DAISY-BELLE'S SECOND HELPING

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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- Thank you for your help, Wendy Arthur :D

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: Three months on from their first (a)rousing encounter in Cape Whitnell, the folk singer and hippie bird Daisy-Belle Cosmick and by-the-book Sheriff Erica Wayne are finally
back together in Daisy-Belle's hacienda in Coulson, California. Erica has a long-term plan that she can't wait to let the older woman in on, but Daisy-Belle is buried up to her eyebrows in work, stretching herself beyond her limits trying to organize a charity concert at the local community center for New Year's Eve. Will they achieve their goals and dreams, or will the stress from the concert send everything into a tailspin?

Part 1: Daisy-Belle and her Big Bad Bear

PREVIOUSLY

When folk singer and self-confessed hippie Daisy-Belle Cosmick got stuck in Cape Whitnell with her band The Butterflies, her meeting with the clean-cut, by-the-book Sheriff Erica Wayne gave her plenty to think about. What she couldn't know was that the meeting had also awoken something deep inside the tough Sheriff.

Both women had dark pasts, but over the course of the following days, the two very different souls became close in a way neither of them had thought possible. Unfortunately, both had obligations they couldn't put aside and Daisy-Belle had to move on from the small town and Erica - but they vowed to stay in touch...

CHAPTER 1

Three months later - December 26th.

The former lead singer of the folk rock band the Butterflies - Daisy-Belle Cosmick, Belle among friends - let out a deep sigh as she looked at the pile of notes spread out over the floor of her den in a seemingly haphazard fashion. She had used an entire notepad for the endeavor, but now that she looked at the confusing results, she didn't think it had been worth the two dollars she had spent on it. Though it was hard to spot even for her, there was a pattern to the apparent madness - it was just nearly impossible to keep track of.

Sitting cross-legged in the middle of it all, she sighed again and lowered her head to bury her face in her hands. "What the hell was I thinking?" she mumbled to herself, shaking her head slowly. "What in the holy hell was I thinking saying yes to something like this? I'm not a... a... an
analyst! I'm a folk singer, for crap's sake. I know how to sing, how to create magic with my voice. Not to... not to... shit, build a damn spreadsheet just to keep track of all the damn songs and stuff! Shit!"

The notes Belle was staring at formed the backbone of the New Year's concert she had agreed to arrange at the community center; each note represented a song that could work, a song that should work, a song that probably wouldn't work, and finally songs she knew she wouldn't be able to perform but that the young people in the glee club they were going to perform with had asked for.

Set lists, song arrangements, phone numbers for radio stations where she was supposed to promote the event, contact information for the musicians who were available and for those who weren't, contact information for the members of the glee club and contact information for the parents of the members of the glee club, and a ton of other things - all in all, it was far too much for her to deal with.

"Naw, I need a break," she croaked and clambered to her feet, wincing when her hip - that she had injured in a motorcycle accident many years previously - felt like the two bones were grinding against each other.

As she moved over to the bamboo couch she had in her den, she felt every single one of her sixty-two years, and although she knew she could still be categorized as 'cute' with her emerald green eyes, her braided gray-blond hair and her photogenic dimples, she only needed to look into the mirror to see that the three weeks she had spent on the concert project had left their mark on her face. She had bags where bags shouldn't be, lines everywhere, and a grayish complexion that she just knew her Big Bad Bear Erica Wayne would pick up on the second she cast a glance at her little squeeze.

"Ahh, Erica," she said dreamily as she sat down on the couch and took out her iPhone, "my beautiful, sexy, Native American babe-with-a-six-foot-B. Tomorrow... she'll be here tomorrow and I can wait that long. I can! I can wait that long... honest I can," she mumbled as she found Erica's number in the registry and put the phone to her ear.

The delay was brief, but it was long enough for Belle to swing her legs up into the couch. Before she got comfortable, she quickly reached behind her to grab a fluffy dark brown pillow that she used as a cushion.

'This is Sheriff Wayne, go ahead.'

Even though Erica had replied in her hard, no-nonsense I'm The Sheriff Of Cape Whitnell And Don't You Forget It-voice, the sound of her warm timbre gave Belle a pleasant, little jolt that rolled through her and left a blanket of warmth from the soles of her feet to the top of her head. The mere sound of the voice made her close her eyes and smile - and not just any old smile but a broad, genuine grin that revealed her very nice set of teeth.

'Hello?'
"Hi, Erica. It's me. Again." As Belle spoke, the tension and the stress drifted out of her body and left her in a far better state of mind.

'Oh... hi. What's up?' Erica said in a far softer voice at the other end of the line.

Belle could hear how the tall, tough, square-built woman smiled into the telephone. The knowledge that it wasn't just a one-way love affair made her grow even warmer inside. In the three months since the slightly insane turn of events where she and the Sheriff had become friends, then lovers over the course of a few days, she had felt more complete than in the thirty-five years she had spent walking, living and sleeping alone since her last serious relationship had ended in tragedy.

Although she and Erica had been physically apart, they had called each other and sent each other pictures every single day. It had been enough so far, but it wasn't anymore. Now, she yearned for the younger woman's loving touch, for the sweet taste of her lips and for the sheer size of her heart. "Oh, nothin' special, hon. I just wanted to hear your voice. Are you working?"

'Yep. Speed radar duty.'

"Is it raining?"

'O-yeah.'

"Thought as much. Do you know what I'm wearing?" Snickering, Belle snuggled down on the bamboo couch and dipped her fingertips underneath the waist of her faded jeans.

'Uh... no?'

"A smile."

'Uh... okay. And nothing else?'

"Oh, I probably have a Visit Hawaii sweatshirt and my favorite pair of blue jeans on, too..."

'Tease.'

"That's me, hon," Belle said with a broad grin and made a few kissy sounds into the telephone.

'Do you know what I'm wearing?'

"Let me see... your waterproof cape? And your new hat? Wrapped in a plastic bag, of course."

'Yes, yes and yes. Hell of a way to spend December twenty-sixth, I'm telling you. Everybody's staying at home. I've been here for two hours, and three, count 'em, one-two-three cars have gone past.'
"Wow, that sucks. D'ya want me to sing you a song? I'm learning a few new ones for the concert-
"

'Belle, you're not stressing yourself out, are you? You know we've talked about that. I don't have
to bring my medical kit for you when I come tomorrow afternoon, do I?'

"No, no, no... I'm perfectly cool," Belle said, biting her lips and glancing at the confusing maze
of notes on the floor. She furrowed her brow at the uneasy feeling of fibbing to her sweetheart,
but she justified it in her mind by saying to herself that it would make Erica upset if she knew the
finer details. It was a moot point, anyway - Erica would find out in a hurry when she arrived.
"Naw, I'm on top of everything. I know what I'm doing, hon. It's a challenge, but it's actually
kinda fun. Sort of."

'Well, that's good. Oh... hang on...'

Snickering, Belle snuggled back down on the couch and let her fingers draw a pattern across her
sweatshirt-clad stomach. "Ooh, do you have a speeder?"

A brief delay, then - 'No. It was Wylie Donaldson's tow truck... you know, the mechanic.'

"I remember him. Mr. Greedy."

'Yeah. You said something about singing me a song?'

"That's right, I did!" Belle said and swung her legs over the side of the couch. She needed a
moment to get a slight wave of dizziness to go away, but then she closed her eyes and began to
sing Wish You Were Here With Me into the iPhone. It was an old folk rock love ballad from the
late 1960s that originally sang of a young soldier sent off to a faraway land called Vietnam,
though she changed most of the lyrics to make it about a young woman earning her money by
getting wet and miserable, or spending her days sitting in a police truck with nothing to do.

The warm laughter that wafted back over the connection made it difficult for Belle to keep a
straight face, and her voice broke a couple of times as bursts of giggles escaped her chest. The
final note in particular was affected by her giggles, but she made up for it by sending her
sweetheart a few kisses through the phone.

'Aw, that was beautiful, Belle. Just beautiful. Thank you so much for making my day brighter. '

"You're welcome, hon. It was my pleasure. Tomorrow, oh Lawrd, tomorrow you'll be here and
everything's gonna be just fine. Can't wait," Belle said, looking down at the pile of notes on the
floor. Rubbing her brow, she rose from the couch and walked into the middle of her den.

'Yeah. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to it. I'm really sorry it didn't work out with
me getting over there for the holidays, Belle.'
"Oh, I've recovered from that disappointment. I only needed to cry myself asleep a couple o' dozen times. And, you know, I don't celebrate Christmas anyway, so..."

'Yeah. We just couldn't get a temp Sheriff to come even though we advertised for one way back in early October.'

"Can't blame them. Who wants to work in Rainy City? Come to Rainy City and get wet... and not in the good sense of the word."

'Oh, it's not that bad here... you meet the loveliest people.'

"Yeah?" Belle said with a snicker.

'Yeah. Listen, Belle... I gotta go. Okay? I'll call you tomorrow when I'm on my way to the airport.'

Belle's shoulders slumped at the prospect of finishing the conversation far too early. She tried to come up with something that would make Erica stay on for a little longer, but even as she thought about it, she knew it was unfair to the Sheriff who couldn't spend the entire day talking privately. "Oh no, already? I mean... we've only just started talking. I wanted to ask you if you had any preferences when it came to dinner tomorrow night? I can't provide a Pittsburgh Waterfront or whatever that steak-monster was called, but."

'Belle, we already talked about that. I'm cool with whatever you make for me.'

"Oh, we did? Yeah, okay... I guess I forgot."

'Do you remember how I look so we won't run past each other when I reach the airport?'

Belle's eyes slid shut and she entered a dream world where she explored every inch of the gorgeous, pale ocher-colored body of the tall, sculpted Sheriff. She let her mind's eye trickle down from the dark hair, past the strange, blue eyes that Erica had inherited from her father, past the breasts that were just the right size, over her wonderfully smooth stomach, past her dark patch of hair and onto her thighs that simply wouldn't quit. "Oh, you know," Belle said wearing a shit-eating grin, "I think I got ya nailed down. Yeah."

'That's good. Listen, I really have to go. I have the base hailing me on the CB.'

"Oh! Off you go, my caped crusader... off you go to get the bad guys, the bagel-nappers, the people parking in front of the fire hydrants..."

'Haw, haw... Don't forget I love you, Belle. Talk to you tomorrow. Bye-bye.'

The kissing sound that followed seemed to reach through the connection and slap a wet one right on Belle's lips. Grinning even harder, Belle performed a little shimmy and returned the favor into her iPhone. "Mmmmua. I love you, too, hon. And tomorrow can't come fast enough!"
With the highlight of her day over and done with, she put the warm iPhone into her jeans pocket and let her love for Erica give her a little thrill. Looking down, the smile faded from her face as she took in the sight of the myriad of notes on the floor. For some reason, the piles seemed to have grown larger and even more unruly since the last time she had looked.

She gulped down a bitter taste when she realized she only had five days to get everything sorted. Like so often before when she thought of the challenge that faced her, she got a little lightheaded - fortunately, she knew that a cup of herbal tea and an Aspirin or two would push it into the background.

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Three thousand miles east of Belle's house in Coulson, California, Sheriff Erica Wayne chuckled warmly at her lover's parting comment before she reached in under her waterproof cape and shoved her phone into one of her pockets.

Sitting in the Chevrolet Tahoe belonging to the Sheriff's Office of Cape Whitnell, she had the wipers going on their second-to-lowest setting to keep the inevitable drops of rain off the windshield so she could have a clear look at the desolate, rain-slicked stretch of coastal road ahead of her.

'Base to Sheriff Wayne... base to Sheriff Wayne... oh, is this thing even on?' Wanda said at the other end of the CB connection.

The young, bubblegum-chewing secretary sounded like she was on the brink of a nervous breakdown, so Erica relented and picked up the CB mic. "This is Sheriff Wayne, go ahead," she said as she stared out onto the shiny asphalt.

'Sheriff, I've been trying to raise you for the past five minutes!' Wanda whined nasally. 'Sheriff Combs is here! But Mr. Judson has just come in and Deputy Rogers doesn't want to leave the old guy alone... uh, that would be Mr. Judson, not Sheriff Combs, obviously. Over.'

"Obviously," Erica said and reached across the steering wheel to take the key out of the ignition so she could unlock the rear doors. "All right... thanks, Wanda, I'll be right in. Sheriff Wayne over and out."

'Base out.'

After attaching the microphone to the little piece of Velcro on top of the ancient CB-radio on the dashboard, Erica opened the driver's side door and ventured into the rain to retrieve the radar gun that she had put on a tripod at the far side of the dangerous curve she was watching.

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A short fifteen minutes later, Erica swung the large Tahoe into the parking lot in front of the Sheriff's Office and stopped next to a white Ford Explorer that hadn't been there when she had
left nearly three hours earlier. As she stepped out of the Tahoe, she noticed a red, removable magnet-light on the front seat of the Explorer, seemingly ready to be slapped onto the roof when they got called out to a hot pursuit.

"Like Smokey and the Bandit," she mumbled. Chuckling, she took the radar gun and closed the heavy rear doors of the Tahoe.

Inside the Sheriff's Office, everything was going to the regular plan: Edgar Judson was having a polite if rather one-sided conversation with Deputy Patrick Rogers, no doubt relaying some dastardly crime he had been involved in since the last time he had been in there to give himself up; the coffee machine was blubbering merrily on a table at the far wall of the room, and Wanda was chewing on her ubiquitous wad of bubblegum while she typed up a report from the tall pile of paperwork next to her. She had changed the flavor since Erica had left earlier in the day, though. Going by the scent, it was now lemon or possibly peach.

A uniformed man in his late fifties sat on one of the plastic chairs close to the door that led up to Erica's private apartment on the first floor of the building. He was slightly overweight and he had a ruddy complexion to go with the extra bulk, but his pale brown uniform was still a good fit. His eyebrows were on the bushy side which gave him a grandfatherly appearance, but Erica knew from past experience that he could turn into a tough, old S.O.B. if the situation called for it. That particular point was underlined by the sidearm that sat high on his hip in a leather holster: a .38 long-nosed Police Special revolver instead of the later generation Glock pistol that Erica and her deputy carried.

"Sheriff Combs, I'm glad you could make it," Erica said and put out her hand.

"Hello, Sheriff Wayne," Walter Combs said while he shook Erica's hand, speaking in a voice that was smoother than his bulk hinted at. "I'm glad I accepted the assignment. You run a tight ship here. I've been observing your crew and they certainly don't waste their time."

"No, they don't. They're good people," Erica said and turned around to look at her two secretaries, Wanda and the new girl Josepha who only worked part-time. She cast a quick glance at Deputy Rogers who seemed somewhat annoyed with Mr. Judson. When they made eye contact, she sent him a sly wink that Sheriff Combs couldn't see. "I take it you've been introduced?" she continued as she turned back to her holiday relief.

"Oh, yes. I've said hello to them. Wanda, Josepha and Deputy Rogers. I take special pride in remembering the names of the people I work with," Walter Combs said and rose from the plastic chair.

"That's good. On that note," Erica said and gestured at her empty swivel-chair, "why don't you familiarize yourself with our computer system? We only have a ghost in the machine once in a while... most of the time, it actually works pretty well."

"Imagine that," Sheriff Combs said and broke out in a screechy chuckle that made Wanda stop chewing and stare at her temp boss with wide open eyes.
Erica noticed and shrugged apologetically, thinking that the laugh would drive the young secretary nuts before the week was over. "In the meanwhile, I'll go upstairs and put on a dry uniform. All right?"

"All right, Sheriff Wayne," Walter said and sat down on the swivel-chair. The first thing he did was to lower it so he could reach the floor.

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Upstairs, Erica locked herself into her apartment and immediately took off her plastic-wrapped hat and her waterproof cape. Going into the bathroom, she hung the dripping wet items inside the shower stall and began to unbutton her gray shirt that had turned dark from the moisture.

Even three months on, she vividly remembered the wonderful evening and night she and Belle had spent exploring each other's bodies in the shower and the bedroom. It was quite simply the best sex she had ever had, and she still had to pinch herself when she thought of how it had come about - not to mention the age gap between herself and her new lover.

That particular niggle, however, had vanished like the morning dew by the time they had truly connected. The fact that Belle Cosmick was twenty-four years her senior was nothing short of irrelevant. The folk singer had stolen her heart so completely and so effortlessly that all she could do when she thought of the gray-blonde beauty was to swoon; and tough, no-nonsense, by-the-book Sheriffs never swooned for anybody, full stop.

Snapping back to the present, Erica suddenly realized she had forgotten to undo two buttons which would explain the difficulty she had in taking off the damp shirt. Looking into the mirror above the wash basin opposite the shower, the goofy grin that stared back at her explained it better than words ever could - she had Daisy-Belle on her mind, not buttons.

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A few minutes later, she went into the living room in a new, dry uniform. The boots were shiny, the creases on her charcoal gray pants were razor-sharp, the belt buckle was lined up just right, and the pale gray shirt with the charcoal highlights on the breast pockets and the shoulder straps was flawless.

Straightening her cuffs, Erica moved over to the coffee table where she took a four-wing photo frame that she had printed out from a series of photos Belle had sent her. They were selfies that showed Belle mugging for the camera alone and with her acoustic guitar, but they had captured the essence of the folk singer so well that Erica thought she could hear the characteristic raw sound of Belle's throaty pipes somewhere in the background as she looked at them.

She smiled at the photo frame and put it down with reverence. "Not long to go now... just a day and a little more and I'll be there," she mumbled as she took her hat and her house keys.
Going back downstairs into the Sheriff's Office, Erica went over to her own desk where Walter Combs was working at the PC. "Sheriff, do you have time to do the rounds? I thought I better show you all the hot spots here in Cape Whitnell. Like Judy's Diner."

"Sounds like a good idea, Sheriff. Your system won't be much trouble for me. It's very similar to one I used up in Lyndonville last year," Walter Combs said and took his hat that he had put down next to him.

"That's good. Let's take your Explorer," Erica said and moved aside so the slightly bulky temp Sheriff could shuffle between her and the desk. "I've always wanted to slap a magnet-light on the roof like they did on Kojak," she said with a broad grin that made Sheriff Combs guffaw back at her.

Belle had been given a boost by the Aspirin and the half-hour power nap, but now that she was back in her den staring at the pieces of paper for the concert, her recently acquired energy was slowly drained from her system.

"Screw that, it's more important to clean up my mess before Erica gets here," she mumbled and walked back into her living room to get the big picture of what she needed to do.

Her hacienda-like bungalow was the only thing she had ever splashed out on. She had bought it in the late 1980s to have a solid home base during a period of her life where she wasn't sure what she wanted to do or where to go, and the fact that she had bought it before the local house prices had gone through the proverbial roof was only a bonus. She had been so pleased with the bungalow that she had decided to stay there for good, even when the Butterflies had gone back on the road in the following years when the retro craze hit in the early 1990s.

The bungalow had a large living room as the heart of the home. Apart from the two bathrooms that were accessible through the master and spare bedrooms, the other rooms of the house were all placed like satellites to the central area, connected through regular doors or open portals, like to the den and the kitchen.

It was clear to see what was most important to Belle: the living room was dominated by a crimson velvet couch arrangement consisting of two three-seater couches and two chairs that all faced each other across a brown coffee table, making sure the discussions that took place there would be free-flowing and spirited.

She had a TV and a digital recorder, but they were pushed off to the side up against the far wall underneath a framed abstract drawing of a whale tail.

Nearly everything was held in shades of tan, brown, crimson and ocher to keep with the Mother Earth-like theme, even down to the rugs and the hippie-inspired artwork and strings of beads she had adorning the walls.
Unlike the living room that she mostly used when she had her friends and neighbors over for herbal tea and to chew the fat - or more precisely, chew the celery sticks and the guacamole dip - the den was her sanctuary. That's where she wrote her songs and rehearsed for the concerts she used to do at fairs and folk festivals all over the country with her old band, the Butterflies, and where she withdrew to light up a dutchie when the cruel world became too much for her to handle.

After the Butterflies had split up in September, she'd had far more time on her hands for household chores, but it seemed to have slipped through her fingers - it hadn't helped that she had been so far removed from her sweetheart that she had almost experienced physical pain from the separation.

"All right," she said with her hands on her hips as she took in the sights of the slightly messy living room, "gotta vacuum... gotta dust off... the curtains really oughtta be cleaned... nah. Okay, the vacuuming is the most important."

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Ten minutes later, Belle had her upright going at full speed, flying across the loose rugs and in under the chairs and couches. She whistled while she worked, and it didn't take long before the carpets at least were spick-and-span.

As she pulled the plug for the vacuum, she suddenly felt lightheaded again and had to stand up straight while she waited for it to recede. When it had, she shook her head slowly and furrowed her brow. "What the hell *is* that?" she mumbled under her breath as she clicked on the button on the vacuum to make the cord roll up.

Her comments were interrupted by someone knocking on the kitchen door. 'Belle? Belle? Are you there? If you can hear me, say yes!' she heard a familiar female voice say.

Belle broke out in a smile and let vacuum cleaner be vacuum cleaner. She quickly went into the kitchen and opened the top part of the rear door that she had converted into an old-fashioned barn door. "Hi, Leaf!" she said with a smile, leaning her elbow on the lower half of the door.

Autumn Leaf - the former harmony vocalist of the Butterflies and still Belle's best friend - was wearing a thick winter coat, mittens and a woolly hat that she had pulled way down over her ears. "Hi, Belle," she said, returning the smile. "Is she here yet? Have you picked her up yet?"

"Who... Erica?"

"No, Nancy Reagan!"

"Leaf, Erica's not coming until tomorrow."

"Oh... tomorrow? I thought it was today," the thin woman said and broke out into a childish giggle when she realized she had read the calendar wrong.
"It's not. C'mon inside, you look colder than an icicle out there," Belle said and opened the lower half of the barn door as well to let her friend inside.

Leaf quickly walked in and took off her Arctic equipment to reveal a loose, flowery dress with three-quarter sleeves. Both her wrists were covered by a multitude of leather bands, and her fingernails had been painted meticulously in all the colors of the rainbow. To round off the ensemble, she wore a braided leather necklace that carried a peace symbol carved in wood as its pendant. The hat came off last and revealed that Leaf's white hair had grown thicker and was almost back to its normal strength after her bout with breast cancer, if still a lot shorter than she had worn it before she got ill.

Belle smiled at her friend as she closed the barn door. "Leaf, you look great today. Sleep well?"
Before she got an answer, she went up to the slightly taller woman and gently ran her thumb across the pale cheek.

"I did, thank you. But... uh... I guess you didn't? You have the strangest complexion, Belle... sort of like gray and red... and some more gray. Did you smoke something that was too strong for you?"

Belle grunted and moved over to the cupboard above the kitchen sink to take two mugs for their tea session. "No. I wish it was as simple as that. It's that fuckin' New Year's concert. It's giving this old bird all kinds of grief... I should never have said yes to doing that shit." Sighing, she closed the cupboard and moved over to the other side of the kitchen to get the jar of Herbal Extract Gold for herself and Leaf.

"Can't you, like, call it off... or something?" Leaf said, chewing on one of her fingernails until she remembered she had painted it.

"No. That would be so uncool of me, Leaf. Soy milk as usual, right?" Belle said and held up a jar of milk powder.

"Yeah, thanks. I guess you're right. Don't forget I'll be there to back you up," Leaf said and moved over to her stressed-out friend to give her support by stroking the sweatshirt-clad back.
"Right?"

"I know and I appreciate it. Whoa, dude, this thing is kicking my ass, though," Belle said and leaned against the kitchen table while the electric kettle heated the water. She sighed and looked down at her fingers. "It's no fun when you discover you can do less than what you thought you could."

"Trust me, I know," Leaf whispered and moved in to hug her best friend. As the two women made contact, Leaf's missing left breast underlined her statement quite clearly. "But I still love you," she continued as she moved back.

"Thanks, hon. I love you too. Ah, you know me... I'm not giving up yet... and tomorrow, Erica will be over for ten days... ten fuckin' days, Leaf!"
The vocalist stepped back and flashed her friend a wink and a knowing grin. "She's the best thing that ever happened to you."

At that, Belle cocked her head and thought of what she and Leaf had been through together in the decades they had known each other - including Belle's two suicide attempts where Leaf had been the only one standing between her and the Pearly Gates. "No," she said wistfully. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Leaf. But Erica is very, very special."

"Awww... you don't mean that, Belle. I'm your friend but she's the one you really love. That goes far deeper. Hey, do you know what I predict? I predict that one day, you and Erica will be so close you'll forget all about Autumn Leaf."

As the electric kettle turned itself off, Belle let out a dark chuckle and began to pour the hot water into the mugs. "Never gonna happen... never, ever gonna happen. All right... let's go into the den and have some tea. We got stuff to talk about and songs to sing, man!"

"Right on, man," Leaf said and reached into her coat pocket to get the small plastic bag containing her preferred brand of premium-grade marihuana.

A while later - they had lost track of time - Belle sat on the floor in her den and picked a few chords on her beloved acoustic guitar. She thought they were the best ever, and the way Leaf danced and played the tambourine to the crisp sounds convinced her she was right.

Feeling inspired, Belle started belting out a stirring Beatles medley starting with Get Back that soon segued into Drive My Car and finally into Yellow Submarine.

It didn't take long before the medley had Leaf in stitches because of the way the words were mangled, and her friend's joyful laughter made Belle try even harder with the last two songs, a jazzy rendition of Yesterday and a rousing Hey Jude.

Belle was chasing a beautiful rainbow that swept through her mind, leaving behind contrails of purple stars and oddly rampant unicorns and fluffy bunnies that all had dark hair and blue eyes. Her haze was going wonderfully until it suddenly turned dark and threatening. When an unseen force pressed against her brain and throat, her playing came to an abrupt halt and she tried to shake the darkness out of her head.

Leaf hadn't noticed and kept dancing, but Belle knew she was in some kind of trouble and clambered to her feet. Staggering over to the window that opened up to the garden, she unlatched it and stuck her head outside. The fresh air removed some of the darkness but other parts of it lingered on.

Sighing, she carefully put down her precious guitar and leaned her forehead against the cool windowsill. "What the hell is wrong with me? Now I can't even enjoy good weed. Oh, I wish Erica would hurry up and get here," she said to no one in particular. "Man, I miss her so much..."
that fuckin' concert is killing me slowly... when she gets here, she'll help me and we can get it over with."

Leaf seemed to have reached the end of her active phase and sat down on the bamboo couch to chill. The feel-no-pain look on her face told a tale of seeing the sounds and hearing the colors, and she waved lazily to get Belle to come over to her.

Belle was only too happy to comply, so she closed the window and shuffled over to her best friend. She quickly kicked off her shoes and crawled up into the couch where she leaned her swimming head on the stoned woman's shoulder. The brief, colorful trip had worn her out, and she wasn't even in the mood to join in on the fun when Leaf went into her patented giggle-fit a few minutes later.

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CHAPTER 2

The next morning at the breakfast table, Belle only had a vague recollection of what had happened the previous afternoon and evening. The only thing she knew for a fact was that she had tried to slip Leaf the tongue while calling her Erica - oh, and that she had forgotten to take her evening pills.

The latter was worse than the former and she had the headache, the red eyes and the aching tummy to prove it. Sighing, she got up from the chair and shuffled over to the kitchen sink to get the glass of water she needed to chase down the five pills she had to take each morning: one for her allergies, one to combat her indigestion, one to keep her mucous membranes moist and happy, and finally two painkillers to counter the inevitable nausea brought on by the indigestion pill.

"I'm so sick of this shit," she mumbled as she gulped down the last of the two painkillers. "How could I get a blackout from smoking a regular, boring old doobie? It wasn't even that strong... I'm just getting old, that's how. Old and weak... fuck it."

With a protesting neck, she glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was ten to nine and her plan was to leave at nine forty-five to get to the municipal airport in time. The mere thought of holding, kissing and loving her big bad bear sent a wave of warmth through her which in turn made her close her eyes and smile at the pleasant images that rolled past her mind's eye.

The images gave her mood an instant boost, and she was soon in the process of making herself a slice of toast and a mug of strong herbal tea so she could build up some stamina for what would undoubtedly be a day filled with hard work of the bedroom kind.

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Right on time - and dressed like she was going on a polar bear hunt in a thick, bright blue down jacket with a matching hat, lined jeans, black Wayfarer shades and finally a rainbow-colored scarf wrapped around her neck - Belle ventured outside her hacienda and shuffled over to her garage. Once there, she clicked on the little button on the remote that controlled the garage door.

As the sliding door slowly trickled upwards, her psychedelically-colored 1966 VW Microbus came into full view. The veteran tour bus of Daisy-Belle's Butterflies hadn't had much use since they had returned from the fateful trip in September where she had met Erica, but she had faith in the old bus that only broke down once a year at the most, and it had already done so in Cape Whitnell.

Getting in, Belle got herself comfortable behind the thin, white steering wheel and turned the ignition key. At first, the engine coughed, spluttered and belched black smoke, but the fourth cylinder eventually came on song and joined its brethren. With another cough and a slight puff of pale blue oil smoke, the old car settled down into a smooth idle.

Belle grinned and fished around the gearbox for reverse. It took her four tries, but when she got it, it was fully there. She reversed slowly out of the garage and onto the quiet street she lived on. After clicking the button on the remote, she waited for the garage door to close fully before she started fishing around for first gear.

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The trip to the municipal airport had been largely uneventful save for the instance where Belle had held up an entire turning lane of cars at a traffic light because she couldn't find first gear. Just as she turned onto the final stretch of road that would take her to the ticket booth for the airport's gigantic parking lots, a twin-engined commuter jet howled wildly as it tore down the runway on its take-off.

"Hi," Belle said as she pulled to a halt outside the ticket booth. "I need to park here for an hour or so."

A young woman in a yellow fluorescent vest was manning the booth, and she leaned forward to speak into a microphone that was suspended in front of her. 'We only sell transit or two-hour parking tickets, Ma'am.'

"Then I guess I need a two-hour ticket," Belle said and found her credit card.

After she had inserted the card and punched in the numbers on the external reader, the ticket was printed out inside the booth, and the young woman quickly put it in a metal drawer that she turned around so Belle could reach it. 'Here you go, Ma'am. Put it in the lower right corner of your windshield.'

"That's a big ten-four, pardner. Say, do you know if the planes are on time or what?"
"I don't have that information here, Ma'am," the young woman said, shaking her head to add extra weight to her words.

"All right. Thanks, anyhow," Belle said and put the ticket on the bench seat of the VW while she drove into the parking lot to find a free slot for the colorful vehicle.

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The arrival hall was easily found and Belle strode over to the large information monitor in the center to check up on the status of the arriving flights. Expecting Erica's plane to land shortly, she swiftly zoomed in on the flight on the monitor, but groaned loudly when she followed the line across the screen and read the dreaded words, 'Delayed, fifteen minutes.'

"Aw, hell... typical. But I'm good, I'm fine... I've waited three months, I can wait another fifteen minutes..." she mumbled as she took off her hat and unzipped her winter jacket down to half-mast.

An enterprising businessman had put up a small stand next to the information monitor where he sold long-stemmed roses wrapped in cellophane. Belle suddenly remembered that Erica had given her a similar rose back in Cape Whitnell, and she promptly reached for her wallet to buy one. 'Full circle!' she thought as she handed the florist the two dollars and took a rose that had a particularly impressive head.

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Some time later, the information monitor changed the status of Erica's flight to 'Landed' and Belle's excitement grew exponentially. She began to wander around restlessly, holding her hat in one hand and the wrapped rose in the other while looking at the doors to the gate and the luggage carrousel that had already begun to move.

The arrival hall had filled up since she had got there, and the waiting individuals and families made it difficult for her to keep an eye on the gate. She tried to shuffle her way to the front of the line - after all, she was the one with the greatest need of them all - but a group of men she could only describe as seven feet tall surfer dudes had had the same idea and were presently hugging the entire line.

Belle couldn't see past their broad backs so she shuffled off to the side at the same moment the first passengers came through the gate. Several children let out joyful squeals at someone, and a late twenty-something woman in a US Air Force uniform soon had her legs firmly hugged by two young female wildcats.

The seven feet tall surfer dudes were there for another, even taller, surfer dude who greeted his homies by throwing them a series of hand gestures. The men duly laughed and cheered at their friend who came over for hugs and high fives.

When the tall men moved away, Belle saw her.
Striding down the long accessway dragging a royal blue suitcase on wheels, Erica's purposeful, military-like gait marked her out as someone to watch. Even if her gait hadn't done the trick, the dark gray, formfitting slacks and the loose blazer in a matching color that she wore over a mother-of-pearl v-neck blouse was enough to make all but the most pious turn their head and stare - and the final holdouts would no doubt succumb when they caught a glimpse of her dark hair and her ocher skin.

Belle felt a wild cheer bubble up inside her chest, but for the sake of keeping up appearances, she made sure it was all kept inside. She couldn't stop her eyes from wandering, though.

As the two women found each other across the crowded room, they both broke out in identical broad, goofy smiles that just kept getting broader and goofier the closer they got. When Erica was finally out of the accessway, Belle hurried towards her with her arms wide open, mindful to hold the wrapped rose so it wouldn't get crushed.

The hug that followed was every bit as good as Belle had hoped it would be. Their connection was re-established immediately, and the pain of their extended separation vanished like the morning dew from the firm yet tender touches they shared. Holding onto each other like the future of the world depended on it, they both let out contented sighs with goofy grins on their faces.

"Oh my hell, I've been looking forward to doing that ever since we said goodbye on the Lyndonville fairgrounds. Oh, it's so flippin' fantastic to see you again, baby," Belle husked, lapping up Erica's presence. "Here! I bought you a rose!"

"Awww, I've missed you, too. Thank you. That's so sweet of you," Erica said and took the long-stemmed flower. Even while she sniffed its impressive head, she never took her eyes off Belle's face.

After a few seconds, her grin faded away and was replaced by a deep frown that appeared between her eyebrows. She studied Belle's face closely, and it was clear from the concerned look in her blue orbs and the way she started biting her lips that she thought something was wrong.

Belle knew what Erica was thinking and she also knew she needed to defuse the situation at once. "Erica... welcome to Coulson. I love you. That's just a small token... my own rose is yours once we get home," she said with a saucy wink.

Erica opened her mouth to reply but seemed to momentarily lose her train of thought. "Uh, great," she eventually said and pulled Belle into a new hug that finished with a kiss on each of the folk singer's cheeks. "I love you too, Belle. Thank you so much for the flower. But... you look really tired. Are you ill?" she whispered for Belle's ears only.

"No, I'm as healthy as a blue jay in May. I'm just... well, I guess I'm pretty tired. Kinda worn out, I guess. Yeah."

Erica's reply was immediate. "The concert."
Belle could hear it hadn't been a question, not even a rhetorical one, but quite simply a statement of undeniable fact. She looked up into Erica's eyes and caught the faintest glimpse of the Sheriff in there. It was gone almost before it had arrived, but she had seen the characteristic hardness. "I guess."

A few seconds went by where Erica studied Belle's face so closely the folk singer could feel her ears burning at the attention. The moment was resolved by a wide, almost wistful smile on Erica's lips that made Belle let out a breath she hadn't even realized she had been holding.

"Let's talk about that when we get home," Erica said with a smile. "I could use a cup of coffee... a good cup of coffee, not that airline dishwater. And we have so much to talk about. Even more than I thought we had, apparently."

"Uh, yeah. Leaf can't wait to see you again, kiddo. She's all giddy and everything."

"Oh, really? How is Leaf?"

"Much stronger now and getting better every day. Uh, just you hang onto your rose there, Missy, I'll get your suitcase," Belle said and grabbed the extended handle for the suitcase on wheels.

"Thank you. But that's just one of them... I better get the other myself. It's taller than you," Erica said and very, very quickly stuck out her tongue.

As the Sheriff of Cape Whitnell strolled over to the luggage carousel, Belle was rooted to the spot. She briefly wondered if Erica had a body double who had come instead of her, but a quick glance at the gently wiggling hips inside the formfitting slacks told her that such a woman had to be a one-off.

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"Oh, it's the hippie bus!" Erica exclaimed gleefully as she and Belle walked up to the instantly recognizable vehicle.

"That's the only ride I got, Sheriff! But don't despair, I have a pair of sunglasses you can borrow if you're afraid someone's gonna recognize you..." Belle said and unlocked the Microbus. She quickly opened the central door and stepped back to give her lover room to load the travel gear.

"Nah, I'm just fine," Erica said and put the two hard suitcases down into the footwell between the center bench and the backrest of the front seat. "Oh, before I forget, Marcia Willems says hi and 'rock on.' She told me you'd know what that meant."

"Oh, I do," Belle said and turned away from the Microbus. "Hi, Marcia!" she shouted into thin air, making several people stop and look in her direction.

Giggling, Belle closed the central door and put her hand on Erica's elbow. "She was one of the greatest gals I've ever met. Is her Bed & Breakfast going well?"
"Oh yeah. She had a full house for the holidays."

"Man, that's great. Okie-dokie, hop in... wait a minute, ain't you cold?" Belle said, taking a step back to compare her own winter garments to Erica's flimsy outfit.

"No. Aren't you cooking in that thing?" Erica said and poked Belle's winter jacket with an index finger. "This is quite warm for the season. It's, oh... ten degrees warmer than back home. At least."

"Wow, are you shitting me? This is flippin' freezing cold, girl!" Belle said and let out a belly laugh as she opened the passenger side door to usher her tall lover into the Microbus.

Getting in herself, she turned the ignition key and waited for the engine to finish its regular will-I-won't-I routine. While they waited, she turned to look at the woman on her right. "Erica Wayne... I'm an old bird and you're a sprouncy young gal. You can't expect me to do all the first moves... in other words, when are ya gonna move your glorious butt over here so I can kiss you senseless? C'mere, girl!"

Erica laughed out loud and quickly scooted across the bench seat where she delivered a willing pair of lips to her older lover's magnificent request. The kiss went on and on until the two women pulled back and were content to simply look deeply into each other's eyes.

"Oh-ho yeah, this is gonna be the best ten days of my life," Belle mumbled as she started fishing around for reverse.

A little while later, Belle drove the Microbus up the paved driveway and pulled to a halt in front of the garage. She tried to look at her house through the eyes of someone who had never seen it before, and came to the conclusion that it looked all right, all things considered.

"So... here we are, kiddo," she said and turned off the engine. "Welcome to my hacienda. My home. I hope you'll think of it as your home for the coming days, too."

"Oh, it's really nice!" Erica said and let her eyes roam all over the front of the house, taking in as much as she could. The single-story bungalow was held in earthy tones with cream walls and brown highlights around the windows, the roofline and the main entrance. It was pulled back slightly from the street, separated from the sidewalk by a neatly groomed lawn, a few bushes and a low hedge.

A narrow, gravelly path that went through the garden and around the far end of the house moved past two ceramic steps that seemed to blend directly into the wooden door at the main entrance.

"Very classy," Erica continued. "Do you keep the garden yourself?"
"Not really. Around the back, I have a few flower beds that I tend to, but other than that, I have a deal with a local gardener who comes over every once in a while to take care of my, uh... bushes."

Snickering, Erica reached over to muss Belle's jeans-clad leg. "Oh, I should have known."

"Oh, yeah? And what's that supposed to mean?" Belle said and quickly leaned over to steal a kiss.

"Nothing," Erica countered, stealing another kiss just for good measure.

Belle returned the earlier favor by stroking Erica's thigh that she couldn't wait to get herself reacquainted with. "Let's get inside so I can make us some coffee and stuff. You're gettin' awfully frisky, girl!"

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In the kitchen a little while later, Erica's blazer was hanging over the backrest of a chair, and she had rolled up the sleeves of her mother-of-pearl blouse while she was waiting for the coffee-pads machine to finish producing its liquid gold.

All these little acts and scenes of perfect domesticity came together for Belle who broke out in a beaming smile at the sizzling thought of what the immediate future would hold for them - on an intimate as well as a grander scale.

"What?" Erica said, cocking her head while her sparkling eyes zoomed in on Belle's emerald orbs.

"I just can't believe you're actually here, hon. Ain't it crazy? I mean, I waited for so long for someone... anyone... to look at me like you do now. Then we met under the weirdest of circumstances and did the wild thing in the shower and split up again... all in the space of a couple of days! And now... now... you're here and... fuuuck, man!" - Belle drew out the expletive in a way that left no room for misunderstanding.

The oddity of hearing an older woman dropping the F-bomb - not to mention her honest, raw expression while doing so - made Erica chuckle out loud and put out her arms.

Belle wasn't slow on the uptake and hurried over to the younger woman. She wrapped her arms around the long torso and buried her face in the soft blouse. "Lawrd, when the ten days are up, I don't know what I'm gonna do..."

"We'll think of something. Don't you worry 'bout that," Erica said and ran her hands up and down the back of Belle's Mother Nature's Not Yours To Ruin sweatshirt. "I'm more concerned about the concert..."
Belle pulled back and offered her lover a wistful smile. "Oh, the concert... let's talk about that a little later, okay?"

"Well, okay. But we need to-"

"I know. A little later. Please. This is you-and-me time."

The moment was saved when the electronic coffee maker sent out a shrill ding. Belle reluctantly moved away from her Big Bad Bear and reached in under one of the two cranes to take the mug of freshly made organic pad coffee.

She had purposely only made it three-quarters full so Erica could walk around with it without spilling a drop. "Here you go... the best coffee the house has to offer."

"Thanks. Smells great!"

"It damn well should, those pads are so flippin' expensive! Anyway, d'ya wanna go on a guided tour of the mansion?"

"Sure. Lead on, Milady," Erica said with a broad smile that faded when Belle turned away from her. By the time the folk singer opened the swing door and performed a flamboyant gesture meant to say 'welcome to my humble abode,' Erica felt a rock hard determination to help and support her older lover through thick and thin - not to mention a New Year's concert that had quite clearly overwhelmed her.

"First up, here's the living room," Belle said and did a little windmill spin in the middle of the room that made her sweatshirt flow out at the waist. "Just the basic amenities, ya know. Couch arrangement, bookshelves, music and stuff. TV tho' I don't really use it. I got a truckload of sheet music if you're interested in that sorta thing. This is where I have the gang over from time to time."

"How are the guys... Packard and, uh... the Walrus?" Erica said and shuffled off down a short connecting hallway while sipping her coffee.

"Oh, the Walrus is just fine. He and Leaf live just two blocks away. Sometimes when the wind is right, I can hear him play his fiddle," Belle said and nodded enthusiastically. "I haven't spoken to Pack since September. Anyway, moving on... the den is over there-" - she pointed at a portal covered by a curtain made of wooden beads. A large peace symbol had been etched into the curtain by replacing a few of the dark brown beads with white ones - "-but that's for a little later. You've already seen the kitchen so let's go into the spare bedroom. I have a little surprise for you there... one I think you'll recognize from your own bedroom."

"Huh, I can't wait to see what that is," Erica said and shuffled off down a short connecting hallway while sipping her coffee.
The spare bedroom was small but it was equipped with a double bed. It had a window overlooking the back garden, and the entire wall opposite the window consisted of a huge built-in wardrobe with white, sliding doors and a tall mirror in the central part.

The bed was presently covered by a dust sheet decorated with the peace symbol and a stylized drawing of a blood-red heart.

The surprise was quickly revealed to be a life-sized poster of Melissa Etheridge identical to the one hanging on the wall overlooking Erica's bed in her bedroom on top of the Sheriff's Office. "Eh?" Belle said, pointing her thumb at the poster while flashing a crooked grin. "Eh? Doesn't she seem familiar to you?"

"Very familiar," Erica said and gently pulled Belle into a sideways hug. "But why isn't Melissa hanging in the master bedroom?"

Belle shimmied sheepishly on the spot and looked up at her taller lover with the cutest expression on her suddenly shy face. "Well... I was hoping it would happen along the way, but I didn't know if you wanted to share a bed with me from the get go-"

"What? Oh, come on, Miss Cosmick!"

"Yeeeeeah, but we've only spent a single night in each other's arms, Erica... and that was three months ago. I mean, you could have changed your mind or something..."

The only logical answer to that question was the one Erica pursued. After putting down her nearly empty mug on the windowsill, she leaned down and claimed the older woman's lips in a long, warm kiss that tasted of sweetness and high quality organic coffee. "Are my intentions clear enough for you, Belle?" she whispered when they separated.

"Very clear. Much obliged, Ma'am, Sheriff, Ma'am," Belle said and once again wrapped her arms around the long torso in front of her.

"You're welcome. Now, when do I get to see the famed den of yours? You've talked so much about it over the phone I feel like I've already known it forever."

The kiss had ignited a spark deep inside Belle that she couldn't turn off at will. She licked her lips a couple of times while she pondered what to do about the warm wave that rolled around inside her. The wave trickled past her chest and ended up due south at a spot that still gave her a little grief when she didn't use a special remedy prescribed to her by her doctor - fortunately, she had taken a pre-emptive pill just before she left for the airport.

In the end, she sought out Erica's hand and gave it a strong squeeze. "Hon... the den can wait. There's something else I need to do first. Will you make love with me?" she said, caressing Erica's knuckles with her thumb.
The husky smile that graced Erica's face said more than a thousand words could - and so did the kiss that followed.

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The two lumps under the quilt in the master bedroom were still, but the state of the sheets and the pillows proved there had been plenty of activity of the lovely kind.

Panting, Erica swept the quilt aside and brushed her damp hair out of her eyes. "I need some air," she husked, running her fingers down her glistening body as proof.

Belle still hadn't regained the ability to speak. All she could do was to lie back and enjoy the garish yet warm colors that flew around her mind as the shroud of afterglow swept around her body and soul. Sated, she rolled over onto her right side to be nose to nose with her lover, though the acres of smooth, pale ocher skin she found on proud display nearly sent her into another state of rapture.

The first of Belle's faculties to return was her smile; the second was a tear that escaped her eyes and ran down her cheek to stain the pillow. The tear was soon joined by several more, but the smile she wore offered the perfect counter.

"Wh- why are you crying?" Erica said and moved in to kiss away the tears.

"'Cos I love you. And I love what you do to me... and I love that you don't consider me an old, wrinkled has-been who's got nothing left to offer..."

Grunting, Erica moved back slightly to take in the big picture. "Whoa, where did that come from?" she said as she ran her hand down Belle's bare side and onto her hip. "Hey...?"

"I'm sorry... I'm just..."

"Belle, hey... you can talk to me, you know. What's on your mind? Is it that concert?"

"I guess I'm just a little... shit, I don't know what I am. Come back, I wanna feel your warm skin," Belle said and pulled Erica back towards her.

Erica duly complied and moved back into Belle's arms. The two women snuggled up close and just lay there in their splendid, glistening nakedness.

"Baby, please cover me... I need to feel you all over," Belle whispered, tugging at Erica's arm.

"I don't want to squish you..."

"Please..."
"Well... all right," Erica said and swung a leg across Belle's. She quickly moved her weight over to rest on top of the smaller woman but stopped before she went any further. "But you have to promise me that you'll speak up if it hurts," she continued.

"I will. Please," Belle said and patted her chest to show that she meant business.

Nodding, Erica lowered herself onto her petite lover and slid her arms under the shoulders. They were touching all the way down, but even that wasn't enough for Belle who moved her arms up to cover Erica's back and her legs up to wrap around Erica's rear.

Belle truly experienced every inch, every ounce of her lover, and rejoiced in the magnificent feeling of the warm skin upon hers. "I love you," she whispered, peeking at the curtain of dark hair that had cascaded on her chest, and then up at the gorgeous blue orbs that were so close to her. "I love you and I never, ever wanna be alone again."

"And you won't be," Erica whispered back. "I'm here for good. I love you too, Belle Cosmick."

They shared a little kiss - or two - but it wasn't long before the extra weight made its presence felt on Belle's smaller body. "Now *I* need some air," she said in a wheezy voice.

Chuckling, Erica moved back down on her side to give her lover a little freedom, but she never stopped caressing and exploring the aged skin under her fingertips. After a little while, she reached down to pull the quilt back up over their heads so they could continue with the delightful activity.

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*A fair while later.*

Swept in a sheet and nothing else, Erica shuffled over to a small display shelf on the wall opposite the bed in the master bedroom. "I can't believe you kept that thing," she said, pointing at a teddy bear in a Native American outfit complete with a feather-equipped headband.

The teddy bear and several other little trinkets, souvenirs and figurines were perched on the shelf between two wooden book-ends that were shaped like a peace symbol and a chillum, respectively.

Belle stuck her head out of the bathroom while she combed her long hair that was still damp after her shower. "Of course I did. I sure hope you didn't expect me to throw out your gifts? I still have the rose, too. I picked off the petals and created a diorama in a glass frame. It's in the den."

"Wow..."

"I love to do things like that, it gives me something to do with my hands," Belle said and popped back into the bathroom to finish up.
Erica shuffled back towards the bed and sat down on the edge. "That's great. By the way, I remembered to bring that book you've raved about ever since you were in my apartment. It's in one of my suitcases."

'AFTER THE STORM?' Belle said from inside the bathroom.

"Yep."

A moment later, Belle came back out and held the door ajar for her lover. "Way cool singing, tweetie bird! I've heard so much good stuff about that book. Okie-dokie, it's all yours. I bought a brand new towel for you the other day so you don't have to worry about gettin' any old-bird cooties. It's on the right... ya can't miss it. It has 'Police Business! This Is A Bust!' on it."

"Aw, Belle!" Erica guffawed, raising the sheet off the carpet so she could walk over to the older woman without tripping. Once there, she stole a quick kiss and a slightly slower nibble. "Which reminds me... I brought you another little thing that I hope you'll enjoy."

"Oooh, what?"

"I'll tell you..." - long kiss - "later."

"Tease!"

"That's Sheriff Tease, to you, Miss Cosmick!" Erica husked. Throwing her head, she let go of the sheet and wiggled into the bathroom.

Belle just stood there with a mighty grin on her face. "Oh, this is just too good to be true! One day, I'm gonna wake up and discover it was all just an acid-laced hallucination. Yeah, I'm gonna wake up in the Microbus with the gang and go off to do a double-header gig in Dullwater, Michigan with Archie Hansen and the Doughboys Polka Crew... I just know it," she said and chuckled heartily.

As the water began to splash down on the tiles in the shower, someone knocked on the kitchen door. Belle knew at once who that would be, and she let out a happy little squeal before she hurried out of the master bedroom and into the kitchen.

"I'm coming, Leaf!" she said as she worked the lock on the barn door. It didn't take long before she swung the entire door open to let her friend come in.

"IS SHE HERE? She's here, right? It's today, right?" Leaf said, standing on the doorstep wearing her thick winter coat.

"She's here, Leaf. C'mon in. Make yourself at home, girl," Belle said and gave her friend a quick peck on the cheek.
Leaf stepped into the kitchen and took off her coat, revealing that she was wearing a pair of black sweatpants and a loose, dark green denim shirt that wasn't tucked in. Like the day before, her fingernails were done up in all the colors of the rainbow and she wore a wooden peace symbol on a braided leather necklace.

"Erica's in the shower right now, but she'll be out real soon. She's just gone in for a little scrub-off," Belle said as she put Leaf's coat on a hallstand.

"Right. So... did the realities match the fantasies?"

Grinning, Belle leaned in and put her hands around Leaf's waist. "And then some," she husked, nodding tellingly.

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Five minutes later, Leaf acted on autopilot and reached into her coat pocket to get her weed, but Belle stopped her by putting a hand on her arm.

"Not today, Leaf. Remember we talked about easing off? About only smoking every other day?"

"But... we didn't smoke yesterday...?"

Chuckling, Belle put a hand on the small of Leaf's back and guided her away from the temptation in the plastic bag. "Oh we did, bunny girl, believe me."

"I... I can't remember," Leaf said and scratched her white hair. "Oh! But of course! You were so far gone you tried to slip me a Frenchie right there on your couch... yeah, now that I do remember. Like I told you, I was flattered but I'm a one-tongue girl. And my husband's got dibs," Leaf continued and let out a cheeky giggle while she wagged her tongue in the air at her friend.

"Yeah, huh?"

"Just teasin' ya 'cos I love ya, Belle," Leaf said and swatted at Belle's stomach.

"And I love you, you crazy old bird. Oh, I'm so happy today... so fuckin' happy... c'mere, girl, gimme a cuddle!" Belle said and pulled Leaf in for a swinging hug.

While the two women gave each other a crush, Erica stepped into the kitchen wearing her slacks, her mother-of-pearl blouse and a highly puzzled look on her face. She lit up when she caught a glimpse of Leaf's white hair, and she quickly put down the mug with the stale coffee she had found in the spare bedroom. "Say, is this a private party or can anyone join in on the fun?" she said with a smile.

The answer was immediate when Leaf took a step back from Belle and whipped off her loose shirt. "It's a free-for-all! Nude-in!" she hollered and began to push down her sweatpants.
Erica stared wide-eyed at the semi-naked older woman while trying not to linger at the part that wasn't there anymore.

Belle hollered even louder than Leaf had done and hurriedly pulled the sweats back up before the world at large would see what color panties Leaf was wearing. "No, no, no, no, Leaf... wait a minute! Cover your tittie, girl, I got a house guest!" she said as she grabbed the discarded denim shirt and shoved it up against Leaf's exposed chest.

"But-" Leaf said, shaking her head in confusion.

Erica stifled a belly laugh and went over to the two older women. "It's okay, Belle. Hello, Autumn Leaf, I'm really glad to see you again. You look great," she said and put out her hand in a more traditional greeting.

"Uh... thank you. Hi," Leaf said and shook Erica's hand while holding onto her denim shirt with the other. "No nude-in?"

"Not right now," Erica continued. "I'm sure they're great fun and everything, but I'm more of a personal nudity kind of gal. You know?"

"Uh... okay. Let me tell you, you don't know what you're missing. Our bodies are the most personal things we have, in my opinion," Leaf said, nodding solemnly.

Giggling, Belle decided to step in before the conversation became too esoteric and new age for the by-the-book Sheriff to handle. "So do I, Leaf, but let's not have that talk right now, okay? I want the two most important women in my life to get along. So, why don't you go into the living room and I'll make some tea and coffee for all of us. Right? Okay?"

"Sure," Erica said with a grin before she pushed open the swing door. When Leaf didn't follow her, she went into the living room by herself.

Putting her shirt back on, Leaf scrunched up her face and turned back to Belle. "No nude-in?"

"I promise we'll have one later. Now scoot, okay? The tea and coffee won't make itself."

"Uh... okay. Let me just get my bag of-"

"No, Leaf, we talked about that, remember?" When Leaf's face turned into a big question mark, Belle grunted and pushed her best friend into the living room and over to one of the couches.

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Once the herbal tea was nice and dark and the instant coffee had been properly dissolved in the hot water, Belle used her rear end to push open the swing door. She paused momentarily when she saw Leaf offer Erica a brief kiss on the lips, but she shrugged and felt pleased her girlfriend
was so willing to follow Leaf's whims. "What the flying flip, are ya girls tryin' to tell me something?" she said cheekily as she put down the three mugs on the coffee table.

"No," Erica said and reached for her coffee mug at once. "Leaf was just showing me the wish-me-luck gesture that you and she used to do before every concert. I didn't mind."

"Oh, right," Belle said and sat down in the armchair that had been placed at the end of the coffee table so she could keep an eye on both Erica and Leaf at the same time.

Erica nodded and shot Belle a wink as she sipped her instant coffee.

On the other couch, Leaf kicked off her shoes and folded her legs up underneath her. With a contented sigh, she took a swig of her herbal tea and leaned down to rest her head on the armrest. "The vibes... the vibes in here, Sisters. The vibes in here are so strong I'm practically melting. I can feel the love going on between you... oh yes I can. It's so strong I can almost taste it. I have seen a lot... and I mean a lot... over the decades, but I'm telling you, your love is the strongest I have ever experienced. Except perhaps for the love vibes that flowed between our Belle here and a very special woman who left us all too soon. Don't you think so, Belle?"

"Yeah," Belle said solemnly. "That was just a little different 'cos we were both young, Stephanie and me. Now..." - pausing, she looked over at Erica with eyes that grew slightly moist - "now, I've been given a second chance. Man, a second helping of love... one that I never saw coming at my age. And I'm never gonna give it up. Never. I love you, Erica."

"And I love you, Belle," Erica said with a smile.

"Wow! I mean, this is like a love temple!" Leaf said and bolted upright. "I love both of you guys. Erica, would you like to come over and sleep with me and the Walrus some time?"

**SPLUTTER!** - "Wh- wha- what?" Erica croaked, staring wide-eyed at the spaced-out woman opposite her. When she didn't get an answer at once, her eyes slowly slid over to Belle who was trying hard to stifle a snicker.

The folk singer quickly put her hands on the side of her face and pretended to be snoring to illustrate that Leaf meant a sleep-over and not the adult meaning of 'sleep with."

"Oh... uh..." Erica said, scrunching up her face. "I'll... uh, I'll think about it, Leaf."

"Cool," Leaf said and leaned her head back down onto the armrest.

Erica blinked in disbelief a couple of times before she took a deep swig of her coffee to get over the rather unexpected request. She could already tell it was going to be a highly unpredictable ten days...
CHAPTER 3

The next morning at ten past seven, Belle's aching hip prevented her from getting any more rest. As she quietly swung her legs over her side of the bed, she reached for the alarm clock to see what time it actually was, other than dark o'clock. 'Huh,' she thought, 'that's practically sleeping in these days... usually, I'm up at a quarter to.'

Yawning, she sat up straight but was suddenly hit by a weird wave of dizziness. She gripped the sheets hard while she waited for it to recede. When it had, she rubbed her face and looked over her shoulder to see if Erica had noticed anything. 'What the hell is that? It's almost like when I had my period... when I bled so much I got anemic... but that can't be right.'

Her lover was sleeping on her left side, away from Belle's side of the bed, and hadn't noticed anything. The shapely form under the quilt almost made Belle throw it all away and dive back down under the covers, but at the last moment, a grinding pain shot up from her hip that convinced her it was time to get up after all.

Grabbing her morning coat and her lined winter slippers, she shuffled into the bathroom to heed nature's call.

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A few minutes later, she tip-toed into the kitchen and put her medicine case down on the table. She quickly found her prescribed chemicals for the day and arranged them in a neat little pile - five pills in various colors that seemed to mock her with their conformity.

Grunting, she went over to the kitchen sink to pour herself a glass of water.

Once the pills had been taken care of, she knew it was time to face the beast that was still in her den where she had left it - the plans for the concert. 'I'm gonna look at that thing for fifteen minutes tops... then I'm gonna come back out and prepare breakfast for us. Yeah.' She sighed deeply and went out of the kitchen to face the critter that had almost run her into the ground.

---

A quarter to eight, Erica rolled over onto her back and yawned so widely an aircraft carrier could have docked between her jaws. After stretching this way and that, she turned over to her right only to face an empty bed. She tried to listen for any breakfast-related activity, but the house was silent.

She quickly got out of bed and padded on bare feet over to the bathroom door where she knocked a couple of times. It was evident Belle wasn't in there, so she opened the door to take care of her own morning business.
'Belle?' Erica whispered strongly, peeking into the kitchen. In the meantime, she had wrapped herself in her favorite dark red kimono that she had brought with her from Cape Whitnell. "Belle...? That's odd... where in the world could she be?" she said and shook her head.

The answer came to her almost at once, and she padded back into the living room and over to the mythical den. She poked her head through the curtain of beads and found Belle flaking out on a swivel-chair at a desk. The folk singer had her arms wrapped around her body and was staring out of the window without seeing anything.

"Belle?"

Belle suddenly realized she wasn't alone anymore - figuratively as well as metaphorically - and turned around to face her lover. The redness of her eyes showed she had been crying, but she did her best to hide it by quickly turning away and wiping her cheeks with the sleeve of her morning coat.

Erica strode resolutely over to the older woman and inched her rear between the desk and the chair so she could see her face to face. "Belle, please talk to me... are you ill? Did I miss the phone? Has something happened to Leaf?" she said while taking Belle's hands in her own.

"No," Belle said and sighed so deeply her chest heaved. "None of the above. It's that thing." She nodded at a mess of papers on the desktop.

Erica only needed a one-second glance to understand it was the concert that was tormenting her lover. "Oh, baby," she whispered, looking at the myriad of notes on the desktop.

"When I was younger... young... I could arrange a concert like that blindfolded and with my hands tied behind my back. Now... fuck. Now I can't even look at it for ten fuckin' minutes before my brain turns to mush and I screw something up 'cos I'm confused. The schedule, the songs, the musicians, the glee club, contact info on all of 'em, the radio promotion I'm supposed to do... to have done. Yesterday, Erica."

"Shit..."

"That about sums it up, yeah," Belle said and wiped her eyes again. "You know what I am?"

"Sure I do, you're a kind, warm, beauti-"

Belle shook her head and gave Erica's hands a strong squeeze. "I'm a pathetic, worthless old bird, Erica. Worthless. People depend on me to get this right, and I can't even do that. Do you think they'll ask me to do anything, anything at all after this flamin' fuck-up? The hell they will."

"Well, maybe-"
"The reason I said yes was because I thought I could do this, honey. But the truth is that I can't. Not anymore. I've screwed it all beyond salvation," Belle said with a deep sigh and a nearly lethargic shrug.

Erica took an equally deep breath and let it out through her nose. Grunting, she looked from the stack of papers and over to her lover, and then back at the papers. "Listen... tell you what we're gonna do. First of all, we're gonna eat breakfast because no one's ever been a hero on an empty stomach. Then-"

"Baby, it's no use," Belle said, but Erica reached up and put two fingers across the folk singer's lips.

"Don't interrupt me, I'm on a roll here. After breakfast, I'll call the radio station and ask if we can do it today. If we can, we'll take it from there. Then you and I are going to sit down and get this thing sorted. Okay? And don't say no. The only thing I want to hear you say right now is 'okay.' "

"Okay," Belle said with a tired, dark chuckle. The wrinkles on her face seemed deeper than normal because of her gray complexion, but her eyes regained a bit of the luster that had been missing earlier.

Erica smiled and leaned in to give Belle a little kiss. "Great. Now scoot back so I can get my butt out of here."

---

After breakfast - jam, toast and strong herbal tea - Belle went back into the den and picked up her iPhone. With a sigh, she sat down on her bamboo couch and began to run through the registry to find the number for the man in charge at the community center. When she had it, she accessed the number and held the phone to her ear, closing her eyes in advance to combat the negative comments she knew the man would have for her.

'This is Gerald Thackeray. I'm all ears.'

"Good morning, Mr. Thackeray, this is Belle Cosmick. First of all, I need to give you an apology. I forgot to get the radio promotion sorted yesterday. It completely slipped my mind. I'm sorry."

'Well... I see. That would explain why they didn't run the promo. I thought it had been preempted by something else, but...'

"No, it was my mistake, Mr. Thackeray. My mistake alone," Belle said and rubbed her face.

'I see. Miss Cosmick, we needed that promo to get people interested in our New Year's concert.'

"I know, Mr. Thackeray."
A few seconds went by without a sound, but then Gerald Thackeray drew a deep breath. 'We have several local charity organizations as our business partners and we have told them the proceeds from the concert would be shared between them. It's difficult to attract an audience for a live show these days, I'm sure you know that as a performing artist, Miss Cosmick. If they don't know we're there at all, it'll be near impossible to attract them. After all, most people today have so many other interests that music almost inevitably comes at the bottom of their list, charities or no charities. But if we don't sell the tickets, the charities won't get any money... and that'll draw a few headlines, I'm sure. Negative headlines.'

"I know, Mr. Thackeray. I'll try to call the radio station in five minutes to see where we stand."

'All right. I trust you'll keep me posted?'

"Of course, Mr. Thackeray, of course."

'Thank you. Was that all?'

"That's all for now, yes," Belle said and rose from the couch just as Erica came into the den carrying a wad of blank paper, two felt-tip pens and an opened phonebook.

'All right. See you at three, Miss Cosmick."

The world seemed to come to a standstill for Belle. See you at three? She felt the blood drain from her head as she made the connection that at three, she was supposed to be at the community center to oversee the first rehearsal. In all her giddiness over Erica's arrival, insignificant things - like her entire agenda - had slipped her mind. She closed her eyes as a cold sweat sprang forth all over her body. "Uh, we'll make it a great reh- uh, rehearsal, Mr. Thackeray," she croaked into the iPhone.

'That's good, miss Cosmick. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Mr. Thackeray," Belle said and closed the connection.

"Rehearsal?" Erica said, cocking her head.

Belle nodded with a resigned thousand-mile stare in her eyes. "Rehearsal. At three. Today."

"Oh. Okay..."

The two women locked eyes and sent each other a silent message of support that went a long way to restore Belle's mood. A shiver ran down her spine when she thought of the painful jabs to her soul she had already felt twice that morning. She didn't know how many of those she could withstand, but a look into Erica's deep blue orbs gave her plenty of moral support. 'And thank the Lawrd for that... if Erica had yelled at me for forgetting it, I would... I would have had a real breakdown.'
Belle shook her head slowly to get the dark thoughts to go away. Screwing a tired smile on her face, she shuffled over to her lover and pointed at the items. "Wotcha got there?"

Erica looked down at the things she was carrying. Her plan had been to gather all the vital information on larger, simpler sheets so Belle wouldn't drown in the myriad of little pieces of paper - the plan was still on, only now it seemed they needed to do it quicker. "Our battle plans. Listen, here's what we're gonna do. The music is your side of the deal so I want you to come sit down and create a realistic playlist from what you've already come up with. Here's your felt-tip pen. Once we've got that in place, we'll call the radio station and get that fixed."

"Thanks... I need to talk to you while doing the playlist, hon," Belle said and dumped the entire stack of notes concerning the playlist onto the floor. "I need to ping-pong the titles. When I don't, I forget which ones I've already talked about."

"No worries," Erica said with a broad smile. She went over to the desk and sat down on the swivel-chair. "I'll collect the contact information and make it presentable. Okay?"

"Okie-dokie," Belle said and sat cross-legged on the floor so she had plenty of room. Taking the felt-tip pen, she uncapped it and started writing 'Playlist:' on her blank piece of paper. "Shit... it's dry. Aw hell, I can only take so much bitter irony, you know? You got another one up there, Sheriff?"

Erica scrunched up her face in sympathy and quickly threw her own pen down in Belle's waiting hands. "I'm really sorry. I just took it from the tray in the sideboard."

"Oh, you couldn't know. Don't worry 'bout it. All right, this one's better," Belle said after having written the title. "Okay. The glee club comes from the local high school so I think we better start with something they know. How about..."

-_*-_*_*-_*

Half past two, Belle stepped outside and clicked on the remote to the garage door. While she waited for it to go up, she adjusted her winter jacket and her knitted hat that she had pulled way down over her ears.

Behind her, Erica came out in a pair of pale blue jeans and a dark blue Cape Whitnell Sheriff's Office sweatshirt with 'We Get The Job Done' printed in white below the logo. She had her sleeves rolled up halfway up to her elbows and didn't look cold at all.

Belle just grinned at the difference between them. Stuffing her hands into her jacket pockets, she moved over to her lover with a cheeky grin on her face. "Hon, if you're wearing this little when it's the bleak mid-winter, what do you think you'll be wearing come July or August?"

"Even littler."

"Mmmm? You could do what Leaf does... or used to do, to be precise."
"Let me guess," Erica said and bumped shoulders with the older woman. "On the hottest days, she went shopping in her birthday suit?"

"Hey, are you a psychic? No, it wasn't quite that little. She wore a bikini top 'cos all-natural is a huge no-no here, but she wore a t-shirt as a loincloth."

"And nothing else?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, baby," Belle said with a cheeky laugh.

"Belle, what did you wear on the hottest days?"

Belle turned around and shot Erica a wink and a crooked grin - and that was all she had to say about that particular subject. "Okay, I'll drive the tour bus out so it'll be easier for us to stow the gear. Wouldya mind getting the first of the boxes, hon? We need the heavy ones first to keep the balance."

"Sure thing, Belle... and..."

"Yeah?"

"If you ever feel like walking around like that in my town, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to give you a citation," Erica said and briefly stuck out her tongue before she spun around on her heel and walked up the garden path.

"Oh, you can give me anything you like... anything at all, baby," Belle said under her breath as she watched Erica's gently wiggling hips fill out her jeans admirably.

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With the last of the four boxes of sheet music safely stored in the back of the Microbus, Belle went inside to get her three guitars. She knew there would be a selection of acoustic and electric guitars available at the community center, but she couldn't play a gig - or even a rehearsal - without her old, beloved quality instrument. She brought the other two, lesser guitars along simply as backups in case the lead popped a string or lost the tune in a situation where they didn't have time to fix it.

"All set," she said after stowing the guitars in the footwell between the front bench seat and the center row. As she crawled back out of the Microbus and stood up straight, she suddenly felt lightheaded, and she had to grip the pillar next to the center door until it receded.

Furrowing her brow in concern, she looked to her right at Erica who was already sitting in the front passenger seat. She thought about canceling the whole deal, but even thinking about it sent a new wave of discomfort through her. Shaking her head in disgust over her frailty, she clenched her jaw and closed the door.
For once, finding reverse didn't prove problematic and the multi-colored Microbus was soon backed out onto the street in front of Belle's hacienda.

Finding first gear, however, was another issue. Belle fished repeatedly after anything in the gearbox and she grew more and more frustrated with the old vehicle. It wasn't until her fifth attempt that she finally located a gear - which turned out to be second - and used it to drive away from the curb with the engine and the exhaust putt-putt-putting from the strain of the extra weight and being in the wrong gear.

"It's getting old... like its owner," Belle mumbled in a downcast voice. "I don't think it's worth fixing now. One of these days, it's just gonna fart one last time and that'll be it. Like its owner."

"Don't say things like that, Belle," Erica said and mussed Belle's jeans-clad thigh. "You've got thousands of miles left on your clock."

"Thanks. We never know, do we?"

"I guess we don't. I remember you talked about that in my apartment after we had made love. How much Leaf's illness affected you and those things."

Belle scrunched up her face and looked at her lover. "I did? Shit, I can't even remember. And that's me in a nutshell, ain't it? Like a broken record. Man, it's a good thing you already know me, love... otherwise you'd think I was some nutty old bird who forgets more than she remembers. Funnily enough, I can remember the old days just fine. With all the drugs I did then, you'd think they were all gone, but no... it's spooky."

"Oh, that's the same for everybody, Belle. Uh, once people reach a certain age, that is."

"Hey, you wanna walk the rest of the way?" Belle said in a mock growl.

"Nope. I don't even know where we're going..."

Ahead of them, the traffic lights at an intersection turned red, and Belle pulled the tour bus to a halt in the slow lane. As she put it in neutral, she hoped she'd be able to find a gear once the lights turned back to green. "Nah, didn't think so," she said and wobbled the gearstick to make sure it was in neutral. "ANYway, seeing the guitars made me think of a funny episode from, oh, 1974 or so. Yeah, it must have been '74 'cos we had the extra drummer there. You wanna hear it?"

"Sure."

"I accidentally smashed a guitar once in a hazy stupor."

"Wow, really? Wasn't it The Who who did that all the time?"

"Well, I've only seen clips of them on YouTube..."

"Oh... figures. Anyway, the Butterflies were on the road somewhere in the northwest. It was the fourth gig on a seven-day tour. Well, the night before, we had met a band who was going the other way and we had, you know, traded, uh... recipes and the stuff you do when you meet like-minded people. Right?" Belle said and shot the no-nonsense Sheriff next to her a wink and a smile.

"Oh, I wouldn't know anything about that, Belle," Erica said and tried to fold down a loose thread on her jeans.

Belle thought Erica's voice didn't sound entirely sincere but it was hard to tell with the business-like poker face usually employed by the Sheriff. Chuckling, she turned to look but couldn't read her face any better than her voice.

As the traffic lights changed to green, she fished around for a gear and miraculously found first gear at only her second attempt. "I'll bet you've never let it all hang out, have you?"

"Oh, of course I have. I'm not one of the holier-than-thou people."

"Like, when?"

"Well, I'm thirty-eight now, so... hmmm," Erica said and pretended to count back on her fingers.

Belle laughed so hard she fluffed a gear change which produced a crunching sound from the transmission. "You're such a goofball, Sheriff!"

"Enough about me... the guitar, Belle... what happened to the guitar?" Erica said and playfully slapped the driver's thigh.

"Yeah, okay... my smashed guitar. On this occasion, I had dropped some acid I hadn't tried before and I was buzzing along on the stage. I was so far gone I had no idea where I was or even who I was. Anyway, Leaf was doing her harmony vocals and Stephanie was in the middle of a flute solo when this butterfly flew onto the stage we were performing on. And we were the Butterflies, right?"

"Right. I can see where this is going."

"Yeah? Well, in my mind, this little critter was the size of a fuckin' school bus, man, and I nearly shit myself. It came for me and I wanted to escape... I wore my guitar over my shoulder... but I couldn't get my legs to work so I fell down, right on the guitar. It was crushed into kindling that I thought were snakes out to get me. Man... I thought my guitar bit me and I was gonna die right
there on the stage. I kicked, I screamed, I fuckin' freaked out like a big baby. And I mean freaked out! They had to break off the gig to drag my ass off the stage. Can you believe that?"

Erica had put her hand across her mouth so she wouldn't laugh out loud at the older woman's story, but she couldn't stop a wide grin from spreading over her face. "I can believe it, all right. I've often seen people freak out on LSD. Oh, Belle, I love it when you tell stories from the old days. They give me such a great insight into your life. Your crazy life, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Oh, I don't. I've really had a crazy, whacked-out life... but I'll tell you one thing, though," Belle said and looked across at the parking lot in front of the community center. Activating the turning signal, she waited for a truck going the opposite way to clear the street before crossing over and driving into the lot.

"What's that?"

"If you had been there, kiddo, you and Stephanie would have been, like, the hottest couple in the world. Holy shit, you gals would have rocked. Yeah."

"Well, who says I would have gone for Stephanie?" Erica said and hung onto the dashboard as the old bus creaked and groaned over a speed bump the city council had placed in the access road to stop people from speeding out of the parking lot. "I think I would still have been attracted to you, to be honest."

"Oh, you say that because you never got to know her. Everybody had the hots for Stephanie. Hell, everybody lusted after her... and I do mean everybody. But-"

"But you truly loved her?"

"I did. And she loved me," Belle said and drove up to a pair of glass double doors on the side of the community center. She turned off the engine and waited for it to simmer down before she looked at Erica.

"Listen, love," Erica said and scooted across the bench seat to take the older woman in her arms. "I wouldn't have been a threat to you. Like I said, I'm positive I would have been attracted to you. Like I am now. And there's no way you were less cute back then."

"Oh-ho... nice save, Sheriff lady!"

"Wasn't a save, Belle. Just the honest to goodness truth," Erica said and leaned in to offer her sweetheart a loving kiss to prove that her words were true, each and every one of them.

Outside the Microbus, a slightly overweight figure in a hunting vest, a ZZ Top t-shirt, faded blue jeans and a battered leather cowboy hat peeked in through the windows that were on the verge of misting up due to the amount of kissing that took place.
"Awwww"-ing, the man tapped a knuckle against the driver's side window a couple of times to get their attention.

Erica cracked open an eyelid and found herself being gawked at by a man who was the proud owner of a white, walrus-like mustache. "Oh!" she groaned into Belle's mouth before she pulled back from her sweet lips. "I know that 'stache."

Wiggling free of her lover, Belle turned around and flashed Oswald 'the Walrus' Jones - the fiddler of the dearly departed Butterflies - a pair of big, ol' thumbs-up.

The Walrus mirrored the gesture and reached for the door handle. "Hi, Belle. Hello there, Sheriff, Ma'am," he said and tipped his cowboy hat.

"Hi, Walrus," Erica said and reached across Belle to put out her hand. "I'm on vacation so I'm just Erica, okay?"

"Sure thing," the Walrus said and shook Erica's hand. "Leaf's inside, she's warming up as we speak. Pack's here too, Belle. Just a heads-up."

At that, Belle furrowed her brow and looked intently at her old friend. "Uh... thanks."

"Yeah," the Walrus said and scratched his mustache. "Old habits are hard to break, ya know. When the music's playing, can anyone of us really stay away?"

Belle chuckled and shook her head slowly. That statement summed up her entire life in eleven easy words. "Naw, I guess we can't. So... all you muscle-bound creatures, you get to have all the fun hauling the boxes inside while I get the guitars. Okie-dokie?"

"Sure thing, Belle," the Walrus said and walked around the Microbus to get to the center door on the other side.

Erica said much the same thing, only she did it with a kiss.

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The community center was a white, square-angled, one-and-a-half storey concrete building that had been erected in two weeks on the site of a former supermarket when the city council had been made aware by a national report that they were at the wrong end of the list when it came to being in touch with their voters.

The central part of the building was a hallway held mostly in white from where the users had access to several offices, halls and auditoriums. The plenum hall where the concert was to take place was down at the far end of the central hallway, and Belle duly dragged her three guitars down there.
It was quite literally impossible for her to miss because of the way the hallway was created; all she had to do to get there was to walk straight ahead.

Along the way, she said 'hi', 'wassup', and 'how's it shaking?' to several of the young people from the high school's glee club, but most replied with a very polite 'good afternoon, Miss Cosmick' to treat the elderly lady with the proper respect. When a young man finally returned her greeting with a 'yo wassup, dude,' she flashed him a broad grin.

Inside the plenum hall, most of the stage had already been built, but a crew of four was putting the finishing touches on it, including adding two staggered benches behind the musicians for the glee club singers to stand on. In front of the stage, twelve rows of seating had been put up with each row made up of twenty plastic chairs that didn't look all that comfortable.

Putting down the guitars against the edge of the stage, Belle took off her hat and her jacket - revealing her classic No More Death Stop The War T-shirt and the full extent of her faded, fashionably torn jeans - while she studied the space available for her to do her stuff in.

All things considered, it wasn't too bad, but the sound-dampening material built into the walls and the ceiling made her furrow her brow.

There were large windows on three of the plenum hall's four walls and even a skylight in the ceiling one-and-a-half storeys up, but she knew from watching a foreign movie with Leaf - under the influence of an illegal substance to make the movie more digestible - that the black-out curtains were highly effective.

She grunted loudly when she spotted the uneven surface of the boards making up the stage. "Naw, they gotta fix that. I'm not breaking my hip tripping over any of those, thankyouverymuch," she mumbled as she began to look around for Gerald Thackeray or the foreman.

A fast, insistent tambourine heralded the arrival of Autumn Leaf. The thin woman came gliding into the plenum hall from a door on the wall opposite the stage, shaking and banging away on her instrument. The far-out look on her face proved that she had given herself a little pick-me-up before she had started, but she was still able to crank out a hot groove on the small instrument.

Still looking for someone in charge. Belle waved at Erica and the Walrus who put down the boxes of sheet music near the stage. "That's just fine, just put 'em right there, guys... thanks. Hey, Walrus, where's Mr. Thackeray?"

"In his office, I imagine. Why?"

"Cos the stage is all fucked up. It's uneven."

"Okay. Uh, Belle, Pack just asked for you. He's back in the coffee room," the Walrus said and pointed over his shoulder down the hallway they had just gone through. "You should go talk to him. Me and Erica will take care of the uneven surface, no worries."
Belle licked her lips and looked to Erica for support. When she got a warm, supportive smile in return, she nodded and shuffled off down to the coffee room.

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Leaning against the doorjamb, Belle studied her old friend who was sitting at a table casually reading the Coulson Chronicle. Packard Summer's slouchy appearance and furrowed face was no different from when she had seen him last, but he seemed older and more haggard than she remembered - some of it was caused by a Band-Aid on his left cheekbone and his left eye being black and blue.

"Hi, Pack," Belle said and walked into the coffee room.

Packard quickly put away the newspaper and looked up at the folk singer. "Hi, Belle. You look great, dude."

"Thanks. You look like shit. What the hell happened to your eye?"

"I fell, dude," Packard said with a shrug.

"In a haze?"

"What else, dude? So... I heard from the Walrus that she's here?" he said, giving Belle a defiant glare.

Belle came to an abrupt halt six feet away from the man she had considered a friend for nearly four decades. She chewed on one cheek, then the other while she pondered how to make a comeback to that particular comment without swearing in Packard's face.

It wasn't that she didn't understand where his attitude against the police came from: in their younger years, all four of them had been stereotypical hippies with long hair, wild clothes and a countercultural lifestyle that authorities in general and the police in particular hadn't been too fond of. The result had been frequent harassment, unfounded arrests and even beatings. They had all experienced it, they had all sung the billy club blues, but Packard was the only one who couldn't move on from it.

"Depends, Pack," Belle said and moved further into the coffee room. "Who's this 'she' you're talkin' about?"

"You know feckin' well who I'm talkin' about, dude. The tall, Native American fuzz from that little piece of shit town we broke down in, dude."

"Her name is Erica, Pack," Belle said in a voice that was so cold it was practically frosty.

"She's the fuzz. I don't give a feck about her name, dude."
"Pack..." Belle said and rubbed her mouth to give herself a few more seconds before she would go ballistic. "If all you can do is bitch and moan, why the fuck did you come?"

"'Cos I wanted to play with the Walrus and Leaf... and you."

Putting her hands on her hips, Belle nodded but made sure not to look in Pack's direction. "Huh. Okay. You can play. You can play at the rehearsals and at the concert... if you fuckin' well behave yourself and treat Erica with the respect she deserves. D'ya get what I'm sayin', Pack? Don't piss on her. One fucked-up comment out of you and you're history... dude."

"I don't want nothin' to do with her so you got a feckin' deal, dude," Packard said and put out his hand, but Belle was already gone.

In the hallway, Belle's light-headedness returned with a vengeance and she lost a step while it was at its worst. Groaning into her hands, she had to wait for it to recede before she could go on. "Holy crap, I'm on the fast track to the Pearly Gates here... what the hell is wrong with me?" she mumbled as she shuffled back into the plenum hall. "I can't let Erica know... she'll skin me alive for going ahead with this damn concert..."

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Standing at the stage after fixing the uneven boards by giving them a few, well-placed whacks with a borrowed hammer, Erica could see at once that something had happened to Belle in the short two minutes she had been out of the plenum hall. The older woman's complexion was once again gray with a few red blotches, and she looked a mere shadow of herself.

She quickly excused herself from the conversation she had with the Walrus and strode across the floor to intercept the woman she loved. "Hey... hey, Belle... wait up. What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's Brother Sunshine in there... Packard," Belle said and rubbed her face again. "He's being a dick."

"About me?"

"Yeah."

"Listen, if you feel my presence is rocking the boat, I can do something else--"

"No!"

"--while you rehearse."

Belle scrunched up her face and bit hard down on her lips. After a few seconds, she took a deep breath and thrust an index finger into Erica's Cape Whitnell Sheriff's Office sweatshirt. "Erica... no. If anyone here should leave, it's Pack. You listen to me now, I want you here. Okay? None of this will ever happen if you're not here. And that's final."
"All right," Erica said and caressed Belle's cheek.

Leaning into the touch, Belle reached out and pulled Erica in for a hug. The two women gave each other a little crush before pulling back. "Congratulations, Miss Wayne, you're now a Butterfly. Grab a spare tambourine and follow my lead. I'm gonna blow off some steam with an oldie... and it's gonna be a wild one."

"Go for it, Daisy-Belle," Erica said with a snicker. She had just time to dive down and steal a kiss before Belle stomped over to the stage and called Leaf and the Walrus up with her.

Climbing the foot-tall stage, Belle put her arms in the air to get everyone's attention. "All right, ev'rybody! This is how we did it back in the old days. Leaf, Walrus, are ya ready?"

"Ready, Belle. Which one are we doing?" the Walrus said and held his fiddle ready under his chin. Leaf just nodded imperceptibly while staring at a point on the far wall; she was still too busy chasing the rainbows in her mind to answer.

"Proud Mary and then Hippy Hippy Shake. Gotta get the old blood pumpin'."

"You got it," the Walrus said and went to work on his fiddle.

Taking a deep breath, Belle hollered: "Wham-bam-alakazam, this is the sound of the sixties, kids!" and jumped right into a spirited performance of the old superhits where she shook, shimmied and clapped to the beat while she belted out the lyrics with her strong, throaty pipes that made more than a few of the singers from the glee club do a double-take or stare at her with wide, disbelieving eyes.

The singing made Packard come out of the coffee room and take his congas. On his way to the stage, he gave Erica a very wide berth.

Erica noticed but she didn't care a bit. She had her own tambourine going to the beat, but she found it excessively difficult to keep up with the veteran performers who were doing what they did best. After a long line of flubbed cues, she stopped pretending she knew what she was doing and settled for clapping along to the catchy performance.

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"Wa-hhey, what can I say! How's that for a rehearsal, baby doll?" Belle said, positively glowing from the exertion. Breathing heavily, she wiped her damp brow with the back of her hand while she looked around for something to drink.

Erica didn't care about the perspiration and pulled Belle in for a little hug. "Just fantastic, love. Much better than my feeble attempts with the tambourine..." she said, helping Belle sweep some of her damp hair behind her ears.

"Mmmm. Yeah, I saw that, you know."
"Oh, you did?"

"I saw that," Belle echoed with a broad grin on her face. "You may need a lesson or two before you're ready to go up on the stage with us adults."

Snickering, Erica pulled Belle out of the way of the glee club who had taken some of the sheet music and were assembling at the stage for their own rehearsal. "Oh, you think so? Are you going to tutor me?"

"You know, that's not a bad idea, hon. Of course, you may wonder about my hands-on teaching techniques, but I can assure you that we are indeed supposed to be naked."

"Pffff!" Erica said and quickly slapped a kiss onto Belle's forehead.

"Oh, Miss Cosmick?" a male voice said behind them.

Turning around, Erica and Belle soon spotted Gerald Thackeray who was trying to pick his way through the throng of high school students. It was tough going, but the administrator eventually managed to get to them.

In his late fifties, Gerald was fairly tall, balding and wearing a uniform of sorts, namely gray polyester pants and a striped, short-sleeved shirt with no less than two ball point pens stuck into the breast pocket. "Miss Cosmick, that was an excellent rehearsal. What's your verdict?" he said, putting out his hand so the two women could shake it.

After shaking the administrator's hand, Belle wiped a few further beads of sweat off her brow. "Well, Mr. Thackeray, the acoustics suck, quite frankly. It's the sound-dampening panels, ya know. They eat the voices like a pack of leaping lizards. Nothing gets reflected back at us... it's just gone. Microphones and amplifiers would only make it worse so it's good we didn't borrow any of those."

"There isn't much we can do about that, I'm afraid, Miss Cosmick. Uh, hello, I'm Gerald Thackeray," Gerald said while he shook Erica's hand.

"Erica Wayne, Mr. Thackeray. I'm with Belle here," Erica said and offered the man a strong handshake.

Belle chuckled at the look on Gerald's face when he experienced just how hard the tall woman's grip was. Clearing her throat to let Erica know that she should take it easy with the fellow, she turned back to the administrator and offered him a tired smile. "Yeah. Well, other than that, it was okay. Erica, do you have any observations from where you were standing?"

"No," Erica said and discreetly wiped the palm of her hand that had turned quite clammy from Gerald Thackeray's limp handshake. "Everything was pretty much okay. All rows will be able to hear the music, that's for sure."
"Right. Good," Gerald said and flexed his fist a couple of times as a precautionary measure so he could rule out going to the emergency room to look for the missing bones in his hand. "Let's see what the glee club can do. From what their teachers have told me, they're the best class at the high school for several years. Oh, here they are now. Please excuse me, Miss Cosmick. Miss Wayne."

"You're excused. Peace, dude," Belle said and held up her fingers in the age-old V sign. "Holy shit, ain't there anywhere a dry old bird can get something to drink around here? I'm telling you, I'm turning to dust on the inside, man!"

Looking at each other, both Erica and Belle said, "The coffee room."

They had barely turned around when Leaf began to sing one of her crystal clear harmonies up on the stage. It wasn't difficult to see the thin woman was still floating somewhere between Jupiter and Saturn, but her singing was sublime. Before long, the glee club singers reached their cue and joined in.

"Man... Leaf's hitting the bullseye today. Ain't she awesome, hon?" Belle said and hooked her arm inside Erica's.

"She sure is."

"Yeah. If I ever get seriously ill, I hope I can fight back with the same dignity Leaf showed last year. She really fought that fuckin' cancer like a lioness. And she whipped its ass but good. Ah, let's not dwell on that now. I really need a soda pop... c'mon, the coffee room beckons."

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**CHAPTER 4**

The fading, late afternoon light streamed in through the master bedroom window in Belle's hacienda and cast a golden hue onto the bed where a single, if rather oblong, lump was half-hidden under the quilt.

"Now that's what I call a power nap," Belle said and took a deep, cleansing breath. She tried to put her arms behind her head but her shoulders protested too much and she had to lower them again. Chuckling huskily, she looked around the bedroom; at the lengthening shadows, at the many books and mementos she had on the shelves, and at the lump under the quilt that seemed to extend several feet beyond the point where her legs ended. "Mmmm-yeah. Hon, you can come up for air now," she said, peeking in under the edge of the quilt.

The lump soon started moving upwards and it wasn't long before Erica's dark, damp hair and flushed face appeared from somewhere far below. Picking a hair from her mouth, she stretched up the final bit and claimed Belle's lips in a heated kiss.
Belle let out a contented sigh as she snuggled down next to Erica, marveling at tasting herself on her younger lover's lips. "Ahhhh... the five S'es. Singing, a steam shower and sizzling sex. Can an old bird ask for more than that? No she fuckin' well can't is the right answer!"

"Only glad to help, Miss Cosmick," Erica said and dove down to nibble at the folk singer's earlobes.

"Man, I'm so glad I finally grew up and asked my doc for those pills," Belle said and caressed the acres of naked, pale ochre skin under her fingertips. "I mean... it was the most awkward thing I've ever done in my entire life... which says a lot... but that very life would have been so much less without it."

"Most awkward thing? Really?"

"Hell yeah," Belle said and cocked her head so she could look Erica in the eye. "It's still taboo that women of a certain age... damn, I hate that expression... have sex. We ain't supposed to, ya know. Once we're over the menopause, we're supposed to be good little grandmommas and make needlepoint from dawn to dusk. God forbid we ever play with ourselves, and we can never, ever be allowed to have sex with a hot momma like you again. Ever!"

"I guess," Erica said and let her tongue roll around in the hollow of Belle's throat much to the folk singer's vocal amusement. "I think we're seeing a change now, though. The world's catching up to us."

"Weeeellll, maybe. But can you imagine the uproar if I, or a gal in her seventies... or eighties for that matter, spoke freely about having had a great, two-hour fuck'n'roll the night before? I mean-

"Jesus, Belle!" Erica spluttered and let out a loud belly laugh. Still laughing, she dove down to bury her face in the crook of Belle's neck.

Belle grinned broadly as she held the laughing Sheriff tight. Wrapping her arms around the ochre torso, she gave the taller, sturdier woman a good squeeze. "See what I mean? Huh? Even you're affected. And we just did it!"

"I know, I know... guilty as charged, your honor," Erica said and rolled over onto her left side. With her right hand, she began to draw patterns on the aged skin between and under Belle's breasts, knowing it had always been the most sensitive zone on her body. Her fingers roamed further and further towards the soft mounds, circling them and giving them just enough attention to keep things going.

For Belle, the sensations made her breath hitch and her skin catch fire. A new wave of lust rolled through her even though the afterglow of her last orgasm had barely left her. Gasping with pleasure, she took Erica's fingers and guided them over to where she needed her touch the most, her nipples that already stood at perfect attention.
An hour later, Erica and Belle were both freshly scrubbed and dressed for the occasion of calling for food from the local vegetarian restaurant. Both dressed casually in sweatshirts and jogging pants, they were lounging in each other's arms on one of the couches in the living room. Belle was wearing Erica's Cape Whitnell Sheriff's Office sweatshirt and it didn't matter to her the sleeves were so long she couldn't even see her hands.

Erica was busy reading the three-wing brochure from d'Ambrosio's Restaurant, but the look on her face proved that she had difficulty in picturing the exotic dishes the place had to offer. "Daisy-Belle Cosmick, I'm gonna put my life and good health in your hands. I need you to order for me 'cos I have no clue in the world what most of this stuff is..."

"Oh Lawrd," Belle sang, mangling the old Janis Joplin hit, "won't you buy me a flippin' clue..."

"Haw, haw, missy... I'm new to this vegetarian game," Erica said and gave her lover a little crush from behind. "Basmati, aubergine, parsnip, quinoa, cous-cous... sounds like something you could get busted for in Mississippi. What the hell are all those things?"

"Why, they're just regular food things, kiddo. I know it's not up to your usual standard of an Omaha Ohmigod or an Arizona Artery-Clogger or even a Boise Blewymind with a gallon of barbecue sauce, but I'm telling you they're yummy," Belle said and briefly turned around to stick out her tongue. Mission accomplished, she turned back around and snuggled down in the taller woman's warm and soft grip.

"Would that be a New York Skyscraper... or a Chicago Waterfront with baked potatoes and coleslaw?"

"Yeah, it would. Nyah-nyah."

Chuckling, Erica reached down and pulled Belle even closer. The two women rocked back and forth for a few seconds before Erica leaned in to kiss the side of the older woman's neck. "I could always have a Beef Celery...?"

"Or a meatless spring roll? Yuck, that was neither spring nor roll. I don't know where the hell they had found that thing... or which decade it came from," Belle said and pretended to shiver. "Nah, tell you what. I'll find something I just know you'll love. It's gonna be a secret until it gets here. Okie-dokie?"

"Okay. I trust you completely."

Grunting, Belle turned around to see if Erica was jesting. When it was clear she wasn't, the heartfelt statement was rewarded with a long kiss that almost took their minds off dinner.

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It didn't take long for the delivery boy to drop by with their dinner, and while Belle was busy finding something in the den, Erica distributed the Styrofoam boxes, their Miller Lites, the eating utensils, the napkins and finally the plates on the coffee table by the couches. "It's all here, Belle!" she said loudly to be heard over the occasional grunting that came from the den. "Uh... d'ya need a hand?"

"Naw, I got it," Belle said and appeared through the curtain of beads pushing a strange-looking wooden box on wheels.

Zipping the adhesive tape off the first Styrofoam box, Erica looked up and had to do a double-take. "What in the world is that thing?"

"This, kiddo, is a portable record player," Belle said and stood in front of the wooden box like a young starlet trying to sell the latest Chrysler. "Yes, a genuine turntable. Three speeds, seventy-eight, forty-five and thirty-three and a third revolutions per minute. Built-in speakers, built-in amplifier... all analog, of course. Not built-in power supply so I just have to plug this here power cord into the socket."

Pulling out the cord from a coil on the back of the box, Belle quickly bent down and plugged it into the socket next to the portal to the den. As she got up, she nearly lost her balance and had to put her hands on the wall so she wouldn't fall down. The familiar light-headedness swept over her for a few moments, and while it wasn't as strong as the earlier attacks, it still left her stunned and with a growing sense of anxiousness.

Once it had receded, she peeked over her shoulder to see if Erica had noticed, but the Sheriff was too busy sniffing at the various boxes. "Okay... that's the power taken care of. Now, kiddo, may I have your attention, please," Belle said and shuffled back to the record player.

"Oh, you have it."

"Good. Now, this..." she said and opened the two protective wings on the portable player. Behind the wooden doors, a whole row of albums came into light, sorted in chronological rather than alphabetical order.

Leaning down, she wanted to take out an album, but she did it slowly out of fear of triggering another attack. She hid it by pretending she didn't know which one to take. "... this is an album. Yes, a vinyl album. Not a compact disc. A genuine vinyl album. It's got a deep, rich sound that I'm sure you'll enjoy."

"Boy, you're silly tonight, Belle," Erica said with a laugh. "I was a teenager in the late eighties and early nineties, I know what a vinyl album is. I just never got that many 'cos the CD became so popular... I concentrated on the silver discs instead. I have three drawers full of them, you saw that when you visited me."

"Yeah... I'll bet your first vinyl was Tiffany?"
"It was Rubber Duckie with Ernie from Sesame Street, ac-chew-ly. And I got it for my fourth birthday as a second-hand single," Erica said and stuck out her tongue.

"Awwww, I love Rubber Duckie... it's so great to spazz out to in an acid haze. Well this, kiddo," Belle said and put the album she had found on the turntable, "is the real deal. Fleetwood Mac's white album from 1975. Yeah, baby. Creedence Clearwater Revival, Kris Kristofferson, early Bruce Springsteen, Janis Joplin, Joan Baez, Lynyrd Skynyrd, you name it, I got it. And tonight, we're gonna listen to some of the masters of folk and rock."

Turning back around, Belle put the needle on the record and waited for the first track to start. Once the raw, authentic vocals of Lindsey Buckingham filled the living room singing about his Monday Morning, Belle adjusted the volume and the balance and shuffled over to their dinner.

"Are they originals... I mean, are they vintage albums?" Erica said while she dug into one of the Styrofoam boxes and transferred a load of something deliciously smelling but slightly odd-looking to her plate.

"I'm sure they were for someone... I bought 'em on eBay about five years ago. Now *that* was a funny look you just gave me there, kiddo," Belle said with a chuckle as she unzipped the adhesive tape from one of her own boxes.

Erica had indeed shot the folk singer a puzzled look, but she soon snapped out of it and dug her fork into the food. "Sorry... that was the last thing I had expected you to say, 's all."

"Yeah, but don't forget we practically lived out of the Microbus for the first several years we toured. We had no place for records or anything like that. How do you like your stuffed portobello mushrooms with sesame seeds and feta cheese?"

"Well..." - sniff, sniff - "it smells pretty good. I'll give it a try. If I keel over, you can keep my sweatshirt," Erica said and put the first forkful into her mouth. After chewing, swallowing and evaluating the taste, she lit up in a smile. "Hey... it's not that bad!"

"Told you you'd like it!"

"What's yours like?"

"Uh... it's great but it's slightly more advanced than yours," Belle said and looked down at her baked beetroot in spicy herbal sauce.

"May I try?" Erica said, holding her fork ready.

"Oh, sure. But, uh... you know. You better have your beer on stand by."

"Good thinking," Erica said and cracked open her can of Miller Lite. Once her backup plan was in place, she dug into Belle's food and scooped up a forkful. She chewed on it for a few seconds; then for a few seconds more, then for a full ten seconds before finally gulping it down. At once,
she reached for the beer to chase it away with a golden, sparkly shower. "Blergh... and that's supposed to be better than a Texas Badlands steak and fries drowned in barbecue sauce...?" she said while she burped discreetly into her napkin.

"Whoa, dude, are you questioning my culinary tastes? You better believe this is better!" Belle said and took a forkful that she chewed on with great relish.

"Huh. I'm not sure I'm very good at this vegetarian game..."

Belle merely chuckled and let Stevie Nicks and the boys take care of the entertainment.

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After dinner, they quickly did the dishes and sorted the recyclable and non-recyclable waste into the appropriate trash cans before going back into the living room to kiss and cuddle.

Before they could make it to the couches, Belle got a new idea and pulled Erica over to the den.
"Baby, this morning, you said you loved to listen to me tell anecdotes and stuff from the old days...?" she said as they dove through the curtain of beads.

"Yeah, I do."

"Well... how about turning this into an evening of nostalgia?" Belle said and took Erica's hands in her own.

"Oh, I'd love that!"

"And you're not just saying-"

"Hell, no, Belle! It would be a perfect way to end a pretty good day."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

The two women swung their arms back and forth for a few seconds before the urge to connect became too strong for them to ignore. Grinning, Erica leaned down to claim Belle's lips in a sweet, little kiss.

"Yeah," Belle said and returned the favor. "I'm just gonna fix us some new music and then I'm gonna show you something I have never shown anyone else... well, apart from the people who are in 'em, of course. My old scrapbooks."

"Oh wow, I'd love to see those, Belle," Erica said and nodded enthusiastically.

"I knew you would. I was thinking we could reminisce about the good and the bad old days?"
"Yeah, but my stories aren't always fun and uplifting..." Erica said with a half-shrug.

"The good and the bad, hon. That's what a relationship is all about." With a parting kiss, Belle left the den and went out to the portable record player. A short minute later, the crisp tones of Kris Kristofferson's debut album filled the hacienda.

Slipping back inside the den, Belle smiled at Erica who was lounging on the bamboo couch and looking quite fine indeed. Once she had taken the keys from a drawer in the desk, she went down to the other end of the den and got down on her aching knees to unlock and open a roll-front cabinet. She quickly found the items in question, clambered to her feet and shuffled back to the couch.

"Here they are. This is my life from 1966 to 1978," she said and put down seven dusty tomes on the corner of the desk. The book on top was labeled '1978-' but she knew half the pages were empty.

When Stephanie Lorenz had died, so had Belle's creativity. After that fateful morning in the hospital where she had found an empty bed instead of the woman she loved, she had been unable to write songs or poetry, much less update her diary-like scrapbooks.

It had taken her several years to overcome the depression that had threatened to drown her, but when she had, the scrapbooks were so out of date it was useless to go back to them.

Fortunately, her ability to write songs had returned, and one of the first she had been able to commit to paper was the song she always used to close the concerts she had done with the Butterflies - 'Stephanie.'

She suddenly realized she was long gone and began to rearrange the books so they could start at the beginning. "Sorry for tripping, dude. So, anyway, this is 1966. You're about to meet a very, very innocent fifteen year old who went by the name of Valerie Clark."

"That's such a pretty name," Erica said and moved to the side to make room for Belle next to her on the couch. "Why did you change it?"

"'Cos Daisy-Belle Cosmick was cool, hip and with-it, dontcha-know!"

"If anyone called you Valerie today, would you react?"

"Eh... I doubt it. Okay," Belle said and opened the 1966-1967 scrapbook. "Ta-da!" she continued, pointing at the picture on the first page of the book, a black-and-white newspaper clipping showing an inherently cute young woman with sensible shoes, bobby socks, a sensible dress, an acoustic guitar in front of her, and her long hair arranged in a neat, traditional hairdo.

"Wow... you were so cute," Erica breathed as she took in the picture. She let the tip of her index finger trail down the face of the broadly smiling Valerie Clark, and then reached up to trail the
same finger down Daisy-Belle Cosmick's aged cheek that still bore the same dimples. "Yup, that's you, all right."

"Hey, did you hit the loco weed while I was gone? You're such a goofball!"

"It's just 'cos I love ya..."

"Awww!"

"What kind of music did you sing then?"

"Gospel."

"What?!

"I'm not shitting you, Sheriff lady!" Belle said and shook her head. "I started out singing gospel... well, a lily white version of it, anyway. I'm A Poor Wayfaring Stranger, Shall We Gather At The River, I Wonder As I Wander... I did them all. It's a fantastic way to train your vocal cords. I started singing when I was nine or ten. Tho' you can't see it from my height, I went into puberty kinda early and my voice was pretty much the first thing that matured. Even before my titties... as you can see," Belle continued and looked down at her chest.

"Listen, I like what I see just fine, Belle," Erica said and slapped the singer's thigh.

"Thanks. So, moving on... the first few clippings are of church concerts and stuff. The regular stuff, y'know. Nothing special."

Erica flipped a few pages and zoomed in on another picture of the young Valerie Clark. "Oh, the skirts are getting shorter, huh?"

"Yup," Belle said and crinkled her nose in a grin. Flipping the pages, she went past a New Year's party from 1966 and her birthday in 1967 - where she was dancing with a male date who was wearing a two-piece tuxedo - until she reached a faded color photo of herself with a ribbon of daisies in her hair.

She was still wearing a dress, but the design and coloring were pointing to the future instead of the highly conformative past like the older ones. "Okay, this is the spring of 1967. The Summer of Love was almost upon us. Within six months of this photo being taken, I had spaced out on LSD, I had smoked enough weed to choke a bull, I had sung a thousand songs on grassy knolls with people I didn't even know, barefoot, in loose robes... or no robes at all... and wearing pearls and hippie beads in my hair..."

Erica guffawed at the description and squinted so hard at Belle that the singer had to squint back just because. "Boy, you really were a hippie, weren't you?"
"Whaddaya mean 'were'? Once a hippie, always a hippie!" Belle said and nudged Erica in the side with predictable results - a snicker.

"What was it like, Belle? I mean, the whole experience of the Summer of Love and all those things... what was it actually like to be right in the middle of it?"

"Well, it was..." Belle said, but came to a stop when she couldn't find the right words to put on the many pretty pictures she had in her mind. "I guess you could call it a true revolution, Erica. You gotta remember, we came from a world where everything was predetermined. How we were supposed to look and behave, what kind of jobs and careers we should have, the kind of husbands and how many children we women should have... it was a straitjacket in every sense of the word. Of course, I'm not a guru or anything so I don't know what triggered the change, but one day... one glorious day, we kids suddenly realized that we had the power to say fuck off to the old world and make our own. And we did. To be in it was a breath of fresh air, hon. We could do what we wanted, fuck who we wanted, smoke what we wanted... go where we wanted. It's so hard to explain 'cos so much of it is still in place today."

"It must have been a crazy world, though... to be honest, I don't know if I would have fit in back then. Skin color aside."

"Yeah, but," Belle said and gave Erica a little squeeze, "the black community, us gays and the Native Americans were all treated like the stinkiest shit on your shoe back then, Erica."

"Oh, I know, but still... I don't think... well, I... I'm not sure I would have wanted to revolutionize everything."

"Love... you would never have had that chance. You would have been stuck on the reservation, dirt poor and unemployed, with four kids next to you and one in the oven..."

Erica looked at Belle and saw genuine concern in the old, green eyes. Smiling wistfully, she leaned in and placed a little kiss on her partner's forehead. "Yeah... I know. I guess we owe your generation a lot, huh?"

"Yeah... it really was a revolution," Belle said and decided to find a funny tale to offset the somber mood. "Huh, I remember one time where I was dancing to an imaginary beat at a beach party or something. Topless, you know... that was how we did it back then. Anyway, a bunch of equally topless girls came up to me and began to finger-paint my stomach and my chest. They painted little sunflowers around my titties, a tree down my cleavage and a meadow across my stomach. It was whacked-out but it was fun."

"Oh, I can definitely see how it would be!"

"Yup. They were attractive so I guess I got a little thing going from their fingers on my body, and that made my nipples stand out. The girls just giggled and showed me theirs were, too. Can you imagine what would happen today, Erica? Man, the Prude Po-leese would be there before the first glob of paint had touched my body."
Belle's voice trailed off as she fell into a zone where she remembered the many crazy things that had happened to her in those days - the people she had met, the friends she had made and lost, the drugs she had tried, and the trouble she and her like-minded had had with the riot police. The last thought made her look up and zoom in on Erica's profile. *Wouldn't it have been crazy if we had actually met back then? Of course, it was eight years before Erica was born, but still...'*

Sensing her lover's thoughts, Erica turned to lock eyes with the older woman. "You know," she said thoughtfully, "I'm glad we met now and not back then. We wouldn't have been allowed to be together, would we? Even beyond the color thing... a hippie and the fuzz? Unthinkable."

"Dude, you... you reached into my brain and read my thoughts! Spooky!" Belle said and snuggled up to Erica's shoulder. "So, yeah, that was my humble beginning. Do you want to keep on looking? The next one is 1968-1969..."

"Of course!"

Before Belle could make it over to the desk to swap the scrapbooks, her iPhone started ringing. "It's Leaf," she said from looking at the display. She quickly clicked on the button and put the phone to her ear. "Wassup, girl? ... Yeah, Erica's here ... you wanna talk to her? About what? ... The what? ... Okay ... no, I can't say I've ever heard of it ... yeah, I'm sure it's fascinating, Leaf ... yeah, like I said, Erica's right here ... yeah ... okay, here she- hold it, hold it, hold it, you gotta wait for her to come on before you can speak to her ... yeah."

Handing the phone to Erica, Belle offered the Sheriff a cheesy grin. "She's out there, somewhere. But she really wants to talk to you."

"Uh... okay," Erica said and took the phone. "Hi, Leaf, it's Erica."

'Hi! Are you familiar with the unsanity theory?'

"The- the what? Don't you mean insanity?"

'No, no! The unsanity theory. I mean, you're a circle, right?'

"I am? Uh... right."

'Yeah, and at one end of your circle, you have regular sanity, right? Then going halfway around your circle, you go from sanity to insanity, right?'

"Yeah...?"

'And go past insanity and almost back to sanity and what do you find?'

"I don't know... uh, unsanity?"
'Gawd yes! Yes! Yes! I knew you would know about it... it's, like, the most mind-expanding thing ever, don't you think?'

"Uh... well, it's certainly fascinating."

'Yes... that's where they are!'

"They?"

'The doors... the doors! The doors to the subconscious, you know? The place where you can expand your mind endlessly... where you can grasp the entire world and the smallest atom. Where you can be a purple Roy or a golden Jane!'

"I guess... can't say I've ever tried to be a golden Jane... much less a purple Roy."

At that, Belle scrunched up her face and wondered what in the world the conversation had turned to.

'But they're listening! They're listening and they don't want us to go in there because it may make us super-intelligent which would take us out of their control, right? They can't listen to what's inside my mind! We can explore outer space and the inner space and the deep sea space without leaving our minds! Oh, it was so beautiful to talk to someone who knew about it. Oh, I love you so much, Belle.'

"No, it's Eri-"

'Give Erica a nice, wet kiss from me, okay? Goodbye and see you in heaven.'

"Uh... see you in heaven, Leaf."

Closing the connection, Erica stared wide-eyed at the telephone before handing it back to Belle. "Now that was... hmmm... unusual. Or mind-blowing. One of the two, anyway."

"What the hell is unsanity?" Belle said and put the phone back on the desk.

"I was hoping you could tell me?"

"I ain't got a flippin' clue what that is! Ah, here's 1968-1969..." she continued and snuggled up next to Erica with the next scrapbook. "So... by then, I had enrolled in a college down in San Fran. I didn't learn much, but that was my own fault. Too busy with the chillum. There were riots on a weekly basis and we rebels and flower children thought it was the end of the world when the riot cops came in and cleaned up. Of course, for some, it was..."

"Kent State," Erica said as a statement of fact.
"Yeah. We never got it quite that bad, of course, but we weren't far behind. Look at this one from the summer of '69." Belle flipped the page in the scrapbook to show an article cut from the front page of a San Francisco newspaper: 'Campus protest turns violent; four teenagers hospitalized with various injuries.' "Various injuries was the polite way of saying that a young man had been permanently brain-damaged from being hit over the head four or five times with a riot club. For no good reason at all."

"I'm sorry to hear that..."

"I know you are. That's what makes you different from the cops who were around back then, Erica. They didn't hesitate dishing out the pain just for kicks."

Erica grunted and pulled Belle closer. "Well, they were just regular Joes, too, honey. They were doing a job so they could put food on the table for their families."

"Mmmm. I sort of get that now... sort of... but it wasn't the impression we got back then, lemme tell you. Some of them just liked to kick hippie ass. I present you with exhibit A," Belle said and flipped the page again to show another newspaper clipping of a very familiar young woman on her stomach on the campus lawn. Young Valerie had an officer from the riot police halfway on top of her, kneeing her in the back while forcing her arms behind her to slap on the handcuffs. It was clear to see from Valerie's pained expression that the photographer had caught her in the middle of a scream.

"Shit," Erica said and rubbed her nose.

"A second later, the photographer had been thumped to the ground, too, but he saved his camera and got the fuck out of there. When this photo hit the front page, holy shit, my parents went ballistic. This was the newspaper they read and they hadn't expected to see their sweet little daughter grace the cover quite like that, lemme tell you."

"I can imagine. That photo gives me the chills... believe it or not, I have actually handcuffed a young black woman in an, uh... a similar situation some years ago."

"Really?" Belle said in a voice that had grown just the tiniest bit chilly.

"At the Summer Rap Wars in... huh. 2004, I think it was. We were there on riot duty. A rap group was performing on the stage when another group they had a row with crashed their show. All hell broke loose in a matter of seconds... I mean it was a huge, uncontrollable brawl with guns, knives, modified screwdrivers, brass knuckles and all sorts of crap. We were ordered in to clean up the mess."

"Oh... okay. That's different. We had that back then as well. I'm sure you've heard about the murder at the concert at Altamont Speedway? That was the end of the flower child culture, in my opinion. I was supposed to have been there... glad I wasn't," Belle said and closed the scrapbook. "Eh. My arrest doesn't really matter now, anyway. It's so long ago it's almost turned into a vague
dream. Or a nightmare, depending... but anyway, I hope you understand why Packard and the others were so hostile towards you to begin with."

"Oh, I do. I certainly do," Erica said and leaned in to offer Belle a consolatory kiss on the cheek.

Smiling, Belle rose from the couch and went over to the stack of scrapbooks. She briefly tapped a finger on the dusty tomes, thinking about the contents of the next volume. Instead of taking it, she decided to do something else instead. With the Kris Kristofferson album finishing on the record player, it was a good time to take her guitar and create a little musical magic of her own.

"Hon," she said and moved across the den to take her beloved acoustic guitar. "The next book is very important to me, but I feel like jamming a little first. With your help, we gave the concert work a real kick in the nuts today, but there's a shitload of stuff left for us to do. I know I'll go flip-floppin' freakazoid over it sooner or later, so... uh... I wanna serenade you before I lose my mind completely. Okay?"

"I've never been serenaded in my life. Go for it, Belle," Erica said and swung her legs up into the couch.

Belle nodded and moved out into the center of the floor. "All-righty," she said and put her guitar over her shoulder. At first, she just performed a few random chords to warm up, but she was soon ready to sing her heart out.

With a low, chanting voice, Belle hummed along to the crisp tones that came from her guitar. Instead of singing in her traditional raw and strong manner, her voice was heartfelt and quiet, even subdued. She sang of a woman who had been lost until she had been given a second chance at love; of a woman who had thought she had gone past the point where she could even love at all, until a tall, dark stranger with a beautiful soul and an open mind unlocked her heart; and finally of a woman who would do anything in her powers - and even beyond - to hang onto her newfound love.

A series of uplifting chords ended the song, accompanied once again by Belle's chant-like humming. As the song came to its conclusion, she performed a slight bow to her captivated audience of one, hoping that it wouldn't trigger the dreaded light-headedness - fortunately, it didn't.

Erica jumped up from the couch and stood at the older woman's side in a single step. "That was so beautiful, Belle... thank you," she said, waiting for the folk singer to take off her guitar. Once the path was clear, Erica claimed Belle's lips in a long, emotional kiss that proved how much she had enjoyed the song and how much she cherished their new relationship.

Separating, Erica held Belle by the waist, but a tear that sprung from the older woman's eye made her reach up and wipe it away with her thumb. "I love you, Belle. I can't explain how it happened... but in the short time we've known each other, you've come to mean the world to me. And don't worry, I'll never let you go."
"Thank you. I love you too," Belle whispered, smiling through a veil of tears that she tried to blink away. When her efforts weren't quite enough, she reached up and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. She hadn't expected to become so emotional, but there was a niggling worry at the back of her mind about the strange dizzy spells that gave her a few unfortunate flashbacks to a much darker period of her life.

Erica once again wiped away a tear that had escaped Belle's attention, but suddenly stopped with her thumb resting on Belle's cheek. "Uh... the song was about me, right?" she said with a whole series of winks.

"Naw, the song's about my other lover... you know, Lothario Dingleberry who lives next door...? Of course it's about you, goofball!" Belle said and slapped Erica playfully across the stomach.

"Just checking," Erica said and pulled Belle into another loving hug. After a while, the two women shuffled back over to the couch, though Belle had time to pick up the next scrapbook before she sat down.

When they were comfortably snuggled up next to each other, Erica reached down and snuck her hand up under the edge of Belle's borrowed sweatshirt. "It was beautiful. I wish I had your skills as a songwriter," she said as she let her fingertips trickle across Belle's bare skin. "Or any music skills at all, really. Did you see me with the tambourine? Oh, that was so pitiful. I've got no rhythm, baby. No rhythm at all."

"I noticed," Belle said cheesily.

"Can I still be an honorary Butterfly?"

"Well... we don't have a manager right now..."

"Gee, thanks, Miss Cosmick. I always wanted to be someone's manager," Erica said flatly, pursuing - and finding - Belle's belly button. Her index finger soon caressed the little hollow by running around the rim several times before going further south.

At first, Belle couldn't find the words to reply - all her senses were standing on edge, enjoying the fingers drawing patterns on her skin - but she soon came to and turned her head to look at Erica. "I wrote it the week after we had come back from our last tour. A couple of days later, I could feel in my heart just how much you meant to me. I had come home physically and I honestly felt I had come home in a spiritual sense as well. It really was love, that strange, wonderful, crazy feeling I had in my chest. Love for a woman... you... whom I'd only known for a couple of days. Then I remembered you mentioning the old Abenaki tale of the Two Wandering Spirits... the song wrote itself after that. I was just along for the ride, dude."

"Aww, that's great-"

Belle suddenly remembered that she had intended the serenade to be a bridge to the more dreary part of the evening: working on the playlist for the concert. Instead, she found herself back on
the couch in the hands of the woman who could turn her to mush with a simple touch - as witnessed by the fingers on Belle's stomach that slowly but surely crept down towards the elastic band of her sweatpants. Snorting, she pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head into Erica's broad shoulder. "Yeah. Whoop-di-do. It's official, I got a brain like a fuckin' sieve."

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Well, we were supposed to be working on the playlist now! I need to get it sorted and emailed to the members of the band and the glee club... oh, and to the administrator, too, if you can believe that. He needs to check it to make sure we don't play any lewd or morally questionable songs! For cryin' out loud..."

Erica grunted but didn't let go of her lover. "Are you saying you'd rather do that than what we're doing now... or this?" - the last words were accompanied by two fingers that did indeed slip below the elastic band of Belle's sweatpants, and a tongue that was wrapped around a succulent earlobe.

"Yeah, it does sound insane, doesn't it? Ugngh! Simmer down, kiddo... go sit on a block of ice for five minutes. There's- Ooooh! Tee-hee... uh, th- there's something I really, really wanna sh- Ohhhh! That's so good... ugngh. There's something I w- I wanna show you before we get wild and busy. My next scrapbook. It's from- Oh, baby! Fr- uh, from 1970 and it's very important to me."

Pulling back from the earlobe, Erica shot her older lover a grin that showed she hadn't been entirely sincere. "Oh, okay. Maybe a little later," she said while she pulled her roaming fingers up from Belle's pants.

Belle shook her head and chuckled huskily. "I promise you'll get it back with interest a little later on... but look here. 1970... I'll bet you can guess what happened to me then."

In addition to the regular snapshots and newspaper clippings, the pages of the scrapbook were filled with love poems, drawings of little flowers and cute cartoon characters like Snoopy. Valerie's handwriting had taken on a dreamy quality where her letters were curvaceous and where the captions were boxed in with X's or other special characters.

"Let me guess... you fell in love?"

"I fell in love, all right. For the first time in my life, I loved someone romantically. Until then, I had watched other gals get hit by the love bolts, you know... hook up, start kissin', get pregnant and drop out of school... but now, I felt all that myself. Of course, there was a little twist to the story. Well, two, actually."

"With you, there always is," Erica said with a grin.
"Hey! The first twist was that it was a one-way love affair. At the time, the person in question had no idea I was starry-eyed. That was a constant source of pain in itself, lemme tell you. I couldn't... just couldn't get myself to tell her... and, yes, I had fallen in love with a woman."

Erica leaned in and gave Belle a kiss on the side of her neck. When it tasted sweetly, she added another for good measure. "I sort of guessed it would be that."

"Yeah. That scared me so badly I nearly jumped off a bridge. I had no one to talk to, no one who could understand what I felt inside, no one who could... well, tell me that it was okay, you know, despite what the older generation said about those unnatural, disgusting homophiles as we were called back then. And they really fuckin' meant it, too! Man, I was so confused... so full of angst and shit... so worried that I really was a freak like they said I was. I kept everything inside for so long it began to fester and turn nasty and shit. Well. Here she is..."

The singer flipped the page to reveal a faded color snapshot of herself standing next to a beautiful strawberry-blond with intense eyes and a soft yet striking face. Both women had flowers in their hair and several hippie beads around their necks, and they were both wearing loose robes - white for Belle, pale red for the other woman. They were holding hands, but it all seemed very innocent.

Belle sighed and looked dreamily at the old photo. "She was everything to me," she said quietly. "One night at a party, all the angst inside me had turned so rotten it just had to get out or else I'd die. I was high on some stolen prescription medicine and I simply could not keep my mouth shut. I blathered on and on to everyone and his fuckin' seeing eye dog about how much I loved her and wanted to be with her... on and on. Finally, she found me and pulled me aside. Even in my delirious state, I thought she was gonna kick my ass for the things I had said... but instead, she kissed me. She kissed me and I took a first class trip to paradise. Oh Lawrd, that was the kiss that defined my life and my soul, lemme tell you. Then she told me to find her again once I had landed on planet Earth. And I did."

"So she's Stephanie?" Erica said and studied the two women in the photo very closely. "Wow, you were right. She's charismatic... but look at you... that's the epitome of cute right there."

"Dude! You're way silly tonight, Erica... must be the Miller Lites you had. Stephanie was far more beautiful than I ever was."

"She's real pretty, sure... but from my point of view... sorry, honey. You're the only one for me."

"Thanks, kiddo... you've earned yourself a kiss," Belle said and made sure the gift was delivered personally, and right on Erica's lips.

Erica quickly stole another kiss just as Belle pulled back simply to even the score. "Yeah. You had it bad there, though. It's so clear to see on your face and in your eyes... look at the way you sort of glance smugly in her direction."
"I know, right?" Belle said with a dark chuckle. "I had it bad for eight years until her death in 1978. Even beyond that, I guess... you know the rest."

"Yeah. You told me."

"Yeah. By then, Stephanie's looks were gone, though. Eaten away by that fuckin' heroin. I don't wanna talk about that, it always gives me a knot in my stomach. Let's flip the pages," Belle said and did just that. "Okay, in late 1970, Stephanie and I started jamming together on her flute and my acoustic guitar. Sounds weird today, but it wasn't out of the ordinary back then. At first, it was just for fun, but then we realized we could create magic if we got serious about it. We sent out a call for female vocalists to back us up... and... who do you think that lovely gal is?" she continued, pointing at a picture where Belle and Stephanie were jamming in a circle with a third woman.

"I don't kn- Oh! Is that Leaf?" Erica said, staring at the photo.

"That's Autumn Leaf, all right. Wasn't she gorgeous back then?"

"Yeah... wow. Was she already Leaf then or did she have a regular name like the rest of you?"

"Naw, she was always Autumn Leaf to us. Yeah. She had lived in San Fran in '67 so she had been deeply involved in the Summer of Love... I s'pose that's where she got that name. Late '70 going into '71, the three of us did a gig or two in local bars and stuff... no success there. And I mean, like, none at all. We did a little better in the student bars, but there was no money in that and we were living on poverty row, so... you know."

Erica chuckled and reached around Belle's waist to give her a little squeeze. "Oh, I know all about eating oatmeal or spaghetti and ketchup for weeks without end."

"It's a rite of passage! Anyway, Leaf was and is straight, so it didn't take long for some dude to catch her eye. Me and Stephanie were kinda annoyed with that, to be honest. We thought we were the vanguard of a militant front of righteous Sisters that would conquer the world and overthrow the despots, but eh... youthful idealism, right?"

"Is that where the Walrus came into the picture?"

"No, not yet. He came a couple of years later. No, I can't even remember who the other guy was. She left us for a couple of weeks only to come back later when they had split up. Happened more than once, actually. Looking back now, we had a wonderful time. Despite Vietnam and Nixon and protest marches and all that shit, it was a wonderful, innocent time for me, Stephanie and Leaf. We played music, we smoked weed, we made love... and we were happy. Yeah."

Belle flipped through the next few pages without finding anything to stop at. Closing the scrapbook, she leaned back on the couch and stared into empty space for a little while. "Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Stephanie hadn't died. If she'd gone into rehab or something. How it would have continued between us, you know? Would we have been
able to keep everything alive once our music went away only a couple of years later? Maybe we would have left everything behind and emigrated to... to... I dunno, somewhere far away. We were still in love, but I... well, a part of me feels like I'm betraying her by saying it, but I was so fuckin' sick and tired of her addiction. It robbed her... us... of all the good stuff we had shared. At that time, we lived in a little shed down south here in California, and the people who came there... fuck, drug dealers is too nice a term for some of them. Well. I guess I don't have to tell you about that whole world..."

"No. When I worked in the inner-city precinct, we saw the results on a daily basis. Young black kids lying face down in the gutter, every single night. Crying mothers, angry fathers... and the next day, it could be their other kid lying there. Street corner dealers, drug factories, crack houses... you name it, I've seen it."

Belle shivered and pressed herself closer to her lover. "Baby, you must have seen shit I can't even begin to understand. I realize I've had a privileged life, you know... all things considering."

"Yeah. I don't wanna talk about it," Erica said and kissed Belle's hair.

"No wonder. Okay... back to my scrapbook. Well, even beyond the problems Stephanie and I had, we were both frustrated by our relative lack of success. We did Monterey '76 like I told you about and one or two prime-time gigs after that, but we got big just when folk rock died on its feet. After that, it was punk or country and western... I mean... I guess we were closest to country, but can you imagine me dressed up like a rhinestone cowboy?"

"Uh... no," Erica said with a chuckle.

"No is definitely the right answer, man! Country music today is very different from what it was back then, though. Today, we could definitely do a country song. Country Rock. Yeah. Back then, popular country meant Nashville. Rhinestones, white suits, fake ten-gallon cowboy hats. Glorified lounge singers attempting to be authentic... no, thanks. Gimme a strong folk song and I'll kill the audience, dude!" Belle said in an exaggerated twang.

"I seem to recall there was a genre called Outlaw Country? I think I have a couple of CD's of that. Greatest Hits compilations and the like. I could picture you as an outlaw, actually."

"Yeah, Waylon and those boys. The Butterflies did sing a few Outlaw songs now and then... the problem with those songs was they often didn't fit my voice. And I guess the people we attracted to our concerts weren't there for Outlaw, so... but good thinking, hon."

Chuckling again, Erica suddenly stifled a wide yawn. "Oops. Pardon me," she said and wiped her mouth in a comical fashion.

"Awww... am I boring you, honey?" Belle said and drilled an index finger into Erica's gut. "Is it past your bedtime, kiddo? Do you want me to sing you Rock-a-Bye so you can go sleepy-nippy?"
"You're askin' for a ticklin', lady!" Erica said in a mock growl, already holding out her long fingers. "But since you're offering, yes, I'd like you to sing another song for me."

Belle quickly hopped off the couch to get out of range before her younger lover could mount a surprise attack. Standing in the middle of the den, she put her hands under her chin and began to rock back and forth. "Rock-a-Bye Baby or what?"

"Anything," Erica said as she swung her legs up into the couch and pretended to flake out.

"Anything. Okay. Hmmm. Well. Hmmm... how about..." - taking a deep breath, Belle belted out a strong rendition of Here's What You Do To Me. While she sang, she went through a whole sequence of suggestive moves that left no doubt as to the effect Erica had on her. At the end of the song, she reversed through the curtain of beads wagging her index finger in a come-hither gesture that worked wonders with the supposedly sleepy Erica.

Moments later, the door to the master bedroom was slammed shut, and giggles, sloppy kisses and lusty moans once again echoed through the hacienda.

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CHAPTER 5

The next morning saw Belle staring despondently at the daily pile of chemicals she needed to take. One by one, the five pills went down chased by healthy swigs of water, and when she was done, she shuffled over to where she kept her tea towels to wipe the glass. "Yuk... how come I'm taking more pills now that I'm mostly clean than I did back when I was wild and adventurous? Man, this is stupid."

Her hip was giving her a little bit of grief from the many positions she had insisted on trying the night before - despite Erica's gentle protestations - so she walked around the kitchen with a slight limp and a crooked smile from remembering said positions.

Finding her favorite brand of lactose-free yogurt in the refrigerator, she limped back to the kitchen table intending to pour it into a bowl. From one step to the next, she came to an abrupt halt and stared wide-eyed at her lover who had entered the kitchen looking like a complete stranger.

Erica was dressed in dark shoes, black, high-waisted slacks with perfect creases, and a black button-down shirt where the top button had been left undone to reveal a bright white t-shirt. If that wasn't martial enough, she was picking lint off her uniform-like dark gray blazer as she came in.

"Whoa..." Belle croaked and put her hands - with the yogurt - in the air, "is this a bust? Has this been a sting operation all along? Are you here to collar me on an excessive sexual activity for a
woman over fifty-charge... or possibly an attempt at bribing a police officer with vegetarian food, Miller Lites and French kisses?"

"None of the above," Erica said in her authoritarian voice that she had down pat, "I'm here to issue a health and safety warning for a Miss Daisy-Belle Cosmick. You are simply too cute for your own good."

Erica was unable to keep the act going and eventually stuck out her tongue at Belle. "Nah. I have a little something to do today, that's all."

"Verrrrry funny, Sheriff!" Belle said and shuffled the rest of the way over to the table where she opened the yogurt and poured it into the bowl. "And you need to be dressed like that to do a little something? Y'know, looking at you, I'd almost say you were going to... huu! Are you?" she continued, standing up straight and shooting Erica a curious glance.

"Well, if you mean to ask if I'm going down to the Coulson Police Department, I can only confirm that I am."

While Belle scooped out the last of the yogurt with a spoon, she furrowed her brow and looked back at her lover. "But why? Uhu... to show professional courtesy or what?"

"No," Erica said and sat down opposite from where Belle had put her bowl. "You see, before I even came over here, I... well, I've emailed back and forth with the Chief of the Coulson PD. He's about to ret-"

"How come didn't you tell me that sooner?"

"I was just getting to that!"

"Sowwy."

"You're welcome," Erica said in the same jokey manner. "No seriously, he's about to retire but he feels his junior officers aren't ready to take over the mantle at this moment. He's been asking around through the official channels but no one wants to work in such a small town. Enter Yours Truly who sent out a feeler at just the right time. Who knows, it could be the one for me."

"But..." Belle croaked, staring at her younger lover. "But that would mean starting over for you... again!"

Erica smiled wistfully and put her clean blazer across her lap. "Not quite. But it would mean that I would be closer to you. Well, to be honest, it would mean that I could live here with you... if you'd want me to, of course."

"If I would want you to?!" Belle croaked, staring wide-eyed at the well-dressed woman sitting opposite her.
"Yeah... first of all, I don't know if I'm a good fit for the job, ya know. He could say no thanks the second I walk in the door. But beyond that, I was... uh, thinking there was a risk that we were... well... content with having a three-thousand mile relationship where we only talked over the phone daily or a couple of times a week. And then, maybe to get together a couple of times a year. I have to admit that things like that went through my head... I mean, we've only known each other for such a short while," Erica rambled, picking at a piece of lint that she had long since removed from her blazer.

"If I would want you to move in with me...? For good...?" Belle croaked again, slowly shuffling around the table. Suddenly needing to wrap her arms around Erica and give her the squeeze of a lifetime, she let yogurt be yogurt and hurried around the table.

"Wait!" Erica cried and shied back from her lover's slightly sticky touch. "Wait-wait-wait...! You have yogurt all over your fingers!"

"Oh, fuck it!" Belle growled and hurried over to the sink to wash off the gunk. Once she was clean and dry again, she hurried back to Erica and did what she had planned to do - wrapping her arms around the taller woman's body and giving her such a crush that all the air rushed out of her. "Oh, baby... there ain't nothing in the world that I would rather want... I don't want a billion dollars, I don't want a private jet, I don't want anything material... all I want is you. You, Erica... you gotta understand that. If one of us could move in with the other so we could be together day-in, day-out... mercy, that would make me the happiest old hippie bird on the planet. And I hope it would make you the happiest young fuzz-girl on the planet...?"

"It would," Erica wheezed, surprised at how strong her lover's grip actually was. "But like I said, it might not work with this particular job. But even if it doesn't, I promise I'll think of something else to try."

Smiling, Belle stood up on tip-toes - she was in her slippers and Erica was wearing two-inch heels on her shoes which made the difference in height even greater - and offered her partner a quick but grateful kiss. "I know you will. That's the kind of woman you are, Erica Wayne. But... what about your rank? I'm a hundred percent sure Coulson doesn't have any Sheriffs...?"

"They don't, but I could go back to my old rank of Sergeant."

"Oh... just like that?"

"Well, more or less, yes," Erica wheezed. "Yikes, I think you have too much spinach in your diet... I'm ready to breathe on my own again if ya don't mind..."

With a cheesy grin, Belle let go of her lover's long torso and shuffled back to her yogurt. 

Erica pretended to take a couple of very deep breaths before she sat back down to watch Belle eat her breakfast. "Like I said, I've been emailing the Chief here. If this goes ahead, my day wouldn't be that much different from my job in Cape Whitnell. I would go on patrol, sit at the watch desk and perhaps train the rookies. And do the paperwork, of course."
"Ugh, don't say the p-word. I got the playlist to wrestle with today. Old songs, new songs, songs I can sing, songs they can sing, songs I can't sing... you get the picture," Belle croaked around a mouthful of yogurt.

"Sounds challenging. Please don't over-stress yourself, okay? I don't want to come home at lunch or so to find you in pieces 'cos you worked too hard."

"I won't. I know when to quit now."

"Good," Erica said and stood up. She quickly put on the blazer and made sure the sleeves were straight and classy. Once everything was in order with her clothing, she flipped her hair out of her collar and assumed her patented look of steely determination. "So... I have a sneaking suspicion it would give people the wrong first impression if I came in the Microbus so I think I'll call a cab."

"Probably a good thing, love... huh."

"What?"

Running her eyes up Erica's long figure, Belle sized her up but found it hard to put her in the box she regularly fit into. "I know it's just my old brain talking, but it feels odd... really odd... to call you love, or sweetheart, or honey or anything like that when you're in uniform. Not to mention when you have that expression on your face. I'm sorry, it's just... boom. Brainsplatter," she said, pretending that her head exploded.

Erica decided to go easy on her lover and relaxed her authoritarian stance. She even added a broad - if shy - smile and held out her arms in an invitation for a hug.

"Awwww," Belle said and got back up from the chair. "That's much better. Now I can call you my love again without feeling like I was trying to butter up to a fuzz. If I'm not mistaken, you can even kiss now, can't y- MMPF!" - Yes, Erica could indeed use her lips for kissing.

When they separated, Belle let her fingers play up and down Erica's long side while she studied the effects her touch had on the Sheriff's happy face. "But what about your friends in Cape Whitnell? Marcia and the others?"

"Well, the way I see it... if anyone would understand that I would, uh... strike the teepee, so to speak, and move across the country to be with the woman I love, it would be Marcia."

"Mmmm-yyeah, that sounds about right, actually..."

"And besides, the telephone has been invented," Erica said and straightened her sleeves again. "Speaking of which, I think I'll call the cab now. Is there anything you want me to bring back from town? Groceries, sodas... anything?"
"Uh... I dunno. Uh... do we need anything?" Belle said and looked around the kitchen. "Oh, that's right. We need some more toilet paper. We're down to the last two rolls."

"Toilet paper. All right. Soft, extra soft, super soft, insanely soft?" Erica said with a perfectly straight face.

"You're asking me...? I always buy a no-name brand. It's gotta be environmentally friendly, though. And butt-friendly, too..."

Erica assumed her game face and nodded like she had just agreed to save the world from the plague. "Super soft," she said in her determined voice.

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The trip through Coulson proved very informative for Erica. The cab driver took her through parts of the town she hadn't seen when she and Belle had driven to the community center, so she was constantly looking out of the windows to take in all the sights.

The town itself was larger than she had predicted, geographically speaking, and nearly all the neighborhoods they drove through were nice and quiet. It was clear to see the one-storey bungalow was the housing of choice, even if some of them had been designed to resemble Mexican haciendas like Belle's.

Once they got closer to the town center, the buildings grew taller, and one or two of the streets they went past just before they reached the commercial zone triggered Erica's feel for potential hot spots that she had honed in her younger days patrolling the tough, inner-city streets.

The commercial zone proved to be two connected streets with a dozen mom-and-pop stores, several coffee shops and diners, and one or two supermarkets and delis. Here and there, realtor signs in the windows of empty stores proved that Coulson wasn't immune to the growing trend of life being slowly sucked out of the smaller towns and transplanted to the gigantic shopping malls beyond the town limits.

Coulson's main artery was appropriately named Main Street, and the police stationhouse was located roughly in the center of the mile-long drive. The street wasn't exactly a melting pot of activity, but there were enough cars and trucks around to give it some life.

Soon after they had driven onto Main Street, the cab driver slowed down and activated his turning signal. "That's the Coulson PD right over there, Ma'am," he said and pressed a button on his electronic taximeter while he drove up to the curb.

"Thanks. What do I owe?"

"Twelve dollars ninety-eight, Ma'am."

"Here's fifteen dollars, keep the change," Erica said and handed the driver two bills.
After getting out, Erica studied the exterior while standing on the sidewalk opposite the stationhouse. It was an old but solid three-storey, flat-topped brick building with old-fashioned air condition units hanging on the outside of most of the windows of which there were sixteen in total. Two huge antennas on the roof suggested they had the dispatcher in the same building.

The stationhouse was pulled back twelve feet or so from the sidewalk to make room for a four-step concrete staircase that led to a glass windbreak. The Stars & Stripes hung side by side with the California state flag on either side of the staircase, but there was so little wind both standards were limp.

On Main Street, two black-and-white Dodge Charger police cruisers and two plain white Durango SUVs were parked against the curb. The vehicles were all neat and well-maintained which Erica knew was a good indicator of how the precinct was run.

"Well... let's see where this'll take me," Erica said under her breath as she quickly crossed the street and went up the short flight of stairs.

The windbreak opened up into a lobby of sorts with the watch desk just inside and to the left. On the wall opposite the desk, a row of chairs were lined up in perfect order under a few posters from old campaigns that warned people of pickpockets, scammers, phoney collectors and assorted other criminals.

The watch desk was elevated two feet off the ground to give whomever was on duty a bird's eye view of the lobby in case trouble ever broke out - though, as Erica surmised when she gave the slightly sterile lobby a quick once-over, she couldn't imagine Coulson ever seeing trouble of such a magnitude. That said, there was a very faint whiff of vomit hanging in the air mixed into the scent of dust, linoleum and the wooden staircase at the far end of the lobby.

She could hear laughter coming from the watch room behind the desk, but she wasn't in a hurry so she didn't want to ding the metal bell that she had spotted on a small stand next to the desk. Instead, she shuffled over to a table and took a dog-eared magazine that she proceeded to leaf through.

Three minutes later, a young male officer carrying a newspaper came out to the watch desk but promptly spun around and stormed back inside when he caught a glimpse of their official-looking guest.

A few heated comments wafted out of the watch room before a female officer hurried out to the desk. "Good morning, Ma'am. Can I help you?" she said, shuffling a few items around on the desk to hide her embarrassment at being caught unaware.

"Good morning, Officer," Erica said and put down the magazine. Walking up to the desk, she noted the female officer was in her mid-twenties and that she had a sturdy physique that filled out her khaki uniform admirably. She was honey-blond and had her hair tied up in a tight ponytail that seemed to take a few years off her age, though her broad shoulders did their best to offset that. "My name is Erica Wayne. I have an appointment with Chief Gallagher."
"Of course, Ma'am. If you go down to the staircase," the Officer said, leaning over the edge of the watch desk and pointing down the other end of the lobby, "and go a floor up, you can't miss Chief Gallagher's office."

"Thank you, Officer...?"

"Bradley, Ma'am. Kaye Bradley."

"Thank you, Officer Bradley. I appreciate it," Erica said and walked through the lobby in the militaristic stride she had perfected at the Academy.

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Upstairs, Erica could indeed not miss the Chief's office seeing as it was the first - and only - door on her right once she came up the stairs. The improvised office had been created by putting up two sections of aluminum scaffolding complete with windows and Venetian blinds. Simple panels of hard plastic had been grafted onto the scaffolding to make it appear the walls were made of a sturdier material, but the metal pipes were quite visible in places.

The rest of the floor was a large, open office with plenty of desks and chairs, though the meager amount of computer monitors on the desks proved that it wasn't used by a great number of people.

'If I get this job,' Erica thought as she looked at the sorry excuse for an office, 'that ugly thing is outta here on my first day... if I can sit in an open office in Cape Whitnell, I sure as hell can sit in an open office here.'

Grunting, she went over to the glass door and tapped on it with a knuckle - she did it carefully in case the structure would collapse.

'Enter!' a male voice said from the inside.

Erica rolled her shoulders to prepare herself, then depressed the door handle and stepped inside. "Good morning, Chief Gallagher. I'm Erica Wayne. We've emailed each other," she said as she put out her hand.

"Hello, Sheriff Wayne. So nice to finally meet you," Chief Conrad Gallagher said, rising slightly from his swivel-chair to shake hands with his guest.

Conrad Gallagher was in his mid-sixties, in other words, several years past the point where he should have resigned from his post. Like his officers, he wore a khaki uniform with gold highlights, though he had a black tie around his neck as well that he had stuffed in between two of the shirt's buttons. He had a crewcut that had turned white, a slightly ruddy complexion that made his fair hair stand out even more, and a low brow with prominent, slightly accusing eyebrows that gave him a gruff exterior.
From emailing him several times and speaking to him over the phone, Erica knew the first impression wasn't truthful - the Chief was in fact a quiet, well-spoken gentleman and not the bruiser he appeared to be.

"Please, have a seat, Sheriff," Conrad Gallagher said and gestured at a swivel-chair that stood in front of the desk he was sitting at. The office was dominated by a row of metal filing cabinets, though it also had a tall floor fan in the corner, a small table with a coffee machine and finally a book case filled with plastic binders.

Erica pulled out the swivel-chair and sat down opposite the Chief. "Thank you," she said, looking him squarely in the eye.

The two people studied each other closely for a few seconds before the Chief pushed himself back from his desk and rose. "Would you like some coffee? It's fresh. I've made it myself so I can vouch for the quality."

"Yes I would, thank you. Black if you don't mind," Erica said and crossed her legs.

Once two small mugs had been filled with coffee and a dash of cream for the Chief, he gave one of them to Erica before he shuffled back behind his desk. "So. I've studied the CV you sent me, Sheriff Wayne. I must admit you're a little overqualified for the job with your operational history and your impressive list of supplementary training courses. I was surprised to see that we have the same experience and seniority though you're nearly thirty years my junior. Of course, I started quite late, but still..."

"I learned my lessons the hard way on the streets of the big city, Chief," Erica said and sipped her coffee. She had to admit that it was quite all right. "In the slums, we only got one chance. Sometimes not even that. It taught me to think fast and clearly, or on occasion, to stop a given situation from even developing."

"Yes, but... to be frank, Sheriff, you'll never see anything like that here. At most, we get a few drunks on Saturday nights, but even that has died down in recent years since the rowdiest bar closed for good. On the other hand," - he shuffled through Erica's CV - "I can see that's pretty much what you've been doing for the past few years in Cape Whitnell."

"It was, Chief."

"Mmmm. Tell me, Sheriff, why did you transfer out of the inner-city precinct three years ago? I can certainly understand you needed a breath of fresh air after working in the underbelly of the city for nine years... but why a small hamlet on the coast?"

Taking a sip of her coffee to stall, Erica considered how much she should tell the Chief. Since the introduction of a more modern set of rules in the late 1980s, the sexual orientation of a job applicant could no longer have any weight, so she didn't have to tell him a thing beyond the most basic.
'They can't use it against me,' she thought, 'but on the other hand, it would perhaps save me some whispers behind my back later on if I told everything from the get-go. Hmmm. All right.' - "Well, I needed to get as far away as I could. I received death threats from the associates of a drug dealer I had shot dead in a crack house raid. Also threats that were severely homophobic in nature."

"Homophobic? Oh... I see," Conrad said, looking up from the papers he had been shuffling through to shoot Erica a curious glance. After a few seconds, he grunted and looked back down. "Well. You won't find anything of the sort here, Sheriff. We're an open-minded town with nothing but friendly people. One of my junior officers is gay. Perhaps you could talk to him if you want to know where the, uh... special bars are here in Coulson...?"

Erica's left eyebrow twitched and slowly crept up her forehead. She had to give the Chief credit for trying, even if his efforts were slightly inappropriate. "Thank you, Chief, but I'm in a steady relationship. You might say I'm but a single question away from being a married woman."

"Oh... uh..." - shuffle, shuffle - "Shit, I stepped in it there, didn't I?" Chief Gallagher said with a disarming, if nervous, smile. "I beg your pardon, Sheriff Wayne. I hope it won't make you withdraw your interest."

"It won't."

"Good. Since I've already made a fool of myself," the Chief said and rose from his chair, "how about I introduced you to my crew? Uh... they're all downstairs save for one who's on patrol."

"I would like that, Chief," Erica said as she put down the mug of coffee and got up from the uncomfortable swivel-chair.

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As the two people walked down the stairs to get to the watch room, Erica noticed that the Chief was walking with a limp. She didn't want to inquire about it, but she had a gut feeling it was a product of his age and not something that had happened on the job.

"And here we are, Sheriff," the Chief said and gestured Erica towards a door halfway down the lobby on the same side as the watch desk that was once again unmanned. "Go ahead. Don't bother to knock... I'll be with you in a minute. I just gotta..." he said, pointing over his shoulder at a door marked Restroom.

"All right," Erica said and opened the door without hesitation.

The room she entered was clearly the guardroom. It was furnished surprisingly cozy with a three-seater couch, a coffee table and an armchair on wheels - they even had a round rug that covered the linoleum floor under the table. The back wall held two small windows that overlooked Main Street, and there was an even smaller porthole in the wall towards the alley between the stationhouse and the next building.
Three additional doorways led out of the guardroom beyond the one she had just come through. One went out to the watch desk, and Erica assumed the other two - that were both behind her - led to a kitchen and the private shower facilities, respectively.

A thermos, three mugs and a bowl of what appeared to be chocolate chip cookies were on the table though only two people were sitting in the couch - the young man Erica had seen initially and the woman with the ponytail.

As Erica stepped into the guardroom wearing her most formal expression and assuming her customary authoritarian stance, she clearly saw 'Oh, shit!' and a growing panic written all over the faces of the two junior officers.

What they couldn't know was that she was cracking up on the inside from their reaction. Without speaking a word - and to compound their misery - she let her knowing eye roam over the guardroom and the two officers who had bounded to their feet and stood at attention even though Erica wasn't in uniform.

Everything was neat and tidy: there weren't any mug-rings on the table, the rug had recently been vacuumed, there weren't any magazines or books thrown around haphazardly, and the khaki uniforms of the two officers were clean and in perfect accordance with the code. In short, it was a tightly run precinct like she had predicted.

"At ease, Officers, I'm not on duty," Erica said with a smile as she stepped further into the guardroom and put out her hand. "As a matter of fact, I'm on vacation. Hello, I'm Erica Wayne, the Sheriff of Cape Whitnell. That's over on the east coast."

The sigh of relief was quite audible even though both junior officers tried to hide it. The young man stepped up first to shake Erica's hand. "Hello, I'm Josh Van Eyck."

Once he stepped back, the blonde woman put out her hand as well. "And I'm Kaye Bradley, but you know that already."

"I do," Erica said and looked the two officers in the eye to get a feel for them. From their stance and behavior around her, she quickly decided they were good people. Behind her, the sound of a flushing toilet and a muted curse heralded the arrival of the third junior officer.

The door to the bathroom was yanked open and a man who was a few years older than the others stuck out his head and growled: "What in the hell happened to the soap that was in here yesterday evening? I know for a fact I bought two bars last month. You know just as well as I do that washing your hands in water alone doesn't have the same effect. Yeah, I can understand why you're shooting me funny looks, guys, I'd be embarrassed, too," he said and clicked off the bathroom light before he stomped into the guardroom.

"Christ, Stu," Kaye whispered hoarsely out of the corner of her mouth while she rolled her eyes repeatedly. "Meet Sheriff Wayne from Cape Whitnell," she said out loud, pointing at Erica.
"Oh..." Stuart said and shot the Sheriff the same funny look that Josh and Kaye had just given him. "Uh... hello, Sheriff. I'm Stuart Burton. Everybody calls me Stu," he said and put out his hand. At the last moment, he reconsidered and wiped his hand thoroughly on his uniform pants just to make sure he wouldn't pass any germs to the striking woman.

"Erica Wayne. Hello," Erica said and shook his hand.

Behind Erica, the Chief stepped into the guardroom and went up to stand at her side. "So," he said, looking at his junior officers, "this is what I have to offer. Do you think you'd be able to work with them?"

The news that the tall woman could be their new Chief made the three juniors look even more embarrassed at having been caught napping - or in Stuart's case, in the bathroom.

Erica looked all three in the eye. She liked what she saw and knew instinctively they would give her no grief. Kaye reminded her of herself at that age, but all three were solid, professional and with strong personalities. "Yes I would, Chief. They're quite clearly dedicated officers," she said, looking from one to the other.

"That's what I always say. All right... let's see... Josh, I think you should take the Sheriff on a ride-along to show her the ups and downs of Coulson. Number five is gassed up and ready to go. All right?"

The young man shot his colleagues a quick sideways glance as if to say 'Why me?' but stepped forward nonetheless. "Yes, Chief."

"Get to it," Conrad Gallagher said and left the guardroom after smiling at Erica.

"Yes, Chief," Josh said and quickly went over to a table next to the doorway to the watch desk. There, he took a utility belt with a small radio unit and put it around his waist. Once the buckle was tight, he attached the wireless mic to a hidden hook on the uniform shirt just below his left shoulder strap.

Erica observed the little scene with great interest. 'Wow, that certainly beats the old, shitty CB I have to wrestle with back home...' she thought, looking at the junior officer as he put on a thick winter jacket.

"All set," Josh said and gestured towards the door.

Just before they left, Erica turned around unexpectedly just to see the looks on the faces of the two remaining juniors. She knew from past experience that if she caught them grimacing, she needed to have a word with them in private later on. Once again, she had to stifle a laugh when she noticed that Stuart had been looking at her rear, and that Kaye was grinning at her colleague's juvenile tendencies.
Both juniors froze in place when they realized they were being watched by the Sheriff, but Erica offered them a friendly wave before she left the guardroom.

On her way out, she could clearly hear Kaye utter: *'Way to go, Stu! Christ, man... busted starin' at the new boss' ass! Perv!'* followed by a thump like she had slapped her colleague in the gut.

'*Ouch, you Amazon! How many times do I have to tell you that I bruise easily?*' Stuart replied indignantly.

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By the time Erica made it out to the sidewalk, Officer Van Eyck had started the first of the two unmarked Durangos and had opened the passenger side door for her. "Sheriff Wayne, please allow me to take you on a tour of Coulson," Josh said when Erica climbed up into the tall SUV and closed the door behind her.

"Thank you. Like I said inside, I'm not on duty right now. You can call me Erica."

"I'd rather not, Sheriff," Josh said and drove away from the curb.

Erica grunted and reached for the seat belt. "All right. Noted," she said as she clicked it into place.

Officer Van Eyck soon cruised down Main Street at a sensible twenty-five miles an hour with both hands on the steering wheel while talking about the shops they went past in a clipped, highly formal tone.

As they pulled to a stop at the intersection of Main Street and the romantically named Valentine Avenue, Erica turned around in her seat and looked at the profile of her driver. "Officer Van Eyck, I'm not here to evaluate you. I'm simply here to see if this job is something I could envision doing for the next couple of years or more. That's all."

Josh Van Eyck briefly let down his defenses but soon looked back straight ahead with a neutral look on his face. "Yes, but you could become my new Chief, Sheriff. I prefer to keep a certain respectful distance."

"Mmmm. Noted. However," Erica said just as the traffic lights turned green and Officer Van Eyck put his foot down on the gas, "you should know that my preferred style of command is one that's based on inherent trust and natural openness. In short, I want to create a synergy where it isn't you and me, but us. That's how we get results. The last thing I want is for my officers to keep a 'respectful distance' to me," Erica said while waving her fingers in the air to form quotation marks.

"Oh... I see," Josh said quietly. "Chief Gallagher's command style is somewhat different."
"Seeing his boxed-in office, I had a hunch it would be," Erica said, spotting a supermarket two hundred yards further up Main Street. "Can you pull over here, Josh? I promised my girlfriend I'd get something for her."

That tidbit of news made Josh Van Eyck furrow his brow, but it soon passed. When it did, it took his steely defenses with it. "Can do. Once you're done here, perhaps I could drive you home? It would save you the cab fare," he said and pulled over to the curb in front of the supermarket.

"And how do you know I didn't drive to the stationhouse myself, Officer Van Eyck?" Erica said with her hand already on the lever for the door.

"There were no strange cars parked on Main Street. With a slight exaggeration to further my point, I know just about every vehicle in town... it's sort of a hobby of mine. Fortunately, my boyfriend is cool with it," Josh said with a smile.

Erica nodded at the young man - she had read him right. "Very astute observation, Officer... I took a cab. All right, I'll only be five minutes."

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Two hours later, Josh drove the Durango up to Belle's hacienda and put the shifter in Park.

Erica noticed at once the garage door wasn't closed completely which left the lower half of the colorful Microbus clearly visible in the afternoon sunlight.

"Oh..." Josh said as he turned off the engine. "I know that bus. Well, I guess it's hard to overlook. You were down at the community center yesterday, weren't you?"

"That's right, Josh," Erica said, holding an extra-large pack of super-soft toilet paper. "We were there to rehearse for the big charity concert tomorrow night. All in all, I don't think it'll be necessary for you guys to be on riot duty," she continued with a smile.

"Probably not... I still have to work on New Year's Eve, though. A concert... do you sing or play an instrument?"

"Oh hell, no! I can't even play a tambourine... my girlfriend's the singer, I'm just a Sheriff," Erica said, wondering why the garage door wasn't all the way down.

Right on cue, Belle came out of the garage and pulled the door all the way down using the manual shutter. As she turned around holding an armful of what appeared to be clothes, her old habits made her come to a jerking halt when she spotted the unmarked police car. She quickly held up a hand to shield her eyes from the afternoon sun and didn't relax until she saw Erica waving at her out of the passenger side window.

"That's her," Erica said with a beaming smile.
"Wow... she's..." Josh said, drawing out the word while he studied the older woman and especially her torn jeans and long-sleeved batik T-shirt that sported an anti-war message, "a hippie...?"

"She's a folk singer, Josh."

"Oh... but still... a Sheriff and a hippie?"

"What can I say... she's my sweetheart."

"Can't argue with that," Josh said with a big grin that Erica responded to in style.

"No. All right, thanks for driving me home, Officer. I appreciate it," Erica said and opened the door. She quickly stepped out and closed the door behind her but came back to lean on the windowsill. "Let's see what happens with the job, eh? I know for a fact that I couldn't get better people to work with. Thanks again, Josh," she continued, stepping back from the door and patting the roof.

"You betcha, Sheriff. See ya around," Josh said and started the engine. With a brief stab of the sirens as a goodbye, he drove off and was soon out of sight.

Holding the pack of toilet paper like a Knight's lance of yore, Erica turned around to walk up to the hacienda, but Belle was already at her side.

"Erica Wayne," Belle said sternly while she put her hands on her hips, "I can't let you out of my sight for two minutes, can I? Tell me, how did you get yourself arrested this time? Were your slacks too tight? Were you too tall for the po-leese to cope with? What?"

"Honey, I'm home," Erica said with a broad grin. "I'll tell you all about it over a cup of coffee and a slice of that great honey-bread we bought yesterday."

Belle was unable to maintain her mock-stern facade and broke out in a grin that matched her partner's perfectly. "Okie-dokie. Luckily, I was gonna have a cup now so I got the kettle going as we speak. C'mon," she said and wrapped an arm around Erica's waist. "Hey, is that a gift for me? Super-soft, huh? Groovy! You sure know how to please an old bird. Lovely stuff," she continued, poking her index finger into the pack of toilet paper.

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A short while later, Erica carried a tray with a cup of coffee and a mug of herbal tea into the living room and put it down on the coffee table by the couches. She had changed back into her Cape Whitnell sweatsuit to preserve her good outfit in case she needed to wear it again. Kicking off her slippers, she sat down and swung her legs up into the crimson couch to flake out - moments later, she wagged her toes at Belle who came into the living room from the kitchen carrying two plates with the sweet bread.
"So," Erica said as she took one of the plates and immediately began to chow down the honey-bread. "I think I've got a pretty good shot at getting that job. The Chief is a slightly funny dude, but his junior officers are good people."

"Dude? You've been hanging out with Pack, haven't you... dude?" Belle said and stuck out her tongue.

"Ha ha. I only met three of the four officers as the final one was out on patrol, but those I met were great. Really great. All mid-twenties and enthusiastic. They're three guys and a gal plus the Chief. Very distinct personalities, too."

Belle took her own plate of honey-bread and held the sticky slice between her fingers. "Huh, must be kinda one-sided for the gal, then," she said and took the first bite.

"Yeah. Well, she was a tough cookie. Enough about me... how has your day been, Belle?"

"Oh, pretty good, actually," Belle said and put the sticky slice back down on the plate so she didn't have to hold it the whole time. "Yeah... I think I have the playlist ready. Well, maybe not ready-ready, but it's almost there. Just about. I only need to hammer one or two songs into place, then it's good to go."

"That's great," Erica said around a mouth of her new favorite sweet dish.

"Yeah. You wanna hear it?"

"Sure!"

Belle rose slowly from her chair and went into the den to get the list she had worked so hard on. Once she was out of sight of her partner, she ground her jaw and let out a frustrated sigh, upset that she had to hide that she had once again been hit by one of the dizzy spells.

It had happened when she had dropped her ball point pen on the floor while working on the list of songs. A simple problem with an equally simple solution: bend down to retrieve it, like she had done a thousand times.

When she had done just that, the world had tilted violently. Unlike the other times the attack had struck, she hadn't been able to regain her balance in time and had ended up in an unruly pile of humanity on the carpet. Nothing had been hurt other than her pride, but that was more than enough in itself.

Snapping back to the present, Belle shook her head in frustration and went over to the desk to take the playlist. "Got it right here," she said when she ducked back through the curtain of beads. "Eighteen songs in total. Six for me, six for the glee club, two for Leaf and four we all do together as the opening and the grand finale."
"Cool. And you're sure you can handle six songs?" Erica said and licked her fingers so she wouldn't let any of the honey go to waste.

This time, the stern, insulted look on Belle's face was real, as were the hands that slammed onto her hips. "Oh yes, I think I can handle six songs, Erica. After all, even the regular gigs had at least ten songs, sometimes even fifteen."

Erica looked up, surprised at the hard tone in Belle's voice. She knew she needed to perform a little damage limitation and quickly got up from the couch. "I didn't mean it like that, love. I meant, with all the other things that you seem to be in charge of, are you ready to do six songs?"

The sour note didn't last too long, and soon, the smile returned to Belle's face. "Okay. Yeah, I think I am. I'm a little worried about the final rehearsals tomorrow afternoon, though. I can feel it in my stomach... there's a little knot of worry. Anyway, the playlist...?" she said, waving a piece of paper in the air.

"You can tell me while we cuddle," Erica said and held her arms open. Smiling, she quickly sat down and finished her slice of honey-bread to have room for her real honey.

Belle wasn't about to let that offer go, so after moving her herbal tea over to the other side of the table, she climbed up into the couch and got comfortable splayed over Erica's long, rock-solid body. "Mmmm-yeah. You're the best cushion in the world, love."

"Thanks," Erica said, playing with Belle's long, braided hair.

"Okay. The playlist. It's a New Year's show so I thought the songs better be uptempo and fun, right? Okay, the plan is to start with Doo Wah Diddy Diddy and then segue directly into..."

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CHAPTER 6

The next day - December thirtieth.

"Yes, Mr. Thackeray," Belle said as she hurried through her hacienda with her iPhone pinned down between her ear and her shoulder, holding her winter jacket, a plastic bag with additional sheet music and a bottle of spring water in her hands. "No, I don't know why only half the glee club has shown up. I've spent all morning, and when I say all morning, I really do mean all morning, calling them to give them a kick up their asses ... no, I obviously didn't use that kind of language, Mr. Thackeray ... yes, I know young people these days aren't used to hearing that kind of language ... no ... no ... hey, wait a minute... hang on, I just gotta..."

Using the back door, Belle hurried out into the garage where she dumped the plastic bag on the back seat of the Microbus. After putting the phone and the water on the seat as well, she stuck
her arms down the sleeves of the winter jacket, put it on and zipped it in an almighty hurry. "I'm back," she said, snatching the iPhone again. "No, I didn't hear what you said, Mr. Thackeray 'cos I said hang on ... no ... all right ... I understand it's an important concert for the community center's public image, Mr. Thackeray ... we'll be right over. Fifteen minutes, tops. Bye."

Closing the connection, Belle shoved the phone into her jeans pocket and hurried around the front of the Microbus where she jumped into the driver's seat. She quickly started the engine and waited for the fourth cylinder to show up for work. Once it had, she fished around for reverse but managed to find first gear instead - and she so nearly mashed the front of the old tour bus up against the back wall of the garage. "Fuck!" she growled and fished a little harder.

Finally finding reverse, she started going backwards only to discover she had forgotten to raise the garage door. Growling, she slammed on the brakes and hurriedly clicked on the remote which let in the daylight - and a perfect view of a surly Erica who was standing in the driveway dressed in jeans, a hoodie and a windbreaker. She was holding up Belle's beloved acoustic guitar while tapping her foot like she wanted to illustrate that someone was in way over her head.

"Fuck... I can't believe I forgot my guitar..." Belle mumbled, looking at Erica's statuesque shape. "Oh hell, ain't got no time to waste..."

The sliding door was barely all the way up when Belle hit the gas and reversed out of the garage. She came to a screeching halt in front of Erica and had already started reaching for the passenger side door when her phone rang again.

In her confusion, she took her foot off the clutch pedal which made the old bus jerk backwards and stall. "Oh, fuck it," she mumbled, reaching for her phone and the ignition keys at the same time. "Uh, hello. Hang on, I just gotta..." she said into the telephone.

A second later, the driver's side door was opened and a very authoritative hand grabbed the thin, white rim of the steering wheel to prevent Belle from even thinking about moving it. "Either you drive or you use your phone, Miss Cosmick. Which will it be?" Erica said in her patented Sheriff-voice - and this time, she wasn't kidding.

Belle smiled sheepishly and scooted across the bench seat. "Sorry, babe. I just gotta..." she said and pointed at the phone.

"Uh-huh," Erica said and stepped into the Microbus. She needed a moment to familiarize herself with the ancient vehicle, but she was soon on top of things and reached for the ignition key.

While Belle spoke into her phone, Erica clicked on the remote to close the garage door. Once it was fully down, she reversed away from the driveway and out onto the street. She had no better luck in finding first gear, but after a few crunches, she got it and drove off.

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Seventeen minutes later, they drove into the parking lot at the community center. Unlike the other day, the lot was pretty full with all kinds of vehicles, and it was difficult to find a spot for the multi-colored Microbus.

At the back entrance to the center, Gerald Thackeray blasted out of the door at the sight of the old bus approaching. When Belle and Erica didn't show signs of getting out, he started wringing his hands like the fate of the world depended on their arrival.

"Hon, remember that knot in my stomach I told you about?" Belle said, looking at the visibly panicky man.

"Yeah?"

"Forget the knot, it's a fuckin' boulder now!"

"Listen, Belle," Erica said and put a calming hand on the jittery singer's jeans-clad thigh. "Everything's gonna be just fine. Hey... calm down, okay?"

"Oh, I'm ca- ca- calm..." Belle said in a shaky voice, remembering to add a little wink to temper her words.

"No you're not," Erica said and turned off the engine. "Isn't there a showbiz saying that if the final rehearsals are crap, the premiere will be gold... uh, something like, practice badly, play well... or something?"

Looking into the wing mirror on her side of the Microbus, Belle could see that Gerald Thackeray hurried over to them as fast as his brown polyester pants would go. "Yeah, but... aw, this day is gonna suck so badly," she mumbled and opened the door. "Hi, Mr. Thackeray-"

"You were supposed to be here five minutes ago!" Gerald Thackeray howled, still wringing his hands. In addition to his brown pants, he also wore a brown tie, a brown, knitted pullover and a yellow shirt with a huge collar.

"I know, uh... excuse me, but what in the hell are you wearing?" Belle said as she dove into the back seat to get her guitar, her water and the plastic bag with the sheet music.

Gerald looked down at himself and offered the folk singer his first smile of the day. "Well, it's going to be a concert with songs from the 1960s and 1970s so I thought I'd dress the part."

Belle stared at the near-monochrome time-warp combo while a multitude of thoughts of which none were quotable roamed around in her mind. In the end, she could only shrug and say: "That's good, Mr. Thackeray... yes, that's... uh, good."

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Inside the auditorium, the Walrus and Leaf were already there, trying to get some kind of order to the slightly unruly members of the glee club. When Leaf spotted Belle and Erica, she hurried over to them and pulled her old friend into a strong hug. "It's so great you're here, Belle... I mean, this is the most confusing shit I've ever been involved in..."

"And that says a lot," Belle interjected, nodding solemnly.

"Boy, doesn't it ever! Hi, Erica!"

"Hi, Leaf," Erica said and reached out to put a hand on the older woman's elbow. "I think I'll go over and help the Walrus conduct the, uh, traffic. Looks like he could use some assistance."

"Good thinking, Erica. Thanks!" Leaf said and turned back to Belle. "Man, they're just wild... I don't know what the hell is going on with the kids these days!"

The two aged hippie birds looked wide-eyed at each other before they took a step back to study the other one's looks and choice of clothing - torn jeans and a loud sweatshirt for Belle, and a red-and-purple batik dress with a gold chain belt for Leaf.

Autumn Leaf was the first to lose it, and she broke down in a childish snicker and began to shimmy around on the spot. "Gawd, I just channeled my Mom there, didn't I?"

"I think you channeled all our moms... well, maybe not Erica's," Belle said and pulled Leaf back into a new hug.

Separating, Leaf shook her head as she looked back at the members of the high school glee club who were goofing around near the stage. "Some of the singers ain't even here and the rest of them are doing... I dunno, something, over there, and me and the Walrus are blue in the face from tellin' them to calm the hell down... and Mr. Thackeray is so hysterical he's developed a speech impediment!"

Belle chuckled and hung her winter jacket on the hallstand just inside the door. "Well, all that's about to change, Leaf. Momma's here to whip the kids into shape."

"Let's hope they'll listen..."

"They will once I get going. How are you holding up, Leaf? Have you needed to have a smoke yet?" Belle said and put the strap for her beloved guitar over her shoulder.

"No. I thought I better keep my head clear. But I got some premium-grade grass in my jacket if you want a hit to settle your nerves?"

"Weeeelll... maybe later," Belle said and put a hand on the small of Leaf's back to guide her over to the stage.

_*_*_*_*_
An hour later, Belle's damp brow and the two dark spots under her arms proved how hard she had worked and how frustrated she had become. "Holy crap, the sound in here sucks..." she mumbled as she drained the last of her water. "But I guess it's a good match with the sucky glee clubbers and the even suckier lead singer! Screw it, this is a suck-fest of mammoth proportions... a flippin' disaster in the making. And we got people from the charities coming and... aw, fuck this shit..."

Up on the stage, the glee club had just finished mangling a Katy Perry song, and Belle found herself worn down to her last nerve. She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't find any words that didn't rhyme with kit, wrap or bucking.

The proceedings had given her a throbbing headache, and even worse, a strange feeling of light-headedness that didn't seem to be like the attacks she had already had. "All right, guys," she said and held her hands high in the air to catch the glee club's attention, "we'll need to come back to that one. How about... uh... how about we skip ahead to... to... shit, where did I put the playlist?"

Erica jumped up from the chair where she had been comforting Mr. Thackeray who had nearly broken down in tears when the glee club had mangled one of his favorite oldies. "Got it right here, Belle!" she said and hurried over to her lover.

She quickly put the piece of paper into Belle's hand, but was shocked to see several sickly red blotches standing out quite clearly against the folk singer's suddenly gray complexion. "Baby, you need a break," she said for Belle's ears only.

"Just one more song, love. Then I'll call for a break. Just one more," Belle said and wiped her sweaty brow with her sleeve.

"Baby, listen to me..."

"Just gotta do one more. I know how much I can take... but thanks for keeping an eye on me. I love you," Belle said, offering her partner a wistful smile.

"Love you too," Erica whispered and moved back to the chair to resume comforting the hysterical administrator.

Belle sighed, wishing she was anywhere else doing anything else - anything but trying to get a bunch of people who were supposed to know what they were doing to work together so they could create magic. In the hope of finding some inspiration or even enthusiasm, she glanced over at Leaf and the Walrus, but they were sitting very still on a pair of plastic chairs, appearing to be worn out or just plain despondent.

When Belle realized her old friends were suddenly looking their age, a cold shiver ran down her back. 'Man... is that how those kids see me, too? Old, gray and tired...? I used to be bouncy and colorful, but now? Now I'm just an old bird who's up to her neck in something that's way, way, way out of her league...'
Instinctively, her eyes found her charismatic lover whose ocher skin and dark hair stood out like a searchlight among the many lily whites in the auditorium. Even as Belle was watching, Erica's sixth sense appeared to tickle her ear because she turned towards the older woman and offered her a smile and a little wink. Belle smiled back, relieved to see pure love in the strong, blue orbs.

'Thank the old guy upstairs for little favors... or even big favors,' Belle thought as she checked the playlist and went up to the glee club. "All right, everybody," she tried again, "let's do Dancing In The Street, the first of the two songs in the final act. Okay?"

When the members of the glee club answered affirmatively and began to shuffle through the sheet music, Belle strolled over to Leaf and the Walrus to see if she couldn't coax her old friends into action one more time.

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The first part of the old party favorite had gone well, but just as the glee club singers completed the bridge and went into the second half, someone's telephone started ringing. At first, Belle tried to ignore it, but by the third ring, she stopped singing and cried "Will somebody get that fuckin' phone!" at the top of her lungs.

Dancing In The Street came to a screeching halt as one of the young women in the back row dug into her pocket to find her telephone. "Sorry!" she said, but the damage had already been done.

Belle closed her eyes and rubbed her brow furiously. Already breathing hard from the singing, the interruption had severed her last nerve and left her as a blubbering mass of frustration.

Then someone else's telephone started ringing. And ringing. And ringing. Belle's face turned white as a sheet and it was clear to everyone there that she was trying very hard to keep it all inside.

The auditorium fell quiet with all present waiting for the inevitable explosion with bated breath, even Erica whose eyes were glued onto Belle's left jeans pocket.

"Miss Cosmick," Gerald whined, "please calm down. There's no reason for you to-"

"You, shut up!" Belle barked in the man's face. "Don't you fuckin' talk to me right now!"
"Miss Cosmick, your language, please! There are young people present..." Gerald said, but quickly realized he had said too much already.

"You can take your young people and your fuckin' brown tie and your fuckin' pullover and stick 'em up your fuckin'..." - that was all Belle had time to say before Erica had clapped not one but two hands across the folk singer's mouth.

"Well, really!" Gerald huffed and spun around.

Erica kept her hands on Belle's mouth until she could feel her firebrand of a lover had calmed down sufficiently to be let off the leash. As a precaution, she only moved her hands down to Belle's shoulders so they were ready in case the gray-blond volcano would erupt again.

Belle sighed and rubbed her damp brow. "All right, take ten, everybody! Once we get back to business, we'll do Dancing In The Street again and then work on the Perry song until we get it right. The concert's in less than thirty hours but right now, we ain't even good enough to open for a stinking polka band! All right? Gimme a 'Yes, Miss Cosmick' so I know you got the message!"

"Yes, Miss Cosmick," the member of the glee club all said as one before they split up and drifted down from the stage to tweet or blog about the disaster they found themselves in the middle of.

Smiling at her partner, Erica wrapped an arm around Belle's waist and pulled her off towards one of the rows of plastic chairs that had been put up for the spectators they hoped would come. "C'mon, Belle. You need to sit down. I don't like the way you look. Uh, that didn't come out right," she added hurriedly.

"Huh... nice save, Sheriff," Belle said, but even the old comeback wasn't delivered with any kind of energy.

They eventually found two chairs that were far enough back from the stage to allow them to sit in privacy. Belle soon bumped down on it and let out a long, slow sigh. "Baby, this is so f*cked up it's beyond salvation. I remember one of the first gigs we did as the Butterflies... the crowd turned out to be a bunch of rednecks who threw beer bottles at the stage. This is gonna be worse than that. You know why?"

"No?"

"Cos back then, we could actually play. They just hated what we did... now, we can't play, the singers can't sing... and those fuckin' telephones keep interrupting everything. It's gonna be that in the concert, too. Just so f*cked up... aw, hell. What a fiasco."

"Well, I'm sure that."

"Erica, when you see me... when you look at me..."

"Uh... yeah?"
"Do you see a woman, or an old woman?" The question was backed up with the saddest look imaginable in Belle's green eyes.

"Well, I see a..." Erica said, but stopped when she realized she couldn't treat the question as a joke. Trying to see Belle like a stranger, she let her eyes glide down the veteran folk singer's body from the top of her gray-blonde, braided hair, past her lined, aged face where the emerald green orbs had lost a good deal of their luster from the recent frustration, further down the body whose minor imperfections were already etched into Erica's brain, like the discoloration on her hip and thigh that stemmed from her motorcycle accident. She paused there briefly before she ventured further down the body.

Then she thought of Belle's spunk and spirit, of her huge heart and boundless devotion to her friends, of the love they shared that only seemed to grow more intense, of their wonderful experiences in bed, and finally of Belle's skills as a sublime singer whose raw, authentic pipes rivaled anything the commercial music industry had to offer.

"Well," Erica said and took Belle's hands in her own. "First of all, I see the woman I love. I hope you know that."

"I do," Belle replied quietly.

"Good. And beyond that, I see a woman who has lived one hell of a life. A woman who has perhaps gained a few lines here and there," - while she spoke, Erica reached up to caress the crow's feet around Belle's eyes - "but whose strong, honest heart and soul more than make up for the minuscule deficiencies on her exterior. That's what I see."

A wistful smile played across Belle's lips. A moment later, a few tears escaped her eyes and she reached up to wipe them away with her sleeve. "Thank you. I needed to hear that," she whispered.

"You're welcome."

Belle sighed deeply and glanced despondently at the stage. "Erica, would you be offended if I went outside to smoke a joint? I need it so badly, but... if you don't approve, I can wait until later," Belle said and gave Erica's hands a little squeeze while she looked her in the eye.

Erica licked her lips and returned the look. "That's your decision, love. I'm not the Sheriff here, remember? Though I'm fairly certain that smoking illegal substances in public is a finable offense here as well."

"I'm willing to risk that, love. I'll... uh, I'll go and smoke it in the Microbus. I promise that I'll give the bus a thorough airing before we go back home."

Erica chuckled at the thought of being pulled over by one of the junior officers she had spoken to the day before while driving in a car that reeked of cannabis smoke. Such an event would no doubt get a full page in Coulson's annals. "Well... all right. Do you have time for it?"
"Oh, sure. I only need a few hits to get the desired effect. It's premium grade... fine cut, ya know."

"Uh-huh? That's funny," Erica said and touched her ears, "my ears are ringing so loudly I couldn't hear a word of what you just said, Belle. Was it something about the Microbus?"

"Something about the Microbus, yeah," Belle said and quickly leaned in to steal a kiss from the Sheriff. "I'll probably be a couple of minutes or so. Don't worry if I don't come in at once... okay?"

"Sure."

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After getting what she needed from Leaf, Belle walked down the hallway to get to the rear entrance. On her way there, she began to get the strangest feeling in her head, almost like her brain had accidentally let go of the connection to the rest of her body.

Opening the door and stepping outside, she hoped the clear, crisp late December air would help her. Even though she could see the colorful Microbus across the lot pinned in between two larger vehicles, she had a hard time getting her legs to move over there.

She considered going back inside but decided on moving ahead with her plan. She eventually managed to reach the bus, but once she got there, she had to lean against the cool, colorful metal surface for support. Blinking in confusion over the strange, numb sensations that ran through her mind, she took several deep, cleansing breaths in the hope her condition would improve.

Then her knees buckled and she collapsed onto the hard, cold pavement next to the old Microbus. Panicking, she tried to hold herself up, but her arms turned to lead and she had to admit defeat with a pained groan.

The world around her began to tilt to the right; first slowly, then faster and faster until everything in her vision spun around and she felt she was falling into a bottomless chasm. Her head was on the brink of exploding, and a very unpleasant and even painful throbbing started somewhere deep inside her brain. "Erica..." she croaked, but her voice sounded like it came from a million miles away. "Please... please help me... Erica... Oh God, no... Erica... I need you..."

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Erica was still sitting on the plastic chair where she and Belle had talked, looking at the mass confusion in the auditorium and growing increasingly annoyed with the administrator who took the final rehearsals far too seriously and with the members of the glee club who didn't take it seriously enough.
'And Belle and the guys are stuck in the middle... under pressure from both sides without any room whatso-flippin'-ever to do what they're here for. The old Butterflies have more talent than the entire glee club put together, Goddammit!'

In her peripheral vision, she spotted a young man who was trying to distribute the sheet music for the next group of songs they were supposed to rehearse. He didn't do a particularly good job of it, and even with Leaf's help, they didn't get anywhere.

Rolling her eyes, Erica got up from the chair and stomped over to help them.

After a couple of minutes, Erica and Leaf had put all the sheet music on the correct stands in chronological order without even breaking a sweat. The young man had silently slipped away, clearly out of his depth with the task.

"Man," Leaf said as she and Erica stood on the stage, "Belle really lost her temper, huh? I can't remember the last time she lost her shit like that. I wish she hadn't said yes to this gig."

"So do I, Leaf. I know that Belle does too," Erica grumbled as she took a batch of unused music stands and shoved them off into a corner.

"Yeah. We had some awful gigs back in the old days, but this stuff here... man. Uh... which reminds me, Belle has gone out for a-" - Leaf didn't say the exact reason by name, but she held a thumb and index finger up to her lips.

"I know, Leaf."

"And... uh... Erica... are you cool with that?"

Erica sighed and stopped trying to make order out of chaos. "Yes and no. It's her choice and I respect her decision. I just wish she would decide to stay away from it. When I patrolled the slums, I saw far too many lives ruined, far too many families wrecked by drugs and alcohol to ever think that... well, that it's cool, you know?"

"I know. I've lost many friends over the years 'cos they got addicted," Leaf said and nodded somberly. "But Belle isn't like that. She knows how and when to stop. These days, she only smokes weed when the situation really calls for it... and even then, it's only one or two hits. Or perhaps three. Uh... anyway. I guess I've fallen into the trap, but she hasn't."

"Listen, if you want to kick the habit, I'd love to help you, Leaf," Erica said quietly so the world around them wouldn't learn of the singer's issues.

"Thank you... but Belle is already helping me. I'm only smoking weed every other day now. Then it's gonna be every third day, every fourth day and so on... I hope I can do it. I don't wanna let Belle down, you know."
"That's okay, Leaf," Erica said and briefly put her arm around the older woman's waist. "We wouldn't dream of holding it against you. Belle loves you and so do I."

Leaf smiled and quickly leaned into the touch. "Thank you... your soul is luminous, Sister. May I kiss you on the lips?"

"Uh, buh... okay."

Leaf quickly moved up to the taller woman and puckered up her lips. The distance was too great for her, so she had to get up on tip-toes to seal the deal. "Thank you," she said after a quick peck.

"You're welcome," Erica said with a grin, thinking about the endless list of outrageous things she had been involved in since she had met the colorful old bird known as Daisy-Belle Cosmick. "Uh, won't your husband get jealous when you go around kissing random women?"

"Oh, no! No, no, he can kiss anyone he likes, too! Just as long as he remembers to come home to our bed in the evening, I'm perfectly cool with whatever he does during the day!"

"Well, that's nice, Leaf."

"Yes... oh... look," Leaf said and pointed at Belle's pale blue winter jacket that was still hanging on the hallstand. "Belle forgot her jacket. I think I'll... uh... uh..."

"Go out to her and get a few hits of the premium grade weed, I know, I know," Erica said with a grin.

Leaf grinned back and quickly left the confusion behind on her way over to the hallway that would take her to the rear entrance.

Chuckling, Erica looked around and found the Walrus sitting by himself, reading a magazine. Shuffling over to him, she was about to say hi when a commotion at the door made her look over her shoulder.

"Help!" Leaf cried hysterically as she bounded back into the auditorium. "Help! Somebody help me! Belle has collapsed! Help me, please! Help! Oh God, somebody help me!"

The world came to a standstill for Erica. From one second to the next, she was drowning in a wave of ice cold fear that swept over her with the strength of a tsunami. Her heart and soul, her entire being froze solid as the terrible news hit her. A strong panic mushroomed inside her that threatened to make her incapable of even the simplest of functions, like breathing.

All that took place within the first second and a half. Then her many years of experience in dealing with dramatic situations kicked in and assumed control over her reluctant mind. "Walrus, keep everyone inside. Leaf, you're with me," she said in a hard voice that cut through the growing din like a hot knife through butter.
"Yes, Sheriff..." Oswald 'the Walrus' said, dropping the magazine he had been reading and clambering to his feet.

Erica took off in a sprint, bounding past the gap-mouthed members of the glee club and Gerald Thackeray who had come out of his office to see what the hubbub was about.

Blasting outside, she quickly spotted Belle lying next to the Microbus. She could see that her partner wasn't completely still which she took for a good sign. "Leaf, get her jacket. We need to keep her warm while we wait for the ambulance."

"O- okay, Erica," Leaf stuttered and hurried back inside to get the thick winter jacket that she had simply thrown onto the floor in her confusion.

A wave of panic bubbled up inside Erica but she swallowed hard and set off towards the colorful Microbus and the woman who was lying on the cold pavement next to it.

Arriving at Belle's side, Erica strode over the prone body and knelt down at the head. She quickly established that Belle's skin had turned even grayer than it had been earlier, but also that her pulse was strong and that her pupils weren't dilated, even if her eyes were rolling around uncontrollably in her head.

"Belle, can you hear me? It's Erica," she said, taking Belle's hand in her own. A pang of shock rippled through her when the hand was initially unresponsive, but after a few seconds, she felt her partner give her a little squeeze.

"Erica..." Belle croaked in a tiny, choked-up voice. "I'm so scared... so scared... I don't wanna die..."

Hearing her lover speak in such a pained voice made Erica clench her jaw hard and swallow even harder. "You're not gonna die, baby... you hear me? You're gonna be just fine," she said hoarsely. Her mind threatened to go into a full panic attack, but she forced herself to follow the book.

First, she dove down to Belle to sniff the air around the prone woman. She wanted to check if Belle's condition had been caused by bad or laced cannabis, but the air was clean. A moment later, she spotted a small, unopened plastic bag containing weed, cigarette paper and a lighter lying halfway underneath the Microbus.

Erica closed her eyes as the implications of what was happening and what she was about to do raced through her mind. It would mean the end of her career if she was caught possessing an illegal substance, but it didn't matter at that moment in time. Grunting, she reached in under the Microbus, snatched the plastic bag and stuffed it down her jeans pocket.

A few seconds later, Leaf came hurrying over with the thick winter jacket. "H- here..."
"Good. Let's swap," Erica said and strode back over Belle's body while Leaf went up to the prone woman's head. "I'm gonna lift her torso. Cocoon her with the jacket so she's not directly on the ground. Don't bother with the sleeves."

"All right," Leaf said and held the jacket ready. Once Belle was lifted off the ground, uttering a trembling groan, Leaf stuffed the winter jacket around her body and made sure it was in place.

"Now I'm gonna let her back down," Erica said and did just that.

The large collar on the jacket meant that Belle's head fell back in an unnatural angle, but Leaf took care of that by getting down on her knees with her legs together so Belle could use her thighs as a pillow.

"Way to go, Leaf... you're doing great," Erica said and quickly put a hand on the trembling woman's arm.

At first, Leaf was too frightened and choked-up to answer, but after a second or two, she was able to let go of the gasping breath she had been holding back. "Do you think Belle's got a brain hemorrhage? Or a stroke?" she said hoarsely.

"I don't know, Leaf," Erica said and wiped her brow with a shaking hand. "Her pulse is strong, so... I don't know. All right, I think she's calming down now," she continued, looking intently at her partner's behavior.

Right on cue, Belle let out a groan and tried to open her eyes. By the way her face contorted from the results, it was obvious she hadn't yet cleared the hurdle she had tripped over. "Erica?" she croaked, reaching out with her hand.

"I'm here, love."

"Please hold me... hold me..."

Erica grabbed Belle's hand and gave it the squeeze of a lifetime. Leaning down, she brought the hand up to her mouth and placed a simple kiss on the back of it that said more than a thousand words could have. "I love you, Belle Cosmick. You're gonna be fine, you hear me?" she whispered.

"I'm so scared... the world... the world is spinning... please make it stop..."

"I will," Erica said so decisively Leaf had no doubt she would.

Once Erica had put Belle's hand down very tenderly, she began digging through her pockets to find her cell phone, but came up short. "Goddammit, I left it inside..." she said, looking over her shoulder at the community center where the Walrus was acting as the perfect roadblock at the rear entrance.
"Use Belle's phone," Leaf said, pointing down at the square silhouette in Belle's left pocket.

Nodding, Erica reached into Belle's pocket and snatched the white telephone that was still on and unprotected. With a worried glance at the pained look on Belle's face, she dialed 9-1-1.

'Coulson Emergency Services, how may we help you?' a male voice said at the other end of the connection.

"This is Sher- uh... My name is Erica Wayne. I'm requesting an ambulance and a paramedic unit at the community center parking lot. We have a woman in her early sixties who has collapsed and is presently unresponsive. She has no medical record of note, no diabetes nor epilepsy. Alcohol is not involved. In her brief, lucid moments, she complains of severe vertigo. There is no external bruising on her body nor her head... you got all that?"

'I got it, Miss Wayne. The order has been sent out. We have a paramedic unit five blocks away but the ambulance may be ETA six to eight minutes."

"All right... sounds fine. Thank you," Erica said and put the iPhone in her own pocket so she could get to it quicker. "Leaf, the paramedics are just around the corner but the ambulance could be a little while."

"Just... just like the other time," Leaf croaked, staring down at Belle without blinking.

"What other time? Hey... Leaf, what other time? Has Belle collapsed like this before? Leaf!"

"No! Not now... back at the motel... the motel..."

"What motel? On your last tour coming back from Cape Whitnell? Leaf!" Erica said, but Belle's old friend was too out of it to speak.

Sighing, Erica leaned back on her thighs and rubbed her brow with both hands. She could already hear the paramedic unit's characteristic electronic siren in the near distance, but she couldn't get the thought out of her mind that Belle had collapsed before without saying as much as a peep about it.

Another siren soon mixed in with that of the paramedic unit. At first, Erica thought it was the ambulance arriving early, but a scant ten seconds later, a black-and-white Dodge Charger blasted into the parking lot and came to a screeching halt near the rear entrance. Before the car had even come to a full stop, Josh bounded from it and ran over to the three women on the ground.

"Hey, Sheriff, the dispatcher remembered your name from yesterday and relayed it to us..." he said on his way over to Erica and the others. "Oh, Jesus," he suddenly croaked when he recognized the identity of the prone woman on the ground.
"Yeah, we got a little situation here, Josh," Erica said, reaching down to take Belle's hand again. When she got a good squeeze back, she tried to smile at her partner but the shock meant her lips were barely able to crease.

Josh grunted and reached for the microphone on his shoulder. "Base, this is unit three responding to the eleven nine-nine. I'm on-site, no further action required. Remaining on-site until EMS have left, over."

'Copy, unit three. Base out,' the dispatcher said - the same man Erica had spoken to.

Behind them, the paramedic unit drove into the parking lot and came to a stop at the next car over from the Microbus, no doubt to leave room for the ambulance when it arrived. The doctor and the driver quickly got out and opened the sliding door of the GMC van to take their equipment.

With a final squeeze of Belle's hand, Erica stepped back to give the professionals plenty of space to do their job.

The doctor quickly checked Belle's pulse and her pupils like Erica had already done before taking an electronic blood pressure gauge.

At the same time, the driver strode over Belle's prone body with a firm, orange pillow in her hand. "Hello, Miss," he said to Leaf who simply stared at him with wide eyes. "I'll take over now," he continued and gently held Belle's head free and steady so Leaf could slide back.

Leaf did so - reluctantly - and clambered to her feet. Glancing down at her old friend, she moved around the body and joined Erica at the paramedic unit. "I'm so worried, Erica... really worried," she said, pressing herself against Erica's solid body.

Erica didn't want to speak in case she couldn't control her voice, so she settled for pulling Leaf in for a sideways hug that the older woman responded to at once.

On the ground, the doctor put his hand across Belle's forehead to check for a possible fever. "Miss? Can you hear me? Miss?"

"Yeah," Belle croaked, trying to focus on Erica but failing horribly.

"Are you in pain?"

"My head's throbbing... and I'm spinning... everything's spinning... I'm falling...

"All right," the doctor said and reached for the electronic gauge. "I'm going to check your blood pressure now. I will do that by wrapping a plastic cushion around your left upper arm. You will not feel any discomfort from the equipment," he said and pushed Belle's winter jacket aside to have room to wrap the device around her upper arm.
After working the strange-looking device, he let out a grunt and looked up at Erica. "The patient's blood pressure is off the scale. She'll need to go to the Methodist Hospital downtown for immediate treatment."

"Okay," Erica croaked through a throat that would hardly give her the time of day.

"Were you the first officer on-site?"

"Uh... not exactly," Erica said and scratched her ear. "I'm on vacation. The patient is my girlfriend."

The doctor looked down at his patient and then back up at the far younger woman. "All right," he said without elaborating. Turning back to Belle, he checked her pupils again with a small penlight to see if there had been any change in her condition. "Miss, I'm going to administer you a strong sedative through intravenous injection. That will reduce the stress levels on your heart and your blood vessels."

"All right... whatever," Belle croaked, trying - and failing - to nod at the doctor.

Through all this, Leaf had been quiet as the grave, but the sight of the injection needle made her gasp loudly. "Belle doesn't like needles!" she squeaked, staring wide-eyed at the medical instrument.

"I'm afraid it's necessary, Miss," the doctor said and rubbed the inside of Belle's left elbow with alcohol. After checking the needle, he inserted it gently into a blood stream and pressed down until the container was empty.

Josh ran a hand through his short hair and looked at the hard, stoic expression on Erica's face, wondering how he would react if it had been his boyfriend on the ground. He eventually went over to the Sheriff to pull her aside. "I overheard the doc saying the patient will be taken to the Methodist. Do you know where that is?"

"No," Erica said, never taking her eyes off Belle whose face seemed to relax and lose tension as Josh spoke. Unexpectedly, the gray, inanimate mask that replaced the pain and contortion on Belle's face gave Erica such a violent punch in the gut she nearly let out a sob. She had seen that mask far too often when she had dealt with dead or dying victims of accidents, or after incidents of violence - or indeed after illnesses. Her logical mind told her that Belle was merely falling under the influence of the sedative, but her heart screamed that it was far worse than that.

She suddenly realized that Josh had asked her another question. "I'm... I'm sorry?" she said, staring at the police officer like she saw him for the first time.

Josh smiled and put a hand on the arm of the woman who could become his superior if the stars aligned right. "Nothing, Sheriff."
Erica didn't have time to ask again as the ambulance finally arrived at the scene. Getting up, the paramedic spoke a lot of gibberish to the two EMTs who nodded and began to pull out the stretcher.

It didn't take long for them to transfer Belle to the stretcher and shove her back into the ambulance, but the next question presented itself immediately: "Which of you ladies will ride with us? We only have room for one of you," the lead EMT said to Erica and Leaf.

Josh quickly put his hand in the air. "The other can drive with me."

Leaf nearly panicked at that news - even the simple thought of being driven in a police car with an officer she didn't know was enough to give her the look of a deer caught in the headlights. "Erica, m- may I...? The am- the ambulance?"

For once, Erica wanted to push Belle's old friend aside, but she knew it would be grossly unfair to the older woman who was perhaps even more frightened than she was herself. "All right, Leaf. Go with her," she croaked, squeezing the harmony vocalist's shoulder.

The look of relief and gratitude on Leaf's pale, tear-stained face was reward enough in itself, and as Erica took a step back to let the paramedic unit out, Leaf stepped up into the front of the ambulance and shut the door behind her.

The paramedics left without lights or sirens, but the ambulance kept its lights on as it performed a three-point turn to get out of the parking lot. As soon as it drove out onto the street, it stabbed the sirens briefly to tell the other vehicles to make way.

"Josh, I'll be with you shortly," Erica said and wiped her clammy brow. "I just gotta get my jacket and update the people inside."

"Okay. I'll turn around in the meantime," Josh said and walked back to his cruiser.

On her way over to the rear entrance where the Walrus was still acting as a roadblock, Erica dug into her pants pocket to find the plastic bag with the weed.

When she made it there, the Walrus came out to greet her. "How is the old bird? Is she gonna make it?" he said, nervously fiddling with his impressive mustache that gave him his nickname.

"God, I hope so," Erica said and wiped away a tear that had thwarted her efforts of keeping it all inside. "I don't know what the hell is wrong with her... she said the world was spinning around. And the doc said her blood pressure was off the clock."

"Shit... no wonder with all that crap goin' on here."

"No. By the way, Leaf went with the ambulance guys," Erica said as she hurried past the Walrus to get her jacket.
"I saw that... are you gonna go with the cop?"

"Yeah," Erica said and stuffed an arm down the sleeve of her jacket. Doing so, she suddenly remembered she was holding a bag of weed. "Before I do, though... you better hang onto this little thing," she continued, handing the older man the plastic bag.

"Jeez... Belle gave it to you?" the Walrus said, stuffing it down his rear pocket in a hurry.

"No. I took it so the fuzz wouldn't have a reason to ask any questions. We'll call you later," Erica said flatly as she went past Belle's friend and out to the waiting cruiser.

Once the words sunk in, Oswald 'the Walrus' Jones simply stared at her with a wide open look on his face.

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CHAPTER 7

The Methodist hospital smelled and sounded like any other hospital Erica had ever visited. A perpetual smell of bedlinen, medicine and antiseptics hung in the air, and the endless, sterile corridors on the sixth floor of the concrete building echoed with the soft clacks of the rubber shoes worn by the nurses and the occasional doctor who strode up and down looking for God-knows-what.

"It even tastes the same," Erica mumbled, staring at the plastic cup with the bitter, dark brown liquid the vending machine where she had bought it had falsely promised would be black coffee.

She and Leaf were sitting on a row of bright blue plastic seats that had been built into the wall opposite the information desk. According to a plaque next to the blue chairs, the seats had been donated by a foundation and were molded ergonomically to offer the perfect seating comfort.

Erica grunted and tried to take another sip of the bitter liquid. 'They may fit someone's butt, but they sure as hell don't fit mine!' she thought, shuffling around on it to make the growing numbness go away.

The next sip of coffee was even worse than the first had been and she grimaced at the horrendously bitter aftertaste. 'Blergh, this is... this is worse than dishwater. I can't drink it... listen, Leaf, you want a lemonade or something? How about an apple juice? They have all kinds of juices and pulp here."

"No thank you, Erica," Leaf said in a very small voice. The older woman seemed far more frail than usual; wrapped up in Erica's windbreaker, her face was pale and drawn, and she was staring at a spot on the floor across the corridor. A few tears ran down her cheeks now and then, but she did nothing to stop them or wipe those away that had already drawn wet lines on her aged skin.
After dumping the so-called coffee in the trash where it belonged, Erica sat down and wrapped an arm around Leaf’s shoulder. With a gentle tug, she showed the older woman that she could use her as support.

Leaf accepted at once and leaned into the Sheriff’s strong touch, sighing so deeply as she did so that it turned into a sob.

Inside the information desk, a phone started ringing but was quickly answered by the duty nurse. Erica observed her speaking into the old-fashioned receiver, but the sheets of glass between them meant she couldn't hear what was said.

Moments after hanging up, the nurse came out into the corridor with a notepad and a ball point pen. "Hello, I'm Nurse Chaffee. You are here for Miss Cosmick?"

"That's right," Erica said and helped Leaf get back in her own seat before rising from the uncomfortable blue plastic shell. Out of habit, she studied the nurse with a critical eye: she was a slightly heavy-set woman in her early thirties with a hefty bosom, a pair of sparkly eyes and an impressive jaw - and a perfect set of teeth, Erica noted.

"I have good news for you," Nurse Chaffee continued. "Doctor Singh is moving her up from the emergency room as we speak, and they will arrive shortly. When they do, they'll go past here so you can see her. The first tests conducted by Doctor Singh were inconclusive, but in his initial estimation, Miss Cosmick has not suffered any lasting injuries to the blood vessels in her brain."

"That's pretty good news, Nurse Chaffee," Erica said in a choked-up voice. Her heart had decided to take on a life of its own and was thumping so hard in her chest it was nearly poking through her ribs. The palms of her hands turned clammy in an instant, and she wiped them absentmindedly on her jeans.

"Yes. Now, for purposes of insurance, I need to inquire about your relation to Miss Cosmick?"

Erica's left eyebrow crept up her forehead, but she realized there wasn't any hidden agenda behind the nurse's words. Even so, Belle's story about the way she and Stephanie Lorenz had been treated at a similar hospital all those years ago flashed through her mind. "We're partners. Like in girlfriends," she said, scrunching up her face.

"I see," Nurse Chaffee said and made a quick note on her notepad. "Ummm... in that case, I fear there's been a little confusion somewhere. According to my information, Miss Cosmick was born February twenty-sixth, 1951. I suspect we better change that to 1971 right away, ha ha...?"

Now Erica's other eyebrow went up as well. Moments later, they both went down, leaving her with a dark expression on her face. "No. 1951 is the right year."

"Oh... I see," Nurse Chaffee said and made a correction on her notepad.
The awkward conversation was interrupted by an elevator arriving not far from where Erica and the nurse were talking. A porter rolled a cumbersome metal bed out of the elevator car and into the corridor, closely followed by a tall doctor in a white lab coat who was holding a touch-screen tablet in his hands.

When the porter started pushing the bed along the corridor, Leaf rose to see if it was Belle. There was no mistaking the long, braided gray-blonde hair of the woman in the bed, and Leaf took off in a slow jog to intercept it.

"Excuse me," Erica said and turned away from the nurse. At the last moment, she remembered her manners and offered the nurse a quick "Thank you" that was responded to by a nod and a smile.

The bed had already come more than halfway down to the information desk, but Erica had an urgent need to race towards it. In the end, she stopped and waited for it to arrive, wanting to give Leaf a few moments with her old friend first.

As it was, neither of them was able to speak to Belle who was still under the influence of the sedative she had been given in the parking lot. Erica bit hard down on her lips as the hospital bed was wheeled past her. Belle looked so tiny, so frail, so vulnerable in her pale green hospital-issue nightgown that all she wanted to do was to hop into the bed and wrap her arms around her lover to protect her from all evil.

Even as the thought flashed through her mind, she knew it would be a fruitless task considering the evil that had claimed Belle had come from the inside.

The porter spoke briefly with Nurse Chaffee who walked with him down to one of the rooms further down the corridor. Leaf continued to hurry along the hospital bed, but Erica came to a halt, unable to get her legs to move her any further. Sighing deeply, she leaned forward to put her hands on her knees.

"Miss... uh, Wayne?" the Doctor said from a million miles away.

Taking a deep breath, Erica turned around to face the tall doctor whose hair, features and skin were even darker than her own ocher tones. "Erica Wayne, yes."

"Hello, I'm Doctor Vijay Singh," the doctor said and put out his hand.

At first, Erica just stared at it but soon snapped out of the darkness and shook the man's hand. When she noted he had a strong handshake, she became less nervous - and a second later, she scoffed at that ridiculous notion.

"I was the first doctor to see your mother here. I know from speaking to the paramedic-"

Erica never made it further than 'your mother.' A deep growl rose up from her throat, but she swallowed it to save herself from trouble later on.
"-who treated her at the parking lot that she was complaining of severe vertigo... in other words, her sense of balance had been disrupted quite badly. I was also informed that your mother's blood pressure-

"Wait! Wait just a minute, Doctor Singh... she isn't my mother. She's my girlfriend," Erica said in a steely voice.

"Oh... I see," the doctor said and looked down at his electronic gizmo. "All right. Uh... pardon me, but she's twenty-four years older than you?"

"Yes, she is. Tell me, what the fuck does that have to do with anything?" Erica said hoarsely, pinning the doctor to the spot with such a cold, steely blue glare that he had to look down in a hurry.

"Nothing... uh, nothing. I beg your pardon, Miss Wayne," the doctor said and hurriedly flipped through a couple of pages on his tablet. "Uh... I was also informed by the paramedic that Miss Cosmick's blood pressure was critical. When she arrived here, we gave her a fast-working solution that should kick in fairly quickly."

"Good," Erica said, wiping her upper lip that had turned sweaty from her temper.

"Yes. While she was in the ER, I ran a preliminary scan just to make sure no vital parts of her brain had been affected by the paroxysm. I'll perform a thorough scan and a subsequent analysis as soon as we've finished. Will you be here later on?"

Erica nodded and turned to look at the room where Leaf was waiting outside until the Nurse and the porter had installed Belle's bed. "I'm not going anywhere."

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Two and a half hours later, the private ward Belle had been allocated because of her age was so quiet that Leaf had fallen asleep across a three-seater couch that was placed up against the wall opposite the bed.

Erica was flaking out on a wooden chair that felt as hard as a granite boulder despite sitting on no less than two cushions. Now and then, she looked up in the hope of seeing Belle's green eyes smile back at her, but the folk singer was still sleeping.

Belle was lying completely still on her back with her hands above the duvet. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically, proving that her breathing had returned to normal after the shocking events in the parking lot.

A bright red cord marked ALARM that stretched up to a socket in the wall was draped over the duvet next to her right hand that sported a plastic ID-tag around the wrist. She didn't have a drip in her left hand, but the nurses had prepared for it by drawing a mark on the back of her hand with a red felt-tip pen.
To her right, a flat-topped table on wheels had been pushed up to the side of the bed, presenting a jug of water and a plastic cup that she could use if she got thirsty. Her street clothes and personal items had been stuffed into a hospital-issue cotton carrier bag that was hanging from a hook on the underside of the table, and the next hook was the home of a plastic bag for scrap paper or any other non-personal waste she would produce while she was in bed.

The two narrow windows in the private ward were both covered by metal blinds, but the last rays of daylight shone through and drew golden stripes on the dark linoleum floor.

Erica shuffled over onto her other cheek to distribute the burden of sitting on the hard chair. She yawned widely and considered moving over to the windows to open the blinds to let in more of the fading daylight, but she couldn't really be bothered.

Instead, she rubbed her weary eyes and looked around the private ward that was quite well equipped with a flatscreen TV suspended high above the bed, a radio tuned into the local stations along with the hospital's own frequency, and a Bluetooth headset that worked with both units.

A sudden croak made her grip the armrests hard. It hadn't come from Leaf, of that she was certain. Holding her breath, she slid out of the chair and inched over to the bed. She stared so hard at Belle's languid, passive face willing her to come to that her eyes began to water, forcing her to angrily blink away the moisture.

With a new croak that turned into a cough, Belle cracked open her eyelids and looked into the semi-darkness. The world seemed to be too much for her at first because she blinked a couple of times and shook her head ever so slightly, but then she opened her eyes for good and looked squarely into the eyes of the blue-eyed, ocher-skinned - though slightly pale - woman who was standing above her. "Hey..." she croaked with a throat so dry it tickled. "I love you..."

Erica had been ready for anything except that. The three little words hit her squarely in the heart with the force of a freight train. Those three little words and their meaning made her chin quiver and her breathing turn labored; finally, she let out a gasping sob and leaned down to give Belle a gentle, loving kiss on the lips while tears streamed unhindered down her cheeks. "I love you, too," she whispered hoarsely, struggling not to break down completely.

"Hey... Sheriffs don't cry," Belle joked, but her sandy throat made her cough. "Water?" she croaked, looking at the jug on the flat-topped table.

Erica stared dumbly at the jug of water until Belle's request penetrated the thick cushion of cotton in her mind. Reaching for the jug, she let out a sound that was a cross between a grunt and another sob. Her trembling hands turned filling the glass with water into a perilous task, but she managed to keep the spillage to an absolute minimum.

Leaning down, she held the glass to Belle's mouth and watched wide-eyed as the older woman chugged down the whole thing in five seconds flat. "Goodness me, you were thirsty, love..."

"Tell me about it... where am I?"
"Methodist Hospital downtown," Erica said and put the empty glass on the table.

"I hate hospitals..."

"It couldn't be helped, love. Do you remember anything?"

Belle sighed and tried to put an arm behind her head. When her shoulders protested, she gave up trying and settled for seeking out Erica's hand and giving it a squeeze. "Some of it. It was the worst trip I have ever been on... blows acid clean out of the water, lemme tell you. It was the weirdest feeling... the world just... hell, I can't even explain it. It just tilted to the right, and that was before I fell down. It just... tilted. Like the world flipped over..."

"How do you feel now?"

"Drowsy. Better overall, but... you know. A bit of headache and some light-headedness. All in all, sucky."

Hearing Belle's characteristic humor return, Erica's chin started quivering again, but she rubbed it very quickly to stop herself from losing it now that Belle was on the mend. "It was your blood pressure, love. The doc said it was so high it was off the scale..."

"Shit... no wonder I've been queasy for some time. I'm speaking so I guess it didn't fry my brain?"

"Belle..." Erica croaked, suddenly even paler than she had been before, "please don't say things like that..."

"I'm sorry, love," Belle said and squeezed Erica's hand again.

Erica sighed deeply and wiped away a few new tears that insisted on ruining her image as a tough, no-nonsense woman of action. "The doc ordered another scan, but I haven't heard anything yet... I guess he's been busy."

Belle nodded and suddenly broke out in a wide yawn. "Figures. They always push us old birds down the queue. Aw, hell..."

"Wh- what?"

"All that hard work with the concert... all that blood, sweat and tears I put into it... all that grief and heartache and raw nerves and sleepless nights and... fuck. It was all for nothing."

"I know... but we got you back and that's all that matters," Erica said as she caressed Belle's eyebrows and forehead with a thumb.
Belle smiled warmly at Erica but she was soon overwhelmed by a wide yawn that almost split her face in two. "At any other time, I would have said 'the show must go on,' but now I'm gonna say... fuck it," she said and snuggled down in her bed.

Erica snickered and leaned down to place another soft kiss on Belle's lips. "Listen, Leaf's here. She's resting right now. Would you like to speak to her?"

"Yeah... yeah, I would. Thank you."

"While you guys talk," Erica said and stole another kiss while she was close to her partner's inviting lips. "I think I'll go on an office to office canvass to find the doc and get some answers."

"Okie-dokie..."

"You have a bright red alarm cord right next to your right arm... see it?"

"Uh... yeah," Belle said, looking down and to her right.

"If you feel the... the thing return, just pull the cord and the nurses will come and help you, okay?"

"Sure. Hey...?"

"...Yeah?"

"I love you... I really do," Belle said and puckered up her lips to ask for yet another kiss - one that she got at once.

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A short fifteen minutes later, Erica and Doctor Singh strode down towards Belle's private ward. As always, the doctor was updating his tablet while he walked which apparently rendered him incapable of engaging in an actual conversation.

Turning into the private ward, the doctor came to an abrupt halt when he spotted his patient and another woman of the same age holding each other tight in a tender embrace. He glanced at Erica as if to say 'didn't you say she was *your* girlfriend?' but the steely glare that came back at him made him shrug and go about his business.

"Hello, Miss Cosmick, I'm Vijay Singh, your doctor. I'm glad to see you're awake," he said and put out his hand.

After caressing Leaf's tear-streaked cheek and giving her a little kiss on the forehead, Belle sniffed a couple of times and put out her hand as well. "Hello, Doc. Thanks for saving my ass."
"Oh, you're very welcome, Miss Cosmick. Ladies," he said and turned to Erica and Leaf, "I'll need a few minutes in private with Miss Cosmick."

"All right, Doctor Singh," Erica said and took care of the frail-looking Leaf by wrapping an arm around her bony shoulders. "Belle, we'll be outside. Holler if you need us."

"Sure thing, hon," Belle said and blew Erica a kiss that made the doctor scrunch up his face in confusion.

As the door closed softly behind Erica and Leaf, Belle let out a long sigh and turned back to the doctor. "Tell me straight up, Doc. What's wrong with me?" she said while she pressed a small button on the rail of the bed to elevate the top end.

"Well, Miss Cosmick," Vijay Singh said and sat down on the corner of the bed to break down the natural barrier he knew existed between a patient and a doctor, "the initial paroxysm was-"

"I'm sorry, the what?"

"The fit."

"Oh... okay. Go on."

"Uh, the initial fit was caused by your blood pressure being at a critical level. Had the paroxysm gone on for much longer, you stood a risk of suffering a potentially fatal brain hemorrhage, especially considering the fact the blood vessels in and near the brain grow more brittle with age."

"Damn..."

"As it was, the scan showed you have already had two minor, insignificant hemorrhages near the stem of your brain, what we call the truncus cerebri. Now, the scan can't show when these hemorrhages occurred, it could have been yesterday, last week or five years ago. We can't say for sure."

"Mmmm..." Belle said, suddenly feeling less cocksure than she had been earlier. "I... well, earlier this week, I... I had a strange blackout one night. I was completely blotto. I had a bad headache when I woke up... which was later than usual, by the way. I just thought it was caused by smoking weed the night before, but... well, I guess it could have been a..."

"It could have been, yes," the doctor said and studied his patient's face. "It might not be, though. Have you suffered a concussion recently?"

"No... not since 1983 where I fell off a motorbike. But I've been so awfully, stupidly, mind-numbingly stressed out the past week... well, two weeks, really. I agreed to organize a New Year's party down at the community center. I think that's what pushed me over the edge."
Nodding, the Doctor updated that piece of information into his tablet. Once he was done, he looked back up at his patient. "All right, Miss Cosmick. We have given you a strong dose of Paracetamol, Dramamine and Bendroflumethiazid-

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Doc... what the hell's that last thing?"

"It regulates your blood pressure."

"Oh... yeah, I could definitely have used that earlier..."

"Sounds like it. Uh... where was I? Oh yes, Dramamine and Bendro... uh, the medicine that will regulate your blood pressure. I'll write you a prescription for pills that you'll need to take every morning."

"Aw hell, more pills," Belle grumbled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

"I'm afraid so. The computer tells me you already take five each morning, is that correct?"

"Yeah... five. A further five at dinnertime... And how many more now?"

"Two more."

"Holy crap! Seven in total? Aw, hell... but, all right, Doc. I guess it can't be helped."

"I'm afraid it can't, Miss Cosmick," the doctor said and finished issuing the prescription by adding his digital signature to the order. "Oh, and before I forget, by receiving the Dramamine now, you have automatically been given a driving ban while the pills are active. They'll last until tomorrow morning."

"Whoa... do I have to hand over my driver's license for good? I need my car, Doc..."

"No, because the effect of the Dramamine is temporary. The Bendro- I mean, the blood pressure regulators are permanent, however, but they will not affect your ability to control a motorized vehicle."

"All right. Huh. And I suspect your electronic gizmo there has already sent the driving ban to the fuzz, huh?"

"The... uh, the fuzz?"

"The cops, Doc," Belle said with a cheeky grin.

"Oh... yes, as a matter of fact, it has. We're hooked up to each other's computer systems to speed up the processes."
"Holy fuck!" Belle said and blinked several times. "Uh... pardon my French. Okay... Doc, the thing where I said I smoked weed, is that... does that... do they, uh...?"

"No, that's confidential."

"Oh... that's a load off. You see, my sweetheart is a fuzz, so... I don't wanna screw anything up for her," Belle said, nodding to herself.

The Doctor quickly answered a message that pinged in on his tablet before looking back up at his patient. "Would that be the younger woman, or the older woman...?"

"The younger woman," Belle said with a grin. "The older woman is my best friend. We've known each other since the early 1970s. We're in a folk rock band together, actually," she said, knowing it would clear up a lot of the doctor's apparent confusion.

"Ohhh, I see. Now I get it... you're showbiz people."

"That's right!"

"Huh," Doctor Singh said and got up from the corner of the bed. "Miss Cosmick, I think we can both agree that you need to spend the night here under observation. We need to monitor your blood pressure at regular intervals, and also the effectiveness of the medicine you've been given."

"Yeah... I s'pose that makes sense. I don't wanna experience that ride again any time soon."

"I wouldn't think so. All right... that's it for now, Miss Cosmick. I'll let your friends back in... unless you want some rest?"

"No, I'm fine, Doc. I need to speak with them about something important. Hey, thank you for saving my butt and all the other things," Belle said and waved at the doctor.

"That's what I'm here for, Miss Cosmick. See you later."

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The door had barely closed after the doctor had left before Erica stuck her head inside. "All clear?" she said in a stage-whisper.

"All clear," Belle said and waved her lover back into the private ward.

Stepping back in with Leaf on her arm, Erica could see at once that Belle had been told something that had shocked her. Although she had two red blotches on her cheeks and a worried frown across her forehead like when she had been stressing out, the signs weren't accompanied by the usual frazzled appearance but rather by a pensive, almost profound look on her face.
"Love... what did the doctor say?" Erica said and helped Leaf sit down on the edge of the bed in the same spot where the doctor had just been.

"Well... he said a lot of things," Belle said quietly, taking Leaf's hands in her own.

Erica quickly went over to the other side of the bed and pulled the chair up close to the safety rail. "Good news first, please..."

"All right," Belle said and cleared her throat. "Well... he said that I'm gonna get some tongue-twister pills that will regulate my blood pressure. I'm gonna have to take them on a permanent basis... they'll stop further fits."

Leaf sniffed and gave Belle's hands a squeeze. "So that's really all it was? Just your blood pressure going insane?"

"Mostly, yeah."

"Mostly?" Erica said. "What does that mean?" The nervousness that rolled around inside her made her slip into her old Sheriff-voice, but she managed to make it more human than usual.

"Well," Belle said and took Erica's hand as well to have a full house, "it means that I've had two minor brain hemorrhages at some point in time. The doc couldn't say if they were fresh or old. Just that I'd had them. Now, Leaf, don't you start to panic... they haven't had an influence on me. And they won't, neither. The doc actually called them insignificant... I'm guessin' he knows what he's talking about."

The news was clearly too much for the frail Leaf to handle. Shaking her head over and over, she began to cry silently while she caressed Belle's hand and arm. "I thought you were gone," she said in a tiny voice. "I thought I had seen you for the last time. When I was down on the fourth floor in the cancer ward all of last winter, you were there for me the whole time. And now... now I couldn't do a damn thing for you."

"That's not true, Leaf," Belle said and reached up to hold her old friend's arm. "You found me, remember. Again! I already owed you my life twice over... now it's three times. We gotta stop meetin' this way, you know... Leaf, please don't cry... hey..."

When Belle could see her words had very little effect on Leaf, she rose up from the pillow for the first time since getting into the bed so she could give her old friend a little crush.

The pillow promptly fell down and got stuck between Belle's nightgown and the sheet, but Erica got up, fluffed it and held it in place until Belle leaned back down onto it.

"Mondo cool," Belle said with a cheesy grin that wasn't quite as strong as they usually were, "I'm surrounded by gorgeous women who wanna fulfil my every whim."
Chuckling, Erica pulled up the duvet so Belle was comfortable in the strange bed. "Yeah? Well, there's plenty more where that came from," she husked for Belle's ears only.

Behind them, the door swung open to reveal Nurse Chaffee who pushed a metal cart into the private ward. "Hello again, ladies. I need to take Miss Cosmick's temperature and blood pressure so I'm going to have to ask you to wait outside. I promise it'll only be a couple of minutes."

"Oh, there's no need to hurry, Nurse Chaffee," Erica said and walked around the bed to help the increasingly haggard Leaf up. "Listen, hon... stay cool, okay?" she continued, caressing the back of Belle's right hand.

"I will. Leaf needs your help more than I do right now..."

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After Nurse Chaffee had left, Erica came back in with Leaf, but it was clear to see the already frail woman had had all she could take. Slouching on the hard chair next to the bed, Leaf was white as a sheet and she had problems keeping the conversation going.

Belle smiled wistfully and reached out to take Leaf's pale, chilly hand in her own. "Autumn Leaf, I think it's time for you to go home, old girl. I love you too much to see you flop around like this. We don't want you to get sick, do we?"

"No..." Leaf mumbled, rubbing her tired face. "I'm so tired. Are you gonna be all right?"

"I'm just fine, Leaf. Don't you worry 'bout a thing. Hey, it's not the first time you and me got through a bad trip, right? Shoot, we've done a lot of crazy shit together, haven't we?"

"Yeah, we have..."

"Yeah. Of course, the nutty thing about this trip is that I didn't get the chemicals until after I had flaked..." Belle said, trying to coax a smile out of her old friend.

A faint smile did grace Leaf's face but it soon faded and was replaced by a deep frown. "I love you, Daisy-Belle," she said and slowly clambered to her feet, ultimately helped by Erica's strong hand. Once she was upright, she leaned down to pull her old friend into another tender embrace.

"I love you too, Leaf. Get home safely, okay?" Belle said and ran a thumb across Leaf's pale cheekbone.

Erica had stayed well back to give the old friends some privacy, but now she moved back from the three-seater couch and held her windbreaker ready to put over Leaf's shoulders. "I'll see to that," she said decisively. "We'll go downstairs and take a cab home. Won't we, Leaf?"

"Uh-huh..."
Belle looked from one to the other, suddenly realizing she would have to spend some time alone in the quiet, dark, even foreboding room. "Well, I suppose I could try to get some sleep..." she said in a curiously muted voice.

"You should," Erica said and helped Leaf put her arms down the sleeves of the windbreaker, "'cos I'll be back at seven thirty for the last ninety minutes of the visiting hours. That's in less than two hours."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Belle tried, but the croak she got in her voice proved without a shadow of a doubt that it was merely a polite reflex.

"You couldn't keep me away with a crocodile pond and a barbed-wire fence," Erica said and leaned down to place a kiss on Belle's forehead. After looking at Leaf to make sure she was far enough away, she leaned even further down so she could nibble a little on Belle's gray lips. "Listen, I'm gonna keep Leaf out of trouble while you're here. Okay?" she whispered.

"Thank you," Belle whispered back.

"Yeah. Hurry up and get better. I'm gonna ravish you all night long once you get back home. Mmmm?"

A husky smile spread across Belle's face, and she took full advantage of the closeness of her lover by reaching up and putting a loving hand on Erica's side. "Mmmm! Can't wait!"

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Music. A stage. An audience in colorful clothes and long hair, waving their arms at her. Hot spotlights shining down upon her. She was singing. Singing an old song she had long since forgotten. No, it was Dusty Roads though the lyrics didn't match. She was dancing to the song's folksy beat, singing her heart out to please the crowd. An old-fashioned, square microphone with an endless cord was in her hand. Autumn Leaf was there with her tambourine. She was young. So was the other woman standing next to her playing a flute. A strawberry-blonde with a slender body and a soft yet striking face. Stephanie. But there was another woman, too. Tall and dark-haired. Ocher skin. Blue eyes. Bare feet in sandals. Cut-off jeans and a blue hoodie. Playing a tambourine. Almost unnoticeably, everything else faded away leaving only the dark-skinned woman and her tambourine. The woman turned. Her blue eyes shone with love. She reached out...

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"Erica!" Belle blurted out into the darkness of the private ward. Panting, she stared wide-eyed into the darkened, awfully quiet hospital room to get her bearings. Then everything came back to her and she leaned her head back down onto the pillow and let out a long groan. "Sweet mercy, what a dream... I wish the crappy reality was a dream," she croaked and reached for the glass of water to get some cool fluid down her bone dry throat.

She didn't feel like going back to sleep, so she reached for the remote that was on the flat-topped table so she could turn on the TV. The first station she landed on was a news channel where she learned the time - a quarter past seven in the evening - but all they had to offer were the usual stories of natural disasters and sordid tales of corruption, adultery and political wranglings.

Zapping on, she tried all the channels the TV had to offer - even the Cartoon Network - before she gave up and turned it off again. As she watched the flatscreen TV go blank, she realized she needed to pee.

"Aw hell," she grumbled, trying to find the bell for the nurse without getting tangled up in the cord for the real alarm. In the end, she couldn't find the bell and decided to take matters into her own hands.

Slowly, very slowly, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. She gripped the mattress hard with both hands in case the terrifying fit would return, but everything seemed to be fine - everything except her hip that gave her the usual amount of grief when she got up from any bed.

She used the flat-topped table for leverage and was able to get to her feet with surprising ease. Glad she hadn't made a fool of herself - but feeling every single one of her years - she snuck her bare feet into a pair of hospital-issue slippers and shuffled over to the door to the corridor, mindful not to overstress her weak hip or indeed her even weaker head.

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On her way back from the bathroom in the hall, she looked up at a large, round clock that read twenty past seven. 'This ain't exactly how I wanted to spend December thirtieth, but I guess it beats a pine box with a lid. And my sweetheart is gonna be here any minute now,' she thought on her way down the corridor. Instead of turning into her private ward, she continued down the hallway until she reached a double window that offered a perfect view of Coulson.

Evening had fallen and the city was illuminated by what seemed to be thousands of lights. The angle was wrong to see the community center where everything had fallen to pieces for her, but she had a great view of the downtown area of Coulson, especially the intersection at Main Street and Milner that was quite full of cars stopping or driving in accordance with the traffic lights that hung high above.

Stepping forward, she could see the lights from the parking lot far below. She tried to look after the easily recognizable Microbus, but she couldn't find it among the scores of vehicles parked there. 'Ah, Erica might not even use it, anyhow. She's probably just gonna catch another cab
'over here or something,' she thought. Then, her quiet moment was interrupted by the elevator dinging behind her.

She hoped the sliding doors would reveal the woman she was waiting for but she didn't dare believe it - that is, not until a very familiar, tall figure stepped through the doors and out into the corridor. There was no mistaking the ocher skin, the long legs or the elegantly shaped torso, and Belle wanted to let out a whoop at the sight.

Erica strode down the corridor like a woman on a mission. She had changed into her dark clothes that gave her a very official appearance, though she had put on a gray down vest instead of her blazer. The moment she spotted Belle standing alone at the end of the hallway in her hospital-issue nightgown, her face was transformed from a dark look of worry into a beaming, relieved smile.

A very similar smile played on Belle's face - a smile that only grew larger the closer Erica got. 'Hell yeah... how can I hit the jackpot twice?' she thought, shaking her head in disbelief. 'Unbelievable... but wonderful... but unbe-friggin'-lievable!'

"Hi!" Erica said and hurriedly closed the distance between them. Once they were near enough to each other, she held out her arms and pulled Belle into a warm hug. "I've missed you..."

"I've missed you too," Belle said with her face buried in six feet of mush. Sighing deeply, she rocked back and forth and let herself be engulfed fully by her sweetheart. When they separated, she held Erica out at arm's length. "Man, listen to us... it ain't even been two hours! We're so pathetic..."

"We're so in love is what we are," Erica said with a smile. "Oh, I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you up and about. Are you dizzy? Or in pain? Or-"

Belle shook her head and pulled Erica closer so she didn't have to spread the news all over the corridor. "Nope, I had to pee!"

"Oh..."

"But I'm doing fine now. Maybe it's the medicine, maybe the fit has just packed its bags and moved to Alaska, I dunno. Anyhow, I'm doing just fine at the moment."

"That's great, love," Erica said and automatically swept some of Belle's long, braided hair down over her shoulders. "Oh, by the way, Leaf is in good hands. I dropped her off at home. The Walrus was already there and he promised he'd take her to bed at once."

Hearing that, Belle snickered like a schoolgirl and pretended to be shocked. "Ohhh... but won't that just make her even more tired? Nah, seriously... that dear, old man loves her more than you'd think was possible. I swear they share the same soul, he and Leaf. They're just so great together. Yeah," Belle said dreamily, thinking about the many special moments between Leaf and the Walrus she had witnessed in the years she had lived and worked with them.
Erica nodded and used the opportunity to steal a quick kiss.

"Hon, have you eaten yet? I definitely need some chow. My panties are slipping down, that's how hungry I am," Belle said and reached through the pale green nightgown to pull up in the elastic band just to illustrate her point. Right on cue, her stomach let out a rumbling growl.

"Yeah, I ordered a burrito from d'Ambrosio's."

"Hold it right there, kiddo... you ordered a vegetarian burrito?"

"That's all they've got," Erica said with a smug grin.

"Huh. I'm gonna put my mark on you yet, girl!"

"I think you already have... girl."

Smiling, Belle reached up and snuck a hand inside Erica's down vest to cop a feel just because she could. "Yeah. Hey, I just thought of something... what happened to my iPhone?"

"I got it right here, Belle," Erica said and patted her right front pocket.

"Oh... phew. It was expensive. I need it to call Gerald Thackeray. I need to tell him the whole deal's off. Uh..." Belle said and looked at the pictogram that clearly showed that usage of cell phones was prohibited outside of the visitor's lounge. "Uh, okay. We need to go down to the lounge so we can make the call. We don't wanna turn off any life support machines, don'tcha know."

"No. Where is it?"

"You're asking me? How the hell should I know! These are my first baby steps out of the padded holding cell... eh... we better ask at the desk," Belle said and began to shuffle up the corridor to get to the information desk.

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Five short minutes later, Erica held open a glass door for Belle who shuffled into a cozy area the patients and visitors could use for recreational purposes.

The room was the size of two hospital suites put together, but the furniture and carpets were of a much higher quality. Each of the four corners was equipped with a table and two satellite chairs, and there were two open couch arrangements in the center with room to seat six in each. The walls were decorated with colorful yet tasteful abstract paintings donated by the same foundation that had funded the uncomfortable plastic shells in the corridor, and there were two vending machines placed opposite of the door, one for coffee and one for carbonated and uncarbonated soft drinks.
"Listen, do you want something to drink?" Erica said, pointing at the machines.

"Uh... yes, please. For a change, I think I'll have coff-"

"Anything but the coffee."

"Okay," Belle said with a grin, "a soda pop. Your choice."

While Erica fixed the beverages, Belle sat down in a soft chair at one of the corner tables and crossed her legs. Her nightgown kept creeping up, and she found herself pulling it down even though she had worn far less in public at other times. Sighing over the weird situations she always got stuck into head-first, she looked around at the visitor's lounge and the other people there.

It didn't take long for Erica to return with two diet Pepsis and two plastic cups. Sitting down, she cracked open the cans and poured some of the sticky, brown liquid into the cups. "Baby, if you can't drink it all now, you can take it back to the room."

"Good thinking. I think I can, though," Belle said and took a sip. Diet sodas weren't her thing because of the peculiar aftertaste of the artificial sweetener, but it was better than nothing. "Aw hell, I'm so hungry I could eat this table right here, but I guess I better get on with... ugh, that other thing. Where did you have my iPhone?" she said and put down her cup.

Erica quickly produced the phone from her pocket and watched with interest as Belle found the number for the administrator in the registry and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello, Mr. Thackeray, it's Belle Cos- ... yes, I'm fine, thank you ... no, that didn't happen, I didn't trip over anyth- beg' pardon? ... So I can't sue you 'cos it happened in the parking lot? ... Well, Mr. Thackeray, good thing I wasn't planning to, then ... no ... all right, but- ..."]

Belle held the phone away from her ear so Erica could hear Gerald Thackeray whine his behind off at the other end of the connection.

Chuckling, Erica held up her fingers in the age-old 'Yadda, yadda, yadda'-gesture.

"Mr. Thackeray, hang on ... hang on just a sec ... are you with me? ... Okay, all I wanted to say is that I hereby, oh-fficilly, relinquish command over the New Year's party. Doctor's orders ... yes ... yes, that's right ... yes, I'm throwing in the towel ... oh, Mr. Thackeray, grown men shouldn't whine like that ... yikes, this is embarrassing to listen to ... look, Mr. Thackeray, you're the administrator, you're supposed to be in charge, right? ... Hello? ... Hello?"

Shrugging, Belle closed the connection and slid the phone back across the table. "He hung up," she said with a shrug.

"I guessed as much," Erica said as she raised her rear end off the chair to shove the phone into her pocket. "Listen, Belle... on a more serious note..."
"Uh... yeah?"

"Two things, actually. When we were down at the parking lot, I took your weed. I gave it to the Walrus."

"Oh... Jeez, baby, you didn't have to do that. That could have brought you a lotta grief, couldn't it?" Belle said and reached across the table to put a hand on Erica's elbow.

"Yes. But it's really something else I need to ask you. Leaf told me you had collapsed before," Erica said and shot her lover a slightly pointed gaze. "I'd like to know why you felt you couldn't tell me?"

Belle sighed and leaned back on the chair. At first, she didn't have an answer but simply played with the can. "I... well, I don't have an answer to that, baby. It wasn't that much of a thing, really. I just grabbed a mouthful of rug. I dropped my pen and wanted to reach down to get it. The carpet sorta came up to greet me instead... no big deal."

"Love, if you had hit your head going down, you could have split it wide open. People have died of less. Trust me, I've been called out more than once to people who had received fatal injuries in domestic falls."

"Yeah, I know, baby... hey... wait a minute," Belle said and sat up straight, "how did Leaf know about my belly-flop? I didn't tell her about it...

"You collapsed more than once?!!" Erica said in a voice that sounded suspiciously like the one she used when she wore her badge and her gun.

"Uh, no... wait, honey... I fell in my den... I don't know what Leaf is talking about-

"She said it was at the motel."

"The motel?" Belle said and scrunched up her face into a mask of total confusion. "What motel? We haven't been staying at a motel for, like, years and years and years... I mean, why pay for a motel when we got the tour bus? What the hell is that all about? Are you sure she wasn't buzzing when you spoke to her?"

Belle's confusion made Erica even more confused. After scratching her forehead several times, she eventually put out her hands in the age-old gesture of being so baffled words failed her.

"Uh... quite sure. It was back at the parking lot... she hadn't smoked anything yet. I was under the impression that it happened when you guys drove back from Cape Whitnell...?"

"Well... no. This thing didn't start until, shit... two weeks ago. Tops."

"Huh. Okay," Erica said and took a long swig of her Diet Pepsi. After a few seconds of confused reflection, she remembered the comments that had triggered Leaf's memory. "Oh, she mentioned
it when I said the paramedic unit was right around the corner but the ambulance was further away. Leaf said it was just like the other time."

"Oh... ohhhhh, okay," Belle said with a slow nod. "Oh yeah, now I know what's going on..."

Shaking her head in confusion, Erica chuckled and took another sip of her soda. "I'm glad somebody does. Would you care to clue me in?"

"What Leaf mentioned was the old thing we talked about in your apartment just before you were called out to do... uh, something that I've forgotten what was. Remember I told you about my attempted suicide in the-"

"The motel room! Aw shit, of course," Erica said and rubbed her forehead. "The intentional overdose?"

"Yeah, exactly. Leaf busted down the whole place to get to me. Back then, the paramedics were right around the corner, too. Huh. Talk about your cosmic coincidence..." Belle said and emptied her can of Pepsi.

Erica leaned back and studied the older woman sitting opposite her. Because of the stress and the shock of the sudden illness, the lines in Belle's face were deeper than normal and her complexion still wasn't back to what it usually was, but none of those things stood a chance against Belle's spirit that shone so brightly that all the negativity paled into insignificance. "Yeah. Anyway, I'm glad we got that settled, love... but there's another little thing..."

"Uh... yeah?"

"I don't have many hang-ups, but being kept in the dark by someone I love is definitely one of them." Erica said and put her hand on top of Belle's. "In the future, will you please keep me posted on what's going on with you? I mean, it's just-"

"I understand, love," Belle said and briefly put her other hand on top of Erica's. "I swear that from now on, you'll hear about every single one of my niggles and worries!"

"Thank you. So... now what?"

"Well... I'm gonna eat... I gotta eat!" Belle said with a wink. "Then I'm gonna spend the night here so they can check my vital signs and stuff. I s'pose that's acceptable."

"Definitely."

"Yeah, I didn't get all the details, but I'm guessing if they don't find anything wrong with me, they'll let me go me tomorrow sometime... maybe before lunch? I dunno. Then it's home and into the shower... a long shower... a long, hot shower."
Smiling, Erica turned Belle's hand over so she could tickle her on the palm. "Are ya gonna need someone to wash your hard-to-reach spots?"

"Mmmm, let me see- yes!" Belle said, snatching Erica's hand and returning the favor.

Snickering, the two women hurriedly looked around to see if anyone had been close enough to listen in on their frivolous conversation, but they were safe.

Holding Belle's hand and giving it a little squeeze, Erica leaned in towards her partner so she could speak more quietly. "Tonight, I'm gonna stay until they kick me out. The visiting hours start at nine thirty tomorrow morning and I'm gonna be here on the dot. We'll see what's shaking then, right?"

"'Shaking,' " Belle said with another snicker. "Sheriff, I swear if you spend much more time with me, you're gonna end up with beads in your hair, amber around your neck and shrooms on your omelet."

Erica's left eyebrow crept up her forehead, but it was the warm gaze she sent Belle that really made the air between them heat up. "Well, you better order some more beads, then... 'cos I wanna spend the rest of my life with you."

- And then they kissed.

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CHAPTER 8

Early the next day.

The odd sight of a Volkswagen Microbus painted in outrageous, psychedelic colors driving up to - not to mention parking in front of - the Coulson police station on Main Street attracted more attention from passers-by than anything since the floats at the last Independence Day Parade.

Several people stopped to stare at the multi-colored vehicle parked next to the police cruisers, and their staring didn't grow less when the driver was revealed to be a tall, well-dressed woman instead of the flea-bitten, crusty hippies they had expected.

Erica chuckled over the attention but was aware she shouldn't make a show of it - after all, there was a chance she could be the next Chief of Police. Taking a box of donuts from the front seat, she quickly locked the Microbus and bounded up the concrete staircase two steps at a time.

Like the first time she had been there, the watch desk was abandoned and laughter once again filtered through from the guardroom beyond the tall desk. Studying everything around her with a critical eye, Erica made mental notes of the most important items that needed to be changed if
she was to take over command. The fact that no one seemed to treat the watch duty seriously was at the top of her list.

'Some of the things that can really make or break a working relationship are unwelcome yet necessary changes to the daily routines,' she thought as she continued to look around. 'Sometimes, though, a shake-up is badly needed. It is here.'

When she had been ignored for long enough, she went up to the small stand next to the watch desk and dinged the silver bell.

A few moments later, Officer Kaye Bradley came out to the desk to see what was going on. The grin on her face was promptly replaced by an embarrassed frown when she realized she and her colleagues and been caught napping all over again. "Sheriff Wayne," she said in a business-like tone. "The Chief is in if you wish to speak with him."

"I do. First, though, I have a box of donuts I'd like to share," Erica said and held up the box she had bought at a local bakery.

"Oh... cool. Uh... you could have gone straight in, Sheriff," Kaye said and pointed at the door to the guardroom that Erica and the Chief had used the other day.

"I'm on vacation, Officer Bradley. How many civilians do you allow into your guardroom?"

"Uh... none, Sheriff."

"Good. See you inside, Officer," Erica said and strode over to the door.

Behind her, Kaye grimaced and scratched her earlobe out of pure embarrassment. Rubbing her face to get rid of the blush that was creeping up on her, she spun around on her heel and hurried back inside to warn her colleagues.

When Erica made it into the guardroom with the donuts, the three officers in there were standing to attention. Grinning, she put down the cardboard box and dusted off her hands. "At ease, people. I'm on vacation. Hi, Josh," she said and went straight over to the young man to shake his hand.

"Hello, Sheriff," Josh said and shook the taller woman's hand. "How is your loved one?"

"Oh, she's just fine, thank you. Thanks for the ride, by the way."

"You're very welcome, Sheriff. I'm glad to hear she's better... it looked really bad over there," Josh said and gestured towards a uniformed man who hadn't been there the first time Erica had visited the stationhouse. "Sheriff Wayne, this is Robby Lechner. He was out on patrol the other day."

"Hello, Officer Lechner," Erica said and put out her hand.
The final man of the Coulson police force was in his mid-twenties like the others, with blue eyes, dusty-blonde hair and a nose that looked like it had been broken and remodeled once upon a time. His khaki uniform was stretched over his broad shoulders and strong upper body, but those features made his head look curiously small.

When Erica got close to him to shake his hand, she could see that his head was in fact of regular size, his shoulders were merely unusually square. That combined with his hefty hands and his brawny appearance made Erica surmise that he wrestled or played football in his spare time.

"Hello, Sheriff. Nice to meet you," Robby said in a voice that was softer and more velvety than his hard exterior suggested. "Kaye has told me all about our potential new Chief"

Kaye let out a brief groan that sounded like she wanted to kick Robby's butt. Once again, the blonde's cheeks were tinted red, and once again, she rubbed them to make it go away.

"Well," Erica said and looked all her future colleagues in the eye. "That part hasn't been decided yet. However, I would be hard pressed to find a better roster of officers, that's a fact."

"Thank you, Sheriff," all three mumbled.

"I'm only speaking the truth. Which reminds me, has Officer Burton called in sick today? I noticed all five vehicles were parked outside."

"No, Sheriff," Josh said, "he's on plain clothes duty in the supermarkets. We had a spate of bag-snatchings and pickpocketing yesterday. Officer Burton fit in best with the clientele over there."

"I see. All right. Well, have fun with the donuts. I'll go upstairs to see the Chief now," Erica said and waved to the three officers, "but I'll be back once I'm done... so save one with chocolate frosting for me, eh?"

Josh, Kaye and Robby all looked at each other, knowing it meant one of them needed to sit at the watch desk for the foreseeable future. Kaye shrugged, knowing she had drawn the proverbial shortest straw because of her shortest tenure at the precinct.

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Upstairs, Erica arrived at the door to the odd office but didn't knock at first. Instead, she reached inside herself to interpret the messages her heart sent her. If she was offered the contract, should she accept it, or should she remain in Cape Whitnell?

She had many good friends there, like her deputy, Patrick Rogers, or the incomparable Marcia Willems. The bubblegum-chewing secretary Wanda and Judy Shaheen from the diner were also part of the group she liked to consider her friends and acquaintances. The election to find the next Sheriff would take place the following summer - which would mean she would have to go on a tedious ass-kissing campaign - but she couldn't see anyone challenging her for the position.
In Coulson, it was a slightly different matter. Apart from Belle, Leaf and the Walrus, she really didn't know anyone there. She had no doubt she would get close to the four junior officers to fit her preferred command style of creating a strong synergy among the squad, but it would take a while as her position as their superior demanded that she kept half a step back for at least the first few months so the boundaries wouldn't get blurred. And besides, with the changes she wanted to introduce, she was sure to ruffle a few feathers from the get-go.

And yet, what weighed most on Erica's mind was the colorful, feisty old hippie bird Daisy-Belle Cosmick who had stolen her heart so completely and so easily that it bordered on being the heist of the century.

Belle's fit had been a stark reminder that immortality was only found in comic books. They had both faced death in the distant past, but an illness like the one that had snuck up on Belle like a spy in the night was out of their control.

They were twenty-four years apart, and Erica knew it would all come to an end sooner than if she had found someone younger, but even the thought of what would happen then sent a freezing shiver down her spine - however, the age difference also gave her a strong push to invest all she had to make the relationship burn as brightly as humanly possible in the time they were allotted.

In the end, her heart sent her a clear and unencrypted message that whatever else she did, she needed to be at Belle's side, in Belle's arms, and in Belle's bed.

Nodding decisively, she knocked on the door, remembering to do it softly so the flimsy scaffolding wouldn't give up the ghost.

'Enter!' the Chief's familiar voice said through the glass door.

"This is it," Erica mumbled to herself as she depressed the door handle and went inside.

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Up in the private ward on the sixth floor of the Methodist Hospital, Belle sat on the edge of the bed and leafed through a dog-eared edition of the previous day's Coulson Chronicle while she waited for the Doctor to do the rounds.

She read it for the third time so the news wasn't exactly fresh, but the funny stories from around the town still beat the dreary nonsense that played on the TV. She had found the hospital's own movie channel that seemingly only showed comedies to keep everyone's spirits up, but the movie that had been playing when she had checked it starred a leading man she wasn't a fan of so she had turned it off pretty quickly.

Yawning widely, she slapped the newspaper down onto the mattress and rose from the bed. After sticking her feet into her hospital-issue slippers, she shuffled over to the door to see what in the world was keeping the doctor.
Outside, the corridor was empty but she could hear Doctor Singh's characteristic accent from a room somewhere further down the hall. He appeared to be holding court in Latin - at least, that's what it sounded like.

Sighing, Belle bumped her forehead against the doorjamb. "Yikes, this is like doin' thirty years in Alcatraz," she mumbled. "The only difference is there ain't no bars on the door. Hell, I'm even waiting for a Sheriff to show up... oh crap, when is that doc gonna come and release me so I can go home to my big, bad bear? Man, this is the worst kind of suckiness- oh!"

Doctor Singh and his entourage of younger doctors suddenly appeared in the hallway. They spoke quietly for a few seconds before they turned towards Belle's room and began to slide down the corridor on their near-silent rubber shoes.

"Oh hell, here they come... I better hop back into bed and look healthy," Belle mumbled and hurried back to her hospital bed. She had barely swung her legs up under the duvet when Doctor Vijay Singh and four doctors entered the room.

"Good morning, Miss Cosmick," Doctor Singh said, making a note on his tablet that apparently never left his hand.

"Good morning, Doctor Singh," Belle said, trying to be as upbeat and cheery as possible. "Good morning, fellas," she said to the others - they all mumbled 'good morning' to her.

The senior Doctor briefly looked at Belle and then down at his tablet. Then up at Belle, then down at his tablet - the game of hide and seek continued for nearly thirty seconds.

By then, Belle had grown thoroughly nervous. 'Maybe they've donated my body to science but forgot to tell me? Maybe he's sizing me up for... uh, something I don't wanna know what is?'

"Miss Cosmick," Doctor Singh said and did indeed size Belle up. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Oh, just fine, doc. Thank you."

"Have you experienced further paroxysms... fits, since the big one?"

"No," Belle said, deciding to treat the situation a bit more seriously, "no, I haven't. I haven't had any discomfort of any kind since I was brought up here."

The Doctor turned to his entourage and blurted out an endless stream of Latin terms that left Belle quite dizzy - though a different kind of dizzy. When he was done, he turned back to his patient and offered her a smile. "All right. The last test showed the regulators were doing their job, your blood pressure was well within acceptable limits. Yesterday evening, you weren't given a Dramamine. Have you had any moments of nausea or vertigo since then?"
"No, not at all, Doctor. I had a little trouble falling asleep last night, but that was because I didn't have my sweetheart next to me," Belle said with a wide grin.

"Ah yes, that's understandable," Doctor Singh said, making yet another note on his tablet. "All right. Miss Cosmick, I'll inform Nurse Chaffee to prepare your discharge. She'll take care of the paperwork and the minutiae shortly."

"Mondo cool, Doc. Rock on!" Belle said and flashed Doctor Singh a big thumbs-up.

The doctor briefly furrowed his brow and looked like he had just experienced a generation-gap issue, though of a slightly different kind than normal. "Uh... yes. Quite. Have a nice day, Miss Cosmick."

By now, Belle grinned so widely her smile could barely fit on her face. "Oh, it's gonna be grand, Doc. Don't you worry 'bout that."

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By cosmic coincidence, the situation from the previous evening was repeated down to the exact position Belle was standing in when Erica came out of the elevator. Once again, the folk singer was leaning against the windowsill at the end of the corridor, looking down onto the parking lot far below and wondering where Erica had parked the Microbus.

This time, though, Belle was wearing her street clothes instead of the sickly green hospital-issue nightgown from the night before. Her long, braided hair, the fashionably torn jeans and the loud, long-sleeved T-shirt clashed with the conservative look of the hallway, but she didn't care - all she had eyes for was her big, bad bear who strode down the corridor towards her.

"Hi... good morning, love," Erica said and pulled Belle into a big crush.

"'Morning. You're a sight for sore eyes, lemme tell you..."

Erica looked down at Belle's street clothes and briefly pressed her lips together. "Listen... uh... you're not eloping, are you?" she said in a strong whisper.

"Nope! No, they've let me go. The doc okayed it and everything," Belle said and hooked her arm inside Erica's. "Man... I'm really glad to see you. We're finally going home."

"I kept the bed warm for you."

"I'll bet you did. That won't be a problem a little later on," Belle said with a cheesy grin. "I need a shower first, though. I got a sticky, unclean feeling, ya know? I mean, a male nurse came in with... whatshername..."

"Nurse Chaffee."
"Right. Well, he came in very early this morning and offered me a sponge bath, but... uh... no. Just no."

"You're trying to tell me there's a limit to even your broad-mindedness?"

"Mmmmm-yeah. Something like that. Goof. Anyway, I'm just gonna get my jacket," Belle said and went over to where she had hung her pale blue winter jacket from a hook, "and I'm ready to go home. Can't fuckin' wait!"

Smiling, she hooked her arm back inside Erica's and began to shuffle down the hall towards the elevator. On her way there, she let out a long, very deep sigh of relief that showed exactly what she had thought of the whole situation.

Erica shared her partner's relief and pulled the older woman into a sideways hug while they waited for the elevator to arrive. "Driving over here, I stopped at the community center to see Gerald Thackeray."

"Ugh. How was he?"

"Well, let's say hysteria had claimed him."

"O-yeah, that's Gerald Thackeray all right."

"Yeah. By the way, the concert is actually going ahead."

"Huh? Poor kids..."

"Yeah. He was bossing the glee clubbers around like a caricature from a World War Two movie, but nobody listened to him."

"Figures."

"But more importantly," Erica said and gave Belle's shoulders a squeeze, "I found your acoustic guitar. The Walrus called me to say he had put it in the coffee room and forgot all about it when your shit hit the fan... his words."

"My guitar?" Belle said, staring wide-eyed at Erica. "Man... thank you. I love that guitar..."

"I know. It's down in the bus. Listen, could I tempt you with some tea and a breakfast pancake or two? I found a bakery slash café downtown that's got a pancake buffet until ten thirty. Or do you feel too sticky?"

"Weeeel... yeah. Yeah, I do... I think I'll pass today, okay? But don't forget where it is... sounds like a fun place to have a date," Belle said with a grin.

"Sure, no worries."
"Oh, and before you ask, I've already taken my pills... all seven of 'em, screw it. State-issue chemicals, how about that? Same brand as my own, though."

"Nice to see that our tax dollars are actually being used on something worthwhile..."

"Yep. Namely me, the old hippie bird," Belle said with a cheeky grin.

As the elevator arrived, Belle and Erica quickly stepped inside and chose the button labeled 'Lobby' on the panel.

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The trip home went without drama, and it didn't take long before Erica drove the Microbus into the driveway at Belle's hacienda. To share the workload, Belle put a thumb on the remote which made the garage door roll up.

"Wow, that was tough going... I think I earned myself a kiss for that," Belle said, pretending to wipe her brow.

Erica swiftly drove inside and turned off the engine. "I'll put it on the tab. Can you press it again so the door will roll down?"

"Ugh, I dunno... let me try." - click - "Yes!"

Erica snickered and reached over to rub Belle's thigh. "That's great, love. C'mon, let's go inside."

Belle stepped out and opened the center door to take her guitar that Erica had put down between the seats so it wouldn't slide around. The feel of the old, well-worn instrument in the palm of her hand made her quite emotional, and she needed to take a few deep breaths before she backed out of the Microbus and closed its doors.

Walking up the garden path with her beloved guitar under her arm and a firm grip on her sweetheart's hand, it dawned on her how close she had been to never experiencing any of that again. As Erica opened the door and moved aside so Belle could step into the living room, the myriad of familiar inputs that rushed towards her became too much for her to bear, and she started to sob.

Once the tears came, they didn't want to stop, and it took a warm, soothing embrace by the woman she loved to make everything all right again. Sobbing, Belle placed the guitar on one of the couches and promptly went back into Erica's strong arms. "Man..." she croaked, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get this emotional... I just..."

"You've got nothing to apologize for, love," Erica said and wiped a few of Belle's tears away with her thumb. "Come on, have a rest in the den while I prepare your shower."
"Oh, I'm so exhausted... I really need a nap first. I feel safe now... but... I'm suddenly so damn tired."

Hearing that, Erica pulled back and shot Belle a dark, worried look. "Tired? Are you feeling-

"Oh no, not like that, hon," Belle said and tugged at Erica's arms to get her to come back to her. "I'm not queasy or anything. Just tired. I didn't sleep until it was one or two in the flippin' morning 'cos you weren't there."

"Oh... okay."

"I can't sleep without my favorite soft toy, you know... my big, bad bear." To underscore Belle's words, her face suddenly cracked open in a yawn so wide her jaw popped. Once she settled back down, she smacked her lips a couple of times and shot Erica a droopy gaze. "That kinda tired."

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Four hours later, Belle woke up when her bladder was thumping insistently on the inside of her gut to get her to empty it. "Damn," she croaked, "I slept for four hours... what the hell... ugh, gotta pee! Ouch, my hip... and my neck... oh, screw these old bones," she grumbled as she swung her legs over the side of her own bed in the master bedroom.

After scratching her hair and several other places underneath her pajamas, she so nearly went back to sleep sitting up, but the scrunched-up nature of her position made the pressure on her bladder even stronger, so she clambered to her feet and padded into the bathroom.

With everything out, she shuffled into the living room in her morning coat to see what Erica had been doing while she had been sleeping. "Hey?" she said, not finding her human soft toy anywhere. "Hey? Erica?"

'In here!' the familiar voice said from the den.

Inside the den, Erica was sitting cross-legged on the floor reading one of Belle's old scrapbooks, the one from 1971-1972. When Belle came in, Erica quickly got up and put the book on the bamboo couch. In the meantime, she had changed into her dark blue Cape Whitnell Sheriff's Office sweatshirt and a pair of pale gray sweatpants.

"What the hell, hon... are you reading my old scrapbooks?"

"Yes, I wanted to find out all about your wild years. Uh, I hope you don't mind?" Erica said and bit her lip.

"Of course not," Belle said and pulled Erica into a hug. "'71-'72, huh? Dude, those years were frustrating to the Nth degree."
"Tell me about it. I've just read about the manager who conned you out of several thousand dollars!"

"Oh, you had to mention That Man. Now you've given me the burps!" Belle said and patted her stomach. "He was an asshole, no doubt about that. That was before we called ourselves the Butterflies, but that's another story for another day. I'm way, way too sticky to be this close to you. There's a shower calling my name, so..."

Erica shook her head and leaned in for a kiss and a few nibbles. "Nuh-uh, there's a shower calling both our names..." she husked, running her tongue seductively across Belle's upper lip.

"Oh, Gaaaawd," Belle moaned as she let her mouth be consumed by her younger lover. "Aw... mmmph... unnnh... ugh... wait, hon..."

"What do you mean, wait? I can't wait!" Erica husked before she dove back down to resume feasting on Belle's lips.

"I... ugh... I didn't have time to take my special little pill. I really wanna wait, love. I know it blows, but... but if I don't, I won't get anything out of it. I'm... I'm sorry. Just that kiss alone is making me a little tight," Belle said and put a hand across the lowest part of her stomach.

Smiling, Erica reached up to caress Belle's cheek. "Tell you what we're gonna do... while you shower and take your special pill, I'll make you lunch. Seduction by food... how's that sound?" she said, trailing the tips of her fingers down the older woman's neck, across the pulse point and back up to her ears.

"Ugggn... you know," Belle croaked and pretended to swoon from the tender touch, "it does have a nice ring to it! See you in a verrrry short little while!"

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After Belle's shower, they both savored the late lunch - a light salad and a club soda with mint leaves for each. Following that, Belle brushed her teeth again, just to make sure she was on the clean and wholesome side of the fence.

As she came back into the living room, she came to a dead stop when she clapped eyes on Erica's long, catlike form stretched out on the couch. A hand was buried halfway underneath the waistband of her pale gray sweatpants, and she was looking directly at Belle with the huskiest pair of bedroom eyes imaginable.

Smirking, Belle slipped the morning coat off her shoulders and left it in the middle of the living room floor. Moving with graceful steps, she slid over to the couch and sat down next to Erica's long legs. Her eyes never left Erica's, even as she began to caress the shapely thigh next to her.

Higher and higher her hand went until it reached its destination. Grinning, she cupped Erica's center through the sweatpants and began to rub it ever so gently.
"Ohhh... that's so good, baby," Erica husked and reached down to add a little more pressure to Belle's hand. Together, they rubbed a little harder but kept it reasonable - there was no reason to rush.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah... ohhh..."

"I love to love you, doll. You never hold anything back," Belle husked as she reached in under her pajama top to run her fingers around and across her sensitive breasts.

"Baby, are you good to go?"

"Fully," Belle said and locked eyes with her lover. The crackling message they sent each other proved their obligation to please each other was still as strong as ever.

Working as one, Erica repositioned her legs to make room for Belle who slowly slid downwards and pulled her pajama bottoms down. Her panties soon fluttered onto the floor, too, and then she reached up to help Erica pull off the sweatpants.

The glistening flesh that came into view made Belle grin wickedly and lick her lips in anticipation. "Oh, you... no panties, Sheriff? I'm shocked... really, really shocked," she husked as she slid down on top of her younger lover, making sure her well-lubricated center lined up with Erica's strong thigh while placing her own leg up against the burning hot flesh.

In the meanwhile, Erica had raised up her sweatshirt to reveal she wasn't wearing anything underneath that, either. "You shouldn't be. I'm not your average Sheriff."

"Hell, ain't that the truth!"

The two glorious, liberated ocher breasts proved too hard for Belle to ignore, and she leaned down and began to nibble at the right peak while gently kneading the other. When she was rewarded with more moans, she swapped peaks and zeroed in on the other soft mound. "Oh, Erica Wayne... I fuckin' love you, girl!" she mumbled with her tongue wrapped around the wonderfully erect nipple.

"How much?" Erica husked, reaching down to press Belle's body against her own. With a lustful sigh, she commenced the ancient rhythm and soon felt the love juices from Belle's slick folds coat her thigh.

"This much!" Belle groaned, following her lover's every move. Soon, she lost the ability to speak and settled for groaning out her delight at being loved quite so thoroughly.

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The scream that tore through Belle's throat brought a sobbing moan along with it; a sob that soon turned into laughter that came out in fits and bursts in between the frantic panting. "Oh, baby! What a magic bunny ride!" she cried, floating down onto Erica's naked, steaming hot body.

Erica was still riding her own high from the orgasm that had sent a wave of warm, sparkly pleasure through her. "You don't know what you do to me..." she husked, smiling goofily as she ran her fingers across Belle's back.

"I got a hunch..."

Feeling cheeky, Erica suddenly wrapped her legs around Belle's body and held the petite woman in an ocher vise. "Wotcha gonna do now, huh?"

Belle didn't answer verbally; instead, she decided to let her actions speak for themselves. Moving up while reaching down, she rubbed the tip of her middle finger against Erica's super-sensitive nub a couple of times just to show that she always had a plan B.

The fiery, unexpected touch made Erica throw her head back and let out a throaty cry that left no doubt as to what she was feeling at that precise moment in time. Panting, she came back down and stuck out her tongue at her lover.

"Caught ya by surprise, eh?" Belle said and dove down to nibble at Erica's warm skin. She had only just licked a pathway from one breast to the other when her iPhone sent out a shrill electronic ringing from somewhere on the coffee table next to them. "Oh, hell... that's gotta be Leaf."

"You better take it," Erica said and reached out blindly. On her third attempt, she snagged the phone and put it between her breasts.

Belle chuckled at the curious sight of two ocher breasts framing the white telephone. "D'ya think we can take a picture of your boobs and put it on the cover?" she said, running her finger along the swell of Erica's left breast. "Nah, just kidding... or am I?"

"Will you answer the phone! It's tickling me something fierce!"

"All right, all right, sheesh!" Belle said and touched the screen. "You're live and on the air with the handsome hippie bird Belle Cosmick. Who is this, come on back?"

'Hi Belle, it's Leaf! How are you? Please tell me you're feeling better now.'

"I am... I'm feeling so fine right now you wouldn't believe it."

'Oh, are you high?'

"Naw, positively orgasmic," Belle said and wiggled her eyebrows at her lover.
'Ohhh... okay. Was it good?'

"Girl! Do you even have to ask?"

At the other end of the line, Leaf snickered so loudly it echoed through the living room.

Chuckling along with Belle's old friend, Erica motioned that she would like to move out of the position she was in. When Belle took the phone and pulled back, she swung her legs over the side of the couch enjoying the final traces of her last orgasm. A sudden impulse to return the favor made her stand up and walk around the coffee table.

'Belle, I'm calling to invite you and Erica to our traditional New Year's party that me and the Walrus are gonna be organizing tomorrow evening. It was gonna be tonight, but you know... that just didn't work out. It's at ten PM over at our place. Please say yes.'

"Hell yeah, you can count on us. We'll be there!" Belle said and glanced admiringly at the stark naked Erica who walked around the table. When her tall lover sat down on the foot-end of the couch and shot her a look that said Lie Down And I'll Show You What I Can Do, Belle nearly dropped the iPhone from her limp hand. Grinning, she scooted up to the top end of the couch and got comfortable.

'Great! Oh, it's gonna be so much fun, Belle. I've invited several of the old boys and girls and they've all said yes. Oh, we're gonna have such a good time. This year, we're gonna make it like a theme night... we're all gonna dress up like we did back then.'

"Oh, like a costume party? Cool," Belle said, barely able to contain her excitement as Erica slid towards her like a tigress on the prowl.

'Yeah! And we're of course gonna play all the old records and stuff like we always do. You don't have to bring anything to eat or drink or anything like that... of course, if you got some good shit to smoke, you're more than welcome to bring that...'"I'll see what I can find."

By now, Erica had reached the spot she had been searching for. Leaning down, she placed a tender kiss on Belle's graying patch of hair before looking up and locking eyes with her lover to ask for permission.

The permission came at once with an unsubtle jerk of the head. Two red blotches formed on Belle's cheeks as Erica extended her tongue and went to work pleasing her. Within a few seconds, the older woman was unable to carry on the conversation with Leaf and simply dropped the phone onto the carpet.

As the first of many moans escaped Belle's lips, Leaf's fair voice could be heard saying: 'Hello? Belle? Ooooh, you go, girls!' followed by a long snicker before the line went dead.
Many, many moans and groans later...

Leaving Erica's burning hot flesh behind, Belle crawled up the trembling, glistening body underneath her, kissing, fondling and caressing every inch of the ocher skin she had neglected when she went the other way.

Once she reached her lover's breasts, she briefly ran her tongue all around the tender mounds but soon pulled back and sat up on her thighs to behold the naked Native American Goddess who was splayed out across her couch - her dark hair that cascaded over the cushions, her heaving chest with her well-shaped breasts, her long arms with the oh-so-skilled fingers, her flat, slightly muscular stomach that led into her V's and the prize below, and finally onto her endless legs that Belle had just been intimately acquainted with.

One thing was missing - her blue eyes. Erica still had her eyes closed from the rush that had claimed her, but Belle was determined to do something about that. Reaching down behind the couch, she grabbed a fleece plaid she kept there for the chilly evenings. Spreading it out over them, she squeezed down next to her lover, making sure that as many square inches of ocher skin as possible were rubbing against her own, paler exterior.

"Hey," she whispered before moving in to nibble on Erica's lips. "That was good, yeah?"

"That was better than good," Erica whispered back, opening her eyes.

'And there they are!' Belle thought, looking at the pale blue orbs. Smirking, she wrapped an arm and a leg around Erica's naked body and snuggled down into her grasp. After a little while, she climbed further up Erica's strong body to be at eye level with her. "An old bird could nest here... hell yeah," she husked, tightening the grip.

"Uh, listen," Erica said, but didn't go any further.

"What?"

"Ah..." Erica said with a tired snicker.

When Erica still didn't go on, Belle leaned in and stole a little kiss. "Whaaat? Oh, come on, girl!"

"I'm... I have a..."

"Now that sounds serious, ac-chew-ly."

"No, uh... before I picked you up, I-"

"Spoke to Gerald Thackeray...? You told me that already," Belle said and stole another one. When it tasted even better than the first, she went back for her third helping.
Erica snickered and teased her older lover by running a few fingers up and down her bare back underneath the fleece plaid. "No... well, I did, I told you, but... uh, before that."

"Yeah?"

"I went down to the police station and..."

For the fifth time in a row, Erica fell quiet, but this time, Belle had already sussed out what it was she was stuttering to tell her. "The contract? You signed the contract?"

"Well... no."

"No? Wow, this is fuckin' confusing..." Belle said and pretended to shrug. She could feel the shrug accidentally caused her leg to rub against Erica's sensitive center, but she wasn't about to apologize.

The sweet touch made Erica gasp loudly and worm around under the plaid. Exhaling slowly, she sought out Belle's mouth and offered her a very long, very insistent kiss to transfer some of the heat that had suddenly built up inside her. "Careful with that leg, love," she whispered huskily. "You don't want me to burn to a crisp, do you?"

"Hell yes, I do! But only when I'm good and ready to reap the benefits," Belle whispered and dove in to return the kiss. Once they separated, she reached up to put the tip of an index finger on Erica's chin. "The contract, Erica... what about the flippin' contract?"

"Oh yeah, well... I didn't sign it. Yet. I wanted to square things with you first. Do you... would you, uh... Belle, could you imagine sharing your house and bed with the Coulson Chief of Police... or would it be murder for your street cred?"

Now Belle didn't answer. Erica grunted and rolled over onto her right side so they were face to face. Reaching down under the fleece plaid, she tugged Belle towards her so their bodies were glued together from top to toe. "Belle? Is that a yes or a no?"

"It's a yes, sweetheart," Belle croaked, looking at Erica through a veil of tears. "Yes, I would share a bed and... hell, my whole life... with the Coulson Chief of Police. But only if it's you. Not that hairy fella who's got the job now."

Erica let out a loud chuckle and wrapped her free arm around Belle's body to bring them even closer together. "Duh, that was kinda the plan..."

"Ohhhh..."

The two women looked each other in the eye - and promptly broke down in identical giggles fits.

"All right," Erica said and rubbed her nose against Belle's. "I hoped you'd say that... yeah. The current Chief... the hairy one... presented me with the contract. The pay is slightly less than what
I get in Cape Whitnell, but not by much. I'll have more responsibility and a bigger team of people to work with... I'll still do the occasional patrol but nowhere near as many as I do now. After a year or so, I'll be able to improve my qualifications by taking a few supplementary courses. I could be a Lieutenant if I pass the exam. That'll mean a pay raise... but above and beyond all that, there's you."

"Awww..."

"All in all, it's a win-win situation for everybody," Erica said and gave Belle a hug underneath the fleece plaid. "Oh, you gotta meet my new team. They're great people."

"Team? When you say team, you don't mean the janitors and the window cleaners, right? You mean the fuzz, right?"

"Well... yeah."

"Oh, that'll be the day. Are you gonna have staff meetings here? Do you want me to be a li'l ol' housewife and make you Idaho Igotgas steaks and my world famous hashish browns?"

"Uh, speaking of sayings... when you say, uh... hashish browns, you mean the potatoes, right?"

"No!"

"Okay... we better skip that part, Miss Li'l Ol' Housewife," Erica said and tweaked Belle's chin. "I'd still like you to meet them. Actually, you sort of already have, at least one of them... Josh came down to the parking lot at the community center when he heard our emergency call."

Belle chuckled darkly and gave Erica a slight push on her shoulders to let her know she should roll over onto her back. "I was kinda out of it at the time," she said and climbed up on the strong body underneath her. Snuggling into position under the fleece plaid, she slipped her hands under Erica's shoulders and rested her head on the wonderfully soft chest. When Erica put her arms around Belle's body, the folk singer's paradise was complete.

"I know," Erica said and simply enjoyed the weight of her lover on top of her. "I've never been so frightened in my life. It was the most terrifying situation I've ever been in... even worse than getting shot at."

"Oh, my big bad bear can't get scared!"

"But I was. I love you, you know. And to see you lying there, in pain and... ugh."

Belle sighed deeply and snuggled even further down onto her lover's warm, soft body. "Yeah. For a while there, I didn't think I'd ever get to do this again," she said and gently kissed Erica's ocher skin. "And all because of that stinking New Year's concert. Fuck that, dude. I don't know what the hell I was thinking. Actually, I do... I wanted to prove to the world and myself I could still do it. Well guess what, I couldn't."
"Mmmm, that's not true..."

"Sure it is. If I could, we'd be over there now, playing... right?"

"It wasn't your fault, love. They were just the worst bunch of untalented people I've ever come across," Erica said with a shrug that made her precious cargo bob up and down on her chest.

"Aw, they weren't even untalented, they just didn't give a fuck. I learned a lesson... a huge lesson... from this mess, though. My health is more important than my ambitions. From now on, I'm gonna simmer down and... well... not say yes to shit like that without at least discussing it with you."

Grunting, Erica began to run her fingers up and down Belle's bare skin. Now and then she stopped to draw a little flower or a similar pattern before she moved on. "Listen, that's a choice you have to make for yourself, love. I don't want to play the queen of the castle who tells her cowed wife that she can't leave the establishment, you know."

"Cowed?" Belle said and raised her head to look Erica in the eye. "Never gonna happen. Never."

"I believe you," Erica said with a snicker. "But you know what I meant."

"Yeah," Belle said and snuggled back down into her living cushion. "I still love to sing, though. At Halloween, I was invited to do a little show down at the pavilion in the park near the community center. That was a fun gig. Just me and my guitar, though Leaf was backstage. I did six goofy songs with a buncha kids from a kindergarten. Man, you should have seen the parent's faces when the old hippie bird let rip."

"Yeah, huh?"

"Yeah. That's the kinda gig I'd like to keep on doing. Or sing a few songs down at MacRowdy's on talent night. If they're too much for my blood pressure, you might as well dig a hole for me in the back yard and throw me in right away, 'cos then I don't wanna live."

"But that's so messy..." Erica said and motioned that she would like Belle to slide off her. Once they were apart, Erica turned around and leaned in to nibble on the singer's lips, "how about I just loved you to pieces instead? Wouldn't that be a great way to celebrate? You know, it's New Year's Eve... we could have a little fireworks?"

"That's probably a better deal... I love fireworks. Mmmm-yeah... I could live with that," Belle husked, but that was all she had time to say before Erica began to slide down her body with the intent to thrill and please.

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"You know, Belle..." Erica said as she stood in front of the mirror in the spare bedroom, holding up the vintage sleeveless dress she had been given. Dyed purple, the dress had a hand-painted symbol of the Ethereal Sun on the front with blue tendrils twisting away from the orange blob in the center. The blob had an open mouth and two eyes, one open and one closed.

The back wasn't better - a peace symbol and two white doves that appeared to be kissing, though Erica couldn't fathom how they could do that considering they both had beaks.

"Whassat, honey?" Belle said, sticking her head in from the master bedroom only wearing a wrap-around towel.

"I'm not sure this is really my thing..."

"Of course it is. You'll look great... and just right. Trust me," Belle said and popped back out.

Erica grunted and held up the dress again. Looking down, she could see it barely came to mid-thigh. "I shoulda brought some bicycle shorts... man. There's no way I'm going bare-legged in this dress. Honey!"

'I can hear you! Go on!' Belle shouted from the next room.

"I'm not kidding! It's way too short for me... if I sneeze, the people at the party are gonna see what color my panties are!"

'Oooh, you better wear some, then!'

"Haw, haw..."

'Check the closet... I think I got a pair of sweatpants you can use.'

"Sweatpants? Okay!" Erica shouted back, putting down the outrageous dress on the bed. She went back to the closet and rummaged through a few shelves before she found the aforementioned garment. It didn't take her five seconds to figure out they were so small she would barely be able to get one leg down into them. "I can't wear these... I'd look like Mathilda the flippin' Circus Elephant. But Belle will be so disappointed if I don't dress up. Hmmm."

Erica turned back to the wild dress and looked at the psychedelic colors. Rubbing the side of her nose, she went through a few possible solutions but didn't really arrive at anything solid. An idea suddenly formed in her brain and she let out a little whoop before striding out of the spare bedroom.
A scant minute later, she came back with a pair of scissors and the freshly washed pale gray sweatpants she and Belle had had so much fun with on the couch the day before.

Putting the sweatpants on the bed, she swiftly and remorselessly cut off both legs five inches above the knee, remembering to add a jagged, authentic fringe to both. Grinning, she slammed her hands onto her hips and nodded victoriously.

"Oh, yeah... Belle's gonna be so surprised," she mumbled and pulled off her favorite Cape Whitnell sweatshirt to try on the costume.

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A few minutes later, Belle wondered about the uncharacteristic silence from the spare bedroom. Still wrapped in a towel, she peeked around the corner but couldn't really see anything apart from a pair of cut-off legs lying on the carpet. "What the hell...? Hullo, hullo, anybody home?" she said, knocking on the doorjamb.

The second she came into the bedroom, her jaw fell down to her chest and she let out a wild whoop at the sight of Erica wearing the old, psychedelic dress over a pair of cut-off sweatpants. The tall woman's arms, lower legs and feet were bare, and she wore a rainbow headband around her head. At the same time, her thick hair was gathered in a makeshift pigtail that was tied together by a purple tassel. Erica's hair wasn't quite long enough to fall down over her shoulder, but she had tried.

"Yo, Sister... peace," the Sheriff of Cape Whitnell drawled as she held up her left hand in the age-old V symbol.

"Ho... leee... shit!" Belle exclaimed and clapped her hands together. "Look at you! Oh my hell, you're so... so... wow! Flashback, dude! I'm getting flashbacks..." she continued as she hurried over to her lover to admire her from all angles.

"What do you think? Can I wear this?"

"Oh, you bet your sweet ass you can! Dude! But you ruined your sweats for it...?"

"Yeah. They were kinda old anyway, so... you know," Erica said and spun around to show Belle the whole package.

Belle simply stared at the dress and the woman inside it. The old fabric was somewhat tight over the far taller woman's chest and rear end, but Belle wasn't about to complain over that particular part of the ensemble. "Dude..." she said, lapping up the sight of the stark contrast between the multi-colored dress and the ocher skin on Erica's toned arms and legs. "Wow. Now I'm gonna hafta find something better to wear. You're gonna be a star tonight, love..."

"Nah, you said that everyone will just show up in the clothes they actually wore back then," Erica said modestly.
"But they ain't gonna look like this! Dude!"

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Fifteen minutes before they were supposed to leave, Belle came into the living room holding two jackets in her hand. "Baby, I need your help! Okay, the rest of my costume is pretty much set as you can see... bell-bottom jeans with original, colorful patchwork from 1976. They still fit, how 'bout that?" she said, strutting around so Erica could see the old pants.

"Impressive," Erica said. She put down the magazine she had been reading to pay full attention to her partner's dilemma.

"You betcha. Anyway, and this, baby, this is a hand-dyed green T-shirt from 1971 or so with a stoned smiley-face," Belle said and held out her shirt, "I know it's really washed out now, but I made it myself. Uh... the dye..."

"Obviously."

"Yeah, ha ha. Uh, but the jacket... they're both denim. Either my old biker jacket from 1982," Belle said and held up her right hand to show a jacket that was adorned with patches displaying motorcycle brands, eagles and various other symbols associated with the open road, "or a Wrangler Original I bought second-hand in 1974. It's fashionably worn... hell, it's actually a little threadbare now. But get this, this was reputedly worn by the one and only Janis Ian once upon a time!" she said, holding up her left hand.

"And now it's worn by the one and only Daisy-Belle Cosmick," Erica said and got up from the couch. "Put that one on, the '74 model. It'll work really well with the bell-bottoms."

Dumping the motorcycle jacket on the carpet, Belle stuck her arms down the Wrangler jacket and slipped it on. It was still a perfect fit, and as soon as Belle flipped her braided, gray-blonde hair free of the collar, it was clear to see it was the one for her.

"Yeah," Belle said, looking down at the faded denim. "This is cool. Y'know, I bought this only a couple of days after changing my name to Daisy-Belle. I wanted to give myself a special gift. Yeah. This is the one I'm gonna use tonight. Hey..."

"What?" Erica said, reaching up to caress Belle's cheek.

"Ain't we a team of pretty swell-lookin' gals?"

"We definitely are. Listen, have you checked the pockets for forty-year old grass?"

"No, but I better!" Belle said and looked into the large side pockets. "No weed here, no weed there, no weed anywhere... only a candy wrapper, Sheriff. Were you gonna arrest me for possession with the intent to inhale if I'd been packing?"
"Well, for starters, I would have frisked you thoroughly," Erica said and dove down for a kiss that strangled a perfectly insulted squeal.

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"We're ten minutes late," Erica said, looking at her wristwatch just as Belle drove the old Microbus onto the street where Leaf and the Walrus lived.

"Doesn't matter, love."

"Well... we were told to be here at ten, so..."

"No," Belle said as she cruised along to find a spot to park between the many cars that clogged both sides of the street. The lights on the old Microbus weren't particularly effective and she had to strain her eyes to look through the darkness - as a result, she was practically leaning over the thin, white steering wheel. "Leaf invited us to her party at ten."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Not out here," Belle said and flashed the Flower Power girl next to her a wide, toothy grin. "Time doesn't exist, man. Yesterday, today, tomorrow... morning, noon, evening, night... it's all the same for my generation."

"Right... I'll need an Encyclopedia Hippionica before I can even think of moving in..." Erica mumbled, but reached over to pat Belle's thigh to show she didn't mean it quite so seriously.

Belle chuckled but suddenly zeroed in on a free spot between a multi-colored VW Bug and - somewhat surprisingly considering the rest of the cars - a black Ferrari California. With a grin, she parked the Microbus sort-of up against the curb and quickly turned off the engine.

"What in the world is a Ferrari doing here?" Erica said as she climbed out of the bus to stare at the black wonder behind them.

"One of our old buddies got a great idea for a little electronic gizmo I can't even begin to explain. He sold a quantazillion of those little buggers and now he's got enough dough to buy half of the United States."

"Wow... but he can't still be a hippie? I thought hippies swore off worldly possessions?"

"Wеееее???," Belle said with a wink.

While Erica rolled her eyes, Belle quickly opened the central door of the bus, unzipped the thick winter jacket she had been driving in and put on the 1974 Wrangler Original that had been stored in the back.
As expected on January first, the evening was chilly and she felt a freeze crawling up her arms immediately, but the old denim jacket was quick to combat it.

Adjusting her sleeves and flipping her hair out of the collar, she looked at Erica who was taking off the thin windbreaker she had been wearing during the drive. "Honey, I think you should take off your wristwatch as well. It'll look really out of place."

"My watch? But I'm a slave to the hands of time," Erica said and stopped trying to get her outrageous dress to fit less snugly across her bosom. "Uh... but okay. I can go an evening without knowing what time it is. I'll just have to rely on my internal chronometer," she continued with a grin as she took off her watch and put it down between the seats so it couldn't be spotted from the sidewalk.

As Belle closed and locked the Microbus, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Baby, before we go in, there's something important I need to say. I know this kind of gig is way, way removed from your everyday world... when we go through that door, we're gonna be transported back in time to, oh, 1969 or so. If it's too much for you, I won't mind if you leave early and head for home. But, baby... this is my world, my people... I'm here 'til they kick me out. I hope you understand that. Even if you don't, don't forget I still love you."

"Well, thanks for thinking of me, love," Erica said and pulled her partner into a hug. "Tell you what... tonight, I'll just open my mind and go with the flow. If things get really, really out of hand, I'll chicken out. Uh... just don't expect me to get stoned on acid or anything. That's where I draw the line. And I love you, too."

"Heh, I'm gonna stick to lite beer and maybe a little grass, too, that's a fact. I've already been in orbit around Mercury once this week... I ain't planning another trip to the stars."

"Good," Erica said and stole a kiss while she was so close to her sweetheart.

The house shared by Leaf and the Walrus was a one-storey red brick bungalow designed in a more traditional style than Belle's hacienda. The house was drawn back some thirty feet from the sidewalk, leaving plenty of room for a lawn and a few, small trees in front of it.

Unusually for a one-storey building, the forward part of the house was a large, covered porch with two pillars that supported the sloped, tiled roof on either side of the square. A glass sliding door formed the back wall of the porch, and it was clear to see from the activity inside the party was already hot.

Since Leaf and her husband didn't have a car, the gravelly driveway up to the garage that was pulled back even further from the street had been brought into use as a parking lot and was occupied by a very old Mercedes and two Volkswagens, an old Bug and a fairly new Jetta.

The gravel crunched under Erica's and Belle's shoes as they walked up to the front door that was placed exactly halfway along the front of the bungalow. Erica still intended to be barefoot the
entire evening but she had insisted on wearing a pair of sneakers on the way there, claiming much to Belle's amusement - that she wasn't a method actress.

Erica's esoteric dress combined with Belle's bell-bottom jeans that flapped around in just the right fashion - and gave her the look of Shaggy from Scooby-Doo - meant they really were a swell-looking pair of gals, like Belle had claimed them to be.

A marquee above the door said the house was the White Angel Commune. Another, smaller marquee below it said in loud and clear letters that the guests should 'Check Your Tude At The Door.'

"Are you ready?" Belle said and dinged the doorbell. "Let me look at you... mmmm-mmm-mmmmm-mm-mmmm... yeah, you're ready, all right."

"If I'm ready, you're even more ready," Erica said and bumped shoulders with Belle.

"You betcha."

A second later, the door was opened to reveal Leaf in an olive green, Vietnam-vintage US Army jacket, a pair of ripped - not torn, ripped - blue jeans, a 'Save The Planet Ban Fracking'-T-shirt and a pair of sandals. As always, she had her fingernails painted in all the colors of the rainbow, and to mark the occasion, she also had her toenails done up in the same way. In addition to those splashes of color, she had painted little flowers on her cheeks, a blue one on the right and a yellow on the left.

"Oooooh!" Leaf cried when she clapped her eyes on the two women outside. "Come in! Come in! You girls look good enough to eat!"

"Gee, thanks," Belle said with a snicker. Going into a hallway beyond the front door, she pulled her old friend into a hug and then stepped back to study her costume. "Hell yeah, you look great, Leaf!"

"Thanks, Belle," Leaf said and flashed a beaming smile at the two new guests. "I'm the Runaway. Who are you girls tonight?"

"Uh... I'm the Girl Wrangler," Belle said with a cheesy grin. "And this is my best friend, The Lady of the Sun-"

"Naw, tonight I'm Rikka Walking Bear. Peace, sister," Erica said with a grin, deciding for once to use her ceremonial name given to her by the elders of her Abenaki tribe back home.

Leaf's jaw made a slow descent until it was hanging quite loose. "Rikka Walking Bear?" she whispered reverently.

"That's me, all right. I guess it's my tribal name."
"Your tribal name? Gawd... I just came..." Leaf said and wiped her brow.

"Uh... okay. Always glad to be of assistance..." Erica said, taking off her sneakers. When nothing more happened, she glanced at Belle in a plea for help. "Uh..."

Belle chuckled and hooked her arm inside her partner's. "While you put on a dry pair o' panties, Leaf, me and the Walkin' Bear here are gonna go inside and introduce ourselves, okay?"

"Okay," Leaf squeaked.

The hallway opened up into a large living room that could be divided into two by a sliding wall two-thirds of the way towards the glass door that led onto the porch. One end of the living room had been cleared to make way for a landscape of Moroccan poufs of all colors and sizes, and the other saw two couches moved into an L with a low table in front so people could mingle while enjoying various snacks and beverages.

Just ahead of the many Moroccan poufs, a door led off to the kitchen - a little plaque on the door actually said 'Kitchen' - and next to that, a hallway went down to the bathroom and the bedrooms. To the left of the living room, beyond the couches, a carpeted staircase went down and out of sight.

There were lava lamps and regular lamps with filtered shades everywhere, all creating quite a spectacle of psychedelic lights on the walls and the ceiling. In two places, rotating glittery disco balls had been placed upside-down on the carpet to add a sparkly touch to the party.

The Beatles provided the soundtrack with Sergeant Pepper playing on an old-fashioned turntable that had been set up among the landscape of poufs. The sound was distributed evenly throughout the living room by an intricate maze of speakers that had been placed seemingly at random, but with great effect.

Over at the couch arrangement, a fairly large flatscreen TV was playing the original Woodstock concert movie from a DVD, and the split-screen cinematography mixed well with the colorful lights from the many lamps.

And the entire place was populated with hippies. Old hippies, even older hippies, skinny hippies, pot-bellied hippies, talking hippies, laughing hippies, buzzing hippies and stoned hippies.

Erica stared wide-eyed at the partygoers who were all dressed in genuine period outfits. At first count, including themselves, there were three men and seven women present. "Wow...!" she croaked at Belle who came up to her after making sure Leaf was all right. "I had no idea it would be this popular!"

"Leaf's parties always are. C'mon, let's go over to the couches. I see a couple of guys and gals I want you to meet."

"Uh... sure," Erica said and shuffled on bare feet over to the many people sitting in the couches.
"Hi, everybody!" Belle shouted to be heard over The Beatles and the Woodstock movie soundtrack playing from the DVD. "This is my sweetheart, Rikka Walking Bear of the Abenaki tribe. She's a party virgin so please give her a warm welcome, yeah?"

The people on the couch duly waved at Erica or raised cans of beer at her. Erica settled for waving back at them.

"Rikka," Belle said and gestured at the group of people, "meet Rainbow, Dawn, Crystal... they're sisters that's why they look so much alike... Cloud, Hawk and Shea."

"Hello, everybody. I'm Rikka," Erica said and waved again.

While Belle sat down on the couch and said hello to the others in a more intimate way, a woman in her late fifties quickly stubbed out a suspicious-looking cigarette and jumped to her feet.

Like the others, she was dressed in an authentic costume: a clearly home-sown Flower Power t-shirt with longer than usual sleeves, purple satin harem pants and finally a pair of sandals. She had several beads in her hair and she wore a necklace carrying irregular-sized pieces of amber. "Sweet mercy, your aura is so strong I can feel it way over here!" she said and unceremoniously put two fingers on Erica's forehead in an upside-down V. "You're three thousand years old, Rikka," she said with a perfectly sincere look on her face.

"Oh, that's... uh, nice. And there I was, gettin' worked up about approaching forty..."

The woman suddenly stood up on tip-toes and placed a kiss right on Erica's lips. "I'm Cloud but people call me Carol... no! Hee-hee, hee, hee-hee, I'm Carol but people call me Cloud," she said and performed a little shimmy on the spot.

Erica was saved by Oswald 'the Walrus' who came out from the kitchen with a tray filled with taco shells and a large bowl of organic guacamole dip. Like always, the fiddler was dressed in a nice pair of blue jeans, a Bruce Springsteen t-shirt and his battered and completely indispensable leather cowboy hat. "Hi, guys! You look great, both of you!" he said as he put down the items on the coffee table between the couches.

"Thanks, Walrus," Erica said and excused herself from Cloud and the others. "You need a hand with that?"

"Uh... sure. I got two more trays out in the kitchen. Just take either one and come back in here," the Walrus said and dug a taco shell into the dip.

While Erica walked over to the kitchen door, the Walrus admired the way her rear end filled out the dress. Popping the taco shell into his mouth, he sat down next to Belle and nudged his elbow into her side. "She sure looks different tonight, huh?"

"Don't even think about it, Walrus. She's way outta your league... and way off-limits, too," Belle said and poked him in the gut.
"Oh, I already got all I can handle. Speaking of which, have you seen my wife anywhere?"

"Yeah. The last time I saw her, she went into the bedroom," Belle said and took one of the taco shells. After dunking it in the organic dip, she put everything in her mouth at once and began to crunch audibly.

"By the way, Belle... Pack's here somewhere," the Walrus said, leaning in so he wouldn't have to shout.

The groan Belle produced around the taco shell didn't need a translation.

"I know. Leaf thought we should invite him. He was one of the first to come but we haven't said five words to each other. He did help put up some of the stuff, though."

In the background, a man wearing a denim jacket with dozens of flounces hanging down from the arms slipped into the kitchen.

"Yeah, okay," Belle said, shrugging. "I guess that's okay. But he better not fuck it up with Erica. That's all I'm saying."

When Sergeant Pepper ran out on the turntable, Leaf appeared as if by magic and put a new record on the old machine, Cheap Thrills by Big Brother & The Holding Company. Soon, Janis Joplin's characteristic voice filled the living room singing Turtle Blues which made several of the partygoers cheer and sing along.

"On a lighter note," the Walrus said, leaning in towards Belle, "I swear my wife's got all our old albums memorized. She knows exactly when they run out so she can put on something new. Hey, you want a lite beer to go with that taco, Belle?"

"Yeah, thanks," Belle said and gave her old friend a thumbs-up.

"I better go see what the hell's taking Erica so long in the kitchen... do you think she's bingeing on the dip?"

"Highly doubtful, Walrus!" Belle said and leaned her head back to let out a loud laugh.

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Stepping into the kitchen, the Walrus scrunched up his face when he realized the reason why Erica hadn't returned: Packard Summer was speaking to her, leaning against the counter in his trademark, flouncy denim jacket. His eye was still black and blue, but the Band-Aid on his cheek was gone, leaving a red gash that stood out quite clearly against his gray complexion.

"Pack," the Walrus said coolly, moving over to take the next tray.

"Walrus," the former percussionist of the Butterflies said.
The two men who had known each other for nearly forty years but who had barely seen each other since their last tour sized each other up to gauge what the other was going to do. Packard broke the silence first. "I ain't here to bitch and moan, dude. I'm here 'cos Leaf invited me. I got something important to say to Belle and the Sheriff."

"No sweat, Pack. Once you have, come in and say hi to the others," the Walrus said before he took a Miller Lite for Belle and put it on the tray. With a final glance at Erica to inquire if she could handle him - she could - he left the kitchen.

Erica turned back to the older man and ran her eyes over his slouchy appearance and lined face that were both tell-tale signs of a life lived with a lit joint in the mouth. "So... I'm all ears, Packard."

"I... feck, this was all so easy back home," Packard said and rubbed his forehead. "I guess I want to apol-"

"Pack!" Belle suddenly growled, standing in the doorway to the living room. "I'm tellin' you right now, if you're here to fuck this up like you always do, you might as well hit the fuckin' road right now, dude, 'cos I'm done listening to you spewing crap."

"I ain't gonna spew crap, dude," Packard said and stood up straight for a change. "I know I've been a feckin' nuisance ever since you guys met each other but I got my reasons for hatin' the feckin' fuzz..."

"Pack..." Belle growled and stepped into the kitchen.

"Lemme speak, for feck's sake, Belle!"

Erica walked over to her partner and put an arm around her Wrangler-clad shoulders. "I think we should let him speak, love."

"Thanks, dude," Pack said and rubbed his eyebrows. "I guess what I wanna do is apologize to ya. I've been an asshole but now I've met a girl of my own and-"

"You what?" Belle said, doing the proverbial double-take.

"Yeah, it's true, dude. I met a girl. Well, she ain't no girl, she's a woman. Her name is Katherine. She works down at the bank, dude. One of them cash-eer clerks, you know? But anyhow, now that I got a girl of my own, I sorta see what went on back in... uh, whatever town it was you met each other in. I want to apologize for the crap things I said back then. Also the crap from when you and me, Belle, were... you know, down at the community center."

A long pause went by where the only sounds came from the party going on right next door. Finally, Belle drew a deep breath and moved over to her old friend. "Works for me, Pack. I wish you all the best with your new girl. Get everything you can out of it, it'll make you forty years younger, dude," she said and put out her arms.
Sighing, Packard gave Belle a brief, but sincere hug before moving over to Erica to do the same.

"I concur, Packard," Erica said and gave him a brief hug as well.

"Thanks, dudes. I better get back, Katherine's waiting for me. Feck, that really was a feckin' load off... I'm glad ya didn't punch my feckin' lights out, dudes... I'll bet you know that jiu-jitsu shit, Sheriff."

"Yep," Erica said with a grin.

"Thought as much. Well, see ya around, dudes," Packard said and put his hand on the knob on the door leading to the back garden.

"Hey, Pack, wait," Belle said, "aintcha gonna come in and say hi to the gang?"

Packard briefly looked at the two women before shrugging. "Nah. I better get on home, dudes."

"Well... okay. see ya," Belle said, with Erica soon joining in.

After Packard had left through the kitchen entrance, the two women looked at each other and performed identical shrugs. "Wow, who'd ha' thunk it?" Belle said and snatched a taco shell from the last remaining tray. She quickly dunked it in the guacamole dip and popped it into her mouth.

"Not me, that's for sure," Erica said and took the tray before Belle could raid it completely. "C'mon, let's go back to the party. Hey, did you know I'm three thousand years old?"

"Nope," Belle said and held the door open, "but I'm glad you are. That way, I'm gonna feel a little less like I'm cradle-snatchin' when I'm rockin' your glorious bod!"

"What?!"

"Nothin'... oh look," Belle said cheekily as she closed the door behind Erica, "there's Leaf... I gotta have a word with her about something... shhh, it's a secret."

Erica looked at her lover like she had grown a second head, but decided not to pursue it. As the older woman scooted off to find Leaf, Erica walked over to the table by the couches with the tray.

After she had put the snacks on the table, the handful of people there quickly snatched up what they could and waved at her as a thank you. Smiling, Erica dusted off her hands and moved to sit down, but the Walrus intercepted her and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Erica, did Pack take off? I can't find him anywhere," he said, pushing his leather cowboy hat back to wipe his sweaty brow.

"Yeah, he left. I don't know why he didn't want to say hi to the others, but... he left."
"Shit. He's really changed a lot recently. He used to be the most outgoing of all of us."

"Yeah, well, people change," Erica said with a shrug. "Is there anything else you need a hand with?"

"No, but there's something I wanna show you in my office," the Walrus said and pointed at the hallway between the kitchen and the staircase. "Some stuff from the good old days."

"Yeah? I love that kinda thing," Erica said and grabbed a taco shell and quickly dipped it in the organic guacamole.

"I know. Leaf told me that you and Belle had looked in her old scrapbooks."

"We did, yeah," Erica said and munched on the taco shell. "There were a couple of really great pictures of your wife in 'em. No wonder you fell for her back then. She was gorgeous... a real elfin."

The Walrus laughed and tweaked his impressive mustache. "You bet your belly button she was. She hasn't changed that much... I look like fuckin' Methuselah now, but Leaf is still very much Leaf. Yeah. Anyway...?"

"Yep, I'm right behind you," Erica said and snatched another taco shell for the road.

The two people left the living room behind and walked down the hallway. There were several framed paintings hanging on the walls, and Erica was surprised at the high quality of the artwork. "Wow, you've got a Corbett, a Mazatlan, a Massey... I've heard about them, they're big names in modern art. Did you buy them at an auction or something?"

"Naw," the Walrus said as he opened the door to his office and turned on the lights. "They're originals. Back in the late seventies, we did a gig in an artist commune further south where they all worked. They were just a bunch of kids then. They gave us those paintings as payment for the gig."

"Wow, no kidding?!" Erica said and spun around to look at the three priceless originals.

"No. Okay, here we are," the Walrus said and stepped aside to let Erica into the office. "Check out the old event posters. Ain't they something? And the collage of old photos next to it was made by Leaf a couple of years ago. Hell, I guess it's nearly a decade ago now."

Erica walked into the office and immediately began to study the colorful posters. Most were held in bright, loud colors like orange, yellow or shock green, but some were grittier and were in black and white with the band names printed in fonts that were supposed to appear hand-drawn.

Most were simply the names of the bands with the title and the dates of the event, but some had likenesses of the bandmembers on them. On one, inevitably the one from Monterey 1976, the entire lineup of the Butterflies were depicted as little cartoon characters underneath the name of
the band. The artist's hand had captured Belle perfectly, but even Stephanie Lorenz and Autumn Leaf were very easy to recognize.

"Wow, this is so flippin' fantastic," Erica said, taking in all the sights including the other names on the bill. Beyond the star band and the Butterflies, she had never heard of a single one of the supporting acts.

"That was our high point," the Walrus said and sat down on the corner of his desk.

"I know, Belle has told me all about that concert," Erica said and moved onto the collage of black-and-white shots and faded color Polaroids. They were all of the Butterflies rehearsing or playing at gigs over the course of their career, and everybody looked so incredibly young.

The Walrus grunted and looked at some of the event posters. "Monterey '76 is the last one 'cos everything turned to shit after that. For us and for the whole folk rock scene. Disco came, saw and conquered. Modern music is just computerized fuckin' around compared to the honest songs we had back then. Hell, nobody's singing anymore, it's all just repeated hooks and asinine lyrics."

"Yeah..." Erica said, looking at the younger version of her sweetheart in the many photos - she couldn't help but falling in love all over again, right there on the spot.

One of them was of Belle rehearsing a song with a guitar over her shoulder, and she wore the exact same expression she did now when she reached into her heart to ground the song. Another photo was of Belle seemingly hopping mad at something, pointing at a roadie who carried a large roll of cables. Some of the other people on the photos were true to themselves as well, like Leaf and a very young - and skinny! - Walrus standing in a corner, snogging. The final picture of Belle was one where she stood next to Stephanie Lorenz, studying a piece of sheet music.

Leaning in, Erica looked at the hand-written caption that read, 'June 1974'. The photo was nearly forty years old, and yet she felt a pang of jealousy at the way Stephanie had her eyes all over Belle. Chuckling, she moved away to the next of the event posters.

"Shit, I didn't mean to be a grump," the Walrus said and slid off the edge of the desk.

Erica grunted and turned back to her host, realizing she had almost forgotten about him on her trip back in time. "Oh, that's all right, Walrus. I mostly agree with you. From documentaries and checking out the old music on YouTube, I know that everything was rawer and more authentic back then. But I will say that there's still a couple of people around who know what they're doing."

"Oh, sure. Well, I hope you enjoyed the guided tour down memory lane. We better get back to the party now," the Walrus said and put his hand on Erica's elbow to lead her back to the door. "I don't want Belle to think we're foolin' around in here... wouldn't be good for my health," he joked as he clicked off the light and closed the door. 
When Erica came back into the living room, the party was still in full swing and there were even some of the aging hippies who had come over to the area with the many Moroccan poufs to wiggle around in weird, slightly disharmonic patterns.

She had to admit that she felt comfortable if not exactly a hundred percent at home amid the hard partying. As she looked around at the older guests, it was clear they were enjoying themselves to the fullest. The colors from the filtered shades mixed with the lava lamps and the disco balls to create a magic symphony of psychedelic lights that played all over the walls, the ceiling and the dancing guests, and she almost felt like she had been allowed a peek at how the people at the party had been in their wild youth back in the sixties and early seventies.

She suddenly spotted an unopened can of Miller Lite on the table and reached for it. Cracking it open, she sat down on the couch and listened to the old-school rock playing on the turntable.

A minute or two went by before a man and a woman left the dance floor and came over to the couches to join Erica. The two people were holding hands and looked like they knew each other well. They were both in their early to mid-sixties and were dressed to the occasion with the man being bare-chested underneath a loose, yellow shirt that clashed with his blue jeans, and the woman dressed in a white robe with a plunging neckline and a braided leather belt around her waist.

"Hi again, Rikka," the woman said and sat down next to Erica. "We were introduced before, but I'm Rainbow. This is my husband Hawk," she said, pointing at the man who sat down on the other side of Erica.

"Nice to meet you both," Erica said and nodded at the two people.

"You're such a beautiful woman," Rainbow said, giving Erica a smoldering gaze. "Your ocher skin is so gorgeous. Daisy-Belle said you're a Native American?"

"That's right," Erica said, suddenly feeling put under an intense spotlight. "One half Abenaki. That's a tribe over in the north-east."

Rainbow nodded and cranked up her smoldering gaze another notch or two. "Oh, that's so glorious. Isn't it, Hawk?"

Her husband nodded.

"Rikka, while we were dancing," Rainbow said and turned up the heat even further, "Hawk and I were wondering if you would like to join us in the Tao?"

Erica narrowed her eyes and looked from one to the other. "I'm sorry... the tower?"

"No, no," Rainbow said with a lusty chuckle, "the Tao. Downstairs. The Tao of Tantric Zen."
"Oh, you know," Erica said and scratched her neck. "I'd only be a stick in the mud. I don't smoke weed or anything like that."

Now Hawk chuckled as well. He and his wife exchanged knowing looks before he suddenly left the couch without having said a word. A few seconds later, he shuffled down the inner staircase to the basement and went out of sight.

"No, Rikka," Rainbow said and began to run her hand up and down her own thigh, "the Tao is a place where open-minded human beings can cast off the shackles of conformity and allow their blue and golden akhta shanas to run wild and free, and mix with the energy created by the others in the room."

Erica pieced together the puzzle with the information she'd been given, and came to the conclusion that she had been invited downstairs to be part of a triple. "Uh... you know," she said, scratching her nose and looking at Rainbow whose face was open and friendly. It was clear to see the suggestion wasn't sinister in the least, but it was still just a tad too personal for Erica. "That's not really... I'm a one-woman kinda gal, to be honest. I'm sorry."

"Awww... okay. If you change your mind, just come downstairs and we'll show you the sights. It's really quite fun," Rainbow said and got up. With a little wave, she sashayed over to the staircase and went downstairs.

"Yeah, uh... yeah. Okay. Maybe in my next life," Erica said and took a long swig of her beer while she watched the split-screen concert going on on the Woodstock DVD that was still playing.

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Five minutes later, Belle shuffled over to the couch - shuffling was the only way to walk in her bell-bottom jeans - and sat down next to Erica. "Hi, honey-bunny, how's it going?" she said, snuggling up to her partner.

"I've just been propositioned..."

"Wow, really? By whom?" Belle said and took a taco shell. Like always, she dunked it in the organic guacamole dip and popped it into her mouth.

"Moonbeam and her husband."

"Rainbow," Belle said around munching on the taco shell.

"Huh?"

"Rainbow, not Moonbeam... though that's a cool name. I think I'll write it down."

Erica chuckled and emptied her beer. "Uh-huh?"
"What happened?"

"Well..." - The Big Brother album faded out, and right on cue, Leaf came in from the kitchen and changed it to Lynyrd Skynyrd's One More From The Road - "They wanted me to go downstairs into the orgy room."

"Oh... okay. It's because you look so fine, hon. You should be flattered. What did you say?"

"That I'm a one-woman gal."

"Awwww! Would the one woman be me?"

"It would," Erica said and suddenly wrapped her arms around Belle. The two women play-wrestled on the couch for a few seconds before the struggle became a warm kiss with just the right amount of tongue for the setting.

"Anyway," Belle said and pushed away a few strands of Erica's dark hair that had escaped its makeshift pigtail, "I've spoken with Leaf and she's gonna make an announcement in a while... right about midnight, actually. It's gonna be kinda important to us, so please stay a little longer."

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere, Belle. I'm enjoying myself, honest," Erica said, leaning in to nibble on Belle's neck.

Their conversation was rudely interrupted by two people running up the stairs from below. It was a man and a woman in their early sixties, and neither was wearing any clothes.

"Holy fuck and a half! That's Chas and Mal!" Belle howled and whooped loudly - Erica simply stared at the outrageous, bouncy sight.

The woman stopped the party dead by flaunting her stuff on the dancefloor for several seconds while shouting "Free bird!" at the top of her lungs. Then, she and the butt-naked man squealed wildly and sprinted back down the stairs, accompanied by a storm of wild cheers from the other people at the party.

"Yikes... now there's something you don't see every day back in Cape Whitnell," Erica croaked, rubbing her eyes.

"I'll bet! Oh-ho yeah! Sweetheart, that was Charles Emerson and his wife Mallory. He's the tech billionaire I told you about..."

"You'd think he could afford some shorts... Gawd, I need to wash my eyes in soap..."

"Goofball!" Belle said and jumped forward to tickle Erica through her purple dress with the Ethereal Sun. They were soon lost to the world and thus missed the whistles and appreciative nods that came from the people on the dancefloor.
CHAPTER 10

Thirty seconds to midnight, every single one of the partygoers were staring at their smartphones or wristwatches to keep track of time - everyone except Erica whose watch was out in the Microbus on Belle's behest. "Belle," she whispered out of the corner of her mouth, "I thought you said my watch would look out of place! Well, whaddaya call this?"

"Progress?" Belle said with a cheesy grin on her lips.

"Progress my..."

"Hush, here it comes!"

Leaf hurried out into the center of the living room with her eyes glued to her phone. For each passing second, she performed a little shimmy to show her guests that it was almost time to celebrate. "Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... three... four... two... one... Happy New Year, everybody!" she squealed, hopping up and down on the spot.

"Happy New Year!" everyone hollered and threw purpose-made popcorn at each other like crazy. The little white corns flew through the room in all directions, and the clever among the party people tried to catch them with their mouth.

Over at the turntable, the Walrus cued Born To Be Wild and set the volume to eleven. Soon, the whole house was rocking to the rafters, belying the ages of the hippies involved.

Belle was no different and wrapped her arms around Erica's body. "Happy New Year, oh you, the love of my life!"

"Happy New Year and everything else right back atcha, Daisy-Belle," Erica said and gave her partner a little crush. "Technically, it's not called the new year when we change from January first to the second, but... eh, who gives a flip."

"Not me, that's for sure," Belle said and grabbed hold of Erica's head to give her one hell of a sloppy kiss right on the lips.

The next thing Erica knew, she was pulled away from Belle by Cloud, the aura reader in the satin harem pants, who had her sights firmly set on dancing with the three thousand year old Native American. "Oof!" Erica cried, but Cloud wasn't about to stop and went into a highly impressive dance routine while holding onto Erica's hands like a pair of vises.

A few seconds went past where the far younger woman was permanently three steps behind, but then she caught the rhythm and accepted the other woman's merriment.
At first, Belle simply laughed at the colorful sight but soon joined in on the fun. Her bad hip and tired knees meant she couldn't keep going for more than a minute before she had to call it quits, but she stayed with Erica and Cloud and sort-of wiggled in one place for the next couple of songs.

When Leaf spotted them, she was at her old friend's side in an instant. Wrapping her arms around Belle's waist from behind, she leaned in and gave her a little kiss on the cheek. "Happy New Year, my old friend. It means the world to me that you're here," she whispered secretively.

"Happy New Year to you, too, Leaf. And ya can't imagine how glad I am to be here. What's shaking with the thing, you know?"

"It's all set... but first, wanna join me in a little dance?"

"Jeez, I'm sorry, Leaf... I'm all bombed out. But you can dance for me if you like," Belle said, tilting her head back to look at Leaf.

"Are you sure you can handle it?" Leaf said and winked.

"Gimme a little sample an' I'll say for sure, girl!"

"You got it. Oh-" Before Leaf could start her dance, Dawn and Crystal had a little mishap on the dance floor. The two sisters - who were both in their late fifties, each with a crown of daisies in their hairbuns and dressed opposite of the other: Dawn had a green shirt and blue jeans and Crystal was the other way 'round - accidentally got their feet snagged and ended up on their rear ends on either side of a Moroccan pouf.

Two seconds later, they both howled with infectious laughter that made the others join in, especially Shea, the oldest of the bunch at sixty-eight. The elderly man who wore a flannel shirt and a pair of olive green US Army pants covered in peace symbols was clearly under the influence of something because his laughter grew more and more manic until he was positively fire-engine red in the face.

It took three people to help him over to the couches where his first and only comment was: "Wow, this is a fuckin' groooooooovy party, man!"

Normalcy returned to the dance floor once the next song started, but Leaf shuffled over to the turntable and turned down the volume much to the vocal dissatisfaction of her guests. She eventually took the needle off the record and moved the arm back. "Ev'rybody, it's past midnight," she said with her hands in the air to catch everyone's attention. "It's time for the ceremony. I've sent the Walrus downstairs to get everybody to come... uh... come up here. You know how important this is to me and it needs to be solid."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the audience, and Erica took the opportunity to thank Cloud for the dance with a little hug before moving over to Belle's side. "Psst... what ceremony?"
she whispered so she wouldn't interrupt Leaf. "Is this gonna be some kind of weird hippie initiation thing or something?"

"No," Belle whispered back, "it's a... well, kind of a blessing if you will."

"Oh... okay."

Over at the staircase, Rainbow and Hawk came up from the Tao of Tantric Zen, looking flushed and fixing their clothing. Right behind them came the nude couple from earlier, though this time they had put on clothes. When Rainbow spotted Belle and Erica, she slipped over to them and put her hands on both their shoulders. "Hi, Belle... Rikka. The offer still stands. I would love to help you both...?" she said, sporting a deep flush and a strong erotic presence.

"Thanks, Rainbow, I know you're good for it," Belle said and winked at her friend, "but my sweetheart here is the shy, reserved type. It just wouldn't work, you know..."

"Sure, sure. But call me sometime, yeah?"

"Will do," Belle said with a wide grin plastered on her face.

The Walrus was the last person to come up from below. Once he had made it to the top of the stairs, he sent his wife a thumbs-up. Leaf nodded back at him and took off her US Army jacket to lose a bit of her martial appearance. "My friends," she said and folded her hands in front of her chest, "tonight, as all New Year's Eves, we're going to honor those among us who have lost loved ones, and those who have found loved ones. I will call your names in turn and you will come up to me for a flower, our symbol of universal love and unity. Cloud."

Hearing the name, Erica glanced over her shoulder with a surprised look on her face. The aura reader was standing a few paces behind her wearing an expression that had turned anything but cheery since she had looked at her last.

Threading her way through the partygoers, Cloud stepped up to Leaf and knelt down in front of her on one of the Moroccan poufs.

"Cloud, in February, you lost your son in a car accident. Please accept this flower as a token for the love we have for you," Leaf said and placed a red, thornless rose behind Cloud's ear. "Never forget you're part of a community where we always take care of each other, not because it's the right thing to do, but because it's the only thing to do," she continued, eventually helping Cloud to her feet.

"Wow," Erica whispered, "I had no idea Leaf could be so... so... poetic."

"Let's talk about it once we're done, love. Not now," Belle whispered back, giving Erica's hand a little squeeze.
Everybody offered Cloud a hug and words of support on her way back to the group, including Erica who wanted to kick herself up the rear for initially thinking that Cloud was a slightly odd figure.

"My friends," Leaf continued, "now we shall celebrate those who found love in the year we've just left behind. It's a short list, unfortunately, but I'm sure we can all agree it was high time the old bird found someone to love. Daisy-Belle and Rikka Walking Bear, will you please come up here."

Now Erica really stared at Belle, but the older woman simply smiled and pulled her up towards the head of the group. Once they were there, they knelt down on a Moroccan pouf each and waited for Leaf to start again. Inevitably, they sought each other's hands.

"Daisy-Belle, those of us who were there when we drove into the small town on the coastal road this past September will never forget how you blossomed in the day and a half we spent there. You truly became a whole woman again after spending years being a mere shell of one. You found love, love in the shape of a woman who could not be more different from you. But as I'm sure we all know, when the heart speaks, the rest is irrelevant. Then the other day, Fate was determined to have a role to play, and you fell ill. Had you still been alone, it would have had a different outcome... but you weren't alone anymore, and the bond between you and the woman you love proved so strong that Fate had no choice but to surrender. Please accept this rose as a symbol of the love you have for each other, and as a symbol of the love we have for you."

Leaning forward, Leaf slid the thornless rose in behind Belle's ear and finished by giving her a gentle kiss on the lips. "We love you, Belle," Leaf whispered.

"Thanks, Leaf," Belle whispered, squeezing both Erica's and Leaf's hands at the same time.

Standing up straight, Leaf went over to the little box and took the last remaining rose. "Rikka Walking Bear," she said out loud, "or Erica Wayne as you are sometimes known, when we met you, we were afraid of you. Afraid of the colors you wore, afraid of your physical presence, afraid of the steely glare in your beautiful and oh-so unusual blue eyes. When Belle fell for you, we were certain it was a terrible mistake. How wrong we were... we should have listened to the heart, we should have looked beyond your uniform. We should have looked at the woman and not the badge on her chest. But when we finally did, we knew what Belle had seen in you. You always have time to help anyone who needs it, you are a warm, kind, gentle spirit who only seeks love and never anger or hatred, and above all, your love for Daisy-Belle is so strong that nothing of this world can come between you. We know you have experienced very bad things in the past, but please understand that you have arrived in a circle of love and friendship where we wish to help you when you're in need, like you have helped others. Please accept this rose as a symbol of the love you have for each other, and as a symbol of the love we have for you."

Leaning forward, Leaf tried to slide the rose behind Erica's ear, but the rainbow-colored headband was in the way.
Erica realized at once and quickly whipped it off to give Leaf plenty of room to add the ceremonial flower.

"Welcome to our circle, Rikka... Erica," Leaf whispered and kissed the far younger woman on the lips.

Erica wanted to thank Leaf from the bottom of her heart, but her throat was so choked-up she couldn't get a word past her lips. Instead, she simply sought out the older woman's hands and gave them a squeeze. Her insides had turned into a big pile of soggy mush at Leaf's words, and she couldn't fathom how she, a fuzz of all people, could so easily be accepted into the circle of love and friendship, as Leaf had called it. She remembered some of the horror stories Belle had told her about how awfully police officers and deputies had treated the Butterflies, and indeed all those who identified with the countercultures of the time. She knew that everyone at the party would have a similar story to tell, and yet, they had invited her in - simply because she and the firebrand of a woman kneeling next to her loved each other.

Taking a very deep breath, Erica tried to blink away a few tears as she looked to her right at the woman of her desire. She suddenly realized Belle was chewing on her cheek and shooting her an odd look back. "Wh- what?" Erica croaked, wiping her eyes.

"I said, wouldya mind givin' me a hand?" Belle whispered out of the corner of her mouth. "I sorta can't get up on my own... my knees... fuck it..."

"Oh... oh, yeah," Erica said and rose from the Moroccan pouf without any problems. She swiftly lifted Belle up from her own pillow but did it in a way that made it appear they were simply holding onto each other.

"Thank you," Belle whispered, sliding her arms around Erica. "I love you!" she said so loudly that everyone present heard it.

"And I love you," Erica echoed, pulling the older woman into a hug.

'C'mon, girls! Kiss!' someone shouted, and Erica and Belle weren't slow on the uptake. After briefly looking at each other, they leaned in and claimed their partner's lips in a long, warm and most of all, loving kiss.

'Kissin' under the moon, puppies in June!' someone shouted, and the whole party started laughing at the silly joke.

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A quarter to one, the mood of the party had turned more intimate. The psychedelic lights were still flashing but the partygoers had calmed down and were sitting in a big circle on the Moroccan poufs or on the floor, flaking out to the music - Sitar Moods by Anil Khan. Some were humming along to the exotic music and some were holding hands, but they were all reflective.
Erica sat on the floor just beyond the inner circle of aging hippies with her legs and arms around Belle who was in front of her. Studying the others, she rested her cheek on Belle's old Wrangler jacket and just absorbed the unique atmosphere. She was still quite emotional over Leaf's words to her, but even as she digested the meaning of those words, she couldn't help but feel that she was still on the outside looking in.

After all, she was different from the others; far younger, her skin was of a different color though that particular aspect didn't seem to play a part at all, and she was of a different persuasion from most of the other guests. But the thing that cast the largest shadow over the future relationships she hoped to have with the extended family beyond Leaf and the Walrus was what she did for a living. She wasn't a musician or a tech guru, or even a stay-at-home housewife for that matter - she was a cop, a fuzz, one of the pigs.

"Man, this is like coming out all over again. I can't believe I'm getting angsty at thirty-eight... but what'll happen when I bump into someone like Rainbow and her husband... or Cloud... or any of them when I'm on duty, or even when I come home after work? What's going to happen when they put two and two together? Until now, no one's asked what Leaf meant in her beautiful speech, but they'll figure it out sooner or later. Some will be okay with it, some won't be. Even with Belle and the others, there were snags at first... how will it pan out with people I'll only meet once in a while? They'll hold me responsible for every piece of bad press the Coulson police will get... and there's only so much shit Belle can take before she blows up. I don't want to get between her and her old friends, but I don't want them to get in our way, either... hell, this has all the signs of a huge fuck-up in the making...'

Sighing, she leaned in to kiss Belle on the neck.

"Hey," Belle said and twisted around so she could look at her partner. To respect the others who were all quiet and listening to the music, she spoke in hushed tones. "Are you getting tired? Bored?"

"Oh no. This is very special, love."

"I'm glad you see that," Belle said and pulled Erica's head closer so she could give her a proper kiss.

At the same time, Leaf came in from the hallway with another tray of refreshments. Unlike the taco shells, the organic guacamole dip, the carrot sticks and the sesame pretzels they had snacked on earlier, this tray carried three chillums, cigarette papers, a few lighters, a large pile of regular tobacco and seven chunks of cannabis that were sorted in increasing strength and quality grading.

The party people let out a few whoops and reached for their favorite grass on the tray. The three chillums were quickly snatched by those who preferred to smoke that way, and the rest reached for the cigarette papers and the regular tobacco so they could roll themselves a special.
Grunting, Erica rubbed her face and looked at the ceiling. It didn't take long for her to make up her mind, and she reached out to tap Belle on the shoulder. "Love, I can't stay for this. I'll be in the kitchen. I think I'll do the dishes or something. Okay?"

"I understand," Belle said with a smile as she sprinkled regular tobacco out on a piece of cigarette paper.

"Thank you," Erica said and kissed Belle's neck again. Getting up, she smoothed down her outrageous dress and began to shuffle towards the kitchen. She stopped at the door to take a look at the aging hippies who had already lit up. It didn't take long for the characteristic sweet smoke to spread around among them, but by then, Erica had already gone into the kitchen.

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Five minutes later, Erica was elbow-deep in dish water - with a fan going at full speed next to her blowing towards the door to keep the smoke out - when the kitchen door opened. She thought it could be Belle, but it was Dawn and Crystal, the sisters who had fallen over each other's feet earlier.

"Hi!" Crystal said on her way over to the refrigerator. "Oh... there are only a few beers left. Rikka, do you know if the Walrus has another stash somewhere?" she continued, looking at the sorry remains.

"Sorry, I don't," Erica said and dunked a glass in the warm water.

"Shit," Dawn said and took one of the remaining four cans of Miller Lite. Cracking it open, she leaned against the kitchen table and took a long swig before she handed it to her sister. "Hey, how come you're not in there gettin' your kicks with the weed like the rest of the gang?"

"It's not my thing."

"Oh... okay. My sis and I can't stay in the smoke for too long. We've got asthma. Both of us," Dawn said and laughed like she thought it was funny.

"I see."

"Yeah, it blows," Crystal said, handing the can back to her sister. "So... uh, what did Leaf mean when she said you wore the wrong colors when you first met, Rikka? Are you, like, in the military or something?"

"That didn't take long," Erica thought and opened the trash can below the sink to throw in a half-eaten taco shell that had become thoroughly soaked by the dip it was drowned in. "No, I'm a cop. A Sheriff to be exact."

"Whoa..." Dawn mumbled and jumped away from the kitchen table. "Uh... now, I definitely didn't see that one coming. Does Belle know?" she said, biting her fingernails.
"Dawn!" Crystal groaned, slapping her forehead.

"Yeah, tee hee... I guess she does?"

Erica chuckled and dunked the next glass into the soapy water. She looked at her ceremonial rose that she had put on the kitchen table to protect it. "Oh, she knows. So do Leaf and the Walrus before you ask."

Seemingly shell-shocked over the surprising announcement, Dawn leaned back against the kitchen table and drained the last of the beer, much to the annoyance of her sister who had only gotten a few sips. "Well, Leaf loves you, that much is obvious. That's enough for us, right, sis?"

"Yeah..." Crystal said, rolling her eyes. "But why did you have to empty the b-"

"I know it doesn't look like it on the surface," Dawn continued, cutting Crystal off, "but Leaf is very selective when it comes to people. She'll block you out completely if she doesn't like you. Now, Rikka, it was really, really obvious back at the ceremony that she cares about you. And that's good enough for us."

Erica looked at the two sisters while she wiped a plate, wondering how much they had smoked since Dawn couldn't remember what she had just said. She opened her mouth to reply, but never made it further than "Well-
"

"Duh, Dawn!" Crystal said and rolled her eyes again. "Didn't you say the same thing twice in, like, five seconds? What are you, dumb or something? And why did you have to empty that beer? I only got a few sips!"

"I beg your pardon? There's another in the fridge!"

"Oh yeah, and I guess you think we should drink all of Oswald's beer?"

Erica sucked on her teeth and hoped that someone would come and rescue her from the bickering sisters. Her wish came true almost at once when the Walrus came into the kitchen with four empty beer cans in his grasp.

"Hey, girls," he said to Dawn and Crystal as he put down the cans on the table. "I knew I'd find out you here. Have you been raiding my fridge?"

Crystal scrunched up her face and stuck it into her sister's. "What did I tell you? Huh? Didn't I tell you that would happen?"

"No, you didn't!" Dawn howled. "Let's go into the john and bicker on... there's no point in exposing all these friendly folks to you blathering on about nothing."
Moments later, the sisters left the kitchen and turned right to go into the hallway between the kitchen and the staircase, bickering all the way there until their voices were muffled by the bathroom door.

"Okay..." the Walrus said, scratching his mustache. Chuckling, he threw the four cans into a plastic bag labeled 'aluminum recycling' before he turned to Erica. "Just so you know, they ain't gonna kill each other in there, they've been like that for as long as we've known 'em. Huh, since 1992, I guess."

"I see," Erica said and chuckled darkly.

"By the way, you didn't have to do the dishes... there's gonna be more later on, you know."

Finishing up, Erica hung the tea towel on a nail underneath a vintage cartoon of Fritz The Cat. "I know, but I needed an excuse," she said and put the last glass into the cupboard and closed the door. "Oh yeah, we're nearly out of beer."

"Not for long," the Walrus said and shuffled over to the other side of the kitchen. There, he opened another cupboard and took a cardboard case of Miller Lites off a stack that was four and a half feet tall.

"You won't run out of beer anytime soon, huh?" Erica said, opening the door to the refrigerator so the new case could get nice and chilly. While she was there, she grabbed the second to last of the old cans and cracked it open at once.

The Walrus chuckled and shoved the case into the refrigerator. "No, we won't. I think I'll have one, too," he said and took the last can. Drinking from it, he noticed the fan that was still going at the highest setting to blow any cannabis smoke away from Erica. "Uh... I think it's safe for you to go back in now. The stoners are bombed out and the occasional smokers are in good spirits. Belle's playing pattycake with Leaf and the other girls."

"Thanks, Walrus," Erica said, taking a sip. "I had to draw the line there. I hope you understand."

"Sure. Hey, tell you what I'm gonna do... I'm gonna open the sliding door for a little while is what I'm gonna do. That should let in a few penguins and let out a lot of the smoke. How's that?"

After taking another sip, Erica pushed herself off the kitchen table and took her ceremonial rose. "Sounds just fine, Walrus. Much obliged," she said as she pushed the thornless stem behind her ear.

In the living room, the mood had changed again after the weed had been lit up. Shea, Hawk and Charles Emerson were watching Easy Rider on the DVD and were drooling over the motorcycles, while Rainbow, Cloud, Leaf, Mallory and Belle were playing pattycake with each other over by the Moroccan poufs.
The game was a little too difficult for the present condition of the five women who constantly messed it up and had to start over. The merry laughter that came from their side of the living room proved they were having a wonderful time.

While the Walrus walked over to the glass sliding door to get some fresh air inside like he had promised, Erica looked from the TV and over to the pattycake session a couple of times before she made up her mind and joined her sweetheart and the other women. Quickly getting down on the floor behind Belle, she snuck her hands around the folk singer's waist to mess with the game.

At first, the five buzzing women had no idea another player had joined their game until an ocher hand suddenly appeared on top of the pile. Cloud and Rainbow stared bleary-eyed at the strange hand, but Leaf and Belle had already sussed out who it belonged to. Mallory was too hazy to even know what game they were playing.

"Cheat!" Belle howled and began to tickle the ocher hand. Soon, her four fellow players all tickled the hand which caused Erica to pull it back on the double.

The game started anew, but it lasted for all of nine seconds before the sequence got messed up and Belle and the others broke down in infectious giggles.

While Erica had been doing the dishes, the album on the turntable had been Rubber Soul by The Beatles, but the last song was playing, and it wasn't long before it ran out. "Whatcha wanna hear now?" Leaf said as she staggered to her feet.

"Oh, something edgy. Jimi Hendrix!" Rainbow said, but suddenly pointed at a Moroccan pouf that Leaf hadn't spotted in her hazy conditions. "Watch out, Leaf!" she cried, but it was too late.

With a surprised cry, Leaf took a tumble over the pouf and thumped her elbow and shoulder down onto the floor.

"Fuck... Leaf!" Belle cried, but before she could even raise her behind off the carpet, Erica had flown over to the old vocalist to rescue her.

"Leaf, are you all right?" Erica said, putting a gentle hand under the frail woman and helping her sit up on the carpet. "Did you bump your head, honey?"

"Naw," Leaf said and tried to shake it to see for sure. "Naw... but I'm kinda hazy... I was hazy before, though... naw, I think I'm fine. Thank you."

"Anytime. You wanna get up?"

"Yeah, I gotta change the record," Leaf said and tried to get up on her own. At first, she struggled a bit with the pull of gravity, but she suddenly let out a wild squeal when she found herself pulled to her feet by two strong hands like she weighed nothing at all. "Shweeet! Belle, is that how it feels when you girls make love?"
"Just about, yeah," Belle said with a cheesy grin.

Erica just blushed, but when Rainbow puckered up her lips and shot the tall woman a lusty gaze, her cheeks really caught fire which looked odd against her natural ocher tone. Mumbling something unintelligible, she helped Leaf over to the record player and waited for her to change the record.

Once Jimi Hendrix' Are You Experienced started playing, she helped Leaf back down before she sat down herself and emptied her Miller Lite in a single gulp. Then she wrapped her arms around Belle's waist and hoped her cheeks would cool off in a hurry.

Playing pattycake seemed to have lost its attraction and the six women just looked at each other in a flaked-out sort of way while the music played. Then Rainbow woke up like she'd had a bright idea. "Anybody wanna play spin the bottle?" she said with a snicker.

"Noooo," Belle said, drawing out the word and shaking her head to show that she really didn't want to play that game.

"Me neither," Mallory said in a voice that didn't sound like hers at all. She had trouble focusing and was just staring down at a particular spot on the carpet in front of where she was sitting.

"Oh, that's too bad," Rainbow said, shooting Belle and Erica a sizzling look or two, "I had a couple of really fun questions lined up."

Cloud looked from Rainbow and over to Erica, knowing from a single glance that such a combination could never work - their shaktis were just too different. "How about I did a palm and aura reading for you girls instead?" she said, looking at her friends in turn.

That woke Mallory up and she nodded enthusiastically. "I'd like that, Cloud! That's always a lotta fun! Remember the time when you said that I wuz gonna go on a long journey and I did the verrry next day?"

"I never said that... when did I say that?" Cloud said, scratching her cheek. She never got an answer: Mallory had already fallen back down into the dark hole.

"No palm readings," Belle and Rainbow both said as one. When they realized they had parroted each other, they both started snickering.

Throughout the exchange, Erica had studied Leaf whose forehead was furrowed like she was trying to solve the Riddle of the Sphinx. "Leaf, is something wrong? Did you hurt yourself in the fall?"

The others all looked at their old friend who was still deep in thought.

"No," Leaf said thoughtfully, "but there's something I've... we've forgotten to do... I can't remember what it could- Oh! Oh, this is the New Year's Eve party! It's New Year's Eve!"
"Well, technically, it's January second, but-" Erica said, but a gentle poke in the side by Belle told her that it didn't matter.

Suddenly Leaf startled the others by slapping her forehead. "We didn't sing Auld Lang Syne! At midnight! We didn't sing it! We gotta sing it... it's not New Year's Eve without singing Auld Lang Syne," she howled and clambered to her feet. "Walrus!" she cried, moving away from the Moroccan poufs with surprising grace and agility.

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Two minutes later, Leaf pulled the three guys watching Easy Rider over to the others so they could get cozy. Soon after, she pulled Dawn and Crystal out of the bathroom where they had been the whole time since they had started arguing in the kitchen.

While the Walrus sat down on a Moroccan pouf and hit a few notes on his fiddle to make sure it was in tune, Leaf orchestrated the whole party into sitting in a big circle on the floor, all holding hands.

Once everyone was in place, she faded down the Hendrix album and eventually took the arm off the record. "Walrus, are you ready?" she said and squeezed down between Hawk and Cloud who shuffled to the side to make room for her.

"I'm ready, honey," the Walrus said and began playing the intro to the old, sentimental song. Just when the cue came up and the partygoers got ready to start singing, the Walrus played the intro again to really set the tone.

"Oh, booooh!" Belle shouted, waving at her old friend in a five-star display of mock disgust. She was quickly shushed into silence by the others and even tickled by Erica's long fingers.

The next time the cue came up, the whole gang kept quiet to see if the Walrus would trick them again - of course, he didn't, and they fell into the song one by one. Soon, everybody sang along to the sentimental favorite with Belle's throaty pipes and Leaf's crystal clear harmonies setting the framework for the others to sing around.

Erica tried her best, but her unschooled voice couldn't match what the two old professionals brought to the game. Her efforts were noted by Belle who leaned in to rub a hand up and down Erica's long, ochre thigh, and even up the inside of the cut-off sweatpants for a little tickle.

When the song came to an end, an emotional Cloud waved her hand in the air. "Encore! Encore!" she said in a choked-up voice, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. "I'm sorry people... it was the exit song at my son's funeral. I sh- should have known it would make me so emotional. Would... would it be possible to hear it again...?"

"Yeah, do it again, Walrus," Belle said and wrapped her arm around the sniffing Cloud who sat next to her. The two women gave each other a big hug while the Walrus played the intro.
From an unspoken agreement, the amateurs in the group kept quiet so the three professionals could perform the song the way it was supposed to sound. Belle, the Walrus and Autumn Leaf really put their hearts into the encore and it became even more beautiful and haunting than it had been the first time around.

By the time the song ended, Cloud dried her moist eyes and pulled Belle in for another hug. "I knew I should have asked The Butterflies to play at Jason's funeral... it would have been a glorious celebration of his life."

"I wish you had asked us, Cloud. We would have been there in a flash," Belle said, mussing her friend's graying hair. "Anyway, I hope you feel our version did the old song justice."

"Oh yes, very much so. Thank you."

It all became too much for the flaked-out Mallory who suddenly and without warning broke down in a howling cry that made everyone else jump. Within two seconds, her dam burst and she cried so inconsolably that not even the combined efforts of Dawn, Crystal and her husband could make her stop again.

"Shit," Cloud sniffed, dabbing her eyes on the handkerchief, "now I messed it up for everybody..."

"Naw, a party ain't messed up until we're all hog-tied in the back of a paddy wagon," Belle said and clambered to her feet. Once she had made her hip come to life, she shuffled over to the turntable. "And in the meantime, I got an idea for the next album we're gonna hear... hey, Leaf, you still got a copy of A Whale Of A Time?"

Erica quickly scrunched up her face, thinking that her partner had finally smoked a doobie too many. "A whale... what?" she said in a puzzled tone as she moved up to sit on one of the Moroccan poufs.

"A Whale Of A Time," Belle said, looking through the albums in the rack. "Don't tell me you don't have it anymore, Leaf?"

Leaf had been transfixed on the two crying women, but she shook her head and got to her feet. "Of course I got it. It's right there..."

"No, it ain't."

"It's not?"

"No."

"Walrus, where's the whale?"

"In the bookcase in the office, hon," the Walrus said over his shoulder.
"In the bookcase in the office, Belle," Leaf said to Belle even though she was standing only three feet away from the Walrus.

After grinning at her old friends, Belle spun around on her heel and stomped down the hallway. "Thanks, Leaf... thanks, Walrus!"

Erica rubbed her eyebrows and looked from one to the other of the remaining guests. "Uh... will someone please tell the ignorant person over here what A Whale Of A Time is? I can guess it's an album...?"

Rainbow and Hawk both looked at each other and broke out in identical giggles. "You've never listened to A Whale Of A Time, Rikka?" Rainbow said and pretended to shy back in shock.

"No," Erica said flatly, wondering why on Earth she had never heard of what was clearly an earth-shattering album even with her extensive music collection back home.

Belle came back in a hurry carrying an orange-and-green album cover. With a broad smile, she took out the pristine vinyl and held it by the edges while she put it on the turntable. Taking the pickup arm, she waited for a couple of seconds to add another few layers to the tension - then she put the needle on the record and shuffled over to Erica.

The old-fashioned vinyl scratch gave way to a male voice counting off. Erica had just enough time to think that the voice sounded suspiciously like a young Walrus before her doubts were blown away when the first song started.

There was no mistaking the lead vocals; a female singer whose voice may have been young and less husky, but whose raw, authentic pipes spelled out in ten-feet tall, blood-red block letters that it was none other than Daisy-Belle Cosmick going at it at a hundred and ten percent in the uptempo folk rock track.

"Oh... my... flip!" Erica mumbled, grabbing onto Belle's arms. "Why have you never played me that album?! You sound great..."

"Hell yeah, we do!" Belle said, strutting like a peacock. "That's our best album... A Whale Of A Time from 1975. The album that booked us the spot at the Monterey festival."

"Gimme that cover!" Erica demanded jokingly, putting out her hand in the hope that someone would hand her the cardboard cover. Rainbow duly delivered and added a saucy, little wink.

For once, Erica didn't mind - she was too busy looking at the colorful cover. The front was dominated by an orange cartoon whale with stoned eyes. The whale seemed to have swallowed the Butterflies whole as there was a picture of the band - tinged in green and twisted slightly out of proportion - in it's mouth where the members reacted to being gulped up by freaking out. The band's logo and the title of the album were drawn in a cartoony style and were placed in the lower right corner of the cover.
The flipside was a high-contrast black and white photo of the Butterflies performing at a nameless gig, with Daisy-Belle Cosmick and Stephanie Lorenz at the center, Autumn Leaf stage-right with the Walrus, and Packard Summer stage-left with his congas and another man behind a real set of drums. Behind them, two temp musicians were playing bass and electric guitar.

"Okay," Erica said, studying the track list on the flipside. "Side A, Hot Little Number... that's the one we're listening to now, right?"

"Yup!" Belle said and leaned in over Erica's shoulder even though she had seen the album cover so often she had memorized it.

"Hot Little Number, Dusty Roads, One Chance, Will She Look At Me Today-"

"That's a ballad. I wrote it," Belle said and began to muss Erica's neck with her mouth.

"Uh-huh? I Sent Her A Letter... side B, A Whale Of A Time, My Life My Choice, Biding My Time... oh, I remember those two from back in Cape Whitnell..."

Belle nodded and nibbled Erica's neck a little more. "Mmmm. I love those songs. They were covers, though. We didn't write them," she husked in between getting serious with the ochre skin on Erica's neck.

"Okay... oooh," Erica said and squirmed a little under the sweet onslaught. "Uh... and then there's Slow... Oooh! Uh, Slow River Blues and Keep It High, Ride The Sky... whoa, what a... ohhh, Belle... uh, what a title. Is it really nine minutes twenty-two seconds long?"

"Keep It High? Yeah. That's a huge, improvised jam track," Belle said and gave Erica's neck a respite only to run her fingers across the tight dress instead. "All the serious groups had one of those on their albums back then. We recorded it live at a club that I've forgotten the name of. We just sort of let ourselves go on that track... we all did a little solo and stuff. We thought it would be a fun way to end the album. The coolest thing ever, dontchaknow, you gorgeous gal," Belle continued and dove down to resume feasting on her big, bad bear's exposed neck.

Erica smiled goofily from feeling her lover's fingers on her stomach and her wonderfully moist lips on her neck - but suddenly realized that all the others were looking at her and Belle with fluttering eyelids. "Oh, now what? Can't a girl get a little attention without having an audience?"

"Awwwww," Rainbow said, quickly joined by Leaf and Cloud who provided ample support. "You're just so cute together... the way you feast on each other and... awwww! The Zen room is available in case your urges get too great, you know!"

"Haw, haw, thank you very much," Erica said and looked back down at the cover.

Behind her, Belle pondered the idea very, very hard. In the end, she pushed it aside for a little later and let her twenty-four year old self set the stage with the song that would be the biggest hit of the Butterflies, the uptempo boogie rock-track Dusty Roads.
As the song started, Belle's foot soon started wagging to the beat; then bopping, then positively rockin'. Inevitably, she moved out into center stage - slowly so her hip could keep up - and began to jimmy and jive to the old song.

As the first chorus came on, she let rip and accompanied herself on the song, singing it the only way boogie rock should be sung - loud and raw. "Dusty roads will bring me back to you... Lord have mercy, gotta know it's true..." she sang, rocking back and forth while clapping to the beat.

The partygoers all cheered at the unexpected performance, whistling at the old hippie bird and clapping along with the tune. Soon, Leaf joined in with her harmony vocals, and the Walrus grabbed the fiddle and added a whole new layer to the old production.

Erica clapped and cheered along with the other guests. A huge pang of pride blossomed in her chest when she looked at Belle and the way she threw herself into the performance. There was no hiding that the older woman had been put on this earth for this exact purpose - and Erica knew that now Belle had started singing, there would be no stopping her until the break of dawn.

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In the end, it didn't get quite that late. By the time three thirty rolled around, most of the older folks had already called it a night. The hard core - Erica, Belle, Rainbow, Hawk, Leaf and the Walrus - were still there, though only the Walrus and Erica were technically still awake.

Rainbow and her husband occupied one of the two couches, and Leaf and Belle were sitting in the other, arm in arm and very much snoozing.

Outside, the Walrus said a few last goodbyes to Dawn and Crystal as he shut the door of the cab they had ordered for the two sisters. As the yellow car drove down the street and around the next turn, his face cracked wide open in a huge yawn.

"This was a great party... eh?" he said, smacking his lips.

"It definitely was, Walrus," Erica said and helped the older man back up the gravelly driveway where two deep furrows were the only traces of the cars that had parked there earlier. "Listen, do you need a hand with the dishes or anything?"

"Naw, we're heading to bed now. But, uh... if you could come over at three or maybe four... or maybe five this afternoon and give us a hand with this and that, we'd be grateful."

"You betcha. Hey, we could order some takeout... do you guys know d'Ambrosio's? I could call ahead and get them to deliver over here at maybe quarter to five or so...? I'd pay, of course."

"Oh, that'd be so cool. Thanks!"
After letting themselves in, the Walrus put a hand on Erica's elbow and pointed at the four sleeping people on the couches. "Look at my wife and Belle... ain't that just too fuckin' cute?" he whispered.

Belle and her best friend were still arm in arm, leaning against each other like an old married couple. The two older women were such a great match that Erica kicked herself for not having a camera ready. "Yeah," she whispered back. "Aren't we just the luckiest sons of bitches in the whole wide world?"

The Walrus stared at her wide-eyed and had to clamp a hand over his mouth to muffle the braying laugh that bubbled up from his chest. "You said it, Sheriff. Hell, I'm so glad we got to know you better. You're one hell of a straight-up woman... no pun intended," he said and suddenly pulled Erica into a crushing hug. "Belle said you'll be moving in for good now? That you got a job here or something?"

"That's right. I'll start on February first. I'll be back here a short week before then, but in the meantime, I'm going back to Cape Whitnell in three days' time to get things sorted over there. Pack my bags and say my goodbyes, you know."

"Cool... but what kind of job is it, girl?"

"I'll be Coulson's new Chief of Police."

Several seconds went by where the only sounds heard came from the snores over at the couch. "Ho... lee... fuck!" the Walrus exclaimed loudly, knocking all four people on the couch out of their slumber. "Well I'll be a possum's pecker... wow... congratulations, Sheriff!" he said and put out his hand.

"Thanks, Walrus," Erica said and shook the older man's hand thoroughly. "Now that we've woken up the house, I think it's time for me and the old bird to head for home."

Walking into the living room, Erica briefly waved at Belle before she went over to Rainbow and her husband. "D'ya want me to call a cab for you guys?"

"No thanks, Rikka," Rainbow said and sat up on the couch. "We've arranged that Hawk and I can sleep downstairs in the Zen room. Are you leaving now?"

"Yeah. Goodnight, it's been fun," Erica said and stepped forward with her hand out.

Rainbow took it and gave Erica a little squeeze. "Oh, it's been more than fun," she husked. "Will you be here for the next party?"

"If Belle's coming, I'm coming," Erica said, but caught the innuendo too late to do anything about it.
Rainbow wasn't slow in nabbing it - "Oh, I bet you are. I just bet you are," she said with a big, old, cheesy grin on her face.

"Uh-huh," Erica said and shuffled over to Leaf and Belle. "C'mon, you two, it's time to hit the sack."

Yawning, Belle pulled her arm free of Leaf's and wiped her bleary eyes. "Oh, just five more minutes, Mom!"

Leaf chuckled and leaned in to kiss Belle on the cheek. "Ohhh, there goes the neighborhood... goodnight, Rikka. I can't tell you how much fun this has been," she said and clambered to her feet.

"It's been a lot of fun for me, too, Leaf," Erica said and helped the older woman up from the couch.

"You'll remember to protect your rose, right?" Leaf said and reached up to gently touch the red rose that Erica still wore behind her ear.

"Oh, you better believe I will."

Leaf spread her arms and waited for the younger woman to step into her grasp before she gave her a warm hug. "I know you will... may I kiss you?"

"Sure. Sleep tight," Erica said with a chuckle, bending down slightly so the shorter woman could reach.

Smiling, Leaf quickly kissed Erica on the mouth before waving goodnight to everybody - while yawning so widely her jaw popped.

Behind them, Rainbow and her husband shuffled over to the staircase down to the Tao of Tantric Zen, but stopped and waited at the stairs. "G'night, everybody! Rikka, Belle... you sure we can't persuade you girls to... you know...?"

"Oh, we're quite sure, Rainbow," Belle said, pulled Erica close to her in a rare display of possessiveness.

Once they were alone, Erica leaned down and gave Belle a little kiss on the forehead. "While you say goodnight to Leaf, I'll go out to the Microbus to take our jackets and my watch."

"Wait, aren't we gonna drive home?"

"How many beers have you had tonight?"

"Uh..." Belle said and tried to count on her fingers, "I dunno... and the dutchie, I guess, and... okay, you have a point."
"Uh-huh," Erica said and walked back to the front door.

Belle looked after her lover as the tall woman opened and then closed the door. Grinning proudly, she turned towards Leaf and pulled her old friend into a hug. "Goodnight, Leaf. This has been such a fab New Year's party. Next time, it's on me, okay?"

"Okay," Leaf said and wrapped her arms around Belle's waist. Squeezing herself up against the other woman, she winked and whispered: "Maybe next time, we can have a nude-in?"

"Ummmm... maybe, Leaf. Maybe."

"All right. Get home safely. I love you, you crazy old hippie bird," she said and leaned in to give Belle a nice, little goodbye kiss on the lips.

"I love you too, Autumn Leaf. 'Night, Walrus! See y'all next time!"

"Goodnight, Belle... will you get the hell outta here so I can take my wife to bed!" the old fiddler said with his hands firmly ensconced on his hips.

"Yup, yup, yup, I'm goin'!" Belle said and hurried out of the White Angel Commune, laughing all the way down the garden path and the driveway.

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Five minutes later, Erica and Belle turned onto the completely deserted connecting street that would lead them home. Unsurprisingly, the night was dark, but they felt safe under the many street lights. The stars were out and the air was nippy so Belle had her thick winter jacket zipped up so far - and her knitted hat pulled down so far - that only her eyes and nose were visible. Erica was dressed more casually, but even she felt the chill creep up her bare legs.

"You know something funny?" Belle said as she swung their entwined hands back and forth.

"What?"

"All this... you and me... everything has happened 'cos the Catalina Beach Hotel burned down. If it hadn't, you and I would never have met. Back then, the gang and I would have come late at night and we were supposed to leave early in the morning. We wouldn't have met, ever. Or maybe we would have passed each other in the street and I would have thought, wow, look at that gorgeous Native American babe-with-a-six-foot-B, but it wouldn't have been more than that."

"Weeeelll," Erica said, looking down at her partner, "that's not entirely true."

"Uh... it's not?"
"No. We met 'cos you made a wrong turn up the muddy trail next to Marcia Willem's Bed & Breakfast."

"Holy shit, that's right! Whoa, dude, I had forgotten all about that!" Belle said and let out a loud laugh. "Man, I'm getting way too old for my own good here... I don't need a hearing aid, I need a thinking aid! Maybe I'll need some of that Ginseng shit to go with my seven pills each and every flippin' morning..."

They walked along in silence for a couple of minutes before Belle pulled them to a halt underneath a street light. "Baby..." she said, sniffing the ceremonial rose given to her by Leaf.

"Yeah?"

"I got a little problem that I'm hoping you can help me with..."

"A problem?" Erica said and furrowed her brow. "Are you... are you feeling queasy again?"

"Oh no, no... nothing like that. No, you see, I have a persistent tickle."

Erica nodded and rolled up the sleeves of her windbreaker to get her long fingers free to combat any tickle known to Womankind. "Where? I'll give the little bugger a good workout."

"Oh, I'm hoping you will." Belle said cryptically. Her smug looks offered a hint that not all was as it seemed, but her acting skills were good enough to stop giving too much away.

Erica narrowed her eyes, feeling in her gut she was being snookered - even if she didn't know exactly how. In the end, she decided to continue with the game. "Well, where is it?"

"It's my ding-a-ling," Belle said with the broadest smirk imaginable. "It's really, really ticklin' now!"

Chuckling saucily, Erica decided that two could play that game and moved up really, really close to her lover to give as good as she got. "Do you want me to take care of it right here...? Or can you wait 'til we get home?" she husked in a voice that left no doubt as to the nature of her own preference.

"Sheriff Wayne! I'm shocked! Shocked, I tell you!" Belle cried, clutching her head.

"What can I say... I'm not your average Sheriff," Erica Wayne said and dove down to at least give Daisy-Belle Cosmick a good, strong kiss.

The kiss went on and on for a good thirty seconds until Belle had to come up for air. "Far out, dude!" she said with a big, goofy grin on her face.
Once they resumed walking home, Belle snickered and put a hand quite firmly on Erica's butt to make sure it was comfy and warm - after all, she was planning on being close to it for the rest of the night...

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THE END.

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