Endear You To Me

by DocileBoy

Summary

It's all the moments in between that endear you to me.
Chapter 1

After three days on full alert hunting down a family of four that had fallen off the face of the earth, Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson had found her quarry. They were dead; father, mother, twin boys. The prime suspect, a former employee of the family’s pool installation and service company, had fled for parts unknown. Now she was trying to track the perp’s movements waiting on the autopsies of the victims and the forensics from the construction site where they had been found, at the bottom of one of their own company’s partially completed pools.

Her squad was out canvassing a neighborhood where only about a third of the houses were occupied, and Brenda was nibbling on a square of milk chocolate, alternating between staring dumbly at the bank records of their suspect and watching through her blinds as Captain Raydor paced her murder room, gripping a print out of text messages and emails sent between the father and their suspect. Raydor had asked Brenda for something to do, something to keep her busy in between trying to talk print journalists out of making this story salacious and talking to the cameras.

Pope had impressed Raydor into service as media liaison a couple of times since Taylor’s involuntary retirement, but this was the first time she had done the job on case with so much media attention. Brenda didn’t think she was handling it well; though Sharon’s voice had been its usual, silky alto, during the last press conference, her hands had been trembling as she informed the cameras that the missing persons were now murder victims.

Brenda knew that Sharon adopted a reserved facade to protect a heart that was easily affected by the plight of their victims. She had known that since she had sat next to the woman in Pope’s office and watched her fight back tears because one of her subordinates had come to work covered in bruises. She had seen it every time Sharon observed an autopsy, or encountered a rape victim or a child that the system had failed. She had seen it writ especially large across Sharon’s face after incidents where Brenda had put herself in danger.

That softness, that tightly concealed concern in the limpid eyes, magnified by the black framed glasses, made it very hard for Brenda to maintain her own facade of dislike and mistrust; a facade that Brenda had erected to protect her rocky marriage and vulnerable heart; a facade that would have cracked, shattered even, had Brenda given in to her desires to reach out and make a friend that understood the burdens in Brenda’s life (even if Sharon was a little more by the book than Brenda had ever been).

But friendship hadn’t been what Brenda wanted from Sharon, not really, not if she was being truthful with herself. When she had first encountered the slender, impeccably clad brunette, the moment was electric, and not only because the woman was beautiful: Brenda had been unable to stop her eyes from tracing the smooth silhouette of the Captain’s body, had let her gaze linger on the Captain’s bare legs. When the Captain had stood toe to toe with her, that ignited the real spark in Brenda. Sharon Raydor was a worthy opponent and Brenda Leigh Johnson was just as infatuated with the Captain’s stubbornness as she was with the curve of the woman’s lips and the cadence of her voice and the shape of a breast against the tailored silk of her blouse.

Of course, her infatuation had been tempered into respect and a deep, genuine affection in the comfortably warm, but intriguing (intoxicating, Brenda thought sometimes), fires of Sharon Raydor’s humanity. A humanity that her Captain tried very hard to hide in the workplace. And Sharon Raydor had turned out to be one of the most trustworthy and principled individuals Brenda had ever encountered. She had supported Brenda, warts and all, to the very end of a lawsuit.
that saw her boss and lawyer and even her husband (her EX-husband, she reminded herself) practically throw her under the bus, and Brenda could no longer bring herself to be anything but kind to the other woman. Even her squad had started treating the Captain with a grudging respect, for the most part.

And now kind-hearted Sharon looked as if she was in dire need of an opportunity to blow off some steam, or at least in need of someone with a sympathetic ear, and Brenda really wanted to indulge a long suppressed desire and take the opportunity to draw the brunette into her personal life. It wasn’t even mildly distressing to Brenda that she wanted to do romantic things with the brunette - only a little thrilling. She had hazy fantasies of dimly lit meals with heavenly bottles of wine and rich desserts, of drives up the coast to picnic on scenic overlooks and a myriad other things that she was sure covered every cliche in the book. She was even anticipating taking the step that turned their tentative friendship into something more, if the lingering, heated glances that Sharon sometimes shot her way (only when she thought Brenda wasn’t looking) could be proven substantial, even if it was a risk.

Thinking about Sharon at all, letting her mind expound on the subject of the pretty, brunette Captain - thinking about Sharon led to thinking about doing things to Sharon, doing things with Sharon. Against the wall in her office, on her desk, in a very large bed. These were fantasies she had fewer and fewer reasons not to attempt to turn into reality.

The whole mess was complicated, though. Brenda chuckled to herself. Wasn’t it always? But Brenda was once again single, and she was through with men who were good to her until they weren’t, usually because they thought their love and attention should have changed her and then it didn’t. Any further misgivings were subsumed by the fact that she was positive that even if her romantic notions bore no fruit, and if she could prove to Sharon that she was trustworthy - that she had no ulterior motive beyond Sharon herself - any time spent with Sharon Raydor would be a worthy reward.

Brenda Leigh sighed. Trolling through these records was proving fruitless, her attention divided as it was, so Brenda was staging an intervention for herself and for Sharon. She tossed the chocolate back into her drawer and marched into the murder room. Sharon was still pacing, flipping the top page of her packet of papers incessantly; she couldn’t be reading - her glasses were currently holding her hair back from her face. Brenda choked back her initial, bossy impulse. There was no one else here - she didn’t need to be the boss or the superior officer right now.

“Cap’n Raydor.” Sharon kept pacing. “Sharon.” The woman gave no indication she heard. Brenda stepped into her personal space and laid a hand on the brunette’s shoulder. Sharon jumped.

“Oh, Chief! Is there something I can do for you?”

“No, no, I just…I’m not getting anywhere with the bank records, and you look like you’re having about the same amount of luck with those emails.” She dropped her eyes down to Sharon’s hands on the printouts. “Would you care for some dinner? My treat.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. You know, the evening meal.” She plucked the papers from Sharon’s grasp. “It’s been a rough day. I need a break and I’m starving. I’m going to get out of here for an hour or two, and I would appreciate your company.”

“My company, Chief Johnson?” Sharon said a little snottily, though there was a smile playing on her lips.
“Yes, Cap’n Raydor. Your company.”

“Mmmm. If that’s what you want, Chief.”

“I’m not asking as your superior officer, Captain. If you want to say no, you’ll only hurt my feelings, not make your life harder at work.” Brenda pushed her lips into a pout, ready to break out the eyelashes if Sharon looked like she was going to decline her offer.

“Dinner sounds nice, then.” Brenda allowed the pleasure she felt at Sharon’s acquiescence to momentarily show on her face, smiling affectionately. Sharon smiled back, looking perhaps a little dazed at the strength of the Chief’s reaction.

“How do you feel about Irish food, Captain?”

“Well, Chief, I can’t say that I’ve ever had it in LA. I’ll give it a try, though, if that’s what you’re in the mood for.”

“There’s this little pub that I know that serves a mean cottage pie, and I have a hankering for mashed potatoes.”

“You have a hankering?” Sharon asked. A bit of wry disbelief in her expression.

Brenda shrugged a shoulder and merely grinned at Sharon’s jab at her choice of words. “Comfort food, I guess,” she admitted.

“Mashed potatoes certainly fit that bill for me too. I’ve liked cottage pie when I’ve had it in the past.”

“Excellent. Come on, I’ll drive.”

Brenda drove them to a little corner bar that had a facade of dark wood over the L.A. standard of brick or cinderblock. Inside, it was clean and well lit. A highly polished bar ran along one long side of the room and a row of deep booths along the other. Maybe not a place Sharon thought a very southern blonde would favor, but it certainly had a lot of character. A bit of a surprise. Sharon decided she liked it. Brenda slid into the corner booth and Sharon took the bench opposite. As it was only 3:30, the place was empty. A server was at the table before Brenda had even found a place for her purse.

“Hi, welcome to Lonegan’s.” The cheerful redhead actually had a faint Irish lilt to her voice. She placed a menu in front of each of them. “Our special today is steak and kidney pie, and our vegetable of the day is green beans. Can I get you something to drink to start?”

“Iced tea with lemon, please.” Sharon said.

“The same for me.” The server nodded.

“Alright ladies, I’ll be right back with those drinks.” She spun and left.

“This is nice. Surprisingly understated for L.A.” Sharon smiled encouragingly at Brenda.

“It’s a good little place. Friday nights they cram a band over in the far corner. They have whiskey tastings once a month, too.” Brenda grinned, wicked.

“Though that can be a little dangerous.”

“Now that sounds interesting, Chief.” Sharon’s voiced was pitched with something Brenda
couldn’t identify, a little huskier than usual, and her green eyes gleamed. Brenda’s mouth got dry at
the thought of Sharon Raydor, drunk on whiskey, sharing this very booth with her while a band
jammed away in the corner. They would have to sit on the same bench so they could lean close
enough to hear one another. Brenda wished her drink would come so she could alleviate the desert
in her mouth.

“I think, Captain, if I’m buying us dinner, you can call me Brenda. Actually, I would really like it if
you would call me Brenda unless we’re doing official things with colleagues around.” The look
Sharon gave her then was considering - as though Sharon couldn’t figure out whether the request
was genuine, or what Brenda’s motives were in relaxing their strict use of titles.

“Ok, Brenda, as long as you call me Sharon.” A long silence stretched between them as each
smiled shyly at the other. They were startled out of their reverie by the arrival of their drinks.
Sharon surprised herself by allowing Brenda to order for both of them: a family sized cottage pie
and mixed green salads, dressing on the side.

“Family sized?” Sharon asked when the waitress had walked away.
Brenda shrugged and smiled again. “It makes really good leftovers.”
Sharon thought that maybe she was caught in some weird dream of an alternate universe brought
on by that Star Trek: Voyager marathon she had indulged in last weekend. This surreal situation
had all the hallmarks of her best dreams, and some of her worst nightmares. She was sharing an
intimate booth, fighting for the last bites of a rather large cottage pie (had they eaten all of that?),
with her broadly smiling, highly charming superior officer. She made a vow that if she survived
this, she would lay off the crazy science fiction television shows just before bedtime; although she
wasn’t entirely sure she would survive this because she was pretty sure she’d idly dreamed up a
situation just like this one that ended with some delicious kissing against her parked car.

For someone who was notoriously single minded when she was working an investigation, the
Chief (Brenda, she corrected herself mentally, again), hadn’t mentioned the case that they had been
embroiled in for the past three days and change. In fact, the only direct mention she made of work
was to ask Sharon how she was dealing with the notoriously insensitive, nosey, pushy press on a
case that was so heartbreaking. Brenda’s concern was genuine - Sharon knew the woman’s ‘Chief’
face well enough to know that - and it was dreadfully, dangerously appealing to Sharon.

Brenda Leigh Johnson was a person for whom Sharon had always had strong feelings. Not always
positive feelings, but always intense, and always underwritten by a current of desire that Sharon
had to clamp down on, lest it consume her. When her relationship with the Chief had been more…
combative, Sharon’s desire would threaten her control at inopportune moments, and then the
affection had begun to creep in.

Affection for a woman whose rather cavalier attitude towards the health and safety of criminals
never affected her empathy for their victims. Affection for a woman who remained loyal to Will
Pope even after Pope had shown a willingness to throw Brenda to the wolves of the department and
the public on more than one occasion. Affection for a woman who wouldn’t let herself believe that
one of her squad had sold her out to that creep Goldman (Sharon had been so relieved that Taylor
had been the leak; had it been anyone else, it might have broken Brenda). This affection was
roaring through her at this very moment, chased by that subtle but ever present frisson of desire.
Sharon was sure it was showing on her face, but Brenda didn’t seem alarmed by what she was
seeing, because she only continued to smile at her, the corners of her eyes crinkling, and snaked her
fork under Sharon’s to snag the last bite of mashed potato crust from the dish.

“That was so good.” Brenda sighed, replete. “Thanks for coming with me, Sharon.” She quirked
the corners of her generous lips up. “Though I’m sorry we won’t have any leftovers to snack on
later.”

“You were looking at that pie like it was a ding-dong, Brenda. Who was I to stand in your way?” Brenda laughed, then sobered a little.

“You did get enough didn’t you? I’m afraid that sometimes my manners fly out the window when I’m hungry.” The blonde looked a little embarrassed. “I don’t think I’ve had anything substantial to eat since lunch yesterday.” Sharon shot her a scandalized look. “I’ll have to keep a better eye on you, Brenda Leigh. Raiding your candy drawer does not count as a meal.” Not to mention the fact that the woman was already whipcord and bone. With the stress and energy requirements of her job, she couldn’t afford to miss many meals.

“I know, I know. I went to heat up some leftovers in the break room last night, but someone had eaten them.” She scowled. “Despite the fact that I had scrawled my name all over the container in red sharpie.”

“Wouldn’t happen to have been Chinese leftovers? Happy Family?”

“Yes. It was. It wasn’t you that ate my leftovers, was it? Because I really don’t want to be angry at you for stealing my Happy Family.” Sharon pulled a face at the idea of stealing food from the department fridge.

“Yuck. No reheated shrimp for me, thanks. It was Provenza. I saw him shoveling it into his face a few hours before our victims turned up.” Brenda scowled mightily.

“That man is lucky I don’t have oral herpes or something, as much food as he steals from me.” Sharon barked a laugh and Brenda rolled her eyes a little, grinning.

“And I’ll have you know I always eat all the shrimp out of the container the first go-round. They get all chewy in the microwave.” The blonde pulled out her wallet and removed some bills, which she tucked under the edge of her empty glass.

“Thanks for getting me out of the office, Brenda. I would still be there pacing if you hadn’t suggested it.” Sharon smiled and tried to catch Brenda’s eye, who was fiddling shyly with the snap of her oversized wallet.

“Thanks for humoring me, Sharon.” Brenda was still avoiding eye contact, transfixed by her own hands.

“I wasn’t humoring you. I hope we can do this again. I had a good time.” Now Brenda practically beamed at her.

“Me too. Now, let’s go put a few more hours into trying to track down our nasty Mr. Mitchell, then I’m ordering all of us off duty for the night.”
Sharon was in a pickle. After the conclusion of that last critical missing turned quadruple homicide, she’d been offered a promotion by Chief Pope and Assistant Chief Tompkins. It was an odd sort of offer - apparently one of the few jobs in the LAPD that could be turned down without consequence because it was not to the department’s best interest if the one of the public faces of the police force hated their job.

An increase in rank to Commander would be accompanied by a move out of FID and Professional Standards and into a position under Pope’s direct command, where she would be trotted in front of the cameras and talk to print journalists during the investigation of high profile cases. Apparently her cooler heads approach to dealing with the media had appealed to the Chief - and the Mayor.

The promotion was tempting, certainly. She had been at her current rank and in her current position for a decade, and there were very few paths to Commander and beyond for someone of her age and skill set. But going in front of the cameras was nerve wracking, and she was pretty sure she’d only survived the last case because of Chief Johnson’s quiet support. Going on television to talk about dead children just sucked.

She wanted to talk to the Chief. She knew Brenda would ask the right questions to help her resolve this situation, but she hadn’t seen the woman since shortly after their shared meal three days ago. Almost as soon as they had set foot back into the office, a call had come in from the San Luis Obispo Police Department. Their suspect, a Mr. Karl Mitchell, had crashed his truck into the median of the 101 after a short car chase. He had been transported to the local hospital to undergo treatment for a moderate concussion. Brenda and Gabriel had left immediately to board a chopper to take custody of the prisoner. Karl Mitchell had turned out to be another tragedy. Neural syphilis contracted, as best they could tell, nearly 15 years ago, had turned the man’s brain into swiss cheese, precipitating a psychotic break. An entire family dead and a man’s life ruined because he had failed to get a penicillin shot when he had first gotten sick. Since Mitchell clearly was non compos mentis at the time of the killing, he would spend the rest of his life in a mental institution.

Should she call? It was only nine, and as far as she knew, Major Crimes hadn’t caught a case since the resolution of the last one. A text message, perhaps, to test the waters.

TO: BLJ Pope offered me a promotion. Commander. Public Relations Officer.

The message went wizzing off into cellular cyberspace. Thirty seconds later her phone was ringing. She answered it.

“Sharon Raydor! Should I be congratulating you?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m ready to move on from FID, but department media shill? I don’t know if that’s really for me.” It didn’t help that Taylor was the last person to hold the position, staining it forever in Sharon’s mind.

“You do have a compelling television presence, Sharon. You do all our work justice when you’re behind those microphones, and you dress a damn sight better than Taylor ever did, with those ridiculous ties he wore. You also seem to have a decent rapport with the reporters - they like you and must trust you or something, because they actually go to you for information instead of pestering me and my people.”

“Well, you’re welcome, I guess.” Sharon sighed. “I just don’t know if I’ll be able to handle dealing...
with them on a regular basis, plus working so closely with Pope doesn’t really appeal to me.”

Brenda let out a bark of laughter, and said coyly: “Our illustrious Chief has a thing for you, you know. He always, always has his eyes on your posterior when you walk away. Though he’s a little bit scared of you, too. It makes him real nervous when you raise your voice, he straightens his tie when you do.”

Sharon grunted in displeasure, but she could imagine the look of evil glee on Brenda’s face at this moment. “Pope has been eyeing me since he joined the department, Brenda Leigh. And he is well aware of my boundaries. Besides, he looks at you like you look at chocolate at the end of a long day. I’ve met pimps and frat boys with more subtlety.”

Brenda laughed uproariously. “The man is nothing if he isn’t predictable, I will give him that,” she said between chuckles and Sharon chuckled along with her.

Sharon wanted to say something flip about Brenda’s history with Pope, but didn’t know if they had reached a point where that was in bounds. She needn’t have worried.

“God, did I really date him? It must have been temporary insanity. Do you know when I first moved back here he was after me again? He was still married, and he knew that I knew, but he went so far as to get me a pair of earrings from Tiffany’s.”

“Tiffany’s, really? Did he think some diamonds would make up for the fact he was pulling the same shit on you again?” Sharon kind of wanted to throw up at the thought of Brenda still fending off Pope’s advances.

“Hell if I know what he was thinking. Though they were the tiniest damn earrings they sell there. A few days later I gave those earrings back and told him that if he ever made another advance on me, I’d slap him with a lawsuit before he could shut his jaw from saying the words.”

“Too bad that didn’t teach him to keep his eyes to himself. I don’t know if I could stand having him and his jowls salivating over me every day. At least in FID I only encounter him once a week.” Sharon had to hold the phone away from her ear as Brenda laughed hysterically.

“Oh god, his jowls! They are a bit like their own separate personality, aren’t they - sometimes disapproving, sometimes smarmy, sometimes cheeky.”


“Yes, yes, I’m awful,” she said and Sharon could hear the smile in her voice. “So Pope and actually dealing with the media are the downsides. Any upsides to this promotion?”

Sharon smiled to herself, she was so glad that her intuition about calling Brenda had proven to be a good one. “Well, I could spout off platitudes about providing an example for the women of the LAPD, but I don’t know if media liaison is the example I want to be.”

“You taking the position would prove to the department that the position of Community Relations Officer doesn’t have to be about sleazy brown-nosing.” Brenda reasoned. “You could do a lot to undo the damage that Taylor did.”

“I could.” Sharon agreed, reluctantly.

“Sharon, if you have this many reservations, if you even think that this job is going to make you miserable, then you shouldn’t take it. You have done so much for the LAPD in past year, between plugging a high ranking leak, and helping stop a multi-million dollar federal lawsuit, and instituting
policies to protect those silly idealistic college students protesting downtown from frustrated and unsympathetic police officers, which in turn protects the reputation of the department - policies that have been used in at least five other cities to great effect.” Brenda’s voice softened, lost the slight stridency that had slipped in while she was singing Sharon’s praises. “If you don’t want this position, I am positive that Pope will find something else for you - I know for a fact that the Mayor has been on his case about promoting you. You have saved both those men a lot of money and bad press.”

Sharon was glad she wasn’t talking to Brenda in person because she was positive she was blushing scarlet. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Chief.”

“Anytime, Cap’n. So what are you going to say if Pope asks why you don’t want the position?”

“Hmmm.” Brenda felt a shiver travel down her spine at the sound. Sharon really had a wonderful voice. “That is an excellent question.” Sharon was silent for a long moment.

“I think I’ll tell him that I would like to be in a position where more of my skills can be used by the department. I’ll have to restrain myself from saying something about not being departmental tits and ass - or his tits and ass.” Brenda giggled.

“You do look ever so nice in high def, Cap’n. I’ll just bet Pope TiVos you for his personal viewing pleasure.” Brenda said, then broke down in a fit of laughter.

“If you keep saying things like that, I’m going to have to hang up because I’ll be throwing up, Brenda Leigh Johnson.” Brenda laughed even harder. “You’re terrible, Chief, just terrible.”

“It’s true. But I’ve never had anyone to joke with about Pope’s lecherous ways, so you’re just going to have to deal, Captain.”

“Well, next time you want to joke about Pope staring at my ass, at least ply me with alcohol first.” Sharon groused.

“That can be arranged,” Brenda purred. Sharon was a little dismayed by the fact that she could clearly picture the Chief’s facial expression at that moment because she knew that tone of voice. Brenda’s playful side was something that really stood out in Sharon’s memory. “Will you call me and let me know how it goes? Maybe we can have an after action drink, if you need one. Or call if you need a pep talk. I’ll be in the office early.”

Then Brenda paused, and when she continued, the grin was writ even louder in her voice. “I find it ironic in the extreme that we’re having this conversation about Pope and his…flirtations, Cap’n. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you why.”

“They irony hasn’t escaped me either, Chief.” Sharon said wryly.

“I would like to state, for the record of this friendship,” Brenda said, adopting an imperious tone. “That the first air quote promotion end air quote that Pope got me was more of a lateral move, and I accepted mostly because working for an intelligence agency was making me even more crazy and paranoid than I already was. And my move here - well that was more of a promotion, and he definitely wanted me to be grateful to him, probably wanted me to be with him again. But I shot him down, repeatedly, threatened him with a sexual harassment lawsuit and then caused him heaps of professional trouble, so I think maybe he got what was coming to him, even if he did end up Chief of Police.”

“Well, when you lay out your relationship like that, the story sounds a little different than the office
scuttlebutt likes to tell it." Sharon said, grinning too. Brenda hmmm’ed in agreement. “And I take great pleasure in remembering we’re talking about a Chief of Police that was destined for Valley’s Traffic Division.”

Brenda barked out a laugh. “That reorganization chart is still a well loved piece of memorabilia in my murder room, Sharon. In fact, I believe that Buzz and Tao even blew up that picture of him with the photoshopped Captain’s bars and his un-photoshopped jowls for use as computer background, screen saver or dartboard.”

“It’s Pope who was the dartboard, huh?” Sharon would have thought that her picture would have been the dartboard in the murder room at that point in the law suit and transparency audit. Brenda could hear the doubt in Sharon’s voice, even over the phone.

“Sharon,” Brenda said, soft voiced. Sharon wished she could see her face, then. “I did figure out that it was Pope who made you continue that audit, even if it was after I was a complete bitch to you.” Brenda was pretty sure she had a complete catalogue in her head of all the mean, petty things she’d done to Sharon over the three years of their acquaintance. She wanted desperately to apologize for all of them. Brenda tried to speak again, but her words got caught somewhere between her lungs and her mouth. She cleared her throat. “I think I could apologize for every rotten thing I’ve ever said or done to you, Sharon.” She sighed. “But words can’t really…”

Sharon interrupted her. “Brenda Leigh, no. It’s forgotten. And I can’t say I can complain about how everything worked out. I wouldn’t have been able to protect you and your squad as well if I hadn’t known the things I learned during that audit. And I don’t think you’d have gotten a lawyer if I hadn’t been around trying to impress upon you how serious the situation was.” Sharon hoped that her sincerity was evident over the phone. Then she chuckled. “And our little sparring matches? Well, life was never boring when I was working around Major Crimes, Brenda Leigh.”

“Ok, I guess.” Brenda still wanted to prostrate herself in front of the brunette - to vow that she’d never lie and never hurt Sharon’s feelings again, but that probably wasn’t a promise she could keep. But she could trust Sharon when she said that past was past.

“I’m glad things worked out, Brenda, even if it was a little rough along the way,” Brenda was almost positive Sharon wasn’t talking about work, or at least not just about work.

“Me too, Sharon.” Brenda covered the mic of her phone and took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to suppress the things she wanted to say; trying to keep a clamp on her emotions so she could be the support Sharon needed. “Make sure you let me know how it goes. Good luck tomorrow.”

“Ok, Brenda. Keep your fingers crossed for me.”

“Of course, but make sure to be nice, even if Will is a pig.” Brenda waited for Sharon to hang up, then flung herself back on her bed with a silly smile on her face.
Brenda’s cell phone rang at 7:36 pm the next day.

“If it isn’t not-quite-Commander Raydor!” Brenda had put two glasses of wine away in the past 45 minutes. She was feeling pretty happy.

“Hey.” Sharon sounded small, smaller than Brenda had ever heard her, and disaffected. Brenda’s buzz faded immediately.

“Oh no, what happened?” She asked, urgent and concerned.

“Well, I said thanks, but no thanks. Nicely. Very nicely.” Sharon let out a shuddering breath and Brenda’s heart ached for her. “And Pope got this look on his face, like he thought I wasn’t worth the dirt on the sole of his shoe, and said I wasn’t properly appreciative of the opportunity he was giving me.”

“Giving you!” Brenda was beyond outraged. “You’ve earned a promotion about a thousand times over in the past year. Dealing with me alone shoulda gotten you a star on your collar.” Sharon dabbed at her tearing eyes a little and smiled a watery smile at the Chief’s vehemence.

“Thanks, Chief. But I don’t think they hand out promotions for just escaping Major Crimes and Brenda Leigh Johnson unscathed,” Sharon said sardonically. “You say that like you wouldn’t be the only one eligible for that promotion, Sharon.” Brenda sassed, though Sharon could hear the tease in her voice. Sharon was feeling too raw to tease back.

She went for a truth, instead, though she couched it in a little ambiguity. “And you seem to think I got away with no scars to show for my efforts.” Brenda worried her lower lip. That could be interpreted in a few ways, but Sharon had said, explicitly that the battles they had fought in the past were behind them. Brenda hoped that bad blood wouldn’t well up between her and Sharon whenever one of them was feeling hurt. She decided she would leave it alone, and hoped that the small silence on the line would let Sharon know she had felt the jab as intended.

“So what happened next?” Brenda asked, clearing her throat of the knot that had formed there. Pope’s idiocy was a much safer topic, something that Brenda could offer solace and advice about. She couldn’t do anything about the past other than apologize repeatedly and profusely while trying to do better for Sharon in the future.

“I told him I would be happy to continue in my current position, one that makes use of all my skills, protecting the LAPD and the community, just as I have for a decade. That I’m open to new opportunities, but not ones that I’m sure would make me feel less useful than where I already am, than the jobs I’m already doing. And then he had the gall to say that my age was a ‘strong mitigating factor against more conventional avenues of promotion’.” Sharon sucked in some air to keep the tears from spilling over and continued:

“So I’m promotable enough and pretty enough to be one of the public faces of the department, but too old to expect a more serious promotion that involves actual police work.” She started crying in earnest.

“Oh Sharon.” Brenda railed at her powerlessness to help Sharon in this situation. But more than
that, she wanted to take the other woman in her arms and let her cry herself out. She wanted Sharon to want that from her. More than anything. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

Sharon didn’t cry for long, just long enough to let go of the impotent rage that had been sitting on her chest, suffocating her, for most of the day. Despite her roiling emotions, she was pleasantly surprised and warmed by the fact that Brenda had turned out to be exactly the right person to call in her hour of need. Apparently the Chief could offer emotional succor and roll with a sucker punch as well as she listened to Sharon and helped her tease a resolution from her own conflicted thinking. Sharon was glad that, in spite of all the reasons she had to not trust Brenda Leigh Johnson, she had trusted her instincts instead.

“Thanks for letting me get that out, Brenda. I didn’t mean to get weepy on you.” Sharon swiped a mangled tissue under her nose.

“You’re angry and upset with good cause, Sharon. I’m happy to be your cellular shoulder, even if I can’t really do anything to help,” not trying to hide that her voice was heavy with the empathetic tears she was fighting back on Sharon’s behalf.

“You helped, Brenda, and I’ll feel better, nearly back to normal, even, after a good night’s sleep and a quiet weekend. I’ve always known I didn’t do myself any professional favors taking a position in FID, I just need to get my perspective back.”

“You’re the best of us, Sharon Raydor,” Brenda husked softly. “You do a thankless job with integrity and honor. Take care of yourself tonight, and if you need to talk again, please call, no matter the time.” Sharon murmured a thank you and good night, sighed, and hung up, leaving Brenda Leigh holding a silent phone to her ear, contemplating what she could do for Sharon to make the next few days at least a little brighter.
Thirty-three hours ago, some off-duty neanderthal from Central Division had discharged his weapon into a moving vehicle carrying his ex-wife and her sister. Off-duty or otherwise, domestic violence or otherwise, it was FID’s job to investigate, and ultimately, Sharon’s job to determine whether or not criminal charges were to be brought.

It was pretty clear to Sharon that whatever Officer Dunleavy’s character may have been (though Sharon had her doubts), his divorce had seriously unhinged him. Dunleavy’s former sister-in-law, sitting in the passenger seat of the car, now had half a dozen pins in her ankle and lower leg, courtesy of a police issue bullet. Dunleavy showed no concern - no remorse - beyond saying, “I didn’t mean to hit her; I was aiming at that bitch.”

The cherry on top of the whole cluster fuck was that not only was Central actively obstructing FID’s investigation, Lieutenant Elliot and Sergeant Markham had been physically threatened when they attempted to question Officer Dunleavy’s partner and colleagues. ‘That bitch’ - meaning Dunleavy’s wife - had it coming, according to Central’s desk sergeant and the three other officers that had bodily obstructed her people’s access to the premises and personnel.

These OIS investigations always went to shit when everyone knew the officer involved was as guilty as sin, and Sharon was in no mood to get into a territorial pissing match with the Captain of Central. So Sharon had called the Inspector General, and the Inspector General had, she presumed, called the Captain of Central Division, and by 12:30 pm yesterday, she had had twelve very angry police officers, all buddies of Dunleavy, and their union representatives in interview rooms and waiting areas. And because the Captain of Central had done some asinine thing or other to piss off the Inspector General, not only was Central now subject to a full IA audit for collusion, but Sharon had been ordered to interview every. single. officer. in the hopes that a verbal flaying by the ice bitch of FID would impress upon them the seriousness of the situation.

A flat, angry stare over the rims of her glasses had been enough to silence union representatives bitching about the late hour, so the final interviewee had been ushered out of the bullpen at 2:30 am. Now, it was a quarter till eight the next morning and Sharon was in triplicate paperwork hell. A copy for the LAPD, a copy for the federal government, and a copy for the poor IA bastards that were picking up this investigation where her OIS left off.

She heard the sound of high heels clicking their way through her bullpen, and Brenda Leigh Johnson appeared in her doorway, juggling a tray and a takeout box and her massive black purse. She hadn’t had a chance to thank the blonde for her support the other night; or to apologize profusely for breaking down crying and taking a thoroughly veiled, but cheap, shot during their phone call when Brenda had been nothing but kind and supportive.

“Hey, Sharon.” The blonde husked, voice barely louder than a whisper. Sharon leaned forward to push back her chair.

“No, don’t get up.” Brenda dropped her purse on the floor with a whump and changed her grip on the food. “I figured you’d still be here. I heard what happened yesterday.” Sharon didn’t really want to talk about it, so she grimaced and shrugged a shoulder.

“Business as usual at FID.” Sharon hadn’t quite been able to put her perspective back in place in the few days since Pope had run roughshod over her dreams of promotion to a position where her relationship with the rest of the force could be more congenial.
“Sharon, it may be business as usual for FID, but it isn’t business as usual for you - not after the week you’ve had.”

“No, but there isn’t much I can do about that, not with this investigation to deal with.” Sharon smiled sadly at Brenda, who looked at Sharon with an expression Sharon could not contemplate - not if she wanted to survive the rest of the day without losing it.

“So did you come to taunt me with whatever is in that box that smells so good?” Sharon changed the subject. There were tantalizing smells wafting from the takeout box in Brenda’s hand.

“What?” Brenda looked at what she held, like she had forgotten her hands were full. “No, this is for you. Pancakes with fresh blueberry compote and an omelet with tomato, spinach and mushroom. And some kind of cheese. Do you want to clear a space? I don’t want to mess up whatever system you have going here.” Sharon was struck a little dumb at the gesture, but too tired and too raw and too edgy to really ponder what it could mean.

“Oh. Sure, let me just…” Sharon stacked up some file folders and dropped them on top of her keyboard. Brenda leaned over the desk to put the box in front of Sharon. She set the tray down next to it.

“There’s juice and coffee, too. I don’t know how you take your coffee, so I figured you could use whatever fixins’ you have here.” Sharon popped open the box and let the steam from the still hot pancakes drift up into her face.

“Enjoy, Sharon. And hang in there.” Sharon looked up from ogling her pancakes, a bit alarmed that the Chief was dismissing herself so quickly. She couldn’t let herself think about the reasons she wanted Brenda Leigh to eat with her, but Sharon didn’t want her to go, either. She hoped it wasn’t her surliness that was causing Brenda to leave so quickly.

“You’re not eating too?” Brenda smiled and shook her head.

“I have a surveillance briefing at eight.” She sounded genuinely apologetic. “Next time, definitely.”

“Ok, next time. Thanks, Brenda.” Brenda smiled again, scooped up her purse and headed back to the elevators and Sharon was left alone with what were, frankly, sinfully delicious pancakes. And even though she was in a foul mood, and not fit company for anyone, she found herself wishing Brenda Leigh had stayed. She pulled out her phone.

TO: BLJ

I sugar for a small coffee, 2 for a large. A dash of milk regardless. For next time.

Across the building, in a dark media room, Brenda’s phone chirped. When she read the new message, Brenda Leigh smiled.
Sharon took Friday off after resolving Officer Dunleavy’s OIS late Thursday afternoon. She had recommended that the officer be fired and that criminal charges be brought. Something that she had done only three times in ten years, despite what the rest of the LAPD thought. The Inspector General had agreed with her recommendation. And though it was up to Will Pope to follow through with the firing, the criminal proceedings were underway - Dunleavy had been arraigned on charges of unlawful discharge of a firearm, four counts of reckless endangerment, assault with a deadly weapon, and attempted murder. ‘Aiming at that bitch’, indeed. Justice was, in Sharon’s mind, served. And in the department’s mind, Sharon had reaffirmed her status as that bitch who was forever crossing the thin blue line.

She spent most of Monday morning hiding in her office, deleting anonymous hate mail from untrackable free email accounts (patrol officers were worse than fraternity boys), and reviewing paperwork for a case that she was testifying in and a case that was pending against the department and a few officers from Hollywood division.

Come lunch, Sharon snuck down the stairs and out a door that led directly into the garage. When Sharon returned to her office nearly two hours later - depositions could be very comfortably read in that nice little bistro five blocks away where no self-respecting boots on the ground cop would ever set foot, thank you very much - there was a riotous bouquet of flowers on her desk. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a few long moments, eyeing the flowers with a bit of suspicion. Would a bunch of gun toting, immature frat boy police officers send her tainted flowers? Probably not. And probably not a bouquet of honeysuckle, daffodil, forsythia cuttings and something faded orange and slightly tropical looking. She leaned in and let the sweet scent of the honeysuckle fill her nostrils. Her fingers itched to pop one of the orange blossoms off its stem and drip the nectar onto her tongue, just as she had during the long California summers of her childhood, but she removed the card from its holder instead.

The card was handwritten - vaguely familiar, loopy feminine script. It said:

Sharon,

I am endlessly thankful for the loyalty and integrity you bring to the job every day. You ARE the best of us. And I am honored and privileged to know a little of the kind and funny woman that is Sharon Raydor. I hope that these flowers can do a little to brighten your day.

BLJ

Oh. Oh wow. Sharon set the card down and leaned on her desk, supporting herself on shaking arms. What did this mean? She dropped into one of the chairs that sat in front of her desk. Was this friendship with a southern woman? Flowers and obscenely delicious breakfasts on horrible mornings when a kind gesture made all the difference in the world, and flirtatious conversations over meals and on the phone, and implicit understanding when your day went absolutely pear shaped and you desperately needed to cry on someone’s shoulder, even if it was only over the phone.

If this was friendship with Brenda Leigh Johnson, Sharon Raydor didn’t think she would survive, because each gesture from her Chief hammered another dent in the armor that Sharon Raydor had built around her heart; many more dents, and her heart would begin to bruise. And she was furious
that life was throwing her another curveball when even her status quo, with Brenda Leigh and in
general, was rather solitary and hard to bear. Her mask of distance and reserve along with sheer
willpower allowed her to do her job in FID. What would happen if Brenda Leigh breached those
walls and she had no one to help her pick herself up when their friendship (inevitably, Sharon
thought) self destructed? She picked up her Blackberry and pounded frustratively on the keyboard.

TO: BLJ

Why are you doing this?

Her phone rang almost the very second the message registered as sent. Fuck. This was a
collection she really wanted to have by text message. She was feeling much too brittle for a
phone conversation. She answered anyway; sending her Chief to voicemail was never really an
option.

“Why am I doing what, Sharon? What have I done?” What have I done this time, was the question
Sharon heard. Brenda sounded weary and a little terse, like Sharon was fulfilling every one of the
unfavorable expectations she’d had for this conversation.

“You sent me flowers,” her voice breaking with emotion.

“I did. I sent you flowers.” Brenda confirmed warily.

“You sent me beautiful flowers and you’ve been sweet and thoughtful and understanding when it
feels like the whole fucking world is lined up against me and I don’t know what it means,” Sharon
choked out through the lump of tears and fear in her throat.

“Sharon, I can’t help you professionally like you’ve helped me, I’ve burned too many bridges to do
that for you, but I can be supportive, can’t I? When you need it?” And for the second time in less
than a week, Sharon found herself sobbing into the phone while Brenda Leigh Johnson breathed
quietly on the other end of the line.

“Oh Shari, I’m sorry I made your day worse. I didn’t mean to. I always seem to do the wrong
thing.” Brenda sighed. “Listen, I’m about to walk into an interview. If it wasn’t time sensitive, I
would…” She trailed off and Sharon heard David Gabriel’s voice in the background. She said
something to Gabriel then came back on the line.

“The flowers will tell you what I mean, ok? Not the card; but the flowers themselves will tell you
what you need to know. Do you understand?” Brenda’s voice was soft.

“Yes. At least I think so.” Sharon wanted to stomp her foot and demand that the blonde explain
herself immediately, to demand directness, to resolve this at this very instant. But they were at
work, and even if Sharon was hiding from her more onerous duties, Brenda still had a job to do.

“I can’t promise you’ll like what they mean, Sharon.” Brenda sighed, her tone still endlessly
weary and very much apprehensive. “I’ll call you later and we can talk.” Sharon mumbled an
acknowledgement and Brenda hung up.

Sharon stabbed the end call button after Brenda disconnected and clunked her head onto the desk.
The lovely cut crystal vase that held her bouquet rattled. The flowers, then. Brenda had to be
referring to the meanings Victorian and other cultures had assigned to flowers of different species
and colors, but Sharon couldn’t even identify one of the flowers.

Sharon sat in the dim quiet for a while, staring at the flowers, the tang of honeysuckle permeating
the air of her office. Finally, she sighed and woke her computer from sleep; time to do some
googling if she wanted to solve the mystery message in the flowers Brenda had sent her.

She opened a browser window and considered the cursor blinking in the search bar for a moment. ‘Flower meanings’ she typed and then hit enter. The fourth hit was a wikipedia page, she clicked the link and scrolled down the table to the entry for ‘daffodil’ - it read ‘uncertainty, chivalry, respect or unrequited love’. Sharon bit her lip and shifted in her chair. She scrolled down a little more. Forsythia wasn’t present among the f’s, so she moved on to the h’s. ‘Devoted affection, bonds of love’ said the honeysuckle entry. Oh. Sharon brought her fingers to her lips, like she was trying to physically contain her gasp. A familiar, pleasant ache arose in the pit of her stomach; a feeling of yearning that had long been absent from her life. She allowed herself a small smile and returned her cursor to the search box, typed ‘forsythia meaning’, and pressed enter. She chose the first hit this time, scanning the pdf she had found for the f’s. ‘Forsythia - anticipation’ it said. Sharon smiled broadly for what felt like the first time in days.

Brenda Leigh’s feelings for her writ large in heady blossoms and redolent with the perfume of honeysuckle; even if she couldn’t identify one of flowers, the intent was clear. What a risk her Chief was taking! Despite her preference for directness, Sharon thought she could develop an appreciation for the layers of meaning in the language of flowers. Especially if Brenda wanted to continue giving her lessons.

The question now wasn’t how she felt about her Chief’s declaration, or how she was going to respond, but how to put Brenda’s mind at ease. Brenda Leigh had to be nervous, putting something like this out there for Sharon’s consideration, not truly knowing how she would react. She came to a decision quickly, pushing back a little to pull a mirror and makeup removal wipes out of her desk drawer. With her fingers, she blended in the tear tracks on her cheeks, and used a wipe to remove her mascara. Checking her hair and tucking her glasses and a pen into her blazer pocket and a folder of depositions under her arm, she left her office and headed for the stairs.

The murder room was empty when Sharon walked into Major Crimes, though she could hear voices filtering out from the media room. Sharon stepped into the Chief’s office, thankful that the blinds were already drawn and she wouldn’t have to endure being in a fishbowl while she was waiting. She sat down at the Chief’s table, opened her folder and began to read.

Sharon looked up from her work when the murder room sprang to life - she could hear the click of the Chief’s heels across the tile and the nervousness trickled down the back of her throat and into her belly. Brenda stepped into her door and froze, cringing. Flynn and Provenza plowed into the Chief’s back, nearly bowling her over. The Chief kept her feet, but just barely. Sharon stood and quirked a small smile, trying to catch the blonde’s gaze, but Brenda’s eyes were darting around nervously, focusing on anything but Sharon herself. The Chief collected herself and dismissed her lieutenants with twitch of her head. They turned to leave, but not without narrowing their eyes at Sharon.

Brenda closed the door behind them and leaned on it, finally looking at Sharon directly. Everything about her face and body language screamed wariness, like she was about to bolt. Sharon took a step towards her, a hand extended, like she was approaching a skittish horse. “Brenda Leigh,” she intoned, and smiled. Brenda smiled back tentatively, relaxing a little.

“You really surprised me today, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon said softly.

“Was it really that much of a surprise? I’ve been worried that you would catch me out, you know, moonin’ over you.” Brenda cast her eyes down, shy.

“You were hiding it better than you thought, I guess.” They were both blushing, nervous as a pair of school girls realizing a mutual crush.
“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Brenda whispered frustratedly and then she stepped into Sharon’s body, lifting a hand to brush a lock of silky hair back behind Sharon’s ear. Sharon brought shaking hands to rest on the blonde’s slender waist and Brenda slipped her hands under Sharon’s arms and pulled them into a hug - an awkward clinch of their upper bodies until Sharon shifted her hips and brought their lower bodies into contact. Brenda made a happy little noise in her throat. They held each other for a few heartbeats, then pulled away, hands still clasped.

“Why today?” Sharon wanted to know.

“Pure selfishness.” Brenda quipped and Sharon made a face at her. Then Brenda quirked her lips up and cocked a shoulder. “I was tryin’ hard to be your friend, to be supportive, but I wanted more and I’m well known for my patience.” She squeezed Sharon’s hand. “Told you - pure selfishness.”

“I was a little scared when I read that card, because I knew there was something I was missing, and after the week I had…” Sharon whispered, trailing off. “And now, god, I’m so happy. Stunned, but happy.” Brenda let out a gusty breath and smiled brightly, brown eyes glittering, and Sharon couldn’t help the reflexive smile that grew on her face.

“Sharon,” Brenda breathed, like a prayer. “I’m sorry I caused you such stress earlier. My mama taught me about flowers when I was little - I guess I thought it would be a subtle way for me to let you know my intentions.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t understand the gesture, Brenda Leigh, but this California girl didn’t learn about flowers from her mama. You were off limits for so long, and you have to understand I couldn’t ever let myself think or hope or imagine that this could happen. I had to let protecting you professionally and being around you be enough. Letting myself think too much about you, about why I needed to protect you, it was never safe for me.”

“Oh, Shari, I do. I do understand.” Brenda murmured and they were both silent for a few moments, reveling in their new understanding.

“Can I…can I take you out tonight, Sharon?” Brenda stuttered charmingly, unsure of herself again. Sharon tilted her head and furrowed her brow at the nervous blonde.

“Tonight? Didn’t you just catch a case?”

“Yea, yea I did. But my suspect,” she broke off and made a frustrated noise. “My suspect walked into HQ before I was ready for him and now he’s lawyered up. And I don’t have anything I can use to convince him to revoke counsel. I have a post mortem in a little while and by the time that’s through, I’ll have preliminary SID and canvass reports. But I can’t…none of that will matter if I can’t see you tonight, Shari, because I won’t be able to concentrate.”

“I see.”

“Is that a yes?” Brenda wanted to know, shy.

“Of course it is. I want to have dinner with you. We can do something close, if you want. So you can get back to work.”

“No, I’m gonna make reservations somewhere nice. I’ll text you later, with the details.” Hands still clasped, they shared a silent moment, heavy with emotion.

“Okay. I’ll see you tonight, then, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon squeezed her Chief’s hand, and left.
Twenty five minutes later, Sharon was back in her office, back at work and a little distracted, though happily so. Her phone dinged.

FROM: BLJ

Let me pick you up? Between 8 and 8:15?

TO: BLJ

That’s fine. What do I wear?

FROM: BLJ

It’s not a jeans sort of place. Work attire would be fine, if you don’t want an extra outfit for the dry cleaners. I’m going to change, though. Cuz of the morgue smell.

TO: BLJ

I think I can do a little better than business wear, Brenda Leigh.

FROM: BLJ

You always take my breath away, but I can’t wait to see what you pick for our date. I have to put on my gloves now - Morales is giving me his cranky face. Five hours is an eternity, but I’ll see you when I pick you up.

Brenda was positive that if her mind wasn’t occupied by a fresh investigation and autopsy and all the details that this stage of a case entailed, she would be pacing or running stairs or demolishing the entire contents of her candy drawer, so intensely was she anticipating spending her evening with Sharon. She had a date! With Sharon Raydor! Who was beautiful and funny (and thought Brenda was funny) and had preternaturally fantastic hair. Sharon Raydor who never let her get away with anything and knew all her dirty little professional secrets and that her personal life could be a train wreck and still wanted to date her. Sharon Raydor, who brought out a tenderness and protectiveness in Brenda that Brenda had thought gone, dismantled and discarded by her CIA training and years of wariness and mistrust of almost everyone, personally and professionally.

As it was, she was grinning like a madwoman at nothing and jogging her crossed leg so hard that it would occasionally bang into the media room desk and make the monitors bounce. Her team was looking at her like they might need a stun gun at any moment because surely, the Chief was losing it. Andy was giving her the sidelong eye and inching his chair away slowly as if her crazy was catching. Brenda curled her lip at him in a half snarl and he gave her a startled look, but stopped inching.

Brenda whipped out her phone and hunched over it, ignoring the footage from some fast food drive-thru for a moment.

TO: S. Raydor

I can’t stop smiling like a crazy person. I think my team is ready to taser me and throw me in a straitjacket.

Brenda dragged her eyes back to the screens.

“OH! There he is!” Andy hooted, jamming his fingers down on the pause button. The video stopped on a frame that showed their suspect’s alibi witness ordering two double cheeseburgers, a
large fry and a large Coke six minutes before their quite specific time of death.

“Send copies of that to my printer please, Buzz.” Brenda was almost where she needed to be for her interview tomorrow. Her phone dinged.

FROM: S. Raydor

Well, if they did that, you would get to see me sooner. But I don’t think we’d make dinner. And then I’d have to kill your entire squad for making us miss our date. Even Buzz.

Brenda giggled.

TO: S. Raydor

Poor Buzz. Always guilty by association. That would be an awful lot of paperwork just to see you two hours sooner. I guess I’ll also have to scrap my plans to get sued again to have you around more often.

FROM: S. Raydor

You’re terrible. Though I think I prefer jokes about multi-million dollar Federal lawsuits to jokes about Pope and his lechery. I’ll see you soon.

Brenda smiled stupidly again. Oh, that woman. She tripped happily back into the murder room, only to stop dead in her tracks when she saw Provenza working diligently at the white board - a much more elaborate, multi-colored version of the legendary wicked witch artwork was taking shape there. Flynn and Sanchez were providing color commentary and critique. Brenda clenched her jaw and flared her nostrils.

“LIEUTENANT PROVENZA PUT THAT MARKER DOWN AND ERASE THAT IMMEDIATELY!” She barked in a tone that she thought put her daddy’s best military bark to shame. Provenza startled and fumbled the marker, but had enough good sense not to protest. Flynn and Sanchez hung their heads; little boys - like puppies caught out doing something naughty.

Brenda lowered her voice, but kept her tone dangerous. “Everyone in my conference room, this instant. Buzz too.” Brenda stopped off in her office to deposit her purse and folders before slamming furiously into the conference room where her squad had assembled with remarkable rapidity. There were no protests or excuses or whispering.

Again Brenda kept her voice low. “I will tolerate no more disrespect of Captain Raydor or FID in my hearing or in my murder room. If you have a problem with the difficult decisions that Captain Raydor has to make in regards to officer involved shootings, I suggest you grow up and find yourself a clue. I had to, and now I’m dragging the rest of ya’ll along with me. I also suggest you take a moment to think on exactly where you would be had Cap’n Raydor not plugged the leak in this department and helped make the Goldman go away, because it probably wouldn’t be here.” Provenza opened his mouth to speak. Brenda cut him off.

“No. This is not a situation where you get to justify what you were doing and try to sound reasonable. There is no justification. Without even considering the dozens of helpful little things she did for us while the lawsuits were hangin’ over our collective heads, Captain Raydor is responsible for the continued existence of Major Crimes. Period. The next step the brass were considering to combat the leak was to break up the unit and distribute all of us throughout the department. No more Major Crimes meant no more leak, gentlemen, and Pope was ready to move on to drastic solutions.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and rubbed a little to alleviate the
tension that was forming there.

“And as for Officer Dunleavy and the OIS that FID closed last week; how far does one of our brother officers have to go before you think he should lose his badge?” Provenza opened his mouth again. She cut him off again.

“No Provenza, that was a rhetorical question. The fact of the matter is that someone has to police the police. And as bothersome as an FID investigation can be, 80% of the time, and that is the actual number for the past five years, those investigated for an OIS are back on duty with nothing more than a note in their file and a few mandatory counseling sessions, usually before FID’s 72 hour reporting period has even ended.” She paused and met each man’s eyes.

“This unit will no longer be involved with or participate in any obstruction of FID investigations. Any attempt to do so, or any disrespect of Captain Raydor and her people will result in an immediate two day suspension without pay and a citation in your permanent records. And I am the final arbiter of what constitutes disrespect. Dismissed.”

Looking a little shell-shocked, they all filed out of the conference room. Flynn murmured an apology as he passed, a thoughtful look on his face. She didn’t acknowledge him, or any of them, beyond her unblinking stare. When they had all exited, she returned to her office and packed her bag. Without a word to anyone, she left the murder room and then the building, already mentally going through her closet, trying to decide what she was going to wear.
Chapter 6

It was 8:20 when Brenda’s silver Crown Vic screeched to a halt in front of Sharon’s house. Sharon, who was waiting on the front porch, dropped her head back and grinned. The Chief tripped up her sidewalk, a little black dress stretched over her lithe frame, a profusion of loose blonde curls spilled over her shoulders, and a tantalizing amount of chest and cleavage displayed by the décolletage of her dress. Sharon licked her lips.

“Sorry I’m late, Sharon. Wardrobe issues.” And then Brenda got a good look at what her Captain had donned for their date, and she was struck dumb. Sharon had traded in her regulation business wear for a high waisted black pencil skirt with detailing that mimicked a corset along the top. The sleek, uninterrupted black of the skirt accentuated the curves of Sharon’s hips and waist in a way that conservatively cut suits she wore to work did not. A plum colored long sleeved button-up silk blouse was tucked into the skirt. On display were the tops of Sharon’s breasts and nearly the entire expanse of her chest. And her hair, that lovely, lustrous auburn hair played across her silk covered shoulders and back. Between the end of her skirt and her black peep toe heels, the brunette’s legs were bare, and Sharon Raydor’s legs were a work of art.

“Dear god,” Brenda breathed out, a benediction perhaps, or the first words of a prayer of thanks for just how lucky she was. Brenda mounted the first of the steps leading to Sharon’s front porch and paused to blink rapidly a few times, lest the beauty of Sharon Raydor burn her retinas, before stepping quickly onto the porch itself.

“Chief,” Sharon husked. “You’re staring.” She could feel the beginnings of a blush tickling the edges of her cheeks and turning the tops of her ears hot.

Brenda reached out to take one of Sharon’s hands in her own. “You are a vision, Sharon Raydor,” she said softly, stepping closer. Sharon’s mossy eyes were lambent behind the lenses of her glasses and her hand was as clammy as Brenda’s was and now Brenda was close enough to feel the warmth of her body and catch the lingering scent of her hair.

“You smell like honeysuckle.” Brenda murmured wonderingly and stepped closer still. The intricate edging of Sharon’s skirt scraped against Brenda’s dress and they were pressed together; thighs, bellies, breasts, all touching. Sharon sighed, her eyelids fluttering as the breath left her lungs, and brought a hand up to Brenda’s waist. Then, head cocked, she brought her lips very softly to Brenda Leigh’s.

It was a simple thing, that kiss, and brief, though neither of them wanted it to end. Sharon took responsibility and pulled away, though only just. She could see under the frames of her glasses, at the edge of her vision, that Brenda was smiling broadly, her eyes still closed.

“Oh my,” Brenda breathed onto Sharon’s lips. “I’m going to want to do a lot more of that.” She brought a hand up and trailed her fingers along one of Sharon’s collar bones. “We should get on the road, though. The restaurant is in Santa Monica, and our reservations are for 9:00.”

Brenda didn’t relinquish Sharon’s hand until she had led her to the car and handed her into the passenger seat.

The 30 minute drive to Santa Monica was a dangerous one for Brenda Leigh, because when Sharon had arranged herself in the car, her skirt had ridden up, exposing a couple of inches of thigh, and now in the footwell of her passenger seat, easily within the line of her vision, were a pair of long, nearly bare, lightly tanned and muscular legs. Legs that had figured in her fantasies for months.
She gripped the steering wheel tighter, and tried to keep from biting her lower lip bloody, hoping Sharon wouldn’t notice her struggle. She nearly jumped out of her skin when Sharon laid a slightly clammy hand on her forearm.

“I think we’re both a little out of sorts.” Sharon said, a little timid. “I haven’t had sweaty palms on a first date in ages.”

Brenda flashed her a smile. “I can’t say that my palms are sweaty, but my heart is beatin’ like I just dropped out of a dead sprint.”

“You don’t have pretend that you don’t like looking at me, Brenda. I don’t mind, not at all.” Sharon confessed - now her heart was pounding. “I get insecure sometimes - thinking that I’m too old to be desirable.” She found herself flushing at her admission.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“It doesn’t, at least, not in a bad way.” The moist hands and butterflies were uncomfortable and pleasant, in a way that hearkened back not to her first dates in high school, but the first few times she went out with a women, when she was in her thirties.

“You know, I had sweaty palms the first time we met, though,” Brenda admitted.

“Why? Because they were itching to slap me?”

“I’ve never wanted to slap you! Throttle you maybe, but only a little.”

“Well, that’s ok then,” Sharon snarked. Brenda ignored her.

“You marched into that dingy hospital waiting room in that navy trench and those gorgeous black Manolos, with your perfect hair and righteous anger and got right in my face…” Brenda paused, probably for dramatic effect, Sharon thought.

“And I wanted to kiss that superior expression right off your face!” Sharon snorted a laugh, and then a short silenced encompassed them.

“So when did they go away?” Sharon wanted to know.

“The sweaty palms? Never. I had ‘em today something awful during that autopsy. And my heart has been carryin’ on ever since I got the confirmation that those flowers were delivered to your office.” Sharon was silent again, considering what her Chief was telling her.

“You wanted to kiss me the first time we met,” Sharon mused. “Brenda, how long have you wanted this?”

“Ages,” the blonde breathed. “Since that thing with Detective Moore. I wanted to pistol whip that bitch around the morgue for abusin’ your trust. I can’t imagine what that was like for you - having someone you trained and mentored take advantage of the fact that you’re a decent human being.”

“It’s been that long?” Sharon was aghast. “But you were so…” Sharon didn’t want to say it.

“Bitchy?” Brenda laughed. “Yea, that long. I couldn’t let myself be nice because I would want more, and…” She shrugged.

“And you were married.” Sharon said succinctly and Brenda pulled a face.

“I was. And now, I’m not.”
“And this is what, Brenda Leigh?” Sharon realized that she might be probing a little too far, too fast, but she needed to know. Brenda shot her a fleeting, considering glance.

“Fair question.” She didn’t even have to consider her answer. “Feels serious. I know it’s a little soon, but if I waited longer and let you get away, it really would have done a number on me,” she finished sheepishly.

“You wouldn’t have had to worry.” Sharon smiled, trying to be reassuring. “I was sort of hung up on this unavailable blonde for a few years and no one else could turn my head.”

“A blonde, you say?” Brenda joked.

“I guess I have a type,” Sharon demurred.

Brenda led Sharon into Catch at the Hotel Casa del Mar. It was crowded, but quiet - the ambiance was muted and romantic. The entire back wall was glass, and the Pacific dominated the view. Brenda stepped up to the maitre’d and gave her name. The man smiled politely at her.

“Yes, Chief Johnson. Your table is being reset as we speak. Would you and your guest like to have a seat at our bar while you wait? It shouldn’t be more than a minute or two.”

“That’s fine.” Brenda caught Sharon’s eye, and the brunette let herself be gently guided into the bar by Brenda’s hand on her elbow.

“Would you like a drink, Sharon?” Brenda was being very solicitous. It surprised Sharon. It surprised Sharon even more that she didn’t mind it.

“A scotch on the rocks, if I could get one.” Brenda smiled and turned to catch the bartender’s attention. Sharon took the opportunity to take a good look at her Chief, her Brenda, in the simple, but beautiful little black dress she had chosen for dinner. The blonde had no notion of how gorgeous she was, especially when she disposed of the frills and fripperies and loud prints she wore to work. Very little was needed to ornament the elegance of Brenda Leigh’s body, and Sharon looked her fill.

Brenda handed Sharon a cut crystal glass filled with a measure of scotch over the requested ice cubes. “A Macallan for the lady.” Sharon swirled the glass and took a delicate sniff before taking a sip.

“Mmmmmm. Very nice. Don’t you want a drink?”

“I’ll stick to wine with dinner, but watching you enjoy that tumbler of excellent scotch is nearly as nice as having one myself.” Sharon took another sip and as the scotch spread a bit of warmth into her belly, let her eyes slip along the low neckline of Brenda’s dress and over the smooth silhouette of her torso. Brenda flushed under the frank appraisal.

“You look lovely tonight, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon purred in that husky voice that Brenda was desperate to hear more of, though the her cheeks flushed a little at her own boldness. The maitre’d appeared over Sharon’s shoulder and inclined his head slightly at Brenda.

“Our table is ready.” Sharon turned and Brenda stepped forward with her, a hand on the small of the brunette’s back. Sharon forced down a shiver at her touch.

Their table was, in terms of privacy, the best in the restaurant. They were tucked away in a corner with an unobstructed view out the window, where the surf pounded relentlessly on the shallowly sloped beach.
“This is a lovely place, Brenda.” The blonde had allowed Sharon to take the seat looking out over the water.

“IT is. I met the manager a few years ago on a case.”

“Do you come here often?”

“No, I’ve actually never eaten here. Michele, the manager, sends me a few bottles of good wine every year for the holidays. Last spring, I did miss dinner here with my parents because I caught a case.” Brenda smiled at Sharon, wondering what the other woman had been expecting to hear.

“The view is something else, though.” Brenda hadn’t taken her eyes off Sharon since they had stepped into the restaurant.

Over lamb (for Sharon), and beef short ribs (for Brenda), paired with a nice Spanish Rioja, Brenda charmed Sharon with stories about growing up blonde and bossy in Atlanta.

“So you’ve always been this bossy?” Sharon was curious to know.

“Oh, yes, since I could talk. Though it was much worse before I had a command structure in which to exercise my…supervisory nature.” Sharon threw back her head and laughed at that.

“That’s quite an equivocation, Brenda. Supervisory nature.” She chuckled and shook her head.

“You’re one to talk, Sharon Raydor!” Brenda said in mock outrage.

“Oh no, Brenda Leigh. I had to learn how to be bossy in my first year of law school so I wouldn’t get trampled on by all the type A’s in my class.”

“Law school! You never said you were a lawyer.” Brenda narrowed her eyes at Sharon. “I might have to reevaluate my opinion of you.” Sharon laughed again.

“Well, if it makes you feel better, other than doing some pro bono work at a DV shelter, I’ve never practiced law, though I did pass the bar, and I’m still a member in good standing.”

“This does explain a few holes I had in my professional picture of you, like why you wear so many different hats for the department, but the pro bono work - I always suspected you would be the type to be generous with her time.”

“I’m just surprised you didn’t read my personnel packet. It would have been in bounds for you to do so as a Deputy Chief.”

“No, Sharon. As much as I do like to snoop, it would have been unprofessional for me to read up on you while we were investigating at cross purposes. And anyway, I don’t think Pope would have given your packet to me if I had requested it - not at that juncture. And during the lawsuit, for the most part, I didn’t care what was in your packet because I trusted you.” Sharon cast her eyes down and blushed a little as she chewed her lamb.

“Where did you get your JD? For that matter, where did you do your bachelor’s degree?”

“Stanford Law. And Vassar, for undergrad.”

“That’s impressive.” Brenda pulled a face. “You have an advantage on me for this kind of stuff because I know you have read my personnel packet and you vetted me for the Chief of Police thing.” Sharon grinned ruefully at her. “I’m not going to interrogate you to catch myself up, don’t worry.”
“I’m not worried. You can ask away.”

“Well, to start, how about you just tell me about your children.” Sharon’s face froze and hurt flickered through her eyes, and Brenda immediately regretted the personal question. “I’m sorry, you don’t have to answer that.”


“Smart like his mama, then.”

“He is. He’s a good man; very kind and big hearted.” Sharon took a long draught from her water - her scotch was gone, Brenda noticed.

“Would you like another drink, Sharon?”

“Another scotch would be lovely, thank you.” Brenda caught the server’s eye and pointed at Sharon’s whiskey glass. The young woman nodded and turned on her heel towards the bar.

“You don’t have to talk about your children if it’s painful or uncomfortable.”

“Brenda, it’s ok. Really.” Sharon fiddled with her silver. “I’ve been estranged from my daughter off and on for about a decade. On, recently, which is why it’s a little raw to talk about.”

“Oh, Sharon. I’m sorry. I can’t even imagine.”

“It’s an old wound, mostly. She was a daddy’s girl, and when her father and I divorced, she blamed me for his leaving. He fanned the flames, of course, because pettiness knows no bounds when going through a divorce and custody battle.” She sighed, and Brenda snaked her hand out across the table and took Sharon’s hand in her own.

“So even though I got primary custody, and spent the 12 years after the divorce showing Margot every day that I loved her, her father was still a bigger influence, despite the fact that even when the kids were with him, he was an absentee father. Once she went to college and converted to Mormonism,” she paused when Brenda pulled a face. “Yea, I know. So she got religion, and I pretty much lost a daughter because her religion legitimized her issues with me, in her mind at least.”

“Mormons aren’t big on homosexuality, then? I’m not that familiar with them - in DC it was mostly Jehovah’s Witness knocking on your door at 8 am on weekends, and in Atlanta, it was packs of Southern Baptists and evangelicals roaming the streets.”

“Mormons are about as pro-gay as the Jehovah’s and the Baptists and evangelical denominations. They actually poured a lot of money into supporting Proposition 8.”

“Oh, yea. I remember seeing that on the news.”

“Margot only sees the problems that her father had with me - mostly work. She can’t grasp that his 18 hour days caused just as many problems as me working Robbery Homicide, not to mention the fact that he spent two years sleeping with every female intern and associate that passed through his office. Though if she knows about his affairs, it’s never come up. So she is content to blame the dissolution of my marriage to her father on me and my unreasonable devotion to my job and whatever confusion I was feeling in regards to my sexuality.”

“That’s pretty low of her, Sharon. Did you not tell her the truth?” Brenda wanted to strangle
Margot for causing her lovely mother so much pain.

“I couldn’t, Brenda. I couldn’t break my little girl’s heart by telling her that her daddy was a cheating bastard.” Brenda was silent for long moment. What could she say about a mother making a sacrifice like that?

“You’re a brave woman, Sharon Raydor.” Sharon sipped from her newly delivered glass of scotch.

“Not brave, just trying to keep my baby’s heart as whole as possible.” Brenda grabbed Sharon’s hand again, her expression was impossibly soft.

“No, you’re brave. And very strong.” Brenda said with conviction, and Sharon could almost believe it. Sharon tightly gripped the blonde’s delicate hand and kept contact with her dark eyes and let the silence draw out for a few comfortable moments.

They lingered over coffee - decaf espresso - and dessert for Brenda. Sharon did have a few bites of Brenda’s chocolate mousse, and Brenda’s eyes burned into Sharon as Sharon enjoyed the rich treat.

“I’m surprised you’re sharing that,” Sharon quipped. “It’s fantastic.”

Brenda smirked and purred, “I’ll say again that watching you enjoy it is as pleasurable as enjoying it myself.” Sharon flushed and dropped her eyes to the table, aligning the salt and pepper shakers with the little sugar container and avoiding the blonde’s gaze.

When she finally lifted her eyes, Brenda caught her gaze, brown eyes hungry, and said, “Can I interest you in another bite, Sharon?” Sharon couldn’t help the chuckle elicited by the blonde’s ardor.

The car ride back to Sharon’s was again fraught for Brenda. Sharon wasn’t drunk, but she was very relaxed, and clearly happy. Maybe even ecstatic, if the smile that graced her features was any indication. And she was sprawled in the seat next to Brenda, looking at the blonde with desire and affection in her eyes. It was all Brenda could do to not pull off the highway and kiss her senseless.

“Sharon Raydor, when I get you home, I fully intend to kiss you some more.”

“You’d better, Chief. I’d hate for you to be derelict in your duties so soon after we negotiated this little agreement.” Then the brunette arched her back and stretched her arms up to touch the roof of the car, exposing the black lace of her bra. Brenda couldn’t suppress a whimper and Sharon grinned wickedly at her, happy that she had such an effect on the blonde woman.

“That was an excellent date, Brenda Leigh.”

“Are you sure it’s not the expensive scotch that’s saying that, Sharon?”

“Of course not! Though that was very, very good scotch.” Sharon laid a hand on Brenda’s thigh. “You’ve made me very, very happy today, Brenda Leigh.”

“I’m pretty happy myself, Shari.”

Brenda accompanied Sharon up the walk to the door of her beautiful, neatly kept home.

“Thanks for the lovely evening, Brenda.”

“It was very much my pleasure, Sharon. I hope we can do it again. Soon.” Very, very soon. As
soon as could be managed, Brenda hoped.

“Are you free Friday? I’d like to cook for you.” Sharon looked a little shy, which made Brenda’s heart swell.

“Friday? I don’t know that I can wait that many days to see you again, Sharon.” She squeezed Sharon’s hand and stepped well into her personal space. “I feel like I’ve been waiting forever to be able to spend time with you like this.” Then she put her hands gently on Sharon’s waist and leaned in, letting Sharon close the last bit of distance. Chaste at first, Sharon deepened the kiss quickly, letting her Chief feel all the months of pent up desire that she had been hiding from the blonde and from herself, hoping to keep her heart in one piece.

They were so wrapped up in one another, in the intensity of the feelings, that Brenda didn’t notice her hands slide onto Sharon’s ass, and Sharon didn’t notice her hands flat on Brenda’s firm, muscled stomach tracing gentle patterns through the blonde’s dress. When the need for oxygen broke them apart, Brenda tucked her head into the crook of Sharon’s neck.

“Wow,” she breathed. “That was…” She sighed happily, then inhaled the slightly spicy scent of Sharon’s skin and the lingering perfume of honeysuckle in Sharon’s hair.

“That was amazing, Brenda Leigh.”

“More?” Sharon didn’t say anything - she just pushed Brenda against her front door and kissed her again.

When they finally parted, after nearly half an hour of shameless necking on Sharon’s front porch, Brenda had secured an invitation for dinner on Wednesday at 7. She was looking forward to it already.
Brenda didn’t see or hear from Sharon at all Tuesday after their date. She was beginning to get a little worried that Sharon was having second thoughts about this probably ill-advised relationship.

Brenda’s desire to be close to the older woman - physically or emotionally or whichever way she could manage - made her feel needy and out of control. And now that she had spoken the words, that she and Sharon had acknowledged what was between them, Brenda felt like she was trying to push back the tide with her bare hands trying to deny her needs. She didn’t want Sharon to be scared away by her dysfunction. She had to act like an adult, not like a woman who had been falling headlong into love since Sharon had offered her unconditional support during an ugly lawsuit that had exposed all of Brenda’s warts to the world.

It was Tuesday night, and Brenda needed contact with her Captain. She sighed and picked up her cell.

TO: S. Raydor

*Can I bring something tomorrow?*

A few miles away, Sharon was fixing herself dinner when her phone chimed with a new text. She smiled and her stomach fluttered when she saw who it was from. She wiped her hands and texted back.

TO: BLJ

*Was thinking of you. You don’t need to bring anything. And don’t dress up.*

Brenda’s heart skipped a beat at the knowledge Sharon was thinking of her. A good sign, Brenda thought, though she was hard pressed to remember a moment she hadn’t been thinking of Sharon since their dinner at the pub. During interviews, maybe.

TO: S. Raydor

*You’ve been on my mind, too. Are you sure I can’t bring something? A bottle of wine, dessert?*

Sharon was amused and touched at how thoughtful Brenda was proving to be, but tomorrow night was Sharon’s turn to court Brenda.

TO: BLJ

*I’m making dessert. With lots of chocolate. All I need is your company. In casual clothes. And you can bring your swimsuit if you think you might like to take a dip in the pool.*

Brenda shivered as visions of Sharon Raydor in a revealing bikini began playing like a film reel across her subconscious. Brenda didn’t know if she was strong enough to keep their relationship moving on even a remotely slow and steady track in that situation.

TO: S. Raydor

*If you’re sure. I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m really looking forward to it.*

Sharon was smiling so broadly that her cheeks were starting to hurt.
TO: BLJ

Me too. It’s silly, but I find myself missing you tonight.

Brenda blushed at the words on the screen of her cell phone. It was like Sharon was reading her mind.

TO: S. Raydor

Not silly. Not at all. I feel the same way, Shari. I can’t wait to see you tomorrow.

TO: BLJ

Me neither. Tomorrow.

That entire Wednesday, Brenda was beside herself. She had never known a workday to pass with such agonizing slowness. Her suspect in the murder of an elderly woman had obstinately refused to revoke his right to counsel, despite being confronted in her interview room with evidence contradicting his lies, so Brenda and Major Crimes were stuck putting together an evidentiary case, something that bored Brenda Leigh out of her skull under the best of circumstances. When her interview room was off the table, Brenda Leigh had to admit that her interest in a case waned a little - not in it’s successful resolution, but the immediacy went out of it for her when a confession was not an option.

So she fidgeted and stared off into space and fiddled with the stuff on her desk as she watched traffic cam video and read witness statements and tried to determine what would be compelling for use in a jury trial. Of course, all of the collected evidence would get turned over to the District Attorney, but the most relevant evidence went ‘on top of the pile’, so to speak. Brenda Leigh sighed. It was only noon!

*****

Andy Flynn leaned back in his chair and watched his Chief twitch and fidget behind her desk in her office. She had been acting strangely for a while now; stranger, even, than the new, more contemplative and less prone to over work Chief that had emerged after the year of hell that was Goldman hounding the division and the slow collapse of her marriage to Agent Howard.

So the Chief was, ostensibly, single again, but although Fritz had only been gone about two months (as best the boys could tell), Andy wasn’t so sure that was the case. The Chief had been smiling goofily while lost in thought, blushing apropos of nothing, and Monday, for something like a terribly tense hour, she had looked bereft and utterly lost.

But yesterday and today, the happiness was back, and now, Brenda was clearly anticipating something, though it was unclear what that could be, or with whom. He would keep his eyes open.

*****

Brenda had managed to make it through the day, though towards the end, it was a near thing. Now, she was standing on Sharon’s porch in jeans, flip-flops, and pair of layered brightly colored v-neck shirts - her bathing suit underneath, though she was unsure about that - with her cell phone tucked in her back pocket and her hands clasped nervously in front of her. Sharon opened the door, already smiling.

“Brenda, come on in.” Brenda was once again struck dumb by her Captain as she stepped through the door. Sharon was wearing a pair of loose linen drawstring pants in a pale creme. A well-worn
blue chambray shirt completed Sharon’s casual look - the sleeves rolled up to expose her forearms, the neck parted to once again expose her delicate collar bones and smooth chest, bracketed by what looked like a black halter top swimsuit. Her hair pulled back in a long queue, the tail end pulled over a shoulder. Brenda could do little more than wave dumbly, and awkwardly and stare. Sharon closed the door behind Brenda.

“Chief, you’re staring.” Sharon said shyly. Brenda flushed.

“I can’t…” She stammered. “I can’t seem to help myself, Sharon.” She dragged her gaze from the deep v at the neck of Sharon’s shirt and to the woman’s face. There was a hungry look to Sharon that Brenda was sure mirrored her own. In a blink, Brenda found herself pressed against Sharon’s front door. Again.

Despite their fervor to touch one another, the first kiss they shared was gentle. Sharon sucked lightly on Brenda’s bottom lip before plunging her tongue into the blonde’s mouth. Brenda found her hands had slid themselves under the other woman’s soft shirt and were resting on the bare skin of Sharon’s back before she had ever realized her hands were moving. Sharon pulled their lips apart, and stood panting, eyes closed, with her forehead pressed to Brenda’s.

“Jesus,” Brenda breathed. Sharon laughed and pushed away from the door.

“Come on, Brenda Leigh. I believe I promised to feed you.”

Sharon led the way into her kitchen. Her house was as beautiful and comfortable and well put together as Brenda could have imagined. “I love your place, Sharon. It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks. I like it well enough - I’ve been here almost 30 years now.”

“Wow. That’s a long time, especially in LA years.” Sharon’s eyes crinkled up with humour.

“Is that like dog years, Brenda Leigh?”

“Maybe,” Brenda said coyly.

Sharon stepped from the kitchen into her back yard through a sliding glass door. A open deck stepped down to a pool area paved with red stone and dotted with comfortable looking furniture. Evergreen shrubs stood sentry around the property, just inside a wooden privacy fence.

“Oh, wow.” Brenda exhaled. “How do you pry yourself away from this every morning?”

“It’s hard, but it is a nice place to escape from work and to pretend you aren’t in LA.” Sharon pulled out a chair for Brenda at a solid wooden table, loaded with steaming dishes and set with lovely stoneware. “I thought you might like eating out here tonight.”

“It’s fabulous - I think I’d eat every meal out here. And the food looks great - what a spread.” Brenda sat down and put her napkin in her lap. Sharon poured her a glass of wine before sitting down herself. They both assembled their own fajitas: tender steak and vegetables in soft shells. There was also rice and salads. As they ate, they talked.

Their days were both rather low key - though Sharon found Brenda’s frustration with actually having to put a court case together rather adorable. Sharon told Brenda about constructing her backyard oasis - after her kids moved out, much to Jackson’s dismay.

“Jack’s a bit of a fish. He’s been surfing since age 10, and swam all through college.”
“Should I check you for gills, Sharon?” Brenda teased, grinning. “Raising an aquatic child, and you do have your own personal pool and is that a hot tub down there?”

“I swim almost every morning. I had to stop running after I took a round in the hip when I was working Robbery Homicide.”

“Oh, Sharon!” Brenda reached out for Sharon’s hand. “I didn’t know that you’d been shot!” Sharon squeezed Brenda’s hand and smiled a little affectionate smile.

“Brenda, it was almost twenty years ago! I rarely even think about it. The ball of my left hip is made of metal and grafted bone, and I can’t run regularly, but I can swim and ski and bike and wear heels.” Brenda looked doubtful, but relinquished Sharon’s hand, laid her silver on the edge of her plate, and leaned back in her chair. Sharon did the same.

“Give me five minutes to put the leftovers away and I’ll have dessert for you,” Sharon said, stretching. She felt comfortable and relaxed on this warm fall evening with Brenda Leigh.

“Let me help, Shari. Get the food and I’ll get the dishes.” She stood and reached for Sharon’s plate, stacking it with hers. Sharon stood too, and lifted a hand to Brenda’s cheek, running the backs of her fingers across the smooth skin, before smiling and hefting the platter of vegetables and meat. Brenda followed her into the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher while Sharon scraped food into tupperware.

When everything was cleaned up, Sharon leaned a hip against the counter and cocked her head at Brenda. “Hot tub? Pool? Dessert? Dessert in the pool or hot tub?” Brenda mirrored Sharon’s head cock and nibbled on her bottom lip, letting the desire show on her face as she ran her eyes over Sharon’s body.

“Is it the prospect of chocolatey dessert you’re lusting over, or…” Sharon teased, her shimmering malachite eyes dark and piercing when she caught Brenda’s gaze.

“You.” Brenda said simply. She allowed the magnetic attraction she was feeling pull her straight into Sharon’s body and guided their lips together. Brenda slid a hand up Sharon’s torso and let her fingertips flirt with the underside of Sharon’s breast through her shirt and swimsuit. Sharon groaned, and Brenda pulled away, chuckling.

“I probably shouldn’t get into a hot tub with you, not yet.” Brenda admitted, and Sharon smirked and leaned in to nuzzle at Brenda’s temple and then press a kiss there.

‘It’s okay, you know.” Sharon whispered. “We can do what feels natural for us - we don’t have to fight it.” She slid her hands down into the back pockets of Brenda’s jeans and pulled the blonde’s slender hips more firmly into her body. Brenda shifted a little so one of her thighs slipped between Sharon’s legs, pressing the seam of her jeans against Sharon’s thigh and into delicious contact with her center. Brenda moaned.

“If I wasn’t fighting it, we’d be in your bed with whatever dessert you made and a bottle of wine, Sharon.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat, Brenda Leigh?” Sharon purred, her voice dropping a register and a leg lifting to curl around the back of Brenda’s leg to keep the blonde close. She could see Brenda’s pulse hammering in her neck, could feel the heat between her legs.

“I don’t want you to think this is just about sex or that I’m wooing you just to, you know, get into your pants.” Brenda sounded rueful and Sharon smiled.
“Brenda Leigh, there are easier and faster ways of getting into my bed than being sweet and supportive through nearly two weeks of professional hell.”

“All I did was bring you pancakes!” Brenda tried to jest.

“Don’t minimize. The pancakes were the least of it. And now…” She trailed off.

“And now we’re here, together,” Brenda sighed happily and snuggled in deeper to Sharon, like she wanted to merge their masses and share the same space. Sharon was happy to let her try.

They cuddled awhile - Sharon enjoyed the feeling of Brenda’s breath against her neck, the comforting weight of her body and powdery floral scent of her hair and skin.

When the edge of the counter against her back became uncomfortable, Sharon shifted.

“I have a chocolate torte with strawberry cream glaze in the fridge for us,” Sharon said, low voiced and a little sultry.

“Chocolate, you, hot tub.” Brenda asserted firmly.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive about how I feel about you, Shari.” Brenda placed a soft kiss on the very edge of Sharon’s mouth and then looked at her, face somber and searching.

“But can you honestly say that you are sure about me? That you know that I’m not on the rebound or experimenting or having some sort of midlife crisis?” Sharon shrugged, their gazes were locked. Brenda’s large brown eyes radiated sincerity and affection.

“I’ve been so happy the past few days, Brenda Leigh. I was trying not to think about that, but it’s always a risk when dating women who were previously straight, but then again, putting your heart in someone else’s hands is always a risk.” Brenda smiled fondly at her and reached up to cup her cheek.

“I want us to both be in the same place on this, Shari, because my heart is already invested.” She peeled herself away from Sharon’s body. “So now, I want to eat dessert in your hot tub with you.” Brenda kissed Sharon again, this time flicking her tongue gently along the crease of Sharon’s closed mouth.

“And I want to tell you something about myself, a story from my past. One that I think you’ll find relevant.”

“Ok. I’ll cut the torte. There are towels in the box on the deck.” Sharon palmed Brenda’s hip possessively. “Water or milk or wine with your torte?”

“I’ll have milk. What do you want? I’ll carry the drinks out for us.”

“You can refill my wineglass.” Sharon took the torte out of the refrigerator. “Tumblers are up and to the right of the sink. Milk is on the door of the fridge. Big piece, little piece or somewhere in between?”

“In between, please.” Sharon cut and plated two slices, a larger one for her Chief, while Brenda poured a glass of milk and returned the carton to the refrigerator. They stepped outside together and Brenda paused at the table to empty the last of the wine into Sharon’s glass.

Sharon set the plates next to the hot tub and began to unbutton her shirt. Brenda dropped two towels well away from the cake, put the glasses next to the plates, cut her eyes over to Sharon, and
unbuttoned her jeans, letting them fall from her hips and puddle on the flagstones. Sharon bit her lip at the sight of the blonde’s smooth, toned legs and then parted her shirt and pushed it off her shoulders. She couldn’t help but feel that her nearly 60 year old body wouldn’t live up to Brenda Leigh’s expectations; Sharon was still in decent shape, but middle aged spread had hit her around the middle, and she had nursed two children - she had no illusions about what her highly flattering designer clothing concealed. And Brenda’s body, for all that Sharon could tell, was as tight and toned as a distance runner’s. She steeled herself and undid the drawstring of her pants, letting them drop down her legs.

Brenda had paused in the midst of pulling off her shirts. Sharon’s bathing suit was a simple, black bikini. The halter style top didn’t enhance her cleavage, but did emphasize the heft of her breasts, which were set wide and a bit low on her chest. Sharon was slender, but Brenda already knew that. The brunette’s lightly muscled torso flared with a little drama into her hips and the bottoms of her bikini clung to slight softness of her belly and arched over her hip bones to cover an ass that Brenda desperately wanted to see.

Sharon could see that Brenda was staring again, panting heavily through her nose, trembling a little and biting down hard on her bottom lip. When Sharon lifted her arms to scrape her hair into a higher ponytail and re-secure it with her elastic, it was as though someone had pushed a button on Brenda Leigh, because she had whipped off her shirts and had hands cupping Sharon’s breasts and lips on Sharon’s throat and a thigh pressed against Sharon’s pussy before Sharon could even secure the mass of her hair firmly on her head.

Sharon persevered with her hair against the sensations of Brenda’s tongue on her pulse point and Brenda’s thumbs on her nipples and Brenda’s muscular thigh between her legs. When she finished with it, she dropped her hands to Brenda’s bare back and gently played her fingers along the shallow indent of Brenda’s spine. Her Chief was all soft, pale skin and sinew and delicate muscle and she felt exquisite pressed, nearly bare, into Sharon’s body.

Brenda’s mouth stopped tasting her neck, though her thumbs on Sharon’s nipples continued moving. Sharon was holding herself very, very still, trying to resist the desire to clutch the blonde to her and ride the thigh that the other woman was offering for her pleasure.

“I knew,” Brenda whispered. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you once I saw you like this.” She stepped back, sliding her hands down to Sharon’s waist. Brenda’s bikini was a brief, royal blue affair with a bandeau top. She was so very slender - every muscle of her body stood out in sharp relief beneath her skin, like she had been chiseled from marble or cast in bronze by some Renaissance master of anatomy. The lushness of her breasts was an unexpected bounty on the firmness of her body.

Brenda drew in a deep, shuddering breath. “I think we should get in the hot tub and I should occupy my hands with cake before I start taking off your suit.” Sharon chuckled throatily.

“Maybe I’ll be the one taking off your suit, Brenda Leigh.” She stepped into Brenda to bring their skin into contact again. Brenda groaned.

“Can I at least tell you my story and eat that cake before you start undressin’ me?”

“If you must.”

They settled facing one another in the hot tub with their plates of torte. Brenda forked off a large bite and crammed it in her mouth. She chewed slowly, her eyes rolling back in her head, the pleasure on her face was nearly enough to make Sharon jealous of her own baking. Sharon took a bite for herself. It was good - the glaze had turned out better than she thought, but Sharon didn’t
derive a nearly sexual satisfaction from chocolatey desserts like Brenda Leigh Johnson did.

Brenda ate slowly, enjoying each bite, occasionally taking a long draught of milk to wash down the heavy chocolate confection. They didn’t speak, and the eye contact they maintained was intense - though the silence wasn’t awkward, just laden with desire and whatever Brenda Leigh wanted to tell her.

Sharon was sipping at her wine when Brenda slid her plate back onto the pool deck. The stoneware scraped across the flagstones with an awful grinding noise. Brenda winced; then shrugged, smirked and dashed under the water; Sharon saw Brenda’s distorted image push her hair back from her face. Then the blonde emerged from underneath the water, exposing her torso and breasts, covered only by the soaked lycra of her strapless bikini top. It sagged a little with the weight of the water and Sharon couldn’t drag her eyes away from valley between Brenda Leigh’s breasts and her hardened nipples.

“Sharon,” Brenda purred in a playful sing-song. “Eyes up.” Sharon gulped and flicked her eyes up to Brenda’s. They were sparkling with levity. The blonde smirked at her and wormed her way into Sharon’s arms, straddling her lap and resting her chin on her shoulder. She settled into Sharon’s body and made a blissful little noise.

“Feels nice, Shari,” she breathed. Sharon brought her hands to Brenda’s back again and wrapped the blonde in her arms.

“So, are you going to tell me this story or can I start undressing you?”

“This isn’t a clothing optional kind of story, Sharon.” Brenda shifted in her lap and sighed gustily. “I’ve never told the whole story to anyone before.”

“If you aren’t comfortable…” Sharon started, but Brenda cut her off.

“No, no I want to tell you. It’s just, once I start, you can’t interrupt, or I don’t know if I’ll be able to finish.”

“Ok, Brenda Leigh.” She tightened her grasp on the blonde. “Stay here, though. Please.” Sharon felt Brenda nod, then she paused a moment.

“Once upon a time, in the eighties, a bossy little southern blonde moved to DC to go to college. She was a very serious girl - serious about school, about her goals, and awkward around people, partly because of her bossiness, but also because her peers confused her.” Sharon gave her a little squeeze at this.

“I think I’ll abandon the third person thing; too confusing.” She sighed again. “I knew exactly what I wanted to study - Slavic languages, but I liked everything about the classes I was taking, and the library to get lost in, and the professors to pester. My first semester, I was taking a freshman English seminar. Pretty standard really, lots of reading and writing. There was this one brilliant girl in my class - she was a tiny, dark haired Texan - she was the only other southerner I had encountered at Georgetown - and I was absolutely captivated by her. I was too nervous to even talk to her until our professor assigned us as peer review partners for the rest of the semester.”

“Her name was Neecie. Short for Bernice - though the only person who ever called her that was her father. The first time I tried to boss her around, when I didn’t like the comments she made on the first assignment she critiqued for me, she just smiled calmly and turned her comments in to the professor anyways. God, I was so scared she wouldn’t like me, it made me act like an idiot.”
“I was lost, after that very first smile. I didn’t even care anymore that she had ripped my paper to shreds. And after that class, we were inseparable. She became everything to me so quickly. And we fell in love.”

“The way I felt for her scared me at first, and even after almost four years together, I always felt a little... out of control around her, a little possessive, and tender, always tender and I always needed her in ways I couldn’t explain. We had our happiness, though it wasn’t perfect, by any means. Neecie could never reconcile what she felt for me with her very conservative faith, so she was always in crisis, a little, because of our relationship.” Sharon could feel tears trickling onto her shoulder, but held her tongue, like Brenda had asked of her.

“We shared an apartment, a bed, and did everything together for three and a half years, and I loved her, and it was enough. Looking back, I should have known that she would leave. We never talked about the future beyond the abstract; I was never a part of the future she saw for herself. A few weeks after we walked across that stage, she was gone. I went to the class I was TA-ing for summer semester, and when I got home, everything that was hers had been taken away.” Brenda choked back a sob and Sharon nuzzled her wet blonde hair and made soft noises of non-sensical comfort.

“No note, no goodbye, no anything. I stayed in that apartment for two years, alone, hopin’ that maybe she’d change her mind and come back to me. After I finished my degree, I joined the CIA with the thought that they could teach me to be someone else. But apparently operative training is a no go if you’re incapable of hiding your natural accent.” Brenda sighed and snuggled deeper into Sharon, tightening her grip.

“Later, I heard from a mutual friend that Neecie was working as a missionary on a remote island in the Pacific, and that she was engaged to some man her father had practically picked for her. I never heard from her again.” Brenda stopped talking and just cried for a few minutes. Her voice was hoarse when she started speaking again.

“She died a few months ago, just before my marriage ended, from some disease that doesn’t exist in the developed world. I had to find out from the GU alumni magazine. She had a whole passel of kids and had only come back to the states a few times since she graduated from college.”

She pulled back to look at Sharon now. “It didn’t even take a smile from you and I was done in, Sharon Raydor. And then I got to know you a little and all those feelings came rushing back like they had never left me.” She cupped Sharon’s jaw with both her hands. “All the need and the tenderness. After everything, I never thought I would feel this way again, didn’t think I was capable anymore.”

She kissed Sharon then, and in that kiss, Sharon felt all the out of control passion and need that Brenda confessed to feeling, and Sharon did her best to let Brenda feel that those emotions were in her, too.

When the immediacy was extinguished, Brenda slumped bonelessly in Sharon’s arms, emotionally wrung out from relating the story of her first love and its loss.

“I want to take you up to my bed and hold you tonight, Brenda Leigh. Will you let me do that for you?” Sharon husked into Brenda’s ear. The blonde head nodded listlessly. “Come on, I’m starting to prune, honey.” Brenda pushed up out of Sharon’s lap to a standing position and stepped out of the hot tub. She looked small and a little broken and Sharon wanted to wrap her up and not let her leave until both their hearts were healed. Brenda stooped for the towels, wrapping one around herself, handing the other to Sharon as she rose from the water. They gathered up the dishes, and they headed silently into the house.
Brenda remained silent as Sharon guided her upstairs and into her bedroom.

“Are you sure you’re ok with this, Sharon?” She asked, standing hunched next to Sharon’s big bed.

“Of course I am, Brenda Leigh.” She pulled the blonde into her body, holding her to her tightly. “Do you want to rinse off before I give you some pajamas?” She felt the blonde nod. “Sweats or gown for sleeping?”

“Sweats, please.” Brenda said. She nosed along the hollows of Sharon’s collarbones and sighed. “I dunno why I’m feeling so worn down all of a sudden.”

“Getting something like that off your chest can take a lot out of a person.” Sharon’s voice was a muted rumble where Brenda’s ear was pressed against the brunette’s chest. They both shivered, suddenly overcome by the chill of damp bathing suits and towels.

“Let’s get you out of that clammy suit and into a warm shower.” Sharon said, gently turning Brenda and herding her towards the bathroom. Brenda adjusted the water in the large, built in, granite tiled shower while Sharon fished some sweats and a thermal out of her messy bottom drawer.

When Sharon entered the bathroom, Brenda was stepping into the steamy cubicle, flesh goose pimpled, dark pink nipples drawn taut. Sharon didn’t try to hide her lingering perusal of the curve of Brenda’s buttocks or shape of her naked breasts. The blonde left the glass shower door hanging open.

“I’ll leave these on the counter with clean towels, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon pulled two bath towels from her closet and put them on the vanity counter next to the pajamas. She turned to leave.

“Where’re you going, Shari?” Brenda’s voice echoed out of the shower. “I was going to go rinse off in the guest bathroom. I won’t be long.”

“Please don’t go,” Brenda implored, popping her wet head out the shower door. “Come in here with me,” she said shyly, unable to meet Sharon’s eyes, staring at the burgundy polish on Sharon’s toes.

“You’re sure?” Sharon wanted to know. Brenda lifted her eyes then and smiled at Sharon, nodding. Sharon smiled back and let her towel drop. Brenda’s gaze on Sharon as Sharon unhooked her swimsuit top was as physical as a touch and the shiver that ran through Sharon’s body had nothing to do with removing the cold lycra from her body. She blushed a little but kept her chin up and her eyes on the slick, flushed skin of Brenda Leigh, as she hooked her thumbs in her bikini bottoms and rolled them off her hips.

Brenda Leigh grinned coyly at her, and disappeared back into the shower. When Sharon stepped in and closed the door behind her, Brenda was in her arms.

“It’s funny how I was talkin’ about wanting to take it slow, and now I’m naked in your shower.” Brenda joked, her head was resting on Sharon’s shoulder, and she looked content and relaxed, despite her humorous protestations.

“As much as physical intimacy is something I want to share with you, a little emotional intimacy isn’t unwelcome, either. Even if we are naked.” Sharon whispered, wry, but serious, inclining her head to rest on the blonde’s.
“I am very glad you trusted me with that story.” Sharon could imagine the pain that Neecie inflicted on Brenda - loving someone so much and it turns out they don’t even see you in their future - to say nothing of loving you without reservation or condition. Sharon felt that pain everyday, too, because of her daughter. It was different than the hurt and anger that her ex had caused in her; it was a raw wound that never quite healed.

“It was easy to tell you about Neecie, easier than I thought it would be.” She sighed happily. “Are you sure my dysfunctional past isn’t gonna scare you away?”

“If that’s what you’re thinking, then I’ll have to ask you the same question.” Sharon splayed her hands in the small of Brenda’s back. “I have my own issues, you know. Infidelity is an absolute deal breaker for me. And what my husband did after I came out…- well, I haven’t had a relationship longer than six months since then - he soured me on people in general for a while.”

“What’d he do to you, Shari?” Brenda Leigh wanted to know, her hands mirrored Sharon’s, finger’s resting on the swell of Sharon’s ass.

“It took seven years after my divorce to find someone to love and trust, that I wanted to share my life with. When Kellan found out that person happened to be a woman, he tried to take the kids from me again - charged that I was an unfit mother in the courts, had investigators questioning all my co-workers and my children’s friends. I lost my lover because of the shit he pulled.” Sharon chuckled darkly, remembering.

“I already had a reputation as a ball-buster, though I’m sure you know that, so people nosing around asking about me dating women got the department gossiping like I’d never seen before. It wasn’t long after that I joined FID - if my coworkers were going to treat me like a leper, they might as well have good cause to do so, and I might as well get a promotion out of it.”

“Oh, Sharon,” Brenda murmured, happy to be holding Sharon, much as Sharon was holding her.

“It was a long time ago, Brenda Leigh. I made my peace with what happened, and with my choices. And besides, Kellan got his in the end. He eventually got fired for screwing around with the wrong intern and had to move to flyover country to find a firm that would hire him. Reputation is everything in law, and his is worth shit on both coasts.”

They stood, skin to skin under the spray, bodies pressed together and washed the chlorine from their hair and skin, neither willing to pull away, both a little lost in memories, but grounded in one another’s touch.

Brenda Leigh looked adorable in her borrowed pajamas - the pants hung low on her slim hips, and the thermal clung to the planes of her torso and molded to her breasts. A sliver of pale skin peeked out in the gap between the sweats and the shirt.

Brenda sat on Sharon’s bed in Sharon’s clothes, pulling Sharon’s brush through wet blonde waves, and Sharon, standing naked in the door to the bathroom toweling the excess water from her hair was punched in the gut with a wash of emotion. Affection, desire, and love, certainly. Once their walls had come down, Sharon was sure it had only taken mere moments for her to fall in love with Brenda Leigh Johnson. But there was a sharp thread of possessiveness that Sharon was unfamiliar with and that thrilled her and sent a tendril of fear through her at the same time. She let the fear chase through her with a shiver, then banished it.

Brenda noticed her watching and wrinkled her nose. “What? Do I have something in my teeth? Or is something hanging out that shouldn’t be?” She made a show of checking herself over then cocked her head inquiringly at Sharon.
“Just admiring how cute you look in my sweats, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon positively purred.

Brenda smirked at her, biting her bottom lip and letting her eyes travel from Sharon’s face to her chest, over her stomach and finally, between her legs, to the thatch of wiry brown hair there. She worried the lip between her teeth.

“You’re looking pretty cute yourself there, Sharon Raydor.” She pursed her lips. “Though maybe cute isn’t the word I’m really looking for.” Brenda cocked her head and raised her chin, invitation clear on her face.

Sharon dropped the towel, crawled onto the bed and curled on her side around Brenda, tugging at her hips to pull her down onto the bed. Brenda giggled and put the brush down on the bedside table. She laid down facing Sharon, throwing a leg over Sharon’s bare hip and pulling them closer together.

Nose to nose; Sharon could feel Brenda’s breath puffing across her lips, could feel Brenda’s hard nipples against the underside of her breasts through the textured cotton of the thermal, could feel the heat between Brenda’s legs against her hipbone where the blonde had entwined their legs.

They both moved at the same time to bring their mouths together - not a lusty kiss, but a sweet kiss, a mere grazing of the lips. They both grinned broadly when they pulled apart.

“Are you ready to sleep, Brenda Leigh?” Sharon asked. She wasn’t tired yet, but holding Brenda while she slept would be immensely satisfying.

“I could.” She kissed Sharon again. “But I could also be persuaded to stay up a little longer if you aren’t sleepy, since you’re bein’ so sweet and lettin’ me bunk up with you tonight.” She sounded drowsy, like she was half asleep already.

“You’re drifting off, honey. Get under the covers and I’ll turn out the light and go lock up.” She kissed Brenda, on the forehead this time and swung her legs out of the bed to hit the switches for the bedroom and bathroom.

Brenda pushed down the duvet and sheet and folded herself under it. Sharon left the room to flip the locks and double check that her service weapon was secure.

When she came back into the bedroom, Brenda was facing the door, curled up on her side, watching for her with lidded eyes. She smiled sleepily, sultrily.

“No pajamas for Sharon Raydor?” she asked huskily, her gaze on Sharon’s naked body was hungry. Sharon let the corners of her mouth curve up a little.

“I sleep a little warm, usually.” Then she smiled fully. “And something tells me that you’re a cuddler.” Brenda bit her lip, her sleepy eyes glittering, and nodded.

Sharon rounded the bed slid under the sheets and into Brenda’s body, and this time, it was Sharon who cocked a hip to pull herself as close to Brenda as she could manage, her nose seeking out the hollow at the base of Brenda’s skull, an arm slung over the bare skin around her middle where Brenda’s shirt had ridden up, fingers ghosting over an exposed hip bone.

“Shari,” Brenda murmured. It took no time at all for the blonde’s body to relax completely and her breathing to even out and deepen. Curled around the warm woman, Sharon followed not long after.
It was Tuesday morning and Sharon Raydor was walking on air. Her weekend had been excellent - a Saturday afternoon Russian film double feature where Brenda Leigh had kept her in stitches with alternate translations for the onscreen subtitles (much to the consternation of the other filmgoers), and then sushi at Haru, which they had drawn out into coffee and some light petting on the couch at Sharon’s.

Sunday, they spent much of the evening on the phone after Brenda had called Sharon: “cuz I needed to hear your voice,” Brenda had said.

Sharon had been happy to oblige, and they talked about nothing - the pernicious mold in Brenda’s shower, what sort of car Sharon might get now that the lease on her personal vehicle was up, where Brenda wanted to go to dinner this week - before sitting down to mutually view and tear apart a crime procedural. When the show was over, Brenda confessed that her cell phone was making her ear sweat and that the next time it was a weekend and she wanted to hear Sharon’s voice, she was going to get in her car and come over.

“Yes.” Sharon had said. “Yes.” Then she paused, considering. “Why don’t you come over for dinner again tomorrow. Just let me know what time to expect you.”

“I’d really like that.” Brenda shyly admitted. “You’ll let me know if anything changes; if you catch a case?”

“Of course.” Sharon paused again, not ready to say good night, so she listened to Brenda breathe for a few moments. “Goodnight, Brenda Leigh.”

“You too, Shari. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dinner Monday night had been as lovely as all the other meals they had shared, though Brenda had been rolled out to a crime scene in the middle of their make-out session. The blonde actually growled and bared her teeth at her phone as she pulled her hands from where they were cupping Sharon’s breasts to answer it. Even left panting on her couch as Brenda Leigh stomped out to her car, Sharon couldn’t help but smile.

Despite being distracted by a murder, Brenda had thought to dash off a text message shortly after 11:

FROM: BLJ

Lunch tomorrow? I’ll need to see your face after this one. I might even need a hug.

TO: BLJ

Certainly. Leftovers in my break room whenever you can manage.

FROM: BLJ

You’re sweet. I’ll see you then. And can we make plans for this weekend? If you want, I’d really like to have a day or two free to spend in bed with you.

TO: BLJ
Would you be offended if I told you that was a stupid question, Brenda Leigh? I'll take myself off the rollout list for the weekend first thing tomorrow.

FROM: BLJ

Brenda Leigh Johnson never asks a stupid question, Sharon Raydor. I'll do the same for my communications list.

*****

Sharon had just set her bag down on her desk when every phone in her bullpen began ringing. Her first thought was: shit, there goes lunch.

Elliot answered his phone and pursed his lips at whatever he was hearing. He said something, and listened some more, then jotted something down and hung up before shuffling into the door of her office.

“Non-fatal OIS down in Major Crimes, Captain Raydor.” Double, triple, quadruple shit. She sighed.

“Bring everyone in here before we head downstairs, please Lieutenant.” He nodded and turned away to gather his colleagues.

Sharon perched on the edge of her desk, her people arrayed in front of it. She looked each of them in the eye, deliberately. “This is nothing I haven’t said before, but I wanted to reiterate the importance of maintaining decorum and a modicum of distance from our investigations. I know our last OIS was difficult for everyone, but keep your calm and let me handle any issues.” They all nodded and began to file out.

“Lieutenant Elliot,” she intoned softly. He waited. So well trained.

“I need you to take point on this. Keep me informed, and let me handle the Chief - I assume she wasn’t the shooter?”

“No, Sanchez double tapped a raging suspect in the knee.” Sharon made a frustrated noise.

“Don’t they keep tasers or stun guns down there?”

“From what Flynn just told me, the suspect managed to pull open a link on his handcuffs, shrugged off two hits from a taser and no one could get close enough to try to uh…disable him bodily, m’am. Sanchez took the shots from close range, but that’s all I know.”

“Ok, Lieutenant, let’s get down to Major Crimes.”

When they arrived in the murder room, chaos reigned around the stretcher that was parked in the middle of the desks. On it, a massive man in an orange corrections issue jumpsuit was laying on his back, and despite an immobilized and ice packed left knee, he was straining with very little leverage against what appeared to be full body chains.

The paramedics were arguing strenuously with Lieutenants Flynn and Provenza about whether or not the shooting victim was secure enough to safely transport. The paramedics were scared, and Sharon couldn’t blame them. Elliot left her side, probably to begin his interviews, and Sharon waded into the verbal altercation. Where was Brenda Leigh?

“Enough.” She said, just loud enough to be heard over the argument. “Can you not sedate this man
long enough to get him to the hospital?” Flynn bobbed his head, apparently that had been his question, too. Provenza just scowled at her.

“No m’am, Captain Raydor.” One of the paramedics piped up, an older man. “He’s got something else in his system. He’s not responding normally to painful stimuli; his pupils are dilated. I can’t sedate him without knowing what he’s taken, and he’s not talking.” Sharon pursed her lips.

“Is he stable enough that you could transport him in a paddy wagon with a couple of officers?”

The paramedic shrugged. “It’s against regs, but I don’t want this guy to smear me against the inside of my bus if he breaks those chains.”

“Let me make a call to prisoner transport and you can meet them in the parking garage.” She turned to Flynn and Provenza. “Gentleman, can you see to it that the paramedics and uh, Mr….”

“Hulk,” Flynn deadpanned. Sharon bit her lip to keep a smile from showing.

“Bowers, his name is Bowers.” Provenza growled.

“Can you make sure that everyone makes it down to the garage in one piece, please?” The Lieutenants nodded. Sharon stepped away from Flynn and Provenza to use the phone. She arranged for a paddy wagon and two transport officers armed with lethal and non-lethal weapons to accompany the prisoner to the E.R. of Cedars and remain there with him. Sharon eyed Mr. Bowers’s knee. God only knew what was going to happen with that.

“All set.” The paramedics began wheeling the sweating, struggling man out of the murder room. Flynn and Provenza made to follow.

“Lieutenant Flynn, a word, please.” Flynn narrowed his eyes at Sharon and stepped closer.

“Is the Chief in her office?” Sharon kept her voice low.

“Yeaaa,” he said slowly. “She’s in there with that dirtbag’s daughter. We’re pretty sure that he beat his child’s mother and stepfather to death with his bare hands last night. That damage to his knuckles didn’t come from what happened just now. It’s all documented, too.” Sharon nodded and then pushed her glasses up a bit and massaged the bridge of her nose.

“And they’re ok? The Chief and the daughter?”

“Lucy’s her name. A little shaken up, but unhurt. Chief Johnson was talking to the daughter when the guy hulked out. She put herself between the two of them.” Sharon could feel the blood drain from her face. Of course she did. Brenda Leigh never hesitated to put herself between a victim and danger.

“Ok.” Sharon pulled off her glasses completely. “Ok. Go catch up with the paramedics. Make sure you and Provenza do your interviews with Elliot and Markham ASAP, please. I would really like the focus off of this incident and back on your murders before the end of business today, alright?”

“Oh, ok, Captain. I’ll keep that in mind.” She smiled grimly at him, and turned to march towards Brenda Leigh’s office.

The blinds were all drawn and Sharon couldn’t hear any noise from within. She knocked softly on the door and pushed it open. The lights were off; Brenda was in her desk chair, cradling a sleeping girl of 6 or 7 in her lap. Sharon slipped off her heels and crept on quiet feet to Brenda’s side. Brenda looked absolutely shattered. She was pale and her eyes were red rimmed, tension furrowed
her brow and thinned her lips. She bent to the blonde, who tilted her chin up and kissed Sharon fervently. When she pulled away, Brenda’s eyes were shut, and Sharon could see tears well out from under her lashes.

“I’m so glad you’re ok, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon whispered, as she threaded her fingers through the honeyed strands of hair at Brenda’s temple. Brenda gulped and nodded, afraid she would start to sob if she spoke.

“Did your team locate Lucy’s next of kin?” Brenda nodded again and then she took a few deep breaths.

“She has an aunt - the step-father’s sister, that we’ve not been able to reach. And her maternal grandmother is flying in from Boise. She’ll be here this afternoon.” Tears were streaming down Brenda’s face in earnest now. “She lost both her parents last night, Shari. And this morning had a front row seat to a man getting tasered and shot.” Sharon knelt next to the chair and slid an arm around Brenda’s shoulders. God, she wished she could gather the blonde in her arms.

“Do you want to keep her with you, Brenda?”

“Yea. Yea. It’s only for a few hours, but I don’t want her to have stay here. And I think I might need some time, too. To check my head, you know?” It was hard for Brenda to admit this; that she was too emotionally invested. Brenda knew in her gut, just like she knew when someone was lying, or holding something back, that Sharon Raydor could, and would help her with this.

“Ok, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon’s voice was that husk that Brenda loved so much. “Why don’t we both take a little lost time and get Lucy across the street for a check-up? She’ll need one before we can release her to a family member, anyway.” Sharon said softly. “And then we can take her to my house, if you want. To get her out of the murder room? My team should have this OIS cleared up by the time her grandmother arrives.”

“I think I would like that, but don’t you have to deal with Sanchez?” Brenda asked in a small voice.

“Elliot is in charge of the investigation, Chief,” Sharon said rather tonelessly. Then her voice softened; “I think you know why.”

“I feel selfish saying this, but I’m glad.” Brenda smiled gratefully up at the brunette until a realization sobered her expression. “It’ll probably have to be like this from now on, won’t it. Elliot in charge of things if my squad is involved with an OIS or use of force?”

“I think so, yes.” Sharon was wary; she wasn’t sure how Brenda would react to this realization.

“And you’re ok with that, Sharon?” Brenda grabbed for one of Sharon’s hands. “Your job is already hard enough. Is this - are we, I mean - going to make your life worse?”

Sharon leaned in for another kiss and said softly, “Brenda Leigh, whatever problems our relationship might cause at work, I am positive you are worth it.” She trailed a finger down Brenda’s cheek and over the collar bone exposed by Brenda’s unbuttoned twinset.

“We can talk about it more later,” Sharon said before standing and sliding her feet back into her shoes.

“Let me take Lucy.” She lifted the girl from Brenda’s lap easily. Lucy didn’t wake, just shifted her weight in Sharon’s arms and buried her face in the brunette’s neck. Brenda stood and
stretched, taking in the sight of her Captain cradling a child to her.

“You don’t have your bag Sharon,” Brenda observed. Sharon twisted her lips in a moue of distaste.

“I didn’t think I’d need it. Can you run up to my office? I’ll meet you in the lobby,” Brenda nodded, but before she gathered up her own purse, she pressed her body into Sharon’s back. Sharon felt the blonde’s nose in her hair, heard her inhale deeply, felt Brenda’s palms slide along her blazer from shoulder blades to the outside of her thighs, then felt Brenda’s lips on the back of her neck.

“I know, Brenda Leigh, honey. I know.” Sharon cooed. Brenda stepped back and sighed and scooped up her bag, striding out of the office. Sharon took a deep breath and backed through the door to keep from disturbing the sleeping girl. Elliot approached as soon as she exited the office.

“I hope you have things in hand, Lieutenant. I’m going to be unavailable until this young lady’s next of kin comes to collect her.” Elliot looked at her oddly but didn’t object.

“Ok, m’am. I will contact you if we encounter any surprises, and I still need to interview Chief Johnson and Lieutenants Flynn and Provenza.”

“Chief Johnson will be unavailable till later as well, maybe until tomorrow. The Lieutenants will be back as soon as transport has taken custody of the prisoner.”

“Yes m’am. Should I contact Chief Johnson later today, or will you take her statement.”

“You or Markham can take it whenever she returns to the office. If you can’t get a complete picture of what happened without it, call me and we’ll get it done sooner.” Elliot nodded and returned to his duties.

Sharon stepped off the elevator in the lobby at the same time Brenda Leigh exited one of the other elevators. She stepped close and they paused, alone together despite the hustle of Police HQ around them.

“Is she still asleep, even with all this noise?”

“Playing possum, I think.” Brenda gave her a wry grin at the expression. Flynn and Provenza approached from the entrance that lead to the HQ parking garage.

“Let me talk to them a minute and then I’ll pull the car around, Shari.”

“Chief!” Provenza called; loud even over the usual hubbub of the lobby. Flynn smacked him in the arm, hissed, and pointed to the sleeping child in Sharon’s arm. Provenza shrugged and shuffled rapidly their way. Brenda moved to intercept him. Sharon’s arms were getting tired. She widened her stance and shifted the girl around to her other hip.

“Chief, where are you going?” Provenza was whispering urgently, like they were in some sort of secret huddle. “Is Captain Raydor taking you off the case? What about Sanchez?” Brenda narrowed her eyes at him.

“I wouldn’t want to insult your steel trap of a memory and remind you of the conversation we had in my conference room a few days ago.” Provenza averted his eyes and shook his head. “Captain Raydor and I are taking Lucy for her mandatory physical. I won’t be back until later. You both will report for your FID interviews as soon as you get back upstairs.” Provenza spluttered and looked like he was going to protest.
“No, Lieutenant. It will be done, and there will be no complaints or shenanigans, or there will be consequences.” Provenza scowled, threw up his hands, and shuffled off to the elevator.

“I’ll keep an eye on him, Chief.” Andy supplied helpfully. “Will you be available by phone today?”

“Yes, certainly. I’m just going to get Lucy out of the office until a family member comes for her. I need your first priority after your interview to be getting in touch with that aunt.”

“I’ll do what I can, Chief. According to her secretary, she took a few vacation days with her partner while their house was being tented for termites. Neither the aunt nor the partner have their cell phones on, and I have no probable cause to pull their financials to find out where they are staying.” Andy shrugged his shoulders. “They’re supposed to be back at work tomorrow, so hopefully sometime today they’ll re-enter reality.”

“Oh, Lieutenant. Let me know if there are any changes.” She effectively dismissed him and turned back to Raydor, who was still cuddling the child to her chest.

The Chief stepped close to Raydor and murmured to her in a tone Andy couldn’t overhear. Raydor nodded and said something back, and then smiled a sweet smile at his Chief. Brenda smiled back with her eyes - her lips were pressed together - and briefly grasped the Captain’s elbow, before turning towards the parking garage, rummaging in her bag for her car keys.

Andy had never seen a smile like that on Sharon Raydor’s face - not in two decades of professional association. Raydor was still watching the Chief as she walked away, her face still soft, though her gaze on the twitch of the Chief’s hips was somewhat…proprietary.

Oh. Andy tried very hard to school his face into placidity. Office scuttlebutt had pegged Raydor as a lesbian in the early nineties, when she had been tied up in court trying to keep her kids after her ex had found out about her sexual orientation. A dick move by the ex, to be sure. Despite his dislike for the woman at that point in his career (at every point in his career, he was somewhat ashamed to admit), he couldn’t imagine her as anything other than a conscientious and devoted mother; Sharon Raydor was much too upright to be anything else.

But Raydor and the Chief? It would certainly explain the Chief’s secretive texting and the staring off into space with a goofy grin and her impassioned defense of FID and Raydor’s job. It would also explain why Raydor was letting her Lieutenant run point on this investigation and Sharon herself (Andy felt like this was the first time he’d ever seen Sharon the woman) was here, with a sleeping child resting on one hip, looking rather pleased about spending the day with Chief Johnson.

Andy was too intrigued with his sudden flash of insight to get on with his day, so he lurked and watched Raydor, who was staring out the doors, across the plaza. When she started moving towards the doors, Andy took a few quick steps and opened the door for her. Sharon quirked her lips up, nodded an acknowledgment, and strode off, her gaze already fixed on the silver unmarked pulling up to the curb in the distance. He watched her progress, still lost in thought. Were the neurotic Chief and the prickly Captain romantically involved? Andy’s instincts were saying that they were.

Sharon unlocked the front door to her house and looked back to where Brenda Leigh was half in the back seat of her Crown Vic, extracting Lucy from a borrowed car seat. The girl was awake, but DCFS’s pediatrician had recommended a long sleep as the best medicine for the trauma of last night and this morning. So Brenda and Sharon had been instructed to get her to eat as big a meal as she could manage and if Lucy couldn’t sleep on her own (she had been awake for nearly 36 hours
at this point), they had two tiny sleeping pills to help her along to dreamland.

Brenda deposited Lucy on the ground and bent to speak to her, pointing at Sharon on the porch. She nodded her little brown head and tripped up the walkway. Sharon smiled at the child and extended a hand to her. Lucy stomped up the stairs and took Sharon’s hand. She led the little girl into the house.

“So little Lucy, what would you like for lunch?” Sharon hoped she had food that would appeal to a potentially picky six year old. She was also cursing the fact that she’d left the tupperware that contained her and Brenda’s lunch in the office refrigerator.

“Ummm, what kind of fings do you have to eat, Miss Sharon?” Lucy inquired in her piping voice that had utterly charmed everyone from detectives to doctors to Sharon herself.

“Well, why don’t we go have a look, kiddo.” She pointed through the living room to the kitchen. “The kitchen is right in there. I’m just going to take off my pointy shoes, ok?”

Lucy headed into the kitchen and Sharon was toeing off her heels as Brenda came through the door, shutting it behind her. The blonde gave her a weak smile and dropped her purse next to the door, slipping out of her own footwear. Sharon placed her keys on the entryway table and wrapped the blonde up in the first real hug they’d been able to share during the whole interminable morning. Brenda melted into her body and Sharon was sure that the only thing holding the blonde upright was her locked knees and Sharon herself.

Brenda made a choked noise, and Sharon rubbed her back soothingly. “Shhhhhh, honey. Let’s get her fed and asleep and then I’ll hold you for a few hours, ok?”

“Yes. Please.” They stepped apart and Brenda scrubbed her hands across her face. In the kitchen, Lucy had the refrigerator open and was peering intently into it.

“Can I have some of those noodles, Miss Sharon?” Lucy pointed at the linguini Sharon had fixed to go with some sautéed shrimp and vegetables Sunday night. Sharon reached over the girl’s head for the container.

“Just pasta, Lucy? Would you like something on it?”

“Um, the green bottle powdery cheese. And I haf to haf a fruit or veggie at every meal. Momma says.” Brenda slumped herself into a kitchen chair, and Lucy, oblivious to the grief etched into the blonde’s face, climbed into her lap and tucked her head under Brenda’s chin.

“I have crunchy green beans, some cantaloupe, grapes and baby carrots. Which would you like?”

“Can I pick two?”

“Sure you can.”

“Green beans and cannalopes please.” Satisfied with her choices, Lucy snuggled tighter into Brenda’s chest, and the Brenda looped her arms around her little body. Sharon snagged the fruit and vegetables and the slightly embarrassing green bottle of sprinkle cheese.

Brenda’s eyes tracked Sharon’s efficient movements in the kitchen. Pasta and green beans on a plate and stuck, covered into the microwave. Cantaloupe in a bowl, cut into smaller pieces before the microwave even beeped.

“Lots of cheese or a little cheese?” Lucy was watching Sharon, too. She weighed her options.
“Lots.” Sharon nodded and sprinkled a generous helping of parmesan cheese onto the steaming noodles, then sliced them into smaller bites. She cut up the green beans too, for good measure. It had been a long time since Sharon had prepared food for a child this age.

She put the plate and bowl in front of Lucy, who shifted in Brenda’s lap. “Blow on the noodles and beans; they’re still hot.” Lucy poked a green bean with her fork and blew on it obediently before popping it into her mouth. She beamed up at Sharon.

“Fanks, Miss Sharon.”

“You’re very welcome, Miss Lucy.” She smiled at the little girl and then turned her attention to her girlfriend, who was looking very small and sad cuddling Lucy in her lap.

“Are you hungry yet, Brenda?” Brenda shook her head.

“I actually ate breakfast. Lucy and I did.”

“We had French toast!” Lucy chirped happily. Brenda blushed.

“That sounds delicious. Do you think you can take a nap after you eat your lunch, little Lucy?”

“I fink so Miss Sharon. I’m pretty sleepy.”

“Ok. I’m going to get some comfortable things to rest in, then.” She squeezed Brenda’s shoulder as she left the room.

Sharon tucked little Lucy, clad in a gigantic t-shirt into her own bed under a soft throw. Her eyes had begun to droop before she could even finish her meal, and it had been a race to get her changed and in and out of the bathroom before she dropped off to sleep. Brenda was in the bathroom now, changing into a pair of Sharon’s sweats, and Sharon was pulling on sweats of her own. She unhooked her bra and slipped it off from under the tank she had pulled from her drawer.

Brenda stepped out of the bathroom with her clothes in her arms. She took the clothes from the unresisting blonde and guided her to the bed. “Why don’t I go throw these into the dryer with a sheet so they’ll feel fresh when you have to put them back on.”

“Lay down, honey. I’ll be right back.” Brenda and Sharon had decided to nap with Lucy - the doctor had told them not to let the girl wake up alone in an unfamiliar place. Brenda crawled onto the bed and curled up on her side, watching the sleeping child.

When Sharon reentered the room, Brenda was facing the door. She caught Sharon’s gaze and extended her arms, and Sharon took the invitation gladly, making sure both their phones were on the bedside table before removing her glasses and embracing Brenda Leigh, holding her close. The blonde cried soundlessly into Sharon’s shoulder - Sharon could feel the tears moistening the skin of her neck and chest and dampening her tank-top.

The ringing of a cell phone brought Sharon out of her pleasant dream. Brenda was still pressed against her, their legs twined together. Sharon twisted an arm around to snatch up the phone before it could wake Brenda and Lucy.

“Raydor,” she whispered.

“Oh. Captain Raydor. I was looking for Chief Johnson.” It was Andy Flynn. She bit back a sigh.

“She’s asleep. Can it wait?” Brenda stirred in her arms.
“Shari baby, whosit?” She mumbled, tilting her chin up. Miles away, at HQ, Andy Flynn bit down on his lip to hide a grin and spun around once in his desk chair.

“I’m sorry Captain, but the aunt and her partner are here and they want to see Lucy. They’re pretty freaked out.” Sharon let herself sigh audibly.

“Lucy is completely conked out and the doctor told us to let her sleep for as long as we could get her to.” She worried the insides of her cheeks with her molars. “Could you bring them to my house, Lieutenant Flynn. It isn’t protocol, and if you aren’t comfortable, we’ll wake her. But I’d rather…” Flynn cut her off.

“No, Captain, it’s fine. The girl’s been through enough. I’ll bring them myself.”

“Yes. I’d prefer that.” Andy could hear a little trepidation in the Captain’s voice.

“Captain, you don’t have to worry about me, not about protocol or anything else, understand?” He tried to reassure her.

“Understood, Lieutenant. Thank you.”

“We’ll be along in a thirty minutes or so.” Sharon hung up and tossed the phone to the bed.

“Brenda Leigh, honey.” The blonde groaned and fumbled her lips along Sharon’s neck in sweet, sleepy, open mouthed kisses.

“We have to get up and get dressed, Brenda Leigh.” She kissed Brenda’s forehead and nuzzled along her temple. “Come on, honey,” she cooed. “Lucy’s aunt is coming and we don’t want Flynn to see us cuddling.” Brenda groaned again.

“Flynn’s comin’? And the aunt?” Brenda still sounded half asleep.

“Yea, honey. We have to put our clothes back on.”

“Must we?” The blonde was awake now, and her lips punctuated her words with kisses. “I really like you in this tank top.” Sharon chuckled and then Brenda said in a small voice: “Can I stay with you again tonight? After we’re through with this?” Sharon gathered Brenda to her; held her as close as she could.

“Of course you can. You can stay whenever you want, Brenda Leigh.” Brenda pulled back a little to look into Sharon’s eyes.

“I love you, Sharon Raydor,” she whispered and then kissed the brunette on the corner of her mouth. Sharon heard herself make an enraptured noise, a little mew of pleasure and surprise, before kissing the blonde soundly.

“I love you too, Brenda Leigh.”

Sharon had just finished brewing a pitcher of iced tea when there was a knock on the front door. She hoped her bare feet and jeans didn’t offend Flynn’s sensibilities. She pulled the door open.

“Lieutenant Flynn, come on in.” Flynn stepped into the entryway, flanked by two petite women with wild eyes and tear streaked cheeks.

“Captain Raydor, this is Maureen and Kristina Winn, Lucy’s aunts.” Sharon heard Brenda’s feet on the stairs behind her. “And here’s Chief Johnson.” Brenda was back in her skirt and twinset,
though her feet were also bare. Brenda came over to shake both woman’s hands.

“Chief Johnson, Lieutenant Flynn told us what happened this morning.” Kristina Winn’s eyes were red and swollen, but her voice was steady. “Thank you for protecting Lucy.”

Brenda smiled sadly at Lucy’s aunt. “She’s a brave little girl, Ms. Winn.”

“Could we see her? Just peek would be…” Kristina gulped and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. Maureen gripped her shoulder. “It would really put our minds at ease.”

“Sure you can. She’s just upstairs.” Brenda led the two women back up the stairs and down the hallway and Sharon was left standing in the entryway with Lieutenant Flynn.

“Have you had lunch, Lieutenant?” Sharon inquired evenly. If Flynn had figured out she was dating his Chief and didn’t have a problem with it, she could, at the very least, show the man some hospitality. “I was going to make sandwiches for myself and Brenda.”

She started towards the kitchen and Andy followed. Andy hesitated before answering - most people didn’t keep options for a decent vegetarian sandwich in their houses if they weren’t vegetarians themselves. Sharon spoke again before he could figure out what to say.

“I have a couple types of hummus. And a lot of produce. Cukes. Squash. Tomato.” She’d actually remembered that he was a vegetarian.

“Okay. That sounds good, actually.”

She turned to open the refrigerator and smirked at him - a friendly sort of smirk.

“Garlic, plain or roasted red pepper?”

“Garlic, and cucumber, please.” She rooted around and fished out a tub of hummus and a whole cucumber and handed them to him. “Would you happen to have a sweet pepper in there too?”

“I might.” She bent to open the bottom crisper drawer and Andy averted his eyes from her ass in those jeans. Jesus in short pants if Sharon Raydor wasn’t become more appealing by the moment. He found himself appreciating her with different eyes in this new environment and now that he knew she and the Chief were…whatever they were.

Sharon’s refrigerator was massive - the whole kitchen was modern and efficiently appointed, and looked frequently used and well maintained. A half open pocket door next to the fridge exposed a pantry or wine closet of some sort - one of the walls was covered in lightly stained wooden bottle racks.

Sharon put the pepper on the counter and turned back to gather meat and cheese and lettuce and mayo into her arms before turning and letting the refrigerator door swing shut.

“Cutting board is in the dish drain, knife block to the left of the sink.” Sharon opened the bread box on the counter. “Wrap or wheat?”

“Wheat, please.” Andy turned on the sink and washed his hands and the vegetables. He worked quickly; Sharon used the section of counter on the other side of the sink. She handed him two slices of soft bread, a plate and a spoon when the vegetables had been cut and Andy assembled a thick sandwich of hummus, pepper and cucumber. He placed the cutting board, knife and spoon in the sink.
“This looks really good. Thanks, Captain.”

“I have iced tea, water, lemonade…some soda and chips in the pantry.” She pointed to the pocket door. “Glasses are above your head.” Andy poured himself a glass of tea and leaned against the counter to enjoy his sandwich and watch the Captain finish assembling two roast beef sandwiches. He wondered how the Chief was faring upstairs with the two distraught family members. Apparently the Captain was wondering that too.

“I’m going to go check on the Chief,” she said softly, and left the kitchen. Andy took advantage of her absence to snoop a little. He slid back the pocket door to take in the pantry, which did double duty as dry goods storage and a well stocked wine cellar. He noticed a package of snack sized Cheeto’s bags and snagged one. Those things were the Chief in spades. He pulled the door back into place and put the bag of Cheeto’s on the counter next to the sandwiches.

When Andy noticed the back yard, he considered finishing his sandwich and tea out there, but didn’t want to push anything - to abuse this strange trust that the Captain had seemed to place in him. So he stood in front of the glass doors and ate his sandwich and looked at the glint of the sun and the reflection of the clouds in the Captain’s pool.

Andy was sipping at his tea at the table when he heard feet on the stairs. He had loaded his plate into the dishwasher after he’d finished eating. The Captain entered the kitchen, followed by the Winns and the Chief. Andy stood up and moved to lean against the counter and the Chief and the Winn’s sat down at the table.

“So Tony and Kathy had a living will that gives you and Maureen custody of Lucy?” The Chief asked, continuing whatever conversation they had been having upstairs.

“Yes.” Kristina said, and Maureen clasped hands with her on top of the table. Sharon noticed Brenda shift her eyes to the knot of fingers and nibble on her bottom lip. “It was a family decision. Kathy’s mom runs a huge farm by herself, out in Idaho, and doesn’t think she can parent full-time and keep on top of the farm like it needs. And Tony and my parents are deceased.”

“Ok.” The Chief’s eyes shot to the Captain. “I think that under the circumstances, we can get a copy of that will to DCFS so you can take Lucy home right now.”

“I’ll call our family attorney.” Kristina pulled out a cell phone and started scrolling through her contacts.

“Lieutenant Flynn, could you find the fax number for DCFS for Ms. Winn, please?” Andy nodded and took his cell out of the inside pocket of his coat and dashed off a text to Tao. He got a reply almost immediately and placed the phone in front of the Chief. She gave him a small distracted smile. Andy wondered where her mind was at that moment.

It took about 30 tense, quiet minutes for the Winn’s attorney to fax the will to DCFS and for DCFS to call the Chief and the Winns and give the OK for the Winn’s to take Lucy home. It was Brenda who peeled the sleeping little one from Sharon’s bed and deposited her in the arms of her aunt. Sharon gave them the sleeping pills and recommendations from the doctor, and the three of them piled into the back of Andy’s unmarked for the ride back to their car at HQ. Brenda would interview Lucy at their house sometime in the next few days; she felt strongly about not bringing Lucy back to the murder room.

As the car pulled away, Sharon snugged an arm around Brenda’s waist. “Why don’t you go put those sweats back on, and then we can eat those sandwiches on the back porch.”
“Will you put that tank top back on?” Brenda asked, dropping her head onto Sharon’s shoulder.

Sharon dropped a kiss on the blonde head. “Of course I will. You sure you want to take the rest of the afternoon?” Brenda tilted her chin up to look into Sharon’s eyes.

“Yea. I need to get a little distance - especially after having Lucy around all morning. Though I’m not sure I could have let DCFS take her.”

“You did the right thing, Brenda Leigh. She had bonded with you and felt safe with you. It was right to keep her until someone else she trusted could take her home.”

“You really think so?”

“I do really think so.” She patted the blonde on the butt. “Now let’s go get changed.”

Sharon really liked seeing Brenda Leigh in her clothes. She’d realized that when the blonde had slept over last week and she had the same possessive little thrill running down her spine now. Brenda was wearing a t-shirt Jackson had brought her from Berkeley years ago, when he was still an undergraduate, and an old pair of LAPD sweatpants from a law enforcement marathon Sharon had completed before her injury.

Brenda picked up the last of piece melon with her fingers and nibbled on it, her eyes closed, face turned towards the late fall sunshine. Her beauty made Sharon’s breath catch in her chest; features relaxed, pale skin aglow, the light limned each strand of hair, turning it to molten honey. Sharon let her eyes caress each detail of Brenda’s face, marveling that this lovely creature was here, with her. Brenda cracked an eye open and smirked

Sharon watched Brenda pop the melon in her mouth and suck the stickiness off her fingers. She chewed and swallowed and pushed up and out of her chair, propelling herself directly into Sharon’s lap. She folded her legs awkwardly to sit on Sharon’s knees, facing her.

Sharon smoothed a palm down Brenda’s torso, intrigued by her freely swinging breasts under the t-shirt. Face soft and open, eyes lidded, Brenda took ahold of Sharon’s wrist and slid her hand down, down under the waistband of the sweatpants.

“Will you make love to me, Sharon?” Brenda asked, her voice gentle.

Oh, yes, Sharon was ready for this. She scraped her fingernails lightly through the curls over Brenda’s mound. Brenda was wearing no panties under Sharon’s sweats. Sharon moved her fingers that last little distance and cupped Brenda’s sex. Brenda groaned and pulled Sharon’s head into her chest.

“You wanna go inside, Shari, baby?” Brenda purred into Sharon’s hair. Sharon nodded frantically, and dipped two fingers into the startling wetness between Brenda Leigh’s legs. The satiny warmth was irresistible, so she sheathed her fingers all the way to the first knuckle, bearing down gently against the strength of her internal muscles. Brenda moaned and her hips bucked. Then she chuckled.

“That wasn’t quite what I meant, though it feels really, really nice.” She rose up on her knees a little and began fucking herself on Sharon’s fingers. “Are you sure you don’t want to take me in the house and strip me and lay me out on your bed?”

“Later,” Sharon growled. She had a hand up Brenda’s t-shirt and was rolling a nipple, mouthing the other through the thin fabric of the shirt. “Though I do want you naked.” Brenda whipped off the shirt like it was on fire. Sharon latched back onto the blonde’s nipples.
“I don’t think I can get the pants off without getting up.” Sharon made a frustrated noise and lifted Brenda off her lap with an arm around her torso. When she was standing, Brenda yanked the pants down herself, and Sharon unbuttoned her jeans and lifted her hips to push them off. Brenda was back in her lap before Sharon could get her tank off.

“Back inside,” she husked urgently. “Please, Shari, go back inside.” Sharon obeyed - how could she not?

Brenda rode Sharon’s long fingers slowly, using the muscles of her thighs to set a deliberate pace. She kept her eyes locked on Sharon’s, making soft sounds of pleasure and occasionally bending her head to kiss Sharon’s upturned lips.

“After taking that nap wrapped up in your arms, I wanted you so bad, baby. I had such a nice dream of your pretty hands touching me, making me feel so wonderful. And then I woke up surrounded by you, and I felt safe and happy, and so, so turned on.” The sweet need of Brenda’s words made Sharon’s sex throb. Her hips canted upwards instinctively, seeking some contact. Brenda Leigh sought out her lips and wormed a hand between their bodies, running her fingers through the damp, wiry hair at Sharon’s apex before her thumb found the sweet spot just to the left of Sharon’s clit with an unerring accuracy. Sharon groaned at the contact, and then Brenda’s fingers were playing along her slit and Sharon couldn’t help herself; her hips bucked up and nearly dislodged Brenda from her perch.

“Mmmmmmm,” Brenda moaned, her eyes intent on Sharon’s face, drinking in her pleasure. She kept up the teasing contact, and soon they were both breathing hard, Brenda on top of Sharon and panting through her nose.

She buried her nose in Sharon’s hair and inhaled. “You smell so damn good. It must be pheromones or something, cuz just the tiniest little whiff makes me crazy, wantin’ you.” Her pace became more frantic and Sharon began working her thumb over the blonde’s swollen clit. “God, Shari. I’m gonna come.”

And before she could take another breath, she did. Brenda’s body didn’t stiffen and strain against her orgasm like Sharon was expecting - it was more like whatever tension she had been holding on to from the day melted from her in a rush of pleasure, her inner walls pulsing around Sharon’s fingers. Brenda held Sharon to her tightly, sighing her pleasure.

“Oh,” she breathed, the rush of air tickling the hair at the crown of Sharon’s head. “That was just perfect.” Her grip around Sharon’s head eased and she leaned down to Sharon’s mouth and kissed her deeply. Sharon removed her fingers from the warmth and wetness of Brenda Leigh, who moaned and twitched her hips a little.

“Oh,” Brenda breathed again, eyelids fluttering. “Another little one.” She kissed Sharon once more, then pulled back and gave the brunette a considering look. “I think I want to taste you now.” She said seriously. “But first I want to take that tank top off.” Sharon couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Bossy,” she husked.

Brenda rested her forehead on Sharon’s, smiling a little saucily. “I’ve never made love outside before, Shari.” She arched her back a little, stretching and reveling in the light and open air. “The sun feels nice.” She pushed up off Sharon’s lap and propped her bare ass on the edge of table, bare feet on the arms of Sharon’s chair. “Now, up. I want to see you.” Sharon stood and stepped in between Brenda’s legs. Brenda grasped the bottom of the tank, and Sharon raised her arms and let her remove it.
“Mmmmmm, so beautiful,” Brenda purred. Her fingers splayed across Sharon’s belly, tracing the scar at her hip, coming to rest at the curve of her hips. She bent forward to circle a nipple with her tongue.

“Let’s go in the house, baby.” Brenda husked, nuzzling in the valley between Sharon’s breasts. “I want to take my time with you.”

So Sharon found herself spread eagle on her own bed, with Brenda Leigh hovering over her, mapping every inch of her skin with lips and fingers and nose until Sharon was shivering with the diffuse pleasure of her attention and every press of Brenda’s lips against her made her twitch with want and anticipation. No part of Sharon escaped Brenda’s intense scrutiny; forearm to bicep over her shoulder, to her underarm, down her ribcage, over her hipbone, a long pause on Sharon’s well muscled thighs and calves that had Sharon squirming, to the heel of her foot, along the arch and down to her toes.

“Please, Brenda Leigh, please, please,” she whined. Brenda dipped her nose in Sharon’s navel and then licked it delicately.

“Please what, Sharon?” Brenda husked, a chuckle lacing her tone.

“Please, I need you, please, please, please…” she breathed with each exhale. Sharon was too far gone to even be aware she was begging. Brenda trailed her lips over Sharon’s belly and shouldered Sharon’s thighs farther apart. And she poised, lips parted slightly, breath ruffling the hair between Sharon’s legs.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about doing this for you so long,” Brenda whispered.

“Please, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon pleaded, clutching at the sheets, trying to keep from jerking her hips into Brenda’s mouth. “Please.” Brenda exhaled and with the tip of her tongue, parted Sharon’s folds, then dragged her tongue up over Sharon’s clit. Sharon let out a strangled cry and Brenda moaned and latched onto the stiffened bundle of nerves, sucking it into her mouth.

“Ohhhh, yessssss.” Sharon babbled “Suck on it, suck me, Brenda Leigh honey.” Brenda obliged, applying rhythmic suction to Sharon’s clit and using the tips of her fingers to stimulate the nerve endings at the threshold of Sharon’s vagina. Sharon tangled her hands in Brenda’s loose hair and came; Brenda hung on with an arm across Sharon’s hips.

Sharon’s orgasm passed, but Brenda wasn’t finished; she reveled in Sharon’s arousal, cleaning every bit of it from Sharon’s sex, relishing the taste of her lover and the shivers and moans that her continued attentions were eliciting from Sharon.

When she was through, Brenda crawled back up Sharon’s body and curled up, head on her hand, leg thrown over Sharon’s hips, next to the prone brunette.

“That was wonderful, Sharon. Tasting you was wonderful,” she purred. Sharon laughed and turned her head to kiss Brenda.

“It was pretty good for me too, honey.”

“Why do men always complain about goin’ down on us? You taste even better than I’d imagined.” Brenda said dreamily. Sharon kissed her again, snaking an arm around Brenda’s shoulders and pulling the blonde down on top of her. They both sighed contentedly.
Chapter 9

Brenda Leigh resisted the pull towards consciousness fiercely. Back in the depths of sleep, delicious dreams of Sharon - naked Sharon, bringing Sharon to orgasm with her tongue and fingers, Sharon fucking Brenda lovingly while holding her very close - beckoned; a siren call Brenda wanted desperately to succumb to instead of giving into the reality of a work day in the middle of the work week.

She grunted her disapproval; someone was shaking her.

“Brenda Leigh,” a low, familiar voice intoned. “Squeezing your eyes shut tighter and pouting will not change the fact that you have to wake up.” Sharon! All those lovely dreams weren’t dreams at all! At least, not dreams only, not anymore. Suddenly she was ready to spring out of bed. Her eyes popped open.

“Mornin’,” Brenda croaked, then grimaced at the sound of her own voice. Sharon was perched on the edge of the bed, wrapped in a towel, swimsuit straps peeking out and over her shoulders. Brenda caught a faint whiff of pool chemicals, though Sharon’s hair still looked bed-mussed and sexy. She was smiling fondly at Brenda, her green eyes crinkled warmly, and Brenda smiled back.

“You’ve clearly already had your swim, so how does your hair look so damn good?” Brenda wanted to know, her voice still rough. She also wanted to fist her hands in the luxurious mass of it and pull Sharon down to her for a kiss. Brenda knew exactly how soft that hair was - touching it was nearly irresistible.

“Swim cap,” Sharon said, and then shivered because Brenda Leigh was trailing a finger across her knuckles. Brenda smirked and rose up, intending to pull Sharon into bed with her and divest her of the towel and swimsuit. That intent must have been clear on her face, because Sharon dodged her arms.

“We can’t. We have to work today, and unless you want to wear the same thing you wore yesterday, you’ve got to go back to your place.” She smiled apologetically at Brenda, but when she took in what had been exposed when Brenda had made her play to get Sharon back into bed with her, she felt more sorry for herself than Brenda. The blonde’s sleek body was coiled amidst the rumpled blankets, a flush of arousal painting her pale skin and tightening her nipples, her hair a riot of loose waves that beckoned Sharon’s fingers, the generous mouth set in an exaggerated pout that begged to be kissed away.

Sharon leaned in to do just that, heedless of morning breath or fuzzy teeth and tongue, and Brenda murmured happily as their lips met.

“Not that I don’t really, really want to, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon whispered against the blonde’s lips. Brenda smiled dreamily up at her, eyes a little glazed.

“’S good,” she mumbled. “More kisses, please.” Sharon obliged, moaning when the blonde’s tongue licked out to caress her lower lip, but resisted the backwards momentum Brenda tried to initiate to break away, breathing heavily. Brenda was leaned back on her elbows, smirking up at her, breasts thrust out proudly, bedclothes pooled around her waist, exposing her hips and the barest shadow of that secret place at the apex of her thighs. Every bit of Brenda Leigh was a temptation. Sharon clenched her hands into fists.

“Dear god, you are so beautiful,” Sharon breathed, and Brenda squirmed, the outlines of her thighs pressing together briefly under the sheets. “Tonight. Will you come back tonight? We can continue this.”
“Can’t think of anything I’d enjoy more, Shari,” Brenda said, and finally slithered out from under the blankets and stood to stretch on the far side of the bed in the weak morning light that filtered through Sharon’s diaphanous drapes. Sharon let her eyes linger on the sinuous curve of her lover’s back and the swell of her ass. After a long moment enjoying the sights of Brenda Leigh, Sharon shook herself out of her stupor and let her towel drop to the floor. She peeled off her bathing suit.

“Mind if I borrow your sweats? I’ll bring them back tonight.” Brenda swooped to scoop up the clothes she had taken off and put back on at least three times the day before.

“If you like. I wouldn’t let anyone get a look at you in that shirt though, honey. It’s a little see through.” Brenda pulled the pants up so they hung from her hips then rucked up the the thermal shirt and pulled it over her head. After she jammed her arms through the sleeves, Brenda looked contemplatively down at her torso. The textured, buff colored cotton clung to her breasts in a way that left very little to the imagination, and the dark circles of her nipples were clearly visible. She shrugged and rounded the bed to where Sharon was standing in front of her closet. Brenda molded herself to Sharon’s back and hugged her tightly around the waist, splaying her fingers possessively over Sharon’s stomach and kissing the bumps of her spine.

“I’ll be back at 8 to pick you up, Shari. I would say you could walk me out, but you’re pretty naked.”

“I forgot about my car,” Sharon admitted. She craned her neck around to share a kiss with Brenda. “I’ll see you in an hour and a half, then. Thank you, Brenda Leigh.”

“Thank you, Sharon Raydor.” They shared another kiss and Brenda left.

Brenda tripped into Major Crimes on a major high. She had just left Sharon in the garage - they had parted with a kiss. Sharon had not only provided her with a travel mug full of perfectly prepared coffee, but a tupperware of leftover pierogi with her name scrawled on the lid.

She dropped her purse on her desk and collapsed at her desk, allowing herself a silly grin and a spin in her chair, already feeling the anticipatory warmth of spending another night in Sharon Raydor’s bed and in Sharon Raydor’s arms. There was a knock at her door, and Brenda schooled her face into seriousness. It was Flynn.

“Hey Chief, Pope’s been in here looking for you.” She wrinkled her nose. He cocked his head at her. “Are you ok after what went down yesterday?”

“Yea.” She said, smiling at his concern. “Yea, I’m ok.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Chief. It’s nice to know you’re taking care of yourself.” He gave her a mock salute and stepped back from her door and away into the murder room.

Brenda pursed her lips. Why did real life have to intrude on her fantastic mood so quickly? What could Pope want? Even though he’d been confirmed as Chief of Police, Pope still dipped his fingers into the running of Major Crimes, though the case they’d been working was not one that he would normally show an interest in. She dialed his cell. He picked up on the first ring.

“Ahh, Chief Johnson, hello.”

“Good morning, Chief Pope. Lieutenant Flynn said you were looking for me?”

“I was. Could I come by your office in the next thirty minutes or so?”

“I don’t see why not. Is it something urgent?”
“No, no. I just wanted to…catch up, and this is only time I have free all day.” Brenda snarled silently. ‘Catching up’ with Will Pope interested Brenda Leigh not at all. She had a case to catch up on, and images of a lovely brunette swimming in her subconscious that she wanted to spend some time considering - not to mention plotting out the particular ways she wanted to bring pleasure to Sharon later, in the evening.

“That’s fine. I’ll be here,” she said with a cordiality she did not feel.

Brenda buried herself in the reports that had piled up while she was out of the office yesterday. She had a mystery on her hands. TJ Bowers was out on parole in New York on an assault rap that he had served three of five years for. Released from Attica two weeks ago, he’d been in LA for twelve of the fourteen days he’d been free. Bowers’s New York parole officer had no idea Bowers had fled his jurisdiction, and no idea that he’d fled straight into the city where his ex-wife lived. An ex-wife who had a restraining order against him - granted because Mr. Bowers used his fists against his wife in ways it was surprising she survived. The wording of Provenza’s report made it seem like that parole officer didn’t really care, though she would talk to Provenza to be sure that was the case.

Additionally, blood work from the hospital indicated that Mr. Bowers hadn’t had any drugs aboard when he went on his little rampage yesterday, but his epinephrine levels had been abnormally high, almost off the charts. There were no underlying medical issues to explain his incredible strength and high levels of hormones and Mr. Bowers was offering them no help; he still hadn’t said a single word.

A mystery. Brenda Leigh loved a mystery.

It took Pope over an hour to make it down to Major Crimes. Brenda wasn’t surprised. The man could turn a five minute conversation into thirty. He didn’t knock. He never did these days.

She stood up when he entered, but instead of taking a chair, he propped up a wall, so Brenda plopped back down and yanked open her candy drawer. A little nibble of dark chocolate would remind her of the lovely chocolate dessert wine Sharon had opened for them last night.

“I just wanted to make sure you were doing ok after yesterday, Brenda.” He looked very concerned. “I heard you took the afternoon off.”

“I’m fine, Will. I needed the afternoon to make sure I had my distance - just a little lost time.” That the afternoon and evening had provided ample time for her to connect sexually with Sharon Raydor was just a happy bonus, as far as Brenda was concerned.

“I heard that Captain Raydor turned the investigation over to her Lieutenant and dragged you out of here with the suspect’s daughter.” He furrowed his brow. “Do I need to talk to her?”

“Who on earth told you that?” Of all the ridiculous… “Captain Raydor didn’t drag me anywhere, though we did take the daughter, whose name is Lucy, by the way, over to DCFS, and later, Sharon was helpful to me and a comfort to a traumatized six year old victim.”

“So she wasn’t causing problems for you? And it’s not causing problems with your squad that she isn’t running the investigation?”

“On the contrary, Will. Detective Sanchez was cleared before end of business yesterday. And Cap’n Raydor was kind enough to let Lucy and I stay at her house for a few hours while we found next of kin and knowledgable enough about the law to help expedite the paper work to get Lucy released to her aunts; and then she was thoughtful enough to let me relax by her pool and forget
that I’d almost been pummeled in my own office by a 300 pound man on a rampage.” Making love by the pool was kind of like relaxing by the pool, wasn’t it? She felt the back of her neck grow hot with the memory of sitting naked on Sharon’s lap, poolside, Sharon’s fingers inside her, bringing her to orgasm.

“So you’re friends with Sharon Raydor now?” The look of disbelief on his face really incensed Brenda Leigh. She glowered at him.

“Looks that way,” she bit out.

“The same woman who you nearly came to blows with the first few times you encountered her in a professional capacity?” Now Pope was having a chuckle at her expense.

“Regardless of how we started out, sir,” Brenda said, putting emphasis on the honorific, hoping to stave him off before this got anymore personal. “Captain Raydor and I reached a professional understanding months ago, and it turns out we get along pretty well under less stressful circumstances.” And when certain people weren’t purposely setting them at odds with one another. She shrugged and broke off a tiny piece of chocolate and laid it on her tongue - the bitterness of the dark confection wasn’t dissimilar to the taste of Sharon. Brenda nearly moaned at the sense memory.

“You don’t think she has, maybe, I don’t know, an ulterior motive?” He suggested, staring at the shiny tips of his shoes, unable to meet her eyes. This was going to be good. She raised an eyebrow at him. “Office gossip says she’s ready to move on from FID. She already turned down one offer - maybe she thinks you can get her another. Plus…” He paused and averted his eyes. Brenda had to close her eyes briefly to keep from rolling them.

“Plus what?” He still wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Plus, she’s you know, a lesbian.” His neck flushed a brilliant red as he said the words.

“As opposed to the ulterior motives that characterize everything that you do these days, Will?” She growled, hoping he could see how angry she was at his implications. “First of all, Sharon Raydor is well aware that there is very little I can do for her as far as professional advancement is concerned. And secondly, so what? I shouldn’t be friends with her because she’s a lesbian?” Brenda fixed him with a flat stare. “Do I really need to tell you how wrong it is to even intimate that?” He had the grace to look a little embarrassed.

“I think maybe this conversation is over, Chief Pope.” Brenda stood, her voice hard, her gaze steady, gimlet. She knew his game. He wanted to cause problems between her and Sharon, just like he had the first time they had begun a tentative friendship.

“Chief Johnson,” he said tonelessly. And left. Brenda threw herself back down in her chair. Just peachy. Now the question was whether or not to tell Sharon that Pope was sticking his nose in their business, causing trouble. She should. She would. No falling back on old patterns and hoping the problem would go away before she had to deal with it.

TO: S. Raydor

Pope’s sniffing around, trying to cause trouble between you and me again. I shut him down, so he might try you next.

If Pope tried to come between her and Shari again, he’d learn what trouble was. Brenda put the phone on her desk and attempted to turn her attention back to the reports, but she found herself
nibbling on her pen and cutting her eyes over to the stubbornly silent piece of technology.

FROM: S. Raydor

It figures. What’d you tell him?

They needed to get their stories together. Brenda hated this. She wanted to pull Pope back into her office and set him straight on a few things. She’d had bits of that particular rant floating around in her skull for years.

TO: S. Raydor

That we’re friends. That you kept me company while we waited for next of kin for Lucy. And that you let me sit by your pool and relax so I could come back today with a clear head. I figured making love by the pool counted as sitting by the pool.

Brenda set the phone down and let her eyes drop shut. Images from yesterday afternoon filled her forebrain - skin to skin with Sharon, folded on her lap in the big outdoor chair, her green eyes dilated, their expression soft, her lips parted, her mussed hair gleaming auburn in the fall sunshine, her stiffened nipples against the thin ribbed cotton of her tank top, one hand between Brenda’s legs, two of her long fingers disappearing into Brenda’s body.

Brenda shuddered, the scent of Sharon and arousal and a faint hint of chlorine played in her nostrils, even though she was alone in her sterile office in the sterile Police Headquarters. How was she going to get through this day?

She picked up her phone again. Brenda wanted Sharon to know how much their lovemaking, how much all of the intimacy they had shared, was affecting her, but they were still negotiating boundaries as to what was appropriate at work and when they were on duty.

TO: S. Raydor

You know, even with the near beating, yesterday was so amazing.

She picked up the records faxed over from the hospital again. She should probably take them down to Morales, and see about getting him a blood sample for independent testing. Her phone chirped.

FROM: S. Raydor

It was amazing for me too, Brenda Leigh. Will you come have lunch with me so we can take care of some…less pleasurable business? Nothing bad, so don’t get worried on me, I just want to get it out of the way.

Brenda screwed her mouth up. She was sure Sharon just wanted to hash out the details of how they would be handling their new relationship in the work place.

TO: S. Raydor

Sure can. What time? I like it when you call me Brenda Leigh.

FROM: S. Raydor

12:30? Even when we’re texting you like it?

TO: S. Raydor
See you then. Especially when we’re texting. It’s an even more deliberate choice then.

Brenda slunk into FID juggling the steaming tupperware and a bottle of tea. She ignored the strange looks and sidelong glances from Sharon’s people and strode into her Captain’s office without knocking. Sharon, crunching on a carrot, pen in hand, quirked her lips at her and swallowed.

“Chief Johnson. Please come in.” Sharon’s voice was all business, but her eyes and expression were welcoming. Brenda slid her burden onto the desk and turned back to close the door behind her. She snapped the lock into place, intending to procure at least a few kisses for herself before they turned to business.

“Come’ere a minute and lemme kiss you before we get onion pierogi breath,” Brenda said, and Sharon gave her a wry smile, rising from her chair and stepping around the desk to place her hands on Brenda’s hips. Brenda leaned in and up for a kiss. She liked that Sharon’s higher heels gave the brunette a few inches on her - it made it easier to rest her head on Sharon’s shoulder and inhale the mildly spicy scent of her.

They enjoyed the peace for an extended moment before moving apart. Brenda unlocked the door and sat down in one of the desk chairs, pleased that Sharon took the seat next to her instead of the larger seat behind the desk. Brenda plucked a fork from the pocket of her blazer, and as Sharon situated her food in front of her, carefully used the utensil’s edge to cut her dumplings in half to cool.

“So,” Brenda broke the silence. “How do we protect ourselves from Pope?” Sharon forked a partial dumpling into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully before answering.

“You mean other than killing him and disposing of the body where it would never be discovered?”

“As much as I would enjoy committing premeditated murder with you, and though I have no doubts we would be anything but successful, I couldn’t do that to his kids. No child deserves to be raised by Estelle Pope.”

“Well, if felonies aren’t an option,” Sharon said, maintaining her impressively impassive expression, “then we have to disclose to some people, in order to protect the chain of command and the integrity of our investigations.” When Brenda merely nodded, Sharon gave her a disbelieving look.

“What?” Brenda asked. “Is this conversation not going how you planned?”

“I guess I had envisioned more protest and maybe some spluttering and indignation.” Sharon’s green eyes gleamed with sarcasm, and her mouth was smirking that pleased little smirk. Brenda made a face at her and then popped a pierogi in her mouth, mock scowling as she chewed.

“Did you really think I would be so averse to telling people?” Brenda queried softly. Sharon shrugged.

“I tend towards pessimism sometimes, Brenda Leigh. If you expect the worst and prepare for the most painful eventualities, most of the time you’re pleasantly surprised.” She smiled sadly, hoping Brenda would understand that this tendency was rooted well back in Sharon’s history and had very little to do with their past interactions.

“I don’t want you to feel pessimistic about us, Shari.”

“I’m not, not about us.”
Brenda returned her sad smile and hit on the heart of Sharon’s concerns: “But you are pessimistic about me coming out.” Sharon averted her eyes. She couldn’t shake the knowledge that Brenda had been with Neecie for nearly four years and had hidden her relationship for the duration.

“Sharon, the last time I was with a woman, she wanted very much to stay closeted, and I had no way to counter her assertions that her parents would drag her away if they even got a whiff of what we were doing. And no way to protect her or support her if they did.”

Brenda laid a gentle hand on Sharon’s wool clad knee. “The titillation of hidin’ the most important relationship in my life from everyone wore off real damn quick, Sharon. And as for us, the thought of kissin’ you when I leave your office for all those hard working officers to see is much more titillatin’ than hidin’ this.”

“Exhibitionist,” Sharon murmured, her lips quirked amusedly. Brenda gave her a smug, but fond, look, though she flushed a bit at the accusation.

They ate in reflective silence until Brenda asked: “So who should we tell?”

“Someone in our squads who can take point on investigations if we encounter a conflict of interest. For me, that’s Elliot. For you, I would suggest Andy, because, well, he figured us out yesterday.” Brenda raised a startled eyebrow at her, clearly wanting Sharon to explain.

“I answered a call for you yesterday, when you were sleeping. And you called me ‘Shari baby’ about two centimeters from the phone. And when you were upstairs with Lucy’s aunts, he kept looking at me like he couldn’t figure out how he’d missed that I was human. And he was staring at my ass.” Brenda made an outraged sound.

“No wonder he looked so smug this mornin’. Oooooo, I’m gonna get him good.” The look of anticipatory glee on Brenda’s face made Sharon’s stomach flutter pleasantly, and she rolled her eyes, at herself and Brenda.

“Brenda Leigh, don’t torment him too much - remember we want him to keep our confidence,” Sharon admonished jokingly.

“Naw, he wouldn’t tell tales. He’ll tease me back something fierce, though.” Sharon snorted. Sometimes Major Crimes was more like a middle school than an elite investigative unit.

“We also need to tell someone from HR. And if at any time you come under investigation, I’ll probably need to talk to the Inspector General. So don’t shoot anyone. Please.”

“Very funny.”

“I am well known for my sense of humor, Brenda.” Sharon declared haughtily, her face breaking into a broad smile when Brenda giggled at her.

“You should be,” Brenda retorted. “What time do you think you’ll finish up tonight?”

“I’m leaving at 6, unless I catch a case. Just leave the tupperware. I’ll take care of it.”

“Expect me before 7. Can I pick up dinner or something?” Sharon shot her a bemused look.

“Mmmmm, let me think about what I’ll want to eat, and if I feel like cooking it.” Sharon was too full to think about dinner at that second. Brenda rose then, wanting to prolong their lunch break, but not having a legitimate reason to do so. Sharon stood too, and they huddled close together, heads bowed, hidden behind a mingled curtain of red brown and muted gold hair.
“Love you, Shari,” Brenda breathed, laying her palm on Sharon’s stomach, thumb caressing the brushed emerald silk of her short sleeved shell. Sharon loosely twined a blonde wave around a delicate finger.

“Love you too, Brenda Leigh,” she husked.

Before stepping into Major Crimes, Brenda poked her head around the door, wanting to be sure her target was present, and there was an audience, before she began her performance. She was going to scare the shit out of Lieutenant Flynn, and she was going to enjoy every second of it. Flynn was at his desk, and Tao was the only one missing from the group.

Brenda schooled her features into what she hoped was a suitably grim expression and marched into the murder room. “Lieutenant Flynn, with me,” she barked. She ignored the smirking boys and the gaping Andy and pushed into her office. Brenda had snapped the blinds shut and sat down when Flynn entered, wild eyed and faking calm. He hovered not far from the door.

“Take a seat, Lieutenant.” He did, perching rigidly in one of the chairs in front of her desk. He looked at her expectantly, she gazed back calmly, praying that her eyes didn’t betray the fact she was trying not to giggle like a madwoman.

“You thought I wouldn’t find out?” She was trying Sharon’s low voiced method of intimidation, and it must have been working, because Andy’s eyes widened and she could see the gears turning in his head, trying to figure out what he had done to warrant discipline.

“Uh, I’m sorry?” He offered, cringing. Brenda remained silent and kept an even gaze on him, so he tried again: “To be honest, Chief, I have no idea what I did.” She flashed him a smile.

“To be honest, neither do I.” She paused and gave him a stern look. “Though I would appreciate it if you would refrain from ogling my Cap’n Raydor, even if she looks really nice in jeans.” Andy smirked and couldn’t help that the expression turned into a genuine smile.

“Of course Chief. I’ll do my best.” He made as if to push out of his seat. “I’m going to get back to work, unless there was a real reason you pulled me in here.”

“Yes, actually there is.” Andy relaxed back into his chair. Brenda was suddenly nervous. “If our investigations intersect with FID in the future, you’re going to be in charge. Captain Raydor will be having this conversation with Lieutenant Elliot in the near future.” Andy studied her thoughtfully.

“Ok, I guess if the two of you think it’s necessary.” She nodded.

“We do. There are other considerations, beyond chain of command and protecting investigations from any accusations of impropriety.”

“By considerations, you mean Pope and his torch.” Andy said, smirking again. Brenda scowled at him, which merely made him grin.

“Yes, that’s what I mean, Lieutenant,” she groused. Stupid Pope and his stupid bitter ex-wife and her big stupid mouth.

“So you and the Captain are preparing for the long term? As in, eventually, this won’t be a confidence I have to keep?” He looked thoughtful again. Brenda narrowed her eyes at him - dangerous things occurred when Andy Flynn actually used the brain in his head.

“That’s the plan. If you aren’t comfortable with this, I don’t know what to tell you.” Brenda
spread her hands palm up in a helpless gesture. “Can’t un-ring a bell.”

“That’s not it at all, Chief. I’m glad you and the Captain feel you can trust me with this. And I’m glad that you’re happy. But…” He paused and twisted his face into an exaggeration of despair.

“But what? I can’t even begin to guess what that face means. Have you been poisoned?”

“I guess I’m just mourning that two of the most beautiful single women in the department are suddenly off the market.” His expression changed again, to that familiar smirk. “I just don’t know that my imagination is up to comforting me during this time of deep sadness.” Brenda gaped at him.

“Out! Get out!” She was torn between laughing and leading him out of the office by his ear. “Get out before I sic the Captain on you!” He winked, mock saluted, and left.

Sharon yanked the door open bare seconds after Brenda had knocked. She pulled her Chief into the house and into her body by the collar of her not hideous cardigan and kicked the door shut behind them. Sharon kissed Brenda feverishly, and Brenda didn’t protest, parting her lips to allow Sharon’s demanding tongue access.

Brenda’s hands realized her Captain’s state of undress before she actually saw what Sharon had answered the door wearing. Brenda dropped her overnight bag, purse, and the hanger that held her outfit for the next day to fill her arms with Sharon Raydor, and was surprised to find no barrier between her hands and the soft skin of Sharon’s lower back. She wrenched her lips away from Sharon’s and pulled back a little to take in the hungry brunette.

Sharon’s black gabardine suit skirt was unzipped and hung low on her hips, below the soft curve of her stomach. A hint of scalloped bronze embroidery was visible along the finished edge of the waistline. The slight freckling of Sharon’s chest was hidden by her flush, and her breasts were packed into a matching bronze lace bra, the sheer demi cups displaying her tightly furled nipples quite clearly. Her hair was loose - a profusion of chocolate swirling over her bare shoulders.

“You awful hypocrite! Callin’ me an exhibitionist and here you are answering the door in your bra.” Sharon smirked and kissed Brenda again, softly this time, spinning them around and maneuvering Brenda backwards toward the couch. When her heels hit the piece of furniture, Brenda let herself fall back on it. Sharon followed her down and their lips met again. Before Brenda could get her brain and hands coordinated enough to find the zipper at the side of Sharon’s skirt, Sharon was kneeling in front of her, reaching up under her pastel patterned skirt to hook fingers into the elastic of her panties.

“Lift up,” Sharon husked. Brenda did, amazed that these were the first words Sharon had spoken since she’d been pulled into the house. It didn’t feel like her Captain had been silent; her eyes and lips and hands had communicated to Brenda quite clearly. “I’m glad you’re here,” they said. And, “I missed you.” And very adamantly, “I want you.”

Sharon rolled Brenda’s panties down her thighs, over her bent knees, and to the floor. Then she rucked up Brenda’s skirt, and with gentle hands, spread Brenda’s legs wide enough to accommodate her shoulders. Sharon leaned in, mossy eyes fixed on Brenda’s, and Brenda felt her stomach muscles clench in anticipation. Sharon hadn’t done this for her yesterday - she had used her fingers, and had guided Brenda in riding the firm muscles of Sharon’s thigh, holding her close every time.

When the warmth of Sharon’s tongue penetrated Brenda shallowly and then slid up to tease her clit, Brenda gasped, fighting to keep her hips on the couch. Sharon moaned into Brenda, like it was
Brenda’s tongue on her and in her, and the vibrations made Brenda moan too. Parting her inner labia delicately, Sharon sucked first one lip, and then the other into her mouth, her nose making firm contact with Brenda’s clit.

Sharon manipulated Brenda’s labia with her mouth and teased the entrance of Brenda’s vagina with her tongue, ignoring her clitoris, until the blonde was a sopping, trembling mess. From where her arms and hands were wrapped around Brenda’s thighs, Sharon could feel the tension coiled in her lover’s lower body: every muscle was taut, the pressure around Sharon’s ears was intense, and her chin and cheeks were smeared with evidence of Brenda’s arousal. The feeling of Brenda’s need surrounding her was exquisite; sympathetic moans burbled from her throat and she could feel her own desire moistening the gusset of her panties.

Through toying with the blonde, Sharon applied forceful suction to Brenda’s clit. Brenda drew in a great breath and then wailed as she came, one heel digging into Sharon’s back, hips jerking up off the couch. Sharon kept up her attention until Brenda was still except for periodic shivers wracking her slender body. With a last, fond lick, Sharon removed her head and re-situated Brenda’s skirt. She then pivoted the supine woman so she was stretched out fully on the couch. Sharon curled up alongside her, hiking up her own skirt to cock a leg over Brenda’s hip, an arm slung across her middle. She felt a hand snake over her back and settle on her hip, fingers trailing tender patterns on the scar there.

“Well hello to you, too, Cap’n Raydor,” Brenda said in a dreamy tone. Sharon propped herself up on an elbow to lean in for a kiss.

“Was that ok?” Sharon asked, suddenly nervous that her spontaneous desire to have Brenda might have been a little…aggressive.

“Was it ok that a beautiful, half naked woman pulled me into her house and proceeded to tongue fuck me into oblivion?” Brenda clarified sardonically. “I’m clearly incensed and as soon as I can walk again, I’m storming out.” Brenda turned over on her side and pressed her body into Sharon’s.

“You can manhandle me anytime you like, Sharon Raydor,” Brenda purred into Sharon’s ear, then flicked her tongue along the lobe and down the side of her neck. “Now get rid of that skirt. I wanna see the panties that match that bra.” Sharon wiggled out of her skirt and kicked it off onto the floor and Brenda scooted back enough to get an eyeful of the sheer, low slung bikinis that clung to Sharon’s hips.

“Gorgeous,” Brenda sighed. She let her eyes rake over Sharon, contemplating all the enticing options available to her. Her head fairly buzzed with the possibilities, but her opening gambit was simple - she slid her hands onto the small of Sharon’s back and pulled them closer. Now nose to nose, Brenda brought their foreheads together, taking in Sharon’s dilated pupils.

“How long had you been thinkin’ of doing that for me, Shari?” She asked, not really expecting an answer. “I’ve been thinkin’ about your mouth on me ‘bout as long as I’d been thinkin’ ‘bout tasting you.” Sharon moaned, her lips parting slightly and her hips jerked into Brenda’s. Brenda wormed her hands under the elastic of Sharon’s panties to grasp the soft globes of her ass. She squeezed and Sharon moaned again. Brenda captured the woman’s lower lip and sucked on it gently. Brenda loved the contrasts she was discovering in Sharon: the intense and reserved police Captain who rarely smiled, had incredible focus and dressed in conservatively cut suits and the woman who had a smile that truly could, Brenda thought, light up a room, who wore these mere whispers of lingerie and greeted her lover half naked at the door.

“Let’s get these panties off, baby. I would very much like to see you in them again and this mesh seems very delicate.” Sharon wriggled out of the scrap of fabric much as she had her skirt and the
panties disappeared onto the floor.

In her mind’s eye, Brenda could see the path her finger drew along Sharon’s slit, making only fleeting contact. The coarse hair on Sharon’s outer labia and the smooth skin of her inner labia were slick with arousal. She flicked her thumb across the nodule of Sharon’s clitoris, eliciting a gasp.

“Oh,” Brenda sighed. “I bet you’re close, aren’t you?” She firmly grasped the fleshy part of Sharon’s mound, folding it in her hand, and with her thumb, found the button of Sharon’s clitoris and pressed on it. It jumped away from her fingers and then back when she let up. Brenda repeated the motion. And then again and again, setting a fast pace, jerking Sharon’s clit. The movement of Sharon’s hips set a counter point to Brenda’s rhythm, pushing herself into Brenda’s hand even harder.

“You feel so good in my hand, Shari. So warm and wet.” Brenda murmured. “Later I’m going to taste you. I’ve been thinking about it since this morning when I laid a piece of dark chocolate on my tongue and nearly moaned, cuz it tasted just like you.”

Sharon’s eyes fluttered closed. “Fuck,” she groaned, the steady drumbeat of her hips faltering. Brenda thrummed Sharon’s clit faster, and with a few more stuttering thrusts, Sharon fell over the edge, eyes popping open, lips seeking Brenda’s, sending the moan of her satisfaction into the other woman’s mouth.

Sharon rode herself out on Brenda’s hand, chasing those last few pulses of pleasure before melting into the blonde. After uncramping her hand, Brenda couldn’t resist dipping two fingers into the wetness accumulated between Sharon’s legs and bringing the fingers to her mouth. Affecting a wide-eyed expression, she sucked them clean under Sharon’s lascivious gaze, moaning.

“Fuck,” Sharon groaned again, and kissed her.

Dinner was a large spinach salad with pear and gruyere and chicken breast marinated in some sort of vinaigrette. Sharon opened a Sauvignon Blanc to enjoy with the meal.

“Do you always eat like this?” Brenda queried around a mouthful of tender white meat. Sharon smiled at her, wine glass poised at her lips.

“If by ‘like this’, you mean quick and dirty with almost no prep time, then no, I usually spend more time cooking. But tonight, I thought there might be…other things you’d rather be doing.” Brenda blushed. Sharon smirked.

“Regardless, I think I’ve eaten better in the past few weeks than I have in years, so thank you.”

“You are very welcome.” Sharon said warmly. “It’s nice to cook for someone who enjoys food as much as you do, Brenda Leigh.”

“Did your mama teach you to cook like this?” Brenda asked casually, though her attention was riveted on the brunette. Sharon chuckled.

“I think my mother enjoys cooking about as much as you do.” Sharon picked a piece of pear out of her salad and popped it into her mouth. “I spent a lot of time in our kitchen with the family cook - after school and in the summers she would teach me and I would help her.”

“The family cook, eh? What did your parents do?”

“I forget that you don’t know as much about my family as I do yours.” Sharon said with a soft
smile, reaching across the table to lay her fingers on Brenda’s forearm. “My family owns and operates a textile company. My dad was CEO until ’95. Mom was an English professor at UC Santa Cruz.”

“Were you ever interested in the family business?”

“No, never. I have a whole passel of first cousins that took various positions in the company, but I never had more than a passing interest.” Sharon placed her fork and knife in her shallow bowl and leaned back in her seat. After they had made love, Sharon had pulled on a matte silk robe in gunmetal gray. She had belted it loosely and the deep v exposed the valley between her breasts and a strip of skin down to her naval. She looked delicious and Brenda was ready to be through with dinner.

“So I was thinkin’ about tomorrow night,” Brenda said, apropos of nothing, as she was loading the dishwasher. Sharon, washing the large wooden bowl that she’d mixed the salad in, shot a glance over at the blonde.

“I can’t,” Sharon interrupted whatever Brenda was going to say next. “I’m on desk duty at the shelter I volunteer at from 6 pm to 6 am tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Brenda felt a little ashamed of her disappointment. “We’re still planning on this weekend, though, right?”

“Definitely.” Sharon husked, placing the bowl in the dish drain and drying her hands on a towel. Brenda closed the dishwasher and stepped into her Captain’s body and brought their lips together. One long kiss later, Sharon pulled away. “Let me set up the coffee maker, and then we can go up to bed.”
Chapter 10

Sharon took a deep breath before stepping into the FID bullpen on Monday morning. Her thighs were burning like she had just run a marathon and she felt a little wobbly in the legs in general. She willed some strength into her shaky limbs, straightened her back, smoothed down her ochre dress, making sure the buckle on the silver metallic leather belt that matched her silver metallic leather pumps was just so, and clipped into her division, hoping that she didn’t look like she had been fucking her girlfriend against the wall in her shower barely 40 minutes ago, even if she could feel the delicious soreness and languor of their weekend activities in every muscle of her body.

Sharon nodded politely to Sergeant Markham and Lieutenant Elliot, here early as always, and slipped into her office. She was going to have to start pushing Markham to take the detective’s exam - she wanted the woman to have opportunities for advancement, and she was definitely sharp enough and dedicated enough to do well on the difficult exam. Plopping into her chair with a sigh of relief, Sharon allowed an enormous grin to overtake her normally sober expression.

The past few weeks with Brenda Leigh had been phenomenal - her Chief was surprisingly sweet, kept Sharon laughing and interested (though that wasn’t at all a surprise), and was an extraordinarily generous lover. Hence the trembling muscles and lingering post-coital haze. Sharon didn’t banish her smile, but she focused on the pile of paper work she needed to review in order to compile the end of the year statistics for her division, intent on getting as much as possible done before she was due to meet Brenda in Human Resources before lunch.

Brenda was already behind her desk when the first of her detectives barreled into the murder room. Tao sketched her a wave through the glass and hightailed it into the media room after dropping his satchel at his desk. He and Buzz were working on a grant proposal to get Major Crimes some sort of server-thingy that would allow off site access to their databases and evidence. Brenda very much liked this idea in theory, especially after the weekend she’d just had. It remained to be seen if additional technology would be a help or a hinderance to their standard operating procedure.

Brenda turned her attention back to the crime scene photos on her monitor. Major Crimes had been rolled out to a crime scene in Hancock Park Saturday night. A woman was dead and her husband and fourteen year old daughter were in critical condition at Ronald Reagan. No forced entry was evident, and there was nothing obviously missing from the house. In fact, from the photos, it didn’t look like the assailant had set foot anywhere other than the entry way and den. Brenda picked up the ballistics report, expecting background and financials as soon as Gabriel and Sanchez turned up. She expected the rest of her day, and her squad’s day, would be spent conducting interviews with friends, family and associates of the Messick family. Except for her visit to HR with Sharon. She fidgeted uncomfortably, and forced it from her mind.

She was still reading the ballistics report (a shotgun? really?), when Flynn tapped on the door. She waved him in and he sauntered over to slouch in a chair. Brenda finished the page she was on and turned her attention to her Lieutenant. “Any trouble at the crime scene?”

Brenda was feeling a little guilty that she’d been having a nice dinner and making love while her squad was working a murder, but she was determined to not end up in any more untenable positions because she mired herself in her job. A little distance would keep her sane and give her extremely competent Lieutenants opportunities to hone their leadership skills. It’s not like she wasn’t a phone call away if things went pear shaped.

“No m’am. No problems at all.” He answered without hesitation. Good, that meant he wasn’t
lying.

“And where are my three other little ducklings this mornin’?” She figured he had them out on some errand or other.

“I passed David in the hall on my way in - he’s having a strongly worded discussion with someone at the Messick’s bank.” Andy smirked and Brenda rolled her eyes. “Julio and Provenza stopped by the hospital to check up on the victims - James and Caroline. I posted protective details on them until we know what’s going on - this looks more like a hit than a robbery.”

“What about my post-mortem?”

“You’re due in the morgue at 2.”

“Nice work, Lieutenant,” Brenda said sincerely, and Andy puffed up under the praise. Brenda was surprised to find her guilt at taking a weekend for herself and Sharon vanished, disappeared like it had never been.

Andy’s phone beeped; he whipped it off his belt and peered at his new text message.

“Caroline is awake and ready to talk to us.”

“Alright. We’ll head over there as soon as Gabriel has the basics on their finances for us.” She cocked her head at him. “You’re riding with me today. I absolutely have to be back here for an 11:45 appointment, and your chief responsibility this morning is wrangling the Chief.” He shot her a strange look.

“Sharon and I have a meeting with HR.” He nodded sagely, but said nothing, his dark eyes mirthful. Brenda scowled at him.

“I can see you chuckling, Andy Flynn. Out with it,” she demanded.

“Oh,” he said in a manner that was supposed to read as nonchalance. “I was just wondering how your weekend went. You certainly look very…” he paused for effect and scrutinized Brenda, “satisfied.” Brenda choked back a sound that was an unholy blend of a laugh and a splutter of indignation.

“Why, Lieutenant, I’m surprised you recognize that particular expression on a woman,” Brenda sniffed primly. Andy guffawed, his jaw dropping.

“You wound me, Chief.”

Sharon was leaning against the wall outside the door to Human Resources when Brenda Leigh flounced off the elevator, teal and camel and cream skirt swishing vigorously around her knees. She looked a little disgruntled, beyond her usual case related anxiety, even though she spared a smile for Sharon. She stopped the blonde before she could open the door, and pulled her into a huddle that was probably closer than advised for HQ.

“What’s the matter?” Sharon asked simply. Brenda made brief eye contact before dropping her gaze to the vicinity of Sharon’s silver metallic Manolos and pursing her lips. “Can I help in any way?”

“I want to tell you, but I don’t know that I can handle any jealousy right now.” Brenda said in a quiet voice. Well, that was clue enough for Sharon, and she stepped down hard on her feelings of anger towards their boss.
“Pope?” Sharon was proud that her voice stayed even.

“Yea,” Brenda admitted. “He just stopped me in the hall and asked me to dinner.” Her face twisted into something like regret, shot through with a touch of anger, and she folded into herself, looking very small and brittle all of a sudden. Sharon took a chance and smoothed a hand down the arm of Brenda’s soft teal blazer.

“I know you’ve been clear with him, honey. I’m sorry he keeps putting you in this situation.”

“Thank you for trusting me, Shari.” Brenda’s voice was fragile, like she could shatter with the slightest wrong move.

“I’d be hugging you right now, if I could, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon husked, hoping that the blonde could hear the emotion and sincerity behind her statement.

“You’re sweet, and a hug would be very welcome.” They had to make do with a loaded glance and Sharon’s hand on Brenda’s arm.

“Let’s go take care of this, and we can go somewhere quiet for lunch, if you’re available.” Sharon suggested hopefully, after a moment’s silence.

“I’d like that.”

Candace Morrell had been working in the LAPD’s Human Resources Department for more than two decades, and she had seen it all, probably more than once, though the two women who slunk into her office at 11:45 on the dot might have been a little higher ranking than her usual customers. She had dealt with Sharon Raydor on a regular basis since the woman had taken over FID a decade ago. Despite her reserved nature, the brunette Captain was in Candace’s opinion, a lovely woman, and by all accounts, an excellent boss. Candace had never had contact with Deputy Chief Johnson, though she had certainly heard of the blonde and her exploits. She had been working with the same group of people for nearly eight years, and rumor was that Mike Tao had turned down a promotion to Captain and charge of his own SID squad in order to remain with her in Major Crimes, so she couldn’t be all flash and craziness. She certainly didn’t look overbearing at this moment; she looked nervous as hell.

“Captain Raydor, Chief Johnson, come in and have a seat.” As they sat, Candace observed. She was fairly certain she knew why they were here, now. The way the Chief angled her body towards the Captain once she was settled in the chair said it all. Candace had seen it a million times, but she decided a little circumspection was in order - the fights these two had had back in the early days of their association were still the stuff of legend.

“Captain Raydor’s email was a little vague, so I’m wondering what can I do for you today?” Raydor actually flushed a little before speaking; Candace had to bite back a chuckle and the Deputy Chief rolled her eyes, not attempting to hide it.

“We’re here to disclose a romantic relationship and take care of whatever paperwork we need to fill out.” Candace nodded and plucked two forms from her filing system, deftly attaching them to two clipboards and handing them over the desk.

“Now, as you can see, the paperwork isn’t particularly complicated.” And it really wasn’t. A notice of confidentiality until such time as they waived it, a disclaimer that in some cases Internal Affairs would have access without their waiver, and a place to sign and date.

“What can be complicated is making sure that the integrity of your departments isn’t affected,
especially considering FID tends to overlap so often with just about everyone.” Candace raised an eyebrow at the Captain, who had just finished signing her name with a flourish. She was sure Captain Raydor had already handled this part of her job for her.

“Lieutenant Elliot will handle any use of force investigations involving Major Crimes, and Lieutenant Flynn is aware of the situation,” Raydor stated matter-of-factly.

“And what about parallel or overlapping investigations?” Candace wanted to know, and this time it was Chief Johnson who answered.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t work on those rare cases in a professional manner - I mean, I could never be accused of givin’ my significant other a free pass for shoddy work, and I think Sharon here would have my head checked herself if I did.” Sharon shrugged an oblique agreement, and Candace nodded definitively.

“Right then.” Candace collected the clipboards and pulled the top sheet from the forms. The secondary yellow copies went to the Captain and the Chief. “Anything else?” Raydor rose to leave, but Chief Johnson remained seated.

“Actually,” the blonde said in a small voice, “could you update my emergency contact list, since I’m here?”

“Not a problem.” Candace opened the Chief’s file in the personnel database and scrolled down to emergency contacts; a Fritz Howard was listed on top, followed by Clay and Willie Rae Johnson. “Now what am I changing?”

“Replace Fritz with Sharon, please. Do I need to give you her phone number?”

Candace shook her head and chanced a look at the Captain, standing, staring down at the Chief with a soft and utterly entranced smile on her face. It was the work of a few seconds to change the information in the computer, and the two women thanked Candace with quite politeness and left. Candace found herself wondering what sort of reaction Chief Johnson’s little gesture would elicit from Captain Raydor in private.

“That was less painful than I was expecting,” Brenda noted as they clicked their way back to the elevator.

“What were you expecting that was so awful?” Sharon was curious what the other woman’s active imagination had conjured up.

“I dunno, like at the doctor’s when they’re harpin’ on you for not sleepin’ enough or not eatin’ right.” She scowled at the floor. “I was braced for judgment, I guess.” A sliver of worry flashed through Sharon at Brenda’s words, but she buried it and moved on.

“How long do you have for lunch?”

“Mmmm, we should take our whole hour, ‘cuz tonight I’ve absolutely got to back to my place to do laundry, Shari.”

“I thought you had a never ending supply of flower print skirts and matching twin-sets, Brenda Leigh.” Brenda laughed and reached out to press the ‘down’ button to call the elevator.

“That I do, but underwear - not so much.” Sharon scoffed and smirked at her lover, and then seeing as how they were alone in the elevator bay and all four of the elevators were floors away, she dropped a kiss on Brenda’s blonde temple.
Brenda was sitting on her couch, nursing a glass of wine, in deep mourning for a number of reasons when a knock sounded on her front door. She scowled. Anyone calling at 11 pm would have to deal with her surly attitude, the state of her apartment, and the truly ratty sweat pants and t-shirt she was wearing. She whipped the door open, prepared to thoroughly upbraid the late night intruder on her wine-drunk.

An abashed Sharon Raydor stood there, dressed in sweats only slightly neater than Brenda’s own, and holding a small bag and a pant suit and blouse on some hangers.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said, sheepish. Brenda stepped aside and Sharon stepped into her body and kissed her very softly on the corner of the lips, slightly embarrassed that after only a few nights her need for the blonde in her bed at night was such that she couldn’t sleep without her. Once the door was closed behind them, she blurted:

“Is this ok?” Her grip was white knuckled on the handle of her chocolate leather Coach weekender. This time it was Brenda who stepped into Sharon, and pried the bag from her fingers.

“More than ok,” she said, tucking her head into Sharon’s neck and rubbing her nose along the frayed edge of Sharon’s t-shirt. “I wasn’t even gonna try to sleep.” Sharon heard the bag drop to the floor and Brenda’s arms snaked around her waist and under the nearly threadbare cotton to rest on the bare skin of her back.

“I guess we’re feelin’ the same way, so I’m just gonna say it: Sharon Raydor, I would prefer to sleep in the same bed as you as many nights as we can manage.” Sharon didn’t hesitate when she replied, “me too.” She sniffled a little. “Can I put these hangers down so I can hold you better?” She had Brenda in an awkward, one armed hug, the other arm holding her clothing away from their bodies. Brenda released her and stepped away, taking the hangers from her hands and scooping the bag back up from the floor. She turned and headed further into the apartment; Sharon took in the scene around her. There were skirts and sweaters spread on every available flat service barring the couch and coffee table. Lacy bras and panties were hanging from the corners of chairs and off doorknobs. On the coffee table next to a half empty bottle of white and goblet, was Brenda’s purse, turned inside out, liner partially shredded. Sharon sat down on the couch and took a sip from Brenda’s glass, and promptly spit it back in.

“Ugh, what are you drinking? And what happened to your purse?” Brenda padded back into the room.

“I’m drinking bad white wine because I’m in mourning for my purse,” she groused and threw herself on the couch and onto Sharon.

“I would offer my apologies, honey, but outright falsehoods aren’t my style. And there is never any excuse for bad wine, Brenda Leigh.”

“That purse has carried me through nearly 8 years, Sharon. It deserves a little respect, and a decent send off.” Brenda’s head was in Sharon’s lap; she pressed a cheek against Sharon’s belly and closed her eyes, the slight strain around her eyes disappearing. Sharon leaned over to pick up the sad looking heap of leather and acetate lining, squishing Brenda a little, but the blonde merely giggled. She examined the bag - there was a sizable hole in the leather bottom, and the lining was not only detached from the leather in a few places, but had several clean edged slits in the bottom. Sharon poked a finger through one.

“Were you carrying a knife in here?” Sharon asked, incredulous.
“The hinge on my little tactical blade was loose, and the lining was the only thing protecting my stuff from the hole in the bottom. I fixed my knife, but there’s no fixing my poor purse.” She pouted fiercely up at Sharon.

“Well, why don’t you postpone your wake at least until you have some better booze, and in the meantime, I’ll take custody of the deceased and see if my shoe and leather repair guy can’t breath some life back into the old bag.” Sharon tried not to laugh at her own pun.

“Oh, haha.” Brenda sat up and kissed her, tossing the black mess onto the floor and throwing a leg over Sharon to straddle her lap. “If you can rescue my purse, I’ll be forever in your debt,” she purred. And then yawned, her jaw cracking and eyes tearing up.

“I think I just saw your tonsils,” Sharon said after her own sympathetic yawn. “Let’s go to bed.” Brenda stood and offered a hand to pull Sharon off the couch. She followed Brenda back to the bedroom, but paused before crossing the threshold. Brenda turned a quizzical gaze on the brunette.

“I don’t know that look, Shari. What’s wrong?” Sharon’s eyes flicked to the bed and then back to Brenda.

“Is that your marital bed, Brenda Leigh?” Sharon could barely form the words to ask, and it wasn’t something she had considered before packing a bag and driving over here, but she had to know.

“Oh my god, no. Fritz took that medieval torture device with him and I bought myself a nice mattress with a little give, along with new pillows and new linens.” She pulled Sharon into the room and broke away to pull down the bedding. Then she pulled her t-shirt over her head and pushed down her pants, kicking them over into the corner. Bare, she crawled onto the bed and over to the far side. Sharon stripped and climbed into bed, and into Brenda’s arms.

“Love you,” Brenda murmured, her face buried in Sharon’s hair. “Glad you came over.”

“Love you too, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon husked, and they both succumbed to sleep.
Chapter 11

The next Friday when Brenda Leigh returned to her office after a late lunch with Andy in the HQ cafeteria, there was a surprise waiting on her desk. She gasped out loud when she stepped into the door and saw the familiar black handles of her purse tied together by a large, lime green bow.

“Oh, that woman!” she purred under her breath. Behind her, Andy’s ears pricked up and he stepped closer to peer into the office.

“Isn’t that your purse? The one that had a gaping hole in the bottom and was leaking candy like breadcrumbs?” Brenda nodded and, squinting at the bag like it was a mirage, moved to run the fingers of her right hand down the smooth, black leather. It was free of the scratches and dings acquired over many years of hard use.

“Did Raydor kidnap it for ransom or something?”

“No, Lieutenant!” She flashed him a scowl. “I think she might have had it copied - in better leather, too.” Brenda loosened the bow and unwound it from the handles. It was silk. She resisted the urge to bring it to her nose, even though she was positive that it would smell like Sharon. The bag opened with a quiet click; apparently purse 2.0 had a magnetic closure. The lining was still black, but quilted from a double layer of slick cloth. There were pockets in a variety of sizes sewn in, and the whole shebang appeared to be removable so it could be thrown in the washing machine.

“Oh my,” she said in a low voice. She turned back to the door; Andy had wandered away - despite his curiosity about her relationship with Sharon, handbags just didn’t keep his attention. She pulled out her cell and dialed.

“Hey, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon said when she picked up.

“Sharon Raydor, you are a very thoughtful woman,” Brenda husked. She flushed faintly at the tone of her own voice.

“You like it?” Her confidant Captain sounded doubtful. “The original just wasn’t salvageable - the stitching had ruined the edges of the leather.”

“The bag is perfect. There’s a pocket for my cellphone, ammo clip and I wouldn’t be surprised if it was bulletproof.” Brenda crowed happily. Sharon chuckled.

“I’m sorry, but it isn’t. Kevlar is a little heavy for a handbag, honey.”

“Well, I guess it’s better that I can’t use it as a shield during hot entries; it’s much too lovely too be full of bullet holes. Thank you so much, Shari.”

“Mmmmmm,” Sharon deflected. She was absolutely charmed by Brenda Leigh’s enthusiasm over the bag and over her gesture. “If you check the zip pocket you’ll find a little after lunch treat. I love you and I’ll see you tonight, Brenda Leigh, honey.”

“Love you too, Sharon,” Brenda murmured as she fumbled for the leather toggle on the interior zip pocket. She dipped her hand in and pulled out four individually wrapped, handmade truffles. They were from an exorbitantly expensive and ridiculously decadent confectioners that Sharon occasionally bought morsels from. She sniffed the one with the café au lait colored sticker on the bottom of its slick black wrapper. Coffee. She unwrapped it and shaved off a thin sliver with her front teeth. Her eyes rolled back at the combination of rich milk chocolate and the slightly bitter
flavor of the coffee.

“Oh, that woman,” she moaned into the quiet of her empty office.

It was Saturday and Sharon Raydor was sunbathing. Not an activity in which she often partook, but it had been a rough week, and recharging her batteries by basking in the sun of this late fall heat-wave seemed to be just the ticket. And now, after two lovely, shattering orgasms courtesy of one Brenda Leigh Johnson, Sharon was sprawled bonelessly on a double wide lounger next to her pool. Brenda was somewhere in the house; she had set up a playlist on the iPod that drove Sharon’s outdoor speakers - a Carly Simon song rolled over into “California” by Joni Mitchell - apparently Brenda was feeling the folk goddesses today. Sharon sighed, utterly content, closed her eyes and tilted her chin towards the sun.

The clatter of the gate shutting startled Sharon out of her doze.

“Sharon Raydor, are you hiding back here?” Ah, the joy having having neighbors who are also friends. Sharon craned her neck to see her visitor.

“Is laying low the same as hiding, Tomás?” Morales rounded the lounger.

“Is it truly laying low when you’re letting the girls out to play?” Morales quipped with a sardonic raised eyebrow at her state of undress, and plopped down next to Sharon. “I hope you’re wearing sunscreen.”

“I’m touched by your concern,” Sharon snarked, “but now isn’t a very good time.” Morales turned his body to look at her dead on.

“But I haven’t seen you in weeks…Is that a hickey?” There was indeed a hickey on the inside curve of Sharon’s left breast. And another in the hollow beneath her right collar bone. Sharon was almost positive there was a third on the swell of her left ass-cheek. Brenda had been feeling a little possessive that morning, and Sharon had loved every second of it.

“Well, at least now I know why you’ve been laying low - casual nudity not withstanding.”

The sliding glass door banged shut. Sharon fought down a cringe; she had no idea how her lover was going to react to the presence of their co-worker in her backyard.

“Shari, baby, will you get my back please?” Brenda Leigh sashayed off the deck, clad in the brief bottom half of her royal blue bikini and holding a tube of sunscreen, then froze when she saw that the lounge chair had an extra occupant. Despite the situation’s enormous potential for awkwardness, Sharon’s mouth went a little dry at the sight of her Brenda Leigh, sylph-like and nearly bare, hair pulled up in a messy bun.

“I didn’t realize we were havin’ a pool party. Hello, Dr. Morales.” She narrowed her eyes at Sharon, mouth contorted in that odd half smile she affected when she was unsure of a situation, flicking her gaze from Sharon to their guest.

“Don’t look at me like that, Brenda Leigh. Tomás dropped by to say hello - you’re the one who decided you wanted to reenact summer on the beaches of the Balkan Med.” Morales let out a guffaw and Brenda turned her glare on him.

“Oh cool it, Chief,” he said, still laughing. “The angry face just doesn’t have the same impact when you’re topless - not that I wasn’t nearly immune anyways.” He stood and cocked his head at Sharon. “Do you mind if I take a dip? My AC is out and the repair guy won’t get to me ’til 4 at the earliest.”
Sharon shrugged a shoulder and looked at Brenda, who said, with a sly pout in Sharon’s direction: “I don’t mind. I guess you’re not really interrupting anything.” Sharon rolled her eyes at Brenda’s brazen teasing.

“Thanks, ladies,” Morales was grateful and quirked a smile at each of them before stepping over to one of the other chairs and stripping down to his trunks. Sweltering in the unseasonable heat, he didn’t spare either of them another glance until he had submerged himself in the shaded waters of the far side of the pool. What he saw was surprising.

Sharon Raydor, eternally a tad aloof and reserved even when she was being friendly, was ostensibly sunscreening the Chief’s hard to reach places, though she looked to be working out a knot beneath the blonde woman’s scapula. Sharon was kneeling behind Brenda with a look of such affection on her face that it took his breath away; she was nearly unrecognizable as the stern police Captain that inhabited HQ, or even as the woman that occasionally got buzzed on wine with him and bitched about their perpetual singledom. And the Chief! Eyes closed, chin lolling on her chest and a nearly beatific smile on her wide-lipped mouth.

He had always noticed the loaded glances that bounced between the two women, and once, in the midst of that Federal lawsuit, a drunk Sharon had confessed to her desire for the pretty blonde Chief (though he was sure she didn’t remember that), but he had always assumed that if anything happened between the two of them, it’d be an angry encounter in the midst of one of their arguments, and that he’d either never hear about it, or Sharon would drunkenly confess to fucking the southern out of the blonde over the desk in her office and then never speak of it again. This apparent domesticity was intriguing. He might have been intruding on their plans for an intimate afternoon in the sun, but he wasn’t going to lie to himself and say he wasn’t interested in what he saw between them and willing to risk their displeasure (and the eyeful of rather sizable mammary glands) to stick around and see a little more.

Sharon said something to the Chief in a low indistinct tone - Morales couldn’t make out the words, and Brenda slapped her playfully on the thigh. They kissed, a brief touch of the lips and then Brenda crawled to the other side of the lounger and sprawled on her stomach, head cradled on her arms. It wasn’t long before they both looked nearly comatose, though Sharon would occasionally drag a languid hand down the curve of Brenda’s back. However Sharon had gotten those hickeys must have been intense - though he didn’t need to be contemplating other people’s pleasure, not when he was going home to an empty house.

When Tomás finished his laps, the ladies were well and truly asleep, and the pale slopes of Sharon’s breasts were beginning to turn a fetching shade of pink. He rolled his eyes and picked up the heavy stand umbrella that lurked next to the fence, positioning it so it cast its shadow on as much of them as possible. Sitting down with a towel on another of Sharon’s plush loungers (the woman really had excellent taste in pool furniture), Tomás intended to dry off and be on his way, but the seductive warmth of the sun drying his hair was too much, and he succumbed to the drowsy mood of the early afternoon.

Brenda Leigh woke with a start, overtaken by a sudden chill. An umbrella was shading the lounger that she and Sharon were resting on. She pushed herself upright, curling her legs beneath her and took a good long look at her lover. She could feel the smile creep over her features at the sight of Sharon, relaxed and gorgeous, a smattering of new freckles strewn across her nose and over the plane of her chest and the curve of her shoulders. She gently shook the brunette awake.

“Shari, rise and shine.” Sharon blinked herself back to awareness and grinned muzzily up at her.
"Hey," she husked. "How long was I out?"

"Not that long, but long enough to burn a little. We’d better get some aloe on your breasts."
Brenda dropped her eyes to the breasts in question and pressed her lips together, nostrils flaring. Sharon’s nipples puckered under the scrutiny and Brenda’s tongue darted out to moisten her lower lip.

"None of that, Brenda Leigh. We still have company." Sharon’s tone belied her words, though and Brenda leaned in for a brief kiss. Sharon’s eyes dropped shut and she made a pleased little sound in her throat as their lips came into contact.

"Hypocrite," Brenda murmured and rose up to her knees, intent on bringing her skin into contact with Sharon’s. Sharon allowed it, even embraced her - bringing her hands around to grasp Brenda’s buttocks - but wouldn’t escalate their kisses past chaste. “I want you,” Brenda whispered into Sharon’s ear, flexing her thigh against Sharon’s cunt. Sharon gasped, and then chuckled.

“You had me this morning - twice,” she husked in a low voice that sent a shiver through Brenda. “And you can have me again later, honey. But first we’re going to be nice to Tomás for a little while.” She patted the blonde on the rear. “Up. I’m going to go get lunch started. Why don’t you wake sleeping beauty.” Brenda pouted fiercely at her but got up, offering a hand to pull Sharon to her feet. Sharon dropped a kiss on her slightly sweaty blonde temple and turned to pad into the house. Brenda watched her go; watched the play of muscles in her back and ass and the contraction and release of her well-defined calves. She licked her lips again; the quicker they ate and Morales left, the quicker she could get Sharon back into bed, or horizontal on any flat surface in the immediate vicinity.

Brenda had stopped being surprised by her continuous and sometimes overwhelming desire for Sharon Raydor after their first night together. The woman was lovely, and Brenda had always noticed her beauty and confidence (sometimes shading to arrogance) in a way that was very sexually charged - even if she fought down her reactions. But since they’d begun sleeping together, it was like someone had flipped a switch in Brenda Leigh. She was ‘ok’ when Sharon wasn’t around; she could function and was productive when Sharon was safely elsewhere, but when the other woman was around, Brenda Leigh existed in a near constant haze of arousal that was only briefly assuaged by their love making.

Take this morning, for example. They had both had long weeks, and last night had passed out a little past 8, after splitting a bottle of wine. Brenda had wanted Sharon - she had wanted very much, especially after Sharon had presented her with her purse, rebuilt and better than before - but she hadn’t asked, because Sharon had been nearly comatose with weariness. So they had fallen asleep twined together, Brenda’s head on Sharon’s chest, letting the metronome of the brunette’s steady, slow heartbeat lull her to into unconsciousness. Brenda woke up a little after 7, refreshed and extraordinarily horny. She had popped out of bed to brush her teeth and relieve herself and popped right back in to bed to perch on Sharon’s naked buttocks, latching like a limpet onto Sharon’s neck with her lips. A thoroughly enjoyable two hours had elapsed, with a pair of orgasms for each of them, before Brenda had allowed them to surface for sunshine and sustenance. The depth of her need would be frightening if it wasn’t so heady and thrilling and enjoyable, and of course accepted and shared by her lover.

Brenda spared a glance at Morales before slipping into the house behind the object of her musings. She was disappointed to find Sharon exiting the laundry room, pulling a plain white t-shirt over her head. Sharon smirked at Brenda’s pouting and pulled her hair out of it’s now lopsided ponytail, smoothing it back into a semblance of order.
“My tits are already burnt, Brenda Leigh. Cooking topless might be tempting fate,” Sharon said, wry humor lacing her tone.

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” Brenda sighed theatrically, though she still gazed a little mournfully at the shadows of Sharon’s nipples just visible beneath the thin cotton. “I’ll make sangria to go with lunch. What wine should I use?” Sharon paused to think a moment - the woman had a mental catalogue of every available bottle in her cellar, a fact that amused Brenda to no end. And Sharon Raydor insisted, even when making sangria, that the wine compliment the food they were eating.

“A bottle of the Chamisal 2010 will go nicely with my pesto sauce and the fruit in the sangria. Or two bottles, depending on just how much day drinking you want to do.”

“One bottle sounds just fine,” Brenda sassed and stepped into the enormous pantry. Looking for the correct vintage, she said saucily, “Besides, who needs wine to get drunk when you’re around, Sharon Raydor.”

“Sweet talker,” The grin on Sharon’s face was audible in her voice.

Sharon was still working when Brenda put the effort of her labors in the fridge, sliding the pitcher of fruit, wine and ginger ale into an empty spot on the door. Pasta was boiling, a freezer bag of Sharon’s home made pesto was defrosting in the microwave and Sharon was quartering cherry tomatoes, humming along to the Joan Baez song that drifted in from the outdoor speakers. Brenda edged in behind Sharon to wrap the industrious brunette in her arms. Sharon leaned into her, swaying a little and singing along:

“And only say that you’ll be mine, in no others arms entwine.” Her voice was low and husky; an intriguing counterpoint to Joan’s. Sharon’s hands stilled and her head dropped back onto Brenda’s shoulder. Brenda sighed happily and wormed her fingers up under Sharon’s thin t-shirt - Brenda’s hands belonged on Sharon’s bare skin.

“This has been a good day, even if you are singin’ murder ballads to me. Should I be worried?” Brenda said into Sharon’s exposed ear. Sharon chuckled.

“The chorus is pretty, though. It’s been a good day, even with our coworker wandering into your little topless fantasy?” Sharon felt Brenda shrug.

“He barged in! If he saw somethin’ he didn’t want to see, that’s his problem. Plus, he’s your friend and he missed you.” Brenda nuzzled at the spot behind Sharon’s ear that never failed to make the other woman shiver. She wasn’t disappointed by Sharon’s reaction. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

“You can grate some cheese, for the pasta. It’s in the drawer - should be the palest block in there.” Brenda reluctantly released Sharon and went to fish the hunk of Parmesan out of the refrigerator. She set herself at the counter with the grater and a small cutting board. It surprised Brenda how much she enjoyed working in the kitchen with Sharon, who loved to cook, loved good food and good drink, and loved Brenda’s company while she worked, even if the blonde could only help in a limited capacity without supervision. She even seemed to love that Brenda was hopeless with anything more complicated than boiling pasta - which she often under or over cooked. For her part, Brenda loved the closeness they shared when they moved together in the closed space, the expressions Sharon made when something wasn’t properly spiced, or too hot, the strength and adeptness of Sharon’s hands as she cut or mixed or stirred (especially so when she was working with icing), and of course, she loved the finished products, and the woman she shared them with.
Brenda took a firm grip on the wedge of Parmesan and drew it firmly across the grater. And again. And again. A small pile of Parmesan slivers grew on the cutting board. She kept at it, and then realized that she no longer heard the sounds of Sharon’s careful chopping. Brenda looked up; Sharon was staring, sidelong, at her chest, eyes hooded, lips parted.

“What?” Brenda asked, a little mystified as to why Sharon was all of a sudden looking at her like she was a bon bon to be devoured when she had been prancing around topless for a couple of hours now.

“Could you please put on a shirt before I cut off a finger? Please?” Sharon nearly begged. Brenda flushed a little, and could feel her nipples harden. “When you’re doing that,” Sharon waved her knife at the grater and cheese and cutting board in an encompassing sort of gesture, “your breasts move just like they do when I’m fucking you. Hard.”

A flash of heat erupted in Brenda’s belly, and she gulped, throat working against her suddenly dry mouth. She left her station to retrieve a camisole from on top of the dryer. Brenda pulled the tank on and untwisted the straps before returning to her grating.

Sharon paused to look at her again after quartering the last of the tomatoes. “Later I’ll make the wait up to you, Brenda Leigh,” she said.

Brenda chuckled, surprised at the throatiness of the sound coming from her throat. “A little anticipation never hurt anyone, Shari.” She met the other woman’s bright, mossy eyes and grinned. “Like I said, this has been a good day. And it’ll be a better evenin’, I imagine.”

Sharon smiled back; the one that painted her whole face over with joy and good feeling. Brenda felt her knees weaken. She was happy the counter was there to hold her up.

Morales was still unconscious in the afternoon sun when Brenda waltzed back onto the deck to wake him. Feeling puckish, she dipped her hand in the pool, and moved swiftly to let the drops fall onto Tomás’s relaxed countenance. His hands flew to his face and he made a startled noise. Brenda snorted. Tomás sat up and scraped his hair back.

“How long did I sleep?” He asked, glancing over at Brenda only briefly.

“Not long enough to miss your AC guy, but long enough for Sharon to cook a late lunch,” Brenda drawled

“That was nice of her. You don’t mind if I stay? I can go home and feed myself.” Brenda looked at the usually self-assured doctor who wouldn’t meet her eyes, and steeled herself to tell a small truth.

“No, I don’t mind. Sharon has friends she hasn’t been seein’ cuz of me, and that’s not the sort of precedent I want to set. I think she’s half ready for me to bolt as soon as the rest of the world starts nosin’ around.” Tomás was startled by the candidness of those few sentences. He looked over at her then, at her face instead of her feet, and he could see that she was attempting to extend a figurative hand in friendship, or at least a mutual fondness for Sharon Raydor.

“It’ll just take time, and a little patience. But you’re well known for your patience, Chief.” She wrinkled her nose at him and got a boyish grin in return. “Sharon’s coming out was hellacious, and cost her a lot, personally and professionally, so she tends to project.”

“Yea, she told me ‘bout that. I’m not too worried about it - me, comin’ out, that is.” Brenda said steadily, and she was proud to find she actually believed it. “I’m more prone to freakin’ out after the fact, anyways. I’m mostly concerned with makin’ sure she and I are in a good place before we
tackle our bosses and my parents. Hence, lunch. Come on, I made sangria.”

Sharon sent Tomás on his way with a small container of leftovers about an hour later. The particular genius of the pesto pasta dish she’d made was that it was just as delicious cold as it was warm. She padded back into the kitchen where Brenda Leigh was busy loading the dishwasher. She was moving with quick efficiency - the bowl of pasta was covered with plastic wrap, waiting to go into the refrigerator, the pot and grater were clean and in the dish drain, and Brenda was dropping the silverware into the appropriate holders. Brenda closed and latched the dishwasher and turned to Sharon with a smile.

“Alllllll done,” she drawled, picking up the bowl of food and opening the refrigerator door. She deposited it there with aplomb and turned to slink herself into Sharon’s arms, chin tilted up for a kiss. Sharon was happy to oblige her, despite the fact that they both tasted of basil and garlic and parmesan cheese.

“Thank you for indulging Tomás today, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon murmured against Brenda’s temple when they broke apart. Brenda pulled away and brought a hand up to cup Sharon’s cheek, trailing a thumb across the few new freckles on the brunette’s cheekbone.

“Shari, baby, as much as I love havin’ you all to myself, you should spend time with your friends. If you want to include me, I’m happy to meet them.” Brenda’s voice was soft, and she dropped a kiss just at the edge of Sharon’s lips. “I want you to be happy, and I don’t want any of the important people in your life to resent me for monopolizin’ all your time.”

“I am happy,” Sharon asserted, hoping that Brenda could see the truth of it in her eyes. “Very happy, but I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable, or like I was blowing you off.”

“Worst case scenario, your friends and I only have one thing in common: a mutual appreciation of you. Best case, I’ll make some new friends, too. I am warnin’ you, though, I tend to be sort of awful at socializin’ and what not.”

“I don’t know about that, honey. You managed to thoroughly charm Tomás - he walked out the door liking you much more than when he came in the back gate.”

“I would say it was the boobs, but we both know that isn’t the case,” Brenda said in an arch tone. Sharon barked out a laugh.

“You could definitely influence my friends Lynn and Denise in your favor with your boobs,” Sharon suggested impishly.

“Denise is the one that runs the shelter you volunteer at? And Lynn is?”

“Lynn is her wife. She’s a television studio executive.”

“Well, I’ll just have to be extra nice to them, cuz the only person I want to influence with my breasts is you,” Brenda retorted.

“Is that so? In which ways would you want to influence me - nothing untoward, I’m sure!”

“Mmmm, I’m hoping to influence you right onto a horizontal surface, or maybe up against a vertical one.” Brenda pushed the straps of her tank top off her shoulders.

“Why Ms. Johnson, I do believe you are attempting to entice me into a sexual liaison!” Sharon drawled, and then yanked Brenda’s shirt down from the waist. Brenda snorted and then snarked:
“Why don’t you leave the southern belle routine to me, baby.” Sharon ignored the jab and captured Brenda’s lips in a hungry kiss, fingers sneaking beneath the elastic at the low waist of Brenda’s swimsuit bottoms, pulling them into firmer contact. Brenda moaned, and Sharon drew the blonde’s generous lower lip out with her teeth. Sharon kissed gently along Brenda’s jaw, and down the sensitive tendon parallel to her jugular. Then she stopped.

“Nuh,” was the small, bereft noise Brenda made.

“You taste like sunscreen,” Sharon said, working her tongue against the roof of her mouth, trying to clear the taste. Brenda grumbled, then took a swipe at Sharon’s neck with her tongue.

“You too,” she groused. Then she tucked her face into Sharon’s neck. “Smell like it too.”

“Shower?” Sharon queried. She felt Brenda nod.

Sharon took Brenda’s hand and led her out of the kitchen and up the stairs. She could feel Brenda’s eyes burning a blazing trail up her calves and onto her ass. Sharon gave the muscles in each extra play as she paced slowly up the stairs, for the blonde’s viewing pleasure. She was gratified when she heard Brenda exhale loudly through her nose.

Sharon’s bathroom was spacious - she’d cannibalized part of the largest of her spare bedrooms in order to expand the master bath and build a walk-in closet. The counters and shower were constructed from dark chocolate granite, speckled with a taupe that was picked out by the color of the walls. The wood of the double vanity, built in storage and mirror bezel was dark walnut. Warm yellow incandescent light gleamed dully off the brass fixtures. Sharon turned on the shower, and before she could lean back out of the enclosure, she felt Brenda’s fingers on the hem of her t-shirt. She lifted her arms and allowed the blonde to pull the shirt over her head. Brenda crowded her into the shower and under the warm stream of water. Like Sharon, she was clad only in her bathing suit bottom. The blonde rolled the scrap of lycra off her hips and kicked it into the corner, where it landed with a wet smack. Then her fingers were scrabbling frantically at Sharon’s hips, failing to find purchase on the wet skin and slick fabric.

“Off, off,” she growled, and Sharon hooked her thumbs into the offending garment and pushed it down to her ankles. Brenda scratched her fingers through the coarse, neatly trimmed hair at Sharon’s apex, and then cupped her, purring in satisfaction, like the eventual orgasms were secondary to being physically close to Sharon. Sharon shivered and spread her legs to allow the blonde better access. She was still - a hand cradling Sharon’s sex, the other on the middle of her back, holding Sharon tight. Her was face pressed into Sharon’s neck, an action that was quickly becoming habitual.

“How’s your sunburn?”

“I don’t think I was burnt, really. I’ve got more freckles, though.”

“Good. I like freckles,” Brenda said definitively, and Sharon believed that she did. Her lips started moving against Sharon’s neck, no longer forming words.

“Is the sunscreen taste gone, honey?” Sharon asked as Brenda’s teeth scraped over the slanting muscle that attached her neck to her shoulders.

“Uh huh.” Brenda mumbled, then nibbled along the tensed muscle. “I don’t think it was waterproof.” Her tongue and lips soothed were her teeth had been, and Sharon’s head dropped back with a groan. Brenda tugged Sharon back by the hips and sat herself on the built in bench, and turned her attentions to Sharon’s breasts. She pressed open mouthed kisses to the freckles that
trailed down into the valley of Sharon’s sternum, and gently tongued the diffuse purplish mark she’d left on Sharon’s skin earlier that morning. Brenda’s wicked tongue traced around a nipple, flicking at the stiffened tip and then drawing the nipple and a large part of the soft flesh into her mouth. Sharon’s hips shot forward when slick fingers pinched at her other nipple.

“Oh,” Brenda cooed after detaching her mouth from Sharon’s skin with a moist pop. “Oh, I’m gonna take care of you, baby.” She bent and kissed the soft slope of Sharon’s belly, dragged her tongue from Sharon’s pubic line to dip into her navel. Sharon shivered. Her Brenda Leigh approached oral with the same relentlessness she employed in her interview room, but Sharon wanted to try something a little different today - after Brenda used her mouth on Sharon, Sharon almost invariably had to recuperate for a bit, and that wasn’t what Sharon wanted in this particular situation.

Sharon stepped back, using pressure on Brenda’s shoulders to indicate she wanted the blonde to come with her. She knelt, and pulled Brenda down with her.

“What’re you up to?” Brenda asked with a quizzical arch of her eyebrow.

“Patience,” Sharon intoned and sat back, she slid her hips forward, encouraging Brenda to straddle them. When she was reclining on her back, she instructed Brenda to turn around. When Brenda scooted back and lowered her hips to Sharon’s mouth, she knew that the blonde had figured out what Sharon was trying to organize.

“Bend your knees,” Brenda said, but paused before getting back to what she had begun. “Are you sure you want to try this for the first time in the shower?”

Sharon licked her lips and ran her hands up the back of Brenda’s thighs to dip a few fingers into the moisture that had collected between the dusky pink lips of Brenda’s sex.

“So long as I don’t stop the drain up with my ass, we shouldn’t drown.” Brenda giggled then leaned in to drag the tip of her tongue up the hood of Sharon’s clit. Sharon moaned, then wrapped an arm around Brenda’s slim hips and pulled her down so her lower body was resting on Sharon’s chest.

With her face buried in Brenda Leigh, Sharon decided she liked this upside down position. The smell and taste of her surrounded Sharon, and the weight of her was a pleasantly confining presence on Sharon’s chest. Brenda’s attentions to her clit made Sharon gasp. Then she coughed. And coughed again.

“What’sa matter?” Brenda’s voice was muffled, but echoed strangely against the granite floor of the shower.

“Inhaled some water,” Sharon choked out between coughs. Brenda huffed, and Sharon knew that her eyes had to be rolling something fierce. Brenda sat up, perched backwards on Sharon’s midsection.

“You have the worst ideas, Sharon Raydor,” Brenda snarked firmly. “I coulda been suckin’ you off, but you had to get clever, in the shower of all places, and now you’re gonna end up with pneumonia from a sex-related mishap.” She pushed herself up and plopped herself back on the shower bench. “We might as well wash up and take this out to the bed.” She prodded Sharon, still supine on the floor, with a gentle, but insistent foot. Sharon was still too busy trying to catch her breath to laugh, but she really wanted to.

Once they had adjourned to the bedroom and the bed, skin dried, hair still damp, Sharon yanked
Brenda down on top of her for a kiss, wanting to feel her lover’s weight anchoring her to the bed. Brenda slipped a leg between hers and skidded the moist heat of her sex along the smooth muscle of Sharon’s thigh. Brenda sighed into Sharon’s mouth and began to move, making little sounds of need and pleasure against Sharon’s lips.

Sharon cocked a leg over Brenda’s thigh, pulling them even closer, and increasing the contact to her clitoris. Brenda groaned and dropped her head back, the movement dragging her stiff nipples against the soft undersides of Sharon’s breasts.

They rocked together slowly, reveling in the simple intimacy of it, the pleasure a natural extension of their physical closeness. They didn’t kiss: their foreheads bumped together softly and stayed, Brenda gazed down at Sharon through hooded eyes, breathing in the air expelled from Sharon’s lungs. Brenda sped her hips, increasing the friction for both of them, and Sharon arched into her and set her own counter-rhythm. A few more strokes, and they fell over the edge, together.

“Ooooooh,” Brenda exhaled into Sharon’s ear, unaware of the mute cry issuing from Sharon’s slack mouth. The smaller woman collapsed onto Sharon, peppering her neck and jaw with kisses before returning her lips to Sharon’s. Wanting to keep Brenda Leigh close, Sharon wrapped arms and legs around the warm, slender body of her lover. Brenda burrowed her face into Sharon’s partially dried hair, practically boneless in her relaxation.

“I love you too, Shari,” Brenda mumbled into Sharon’s neck.
Chapter 12

Brenda was rattling around Sharon’s house by herself on a Sunday morning. The brunette had left hours ago to run a few errands (including a drop off at the dry cleaners that was going to cost them both a ridiculous amount of money), and to collect a ‘surprise’, so Brenda was curled up on Sharon’s couch with personnel reviews and the beginnings of yearly divisional statistic paperwork, waiting.

It was a little weird being alone in Sharon’s house, but not because she was uncomfortable - she was very much at ease here among Sharon’s things and the memories she had of them together, and Sharon was comfortable leaving her here alone - but Brenda was lonely. Even if Sharon was here, they would both be working, but Sharon’s presence at the kitchen table or her cozy built in desk or leaning against the other arm of the couch was sorely missed. Brenda liked working with Sharon around, even if she wasn’t as productive as she would be working by herself. Her Captain made all of these adorable little noises while she was going over paperwork or reviewing policy changes or reading case law that pertained to her work for the LAPD or the shelter. The cute little ‘mmmmm’s’ and grunts that issued from Sharon’s pretty mouth as she concentrated were well worth a little bit of wasted time.

Brenda was hunched over the coffee table, filling out Buzz’s yearly personnel review when she heard the sound of tires on the drive. She finished her final sentence, recommending the civilian tech for promotion, but leaning on the fact that he was an integral part of her team, hoping that he would get the raise he deserved without going anywhere. Brenda signed her name with a flourish and capped her pen. One of Sharon’s, actually - a fancy Montblanc rollerball with silver inlay. She tucked it into the pocket of her long heather gray grandfather-style cardigan. Maybe Sharon wouldn’t notice its absence; she did have a few others, equally nice, that she used regularly. Brenda liked the little luxuries that had picked up from Sharon, and fine writing utensils was just one of them. She slapped the folder she had just finished with on top of her ‘done’ stack, stood to stretch, then smoothed down her cantaloupe colored cashmere shell and buttoned the top button of her lightweight gray wool pants. It was about time for lunch.

The door opened and Sharon stood in the entryway, an unbleached canvas bag of groceries in one hand. She smiled fondly at Brenda.

“Can you get the other bags out of the car, honey?” She tossed the keys to Brenda, who fumbled, but managed to keep them from crashing to the coffee table. Brenda brushed past Sharon, pausing for a brief kiss on the lips. She was halfway down the walk before she noticed that the car Sharon had left in (a five year old Lexus sedan, nice but not flashy) was not the car that was sitting in the drive next to Sharon’s Crown Vic. Brenda took the two bags out of the passenger seat of the little midnight blue coupe (it was a Jaguar) and pressed the lock button on the key fob, checking to make sure the locks engaged.

“Shari, baby,” Brenda called after she kicked the door shut behind her. “Did you make a purchase other than groceries when you went out today?”

Sharon was offloading items into the pantry. “Mmmm, no. My father wanted to surprise me with an early birthday present. I wouldn’t let him get me something for my fiftieth, so he doubled down for sixty.”

Brenda put the bags down and bent to fish out anything that needed to go into the refrigerator. “A sports car?”
“Fast cars were always Donald Raydor’s one extravagance, and he can’t drive anymore, so I guess he’s living vicariously through his only child.”

“I guess!” Brenda exclaimed, putting a bag of shelled, fresh sweet peas in the crisper drawer. “Is it fun to drive?” Brenda had a compelling picture in her head of Sharon behind the wheel of that car in one of her shorter work skirts, stomping hard on the gas pedal.

“It handles very nicely, and the built in USB for my iPod and Bluetooth for my phone is useful. Its hard to tell much else on the surface roads. I was thinking we could take a drive up the PCH - maybe have a late lunch in Malibu and take a walk on the beach?”

“That sounds like a lovely idea.” Brenda had begun her year end review and finished 2/3 of her personnel reviews in one morning; a little reward for all that paperwork was more than due.

Brenda locked the door and pulled the keys out of the deadbolt where Sharon had left them for her. Her lover was leaning against the car, waiting. As much as Brenda loved Sharon’s work wardrobe, it was casual clothing that made Brenda’s heart skip a thrilling beat every time the brunette wiggled into a pair of jeans or pulled on a oft-washed polo shirt or put on a pair of shoes that didn’t have heels.

Sharon was wearing a faded, mint-green button down with the sleeves rolled up to expose her forearms, tucked into a pair of dark wash, boot cut jeans that fit her like a second skin. A thick brown belt matched the well-worn Frye’s on her feet. Brenda loved those boots. Gleaming brunette hair was held off Sharon’s face by large, square tortoise shell sunglasses.

She handed the keys to Sharon and leaned herself against the pretty Captain. “Hot woman, hot car,” Brenda hummed into Sharon’s ear, then nibbled delicately on the lobe. Her Sharon had very sensitive ears - which was probably why they weren’t pierced, and why she never had to worry about sucking the backs off Sharon’s earrings when she centered her affections there.

“So you like it? It’s not too ostentatious?” Sharon sounded like she was on the fence about the whole sports car, thing.

“Welllllll,” Brenda hedged, “I can guarantee that I’ll enjoy watchin’ you drive it. You’ll have to decide anything else, darlin’.”

“I guess we’d better get driving then - I have a week to make up my mind and I’m sure as hell not taking this to work.”

“You could make all kinds of new friends in the parking garage with this ride, baby,” Brenda teased.

“I could also bring it back covered in dings and key marks because IA isn’t allowed to have nice things. The rank and file’ll assume I’m taking payment from the Mayor or the people who file lawsuits against them,” Sharon groused, frowning. Brenda kissed the little furrow that formed in between Sharon’s brows when she knit them together, and the tension that had momentarily stiffened Sharon faded away.

“Come on, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon pushed gently at the blonde’s hips. “I have something for you in the car.”

The Jag was much lower to the ground than anything Brenda had ridden in in a long while, and it didn’t have that slightly chemical tang that seemed to be universal to new cars; instead it smelled like good leather and ionized air. The doors shut with a muted thump, and all of the suburban
street noise disappeared.

Sharon opened the center console and pulled out a tiny, white cake box, festooned with yet another lime green silk ribbon. Brenda untied the loops of the bow, and nestled where the ribbon crossed over the white cardboard was a silver key. She unthreaded it from the ribbon and gripped it tightly in her palm. Sharon wrapped her hand around Brenda’s that was clutching the key.

“I know we’ve been spending most nights together, but I want you to feel welcome here all the time, even if I’m out.” Brenda leaned over to kiss Sharon, her tongue flirting with the brunette’s lower lip and edging minutely into Sharon’s mouth. She pulled away when Sharon tried to deepen the contact; they could make out in the car later.

“Mmmmm, I think you promised me lunch, Shari.” Sharon chuckled, though her eyes were closed, her lips parted slightly, savoring the kiss they had shared.

“There’s something in that box that should tide you over till we get to Malibu.” Inside the white cardboard was one perfect cupcake, smoothly iced with dark frosting. Brenda dipped a finger into the icing and brought it to her lips. Dark chocolate ganache.

“You are so thoughtful, Sharon Raydor. If the rest of the world knew how sweet you are…” She trailed off, a slightly goofy smile on her face. “I’m so lucky to have you in my life.” Sharon blushed brightly and turned the key in the ignition. The powerful engine came to life with a deep growl.

Sharon backed the car down the drive, pausing to let the road clear before bumping slowly down the curb. One three point turn later, they were headed towards the 10. Brenda was licking the icing from the cupcake, head bent awkwardly over the box to keep any crumbs from the ivory leather seats. Sharon very much enjoyed spoiling her Brenda Leigh - she got so adorably giddy about little gestures (especially if those gestures involved chocolate) and often rewarded Sharon’s efforts with excellent kisses.

She found herself having to curb her impulses when it came to showering Brenda Leigh with gifts. A daisy print Marc Jacobs sheath was a temptation Sharon had had to drag herself away from. She had, hidden in the closet of one of the guest rooms, a pair of delicate Prada pumps in that shade of teal that Brenda favored. Also tucked away were a trio of silk and cashmere blend cardigans in some of pastels that populated Brenda’s wardrobe. Sharon had been unable to resist the soft fabric, clean lines, and attention to detail along the placket and at the cuffs. This most recent gesture, the gift of a simple, silver key that had cost $2.50 at the hardware store a few blocks away had been the most frightening impulse of all: she had wanted to give Brenda that little sliver of metal and beg her to move in and never leave, but she couldn’t. It was too soon, and Brenda wasn’t yet actually divorced, only separated, and neither of their families knew what was going on, but all the reasons why she shouldn’t didn’t stop Sharon from wanting.

In deference to her desire to give her lover sumptuous and beautiful things, but unsure of how expensive gifts would be received, Sharon had bought a few dozen of those individually wrapped truffles that Brenda adored and would pepper them around places for the blonde to find; one on her keyboard in her office during a long workday, one taped to the leftovers Sharon left in the Major Crimes break room refrigerator, one on the pillow she left behind when she woke for her morning swim. Sometimes these little gifts would elicit a spontaneous visit from her Chief, and behind the closed door of her office, Sharon would get to kiss the taste of expensive chocolate from that broad mouth, and they could just coexist, alone together for a few moments, in the quiet of that seldom traveled corner of Police HQ. As much stress and anxiety as Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson had caused her in the past, now Brenda Leigh kept Sharon centered, and in a professional position
she was becoming more dissatisfied with each passing day, a little bit of ‘zen’ in her life made all the difference.

“Is the icing any good?” She had chosen the chocolate marshmallow cupcake specifically because of the icing: Brenda Leigh loved dark chocolate ganache, and she figured Brenda would indulge in the frosting and leave the cake. If the woman wasn’t nearly constantly hungry for almost anything, Sharon would swear she was a hummingbird, between her metabolism and the sheer amount of sugar she consumed.

“Not as good as yours. The texture is different.” Brenda licked her lips in consideration, but failed to remove all the frosting from them. “And a different percentage of cocoa for the base, I think.” She put the slightly mangled baked good back in the box and tucked the box between her knees. She settled back in the seat to scrutinize Sharon’s operation of the car. Sharon made a right turn and then immediately changed lanes to dodge around a slow truck.

“It rides fairly comfortably - the suspension’s not so stiff that the LA potholes’ll rattle your teeth out.” Brenda remarked, and Sharon made a general noise of agreement. Her focus was mostly split between the road and the intense attention Brenda Leigh was paying her legs. She sped up a little to shoot under a light that had just turned yellow. The on-ramp to the 10 was visible a block away.

The acceleration of the little Jag onto the freeway pushed both women back into their seats, and Brenda gave an excited little squeal. Sharon had a huge grin on her face; it would be a hard thing to return this car at the end of the week. She switched smoothly into the leftmost lane, keeping one eye on the speedometer; nine miles over would probably have to be her limit in this car. Sharon was well aware of how much cops enjoyed pulling over expensive cars for moving violations.

“Make yourself useful and get out the manual. It’s in the glove box.” Brenda mock sneered at her and fished the little leather bound volume out of the compartment.

“What am I lookin’ up?” Brenda flipped the book open to the index.

“Cruise control,” she stated, and Brenda made a noise of outrage. “I don’t want to have to badge my way out of speeding ticket, Brenda Leigh.” The blonde muttered something under her breath, probably something unflattering about how every cop everywhere badged themselves out of speeding tickets, but turned the pages anyway.

“Controls are on the left steering wheel - the button second from the top turns it on, top button sets and changes the speed.” Sharon set the cruise control and took her foot off the gas. The glove compartment clicked shut and then Brenda Leigh slid a hand across the center console to rest on Sharon’s thigh. The blonde had leaned back in the seat and her eyes were shut, lashes a dark fan on her pale cheeks, the loose honeyed waves of her hair pulled over one shoulder. Sharon took Brenda’s hand in hers and settled in for the drive.

When Sharon pulled into a parking space outside Geoffrey’s in Malibu, Brenda was asleep, snoring softly, hand still on Sharon’s leg. She tended to do that during rides longer than 30 minutes; or at least she did when Sharon was driving. Sharon had a hard time picturing Brenda falling asleep in the passenger seat if Gabriel or Flynn were behind the wheel. And she didn’t much like the idea of Brenda’s squad being familiar with the noises and faces Brenda Leigh made while she was dozing - she felt very possessive of such things.

“Brenda Leigh,” Sharon cooed, reaching out to cup a soft cheek. “Wake up, honey.” The blonde’s eyes fluttered open and she smiled a sweet, sleepy smile at Sharon.
“Was I out the whole way?” Brenda asked, lifting her shoulders and wriggling to work out the kinks in her spine. Sharon hmmm’ed and leaned across the car to brush her lips against Brenda’s. Her tongue snuck out for a taste, almost of its own volition; Brenda tasted like chocolate.

Sharon and Brenda followed the hostess onto a broad deck overlooking the ocean. They ducked under the giant umbrella that shaded their table and Brenda looked at the place settings with dissatisfaction. She pulled the chair that was to be hers about 110 degrees closer to Sharon’s, moved the silver and water goblet and menu, and sat down, well pleased with herself.

“Classy, Brenda Leigh” Sharon said in a low voice as she took her own seat.

“Well,” Brenda sniffed, eyes sparkling, “I wanted to sit closer to you. Now I’m wonderin’ why I even bothered.” Sharon appropriated one of Brenda’s hands and brought it to her lips, bussing the knuckles gently, then entwined their fingers.

“Because you love me,” Sharon stated smugly.

“I guess,” Brenda grumbled, giving Sharon’s hand a squeeze before letting it drop and picking up her menu. “Now get to orderin’. I think my blood sugar’s low,” Brenda poked fun at her tendency to get a little cranky when she was hungry

Meal chosen, (they were going to split appetizers of coconut shrimp and baked brie, then chicken picatta for Brenda; Sharon couldn’t decide between sea bass and scallops), Brenda turned her attention to their surroundings. It was a little late for brunch, so the restaurant wasn’t terribly crowded. Excepting a couple in their Sunday church best, their fellow diners were as casually dressed as they were. At the table next to theirs, sitting in a chair on his knees with his back to the ocean, a little boy of maybe 5 was enjoying a view of a different sort. The pad of paper and crayons on the table in front of him forgotten, he was staring at Sharon, utterly enraptured.

“Someone has a crush on Sharon Raydor,” Brenda singsonged.

“Old news, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon said, still smug, her attention still on the menu. Brenda swatted her on the shoulder.

“I’m not talkin’ about me, you jerk. The little boy at the table next to ours is makin’ some serious goo-goo eyes at you.”

“Mmmm,” Sharon looked up to make eye contact with Brenda and smirked. “I saw him when we walked in - I thought he was looking at you. I guess you were too busy staring at my ass to notice.”

Brenda blushed, but smiled wickedly. “I like those jeans,” she purred. “Gimme a smile; I wanna see what your admirer does.” Sharon rolled her eyes, but smiled at Brenda, partly because Brenda had asked her to, but mostly because her Chief was being ridiculous, and that was always worth a smile.

At the other table, the little boy blushed furiously, picked up a crayon and began to draw on his pad of paper, intent. Brenda chuckled and leaned in just a little bit more for a kiss.

“Oh, it’s definitely you he has his eyes on, Shari. That smile lit him up like a little red Christmas light.” She chuckled again. “I know exactly how he feels - when you smile at me like that, it makes me wobbly in the knees and all fluttery in the heart.”

“You’re sweet and ridiculous.”
“It’s the truth!”

The little boy was peeking at them again when the server finished taking their order. Sharon winked at him over the rim of her water glass. He giggled.

“Should I be jealous?” joked Brenda.

“Jackson was a horrible flirt when he was that age - we would walk into a restaurant or into the grocery store or wherever and he would bat his eyes and smile and have everyone wrapped around his little finger in a minute. Made for excellent embarrassing story material when he got older. I would trot it out whenever he got too big for his britches.” Brenda laughed; she was nervous as hell to meet Jackson, but at the same time, wanted desperately to meet him and the rest of Sharon’s family - she wanted to be included.

Brenda was nibbling on a piece of puff pastry filled with soft, melted brie when she felt a tug on the sleeve of her sweater. Sharon’s little toe-headed admirer was standing at her elbow, an apprehensive look on his round face.

“Hello there,” she said, smiling. He motioned at her to lean closer, and she did.

“Is your friend a movie star?” He whispered - his voice was lightly accented; British, she thought.

“She is awfully pretty, isn’t she?” Brenda replied, fighting a case of the giggles.

“He nodded, his expression serious. “I dunno, though. You’ll have to ask her yourself.” He blushed to the roots of his white blonde hair, but stiffened his spine and squared his shoulders. Brenda couldn’t risk a glance at Sharon without losing it completely. She glanced at his parents who had one eye on their son and another on their nearly finished appetizers and smiled reassuringly. The gentleman turned his full attention back to his oysters, but the woman was still focused on her child interacting with total strangers.

“Miss,” he asked, polite and solemn, across Brenda’s lap. “Are you a movie star?” Sharon shook her head gravely.

“Just a regular, non-famous person, sorry.” Sharon voiced in that alto thrum of hers. The boy hung his little head, looking very disappointed. “But you know,” Sharon continued, “movie stars have been known to come to this restaurant, especially for brunch on Sundays.” He perked up.

“Really?”

“Really,” Sharon said with a firm nod. “I used to bring my kids here on Sundays, and we saw Luke Skywalker and Mary Poppins.”

“Luke Skywalker!” He exclaimed, excited now, his little body vibrating. “Star Wars is awesome!”

“It is pretty awesome,” Sharon agreed. Brenda totally forgotten, Sharon’s new friend planted himself next to her and they embarked on a detailed discussion about movies that Brenda had seen once, ages ago. She was way out of her depth. The little boy’s mother was listening in on the conversation, relaxed fully. Apparently sci-fi geekery was very non-threatening. She pushed her chair back and stood; if Sharon was going to make a new friend, than so was she. The little boy’s mother made it easy on her.

“Looks like those two are sympatico,” she said. She had a strong accent: definitely British, but Brenda couldn’t tell the flavor. “He’ll talk about Star Wars for hours.”
“Her, too. It’s like another language to me.” She held out a hand, the other woman took it. “Brenda Johnson. And Sharon Raydor,” she indicated her geeky girlfriend with a jerk of her head.

“Amelia and Jonathan Kinlan. And Marcus, enthralled with your girlfriend.” The Kinlan’s were both tall, even seated, and dressed in that nearly universal casual weekend uniform of khakis and polo shirts, though both had sweaters on in deference to the fall wind coming in off the ocean. Mr. Kinlan was almost absurdly rangy, the cuffs of his thick oatmeal colored cardigan didn’t quite reach his bony wrists, and he had a thick shock of straw colored hair that fell into his eyes. Amelia’s hair was a messy bob of pale gingery ringlets that framed an open face with a slightly crooked nose and a small bow of a mouth. Brenda found her quite charming.

“She has that effect on children. I think it’s the hair,” Brenda deadpanned. Amelia and Jonathan chuckled.

“Do the two of you have any spawn of your own?” Jonathan asked, curious. His wife shot him a scowl.

“Not me; childless and fancy-free, or something to that effect. Sharon has two; a boy and a girl.”

“I suppose they’d be a little old to be buddies with Marcus, he’s had trouble making friends since we moved here.” Jonathan pronounced mournfully. It was Brenda’s turn to chuckle.

“You could say that. They’re 28 and 30. Though Jackson does share his mother’s taste in movies.”

“You’re joking,” Amelia said, incredulous. “There is no way that woman has children my age.”

“She does. And she’d kill me for telling you this, but she’s just shy of her sixtieth.” Brenda looked over at her beautiful, kind Sharon, Marcus now seated on her lap, taking a tentative bite of gooey brie and pastry.

“She must be the pied piper, because I’ve never been able to get him to eat cheese that wasn’t perfectly square and packaged in transparent film.” Amelia was goggling at her son. Brenda couldn’t disagree with the notion that Sharon wound a potent spell around the object of her attention.

“Mummy, brie is good!” Marcus exclaimed loudly from Sharon’s lap. He wiggled his little feet down to the deck and shot out from underneath the table. Jumping in place next to his mother, he asked (he really had good volume control for such a young guy, especially considering how excited he was), “Mummy, mummy, mummy, can Sharon eat with us?” Sharon caught Brenda’s eye - she wanted to say yes. Brenda nodded once, just slightly. Sharon beamed at her, and Brenda’s heart skipped a beat.

“You’ll have to ask her and Miss Brenda if that’s ok with them, Marcus.” Amelia told her son, her tone serious. He nodded enthusiastically and turned back to the brunette.

“Will you eat lunch with us, Miss Sharon? And you too, Miss Brenda? Pretty please?” Marcus’s eyes were wide and hopeful.

“We would like that very much, Marcus,” Sharon intoned, a smile lifting the corners of her mouth. He clapped his hands together with glee, bouncing in place a few more times.

“Why don’t we just slide an extra chair up to your table,” Brenda suggested. Sharon rose, scooped up their bags and did just that. Brenda picked up their water glasses and silver, and sat down. She was crowded next to Sharon on one side of the square table, and that was just fine with her.
Marcus took his seat again, very pleased with what he had orchestrated.

“Sharon, Amelia and Jonathan Kinlan. Jonathan, Amelia, Sharon Raydor.” Sharon smiled congenially at them.

“Mummy, Miss Sharon and Miss Brenda are police officers!” Conversation was easy with an excited child to choose the topics. “Do you catch bad guys?” he asked Brenda.

“I do, and so does Miss Sharon.”

“Are you detectives?” Jonathan inquired. Sharon answered for both of them.

“We’re investigators. Brenda handles high profile cases - unpleasant stuff. I’m in Internal Affairs, also unpleasant stuff.” Brenda rumbled around in her bag for her badge and passed it across the table to Marcus.

“Wicked,” he said, running a tiny finger across the relief of Los Angeles City Hall in the center and then the words that arched over the detailed representation of the building. “Dep, Depu,” he struggled to sound out the unfamiliar words. “I don’t know these words. What does it say on the top?”

“Deputy Chief,” Brenda said. Marcus mouthed the two words, silently, a few times, familiarizing himself with the way the letters on the badge related to the sounds. Then he pulled a face.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, it means that sometimes I get to boss Miss Sharon around, because she’s only a Captain.” Brenda was playfully haughty, and Marcus giggled at her, eliciting a mock scowl from Sharon.

“All police officers have ranks. Our boss is the Chief,” Sharon explained, patient, but not condescending. “And his right hand man is the Assistant Chief. Below him are the Deputy Chiefs, then the Commanders, then Captains, Lieutenants, Sergeants, Detectives, then Officers.”

“Oh, it’s like army guys, but with different names,” Marcus realized, and Sharon nodded. “Daddy and I were watching this show about the American Civil War on the History Channel and they talked about the generals and colonels and the other ranks. I don’t remember them all, though.” Brenda rummaged in her purse again till her fingers found one of her extra star pins, loose at the bottom of the bag. She leaned over Sharon and the table and stuck it through the collar of Marcus’s polo shirt and fastened the back on.

“There, now you’re a Commander and can boss Miss Sharon around, too.”

“Double wicked,” Marcus enthused, fingering the pin.

“So you two are like, big time in the Los Angeles Police?” Jonathan blurted, and Sharon laughed.

“I don’t know about big time.” The Captain demurred.

“Sharon’s being modest,” Brenda boasted. “I might be ranked higher, but she’s been in charge of her own division for over a decade. The first woman in the LAPD to have her own command, too.” Brenda was proud of Sharon’s accomplishments - achieved by tenacity, intelligence, an encyclopedic knowledge of Federal, State and City law and law enforcement regulations and by making herself indispensable not only to LAPD brass, but to the Inspector General’s Office and the Federal offices that monitored state and city FID divisions.
“That’s impressive,” Amelia added. “I guess you really never know who’s going to sit down next to you at a restaurant.”

Sharon and Brenda left the restaurant with the Kinlans. Marcus bounced down the stairs ahead of them, pleased that a tour of Police HQ and another meal with Sharon Raydor awaited him in the near future. Brenda was replete, leaning into Sharon with a hand in the brunette’s back pocket, a little amazed that she had so enjoyed a situation that, in the past, would have had her faking an urgent phone call from work. Watching Sharon charm a lonely little boy with police and sci-fi talk had made for a relaxing afternoon. And now, she had a walk on the beach and a sunset to enjoy with her lover.

They strolled into the parking lot, and before following his parents to their Volvo station wagon, Marcus threw himself against Sharon’s legs for a hug. Sharon grasped his shoulders gently, prying him away and crouching to give the child a proper hug. Marcus wrapped his little arms around her neck and squeezed. Sharon squeezed back.

“Come on, Marcus, it’s time to get home,” Amelia called, and Marcus released Sharon reluctantly.

“I’ll see you soon, kiddo, okay?” Sharon said, her face still at his eye level. He nodded, then hugged her again.

When he stepped back, he looked up to Brenda. “Thank you for the Commander pin, Miss Brenda.” Marcus turned and scampered to his parents’ car. Amelia lifted him into a booster seat in the back, and shut the door. She waved before climbing into the passenger seat, and Sharon and Brenda returned the gesture. When the Volvo began to back out of the parking space, they turned away to put their bags into the Jag. Sharon relocked the car and, arm snugged around Brenda’s slender waist, lead them towards the beach.

Jonathan made a low whistling sound as they pulled out of the parking lot.

“What?” Amelia asked her husband, more focused on making sure Marcus was wearing his seatbelt properly than anything that was going on outside the car.

“Those are two interesting women. We certainly didn’t get the whole story, because that car runs…” he paused to do the math in his head, “about $100000 US. That British car,” he said, a note of approval in his voice. Amelia rolled her eyes. For someone whose professional reputation involved characterizing and categorizing human behavior, her husband could be a little dense.

“Of course we didn’t get the whole story, Jon. Two of the most powerful women in southern California law enforcement would hardly be open books, even if they were very friendly.” She pulled out her phone and opened the web browser - ‘Brenda’ she typed in to the search bar.

“They spell Johnson with an ‘h’ over here, don’t they?” Jon shrugged. ‘Johnson LAPD’ she finished typing and then hit ‘done.’ The first search result was a link to a bio on the LAPD website - a bunch of links to new articles followed. She pressed the link for the bio. A picture of Brenda in her blue uniform cover, stars at her collar, sat next to the text. She read out loud:

“Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson heads the Major Crimes division of the LAPD. Trained by the CIA in interrogation and deception detection, she worked previously for the Atlanta Police Department and the DC Metro Police Department. Major Crimes has a 95% case closure rate, and a 80% conviction rate.”

“CIA? That little blonde woman with the accent straight out of Gone With the Wind?” Jon asked.
“Seven years, it says here. BA and MA from Georgetown in Russian and Slavic languages respectively.”

“Russian speaking CIA in the late 80’s and early 90’s? Serious stuff.” Jon was duly impressed by Brenda’s academic credentials, even if her work history was a little frightening. “I guess you really don’t know who’s going to sit down next to you at a restaurant.” He shot a glance to the phone.

“Google Sharon now.” Amelia dutifully typed ’Sharon Raydor’ in to the search bar. She was still curious, but she didn’t really want to learn enough to make her nervous around two women that had been so nice to her son. Amelia opened the link to Sharon’s LAPD bio. Sharon wasn’t in uniform in her photo. She was wearing a smartly cut black suit jacket over an emerald shell, a pearls and platinum collar around her neck. Her brunette hair was straight and sleek, the section at the crown of her head pulled back. Dark frame glasses were perched on her nose. She looked stern and absolutely unapproachable - 180 degrees from the woman that Marcus was flirting with.

“Captain Sharon Raydor heads the Force Investigation Division of the LAPD. She joined the LAPD after earning her Juris Doctor from the Law School at Stanford University. She is also the LAPD’s Women’s Coordinator and sits on the board that chooses candidates for the Chief of Police and the Police Commission.”

“She also speaks fluent Star Wars geek with five year olds in beach side restaurants,” Jon remarked pithily. “And is now our son’s new friend.”
Chapter 13

Brenda and Sharon watched the sun sink below the horizon, turning the ocean into a blazing puddle of liquid gold. Sharon was leaning against a retaining wall, and Brenda was leaning against her, seated in the v of her legs and resting back against her chest. Looking up at the stars of early evening winking into existence above their heads, Brenda wished fervently for a blanket, because she was starting to get chilly, and she absolutely didn’t want to leave the circle of Sharon’s arms. She was finally overtaken by a shiver she couldn’t fight down and Sharon chuckled.

“Let’s go,” she husked in Brenda’s ear, and Brenda shivered for another reason altogether. “There will be more sunsets on the beach for us, Brenda Leigh. And more nights under the stars.” Brenda used Sharon’s knees to lever herself off the ground and offered a hand to the brunette, pulling her up. They brushed the sand from their pants and fell together for a kiss; a brief touch of the lips, and then Sharon dropped another on the tip of Brenda’s nose. Brenda smiled dopily at her. Arm in arm, they headed back towards the parking lot.

They checked each other over for sand before getting into the car, and Brenda’s hand lingered teasingly on Sharon’s ass. “I think there’s some caught in this seam - wouldn’t want to get a single grain in this new car of yours.”

“Likely story,” Sharon purred and shifted her hips so the contact became more firm. A low growl issued from Brenda and suddenly two hands were on Sharon’s ass and Sharon was pressed against the Jag.

“Naughty,” Sharon breathed as fingers trailed down to her thigh and over the inseam of her pants. She spread her legs, curious to see how far Brenda would take this, and willing to let her do as she wished, despite the fact that they were in a public parking lot. Clever digits manipulated the crotch seam of her jeans against Sharon’s clit and Sharon moaned.

“Gorgeous,” Brenda said and gathered up the heavy mass of Sharon’s hair to bare her neck. The gentle kisses she placed on the exposed skin, on the knobs of her spine, were a soft counterpoint to the insistent pressure of her fingers between Sharon’s legs. Sharon groaned and her knees threatened to buckle. She leaned forward to let the car take a little more of her weight.

“How far would you let me go, in this parking lot, Shari,” Brenda murmured and Sharon shivered at the rush of warm air against her ear. “If I were to undo your belt and jeans and slip my hand inside your panties and then inside you, would you object? If someone were to walk out of the restaurant and saw us up against this car, would you push me away?”

“I’m yours, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon managed to gasp out. “Whenever you want me.”

“That’s quite a claim,” Brenda said, and then spun Sharon to face her. The kiss they shared was tender, and Brenda then tucked herself against Sharon, face in the crook of Sharon’s neck. “This is a little more public than your back yard, and that might be about as public as I get. Though this was a fun bit of fantasy.”

“Tease,” Sharon accused playfully. “I was wondering just how far you would go.”

“Just far enough to get you revved up for when we get home.” Lips latched on to Sharon’s earlobe and suckled gently. Sharon’s eyes fluttered shut, and she whimpered. “So tell me, Ms. Raydor,” Brenda whispered, tongue tracing the delicate curve of Sharon’s ear, “are you wet?” Sharon’s hips bucked into the blonde’s slender body.
“Fuck, Brenda Leigh.”

They were half-way back to LA when Sharon’s cellphone rang. It wasn’t a ringtone Brenda recognized. Sharon pushed a button on the steering wheel to answer.

“Raydor,” Sharon answered crisply.

“Hey Sharon, I did a critical removal about an hour ago and I need you to come get the paperwork started on emergency custody and a TRO.” Someone from the shelter, then.

“Ok, Denise. Where do you need me to go?”

“We’re at the safe house.” The woman on the line heaved a sigh. “This is a bad one, Shar. That paperwork needs to be pushed in front of a judge at start of business tomorrow.”

“It’ll get done. I’ll be there in 30.” The call cut off. “Mmmmm, sorry about this,” Sharon said with an apologetic twist of her lips and a mournful look at the swells of Brenda’s breasts underneath the soft weave of her sweater. It was doubtful that she would be in the mood for anything more than sleep after interviewing a domestic abuse victim. “Do you want me to drop you at the house? I’ll probably be an hour or so at the shelter.”

“Can I come with you? Would it be weird?” Brenda asked.

“Not weird for me, but definitely boring for you. I’m just going to be filling out paperwork.”

“I like watching you work.” Brenda confessed shyly, blushing. “I won’t be bored.”

Sharon pulled into an alley adjacent to a large warehouse and turned off the engine. She twisted around to pull a leather portfolio from the narrow space behind the seats. They exited the car, Brenda carrying both of their bags.

“What is this place?” Brenda asked as Sharon input a long code into a number pad next to a heavy steel door. The lock popped and the door slid back a little. Sharon rolled it back far enough for them to enter.

“This is the shelter’s safe house. The address isn’t publicized and the security is an order of magnitude greater than at the shelter proper.”

Brenda’s mouth set in a grim line. “So this family is in danger.” It wasn’t a question.

“If they were brought here, then yes.” Sharon stepped into a small, bare lobby. There was a door opposite the one they’d come in, and a camera blinked menacingly high in one corner. Sharon approached the door and pressed a buzzer in the frame. A moment later, the lock clicked and Sharon pulled the door open. The door was heavy, wood with a steel core, and the room it opened into wasn’t a room at all, but a man trap. Another camera looked down on them. Sharon pushed another buzzer, and they exited the man trap.

The interior of the safe house was homey enough if you didn’t take into account the fact that there were no windows. A large living area filled with comfortable furniture opened into a sizable kitchen - both were big enough to comfortably accommodate multiple families.

One of the doors lining the walls of the living area opened and a petite Asian woman stepped out of what looked to be an office cum control center. “Hey Sharon, and Sharon’s guest.” Brenda resisted the urge to roll her eyes.
“Denise, this is Brenda Johnson. Brenda, Denise Tremont.” Sharon introduced succinctly. “Where’s my client?” she asked, ready to get down to business. Denise gave Sharon a strange look, but acquiesced to her desire to get to work.

“She’s in with her children. I’ll go get her.” Denise gave them a tight lipped smile and went to retrieve Sharon’s client. Brenda gave Sharon her own strange look, and Sharon discreetly slid her free hand into Brenda’s, tickling the blonde’s palm with her fingers.

“If I had let her start chatting, we wouldn’t get home till midnight, and even if we aren’t in the mood for other bedtime activities, I would like to at least cuddle up with you for a good night’s sleep.” Sharon explained the reason for her brusqueness with her friend, and Brenda flushed, pleased at Sharon’s small admission. She squeezed Sharon’s hand.

“Just make sure you talk to her soon - I don’t want your friends to hate me before they get to know me,” Brenda admonished gently.

“I’ll set up dinner. Or maybe lunch. Denise can be a little...much until you get to know her.”

“Well, I can always be a little much, especially once you’ve gotten to know me, so it’ll all even out.”

Brenda took a strange sort of pleasure in watching Sharon work with victims. Something about the competent air of Captain Raydor combined with Sharon’s almost palpable empathy made for an arresting interview style, drawing the victim out of their shell with quiet care, and comforting them with her knowledge and competence. Her client had been severely beaten; two black eyes, what was probably a cheek fracture, visible defensive bruising on upper arms and forearms, and one arm in a sling. She sat hunched over, like her torso was too sore for her to fully straighten her spine, one eye on the door that opened into the room where her children sat, watching a movie, the other on Sharon. The woman was a wreck beyond her physical wounds - her affect was flat, speech slow and halting, but she answered Sharon’s questions gamely.

Brenda watched, discreetly, while going through contacts on her phone, deleting duplicates and doubles, making sure numbers were labelled properly and etc. When she came to Sharon’s name, with a rush of giddy affection, she changed the contact from S. Raydor to Shari, and blushed at herself.

Familiar sounds lulled Brenda - the low murmur of Sharon’s voice, the scratching of her pen on paper, the hum of a Disney movie in the other room - she hadn’t lied; she wasn’t bored, and despite the horrific night Sharon’s client and her children must have had, Brenda was content. Then her phone rang, her parents’ home number. It had to be Willie Rae, as Clay still wasn’t talking to her of his own volition. “Hey, mama,” Brenda answered. “Brenda Leigh,” came the familiar, querulous tone. “You didn’t call at your usual time and I was getting worried.” Brenda rolled her eyes that her mother would get worried about her missing a once weekly phone call. They usually spoke at least once more during the average week, so it wasn’t like Brenda’s calls were the only time they talked.

“I’m sorry mama. I was havin’ brunch with a friend in Malibu and we got to talkin’ and time got away from me.” Brenda self-edited, and felt a pang of regret. She was going to have to tell her mother, at the very least, about Sharon soon. “I was going to call you tomorrow on my lunch break.”
“Malibu! That’s fancy.” Willie Rae was a fan of old Hollywood and the historical glamour of beachfront Malibu would be right up her alley.

“I’ll have to take you up there next time you visit. It was very nice and very relaxin’.”

“You, relax? I can hardly believe it.” Willie Rae paused significantly. “So do I know your friend?” Her mother was fishing, but Brenda had been mentioning Sharon for weeks in little ways, so her presence in Brenda’s burgeoning private life shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise.

“I rode up with Sharon, mama. She’s tryin’ out a new car and wanted to get it out on the highways.”

“A new car. You mean she actually drives something other than a Crown Victoria?”

“She drives when she goes to see her family up north. Can’t take city issue cars on road trips.” Brenda explained. “Plus those Crown Vics have terrible gas mileage and ride like tanks.”

“I guess you have no need of a personal car, since you rarely leave the city,” Willie Rae groused.

“Mama, I don’t know anyone outside of LA - where would I drive to?” huffed Brenda in reply, exasperated.

“I don’t know Brenda Leigh, but some people take weekends off to do things that don’t involve murder.” This was an old argument that would circle around to Brenda’s failures as a wife, woman and human being in general. They had had this discussion at least once a month since Brenda had joined the CIA after finishing her masters degree, and even oftener during her two marriages. Brenda knew her mother thought she was being helpful with her reminders that relationships required compromise and that her partner (read: Fritz, because she had no doubt Willie Rae would go there) had needs too. Willie Rae couldn’t or wouldn’t understand that Brenda didn’t want children and a suburban life and a doting husband, and she supposed that some of her mother’s reluctance to accept that she and Fritz were finished and that there would be no reconciliation was her fault, since she had sheltered her parents so thoroughly from the arguments that had plagued the last year of their marriage. Clay and Willie Rae wouldn’t have understood that giving in to Fritz’s desire to start a family wasn’t a compromise, or that caving to his fears regarding her job didn’t indicate an equal partnership because they wanted the same things Fritz wanted. Regardless, she wasn’t rehashing this ancient mess on the phone in a DV shelter.

“Mama,” she started off, trying for placating. “I’ve been tryin’ to take better care of myself - I took an official weekend off last month, and this weekend has been entirely work free other than some paperwork this morning, and that wasn’t even murder related paperwork, just personnel stuff.”

“Brenda Leigh,” Willie Rae sighed, “if you’re making changes in your life, maybe you should talk to Fritz about...” Brenda cut her off.

“Mama. Stop right there. I don’t want to talk to you about Fritz.” Her mother spluttered and started to speak again, but Brenda stopped her short. “Mama, I’m eating well, sleeping well and happy, ok, so just don’t.”

“Fine.” Wille Rae gave in, and heaved another sigh. Brenda knew that she hadn’t heard the last of this. “I’ll talk to you later this week, honey.”

“Ok, mama. Tell daddy I love him.” Willie Rae made a noise of agreement and they hung up. It was Brenda’s turn to sigh and drop her head back onto the couch. Family could be a pain in the
ass. She opened her ears again to the sounds of domesticity and her Sharon, speaking in a low voice to her client in the kitchen. Brenda closed her eyes.

Brenda was late for work, and it was Sharon’s fault, though she wasn’t sure that ‘my girlfriend really really wanted to fuck me, and I would be crazy and stupid to say no when Sharon Raydor is offering sex,’ made for a legitimate excuse. She tripped into Major Crimes as fast as her heels could carry her. Andy greeted her before the door could even swing shut in her wake.

“Hey Chief, we’ve a scene to get to. Homicide just kicked us a case per Tompkins and we’re due for a walkthrough.”

“Ooookkkk, why didn’t I get a call? I could have gone straight there?” Brenda exclaimed. Flynn gave her a perplexed look.

“Uh, Chief, you did get called, but you never answered. That’s why I’m waiting here for you.” Brenda’s eyes went wide and she began to rummage frantically in her purse. The phone she pulled out was not her almost new iPhone, but Sharon’s slightly battered Blackberry.

“Oh my,” she stated simply. She pushed at the buttons; she had no idea how to operate this thing. “I must have picked up Sharon’s phone from the charging station this morning ‘cuz I was in such a rush. Do you know how to work one of these?” She handed the phone to Andy. “Maybe she’ll pick up if she sees herself calling.”

Andy scrolled through the Captain’s contacts. BLJ was listed as a cell number. He dialed and handed the phone back to the Chief. Sharon picked up after a single ring.

“Brenda Leigh, you have my phone,” came Sharon’s smooth voice over the line. She sounded amused.

“Yea. Guess I was a little distracted on my way out the door.” Brenda blushed. She had been thinking about Sharon’s mouth between her legs, relentless, on her way out the door. Sharon chuckled.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Sharon husked and Brenda felt herself redden further. Andy was smirking at her. “I’m on my way up to you now.”

Sharon clipped into the murder room a minute later. They exchanged phones and a touch of the lips, since the murder room was empty.

“Lieutenant.” Sharon acknowledged Andy in a crisp tone. “Brenda Leigh,” she fairly purred, then Sharon nodded to each of them, a smirk curving her finely drawn mouth, and clicked away, back towards the elevators. Brenda watched her go, teeth worrying her bottom lip - she liked pantsuits, and she had seen Sharon slip that one on over mauve lace less than an hour ago. Andy was watching too and Brenda hit him on the arm.

“Stop that,” she growled. “Let’s go.” She threw her car keys to him with a little force and stalked off towards the elevators herself. He chuckled and followed, enjoying the swish of his Chief’s… dress and the flex of her calves.

Behind the wheel of the Chief’s Crown Vic, Andy readjusted the seat and the mirrors and buckled up. Brenda settled herself in the passenger seat, purse on her lap. He backed out of the parking space and pulled into traffic.

“So Chief, how was your weekend?” Flynn teased her gently. He was a little curious as to exactly what the two women got up to during the time they spent together.
“It was nice - relaxin’. Sharon took me to Malibu yesterday and we had brunch lookin’ out over the Pacific. I had never been up there but to drive past on the PCH.”

“Brunch oceanside in Malibu. Swanky.” Brenda laughed and wrinkled her nose at him.

“Oh, it so wasn’t.” She unlocked her phone and opened the picture she had taken of Marcus sitting in Sharon’s lap. She looked at it a minute, considering the smile on Sharon’s face and the twinkle in her malachite eyes and the profusion of dark brown waves picked out in red by the warm light of the sun. She’d caught Marcus mid-word, his eyes shut and hands frozen mid-gesticulation. When they paused at a red light, Brenda showed the picture to Andy.

“Who’s the squirt?” he asked, hiding the small shock he got at seeing the Captain in something that wasn’t a designer suit or her blues.

“A little boy who wanted to know if Sharon was a movie star, and then they ended up talking about sci-fi for nearly two hours.” Andy guffawed.

“Science fiction? Really? I would have pegged the Captain’s tastes as much more highbrow.”

“Well, her taste in books is very highbrow. But movies and TV? Star Wars, Star Trek, Dr. Who, Alien and so on and so forth.”

“That’s…surprising.” Andy enjoyed the little tidbits about Sharon Raydor the Chief shared with him. It made him feel trustworthy in a way that being granted charge of a crucial part of an investigation didn’t, like he as a person, rather than as a police officer, had turned some sort of corner.

Sharon pressed the button for her floor and leaned back against the wall of the box. She smiled to herself; the name that had flashed across Brenda’s phone when she had called was ‘Shari’ Dear god, her Chief was adorable. She stalked off the elevator and into her bullpen, fighting to keep her usual professional expression. It was hard sometimes, these days, to be Captain Raydor. Sharon liked it, liked that Captain Raydor was more mask than her entire persona - she felt more herself, like a whole person rather than two distinct personas, than she had in years.

Work should be quiet today, barring some major incident that she had to handle personally. Sharon was glad she wasn’t rushing down to court to file paperwork on behalf of the client she’d obtained last night. Sometimes it paid to know people, like a friend from law school who was now a Superior Court Judge and had been happy to review and sign copies of the TRO, emergency custody paperwork and the police report and fax the former back to Sharon. Someone from the shelter would have filed the papers at the court proper as soon as the building had opened for business. Today was about FID personnel; she needed to complete her own reviews and consider transfers and promotions for those of her people who wanted to move on. This work could take a lot out of a person - it was isolating and thankless - and she wouldn’t keep anyone in FID that couldn’t handle it.

Sharon was lost in her paperwork, writing a glowing review for Sergeant Markham when her phone buzzed.

FROM: Denise

Did you think I wouldn’t recognize her, Sharon? Fucking your straight, married boss? What are you thinking, risking your career for some mid-life crisis affair?

Sharon would have laughed if she wasn’t completely incensed. Denise fancied herself the
conscience of their little circle of friends, but mostly it was just her excuse to be nosy and say asinine things under the cover of ‘providing a mental health check’. Sharon had never wanted or needed Denise’s advice, and the last time it had been offered unsolicited, Sharon hadn’t spoken to Denise outside of their professional dealings for months, not until Denise had apologized. Sharon fully intended on giving Denise a piece of her mind, even it was by text message.

TO: Denise

Where the fuck do you get off talking to me that way? Not only do you know absolutely nothing about Brenda, or my relationship with her, but do you actually think I would mess with someone else’s marriage?

Sharon stamped her thumb down on the send button. Text-fighting. Was she twelve? She went back to her review, resolving to finish at least this one before engaging in anymore idiocy. She ignored the the next two texts she got until she signed her name neatly at the bottom of the report.

FROM: Denise

If you’re going to self-destruct over a straight, married woman, then I’m going to call you on it. You’re a catch - you could have any lesbian in LA, in fucking CA - but you choose a straight woman who could ruin your professional reputation. From what I hear about her, she wouldn’t be good enough for you even if she wasn’t straight.

FROM: Denise

Nothing to say?

Sharon had plenty to say. She also had tears in her eyes. Why would someone who was supposed to be her friend talk to her this way?

TO: Denise

Why are you treating me this way? I fall in love for the first time in over a decade and you’re shitting on my happiness. You’re supposed to be my friend. Fuck you. I don’t want to hear from you for a while.

Thirty minutes ago, Sharon had been feeling fantastic. Now she felt horrible. She looked at the phone still in her hand. Whether or not to call her Brenda Leigh wasn’t really a difficult decision. Brenda answered promptly

“Hey Shari, what’s up?” the blonde chirped. Sharon could hear crime scene noise in the background.

“Denise just gave me a crash-course via text message on the myriad ways in which people suck. Like I needed a reminder.” Sharon said, voice wavering. She choked down a sob.

“Oh, Shari,” Brenda sighed. “What did she say?”

“It’s not important.”

“It is important.” Brenda’s voice was kind, but firm. “Part of why you’re upset and angry is that she was an inconsiderate bitch, but I’m bettin’ that what she said also upset you, and that it was probably somethin’ about me. I can’t do anything about her, Sharon, but I can try to do somethin’ about what she said.”
“When did you get to be such a mind reader,” Sharon grumbled, and Brenda smirked to herself, gratified when Sharon continued: “She said she recognized you last night and that she can’t believe I’m ‘self-destructing’ over a mid-life crisis affair with straight, married woman who could ruin my career and isn’t good enough for me anyway,” Sharon spit out in a single protracted breath.

“I see,” Brenda tried to keep her tone steady, but she was livid. Some friend Denise was, giving a generous woman like Sharon a hard time, and over the phone, too.

“Well, she’s makin assumptions, obviously. We both know I’m not so straight, baby. Also, not so married. The career thing remains to be seen, I guess, but we can’t get fired for bein’ gay, and not for being gay together, not unless the Department and City wants a major lawsuit on their hands. But we’ll deal with that as it comes along.”

“I love you, Brenda Leigh Johnson,” Sharon whispered.

“I love you too, Sharon Raydor. Come see me if you’ve got a minute later - I’ll be in the office after lunch.”

Call ended, Brenda looked up. Lieutenant Tao was frozen, wide-eyed, in the door of the bedroom Brenda had ducked into to take her call.

“Chief,” he blurted. “Uh…”

“Relax Lieutenant. I’m not going to bump you off and hide the body.” She was less concerned with her Lieutenant overhearing her goodbye to Sharon than she was with coming up with something that would help take Sharon’s mind off her shitty friend.

“Are you done riding herd on the SID techs?” She inquired, hoping to keep this professional; Brenda needed to do a final walkthrough of the scene herself before heading to HQ for the postmortem.

“Yes, Chief. They’re packing up all the evidence now, I was just taking a last look-see.” She smiled at him, pleased. Most of the time Lieutenant Tao was so efficient and reliable, so Brenda forgave him his occasional bout of long-windedness.

“And preliminaries will be ready…?”

“I’ll have what I can by the time you’re through with the autopsy.” He paused, and Brenda just knew that whatever he said next would be incredibly awkward in a way that only Michael Tao could manage. She still cringed thinking about the time she had asked him about the state of the relationship between Daniels and Gabriel.

“You know, Chief, you’ve been content and almost easy going the past few months, and at first it was a little disconcerting, but I like the new you.” He stopped talking and fiddled with his glasses a moment. “What I’m trying to say, is that I’m glad you’re happy.”

She gave him a wry look and a crooked grin. “I guess I’ll take that as a compliment, which I’m positive is how you meant it.” He blushed and sketched a strange little half bow, turned on his heel and fled. Brenda rolled her eyes. Sometimes her boys were ridiculous.

“I need to make a stop before we head back for the post,” Brenda said to Andy as she settled into the passenger seat of her car.

“Where to, Chief?”
“The Empty Vase - it’s on Santa Monica, a little east of where Melrose splits off.”

“Aye, aye,” Flynn saluted and pulled the car out of the knot of police vehicles surrounding the crime scene. Flynn was silent as they made their way to West Hollywood. Usually she appreciated this tendency of his, especially at the beginning of a case when she was mulling over all the possibilities. Today, she wasn’t thinking of the case, she was thinking about Sharon, and fidgeting. Flynn took pity on her:

“Did you manage to get yourself in the dog house between leaving the office and processing that crime scene?” He asked, flashing her his trademark smirk.

“Course not!” She exclaimed. “Nothing like that, Lieutenant.”

“Then why are we headed to the most expensive flower shop in LA? Why else do you give a woman flowers?”

“Seriously?” She inquired in disbelief. As an answer, Andy lifted his shoulders up to his ears and let them drop. “Andy, you give a woman flowers because the sky is blue, or because the sun is shining, or because she’s breathing and she loves you. The important part is the right flowers for the right occasion. You can’t just throw roses at every situation.”

“If you say so, Chief. What’s your plan, then?”

“One of Sharon’s friends lit her up something awful this mornin’, so I’m thinkin’ a wreath of honeysuckle vine and lily of the valley. Empty Vase is the only shop in LA that carries honeysuckle year round.”

“Honeysuckle?” Andy looked highly skeptical.

“You can google it when we get back to the office,” she sniffed curtly. “Neanderthal.”

“You wound me, Chief.” Andy joked, and Brenda smiled.

It was Andy who walked into the lobby at HQ holding not a wreath, but a delicate arrangement of honeysuckle vines and lily of the valley, in a graceful vase that would double as sculpture when empty. He had watched his Chief shell out just over $200 (and that was after a steep discount) for the flowers and the handblown glass artwork, chatting conversationally with the store owner, who knew her well enough to call Brenda by name when they had entered the store. The arrangement was beautiful and unique and it smelled like late summer in the flower gardens at the Arboretum. The Chief might have a point about flowers.

“Chief, I can’t take these up to FID!” Flynn complained. “Everyone’s going to think I’m the one that’s sweet on the Captain.”

“Either you walk the flowers up to Sharon’s office or you have to attend the post with me,” Brenda said sweetly. She knew Andy hated attending autopsies - he would rather chase evidence in dumpsters or direct traffic in dress blues in 100 degree weather.


“Thank you, Lieutenant,” she trilled. “Please make sure all available preliminary reports are on my desk when I get back.”

“Sure, Chief.” She smiled and clicked away. Andy gave himself a little shake and slunk onto the elevators, ignoring the strange looks of the uniforms and other police personnel occupying the
small place. He was secure enough in his masculinity to carry vase of flowers through Police HQ. What he wasn’t sure of was his ability to withstand the teasing that his bringing flowers to the Captain of FID could elicit. The things he did for his Chief.

The FID bullpen was hopping when Andy approached. He really didn’t want to walk past every single one of Sharon’s people to deliver these flowers. He had an idea. He pulled out his cellphone and dialed Elliot.

“Elliot,” the FID Lieutenant answered promptly.

“Hey, it’s Flynn. Could you step out into the hallway real quick? I have something for you.”

“I’m kind of busy, can’t you just bring it in here?”

“Please? I’ll owe you one,” Andy wheedled.

“Fine,” Elliot grouched. “Gimme a sec.” And he hung up.

Andy was propping up the wall when Elliot blasted into the hallway at high speed. He stopped and grinned when he saw what Andy was holding.

“Why Lieutenant Flynn, you shouldn’t have!” Elliot said mockingly.

“They’re for your Captain.” He held the vase out to Elliot, who took it carefully, making sure not to crush any of the blossoms. “From her lady love.”

“What’d she do?” Apparently Brenda Leigh Johnson was the only person in the world who gave a woman flowers when someone else screwed up. Even allowing that she may have a point about the custom, Andy resolved to tell her this.

“Nothing!” Andy exclaimed defensively. “They were all kissy face this morning before we rolled out. Apparently one of your Captain’s friends is showing her ass, and my Chief is trying to cheer her up.” Elliot rolled his eyes to the heavens and gave a sighed.

“How did we end up as go betweens for those two, Flynn. I can’t decide if God is punishing us or smiling on us.”

“Probably a little bit of both. They do seem happier these days, though, so I guess I can’t really complain.” Andy rationalized. “And I’ve not had so many nights to myself in years.”

“True that.” Elliot agreed. “And weekends off, too. My wife keeps asking if the Captain got a lobotomy,” he deadpanned and Flynn snorted.

“Thanks for this, man,” Andy said. He had to get back to work. The Chief might be more relaxed these days, but she would still chew him out if those preliminaries weren’t on her desk when the post-mortem was done. “Give me a yell if there’s something I can do for you.”

Elliot gave an abbreviated wave and turned back to the bullpen. He hoped his squad didn’t think he was trying to woo the boss. That could be weird. Markham gave him an exaggerated eyebrow waggle when he passed by her desk and he scowled at her. Elliot knocked on the frame of the Captain’s door.

“Oh,” she croaked, her voice hoarse, eyes fixed on the flowers. Elliot entered and sat the vase on the desk, in front of her. “Where’d these come from?” Elliot shrugged exaggeratedly.
“Some grey haired guy dropped them off.” He shot her a grin and left.

Sharon brushed her fingers through the spray of honeysuckle that erupted over the lip of the vase like a fall of water, lily of the valley frothed out from among the creamy orange of the honeysuckle, foam amid the waves. The vase was a work of art, shaped like a slightly abstract pitcher and colored a rich blue that melted away at the top, exposing the verdant green of stems and leaves. It was like a sculpture made of glass and flowers.

Honeysuckle Sharon remembered - the bonds of love and devoted affection; she woke up her computer to google what lily of the valley meant. Sweetness, trustworthiness. Sharon decided she really liked Brenda Leigh’s particular ideas about flowers and the things they could mean; it was a bit like receiving a love note written in invisible ink.

Sharon pulled the little cream envelope out from where it was tucked amid the blossoms. The card had a stanza of poetry on it, written in cyrillic script. Underneath was a translation in Brenda’s handwriting:

“In the torture of hopeless melancholy, in the bustle of the world’s noisy hours, that voice rang out so tenderly, I dreamed of that lovely face of yours.”

Sharon sighed gustily, a silly grin on her face, and ran her fingers over the wafer thin softness of a honeysuckle trumpet.

Brenda was already apologizing as she walked through the double doors into the morgue. Doctor Morales was gowned and gloved standing over the already partially dissected body.

“I’m so sorry I’m late. Sharon’s had a rotten mornin’ and I stopped to get her some flowers and it ended up takin’ longer than I thought.”

“Well aren’t you girlfriend of the year,” he sassed. “Don’t be too sorry: I started without you. But there aren’t really any surprises here.” He fished around inside the torso, pulled out a bullet, and dropped it into a metal basin with a ‘plink’. He plunged his hand in again and surfaced with another tiny wad of metal.

“Two shots to center mass, .38’s maybe, with penetration of several vital organs. He wouldn’t have expired immediately, though.” The doctor narrated. “Otherwise this is a healthy young latino male, 25 to 28 years old. No signs of tattoos, drug use - recreational or chronic - or any of the usual physical indicators of gang activity.” Brenda wrinkled her nose; she guessed the body wasn’t going to tell her why it was lying dead in a house owned by an elderly white couple who no one had seen hide nor hair of since Saturday evening.

Morales moved to the sink with the little basin. “I’ll wash these off so you can get them to ballistics.”

“Thank you Doctor,” Brenda offered quietly, contemplating the still visage of her victim.

“So what’s bothering the lovely Captain today?” Morales asked over the rush of water from the tap.

“I met Denise, that chippie from the shelter, last night, and this morning, from what I can gather, she was givin’ Shari shit about me via text message.”

“Oh really?” Morales turned to look at her, curious. “What did Denise have to say about you?”

“She said that Sharon is self-destructin’, having an affair with her straight, married boss.” Brenda
snarled to herself before she said the next part. “And that I wasn’t good enough for her.”

“She would.” Morales stripped off his gloves and moved to lean against the counter next to Brenda. He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Denise is a real piece of work. She says nasty, terrible things to people she claims are her friends because she’s sure she can conduct your life better than you can.” He paused and took a deep breath, then continued, on a bit of a roll. “And another thing, happily married little Denise has a thing for Sharon - I saw it the first time I saw the two of them interact, so in Denise’s mind, no one will ever be good enough for Sharon.”

“Well that’s just charmin’,” Brenda said petulantly. Morales laughed.

“Welcome to the world of dyke drama,” he stated sarcastically. “Let Sharon handle Denise, she’s got practice. You just handle Sharon.”

Brenda smiled a smile at him that was just a touch melancholy. “Thanks,” she said.

“And another thing, happily married little Denise has a thing for Sharon - I saw it the first time I saw the two of them interact, so in Denise’s mind, no one will ever be good enough for Sharon.”

Brenda smiled a smile at him that was just a touch melancholy. “Thanks,” she said.

“Anytime, Brenda.” And she could see he genuinely meant it. Brenda left the morgue, bullets in hand, feeling like she truly had made a new friend, and not just charmed one of Sharon’s.

Sharon was sure she didn’t want to know why Will Pope was standing in the door to her office. She swallowed the bite of slightly wilted take-out salad she had purloined for her lunch and stood up.

“Chief Pope. Come in.” She hope she sounded gracious. Mostly she was just tired. She hadn’t seen all that much of Pope since she had turned down that promotion - a couple of meetings about pending litigation and investigations, but they had been cordial. She couldn’t imagine what would bring him to FID.

“Captain. I’m sorry to interrupt your lunch, but my free time is rather at a premium this week.” He sat down, noticing the arrangement on her desk. “These are interesting.” He poked at a bud and Sharon fought down the urge to slap his hand away.

“Is there something I can do for you, Chief Pope?”

“Actually, there is something I can do for you.” He leaned back and unbuttoned the top two buttons on his jacket. “Chief McIntire is retiring at the end of November, and I’m offering you his position. Head of Professional Standards and a promotion to Deputy Chief.”

“Deputy Chief?” Sharon exclaimed, astounded. He nodded.

“I know jumping a rank isn’t quite…policy, but the job requires it. A Commander can’t head the division, and no one currently at the rank of Commander possesses anything like your skill set. You’ve been an LAPD officer for more than thirty years, I can’t imagine there will be too much protest. If there is, chalk it up to sour grapes.”

Sharon knew she should probably take a day or two to consider, but she wanted this job. She would be really good at this job. Apparently Pope saw the indecision on her face.

“I know you aren’t the type to rush headlong into things, but there is literally no one else in the LAPD who can head this division. I find myself thankful you turned down the media liaison position.” He was really laying it on thick. She wondered if Pope and Tompkins had already lobbied to start searching for an outside hire and been turned down.

“I don’t need any time to consider, Chief. Head of Professional Standards is not an opportunity I’m going to turn down.” She was glad sounded like her usual, collected self. Pope clapped his
hands down on the arms of the chair.

“Fantastic. 30th of November, which is a Friday, you’ll be getting your stars as well as a Meritorious Achievement Medal for the work you did in regards to Occupy LA and the Goldman suit.”

“Oh. Okay. I was planning on taking the Tuesday and Wednesday before Thanksgiving to visit my parents. Will that be a problem, considering?”

“As long as you are briefed and prepared to take over on December the 1st, I have no issue with you using a couple of vacation days.” He narrowed his eyes at the personnel reviews stacked neatly at the edge of her desk. “Have you by chance completed Lieutenant Elliot’s year end report?” Sharon was surprised, but didn’t let it touch her face. If they were considering Elliot for promotion, she was ecstatic. Her taciturn Lieutenant deserved it.

“Let me make you a copy, Chief.” She stood and rifled through the pile. He stood too and rebuttoned his jacket.

“I’ll follow you out,” he said, but didn’t move to clear a path to the door. “McIntire will want to start meeting with you beginning tomorrow - you can work out your schedule with him.” He paused before turning to leave. “That really is an unusual bouquet,” he sounded puzzled, but said no more and followed Sharon out of the office.

Sharon walked into the murder room, only peripherally aware that Flynn, Gabriel, Buzz and Tao were clustered around the monitors that drove the projector and printers. Her Chief was in her office - that was all that mattered. She stepped in without knocking, closed the door behind her and leaned back against. Brenda looked up at her curiously.

“This has been one weird, weird day,” Sharon pronounced. “Can I close the blinds?”

“You’d better,” Brenda drawled, “’cuz I have every intention of givin’ you a hug, and maybe stealin’ a few kisses.”

“Someone’s awfully sure of herself.” Sharon gave the cord that controlled the blinds over the window into the murder room a sharp tug.

“You would deny me kisses?” Brenda asked, playfully incredulous. Sharon only smirked.

Once they were protected from prying eyes, Brenda stood and stepped into Sharon’s arms. Heart pounding at Sharon’s ever intoxicating proximity, the heat of the other woman’s body lighting up her nerve endings and senses, it was hard to resist the desire to tuck her head into its usual spot; she didn’t want to foul Sharon’s blazer or shirt with makeup. Brenda took a kiss for herself instead, tilting her head a fraction to avoid a clash of noses.

Sharon hummed as their bodies and lips made contact and Brenda smiled at the sound. Sharon took the opportunity to snake her tongue into Brenda’s mouth with a teasing flick, drawing the blonde in deeper. Brenda moaned and chased Sharon’s tongue with her own, sliding her hands under Sharon’s blazer and pressing her fingers into the small of Sharon’s back through the crisp fabric of her broadcloth shirt and slipping them under the high waist of her wool trousers. Sharon’s hands splayed possessively on Brenda’s ass, rumpling the thin fabric of her print dress.

“Are you not wearing underwear?” Sharon murmured. Brenda shook her head in confirmation.

“I need to go get the ones I washed last week out of my dryer,” she said, feeling the skirt of her
dress inch up the back of her thighs; Sharon was practically purring against Brenda’s lips.

“Delicious,” Sharon whispered, palming the soft skin and soft flesh of her Chief’s exposed ass. “Mine,” she growled, surprising herself - this was certainly something she had thought before, just this morning, actually, but she had managed to bite down on verbalizing it. In answer, Brenda whimpered, spread her legs, and arched enticingly into Sharon.

“Do you want…” Sharon asked.

“I do. I do want, but we shouldn’t.” Brenda shivered and pushed back, trembling and breathing shakily through her nose. “Besides, I already owe you one from this mornin’.” She groaned and threw herself down in one of the chairs in front of her desk. “The things you do to me, Sharon Raydor.”

Sharon chuckled, smoothing her shirt and blazer and resettling the waist of her pants just above the curves of her hips. She took the chair next to Brenda’s.

“I didn’t come down here to tease you, I promise.” She took one of Brenda’s hands and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I have some good news, and something I want to ask you.”

“Oh?” Brenda sounded a lot curious and a little cautious.

“First, I’m getting a promotion. McIntire is retiring at the end of the month and Pope just offered me his position. And I accepted.” A broad smile broke out on Brenda’s face.

“Deputy Chief Sharon Raydor!” She crowed happily. “Congratulations, Shari! That’s the perfect job for you.”

“I’m getting my stars on the 30th.” Sharon sighed, “and a Meritorious Achievement Medal.”

“Sharon Raydor, are you bein’ grumpy about gettin’ a medal?”

“Maybe a little. I’d rather just get down to work on the 1st and skip the ceremony and the glad-handing.”

“Sharon,” Brenda pronounced her name with deliberate significance. “You may be uncomfortable with the recognition, but the department and the community needs to know what you’ve done for them. It’s important that the best parts of our jobs are in the papers, and not just the worst.” Brenda propelled herself across the small space between the chairs and straddled Sharon’s legs on her knees, seating herself on Sharon’s lap, settling in comfortably.

“And I might be just a little biased,” she purred. “But you’re brilliant and beautiful and that should be front page news every day.”

“Sweet talker,” Sharon said, lips against Brenda’s blonde temple.

“Now, Chief Raydor, what was it you wanted to ask me?” For a moment, Sharon couldn’t remember what she’d wanted to ask - she could barely remember where they were - there was only the weight and presence of Brenda Leigh on Sharon’s lap, the clean scent of her skin in Sharon’s nostrils, and the slender silhouette of Brenda Leigh’s body in her close fitting dress. Sharon was lost in her guileless chocolate eyes.

“I want you to move in with me,” she blurted, then paused, wide eyed and startled at what had come out of her own mouth. Brenda froze, hunkered down and slightly tensed. “I guess there was more than one thing I wanted to ask you,” Sharon said softly. This was something that had been on
Sharon’s mind for a while, and apparently it wasn’t so much floating around in her subconscious as it was bursting from her forebrain.

“I…Are you serious?” Brenda stammered, not making eye contact, fiddling with one of the buttons on Sharon’s blazer.

“Yes, I believe I am, but I can drop it right now if it’s going to make things weird.” Sharon reached out and tilted Brenda’s chin up, meeting distressed brown eyes with her own.

“No, no I’m just surprised is all.” Brenda said, and Sharon could see the wheels turning in her head.

“I know it’s maybe a little soon, but my home doesn’t feel like my home anymore, Brenda Leigh, it feels like our home. And I would like to share it with you, if that’s what you want, now or sometime in the future.” Brenda was scrutinizing her intently, searching for the slightest detail that could mean untruth or insincerity. Sharon hoped that the woman on her lap, the woman that she loved, could see that her presence in Sharon’s life was essential.

“Yes.” Brenda said simply after a moment of silence, her eyes still riveted on Sharon’s face. “Yes, I wanna live with you.” She kissed Sharon on the forehead, lips lingering sweetly, a soft sigh escaping through her nose. “Are you sure you don’t wanna move into the apartment with me?” She quipped slyly.

“You think your landlord would install a pool in the courtyard?” Sharon asked, and Brenda chuckled.

“I love you, Sharon,” Brenda murmured, resting her chin on the crown of Sharon’s head.

“I love you, Brenda,” Sharon replied into Brenda’s neck.

“So what was it you really wanted to ask me, Shari?”

“I was wondering, since you’re officially off for Thanksgiving and Black Friday, if you would take Tuesday and Wednesday as well and come up to Santa Cruz with me for the holiday.”

“And meet your family.” Brenda stated, the wheels turning again.

“Well, some of them - my parents and some cousins. Jax and Ginny are going to see her family in Baton Rouge. We can do something more low key another time, if you want.”

“Thanksgivin’ in Santa Cruz with you sounds perfect. And a little nerve-wracking,” Brenda grumbled. Sharon smiled and placed a kiss in the hollow of Brenda’s throat, hands gripping the blonde’s slender hips.

“You make me so happy, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon murmured. “The flowers you sent are extraordinarily beautiful.” Brenda cupped Sharon’s face in her small hands and brought their mouths together. She sucked gently on Sharon’s upper lip, eyes closed, face serene. When Brenda pulled away, she slid her hands into Sharon’s hair and tugged lightly on the silky brunette strands.

“It seems only fair, since I’m only repaying the happiness you give me, Shari.” She met Sharon’s gaze, and Sharon could see a glimmer of humor there. “You know, invitin’ me to move in with you doesn’t change the fact that I have to go back to my apartment to get my underwear out of the dryer.” Sharon laughed.

“You could just leave them there. I don’t mind you going commando.” Brenda smirked wickedly
and rolled her hips, drawing Sharon’s attention down. She was certain she could see the
topography of Brenda’s curls in relief through her dress.

“Fuck, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon moaned.

Brenda giggled. “When we get home, baby,” she said, a playful hand on Sharon’s chest.

“Plan on it.” Sharon purred. “And you can just use my laundry room, because you’re not going
anywhere tonight but home with me.”
Brenda and Sharon had spent Tuesday night at Brenda’s apartment packing up the rest of Brenda’s clothes and deciding what furniture would be making the move, and which would be offered back to Fritz or donated to the shelter. Brenda’s bedstead was vetoed once Sharon heard the story of its origins, but the new and very comfortable mattress was going to go on their bed in their bedroom. Sharon had tossed around the idea of finding a new suite for their bedroom, something that Brenda helped to pick out, but Brenda liked the furniture Sharon had - it already had memories attached for her, and she told Sharon so. It definitely gave Brenda a little thrill to think of Sharon’s spacious and comfortable bedroom as ‘theirs’.

The couch was in, too - they both agreed that the stately leather piece was attractive and comfortable. They would shop for an armchair to match at some point. Surprisingly, Sharon also liked Brenda’s vintage kitchen set - she wanted to replace the vinyl on the seats and give it a fresh coat of varnish, but she much preferred the delicate chrome and laminate to the sturdy and serviceable wood dining set she had purchased 25 years ago solely because the chairs were too heavy for rambunctious five year old Jackson to tip over backwards.

Sharon had been up and out of bed early, pulling sweatpants and a t-shirt on over her swimsuit. With a kiss for Brenda, she left to use the pool at HQ. Brenda couldn’t fall back to sleep - she had found herself thinking about the nameless, faceless female police personnel that could potentially see her Sharon naked in the locker room showers; see her Sharon dry and style that wealth of hair wearing only a few scraps of lace or silk; see her Sharon zip and button herself into immaculately tailored business wear. Brenda decided she didn’t much like the idea of Sharon using the pool at HQ. Jaw clenched, those thoughts had propelled her up and out of bed. After pacing for a few minutes, Brenda had settled on packing up her bathroom instead of dwelling on her jealousy. Other people could look all they wanted, but Brenda was the one who slept with a nude Sharon Raydor curled around her and that thought was enough to see her happily through the rest of the morning and into the office.

So it was Wednesday morning and the back of Brenda and Sharon’s Crown Vic’s were full of clothes. Brenda hoped she didn’t have to go anywhere with any of the squad or bring in a suspect in her car today. The hope was to clue the rest of her boys in so they could enlist them to help with her move - both Sharon and Brenda wanted to get everything taken care of before the start of the holidays. Brenda was confident that bribed with a home cooked meal and good booze, Flynn, Sanchez and Gabriel at the very least could be persuaded to lend a hand. And there was always Tomás.

Brenda sat down at her desk, ready to get back to the task of finding her still missing homeowners and the also disappeared 19 year old grandson that had been visiting from a small town in Oklahoma. Her gut was telling her that the grandson was her perpetrator, but despite a warrant served on his residence in Elk City, she had no idea what he was a perpetrator of or where he and his grandparents had gotten to. Though a pile of material waited on her desk along what she was sure had to be a mountain of digital information on the Major Crimes server, she was going to start the day off with something a little more pleasurable than people vanishing into thin air.

TO: Shari

Missed you this morning. Got the bathroom packed up. Have some unopened stuff that could maybe be donated somewhere.

FROM: Shari
You didn’t go back to sleep?

TO: Shari

Naw. Lunch? I’ll order salads in.

FROM: Shari

Yes, please. Get my dressing on the side, if you would. 12:30?

TO: Shari

See you then, baby.

Now confident of her ability to concentrate without distraction, Brenda dug into the work on her desk.

When she next looked at a clock, it was 11:30. She was huddled in front of the monitors in the media room watching footage from tollbooth cameras, trying to find some hint of the location of her missings - otherwise, they were going to have to write this one off as cold, and there was nothing Brenda hated more than a case that she couldn’t resolve. It was time to order lunch. She stood and stretched, smoothing her peacock blue sheath over her hips; two hours staring at a monitor really did a number on her back.

“I’m gonna go take a break - rest my eyes,” she said to Tao and Buzz, still engaged in peering at license plates and drivers on slightly grainy black and white surveillance footage. “Make sure you two get some lunch, and not in front of the computer.”

“Sure, Chief,” Tao said absently, and Buzz made a noise of acknowledgement. Brenda rolled her eyes and clicked out of the room.

In her office, she called the little bistro down the street, the one that Sharon sometimes frequented, and ordered their lunch. They didn’t deliver, but one of their servers would walk down the block and drop the food with a desk sergeant, and a hefty tip would ensure that someone would be willing to do it again. Sometimes it paid to be Chief. Brenda decided she would take a look at the daily homicide report while she waited, since this case was going nowhere, she was interested in finding another to dabble in until they got an official assignment. Not wanting to spend the next hour staring at the computer, she printed the report, and kicked back in her desk chair with it, sliding off her brown sling backs and propping her bare feet on an open drawer.

Brenda was startled out of her homicide induced reverie by a knock on her door. She scrambled for her shoes, jamming her feet into them, not bothering with the straps.

“Come in,” she called out and made as if to stand up, but didn’t when she saw who was at the door. Fritz was standing in the entryway, smiling at her. The nerve.

“Agent Howard.” Brenda wasn’t about to make the first move in this little dance. She could tell by his hesitancy and the grin on his face that whatever the reason was, it had nothing to do with work. He closed the door behind him.

“Brenda. Hi.” Fritz pushed his coat back and stuck his hands in his pockets. “How’ve you been?”

“I’m fine,” she said warily. Fantastic, wonderful, amazing, was how she had been.

“You look good. Really good.” Brenda could feel his eyes on her narrowly tailored dress. She
felt exposed, very glad that she had the matching bolero covering her shoulders and arms. Brenda covered her urge to roll her eyes with a tight-lipped smile, ignoring his comment about her appearance.

“Can I help you with something?” Brenda knew she sounded short, but whatever Fritz’s motives for stopping by were, she didn’t really care. At this juncture, all she wanted from the man was for him to leave her be, and a timely signature on their divorce papers.

He shrugged. “I’ve been missing you, Brenda, and then your mother called the other day and suggested I stop by and talk with you.” Now Brenda did roll her eyes. She was going to give her mother a piece of her mind.

“There’s nothing to talk about, not unless you have an FBI case that’s intersected with one of mine, or are officially requesting the assistance of Major Crimes in an FBI investigation,” she snapped, standing up.

“I never wanted a divorce, Brenda. I just wanted you to take notice of my needs for once.” He rehashed the reasoning he’d given the day she’d asked him to move out of the apartment, the day after he had presented her with divorce papers.

“Your needs! Having children isn’t something one can compromise on Fritz Howard. Pretty much an either or proposition. And my job, the oath I took to protect and serve, was never somethin’ I was going to give up, not for any reason.” Brenda hated that she couldn’t control the tone of her voice in anger; she heard herself getting more shrill. “You knew. You knew who I was and what my priorities were when you moved in with me…” She paused, because she was nearly yelling now, and she had had this same argument so many times, and she was done. Fritz tried to interject while she was calming herself. She stopped him.

“No. That the fact that you filed for divorce as some sort of bargaining chip to get your way was just the cherry on top of the whole fucked up sundae.” Brenda hissed the last few words, fighting the urge to shout at him for his presumption and his arrogance, coming here during working hours to have this discussion yet again, as if it would change anything.

“Now get out. If you need to talk to me again, contact my attorney.” He hesitated, not moving to open the door immediately. “Leave, or I’ll have Gabriel and Sanchez haul you out of here.”

“You can’t threaten me, Brenda,” Fritz snarled, and whirled, yanking the door open and stomping out of the office and out of the murder room.

“I just did,” she said, weary, and flopped down in her chair. Brenda knew without even looking that at least two of her boys were hovering. She lifted an arm and made an exaggerated ‘shooing’ gesture, hoping to stave off their worrying for now. She needed two things to put herself to rights: lunch and Sharon Raydor, and those two things would conveniently arrive in her office in about 15 minutes.

It took one look at the Major Crimes detectives, pow-wowing anxiously around Gabriel’s desk, for Sharon to know that something was up with Brenda Leigh. Even though she was a bit concerned, Sharon had to chuckle at the mother hens of Major Crimes.

Her Chief’s door was closed, though the blinds were open - Sharon could see the back of Brenda’s blonde head through the window. Sharon made for office, heels clicking authoritatively across the linoleum. Gabriel moved to intercept her.

“Captain, now isn’t a good time. The Chief is expecting someone for lunch.” He blocked her path.
to the door with his body.

“Yes, Detective,” Sharon stated evenly. “That someone would be me.” She tilted her head just a fraction, waiting to see what he would do next, wondering how far his protectiveness of the Chief would extend.

“David,” Andy said, and Gabriel glanced away. Sharon winked at the Lieutenant, a infinitesimal twitch of the muscles at the corner of her eye. Andy’s gaze shot up briefly to the ceiling - a discreet eye roll. She smirked. “David, leave it.” Gabriel shot Andy a disbelieving look but stepped away from the door, eyes narrowed at the Captain. Sharon smiled at him, tight lipped and pulled open the door.

“Hey sweetheart,” she murmured when the door had shut behind her with a soft ‘whump’. “What’s gone pear shaped in the world of Brenda Leigh today?”

“Oh you know, cold cases, visits from a obnoxious ex-husbands, you’re pretty much the only bright spot,” Brenda groused, pouting fiercely. Sharon took a seat in the empty chair and took Brenda’s hand, pulling it across the short distance and into her lap.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Sharon asked gently, tracing a circle into Brenda’s palm with her thumb, over and over, the pad of her thumb ghosting over the creases of the soft skin.

“It was the same old argument with Fritz - though apparently my mama called him after I talked to her Sunday, told him he should ‘come talk to me.’” Brenda barked a short, bitter laugh and swiped angrily at her eyes with her free hand. “Comin’ to my work to try to talk me out of somethin’ I’ve held firm on for more than six months. Maybe he thought I’d agree to continue the conversation later, just to get him out of my office.”

Brenda paused in reflection and then she chuckled, a dark and unhappy sound, gaze fixed on a knot in the faux wood of the table. “He skedaddled right on out of here after I told him I’d have the boys drag him out the front door.”

“Good.” Sharon said simply. It gave Sharon some peace of mind to know, if Sharon herself couldn’t be there, that Brenda was almost always in the presence of someone who was willing to intercede on her behalf if things got out of hand. Not that she expected anything more than hot air and empty threats out of the man - Brenda hadn’t explicitly talked about the reasons for their divorce, but Sharon had surmised that Fritz’s motives in filing weren’t ‘on the level’ so to speak, and that Brenda had not only been at the end of her rope in the relationship, but had also railed against his manipulation. Fritz was an idiot. Sharon squeezed Brenda’s hand, wanting to offer a more overt gesture of comfort, but the blinds weren’t drawn, and the boys were watching.

Brenda jerked her head up to look at Sharon, brown eyes limpid, a hint of moisture sparkling in their depths.

“Hey, Brenda Leigh, honey,” Sharon cooed, unsure of what had Brenda close to tears. “What can I do?”

“Ugh,” the blonde groaned, and pressed the heel of her hand into her eye. “Just hold me a minute, please?”

“Gladly. Should I close the blinds first?”

“No,” Brenda stated firmly, standing and using Sharon’s grip on her hand to pull her up. She stepped into Sharon’s body without hesitation, and Sharon wrapped her arms around the other
woman’s thin shoulders. Brenda’s arms slid under Sharon’s blazer and came to rest between her shoulder blades, fingers gripping tightly. As her feet were bare, Brenda’s head tucked neatly into Sharon’s neck.

“Mmmmmm,” said Brenda, and Sharon dropped a light kiss on the smooth golden strands, not wanting to disturb the neat perfection of Brenda’s bun. Sharon could see at the edges of her vision that all movement outside the office had ceased; Gabriel practically had his face pressed against the window, Sanchez was watching over Gabriel’s shoulder, mouth agape.

“We have an audience,” Sharon whispered and Brenda grumbled. She lifted her head and glared at Gabriel and Sanchez, giving an aggressive jab with her chin. Gabriel jumped like the jab had actually connected and turned away, running a hand over his head sheepishly and colliding with Sanchez. Brenda kissed along the length of Sharon’s collarbone, under the curtain of her hair, before tucking her head back into place and inhaling deeply.

In the murder room, Gabriel banged a foot against the leg of Flynn’s desk. “Andy, do you know what’s going on with those two?” Andy turned his head and took in the slender blonde leaning against, perhaps fully supported by, the impeccably appointed brunette Captain.

“Looks like a little post argument with the ex cuddle session.” Then the Chief’s face tilted up towards the Captain’s, as if towards the sun, and they kissed lingeringly. It was an attractive sight.

“How long have the Captain and the Chief been...cuddling?” Sanchez asked. Neither he nor Gabriel had noticed the lip lock.

“A couple of months,” Andy confirmed.

“Huh,” said Gabriel, a contemplative set to his features. Sanchez mostly looked a little shell shocked. “Is it serious?”

“As far as I know. The Chief seems smitten - so don’t get weird, David. You either, Julio,” Andy admonished.

“Don’t get weird,” Gabriel spluttered. “Everything about this is weird.”

“The Chief is happy, has been playing well with other divisions and agencies, goes home at a regular hour most nights, which means we can too, and hasn’t been insisting on ridiculous amounts of unpaid overtime. Don’t rock the boat about who she happens to be going home to, because if either of you do something that could fuck any of that up…” Andy paused without finishing the threat and clenched his jaw grimly.

“So how do we act ‘not weird’ about the Chief and Captain Raydor dating?” Gabriel asked. Then he paled. “Oh god, they’re having sex aren’t they?”

“It took this long for you mind to go there, David,” Andy smirked, and rolled his eyes. “I think I have that porno,” contributed Sanchez with a satisfied nod, a wicked grin on his face.

“Oh god,” Gabriel groaned again and collapsed in his own desk chair.

Things quieted down after Gabriel fell voraciously into his lunch, head down, attention completely on his food. Sanchez sat down to eat, but would smile to himself occasionally. Andy was sure he didn’t want to know what was going through his head.

The sound of booted feet in the hallway caught Andy’s attention and he swiveled around. A
woman from a case they’d caught a few months ago - Kristina Winn - was lurking at the entrance to the bullpen, a confused look on her face. Andy stood to greet her.

“Ms. Winn. How can I help you?” She gave a relieved little smile at seeing a familiar face.

“I was wondering,” she said, her hands clasped tensely in front of her, “if I could talk to Chief Johnson for a few minutes. Is she in?”

“She is. Let me just…” He strode over to the door and knocked smartly on the doorframe. The Chief waved him in. She was kicked back in one of the chairs at her table, styrofoam box of salad empty in front of her. The Captain was dunking the end of a breadstick into a ramekin of dressing, some sort of vinaigrette, perhaps.

“Chief, Lucy Winn’s aunt is here. She’d like to speak to you.”

“Oh, uh, show her in.” The Chief jumped out of her seat and ushered her visitor in. Sharon rolled her eyes at her Brenda Leigh’s bare feet, stood and dumped the empty boxes in the trashcan. She leaned against Brenda’s desk, crossing her bare legs at the ankles. Brenda directed Ms. Winn into the chair Sharon had vacated, shut the door in Andy’s face and sat back down herself.

“What can I do for you today, Ms. Winn?” Brenda asked.

“Please, call me Kristina. Thanks for interrupting your lunch.” Sharon thought the young woman looked tense and rather haggard; there were circles under her eyes that makeup couldn’t hide, and her skin had a grayish cast - exhaustion. Sharon had seen it before.

“It’s no trouble. We were through eatin’, just chattin’. Is everything ok? How is Lucy?” Brenda saw the same signs of distress in Kristina Winn that she did, Sharon was sure.

“That’s why I’m here - I need your help with something.” Brenda cocked her head at Kristina inquiringly. “Lucy was ok for a while, but the past few weeks have been rough. Her therapist said that the symptoms of PTSD didn’t appear until after the shock wore off, and now she’s having night terrors and panic attacks and has bouts of hyper vigilance.” Brenda clasped Kristina’s hand on top of the table.

“What can I do to help her?” Brenda’s voice held a note of deep sadness and Sharon itched to put a hand on the blonde’s shoulder.

“She’s been waking up, screaming, desperately afraid for your wellbeing, flashing back to what happened here, I guess.” Kristina inhaled shakily. “I know you must be busy, but Maureen and I were wondering if you would be open to spending some time with Lucy; the doctor said that it might help diffuse the terrors faster, if she had actual knowledge that you were ok.”

“Oh my god, oh my god, of course. Tell me what you need from me.” Sharon did lay a hand on Brenda’s shoulder, and not only for Brenda’s comfort, for her own, too.

“Um, I don’t know what your schedule is like, but Lucy is mostly managing to get through the school day, so lunch isn’t really an option during the week. Dinner?” Brenda turned to Sharon, who nodded slightly. “Oh, and Captain Raydor is welcome too, of course. I just assumed that the two of you are a package deal when you’re not working.” Sharon smiled broadly at Brenda and then at Ms. Winn.

“How about,” Sharon posited quietly, “I cook tonight, if that works for you. I was planning on whipping up some mashed potatoes, though I hadn’t gotten so far as figuring out vegetables and protein yet.”
“That would be ok,” Kristina hesitantly said. “Are you sure we wouldn’t be intruding?”

“Not at all. Any dietary restrictions I should be aware of?” Sharon hoped their erstwhile guests weren’t vegetarians because she was thinking steak or burgers - something slightly rare and juicy.

“No, Lucy has her moments of pickiness, but she’ll eat mashed potatoes with two forks. And Maureen and I will eat nearly anything.”

“Excellent.” She twisted to pluck a yellow pad and pen off Brenda’s desk. On it, she wrote her address, Brenda’s cellphone number and her cellphone number. She ripped the top sheet off the pad and folded it over, handing it to Brenda who handed it Kristina. “Is 6 alright for you?”

“Yes, yes 6 is fine.” Kristina looked a bit astounded at how smoothly Sharon had taken control of the situation and engineered a meal. Brenda had to smirk: Sharon had made sure everyone got what they needed - Lucy got to see Brenda, Lucy’s aunts got a bit of a break from kitchen duty, Brenda got the comfort food she’d been promised over lunch, and Sharon got an at least semi-relaxing evening at home with Brenda. Sharon was good at arranging things like that.

Sharon took off from work a bit early - her briefings with Chief McIntire had been going well, and he was already confident that Sharon was well versed in departmental policy, all that was really required was her being read in on on-going investigations and trials. McIntire had waved off her apologies for needing to leave early:

“I’m going to play Angry Birds for 30 minutes and then pack it in at five,” he confessed, rather gleefully. “What would we have been doing? Talking about cases I can’t just as easily tell you about tomorrow.” She had given him a conspiratorial little smirk, and left. Angry Birds. She’d have to steal Brenda’s phone and give that one a whirl.

As she clipped into the grocery store a few minutes before 5, Sharon was glad she didn’t need much in the way of groceries, because not much was going to fit in the car. Brenda was going to have to empty out the back of her Crown Vic that very night, though Sharon was going to have to clean out her closet before Brenda could fit much in there. It shouldn’t be hard - there was some outdated stuff that could be donated, some situational clothing that could be relegated to the closet in the guest room, etc etc.

Sharon shivered a little in pleasure or anticipation thinking of ‘their closet’ and ‘their bedroom’, though an observer probably would have attributed the chill to Sharon approaching the open faced refrigerators in the produce section. She examined the carrots and other root type vegetables mechanically, her forebrain truly focused on Brenda Leigh. The cohabitation question had been resolved with much less angst than Sharon had expected. In fact, Brenda had seemed almost relieved that Sharon had asked. Sharon passed up the leafy greens altogether. One salad a day was her limit. Along past the lettuces was a shelf of sweet white corn, still in its husk. She picked up an ear and peeled away some of the casing and silk. The kernels were plump and unblemished. Sharon pinched one off and placed it on her tongue. It tasted like candy. She put a half dozen ears in her basket - she could do something tasty with the leftovers.

Paper number in hand, Sharon leaned against a massive refrigerated cheese case, waiting to be called to the counter by the butcher. Five or six small filet mignons would round out their meal nicely. Her mind wandered.

Sharon was still a little surprised Brenda had so placidly let her orchestrate this meal. After Ms. Winn had departed, Sharon had been anticipating annoyance from Brenda, at the very least, she was usually so loathe to give up control in front of a complete stranger, and a stranger connected to a case, no less. But Brenda had merely sidled up to her for a kiss, heedless of green teeth and salad
Sharon had nearly swooned at the salacious tongue that had teased along the curve of her ear during their seemingly chastely affectionate parting hug. She blushed a little, despite the chill of the refrigerator she was leaning on, and groaned. She likely wouldn’t get to pay Brenda back for that little move for many more hours.

The final additions to Sharon’s basket were a small carton of cream and a package of feta cheese (she had an inkling of what to do with what she hoped would be plentiful leftovers). The cream was for the mashed potatoes - a dash of cream along with milk and butter would make the comfort staple that much more decadent.

Brenda’s car was in the drive, doors hanging open, when Sharon pulled in. Brenda was nowhere to be seen, not even through the front door, also agape. Suddenly the blonde shot out onto the porch, her feet bare, sweater discarded, neat bun unpinned and refashioned into a messy ponytail. She trotted down the stairs and walkway and waved cheerfully at Sharon, who was extricating herself and the bags of groceries from the front seat.

“You know Brenda Leigh, I might be inviting trouble saying this, but I almost relish the thought of you trying to explain how your city issue car was stolen from my driveway.” Sharon snarked, her mouth etched into a grin.

Brenda smiled coquettishly. “Our driveway,” she purred, and sashayed past. “I only have one more load to bring in from my car, then I’m going to change and I’ll report for kitchen duty.”

Sharon laughed. “Can I trust you with a potato peeler?”

“Yes m’am,” Brenda bent into the back of the car and gathered up the last of her clothes. She kicked the door shut with a flick of her ankle. “Even my mama trusts me with a potato peeler,” she sassed. “Though you should do the boilin’, unless you want potato water all over the stove.”

“Oh my god.” Sharon groaned. “You are officially banned from using the stove, the grill, the oven - basically anything that isn’t the microwave or coffee maker - without direct supervision.” Brenda snarled at her as she trudged past, loaded down with clothing. Then winked.

“I promise I won’t burn the house down,” she tossed back over her shoulder. “Could you close that door for me please?” Sharon rolled her eyes and kicked her own car door shut before doing the same to Brenda’s.

Groceries abandoned in the kitchen, Sharon jogged up the stairs. She popped her head into the guest room - the bed was invisible under the masses of Brenda’s clothes, a riot of bright color and floral patterns, intermixed with the staid colors of more traditional business wear.

Sharon had started to appreciate Brenda’s unique fashion sense at the same time she had started to appreciate the other woman’s unique approach to the business of solving crime, though she would be loathe to admit that to anyone. Now the splash of color in a monochrome and uniform world that was Brenda Leigh was as comforting as her southern drawl and the wrinkle-nosed grin that was the blonde’s most common expression of enjoyment.

In the bedroom, Brenda was riffling through Sharon’s drawer of t-shirts and knit tops. She had stripped off her dress and slip, and Sharon was pleased to note that her bra and thong were a demure shade of pink. Though there was nothing at all demure about the pale, round cheeks of Brenda’s ass bracketing the tantalizing string of that little thong.

Sharon couldn’t resist cupping that ass and pressing herself against Brenda’s back. Brenda made a happy little noise in her throat and dropped her head back onto Sharon’s shoulder, exposing her
long neck to Sharon’s hungry mouth. Sharon tongued the hollow of her clavicle, relishing the hint of salt on her clean skin, and left an open mouthed kiss on the mole at the base of her neck.

“Hey baby,” Brenda murmured. She gave a sinuous little wiggle against Sharon’s suit clad body and Sharon slid her hands around to cover the angular bones of the blonde’s hips. She plucked at the waistband of Brenda’s underwear and groaned in regret.

“I find myself sorry we have company coming early,” Sharon said, nuzzling soft blonde hair.

“I find myself sorry every second of every day I’m not in bed with you,” Brenda retorted. “Mashed potatoes will just have to make do until I can get you naked, Shari.”

“Not everyone gets sexual satisfaction from starches, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon grumbled, playing her fingers up Brenda’s ribs and across her flat stomach.

“Awww, don’t get grouchy,” Brenda cooed, turning her head and tilting her chin to nuzzle along Sharon’s jaw. “Later, I’m going to lie you down on that bed, on our bed, and I’m going to put my mouth on your pussy and eat you till you scream. Do you count as a starch?” She asked demurely, wickedly. Sharon moaned at the image - Brenda loved using her mouth on Sharon, the last time had been yesterday, against the door in the bathroom in Brenda’s apartment, and Sharon came so hard that her knees buckled and dragged her down to the floor - and then chuckled throatily.

“Fuck,” breathed Sharon. “Fuck. You’d better put some clothes on or I won’t be held responsible for my actions and our guests won’t get any further than the front porch.”

“I will...” Brenda flattened her nose on Sharon’s jawbone and inhaled. “Just let me look at you a minute - I didn’t get to see you put yourself together this morning.” Brenda turned in her arms and gazed at Sharon, absorbing every detail with her eyes; the sumptuous tan tweed of her dress and blazer, the brown velvet accents along the edges, a gold cuff below the cropped sleeve of her blazer matched the gold accented watch on her other wrist. A pair of two toned pumps set off the outfit, and Sharon’s calves, perfectly.

“Mmmmm, look how pretty you are, Sharon Raydor.” Brenda trailed her fingers across Sharon’s chest and under the lapel of her jacket. “Let’s get this off; I have a burning desire to know what color lingerie you’re wearing today.” Sharon shrugged off the jacket and tossed it on the chest at the foot of the bed. She gathered her hair up and pulled it over her shoulder, turning around.

“Unzip me,” Sharon husked. Brenda fumbled at the neck of the dress for the zipper and lowered it with a slow ‘snknkkkkkkkk’.

“Ohhhh, burgundy.” Brenda peppered the back of Sharon’s neck with kisses. “Sheer or opaque?” Sharon let the top of the dress drop forward and turned around, inhaling a bit to better display her décolletage. “Lace. Gorgeous.” Brenda reached out to cup Sharon’s breasts.

“Ah ah ah, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon cautioned, stepping back. “You get your little peep show and then you’re peeling potatoes.” She pushed the dress off her hips and let it puddle to the ground, then stepped out of it. When she bent to retrieve it from the floor Brenda groaned, taking in the smooth curve of Sharon’s spine and the flex of her shoulder blades and the stretch of her panties over the swell of her ass. Sharon had moved away before Brenda could react to the tantalizing sight.

Sharon hung up her suit and slipped her shoes off in their place. Brenda watched a moment; Sharon could feel her eyes on her body. She shivered.
Brenda thought Sharon looked unreasonably sexy in her black lounge pants and tunic shirt in the same color as the bra that Sharon had pulled off before pulling on the shirt. If Brenda concentrated on Sharon instead of on peeling potatoes, she could see the brunette’s nipples brushing against the lightly textured cotton as she seasoned the steaks with a dry brown sugar and white pepper marinade. Brenda pursed her lips in frustration.

“Get to peeling or mashed potatoes are going to be a pipe dream instead of reality, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon admonished playfully. “I’m going to heat up the grill.” She disappeared out onto the porch. Brenda huffed and attacked the russet in her hands with renewed vigor. The naked potatoes went in the pot on the table, the skin into the garbage can between her knees - Brenda worked faster without the potent visual distraction of Sharon massaging spices into red meat.

The corn and steaks were on the neatly set table (Brenda was rather proud of her table-setting skills), and Sharon was working on the potatoes when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Brenda trilled. She smoothed down her shirt and readjusted the cuff on her denim shorts, fingers fluttering nervously. She second guessed the choice of the shorts a moment - they were a little more revealing than what she would usually wear around victims and their families, but Sharon really liked them, so she had pulled them on.

Brenda schooled her face into a smile and opened the door. “Hey. Welcome. Come on in.”

“Miss Brenda!” Lucy squealed and launched herself at Brenda, burying her face in Brenda’s stomach. Brenda stooped to pick her up.

“Hey, little bit.” Brenda murmured. The little girl wrapped her legs around Brenda’s waist and thin arms around Brenda’s neck and squeezed. Brenda squeezed back gently and stepped aside to allow the adults into the house.

“I thought he hurt you too,” whispered Lucy in Brenda’s ear.

“No honey, I’m right here,” reassured Brenda. Lucy clung tighter. Brenda carried the girl into the kitchen, aunts following behind silently.

“Miss Sharon!” Lucy chirped excitedly. Sharon looked up, potato masher in hand, when they walked in. “Heya, little Lucy,” Sharon said, and smiled welcomingly at Maureen and Kristina. “Hello. Please have a seat.” She banged the masher on the side of the pot and dropped it in the sink, then she picked up the electric hand mixer waiting on the counter. “This’ll just take a minute. Brenda abhors lumpy potatoes.” She clicked the appliance on.

The whir of the mixer made conversation difficult, to say nothing of the odd situation - this was about Lucy, and her troubles, so the adults felt a little awkward initiating small talk.

“I love mashed potatoes!” Lucy chirped excitedly, bouncing once in Brenda’s arms.

“No honey, I’m right here,” reassured Brenda. “Me too,” Brenda confessed. “And Miss Sharon makes really, really good mashed potatoes.”

At the table, Lucy refused to be separated from Brenda, so Sharon took the seat on the short side of the table, caddy corner to Brenda and Kristina, hiding a grin at the little girl’s clinginess. Food was portioned out, and it was left to Brenda to cut Lucy’s steak for her. Not that the Lucy was all that interested in the meat or corn once she got a taste of the potatoes.

“Ohmigod,” Brenda moaned after her first forkful of the fluffy, white delicacy. “Did you put real
She took a bigger bite, eyes fluttering shut at the rich taste. Sharon felt a reciprocal flutter in her abdomen and smiled secretively at Brenda.

“It doesn’t count as comfort food unless it’s bad for you,” Sharon stated, winking at Lucy, who was watching her and Brenda intently. The girl giggled and turned back to her meal.

It was easy to let Lucy carry the conversation - she had had to switch schools when she relocated to her aunts’ house, so she was fully of stories about the new faces in her first grade classroom. Even with the issues the PTSD was causing, Lucy was gregarious enough to have made a number of new friends, and her old friends were still present in her life, though it was hard on Lucy answering their questions about her parents.

After two (fairly large) helpings of mashed potatoes, Brenda and Lucy were slowing down.

“Brenda Leigh, eat your corn. You’re setting a terrible example!” Sharon snarked.

“Yes m’am,” Brenda answered in a pretend sulk, picking up her discarded ear of corn. It was good - she didn’t know how Sharon had managed to find such sweet corn at this time of year - but it wasn’t as good as the mashed potatoes and tender, smokily sweet beef. Lucy giggled at them, but imitated Brenda in taking a bite of corn.

Kristina and Maureen watched as Brenda and Sharon tidied up the kitchen. They had both refused any offers of help, and were working efficiently to put away leftovers and wash dishes. Sharon flicked water on Brenda when the blonde leaned into the sink, pointed at the pot Sharon was washing, and said officiously, “You missed a spot.” Kristina couldn’t suppress a snort and Brenda smiled over at them.

“Think you have room for a brownie, Miss Lucy?” Brenda asked the little girl who was standing with her forehead pressed against the glass door, looking into the back yard. Lucy looked up at her.

“Maybe later. Can we go swimming?” She asked, bouncing in place enthusiastically.

“It’s a little cold for the pool, kiddo,” Brenda answered, with a wide-eyed glance at Sharon. She didn’t want to say no, really. Sharon lifted a shoulder, leaving the decision up to Brenda. “The hot tub is on, though. But only if it’s ok with your aunts.” Lucy nodded wildly and rushed to her aunts.

“Krissy, Krissy! Can I get in the hot tub?” She wrapped her hands around Kristina’s forearm, excited.

“You don’t have your swimsuit, Lucy.” Lucy gave her a look that was full of scorn.

“We’re all girls, Krissy,” the six year old explained patiently. “I can just wear my panties.” Her aunt still looked skeptical. “Please,” Lucy wheedled. “I don’t want to go home yet.”

“Who’s going to get in with you? Mo and I don’t have our swimsuits, and we are definitely not hot tubbing in our panties.” Lucy pouted and Brenda’s heart melted a little.

“I’ll get in with her,” she offered.

“You don’t have to do that,” Kristina replied. Brenda cocked her head and smiled at Kristina and then at Lucy.

“Let me go put my suit on.”
Sharon was making coffee when Brenda flounced into the kitchen, arms full of towels. The look Sharon shot her was full of heat.

“If you’re going to be swimming with minors on a regular basis, we’re going to have to get you another bathing suit.” Sharon’s eyes lingered on where the brightly colored lycra arched over the smooth curve of Brenda’s hip.

“Yea? Why’s that?” Brenda asked, one eyebrow arched knowingly, brown eyes liquid and soft, and very, very inviting.

“Fishing for compliments, Brenda Leigh?” Brenda smirked at her and Sharon relented. “You are a walking wet dream in that bikini, honey. You wouldn’t want to be inadvertently responsible for any sexual awakenings, hmmm?”

“I wear it for you, Shari,” Brenda drawled. “Anything else you can chalk up to collateral damage.” Then she turned and sauntered out the door. Dear lord.

Lucy was waiting not so patiently next to the hot tub when Brenda stepped off the porch. Kristina and Maureen were sitting a little back from the tub, on one of the double loungers. Brenda couldn’t help but smile at Lucy’s little girl eagerness. She dropped the towels on the edge of the tub and went to rummage in the little shed where Sharon kept her pool toys. She pulled out an inflatable ball and a noodle and turned back to the happy child.

“Holy shit,” Maureen hissed in Kristina’s ear. “Look at that. Do you think she’s in that pin up calendar that the cops do to fundraise every year?”

“That’s the fire department,” Kristina corrected, casting an appreciative glance at the deep valley between Chief Johnson’s breasts, and along the fine definition of her abdomen. “And if she was in any calendar, I would buy multiple copies. If either of them were, actually.” Maureen chuckled.

“Too bad the Captain isn’t hot tubbing it, too. Nearly better than a night out for ourselves.”

“Perv,” Kristina murmured, chuckling.

“You like it,” said Maureen, and kissed her wife on the cheek.

Sharon walked out of the house with a tray, a hastily assembled coffee service clinking gently with her steps. Brenda was talking quietly with Lucy in the tub, and Kristina and Maureen were laid back on one of the loungers.

Sharon seated herself on the corner of the large piece of furniture and placed the tray on the cushion beneath their drawn up legs.

“Thank you so much for this,” Kristina stated softly. “This is the most relaxing evening we’ve had in months.”

“You’re very welcome,” Sharon husked in that smoky alto of hers, pouring coffee in generous measures into the matching mugs. “I know that Brenda Leigh appreciates being able to help Lucy.”

“We’re very grateful for that. A six year old dealing with PTSD is…” Kristina trailed off and sighed. Sharon gave her a tight smile and they changed the subject to something less heart-wrenching.

“Miss Brenda?” Lucy chirped. She was floating on the noodle in the middle of the hot tub,
bobbing slightly. Brenda was slumped in one of the molded stone seats, enjoying the relaxing properties of the body temperature water - it wasn’t warm enough to make inroads on the tension in her lower back, but it was nice.

“Yes, Miss Lucy?”

“Are you and Miss Sharon wives, like Krissy and Mo?”

“No honey, we’re not wives,” Brenda answered, a little cautiously.

“Do you love Miss Sharon?”

“Very much. And she loves me very much,” Brenda stated truthfully.

“Oh, well that’s good.” Lucy looked a little unsatisfied with Brenda’s answers.

“Why do you ask, kiddo?” Brenda kept her tone gentle. Lucy chewed on her lip a little, considering whether she wanted to share what was bothering her.

“There’s a boy, in my new class, and he said some mean things.” Lucy said, still hedging.

“What kind of mean things did he say?”

“He said that Krissy and Mo are dirty dykes. I don’t know what it means, but I know it’s not a nice word. I didn’t want to ask Krissy or Mo about it - it would make them upset.” Brenda’s eyes widened in surprise. A six year old spouting anti-gay rhetoric. This little boy must have a stellar home life.

“Honey, some people think that love can only be certain ways. You know that Krissy and Mo love each other and love you. Love is never dirty. You should always ignore people like that boy, little Lucy.”

An exhausted Lucy buckled herself into the car with strict instructions to call Miss Brenda if she got scared. Brenda lingered in the drive until the Winns had pulled away - she was under strict instructions to get the rest of her clothing into the house while Sharon did a bit of preparation for lunch tomorrow. They would reconvene in the bedroom.

Brenda, still in her damp swim suit, worried abstractedly that her top would fall down as she jogged armfuls of clothing into the house and up the stairs. In the kitchen, she could hear the sound of a knife against the cutting board; the confidant strokes of Sharon conjuring up something delicious for their lunch tomorrow.

Her last load was two canvas bags full of shoes - Sharon’s grocery bags, and knowing that the woman in question would grouse at being made to use plastic the next time she went to the store, Brenda made one final trip to the car to return the bags and lock the doors.

Before she hit the stairs, Brenda stuck her head into the kitchen and said: “I’m going to go wash the pool chemicals off. And maybe touch myself a little.” She paused. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Tease,” Sharon called after her, but Brenda knew she wouldn’t hurry; wouldn’t risk a knife wound to get to their bedroom a few moments faster. Sharon would let her wait, and let the tension ratchet up in each of them. Brenda hurried up the stairs.

When Sharon entered the bedroom, Brenda was on her back in their bed, knees bent, legs akimbo. One small hand was hidden from view, between her legs, the other clutching at the duvet. Sharon
could see the smallest of shivers roll through the blonde’s sleek body, toes curling under, the long muscles of her thighs jumping just a fraction. She was teasing her clit; Sharon knew that the same way she could tell when the blonde was lying to her - familiarity - and these days, Sharon was as familiar with the minutiae of Brenda Leigh Johnson lost in pleasure as she was with Brenda Leigh Johnson engaging in subterfuge. She found them equally compelling, which might be why this love between them had been easy and familiar, rather than combative and uncomfortable.

Brenda’s head turned toward the door; Sharon didn’t know if it was her suddenly heavy breathing or the creak of her feet on the floorboards that had dragged the blonde’s attention away from her own hand between her thighs. Brenda smiled a welcoming, naughty smile at her and Sharon smiled back, breaking eye contact only to drag her shirt over her head. Her pants she unfastened blind and pushed to the floor, along with her panties, and she crawled onto the bed to curl on her side next to Brenda, weight resting on one outstretched arm.

“Don’t you make a pretty picture,” Sharon husked. In the low light coming from the open bathroom door and the bedside lamp, looking down at the supine blonde, Sharon could see the hand working slowly, unerringly, on Brenda’s pussy. She was touching herself to arouse, to tease Sharon with this little spectacle. With her free hand, Sharon plucked at one of Brenda’s nipples, rolling it firmly between thumb and forefinger before sliding her palm around to cup the soft flesh of her breast.

“Shari,” Brenda moaned, her hips jerking into firmer contact with her hand.

“I know you had particular designs on me tonight, Brenda Leigh, but would you mind terribly if I fucked you this evening?”

“As opposed to all the other evenings?” Brenda snarked a little breathlessly.

“No, what I mean is…” Sharon leaned over, opened the bottom drawer of her nightstand and pulled out the harness and cock she’d ordered a couple of weeks ago. Brenda’s eyes widened.

“I was going to suggest we christen it and the new bed at the same time once you’re officially moved in, but…” She stopped talking because Brenda was nodding fervently.

“Yes, yes, yes.” She drawled impatiently. “Put it on already.”

Sharon wiggled into the black leather straps, tightening them down so they bit into her flesh just a little - she figured they would loosen during vigorous activity, though she had no first hand experience. She fitted the flesh-colored dick into the o-ring over her mound and gave the whole apparatus an exploratory wiggle before positioning herself between Brenda’s legs. With one hand Sharon brought the tip of the cock to Brenda’s cunt; she leaned forward onto the other hand to kiss Brenda. Brenda opened her mouth to Sharon’s tongue in supplication, whimpering softly, hips surging blindly towards the phallus strapped between Sharon’s legs. Sharon’s hand on the cock was the only thing preventing Brenda from impaling herself on the toy. When she felt Brenda’s heels digging into the backs of her thighs, Sharon moved her hand and allowed Brenda to pull herself onto the dick.

The look on Brenda’s face when the toy bottomed out was a sublime mix of anguish and relief. “Fuck,” she exhaled, as if the cock had pushed all the air from her lungs. “Just hold still a minute.”

“How’s that feel?” Sharon wanted to know. Brenda groaned; head tilted back, eyes clamped shut
and locked her ankles around Sharon’s waist. Sharon held absolutely still for one long breath, then another, and then Brenda’s ankles loosened their death grip and Sharon pulled out what little she could, paused infinitesimally, and slid back in. And again, and again, and again, until Brenda was pinching and rolling her nipples between thumb and forefinger, her eyelids fluttering in pleasure.

“Fuck me harder, baby.” Brenda moaned. “I want to feel you between my legs tomorrow.” Sharon wanted that for Brenda; wanted the blonde to know who she belonged to whenever she felt a twinge of soreness the next day, so she put enough force behind her still short strokes that Brenda was grunting rhythmically in time with her movements. Sweat was forming in a glistening haze in the small of Sharon’s back and on the planes of her chest and damping the hair at her temples. They kissed again - Brenda’s mouth still open and wanton, accepting Sharon’s tongue as willingly as her cunt had taken Sharon’s cock.

Brenda came without warning; her body bucked up into Sharon’s suddenly and she moaned and shook through four or five more strokes. Then she was still; eyes closed, sucking in great, panting breaths through her slack mouth. Sharon stopped moving. Brenda’s ankles remained clasped around her waist, preventing her from pulling out.

Then Brenda’s body tensed again and twisted and all of a sudden Sharon was on her back under the blonde, the cock still buried inside her, the stretched lips of her pussy reddened and glistening beneath her stiffened clit, which was hard enough to be peeking out from it’s swollen hood.

Brenda caught Sharon’s gaze with lust darkened, lascivious eyes. She bore down and ground her hips so that the crotch of the harness rubbed with delicious friction against Sharon’s clit. Sharon moaned and involuntarily she thrust upwards. Brenda let the weight of her body bring the brunette’s hips back to the bed. Sharon bent her knees and dug her toes into the duvet, desperate to keep her hips steady so Brenda could continue her seductive grind. Sharon’s hands rested in the curves of Brenda’s hips, where she could feel the contraction and release of the muscles in the blonde’s torso.

Sharon tightened her grip, fingers nearly meeting around Brenda’s slender waist, and growled, “Mine.” Brenda swooped down and crashed her lips to Sharon’s, then pulled away to hunch and take one of Sharon’s nipples in her mouth. She had to bend awkwardly to keep up the pressure on Sharon’s clit while applying lips and tongue and teeth to Sharon’s breasts. It was the teeth that ultimately did Sharon in; gentle, but firm molars working at one nipple while thumb and forefinger pulled at the other sent Sharon over the edge. Her hips rocketed upward and Brenda slid off the cock, perching lightly on Sharon’s abdomen, now pulling at both her nipples as her orgasm wound down.

When Sharon could breath again, she smiled a blinding smile at the blonde, who moved to lay alongside her. They both plucked awkwardly at the straps of the harness until it was loose enough for Sharon to wrest it from her body and toss it on the floor. Brenda snuggled in closer, hooking a thigh over Sharon’s hips, and they both sighed contentedly.

After a long moment, Brenda nuzzled at Sharon’s hairline behind her ear, agile tongue darting out to taste the sweat that darkened the roots. “I’m still gonna use my mouth on you - don’t think you’ve gotten out of it,” Brenda stated saucily.

“Mmmmmm,” Sharon managed to force some sound out of her parched throat and through her dry lips. “Just give an old woman a minute to recover.

“Not too long,” Brenda groused. “I’ll have to start without you again.” Sharon chuckled hoarsely and fist ed a hand in Brenda’s messy tumble of curls to pull her in for a kiss.
Chapter 15

Sharon had caught a case late Sunday afternoon and Brenda was home alone, and instead of twiddling her thumbs or staring at the television, she decided to take that first step in coming out to her family. But first - a drink to fortify her constitution. She rummaged around in the pantry, rotating wine bottles to peer at their labels, enjoying the musical clink of her fingernails on the bottles of liquor on Sharon’s well stocked shelves. In a slightly dusty box from a lackluster winery not far outside of Los Angeles, Brenda found an unexpected treasure trove: three bottles of her very favorite merlot, the ’97 McCray Ridge, and another six of a more recent favorite - an ’06 Beringer.

She lifted one of the bottles of McCray from the box with gentle hands; the last time she had priced this wine it had been selling for over $200 a bottle. How did Sharon even know this was her favorite? She whipped her cellphone out of the back pocket of her jeans.

TO: Shari

I found your wine stash. How did you know my favorite vintage?

FROM: Shari

Curiosity killed the cat’s surprise. And I have my sources. Don’t you dare polish off a bottle of that by yourself.

TO: Shari

Can I open a bottle of the Beringer? I need a little enjoyable liquid courage before I call Charlie.

FROM: Shari

Brenda Leigh honey, it’s your wine too. You’re going to do that now? You know I’ll be there with you if that’s what you want.

Brenda cradled the phone like it was her Sharon’s hand. The woman really was so very thoughtful.

TO: Shari

It’ll be ok. And on the off chance that it isn’t, I’ll just get drunk and you can pick up the pieces when you get home.

FROM: Shari

I love you. I’ll call when I know better what time I’ll be done.

Brenda couldn’t bear to leave Sharon’s ‘I love you’ hanging.

TO: Shari

I love you, too.

Brenda opened a bottle of the Beringer merlot and then poured the richly colored liquid into a goblet. Before taking a sip she let the faint chocolatey smell of the vintage waft into her nostrils. It was with a pleased sigh that she let the wine coat her tongue.

Considering how she wanted to approach this conversation with her niece, Brenda let herself drift
up the stairs and into their bedroom. The bed was rumpled, the duvet pulled up unevenly, and Brenda threw herself down on it after setting her glass and the bottle carefully on her night stand. The soft cotton lounge pants and long sleeved shirt that Sharon had removed to put on a suit had been abandoned on the clothes chest at the foot of the four poster. Brenda stretched out a foot and snagged the shirt on a toe, flicking it up into reach of her hands. When she brought the fabric to her nose, she imagined she could still feel the warmth of Sharon’s skin in the weave of the fabric. She stripped off her own v-neck and pulled Sharon’s shirt on, reveling in the subtle scent of Sharon on the garment. Her Sharon wore no artificial fragrances; no perfume, no scented lotions, and used a mild shampoo and conditioner that Brenda rarely caught a whiff of. She sometimes used an oil on her hair that would leave behind a trace of amber musk in her wake, and Brenda enjoyed those days, but mostly she preferred Sharon’s natural scent. Brenda had even abandoned her vanilla lotion because it sometimes stuck in her nostrils and interfered with her ability to appreciate her lover’s delicate fragrance.

Sitting on the bed she and Sharon shared, surrounded by Sharon’s things and wearing Sharon’s clothes, Brenda felt centered and content. She shifted her weight to pull her phone out of her back pocket.

TO: Charlie

Do you have a few minutes to talk to your old aunt?

The phone rang a few minutes later. Brenda was snuggled down into the duvet, curled around Sharon’s pillow. She answered.

“So you finally figured out how to text message?” Charlie said when the call connected, laughter in her tone.

“I wasn’t that bad!” Brenda exclaimed. “And I had a free upgrade and sprung for an iPhone, which made the whole texting thing much easier.”

“Sure you weren’t. You could barely change your old phone to silent and back.”

“Wretch,” groused Brenda, and Charlie giggled. “Have you finished your applications yet?” Charlie had decided to do a year at Georgia State and take a couple classes to see where her interests lay before committing to a more expensive university. Her parents had protested, believing that Charlie was ‘off track’ again and becoming complacent in her studies, but Brenda (and Willie Rae) had managed to convince them that she was showing quite a bit of foresight - and it wasn’t like GSU was a bad place to earn a degree, by any means.

“I have two more essays to write - the weird ones that I’ve been putting off. One of them is for Emory, which might be part of my problem.” Charlie wanted to get out of Georgia - she really felt like she needed to prove she could be responsible out from under the watchful eye of her parents. Brenda was confident that Charlie was ready.

“And what does your final list look like, aside from Emory?” Brenda asked. She had been privy to the narrowing down process, but hadn’t heard the ultimate picks.

“Uh, Emory, Chapel Hill, Austin, Washington in St. Louis, USC and UCLA,” she rattled off.

“USC and UCLA?”

“What can I say, I liked Los Angeles.” Charlie hedged, then paused. “And I miss you, and you don’t have anyone anymore.”
“Charlie,” Brenda chastened. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m a big girl - you need to promise me you’ll pick the school that’s right for you, and not choose based on how close to me it is. Promise me,” she demanded.

“I promise,” Charlie said grudgingly.

“Good. And I’m not completely on my own. That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” Brenda stated sheepishly.

“You actually called a family member to talk about something personal?” Charlie crowed. “One second; let me check outside for the apocalypse.”

“Haha Charlene.”

“Oh, Aunt Brenda, you know I love you, quirks and all. What made you want to call me about this, anyways?”

“Um, practice, I guess. For tellin’ your grandma and grandpa.”

“You really think they’ll care that much that you’re what, dating again?” Charlie sounded a little perplexed.

“Grandpa is still mad at me for divorcin’ Fritz, so a little yes. But mostly, it’s about who I’m datin’,” Brenda confessed.

“Why does that matter? It’s not that Pope guy again, is it?”

“No, dear god no,” Brenda exclaimed. “No, I’m datin’…well, her name is Sharon,” she blurted and braced for scorn or rejection, body tensed, clutching the pillow to her chest.

“Sharon, eh?” Charlie said, considering. “I’m a little surprised. Was it a surprise for you, too? To be interested in a woman?”

“Not so much, no,” Brenda hedged.

“I’m dying to hear more about why it wasn’t but I don’t want to ask you anything you’re unwilling to answer.”

“In college,” Brenda began, and Charlie interrupted her with a gleeful squawk.

“Aunt Brenda! Such a cliche!”

“That’s not what I meant, so hush.” Brenda scolded. “I lived with a woman for almost 4 years, certainly more than a night of experimentation.”

“Oh, you mean your college roommate Neecie? You were more than roommates?”

“How do you know about Neecie?” Brenda wondered.

“Grandma’s mentioned her a few times. Said she was your best friend and then ended up a missionary in the Pacific somewhere.” Charlie paused. “But you were…”

Brenda answered succinctly, without detail: “Yes, we were.”

“And Grandma and Grandpa never knew?”
“Nope. Neecie’s parents were very strict - very religious - and she was terrified of anyone finding out about us.”

“That doesn’t sound like a very happy way to live,” Charlie said empathetically.

“It wasn’t - but I was young and naive and in love. I certainly don’t want to live like that again. And Sharon wouldn’t stand for it.” Brenda wouldn’t stand for it, either. She was unfathomably proud of the fact that the brave, kind, and beautiful creature that was Sharon Raydor had chosen her; was as smitten with Brenda as Brenda was with her.

“Did I meet her while I was there? Your Sharon?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Brenda was a bit surprised by Charlie’s complete lack of judgement. “I don’t think she was hanging around the murder room while you were visitin’.”

“But she’s a cop, too?“

“Yea, my Cap’n Raydor, though she’ll be a Deputy Chief in a few weeks,” boasted Brenda.

“What’s she like?”

Brenda sighed as adjectives flooded her brain. “She’s brilliant and dedicated to her job. And absolutely trustworthy. Sensitive. Thoughtful. A little bit bossy. And funny. Kind. A fantastic cook. And very, very beautiful.”

“Do you have a picture?” Charlie demanded excitedly. “Send me a picture.”

“Uh, ok.” Brenda took the phone from her ear and navigated to her messages. It took but a moment to choose a photo to send to Charlie. A snap she’d taken of Sharon on the beach in Malibu, sunglasses holding back the sun brightened mass of her hair, broad smile on her face. She’d never been much of a photographer, but moments spent with Sharon had Brenda’s fingers itching to capture the memory for posterity and to further cement it in her mind. The picture zipped away, bouncing across the country to her niece.

“So you’re happy, right, Aunt Brenda? Despite the anxiety about telling Grandma and Grandpa.”

“Yea, I’m really happy, kiddo.” Brenda answered sincerely. “I’m movin’ in with her, actually.”


“She does, actually.” Brenda was a bit sheepish. “I don’t think I’ve ever been wrapped around someone’s little finger before - I’ve always done the wrapping.”

“Awwwww. Ooo, picture’s here.” Brenda heard the sounds of movement on the other end of the line. “She is pretty. Where did you take this?”

“On the beach in Malibu. Shari took me up there for brunch last weekend.”

“And what’s her place like?”

“Nice. Really nice. And comfortable. There’s a pool and a hot tub.”

“Does she get you?”

“More than anyone I’ve ever met. She doesn’t judge - even when I’m at my worst, and she’s seen me at my worst. We almost never fight, but when we do, she forgives me, truly, and doesn’t hold
onto the issue as ammo for the next confrontation. I really admire that about her.”

“Will she mind if I stay with you when I do overnight visits at USC and UCLA?”

“You’re welcome anytime, Charlie. But isn’t the point to actually stay on campus?”

“Yea, I will be, though I don’t want to fly all the way out there and not see you, and sleeping more than a night or two in a row on a dorm room floor doesn’t really sound like my idea of a good time.”

“Well, we’ve got extra bedrooms and we’d be happy to have you.”

“It’ll probably be sometime over my Christmas break - both schools have winter-mesters. I submitted some dates to USC, and when they get back to me, I’ll get my date for UCLA.”

“Are USC and UCLA the only schools you’re visiting?” Brenda wanted to make sure Charlie was exploring all her options.

“I visited Chapel Hill over the summer and Washington in St. Louis last year.” Charlie was jokingly defensive. “I didn’t really know what I was interested in until I started this class on the sociology of the family and did some visits to the Department of Family and Children Services, so I’m applying to some places sight unseen. Not ideal, but it is what it is.”

“I’m glad you’ve found something you’re excited about, honey.”

“Me too. I’ll call you about the dates, once I know them,” Charlie promised. “And I’m glad you trusted me enough to tell me about Sharon - though I have one more question.”

“Okaaaaay.” Charlie sounded like she was trying to contain her laughter, which made Brenda a little nervous.

“How’s the sex?” Her niece managed to choke out before bursting into maniacal giggles. Oh, so that’s how it was going to be. Brenda had a good idea of how to get a lick in. She felt a sly smile twitch up the corners of her lips.

“Oh, Charlie, you have no idea,” she purred suggestively. Charlie stopped giggling.

“Wow, you win. I shouldn’t tease if I can’t take the heat.”

“Tease all you like, but expect consequences,” was Brenda’s amiable reply.

They said their goodbyes and Brenda hung up feeling considerably heartened by the easy conversation. She didn’t expect such acceptance from all of her family, but Charlie wouldn’t abandon Brenda because Sharon was in her life, and that was something.

Sharon didn’t make it back home until nearly midnight. Thankfully the 72 hour deadline was only her concern in regards to personnel management now - Elliot had taken over the case. Sharon had remained on the scene long enough to be sure that the officers from Hollywood division were behaving themselves, then she had left Elliot and the others to their work.

She toed off her heels in the entryway - the house was dark, she didn’t want to wake Brenda with the clicking of her heels if she could help it. Padding into the kitchen, Sharon took note of the wine bottle stashed neatly away on the counter. It was about two-thirds full, so Brenda’s conversation with Charlie must’ve gone alright. Sharon chuckled at herself - gauging the progress of Brenda’s coming out by her wine consumption. She needed to eat something and she needed to
go to bed. She pulled a granola bar out of the pantry and unwrapped it, taking a large bite and chewing the dry, but not unappetizing, morsel slowly. She filled a tumbler with water from the door of the refrigerator and took a seat at the table.

Sharon chewed methodically, not really tasting what she was eating, washing down each bite with a sip of water. When she finished, she put her cup in the sink, threw the wrapper away, and headed up to bed.

Brenda was sprawled across the mattress on her stomach, dead asleep. Her tangled hair was covering her face, and the soft striped shirt that Sharon had taken off before she changed was visible above the sheets, covering the blonde’s narrow shoulders. Sharon’s heart fluttered with affection, and turning, she tiptoed into the bathroom to perform her nightly ablutions.

Teeth brushed, face washed, suit hanging on the back of the bathroom door, Sharon tiptoed back into the room. This was the first time she’d come home after Brenda was already asleep, and with her change in position imminent, late night callouts were soon to be a part of Sharon’s past, so she took a moment to absorb this picture, to let the details seep into her mind, before lifting the edge of the blanket and sliding in to the bed. She wiggled close to the other woman - Brenda would reposition herself to embrace Sharon, she didn’t need to be conscious to do so. And sure enough, as soon as Brenda registered the heat of Sharon’s body, she snuggled into her, slinging an arm across her torso. Sharon shifted them closer to the center of the bed and laid back, cradling Brenda. She rested her cheek on Brenda’s head and fell asleep.

For the first time in a long while, Sharon wanted to ignore the graceful chime of her alarm clock and go back to sleep. She knew, intellectually, if she did, in five minutes her phone would start going off across the room and she would have to get out of bed to turn it off. Five and a half hours was usually more than enough rest for her; Sharon simply felt exceptionally cozy on this particular Monday morning. Beneath her arm, Brenda stirred, pressing her face into Sharon’s shoulder with a groan.

“Hey,” she croaked and then cleared her throat. “I didn’t even hear you come in last night, you ninja. You shoulda woken me.”

Sharon chuckled and dropped a kiss into sleep-locked blonde curls. “I’m surprised I didn’t. I practically had to pick you up to make space for myself on the bed.” She stretched her arms above her head, pushing against the headboard to tense and then loosen her muscles. “How’d your chat with Charlie go?”

“Pretty good.” Brenda answered confidently and Sharon felt a coil of unease dissipate from her belly; she hadn’t realized she’d been holding onto the nervousness since Brenda informed her of the impending conversation the day before. “She’s curious, and she wants to come visit over her Christmas break - she’s visitin’ some schools, too.”

“That sounds fine,” Sharon agreed. “I’m looking forward to meeting her.” Sharon was pleasantly anticipating Christmas. It would be the first time she’d spent the holiday with someone she really cared about (outside of her family, of course), since well before the dissolution of her marriage. Even considering Brenda was on call for the holiday, they’d have their moments together, and Jackson and Ginny would be here.

“I’m so proud of her,” Brenda murmured sleepily, drifting off again, snuggling in tighter to Sharon’s body. Then she jerked herself awake. “Ugh, I don’t wanna go back to sleep - I conked out much too early last night.” She rolled over onto Sharon’s body, on her knees straddling the brunette’s hips, resting some of her weight on Sharon’s torso for a full body hug.
She hummed happily; Sharon heard the sound next to her ear and felt the vibration in her chest and hummed back. Sharon’s arms anchoring Brenda to her, they cuddled until Sharon’s phone started blaring from on top of the dresser.

“Curse you for setting two alarms, Sharon Raydor,” Brenda grumbled and rolled off onto the floor, digging her toes into the carpet and stretching up onto her tip toes. She reached over to the dresser and jabbed the off button on the phone - the alarm stopped sounding. Sharon turned onto her side to watch Brenda through hooded eyes, the sight of her shirt sliding up Brenda’s smooth, slender thighs, exposing the plain, white cotton bikinis she wore underneath. Sharon licked her lips. Her Brenda Leigh was effortlessly sexy. As much as Sharon wanted to, dragging Brenda Leigh back into bed, stripping her of those deceptively innocent panties and bringing her to orgasm with tongue and fingers just wasn’t an option this morning. Dealing with briefings in the afternoon meant that her time in the morning was packed full of FID business and being sure Elliot was prepared to take over the unit in a few weeks. Sometimes responsibility was a real pain in her ass. She swung her legs around and stepped out of the bed. Time for her swim.

Brenda showered and pulled her sleep shirt back on with a pair of Sharon’s sweats. She wrapped her hair in a towel and padded into the kitchen to pour herself a mug of coffee. She topped the mug off with milk and a generous squeeze from her plastic bear full of honey; a bear that had been nestled, unopened, next to the coffee maker after the very first night she had spent here, the night she had bared her soul to Sharon in the hot tub and slept, for the first time, in Sharon’s arms. Brenda took a sip from the steaming mug and nearly purred; Sharon favored fantastic coffee. Brenda could no longer bring herself to touch the crap that was brewed in the break rooms at HQ, but that was ok, because so long as she remembered to clean out her travel mug, there was always more than enough of Sharon’s brew to take a cup to work, if she wished it.

She stepped out onto the deck and down to the pool, plucking Sharon’s dry towel from where she had tossed it and curling up on a lounger, warmed by the plush terrycloth. Sharon was knifing through the water of the slightly steaming pool with steady strokes. She favored freestyle. Brenda watched through the bathroom window most mornings for a few minutes at the very least. She took every opportunity to observe this near daily ritual of Sharon’s up close; it was possibly as meditative for her as it was for Sharon. Brenda closed her eyes, fingers wrapped around her mug, and listened to the metronomic cadence of Sharon pulling herself through the water.

Brenda handed Sharon her towel when she stepped from the pool, shedding water droplets that winked dully in the still gray morning light. Sharon smiled at her before pressing her face into the terrycloth and then slinging it around her shoulders. Brenda loved Sharon like this, breathing hard, but almost serene; it reminded her of those times after they made love, when Brenda would press an ear to Sharon’s chest and listen to rapid thudding of her heart and the quick wooshing of her breathing slow and return to normal. If she hadn’t showered already, she would indulge her desire to listen to that well loved rhythm.

“Go ahead and shower and I’ll bring your coffee up, Shari,” Brenda murmured softly. Sharon kissed her, a brief press of her cool lips against Brenda’s forehead. Brenda followed her into the house, content in a way that she had only begun to experience in in the past few months.

Brenda was drying the last of the water from her hair when Sharon stepped from the shower. There was a fresh mug of coffee sitting on the counter next to Sharon’s sink. Sharon knew it would taste exactly the way she liked her first cup of the morning - Brenda was adept at replicating the addition of sugar and milk to the dark liquid. She also knew (and Sharon hadn’t even had to tell her), that Sharon preferred that first cup milk-heavy and barely sweetened. Brenda clicked off the hair dryer and tossed the loose mass of her curls over one shoulder. The cream colored slip she was wearing was edged with antiqued lace, the cups and straps of her rose colored bra were a
teasing hint of color against the paleness of her skin and slip.

“Beautiful,” whispered Sharon. Brenda paused in the act of dusting a bit of blush across her cheekbones and met Sharon’s eyes in the mirror. She smiled blindingly at Sharon, cheeks flushed - Sharon couldn’t be sure if that was from the heat of the bathroom or the compliment, though. Sharon smiled back and dried herself off, then tucked the towel around her breasts and reached for the microfiber sheet she used to wick the moisture from her hair.

Brenda was quiet, methodically applying her makeup, sidling a little closer to Sharon than she might normally stand, careful not to bump elbows accidentally, but deliberately drawing her fingers along the bare skin of Sharon’s back and shoulders in between ‘steps’; after she finished brushing shadow across her eyelids, after applying mascara to her normally pale lashes. Enjoying the gentle physical contact, Sharon massaged a bit of vitamin E oil into her hair, concentrating on the ends, considering her unusually subdued lover in the slightly fogged mirror.

“You’re awfully contemplative this morning, Brenda Leigh. Something on your mind?” Sharon husked.

“Nothin’ bad,” Brenda assured her. “Just considerin’ how content I am. And enjoying the quiet morning with you, of course.” Sharon leaned over to kiss her on the shoulder, on the curve of her well-defined deltoid. Brenda grinned at her, the skin at the corners of her brown eyes crinkling pleasantly. Sharon let her lips linger a moment and then turned and headed into the bedroom.

Sharon’s eyes narrowed at the outfit Brenda had laid out on the bed for herself. Her gray skirt-suit was arrayed neatly on the duvet. A pair of rose colored pumps were on the floor awaiting their owner’s delicate feet. It was a lovely outfit; that particular suit was well-tailored to her Brenda Leigh’s body - but Brenda’s florals and bold, bright colors had been practically absent in the past few months, appearing only when the dry-cleaning pile was of truly epic proportions. Sharon missed them - missed the swish of Brenda Leigh’s pert bottom in her flirty little print skirts, missed the unapologetic, in your face femininity that was classic Brenda Leigh Johnson.

“Brenda Leigh, honey,” Sharon stuck her head back into the bathroom. “Can I ask you something?” Brenda cocked her head in invitation. “Why haven’t you been wearing your floral print skirts and dresses?” Brenda’s brow furrowed and her lips twisted in an anxious moue.

“I thought you didn’t like them,” she said tersely. “I remember very distinctly you sayin’…” Sharon cut her off.

“I never said I didn’t like your clothes,” Sharon stated definitively. “I like your vintage pieces and I like your florals and I like your bright colors. I like your kitten heels and I even like your enormous hats. I like you in jeans and I like you in my sweat pants. I like you in your bathing suit; I like you in half your bathing suit. I can keep going, should I?” Brenda shook her head, blushing now, beyond what the dissipating heat of the bathroom could account for.

“I just want to look like someone who belongs with you,” Brenda confessed in a tiny voice and Sharon’s insides twisted up with guilt. She couldn’t help but feel responsible for Brenda’s insecurities in regards to Sharon’s opinions about her wardrobe. An idea struck her.

“I have something for you. I’ll be right back.” Sharon strode purposefully out into the hall and into the guest room. Clothes were still heaped on the bed. They’d have to take care of that in the next few days; they had planned to deal with cleaning out the closets over the weekend, but they had gotten wrapped up in one another.

She liberated a white sheath dress printed with sketched, black daisies from its hiding spot behind
a mass of garment bags. A shoe box and a neatly folded sweater she plucked off the high shelf and her towel lost its fight with gravity; Sharon let it fall - modesty wasn’t really at the forefront of her thoughts at the moment, not that Sharon had any issue with Brenda laying eyes on her naked body, not at any time.

Brenda was waiting on the bed when she padded back into their room. Sharon laid the dress next to her lover, whose eyes lit up at the sight of the pretty garment. She handed Brenda the shoebox and spread the light teal sweater over the dress. Brenda opened the shoebox slowly, eyes locked on Sharon’s. When she lifted the delicate, matte leather pump from the box, Brenda gasped. The low profile, stiletto was a perfect color match to the sweater.

“What is this for?” Brenda asked, as enthralled with the shoes as Sharon knew she would be. Brenda slipped the shoe onto her bare foot and admired it.

“I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate your sense of style Brenda Leigh Johnson. Sometimes, when I’m out, I see things that remind me of you. And sometimes, I buy them.” Sharon laid a hand on Brenda’s exposed knee. “What I said when I was prepping you for your interview with the mayor was to provoke a reaction from you other than disinterest - and I shouldn’t have said any of it. Not to someone I respected and admired, not for any reason,” Sharon said with conviction. Brenda put the shoe box aside and stood to step into Sharon’s arms, folding her elbows in and tucking her hands beneath her own chin.

“Thank you, Shari,” she murmured. “I guess I needed to hear that.” She tilted her head into Sharon’s neck, reveling in her warm skin and the cool tendrils of still damp hair underneath her cheek.

“I should have said it a long time ago. I didn’t know any other way for you to want to prove me wrong; getting you riled up was the only option I saw available to me.” She kissed Brenda’s soft golden waves. “You belong with me,” Sharon assured her gently. “We belong with each other.”
Chapter 16

Brenda decided to wear her new outfit on Wednesday, as a mid-week pick me up. She spent Tuesday evening wearing her new shoes with a pair of sweats and one of Sharon’s soft long-sleeved t-shirts. Sharon watched her with barely veiled amusement, and Brenda struck a pose, hand on cocked hip.

“What’s so funny?” She demanded with a playful tilt of her head.

Sharon dropped her head on her hand and gave her lover an appraising, sideways glance. “I didn’t know that breaking in a pair of pumps could be classified as adorable, but you manage it.”

“They didn’t need much breakin’ in, actually. I just like ‘em,” Brenda said and stuck out a foot for emphasis. The shoes did suit her very well; the low profile leather emphasized her delicate ankle and well-muscled calf.

Brenda took a seat next to Sharon at the kitchen table and reached out to wrap her fingers around the shapely forearm that was propping up the brunette’s head.

“So what do you want to do tonight, Shari, now that we’re fed and the kitchen is clean?” Brenda’s face was the picture of innocence, but her small fingers stroking the soft, blue-veined skin of Sharon’s wrist told an entirely different story - a story that would end with them, naked, or mostly naked, and coming, somewhere between here and the bedroom. Sharon grinned wickedly at the none-to-subtle come on, and Brenda grinned back.

“Well, I have to make a few calls, to find someone with a truck to pick up the sofa and the mattress and the kitchen set, if your boys don’t want them. After though, lady’s choice?” Sharon could see that was absolutely the right answer, because Brenda’s face lit up in a broad smile, pupils dilating ever so slightly.

“Oh my, carte blanche with a beautiful woman,” Brenda purred, a minute tremble running through her body. An answering shiver raced through Sharon, beginning at the point of contact between Brenda’s fingers and her arm. “You just make those phone calls, and I’ll go make a few preparations.” Brenda winked saucily, rose, and sauntered from the kitchen. At that moment, Sharon was sure that there was nothing sexier than Brenda Leigh, covered in well worn cotton, a thin strip of bare skin glowing between the hem of her shirt and the waistband of her sweatpants, and $600 dollar Prada pumps on her feet. Sharon clutched at her cellphone a moment, taking deep breaths until she was sure she could speak without her voice cracking like a 14 year old boy’s.

Brenda left the kitchen thinking about what Sharon had said about the couch. She already knew what she was going to do once she got Sharon naked - she’d been saving that one up for a few days - so the couch and its fate was on Brenda’s mind. That couch was the first place that Sharon had gone down on her, and Brenda still got a little thrill every time she walked through the front door because of that day when Sharon had opened it, half naked and wanting her, and then pushed Brenda down on the sofa and used her mouth to make Brenda come. Brenda wanted to memorialize this little piece of their life together - one of their first loving and passionate moments.

Brenda tripped up the stairs into the bedroom; in the newly organized closet, it was easy to find the skirt she’d been wearing that day. She stepped out of her shoes, shucked off her sweatpants and pulled on the skirt. Her underwear were more than acceptable, pretty pink gingham. Brenda took off Sharon’s shirt and tossed it on the bed. Her matching bra was already in the wash pile and she didn’t want to put it back on. The cardigan Sharon had given her the other day was snug enough to
give her a little cleavage. She unfolded it from its place on the shelf and shrugged it on, buttoning only the middle two buttons.

Brenda examined herself in the mirror after stepping back into her shoes. She looked good - a little trampy, but that was the point. She just hoped she could figure out the timer on Sharon’s digital camera.

Tiptoeing down the stairs, Brenda could hear Sharon talking on the phone in the kitchen. She snuck over to the built in desk that housed Sharon’s personal laptop and other technology related items. The camera was in the top right hand drawer. Brenda opened it, blessing Sharon Raydor’s neatness, because the camera was the first thing her hand found. It was easier to figure out the little device than she thought - apparently it wasn’t built to be complicated, not like the cameras Buzz used at work. She pressed a fingernail against the ‘on’ button and the camera hummed to life, lens opening, LCD lighting up. A dial next to the shutter button indicated different settings, and Brenda chose the one depicting a house. Indoor, she guessed. The button for the timer was also easily located on the back of the camera body; it had a little clock on it. One push and a 10 flashed across the LCD; another push, a 20; a third, and the little clock icon disappeared from the screen. Okay. Brenda huffed softly, in frustration. She could do this. It was just too bad that the camera feature on her phone didn’t have a timer, because she knew how to work that. She’d even figured out that the little bitty ‘plus’ button worked as the shutter when the camera app was open.

Brenda wiggled behind the television and perched the tiny camera on top of it. She checked to make sure that the sofa was in frame and on level - and it was, though it was a bit distant. She zoomed in so that the couch’s center cushion dominated the frame.

After carefully extricating herself from the narrow space between television and wall, Brenda made her preparations. She bent and the waist and stood quickly, snapping her head back to fluff her hair. Considering the two pearl buttons that barely restrained her breasts, she unbuttoned the uppermost of the two, and apparently that was the right move, because suddenly she was spilling out of the sweater. Sharon would like this very much. She rucked up her skirt and rolled her panties down her thighs, bending a knee to step out of one leg. Pressing the shutter button on the camera, Brenda shuffled awkwardly to the sofa, holding onto her underwear so she wouldn’t tangle herself in them. As the red light on the camera blinked away the seconds, she positioned herself on the sofa, skirt hiked up, knees spread, panties dangling from her ankle, one hand clutching the edge of the couch cushion and the other toying with the bare skin at the waist of her skirt. She bit her lip, letting herself imagine that it was Sharon taking the picture. The red light blinked faster, and the shutter clicked.

Brenda pushed herself up and shuffled awkwardly over to the camera. She should probably take a few, to be sure at least one turned out. Hitting the shutter again, she waddled back to the sofa. This time she arched her back a little, hands splayed against the flatness of her stomach. She held the pose uncomfortably for a moment, waiting for the shutter to sound. When it did, she jumped up and promptly toppled over, the heel of a pump caught in the fabric of her underwear. Before she hit the floor, Brenda was certain she heard something rip. That was a shame, she liked those panties.

Laying on the floor, skirt flipped up to expose her bare ass, feet tangled in her own underwear, Brenda’s embarrassment was compounded when Sharon rushed into the room. Brenda didn’t lift her head from where it was smushed into the plush rug.

“I’m ok,” she said, her voice muffled by the floor.

“Are you sure? …what on earth,” Sharon wondered, laughter threatening to spill out from her
smiling mouth. Brenda could hear it, and couldn’t bring herself to look at the brunette, torn between mourning her ripped panties and skinned knees and laughing at her own idiocy.

“I think I ripped my underwear,” she managed to say, hoping to forestall any questions about why her underwear had happened to be around her ankles. Through the curtain of her hair, Brenda saw Sharon collapse onto the floor next to her. Brenda propped herself up on her elbows and glared at the other woman, who was curled around herself, laughing so hard she couldn’t draw air into her lungs, tears trickling down her rosy cheeks.

“Thanks for your concern, Sharon,” Brenda groused. Not really angry, but a little put out that Sharon had broken down laughing so quickly. Sharon didn’t appear to be able to reply, at least not sensibly, so Brenda pushed herself into a sitting position and examined the red skin on her knees. She hissed as she prodded it delicately with one finger; the skin wasn’t broken, but it stung.

It took Sharon a minute to collect herself. “Dear god I never have a camera on hand when I need one,” was the first thing she said when her lungs began working again. Brenda flushed guiltily and glanced up at the camera perched precariously on the television. She was glad it hadn’t coming crashing down to the floor with her. Sharon followed her gaze and then raised a questioning eyebrow at her. When Brenda didn’t seem inclined to answer the unspoken query, Sharon levered herself off the floor and retrieved the camera for herself. Brenda flushed harder.

The look on Sharon’s face when she saw what Brenda had been doing with her camera was less laughing and more lustful.

“I…naughty pictures?” She asked, already looking forward to the moment when she could examine the photos at her leisure on the large screen of her laptop.

“Yes?” Brenda offered with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Not that I’m not extraordinarily appreciative of your efforts, Brenda Leigh, but was there a particular reason for your foray into erotic portraiture?”

“It’s just, well, we’re gettin’ rid of that couch, but it was the first place you ever, you know…” Brenda trailed off, unable to say it. She was usually quite frank in speaking about their sex life and the ways in which they made love to one another, but she was still mortified by her tumble.

“Mmmmmmm, the first place I ate you out.” Sharon remembered. And licked her lips, not at the pictures, which were but a pale reflection of the lovely, sexy and sometimes confounding creature that was still sprawled rather ungracefully across the floor.

“I thought it deserved memorializin’,” Brenda offered by way of an explanation. Sharon smiled at her and set the camera down on the television stand. She offered the blonde a hand up, and pulled the slight form into her body.

“I’m sorry for laughing, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon murmured into Brenda’s ear; she didn’t think Brenda was really angry, but Sharon didn’t want to exacerbate the situation if she had gotten herself into hot water.

“No, it was pretty funny,” Brenda allowed. “Just don’t expect any sympathy from me next time you go ass over teakettle, Shari.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Sharon drawled. “Though I don’t usually wander around with my panties around one ankle.”

“Shame,” quipped Brenda and Sharon chuckled. Brenda’s hands snuck around Sharon’s waist and
palmed the brunette’s strong buttocks; she pulled their hips flush, tilting her chin down to capture Sharon’s lips in a hungry kiss. She licked into Sharon’s mouth with an insistent tongue, drawing out the taste of the wine they’d had with dinner.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten it’s lady’s choice tonight, Sharon Raydor,” Brenda purred when they pulled apart.

“What makes you think that you’re the lady in question, Brenda Leigh Johnson,” Sharon joked. Brenda nipped at her jaw in retaliation, and Sharon groaned, hips grinding briefly into Brenda’s. “Last time I checked, I was a lady too.”

“I dunno, baby. Maybe I should take a peek, make sure,” teased Brenda, snaking a leg between Sharon’s thighs, making good use of her unusual height advantage over Sharon, but constrained by the fabric of her skirt. Sharon was barefoot, still wearing half of her suit from work, black pinstriped pants that made her long legs seem absolutely endless, and a faded hunter polo shirt she’d pulled on to save her white work blouse from the dangers of cooking. Brenda enjoyed the contrast of the immaculate, expensive and impeccably tailored designer suiting and the worn, comfortable shirt. They were both Sharon; they both fit the soft, warm, delicious smelling woman in her arms.

Sharon’s eyes dropped to the exposed skin of Brenda’s chest, and there was a lot of skin - her lover’s breasts were barely constrained by the single button of the teal cardigan. She leaned in to press her mouth against the soft skin behind Brenda’s ear.


“I wanted to do something special for you, and to have a memento, for me too.”

“You’re something special, you know that?” Sharon whispered, and hugged Brenda tightly to her. Brenda gripped her with just as much strength.

“I feel like somethin’ special when I’m with you, Shari.”

Sharon locked up while Brenda headed up to their bedroom. She had plans for Sharon Raydor; she only hoped that her sore knees wouldn’t get in the way of their pleasure. She stripped off her clothes, hanging her skirt back up, folding the sweater neatly in preparation for the next day, and tossing her ruined underwear into the trashcan. She opened the bottom drawer of Sharon’s nightstand, listening for her lover’s footsteps on the stairs.

It was easy to strap herself into the harness after her rapt attention to the particulars of it the week before. Watching Sharon put it on had been very stimulating exercise. Brenda fitted the cock into the o-ring and tightened the waist strap. The dick felt odd, heavy between her legs. She wiggled her hips and the phallus waggled - she was felt simultaneously ridiculous and a bit powerful. Brenda grasped the penis and jerked it a few times - a familiar motion, even if the angle was different. Her hips bucked when the base of the cock bumped against her clitoris. She grinned wickedly; this was going to be fun.

Brenda was laying back on the bed, idly giving herself a hand job when Sharon came in.

“Oh my,” Sharon breathed. “So this is lady’s choice, then?”

“Yea, if you wanna.” Brenda was willing to do whatever the brunette wanted, however she wanted, were Sharon not in the mood for penetration. Sharon rolled her eyes in answer and then
stripped off her polo shirt. Her breasts bounced free, nipples already tightly furled.

Sharon bent to rummage in the still open nightstand drawer and pulled out a bottle of lube. She tossed it onto the bed next to Brenda, who picked it up to read the label. Sharon shucked her pants and followed the bottle onto the bed. She swooped in for a kiss and Brenda rose up eagerly to meet her lips, reaching out to Sharon and directing the brunette to stretch out next to her. Lube was all well and good, but Brenda wanted Sharon ready and begging for it before she arched into her, filled her, and made her come on the cock strapped to her hips.

Sharon pulled herself into Brenda’s body with a leg hitched over her hip, groaning when the firmness of the dick pressed into the softness of her belly.

“Oh, you want this, do you?” Brenda murmured. She cupped Sharon’s breasts with gentle hands, enjoying the heft of them and the way the soft flesh spilled out of her palms. Brenda wiped her thumbs over Sharon’s stiff nipples, then pinched them, letting gravity pull their weight away from her fingers. Sharon gasped, and her hips bucked. Brenda pinched harder, rolling and stretching until she elicited a moan from Sharon. At that breathless, needful noise, Brenda scooted herself down Sharon’s body to take a nipple between her lips. She touched the tip, just the tip, with her tongue.

“Fuck,” Sharon hissed, and then whimpered when Brenda flattened her tongue and engulfed her areola. Brenda hummed happily into the flesh that covered her Sharon’s heart.

Brenda worked at Sharon’s sensitive breasts and nipples until the brunette was writhing against her, flexing the muscles of her thighs against the hardness of Brenda’s cock.

“Please, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon begged. “Please.”

“Please what, Shari?”

“Fuck me, please.” Sharon sobbed. “Please. I need it.”

“Course you do, baby,” agreed Brenda. “Just turn over for me, and you’ll have it.” Sharon flipped herself in Brenda’s arms unquestioningly, and when she had settled, pressed back against Brenda, brunette head dropped back on Brenda’s shoulder, Brenda parted Sharon’s thighs with deft hands and ran a firm finger along the unfurled lips of her sex. Warm, and wet. Very wet. No lube necessary. Brenda wiped the moisture collected on her fingertip on the head of the dick, then used a hand to guide the phallus where Sharon wanted it. Sharon reached a hand down to part herself to smooth the way for the cock, and Brenda did it - pressed herself up and into Sharon.

“Ohhhhhh, yes,” Sharon groaned, and Brenda made an answering sound in sympathy; she wished desperately she could feel the silky walls of Sharon’s sex flexing around her like this. She tried to hold still a moment - her hips jogged once, uncontrollably and Sharon moaned. Brenda enfolded Sharon in her arms, and then slid the cock from Sharon, slowly, stopping when the angle became too awkward for her to withdraw further, then pushed back in, inhaling sharply when the cock made contact with her clit.

Sharon chuckled breathily. “It feels good, doesn’t it,” she purred. “Being inside me like this.” Brenda didn’t answer, just set a slow rhythm, hands splayed protectively, possessively across Sharon’s stomach, feeling the flex of the muscle beneath her warm skin, fingers teasing at the wiry hair on Sharon’s mound, face buried in Sharon’s hair, taking in Sharon’s scent. Hers, this woman was all hers, Brenda thought, to shatter with an orgasm and Brenda would hold all the sharp edged pieces in her arms until Sharon came back to herself, put herself back together. Brenda needed that - needed the indomitable Sharon Raydor to melt against her in pleasure, it made Brenda feel
absolutely trusted, which was a new sensation for her.

Brenda growled, excited by her own thoughts, and by Sharon’s hand bracing against Brenda’s hip, and sped her pace, though without leverage or something to brace herself against, she couldn’t put a lot of force into her thrusts. To increase Sharon’s pleasure, Brenda dipped her fingers between Sharon’s legs to push against her erect clit, stroking the hood firmly. She could feel the lips of Sharon’s sex gripping the cock - Brenda wanted to see her dick sliding into Sharon’s pussy. Sharon arched against Brenda enthusiastically, parting her thighs further to give Brenda room to maneuver.

“Come for me, Shari,” Brenda murmured into Sharon’s ear. “Come in my arms, come so we can start all over again.”

“Again?” Sharon groaned, a little lost in her pleasure; Brenda could feel her tensing, could feel the beginnings of the brunette’s orgasm in the tightness of her thighs and of her ass. Brenda put a little twist in her strokes, hoping to hit that place that drove Sharon crazy.

“Mmmmmmm.” Brenda purred. “I’m gonna put you on your hands and knees and take you from behind. How’s that sound, baby?”

“Oh, Brenda Leigh. Oh, fuck,” moaned Sharon, trembling. She bent her knees to brace her feet on Brenda’s thighs, meeting Brenda’s thrusts now with the motion of her own hips. Brenda worked Sharon’s clit furiously, until Sharon’s back bowed and she cried out wordlessly, shouting her pleasure into the quiet of the house.

Sharon came down quickly, her body relaxing, but she didn’t stop the movement of her hips. “I think you promised me another,” she husked, and rolled herself over and forward slowly, onto her hands and knees. Brenda followed, and ended up just where she had wanted to be; on her knees, buried balls deep in Sharon’s wet cunt, the enticing curves of Sharon’s ass and the smooth planes of her back spread out in front of her.

Brenda drew her hips back, watching the cock slide from the dripping wetness between Sharon’s legs. She pulled out all the way, wanting to see the whole spectacle, wanting to see her cock open Sharon up, and then fill her again. Brenda grasped Sharon at the waist and slammed back into her. Sharon grunted at the force and waggled her ass encouragingly when Brenda hesitated.

“Fuck me, Brenda Leigh. You know you want to,” Sharon challenged. Brenda growled, then set a bruising pace, enjoying the contact of the dildo’s base against her clit, and the shockwaves her powerful strokes sent through Sharon’s flesh. Brenda wonder how this felt for her - she would still be sensitive from her first orgasm, if Brenda applied her fingers where the cock was thrusting into Sharon, she’d still be able to feel the flutters and spasms of lingering pleasure.

Sharon mewled each time Brenda’s cock hit home, and the noise drove Brenda harder; her hips were a blur, sweat pricked from her pores, the harness was chafing uncomfortably on her hipbones. Sharon collapsed forward bonelessly onto her elbows, face buried in the duvet, fingers clutching at the cloth, white knuckled. A guttural noise erupted from deep within her chest and she thrust herself back onto the cock, her ass meeting Brenda’s thighs with the sharp slaps of flesh on flesh. Brenda could feel the tension coiling in Sharon - building in her belly, spreading tendrils of weakness into her limbs - she wanted to feel this one, wanted Sharon to cum around her fingers, wanted to feel the strength of her orgasm and the strength of the woman herself. She pulled out, replacing the plastic with three of her fingers, curved in just the way Sharon liked.

Sharon made a bereft sound at the loss of the dick, but rocked back into Brenda’s hand. Brenda resumed, with her fingers, the pace she had set with the cock on her hips, bearing down firmly
against the strength of Sharon’s internal muscles. Sharon keened loudly, nearly a wail, and shook once, twice and came, clamping down on Brenda’s fingers like a vise. Brenda groaned, cursing the harness that prevented easy access to her own clit.

Sharon’s knees gave out and she sprawled on the bed, breathing heavily, trembling. Brenda shivered in pride and in need and worked desperately at the buckles at her waist and thighs with slick fingers. She ripped the harness from her body and tossed it aside, then fell onto Sharon, straddling one of her legs, sighing when her clit made contact with her lover’s skin. Brenda rode Sharon’s thigh furiously; she was so close, she could taste it, could taste her orgasm on the heels of the pleasure she had given Sharon, and then she was there, falling over the edge with a shout.

Brenda curled around Sharon, entwining a leg with her’s, keeping close, idly tracing patterns along the topography of Sharon’s back. She was breathing normally again, though Brenda was feeling a bit like she’d run the hundred yard dash. She closed her eyes and concentrated on this moment; Sharon’s warmth, the smell of sex in the air, the heaviness of her limbs. Sharon stirred, groaned, and turned onto her side. She smiled at Brenda, full and sweet and laden with emotion, then kissed her, drawing out Brenda’s lower lip and caressing it gently with her tongue.

“That was amazing, Brenda Leigh,” she husked after she released Brenda’s mouth.

“I was inspired. I’ve been thinkin’ ‘bout ways to use that cock on you since last week, baby.”

Sharon chuckled. “Well, bless your imagination, honey.”

“Like I said, you’re very inspirin’. And watchin’ you, seein’ you come like that was so damned sexy,” Brenda confessed. Sharon kissed her again, first on the lips, ever so gently, then on each eyelid, like a benediction for the truth she had told.

“Well, Brenda Leigh Johnson, I suppose I was also inspired,” murmured Sharon in reply.
Sharon woke up at her usual time even though she hadn’t set her alarm. She had realized last night that her morning swim probably wasn’t in the cards - her limbs felt a bit shaky, more so than usual after a couple of orgasms, though she didn’t usually come twice in such quick succession. Sharon had told Brenda this, and that she was planning on sleeping in, and the blonde had looked extraordinarily smug, a positively wicked smirk playing on her broad mouth, but she acted sweet and solicitous, fetching Sharon a glass of water and her book from downstairs.

They read a while, before drifting off, Sharon involved in some book about the military-industrial complex by that female talking head she liked, Brenda browsing through case files, head pillowed on Sharon’s thigh. Brenda fell asleep first, nodding off with a manila folder over her face. Sharon wiggled it from her grasp and tucked it away on the nightstand underneath her book. It had been simplicity itself to gently prod the blonde into a more suitable position for sleeping - head on the pillow and all that - and curl around her after clicking off the lamp.

She floated toward consciousness in the same position in which she’d fallen asleep; pressed against Brenda’s t-shirt clad back with a face full of mussed blonde waves. A king-sized bed at their disposal, they could have fit comfortably in a twin, so close together did they sleep most nights. Sharon hadn’t expected that - hadn’t expected that beyond choosing to be physically close to her Brenda Leigh while awake, her body would seek out Brenda’s in sleep, too. Sharon had never experienced this particular facet of a relationship before; sleeping next to other sexual partners had always been stifling, and even oddly isolating (though truthfully Sharon very rarely thought of her previous relationships, and never to compare them to what she had with Brenda - it seemed to her that sex and/or cohabitation were the only things they really had in common.) Brenda was a happy anomaly in Sharon Raydor’s life.

Regretfully, Sharon slid away from Brenda and out from under the covers; the blonde stirred, but didn’t wake. Moving quietly, Sharon lifted her robe from its hook on the back of the door and padded out into the hall, pausing to swing the gray silk around her shoulders before descending the stairs. Sharon could feel the pleasant twinge from the previous night’s exertions in the big muscles of her legs and in her arms. Forcing already unsteady limbs to support her body while Brenda Leigh had pounded into her from behind had been… She shivered. There wasn’t a single adjective that really encompassed her feelings about making love with Brenda Leigh, in any iteration.

Sharon had time on her hands this morning, and she decided to make breakfast - something decadent that Brenda would enjoy. It was nice to be able to channel her protective instincts into taking care of Brenda beyond shielding her from Goldman and Pope and their ambitions. Their domestic life was much more than satisfactory, and it thrilled Sharon that Brenda enjoyed coming home to her so much - Sharon was no Fritz Howard, she wasn’t going to give Brenda crap for her devotion to her career because she wasn’t troubled by Brenda’s devotion to her career, just as Brenda wasn’t troubled by Sharon’s devotion to her work for the LAPD or her work at the shelter. It was easier for Brenda to come home and leave work behind if home didn’t mean arguments, and it was easier for Sharon to come home now that her home was no longer empty. Funny how that worked.

Sharon collected the ingredients for pancake batter from the pantry - along with a small bag of chocolate chips. With bananas and some maple syrup, Brenda would about roll over and die when Sharon presented breakfast to her on a tray, in bed.

Making pancakes was something that Sharon could do drunk, hungover, or half-asleep, so her mind
wandered across her plans for the day, travel plans for Thanksgiving (taking the Jag up to Santa Cruz with Brenda - perhaps they’d take the scenic route); Jackson and Ginny visiting for Christmas; Charlie visiting after the holidays. She hadn’t told Jack yet that Brenda had moved in - though she supposed it was time - not because she thought he would react poorly, but because she was savoring this uninterrupted quiet with Brenda Leigh before the chaos of the holidays.

“I thought you were sleepin’ in this morning, Shari,” said a sleep thickened voice from the kitchen door, shaking Sharon from her pleasant reverie. Sharon turned to take in her tousled and tempting lover, clad in a well-worn t-shirt that proclaimed her property of the LAPD and fell only to the tops of her thighs.

“I woke up and thought I would make us breakfast in bed,” Sharon explained and Brenda beamed at her. She came closer and tangled her fingers in the belt of Sharon’s robe.

“Chocolate chip pancakes,” Brenda purred. “You sure know how to spoil a girl, Sharon Raydor.”

“I know how to spoil you,” Sharon said, turning back to her mixing. She wasn’t disappointed when Brenda pressed her body against her back, chin on Sharon’s shoulder, watching Sharon whisk lumps out of the pancake batter.

“Can I help,” she asked, the question buzzing through Sharon’s skin due to their proximity.

“That depends on what else you want with your pancakes. I was thinking bananas and walnuts and maple syrup, but we also have a container of raspberries and one of blueberries.” Brenda moaned and her hips jolted into Sharon’s ass, just once. Sharon chuckled.

“You know it’s practically foreplay when you cook like this,” Brenda quipped lightly, and kissed Sharon on the shoulder before pulling away. “I’ll warm the syrup and cut the bananas.”

Brenda deftly peeled and cut two bananas while the little glass bottle of syrup spun in the microwave and the pancakes bubbled and browned in the skillet, chocolate crisping on their surfaces. Brenda really was getting much better at helping with food prep - even though neither of them trusted her to actually combine ingredients over a heat source - she was becoming more proficient in cutting, peeling, grating and carving. They both enjoyed the time spent together.

After dealing with the bananas Brenda took it upon herself to prepare their coffee, and set their mugs at the table next to glasses of orange juice. She arranged syrup, walnuts and silver around the beverages and provided two plates for Sharon to put the pancakes on.

Brenda ate her breakfast with a strange sort of precision. She made sure to get some pancake, a bit of banana, and walnut in each bite. The sounds she made as she chewed were blatantly sexual, and Sharon was sure that if she reached out a hand to dip her fingers between Brenda’s legs, she would find arousal there. Cooking meals for and sharing them with someone who was genuinely turned on by food - sometimes Sharon was a little jealous of her own cooking, but she truly did reap all the rewards of Brenda’s idiosyncrasy. Sharon was a little more circumspect in her enjoyment and in her method of eating, but she relished the treat nevertheless.

When Brenda finally slumped back in her chair, five pancakes and appropriate toppings gone, juice and coffee drained, it was with a glazed look in her brown eyes. Sharon had already finished her more modest portion and was drinking her coffee, a smirk etched on her lips.

“You look like you’ve been ridden hard and put away wet,” Sharon joked.

“That sounds about right,” Brenda drawled, and then groaned. “I can’t believe I ate all that, you
wicked, evil temptress. I also can’t believe you were going to bring that mess up to bed.”

“Mmmmm,” agreed Sharon. “It’s probably best to keep syrup away from the linens, especially when you’re involved.”

“You know,” Brenda remarked, a placid expression on her face. “If we had eaten that in bed, we’d most definitely be late for work.” Her gaze dropped from Sharon’s eyes and down into the shadows at the neck of Sharon’s robe; her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. “Just fair warnin’, for if you’re ever wantin’ to do this again.”

“Duly noted,” Sharon husked and then leaned over to capture Brenda’s lips in a sticky, maple flavored kiss.

Brenda took care of the dishes while Sharon went to shower. If she had followed the brunette up the stairs, she would have tried to tempt Sharon into bed. Brenda was ready for Sharon to be firmly ensconced in her new position so they could go back to the occasional (read: two or three mornings a week) pre-work roll in the hay - but split as she was between briefings with McIntire and readying FID for the transition to a new Captain, Sharon felt like her days at the office should begin a little earlier than usual. Brenda had succeeded thus far in being respectful of her girlfriend’s dedication, and she was sure she could make it through another week or so, but going into work coasting on the remnants of an orgasm was something she was starting to really miss. Even the most dedicated night owl could conceivably become a morning person under those circumstances, mused Brenda, wrist deep in warm soapy water.

Brenda sashayed into her Murder Room precisely on time and feeling like a million bucks. Sharon really had an incredible eye for what would fit her body - her new Marc Jacobs sheath looked as though it had been tailored for her, and the close fit paired with the just above the knee hem and demure neckline made it sexy, but meant she wouldn’t have interviewees (or Pope) face first in her cleavage all day.

Andy spun around in his chair as soon as he heard her heels on the linoleum. He let out a low whistle and gave her a sly grin, getting up to follow her into her office.

“New outfit?”

“Mmmhmm,” Brenda confirmed, putting her purse on her desk and removing the brown bag Sharon had handed her before they left the house. “Chief Johnson” was scrawled across the paper in her Captain’s neat script.

“Captain Raydor has good taste,” Andy quipped, smirking.

“Hey!” Brenda squawked. “Who’s to say I didn’t pick out this ensemble?” Andy just looked at her. Brenda grumbled to herself before casting a glare at her Lieutenant.

“Fine. Though I’m sure Cap’n Raydor would love to hear how much you appreciate her taste in apparel on Saturday, when you come help me move some furniture over to her place.”

“Uh, ok?” Andy offered, still processing. Then the lightbulb clicked on. “Oh. OH! Really?” Brenda snickered, gratified that he’d been slow on the uptake.

“Really. We want to be settled before the holidays - and payin’ movers to haul five pieces of furniture just seemed like a waste when I have all a’ ya’ll around. And we’ll feed you too, when we’re done. Don’t worry, Sharon’s cookin’.”

“That sounds…nice actually.” Then Andy grinned and pointed at the bag in her hand. “What’d
“The Captain pack you for lunch, Chief?”

“Hardboiled eggs, veggies, pita chips.” She rolled her eyes at his look of disbelief. “I had a rather large breakfast.”

“Yeah?”

“Chocolate chip banana pancakes with walnuts and real maple syrup.” Brenda said smugly.

“That’s…I can’t…I hate you right now.” Brenda gave a little ‘what can you do’ shrug and smirk at his comical outrage.

“I keep tellin’ you that chasin’ after younger women’ll get you absolutely nothin’, Andrew Flynn.”

“Yea, yea, yea, nothing but bad sex and idiotic conversation. I told you when you started dating the Captain that it took the only worthwhile eligible women on the force off the market. Where else am I going to meet women - on an airplane?”

“You’re terrible.”

“I try.” Andy mock saluted and turned to leave, but stopped dead when the Chief blurted:

“Does Lieutenant Provenza know about me and Sharon?”

“Yes, of course he does. You kissed her in front of Gabriel and Sanchez. Gabriel pow-wowed with every one in the squad within an hour, and Sanchez…” She cut him off.

“I don’t want to know.” She fiddled with the bag in her hands, tracing the script of her title and name with a finger. “He’s not upset? He’s not usually good at hidin’ things like that from me, but I dunno. I guess I’m a little…”

“You’ve made some big changes, but you’re happy, and that’s all any of us want for you, Provenza included.” Andy liked this sweetly vulnerable Brenda Leigh Johnson - but then he also liked the viciously vulnerable Brenda Leigh Johnson that would appear like a lightning strike when a case wasn’t going their way.

“Should I invite him, just for dinner maybe?” Brenda asked, sill unsure of herself. “I know he won’t help with the movin’, and Sharon’s got all the bossy we need in regards to how and where to put things.” Andy chuckled at that.

“You should give him the option. It might do him some good to see the Captain outside of work. I think he thinks she’s some sort of robot that powers down in her office at night or something.”

“Definitely not a robot.”

“And I hope that any powering down occurs in bed with you. And Sanchez hopes. And Gabriel, though he’d never admit it.” Brenda gaped at him and then made an incoherent noise.

“If I had a taser right now, Andy Flynn,” she threatened in the face of his chuckling.

Over the course of the day, Brenda spoke to each of her boys, and they all happily accepted her invitation for Saturday - not even expressing surprise that she was moving in with Sharon, though she supposed Andy might have gotten to them first. Tao was even planning to bring Cathy and Kevin, at least for dinner. Brenda was pleased, though she still had to talk to Provenza.

She approached him at the end of the day, they were all winding down, readying their desks and
workspaces for the business of the Thursday to come.

“Can I have a second, Lieutenant?” Brenda queried politely. Provenza followed her to the no man’s land at the front of the murder room, where one could conduct a quiet conversation without being overheard.

“Sharon and I are having a little get together Saturday evenin’ after the younger bucks help me move a few things over to her house, and we were hopin’ you would come, at least to barbecue with us.”

“I don’t have to be cheerful, do I?” He groused.

“I certainly wouldn’t want you to strain yourself,” Brenda sassed back. “Civil would suffice, pleasant if you’re feeling generous.”

“Will there be beer at this shindig? Beer alway improves my mood. Unless its crappy beer, then the opposite is true.”

“There certainly can be beer - is there something that you and the rest of the boys will drink that I can pick up?”

“A case of Sam Adams or Dos Equis should make everyone happy. Tao enjoys wine more than beer, though.”

“Wine we’ve got in spades. Hard stuff too. And Sharon makes a mean burger, so bring your appetite.”

“Yes, yes. Sharon Raydor grilling. The world’s gone topsy turvy,” groused Provenza, throwing up his hands. “Just text me the address and time.” Brenda smiled as he shuffled off towards the break room.

Brenda had been tasked with picking up dry cleaning and then dinner (Thai, Sharon’s favored takeout) as Sharon’s meeting with McIntire had run later than expected. Standing in line at the dry cleaners, ticket clenched in her hand, Brenda thought that it was nice to be relied upon to do these everyday things. Also nice was the sense of routine; leaving work by a certain time on the evenings she was able had enriched her life in ways she hadn’t expected. She was actually in the middle of a book! A ridiculous spy novel written in Russian, but it was fun and she was getting her hard won language skills back up to expert.

Happily lost in her rumination and back four customers from the counter, Brenda felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to find Denise Tremont, Sharon’s ostensible friend, glaring at her. Brenda offered a feral smile, more a baring of the teeth, really, in return. This worthless bitch was hurting Sharon for no reason other than petty jealousy, and now she was staring down the object of that jealousy in a public place.

Brenda cocked her head and maintained unblinking eye contact - forcing the other woman to speak first if she wanted to continue the confrontation.

“So what are you? Some kind of gold-digging bed bunny? Wearing clothes she bought you, picking up her dry cleaning,” Denise spat angrily, voice low.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” snipped Brenda. “Why don’t you just walk away before you make this even worse than it already is.” Brenda couldn’t believe Denise was suggesting that she was some sort of kept woman; was suggesting that Sharon would keep a woman. Denise was trying to be as hurtful as possible, because anyone who knew even the
slightest thing about Sharon would know that a relationship in trade (sex for what, Sharon’s money? As if sex with Sharon Raydor wasn’t its own reward. As if Sharon Raydor herself, full stop, no accoutrements or trappings, wasn’t ample reward.) was not her style in the slightest.

“It’s my business because your midlife experimentation is messing up my friendship and my working relationship.” Brenda couldn’t suppress a bark of laughter at Denise’s pretension.

“You messed up your friendship by presuming to dictate to Sharon who she could have a relationship with. If you don’t like me, that’s fine. If you think she’s going to end up hurt, that’s also fine, but we both know that isn’t what this is about.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” the other woman hedged, her eyes slipping down and away from Brenda’s briefly. Brenda smirked internally. Attempting to hide things from a CIA trained interrogator was always a good plan, and this woman was clearly inexperienced at lying. “I’m trying to protect someone I value from making a choice that could ruin her life.”

“Oh, Denise,” Brenda breathed in mock sympathy. “Bullshittin’ bullshitters is my job, and let me tell you, you don’t even rank among the worst liars I corral in my interview room. I can’t say I blame you, you know. Sharon is very special. What did you call her? A catch? Well, she is a catch in every single way.”

“She told you what was in my text message?” Denise was aghast - she had thought Sharon would hide the argument, or at least its specifics, from her lover.

“She let me read your text message. Just like I’ll tell her about this conversation when I get home, even though it will hurt her. And that’s what really makes me angry. That this will cause Sharon heartache, because you are incapable of swallowing your pride and jealousy and leaving us be.”

“Now listen you little piece of trash,” Denise began, color heightened, an index finger nearly poking Brenda in the shoulder. Brenda couldn’t really fathom why this woman was so very angry and cut her off before this could go any further.

“Are you threatenin’ a police officer?” She asked conversationally. “Because that’ll earn you a night in lockup, courtesy of Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson and the LAPD.” Denise took a step back, unable to determine whether the threat was a bluff or not. “Now I’m gonna get mine and Sharon’s clothes, and then I’m going to go home to the house I share with her, and you are eventually going to realize that there isn’t a damn thing you can do about any of this, though I’m afraid it’s probably too late for your friendship.” Brenda turned her back to Denise and stepped up to the counter, willing herself to ignore anything else that the other woman said or did.

Sharon had texted while Brenda was waiting at the Thai place:

FROM: Shari

OMW home. Love you.

Brenda didn’t want Sharon angry while she was driving, so she didn’t mention the run in she’d had with Denise.

TO: Shari

You’re just saying that cuz I’m picking up your favorite soup for you.

FROM: Shari
I do love prawn soup, but I love you more. Though that suit you picked up for me at the dry cleaners…

TO: Shari

I’ll be sure to leave it on the side of the road. Don’t text in the car. I love you and I’ll see you in a few.

Sharon often texted at the end of her day - an innocent and thoughtful gesture that became like a siren’s call for Brenda Leigh to pack it in and get out of the office. Sometimes she wondered if she was becoming codependent, because her brain just didn’t work as well if Sharon was no longer in the building. Her focus was split between the case and whatever Sharon might be doing at home; changing out of her suit, singing softly to herself while cooking or folding laundry, grumbling at talking heads on the 24 hour news channel, reading a book - any possibility was at least as interesting as whatever case Brenda was working on. So Brenda would make haste to follow Sharon home, taking paperwork or case files with her as those could be dealt with much more enjoyably in close proximity to her lover.

With her order of food, Sharon’s soup perched precariously on top of the containers, Brenda made her way up the walk. She’d been looking forward to an enjoyable evening (most were), but it seemed that bit more stress was about to seep into their domestic bliss.

Sharon had left the front door open, and intercepted Brenda in the door to the kitchen, taking the food and dropping a peck on Brenda’s cheek. Her heels were off, her blazer was nowhere to be seen, and she’d unzipped the back of her dress, exposing a sliver of bare back and the band of her bra.

“Oh I see how it is,” Brenda snarked, tucking her purse out of the way on an empty kitchen chair. “I don’t even get a proper kiss when you’re trying to get your hands on that soup.” She turned to slip out of her shoes, then giggled when she felt Sharon’s hands around her waist, and shrieked when she was nearly pulled out of her pumps and firmly into Sharon’s body. Brenda felt safe in the brunette’s strong, stable grasp, and she sighed contentedly when she felt the press of lips against her neck. She leaned back into Sharon, and willed herself to relax; since Sharon was happy and feeling playful, discussion of Brenda’s run in with Denise could wait until they finished eating.

Sharon ate with chopsticks as gracefully as she did everything else; the blonde wood punctuating their conversation, stealing tidbits from Brenda’s plate, and depositing food neatly onto Sharon’s tongue. She related to Brenda the reason for McIntire’s late arrival to their meeting - apparently the retiring Chief was making the rounds, saying farewell to people he’d worked with for 40 years and had gotten caught up in a conversation across town and left Sharon waiting in his office for nearly an hour. Sharon had been mourning the lack of games on her Blackberry, finished with whatever make-work she had brought with her, when he’d finally appeared.

“I nearly ran downstairs to steal your phone,” she joked.

“You coulda borrowed Tao’s iPad. He has that Angry Birds Space on there - the boys’ll play that for their entire lunch break!”

“If I had brought an iPad into that office, I would never have left because McIntire would have offed me to steal it. He says he’s retiring to golf and fish and spend time with his family, but I think he really just wants more time to play Angry Birds. And something called Plants vs. Zombies, which I’m not familiar with.”

“Cap’n Raydor, do you always speak about your superior officers with such disdain?”
“Depends on the superior officer - sometimes I’m downright disrespectful,” she quipped with a wink. “And that’s Chief Raydor to you, missy.”

“Not for another two weeks, it isn’t. And you’ll always be my Cap’n,” Brenda confessed with a fond tap to Sharon’s knuckles with a finger. “I talked to the boys today - we’ll have a full house on Saturday, Kathy and Kevin Tao are going to come help, and Provenza is coming at least to eat.”

So talking with him went ok?” Sharon asked. She knew Brenda had been fretting in a minor key about Provenza for a while.

“Yea, it went ok,” Brenda confirmed. “Though he’s demandin’ beer.”

“I suppose I’ll let beer into the house,” Sharon sniffed haughtily. Brenda chuckled.

“It doesn’t have to stay long, Cap’n Snobbypants. We can send the leftovers home with them.”

“Captain Snobbypants? Really?”

“If the ridiculous and immature nickname fits…” drawled Brenda with a teasing wink. “What would you have done if I was a beer drinker?” Sharon raised an eyebrow in answer, then stood to take her plate to the sink.

“I love you Cap’n Snobbypants,” Brenda singsonged, and giggled. Sharon couldn’t help but giggle with her.

They packed up the food in companionable silence, though Brenda was simultaneously musing on how good her leftovers were going to taste for lunch tomorrow, and contemplating just how to interject the subject of Denise into their evening in order to elicit the least amount of drama. She closed the refrigerator door with a soft ‘whump’ and heard Sharon close the dishwasher with a rattle.

She didn’t want to seem too nonchalant or blithe - Denise’s behavior was troubling, and Brenda thought she must be damaged in some way to treat a friend in such a way. Even Brenda, whose track record with maintaining friendships was rather dismal, knew that Denise’s behavior far overstepped any cordial standard of behavior.

Brenda turned to look at Sharon, who was surveying the kitchen, hands on hips, looking for anything that still needed doing. Apparently satisfied with the clean-up effort, she reached for her wine glass.

“So,” Brenda began tentatively. “I had a sort of disturbing encounter at the dry-cleaners earlier.” Sharon sipped her wine, mute, though her raised eyebrow clearly asked Brenda to continue.

“Denise approached me, and said some nasty things, ranted a little. I think she was trying to hurt my feelings or draw me into a confrontation.” The expression on Sharon’s face as Brenda said this could only be described as a snarl.

“I didn’t let her get to me though - it was kinda sad, really,” Brenda offered with a grimace of a smile.

Sharon grimaced back, and then asked: “What exactly did she say to you?”

“Do you want the broad strokes? Or specifics?”

“The specifics, if you please. I need specifics to confront her with, so she knows we’re not keeping
secrets from one another,” Sharon reasoned.

“She did seem surprised that you let me read her text message. It was more of the same - she called me a bed bunny, implied that I was a kept woman cuz of my outfit and on account I was runnin’ errands for you or somethin’.”

“Denise has never been one for absolute honesty...what the hell is a bed bunny?”

“We’re really going to get into semantics, Sharon?” Brenda queried with a raised eyebrow.

“I guess I want to know exactly what she’s accusing me of, Brenda Leigh,” groused Sharon, wrinkling her nose and tossing back the rest of her wine. She looked covetously at the bottle but didn’t pour herself another glass.

“If I had to guess, I would say that she’s intimating that I’m some sort of gold-digging trollop. I don’t so much mind the sexual implications, cuz we both know I’m your trollop, but I’m no gold-digger.” Sharon managed a smile at that, and Brenda reached out to take the brunette in her arms, trailing gentle fingers along the bare skin exposed by Sharon’s unzipped dress. Sharon wrapped her arms around Brenda and held fast, squeezing a little.

“Thank you for being such a good sport about this, Brenda Leigh. I can’t believe she actually approached you in a public place like that,” Sharon murmured, her lips moving against the smooth strands of Brenda’s hair.

“I’d put up with bucketloads more crazy so long as I can be here with you like this, Shari.” She plucked gently at the band of Sharon’s bra. “Can I call you my sugar mama?”

“I think I’d rather Captain Snobbypants,” said Sharon with a wry chuckle.
Sharon was still standing in front of the closet, wearing only her jeans and a comfortable black cotton bra, when Brenda exited the bathroom.

“You still haven’t picked out a shirt, Sharon?” She put a hand on the brunette’s bare shoulder and the other woman startled a little. “Baby, we have to get going - the boys are going to beat us there and they don’t have keys.”

“Sorry,” Sharon apologized, a faint flush coloring her cheeks. “I think I might be a little nervous.” Brenda smiled and let her fingers trail down Sharon’s bare arm to clasp hands with her. Brenda’s team had only ever gotten glimpses of ‘Sharon’ versus the ‘Captain Raydor’ that had previously lurked in their murder room and stepped on their heels at crime scenes.

Sharon squeezed Brenda’s hand. She knew it was a bit silly, but she felt almost as though she was about to meet a bunch of new people and not the cops that she’d been working with for years.

“You’ll be fine,” Brenda assured her. “I have faith in you, and I know for a fact that the boys’ll have open minds. Even Provenza.” Sharon quirked a brow and fashioned her lips into a doubtful moue. “He wouldn’t have agreed to come, otherwise, Shari. He might not like change, but he isn’t stupid. Most of the time.” Brenda pulled a hunter and cream striped henley off a hanger and pushed it against Sharon’s chest. “Finish getting dressed - I’ll go get the coffee ready.” With a last fond squeeze to Sharon’s hand, Brenda released it and left. Sharon watched her, admiring the tumble of blonde curls that spilled prettily against the pale blue sweater she was wearing. Obediently pulling on the shirt, Sharon chuckled to herself at the incongruity of Brenda Leigh picking out a shirt for her! It was a good shirt, for the weather and the task at hand, but Sharon knew that Brenda liked it because it clung to the shape of her breasts and belly. She settled the soft fabric around her hips, tucking the front into the waist of her jeans and reached for her brown boots.

Brenda was waiting by the door, on the phone, with both their purses at her feet when Sharon came down the stairs.

“No, we’re leavin’ right now, so we’ll probably get there the same time as you.” She paused and listened, head cocked. “No, just pull into the drive - it should be empty on account of no one livin’ there.” Another pause, and a smile and a hand on Sharon’s waist as she joined her at the door. “Ok. See you in a few minutes.” She hung up.

“Julio and David just picked up the truck from Julio’s church,” Brenda informed her. “I’m assumin’ Andy and Mike are takin’ separate cars and’ll show up eventually.” Brenda stooped to pick their bags and stepped back to open the door. “Let’s go.”

There were two cars parked on the street in front of Brenda’s small apartment building when Sharon and Brenda pulled up in the Jag. Sharon maneuvered the little car in to place behind Andy’s Accord and turned off the engine. Sharon was positive that the people standing on the walk didn’t recognize the vehicle because none of them seemed to take notice of them. They left their bags in the car and exited the vehicle with their coffee cups in hand.

“Heyyyyy ya’ll,” drawled Brenda after the doors thumped shut. The little knot of people turned and greeted the two women politely. Brenda introduced Sharon to Cathy Tao and turned to do the same for Kevin, and found that he, Mike and Andy were huddled around Sharon’s car.
“Oh lord,” Brenda said, lightly elbowing Sharon in the ribs. “I told you we shoulda brought one of the Crown Vics.”

“But this is so much more amusing,” smirked Sharon good-naturedly. “Besides, the car needs to be driven - especially since we’re supposed to be driving it up to Santa Cruz on Tuesday.”

“Yea, it’s going to get driven plenty when you have to take my whole squad on a test ride before they’ll go home.” Sharon chuckled at Brenda’s consternation and snaked an arm around her waist. Cathy was happy to chat with them about the upcoming holiday - the whole squad and their families were so grateful to finally have the guarantee of some holidays off every year.

Mike and Kevin and Andy may have been, for all appearances, inspecting the car, but in reality, they were talking, circumspectly, about the Chief and the Captain.

“So what happened to Agent Howard?” Kevin wanted to know. Tao opened his mouth, probably to launch into an explanation that would be both long winded and embarrassing. Andy cut him off.

“Kevin, if at any point in your life, you find yourself involved with a brilliant, career-driven woman, do not, under any circumstances, attempt to dictate to her what should be most important in her life.”

“Uhhh,” Kevin said, a little mystified as to why Andy was providing him this lesson in romance.

“Just make a note of it or something, kid.”

“If you say so, Uncle Andy.” Kevin lifted his head to look more openly at the women, who were walking into the apartment building. “So how did that,” he gestured to Brenda, who was gathering up the mail that was spilling out of her mailbox, and the Captain, who was patiently holding their travel mugs of coffee, “happen?”

“A mystery,” answered his father and Andy nodded in agreement.

“Didn’t they used to fight?”

“That only happened once, really,” Andy stated with a smirk. If he ever got to make a toast at their wedding, he was mentioning the shouting match in Pope’s office. “Once the Captain figured out that getting riled up just makes the Chief gun harder for ya, she cooled it. The sarcasm, though. And the deadly quiet struggles for evidence and resources…”

Kevin had a light bulb moment. “Maybe they were sublimating.” Andy snorted and his father raised an eyebrow at him. “What? We learned about it in AP Psych.” The conversation paused a long beat. “You think they still fight?”

“Naw - they don’t have to sublimate,” Andy put extra emphasis on the word, “anymore.” Kevin’s face twisted into an expression that could only be called a leer. He fought it down quickly, but unfortunately for him, his father was an observant man. Tao narrowed his eyes at his son.

“Kevin…” he began in a warning tone, but Kevin cut him off, knowing he was probably in for an embarrassing bit of parenting and wanting to stave it off.

“Awww, Dad, I didn’t mean it,” he whined, but only a little.

“No, listen to me. I had to have this discussion with Julio yesterday. If the Chief is affectionate with Captain Raydor, and I expect she will be, because she is that sort of person, that does not give you license to stare or ogle.” Kevin was flushing crimson, but that didn’t stop his father.
“Lesbians do not exist for your titillation or to be objectified, and I expect you to treat Chief Johnson and Captain Raydor with respect.”

“I get it Dad. Sorry.” There was an awkward silence. “I’m just going to go, uh, elsewhere, since this just got really uncomfortable.” Kevin walked away to find somewhere to let his embarrassment fade - maybe he’d try his luck actually helping with their task for the day. That should keep him out of anymore unbearable situations.

“That was harsh, Mike,” Andy declared once the young man was out of earshot. Tao shrugged.

“He needed to hear it. I don’t want him to be ‘that guy’ to any woman - gay or straight or somewhere in between. Better to embarrass him now than for him to make an ass out of himself later.” Andy made a rueful face.

“Sometimes you gotta show your ass to really learn the lesson, Mike.” He clapped the other man on the back. “Let’s go get to work.”

The truck had arrived and the furniture was ready to be moved out, but the boys were still outside, carrying on about the Jag; Brenda thought that Julio was going to have a stroke when he saw it. She was standing in her former dining room, looking around at this place that was slowly being emptied of anything memorable or meaningful. It was a surprisingly nice feeling, transitioning the detritus of her life over to the house she now shared with Sharon. The apartment was always supposed to be temporary, a step on the road to something bigger and better, so it had never been repainted or decorated to suit either Brenda or Fritz’s tastes - they hadn’t even talked about it, really. Sharon was already pestering her good-naturedly about redecorating the bedroom and adding more shoe storage to the closet (they had a lot of shoes, between them) and adding a workspace for Brenda in the corner of the living room.

Sharon’s taste in interior decoration was all warm colors and clean lines, much like the woman herself. And like the cool facade of Captain Raydor that hid the woman, Sharon, on the surface, the house was extraordinarily tidy, but Brenda had found, after spending time there, that the furniture had been chosen for comfort first, and the fabrics to hide potential stains, and that Sharon didn’t mind a little clutter (her discarded clothing didn’t always make it all the way into the laundry basket, and sometimes shoes would be hiding in strange places when she went to look for them, and she had a tendency to leave books or magazines or other reading material open on flat surfaces for days, particularly the LA Times crossword puzzle). So Brenda was loathe, really, to change anything about the house, but supposed it could be fun to go furniture shopping with Sharon, or to pick out paint swatches, or even to do some DIY type things - though she didn’t really know if Sharon was a do-it-herselfer. She certainly didn’t clean her own pool or maintain her own yard, though she (now they) did clean the house once a week.

Sharon’s willingness to refashion her house to suit Brenda was heartening, but even more heartening had been coming home Thursday to find a new picture in a handsome new frame on Sharon’s desk, next to her laptop. It was one that Amelia Kinlan had taken of them, that Sunday at Geoffrey’s; they were leaning back in their chairs, smiling more at one another than the camera. It was a candid sort of moment, captured by a good eye with a decent camera phone. Sharon had been occupied in the kitchen when Brenda noticed this new addition, so she popped the 4x6 out of it’s frame and wrote their names, the date and the location on the back of the slick photo paper. Hopefully someday soon she could keep a similar photo on her desk at work and as the wallpaper on her desktop and the lock screen on her phone. She was a little ridiculous, and completely smitten.

Brenda was startled from her reverie by Sharon calling out for her: “Brenda, what are you doing in
“Well, I was under the impression that we were going to get some furniture moved and then do our socializin’ back at our place,” Brenda grumbled. Sharon gave her an unrepentant grin and sidled in for a hug. She wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and spun her around, just once, to the sound of Brenda chuckling in her ear.

“Our place,” Sharon murmured. “I really like the sound of that.”

“Me too,” said Brenda with a contented sigh. “I was just standin’ here thinkin’ how temporary this apartment always felt.” Sharon took in the bare walls and empty shelves and had to agree that it didn’t really look lived in - but then she hadn’t ever seen the place when Fritz was living in it. They were silent for a moment, both congruently happy that their place was not this place, and that their place was together. Sharon felt Brenda’s nose nuzzling through her hair and blessed the slender blonde’s affectionate nature.

“I love you, Brenda Leigh.”

“I love you too, Shari.” Brenda pulled back and mock scowled at her. “Even if you did bring that awful car and distract all my children.”

“Well then, maw, why don’t you go whip them into shape,” Sharon teased.

“If I’m maw, does that make you paw?” Brenda queried sweetly, a mischievous glint in her brown eyes. “And maybe we should just press the alarm button on the key fob that’s diggin’ into my hip. That’ll light a fire under’em.”

“Do you really want your former neighbors’ final memory of you to be a bunch of men squealing about a car alarm?” Sharon dug the little electronic key out of her pocket. “I have no idea what this is going to sound like…” she warned, putting her thumb on the red alarm button. Brenda only wiggled her eyebrows in encouragement. ‘Terrible,’ Sharon mouthed before pointing the key out towards the street and pushing down on the button. An unholy racket sounded from outside. Sharon thought she heard a shriek through the din. She hoped no one had a heart attack and pressed the lock button to turn the alarm off.

“That’s some alarm,” Brenda said, blinking a little dazedly. “Give ‘em about 30 seconds to get in here then do it again.”

“You’re evil.”

“I’m gettin’ an air horn for the office.”

Julio came pelting into the apartment: “Chief! Captain! Something’s wrong with the car alarmrrrrrrrrrrrr.” He trailed off when he saw the keys in Sharon’s hand and the wicked smirk on Brenda’s face. “Not cool.”

“Oh hush. I’m sure Sharon’ll let you look up the car’s skirt some more once we get over to the house and get the truck unloaded.” She pointed out the door behind him. “Now go herd everyone else in here so we can get this over with.”

“They’re coming, Chief.” He looked around the rather forlorn apartment. “What’s the biggest piece that’s going on the truck,” he asked.

“The couch, definitely,” Sharon answered. “That should probably go on first. We can fit the mattress and table and chairs and odds and ends around it.” Julio sighed mournfully.
“That couch looks heavy.”

“It is heavy. Brenda and I couldn’t even get the damn thing off the ground.”

“Hopefully we get this taken care of and no one throws their back out,” joked Julio and Sharon smirked.

“I think he just called us old, Sharon,” Brenda stage whispered to her lover.

“Mmmm, I’m pretty sure he was intimating that you are out of shape, honey,” teased Sharon in a seductive purr. Brenda scowled at her and Sanchez snickered, but was saved the Chief’s ire by the rest of their little party trooping in through the door.

Brenda watched as Sharon got all the boys in a more or less orderly ring around the large sofa and had David and Julio, on either end, get the monstrous piece of furniture off the ground so everyone could get a grip on it. They shuffled awkwardly towards the door, which Brenda was supposed to hold open, though she was momentarily transfixed by the straining muscles of Sharon’s arms, snapping back to reality when Cathy nudged her gently. She scuttled over to hold open the heavy wooden door as the couch slid through it, rolling her eyes at herself. Brenda had caught herself staring at Sharon arms before, last weekend, when they were moving carefully packed boxes of Brenda’s Grandmother’s china into the back seat of Brenda’s car. Sharon had caught her at it and smirked, then dragged her eyes along Brenda’s bare shoulder and bicep, and licked her lips. Brenda flushed, but was grateful - there was no need to feel embarrassment over a shared desire.

After some unexpected trouble with the mattress (who knew memory foam was so heavy - not Brenda, because she hadn’t been at home when the thing was delivered), the truck was nearly loaded, and everyone was getting along surprisingly well. Not that there hadn’t been any conflict - what Brenda really meant was that Sharon was comfortable being Sharon and hadn’t slipped into defensive Captain Raydor mode even once - because there had been an argument between Julio and David about where to put the mattress on the truck, and a few stern glances from Mike directed towards his son.

Andy and Sharon were fitting the final piece of furniture into the puzzle when the landlord and super of the little apartment building approached to stand next to Brenda on the sidewalk.

“Hey, Tony,” Brenda said, genuinely glad to see him. They had gotten along quite well once Brenda got over her initial reticence about the cat situation. “I was gonna call you on Monday to thank you for lettin’ me keep some stuff here over the holidays.”

“Oh, that’s no trouble at all. I’m going to be redoing the tile in the master bath and putting down a new floor in the kitchen, so there’s no rush.”

“Well, it’s appreciated, anyway,” she demurred. Tony was silent a few moments, a type of silence that Brenda was very familiar with - he wanted to tell her something. She waited out his reticence.

“Fritz has been here looking for you. I’m aware of at least three times in the last two weeks. He asked me once, if I knew where you were. He also asked if there had been any men hanging around. I answered no on both counts, but it’s sort of…” Tony trailed off.

“It’s an uncomfortable spot for you to be in,” Brenda finished for him. “I apologize. Fritz has been acting a little weird, so I haven’t talked to him about moving yet.” She laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “If he bothers you over Thanksgiving, tell him whatever you like. I plan to talk to him just after, regardless.”
“I’ll just plead ignorance again if he comes around.” He looked over to where Sharon was standing on the ramp of the truck, talking with Andy. “I’m sorry he’s causing trouble for you and your lady.” Brenda’s eyebrows shot to her hairline and she opened her mouth to say something, but Tony cut her off. “She’s been around as much as you have the past six weeks - which isn’t much, but she’s been there. Plus, she keeps looking over here, to make sure you’re all right.”

Brenda managed a rueful, but genuine smile. “Are we that obvious?” she asked curiously.

“Nah,” Tony answered with a wink. “Though you do seem to have a thing for attractive brunettes,” he mused and Brenda barked out a laugh. “Have a nice Thanksgiving, and don’t be a stranger, okay.” He left with a smile for Brenda and a nod for Sharon who was walking up, keys in hand.

“We’re all loaded up,” she said.

“Let me make sure all the lights are off and lock up.”

“Was that your building super?” Sharon called into the house from the entryway as Brenda took one last turn through the apartment, checking to make sure everything necessary had been loaded, and flipping off lights and clicking off lamps in her wake.

“Yea. Fritz has been over here checkin’ up on my whereabouts.” There was a pause and Sharon knew that Brenda had probably heaved a sigh. “I’ll have to talk to him after we get back from Santa Cruz. I can’t believe he’s bein’ so nosy…” she appeared in the arch from the darkened kitchen.

“He’s probably just now realizing that the two of you aren’t reconciling, Brenda,” Sharon soothed.

“How’d you get to be so reasonable,” Brenda grumbled, though she was really relieved that Sharon wasn’t reacting to Fritz’s behavior with stridency or anger.

“I don’t know about that, but I think I can…empathize with what he’s going through right now.”

“How do you mean?” Brenda asked, a wary tremolo catching her words and making them waver a bit.

“The last night we spent apart, I had a nightmare that you’d left, just vanished. And then I woke up and you weren’t there and I couldn’t breathe, or think. It was awful. I couldn’t fall back asleep after,” Sharon confessed.

“Oh, Sharon,” Brenda whispered like a benediction, her gaze lambent and tear pricked. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I wouldn’t have been sleepin’. If I’m out at weird hours and that happens again, call me,” she insisted. Sharon averted her eyes. Brenda narrowed hers. “Promise me, Sharon Raydor.”

“I promise,” Sharon mumbled, still looking down at where her hands fiddling with her keys. She willed her body to relax when Brenda wrapped her up in a fierce hug, murmuring words of love into Sharon’s ear in a husky drawl. They both were aware that this subject needed revisiting, but now was not the time, not with Brenda’s entire squad waiting for them outside.

The second part of the move - Sharon’s old furniture out and on the lawn, Brenda’s things off the truck and in their proper places, and the truck reloaded - took a fraction of the time the first portion
had. Once the boys had gotten a look at the back yard, including the fire pit Sharon had dragged from her shed, motivation had been in abundant supply.

Standing next to Brenda on the front porch, watching Gabriel and Kevin Tao practically jog the last of her old dinette onto the truck, Sharon chuckled.

“I would have started inviting Major Crimes over for barbecues years ago had I known that a pool and some beer and the promise of s’mores would make them so helpful,” she murmured to Brenda and Cathy. Cathy sniffed. Brenda smirked and shot her a flirtatious wink. Sharon wondered exactly how much cooperation she could have gotten out of Brenda in the past with s’mores and baked goods.

With the truck closed, and everyone looking a little worse for the wear, they trickled through the house and into the back yard where a cooler of beer and soda and pitchers of sangria and iced tea were waiting. Julio and David fished beers out of the cooler while Andy flopped down onto a lounger with a groan and Mike filled a tumbler to the brim with sangria and greedily gulped down half of it before raising his glass to Brenda and Sharon who had taken seats next to one another at the table on Sharon’s deck.

It was Kevin who moved things along from quietly awkward to enjoyable. He kicked off his tennis shoes, pulled his t-shirt over his head and shucked off his jeans to reveal a pair of board shorts and hit the surface of the pool with an impressive splash. Julio and David followed suit at a more sedate pace, making for the hot tub with drinks in hand.

Brenda ignored the goings on, chatting with Sharon and Mike and Cathy, until Andy sat up and removed his shirt. Brenda fought back a cringe and slid her hand into Sharon’s underneath the table and squeezed, suddenly very glad that she lived a back hair free lifestyle.

When Mike excused himself to join his son in the pool, Sharon shot Brenda a glance. “We could set up the volleyball net,” she suggested.

“Lord, then someone really will throw their back out,” Brenda snarked. “Remember that stupid badminton game at the LAPD picnic a few summers ago?” she asked Cathy.

“Of course I do,” Cathy replied, rolling her eyes to the sky. “Mike could barely walk for a week afterwards. These geniuses were playing something like geriatric full contact badminton,” she explained to Sharon.

“And no one videoed it?” Sharon said with a disapproving note in her voice. “For shame!”

“I like the way you think, Sharon.”

“Cathy, you’re going to give her pretensions,” warned Brenda playfully.

“Mmmm, we both know I’m quite pretentious, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon purred and Brenda swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. At that moment, and with that statement, everything about the brunette was sultry and suggestive, even if it was unintentional; the cant of her head, the curl of her abundant hair around her face, the throatiness of her voice, her lidded green eyes behind her glasses.

Brenda cleared her throat before speaking, unsure if her voice would crack with the wave of lust that she was caught in. Sharon raised a questioning eyebrow at her. “Ok, Cap’n Snobbypants, how about we go get the appetizers out of the fridge.” Brenda could suppress her desire for Sharon by shoveling crudite and dip into her face.
With a smile for Cathy that Brenda was sure had to look somewhat psychotic, Brenda stood and hustled into the house. As soon as Sharon stepped through the door Brenda pounced on her, maneuvering her up against the counter and bringing their lips together, swiping a greedy tongue against the surprised woman’s mouth. A contented noise burbled from Brenda’s throat when Sharon relaxed and allowed the counter and Brenda to support her; her hands clasping Brenda’s waist and then sliding into the rear pockets of her jeans, one leg twining around Brenda’s. Now pressed against Sharon, the urgency drained from Brenda and she concentrated on making the other woman melt against her using lips and teeth and tongue and fingers worming their way under clothing to find bare skin.

Sharon tasted like the sangria she had been sipping on the back porch and the peppermint lip balm she used when she wasn’t wearing lipstick and something undefinable that was distinctly Sharon, and even though Brenda hadn’t had nearly enough, she pulled away to suck in a ragged breath then promptly nosed away Sharon’s hair to suckle an earlobe into her mouth.

“Mmmmmm,” Sharon hummed a little breathlessly. “Not that I’m complaining, but what has you all hot and bothered.”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” Brenda kissed down to her Captain’s jaw and paused on her neck to feel the flutter of Sharon’s pulse beneath her lips.

“Maybe?”

“I needed to feel you,” Brenda murmured and forestalled any more questions by capturing Sharon’s lips again.

It was in that position that Cathy and the newly arrived Tomás found them nearly ten minutes later. Tomás smirked at the scene in front of him and spared a glance for the Missus Tao - she had an amused glint in her eye. Brenda was leaning on Sharon, cupping one of Sharon’s breasts between their tightly clinched upper bodies. He was glad he couldn’t see what her fingers were doing. He was also glad that despite Sharon’s hands in Brenda’s back pockets, there was no lower body action happening in this little tableau. That would have embarrassed him more than the whole topless sunbathing thing. He cleared his throat obnoxiously. The Chief blushed scarlet and hid her face in Sharon’s hair.

“All right ladies, enough with the make out break, your macho moving men are clamoring for sustenance.” The two women pulled apart, but not before Sharon whispered something into Brenda’s ear, eliciting a chuckle from the blonde. Tomás bit back a sigh - they really were very cute together.

It took only a few moments to retrieve the dip and hummus from the refrigerator and pass it off to Tomás and Cathy, who took it out to the table. There was a scramble from the pool and hot tub when the boys realized there was food present.

“Do you want to get in the pool, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon asked quietly - the question for Brenda’s ears alone. Brenda shrugged; she wasn’t in a hurry to be on display, alone, in front of her squad. Her only bathing suit was the blue strapless one she’d purchased for Sharon’s enjoyment and she couldn’t see herself wearing it in front a bunch of coworkers.

“Do you want to get in the pool, Sharon?”

“I would like to soak in the hot tub for a few minutes before starting the grill, yes, but I’m not eager to…”
“Go it alone?” Brenda finished for her. “I’ll get in with you if you lend me a one piece.” Sharon chuckled.

“I think you’d be better off in your suit. But I bought you something with a little more coverage for when we go visit my parents - the kids’ll want us to swim with them.”

“Is the entire Raydor clan semi-aquatic?”

“It’s possible. My parents’ indoor pool is a powerful draw for the age 5 to 10 set, but in the summer, it’s the beach and the boat.”

“Let’s go get changed then.”

Tomás rolled his eyes when Brenda and Sharon didn’t follow the appetizers (and guests) out to the deck. He made polite conversation with the men who were sometimes co-workers as they came to partake of Sharon’s delicious (and deceptively spicy) layered bean dip and some sort of hummus. He also took a minute to discreetly ogle David Gabriel in a pair of rather brief, stylish swim trunks. Eye candy was eye candy.

The rush for food subsided and Tomás was left with Cathy Tao, enjoying her second glass of sangria, and Andy Flynn, whose eyes were still watering after taking too large a bit of bean dip, nibbling on a piece of flat bread to help soothe his scorched taste buds.

“Where’d the Chief and the Captain get to?” Andy asked. Cathy snorted into her drink, prompting a confused look from the gray-haired Lieutenant. “What?”

“They were making out in the kitchen when Cathy and I went to check on them.”

Andy chuckled. “They’re like a couple of teenagers.”

“Sharon would probably smack you upside the head if she heard you compare her to an adolescent.”

“Probably,” Andy agreed amiably. “But love looks good on the Captain, goo-goo eyes and all.”

“So, how’d you find out about the two of them?” Tomás asked Andy, whom he knew had a good eye for detail, and an ever better eye for the foibles of Brenda Leigh Johnson.

“Remember when Sanchez tapped that guy in the knee? The Chief’d been acting cagey for a couple weeks before that - texting and staring off into space and silly smiles and the whole nine yards, so I knew something was up. But the Captain bringing the Chief and the little girl here after the shooting, that’s when I figured out the ‘who’.”

“Mike and I saw them at the movies the weekend before that, I think. It took a double feature for him to believe that they were dating and not just friends. It took me about 30 seconds of watching them share popcorn and a soda.”

“I can’t believe he managed to keep that to himself,” Andy remarked a little sourly.

“That’s because he was under strict orders to restrain himself and not be a gossip.” Cathy gave Andy a stern look. “I think Major Crimes and Chief Johnson have had quite enough of loose lips to last a life time.”

“Point taken,” Andy muttered, feeling thoroughly reproached. “So what about you, Doctor?” Andy inquired, trying to dispel the slight awkwardness that had settled over the table. “Being the
Captain’s neighbor and all, did you know the moment they started dating?”

“Nope. You and Cathy both found out well before I did. You’re going to love this, Flynn,” Tomás said with a smug grin. “I stopped by a few weeks ago to see Sharon - we usually have drinks and dinner a couple times a month and she’d been rather conspicuously absent. So I walk over here thinking I can take a swim and chat with Sharon and maybe wrangle myself a meal in the process, because the woman is a fabulous cook.”

Tomás paused to take a sip of his sangria, wanting to drag out his reveal as long as possible. “What I wandered into was apparently Miss Brenda Leigh’s recreation of summer on the topless beaches of the Balkan Mediterranean, because they were both sunbathing in 50% of already rather skimpy bikinis. Imagine my surprise.” Andy’s jaw dropped and his eyes filled with naked envy and quite a bit of longing.

“That is so extraordinarily unfair,” the normally stoic detective whined and Tomás smirked at him. Andy narrowed his eyes at the gloating doctor, unsure if he wanted to take the risk of asking for details. He had opened his mouth to do so when a considerable portion of his curiosity was assuaged by the Chief and the Captain stepping out on the deck in revealing, but not scandalously so, bikinis.

Though the Chief frequently bared her arms and showed a substantial amount of cleavage in her work outfits, Andy’s imagination had not adequately or accurately conjured the slender, sculpted perfection of the rest of Brenda’s body. The peacock green of her boy shorts and halter style top set off the creamy paleness of her skin and exposed the musculature of her abdomen and the delicate dips of her ribs and her tiny navel. Andy averted his eyes and took a gulp of his tea because all of a sudden the mild November day was as sweltering as the fury of August, and Andy was a kid again, at the municipal pool in Mt. Holly, New Jersey, struck dumb by the beautiful, unobtainable girls that hung out under the awning of the concession stand.

The Captain wasn’t any easier for Andy to look at. Her body was curvier, softer than the Chief’s, but hard muscle flexed under the skin of her torso and along the length of her arms and in her strong thighs. A smattering of freckles dusted Sharon’s shoulders and chest and down into the valley between her breasts, and her nipples were hard beneath the shiny black fabric of her bathing suit top. The little bits of flab and sagging skin in the usual places (stomach, inner thigh, upper arms) were almost a comfort - a reminder that this was an actual flesh and blood woman, not a statue of cool, pristine marble carved by Michelangelo and given life by some arcane process.

Andy had to suck the inside of his cheek between his molars and bite down to keep his expression anything like neutral - the pain had the added benefit of distracting him from thoughts involving the color of nipples and what it would be like to slip fingers under the elastic of bikini bottoms and feel a shiver of pleasure. Or if the Chief slid her fingers along the waist of the Captain’s bikini and…No! He clamped down on his thoughts. Provenza in a speedo, he thought. Provenza featured in a pinup calendar in French maid getup with a feather duster.

His new mantra allowed him to smile pleasantly at the Chief as she collected her sweating glass of sangria and sauntered to the hot tub. He even managed not to full on stare as she crouched next to the tub, the curve of her back and the dimples at the base of her spine utterly entrancing, and then gingerly lowered herself into the water. When he looked away, back at Cathy and Morales, the Captain was there, scrutinizing him. She cocked her head a little and pursed her lips. Andy swallowed nervously. Was she going to take the piss out of him for ogling? The little stare down ended when the Captain shifted her weight and Andy’s gaze flicked down to her torso, lingering on the flare of her hips. The raised eyebrow and the smirk on her face when he dragged his eyes back to civilized territory was a clear message for him: so predictable. She collected her own drink and
decamped for the hot tub, taking a place next to Brenda, their backs to the table, bare shoulders nearly touching.
Chapter 19

Morales had volunteered to fire up the grill and take charge of the burgers and vegetable kabobs to afford Sharon a bit more time to relax and socialize, and Andy had been surprised to find himself rising from the chair he had pulled closer to the hot tub to assist. He had been in the kitchen, retrieving the covered basket of buns when the doorbell rang.

Approaching the door, Andy could see Provenza’s glowering face through the decorative glass. He was wearing a loud Hawaiian print shirt and was cradling a maroon box in his arms. Andy was familiar with that box - it contained a bottle of 12 year old Macallan sherry oak scotch.

Flynn flipped the deadbolt and opened the door to let his partner in. Provenza didn’t even bother with a greeting, just stepped past him into the house, nearly handing off the box, but thinking better of it.

“Where’ve you been?”

“At Liz’s with the grandkids. Then I stopped to pick up a little housewarming gift.” He waggled the box at Flynn.

“For you or for the Chief? Does the Chief even like scotch?”

“No clue. But I have it on good authority that the Captain does.”

“Did Louie Provenza actually make an effort?” Flynn asked, mockingly aghast.

“Shut up. Now where is everyone?”

“In the back yard talking. Morales and I are getting the burgers started.” Provenza chuckled derisively and made a whipping motion with his free hand.

“You know, I’ll gladly man the grill and set up the food if it means the Chief and the Captain stay in their bikinis instead of changing to cook.”

Provenza snorted. “You say that like I want to see a 60 year old woman in a bikini,” he grumped. Andy rolled his eyes and led the way into the kitchen.

“You know, you really are an idiot sometimes, Provenza.” Andy picked up the basket of rolls to take outside to the table. “Drinks are outside in the cooler.” He stepped outside, leaving Provenza to his own devices. Andy didn’t really want to be around him if he was going to be a downer.

Provenza rolled his eyes at his friend’s departure. Did Andy really expect him to be hearts and flowers about anything? Ever? Left alone in the house, he decided to snoop a little. Laziness restricted his efforts to peeking in the pantry (filled with wine and booze and a plentiful amount of dry goods, including a giant bag of miniature Reese’s cups and two boxes of ding-dongs) and examining the photos and mementos on the refrigerator. An impressive row of cookbooks weighted down the refrigerator; they all looked well thumbed, which fit with the amount of delicious-looking leftovers that the Chief had been eating lately. Pictures were clustered on the freezer door - the Captain with a tall young man, a younger Captain with a dark haired young lady, hardly more than a girl; her children he guessed, as they both wore the Captain’s most impish smirk. Next to a picture of an elderly woman reaching into an enormous turkey, her face stretched into a grimace, the Chief and Willie Rae lifted their glasses to the photographer at the impromptu Christmas gathering they had held a few years back. A picture of the Chief and the deceased Kitty...
rounded out the collage. On the refrigerator door, held in place by a bright red magnet marked ‘IMPORTANT’ was a reminder from a dental office close to police HQ, that Brenda Johnson had a cleaning on December 14. A similar card reminded Sharon Raydor of an upcoming gynecological exam and mammogram.

It was so disconcerting to find out one’s nemesis was an actual human being who had a family that she loved and a woman that she was meshing her life with and hobbies that she was good at and health that she took care of. It was all so mundane - not to mention mildly disappointing - to find out that Captain Sharon Raydor didn’t sleep in a coffin.

Provenza was greeted warmly as he stepped out on to the deck. Morales waved a pair of tongs at him from his place at the grill; Julio and Kevin Tao took a timeout from whatever game they were playing in the pool with a ball and a pair of inner tubes; David and Mike waved him over to the hot tub where they were lounging with the Chief and the Captain, and Cathy on the sidelines.

Depositing the box onto the table, Provenza’s first order of business was to procure himself a beer. He plunged his hand into the bitter, stinging cold of the cooler and surfaced with a bottle of Sam Adams. Thank god the Chief had taken his advice on beverage selection - a beer or two was exactly what he needed after a long morning of wrangling grandchildren under the watchful eye of his former wife Liz. Helping the Chief move probably would have been much more relaxing. Using the church key fastened helpfully to the side of the cooler, Provenza popped the cap off his beer and took a long swig. Beer and burgers would make for a perfect afternoon if he wasn’t also expected to be sociable. There were perfectly good college football games on, for Christ’s sake.

When he sat down at the end of a lounger close to the knot of people in the hot tub, Provenza was reminded of just why he did these social sorts of things he didn’t particularly want to do: cheeks flush from the heat of water, honeyed curls piled on top of her head, the Chief turned to beam at him. She was happy that he was here with all of them in a pleasant setting that had nothing to do with murder or any other sort of crime. Eager to not dwell too long on his feelings, Provenza opted for humor:

“You know,” he remarked conversationally to the occupants of the hot tub, “this is a lot nicer than a boat filled with water in the front yard.” He was gratified when a laugh burbled up from Brenda’s throat and David started chuckling. Raydor looked slightly askance at the lot of them.

“Do I want to know?” She asked.

“Oh, it’s nothin’ bad, Shari. During the course of an investigation a couple years ago we came across a gaggle of gangsters that had pulled a boat onto their front lawn and filled it with water and were using it as a pool-cum-soakin’ tub or somethin’."

Provenza took up the thread of the story: “And after such a long day of chasing down leads, I decided that I just had to soak my feet.”

“Lieutenant Provenza rolling up his pant legs to dip his toes into a boat pool full of gangsters is one for the history books,” contributed David, raising his bottle to Provenza.

Completely straight faced, Sharon turned to Provenza and said, gravely, “Lieutenant, I am a little concerned that you were having foot pain even with your orthopedic shoes. I do hope you’ve consulted with your doctor about this.”

Brenda snorted and under the roiling surface of the tub, poked Sharon gently in the ribs.

“Score one for the Captain with an age joke,” crowed Mike and Sharon smirked at him.
Smooth as your please, Provenza piped up again. “You might think about trying some orthopedic shoes, Captain. The pinched toes of those heels you wear can’t be good for your temperament.”

“My personality is pinched regardless of footwear, Lieutenant. And where’s the fun in having a pleasant temperament?” Sharon asked with an expression of exaggerated disgust on her lovely features.

Having dragged herself from the relaxing warmth of the hot tub in order to change back into her jeans before dinner, Sharon noticed something on the table amid the pitchers and glasses and bottles of beer. A familiar, elegant red box with the label picked out in gold. Macallan’s sherry oak was her father’s favorite, and the two of them always shared a glass after meals when Sharon visited her parents. Provenza must have brought it with him. She picked up the box and left it on the kitchen counter as she passed through.

Once again in her jeans, with a thick cream cardigan pulled over her henley, Sharon paused in the kitchen to open the box of scotch. She set the bottle of amber liquid on the counter and reached into the cabinet for two short tumblers. Four ice cubes went in each glass and Sharon poured a generous measure of scotch over the cold rocks. She capped the bottle and picked the glasses up and took them outside. Provenza was still seated next to the hot tub - without saying anything, Sharon handed him a glass. He looked up at her in surprise but took the offered drink. Sharon smirked and gently clinked the rim of her squat glass tumbler to the rim of the one Provenza held. Provenza smirked right back and took a long, grateful swallow of the scotch, letting it coat his tastebuds on the way down.

“Just don’t drop my glass,” Sharon said over her shoulder as she walked back to the deck, where Brenda was exiting the house after having done her own quick change out of her bathing suit. Provenza snorted.

Dinner was a surprisingly raucous affair - fanciful and enormous burgers were assembled (portobello burgers for Andy and Cathy) and consumed with relish. Kevin, David and Julio even had seconds. Sharon joked with Julio that maybe he should sign a waiver in case he dislocated his jaw on his combination of beef, mushrooms, cheese, lettuce, tomato and onion.

Darkness had truly fallen by the time dinner was packed away and leftovers prepared for those who wanted them - mostly Kevin, as all those not currently in the middle of a teenage boy’s growth spurt were much too full to think about more food just then.

Sharon deftly lit a cheerfully crackling fire in the stone and wrought iron fire pit. Julio and Kevin and Mike and David eased themselves back into the warmth of the hot tub and Provenza slipped his shoes off to dip his toes in the water. Cathy, Andy and Tomás chatted amiably at the table. Brenda had commandeered a big lounger for the two of them and was curled on her side, watching Sharon work. Sharon caught her eye and the blonde smiled drowsily. The combination of a big meal, the hot tub and the sangria meant that her Brenda Leigh would be sleepy and sweet for the remainder of the evening and suddenly Sharon wanted to shoo their guests out and away to their own homes so she could have Brenda all to herself.

As soon as Sharon eased herself down onto the lounger, Brenda cuddled up against her, snaking a possessive arm across Sharon’s middle and burying her hand under the unbuttoned wool of Sharon’s cardigan. “Don’t need a fire when you’re around,” she murmured and Sharon chuckled.

“You can’t toast marshmallows on me, Brenda Leigh.”

“I’ll keep you anyways,” she said and laid her head on Sharon’s shoulder with a contented little squeak and Sharon’s heart thumped a funny beat in response.
“No falling asleep, Brenda Leigh.”

“But I’m so comfortable and you’re so warm,” Brenda whined.

“And if you nap now you’ll never fall asleep later tonight,” Sharon admonished. She felt like she’d said the same thing to her children dozens of times, but now it was harder to actually mean it because Brenda felt so nice pressed up against her side and Sharon felt replete and drowsy and quite ready to doze off herself.

“Would that be so awful? We could fool around for longer.”

“Someone is awfully sure of herself.” Sharon teased, mind already drifting to the pleasurable activities she was sure they would get up to once their company had gone.

“We always make love on the weekends,” Brenda groused. And it was true; they usually spent a significant amount of time on the weekends in bed together decidedly not sleeping; reaffirming their physical connection with long, slow lovemaking that they didn’t necessarily have the time or energy for during the week. It amused Sharon that sleepy Brenda was gullible enough to believe that she was serious.

“We will,” Sharon reassured her, not wanting the blonde to start making heart wrenching pouty faces and touching Sharon in not so innocent places in order to ramp up their arousal. Because she would. “But I don’t think we should kick our guests out just yet.”

“No,” agreed Brenda. “We still have to make s’mores.” As if Brenda would ever forget dessert, even blissed out and half asleep.

“I wish I had one of my cameras with me,” Mike remarked, discreetly eyeing the two women relaxing on the lounger, Sharon’s hand stroking Brenda’s blonde head. Julio raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

“And I thought I was supposed to be the perv, Mike,” he snarked.

“That’s not what I meant,” Tao huffed back. “A long exposure with the fire as the only light would be cool - the Captain’s hand would be blurred and the whole picture would look sort of soft and out of focus. And I was thinking that it would make a nice Christmas present or something - they can’t have very many photos together yet.”

“Oh, so you were only brown nosing then.”

“I can’t win,” Tao grumbled and Sanchez flashed him a cheeky grin.

Kevin piped up helpfully: “Buzz would have brought a camera.”

“Where is Buzz?” asked Provenza from his seat on the stone edge of the tub.

“Playing designated driver on his mom’s annual gambling weekend.” Buzz had been bitching about the trip to Vegas for weeks, prompting Mike to avoid spending too much time working on their usual projects and upgrades. Maybe things could get back to normal now that the impending doom was no longer impending. Though he couldn’t imagine that Buzz would be in a very good mood on Monday.

“Ouch,” Provenza winced visibly. “His mom is off her nut - it’s a wonder he turned out as normal as he did.”
“You barely know the woman, Provenza. We’ve all met her once.”


Andy couldn’t help but be a little envious, watching Sharon Raydor bury her fingers in Brenda Leigh Johnson’s thick blonde hair. Not too many weeks ago, he would have said without hesitation that he wanted to be in the Captain’s shoes, but now, Sharon was nearly as enticing as his pretty Chief. He was very aware that his crushes were just that - nothing serious - and he was genuinely happy for the both of them; sometimes two people came together at the right time and for the right reasons and Andy felt like he was watching it happen.

Out of nowhere, Morales sighed, and Andy noticed that the doctor’s eyes were pointing in the same direction his were.

“I’m so jealous of them all happy and falling in love,” he said wistfully. “Sharon Raydor and Brenda Leigh Johnson cuddling. Who knew.”

“Sometimes I feel like I should be on the lookout for the apocalypse,” quipped Andy and Morales laughed.

“Somehow I was not that surprised. You know what they say about the line between love and hate.”

“Kevin said something about sublimation earlier that stuck with me,” said Andy with a smirk and Morales threw his head back and let out an honest to goodness guffaw.

“Smart kid.”

“I need to take those psychology books away from him,” Cathy murmured.

“That’s probably not far from the truth though - there was probably some recognition from both of them from the word go.”

“You’re probably right,” Andy agreed. “I still want to know how it happened. Did they start with a date? Who asked who? Or did they just sort of…” he trailed off, but brought his hands together sharply and made a soft ‘explosion’ noise.

“You’re terrible,” Cathy admonished, narrowing her eyes at him. Andy responded with an unrepentant smirk.

“We’ll probably never know,” Morales said mournfully.

“I hate not knowing things,” grumbled Andy, which earned him an amused and exasperated look from both his table mates.

Brenda Leigh Johnson liked her marshmallows an even golden-brown, but she was utterly incapable of producing one that wasn’t crusted black as a lump of charcoal. Julio and Provenza happily consumed her first two failures, though after the third, now a rapidly disintegrating heap on the bottom of the fire pit, Sharon gently took the wire hanger from her lover.

“Let me,” she murmured, plucking a fresh bit of sugar and air from the bag and easing it on to the hanger. Brenda smiled blithely at her and popped another marshmallow into her mouth, one cheek bulging briefly as she chewed. They were sitting at the end of their lounger, pulled close to the fire, huddled together more to be close than for warmth.
“Thanks,” Brenda said and bumped Sharon with her shoulder gently, affectionately, then tilted her face towards Sharon’s, asking for a kiss. Sharon obliged, bringing her lips to Brenda’s and sucking the sweet stickiness of marshmallow from them. Purring in satisfaction, Brenda tried to deepen their lip-lock; her tongue snaking out to curl behind Sharon’s teeth, but Sharon pulled away.

“Do you want a s’more or do you want to make out?” She asked as reasonably as she could with Brenda’s hand on her thigh, fingers skittering along the inseam of her jeans.

“I wanna kiss on you,” was the petulant answer.

“You and your rationality and common sense. I’m holdin’ you to what you said about makin’ out, Sharon,” Brenda said, utterly serious.

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t. Now get the chocolate and graham crackers ready for this marshmallow.”

Brenda scrutinized Sharon’s marshmallow toasting technique - it shouldn’t have surprised her that Sharon played it safe and didn’t thrust the thing into the heart of the fire; she rotated it slowly at the edges of the flames and let it turn an even golden-brown. Always in a hurry, Brenda would let hers catch on fire and then blow it out and hope for the best. She doubted she was patient enough to pull off Sharon’s method, but watching Sharon toast a marshmallow for her? Brenda definitely had the patience for that.

“Ooooo,” cooed Brenda when Sharon presented her with the marshmallow to sandwich between her four squares of Hershey’s and two halves of graham cracker. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m glad my marshmallow toasting skills are appreciated. Even if you are a hazard around open flame.”

“Hey!” Brenda exclaimed around a mouthful of melted chocolate, crunchy graham and too hot sugar. Her eyes watered and she sucked in air in an attempt to cool her scalded tongue.

“And apparently a hazard around too warm desserts,” Sharon quipped, smiling affectionately at her sometimes haphazard lover.

“They’re better when the chocolate is still melty,” the blonde groused, then blew a little on the treat before taking another bite. She moaned a little as she chewed, eyes rolling back. Sharon popped a marshmallow in her mouth in an attempt to keep herself from kissing away the chocolate clinging to Brenda’s upper lip.

Brenda and Sharon escorted the last of their guests out the front door and down the driveway. With a wave and a thank you, David and Julio hopped up into the truck carrying Sharon’s old furniture away. Brenda clasped Sharon’s hand in her’s and they walked back into the house.

“Shari, you wanna deal with the fire pit now or tomorrow,” Brenda asked as she walked into the kitchen to start the dishwasher. She was thankful that Sharon’s efficient planning and judicious use of paper plates meant that dirty dishes were minimal.

Sharon flipped off the lights around the pool and flipped the lock on the back door. “Tomorrow definitely. It’s a messy job.” She moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a tightly zip-locked bag of coffee beans.
“Getting ready for bed already? It’s only 9 and it’s Saturday,” teased Brenda as she shut the dishwasher with a click and pushed the start button - the machine hummed to life.

“Well, someone was quite clear earlier about how they wanted to cap off their evening. Did you want to get out of bed later to get the coffee set up?” She looked over at the blonde, who gave her a sidelong glance that said clearly that neither of them would be getting out of bed for any reason - whether to satisfy their daily caffeine needs or to put out a house fire.

Sharon dumped a heaping portion of beans into the grinder. As the little machine whirred, the potent, hypnotizing aroma of excellent Hawaiian coffee filled the kitchen. Brenda sidled up, sliding arms around Sharon’s waist, hands clasping over the button of Sharon’s jeans, to get a face full of the scent before Sharon dumped the grounds into the filter, shut the machine and set the timer for 7 am.

Feeling Brenda nosing along the bare skin above the collar of her sweater, Sharon leaned back, tilting her head to allow Brenda easier access to the side of her neck. Soft kisses were placed delicately along the tendon at the side of Sharon’s neck.

“So beautiful,” Brenda whispered, nuzzling at the tender, sensitive spot behind Sharon’s ear. Sharon shivered at the sensation, and flushed at the compliment. “Can we talk a little more about the dream you mentioned earlier?” she asked in a quiet voice. Sharon stiffened in Brenda’s arms, and try to pull away, to distance herself from the potential of Brenda’s judgment or ridicule for her neediness. Instead of letting her pull away, Brenda held her more tightly, murmuring soothingly into her ear:

“Hey now, hey. Just listen a second, baby.” Sharon froze, but didn’t relax back into Brenda. “For the most part, I’ve been feelin’ absolutely ecstatic about bein’ with you, about there bein’ an ‘us’, and all my dreams about you have been wonderful. But every once in a while, I’ll be so wrapped in somethin’ - usually somethin’ ugly at work and for a minute I’ll forget my happiness and the world just goes monochrome, like the old movies I used to watch with my Grammy, but flat and ugly.” Brenda’s voice was a low, heavily accented burr, which wasn’t unusual when she was feeling emotional or vulnerable and this simple fact, and Sharon’s ability to recognize it, gave her quite a bit of comfort. She took a deep breath and let the tension go from her body.

“That’s better,” Brenda husked. “I didn’t mean ta’…”

“I know, Brenda Leigh. I know you didn’t.” Sharon sighed heavily. “Sometimes I get panicky because between my ex-husband and my daughter and all the shit that happened at work and with Helena when I was forced out of the closet, I was convinced that not only would I never find someone who made me feel wanted and content and joyful and in love, I was convinced that I didn’t deserve any of it.”

“And here I was thinkin’ that I didn’t deserve someone as wonderful as you after all my abject failures.” It was Brenda’s turn to sigh. “I’ve never wanted to be ‘that person’ that compares relationships, but Shari, I’ve never, never felt so strongly or been so connected to someone before.” Sharon turned in the circle of Brenda’s arms, bringing her hands to rest on the blonde’s thin shoulders and looked into liquid dark chocolate eyes. A tear was coalescing in the corners of both and Sharon reached up to dab them away, ever so gently, with an index finger.

“Don’t cry, honey.” Sharon implored in a voice that throbbed with the threat of tears.

“I’m tryin’ not to. I’m not sad - just kinda emotional.”

“Me too. There are so many things that I feel for you that I struggle to put into words, so I try my
best to let my actions speak for me, but that doesn’t always work since I said some things to you in the past that I needed to correct with words.”

“Like the clothes thing,” Brenda interrupted with a wry smile. Sharon flashed her a matching smile.

“Like the clothes thing. I remain apologetic for that misunderstanding, by the way.”

“I appreciate that.” And Brenda did - and she knew that Sharon kept apologizing in little ways for that failure to communicate, like wearing the shirt that Brenda had picked out for her that morning.

“I shoulda realized after gettin’ to know you better that you would never be shallow enough to care about something as silly as clothes.”

There was a lapse in the conversation as they each took stock of what had been said, and considered what else, if anything, remained unsaid. Brenda opened her mouth to speak, but Sharon got her voice started first. Then stopped and looked expectantly at Brenda, waiting for her to continue.

“No, you go ahead. I have no problem with you goin’ first sometimes,” teased Brenda.

“That was terrible, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon murmured with a shake of her head - though her words were belied by the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “There’s something big I want to talk to you about, and my head keeps telling me it’s too soon, but we’ve already defied conventional expectations about ‘soon enough’ and ‘enough time’ that I should go with what feels right for us and broach the subject.” She paused and swallowed nervously. She had no idea if Brenda even wanted to formalize their relationship beyond cohabitation.

“Really?” Brenda asked breathlessly, wide-eyed but beaming up at her. Sharon smiled back, her anxiety about Brenda’s reaction disappearing, melting away as if it had never been. “You’d wanna ask me somethin’ like that?”

“Most definitely,” Sharon heard herself purr. She felt almost as if she was watching this unfold from a point near the ceiling - like it was an out of body experience.

“We can’t, though, in California. Not legally, anyhow,” Brenda bit out. And then she flushed a little. “I did a little research,” she confessed.

“We have options, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon soothed. “Do you want to talk about this now?”

“I want…” She paused, considering. “I want to know what you want. What your best case scenario is.”

That was an easy one for Sharon, because she wanted it all, and in a fit of honesty shot through with hope and a little bit of fear, she decided to share that with Brenda.

“I want, as soon as your divorce is final, to register as domestic partners. That would give you all the rights of a spouse and allow us to do things like share health insurance and file joint taxes. It would also give you legal recourse if something happened to me,” Brenda opened her mouth to protest and Sharon laid a gentle finger over her lips. “Please let me get this out. Domestic partnership would give you standing in the courts in case one of my children or my ex or the state tried to get greedy. It would give me the same rights and protections, too, of course. But in the mean time, I want you to meet my parents and I want them to love you; I want you to meet my children, even the one that hates my guts and will probably heap abuse on both of us for being together; I want to meet your parents again and have them accept our relationship and even be
happy for us; I want, when we come out at work, for it to not even cause a blip on the radar; I want Fritz to move on and leave you alone. More practically, I want to file a medical and legal power of attorney so that you have some rights in case of an emergency; I want to put you on my car insurance so you can drive the Jag; I want us to talk about combining our finances. I want you to wear my ring. I want to call you ‘wife’,” she finished softly.

She wouldn’t mention her plans to put Brenda in her will or on the deed to the house or to give her access to her trust. Sharon would probably do those things even if Brenda objected - she wanted, in the worst case scenario, for Brenda to be able to keep their house if she wanted, at the very least.

Brenda was crying in earnest now; tears slipped down her cheeks and curved around the corners of her mouth and down her chin. “You,” she began, then stopped, and lifted up a hand to cup Sharon’s cheek, a look of wonderment on her face. “That was very thorough, my Cap’n Raydor. And the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.” She leaned in for a kiss, raising up on her tiptoes a bit, bringing her lips to Sharon’s.

Brenda tasted of salt tears and sugar and her lips were the only lips Sharon wanted to taste for the rest of her life.

“I like all of those ideas, though we might argue about the finances. I don’t know if I’m comfortable jumpin’ about a dozen tax brackets in one fell swoop.”

“It’s not a dozen, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon admonished with a smirk. “I’m very, very privileged in that I’ve never had to worry about money, and I can be very blasé about such things, which might seem strange to you. Will you think about what you’re comfortable with?”

“I don’t want you, or your family, to feel that I’m taking advantage.”

“Brenda, if I put you on my accounts right now, at this very minute, would you go on a crazy shopping spree? Or go gambling? Or fund terrorism?”

“Well, the first one sounds kinda fun,” Brenda joked, “but a big no to the gambling and the terrorism.”

“Sometimes I don’t think you realize that I trust you just as much as you do me.”

“I just…” Brenda began, and then stopped. Sharon could see her searching for the right words. “Maybe I don’t feel like I deserve your trust yet, not after all the shit I put you through at work.”

“Brenda Leigh, all of that is forgiven on my part. What about you? Do you forgive me for using Pope like a sledgehammer when you were driving me crazy and for sneaking off with evidence or interviewing suspects before you were prepared?”

“‘Course I do.”

“Then you’re just going to have to trust that I trust you, personally and professionally.”

“You might be infuriatin’ when you’re all logical,” Brenda groused, burying her face into Sharon’s neck.

“I count both among my many skills.”

“Jerk,” breathed the blonde, then she moaned, a shiver traveling down her spine that Sharon could feel through the other woman’s sweater and t-shirt. Brenda clutched at Sharon’s back and whispered in her ear, practically panting: “Say it.”
“Say what?” Sharon was confused, but caught up in the press of Brenda’s body against hers; the shift of a slender thigh between Sharon’s, the stiffened nipples Sharon could feel even through a few layers of clothing.

“Call me your wife,” Brenda growled, pressing her thigh against Sharon’s apex. Sharon gasped. She was certain that Brenda would be able to feel the warmth of her, denim or no denim.

“Let’s go to bed, wife.” Sharon thought her voice must be impossibly husky in that moment. Her Brenda Leigh was apparently quite enamored with the idea of being Sharon’s spouse - of Sharon being her spouse.

As Brenda practically dragged her up the stairs, Sharon’s pleasantly arousal fogged mind mulled over just what sort of ring she could put on that slightly stubby ring finger that would make her ‘wife’ happiest.
Chapter 20

Sharon opened her eyes to find herself nose to nose with a very awake Brenda Leigh. The blonde’s cocoa colored eyes were sparkling, and the little crinkles at their corners told Sharon that there was a smile on Brenda’s face. She blinked rapidly to clear the fog of sleep from her vision.

“Good morning,” Brenda purred, and then kissed her, sweeping her warm tongue against Sharon’s upper lip before pulling away.

“How long have you been up?”

Brenda shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Ten or fifteen minutes.” She smiled shyly and flushed. “I rarely get to watch you sleep, so I took the opportunity,” she confessed. Sharon’s heart fluttered and a pleasant warmth bloomed in the pit of her stomach. She reached up to cup one of Brenda’s blood suffused cheeks.

“I love you.”

“Love you, too,” murmured Brenda into the palm of Sharon’s hand as she pressed her lips there, and again on the blue veined pulse-point on Sharon’s wrist. “Yesterday was so perfect, Shari. Maybe the best day ever.”

“Really?” Sharon asked with a hitch in her voice. The heat in her belly curled deliciously up her spine and she felt her cheeks and ears tingle with the beginnings of a blush.

“Oh, most definitely.”

Sharon grinned at her. “Well, then I have my work cut out for me, trying to top it.”

“I know you had to be nervous, laying all that out there for me. Thank you, for trusting me enough to put your heart on the line.” She said the last bit with the most adorable apprehensive look on her face, clearly expecting a humorous ‘I told you so’ from Sharon, and in any other situation, Sharon would have taken the opportunity to tease, but not now, not when they were both very vulnerable. So she just smiled, beatifically, knowingly, enough so Brenda would realize that Sharon realized what she was trying to say. Brenda flushed deeper, licked her lips and looked away, then clasped one of Sharon’s hands in her own, her eyes darting back to Sharon’s.

“Would you wear my ring, too, Shari? Is that something you would like?”

Brenda’s question elicited a smile from Sharon that made her mouth go dry and her heart thud funnily; her mossy green eyes shone, smile lines creased at their edges, and her lips were pressed together and trembling like she was fighting back tears.

“Oh, don’t cry!” Brenda exclaimed and gathered the brunette to her, stroking Sharon’s hair and cooing into one of her little bitty ears. Sharon shuddered once and took in a great breath.

“I’m ok,” she sniffled. “And of course I’ll wear your ring Brenda Leigh.”

“Good. Excellent. Maybe we should lighten the mood a little bit.”

“Yes, please,” Sharon agreed. “How about some breakfast?”

“I could eat,” she said and Sharon chuckled; Brenda Leigh could always eat. “And then we can
deal with the fire pit and then maybe watch a few more episodes of Dr. Who on Netflix.”

“That sounds very nice. I have to be out of here by noon, though, to get to my pre-meeting meeting and we should probably pack some.”

“If we must,” Brenda grumbled.

“I’d rather not have to pack after my potentially obnoxious meetings. We can always cuddle up on the couch tonight with a bottle of that McCray Ridge, to celebrate?”

“I really, really like that idea.” Her wide-lipped mouth stretched into a goofy grin. “You’re so thoughtful,” she sighed.

Watching Sharon Raydor pack was like taking a master class in organization and planning. Brenda stood in the closet pretending to decide which dresses she wanted to bring (she had to pick two - apparently nights out with the Raydor family were cocktail attire only), but really she was watching Sharon neatly lay out lingerie on the bed. Three nice sets (black, black, burgundy), three cotton sets (gray, gray, black) and two extra pairs of panties. Brenda blushed. She’d probably have to pack extra underwear too; it was impossible to predict when her desire for Sharon would ratchet up and leave her uncomfortably damp in her underwear with no relief in sight. She’d taken to carrying an extra pair or two in a plastic baggie at the bottom of her purse, too. She turned back to the small selection of cocktail attire on her side of the closet. Everything she owned was black.

“All my dresses are black,” Brenda whined. She pulled her favorite off the bar, a sheath with a dramatic ‘v’ neckline and back and flattering ruching along the torso and laid it over the chest at the foot of the bed. “I could just wear this one twice with two different pairs of shoes,” she suggested sulkily. Sharon gave her an affectionate smile, even though Brenda was sure she sounded like a pouting teenager. Most of the time she loved the fact that her girlfriend cum fiancé was the best dressed woman in the LAPD. Right now, trying to pick out clothing that would impress Sharon’s family, she was less enamored of that fact.

“How often do you have a reason to wear a cocktail dress that isn’t black?”

“Never. Don’t want to stand out like a sore thumb at work events.”

“Certainly not,” Sharon teased and Brenda mock scowled at her. Brenda was right, though; wearing color at a law enforcement function screamed ‘civilian’, and for women who had to fight tooth and nail to be seen as professionals, black was the only option. And even Brenda, who regularly and almost joyfully flouted the conventions of acceptable work attire, didn’t feel comfortable breaking the unwritten proscriptions concerning proper attire at formal law enforcement functions.

“I might have a solution to your problem, but it depends on how you feel about another gift.”

Brenda sighed, but said, “Bring it on. Wanting to look good when I meet your family trumps whatever peevishness I might feel about you spendin’ money on me.”

“In my defense, it was going to be one of your Christmas presents.” Sharon abandoned her folding and left the room.

Brenda was torn. Part of her (the larger part, if she was being honest with herself) relished the fact that her gorgeous, classy significant other sometimes couldn’t resist buying pretty, sumptuous clothing that made her think of Brenda. Though Sharon buying her a designer outfit was, in terms
of relative expense, not much different than Fritz buying her that ugly potted orchid or taking her out for dinner, she thought, reasoning away that little niggling voice that said she should be wary of being showered with gifts. Sharon showered her with lots of other things, too: love, affection, understanding, laughter, food, wine, excellent sex. And it wasn’t like Sharon hadn’t offered to combine her own substantial wealth with Brenda’s own income and modest savings the night before. The salient point was, Brenda never felt like Sharon was trying to buy her affections, nor did she feel obligated to repay Sharon in any way for the gifts she received. Though she did repay her - with kisses and orgasms - largely because the indomitable Sharon Raydor nervous about the reception of her always thoughtful gifts was an intoxicating mishmash of sexy and adorable that Brenda found irresistible.

Brenda resolved to let go of her reservations and dove into the pile of shoes at the bottom of the closet in search of her turquoise pumps - she just hoped she had something to match whatever dress Sharon had hidden away.

Sharon reentered the bedroom carrying a Neiman Marcus branded garment bag and a red shoe box.

“Shoes too?” Brenda asked, and Sharon lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug.

“I checked to see if you had anything to match first, honest.” She put the shoe box on the bed and unzipped the garment bag, sliding it around the dress on the hanger and then up and off. Brenda gasped.

“That’s the one from the window the other day when we were in Beverly Hills!” she exclaimed to Sharon’s shy delight. Of course Sharon noticed that particular shimmering blue and gold jacquard dress she’d nearly face planted on the glass in front of when she’d noticed it in the window of Neiman Marcus. She’d even offered to skip her lunch and go inside, but Brenda had declined her offer; what use did she have for a cocktail dress with color, anyways?

“I bet some poor cleaning person had to scrub my face print off that window - I can’t believe you went back,” Brenda crowed and ran a finger down the slightly scratchy fabric. She had half a mind to put the dress somewhere safe and tackle Sharon to the bed.

“Of course I did. It’s a beautiful dress, and I am positive that it will look fantastic on you.”

“So are we having a little fitting room session then?”

“Well, if you want to bring the dress to Santa Cruz, you might want to find out if it fits.”

“I have no doubt, Shari. You do know my body ever so well,” Brenda said in a purr, though she unbuttoned her jeans anyway and pushed them off her hips. She pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it on the floor without a care. Sharon unzipped the dress, slipped it off the hanger and handed it to Brenda before taking a seat on the bed.

Brenda stepped into the garment and pulled it up around her waist. The bra would have to go; it was cotton patterned with flowers and would be visible through the asymmetrical neckline and cut out. She let the dress hang and flicked open the front clasp of her bra, shrugging it off her shoulders, intending to let it fall to the floor; Sharon caught it before it could and set it gently on the bed, her fingers lingering on the soft cup, eyelids fluttering. She caught Brenda’s gaze; her eyes glittered a darker green than usual - nearly emerald from the expansion of her pupils. Sharon Raydor was aroused, and it became a struggle for Brenda Leigh to continue on with her task of trying on the dress.

Slipping her arms through the holes, Brenda lifted the bodice into place and turned her back to
Sharon, pulling her hair over one shoulder, mutely asking for the other woman to attend to her zipper. Gentle fingers bumped at the base of her spine and drew the dress closed. Brenda took a step away and then turned around.

“You think it fits?”

“Oh my,” Sharon breathed. “Yes, I believe it fits. Try the shoes.” She fumbled with the lid of the shoe box, apparently unable to look away from Brenda. The shoe box contained a pair of Valentino peep toe pumps covered in iridescent gold bead; Brenda traced over the beadwork with a questing finger. She fished them out from their nest of paper and slipped them on, unsurprised that they fit as perfectly as the dress, even if they were a little higher than she was used to - she wobbled a little on her way to the mirror, eager to see the full effect.

“Wow. Sharon, you sure can pick ‘em.”

“It seems that I can,” Sharon husked, moving up behind Brenda in the mirror, placing a kiss on the shoulder left bare by the dress’s neckline. Brenda was struck by the picture the two of them made together - they really were a striking couple.

“You think we could have someone take a few pictures when we’re all dressed up?”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to talk someone into snapping a few for posterity. I certainly wouldn’t say no to pictures of you in this dress.”

“Mmmmm,” Brenda agreed, wondering what Sharon would be packing to wear, certain that it would be gorgeous and flattering. “Unzip me?” Sharon did, and Brenda peeled the dress from her chest and let it slip down, stepping out of it. With careful hands, she laid the shimmering fabric on the chest and then turned her attention back to Sharon. Sharon who was staring and didn’t seem to be aware she was doing so.

“See something you like?” teased Brenda, hooking her thumbs in the waist of her panties and rolling them down her thighs, dragging her nails lightly across the soft skin - this shook Sharon out of her trance and her eyes snapped up to Brenda’s, smoldering.

“Yes.” Sharon answered simply, her eyes darting down to the moisture clinging to the lips of Brenda’s sex - she looked red and a bit swollen from their lovemaking the night before and Sharon couldn’t believe that Brenda was standing in front of her in a pair of four inch heels, wet and ready and all for her.

“Touch me?” the blonde implored, kicking her underwear off and away.

“Are you sure?” Sharon gathered the blonde to her, the height difference allowing her to lean in and kiss Brenda’s neck, her lips finding the rapidly fluttering pulse under the soft skin.

“Just be gentle, I’m a little tender.” Brenda hissed when Sharon cupped her, but as Sharon drew a finger along her slit, collecting Brenda’s arousal on its tip, she moaned and widened her stance to give Sharon better access. “Inside,” she breathed, and when Sharon entered her with two fingers she moaned again, knees buckling, she relied on Sharon to keep her from falling; Sharon wrapped an arm around her waist until Brenda found her feet again.

“Good?” With the pads of her fingers, Sharon applied firm pressure to the slick, silken flesh of Brenda’s inner walls, her thumb gently stroking the hood of Brenda’s clit.

“Fuck, yes. Don’t stop.”
“Could we turn around? I won’t let you fall.”

“Ohhh,” Brenda moaned, trembling. “Why ever do you want…” Then she laughed breathlessly. “The mirror. Naughty.” They shuffled in place a few steps, rotating until Sharon could see Brenda’s pale back in the mirror, tawny curls brushing the bottom of her shoulder blades, the muscles of her buttocks and thighs flexing and shivering in time with the movements of Sharon’s fingers. Sharon dragged her gaze up to her face, flushed with reciprocal pleasure, staring into her own eyes over one of Brenda’s shoulders. She’d only ever had glimpses of herself like this, before Brenda, but her newfound libido and Brenda’s willingness to have at it with her anywhere in the house had led to Sharon discovering, thanks to the reflection of Brenda kneeling between her legs in the darkened glass of the back door, that she enjoyed this low-key voyeurism. Seeing herself with Brenda, not only in passion, but also when they were watching television, or working side by side in the kitchen, or brushing their teeth, gave Sharon a thrill.

“Another,” the blonde demanded, breaking Sharon from her reverie, her hips moving now in counterpoint to Sharon’s ministrations. She slid a third finger into place alongside its fellows and relished the way her hand fit so snugly in and against Brenda’s most intimate parts. Pressing kisses to the corner of Brenda’s jaw and along the length of her neck, Sharon was lost in the humid warmth surrounding her fingers, the scratch of Brenda’s curls against the heel of her hand, and even the slight crick in her wrist. Brenda groaned at the stretch of an additional finger and then panted in Sharon’s ear: “I’m close.” But Sharon already knew; she could tell by the way the other woman was clinging to her, and by the twitch in her hamstrings visible in the mirror, like she was having trouble staying upright, and most of all, by the flutter of the strong muscles clenched around her fingers. Sharon bore down on Brenda’s clit, and curved her fingers to press firmly upwards and rubbed.

“Sharon,” Brenda moaned, then stiffened and promptly turned to jelly in Sharon’s arms. Doing her best to prolong the blonde’s orgasm, Sharon managed to keep them both upright by slumping back to perch on the edge of the trunk, Brenda collapsed awkwardly on top of her, feet still on the floor, resting most of her weight on her arms around Sharon’s neck, head on Sharon’s shoulder.

“Standing up sex always works out better in my head,” Brenda said wryly after a moment’s pause. Sharon snorted and gently removed her fingers from between the other woman’s legs, eliciting a twitch and a sigh.

“I don’t mind holding you up,” Sharon reassured her and as the blonde took to her own feet again, hand’s on Sharon’s shoulders, Sharon was rewarded with a lovely, post-orgasmic smile, hazy brown eyes lidded and secretive.

“And I love you for it,” teased Brenda with a wink. Placing her hands on Sharon’s thighs, Brenda levered herself down to her knees. “Your turn,” she husked, licking her lips and moving to unbutton Sharon’s trousers.

Sharon should have stopped her - she was supposed to leave in 30 minutes to meet with a fellow board member about Denise’s unprofessional behavior, and being late was not Sharon Raydor’s style. But she didn’t. She lifted her hips so Brenda could pull off her pants and panties. Dropped her head back and groaned at the first swipe of that agile tongue against her lips. She watched herself, flushed and panting and slightly wild-eyed, one hand threaded through honeyed locks as Brenda’s head worked between her legs. And finally, she came, her hips jerking up uncontrollably, her back arching like the curve of a bow as she shuddered and shook her release into Brenda’s mouth. Surprisingly, as she pulled Brenda up to her mouth for a messy, come flavored kiss, Sharon found she didn’t feel guilty at all.
After sending Sharon out the door (10 minutes behind schedule) with a travel mug of coffee, her laptop, and a kiss, Brenda trudged back up the stairs and fell face first onto the bed. She was under strict instructions to finish packing, but first, she needed a nap. She set the alarm on her phone for one hour and then curled up with her head on Sharon’s pillow, hugging her own pillow to her chest. She closed her eyes and let the scent of Sharon and their love-making lull her into dream land.

The shrill ringing of her phone dragged Brenda from pleasantly fuzzy dreams of Sharon and their friends and food and wine. She groaned and reached blindly for the obnoxious device, stabbing the answer button.

“‘Lo,” she croaked, then scrubbed the back of her hand across her mouth to clear the drool that had dribbled down her chin.

“Hello? Is this Brenda Johnson?” The caller was an older woman - her voice was utterly unfamiliar to Brenda.

“Uh, yes, this is she.” Brenda cringed at the significant frog in her voice.

“Excellent. Hello, this is Margery Raydor, Sharon’s mother.” Brenda sat bolt upright and nearly let the phone slip from her hand.

“Um, hello,” was all Brenda could manage to get out. She must be making a stellar first impression.

“I’m sorry to spring myself on you, dear, especially since it sounds like you were napping, but I need your help with something.”

“Okay,” Brenda said dumbly, unsure of how to respond, really. She swung her legs out of bed and headed into the bathroom, intending to splash some cold water on her face.

“Some of the cousins organized a little surprise get together for Sharon at a restaurant she likes in Santa Cruz. Nothing fancy - just dinner and some champagne, but she’ll need an extra dress.” Brenda turned the tap on low.

“I think I can handle that - I think she was gonna pack an extra, anyways. In case of emergency cocktail party, I guess,” Brenda joked, and stuck her wrist under the cool water. She smiled a little when Mrs. Raydor laughed at her quip.

“One never knows when and where a fancy dress event will spring up, dear.”

“Should I bring the trinket I got her with me? Are ya’ll doing gifts?”

“Why don’t you give her yours whenever you planned to originally. I don’t know if you’ve had occasion to find this out, but my daughter doesn’t really like receiving gifts in public.”

“You know, that doesn’t surprise me, but thank you for the heads up.” Public praise and recognition also made the good Captain rather twitchy.

“My hope is that no one has done the ridiculous and gotten gifts on top of everything; they mostly know better. The party will probably be about all she can handle.” Brenda knew what that meant - Sharon would be wearing what she’d come to think of as her ‘Captain Raydor’ mask. She was confident in her ability to deal with any grumpiness Sharon Raydor could dish out; give her a good bottle of wine, a bathroom with a tub and door with a lock and she’d have Sharon purring like a kitten, else she’d throw her in the pool and tell her to swim out her grouchies. Though it was too
bad that Sharon’s cousins apparently thought that celebrating was more important than Sharon’s feelings on the matter.

“Oh dear. Well, I’m glad her cousins are excited for her,” Brenda offered diplomatically.

“That’s nice of you to say. Have a pleasant afternoon, Brenda.”

“You too, m’am.” The older woman hung up. Brenda put her phone down on the counter and looked at it as it might bite her. She was supposed to call her own mama later, but Brenda was feeling like one parental phone conversation per day was more than enough. Sighing, she turned the tap back on and splashed some water on her flaming cheeks. She still hadn’t worked out how she was going to handle Sharon’s parents in person - she’d never really had to deal with the ‘I really enjoy putting my face in your daughter’s vagina, in fact I’d really like to do it right now’ aspect of a romantic relationship before. ‘Fake it till you make it’, she supposed. On the upside, Mrs. Raydor seemed nice enough.

Utterly mystified by the inner workings of families, Brenda moved into the bedroom to resume her packing. She opened her underwear drawer, wondering if she could tell Sharon about her mother’s phone call without the other woman getting suspicious about the party thing. Because she was going to tell Sharon about it; thus far, near complete honesty (Sharon didn’t need to know about her vending machine addiction, really) had worked extraordinarily well for Brenda in this relationship. Probably, she should just tell Sharon about the party so she could prepare herself; she had no doubts that Sharon Raydor could feign surprise well enough to fake out a few well-meaning cousins.

Brenda assembled her clothing methodically; underwear, a couple pairs of socks (her toes got cold easily and Sharon grumbled about chilly feet in bed), nightshirt, a pair of Sharon’s old sweatpants, swimsuit, shoes and dresses on their hangers laid out on top of the chest. Casual was what she had been told to pack, though Brenda was wishing she’d been able to see what Sharon would choose for herself - that would have made this process easier. She decided to simply split the difference by rolling up two pairs of jeans, a pair of relaxed gray slacks and one of her skirts and tucking them into the suitcase Sharon had left out for them to fill. Shirts and a pair of warm sweaters went in next, then she filled in the holes with the smaller articles she’d gathered on the bed. When she was done, she noted with a little pride that she’d taken up exactly half of the bag.

Across town, Sharon had just endured a fraught meeting with another board of directors member - Anne, and Denise. It worried her that despite being told that her job was on the line, Denise had still railed against the injustice of having her behavior called into question while a board member was ‘shacking up’ with a married woman. Was Sharon immune from criticism because she and her family were financial backers of the shelter?

Sharon’s colleague, with whom she had worked for nearly twenty years, had been taken aback by Denise’s vehemence. Sharon’s position on the board did have something to do with her financial contributions to the shelter, but her work as emergency counsel for victims was purely a result of her abilities and her disposition - it was difficult to find reliable lawyers for pro bono work who wouldn’t run roughshod over the shelter’s clients. Seeing hurt bloom on Sharon’s face, and then harden into icy cold anger, Anne had dismissed the still verbally pugilistic Denise to wait in her office.

“We’ll deal with her,” Anne had said simply and then left, presumably to do just that.

She slumped down into the chair she had occupied during the board meeting and rested her head in her hands, resisting the urge to thump it against the table a few times. How had this happened? She knew what Brenda thought: that Denise, faced with evidence that her unrequited affection for
Sharon was just that, was striving to assert some sort of control over Sharon’s life.

But could it be that simple? Was Denise really willing to risk her livelihood by acting out this petty jealousy? And what about Lynn? Sharon didn’t feel comfortable calling to make sure the other woman was ok. What if she was happily oblivious? What if she blamed Sharon? She scrubbed her hands over her face and then woke up her laptop; she had set up her machine so that an absent board member could at least attend the meeting through the magic of Skype. Sometime since the end of the meeting, her son had signed on and sent her a message:

*Jackson: Mooooooraaaaaaaaaaaaaomm*

Sharon rolled her eyes. She’d raised a charming child. She clicked on the video call button - she needed to talk to him, anyway. It rang a few times and then the screen shifted and her son’s handsome face appeared in the Skype window.

“Mooooooraaaaaaaaaaaaaomm,” he exclaimed with a big wave. Sharon could only smile indulgently. He leaned towards his monitor and peered around at the scenery behind her. “Hey, where are you?”

“I’m at the shelter. Our monthly meeting just wrapped up.”

“Were you chatting during your very important and very serious meeting, Sharon Raydor?” He accused playfully, narrowing his eyes and raising an eyebrow at her.

“No, Jackson Raydor, I was not chatting. We had an absentee member and he participated by video call.”

“How technologically savvy of you, mother dearest. Though I’m not sure I believe you weren’t gossiping with Anne or sending mash notes to Ms. Brenda Leeeeeeeigh. When am I going to meet her, anyways. Will she be around at Christmas?” Sharon felt herself smile at the mention of Brenda.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about Christmas, Jax,” she started, resting her head in her hand, elbow on the table, but he interrupted her.

“Awwww, you’re not going out of town, are you? Gin is dying to see you and I have like three new recipes I want your opinion on…”

“Jackson! Relax. My plans have not changed, ok? I have some news though, that might affect Christmas and hopefully future holidays as well.”

“Hopefully? What is it?”

“Brenda moved in with me, so she’ll be around for Christmas.”


“She fits, and I fit. And I haven’t been this happy since you grew up and blew away.”

“I’m glad. You deserve it.” He smiled at her, and Sharon blinked back tears. So many emotional talks over the past few days - she was ready for a little smooth sailing. “Don’t cry, Mommy. Let me go get Gin so you can tell her, too.”

Sharon found herself looking at a threadbare t-shirt from some surf competition in Huntington Beach as her son wandered off into the small bungalow he shared with his longtime fiancé, Ginny. Sharon had become close with Ginny in a way she would probably never know with her own
daughter, and she cherished the time she got to spend with the young woman, thankful that Jackson’s taste in the opposite sex had proven to be much better than Sharon’s.

“Mama Sharon!” Ginny practically shouted as she threw herself into the rolling desk chair and disappeared from view for a moment. When her face came back on screen she was grinning. “Jackson told me the news about your lady. I might have mentioned girl-talk so he would stay in the kitchen.”

“I can’t believe he still falls for that trick.” Ginny would occasionally play the ‘girl-talk’ card so she and Sharon could get away and have dinner or drinks or see a movie that Jackson wasn’t interested in. Her son never objected because Ginny had him wound up believing that ‘girl-talk’ meant his fiancé was talking about sex with his mother.

“Can’t go wrong with the classics, Shar. Speaking of girl-talk, does this mean I can stop sending you pictures of ridiculous vibrators?”

“Well,” Sharon said, smirking wickedly, “toys are always fun, solo or otherwise.” Ginny clapped her hands together in delight.

“I’m happy for you, Mama Sharon. I’m sorry now we’ll be in Louisiana for Thanksgiving.”

“I can’t believe I haven’t seen you two since August.” Sharon had been so wrapped up in Brenda Leigh that fall had passed by without her taking her customary long weekend to drive up to Berkeley for a visit.

“I’ll forgive you this time - you had good reason.”

“I guess I did. Travel safe and say hello to your parents for me.”

“I will. Love you, Mama Sharon.”

“Love you, too, Gin. Talk to you soon.” Sharon closed the app and closed her laptop. Brenda was waiting for her at home, and she had packing to finish before they could begin their celebrating.

Sharon found Brenda in the kitchen, of all places, laboring industriously with a knife, slicing a tomato into wafer thin slices.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Brenda offered in greeting. “How did your meeting go?”

“It went fine,” Sharon said distractedly, amazed by Brenda’s voluntary foray into food preparation. She pressed herself against Brenda’s back and rested her chin on a narrow shoulder. “Are you cooking?”

“I am assembling a pizza for our consumption later this evening. I think the actual cooking will be up to you, darlin’.” She hmmmmed as Sharon’s arms snaked around her waist and worked the knife against the tomato a few more times. “Unless you enjoy burnt pizza?”

“I think that I can take care of the application of heat to the victuals since you have put so much effort into this lovely pizza.” Instead of sauce, Brenda was layering the pizza with the tomatoes. A bag of shredded mozzarella and a container of spinach leaves waited in the wings.

“I was going to do spinach and mushroom and maybe some chicken breast left over from the other night.” Brenda ended the statement like a question, looking for Sharon’s approval of her plan.

“Perfect.” Sharon released Brenda’s waist and stepped away to shrug out of her blazer. She
dropped it over the back of a kitchen chair. “How was your day? Did you finish packing?”

“I did finish packing. It took about ten minutes once you made my choice of dresses so much easier.” She arranged the tomatoes on the last empty spots on the crust. “So, I talked to your mama today.”

“What?” Sharon’s head whipped around, shiny brunette hair sketching a surprised circle around her head. “Really?”

“Yes.” Brenda opened the bag of cheese and began spreading generous amounts of mozzarella over the tomatoes. “I had been nappin’, so I don’t know how coherent I was to start off, but we had a nice chat.”

“About anything in particular?”

“Uh, well, we’re supposed to bring two dresses with us.”

“Brenda Leigh.” Sharon resumed her previous position behind Brenda, this time sneaking fingers under Brenda’s shirt to find bare skin, lightly stroking the baby-fine hairs on Brenda’s belly, cooing directly into her ear: “Brenda Leigh. Why did my mother call you to make sure I brought another dress?” Brenda shivered against her.

“Not that I don’t appreciate your methods of interrogation, but I was going to tell you, Shari.”

“So you’re telling me if I did this;” she bent her neck to suck one of Brenda’s earlobes in to her mouth, laving it briefly with her tongue. Brenda gasped. “It would have absolutely no bearing on what you were going to tell me?”

“I’m gonna make a mess with this cheese if you keep it up,” groused the blonde, but she was relaxed against Sharon, so Sharon did keep it up. Brenda kept talking as her neck was lavished with gentle affection. “Apparently some cousins have planned a surprise thing for you Wednesday night.”

“What kind of thing and where?”

“Dinner and champagne at a restaurant you like.” Sharon huffed a sigh. “Hey now, no bein’ grumpy. It’s not for three more days. Why don’t you go get set up on the couch with the good Doctor and I’ll be in as soon as I finish with this.”

“Alright.” Sharon placed a final kiss behind Brenda’s ear. “Do you want to open the wine now?”

“Let’s wait for the pizza.”

Sharon left the kitchen, and Brenda heard the leather of the couch creak as the other woman settled herself upon it. That was a familiar sound that was soon replaced by the newly familiar music of the Doctor Who credits. Brenda sliced a few mushrooms and applied them liberally to her creation, then did the same with some chicken.

Kitchen back in order and pizza waiting in the refrigerator, Brenda curled up against Sharon on the couch to watch a slight man in a pinstripe suit and a red-headed woman fight wheeled metal trashcans with plungers that came out of their faces. She was reluctant to admit she found this show quite amusing in spite of herself. As the story unfolded, cradled comfortably in the space behind Sharon’s knees, Brenda realized that she hadn’t thought about murder (except for briefly homicidal thoughts directed towards Denise) or work all day.
Chapter 21

The road to Sharon’s parents’ place wound along cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. At the base of the drive a gate stood sentry; Sharon pulled up and rolled down her window to punch a code into a security box. Brenda couldn’t even see the house yet. She felt the palms of her hands grow clammy. She scraped them against the legs of her jeans. Brenda couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so anxious - even asking Sharon out had caused more of a pleasant anticipatory nervousness than what she was feeling now, which was a sort of gut clenching, cold sweat thing that had her shifting uncomfortably in the passenger seat of the Jag.

The house came into view as the car climbed the slight incline past the gate - though Brenda couldn’t decide if it was a mansion or a really big house, in a white-washed Spanish style complete with red tile roof. Sharon guided them around the looped driveway and pulled to a stop in front of a detached garage. Pushing her glasses back on her head, Sharon put the Jag in park and smiled encouragingly at Brenda before removing the keys from the ignition. With a wink, Sharon opened her door and climbed out of the car, feet still bare. (Apparently Sharon disliked driving long distances while wearing shoes as it made her toes feel pinched. Brenda thought it adorable.)

In the side mirror, Brenda saw the dark stained front door swing in and a tiny steely haired woman stump out on to the stoop, leaning heavily on a cane. Brenda took a fortifying breath, opened the car door, pushing it open, and stepped out on to the drive. She faced down murderers, rapists and the worst LA had to offer every day. She could face Sharon’s parents.

Some of Brenda’s anxiety fell away when she approached the stoop and heard Sharon’s mother upbraiding her soundly for her bare feet.

“You would have made me take my boots off before I came in the house anyway,” Sharon groused.

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t wear shoes outside in November, Sharon Marie. And driving six and a half hours in your bare feet!” Brenda snickered, taking in her normally confident girlfriend’s thoroughly teenage, slump-shouldered posture; Sharon turned sneered playfully at her before catching her hand and pulling her forward.

“Brenda Leigh, this is my mother, Margery.” Sharon’s arm tucked itself around Brenda’s waist, fingers tucking into the hip pocket of her jeans. “Mom, this is Brenda Johnson.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am” Brenda said, accent at its broadest. She couldn’t help it - nerves made her sound like more of a hick than usual. She extended her hand and Margery clasped it tightly, and Brenda found herself looking into familiar green eyes in surprisingly unlined face, considering that Sharon’s mother was pushing ninety. Brenda suspected that if Margery wasn’t dependent on her cane to stand, she would be on the receiving end of a hug.

“Sharon’s told us a lot about you, Brenda.” Margery’s smile was something else her daughter had inherited. Brenda smiled back reflexively - a pavlovian response to the well-loved expression. “I’m glad she’s done keeping you all to herself.” Brenda caught Sharon’s exaggerated eye-roll even out of the corner of her eye.

“Don’t roll your eyes at your mother, Sharon Marie,” Margery said without missing a beat. “Why don’t you girls get your bags and come on in the house. Donald’s camped out in front of the television waiting for some football game to start.” She turned and thumped back into the house, leaving the door ajar behind her.
Brenda tucked both of their cellphones into her pockets before taking charge of their garment bag - and Sharon’s boots. Sharon extended the handle of their suitcase and matched her pace across the drive.

“Are you ok?” Sharon asked softly, face and voice concerned.

“I’m fine, Shari. Just a little nervous, ’s all.”

The interior of the house was surprising informal. Dark wood floors and exposed beams in the high ceilings contrasted with the warmly painted walls - the palette was very similar to Sharon’s home and put Brenda a little more at ease. She tossed Sharon’s boots into a pile of shoes inside the door that Sharon pointed out.

“No hard soles on the wood floors.” Sharon told her. “Mom’s rules.” Brenda snorted at her and toed off her cloggy half boots into the messy pile.

“Now I know why you never fail to take your shoes off more than two feet from the door,” she teased. And god help her, but Sharon stuck her tongue out at the blonde.

“Don’t stick your tongue out at your girlfriend, Sharon Marie,” Brenda admonished in the same tone that Sharon’s mother had used. Sharon smirked and placed their bag at the foot of the stairs and took the garment bag from Brenda and folded it over the railing, then preceded farther into the house.

The Raydor kitchen, dining room and den were arrayed along the back of the house, overlooking the ocean through a succession of french doors and tall windows. Natural light streamed into the space, and Brenda suspected that for much of the day, lamps and overhead lights were completely unnecessary. The den and dining room opened into the kitchen through two wide arches. To her left, Brenda caught the flicker of a television, and followed Sharon towards it.

Sharon’s father was stretched out on the longest leather couch that Brenda Leigh had ever seen, though the lean man took up nearly every inch of that length. He swung his legs out and sat up slowly when they entered the room, but his eyes remained glued to the TV. Two football teams were lining up to face one another - college teams, judging by the marching band occupying a large swath of sideline.

“Dad,” Sharon chided, and Mr. Raydor paused the game and pushed himself off the couch and shuffled over to hug his daughter. He was tall - well over six feet, even stooped with age - and silver haired with craggy features and gray blue eyes. Aside from the hunched back and shuffle and a pair of hearing aids, he could have been anywhere between the ages of 65 and 100.

“Sharon, sweetheart.” He boomed in a warm baritone, releasing Sharon from the embrace. “And Ms. Brenda Johnson, I presume.” He tipped an imaginary hat at Brenda before clasping her offered hand in both of his large ones.

“Brenda, this is my dad, Donald Raydor.” Sharon said rather formally, though she snugged an arm around Brenda’s waist. Brenda smiled up at the man.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Raydor, sir.” Brenda said politely.

“Please, Brenda, call me Don, or Donald or Big Don. I don’t put much stock in formality these days.” He cocked an eyebrow at Sharon - another familiar expression, especially considering Don shared Sharon’s expressive mouth and high cheekbones. “Sharon, I don’t think I blame you for keeping her all to yourself for a while,” he remarked slyly. Sharon flushed scarlet and Brenda
chuckled. It was never easy getting teased by one’s parents, especially in front of one’s lover.

“Maybe I was the one keeping Sharon to myself, sir,” Brenda joked, hoping to ease Sharon’s embarrassment at least a little. Sharon bumped her hip against Brenda’s gently and smirked.

Donald beamed at them and limped back to the couch and eased himself down, Sharon followed to settle herself on the smaller sofa at right angles to the massive one and Brenda took a seat next to her, trying not to appear stiff, sitting with her hands on her knees. Brenda was unsure about how much affection Sharon was comfortable with in front of her parents, so she would follow Sharon’s lead. Sharon’s lead was to pluck one of Brenda’s hands from her knees and interlace their fingers, Brenda relaxed at the familiar warmth of Sharon’s palm against hers. Brenda smiled sweetly at her and Sharon’s mossy eyes twinkled back, their corners crinkled up in good humor.

Margery entered from parts unknown, thumping her way into the den to sit next to her husband.

“So girls,” Margery inquired, “how was your drive? Sharon’s bare feet didn’t slip off the pedals and cause any traffic accidents?” Brenda chuckled, and shot Sharon an affectionate look. Apparently teasing was a sign of affection in the Raydor household, because Sharon was smiling.

“Awww, Shari. Your parents don’t find your bare foot driving as charmin’ and quirky as I do?” Brenda patted the brunette’s denim clad thigh. Margery and Donald laughed.

“You know, Brenda Leigh, maybe joining in on my mother’s dog pile isn’t the best way to ingratiate yourself with my family, especially if you don’t enjoy sleeping on the couch,” Sharon snarked.

“You say that like I don’t tease you all the time,” said Brenda with a wink at Mr. and Mrs. Raydor. Sharon rolled her eyes at the blonde.

“It must be love, if Brenda can get our lovely daughter to roll her eyes with such vigor,” Donald said sagely to his wife. They all chuckled.

Brenda spent a surprisingly relaxed half hour, at her lover’s urging, recounting the story of her first meeting with Sharon to Sharon’s amused parents. They didn’t seem to begrudge the two of them their initial spats - in fact, they seemed pleased that Sharon had found someone who could give as good as she got from the brunette.

After Brenda finished her story, Sharon picked up the narration with the details of some of their more recent doings, including her new friendship with Marcus (the two of them exchanged regular emails - sometimes Brenda contributed a tidbit or a hello) and the details of Brenda’s recent move. Donald and Margery especially enjoyed the story of Sharon using the Jaguar’s alarm to scare the stuffing out of Brenda’s squad, laughing uproariously at the image of a bunch of tough cops startled by a mysteriously triggered fire alarm.

“You have your mama’s laugh, Shari,” Brenda said softly to her love, whose green eyes were dancing with mirth. She turned a little to face Sharon and caught up a tendril of Sharon’s thick, beautiful hair around one of her fingers. “It’s also nice to know I won’t have to worry about you baldin’ on me any time soon,” she whispered, leaning in a little closer. Sharon barked out a laugh and kissed Brenda on the temple.

Dinner was a delicious smelling vegetable chili that was simmering in a crockpot on the granite counter of the spacious kitchen. Brenda and Sharon set the table, under the circumspect eye of Margery, then Sharon popped the pre-prepared cheesy bread into the oven. She set the timer on the oven and a corresponding timer on her phone.
“I’m going to show Brenda Leigh the pool and the back yard before the sun sets,” Sharon said, pulling Brenda towards the french doors that led to the glass enclosed indoor pool.

“Put a sweater on, Sharon,” Margery said absently, absorbed in the latest edition of Time.

“We’re going outside for five minutes, mom,” scoffed Sharon and Brenda giggled.

The pool wasn’t huge - maybe a little bigger than the one in Sharon’s back yard - and was enclosed by glass in a fashion that reminded Brenda of a very nice green house. As if confirming Brenda’s assessment, landscaping and potted plants dot the red brick decking, adding life to the space. A large hot tub peeked up above the edge of the pool, and Brenda imagined that it would offer a even better view of the not-so-distant Pacific than merely standing on the deck commanded. The ocean stretched out along the horizon, blue-green and dotted with foam, the setting sun spreading like flame across it’s surface.

“My, this is lovely,” Brenda breathed. “How did you ever move away from here?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Los Angeles has its charms,” answered Sharon.

“Smog and crime and unbearable summer heat. A veritable paradise,” the blonde drawled, leveling a droll stare at Sharon, who laughed.

“So is this your way of telling me you wouldn’t mind coming up here for a week during the miserable months of July and August?”

“I think,” Brenda purred, “you could twist my arm.” She used their clasped hands to pull Sharon into her and tilted her chin for a kiss.

Margery felt like a bit of a snoop watching her daughter and her daughter’s lover out of the corner of her eye, but she was curious. Other than a single dinner with a woman named Helena, the last time Margery had seen Sharon interact with a significant other in a positive manner was with her ex-husband, before their relationship had turned sour. Even in better times, her daughter was stilted with Kellan, stiff and wary and not very affectionate. With Brenda, the opposite was true. Brenda and Sharon were always in one another’s personal space, touching and smiling and generally acting smitten. Margery watched as Brenda slid her arms around Sharon’s neck and brought their lips together. Sharon smiled (actually smiled) into the kiss, and Margery blushed, but couldn’t look away. Brenda was certainly a beautiful woman who clearly adored her daughter. Her professional reputation, both from the news and from Sharon directly, was quite extraordinary, though Margery had seen no trace of that devious interrogator - just a sweet woman with a ready laugh who was a bit nervous about meeting her girlfriend’s parents.

Margery realized that many people of her generation, even of younger generations, would take issue with Sharon’s sexuality, and even though Margery had been uneasy with it at first, due to unfamiliarity - observing the weight lift from Sharon’s shoulders as she came to this reckoning within herself had made Margery determined to be supportive and accepting. And it had been fine and easy, listening to her sharply sarcastic child recount tales of her forays into a new world of dating. The real turning point for Margery had come when Kellan reacted with venom and with a strange bigoted jealousy to Sharon’s new relationship with a young school teacher named Helena. She had found herself thinking: ‘How dare that bastard persecute her only child and make her grandchildren’s lives hell because of this?’ She’d been enraged, debating placing a few phone calls that would put Kellan’s job in jeopardy, but Donald had convinced her to exercise restraint, that this was a battle Sharon had to fight herself, a loss that Kellan needed to suffer at his ex-wife’s hands, not at Donald and Margery’s.
So she had stepped back and watched as Sharon’s relationship with Helena had imploded due to Kellan’s idiocy, watched as Margot (responsible for Kellan’s knowledge of Helena in the first place), became more and more disrespectful of a mother that had repeatedly bent over backwards to shield her children from the crap their father was pulling in the courts and in Sharon’s professional life, not to mention shielding them from the rampant infidelity that had precipitated the divorce in the first place.

But now there was Brenda, and Sharon was happy and lighter than Margery had seen her since girlhood. Next to the pool, Brenda pulled her lips away from Sharon’s and brought their foreheads together. Eyes still closed, Sharon smiled again, blissfully, and Margery smiled too, then turned back to her magazine.

Brenda started awake in a familiar position in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. No light filtered through the window that, during daytime, looked out onto the Pacific. She was tucked up against Sharon’s side, who was sprawled on her back in the center of the enormous mattress. Brenda’s head was on Sharon’s shoulder, something the brunette insisted didn’t cause her any discomfort. She shifted a little, turning her head to press her nose into the bare skin of Sharon’s chest, inhaling her distinctive scent. When they were preparing for bed, it had amused Brenda that Sharon would sleep in the nude even at her parents’ house, but truthfully, she was grateful for it.

Sharon twitched in her sleep and grumbled: “Mmmmmphrumphhh.” Then she sighed and pulled Brenda closer to her. Brenda translated that as ‘go back to sleep’, so she shut her eyes and concentrated on evening out her breathing, slipping back into a dreamworld that was strikingly similar to her reality.

When she woke again, Brenda was alone, spread eagle on her stomach in the middle of the bed. She lifted her head and scrubbed a fist against her eyes. Sunlight streamed through the large bank of windows and Brenda groaned and stretched; her stomach growled ferociously. Rolling out of bed, she contemplated the door to the bathroom. Did she really want to shower before breakfast on her vacation? Not even a little, especially considering they were supposed to go out to dinner tonight after making the pies for tomorrow’s dessert. Brenda would shower afterwards; no doubt she would feel gross after spending the afternoon in the kitchen.

From the suitcase resting on the large ottoman at the foot of the bed, Brenda removed a pair of Sharon’s lounge pants and a cardigan. Her sleepwear - panties and the white t-shirt she had worn under her blazer the day before - didn’t cover nearly enough for her to feel comfortable roaming around her lover’s parents’ house. Brenda pulled the clothing on, dragged her fingers through her hair and left the bedroom, closing the door behind her to hide the fact that she hadn’t made the bed.

There was an unfamiliar woman at work in the kitchen, and Brenda found herself hovering awkwardly in the doorway, smelling the tantalizing odor of coffee, but unwilling to impinge on the domain of a stranger. The other woman smiled when she noticed Brenda poised in the entryway.

“Good morning. You must be Brenda. I’m Jules, the housekeeper.” Jules’ plump cheeks were pink from laboring over the stove, and her smile was merry and genuine. “Would you like some coffee?”

Brenda returned the smile shyly and finally stepped into the kitchen to lean against the large center island. “I would love some.” Brenda almost protested when Jules stepped away from what she was doing to retrieve a mug from the cabinet over the coffee maker, then realized she had no idea were anything was located in the Raydors’ large kitchen. Jules poured a generous measure of dark coffee into a large stoneware mug, leaving room at the top to add milk or creamer. She pushed the mug across the granite counter top into Brenda’s eager hands.
“Milk and half and half are on the door of the fridge.” Jules squinted and cocked her head, trying to remember something. “Oh, oh, oh!” She turned and stooped, opening a cabinet that concealed a Lazy Susan, rotating it to pull a bear-shaped bottle off the shelf.

“A little birdie told me that this is your sweetener of choice.” Brenda took the bottle and smiled gratefully. She shouldn’t be surprised that Sharon had made sure honey was available for her morning coffee, but she was, and she was touched, her heart swelling, and her cheeks flushing with a delicious warmth that matched the temperature of the mug against her palm.

“I’ll have to thank that little birdie for her thoughtfulness,” Brenda said, squeezing a very generous dollop of honey into the steaming beverage. She clicked the cap back into place on the bear’s head and wrapped her hands around the mug. “Is Sharon in the pool?”

“Mmmmm, yes. She started her laps about thirty minutes ago. Donald and Margery are in the pool with their trainer.” Jules covered the skillet with a shiny stainless steel lid and turned the heat down on the burner. “Breakfast will be ready by the time they’re through.”

“It smells delicious.” The aroma of sausage and potatoes made Brenda’s stomach gurgle in anticipation and Jules chuckled. She uncovered the serving dish on the warmer next to the range.

“Take a popover to tide you over. They’re pumpkin.” Brenda took one eagerly, and the paper towel that Jules offered with it.

“Thanks,” she said around a mouthful of spicy pastry. Brenda picked up her mug and lifted it to the cook, who chuckled.

“I’ve heard about your appetite, missy. Why don’t you go on in to the pool area and I’ll come get you when the food is done.”

Brenda settled herself on a lounge chair with her deliciously pumpkin-spiced popover and her perfectly prepared coffee and cast a satisfied eye on her girlfriend, completing a flip-turn at the far end of the pool. With her black racerback tank suit and black swim cap and dark mirrored goggles, and the confident way she sliced through the water, Sharon made an athletic picture next to the slow moving trio doing an easy workout on the other side of the pool. Margery and Donald were following the motions of a well-built middle younger man in a sort of repetitive tai chi routine. The trainer had locked eyes with Brenda as she entered the room and kept glancing over her way in a manner that was completely obvious. Brenda ignored him, nibbling on her pastry and sipping her coffee, watching Sharon’s steady progress and graceful turns.

Margery and Donald finished their workout before Sharon finished her laps and exited the pool using the broad stairs close to the chair where Brenda sat, the trainer assisting Donald up the stairs and on to the dry decking where his cane was propped against a table.

“Breakfast in twenty minutes?” Margery asked, shrugged on a plush looking terrycloth robe. “Or you can eat now if you’re hungry.”

“No ma’am, I’m okay to wait for ya’ll.”

“Allright then. Tell Sharon that if she doesn’t make it to the table on time, I’ll eat her sausage links.”

“That’s quite a threat. I’ll be sure to let her know, but I would be wary of retaliation if you do,” warned Brenda playfully.

“I can handle her,” sassed the older woman, and she and Donald left, presumably to change.
The trainer made quite a show of drying himself at the lounger next to Brenda’s, rubbing his towel over muscles he was flexing so hard she wouldn’t be surprised if he stroked out. He was very young and very focused on showing off his physical prowess. Not surprised at how absolutely uninterested she was, Brenda rolled her eyes and popped the last of her snack into her mouth, washing it down with a sip of coffee. Sharon was making her cool down laps; her pace slow and measured.

Brenda was utterly unsurprised when the shadow of Mr. Trainer-guy fell over her chair. She resisted the urge to scowl, hiding her mouth behind her mug in case some displeasure leaked out.

“He, I’m John.” He offered a large hand for her to shake, and Brenda took it delicately. She couldn’t use her normal method of ducking unwanted attention - introducing herself as ‘Deputy Chief Johnson’ and flashing her gun or badge or both.

“Brenda.” He flashed her what he probably thought was a charming smile despite the not particularly friendly tone of Brenda’s voice.

“So, Brenda.” John still hadn’t relinquished Brenda’s hand, and she tugged her fingers from his meaty paw. “Are you one of the cousins visiting for the holiday?” Brenda raised an eyebrow - that was an awfully forward and odd question.

“I’m not a relative, I’m Sharon’s partner.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Raydor mentioned that their daughter was a cop - it’s nice that she invited you up to spend Thanksgiving with her family.”

“That’s not what I…,” she tried to interrupt, but he bulled over Brenda’s interdiction:

“Would you be interested in going out and having some fun with me while you’re up here? There’s a great club in Santa Cruz that’s having a Black Friday Bash…” John left the end hanging, clearly expecting Brenda to accept his invitation.

“No, I don’t think so,” Brenda stated shortly. “And when I said partner, I didn’t mean professionally. I mean I’m her fiancé.” John chuckled and Brenda wanted to slap him.

“Please, I saw you looking at me,” he remarked blithely, with the confidence of the very young, and another grin.

Brenda snorted. “You were not the only person in that pool. Why don’t you go on and vamoose before someone else witnesses your unprofessional behavior.” John looked like he wanted to say something else, but he thought better of it, and lucky for him because Sharon was striding out of the pool and Brenda couldn’t imagine she’d be ok with a person hired to help her parents’ maintain mobility and good health hitting on someone while he was on their dime. Brenda narrowed her eyes at John and he moved away.

Sharon pulled off her goggles and peeled her cap from her head. Her ponytail sprang free even after nearly an hour crammed under the tight rubber cap. The sight made Brenda’s breath catch a little - this was the only person she had eyes for.

“Good morning,” Brenda purred. Sharon raised a wry eyebrow at her and bent to scoop the terry cloth robe from the foot of the lounger.

“Was he chatting you up?” Sharon shrugged into the robe and belted it securely.

“He was tryin’,” grumped the blonde, making a petulant face that Sharon couldn’t help but find
adorable. “Boys.” Sharon spritzed out a laugh and held out a hand to Brenda, pulling her to her feet.

“I was going to go change before breakfast, but you appear to be wearing my pants.”

“You can have ‘em back. I brought sweats.”

Sharon fisted a hand in the soft wool of Brenda’s cardigan and pulled her in for a kiss. She supposed it was a little immature and possessive, but she was doing more than just staking her claim. A good morning kiss was necessary for the beginning of every day, and as Sharon lost herself in the taste of Brenda Leigh and feel of her tongue and lips and the solidity of her body, the rest of the world faded away to nothing.

When Sharon and Brenda separated, the trainer had gathered up his things and left. Sharon felt smug and it must have shown on her face because Brenda gave her a knowing look.

“Your mama said if you’re late for breakfast, she’s gonna eat your helping of sausage, so you best go get changed.”

“Pish. Like Jules isn’t on my side. She’ll save me a few links.” Sharon reached out and tucked a curl behind Brenda’s ear. “Come up with me - I need my pants and I have something for you.”

“If you insist, but you’re nuts if you think you’re gettin’ these pants back.”

The room that Brenda and Sharon were occupying on the second floor was the former master suite. It was huge, and the bathroom proportionally as large, featuring a jacuzzi tub and a shower stall more than big enough for two.

Sharon reached into the suitcase and pulled out a polo shirt and another pair of the soft knit pants, like the ones that Brenda had appropriated for herself. Brenda tried to muster some joking outrage for the bit of trickery, but faking indignation as Sharon peeled her wet swim suit from her heavy, cream-pale breasts was beyond Brenda’s skill.

As Sharon padded naked into bathroom to hang up her swim suit, Brenda flopped back onto the bed with a sigh. She tried not to think thoughts that would necessitate a change of underwear. It was too bad that Brenda was hungry, or she’d keep Sharon in bed all day, to hell with what anyone else would think.

Thoughts of naked Pope kept Brenda’s mind away from sex with Sharon, as she stared up at the high ceiling and listened to the sounds of Sharon rinsing the pool water from her swim suit. Life wasn’t fair - on vacation and she couldn’t fuck her girlfriend whenever she wanted. Even though she really wanted to.

The mattress dipped. Sharon crawled onto the bed and straddled Brenda, resting her weight lightly on the cradle of Brenda’s hips, one hand hidden behind her back. She was gloriously, decadently nude. Her breasts swung as she settled into place on top of Brenda, nipples tightly furled. Brenda ached to reach up and cup that abundant flesh; instead she clutched at the sheets.

“My god you are such a terrible tease, Sharon Raydor.”

“Who says I’m teasing?” Sharon countered, resting more of her weight on Brenda, the heat of her body leeching through the thin layer of Brenda’s clothes.

Brenda released her stranglehold on the bed linens, palms damp from the strength of her grip. She brought her hands to the curve of Sharon’s waist, playing her fingers along the smooth skin of her
hips.

“You really wanna skip breakfast, baby?”

“Mmmmmmm,” husked Sharon, rolling her hips a little. She removed the hand from behind her back and presented Brenda with a brown leather jewelry box, sized for a ring, and embossed with the initials ‘BR’.

“My word,” Brenda gasped. “You work fast, Ms. Raydor.”

“Open it.” Brenda took the box with slightly shaking fingers and flipped open the lid. Inside was an engagement ring, diamonds and platinum. Brenda took it from its place in the cushion - the ring was heavy, solid feeling. A loop of platinum studded with dozens of tiny stones circled the larger center stone, like a button through a button hole. The band had a slight patina of age, and its inner face was worn smooth, nearly obscuring the maker’s stamp. ‘Van Cleef & Arpels’ was faintly visible etched into the metal.

“Oh Sharon, it’s beautiful.”

“It was my Grandmother’s. My father’s mother.” With cool fingers she took the ring from Brenda and grasped the blonde’s left hand. She slipped the band onto Brenda’s ring finger and pushed slightly to get it over the knuckle. It settled comfortably at the at the base of her finger. Brenda shivered again at the feeling of the cool metal around her finger, and the delicate press of Sharon’s lips on the back of her hand.

Brenda surged up, cradling Sharon’s face in her hands, and claimed Sharon’s mouth with her own. A surge of possessiveness turned the kiss into a fierce embrace, clinging to one another, Brenda’s head supported by the curve of Sharon’s neck.

“God, I love you,” Brenda whispered.

“I love you, too, Brenda Leigh,” murmured Sharon, a hitch in her voice.

It was two tranquil, relaxed women that entered the kitchen, holding hands. The immediacy of Brenda’s desire for Sharon had faded, and now she wanted to pull the brunette back into bed just to curl up with her - to hold her and be held. Brenda wanted to be physically close to the woman who had given her a piece of her family history to wear on her finger.

Donald and Margery were seated and eating, and Jules was perched on a stool at the island, reading aloud from an iPad - some sort of news article about state politics. Everyone paused and looked up when Sharon and Brenda walked in.

“Here they are. Sharon, you’re too late,” Margery sassed her daughter. “I’ve already eaten all the sausage.”

“If you ate all that sausage, I expect you to keel over any minute now. And like Jules doesn’t always save me a few links.”

Jules rolled her eyes. “You’re not supposed to let on you have an inside man, Sharon. Aren’t you supposed to be good at police work?” She pointed at the two empty plates. “I saved some links for Brenda - you’ll have to negotiate with her for some. Go ahead and serve yourselves.”

Brenda filled her plate with generous helpings of hash brown potatoes, sausage (of which there was plenty for both Sharon and Brenda), tomatoes and warm fruit compote. “Is your family always so territorial about their breakfast meats? Should I count my fingers next time we have bacon?”
“Your fingers are safe, only my mother needs to worry.” Sharon dished herself a rather larger portion of starches then she would eat at home. She also took a popover. Brenda liked Sharon’s little indulgences - maybe later they could find a way to burn off all this rich food. In bed. Perhaps with that toy that Sharon had stuck in one of the zippered pockets of their suitcase.

Brenda took their plates to the table while Sharon poured a glass of juice for Brenda and a cup of coffee for herself. Taking the seat across from Donald, Brenda left the foot of the table to Sharon, so she could stare down her mother as she enjoyed her sausage.

Margery noticed the ring as soon as Brenda picked up her fork. “You asked her!” She crowed, eyes shining. Brenda shoveled a large bite of potatoes in her mouth and chewed, casting a sidelong glance at Sharon, stirring sugar into her coffee.

“I actually asked her a few days ago, mom.” Sharon sat the tumbler of orange juice next to Brenda and took her seat. “I’ve graciously agreed to let Brenda marry me.” Margery laughed.

“Mmmmmmm, maybe I shouldn’t have shared my sausage with you,” Brenda warned sweetly.

“You tell her, Brenda,” Jules chimed in. “Withholding sausage is always a good play.” Brenda couldn’t help it - she giggled at the sausage jab. She grabbed for Sharon’s hand, the weight of the ring on her finger unfamiliar, and yet a comfort. She smiled at Margery and Donald.

“You raised a very gracious woman, though sometimes she hides it well.” Everyone laughed, and Brenda squeezed Sharon’s hand, and the brunette shot her an affectionate glance, mossy eyes lambent.

Brenda and Sharon helped cleared the breakfast dishes, but Jules wouldn’t let them do anymore than that. Donald and Margery wandered away, off to their own business and to enjoy the last of the quiet before the family descended on the house in a few hours. Sharon wanted to do the same.

“Let’s go down to the boathouse and watch the water,” she whispered, nuzzling at the fine, golden hair of Brenda’s temple.

“That sounds nice.” Brenda relaxed into the soft strength of Sharon. “Let me run up and get my shoes and use the restroom.”

“Grab my moccasins, would you. Do you want coffee to bring outside?”

“No, I think I’m alright on caffeine for now.” Brenda kissed Sharon on the cheek, just under the arch of her cheekbone. “I’ll be right back.” She separated from Sharon reluctantly and turned towards the stairs.

Brenda pushed the home button on her phone. There was a new message from Charlie.

FROM: Charlie

Holidays are boring without you. Though Grandpa is grumping about it.

Brenda snorted. Her father didn’t want to talk to her, but still complained about her not flying to Atlanta for the holiday. Even excepting Sharon’s invitation, Brenda hadn’t fancied spending Thanksgiving enduring her father’s cold shoulder and her mother’s meddling.

Moving to the window to take advantage of the natural light, Brenda opened the camera on her phone. Extending her fingers, Brenda snapped a picture of her ring. She had exchanged emails with Charlie since their first conversation about Sharon, but hadn’t told her about Sharon’s
proposal. Her niece would appreciate a picture of diamonds and platinum more than Brenda gushing about her incredibly thoughtful and romantic Captain Raydor.

She attached the photo to a message and added: Sometimes good things happen when you piss off your parents. Don’t take that as an endorsement, though.

Brenda abandoned the phone back on the nightstand and shoved her feet into her own slippers. She gathered up Sharon’s mocs and the books that they’d brought with them, just in case.

Sharon waited in the kitchen for Brenda, a fleece blanket purloined from the den thrown over her shoulder. Jules was working assembling platters of sandwiches for the family due in a few hours. She would make lunch, be sure the guest bedrooms were ready and then she would go be with her own family until Saturday. Not that every year she and her family weren’t invited to spend the holiday with the Raydors - she had been working for the family for more than twenty years, had gotten certified as a nurse’s aid when Donald’s health troubles had surfaced, her children and grandchildren socialized with and went to school with Sharon’s cousins. Sharon suspected that the problem was Jules was unable to be anything other than completely in control of the kitchen when she was in the house. Raydor family meals were prepared by many hands; it was a tradition, and it made for some interesting dishes. Jules, educated at the Culinary Institute of America (although she was generous enough to do some housekeeping duties), would be appalled by the food they ate on Thanksgiving.

The boathouse was a simple shed, used for the storage of a few jet skis and other boating equipment, at the base of a short quay. A boat lift sat forlorn and empty at the end of the concrete structure, which was dotted with all-weather furniture. It was chilly on the water, and the salt smell of the sea air pricked Brenda’s nostrils. Sharon led her to a deck chair, slung the blanket around her shoulders and sat, arms open, inviting Brenda to sit and lean against her. Brenda dropped the books on the ground and took her place in Sharon’s arms.

“Tell me about your grandmother,” Brenda asked, spinning the ring on her left hand, feeling the diamonds dig into the pad of her thumb.

“She was Beatrice. She was an extraordinary woman - helped manage the finishing factories while my grandfather dealt with the business as a whole. And during the war, she trained hundred of women on the looms. She liked to keep in practice on the machines. She could restring and reload a machine faster than most of the men that worked on them.”

“Beatrice and my grandfather, Sean, were married for more than 60 years. She never took that ring off, or her wedding band, even after he passed.”

“Beatrice and Sean?” Brenda shivered. Her Captain was so romantic.

“It seemed appropriate.”

“Mushball,” cooed Brenda, and craned her neck back for a kiss. Sharon didn’t disappoint, capturing her mouth eagerly, tracing the curve of Brenda’s upper lip with a gentle tongue.

In the tight cocoon of the blanket and Sharon’s arms, Brenda turned to face her. The width of the chair was enough that Brenda could fit her knees comfortably on either side of Sharon’s hips. She pressed herself to Sharon, bringing their noses together. “Hey,” she breathed.

“Hello,” Sharon whispered, her breath puffing across Brenda’s lips. They kissed again, and it was sweet and easy and yet didn’t fail to ratchet up Brenda’s desire.
“Mmmmmmmmm,” she hummed, worming her fingers under Sharon’s shirt to let them dance over the soft skin just above the waistband of her drawstring pants. Back and forth, back and forth, she trailed lazy patterns over Sharon’s sensitive stomach as they kissed.

When they were both panting heavily, hips moving unconsciously with the pace of their kisses, Brenda pulled at the tie of Sharon’s pants.

“What are we really going to do this here?” Sharon asked breathlessly, though she moaned when Brenda scratched at the wiry hairs on her mound.

“Should I stop?” Brenda didn’t move her hand, but leaned in to suck Sharon’s earlobe into her mouth. Sharon’s answer in the negative came out as another moan. Brenda grinned and drew one finger up the length of Sharon’s clit. “Scooch your hips forward a little, baby.” Sharon obeyed and Brenda repeated the motion along the velvety soft lips of Sharon’s sex. Brenda parted her and stroked once, to coat two of her fingers in the silk of Sharon’s arousal. Then Brenda entered her with those two fingers. She swallowed the gasp that erupted from Sharon’s mouth with a fierce kiss - unable to stop her own shudder at the feel of Sharon surrounding her fingers.

“You feel so good, Shari,” Brenda purred against Sharon’s lips.

“I do feel good, thanks,” she joked, voice cracking just a bit.

“Oh, you’re a comedian now, are you?” growled Brenda, using her thumb to thrum Sharon’s clit.

“Of course not - oh god,” Sharon gasped, “please, Brenda Leigh.” Her hips jerked up into Brenda’s hand, seeking more contact. Brenda ghosted her thumb over the brunette’s clit again.

“Please what, Sharon?”

“Please, please fuck me,” Sharon begged. Brenda smiled beatifically at her and did so. The addition of an extra finger made Sharon groan and Brenda used the curve of her fingers and the pad of her thumb to manipulate Sharon’s most sensitive spots - Brenda wasn’t so much fucking Sharon as she was rubbing firmly, but that didn’t seem to matter to Sharon, whose eyes were half-lidded and rolled back, her jaw slack with pleasure, her arms still cradling Brenda, keeping them cocooned in the blanket.

“You’re so beautiful like this, Sharon,” Brenda murmured in to the brunette’s delicate ear, nose buried in the wealth of shiny hair. Even though she was making love to Sharon, she acutely missed the sensation of bare (or mostly bare) skin on skin; Brenda had to satisfy herself with a little dirty talk instead of reveling in the rest of Sharon’s body.

“Sometimes, all I can think about is being inside you, or putting my mouth on you - it’s like time stops, like the earth ceases to rotate and there’s only you and my overwhelming desire to make love to you, to make you come for me.” Brenda traced the curve of Sharon’s ear with her tongue, and Sharon whimpered.

“Are you close? Are you going to come for me, Shari?”

“Oh god, Brenda.” Sharon was writhing, her hips chasing the pace of Brenda’s hand. “Harder.” Brenda obliged; her thumb working frantically on the stiff nodule. She could feel the first flutters of Sharon’s orgasm around her fingers, her internal muscles pulsing, gripping Brenda’s fingers with an intense pressure.

“Come for me, baby,” Brenda cooed. “Come for me.” And she did. Her whole body tensed, and her hips arched up off the wood of the chair, teeth worrying her bottom lip. She grunted her
pleasure into the ocean tanged air, an animalistic noise that made Brenda’s own hips jerk.

Brenda kept up her attentions as Sharon came down from her orgasm, milking the last bits of pleasure from the brunette’s body. Then she was still, face serene, body relaxed. Brenda dropped a kiss on her temple, uncricked her wrist, and slipped her fingers from the warmth and wet of Sharon’s body, folding her fingers into the palm of her hand to keep from fouling Sharon’s clothes. She wiped them on her own t-shirt, then leaned in to rest her head on Sharon’s chest, listening to the frantic rhythm of her fiancé’s heart.

“Mmmmmmm,” Sharon hummed, and the sound reverberated under Brenda’s ear, and her arms tightened around Brenda’s body. “That was lovely. And unexpected.”

“Well what did you expect, giving me that ring, all naked and gorgeous. You’re lucky I let you out of the bedroom.” Sharon chuckled.

“Can I return the favor?” Brenda tilted her head up and captured Sharon’s lips - she was so generous and willing and Brenda melted against her.

“Later? I really want to feel your skin on mine, baby.”

“I think we can manage that, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon chuckled again.

“What’s funny?”

“You know, I’d never so much as made out on this dock before today.” Brenda snorted and buried her face in Sharon’s neck, secure in Sharon’s embrace.
Chapter 22

Jessica and Franklin Black were surprised when Donald opened the door - Margery was usually on greeting duty as she was a bit more mobile. The twins, taught to be aware of the physical infirmities of their older relatives, waited till the door was open all the way before dashing through in search of their aunt.

“Hi, Uncle Don,” Jessica greeted sheepishly, stepping inside and hugging the tall man.

“Hello, Jess. Franklin.” Donald shook Franklin’s hand; he wasn’t a big hugger.

“Hey, Uncle Don.” Franklin jerked his thumb back out the door. “I’m going to go grab the bags. I’ll be right back.”

“So what’s she like?” Jessica asked, kicking her shoes off into the pile next to the door.

“I have no idea to whom you are referring, dear,” Donald answered coyly. He knew the entire family was curious about Brenda - he did not envy her the scrutiny she would face in the next few days, but he also knew Sharon wouldn’t let her get overwhelmed.

Jess spluttered in protest: “Uncle Don!” Chuckling, Donald turned back towards the den; Jessica followed. He lowered himself onto the couch and Jess perched in front of him on the large square wooden coffee table. “Come on! Give me the scoop!” she begged.

“Brenda is lovely - she really adores your Aunt, Jess. And Sharon proposed to her, so she’s going to be family.” Jessica felt her jaw drop; she was stunned.

“Wow. That was kinda fast, wasn’t it?”

“They have known each other for nearly four years. And they fit together well. They’re in the kitchen with Margery getting the pies ready for the oven tomorrow. Why don’t you go help your husband and then join them,” Donald suggested.

“Why aren’t you helping?”

“I was kicked out for stealing too many apples and sticking my fingers in the chocolate mousse.” Jess gave him an arch look and he grinned.

“You’re terrible.”

“I try.”

Brenda and Sharon were working diligently at their pie-making - Brenda peeling, coring and cutting apples, Sharon making pie crusts - when the first of the Raydor cousins arrived. Two small dark haired children pounded into the kitchen screaming: “AUNT SHARON! AUNT SHARON!” at the top of their little lungs.

Brenda cocked her head and watched the two munchkins throw themselves at Sharon, heedless of the flour coating her hands and forearms. She lifted both of them, sitting the curly haired little boy on the counter and slinging the girl onto her hip. The children squealed as Sharon peppered their smiling faces with sloppy, silly kisses.

“Someone’s the favorite,” Brenda murmured to Margery, who was ‘helping’ (aka chatting while
the less arthritic did the food preparation).

“She has a peculiar magic,” Margery stated, stealing a piece of Honeycrisp from Brenda’s bowl.

“Could it be the hair? I’ve always thought it could be the hair.”

Margery popped a bite of apple into her mouth and chewed contemplatively. “It’s possible.”

“Does she have the same effect on teenagers?” Brenda wondered.

“Less effusive, but they appreciate the fact that she doesn’t talk down to them.”

“Huh.” Brenda cranked the handle of the apple peeler a few times. “So who are these munchkins?”

“Sam and Sarah - twins. Jess and Franklin’s kids. She’s closest to Jess and Alexandra, out of all the cousins.” Brenda was aware of this; not only because Sharon had told her, but through the murmurs of Sharon’s halves of phone calls, and pictures in emails and tentative plans for summer visits.

“You think we could get everyone to wear name tags?” Brenda groused, cranking a little more vigorously on the apple peeler.

“But it’s so much more fun to watch you flounder, dear.” Margery only laughed when Brenda pouted at her.

It was lucky that using the apple peeler didn’t require much concentration, because most of Brenda’s focus was on Sharon’s interaction with the twins. She was guiding their little fingers in pressing dough into pie tins. They had flour on their faces and on their once neat outfits, and their giggling was infectious and made Brenda’s heart swell. Jess and Franklin hadn’t come looking for their offspring - Aunt Sharon must be an acceptable steward of children in the Raydor family. Not a surprise, really.

Sharon looked up from the babies and caught Brenda staring. Their eyes met and they shared a significant look and a smile. Even separated by the counter, Brenda felt very connected to Sharon just then - after the ring and the moment they had made for themselves on the quay - beyond the potency of their eye contact, these threads of awareness, of knowing, pricked at her skin and made her shiver.

Back in their room, Brenda had found a number of excited messages from Charlie, wanting to know the particulars of the proposal and the ring. Brenda guessed she could tell Charlie about the conversation on Saturday - Sharon’s incredibly detailed proposal probably wouldn’t be very romantic to a 19 year old (it gave Brenda a thrill that Sharon had been thinking about all those things, and she suspected it always would). She certainly wasn’t going to tell Charlie just how Sharon had given her the ring. That was just for them - like the circumstances of their first date was just for them. Brenda had replied, promising pictures of the holiday soon and more details about her engagement when Charlie came to visit in January.

Sharon, still looking at Brenda, leaned in and whispered something in Sam’s ear. He giggled, his little hands flying to his mouth and looked over at Brenda. He grinned at her and waved. Brenda waved back.

“You think she’s tellin’ secrets about me?” Brenda faux whispered to Margery.

“Probably,” Margery affirmed.
“Shari, are you tellin’ tales on me?”

“Maybe,” purred Sharon. “I’m pretty sure you deserve it, though.”

“And I’m pretty sure you’re causin’ trouble, missy.” Brenda scolded, waggling a finger at Sharon. Both the kids laughed and Sharon stuck her tongue out at the blonde across the island, causing Sam and Sarah to squeal with glee, Brenda to giggle in absolute delight, and Margery to roll her eyes.

“Sharon Marie!” she barked at her playful daughter, her own eyes twinkling. “Don’t stick your tongue out at your fiancé!” She turned to Brenda. “Are you sure you want to marry her, Brenda?”

“Oh, yes,” Brenda answered breathlessly, too charmed by Sharon’s interactions with Sam and Sarah to play along with Margery. Margery chuckled, and Brenda blushed, but Sharon was beaming at her, so Brenda smiled back, eliciting grins and short laughs from the children.

Jessica followed the sounds of her children’s laughter to the kitchen and paused a moment in the door to watch. Sam and Sarah had been eagerly anticipating Thanksgiving with Aunt Sharon since the last time they had seen her - a visit to LA in August. It had been much the same for Jess as a child; spending holidays with Sharon and Jackson and Margot were some of her fondest memories. Nearly all the cousins loved Sharon, and they were all nervous about the new significant other. Sharon was special to so many of them for so many reasons, and she deserved someone as amazing as she was.

Even though Sam and Sarah and Sharon were lightly dusted in flour, Jess was heartened by the scene in the kitchen. Everyone was all smiles, including the slight woman standing next to Margery. Flaxen curls were piled messily on top of her head, a few tendrils framing a pretty, angular face. Her broad mouth was curled up in a grin, and a pair of liquid coffee eyes sparkled merrily at the antics of Sharon and the children. The diamonds on her finger shone as brightly as her eyes, and proclaimed her status - the whole family knew that ring, and many had coveted it. Beatrice’s ring wasn’t quite an heirloom, but it was piece of Raydor history that had been bequeathed to Sharon upon Beatrice’s death, and had been sought after by sons of the family for the fingers of their brides ever since.

Sam caught sight of her first. “Mommy! he screeched. “We’re making pies!” Jess almost admonished the four year old for volume control, but he was excited, and she didn’t want to spoil the mood.

Sharon looked up at Jess and smiled. It was a familiar expression, but different, somehow, than the smile she had known for 29 years; like it came easier - perhaps Sharon didn’t have to disengage her brain in order for the smile to effect her whole face.

“Hi, Jess,” she greeted, and Jessica entered the kitchen to kiss her aunt on her floury cheek. Sharon smelled like she always did - clean skin and a faint tang of pool chemicals. Jess wanted to hug her, but she was wary of the white dust that liberally coated her aunt’s forearms and obscured the deep blue of her shirt.

“Hi to you, too. I see you’ve already made a mess of my children.”

“You sound as if you expected something else?” Sharon sassed, with a wink to her little coconspirators.

“I guess I should know better by now,” Jess sighed resignedly. “Can I help?”
“We’re almost through, actually. The pumpkin filling is in the fridge, chilling with the chocolate mousse. As soon as Brenda finishes with those apples…”

“Hey now, ya’ll keep stealing the finished product,” Brenda protested. Jessica was struck by the blonde’s soft drawl. “But I’m almost done - this is the last apple.”

“Brenda, this is Jessica Black, my cousin,” Sharon proffered, and Brenda gave the tall, sable haired woman a wave; no handshakes with sticky hands. “Jess, this is Brenda Johnson, my fiancé.”

“Nice to meet you, Brenda.” The smart remark Jess was going to make about Brenda already being put to work was forestalled by Franklin darting into the kitchen.

“Heads up, the Ice Queen cometh” he hissed, then smirked at the sight of his children. Jess had bath duty tonight. Lucky her.

“Franklin!” his wife admonished, but Franklin was of the mind that the moratorium on unflattering nicknames around little pitchers (with big ears and bigger mouths) should be suspended when it concerned Constance Raydor. Maybe a little actual offense, beyond that which she manufactured out of the most innocuous of circumstances, would keep Constance away from family functions with more regularity.

The mood in the kitchen deflated a bit; Sharon helped Sam and Sarah cut dough into strips for lattice, Brenda tossed the apples with a bit of lemon juice to prevent them from browning, and Jess, despite Sharon’s assertions, took up the recipe card from Margery and set about mixing the spices for the apple pie filling.

While they were taking their leisure on the quay, Sharon had related a bit about Constance - the second wife of her late uncle - to Brenda. A wholehearted east coast WASP, while marriage to Sean Raydor II had mellowed Constance a bit, widowhood had magnified her less desirable traits. Brenda had been told to expect not-so-subtle jabs at their sexuality and relationship, and was encouraged (by Margery as well as Sharon) to jab right back, so long as it wasn’t in front of the children, though Constance didn’t always restrain herself. Brenda figured after dealing with Denise, who Sharon had once counted as a close friend, she could handle Constance, whom Sharon alternately seemed to dislike and pity, especially since the rest of the Raydor clan seemed to feel the same.

Constance swept into the kitchen as if she were displaced royalty, untying the silk scarf that covered her neat, silver bob. She was out of place in the previously homey, domestic scene. Immaculate in black trousers and a crimson cardigan with loud, gold buttons, Brenda thought Constance as pinched and tight as some of the Hollywood wives she sometimes had the misfortune of interacting with. She cut her eyes away, and slid the bowl of apples in front of Jessica, who quirked her lips and busied herself undertaking the next step of combining the apples with the mixture of nutmeg, brown sugar and cinnamon.

“Constance.” Margery greeted with what Brenda could tell, despite having known Sharon’s mother for less than a day, was false cheer. “Glad to see you safe and sound, despite your predictions of disaster.”

As she turned away to wash her hands, Brenda felt Constance’s eyes jump to her, her gaze rasping at the edges of Brenda’s awareness like sandpaper.

“I don’t see why you don’t have the help answering the door, Margery, instead of leaving it unlocked for all and sundry,” Constance stated, still addressing Margery while referring to Brenda, who she clearly thought was ‘help’. Brenda forced herself to remain relaxed, carefully washing the
stickiness off her ring, twisting it around on her soapy finger to be sure none lingered. She took a moment to admire it; the delicacy of the metal and the cut of the stones looked nice on what she knew were rather stubby fingers. Leave it to Sharon to choose a ring that not only looked nice, but was a piece of her history, and had another layer of meaning besides.

“Am I expected to bring in my own luggage, too?”

“I’m sure if you ask nicely, someone will help you with your bags, Constance,” said Margery evenly. Brenda turned off the water and dried her hands on a paper towel.

“Why do I have to ask nicely? Isn’t that young woman paid to do such things?” Constance gestured dismissively towards Brenda, who was biting her lip, though she didn’t know if it was to keep from laughing at being called a ‘young woman’ or to take a few stripes out of the old snob. What a first impression. She shot a glance towards Sharon, who was still patiently helping the twins, her jaw clenched, one hand white knuckled where she was gripping the edge of the counter.

Margery’s tone was cold now. “You know very well that hired or no, we treat people with common courtesy and respect in this house. And this ‘young woman’ is Brenda, Sharon’s fiancé.” Constance’s face twisted into a moue of distaste, nostrils flaring. Brenda had never been in a situation where someone reacted with disgust to her romantic relationship. The realization struck her that this was probably something Sharon had been dealing with for a long time, and she bit back a snarl.

“Well you can excuse my confusion,” sniffed Constance primly. “Raydors don’t usually dress like ragamuffins. Although Sharon clearly isn’t setting the best example.” She said this last bit wryly, like she was expecting a chuckle. No one laughed.

“Seeing as how both Sharon and Brenda work extremely long hours at stressful jobs, I think they are entitled to dress however they like on their vacation, Constance,” Margery countered, wondering if the woman would ever take a seat at the table and shut her mouth. Luckily the children were oblivious to the tension in the room, happily helping their aunt flatten and cut the pie crust.

Brenda removed the bowl of pumpkin pie filling from the refrigerator, determined to act as if Constance didn’t effect her. She wasn’t going to let some miserable old woman bring her down; she could treat her like she treated high profile suspects - pretend deference, but bull right over them when it mattered. And right now Brenda felt that reassuring Sharon mattered, so she sidled up behind her, setting the bowl of pie filling down on the counter, and placed hand in the small of the brunette woman’s back. She could feel the tension radiating from under her palm, the muscles supporting Sharon’s spine were so tense that Brenda thought they might snap at the next provocation. She rubbed soothing circles there, once, twice, thrice, then slid her hand around to cup the curve of Sharon’s hip. Leaning in, gaze locked with Constance’s, daring her to say something, Brenda rested her chin on Sharon’s shoulder, and her lover relaxed into her touch. Color suffused Constance’s cheeks and she turned on her heel and stalked out of the kitchen, muttering something under her breath.

Brenda decided then, holding the large glass bowl while Sharon helped Sarah spoon pie filling into a crust, that she could be strong in the face of this kind of hatred. The love that she and Sharon shared, and the trust that was evident to Brenda in Sharon’s ability to unwind in Brenda’s hands, was special and worth protecting, and Brenda resolved to do so.

The pies were done, ready to go into the oven tomorrow, and the kitchen spotless as Sharon and Brenda and Franklin working in concert could make it. Task completed, Franklin wandered off to find his children, who were taking a swim in lieu of the bath they usually had before bedtime.
Only Margery remained in the room with Brenda and Sharon, idly flipping through a home and garden magazine, so Brenda pulled Sharon to her, heedless of the brunette’s flour covered clothes, and wiped a smudge of dust from the angle of Sharon’s jaw.

“You’re absolutely covered in flour, Shari,” she husked. “Worse than the kids.”

“I try.”

“And they love you for it.” She leaned in to place a precise kiss on the tip of Sharon’s nose, and then another on her finely drawn lips. She wiggled happily when Sharon’s arms slid around her waist, trying not to vocalize the purr that wanted to bubble up at the feeling of Sharon’s curves against her body. Mindful that they had an audience, they took a moment to relish their connection, Brenda resting her head against Sharon’s shoulder. It was odd for Brenda, being so close and not taking the opportunity to pay homage to the parts of Sharon that fascinated her; that spot between her ear and her hairline, the line of her neck leading to her collarbone, the little wrinkles under her chin. She inhaled noisily through her nose; Sharon smelled fantastic even when she smelled like the pool.

“I need to go call my mama,” Brenda sighed, not really wanting to drag herself away from Sharon. “I’ve been puttin’ it off since Sunday.”

“Alright.” She kissed Brenda’s temple. “There’s an emergency truffle in the zippered pocket in my purse, if you need it.”

“So thoughtful,” Brenda husked, leaning in to very deliberately, but briefly, capture Sharon’s upper lip between her own. Pulling away reluctantly, Brenda sashayed out of the kitchen.

Margery couldn’t help but chuckle at her daughter’s slightly poleaxed expression. “She’s very affectionate, isn’t she?” She chuckled again when Sharon flushed scarlet at her observation. “Oh, honey, don’t be embarrassed; Brenda is a lovely girl and I’m very happy for you.”

Brenda fished the tiny treat from Sharon’s purse and peeled back the wrapper. She sniffed it - semi-sweet chocolate and raspberry - then used her front teeth to shave off a bite, letting the sliver of confection melt on her tongue. The perfect prelude to what would probably be a fraught conversation with her mother, especially considering she had two missed calls in the last hour from the Johnson household.

Leaving the rest of her truffle for after, Brenda took a seat on the chaise beneath the large bay of windows overlooking the ocean and dialed her parents’ landline. Willie Rae picked up after a few rings, and Brenda breathed a sigh of relief - at least she wouldn’t have to deal with her father, too.

“Johnson residence.” Willie Rae never checked the caller id on any phone, and she thought call screening was unspeakably rude. Brenda thought it necessary to her survival and sanity.

“Hey, mama.”

“Oh my goodness! Brenda Leigh, we were starting to worry!” Willie Rae exclaimed, loudly. Brenda held the phone away from her ear a little.

“Why would you be worried? I told you ages ago I wasn’t comin’ to Atlanta for Thanksgiving.”

“Fritz called and said he went by your place, and it looked like you had moved out and the landlord wouldn’t tell him where you had gone,” her mother was off and running in her narration of how distraught Brenda had managed to make her without even lifting a finger, and Brenda was looking for the nearest flat surface on which to bang her head. She was going to kill Fritz. Or at least let
her boys take a few stripes out of him.

“And then he went by the office and those boys of yours wouldn’t tell him where you’d moved or where you were, only that you’d be back on Monday,” she finished with a huff. Brenda said nothing, knowing that the second she made a sound, she’d be cut off and on the defensive.

“Brenda Leigh, you can’t keep the people that love you in the dark like this,”’ her mother admonished dolefully. “How are you supposed to reconnect with Fritz if he can’t find you, honey.” A growl escaped Brenda before she could stop it.

“Mama, I don’t know why you and Fritz are havin’ such a hard time with this, but let me spell it out for you: I will not be reconciling, reconnecting or any other such thing with Fritz Howard.”

“But Brenda Leigh, he’s a good man and he loves you. Isn’t that worth preservin’? Can’t you figure out some way to accommodate his needs?” Brenda sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. For what she thought were unselfish reasons, she had tried so hard to keep her parents in the dark about the wherefores of the divorce. Fritz loved her parents, and her parents loved Fritz and she thought that didn’t have to change even with their separation, but apparently Fritz wasn’t above using her parents to manipulate Brenda into yet more pointless, circular arguments.

“Mama,” Brenda began softly. “I don’t want to have Fritz’s children. There is no way for me to accommodate his desire to be a parent without completely subsuming my needs. Furthermore, I don’t want to give up a career that I love to satisfy his concerns about my safety. Would it be alright for me to ask him to give up his career in the FBI for the same reason?” She sighed again, waiting for Willie Rae to take the bit between her teeth and take off heedlessly into the conversation once more. It was a surprise when she didn’t.

“Fritz knew who I was and what I was about well before he married me, Mama. And I don’t know if he expected that I’d change or what, but there was a monumental miscommunication there, somewhere.”

“But Brenda Leigh,” Willie Rae protested, “he’s your husband.” Brenda was convinced that this conversation could travel around in circles ad infinitum if she didn’t stop it short.

“Not anymore, he’s not,” she said adamantly. “I’ve moved on, and I’m happy, and I wish you and Daddy would just get over it so we can get back to our regularly scheduled family stuff. I’m awfully tired of having to avoid you because of all the nagging, and the silent treatment from Daddy isn’t going to change anything.”

“So what you’re sayin’ is that you’re seein’ someone else,” Willie Rae queried in a flat voice.

“Yes, Mama, I am. And I’ll tell you all about it when you and Daddy stop mournin’ my divorce like a couple a’ teenage girls breakin’ up with their first beaus.” It took some effort for Brenda to choke back the frustration and imbue her voice with some sincerity. “You’re allowed to love Fritz. I’m not sayin’ that you can’t or shouldn’t, but maybe if you could look at the situation from my point of view, you would see that our relationship was makin’ both of us unhappy for reasons we couldn’t or wouldn’t change.”

“I guess,” Willie Rae groused after a gusty sigh. Brenda couldn’t tell if she’d really brought her mother around to toning down her campaign for reconciliation, but it was a start.

“Alright then!” Brenda poured on the faux-cheer. “Ya’ll have a good holiday, now, and I’ll call again this comin’ weekend, ok?”
“Wait, Brenda Leigh! You still haven’t told me where you are, or where you are livin’!”

“Well, mama, right now I’m in Santa Cruz in a big ol’ mansion overlooking the Pacific Ocean. And I’m livin’ in a gorgeous three bedroom house over in Silverlake - it has a big backyard and a pool and a hot tub!” Willie Rae would think she was fibbing.

“Ok then, Brenda Leigh,” her mother conceded after a resigned silence. “I hope that wherever you are, you have a good Thanksgiving.”

“I am, Mama. Give my love to everyone. And give that ol’ Charlie a hug from me, ok?”

“I will. Bye now.” The line went dead, and Brenda groaned and flopped back on the chaise. What in the hell was she going to do about this? There was no manual or help line for dealing with parents who were more fond of their child’s ex-spouse than their own child. She fished the remainder of the truffle from the pocket of her cardigan, unwrapped it, and popped it in her mouth, biting down to let the sinful combination of raspberry and chocolate flood her senses and chase away the desire to throttle Fritz. And her parents.

Letting the chocolate melt on the back of her tongue, Brenda settled back comfortably on to the plush lounge. She felt a little selfish, wishing Sharon were here with her to cuddle her up and help her to get a rational hold on this issue. It wouldn’t be right of her to tear Sharon away from her family - she could deal with this for the moment. There was at least one person she could use as her eyes and ears, conveniently already in place at ground zero in Atlanta.

TO: Charlie

Hey Charlie-girl. Gimme a call when you have a minute.

They had just over two hours before they were supposed to leave for dinner and she still needed to shower (and didn’t know what dress she was going to be wearing), but Brenda still had some time. She checked her email and scanned some emails related to the case they had caught mid-day on Monday - the boys seemed to be wrapping it up fine; Provenza had brought in DDA Hobbs to wrangle with the perpetrator’s defense attorney and it looked like a plea bargain was in the works. Brenda was ok with that; she had learned over the years that confession or no, circumstantial cases didn’t always play well with a jury, and just as Brenda was good at wrangling confessions from criminals, DDA Hobbs was good at wrangling maximum sentences out of reduced charges. The most recent message in her inbox was a short note from Andy detailing Fritz’s visit to the murder room. Nosy ex-husbands and meddling mothers would be the death of her.

Her email vanished and the screen prompting Brenda to answer or ignore an incoming call from Charlie popped up. She answered.

“Hey Charlie.”

“Ohmigod Aunt Brenda that is the prettiest ring I’ve ever seen.” Brenda chuckled at her enthusiasm.

“I know - I love it too.” She spun the ring around with her thumb. “It was Sharon’s grandmother’s.”

“You sound like you’re smiling. I take it you’re happy with this development.”

“Oh yes, very. I was so excited when she asked me to move in with her, and now I’ve got a gorgeous ring, and the best part is, for the first time in my life, I’m not freaked out about any of it.” Brenda cringed a little at her words - she probably shouldn’t sharing this with her 19 year old
“You really love her, don’t you?” asked Charlie quietly.

“I really do, and that’s why I need your help.” Brenda said with absolute earnestly.

“My help?”

“Your grandmother is pushing me so hard to reconcile with Fritz, and I can’t figure out why. She won’t give me a straight answer - just platitudes about marriage and blah blah blah.”

“They talked a couple of times today, Aunt Brenda. I don’t know what about, though.”

“Fritz found out I moved and is having a drama moment. I’ll deal with him, but I need you to talk to your grandmother and see what you can find out about why she’s unable to let go. I don’t want you to push, and if she gets upset with you, just leave it and I’ll figure something out.”

“Please,” Charlie scoffed. “I’ll have her singing like a birdie and she won’t even realize that I’m pumping her for information,” she finished confidently and Brenda laughed.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to pull some strings for you at the CIA or FBI after you graduate, honey?”

“Nah, I’m not into the whole ‘guns’ thing, but I do have this parking ticket…”

“Well, since it isn’t a moving violation, I think I can make a call, since you’re helping me out with this. Unless it was on campus; if that’s the case you’re SOL.”

“No, it was downtown. I was trying to find a place to park to do this court observation thing and the lot I’d been directed to was not showing up on my GPS. I walked around after and found the right place, but I already had the ticket by then.”

“Oh, Charlie,” opined Brenda. “Give me your plate numbers and I’ll take care of it.”

“I’ll text it to you. And I’ll let you know what I find out from Grandma,” her niece promised. “So what’s Sharon’s family like?”

“There’s one misfit, but so far everyone else is very pleasant. Especially Sharon’s mama and daddy.”

“Is their house nice? Is it close to the ocean?”

“It’s on the ocean. I’m looking out the window at it right now - the view is pretty spectacular.”

Charlie sighed wistfully. “Take a few pictures for me, ok?”

“Oh course I will. Have a good Thanksgiving. And don’t forget to send me your plate number!”

“I will. Love you!” Charlie signed off, and Brenda debated her next move. Should she call Fritz or resort to more passive aggressive measures. But wasn’t that Fritz’s whole angle in stirring up trouble? Forcing her to come to him asking for something (even if it was for him to leave her alone). She would consult Sharon and then sleep on it - it definitely wouldn’t do for her to be riled up if she did end up contacting Fritz.
Chapter 23

The whole house was abuzz as the adults and older children prepared for their evening out. Sharon had heard Alexandra and the kids arrive, but she had already stripped in order to hop in the shower, so she didn’t go to greet them. She and Brenda showered together - the stall was more than big enough, so they took turns under the shower head to wash and on the stone bench to shave, and a moment to enjoy the press of slick bare skin against skin and the fragile beauty of wet hair and water droplets caught in the eyelashes of the one you love most.

Just like most mornings when they got ready for work, the racket of the hair dryer made conversation impossible, but neither of them minded. Brenda dried her hair haphazardly, watching Sharon, towel turbaned on her head, rub lotion onto her limbs. It was a tantalizing sight, but Brenda was (mostly) distracted by her Captain’s long-fingered hands. She needed a ring, and she had an idea of what she wanted to get Sharon, generally, but had no earthly idea of where to begin shopping. Brenda supposed a trip to browse through the jewelry retailers in Beverly Hills was in order.

Leaving her hair just a tad damp for the straightening iron, Brenda clicked off the dryer and left the bathroom to retrieve her underwear. Sharon was bent over, massaging a palm full of oil into the wet mass of waves that, in her position, just brushed the floor. Brenda couldn’t resist giving a teasing pinch to the soft, pale flesh of Sharon’s ass.

“Hey,” Sharon squawked.

“Gorgeous,” purred Brenda as she sashayed past, acutely aware that the Sharon’s eye-line was conveniently at her waist level. She wanted to say ‘fuck it’ to the whole going out to dinner thing and mold herself to Sharon’s naked back and drag the other woman to bed.

Sharon watched her move into the bedroom, craning her neck a bit awkwardly, carefully working the oil into her hair from root to tip. She watched Brenda rummage in their suitcase to find a shimmering, midnight blue panties and matching strapless bra; watched her shimmy into the underwear and settle herself into the cups of the bra. Sharon’s fingers twitched - they’d done a lot of very intimate things with one another, and Sharon had certainly undressed Brenda, but she had never dressed her before. Maybe Friday, before they went out again, Sharon would think to ask, and Brenda would give her permission.

Brenda was ready but for her shoes when there was a knock at the bedroom door. “Come on in; it’s open,” she called hesitantly. The teenager who opened it could only be Sharon’s teenage ‘niece’, Colleen. She was also, incidentally, Constance’s granddaughter, though Sharon assured her that Colleen and her mother Alexandra were nothing like the family matriarch, so Brenda would do her best not to hold their relative against them.

“Uh, hi,” Colleen offered. She peered around the room. “I was looking for my aunt. Is she in here?”

“She’s still in the bathroom - havin’ an eye makeup malfunction I think.”

“Oh, well, I guess that means she can’t help with my hair malfunction. I can’t seem to get it to do anything tonight, and I like to wear it up, otherwise I end up with it in my mouth.” Colleen grimaced and Brenda copied the expression in empathy.

“I know what that’s like. I can do buns and braids - would either of those options strike your
fancy?"

Brenda offered, and Colleen looked shyly pleased, and so very unlike a teenager, who could be rather haughty, in Brenda’s experience.

“I would like that,” the girl answered, and Brenda smiled in response. “A braid, maybe? Sort of messy?”

“I think I can handle that. Lemme just find a hair tie and some bobby pins.” Brenda knocked softly on the bathroom door and then opened it a crack. Sharon was bent over the vanity, still fussing with her eye-liner, naked but for a pair of black moiré boyshorts. The familiar burn of arousal and want, heady and heavy, began to bubble in the pit of Brenda’s stomach at the sight. Sometimes Brenda would catch herself wondering, in what she thought of as weak moments, if she would ever cease to react to Sharon with so viscerally. Every time her thoughts meandered in such a way, Brenda would give herself a little mental shake - she did so now; today wasn’t that day. She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

“Are you doin’ alright in here, baby?”

Sharon, growled faintly, catching Brenda’s gaze in the mirror. “I think this eyeliner is expired or something, because it wouldn’t sharpen properly.”

“You look beautiful, Sharon,” Brenda observed honestly. Sharon’s reflection smirked at her and then the other woman turned to lean languidly against the counter, putting herself on display for Brenda.

“You’re just saying that because I’m practically naked, Brenda Leigh.”

“I’m sayin’ that ‘cuz you take my breath away, clothed or otherwise, but right now you look particularly temptin’… but that’s not why I came in here. I need some hair doo-dads.” Brenda collected the items she needed. “Now put your dress on and come say hello to Colleen.”

“I…” Sharon looked puzzled. “Colleen?”

“She came to find you. Hair crisis.” Brenda waved the brush for emphasis. “I’ll take care of it. Finish gettin’ ready.”

By the time the bathroom door opened to reveal Sharon in her tantalizing little black dress, Brenda had done up Colleen’s shiny, nearly black hair into a fishtail braid that curved over one shoulder and whimsically enhanced her youthful appeal. They had bonded a bit, too - girls with brothers tended to find they had much to discuss, and Colleen’s brothers were a handful. She had come seeking Sharon’s help because her mother had been busy wrestling the 10 and 13 year old boys into sport coats and ties.

It was all Brenda could manage to not stare like a slack-jawed idiot. On the hanger, Sharon’s dress hadn’t really looked like anything special; a cap-shouldered, shiny black jersey sheath with some rouching, but on the woman, it was transformed. The fabric clung to Sharon’s curves, enhancing and smoothing them. Her chest, propped up by the bodice to delicious effect, and shoulders were bare, framed by the black of the sleeves and the fall of her hair.

“Wow,” Brenda croaked, dry mouthed, cheeks flaming. Colleen echoed Brenda’s sentiment, and Sharon favored the girl with a welcoming smile, then gathered the girl up in her arms for a hug.

“Hey, girlie. I’ve missed you,” Sharon murmured, with a squeeze.
“I missed you, too.” Colleen returned Sharon’s affection without any teenage reluctance.

“We’ll talk this weekend about you coming to visit this summer - just you, if you want, no brothers.” In reaction to Sharon’s offer, Colleen squealed excitedly, and Brenda smiled and shot a look a Sharon who gave her a bemused little grin. She would, as soon as they were alone, apologize to Brenda for not asking before inviting Colleen. Brenda would reassure her, it would be her pleasure because her Captain was so thoughtful, and Brenda loved that Sharon was so adored by her family. And Brenda had her own favorite aunt, her mother’s older sister, who had rescued Brenda from her brothers for shopping or a movie or a lunch out quite often while she was growing up; Brenda had nothing but fond memories of those low-key adventures where she was the center of attention for being well-behaved, instead of competing with her brothers for her mother’s time.

“I’m going to go tell mom!” Colleen exclaimed excitedly. “Thanks for helping with my hair, Brenda.”

“That was sweet of you,” Sharon husked after Colleen had fairly skipped out of the room.

“She seems like a nice girl,” Brenda demurred. “You look…” Brenda let out a shaky breath, unable to conjure an adjective that adequately described how Brenda felt about Sharon in her outfit. That dress is really somethin’ - or I should say: you in that dress is really somethin’.”

“I’m glad you think so. I really like that smooth bun with your dress - you look very polished. And very lovely.” Sharon complimented, running her fingers through her hair, pushing it back from the crown of her head. Brenda had to clench her hands into fists to keep from following suit and tangling her own fingers in that silky mass. A bit embarrassed by the talk of her attractiveness, Sharon turned to retrieve her shoes - black suede Valentino platform pumps with gold spike detail on the toes - and then Brenda was unable to resist; she rested her hands on the curves of Sharon’s hips and nosed through her hair to place delicate kisses along a bare shoulder. The brunette chuckled breathily, exhaling in a tremulous rush when she felt Brenda’s tongue dart out briefly to taste her skin.

“What toy’d you pack in the suitcase, baby?” Brenda asked, rough voiced, the movement of her lips sending shivers across Sharon’s back.

“A new one. A strapless dildo.”

“You went sex-toy shoppin’ without me?” Crowed Brenda, incredulous.

“I may have picked out a few things on the internet, but it was before we started spending most nights together, or I would have solicited your opinion.”

“What sorts of things did you pick out?”

“I bought the strap on and harness. And the one I packed to bring with us. And some other things, that I think can remain as surprises.”

“Well, then. Maybe I’ll have to purchase a few surprises of my own,” Brenda retorted, playful, punctuating her statement with kisses across the fading freckles on Sharon’s shoulders.

“I think that is the very definition of a win-win situation, Brenda Leigh,” said Sharon, a laugh burbling up from her chest.

The party was not quite what Brenda expected. The organizers had rented out the entire restaurant (a rather romantic, in Brenda’s mind, wine bar called Soif) and while the menu was available, an enormous selection of finger foods were displayed on a buffet table, along with champagne, wine
and a full bar. Brenda couldn’t bring herself to mind - much less of a chance of getting stuck at a dinner table with someone stultifying or terrible - you could always take your plate and find another knot of people with whom to converse.

As it was, Constance lingered in the vicinity of Brenda and Sharon, casting nasty looks their way whenever they were affectionate or when they laughed. She didn’t appear to be having a good time, not by any stretch of the imagination. Brenda was not in the least surprised that her grandchildren preferred to hang out with Aunt Sharon, because the single interaction Brenda observed between Constance and Colleen involved the older woman sniping at her only granddaughter. The boys didn’t even approach her; Steven Jr., the older of the two sat quietly, nibbling at a plateful of food and playing something on an iPod or iPhone. Matt, who was 9 and still very much the curious boy, shadowed them, watching.

“What’s up with him? He’s not scared is he? I don’t wanna be scary.” There was a lull in the conversation with one of Sharon’s first cousins, and Brenda leaned in, not wanting to embarrass Matt, who was in ear-shot.

“Brenda, you and I both know that is an utter falsehood, and that you love scaring the you-know-what out of all sorts of people,” Sharon teased. Brenda pinched her, gently, on the arm in retaliation, then left a lingering caress on the same spot. “I think he’s just assessing the situation, honey. I’ve been single their whole lives, so Matt is trying to figure out how this is going to work for him. I wouldn’t worry about it; just be yourself.”

Brenda heaved a sigh at this advice. “You know you are the only person that likes ‘myself’, right, and that everyone else has some sort of bone to pick with her?”

Sharon chuckled, but looked at Brenda soberly and said: “I guarantee that the family members that like me will like you, but please keep in mind that teenagers like Steven oftentimes don’t like anyone, not even themselves, ok?”

“That is true,” Brenda groused. “I’m sorry I’m bein’ silly. I think I’m a little nervous, still.”

“No need to apologize, Brenda Leigh.” Sharon squeezed the blonde’s hand comfortably and smiled. Brenda’s nervousness about Sharon’s family was adorable - that this confident, brash and frequently confrontational woman was tying herself up in knots about whether a child liked her was utterly charming, not that Sharon would ever tell her so.

“Would you like another glass of wine?”

“I would, thank you.” Brenda relinquished her empty glass to Sharon and her lover - no, her fiancé - strode purposefully towards the bar at the front of the room, a hypnotic rhythm to her steps. Watching, Brenda felt her eyelids drop to half-mast; dear lord she was worse than Andy Flynn. Her X-rated, totally inappropriate for being comfortable in public, musings were interrupted when someone sidled up next to her. A short, gangly someone.

Matt cocked his head at Brenda inquiringly, looking uncannily like his aunt when she was on the trail of an untruth or misdeed. Brenda cocked her head right back.

“Mom said you were a spy,” he stated, face blank, daring her to disagree and by default, prove his mother a liar. Brenda didn’t know what the right answer was.

“Of a sort. I worked for the CIA.”

“Isn’t that what the CIA does? Spies?”
"Partly, yes. They do other things, too." Brenda questioned whether a nine year old needed to know about analysts and interrogation specialists. Especially not interrogation specialists, not when interrogation, in the world of television, meant torture. Like she had said, Brenda didn’t want anyone to be scared of her.

"Like what?"

"They talk to people, and a lot of people analyze the information that the spies gather - that’s pretty important." Matt narrowed his eyes skeptically, unconvinced. "It’s not always very exciting, I’m afraid," Brenda apologized, pursing her lips in a conciliatory moue. "And it’s all classified, anyway."

Matt scowled at her, but looked impressed, regardless. Just then, Constance inserted herself into their conversation, almost violently.

"Matt, why don’t you go play your game with your brother," she ordered harshly. The scowl Matt gave his grandmother was much more severe and serious than the contemplative looks he’d given Brenda. He obeyed, but grudgingly.

"I’d appreciate," Constance hissed contemptuously, "if you would leave my grandchildren alone."

"Pardon me?" Brenda couldn’t help but be effected by Constance’s venom, but she was practiced enough to not let it show.

"You strut around here with that ring on your finger like it actually means something, telling outright lies to impressionable children? I will not stand for it! And I will not pretend to be overjoyed that you’re preying on my desperate, confused relation."

Brenda didn’t really know how to respond. She fought to keep the hard look on her face, versus staring at Constance, mouth agape, while she considered what to say.

“I’m sorry you feel that way about Sharon,” Brenda said in a quiet, level tone, “and frankly I couldn’t care less what you think about me wearin’ Sharon’s ring, but I haven’t lied. And certainly not to any children."

“As if the CIA would call upon your services? Please. I don’t know who you think you’re fooling with that story, but I can see right through it.”

Brenda couldn’t help it; she laughed. More like a bray or a bark than any sound indicating humor, though. “It’s rich that you think I would lie to someone who has access to my professional history. And you have absolutely no idea of my qualifications, so why don’t you just write this one up as a loss and manufacture some other reason to hate my guts.”

“I’ll have you know I’m on good terms with a former director of the CIA, and someone like you would never have…” Brenda interrupted her.

“The director is a political appointee, and if this former director is talking about his service as director, than perhaps I should make a phone call for some inquiries to be made,” Brenda said gravely, completely serious. Constance blanched, but quickly recovered.

“What I mean to say, is a man like him, in service to this country, would never…” Brenda interrupted again.

“You’re naive. And I’m done with this conversation.” Constance clearly was only marginally aligned with reality. Brenda stalked away, over to where Sharon was leaning against the bar, and
slid in next to her, slipping a hand onto the small of the other woman’s back, fingers toying with the rouching of her dress.

“Hey, baby. Think you could get me a shot of something stronger to chase with that wine?”

“Sure.” Sharon signaled the bartender, who was uncorking a bottle of wine. “Is everything alright?”

“Just a little conversation with Constance.”

“Is that so?” Sharon turned to take in the room, her gaze finding the older woman in a heated conversation with her daughter. Alex appeared to have dragged her mother into a corner and was talking intently to her, body language tense.

“She told me to stay away from the kids, and took some pot shots at my ‘qualifications’ and my work history - which doesn’t bother me that much, but she seems to be laborin’ under the misconception that, I dunno, homosexuality is catchin’ or some such thing.” Sharon ordered two shots of good whiskey from the bartender and then stared off at the bottles lining the wall for a moment, expression sort of blank. She was not in the mood for conflict about this, not in a public venue with the children around.

“Alex will deal with her,” she murmured, after coming back to herself with a tiny, almost imperceptible start. “Constance won’t think to obscure what she said or did because she thinks she’s in the right, and Alex will handle it.”

“That’s fine with me,” the blonde assented. They each took a shot glass from the bar and shared a glance. Brenda couldn’t tell if the sparkle in Sharon’s eyes was anger at her aunt, or something else, so she decided to attempt to lighten the mood.

“To family,” Brenda toasted quietly, for Sharon’s ears only, clinking her glass to the brunette’s gently. Sharon laughed, her eyes crinkling up in genuine good humor.

“To family,” she agreed, and they drank.
Chapter 24

It was an exhausted, but not unhappy, Brenda Leigh that clipped into Major Crimes on Monday morning. It had been a long weekend of socializing and playing with energetic children and lots and lots of food, and after more than 6 hours in the car, Brenda and Sharon had arrived home late afternoon Sunday, brought the suitcase and garment bag inside, and promptly passed out on the couch. Dinner was heavenly, greasy delivery on paper plates and wine in plastic tumblers, and subsequently, bed time was earlier than your average, self-respecting six year olds. Even after nearly 12 hours of sleep, Brenda was still dragging, and Sharon hadn't had much pep in her step that morning either. They had agreed to reconvene for dinner and another early evening at 6:30; throwing her suddenly tiresomely heavy purse onto her desk, Brenda already couldn't wait.

There were a few signs of life in the murder room - the media room door was open and light spilled out on to the linoleum, and Flynn's computer was on, humming through its boot-up process. Brenda pushed the button to start up her own machine and plopped down in her desk chair; there were a few file folders piled on her blotter, and she flipped open the top one to find details of the case they were working, neatly organized in a way that screamed 'Michael Tao'. She sighed and started reading, grateful for the coffee she'd brought from home because the thought of catching up on everything and stomaching the swill from the break room was a little too much.

Brenda was flipping through the last few pages of the file when Andy knocked on her doorjamb. "Hey, Chief."

"Hello, Lieutenant."

"Tao has some footage cued up in the media room, if you're ready to join us."

Brenda nodded. "I sure am." Enough reading; time to throw herself into this case and put a killer away. She gathered up her coffee and the file and followed Andy out of her office, falling into step alongside him as they crossed the murder room.

"Did everyone actually take advantage of their days off, Lieutenant?"

"As far as I know," he answered with a shrug. "Provenza might have come in for a few hours, but only to do the crossword puzzle. His daughter and her two young children were staying at his place." Brenda laughed. She certainly couldn't upbraid anyone for seeking out the peace and quiet of the murder room during a too busy holiday.

"What about you, Chief? How was Santa Cruz?"

"Oh, it was ok," she demurred, and then remembered who she was talking to - can't bullshit a bullshitter. "Exhausting and nerve-wracking, but ok."

He chuckled and looked down at her. "You do look a little worn out - hopefully we can make this an early day."

"Why thank you, Lieutenant Flynn," Brenda groused, furrowing her brow at him, waving off his faux pas with a careless hand. She watched Andy's eyes widen, and then he stopped dead. She stopped a few paces ahead of him.

"No way. Lemme see." Brenda turned and allowed Andy to grasp her hand and examine the ring. He let out a low whistle.
"You know, I've bought more than my share of engagement rings. And tagged along with other guys to buy more than their fair share of engagement rings, but I've never seen anything like this." Blushing, Brenda tugged her hand away, unconsciously caressing the ring with the pad of her thumb.

"Uh, it belonged to Sharon's grandmother."

"It's beautiful. And you're happy about this development?"

"Yea, I am."

"Good. You know the guys are going to be all over it, so you might as well just…"

"Rip off the band-aid. Yea, I know." She gave him a withering look and stalked off, grumbling under her breath. Andy could only just make out what she was saying: "Why do I have to work around a bunch of detectives, anyway."

Her boys had been (unsurprisingly), quite happy with Brenda's production of her ring in the media room. They cooed over the diamonds (Tao had an interest in all things gemological), and didn't ask Brenda what, exactly, the ring meant, which suited Brenda just fine, because she was not prepared to explain her Captain's proposal to anyone at present. Provenza had even managed a smile - but only a small one.

Her mood took a decidedly downward turn when someone mentioned Fritz, and his visit to the murder room last week. The boys wanted to know how they should handle any future stopovers, and Brenda assured them that keeping mum was most acceptable, then promptly turned the discussion to the case. Thankfully, a rather pedestrian love triangle murder didn't really strain Brenda's capabilities, because just what she was going to do about the problem of Special Agent Fritz Howard was at the forefront of her mind.

"He's actin' all creepy and stalker-like," she opined to Sharon over leftover Chinese in her office at lunch. Sharon was supposed to be in briefings with McIntire and his Captains all day, but had managed to break away to join Brenda. "He's not actin' rationally, and that's freakin' me out a little. Oh, and accordin' to Charlie, he's got my mama thinkin' that I'll be forever alone and unloved because I've managed to alienate everyone in the greater Los Angeles area. Is she really that gullible. And! And!" Brenda shrilled, really getting into the flow of her rant, until she paused and quirked her lips, embarrassed. "And I just don't know what to do," she finished, looking over at Sharon from under her lashes.

"Your mother is just worried about you, Brenda Leigh," Sharon soothed, then bit the top off a stalk of broccoli and chewed thoughtfully. "Do you really want to know what I think about the Fritz problem?"

"Of course I do!" Brenda exclaimed, slightly exasperated, rice falling off her fork from the force of her vehemence. "This affects you, too."

"I didn't know if you were just talking yourself through it, honey."

"You're the reasonable, level-headed one in this relationship, Sharon," Brenda asserted, punctuating her statement with a jab of her fork. "Of course I want to hear what you have to say."

"Fritz is going to find out, probably soon. With the way he's acting, I wouldn't be surprised if he tails you home at some point." Brenda scowled. She was of a mind to have a strongly worded discussion with the Los Angeles SAC. "I know, but it is what it is. Professionally, we've taken the
appropriate steps, and it won't reflect very well on him if he goes telling tales to the brass, but in order to limit whatever harm he might try to cause in your personal life, you should talk to your parents, as soon as you can muster up the courage." Brenda's scowl deepened.

"I guess the sooner I get it over with, the sooner we can have relative peace and quiet and only the usual family disruptions, right?"

"Precisely."

Brenda Leigh was ostensibly visiting the morgue for a report on the post-mortem she had been unable to attend, but really, she need the good doctor's help.

"Tomás? Where are you hidin'?"

"I'm in here," he said, walking out of the antechamber where some of the equipment was stored. "So let me see."

"How did you know?" Brenda complained, but she held her hand out obediently.

"A certain Chinese-American birdie called down here a little while ago. Apparently none of your boys quite know what to do with themselves, because last time you got engaged, something…I don't know. I had a hard time understanding him through all the gushing about your ring, which is lovely, by the way."

Brenda's smile at the compliment was sincere, if a little strained. Given tacit permission to be excited about her relationship with Sharon, they were taking wholehearted advantage: they were worse than Brenda's teenage girlfriends cooing over bridal magazines and swooning during Diana's marriage to Prince Charles, if only because of the truly absurd number of nuptials between them, Brenda included.

"How was your holiday? I hope you actually got your days off and didn't get called in."

"I got a few days, until Saturday, when Major Crimes caught a case. And it was fine. Busy, since my brother and mamá came into town."

"Well, that sounds nice! I hope Flynn and Provenza didn't drag you in here on a Sunday, either."

"Oh, they didn't. They had some football thing going on, so I was safe." Pleasantries aside, Tomás narrowed his eyes at Brendaly. "Did you come down here for a reason? This murder was not at all complicated, and my notes were pretty clear." Brenda flushed a little, embarrassed at being caught out, but was determined to soldier on with the purpose that had brought her to the morgue.

"Uh, I wanted to ask you a favor. Just a little, teensy, bitty one."

An eyebrow shot up above Tomás's squint. "Go on…"

"I want to get Sharon a ring, and I have a pretty good idea of what I want and where to start, but I need someone there, like a mental health check or something, to be sure I don't do anything really crazy."

"And why can't you take Sharon along on this little shopping trip. I'm sure she would tell you exactly what she prefers." Brenda could only glare at him.

"Ok, stupid question."
"I know what she likes," Brenda sassed. "That's not the issue. But I'm a little…I don't need to be spendin’ a year's salary on an engagement ring, and I might need someone to pull me back from that ledge. And with the way my boys are acting, they might push me right off it with a smile and wave."

"I think I could provide such a service. For a price."

"Dinner afterwards," Brenda offered. He didn't need to know Brenda had planned to invite him to dinner anyways. Tomás pursed his lips and gave her a considering sort of look.

"And I want proposal details, you know, later. Once you give her the ring."

"Ooooooooh," groaned Brenda frustratedly. "You're as bad as the rest of 'em, you just hide it better. Fine. But I get to draw the line, because some things are private, and I won't betray any confidences."

"I wouldn't want you to."

"Good. I'll see you Saturday at 3."

"Yes you will," Tomás agreed. Brenda nodded briskly once, then turned on her heel and stalked out of the morgue.

With a huff, Brenda flopped down in her desk chair; her suspect was not cooperating, refusing to sit down for questions without an attorney present, supposedly in order to safeguard her 'image'. She hated it when they were savvy, it just wasted time. A commotion in the murder room drew Brenda's attention from her musings on the average intelligence of the common murderer; Flynn, Gabriel and Sanchez were bearing down on someone, obscuring them from view and attempting to bar them access. She flew out of her chair, grumbling to herself again:

"Of all the rotten days. I swear nothin' can be simple or easy anymore, everything's gotta be some big production with hootin' and hollerin' and carryin' on…What on earth is goin' on out here," Brenda barked, prompting her officers to step aside, slump-shouldered, to reveal a purple-faced, nearly apoplectic Fritz.

"I am going to file a complaint with Tompkins against this whole division," he raged, pointing at Flynn, who responded with a particularly mulish glare and a snort.

"In my office," hissed Brenda, seething. She had never been so furious in her life. Even her first husband, after accusing her of fraternization with a subordinate, had had the self-preservation instincts to stay away; Fritz apparently didn't have the common sense God gave any number of animals. Ignoring the worried faces of her boys, Brenda stomped after her ex-husband and kicked the door shut behind them.

"I'm not some stooge you can have banned from the murder room, Brenda."

"Well, you certainly are acting the part. And I didn't ban you from anything. My officers acted of their own accord, probably on account of your behavior over the holiday, comin' in here, demandin' to know my whereabouts and makin' threats. What did you think was going to happen?"

"What did you think was going to happen when you disappeared off the face of the earth? You weren't in LA, you weren't in Atlanta, you apparently don't live in your apartment anymore. Your own mother has no idea where you're living or where you went for the holidays. I was worried sick!"
"This is worried? Seems more like possessive and angry to me."

"You owe me an explanation," Fritz demanded, forcefully thrusting a finger at Brenda.

"I don't owe you anything, Fritz Howard," she retorted. "That's the beauty of divorce."

"You are still my wife," he asserted.

"In name only, and the clock is runnin' down on that awfully quick," sassed Brenda nastily with an insolent twist of her lips, leaning forward on her desk. The movement drew Fritz's eyes to Brenda's hands and he gaped, then turned, if it was possible, an even more alarming shade of purple.

"You know, it doesn't surprise me that you had some poor rube lined up to take over the second our relationship hit the skids. Who is it? Flynn? He was awfully quick to throw down the gauntlet out there. Pope? How long has this been going on that you're wearing his ring to the office? I swear to god if you were cheating on me…"

"You'll what? Make an even bigger ass of yourself playing poor cuckolded spouse? Get out."
Brenda pointed at the door, reminding herself of nothing more than her mother, sending Clay Jr. or Bobby to their room for some infraction. It seemed fitting, since Fritz was hellbent on acting the adolescent. She could see her boys hovering out in the bull pen area, watching, waiting to see if Fritz would leave on his own. "And don't come back or I will let my boys drag you out of the building."

"You can't do that. I work here, too," he protested.

"You work here at the discretion of the departments you 'liaise' with. Major Crimes does not require your services. Get out."

"This isn't over," he snarled, yanking the door open.
Brenda shrugged. "I can't stop you from feelin' that way, but you won't be doin' this here, not again." Fritz left, and Andy, hovering outside, made as if to enter the office, but Brenda waved him off. Plopping down in her chair for what felt like the thousandth time that day, she dialed Sharon's cell and brought her phone to her ear.

"Didn't I just see you," answered Sharon playfully.

"You did, but I had a surprise visitor. Though I shouldn't be that surprised."

"Fritz?"

"Yes," Brenda stated shortly.

"Is he still acting a little, uh, coo coo for cocoa puffs?" Brenda couldn't help but snort at Sharon's rare use of an idiom.

"Yea, he is, but nothin' quite so out of character as you sayin' somethin' like 'coo coo for cocoa puffs'."

"I thought you'd appreciate that." Sharon lowered her voice to that intimate husk that Brenda loved so much. "Are you ok, Brenda Leigh?"

"I'm kinda pissed off," Brenda confessed readily. "I might go down to the range and fire off a couple 'a clips while the boys close up shop and get ready for tomorrow."
"Alright. Is there anything in particular you would like for dinner?"

"Maybe some comfort food? You know what I like."

"I do know what you like. Let me think about what I have at the house and what I would need to pick up…" she trailed off and Brenda could tell the other woman was already contemplating what would best please Brenda Leigh for dinner. "I love you and I'll see you at home."

"Love you, too."

Andy heaved a sigh of relief when the Chief, on the phone in her office, cracked a tentative smile. Sharon Raydor: guaranteed pick me up - who knew?

"You know," Shanchez murmured from where he was helping Andy prop up his desk, not so discreetly keeping an eye on the woman in the office, "any other woman, I would post a patrol car on her house until the husband calmed down."

"I was thinking the same thing," Andy admitted. "The Chief and the Captain would kill us in very unpleasant ways if we did that. Even if it was one of us sitting out there. And you know they would get off scot free for it, too."

"No doubt."

"Maybe we should go have a little talk with ol' Fritz."

"I don't think that's the better option of the two, Lieutenant." Andy shrugged; he was only tossing ideas around.

"I know!" he blurted after a moment's contemplation. "I have a buddy who rides a patrol car in that sector. He owes me a favor, and driving by their house once an hour for the next couple nights fits the bill as payback. That way it doesn't have to go on the record anywhere."

"For the Chief's protection or yours?" Sanchez teased.

"Both."
Chapter 25

It was typical, selfish Brenda Leigh Johnson to start a new relationship and not even have the courtesy to let him know. Fritz knew he was brooding, and had been since his confrontation with the woman earlier in the day, but he couldn't bring himself to care that he was only half listening to the wire-tap recordings he was supposed to have completed his report on today, or that he hadn't fixed himself dinner yet. He kept seeing another man's ring on his wife's finger; a more expensive ring than Fritz could afford, even dipping into his savings and retirement. And Brenda had been wearing it openly, unashamedly. It had taken months for her to wear his ring into the office, and he suspected that, in the end, one morning she had simply forgotten to take it off before getting out of her car and heading into HQ.

So he was fuming. And fretting. How could he possibly get his relationship with Brenda back on track if he had no idea who the competition was? He pressed stop on the audio program on his laptop, currently reeling through 14 hours of recordings at double time, and opened up a new tab in his browser window. Although LAPD policy dictated that officers changed the password on their work email every eight weeks, he knew Brenda never, ever changed the passwords on her personal accounts. And they were all the same thing: her initials, the four numerals of her parents' street address in Atlanta, and the last four digits of her cell number in some combination. It galled him that someone trained by the CIA could be so cavalier about the security of personal data, and had told her so on many occasions. Brenda had always insisted that if someone wanted to read emails from her mama and see the pictures Jimmy sent of his dogs, Lola and Marco, or the stupid chain emails that Clay Jr. thought were just hilarious, they were welcome to all of it.

He typed her username and password into Gmail's log in and cringed, half-expecting it to kick out a message that the password had been changed. He gave a little hiss of victory when Brenda's inbox loaded, though he was disappointed to find not much of interest there: payment confirmation from a florist regarding an arrangement due to be delivered on Friday - it didn't say who the recipient was to be; another confirmation from a bakery about an order of cupcakes that Brenda could pick up Thursday evening or Friday morning; a rambling email from Willie Rae about family news and not-so-subtle talk about Fritz. At least someone was on his side in this.

Brenda didn't really have any interest in social media, so there were no Facebook or Twitter accounts for him to check, though she did have an iPhone - maybe logging into her Apple account would provide him with some information. He could always use that find my iPhone thing, provided she had turned the service on on the device itself. He couldn't allow himself to feel guilty at this invasion of Brenda's privacy - he needed to know these things, after all, and it wasn't like Brenda would ever tell him anything; she hadn't even when they lived together. Maybe this was the only way to get into Brenda's head and figure out what she was really after with this charade of a new relationship - and the only way to fix their marriage - snooping and investigation.

The mail account gave him no clues - it was all promotional crap from Apple. Contacts wouldn't help; it didn't show who was on Brenda's favorites list or who she'd recently called. The calendar was empty but for a dentist appointment the week after next, and a reminder for Friday to pick up the cupcakes mentioned in the email he'd read earlier. He wondered what that was about; someone's birthday maybe? Though he'd never known Brenda to be aware of anyone's birthday, not even her own. There were a few saved notes: three saved grocery lists, though none of them had a single frozen meal listed on them, only things that required actual preparation, one list of high end jewelry retailers (Bvlgari, Van Cleef and Arples, Cartier, Chopard), and the last was a cryptic list of dates beginning in September and ending with last Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving.
None of this was actually helpful in regards to who Brenda was seeing, but Fritz took a moment to parse out what he had learned. Brenda was bringing treats to the office, was either making forays into cooking or had found someone to do it for her, and had been shopping for jewelry - maybe she had picked out that ring herself. With a sigh he clicked on the next to last web app, the Photostream. He didn't have much hope for it; Brenda had never been one for photography so he expected to find photos she had snapped at crime scenes for one purpose or another. What he found were very much not random snaps from crime scenes, but a few dozen pictures of Sharon Raydor, some including Brenda, but more without.

The newest was dated the day before, and it featured the Captain, dressed casually, her hair a riot of messy waves, driving. The Jaguar emblem gleamed on the steering wheel in front of her and the interior of the vehicle looked brand new. Next was the Captain in a one-piece swim suit, wrestling with a dark haired child in an indoor pool. Other, unfamiliar faces populated the background of the photo. The Captain cutting into a pie. The Captain with her arm around a tiny, steely haired older woman with a heavily laden table between them and the photographer.

The next photo made Fritz pause for another look. The Captain in a black dress and Brenda in a shimmering blue number shot through with gold. Both women looked exceedingly beautiful. They weren't looking at the camera, but at one another, smiling, bodies angled in intimately. There was no contact, but the pose screamed of familiarity. No way.

He kept scrolling. A ring on Brenda's finger - the ring he had caught a glimpse of earlier that day. The Captain driving again, her hand out stretched towards the camera. The Captain roasting a marshmallow, lit only by firelight, the faces of a few members of Brenda's team swam in the shadows in the background. The Captain and Brenda, sitting on the end of a lounger, lit by that same fire, Brenda's blonde head resting on the Captain's shoulder, a soft, rather knowing grin on her face. He scrolled faster, not wanting to see the Captain backlit by the setting sun, turning her hair the color of a burning ember, or the Captain in a black bikini, manning a barbecue grill. Fritz reached the end, a picture of a gorgeous bouquet of wild flowers. The time and date stamp seemed familiar, and when he checked, it matched the first date on Brenda's cryptic list in her notes. Was this some sort of cosmic and stupendously unfunny joke? It had to be, right? As far as he knew, Brenda tolerated Sharon Raydor because Sharon Raydor was a fixer - the only person who could save her career from Taylor and Pope and Goldman and Brenda herself. Raydor's motivations had never been clear to Fritz (or to Brenda, as far as he knew), but Brenda had constantly railed against the woman's presence in her murder room and around her investigations, with fire in her eyes and contempt in her tone. And now he was expected to believe, what, that they were engaged? That Brenda, notoriously and almost hilariously unromantic Brenda Leigh Johnson, was chronicling their romance with pictures and lists of dates and pal-ing around with Raydor and the Major Crimes squad? Fritz needed an explanation, and he wasn't prepared to wait or to go through Brenda's lawyer.

It wasn't strictly policy to use the FBI's databases to track down errant spouses, but Fritz was positive he could explain away the Captain's name in his search history were his account audited. The question was, as he navigated to the Silverlake address that the computer had kicked out, how to approach the situation. He couldn't really make a plan without a better idea of what was going on, anyways.

Raydor's house was certainly charming and neat, and in a nice neighborhood, Fritz could give her that. The tree-lined street was quiet as Fritz made his way up the slate walk and tried to step silently onto the porch. The flickering light of the television punctuated the glow coming from one of the front rooms, and he discreetly peeked around the casement and into the house.
Brenda was sitting on the floor, leaning against the couch, bracketed by Raydor's legs, her head resting on one of the Captain's thighs. The other woman was massaging his wife's scalp with her fingertips, and Brenda appeared to be so relaxed she was nearly comatose; eyes lidded, jaw slack. It was a surprisingly tender scene and not what Fritz had expected - there was nothing of the tension that had characterized their interactions during the lawsuit and before. In fact, he wouldn't have thought that 'tenderness' was part of the Captain's emotional range; it didn't fit within the spectrum of 'officious' or 'nosy' or 'frustrated'. And Brenda was most often tender as an act, when she was conning a con in her interview room, or conning Fritz himself. All that aside, this could still be friendly; head touches were sort of on the borderline of friendship intimate versus intimate intimate, in his mind anyway.

He observed a while longer; they were obviously watching something on TV, not talking, though Brenda said something once, and the Captain threw her head back and laughed. The head massage continued for what seemed like endless minutes, until Brenda dropped a kiss on the Captain's thigh where her head had been resting, and rose to her feet. In a blink, she was on her knees on the couch, straddling the Captain, kissing her, busyng herself with the buttons of her shirt, as if she was desperate to feel the older woman's skin under her hands. The Captain's hips bucked up, her hands trailed up the back of Brenda's thighs to grip her ass possessively. Fritz knew the smooth, inviting planes of Brenda Leigh's body and Fritz knew the potent force of Brenda Leigh's desire, and watching it directed at someone else was too much for him to bear without interrupting.

He pounded on the door, waited a few seconds then pounded again. It flew open to expose a highly annoyed Brenda.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" she snarled.

"What the hell am I doing? What the hell are you doing, Brenda," Fritz countered indignantly. "What the hell," he repeated.

"I've tried to make it clear to you, Fritz," Brenda intoned slowly, hands on her hips, like she was talking to a particularly slow interviewee, "that what I do is no longer any of your concern, but it doesn't seem to be getting through."

"What you are doing is cheating on me," he spat, voice raising with every word. Raydor appeared in the vestibule behind Brenda, her face still and almost emotionless. That was more to Fritz's expectations. "And making a mockery of our wedding vows. For what? For her?" Neither of the women spoke, they just looked at him, eerily calm, which he expected from the Captain, but Brenda had a tendency towards the dramatic. Her apparent calm was disconcerting.

"You're fucking someone else and I'm supposed to just roll over and accept it?." He caught Raydor's cold green eyes with his and addressed her. "Do you honestly think she isn't just using you?" Her lips nearly disappeared, pressed together, and the fine lines around her mouth deepened; she looked old to him, in that moment, and Fritz was satisfied to have caused a visible reaction in someone so stoic.

"I'm not usin' anyone for anything - and all you're doin' is making yourself miserable, comin' over here like this, all worked up."

"I'm not miserable, I'm confused," Fritz nearly wailed. "You're my wife, and you're straight, and you don't see why I'm having a hard time with this? Are you being coerced? Is she holding something over your head, Brenda? Can I help?"

"Either I'm usin' her or she's coercin' me. Make up your mind, because it can't be both." She narrowed her eyes at him, considering. "Are you drinkin' again? Is that what's going on here?"
"I am not," he spat, "drinking again. You were practically fucking that woman in full view of the street and you accuse me of that?"

"You were watchin' us," Brenda shrieked, fingers coming up to press against the bridge of her nose.

"I'm curious," the Captain joined in the conversation in that slow, deadly monotone she often affected, "how Agent Howard found out where you were in the first place. Not to mention how he found my address. Due to my position, after all, I'm not listed in any LAPD database that he would have access to."

"That is a damn good question. Clearly, Agent Howard," Brenda said, using his title mockingly. "You've misused FBI resources. What other crimes have you committed tonight? Did you tail me home? Tap my cell?"

She would find out; she always did, so Fritz figured confessing would be less painful in the long run. And was it really hacking if she didn't ever change her passwords?

"I needed to know what was going on with you, so I logged into your email and then your Apple account to try to figure out where you were staying. Imagine my surprise when I found all those disgusting pictures..." he trailed off as the expression on Brenda's face went from merely furious to implacable, icy rage. He knew that look; people, usually criminals, turned up dead when Brenda got that look. Her face softened, became a bit less terrifying, and Fritz realized it was because Raydor had placed a steadying hand on Brenda's hip.

"You need to leave," Raydor ordered, still frustratingly monotone and cool. "Now."

"Fine," he shrugged. "But don't think this is over." Fritz was fine with leaving this farce behind. He didn't want to look at it, or at them anymore. All of a sudden, he was freed from his desire to reconcile with Brenda. He imagined the amount of havoc the information he now possessed could cause in Brenda's life. And in Raydor's too. Pope alone...

Before he could finish that thought, he found himself trapped between the porch railing and a furious Captain, the prongs of a hand-held taser digging painfully into his ribs. Fritz was uncertain if he could overpower her and get away before she depressed a button and shot 50 thousand volts into his torso.

"I know what you're thinking," she hissed in a low tone, green eyes flashing fiercely. "And I am warning you, any hurt that you cause her, I will take it out of your hide, Fritz Howard, and enjoy doing so."

He growled in frustration, not daring to move. She stepped away, the taser still held low in warning. Fritz looked up at Brenda, half expecting to find some sympathy there, or outrage that Raydor had threatened him, but her eyes were hard. He turned and left, the adrenaline of his close encounter with the taser carrying him quickly to his car.

Sharon flipped the dead bolt on the door and snapped on the security lights that often went unused; if Fritz came back tonight, there would be no shadowy corner from which he could watch them. She was afraid to turn around and look at Brenda, worried that she'd overstepped some boundary in threatening Fritz, who was, by unspoken agreement, Brenda's problem.

"I'm sorry," she began, still looking out the glass panel in the door to be sure Fritz's car turned off their street. "I shouldn't have..." Brenda cut her off.

"Sharon," Brenda said, stopping Sharon's apology short. "Look at me, Sharon." Sharon obeyed, but
couldn't bring herself to look Brenda in the eye. "I'm not mad at you, baby. A little warning next time would be nice, because you nearly scared the stuffing outa me when you pushed past." Fears assuaged, Sharon met Brenda's sad, dark gaze.

"Are you alright, Brenda Leigh?" asked Sharon, and Brenda paused to actually think about the question and to take stock of how she was feeling.

"I would be much less alright if you weren't here, Shari. I feel a little violated, that Fritz was lookin' at the pictures I have saved of you and of us. And that he was watchin' us through the window."

"Maybe the first thing you should do is sit down and change the passwords to all the personal accounts that you use regularly. And I'll browse drapes for the front windows."

"Ok," agreed Brenda. "But what should we do about him? We could report him to his SAC, or file a report for trespass and identity theft?"

"Or his behavior today could get you a restraining order from a sympathetic judge, but let me sleep on it, ok? I might be a little too angry to be objective right now." Sharon walked over to her desk to unplug her laptop, truly intending for Brenda to sit down and change her passwords. Brenda's tendency to take photos of her was surprisingly sweet, and the thought of Fritz having access to them for any longer turned Sharon's stomach. She felt a tentative hand on her hip and turned to find herself caught up in a fierce hug.

"He coulda hurt you," Brenda sobbed, struck by that reality that, as strong as Sharon was, Fritz had six inches and probably 80 lbs. on her.

"I'm sorry," soothed Sharon, near tears herself now that the immediacy of the situation had dissipated somewhat. She hadn't really thought about her actions before slipping out the door and digging her taser into Fritz Howard's ribs. It had just sort of happened, the same way that jumping out of her car and putting a forearm across the throat of a creepy young man who had touched her thirteen year old daughter in a grocery store parking lot had happened. When people she loved were threatened, sometimes Sharon Raydor just reacted - something quite out of character for her. "I didn't mean to scare you," she murmured.

"I know you didn't," Brenda replied, her voice trembling with unshed tears.

"I can't promise it'll never happen again."

"I know that, too. Just promise me you'll be careful, please."

"I promise, Brenda Leigh," Sharon asserted, stroking the messy tumble of curls that spilled over Brenda's shoulders and down her back. "Will you promise me the same thing?"

"Course I will, baby. Of course I will."
If Brenda thought that her Monday had been vaguely uncomfortable, it had nothing on the Tuesday she was currently enduring. Surprising herself, and Sharon, she had agreed to let her fiancé deal with her ex-husband. She was through with him; totally and completely finished, and Sharon could have him fired, trussed up and shipped to a CIA black box in whotefuckcaresistan, and Brenda would pour her a glass of wine and give her celebratory oral sex.

So Brenda was prepped for her interview (this particular murdering scumbag had picked the wrong day to lawyer up - Brenda was going to have her confession, counsel or no counsel), and now she was waiting; waiting for her perp and waiting to hear how Sharon's 'talk' with Fritz went and waiting to see if he had had time to wreak any havoc in Brenda's life. Brenda wasn't any good at waiting, but she was getting better at realizations.

Last night, after changing the passwords to Brenda's personal email and Apple account and a couple of other things, she and Sharon had sat and looked at Brenda's collection of photos together, recounting the happy and fond memories they had already made. Sharon wanted to frame the picture from the backyard, of them next to the fire, and Brenda thought they should put the one of them dressed up for dinner on the fridge.

It had been so easy for Brenda to get lost in that quiet moment with Sharon, despite the terrible encounter they'd had with Fritz and despite her anxieties about the damage he could do. She realized then, that frankly, the rest of the world could go to hell; that unless she and Sharon lost their way as a couple and decided it wasn't working, that her parents, Will Pope, the mayor, and her ex-husband could piss and moan all they liked, Brenda was sticking with Sharon. Anything that could make her feel calm and content after the day she'd had, hell, after the shit she saw most every day, was worth fighting tooth and nail for.

Brenda had her resolution, she had her endgame, but she had no idea how things were going to play out and it was driving her absolutely batty. She gnawed on a fingernail agitatedly, casting about for a memory that would soothe her nerves. Last night, in a rare reversal of their routine, Brenda had curled up behind Sharon, thoroughly absorbed with (though in a less freaked out manner) the petite size of her lover; Sharon really wasn't much bigger than Brenda herself - a little taller, a little broader and more solidly muscular, but she was still a small woman. In Brenda's mind, Sharon sometimes took on somewhat Amazonian proportions; she was the tallest, the strongest, the most graceful, so the moments where Brenda realized Sharon's relative fragility came as a surprise, though not always a pleasant one, like their encounter with Fritz earlier that evening had demonstrated.

As Sharon drifted off to sleep in Brenda's arms, Brenda had had the startling thought that maybe Sharon felt as safe with her as Brenda felt with Sharon. For Brenda, as much as she loved sleeping in Sharon's embrace, there was nothing quite like holding beautiful, naked Sharon Raydor in her arms as she slept. Brenda had fought her own descent into dream land to fully enjoy the opportunity. She had been pressed against Sharon's bare back, her arm slung over Sharon's torso, hand splayed over the soft flesh of her stomach. Occasionally an auburn curl would tickle her nose, and Brenda would huff out a breath to push it away, then inhale through her nose to pull in Sharon's distinct scent.

Smiling at the pleasant sense memories, Brenda mentally reviewed her game plan for the interview one more time. This step, and then the next, and however many more it took to get her home to Sharon Raydor at the end of the day.
Humming a jaunty little tune under her breath, Brenda entered her office after her interview; Brenda Leigh, 1 - this particular murdering jerkwad, less than 0. Jail, for a long time, was his score. Smart enough to call a lawyer, but not smart enough to shut the hell up when his lawyer told him to. She activated the screen on her phone; one missed call and one voicemail from her parents' land line. A wave of nausea so intense rolled through Brenda that she nearly dropped to her knees next to her desk. She managed to get herself into her chair, staring at the piece of technology like it was a poisonous snake. With shaking and suddenly damp fingers, Brenda navigated to her voicemail and put the phone up to her ear. Her mother's voice began to play, tremulous and halting.

"Brenda Leigh, I've had a talk with Fritz today, and he had some very disturbin' things to say about what you've been up to. I don't...I know you're workin', but please call me back as soon as you can." A weary little sigh echoed over the line before Willie Rae hung up. Brenda thought she was going to vomit, she was so angry at Fritz and so scared that he'd forever prejudiced her mother against this relationship when Brenda was so happy. Brenda swallowed back her nausea, and breathed deeply through her nose. She had her end game, and this was one more step. She opened up her text window with Sharon.

TO: Shari

Fritz talked to my mama today. I don't know exactly what he told her, but I'm about to call her back.

Brenda knew Sharon was in meetings all day and might not be able to respond, but she'd need to know if she was going to have a little discussion with Fritz at some point that afternoon. It was a pleasant surprise when Brenda's phone chimed with a reply.

FROM: Shari

I'm sorry, honey. I didn't think he'd go there first. Is there anything I can do?

TO: Shari

You're doing it. I just have to suck it up and have what I'm sure is going to be a painfully awkward conversation. I love you, and be careful later. PS: You looked really, really beautiful this morning. Shari. Thought you should know that.

FROM: Shari

Glad you thought so, honey. I love you, too, and I'll see you at home.

Home. Yesterday, Fritz had violated their privacy and their home in a big way, and now he was continuing to violate Brenda's relationship with her parents. Enough was enough, she thought, stabbing the screen to call her mother back.

"Brenda Leigh," Willie Rae answered the phone without the customary greeting. "What is going on with you? Is it true, what Fritz said?"

"Mama, I don't know what Fritz said, so I can't tell you whether or not it's true."

"He told me you've taken up with that Raydor woman, and that you're living with her and wearing an engagement ring and you never even told him you were seein' someone else, let alone a woman you work with. And he said that you have pictures of the two of you carryin' on, and that when he came to talk to you, you were carryin' on with her, and that she threatened him!" Willie Rae sighed gustily, and carried on. "What kind of game are you playin' Brenda Leigh? This is no way to treat a good man who loves you!"
"I'm not playin' any game, mama. I'm movin' on with my life, and dealin' with an ex-husband who can't let go a' me, and parents who can't let go a' him. Did you even stop to think that maybe Fritz didn't tell you the whole truth; that maybe he hasn't been telling you the whole truth since this mess started?"

"So you're tellin' me you aren't involved with Sharon Raydor?"

"No, mama, that isn't what I'm sayin'. What I mean is that Fritz has you fallin' all over yourself believin' that I'm depressed and crazy and fallin' apart without him, and what he failed to mention is that he initiated divorce proceedings in an attempt to blackmail me into havin' children with him and changin' the way I do my job. Then, after I signed the papers, he spent the next month houndin' me every single day, tryin' to get me to change my mind. And now he's strong-arming my subordinates and our former landlord, tellin' tales to my own parents, berating me at my workplace, and using my email and photos to track me down when I don't want him to know where I am," Brenda finished in a rush.

"You know, the only reason he saw my pictures is because he was snooping in places he had no business. And every single one of those photos is rated PG. And last night he only saw me kissin' Sharon because he was standing on our porch peekin' in the windows!"

"What about that woman threatenin' him? You can't tell me that is acceptable behavior?"

"He was threatening us! Standing on our porch, making a scene! All she did was poke a taser in his ribs and tell him to leave us alone. Fritz was lucky that Sharon had that taser and not me, 'cuz I woulda zapped him but good, and probably not in the ribs!"

"I don't know what to say, Brenda Leigh," Willie Rae responded after a few moments of strained silence.

"You don't know what to say about what, mama?"

"About any of it. Why didn't you ever say anything about Fritz? You should have told us he wasn't acting right."

"I didn't dream he'd get this bad, and he's only been annoyin', really, until a few weeks ago. I figured he'd just give up on me and would still be able to have a good relationship with you. I didn't want to take that away from him." Brenda thought it rather fitting that trying to be generous and considerate to an ex-husband she hadn't hated had come back to bite her in the ass so spectacularly.

"Oh, Brenda Leigh. And I don't...Are you gay, honey?" Brenda (silently) clunked her head down onto the pile of case files that covered her blotter. Even that didn't accurately express the extreme awkwardness of discussing her sexual identity with her aging, conservative mother.

"Mama, it's immaterial. It wasn't a surprise to me, but regardless of how I identify, the end result is the same."

"And what is that? Are you going to marry her?"

"I don't know yet. We haven't had a chance to talk about it, what with the holiday and Sharon's promotion and the craziness with Fritz."

"Then what does the ring mean, if it isn't an engagement ring?" Willie Rae wanted to know.

"It means that Sharon loves me, mama."
"It just doesn't make much sense to me, Brenda Leigh. Do you even love this woman, or are you just afraid to be alone and latchin' on to someone available?"

"Of course I love her," Brenda protested vehemently. "Very much. I made the decision to try to change our relationship, not Sharon, and it doesn't have to make sense to you. Maybe we'll have some sort of marriage ceremony, maybe we won't, but I know that Sharon's ring and Sharon's promise is better than a legally binding contract signed in blood from anyone else."

"Can I see it?"

"See what, mama?"

"The ring."

"You wanna see my ring that doesn't make any sense to you," Brenda sassed, fiddling with the object in question; the solid weight of it was already a comfort.

"Brenda Leigh," her mother warned in that parental tone that is familiar to toddlers and teenagers everywhere.

"Fine, mama. I'll email you a picture of my ring, ok? But I have to go; I'm supposed to be workin'."

"But Brenda Leigh…"

Brenda cut her mother off. "You might be havin' a crisis about my new relationship, but I most certainly am not. What I am doin' is tryin' to solve a murder. If you have any more questions, why don't you think on them a while and we can talk this weekend."

"This weekend!" Willie Rae spluttered.

"Yes, mama, this weekend. It may be hard for you to imagine, but I have quite a bit goin' on right now; plans to finalize for Friday, Christmas shoppin', crazy ex-husband, and I still have a job to do. I'll send you that picture of my ring. Bye, mama. Bye, now."

Willie Rae hung up with a huffy: "Bye, then." Brenda groaned and let her head hit the desk, for real this time.
With the unexpected boon of Brenda's permission to deal with Fritz in a manner she saw fit, Sharon prepared for the encounter like she would prepare for a court date with an especially hostile defense attorney (or a day spent in the company of Major Crimes, before…everything). Her most severe suit - perfectly tailored raw silk in matte black that concealed nearly from neck to knee but for a four inch slit up the back of the skirt and the deep v of the blazer - over a dark purple blouse, was much more than was necessary to intimidate the average cop involved in one of her OIS or use of force cases. That suit, with its 'look, but don't touch' details, was Captain Raydor at her haughtiest, and Sharon hadn't had to play that game, lately, for more than a few minutes at a time, so she needed all the help she could get to believe herself in what used to be a rather habitual role.

It didn't help that as soon as she had walked into the kitchen, dressed and with her hair blown straight, Brenda had given her this lustful, considering looking, like she was trying to figure out if she could ruck Sharon's skirt up without ruining or wrinkling it. (It was too tight, or Sharon might have let her - coasting on that sort of high to give Brenda's ex a dressing down would have been… nice.) It wasn't too long ago that a suit like this would have had Brenda Leigh plotting doubly hard to ruffle Sharon's feathers, but now that Sharon knew what she knew, it was highly probably that Brenda Leigh did so simply to see more of Sharon in a particular outfit.

She hadn't really decided how rough she was going to be on Fritz, but once she received Brenda's text message and found herself shaking with anger and not a little fear, she was resolved: come the end of the day, Fritz Howard was not going to be a happy camper.

Her meeting let out around four, and Sharon slipped into the bathroom, smoothed her hair, picked a bit of salad from between her teeth and reapplied her lipstick. As she looked into the mirror, she hardened herself; let the mask of Captain Raydor slip over her and transform her face into a smooth, haughty facsimile of itself. No cracks, and no crying. She might be angry and scared, but they needed Fritz off their backs to have any chance of doing this right, and having it work out in a way that didn't put an unholy amount of strain on Brenda and Sharon and on their relationship.

Sharon had spent rather a lot of time in the Federal Building, so it was with a polite nod and no trouble that she handed over her service weapon to be secured behind the desk and stepped through the metal detectors as her purse took a pass under the x-ray machine. She nodded back, collected her bag as it exited the machine, and clicked her way across the rather dreary lobby to the elevator bay.

The office of the FBI Liaison to the LAPD was near the top of the building, probably because Fritz was responsible for briefing the SAC's and the US attorneys on the progress of joint LAPD/FBI investigations, and proximity was convenient. Sharon didn't know how often he was actually in his office, so she had called an acquaintance before coming over, just to be sure. Though she supposed that him finding her there, waiting, could have been a right scare, but she didn't have the time or the patience to wait on Special Agent Fritz Howard.

His door was open, and Sharon was inside and had the door closed behind her before he realized what was going on. He looked up from his computer, seemingly unsurprised, but Sharon knew better; she could see the pulse hammering above the collar of his slightly limp looking dress shirt. He bared his teeth at her in a sort of grin; she leaned back against the door and cocked her head at him.

"I can't say that I thought you would show your face around here. Come to beg for mercy? I can't say that I'm feeling particularly generous today, what with you shacking up with my wife and all."
"What, exactly, do you hope to accomplish with this belligerent and nonsensical course of action, Agent Howard?"

"Accomplish? I don't know that I have a particular goal in mind here, Captain, though it is nice to see you squirm. Just trying to get some of my own back from the two of you, I guess."

Sharon gave him a feral grin. "Oh, really? I bet you'll be feeling very confident and very masculine when the entirety of LA law enforcement is talking about your ex-wife fucking FID's ice queen." She shrugged a shoulder dismissively. "Anyone's better than Fritz Howard."

"Bitch," he spat. Sharon let out a bark of genuine laughter.

"It's been said. I guess the irony here is that I haven't actually done anything to you to warrant your abuse. And neither has Brenda. All she wanted was to be enough for you; just Brenda, as she is, not Brenda plus kids, not Brenda minus work. You couldn't give that to her, and now you are punishing her for moving on."

"She's my wife - we were supposed to want the same things. You think that self-absorbed, work-obsessed Brenda Leigh Johnson will ever put your needs first or give a damn about anyone but herself? She'll use you up, take advantage of every kindness you ever paid her, and then move on to the next sucker," he finished with a significant look at Sharon.

"It's funny, you don't look very used up to me. Angry and a little pathetic, perhaps, but not used up. You spent a few years with an intelligent, funny, sometimes sweet and naive woman who happens to be dynamite in the sack and a crack shot with a 9 mil. It didn't work out; you get over it and you move on. At least, I presume that's how it went with your first wife. You're not still harassing her or trying to ruin her life, are you?"

"Fuck you" Fritz snarled. "And you better think again if you think she'll keep putting out for you once she's gotten what she wants, which is security and someone to cook her meals and deal with her dry cleaning."

At this accusation, Sharon couldn't decide if she wanted to burst out laughing or strangle the man. Brenda had confessed to Sharon that she had stopped trusting that Fritz would respect her wishes regarding birth control, so she had stopped having sex with him. It had been hard for Brenda, as much as she craved intimate contact with her partner, to let go of that part of their relationship. Sharon hoped that she would never give Brenda a reason to so thoroughly mistrust her, that they would lose such a crucial part of their relationship, and one of the ways in which they communicated.

To Fritz, she said nothing, merely shrugging, as if to say: 'we'll see.'

"Just wait," he sneered, then gave her a lingering once over that made Sharon's skin crawl. "I'm surprised she puts out for you, period, since she's possibly the straightest woman I've ever met."

"Clearly, not so straight." Sharon observed, then smirked at him, done with trading barbs and cheap shots. Fritz was like a little boy, angry at the loss of a favorite toy, stomping his feet and engaging in a destructive tantrum. Her children had thrown a few of these fits as toddlers, before she had disabused them of the notion that the habit was in any way constructive. She new exactly how to handle this.

"Moving on, I find myself confused, Agent Howard," Sharon husked in that tone capable of causing men more stalwart than Fritz Howard to sit up and straighten their ties. "Last night, I quite clearly warned you that any actions you decided to take against Brenda, I would return in kind, and"
yet, here I am."

"And you're confused that I failed to take you seriously?" He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. "I'm sorry to tell you, Captain, that I'm confident that there isn't much you can threaten me with."

"Mmmmmm," she hummed, acknowledging his bravado and his misunderstanding with a bit of condescension. "No, Agent Howard. What confuses, and troubles me, to be frank, is that you spent months working closely with Brenda Leigh and Mr. Baker and myself in order to preserve her job and reputation, and yet you seem to be completely in the dark as to my personal and professional connections and what I am capable of."

"FID doesn't have any pull in the FBI, Captain. And neither does the PSB."

She clicked her tongue at him. "Such narrow thinking. You know, I've worked with people in this building for nearly 30 years, in a number of capacities; cop, advisor on issues of legality and procedure, policy maker. All that would have been in my CV, which you could have had access to, had you asked. What isn't in my CV is that I've been recruited by this Bureau probably half a dozen times, also by the District Attorney's Office, the State Attorney's Office, the US Attorney's Office, the Inspector General's Office, the Board of Police Commissioners...I could go on. The point being, I have a lot of friends, and that is something you would have known had you asked, oh, I don't know, anyone that you work with outside of the LAPD." Fritz looked a little shocked at Sharon's litany, but he merely narrowed his eyes at her.

"So you've had job offers. Maybe you should have taken them, because I'm hardly trembling in fear right now. How do you think I should tell Pope about your little affair? Do you think he would appreciate the pictures I saved from Brenda's Photostream? Perhaps I should show them to him in person - the look on his face should be worth a picture itself!"

"So what you're telling me is: you aren't going to back down," Sharon clarified.

"Not a chance. You know, I find myself wondering if the only reason your audit of Major Crimes didn't find Brenda at fault was because you had a thing for her. I bet Pope will be curious about that fact, too." Ignoring him, Sharon pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts.

"Do you like Los Angeles, Agent Howard," she asked conversationally as she located the name she sought and dialed.

"What? What does that matter?" She smiled at his confusion, a real smile, because this was done and he didn't even know it yet.

"Hello, Cole," Sharon responded into her phone. "Yes, I know I haven't, I apologize." She listened for a moment. "No, I will at Christmas. What about yours?" She paused again. "That sounds nice. I'll do that." Another pause and Sharon sent a positively shit eating grin Fritz's way. "Unfortunately this isn't a purely social call. I recently got engaged to a certain Deputy Chief of the LAPD." Fritz could hear the tinny sounds excited male voice through the Captain's phone speaker even at this distance. "The very same. And I will, Cole. We've encountered a little...pushback from her ex-husband, who is, as you know, one of your agents. I have strong suspicions that he used Bureau resources to find out my address, and has engaged in some other highly unprofessional actions. We could have gone to the courts and asked for a TRO, but...I'm in his office." She chuckled. "I'll be here." She slipped the Blackberry back into her blazer pocket.

"You think Hauser will do anything about this? He doesn't answer to you anymore than I do." Fritz knew that Sharon had been on the phone with his boss's boss, Cole Hauser, the Assistant Director
in Charge of the Los Angeles division of the FBI. Apparently they were friends; he hadn't known that.

"Regardless of what you may think, you've committed some pretty serious infractions here, Agent Howard. Brenda would have a case in civil court for a restraining order, and I can't imagine your boss would be very happy about your code of conduct violations. Why don't you just sit tight and we'll see what Director Hauser has to say about all this."

Fritz glared at her; he was well and truly trapped in this situation now, with the Captain looking as cool and collected as ever, one hand in a blazer pocket. What did Brenda see in her? She dressed well, in clothing that flattered a not unattractive shape, and her hair was certainly luxurious, but there was no warmth in her. Other than last night, on the couch with Brenda, the strongest emotion he'd seen from her was frustration, and that had also been directed at his wife. He couldn't imagine her having the patience to deal with the mess that was Brenda Leigh in her personal life for more than a few hours at a time. What could she possibly be getting from their relationship?

Their little détente continued for a while; Fritz was reluctant to show weakness by dropping Raydor's even gaze to look at the clock. She was practically motionless; only the steady rhythm of her breathing and the occasional sweep of eyelids across those cool, green eyes hinted at her being more than a wax statue. She was unnerving. Finally, the tension was broken by a knock on the door. The Captain said nothing, but turned, opened the door, exited his office and shut it firmly behind her.

"That was fast," she murmured to Cole Hauser, who, before he was an Assistant Director with the FBI, had been a classmate of Sharon's in law school.

"I figured you'd be in there staring him down and I didn't want to have him throw himself out the window," the well-built, gray-haired man joked. "It's good to see you, Shar. Though I do wish it was under better circumstances."

She gave him an apologetic smile. "I know, and I'm sorry. You were the first person I thought of that could help me handle this. He's already called Brenda's mother, and he was threatening to call Pope."

"I have a tech looking to see if he searched your name in our databases. She hadn't told him anything about the two of you, prior to last night?"

"Not a thing," Sharon affirmed. "He's been acting possessive and controlling since their separation began, so Brenda has been shutting him out. He showed up on our doorstep last night at around 8. Apparently he'd gained access to Brenda's personal email and Apple accounts and decided to confront us - to what purpose, I have no idea."

"Hmmmm. Some consequences are a given, but if Agent Howard decides he doesn't care, there isn't going to be much that I can do." Sharon's face grew dark, brows furrowed, lips pursed.

"I am aware. There isn't much I can do either, that isn't felonious."

"Ha ha, Sharon. No murder, if you please. We do spend a substantial amount of tax dollars training these agents. I'd prefer to not have to replace any of them." She shot him a evil grin. "That's not a reassuring face. You know I'll do what I can."

"I know you will," Sharon breathed, then drew in a shaky breath, the first weakness she'd allowed herself since she left LAPD HQ. "I just can't have this happen again, Cole."
"I know." Cole grasped Sharon's arm, just below the shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I've not had the pleasure of meeting her, but from what I understand, your Deputy Chief is pretty bullheaded, so have a little faith, ok?" Sharon managed a tremulous smile at his characterization of Brenda.

"I'm trying. It's been an exhausting couple of weeks - my reserves are running a little low."

"I'll let you know what happens here, alright. Dinner soon?"

"Sure," Sharon replied, knowing that Cole had to be itching to meet Brenda now. "Thanks for this."

"Anytime, and you know I mean that. Go home and take a load off. I'll call you." Sharon nodded, gave Cold a sad little grin, and left.

Cole straightened his tie and smoothed back his hair, fighting down the not-entirely-appropriate anger he felt on Sharon's behalf. He had had the biggest crush on her in law school, and she had been completely sweet about it - no weirdness, no snickering from Kellan, who was at that point just her boyfriend. She had been a steady friend for more than thirty years; the type you could not talk to for a couple of months and when you reconnected, it was as if there was no gap. He was happy to know that this latest silence had been because she was courting (and hopefully being courted by) a woman she was in love with. Cole knocked lightly on the door and opened it without waiting for an answer.
Chapter 28

Brenda was surprised when she arrived home before Sharon; she was even more surprised when 6 pm came and went with no word from the other woman. She sent a single text, not wanting to hover, but it went unanswered. Worried, she put the remains of the casserole from the night before in the oven to warm and went to change her clothes. The table was set and Brenda was contemplating opening a bottle of wine without consulting Sharon when her fiancé came through the door. The brunette looked absolutely wrecked, stiff and exhausted, and she was no longer wearing the pretty suit that Brenda had so admired that morning, instead wearing a pair of gray LAPD sweats and a navy hoodie, her hair pulled back into a messy ponytail.

"Hey," Brenda greeted her softly, and was rewarded with a slight smile, the barest curving of those well loved lips. "Dinner's almost ready. Can I get you a drink?"

Sharon dropped her purse on the entryway table and hung her suit on the coat rack and took a good look at the woman who was greeting her from the door to the kitchen. Brenda was wearing her version of a security blanket: a shirt that Sharon sometimes slept in, if it was chilly enough, with a pair of black yoga pants so worn as to be a dingy gray - also Sharon's. She looked concerned, brown eyes wide and lambent, and Sharon knew that if she relaxed her body language even a little, Brenda would wrap her up in a hug that Sharon desperately wanted, but felt weak for needing. Sharon found herself paralyzed in the entryway to her own house, unsure of how to ask for what she needed from the blonde.

It shouldn't have surprised her when Brenda walked over to cup her cheek, and then slid her arms under Sharon's to pull them together, but it did, just a little. As she allowed herself to relax against the lithe little woman, it occurred to Sharon that Fritz Howard didn't know Brenda at all if he thought her selfish.

"You smell like the firin' range, baby," Brenda murmured. "Why don't you go wash up, and I'll make you a drink." She rubbed Sharon's back with just enough pressure that Sharon could feel the pads of her fingers through the thick fabric, then pulled away to kiss Sharon right on the tip of her nose. "Feels like a whiskey night to me. Want yours with soda, water, or on the rocks?"

"Rocks, and a glass of water, please."

"Course. Now go wash your hands, else dinner will taste like cordite." Sharon watched her go back to the kitchen - she never even asked why Sharon had felt the need to go shoot paper men after work instead of coming straight home; probably, she trusted Sharon to tell her if anything was truly wrong.

Dinner was a quiet affair until Sharon stabbed a piece of squash with her fork and said: "My friend Cole is the director of the FBI's LAPD office."

Brenda barked a startled laugh before looking at Sharon with a raised eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Mmmmm," confirmed Sharon, looking down at her plate rather than at the curious woman at the table with her. "Agent Howard has been made aware that any more misuse of Bureau resources or violations of the code of conduct will result in either the loss of his job or permanent reassignment to the last listening post in Alaska."

Brenda laughed again. "That's fantastic." She laid a gentle hand on Sharon's that was fiddling with her napkin in her lap. "Hey," she murmured, prompting Sharon to look up at her. "Thank you, for
dealing with this for us - I know it couldn't have been easy for you," Brenda acknowledged. "I don't think that I coulda done what you did - there woulda been bloodshed if I had to handle it, especially after talkin' to my mama."

"How did that go, by the way?" Sharon wanted to know. In her misery and anger, she had forgotten Brenda had had to deal with a confused and possible angry parent, and she was a bit ashamed of herself for failing to remember that it had probably been a rather wretched experience for the other woman.

"All things considered, probably better than it could have. I was on the defensive, and I mighta been a little mean, 'cuz she was still shillin' for Fritz!" Sharon gave her hand a sympathetic squeeze. "Though I think I mighta heard the end of that, thank god. But she's confused, 'cuz as far as she knows, I haven't had any female romantic partners, ever. I told her that it wasn't a surprise for me, but I can't imagine her knowin' about Neecie doin' a bit of good, at this point."

"Maybe after she's had some time to process, if she's still having trouble, you can talk to her about it," Sharon suggested. "You might not even have to. It may be that knowing about you and I will put some things in to perspective for her."

Brenda pulled a face, sticking her tongue out a little. "I don't wanna think about my mama thinkin' about my sex life."

"I doubt she'll ever say anything to you about it, honey," consoled Sharon.

"Lord, I hope not. Now that would be an awkward conversation." She shuddered. "You know that really puts my little chat with her this mornin' into proper perspective. It could be much, much worse." Shooting Sharon a rueful look, she said: "You know, I still like to think my parents had sex exactly four times. I imagine its probably the same for them, maybe worse, 'cuz lord knows there's no procreation going on in this household."

"Plenty of sex, though," Sharon retorted, the thought eliciting a slightly naughty grin that Brenda returned.

"You're ok though, really and truly, Sharon?"

"I'm getting there," Sharon assured her. And she really was, thanks to Brenda's sweet concern and the fact that when they were alone together, the rest of the world seemed very far away. "What about you?"

"I'm ok. Honestly," she asserted at Sharon's somewhat skeptical expression. "I thought I would be freaked out, but mostly I'm just pissed off at Fritz. And a little sorry that instead of me tellin' my parents about somethin' that has made me really happy, I had to defend myself against my ex-husband actin' like a spoiled baby."

Sharon didn't know what to say - she could see no hint of untruth on Brenda's face, no impending freak out about the fact that their professional lives could possibly come crashing down around their ears.

"You're really not worried?"

"Maybe a little, but my mama and daddy will eventually come around and we both know that Will Pope is an impotent, self-important jackass, with extra emphasis on the impotent." With a final squeeze of Sharon's hand, she pushed back from the table and stood, gathering up her plate and glass. "You have any work that needs doin' tonight?"
"Not a thing. Elliot has taken over all the FID duties already, unless there's a real stinker of a case, then I'm pretty much off the hook in the evenings."

"Then why don't you go get in the hot tub. I'll wash the casserole dish and put the plates away and join you in a few minutes."

"I should help clean up," Sharon protested. They always worked together to prepare and clean up after dinner; it didn't seem right that Brenda was doing both, even if Sharon knew she was offering to be sweet and to give Sharon a chance to relax. "It's not fair for you to do all the work."

"Sharon, I put the casserole in the oven to warm while I changed my clothes, and then set the table. Not exactly slave labor." She flapped her hands at Sharon. "Go on now, get. I'll be along in a few minutes."

"Are you shooing me?"

"Yes! Now get!"

"Bossy," Sharon tossed over her shoulder on her way out the door and onto the deck.

"You like it," retorted Brenda.

A naked Sharon Raydor lounging in the hot tub wasn't quite what Brenda had expected, but it was what she found when she stepped off the deck and into the chilly, dark December evening. The jets were on and the frothing water, unfortunately, hid most of what Brenda wanted to see, though Sharon's shape was a svelte, tempting shadow in the glow of the underwater lights in the tub. What the water didn't hide was the large, red and purple bruise on Sharon's right shoulder.

"Sharon Marie! What did you do to yourself at the shootin' range?" Sharon sat up a little from her slumped position and looked down at herself.

"Oh. I didn't even realize - it doesn't hurt." She rotated her shoulder a little, as if to confirm to herself. "I wasn't braced properly and took a shot anyway, the kickback must have gotten me more than I realized."

Brenda dropped the towels she was carrying and knelt next to the other woman, probing the bruised flesh with a whisper-light touch. "You shouldn't be soakin' that; it'll make it worse."

Sharon tilted her head back to look Brenda in the eye. "It's ok, really. It doesn't feel like a deep one." Brenda sighed mightily.

"Shotgun or rifle?"

"Shotgun."

"And you couldn't have let the target fly and waited for the next one?"

"Uh, no?"

"Who were you tryin' to put in their place, then?"

"Some ATF guy was being a punk, talking to his buddies about how they shouldn't let grannies on the range because it slows everyone down."

"Oh lord," Brenda sighed. Sharon could be a little touchy about her marksmanship skills, and Brenda was positive 'let it go' hadn't been in her emotional vocabulary that afternoon. "Did you
Sharon didn't answer, only smirked a particularly ridiculous smirk. Sharon was good with a rifle and pistol, but no one beat her with a shotgun. Learning to shoot skeet off the back of a bucking sailboat had a rather particular effect on one's aim that people who learned in a more sedate settings couldn't really replicate.

"Well, good for you, baby," congratulated Brenda, tugging on Sharon's ponytail jokingly. "Are you sure you don't want me to get you some ice for that shoulder?"

"Nope," Sharon said, reaching her arms above her head to stretch, a move that caused her nipples to pop out above the surface of the water. Brenda licked her lips and Sharon smirked again. "What I really, really want is for you to strip off and get your ass in here, Brenda Leigh."

"Yes m'am," agreed Brenda, and stood, shucking her pants down her legs as she rose. Sharon watched greedily, eagerly as the blonde pulled her shirt over her head and let it drop to the stone decking. She settled into the seat across from Sharon's with a sigh, slumping down into the water, eyelids fluttering.

"We should do this more often," Brenda purred; the relaxation had overtaken her almost immediately as she sank down into the warm water. Sharon only chuckled.

"So are you at all excited about Friday, Captain?" asked Brenda after a few minutes of contented silence. She nearly laughed out loud at the exaggerated wrinkle of Sharon's nose the question garnered.

"Not really," she confessed. "I'm looking forward to starting in my new position, for real. But glad-handing it with Pope and the mayor and the rest of the brass? No thank you."

"It's only an hour or so - and then we can have cupcakes with our squads and a special guest I invited for you, baby."

"Special guest?" Sharon repeated, sounding quite dubious, and Brenda gave her a merry smile in return.

"Just a young 'un with a little bitty crush that'll get a kick out of seein' you in your dress blues, is all."

"You didn't." Sharon didn't sound mad, just surprised, so Brenda continued to smile.

"Yup, I did. And Amelia is gonna take some pictures for us, since we both have to be in uniform. Actually, I got an email from Pope while we were out of town threatening me with hellfire and damnation and a demotion to traffic if I don't show up."

"Little does he know, you'll be leading my cheering section."

"Mmmmmhmmmm. And after work I have special, celebratory plans for the woman of the hour."

"Brenda, you didn't have to go to any trouble for me," Sharon demurred, and Brenda scowled at her.

"Yes, of course I did, and I wanted to. We're not talkin' a cocktail party here, I ordered some cupcakes from that bakery you like and made dinner reservations for just you and me."

Truthfully, Sharon was thrilled that Brenda had planned some special things for a day that was
important, but that Sharon wasn't necessarily going to enjoy. The last time she had been promoted, both her children had been away at college, and it wasn't like she had any real work friends, thanks to her career path, so that day had passed by with little notice by anyone, beyond a few congratulatory phone calls from friends and friendly acquaintances. But now she had Brenda, who was (a little surprisingly), very proud of Sharon's accomplishments and supportive of her ambition and wanted to celebrate with her.

Realizing this made Sharon smile, and reach out with a foot to make contact with Brenda's legs, fluttering her toes against the other woman's shin. Brenda wrinkled her nose and grinned playfully, and Sharon felt a foot hook around her calf and tug.

"Are you playin' footsie with me, Ms. Raydor?" Brenda inquired, a naughty little smirk playing on her lips as her foot gently parted Sharon's knees and lingered.

"And if I am?"

"I'd be wonderin' why you're all the way over there, instead of over here, kissin' on me."

Sharon was glad to accept her invitation, and sliced through the water, settling over Brenda Leigh, her knees bracketing the other woman's thighs.

"Hey," Brenda breathed, the word a faint gust that tickled Sharon's lips bare millimeters away. As she brought their lips together, it occurred to Sharon that Brenda's efforts and empathy this evening required a bit of a reward - not that they ever used sex as anything other than a genuine expression of feeling, it's just that Brenda had a rather particular fondness for making love in the backyard, and it wasn't something they did often.

Sharon allowed her weight to rest on Brenda's lap as they kissed, and kissed, and kissed, reveling in her whiskey breath and in the press of her hard nipples into the undersides of Sharon's breasts. Deliberate and teasing, Sharon's approach was a bit like the steps of a dance; slow, slow, fast, wherein 'fast' was the flick of Sharon's tongue against Brenda's lips, or a quick foray into the other woman's mouth. Her aim wasn't to ramp Brenda up as quickly as possible - there was a time and a place (many times and many places) for that - she was after the long, slow burn that had Brenda relaxed and sighing contentedly under the ministrations of Sharon's lips. In fact, Brenda was so relaxed that Sharon didn't know if this make out session would even turn in to sex, which was fine; turning the usually-a-little-jittery Brenda Leigh in to an overcooked spaghetti noodle with kisses and a hot tub was something of an accomplishment in Sharon's mind.

Her question was answered when Brenda moaned and the slender hips beneath her rolled, just once. Sharon pulled back a little and chuckled.

"You," Brenda panted, "are a demon. Unless you want me to spontaneously combust, you'd better stop."

"Do you want me to stop, really? Or would you like an orgasm?"

"You don't haveta, Shari." Her eyes were big and dark in the low light, and her cheeks suffused a darker pink than the rest of her, flush from the warmth of the hot tub.

"Brenda," chided Sharon gently. "I wouldn't offer if I didn't want to." She leaned in to nibble on the prominent line of the blonde's collar bone. It was too cold for Sharon to lay Brenda down on one of the loungers and fuck her, especially since they were wet, and going inside and drying off would lessen Brenda's heady need that was very much a thing 'of the moment'. But Sharon had an idea; she stood, and motioned for Brenda to turn around.
"Turn around and kneel on the bench - and make sure you're in front of a jet." Brenda raised an eyebrow at her, but complied, and Sharon moved in behind her, pressing up to Brenda's back, using the one foot she had planted firmly on the bottom of the tub for leverage. With one hand, she cupped Brenda's pussy, a finger lightly teasing her hard clit, with the other, she fumbled around for the jet, adjusting it so the water streamed against the back of her knuckles.

"What're you up to?" Brenda asked breathily, most of her attention on the feeling of Sharon's hand between her legs. Sharon chuckled again, and much to Brenda's consternation, and then surprise, dragged her hand away from Brenda's cunt and up her torso, cupping her breasts and kissing her neck while Brenda processed the feeling of the water pounding against her intimate flesh. This bonus feature of her hot tub was something Sharon had taken advantage of many times while alone and trying to relax after a long day; sharing it with a lover was exciting.

"Oh," gasped Brenda, falling forward a little to rest her hands on the lip of the tub.

"Does that work for you?" Sharon asked. "Will it make you come?"

Brenda responded with a fervent nod, closing her eyes and tilting her head back in pleasure. The slight motion of her ass in the cradle of Sharon's hips was intoxicating, putting a tantalizing pressure on Sharon's clit and causing her to buck forward a little. They set a rhythm, a slow grind, Brenda chasing the sensation of the jet of water against her clit and Sharon bringing herself off against the perfect curve of Brenda Leigh's rear-end.

They began another sort of dance - more literally this time. Sharon worked Brenda's breasts, palming their weight and then pinching her nipples as a counterpoint to the movement of their hips, surprised that she was so very close with so little stimulation. The feeling of Brenda moving against her was, as always, indescribable, and the blonde's almost innocent delight at this new sensation was both adorable and titillating; she cooed and she purred and she moaned, writhing, caught between the solid warmth of Sharon and the pleasure the water was providing her.

When Brenda fell apart in Sharon's arms, coming with a hand slapped across her own mouth and a sinuous full-body wiggle, of their own accord, Sharon's hips chased down her own orgasm with a few, firm thrusts, and she melted, sinking down into the water a little, resting a cheek on the bony slope of Brenda's shoulder.

"Well," Brenda ventured, rough voiced. "That was nice. You've done that before, I presume?"

"Only by myself," Sharon admitted blissfully, focusing on the rapid-fire thump of Brenda's heart not far from her ear.

"I would ask if you'd like a turn, but it sounds like you've already had your turn, baby."

"Yup," Sharon agreed. "That was really nice," she confirmed.

"Much better than the last bright idea you had, that one in the shower," Brenda teased.

"Hey," protested Sharon, standing up fully. "I learned my lesson!"

"I guess you did, since you were the one with a lungful of water!"

Brenda yelped when Sharon grabbed her around the waist and pulled them both back into the water with a splash.

"Jerk," Sharon growled playfully, supporting the slender body of her lover as they lounged in shallow tub.
"You love me anyway," Brenda asserted with a contented sigh, and Sharon couldn't argue with that.
Chapter 29

Sharon was already half-dressed when Brenda exited the bathroom in her underwear. A tight white t-shirt covered her curves, and her uniform pants hung unbuttoned from her hips; spilling over her shoulders, her hair was a riot of unruly waves that Brenda had a hard time believing could be tamed into the bun that Sharon regularly wore beneath her cover. She was bent over the clothes chest, working on one of her shoes with a soft brush, polishing the black leather to an immaculate gleam.

Brenda's own uniform was hanging on the closet door, and she was so not looking forward to putting on the polyester blend that didn't breathe, and pinning on her ribbons and insignia and invariably poking herself, and wearing those shoes that did nothing for her legs, and putting her hair up in a style that she was constantly having to fiddle with; she was very much looking forward to Sharon's promotion, though. And, of course, Sharon in uniform was enough to make anyone sit up and beg.

"I buffed up your shoes for you, honey," Sharon said without turning around, concentrating on the strokes of the brush across the smooth leather of her shoe.

"You didn't have to do that." Brenda approached the brunette and flipped a lock of silky brown hair over Sharon's shoulder. Sharon smiled, still focused on her work.

"I know - they didn't need much, though, and I already had the shine kit out."

"Well, thank you," Brenda purred, unwilling to step away from Sharon and remove her hands from the other woman's warm, t-shirt clad shoulders.

"You are quite welcome."

Brenda allowed herself one final, lingering caress; dragging her palms down Sharon's back and briefly cupping her hips before pulling away and reaching for her uniform pants.

Brenda wiggled herself in to her regulation apparel and stood in front of the mirror, attempting to affix her marksmanship medal, which didn't seem to want to rest straight. Stabbing the pin through the fabric one more time, she caught herself in the pad of her thumb. She yelped and flapped her hand a few times, then stuck the tender digit in her mouth.

Sharon stepped out of the bathroom, the look on her face half concerned, half amused. Her hair was up now, and her uniform shirt on, but unbuttoned.

"Do you want me to do that?" She offered. "I don't want you to end up septic from pin-sticks."

Brenda gave her a mock glare. "I'd like to see you do better Cap'n Snobby Pants."

"That's Chief Snobby Pants to you," Sharon sniffed with a minute curl of her lip to indicate her playful disdain.

"Not for another 3 hours, it isn't," retorted Brenda, sticking out her tongue, going about the business of tucking in her shirt. "Anyways, you'll always be my Cap'n."

Sharon was glad that the actual ceremony where Pope gave her her medal and said a few words about her accomplishments had been brief, because she wasn't sure how much longer Brenda would have been able to last without bursting into proud tears. As it was, Brenda was still the least discreet cheering section ever, those familiar, fathomless brown eyes glittering with poorly
repressed emotion. This was not the day for questions from their boss about the nature of their relationship.

Thankfully, they all - Brenda's and Sharon's squads and the Kinlans - managed to escape unnoticed while Pope was busy schmoozing with the Mayor and Inspector General, and had reconvened in the Major Crimes murder room for cupcakes (frosted police blue with yellow stars) and milk.

Brenda and Marcus were seated on an empty desk, Brenda's cover on Marcus's little blonde head, slipping down around his ears, both of them with smears of blue icing around their mouths. They had each eaten a cupcake, then had ganged up on poor Amelia to get her to allow Marcus to split a second treat with Brenda. Though, to Sharon, leaning next to them, it appeared that Marcus's eyes had been bigger than his stomach, and Brenda was finishing the cupcake on her own, leaving the icing for Marcus to pick at. Not that Brenda would ever complain about extra baked goods.

Brenda gave Sharon a small wrinkled nose grin, flashing blue-tinted teeth her way, and Sharon couldn't help but grin back. The woman was adorable. Sharon had to resist the urge to lick her thumb and wipe away the icing above Brenda's upper lip - no grown up spit baths in public - though if they were at home, she'd probably just kiss the smear of blue away. Six months ago, Sharon would have recoiled in disgust had anyone suggested she would have the impulse to kiss food off her lover's face, but with Brenda she seemed to have very few physical boundaries, plus, the other woman almost always tasted like sugar anyway.

Brenda's eyes sparkled knowingly and she waggled a finger in Sharon's direction. Marcus, interested in their interaction, looked up at them, the hat toppling backwards off his head, and grinned. Sharon winked at him and he giggled. He was a funny, well-mannered little guy; he'd already managed to secure promises of a tour of the SID labs and the media room from Tao, and, at some point, a ride in a cruiser, lights and sirens and all, from Sanchez.

"Miss Sharon," Marcus asked. "May I have some more milk?" He held up his empty cup.

"I don't see why not. Can you handle the carton yourself?"

"Only if it's mostly empty," he admitted ruefully. Sharon offered him her hand and helped him to hop off the desk.

"Will you get me a refill, too, Shari?" Brenda waggled her cup, and waggled her eyebrows. Sharon took it with exaggerated aplomb and rolled her eyes.

"I see how it is; playing waitress at my own party," she opined with a sigh. Brenda ignored her grousing and smiled broadly.

"Thanks! I'm just gonna finish off this cupcake." She paused, like she was going to say something else, but was having second thoughts about it, her eyes flashing to the red solo cup in Sharon's hand.

"No, I will not put chocolate syrup in your milk when you're eating chocolate cupcakes, Brenda Leigh."

"How did you know I was going to ask that?" Brenda questioned incredulously. Sharon gave her a haughty look, then executed a sharp turn on her heel, and Marcus followed her off towards the break room, chuckling at the two women's antics.

Sharon poured a generous cup of two percent for Brenda, returned the jug to the refrigerator, and then pulled the carton of Silk out for Marcus, who was hanging back by the door, fiddling with the
"Are you really going to marry Miss Brenda?" He asked gravely, after a moment's silence during which Sharon watched him gather up his courage, much like he had the day he had approached her and Brenda on the deck at Geoffrey's.

Sharon put down the carton of milk and answered his question in an equally serious manner; "Yes, I am going to marry her." She was prepared to answer some questions about a woman marrying a woman, and was utterly surprised when Marcus's lower lip started quivering and a single tear dribbled down his cheek. Sharon was aghast; what about her marrying Brenda made Marcus want to cry? As far as she knew, Marcus liked Brenda! Even shocked, it was more than she could bear to see him cry, and she abandoned the beverages and scooped him into her arms. He buried his face into her neck, heedless of the sharp insignia and less than soft edges of her uniform.

"What's wrong?"

"If you marry Miss Brenda," he sniffled, "that means you can't marry me when I grown up." Now she was torn between laughter and crying herself, but Sharon knew it would make Marcus feel worse if she laughed - that he wouldn't understand why she found him adorable.

"I'm old enough to be your grandmother, honey; why ever would you want to marry me?"

"You're really nice to me and you like Star Wars!" he exclaimed, with a sharp look at her that clearly said: 'duh'. "And you're beautiful," he admitted, a blush further reddening his emotion-stained cheeks. "And you can't be old enough to be a gran! My gran has gray hair and saggy wrinkles!" Sharon laughed and gave him a little squeeze.

"I'll have gray hair and saggy wrinkles before long - well before you're ready to get married, Marcus." His expression spoke volumes as to his disbelief. "Someday you will meet someone that likes you and Star Wars in equal measure and the two of you will be very happy together."

"I don't think so," the boy grumped skeptically. "And besides, no one is as pretty as you."

"You're very sweet." Sharon replied truthfully; Marcus reminded her quite a bit of Jackson at the same age, though 30 year old Jackson still insisted that his mother was the most beautiful woman in the world. "Now let's get your milk and we'll get back to the fun, ok?"

Amelia approached Brenda as soon as Sharon and Marcus had disappeared around the corner on their way to the break room, settling herself on the desk with something like grace, though her feet swung once, hitting the drawers with a hollow thud.

"I wanted to thank you for inviting us. Marcus was so excited about this, I don't know that he's slept all week."

Brenda laughed. "I'm glad someone, besides myself, was looking forward to it."

"There hasn't been a lot that has sparked his interest, since we moved," Amelia admitted. "Jon and I are really grateful that you and Sharon have taken some time for him."

"Please," scoffed Brenda playfully. "Marcus is darlin'. We're just sorry it took so long to get together again."

"Well, he really enjoyed the Skyping and the emails, at any rate. Though we've had to have a few
discussions about the fact that mum and dad and the babysitter are not his secretaries, available to take dictation at all hours." Brenda snorted out a laugh. With the last email Sharon had received from Marcus, Amelia had attached a video she had taken with the webcam of him pacing behind the computer, contemplating word choice and overall tone while his mother typed, rolling her eyes and trying not to giggle all the while.

"He's quite the little perfectionist," Brenda equivocated, trying to keep a straight face.

Amelia barked a laugh. "Oh, is that what they call it?" She asked. "I was going to say he's a terror! His father is the same way." She heaved a sighed: "At least I don't have to take Jon's dictation."

"I'm sure your tune'll change when Marcus is doin' his own flirtin' with the ladies on the internet," Brenda remarked with a sly little grin, eliciting a horrified look from Amelia.

Amelia tilted her head back and groaned. "You, Brenda, are terrible." Brenda didn't reply, but kept on grinning.

Amelia realized that Marcus had been crying as soon as he and Sharon walked back into the murder room. "Oh dear, tears," she murmured, wondering what could have set off her son on a short trip to get a drink, though not all that surprised, considering she wasn't sure how much sleep he'd gotten over the past few days.

Marcus no longer appeared upset, so Amelia didn't mention his red eyes, only lifted him onto the desk without comment. Marcus smiled up at her, took a gulp of his milk, and stuck a finger in the icing that Brenda had left for him. Sharon gave them both a slightly bewildered look while Marcus's attention was on the sugar, and handed Brenda's cup over to her.

Amelia took it upon herself to start up a thread of conversation - silence was a little weird when only one person was eating. "Jon and I were wondering if you two would be amenable to having dinner sometime." She watched the two older woman make eye contact and come to a decision by some process she couldn't follow, because Sharon answered for them both.

"We would like that, but it will probably have to be after Christmas."

"Oh, that's fine. We're going to be in England until just after the New Year - almost two weeks all told, so that works for us, too."

"Mum," Marcus piped up. "Can I Skype Miss Sharon from Gran's house and show her my Christmas presents?"

"Your gran doesn't have high speed internet, Marcus, so I don't know how well video chat will work, but we'll figure something out, ok?"

Marcus favored her with a flat stare. "No high speed internet? Does that mean I can't watch Avatar or NOVA on Dad's laptop?"

"Yes, that's what it means. And I don't believe our Netflix subscription follows us across international boundaries."

The look of disbelief on Marcus's face was transformative. No Netflix? The adults exchanged glances full of tightly controlled humor.

"Mum, maybe we should think about getting Gran high speed internet for Christmas," the boy pronounced after a long moment's serious contemplation. "That way, we can have Netflix and video chat when we visit, and video chat when we're here."
"That's not a terrible idea, Marcus," his mother had to admit, much to Marcus's obvious delight. "We can discuss it with your dad when we get home."

Satisfied that all would work out in his favor, Marcus was ready to move on. "Do you think I could see the media room and the lab now?" He asked hopefully. Brenda, trying desperately not to giggle, waved Tao over from where he was chatting with Buzz, hoping for a moment to shut herself in her office and laugh - and maybe to ask Sharon what had caused Marcus's tears and Sharon's bewilderment.
Chapter 30

The lobby of HQ was bustling at 10 pm on this Friday night; a knot of uniforms wrestled a trio of struggling, handcuffed men through the doors that led to holding, and Brenda noticed Sharon's eyes flick to the spectacle, though she said nothing. When, on their way home from Sharon's favorite sushi place, Brenda had suggested a stopover at work for a surprise, Sharon had also said nothing, merely favoring Brenda with a slightly suspicious look before steering the Jag into the turn lane that would take them further downtown.

Aside from a nod from the desk sergeant, no one paid them any mind as they clicked across the open space and into the elevator bay. Brenda leaned in to press the button to call a car, observing out of the corner of her eye as Sharon watched the steady, downward progression of the lights across the display above the door. She looked gorgeous tonight; sophisticated, confident and elegantly simple in wide-legged black trousers and a drapey, off the shoulder sweater of a midnight blue. Brenda liked that it exposed an asymmetrical piece of Sharon's neck and back, two of many places Brenda was very fond of pressing her lips to frequently and with reverence. After two glasses of wine (Sharon hadn't wanted any, though Brenda had offered to drive), Brenda felt full to the brim of well-being, and was more than a little aroused, standing so close to the sleek warmth of her fiancé. She shifted her feet, pressing her thighs together, hoping that what she was feeling wasn't completely obvious to all and sundry, or to Sharon.

When the doors slid open, they stepped into the elevator together, Brenda pushing the button for the tenth floor, where Sharon's new office was located. The head of IA and the two commanders under her direct supervision shared a suite of offices with their own administrative assistant. Although Brenda had gleefully exploited the administrative assistant's rather impressive ditziness in setting up this surprise for Sharon, she felt a little sorry for the woman; ever the professional, Sharon didn't handle incompetence or chattiness particularly well, and Jane (said assistant) was very chatty and even more disorganized than Brenda.

"I cannot believe I let you drag me back here on a Friday night," Sharon groused as they made their way through the eerily silent halls of the administrative floor.

"Oh, hush. Like you'd even come if you didn't think it would be worth your while," Brenda contradicted with a smile, grabbing Sharon's hand and tugging playfully on it. Sharon replied with a smirk; sometimes a little complaint was totally worth her while, because Brenda in placation-mode was completely adorable.

Discreetly, Brenda locked both the door to the office suite and Sharon's door behind them as they entered. She ignored Sharon's expectant stance and cocked head, and slipped around her to open a cabinet in the large bookshelf and remove a gift bag.

"Another present? Brenda Leigh," protested Sharon, "the flowers and dinner were more than enough." But as much as Sharon didn't enjoy public acclaim or attention called to her accomplishments, here, one on one with Brenda, who loved her and was proud of her, she was pleasantly flustered at the thought given to the plans Brenda had made.

Earlier in the afternoon an arrangement à la Brenda Leigh Johnson had arrived at the office suite. The administrative assistant, Jane, had brought the vase into Sharon, who was unpacking the few boxes she had carted up from her old office in FID. It had been clear that Jane was curious about the flowers, going so far as to hover, as if she thought Sharon would read the card aloud and the two of them would giggle and be pals. Sharon had dismissed her with a polite 'thank you' and a level look, and had waited for the rather nosy young woman to leave.
In a regular vase this time (unlike the beautiful blue glass pitcher that had pride of place on one of Sharon's new shelves), the blossoms were creamy orange and mauve with the unmistakeable lily of the valley dotted throughout. The card was simple, and not in Brenda's hand writing. It read: Gladiolus, camellia, lily of the valley. Love, B.

The text was like a stanza of poetry, stripped down to its most basic elements and only translatable by someone who possessed the key, which Sharon did. Unfortunately, her computer had not made the move with her (she was due a new one sometime on Monday), so Sharon was left to Google on her Blackberry. Armed with a scrap of paper and a pen, Sharon had fashioned a message out of Brenda's flowers: strength of character and faithfulness, you are a flame in my heart, I am incomplete without you.

Reminiscent of the first time she had received flowers from Brenda Leigh, and with no real work clamoring for her attention, Sharon had taken the time to sit for a bit in the slightly dim isolation of her office and revel in the fact that she was loved.

Sharon took the gift bag from Brenda and placed it on the desk, giving the other woman an flirtatious glare.

"You shouldn't have gotten me anything else, honey," Sharon chided, already removing the top layer of tissue paper from the bag.

"It's nothin' big, I promise, just somethin' I thought would look nice in here, is all." And a little something extra that Brenda had tucked underneath the actual gift, hoping that Sharon would be willing to play along with her in the deserted office suite.

Out of the bag, Sharon pulled a handsome trifold picture frame. It was antiqued wood, a bit weathered, and Sharon unfolded it to find there were no pictures in it. She gave Brenda a strange look; not that she could display any pictures of the two of them right now, but she would have like to have some.

"I know there are no pictures in it," Brenda acknowledged, "but turn it over." Sharon did, and in the back of the panels, there were three glass squares. Two of them had pressed flowers in them - a honeysuckle bloom and a sprig of lily of the valley. The third was empty.

"Are these from…" She trailed a finger across the little piece of glass.

"From the other arrangements, yea. I have a gladiolus from the one from today dryin' in the phonebook in my office. It'll be ready in a week or so."

"This is beautiful, Brenda Leigh," Sharon breathed. "Who knew you were such a romantic." And it was romantic; a symbolic progression of their relationship that Sharon could keep on her desk in plain view. And eventually, Sharon could fill the frames with pictures of the two of them and turn the symbolic into something she displayed openly.

"Course I am!" Brenda exclaimed, then her expression grew sly, and she grasped Sharon's wrist and squeezed gently. "There's something else for you in that bag."

Sharon narrowed her eyes at Brenda, but plunged her hand to the bottom of the gift bag. Her jaw dropped in surprise when she felt what comprised the final part of her gift from Brenda Leigh. Fighting down a laugh, Sharon schooled her face into exaggerated sternness and drew the offending object out with a facade of gravitas.

"Really?" Sharon asked, the strapless dildo bobbing self-importantly in her hand.
"Well," Brenda hedged, "I thought we could christen your new office the right way!"

"Christen my office?" Sharon proclaimed. "What about your office? We've spent a lot more time in there."

"I work in a glass bubble on an open floor, Sharon."

"You have a point."

"So are you interested?" Brenda looked at Sharon with hooded eyes, and stepped closer to the other woman, reaching out to cup her hip.

Sharon hummed in consideration. "What, exactly, is on offer tonight?" She asked, waggling the dick she was still, improbably, holding.

"Welllll, what're you up for? We don't have to use the toy - I only included it for some flavor."

Sharon cocked her head and gave Brenda an appraising look. Brenda wouldn't have brought the toy if it hadn't been on her mind - and knowing the other woman's prodigious imagination, whatever she'd dreamed up involving the dick, it was probably worth sharing.

"Brenda Leigh," Sharon husked, hoping to prompt Brenda into telling her the truth.

"I just…the last time we used it was incredible," the blonde said breathlessly. And that was the truth. Sharon had lucked into a toy that hit them both in exactly the right spots and had, surprisingly, thought to tuck the toy in their suitcase when they went to Santa Cruz for Thanksgiving.

In the nighttime hush of her parents' house, as she had moved above a panting, whimpering Brenda, the bulb-end of the strapless cock pulled against Sharon in a delicious manner, to the point where she had had trouble concentrating on Brenda's pleasure. And apparently the length and girth (a little shorter and girthier than their strap on) was precisely what Brenda wanted in a penetrative object, because simple missionary position sex had turned into something, as Brenda had said, incredible.

Dragging her mind out of the past, warmth bloomed in Sharon's belly and coursed through her bloodstream. She shot Brenda a heated look and the other woman let out a breath of anticipation, then stepped into Sharon, bringing their bodies into contact from knee to breast, trapping the toy between them.

"So you wanna, baby," Brenda asked, her words puffing across Sharon's lips.

"I think that maybe we can come to some sort of accord," mused Sharon teasingly, slanting her lips across Brenda's for a soft, lipstick flavored kiss. Brenda whimpered, pressing even closer, her hands fisting in Sharon's sweater, hips shifting restlessly against Sharon's.

Sharon focused intently on these kisses, using her mouth to make Brenda sigh and melt against her. It wasn't easy to not do the same, to keep them both upright and not lean back against the desk, but if they were going to do this one of them needed to keep at least a little cool.

"Oh," Brenda moaned, wrenching her lips away. "Please, Sharon. Please." She looked up at Sharon, her eyes hazed over with want, cheeks flushed, lips swollen, lipstick all kissed away.

Sharon pivoted them swiftly, then used pressure on Brenda's hips to spin her. With sure hands, she bent the blonde over the front of the mostly bare desk, then flipped the skirt of Brenda's dress over her hips to expose her very bare ass.
At the sight of Brenda Leigh, exposed and shamelessly needy, all the air rushed out of Sharon's lungs in a 'woosh' - the wily, imaginative Chief was capable of surprising her over and over again.

"No panties, Brenda Leigh?" She enquired in what she hoped was a steady tone.

"I took 'em off in the restaurant," replied Brenda, her voice trembling just as her thighs were, with a need she was trying to keep a hold of.

"Reach down and spread your lips for me - show me how wet you are," Sharon heard herself order, the thought rolling off her lips before higher order brain function could intervene. Brenda did as she had asked; insinuating a had between herself and the desk and using her fingers to part the lips of her pussy. Fingers glistening with arousal, Brenda fought to keep from seeking contact for her clit on the palm of her hand; Sharon could see the struggle - every muscle in Brenda's legs was taut and quivering. Moaning, Brenda's hips jolted once, back towards Sharon.

"Please," she entreated. "Please, Sharon."

Holding the dildo by the bulb end, Sharon stepped up behind Brenda, placing one hand on one smooth, warm, trembling buttock, and using the other to drag the fat head of the cock up Brenda's slit, still held open by her fingers.

"Oh," she exhaled, then inhaled a shaky breath. "Oh." She spread her legs farther, tilting her pelvis up, seeking the toy out. Continuing to tease Brenda with just the tip of the cock, Sharon bit back a groan. She could smell Brenda - salt and the musky tang of female desire - and all she wanted to do was get on her knees and have a taste of all that arousal that was just for her. But she didn't. Instead, she finally parted Brenda and sheathed the toy in her ever so slowly, watching as the other woman's pussy stretched to accept its girth, listening to her throaty pants, feeling the burn of Brenda's skin beneath her palm and the sharp tingle of her own want between her legs. Once the toy had sunk in to its hilt, sweaty palmed, Sharon used the bulb to draw it back out at that same unhurried pace. A few more leisurely strokes, and she took her hands away, leaving the toy sheathed in Brenda, who gave a distressed little grunt.

"Hold on to that for me for a sec, honey." Sharon whipped her sweater over her head, dropping it on to one of the guest chairs in front of her desk. The flushed skin of her bared chest cooled rapidly without the garment and goosebumps pricked up on her arms, but a little chill was much preferable to the thought of vigorous sex in a heavy wool sweater.

Brenda shifted her lower body and tried to crane her head around enough to see what Sharon was doing. "Sharon," she protested, sounding a bit put out.

"Just a second," Sharon soothed, unfastening her pants and pushing them down to her ankles. Her panties followed. "Just a second."

Though she was feeling a bit unsteady on her legs, Sharon moved quickly; sliding the thoroughly soaked dildo from Brenda's pussy (much to Brenda's vocal displeasure), parting her own warm, wet lips and slipping the bulb end of the toy inside herself, hissing at the penetration. Awkwardly yoked by the clothing around her ankles, she got into position behind Brenda, between her spread legs, and guided the dick home in one fluid motion, pausing at the end of her stroke. Brenda pushed back against her and wriggled in aroused enthusiasm.

Feeling oddly constrained by the position and by the puddle of clothing tangling her feet, Sharon set a steady pace, not wanting to tease Brenda anymore, using her hands on the blonde's slim hips to give herself a little leverage.
Brenda, meeting Sharon's every thrust eagerly, loving the scratch of Sharon's curls against her ass, and the feel of Sharon's fingers digging into her hips, and the persistent stretch of dick that Sharon was pleasuring her with, was a bit disappointed. Apparently their perfect toy was less perfect in this position - she had no friction on or access to her clit, and there was no delicious drag of the cock's head against her inner walls like there had been before. And maybe, when it came to sex with Sharon, Brenda was less enamored of doggy style in general. In their bed at home, perhaps, but right now, she couldn't see or touch Sharon and that was less than appealing. She sighed gustily and Sharon hesitated mid-stroke, then stopped.

"What's wrong?" Sharon asked, running her fingers along the skin of Brenda's back, up and under her dress, to skim along her ribcage and pluck at the band of her bra.

"That's what's wrong," answered Brenda answered vaguely. "Not enough contact." She arched under Sharon's hands for emphasis.

Sharon chuckled - she had been feeling the same way, but if Brenda was enjoying being bent over the desk, she would have seen it through till the other woman came. She shuffled back a step, the dildo falling from between Brenda's legs with a faint slurp.

"Oh, good lord," Brenda murmured.

"Turn around, honey."

Brenda stood and turned, gathering her dress in one arm to keep it out of the way and propped herself on the edge of the desk, her legs spread for Sharon, exposing the damp patch of dark blonde curls at her apex and the slightly pouting lips below. Sharon stepped back into place, Brenda guiding the cock back where she wanted it. She sighed, with pleasure this time, and clasped Sharon to her, arms sliding under Sharon's and fingers clutching at the skin of Sharon's bare back.

Clinched tightly to Brenda, Sharon used short strokes to chase Brenda to the edge of her orgasm, enjoying the tug of the dildo on that sensitive spot in her pussy, Brenda Leigh's labored breathing against her neck, and the scent of sweat and sex heavy in her nostrils. She hummed her satisfaction softly in Brenda's ear.

"This is much better," Brenda agreed, her voice muffled by the curtain of Sharon's hair, and they rocked together until Brenda hunched her back a bit, wormed a hand in between them to stroke her clit firmly.

"Fuck, Shari!" She gasped, and then came, pressing her face into Sharon's chest, and curling her legs around the backs of Sharon's thighs. Sharon fucked her through the orgasm, only stopping when the blonde slumped bonelessly against her. Brenda giggled; her orgasm had made her giddy and effusive and she wanted to do the same for Sharon, but she allowed herself a few long moments to enjoy her afterglow, wrapped in Sharon's arms.

When Sharon's hips shifted, causing the dick still inside Brenda to bump up against a still deliciously sensitive spot, Brenda pulled back a bit. Now was not the time to go for secondsies with the dildo.

"Alright, then," she pronounced. "Your turn now, baby." She grasped Sharon's hips and pushed back gently in the direction of a chair. The brunette stumbled a bit, but managed to keep her feet and collapse into the chair, the plastic penis bobbing ludicrously in her crotch like some sort of divining rod.

"Sorry 'bout that," Brenda murmured, and knelt to divest Sharon of shoes and clothing.
"Aren't we sort of tempting fate here, Brenda Leigh," protested Sharon, albeit, half-heartedly. It was hard to think logically with gleaming eyed woman on her knees between her legs, looking at her like she was dessert. Brenda paused and looked up at Sharon from under the inky sweep of her eyelashes.

"Don't you wanna come, Shari?"

"What I don't want is to get caught having sex in my office," Sharon managed to say, despite the fact that she was responding to Brenda's physical cues to scoot forward and spread her legs more. Brenda rolled her eyes at Sharon, then focused her attention on the cock standing at attention amidst Sharon's curls.

"Hush now," she said, and licked her lips. She leaned in, looking up at Sharon again, the most devilish smirk Sharon had ever seen playing on her lips. The pink tip of her tongue peeking out, she winked, then swirled her tongue around the head of the toy, and moaned. She broke eye contact and took the head into her mouth, hollowing her cheeks, and then releasing it with a pop.

"Jesus, Brenda," Sharon groaned, her toes curling, she clutched at the arms of the chair to keep from burying her hands in Brenda's hair. She felt a hand between her legs, keeping the toy steady and providing pressure on the bulb inside of her. Her hips bucked. Brenda chuckled and slung an arm across Sharon's hips to control her movements.

With long, slow strokes of her tongue, Brenda cleaned every bit of her arousal off the shaft of the fake dick, pausing occasionally to lick her lips and grin up at Sharon, who was wide-eyed and slack-jawed. Noticing Sharon's white knuckled grip on the chair, she said: "'S okay, you can put your hands on my head," then went back to work, taking the toy in her mouth and using suction to pull upwards against Sharon's g-spot. Sharon took Brenda at her word, using her hands to lift Brenda's hair up and back so it wouldn't get in her way.

The toy clean, and Sharon panting and desperate after the little show, Brenda popped her mouth off the toy for the last time, and grasped the shaft firmly. Sitting back on her heels, face screwed up in concentration, she gave the toy a firm tug upwards, making sure to keep pressure on bulb so it hit Sharon properly. On the down stroke, she made sure to bump the base of the shaft against Sharon's clt.

Already on edge from the stimulation overload, it was with a pleasant sort of disbelief that Sharon realized Brenda was going to get her off with a hand job. She moaned.

"Good, baby?" Brenda asked, still intently focused on the rhythm of her hand on the cock and her hand between Sharon's legs.

"Ohmigod," Sharon managed to grunt. "Don't stop." If her eyes hadn't slammed shut at the stirrings of her impending orgasm, Sharon would have seen Brenda cast another eye-roll her way.

Sharon came with a wail, her back arching away from the chair, hands back to clutching at the arms of the chair. Brenda hoped to god there wasn't anyone on this floor, dropping kisses on the quivering muscles of Sharon's thighs. She rose up on her knees, and Sharon fell forward against her.

"That was wonderful," she whispered fondly, wrapping her arms around Brenda and resting her cheek on Brenda's blonde head.

Brenda hummed in reply, smug and happy, listening to the rapid beat of Sharon's heart calm itself. Sharon shivered in her arms. "Let's get cleaned up, and get you dressed."
"I don't think I can move," Sharon whined, but she managed it.

They made themselves presentable, and left the suite hand-in-hand, entwined fingers pulling apart only when the elevator bumped to a stop back in the lobby.
Brenda didn't know how she'd manage to make herself late to pick up a neighbor that lived three houses down, but she was ten minutes past the time she'd told Tomás she would pick him up. She was surprised that the man himself hadn't strolled down the street to give her crap about her constant inability to be places on time (like to his postmortems and briefings).

Throwing herself into her Crown Vic and tossing her bag into the passenger side footwell, Brenda practically laid rubber pulling out of the driveway. It was just so hard to pull herself away from a lazy Saturday at home with Sharon - a quiet day hanging out and enjoying one another's company. Especially since she was on call this weekend with Andy - law of averages said she would get a body at some point, and endless weekend hours at work were much less appealing than they'd been this time last year.

She slammed to a stop in front of Tomás's bungalow, her brakes squealing. It was time for the tank to take a visit to the motor pool. She left the motor running and trotted up the sidewalk, hopping up the porch stairs, and rapping briskly on the door.

Morales yanked open the door, one scolding eyebrow already raised.

"Oh, hush," Brenda preempted his complaining, much to Tomás's obvious disappointment. "You ready?"

"I am. Are you ready?" He asked, giving her outfit a once over and flaring his nostrils dismissively.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearin'?" She looked down at herself. Ballet flats, a pair of close fitting, tailored looking, dark wash jeans, a pink and cream cashmere tunic she'd stolen from Sharon and a brown leather jacket was a perfectly acceptable ensemble for shopping on a relatively chilly winter day.

"We're going to high-end jewelry stores, aren't we? Do you want the sales staff to ignore you?"

"You forget my all access pass," Brenda replied flatly. "I'm sure that if they aren't willin' to assist me, they'll be so pleased to know that a cop is reportin' them to the Better Business Bureau."

Tomás took a jacket off a hook next to his door and stepped outside. "Crafty."

"I didn't feel like dressing up. We went to two cocktail attire thingies over Thanksgiving!" Brenda exclaimed, pulling a disgusted face, even though Tomás was behind her on the sidewalk.

"Cocktail attire thingies?"

"Are you gonna pick on me all day?" Brenda whined, meeting the doctor's eyes over the roof of the car. He smirked, and opened the passenger side door. Brenda humphed and jerked her own door open, collapsing gracelessly into the driver's seat.

Tomás settled himself into the vehicle with considerably more aplomb. "That depends," he said, examining his fingernails, feigning indifference. Brenda narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion and then ripped her gaze away, starting the car with a frustrated flourish.

"Depends on what?"

"Well, since you have me out here so much earlier than we'd agreed on, I think a little information
about Sharon's proposal to you would go a long way towards ameliorating my crankiness."

Brenda gnawed on her bottom lip and drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, remaining silent through a left turn onto a cross street.

"It's not really a story that will have any meaning to you, Tomás." Brenda attempted to dissuade him and his interest. "And it was a very private moment, for both of us."

"Please! There has to be something you can share," he cajoled. "My life is so utterly romance free right now it's pathetic."

Brenda opened her mouth to say something snotty about his pathetic love life, then glanced over at Tomás, who was no longer feigning indifference, but looking at her eagerly. She wrinkled her nose, then shot the doctor a serious look.

"This stays between you and me, you hear?"

"Sure. Just, please commence with the vicarious romance."

Brenda sighed. "We were talkin' about fears," Brenda began, not willing to expose Sharon's vulnerability to anyone; that was hers. "And I asked her what her best case scenario was."

"For your relationship?" Morales interjected.

"Yea. She said all these wonderful things to me, things she'd been thinkin' about."

"Like what?" Interrupted Morales again. Brenda glared at him. "Clearly you aren't going to give me any details unless I push you for them."

"Fine. Things like, she wants to register as domestic partners as soon as my divorce is final, that she wants our families to accept us and be happy for us, that she wants me to have the legal rights of a spouse, and wear her ring."

"That's not very romantic. I expected better from Sharon Raydor."

"I told you you wouldn't get it," Brenda said, whipping the car around a corner with a little more force and speed than was necessary. "What were you expectin' - Sharon to rent out a billboard?"

Tomás snorted. That sort of gesture was most definitely not Sharon Raydor. "I dunno; ambiance, good food and good wine, on one knee, something like that."

It was Brenda's turn to snort. "Talk about your clichés."

Tomás let out an aggrieved sigh and slumped slightly in his seat, looking a little dejected. Despite his teasing and their banter, he seemed rather down about something. Brenda didn't take pity on him - if he was feeling lonely or friendless, maybe she and Sharon should have him over more, but she didn't need to explicate the realities of romance in her relationship with Sharon to anyone. She knew exactly why she found Sharon's proposal romantic: it was spontaneous. Just like her invitation to move in had been spontaneous. Sharon was probably the most forward-looking person that Brenda knew - the woman was the epitome of a planner. Even the content of her proposal showed that she was thinking about her future with Brenda in concrete terms. For Brenda, that Sharon wanted those things so much that they just popped out of her mouth, that was romantic.

Even if she wasn't taking pity on him and spilling her guts about her relationship, Brenda still found it in herself to apologize.
"Sorry, Tomás," she said with sincerity. "I'm feelin' protective of Sharon at the moment and that has nothing to do with you."

"I guess that's ok then," Tomás conceded grudgingly, then flashed Brenda a small smile. "So where are we headed first?"

Brenda bent over the gleaming glass case in Tiffany, hands locked behind her back, trying hard not to breathe and smudge up the surface. She could sense Tomás standing behind her, pouting a little because she'd asked him to hold on to her purse so it wouldn't be swinging around and knocking into things.

She was peering at a couple of rings that interested her. Platinum and diamonds, but more solid than flashy. Sharon had long, slender fingers that could carry off something with a bit more heft than Brenda's own stubby digits. She had been 'peering' intently for a few minutes now - perhaps Morales had been right about the clothes.

A soft cough interrupted Brenda's musings about her wardrobe, and she straightened, ignoring the twinge in the small of her back. A neatly coiffed, besuited saleswoman stood, hands resting on the counter, looking disdainfully down her nose at Brenda. Brenda plastered on a bright smile and cocked her head congenially, sliding her hands in her back pockets and rocking back on her heels.

"May I help you, ma'am?" The other woman asked with a hollow formality.

"Hi there," Brenda drawled with her own brand of saccharine falseness. "I'd like to take a look at a few rings, please."

"Alright, then," the woman said, flashing too white teeth at Brenda. "You're awfully lucky, getting to pick out your own ring. Which ones would you like to look at?"

Ignoring the commentary, Brenda pointed out the three rings that interested her. The saleswoman gasped. "My goodness! That is a lovely ring! Are you sure you want to look at these? They don't really compare…"

Brenda favored the woman with a flat look, unwilling to believe she needed to impart personal details in order to look at jewelry, but the woman wasn't moving.

"I'm in the market for a ring for my fiancé. As you can see, she has already given me mine."

The saleslady's body stiffened, her nostrils flared, and the left corner of her upper lip curled up just a fraction before she got ahold of herself. Unlucky for her, Brenda could read faces the way most people read books. Brenda lifted a brow to let the other woman know she was on to her. The saleswoman pursed her lips, and bent to remove the jewelry from the case.

Brenda shot a glance back at Morales, who only shrugged. Brenda turned back to the counter. It was a good job she wasn't sold on any of these rings to begin with, because there was no way in hell she was giving this woman any sort of commission.

The saleswoman unfolded a soft white cloth over the glass and placed the three rings on it. As her new not-so-much a friend hovered, Brenda handled each one carefully, trying to imagine them on Sharon's finger, and trying to contemplate the possibility of Sharon wearing it every day for the rest of her life. Her own ring was definitely forever material; she wanted the same thing for Sharon, and none of these rings really were saying 'forever' to Brenda.

"Well," Brenda drawled with another false smile, "I can't say that any of these are strikin' my fancy." She clapped her fingers down on the counter, her own ring making a metallic noise against
the glass, resisting the urge to smear her fingers around on the pristine surface.

The saleswoman gave her a simpering little grin, folded the cloth over the rings, and turned her back on Brenda, dismissing her. Brenda narrowed her eyes, debating the merits of wasting time calling out this woman for pretty atrocious behavior for a high end salesperson, especially considering the state of the economy. Maybe she would think on it a while - decide just how much she wanted to ruin this asshole's life.

"Do you think it's worth it, tryin' to throw a wrench in the works about that rude-ass saleswoman?" Brenda asked Tomás in the car on the way to their next stop. Brenda had encountered all manner of prejudice before; she'd been stereotyped as blonde, as southern, as a woman, but homophobia was new to her, and she wasn't really sure about the realities of dealing with it.

"That depends on what your goal is, Brenda."

"How do you mean?"

"I know it's not really in your nature, but if you're looking to assuage your own anger about her treating you like shit, it's probably best to let it go."

Brenda flashed him a scowl and Tomás chuckled.

"Brenda, you're going to encounter people who dislike you for no other reason than the fact that you are in a relationship with a woman, and if you go full force after each one of them, you're going to be spending a lot of time and energy and anger on people who's minds you aren't going to be able to change."

"So when is it worth it?"

"When it's institutional, when it's someone in a position of authority or someone who can make people miserable on a regular basis."

"I see," Brenda said. And she did, mostly. A personal vendetta against homophobia was not like a personal vendetta against murderers in Los Angeles. There were a lot more homophobes out there, for one thing.

The next two stores were a bust. Nothing that called out to Brenda as being at all right for Sharon. She was beginning to despair, thinking she might have to have a ring made, which would take way too much time. Unique wasn't a requirement, but right definitely was.

They walked out of Harry Winston and walked across the street to Bvlgari, the last place on Brenda's list. She yanked the door open with a sour look for her shopping companion.

"Buck up, Chief. Last stop, and then we can go get good and pissed with your lady."

"As fun as that sounds, for this day schlepping around stores I will never set foot in again to be successful, I have to have purchased a ring for that lady, Tomás." Brenda groused, setting her sights on a salesperson. She was going to get help this time, and god help her, but the salesperson was going to be nice about it.

She marched right up to the man in the neatly cut, gray three piece suit and said: "I'm looking for engagement rings. Platinum and diamond solitaire."

He smiled at her like he was genuinely amused by her brusqueness. "Good afternoon and welcome to Bvlgari. I'm Evan. Are you looking for men's rings?" He asked with a quizzical look at Morales,
still on purse duty (in fact he hadn't remembered to give it back as they were leaving Harry Winston).

"No, I'm looking for women's rings. And he's just here for moral support."

"Alright," Evan gestured to a counter on the far side of the store, and Brenda resisted the urge to give the salesman a narrow-eyed glance as she paraded past.

Evan settled himself behind the counter with another smile. "This is our selection of platinum women's rings. Though, Miss…"

"Brenda," Brenda answered shortly. "Just Brenda."

"Ok, Brenda. Is there any particular reason you're restricting yourself to solitaire rings? We have a lot of lovely pieces with a range of stones."

"Diamond with platinum is non-negotiable," murmured Brenda, bent and examining the rings in the case. "Sharon has a certain aesthetic, and I'm lookin' for somethin' quite particular."

"I see," Evan commented. "So I take it this isn't your first stop of the day."

Brenda hummed in agreement and straightened, then pointed to four possibilities in the case.

Just like in the other stores, Evan swept a cloth across the glass before removing the rings in their little cloth pouches from a drawer. He unsnapped the first pouch and upturned it over Brenda's outstretched palm. Brenda considered it as Evan removed the rest of the rings from their pouches and set them on the cloth.

"Your ring is lovely, Brenda. Sharon has exquisite taste - I can understand why you're looking for something particular."

In Brenda's opinion, the compliment was genuine, so she gave Evan a genuine smile, putting the first ring down gently and picking up the next.

"Is that vintage Van Cleef & Arpels?"

Brenda looked up at him in surprise. "Yes, it is."

"May I ask what year?"

Brenda shrugged a shoulder. "In the 20's sometime? It's a family heirloom of sorts - her family."

"Truly gorgeous. A work of art from another era." He looked down at the rings Brenda had chosen. "Now, I see you've picked pieces that are mostly metal, with modern silhouettes and settings. Is that your fiancé's usual aesthetic?"

"The stuff that she favors, yes. Pearls, diamonds, and platinum."

The ring in Brenda's hand had piqued her interest. The band wasn't wide, but it was a heavy piece of jewelry, with a high profile and a sort of architectural setting, the diamond lifted up away from the band on an elegant arch.

"I like this one," she stated definitively. It was sleek and modern but had a bit of romantic softness and it felt like Sharon in the same way that her impeccably tailored suits and her black bikini and her dark wash boot cut jeans did.
"That's a good choice." Evan turned and removed a tray from a locked cabinet behind the counter. "The one in your hand has a half carat round cut diamond. That particular setting can hold up to a three carat solitaire." He pointed at a ring farthest to his left on the tray that had a much larger diamond in it.

Brenda bent to take a closer look at the bigger diamonds in the setting she'd chosen. Three carats was much too large (and she had no doubt that three carats would also be much too expensive).

"Which one is a carat and a half?" She asked. Evan pointed it out and Brenda plucked it out of the velvet flocking. She weighed it in her hand; the bigger stone was about the size of the center stone in her own ring, and it sparkled more intensely than the half carat stone.

"This is it," Brenda said with conviction. "This is the one."

"Excellent!" Evan exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "A beautiful choice."

Morales stepped up behind Brenda, craning his neck over Brenda's shoulder. "I like it," he pronounced. "But I'm supposed to make sure you don't beggar yourself."

"Too true," Brenda sighed. "So, what's the damage?"

The price wasn't as bad as Brenda thought it was going to be. She worked out a deal to finance the ring over the next year with no interest. With the details hashed out, and Brenda due back to pick up the resized ring on Wednesday, Evan asked if he might see a picture of Brenda's intended. Brenda hesitated, a little leery of sharing her pictures after Fritz's violation earlier in the week - the Sharon in her photos was not for public consumption by people who might not be sympathetic.

Striking up her resolve, Brenda stuck her hand in her pocket and pulled out her phone. She navigated to the picture of them dressed up for Sharon's party and slid the device across the glass. Evan bent in to look, then glanced up at Brenda with a rueful grin, and pulled a pair of reading glasses from inside his jacket. Once the glasses were settled on his nose, he peered at the little screen.

"My goodness. You make an attractive couple." He put a finger to the screen, but stopped and looked up to meet Brenda's gaze. "May I?"

Brenda nodded. "There are more if you swipe backwards," she advised him. And he did, swiping quickly through the pictures of their Thanksgiving, pausing on the picture of Sharon behind the wheel of the Jag, and then stopping at the picture of them next to the fire in Sharon's back yard, and gave a wistful little sigh.

"I know they're not puppies," he joked, "but I appreciate it when I sell a ring to such a lovely couple."
Another week, another two murderers put away, Sharon's ring picked up, and her Christmas shopping almost complete. Brenda was feeling more than mildly accomplished. Tomorrow, little Lucy was spending the night with her and Sharon, both to give her aunts a chance for a little quality time, and for Lucy to get reacclimated to sleeping away from home - she'd had some invites to sleepovers, but nightmares were still an issue, so a night or two at the Raydor-Johnson household had been proposed as a stopgap, since Lucy trusted both Brenda and Sharon.

Brenda liked spending time with children - they were fun and funny in small doses, they didn't prejudge Brenda because of her accent or her job title or her addiction to sugar, and they were quick to forgive if you made a mistake - so she was thrilled with an arrangement that allowed her to spoil a darling little girl for an evening, stuff her full of sugary breakfast food the next morning, and send her home. They would 'swim' in the hot tub, order pizza, watch some movies, and Lucy would be bringing the books required for an epic story time.

Sharon never twisted Brenda's enjoyment of and curiosity about small humans into platitudes about how Brenda would make a great mother or screeds on her failure as a woman, and thus they could do things like spend time with Marcus and Lucy, or watch a billion Pixar movies with Sharon's littlest cousins without it being more than it was.

She hummed to herself, putting the finishing touches on the second to last report she had to file on the case they had closed yesterday. After this, all that was left was the case inventory, making sure that everything was in the file and ready to be handed over to the DA's office. Then Brenda would spend the next four hours keeping her fingers crossed that they didn't get a roll out and taking a look at a case that Robbery Homicide wanted her opinion on.

Kicked back in her desk chair, reading about a series of smash and grabs that had escalated to murder, Brenda saw Provenza wander in from his lunch break. He caught her eye and gave her a look, a look that Brenda knew meant 'brace yourself'. She nearly tipped over backwards when she saw her mother enter the murder room behind her lieutenant. The warm greetings Willie Rae received from the rest of the squad gave Brenda a moment to compose herself, at least externally. She couldn't let her mother see that she was affected by the surprise of her visit, beyond being furious, of course.

Brenda rose, smoothed down her skirt, and stalked to her door, yanking it open and letting it close with a 'whump' behind her.

"Mama," she said coolly, her voice as flat and toneless as any of them had ever heard it. "Isn't this a surprise." The friendly chatter in the murder room quieted with startling abruptness, Brenda's detectives exchanging wary glances, except for Provenza. He had figured that Willie Rae's visit probably wasn't a planned one when he had happened across her idling in the lobby with a carry on suitcase and a rather lost expression on her face.

"I'll talk to ya'll later," Willie Rae remarked, as if they weren't all aware that her daughter was seething. Brenda turned and reentered her office; Willie Rae followed.

Brenda propped herself against her desk, leaving her mother to take one of the chairs in front of it; she needed that little boost, that little construction of superiority to not break down into tears over the fact that her mother was manipulating her like this.

"It was very presumptuous of you to show up here with no warnin', Mama," Brenda scolded. Willie
Rae looked ashamed only briefly before meeting Brenda's gaze with a bit of haughtiness.

"I wasn't gonna stand idly by and watch you..." she trailed off, her eyes flicking down and away, lips pursing.

"Watch me what, mama?" Brenda demanded. "Fall in love? Have a little happiness and balance in my life for once?"

The trouble was, Willie Rae didn't really know why she had gotten on a plane that morning. Brenda Leigh wasn't the only Johnson that had issues with impulse control. Willie Rae had packed a bag, told her husband she was going to visit a first cousin in Biloxi, and boarded a plane to LA, determined to figure out what was really going on with her daughter. But face to face with Brenda Leigh, who looked healthy and well-rested with her engagement ring very much present on left ring finger (it was really much larger, and lovelier, than the picture had let on), Willie Rae was unsure.

"I had to see for myself," she said finally, to which Brenda pursed her lips, nostrils flaring in irritation.

"I am very upset with you, mama. In fact, my first impulse is to make you change your flight or to find you a hotel, because I am havin' less than hospitable feelings for you right now, and I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to be nice."

"Brenda Leigh!" Willie Rae exclaimed, aghast. "I'm your mother, and I deserve some respect!"

Brenda snorted. "Like you're respectin' me by comin' out here without so much as a by your leave? I don't feel respected, and at almost 50, I don't feel like I owe it to you anymore, 'specially since you've not been particularly respectful recently."

"I'm your mother, Brenda Leigh," Willie Rae insisted again. "I'm sure I taught you better than treatin' me like this!"

"Guess not!" Brenda muttered under her breath. "There are going to be some ground rules, mama, that you're gonna have to agree to before I let you stay with Sharon and me."

"Rules? Brenda Leigh, I am..."

"My mother, yes I am aware. And just like you insisted on my respect when I was livin' under your roof, disrespektin' Sharon or myself, especially Sharon, under our roof, will get you a one way ticket to the nearest hotel."

"Your roof," Willie Rae scoffed.

"Yes, mama, my roof. Mine and Sharon's!" Brenda chirped with exaggerated cheer. She sobered, narrowing her eyes at her mother. "You stay here. I got a couple things to take care of. I mean it - stay here."

Brenda snatched up her cell phone and stalked back out of the office. Sharon was not going to like this. Sharon feared that negative attention from parents and employers would rip them apart, and even though Brenda knew she wasn't going anywhere, Sharon's insecurities would have her feeling guilty and scared, and even though Brenda had to tell her that Willie Rae was in town, she didn't want to put the woman she loved through this. She dialed Sharon's cell phone - Sharon picked up promptly, just like always.

"Hey, Brenda Leigh," she answered jovially. She must be alone in her office, to be so casual. If she
thought her mother would stay put for more than two minutes, Brenda would go up to speak to her in person. But Brenda didn't really want to go hunting through the whole of HQ for Willie Rae if her mother got to socializing.

"So, uh, I have some news," Brenda began haltingly.

"Oh?" Sharon sounded curious.

"Uh, my mama showed up in my office a few minutes ago." Silence poured over the line. "Sharon?" Brenda queried softly.

"What...What're you going to do?" Sharon asked, her voice aching and empty.

"Well, I gave her what for, for showin' up like this. And I read her the riot act about bein' respectful, and now I'm gonna take her home and we're gonna have a little chat."

"Oh. I guess I'll see you at home, then," Sharon replied, sounding desolate.

"Sharon, it's gonna be ok, baby. I love you, alright?"

"Love you, too."

Brenda left work not long after her mother arrived - Provenza had offered to take on the responsibility of Brenda's final report, so she was free to take her mother home. The car ride was frostily silent; Brenda consciously kept her expression stony to discourage any conversation so she could concentrate on her driving. The desire to commit matricide would not do well with a heaping helping of road rage on top. Willie Rae seemed to realize that not only was Brenda less than pleased, but that she needed the quiet as well.

When Brenda pulled into the driveway, Willie Rae gasped. "This isn't your house, Brenda Leigh. I thought we were goin' to the duplex."

"This is my house mama. I told you not an hour ago that I moved - and Sharon's lived here for thirty years."

Willie Rae pursed her lips. "And you felt ok about movin' into a situation like this?"

"Movin' into a gorgeous home with a gorgeous, stable woman because she genuinely wanted us to live together" Brenda laughed. "I actually felt pretty great about that, mama." She threw open her door. "Come on - if we're gonna deconstruct my life, let's at least do it inside."

Brenda carried her mother's suitcase into the house - she wasn't a complete jerk - and led her into the kitchen.

"Have you had lunch?" she asked. When Willie Rae answered in the negative, Brenda busied herself in the refrigerator.

Over half-sandwiches and leftover pasta, Willie Rae began her interrogation. It was all fairly standard - grumping about Brenda's failure to share absolutely everything with her mother, about Brenda's failures as a daughter and wife - until Willie Rae said: "You're not gay Brenda Leigh; how could you be doin' THAT with some woman." Brenda, nearly choking on the bite of pasta she'd taken, looked at her mother, aghast.

"Mama, I'm almost positive that you don't want to talk about this," Brenda Leigh tried to reason, though the look on her mother's face could only be described as 'bull headed', so Brenda decided to
try another tack. "Why does it matter if I'm gay or not? It doesn't change anything."

Brenda Leigh knew that her mother dealt with her brother's sexuality though the belief that Jimmy was born that way, a belief that was substantiated by the fact that Jimmy had been demonstrably different from his brothers from early childhood on. For Willie Rae, sexuality was black and white, and Brenda's reality, which was a reality that had included a certain fluidity of desire since she was a teenager probably wouldn't be easily understood. Her mother wouldn't understand that Sharon wasn't a substitute for an acceptable male partner, she wouldn't understand that Brenda appreciated (even reveled in) Sharon's femininity, and she probably would have a hard time believing that Brenda's head wouldn't be turned by the first handsome man to show some interest in her.

"I'm not gonna talk to you about my sex life, mama. I haven't in the past, and I'm not gonna start now," Brenda stated firmly. "I love Sharon - she's my friend and my partner and my lover, and I'm comfortable with her role in my life, and I hope that once you get to know her better, you'll realize that we're good for one another. I plan to spend the rest of my life with her, mama, so I suggest you keep an open mind."

"I've never heard you talk like this before, Brenda Leigh."

Brenda shrugged, unwilling to play that sort of comparison game with her mother - she even hated making that sort of comparison in her own mind, it just didn't seem fair to anyone.

"I'm not givin' this up, mama, not for anything."

It was a cold night, and Brenda knew her mother was watching her from inside the house, but she slumped on the bench and huddled down further into her jacket to wait for Sharon, who had put off coming home for more than an hour past her usual time. Brenda knew the older woman was scared, but now Brenda was starting to worry. Even while talking to her mother, Brenda had been thinking of ways that she could make Sharon feel better and more confident about this situation. In her pocket, her cold fingers wrapped around a black leather jewelry box. Her phone was in her other pocket - she pulled it out and dialed Sharon.

"Raydor," Sharon barked; she sounded like she was in the car.

"Hey, baby," said Brenda placatingly.

"Hey. Sorry, I didn't look at my caller id."

"S Okay. You comin' home?" Brenda asked sweetly. She didn't want to wheedle or nag, but she wanted to try to reassure Sharon. "I promise everything is ok, baby."

"I'm scared," stated Sharon in a small voice, and Brenda's heart ached for her.

"You don't have to be, Shari. Please, just trust me."

"I do. I do, it's just…"

"I know. I'll see you in a few, ok?"

The sight of Sharon pacing slowly up the sidewalk towards her, navy trench swishing around her knees, made Brenda's breath catch in her throat: Sharon was really the most beautiful woman that Brenda had ever met, even with a look of significant trepidation on her lovely face.

Brenda waited till she mounted the stairs and called out softly: "Hey, pretty lady." Sharon started, pressing a hand to her chest.
"What are you doing lurking out here?" Sharon hissed. "It's freezing, Brenda Leigh!"

"It's not that cold." She scooted over on the bench and patted it. Sharon dropped her purse and plopped down next to her. Brenda pulled her hand out of the warmth of her pocket and took Sharon's hand.

"Your fingers would indicate otherwise. How long have you been sitting out here?"

Brenda shrugged. "A while." She rubbed her thumb across the back of Sharon's hand, feeling the veins and the delicate bones under the soft skin. "Are you ok, Shari?"

"I'm just...uneasy about all this scrutiny." Sharon sighed and tilted her head back to thunk against the side of the house. "Speaking of, where is your mother?"

"Inside, probably spyin' on us," said Brenda with a wry grin. "And we'll be alright. All this nonsense is just temporary."

"I don't want it to pull us apart, Brenda Leigh."

"Neither do I, baby. I've been sittin' here, thinkin' about how to put your mind at ease."

"I don't know that there is anything you can do, honey." Sharon closed her eyes and gave a contemplative sigh. "It'll just take time"

Brenda gave her a gentle bump with her shoulder. "I dunno, I had an idea that could maybe perk you up a little bit!"

"Please tell me you aren't contemplating a marathon sex session while your mother is in the house, Brenda Leigh."

Brenda laughed. "As lovely and temptin' as that sounds, that's not what I had in mind. You are altogether too noisy and my mother is altogether too nosey. Plus we couldn't make use of the couch or the backyard or any other fun places."

"I'm too noisy!" protested Sharon with a little volume.

"Mmmmmhmm. See, you're bein' noisy right now."

Sharon spluttered, and Brenda gave her a little wrinkle-nosed grin. Then in one smooth motion, she slid off the bench and onto a knee in front of Sharon, whose eyes widened. She fished the ring box out of her pocket.

"You, Sharon Marie Raydor, are an amazin' person, and I would like nothin' more than to spend the rest of my life figurin' out all the ways in which you are superlative, so I was wonderin' if you would do me the honor and the privilege of bein' my wife."

She popped open the ring box and held it up to Sharon, who gasped and clutched at Brenda's wrist with both hands.

"Oh, Brenda," she breathed. "It's beautiful." Brenda plucked the ring from the box and slid it on to Sharon's ring finger; both their hands were shaking a little. Once the ring was settled where it belonged, Sharon spread her fingers to get a proper look at it on her hand. "It's beautiful," she repeated.

Sharon leaned in, eyes fluttering shut, and Brenda rose to meet her, capturing that finely etched
upper lip between her own; a contented little burble rose from Sharon's throat. Sharon pulled back a little and placed a deliberate kiss on the corner of Brenda's mouth.

"I love you, Brenda Leigh," she whispered. "That was a pretty little proposal you made."

"It shoulda been; I've been sittin' here thinkin' it up for about an hour!"

Willie Rae Johnson never thought she'd watch her daughter propose to another woman on the porch of a quaint little house in Silver Lake, but when she had heard voices, she sidled up to the front window, peeking her head cautiously around the casement. In the dim light of the porch, Sharon Raydor looked wan and tired, but she relaxed on the bench next to Brenda and they bent their heads together and talked quietly - Willie Rae couldn't make out what they were saying beyond a few individual words. She gasped when Brenda slid onto her knees and held a ring out to the other woman, and then flushed when they kissed. It was too dark and too far to see the ring that Brenda had picked out for Sharon, but the brunette seemed pleased with it, or pleased with the proposal at the very least, because now she was all smiles and contentment.

They kissed once, and then again, then stood; Willie Rae saw Brenda's arms disappear under Sharon's coat as she pulled the other woman in for a hug. Not wanting to get caught at her spying, Willie Rae moved away from the window, taking a seat on the couch with the book she'd discarded a few minutes before.

When they came back inside, the two women were holding hands, fingers intertwined, focused completely on one another. Willie Rae glanced up from her book, feigning disinterest, but really fascinated by their interaction. Sharon caught the flicker of movement and flashed her a polite, if abbreviated smile.

"Nice to see you again, Mrs. Johnson," she said, and managed to sound as if she actually meant it. She turned her attention back to Brenda. "I'm going to go get out of this suit. What's for dinner?"

"I was going to reheat that stew from the other day," Brenda answered. "And some bread."

"Salad too? I'm starving."

"I can manage that," her daughter affirmed. "Spinach or mixed greens?"

"Both, please. And some pine nuts, and...I don't know what else. Surprise me."

"That's a dangerous thing to say to me, Shari," said Brenda with a sly grin. Sharon smiled back at her, fondly, and pulled away to head up the stairs.

"Chocolate is not a proper salad additive," she cautioned, over her shoulder.

"I think I could make it work," Brenda shot back, and disappeared into the kitchen.

As the clank of pots and dish ware sounded from the other room, Willie Rae dropped her ruse of reading. This whole situation seemed so very domestic, which was the last word that she would use to describe Brenda Leigh Johnson. For a long time, Willie Rae hadn't thought her daughter capable of simple domesticity, and here she was volunteering to heat up food and prepare a salad! And Sharon seemed comfortable letting her do so, which, considering the brunette woman's exacting standards (Willie Rae had spent time in a kitchen with Sharon that one Christmas a couple of years ago), was no small matter.

Curious to observe Brenda Leigh's newly acquired skills (and in a kitchen that was as organized and well stocked as any Willie Rae had ever seen, no less), Willie Rae abandoned her book and
Brenda looked, for once, at ease with her domesticity. A pot of something sat on a lit burner of the stainless steel range and Brenda was putting a loaf of bread onto a baking sheet in preparation for putting it in the oven. Willie Rae watched her slide the sheet into the oven barehanded, then set the timer. Ignoring Willie Rae, she moved to the refrigerator, choosing the ingredients for her salad. Sitting down gingerly at the kitchen table, Willie Rae vowed to keep one eye on the pot of soup and the bread - she knew her daughter, and accidents tended to happen when Brenda Leigh was trusted around food and fire.
Chapter 33

Sharon slipped out of bed; Brenda Leigh groaned her displeasure and rolled over to wrap herself around Sharon's discarded pillow. 

"Don't go," she murmured, eyes still closed, face scrunched in disapproval at Sharon leaving her alone in their bed. 

"I'm just going to swim," soothed Sharon, unsure if Brenda was really aware or just muttering in her sleep. She resisted the urge to lean in and drop a kiss on the other woman's sleep tousled blonde curls - Brenda deserved a lie in, especially since they were babysitting tonight. 

Last night, due to the time difference, Willie Rae had retired early, and Brenda Leigh and Sharon were left to their own devices. After lingering in the living room for a while, pretending to be interested in choosing a movie, they retired as well, and, curled up on their bed in a nest of blankets, talked quietly. With Brenda's head resting comfortably on her shoulder and Brenda's ring on her finger, Sharon wholeheartedly believed Brenda's assurances regarding their future. "I'll never leave you," she had stated firmly, propping herself on an elbow to look Sharon in the eyes. "Never." She punctuated the last with a fierce kiss. Once they were reasonably sure Willie Rae was asleep (though Brenda wasn't all that worried), they made love, sweet and slow. 

Sharon stretched, casting a loving gaze on the woman she adored while loosening muscles tightened during the night. Brenda's face was sleep creased and there was a slight furrow between her brows, something that appeared nearly every morning Sharon left the bed early in order to take her swim. Sharon had to turn away to resist kissing away that little worry-line - that would end with her getting back into bed and whiling the morning away in a manner that Brenda's mother would probably not appreciate (even if Brenda would appreciate it, very much). Silently, she performed her morning ablutions and slipped into her bathing suit, shrugging a thick terry-cloth robe around her shoulders to counter to chill outside. 

Stepping off the stairs, Sharon heard a sound from the kitchen. She grimaced - she had hoped to have the house to herself at least for a little while. Willie Rae was seated at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and the newspaper. 

"Good morning," Sharon murmured, trying not to feel desperately awkward in her own home. 

"I hope you don't mind, I started the coffee early - I know you have it on a timer."

"That's fine. I'm usually up first, so I set it to be ready when I'm finished with my swim." Sharon made a vague gesture towards the backdoor. "I'll make breakfast when I'm through, but if you're hungry now, please help yourself." 

She managed a tiny, but polite smile, and headed out into the cold morning, shivering when the winter air hit the bare skin of her face and feet. At the edge of the pool, she bent to hit the switch that would retract the solar cover. The exposed water steamed gently into the gray morning, and after carefully tucking her hair into her swim cap, Sharon shucked her robe, and plunged in. 

When Sharon reentered the house, Willie Rae was no where to be seen. Ignoring the fact that she was freezing and dripping all over the kitchen floor, she prepared two mugs of coffee. The first sip of hers, milk heavy and barely sweetened, warmed her insides pleasantly and she sighed in contentment and added another dollop of honey to Brenda's mug for good measure - Sharon had never heard Brenda complain of coffee being 'too sweet' and as a result she now purchased bear-
shaped bottles of honey in bulk. Sharon took another sip, and then another, but the warmth of the coffee wasn't enough to stop her shivering, even in the heated house, so she left the kitchen, and sought out her bedroom and some cozy pajamas.

Brenda was still asleep, so Sharon crept into the bathroom, hung her robe on the back of the door, and peeled out of her bathing suit, throwing it in the shower, where it landed with a wet 'plop'. It took not a moment to finish drying herself with a fresh towel.

Crawling onto the bed next to Brenda, she curled up on her side facing the sleeping woman. A fall of curls covered Brenda's face, and with a gentle hand, Sharon tucked the hair behind an ear, and then let her hand trail over a t-shirt clad shoulder and down Brenda's slender back. Pushing aside the blankets, Sharon wormed her fingers beneath Brenda's shirt and then skittered them up her spine, avoiding the slightly ticklish ribcage area. She hummed, enjoying the feel of smooth, warm skin, and leaned in, intending to kiss her drowsing beauty into wakefulness.

A kiss on the forehead, and one on the cheek, and a series of them trailing towards to corner of Brenda's mouth, and Sharon could feel the other woman smile beneath her lips.

"Good morning," Sharon whispered. Brenda gave a happy little still-sleepy purr and wiggled closer to Sharon, snaking an arm over Sharon's hip.

"Hi," croaked Brenda, then kissed Sharon's shoulder, and nuzzled into her neck, and snuggled in, as if she were preparing to go back to sleep. "You should get under the covers," she mumbled.

"We can't lounge around in bed all day, Brenda Leigh."

"Why not? It's Saturday."

"We do have company," Sharon reminded her, resting her chin on top of Brenda's blonde head. "And our little friend coming over this afternoon."

Brenda groaned. "Curse my mother and her meddling."

"I'll make you pancakes. With chocolate chips."

"But if we go down downstairs, you'll have to put clothes on."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Mama's fault," grumped the blonde.

Sharon was unable to tell if Brenda was actually upset about the fact that they couldn't spend the morning naked and in bed, or if she was being grouchy just on principle.

It took twenty minutes of cuddling (Sharon did end up under the blankets, and was felt up quite thoroughly once she was there, though she was unsure whether her boobs functioned as motivation or distraction) before Brenda Leigh was ready to face her mother. Brenda struggled into a pair of pants and down the stairs, and let herself be put to work by Sharon, giving her mother a bare nod in greeting.

As she prepared some fruit to go with their pancakes, Brenda watched her mother out of the corner of her eyes. Willie Rae in a kitchen and not attempting to take control of the cooking was a rare sight. It was also strange that her mother was silently reading the newspaper instead of relating the latest gossip from Atlanta or pestering Brenda about her failings - apparently they had silently agreed to ignore one another, which was just fine with Brenda.
The sizzle of batter on the griddle prompted Brenda to finish, already, with the fruit and scrape it into a bowl. It didn't look pretty, but Brenda wasn't concerned with presentation; the strawberries, pineapple, tart raspberries and oranges would taste excellent after she'd washed the remains of chocolate chip pancakes off her palate, and that was what mattered. She slid the bowl onto the table, then sidled up behind Sharon, fitting herself to the other woman's back like a shadow. Sharon hummed, flipped the neat blueberry pancake she was tending, and leaned back into Brenda.

"Can I have blueberries and chocolate chips in mine?" Brenda asked after getting a face-full of the steamy scent of fruit and batter.

Sharon chuckled. "Would you like some pancake with that, too? Or shall I melt some chocolate over some blueberries for you?" She asked with a smile in the tone of her voice.

"Hmmmmmm." Brenda pretended to consider her options. "Your way sounds good, too. But I think it'll be healthier with the pancake batter."

Sharon barked out a laugh, startling Willie Rae, who rattled her paper. Turning her head to catch the other woman just in the corner of her eye, Sharon murmured, for Brenda's ears only: "I really love cooking for you, you know that?"

Brenda kissed on her on her conveniently turned cheek. "I truly appreciate it," she whispered, then kissed her again. "And I love you."

Not wanting to leave Willie Rae alone in the house, Brenda had gone by herself to pick up Lucy. Sharon was left with Willie Rae, waiting. And while the morning had been mostly ok - they had managed to share an amiable breakfast, and Willie Rae had relaxed while Brenda and Sharon took care of some chores, including making the extra bed up for the little girl to sleep in, and doing a quick vacuum. But the awkward had ramped up as soon as Brenda had left, and now Sharon was curled against an arm of the couch, pretending to read, and Willie Rae was sitting on the opposite end, pretending not to stare.

Sharon fluttered the pages of her book and Willie Rae cleared her throat.

"I wanted to apologize, for intrudin' on you like this," she said, and then hesitated, like she was unsure of what else to say, or even if she wanted to say more. Sharon closed her book and put it on the end table, turning her body towards the older woman and trying to keep her expression neutral, shading towards curious. She had some things she wanted to say to Brenda's mother, but Sharon didn't want to alienate her.

"I think I got the wrong impression of you, when we met before. You were so reserved, and I could tell Brenda was unsure of you. And then last week, Fritz called and the way he was talkin' about you and about Brenda… I don't know if I thought what he was sayin' was true or not, but I had to see for myself what was goin' on."

Sharon could understand the impulse, especially where one's children were involved, but Sharon didn't really know Willie Rae well enough to really assess her motives. She managed an encouraging smile, hoping to spur more revelations from the other woman.

"I didn't know what I was going to find, but I still feel like I should apologize for makin' any assumptions, about you and about your relationship with Brenda."

"Mmmmmmm," hummed Sharon agreeably. "I appreciate the apology, but, respectfully, you should probably offer the same apology to Brenda Leigh. I'm accustomed to people, even family, casting aspersions on my character and on my sexuality, but Brenda was very upset, for a number"
of reasons, after your phone conversation last week."

Willie Rae looked down and away, breaking eye contact - Sharon thought she saw a little shame there.

"I'm just havin' a hard time - reconcilin' what I thought I knew about my daughter with reality. Her relationship with you? And she hasn't even mentioned work once! Not that she's been talkin' much to me…"

"She'll come around." Sharon cocked her head and asked: "Brenda hasn't talked to you about work?"

"Brenda doesn't talk to me about much of anything," groused Willie Rae with a sour look at Sharon. "In fact, I think she's perfected the art of tellin' me as little as possible."

"I can't speak out of turn, Willie Rae. Especially not when Fritz was doing that very thing for months - Brenda would never forgive me if she found out, and I wouldn't blame her."

"She seems to talk to you, and that's better than nothin', I guess. I don't know that my daughter has ever had a confidant in her life."

It didn't surprise Sharon that Brenda was reluctant to confide in her mother. Willie Rae seemed sweet enough, but Sharon didn't imagine that she was a particularly good keeper of secrets, and she had some prescriptive and old fashioned ideas about what her daughter's life should look like. Sharon knew as well as anyone that relationships between parents and their children could be complicated - her relationship with Margot could hardly be called communicative. Sometimes, for one's own sanity and well-being, a certain amount of circumspection was necessary. She could only hope that Willie Rae (and Brenda, to a certain extent), reached a point where they were comfortable with the realities of Brenda's life.

Sharon paused briefly to watch Brenda wrestle an animatedly chatting Lucy from her booster seat before walking outside to help. Lucy threw herself at Sharon's legs for an enthusiastic hug; over the little girl's head, Brenda gave Sharon a wry look and a bit of a smile.

"Miss Sharon! Miss Sharon!" Lucy chirped in greeting. "Can we go swimming now?" She let go of Sharon's waist and bounced herself up the sidewalk, apparently feeling very comfortable.

"I don't know if she stopped talkin' to breathe on the way over here," Brenda remarked softly as Lucy mounted the stairs ahead of them. She had her purse tucked under one arm and a purple back pack, emblazoned with some cartoon character, in the other hand.

"So she's excited?"

"I don't think excited adequately describes it." Brenda put the back pack into Sharon's offered hand. "Kristina looked positively harassed," she said with a touch of worry.

Sharon chuckled and patted Brenda comfortingly on the shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll wear her out."

They managed to convince Lucy to pause for lunch before her swim, so as Sharon flipped gooey grilled cheese for Brenda and Lucy, and Brenda assembled salad for the grown ups (and a plate of raw veggies with dip for Lucy), Lucy chattered happily to a rather shell-shocked Willie Rae about school and her friends and what she wanted for Christmas.

Sharon smiled to herself - with Lucy around, there would be no room for more emotionally fraught
conversations with Brenda Leigh's mother. One per visit seemed like plenty, anyhow.
Lucy had insisted that both Sharon and Brenda accompany her into the hot tub, so Brenda found herself shoulder deep in warm water, watching as Lucy floated in the center of the tub, lightly supported by Sharon's hand under her back. The lesson on how to float on one's back was progressing with much giggling and splashing. Sharon, Brenda had learned over Thanksgiving, employed a deft hand in teaching children how to swim - she had taught her own children and quite a few of the cousins Brenda had met up in Santa Cruz, and now, Lucy was benefiting from that experience.

All of a sudden, Lucy flailed, and sank beneath the water. She surfaced in Sharon's arms, spluttering. "Miss Sharon!" she exclaimed accusingly, pushing her wet bangs out of her eyes.

"You were floating all by yourself, so I took my hand away a little," explained Sharon.

"Ok." Lucy countered, disbelief in her tone. She narrowed her eyes, managing to look utterly put out with the woman even as her arms were slung around Sharon's neck.

"Would you like to try again?"

"Do you promise not to move your hand until I say so?"

"I promise," Sharon intoned, gravely serious. "I shouldn't have before - I apologize."

Mollified, Lucy countered Sharon's sincerity with a grin. "Ok," she chirped, and let go of Sharon, positioning herself to lean back in the water. When she did, Sharon supported her as promised and the little girl swished her limbs happily.

Brenda caught Sharon's eye and gave her a grin and a wink - the woman really was too cute with kids.

Willie Rae perched herself in the window of the guest bedroom where she had spent the night, watching her daughter and Sharon frolic with their little friend, Lucy. Brenda had read her the riot act about Lucy - not only did Lucy see Brenda and Sharon's relationship as the norm, she was being raised by two aunts who had become her guardians after Lucy's mother and stepfather were killed, so Willie Rae was not to question or to equivocate or make Lucy feel weird about same sex couples in general or Brenda and Sharon in particular.

At this distance, and filtered through the window and the lenses of her aging eyes, the little group in the hot tub could be her daughter's family - even if it wasn't one that Willie Rae had imagined for Brenda. She supposed that Sharon was Brenda's family, and that Brenda would label her as such without hesitation. And though Willie Rae couldn't conceive of an objection that could counter what Brenda and Sharon were to one another, it made her stomach churn with guilt that, despite her daughter's happiness, she wanted to find those magical words that would turn the world back the way it had been.

In the hot tub, Lucy leapt on to Sharon, looping little arms around her neck, attempting to drag the woman down into the water. Willie Rae heard the girl's playful shriek, and then Brenda gave a cheer, and dove in to assist, fingers skittering over Sharon's ribs in an attempt to tickle her into submission. Sharon shoved a fan of water at Brenda with one hand, then jumped up, and came back down with a splash, to the giggling delight of Lucy, swamping them both.

Lucy shrieked again and let go of Sharon, hopping out of the tub to chase after an inflatable ball.
that had rolled some distance away. She squealed and did a little dance when she hit the cold air, taking exaggerated steps across the paving stones. Willie Rae saw Sharon throw her head back and laugh, then she sliced through the water to sit next to Brenda on the bench, sliding an arm around the other woman's slim shoulders. Lucy dashed back across the deck and splashed down into the tub with the ball; Willie Rae turned away, searching out the cell phone that she'd left on the nightstand. Maybe her son could help her get a better grasp on this situation, or better yet, maybe he would be a sympathetic ear to her confusion.

"Jimmy, it's your mama," Willie Rae said when the line connected. And like always, like every week, he chuckled.

"I know, mama. I have caller id. Daddy says you're in Biloxi, visitin' cousin Ruthie. I'm surprised you found time to call."

Willie Rae nibbled on her bottom lip - she had outright lied to Clay when she planned this little excursion, and now that lie was spreading around to the rest of her family.

"I'm not in Mississippi, Jimmy. I'm out visitin' with your sister," she confessed. Jimmy was silent for a moment.

"Tell me what's goin' on, please, Mama."

"I knew your daddy would want to come if I told him where I was goin', if for no other reason than to express his displeasure about your sister's divorce in person, but that's not the only reason I wanted to keep him outta LA."

"Ok? I don't understand, mama. Has Brenda started drunkin' heavily or usin' drugs or gone off the deep end? You're gonna gave to spell it out for me."

"Jimmy, your sister is livin' with a woman, and they're engaged," pronounced Willie Rae with not a little trepidation. After her statement, Jimmy said nothing, but snorted, like he was trying to hold back a laugh.

"It's not funny," she protested forcefully, her voice shaking.

"Mama," Jimmy almost barked. "This isn't some crisis in your life or in Daddy's life that you can use to muster up sympathy and attention. Brenda Leigh is a grown-ass woman, and if she's happy you should be genuinely happy for her, not sneakin' around behind everyone's back like you're on some kind of reconnaissance mission, keepin' an eye on the lesbians behind enemy lines."

"Don't say that! And watch your language."

"Don't say what? Lesbian?" Jimmy snorted again. "It's not a dirty word, Mama."

"But it's not..." Willie Rae began. "She was never like this before. I knew you were different, Jimmy, but Brenda was always... Why would she choose this?"

"Why does it matter?" He asked sharply, then softened his tone. "Brenda isn't obligated to make any of us understand, Mama. I know you have a burning need to know every detail about our lives, and hers especially, but her life is her business, and what she shares about her life should be on her terms and because she wanted to, not because she was pestered endlessly. How did you even find out about this, anyway?"

"Fritz called me last week and said..."
Jimmy cut her off. "Her ex!" He exclaimed. "And how did he find out?"

"Brenda said he was spyin' on them."

"So her ex husband spies on her and then outs her, and then you decide to fly out there without so much as a by-your-leave? Mama, I'm surprised Brenda is even talkin' to you. What Fritz did was a huge violation, and then you compounded it by invading her privacy."

"No - Fritz was just concerned, is all..." she trailed off, not really believing the words.

"Mama, you might not want to admit it, but Fritz was being controlling, trying to influence Brenda's behavior and trying to influence you against her. And you let him manipulate you."

Willie Rae couldn't argue with that: Jimmy was right that she had probably reacted almost exactly how Fritz had expected and even wanted her to, and had compounded the issues that Brenda was having with Fritz by making her daughter feel worse. Her shame about her behavior couldn't change the fact that she was still completely confused about Brenda's apparent ease in her new relationship.

She sighed. "I just don't know what to do, Jimmy."

"Well, what's this woman like? And Christ - what's her name?"

"Her name is Sharon. I met her before, when we visited, and she seemed...cool, reserved. But now..." Willie Rae trailed off and looked back out the window where an enthusiastic game of 'keep the ball in the air' was in progress, with Sharon pretending to try to snatch the ball out of the air as it floated between Brenda and Lucy.

"But now what?" Demanded Jimmy.

"I don't know. She's different than I thought, I guess."

"Different how?"

"She's warm and kind with your sister and with kids. And Brenda is very protective of her."

"Kids?"

"They're babysittin' a little girl this weekend."

The sound that echoed through Willie Rae's cell phone could only be described as a hoot. After a few seconds of laughter, Jimmy managed to calm himself down.

"I hope you haven't said anything about Brenda havin' kids of her own, Mama."

"I haven't," she groused. "I just don't understand why she just doesn't, instead of carryin' on with someone elses!"

"There's somethin' to be said for borrowin' other people's kids for a bit. Mama," Jimmy soothed, "you really need to start bein' happy that Brenda Leigh is happy and let go of the things that you think she should want."

"I don't know if I know how to do that, Jimmy. And I still don't know what I'm going to tell your Daddy."

"You know as well as I do, Mama, that Daddy's gonna believe what he wants to believe, regardless
of what you tell him. And you'd better figure out how to be happy for Brenda Leigh - else your relationship with her is going to suffer."

"My fingers are like raisins!" Lucy chirped, examining her fingers intently. She was standing on the rug in the master bath, wrapped in a bath sheet.

"You certainly are," Brenda agreed. She was quite pruned, herself. Nearly three hours in a hot tub would do that to a person - though they had still had to bribe Lucy out of the water with promises of pizza making and movie watching. "Do you wanna rinse off before we go make pizza?"

Lucy gave Brenda a scornful look but otherwise ignored the question.

"She's six, Brenda," Sharon said, reentering the bathroom. "She doesn't care if she smells like pool chemicals." Lucy giggled as if to confirm Sharon's statement. She handed Lucy her clothes and the little girl promptly dropped them and her towel to the rug.

Leaving the bathroom to Lucy, Brenda and Sharon quickly stripped out of their own bathing suits and put their slouchy, weekend clothes back on. Lucy tripped out of the bathroom, her braids still dripping. Sharon took a discarded towel and began to wring the excess water from Lucy's hair. Brenda brushed her own hair out, trying not to laugh at Sharon working on Lucy, who squirmed with impatience, eager to get to her evening of pizza and Pixar.

Lucy managed to be still long enough for Sharon to brush her own hair (though she did try to jump on the bed while she waited, and was disappointed when she found the mattress to be not particularly bouncy), but as soon as Sharon had put the brush down on the dresser, she charged out the door, squealing: "I want pepperoni on my pizza!"

For all her excitement, Lucy exhibited quite a bit of control when carefully crafting her personal pizza. After Sharon spooned some sauce onto the crust and spread it around, Lucy very neatly covered the sauce with shreds of mozzarella, then placed pepperoni in two concentric rings on top of the cheese.

"All done," she chirped, sliding out of her chair and bouncing over to the counter where Brenda was agonizing over the ingredients for her already fanciful creation. "Whatcha makin', Miss Brenda?"

"Pine nuts, parmesan, arugula and maybe sun-dried tomato."

"Eww," said Lucy, with the same scornful look she'd given Brenda earlier in the bathroom. Brenda stuck out her tongue in retaliation.

"That's fine," Brenda snipped playfully, with a grin directed at the little girl. "I'll eat it all by myself, thank you very much."

Sharon and Willie Rae were also through with their pizza making, so all eyes were on Brenda as she deliberated, nibbling obliviously on a handful of pepperoni. After a long moment, Sharon husked: "Brenda Leigh, tomatoes or no tomatoes - make the call."

Brenda sneered at her, then plopped a few sun dried tomatoes on her pie. "Fine. I'm finished," she sassed. "None a' ya'll understand the relationship between a woman and her pizza."

Willie Rae snorted. "What we understand is that you'll inhale yours in two minutes and then be pickin' at ours, lookin' for more."

Sharon let out a guffaw, and then gave Brenda a wink when she caught the glare the blonde was
sending her way. "I'll share with you if you're still hungry," she said, scooping up Brenda's creation and carrying it carefully over to the oven.

"You'd better," Brenda groused.

While the pizza cooked, Lucy and Brenda got the movie ready to go. *Up* was Lucy's choice, and Brenda wanted to get the first ten minutes out of the way so she wouldn't be crying on a full stomach. She and Sharon had watched *Up* with Sharon's little cousins over Thanksgiving, and Brenda had been surprised to find herself crying into Sharon's shoulder not long after movie started. Although the little twins had gaped at her, and the older boys had snickered, Sharon had merely pulled Brenda closer, sending a reproachful glance towards Steven and Matt. Brenda didn't know why she was so surprised that *Up* had done a number on her feelings; she had not-so-fond memories of babysitting Charlie, aged 5, and sobbing about the dad lion dying in *The Lion King*. Watching sad movies was all well and good, but Brenda didn't really want to cry in front of her mother at this point. No sense in giving the woman any ammunition for future, nosey inquiries into Brenda's well being.

Sharon entered the living room with Willie Rae trailing behind, as eerily silent and weirdly watchful, as she had been the past few days. Brenda had sat herself on the floor next to the television, to help Lucy put the DVD in the player and queue up the film (though, truth was, Lucy had a pretty good command of the remote and its functions, probably better than Brenda's), and she was surprised when Sharon sat next to them, leaving the couch to Willie Rae. Lucy, completely oblivious to the tension between the adults, sprawled between them on her stomach.

"Press play, Miss Brenda!"

Brenda obeyed, steeling herself for some emotionally devastating animation.

Using the excuse of checking on the pizzas, Brenda got up part-way through the opening sequence of the movie, about the time that Ellie and Carl suffered a miscarriage. Padding into the kitchen, she lightly dragged her fingers across the crown of Sharon's head as she passed and felt the other woman lean into her touch.

She opened the oven and peeked in. The cheese on the pizzas was melting, but the crusts still looked white and doughy, so Brenda busied herself setting up trays so they could enjoy their dinner and continue watching the movie. Lucy was a neat eater, so Brenda didn't worry about her smearing pizza sauce all over the living room rug - at least she didn't worry too much.

Trays and drinks were ready when the timer on the oven chimed. Sharon entered the room to assist and Brenda couldn't help the broad smile that broke out across her face as she handed over the hot hands so Sharon could take the two cookie sheets out of the oven. They worked together in comfortable silence to cut the pizzas into quarters, plate them and pair them with their guests' chosen beverages.

Before taking up their burdens, Brenda trapped Sharon against the counter and pressed their bodies together. Sharon chuckled and wrapped her arms around Brenda, sighing happily at the contact; her beautiful Brenda Leigh was always affectionate - and even though they were circumspect at work and (mostly) appropriate in public, Brenda never shied away from her touch.

"Hey, baby," Brenda purred, then leaned in to nuzzle along Sharon's neck.

"Brenda Leigh, you're going to get us in trouble with the ravening hordes of pizza eating munchkins in our living room."
"The horde of one?" Brenda scoffed, zeroing in on Sharon's ear and nibbling the lobe gently.

Sharon hummed her pleasure at Brenda Leigh's ministrations. "Just for a minute," she acceded, "or the pizza will get cold."

By the end of the movie, Lucy was fading fast. After the thrilling zeppelin chase, during which she was sitting bolt upright, fixated on the TV, she curled up alongside Brenda, little eyes fluttering shut repeatedly as Russell and Carl and Kevin and Dug and the rest of the dogs rode off into the animated sunset. She allowed Sharon to pick her up with no protests that she wasn't tired yet, resting her head on a convenient shoulder.

"Alright," murmured Sharon, "time for PJ's and stories, Miss Lucy."

"Will you both read me one?" She yawned. "If I don't fall 'sleep?"

"Of course," Sharon assured her. Though Sharon didn't think Lucy would be conscious much longer, not with the way her little body was practically boneless in Sharon's arms.

Sharon took Lucy upstairs to get ready for bed while Brenda cleaned up the last of the dishes from their meal. She collected plates from post-dinner brownies and mostly-empty glasses of milk and took them in to the kitchen, Willie Rae trailing behind.

Brenda rinsed the plates and the glasses before putting them in the dishwasher, working slowly because she knew her mother was itching to add some color commentary.

"So is this what you do now, Brenda Leigh?"

Brenda laughed flatly andpicked up a sponge to wipe down the counters. "How do you mean, Mama?"

"You know, cookin', cleanin', babysittin', not workin' a case every weekend?"

"I'm on call every third weekend, Mama. LAPD made some big changes to overtime to cover budget shortfalls, so yes, I have more weekends free, barring an absolute catastrophe. And Mama, Fritz might have had you believin' otherwise, but I was never a complete slob, and cookin' is a lot less stressful when I don't have to take responsibility for the actual…cookin'."

"And that little girl?"

"So help me, don't start, Mama," Brenda hissed. "We've had a nice night, so just don't start."

"You think I'm the only one who's going to be questionin' you about this, Brenda Leigh?"

"No, I don't think that. But for almost anyone else I have the luxury of not givin' a damn what they think about what I do with my free time." She tossed the sponge back into the sink and turned an anguished look on the small woman standing stiffly next to her kitchen table. "Why can't you just let me enjoy what I have, Mama."

"Brenda Leigh, are you sure…" Wille Rae didn't know how she wanted to finish that sentence. Was Brenda sure this was what she wanted? Or was she sure this was right?

Brenda brought her hand down on the counter with force. Her ring made a clanking noise against the granite surface of the counter. "Enough. I don't wanna hear any more. Excuse me, I have a story to read." Squaring her shoulders, she left the kitchen, careful not to stomp her feet or slump her shoulders, or give her mother any ammunition for calling her juvenile or immature.
Brenda entered the smaller guest room to find Sharon and Lucy already cuddled up in the double bed. Lucy was telling Sharon about how she wanted to learn to jump off the diving board - only trouble was she was scared to swim in the deep end even with her water wings. Sharon commiserated with Lucy on the scariness of the deep end and offered her services as swimming instructor if Lucy needed.

"So what are we readin' tonight, Miss Lucy and Miss Sharon?" She asked, sliding in on the empty side of the bed.

"A Bad Case of the Stripes!" Lucy chirped. She handed Brenda a book with a winged pig on the cover. "And Perfect the Pig!"

"Excellent. Who's first?"

"Pig is always last. Mommy used to read it to me every night," pronounced Lucy blithely. Brenda glanced over at Sharon, giving her a wide-eyed look over the little girl's head.

Sharon cleared her throat and opened the book in her hands. "Camilla Cream loved lima beans," she read. "But she never ate them." Lucy sighed happily and snuggled down against Sharon, ignoring Brenda craning her neck to get a good view of the pictures.
Brenda bolted awake at the sound of a cry. She sat up, shrugging out of Sharon's grasp, and listened; a low whimper filtered down the hallway and through the cracked door to their bedroom. Disturbed by Brenda's movement, Sharon stirred, her eyes fluttering open.

"I'll get her," Brenda murmured, slipping out from under the covers and rounding the end of the bed.

Sharon blinked muzzily at her, then shook her head, as if to clear away the fog of sleep. "Bring her in here," she husked, then stretched - she was wearing a t-shirt (threadbare) and a pair of shorts in deference to the open door and their guests.

Brenda nodded and crept out into the hallway, not wanting to wake her mother if she could help it - on the off chance that she hadn't heard Lucy's nightmare.

It wasn't a surprise to find her mother, wispy hair a disheveled halo and clad in an utterly familiar white nightgown, standing in the doorway to the bedroom she was occupying.

"Is she alright?" Willie Rae hissed.

"I dunno, Mama. That's what I'm goin' to see. Now go back to bed."

Brenda pushed the partially open door out of her way and entered the bedroom, hitting the wall-switch that controlled the bedside lamp. Lucy was sitting up in the middle of the big bed, wide-eyed and clutching the slightly ragged stuffed koala that had hitched a ride in her backpack.

"I had a bad dream," she said pathetically, her lower lip quivering.

"I know, honey," Brenda soothed. She held out her arms. "Come on, then."

Brenda gathered up the girl and the bear and hustled them right back down the hall; it wasn't a surprise, again, to find that her mother hadn't retreated back to bed, but was still hovering, watching, looking like some sort of pale phantom in the dim light of the upstairs hallway. Brenda ignored her and entered the master bedroom, happy to find Sharon looking more alert - she would know what to do to help Lucy with her nightmare.

She deposited the little girl and the stuffed animal on to the bed; Lucy scrambled over Sharon without a word and settled herself in the center of the mattress. Brenda wanted to do the same, but she did the adult thing and walked around the bed to slide into her side. She scooted in until she was close enough to reach over Lucy and touch Sharon if she so chose, and mimicked Sharon's pose - on her side with her head resting in her hand.

"You wanna talk about it?" Sharon asked softly, reaching out to flip the end of one of Lucy's braids with deliberate fingers.

"I don't really remember; it was just scary." She blinked up at both of them with sleepy blue eyes. "Will you cuddle me up? That's what Krissy and Mo do - it usually helps."

"Of course we will. How do you like to be cuddled up?"

"I don't care, I just like to be in the middle because it makes me feel safe," Lucy explained.
"In the middle," repeated Sharon. "Ok, get comfortable then."

Lucy turned on her side to face Brenda, and the two women took that as their cue to 'cuddle her up'.

"Are you sure we aren't squishin' you?" Brenda asked. Lucy's blonde head was resting on her shoulder, and Sharon was nearly close enough for her to kiss without too much stretching.

"No, it's good. Just 'till I fall asleep," the little girl answered, punctuated with a yawn. Brenda smiled a little and kissed her on the crown of her head. Sharon caught her gaze, green eyes gleaming warmly in the half light, then reached over to cup Brenda's cheek, and Brenda nuzzled into the warm palm, kissed it, then closed her eyes and settled in to sleep. Sharon's hand ended up on Brenda's waist, a familiar weight, linking them all together.

Brenda floated muzzily towards consciousness, vaguely aware that someone was whispering softly next to her. Through bleary eyes, she could see that the clock read 6:52 - not bad considering Sharon was Ms. Morning Person, and Lucy's aunts had warned she wasn't predisposed to sleeping in. Groaning - because it was Sunday and still early by her estimation - Brenda buried her face in the pillow.

Lucy giggled. "Is Miss Brenda always grumpy in the morning," she asked chirpily.

Sharon chuckled throatily. "Not always."

"Sharon Marie!" Brenda chided, turning over. "Ya'll are looking awfully awake for this hour of the morning." And they did; Sharon was reclining against some pillows, bright-eyed and smiling, with Lucy upright and resting against Sharon's knees, no doubt ready to bounce out of bed at the slightest provocation. Brenda was not ready to get out of bed; weekend mornings were meant to have a certain order to them, and right at that moment, she needed a kiss. Edging over a little, she leaned in, humming happily when Sharon met her halfway.

"Mornin', gorgeous," murmured Brenda against those well loved lips, before taking going in for seconds, taking the briefest of tastes before pulling away and humming again.

"And good mornin' to you, too, Miss Lucy," Brenda drawled, looking at the little girl who was utterly comfortable with the early morning laziness.

Lucy only giggled in response, and giggled harder when Brenda wormed her way under the sheets to curl up closer to Sharon, like she had had second thoughts, after all, about getting up.

Lucy's aunts Krissy and Mo were due for breakfast any minute, and the little girl was practically vibrating with anticipation to get her hands on one of Willie Rae's made-from-scratch biscuits that were steaming gently on the table in front of her.

"They smell so good," Lucy whined. "And I'm soooooo hungry." The leftover fruit salad she had had to tide her over just didn't compare to homemade biscuits. Brenda agreed wholeheartedly.

"Can't we have just one," Brenda asked, fluttering her eyelashes at Sharon, who had insisted that, out of politeness, they wait for their guests before breaking their fast.

Sharon narrowed her eyes, trying not to grin at Brenda's rather endearing, and endless, enthusiasm for carbohydrates. "Why don't you split one?" She suggested.

Lucy's wide-eyed look at Brenda said that she was willing to sacrifice half a biscuit in order to get her hands on one this instant, versus at an indeterminate point in the future.
Brenda would have held out for a whole biscuit, but she acquiesced to Lucy's wishes. She snatched up a biscuit and deftly halved it with a knife, careful not to burn her fingers. "Plain, or do you want somethin' on it?" she asked, knife poised over the butter.

"Butter and strawberry, please." Lucy leaned in to get a whiff of the buttery baked goods as Brenda spread a thin layer of butter and preserves over its flakey innards.

Brenda was still savoring the last bite of her half of the biscuit when the doorbell rang.

"Yea!" Lucy shrieked, hopping out of the chair she'd claimed at the kitchen table. "I'll get it!"

Brenda followed her out of the kitchen, hovering in the living room as the little girl yanked the door open. Her aunts were there, casually dressed in jeans and warm sweaters, and looking much refreshed from their night alone.

"Krissy! Mo!" Lucy threw herself against her aunts' legs before they even had a chance to step into the house. Kristina bent to pick her up, slinging her over a hip. Lucy wrapped her arms around her aunt's neck and placed a kiss on her cheek, then she chirped: "I'm so hungry - let's go eat!"

"Goodness, you're bossy," quipped Krissy, smiling hello at Brenda and stepping through the door. Maureen followed, shutting the door behind her. They trickled into the kitchen, where Sharon was already at the range, making Lucy's scrambled eggs with cheese, and Willie Rae was at the table with a section of the LA Times. Brenda figured she should introduce them, even if her mother was still in the doghouse - despite the peace offering of homemade biscuits.

"Maureen, Kristina, this is my mother, Willie Rae Johnson. Mama, these are Lucy's aunts, Maureen and Kristina Winn."

Everyone said polite hellos, and Willie Rae stopped pouting and put the newspaper aside to small talk with her table mates while the rest of their food was prepared. Sharon hummed as she made omelets to order, Brenda hovering (for the humming and because Sharon was making her omelet), hands on Sharon's waist, chin on her shoulder.

"Brenda is very enthusiastic about food," Maureen remarked to Willie Rae.

"Yes," agreed Willie Rae. "She's been that way as long as I can remember."

"Last night, she ate her whole pizza AND part of Miss Sharon's AND Miss Willie Rae's," Lucy bragged on Brenda'a behalf, doing some damage of her own on a plate of scrambled eggs and home fries.

"It's lucky she found someone who loves to cook as much as Sharon does," mused Maureen, glancing over at the stove.

Willie Rae managed a polite smile, though she was sure her discomfort was registering on her face; she was having a hard time mustering enthusiasm for Brenda Leigh's relationship. "She does seem to be eating well these days," she hedged.

Before the conversation could get any more awkward, the omelets were served, and everyone was too busy eating to say more. Willie Rae's mind was still churning, though. Maureen and Kristina seemed to have no idea that Brenda Leigh had been married to a man as recently as a year ago, and perhaps they wouldn't care, but Willie Rae was hung up on the idea that her daughter had once been normal, and found herself wanting to shout that fact to these people. But it wouldn't do any good, and it would probably see her exiled to a hotel for the rest of her stay. Despite her continuing reservations, Willie Rae had to resign herself, at the very least, to the situation; Brenda was already
angry enough with her that one more misstep might see her exiled to a hotel for the remainder of her stay.

"I think I said something wrong to your mother," Maureen said sotto voce to Brenda while they were waiting for Sharon and Lucy to retrieve Lucy's bag from upstairs.

"I'm sure you didn't," Brenda reassured her with a tiny smile. "Nothin' is right to her at the moment."

"Oh. Well, then I hope things work themselves out," offered Maureen vaguely, since she didn't really know what was going on.

"It'll be ok - Sharon and I will deal with it."

Maureen didn't doubt that they would. On the terrible day they had met, after getting over their anger that the police hadn't located them sooner, Kristina and Maureen had found themselves grateful that the other two women had gotten Lucy out of the police headquarters, especially considering the further trauma the little girl had endured within its walls. From what she understood, sheltering Lucy in a private home had been perhaps a little against the rules, but finding her somewhere safe, with someone who cared deeply about her safety had been a relief. It wasn't until their second meeting weeks later that she and Kristina had noticed just how smitten Sharon and Brenda were with one another - a deep affection and respect that was as comforting as Sharon's sinful mashed potatoes. This visit had only confirmed the diagnosis of smitten, and their affection had only seemed to increase, as they were in-sync in a way that was unaffected by whatever was going on with Brenda's mother.

As a still protesting Lucy (she wanted to show her aunts how she had learned to float) drove away, Brenda and Sharon regrouped on the porch, lingering despite the chill in the air.

Brenda slid an arm around Sharon's waist and dropped her head on the other woman's shoulder, but found herself being pulled into a full hug.

"What do you wanna do today?" Brenda murmured, lips brushing the soft skin of Sharon's throat as she spoke.

"I have a few files to look over for the shelter, and we should probably do some laundry, but other than that…"

"I'll get the laundry goin', then I can finish my book. Meet me on the couch?" Brenda asked, placing a gentle kiss under Sharon's jaw. She hoped that Sharon would consent to cuddling while she worked and Brenda read.

"I think I could manage that, but won't your mother want to be entertained?"

Brenda made a derisive noise in the back of her throat. "If she was an invited guest, perhaps I'd ask her what she wanted to do, but she isn't, and I'm not feelin' all that charitable."

Sharon sighed and wrapped her arms even more securely around Brenda. "It'll get easier," she promised in a whisper.

"I know. I'm just really furious with her right now."

Sharon pulled back to look Brenda in the eyes, bringing one hand up to cup a warm, smooth cheek. "I really admire you for the way you're handling all this - I don't know that I'd be as calm as you've been."
Brenda blinked rapidly, her eyelashes darkening with unshed tears; then she chuckled a little huskily. "You make me feel calm, baby."

"I can't help but feel sort of responsible though," Sharon confessed, averting her eyes. She loved Brenda so much that the thought of being without her caused a physical ache in Sharon's chest, but coming out and dealing with its consequences could be a prolonged struggle.

"You know I don't think that at all - and you shouldn't be thinkin' that either," asserted Brenda fiercely, knowing Sharon had a tendency to shoulder too much blame in situations she couldn't control. "I shoulda come clean to my parents about Neecie - either during or after, but I was young and stupid, and after she left I was completely convinced I'd never fall in love ever again. That was my failure. And this situation would have been much improved had I been able to do the tellin'. Once my mama gets over me not bein' truthful about Fritz, and Fritz lyin' to her, she'll figure out some way to rationalize the same sex thing, realize that we're happy, and go back to her usual levels of nosy and annoying."

"What about your father?"

Brenda shrugged. "I don't really know how he'll react. He treats Jimmy's partner, Frank, with respect, although he doesn't acknowledge Frank as Jimmy's spouse, and I have no idea how they got to that point. I suppose he'll probably bluster and carry on at the outset, but," she shrugged again, "I really don't know."

"Then I guess we'll handle his reaction when and if it becomes an issue," Sharon concluded reasonably.

Brenda nodded, then snuggled back into Sharon, sighing happily. Sharon's mostly levelheaded reaction to Brenda's family drama aside, they really did compliment each other well, and it was wonderful to have a partner who didn't assume the worst of your motives at any hint of conflict. Feeling the warmth of Sharon's breath against her head, and the other woman's lips pressing into her hair, Brenda murmured: "Love you, Shari."

Brenda felt Sharon's smile at her words, just as she felt words of reciprocation rumble beneath her ear as Sharon answered.
Neither Brenda nor Sharon could believe their good fortune; after a day of dealing with Willie Rae's (probably bored and slightly pouty) presence in the background as they attempted to have as normal a Sunday as possible, Lieutenant Flynn, in conjunction and collaboration with Lieutenant Provenza, had called to invite Willie Rae to dinner. Sharon was sprawled on the couch with her eyes closed when Brenda came back in the house from walking her mother out to Flynn's car. Brenda insinuated herself onto the couch, curling around Sharon's body and clinging to her to keep from sliding to the floor.

"Flynn said we have two hours at least," Brenda informed her apparently comatose partner. Sharon's eyes popped open and she grinned wickedly at Brenda.

"What would you like to do with our two hours of alone time, Brenda Leigh?" Sharon positively purred, twining one leg around Brenda's. Brenda smirked and shifted herself more fully on top of Sharon, straddling a strong thigh and reveling at the increased contact between them. Despite the playful mood, with her partner looking up at her so openly, green eyes sparkling and crinkled by the smile she was fighting, Brenda's heart swelled with something that was no longer unrecognizable to her: an intense desire to be linked so inextricably with this woman that they could never be separated, so that no one could question her commitment or the seriousness with which she regarded this relationship. Brenda's slightly predatory smirk faded into a minute, tremulous smile, and tears pricked the corners of her eyes.

Sharon's eyes got huge and she reached up to cup Brenda's cheek with a gentle hand.

"What's the matter?" She husked urgently, thumb tracing over Brenda's cheekbone.

Unable to articulate the pent up emotion that dealing with her mother and coming to some sort of (fragile) resolution had released in her, Brenda shook her head mutely then buried her face in Sharon's neck with a strangled sob. She cried hidden underneath the curtain of Sharon's hair, drawing Sharon's scent into her heaving lungs, with Sharon's hands tracing soothing circles on her back.

When her sobs had quieted to hiccups, and her tears were only tracks staining her cheeks, Brenda lifted herself up on her elbows to take in Sharon's troubled feature.

"Are you alright?" she asked, green eyes liquid with worry.

Brenda nodded and croaked, "I think so." She sat up more fully and perched straddling Sharon's hips. "I'm sorry," she said, scrubbing at her stiff-feeling cheeks. "I think I needed that."

"You don't have to apologize, Brenda Leigh," placated Sharon in that thrumming voice that accompanied some of their emotional moments.

Brenda offered her a rueful smile and an explanation anyways. "It's been a pent-up couple 'a days. I feel better now, though." Sharon arched a brow at that, perhaps unwilling to believe that Brenda felt better after a crying jag that would induce a headache in most people.

"I really do," Brenda protested. "Havin' some kind of resolution with mama is good, though I wish she'd stop bein' so esoteric and whatever and just see how happy we are together."

Sharon couldn't help her smile at Brenda's pronouncement. "She'll come around," she assured the other woman, reaching up to cup her hips.
"I know - but I feel like maybe I'm missin' the right words or somethin', that would make her get it." Brenda sat up straighter and cocked her head, a contemplative look on her face. "The only way I know how to explain is; it's like when you're workin' on a real mess of a case, and you can't make sense of anything, cuz you're missin' some key piece of information - and then when you get that piece of information, everything clicks into place, and you know exactly what you need to do to get your resolution. That's how you make me feel - every moment with you is a moment that clicks," she finished with an embarrassed little shrug.

"That was fairly poetic, Brenda Leigh Johnson," Sharon pronounced with an adoring smile. "And I know exactly what you mean."

"I thought you would." Then Brenda leaned in for a kiss, again stretching her body out along Sharon's, and losing herself in the feeling of Sharon's lips against hers.

Conversation over dinner dispelled the notion that the Lieutenants would be a sympathetic ear to Willie Rae's concerns about Brenda's new relationship. Even the perpetually cynical Lieutenant Provenza seemed to think that Sharon Raydor was a good match for her daughter. Despite her disappointment, dinner was a pleasant affair, and Willie Rae enjoyed hearing about Lieutenant Flynn's children and Lieutenant Provenza's grandchildren (and his improving relationship with his first ex-wife).

It went against Willie Rae's every principle to pay four dollars for a cup of drip coffee, so instead of enjoying coffee and a slice of cake at the very nice restaurant that Lieutenants Flynn and Provenza had picked, she had half a cake boxed up so they could enjoy it at the house. The cake was an exceptionally delicious looking red velvet, made on the premises, so Willie Rae was expecting much delight on Brenda Leigh's part. Despite her assurances, both the Lieutenants seemed uneasy about returning to the house so soon, and tried to insist that they stay where they were to eat dessert. Blustering through their attempts to delay, Willie Rae had them cowed in a matter of minutes.

Opening the door, Willie Rae regretted her insistence in an instant; on the couch, Sharon Raydor was on top of her daughter, and the two women were kissing languorously. Willie Rae flushed and turned to high tail it right back out the door, but Flynn and Provenza were a solid wall against her escape. Provenza cleared his throat loudly and averted his eyes, but Flynn let out a low chuckle, remembering his assessment of them from a few weeks ago: still like a couple of teenagers.

"Well, ya'll are earlier than we expected!" Brenda said with exaggerated brightness as Sharon offered her a hand with which to lever herself off the couch. Her cheeks were flushed faintly, but she didn't show any other outward signs of embarrassment - and that flush could be attributed to more pleasurable things.

Sharon dragged a hand through her hair, but regarded her visitors with apparent calm. "I'm sure I have some decaf in the freezer somewhere," she managed to say with some aplomb, turning towards the kitchen.

Provenza didn't give Willie Rae a chance to bolt or start something with the Chief, hooking her arm through his and half dragging her out of the entryway, following Raydor into the kitchen. That left Flynn holding the cake box, watching the Chief warily, wondering if he was going to be subject to whatever displeasure she felt over being interrupted.

Sure enough, she turned to him, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. "You said two hours at least," she hissed.

"We tried to tell her that we didn't mind paying for the restaurant's coffee, but she insisted!" Andy
countered earnestly, holding the cake box out like a sacrificial offering. Brenda snatched it from him and peeked inside. Cream cheese icing. She fought for control of her face - she wasn't really mad at Flynn (in truth, they could have caught her and Sharon at much, much worse), but she loved making him sweat.

"And you let one little ol' southern lady bully you? Did she swipe the keys to your car or something?"

Andy had no answer, and shrugged, sort of shrinking into himself, his shoulders hunching. How could he tell her that he had a hard time not jumping to when Willie Rae insisted on something because it was practically pavlovian for him to obey a Johnson woman?

"Is she behaving that badly," he asked softly, trying to move the subject away from his failures, though perhaps his choice of topic wasn't the safest.

"She's doin' that guilt-trippy mom pout thing, and it's real annoyin', Lieutenant."

"Did you at least enjoy your," Andy checked his watch, "one hour and thirty-six minutes of alone time?" Brenda didn't answer, merely glared. "Because it looks to me like you did," he continued, trying not to laugh at her incoherent noise of rage. "Seriously, though, your lips are pretty swollen." Brenda's hand flew briefly to her mouth, then flashed out to punch Andy firmly in the shoulder. It stung a bit, but it was totally worth it. She glared at him again, then spun and marched into the other room.

"No cake for you," she pronounced firmly; Andy couldn't tell if she was serious.
Chapter 37

Brenda was aware that it probably reflected poorly on her that she was so excited to be taking her mother to the airport in about 45 minutes, but at the moment, she was past caring. Willie Rae's broody silence was unnerving and unnatural, and if there wasn't going to be some sort of reckoning, Brenda was ready to go back to the comfortable quiet of her daily life with Sharon, and the noise and chaos of police work.

Take this morning for example; after placing a few phone calls to be sure her squad had their marching orders for the immediate future, she and Willie Rae had spent a tense hour not talking, occasionally regarding one another across the kitchen table as Willie Rae read the paper and Brenda futzed around with some photos on Sharon's laptop. She'd had Tao demonstrate the process of transferring photos from phone to computer so many times at this point that she could accomplish the task with confidence. With one eye on her mother, Brenda played with filters and cropped and rotated - some of her adjustments turned out well, and she saved them, but mostly she was trying to keep her hands busy.

When Willie Rae excused herself to shower and pack, Brenda sent the four photos she was proudest of to the printer, including one of Sharon and Lucy stretched out on the living room floor watching movies, and the snap she'd taken of the first flower arrangement she sent Sharon. It was nice to have a photo printer in the house; in the past she'd prevailed upon Buzz to print out the few pictures she wanted to have physical copies of, and it was never many, a few a year. But with her new predilection for taking photos, the easily accessible printer at her new abode was impossible to resist.

Almost meditatively, Brenda trimmed the white edges from the photos, half-aware of the sounds of the showering running upstairs. When she was through, she considered the collage of pictures and mementos on the refrigerator; there was still plenty of room, but she would have to move some things around to fit everything on. Digging through the junk drawer for the double-sided tape, Brenda let herself get carried away with her task.

So absorbed was Brenda that she failed to hear her mother reenter the kitchen.

"Well, that looks nice, Brenda Leigh," Willie Rae said, peering over Brenda's shoulder at the refrigerator. "What are those flowers, there." She pointed at the photo of the flower arrangement that Brenda had position at the center of the collage, the rest of the pictures leading out from it in a tight spiral. Brenda started.

"Mama! Make some noise next time, goodness," she protested, hand flying to her chest in startlement.

"That is a lovely arrangement, Brenda Leigh - look at all that honeysuckle. Did Sharon give those to you?"

Brenda rolled her eyes. "No Mama, I gave them to her a couple of months ago."

Willie Rae blinked at her, then leaned in closer to get a better look at the picture. "I recognize the forsythia and the daffodils, but what are the orange ones?"

Worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, Brenda was unsure if she wanted to answer as she was unsure where this conversation was going. She sighed, giving in. "They're gladioluses, Mama."
"And what is the meaning of the gladiolus?" Willie Rae wanted to know.

Brenda resisted sulkily for a few beats before answering. "It means 'you pierce my heart' and 'sincerity'." Willie Rae was silent for a few long beats, and Brenda was sure she was going to be facing another awkward conversation filled with questions that she didn't want to answer - questions that her mother would really not appreciate the answers to.

"I never knew you were payin' attention when I taught you about flowers, Brenda Leigh."

She turned slightly to favor Willie Rae with a steady look, and shrugged. "I was," she stated simply, not wanting to get into the fact that while in college she had pored over a few books on the subject to find the perfect flowers, and would often spend the little bits of change she accumulated on a single blossom for Neecie. Brenda enjoyed languages, and one that could be a secret between lovers who couldn't express their love openly had been compelling for her, probably for all the wrong reasons. But what had been a tool for teenage romance was now useful as a way to communicate extra meaning to a mature and reserved partner - and more use would come when she was able to openly sign the cards on the arrangements she sent.

Willie Rae caught her up in a hug then, surprising Brenda mightily, but she relaxed into it; her mama was still her mama, after all.

"I love you, Brenda Leigh, and I like your Sharon, so have a little faith in your ol' mama, alright?"

Brenda pulled away a little and looked Willie Rae straight in the eye, and said with some gravity: "Sharon is really important to me, Mama."

"I can see that. You've made a lot of changes in your life, Brenda Leigh, and I just need some time to catch up." Brenda looked as if she was going to protest that statement, and Willie Rae hushed her. "You have, honey. And it's not a bad thing, by any means, but it's a lot to spring on a gal at once."

"I'm sorry you found out about Sharon and me the way you did, Mama. That was never my intention, and I can't help but think that the way you were told is coloring your reaction."

Willie Rae knew that what Brenda said was true, but she didn't want to admit it; she liked to think she didn't let other people's biases affect her own opinions, but when someone she trusted held something in poor regard, it colored her own perceptions. Until a few days ago, she had trusted Fritz Howard, and now Willie Rae wondered how long she should have been regarding him with a bit of suspicion. It was a lesson, she supposed, in her own tendencies, and it shamed her how frequently she misbelieved her own child, and she had an inkling as to why that was, too. Brenda's life wasn't what Willie Rae had pictured for her as a child and as a young woman, but if Brenda continued to insist, quite vehemently, that she was happy, Willie Rae couldn't ignore that; it was time to get over that her expectations hadn't been met, because her daughter was a respected and successful woman.

"I know," Willie Rae admitted a little grudgingly, and Brenda made a sour face in warning. "I just don't like bein' so wrong about people, is all," she quickly reassured, to which Brenda snorted; Willie Rae didn't imagine Brenda liked being wrong about Fritz any more than she did.

"Maybe we should end this conversation on that relatively positive note, Mama," Brenda said after a moment's consideration. "I dunno if you realize this, but it has been a pretty emotionally stressful weekend for me, and I don't wanna get frustrated with you just because my nerves are frayed, ok?"

"Ok, Brenda Leigh," Willie Rae agreed, "but there's one more thing we need to address: your
"I know, Mama," Brenda whined, but it was only a little whine. "What do you think I should do?"

"Well, you know how he is with Frank, honey. He treats him with respect and like family, but he never acknowledges what Frank is to your brother. I think he used to need that little bit 'a fiction, but at this point he just doesn't know how to apologize or change things, you know?"

"Yea, I do know Daddy," grumbled Brenda under her breath, and Willie Rae gave her an arch look that spoke volumes. "So what should I do?" she asked, ignoring her mother's expression - she figured she was due a little bit of sarcasm.

"Why don't you let me work on him for a couple weeks; you should send all a' those pictures you have of you and Sharon, especially with the kids, and I'll make is so's he can't turn around without seein' the two of you enjoyin' yourselves, and then in a few weeks you can call him and continue the process, and he'll already be used to the idea."

Brenda gaped momentarily, then recovered her wits enough to say: "Mama, you don't need to do that, and isn't talking to daddy something I should be doin' for myself?"

"I want to do it, Brenda Leigh. And like you said, reactions can be dependent on the tellin', so let me work on your Daddy," she stated with finality. "Now let's sit and pick out those pictures before we have to leave for the airport."
The Friday after her mother's surprise visit was the first time that Brenda was able to stop for a breather that entire, hellish week. An inexperienced and new-to-homicides DDA had made a rotten mess of things in Andrea Hobbs' absence, and her entire Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday had been spent attempting to remedy a situation that had been, even with Sharon's legal advice and timely intervention with the District Attorney's office, completely unfixable. Who knew that a young, completely cowed DDA blurting to a belligerent defense attorney that they did not, in fact, have any physical evidence would completely shut down a murder investigation and leave them with only penny ante drug charges with which to punish a probable murderer. It was completely unconscionable, and yet sitting across the table from an insufferably smug, but lamentably silent, pseudo-celebrity and his even more smug attorney, Brenda felt a kind of calm; this wasn't a failure that was on her head or because of her people or her poor management or anything else. The DA's office had dug this hole, and they could deal with the fallout, press included. She supposed her reaction was the result of the new outlook she had been actively cultivating after the Goldman fiasco; if she was going to slide back into her old ways, this case would have given her ample opportunity. And yet, she wasn't even tempted to visit justice upon this man. That had made her a little smug. So many people thought her incapable of change, but here she was. And she might be physically and mentally exhausted, but she wasn't emotionally overwrought and plotting.

Tomorrow might be another story on that front, as she was attending a fundraising dinner for the shelter Sharon volunteered for. It would be their first time out as a couple in L.A., and Brenda wasn't so nervous about that as she was nervous about hobnobbing it with people that were important to the finances of Sharon's shelter and making a good impression as Sharon's partner. If Pope found out about her relationship with Sharon through some gossip column, so be it, but she was very worried that one of the shelter's donors would turn out to be someone she had pissed off in the course of one of her investigations and that some sort of confrontation would ensue. Sharon had (very sweetly) told Brenda that she shouldn't let it weigh on her mind, but come tomorrow, she'd probably be a bundle of nerves, regardless.

After the excruciating week they'd had, Brenda let her squad go early, and no one had lingered, so Brenda was home alone on a Friday afternoon, putting some chicken and mushrooms in marinade for Sharon, and she figured 30 minutes in the hot tub after she finished the food prep would cure some of what ailed her.

When Sharon stepped out onto the porch, she thought Brenda asleep, she was so still, but Brenda turned at the sound of footsteps on the flagstones.

"I think I lost track of time," she said sheepishly by way of greeting.

"That's alright, honey," Sharon soothed, crouching down next to the hot tub, then swinging her legs around, sliding them in the water next to Brenda. The heat felt amazing on her abused feet. Brenda popped briefly out of the water (she hadn't bothered with a suit, and why should she when they had no company), stretching up for a kiss; a thorough kiss, not at all perfunctory, beginning with the lips, progressing with a quick swipe of her tongue, and ending with her teeth pulling gently at Sharon's lower lip as she pulled away and sank back into the water. Instead of leaning back against the tub, Brenda pushed Sharon's skirt up a bit so she could rest her head on Sharon's thigh.

"Do you need me to come help with dinner?"

"It's all cooking - we have 25 minutes."
"Hmmm," Brenda acknowledged, her fingers tracing patterns on Sharon's calves beneath the surface of the water. "Thank you for all your help this week, Shari. I dunno what I woulda done without you. Well, maybe I woulda hogtied that idiot DDA and had some unis dump him on the DA's doorstep, but your way was better."

Sharon chuckled and caressed the slightly damp blonde head. She was surprised that Brenda was so relaxed about the way her case had turned out, and not fretting that a man who'd murdered a so-called friend and then rather successfully covered it up had ended up only being charged with something that would get him probation and some community service.

"I'm glad I could at least get DDA Malone out of your murder room and out of the building. Make sure you follow up with the bureau director about your concerns - we don't want to foist him off on any other undeserving investigations."

"Heck no," Brenda agreed. "How'd he survive in white collar, anyways, if one defense attorney rattled him so bad?"

"Maybe he's an accountant or something," surmised Sharon. "But who knows how he ended up in the pool to cover violent felonies."

Brenda made a noise of commiserating agreement, then fell silent, apparently no longer interested in speculating about terrible lawyers. Her fingers were still tracing lazily over Sharon's legs, now above the surface of the water, leaving wet trails that cooled rapidly in the night air, causing Sharon to shiver - from the little chill and from arousal. It had been a week since they had had the privacy or the energy to make love, and Sharon was feeling the lack. She'd bet that Brenda was too.

After a few more minutes of silent, teasing caresses confined to just her legs, Sharon's hips shifted forward almost of their own accord. Brenda looked up at her then, her eyes lidded with want. "Can I?" She asked in a low voice, dropping a kiss on Sharon's thigh for punctuation. Sharon nodded, not really knowing what she was saying yes to, but absolutely willing. Brenda slid off her seat and repositioned herself in front of Sharon, surging up out of the water for more intent kisses orchestrated by Brenda to further enflame Sharon's desire, to catch the other woman up to her own state of need. And Brenda knew exactly what Sharon liked most in kisses; tender, teasing, sparing with the tongue, punctuated by occasional forays along her jaw to her sensitive ears. Brenda made judicious use of all her knowledge, then with a final, slightly sloppy, passionate kiss, pulled away.

"Lean back against my robe," directed Brenda, and through the fog of her arousal, Sharon understood what Brenda was asking and curled herself back to rest her elbows on the plush pile of terrycloth, then lifted her hips to bunch her skirt up around her waist. Brenda's wet fingers were immediately scrabbling at the waistband of panties, and she spared a brief hope that they would not be discolored by the chemicals in the hot tub's water, but really, it would be no big loss.

Sharon felt a little odd, still in her brown wool gabardine skirt suit, half-lying on the slate decking with her nethers exposed, but mostly she just wanted whatever Brenda was going to give her; probably her mouth, from the way Brenda was licking her lips. Brenda leaned in slowly, hands still stroking Sharon's legs as she placed kisses along thighs that were tensed with anticipation.

Brenda's nose nuzzled into the thatch of hair between Sharon's legs, and Brenda made a pleased little noise in her throat, and Brenda coiled one arm around Sharon's thigh and reached up with the other to grasp Sharon's hand, and then finally, with the tip of her tongue, Brenda left a ghostly touch along Sharon's clit. Sharon explosively exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, and her head dropped back a moment between her shoulder blades.
"Oh, god," she gasped, the tension in her thighs giving way to a burst of fiery pleasure between her legs as she let herself relax into what was happening. "Brenda Leigh."

Brenda moaned in response and squeezed Sharon's hand, focusing on that point of contact and the others that this position afforded them. Later, she would need to feel all of Sharon beneath her, or maybe on top of her - it didn't really matter, so long as she could touch as much of that soft skin as possible - but for now, this would have to do. How had she done without this for a week? Chaste kisses and bed time cuddling were not enough to satisfy her need to be close to Sharon, and certainly not enough to show Sharon precisely how crazy Brenda was about her.

Unbidden, Brenda's hand left Sharon's and dropped between her own legs, seeking out her clitoris. It wasn't with any finesse that she touched herself as she concentrated on pleasing Sharon with her mouth, closing her eyes and dipping her tongue as deep into the other woman as she could manage and groaning at the texture and taste and the smell of Sharon overwhelming her senses completely.

At the loss of Brenda's grip, Sharon craned her neck a little to determine what the blonde was up to - she chuckled (though maybe it was more of a whimper) at the sight of that forearm disappearing beneath the surface of the water; she knew exactly what Brenda was doing.

When Brenda focused her attentions on Sharon's clit, Sharon had to clamp her jaw shut to muffle the cry that surged from her lungs and nearly slipped past her lips. She grunted, clenching her teeth to keep herself quiet in the still, winter evening; her blood was singing, every muscle poised on the edge of what was going to be a spectacular orgasm. Sharon wasn't sure if it was Brenda sucking her clit into her mouth that set her off, or the pleased little hum she made as she did it, but she came, her hips bucking against the tether of Brenda's confining arm, her eyes slamming shut and her mouth dropping open despite her efforts to keep it closed, and her ass coming back down on the pavers with a slap of flesh. Brenda continued to hum, teasing Sharon through aftershocks as her muscles strained and shook.

White-hot pleasure gave way to languid relaxation, but Brenda remained between Sharon's legs, and Sharon fought off her stupor to lift herself a little more on her elbows in order to get a better look at what Brenda was doing. The blonde's eyes were closed, her face was contorted with a mask of arousal and concentration, and she was still apparently lost in Sharon, which was terribly hot, and terribly good for Sharon's ego, and though Sharon was more than happy to let Brenda bring herself off, she wanted a better view when it happened.

"Lemme see, gorgeous," she husked, her voice sounding deep in her own ears, like trying to hold back her shouts had altered her vocal cords in some way. "I need to see you come, Brenda Leigh."

Brenda moaned and took a last lungful of Sharon's scent, straightening slowly and uncurling her arm from around Sharon's hip as if it pained her to do so. Standing in the deeper part of the tub, with one leg on the bench, Brenda thrust her hips forward proudly and continued her self-pleasure, eyes locked on Sharon's, free hand sliding up to cup one flushed, lush breast.

Sharon couldn't resist; she levered herself into a sitting position and reached out, smoothing her hands down the damp skin of Brenda's abdomen, and then skimmed back up her ribs, cupping the breast that Brenda wasn't working on, then rotating her wrist to pinch the nipple that pushed so insistently into her palm. She gave it a tug, stretching and twisting gently; Brenda hissed in delight, and it was all Sharon could do to keep herself from pulling the other woman from the water and having her, noisily and vigorously, on the slate pool deck. Leaning in, she nudged Brenda's hand away, and let her lips ghost over the puckered flesh of Brenda's areola; it tightened even further under the barest application of her tongue, and when Sharon finally took the nipple in her mouth, giving it a firm pull as if she was sucking something off the tip of her finger, Brenda groaned, her
now unoccupied hand threading through Sharon's hair and tangling there, tugging at the thick mass encouragingly.

At the edge of her vision, Sharon could see the furious, minute movements of Brenda's wrist and the hand between her legs.

"Come for me, Brenda Leigh," she purred around a mouthful of breast. "Come for me now, and later, I'm going to lay you down on our bed and fuck you till you can't see straight." Then she turned her head and carefully applied her molars to the nipple her lips and tongue had teased, bearing down on the plump, slick little bud.

Brenda whimpered at Sharon's words, and then whined almost painfully at the sensation of Sharon's teeth. And then she stiffened, and Sharon could feel the muscles of her abdomen straining against her orgasm, making her tremble. "Oh," Brenda gasped. "Oh, Shari."

Brenda was sure that Sharon's hands on her hips were the only things keeping her upright after that orgasm (that she had desperately needed, as she found the tension of the awful, terrible week had vanished as if it had never been).

"I needed that," she admitted in a low voice, feeling a little shy about vocalizing such thoughts, and unsure if she meant her own orgasm or pleasuring Sharon, or both. Probably both. She had a hard time expressing in words how much she needed Sharon physically - it usually ended up sounding tawdry and shallow even in her own mind, but maybe she should try; maybe it would make it easier to handle a week of no love making.

"Me too."

"Did you mean what you said about later?"

"Absolutely," Sharon purred, though it was almost a growl, and Brenda shivered a little.

"Then we'd better eat now, cuz once we get in bed, we're not gettin' out."
Chapter 39

Brenda flopped down onto the couch with a contented sigh. It had been a wonderful morning, and she was sure that the grin on her face was ridiculous, edging towards dopey. It had been one of those rare occasions that Brenda crawled into wakefulness before Sharon, who had decided that she didn't want to wake up to an alarm. So Brenda had gotten to spend a while holding the sleeping woman, after ever so changing adjusting their positions, before waking Sharon slowly with gentle kisses, while murmuring things that were sometimes hard to say in the harsh light of daytime, when the full force of Sharon's formidable mind would be focused on her. When they were both half-awake, though, it was easy to whisper something like 'you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met' or 'I never, ever want to be without you' and know that Sharon would believe and wouldn't judge.

Yes, the morning had been a wonderful culmination to the previous night's lovemaking; Brenda shivered in remembered delight thinking about how passionate Sharon had been, and how she had done exactly as promised, using three fingers, and then four fingers to bring Brenda to orgasm. The slight burn and stretch of herself around Sharon's fingers had been indescribable and electric. She wondered if other almost-fifty year olds had almost-sixty year old lovers who could make them come until they nearly passed out.

Wriggling into a comfortable position on the sofa, Brenda reached for the television remote. She had stripped the bed and started a load of laundry, and while Sharon was getting in her swim (a little later than usual), Brenda was going to enjoy a little "House Hunters" or maybe some Animal Planet.

She was scrolling through the programming guide when her phone rang. It wasn't work; she'd changed all her ringtones to something particularly obnoxious to alert her when business was calling. The screen of the device was lit up with a ridiculous picture of her youngest brother Jimmy's face. She rolled her eyes; she didn't know when Willie Rae had talked to Jimmy, so she had no idea what he'd heard.

It was a surprise when Brenda swiped across the screen to answer the call, and Jimmy's face remained, still smiling, but now mobile, and waving at her.

"Hey, Jimmy," Brenda greeted indulgently. He rolled his eyes at her.

"Oh, can the 'tude, missy. I'm vexed with you! Lettin' me hear from Mama that you've hopped the proverbial fence."

Brenda's eyes narrowed at his choice in verbiage, and because he had chosen to video call, Jimmy couldn't feign ignorance and bull his way through her displeasure.

"Sorry," he mumbled; she was his big sister, after all, and she had a mean right hook when she was pissed. "I just…why didn't you say something? You had to know I would understand."

"Yes, Jimmy, I know you would understand," Brenda said huffily. "That's why I didn't worry about telling you, and concentrated on my relationship and on Mama and how this could effect my job."

"Your job? How would dating a woman have any bearing on your job?"

Brenda blushed a little; she wasn't embarrassed that Sharon also worked for the LAPD, but the fact that her ex-boyfriend was ultimately responsible for their employment was a little awkward.
"Sharon's a cop, too."

"Oh, Brenda Leigh, sister mine, did you fall for a detective?"

"Hardly!" scoffed Brenda. "She was a Captain. Now she's a Deputy Chief."

"Oh, well then," he lightly mocked, then he grinned wickedly. "If you're both Chief, who gets to be Chief in bed?"

"Jimmy!" Brenda squealed, blushing fully now. Jimmy had never been shy about sex, and had been teasing Brenda since the two of them could talk, so it was only natural that he would tease her about sex. And Brenda would sputter and spit, then she would rally and get back some of her own. It was one of Jimmy's favorite past-times, and as much as Brenda protested, it was one of hers, too.

She narrowed her eyes at him as he giggled, and when he quieted down, she said: "Unless you want to talk about who is chief in YOUR bed, then you best hush up. And if you do, I'll tell Frank, so it's a lose lose situation for you, Jimmy-boy."

"You don't play fair. It's not like I can tattle on you to your lady yet."

"You could try, she'd just give you the ol' eyebrow and a smirk."

"A smirk?" Jimmy asked, trying his best smirk as if to say he was unimpressed.

"Doesn't even compare, Jimmy. Sharon can say volumes with a simple lift of her brow and quirk of her lips. You just look constipated."

"And you sound smitten, sister mine."

Brenda blushed, because it was true and she wasn't going to protest the fact that she adored her fiancé. Instead she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Who's constipated?" asked Sharon, entering the living room from the kitchen. She was wearing her thick terry-cloth robe; belted loosely enough that Brenda could see she'd taken her suit off, probably in the laundry room. Flushed from her swim and with her hair wild after being trapped in a swim cap, she looked gorgeous.

"Oh, just Jimmy," quipped Brenda lightly while flashing Jimmy her most shit-eating grin. "But that's fairly usual for him."

"Brenda!" Jimmy protested loudly, his voice blasting from the tiny speakers on her phone. Brenda grinned wider and Sharon chuckled, sitting down next to Brenda on the couch, tucking her feet up under her and leaning in to Brenda.

"Are you playing nicely with your brother, Brenda Leigh?" she husked.

"No, she isn't!" squawked Jimmy. "She's being dreadful. Hello, I'm Jimmy, and aren't you just pretty as can be?"

It was Brenda's turn to squawk in outrage, and Jimmy grinned at both of them.

Ever polite, Sharon ignored her significant other's scowling and introduced herself. "Nice to meet you, Jimmy. I'm Sharon."

Brenda found her voice and said threateningly; "Don't make me tell Frankie that you've got your eyes on my lady."
Jimmy's eyes lit up, and he turned his head to speak loudly into the apartment behind him. "Frankie, come meet Sharon and help me pick on Brenda."

Sharon patted Brenda's thigh placatingly when the little blonde growled at the phone, then threaded her fingers through the fingers of Brenda's free hand. The playfulness between Brenda and her brother was fairly adorable; Brenda needed more people regularly in her life that she could be playful with. Feeling fond, she placed a delicate kiss on Brenda's flushed cheekbone. Jimmy was smirking when her gaze returned to the phone, and there was a dark haired man also smirking behind him.

"Awwwww," they said in concert. Brenda flushed even more, and Sharon favored the two men with a lift of her eyebrow.

"Oh, ouch," exclaimed Jimmy. "Brenda said you were good with that eyebrow. Lethal is more like it."

Sharon quirked her lips, pleased that her skills were getting proper acknowledgement.

"Isn't she hot, Frankie?" Jimmy prodded his partner, wanting his opinion validated because it would annoy Brenda, and because it was helping him take measure of Sharon's personality. She already seemed to have more of a sense of humor than Fritz had ever shown. Jimmy had been of the opinion that Fritz was much too boring and conventional for his quirky, independent and opinionated sister, but Brenda had been the only person in his family who had supported him without reservation when he was dealing with his sexuality, so Jimmy felt he could put up with as many pedestrian, unsuitable or just plain terrible love interests as she could throw at them. He already had high hopes for this one - what with dealing with an unscheduled Willie Rae visit, and the completely besotted looks on both of their faces.

Frankie made a noise that sounded affirmative, and Jimmy was pleased. He was pleased even more by Brenda's exhortation to 'stop ogling her fiancé', at which point rings were demanded and produced, and Frank and Jimmy exclaimed over them, and pleasant conversation was had for a few more minutes.

"I need to start lunch," Sharon murmured into Brenda's ear.

"Chicken salad?" asked Brenda excitedly.

"I told you I would make you chicken salad, Brenda Leigh," admonished Sharon fondly. She didn't know why Brenda liked her chicken salad so much, but the other woman would eat it with two forks straight from the refrigerator if she wasn't watched closely. "It was nice to meet you, Jimmy, and Frank."

"You, too, Sharon," they chorused.

"You and Brenda will have to come visit sometime soon," Jimmy continued.

"I'd like that," Sharon husked with a small smile. "We'll even stay in a hotel."

"Hey! We have a pull-out couch!" protested Jimmy. Brenda rolled her eyes. Jimmy hated having overnight guests in their loft apartment.

Sharon hummed in amusement. "I'm a bona fide member of the AARP, gentlemen. My old bones don't handle sleeper sofas very well, but I appreciate the generosity, nonetheless." She smiled again and rose, heading up the stairs to change out of her robe.
Brenda watched her go; she couldn't help it, coveting Sharon and her cooking was a tough cross to bear.

"Wow," was all Jimmy had to offer when Brenda turned her attention back to the phone.

"Yea," Brenda sighed a bit dreamily.

"Well, she's gorgeous and has a sense of humor. And she cooks. Tell me the other ways in which Sharon is the perfect woman."

"She volunteers at a shelter for victims of domestic violence in her free time. Every single one of her cousins adores her - they all call her 'Aunt Sharon'. She doesn't just cook, she's a fantastic cook and keeps a wonderful stock of wine. And she really gets me and respects what I do in a way that I've never encountered before. Oh, and she has better hair than anyone I've ever met, movie stars included."

Jimmy and Frank both laughed and agreed. Citing her need to help Sharon in the kitchen, Brenda signed off with a wave and a promise to call again at Christmas.
Chapter 40

When Sharon stepped into the kitchen, dressed and ready to leave for their function, she found Brenda Leigh, also dressed (in the blue and gold cocktail dress Sharon had given her), hair perfectly coiffed, hunched over the counter, eating chicken salad straight from the container. At least she was using a fork and not her fingers.

"Brenda, are you stress eating right now? Because you cannot possibly be hungry after the lunch that I fed you."

Brenda turned her head and favored Sharon with a look that was equal parts guilty and terrified. There was a smear of mayo on her upper lip. She was adorable.

"You look really pretty," the blonde mumbled around a mouthful of chicken, apple and grape. Sharon's dress was black, silk, and sleeveless; thick straps made a square neckline that showed off a hint of cleavage. A black velvet waistband emphasized the narrowness of Sharon's waist. Her hair was sleek tonight and pulled back from the crown with a bit of 'poof'. A slinky gold necklace dangled between her breasts, drawing the eye down. Brenda swallowed, the delicious chicken salad in her mouth suddenly dry and tasteless.

"C'mere," Sharon husked, stepping over the Brenda, and using a gentle thumb to wipe the mayo off her mouth. "You look gorgeous as always, and you have nothing to worry about, honey. Most of these people are long-term benefactors that the shelter has been working with for years and treat this party as a chance to catch up with fellow donors and the people who work at the shelter. It's very light-hearted and fun and I promise that everything will be ok."

"I don't wanna embarrass you," Brenda whined rather pitifully, her lower lip trembling minutely.

"Brenda, honey, you aren't going to embarrass me, and I'm going to show your pretty self off to all the donors, and we're going to have a good time."

Brenda flushed and tilted her head away coyly.

"And the food is usually excellent, so you might not want to fill up on chicken salad."

"It's excellent chicken salad," Brenda countered, but she put the fork in the sink and snapped the lid of the Tupperware container into place.

"I'm still nervous though," she said with a sidelong glance at Sharon, before moving to put the container back into the fridge.

"Nervous is better than stress eating. Open bar when we get there, or do you want a whiskey before we leave?" Sharon asked, knowing that a little bit of liquid courage went a long way for Brenda's self-confidence problems, allowing her to chat freely without second guessing her every word.

"Will you pour me a shot while I go make sure I don't have food in my teeth?"

"A whiskey for the lady," Sharon teased, reaching into the cabinet above her head for a shot glass. Brenda had spent so many years second-guessing herself in social situations that her anxiety was probably to be expected, though Sharon didn't really know the origins of that anxiety. Her parents? Past partners? A Brenda Leigh Johnson quirk? Brenda deserved to be confident in all areas of her life, and Sharon rather enjoyed being her personal cheerleader - and not only for the fringe benefits, which in this case would be a few whiskey-flavored kisses that Sharon would steal before they got
in the car to leave.

Brenda walked into the lobby of the hotel on Sharon's arm. It was a smallish, older place, but lovingly refurbished with a nod towards old Hollywood glamour. It was owned by one of the shelter's patrons, who had donated venue and staff for the evening’s festivities. Sharon led them past the check-in desk towards a wall of French doors, two of which were open wide.

The space beyond the doors wasn't huge; tables dotted the room with seating for maybe 50, and along one wall more French doors opened onto a terrace. Groups of well-dressed people were already chatting in knots among the tables, and two women in two separate groups waved welcomingly at Sharon the second they stepped through the door.

"Why don't you go say hello to your friends, and I'll get us a drink," Brenda offered. Sharon took Brenda's clutch and gave her one of those luminous smiles that had the ability to stop her heart. "Scotch on the rocks?"

"Yes, please," Sharon answered in a quiet purr. "Lagavulin, if they have it."

As Brenda sauntered off towards the bar, Sharon joined the group of people that contained Anne, her friend and ally on the shelter's board of directors.

Anne greeted her with ebullience and not a little sarcasm. "God, you look amazing. As usual. I wish you had the grace to be a terrible person, then I could hate you for it."

Sharon hummed in acknowledgment of her silliness, and gave a genuine compliment in return: "I love that color on you; it really makes your hair pop." The light plum color of Anne's dress made her silver bob gleam in the three-quarter lighting of the dining room.

"You sure know how to compliment a woman, Sharon Raydor. Better not let Jerry hear you talking like that - he'll get the wrong idea."

"Get the wrong idea about what?" Jerry asked from a few feet away. Anne liked to pretend that Jerry was hapless, and Jerry liked to let her - really he was an utterly incisive therapist.

"Go back to talking Lakers stats, Jerry," Anne teased, with a roll of her eyes for Sharon's benefit. Jerry nodded a greeting to Sharon and went back to his discussion.

"So the blonde you walked in with? Is that the future Mrs. Sharon Raydor?"

Sharon blushed at the glib remark - she hadn't yet told anyone from the shelter that she'd proposed to Brenda.

"You didn't!"

"I did," said Sharon with a self-satisfied smirk. "Be gentle, please. She's nervous."

"I'm always gentle," huffed Anne. "And maybe she should be nervous; she's already got jealous-Denise sniffing around."

Sharon shot her an arch look. "Don't even joke about that. She's on a short leash tonight, right?"

"Under threat of termination if she causes a scene. We can't ban her from talking to you, but if she's inappropriate, let me know."

Sharon pursed her lips, but nodded. If Denise continued to act irrationally, she couldn't get
involved. Sharon's shock and bewilderment and hurt had seemed to only incense Denise more the last time they had interacted. She was relieved that Brenda's hand on her shoulder and the press of a cut crystal glass into her palm necessitated a change of subject.

Brenda got the sense that she was being watched practically the moment they sat down with their plates. She had managed to hide her unreasonable excitement at the quantity and quality of food on the buffet. It was a struggle, though. Sharon might find her unreasonable obsession with comestibles cute, but these people probably would not.

Sharon hadn't loaded up her plate in the same way Brenda had, but the amount of food she had taken said she expected the meal to be a good one. Conversation at their table of Sharon's colleagues and a few donors fell off as everyone ate. Brenda had found it fairly easy to participate in a conversation that had essentially been shelter shoptalk - it wasn't exactly a cheery subject, but it was in Brenda's wheelhouse. But now there was silence as everyone tucked in.

A shiver skittered down Brenda's spine as she delicately cut the meat off skewer of mustard glazed chicken and tiny, bead-like pearl onions. She stiffened, but didn't whip her head around. Sharon leaned in, and asked quietly: "What's the matter?"

"Nothin'," Brenda demurred. "Just a chill."

Sharon gave her a knowing look and a touch on the forearm with her free hand, then speared a potato and turned her attention back to her plate.

Returning from the bar with a scotch-laced coffee for Sharon and a sparkling cider for herself (she'd decided that she was going to drive them home so Sharon could enjoy the excellent open bar), Brenda felt the eyes following her again. It was probably Denise; Sharon had said she'd be here, but Brenda had been focused on their dinner companions and not scanning the room for the troublemaker.

Sharon had separated from the group and was talking to a man a short distance away from the table where they had eaten. Her body language had changed and she was absolutely rigid, shoulders squared, with none of the languid, tipsy ease that two scotches had engendered in her.

Brenda didn't know what was going on or who the man was, but Sharon looked incredibly uncomfortable, so she had no compunctions about interrupting whatever conversation was going on. When the gentleman made like he was going to grab Sharon's hand, and Sharon pulled it back out of her reach, Brenda increased her pace and, depositing her own glass on a convenient table, stepping into place next to Sharon.

"I got your coffee, baby. Decaf, with a shot of whiskey," she said, handing the mug to her lover, who took it and settled gratefully against her. Brenda was now confident she had done the right thing by interrupting. She plastered a broad, slightly vacant smile on her face and turned her attention to the gentleman who was regarding her with poorly disguised dislike. "Hi, I'm Brenda," she drawled cheerily.

"We were having a private conversation," he declared patronizingly, shifting in his ill-fitting (though expensive) suit, literally looking down his too long nose at her.

Brenda gave him a smile that said she saw through his crap. "I dunno, looked to me like you're makin' the lady uncomfortable." She pointedly slid a hand into the small of Sharon's back, to stake a claim, as well as to dispel some of the tension that Sharon was carrying there.

Glaring briefly at Brenda, the man turned his attention back to Sharon, apparently hell-bent on
having his say, regardless of Brenda's presence.

"I was misled, then? You let me believe that we could continue our relationship even after I make a contribution to the shelter."

"Our professional relationship. You misled yourself, Richard, by assuming that my interest in your business and philanthropic activities was more than what it was."

"But we spent hours together!"

"We spent hours together setting up a trust to support two paid positions at the shelter. If that's your idea of romantic…"

"All those meals you were happy to share? And the wine we drank? That wasn't romance?"

Sharon reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose, then huffed a sigh. Apparently she'd seriously miscalculated Richard's interests. She had enjoyed the challenge of setting up a trust and investment portfolio that could support two of the shelter's full-time employees, and had thought Richard was similarly engaged. If his only interest was in her, it could undo all of that hard work and put the shelter in tenuous financial straits until additional donations could be secured.

"I misunderstood those gestures - I didn't read anything in to it, beyond being grateful that you had good taste in restaurants and vintages."

"You never said anything about," his gaze shifted to Brenda and flicked over her from top to toe, "being with someone - a woman. Or not being interested in…" He trailed off, and Brenda wasn't sure if he was going to say 'men' or 'me'.

"It is not my responsibility to definitively take myself off the market for every single man that I interact with in order to avoid hurt feelings or misunderstandings," said Sharon in her icy, 'Captain Raydor' voice. "If you had been open regarding your intentions just once, there would have been no misunderstanding."

"Most women understand what's going on when a man spends hundreds of dollars on a meal, and more than once."

Sharon drew herself up even more; Brenda could feel the tension return to the muscles under her hand on Sharon's back. It was often easy to forget the sheer privilege of Sharon's upbringing, and just how much social cachet she and her family possessed in this world, because Sharon didn't wear it openly or rely on it for her success. But the look she gave this Richard fellow just then was rife with it; haughty, cool and very aware of just how beautiful she was and just how much she had to offer. It made a very clear statement: 'I am NOT most women'.

Brenda almost laughed at the look on Richard the dick's face - it was impossible not to feel emasculated with Sharon Raydor in full-on bitch mode staring you down. Brenda was immune at their point their relationship, or at least she liked to think so. She didn't know what she would do if Sharon's ire was directed at her. Right now, she was feeling pangs of arousal that had become familiar years ago, when she and Sharon would clash on a regular basis.

Deciding to add insult to injury, Brenda gave the man a simpering little smile, fluttering her eyelashes a little for added effect. He very nearly snarled at them; Brenda knew that these master-of-the-universe types were used to getting everything they wanted, milquetoast or not. He turned on his heel and stalked away, out of the dining room.

Brenda didn't say anything after he had gone; no quips, no giggles, rubbing Sharon's back in small,
hopefully soothing, circles. She knew that Sharon didn't enjoy putting on her bitch face, not like Brenda enjoyed it, and definitely not in situations like this.

Finally, the other woman sighed, then took a long draught of her coffee.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," she murmured, apparently unable to meet Brenda's gaze, her eyes darting around the room, maybe trying to ascertain if anyone had realized what was going on.

"Sharon, baby," Brenda murmured, taking in the profile she adored so much; the blunt little nose, strong chin and jaw line, lips pressed together in a worried line, sculpted cheekbones, and the beautiful green eyes that were obscured by Sharon's glasses. "Sharon, look at me, please."

Sharon looked guilty; feeling too responsible for other people's actions was a Sharon Raydor hallmark. Brenda hoped she could help with that a little, at least in this situation.

"Sharon, you have no reason to apologize. I'm sorry that jerk thought he was entitled to you in some way and put you on the spot in front of all these people. Don't let him make you feel guilty for something that was his fault entirely, ok?"

"I'll try," Sharon conceded. "Rome can't be razed in a day," she joked, turning the traditional idiom on its ear to tell Brenda that her emotional habits were deeply ingrained.

"I love you," Brenda chirped with a naughty smile, her hand slipping down onto the curve of Sharon's ass. "And you're gorgeous when you're angry, you know that?"

Sharon laughed at that. "You're terrible!" she exclaimed.

"I do try," drawled Brenda with a saucy wink for the woman she loved. "I do try."

Forty-five minutes of chatting amiably with her friends left Sharon feeling better, full of slightly tipsy well-being and distinctly grateful to Brenda Leigh, who, despite her own discomfort and nervousness, had guided the conversation and told ridiculous stories about her team and their antics to keep Sharon comfortably not in the center of attention. She had thoroughly charmed everyone who had wandered over to listen to her hold forth on the lighter side of Los Angeles law enforcement.

Leaving Brenda with a deep kiss, definitely not caring if anyone witnessed it, Sharon had excused herself to use the restroom before they left, practically strutting into the lobby's bathroom, knowing Brenda's eyes would be on her, enjoying the exaggerated swish of her hips and flex of her calves.

She was washing her hands when Denise stepped out of the small sitting area that was practically mandatory in fancy hotel bathrooms. Sharon wasn't a believer, and she hadn't been for a long, long time, but at that moment, she was cursing all the deities she could think of.

Flicking the excess water off her fingers, she met Denise's eye in the mirror, refusing to engage.

"So you're fighting with donors now? You never used to do that. Are you really going to let this woman ruin the life you've built for yourself? Throw away the respect and admiration of our community for a woman that doesn't fit here? Is the shelter going to suffer because the two of you chased away an investor?"

Sharon turned and regarded the woman that three months ago, Sharon would have called one of her closest friends.

"First of all," Sharon began coolly, because now she was going to say her piece, "you deal with the
shelter's clients, not its finances, and you really have no idea what that entails. Maybe you need to spend more time thinking about the clients and less time thinking about how I interact with donors. Secondly, my obligation to financial donors ends when they begin thinking a romantic relationship is an entitlement of our business relationship."

"You would have handled that differently in the past," Denise insisted, interrupting Sharon. "You can't tell me that little Miss Brenda Leigh staking her claim didn't enflame the situation."

Sharon was fairly certain that Brenda Leigh's presence was the only thing that had kept her from popping Richard the entitled dick in his weak jaw.

"Finally," Sharon continued, ignoring Denise's interruption, "no matter what you keep telling yourself about my relationship with Brenda, there was nothing, NOTHING," she spat vehemently, "untoward about how it started, and I have no doubts that her feelings for me are genuine."

Denise's nostrils flared at that last statement, and Sharon found herself wondering how she had been so wrong about this woman for so long - nearly ten years, and she didn't know Denise at all.

"I don't understand what you want from me, Denise. Should I remain single to prevent any potential misunderstandings with donors? To allow you your fantasies of me as available, and eternally out of reach? Should I prostitute myself out to donors to keep their grudging support if all they want is an inroads to my personal time?"

She sighed, closing her eyes and leaning back against the granite counter top, and pinched the bridge of her nose against the headache that was building there.

"I don't understand what you want from me," she repeated, and all of a sudden, she was being kissed, her hand pushed away from her eyes, and lips moving insistently against her own. Her eyes shot open, her hands moved of their own accord, grasping Denise by the shoulders to prise her away, then slapping her across the cheek, the sound echoing in the stark stone of the bathroom.

"What is wrong with you," she hissed. Denise was clutching her cheek and glaring at her indignantly. "How could you even think that would be welcome?"

"You were talking about Brenda's feelings, not your feelings!"

"I love Brenda. I asked her to be my wife and I intend to spend the rest of my life with her. You are a married woman, and if you knew anything about me at all, you would know that I take those vows very seriously, and I would never, not ever, interfere with someone else's relationship. Clearly, and you've demonstrated this amply, you have no respect for my relationship, or even the friendship we once had."

With that, Sharon brushed past her and left, walking out the door, out of the hotel, and sliding into the car that Brenda had thoughtfully pulled around for her.
Sharon agonized over the situation with Denise for days. She felt guilty about being kissed, despite Brenda's repeated protests that the blame for that little incident rested squarely on Denise's shoulders. "You aren't responsible for her behavior, baby," she had said, more than once, and Sharon mostly believed her, but she couldn't shake her guilt over that, and over Denise's decline into irrationality, and over not knowing how Lynn was faring because she had no idea what Denise had told her, or how to approach Lynne with her concern. She expected a conflict with every phone call and every knock at her door, but it never came. At least Richard the dick hadn't withdrawn his support from the shelter.

She brooded a little, mostly in the quiet moments in her office when her work failed to hold all of her attention, but between Brenda's natural, joyful monopoly of her attention and finishing off her Christmas shopping, she didn't have much time to dwell outside of the office, which was probably for the best.

The desire to brood fell away as her excitement for Jackson and Ginny's impending visit ramped up. A little after noon on Friday, she received a text letting her know that they were at the house, and Sharon was officially useless, ping-ponging around her office and occasionally down the hall to the break room on the administrative floor. She gave up at 3:30 and bid a quiet good-bye to her suite-mates.

Stopping by the Major Crimes squad room on her way out of the building was a necessity. It was a three ring circus, and Brenda Leigh was the tiny, bossy ring-master; she looked like she was having a blast. She smiled when she saw Sharon near the door, and gestured her over.

"Cuttin' out already?" Brenda asked impishly when Sharon was within earshot. Sharon nodded, a little sheepish, but smiling.

"I'm not getting anything done," she admitted. Brenda smiled at her; Sharon's excitement about Jackson's visit was adorable. For her part, Brenda had had enough of being nervous, and the rest of Sharon's family had been lovely, so she was mostly just excited for Christmas; trusting Sharon's assurances that Jackson was fully prepared to adore her. She thought that maybe Sharon was the only person who could adore her, but Brenda would take what she could get.

"You think you'll be home at the usual time?" Sharon inquired, looking around at the chaos that seemed to involve not only her squad, but some Detectives from Robbery/Homicide, a few Sheriff's Deputies and a whole bunch of belligerent witnesses or victims. Sharon didn't know which they were.

"Yea. Provenza will take over at 5:30 - we're mostly just sortin' out what belongs to whom after wrappin' up a burglary ring. All these folks are very pushy and are gettin' greedy, so we're makin' sure that no one tries to pull a fast one."

"Don't have too much fun, Brenda Leigh," warned Sharon playfully. "I'll see you at home."

"Fun!" Brenda protested, like she couldn't possibly be having fun bossing all these people around, but then she spritzed out a little laugh, and watched Sharon swish her way out of the Murder Room.

There was music she'd never heard before coming from her built-in speakers when Sharon entered her house. Her son bounded out of the kitchen as soon as she'd closed the front door behind her.
"Mama! You're early!" Jackson yelped, then proceeded to hug her vigorously, picking her up off her feet and even twirling her around once. She breathed in the familiar scent of him; a woodsy cologne and an ever present, though faint, hint of the beach. Once his exuberance faded a little, they embraced more sedately.

"I missed you," Sharon murmured into the well-worn sweatshirt he was wearing.

"Missed you more."

He pushed back and looked down at her. "You look wonderful, fabulous and amazing."

"Flatterer," she said and stretched up to peck him on the cheek. "You look like a very handsome beach bum, as per usual." His cargo shorts and sweatshirt had been washed probably a million times, and his thick brown hair was in need of a trim, falling over his forehead and almost obscuring his light green eyes.

"Well, that's exactly the look I was going for," he countered and she rolled her eyes at him. One of these days she was going to get him to get a grown-up hair cut.

"Where's Ginny?"

"Relaxing in the hot tub. She drove the whole way, so she was feeling it in her shoulders."

"Jackson Raydor! You let Ginny drive the entire five hours from Stanford to LA? She should trade you in for a better model."

"Don't even," she warned, and Jackson grinned cheekily, patting her a few times.

"I'm not scared of you," he quipped. "Keep it up and I'll put all the booze on the high shelves where you can't reach it."

"I'm not that short," Sharon protested, slapping his hand away and stalking in to the kitchen.

Jackson chuckled, and followed. "You made me that way," he countered.

"Mama Sharon!" Ginny called from her spot in the tub. "Did you skip out of work early to come see us?"

"Maybe," Sharon said, taking a seat on the deck chair closest to the tub, wrapping the towel that was waiting there around her shoulders.

Ginny had her curly black hair piled on top of her head and was slumped bonelessly in one of the tub's molded seats.

"Where's your lady? She didn't play hooky with you?"

"Brenda had maybe half of LA in her Murder Room when I left, and was in her element bossing around men from at least two agencies."

"Murder Room? And will she be done bossing in time for dinner?"

"Well, the Murder Room is a room that is primarily used for the solving of murders. And she plans
to be home around 6."

When 6 rolled around, they were sitting in the kitchen with glasses of Sharon's famous margaritas, talking; Jackson and Ginny had finished dinner and it was waiting on the stove while they waited for their fourth. They had sort of talked around the obvious subject - that for the first time in two decades his mother was sharing this house, and her life, with someone that wasn't him or his sister. Jackson was terrified; would he like Brenda? What if she was using his mother? So many scenarios about this meeting had gone through his head in the past few months. What if he and Brenda just didn't like one another?

His mother had always been very private about her dating life after the divorce, but Jackson, wanting to know where his mother went on the occasional weekend night, so at age ten he'd ignored his bed time and eluded the babysitter to find Sharon kissing a woman goodnight on the front porch. She had answered his questions, and told him that she would gladly answer any more that he had, and he'd trusted that, and kept what he had learned to himself. He hadn't really had any other questions, not until his mother had sat him and Margot down and told them that there was someone she wanted them to meet, and all hell had broken loose when his father found out that the person happened to be a woman. The memory of that afternoon, of her reserved and hopeful smile, and then the pain that had followed had stuck with Jackson. After that, after never meeting that woman because she couldn't handle the drama of Jackson's family, it was easy for him to understand why his mother rarely shared any details concerning that facet of her personal life.

Ginny said not only was he over thinking things, but he was going to subconsciously sabotage his first impression of Brenda, despite his intentions and his real desire to like the woman. And she was probably right, because his anxiety had formed a heavy ball in his stomach, and he was having a difficult time enjoying the conversation and the smell of dinner simmering on the stove. Regardless, Jackson would never let his mother know if he ended up not liking Brenda; he'd do his best to keep that from her, because he wanted her to be happy, and there was every indication that Brenda made his mother very happy. Even now she kept glancing towards the front door, waiting to hear a key in the lock.

Jackson half-expected his mother to leap out of her seat when they heard the sound of the front door open, and then close, but she only smiled to herself. Even after peering at pictures of her all afternoon, Jackson was struck by just how tiny Brenda was when she tripped in to the kitchen in a pair of magenta kitten heels; even next to his similarly sized mother, Brenda was short and very slender. The rest of her outfit was as colorful as her shoes; a flower printed skirt and a pink twinset that matched the color of her heels. Her ensemble was probably as far removed from Sharon Raydor's usual work attire as it was possible to get. It was sort of charming, and not at all what Jackson was expecting.

"Is that gumbo I smell," she drawled, with a small smile for Ginny and himself, and a bigger smile for his mother. In fact, they were both wearing matching looks of adoration. Brenda bent and kissed Sharon on the lips, and they exchanged murmured hellos when they separated.

"Hi," she said, with an awkward little wave, "I'm Brenda. And dinner smells fantastic."

"It's my mom's recipe - seafood gumbo," Ginny volunteered with a friendly smile.

"I haven't had good gumbo since I moved out here - so color me excited!"

"You're always excited about food, Brenda Leigh," Sharon snarked playfully. "You would be equally excited by hot dogs in the microwave."

"That's not true!" Brenda protested. "Nothin' against hot dogs, but I do prefer my meat to not be in
"So processed desserts are on the top of your list, but not processed meats?"

"Nope!" Chirped Brenda, unrepentant about her eating habits, swatting Sharon on the shoulder for her teasing.

"Well," said Jackson, finding his voice. "We used bacon instead of sausage, so no processed meats to worry about in this gumbo."

"That's not to say I have anything against a good sausage!" Brenda blurted quickly, not wanting a potential purveyor of meals to think she was in any way prejudiced against a particular foodstuff.

Jackson was fascinated by the sheer pleasure that Brenda seemed to derive from each bite of her meal. She had filled her shallow bowl to brimming, added rice to soak up the broth, and sprinkled filé powder liberally over the the whole thing. Brenda chewed her way through two cornbread muffins along with her gumbo, looking like she enjoyed each and every bite with the same relish as she enjoyed the first. It was fascinating to Jackson; the woman was tiny, and yet she was putting away a massive amount of food with an impressive single-mindedness.

Conversation was congenial - Jackson and Ginny related news from Ginny's family and anecdotes from Thanksgiving; Brenda and Sharon did the same regarding their Thanksgiving and Sharon's promotion.

Everyone was well finished when Brenda lifted her bowl to her mouth and sipped down the remainder of her broth, then daintily patted her lips dry.

"My word," she sighed, a little breathily, then burped, coloring prettily in mild embarrassment.

No one laughed, but Sharon winked and gave everyone a fond smile - Jackson was hard pressed to remember a time when she had looked happier.

"That was really, really wonderful," Brenda said sincerely to Jackson and Ginny. "And I will further show my appreciation of your lovely gumbo by cleaning the kitchen."

"And I'll help her," Sharon chimed in. "Why don't the two of you go relax in the living room?"

"Can't we help?" Jackson asked, standing and picking up his dish and flatware.

"Nope," Brenda chirped, standing and holding out her hands for his bowl. "We have a system; it won't take us long."

Sharon nodded and flapped her hands at her son and not-quite daughter-in-law. "Go - it'll only take us fifteen minutes or so."

Jackson and Ginny meandered their way into the living room, and Jackson followed Ginny's lead in flopping down on the couch.

"You think Brenda has a hollow leg or something?" Jackson murmured to Ginny.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "She eats like you do; what's wrong with that?"

"Uh, I have a foot of height and probably 100 lbs on her!"

"Yea, you should be embarrassed - getting shown up by a tiny little thing like that."
"At least she appreciated my gumbo," grumped Jackson, scowling.
Chapter 42

It was Christmas Eve, and Sharon was feeling a surfeit of holiday cheer. In fact, she felt like whistling as she fairly bounced up the stairs after her morning swim, but she didn't want to wake anyone who had chosen to sleep in on their lazy Monday morning. She and Brenda both had Christmas Eve and Christmas day off, and Brenda wanted to take complete advantage of her four day weekend. When she crept back into the bedroom, Brenda was still curled around the pillow Sharon had substituted for herself an hour or so earlier. Sharon was overcome with affection - Brenda's face was adorably sleep-creased; her forehead was wrinkled in sleepy consternation; her hair would probably be a mess (Sharon had had her hands thoroughly tangled in it the night before). Today, they were going to relax and do a little cooking; tonight, a bunch of friends were coming over for nibbles and for the carolers that descended upon the neighborhood on Christmas Eve.

Sharon tiptoed in to the bathroom to deal with her bathing suit, contemplating enjoyable ways in which she could awaken the sleeping woman who had brought so much joy in to her life.

Brenda was awake and blinking sleepily at her when Sharon left the bathroom; she wrinkled her nose and reached out for Sharon, making insistent grabby-hands.

Sharon chuckled. "Have we regressed to the pre-verbal stage, Brenda Leigh," she teased.

Brenda stuck out her tongue, then said sweetly: "Come cuddle with me, please."

Tease she might, but Sharon wasn't about to refuse a request for cuddles, non-verbal or verbal; she slid under the covers and scooted over. Brenda glommed on to her immediately; settling in with her head resting on Sharon's shoulder before Sharon had even gotten comfortable against the pillows. Brenda hummed contentedly, one hand whisking over Sharon's body, perhaps checking that everything was still in order, the other tucked up under her chin.

"Best cuddles in the Western Hemisphere," Brenda murmured, sounding very much like she was going to fall back asleep.

"There's no objective way to measure the quality of cuddles, Brenda Leigh. It's too subjective," protested Sharon in a low voice, lips curving up in a grin.

"Are we really going to have this argument again?" Brenda enjoyed this particular bit of banter, and they were always cuddling when they indulged in it.

"I'm just saying that definitions of good cuddling will be as numerous and varied as the individuals that hold them."

"I'm not sayin' that there is a universal definition of good cuddlin', Shari. I'm just sayin' that I'm confident that there would be a large proportion of individuals who share my opinion that you are good at all the discrete elements of cuddlin'."

"Discrete elements of cuddling?" Sharon asked skeptically.

"You know, things like, participation, scent, skin and hair softness, pleasantness of voice, etc, etc."

"Brenda Leigh, those are all totally subjective."

"Psh," Brenda disagreed with good humor. "You'll see. I'mma take a survey tonight, and then
you're gonna owe me all the cuddles, because I'll be so right."

"Brenda, I already give you all the cuddles you want."

"Well, I'll still be right."

Tomás was late; he found himself speed-walking down the street in anticipation of whatever goodies Sharon and her freakishly large son had waiting for him. A gift bag swung frantically at his side - a pretty silver picture frame he'd bought in Taxco and inside, a picture of the two Chiefs in uniform with their little friend Marcus. He found the new pictures dotting the now shared domicile rather cute, and they had both looked adorable in their uniforms eating cupcakes with Marcus.

Every light in the house was on, illuminating the extra cars lining the block; Tomás imagined he could smell Sharon's wonderful cooking and broke into a jog, then slammed on the brakes, because Fritz Howard was standing in the middle of sidewalk in front of the house next door to Sharon and Brenda's. He nearly let a string of expletives fly. Ducking behind a convenient tree, Tomás pulled out his cell phone to dash a quick note to someone he knew was already in the house. Someone who wasn't Brenda or Sharon, because he had heard rumors about a certain, usually quite (sometimes infuriatingly) levelheaded Deputy Chief jamming a taser into the ribs of a certain FBI agent. It didn't surprise him that much, not when it came Sharon Raydor and her loved ones, which is why he was calling in the less emotionally involved cavalry.

Tomás saw Andy step authoritatively off the porch and stride over to where Fritz was standing frozen on the sidewalk. The FBI agent didn't even appear to notice his approach.

"You shouldn't be here," said Andy evenly when he got close. Tomás felt it was safe enough to leave his hiding spot and popped out from behind a tree and approached the pair from behind.

Fritz chuckled darkly. "I can't believe YOU, Andy Flynn, are out here telling me this," he growled. "How the hell are you on board with this bullshit?"

"How is this bullshit?" Flynn growled back, and Tomás couldn't keep his eyes from rolling.

"You hate Raydor! The whole damn squad hates Raydor! Brenda hated Raydor, and now she's playing happy fucking families with her and you're playing right along with her!"

"She's not playing anything," said Flynn emphatically, punctuating the statement with slash of his hand. "And you need to get over it and get on with your life because you are acting like a fucking stalker, man."

"I'm spending Christmas alone and Brenda Leigh is fucking some bitch that she hates," Fritz nearly shouted into the night air, the sound bouncing down the quiet street.

"You need to leave." Andy took a menacing step towards Fritz.

"What're you going to do, Lieutenant?" Fritz snarled, shifting his weight restlessly. "Cuff me and throw me in your car?"

"I just might. There are kids in there, and you aren't going to be causing a scene."

Fritz was unmoved. "I want to see Brenda," he insisted.

Andy was also unmoved. "Not going to happen."
"I want to see my wife, goddammit."

"She isn't your wife anymore, and this is completely, laughably pathetic. I hope I'm right in thinking that you aren't drunk right now, because this stalker bullshit is just screaming booze to me."

Tomás nearly laughed out loud at Andy's scornful expression. Maybe a little shaming would be what it took to get Agent Howard to walk away from this idiocy; he didn't want to know what would happen if they had to alert the Chiefs to what was happening out here.

"She's more my wife than she is Raydor's...whatever the fuck they call themselves."

Flynn let out a derisive peal of laughter. "Don't kid yourself man. Sharon Raydor is a powerful draw, and I can tell you that they are completely into one another. You're out here obsessing and I can guarantee you're barely a blip on the radar for them."

"She's not gay." Fritz snarled and shifted again, shoulders tensing causing his suit jacket to pull at the seams. Tomás wondered if a punch was about to be thrown. He hoped that Flynn had good reflexes. "And she hated Raydor."

"Well, she isn't straight, either. And now you're talking in circles. You've got two options: leave in your own car under your own steam, or you can take a ride downtown in my car and I'll start making phone calls to your superiors."

That threat seemed to sink in, because Fritz sighed and scrubbed his hands across his face.

"Then I guess I don't have a choice," he murmured, almost too quiet for Tomás to hear, then he turned abruptly and stalked off across and down the street, not sparing another glance for Andy; Tomás wasn't sure Fritz even knew he was there.

Tomás crept out from his hiding spot when he heard a car door slam; Andy turned and gave him a nod.

"What're we going to tell the Chiefs," Tomás wondered in lieu of a standard greeting.

Andy ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "I wish we didn't have to tell them."

"Maybe wait till after the party?"

"Probably the best bet. And I think I'll talk to Raydor, uh, Sharon, and not the Chief."

Tomás nodded in tentative agreement, though he tempered his acquiescence with a warning: "She can be...less calm when her loved ones are involved."

"I think I could have guessed that," said Flynn with a grim smile. "But I still trust her to use non-lethal force, versus Miss Brenda Leigh."

For Sharon, nothing compared to watching Brenda enjoying the company of her friends. She had told Sharon, before their first get together, on moving day, that Fritz had jealously guarded their free time to the extent that Brenda had rarely been able to spend any time with the men she considered part of her family outside of a work setting. Brenda had even (tearfully) confessed to being secretly ecstatic about the Christmas they'd all spent in the murder room. It was impossible for Sharon to begrudge Brenda the company of her friends, and she was enjoying their company for its own sake, as well as the company of her son and Ginny and Tomás and DDA Hobbs and happy little Lucy.
The house was packed, and yet it didn't feel crowded, just homey. Guests conversed in small groups, with Lucy darting in between the grownups that she knew, and her new friend Jackson, showing off her new striped shirt and striped socks - a Christmas present from Brenda and Sharon, who had thought immediately of *A Bad Case of Stripes* when they came across them while looking for gifts for Sharon's little cousins.

Sharon was holding court on the couch, sipping whiskey with Provenza and chatting with Tomás and Andrea, who was still suffering from shell shock regarding the revelation of Brenda and Sharon's relationship. Despite her surprise, she'd been full of genuine congratulations and admiration for the rings and the house and the photos scattered around the house. Now, Andrea was pestering Sharon to tell her the story of how the relationship had progressed, with Tomás listening in eagerly. Sharon was demurring, meeting the gaze of Brenda, who was hovering, chatting with Lucy's aunts and Gabriel, and sharing a secretive smile. They had both agreed, separately, that the story of Brenda's flowers and Sharon's freak-out was theirs and theirs alone.

Andrea caught their exchange and raised an eyebrow at Sharon. Sharon raised an eyebrow back, wondering what would come out of Andrea's mouth, as the attorney could be very outspoken.

"Some hot and heavy story then," Andrea purred with a thoroughly naughty smile. Sharon cocked her eyebrow again, in acknowledgment of Andrea's daring.

"It's not the story that's hot and heavy," husked Sharon around the rim of her cut crystal whiskey. Andrea responded with a muted bark of laughter and Tomás immediately let fly with his story about walking in on Brenda and Sharon sunbathing topless on an late summer Saturday.

"Next time you two want to avoid tan-lines, you should give me a call," Andrea teased.

Brenda had one last gift to set under the tree before bedtime. They'd forgone a full size tree in the interest of having space for their little get together, instead picking a smallish potted evergreen that they could plant after the holiday. They had set the tree up on the dining room table on Saturday and the presents had started appearing beneath it immediately. Brenda had already put all her other gifts under the tree, but the plain envelope she had in her hand had arrived earlier today, and she knew Sharon would appreciate the contents, even if it wasn't anything traditional. She moved aside some other gifts and tucked the envelope back against the tree.

Replacing the gifts, she took in their little tree, decorated with ornaments from both the Raydor and Johnson families - it wasn't fancy or polished, but it was full of memories for Sharon and Brenda. The tree had been much too small for Brenda's angel, Keith, which had been given pride of place amongst a display of decorations on the sideboard buffet, sitting on a funnel so it could stand up on its own. Brenda hadn't even had to tell Sharon that Keith was important.

Clicking the downstairs lights out behind her, Brenda crept up the stairs; it was pretty late and Jackson and Ginny had already gone to bed. She slipped into the bedroom to find an early Christmas present: Sharon, in the buff, on her stomach on the bed - a Santa hat perched on her head and a stick on bow on her tailbone like a red-ribbon bunny tail - flipping through a magazine. There were a few neatly wrapped gifts next to Sharon on the bed, but Brenda barely noticed them, shucking off her jeans and throwing herself onto the bed and cuddling up to Sharon.

"Merry Christmas to me," she murmured, nuzzling into Sharon's hair; her hand sweeping down Sharon's bare back to ruffle the bow on her bottom. Sharon smirked to herself and set the magazine aside. "How did you know exactly what I wanted?"

"Oh, just a lucky guess, love," Sharon replied smugly. Brenda pinched her lightly on the rear in response. Sharon knew she had some not so happy news to relate to Brenda, but first, there were
more important things to attend to. She shifted onto her side and leaned in for a kiss. Brenda hummed contentedly as their lips met, and slung a leg over Sharon's hip.

It nearly killed Sharon to distract Brenda from the open-mouthed trail she was kissing down her neck, but her conscience demanded that truth telling came before love-making.

"Brenda, honey, come up here a second. I have something…" she trailed off when a deft hand tweaked a nipple with precise pressure; Brenda was talented at distraction when she wanted something, and right now, what she wanted was Sharon.

"Brenda, if you don't give me a minute to tell you something, I'm not going to give you your presents."

Brenda made a noise that was part whine, part growl, but she relented, bringing herself face-to-face with Sharon, scowling mightily.

"You're not going to like this," Sharon admitted, and Brenda's scowl deepened.

"You couldn't 'a waited till after we had our fun, then?" She wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue. "Just tell me already, so I can get back to what I was doin'," demanded Brenda with a purposeful fondle of Sharon's breasts.

"Before Flynn left, he told me that he'd chased Fritz off a few hours ago."

"Ooooooooooo, that idiot man," Brenda growled. "And why didn't Flynn tell me?"

Sharon ran a soothing hand down Brenda's arm. "Because he likes to see you enjoying yourself, honey."

"So he lets you hand down the bad news, which interrupts our adult fun-times," she groused.

"I'm sorry, honey," Sharon cooed. "But I did bring you presents!"

"I think the bow on your booty was the best touch," said Brenda with a little grin, the tension from Sharon's revelation melting from her body.

"So what do you want to do?"

"Sleep on it," Brenda stated with not a little certainty. "After I open my presents, and after I enjoy you."

Sharon waggled her eyebrows suggestively. "It is possible that you will be able to enjoy me and your presents simultaneously."

"Oh?"

"Mmmmmmm, I'm fairly certain."

Eyes lit up like little twinkle lights, Brenda twisted and reached eagerly for one of the neatly wrapped presents, and Sharon laughed quietly at her eagerness.
Chapter 43

This Christmas was the first time ever that the prospect of hanging around in bed was equally as tempting to Brenda as the presents that were waiting for her downstairs. Not that she wasn’t excited for presents, it was just that cuddling with Sharon was practically her favorite thing ever. An involuntary little happy sound burbled from her throat and she snuggled in deeper. Sharon’s arm tightened around her reflexively; Sharon was still soundly asleep - apparently they had thoroughly worn one another out the night before. One of the new toys that they had unwrapped, a pair of weighted Ben Wa balls, had paired nicely with their strap-on. Just slipping the heavy metal orbs into Sharon, slick and warm after the ministrations of Brenda’s fingers, had been nearly orgasm inducing. She had then buckled the harness around Sharon’s hips, giving the shaft of the plastic dick a few solid tugs to set the toys inside Sharon to moving, wondering what the sensation was like for her partner. Pretty good, it seemed, because Sharon groaned and pushed her back on the bed. Brenda had been literally panting for it, and a shiver ran through her now at the remembered sensation of Sharon sheathing the dick inside her in one smooth, confident motion.

Brenda pressed her lips to the soft skin of of Sharon’s ribcage, inhaling the salt and sex scent of her, causing the brunette to shift in her sleep again. Sweat and love-making; Brenda imagined that she smelled much the same. They had fucked long and slow, skin to skin; Brenda had come twice, muffling a howl in Sharon’s chest each time. After collapsing on top of her, Sharon had confessed to two orgasms herself - the Ben Wa balls were an official success on Sharon’s end.

Almost fifty and having the best sex of her life; she wondered if things would get even better, as sex tended to do as lovers gained more and more familiarity with one another. Dropping off to sleep again, Brenda wondered if she would survive sex getting better than it was now.

Sharon woke with Brenda nestled against her side, nose smushed into her flesh just below her underarm. Sharon knew she must smell gross after their bout of intense love-making, during which she had sweated like a racehorse, but she knew that Brenda would swear up and down that she smelled delicious or irresistible or something like that. Being so thoroughly desired was as intoxicating to Sharon as Sharon’s scent seemed to be to Brenda.

Ducking her head, she kissed Brenda on the tangled mess of her hair. She caught a glimpse of the clock - 9 am! They had really done themselves in the night before. Sharon found herself wondering if she’d stowed those Ben Wa balls somewhere, or if they were loose in the sheets. The strap-on was laying somewhere on the floor next to the bed; she was glad her son was no longer of the age to come bursting into her room on Christmas morning - she could picture feet tangled in the fake dick’s strap and a face-first fall on the bed in which she and Brenda were very naked.

“Brenda, honey, its time to wake up,” she whispered, shaking the blonde gently. Brenda grunted and smacked her lips, the arm she had slung across Sharon’s waist tightening in sleepy possessiveness. “Come on now. You have more presents to open. And there’s nutella french toast coming your way.”

At the edge of her vision, Sharon saw a brown eye pop open. Brenda propped herself up on an elbow and blinked blearily down at Sharon. Then she smiled a long, slow smile.

“Merry Christmas,” Sharon murmured, before stretching up for a kiss.

“It is a merry Christmas,” agreed Brenda, snuggling down again.

“Brenda, we need to shower before we’re fit for the company of others.” There was no way
Sharon was going to go downstairs where her son was probably waiting, smelling like sex and body-odor.

“Can we shower together?” Brenda asked brightly.

Sharon smirked, but she said sternly, “Of course, but no funny business.”

“You’re no fun,” the blonde groused, giving Sharon a playfully resentful look, then pushed herself out of the bed. Sharon levered herself up on her elbows to watch that tight little rear disappear in to the bathroom, her mouth going dry with want despite herself.

“That’s not what you said last night,” Sharon countered. She heard the shower turn on.

“Come on then,” Brenda exhorted, coming back to stand in the door way. “You might want to bring that,” she said with a pointed look at the dildo abandoned rather forlornly on the floor.

Sharon obeyed, stopping to scoop up the toy - the harness would have to get wiped down later, as water was no good for leather. Maybe a little Christmas morning funny business was exactly what Sharon wanted.

The clock had just turned over ten o’clock and Brenda and his mother had not yet emerged from their lair. Jackson couldn’t say he was all that surprised, not after what he had heard during a trip to the bathroom last night. The part of him that could be objective was happy for Sharon, but a larger part of him, the part that still sometimes thought of her as ‘mommy’, was squicked. It didn’t help that Ginny was thoroughly impressed with Sharon and Brenda’s sexual prowess and not shy about telling him so. He supposed a little desensitization wouldn’t hurt anyone in this situation. But right now, he was hungry; ready for the french toast that was a Christmas tradition in the Raydor household.

Jackson was prepared to be a little miffed with the two ladies, but when he heard the sound of feet on the stairs, co-mingled with the sound of his mother’s laughter, he knew that anger wasn’t really an option. How long had it been since someone outside their family (and not under the age of 10) had been able to make his mother laugh like that?

They entered the kitchen looking a little embarrassed at least. Wet-haired and blushing, Jackson thought Sharon looked more relaxed than he had ever seen her, and Brenda seemed simultaneously pleased with herself and shy, hiding behind Sharon and giggling when Sharon pinched her playfully on the hip. What they found funny, Jackson didn’t know - and didn’t want to know - but it was nice to see his mother so happy.

Sharon cleared her throat, lifting Jackson from his contemplative reverie, and said: “I’ve promised Brenda nutella on her french toast. Any other requests?”

The two women took up their kitchen duties as if their was nothing unusual about their late appearance or the rather noticeable cheerfulness. Maybe there wasn’t anything unusual - maybe his mother was leading a life that involved sleeping in and occasional giggle fits, and even vigorous late night sex.

Jackson shook his head to clear that image from his mind, then noisily asserted his need for cinnamon-heavy french toast, as he intended to use all the genuine Maine maple syrup himself.

After breakfast, they adjourned to the living room with their coffee. Jackson and Ginny took it upon themselves to gather up the gifts from the dining room and transport them to the coffee table. Brenda was nearly bouncing in place next to Sharon, she was so excited. Sharon was a little
worried that her gifts for Brenda would fail to live up to expectations until Brenda gave her a wide-eyed look and murmured, “I am so excited for you to open your present from me, baby. I think I’m gonna have a stroke.”

“Mmmmm,” Sharon mused. “I just hope what I got for you lives up to expectations.” Sharon was at a point where she knew Brenda’s tastes, but things hadn’t quite settled down enough for her to figure out what Brenda needed, or what would be useful, so she’d gotten a variety of small things (like the sex toys), and not one large all-or-nothing gift. She enjoyed buying Brenda small, beautiful things; Christmas had simply given her an excuse to wrap all the things up for Brenda to open.

“As far as I’m concerned,” Brenda husked directly into Sharon’s ear, pressing herself into Sharon’s side provocatively, “after last night, I’m forever in your debt.”

“Maybe it’s me who is in your debt,” Sharon countered, eyeing Jackson and Ginny and their loaded arms.

“Oooh. You should think about what you might like as payback, ’specially since we have so many options now!”

Sharon shivered, then moaned quietly, thinking about the other new toys they had stuffed into one of the bedside tables. Now she was doubly sure to have x-rated imagery playing in her mind’s eye all day.

“You are evil, you know that?” Sharon commented in a light tone as Ginny and Jackson took places on the floor, ignoring their curious looks. Brenda merely grinned wickedly.

Jackson and Ginny opened their gifts first - lots of little things from Sharon and Margery and Donald, cards and pictures from cousins, and the piece de resistance, a trip to France for Jax and Ginny and four friends of their choice. Sharon could afford to be extravagant, though it wasn’t really in her nature to consume conspicuously, treating her loved ones was very much in her nature, and doing something nice for her son’s and not quite daughter-in-law’s hardworking friends.

Next it was Brenda and Sharon’s turn, and they started with family presents. The first gift Sharon grabbed was from Jimmy. Much to Brenda’s dismay, Sharon lifted the tape on the box very slowly. Brenda huffed in consternation, at the slow pace, and at Sharon’s knowing smile. The smile faded though, into shock, as she pulled back the paper.

“Mother of God,” she exclaimed, tipping the box towards her lover. “I might have to murder your brother the very first time I meet him.”

Nested in the tissue paper was an enormous black dildo, nearly as thick around as Brenda’s forearm.

“I’ll help,” Brenda said darkly.

Jackson leaned over, his stature allowing him enough reach to get a peek in the box before Sharon managed to jerk it back. He jerked back too, his eyes wide. She shot him a serious look.

“It’s a joke, Jax. Relax.” She pulled out the book that had been hiding beneath the mammoth cock. “This looks more useful, though.”

Her son gaped at the copy of The Whole Lesbian Sex Book she held up.

Brenda shrieked, snatching the book out of Sharon’s hands. “You are so bad,” she exclaimed, swatting Sharon on the shoulder, then giving Jackson an apologetic moue. “My brother is a joker, and has a definite flair for the inappropriate.”
“We should video call him later, and thank him properly - maybe give him a demonstration,” Sharon sassed, her face full of mischief - Brenda loved her playfulness and the utterly fantastic mood Sharon was in.

Ginny cackled a laugh, finding humor in both Jackson’s reactions and Sharon’s not-quite-explicit silliness. “Can I see that book?” Ginny asked, intent on tweaking Jackson a little more. Brenda handed over the weighty book with a smirk, then picked up the first of her presents for Sharon, handing the box to her with a flourish - she had worked long and hard to put this gift together, and was anxious to see how it would be received.

Sharon cut her eyes shyly at Brenda and began to peel back the paper at a glacial pace again. Brenda didn’t care at the moment; she was too excited to see Sharon’s reaction to be silly with her.

Inside the slim box, a large, hand lettered envelope rested in a nest of tissue paper. Both their names were scripted in flowing letters across the front. On the back, the envelope was sealed shut with red wax, stamped with the White House in relief.

“What is this?” Sharon murmured, intrigued, and she gently pried the wax from the heavy card stock, opening the envelope. In the same script, the card proclaimed that Sharon and Brenda were invited to the inaugural ball at the White House on the evening of January 21st, 2013.

“Oh, Brenda,” Sharon breathed. “How did you manage this?”

“I know a guy who knows a guy,” demurred Brenda. “Do you think you’d be interested in going with me?”

“I think I could definitely be convinced.”

“How would seats at the balcony during the ceremony, a suite at the Four Seasons, and a spa day do towards convincing you?”

Sharon’s eyes were sparkling as she looked at Brenda; she didn’t know how the other woman had put this getaway together, along with the singular opportunity to experience the swearing in of a president pretty much from the front row, but if Brenda was willing to take the days off to vacation with her, Sharon was more than willing to brave DC in January.

Although still focused on Brenda (because how could she not be), Sharon did notice Jax and Ginny’s curiosity, so she passed the box over to them so they could get a look at the beautifully calligraphed invitation.

Using her hands, Sharon gently drew Brenda to her for a kiss. She lingered, helpless against the feel of Brenda’s lips against her own.

Everything had been opened, Brenda noticed a bit later, except for the envelope she had snuck under the tree the night before. She looked under a pile of new clothes (hers, from Sharon, and all bright and boldly colored in sumptuous, decadent fabrics), and the iPad box (Sharon’s, from Jackson and Ginny and already loaded with the Angry Birds game Sharon had wanted to try), before finding the unassuming, plain, everyday envelope halfway under the couch. Sharon was intently focused on figuring out the physics of birdies in a slingshot, but Brenda figured she could be distracted for this, and slid the envelope down over the screen, garnering a soft squawk of annoyance from the new mobile gamer.

“This isn’t another fabulous getaway, is it?” Sharon asked with fake suspicion, undoing the metal grommet holding the envelope closed. Brenda shook her head, her expression slightly nervous, but
otherwise unreadable. Sharon slid the sheaf of papers out; it was Brenda’s divorce decree.

“You said,” she began, fiddling with the buttons on a soft new sweater, and not meeting Sharon’s eyes, “as soon as my divorce was final, you wanted to register as domestic partners.”

“I want that very, very much,” Sharon reaffirmed, trading her grip on the papers and tablet for one of Brenda’s hands, heart fluttering when the other woman lifted her head and smiled.

“Tomorrow?” asked Brenda eagerly.

“Absolutely. I have something for you - I’ll be right back.” Sharon rose and stalked off to find her purse.

She came back with a black velvet bag. Sliding back into her spot on the couch, Sharon upended the bag over her hand, and two rings fell out. Two bands of platinum, delicately etched with sort sort of design.

“May I?” Sharon asked, and after removing her engagement ring, Brenda offered up her hand excitedly. Sharon slid the band on Brenda’s finger and then brought it up to her lips to buss the knuckles with a delicate kiss.

“It’s so pretty,” the blonde cooed, examining the band, running a finger over the design before putting her rock back on to take them in together. “Perfect.” I love it - now let me put yours on you, and tomorrow, you and I are going where we need to go to file that paperwork.”
It was January 3rd when Brenda came home to find a letter from her father waiting on the kitchen table. She recoiled from it as though it was a poisonous snake. Brenda had talked to her mother two days ago; had sent pictures from Christmas, and nothing had been said about a letter. That might have been a blessing, because waiting for her father’s letters ratcheted up her anxiety level in a big way. Her family had distinctly dysfunctional ways of communicating.

According to her (increasingly cordial) conversations with her mother, after some initial grumbling, her father had shown only mild, quiet interest in the photos and stories Willie Rae shared with him. She had no idea what to expect; her father wasn’t much for talking on the phone, preferring to relay information through his wife, so beyond a very brief ‘Merry Christmas’ on the day of, Brenda hadn’t talked to her father since before Thanksgiving. She frequently felt guilty about allowing their relationship to exist on such a surface level, but Brenda couldn’t allow her father’s priorities to dictate the course of her life, just as she couldn’t allow Fritz priorities to do the same. Some distance let Brenda maintain her mental well-being and cut down on her anxiety.

She left the letter and sought out Sharon who was upstairs, probably changing her clothes. Brenda was partially right: her newly minted, duly registered domestic partner (Brenda preferred wife or partner, but the kicker was that she and Sharon belonged to one another) was kicked back on the bed in half of her skirt suit, talking on the phone to someone. She flashed Brenda a smile as she crossed the threshold in to the bedroom.

Brenda kicked off her shoes (tan kitten heeled pumps) and shimmed out of her skirt (also tan with mauve flowers), and crawled on to the bed, curling around her lover, reveling in the instant relaxation she felt just from this simple interaction. She closed her eyes, letting herself drift in to a near doze as she waited for Sharon to wrap up her conversation.

“Tomás invited us over for dinner - chicken and fresh corn tamales, rice and black beans,” she murmured after hanging up, stroking Brenda’s hair - Brenda wanted to purr like a contented kitty, but restrained herself.

“Yum, but I guess that means I gotta put some pants back on.”

“What a hardship. Have to wear pants to walk down the street for the free food.”

“I see how it is. No sympathy for the trials that your poor wife endures.”

“I’m full of sympathy, but not for the trauma of having to wear pants in public,” Sharon scoffed. Brenda mock growled, then rolled herself up to straddle Sharon’s lap, leaning in for a kiss.

“Hey,” she breathed. “How was your day?”

“Perfectly fine and perfectly boring,” answered Sharon with a self-deprecating little grin. “And how are you this evening?” Sharon asked, cocking her head and looking carefully at Brenda. They had talked about Brenda’s father and his tendency to hold their relationship hostage to his likes and dislikes, and his passive aggressive communication style, and she knew how it effected Brenda.

“I didn’t open it,” Brenda answered the unasked part of Sharon’s question. “I don’t know if I want to play this game this go round.”

“That is entirely your prerogative honey - do what you need to do to keep yourself in a good
She cupped Brenda’s hips, rubbing her sides comfortably.

“I’m going to think on it while we eat that delicious, homemade Mexican food.”

“And have a margarita or two.”

“Ooooo, margaritas too?” Brenda’s eyes widened with anticipation.

“We’re in charge of those, so let’s get changed.”

Curled up on the couch, full up on yummy, yummy tamales and feeling warm from Sharon’s ridiculous margaritas, Brenda stared at the envelope addressed in her father’s cramped script. Her head was pillowed in Sharon’s lap; the brunette was watching Rachel Maddow and absently playing with Brenda’s hair.

She flipped it, and flipped it again, unsure of whether she wanted to indulge her father’s eccentricities, or if she wanted to have an actual conversation with him. It was a little hypocritical perhaps, but even if she wasn’t the most proactive communicator, she didn’t resort to letters when she did have something to say.

The last time she’d had a letter situation, she’d known exactly what was in store for her - Clay had been disappointed about the divorce and had expressed his disappointment with the written word and then with persistent silent treatment.

And the time before that, she had passed the responsibility off to Fritz. She wasn’t going to do that to Sharon, who did so much for her - who had dealt with Fritz for her a few weeks ago, sparing her that emotional nightmare.

“You don’t have to decide tonight, honey,” Sharon said softly, glancing down to meet Brenda’s eyes.

“If I don’t, I probably won’t sleep well.”

Sharon gave the fretting woman an empathetic purse of the lips. Family was rough; they could chew you up and spit you out, but you came back for more because they were family. Sharon’s daughter frequently put her in the same position, and Sharon would endure Margot’s disdain and judgement (up to a point) in order to have even the barest of relationships with her child.

If Brenda asked it of her, she would read the letter, but otherwise, this was Brenda’s to puzzle through. Sharon was here to be supportive of whatever decision Brenda made, and she relished the opportunity to so.

Taking a deep breath, Brenda slid a thumb under the flap of the envelope, ripping it in a ragged edge.

“I don’t really wanna read this,” she grumbled. “But I don’t feel like I’ve been given a choice.”

“You could talk to your mother tomorrow,” suggested Sharon, and Brenda paused in her ripping.

“You’re right; I could do that.” She tossed the envelope on the table. “I will do that.” Then Brenda settled in to watch the rest of the show with Sharon, apparently comfortable with her decision.

A conversation with her mother the next morning led to a conversation with her father at the end of her work day.
“Daddy, I love you, but I don’t really care that you’re mad that I didn’t tell you about Fritz acting weird,” Brenda tried to state as calmly as she could. She was only two minutes in to this conversation and already she was extremely frustrated.

“You never tell us anything, Brenda Leigh, then get upset when we believe the people who do talk to us.”

Her whole life, Brenda had bend dealing with her parents’ disapproval when she did something that didn’t fall within their expectations for what she should think or do or say, so she had just stopped sharing. Coupled with her mother’s tendency to pressure her, and her father’s silent stoicism outside of his letters or expressions of disapproval, communication in the Johnson family was not great.

“Maybe I’m just a little blown away that you would believe that I’m so horrible a person as Fritz made me out to be, and that he had no choice but to leave me.”

“You don’t exactly have the greatest track record, Brenda Leigh,” said Clay patronizingly. Brenda was silent for a minute, fighting back the incoherent anger that erupted in her chest.

“All I’ve ever wanted, Daddy,” Brenda snarled, “is someone who could love me the way I am. Who could come in to our relationship not wanting to change me or significantly alter my priorities. Fritz couldn’t do that, and then he acted like a child when our relationship ended.”

Clay said nothing, and Brenda couldn’t tell if he was angry or if he was actually thinking about what she had said.

“I don’t want children and I don’t want to give up a job that I love in order to please a spouse. I’ve never hidden that and I will not apologize for it.”

“So this woman doesn’t have a problem with your work schedule?” He questioned skeptically, as if it was impossible to fathom that someone could handle Brenda’s work schedule without complaint.

“Sharon,” Brenda stressed her wife’s name, “has no problem with my work responsibilities. In fact, she’s encouraging and supportive and wouldn’t you know that makes being supportive in return as easy as breathing.”

“I’m still not convinced that you gave Fritz a fair shake,” grumbled Clay, as yet unable to relinquish his opinions - Brenda didn’t know if he ever would, but at least he didn’t seem to care that Sharon was woman.

“I’m not obligated to give anyone a shot who holds our relationship hostage in order to force me in to a very high risk pregnancy - especially considering I don’t want to parent and he knew that from go.”

“I guess he thought you loved him enough to change your mind, Brenda Leigh.”

“Guess I didn’t,” answered Brenda flatly. “I’m gonna go now, Daddy. Maybe we can talk again when you’ve gotten over yourself.” She hung up, without waiting for him to say goodbye, then stared blankly down at her desk for a long moment.

Inhaling a shaky breath and noting her trembling hands, Brenda dialed another number. She hoped that Sharon was still in the building.

“Can I ride home with you?” Brenda blurted before Sharon even had a chance to say hello.
“Of course you can,” Sharon soothed. “I’m in the garage, ok?”

Brenda nodded mutely, miserably, then croaked out an affirmative noise. “I just gotta pack my bag,” she managed to say.

“Alright, honey. I’ll be here.”
Chapter 45

Somehow, it was Sharon who left the house Sunday afternoon to pick up Charlie from LAX, and not Brenda Leigh. And by somehow, Sharon meant that Pope had called not long after nine that morning to personally order Brenda to a scene. It had been a while since he had taken that liberty, so they weren’t too upset. And considering that they were planning to rock his self-centered little world some time this week, Brenda had thought it best to go along without complaint. Thankfully, at this stage of the budget crisis, even the Chief of Police couldn’t circumvent the new rules for overtime for anything less than a critical missing, so Brenda should be home before Sharon and Charlie made it back from the airport.

So Sharon was leaning against her Jag, parked in a police pull in by virtue of the LAPD license plates on her sporty little car. She wished Charlie would hurry up - the handy little app on her phone told her the flight had landed 20 minutes ago - she’d already been eyeballed by one curious patrol car, no doubt it would be by again any minute. She also hoped that she would recognize Brenda’s niece. The other woman had been unable to direct Sharon to a recent picture as they were all tucked away somewhere, and she had none on her phone, so Sharon was flying a little blind here.

Checking her watch again, Sharon sighed. She’d left her book at home, thinking that since the flight was on time and she could pull right up to the terminal, she wouldn’t be waiting long, but at LAX things never went quickly. The automatic doors slid open and a new wave of people streamed out into the cool LA evening. Sharon hoped Charlie was among them. Sharon hoped Charlie would recognize her and save her a lot of squinting weirdly at strangers.

Charlie had been laid over in Dallas-Fort Worth when her aunt had texted her that Sharon was going to be meeting her at the airport. She was disappointed - she couldn’t help it. She saw Brenda so infrequently, though they talked and texted and emailed with regularity. Charlie had her fingers crossed that this visit wouldn’t go the way of the last one, where she spent more time with Fritz than with her hard-working aunt, who he had seemed to resent, and who she just missed and wanted to spend time with, even after drugging her, even when Brenda was mad at her. Fritz, after the broken crockery incident, had scared her a little. She didn’t want to be scared of her aunt’s significant other, regardless of how all over the place she might be.

She stepped out onto the pavement and shivered; it was cooler here than she thought it’d be. Brenda had told her to look for a silver Crown Vic, probably parked in front of the terminal, and of course Charlie had seen pictures of Sharon. Shivering, but not wanting to bend down to rummage through her suitcase on the busy, unfamiliar sidewalk, Charlie scanned the cars lined up waiting to bear travelers away. She didn’t see an unmarked Crown Vic, but she did see a small, blue sports car sitting in a posted emergency vehicles only lane, a brown-haired woman leaning against it, watching the people exiting the airport. That had to be her. She wrangled her suitcase and shifted her backpack more comfortably across her shoulders and headed towards the woman she hoped wasn’t a total stranger.

The woman smiled at her as she approached, and Charlie could see that it was Sharon. She looked a little different with her hair pulled half back - Charlie wouldn’t have recognized her at all had she been wearing the oversized sunglasses hooked over the neck of her thin sweater. Between the expensive-looking clothes and the car, Sharon looked like an ad from a lifestyle magazine targeted at wealthy professionals. Even with the welcoming smile on her face, she was a little intimidating.

“I’m glad you recognized me,” Sharon said in smooth, alto voice when Charlie got closer. “I was
beginning to think I’d missed you somehow.

“Yea, Aunt Brenda told me she couldn’t find a picture - though she did give me your number.”

“It’s good she thought to.” Sharon smiled again, then gestured to Charlie’s bag. “Go ahead and get in and let me get that for you so we can get out of here. Brenda should beat us to the house - unless her boss caught her on the way out the door.”

Sharon popped the latch with the keys in her hand and then easily hefted Charlie’s suitcase into the trunk. Charlie settled into the passenger seat. The buttery leather was a nice change from the scratchy upholstery of every coach airplane seat ever.

It was a little awkward as they got underway - Sharon was quiet, concentrating on navigating them out of the snarl of traffic that was LAX, while Charlie watched out of the corner of her eye. Sharon was older than her aunt; the lines around her eyes and mouth were deeper, but spoke of someone who spent a lot of time smiling. She was smirking faintly now, like she knew Charlie was sizing her up. But other than a few lines and the prominent bones of the hands that gripped the steering wheel, Sharon didn’t look old - certainly not like her grandparents, at any rate. There was, underneath the prominent knuckle of her left ring finger, a large diamond ring sat atop a slimmer band etched with knot work.

“Did you and my aunt get married,” she asked in spite of herself, in spite of knowing that what the rings meant was none of her business.

The smirk on Sharon’s face morphed into an expression of almost sublime joy.

“We can’t legally marry in California, but we registered as domestic partners after Christmas.”

“Wow.” Charlie couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Your rings are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Sharon said, glancing down at her hand. “Brenda picked out the diamond, and I got matching bands for us for Christmas.”

If Brenda had essentially gotten married and hadn’t invited her mother, that mother was going to be pissed. Charlie shuddered to think about it, but it was amazing that her aunt had taken that step so quickly - then again she had been so excited when Sharon had given her that ring over Thanksgiving. It wasn’t her business to be concerned about Wille Rae’s reaction, but she could be happy for them, especially considering how her grandfather was behaving at the moment. He wouldn’t even say good-bye to Charlie last night when she had stopped by for dessert; he’d only grunted, his attention on a professional basketball game playing on TV.

“I saw the ring you gave her - it’s a real ‘gasper’ as Grandma likes to say.”

“Willie Rae said that?” Sharon asked with some surprise, and a glance away from the road at Charlie. “I’m just glad Brenda likes it.”

Things got quiet then. Charlie didn’t know enough about Sharon to ask after family members or her job - though she knew Sharon had just been promoted, so she just looked out the window and watched the city go by, thankful that Sharon didn’t drive like her aunt (or her grandmother).

When the silence began to get a little weird and uncomfortable, Sharon cleared her throat and asked: “Did you let your parents know that you arrived safely?”

Charlie chuckled - that was a very ‘mom’ thing to ask. “Before I even got off the plane.”
“Good. I wouldn’t want them to worry while you’re here.”

“They’ll worry anyway, but they do bug me less if I let them know where I am.”

“That’s usually how it works,” Sharon agreed, with another smirk for Charlie, this one edging more into full-on smile territory.

Just as Sharon had predicted, her aunt’s ugly car was sitting in the drive of a neat, medium sized house on a shady street. They pulled in past it and into a garage. After parking, Sharon ushered Charlie into the house and into the waiting arms of her aunt.

Brenda looked good in Charlie’s estimation. Relaxed, despite her Sunday spent at a crime scene, and not as gaunt as she could be in the midst of a work related crisis. She hugged Charlie tight before kissing Sharon on the lips and taking Charlie’s suitcase from the other woman.

“Why don’t you let Charlie pick which room she wants and then work out what she’d like to do for dinner,” Sharon suggested, trailing a hand down Brenda’s back, then turning to walk farther in to the house.

“Aye, boss,” Brenda confirmed sassily before showing Charlie up the stairs.

After a dinner of steak fajitas (she had gotten to choose between that and going out somewhere), Charlie was more than tired enough to sleep, but it was early yet. She settled into a massive armchair - new, her aunt had told her, a Christmas present from Sharon’s parents - and was passed the remote to pick something for them to watch.

“That’s a lot of pressure, Aunt Brenda,” she grumbled, scrolling through the offerings in the guide. Reality TV or scripted? Re-run or new? Thirty minutes or an hour? Brenda only grinned at her consternation, cuddled up on the sofa behind Sharon’s knees. The brunette appeared, after a cheerful and upbeat meal, rather enigmatic at the moment. She was marking articles in a law journal with little post it flags, a secretive smile on her lips. Charlie could see that she adored Brenda - it was clear in the way she constantly welcomed Brenda in to her personal space, and in the way they were markedly in sync.

She settled on an episode of Grey’s Anatomy from an early season, prepared to switch to a showing of Jurassic Park if there were any objections.

“This, or dinosaurs,” Charlie offered.

“Dinosaurs,” they chorused in unison, causing Charlie to huff in annoyance.

“Fine,” she groaned, flipping the channel.

“I like this one,” Brenda chirped. “I like to think I would survive an island full of dinosaurs, or a chainsaw wielding maniac or the apocalypse.”

Sharon snorted her amusement, shaking her head. Brenda swatted her on the thigh in retaliation.

“You know I would, too, Ms. Skeptic.”

“You might survive the apocalypse, Brenda Leigh,” Sharon purred. “But I’d be in charge.”
Chapter 46

Sharon was so close. Brenda had had her on the edge of an orgasm for what felt like an eternity, bringing her to the edge and then backing off again and again. Her world had narrowed to sensation; sweat pricking from her pores and slicking her skin, the hot, harshness of her breathing as she sucked air into her lungs, Brenda’s arms twined around her hips and Brenda’s mouth between her legs, soft and wet, devouring her. She made a sound that was supposed to be ‘please’, but came out more like an animalistic groan.

Brenda made a similar sound in answer, the vibrations hitting Sharon like shock waves, and finally - finally - sending her careening in to her second climax of the night, white light exploding behind her eyelids like the stars that the ceaseless lights of Los Angeles hid from view.

It took Sharon a moment to come back to herself; the fog of pleasure cleared from her mind slowly, leaving her feeling boneless and satiated. Brenda was stretched out alongside her, gloriously nude and needful, kissing her neck and stroking the sensitive area above her pubic bone, hips moving against her in a familiar rhythm. She turned over a bit, giving Brenda a better vantage from which to grind against her leg. The blonde moaned appreciatively, riding Sharon’s thigh in earnest, and bringing her mouth up to Sharon’s for a kiss that tasted of Sharon herself.

Brenda’s panting breaths made kissing difficult, so Sharon gathered the other woman to her, sliding hands to Brenda’s tight rear-end to guide her thrusts.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, my darling,” Sharon murmured in Brenda’s ear, nosing damp blonde curls aside to place delicate kisses on the sensitive spots there.

“Nooooo,” Brenda moaned, her breathy little pants punctuated by moans. “I like this,” she managed to get out. “Just hold me tighter, baby.”

Sharon could do that easily, giving Brenda (and her glorious bottom) a firm squeeze. She liked when Brenda took her own pleasure - touching herself while getting Sharon off, riding Sharon’s thigh, riding Sharon’s cock, riding Sharon’s face. She gave, gave, gave to Sharon, anything Sharon wanted, things Sharon didn’t even know she wanted, that she occasionally took what she wanted was perfectly hot in Sharon’s mind.

“Mmmmm.” Sharon hummed her satisfaction with the woman quickly working herself to orgasm on her leg. When Brenda was finished, providing she was game, Sharon was going to have a turn. The catalogue of delightful things she could do to Brenda was staggering, but she didn’t let herself get distracted from the present moment, and the trembling, gorgeous, wonderful woman in her arms.

Sharon was jolted from sleep by the insistent ringing of her cell-phone. From her position in Sharon’s arms, Brenda groaned and buried her face in Sharon’s hair.

“I’mma kill whoever’s called you twice at 2 am,” she growled. Sharon stuck an arm out behind her and scooped up the annoying device, answering the call and bringing it to her ear in a smooth motion.

“Raydor,” she rasped.

“Sh…sharon?” A semi-familiar, tear filled voice nearly whimpered. In her sleep-addled state,
Sharon had to wrack her brain to place it.

“Charlie?”

Brenda sat up in alarm when Sharon said her niece’s name and Sharon propped herself up on an arm.

“My aunt’s phone kept going to straight to voicemail.” Charlie sounded terrified and Sharon went immediately in to ‘mom’ mode.

“What’s wrong? What can we do?” She asked, making eye-contact with an anxious Brenda, who was leaning in, trying to hear both sides of the conversation.

“There’s a guy in this suite that is making me really uncomfortable and they’re all still up drinking with the music on, and I just don’t want to be in this situation,” the young woman sobbed.

“Ok, we’re going to come get you,” Sharon said, already swinging out of bed. Brenda did the same at Sharon’s words. “Will you be ok for 25 minutes or would you like me to call campus police?”

“I think I’m ok.”

“Alright, honey,” Sharon soothed. “We’re hurrying. Text me the name of the dorm you’re in and call again if you need to.”

“Ok. Thank you, Sharon.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Charlie. I’m just sorry it took us so long to answer the phone.”

Brenda and Sharon stormed into the dorm like they were advancing on a hostage situation. Sharon had to convince the fuming Brenda to leave her purse in the car, not knowing what sort of implements the Chief had stowed in there. As it was, they were both carrying their badges, Brenda’s clipped conspicuously at her belt, and Sharon’s in a flip case in the back pocket of her jeans. They didn’t know what kind of security they’d encounter when they entered the building, so Brenda had lobbied for the badges as a precaution.

There was what looked like a graduate student manning a small desk in the entryway, but he barely glanced up, even when Brenda flashed her badge. They proceeded to the elevators in silence. Brenda was a little upset with herself for leaving her phone off and charging downstairs, even though it had really only made a difference of about three minutes in someone taking Charlie’s call. Sharon knew that letting Brenda vent her spleen on the young man that was harassing her niece would do a great deal to assuage that angst, and she was prepared to let Brenda scare the shit out of this bro with no boundaries.

The floor that Charlie had directed them to was jumping, but all the noise seemed to be coming from one set of rooms on the hall. Sharon didn’t just knock on the door, she gave it a couple of swift kicks with the motorcycle boots she had pulled on with her jeans, certain the occupants wouldn’t hear a more polite request for entry.

A young man yanked the door open with a cheerful, “Yo!” Then seemed surprised to see two middle aged women standing in the hallway.

“Hey,” he called back in to the raucous interior. “Who ordered the granny strippers?”
Sharon had never heard Brenda growl before (at least not outside the bedroom), but she did then, and looked like she was going to launch herself at the chubby young man in a pair of baggy jeans, so Sharon thrust up a hand to forestall her.

“We’re here for Charlie,” Sharon barked.

“The whiny bitch hired granny strippers!” He crowed. “Not the greatest apology, but I’ll take it. We don’t have a pole or anything, but I’ll take lap dance from the blonde.”

“You’re lucky Chief Raydor here made me leave my gun in the car,” chirped Brenda sweetly, with a vicious grin, pushing past the young man and pointedly stepping on his bare foot with her wooden-soled clog. “Charlie,” she called in to the interior of the suite, ignoring the strange looks from the other young people gathered there. “Charlie?”

Sharon cocked her head at the boy, who whipped his head back and forth between her and Brenda. “You can’t just barge in here like this!” He shouted, taking a threatening step towards Sharon, perhaps trying to keep her from entering.

“Reasonable suspicion is fairly lenient in favor of the police,” stated Sharon evenly, removing her badge from her pocket and flipping it open. “It smells like weed in here to me,” she said, louder now, hoping to catch the attention of someone less belligerent and more intelligent than the young gentleman in front of her.

“Whatever,” he scoffed. “That badge is obviously fake.”

His blustering was interrupted by Charlie emerging from one of the interior rooms with another young woman in tow. While Charlie looked pissed, the new girl’s face was tear streaked, and she was huddled in on herself and miserable seeming. At this point, all 10 or so adolescents in the suite’s common room had redirected their attention to the drama unfolding in their midst, and they were eerily silent, watching as the television continued to blare.

Brenda gathered them up immediately, like a tiny, angry mother hen, extending her arms protectively around their shoulders and ushering them back towards the door.

“Is this the boy who was giving you trouble, Charlie?” the blonde asked, giving Charlie’s shoulder an encouraging squeeze.

“It’s not just me, Aunt Brenda,” Charlie nearly growled. “He’s been giving Kasey a hard time since she moved in last week.”

“Charmin’,” said Brenda with more false sweetness. “You’re just a stellar human bein’, aren’t you?”

Sharon ignored the little pustule for the moment. “Kasey, would you like to come with us for the night?” She offered. “I would be happy to take you where you need to go in the morning. Perhaps to a Dean’s office so they can find you a more suitable place to live.”

Kasey nodded her agreement, surprise registering on a face that looked exhausted, beyond the tears that the little punk, whose face was also transforming with surprise, had caused.

“Hey,” he protested. “It’s not my fault these chicks can’t hang. Coming to LA and then calling mommy when shit goes down.” He shook his head, as if he truly couldn’t believe that the girls would rather leave than put up with his abusive bullshit. Sharon knew the men that boys like this grew in to - amoral, narcissistic jackasses. She would have sooner given the punk a lap dance than leave Charlie or Kasey alone with him and his enabling friends another minute.
“Go pack a few things,” she murmured to the stranger who was going to be spending a night in her home. “Then we can get out of here.”

Sharon resisted the urge to gloat about the potential havoc she could wreak on this disgusting little prat’s disgusting little life. Maybe, after helping Kasey deal with collegiate bureaucracy, she would be feeling generous and only report him to the admissions office, so no more unsuspecting visitors would get dumped into this suite for an overnight visit. Perhaps after hearing exactly what he had done to Charlie and Kasey, Sharon would have his car towed to police impound at every opportunity for the next year. That, or let Brenda deal with him.
Chapter 47

Charlie received a gentle wakeup from Sharon at around 8:30.

"Sorry," the older woman apologized. "I got us an appointment with a dean at 10."

Charlie groaned. "It's fine, it's fine, just…" She scrubbed a hand over her face; Sharon was awake and dressed like she'd stepped out of an Armani ad, but for her bare feet. She smirked, though her words took the sting out of the expression.

"There's coffee downstairs. And I'll fix you something to eat, if you like."

"Kay. Scrambled eggs?"

"Not a problem. Would you wake Kasey and ask her what she would like?"

"Mmmmmmm," Charlie assented, thinking about scrambled eggs and hot, milky coffee, not really hearing what Sharon was asking of her.

"Charlene Johnson," Sharon warned in a playful version of a mom voice. "Don't make me come in there."

"Yes'm," Charlie muttered, already halfway back to dreamland, visions of hot breakfast dancing in her head.

"I swear, you're worse than Brenda Leigh." Sharon took two steps, grasped the end of the soft duvet that covered the bed, and yanked it down. Charlie squawked and sat up jerkily, blinking in consternation at her aunt's partner.

"Hey!"

"I'm sorry, I know you had a late night, but we're on a schedule. I would like to be able to help Kasey before I have to go back to the office."

"Ugh, it's hard to be annoyed with you when you insist on being so NICE," Charlie grumbled. Sharon let out a genuine laugh, then offered Charlie a little moue of apology before turning to leave the room.

It was hard to stay even mildly upset when Sharon was so genuinely helpful. After their first encounter in the car on the way home, Charlie had expected Sharon to be a little reserved. She was nurturing, easy going, and a little goofy, and encouraged the same in her aunt, and as a result, there was no resentment festering over Brenda's obsession with murder or her lack of interest in all things domestic. Brenda seemed happy with the quiet nights they'd had so far - dinner in, dinner out, relaxed conversation, relaxing with a good movie or a book - though storming to Charlie's rescue had most definitely been right up her alley. And of course, Sharon had in her favor her abilities in the kitchen; Fritz Howard had certainly never made her a hot breakfast to order.

Waking Kasey up was easy as she was sitting up in bed when Charlie knocked and opened the door. She felt a little awkward now that the tension of the night before was over, but Kasey was a nice girl, even if she was a little more quiet than the type of person that Charlie surrounded herself with.

"Hey," Charlie said - the greeting universal among people her age.
"Hey."

"Sharon's gonna make us breakfast - we have an appointment at the university at 10."

"An appointment?" Kasey looked vaguely alarmed.

Charlie could only shrug, because she didn't know the details. "I dunno, but I do know that Sharon won't leave you alone with that creep again, ok? And neither would my aunt."

"Ok?" Agreed Kasey, but she sounded unsure.

"Trust me." She jerked her head a little, indicating the hallway, and said: "Come on, Sharon's an awesome cook."

Sharon illuminated her plan for the meeting as she cooked eggs - scrambled for Charlie (with some cheddar melted in), and over easy on an English muffin for Kasey.

"I have some experience twisting the arms of collegiate bureaucrats," she said a little smugly. "I'm confident I can get you into a different living situation, if that's what you would like."

Kasey nodded, wide-eyed.

"I don't know if the school has disciplinary procedures in place for such behavior as you've been experiencing, but we can ask, but I don't want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"I want to report him," Charlie interjected. "Especially since you and Aunt Brenda witnessed the shit he was saying."

"We'll make sure no other visiting students end up overnighting in his room, but Charlie, Kasey is the one who lives on campus and might have to have further interactions with this young man. She needs to feel comfortable with the course of action she decides on."

"I guess," grumbled Charlie into her massive mug of coffee. "Can we at least send Julio to tail him a while and make him really nervous?"

"As the head of the Professional Standards Bureau, I can't condone extra-legal police activity," Sharon hedged, "but you should ask your aunt."

Charlie didn't know that she'd ever seen anyone actually stalk before, but that was the only way to describe the way Sharon walked into the administration building, with Sharon and Kasey walking quickly behind her.

"She's kinda scary like this," Kasey whispered, looking around nervously, like someone would be eavesdropping.

"It's a cop thing," Charlie reassured her. "My aunt can turn it on and off, too."

"Do cops usually dress like the defense attorneys on Law and Order?"

"No, no, that's all Sharon. They seem to prefer bad sport coats and roomy pants. And my aunt dresses like an Atlanta housewife circa 1998, but with more cleavage."

That got a laugh out of Kasey, which is what Charlie had been going for.

"She didn't look like a southern belle last night," Kasey observed.
"Some of its an affectation; criminals see a tiny blonde woman with a pronounced drawl in a floral skirt, and she's got 'em snowed even before they realize she isn't an idiot."

"How do you know all this?"

"I was hanging around one summer a few years ago and got to watch a few cases." She shrugged. "It was pretty cool."

Kasey pursed her lips and mused: "I don't think I'd like that."

"I wouldn't want to do what she does full time." Conceded Charlie.

Unlike Charlie's previous experiences with collegiate bureaucracy, they were ushered into an office as soon as Sharon gave her name to the woman sitting at the computer in the waiting room. The man behind the desk - Mark Langston (Associate Dean of Students) - looked young and confident. Charlie wondered how long that was going to last. She imagined that going up against a woman who had spent her career squeezing information from uncooperative cops probably wouldn't end favorably for this dude, even if he didn't know it yet.
Chapter 48

It took Sharon a mere seven minutes to have Mr. Mark Langston calling his boss in frustration. She had refused to accept the bureaucratic party line that the man was feeding her, and was uninterested in the school attempting to cover it's ass by requiring mediation and documentation and witnesses in order to grant someone a new dorm assignment.

Charlie wondered what Langston was thinking; Sharon responded evenly to every one of his assertions and obfuscations, snorted at his attempts to by proxy-gaslight both Charlie and Kasey. She didn't say much or attempt to counter him, just let him talk and talk, clearly waiting for something - him calling someone who wasn't an 'assistant' anything was probably it. Muffling a smile, Charlie flipped a few candies in Candy Crush, eyeing Kasey, who appeared to be reviewing digital notes from the winter-mester class she was enrolled in. She guessed Kasey wasn't as amused by Sharon's antics as she was, but then again, Charlie was aware her own sense of humor was a little off; maybe irking 'the man' wasn't everyone's idea of a good time - though in this case, that it was 'the man' making 'the man' want to tear his own hair out was just that much sweeter. It was a rumble of the authority figures, and the one she was starting to really like seemed to be winning.

The boss that Langston had summoned was a woman maybe her aunt's age, who looked busy, like she had maybe fifteen other places she'd rather be. Langston stood to introduce them, but only managed to remember Sharon's name. Monica Naples shook Sharon's hand and looked curiously around the room, like she couldn't fathom how her underling couldn't deal with this genteel appearing woman and two quiet young women.

Unfortunately, the boss started out with the same party line that Langston had been toeing. "I know that it can be difficult for someone outside of the campus community to understand our way of doing things, but we have found that our procedures for addressing grievances and changing living arrangements to be the most effective way of dealing with conflict."

Sharon made a humming noise, as if she agreed, then quirked her lips. "Look, I know CYA when I see it. I've spent the past twenty-five years mired in obstructionist policies designed to make transparency meaningless and protect an organization from liability at the expense of individuals and their well-being."

The two representatives of the university didn't say anything, but shared a quick look, full of meaning, that Charlie caught. This was fascinating; there was no way she was going to be able to look away.

"Now, Internal Affairs for the LAPD is my day job. But as a parent, my daughter had less than favorable run in with the administration after an incident of sexual harassment involving a member of a campus fraternity who shared classes with her for a few semesters."

The Dean interjected. "That's completely different…" but Sharon cut her off.

"Yes, it is different. My daughter could escape her harrasser - her dorm was a safe haven, and her professors could control their interaction in the classroom, to some extent at least. Kasey has no safe haven; she does not feel safe in her own home." Sharon stressed.

"If that is the case," Dean Naples began placatingly, "our process will uncover the truth and the situation will be remedied."

"And in the mean time, while you talk to friends and suggest mediation and tell everyone to just get
along, this young woman will be forced to live with the young man who is harassing her. That sounds like an excellent policy." Sharon pursed her lips, and turned a sad-eyed glance towards Kasey. "In fact, I can't think of a policy less likely to encourage students to report stressful or scary living situations than one that requires them to repeatedly face the person they are in conflict with, in an environment that is rife with potential for recrimination and further abuse."

"We merely wish to minimize false accusations of misconduct, and make sure both sides have a chance to air any grievances they might have."

Charlie had to roll her eyes at that line of BS. Sharon merely raised an eyebrow, but then again, she was more diplomatic than Charlie was.

"Well, as an officer of the court, I'm willing here and now, to swear that I witnessed harassment against not only Kasey, but my niece and my wife as well. My wife, also an officer of the court, is willing to swear to the same, in addition to threatening gestures made towards me. After I identified myself as a police officer, I might add."

"That is a rather serious accusation," Dean Naples finally conceded.

"So, on the one hand," Sharon purred, sounding a little dangerous now. "You could have the LAPD hauling a student off campus in order to question him about threatening not one, but two, Deputy Chiefs. Plus a report filed to this university's Title IX compliance coordinator, seeing as how sexual harassment is a violation of the Federal Education Act of 1972. And you had better believe that any additional harassment will be documented and appended to the complaint, and the Office of Civil Rights notified. On the other hand, you could ask Kasey here what it would take to make her feel safe and comfortable in her living space and on this campus and we can wrap this up in a day or two."

Now Charlie understood Sharon's strategy. In order to avoid federal attention, and get Sharon off their collective asses, the school would have to find Kasey a new place to live before any investigation could take place.

The two collegiate bureaucrats, instead of asking any questions themselves, turned to look at Kasey, perhaps expecting her to waffle or cave under their combined scrutiny. But Kasey, as quiet as she was, had some steel in her, at least she did when Sharon had her back.

"I just want to live somewhere quiet, without anyone who's going to call me names for their own entertainment," she stated firmly. "I don't care about an official complaint or about him getting in trouble; I just want to get out of that suite."

As they left the administration building, Charlie thought that Sharon's self-satisfied smirk was a bit ridiculous, but she supposed it was warranted. Kasey would have her own room - a single in a quiet, upper classman's dorm - by Monday. She would be staying with Sharon until her room was ready. Tonight they'd help her pack up what was left in the suite.

"Call when your class is over, and we'll figure out how to get you back to the house, ok?" Sharon paused by a circle of benches under a few shade trees. Kasey nodded, tugging a strand of dark hair back from her face against the pull of the hot summer breeze.

"And don't, under any circumstances, go back to that suite without us, ok?"

Kasey nodded again, then flung herself abruptly at Sharon, hugging her. There were tears in her eyes - maybe of relief - and she sort of melted against the older woman. Charlie turned away to give them a little privacy; Kasey had had a rough few weeks, and sometimes a kid just needed a
hug from a mother figure.
Unfortunately for Brenda, her morning didn’t involve playing hero for a scared, grateful teenage girl. In fact, at about the same time that Sharon was rousting her collegiate opponents, Brenda was facing down a foe of her own. Returning to her office after an interview, she found Chief of Police William Evans Pope waiting. Sitting in her chair, in fact.

“Chief Pope, what can I do for you today?” Brenda asked with all the false cheer she could muster. She really had no idea what had brought him down here; the case they were working wasn’t one that intersected with someone on Pope’s ‘high profile’ list, so he had no reason to bug Brenda about her current investigation.

He leaned back in her chair, steepling his fingers beneath his chin and narrowing his eyes at her, perhaps attempting to be intimidating, but to Brenda, ‘self-important’ and ‘manifestly ridiculous’ were more accurate descriptors.

“What you can do for me is to stop using my command staff as babysitters for your family - whatever you’re holding over Chief Raydor’s head, or however you twisted her arm, it needs to stop. Your job is not more important than her job, and if you can’t handle people visiting you, perhaps you should stop allowing them to visit.”

Brenda’s jaw wanted to drop, but she didn’t let it. She wasn’t going to let Pope get to her with petty bullshit - and speaking of petty bullshit, did he really think she would strong arm Sharon into playing chauffeur for Charlie? Did he really think Sharon would knuckle under like that? If so, he didn’t have a very high opinion of either of them, which was more than a little concerning.

“Excuse me?” She couldn’t wait to hear what came out of his mouth next.

“Sharon Raydor is not one of your ’boys’ and it is completely inappropriate for her to be running your errands instead of doing her job.”

Brenda was torn; she and Sharon had planned to tell Pope about their relationship this very week, but they had planned to do it together. Her mind was working triple time, attempting to calculate the risk of leaving Pope hanging with no explanation, versus explicitly going against what she and Sharon had discussed. She narrowed her eyes in contemplation, gratified when Pope sat up straighter - it was nice to know that the threat of her getting peeved at him still held a little weight. Sharon was definitely more likely to forgive her, especially if Brenda used her words and explained the situation - Sharon was very reasonable like that. Pope was less reasonable, and even Brenda’s best effort at using her words could still result in him having a major meltdown about the fact that Brenda and Sharon were lovers, and married, and committed to one another despite whatever Pope wanted to throw at them.

“Will, Sharon volunteered to help Charlie and a friend with somethin’ this morning. Not only would I never strong-arm Sharon into somethin’ like that, but you should know that.”

“I know that you have a tendency to use the people in your life to do the things you have no interest in doing. Inexplicably, Sharon Raydor has allowed herself to be manipulated, and it needs to stop.”

If this were a cartoon, Brenda imagined there would be steam shooting from her ears in furious spurts. Yes, perhaps her track record wasn’t the greatest in regards to treating other people’s jobs with the respect they deserved, but she had been cooperating with Sharon and FID since well before Sharon’s promotion and transfer, and Will knew that.
“Will,” Brenda began, keeping her voice as steady as she could manage. “I can assure you that I am not manipulating anyone. Sharon offered to help Charlie because she was disturbed by the conditions that the university put Charlie and another young woman in - we got a late night phone call because they were both scared by a young man living in the suite where Charlie was spending the night, and it disturbed both of us.”

“Late night phone call?” Will echoed dully, like he wasn’t comprehending the words coming out of Brenda’s mouth - or the pronouns.

Brenda supposed she should just rip the band-aid off and say it; tip-toeing around reality wouldn’t make Will’s reaction any better.

“Sharon and I are married, Will. She’s part of my family now, and I’m not manipulating her or any other such thing.”

Will was silent for a long, torturous moment, not turning red like Brenda had expected him to. Instead all the blood seemed to drain from his face. Utterly unfamiliar with this reaction, Brenda tensed, not knowing if she was preparing to flee or to lunge for the phone and call for EMTs if her boss stroked out in her office. She had the brief, ugly thought that Will corking it would solve this problem.

“Married,” Will choked out, his voice flat and devoid of any emotion that Brenda could discern.

“Domestic partners, yes,” confirmed Brenda, not wanting to share that she thought of Sharon as her wife, as Sharon did her. She did not feel comfortable with giving any more detail - Will was her boss, and it was time he stopped getting bent out of shape about her personal life, which had been none of his business for two decades at this point.

“You married a woman. Who you hated for years and obstructed and tormented professionally in every way you could manage.”

Fighting to keep her expression neutral, Brenda remained silent. She had never hated Sharon, and she had certainly tormented others with far more frequency, but she didn’t imagine that Will would really process anything she had to say. He was mad and blindsided, and Brenda had to do her best to not provoke him into acting rashly and doing something that would cause even more drama in their lives.

“I want so badly to fire you right now,” he said, suddenly long suffering, and Brenda nearly snarled, wanting to point out every ill advised romantic relationship the esteemed Chief of Police had gotten himself in to. He couldn’t fire her, though, not without cause.

After his elevation from interim Chief, Pope had instituted a policy that prevented anyone ranked Commander or above from being transferred, demoted or fired without the approval of the Police Commissioners - apparently the restructuring Delk had begun during his short term had really scared him, which Brenda understood, and it had certainly been a load off her mind when Sharon pointed out to her that with Sharon’s promotion, neither of them were in danger of an immediate firing; Will would have to convince the Police Commissioners of any wrong doing on her or Sharon’s part for them to get the axe. Sharon was also mostly certain that the Police Commissioners already knew that the two of them were involved, as some of them (or their spouses) frequented the same charities and charity events as some of the shelter’s benefactors - the Commissioners probably assumed that Will knew what was going on between his command staff.

In terms of what he could do to them that was above board, Pope was fairly impotent, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t scheme; that was what Brenda was afraid of, and she intended to head him
off before he did anything rash.

“All we want is to be left alone to do our jobs, Will.” Brenda kept her voice firm - she couldn’t let him see that she was sweating this. “We followed protocol, notified the proper people, and set up contingencies in the event our investigations overlapped.”

“Notified the proper…” he spluttered. “You are fucking one of my command staff and didn’t notify me!” In the course of that single sentence, whatever composure remained in Will had left him, and Brenda saw his anger for what it really was: jealousy. She nearly laughed, but maintained her neutral mask.

“As a Captain, Sharon was never under my direct command, so neither of us were required to notify our direct superiors.”

“God, you even sound like her now! I guess you weren’t required to notify me, Brenda, but its called common fucking courtesy.”

He gave her a long, hard look, then pushed up and out of her chair. “I can’t deal with this right now,” he stated, then stormed out of her office.

It was an incomplete relief that Brenda felt as the pompous jerk who was her boss disappeared from her Murder Room. Round one had been fought - it was over - but Brenda didn’t know if there would be a round 2, or what further conflict would entail. She knew she had to call Sharon.
Listening to Brenda trying to hold back nervous tears over the phone made Sharon exceptionally angry, even after Brenda had assured her that she was alright, pushing through the fear that she felt regarding the situation. Marching over to Pope’s office and giving him what for wouldn’t help the situation, but after the morning she’d had, she was in that kind of mood - plus, it would help her to sublimate the terror that Brenda losing her job would cause Sharon to lose Brenda. She knew it wasn’t rational, and Brenda spent time and energy attempting to soothe Sharon’s fears, but her history had scarred her, deeply.

“Brenda,” she said softly in a husky tone she knew had to sound full of tears. “Brenda, it’s going to be ok.”

“Of course it will be!” Brenda exclaimed, sounding peeved that Sharon would dare to suggest otherwise. Then she tempered her tone: “I came so close to losing my job last year, Sharon, and for something less than savory that I had done, and that I am not proud of - this is a different situation, and if Pope decides to react poorly, that’s on him. We’ve done nothing wrong, and I’m not giving you up for anything - I’m just worked up, is all.”

Sharon felt her face flush in pleasure at Brenda’s vehemence. Somehow the fact that Brenda was a little peeved that Sharon could suggest otherwise just made her that much happier.

“Sharon, baby, I love you.”

“I love you too, Brenda Leigh.”

“He might come sniffin’ around your office, so be ready.”

“I’ll try. If I murder him in a fit of pique, you’ll help me hide the body, right?”

“Course I would! I almost asked you the same thing.”

Satisfied for the moment, they said their goodbyes and went back to work. The possibility of Pope appearing in her doorway kept Sharon on edge all day, but he never showed his face. By quitting time, Sharon was exhausted and her nerves were frazzled - she was more than ready to head home to Brenda and having a relaxing dinner with her and Charlie and Kasey. Maybe she would take them out to dinner - somewhere they would be pampered and catered to.

Brenda knew chicken-fried steak awaited her as soon as she walked in the front door. Her stomach rumbled in response to the delicious smells wafting from the kitchen.

“Dinner in about twenty minutes, Aunt Brenda!” Charlie called from the back of the house. She sighed happily and made for the stairs - she loved chicken fried steak and greens. So much salt. So much fat. So, so yummy.

She was half out of her work clothes when Sharon slipped in to the bedroom, and Brenda slipped herself in to Sharon’s arms. Brenda didn’t fear Sharon’s rejection or that her partner would be consternated with her - it was a wonder what a little communication could do for the health of a relationship.

“Are you doin’ alright, baby?” She whispered, hoping the threat of Pope hadn’t made Sharon’s day too stressful. Her tendency to worry about Sharon’s tendency to worry was oddly comforting, and maybe a little codependent, but Brenda figured that so long as they didn’t start losing individual
identity, it wasn’t a huge deal. It could be that her idea of co-dependence was the really their relationship in a healthy state.

“I’m alright. A bit concerned that Pope is going to work up a head of steam instead of getting his bullshit out of his system, but there’s not much that can be done about that.” Brenda pursed her lips in a moue of agreement, and sighed.

“Yea, I’m surprised he didn’t come put the screws to you after leavin’ my office.” Sharon hummed in what Brenda assumed was relief and tightened her grip around Brenda. Brenda couldn’t help but echo that sentiment, and squeezed Sharon right back.

“We’re professionally prepared for whatever he decides to pull, Brenda Leigh, and we have each other,” Sharon whispered, and it was almost a plea.

“Always, Shari,” Brenda vowed. “I’m not goin’ anywhere, baby.”

Dinner was amazing, and Charlie and Brenda had a good laugh at Sharon’s exaggerated search for any sign of brownies - though Charlie’s cheeks were painted red with embarrassment.

“After we retire, you can come make us a big batch of pot brownies,” Sharon promised, surprising them all and causing Brenda to splutter in shock.

“Is this really Deputy Chief Sharon Raydor talkin’?” She crowed. “Strictest, most rule-abiding cop on the force?”

“It’s just pot, Brenda Leigh,” scoffed Sharon. “And by the time we retire, I would bet on legal avenues of recreational enjoyment. Or I could fake glaucoma,” she joked, and shrugged airily.

Brenda broke down into helpless laughter. It seemed like every day Sharon charmed her even more, and Brenda fell just a little bit more in love with her. Even in the depths of her infatuation with the other woman, she never imagined that Sharon would be so funny and ridiculous and sweet and that they would mesh so well with one another.

Charlie felt a little bit bad about leaving Kasey alone with her aunt and Sharon and going back to Atlanta, but it couldn’t be helped. She was due to leave tomorrow, early Sunday morning (at least early for the west coast), and Kasey’s new room wasn’t going to be ready until Monday. And Charlie was sure, as much as the university had hated being made to provide said room, someone somewhere would drag their feet. She pitied that someone, because Sharon and her aunt were definitely a force to be reckoned with. But the facts were that Kasey would have to spend at least one night by herself with Brenda and Sharon, and the girl was so reserved that Charlie was unsure if she truly felt comfortable with the situation. Although she felt confident in Sharon’s (especially Sharon’s) ability to make Kasey feel at ease, Charlie couldn’t help but feel a bit responsible. She sighed, folding a t-shirt and placing it neatly in the bag in front of her. She supposed these feelings of responsibility were what came of growing up - it was certainly easier to be selfish and childish, but as it turned out, she really wasn’t.

The introspective musings about her newly adult perspective were interrupted by a figure darkening the doorway to the guest room; her aunt, obviously wanting to chat. It was kind of cute how Brenda had a hard time just up and saying that she wanted to talk to you, and would just hover until you got the message or couldn’t ignore her anymore. When Charlie was younger, the habit had annoyed her because she was used to grown-ups being more direct, but after observing Brenda at work, bossing everyone around with absolutely no compunctions about propriety, her reticence
to have personal conversations had become endearing.

“Hey, Aunt Brenda,” she said, by way of invitation. Brenda accepted that invitation, entering the room and plopping herself down on the bed, opposite Charlie’s suitcase. She smiled at Charlie, a little sad.

“I don’t think I’m ready for you to go home quite yet,” she murmured, and Charlie grinned back, a little sad herself.

“Me neither,” she said truthfully. She liked being here - Brenda and Sharon treated her like she was the responsible young adult she wanted to be, unlike her parents, who used every past indiscretion as a reason to keep her under close watch. They also fought constantly; this small house in Los Angeles was downright peaceful by comparison, filled with the noise of genial conversation and laughter. “But hopefully I’ll be back - and for a good long while.”

Brenda nodded in genuine agreement. “I hope so, too. Even if I have to come to campus and glare at nasty boys every day of the week, I want you to come here.”

“I think once you scared off one or two, the rest would get the message,” Charlie joked, and was rewarded with a wrinkle-nosed smile.

“If they’re smart…”

“I dunno if we could accuse many college-age dudes of being smart.”

Brenda laughed outright at that. “Too true.”

“Thanks for taking care of me and Kasey the other night,” Charlie blurted; the thought had just occurred to her that she hadn’t yet prostrated herself in front of her aunt and Sharon for rescuing her. “I dunno what we would have done without you two.”

“Well, we were happy to be the calvary, Charlie, but I’m sure you would have gotten yourself out of there were it necessary.”

“Yea, but it was nice to get your help with no strings attached. My parents would have chewed me out for getting myself into that situation in the first place, and then for calling and waking them up.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie-girl.” Brenda sympathized with a little moue of her lips. “Your grandparents could be the same way, if it makes you feel any better. I was more likely to call Junior to help me out if a party went wrong when I was in high school.”

“Really?”

“Yea,” said Brenda, a bit morose. “Double standard - its worse because we’re girls.” She chuckled at Charlie’s fierce grimace. “You’re doin’ just fine, Charlie. Really.”

“Sometimes I think so, then something like the other day happens and I don’t know. I guess I’ve been guilted into believing that I should somehow be able to know beforehand when other people are going to behave badly.”

Her aunt didn’t say anything in response, just gave a commiserating sort of sigh, looking as though her thoughts had just taken her elsewhere. Impulsively, Charlie leaned across the bed to give her an awkward half-hug, for whatever was bothering her, and because at least one of the adults in her life thought she was doing ok.
Chapter 51

Kasey listened to a nerve-wracking phone call during one of her breaks from class. Housing was letting her know that her new room wasn’t yet ready due to an unanticipated repaint. The last third of the class passed in a blur as Kasey’s mind was occupied with her living situation. She was at the mercy of two near strangers, unless she wanted to go back to her old room and her old roommate, who by now had to know that she’d gone to the Dean’s office about his behavior, even if he wasn’t going to be officially sanctioned.

She had to call Sharon and tell her, even if just the thought of that phone call made her stomach twist with anticipatory nervousness. Even if Sharon wasn’t willing to let her hang around another night.

Excusing herself from the group of new acquaintances that made up her study group, Kasey found a quiet alcove between the classroom and the library to make her phone call. She dialed the cell number Sharon had given her (Sharon had just given it to her that first morning, and told her to call if she needed anything at all), and held her breath.

“Raydor,” answered a crisp, marginally familiar voice. This was the Sharon that had gone up against the Dean, not the Sharon that giggled with Brenda and Charlie and Kasey, eating late night brownies straight out of the pan.

“Uh, hi. It’s Kasey,” she managed, intimidated by the fierce professionalism in those two syllables.

“Kasey!” Sharon exclaimed, her tone softening. “Is everything ok? Do you need a ride?”

Kasey blushed at herself, embarrassed that she’d thought that Sharon would be anything but concerned for her, and helpful.

“No, thank you,” she said, more confident now. “One of my study group will give me a ride in exchange for lunch. But I got a call from housing about my room.”

“Oh? Bad news?” Sharon clearly knew the ways of the collegiate bureaucracy.

“Well, sort of. They had to paint the whole room, so they want to give it a night to dry before I move in.”

“That’s ok with me,” said Sharon placatingly in her smooth voice. “So long as you’re comfortable staying with us another night.”

Kasey had enjoyed the nights she had spent at Sharon and Brenda’s; even last night without Charlie as a buffer had been fine - quiet and relaxed. Dinner from Sharon’s kitchen was head and shoulders above what she could get from the dining hall, and there had even been a made-to-order omelet for her this morning. If she hadn’t made arrangements to eat a late lunch with her study-buddy, she would have packed a meal of last night’s salmon and rice.

“I have no complaints, but I don’t want to be a problem for you and Brenda,” demurred Kasey.

“Please. You’re the least conspicuous house guest we’ve ever had. And no way are you going back to that suite unless its to clear out your things.”

“Yes m’am,” agreed Kasey out of habit.
Sounding playful, Sharon said: “You’re stuck with us now!”

Somehow, Kasey was okay with that.

Kasey was less glad to be ‘stuck’ with two maternally-driven temporary housemates when she walked through the front door that had been kindly left open for her. Her new friend had wanted to know more about her, as new friends are wont to do, so Kasey had been obliged to recount at least the bare minimum of the last six, painful months.

Her mother had died. Been killed, actually, by a drunk driver on her way home from teaching an evening class at the community college six miles from their house. And now that she was in tears on the threshold of someone else’s house after some simple, innocent questions, it occurred to her that perhaps in those months when she was taking care of her family and facilitating their grieving process, she didn’t allow herself to mourn the loss of her mother.

Brenda and Sharon were visible in the kitchen, Sharon’s arms around Brenda, the two of them nose to nose and totally intent on one another until they heard the door close behind her. There was no escaping now, they were both looking at her, an expression of worry already transforming Sharon’s face.

“What’s wrong,” she asked simply, in a voice that oozed concern. Kasey shook her head mutely, not wanting to speak until she had herself under control. She didn’t want to be under control; she wanted to wail and fling herself into Sharon’s arms because she knew Sharon would comfort her, mother her like she needed, but Kasey knew she would feel terrible afterwards, like she had betrayed the woman who had birthed her, and then died. So she did her best to keep her cool.

Sharon pursed her lips, but said, “Dinner isn’t for another hour, if you’d like some time for yourself.”

Kasey nodded gratefully and made for the stairs; she didn’t know if Sharon and Brenda would push for an explanation for her tears later, but for now, she needed the reprieve.

Brenda and Sharon had agreed that they wouldn’t push Kasey for details of why she was upset. It was hard for Sharon, and even harder for Brenda, who needed to know everything, and was action oriented. She was convinced that the young man from the other night had been hassling their new friend, and was ready to take a taser and frog march the obnoxious bro around campus. While the fantasy was entertaining, regardless of who had upset Kasey, Brenda didn’t need an arrest for assault on her record.

So they cooked, and waited, and hoped that Kasey would come to dinner and get whatever was bothering her off her chest, if she needed to. The hour passed enjoyably for the two of them, at least. Sharon finished off dinner, while Brenda chatted with her about their days, and be-bopped around to the soft music she had put on the speakers, seemingly carefree. Sharon’s worries certainly faded to the background - barely audible white noise in the happiness she and Brenda had carved out for themselves.

They were both relieved when they heard Kasey’s feet on the stairs. Brenda shot Sharon a significant look, like she was reminding Sharon not to mess up or something. Sharon shot her a raised eyebrow, and in response, Brenda stuck her chin out obstinately, then grinned. They were cute, it was a fact.

Kasey shuffled into the kitchen, shoulders hunched like she was trying to avoid being noticed.

“We’re havin’ salmon with rice,” Brenda chirped, sounding almost psychotically cheerful. Sharon
rolled her eyes; apparently her little blonde wife was constitutionally incapable of playing it cool. She was still adorable, though.

Kasey managed a bare smile for Brenda’s weirdness, which was something, at least. “It smells good,” she said softly.

“Have a seat,” murmured Sharon. “Would you like something besides water to drink?”

“No, thank you. Water is fine.” Kasey managed to be unfailing polite, regardless of what else was happening in her life - Sharon like that about her.

They all sat, passing around the steaming plates of food in congenial, hungry silence. Brenda ended up with a heaping plate - the amount of rice on her plate was truly impressive. Licking her lips in anticipation, she tucked in. So did Kasey. To Sharon, such obvious enjoyment of her cooking was the best compliment she could receive, and she allowed herself a small smile before picking up her own fork.

Sharon and Kasey both finished before Brenda, and they both sat, watching Brenda plow through a second serving of fish and rice. Kasey seemed a little in awe; Sharon was noticing that this was a common theme among those who watched the truly tiny woman go at a meal.

“How was class?” Sharon asked, hoping that the innocent inquiry could lead to Kasey opening up about what had upset her earlier. She could practically see Brenda’s ears perk up, though she continued to feed the monster that was her appetite.

“It was ok. We have a test Thursday, so we got a study group together today to start preparing.”

“That’s very responsible of you,” praised Sharon, looking to put Kasey at ease. “Is this course in your perspective major?”

Kasey nodded shyly. “I like biology. I don’t know what I want to do with it, though.”

“You have time,” Sharon assured her. “And options. And you’re certainly not locked into anything, even if you graduate with a degree in something! I spent three years in law school, and I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve been in a court room since!”

Kasey just gaped at her. To an 18 year old, spending three years in law school and then not practicing as a lawyer probably seemed absolutely insane, but Sharon knew she wouldn’t love it, and she didn’t want clients to suffer from her dislike of the profession. Not that she didn’t use what she learned, and employ her skills to the benefit of the shelter, but practicing full-time as a lawyer was not for her.

“I think what Sharon’s sayin’,” Brenda jumped in helpfully, “is that you should do what you love. You should study what you love, too. I have a masters degree in slavic languages, and I very rarely use that in my job, but my degrees taught me how to use my brain.”

“My dad is pretty critical of liberal arts majors,” Kasey said, making a face. “He’s an engineer and thinks college should prepare you for a specific career.”

“My dad thought the same thing, ’till I got a job with the CIA,” replied Brenda sassily. Sharon chuckled, and Kasey smiled.

“That would probably keep him off my back after graduation, but four years of him harping on me for getting a language degree or whatever? I dunno if it’s worth it.”
“There are always minors, and electives,” Sharon soothed. “Or double majors.”

“Overachiever,” groaned Brenda, with an eye roll for Sharon. Kasey giggled at that, smiling down at her empty plate.

“There’s nothing wrong with being studious,” sniffed Sharon primly, her eyes twinkling with poorly hidden humor.

“I’m not sayin’ you’re a nerd, baby,” Brenda began, then trailed off when Sharon’s lip curled slightly.

The silence spread into something congenial and contemplative as Brenda cleared her plate, and sat her fork down with a satisfied groan.

“My mom liked the arts,” said Kasey softly into the quiet. “Literature and drama. She taught at the community college in my home town.”

Sharon glanced at Brenda, seeking out her eyes. She knew the interminably inquisitive and preternaturally observant woman would have caught the past tense in Kasey’s statement. Their gazes met, and Sharon also knew that Brenda wouldn’t go at Kasey like a dog with a bone - whatever her other faults, Brenda was excellent at letting someone talk when they had something to get off their chest.

Kasey told them all about her mother; how she was a teacher at heart, even when she was a stay-at-home mom, how excited she was to go back to work, and how much she had loved her job, even with the apathetic teenagers that were a large portion of her students. And she told them about how she had died, crushed in her car by some guy, drunk out of his mind, who had walked away with a few bruises.

By the end of Kasey’s story, they were all teary-eyed; Sharon was doing that empathetic head tilt thing that made Brenda want to wrap her up in a hug. Despite her tears, Kasey seemed lighter somehow, like talking had taken some of the weight off her shoulders.

“This is why you were upset earlier?” Brenda asked gently.

“Yea. I haven’t talked about her much since… It just upset my dad, and my brothers and sisters. Even talking about happy memories. And my friends didn’t know how to talk to me about anything, let alone my mom.”

“Someone else’s grief can be hard to understand,” Sharon commiserated, “especially for young people.”

Brenda nodded in agreement. “I see it often enough - grief can appear completely alien from the outside, lookin’ in.”

Before their discussion about death and grief with Kasey, Sharon had been in the mood. The mood that Brenda had started to inflame as soon as she had gotten home, with touches and glances and sheer brazen flirtation. They had danced these steps dozens of times, and yet, each time was different, and Sharon couldn’t fathom ever tiring of any of it. Brenda was like quicksilver, spreading a heat through her veins that was thrilling and addictive, whether they were in the midst of a passionate encounter or cuddling on the couch, like they had wordlessly decided to do after cleaning the kitchen. Kasey had retreated to the guest room, lost in thought, but not as sad as she had seemed when she had arrived at the house, leaving Sharon and Brenda to their druthers.

Brenda was currently engaged in some serious octopus-mode cuddling; tucked behind Sharon’s
knees, both arms wrapped around her waist in a sort of sideways hug that couldn’t be comfortable, but Brenda favored anyway. If she was a cat, Brenda would be purring. Sharon, too, probably.

Friday’s Daily Show was finishing up on the TV; Sharon was tuning out the moment of zen to focus on the feeling of Brenda pressed up against her, and being wrapped in the blonde’s slender grasp. Brenda seemed to realize that Sharon’s attention had turned to her; she smiled and kissed Sharon’s shoulder.

“Mmmmm.” Sharon hummed at the contact, wanting more than the press of lips through clothing. “Wanna make out, Ms. Johnson?” She asked, with a coy grin.

“Duh, Ms. Raydor,” Brenda answered with a giggle. She immediately rose up on her knees and threw a leg over Sharon, prompting Sharon to shift so Brenda could perch comfortably on her lap. Brenda giggled again, a smile lighting brown eyes that were suddenly very close, and very, very bewitching.

Sharon moved first, and Brenda met her half-way, and they kissed gently, just a whisper, before Brenda lost her cool and bore down, pressing Sharon in to the sofa with her body and moaning. Sharon’s hands reflexively gripped at Brenda’s waist, marveling at the lithe, energetic form of the woman who loved her.

Brenda was a very active make-out partner; there was no cold-fish syndrome here. She wriggled, she wraggled, she tangled her fingers in Sharon’s hair, trailed them down her neck, cupped her shoulders, and spread her hands across Sharon’s chest. She avoided Sharon’s breasts, but Sharon knew what Brenda wanted, and arched her back, pressing her tits in to hands that knew exactly how to drive her wild.

Brenda chuckled. “Eager much?” She rasped throatily, quietly. “You’re gonna have to be quiet, and we both know how you struggle with that.”

“Your fault entirely,” purred Sharon, giving Brenda’s tight rear a teasing pinch. “Besides, I thought we were just making out here.”

“So, you’re sayin’ you don’t want me to put my hands down your pants?”

Sharon feigned a considering expression, stalling for a few seconds, which elicited a growl from Brenda. Now who was eager?

“Well, if you’re offering...”

Brenda growled again, her eyes narrowing. “I’ll show you offering.” She kissed Sharon ferociously, her teeth nipping briefly at Sharon’s lower lip, before her tongue swept in to Sharon’s mouth. A hand plucked deftly at the tie of her drawstring pants, and fingers wormed expertly beneath the elastic of her underwear, then scratched through her pubic hair.

At the first touch of Brenda’s finger on her clit, Sharon moaned. Loudly. The noise was muffled somewhat by Brenda’s lips on hers, but she needed to at least attempt to be quiet.

“Shhhh,” hissed Brenda, as if she knew the direction of Sharon’s thoughts. Her fingers didn’t stop though, stroking over Sharon’s slit, causing a shiver that provoked a similar response in Brenda.

“Fuck, baby,” Brenda grunted. “Fuck. You are so hot. I’ve been dyin’ to do this all damn day.” A finger parted Sharon’s lower lips, just barely, and Sharon immediately wanted more; the only thing she wanted was Brenda’s fingers buried inside her, making her come. She spread her legs as much as she could beneath the weight of Brenda’s body, in invitation to the other woman.
“Brenda,” she whispered imploringly, canting her hips up in invitation. “Brenda.” Brenda didn’t disappoint, because suddenly, Sharon was filled, stretching around Brenda’s fingers. She wanted to cry out at the sheer perfection of the feeling of her lover inside her, but she clenched her jaw instead, and met Brenda’s eyes, brimming over with love, and lust.

Brenda couldn’t get a lot of leverage in the position they’d chosen, but Sharon didn’t care; her pleasure was less about the physical sensations than the emotions. Sometimes it happened this way - how she felt for Brenda and the intimacy of their loving would overwhelm her, and she was sure that Brenda could simply hold her and talk sweet to her and she would orgasm.

It seemed like Brenda was going to put Sharon’s theory to the test, because she was whispering in Sharon’s ear. “You feel so good,” she said, drawing out the last word to include about a million o’s. “Bein’ inside you - sometimes I dream about it; I used to dream about it all the time before I could have you.”

A tongue traced Sharon’s ear, and she twisted her neck, seeking out Brenda’s lips once again. Their tongues tangled, and Sharon pulled away to gasp, Brenda’s thumb intent on her clit.

Brenda began whispering again. “This isn’t going to be enough, baby,” she husked. “I’m gonna have to get you naked - you’re so gorgeous, so sexy, I’m gonna have to put my mouth on your skin. And on your pussy.”

Sharon bit back a loud groan at that, air hissing through her teeth.

“God, I love this,” Brenda purred, sounding as if she was as close to orgasm as Sharon was. “God, I love you, baby.”

That was enough for Sharon. Flame burst through her veins and the world narrowed to the pleasure she was feeling and luminous brown eyes of her Brenda, avidly drinking in the sight of her orgasm.

With the fireworks in her brain no longer going off, she felt loose and languid - so relaxed that she couldn’t even fathom doing any more moving than the tightening of her arms necessary to draw Brenda closer to her.

“I love you, too, Brenda Leigh. So much.”
Chapter 52

Brenda was surprisingly un concerned for a person who usually stressed when she left her squad to its own devices. Even in the massive line winding its way to LAX’s three open security stations, she was relaxed. Encounters with the TSA generally left Brenda grinding her teeth, but today, she couldn’t help but grin. It was definitely the company that accounted for her upbeat mood.

Sharon was such an easy-going travel companion, and she was so excited about the trip that it was impossible not to be swept along by her enthusiasm. Plus, Sharon looked adorable in her slouchy jeans and the comfy cardigan that she totally hadn’t stolen from Brenda’s side of the closet.

Still grinning, Brenda was caught out by the object of her musings.

“What’s funny?” asked Sharon in a low voice.

Brenda felt her face stretch in to a full blown smile. “Not funny. I’m just happy.”

Sharon smiled in answer, and as always, Brenda’s heart fluttered in response to the well-loved expression.

“Goodness, you’re pretty,” Brenda breathed, trying to sound flirty, but only managing to hit ‘absolutely smitten’.

Sharon winked at her, then turned to push their shared carry-on further along the line. They were traveling light - at least as light as two women who were going to a ball on their vacation could travel. The carry-on contained some essentials, in case their luggage was delayed or lost, the jewelry to go with their formal wear, and Sharon’s laptop.

Brenda had been impressed at Sharon’s relaxed attitude regarding the whole ‘ball’ thing. When she had received the invitation, and wrapped it up to stick under the Christmas tree, the trials of procuring formal wear for an event occurring on the other side of the country hadn’t really crossed her mind. But thankfully, Sharon knew someone who knew someone, and after a short visit to a professional shopper, and another to a tailor, their borrowed finery had been shipped across the country and was already waiting for them at their hotel.

There were reasons that Brenda carried her badge clipped to the outside of her purse, and creating a little bubble for herself in crowded places was just one of them. Hoping that the TSA agents won’t open her carry on was another. They had tucked a few adult toys in there, and Brenda was struggling not to blush just thinking about it, but going on vacation without some fun sexual options just didn’t seem optimal to either of them.

They both suffered indignity of removing their shoes, and Brenda had to go through the metal detector twice because of her belt. Once they had gotten themselves together again, they made a beeline for the Starbucks. Brenda was going to treat herself to a grande mocha with extra chocolate and an extra shot. And maybe a pastry. And she was going to treat her Sharon to whatever she wanted; she wanted to treat Sharon to everything this weekend - wanted to sweep her wife off her feet, and let her know exactly how much Brenda cherished her.

Miraculously, there was a little booth open, and Sharon settled herself in while Brenda went to place their order. She felt like she was glowing, incandescent with happiness, and wondered if anyone else could see it. She kept sneaking glances over at Sharon, who was alternately smirking at her Blackberry and sneaking her own glances at Brenda. Their eyes met, and Brenda grinned,
and was once again rewarded with a luminous smile. She felt like she was setting off on an adventure, and for the first time, doing so with a fellow adventurer that was just as invested in the journey as she was. Now Brenda grinned to herself, suddenly smug at her extraordinary good fortune.

With almost an hour until their plane would begin boarding, they had time to linger over their coffee and a paper that Sharon had found abandoned on a table in the Starbucks. They shared a bench, Sharon partaking of the world news section, and Brenda skimming the local happenings. One the second page, she encountered a picture of Pope accompanying an article about yearly crime stats. In it, he was attempting to look competent and manly - she could tell by the set of his chin - but he mostly looked constipated. She sneered, and Sharon, seeing what she was looking at, snorted a quiet laugh.

“I don’t know who takes his official photographs, but they need to be fired,” observed Sharon, sipping primly at her latte.

“I dunno. I kinda like that he always looks like an idiot in the papers.”

Sharon snorted again, and Brenda grinned up at her, unrepentant. Yesterday, she had spent an agonizing hour with Pope in her office, so she was all for enjoying vicarious Pope suffering, or whatever this was.

Pope had come down hard on her, trying to keep her in LA to work on an oh-so-important case. Brenda didn’t know what had pissed him off more: that she was romantically and legally tied to Sharon Raydor, or that for the first time in eight years, she was intending to use her contractually mandated vacation days.

It had surprised her that she hadn’t even been tempted to rearrange her flight to even start the case off. The first time she had politely turned him down with just a bit of glee, the next seven or eight times, there had been less glee and more annoyance. He knew better than to outright threaten her job (or Sharon’s job), but obnoxious persistence was definitely in his wheelhouse. Brenda grumbled to herself, rustling the paper in irritation.

“We’re going on a fabulous vacation, honey,” Sharon said, like she had read Brenda’s mind. “And Pope is facing yet another week of puckering up for city councilmen - and not to kiss them on the mouth.”

It was Brenda’s turn to snort. “You’re bad, Sharon Raydor,” she pronounced with a little grin.

“Mmmmmm,” agreed Sharon with a smirk of her own.

“I’m so glad we’re doin’ this,” Brenda blurted, suddenly verbally enthusiastic. “I’ve never taken a vacation to do some special event like this.”

“Me neither - well, I went to a surf competition with Jackson once, but I don’t think that compares.” She favored Brenda with a brilliant smile. “And I’m so glad you have connections. I can’t believe I’m knocking something off my bucket list!”

“I’m so glad I got to help you knock something off your bucket list!”

“We’ll do one of yours next, ok?” Sharon suggested, as sweet and caring as ever, but Brenda couldn’t help the dirty thought that flashed through her mind.

“Mine might require less travel,” she said, grinning again.
This earned her another smirk. “Now who’s being bad?”

Brenda made a ‘who me?’ sort of gesture, then turned back to her paper, still grinning, and trying not to think about sex - that could make for a very uncomfortable flight, especially considering that Sharon had nipped her ‘mile high club’ fantasies in the bud. ‘Not on a public flight’ Sharon had said, and Brenda knew that was the smart move; public indecency could do a number on their careers, but it didn’t stop her from wanting.

Determined not to let anything get to her for the next five days, not even Pope, Brenda folded the paper and set it aside. Sharon did the same, turning her body towards Brenda and reaching for her hands.

“Thank you so much for this, and for everything, Brenda Leigh,” she husked, her voice gentle and throbbing in that tone that Brenda loved so much to hear. “I’ve been so happy the past few months - happier than I’ve ever been.”

“Me too,” Brenda whispered, tears pricking at her eyes. She was no longer ashamed of feeling like this relationship reached a part of her that had been hidden for so long - how could she be ashamed when what they had made Sharon so happy, too. “I love you.”

Sharon leaned in and kissed her, and Brenda sank into that place of bliss and joy that defined her life with Sharon Marie Raydor.

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