupon each without taking any money.

Once they were inside, Belle pulled Erica down towards her to be able to be heard over the live music that played from the stage. "What the hell was that all about? It's supposed to be ten bucks at the door…"

"A couple of weeks ago, we caught him scouting out a supermarket. I gave him a final warning. The next time he screws up, he goes back into the state slammer to serve his full sentence," Erica said into Belle's ear.

"Ohhh… yeah, that would do it."

Barney's Barmy Blues Bar was rocking. Most of the tables were already fully booked, and the bar was besieged by a thick layer of young men and women who were trying to get their free introductory drink. The racket was deafening, and the two musicians on the stage were wisely taking a breather from the heavier stuff to simply play a pop instrumental favorite while everyone got settled in.
Belle, Leaf and the Walrus were right at home in the melee and steered over to the only remaining free table near the stage, but Erica's troops seemed hopelessly lost. Robby, Josh, Stu and Kaye went their own ways like they had agreed upon, but somehow ended up in the same spot all over again.

Erica decided to leave them be - after all, they were responsible adults. Instead of wasting mind capacity thinking about her colleagues, she strolled over to the bar counter and put down the four drinks coupons they had been given.

The bartender turned out to be Moore Bracken, the owner of Barney's, and he wasn't slow in finding a tray and four shot glasses to appease the Sergeant. A bottle containing a black liquid that smelled of licorice was held over the glasses, and Moore filled them to the rim with an expert's touch. Smiling nervously, he took the four drinks coupons and swept them down into a plastic bag behind the counter.

Erica returned the smile and took the tray. The road back to Belle's table was an obstacle course, but she managed to get back without spilling a drop. As she distributed the four shot glasses, she sniffed the dark liquid to verify the contents.

"It's vodka and crushed licorice hard candy, honey," Belle said, holding her drink. "I can take yours if you don't want it."

"Yeah, go ahead. I want to keep a clear mind," Erica said and pushed out the free chair. Before she had time to sit down, she found herself face to face with the neatly-combed Ivy League kid in the windbreaker that she had lost sight of out front. The two people looked intently at each other, but unfortunately, Mr. Ivy League mistook Erica's close scrutiny of him for something else entirely.

He reached for her sculpted rear end to offer her a proper greeting; one that would not only say 'hello,' but 'meet you in the restroom in a little while?'

"Don't," Erica said in a tone of voice that left no room for misunderstanding.

A moment later, the Ivy League fellow disappeared into the crowd like the devil had been on his tail. Grunting, Erica looked around to see if anyone else needed her advice, but everyone kept their distance and she eventually sat down.

Belle hadn't noticed the unfortunate incident - her eyes were firmly fixed on the two musicians up on the stage who were getting ready to start their real set.

Troy was in his late twenties and projected a somewhat slovenly, scruffy look with a three-day stubble and long hair halfway down his back that was held in place by a ball cap that was on backwards. He wore black skinny jeans and a black t-shirt with a punk rock design that looked like a dog had been sick all over it. His underarms and hands were heavily tattooed save for his left wrist where he wore a wristwatch encased in a broad leather band.

Although his bass guitar was an older model Rickenbacker, it was still working at its peak which was a sign of a musician understanding that his instrument needed to be pampered like a baby to stay alive.

The pop instrumental ran out and the din of the crowd rose to fill the void created by the lack of music. Troy and Rebel glanced out at the spectators almost like they were looking for someone, but the spotlights installed in the ceiling that pointed at the stage made it difficult for them to discern any faces. They stuck their heads together and whispered a short sentence before Rebel took a step back and began playing the intro to Lurking In The Darkness, an uptempo hard rock anthem from the late 1970s.

When Troy joined in on his bass, Belle slammed Erica's vodka licorice shot and studied the young woman intently.
Rebeccah 'Rebel' Tunney was twenty-four at the most, but she played the guitar like a full-blown pro. The plectrum flew across the strings to create a massive soundscape of screeching, harmonic, disharmonic, distorted, thunderous tones that came forth with the greatest of ease.

The spiky-haired Rebel wore unlaced basketball boots, low-sitting khaki cargo pants held up by a canvas belt with a skull-shaped buckle, and a black AC/DC t-shirt where the sleeves had been torn off. Like her brother, her arms were tattooed, only to a lesser extent. She wore distinct Goth makeup with plenty of black eyeliner and a strangely colored lipstick.

The young woman wore a rainbow-colored sweatband on her left wrist, and that made Belle look back up at her somewhat androgynous face. She knew the symbol had become a popular accessory among the allies, but she thought it would be a fun coincidence if Rebel really did play for the right team, so to speak.

Rebel shared many facial features with her brother - nose, lips and cheeks mostly - but her face was softer and friendlier than that of Troy. They both had charming smiles and vibrant, green eyes, but Rebel was just that bit more attractive on every level.

Belle leaned in towards the Walrus and poked him in the side. "Dude… what do you think?"

"Well… not sure I dig their garb, Belle… but the girl can certainly play a mean axe, that's a fact. The bass player is fab as well. Leaf?"

Autumn Leaf was sitting with her hands partially covering her ears. She only noticed she had been spoken to when the Walrus mussed her neck. "Huh? Oh… they're loud!"

"So were we back then," Belle said with a giggle that couldn't be heard over the racket from the musicians. She cast a glance at Erica whose face seemed to be just a tad too passive for the Sergeant to be enjoying herself. "Baby? Are you bored out of your skull, or still on the lookout for someone?"

"Still on the lookout… but it's too crowded for our operation to be effective," Erica said, leaning into Belle's ear. "Stu was right… ninety percent of the guys are clean-cut, neat people. It could be any of them. It was a good thought to come here, but… eh."

Under the table, Belle slipped a hand over to Erica's leg and caressed the green jeans all the way up and down the thigh. "I see your point. Your guys and my guys are the oddest-looking people in here! Anyhow, I got what I came for, that's for dang sure. These cats are worth every buck we threw at ‘em. Can't wait to jam with them tomorrow… holy shit, that's gonna be so good!"

Up on the stage, Troy and Rebel slowed down their frantic pace and set off on a sweaty, gritty, lowdown tour of the blues rock standards starting with Muddy Waters' immortal Mannish Boy which made the spectators clap and cheer. Unusually, it was Rebel who called the lead while Troy took care of the response, but her growly voice made it work.

Hearing the gravelly pipes of the female singer, Belle put her fingers in her mouth and let out a loud whistle. "Holy fuck, this is almost too good to be true…" she said to no one in particular.

Right on cue, Happy Hour began and the layers of people at the bar grew exponentially in a matter of minutes. One part of the audience clapped and whistled to the music, and the other fought a running battle at the bar to get their requirements fulfilled while there was still cheap beer on tap to be had.

Erica pushed her chair back and crouched down next to Belle's ear. "Listen, you guys want a beer or something? I need to get a status update from my officers."
The Walrus had overheard the conversation and nodded back at Erica - Leaf shook her head politely.

Belle grabbed hold of her Big Bad Bear's long digits and swung their arms back and forth. "I could use a beer, baby. Just a little one."

"Yeah, well... I think one size fits all around these parts," Erica said as she looked at the people who came back from the bar counter carrying two, three or even four plastic cups filled to the rim with golden, frothy beer. "Anyway, I'll see what I can do," she said and started digging a tunnel through the rest of the crowd.

Almost up at the bar, Erica changed course when she saw Kaye Bradley sitting by herself at a table with no less than three full cups of beer in front of her. Someone dropped a cup of beer on the floor, and the yellow puddle spread quickly from the unfortunate man's table to the next, creating even more hysteria. Erica calmly stepped over the puddle and carried on. "Kaye," she said once she got to her officer's table. "What's up with all that beer?"

"Ah, I met some of my guy friends, Sergeant," Kaye said. She was busy dabbing a handkerchief against her damp, shiny forehead to keep the worst of the perspiration off it. "They seem to insist on giving me beers... I haven't told anyone I'm working so they think I'm off-duty. I'm being groomed by three potential boyfriends right now... or so they think. They're waiting to see which beer I'll start drinking from, then they'll move in for the sweet thrill."

Erica chuckled and looked at the plastic cups. They were all fresh, as witnessed by the droplets of condensation that ran down the sides. "Tell you what, Kaye... I'm going to solve your problem by abducting all three. That should do it."

Kaye laughed and offered Erica a friendly look and a little smile.

"On a more serious note," Erica said and glanced around the happy spectators, "have you seen anyone that would fit the description?"

"Partially. I've been thinking about the bass player, Sergeant. I know he doesn't fit the profile looks-wise, but it wouldn't be that farfetched to think that he could be our man. I mean, he's popular with the young women... look up at the stage. There's a handful of them right now lapping up his music. He isn't clean-cut but he's got them eating out of his hand... figuratively speaking, of course."

"Mmmm-yeah," Erica said, rubbing her nose while she looked at Troy and then down at Belle's easily recognizable figure sitting just below the stage. She scrunched up her face, hoping that it wasn't the bass player after all - not only would she get into hot water herself for hiring them, Belle would be unspeakably disappointed and it could jeopardize the entire album, not to mention threaten the good mood in the Wayne-Cosmick household. "Good point. Okay, I'll take these three, Kaye. Uh... talk to you later," she said and wrapped her long fingers around all three plastic cups at once.

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"Here ya go, baby... Walrus," Erica said and put down all three cups at the center of the table. "Free of charge courtesy of Kaye Bradley and several hopeful Joes looking for a good time."

The Walrus had already found his wallet but Erica shook her head and pushed the beer over to him. "Naw, free of charge like I said. They didn't cost me a dime."

"Thanks, Sarge!" Oswald said, grinning as he took the first swig that inevitably left froth all over the mustache that had given him his nickname.

Belle leaned over with the intent to say something into Erica's ear, but the racket from the stage and the audience was too loud, so she waved her hand in dismissal and concentrated on her free beer instead.
The handful of young women that Kaye Bradley had pointed out at the stage had grown in size to be a group who all bobbed up and down to the enticing rhythms while looking up at the two musicians. Some of them were provocatively dressed, and none of them seemed to be concerned with hiding their assets.

The more Erica looked at the scene, the more she realized she may have been searching in the wrong place. The young women weren't strutting their stuff for Troy but for the cool gal Rebel. Each time the guitar player went up to the edge of the stage and flashed her charming smile, she got a squealing cheer in return. Each time the guitar player performed a particularly difficult riff, she got a squealing cheer in return. Each time the guitar player as much as batted an eyelid or wagged her tongue, she got a squealing cheer in return.

Erica furrowed her brow and studied the guitarist closely. She was only a few years older than the girls at the stage as well as those who had already fallen under the influence of the drug. She was charming, she was cute in that boyish sort of way, she had the complete admiration of the youngsters because of her skills, age, looks and attitude - and above all, the problems had begun the week following her debut at Barney's.

Grunting, Erica dug into her jeans pocket to find her phone. It would be out of the question to make a call inside the blues bar, so she leaned in towards Belle and tugged at her sleeve. "Listen, I need to go outside and call someone. I'll be back in five minutes."

"Okay!" Belle said and offered Erica a thumbs-up.

"By the way… the guitar player is Rebeccah Tunney, right?"

"Rebeccah Tunney, yeah, but she'll only answer to Rebel."

"Thank you," Erica said and kissed Belle on the cheek.

Outside on Main Street, Erica had to walk a good fifty yards away from the bar to be able to hear herself think. When the cool evening air hit her steaming hot body, a wave of goosebumps traveled across her skin, and she closed the Levi's jacket around her to keep warm. She quickly found the number she was looking for in the registry and held the phone to her ear.

'Dispatch, go ahead,' a male voice said.

"Dispatch, this is Sergeant Wayne. Get someone from upstairs to do a lookup and a printout of Rebecca, Re-b-e-c-c-a-h, Tunney, T-u-n-e-y. Goes by Rebel, r-e-b-e-l. Mid-twenties. Lookup requested due to suspicions of possession with the intent to sell, and suspicions of involvement with organized distribution of illegal substances."

'Rebecca Tunney. Goes by Rebel. Copy. It'll be on your desk in ten minutes, Sergeant Wayne."

"Excellent. Thank you, dispatch."

Erica slipped the phone into her pocket and looked up at the evening sky where the first twinkling stars were peeking through the thin clouds. If she was wrong, Belle would be annoyed with her for investigating someone on a weak hunch, but if she was right, there would be hell to pay for everybody involved. Sighing, she strolled back to the blues bar and the meatloaf bouncer.
CHAPTER 6

Friday was overcast and a threat of rain hung in the air, but that didn't bother Belle in the least. After finding first gear on only her second attempt, she let the VW Microbus rumble up over the tall curb at the entrance to the alley housing the recording studio. The old bus creaked and groaned as its springs worked overtime, but it eventually settled down and chugged along the alley towards the low, pale concrete building.

"Dude! What was that, Mount shittin' Helena?" the Walrus groaned as he kneeled on the back seat with both hands protecting their precious instruments that were stored in the back like in the good old days. As the Microbus had tilted to get up on the curb, everything had shifted dangerously.

"Naw! A curb!" Belle said over her shoulder.

"Some curb," the Walrus mumbled, winking at Autumn Leaf who was busy holding a plastic bag with all the basic amenities - plenty of herbal tea leaves for Belle, incense sticks and meditation beads for herself, and a cheap pulp novel for the Walrus that he could read during the inevitable periods of waiting for someone, something, or both.

Belle pulled into the same parking slot she had used the first time she had been at the studio. As she turned off the engine, she caught sigh of a young man in well-worn clothes who seemed to be loitering around the alley holding a piece of paper.

Shrugging, she opened the door but turned around to address her back seat passengers before she climbed down.

"Guys, I'm just gonna go inside for two seconds to tell Irwin we've arrived and get things straight and stuff, okay? Please wait here until I get back… there's a funny guy loitering over there and I don't wanna leave the instruments unattended."

"Works for me, Belle," Leaf said and promptly grabbed the Walrus' hand so they could snuggle while they were alone.

Just as Belle set foot on the alley's uneven asphalt, the loiterer shuffled over to her. As a reflex, she closed the car door behind her. Behind the man - who was wearing torn jeans and an Oakland Raiders hoodie - she could see a rusty, old open-topped Jeep approaching the studio from the other end of the alley.

"Hi… Daisy-Belle Cosmick?" the young man said, reading from the piece of paper.

Belle realized that it was one of the flyers she had put up around town and released a nervous breath. Even so, she didn't move from the colorful Microbus. "Could be. Who wants to know?" she said, looking at the twenty-something's scruffy appearance.

"I do. I'm Maurice Birnfeld… I'm a drummer. I read the wanted ad and decided to come down here and check it out. I was here earlier but the producer threw me out and said I should wait for you out here."

"Yeah, huh?" Belle said and studied the young man. He was unshaven and had greasy, shoulder-length hair that had been slicked back. He wore bright yellow, fingerless bicycle gloves and a pair of Rokkstar basketball boots where the neon green laces definitely weren't original. His hoodie seemed threadbare as did his jeans - although in their case, they had been shredded on purpose.

"Yeah."

Belle furrowed her brow. Over the years, she had met every kind of man, from the saints to the sinners, including all sorts of unsavory types, but she couldn't find a box to place Maurice Birnfeld in. It didn't help that the fashion for the young people seemed to dictate they should appear like they had been sleeping in their clothes for two weeks in a
homeless shelter. "Yeah, okay... well... what kind of experience do you have?" she said and glanced down at the flyer.

"I've played in a garage band for the past two years."

"Mmmm... okay," Belle said and most of all wanted to scratch her hair like in the movies when the heroine couldn't figure something out. Before she had time to come up with a plan, they were joined by Troy and Rebel who strolled along the alley carrying their instruments that were well-protected in quilted covers.

Troy looked much the same as he had done the evening before, but the young Rebel had turned into a respectable mid-twenty-something woman in blue jeans with a brown leather belt, a blue t-shirt with the words Free (lunch) At Last printed on the front, and a baby blue windbreaker. Her hair was still spiky, but she had lost the garish, Goth-like makeup she had worn during the concert.

"Hi!" Belle said, shuffling past the potential new drummer. "We didn't get a chance to see each other last night. Awesome set, by the way... real groovy shit! I'm Daisy-Belle Cosmick, Belle among friends. I'm the one who's trying to organize this entire pile of confusion," she said and put out her hand.

In one, fluid motion, Rebeccah 'Rebel' Tunney cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. It was clear she had expected someone far younger, not to mention less hippie-like, but she didn't let it show for too long. After shifting her Fender Stratocaster replica to her other hand, she reached out towards Belle. "Hi, I'm Rebeccah Tunney. Everybody calls me Rebel. So... uh... but we're still here to record an album, right?"

"We sure iz! C'mon, lemme introduce you to my band!" Belle said with a grin. She turned around to wave at Leaf and the Walrus, but suddenly remembered that she had forgotten all about the new drummer who was still loitering around the Microbus. "Uh... first of all, this is... uh..."

"Maurice," the young man said.

"Maurice, right. 'Scuse me, Mista. He could be our drummer. Anyway," Belle said and waved her old friends out of the Microbus. When Leaf and the Walrus shuffled around the rear of the bus, Belle pulled them over to the Tunneys. "This here's Autumn Leaf, the best harmony singer you can get... the best, dearest friend you can ever hope to have, full stop. And this is her husband Oswald 'the Walrus' Jones. Best damn fiddler this side of the Texas Panhandle. I'll bet you can figure out why he's got that nickname. We're the Butterflies! Guys, this is Troy and Rebel Tunney."

Handshakes flew back and forth until everyone had shook with everyone else.

It was obvious the younger musicians studied the older musicians and vice versa, but everybody seemed to realize that if someone had the jazz, it didn't matter a damn thing what the birth certificate said.

"Maurice," Belle said and waved the young man over, realizing that she had forgotten him all over again. "Come in with us. You're gonna get a tryout 'cos we really need a drummer."

As if on cue, the brown steel door opened and Irwin, the producer, stepped out with another man in tow. The second man - who was in his early twenties - was a mirror opposite of Irwin. Not only was he slightly overweight and wore a FeelbOP ball cap that sat crooked on his shaved head, he wore a pair of white Nikes and a royal blue sweatsuit that seemed to be a size too large for him, reminiscent of the baggy style so popular among the inner-city hip-hoppers.

"Oh, hey! Whoa, this is massive, bro!" Irwin said at the sight of the many visitors. "Welcome to Ruff Diamond, everybody! Far out, look at all of you... aw, this is gonna be so groovy. Hey, bro... uh, Belle, I've sourced a drum set for ya... not the world's largest or flashiest, but everything's there and it works."
"Yeah? Sounds mi' ty fine, Irwin," Belle said, slipping into her old persona. She walked over to the producer and shook his hand with the traditional hippie handshake that ended in a slap, a hook and finally a thump. "This fella here is auditioning for the vacant spot of drummer for The Butterflies. Ain't ya?"

Maurice nodded.

"And these cats there are the bass man and the axe-woman, respectively," Belle said, gesturing at Troy and Rebel. "And who's your wingman, Irwin?"

The man in the hip-hop sweatsuit stepped forward and put out his hand. "Cuz J-Rox, hiya. I'm the assistant sound editor… that's a fancy title for cable monkey. I wire the mics and all that stuff. I make sure everything is running okay."

"Fine, fine… I'm Daisy-Belle Cosmick, Belle will do. Okay… hey, everybody! You wanna go inside and play some rock and roll?!" Belle cried with her hands high up in the air.

The cheer that greeted her proved that everyone else was excited, too, and the whole crew shuffled through the steel door and into the Ruff Diamond Studio.

Belle went last to shepherd everyone else inside, but she hadn't even made it over the threshold before her iPhone rang. As she checked it, the caller ID said it came from Erica, so she turned around and shuffled back out onto the parking lot. "Hi, baby! What's up?" she said, studying the area surrounding the studio.

'Hi, Belle. Listen, do you have time for a little heart to heart?'

"That sounds serious… Jeez, honey, I'm sorry, I really don't," Belle said and kicked at a pebble. The small stone skipped across the alley and disappeared into the rough underneath a mesh fence. "We're right in the middle of setting up the whole thing… I know it's always me who calls you and begs to chat 'cos I'm lonely, but… shit, I really don't have the time right now, honey-bunny."

'Well, it's something we need to talk about…'

To prove Belle's point, the steel door opened and Irwin stuck his head out holding a long list of things they needed to go through before they could start rehearsing. When he spotted her, he pointed at the list.

Smirking, Belle waved at him and turned her back to the studio. "So… uh… can you give me the highlights? You're not ill, are you?"

'No, it's job-related."

"Oh… uh…"

'No, forget it. I'll pop over later today instead. Would that work?'

"But of course it would, baby! The studio is real easy to find… just take the alley off Chesney and drive for about three hundred-"

'I'll find it, Belle. See ya then… love you."

"Love you too, honey… mmmua," Belle said and closed the connection. She scrunched up her face like she didn't have a clue what that had been about. Shrugging, she put the iPhone in her pocket and shuffled inside.
Inside the studio, all the musicians had pulled out their instruments and were giving them a fine tune to prepare for the first rehearsals. The Walrus strolled around the back with his beloved fiddle under his chin playing a song that seemed to consist of independent notes but very little melody. Troy and Rebel were studying the sheet music intently, pointing out various things to each other and testing them at once. Leaf had the first incense stick going and waved it around to spread positive energy and to create a sphere of kaiwani ameera that no evil spirits or bum notes could pass. At the back, Maurice Birnfeld tried to appear cool behind the drum set, but he didn't look at home at all when faced with the professionalism of the other musicians.

"Mary had a little lamb," Belle said into her microphone that had been set up roughly in the middle of the studio in the same pattern they had used on the stage for forty years. The Walrus would stand behind her and to the right, Leaf would be directly behind her, and Troy and Rebel would be to her left. The drums had to be put at the very back because of their greater volume.

'Okay… and now T,' J-Rox said through the recording studio speakers.

"Terrible Tawny twice took two tussies," Belle said with a giggle.

'Excellent… the final one, S,' J-Rox said after giving Belle a thumbs-up.

"Sister Sara straddled smokin' Sunny's super-sexy… naw I better stop there… wouldn't wanna scare the kiddies," Belle said and snickered out loud. The others in the studio returned the snicker, especially Rebel who winked at the older woman.

'Works like a dream, Belle,' Irwin said, leaning over the younger man inside the mixing room. 'All mics are set up and verified. If you wish, you can jam a little… we'll be recording everything from now on so we won't miss anything. Okay?'

"Ace, Irwin," Belle said and gave the producer a thumbs-up. Turning around, she put her hands in the air to get everyone's attention. It worked, and the rest of the crew eventually simmered down. "All right. We're about to embark on an epic journey here. It's still too early to say what'll happen, we could be on Apollo 13 for all we know, but hey… I just want everyone to know that if you play with your heart, the magic will follow. Okay? We're here to cut an album and have one hell of a good time while doing so. Nuff talkin', let's summon the music gods and get started on the damn thing… boys and girls, let's kick some ass!"

Everybody cheered and got ready in their positions. "Hey, Belle," Troy said, holding his Rickenbacker ready, "how 'bout a fast blues jam, E-flat. Rebel and I'll start, you guys can come in on top with some improv."

"Works a treat, Troy," Belle said and offered the bass player a two-fingered V for victory-symbol.

The bass player and his sister briefly looked at each other before the Rickenbacker came alive with the same blues piece they had played the night before at the bar. Soon, he was running up and down the board with his sister's Fender replica wah-wah'ing merrily.

Belle caught the bug at once and started shimmying around on the spot. It didn't take her long to come up with nonsensical lyrics that she growled, scatted, crooned and bellowed as a top layer to the instrumental base. Behind her, Leaf came along and added her crystal clear harmonies that sent everything and everyone up another level, but the Walrus couldn't really find a good spot for his fiddle so he remained passive until the next jam.

At the back, Maurice was struggling to keep up with the unpredictable nature of the blues jam and was repeatedly caught on the wrong foot - or rather, wrong stick.
Breaking away from her microphone, Belle shimmied back to the drum set and kept a close eye on the drummer's progress. When the playing didn't improve, she cast a glance at Troy who shook his head.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, that was a good first shot at it," Belle said and made a time-out signal with her hands that made the others stop playing. "Okay... uh... let's try one of our old songs. Walrus, let's do one you can follow. How about, uh... Biding My Time, that's got a great solo you can roll with. Troy, Rebel, that's in the third pile. You won't have much to do in that one."

Rebel crouched down and thumbed through the stack of sheet music until she found the correct one. Once the sheet was on the stand, she pulled a chair over and sat down with the Fender replica in her lap and ready to play. Studying the notes, she soon found the appropriate cue. "Hey, Belle...?" she said with her finger pressed against the spot on the sheet music.

"Yeah?" Belle said from the other side of the studio.

"Since we're only jamming, wouldya mind if I played your part this pass? You know, to get a feel for it?"

Belle grinned and shuffled over to the young woman. "No worries, Rebel. May I offer a suggestion? Make it dirty. That's a protest song so it can't be too polished. Give it a little edge... think hangover, bloodshot eyes, shitty job, no money, no future. Get it?"

Rebel smiled broadly at the singer and promptly pushed back the chair to stand up straight in an aggressive stance. Looking down at the sheet music, she found the right grip and got set. "Ready when you guys are," she said, looking up at everybody.

"Let's do it!" Belle said and shuffled over to a table by the wall where they kept all their gear. While she unscrewed the cap of a bottle of mineral water and took a few sips, Troy opened the round. The Walrus put his back into the fiddle and let it create magic as the leading voice in the old protest song about a man at an assembly line who only had an empty house to go home to.

After the introductory phase and the Walrus' first block of playing, Rebel went to work on her guitar. She dirtied up the song so hard it at times didn't even resemble the original work, but Belle loved what the young woman was doing with it. During the center part of the song, Rebel eased off and played it as-was with the result that it became curiously flat. The two women locked eyes and nodded at each other - it was much better dirty.

Towards the end, the Walrus came back strong for his solo that really allowed his fiddle to create soft, warm sounds that swept around the studio and made everyone smile. Rebel joined in with the dirty voice but she kept it low so it wouldn't overpower the crisper sounds from the fiddle.

The only fly in the ointment was Maurice's inability to keep the beat for even that simple song. The man in the Oakland Raiders hoodie was red-faced and sweaty, and worse than that, he was erratic.

Belle didn't want to be the heel so early in the process, but when she looked at her associates, she saw annoyance written clearly on everyone's faces. She knew that problems would only grow if they weren't dealt with in time, so after gulping down the last of the mineral water, she went back to her microphone. "You guys out there in the mixing room, Irwin, J-Rox, save what he have and take five, okay? We got something we need to discuss in here that we don't want printed."

'Okay, Belle. We've stopped recording,' Irwin said and gave her a thumbs-up.

Belle returned the thumbs-up and shuffled back to the drum set. It was evident on Maurice's face that he knew what was coming, and he collected the sticks and put them across the snare.
"Maurice, I'm sorry, dude," Belle said with her hands on her chest to show her sincerity, "but… this ain't gonna work. I hope you can see why. You're erratic… you speed up, then slow down… you miss the skin or get too much… the hi-hat's all over the place… I'm sorry, dude. We need to call it a day."

Maurice smirked and wiped his sweaty brow. "Yeah, all right… it could have worked… guess it didn't. I'm not used to- ah, whatever," he said and got up. Without looking at anyone, he shuffled down the middle of the studio and walked out the door.

The studio was silent for a few seconds before Leaf piped up: "His negative energy was destroying the symbiosis. I better light another incense stick to support the kaiwani ameera sphere before it buckles and grows weak."

"You what?" Rebel said, but Belle waved her hand dismissively like it would explain everything. Shrugging, the young woman pulled the chair closer to her and sat down again while she waited for whatever came next.

The gaping hole in their line-up was weighing heavily on Belle's mind as she shuffled back to the pile of sheet music and knelt down next to it. While the others around her slowly came back to life, she often looked back at the vacant drum set with a dark expression on her face. Though she was meant to find the next song they should jam to to get to know each other better, she was just going through the motions without actually seeing any of the titles.

"Belle?" the Walrus said, putting his fiddle on the table where his wife was busy swinging an incense stick back and forth to spread the sweet smoke and strengthen the sphere. "Hey, Belle…? That was a disaster, but… now what?"

Belle sighed and bumped down on her behind. She let go of the sheet music she had already found, and Mountain Man slipped down onto the pile. "I don't know, Walrus," she said, running a hand through her graying hair that had already turned a little damp at the roots.

"Well… we have one, two, three Butterflies here, but unless my mind deceives me, we were four Butterflies for most of our career."

Belle chewed on her cheeks and looked down at the piles of sheet music so she wouldn't have to comment on the Walrus' suggestion. When the silence grew embarrassing, she sighed and looked up at her old friend. "You mean Packard," she said as a statement of fact.

"Pack, yeah. He's changed, Belle. You know that, you spoke to him at the New Year's party, 'member? Anyway, he's married now… he's mellowed out a lot. I met him down at the supermarket the other week… he's a different man now."

Belle sighed and glanced up at the odd tiles in the ceiling of the studio. "The reason why I broke the contact with him in the first place was that he couldn't move on from the past, Walrus. That meant he hated Erica's guts for no Goddamn reason whatsoever. He became an embittered, cranky old man who saw a pest when the rest of us saw a flower," she said, thumping her fists into the floor.

"Ya don't have to tell me, I was there on our last tour when the shit hit the fan, remember? But I think you should call him, Belle… I really do. To level with ya, I think he deserves another chance."

"Yeah, huh? Jeez…” Belle said and once again stared at the vacant drum set. "One thing's for certain. If we don't get a drummer ASAP, we might as well dump the whole thing in the trash 'cos we'll be fucked over but good."

Getting up, Belle dusted off her hands on the seat of her jeans and looked at her other band members, some old, some new. Somewhere deep inside, she missed Packard who had been a friend for close to forty years before their falling out, even if she would never admit to it. "I'll call him," she said and reached for her iPhone.
Later in the day, Belle, Rebel and J-Rox, the sound assistant, flaked out on a huge sofa in the lounge across the hall from the studio itself. The sixty inch TV on the wall didn't offer anything but depressing news and commercials for anti-depressives, so it was quickly turned off. The famed sixty-four beer refrigerator had held its promise and had served them well - though only J-Rox was drinking a beer. Belle had an iced tea and Rebel suckled on a sports-cap Gatorade.

The fifteen by thirty foot lounge was fairly lifeless - merely four concrete walls, a carpeted floor and a handful of lamps hanging down from the bare ceiling - but Irwin had tried valiantly to spruce it up by adding the TV with an extra soundbar underneath to up the wattage, several different kinds of game consoles, the large refrigerator, the flake-out sofa and close to a dozen colorful posters that displayed legendary album covers and a variety of underdressed women in overly provocative poses.

There was nothing new to Belle in any of those posters, so she kept an eye on J-Rox instead. She had met many strange types over the years, but there was something about the young man with the hip-hop aspirations that she couldn't quite figure out. He was pleasant enough, chatted easily and laughed at the right spots, but he had a look in his eye that told Belle it was all a cover for something else. For what, she had no idea, and she had a hunch she really didn't want to find out.

When Irwin popped his head inside and told J-Rox that he was needed in the mixing room, Belle and Rebel were left alone in the lounge. They were sitting on opposite ends of the huge sofa, and each had their legs up on the low table in front of it to flake out like honest rock stars should.

Once the door had closed behind J-Rox, Rebel grunted and took a long swig of her Gatorade. "I'm not sure I like that guy… he creeps me out," she said as she put down the empty bottle on the table. "There's something about his demeanor, you know…? He's smiling but there's something wrong with his eyes. It's almost like he's just… oh, I don't know. Maybe he's an axe murderer waiting to strike or something."

"I hear ya. I wouldn't wanna turn my back on him in a dark alley, but he seems to know what he's doing."

"I guess. But he still creeps me out! Ah, fuck 'im."

Belle chuckled inwardly upon realizing how much the wild Rebel reminded her of herself at that age. The clothes were different, the hair was vastly different, but the attitude and the fiery spirit were the same.

"Way to go on Biding My Time, Rebel… I didn't write that song, but I adapted it into a folk rocker. Now I wish I had adapted it the way you just played it," Belle said and shuffled around so she sat crooked on the couch.

"Thank you… well, it was your suggestion, so…" Rebel said with a cute smile.

"Whoa, she's certainly a heartbreaker,' Belle thought, studying the young woman's reaction. 'Betcha she's never lacking for companionship.' - "Where are you from and stuff…? You musta been born with a guitar over your shoulder the way you play."

"Aw, I… I've always played the guitar, I guess," Rebel said, smoothing down her t-shirt like she was shy over the attention. "My brother and I moved down from Washington State a couple of years ago… you know, to maybe start a career here."

"Here…? In Coulson?"

"No, in San Francisco."

"Well, I got news for you, Rebel… bad news," Belle said with an appropriately somber face. "You made a wrong turn somewhere!"
"Yeah, I suppose we did," Rebel said with an embarrassed chuckle. "We were going to Frisco but made a detour and got stuck here."

"Happens," Belle said with a grin.

"Yeah. My brother and I rent a two-story house over on McConnell. We've got separate entrances so our girl- uh, so our friends can come and go unnoticed."

Belle smiled at the young woman, feeling more at ease knowing she had been right about her.

Rebel looked down and began to fiddle with a few, old healed scars between her knuckles. "I've done some shit in my past so we also did it to make a clean start, you know. I've moved on now, but it threatened to drown me a few years back. I did some bad shit and got busted for it, but I rediscovered the music, so… all in all, I'm happy where I am."

Belle nodded slowly. She had no interest in prying into Rebel's younger years. In her own past, so many of the people she had interacted with had constantly been on the shady verges of the law when it came to drugs, civil disobedience, even rioting - and Belle herself had dabbled in all three categories. "And now we've all converged here… in the Ruff Diamond studio where we're about to create magic. Ain't that something?"

"Yeah. Uh… Belle… may I ask you a personal question?" Rebel said and cast an ultra-quick glance at the older woman before she looked away again.

"Sure."

"You're gay, aren't you?"

"Oh yeah. Of course, us old birds prefer to call ourselves lesbians. We earned that title the hard way… it's sort of our hallmark now. Y'know, if you turn us over, we all got a big L stamped on the butt. That's how we recognized each other back in the old days… nah, just kiddin'," Belle said off Rebel's gobsmacked look.

Rebel snickered when she realized she'd been had, and shuffled around so she was face to face with the older woman. "I am too," she said and once again glanced up, then down.

"Yeah, I kinda guessed you were. You got a sweetheart at the mo?"

"No… nothing serious. Uh… are you and Autumn Leaf…?"

"Oh, no… no, no, she's happily straight and happily married to Oswald," Belle said with a grin. "No, my baby is at work. Erica Wayne. She called me earlier… I didn't get everything she said to me… something about- I dunno, she was kinda cryptical, but I think she's coming over later. I'll introduce you when she's here."

"I'd like that. Is she a musician too?"

"Ah, no. No, she isn't. She's actually with the fuzz. She's a cop."

"Whoa!"

"I know," Belle said with a smirk. "I'll bet you're thinking, how the hell is that even possible? But let me tell you, Erica is one hell of a woman. She can look beyond the tip of her nose, and… yeah. We've been together since last fall. And it's forever."
Rebel grinned and reached out to slap Belle's knee. "Wow, that's so great."

"I know! We met under the weirdest of circumstances. It was over on the East Coast and we Butterflies were on our way to a festiv-"

That's how far Belle made it before the door to the lounge opened and Packard Summer stepped in. Like in the old days, he was wearing blue jeans and his trademark pale brown Wrangler jacket with dozens of flounces. He didn't wear a hat, but it revealed that he'd had his hair cut recently. His sixty-four year old haggard, furrowed face - the lasting legacy of a life spent smoking weed - was fuller than it used to be, and he even seemed to be standing a little straighter compared to his old, slouchy appearance. "Hi, Belle," he said softly as he closed the door behind him.

"Hi, Packard," Belle said cautiously as she rose from the couch. Although he had been well on his way to coming around the last time they had met, in the Walrus' kitchen at the New Years' party, she couldn't forget the many harsh, even downright nasty words he had said about Erica. 'One negative word out of him and his ass will speak to my boot…' - "You look great. Marriage must be agreein' with you."

Rebel knew when she was intruding, so she got up and quickly left the lounge after grabbing a new Gatorade from the refrigerator. In the door, she winked at Belle before she stepped outside.

"Feck yeah, dude… ain't that the feckin' truth," Packard said and opened his jacket. Underneath, he wore a neutral, black button-down shirt that wasn't a good fit on his slim body. "Katherine is workin' down in the bank so she don't know I'm here… not that I'm whipped or anything, dude."

"Noooo, of course not," Belle said with a smile. In Packard's grayish eyes, she could see traces of her friend from old times, not the grinch he had evolved into in the later years. "Hey, thanks for coming… c'mon, siddown. Fuck, it's great to see you again. In a good mood, I mean."

"Yeah, I know, dude," Packard said with a half-smile. "When I found Katherine, my mood improved by leaps and bounds, dontchaknow. I got something to get up to in the feckin' mornin's, ya know… and someone to go to bed with in the evenin's, dude."

"Oh Gads, dontcha go there, son!" Belle said and threw her arms in the air.

They both laughed at their silliness before Belle grew serious again. "Pack, we're in a fix here. We're recording a greatest hits album and the drummer-"

"When were you gonna tell me, dude? When you had the album under the feckin' Christmas tree?" Packard said and slipped the jacket off his shoulders.

"Good point," Belle mumbled, guiltily scratching her ear. "Yeah, I know. I guess that was kinda shitty of me… I'm sorry, Pack. That was all me. I shoulda called you sooner. I was colored by our last few clashes, you know."

Packard shrugged and sat down on the couch. "Yeah, well… feck all that, dude. I'm here now… wotcha got for me, dude?"

"Can you still play the drums? I mean, a real drum set, Pack?"

"Dude… I might as well be truthful and say it's been a feckin' while since I played on a real feckin' drum set. I'm gonna be as rusty as the feckin' USS Enterprise, but… it's like smokin' weed, you never forget to inhale."
Belle chuckled and reached over to slap Packard's skinny knee. "Yeah, huh? How 'bout you and me go into the studio and re-introduce you to the gang? We got a pair of real great kids with us. You ain't gonna believe your ears when that young girl you just saw starts pickin' her guitar."

Packard hesitated and Belle sensed he wanted to ask about Erica. When nothing came, they both rose from the couch and shuffled out of the lounge.

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In the recording studio, life went on with various people performing various tasks, like the Walrus oiling his fiddle, Leaf gurgling on honey-laced spring water, Troy checking the sheet music and Rebel searching for something that seemed to have fallen in under her chair, and doing so while down on her hands and knees.

Belle and Packard stepped through the door and lined up just inside it. "Hey, gang!" Belle cried to get everyone's attention. "Look what I found at the end of the rainbow!"

The Walrus just grinned at his old friend, but Leaf nearly choked on her gurgle water. She swallowed frantically and rushed over to the previously lost, now returning fourth member of Daisy-Belle's Butterflies. "Packard Summer, you beautiful, beautiful man! Oh, Gawd, it's so good to see you again!" she howled, pulling Packard into a strong hug.

"Jeez, dude! Leaf, dude, your husband is watchin'… and I got a girl back home… I like my remaining teeth where they are, dude… hi, Walrus!" Packard said while doing a clumsy wave around Leaf's body that practically rubbed against his.

Oswald 'the Walrus' Jones duly waved back, grinning so broadly his mustache seemed much narrower than it really was.

Leaf took a step back but promptly kissed Packard on the mouth. "The incense stick worked! The kaiwani ameera sphere gave us what we wished for… it's so good to see you again, Pack."

"Thanks, dude… dude, you look so much better now than back in September. Are you back to full health?" Packard said, caressing Leaf's cheek.

"AlIl-most. Not quite, but I'm getting better every day."

"Too feckin' fabulous, dude!" Packard said and turned towards the new members of the extended Butterflies. "Hiya doin', I'm Packard Summer. I used to play percussion for these dudes," he said and put out his hand.

Troy stepped forward and shook Packard's hand. "Troy Tunney, Packard. This is my sister Rebel. I guess we got a drummer again, huh?"

"You sure do, dude. Hi, Rebel. Love ya name," he said and winked at the young woman. With the introductory phase over, he unbuttoned his cuffs and turned back to Belle. "Uh, dude… perhaps we could, you know… jam a little? Maybe a song or two? Just to knock some of the feckin' rust off, dude…"

Belle nodded and thumped Packard's shoulder with her fist. "Sounds like a mi'ty fine plan to me, Pack. Okay, gang, let's do Dusty Roads. That's such an easy one to get into. Troy, Rebel, that'll be in the third pile. Folk pop slash boogie rock in A, no distortion."

The others nodded, grunted and found the sheet music, respectively. Pack took off his black shirt altogether and sat down behind the drum set in a white, sleeveless undershirt. At first, he stared wide-eyed at what he had been thrown into, but he soon took the sticks and twirled them between his fingers.
"And you guys out there," Belle said loudly so Irwin and J-Rox in the mixing room could hear, "hit the button. We're gonna record it. We never know what's gonna come out of it. Okay?"

'Okay, Belle,' Irwin's voice said through the speakers.

"Okay. Pack… you know the drill. Sound off, man!"

The lump Packard swallowed could be heard quite clearly by the others, but they all knew from personal experience what he was going through so they didn't comment. "A-one, a-two, a-one-two-three-four!" he said, clicking the drumsticks together to mark the beat. On cue, he set off pounding the drums like he had never been away.

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CHAPTER 7

By the time Dusty Roads ended, Belle realized with stark clarity that they had reached critical mass. Packard had performed perfectly despite his claims of being rusty, the Walrus and Leaf were on top form, and Troy and Rebel had hit their marks and had given it their all even though they had never clapped eyes on that song before.

The last chorus faded out but Packard kept pounding a solid rhythm on the bass drum to continue knocking off some of the rust. One after the other, he added the other drums, hi-hats, cymbals and cowbells that Irwin had set up on the old, but functional drum set. Soon, he had a whole rhythm section going by himself.

Belle hurried over to the table with their gear and found a tambourine - green, of course, like in the old song - that she started playing with a dong-jingle-dong-jingle-dong to help Pack stay on the beat. Ultimately, she didn't need to as her old friend was able to rock on just fine without outside assistance.

His improvised drum solo ended with a cymbal crash that echoed through the studio. When nobody said anything, he ducked his head and looked down at the snare drum. "Somebody say somethin', for feck's sake, dudes! Was I that crappy?"

"Aw, hell no, Pack!" Belle said excitedly. "You were on the money… Jeez, we got the ensemble from heaven here… damn!"

Clenching her free hand in excitement, Belle looked around at her crew and came to the conclusion they were ready to move onto the next section of the proceedings - a full-scale test-recording done in the way the real songs were scheduled to be recorded.

"Guys… guys, listen up," she said and smacked the green tambourine a couple of times to get everybody's attention. "Irwin, J-Rox, you guys too out there! Okay… okay, call me nuts, but I think we're ready. I propose we do Dusty Roads again 'cos it's fresh in our minds, but this time, we go the whole nine yards… really do a recording so… well, so we can hear how we actually sound when we pull out all the stops. Dusty Roads is our biggie so if that doesn't work, we need to come up with a plan B. What do you guys think? Leaf? How about the rest of you?"

Leaf nodded and moved her arms in the classic Share The World symbol. "I'm with you, Belle… I think we should try."

The Walrus and Pack both let out grunts that said they agreed, too. Troy and Rebel looked at each other and offered Belle a pair of thumbs-up. Rebel pushed back her chair and leafed back in the sheet music before she assumed her favorite playing stance.
"Okay. Jesus, I haven't been this shit-churningly nervous since Monterey '76," Belle mumbled to herself before she turned around to face the large window pane to the mixing room. "Guys! Roll it!"

'Recording, Belle. Silence on set,' J-Rox said through the speakers.

A pregnant silence spread over the musicians as they prepared themselves mentally to perform the song that was in effect the Butterflies' signature hit. When they were ready, they all looked at Packard who called off again to great effect. He started the boogieing drum beat to the uptempo rock track and led everyone down the path. Troy and Rebel joined in at once with the song's bass line and bouncy, banjo-inspired guitar track. The Walrus was on cue as well with his fiddle that created the warm background for Belle's throaty pipes and Leaf's heavenly harmonies.

As the cue for the first verse came up, Belle's foot was already wagging to the beat. She stood behind the microphone's spit guard with her eyes closed to block out everything around her and to get into the proper mood. The song had been quite polished on the original album to fit the requirements of the era - and to get airtime on the local pop and folk radio stations - but now, her voice had darkened so much she would be unable to reach the same giddy heights as before. She knew that and used it to her advantage.

Exactly on cue, she let rip and sang it loud and raw like she was staring down the Grim Reaper, just like what the song really called for. "Darkened moon, middle of June, Sheriff and his boys came crawlin' over the land…" she bellowed, rocking along to the old track.

In the chorus, Leaf came on and added her crystal clear voice as an ethereal response to the singer's plea to return to the woman she had left behind when the Sheriff's posse had forced her to flee her home in the summer of 1884.

Even as Belle sang the second verse and subsequently listened to the Walrus nailing the bridge, she knew they were on a rocketship going straight up. They had the tools, the talent and the will, and all they had to do was to stay focused and do their utmost - then they'd strike gold.

As the song ended with a repeated chorus after the final verse that described how the two lovers tricked the posse and finally reunited on the back porch of the homestead, Belle put a hand in the air to signal they should continue to remain silent. A few seconds after Packard had reached the end of the sheet music and stopped playing, Belle spun around and hurried out into the mixing room.

She waited outside until the red light came off, and then she barreled through the door. "Didya get that? Oh Gawd, please tell me you got that?"

"We got it, Belle," J-Rox said and pointed at the computer monitor where the pre-mixed waveform was being saved. Irwin nodded and reached across his colleague's spot to press a button on the mixing console. "Okay, so, we've recorded every element on the individual tracks, here," he continued, gesturing at the thirty-two track mixing console, "and we got the pre-mix over there, as you can see. You wanna listen to that?"

"Hell, yeah!" Belle said and pulled an empty swivel-chair over to her so she could rest her legs that were almost knocking with excitement.

"Just a moment," J-Rox said while he waited for the saving to be completed. Once it was, he made a safety copy of the file into a backup folder and hit Play on the master.

The song started playing on the console's own speakers, and it didn't take Belle one second to realize her instincts had been right - not only was it a fantastic take where everyone had nailed their parts beautifully, they were more than ready to go ahead with the project. "Holy shit, that's so great…" she mumbled, running a hand that trembled slightly through her damp hair. "That's a Top 40 hit right there, huh? Watch out, C.C. Burdette, you've got yourself some competition... you're about to be Butterflied!"
"Belle," Irwin said, "do you want to check the individual tracks?"

Belle licked her lips as she finished listening to the pre-mixed version of the song. Her aging ears couldn't hear anything wrong with it at all - the secret of an authentic-sounding folk rock track was that it was less polished on the whole than a pop song. "Mmmm..." she said, rubbing her chin. "Mmmm... mmmm... no. I can see from the sliders that you've already compensated for the drums and the amped guitar being more powerful than the rest... right?" she said, looking at the many sliders that had been pre-set following the microphone tests earlier.

J-Rox nodded. "That's right, Belle."

"Y'know... mmmm... I think we shouldn't mess around with anything now. What you played for me on the pre-mix works ace, boys. Let's keep that for now. Oh, you're gonna save it, right?"

"We already have... we save everything, Belle. We can go back and reload it onto the console later if you wish... you know, if you want one of the instruments to be louder or softer," Irwin said and pointed at the multitude of blinking LEDs on the rack of hard drives.

"Great! Naw, that's cool. I was wondering if you could, you know, edit the master recording to make it fade out and stuff? It ends kinda abruptly..."

"Nothin' to it," Irwin said and performed a series of mouse-clicks and drags. Ten seconds later, the ending faded out perfectly, illustrated by the waveform tapering off into the pair of stereo center lines. While he was working, he fixed the leading space and saved the file again under a numbered filename so they could access all iterations of the song at all times.

"Holy fuck and a half," Belle said and shook her head slowly. "If we'd had that kind of equipment back in the day, we could have... shit, there would have been no stopping us!"

"Don't forget this is six, seven, eight years out of date, Belle," Irwin said with a grin. "These days, the recording studios have turned into Star Trek, bro."

"Aw, this is just fiiiiine for me. Thanks, Irwin... J-Rox. Okay, you can take a breather now," Belle said and got up from the swivel-chair. "Before we can go on, we need to find the songs we actually wanna include on the album... so, uh, do you have an exclusive deal with a restaurant to deliver the food, or can we call anyone? I'm thinking about d'Ambrosio's specifically..."

"Oh, we don't have any exclusive contracts or nothin', Belle," Irwin said and wiped a bead of sweat off his brow. "Don't forget, the garage bands who are usually here just eat pizzas, burgers and way greasy French fries."

"Cool. It's gonna be d'Ambrosio's for everyone!" Belle said and clapped her hands in glee.

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The lounge turned into a makeshift mess tent at the arrival of the delivery guy from d'Ambrosio's - in fact, the man needed to go out to his van three times to get all the boxes for the eight people who were eagerly awaiting his return.

Sixteen plastic cups, sixteen sets of plastic eating utensils, sixteen paper plates - so everyone had a backup - twenty-four Styrofoam boxes zipped shut by twenty-four pieces of adhesive tape, and no less than thirty-two napkins were distributed around the coffee table.

Not all the people there were vegetarians, but everybody had agreed that there would be less confusion if they just ordered eight of d'Ambrosio's famed Mix 'Em Up specials.
However, once the twenty-four Styrofoam boxes and the eight cans of various beverages from the refrigerator filled the coffee table to the brim and then some, it appeared less organized than they had hoped for. Fortunately for all of them, the restaurant had put a sticker on the boxes describing the contents, so Belle went to work calling out the various dishes.

"Rösti casserole?" -- "Here." -- "Black beans and cheese with ranchero sauce?" -- "Yo!" -- "Eggplant parmesan?" -- "I don't like eggplant..." -- "Curried couscous with broccoli and feta?" -- "Oh, now I got two of the brown rice... anybody wanna trade?" -- "Curried couscous?" -- "Uh... you said that already, Belle..." -- "Shit. Uh... roasted asparagus and tomato pasta salad? Roasted asparagus? Hey, I'll grab that myself!" -- "Dude! That was my-" -- "Too slow, gotta go. Gemelli salad with green beans, pistachios, and lemon-thyme vinaigrette?"

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The brown rice, the baked beetroot, the black beans, the chickpeas, the chili-glazed tofu and even the mushroom sauce disappeared like the morning dew, and the coffee table eventually came back into view as the Styrofoam boxes were thrown onto the floor.

"Everybody," Leaf said, holding up one of her empty boxes, 'remember to collect the Styrofoam so we can send it to be recycled!"

"Won't work, bro," Irwin said around a bite of juicy mushroom, "the recycling plant won't take them. Not when they got food gunk and shit on them."

"But... but... no recycling?" Leaf said, looking around at the others. The Styrofoam box she had been holding eventually joined its brethren in a mountainous pile on the floor.

A telephone rang somewhere in the building, and Irwin got up and shuffled out the door. A short while later, J-Rox followed the senior producer out of the lounge. Another short while after that, Troy dug into his pocket and found a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "Hey, Sis, ya wanna go outside for a smoke?" he said, pushing a cigarette out of the pack.

Rebel shook her head and pointed at Belle and her Butterflies. "Not right now, this is more interesting."

"Suit yourself," Troy said and left the lounge with the cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"So," Belle said, wiping her chin on a napkin. She was sitting on the floor next to Leaf because the flake-out sofa had been occupied by the time she had come back from the delivery van. The napkin was crumpled up and thrown over her shoulder. "It's time to go through the songs we want to include on the album. I know it's a back-asswards way of doing it, but until we had proof we could still do it... you know the rest. We all got our favorites, so how about we went around the table and made a mention of the songs we like the best? Leaf, you go first, honey. I think I know which one you're gonna say...?"

Leaf nodded and wiped her lips on a napkin. "Sun Gonna Shine from Flying High," she said with a shy smile. "It's the best song I've ever written, so I would love to have that on the greatest hits."

Nodding, Belle found a piece of paper and a ball point pen that had turned up from somewhere underneath the stack of napkins. When she clicked the pen on, it was dry as a lake bed in mid-July. She groaned and briefly closed her eyes, annoyed by the inappropriate coincidence. "Piece of... anybody got anything else?"

The request brought on a wild treasure hunt involving five people that ended with the Walrus finding a half of a gnawed-on pencil behind the couch.

Belle offered him a wide grin before she wrote on the paper. "Sun Gonna Shine... okay. Pack?"
"The People versus the Government."

Rebel stopped digging through her brown rice to find the last piece of fungi and looked up at the older members of the Butterflies. "Now that's gotta be a protest song…?"

"Aw yeah, ya can say that, dude," Packard said with a half-grin.

"Yeah," Belle said, "that was written during the Watergate crisis, Rebel. I'm sure you've heard about that in school? Anyhow, President Nixon was an object of hate for many of us because of Vietnam and the bombings in Cambodia and the harsh treatment of the campus riots and all that shit. When the Watergate thing broke, millions of people lost all confidence in the government. It's a spoken word track with a ton of angry lyrics. Eh, Pack… I don't know if it's still valid. I mean, things have changed in the White House, ya know."

"Sure, dude, but it's one of my favorites."

"Fair enough," Belle said and added the title to the track list. "Okay, I think we should have all the singles, so that's One-Two-Three!, Still Flying High, Hot Little Number, Dusty Roads, of course… mmmm… also Back On The Road, Chrome Wheels and… shit… maybe Mirror, Mirror On The Wall."

"From Mirror of the Future?" Leaf asked, balancing a baked tomato on her plastic spoon.

Belle put down the gnawed-on pencil and propped her head up on her arms. "Yeah. I know the album as a whole sucked 'cos of the synthesizer shit, but I think we can rescue some of the other songs. I mean, Mirror Mirror, Jukebox and Hot Night Gotta Fight were good songs… they just had shitty arrangements. And the arrangements will be night and day different now because of the way we've set up, so…"

Leaf nodded and put the baked tomato in her mouth.

"Walrus?" Belle said, once again readying the pencil.

"Mmmm, ya know… how about the two-parter We Own The Night and Stay Off Our Street from our first album? They were down and dirty, street tough… I think they would suit our new members really well. Rebel would set fire to those songs… dontcha think?" the Walrus said, nudging the young woman's shoulder.

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Mista," Rebel said, "but I haven't checked the sheets yet so I can't really say either way…"

"I can… and you will," the Walrus said and chuckled into his mustache.

Belle nodded and wrote down the titles. "And I agree. They need distortion and a rough edge… like proto-punk. Okay… round and round we go. Leaf?"

"Well, my next favorite is either Mountain Man or Jealous Heart. I just loved the way you sang those, Belle. You dared to be a lot softer than usual. I honestly believe we need to mix it up a little… I know you guys love the hard sounds, but we can't have an entire album of that. We need a little softness now and then," Leaf said, reaching for the Walrus' hand.

The old, married couple smiled at each other and took each other's hands to underline the point Leaf had just made.

Belle smiled and made a new note on the paper. "Word, Leaf. They're both in. Okay… Pack?"
"Okay," Belle said and began to count the lines she had written, "so that's, ummm, twenty-two songs. Perhaps it's easier to say which ones we haven't included… from our first album, Acid Jam 'cos it's too unstructured, and the entire B-side for some reason including Butterflies Will Fly. Do we agree that it should be left out?"

A chorus of silence greeted her, and she returned to the piece of paper. "I'll put it on the reserve list. Okay. From our second album, we've dropped Hey Man and Love My Little Jam."

Belle was interrupted by Rebel who snickered out loud at the outrageous title.

"Well, excuse the hell outta us, young lady! We were stoned out of our skulls when we came up with that title!" Belle said and threw a crumpled-up piece of paper at the young guitarist as a payback for her lack of respect for the elders. Unfortunately, Rebel's reflexes were too good and she was able to swat the paper away.

Belle stuck out her tongue and returned to the track list. "Also, the entire B-side except Government. The other anti-Nixon songs are just too outdated now. They were strong back then, but… You Better Leave, It's An Injustice, Equality, Change Today… nah, they're just too outdated. They're outta here. From Whale, it's One Chance, that was just dull… and I Sent Her A Letter. Eh… no. Then Keep It High, Ride The Sky. I don't know what we were thinking recording that song… remember that one, Pack?"

"Sure do, dude. It was life. Feckin' shit, that was a raucous affair…"

"And then some…” Belle said and went silent for a moment while she went back in time to revisit the scenes of disorganized chaos that took place at the live event where the song was recorded. Everybody had dropped acid before they came on because some spiritual guru clad in orange and with beads around his ears had said it would improve their performances - it didn't, but it was too late to abort. "Mmmm-yeah. Then from Back On The Road, it's The Gospel According To Me and Two Minutes Fifty Seconds."

"I can't believe you don't want to include that song, Belle. It was highlighted in the review!" the Walrus said.

"But it's so fuckin' cheesy, Walrus!" Belle whined nasally. "It was never meant to be anything but a filler… no, it's not going on the album. No, no, no, no, it's not going on the album. No! Moving on… I think my voice has changed too much for I Got It Bad This Time, Girl to sound any good, but White Line Blues and Big Black Diesel… hmmm… yeah, I'm putting those on the reserve list. They're good companions to Chrome Wheels."

Hearing that, Rebel wagged an index finger in the air like she wanted to be excused. "Chrome Wheels… I checked that one out. It would suit me really well and I think I got a suggestion for the riff line in it. And if the other two are companions, maybe we could, you know, combine all three into some sort of cruise mix or something?"

Belle nodded excitedly and drew a box around the last two titles she had written on the note. "Fab idea, Rebel. I'm holdin' you to it!"

"Thanks," Rebel said, suddenly embarrassed over the attention.

"Okay…” Belle continued, "from Mirror. Groovin' and Forgot Her Already are too outdated to be any fun… and the B-side. Oh shit, the B-side… oh holy shit, the B-side…” she said and pretended to crumble something up into a ball that she threw over her shoulder.

Leaf, the Walrus and Packard duly laughed, but the look on Rebel's face prompted Belle to explain: "We had contractual obligations to make a third album for Polyphonic, but we only had enough material for the A-side. We just couldn't write more because we had… well, for several different personal reasons. The bean-counters weren't sympathetic to the cause and forced the producer to create a synthesizer-driven piece of fuckery on the B-side using session musicians. A sixteen-minute symphony that stank so badly we called it Cheeze Whiz. And that was the end of our career at Polyphonic… and, well, the end of our career, full stop."
"Shit, I'm sorry to hear that, Belle," Rebel said, leaning forward on the couch.

"So were we back then... so were we," Belle said somberly while she tapped the butt of the gnawed-on pencil onto the piece of paper. What she didn't say to the young woman was that three days after receiving the termination of their contract from Polyphonic, the event and the grief over losing Stephanie Lorenz had pushed her over the edge. She had driven from her home to have a midnight rendezvous with a freight train. Leaf had found her near the tracks before the freight train had reached her, and that was the only reason she had lived through the night.

Belle snapped out of her dark thoughts and put down the pencil. "But that's old news... let's get back to the present. Guys and gals, we're ready to create magic. Let's do it."

Just after five o'clock, an unmarked Dodge Charger police cruiser climbed the curb leading to the alley and drove along the uneven surface at a trickle. It wasn't difficult for Erica to spot the colorful VW Microbus, and she slipped in between that and a rusty, open-top Jeep.

Getting out, Erica adjusted her utility belt while she cast a glance at the endless stretches of concrete in the desolate area. The commercial district saw more action at that time of the day compared to earlier, but it was anything but crowded. As she closed the squad car's door, she glanced at a grassy field beyond a mesh fence and wondered how much stolen property and drug paraphernalia they would find if they had the time and the manpower to sift through the tall grass.

The brown steel door beckoned, and Erica walked over to it in her trademark determined stride. After checking out the red arrow that pointed at a door bell, she pushed the little button and waited for the door to be opened.

A short minute later, J-Rox stuck his head out of the steel door and promptly did a triple-take at seeing a police officer outside who seemed to be at least seven foot tall, dressed in black, armed and with a dangerous look in her blue eyes. His own eyes narrowed as he glanced left and right to see if it was a bust.

"Hi, I'm Sergeant Wayne. I'm here to see Belle," Erica said calmly though she employed her steely, no-nonsense voice. As always, she studied the people she was around, and the man with the clean-shaven head, the hip-hop outfit and the shifty eyes raised a yellow flag for her. Yellow, not red because he at least stood firm in the door and didn't appear like he was on the verge of making a run for it. She was used to people staring at her imposing frame, but there was something in the hip-hopper's eyes that bothered her, and that added to the yellow flag's weight in her mind.

"Uh... yeah, okay. I'm J-Rox... uh, come inside," he said and opened the door fully. "Uh... I suppose you can go into the mixing room, but please be qui- uh... calm. We got a red light on 'cos we're recording."

"Sure, sure... I'm not here to ruin anyone's work," Erica said with the faintest hint of a smile gracing her lips.

Trying to walk quietly, she strolled through the hallway past the door to the utility room and the similar door to the lounge. The final door to the mixing room was ajar, and she peeked around the edge. Strong folk rock streamed out of a pair of speakers that were built into the console. Erica couldn't yet see through the pane and into the studio itself, but she didn't need to see the musicians to recognize Belle's voice.

A wide smile spread over her lips as she sneaked inside the mixing room and slid along the back wall so she wouldn't accidentally step on a cable or push a button.

In the studio, Belle shimmied away from her microphone while the Walrus played a solo on his fiddle. When the solo was over, Belle returned to the stand and belted out the last verse and chorus of the song they were recording.
Erica was ashamed to admit she didn't know many of her partner's works, but she recognized the title when Belle sang it in the chorus - it was *Hot Little Number*, the opening song of the *A Whale Of A Time* album.

Irwin Seacombe also performed a triple-take at the sight of a fully armed and operational fuzz standing in his mixing room, but he relaxed when her response was a smile instead of reaching for her handcuffs. Still, he sniffed the air to check if there were any traces of the doobie he had enjoyed at the coffee break - the sweet-smelling smoke still hung in the air, but it was so faint he could hardly pick it up.

J-Rox came back in after a short delay and closed the door softly behind him. As he sat down, he sort-of casually looked over his shoulder at Erica, almost like he was gauging how much she had seen.

Erica had noticed, and it added another layer to the yellow flag. Another two or three layers and it would turn into a red one. She could smell the traces of cannabis in the air, but she knew it would be a near miracle if weed wasn't present in an environment inhabited by hippies and hip-hoppers, so she didn't put too much emphasis on it.

She looked back up and let her eye roam over the other musicians. Leaf and the Walrus looked tired, and she was surprised to see Packard Summer behind the drums. The old man, who was still playing in his undershirt, was flushed and shiny from the perspiration. The two people from the blues bar were on Belle's left, and although the guitarist had had a change of style since Erica had seen her last and was now fairly normal-looking compared to her wilder brother, it was she who was put under severe scrutiny.

Rebel was sitting on a chair with the guitar across her leg, seemingly in the middle of a song that didn't require her full participation. The young woman played a steady rhythm on her guitar, but there was nothing of the showmanship Erica had seen her exude the night before. Rebel was focused on the sheet music and her playing, and didn't seem to be the kind of person who could have racked up the number of clashes with the law that she had - but Erica had read it black on white on her criminal record.

The song eventually came to an end, and Belle promptly shuffled over to one of the tall bar stools and climbed up on it. She took a bottle of mineral water, unscrewed the cap and drained half of it in a single gulp.

Irwin activated a small microphone on the console and leaned down to it. "Belle, the third take was an improvement over the first two. I think we should keep this one… that's number five in the can. Your voice is gettin' kinda raw. Maybe we should call a break? Oh, and there's someone here to see you… are ya in trouble with the law or something?"

Belle hurriedly put down the bottle and hustled across the studio floor as fast as her aching hip would allow. In two heartbeats, she barreled into the mixing room and flew into Erica's arms. "Oh, baby! The Butterflies are back! We're doing so fuckin' great you won't believe it!" she cried, wrapping her arms around Erica's steely frame with no regards for the state of the pristine black uniform.

The whiff of sweat that emanated from Belle made Erica laugh out loud, and she pretended to fan her delicate nose to get away from it. "Hi, Belle… boy, you've been working hard, huh?"

"You better believe we have! Aw, man, this is the best gig ever… holy shit, we should have done it years ago," Belle said and took a step back though she kept a firm grip on Erica's arms. "But Jesus, I'm so tired now… I need a kiss. Can I have a kiss, pleease?"

Erica grinned and leaned down to claim Belle's lips in a small, but effective smooch. "Listen, you have that gray complexion you get when you've worked too hard," she said, caressing Belle's cheek. "You're overstressing yourself, I can see that plain as day. You need to stop."

"I know, I'm a little dizzy now and then… but it's been so good… so good, baby. Did you hear us now?"
"Yes, I heard the last part of it. It sounded really good… not quite like on the old albums, but…"

"No, but that's the whole thing, hon. We're playing live, that's where our strength lies. I'll explain later," Belle said with a grin when she realized Erica didn't really get what she meant. "Look at the computer monitor… that's the song right there inside those squiggly green lines. Ain't it great?"

Irwin quickly saved the master and a safety copy before he edited the recording to have a proper fade-out. "Uh… General, ma'am, if you wanna listen to it, I can-"

"No, it's fine. I don't understand any of it so I'll just listen to it once it's done," Erica said with a dismissive wave. "And by the way, it's Sergeant," she continued, pointing at her chevrons.

"Sorry, Sarge. Y'know," Irwin said and turned around on his swivel-chair, "I ain't certain we've ever had fuzz in here before… naw, I'm quite sure we never had fuzz in here before."

A yawn that Belle didn't have time to shield with a hand cracked her face wide open and left her as tired as an old folks' home - or perhaps an old birds' home. "Dude! I'm more tired than I thought… we better call it a day… night… morning… what time is it, anyway?"

"Ten past four… in the afternoon," Erica said with a smirk.

"Shit! Only ten past four? I thought it would have been nine or ten at least… dude, I'm getting old… Irwin, you can go home now. We're done for today."

Irwin chuckled and turned back to the console. "That's a no-can-do, Belle. Now J-Rox and me gotta do the data dumps and backups and shit. That's a couple of hours of work at least. Then we're gonna go over to Barney's for a brew with the Tunneys."

"Oh… okay… well, I just wanna say you've done one hell of a fantastic job today, Irwin… you too, J-Rox. I'll call you later… okay?"

"Sure thing, Belle," Irwin and J-Rox said as one.

"Honey?" Belle said and hooked her arm inside Erica's.

Erica licked her lips and shot Belle a dark glare. "I have something official out in the car that I need you to take a look at. It's important."

"Okay? Uh… all right, I just need to tell the others we're packing up, so… why don't you wait out in the car and I'll-"

"How's Packard Summer behaving?" Erica said, looking through the pane of glass and into the studio where the old drummer was wiping himself down with a towel.

"Aw, he's fine… he's a different man now."

"Then I'd like to meet him," Erica said and strode over to the door to the studio.

Belle watched her partner stride through the door and into the studio itself. Grinning, she shrugged out wide as she turned to the two producers. "Hey, what can I say… she's a real go-getter…"
The musicians were split into two distinct groups when they shuffled out into the alley at the end of their first day of recording - Troy and Rebel were fresh as daisies, but the older Butterflies were almost dead in the water.

Leaf and the Walrus walked hand in hand over to the Microbus and waited passively for Belle to unlock it. Packard said bye to everybody and shuffled off down the alley on his way home which was only a block away.

Belle leaned so hard against Erica on their way out of the Ruff Diamond building that the taller woman needed to have a firm grip on her partner or else she would tilt. It didn't take Erica half a glance to see that it would be irresponsible of her to let Belle drive home on her own in the Microbus, but the official business in the cruiser was a pressing matter.

After Troy and Rebel had stowed their instruments in the back of their Jeep, they came over to Belle and rubbed her shoulder. "This was one hell of an experience, Belle," Troy said, taking off his ball cap. "Like rock and roll master class."

"Yeah! It was wicked awesome!" Rebel said with a strong nod.

"Aw, you guys… thanks," Belle said in a tired voice. "Go home and get some sleep. Let's meet here tomorrow at eleven or so… should give us enough time to kick the next batch of songs into the can."

"Go home?" Rebel said with a snicker. "No, we're going over to Barney's. Our gig is coming up… it's Friday evening, Belle! The best day of the week!"

Belle stared wide-eyed at her two young associates who seemed utterly unfazed by the hard work in the studio. "Oh, the joys of youth… just you wait 'til you cats reach my age… which is a hundred and forty-seven right now… you'll be playin' a different tune then, I guarantee ya!"

Rebel snickered again and quickly pulled the old bird into a hug before she and her brother hopped into the Jeep and drove off.

Erica followed the open-topped car with her eyes before she escorted Belle over to the Microbus. "Honey, why don't you unlock it so Leaf and the Walrus can sit down? I'll drive you guys home in a little while, but we really, really need to talk first. In the squad car," she said decisively.

"Oh, but I can drive."

"No, you can't," Erica said in the I'm The Sergeant And Don't You Forget It- voice. "G'wan, unlock the door."

"Yes, ma'am, Sergeant, ma'am!" Belle said and hopped into a tired salute.

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Getting into the squad car after ushering Leaf and the Walrus inside the Microbus, Belle sat down on the comfortable seat and waited for Erica to get behind the wheel. Moments later, the door opened, and a lanky, black-clad figure sat down. "Gawd, I need to soak in our bathtub… I'm beat," Belle said, rubbing her brow.

"We don't have a bathtub, Belle."

"Then I'll take a deck chair and camp out at the foot of the shower… I need some hot water on my body."

"Yes."
"Hey!" Belle said and slapped Erica's thigh. "Making music is like making love… if you don't break a sweat, you're not trying hard enough! ANYway, you've been dying to tell me something all day… better make it now before I fall asleep."

Erica drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm suspecting Rebeccah Tunney of being involved in the distribution of pills over at Barney's," she said, sliding her thumb across the upper rim of the steering wheel.

A few seconds went by before the news had filtered through Belle's tired mind. When it had, she sat up straight and shuffled around in the seat. "May I ask why?"

"Last night at the bar, she had the young women responding to her every move. Throughout the case, we've suspected the dealer is someone those young women wouldn't shy away from… someone they'd be attracted to. You know how the typical junkie looks."

"Well… yeah… but what's that got to do with Rebel?"

"The young people who have been affected by the drug were all clean-cut, average kids from quiet, middle-class families. They wouldn't approach someone who looked like the typical junkie dealer, Belle. But they would approach someone who looked just like them, perhaps with a bad boy edge."

"Or a bad girl edge?"

"Exactly."

"Jesus, Erica," Belle said and rubbed her tired face. "I really, really thought you guys had moved on from attaching motives to the way people look. That's the same kind of bullshit that went on in the old days where everyone who had long hair got the billy club rash for that reason alone…"

Erica sighed and reached for a brown envelope that she had stuck down between the seats. "I understand, but Rebeccah Tunney has priors. Plenty of them. When she was a minor, she spent four years in a juvenile detention center for appropriation of private property, car theft, and for possessing sixty Ecstasy pills with the intent to sell," she said, extracting a wad of papers and pointing out the relevant lines on what turned out to be Rebeccah's criminal record.

"She told me that already, honey. Not the specifics, but the highlights… she said she had moved on from that."

"And you believed her?" Erica said, turning to look Belle in the eye.

"Yes," Belle said, never backing down from the look her partner gave her. "I'm sorry, Erica, but I don't buy that bullshit. Tell you what, if you wanna look at someone for this, look at J-Rox… the hip-hopper. He's a strange dude. He's the right age, the right looks… and he's got a weird vibe surrounding him. I think you should look at him."

"J-Rox… what's his real name?"

"No idea. He called himself Irwin's cousin, but I don't know if that's true."

"Okay."

A pregnant pause filled the squad car that Erica used to put the papers into the brown envelope and stick everything back down between the seats.
"Look, Erica," Belle said, softening her voice, "Rebeccah is a great kid… she's ten times smarter than I was at her age… she's got a great head on her shoulders and she's the best damn guitar player I've ever listened to. I know she's done some shit in the past, and worse shit than I had expected from speaking with her, that's true… but I just can't believe she's involved in this thing. That's my honest opinion, honey. And don't forget, I have almost as much experience with drug dealers as you do."

"Well, it says quite clearly that she-"

At once, Belle reached across the squad car and put a warm hand on Erica's thigh. "People change, baby. If Rebeccah hadn't changed, she wouldn't have been here today at all… same with Packard. And if I hadn't changed, none of what you and I have together could ever have happened. I hated the fuzz just as bad as Pack did back in the day. I changed, baby, and Rebeccah has changed too… she's a square kid. You can take that to the bank."

Erica smiled and covered her partner's hand with her own. "I hear you. I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt… but I still need to keep an eye on her."

"Fair enough. Just as long as you don't ask me to spy on her, we're cool."

"I'd never do that, Belle. Stu Burton is over at the blues bar as we speak."

"Stu? Of all people, Mr. Persnickety Moist Towelette Stu Burton is over at the blues bar?" Belle said and shot Erica an exasperated stare.

"Yeah, he had the time of his life last night. I think he's found his niche. Hey, let's talk about it tomorrow, okay? Baby, you need some sleep… I really don't like your color. C'mon, let's transfer to the Microbus so we can get you guys home."

After Belle had grunted an affirmative reply, Erica stepped out of the Charger and strode around the back to help the aching and dead-tired Belle over into her own vehicle.

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**INTERLUDE**

A slow Saturday morning turned into a lazy Saturday afternoon for Belle and Erica. Lunch had been a kiss that tasted so good they needed two for dessert. When Belle had returned from their recording session on Friday evening, she had been far too tired to shower, but a shower had been sorely needed, so she had just spent the better part of half an hour under the reinvigorating hot streams.

Shuffling through the kitchen, Belle listened to the splashing sounds that came from the bathroom where Erica was grabbing the last of the hot water. Smiling, she wrapped her terrycloth robe closer and shuffled through the swinging doors and over to the couch where she sat down with her bare, freshly-scrubbed legs folded up underneath her.

On the coffee table, a small cardboard box adorned with all sorts of medical symbols seemed to mock her with its dispassionate silence. She stared back at the box for a little while before she reached for it.

When she had conferred with her doctor about the unfortunate problems she'd faced the last time she and Erica had tried to make love, the doctor had strongly advised her against taking two of her special pills like she had suggested. Instead, they should try some of the commercial remedies that were available on the market.
Such a remedy was inside the cardboard box.

Belle opened the small box to read the description and the liner notes, but didn't exactly feel enlightened by the endless reams of medical lingo. All in all, she reckoned she would be safe, even if the product didn't contain spermicidal components so it wouldn't protect the user from pregnancy. Belle chuckled at that as she took the tube out of the box.

She had just about read the instructions when her breath was well and truly taken away by the arrival of her partner. Erica had slipped into her dark red kimono, but she hadn't bothered to put anything on underneath when she had finished showering.

The tall woman kept standing in the door to the bathroom sweeping her dark locks behind her head. She knew full well the movement meant the kimono would part down the middle, but the look in Belle's eyes was too good to miss. "There's no hot water left, honey," she said as she strolled over to the couch.

"Gee, ain't that too damn bad," Belle croaked, never taking her eyes off her partner. She opened her mouth to say a few more words of wisdom, but she seemed to lose the ability to speak as Erica shuffled closer and sat down at her feet.

The two women locked eyes and smiled at each other, a smile that promised the afternoon would be a memorable one.

"So… do you think that'll work?" Erica said, pointing at the tube.

"I need it, so it better… but I'm a little nervous. I don't wanna let you down again, baby," Belle said and mussed Erica's damp, neatly combed hair. "I mean… three strikes and you'll find a younger model, ha ha…"

"Never," Erica said and leaned in to place a warm kiss on Belle's thigh. "Let me help you. What do you want me to do?" she whispered.

Belle snickered nervously before she unscrewed the little cap and reached for one of Erica's hands. "Oh, baby… Gawd, this is awkward… so damn awkward…"

"No it's not. Not when we love each other this much," Erica said with a comforting smile. "C'mon, show me what to do."

Belle shook her head slowly while her cheeks grew increasingly red. "This is designed for boys and girls, not girls and girls, so… uh… it's to be smeared onto the condom or the pe- uh, the thing, and, uh… for the first, uh… pass. And, uh, distributed… inside. You know."

"Yeah? Pour some onto my fingers."

"Oh Gawd, baby!" Belle croaked, slamming her free hand over her eyes. "So awkward… so awkward…"

"No, come on…" When Belle didn't react, Erica took the tube and squeezed enough lubricant out onto her fingers to grease even the old bird on the couch. It had an odd consistency, like Vaseline though not quite. It was easily manipulated, but it didn't drip at all. "Baby, I love you and I want to make it so good for you. Please, let me help you. Please…"

Belle looked at her partner's warm, loving expression for a few seconds before she eventually nodded. Briefly moving her rear off the couch, she pushed down her panties and prepared herself for the penetration.
When it came, it was far more effective than she had imagined. The cooling lubricant worked at once, and she realized she had already turned so hot simply from looking at Erica's undressed frame she had begun to clench up. With Erica's long fingers tenderly probing the silky cavity and distributing the lubricant all over, she allowed herself to relax and simply enjoy the help of the woman who loved her.

"Is that enough, baby? Or do you want me to go deeper?" Erica whispered, making sure she had reached all she could inside Belle's center.

"I want you to come up here and kiss me," Belle husked, pushing the bathrobe off her shoulders. She fumbled with the latch on her bra, but stopped when she remembered it was one of Erica's favorite things to do.

Erica smiled and slowly pulled her fingers out of her partner, wiping the last of the cooling creme off on the folds so they would be well-lubricated for later. Like Belle, she pushed off her kimono and leaned down to travel up the body before her.

She skipped the trapped breasts for the time being and continued up to Belle's throat that got plenty of attention. Her tongue ran around the hollow and left a glistening track that slowly moved upwards to Belle's chin, then her lips.

The kiss that followed made them both moan. It was deep and genuine, and just the right thing for the overture to the magic symphony that would follow.

Looking into Belle's eyes, Erica pulled back but kept close enough to let her tongue glide over Belle's lips. "Does it work, baby?"

"Yeah… Gawd, I need you so badly," Belle croaked, pulling Erica back in so she could devour her whole. Down below, everything was cool and comfortable and it made her need explode. She exploited it to the fullest by raising her abdomen off the couch and pressing it against Erica's lower stomach. She rubbed her thigh up and down Erica's hip to show she was more than ready for the next movement in the symphony.

Erica wanted to treat her lover to a little surprise, so she reached in under the petite body and lifted her off the couch like she was a feather. The second part of her surprise was a little more clumsy - getting up from the floor with Belle in her arms without breaking the lip-contact they had - but she managed through her powerful legs and a little help from the woman in her arms.

They snickered at each other as Erica carried her older lover across the living room floor and into the bedroom. The bedspread was quickly pushed aside and Belle lowered onto the bed up near their pillows. Once Belle was comfortable, Erica hopped up in the bed and scooted over to kneel between her partner's legs. "Do you still need me?" she husked, taking Belle's right leg and caressing it with her strong, lubricated fingers.

"Oh Gawd, yes!" Belle croaked, pulling down one of their pillows to put it under her head so she could see what Erica was doing to her without getting a crimp in her neck. "Please, baby, I need you so much…"

Erica replied the best way possible. She kissed her way up the thigh until she reached the tender flesh at the juncture. Before she could make contact, she looked up and locked eyes with her partner. "Listen, baby… if you feel the slightest discomfort, tell me at once… okay?"

"I will… I will… I love you!" Belle whispered.

"I love you too," Erica said and moved down between her partner's legs. She opened her mouth and covered Belle's entire center with her lips, earning herself a throaty moan. The tender flesh was heated, though it was clear the lubrication did its job. The taste was uniquely Belle's, meaning the new remedy was as neutral as the box promised it would be. Moving slowly and tenderly, Erica let her tongue trickle across the folds and up to the little bundle of nerves to entice it into coming out to play.
Belle needed a little more before she was fully ready, so Erica slid up her lover's body to take care of the bra and give plenty of attention to the breasts and the nipples within.

"Jeez, Baby..." Belle said with a sigh.

Erica looked up from the bra's clasp to lock eyes with her lover. "Are you in pain?"

Belle shook her head and pointed at the door to the bedroom that they hadn't had time to close on their way over to the bed. "No... but would you mind closing the door... there's a draft... man, is that the world's lamest request in bed or what?" she said and broke out in a blush.

"I felt it on my cheeks," Erica said with a snicker. Kissing Belle's cleavage, she shuffled off the bed and wiggled over to the door. Instead of closing it, she draped herself against the doorframe and let out a sensual sigh. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" she said and ran her fingers over her pale-ocher breasts and dark nipples, down across her toned stomach and into her dark patch of hair.

"Not way the hell over there, there ain't!" Belle husked, waving her lover back to her.

Erica grinned and shut the door with a thump from her butt. Then, she sashayed back to the bed and went to work pleasing her older lover to the best of her abilities.

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Quite some time later, Erica climbed up Belle's body to rest next to the panting, glowing woman. She kissed the corner of Belle's mouth and let her tongue play over the little lines that crept up to the dimples on her cheeks.

"Thank you... I love you. Gawd, that was so good," Belle whispered, turning to look Erica in the eye. Sighing in relief from finally achieving the orgasm she had been unable to reach with the old medicine, she shuffled over onto her left side and grappled for the blanket so they wouldn't get chilled. She couldn't reach it, but Erica's far longer limbs had no problem finding the fabric that was soon swept over them up to their shoulders. "Ohhh... an old bird could nest here. Thank you once again," Belle said, snuggling down under the comfortable blanket.

"You're welcome... on both counts, baby," Erica said and draped an arm around Belle's body.

Words weren't necessary. Erica and Belle simply had enough in each other and the trust and love that flowed freely between them. Belle shuffled closer so their naked, steaming hot bodies touched all the way down - albeit with a slight disparity caused by the difference in height. When she felt Erica's full breasts poke her own, she let out a lustful sigh.

The acres of pale-ocher skin at her fingertips were too good to ignore, so she reached behind her lover to claw her long back. Erica's lips were next up, and they too were given plenty of attention with a series of little nibbles.

There, face to face with the woman who was nearly twenty-five years her junior, Belle once again had to count her blessings for being allowed a second shot at love. That was one thing, but to be able to attract a far younger woman was something else entirely. She had made it, and it had made her feel desirable again which wasn't a given for someone over fifty, or much less sixty.

If she had any say in the matter, she intended to never let go of her Big Bad Bear until the day she left the world behind. "I love you so much, Erica," she whispered, leaning in to give her lover a warm kiss. "You're so right for me."

Erica smiled and reciprocated the warm kiss. "And I love you, Belle. We can-"
The declaration of love was disturbed by the loud exhaust of a motorcycle that roared past out on the otherwise quiet street they lived on.

"Holy shit, baby," Belle said, having felt Erica's heartbeat go through the roof through her closeness to her partner's chest, "that spooked you!"

"Yeah… I'm sorry," Erica said and snuggled down again.

Belle kissed Erica's face and pulled back a little so she could get the big picture. "Now I'm curious… why did that motorcycle spook you?"

"No, it's just… well…" Erica said and rolled over onto her back. Belle followed her lover and snuggled down in the crook of the taller woman's neck. "I guess there are a few sounds I can't hear without… you know… reliving scenes from my past. Is that weird?"

"Of course it isn't, honey," Belle said and nibbled at Erica's neck. "I know exactly what you mean. I feel the same way with… mmmm… maybe we need a history lesson first so you'll understand."

Erica chuckled and reached down to claw Belle's back. "Go on… I love your history lessons."

"Okay… well, back in the late 1960s, early 1970s, whenever there was a TV report from Vietnam, we always saw the army helicopters… you know, the Hueys. Those oblong choppers with the sliding doors and stuff? They used them for landing troops and medevacs and stuff."

"I know the Hueys well, honey. We used them at the police academy for basic training."

"No shit?" Belle said and looked up at Erica's face.

"No shit. Go on."

"Their rotors make a characteristic noise, yeah? Nothing else sounds like a Huey. When you've heard one, you'll recognize it instantly… and my generation associates that sound with violence. Not only Vietnam but the national guard as well when they showed up to clear out the campus riots. They used choppers."

"I remember seeing that in your old scrapbooks, honey."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Erica said and craned her neck to kiss Belle's hair.

Belle snickered and paid back the favor by nibbling on Erica's neck before she resumed telling her story. "Well, some time ago, the Forest Fire Brigade up here started using Hueys… and when there's a forest fire up north, they fly past here from a base further south. Gawd almighty, baby… when three or four of 'em fly together… and they're always flying fairly low… that sound makes my skin crawl 'cos I expect the riot fuzz to drop from the sky and round all us hippies up in trucks, you know."

"Yeah… I see your point, hon. Of course, the fuzz actually came in through the kitchen door… didn't I?" Erica said with a snicker.

"Yeah, you snuck up on me when I wasn't looking, you big rascal, you!"
They laughed and snuggled tighter. For a few minutes, there wasn't any need to speak, but then Erica sighed and began to claw Belle's back again. "For me, the worst one is hip-hop. Hip-hop blasting out of a tricked-up car cruising along a boulevard with the front windows rolled down and the rear windows blackened by sunfilters. Back in the big city, whenever we saw one of those cruising the streets, we knew there was a big risk there'd be a drive-by shooting. It could happen at any moment, sometimes when we were standing on the opposite corner."

"Jesus… but they couldn't all have been drug lords? I mean, there must have been plenty of regular kids who drove around like that in the summertime? The windows down and loud music… I've done that a thousand times."

"Exactly… but which was which?" Erica said darkly.

Belle shivered and pressed herself closer to her Big Bad Bear. "Yikes, I'm glad I don't live in the big city anymore. That's not a life for an old bird like me. I prefer it out here in the 'burbs…"

"So do I, to be honest. Since the fatal shooting I was involved in back at the raid on the crack house, I've had a thing about loud, sudden reports, especially those I'm not prepared for like balloons popping, cars backfiring… or motorcycles blasting past. I don't know… it's embarrassing. And it's not particularly clever for a cop, I'll tell you that."

"It's a form of PTSD is what it is, honey…"

"Yeah, I guess."

Calmness claimed them once again, but Belle ended it by sliding up on top of her lover's larger body to pin her down. "Let me make it better for you, baby," she whispered, leaning down to lay a wet line of kisses from Erica's throat and down to the top of her breasts.

"Will you?"

"Uh-huh…"

"Are you still good to go?"

"Yeah. I got the hots for you, baby, but I feel wonderfully cool… and besides," Belle said and winked saucily, "I owe you two turns. I gotta even the score, dontchaknow!"

Snickering in unison, they hugged each other before Belle got down to business and the next part of the symphony began in earnest.

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CHAPTER 8

The high-intensity week flew past for Daisy-Belle, her Butterflies and everyone involved in recording the greatest hits album. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and most of Friday each saw a whirlwind of activity at the Ruff Diamond studio that left heads spinning and hearts thumping, but that resulted in twenty-three premium-grade folk rock songs in the can.

One song remained: The People Versus The Government. Belle's opinion on whether or not to include the protest song had flip-flopped more often than she cared to remember, but she had finally come to the conclusion that it still
covered several important topics. After a final moment of indecision, she got up from the couch in the lounge where she had been racking her mind and shuffled into the studio where they were all waiting for her, Erica included.

Erica had decided to spend the whole of the final day at the studio to support Belle and to keep a close eye on Rebel and J-Rox. To blend in a bit better, she wore her dark blue Coulson PD We're Here When You Need Us sweatsuit - but unfortunately, despite her best efforts, she still stood out like a sore thumb among the assorted crew of hipsters, hippies and hip-hoppers.

"Guys," Belle said and put her hands in the air to get everyone's attention. As she did so, her vintage No More Death Stop The War! t-shirt rode up to reveal her belly button. She got a wolf call for her bother, but she couldn't tell which of her captivated audience had delivered it. "Yeah, yeah, kids, so I have a belly button… whoop-di-do. Okay. Settle down now, this is important. I've decided to go ahead with it. But, and this is gonna sound so fuckin' diva-like… but we need to do it in a special way. These lyrics are so angry that I can't just open the faucet at will like I do with the regular songs. So, therefore, we're gonna do it differently. Irwin, are you listening out there?"

'Irwin and J-Rox got their ears on!' The producer's trademark lazy voice said from the mixing room.

"Good. Rebel, Pack, Troy, you guys are gonna do the music first. It needs to be angry, fiery, you against the injustice of the world. Get it? Once we have that in the can, I'm gonna come in here, don a headset that we feed the music to… Irwin, that's possible, right?"

'Aw, hell yeah, Belle!' Irwin said, offering the old bird a thumbs-up.

"Ace. Uh… and sing back to that. Or growl to be exact since it's spoken word. It's more complicated than what we've done so far, but it's necessary. Any comments… complaints… moans and groans?" she said with a crooked grin.

As her response, Leaf squealed and promptly lit a black incense stick. Hurrying around, she waved the stick in the air to summon the dark spirits that would help Belle get through the angry song. "We've done all we can for you, Belle… the rest is up to you!" she said and finished by drawing an intricate pattern with the smoke. The cloud of black smoke swirled everywhere, around the people, the instruments and even up towards the ceiling and the smoke detectors.

"Uh… okay. Thanks, Leaf," Belle said, staring at the cloud of smoke that made everyone wrinkle their noses.

"You're welcome! Me and the Walrus are gonna go out in the lounge and make out!"

"Uh… yeah. Happy days for all, huh? So… anybody else got a comment?"

Erica hopped off the table she had been sitting on and strode over to her partner. "I don't think we have any," she said and wrapped an arm around the shorter woman's shoulders. "Give it some hell, Daisy-Belle…!" she said, kissing Belle on the lips in full view of everybody.

Belle snickered wildly and buried her face in Erica's soft sweatshirt. "Aw, you betcha, Sergeant. Love ya, my Big Bad Bear."

"Love you too, Belle," Erica said and kissed the top of Belle's head to a resounding chorus of "Awwwwwwwwwww!" from everyone else present.

Once her flush had receded from her cheeks, Belle moved back from Erica's chest and waved at her friends. "All right, guys, I'll give you some space, but I'll be out in the mixing room so you can just ask if you need guidance. Okay?"
"Sure, Belle," Rebel said and went over to pick up her guitar. Troy and Packard nodded and shuffled off to their positions.

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Inside the mixing room, Belle held on tight to Erica's hand almost like she wouldn't be able to listen to the old, angry tune without moral support. They were standing at the back wall so they wouldn't be in the way of Irwin and J-Rox who had manned the knobs and sliders.

"Recording. Pack, it's all yours," Irwin said and clicked on the button that lit the red light.

Packard did as asked and moved over to the metal snare they had found at the foot of a pile buried deep inside the utility room. It was old, but perfectly suited for the task at hand. Standing up, he began to play a strict military drum roll on the snare to set the tone.

On cue, Troy came on board with a somber, monotone dam-dam-dam-DAM-DA-DAM-DAM-DAM-DA that made it sound like a firing squad lining up to pull the trigger. At the same time, Rebel made her guitar play a faint, distorted wail meant to illustrate the pain and suffering caused by the atrocities committed by the President and his cronies.

As the music played, Erica stared wide-eyed at the three musicians while she listened to the angry tune. She didn't know if she would ruin the take if she spoke out loud, so she leaned down and whispered into Belle's ear: "Belle, this is crazy stuff… I never knew it would be so angry!"

Belle stopped biting her fingernails and moved in very close. "This is nothing, honey… the lyrics will blow you away. I got something special prepared."

Erica grunted and stood up straight with a slight look of disbelief on her face - she couldn't see how it would be possible to top the darkness of the music.

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Later, after the second take was in the can, Belle, Leaf and the Walrus had swapped places. With a sigh, Belle sat down on the flake-out sofa in the lounge and found her iPhone. A few touches and swipes later, she was on Youtube watching old news clips from her younger years: Rosa Parks in Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr's march on Washington, racial unrest in the south, Kent State, campus riots, the assassinations in Memphis and at the Ambassador Hotel, young men burning their draft cards in DC, the police raid on the Stonewall Inn in the Village, the rising death toll in Vietnam, bombings in Cambodia, a naked, young Vietnamese girl with horrific napalm burns running along a road, the Watergate affair, speeches by the President where he claimed he wasn't a crook, and finally the shot by the helicopter where everyone was deliberately looking away from him.

Belle threw her iPhone down the other end of the flake-out sofa and crossed her arms over her vintage t-shirt. Staring straight ahead, she had a pitch black look in her eyes.

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In the mixing room, Leaf and Rebel were chatting about the finer details of how to remove nail polish in an environmentally friendly way. To mark the start of the weekend, Leaf had painted her finger and toenails in all the colors of the rainbow, and had her sandaled foot up on a swivel-chair to show off her handiwork.

Erica chuckled at that while she kept a close eye on not only Rebel but J-Rox as well. Both young people wore louder clothes to celebrate the final day of recording. The spiky-haired Rebel wore unlaced basketball boots, khaki cargo pants and a black, sleeveless t-shirt with the words Parental Guidance Suggested highlighted in red and
seemingly shattered by bullet holes. J-Rox wore a FeelO BOP ball cap and a maroon, oversized tracksuit that shone like satin but that probably wasn't.

Suddenly Irwin stormed into the mixing room and sat down on his swivel-chair. He hurriedly pressed all the right buttons and activated the recorder to be ready for anything that could or would come out of Belle's mouth. "She's comin'," he said over his shoulder.

Leaf squealed in excitement and shot to her feet to see better. Rebel snickered and joined the older woman, and even Erica sat up straight.

The tension grew in the mixing room until Belle strode through the hallway and into the studio like a woman on a mission. She went straight over to the microphone she had used all weekend and picked up a headset that Irwin had prepared for her. With an impatient gesture, she asked for the music track to start.

Irwin pressed the appropriate button and wheeled over to the monitor to observe the data stream. At first, there were no squiggly lines, but the music soon started.

In the studio, Belle went up to the spit-guard on the microphone and clenched her fists. On cue, she let rip with an angry, righteous, fiery speech that sounded like it came from a much larger creature than her petite frame. Over the course of the next four minutes forty-seven seconds, she cursed everyone in power who stood in the way of the people, cursed everyone in power who were deceitful, corrupt or simply ignorant, cursed everyone in power who couldn't see they were supposed to be civil servants and not greedy money-grabbers, and cursed everyone in power who sent the nation's young men off to die in a war on terror that was conducted without sufficient evidence.

So much raw energy blasted out of Belle it reached all the way into the mixing room. The old bird almost went supernova upon reaching the final block of the song, the one that dealt with the inevitable day when people would reclaim the power from the politicians. Rebel stood all-agape, Erica stared wide-eyed at her partner, and Leaf had tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Whoa… she isn't following the original lyrics," Rebel whispered, but nobody replied.

Belle had barely finished growling before Leaf broke down and buried herself deep into Erica's soft chest. The harmony singer was inconsolable, and Erica could do nothing but rub her hand up and down the old girl's back and whisper soothing words of nonsense.

The waveform was saved and copied for safety at once. When the files had been put into the appropriate folders, Irwin turned around and stared at the crying woman. "It's in the can… and that's a wrap for your greatest hits. Hey… what's wrong with Leaf? I thought it was the best thing since they invented LSD!"

Erica shrugged and tried to comfort the weeping woman in her arms. "Hey… Leaf, what's wrong? Don't you think it was good?"

"That-" Leaf sniffled, "that was the old Belle… the real Belle… she- she hasn't lost a thing. I love her so much…"

"So do I, Leaf," Erica said and tenderly kissed the top of Leaf's white locks.

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Inside the studio, Belle took off the headset and put it on a small hook on the microphone stand. Sighing over the timely contents of the altered lyrics, she shuffled over to the table that held their gear and snatched a bottle of mineral water. The cap stuck and she had spent so much energy on the song she couldn't get the darn thing to come loose.
"Hey, Irwin? Are you still out there?" she said out loud to get the producer's attention.

'We're here, Belle…far out, bro…that was just too awesome!'

"Thanks. I can't do it again, so… that was the only take you'll get out of me," Belle said and once again tried to get the cap loose, with the same disappointing results.

'It was just beautiful, bro!'

"Good," Belle said and gave up the unequal struggle with the cap. A familiar and very much unwanted feeling of light-headedness swept over her, and she stood up straight and took several deep breaths while she waited for it to recede. Once it had blown over - mostly - she shuffled over to one of the tall barstools and climbed up on it to take a much-needed breather.

Looking around the empty studio, she could hardly fathom they were done. All the excitement, the nervous energy and the creative magic that had rolled through the hallowed halls were imprinted in her mind - the happiness when something had worked, the pride when her old friends Leaf, Packard or the Walrus had nailed a piece, the thrill when her new friends Rebel and her brother had acted like the perfect tag team, and even the occasional frustration over someone coughing in a take or flubbing a line like she had done herself a couple of times.

A tired but grateful smile formed on her lips. "Thanks to the old guy upstairs for allowing me to experience this again…" she whispered with her eyes slowly drifting across the instruments and microphones. "For a while there, I thought the last thing I'd see in this life was the pavement down at the community center. Jesus, I'm grateful for all of this…"

Movement to her right made her turn around and lock eyes with Erica who came strolling into the studio. The two women smiled at each other like only lovers could, and Belle hopped off the barstool to intercept the younger woman. "And I'm grateful for her, too," she whispered before she cleared her throat and spoke in her normal voice. "Hey, baby… gimme a cuddle…"

"One cuddle comin' up," Erica said and pulled Belle in for a first class hug where one hand ended up on the back of Belle's head and the other was planted squarely on her jeans-clad rear end.

They rocked back and forth for a little while before they separated. The separation only lasted for a few seconds, then they decided a long, warm, loving kiss would be the perfect follow-up to the cuddle.

"I needed that, baby," Belle whispered, caressing Erica's prominent cheekbones. "Did you like the new lyrics and stuff? The new version of the song? I thought it was a blast."

"You pulled no punches, that's a fact," Erica said with a low chuckle.

"I sure didn't. But did you like it?"

"You did a fantastic job, honey. World class. The closing verse was raw and powerful."

Belle smiled and pulled Erica down for another kiss, then a nibble, then another kiss just for good measure. "But did you like it?" she said with a snicker.

Erica screwed on her most diplomatic smile and performed the age-old trick of running her fingers across her lips in the zip-it gesture.
"Yeah, thought as much. It's not really meant for you guys, anyway. If we play the new version to Kaye Bradley, do you think she'll alert the Congressional Committee for Un-American Activity?" Belle said, wiggling around in Erica's arms.

"You know… she might."

Belle snickered out loud and pulled herself into a new hug. "Oh-ho, she will, baby. No two ways about it. I'm glad you thought it was world class."

At that moment, Leaf and Rebel came into the studio and began to clap and cheer at Belle. The old Butterfly and the young rock'n'roller whistled and cheered so loudly Belle had to cover her ears.

"That was wicked awesome, Belle! You're such a star," Rebel said during a break in her whistling.

"Naw, I'm just an old bird," Belle said with an embarrassed wave.

Leaf was too busy jumping into Belle's arms to speak. The moment was too good to miss, so once the old friends had hopped back and forth on the floor for a little while, Leaf took a step back and whipped off her breezy dress. "Nude-in!" she cried, gracing the others with her bare form as she ran around the studio flailing her arms in the air and hollering the lyrics to Let's Go To San Francisco at the top of her lungs.

Erica nearly choked on her tongue, Rebel did choke on her tongue, and Belle let out a loud, braying laugh and began to clap at her old friend's antics. "You go, girl! Yay, Leaf, show 'em the good stuff! Go on, girl, let it all hang out!" she cried, clapping a perfect beat to the jiggling that went on around the studio.

Rebel gulped audibly and tried to look away out of respect for the older woman though it was hard to find a spot that didn't allow a peek of the pink flesh that hustled around in circles. "Now there's something you don't see every day here in Coulson…" she mumbled, looking everywhere but at Leaf.

"Actually, you do if you travel in the right circles," Erica said and let out an embarrassed chuckle. "I was at their New Year's party. Half the gang there took off their clothes."

"Wow… really?"

"Yeah. Eh. It's a generation thing," Erica said and picked up Leaf's dress so it was ready for her when she ran out of steam.

"Huh," Rebel said and sneaked a peek at the older woman. "Must be. Uh, I just remembered that I needed to… uh, do a thing," she continued, slowly backing out of the studio.

Leaf ran out of steam sooner than predicted, but on her way back from her last tour of the studio, she pulled both Erica and Belle in for a crushing hug. All three women were squished up against each other in an improvised victory dance. "We did it! We recorded a new album! Oh, I love you so much, Belle… I love you so much, Rikka! I just love you all so much!"

"Well, oof… mmmmm… that's… oooof!" Erica said, trying to extricate herself from Leaf's surprisingly strong grip. "Leaf, here's your dress… you may wanna- Oooof! Put it back on before."

"Whoa, dude!" a male voice cried from the door to the hallway. It was Irwin, but his voice held anything but the lazy tones it usually did. "Whoa… a nude-in? A nude-in in my studio!? Count me in, girls!" he said and began to un buckle his leather belt.
Belle shrieked in mock horror and Erica put her hands around Leaf's naked body to turn her away from the impending disaster. "Hold it right there, fella. Nobody takes their pants off while I'm here!" she said in the no-nonsense tone she kept in reserve for the special moments.

"Awww, but-" Irwin whined. He already had the zipper at half mast, but wizened up and shut everything that needed to be shut.

Erica's response was to let her left eyebrow creep up her forehead in a gesture that left no room for misinterpretation. While Belle helped Leaf get her dress back on, Irwin turned around and shuffled out of the studio with sagging shoulders.

"Hey Irwin!" Belle said once Leaf was properly dressed. "Ya wanted to tell us something, dude?"

"Naw, well… yeah. I just wanted to say all the recordings are A-OK and that J-Rox and me are ready for the fine-tuning. He's doing a complete backup onto a portable hard drive as we speak. Anyway, I was thinking you could come over maybe Sunday at noon and select the best takes and stuff…?"

"Sure… Sunday at noon? We can do that, can't we, baby?" Belle said and quickly gave Autumn Leaf a pat on the rear to show that she was ready to go.

"We can… and listen," Erica said sternly with an index finger wagging in the air, "I better come along so nobody gets a notion of taking off their pants in public…"

Irwin nodded hard like he had been told for the first time the world was square, not round. "Uh-that's a plan I can follow, General. Yessiree."

Erica nodded back and turned toward Belle. "Uh-huh. Good. And you, young lady," she said and caressed the aged skin on her partner's cheek, "your presence is requested in the lounge. I have something important I need to share with you… and it needs to be in private. I'm not as social as you are, especially not when it comes to something as personal and intimate as a wet kiss and a hot cuddle."

"Ohhhhh my, Sergeant Wayne!" Belle said saucily, but even that comment was drowned out by the excited squeal that came from Autumn Leaf behind them.

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Over the course of the week, the flake-out sofa had seen almost as much action as the recording studio, though of a different and far more intimate kind. The sixty-inch TV had hardly been touched, but Irwin's refrigerator had been well and truly raided.

The trash from the last party that had gone on in there was still visible as Erica opened the door and stepped aside so Belle could come through. Candy bar wrappers, empty beer and soda cans, and a couple of magazines had created a mess, having been thrown about randomly by the last people in the lounge.

"Sheesh, the kids these days," Belle said and grabbed a metal trash can that stood next to the flake-out sofa. With a wide sweep, she poured everything but the magazines into the trash and dumped the can where she had found it.

"Boys will be boys," Erica said as she closed the door.

"Yeah, but how can five guys create this much of a mess?"

"Lucky us that we don't have to pick up their socks and sort their underwear. Or flip down the toilet seat."
Belle guffawed loudly and sat down on the couch. The first thing she did was to snuggle down in the soft cushions; the second was to put her feet up on the table and sigh contentedly.

"Listen, can I get you anything?" Erica said, pointing at the refrigerator.

"Awwww, and here I thought you wanted to kiss me silly!" Belle whined, making doe-eyes at her partner.

Erica returned the doe-eyes and strolled over to the sixty-four beer refrigerator. "I will… in a while. You want an iced tea or something?"

"Yes, please. Would you mind opening it for me? I seem to have a little thing when it comes to plastic bottles today."

"Huh?" Erica said, taking the two nearest bottles of iced tea. When she didn't get an answer, she closed the door to the refrigerator and strolled over to the couch. The cap was easily twisted off and the bottle handed to Belle. "Here ya go. All ready to drink."

"Gee, thanks, honey-bunny," Belle said and drank nearly half in one gulp. "Dude, singing about the unfairness of the world sure makes one thirsty," she said, looking at the half-empty bottle. She didn't need more, so she put the rest on the table.

Erica didn't reply - she had no time to. She was far too busy gazing lovingly at Belle's profile; at the aged, wrinkled and slightly pale skin that nevertheless meant so much to her. At the crow's feet around and under Belle's green, sparkling orbs, at the cute dimples on her cheeks that were joined by faint lines originating at the corners of her mouth, at the braided, grayish-blonde hair that seemed to grow another gray strain every other day, at the aged skin on her neck where her t-shirt didn't reach, and at all the other little imperfections that went together to shape the frame of the woman she loved.

Reaching over, Erica put her hand on Belle's cheek to make her look her way. When their gazes interlocked, the air around them sizzled - they could both hear it quite clearly. The distance between them was taken care of in a hurry and a kiss was initiated that was so sweet and so loving they had to extend it to the point of almost fainting.

Belle leaned back on the couch and let Erica take the wheel for the time being. The kisses they shared created a wave of warm, golden pins and needles inside her that traveled down her body and raced across every dip, every plane and every curve she had. Somewhere inside her, a greedy, little voice cried out for more, more, more, and she put her hand behind Erica's head to bring her even closer.

The mewling moans that escaped her throat proved she wanted the kiss to last for a lifetime, but the need for air eventually overcame even the strongest voice of lust. She pulled back but never went too far. The wave of golden warmth blossomed inside her as she gazed at her partner's young, pale-ocher face and sky-blue eyes that seemed to shine from within. The urge to kiss the younger woman in her arms became too strong to ignore, and she moaned softly as she picked up where they had left off.

Halfway through the next kiss, Belle put her hands on Erica's shoulders and gave her a gentle push to tell her she should move back against the backrest of the flake-out sofa. Almost without breaking contact, Belle moved over and straddled Erica's endless thighs. She pulled herself close, sliding down as far as she could go on the soft fabric until her knees were buried in the backrest.

It was close enough to get a sense of the firm body underneath her, but not close enough to satisfy the little voice inside her. "Touch me… please touch me," she whispered around the kiss that only deepened when Erica did as asked and put her hands firmly on Belle's rear end.
Erica felt her lust already knocking on the proverbial door, and it only grew stronger when she was allowed to squeeze and fondle Belle's behind. Sighing into the mouth that was attached to hers, she let her hands slide up the loose t-shirt to caress the skin on Belle's back. Soon, her fingers were teasing the bra strap, running below, above and inside the elastic band.

They were too busy with each other to notice the door opening, but they found out the hard way when J-Rox came into the lounge with his phone glued to his ear. "- No, man, no… I'm feelin' the heat, man. No, we gotta get rid of the whole fuckin'- fuck, man!"

J-Rox stopped abruptly and stared at Belle straddling Erica on the couch. His eyes darted from the two women and up to the wall behind them; then back down to Belle's annoyed glare.

"Excuse the fuck outta you!" Belle growled. "Get lost, dude! We're busy!"

J-Rox mumbled an apology before he shuffled back out of the lounge and closed the door behind him.

"Jesus, that weirdo," Belle grumbled before she moved back to Erica's mouth.

They continued kissing for a little while, but the moment had been ruined by the unwanted guest, and Belle settled for nibbling on Erica's lips while she ran her fingers across the pale-ocher skin and through the dark hair. "Love ya, Erica Wayne," she whispered, kissing Erica's nose and cheekbones.

"Love you too, Belle. Oh… oh, I'm really sorry, but…"

"Oh no… no, no, no," Belle whined nasally, "you're not gonna leave me now, are ya? Now?!"

"Yeah…"

"Oh-nooooo!"

"Yeah, I have to go to work, baby. We're going to pull an all-nighter," Erica said and reached down to fondle Belle's rear end and give it a goodbye-squeeze. "But I have your number so we can, you know, always continue at a later date…"

Belle stuck out her tongue but changed her mind at once and leaned in to nibble on Erica's upper lip while she still had the chance. "Over the phone? I'm too old for 1-800-rub-me lines."

"Jeez," Erica said with a deep, dark chuckle. When Belle didn't seem to want to let her go, she simply wrapped her long arms around her partner's slender frame and rose from the couch like her precious cargo weighed nothing at all. Holding on tightly, she walked out into the middle of the lounge and kissed Belle one last time.

"Oh, all right… you can let me down now," Belle said and sighed so deeply it sounded like her world was coming apart. When she had her feet on the floor, she chuckled and stole another kiss just because she could. "Damn, you're strong, Sergeant ma'am. I'll bet you could flick me from one end of the room to the other one-handed and without breaking a sweat."

"Yeah, well… perhaps, but I'd rather kill myself than hurt you, honey," Erica said and kissed Belle's forehead.

Belle chuckled and stood up on tiptoes so the kiss on the forehead turned into one on the lips instead. "Figure of speech. I know you'll never lay a finger on me I haven't asked for."

"Never. I'm sorry, baby… I really gotta go," Erica said and rolled back her sleeve to check her wristwatch.
Not wanting to let her Big Bad Bear go, Belle traced the lettering on Erica's sweatshirt with an index finger in a desperate attempt at stalling. That she copped a feel on Erica's firm breasts underneath the soft fabric was a boon. "Ohhh… but what happened to We're Here When You Need Us? Where can I complain?"

"Baby…"

"I know, I know," Belle said and took a dragging step backwards though she never let go of her prize. "Please take care… it's a mean, old world out there, you know. Love ya."

"Love you too, Belle. And I always take care," Erica said and stole a goodbye kiss.

Outside in the hallway, they bumped into Troy and the Walrus who came in from the alley. A cloud of sweet-smelling smoke hovered around them, and they tried to blend into the concrete walls when the Sergeant approached them.

Erica didn't even need to sniff the air to recognize the scent of strong cannabis. "Good evening, Gentlemen. Listen, Troy, are you going over to Barney's afterwards?"

"Yeah," Troy said in a voice that was a whole yard on the lazy side of the fence.

"I see. Who's driving?"

"I am."

"No, your sister is."

"Uh… no, I'm driv- yes, my sister is driving," Troy said, nodding hard when the fact that Erica was wearing her stoic, no-nonsense game face had filtered through his fuzzy brain.

"Good. Don't let me down, Troy. I can tolerate you guys smoking cannabis here, but I cannot and will not accept intoxicated drivers on my streets. If I find you behind the wheel in your present condition, I will throw the book at you. You hear me?"

"Yes, Sergeant…" Troy said, nodding so hard his hair bobbed up and down.

"Very well. You better sit down until your sister is ready to go," Erica said in a hard voice that immediately softened when she turned back to Belle. "Love ya. See ya tomorrow."

"See ya, baby!" Belle said and waved at her partner as the imposing woman walked over to the squad car with a purposeful stride.

Once Erica had left, Belle shuffled back inside with a big, ol' grin on her face. On her way past the door to the lounge, she remembered they hadn't cleaned up their mess, so she opened it fully and stepped inside - and stopped abruptly just on the other side of the threshold when she realized the flake-out sofa had been moved away from the wall and that a door that had previously been hidden was ajar.

Belle furrowed her brow and tip-toed across the floor of the lounge to investigate. Even without getting too close to the second door, she could hear someone moving something around further into the next room - and that 'something' sounded like a large cardboard box or packing case being pushed across a coarse, concrete floor.
"What the hell?" she whispered, tip-toeing the last part of the way over to the door that still stood ajar. Once she got near enough, she could see it had been perfectly camouflaged by a poster of a scantily-clad model who sat in an outrageous, provocative pose atop a Harley-Davidson.

She peeked around the edge of the door and saw J-Rox kneeling next to a pale brown cardboard box devoid of any company logos. At least six further boxes of the same size were stacked up in the far corner of the small storage room. He was doing something on top of the cardboard box, but she couldn't see what it was. 'Well… he could be working on securing the backups… or the portable hard drive that Irwin talked about, but… but it looks far more shady than that. Jeez, I can't believe we've been here the whole week and never discovered that door!'

Additional movement inside the storage room made her snap out of her thoughts and withdraw to the door to the hallway. Holding her breath, she closed it softly so J-Rox wouldn't find out she had been there.

She paused in the hallway, biting her fingernails. 'I knew there was something wrong with him… but, Jeez, Daisy-Belle Cosmic! He doesn't have to be a kiddie porn collector just because he's doing something odd in a storage room, fer cryin' out loud! He works here, of course he uses the storage rooms… Jeez, get a grip, woman… but it sure looks suspicious…'

The door to the mixing room was suddenly opened with a bang that made Belle jump a foot in the air and let out a strangled squeak.

Bright laughter burst out of the mixing room, quickly followed by Troy, Irwin, Packard, Leaf, and the Walrus who came out in high spirits.

Gulping down the terrified lump in her throat that had been formed by the shock, Belle shimmied off her unease and joined her friends before J-Rox would come out and realize she had been spying on him.

"Daisy-Belle!" Leaf said in a cheery voice that proved she too had had a puff on the magic wand. Like always when she was high, she seemed to look past the person she was speaking to, and her eyes had become lazy and unfocused. "Oh, I do love you so… you are so beautiful inside and out. Hey, me and the Walrus and Troy and Irwin and Pack and the Walrus and Troy are gonna go over to the blues bar to watch our young friends play tonight! You wanna come? Please say yes, Belle."

"Well, seeing that Troy is one of the cats who's gonna play, and that I'm the only straight-minded person here… which is kinda ironic on so many levels… I better, huh? Who else is gonna drive you?"

The look on Leaf's face proved she clearly couldn't answer that question, so Belle relented and pulled her old friend into a hug. "Forget it. Love you too, Leaf. Are you done here?"

"Mostly… I need to find the Walrus and then I'm done."

"He's right next to you, honey," Belle said, taking Leaf's hand and putting it on the Walrus' elbow.

"Then I'm done," Leaf said and shook her head, prompting Packard to guffaw and laugh out loud like a kid.

Belle grinned and placed a quick kiss on Leaf's cheek. "Uh-huh. Okay. Any of you potheads got a clear mind?"

When the answer was a resounding "No!" from all involved, Belle grunted and helped the entire group out of the Ruff Diamond Recording Studio and out to the colorful VW Microbus. After sorting her friends by ascending height, she made them stand in front of the bus while she unlocked the doors. "Hey… Irwin, can you just leave in the middle of the backups and all that?" she said while she opened the central door and helped Leaf onto the rear bench seat.
"Yeah, yeah, bro," Irwin said in his trademark lazy voice that had gained a slightly screechy undertone from the weed he had smoked. "J-Rox got all of that covered. We didn't have much to backup today, anyhow, bro. J-Rox took care of it all. He put the hard drives and stuff in the safe. It's out back, bro."

"Oh, okay." -- 'So that's what I saw him doing... huh. Okay, that's a load off my mind... but it still looked suspicious,' Belle thought as she gave Packard a hand up to get onto the front seat of the Microbus.

"Dude!" Irwin suddenly howled, looking at the colorful vehicle like he saw it for the first time.

"Wh- what...? Didya forget to pee?"

"Naw, this is a 1966 Vee-dub Type 2 Microbus, bro! The original hippie-mobile! Gawd almighty, I've seen so many of 'em but I've never been in one before!"

Belle chuckled as she took in the sight of a grown man turning into a little kid. Irwin hopped around on one leg when he realized that he would not only get to sit in it, but drive in it as well. "Yeah, huh? Well, hop in, sailor... there's a new show in town."

"Whoopee!" Irwin said and hopped in next to the Walrus.

"And will you four potheads please stay calm while I, the old bird, do your work for you by getting your instruments and stowing them in the back?" Belle said and let out a laugh.

When she went inside, she met J-Rox in the doorway. She stepped aside for the young man without speaking a word, but felt a strong, cold trickle run up and down her back at the way he glanced at her. Laughter from further inside the studio made her forget about the creepy J-Rox, and she shuffled into the mixing room to see what was going on through the large pane of glass.

Troy was behaving like a big kid just like Irwin and Packard had done, and Rebel had been forced to assume the role of the responsible adult who collected their instruments and made sure her brother didn't do anything stupid like trip over his own feet.

"Rebel, let me help you with that," Belle said and shuffled into the studio. She quickly picked up the Walrus' violin case, a bag of tambourines and Troy's Rickenbacker bass guitar that was well-protected in a quilted cover.

"Thanks, Belle... man, what's wrong with these guys all of a sudden...?"

"Loco weed," Belle said, shrugging.

Troy was being a nuisance, so Rebel gave him a swift kick up the rear with her unlaced basketball boot. "Will you go out to the Jeep? Jesus, Troy... you're embarrassing tonight... you're getting on my last nerve now!"

Troy grumbled a bit but eventually withdrew to the Jeep.

Rebel rolled her eyes and slammed her hands onto her hips. "And we're supposed to go on stage in an hour over at Barney's! I mean... what the hell did they smoke? It must have been industrial strength weed!"

"I don't know, I wasn't there," Belle said with a shrug.

"Damn, Friday is our biggest night," Rebel grumbled as she picked up her Fender Stratocaster replica that she had put in a quilted cover like Troy's Rickenbacker. "Fridays, we always get enough tips to last us a week. But with Troy acting like that? Forget it."
"Weeeellll, I'm thinking the tippers are tipping you, not your brother," Belle said with a wink.

Rebel shook her head. "No. We're a team. Like your Butterflies."

"I hear ya. Shit, what about the lights?" Belle said and squinted up at the strip lights in the ceiling. "Can we just leave the lights like this? And the security system?"

Rebel shrugged and began to shuffle off towards the entrance to the studio. "Don't know and don't care… oh, J-Rox said something about activating the alarm when we had left, so I guess that's okay."

"Sheesh…" Belle said with a dark chuckle. "One puff on the peace pipe and the entire universe is collapsing… where the hell did the Walrus get that weed?"

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A short time later, the two-car convoy trickled along the semi-dark alley and out onto Chesney. Rebel was far bolder and had a far better car at her disposal than Belle, so she flew out into a narrow gap in the traffic and was soon out of sight going down the Avenue towards Main Street.

Belle had forty-six years of driving experience under her belt so she preferred to stay at the monstrous curb until she found a gap in the traffic wide enough to accommodate a Microbus. When one finally came, she fished for a gear and let the old car creak, groan and stumble down across the side of the mountain.

In the back, Irwin whooped out loud at the carnival ride, and his whooping only intensified when Belle found second gear and set off down Chesney with the VW’s characteristic put-put-putting soundtrack coming from the exhaust.

"Glad to hear someone's happy about my driving," Belle said with a chuckle. They reached Main Street after only a couple of minutes, just after she had found third gear. It was fourth time lucky for her fishing in the gearbox, but it was all in vain as the traffic lights turned red and she had to throw it into neutral.

When they finally turned the corner, the line in front of Barney's Barmy Blues Bar was at least twice the length it had been the first time they had visited the establishment. "Ohhhhhhhhh shit," Belle said as they trickled past the meatloaf bouncer and the long line of well-dressed young men and women who seemed extraordinarily excited about getting in. "Oh shit, this is gonna take an hour just to get in… aw, hell," she mumbled, driving on and on along Main Street until she found a spot by the curb.

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Five minutes later, they had barely moved five yards and they still had twenty yards to go to get to the bouncer at the door. The other people in the line around them were happy and excited, and Belle used the opportunity to study those nearest to her. She could almost hear Erica commending her for using her eyes as she took in the sights of the many clean-cut young women - and a few men - who were lined up in their sharpest, fanciest outfits. Some were even so excited about visiting Barney's they ignored their smartphones and actually spent time talking to the people around them.

Belle furrowed her brow. Although she still refused to believe the level-headed Rebel had anything to do with the rampant drug problem in and around Barney's, she had to admit that it was a strange sight to see all those gorgeous young females lined up at something as rough and tumble as a blues bar. In the old days, only the blue collar crowd would have dared to go to a blues bar, but now, it seemed that it was a pastime for those well off. Something had to be pulling them in, and Belle - reluctantly - had to admit that it could very well be the sexy bad girl Rebel and her brother.
Commotion at the door made Belle snap out of her thoughts and look ahead. She narrowed her eyes when she realized that Rebel, the meatloaf bouncer and one of his black-clad associates were headed down towards the Butterflies.

Once they made it there, Rebel raised her hand to give Belle a high-five that was responded to in kind. "Guys," the guitarist said to the bouncers, "these five people are my personal guests. Please let them in without hassle."

It was clear to see on the meatloaf bouncer's face what he thought of letting five hippies in without at least roughing them up a little, but his meaty lips were eventually pulled back in something approaching a smile. He held a small, orange stamp that he used to give each of the Butterflies and Irwin a mark on the back of their left hand. "But you get no drinks coupons today!" he growled like he had just been told his favorite TV-dinner had gone bad.

"Groovy!" Irwin cried and immediately let out a slightly insane laugh that made the bouncer cringe and the youngsters around them give him funny looks.

Rebel grinned and leaned in towards Belle so the whole world wouldn't hear what she had to say. "Us rainbow girls need to stick together, right?"

"Right," Belle said with a wide grin as she and her friends broke out of the line and strutted up the sidewalk like a bunch of peacocks, much to the visible annoyance and vocal dissatisfaction of the man people waiting in line.

Later in the evening, the music was loud, the beer was cold and the women were hot - or rather, the young women in the crowd had the hots for Rebel who was standing at the edge of the stage with her foot up on a satellite amplifier, playing a wild, distorted Billy Gibbons solo while pulling an orgasmic look on her face that manifested itself best in the unrestrained, provocative wagging of her tongue.

"Holy fuck, the kids these days," Belle said and pushed the cup of beer she shared with Leaf over to the other side of the table. Their table-mates Irwin, the Walrus and Packard were visiting the restroom to hit the weed again, but Leaf was dipping so she had preferred to stay with the cold beer for the time being.

Unlike their first time at the bar, they weren't sitting at the stage, but with the throng of people vying for attention at Rebel's feet, perhaps it was for the better. "Well, I for one never behaved like that when I was twenty-four!" Belle said with a snort. "Holy shit, look at her! That's just outrageous!"

"Who?" Leaf said despondently, sipping from their shared beer.

"Who do you think? Rebel!" Belle said and pointed her thumb at the young, gyrating woman.

Leaf cast half a glance at the stage and snorted out loud in her old friend's direction. "Daisy-Belle Cosmick, you did plenty of insane things when you were twenty-four… you can count your blessings they weren't caught on camera!"

"What are you talk- I did not!"

"In 1975? Like, hell yeah you did!"

Up on the stage, Rebel stepped back from egging on the female crowd and joined her bombed-out brother who was sitting on a barstool at the back playing with far less intensity and vigor than normal.
Belle guffawed and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, maybe I did. But not like that. Dude… that much tongue action in public… and the orgasmic look she had on her face! Back then, we would have been arrested and thrown in the slammer for obscene behavior!"

"Times have changed, Belle… are you getting conservative on us all of a sudden?" Leaf said and played with the half-empty cup of beer.

"I beg your pardon? That's an insult!" Belle said and reached across the table to tickle her old friend's bare arm.

Leaf snickered and drained the rest of the beer in one go.

"Hey!" Belle said, pointing at the empty cup. "We were gonna share that!"

"Oh… I forgot. I'm sorry… I better buy us another one, then," Leaf said and pushed her chair back, but Belle stopped her by holding onto her hand.

"No, I'll do it. I'm nimbler on my feet tonight. Wait for me here, okay? Oh, there's the Walrus and Pack now… they can keep you company," Belle said and rose just as the two men came back from the restroom. "Hey guys… did you forget Irwin in the john?"

"Naw," the Walrus said as he sat down. "He had to take a dump and we didn't wanna wait for it. He said he was constipated… it's the weed. It twists your guts into knots. Makes it real hard to take a dump."

"Not sure I needed to know that," Belle mumbled and turned away from the table. On her way over to the bar counter, she had to thread the proverbial needle to get through the crowd. Although it wasn't a dance joint as such, Rebel's enthusiastic set had the people on their feet, wiggling around to the contagious bluesy beat that came from the stage. Two young women in short, pleated dresses got in Belle's way, and she had to make a side-step to get past them.

The side-step gave Belle a good view of the far corner of Barney's. Moore Bracken, the owner of the blues bar, was crouching down in front of two young women wearing jeans and faux flannel shirts. One of the two sat with her legs spread and her head in her hands. Moore's position seemed inappropriate until Belle could see the man in the urban camouflage pants and the black t-shirt was giving her a glass of water.

Moore - whose shaved head and ten day stubble still didn't do him any favors - left the corner and went back behind the counter to tend the bar.

Belle kept standing in the middle of the throng, watching the young women in the corner who both drank from the glass. She wasn't sure, but she thought she had spotted them up at the stage earlier.

Without warning, the woman who had been sitting down jumped to her feet and began to dance manically with wide-open, bugged-out eyes. It was clear from her unrestrained movements she was tripping inside her mind, and that she had no control over her body.

"Holy fuck," Belle whispered, feeling an ice cold shower run down her back. She had been with enough drug users to know the girl was freaking, or maybe even on the first stage of an overdose.

Even as Belle watched, the dancing woman's friend also began to behave oddly, repeatedly getting up and sitting down on her chair with a distant, trippy look on her pretty face.
"Holy fuck… holy fuck! Screw the beer… we gotta help 'em," Belle said and hurried over to the young women. They were too far gone to even sense her presence, even when she grabbed the arms of the woman who kept standing up and sitting down to make her stay in one place.

She recognized the look of a strong acid trip in the women's dead eyes, and immediately reached for her iPhone. Before she had time to dial 9-1-1, a third young woman came hurrying through the crowd with Loree Malone, the Night Angel, in tow.

The returning young woman screamed when she saw her friends. Clutching her fancy hairdo, she began to howl for help, but the music was so loud and the crowd so tumultuous that she just seemed to be responding to the wild stage show that Rebel and her brother put on.

As always, Loree was dressed in her bright yellow jacket, and she said a brief hello to Belle before she too reached for her telephone.

When Belle heard the Night Angel dial 9-1-1 and deal with the ambulance, she found Erica's personal number in the registry and hit the button. "Don't worry, I got the fuzz," she said to the Angel who nodded in return.

'Hi, honey,' Erica said at the other end of the line. 'Whoa, it's loud where you are! Listen, I'm kinda busy-

"This is an emergency, Erica," Belle said in a voice that left no doubt as to the nature of the call. "Drop what you're holding and race over to Barney's. We've got two girls freaking over here. It's really bad this time."

'On my way,' Erica said and hung up at once.

One minute fifty-five seconds later, a black-and-white Charger came to a screeching halt outside the blues bar with the sirens of further emergency vehicles following close by. Erica and Robby Lechner bounded from the car and ran in through the entrance, going so fast the meatloaf bouncer didn't even have time to see who it was.

"Over here!" Belle cried when she saw the two unmistakable figures run into the bar. By now, the party-goers and the musicians had realized that something was up, and the establishment turned eerily silent.

As always in such situations, Erica's face was a closed mask of steely determination, but even her stoic facade cracked at the sight of the freaking women. "Jesus," she mumbled, rubbing her brow. She needed a moment to get her Ps and Qs lined up, but when they were, she keyed the button on the microphone she carried on her shoulder. "Dispatch, Sergeant Wayne. Responding to a medical emergency at Barney's Blues Bar on Main. This is an eleven-forty three, urgent. Notify paramedics. Gimme an ETA on the EMT, over."

'EMT on site, Sergeant, ETA two seconds tops. Paramedics notified, ETA two to four minutes.'

Even before Erica had finished listening to the voice of the dispatcher, the next emergency vehicles arrived outside which turned the entire front part of Barney's - including the large number of people waiting in line - into a light show of bright reds, whites and blues.

"Dispatch, EMT on site, stand by," Erica said and sought out Belle's hand. "Thanks, baby… we better take over. Don't go too far, we need a word afterwards."

Belle was too stressed to do much but nod, but she did manage to find enough of a voice to be heard over the growing din of the shocked crowd. "Leaf and the guys are over at a table… I'll be there."

"Okay," Erica said, but that was all she had time for. From the door, Josh van Eyck, Kaye Bradley and Stu Burton came in with the white-and-orange-clad EMTs who had already prepared a stretcher.
Erica watched her partner shuffle off to the table she shared with her old Butterflies and their new producer. She offered Autumn Leaf a quick, reassuring wave before she turned back to the EMTs. Robby was next to them, talking to a young woman who stared in wide-eyed horror at her two friends as they were being treated by the medical personnel.

Loree Malone stood close by with a sour look on her face. Erica decided to go through the list one item at a time and strode over to the Night Angel to get that particular point out of the way. "Good evening, Miss Malone. Can you tell me what happened?" she said and put out her hand.

"Good evening, Sergeant," Loree said and shook Erica's hand. "I can't tell you much. I was alerted by the third young woman there who informed me two of her friends were behaving strangely. I had seen them earlier but they weren't freaking yet. By the time she and I got back, they were behaving like that. This is so frustrating! I really thought our increased presence had brought an end to this damn business."

"For a while, it had, but…" Erica said, looking at the dancing girl whose eyes were so listless it was hard to tell if she was even still alive.

"Sergeant… Sergeant Wayne?" Robby said, holding the third young woman's arm in a surprisingly tender fashion though she was visibly frightened out of her mind.

Before Erica had time to deal with that, she turned back to the Night Angel and patted the woman on the shoulder. "Thank you, Miss Malone. You better go back to work. I have a feeling this is going to be one of those nights…"

Nodding somberly, Loree turned around and disappeared into the crowd to keep an eye on the other guests.

Once it was his turn, Robby stepped forward with the frightened young woman. "Sergeant, this is Chastaine, I believe she can give us an account of how she and her friends appropriated the illegal substances."

Erica moved swiftly over to her colleague and softened her expression so the young woman wouldn't be spooked beyond what she already was. "Hi, Chastaine, I'm Erica… this is Robby. Please tell us what happened tonight."

"Am- am I gonna get in trouble with the law?" Chastaine squeaked in a tiny voice. Like most of the young women who had been snared in by the lure of the pills, she was in her early twenties and dressed for a wild night on the town. Her blond hair was styled to a T, and she wore remarkably subdued makeup which accentuated her pretty, natural looks.

"First we need to know what happened."

Chastaine's pale blue eyes darted from Robby to Erica and back before they settled on the tall, imposing woman in the black uniform. "All- all right. My fr- friends and I ca- came over to ch- check out the guitarist. I m- mean, she's so cool… outs- outside, we met a young guy we'v- - oh, Gawd, my parents are gonna kill me," Chastaine said and buried her face in her hands.

"Just take it nice and easy, Chastaine… you met a young guy?" Erica said calmly though the pulse point on the side of her neck was beating double-time. For the first time since the case fell on them, they were on the brink of getting a description of the dealer, and she wasn't about to let the young woman go without giving it.

Chastaine groaned and looked up at the ceiling in a textbook case of a guilty conscience. "We met a young guy and bought some pills," she said in a despondent voice. "We've bought from him before. Tonight, he had a weekend offer. Two for the price of one. Fifteen dollars for two pills. We bought two pills each… my friends took theirs while we waited in line to get in, b- but I couldn't… I c- can't swallow pills so I needed something to wash them down with. We had barely been in five minutes before my friends got weird, but they… they didn't… they didn't
freak out until the owner of the bar came over with a glass of water… s- so I've been told… by then, I had left to find one of the Angels. We've never tried to take two pills before… it's only been one pill… two were too much…"

"Did this young guy have a name?" Erica said, finding her notepad and her trusty ball point pen.

"He must have, but nobody ever said it. We just… it just took, like, ten seconds, you know… pills for cash."

Erica made a note and looked up. Her eyes turned to steel as she pinned the young woman to the spot. "And what did he look like, Chastaine?"

When the only response was a terrified silence, Erica shifted the weight to her other foot and cocked her head to appear somewhat friendlier. "Listen, Chastaine, if you help us catch this bad guy so other kids won't end up like your friends, we can overlook the fact that you bought the pills. What did he look like?"

Chastaine's eyes once again went on a tour of the premises before they landed on Erica's steely frame. "He w- he was just a twenty-something guy… white Nikes, a FeeloBOP cap, uh… hip- uh… like a hip-hop suit, y- you know… maroon…" she said, biting her fingernails.

Erica nearly pressed the ball point pen through the notepad. "Goddammed J-Rox… and I've spent the entire week rubbing shoulders with him… Jesus, I must be blind!" she growled under her breath. Grimacing, she wrote down the details and the suspect's name on her notepad. When she was done, she cleared her throat and looked back up at Chastaine. "Very well. We have enough to go on. Please wait here with Officer Lechner while I check out a few things. All right?"

"Y- yes," Chastaine said, nodding hard.

By then, Erica was already on her way over to Belle's table where Irwin was just sitting down from his extended stay in the restroom. "Mr. Seacombe," she barked once she got there, making the pothead producer freeze in place. "It looks like your cousin J-Rox is the dealer who's responsible for this mess. What's his real name and where does he live?"

Leaf and the Walrus both gasped and stared at their new friend - even Packard seemed shocked, though whether it came from a flashback brought on by Erica's harsh tone was difficult to say. Belle clenched her fists and slammed them down onto the tabletop which made the empty plastic cups dance about. "I knew that son of a bitch was a creep…" she growled.

Irwin slowly put up his hands in a sign of defeat. "Sarge, he's not my real cousin… we j- just call each other cuz, you know… street slang… for fun… and stuff… 'cos we're so different…"

"And what a fuckin' barrel of laughs you got out of it, Brother Sunshine!" Belle barked, spooking the already jittery Irwin.

"So you don't know his real name?" Erica said - Irwin shook his head again. "Very well… I'll contact you later," she continued before she spun around and strode back to Robby and Chastaine. On her way there, she radioed the description to the dispatcher.

Back at the table, Belle rubbed her chin repeatedly while she watched and listened to Irwin whining and moaning about J-Rox. Leaf, the Walrus and Packard chimed in and added to the constant stream of murmurs that came from the crowd around them - all in all, it was impossible to hear herself think. "Guys… guys… guys! Will you shut up, Irwin! I know where J-Rox keeps his stash… it's in the hidden storage room behind the Harley-Davidson poster in the lounge… but-"
"What the feck are ya talkin' about, dude? There's no room there… believe me, I've checked out that motorcycle hussy with the big titties often enough, dude," Packard said, but Belle nodded vigorously.

"Yes there is, Pack… before we left just now… when you guys were so stoned you couldn't walk straight, I caught J-Rox inside the hidden storage room. He was doing something to some cardboard boxes."

Leaf just looked from Belle and over to Irwin with a confused look on her face, but Irwin shook his head slowly. "Naw, that's our backup room. It's got a controlled environment and shit. There's a safe in there. You saw him store the backups in the safe, that's all…"

"No, Irwin, not unless he's been cuttin' a few corners and storin' the backups in cardboard boxes."

"Dude…!" Packard groaned, finally looking convinced. "But if you say that to the fuzz… and if the fuzz raid the feckin' place… what'll happen to our feckin' recordings, dude…?"

Leaf gasped again and whipped her head back around to Belle.

"Jeez, I don't know, Pack," Belle said, rubbing her brow. "All I know is that I saw a girl just now freakin' so badly I was thrown back to the bad old days with Stephanie. Know what I'm saying? That time when she got the contaminated smack? I saw that just now, Packard…"

Packard said something to her, but Belle didn't hear him. She had gone back in time to the final months of Stephanie Lorenz' life where every single day became a struggle to find the money needed for her next heroin fix. Her beauty and her musical skills had long since been lost, and she had only been a shell of a woman until the inevitable happened and she contracted the disease that took her life.

"No…" Belle said and rose from the table without looking at her friends. "No, I won't let that happen to another young girl. I need to tell Erica…"

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CHAPTER 9

Belle tried to push her way through the layers of people who were gawking at the police, the EMTs and the recently arrived paramedics helping the two young women, but her petite frame didn't offer enough leverage to get through cleanly. Growling, she shoved her way through a pair of tall men to get to the other side.

When she reached a small pocket of air that meant she could see what was going on, she just caught a glimpse of Erica's broad, uniformed back striding off towards the entrance to clear the way for the stretcher that carried the first of the two freaking women.

"Shit… Erica! Erica!" Belle shouted, waving her hands in the air to catch her partner's attention. They made eye contact for the briefest of moments, but the moment didn't last long enough for Erica to understand she needed to come over.

Erica winked and offered Belle a quick smile before she stepped outside and strode over to the ambulance to help the EMTs roll the stretcher into the wheel locks. As always, the men worked professionally and the stretcher was soon up into the ambulance and firmly secured. Before they closed the rear hatch, Erica stepped up and disappeared out of sight.
"Shit," Belle groaned, rubbing her face.

Out on Main Street, the ambulance activated its siren and made a U-turn to get over to the Methodist Hospital at the other end of town.

The two paramedics were the same people who had helped Belle when she had collapsed at the community center's parking lot on New Year's Eve, but she didn't feel much of a need to greet them for old times' sake. They were busy helping the least affected of the victims, the young woman who couldn't sit still. Once she had been properly sedated, they requested a second ambulance that should also bring her to the Methodist.

"Shit… now what am I gonna do?" Belle mumbled, trying to look for one of the other police officers so she could give them what she knew about the probable location of the pills. They were all busy taking statements from the other young people and asking them what they knew about the dealer, but they worked the room in a circle so it would take them half the evening to get around to Belle.

Just when Belle spotted Josh van Eyck and tried to go to him, the bar was lit up again by the next ambulance that came for the second victim. Belle was swamped by the crowd who all wanted a grandstand seat for the grisly spectacle.

"Aw, hell," she growled, suddenly finding herself swimming upstream. From somewhere to her right, she could hear a gruff, male voice belonging to Moore Bracken arguing loudly with Rebel and Troy about getting their lazy asses back on the stage and do what they were paid to do. Not long after, the music restarted, only far more subdued than it had been before the incident. Rebel moved up to her microphone and accompanied herself while she sang a quiet blues about how much she missed her old blue jeans.

Down in the crowd — stuck fast and struggling to break free — Belle recognized the blues as one of the Walrus' favorite ZZ Top songs, Blue Jean Blues. She growled out loud at the way the owner of the bar had treated the musicians, and her annoyance was compounded when she finally got a clear view of Rebel whose face proved she was about to suggest to Moore that he could take the gig and shove it.

The next moment, Belle bumped nose-first into the back of a black uniform shirt that had popped up out of nowhere. Unfortunately, the shirt belonged to Kaye Bradley who only had time to cast an annoyed glance at the old hippie who had bothered her.

"And you too, Sister Eternal Sunshine," Belle mumbled, sidestepping to find one of the other officers. She finally ran into Josh who was taking notes on a notepad.

The friendly officer looked up and offered Belle a brief smile before he returned to his notes. Scribbling furiously, he wrote line after line to get everything of the statement he had just taken down on paper.

"Josh, we need to talk," Belle said strongly to be heard over the Blue Jean Blues, "I got some info for you."

"One moment and I'll be there, Miss Cosmick," Josh said, writing an endless stream of words on his notepad. When he was done, he looked up and smiled at the older woman.

Belle opened her mouth to speak, but before she could utter a syllable, she was interrupted by one of the two paramedics who came over to deliver a status update. "Aw, ain't that just too fuckin' typical…" she grumbled, crossing her arms over her vintage t-shirt. So much police and medical lingo flew back and forth she almost got dizzy from listening to it.

The official conversation went on with Josh van Eyck involved in a sequence of nods and head-shakes. On and on they went, speaking for such a length of time that Autumn Leaf, the Walrus, Packard and Irwin went on a quest to
find out where the lead singer of the Butterflies was hiding. When they found her, they moved up next to her and watched the confusing exchange.

"What's up, dude? Fec, they sure are talkin' fast, dude," Packard said, scratching his short hair.

"Yeah… that paramedic must be translatin' the flippin' phonebook into Latin," Belle grumbled. The deep sigh that followed proved she was getting mighty tired of waiting.

Finally, Josh said goodbye to the paramedic and turned back to Belle. He greeted her companions and flipped open the notepad to the next free page. "Sorry for the delay, Miss Cosmick. What do you have for us?"

Belle screwed a smile on her face and lowered her arms to look a bit more cooperative to the fuzz. "Josh, are you familiar with the Ruff Diamond Recording Studio over near Chesney? It's located in an alley in the commercial district?"

"The Sergeant has mentioned it, but I've never been there personally. Go on," Josh said, taking notes.

"Just inside the front door and to the left, okay?" Belle said and drew a map in the air. "You'll find a lounge… at the back of the lounge, there's a-"

The look on Josh's face proved he wasn't quite sure what it was Belle was trying to tell him, and he stopped taking notes to pay more attention to her flaky instructions.

"Aw, but that don't matter, dude," Packard said, pushing his way past Belle. "We've been there all fuckin' week, dude. It's behind a poster of a hussy on a Harley…"

Josh looked from Packard, over to Belle and back to the clearly intoxicated man. "You've been there all week? The Sergeant has told me about the recordings, but-"

"The pills!" Leaf chimed in, clutching her hands to her lone breast. "We've been playing with Rebel and her brother all week, and that's where the pills are, Officer! We've-"

"The pills?" Josh said, suddenly business-like in his manners. He looked up at the stage where Rebel was winding down the blues. "So they were involved with the pills after all? I should have known an old rap sheet never lies. All right, thank you. We'll take it from here."

"Wait, wait, Josh… that's not what I-" Belle said, but it was too late. Josh van Eyck closed his notepad and strode away from the group of slightly confused Butterflies. "Aw, hell! No, no, no… why didn't you guys let me speak, for cryin' out loud?? I had this under control! Now he's gonna… gonna…"

Below the stage, Josh waved Kaye Bradley over to him. They spoke briefly before they stepped up next to Rebel and her brother and ordered them to put down the instruments.

"What a clusterfuck!" Belle cried, clutching her head.

She, Leaf, Packard, the Walrus and Irwin watched in silent horror as Rebel and Troy were led off the stage with the heavy hand of the law on their shoulders.

The situation only grew worse when Moore Bracken ran over from the bar counter and confronted the officers with a shove and angry words. In no time flat, Kaye Bradley slapped her cuffs on him and read him his rights.
Belle buried her face in her hands and groaned out loud. Next to her, Leaf began to cry, the Walrus and Irwin stared wide-eyed at the mess, and Packard mumbled something about firebombing the feckin' police station.

Josh led Rebel and Troy down past Belle and the Butterflies. As the young guitarist was forced along, she locked eyes with Belle and sent her a silent message that said, 'I didn't deserve this shit!'

"Josh…" Belle tried, but there was too much going down at once for anyone to listen to her. "Josh, will you wait up… you've got it all wrong, man! Josh! Hey, Josh, you misunderstood us, man… we didn't say anything about Rebel and her brother… that was all a misunderstanding… the pills are-"

Josh van Eyck kept walking like he hadn't heard a thing. Behind him, Kaye Bradley shoved a cursing and swearing Moore in the back while holding his handcuffed arms in a force-hold.

"Holy crap, this is going to hell in a handbasket…" Belle groaned as she watched Josh move his two detainees outside and into the nearest cruiser.

Another commotion at the door proved to be the meatloaf bouncer and his associates tussling with Robby Lechner and Kaye Bradley to get their boss free. The tussle turned into fisticuffs and then a wrestling match that drew an excited crowd at once.

"No, that's it, we're done here," Belle said and grabbed hold of Leaf's arm. "We gotta get outta here before the shit comes down like the Berlin wall… Leaf! C'mon… guys! It's now or never."

"But they're blocking the door, Belle!" Leaf cried, pointing at the mess.

At that exact moment, chaos turned to carnage as a chair was flung through the air on a collision course with Robby's back. The large officer was hit, but not too bad. The chair suffered a different fate: after it bounced off Robby, it crashed through one of the storefront windows and smashed it into a million tiny fragments before it continued out onto the street.

The assembled crowd that consisted mostly of young, well-dressed women shrieked as one and ran for cover. Robby and the bouncer were still fighting at the door, but several of the guests escaped over a table and through the busted window. After finishing off her first opponent, Kaye came back inside and immediately took on one of the other bouncers.

"Dude!" Packard cried, clapping his hands. "Dude, this is gonna be a brawl against the fuzz… just like that time in Mobile, Georgia, dude!"

"Alabama, Pack," Belle said, ducking down to get out of the firing line as someone threw a plastic cup filled with beer at someone else. She turned around and looked up at the stage where Troy's Rickenbacker and Rebel's Fender Stratocaster replica were lying unattended and in grave danger of being damaged if the minor brawl turned into a free-for-all.

"It was in Georgia, dude…"

"Mobile is in Alabama… ah, who the fuck cares! C'mon, Pack, I need your long arms, man!"

"Huh? For what? Where, dude?"

"Up on the stage… get their guitars!" Belle cried, pointing at the expensive instruments.
Even with his long arms, Packard couldn't reach them, so he hurriedly hopped up onto the stage, unplugged them from the amplifiers and picked them up. "Now what, dude?" he said, stuffing a guitar under each arm.

"Now we old geezers need to get the hell outta here before we're all shepherded into the paddy wagon! Hustle, hustle!" Belle cried, wrapping an arm around Leaf's shoulders to drag the confused, crying woman away from the carnage.

The Butterflies and Irwin shuffled over to the busted window, but before they had made it all the way there, Josh came back inside and jumped into the wrestling match to help Robby and Kaye who had received a bleeding gash over her left eye.

Irwin was at the back of the line and out of harm's way, but he was suddenly grabbed from behind and flung onto the floor. He howled as he was pinned down by a pair of strong, hairy arms that clearly belonged to one of the bouncers.

Belle bared her teeth in a distracted grimace at the sight. Spinning around, she and Leaf pushed their way through the assorted young women, climbed up on the table and escaped through the shattered storefront window. Once they were safe out on Main Street with a motley group of hysterical party-goers, they worked together to give the heavier and less nimble Packard and Oswald a hand-up to get out of the mess.

"Get down to the bus… everybody, get down to the bus!" Belle cried, directing her Butterflies away from the window. Her heart pounded in her chest and she was so stressed out she was on the verge of a dizzy spell, but the safety of her friends meant more to her at that point than her own health, so she pushed on regardless.

At the Microbus, she fumbled and bumbled to get the car keys into the tiny hole in the lock, but she finally managed to unlock the door with hands that trembled so badly she could hardly wipe her sweaty brow. She opened the central door and helped Autumn Leaf and the Walrus up onto the rear bench seat. "In you go, boys and girls… Pack, get the instruments in the back… okay? Okay?"

"You ain't feckin' opened it yet, dude!"

"Aw shit," Belle mumbled and hurried around the back of the Microbus. She quickly unlocked the rear hatch and helped Packard offload the expensive guitars up next to the violin case and the assorted other gear they had brought from the recording studio. She made sure the guitars were secure in the same place they had kept their own instruments throughout the countless years they had been on the road.

"Okay, get in… we're leaving!" Belle said and ran the long way around the Microbus to get to the driver's door.

"Yeah, yeah, dude," Packard said as he opened the passenger door and climbed up onto the seat.

"Jesus, we gotta hustle before they bring in the shock troops…" Belle said, looking behind her at the commotion in front of the blues bar.

Hopping in behind the thin, white steering wheel, she turned the ignition key and prayed to the God she didn't usually pray to that the old bus would start. It did, and she was even able to find first gear on only her second attempt. She dropped the clutch and the old bus lurched away from the curb with a tiny screech from its narrow tires.

They hustled up Main Street with Belle's eyes glued to the rear view mirror. Another chair came flying through the second storefront window, distributing a million shards onto the pavement.

"Dude! Swerve!" Packard said, pointing ahead.
Packard's warning made Belle's eyes snap back to the road, and she swerved out into the fast lane to get around a car that had stopped at a crazy angle to check out what was going on at the blues bar.

"Goddammit, how could that happen? How could it turn so shitty so fast…?" Belle mumbled, fishing through the gearbox until she found third gear. The familiar put-put-putting from the exhaust did its best to soothe the frayed nerves of the Butterflies, but even so, they were still quite frazzled when they left the bright lights and harsh reality of Main Street behind and drove into the darker, quieter suburbs.

Autumn Leaf began to sob again, and she leaned into her husband's side to find comfort. "Oh… Irwin… I hope they don't beat him up too much. And it was my fault Rebel was arrested… that beautiful young girl… now she's going to prison and it's my fault," she said quietly between the sobs.

"It wasn't your fault, love… it was just a whole buncha negative waves converging," the Walrus whispered, mussing his wife's white hair. "Hey, Belle," he said out loud, "what did the fuzz mean when he said that rap sheets don't lie?"

Belle fished around for fourth gear but gave up and continued along the quiet residential street in third. "Rebel did time in juvie some years ago for possession and distribution, Walrus. Ecstasy."


The Walrus grunted and pulled his sobbing wife closer. "So the fuzz jumped to conclusions just because he got confused? And he went for the easy target? Yeah… sounds like the fuzz we know, don't it? Yeah."

For once, Belle didn't have an answer to that as there was no point in trying to defend the mess it had turned into. "Fuck, if only Erica hadn't left," she mumbled, thumping her fist down onto the thin steering wheel. "She would have fixed that fuckin' mess in no time. She listens… the others don't! I can't believe Josh fucked us over… Kaye Bradley, sure, I expected nothing less from that mean piece of fuzz… but not Josh!"

Packard turned towards Belle and drew a deep breath, but before he could speak, Belle pointed an angry index finger at him. "Don't you start about Erica, Pack. Not now. Please."

"Naw, dude, I was gonna say that you're right. It got outta control 'cos of the feckin' junior fuzz. Erica woulda fixed it, dude. For a fuzz, she's sorta… well… okay. Don't write this down, dudes, but I… shit, I kinda like her."

"You what?!" Belle, the Walrus and Leaf cried as one.

"Yeah, well, I mean… she's kinda cool," Packard said and squirmed in his seat from the intense scrutiny. "And she's a queer Native A so she knows what it's like to be oppressed. You know. On top of all that, she feckin' loves ya so much, Belle…"

Belle chuckled and reached over to pat Packard's knee. "Yeah, that she does. And I love her just as badly."

"We all do," Leaf said from the back seat.

"Thanks, hon," Belle said, moving her hand over her shoulder so Leaf could touch it if she wished - as she had hoped, Leaf leaned forward and kissed Belle's fingers.

The Walrus grunted darkly into his mustache which caught the attention of his fellow Butterflies. "At least we got out with our asses still attached, but it doesn't change the fact that we got one, giganto unsolved problem here…"

"Three problems, Walrus. Three," Belle said in a matching dark tone. "The first being the pills, the second being our recordings and the third being Rebel and Troy in the slammer. And how we can fix 'em, I have no fuckin' clue…"
"Hey, Pack," Belle said once she had helped a dead-tired Leaf safely up the gravelly driveway to the White Angel Commune, the name Leaf and the Walrus had chosen for their home. "Pack, Jeez, man… I'm really sorry I drove you way the fuck out here… it completely slipped my mind that you live downtown with your wife now…"

"Aw, dude, that don't mean nothin'. The Walrus offered me a bunk to crash on, so… eh," Packard said, shuffling back and forth on the spot. "It was more important to get the feck away from that feckin' mess back there, dude. I'll just call Katherine and explain. No big deal. She knows she's married to a rolling stone, so… no big deal, dude."

The two old friends looked at each other for a few seconds before they broke out in identical grins and put out their arms. Packard pulled Belle in for a hug and took the opportunity to muss the gray-blond hair. "Dude, I've missed doin' this… sorry for being such an asshole last year. The feckin' endless roads we traveled just got to me, dude. This is much more my thing… play music, cut an album, be with the people who mean a lot to me, have fun… you know, the good stuff, dude."

"The good stuff, yeah," Belle said with a broad grin. "Hey Pack, we ain't gonna drift apart again. I'm definitely comin' downtown to visit your wife some time. We can play a couple-a Steppenwolf or B-T-O albums while we flap our gums, huh?"

"Yeah, dude. Katherine loves Satchmo and them jazz cats."


The 'old man' grinned and shuffled up the driveway in his typical slouchy style. Belle waited a few seconds to wave good night to Autumn Leaf who came out to stand in the doorway. The harmony singer had already changed into a sheer sarong that gave her neighbors an opportunity to see a little of everything, and certainly more than they had bargained for at a quarter past ten on a Saturday evening.

Belle smiled at her old friends as Leaf pointed to the sign that said Check Your Tude At The Door before she let Packard inside, but her smile faded when she turned around and shuffled back down to the Microbus.

"I got it all, Belle, you don't need to carry anything," the Walrus said with the rescued guitars under his arms alongside his own violin case. He stepped aside so Belle could close the rear hatch.

"That's good, Walrus. Man, what a night, huh?" Belle said as she pulled the old, squeaky hatch down and locked it.

"Just like the bad old days."

"Ain't that the fuckin' truth. Hey, thanks for letting Packard crash here. I don't know where my head was… I honestly thought he still lived out here," Belle said with a shrug.

The Walrus chuckled and began to shuffle up the gravelly driveway. "Ah, no worries. Stay safe, okay? We'll call tomorrow when the world has gone right side up again."

"Read ya loud and clear, Walrus. See ya some time," Belle said and waved at her friend though she knew he couldn't wave back.

Getting in, she put her fingers on the ignition key but didn't twist it. Instead, she sighed and leaned back on the bench seat while she stared out of the windshield at nothing at all. "Fuck, I can't believe Rebel and Troy got arrested…" she mumbled to herself. "Moore Bracken and his bouncers, those dumb dicks, they got themselves in trouble, but Rebel and Troy… aw, hell."
She leaned forward and turned the ignition key with a disappointed shake of the head. The old engine spluttered to life though it ran rough for the first few cycles until the fourth cylinder showed up for work. "Leaf was right, it was all our fault," she mumbled as she fished for any gear she could get to work. Ultimately, she found first and put-put-puttered away from the curb at a rather more sedate pace than the rocketship launch she had made down at the blues bar.

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Three minutes later, she drove onto her own street and stopped in her driveway with the engine still running. She was about to get out to open the garage door - the remote had quit working and they couldn't get spare parts for the old system - when she came to the conclusion that the only one who could do something about their problems was herself.

"We created this damned mess, we need to fix it… or I do," she said and shut the door again. "If the fuzz are too overwhelmed to listen, I just gotta take care of business myself… I'm gonna go down to Ruff Diamond and… and… and do… something. Shit. Get our recordings… locate the pills so we can get Rebel, that sweet kid, out of jail… but how?" she continued, looking at herself in the mirror just to see what kind of indecisive chicken was driving the Microbus.

With a crunching noise from the gearbox, she selected reverse and drove back down the driveway. First gear was more difficult to find, so she had to start in second. It only added to the strained put-put-puttering, but the old, colorful vehicle eventually trickled down the road headed for the connection to Main Street.

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Once Belle made it downtown, she chose the quiet side streets so she wouldn't have to go anywhere near Barney's Barmy Blues Bar that had lived up to its name. At one point, she pulled over at the curb because she could hear an emergency vehicle somewhere close, but it turned out to be the paramedics driving past behind her on Main Street.

"Sheesh, they're probably still fightin' down there," she mumbled as she found first gear and drove off.

After a short drive through a few sinister alleys, she found Chesney and crossed over all four lanes unhindered to drive into the commercial district for independent businesses. As she had feared, the wide alley that was the home of the Ruff Diamond studio was dark, shadowy and just plain scary that late in the day.

With eyes that bugged out on stalks to see anything at all ahead of her - the headlights of the old bus were dim at the best of times - she trickled along the uneven surface at five miles an hour. She eventually found the non-descript concrete building and parked out front in the spot she had used all weekend. A quick decision later, she drove back out into the alley and reversed into the slot up against the studio building so she could make a hasty retreat if she had to.

"I don't care what they say about daytime dangers being worse than those at night… this is fuckin' scary!" she mumbled as she turned off the engine and stared into the semi-darkness. It didn't help that the studio was located opposite the wide open grassy field that loomed dark and dangerous behind the mesh fence.

Belle thought she could see a hundred eyes of a hundred vicious creatures all ready to jump at her and drag her into their lair, and she couldn't even make it better by turning on the interior lights. Not only was the little bulb broken, the light would have been visible up and down the entire alley - and she was supposed to be there incognito.

"Be brave… you're brave… be brave," she said to herself in the rear view mirror, "you're brave… be bra- aw, fuck that…"
Opening the door, she climbed down onto the uneven surface and scouted out the area. Nothing moved anywhere near her, so she released the death grip she had on the car door and tip-toed towards the entrance to the studio.

She had only made it four steps before she came to a dead stop and smacked her forehead. "And how were you gonna get through that reinforced steel door, dummy? Say Open Sesame or blow your nose in the lock? Daisy-Belle Cosmick, this has got to be the single-most dumbass thing you have ev- holy shit, the door is already open!"

Belle stared wide-eyed at the narrow cone of light that shone out of the steel door. The alarm system wasn't active because the heavy, reinforced door was held open by a tiny plastic wedge that had been jammed up against the threshold. Faced by the imminent threat of danger, her courage deserted her and she hustled back to the Microbus with her eyes firmly glued to the steel door.

Climbing into the VW, Belle took her iPhone and punched in Erica's number. It went to her voice-mail at once. "Aw hell… just when you thought it couldn't get any worse… it must be J-Rox who's in there. He must be fiddling with his damn pills… but I just want the portable hard drive with our songs… nothing more," she said to herself in the mirror to work up enough courage to go inside.

She took a deep breath to fill her being with calmness and courage. It didn't really seem to work. Gulping down a bitter knot of nervousness, she slipped back onto the uneven surface of the alley.

The steel door was reached in no time and she tried to peek through the narrow crevice. It was only just wide enough for her nose and one eye, but she peeked in for all she was worth.

Lights were on in the central hallway that connected the utility room with the lounge, the mixing room and finally the recording studio itself. Although it was difficult to see on that side of the hallway because of the angle, the door to the utility room was ajar as well.

She put her hand on the steel door to test its weight. During the week, she had rarely opened the door herself because she had always been accompanied by someone else when she came or went. The one time she had opened the door by putting her foot on it, she had nearly sprained her toes because of the weight and the resistance of the door spring. As expected, she found it to be so heavy she needed to use both hands.

Employing a proper two-hand grip, she got the door open with nary a hitch, apart from a short squeak that came from herself when her fingers almost slipped. Once she was inside, she closed the door again so it rested on the plastic wedge to make it appear it hadn't been disturbed.

Because the door to the utility room was open, a pulsing, electric buzz flowed out into the hallway that made it difficult for her to hear other sounds. She tip-toed along the smooth floor, remembered to lift her feet over the insulated power cable to the soft drink vending machine - so she wouldn't stumble like she had done on Wednesday when she had carried a box of sheet music that nearly ended up all over the floor - and slid up along the wall so she could peek into the only room she hadn't been in yet.

Inside the utility room, a large generator was buzzing merrily. It had a panel full of bright, blinking lights that she knew better than to fiddle with. On the wall next to the generator, she recognized the water heater and some kind of electronic gadget just below it. She didn't know what the gadget did, but it had a line of blinking, red LEDs on it, and she presumed it could have something to do with the alarm system.

She couldn't see any particular reason why the door was open, but since she didn't know what was in the utility room on an everyday basis, she couldn't tell if anything had been added or removed.

A chill swept over her body and through her bones at the thought of what she was doing. Her breath caught and her heart picked up its pace, but she was determined to at least find the portable hard drive. Gulping, she carried on along the hallway.
With lips that were pressed together so hard they were merely thin, colorless lines in her face, she peeked into the lounge that wasn't quite as they had left it only a few hours earlier. The refrigerator door was open and a six-pack of beer stood on the table, though the plastic wrapping hadn't been broken. The flake-out sofa had once again been pulled away from the wall, and it had the TV remote lying upside-down on it like someone had been zapping to kill time. Below the sofa, the little mesh trash can had been tipped over when the sofa had been shoved aside.

The door to the hidden room behind the Harley-Davidson poster was open, indicating that whoever had jammed the front door knew about the secret stash of pills.

Stepping into the lounge, Belle held her breath to hear better. It only made the blood pounding past her eardrums sound that much louder, so it didn't give her much. A sudden bump followed by a scrape and a curse from somewhere behind her nearly made her heart jump up in her throat.

She scooted back to the door and peeked out into the hallway. Another bump came from the studio itself. A man cursed, but she couldn't tell if it was J-Rox or someone else. 'All right, so whoever this is, he's in there… that means I can… I can… Jesus, I can go into the hidden room and find those damned recordings. I can't believe I'm even thinking that…' she thought as she tip-toed over to the flake-out sofa and moved around it.

The hidden room behind the Harley-Davidson poster was less polished than the rest of the Ruff Diamond studio. The floor and the walls were bare concrete, it had naked light bulbs hanging down from the ceiling, and it had a home-made system of crude aluminum shelves nailed to the walls that didn't improve the elegance of the room. To the right, an old-fashioned cast iron safe stood firmly on the floor with its door closed.

There was a peculiar smell in the room that Belle couldn't recognize but that made her crinkle her nose. In the far corner of the room, a mouse trap where the doors had been sprung proved where the smell came from. An open can of mothballs not far from the trap only added to the less than wonderful environment.

Belle grimaced and moved further into the room. The crude shelves were covered by row after row of small, clear plastic containers. Most of them carried hand-written labels that offered a detailed account of the contents of the containers, like 2010-08-31 Unnamed hobby band, backup of six masters, or 2013-09-18 The Mother-Rockers, backup of nine masters. She followed the shelves that were lined up by date until she found the box she was looking for - their own, labeled 2014-04 active - The Butterflies, top level backup of twenty-four masters.

Sighing in relief, she took the clear plastic container down from the shelf and looked into it. It held an external, portable USB hard drive like Irwin had said it would. 'Okay… so far so good. I doubt this baby can be hooked up to any of our equipment… or maybe our laptop? Don't know and it doesn't matter 'cos we don't have the software to work on the songs anyhow. The number one objective is to get it home for safekeeping,' she thought, looking at the sleek box that was made of shiny, black plastic.

She had no experience with portable drives, so she didn't know how fragile it would be, but she took it out with both hands and put it on the shelf next to the empty box so she knew where it was.

A stack of larger cardboard boxes on the floor caught her attention. She wasn't certain, but it looked to be the same boxes she had seen J-Rox rummage through earlier in the day.

After looking over her shoulder and thoroughly checking her surroundings for any unwanted creepy-crawlies of the two or eight-legged kind, she knelt down on her aching knees and opened the flaps of the cardboard box on top. Even as she did so, a clear plastic bag that had been pushed in behind the stack of boxes caught her eye.

The plastic bag proved more tempting, so she shuffled to her left and reached ahead to take it. When she pulled it back, she stared wide-eyed at its contents. "Holy fuck!" she mumbled before she hurriedly looked over her shoulder to see if anyone had heard her whispered outburst. She was still in the clear, so she turned back to the plastic bag.
Dollar bills - dozens, scores, hundreds of dollar bills. Ones, fives, tens, even a few C-notes were visible as she held up the bag to let the harsh light from the naked bulbs play onto it. She shuffled the contents around with her hand to get a load of everything and to fully realize what she was holding.

Some bills were folded neatly, some were straight, but the majority of them were crumpled like they had been the only money the former owner had had in his or her pocket at the time. 'Drug money… the worst fuckin' kind of dough,' Belle thought, shaking the bag with a deep sigh.

The first cardboard box beckoned, and she pulled back the flaps and stared into it. Like she had feared - or expected - it was filled to the brim with little, round medical bottles of various colors. Roughly forty percent of the bottles were brown, another forty percent were green, and the rest were a mix of blue and clear white. There seemed to be some kind of system to the madness with all brown bottles carrying a white plastic cap, all greenish bottles carrying red caps, and the rest carrying black caps.

None of the boxes or bottles were equipped with labels so she had no way of knowing what they contained. She took one of the green bottles and turned it over to look at the contents. That particular one contained six pills shaped like stars; others were shaped like diamonds, rhombuses, hearts and little E's.

'Ecstasy,' she thought, looking at the bottles with the red caps. 'Six pills in each, at least a hundred bottles in this cardboard box alone… six hundred pills. And there's five boxes. Holy fuck, this should be called The Drug Cartel Recording Studio and not Ruff Diamond!'

She picked up one of the brown bottles, but it was more difficult to look through the tainted glass. She couldn't discern anything apart from the fact it too held six pills.

After looking over her shoulder, she took a green and a brown bottle and stuck them down her front pockets, mindful of not damaging the plastic caps. 'All right… with these fuckers as evidence, even Deputy Goddamned Dawg can't get confused… and Erica told me she needed a few pills to run a chemical analysis,' she thought, making sure the bottles were secure.

Getting up, she needed a moment for her aching hip and knees to comply before she closed the flaps on the cardboard box and tip-toed over to the shelf where she had left the portable hard drive containing their songs.

The lounge was still empty, so she sneaked out into it with long strides to give herself an opportunity to take off in a hurry if she was suddenly cornered or otherwise threatened.

She popped her head out into the hallway to try to listen for the activity she had heard before. It was still there, only fainter, but the constant buzz from the generator masked it too much for her to be certain of anything.

The hallway down to the reinforced steel door was clear and the door itself was still standing ajar, but Belle came to a dead stop when she realized the door to the utility room had been closed since she had seen it last. 'Jeez, someone's been here… right here… and I didn't hear a thing,' she thought, looking around in a panic. 'Whoever this cat is, he coulda come at me with a gun or something… I gotta get outta here while I still have a dry pair of shorts…'

Tip-toeing down the hallway, she wanted to employ the same two-handed grip on the heavy steel door like before but found herself a hand short - the other one was carrying the portable hard drive. Fortunately, the drive could fit down the front of her jeans held in place by her belt, but only if she sucked in her gut.

The door opened without problems, and she soon found herself in the middle of the dark alley that had only grown darker since she had arrived - the fact that her tired eyes had become accustomed to the lights inside only made it worse.
Unable to see a thing, Belle fumbled and bumbled along the concrete wall until she bumped into the side of the colorful Microbus. Sighing in relief, she ran around the front and pulled the driver's side door open. The portable hard drive was put on the bench seat with great care before she climbed up. The pill bottles she had in her jeans pockets bothered her when she sat down, so she took them out and hid them deep under the front seat.

With the alley so pitch black, there was no point in scouting out the area, but a faint reflection in a windshield off to her right made her furrow her brow. She couldn't remember if she had seen a car parked there when she had arrived.

"This is gettin' too scary, Daisy-Belle," she whispered while she reached into her pocket to find her iPhone. She tried Erica's number again, but it still went directly to the voice mail. "Aw, shit… why has she turned off her phone? She's constantly telling me to always keep the damn thing on so we can stay in touch… fuck it, I need to get out of here."

She put the telephone on the bench seat and reached for the ignition key. Much to her surprise, the old engine coughed to life at the first chance, but finding a gear proved to be an entirely different - and far greater - challenge.

All sorts of crunching noises came from the gearbox as she fished for anything that would get her away from the concrete building. A final crunch was followed by a boxful of neutrals.

"Oh, man… man-oh-man," she groaned, jamming the stick through the entire H-pattern before she found a spot where she could feel the cogs send the slightest amount of resistance up through the foot she held on the clutch pedal.

Looking down at the long, needle-thin gear stick with the golf ball-like knob, she couldn't tell if she had selected first or third, but she risked it and eased in the clutch. It was third, not first, and the old Microbus lurched ahead in a violent bunny-hop that created carnage inside the cabin.

Not only was Belle flung back in the seat, the sun guards flipped down, the ashtray fell onto the floor, and the little vase with her favorite bouquet of dried flowers broke out of its holder and disappeared down in front of the bench seat.

If she hadn't flung out her arm to hold back the portable hard drive with all their songs, it would have gone the same way - as it was, it teetered dangerously close to the edge of the seat before she could push it back. Worse still was the fact that the engine coughed twice and promptly died from the rough treatment.

"Aw, hell," Belle whined, frantically twisting the ignition key. Instead of the faithful engine coughing to life, the only sounds that reached her ears were a series of muted groans and a strange, metallic whine that sounded expensive.

"Oh, fuck, no… the mechanic said he had fixed it… he promised me he had fixed it! He charged me three hundred fuckin' bucks for fixin' the fuckin' thing!" she growled, smacking her fist down onto the thin, white steering wheel.

She looked up and down the alley to see if her stunt had attracted attention, but it was as deserted as it had been all along. The bus had rolled five feet ahead in the bunny-hop, and now she could clearly see a van that was parked up against the mesh fence. "Fuck, that definitely wasn't there when I got here… dammit, Daisy-Belle, you had to play the Warrior Princess," she mumbled, rubbing her face.

'What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do, Goddammit… call the fuzz? No. Don't want anything to do with those people right now, thankyouverymuch. Push the damn bus down to Chesney? It'll give me a heart attack or a fuckin' brain hemorrhage… oh, what's an old bird to do?" she thought, baring her teeth in a desperate grimace while she looked at all the little gauges that all showed the same thing - nothing.
Out of sheer desperation, she tried to turn the ignition key again, but this time, it didn't even produce a pained groan, there was simply no reaction whatsoever. "Old piece of shit… ripe for the fuckin' scrapheap… like its owner," Belle growled, turning the key one last time. It hadn't miraculously decided to come back to life in the intervening eight seconds, so the response was the same - in other words, nothing at all.

One moment, she was alone, the next, the front door was yanked open and a dark figure appeared in the doorway. For a split second, the confused part of Belle's mind thought it was Erica there to rescue her, but she soon found out it was wishful thinking that couldn't be further from reality.

A FeeloBOP ball cap above a pair of creepy eyes and an angry mouth made an appearance in the dim light. J-Rox put his foot on the narrow step at the bottom of the opening and stepped up into the Microbus, thus revealing his maroon hip-hop tracksuit.

Belle cringed and tried to come up with a plausible explanation for being where she was at that point in time, but her throat tied itself into a knot when her eyes slid down to the six-inch knife J-Rox was pointing at her stomach. She had no knowledge of knives other than the simple fact that if they were used on you, you would die, but that was more than enough.

She shrieked and tried to scoot to her right across the bench seat to get to the passenger side door, but J-Rox was too fast for her and grabbed hold of her left arm. She let out a pained groan when the grip was increased to the point of nearly breaking her forearm.

"Stay where you are, old fuck," J-Rox said in a harsh voice that had lost all pretenses of warmth and civility. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I was just-"

"Did the pigs send you?"

"N- no…" Belle said, shaking her head vigorously.

"Then fuckin' what?"

"I w- was just… just… I wanted to get our rec- recordings…"

J-Rox narrowed his creepy eyes. It was clear by the vicious look on his face that he didn't believe a word Belle had said to him. "I'm not gonna ask you again, old fuck… what the fuck are you doing here?"

"The recordi-"

"Don't you fuck with me! I got a knife right here… or are you blind too?"

"P- please don't hurt me, man…" Belle said, glancing down at the blade that threatened her stomach. Her heart sped up to a painful cadence and she experienced a cold flash that left her freezing. The resulting tremble raced through her body and caused her to grow dizzy, but she didn't dare take her eyes off the knife. She knew that nothing in the world would be able to stop the knife if J-Rox was intent on murdering her - and certainly not her flimsy t-shirt - but still, her abdominal muscles clenched involuntarily to the point of cramping up.

"Listen to me, old fuck," J-Rox said and yanked at Belle's arm to drag her closer to him, "I will hurt you if you don't tell me if the pigs have sent you."
"They haven't! They haven't, for fuck's sake! I came on my own!" Belle cried in a panic. She stared wide-eyed at his evil face and instinctively knew that he would only understand one approach. "I'm... I'm here for the pills... I wanted to take some of the pills... dude, I know th- they're in the back..."

J-Rox rolled his eyes and let out a disdainful grunt. He lowered the knife but didn't ease the grip he had on Belle's arm. "Fuck you, you stupid, old woman. You wanna take my pills? You just watch yourself... such an old hippie could O-D real easily. You catch my drift?"

"B- but... n-no..."

"Shut the fuck up! Yeah, maybe I should spend a couple-a pills on you... wouldn't that give you, like, the trip of your life? Wouldn't that be groovy, old fuck?" he mocked, yanking Belle towards him.

The threat made Belle nearly freeze solid. She had interacted with enough drug dealers over the course of the past four and a half decades to know they were generally psychopaths who had very little interest in human life. Her fear made her mind turn to mush, but she had enough wherewithal to push the two pill bottles she had stolen further in under the bench seat.

"Cat got your tongue, old fuck? All right, get your wrinkly ass outta the bus. C'mon, get down from there," J-Rox said and yanked Belle down from the bench seat.

She landed ungracefully, but when she tried to pause to get her hip to comply with her wishes, J-Rox had already yanked her along the uneven surface of the alley. She couldn't stop a pained cry from escaping her lips when the bones grinded against each other, but it didn't awake any nurturing feelings in her captor. "J-Rox... wait... can't we... can't we talk about..."

"I talk, you shut the fuck up. Okay?"

Not wanting to tempt fate, Belle settled for nodding as she was shoved in through the brown steel door. Before it went out of sight, she cast a glance at the colorful, psychedelically-colored VW Microbus she had owned since 1974. She gulped down a sour surge when the dark thought that it may have been the last time she would see it flashed through her mind.

As J-Rox shoved her along the hallway and into the lounge, another avalanche of pitch black thoughts rolled over her that were even more frightening and depressing: what if she would never get to feel Erica's soft lips or hear her soothing voice again? What if she would never get to snuggle up to Erica's warm, strong body again? What if this was the end of the road for her and she would never even get to see Erica again?

Her throat once again tied itself into a knot and tears stung at the back of her eyes. She wanted to pause at the threshold to the hidden room to regain her breath, but J-Rox shoved her so hard in the back she nearly fell. She stepped inside the small room, knowing that the man holding her captive would realize at once two bottles were missing from the cardboard box on top - and it didn't take a genius to figure out what he would do then.

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CHAPTER 10

Erica paced up and down the endless, sterile corridors on the third floor of the Methodist Hospital. Friday night had turned into rush hour at the hospital, and nurses, doctors and other medical staff hurried back and forth on their squeaky rubber shoes, bringing with them the familiar scent of antiseptics, bed linen and medicine that always permeated any hospital.
She had been offered coffee from the vending machine more often than she could remember, but the taste of the vile, dark brown liquid produced by the machines that only bore a vague resemblance to coffee had been etched into her brain from the time at the New Year when Belle had spent a few days up on the sixth floor.

Even the bright blue plastic seats that had been built into the wall opposite the information desk were the same, but she stayed far away from those, too, remembering with a shudder how the molded plastic had made her butt turn numb in no time flat.

She was in the middle of one of her least favorite pastimes, waiting for an update from the doctors. The drug victim she had escorted in the ambulance had been sent to the emergency room for immediate treatment, and then onto the third floor for observation and further detox, but that was the last she had seen of her.

The only news she had been given since was that the young woman had been under the influence of alcohol and a widespread recreational drug known as GHB Fantasy.

It didn't improve on Erica's increasingly frustrated state of mind that the sterile corridor she paced ceaselessly was covered in bright red signs banning all use of cell phones and other means of electronic transmission. She sighed deeply each time she read one of the signs - on one hand, she needed to know what went on elsewhere in their little corner of the world, and on the other, she needed to set a good example to the visitors who occasionally walked past on their way down to one of the suites.

After forty-two minutes with no update from anyone on anything, she growled out loud and strode down to the elevator. Once the car came, she hit the button labeled Lobby and crossed her arms over her chest with an annoyed huff.

Down in the lobby itself, she strode across the smooth floor and out onto the paved courtyard that saw three cabs waiting for fares. Out on the boulevard at the other end of the small side street, Friday night went on like it always did with a handful of cars driving from left to right, and right to left - Coulson wasn't exactly a metropole.

She debated with herself if she should call Belle or the stationhouse first, but decided on Belle since she needed a friendly voice in her ear. Her phone was quickly turned on, but the call to Belle's iPhone went nowhere. Another call yielded the same lack of results. "What the hell?" she said and hung up. "I've told her so many times that she should keep her mobile on… I wonder if she's forgotten it someplace…? Hmmm."

Erica put her cell phone back in her pants pocket and rested her hands on her utility belt. Not much was happening in front of the hospital, as witnessed by the three cab drivers who were standing at the lead cab gawking at the colorful pictures in a men's magazine.

After turning up the volume of the two-way radio she wore on her shoulder, she keyed the mic. "Dispatch, Sergeant Wayne."

'Go ahead, Sergeant,' a male voice said at the other end.

"Dispatch, I'm still at the Methodist which is off-limits for radios. I'm outside for a brief moment and I need a status update."

'Sergeant, there has been a brawl at the address of the emergency, Barney's on Main Street. Officer Lechner and Officer Bradley have received minor injuries. Multiple arrests have been made for various infractions of various laws.'

"Shit!" Erica barked loudly, making all three cab drivers look over at her.

'...and the establishment was subsequently forcibly closed. All detained are in the holding cells on the top floor.'
Erica rubbed her brow and let out a long, slow sigh. "Dispatch, acknowledge. Sergeant Wayne out," she said and let go of the mic. "Goddammit… a bar room brawl! What the hell do they think this is… the Wild West??"

She bared her teeth in a grimace at the thought of Belle sitting in one of the holding cells - it would certainly explain why there was no contact with her iPhone. Erica's pale-ocher skin lost some of its color at the thought, and her stoic, closed mask of decisiveness turned to one of worry. The unwanted news created a knot in her stomach that she knew she needed to unravel before she could do anything else. She reached into her pocket to get her cell phone and quickly found Leaf's number in the registry.

Several rings went by before she heard a faint voice at the other end, almost like she had woken someone up. 'H- hello? Belle?' Leaf said in a faint, croaky voice.

"No, it's Erica, Leaf. Listen, I'm really, really sorry for waking you up, but I need to ask you about Belle… is she all right?"

'! I don't know… I think so… she must be, she drove us home twenty… no, thirty minutes ago… maybe a little more… she must be home by now.'

A heavy load was lifted from Erica's shoulders and she found herself able to breathe freely again. She used it to let out another deep sigh, though this one was of relief, not worry. "Thanks, Leaf, I needed to hear that," she said and looked up at the dark sky. "Listen, were you guys involved in the brawl down at the-"

'Oh boy, were we ever! My goodness, that was scary, Rikka! Oh, Gawd, it was just like the bad old days back in the 1960s where the riot fuzz came in and started beating people up for no good reason at all -"

"Whoa, wait… riot fuzz? We don't have riot contr-"

'and people were fighting and the windows were smashed and someone threw a chair at the big fuzz and the lady fuzz got smacked over the eye.'

"Goddammit…"

'-and Josh arrested Rebel and her brother-'

"He what? Leaf, hold up-"

'-and Belle took their instruments 'cos she didn't want to leave them there and now we got them right here and the owner of the bar was arrested as well and poor old Irwin was caught up in the brawl and we haven't heard from him since! We hustled out to the Microbus and we only just escaped with our lives!'

"Whoa, Leaf, please…" Erica said, clutching her head to stop her brain from exploding due to the acute information overload it had been exposed to.

'Uh… yeah?'

"Officer van Eyck arrested Rebel and Troy?"

'Yes, because he thought they were involved in the drugs! But they weren't, Rikka, that was J-Rox and-

"I know, Leaf. We have an APB out on him. We'll catch him."
 but Josh got confused and thought we meant that Rebel and her brother were involved in the drugs, so he and the 
lady fuzz arrested them and shoved them out to the fuzzmobile but I don't know what happened to them because just 
after that, the brawl started-

"Leaf…"

'oh yeah, the owner of the bar… isn't his name Moore? He came over and started bitching and moaning and that's 
why he got arrested… I never liked that guy, Rikka. I like most people… no, I didn't like J-Rox either-

"Leaf, regarding Belle…"

'but I like most people but Moore just gives me the chills with his army pants and his beard and all those things that 
are just so opposite of what we're doing… do you know what I'm saying? I think you do because you're so beautiful, 
just so ethereally beautiful even when you're in uniform, but Moore is just an asshole.'

"Leaf!" Erica said and did what she could to stifle a chuckle. "Are you on something?"

'No…? Oh, that's not true, I took an Aspirin when we got home because I had a headache. '

"An Aspirin? Okay… but, anyway, Belle dropped you off and continued on to our place?"

'Yes!"

'It's just weird that I can't get hold of her…"

'Have you tried her telephone?'

Now Erica did chuckle, but she held the cell away from her mouth so she wouldn't insult Belle's dear friend. "Yes, I 
have, Leaf. It's almost like it's on, but that she's just not answering it…"

'Oh… that's strange,' Leaf said, immediately followed by a pause and a few fumbling sounds, 'Rikka, I'm gonna put 
on some pants and go over to your place to see if Belle's all right.'

"No, Leaf, no… you were sleeping, you don't have to do that…"

'Yes I do, Rikka… I love her too.'

Erica smiled at the undeniable fact of that statement. For the umpteenth time, she wished she'd had friends like 
Autumn Leaf, Oswald 'the Walrus' Jones and even Packard Summer when the dark storm had hit her after the fatal 
shooting and the death threats she received when she had worked in the Big City back east. "I know you do, Leaf. 
Listen, you won't be able to call me back 'cos I'm at the hospital and they won't allow phones to be turned on."

'Oh…'

"Yeah, but I promise I'll call you again in a short hour or so… so please remember to take your phone with you 
when you go over to."

'Oh! Oh, I just remembered, Rikka! Down at the bar before chaos broke out, Belle told us she knew where the pills 
were!'

"She- she what?!! Leaf, okay, slowly now… what did she tell you…?" Erica said and scrambled for her notepad and 
her trusty ball point pen.
'Belle said that she had witnessed J-Rox do something to a cardboard box in a room beyond the lounge… that's all I know, Rikka.'

"A room beyond the lounge? At the studio?" Erica said, frantically scribbling down the note. "There's no… all right, thank you, Leaf. I'll check it out as soon as I'm done here."

'I'm sorry, Rikka, I know I should have said it sooner…'

Erica flipped the notepad closed and stuck it down her left breast pocket. "Ah, don't worry about that, Leaf. First things first… and first up is finding Belle."

'That we can agree on!'

"Listen, I need to hang up now, but I'll talk to you later, okay?"

'Okay. Goodbye… your soul is luminous, sister!'

"Yours too, Leaf. Bye," Erica said and closed the connection.

She rolled her eyes repeatedly at the insanity and improbability of the situation that had nevertheless happened in her quiet, little corner of northern California known as Coulson. With a groan, she once again keyed the mic on her shoulder. "Officer van Eyck, Officer van Eyck, this is Sergeant Wayne. Josh, are you online?"

Static was the only answer.

"Is anyone receiving this transmission, over?" Erica said into the mic. She could feel the eyes of the three cab drivers burning a hole in her neck, and she turned around to give as good as she got. All three drivers hurriedly went back to discussing the finer details of the magazine. "Is anyone out there at all, over? Jesus, this better be an alien invasion," she mumbled once her finger was off the button.

Sighing, she knew she needed to get in touch with the stationhouse, so she did the second best thing. "Dispatch, Sergeant Wayne," she said into the two-way radio.

'Go ahead, Sergeant,' the male voice said at the other end of the connection.

"Dispatch, are all my four Officers busy with the detained? I'm having trouble hailing any of them."

'That's affirmative, Sergeant."

"All right, I need someone to go upstairs with the following message to Officer van Eyck. Tell him that Rebeccah and Troy Tunney are in no way connected to the case at hand, and that they must be released ASAP… before they're told they can sue us for unlawful detention. You got that, dispatch?"

'Affirmative, Sergeant."

"That's all for now. Sergeant Wayne out," Erica said and turned off the radio. A moment later, she turned it back on but kept the volume low so she could remain in contact with the base while still respecting the hospital's rules for electronic communication.

The paved courtyard once again returned to its previous state of tranquility. There was no need for a senior police presence in the quiet forecourt, so Erica spun around and strode back to the lobby. Before she went in through the
revolving door, she stopped and took her cell phone again. She punched in Belle's number, but like before, the call went nowhere.

Erica turned off the phone and put it back into her pocket. Sighing, she once again looked up at the dark sky with an expression of pure worry on her otherwise so stoic face. "She's done something rash… I know it. I can feel it in my bones… she's driven over to the damn studio to do God knows what," she mumbled to herself. "Dammit, Belle, you better be safe or I'll… I'll… Goddammit all to hell, you better be safe…"

Spinning around, Erica strode through the revolving door and across the smooth floor. The elevator seemed to know it shouldn't upset her further and arrived at once; the doors opened before she had released the button.

On the third floor, she strode down the sterile hallway with one primary objective and two secondary objectives on her mind - first, find the doctor treating the drug victim. Second, she needed to get the update she had been promised ages ago, and third, finally get on with the program of checking up on not only Belle but her injured colleagues at the stationhouse as well.

Exactly like she had expected, the information desk was unmanned despite the obvious need for the very thing it was supposed to offer - information. In frustration, she tapped her knuckles on the off-white panels next to the desk a couple of times before she spun around and went through the door behind the desk. The presence of a sign that said Medical Staff Only didn't stop her.

"Hello? Hello, Doctor Carmichael?" she said, walking into what appeared to be an anteroom for the doctor's office.

A blonde nurse in her late twenties sat behind a desk filling out some paperwork, but she jumped to her feet when Erica stepped into the room. The nurse moved so fast she forgot to put down the pen she had been using - it was only when she pointed it at Erica that she noticed she still had it. "Officer… I'm sorry, but you're not supposed to be in here… can I help you with anything?" she said in a friendly, but insistent, voice.

"That's Sergeant," Erica said, pointing at her chevrons. "Yes, you can tell me where Doctor Carmichael is. I need to get that status update he promised me so I can get on with my business."

"On the drug victim?"

"Yes."

"Well…" the nurse said and looked at a closed door at the other side of the anteroom. "Doctor Carmichael is still on the phone, so…"

Even as the nurse was speaking, the door to the doctor's office opened and the fifty-something Frederick Carmichael stepped out. Like the first time Erica had met him, he was dressed in a lab coat and dark pants, and he had a pair of square, metal spectacles perched low on his regal nose. He walked absentmindedly across the linoleum floor for several paces before he realized they had a visitor. "Oh… Sergeant Wayne… you're not supposed to be in here."

"I know," Erica said and put her hands on her utility belt. She could see by the looks on her two companions' faces that they were intimidated by the gesture, so she eased her stance but kept her hands near her hips. "Doctor, I need that update and I need it now. If you don't have it now, will you please contact the stationhouse as soon as you do because I really need to leave."

"I'm sorry, Sergeant," the doctor said and adjusted his designer spectacles, "I don't have the information ready yet. All we know is that the young woman in question almost suffered a Fantasy-induced overdose. She's still being monitored closely. That's what I have for you at this point in time."
Erica grumbled inwardly, thinking about the precious time she had wasted at the hospital. "That's what you had for
me when I first got here, Doctor," she said in a monotone.

"Such is the medical world, Sergeant. There are no easy answers."

"Uh-huh. Very well. I trust that you will keep me updated? Here's my card," Erica said and reached into her pants
pocket to take a business card with her private number. "Or you can call the stationhouse and they'll put you in touch
with me."

The Doctor accepted the card and looked at both sides to see what it said. "All right, Sergeant Wayne. I will. I doubt
it'll be tonight, though."

"Whenever it's done, Doctor. Pardon for the trespassing, it won't happen again. Good evening, Doctor Carmichael…
nurse," Erica said and spun around. She strode back out of the anteroom, into the sterile corridor and down to the
elevator. This time, she had to wait for a while before the car arrived, and when it did, it was nearly full. She
grumbled inwardly and squeezed her tall, wide frame into the crowd.

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Outside on the paved courtyard, she strode over to the lead cab that was still the same as when she had spoken to
Autumn Leaf over the phone earlier. "Are you available?" she said through the window before she opened the back
door.

The elderly cab driver quickly threw his men's magazine onto the passenger seat and started the engine. "Yes,
General! Are you going to war?"

"That's Sergeant," Erica said, pointing at her chevrons before she climbed into the cab and got comfortable on the
vinyl back seat. "And no, we're going over to the stationhouse on Main."

"Oy, you got it, Sarge!" the driver said and drove away from the taxi rank.

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Less than five minutes later, the cab driver double parked in the inner lane in front of the stationhouse on Main.
Every squad car they had was parked along the curb, but not all looked ready to be driven again anytime soon.

"Hell-lo," the driver said when he caught wind of the damage. "You boys 've had a wild evenin', huh? This gotta be
the big fight over at Barney's, right?"

"You know more than I do right now, cabbie," Erica said and handed the elderly wheel man a ten dollar bill. "Here
ya go, keep the change."

"Much obliged, Sarge. Have a nice evenin'…"

Erica chuckled as she stepped out and closed the cab's door behind her. "Yeah, thanks," she said as she surveyed the
damage to the cruisers.

The cab drove off and left her all alone on the sidewalk. Sighing, she strode around the front of one of the black-
and-white Chargers - but came to a dead stop at its right-hand side when she realized that not only had the wing
mirror been torn off and was dangling by a wire, both windows in the passenger side doors had been smashed.
"What… in… the… hell…?" she groaned, staring at the damage that would no doubt be expensive to fix.
The Durango parked right behind the Charger was in no better condition. The SUV had a smashed headlight and a cracked radiator grill that looked like someone had thrown a brick through it.

Erica groaned out loud and rubbed her brow furiously. "I'm away for two damn minutes and the rest of the world goes into a mental breakdown! What the hell!?"

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Stu Burton was sitting at the watch desk when Erica strode through the glass door. The experienced officer had a stressed-out, even harried look on his face as he tried to keep up with the flow of calls, radio messages and emails that threatened to swamp him in work. "Sergeant Wayne," he said in a strained voice as he got up from the swivel-chair to hand Erica a wad of arrest notes. "We have twelve… uh… make that ten detained upstairs in the holding cells. Eight of which have been charged with assault or vandalism, the remaining two have been charged with assault on an Officer of the Law."

"Very well, Officer Burton," Erica said and flipped through the thick wad of papers. "What happened to our squad cars?"

Stu shrugged and sat down again. "Tempers flared, Sergeant."

"Uh-huh? And what's going on with the Tunneys?"

"They have been released, Sergeant. Officer van Eyck is helping them fill out a complaint form upstairs in the open office. They were quite adamant about filing an official complaint."

Erica's face twisted into a sour mask at that particular bit of news. According to the rules and regulations, such a complaint would have to be made public which would mean a frenzy of interest from not only the media but the chiefs as well. "Well, they should be. Their arrests were wholly unjustified, Officer Burton."

"Yes, Sergeant. Such an unfortunate incident, Sergeant," Stu said, nodding with a certain degree of embarrassment etched onto his face. "Everything was so chaotic over there… Officer van Eyck spoke to- to- oh, but it doesn't matter who he spoke to. I better answer the telephone, Sergeant, I have four attorneys on hold already."

"Mmmm. Carry on," Erica said and strode down to the door to the guardroom. Behind her, she heard Stu say "Yes, Sergeant," in a despondent voice.

The guardroom wouldn't win any prizes for good housekeeping. With all the business going on since Belle's frantic emergency call from Barney's, nobody had had time to clean up the various bits and bobs left behind by the officers when they scrambled to get to the cruisers. Thus, magazines, half-full coffee mugs, a tray of cookies and half a game of solitaire - the other half had blown onto the floor - littered the coffee table.

Erica strode over to the box where they kept the car keys for all their official vehicles. She thought about taking the unmarked Charger but went for the undamaged Durango instead - if she had to drive around the dark alley near the studio to search for Belle, the searchlights mounted on the roof of the SUV were far stronger than the smaller one on the Charger's fender.

She sighed and squared her shoulders as she strode back out of the guardroom and climbed the wooden staircase to get to the open office on the second floor. Up there, two of the desks were occupied: one by Kaye Bradley who pressed a handkerchief to her forehead while she typed on her laptop with the other hand, and one by Rebeccah Tunney, her brother and Josh van Eyck whose expression proved that he wished the floor would open and swallow him whole.
Erica briefly sent Josh a dark glare before she strode over to Kaye and knelt down next to the buff rookie. "Officer, let me see that..." she said, reaching for the handkerchief.

Kaye groaned at Erica's touch, but she acted tough and sat up straight. "It's nothing, Sergeant. Just a bump on the head," she said, pushing away the laptop.

"What hit you? A glass?"

"No, half a chair... I think. It was a mess over there. All hell broke loose."

"So I gather," Erica said and looked at the two-inch long abrasion. It appeared to have been washed clean at least once, but blood still seeped out of the jagged edges of the broken skin. "Very well. Where's Officer Lechner?"

"Upstairs at the holding cells. Robby's fine," Kaye said, grimacing when a simple furrowing of her brow sent tendrils of pain all down the side of her face.

Erica grunted and rose to her full height. "Once you're done typing your report, go over to the ER and get yourself checked. You'll also need a few stitches or else it'll scar."

"Sergeant, we can't-"

"Do as I tell you. I have no use for an officer with an untreated concussion," Erica said gruffly and moved away from Kaye Bradley.

After Erica had dumped the wad of arrest notes on her own desk - that was just as messy as the coffee table downstairs - she sorted some of the stacks of papers and reports she had been working on when Belle had called and put them in the proper drawers and out-boxes.

The coffee in her favorite butterfly-adorned mug had gone cold and stale, so she slammed the mug back down onto the desk before she screwed her game face back on and moved over to the other desk to resume her duties.

There, Josh begged her silently to take over since she already knew the two people sitting in front of him. She answered his pleading eyes with a hard stare that was meant to let him know he had messed up.

"Miss Tunney, Mr. Tunney," Erica said in a softer voice to the two people who were still dressed like they had been when she had seen them last at the studio, "I hope you'll accept our sincerest apologies. What happened tonight was unforgivable and certainly deserving of a formal complaint."

"Yes, it fuckin' well was!" Troy said harshly. His sister didn't speak, but the cold glare she sent Erica's way said more than a thousand words could. "And will someone tell us what the fuck happened to our instruments? They're valuable and we'll sue you all to hell if they're damaged!" Troy continued.

Erica looked at Josh who could only shrug with an embarrassed look on his face. "As far as I'm aware," she said, turning back to Rebel, "Miss Cosmick was able to retrieve them, although I cannot vouch for their condition. I believe they're in the possession of Miss Leaf and her husband in their house out in the suburbs."

Troy grunted a reply, but Rebel mumbled something that sounded a lot like "How the fuck Belle can live with a fuckin' cop, I'll never know..."

Erica chose not to comment on it. "Officer van Eyck," she said in a tone she hoped would convey that since Josh had made the bed, now he had to sleep in it, "we may have a lead on the whereabouts of the drugs. I'll investigate as
soon as I'm finished here… so stay sharp and keep your radios turned on! Inform Officer Lechner when you see him."

Josh sighed under his breath and returned to the complaint form on the laptop. "Yes, Sergeant…" he said, casting a brief glance at Rebel and her brother.

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The drive to the studio was brief but not uneventful. Erica drove past Barney's Barmy Blues Bar to survey the damage there, and came away with the knowledge that the city's glaziers would have no problem organizing a grand-scale Fourth of July bash with the earnings they would rake in from Moore Bracken's insurance company.

When she stopped at the red light at Main Street and Valentine, she reached into her pocket to try calling Belle again. Like before, the call went nowhere. After she had put away her cell phone, her fingers began to tap a fast, increasingly nervous beat on the rim of the steering wheel. Sighing deeply, she glanced around at her surroundings like she always did, but for once, she didn't see much.

She quickly made it to Chesney. The four-lane boulevard was almost deserted and it didn't take her long to find the entrance to the alley that led to the commercial district for small businesses. The mountainous curb that had caused so much trouble for the VW Microbus seemed like a mere tussock in the four-wheel drive Durango, and she was quickly into the dark alley itself.

Driving at a trickle, she positioned the heavy SUV in the middle of the street so it wouldn't rumble around too much on the uneven surface. She rolled down the window so she wouldn't miss a peep if one came at her, and she reached for the button that would turn on the powerful searchlights on the roof.

There was nothing to see at the entrance to the alley without them, so she activated the searchlights and let the blinding white cones of light sweep over the buildings, the dumpsters, the pallets with wrapped goods, the delivery vans, and everything else the small businesses needed to operate.

The searchlights picked up a boxy shape some two hundred yards ahead of her. When she recognized it, she needed to apply all the professional skills she had gathered from a decade and a half on the job to stop her heart and mind from running away with her - it was a VW Microbus painted in a very familiar pattern, and it was parked outside the Ruff Diamond studio.

The bus stood in an odd position some five or six feet away from the concrete building behind it, and Erica's eyes zoomed in on the driver's side door that appeared to be open.

"Fuck…" she whispered. Her heart jumped up in her throat and she broke out in an unpleasant, warm sweat that jumped from her pores despite her efforts of remaining cool and detached.

She reached up and trained both searchlights on the old hippie bus. Through the strong light, she could see that nobody was behind the wheel or in the back. Since her need for stealth had now evaporated, she mashed the gas which made the Durango leap forward with a guttural roar.

The distance between herself and the Microbus was quickly closed, and she came to a sliding halt right next to it. Jumping down, she raced around the front of the police SUV and peeked in through the opened door of the old bus without touching anything.

The bench seat had two items on it: Belle's iPhone - which was still turned on - and what appeared to be a portable computer hard drive. Below the bench seat, she could see something glassy reflect the glare from the searchlights. The back seat was empty, as was the cargo bay at the back.
Erica ran back to the Durango, hopped in and took five evidence bags and a pair of cotton gloves from the glovebox so she could examine the various items she had found without contaminating what could be a crime scene. On a whim, she ran back to the Durango's rear hatch and took a powerful flashlight that she hung from a hook on her belt. Fully equipped, she moved the roof-mounted searchlights away from the Microbus and onto the ground next to it so she could work without being blinded.

The driver's side door on the Microbus was easily opened, and Erica knelt down on the uneven asphalt to investigate whatever it was that had reflected the light. "Hell's bells..." she said when she had probed the carpeted floor and found two pill bottles of varying design. Each bottle held six pills, though the brown bottle was hard to see through.

"Jesus, Belle... what have you gotten yourself into here...?" she whispered, putting the pill bottles into two evidence bags. She checked the hard drive but couldn't find any logical connection to her partner. Grunting, she put it back on the bench seat and picked up the iPhone instead. The telephone seemed to work just fine, so she turned it off and placed it down on the carpet next to the two evidence bags with the pill bottles.

Getting up, she clicked on her flashlight and let the bright cone sweep across the grassy field beyond the mesh fence on the other side of the alley. She couldn't see much apart from a few stray cats that mewed and tore out of the cone of light, but came to the conclusion that since the mesh fence wasn't disturbed, Belle couldn't be over there.

With a heart that beat double time, she ran thirty yards further into the alley and performed a thorough sweep of the asphalt to look for signs of a struggle, like scuff marks, dropped items or blood stains.

The flashlight covered every last square inch of the alley within the search area, but nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Erica let out a small sigh of relief and ran back to the Microbus. "At least she isn't lying out here... she could have fallen ill again... Jesus, Belle," she mumbled, shaking her head. A cold flash crept over her and replaced the hot wave that had struck her when she had seen the old vehicle. Neither was particularly pleasant, and she shimmied to get the goosebumps to go away.

Erica clenched her jaw and pushed all her emotions into a little box that she padlocked. Then she threw away the key. She was a professional and there to do a job. That she knew the potential victim was a curveball that needed to be dealt with later - either in bed with her partner or in a therapy session with the police psychologist, depending on the outcome.

She performed a final sweep of the alley and the Microbus. Belle wasn't there, so she had to be inside. With the door to the studio ajar and blocked by a plastic wedge, she could see light coming from the hallway that she knew connected the various rooms.

Standing with her back to the concrete building, she peeked in with one eye, unaware that Belle had been in the exact same position when she had started her exploration. She grunted as she realized she was moving into a hot spot without knowledge of the strength of her opponents, or even their number.

She stepped back from the opening and keyed the mic on her two-way radio. "Stationhouse, this is Sergeant Wayne. Please acknowledge," she said quietly so she wouldn't alert the potential villains inside.

'Sergeant Wayne, this is Officer Bradley, go ahead.'

Erica's upper lip curled into a sneer from the fact that Kaye was still there instead of going to the ER like she had been told, though chewing her out would have to wait. "Officer Bradley, I'm requesting backup at the Ruff Diamond studio in an alley off Chesney Avenue... it's inside the commercial district. The exact address is one-two-seven-four Chesney. The searchlights on the Durango are on so you'll spot it easily. We have a burglary in progress with a possible threat to human life, over."

'Noted, Sergeant. We're still strung up with the other thing, so ETA will be four to five minutes.'
"Copy, Officer Bradley. Come in dark and quiet, uncertain of opponent response, over."

'Understood, Sergeant. Dark and quiet.'

"Sergeant Wayne out," Erica said and turned down the volume of the two-way radio so it wouldn't squawk at the most inopportune moment while she was on the hunt. She clicked off the flashlight and hung it on a loop on her utility belt. Clenching her jaw, she drew her service pistol and moved aside the heavy steel door.

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The hallway was empty save for the soft drink vending machine. Erica moved ahead with the proper two-handed grip on her pistol so she could respond rapidly to any threat that could appear. She thoroughly checked every nook and cranny but found nothing.

The door to the utility room was closed but unlocked, so she opened it and checked it out with a sweeping arc of her weapon. There was nothing in there that shouldn't be there, so she moved on.

She continued silently onto the door to the lounge, remembering Leaf's comment about the pills being in another room beyond the recreational room. Although the door wasn't locked, she couldn't get it to move when she depressed the handle. Taking a step back, she scrunched up her face and weighed her options. If the suspect was in there with Belle, it would be a logical and natural reaction to block the door so he could control the access to the room. If she kicked it down or otherwise forced her entry, he would be alerted and would perhaps decide to retaliate on his hostage - if he had Belle in there.

Instead of going ahead with the door to the lounge, she moved over to the mixing room. Like the others, it wasn't locked and she slipped inside as quietly as she could. There was no sign of Belle there, nor in the studio itself that she had a good view of through the large pane of glass.

"All right," she said quietly, "they're in the lounge or the room beyond… wherever the hell that is."

Taking a deep breath, she moved back out of the mixing room and arrived at the door to the lounge in no time. It didn't have a keyhole so she couldn't get a feel for the room beyond it by peeping through it.

She leaned forward and put her ear to the door to check for voices from the other side. Something did come back to her, perhaps a male voice, but the sounds were inarticulate and too muffled by the door's solid frame to be of any use to her.

Erica needed to get the door open to verify what was on the other side, and she wrapped her long digits around the handle to depress it. Like she had found out before, the mechanism itself worked fine, but her passage was blocked at once by something that was jammed up against the inside of the door. After holstering her pistol, she leaned gently on the door to test its weight and found that she had moved it an inch even without putting her back into it.

Another gentle push gave her another inch, then another, then another, until she had enough space to peek through. The doorstop turned out to be the flake-out sofa that had been removed from its customary spot by the wall.

Behind it, a hitherto hidden door concealed by the poster of the scantily clad biker chick atop the Harley-Davidson had been opened, and a constant stream of curses spewed forth from the storage room. Erica recognized the voice as belonging to J-Rox, the suspected dealer.

She continued pressing gently on the door, hoping that she could get the sofa to move aside without its metal feet grating or squeaking against the floor. When the gap was a foot and a half wide, she moved her leg in and performed a sliding, sideways move fit for a circus artist while holding onto her flashlight and her service pistol so they wouldn't create a racket by knocking on the doorjamb.
Once in, she snaked around and drew her pistol. Holding it in the regulatory grip, she swept the lounge just to make sure nobody was lurking in the shadows. A six-pack of beer on the coffee table was one can short. The can in question had been emptied, crushed and thrown onto the floor next to the flake-out sofa, but Erica sidestepped it easily.

With everything clear, she moved onto the second storage room. Beyond the constant stream of curses, an odd smell wafted out of the room to greet her - a peculiar mix of mothballs and something organic that she couldn't recognize.

The floor and the walls were bare, and three naked bulbs hanging down from the ceiling provided the light. A croaky female voice suddenly spoke from inside the room, and Erica came to a dead stop as she listened to the familiar tones.

"You dumb shit, my hip is hurtin' real bad now," the woman said in a pained voice. "Why the fuck didn't ya let me stand up like I begged you to…?"

"Don't you ever shut up, you old fuck?"

"Fuck off, baby pants!"

A thousand different emotions raced through Erica's heart and soul upon hearing Belle's voice. An acute sense of relief swirled through her first and foremost, but gratitude, a strong, burning love for the old bird, and even deep regret for not having been there when she was needed were all close behind.

And anger - anger over the fact that Belle was in obvious danger. Anger over the fact that the older woman had undoubtedly been manhandled into the room, and anger over the fact that she had been forced into a position that caused her enough physical grief to actually mention it. Anger was a dangerous emotion to have in such a situation as it tended to cloud the judgment, so Erica squared her shoulders and pushed it all behind her.

She moved another twenty inches ahead until she was able to peek fully into the second storage room. Her eyes caught Belle first. The petite woman in the No More Death Stop The War! t-shirt and blue jeans that seemed filthier than they had been earlier was squatting up against one of the shelves with her hands behind her like they were tied to something. Her face was an unhealthy shade of gray and she had her lips pulled back in a constant, pained grimace.

To Erica's left, Belle's right, cardboard boxes were piled up four layers high. The box on top had been opened, and a host of pill bottles were lined up on the floor next to the soles of a pair of white Nikes.

Erica moved further into the second storage room to see better and to get a definite count on the number of opponents she was facing. The Nikes shuffled around on the bare floor like their owner was trying to do something that required leverage. The maroon tracksuit came into view, and Erica knew it had to be J-Rox. But was he alone?

A six-inch hunting knife was lying on the floor not far from J-Rox's right hand. It was three feet away from Belle, but it was still too close for Erica's peace of mind.

She moved diagonally to the right to get a better angle of fire. Looking around, she realized the storage room was ill suited for the discharging of a firearm - the walls were either bare concrete or metal shelves which would both create far too great a risk of ricochets.

Erica could see that Belle was sitting with her eyes closed and her mouth drawn back in pain. Her chest was heaving with each breath she took, and all in all, she appeared like she was on the brink of breaking down.

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For Belle, the pain that shot up from her hip was unbearable. She had been in that uncomfortable squat for nearly the entire time, and she couldn't stretch her legs because the pipe she was tied to had a cross-member that restricted the cable tie around her wrists from sliding lower. If she tried, her shoulders would be yanked upwards, and that would create an even greater pain.

She groaned and opened her eyes to look at her captor. Movement to her left made her look in that direction - and slam open her eyes. Erica was right there, looking like a dark angel of death in her black uniform. With the gun pointed ahead of her, the tall woman's body language was that of a panther on the prowl.

Belle glanced to her right at J-Rox who still cursed under his breath. He was busy color coding the pill bottles and had no time to look behind him. So much stress and adrenaline was injected into her system that her heart began hammering so hard in her chest she feared it was trying to break free - then she realized she had been holding her breath. When she finally released it, it came in a strong gust.

At that exact moment, Erica stepped out of the shadows that had masked her. "Sir, this is the police. You are under arrest," she said in a hoarse, threatening voice, pronouncing every syllable so the man on the floor would understand her. "Step away from the boxes, kneel down and put your hands behind your head."

J-Rox's efforts sorting the pill bottles jerked to a halt, but he quickly snapped out of it and reached for the knife.

Belle took in a sharp breath and clenched her teeth. She stared at the knife, knowing full well she wouldn't be able to move in time if he attacked her.

"Whatever you're thinking of doing, don't," Erica said in a voice that had grown even more threatening. "If you make a sudden move, I will shoot. Move back from the knife, kneel down, and put your hands behind your head."

J-Rox looked over his shoulder and scoffed at Erica's command. "Fuck you… you're alone."

Erica zeroed in on the suspect's face that seemed to have turned creepier than usual. "This is your final warning, Sir… move away from the knife or I will shoot. Make no mistake, I will shoot to kill if I have to."

While Belle stared at the two combatants with eyes as wide as saucers, J-Rox shuffled to his right and started to get up. He put his hand on the edge of one of the cardboard boxes, but it gave at once. He appeared to fall, but in a heartbeat, he reached for the knife and jumped to his feet.

The world stopped for the fraction of a second where J-Rox decided on what to do. When he lurched at Erica with the knife thrust ahead of him, the world restarted with a wild, panicky scream that came from Belle's throat.

Erica jumped to the side and held her firearm ready - but the screaming Belle was directly in the line of fire so she didn't dare pull the trigger.

When J-Rox attacked her again with the long knife glinting in the light from the naked bulbs, her seventeen years of experience paid off when she sidestepped the attack and used her free hand to reach for the flashlight she had put on her utility belt.

She swung the heavy metal tool downwards with all her might and scored a direct hit on J-Rox's wrist that fractured instantly. The knife flew through the air and clanged off the next wall while its owner cried out in pain. By then, Erica had already dropped the dented flashlight, holstered her pistol and grabbed hold of J-Rox's injured arm.

Moving swiftly, she flipped him over her hip and sent him crashing onto the floor where he landed in a cloud of dust. A second later, she forced him over onto his stomach, twisted his arms backwards and planted a knee on his lower back to pacify him. Two seconds after that, she had her handcuffs out and had slapped them onto his wrists.
Only then did Belle stop screaming. Panting, she gulped down the terrors that had threatened to drown her when her love had been attacked by the knife. She shook her head over and over while she watched Erica make sure the pressure on J-Rox's chest wasn't so strong he couldn't breathe.

Belle and Erica locked eyes for a moment that turned into an eternity for both of them. Green met blue, and they simply could not stop falling through the bottomless windows to their partner's soul. Smiling wistfully at each other, they even had time to blow little kisses and send each other a silent message of love before reality intruded on them and they had to come back to the task at hand.

Erica once again adjusted the position of her knee so the pressure was eased on her prisoner's back. "J-Rox… what's your real name?"

"Fuck off! You broke my fuckin' wrist, you fuckin' bitch!"

Erica shook her head and leaned just a little more on J-Rox's back to make him aware she was still ready to use force if she had to. "Sir, you have the right to remain silent…"

While Erica read J-Rox his rights, Belle leaned her head back against the wall behind her and tried to stand up so she could release some of the throbbing pain that shot up from her knees and her old, injured hip. Ashamedly, she had to admit she did not possess enough muscle power in her thighs to stand up on her own.

Groaning, Belle slipped back down and gave Erica a pleading look that she knew was foolish even before she had sent it - her partner couldn't even react on it because the second she moved to help Belle, J-Rox would be on his feet and out of the door. She shook her head and clenched her teeth while she told the pain to take a hike.

To think of something else, she zeroed in on her Big Bad Bear and felt her heart swell with pride. The creep had come at Erica with a knife, but she had acted like it had been a mere rolling pin. The first smile in a long time crept onto Belle's face as she watched Erica hold down the creep who had been her captor. She had a scathing taunt all ready to go, but she knew it would only make matters worse so she kept it to herself.

Once Erica had read J-Rox his rights, she turned the two-way radio's volume back up and keyed the mic. "Sergeant Wayne to any officers listening… the suspect has been disarmed, apprehended and Mirandized. Suspect was only perp on-site. Requesting an ambulance for suspect, not urgent, over."

'Sergeant Wayne, Officer Bradley,' Kaye's voice said at the other end of the connection. 'We're two hundred yards away. We have a visual on the Durango. Stand by for imminent insertion, over.'

"Standing by. Sergeant Wayne, over and out," Erica said and released the key on the mic. She chuckled at Kaye Bradley's military lingo, but was soon back to reality when J-Rox tried to wiggle free before backup arrived. A knee in the back made him reconsider.

For Belle, the painful squat she was in made it seem like an eternity went by before Stu Burton and Kaye Bradley entered the storage room and took over custody of the drug dealer, but from that moment on, it only took another second before Erica put her strong hands under Belle's arms and lifted her into an upright position.

Belle cried out in a trembling voice as her hip gave her such a jolt of pain from the bone grinding against bone that she could hardly stand unassisted. Sobbing, she leaned her head against Erica's soft chest and promptly stained the black shirt with her tears. Her hands were still tied behind her back, but that produced the least of her pains. "Oh, baby…" she croaked in a half-whisper, "I love you so much… th- thank you…"

"Shhh, Belle… don't speak," Erica said, reaching into a pouch on her utility belt while looking behind her partner's shoulder at the plastic cable tie J-Rox had used on her. The sharp blade she found quickly took care of the narrow plastic, and Belle's hands were free once again.
"Ohhhhh," Belle groaned, moving her arms forward for the first time in nearly an hour. Her shoulders had gone stiff and her shoulder blades were sending out an S.O.S., but all of that faded into insignificance when she realized she could wrap her arms around Erica's strong body - and she did, pulling her partner in for a crushing hug that she hoped would never end.

Like all things, the hug eventually had to end, but at least she was able to compensate for the lack of contact by pulling Erica down for a bruising, ferocious, face-hugging kiss that released all the tension and the terrors that had built up inside her while she was held at knifepoint.

Behind them, a figure clad in black stepped into the storage room but came to an immediate dead stop. "Uh… ummm… uh… S- uh, Sergeant Wayne?" Stu Burton said from the door, clearly embarrassed by the way the older woman appeared to be eating his Sergeant's face. "Uh… the suspect has been detained in the cruiser. Ummmm… uh, Officer Bradley is waiting outside for the ambulance…"

The two women were still kissing. Stu bared his teeth in a smirk and slowly backed out of the storage room to give them some privacy.

Belle didn't think the kiss had gone on for long enough yet, but her lungs began to get impatient for the next gulp of air, so she slowly pulled back from Erica's succulent - if bruised - lips to rest her head on the broad chest in front of her. "Oh, man…" she whispered.

"That about covers it. I love you too, Belle," Erica whispered as she reached up to muss the gray-blonde hair at her fingertips.

Belle sighed deeply and wiped her eyes. Pulling back, she looked up at the taller woman with a bleary expression on her face. "Thank you… just… thank you. I- I don't know what to say other than that…"

"You don't have to say anything, love. It's what I do," Erica said and leaned down to place a solitary, loving kiss on Belle's forehead. "C'mon, let's get you home… you're far too gray for my liking. Are you dizzy?"

"A little… but I think it's fatigue and shock… not the other thing," Belle said and took a probing step away from the wall to see if her hip would even obey her commands. It would, though reluctantly so. "Oh… Erica… in the Microbus… I h- I have two of the pill bottles…"

"I know, honey."

"I took them so you could analyze them, but..." - Belle gestured at the cardboard boxes and the dozens if not hundreds of colored bottles on the floor - "but it seems you won't need them now."

"No. Congratulations, Miss Cosmick. You stopped a ruthless drug dealer. The Coulson Police Department is grateful for your cooperation," Erica said and pretended to salute her partner.

Belle tried to smile, but she was so exhausted it never became more than a simple creasing of her lips. "I wanna go home, honey… Jeez, I could sleep standing up… and I'm really thirsty… do you think Irwin would mind if we took an iced tea for the trip?"

"It's the shock, baby… listen, do you want me to call another ambulance for you?"

"Aw hell, no… I just wanna go home…"

"Oh! I nearly forgot," Erica said and slapped her forehead. "Leaf is probably still over at our place… I called her some time ago and she promised she'd check up on you."
Belle came to a full stop and stared up at her partner's bright blue eyes that she was proud to see shone with love and concern. "Shit… I hope the old bird is wearing her winter coat… when I last saw her, she was dressed in a sheer sarong and nothing else…"

"Uh… okay. We better go home and find out if we still have a neighborhood, huh?" Erica said and wrapped an arm around Belle's slumped shoulders. Together, they shuffled out of the storage room and into the lounge. Going past the refrigerator, Erica opened the door and took an iced tea for Belle.

"Thank you, baby… would you mind opening it for me?" Belle said with a dead-tired, lopsided grin.

The cap was quickly taken care of, and Belle chugged down half the contents in one gulp. "I like to consider myself a strong, independent, capable old bird," she said, looking at Erica's broad frame. "So how come I constantly need help from all and sundry to get my ass out of trouble?"

"You know," Erica said and once again wrapped an arm around her partner, though this time it was around her waist. "From personal experience, I know it's much worse to be in a desperate place and be denied help than it is to get help when you don't really need it. We help you 'cos we love you, honey… all of us."

"Yeah, but…"

"Of course, some of us… namely me… would prefer it if your ass got into less trouble on the whole…" Erica said and stole a quick kiss.

"Haw, haw… so would I," Belle said and drained the rest of the iced tea. "So… Sergeant Wayne, can you just take a break like this in the middle of untold chaos and mayhem?"

"Hey, I'm the boss around here… I can do anything I damn well please. And right now, we're going home," Erica said with a broad grin as they resumed shuffling over to the door.

* * *

CHAPTER 11

A week on from the tension, grief and high drama of the kidnapping, the world was a much friendlier place. The sun was shining from a blue sky peppered with a few white clouds, the temperature had only gone up, birds were singing merrily, and the vegetation had burst into the finest green tones imaginable - in short, spring had sprung.

As always on Sunday afternoons in the spring, the traffic was heavy with families taking to the roads in their large station wagons or even larger SUVs. Some were going to the mega-mall outside of town, some were going to the recently opened drive-in cinema to see the latest animated movie from Disney - the Sunday matinee was half price for the kids - and some were trekking to the park near the community center where the fountain had officially been reopened after the repair time in the winter.

One of those motorists headed for the park was a psychedelically-colored 1966 VW Microbus filled with hippies who seemed to have a jolly good time. Autumn Leaf was behind the thin, white steering wheel for the first time in her life, but she spent most of the ride clapping time and singing along to Belle's stirring rendition of the old Joni Mitchell anthem Woodstock, the song that had given them the inspiration for the name The Butterflies.

Belle sat on the passenger seat playing her beloved acoustic guitar while singing about being stardust and golden. Now and then, she looked at her dear, old friends Leaf, the Walrus and Packard and broke out in a smile that
impeded her singing. The latter two shared the back seat and were humming along. They didn't have space to play their instruments, but the violin case and a pair of congas were stored in the back, just like they had been for decades.

They were all decked out in the finest hippie wear they could find in their closets: Belle wore sandals, faded bell-bottom jeans, a batik t-shirt and her genuine 1974 Wrangler Original denim jacket that had turned so threadbare lately that she'd had to sow several patches on it to keep it together - period patches, obviously: peace symbols in several different colors and designs, a cannabis plant and one that said *Say YES To Love* that she had found in her favorite thrift store.

Leaf was wearing sandals as well - highlighting her painted toenails - and an elegant forest green hand-dyed dress with rows and rows of fashionable wooden beads at the lower hem and the sleeves. It had a plunging neckline that made the fact she was missing a breast stand out quite clearly, but she and the Walrus had compensated for it by finger-painting a purple heart on her chest. She completed the ensemble by wearing pink sunglasses on a golden frame.

In the back, the Walrus and Packard were dressed like they always were. They preferred to let the gals do the dressing-up, but the Walrus had polished his cowboy boots and had bought a new ZZ Top *Deguello* t-shirt online to mark the occasion. He wouldn't let anyone 'improve' on his battered leather cowboy hat, though. Packard was wearing his good, old flounced denim jacket over a black shirt and washed-out jeans.

When Belle finished the song, she put the guitar down in the footwell and shuffled up to sit crooked on the bench seat. "Aw, guys… can you believe it? We, the Butterflies, are gonna get an award for bustin' a buncha drug dealers? We, who've spent almost as much time buyin' weed from shady characters that we've done playin' gigs?"

"Naw," the Walrus said, "it's mighty peculiar, that's a fact."

"Yeah, and some of the city council's gonna be there," Belle continued and rested her arm on the top of the backrest. "And Erica's gonna be there of course… and Gerald Thackeray's gonna be there…"

"Oh, uggh…!" the remaining three Butterflies said as one, making Belle laugh. Gerald Thackeray was the leader of the community center where they had tried to organize the New Year's concert that had nearly sent Belle six foot under. The conformist man with the high-waisted polyester pants, the short-sleeved shirts, the brown neckties and the hair neatly parted at the side had been hopelessly at sea trying to keep everything together.

"Dude," Packard said, rubbing his nose. "Maybe it's a trick, dudes? Yeah, maybe it's a feckin' trick to lure us down to the park so the fuzz can arrest us all and- nah."

"Nah," Belle said and let out a chuckle. She reached over and put a warm hand on Leaf's bare thigh. "Hey, girl, you're quiet today. Aren't you feeling well?"

While they were driving, Leaf put her hands on top of Belle's and gave it a little squeeze. "I'm just fine, Belle… I'm working on something for the ceremony, that's all…"

"Oh?"

"A poem."

"Ooooh!"

"It's a secret… it's a secret in case I can't get it to work," Leaf said, smiling at her old friend. "Oh, isn't this so much fun? I've never driven a car before in my life! It's really easy to turn the steering wheel and all those things! Look!"
Belle nodded and looked ahead at the police SUV that drove right in front of them connected to the Microbus through a solid tow bar. There hadn't been time to fix the old hippie bus so Erica had proposed to tow them all the way down to the park so they could arrive in style. "Yeah, I need to thank my Big Bad Bear for that… hey, have you dropped off the Tantric book yet?"

Leaf nodded and turned towards Belle. "Yes we have, but we bought our own copy directly from the author's website. Best fifty dollars we've ever spent on anything… and get this, she has an edition out with three hundred tips…" - she leaned in to get closer to Belle's ear - "for Sapphists."

Belle grinned crookedly and briefly poked out her tongue. "Sapphists, huh? Can it get any classier?"

"Ugh, save it for the feckin' bedroom, dudes!" Packard groaned, pointing out of the windshield that none of the gals up front were paying any attention to, "Look, we're coming up to the park."

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The park near the community center presented itself well in the spring sunshine. The bean-counters at the City Hall had splashed out on a new coat of paint for the benches, the flagpoles and the stones lining the park's main artery, a bright orange, paved path that snaked its way through the entire zone like a Boa Constrictor.

The fountain had been refurbished with a dozen hidden jets that spewed water at the sculpture in the center at regular intervals. The children loved it and were already playing in the water despite their parents' warnings about not getting too wet. Several of the benches near the fountain were occupied by groups of young men and women from the college who had their boom boxes out and were having a good time with their friends.

In the middle of all that, Belle, Leaf, the Walrus and Packard walked along the orange path to get to the ceremony square not far from the community center. The four veterans walked the only way hippies could: shuffling along in a fine ol' swagger with their instruments under their arms. Belle in particular enjoyed the many interested gazes they earned on their way past the young people in the park. She had her beloved guitar over her shoulder, holding the vintage instrument by the neck.

"'Cos I'm walkin' to New Orleans!" she suddenly sang, channeling the old Fats Domino song.

Leaf snickered out loud and bumped shoulders with her old friend.

"Or wherever we're going," Belle added in her regular voice. "Hey, honey… you done with that poem yet?"

"Not saying a word… not a word until it's done or I drop it," Leaf said and shook her head several times.

During the next few shuffling steps, Belle glanced at her old friend who had been through so much but had come out of her illness a far stronger person. "You're so beautiful today, hon. You're glowing, you know that?"

Leaf snickered and sought out Belle's free hand. Once she had it, she swung it back and forth a few times. "Thank you. It took me a year and a half to get back to my old strength and… and now that I have, I want to live life to the fullest every minute of every day," she said, smiling at Belle.

"That's such a wonderful attitude to have… I love you for it."

"I love you too, Belle," Leaf said and made a kissy at her old friend.
Not long after, they arrived at the square and came to a screeching halt on the orange pavement when they realized every bench in the entire square was filled with colorfully dressed people. In front of the rows of benches, a stage had been erected with room for at least a regiment.

Belle let out a long whistle at the sight of the many people, and she let her eyes make a quick tour across the audience. "Holy shit! All them people come to see us? Whoa… the whole gang is here! There's Dawn and Crystal… there's Cloud… Rainbow and Hawk are here too. Where's Shea? Where's… oh, there he is, the old fella! I don't think… no, I don't think Chas and Mallory are here. They've probably rented an island somewhere in the Mediterranean… like Sicily…"

Leaf squealed wildly and waved at all their old hippie friends who promptly waved back.

In addition to a few tall microphone stands up on the stage, a table with a white cloth draped over it stood nearest to the entry to the ceremony square. The table had several different bottles of mineral water on it, some opened, some not. The mineral water just happened to come from the same company that had footed a portion of the bill for the refurbishment of the fountain.

At the other side of the stage, a handful of men and women in dark suits talked among themselves while they waited for the ceremony to begin. Erica - who had mysteriously claimed she had something to do so she had needed to run ahead - loitered at the foot of the stage with none other than Gerald Thackeray who had chosen to wear his best dark brown polyester suit for the ceremony.

Packard was focused on something entirely different: his eyes were locked onto the dark-clad people up on the stage. "Federales! Federales, dudes… didn't I tell you we were gonna get fecked over? Those guys are Feds…"

"Of course they're not Feds, Pack," the Walrus said, rolling his eyes. "The hot blonde in the middle… the one in the peach pant suit is the director of the city council's social affairs committee. The rest are her press people and shit."

"Where the feck you know that from, Walrus?" Packard said, looking like he was about to spin around on his heels and do a runner.

"Duh, I watch the local news, Pack."

"Uh… okay, dude. Whatever you say, dude."

Belle eyed the well-dressed dignitaries warily, feeling her old anti-establishment feelings kicking in. Her eyes drifted down to Erica who seemed to have left Gerald Thackeray behind and was speaking to a man in hippie-like clothing. The man handed Erica a wooden box before he left. Belle furrowed her brow at the unusual event, but promptly forgot all about it when she caught a glimpse of a row of black - Officers van Eyck, Bradley, Burton and Lechner all had front row seats next to each other.

During the week, Belle had visited the stationhouse with a box of Quality Selection donuts to show that she didn't harbor any bad feelings about the mess down at Barney's, and that she was thankful for the assistance at the studio. Kaye was out of reach apart from a brief, courteous inquiry into the older woman's health, but Belle had expected nothing less. Stu was Stu and would always be so - he had helped Belle and the Butterflies before and would do so again; the big boy Robby had turned into someone she knew she would talk to a lot more, but she was disappointed that Josh had grown distant and almost seemed to avoid her.

All that was pushed aside when the forty-something director of social affairs stepped up to the microphone and tapped an index finger on it to see if it was turned on.

It was, and her thumping finger created a thunderclap that rolled over the ceremony square and made everyone flinch. "Oh! Pardon me. Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon and welcome to the ceremony. Today, we're going
to honor four senior citizens who bravely assisted our police force with the unraveling of a ring of drug dealers who sold Ecstasy to our young people. First, I have a few other…"

"Senior feckin' citizens?!" Packard grumbled, and for once, Belle and the others agreed with his sour outburst.

While the director of social affairs spoke on, Belle chewed on her cheek and sought out Erica among the dignitaries. The tall, imposing woman was wearing her black uniform that had been ironed and starched, and every piece of brass had been polished within an inch of its life. Belle thought Erica looked scrumptious even when she only wore an old tracksuit, but the sight of her endless legs that went all the way up and then some in the black, sharply creased pants, her square upper body, her soft yet strong chest and her pale-ocher arms that were visible underneath her regulatory short-sleeved summer uniform shirt made every nerve-end inside her stand on edge.

The two women locked eyes, and Erica sent Belle a broad smile that proved she had felt her partner's eyes on her.

Belle smiled back and added a little wagging of her tongue that made Erica look straight ahead in a hurry, though with a crooked grin on her lips.

Up on the stage, the social director had finally reached the end of her introductory spiel. "So on that note," she said, moving aside but staying within reach of the microphone, "please welcome to the stage, Daisy-Belle Cosmick, Autumn Leaf, Oswald Jones and Packard Summer!"

The audience broke out in a wild cheer as the Butterflies ascended a short flight of stairs and stepped out onto the stage. Belle put down her guitar and waved at the crowd. Down among the spectators, she found and made eye-contact with some of their old friends who had been at the legendary New Year's party, the old man Shea, the bickering sisters Dawn and Crystal, Hawk and his free-loving wife Rainbow, and finally the aura reader Cloud. She gave the recently bereaved Cloud an extra wave and blew her a little kiss.

"Dude… this is feckin' unsettlin'," Packard whispered out of the corner of his mouth as he found his wife Katherine in the audience and gave her a strong wave.

"What, the crowd?" the Walrus whispered back.

"Naw, dude! That we're gonna get a feckin' bourgeois medal!" Packard said, warily eyeing the wooden box that Erica had just put on the table.

Erica strolled over to stand behind Belle who was still waving to the audience. "Hello, baby," she whispered into Belle's ear. "Are you ready for the grand prize?"

"Yeah. A reward of ten thousand dollars, right?"

"That's right," Erica said, looking out over the audience and the rest of the park up to the community center. Several interested spectators had lined up beyond the benches to follow the ceremony, and more than one kid was pointing slack-jawed at the colorfully dressed hippies up on the stage. At the back, up at the community center, a truck with a loose tarpaulin covering the rear was backing up to a low fence. Erica recognized it as one of the trucks that were used to haul the floats at Coulson's parades, but didn't think much of it.

"We'll keep one thousand bucks between us and give the rest to charity," Belle said while she waved. "We don't need it, but others do."

"I knew you'd say that," Erica whispered and strolled over to the nearest microphone stand. When the applause died down, she wanted to give room for the director of social affairs, but the forty-something woman was busy speaking into her smartphone. Erica grunted and moved back to the microphone. "Settle down, everybody. I'm not sayin', just askin'."
The joke caused a murmur of laughter to ripple through the audience, and Erica grinned at her successful microphone debut. "So, shall we get the next part of the ceremony under way? Miss Daisy-Belle Cosmick and the rest of the Butterflies, will you please step over here?"

Belle and the others did as asked and lined up next to Erica. Belle grinned expectantly, but Leaf, the Walrus and Packard all looked a little apprehensive.

"First up," Erica said and held up an oversized, stylized bank check made out to The Butterflies on the value of ten thousand dollars. "We have the small matter of the reward for stopping the drug ring. Ten thousand tax-free dollars. Here you go, Miss Cosmick," she continued, handing the oversized piece of cardboard to Belle.

"Why thank you, Sergeant Wayne," Belle said with a big grin while she shook Erica's hand. She turned towards the microphone so the entire audience could hear her. "Parts of this reward will be donated to the Night Angels, the HIV Research Group and the Comic Relief team up at the Methodist Hospital's children's' cancer ward!"

The transfer and the news earned them a round of applause that was responded to with several waves.

"And next up…” Erica said and went for the wooden box.

Packard rolled his eyes and mumbled something about how the money was nice but that bourgeoisie and hippies don't match.

Opening the wooden box, Erica took out the first medal that she intended to put around her partner's neck. "Miss Cosmick, Miss Leaf, Mr. Jones and Mr. Summer, the city of Coulson and the Coulson Police Department are grateful for your tireless efforts. Please accept this small token of our appreciation."

Packard's rumblings were silenced abruptly and replaced by a resounding "Duuuude!" when he caught a glimpse of the medal. The Walrus stared as well, and Belle and Leaf both let out identical, wild squeals.

Instead of a boring piece of stainless steel that mattered little and meant even less, the medal turned out to be a four-inch wide, polished hardwood peace symbol on a hemp rope.

Erica grinned broadly at the reactions of The Butterflies as she held up the first medal and placed it around Belle's neck. "Looks good on ya," she whispered for her partner's ears only.

"Holy shit… this is gorgeous… nearly as gorgeous as you," Belle said, holding up the peace symbol so she could get a good look at it.

"Thanks, hon. Packard?" Erica said and held up the next medal.

Once the Walrus and Leaf had received their medals too, Leaf stayed at the microphone stand and cleared her throat. The event was unscripted, so Belle pulled Erica aside and quickly explained about Leaf's poem.

Leaf was visibly nervous at the sight of the large audience below her, but she closed her eyes and concentrated on the poem she had prepared:

"Once upon a bygone age, three and two joined to be one, one band, one circle of friends, simply the One - Friends became family, family became lovers, all because of the One - Stardust soon fell upon the One, and we took it, knowing it had happened because we had been One - When one was lost, the others carried on, out of love for she who had become One - Another was found, and she who had been one was now two, and yet, both became part of the One - And now we're here, forty years on. Still one band, one circle of friends, simply the One."
A murmur of "Awwwww" rippled through the audience upon the completion of the poem. Belle wiped away a few tears that seemed to have escaped her eyes. She shuffled ahead and wrapped her arms around her old friend to pull her into a tender hug. "Thank you, hon… it meant a lot to me. I love you."

"I love you too, Belle. Now and forever," Leaf said and quickly kissed Belle on the lips.

"Hey… how about we did a song, Leaf? I feel like singing."

"Let's do it, Belle… Dusty Roads?"

"Dusty Roads," Belle said and nodded decisively.

Waving to the audience, she shimmied over to the microphone stand that Erica had just vacated and adjusted it a foot down so it fit her frame. "Peace, brothers and sisters!" she cried, holding up her right hand in the familiar V. "Yeah, we wanna thank you cats and the Sergeant over there, and also the social director o' course for the money and those awesome medals, dontchaknow. They sure do hit the spot."

A round of applause rolled up from the audience, and Belle had to pause while it died down. "Anyhow, as some of you may have heard and the rest of you will learn now, the Butterflies 've just spent a whole week in the studio recording songs for our greatest hits album. To round off this spectacular spectacle, we'd like to sing you a little ditty. Now, we ain't got no fancy amplified instruments this time, but we got a fiddle, a pair of congas and our voices. That's just gonna hafta be enough. Are you lined up back there, boys and girl?" she said, looking over her shoulder.

Behind her, the Walrus had his fiddle ready on the right of the stage, Leaf was already shimmying at the center of the stage, and Packard had his congas down on the ground and ready to go.

"Well, if it ain't the Butterflies!" Belle said to another round of applause from the audience. "Pack… we's all ready to go up here. Count off, man!"

Packard grinned and cracked his knuckles. "A-one! A-two! A-one-two-three-four!" he shouted before he went to work on the congas. Soon, he had a rock solid, steady beat going that created a deep, rhythmic base to the song they were about to sing. The Walrus joined him on his fiddle and added warm layers that worked perfectly in cooperation with his wife's crystal clear harmonies.

As the song started, Erica recognized it as Dusty Roads although it was very different from the version she had recently heard on the new recordings. She hid a broad smile as she looked at Belle whose foot was already wagging hard to the beat.

When Belle's cue came, she grabbed the microphone and belted out their old hit using every last ounce of soul she had in her throaty pipes. The folk rock song about the doomed lovers who cheated the Sheriff's men and got back together was given the A-quality treatment, and she shimmied on the spot to the beat while she occasionally clapped time to keep the rhythm going.

She had presented the song a hundred-and-ten times over the years, but she didn't slack off for a second to coast home. The lyrics got all she had, and she was pleased to see the audience clapping to the beat - most of their old friends were even singing along.

As the song came to an end to a rapturous applause, she shimmied back to Leaf, the Walrus and Packard and said something to them the audience couldn't hear. The Walrus and Packard kept playing, although they changed pace and key.
Belle shimmied back to the microphone and grabbed it with both hands. "Thank you, you've been a fabulous crowd. To round off our little gig here, we'd like to play a song that some of you know from way back. We've come a long way, but you just have to watch the breaking news to see we've got a long way to go yet. This one's called Shoulder By Shoulder We Stand and it was written in 1964 in a lil' town over in 'Bama called Birmingham. It's just as valid today as it was when it was new. Some will call it a protest song, some will call it support for a community that sorely needs it… others again will simply call it a four-letter word. That's right folks, we're about to get political."

She cast a quick glance back at Erica and the director of social affairs to see how they would react. Erica seemed perhaps a tad nervous, but the director looked positively horrified. At once, the stylish woman in the peach pant suit conferred with her press secretary who whispered a few words of wisdom in her ear. The career politician promptly waved goodbye to the audience and stepped off the stage so she wouldn't be seen anywhere near someone who was making a political statement.

Turning back to the microphone, Belle started belting out a song that was a strong comment on the state of the union in 1964, but every word rang true as to the state of the union fifty years later. The song was about a black family man who was caught in a desperate struggle where their armed opponents only saw the color, not the individual.

Behind the shimmying Belle, Erica smirked but tried to remain as neutral as she could during the song so she wouldn't upset her partner. Some of her past experiences in the inner-city precinct where she had cut her teeth rolled past her mind's eye. She had seen so much death and despair, so many hardships and broken families that she occasionally wondered how she had managed to stay sane. The song’s lyrics were harsh but unfortunately also true.

Up front, Belle finished the protest song and waved enthusiastically to the audience who responded by clapping and cheering. While she received her hard-earned applause, her iPhone rang. Grunting in surprise, she fished the telephone out of her pocket and looked at it. She didn't recognize the caller-ID, but she took the call and shuffled off to the side while her fellow Butterflies received the audience's cheering. "It's Belle Cosmick, talk to me," she said, stuffing a finger in her other ear to hear better.

"Hi, Belle! It's Rebel. I'm-"

"Rebel? Hey, girl! Where are you? Why aren't you down here? You had a big part to play in this thing too, you know."

"Far too many cops, Belle."

"Yeah… I see your point," Belle said, glancing over at Erica, and then down at the four police officers who were visibly uncomfortable on the first row next to the director of social affairs.

"Anyway. We're here… just over a hundred yards from where you are. Up at the community center's parking lot… on the back of a flatbed truck… with two giganto amplifiers!"

"What the hell are you doing up there? And on a truck?" Belle said perplexed, standing up on tip-toes to try to see up to the white buildings that formed the community center just shy of two hundred yards behind the rows of benches.

"Troy, Irwin and me are gonna crash your party, Belle,' Rebel said and broke out in a snicker.

"Oh-hoh, are ya? Bring it on, Sister!"

"Wait, ya gotta introduce us first… we can hear you just fine. And we're gonna play the national anthem."

Belle stared at the iPhone for a few seconds before she understood not only what Rebel meant, but what she intended to do. "Aw, ya betcha. Yeah, girl, this is gonna be so good… the only way to close this gig, huh?"
'Yeah!'

"Okay, talk to you afterwards," Belle said and moved back to the microphone stand. On her way there, she changed plans and grabbed hold of Erica's arm so she could take the Sergeant with her over to the edge of the stage. "Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention please? May I have your attention, please. I have an important announcement. All right, thank you," she said when everyone had settled down.

Leaf, the Walrus, Packard and Erica all stared at her like the old bird had finally gone off the deep end, but Belle grinned back at all of them and raised her hands in the air. "Ladies and Gentlemen," she said into the microphone, "back in 1969 at the Woodstock music festival, the defining moment of perhaps the entire decade came at the very end of the concert… so late in fact that most of the crowd had left. Well, lemme tell you… they missed the best part. Now! Now, for one night only… well, afternoon, but you get the picture-

The audience duly laughed, except the director of social affairs who sat on the first row. The forty-something politician looked helplessly at her twenty-something minders and the police officers who had no idea what Belle was talking about - except perhaps Robby Lechner who smirked broadly.

"-We can announce a couple-a very special guests… Rebel, the ace guitarist, her brother Troy the Bassman, and our super-duper producer Irwin Seacombe. Ladies and Gentlemen, please rise for our national anthem!"

Belle took a step back and threw her hands in the air to receive the applause the audience gave her. Down below, everyone got to their feet and started looking around to see what was going on.

Erica stared at Belle, now fully convinced that the old bird had indeed gone off the deep end, but the Butterflies all cheered - they knew what was coming.

Two seconds later, the most infernal wall of noise hit the ceremony square, the people at the benches and up on the stage. It was unmistakably a guitar playing the Star Spangled Banner, but the way it was played defied all description. Rebel used every single trick in the book to make her Fender Stratocaster replica scream like a banshee and growl like a T-Rex in heat. She deliberately worked in the feedback from the amplifiers, and the distortion threatened to create a wormhole in the time-space continuum.

The elderly part of the audience jumped to their feet and broke out in an insane cheer, as did the Butterflies on the stage, but most of the younger participants either shook their heads or covered their ears.

The director of social affairs seemed so out of it that she didn't know what to do with herself. With shock and horror painted all over her face, she clambered up on the stage and grabbed hold of Erica's arm. "Sergeant! You have to stop this disgusting, revolting abuse of our sacred national anthem!" she cried, pointing up at the truck.

Erica clenched her jaw and turned towards the hysterical politician. "I'm Sorry, Miss Director, but I can't. It's a felony to interrupt a performance of the Star Spangled Banner."

"But…!"

"I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do," Erica said sharply, moving over to Belle to show the politician her moment in the spotlight was over.

When the anthem came to an end, Rebel held the last note so long that it flickered in and out of key. The applause she got was thunderous, but by then, Irwin had already started the float truck and was driving away while Troy folded down the tarpaulin.

Belle opened her arms and pulled her old friends and her new lover over to the edge of the stage. There, they received the ferocious applause of the audience who had turned into a wild crowd by the national anthem. She
laughed out loud and squeezed Leaf closer to her. The Walrus and Packard each received a good fist thump, but the best was reserved for last, for Erica. Not caring in the least how many people were watching, she pulled her partner down for a loving kiss that went on and on and on…

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**EPILOGUE**

Wednesday dawned bright and cheery although the sameness of life had returned to the Cosmick-Wayne household after the stress of recording the album, the terror of being kidnapped by drug dealers and the boundless joy of being cheered upon at the big event in the park.

While Erica grabbed a shower as she prepared to go to work, Belle sat at the breakfast table with morning hair, bleary eyes and a tightly wrapped bathrobe. In front of her, she had her lactose-free yogurt, her mug of herbal tea, her Coulson Herald, her hill of medicine and her radio that appropriately enough played the old hit from the musical Hair, *Let The Sunshine In.*

Yawning, she scratched her cheek and reached for the first of her pills. Working like an automaton, she scooped up a spoonful of yogurt and mashed the pill into the creamy white mass like she had done for too many years to count.

One after the other, the pills went the same way as the first until she had completed her most trying task of the day. Sighing, she reached for the newspaper to read the typically gloomy headlines.

She had only made it halfway across the front page when she heard a knocking from the kitchen door, followed by a familiar voice that said: *Belle! Belle, it's me, Leaf! Ooooh, I got news for you! Belle? Are you awake?*

"What the hell...?" Belle mumbled, pushing aside the newspaper. A quick glance at the clock proved it was a quarter past eight in the morning, in other words, far too early for such exuberance.

'Belle?'

"Yeah, yeah, hold yer horses, pardner," Belle said and moved back her chair. After Jarrod Mayburn - a.k.a. J-Rox - had forced her to squat for so long back in the storage room, her hip had become even more reluctant to turn friendly in the mornings, so she needed to pause for much longer than she would have liked in order to persuade her legs to move without having the bones grind against each other.

Over at the barn door, she opened the top part and stared out at her old friend who seemed far too awake and alert. "What the hell's gotten into you at this ungodly hour of the day, Leaf...?" she mumbled, staring at the bouncy woman.

Leaf wasn't fully dressed for the day either. She seemed to be wearing a nightgown, slippers and a windbreaker that she had simply thrown over her shoulders. "News... I've got news... I've got big news, Belle! May I come in?" she said, holding her hands to her mouth in excitement.

"Well, sure," Belle said and opened the lower part of the door to let in her friend. "You want some herbal tea? You can hang your jacket on the hallstand if this is gonna take long..." she mumbled out of sheer politeness as she closed the door after Leaf.

"Are you online?"
"Wh-?"

"Where's your laptop?"

"Leaf-"

"Ooooh, I need to show you something!"

"Leaf," Belle said and rubbed her bleary face. "Hon, Erica and me had a late night last night and an early morning too… my brain is slower than a slug going uphill in molasses… you need to spell it out for me…"

Leaf flashed her old friend a broad smile as she took off her jacket and put it across the back of a chair. "It's big news, Belle. Where's your laptop?"

"In the living room… on the sideboard…"

"I'll get it," Leaf said and flew through the swinging door.

Belle was left standing with a two-foot, neon-green question mark for a face. Shrugging, she shuffled over to the breakfast table to make room for the laptop.

Moments later, Leaf came bounding back into the kitchen with the computer already booting. She put it down on the table and started looking for the Internet cable so she could go online.

"Leaf, what in the hell are you actually doing…?" Belle mumbled, but there was no stopping Leaf's bounciness.

"Belle, where's your Internet connection?"

"In the den. On my desk. Where it's been since we got the damn thing installed. Why?"

Leaf grabbed the laptop and hooked her arm under Belle's. "Hi-ho, hi-ho, into the den we go!" she sang in a voice that was far too cheery for the time of day.

"Hang on, I'm slow this morning," Belle said and shuffled along. "You go ahead, I'll… uh… follow, when I've called the state hospital so they can prepare your padded cell. Have you been smoking already?"

"No! I'm clean, green and extraordinarily happy!" Leaf said and danced through the swinging doors, leaving Belle standing in the middle of the kitchen.

Predictably, Erica stuck her head out of the bathroom door and shot her partner a puzzled glance. "Is that Leaf this early?"

"Yeah," Belle said with a chuckle. "I have no idea what she's doing… but she's happy, so I'm happy. We'll be in the den."

"Okay," Erica said and shuffled back inside.

When Belle swept aside the bead curtain with the large peace symbol, Leaf was already online and sitting at Belle's desk. Still not sure what in the world was going on, Belle shuffled over to stand behind her old friend and leaned down to look at the website Leaf had loaded into the laptop's browser.
Leaf smiled broadly and pointed at the screen. "Read it and cheer, Belle."

"Retro-rock-reviews dot com?" Belle said, craning her neck to read the small print. "Naw, I need to sit down to read the darn thing… wanna swap?"

"Sure!" Leaf said and hopped up to make way for her friend.

Sitting down, Belle pulled the laptop closer and began to read from the top of the page.

2014 - Dusty Roads: The Best Of The Butterflies

(Own label)

(Now available online at all major retailers)

1. Dusty Roads
2. Hot Little Number
3. Still Flying High
4. One, Two, Three!
5. Railroad Blues
6. Back On The Road
7. Jealous Heart
8. Chrome Wheels-White Line Blues-Big Black Diesel
9. Sun Gonna Shine
10. My Life, My Choice
11. Biding My Time
12. A Whale Of A Time
13. Stay And Fight
14. The People vs. The Government
15. Mountain Man
16. We Own The Night-Stay Off Our Street
17. Mirror, Mirror On The Wall
18. Old-Fashioned Jukebox

19. Hot Night, Gotta Fight

20. Slow River Blues

21. Will She Look At Me Today?

22. This Ain't The End, She Said (And Then She Walked Away)

- "The Butterflies - later Daisy-Belle's Butterflies - was a folk rock band that was active from 1973 to 1979. Although never really a headlining act as such, they produced five albums of which the third - A Whale Of A Time - almost cracked the Top 30 in 1975.

This compilation opens with their biggest hit - Dusty Roads - which is a classic, uptempo boogie rock standard that allows the lead singer's powerful vocals to shine. Most of the other tracks follow the same approach which makes for a slightly samey sounding compilation, but that was a trademark of the folk rock genre.

The production values are excellent, with an exquisite mix that allows the traditional instruments used by the Butterflies to really shine. It was recorded live in a studio which gives it a life, an energy, an urgency that regular layered, multi-dubbed recordings simply cannot match.

Besides Dusty Roads, the highlights are One-Two-Three, My Life My Choice, This Ain't The End, Hot Night Gotta Fight and the twelve minute highway combo Chrome Wheels, White Line Blues and Big Black Diesel - the three songs are mixed together in a near-perfect flow. A special mention must go to Sun Gonna Shine that creates a sense of magic through very simple means: a harmony singer and a fiddle player work together to create a soundscape that borders on the sublime.

Finally, there's the surprisingly edgy, timeless and timely anti-government protest song The People vs. The Government which is a bitter spoken-word indictment against the politicians in D.C. who snatch every opportunity to mess it up. If The Butterflies send this to the right radio stations, they could have an underground hit.

The Verdict: Eighty-seven percent rating, Top Drawer. This is a compilation any folk rocker needs to listen to, and more than once, too -- B.G. Quinn.

www.retrorockreviews.com, 4/18 2014."
Belle bumped against the backrest of the swivel-chair and stared silently at the review. To her right, Leaf was bouncing up and down, but it took a while for Belle to escape the shock created by the top review. "Holy shit," she mumbled, wiping her brow.

"And then some!" Leaf cried, clapping her hands in glee. "This is all yours, Belle! You wanted this album when the rest of us doubted it… this is all yours!"

Belle chuckled and turned the swivel-chair to face Leaf. "Yeah, but your song is one of those highlighted. The reviewer was right, Sun Gonna Shine is the best on the entire album, hon. It's so sincere."

"Aw, shucks, Belle… thank you," Leaf said and performed a little shimmy. "But isn't it cool that we got such a good review?"

"Yeah. Cool and unexpected," Belle said and swiveled back to the laptop. Some of the song titles were links, and she clicked on Dusty Roads to see where it went. The answer was that it led to the Amazing webshop where the track could be bought for $0.99.

Just curious, Belle clicked on Return and tried the link for the album itself. That too loaded a page on Amazing, but when she scrolled down to check out what it said on the page, she stopped at a line of text that read '#1 in category Folk Rock, Oldies Rock, Boogie Rock.' - "Ah, Leaf… uh… what does that thing say right there? Number what?"

"Number one in Folk Rock- oh… wait a minute…?"

"Does it say number one in folk rock, oldies rock, boogie rock?" Belle croaked.

Leaf swallowed several times and stared wide-eyed at the monitor while she tried to parse the exact meaning. "I th- I think it does, Belle…"

"HOLY SHIT!" Belle cried and hopped up from the chair as fast as her hip would allow her. "HOLY SHIT, WE'RE NUMBER ONE!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

Leaf squealed in sympathy and grabbed hold of her old friend. The two Butterflies yelled, cried, squealed, shouted, yelled and squealed some more, hopping around the den like they were young, wild and free.

Four seconds later, Erica came storming through the bead curtain with a look of wide open confusion on her face. In her haste, she had only had time to put on her black sports underwear, so acres of pale-ocher skin were on display.

"We're number one!" Belle cried, still hopping around with Leaf.

"You're what?" Erica said, but the older women didn't have time to elaborate.

When Leaf caught a glimpse of the half-undressed Erica, the result was inevitable. "Nude-in!" she shouted, whipping off her nightgown to bounce around the den in very little.

Smirking, Erica tried to be polite and look anywhere but at the naked woman. "Oh, I better…" she said and began to back out of the den, but Belle had other ideas.

With a joyful whoop, the old bird shed her bathrobe to join her friend in the nude-in - although she was wearing a sleeping t-shirt underneath - and grabbed hold of her partner's arms. "Not today you won't, 'cos we're number one!" she said and pulled Erica and the squealing Leaf in for a triple-hug.
Though Erica was still a bit confused as to what was going on, she had to surrender to the sheer amount of wild, unrestrained happiness in the den, and she gave as good as she got by wrapping her strong arms around Belle and Leaf's bodies and giving them a pair of good ol' squeezes.

"The Butterflies are back on top! Gawd, I love you both! I love you both so much!" Belle cried and proceeded to slap wet, sloppy kisses onto Leaf and Erica's mouths.

"We love you too, Daisy-Belle Cosmick," Erica said, returning the favor by claiming her partner's lips in a deep, genuine kiss that earned them both an excited squeal from the third member of their little trio.

Once they separated, Belle laughed out loud and wagged her tongue at Erica. "Dear friends, a beautiful lover, a brand new number one… what more can an old bird ask for? Naw, it's been too long… kiss me again, baby!"

Leaf and Erica briefly winked at each other before they leaned in and each kissed a corner of Belle's mouth, much to the old bird's unrestrained delight.

"We're number oooooooooooonе!" Belle howled before she reached around her old friend and her new partner - the two most important women in her life - and gave them all a good shake that left everyone winded but ecstatic.

"That's so great… now will someone please tell me what we're number one at…?" Erica said and laughed out loud.

Belle stared wide-eyed for a moment before she whooped out loud and pulled Erica and Leaf back in for another round of squeezes. "The album, baby! The Butterflies are back on top where we belong… we're number one on the charts!"

"Oh… holy shit, baby…!"

"That's what I said!" Belle cried, "C.C. Burdette, eat ya damn heart out! Wo-hoooooosoo!"

Erica only had a vague recollection of who C.C. Burdette was, but with all the excitement in the den, it didn't matter. Laughing out loud over the unexpected success of Daisy-Belle's Butterflies, she pulled the two old birds tighter and gave them the squeeze of a lifetime…

*  
*  

THE END.