

Winds of Change

By Melissa Good

A steady falling of snow dusted the yard and gates outside the window of the broad, three story mansion tucked near the crest of a hillside in Saugatuck, Michigan. Thick clouds clustered overhead, and two men were steadily shoveling the snow from the circular driveway, and two more were brushing off the tops of the multitude of cars parked along the curb.

On the second floor, the lights were on along the series of bedrooms, and in the corner one on the end the occupants inside busied themselves in dressing amidst the scents of apricot body wash, silk, and lightly spicy perfume.

“They’re going to regret asking the wedding party to go strapless.” Kerry regarded her reflection in the mirror with a sense of slightly wicked bemusement. “I think mom forgot about the tattoo.” She studied the snake pattern on her chest, fully revealed on the tan skin over the neckline of her pale blue, floor length, snugly fit gown. “Besides, is this the weather for this kind of thing?”

“Could be worse.” Dar eased into position behind her, putting her arms around Kerry and giving her a hug. “Besides, who cares? You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” Kerry bumped her gently. “I’m glad I picked this one out myself. The one the bridesmaid’s are wearing remind me of my prom.”

“Mm. You have exquisite taste.” Dar kissed the top of her head.

“Well, sure. I picked you, didn’t I?” Kerry chuckled as she was squeezed again and released. “I can’t believe it’s snowing. My sister said it’s been in the sixties all month.”

“Knew I was coming and had to drive.” Her partner said, succinctly. “Anyway, isn’t snow at your wedding supposed to be lucky?”

Kerry eyed her with a tolerant smile. “No.” She said, lifting a pair of sapphire earrings and starting to fasten them to her ears as she watched Dar get into her burgundy, knee length dress and settle the, on her, mid arm length sleeves. “Are those supposed to be that short?”

“No.” Dar turned the cuff of the sleeve up one turn. “But I didn’t have time to get something custom done.” She looked up and met Kerry’s eyes in the mirror. “Look awful?” She smiled at Kerry’s rolled eyes. “We could discuss a sleeveless option. I’m sure your mother has a pair of scissors around this place somewhere.”

Kerry merely chuckled. “Now that we’re doing this, I kinda wish I’d turned my sister down on being in her wedding party.” She sighed. “It would be more fun sitting with you and mom and dad in church.” She finished fastening her other earring, then adjusted the crystal necklace that settled right above her breastbone.

“Won’t be long.” Dar put her hands on Kerry’s neck and massaged her gently. “My mother’s loaded her purse with paint gun balls, by the way.”

“What?” Kerry paused, turning and looking up at her.

“Mm.” She’s got a slingshot in there too. She hears anyone making remarks about either of us she’s gonna let go with it.” Dar informed her. “Hope your mother doesn’t mind green paint stains.”

Kerry blinked, unsure of whether to take her partner seriously or not. Dar’s expression was mild and had a hint of gentle questioning, but after a moment, she saw the twinkle appear in her very blue eyes and relaxed. “Hon, you nearly got me there.” She sighed. “I wouldn’t put that past your mom.”

"Me either." Dar said, cheerfully. "C'mon, Ker, you've got the service, then a party, then tomorrow night we'll be home in time to share a glass of champagne in our hot tub for New Years.." She picked up the brush on the dresser and moved it through Kerry's pale blond locks. "Chill out."

Kerry felt the tickle of the brush tines on her scalp, and considered the words. Was she unchilled, really? She let her eyes flick around the green tinted walls of the suite in her mother's home, and had to admit that yes, in fact, she was a little uptight, even though their visit so far had been in fact benign.

There were just too many bad memories here. Even though her father was gone, and her mother had stopped trying to reorder her life, still, she was hyper aware of the eyes on her, and the constant judging that seemed to permeate the place no matter how many changes it had recently seen.

"Hey, at least your uncles won't be here." Dar leaned over and blew gently in her ear.

"Yeah, that's true." Kerry turned and put her arms around her partner. "Thanks, Dardar."

Dar returned the hug, giving Kerry's back a little scratch. "Anyway, it's nice to have a little break, even if it's here." She said. "Too much going on otherwise."

True. Kerry released her, then went over to sit down and put on her shoes. They were mid height heels, and matched her dress. "You wearing hose?"

"Nope." Dar shook her head. "They'll never tell with this tan, or yours either."

Also true. She regarded her companion's long legs. "You have sexy knees." She commented, after a moment of silence.

Dar rolled a droll look in her direction. "What's sexier, this scar or this one?" She pointed at both, jagged white lines that bisected the front of her joints.

Kerry chuckled. "They just give you character." She got up and looked out the window. "The limos are here." She said. "Must be time to go."

A soft knock came at the door. "C'mon in." Kerry picked up her full length leather jacket and shrugged it on, looking over as the door opened and Ceci Roberts stuck her head in. "Hey mom."

"Ah." Ceci entered and sauntered over. "You ready? I heard that major-domo of your mother's inserting another baseball bat up his ass downstairs. I think the cars are here." She came over to stand next to Kerry, both of them about the same height, and with Ceci's silvered blond hair, appeared more related than the older woman did to her tall, dark haired daughter.

Dar snickered and stood up, going over and removing her own jacket from the closet. "Glad I'm driving the rest of us. We're gonna stop at BK before the pate parade, want me to get you a fish sandwich?"

Kerry sighed. "Wish I was going with you." She said. "I have to ride with my mother, and three of Angie's sorority sisters." She fastened her jacket, and put a dark green pashmina scarf around her neck. "When's our flight tomorrow?"

Ceci patted her on the back. "Try to have fun." She said. "Say mean things with big words they won't understand."

Kerry pondered that. "Hm." She grunted thoughtfully, as she followed Dar and Ceci from the room, pausing to join Dar's father, who was loitering in the hall. "Hey dad."

"Kumquat." Andrew was in his naval dress uniform, with an all weather parka over it. "Dardar, you want me to drive in this here stuff?"

"No." Ceci answered for her, taking her husbands arm and leading him to the stairs. "She has to learn to drive in snow, Andrew. She's going to be spending a lot of time in it if the government keeps pecking at her."

Dar and Kerry strolled after them. "That remains to be seen." Dar commented. "Far as I'm concerned, I'm still retiring in three months."

"Me too." Kerry said. "We've got travel plans." She reached out and took Dar's hand, interlacing their fingers. "They're pretty persistent though."

"Gov'mint." Andy groused. "Always wanting you to do something."

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "They still calling you, Dad?" Dar asked.

"Jackass." Her father said. "Told them ah do not want to be no consultant for nothing for em."

They walked down the staircase as a group of other people came in from the hall, a gust of cold air blowing in from the now open door. The entry's marble floor reflected the sconces and chandelier, and the buzz of voices started to echo.

Kerry paused as they waited at the near the bottom of the steps for the crowd to clear, spotting her mother standing near the grand entrance, talking to her staff, while the rest of the wedding party assembled.

"Dar?"

"Hm?" Dar removed a pair of gloves from her jacket pocket. "Here. These are yours."

Kerry took them. "Next time I volunteer for something like this, spank me."

"Hang in there, hon." Dar draped an arm over her shoulders. "It'll be over before you know it."

She knew that. Kerry put her gloves on and sighed, content to stay in her little huddle of Roberts before she had to join the gathering of wedding party assembling at the door.

"Ah, Kerrison." Her mother spotted her and headed over. "All ready?" She turned to the others. "I am so sorry we don't have room in the limos for you to join us.. would you like my driver to take you over to the church?"

"We're fine." Ceci answered graciously. "But if there's not much room, maybe Kerry should ride with us." She offered "After all, she knows how to get there. I'd hate for Dar to get lost and end up at Dairy Queen."

"Ah wouldn't." Andrew muttered, under his breath.

"Oh." Cynthia Stuart seemed taken aback. "Well..." She half turned. "Kerrison would you mind terribly? Then Aunt Mildred can ride with us. She's quite upset."

"No, mother. I would be glad to." Kerry answered, in the warmest, most sincere tone possible. "I know Aunt Mildred really wanted to be with you, please. Let her take my place." She said. "We'll meet you over there."

Cynthia smiled. "Thank you." She said. "Let me go let her know. See you at the church shortly." She hurried away, leaving them to edge down the stairs and thread their way through the crowd.

"That was slick." Dar commented, as they ducked out the front door and she blinked at the snow hitting her face. "Nice job, mom."

Ceci chuckled as they walked past the waiting limos. Each one had at least one doorman standing by, and they had to pick their way carefully past the clouds of exhaust obscuring the snow slick driveway to the bottom of the entrance, where a dark blue SUV was parked.

Kerry glanced behind her as they got to the car, watching the swirl of activity around the limos as the rest of the wedding party got situated. She imagined herself getting into the car with them, the women and her relatives so far nothing more than a collection of disapproving eyeballs she'd had to deal with over breakfast.

Why had she thought it would be different this time? Because her mother had visited her in Miami, and liked her cabin? She got in the car and repeated the question aloud. "Thanks mom. I have no clue why I thought things would be that much better this trip."

"Well." Ceci got in behind Dar, while Andy folded his long legs in behind Kerry's seat. "Just think of being here for your sister, kiddo. The hell with everyone else."

Dar put the car into drive, and eased forward, leaving the brightly lit mansion behind.

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The church was already filling when they got there, parking as close to the building as they could in deference to the worsening weather. Kerry spotted the press there, and as they climbed up the steps to the front door to the stately brick church the press spotted them.

Andy got between them and the men though, and they made it to the door and inside before the cameras could catch them. "Jackass." He shook the snow off his shoulders as they cleared the door, almost crashing into a tall, spare man with a priest's collar. "Sorry bout that."

The man's face twitched, as he recognized Kerry. "Miss Stuart." He said. "Your sister is in the second dressing room. She was asking for you."

Kerry took a breath and released it. "Thanks." She touched Dar's arm. "Go on in and sit down. I'll meet up with you after the service."

Dar patted her on the side. "Say hi to Angie for me."

"I will." Kerry ducked past the pastor and slipped into the inner hallway, that led to the schoolrooms and side chambers she remembered roaming through as a child. The smell was still the same, a mixture of wax and old paper, the wooden floorboards creaking a little under her steps.

Happy memories, the earliest of them. A time when Sunday school was just a time to gather with her friends, and listen to Pastor Robert, then himself just out of seminary, teach them basic, simple lessons that held no charge and didn't weigh them down morally.

She remembered learning to sing hymns, though she never stood out in that regard as some of her classmates had, and the times when they'd decorated the church for this festival, or that one.

Sunday service with her family, sitting in the first pew, not understanding then why everyone paid so close attention to them, or why her father was always the center of attention.

The place rubbed her raw now. She found the second dressing room and knocked lightly on it, loosening the belt on her coat as the door opened and swung back and she spotted her sister inside. "Hey Ang."

"There you are!" Angie looked up from fiddling with her bouquet and waved her inside. "I thought you'd never get here."

Kerry smiled and entered, removing her scarf and hanging it on the coat rack just inside the door. "I skipped the limo." She said. "Or I'd still probably on our mother's doorstep."

"Ugh." Angie got the ribbons sorted and put the bouquet down. "I should have stuck to my idea of having it be just mom, you and mike, us, and the justice of the peace." She turned as Kerry stripped off her coat and hung it up. "Dar outside?"

"I left her and her folks with Pastor Durham." Kerry turned to face her sister. "I figure if he survives he'll just shut up and marry you without any commentary."

Angie grinned. "I love that dress." She complimented her sister. "You look gorgeous."

Kerry felt her shoulders relax and she grinned back. "You too." She said. "I really like that lace top." She joined her sister, who was wearing a cream colored dress, simple and elegant, strapless as her own was and flattering to her somewhat angular figure. "Was the strapless bit your idea of rebellion?"

Angie chuckled. "Hey, it's my second time." She said. "They say you're supposed to know what you're doing after the first, and none of this princess neckline stuff or veils. Besides." She studied Kerry's chest. "I wanted everyone to see my sister's gorgeous tattoo."

Kerry glanced down at the mark, the snake's intricate scale pattern glistening slightly, its sinuous body wrapping in and out of Dar's name inked clearly and distinctly on her skin. "Everyone's going to freak."

"Yeah, I know." Angie admitted. "But I may break dance with Brian at the banquet so at least they'll all be loosened up for it." She gently touched the tattoo. "Are you mad?"

Kerry thought about that. "No. Everyone's going to be pissed off at me on general principals. Might as well give them a solid reason." She sighed. "Too bad you and Brian couldn't have gotten married down at our place last week."

"I wish." Angie patted her sister's shoulder. "But remember Mike stayed those extra two days?"

"Yeah?"

"He got his nose pierced."

Kerry covered her eyes with one hand. "Jesus."

"So don't worry sis." Angie chuckled. "You really are going to turn out to be the Republican in the family."

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Pastor Durham cleared his throat. "You are friends of Kerrison, I believe?" He said, in a chilly voice.

Dar regarded him, then extended her hand. "We met in the hospital." She said. "I'm Dar Roberts, Kerry's partner." She waited for him to very reluctantly shake her hand. "These are my parents, Andrew and Cecilia Roberts."

He released her. "Yes, I recall seeing you there." He said. "I'm Charles Durham, the family pastor." He gave them a brief nod. "Excuse me. I need to prepare for the ceremony. It will be held in there." He pointed at the entrance to the nave. "Someone will seat you." He turned and went through a side doorway, shutting it behind him with a distinct bang.

"Nice feller." Andrew said, rocking up and down on his heels.

Ceci sighed. "What a wasted opportunity, really." She started for the door to the chapel. "I had a perfectly good set of Samhain robes I could have worn to this thing."

Dar followed them in, using the time as they stood in line to be seated to look around the place. She noticed they were noticed, people looking at them from their seats, or behind them in line and she returned the stares until they all looked elsewhere.

It was overt. Dar's face twitched as she acknowledged the sense of discomfort. The last time she'd had to interact with Kerry's family and their friends it had been at Kerry's father's funeral service, and the circumstances themselves had diverted attention from them.

But here, as invited guests, she could sense an undercurrent of outrage in this conservative community, not willing to accept the acceptance determinedly shown by Cynthia Stuart to them. She had to give Kerry's mother credit, the senator had stuck to her guns and welcomed them as family, with open arms, ignoring the distaste of her social circle and displaying a surprisingly solid backbone when her political and private councilors tried to derail her.

A young page guided them down the aisle to the second pew on the right hand side, where Angie and Kerry's brother Mike was already ensconced, along with a young lady in purple leather with one half of her head shaved.

"Nice." Ceci nodded at her in satisfaction. "Hello there." She greeted Michael.

"Hey." Michael grinned at them, the ring in his nose catching the light. "Welcome to the dark side." He indicated his companion. "This is my girlfriend Tracy." He concluded "Trace, this is my sister in law, Dar, and her parents."

Dar felt her sense of the absurd stir. "When does the juggler and the two headed dog show up?" She asked, as she took her seat next to him. "Kerry was worried her tat would raise eyebrows."

Mike chuckled and sat down. "Yeah, I figure the rate we're going, we'll talk mom into a leather biker vest pretty soon."

He leaned back as Tracey put her hand on his knee and leaned towards Dar. "Hey, you're the computer genius, aren't you?" She asked. "I saw you in the paper a couple months back."

"More or less." Dar admitted. "We did some work on the terrorist recovery."

The woman nodded. "I'm one of the senior copywriters at the marketing firm we work for." She indicated Michael. "My brother got sent to New York last month as part of the rebuilding team. He sent pictures back. Puts it in perspective, you know? We're writing copy to sell Jaegermeister shots and he's there."

"It was pretty horrific." Dar agreed quietly. "Something I will never forget."

"Dar and my sister were there too." Mike piped up. "I told you what was going on at the house when it was all happening, right?"

"You told me." Tracey gave him a tolerant look.

The chapel was filling up, and the pew they were in gathered a few more people, older women and men who were, Dar figured, aunts and uncles of some kind. None of them seemed eager to talk, and after about ten minutes, they saw the pastor move to the front and the crowd quieted down.

Brian and his best man, a red haired and freckled specimen Dar didn't know moved to the front of the altar and stood there quietly, dressed in sharply creased morning suits and bow ties.

Then an usher came down the aisle escorting a woman, who was seated in the first pew on the other side.

"Brian's mom." Mike whispered to Dar. "Freak show in a bowl."

Dar nodded slightly. The woman was sitting bolt upright, a hat firmly perched on her head.

An organ started to play. It had a mellow, sweet tone and Dar folded her hands in her lap, cocking her head to listen to it. After a few minutes, her peripheral vision caught motion, and she turned her head to watch the procession coming in down the center aisle.

The sorority sisters, and three men in morning suits marched down, taking up their place near the altar, then Angie's young daughter Sally came trotting down, carrying a pillow with a small box on it, focusing on keeping the surface even as she ended up almost bumping into Brian's knees.

Dar glanced around to see if, by freakish chance, Angie's ex-husband Richard were around, but a quick scan didn't turn him up. Then she forgot about looking further as she spotted Kerry walking quietly up the aisle, eyes forward, ignoring the stares of the crowd.

Dar felt a smile stretch her lips as she watched her partner make the journey up to the altar, her sculptured, muscular shoulders shifting a little as she walked up and took her place across from Brian, regarding the crowd with an wary expression.

Then her eyes met Dar's and she smiled, folding her hands in front of her as she waited for Angie to arrive. The bridesmaids next to her were dressed in similar style, but in her partner's admittedly biased eyes Kerry's poised confidence easily outshone them and her understated beauty would likely do the same to her sister once the bride was in place.

Kerry glanced back over at her, and whatever she saw in Dar's expression made her blush slightly and she looked away, as Angie came up to the alter, escorted by their mother.

Cynthia gave Brian a little nod, then she seated herself in the first pew, her solitary presence lending an unexpected dignity to the moment.

Pastor Durham cleared his throat, and stepped forward, his eyes sweeping over the party, and his face twitching as he faced the bride and groom and put his back to the crowd. As he lifted his hands, a crackling pop sounded, and then all the lights went off.

Ceci sighed. "Somewhere, PT Barnum is laughing."

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Kerry sat on one of the dressing room benches, old pews re purposed in the small room. "Shoulda done this last week down by us, Ang." She remarked. "You could have had it out on the little island Dar and I had our commitment ceremony on."

Angie was sitting on another bench across from here with Brian next to her, and Sally sitting on Brian's lap. "You think they found enough candles yet?" She asked, looking wryly amused. "I know I should be upset about this but really it's just sort of funny."

Her three bridesmaids were occupying the temporary chairs they'd brought in to do makeup from, and one of them was fluffing up the corsages with a mild, bored expression on her face.

"Very." Brian agreed. "Especially since power's out all over town. I was listening to the local news on the radio and everyone's freaking out."

"Well." Kerry folded her hands on her knee, and wished she could go change into her jeans, mourning the fact they were back in her mother's house. "At least the house has a fireplace."

"You volunteering to go chop firewood? She hasn't used it in probably ten years." Her sister exhaled, glancing up as the door opened and Mike slipped in. "Hey. They ready?"

"The church is ready. The pastor is arguing with mom." Mike came in and dropped down onto the bench Kerry was sitting on. "Saying all kinds of crap about how this was a sign God's pissed off with her."

"What?" Kerry barked.

"What?" Angie echoed her.

"Jerk." Mike shook his head. "He was telling her she's been living an immoral life and we all turned out to be scum buckets because of it."

Both Angie and Kerry stood up at the same time. "Fuck that." Kerry enunciated crisply. "Let me go kick him in the ass. I don't care if he's a priest."

"Don't worry." Mike waved them back. "Dar and her mom and dad got into it. It was really entertaining there for a minute but then they went into his office."

"He's been on that kick." One of the bridesmaids spoke up. "You know it, Ang – he was preaching about that last Sunday, that all the bad things happening, like 9/11, are because we're not living right."

"Missed it." Angie said. "Andy wasn't feeling well so we stayed home. Now I'm glad. Does he really think God sent terrorists to fly planes into New York because we aren't being pious enough?"

Kerry reseated herself and exhaled. "Well, who knows." She muttered. "After all, I'm gay, you're an adulterer, and he's got a tattoo on his ass and a pierced nose." She turned her head and regarded her sister. "Maybe you all should move to Miami."

Angie started chuckling. The bridesmaids looked a little shocked, and Brian just laughed and shook his head. "Yeah." He said. "People are weird."

"So." One of the other bridesmaids spoke up. "Kerry."

"Mm?" Kerry eyed her.

"What's it like being gay?" The woman asked, in a mild tone that had no edge to it.

Kerry pondered that then shrugged. "I don't know. What's it like being straight?" She returned the question. "I guess, it was hard for me when I figured it out because of how I was raised." She added. "But now? It's just... it's normal. I don't feel any different just because Dar's a woman not a guy. It's kind of cool, you know? Not having to explain things like my period, or worry about that Mars versus Venus thing."

Angie chuckled. "You've got a point there."

The other woman nodded. "My brother's gay." She related, surprising everyone else in the room apparently. "He just came out to my parents. Really bad scene." She added. "They flipped. I thought they were going to throw him out, but they didn't."

"Scott's gay?" Angie asked, with a fascinated expression. "Really, Chris?"

Chris nodded. "Yeah. He's going to college next year, so I guess he figured he'd better get the word out before he came back with a boyfriend." She stifled a yawn. "God I hope you have coffee at the reception, Ang."

"Hope they can figure out how to heat it up." Angie responded. "I can just imagine all that quiche gone cold."

Kerry felt a sudden shift in perception, at the offhand discussion. She'd known Chris, and the other two women as friends of Angie's from years back, but this studied acceptance, honest or not of her relationship was an unexpected pleasure. She relaxed, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles.

The door opened again and one of the ushers poked his head in. "We're ready to start." He said. "Could you take your places again, please?"

The wedding party filed out obediently and re-entered the chapel. The altar area had been lit up with candles of many sizes and shapes, and though it provided an irregular light, Kerry decided it was actually pretty charming. There was a dim glow from the narrow stained glass windows on the back wall and the illumination lent a beauty and mystery to the altar she hadn't felt before.

The pastor hadn't returned yet, but as she watched the guests file back in, she spotted Dar and her folks coming down the far aisle and sliding into place in their pew. Dar's temper was visibly bristling and as she met Kerry's eyes, she shook her head a little, sitting down and folding her arms over her chest.

Hm. Kerry folded her hands and flexed her fingers as the pastor came back in, his long face twitching in annoyance as he came to face Angie and Brian again.

For a moment, his eyes slipped past them and fell on Kerry, and the stark dislike in them chilled her. She wondered if he was going to start ranting at her, but after that brief pause, he twitched his robe straight and cleared his throat.

She saw her mother enter, but instead of going to the first pew, she went to the second, and seated herself next to Ceci, leaning close to whisper something to the shorter women.

Ceci patted her knee and then, looking pointedly at the priest's back, raised her hand and extended her middle finger at him, nearly making her daughter's pale blue eyes come out of her head.

Kerry suspected there were lots of things she was going to regret finding out just as soon as the service was over. She spotted reporters now in the back, and she straightened a little as flashbulbs started to pop, and found herself wishing very hard it was just done.

She heard the pastor going through the motions, and tried to focus on the service, willing to give respect to her sister's wish for a new life for herself, and for her kids, but also acknowledging a twinge of sadness that no matter how her own life contrasted to Angie's, she could never stand in that spot, and have a pastor of her own church read those words he was saying to her sister.

No matter her commitment ceremony was held in a far more beautiful space, with lots of her friends around her, and celebrated by an ordained pastor of her faith – it was not a marriage. It didn't give her and Dar the legal rights this simple ceremony would give them, even held in the clerk of courts office.

Did that matter? Kerry listened to Angie's quiet "I do." Did it matter that her own, internal, until death do us part was far more binding in her heart than her sister's now second set of them were?

Did it matter it had taken months of laboriously drawn legal papers to give her and Dar the basic rights to each other's person, and property that this five minute exchange of words would for Angie and Brian?

"You may kiss the bride."

And then the words tickled her sense of the absurd, because who in the hell was this old jerk to be giving permission for two people to kiss each other? Kerry regarded the candles, and stifled a smile, as the recessional started playing and she was watching Angie and Brian's back as they retreated up the aisle towards the doors, with people standing and tossing rice balls in gauze at them.

So it was over. Kerry relaxed a little, as Dar got up and headed her way, evading the milling guests as she dodged past the pastor. "Excuse me." Her partner uttered, just missing crashing into him as he stepped back without looking.

The man turned and stiffened, recognizing her.

"Problem?" Dar straightened up to her full height, matching his.

He stared at her for a moment. "God has a problem with you. I would just prefer you out of his house." He said, then turned and retreated towards the small door just to the left of the altar.

Kerry regarded her partner. "Sorry." She said, with a sigh.

"Nice." Dar shook her head. "How could God have problem with me if he gave me you?" She turned to her partner, putting a hand on her hip. "What a jackass."

Kerry lifted her hands and handed Dar her corsage, ignoring the chatter of conversation as she only just resisted the urge to lean over and kiss her. "I really am sorry, hon. Wish we were home."

"Peh." Dar half shrugged. "I don't know if it's just what we went through but it's hard for me to let morons like that bother me, Ker." She sniffed the flowers, and leaned a little against the blond woman. "He's just pissed because my mother ripped him a new one."

Kerry let her hand rest on Dar's shoulder, glancing past her at the crowd, waiting for it to clear a little so they could escape.

Cameras were still popping, and she figured given their position she was probably going to be at least page 2 of the daily tomorrow. "So." She watched Dar nibble on one of the roses, the warm candlelight gilding her skin. "What happened in there? Mike said you were going at it with him."

"Asshole." Dar muttered back, aware of the press now moving forward to get a shot of them. "Tried to pull a guilt trip on your mother."

Kerry sighed.

"Not over you." Her partner gave one of the nearest reporters a smile. "Matter of fact, it didn't get that far. Started on Angie having an affair and then my mother lit into him."

"Ah."

"Said she was an immoral whore."

"Your mother?" Kerry straightened.

"Yours." Dar bumped her. "My mother started chanting some sort of pagan curse at him."

"Fucking asshole." Kerry said, audible enough for the front rows to hear her. "Let me get out of this dress and I'm going to go kick box him into February." She got down off the raised platform and headed off, but had to pull up short as two reporters blocked her way.

Dar caught up with her as she stopped. "Hon."

"Ms Stuart." The older of the two reporters said. "Would you mind speaking to us for a moment?"

"Kerrison." Cynthia arrived at her elbow. "We've sent the staff back to the house to prepare for the reception, with all the difficulties." She glanced at the press. "Excuse us please, gentlemen. This is a private social affair."

Dar was surprised when the press nodded and backed off. "Sorry about that, Senator." The older one said. "We were just looking for a few minutes with your daughter."

"Some other time." Cynthia said, firmly.

They retreated. "I hear the pastor caused some problems." Kerry said, in a quiet tone, as her mother turned back to her.

Her mother exhaled. "He was unkind." She admitted. "But we mustn't dwell on it. This is a happy occasion, and I'm determined it will stay that way." She said. "Now, shall we go? I have been told this power outage is quite extensive. I'm sure someone will want to talk to me about it." She gestured them forward. "As though I could actually do something."

Kerry's mother was, Dar considered, becoming a lot stronger minded than she had been when they'd first met. "I'm surprised someone hasn't called me to see if I could do something about it." She remarked. "They must have forgotten I'm here."

Cynthia regarded her. "Could you?" She asked, hesitantly. "Do something?"

"Depends on what the problem is." Dar admitted. "If a tanker truck ran into the power station, probably not. If it's a computer glitch..." She lifted her hands, then let them drop.

"I see." The Senator mused. "Well, never mind. You're a guest here. Let someone else who's probably being paid a lot of our budget dollars fix it." She took the lead and the crowd parted as her aides cleared a path. "Excuse us please!"

"Hm." Kerry tucked her hand inside Dar's elbow and suffered the resulting flash bulbs. "My mother's growing on me." She felt the faint chuckle rippled through her partner's body. "She's getting a lot more ..uh.. "

"Ballsy." Dar concluded, glad enough to follow down the aisle and out of the church, getting through the crowd all talking in the antechamber as Ceci and Andrew joined them. "We're heading out."

"Good." Ceci remarked. "The overbearing stench of orthodoxy is making me want to light a passion fruit firecracker in this place."

"Lord." Andrew handed them their coats. "Had me more fun at Navy training."

Kerry covered her mouth hastily, muffling a laugh as they were hustled outside by Cynthia's aides, who kept the crowd back as they walked down the steps and headed past the waiting limos, escaping the line of the press who had stopped the Senator at the door to hers and were questioning her.

"Hon." Kerry put her hand on Dar's back. "Better let me drive back. The lights are all out and I still probably know this place better than you do."

Dar handed her the keys and they got inside, waiting for the doors to thump closed before being subjected to Ceci's bursting into speech. "What a son of a bitch that man is." She said. "Kerry, if that's the church you grew up in, my hats off to you not turning out to be a wing nut."

"Who says I'm not?" Kerry felt her guts relax as she adjusted the seat and started the car up. "But yeah, he's always been very conservative." She got the defroster on, and flexed her hands. "I have no idea how they're going to do the reception without any power. This is a little crazy."

"Yeap." Andrew folded his arms over his chest. "Just a little bit."

Ceci made a snorting sound.

The snow was coming down harder, and there were no lights working. Kerry was grateful that she knew where she was going as she carefully navigated through the storm. "Not all the people in that church were like that." She found herself saying. "I remember when I was graduating from high school, there was a big thing about him, because his wife was caught embezzling money from the church and then she ran away, ended up crashing into a tree and killing herself."

Ceci cleared her throat. "I'll try to refrain from commenting about judgments from God."

"Mm." Kerry turned up the street her childhood home was on and accelerated cautiously. "He certainly doesn't like me. Never did, matter of fact. Said was impudent and that my father should punish me more." She turned in at the gate and paused, as the security guard came over, shielding his face from the snow as she opened the window. "Hey John. Just us."

"Ms. Kerry." The man waved them through. "What a day, huh?"

"What a day."

**

It was cold inside. Dar pondered the possibility of having to wear thermal underwear to the reception as she waited for Kerry to get off her cell phone. They'd left them in the house, and she had two voice mails on hers, but she'd felt no inclination to listen to them.

It had become hard to remain engaged with work. Dar folded her arms and regarded the window, watching the snow fall in thick, drifting waves. She'd gotten to a place where she wanted to move on, and as hard as she was trying to tie things up, it was even harder to get people to realize she was serious, and wanted out.

They kept trying to drag her back in.

"Dar?"

"Hm?" She turned as Kerry came over, folding her phone shut "What's up?"

"Lansing's on generator. Just wanted to let me know they're mostly online, and just monitoring stuff. Said it was pretty quiet. Some people called but they know the blackout is what it is."

"Good." Dar leaned her arm on Kerry's shoulder. "What's the protocol for wearing a bearskin rug to your sister's shindig?"

Kerry chuckled. "If this keeps up, we're going to have to find a way to keep warm tonight. There's no fireplace in this room."

"I'm sure." Dar tilted her head and gently blew in her partner's ear. "We'll think of something."

"Maybe we should start working on ideas right now." Kerry turned her head and their lips met. "At least this gives me an excuse to change out of my scandalous dress and into something more comfortable." She rested her head against Dar's. "Wonder if they figured out what the power problem is yet?"

"Change." Dar gave her another kiss. "I'll call around and see if I can find that out for ya." She angled around behind her and unzipped the strapless gown, running a finger across the back of Kerry's neck.

"Didn't need more goosebumps, hon." Kerry smiled, getting out of her gown while Dar picked up her phone, and opened it, her partner already dressed in a pair of casual pants and a blue knitted sweater. The chill hit her and she hurriedly changed herself, reluctantly bypassing her jeans for a pair of wool slacks and adding sweater of her own to them.

Dar waited for the phone to answer. "Wonder how long the cell sites'll be up." She mused. "Batteries can't last that long." She listened. "Yeah, this is Dar Roberts." She announced. "Yeah, happy new years to you too. Listen. There's a power outage up here in Michigan. Do a search and tell me what the deal is, will ya?"

"You should put a t shirt on, Dar."

Dar looked down at herself, then at her partner, one brow lifting. "What?" She covered the phone with one hand. "It's cold!"

"Under the sweater." Kerry fished a cotton shirt from Dar's bag and handed it to her. "It's layers, right?"

"Oh." Dar juggled the phone and the shirt, pulling off her sweater and laying it on the dresser as she donned the shirt, then put the heavier garment on over it. "Yeah, I'm here." She listened to the phone.

"Ah. Okay. Thanks. Bye." She closed the phone. "Iced over high tension power lines snapped."

"Ah" Kerry brushed her hair. "Well, that's fixable at least."

"Not before we have to make heat I hope." Dar put her arms around Kerry from behind and leaned against her, watching their dual reflections in the mirror. "Maybe everyone'll decide to go to bed early."

"Mmm... maybe we'll inaugurate the green room." Kerry snickered. "We can put our initials on the wall."

Dar looked at her in puzzlement. "Didn't you say this is where they put the married people in your family?" She watched Kerry nod, eyes twinkling. "And married people don't have sex in the Stuart clan?"

Kerry regarded her. "We've had this whole parents and sex conversation, Dar."

"Ah... that's right. Kerry Cabbage Patch Stuart. I forgot."

They both chuckled. "Let's go downstairs." Kerry said. "See if they have any crackers and cheese at least. I'm starving." She patted her companion on the side and they sat down to put their shoes on. With the dim gray light outside, it was almost twilight in the room, and without any electricity they could hear the pops and creaks of the house around them.

"Hope mom has candles around." Kerry stood up. "If this lasts all night it could end up getting creepy."

They left the room and walked along the hallway towards the stairs, coming face to face with Aunt Mildred. "Hi there." Kerry mustered up a smile. "Crazy weather, huh?"

The older woman merely stared at her, then she turned and started down the steps, leaving them behind.

Dar and Kerry sighed in unison, then followed her. "At least mom didn't invite my uncles." Kerry uttered under her breath. "Next time, please tie me up."

The main entry of the Stuart family house was filling with guests, but even with all the people the chill was evident. Someone had put candles in glass jars around the space, and there were two servants putting more out between taking heavy overcoats from their owners.

There was no press around this time. Dar could see a line of them outside, but they weren't getting much for their efforts, and she put her hand on Kerry's back as they reached the bottom of the stairs and paused. "There's your brother." She indicated the far corner of the space. "Should all the black sheep gather together?"

"Baa." Kerry was glad enough to agree. She led the way through the crowd, ignoring the veiled and not so veiled stares as they were recognized, and then she had to stop as a woman got directly in her path. "Excuse me."

"Don't you have any shame?" The woman asked her.

Kerry stared thoughtfully at her, one hand going back to put a halt on Dar's forward motion, as she sensed her beloved partner about to take severe offense. "No, actually I don't" She answered in a mild tone.

"Please get out of my way, Aunt April. This isn't the place to make a scene. My mother wouldn't appreciate it."

The woman shook her head. "Your father would be so ashamed."

Kerry squeezed Dar's hand. "He had a lot of reasons to be ashamed. Now please excuse us." She pushed past the woman, keeping tight hold of her growling spouse. "It's going to be one of those days isn't it?"

"I vote we go back to bed."

“Soon, hon. Soon.”

**

“It was a complete screw up.” The stocky man told Dar, as they both held drinks and watched the candle lit crowd in the grand hall. “They knew those towers needed repair, but all that warm weather we had made them push it off.”

“A mess.” Dar commiserated. “They know how long it’ll take to fix it?”

The Governor shook his head mournfully. “I was hoping it was some systemic mistake, because I knew I’d be seeing you today and maybe I could ask you to fix it.” He winked at her. “But no, they’ve got to take the grid offline, repair the cables, and power it all back up. Maybe late tonight. Probably tomorrow. I’m getting lambasted in the news.”

“As if you could do something about it.”

“Not only that, instead of sitting in my office being a martyr to public opinion I’m here, having a glass of the late Roger’s good scotch and wondering how Cynthia’s going to pull off hot canapés.” The governor chuckled wryly. “Ah, the life of a public servant.”

“You can have it.” Dar was happy enough to be holding up her bit of wall, the presence of the state’s magnate keeping off any of Kerry’s bolder relatives. “I’m looking forward to retiring.”

The Governor eyed her alertly. “Do tell?” He said. “Aren’t you a little young for that?”

Dar smiled, lifting her glass of white wine in acknowledgement. “Been 15 years. I want to see the world a little without worrying about my cell phone ringing because someone’s mainframe crashed.” She spotted Kerry returning, carrying a plate. “I gave them six months notice. They’re working a package for me.”

“Wow.” He said. “After everything that just happened? I heard you were neck deep in the recovery effort. Someone told me they were looking to suck you into the public sector.”

“After everything that just happened.” Dar restated the words. “Life’s too short.”

“Going to go out on your own?” He asked, with a shrewd glance at her. “Be your own boss?”

“Eventually. I’ll have to stay out of the business for a while. Then probably get back in, do some consulting.” Dar replied. “Or who knows? Maybe I’ll open a dive shop down in the keys where our cabin is. Leave tech alone.”

“More power to you, lady.” He tipped his glass back at her. “Don’t tell my wife she’ll be jealous.”

“Jealous of what?” Kerry arrived, offering up her small china platter.

“Are those sliders?” Dar started laughing.

“My sister picked the menu.” Kerry confirmed, with a smile. “They’re brisket sliders, matter of fact. With horseradish sauce.”

“Nice.” The Governor took one. “I was just telling Dar here my wife would be jealous of her retiring.”

“Ahhh.” Kerry waited for Dar to serve herself, then took a sandwich and put the platter down on a nearby table. “I’m looking forward to that myself. I’ve got such a bucket list to get through.” She took a bite of the slider. “Mm.”

“You too?” The Governor exclaimed.

“Oh yeah.” Dar licked a bit of the horseradish sauce off her fingertips. “I think we’re going to start with a visit to the Grand Canyon, then a cruise somewhere.”

“White water rafting.” Kerry clarified, with a grin. “I figure I should get the camping stuff out of the way first because I know Dar doesn’t like it much.” She wiped her lips with a small napkin. “I think we’re going to fly into Vegas, then rent an RV and do the tour.”

He chuckled. "Well, I can't say I don't envy you ladies." He munched on his own sandwich. "Wish I could look forward to the same, but I've got four kids, and three of them are in college at the moment. I'm lucky I can manage Pizza Hut on Fridays."

"One of the bright points of only having a dog." Kerry leaned against the wall next to Dar. "Besides, after all the world saving Dar's done, she's due."

"You haven't done bad for a newbie." Dar's eyes twinkled a little.

One of Cynthia's aides approached them, catching Kerry's eye. "Excuse me?"

"Yes?" Kerry responded. "Did you need something?"

"The Senator asked me to come find you. She'd like to speak to you for a moment." The man said. "Could you come with me?"

Dar and Kerry exchanged looks. "Excuse us." Dar said, putting her glass down. "Probably needs some help with logistics." She put her hand on Kerry's back. "Lead on." She met the aide's eyes, daring him to exclude her.

He looked like he wanted to. But Kerry motioned him on and he ducked his head, turning to lead the way across the room towards a cluster of people on the far side from where they'd been. The room was lit barely from the gray light of outside, and the candles around the edges and as they approached where Kerry's mother was, several servants appeared with more candles in their hands.

The Senator had a cluster of family around her, and Dar could see from where she was the dour faces and glaring eyes as they were spotted heading their way.

What the hell was wrong with those people anyway? Couldn't they take a damn day out to enjoy a wedding and leave off all the moralistic bull crap? Dar sighed, and felt an itch between her shoulder blades.

"Ah, Kerry." Cynthia saw them and turned. "Thank you for coming over. Your aunt Mildred had a question and I thought perhaps you could answer it."

"Sure, if I can." Kerry replied with internal reluctance, regarding the short, dumpy looking woman who was watching her with a sour look. "What is it, Aunt Mildred?" She was aware of Dar behind her, and as she took a breath waiting for whatever it was, she felt the casual warmth as Dar's forearm came to rest on her shoulder.

Backing her up. Kerry had to smile. Just like when she was at work, when present or not Dar cast a very long shadow everyone was very aware of. She didn't even have to drop her lover's name anymore – it was just assumed by everyone that Kerry had her in her pocket.

Aunt Mildred was Uncle Edgar's wife. Uncle Edgar had been explicitly told not to show up for the wedding, and Kerry knew that was for her benefit since their last interaction hadn't been pleasant. She suspected Aunt Mildred was about to unload her resentment over that – though she was a little surprised her mother had bought into it and called her over.

"I would like you to explain all this about log cabin Republicans." Aunt Mildred said, in a firm tone. "Are you a part of them? You must be."

Kerry blinked a few times, her eyes flicking back and forth as she prodded her memory. Then she turned and looked at Dar. "Do you know what that is?"

"I think." Dar said, after a pause to consider. "It's people who are gay, who are also Republican."

"Yes." Mildred said. "They have been petitioning our firm about something. So you are a part of that?"

"What does being gay have to do with log cabins?" Kerry wondered.

"Tell you later." Dar said, with a wry smile. "Let's not get into that debate here."

"Huh?" Kerry gave her a searching look, then shrugged when Dar merely winked at her. "And no, Aunt Mildred.. I may be both gay and a Republican but I don't belong to any groups of either type so I'm not sure if I can help you with whatever it is they want from you." She said. "I stay clear of politics unless it concerns high technology."

"They want us to offer benefits to our employees, benefits like we offer to married people. To people like you." Mildred said. "It's ridiculous."

"Mildred." Cynthia said, sharply.

"Don't Mildred me." She turned on Kerry's mother. "It's terrible, how you promote this. We all remember how you and Roger felt about her lifestyle. Now you pretend you don't? At least I'm honest about it."

There was, Dar recognized, a bit of truth in that. "I'd like to think there's no dishonesty, just a learning process." She said in a mild tone.. "As in, she learned we don't have horns and tails and walk around seducing children." She added. "There's nothing immoral about health benefits. You attract a better employee base if you treat them well."

"Of course you'd say that." Mildred snapped.

"Of course I'm the CIO of an international Fortune 500 company. So yes, I have an opinion about that regardless of my sexual orientation." Dar responded, her voice taking on a sharper note. "But Mrs. Stuart also has the right to form her own opinions as well as have them change over time."

Cynthia gave her a brief, acknowledging smile. "There is more truth to that than you perhaps believe." She said. "Mildred, this is not the place for your bias. Kerry has answered your question, now let's all go sit down for some lunch."

"Disgusting." Mildred said, unrepentant. "I don't know how she had the gall to enter that church or you had the temerity to allow it."

"Mildred that's enough." Cynthia said. "Either go in to lunch, or leave. I will not have you here speaking this way to my daughter." She gestured to the aide. "John, please escort my sister in law."

"Ma'am." The tall security aide moved closer to Aunt Mildred, who ignored him and moved off in another direction, taking the elbow of another older woman and guiding her aside.

"Sorry about that, Kerrison." Cynthia sighed. "I really don't know what's gotten into people these days. Goodness knows there have always been feelings like this, but in public you were expected to act polite about it."

"Has been getting more blatant." Dar noted. "Whole country's gotten more conservative – leadership is. So they think it's all right to say stuff like that. We're the socially acceptable to bash minority people of this age."

Cynthia's face twisted into an expression of distaste. "Surely not."

"Surely yes." Dar replied. "Seen the Westboro jackasses on television?"

"Tch." Cynthia made a sound of irritation. "Those people are insane."

"Insane, yes. But they get air time."

"Yeah, Dar's right." Kerry murmured. "But you just reminded me that we've got to go out and get health insurance before we cut loose from ILS, Dar." She motioned towards the grand hall. "Should we go sit down?"

"Yes." Cynthia joined them as they walked. "Does your company take care of that now?" She asked, diffidently. "I mean, do you have the same issue as Mildred's firm?"

"Nah." Dar shook her head. "We offer domestic partner benefits. Even if Kerry didn't work for us, I could put her on my health insurance. But she's right, we have to go get private policies now, and it won't work

that way. We'll need to get individual ones." She paused. "Fortunately we already had the legal work done to give us both medical authority over each other."

"I see." The Senator frowned. "Hm."

"We're lucky. We can afford it." Dar commented. "A lot of people can't."

They entered the hall and paused, drawing to one side to find their way in the dim light.

In the rear, the fireplace had been restored, and held a brightly burning wood fire. The room had been liberally lit with candles, and there were at least four candles on each table, providing a warm, and almost medieval air. "Come sit at my table." Cynthia pointed to the one closest to the fireplace. "They're using the gas stoves and warmers to keep everything. I hope it turns out all right."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, mother." Kerry murmured. "The sliders were great."

Cynthia grimaced a bit. "They were quite a surprise for some, but you sister insisted."

Ceci and Andrew were already seated at the table, and Mike and his girlfriend joined them as they arrived. "Hey guys." Kerry was about to sit down, when her chair was pulled back for her, and she paused, giving Dar a brief grin before she dropped into it. "Thanks."

"Anytime." Dar sat down next to her and surveyed the room. Despite the lack of electricity, everyone appeared to be determined to make the best of it, and she leaned back and folded her hands, hoping they wouldn't encounter any more of Aunt Mildred.

Or Aunt Alice. Or any of the rest of Kerry's relatives, all of whom seemed to have color coordinated baseball bats up their collective asses.

"Hey Dar?"

She looked across at her mother. "Yeees?"

"You going back into the office when you get back?"

"No." Dar felt a sense of satisfaction in saying that. "Kerry and I are going to go down to the cabin the rest of the week and go back in next Monday." She leaned back in her chair. "We have the time coming to us."

"Such a lovely cabin." Cynthia spoke up. "Really, just charming. And the view from the porch, amazing." She smiled at both Dar and Kerry. "I completely see why you like to spend time there. So peaceful, really."

"It is nice down there." Ceci agreed. "I'm doing a set of paintings from that point, in different weather. " She said. "The colors are wonderful. The water changes every minute."

"It does." Kerry spoke up. "We spent a few weeks out there after we got back from New York. You can really unwind there."

Cynthia smiled. "I can imagine that." She looked up as Angie and Brian arrived, and plopped down in seats next to her. "Oh! There you are."

"Here we are." Angie agreed. "Hey guys." She gave her brother and sister a grin. "Sorry we're late, mom. We ended up dropping Brian's mom off at home, she got lost and we passed her heading here."

"Oh my. She didn't want to come to lunch? I am sure she was invited." Cynthia frowned.

"Um.. no." Brian spoke up. "She's kind of... she doesn't like parties." He said. "She's really just into church."

"Ah." Ceci nodded. "She didn't want to hang out with the infidels. Gotcha." She inspected the basket of rolls that had been placed on the table. "Raisins. Mm. Lunch is looking up."

Brian had the grace to look embarrassed. "Really, she's more embarrassed and disgusted by me than by anyone here." He said, in quiet voice. 'It was just hard on her. She's worked in the church for a really long time, and it was hard for her to face all those people."

"Why does she think she's responsible for what you did?" Angie asked.

He shrugged.

"People who are very traditional are not comfortable with what they view as .. ah." Cynthia paused. "Well, things that are non traditional." She finished somewhat lamely. "Just as the pastor felt that I perhaps should have tried to regulate the morals of my family as Roger tried to, many others feel that this lack of holding to traditions has put us all at a disadvantage with God."

"Really?" Kerry felt her back stiffening.

"I did not say I agreed with that." Cynthia stated, somewhat more forcefully. "But I cannot ignore the fact that many do, in fact, believe this."

"Like them people at the church last week." Andrew spoke up. "Figured to close down that place to keep their kids from walking next to it." He handed over a plate of butter and knife to Ceci. "Just a lot of hating for no reason."

Angie nodded briefly. "Yeah, I got some advice warning me not to let my kids near my sister." She stated. "I don't think the person expected me to slap them."

"Near me?" Kerry blinked. "Aside from making them want Labrador puppies what am I supposed to do to them?"

"Give them ideas." Angie said, straightforwardly. "What I told them was, given how bright you are, the best thing that could happen to them is for you to give them ideas."

'Right on.' Brian agreed, giving Kerry a thumbs up.

"Terrible." Cynthia muttered. "I must look into perhaps finding another place of worship."

"Want to try mine?" Ceci suggested. "Bet I could find a c... I mean chapter up here."

The waiters swirled around them putting plates down on the table. Kerry stared at hers, then she turned her head and looked at Dar, who was leaning forward with her forearms braced on the tablecloth. She could see the flare of her partner's nostrils and as Dar's eyes met hers they were in total emotional sync.

Outrage. Horror. A little revulsion with an outline of anger tinging it. Kerry could see in the set of Dar's jaw and the tension of her hands she was just on the verge of blowing up about it and knew they both had the same ball of tension in their guts for the same reason.

And that, curiously, made everything all right again. Kerry reached over and tweaked Dar's nose, coaxing a smile out of her as she dismissed the bullshit swirling around her like a cloud of gnats.

Screw it. Just wasn't worth it. "Well, I sure can't change what people think if they want to think stuff like that." She said. "So the hell with it. Let them suffocate in their own close mindedness."

Cynthia still looked disturbed. She shook her head and pushed her plate forward a little. "Terrible." She glanced at Ceci. "Perhaps we can talk later about your faith?"

"Sure." Ceci observed her plate. "Ah. Asparagus."

"Sorry about the bacon wrapping it." Angie leaned towards her. "I forgot you were a vegetarian."

"No problem." Ceci unwrapped the bacon and handed it over to her husband, who swapped it for his own asparagus. "Andy and I have this all worked out."

Everyone chuckled, as the servants brought a round of mimosas to the table, setting them down as a hum of voices started to fill the room, while the snow kept falling thickly outside.

**

"Oh my god." Kerry crawled under the covers, free at last of her clothing, her relatives, and the room full of intently watching eyes. She snuggled up next to Dar and put her arm around her, taking her reward for having to stand in the downdraft of a shitstorm most of the day. "That was so bogus."

"Mm." Dar curled her arms around her and exhaled in satisfaction. "But It's over."

"It's over." Her partner agreed. "Now we've just got breakfast to get through, then it's off to the airport. You think the lights'll be back on tomorrow?"

Dar shrugged. "Airport's on generator."

"Thank goodness." Kerry exhaled softly. "I keep saying I'll never come back here. Wonder when that's going to actually be true? How much abuse do I have to take to stay apart of this family, Dar?"

Her partner thought about that for a bit, her fingertips making a slow, gentle pattern on Kerry's back. Then she finally sighed. "Maybe we should have them just visit us. That wasn't so bad."

No, it hadn't been.

"Ker?"

"Yeah?" Kerry breathed in the scent of Dar's skin, which still held a hint of the perfume she'd put on that morning. It was dark out now, and dark in the room, chilly, and a little damp from the weather outside. There was a small battery powered lamp on the bedside table, giving them just enough light to see by.

"Sorry about all the crap today."

"Not your fault." Kerry could hear Dar's heartbeat under her ear, with that tiny little echo thump from her oddly structured heart. "People are jerks. My family is full of them, apparently. But at least my mother's gotten better. Right?"

"Yup."

"And your mom offering to induct her into paganism was worth the whole day."

Dar chuckled. "I got lucky in the parent dice roll." She admitted.

"Oh baby did you ever." Kerry exhaled. "And by extension me too." She blinked a few times, thinking in silence. "You know something?" She finally said. "I think I do want to change my last name, Dar. I know I messed with that when we were in the Caribbean, but now? I want to do it."

She tipped her head up to see Dar studying her in the dim light. "Would you mind that?"

"Would I mind that." Dar mused. "No, I wouldn't mind that, if you want to do it. You sure?"

"There's nothing here for me anymore, Dar. I love Angie and Mike, and mom's gotten better, but the rest of them? Why would I want to say I'm related to people who think I'm a godless whore?"

Dar considered that. "Your sibs are okay." She said. "And I like your Aunt Penny." She concluded. "But I'd love you to share my name if you want to." She smiled. "That was kind of a kick when you did it in the islands."

Kerry looked pleased. "Rocking." She kissed a spot just above Dar's prominent collarbone, and then, as Dar reached over and shut the battery lamp off, she slid a little higher and found Dar's lips as she settled back on the pillow, glad to swap the chill of the room and the coldness of the crowd for the heat of passion.

Dar's hands touched her and brought a welcome warmth and in a moment she was being gently rolled onto her back and Dar's thigh was sliding between hers.

It felt wonderful.

It was fantastic to let that familiar burn start in her guts, and savor the teasing touch against sensitive skin that washed away the taint of the long day. She'd joked about inaugurating the room, but as Dar coaxed a low, guttural sound from her she focused on doing that in earnest.

If they were going to think she was an immoral whore, well then.. Kerry released a low growl. Then she'd show them how that would roll. She felt Dar's lips nibble down the centerline of her body and the pressure built, her body already craving the release as she let it chase the gloomiest of her thoughts right away.

She was looking forward to smirking over her morning coffee, even savoring the looks she knew she'd get. Hell with all of them.

**

Kerry cupped her hand over her free ear and pressed her other against her cell phone. "Yes, I'm here." She listened intently to the voice on the other end. She looked up as Dar entered the dining room, her heavy jacket already on. "So, Jake, you think it's okay to take off at eleven?"

Dar came over and stood next to her, hands in pockets, rocking back and forth on her heels. "Was worth booking the jet." She commented. "News said the regular airport is slammed."

"Okay, so we'll head over." Kerry concluded. "See you in a few." She hung up the phone and tucked it into her pocket. "We all ready?"

"Yup." Dar agreed. "Car's waiting outside."

Kerry felt a distinct sense of relief as she followed her partner through the grand hall towards the entrance. The lights had come on halfway through breakfast, bringing on a blare of lighting to distract the stilted conversation that had been going on.

No one had been rude, but it was also obvious that this was more because of Cynthia's wishes than anything else.

She could see the door open, and outside, the snow falling. Andy and Ceci were already out in it and the only thing between her and them was a few members of her family.

"Thanks for coming up and being my bestie, Sis." Angie held her arms out and embraced Kerry. "Hope you have a good trip home."

"No problem." Kerry returned the hug. "You guys have to come visit us again soon, though, huh?" She turned to her mother as Dar stepped forward to give Angie a somewhat awkward embrace. "Mom, you too."

Cynthia smiled. "Certainly, we should plan for it." She agreed. "Please let us know you get home safe."

Then they were outside and stomping through a thick coating of snow towards the SUV. Kerry already had a firm grip on the keys and she slid behind the driver's seat and slammed the door shut. "Brr."

"No offense, Kerry. But I've never been so happy to see a place in the rear view window." Ceci settled herself behind Dar. "I swear to the Goddess your family is a bowl of pits with no cherries."

Kerry sighed. "Yeah, I know. Thanks for coming up here with me and keeping me company in my insanity." She got the car into gear and started off down the hill. "I was glad to see Angie married."

"That boy shoulda stepped up before." Andrew grumbled. "Not be so candy assed."

"Oh, c'mon Andy. He's not that bad." Ceci poked him. "He's a nice kid."

"Actually." Kerry cleared her throat. "I agree with him. When I went up the last time to help Ang move, I was all set to kick him in the nuts for not taking responsibility for his son."

"Damn straight." Andy said. "Ah would not expect any child of mine to be acting like that."

There was a little silence. Dar glanced at herself, then at Kerry, then half turned to regard her father. "Dad? I'm a girl." She stated. "I don't think it's going to come up."

Kerry chuckled. "It wouldn't anyway." She reached over and patted her partner's leg. "I have total faith in your honor, sweetheart."

Ceci snickered. "Actually, when Dar first told us she was gay, I think the one thing that relieved Andy was that he wasn't going to be spending long summer nights sitting in the driveway with a shotgun waiting for her to come back from dates."

'Mm.. "Kerry spoke up. "I actually thought he was doing a good job of checking me out when we met to make sure I wasn't going to take advantage of his little girl."

Andrew blushed. "Ah did not think any such thing of you, Kerry."

"I was never worried." Dar circled one knee with her hands and rested her shoulder against the car door.

"Considering you started our relationship out by saving me from carjackers? I'm not surprised." Kerry navigated down the back road, passing very few other cars on this quiet Tuesday morning.

"Mm." Dar smiled, but remained silent.

"Kerry, why is it all those people are so nasty to you?" Ceci asked. "Is it because of you and Dar? Or what?"

Kerry sighed. "It's always been tough around those people." She admitted. "It was always very judgmental. About everything. You're supposed to conform, but I think... even if I'd married Brian and maybe taken a job as a clerk somewhere that judging would have still been there."

"Hm." Ceci shifted a little in her seat. "Had that in my family too, but it had nothing to do with religion."

"So, in this case, it's everything." Kerry slowed down to turn into the small regional airport. "My leaving home, my getting a job in high tech, my living in Miami, my being gay, my turning over my father's records to the papers, there's nothing there they can approve of."

"Probably cause them more heartache seeing you than it gives you." Andrew commented.

"Absolutely true." Kerry agreed. "Specially with you all here." She turned and faced them, having turned the engine off. "Thank you for teaching me what family can be.." She studied her in laws, watching them smile and feeling Dar's touch on her leg, warm and real. "So now let's go home."

The lights were bright around the Lear jet crouching on the tarmac, a boarding ladder tucked up against the side of it. The pilot was waiting for them inside the small terminal, and they surrendered their overnight bags to him as they waited to board.

"I really like that plane." Ceci commented. "My brother Charles flies around in one of those, and so do most of his friends. Didn't think it was in my plans."

"No, me either." Dar agreed. "We always had the option. But the first time I flew in a private jet was coming back after the attacks. I liked it." She admitted. "That's why I didn't say no when Alastair and the board offered this one." She saw the pilot motion and she led the rest of them across the snow dusted ground, glad to mount the steps and enter the sleek interior. "We are paying for this ride though. I told Alastair I wasn't going to get into any arguments about me using company resources for personal use."

"It's worth it." Kerry took off her jacket and took it, and Dar's to the small closet where Andrew was already putting Ceci's. "I can just imagine traveling today."

They sat down and buckled in, and a moment later the flight steward came in, as the door was sealed shut and the pilot retreated into the cockpit. "Hello there."

"Hey Jael." Kerry greeted the woman. "Ready to get out of this snow?"

"You know it, Ms. Stuart." The steward brought over a tray and served them all coffee. "Jack's just doing the checklist and filing our flight plan. We should be rolling in about ten minutes."

The inside of the plane was warm, and it wasn't too different from the private plane Kerry remembered her mother using. It had eight seats, two groups of four facing each other with tables to work on between them. The chairs were thick and comfortable, soft leather that warmed to her body as she sat in it.

Jake and Jaele were the A crew and there was a B crew that took over from them sometime. They were on call around the clock for Dar and the attention had outlined a new sense of understanding from the board over just how important Dar was to the company.

Funny, after all the time she'd worked for them and all the things she'd done, for them to now decide that. Kerry watched her partner swinging around in her chair in an almost child like motion. All the attention from the government, and the new requests for service had caught their attention like nothing else before had.

Funny. Crazy. Strange. Kerry leaned back in her chair and crossed her ankles. So much change in their lives in such a relatively short time.

"Okay folks." The pilot stuck his head out of the cockpit. "We're de-iced and ready to go. Buckle up."

"Thanks Jack." Dar lifted a hand and waved at him.

Kerry felt her body relax as she heard the engines spin up and felt the gentle jolt as the plane started to back away from the terminal. She stifled a yawn. "Hope Angie has a nice honeymoon."

"Where's she going?" Ceci asked.

"She's doing a western Mexico cruise." Kerry smiled faintly. "You know, Acapulco, and all that? She's really excited. She's never been on one."

"Mm." Dar made a skeptical sound.

"Yeap." Andrew agreed. "Won't catch me on one of them, not after that whole hoo hah you done got into."

"She got a good deal on a suite." Kerry informed her knowledgeably. "They got a whole honeymoon package and it sounded like fun."

"Mm." Dar repeated the low, growly noise.

"Well, honey, we have our own boat." Kerry reached over and patted her knee. "She doesn't."

"Oh I don't know." Ceci leaned her elbow on the chair arm and rested her chin on her hand. "I always thought an Atlantic crossing cruise might be fun."

"It ain't." Her husband informed her.

"Not on the ones you sailed on, no." She conceded. "But on those nice fancy ones it might be."

"Mm." Andrew made the same noise his daughter had, only an octave lower.

Kerry chuckled as the plane swung out and headed for the top of the runway. She folded her hands on her stomach as Jaele took her seat, and they felt the increase in power as the jet turned onto the runway.

It paused, then with a solid surge of power headed off, and after a far shorter time than a larger jet, it bounded up into the air and arched up into the sky.

"Ah." Ceci fished into her coat pocket. "You get to see the papers, Kerry?"

"Oh no." Kerry winced. "Let me guess, I got a picture in one."

"One?"

Dar chuckled.

"What are you laughing at, kid?" Ceci tossed the folded newsprint over. "Just be glad USA Today wasn't there."

**

"Hey Cheebles!" Kerry sat down on the love seat to properly appreciate the greeting of their pet Labrador.
"You ready to go down to the cabin with us?"

"Growf!"

"Car or boat?" Dar dropped down next to her, then thumped against the back of the couch as Chino leaped up onto her lap. "Oh.. hey! Chino!" She got her arms around the big dog, who proceeded to lick her face with earnest thoroughness. "Hey!"

"Heh." Kerry chuckled. "I just imagined my sister getting slobbered on like that. She's going to have a cow."

Dar got Chino turned around and watched as the dog regarded her owners with a look of doggy delight.
"Boat? We can break out the 3 mils and dive a few reefs on the way down?"

"Sure." Kerry played with the end of Chino's otter tail. "Let's stop at Pennekamp on the way down. That's a nice shallow dive."

"Sounds like a plan." Dar agreed. "We'll leave early. Let me go check the marine forecast." She deposited Chino on the couch and stood up, angling around the couch and heading into her office.

It felt good to be home. Kerry smiled as Chino curled up on the leather surface and rested her head on her thigh. She stroked the animal's soft, silky ears and watched the tiny eyebrows over her gentle brown eyes twitch. "Did you miss us, Cheebles?" She asked. "Did I tell you my sister's getting one of your baby sisters?"

"Growf." Chino peered up at her.

"We're going to have to have her come down here so you can visit with her." Kerry informed her pet.
"Although, y'know, it would be pretty hilarious to have you visit there, and see the two of you turn that house upside down."

Chino wagged her tail.

Kerry chuckled, flexing her bare toes in the throw rug surface as she leaned back, very glad to have the quiet peace of their home around her. She could still smell the faint scent of new paint, the walls now a soft misty blue color and just past the sliding glass doors she could see the colorful all weather hammock they'd added to the swing chair already installed.

"Hm." She got up and went to the door, sliding it open and taking a breath of the cool, salt tinged air. Seagulls were coasting over the surf and she sat down on the hammock, then swung herself into it, watching Chino go over to the wall and stand up to look over it.

With a contented sigh, she extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles, then folded her hands over her stomach and studied the vivid blue, cloudless sky.

So different, from the cloudy snowy skies of Michigan. She could hear the gentle rush of the waves against the rocks that lined the edge of the island and caught a blurb of music carried on the wind from nearby South Beach.

Damn it was good to be home.

The door slid open behind her and she heard the rasp of bare feet against the tile. "Weather good?"

"Be a little choppy, but yeah." Dar went to the railing and looked over, putting her arm around Chino as the dog stood up again to see what she was looking at. "Picked up my voice mail. We're going to have an unexpected visitor tonight."

"Yeah?"

"Alastair." Dar turned and leaned against the low wall. "Just said he wants to have dinner with us, but I get the feeling somethings behind it."

"Oh boy."

Dar half shrugged, a mildly bemused look on her face. "Guess we'll find out." She said. "He'll be here around six. You want to make noodles for him or take him somewhere?"

Kerry put her hands behind her head and pondered the question. "Hm. I don't feel like cooking but I also don't feel like getting dressed up." She said. "Not after that wedding. Want to just go to the beach club? Or .. no, we had him over to the Italian place that last time."

"Let's have something from the main place delivered here." Dar decided. "Good compromise?"

Kerry smiled at her.

"Thought so." Dar yawned. "I'll go make some coffee."

"I'll go check the menu online." Kerry rolled up out of the hammock and joined her at the door. "C'mon, Chino. We'll get you a little steak too."

"Growf!"

**

Kerry poured Alastair a glass of wine, handling the bottle with casual expertise as she handed the glass over to him. "So what's the board's problem, Alastair?"

Alastair McLean, their stocky, gray haired boss, the CEO of ILS, swirled the glass and took a sip before he answered. "Well, now we come down to it." He said. "Glad we left it till after that nice meal to talk about, ladies." He rested his elbow on the table and regarded the two of them.

"Uh oh." Dar leaned back and folded her hands over her stomach. "That sounds like trouble."

"Well." Alastair waggled his free hand. "It's like this. Y'know we've been on a talent search the past few months looking for replacements."

"For us." Kerry seated herself and put her napkin back on her lap.

Alastair gave her a wry grin. "Let's put the cards down. I can be replaced. You can be replaced." He looked over at Dar. "You, on the other hand, are a big problem."

Dar blinked mildly at him. "I've been a big problem since birth if you ask my mother." She said. "C'mon, Alastair. Don't tell me they can't find another CIO. Give me a break."

"Board's been interviewing potential candidates since fall." Her boss agreed. "Not that there's a lack of people out there, but frankly, Dar, you're a tough act to follow."

Dar rolled her eyes. "Oh please."

"No, please." Alastair drummed his fingers on the wooden table surface. "The last six, all told the board the same thing. It would be career suicide to have to follow you in that position. They don't want it, not even at any price."

Kerry chuckled softly under her breath. "I only had to fill in for her for what.. one day? I totally believe that."

"So what are they going to do?" Dar lifted a hand, a puzzled expression on her face. "Alastair, I'm not an indentured servant. I am allowed to leave, right?"

Alastair sighed. "The problem is, the logical person to move into that position is someone in your direct chain who you've mentored."

Kerry cleared her throat.

"Exactly." He tilted his head in her direction. "So my moment of turning a blind eye to your relationship is now biting us very hard in the ass."

"The board knew." Dar said. "We've made no attempt to hide our lives the last few years." She said.

"Anyone with a brain would have figured if I left, Kerry would too." She frowned. "What the hell would you have done if something had happened to us? We've had a few close shaves."

Alastair agreed. "That's why they dedicated a jet to you, Dar." His voice went serious. "You are, like it or not, an extremely valuable corporate asset." He took another sip of wine. "Of course you're not an indentured servant. None of us are, but we have put ourselves into a sticky situation that I'm not sure I know how to get us out of."

Kerry watched her partner's face, as the words sunk in. She had, privately, been wondering if they could find someone or someones to replace them, since she was more aware than most of just how integral they were in the operations of the company.

So to hear Alastair say what he was saying didn't surprise her nearly as much as it seemed to surprise her other half. Dar had a weird, somewhat self blinded view of herself sometimes, and this was one of the times it showed. "So, the problem isn't that you can't get a replacement, the problem is, any replacement you want doesn't want the job, and people who want the job, you don't want."

Alastair nodded.

"Well, crap." Dar lifted her hands and let them fall, an exasperated expression on her face.

Kerry got up and went over to her, putting her hands on her partner's shoulders and squeezing them. "Honey, I've always told you that you're one of a kind." She gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "Let me get the ice cream." She went into the kitchen and got a small tray out, removing the ice cream sundaes the restaurant had sent over that she'd stored in the freezer.

Chino followed her in, and sat down next to her tail sweeping the floor with anticipation.

"Oh, you think you get ice cream too, madame?"

"Growf."

"So, what are we going to do?" Dar asked. "Alastair, not being able to hire a replacement.. what the hell?"

Alastair smiled. "You surprised?"

"I am." Dar said. "It's just a CIO position. There are at least 499 other companies in the Fortune 500 and I'm willing to bet most of them have someone like me."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yes." Dar answered honestly. "I'm not unique. What I do isn't unique. It's just infrastructure operations. Are you telling me the donks they interviewed were so scared of stuff I've done they don't have the balls to come in and better me?"

"Yes." Her boss said. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Alastair."

"Dar, it's just bad timing." He conceded. "If we hadn't been so visible during the attacks, hadn't been on TV every other day, and then the follow ups, and those interviews you did for CNN... spotlight's pretty bright on us and now, the government's calling asking for more."

"I don't want to do anything for that government." Dar answered, flatly. "And you shouldn't either."

Alastair lifted his hand, and let it fall. "I've got a pretty thick skin. I know where they were coming from trying to nail me, and while I don't like it, Dar, I do understand it."

"I don't like it, and I don't want to understand it." She responded. "I've had enough. I want to spend some time just living my life. The board's going to have to get over itself and just hire someone who can keep the pie plates spinning."

"And they will, Dar." Alastair held up a pacifying hand. "No one's saying you can't leave if you want to. What I'm saying is, it might take a little longer than we planned."

"Grr." Dar made a low growling sound deep in her throat.

"C'mon. You gave the company a good part of your life. What's a month or so more?" Alastair said.

"Besides, if you cooperate with the board, they'll hand you everything you want.. you can even get out of the exclusion clause if you want to. If you put them in a corner.."

"If we put them in a corner, what?" Kerry came out with the tray and deposited the sundaes in front of them. "What would they do, Alastair? Take away Dar's stock and pension or something?"

"They might." Alastair answered, with quiet honesty. "But the thing I don't want, is for them take advantage of the two of you, and decide to get ratty. You served the company with a lot of honor, Dar. I want you to go out that way."

"Hm." Dar eyed him over the sundae. "Well." She picked up her spoon and glanced at Kerry. "We'll work something out. I don't want to get them all in an uproar now anyway."

Kerry looked back at her. "Now?"

"The other voice mail was that adviser of the Presidents." Dar said, selecting her cherry and biting into it. "He wants to talk."

"Oh." Alastair frowned.

"Yeah."

**

Kerry took off her sunglasses and tucked them into her jacket pocket as she passed through the front doors to ILS's commercial headquarters. It was still very early, and the office was very quiet, only the security guards, and a few junior secretaries around to see her enter.

"Good morning, Ms. Stuart." The guard greeted her quietly. "Did you have a good holiday?"

"I did." Kerry dutifully swiped her badge into the reader. "Did you, John?"

"We went to Disney World" He said. "Me and Sarah and the kids. It was nice."

Disney World. Dar had promised her a holiday visit there. Kerry tucked that thought away for later and made her way across the lobby to the elevators, hopping inside one to find Mariana, their VP of Human Resources already inside. "Hey Mari. "

"Good morning." Mariana cordially replied. "You look suntanned. Down by cabin?"

"All week." Kerry agreed. "Dar's about ten minutes behind me. She's dropping her truck off for service." She watched the floors pass. "How'd your holiday go?"

"Nice." Mari said. "I was glad we decided not to do a company party this year. We ended up on a catamaran in the Bahamas."

"Nice." Kerry returned the compliment. "Yeah, I was glad too, except that while I was at my sister's wedding I was kinda wishing I wasn't." She smiled briefly. "Would have rather been here having those paella canapés."

Mari chuckled, as the elevator stopped and the doors opened. "Yeah, I forgot you were going to be up there with your family. "She walked alongside Kerry as they entered the big, gray carpeted and maroon walled hallway. "Family's tough. I know mine's always leery of Louis. They think atheists are equal to satanists."

"How do you think my family feels about me and Dar showing up with Dar's Southern Baptist dad and pagan mom?" Kerry inquired. "At least now, it gives them a bigger heartburn than they give me."

Mari chuckled again.

"Not to mention my sister decided to have her whole wedding party wear strapless gowns." Kerry continued. "Well, the women anyway. So I am pretty sure my chest was front page in the local paper the whole next week."

Mari laughed louder.

"Jesus." Kerry sighed. "It actually feels good to get back here and just have some usual IT stuff to deal with." She paused to turn into her office. "Later, Mari."

"Later."

The other woman walked on, and Kerry continued into her outer antechamber, where she was surprised to find her assistant already there working away. "Hey Mayte."

Mayte had looked up when the door opened and smiled. "Good morning, Kerry." She said. "And a happy holidays to you. Did you have a good time off?"

"I did." Kerry agreed. "How about you? Nice to have the extra time, huh?" She said. "I think it was a good idea to give everyone last week off."

"Oh yes." Mayte stood up. "May I get you some cafecita? Mama and Papa had a big party at the house, and all of our family came over for it. It was very nice, and I got to see some of my cousins for the first time in a while."

"I'd love some." Kerry continued on to her office. "And I'm glad to see someone enjoys their family." She winked at Mayte, then opened her door and went inside.

It was quiet, as her office usually was. She crossed over and put her laptop case down, circling her desk and going to the big floor to ceiling windows at the rear. They looked out over the ocean and she put her hands against the glass, watching a speedboat turn out of the cut and roar into life.

With a smile, she turned and sat down in her chair, reaching down to start up her desktop and then leaning back to enjoy the peace and quiet that would last just long enough for the machine to boot up and present her email to her.

The week at the cabin had been fun. They'd gone to a little island party their neighbors had thrown, and spent a lot of time in the sea, even though the waters were colder than she really liked. Dar had set herself the challenge of finding a meal for them a day, and she'd gotten to taste all sorts of things her partner had dredged back out of the ocean for her.

Yum.

The machine finished coming up and Kerry logged in, folding her hands and waiting for her desktop to assemble itself. For better or worse, the holidays had been quiet in the disaster arena, and now she sat there, thinking about what short term goals she had to put in place.

Short term, because they were leaving.

Kerry considered that, finding the thought of them actually walking out of the building and not coming back still surreal to her, and even more so to the staff they managed.

Her phone buzzed. She glanced up and hit the button. "Yes?"

"Kerry, Mark is here to see you."

"Send him in, by all means." Kerry watched her screen fill with emails, sparing a glance towards the door as it opened and admitted their MIS manager, Mark Polenti. "Hey Mark."

"Hey poquito boss." He dropped into one of her visitors chairs. "Big D in?"

"Probably by now She was dropping her ride off to be serviced." Kerry responded. "How was your break?"
"Sweet. Rode the bike down to Key West." Mark grinned. "Nice to have the extra time off. You guys down by Largo?"

Kerry nodded. "Yeah, after I got back from my sister's wedding." She rested her elbows on her desk. "So what's going on? Anything besides my entire inbox I have to worry about?"

Mark shrugged. "Been quiet. I think everyone's waiting for the other shoe to fall."

"What does that mean?"

"See who's they're gonna hire to try and take yours and big D's place." He responded. "No one's looking forward to it."

Kerry sighed, lacing her fingers together. "I'm sure there are people in this company looking forward to it, Mark Dar has enemies here. I met most of them, remember?"

"Not really. Not anymore." He shook his head. "Big diff between when you came here and now, Kerry. You know it."

She did.

"Dar was always tough. She still is." He said. "But one thing you could take to the bank was, you could trust her."

Kerry thought about that in silence for a moment. "You know, you're right about that." She said. "I felt that, even from the start with her. If she said something, she meant it." She looked at Mark. "I get it." She said. "But she's entitled to have a little life with her life, you know?"

"I know." Mark nodded. "I feel great for her and for you. Just not for me, or the rest of us." He glanced around. "So anyway, every thing's sort of in a holding pattern. No one wants to start anything new, cause we don't know what the deal is going to be. You know?"

"I know." Kerry exhaled. "Just between you and me, it might not be as soon as we planned, anyhow. They're having a problem replacing her."

Mark started chuckling softly. "I bet they are."

"Well, I mean how'd you like to follow that act?" Kerry smiled wryly. "I sure as hell am glad I'm not going to try it."

"Oh yeah." Mark agreed. "Hey, who knows? Maybe they'll take a year to find someone." He perked up visibly. "Anyway, the one thing cooking is the new network center coming online downtown. I got five guys over there running cabling and it should be ready to go in about a week."

"Oh. Good." Kerry had almost forgotten the new center, it's need established way back when she and Dar had gone to North Carolina, and it's commissioning overshadowed by recent events. "It'll be good to be able to double home services into that thing. Dar was looking for someplace to land those international circuits from South America."

Mark nodded. "Okay got that on the agenda. See ya at the ops meeting?"

"See ya." Kerry watched him get up and walk out, going over his words in her head as she delayed having to deal with her mail. A moment later, she put even that on hold as she heard footsteps approaching down the back hallway to her office and looked over as the inner door opened and Dar poked her head in. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar entered and parked her tall frame on the edge of Kerry's desk. "Car won't be ready for a few days. They have to replace some gaskets."

Kerry leaned on her chair arm. "Isn't it time we went and picked you out a new car?" She asked. "The last time my car had to have major work that's what you made me do."

Dar opened her mouth to protest, then paused, with a thoughtful expression. "Hm." She wrinkled her nose. "Maybe that's an idea. Let me think about it." She cocked her head. "Speaking of thinking about it - I told the government if they want to talk to me they have to come here."

"Ah." Kerry, who had more exposure to the government, winced. "Y'know, hon..."

Dar shrugged. "They want me. I don't want them." She said, with a truculent note in her voice. "Screw it, Kerry. I don't owe them anything. I delivered above and beyond a few months ago. Maybe if they think I'm going to be an asshole to deal with they'll go elsewhere."

"That didn't stop them the first time." Kerry observed. "Is it really smart to get someone that high up in the government mad at you?" She put a hand on Dar's thigh. "I don't want that kind of trouble."

Dar sighed. "Too late." She managed a wry grin. "His office is going to call me back." She glanced out the windows. "Ah, who knows? Maybe it's a short little something that'll keep me occupied until they find someone to replace me."

"Dar." Kerry patted her leg to get her attention. "They will never do that." She watched the pale blue eyes focus on her, and a small smile appear. "The best they're going to be able to do is find someone who's got guts, who'll get in there and weather the tornadoes until they can start putting their own ideas in."

"You could do that." Dar commented

"I don't want to do that." Kerry replied in a mild tone.

Dar smiled again.

"That thing we did? In New York? That did something to me." The blond woman leaned back in her chair. "I don't want to spend any more time just clearing the next problem off my desk."

"Me either." Dar reached over and tweaked her nose. "So let me get back to my handover plan, and see what the government says about my badass self." She pushed off the desk and sauntered back to the hallway. "See ya for lunch."

"Speaking of cleaning problems." Kerry turned her attention, finally, to her inbox as she heard Mayte come back with the coffee. "Let's get the party started."

**

Dar twirled a pen in her fingers as she listened to the voice coming from the phone. "Listen, Gerry, that sounds like ten times the scope you talked to me about a few months ago."

"Well don't you know? War'll do that to ya." Gerald Easton replied. "Got them throwing money at me right left and up my keister. Don't want to hear about resources, just get it done. So here I am on the phone with you, finding out how we're going to get it done."

Dar rubbed her temples. "Gerry."

"Dar, I know what you're going to say." Easton cut her off. "This all is not your cup of tea. I know it. But they know, and I know, and you know, that you can get this done."

Yeah yeah. Dar took a breath, and released it. "Okay." She finally said. "Let me see what I can work up on it and I'll get back to you."

"Fantastic" General Easton said. "My people want to have a meeting over it. Can we get you up here? Got some folks who want to wring your hand anyhow."

Dar recalled Kerry's words. "Not a bad idea, Gerry." She resigned herself to the trip. "I've got to go talk to some brass up there. Might as well knock both of you out on one trip."

"Brass?"

"Same guy who wanted to talk to me last time."

“Ah.” The general grunted. “That one.”

“Mm.”

“Well, looking forward to hearing from you then, Dar.” Gerry said. “Just let my gal here know when you’re on the way.”

“Sure. Talk to you later.” Dar hung up the line and leaned back in her chair, folding her arms over her chest and studying the phone somberly.

This seemed like trouble to her. Gerry’s project was an overhaul of the government’s intelligence systems, and while Dar knew that individually all that was part of that was well within their scope, navigating the political nightmare that would ensue was not.

She’d had enough of that on one small base with one small system.

The end goal was a logical one – so that all the systems the various agencies used could talk together and share intelligence and data and yet she suspected none of the agencies would go easily into this new world of collective knowledge.

So logic, and egos would clash. Dar didn’t really want to have to deal with that, but she was becoming aware of the fact that despite her steadfast desire to separate herself from all this, it wasn’t going to happen fast enough for her to avoid getting involved.

Damn it.

And then there was whatever the president’s advisor wanted. That might prove to be tougher and more serious. Dar turned to her desktop as her mail dinged, and studied the screen.

Clients. Alastair. Mari. She bypassed them all and clicked on the one from Stuart, Kerry
Hey.

“Hey Ker.”

So I checked online about changing my name.

“Why?” Dar stared at the screen in puzzlement. “I like Kerrison. I didn’t think you hate it...oh.” She felt a faint flush of embarrassment. “Your last name.”

It’s a weird mixture of civil legal stuff and stuff that comes from when everyone lived in a tiny town and all went to the same post office. You have to post the paperwork on a bulletin board for a month. But anyway, I’m going to stop during lunch and pick the forms up. I’ll bring you back some Thai.

Dar regarded the mail in bemusement “You were serious.” She rested her weight on her elbows and thought about it. “Wow.”

I’m jazzed. I think the hardest part of it will be getting my Social Security card changed.

Dar wondered what it would feel like to think about family the way Kerry did, and make the change she was contemplating making.

What would she have done if she hadn’t been gay, and had gotten married and been faced with changing her name. Would she have? Dar regarded the pen in her fingers as she thought hard about that. “Damned if I know if I’d have done that.” She finally said. “I think I’m proud of that name.”

“What?”

Dar turned to find Kerry crossing the carpeted floor “Hey, thought you were going to the post office.”

“I am.” Kerry agreed. “But Mark said something earlier and I wanted to talk to you about it.”

Dar leaned back in her chair. “All ears.”

"All legs, actually." Kerry tickled her knee. "Dar, what does this whole hiring thing do for our time line? Mark was saying people are just sort of holding their breaths and waiting to see what happens... how long can we operate like that?"

"We can't." Dar said. "What would you say if I said I think I want to retract my resignation for now?"

Kerry blinked, caught seriously by surprise. "What?" She paused, watching her partner's face. "Are you serious?"

Dar nodded. "I was just thinking about it. We gave them too much warning. There's no way we'll get out of here in one piece if we keep the date."

Slowly, Kerry walked around the front of Dar's desk and sat down in the seat across from her. "Wow. I don't know what to say to that, Dar. I thought we had this worked out and decided."

"I know." Dar leaned forward and put her head down on her crossed wrists.

"Do I get a say in this?"

Dar felt like she should be mad at the question, and she could see Kerry's temper prickling. "That's why I asked you what you'd say." She remarked. "It was something I was just thinking about. Gerry just called. They want to quadruple the scope of that systems refresh."

"And?"

"And, if I'm fully involved in that government clusterfuck, chances are I can't get sucked into whatever the president has in mind."

Kerry watched her quietly. "Can't you say no to both of them?"

"I could." Dar agreed. "But my gut instinct is, if I walk out now, everyone we know here is going to pay the price. Do I want that on my conscience?" She blinked at her lover. "I should have just handed in my creds in NY."

"Mm." The blond woman grunted softly.

"I'm not going to say anything. You chew it over and see what you think." Dar said. "While you're on your way to go change your name to mine." Her eyes twinkled a little. "Ker, I want to do what's best for us. That means long term as well as short term."

Kerry sighed. "I wanted to go travel with you." She said. "It really makes me feel crappy to know that's not going to happen, Dar." She admitted. "I'm tired of doing this. I don't want to spend more time listening to people yell at me, or want me to pull cats out of my butt for them."

Dar got up and circled her desk, holding out her hands to Kerry and pulling her upright when she grasped them. "Nuff said." She leaned over and kissed Kerry on the lips. "Then we go."

All the roiling tension that had built up in the few minutes evaporated. Kerry leaned against her partner and rested her head against Dar's collarbone. "Now that I've had my mini tantrum and you've indulged my brattiness, let me mull it over." She said. "Talking to Mark was making me think about it too. There's a lot of people here who are invested in the leadership we give them."

Unseen, Dar smiled.

"Especially Mayte and Maria." Kerry finished, quietly. "There's a lot of trust there."

"A lot of your hard work salvaging my reputation there." Dar disagreed, then she looked down as Kerry pulled back and looked up at her. "Damn good job."

Kerry stretched up and gave her a kiss, then patted her on the side. "Be back in a little while." She headed for the door, a faint smile on her face as she shook her head.

Dar sat on the edge of her desk and folded her arms. Then she got up and went back to her chair, whistling softly under her breath.

**

Kerry stood patiently in line, her sunglasses perched firmly on her nose as she ignored the din around her in the county courthouse. There were a lot of people inside, doing a lot of things she really had no interest or knowledge of. The line she was in at the moment promised to end up with her obtaining the forms she needed, and the notary public she would need to sign off on the papers was available as well.

It felt a little strange to be here. Kerry folded her arms over her chest, keeping her eyes mostly on the ground and not meeting anyone's gaze.

"Thanks for nothin!" The man in front of her slammed his hand against the window and left, leaving the clerk behind it shaking her head.

She paused a moment, then glanced at Kerry. "Next?"

Next. Kerry walked up to the window. "Could I please have the forms I need to change my name?"

The clerk gave her a bored look, then she got up and went to a file cabinet, opening a drawer and shuffling through some folders. She withdrew a set of forms and came back, sliding them under the bulletproof glass window into Kerry's hands. "There ya go."

"Thanks." Kerry took her papers and went to a nearby stand up desk, removing a pen from her pocket and studying the questions. "Okay, well, let's get this over with." She started filling it out, resting her arm on the table and scribbling through the questions.

Some she got. "Full current legal name." She printed hers in neatly spaced letters. "Second question. What is my complete present name. What?" She peered at it. "Isn't that the same thing?" With a shake of her head she obediently filled it in. Then - "I request that my name be changed to?"

Kerry paused, and studied the line. She took a breath and flexed her fingers, then filled the line in.
"Kerrison Roberts."

It was a very strange feeling, a mixture of relief and apprehension, a mental awareness of a vivid crossroad visible only to her.

Did Dar get why she was doing this? Her partner had seemed okay with it, pleased, in fact, but how could Dar really understand when she herself had never faced the question?

Ah well. Kerry took another breath and carried on filling out the rest of the form, all four pages of it, racing through the rest of it not pausing to wonder why they needed to know what college she went to, or what her profession was.

When she finished, she took it over to the notary desk, and paid the fee to have it stamped, signing it in front of a sleepy looking man with a bad toupee and a tattoo of a smiley face on the back of his hand.

He didn't actually look at the papers. He just signed his name and applied his stamp, and pushed the papers back at her without even looking up.

"Thanks." Kerry said, taking her forms and going back to stand in line again. She checked her watch, then she opened her palm pilot and tapped in a quick note. After about 15 minutes she was at the front of the line again, and stepping forward to hand the woman her forms.

The clerk sniffed, and shuffled through them, reading quickly through it. "Two hundred and five dollars please." She looked up at Kerry expectantly. "Cash or check."

Kerry removed her checkbook from the inside pocket of her jacket and filled out a check, glancing at the chipped plastic sign to determine who to make it out to. She signed it, then she removed it from the book and handed it over. "So I have to post this somewhere now?"

The clerk looked at her like she was crazy. "Say what?" She asked. "No. You gotta get a court date. You go over there, and fill out that form and put it in the box. They'll call you." She stapled the check to Kerry's form and put it into a plastic folder, and handed her a slip of paper. "Your case number. Next?"

A little startled, Kerry backed off from the window and got out of the way as a man and woman pushed into her place. She hesitated, then she went to the form on the wall, examining it. "Request a hearing?" She pulled a copy down and filled it out, putting the case number on it before she dropped it into the slot.

Then she looked around, the din around her suddenly harsh and metallic, irritating her senses. She put her pen away and went for the door, fastening her jacket as she cleared the doors to the courthouse and emerged into the bright, cool, sunny weather outside.

Her cell phone rang. She pulled it out and stepped to one side to avoid the crowd on the stairs. "Kerry Stuart." She answered, covering her free ear.

"Hey." Dar's voice echoed softly. "Where are you?"

"Just leaving the courthouse." Kerry glanced around. "Why?"

"Meet you for lunch? My noon conference call just got canceled." Her partner told her. "Big storm over in Europe, everyone's going home."

"Sure." Kerry said. "Thai place, ten minutes."

"See ya."

Kerry hung up the phone and leaned against the stone wall, collecting her wits and composure. The process hadn't gone at all how she'd expected it to, and now she was really glad that Dar was coming out to join her for lunch. She wanted to talk. About the court, and about Dar's sudden revelation.

All of a sudden the world seemed to be moving too fast.

**

"So it's done?" Dar looked almost comically astonished. She slid into the back booth in their favorite little lunch place and rested her hands on the table. "Holy crap."

"Yeah I .." Kerry glanced at the waitress. "Usual for me."

"Me too." Dar leaned forward as the waitress left. "It was that fast?"

Kerry took a breath and released it. "It's not all the way over. They have to call me for a hearing, but.. I mean, I thought I had to post it up in public and all that but I guess not anymore. Serves me right for trusting the Internet." She looked across the table as Dar removed her sunglasses, and found herself captivated by her pale eyes. "So I guess now I wait to hear from them, then they sign it and its done."

Dar grinned. "I sent email to my parents telling them." She said. "My mom said my dad wants to formally adopt you."

Kerry blinked. "Can he do that?"

Dar shrugged. "We could check the Internet." She suggested. "But you know he really loves you. They both do."

Kerry felt unexpected tears sting her eyes.

"And of course, I do." Dar added gently. "You look freaked out."

"I am."

The waitress came back and delivered two ice teas, and two bowls of soup. She put them down and retreated in silence.

"Why?"

Kerry took a sip of her tea. "You know, I'm not really sure. Could be because I'm due for my period tomorrow."

"Ah." Dar reached over and chafed her hand. "We got supplies?"

The talk of something so prosaic and mundane snapped Kerry right out of her funk. She chuckled softly and felt her body relax. "Yeah, I'm good." She released Dar's hand and picked up her soup spoon. "Dar, would that make me your sister? Because that would be really really weird."

Her partner started laughing, almost spilling her tea. "I think he just wanted to express the intent, hon." She said, picking up her soup bowl and drinking directly from it. "He already considers you one of his kids."

Kerry watched her fondly. "So." She dipped her spoon into her soup and consumed it in a more conventional manner. "So what made you decide on pulling back your resignation? Was it something someone said, or..."

Dar paused to think about it, setting her bowl down. "Yeah." She said. "Something Alastair said stuck in my monkey brain." She admitted. "And I was thinking about it while we were down at the cabin, about how walking out right now just didn't feel good to me."

"Mm."

"Or it could just be my ego doesn't want to let go of this position." Dar went on, in a wry tone. "Sometimes I like being me."

Kerry smiled. "I think you do enjoy it." She agreed gently. "I enjoy you being you, why shouldn't you have fun with it too?" She finished her soup and pushed the bowl aside. "But Dar, you'll be successful at whatever you end up doing. Don't you want to be your own boss?"

The waitress came back with their lunch and set it down. Dar had her hands folded on the table, and she waited for the woman to leave again. "Do I?" She applied herself to mixing her curry with its attendant rice. "Yeah, I do. I'd like to be rid of that damn board, and not have to answer to anyone."

Kerry felt a sense of relief. "That's what I thought." She said. "I know I would."

"It's just hard for me to turn my back on the responsibility." Dar concluded, rested her head on one hand. "And... will I like being a consultant? Just suggesting things without having the ability to make those things happen?"

Oh. Kerry paused in her motion, as the words penetrated. "Huh." She murmured. "I didn't really think about that."

"Mm." Dar sighed. "Occurred to me when Alastair was at our place for dinner. He's sort of in that place, you know? He just has to take crap from everyone but he depends on people like me to make things happen in the right way."

"Well. We don't have to be consultants. We can make our own super high speed network and sell it to people." Kerry suggested. "You know you're really good at that."

Dar tapped her fork against her lips. "You mean, build out infrastructure in direct competition with my own design here?" She responded. "That'd take a lot of money to bootstrap."

Kerry watched the little twitches shift on her partner's face. "It would." She agreed. "But we could start just in Florida, and build out as we get customers. Sort of like what you did, with provisioning only where we had clients."

"Hm." Dar's eyebrows arched up. "We had a hell of a time finding an alternate datacenter... maybe we can offer that service too. I know we could find someplace on the west side of Dade or Broward to put one in." She reached over and tweaked Kerry's nose. "I like that idea, partner."

Kerry munched her peanut chicken in contented silence. It was hard for her to really put her finger on why she was so intent on a life change, but she knew she was, and she really wanted Dar to buy into that. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate the sentiments about responsibility, and their staff trusting and needing them. She did. She understood at a gut level the ties that held her partner in place, and why it was hard to break them.

But she was determined to. "You know what I think it is, Dar?"

"Bet I'm about to." Dar grinned at her.

"You were right. We waited too long." Kerry concluded "We should have done it in October. Wrapped up everything while everyone was still in a tailspin and gotten out. We gave them a chance to suck us back in." She glanced up, to see her partner nodding at her. "So we've got to turn that around."

Dar's pale eyes twinkled a little. "You really want out."

"I do."

"I do too. I just feel bad about it. I've been there a long time, and even though I fought with a lot of those people like cats and dogs its still.. " She paused. "I don't know."

"They were your family when you didn't have one." Kerry said, quietly.

Dar stopped eating and lowered her fork, gazing at Kerry in silence for a long moment.

"Weren't they?" Kerry asked, into all that quiet. "I mean, not Jose or Elanor, but Maria, and Mark, and Duks and Mari?" She stopped eating as well, and waited, wincing a little as she reviewed her words and wondered if she'd insulted Dar without meaning to.

"As much as I'd let them, yeah." Dar finally said. "Boy that hit a spot."

"Sorry." Kerry reached over and touched her arm. "I didn't mean to bum you out, sweetheart. Maybe I should have just brought you back something."

Dar smiled, after a brief pause. "No, you didn't.. I was just thinking about.. the year I guess before you came into my life I remember going to the office over Christmas for some stupid broken thing and walking in and finding a bunch of little presents on my desk."

"Mm?"

"Just little stuff. Candies and whatever." Dar said. "With no name on them. Just a random kindness and.. when you said that I remembered it. I still don't know who put them there."

"Could have been the cleaning staff." Kerry felt the tension in her guts relax. "Could have been ops."

"Could have."

"Could have been the security guards."

"That's true too, so maybe you've got a point." Dar concluded. "I've been there a lot longer than you have."

"Yeah." Kerry sighed. "I'm just being a jerk today. Maybe I should go home."

"Let's both go home." Dar suggested readily. "Screw it. You got anything on your schedule for this afternoon?"

"Nope." Kerry felt a grin forming again. "Too much beginning of the year to be stuffed with crap yet."

Dar took out her phone and dialed. "Maria? It's Dar." She said. "Listen, Kerry's not feeling well. I'm going to take her home. Just clear my outbox and I'll pick up again tomorrow." She smiled. "I will, thanks. I know she'll appreciate the thought. Thanks Maria."

She closed the phone and picked up her fork. "I'm going to see if I can get her an early retirement package."

"I'm going to see if Mayte wants to watch our place while we're traveling and start the process of setting up our new company." Kerry responded. "Do you mind if I hire her as our first employee?"

"Nope." Dar smoothly handed her credit card to the waitress. "Tell you what. Let's go out to South Beach for dinner. Have some stone crabs."

"Walk out on the beach?" Kerry leaned back and spread her arms out on the seat back. "How about we go out to Crandon and relive our first kiss?"

Dar's grin morphed from just amused to criminally adolescent. "Let's do that."

Ahh. Kerry grinned back. "At this rate, I could get to like Mondays."

**

"We need to stop by this place on the beach on the way." Dar relaxed in Kerry's passenger seat, extending her long legs out. "They've got this new phone thing they want me to look at."

Kerry had unzipped her leather jacket, and paused to let traffic go by as she waited to turn on to the causeway. "What kind of phone thing?"

"Company called Handspring." Her partner stretched her body out contentedly. "Some new phone and mail gizmo. I said I'd give it a try. Their distributor's got a small place down on Washington."

"Can I get one too?" Kerry turned right and proceeded down the road. "You get all the cool toys."

Dar chuckled. "Aaabsolutely." She folded her hands over her sweatshirt covered stomach. "Nice to use the gym while everyone else is at work."

"It was." Kerry felt a little sore, her legs had that slightly heavy feeling of hard use and she suspected her night might end in the hot tub. "I think I overdid the presses a little though.. where on Washington?"

"2nd ave." Dar flexed her hands and then laid them down on her denim covered knees. She had leather boots on, and her sweatshirt had a hood on it, and she was looking out the window with a contented expression.

Kerry's cell phone rang, and before she could get it out of her pocket, Dar had. "Thanks hon."

Dar glanced at the caller ID. "Ops." She opened the phones. "Yes?"

Dead silence. Then a male voice. "Uh.. ah, sorry.. ah, is that Ms. Roberts?"

"Yes." Dar agreed. "You got it in one try. Congratulations."

"Um.. sorry ma'am, I meant to call Ms. Stuart. I must have dialed the wrong number.. uh, let me try again."

"Relax." Dar watched the palm trees flash by. "You got the right number, I just happen to be answering her phone because she's driving and I love her too much to have her risk her life answering a phone."

Kerry's nostrils flared. "Dar." She hissed. "For cripes sake!"

"Uh." The ops tech stuttered.

"So what is it you need?" Dar continued without missing a beat. "I assume you called her for a reason?"

"Ah, yes ma'am." He recovered bravely. "Sorry about the call but we're seeing some latency in the network here and we've gotten some calls from people still working."

Dar considered the phone. The urge to stop, and pull out her laptop, and find the issue tickled her. Then she recalled that she hadn't put the laptop in the car and stifled a smile. "Okay. So." She said. "Let's have a little troubleshooting lesson. If there's latency in the office network there's only a couple things that can cause it. Know what they are?"

There was a period of silence, then the tech cleared his throat. "I asked the guys who called what was slow. They said everything."

"Uh huh."

"But.. usually that's not really true so I tried some stuff myself." The tech said. "It's files, ma'am, and my mail store." He offered. "I checked the DNS with nslookup, and it's answering snappy, so I know it's not that."

“Good man.” Dar said. “So what does that mean, ya think?”

“Well, usually that would be the file servers, ma'am, but we asked the MIS guys to check and they said they didn't see a problem.”

“Good.” Dar nodded approvingly. “Who did you talk to in the MIS team?”

“Johan.”

“Call Johan, and tell Johan I said there's a problem with the file servers, and he'd better find it.”

Kerry turned down Alton Road and glanced at the street signs looking for 2nd Ave. “You're such a maestro.”

The ops tech sounded much happier. “Thank you ma'am, I'll do that.” He said “Is it okay if I send Ms. Stuart a text when it's fixed?”

“That's fine.” Dar said. “Goodnight.” She closed the phone and dropped it back in Kerry's pocket. “You know what else occurred to me?”

“That you do most of the thinking for a company of two hundred and fifty thousand employees?”

Dar chuckled. “Something like that. It's easier to call someone than think for yourself, but we don't get that option.”

Kerry remembered having to face that, when Dar had been in New York and she'd been faced with solving a complex technical issue. “It is easier.” She agreed. “I had to teach myself not to just call you and ask.”

She pulled into a parking lot of a small strip mall, and parked. “Not easy.”

Dar turned her head and regarded Kerry with a bemused expression. “I should have forced everyone to do that.”

Kerry opened her door. “Let's go get your toy, maestro. At least they call me first now.” She hopped out of the car and closed the door, zipping up her leather jacket as the wind off the water chilled her skin. It wasn't the cold of Michigan – but she had a short sleeved shirt under her coat.

She followed Dar to the sidewalk and then around the side of the building to a small shop in the front of it, with a window full of screens and gadgets, and a radio controlled dog outside patiently barking at all passer's by.

The sun was going down, and as they entered the shop it's outside lights flickered on, and a gust of air puffed into their faces full of the smell of electrons and plastic. Dar went to the counter and put her hands on it. “Looking for Douglas?”

The man behind the counter nodded and turned, sticking his head inside a back room. “Doug? Some women here to see ya.”

Kerry wandered around the store as Dar waited for the owner, peering into the counters and finding her attention caught by the myriads of cell phones and accessories, and the cameras.

Hm. She was due a new camera. She leaned on the counter and studied the offerings, debating in her head if she wanted to move from film to digital this time.

“Hey, Ms. Roberts.” A low, gravely voice boomed out. “Thanks for coming over. I thought you'd really like this thing here, maybe you want to try it out.”

“Ker?”

Kerry left the counter and returned to her partner's side. “Hm?” She inspected the device in her partners hands. It was not unlike her palm pilot, but it had a keyboard, and the screen was color. “Oh. Hey.” She took it and touched the keys. “You type with your thumbs?”

“Yeah.” Doug agreed. “Not my thumbs, yeah? That's why I was looking for a lady to try it. I can't type on them tiny keys.”

Kerry tried a few. "Hm." She took out the stylus and touched the screen, watching the applications appear. "Cool."

"She's sold." Dar grinned. "Got two of them? I don't know if I can type on it with these mitts but I'll give it a try."

Beaming, Doug disappeared again, popping back out a moment later with another box. "There ya go. These are like, beat units? Won't be commercial for a couple months. They run on Tmo."

"Beta units." Dar took hers. "We'll give them a workout, and let you know, Doug."

"Great. Thanks!" He gave them a wave as they made their way back out into the crisp air. "Nice ladies."

His assistant looked up at him, and shook his head. "Give up them phones? You're crazy."

Doug gave him a clout on the back as he went back into the store room. "Crazy like a fox, bro. That tall lady likes that thing, we can sell a truckload to her. Big shot in that high tech stuff."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

**

Kerry was glad of the cool air, and the cloudless dark night sky that presented a perfect, full moon as they strolled out onto the boardwalk.

Dar paused after a few minutes and leaned on the railing, eying her partner with a slight grin. "Here we are."

"You remember?" Kerry chuckled, leaning next to her. "I can tell you I was far too slathered with my own hormones to figure out where on this walk we ended up at."

"Mm." Dar looked out over the silver lit sands. "I do remember, because I was figuring out how far it was to that lifeguard station so I'd know how long to run before I could dive into the water and soak my embarrassment if you ended up that kiss with a "Yuk!"

"Oh Dar, please." Kerry chuckled. "You knew I wasn't going to do that!" She said. "I knew we were probably going to end up kissing each other when we left that restaurant."

"Did you?"

"Uh huh." Kerry nodded. "At least, I knew I was going to end up kissing you. I wasn't entirely sure what you were going to end up doing."

"Oh, Kerry please." Dar drawled in response. "You're lucky I didn't start licking that butter sauce off you at that restaurant." She bumped Kerry with her shoulder. "Give me a break."

"You would have scandalized my friends."

"Didn't you want me to?" One of Dar's brows lifted.

Kerry chuckled.

"We've come a long way." Dar straightened up and turned, much as she had that night and gazed at Kerry. "Thanks for deciding to share my life, even though it's been a roller coaster the last few years."

Kerry gently put her hand on Dar's cheek, then leaned closer and kissed her. "Pleasure's been all mine." She took a breath of the cool, salt tinged air and let her hand drop to grasp her partner's. "Can I ask you a question?"

"You found one you haven't yet?" Dar's eyes twinkled gently.

"I'm serious. I thought about it when we were driving out here." Kerry said. "Are you letting me push you into doing something you don't really want to do, Dar?"

Dar looked puzzled.

"Do you really want to quit?"

"Ah." Dar leaned on her elbows, the breeze ruffling her hair. "You know what I think?" She turned her head and regarded Kerry, seeing the lines of tension along her jaw as she clenched it. That made her pause, especially when Kerry's eyes drifted off and didn't meet hers. "Ker?"

"Yeah."

"Hey." Dar moved closer and reached over to give her a tickle on the tip of her nose, waiting until Kerry looked up at her. "Yes." She said. "I think you are forcing me into this.. ah ah ah!" She put her finger on her partner's lips, reading in her body language an emotional explosion she didn't want to trigger.

Kerry went still, watching her intently.

"It's a good thing." Dar said. "Left to my own devices, I'd stay in the same program until someone pushed my off button." She smiled wryly. "You started changing me the minute we met. I don't regret that, Ker. Honestly." She draped her arm over Kerry's shoulders and bumped her. "Let's walk and talk."

She felt the tension in her companion's body relax a little, as they strolled along the wooden walkway, empty at this time of night except for themselves. The silence went on for awhile, only the rustle of the palm trees and the rush of the surf echoing softly.

"I just feel so adrift." Kerry said, suddenly. "I can't even focus on stuff at work, Dar. It all feels so.. I don't know."

"Mm." Dar grunted softly.

"Maybe I need to just step down." She offered. "Just go do something else."

They walked along for a little while, as Dar chewed that over. It was hard for her to determine exactly how she felt about it – on one hand, she wanted Kerry to be happy. On the other hand, she didn't want to have to replace her, and have to deal with someone else in her position.

On a third hand, it occurred to her that she'd walked away from work without a thought today and maybe all her arguing with her ego really had no point. "I'd like us to go out together." She finally concluded.

"Can you hang in there for me a little while so we can get things tied up?"

Kerry studied her profile. "Do you really want to leave? Level with me, Dar."

"I do." Her partner responded easily. "Or.. let me be more specific." She smiled with wry self knowledge. "I want to try something else, do something else, be part of something else." She said. "I just don't walk away from things easily."

"You're loyal."

"Call it that."

"it is that." Kerry said, in a mild tone. "You are a very loyal person. I don't think that's a bad thing, Dar." She paused and regarded the horizon. "I trust you. I don't want to make you unhappy doing something just to make me happy, you know?"

Dar turned and studied her. "I don't know. I'd go through endless amounts on unhappiness in order to make you happy."

Kerry fell silent for a moment. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Dar shrugged lightly and grinned. "I'm not." She said. "It won't make me unhappy to go do something else, or travel with you for a year for that matter, and we both know that. I just have to get over my upbringing and realize I don't run the world and I'm not going to get the satisfaction of saving everyone's ass every ten minutes."

Now it was Kerry's turn to ponder. "You're really self aware sometimes." She remarked.

"Yeah. Thinking about how I think gives me a headache though. I'd rather we started kissing again." Dar responded. "Or go down the beach and get some ice cream. Seriously, Ker, I'm fine with it."

"Mm." Kerry regarded her pensively.

Dar put her arms around her and gave her a hug, lightly scratching her back as she felt Kerry respond and exhale. "Change is a pain in the ass. But we'll muddle through it."

"I know. " Kerry finally let it go. "I'll see what I can do about some networking to find some people brave enough to come do what we do. Maybe that tech seminar next week'll stir up some interest."

"At's my girl." Dar patted her on the back. "You do that while I fly to Washington. Get them off my back."

They started walking back up the boardwalk to the parking lot.

**

Kerry came back into the living room with her hot tea, to find her partner sprawled on the couch, hands folded on her stomach as she patiently waited for Chino to return with her toy to throw. "Whatcha thinking?"

"What am I thinking." Dar tossed the soggy green frog across the condo. "What do you think about Roberts Automation?" She inquired. "As a name for our new company?"

Caught by surprise, Kerry set her tea down and dropped onto the love seat. "Oh. Wow. Hm." She leaned on the love seat arm. "Yeah. I like that. So you hooked on to that idea?"

Dar nodded. "That took my brain somewhere." She admitted. "Like a dozen things popped into my head about it.. what services we can offer, that kind of thing. Hosted services. Why pay for a datacenter, that kind of thing."

Kerry blinked. "You going to keep a running list for a year?" She inquired. "Or can you talk the board into not putting a non compete on you?"

"Me?" Dar eyed her. "That clause doesn't say anything about you." Her eyes twinkled. "You can be my front. After all, if they want to split hairs, we're not legally married."

"Ahhhh." Kerry started laughing. "No that's true. " She sighed. "I could do the startup work. But you know what, Dar? The non competes not going to be their problem."

"No?"

"Half the company wanting to come work for us is going to be their problem."

Chino trotted back over and tossed the soggy frog onto Dar's chest. "That's not illegal unless we solicit them." Dar tossed the frog again, this time onto the love seat. Chino obligingly hopped up next to Kerry and burrowed for it. "Get it, girl."

"Chino! Ow!" Kerry grabbed her pet's digging paws. "You have claws!"

The dog looked at her in astonishment. "Growf!"

"Here." Kerry tossed the frog onto her laughing partner's chest. "Is that ethical, Dar?"

"Is what ethical? It's a right to work state, Kerry. People have the right to apply and be hired by whatever company they want. So as long as we don't solicit them, or initiate contact, why couldn't they come work for us?" Dar asked, reasonably. 'Besides, don't you think whoever takes our jobs is going to bring in their own people?"

Kerry picked up her tea and sipped it. "Well." She said. "I think there are a lot of people who are actually loyal to us, not the company."

Dar nodded, tossing the frog at the sliding glass doors, watching it bounce off. "Listen, the benefits ILS pays are good. We won't be able to match that for a long time, so in the end, people will balance what they need, with wanting to come with us. Don't worry about it."

“Mm.”

A knock on the door surprised them both, and sent Chino gal lumping towards it almost bowling Kerry over as she inadvertently got in the way. “oowho!”

Dar got up from the couch and skirted the table, getting to the door before her partner could recover from her impact with their pet. She opened it to find her parents there. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Ceci had her hands in the pockets of a patchwork leather jacket of many colors. “Can we come in?”

“Sure.” Dar stepped back to let them enter. “What's up?”

“We all are going to haul up out of here, wanted to give you a heads up.” Andrew said. “Them people at the Navy will not stop bothering with me.”

“What?” Kerry evaded the circling Chino. “What do they want from you, Dad? You're retired.”

Andrew and Ceci took a seat on the couch. “Ah do know that, kumquat. But them folks are working hard to get ever'body to sign back up to go mess around ovah there.”

“That makes no sense.” Dar said.

“As if the government ever does make sense?” Ceci said. “Anyway, we're going to take the boat and go cruise around the islands for a couple of months. Let them go bug someone else.”

“Good idea.” Dar said. “I might have to join you if I can't shake off the feds when I fly out there on Thursday.” She crossed her arms. “When you get back, want to come work for me?”

“I thought you weren't supposed to solicit existing ILS employees, Dar.” Kerry head butted her in the back.

“My father and you don't count.”

“You two going to finally set up your own shingle?” Ceci said. “Hey. I could be your receptionist.”

Andrew started laughing.

“Hey!” His wife elbowed him.

“Can they make you go back in the Navy, Dad?” Kerry perched on the arm of the love seat.

Andrew stopped laughing and frowned. “Jackass.” He said. “Ain't got sense to go pull some farm boys in do a better job than me now.”

Ceci also looked serious. “Actually, Kerry, they can. Now, technically because of his record they shouldn't, but that hasn't stopped them from calling, and we'd rather just avoid the question. If they can't find him, they can't twist his arm either.” She said.

“That kinda sucks. I'm going to miss you guys.” Kerry responded. “But if the government tries to draft Dar, maybe we'll join you.”

Both sets of parental eyes swung from her to their daughter. “They really bothering you, Dardar?” Andrew asked, mildly.

Dar shrugged. “Same guy wants to talk to me, has some thing he wants to ask. I said I'd go up there and talk to him, and swing by Gerry Easton's.”

“That does not sound good.” Andrew frowned. “That was some big old mess they got into.”

“Doesn't much matter. I can take notes to pass on to my successor.” Dar said. “Because I'm going to make it clear to both of them that they'll need to deal with them if they want something done. Kerry and I will be busy relaxing and planning the startup of our new gig.”

“Roberts Automation.” Kerry supplied, a moment later. “We were just talking about it before you got here. Got a nice ring, doesn't it?” She got up. “Can I get you guys some tea? Or a soda?”

“Sure.” Ceci also got up. “Let's both go.” They headed off into the kitchen, leaving Dar and Andy behind.

"Yeah." Ceci said, as she removed a couple of cups from the cabinet. "The last straw was Andy's old commander leaving a message on the boat voice mail." She said. "He was filing a float plan before I stopped sputtering." She leaned against the counter. "We're parked in your backyard there, we're going to stay overnight then leave in the morning. Didn't even want to overnight at South Pointe."

"Wow." Kerry pushed her hair behind her ear, as she waited for the water to boil. "I can't believe they'd do that to him."

"Oh, I can." Her mother in law responded. "I don't have any illusions about the service. I never grudged Andy his love for it, but I never shared it. Bottom line, you're a number."

Kerry measured some tea leaves into a strainer and set it into a pot. "Am I really going to be giving tea to dad, or would he rather have chocolate milk?"

Ceci chuckled. "He actually likes iced green tea as long as I dump enough honey in it. But yeah, he'd probably do better with milk. This whole thing's got him ticked off." She went to the refrigerator and opened it, studying the interior. "That milk dispenser cracks me up every time."

Kerry smiled. "The first time I saw it, I was like, what the heck is this?" She poured the water over the leaves. "Now I can't understand why everyone doesn't have one."

Ceci came back with the milk, stirring some chocolate syrup into it. "So I hear you're considering a name change?" She eyed Kerry.

"I filed my papers today." Kerry said, with a smile. "I really didn't think it would be as easy as it was, but apparently as long as you're not doing it to avoid the law it's pretty simple."

"Well, I never regretted it." Ceci said, firmly. "I don't think this is something you had to do, but y'know, kid, I'm glad you are."

Kerry's smile broadened. "Me too." She admitted. "It's change time, you know? I can just feel it. I'm glad Dar's jazzed bout starting up the new company – I know she feels a lot of responsibility for ILS."

"I'll tell her the same thing I told Andy. Don't waste time being loyal to corporations or government. They'll never return it." Ceci said. "The only thing that's due loyalty is people."

Kerry handed her a cup. "Two peas in a pod." She indicated the living room. "And to be honest, if I wasn't leaving, I'd be on my knees begging her to stay so I can't say I blame the board."

"I bet." The older woman said. "But she'd be an idiot to. She's done all she can there. Can't go higher, if what I read about corporate structure is true."

'Well.."

"Kerry, it's true." Ceci insisted. "Andy's the same way, and Dar's come from a very long line on both sides of stubborn traditionalists."

Kerry eyed her skeptically.

"They skipped a generation with me." The older woman grinned a little. "But I remember banging my head against the wall with the two of them wanting to find people who dropped pennies in the street to return them."

"Yeah, I know. I just don't want to egg her into doing something just because I want to." Kerry admitted. "I know she doesn't care, but I spent my whole life before meeting her being egged into doing things and I feel kinda skunked doing that to her."

"Don't." Ceci's expression went serious. "I mean it, kiddo. She'd stay because she thought it was the responsible thing to do. Sometimes it ain't."

Kerry toasted her mother in law with Dar's cup of milk, and they proceeded back into the living room where they found Dar and Andrew poring over a map of the Caribbean. "What are you two up to?"

Dar stood up and accepted the milk. "I told him to go hang out at that place we went to." She pointed at the map. "That place on St John?"

"Oh yeah!" Kerry circled around her and leaned on the table. "That was a pretty cool place. Once the hurricane left."

"And we stopped chasing pirates." Dar agreed.

"And you all stopped getting into hellacious trouble." Ceci added.

"Hm." Kerry regarded the map. "Maybe you should go to Bermuda instead."

**

It felt good to climb into their water-bed, and settle under the cool cotton sheets, as the warmth of the heated water cradled her body. Kerry exhaled, and consciously tried to relax as she waited for a handful of Advil to take effect. "What a pain in the butt."

"You have cramps in your butt?" Dar ambled into the bedroom, turning off the lights and crawling into the other side of the bed. "Want me to see if I can fix that?"

Kerry chuckled. "You're such a goof sometimes." She felt the bed shift as Dar came closer, then a gentle touch against her skin as she was enfolded in a hug.

No words. Dar wasn't much for them. But Kerry could feel the affection around her seem to soak into her skin as she relaxed against her partner and finally felt a moment of peace after the long, and somewhat stressful day. "We didn't play with our new gizmos." She said, feeling Dar's body move in a faint laugh. "I've got meetings all day tomorrow.. let's text each other the whole time."

Dar laughed harder

"Keep my mind off my cramps." Kerry added mournfully.

"Take the day off." Dar suggested. "You're going to have to hold the fort down when I leave for Washington." She started a gentle massage down Kerry's back.

Kerry had opened her mouth to protest, then she paused. Then she sighed . "I committed to hanging in there until we're out of here, Dar. I can't really just not show up for work, especially since we both flaked out this afternoon."

"You could hang out here and start looking up how to set up our new company." Dar continued, undeterred by the demurral. "And .. hey, how about finding out if we could rent an RV for our drive around the Grand Canyon."

"An RV?" Kerry allowed herself to be distracted. "What kind of RV? Like a trailer?" She could feel Dar's powerful hands working at a knot in her lower back. "You just want to skip out on sleeping in a tent."

"And you don't?"

"I'd like to try one night in a tent." Kerry said. "I've never slept in a tent, Dar. The closest I ever came was sleeping in the Dixie during that power outage."

"We can sleep in a tent when we do that white water rafting trip." Dar continued working her way around Kerry's body, ending up easing her thumbs in circles just below her navel. "And we'd better time that right cause I was reading that folder they sent us and you've got to pack everything in and out with you."

Kerry studied her shadowed face, the light from the digital clock just bringing out faint highlights. "Huh?" She murmured, then her face scrunched. "Oh. Ah. Yeah." She said. "Let's time that right.. and speaking of timing..."

Dar sighed. "Yeah. I'll be bleeding all over Washington."

"Well." Kerry, finally, felt herself relax. "At least my PMS is over, so maybe I'll be less of a nut case." She mused. "Maybe I should come with you to Washington. You can go bleed on the Pentagon, and I'll tell my mother I'm changing my name. Think that'll get them to leave us alone?"

"Hehehe." Dar snickered, almost into her ear.

"Then we can go kiss on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Did I tell you I found out about all that log cabin stuff?" She felt Dar's body shaking with laughter. "Holy pooters, Dar I should have joined that years ago! Where the hell was I? I should go visit their offices in DC and apologize for my father."

She felt Dar's forehead press against hers and she looked up, staring right into those ice pale eyes. They were both momentarily silent, then Kerry exhaled. "Take me with you." She whispered.

"Always." Dar responded. "I'll have Maria book your flight with mine. Now." She kissed Kerry on the lips. "Bedtime for nerds."

They snuggled up together and relaxed into peaceful silence.

"Can we get one of those RVs that do all that transformer sliding out stuff?" Kerry asked, after a moment of that. "And a barbecue grill?"

Dar started laughing again. "Sure."

"And a satellite dish."

**

Kerry appreciated a moment of peace in her busy morning, leaning back in her chair and sipping on some tea as she gazed out the window.

She was, she acknowledged, going to miss her view. Her fourteenth floor office overlooked the water and Biscayne Bay, and she adored it. She remembered fondly the first time she'd seen it, walked down the back corridor by Dar on her first day working at ILS.

She remembered dressing for work that morning, stressing over the position of every hair, and twitching her new jacket endless times to adjust the drape of it.

Now? Kerry smiled, as she hiked one ankle up on her knee, smoothing the cotton fabric of her loose fitting cargo pants down. She'd been glad enough to compromise with her solicitously hovering significant other, insisting on coming into the office but grateful her boss relaxed the dress code so she hadn't had to deal with a business suit and heels.

So now she was perched in her comfortable leather chair, drinking a cup of honey laced blackberry tea, taking a break from completing her personnel reviews that were due for imminent raises.

With a contented sigh, she turned her chair back around and put her cup down pulling over her note pad and picking up her pen. She checked her list of names and continued making notes, the sound of her writing echoing only slightly as she rested her head on her left fist.

After a few minutes, a soft buzzing interrupted her, and she glanced at the gizmo resting on her desk. "Ah." She nudged it over and regarded the screen, seeing a new note blinking for her attention. She tapped the screen, and it opened.

Hey. Blue or purple? DD

Blue or purple. Boy that could be almost anything. Kerry picked up the device and using the thumb keyboard, she typed an answer.

Green. She paused, then grinned and tapped again. *KD* The she put the device down and picked up her pen, checking off the next to last name on the list, and turning over the last review in her pile.

Mayte's. She reviewed her printed comments, then she added a long hand written postscript, smiling a little as she praised her admin, and indicated she thought she was ready for a more responsible position when one opened up.

She'd gotten her first technical certification just before Christmas, and while Kerry appreciated her dependability and eye for detail, she knew there were bigger and better things in the company for her to do.

A soft knock at the door made Kerry look up. "Yes?"

The door opened, and Mayte poked her head inside. "Kerry, may I ask a question?"

"Of course. "Kerry turned over the page and leaned her elbows on her desk, folding her hands together as her assistant came in and sat down in one of her visitor's chairs. "Whats up?" She asked. "I like that scarf. The color rocks."

Mayte grinned, reaching up to touch the red pashmina scarf around her neck. "We went to the international shops last weekend and my mama got me this. We don't get to wear them so often, but it's nice and so soft."

'Yeah, I have hats and scarves and gloves somewhere in a box in the back of one of our closets." Kerry agreed. "Dar has a sweater that color that I love on her."

"Yes." Her admin said. "Kerry, what is it you are going to do when you go from the company?"

Ahhh. "What are we going to do. Well, we have some travel planned, going to do some stuff in the Grand Canyon, and a visit to Macchu Picchu, and some skiing and that kind of thing. Maybe go up to Alaska, or visit the Far East." Kerry responded.

"And after that?" Mayte nodded when she finished. "Will you come back to Florida?"

Kerry smiled. "Yes, we will."

Her assistant took a deep breath. "If you make another company could I come to work for you?" She got the words out quickly. "I would not like to be here if you are not."

Kerry was actually a little surprised it had taken so long for someone to ask. "Well, you know Mayte, there are rules and things we have to go by that are part of our leaving here." She said. "We wouldn't want anyone to think we were trying to take people away from ILS."

'Of course not no." Mayte agreed softly.

"But." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "If we were to start our own company, sometime, I would love for you to come be a part of that with us."

Her admin's face lit up. "Oh!"

"Shh." Kerry put a finger to her lips.

"I know. We must be quiet about it." Mayte said, in an almost whisper. "Do you think my mama can come too?"

Kerry rested her chin on her fist. "I think Dar's going to take care of your mama, Mayte." She said. "I think she's going to make it so she doesn't have to work unless she wants to."

Mayte blinked at her in silence, then lifted one hand up to cover her mouth.

"But if she wants to come and hang out with us, you know she'll be welcome." Kerry concluded. "It will be a little while before things start happening, but you'll be one of the first to know about them, okay?"

Mayte nodded, wiping her eyes a little with one finger. "Yes, it is very okay. Mama will be so happy. She was so upset about you leaving."

"Yeah, Dar and I were talking about that yesterday." Kerry said. "There are people here who are like family to her. It's hard."

Mayte nodded again. "But if we can come with you, it's not so hard." She smiled shyly. "Correct?"

"Correct." Kerry grinned back. "I want Dar to be happy." She said "And I know that will make her happy, to have people around us that she knows and trusts." She added. "But we found out, when we were working with the government during the emergency, that a lot of what we were doing and why we were doing it wasn't in our control."

"Yes, mama was telling papa about that." Mayte said at once. "About how the big jefe was going to be in so much trouble, but that you fixed it, at the very last moment."

"We did." Kerry confirmed. "Dar and I, we personally did, risking ourselves to make it all right for Alastair and for the company and we don't regret doing that, but we don't want to have that kind of pressure on us, you know?" It felt comforting, somehow, laying it out for her assistant like that. "Because no one really appreciates it."

"That is just what my papa said."

"Yeah, Dar's papa said that too." Kerry chuckled. "So anyway, that's the deal."

Mayte got up. "Thank you, Kerry." She said. "I will not say anything to anyone, I promise."

"I know you won't." Kerry watched her leave with a sense of mild satisfaction. Then she sighed and turned the paper on her desk back over, taking a sip of her cooling tea. "Absolutely no one appreciates what we did." She shook her head and paused then put the cup down and picked up the gizmo, tapping a message into it and sending it on its way.

She was still trying to decide if she liked the little keyboard. It did seem easier to type out a message, her old standby palm pilot using the stylus and having it recognizing her handwriting did end up with her re-writing it's interpretations a lot. Dar's more regular scribbling seemed to be more to it's tastes.

Her phone buzzed. "Kerry, I have Personnel on line uno."

Kerry reached over. "Thanks, I got it." She hit the button on the phone. "Mari?"

"Good morning." Mari responded. "I was going to schedule an interview with you for some candidates on Friday, but I understand you'll be out of town?"

Ah. "Yes, I'll be going with Dar to Washington to talk to the Joint Chief's office, and the Executive branch." Kerry said, managing to stifle a wry grin. "So maybe it's better we wait until after that so at least I'll be able to warn my replacement."

"Oh boy." Mari sighed. "I don't know if I like us being so Washington Post front page."

"Us either." Kerry agreed promptly. "Consequence of success, according to Alastair. But hey, that might coax a few people into taking a chance on coming over here. Power's an aphrodisiac I hear."

"Might, at that." Mari said. "Somewhere somehow we should be able to find a sucker to take over for the two of you. I'm guessing it'll be a guy."

"Yeah?"

"Kerry, c'mon."

"Yeah." Kerry chuckled. "I know. I've got a call with two of our biggest network vendors this afternoon. Maybe I can see if there's any interest there."

She hung up and went back to her scribing, finishing up Mayte's appraisal with only the slightest tinge of impending hypocrisy for recommending her for advancement. "Hey, it's true." She regarded the paper. "Just because I have other plans for her, doesn't make it any less true, and besides, it'll be a while before Dar and I set up shop."

She sorted her forms with a sense of satisfaction, and inserted them into a sealed envelope for delivery to Mari's attentive hands. It was good to have that task done, and a little bittersweet to know it was for the last

time. The next time that staff was evaluated it would be by someone else, and Kerry found herself determined to make sure that whoever that was had a proper appreciation for good people.

Because she had some really good people.

**

Dar settled into the chair in the presentation room, pulling her sleeves straight and running her fingers through her hair before she touched the button on the video conferencing system.

She was alone in the room, the door locked and the do not disturb sign set. The late morning sun poured in the windows, and she could see parasailers from the corner of her eye as she waited for the system to come up and start to sync to the video gateway.

The weekly executive board meeting was never one of her favorites, and now that the board was aware she was going to leave, it made it all the more unpleasant.

They were pissed. Dar, viewing it dispassionately, could not blame them. It was one thing for a CEO to be resigning – quite another for them to be losing at the same time the senior structure of her operations group.

The screen flickered, then resolved, and one after the other, the board members appeared in their separate squares. Dar kept her hands folded and her mouth shut, having little to report at this the first meeting of the new year. The Houston video center appeared last, with Alastair just dropping into a seat that was the mirror of the one she was in, giving her a wry wink as he rested his elbows on the conference table there.

“Good morning, or good afternoon, all.” Alastair said, after a moment of silence. “Everyone on?”

The group muttered assent, from their sedate squares. They had only recently started using the upgraded video conferencing system, put in place after the September 11th crisis. Dar wasn't at all sure she liked it, really preferring the ability to sprawl at her desk on voice only, free to roll her eyes or make rude gestures without giving offense.

“Okay.” Alastair said, shuffling some papers. “This'll be a short meeting, since we're just back from holidays. The accounting group has advised me that year end closing is well underway, and preliminary numbers look all right. We haven't seen the impact of contract alterations from September, that will probably not really hit until end of first or second quarter.”

“You'll be gone. Why even care?” One of the board members asked, shortly.

Alastair looked mildly at him. “Because until I do walk out the door for the last time, I'm the CEO of the company. I care because that's my job.” He said. “I'm sorry it's all twisting your shorts that I've decided to retire after almost being railroaded on your behalf, but there ya go.”

“Alastair, that's not true.” The man protested.

“John, it is.” Alastair corrected him gently. “All the after the fact revisionist history doesn't make that different. I'm not mad about it, I just want to enjoy my life for a while. That so hard to understand? None of you were there. No one was standing next to me when all those Secret Service men were hovering, ready to grab my elbow and you all agreed it was right and appropriate for me to take the fall. No harm, fellas. I'm a big boy, and it was my call.”

Dar cleared her throat.

“All right, I got to stand there and it was really Dar's call.” The CEO smiled at her. “But anyway, this'll be a short meeting. So let's let me finish with my comments and we can do a round table.”

Dar laced her fingers together and simply waited for her turn, having already been to the December board meeting and dealt with the outrage in person of the people on the screen in front of her. They could, and would continue griping but now, hearing the muttering, her half formed idea of retracting her resignation seemed craven and candy assed to her.

What in the hell had she been thinking?

What really had been behind that impulsive urge to turn around and stay?

“Operations”

Dar looked up. “Kerry and I will be in Washington end of the week. I have meetings scheduled with both the Joint Chief's office, and the presidents advisory board.” She paused briefly. “In terms of the Pentagon, General Easton has advised me that the job scope we were engaged in prior to the attacks has been expanded. It remains to be seen exactly how expanded, but it appears at this time to be a four or five fold increase.”

More mutters, but less negative. “That'll end up being a huge contract.” John Baker said, distracted from his annoyance at Alastair.

“It will.” Alastair agreed. “I've had the personnel group here keeping in close touch with Dar. I think we're looking at establishing a major hub in Maryland to support the effort, we can't run it out of the existing one. Too small.”

“In terms of the advisory board -” Dar paused again. “At this point, I don't know exactly what that request is going to be. I do intend on presenting them with a bill for the last thing they asked us to do.”

Small, crabbed smiles appeared. But Baker cleared his throat. “Dar, did they ask for us, or for you?” He inquired bluntly. “Seemed to me the last time it had very little to do with us.”

“Ah yes.” Jacques Despin nodded. “But of course, the resources they demanded were ours, not our esteemed colleagues.”

Dar nodded. “He asked for me because someone told him my name, but what I committed were company resources and efforts. Same as for the City of New York.”

“So what's going to happen when you tell him you're leaving?” Baker asked. “And, that you can't even tell him who he'll be talking to when you're gone?”

There was a more significant silence. Dar unfolded her hands and lifted them, then let them drop to the table. “I guess we'll find out.” She said. “It could matter to him, and it could matter to Gerry Easton. Or maybe it wont', and they just want to get things done.”

More mutters

“Look.” Dar said. “I'm not going to apologize, just like Alastair isn't for wanting to take possession of my own life. You can all go kiss my ass. The only thing I ever got from this board is bullshit and a lot of happiness in having us, meaning me and him” Dar pointed at Alastair. “Take the fall for everyone else. Screw off.”

Alastair smiled fondly at her. “Ahh.. now that's my Dar.”

“You've been adequately compensated.” Baker said, stiffly. “You get paid well for what you do, Roberts.”

“Do I?” Dar said. “We walked into both New York and Washington with the possibility of dying. What's that worth? How many people working there are going to end up paying for that in years to come? What's that worth? What's Kerry's broken ribs worth? You think anything in my bank account can cover that?”

The board looked uneasily at her.

“It's never been about money for me.” Dar said, after a long pause. “I just want to take myself, and my family, and do something else. If that causes you inconvenience, too fucking bad.”

“Look.” Baker held up a conciliatory hand. “Dar, we all know what you've meant to this company, and our bottom line. So the frustration is not at you, it's just we have to figure out how we're going to rearrange things and not get hung out to dry by our shareholders. You know?”

“I know.” Dar simmered down, feeling her virtual hackles settle. “We want to make this a successful handover. I have a lot people in this organization I feel responsible for. No one wants to screw anyone.”

"We done with that subject?" Alastair took control of the meeting again. "Dar, thanks for going to Washington on our behalf. Just get what information you can, and try not to project the future to them, if you get me."

Dar considered that. "For the advisory board, sure. But Gerry's a family friend. I'm not going to lie to him." She said. "I think he's worked with us – meaning ILS – enough to have confidence that we'll deliver what we promise regardless of who sits in my chair."

The look of doubt was, in a way, a backhanded compliment and Dar acknowledged that. Despite her contentious relationship with the governing board, she knew that they knew that when it came to delivering on promises, she was rock solid reliable and always had been.

So she got that they were upset and angry at having to trade that for an unknown. "Hey." She spoke up. "Maybe whoever takes my place'll play golf and smoke cigars with you all. And not tell you to kiss their ass. Could end up being a good thing. You never know."

Alastair chuckled dryly. "You never know. Now. Pier? I heard we have some new leads in Africa. Wanna fill us in?"

The meeting stumbled on. Dar exhaled, picking up her new gizmo and glancing at it, then tapping the screen to display the message she saw waiting there.

A smile appeared on her face, and she put the device back down, returning her attention to the screen. "Houseboat." She muttered softly. "That's an idea."

"Dar, did you say something?" Alastair had been watching her.

"No, just taking notes." Dar replied dutifully. "We'll need to hike the back haul to the continent if that all comes through. Bring it up through the new Euro hub maybe, or invest in an equatorial tie line."

Everyone nodded as if they knew what she was talking about, and the round table continued on.

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"So what would be the difference between this and a houseboat?" Dar asked, as she set the anchor and they drifted against the current, coming taut against the line and rocking gently.

"Well." Kerry finished setting the table, looking up and appreciating the clear, winter cooled sky above them, the horizon just painted with the last bit of sun. "A house boat is bigger, for one thing."

Dar paused and looked around at the deck of their boat, her brows lifting a little in puzzlement. "This isn't exactly a dinghy."

"No, I know." Kerry chuckled. "Be right back." She went back inside the cabin of the boat, rolling a little with the motion as she went to the small galley, retrieving a platter of fajitas fixings and a round container of tortillas. She brought them both outside with her and set them down on the table. "But it's more like a house."

"The houseboat?" Dar was pouring sangria into wide based glasses. "That would make sense, what with the house in the name and all that."

"Dar."

"Hehe. I'm being an asshole. Sorry." Dar took her seat and relaxed, extending her sweatpants covered legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "I remember seeing houseboats off the west coast, and they were like trailers on pontoons. I'm assuming that's not what you're after."

"No." Kerry sat down and took a sip of the sangria as she took a tortilla and selected some contents for it. "I just think of stuff like, taking one of them up some of those canals, like in Holland, and seeing something new every day."

"Hm." Dar copied her. "That might be fun." She allowed. "I'll have to look at some of those river cruises they have. That could be a hoot, going through locks and stuff like that."

"Ahh." Kerry leaned back and regarded the horizon. She was in a thick hoodie, and had sheepskin lined boots on, a radical change from their usual t shirts and shorts. The weather had gotten colder as the day went on, and now it was in the upper 40s, crisp and chilly out on the water.

But with a pretty sky, and hot chocolate to look forward to, it didn't matter. "There's just so much I want to see and do." Kerry admitted. "Like, where do you start?"

"Yeah." Her partner agreed. "Well, we know we're going to start at the Grand Canyon, March 15th." She pulled a packet from her jacket pocket and put it on the table. "We pick up our RV March 12th in Vegas."

Kerry paused in mid bite, surprise obvious on her face. "Buh." She put her tortilla down and picked up the paperwork. "Wow. Didn't know you..." She studied the contents. "Oh wow. And the parks too?" She looked up at Dar, seeing the grin working its way around a mouthful of steak. "I thought you were still thinking about the timing."

Dar shook her head as she chewed. She swallowed, then chased the mouthful down with some sangria. "Me wanting to stay is bullcrap. I still think we should have gotten out in October, but drawing it out now doesn't do service to anything but my ego. Meeting with the board showed that today."

"Ah huh." Kerry nodded slowly, taking a bite. "Bottom line." She said, after a swallow.

"Victim of my own success." Dar settled her shoulders a little more comfortably. "You were right." She lifted her glass and toasted her partner. "Besides, making plans always makes me feel better."

Kerry chuckled.

'Plans okay with you?" Dar inquired, after a moment.

The packet was a complete set of reservations, including the plane flight to Vegas, a rental of what looked like a pretty snazzy RV, overnights in cabins, the whitewater trip... Kerry sorted through it all with growing delight. "When did you do all this?"

"Me?" Dar eyed her. "I just told the island travel agent what we wanted. She did the heavy lifting."

"It's awesome. I'll go talk to her this weekend and get all the loose ends tied up." Kerry smiled, putting the papers away. "Thanks, hon. You've made me a very happy woman."

Dar responded with a contented smile, as she retrieved another tortilla. "She even made reservations for Chino at a pet resort while we're on the river." She commented. "They have hot stone massages."

Kerry stopped in mid chew. "The pet resort?"

"Uh huh."

"Do they take people reservations too? I think we're gonna need it after a week on the river."

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"Ugh." Dar swallowed several Advil, washing them down with a swig from a chocolate milk chug. "Mind if we order room service instead of going out?" She asked, as she heard Kerry return from the bathroom after storing their overnight sundry kits.

"Of course not." Kerry went over to the luggage stand and removed Dar's pajamas from it, retreating back to drape them over her partner's shoulder. "Get undressed, and I'll see what they have to offer. Do you really think I'd rather go out to eat in downtown Washington and risk running into people who think they know me?"

Dar was glad enough to exchange her jeans and sweater for her long, threadbare t shirt, folding the clothes and packing them neatly before she picked up a magazine and retreated to the couch in their sedate hotel suite and curled up in one corner, willing the drugs to quickly settle her cramping.

Pain in the ass. Dar exhaled, and opened the magazine, full of the ocher and sand colors of the Southwest. She'd started feeling it as the plane took off, and resigned herself to dealing with the monthly annoyance. "Should be a pill for this."

"You mean to prevent it?" Kerry sat down next to her with the menu. "I've been saying that for years. At least it was a short flight."

Short, and private. "Mm." Dar flipped the pages. "I really am gonna miss that jet." She mused mournfully. "Spoiled my ass."

"We just have to get rolling fast enough to get our own, hon." Kerry studied their choices. "Twice grilled par boiled snails, or hamburgers?"

Dar looked at her, one brow arched.

"Yeah, I know. But those conch you brought into the cabin were sort of snail like. I thought maybe you'd gotten fond of them." Kerry smiled as she picked up the phone. "Hello, yes. I'd like something delivered"

Dar went back to studying her magazine, looking at the pictures of the rafting trip they'd planned. It looked fun, and exciting, and she could almost feel the twisting and turning of the boat going through the rapids.

It made her smile. Even the thought of having to sleep in a tent didn't really bum her out. "I bet when we're out there at night, we can see a lot of stars. Like out on the water."

Kerry leaned on the back of the couch and looked at the page. "You're really jazzed about this, aren't you?"

Dar nodded. "I am." She said. "I really want to make up for not taking vacation for fifteen years, and it's going to be pretty cool, out there with that small a group." She flipped a page. "We reserved for the first trip of the season."

"April." Kerry nodded. "So we can take the RV around to all the parks first, then end up there for the rafting trip." She exhaled in contentment. "This is going to be so much fun."

It was. Dar wished they were already on the other side of the remaining two months of work. The thought of going through the stressful separation was starting to annoy her. "Just you and me and Chino, seeing cool stuff. I even got them to send me a brochure for hot air balloons."

"Oo. Hot air balloons." Kerry rested her head against Dar's shoulder. "I saw those on TV taking off at dawn once, is that what you mean?"

"Yup."

Kerry closed her eyes and imagined it, the silence of the pre-dawn and the soft hiss of the wind.

"Awesome." She sighed and got up, replacing the room service menu on the desk in the room and retrieving her own set of pajamas. It was after dark, the flight had landed just after sunset and they had a full day planned for tomorrow with meetings at the White House in the morning, and the Pentagon after lunch.

Then a late night flight home, at their own schedule, with a weekend to look forward to. Kerry slipped into her shirt and put away her traveling clothes. "You think they're going to mind me being at those meetings, Dar? I could just hang out here if you do."

"Don't care." Dar had her head resting against her hand, as she studied the pictures. "They tell you to leave I'll be right behind you."

Kerry regarded her partner with a smile. "At least we don't have a Louisiana lawyer with us this time." She closed the top on the suitcase then she went over to the window, looking out at the familiar landmarks. They'd decided to stay in the center of town this time, and if she were on the roof of the hotel she could hit a few of them with a rock.

It felt strange, to look out at that landscape, and yet feel so disconnected from it. She no longer even felt her father's shadow there, and she was debating whether or not to call her mother, who she knew was here in town in her Senate offices.

After all, she'd just seen her. Right?

"So what if they throw us out?" Kerry mused. "We could go to a museum."

"We could go have lunch with your mother." Dar counter suggested. "Or go swimming in the Potomac."

Kerry chuckled. "I forgot you're not fond of museums." She said. "Oh hey.. how about the Air and Space Museum?" She turned to find a much more interested pair of blue eyes watching her. "Ah, better?"

"Air and Space? Absolutely." Dar put the magazine down. "Though, I have to admit the first time I wandered into a museum of modern art and saw something of my mother's it was hoot." She leaned her head on her hand. "It was some stupid new client meet and greet, and I remember the jackass regional salesman turning to me and saying something snarky like. T'm sure theres no relationship to you, right?"

Kerry chuckled. "Did you say there was?"

"Sure." Dar grinned. "Stopped all conversation within hearing. Pretty funny actually. Remind me to tell mom about that when they get back."

"Okay." Kerry squirmed around and put her head down on Dar's thigh, regarding the swirled plaster ceiling. "So what do you think they're going to ask you?" She asked. "Hey, maybe they want to make you the U S's chief nerd."

"Uggggh."

"Nerdmeister in chief. I like that. It's got a nice ring."

"Last thing I want is to be a federal employee." Dar draped her arm over Kerry's body. "Though that would get around the non compete injunction."

A knock sounded on the door at the same time as Dar's phone rang and Kerry unwound herself to get up and walk over, opening the door and gesturing the room service waiter in. She followed him over to the desk and waited, signing the room charge and giving him a brief, polite smile.

He left without commenting.

"Nice guy." Kerry remarked to the closed door, before she returned her attention to the tray. She sorted out the silverware, half listening to Dar's end of the conversation. "Problems, hon?"

Dar rolled her eyes. "Trying to bring the new datacenter live. Having routing problems." She mouthed. "Give me some ice cream."

"I was going to suggest we eat that first anyway." Kerry brought the bowls over. "It'll melt otherwise, and it looks a lot better than the burgers anyway."

Dar set her bowl on the sofa arm and maneuvered a spoonful of the chocolate into her mouth, as she listened to the phone. "Well." She managed to swallow in time. "You know what? I'm not going to drag my damn laptop out, Mark. Get in there and figure it out."

She got another few spoons down before she had to talk again. "Then we need to hire, in addition to a CIO, a damned senior network engineer." She listened. "Fine, I'll talk to Mari in the morning. In the meantime get in there or get someone in there and waste some brain cells on it"

"CIO, and VP ops, and senior network engineer, and network architect, and writer of adorable gopher programming." Kerry was ticking off on her fingers. "Y'know what, hon? It's going to be freaking expensive to replace us."

Dar gave her a look. Then she looked back at her phone in surprise. "He hung up on me." She said. "I wasn't even that rude, was I?"

Kerry ran her mind over the words. "No, you really weren't." She said. "I think Mark's really pissed off we're leaving."

Dar put the phone down and recaptured her bowl. "Is that any reason to hang up on me? I didn't call him, he called me for help."

"Mm." Kerry pressed her shoulder against her partner's.

"I don't want them to call me for help, Kerry. I want the to start thinking for themselves." Dar went on. "If I have to piss people off to get them to do that, then fine."

"Mm."

Dar rested her head against Kerry's, and sighed.

Kerry offered her some butter pecan, and they munched in silence for a few minutes. Then Kerry wiped her lips with her napkin and picked up her own cell phone. "I'll call him." She said. "Let him vent at me for a while. Maybe an idea will bounce out of that and he'll have a brain wave."

"I love you."

Kerry smiled, as she hit one of her speed dials. "Back at ya, and hold that thought, because I think this ice cream's about enough dinner for me so we can head off to that big bed after this."

"Mm." Dar wrapped her arms around her partner and nuzzled the side of her neck. "Sounds good to me."

"Hey Mark, it's Kerry." Kerry wrapped one hand around Dar's arm. "Yeah, I know, but you know, it's gonna happen. What can I do to help?" She felt Dar's breath warming her ear. "No, honest, I can't. She's not feeling well."

Dar's brow lifted.

"Yeah, that time of the month. So can I get the vendor on the phone for you? No? Oh, okay, you did? Good. Call me if you need me." Kerry folded the phone shut and held a hand out. "C'mon. He's fine."

"Mm."

"They'll get through it."

"Mm."

**

Kerry twitched her jacket straight as she followed Dar through the gate towards the security entrance of the blocky office structure ahead of them. She remembered their last visit, and she was hoping this time it would be both shorter and more pleasant.

Dar was presenting her identification to the guard, and she motioned Kerry forward as the man studied them with a frown. "Are we dangerous again?" Kerry handed over her company credentials. "Dar, don't you have an invitation?"

"No." Dar waited, rocking back and forth a little as the guard went to go make a phone call. "I have, I think, an email from that guy's admin telling me what time to be here. Not worth booting the laptop."

"Okay." The guard came back. "Ms Roberts, I've got you on the list, but not this lady." He indicated Kerry.

"Please call whoever made the list and have her added. I'm not coming in without her." Dar responded in a mild tone. "I was asked to come here, not the other way around."

The guard looked grumpy and frustrated, but he just shrugged and went back to the little booth guarding the entrance and got on the phone.

Dar hummed under her breath. "Glad I took all those Advil before we left." She commented. "Otherwise I might have seen jail time in my near future."

Kerry chuckled. "Yeah, glad I took some too. My cramps lasted way longer than usual this time." She leaned against the fence post and pulled out her new gizmo, tapping the screen and regarding the results. "You can actually surf the Internet on this thing, Dar."

"At one bit per twenty seconds?"

"And it has ringtones. You can make your phone ring songs." Kerry went on. "How about if I had jingle bells as my phone ring?"

"How about if you record me singing jingle bells for your phone ring?" Her partner countered. "At least that would be unique."

"Oh honey, in a freaking heartbeat."

Dar grinned, then turned as the guard came back. "Well?"

"It's okay." The guard said. "Please come with me."

They followed him past the booth and in a side door, which he carefully closed behind them before leading them on. The halls were all polished linoleum, and despite the fact it was a civilian office building there was a touch of the military about it. Kerry kept her eyes slightly down as she walked, just keeping aware in her peripheral vision of the fast moving bodies going in either direction around her.

Then they were going down a hallway and into an antechamber, that she last remembered filled with nervous, rushing people dealing with an unimagined disaster.

Now there were four or five people present, quiet, calm, giving her and Dar brief glances and then returning to their work as they passed them by and went into the conference room.

"Please wait here." The guard said, then left them.

Dar went to one of the comfortable seats and took it, resting her forearms on the table and folding her hands. "Sit."

Kerry took the chair next to her and settled into it. She could feel her heart thumping a little, and she was aware of being nervous but she wasn't entirely sure of why.

Time ran out to think about it, as the door opened and Michael Bridges came in. "Ah." He regarded the two of them. "You two Siamese twins or something? I only asked for one of you." He was tall man, with a craggy face and a spare frame wrapped in expensive silk trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"Yes." Dar responded in a mild tone. "Next question?"

"We were separated at birth." Kerry added. "But in reality, Mr. Bridges, if this is a professional request, I have a piece of it because I am the operations vice president of ILS. If it's a personal request, I have a piece of it because Dar's my spouse. It's just how it is."

"Uh huh." Bridges closed the door, then went to his seat and sat down. "Well as it happens you all did me a very big favor so I suppose you can bring anyone you like in here." He paused "Glad you skipped that lawyer though. God damn he was a pain in the ass."

"I'll pass along that compliment." Dar said. "So." She pushed the envelope she'd brought with her over to him. "That's the bill for your last favor."

He took the envelope and tossed it into a bin behind him. "All right, so let's get down to brass tacks." He paused. "What the hell does that mean? Who uses brass tacks anymore, anyway?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Here's the situation. What we found out a couple months ago is there's too much we don't know."

Kerry cleared her throat, and waited for him to look over at her. "Didn't know, or didn't recognize?"

His lips twitched faintly. "Good point. Maybe both. Maybe that plus we didn't know our ass from a hole in the wall, maybe that plus no one had the sense to share anything with anyone across the hallway. Could be." He said. "Point is, that has to change."

Dar nodded. "That's a point."

"I know we gave Easton a budget to revise all his dinosaur systems. He's talked to you about that?" Bridges looked at Dar.

"He's our next stop." Dar responded.

Bridges nodded. "Okay, that's his problem. My problem is, I need someone to take charge of how we deal with technology and information and all that horse crap at the federal level. I want to bring you on board as what we're calling the.. ' He glanced at a paper he was holding. "Half ass horsecrap. Anyway, they want to call it the techno czar." He looked at Dar. "When can you start?"

Dar blinked. Then she turned and looked at Kerry. Then she looked back at Bridges. "Are you saying you want me to come work for you?"

"Good catch." Bridges said, dryly. "Yes."

"Me personally?" Dar clarified. "As in, not the company I work for?"

Bridges laced his fingers together and gave her a faintly exasperated look. "Yes you." He glance at Kerry. "No offense, Stuart, but you were not in our plans."

"I'm not offended." Kerry said. 'So don't worry about it."

Dar inhaled and exhaled. "What exactly does this position do?" She asked. "Aside from talk to the press in incomprehensible terms about things they don't and won't understand?"

The presidential advisor chuckled dryly. "Don't worry, Roberts. Its not a talking head job. I don't think you really fit the administration's image ideal in any case." He cleared his throat. "The job is to find a way to get this government the ability to see into everything and anything, and find out what's really going on. Needs.. what do you call it? Software. Whatever."

"What do you mean by everything and anything?" Dar asked.

"Everything. The Internet, the phones, we need to see everything people are doing so we can find these bastards and get them out of here." Bridges said. "So you agree? When can you start?"

"You want me to figure out how to spy on everyone." Dar clarified.

Bridges shrugged. "You could call it that, I suppose. But if a terrorist is sending an email to another terrorist about planting a bomb, I want to know that."

Kerry watched Dar's profile, which was as still and cold as she'd ever seen her.

"Well." Dar folded her hands carefully and precisely on the table. "That's not something I want to do. So you'll need to look elsewhere for your candidate." She stared Bridges right in the eye. "I'm sure there are a lot of them out there."

Bridges cocked his head to one side. "You understand what kind of offer this is, right?" He looked at Kerry. "I know you understand, so why not explain it to her?"

"I do understand." Kerry said. "And I really don't have to explain anything to Dar. She gets it." She leaned forward a little. "Wouldn't this really be something better just outsourced, or maybe you could create a group in the Joint Chief's office to handle this?"

"No." Bridges shook his head. "Every existing division in this government wants to be put in charge of this and the infighting ain't worth it. I need an outsider."

Kerry nodded. "I see."

He looked at Dar. "Want to think about it for a couple days? Look, Roberts, I know you probably want to work for us about as much as I want to have to pay you, but I'm a realist, and despite how hoary and old fashioned it is to say it, I'm a patriot. We need to be able to do this so that no one can do what they did on September 11th. You agree with that, yes?"

"Actually no I don't" Dar said. "I don't think you can ever stop someone from doing that at the sharp end. You have to top them wanting to."

Ah. Kerry felt a sense of pleasurable surprise hearing the words, but had no time to appreciate them as she sensed Dar starting to move and she got her feet under her to stand up.

"I'll spend the weekend thinking about what you asked." Dar said, crisply. "Talk to you on Monday."

Bridges looked relieved. He stood up and held his hand out. "Monday it is. Have a good weekend ladies." He got up himself and ushered them out, holding the door open for them and gesturing to the guard.

"Please walk these folks out, Dustan. They're friendlies."

The guard smiled at them, and opened the outer door. "Yes, sir, I will take good care of them." He held the door for them and followed them out, as the sound of the halls started to echo around them.

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. Then Kerry reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose, giving her head a tiny shake. "Dar, I need a drink."

"Me too."

"Well, hey." Dustan the guards ears pricked . "I know a good sports bar round the corner, wanna go there?"

"No thanks." Dar sighed. "We've got to go to the Pentagon." She put her hand on Kerry's back as they maneuvered through the crowd. "But with any luck, Gerry'll have scotch in his desk drawer."

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They didn't get far after leaving the White House. Dar found the first little grill and pulled into the parking lot, turning off the rental cars engine and leaning her hands on the wheel. "My brain hurts."

Kerry had her arms folded across her chest, and she regarded the windy and overcast weather outside with a pensive expression. "Are you really going to think about this?"

Dar's eyebrows twitched and hiked. "Hell no." She said. "What I am going to think about is how to say kiss my ass in some politically acceptable way that won't mean I get the last twenty years of my tax returns audited by members of the Westboro Baptist church."

"That guy really wants you. I was joking before, but sheesh." Kerry exhaled. "What do you think about his idea?"

"His idea to spy on everyone?" Her partner said. "I think I'm going to find another country."

"Really?"

Dar half turned. "Kerry, if he'd asked me to coordinate the intelligence services, or evaluate new technology, or find a way to integrate the multitude of data systems... maybe I would have thought about it for a few minutes. The country needs that."

Kerry nodded

"But figure out a way to snoop on my neighbors? Not my gig." Her partner released her seat belt. "Let's get a cup of coffee or something."

Kerry got out and zipped her jacket closed, as they walked across the parking lot towards the grill. She paused in mid step when Dar did, and stopped when her partner turned to face her. "What?"

"Listen." Dar's face was unusually somber. "I'm really sorry that guy was such a jackass to you."

Kerry smiled. "Thank you sweetheart, but I felt nothing but happiness that he didn't want any part of me. Honest." She patted Dar on the chest. "C'mon. It's cold out here."

"Really?"

"Really." Kerry towed her towards the door. "If I'd wanted a political career, don'cha think I could have managed one from my family?"

"No, I know." Dar opened the door and followed her inside. It was early for lunch, and there were only a few patrons inside, mostly at the bar. They were given the once over as they walked by, and settled gratefully out of sight in a small booth against the wall.

They looked at each other, then started laughing. "How in the hell do we get into crap like this, Dar?" Kerry asked, after a moment of chuckling. "That's crazy, you know?"

"I know." Dar glanced at the waitress as she arrived. "Coffee for me." She eyed Kerry. "Want to share some sliders?"

"Sure." Kerry agreed. "Ice tea for me and one of the six slider plates."

The waitress studied her briefly, then nodded agreement and took the menus back, disappearing behind the service counter without any comment. "I think we were just pegged as not being from around here, Dar." Kerry mused. "We should have ordered a salad to share."

"Yuk." Dar was busy with her little gizmo. "I'm going to text the pilot and see if Gerry's available now. Maybe we can get out of here early."

"Music to my ears." Kerry leaned against the seat back, folding her hands over her stomach. "How about some handball at the gym tonight?"

"You feeling brave?" Dar laughed, as she finished texting, then pressed one of the dialing buttons. "You know, I sorta like this thing." She put it to her ear. "Yes, this is Dar Roberts. Is General Easton there? I'd like to talk to him for a minute."

Kerry smiled, considering the sense of relief she felt. Part of her, she knew had been a little afraid the government was going to ask Dar to do what Dar had mentioned – a logical, and needed request she knew would have tugged hard at her partner's innate sense of honor and likely resulted in some real soul searching on her part.

This? Write a program to spy on citizens? Aside from outraging Dar, it shunted aside any other consideration of the request and selfishly, she was glad.

Glad. Absolutely happy that that took one piece of complication out of her life, and left only Gerald Easton and his systems refresh.

"Okay, Gerry, we'll be there in about forty five minutes." Dar was speaking into the phone. "See ya." She closed the phone and put it on the table. "I think I'm going to end up being a jackass to him." She remarked. "After that last meeting, the less I have to do with the people in this town the happier I'll be."

Kerry picked up her tea and sipped it. "You don't expect me to disagree, do you?" She'd been prepared to. She'd had all her arguments marshaled and her objections ready, absolutely intent that nothing was going to get their hooks into her beloved without her having a chance to stop it.

Kind of skanky, in an over possessive, really, honestly selfish kind of way, but Kerry was in a place where she cared more about their future together than that.

"No." Dar mixed as much sugar and cream into her coffee as was possible given the level in the cup. "I know you're here to keep me from doing something stupid." She glanced up, her eyes twinkling a little. "I don't think you have anything to worry about though." She added, as a blush became evident on Kerry's face.

"Sorry I'm that transparent." Kerry muttered.

“Shouldn’t you be, to me?”

Kerry took a breath to protest, then paused, regarding the look of mild affection on Dar’s face.

“Remember you once made me promise I’d think of both of us before I made decisions, even about myself?” Dar asked. “When I quit that time?”

Kerry nodded.

“Trust me.”

Kerry blushed again, this time more intensely, as she moved her cup to let the waitress put the sliders she now had no interest in eating in front of them. “Wow.” She said, as the woman left. “Now I feel like a complete creep.”

“C’mon, Ker.” Dar picked up a mini burger and took a bite of it. “Ease up. We’ve got a twenty minute scope inspection and then we’re outta here. I want to go back to planning our trip.”

Kerry studied the angular face across from her. “Why the hell am I being such a jerk?” She sighed, shaking her head a little and picking up a burger. “Maybe I need to go get my head examined.”

Dar munched in silence, regarding her.

“You think Doctor Steve knows someone I can talk to?” Kerry nibbled at the bacon sticking out of the slider.

“Probably.” Her partner swallowed and took a sip of coffee. “Yeah, I think he does. He suggested someone he knew for me to talk to after they told us about Dad.”

“Did you?”

Dar’s lips twitched “What do you think?”

Kerry felt the angst ease a little. “Let me guess, that would be no.”

“Correct. But doesn’t mean you shouldn’t, if it would make you feel better.” Dar said. “There’s a lot of people that were part of that whole situation that say they’ve been socked with PTSD.”

“You think that’s what this is?”

“I have no idea, hon.” Dar selected another burger. “I don’t know if there is anything for it to be, but if it’ll make you feel better to talk to someone, hell, do it.”

Kerry chewed thoughtfully for a few minutes. She watched Dar’s body language, the relaxed and easy motion matching the casual speech. Things usually didn’t chew at Dar, she knew. Her partner tended to dismiss things that were in the past, the one exception to that had been her relationships but even now that seemed to have faded, and left her living pretty much in the moment most of the time.

There was value in that. Kerry wished her mind worked the same way. “Meh. I’ll talk to him next week.” She concluded. “So – this government offer.”

“Mm?”

“Why you?” Kerry asked. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, sweetheart, you know I think you’re the greatest gift to IT the world has ever seen.”

Dar started laughing.

“But why would this guy want you to come work for him? I love you, but you’d be a political nightmare and we both know that.” Kerry wiped her lips. “I don’t really get it.”

Dar sat back and took a sip of her coffee, clearing her throat a little. “Those are pretty good.” She indicated the plate. “I think this guy is someone who mostly cares about results. I’m sure he knows my background and my rep, and he’s made the decision that he’s willing to deal with that to get what he wants.”

“Hm.”

"Victim of my own success." Dar reiterated her earlier statement. "He asked for the impossible, and I made it possible. I can see why he wants someone like me to make this impossible dream of his reality."

"Is it impossible?"

Dar motioned the waitress over. "It's impossible for me." She handed the woman her credit card. "It's not right. I won't do it. I'm sure they'll find someone who will."

Kerry rested her hands on the table. "Dar?"

"Mm?"

"I actually suggested that to them."

"What?" Dar's head cocked slightly. "That they find someone else?"

"That they go to the Tier 1 providers and put their sniffer in there to find bad guys." Kerry answered, quietly. "I didn't even think about it from a personal angle. I just wanted them out of our datacenter."

Dar blinked a few times, much as she had in the White House office. "That when they wanted in to Herndon?" She asked. "When I locked everything down?"

Kerry nodded.

The waitress came back and handed the check to Dar, with a pen and a slip. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Dar signed it and took back her card. She folded the receipt up and stuck it in her pocket, then leaned her elbows on the table. "Given where we were right then, you told them the right thing." She said. "It's the same thing we told the yahoos in that guy's office the last time. Follow the money." She held up her card, then put it back in her wallet. "Besides I'm sure that idea occurred to more than one person."

"True." Kerry slid out of the booth and followed her towards the door. "But Dar, that's what we told them to do, wasn't it? To find those people, they would have to do that."

Dar exhaled. "Mm." She opened the door back out into the cold windy weather. "In an abstract sense yeah." She admitted. "So I guess I'm sounding pretty hypocritical, but all the same, I'm not doing it." She insisted. "Besides, by the time you designed a metric and parser, the real bad guys would find out how to hide from it, and it ends up becoming a way to embarrass political rivals."

Kerry sighed. "That's probably very true."

"Probably?" Dar opened her door for her, and watched her slide inside. "Think your father would have used it to get dirt on people?"

"Huh."

Dar closed the door and walked around to the driver's side, pausing to glance around the parking lot before she opened the door and got in. Just a scattering of cars were around them, but one had a guy behind the wheel, reading a newspaper and she spent a moment indulging in a moment of spy fantasy.

Then she shut the door and started the car, wanting nothing more than to get past the Pentagon and go home. "Today is kinda sucking."

Kerry reached across the center console and put her hand on Dar's thigh, rubbing gently with her thumb against the cotton fabric covering it. "Yeah." She agreed. "Let's hope it turns around."

Dar paused as they reached the exit, and waited for traffic to slow before she pulled out. She glanced in her rear view mirror out of long habit, and felt a faint shock as she saw the guy with the paper behind her, waiting to turn as well.

Coincidence? "Yeah, let's hope so." She replied, turning right out of the lot and proceeding along the street, keeping an eye on her mirror until she saw the guy pull out also, but to the left, heading away from them. She exhaled "Let's hope so."

**

Gerald Easton's office was quiet, and there were comfortable leather chairs to sit in near an open space off to one side of his desk. Kerry took a seat as the general arranged for some coffee, leaning back and crossing her legs at the ankles. Off in the distance she could hear the sounds of construction, or more to the point, reconstruction as the area damaged by the attack was rebuilt.

"Now then, Dar." Easton crossed over to them and took a seat. "What's this all about you leaving?"

Dar cleared her throat gently. "We're resigning." She said. "Kerry and I. We gave ILS six months notice." She exchanged looks with her partner. "We're going to form our own company."

"Hm." The general looked thoughtful. "Well now, that's a bit of good news."

About to continue speaking, Dar halted, and looked at him in mild puzzlement.

"It is?" Kerry asked, equally surprised.

The general's admin came in with a tray, bringing it over and putting it down. She poured out cups for them and handed them over, then smiled, and withdrew.

Easton took a sip of his and wriggled his nose a little. "Sounds funny, a bit." He admitted. "Fact is, there's been a bother about your whole lot there, being in so many areas, y'know?"

"No, I don't know." Dar said.

"You mean, because we're international?" Kerry interpreted. "Is that it?"

Easton nodded. "Too big an exposure, people say." He said. "Some of the spooks were talking to us about it the other day. Said it was dangerous, having all those technical things in the hands of people who talked to so many non Americans."

Dar reached up and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "You're kidding me, right? Most of the Fortune 500 are international."

"Sure." Easton agreed. "But they don't handle all our private stuff, don'tcha know?" He reached over and patted her knee. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, in person. We want to do that project, but I'm getting a lot of push back on using all those fellers of yours who aren't from around here."

"Wow." Kerry remarked. "General, most of the staff that handle our government accounts are from the US. Only a few of the follow the sun monitoring services aren't, so we can give 24 hour support."

Easton shrugged. "Got those spook fellers who think differently. Told the President we should change it. So here you are, and I'm thinking I'm going to have bad news for you, and then you tell me this. Wonderful. So we'll just hire you to do it. Problem solved." He looked extremely pleased. "Nicely done!"

Dar set her coffee down. "Gerry, we can't do that." She said. "I'll be under a non compete clause, and it'll take us at least a year to get our company set up and going to where we'll be able to take on something as major as this is." She said. "Especially since we'll in effect be taking this business away from ILS."

"Pah." Easton said. "That's just legal mumbo jumbo. We'll pay off that other thing, why now, it's chicken feed to the dollars they're pushing at me." He said. "Best news I could get, you saying you're cutting out of there, Dar. I was feeling bad, don't you know? About taking the work away. Would have anyway, but still, this is better."

Kerry rubbed her temples. "Dar, you want me to have boxes of Scotch sent to the board for your next meeting with them?"

Dar sighed. "Gerry." She said. "Of the two offers I got today, believe me, yours is the one I'd jump at. But I can't just..." She paused. "I've got a pension and out package coming to me."

"Ah" Easton nodded. "Understand that, Dar. I really do. Got mine in my back pocket too, don'tcha know? But the fact is, the boys upstairs don't want us to put our fannies where someone might take a shot at them." He said. "I know, how about we just draft the two of you? That'd get around your lawyers, eh?"

"Whoa." Kerry held a hand up.

Dar sighed.

"C'mon now, Dar. I know you filled out a draft card." Easton chuckled. "But we'll find a way around it. Long as I know you're bound to get off their payroll, we'll think of something."

Dar propped her head up on her hand. "Got any whiskey? It's been that kind of day."

"Now, Dar. Relax." Gerry patted her knee again. "What did the executive branch want from ya?"

"Don't ask." Dar slid down in her chair and put her arm over her eyes.

"They want Dar to be the technology czar for the government." Kerry supplied helpfully. 'She doesn't want to."

"Hell no!" General Easton straightened up. "That's a scapegoat looking for a place to be shot in. Heard them talking about that. Let em find some politico to fill that slot."

Dar sighed. "I just want to go to the Grand Canyon." She said, in a mournful tone. "Play with my dog, watch Gerry take shots of the sunset, and park my RV downwind from the barbecue grill. Is that too much to ask?" She looked over at Gerry. "After we leave ILS in March, we're going on a tour."

Easton studied her.

"The agreement that Dar is going to sign requires her to stay out of our industry for a period of time." Kerry explained to him. "So we're going to take time off and go travel."

The General sighed. "Soldiers don't get vacations, ladies. Not when we're at war."

"We're not soldiers." Dar slid upright. "I had the chance to do that, and I turned it down." She met the General's eyes. "If we can work out a way to work together, that's great. If not, Gerry, I'm sorry if you don't want to continue with ILS. They're a good company, and they have a lot of good people who have done a very good job for you this last year."

"It's politics, Dar." Easton said. "Nothing personal, you know? I'm sure we can work something out. I've got no quarrel with your people, in fact, I like that McLean fella a lot. Got a good head on his shoulders. But I trust you."

Dar sighed again.

"Victim of your own success, sweetheart." Kerry had, at this point, to find it almost funny. "You said it."

"I said it." Dar agreed mournfully. "Now I wish I'd stayed a technical manager running saturation reports on the tenth floor."

"I'm glad you didn't .We would never have met." Kerry said. "General, I'm sure we can work something out. Even if Dar can't participate officially, there's no reason I can't sign a deal with you."

Easton beamed at her. "That's the ticket!"

"Kerry." Dar eyed her.

"You were the one telling me to get moving on setting up the company." Kerry reminded her. "Fish or cut bait, Roberts." She watched Dar's hands, waiting for any sign of the fidgets she knew meant she'd pissed her partner off. But they remained relaxed and open on her knees, until one lifted to prop her head up. "Dar, someone has to do this. You know they need it. If not us, who?"

General Easton sat back in his chair, sipping his coffee, his eyebrows wiggling around as he listened.

Dar remained silent for a minute, then she half shrugged. "We'll work something out." She conceded. "I'd feel a lot better about bringing the military into the 21st century than dealing with politics."

Kerry patted her knee.

"Great." Gerry said, after a bit of silence. "Well Dar, how are your folks? I tried to give them a call the other day, but no one was home."

"Ah." Dar took a sip of coffee. "That reminds me. Can you get them to leave my dad alone?"

"Eh?"

"They're trying to drag him back into active service." Dar said. "He and mom took off for a while to get away from it."

Easton frowned. "Hmph." He considered. "I suppose he's inactive retired... I know they're doing some stuff with retention, but surely he'd not be in line for a call back?" He said. "I'll sort it out, Dar. Should only die once for your country, eh? He's put in his time."

"That's what I thought too." Dar said, in a quiet voice. "Gerry, I don't want to lose my father again like that. Tell them to lay off, please?"

There was an awkward little silence, then Easton leaned forward and put a hand on her arm. "I'll take care of it Dar, I promise."

"Thanks." Dar exhaled. "And I'll do my best to sort out this contract."

"Deal." The General stood up. "Tell you want, c'mon to dinner, the two of you over at our place. We've got a pile of puppies there, don'cha know? Alabasters. I think one's going to your family." He looked over at Kerry. "Jack's carrier's out in the Med, but the wife'll be glad for company."

"Sure." Dar answered. "That'd be great."

"Never say no to puppies." Kerry smiled. "We'd love to."

**

The puppies were as adorable as she'd imagined them to be. Kerry sat with her legs sprawled out in the utility room of the Easton's house, as the litter of eight puppies climbed all over her, snuffling and squeaking and bringing back memories of Chino when they'd first gotten her. "Oh my gosh."

Dar was in the living room with Alabaster and the Eastons, and Kerry had tactfully elected to spend some time with Alabaster's litter to give them some privacy. The puppies were eight weeks old, and in a week or so one of the little girls would be leaving for Michigan.

"Sweetie, you'll love it." She told the chosen one, who had a little red collar on and a perfect black button nose. "There are two little kids to run around and play with, and a big, big yard for you."

The puppy sat back and stuck her u shaped tongue out at her, small silky ears flopping around as she rocked her head back and forth, squeaking with delight when Kerry picked her up and cuddled her. "You're such a cutie."

Curled up next to her was a large black Labrador, who, she'd been told, was Buford the puppies father. He seemed very relaxed and dignified, his muzzle resting on her thigh as he watched his puppies gamboling around.

Kerry chuckled softly, as she felt a tug on her shoelaces, and a nibble on her ear at the same time. The puppy smelled clean and dusky ,it's breath holding that indefinable scent of new life and she had a sensation of being surrounded by that steadfastly trusting adoration she'd come to associate with her own pet Chino.

It soothed her soul.

"You know what, you little baby you, I want you to be good friends with my niece and nephew." She informed the puppy. "I know Sally's going to love you, so try not to eat all her toys before you grow up, okay?"

The puppy made a squeaking, growling noise as she snuffled down the back of Kerry's collar, making Kerry bite her lip to keep from giggling. She looked down to find another puppy, a chocolate brown little boy climbing up on her leg to sniff at her kneecap. "Hey, I'm not your bed!"

The puppies were a range of colors to her surprise. Of the eight, five were a creamy whitish gold like Chino, two were chocolate brown, and one was inky black.

"Adorable."

Kerry looked up to find Dar in the doorway, watching her with an affectionate smile. "Oh Dar, they're so darn cute." She indicated the puppies, two of whom had rambled off to investigate this new intruder. "I'm remembering all over again the day we got Cappuccino."

Dar sat down on the step and scooped up a puppy. "That was a beautiful day."

"It was." Kerry watched the girl puppy chew her finger. "That was the day I knew we were us." She watched the smile on Dar's face broaden. "So I hope this little girl makes Sally as happy as Chino made me."

"Aw." Dar leaned against the door jamb, giving the brown puppy in her arms a scratch behind his ears. "I remember just thinking about you and your little spaniel and how angry that made me." She said. "Just so pissed. I wanted you to know I was committed to our relationship and that wasn't ever going to happen to you again."

Kerry nodded, savoring the moment. "So what's going on out there?" She asked. "We okay with them?"

"Yeah." Dar gazed fondly at the little boy puppy. "They've had time to come to terms with the fact I'm gay." She said. "Did I ever tell you they were hoping Jack and I would get married?"

Kerry made a little face.

"I told Jack if it came down to it, I'd have a kid with him to give Gerry a grandkid." Dar recalled. "Glad I didn't have to make good on that. He's hooked up with a supply lieutenant and it looks serious."

"Guy or girl?"

"Girl."

"Ah huh." Kerry pursed her lips and nodded. "Well, I think my eyes would turn lime green if I had to deal with that, but you know, Dar, I did tell you your genes should stay in the pool."

"We have a dog." Dar stated. "Matter of fact.. " She eyed the puppy. "Think Chino wants a little brother?"

"Do we want to deal with Chino's little brother?" Kerry demurred. "You're the one who lost half their shoes."

They reluctantly extricated themselves from the furry pile and rejoined the Eastons in the living room. "Those puppies are so cute." Kerry dusted her hands off. "Thanks for letting me snuggle with them."

"Oh, that's all fine, honey." The General's wife smiled at her. "Now tell me, you're that nice young lady who talked to us about Thanksgiving dinner, a few years back aren't you?"

Kerry chuckled. "Matter of fact I am." She admitted. "I think I saved Dar from Brussels sprouts."

"You did." Mary Easton agreed. "I told Dar then I thought you were fond of her, and I was right." She bravely asserted. "Wasn't I?"

"No doubt at all." Dar agreed. "Thanks for not freaking completely out about us, by the way. My parents were really proud of you all."

Easton chuckled with a touch of embarrassment. "Different times." He said, briefly. "But after all, we've known you since you were knee high."

They walked into the dining room where a meal of meat loaf and sides was waiting. Kerry excused herself to wash her hands, and pondered her reflection in the mirror as she did. "Do I even remember what it was like to be on the other end of that phone call?"

She remembered getting it. Mari's admin had called her, apologizing for interrupting her but saying someone was calling asking about Dar, and Maria was out. Could she talk to them?

Of course she could. She recalled the little, nervous start she'd gotten over it, almost a sense of guilt as she spoke to this unknown, friendly sounding woman, taking possession of her new lover while wishing wistfully she was going to join her for the now sprout free meal.

She'd forgotten completely about it, in her own holiday misery.

Drying her hands she returned to the dining room, taking her seat at Dar's side and putting her napkin in her lap in time to hear Dar relating a story about her and Jack in a tree that she thought she'd heard at a party sometime. "I can picture you doing that." She said. "I remember coming into that wiring closet on our first floor and finding you hanging up side down like a bat."

"Why were you doing that, Dar?" Mary asked.

"Why was I doing that." Dar mused. "Damned if I remember. Was I stretching my back out?" She asked Kerry. "Yeah, I think I was. After sitting on that concrete floor all that time. I'm not a kid anymore."

"Oh you poor thing." Mrs. Easton mock clucked her tongue at her. "Wait till you get to be my age, young lady. Then we can talk about aches and pains."

"Well, Dar's retiring, matter of fact." General Easton said. "From that company, that is."

"Really?" Mary said. "My goodness."

Dar nodded. "We both are." She indicated herself and Kerry. "But we're going to open our own company after we take a break to go do some traveling."

"That's wonderful." Mary said. "Could you hire Gerry? He needs a better job." She eyed her husband. "And Jack also. His air group is being assigned to active duty in the Arabian Sea and I don't mind telling you, it makes me nervous."

The general frowned. "Least he's not on the ground, Mary."

"Anytime." Dar said. "I told Jack the last time we hung out I'd be glad to hire him at ILS, matter of fact." She looked at her plate of meatloaf with satisfaction. "Hell, I hired my father."

"He's a great research analyst." Kerry spoke up.

"See?" Mary said.

"Now look here." The General shook his fork at them. "I'll retire soon enough! Service has been my whole life. Done us well so far, hasn't it?"

"Yes but you're here." Mary said. "Jack isn't." She turned and regarded Kerry. "He's my only child."

"Mary, enough."

The general's wife subsided, but her expression was still stormy, and Kerry sorted through possible changes of subject. "So, aside from my sister, do you have homes for the rest of those adorable little kids?"

Gerald Easton gave her an approving look. "Well now, most of them do, in fact." He said. "Only ones we have left to place is one of the brown boys."

Dar and Kerry exchanged looks.

"Really." Kerry said. "So tell me, do Labradors like company? We worry about Chino home alone all the time." She explained. "Do you think we can maybe give that little boy a home?"

Easton's eyes lit up. "Why sure! That's a grand idea, isn't it Mary?"

"Absolutely." His wife agreed at once. "You know, they're really social dogs. Alabaster is such good stock, we only breed her every couple of years, and quite a few of her pups have gone on to do all kinds of things. But she's always a little disconsolate when all the puppies leave. I'm so glad she has Beauregard to keep her company."

"They are very social." Kerry said. "They're almost human, you know? Their expressions and everything. I really think Chino understands what I'm telling her when I talk to her."

"Got the smarts of three, four year old kids." Gerry relaxed, happy to be discussing one of his favorite subjects. "Very smart animals." He glanced to the side as Alabaster arrived, as though she knew she was being spoken of. "Isn't that right, madam?"

"Growf." Alabaster uttered, sitting down next to him with her tail sweeping back and forth.

"So of course, it would be great company for her to get her little brother." Mary said. "Have you thought of breeding Chino?"

"No." Kerry said. "Dar and I have such a busy life, it would be hard to do that, but I think we can handle another puppy, now that we'll have more time for a while."

"Not for too long." General Easton winked at her. "Got customers lining up. Don't forget that."

Dar and Kerry exchanged another glance, with a completely different set of emotions reflected in it.

"Right." Dar said. "So tell me about Jack's new squadron. New planes?"

They launched into a military hardware conversation that left Kerry and Mary Easton regarding each other in bemused silence. "Do you like Washington, Kerry?"

"No, not so much." Kerry had finished her meatloaf, and was now sipping on the blackberry ice tea Mary had served with it. "I spent more than enough time here while I was growing up. Never really liked it."

"No, I guess not. Gerry told me a little about you having some family issues." The older woman looked at her sympathetically. "My father was a state representative. I did my share of cheese and pate parties."

"Yeah." Kerry smiled. "It can be tough for a kid growing up in that world. That was one of the reasons I wanted to get my sister to get a dog like our Chino for her little girl. I think she feels it, and they've had some family problems so.."

Mary smiled back. "Nothing like a little unreserved love, is there?"

"No. Nothing like it."

"I was so glad when Jack said Dar was going to take one of the last litter. When she was here, she seemed a little sad." Mary lowered her voice. "I always felt she missed out not being in the service, no matter what I said before about Jack being out there. It's a family, you know?"

Kerry nodded. "I know. I'm glad there's a family now around her." She said. "I love her parents."

"The Lord certainly looked after them." The general's wife said. "No doubt."

Well. "I'm sure something was." Kerry said. "Good people have a way of winning out that way."

**

Kerry stretched out in the passenger seat, watching the dark streets go by as they headed for the airport. "They're a nice couple."

"They are." Dar agreed. "I'm glad we stayed and had dinner with them."

"And got a puppy." Kerry chuckled. "Was that hasty?"

"I like hasty." Dar asserted. "Besides, it's true. He'll be company for Chino, and he can go in our RV with us."

Kerry thought that was going to be more chaos than the casual words indicated, but that was all right. "Let's make sure the RV has a washable floor."

"Mm." Dar turned into the small private airfield, already spotting their plane waiting to one side of a fenced wall. "That'll be a pleasure to deal with after all the crap we're going to have to get through with all this." She shut the car off and got out, handing over the keys to a uniformed valet.

"Thought about what you're going to tell them?" Kerry zipped her jacket up and followed her partner into the airfield building, lifting a hand in greeting at their pilot.

"I already know what I'm going to tell them. No." Dar handed over their overnight bag. "Sorry to keep you so late, Kent."

"No problem. Friend of mine came over and took me for dinner." The pilot assured them. "And I took a four hour nap. It's all good."

They followed him out to the plane and boarded, trading the cold wind for the smell of leather and a hint of aviation kerosene. Dar dropped into a seat, then grimaced as her phone rang. She removed it from her pocket and glanced at the caller ID. "Uh oh."

"Uh oh?"

"Alastair." Dar hit the answer button. "Dar Roberts." She enunciated clearly.

"Hey there Dar." Alastair's voice echoed softly. "Just wanted to find out how everything went today. Boards a little anxious."

Dar sighed. "With good reason, Alastair. I don't have news you want to hear."

"Ah."

Kerry removed her jacket and hung it up in the little closet, as the flight attendant came out with some cappuccino, and a plate of warm cookies. "Oo."

"You know, Ms. Stuart, I have to say I really wish you two weren't leaving the company." The woman said, with a sigh. "I'm sure going to miss you." She offered the cookies. "The last exec plane I worked the only thing I got to service was vodka and caviar."

"So you like cookies and hot mocha better?" Kerry laughed, taking a cup and a cookie. "I'll tell you it's nice to come back to after a day like today." She could see Dar's grimace. "Better get her some milk."

"Look Alastair.. what do you want me to tell you? Want me to lie? I didn't ask for this." Dar leaned back in her chair and gave Kerry a pathetic look. "It was about as welcome as a hemorrhoid."

"Gotcha." The flight attendant went back to the small galley as Kerry brought her cookie over and broke off a small piece, offering it to her beleaguered partner.

Dar accepted it, chewing and swallowing it as she listened. "Just don't say anything about the government position. The board half figured that was something directed at me personally anyway. I'm going to say no."

Kerry fed her another piece.

"Well, honestly Alastair, it was me that got them Gerry's contract." Dar said after another long moment of listening. "I get their point, we are international."

The flight attendant came back and offered a glass of milk, which Dar took after giving her a bemused glance, which she then turned on Kerry, who smiled and took the seat next to her.

"Then I suggest you tell the board we're going to have to form a US only subsidiary if they want to pursue that. Maybe I can convince Gerry to go that route." Dar said. "I gotta go, they want to take off." She paused to listen. "Yeah, I know Alastair. For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

She hung up as they started to taxi and let the device rest on her thigh, turning her head to regard Kerry. "He thinks they're going to want me to come to Houston again." She said. "Maybe I'll get lucky and they'll decide to let me get out of there early."

"Us." Kerry replied instantly.

"Us." Dar took a sip of her milk. "I hope to hell they find someone to take this damn job soon."

**

"Look at her." Kerry was sitting on their couch, as Chino subjected her to a complete and very thorough sniffing. "She knows I was messing with those puppies."

"Of course she does." Dar was standing looking out of the sliding glass doors, watching the lights of the channel blink in their red and green pattern. "You smell like puppy. You think she's dumb?"

Kerry studied their pet, whose tail was wagging wildly. "I think she likes it." She stroked Chino's thick fur, and the dog settled down and put her head on Kerry's lap, tail still thumping against the couch surface.

"What do you think, Chi? You want to play with your little brother? He's really cute."

She glanced at Dar's back, seeing the tension in the shoulders facing her. "You still freaking out?"

Dar's hands lifted and then fell again. She turned and came over to the couch, sitting down on the other side of Chino and draping her arm across the back. "I feel bad." She admitted. "I wasn't counting on Gerry's deal."

"Yeah." Kerry slid her arm outside Dar's and stroked the skin of her shoulder through her shirt. "But what you told Alastair was right, Dar. You did get that account for ILS. I remember when it happened."

"I remember using it to make your numbers work and save your buddies jobs." Dar mused. "But it was legit. That second one, when I coerced him into giving me all those extra contracts to keep my mouth shut on the Navy base, that wasn't so legit."

"ILS won, either way."

"They did." Dar let her head rest against the couch back. "You know what, maybe I don't feel bad. Maybe I'm just frustrated at being in such a weird spot with everyone." She admitted. "Anything you particularly want to do this weekend?"

"Hm." Kerry accepted the subject change gracefully. "I don't know. We'll figure something out tomorrow." She held her hand out palm up. "It's midnight. Want to join me in our water bed?"

"Yes."

They got up and went into the first floor bedroom, where they undressed in companionable silence, and then eased into the water bed.

The phone rang.

Dar sighed, and reached over, picking up the receiver. "Hello?" She said, then paused. "This is Dar Roberts."

"Uuuuuggghh." Kerry eased over and snuggled up next to her, listening to the voice issuing from the telephone. "That doesn't sound good."

Dar moved the phone closer to her. "Go on."

"Okay, Ms. Roberts? Look, I know it's late, and I'm sorry, but they cut all this stuff over to the new place yesterday and we're having all kinds of problems with it. I'm getting chewed alive."

The man's voice sounded aggravated and upset. "It's not fair, you know? They just told me to deal with it."

"Who told you that?" Dar asked, gently.

"Night supervisor in ops, in Miami." The man responded. "I'm sorry, I'm Jack Bueno. I'm kinda new. I forgot to introduce myself." He added. "I know the chain of command and all that but I'm running out of things to tell these customers so I figured I'd put my *cojones* on the line and see if I could get some help."

"So you want me to help you?" Dar asked, as Kerry rolled off in the other direction and got out of bed, a mild, bemused expression on her face. "For technical problems?"

"Ma'am." Bueno said. "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but your name's all over the base configs of everything in this center. I hope that's not because someone has your login."

Dar chuckled. "No, it's not." She rolled out of the bed herself. "All right, hang on, and let me get some lights on here and go into my office. See what I can do to get things sorted out for you."

"Thank you." Bueno's voice sounded utterly relieved. "I'm real sorry to get you out of bed. I just didn't know what else to do."

"You get points for doing it." Dar pulled a shirt over her head and trudged from the bedroom into her office, finding the lights already on, and smelling coffee on gust of air coming across the living room.

"Matter of fact, I'm sorry you had to call me. Disappoints me like you would not believe."

"Yes ma'am, I get that."

"Call me Dar. It's after midnight." Dar sat down and flicked on her monitor. "By the way, welcome to ILS."

**

Kerry rested her head on her hand, as she scribbled notes on a light purple notepad with a dark purple pen. It was four AM, and she'd been recording changes her harassed partner had been making in the new data center's networking. "Want more coffee, hon?"

"I want a shotgun and a concrete block construction wall." Dar growled, making Kerry smile in pure reaction. "I am so pissed."

"I know." Kerry reached over and patted her arm. "How about a chocolate milkshake instead of coffee?" She watched Dar's profile, as its tension eased and one brow rose, reading the positive reaction with no trouble at all. "Be right back."

She put the pen down and got up, walking around behind Dar and giving her a brief hug and a kiss on the top of her head before she retreated to the kitchen with a sleepy Chino ambling after her.

Dar had every right to be pissed. Kerry considered that, as she got out the required ingredients for a milkshake. In reality, she herself should be in the trenches, getting this sorted out but she knew getting in Dar's way and trying to get between her and the staff would just end up counterproductive for both of them.

She'd learned that the hard way. Four am was no time to be getting into an argument with Dar about their respective areas of responsibility seeing that her boss had spent the last four hours untangling the configuration Kerry's staff had implemented.

Just wasn't any point in it. Dar wasn't mad at her, and she really didn't want that to change.

She had assigned the commissioning of the center out to her infrastructure teams. Apparently, there had been a screw up, or – to be fair, a design choice that had been made that had really not worked out. Dar was in the middle of doing multiple alterations of the systems to fix that, but the changes were extensive, and they impacted already upset customers and she was reserving herself to handle those phone calls to keep them off both the operations and her lover's back.

Of course they could have called in the groups in question and forced them to do the work to make the systems right. From a business and learning perspective, that might have been a better choice. But at midnight, faced with a call from a customer facing director in trouble Dar had been in no mood for a coaching moment.

It was, what it was. She scooped out some chocolate malt and scattered it over the balls of chocolate ice cream, then added milk to the blender before she started it mixing. "Want a cookie, Chi?" She fished a treat from the doggy jar for the patiently waiting dog, and offered it to her. "It's weird, huh? All dark outside and us up and doing stuff."

Chino crunched the treat, scattering tiny crumbs on the tile floor. She sniffed after them, and licked them up, as Kerry poured out two thick milkshakes and debated adding whipped cream.

Sometimes Dar liked whipped cream, sometimes she didn't, saying it blocked access to the ice cream.

"What the hell." She added the cream and headed back to Dar's office, coming in to find her partner studying her screen, pecking away at her keyboard in absorbed attention.

She set the shakes down and resumed her seat, picking up her pen again. "Okay, so now what did you do what that second core, Dar?"

"Made it virtual across the two chassis." Dar muttered. "Why in the hell wouldn't they do that, Kerry? Not only is it our standard it's industry standard."

"Don't know, hon. I will ask at the staff meeting I called first thing Monday." Kerry scribbled down a note. "Is it getting any better?"

"Meh."

Kerry tapped her pen on the pad. "Would it help for us to go there?"

"Peh."

"Okay." Kerry ticked off the items she had to do and wrote a few more notes. "Do you need to add equipment in there? So I can get that prepped?"

Dar scowled. "Let me get back to you on that." She made another change and reviewed the results. "Holy shit what a hairball."

"Ms. Roberts?" Jack came back on the conference bridge. "Whatever you did about five minutes ago really helped Interbank. They're running normal metrics now."

"Oh good." Kerry drew a small line, and made a note on one of the checklist items. "Good to hear, Jack."

"Thanks Ms. Stuart. Sorry you had to get into this too." Jack said, mournfully. "Getting Ms. Roberts up was bad enough."

Kerry studied the phone, then looked at her partner. "Does he not know?" She mouthed, inclining the pen towards her own chest, then at Dar.

Dar pressed the mute button. "He's new." She said, apparently reading her partner's mind. "I don't think they go over our relationship in new employee orientation. Yet."

Kerry chuckled, and shook her head. She reached over to release the mute. "No problem, Jack. Let's just get this squared away so our customers are happy." She said. "We can worry about who and when and why later."

"Yes, ma'am." Jack agreed instantly. "That's what my big problem was. I don't mind having arguments about doing it this way, or doing it that way, but when it starts to impact the people who depend on us we can't be sitting here arguing with each other."

"Yup." Dar was busy typing. "That's the whole point all right."

"I was surprised." Jack said, after a brief pause. "I had heard ILS wasn't like that. One reason I took the data center director job here."

Dar stopped typing and she and Kerry exchanged glances again.

"No offense." Jack said, after an awkward pause.

"None taken." Dar said. "Okay, I just made another change, and re-converged everything. See what that does."

"Okay." Jack walked away from the phone and they could hear a door open, and the airplane engine sound of a datacenter that was cut off as the door closed.

"What he just said bothers me." Kerry spoke up. "Because I believed that too, Dar. So what's going on? Are people that pissed off that we're leaving that they're doing this stuff on purpose?"

"Or is it just that we've told them to think for themselves and this is the result?" Dar responded. "Not sure which I'd hate more."

"Mm." Kerry shook her head back and forth. "Boy that's a tossup."

"Ker I wrote our design standards." Her partner said in a serious tone. "It's not like I just kept it all in my head. It's on the process server."

"Going to be a long Monday." Kerry sighed and made a few more notes, listening to Dar slurp her milkshake as they waited for Jack to come back. "As if it wasn't going to be long enough already."

"No kidding." Dar groused.

"No kidding." She sipped her own drink for a few minutes, then jerked slightly as her own phone rang. "Kerry Stuart." She answered it without bothering to check the caller ID.

"Hey Kerry."

"Hey Mark." Kerry responded. "What's up?"

"I guess I need to ask you that." Mark sounded glum. "Night ops finally called me and told me the new data center's having problems."

"Wow." Kerry said. "Dar's been working on it for about four hours or so. I think she's almost done." She looked up to see Dar watching her over the rim of her glass, a thick white whipped cream mustache on her upper lip. "I scheduled an all hands meeting on Monday to talk about it."

"They said they were having some issues, but it didn't sound serious yesterday." Mark said. "I figured it could wait for us to come in next week."

"Well." Kerry exhaled. "By my count Dar's made about... forty changes to the configuration in there. So apparently it was more serious than that." She took a swallow of her milkshake. "It's been getting better though."

"Shit."

'Yeah."

"She pissed?"

"Yeah." Kerry said. "I am too, actually. I wasn't looking to stay up all night fixing someone else's mistakes tonight."

Mark was silent for a long moment. "Shit." He finally said. "Okay, let me start the research." He added. "See how we can make sure it doesn't happen again."

Kerry felt a sense of relief on hearing that. "It can wait for the morning, Mark. I think Dar's got it now. We can pick up the details afterward so long as they're good until after the weekend." She paused, as she heard the sound of the datacenter pick up on the call and then cease with the bang of the door. "Hang on. "

"Okay." Jack got back on the bridge. "That looks a lot better! The graphs have settled down, and my phone's stopped ringing." He sounded tired, but elated. "The ops center said the metrics are coming back into normal range."

"Good." Dar licked her lips. "So let's hold it here for now, and we can do a complete review in a couple days to see if anything else needs adjusting. Call me if anything else wiggles loose."

"Ma'am... ah, I mean, Dar, thanks a billion." Jack said. "I really really appreciate the help."

"Anytime." Dar smiled. "Good night." She released the speaker phone button and regarded Kerry, shaking her head when Kerry pointed at her phone.

"Okay, looks like we're all right for now, Mark." Kerry concluded.

"Sure. Big D touched it." Mark sighed. "I have no fucking idea what we're going to do without her."

Dar's ears twitched, hearing the words in soft echo. She sat back in her chair with her glass cradled between both hands, and sucked at the contents in silence.

"Hopefully we can make it a learning moment." Kerry said. "You know, Dar had to learn it some way, right?"

"No." Mark responded. "She was born knowing that stuff. It's organic. We were talking about that in the shop the other day. But we'll have to come up with something. Maybe we'll get her to code a virtual Dar in the ops console."

Kerry watched her partner's eyebrows shoot right up to her hairline. "Hmm... that's an idea." She said.

"Talk to you later Mark. Have a good night." She closed the phone and returned her partner's somber gaze. "Yuk."

"Yuk." Dar repeated. "Lets go to bed." She got up and stretched, grimacing as her shoulders popped. "Did we have plans tomorrow?"

"Nope." Kerry drained her glass and stood up to join her. "I vote we sleep in."

"Unless someone else calls for help." Dar took both glasses and headed for the kitchen with them. "The one bright spot of the whole night was that guy Jack. They found a good one there."

"Let's hope we don't lose him." Kerry muttered. "We've got to get this under control, Dar. All those times your folks and my family would ask why the hell the two of us were involved in every damn thing is coming back to bite us in the ass."

"Mm."

**

Regardless of the late night, they only managed to stay in bed until 8. Kerry found herself a little after that on the porch in her bathrobe and slippers, enjoying the crisp air and bright sunlight of a calm Saturday morning. She stifled a yawn and watched a seagull soar overhead, trying to decide if there was anything in specific she wanted to accomplish.

She had several small projects going. Some planting in their small garden, sorting out her newly digitized photos into collections, and a barbecue brisket recipe she wanted to try. But right now, none of that seemed urgent, and she was content to listen to the rustle of palm trees in the winter wind and watch sailboaters heading out of the cut in the choppy waters.

Dar wandered out dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt, and sat down on the swing next to her. "I was thinking about what you said the other day." She announced once the swing stopped moving.

Kerry regarded her. "That covers a lot of ground, hon."

"About me getting a new car." Her partner supplied. "I think I want to."

"Yeah? Cool! What kind?"

Dar shrugged, and grinned. "I don't know. Let's go out and look at some. See if we can find one that fits me." She suggested . "Maybe I'll get a souped up sports car."

Kerry's brows twitched. "Hon, you're way too young for a mid life crisis." She said. "Aren't you?"

"Hey you were the one with the Mustang, babe." Dar chuckled. "I don't really have anything in specific in mind. Let's go see what's out there."

"All right by me." Kerry toasted her with her coffee cup. "Maybe we can look around for a place to put our new office while we're driving." She wiggled her feet in contentment. "I got an email from Jack. Every thing's quiet at the datacenter this morning."

"He get any sleep?" Dar wondered. "Glad things are better. Doesn't make it any less aggravating though."

"We really need to turn this into a learning experience." Kerry mused. "Not a good precedent."

"Well." Dar twiddled her thumbs. "Could be the sign of an independent, though wrong headed, mind."

Kerry chuckled wryly.

"Maybe I should have woken up everyone else and had them fix it." Her partner sighed. "Honestly, I just don't know what to do about this, Ker."

"We can talk about it at the office." Kerry got up and stretched. "Let's go find you a car, Dardar." She ruffled Dar's hair as she came past her and headed for the door. "And we can stop and look at cameras for me."

"That's my kind of shopping." Dar agreed. "Maybe I'll get a new laptop."

"Oh I can see this is going to be an expensive day." Kerry laughed. "Meet you in the shower?"

"Let's do it."

**

An hour later they were dressed, and pulling off the ferry onto the causeway heading west. It was a beautiful day, cool and crisp and cloudless and Kerry almost felt like humming as she leaned back in the passenger seat of Dar's car, enjoying the splash of sunlight through the windows.

Chino was relaxing in the back seat, tail perpetually wagging, delighted to have been added to the excursion. "Growf!" She barked at a palm tree whizzing by.

"You tell em, Chi." Kerry reached back and tickled the dog's paw. "We're going to take you to get ice cream when we're done today. What do you think about that?"

"Growf!" Chino was listening attentively, recognizing the name of a favorite treat.

Dar had her sunglasses on, and she was tapping the steering wheel with her thumbs, waiting for a light to turn green so they could proceed. "So where do we start?"

"Well." Kerry hitched one knee up. "Foreign or domestic?"

Dar thought about that for a minute. "Does it matter?" She wondered. "I've had pretty good luck with both in terms of maintenance."

"It matters in terms of narrowing down our traveling, hon." Kerry said. "Otherwise, just go find some random major street and start driving and we'll stop at the first dealership we find."

"Hm." Her partner made a little face. "Okay let's do that." She decided. "Let's let a little random fate into it."

Fate, as it turned out, led them to an auto mall stretch with six different manufacturers stretched across both sides of the street as far as the eye could see. Dar pulled into the first one and parked. "Here we all."

"Boy." Kerry was peering out the window. "Got enough choices here for you, hon?"

"Mm." Dar got out and opened the back door, attaching Chino's leash to her collar and standing back to let the dog hop out. They walked along the pavement to the first line of new cars, strolling between them and joining a number of other people doing the same. "Now, what in the hell do I want?"

Kerry peered at the cars they were passing. "The biggest thing I liked when I got my buggy was sitting up higher. Do you like that?"

"Yes." Dar responded positively. "I like that, and a big engine." She said. "And leather seats."

"Well that narrows it down a little." Kerry chuckled. "And honestly, I can't see you in a sedan, Dar. It's too boring."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is." Kerry agreed. "So let's get past this Acura dealer and head for where the Jeeps are." She pointed. "Those are cute."

They went from one lot to the other, and now were roaming among taller, boxier looking vehicles. "Hm." Dar reviewed them. "Too squarish. They look too much like the one I have now."

"True."

They kept walking. Chino trotted alongside, head swinging from one side to the other, nose twitching.

"Ford. There's my Mustang." Kerry observed. "It was a cute car."

"Totally fit you." Dar smiled. "I remember thinking that when I saw it that night."

"It was fun to drive." Kerry agreed. "But not enough leg room for you."

"No." Dar spotted a profile. "But hm..." She diverted her steps. "What do we have here?"

Kerry regarded her partner's target. "Ah." She mused. "An SUV married a pickup truck." She followed Dar over to the Ford Sport Trac row, where her companion started nosing around a dark red specimen.

"What do you think of this, Chi?" Kerry peered in a window. "Nice big crew cab back seat for you to ride in."

Chino hopped up on her back legs and Kerry just caught her in time to keep her claws off the paint job. "Ah ah ah." She cradled the dog as she sniffed at the open window "No claws."

Dar had gone around to the driver's side door and opened it, getting inside and looking around. "Leather seats." She remarked, with a grin.

"And a decent size engine." Kerry was looking at the window sticker. She let Chino down and leaned on the door jamb, watching Dar adjust the seat to her long frame.

It wasn't anything she would have picked for herself. Kerry looked back at the bed of the truck. "We can put the bike in there." She said. "Not to mention, camping stuff. Hey." She poked her head inside. "Could we pull this behind the RV?"

Dar had gotten things sorted out to her satisfaction, and reached forward to grip the steering wheel. Her motion attracted the attention of one of the roaming salesmen, and he came over to them.

"Good morning ladies." The man greeted them with an amiable grin.

"Hi." Dar responded. "Can we take a ride?"

Kerry had enough experience with her lover's mentality to know when it was on a track and chugging. She opened the back door and slid into the crew cab, moving over so Chino could jump up and join her.

The seats smelled rich and pungent even above the new car smell, and she stretched out as the salesman hurried back with the keys and got into the front passenger seat. "Uh." He looked at Kerry. "We don't usually allow dogs in the cars... I mean, you know, for a test."

"Won't matter." Kerry told him with a kind smile. "Just give her the keys." She patted Chino, who had curled up on the seat and put her head down on her lap. "Hi, I'm Kerry."

"Tom." The man handed over the keys. "Ah, you gals from around here?"

Dar started the engine and peered at the instruments. "Nice." She said. "Uncluttered."

"Ah, yeah. It's a nice truck." Tom wrestled his priorities into place. "Got a six cylinder engine, yeah? This one's got the automatic package, but you can get manual too if you want."

"I don't." Dar said. "I usually need to use one hand for the wheel and one for a piece of technology." She put the truck in drive and pulled out. "I have an SUV now."

"Oh, yeah?" Tom looked at a page in his little book. "This truck's got a bunch of extras. The seats, the moon roof.." He pointed up. "Wheels, rims, but we got base models too if you're interested."

"Four wheel drive?"

"Yeah." The salesman agreed. "Some people like the 2 wheel better. I got a blue one in that."

Dar turned onto the main drag and gave the truck some gas. The engine made a low, growly noise and responded, putting a grin on its driver's face. She spotted a vacant lot on the next block and turned into it, going over the rocks and grass at a respectable speed.

"Uh hey." Tom held on to the grab handle. "Take it a little easy, it's only got two miles on it."

Dar felt the suspension beneath her handling the uneven ground, and turned the truck in a tight circle.

"Hang on, Ker."

"Hanging." Kerry had one arm around Chino and one on the handle." She glanced back through the window and saw gusts of dust churning up behind the truck, rocks bouncing out of the tire's path. "Got nice pickup, hon."

"It does." Dar got around to the entrance again and without hesitation she gunned the engine and bolted out across the six lane main street, turning left ahead of oncoming traffic and pulling into the flow going the other direction with smooth skill. The road was clear ahead of her and she accelerated, pleased with the power of the engine and the feel of the steering.

It wasn't a sports car. It wasn't an SUV. She'd always liked pickups. Dar glanced at the salesman who had his eyes closed, and his lips pursed and clenched. With a chuckle she aimed her direction back to the lot and turned into it, bumping over the retainer blocks and pulling into a spot in the front of the dealership. "We're back."

Tom opened his eyes and regarded her. "Okay. So.. you want to see something else?"

Dar pulled her wallet out and removed a card from it. "I'll take it. Give us a minute and we'll bring the other one over to trade in."

Tom blinked. "You want to put a deposit with that?" He hazarded, taking the card.

"Nope. Put the whole thing on it." Dar exhaled in satisfaction. "Whatever extras come with it, get them on, and have them shine it up. Okay?"

Tom eyed her with shocked respect. "Yes ma'am!" He got out of the car and carefully put the card into his little folder. "I'll be right back!" He trotted off towards the low, beige building nearby.

Dar turned around and looked at her partner. "This okay?"

Kerry chuckled. "Honey it's very you." She said. "And I like it. Actually, I like it better than the Lexus." She patted the seat. "It'll be great to travel with, and we can put all our camping stuff in the back of it." She said "Let's go get your trade in and make this a done deal."

Dar got out of the front seat and closed it, bouncing a little on her heels. "My dad's gonna love it."

Kerry got out and waited for Chino to join her, and they started back to where they parked. "So far, so good today."

"Yep."

"Hope we get as lucky with my new camera."

**

It was an awesome enough day for her to mostly forget the previous evening. Kerry moved around to the front of Dar's new car and took another picture of it, pulling the camera back to regard her work in all its instantaneous, digital glory. "Huh."

The instant feedback was curiously charming and somewhat addictive. She focused on the front hood of the saucy truck and snapped another shot of it. "Y'know Chi, I really like this thing"

"Growf." Chino was seated nearby in the grass that ringed the parking lot they were parked in, watching her with intelligent interest.

"You like it?" Kerry knelt and took another picture. "Know what I think Chi? I think we're going to end up driving this thing to Vegas instead of flying there. Would you like that? Drive across the country?"

"Growf." Chino's tail wagged enthusiastically.

"We'll fix that crew cab up for you, right? Fold the seats down and put your bed in there." Kerry went on with her planning. "And put all our stuff and camping gear in the back. That's going to work out nice."

Chino got up and wandered over, snuffling at her knees.

"This is going to be cool." Kerry put her arm over the dog's back and hugged her. "Hey.. where's mommy Dar?"

Chino's ears perked up, and she looked around, spotting a familiar figure approaching as her tail started whipping Kerry in the back.

"Ow."

Dar had emerged from the Dairy Queen, holding ice cream sundaes for the two of them, and a cup of vanilla for Chino. She ambled over to her family and beckoned them over to the back of the truck, where she let the tailgate down and perched on it. "Comes with a table."

"It does." Kerry opened the front door and put the camera down on the seat, capping the lens and closing the door. She joined Dar at the back and took her sundae, hopping up to sit on the tailgate and watch Dar give Chino her treat. "That's so cute."

Dar grinned, visibly in a good mood. "So. Think this was a good pick?" She indicated the truck. "For real, I mean, not just to save the salesman's mojo."

"I like it." Kerry swung her feet. "I mean, I really do. I think it's going to be perfect for our travels, and it's really cute and sporty."

"Mm." Dar gave a satisfied grunt. She let Chino finish licking out the cup, and then went on to her own sundae. "It was time for a change. I had that Lexus for years.. I think I bought it two or maybe three years before we met." She messed with the sundae for a minute. "It was all right."

"This fits your image better." Kerry nudged her with an elbow. "I have to check when my lease is up. Maybe I'll get something more exciting this time too." She mused. "Do you always just buy your cars outright? I thought that guy was going to trip over his tongue."

Dar chuckled . "Yeah, I do." She admitted. "I mean, I got a good trade in for that old beast, and I can afford it. The truck wasn't that expensive. I guess if I wanted to buy a Mazarati maybe I would lease it or whatever."

"We always leased." Kerry mused. "But come to think of it, you don't actually have a credit card, do you? Just the Amex."

"Just the Amex. You actually have better credit than I do." Dar responded mildly. "Since I own that condo, and we own the cabin, I don't actually have any debts."

"So un American." Kerry clucked her tongue.

"Yeah, well, credit was scarce when I was growing up." Dar crunched contentedly on her chocolate shell. 'That's how I've managed to sock away most of my paycheck all these years. Not much to spend it on.' She glanced at Kerry. "Until now, that is."

"Mutual spend."

Dar swallowed her mouthful. "Know what?"

"What?"

"I'm in the mood for a dive tomorrow. You up for it?"

"Absolutely. Can we stop back at the camera shop to see if they have an underwater housing for this little Canon beast?" Kerry finished her ice cream and tossed the container in a nearby garbage can. "Let's give it a real workout."

Dar closed the hatch and let Chino into the back seat of her new ride, then she slid into the driver's seat and looked around the cab with a sense of satisfaction.

Definitely a change. It was a more rugged interior than her previous car and like Kerry, she felt it really better reflected her. The Lexus had been fine, and she hadn't minded driving it, but there was always a sense that it projected a tiny bit of status seeking she didn't really think she possessed.

At least, she hoped she didn't. She remembered, vaguely, worrying if the car was equal to the ones her peers in the company were driving but after a while other things had occupied her mind and she'd gotten used to the big beast.

She started the engine and shifted into drive, her peripheral vision catching Kerry fiddling with her new camera unsurprised when her partner half turned in her seat and pointed the lens at her. "Run out of truck to shoot?"

"Heh heh." Kerry let the auto focus do its thing, and snapped the pix, getting a nice shot of her partner's profile.

They drove a few minutes down the road, then Dar pulled back into the photo shop's lot and parked. "Me and Chino will wait for ya."

Kerry hopped out and trotted over to the store, while Dar adjusted the seat back a little and relaxed, idly watching the late Saturday afternoon passersby meander past.

Her cell phone rang. She picked it up and glanced at the caller ID, then opened it. "Hey Alastair."

"Dar."

His vocal tone warned her. "Yeap. What's up?"

"Not going to dance around." Alastair said, in a very quiet voice. "The board has instructed me to terminate your employment, and Kerry's. Right this moment."

Dar felt a flash through of several emotions, a blast of heat, and then of cold, and then oddly of relief.

"Okay." She responded after a moment of silence. "So that's it? They're not going to offer me a package, or hand over pension or anything?"

"No."

"Okay." Dar said again. "That's what I get for being honest?"

“Yes.”

Dar could hear more emotion in those short syllables than she ever had from Alastair. “Sorry boss.” She said gently. “I didn't really deserve that, and neither did you.”

There was a very long moment of silence. “No.” Alastair finally said, a clipped, rough word that Dar could hear the tears in. “And that's the very last god damned thing I'm going to do for them because I just submitted my own termination at the same time. Fuck them all.”

Dar looked up and saw Kerry coming at the truck at a run, briefly distracted by the look of tense upset in her partner's face.

The passenger side door jerked open. “What?” Kerry said. “What's wrong?”

Dar blinked, her mind operating on two separate levels. “Wow. That does work.” She said, then exhaled. “It's Alastair. We've both just been fired.”

Kerry slid across the seat and closed the door. “Done deal? Already?”

Dar nodded. “No benefits or anything. So we've got some planning to do, health insurance and that stuff.” She turned back to the phone. “Alastair, I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say to you.”

He sighed. “They're sending some people to the Miami office, to take over your role. Might want to warn those folks there. I think they'll send an email out.”

“Okay.” Dar said. “I guess if they didn't give me a package, that means I also don't have a non compete clause.” She remarked. “After we go on vacation and come back, if you want a job, call me.”

Alastair was silent for a moment, then he chuckled. “Know what? I just might.” He said. “Dar, I am damned sorry. I didn't want it to end like this.”

Kerry moved closer. “Alastair?” She leaned her head against Dar's shoulder.

“Hm? Oh. Yes. Hello, Kerry.” Alastair said. “I'm sorry about all this, especially after all that we went through.”

“You know, maybe it had to end like this.” She said. “There wasn't an easy way out.”

He sighed.

“I feel bad about the good people we're leaving there.” Kerry said in a more serious tone. “I'm going to call Mayte and Maria, Dar. I think you should call Mark. Let him know before they tell him.”

Dar nodded. “I'll have our laptops couriered to the office, Alastair. Have them turned into security.”

“Y'know? Me too.” Alastair said. “I just texted the wife with that PDA thing. She's happy as a clam.” He sounded surprised. “Maybe you were right, Kerry.”

“Okay, Alastair – give me a call later and we can make sure it's all wrapped up.” Dar said. “I'm going to call Mari and Duks so they don't get surprised either.”

“All right. Talk to you later.” Alastair said, then hung up.

Dar put her phone down on her leg, and looked at Kerry. “Know something?”

“I know I don't feel as bad as I probably should feel.” Kerry said. “And, that we probably need to get that company up and going sooner rather than later.” She sat back. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” Dar shook her head and opened her phone again. “Let me get Mari on the line so she can send out a note to the staff.”

“Let me get her.” Kerry took the phone. “Let's drive by that office complex we looked up and check it out. I get a feeling it's going to be a very very busy week.”

Dar leaned her elbows on the steering wheel and smiled wryly. “Sometimes, fate has a way of kicking you in the ass to make you start moving.”

Kerry nodded as she listened to the phone. "Hey Mari, this is Kerry." She said. "Yeah, somethings wrong. Let me fill you in."

Dar focused her attention on driving, listening with half an ear as Kerry went through her speed dial list, thinking of all the things left undone at ILS that now she'd never get a chance to see happen.

At one level, it hurt. She knew she'd given as much as a human could be expected to give a job over the years and the abrupt release burned.

But now that was in the past, and her mind was already moving ahead, looking forward to the new challenges and the next phase of their lives since she'd already mentally accepted that change was coming.

Now, she was glad she'd spent all night fixing some dumbass problems in the datacenter. It was a completely acceptable way for her to end her tenure there, as she'd started it. No slacking, no compromise, just a job quietly well done. The company would go on, they'd find someone to take the spot, in fact maybe they already had, and everyone would settle down and accept it after a while.

A few people, notably Mayte and Maria, they'd take with them. They were family. But the rest would get over the shock, and maybe even take the opportunity for advancement. Maybe they would give Mark Kerry's job. Dar considered as she turned down the street where their possible office space was.

She nodded to herself. Might be good for everyone.

Kerry finally closed the phone. "Wow." She said "She was kind of pissed."

"At us?"

"No."

"Oh. Well she's the VP of HR." Dar said, reasonably. "They really should have told her before they told us."

Kerry shook her head ."Anyway, she's going to send a note out. Duks was there. He didn't even want to talk to me." She frowned. "Guess we ruined their Saturday."

"We didn't do anything." Dar reminded her. "Okay, this is the place."

The phone in Kerry's hand rang, and she opened it. "Hello.. oh, hi Mark." She glanced at Dar. "No, she's here. No.. yeah, no it's true.." She glanced at Dar. "Yeah, they just called us. What?" She listened for a long moment. "I was just about to call you. I just got off the phone with Mari. No, we're going to have the laptops couri... oh, well, okay sure, that would be nice if you did that."

"Going to come pick them up?" Dar mouthed.

Kerry nodded. "No we're not home right now we were out shopping. Dar got a new car and.. yeah, we're out near the Grove looking at some property..." She paused. "No, not residential." She paused again, and glanced at Dar. "Uh.. sure.. sure, we could meet you for dinner out here."

Dar eyed her.

"Sure, Monty's on South Bayshore, in about an hour. See ya." Kerry shut the phone. "He sounded pretty upset." She said. "So I guess he wants to talk to us about it."

"Uh huh." Dar nodded. "I like Monty's." She said. "C'mon, lets look at this place."

"Yup, let's go." Kerry got out and let Chino out of the back. Then she turned as Dar came up next to her. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar had her sunglasses on, but she removed them as she rested her elbow on Kerry's shoulder.

"I am sorry it had to end like that, sweetheart." Kerry said. "It really isn't fair to you, to what you've done there, or how you lead us all to so many good results."

Dar studied her in silence for a moment, filtered sunlight catching the odd mahogany highlight in her hair. “No.” She finally said. “It’s not fair. But you know what? I’m glad.”

Kerry blinked in surprise. “Huh?”

“The last two months of this would have been one long drawn out never ending frustration. I don’t like that I was fired, or you for that matter, but it’s done.” Dar explained. “Let’s move on.”

She draped her arm over Kerry’s shoulders and looped Chino’s leash over her hand, and they walked across the parking lot in thoughtful silence.

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“I think we’re going to need to sit outside.” Kerry said. “I’m not leaving Cheebles in the car.” She took the dogs leash and waited as Dar addressed the seating person outside Monty’s restaurant. The sun was setting, and a brisk, cool wind was blowing off the bay, making her glad she’d turned the collar up on her jacket.

“C’mon.” Dar beckoned her, and they followed the host around the back to the deck, which was sparsely attended due to the weather. “They’ve got warmers back here.”

“Pfft.” Kerry was glad to take a seat in a relatively sheltered corner, as Chino sat down happily at her side, looking around with interest. “We’re early.”

“Yeah.” Dar said. “Didn’t take that long with the agent. That place had some definite pluses, but we’d need to do some reno to make it work for a tech company.”

“Server room, for one thing.” Kerry agreed. “But it was cute. I liked it. It seemed like a good size for us to start with.”

Her partner nodded, and opened the menu. “Can I have a Jamaican coffee, please?”

“Sure.” The waiting server agreed. “Good night for it.”

“Same here.” Kerry said. “We’re waiting for a third person. He should be here in a few minutes.”

“Right, I’ll get your drinks.” The woman went off.

Dar leaned back. “Long day.” She exhaled. “I think the whole things’ just hitting me.”

Kerry reached over and put her hand over Dar’s, squeezing the fingers. “It’s.. its hard to accept.” She said. “I keep thinking of stuff I have to do on Monday and then..” She paused. “I won’t miss all the chaos, but I will miss the people.”

Dar nodded.

“Hard to absorb that I won’t be having coffee with the gang downstairs, or .. oh crap. I’ve got to send a note to Colleen.” Kerry said. “That’s the hard part. You become used to stuff in your life, and then it’s just gone.”

Dar nodded again, sniffling a little. She looked down at the table, then out over the water.

Kerry squeezed her hand again. “Sorry. I’ll stop that.” She said. “We don’t need to bring ourselves down.”

The server came over with their drinks. “Can I get you some appetizers, ladies? How about a raw bar platter?”

“Sure.” Kerry agreed. “That would be great.”

The woman whisked off again. “Anyway.” Dar cleared her throat. “We don’t need to bring ourselves down, that’s for sure.” She agreed. “I think it’s just sort of starting to piss me off, when I think about it.”

“We did resign.” Kerry pointed out.

“We did. But it still pisses me off.” Dar said. “I wanted to leave on my terms. Not theirs.” She spotted Mark, and waved him over. “Me and my ego. I’ll get over it.”

"Hey." Mark dropped down into the spare seat, his hair in violent disarray. "Should have took the truck." He said. "Dar, I'm' sorry, I know you turned in your chit, but this sucks." He exhaled. "I mean, shit, you know?"

"I know." Dar took a sip of her coffee, her composure restored. "So I went to DC yesterday, and first I get propositioned by the government, then Gerry Easton tells me they don't want to do business with ILS, just with me." She said. "So that's what I told Alastair, and that's what got me booted."

"Oh." Mark frowned. "Holy crap."

"Something like that, yeah." His former boss agreed. "Wasn't something I looked for, but I can see that pissing them all off."

Mark sighed. "Sucks." He repeated. "Specially after last night. Thanks for hauling everyone's stones out of the fire. We're not even going to get to talk design with you about it I guess."

"Probably not."

The server came back and put down their platter. "Hi there. Can I get you a drink?" She asked Mark. "Got two for one beers."

"Yeah, scotch and soda please." Mark said, "Double."

"Sure."

There was a little, almost uncomfortable silence, then Mark visibly steeled himself. "So. What are you guys going to do now?"

Kerry remained silent, waiting for Dar to answer. Her lover was closer to their former employee, and had been Marks supervisor for almost as long as she'd been working there. The offer, which she sensed was coming, was Dar's call, just like her offer to Mayte had been hers.

"Ker and I just got back from looking at some office space." Dar said. "We're going to open our own tech company. Wanna come work for us?"

Very straightforward. Kerry almost had to muffle a smile. No hinting, no feeling him out. So Dar.

Mark blinked at her, then grinned. "You made that too easy, Big D." He echoed Kerry's thoughts.

"They didn't make me sign a non compete, and there's nothing stopping me from moving forward with this." Dar said, briskly. "I can't take everyone. Company's too big and we're bootstrapping. But I'd welcome you as part of our new venture."

Hard to say who was more shocked when Mark lost his grip on his emotions and some tears escaped and ran down his cheeks. Kerry leaned forward at once and reached over to him, touching his arm. "Hey..."

"Sorry." He wiped his eyes with some annoyance. "I mean after last night and all the stuff you've done and .." He exhaled. "It just sucks."

"Yeah, that's true, it does suck. But you know what they say about lemons." Dar said, in a gentle tone. "We were on the way out anyway. This just lets us get started sooner, and without any restrictions. We're going to get the office lease settled, then go on vacation, then when we get back, we'll start lining up clients."

"We were thinking of doing our own datacenter." Kerry said. "And Dar wants to offer engineering services."

"It'll be different." Dar said. "Different scope, smaller, we don't have the resources ILS has."

Mark regarded them, sniffling a little. "Where'd you say the new place is?"

"We were looking at a place in the Grove." Kerry said.

"Fuckin A." Now a smile crossed Mark's face. "Can I start Monday? I don't want to have to face that place without you guys."

Dar smiled, visibly touched. "I think we need a day or two to actually create the company." She demurred. "Maybe give us till Wednesday."

Kerry leaned her elbow on the table. "You have four weeks vacation that just rolled over, Mark." She said. "Take it."

He nodded. "Barbara said the same thing." He admitted. "I told her I was coming out to meet you guys and she knew I was going to ask to go with you. She wants to try skiing."

"Do it." Kerry said. "But maybe if you're not leaving for Aspen for a few days you can come over to the new place and lay out a wiring plan. I think the last tenants were beanbag chair makers."

Mark's smile grew wider. "Absolutely."

"Know any place we can put a datacenter?"

"Absolutely!"

**

They ended up with the moon high overhead, at a table that had been doubled and now had the three of them, plus Mayte, Maria, Maria's husband Tomas, and Colleen.

Dar had switched from Jamaican coffees to regular ones, and she was sitting back in her chair, one hand idly scratching Chino's ears.

"It's terrible." Maria said, for the nth time. "I simply cannot believe it, Dar that they would treat you so." She shook her head, and her husband echoed the motion.

'No kidding.' Mark agreed. "But hey, you know? It could end up great for us, right?"

"I have told Maria, if she wishes, she should leave that place." Tomas said, one of the first things he'd said since he'd gotten there. "And Mayte also. I do not think it would be a good thing for them to be there now that you are gone."

Mayte looked expectantly at Kerry, who smiled and lifted her cup. "We have something else in mind." Kerry said. "I've already talked to Mayte about it.. I think it's just going to happen a little faster than I thought it would."

Maria beamed at her. "Mayte has told me." She said. "I was so happy."

Kerry looked over at her partner, one eyebrow quirking up.

"Yeah." Dar promptly said. "So here's the plan. We're going to get with a lawyer on Monday to set up the new company. We've just checked out some office space, but it's going to take us a few weeks to start all that stuff up."

Everyone was nodding in agreement. "I like the idea of taking my vacation." Mark said. "I don't think I could stand it there with someone else in charge." He added. "It would be a freaking horror show."

"Ai, yes." Maria agreed. "We just now got our vacations again for this year, no?" She said. "It would be nice to take a trip."

"Poor Mari." Kerry sighed.

"Who says she's not going on vacation too?" Colleen asked. "Here now I'm hoping you need an accountant one soon fine day."

Kerry chuckled. "I'm sure we're going to need a lot of things. We've got some pretty ambitious ideas, and some potential clients lined up already." She glanced at her partner. "Actually, Dar's got an offer to become the national technology czar. I don't think she's going to take it though."

"Really?" Colleen goggled at the tall, dark haired woman.

Dar half shrugged. "My reputation gets me in the worst trouble." She admitted. "But yeah, I think I'm going to wiggle out of that one. Way too much politics for me."

"Me too." Kerry agreed. "So anyway, it's getting late and we had a late night last night, so.." She looked around at them. "I guess if you're going to take vacation, send Mari a note. Mayte and Maria, I think if we're moving as fast as it looks, we might need you as early as a week from Monday. That be okay?"

Both women beamed at her.

"Can we get everything in place by then?" Kerry asked Dar. "I'd like to before we take off on vacation ourselves."

"I already sent a note to Richard Edgerton." Her partner said. "We'll see. Everyone give Kerry your personal cell numbers, so we can keep in touch."

Hands reached for phones as Kerry took out her new gizmo, opening the contact program on it, and they gathered around her holding out back lit devices that outlined all their faces in a gray blue light.

Dar leaned back and watched, feeling the long day creeping up on her despite the coffee. It was good, though, to sense the energy of the people around her, and see the happiness in their faces as they made their plans. She looked over to find Maria sitting next to her, watching her face. "Maria."

"Dar." Her former admin said. "Thank you so much for this."

Dar smiled briefly. "Let's see if I can run a company before you thank me." She said. "I could bust out y'know."

"I do not think so for one moment." Maria said, confidently. "It will be a great success."

"With all the help, maybe so." Dar said. "I'm sorry, by the way. I was trying to get you a early out"

Maria reached over and touched her arm. "Mayte told me so." She said. "And thank you, Dar, but this is better. It is so exciting to be doing something new, you see?"

"I do."

"Okay, hon, I got everything." Kerry patted her knee. "Time to get home. My eyelids are sticking."

They all walked out to the lot in a group, through a Saturday evening crowd.

"Hey, is that a new ride?" Mark eyed the Sport Trac as they paused by it.

"Yeah, we started out this morning getting Dar a new car, and me a new camera." Kerry said. "And ended up being fired and having dinner with you all. Long day."

"Nice!" Mark circled the truck. "That's sweet, Dar. Cooler than that beige battle wagon."

"In fact." Kerry opened the passenger door and removed her new camera. "C'mon over and pose. It's an occasion."

They gathered in front of the truck and Kerry adjusted the settings, then pressed the shutter. "Got it." She straightened up. "I think a new future started tonight." She put the device away as everyone said goodbye, then she slid into the seat and closed the door.

Dar got in and closed hers. They both looked at each other. Then Dar laughed and shook her head, starting the truck up as she watched their former and future colleagues part and go off to their own cars. "Y'know? This is going to be fun."

"Y'know? It is." Kerry half turned as Chino poked her head between the seats. "You can have a job too, Chi. We can bring her to the office every day, Dar."

Dar leaned over and gave the dog a kiss on the head. "We can." She agreed. "There's a nice big yard in the back of it too. You like that Chi? Not be cooped up in the condo all day?"

"Growf!"

"What's that old saying, Dar? An ill wind blows nobody good?" Kerry settled into her seat as they started home. "Or do I mean every dark cloud has a silver lining?"

"I think they mean the same thing." Dar stifled a yawn. "Remind me to send a note to my parents letting them know what's going on."

"They'll be pissed."

"Nah." Dar said. "My mother thinks the company's a crock, and my dad thinks I work too hard."

"No, I mean they'll be pissed because you and I were fired." Kerry clarified. "As in, we were dissed."

Yeah, that was probably true. Dar got on the causeway and headed for the ferry terminal. It still stung. She was honest enough with herself to admit that. But things were going to be busy enough for her that she hoped that sting would fade, as she left ILS behind and entered this new adventure.

Would she be a good business owner? Dar had to wonder.

"Know what we forgot?" Kerry said, as they pulled into the residents lane. "To transfer the sticker from your car."

The ferry guard came over to them uncertainly, until Dar rolled the window down and stuck her head out. "Oh, Ms. Roberts." He said. "New car?"

"New truck." Dar agreed. "I'll get a sticker for it tomorrow at the office."

"No problem." He leaned on the car and glanced inside. "I'd love one of these. My baby SeaDoo would maybe fit crosswise in the bed there."

"SeaDoo." Kerry mused. "Hm."

"Uh oh." The guard grinned. "You forget that for Christmas?"

"Apparently I did." Dar drawled. "Have a great night."

He backed off and she closed the window as they were directed onto the ferry. Dar glanced around and smiled a little. Most of the cars around her were Mercedes and BMWs, and one, in the front, a Mazarati. Her Lexus SUV had been borderline. Her Sport Trac definitely was out of place.

"The Grove is cute." Kerry commented. "Didn't you used to live down there?"

"I did." Her partner agreed. "Probably.. ten minutes from Monty's. I liked it. You could walk to places and there are a lot of nice, old trees around."

Kerry eyed her speculatively. "There's a marina there. You want to look around maybe?"

Dar was silent for a moment. "You mean, move down there?" She pondered the dark waters going past them, as they crossed the channel and headed for the island side dock. "Huh."

"Just a thought" Kerry said. "Might as well get all our massive life changes over at one time."

"We'll be down there a lot. Maybe we'll see someplace we like." Dar allowed. "I don't mind the island."

"I don't either. It's gorgeous, and we have a beautiful home." Kerry crossed her ankles. "But some of those places we drove by were pretty cute."

"And they have unique architecture."

"Mm."

"Let's see what we find." Dar suggested. "But maybe let's wait to look until we've got the company set up and running, our staff hired, and our vacation accomplished."

Kerry chuckled, then she exhaled. "Oh crap."

"What?"

"We're going to have someone clean out our offices. I've got a bunch of personal stuff there." Kerry said. "And everyone I would have thought to ask to do that is either going to be on vacation or helping us start up our new company next week."

"Mari'll do it." Dar said. "I don't have much there."

"And we need to courier those laptops since Marks excuse for meeting us had nothing to do with them." Kerry scratched Chino behind the ears. "They would probably let us go in there to drop them off and pick our stuff up."

"I don't want to do that." Dar answered, in a definite tone.

Kerry looked at her.

"Go in there, with security around us? Everyone staring at us? No thanks."

"Okay, hon." Kerry touched her arm. "Just a suggestion."

"In fact lets get a courier to bring them tomorrow. I want them out of our house." Dar continued. "Before something happens and the first place they point blame is at me, figuring I have some sort of half assed back door access." She drove off the ramp and headed around the perimeter road towards their condo.

"You mean you don't?" Kerry asked, after a brief pause.

"No." Dar said. "I don't."

"Good."

"Yeah."

"Do me a favor though?" Kerry asked. "Can you take those pictures of me off your laptop before you give it back?"

Dar paused then relaxed and started laughing.

Kerry slapped her lightly. "We'll get through this, DarDar. I know we will."

"Idiots." Dar let the chuckles wind down. "I'm not sure who's going to be bit in the ass by this the most."

"Well, nobody but me better be biting your ass."

"Growf!"

**

Dar stretched her body out, feeling the light tickling scratch on her navel as Kerry stirred beside her. She looked up at the ceiling and for a moment considered a normal Sunday, then she remembered the prior day. "Buh."

"Felt good to sleep." Kerry muttered, almost incoherently.

"Uh huh." Dar felt Kerry snuggle up to her and she curled her arm around her back, her thumb tracing an idle pattern. "It's gonna be weird not going to work tomorrow."

"Mm."

"I keep thinking about stuff I was going to do." Dar sighed. "My brain keeps going in circles and then tripping."

"Aw, hon." Kerry gave her a sleepy hug. "Give it some time. You had a lot going on."

"Mm."

"I love you."

Dar smiled, unable to resist the power of that sentiment to lighten her heart. "Back atcha." She felt her body relax, and the buzz of thoughts evaporated. "Still up for a dive today?"

"Uh huh." Kerry nodded. "After we wake up."

Dar took the hint and settled down, watching the slits in the shutters take on just the bare hint of pre dawn. She turned her thoughts to the things they needed to get done, and contentedly ran over the tasks at hand, letting the past fade out as she considered how to structure their new company.

Their new company. Dar nodded a little. Roberts Automation. It had been a name, and a plan and a future, and to have it become so sudden and so present felt just a little startling to her.

Startling but good. Good, but a little scary, since she'd spent her whole life depending on a structure around her that now she had to provide for others.

Could she succeed?

"Hon?" Kerry burred softly. "What're you gonna do if Jose wants to come work for us?"

Dar pondered that. "Hire him." She said after a moment. "I was just trying to figure out how I was going to do that stuff I never liked doing – like sell things. You just reminded me why I don't have to."

Kerry patted her on the stomach. "Sleep."

"You made my brain wake up." Her partner complained. "Now I have a picture of Jose in my head. That wasn't nice, Kerry."

"Sorrrrrry."

"Maybe I'll get up and make us pancakes."

Kerry was silent for a long moment. "Now you woke my brain up." She rolled over and sighed. "Oh well. We can sleep in whenever we want for a while huh"

"Mm"

"Okay, let's get up."

They threw shirts on and shorts on and wandered into the kitchen, accompanied by Chino. Kerry started pulling pans out of the cupboards while Dar busied herself with the coffee maker. Once the brew was going, Dar went over to the dining room table where their new PDA's were and picked up hers. "I have a message."

"It's kinda cool knowing I don't have to worry about what's in my work inbox." Kerry got out her pancake mix and some eggs.

"Mm.. ah, Mark created a mailing list and sent a message to all of us." Dar said, in an amused tone. "You can take the man out of the enterprise but not the reverse it seems." She thumbed through the other lines on the screen. "Ah, my folks." She opened it.

"Glad we tagged our personal mail to that, not the work mail." Kerry observed. "Remind me to send out an edress change note later."

"My dad says, 'Dardar, thaths some good news there. Them people look to you like the gov'mint looks to me. Ain't no win in it.'"

With Dar's deliberately added drawl, Kerry had no problem imagining Andrew's speech. "He's right."

"And my mother adds 'I thought that board was stupid. I didn't realize they were that stupid.'

Kerry chuckled.

Dar continued to read a moment. "She's reminding us to schedule an option share sale of our options first thing tomorrow morning."

"Can we do that?" Kerry asked, pouring the pancake batter out into six roundels on her griddle. "Oh wait, we can with the vested ones, can't we?"

"Need to ask Richard. I think we can. There weren't any strings attached to those that required us to remain employed to sell them." Dar said. "Hm... I should check mine. I started getting them ten years ago. Have to see what the price was back then."

"Legitimate profit, Dar. Most of that increase you had a significant something to do with." Her partner commented. "I remember us having a conversation about how important to the daily ops continuing to increase profit was."

"Yeah." Dar smiled. "I'm going to go into my office and start blueprinting." She took the device with her and settled behind her desk, letting her elbows press against the wood surface as she considered what she wanted to do next. "First thing's first."

She logged into the condo's router and checked it, clucking her tongue as she saw the encrypted tunnel to ILS's systems still up and passing traffic. She disconnected it and removed the configuration, pausing a moment and adjusting the access list on the device to prevent any attempt to bring it back up from the other side.

It was a bit of finality, and while she was in there, she remotely connected to the router in the cabin and did the same, feeling better once that was complete.

Then she went to her desktop and deleted the secured share folder she'd kept there for local use, which contained various diagrams and work notes she used from time to time.

Kerry appeared with a cup of coffee and a plate, and she set them down. 'Whatcha doing?"

"Housekeeping." Dar said. "Getting rid of all the hooks and links to the company I had here." She pecked away with one hand and picked up the coffee cup with her other. "Thanks."

"Dar? How many things are in their systems that you kept track of in your head?" Kerry asked. "Wait, hold that thought, let me get my breakfast."

Dar pulled the plate over and cut a square of the pancakes off with her fork, spotting the embedded chocolate chips with a piratical chuckle. She had gotten the mouthful down by the time Kerry came back and she swallowed and took a sip of the coffee to wash it down. "All the stuff in my head is in online documentation." She told her partner. "I'm not that kind of asshole."

"Dar." Kerry settled on the couch in the office, balancing the plate on her knees. "You're not any kind of asshole. You just put on a very good asshole act sometimes."

Dar finished her configuration changes and cleared her desktop, pulling up a browser.

"I have a message from that real estate agent." Kerry was checking her own gizmo. "Dar, I like this thing. You think we can get more for the rest of the people we're going to be working with?"

"Sure."

"The agent says the management company approved us." Kerry remarked. "On a Sunday. They must really want tenants." She looked up. "They say they're willing to give us a move in first month discount if we sign papers today."

"Do we want to do that, or look around some more?"

Kerry pondered. "I like that place a lot." She confessed. "There was something about it that really clicked with me."

"Have them draw up the papers, we'll take the boat over and sign them at that little marina, and then we'll head out and do a dive." Dar suggested. "We can pick up some lunch there and take it with us."

"Sounds like a plan." Kerry grinned. "Can we have the courier meet us there too? Get everything done at once?"

"Sounds like a plan."

**

"Richard'll be here tomorrow morning." Dar slowed the engines to almost idle as they approached the public marina. "He said he wanted to take care of all this stuff the right way for us before we got ourselves into a pickle."

"Awesome. I'm not real fond of pickles." Kerry said. "There's the guest slips. I think we'll fit in that end one, won't we?"

Dar angled for the berth, skillfully maneuvering the Yankee into place with gentle bumps against the rubber bumpers. "Tie us up?"

"Sure." Kerry was already heading for the stairs. She scaled down the ladder and crossed the back deck, climbing up on the transom and untying their stern rope.

Dar held them gently against the dock until her partner finished then she shut down the engines. She tugged down the sleeves on her hoodie and climbed down the ladder, making an idle check of the dive tanks valves before she hopped off onto the dock.

They walked along the dock to the marina office, and spent a few minutes with the dock master, then continued on past the parking area and onto the main street beyond.

Their proposed new digs were a five minute walk, and they enjoyed the stroll, the mid morning sunlight peeking through the trees that lined the road.

"It's nice down here." Kerry said, after a few quiet moments. "Did you move just because your Aunt left you the condo?"

Dar thought about that for a minute, casting her mind back to that time. "Yeah, I guess." She half shrugged. "I remember thinking then what a gag it would be to change my address to the island in the office systems, and how it would sting so many of those assholes that used to look down on me."

"Down on you?"

Dar nodded. "For coming up from the ranks, being a redneck, all that." She responded mildly. "Even though I inherited the place, it was still a hoot telling people where I was moving."

"Mm. Even my parents had heard of the place." Kerry smiled in remembrance. "It's nice though."

"It is, but its not really my style. I like the cabin better." Dar steered her across the parking lot to the office facilities, where she could see the agent and a tall man standing waiting for them. "Here we go."

"Here we go." Kerry agreed.

The agent, a woman, hurried forward. "Hello, I'm Sally Ramirez." She offered her hand. "Thanks for meeting up with me at such short notice."

"Dar Roberts." Dar took her hand ad released it "This is my partner Kerry."

The woman half turned. "This is Marcus Tisop, he's the owner of the building. He wanted to meet you."

The man stepped forward. He was tall, and had dark, short cut hair with an arrow shaved into his head on both sides pointing backwards. He looked to be in his thirties, and was wearing a short waisted black corduroy jacket and jeans. "Hello ladies."

"Hi." Kerry responded. "Nice to meet you."

"So." Marcus said. "Sally tells me you're up for signing a lease today? I know it seems like we're in a rush, but, actually, we're in a rush."

"I see." Dar said. "Want to sit down and talk about it?"

They went into the little garden area and sat down. Sally pulled a plastic folder with a rubber banded cover out of her briefcase and laid it on the table. "I had these drawn up." She said. "I know you said you wouldn't have your incorporation documents for a few days, but that's okay."

Dar and Kerry exchanged looks. "Okay." Kerry put her elbows on the table and folded her hands. "So what's the deal, Mr. Tisop? You about to declare bankruptcy on this place, or is it haunted, or..?"

Marcus chuckled. "Seems like that huh?" He said. "Place has been vacant for a few months so you might be close on your first guess, and its been around a while, so maybe you're close on your second." He added. "Last tenant only lasted three weeks. The ones before that were here a long time, but they lost their business after 9/11. Travel agents."

"Ah." Dar said, briefly.

"So I'm stuck at this job." Marcus said. "And I can't leave it until I get a tenant cause I won't be able to pay the mortgage. You know?"

"Got it." Kerry assented.

"So when Sally told me she had someone interested, I'm all over it." He concluded. "You folks passed the checks, and seem like nice ladies, and I would love to have you as tenants."

"I'm guessing you'd love to have us as tenants even if we were Darth Vader and Yoda opening a nail salon." Dar said, dryly. "But let's talk about it for a minute." She folded her hands. "We talked yesterday to Sally about using the space, and how much liberty we'd have to do construction and changes."

Marcus chuckled. "Douche." He said to her former statement. "She told me you're doing something with computers?"

"That's right." Kerry agreed. "It's a technology consulting company. Or it will be when the papers are finished. So we'll need power and air conditioning, a place to put in servers, that sort of thing."

"Cabling upgrades." Dar interjected. "I liked the hardwood floors, but we'll need to put in work spaces for staff and conference facilities."

Marcus' eyes lit up and he looked at them in visible delight. "You've got carte blanche." He said. "Do whatever you want to the place. The travel agency had some computers, but I think they were older than I am." He tapped the folder. "I put that in there, when Sally told me you were some high tech people. It's all to my advantage, right? If you do leave, that makes the property a lot more rent-able."

Dar smiled. "Now that's a mercenary attitude I can respect." She said. "How did you get into the landlord business?"

"Ah." Marcus sighed. "My grandmother owned property all over the Grove. When she died, it got split up between me and my five brothers and sisters. I'm not really into being a landlord, but I had to do something with it. Would have been different if it had been houses.. but she was into commercial property."

"What do you do?" Kerry asked.

"Marketing and sales, for Sedanos supermarkets." He responded promptly. "I'm tired of it. I want a change, you know what that's like?"

"Yes." Both Dar and Kerry answered at the same time.

"Right, so if you're really interested, let's do it." He said. "I'll even give you a signing bonus. We do a deal today, I'll hook you up with my brother's electrical company with a 50 percent discount on all the work."

Dar started laughing. "Nice." Kerry regarded him with wry amusement. "We'll sign, but the final paperwork on it will need to wait until the ink's dry on our corporation, and we have a company bank account to pay you out of."

"And that'll be?" Marcus was already grinning, jiggling his knees.

"End of the week, most likely." Dar said. "My lawyer's due here tomorrow."

"Deal." He held out his hand. "Sally, get them papers out. Want a real tour after that?"

Why yes, they would like that. A half hour later they were being let into the front door of the space again, and now they took their time in looking around.

"The nail salon only used this front section." Marcus said. "What a mess that was. I had to have the floors resurfaced after they left."

The entrance was relatively square, open space that had a staircase behind it going up to the second floor. To the right and left were large open rooms, and Kerry wandered into one, turning in a circle inside it.

"Conference room?" Dar asked, examining the door.

"Mm."

Behind the entrance past the stairwell was a large kitchen, that had windows that opened onto what might once have been a little garden but now was a roughly mowed and clipped space that had stone tables and benches along its perimeter.

The two story building was in a square, with the open space in the middle and open walkways on the second level that linked the offices upstairs.

"We had jalousies." Marcus commented. "I had them taken out, and hurricane proof glass put in for these inside windows."

Dar nodded. "Good idea." She said. "Outside ones have shutters?"

"Yup."

Kerry leaned towards her partner. "What's a jalousie?"

"Tell you later." Dar whispered back. "Old Florida thing."

They continued along the bottom floor, where besides the conference rooms on either side of the entrance there were long, open rooms with worktables down the middle of them, several storage closets, and custodial rooms. The short side on the other end of the building was a rear exit, and loading dock, along with another set of stairs.

They climbed up to the 2nd level, which was mostly offices. On the front side above the main entrance there was a suite of them. Two decent size rooms that split the corner, a small utility space on the inner edge, and a large administrative area with a curved desk and a set of bathrooms.

Kerry eyed it, turning to look at Dar with a quirk of her blond eyebrow.

"Yep." Dar answered the unasked question, patting the curved desk. "That one storage space on the left side downstairs I think I can convert to a server room. It's got a demarc."

"We'll need to have someone come in and check the power feeds." Kerry agreed. "And verify the AC tonnage."

Marcus was regarding them. "You guys really are tech, huh?"

"Yes." Dar said, as she wandered into one of the two offices and went to the window, looking quietly out at the leafy street that fronted the building, and catching a glimpse of the marina in the distance.

Definitely not the view she'd become used to, but as she glanced around at the room surrounding her, imagining a desk, and a design workstation, and a big white board she could see herself working in it, almost able to hear the hum of activity around her, and the muted ringing of phones. "This'll work."

"There's even an outlet in this corner for a refrigerator full of milk chugs, hon." Kerry had entered and was exploring the space. "And eventually a big monitor on that wall so you can see your net health metrics."

"Mm." Dar turned and leaned against the windowsill. "You happy here?"

"I am." Kerry indicated the door to the second office. "Much shorter walk." She said. "We're starting small, and spending our rent on real work space, not marble floors and a twelve story atrium."

"It feels right" Her partner agreed. "Enough space to bootstrap, but not like I feel like I'm paying for image."

"And there's enough space out there for both Mayte and Maria." Kerry noted in satisfaction. "We're going to need systems, and software... sheesh there's a lot to do."

"We already have some software." Dar said. "I kept a copy of my code repository at home. I'll have to recompile it for us, but it's got my sizing and engineering prototypes and the base of what, believe it or not, ILS uses for their accounting and HR systems."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and I worked on it enough off hours not to feel bad about using it." Dar pushed off the window and indicated the entrance, "Let's get going, I hear fish calling my name."

"Can we paint the walls something other than white?" Kerry asked, as they walked with Marcus outside.

"Something like sea foam green, or light blue?"

"Sure." The landlord shrugged. "You can paint it bright red if you want to. I had to have it painted after the travel agency left. They had murals of Europe all over the place."

They paused outside. "Let me walk you to your car." Marcus suggested, while Sally stood by with her signed papers, looking extraordinarily pleased with herself.

"We didn't drive." Kerry told him. "If we get all our paperwork in place, I think we might want to get in here as early as Wednesday to start making some plans. That okay?"

"Sure." He held his hand out. "You live around here that you walked? I thought you had an address out on Fisher Island?"

"We do." Dar took his hand and released it. "We took our boat over here. We're going diving now." She said. "Have a good rest of your Sunday."

They parted from the landlord and agent and walked off, heading back down to the marina.

Marcus put his hands in his pockets and whistled softly under his breath.

"See? I told you they were on the up and up." Sally said. "You have to strike when the iron's hot, Marcus. I got you your price, and some decent tenants."

"You sure did." He agreed. "Earned every penny of that commission. Glad to have some of those high tech types, I gotta say. Better chance of them staying than a lot of other businesses."

She nudged him. "And they'll upgrade the property no cost to you." She said. "Lunch?"

"Let's go over to Scotty's." He agreed. "Maybe we can see their boat taking off." He winked at her.

"C'mon."

**

Kerry was sprawled, dressed in her dive jacket, savoring the westering sun as they bobbed at anchor just off the reef. If she opened her eyes she could see Biscayne Bay, and when the wind shifted she fancied she could hear snatches of music off the beach.

On the table at her left hand was what was left of a platter of fresh seafood, and she picked up her glass of white wine and sipped it.

Dar was lying on her back on one of the cushioned benches, her bare feet draped over the stern, white cotton sweatpants covering her long legs. "What a nice day." She drawled. "Great seeing those hammerhead sharks, huh?"

"Great getting you silhouetted against them." Kerry agreed. "I can also see us spending time at that raw bar near the new office. That platter was awesome."

"It was." Dar turned her head and regarded her partner sleepily. "I have to call Bridges tomorrow. What the hell am I supposed to tell him?"

"No?"

"Agreed, but how do I say no to him and not piss him off to the point he blackballs our nice shiny new company?" Dar asked. "I'd like to pick up Gerry's new contracts. That'll be a pretty good bootstrap for us."

Kerry pondered the question. "Can you say no to his czar idea, but still do the programming for him?"

Dar half sat up. "Ker, that's the part I don't want any part of."

"Mm.. yeah I know." Kerry got up and picked up a lonely looking oyster, bringing it over and offering it to her partner's lips. "But you know, I was thinking. He's going to get that program done no matter what you say. Could you do it so that it wouldn't be so scummy?"

Dar swallowed the oyster, and licked her lips.

"I mean.." Kerry sat down on the edge of the bench and leaned her arm across Dar's hips. "Think about it, hon. What he's talking about might have caught those guys before they blew up those planes, you know? Is there a way to do it that protects everyone but the bad guys?"

She could see the wheels turning behind those baby blues. "No one else he asks is going to give a crap."

"That's probably very true." Dar answered slowly. "I don't know. Depends on how much control he allows over it." She added in a thoughtful tone. "Let me think about it."

Kerry leaned over and pulled up her sweatshirt, giving her a kiss on the navel. Then she put her cheek down on the spot and gazed quietly up at her partner, knowing a moment of surprising content giving everything going on. "I know there's a lot of unknown in our path right now, but I'm really excited about it."

Dar smiled gently at her, reaching over to push a bit of thick, blond hair out of her eyes. "I'm kinda jazzed about it too." She admitted. "All this time, I had to deal with whatever it was ILS decided to do. Now.. it's scary, but interesting to know we have to make our own decisions and live with what happens from them."

"Angie sent me a note after we came back up." Kerry said. "She said my mother's extremely pleased we got fired."

Dar's eyebrows both twitched and lifted.

"She said ILS got me into too much trouble." Kerry watched and felt her partner start to laugh. "Angie said after she heard about the board wanting to let Alastair fry she decided they were horrible."

"Hm. Forgot she heard that when he was telling us." Dar said "Your mother's growing on me, a little."

"Yeah, me too." Kerry admitted. "I remember seeing Alastair there, when we got up to the exchange, and he looked so pale, and so upset... I thought right then that whatever it was we had to go through was worth it just because it might help him out. I didn't care a squat about the stock exchange."

"Me either." Dar said. "I was so caught up in the fix, for about ten minutes there I didn't even think about what the hell it was I was doing. Just banging out those commands, and then relief when it was over. My hands hurt." She flexed one. "But the coolest thing? It was those guys from NASA."

"Rocket scientists."

"Listening to them talk about how they got this thing done with high tech duct tape and brain cells.. " Dar smiled. "Made me understand how the hell we managed to get to the moon."

Kerry blinked a few times. "Did you know there are people who think that was a scam?"

"Yeah. Some guy once said that to me when I was overseas at a conference." Dar shook her head. "I mean, I get it. There are people who think the government is hiding aliens from space too, and people who think Jesus rode dinosaurs. It's always tempting to recreate your most comfortable world view regardless of facts otherwise."

"So you don't think the moon landings were a government conspiracy?"

Dar eyed her. "Ker, based on your recent experience with the government, you think they could have spoofed those landings?"

Kerry started laughing.

"I mean, really?"

"Bwahahaha. No." Kerry continued chuckling. "Even my father, who let me tell you was no fan of any Kennedy, used to pop a cork whenever someone suggested that. He said it was one of the prime examples of the ability of this country to define a goal and do it, regardless of how impossible it seemed at the time."

"I remember seeing the inside of the VAB for the first time." Dar said. "Seeing those rockets. Seeing the roomfuls of computers that they used, most of which had less power than my cell phone. We should take a drive up to Cocoa and tour the Cape."

"We should." Kerry agreed. "And now, we can. Maybe on our way up the state heading to Vegas?"

"After we finish setting up our new company in our new offices with your new name." Dar grinned. "Never figured retirement to be this exciting"

Kerry reluctantly got up, and tickled Dar's navel. "How about some coffee? I think it's time we go in. Waves are coming up a little."

'Sure.' Dar swung her legs over the edge of the boat and stood up, grabbing hold as the boat rolled from side to side. "Let me go retract the anchor, and get us moving. I don't want to lose those oysters."

"You never get seasick."

"There's always a first time." Dar climbed the ladder up to the flying bridge and took her seat behind it. She started up the engines and engaged them, moving the boat forward and disengaging the anchor before she started the chain retracting. The breeze was stiffening, and she was glad she had her sweatshirt on as she heard the anchor seat and she brought the bow around and headed them back towards home.

Kerry came up to join her after a few minutes, with a thermos jug hung around her neck. She poured out some coffee into the mug in Dar's swinging holder and took the seat next to her, curling her legs around the bolted steel frame. "Oo, rough water." She regarded the whitecaps.

"Yeap.. think we have a storm coming in." Dar agreed, pointing to the northwest. "Cold front. I heard it on the radio earlier. Glad we got out when we did."

"Cold front? How cold?" Kerry wondered. "Enough to call for our flannel PJ's?"

Dar snickered.

"Speaking of PJ's – can we have a casual dress code at our new office?" Kerry asked. "As in, nice jeans and khakis?" She leaned her elbow on Dar's shoulder. "And flex time?"

"Sure."

"This is going to be really cool."

**

Kerry leaned back in her home office chair, answering yet another phone call. "Hello, Kerry Stuart." She paused, then removed the phone and looked at it before she put it back. "Uh. Yes, yes, that's me, thanks. I didn't expect you to... yes, no, that's fine." She scribbled a note. "Yes, I can be there. Thanks."

She hung up, and shook her head. "Make time for a trip to the courthouse on Thursday. Got it. Like this week wasn't crazy enough as it is?"

She checked the clock on her desktop. Eleven am, and things had been to put it mildly jumping since about 8. Richard Edgerton had arrived, and he and Dar were downstairs in her office, busy putting together the filing paperwork for their new corporation.

So that was in work. She'd already signed her name to the papers, and retreated upstairs to work on the logistics of bringing their new company to life, glad she'd spent the past couple of years reconstructing new and acquired firms and setting up operations for them.

She already knew the steps to take, knew the contacts to call in bringing in everything from temp workers to telephones, contacts that were surprised and in some cases dismayed to hear from her outside ILS, but interested and happy to work with her in this new venture.

Surprising, a little, since they were so rawly new, but also gratifying in that these big companies seemed to recognize a potential for a small startup to grow.

Her new PDA rattled softly, and she glanced at it.

She was glad she'd turned over hers and Dar's company cellphones to the courier, and she'd gotten a call from Mari saying that the equipment had been received by her and she'd locked them up for safekeeping.

The office, not surprisingly, was in chaos. Someone had spread around her personal email address, and her new little gadget was buzzing like a drunk beehive with notes from more people than she thought she actually knew there.

From security. From ops. From accounting. From the building custodial staff. Kerry thumbed through them with a sense of bemusement. People were angry, sad, outraged, disgusted... She picked out the one from Jack Bueno and read it again, almost able to hear the passion in his words.

A little surprising. A little humbling. Kerry imagined that Dar's inbox was quantum amounts fuller since her partner had been at the company much longer and had a far deeper history there, and while certainly she'd made her share of enemies, she'd also made her share of devoted believers.

She sighed, and opened a few more messages.

Notes from other parts of the company, from small accounts in Wisconsin, New Hampshire, New York and Seattle. One from Nan in Herndon, expressing intense and straightforward upset at their leaving and including a picture of the ops group in Herndon, all with their thumbs pointing down. Kerry sighed. There were probably just as many who were glad to see them go, who saw room now for advancement, or who chafed under Dar's management style but they probably wouldn't send her notes relating that.

"Ker?"

She looked up to find Dar in her doorway. "Hey." She said "My court date is Thursday."

Dar paused and cocked her head in puzzlement, then her expression cleared. "Oh, the name thing."

"The name thing." Kerry agreed, with a wry smile. "Crazy week, huh?"

"Mm." Dar walked over to her and handed her a paper. "Our option sales just went through." She remarked. "Richard wanted to get that done before ILS made a public announcement."

"You think they will?" Kerry took the page and glanced at it, then stopped and looked closer. She blinked, then looked up at Dar. "Holy crap."

"Yeah. Had more than I thought in that account." Dar shrugged somewhat sheepishly. "Richard thought maybe we could put it in to start up the business accounts for the new company. You think?"

"Sure." Kerry agreed. "That'll help with all those things we need to do for that office, and on-boarding people, and also maybe buying the Queen Elizabeth II." She put the page down. "My inbox is blowing up."

"Mine too." Dar took a seat on the reading chair next to Kerry's desk. "I just got off the phone with Mari."

"And?"

"She's trying to get all the paperwork done to separate us. It's a mess." Dar said. "Because they'd been in the middle of creating our voluntary separation packages."

"Ah." Kerry leaned on her elbows. "Sorry, Dar. Don't feel bad for them, even for Mari. We didn't ask for this."

"No, I know. Me either, but PR's been on the line to her most of the morning trying to figure out what the hell they're going to release to the press."

"Ah. Yeah, bet that's a pickle for them." Kerry mused. "Why do they say they fired us, because you were too popular with our customers? Because your competency was so overwhelmingly sterling that major institutions like the federal government wanted you all to themselves?"

Dar chuckled wryly. "I'm sure someone is working full time to come up with some story to explain it." She said. "That makes them look good and intelligent, and makes us look bad."

"Well, from my side, they can't do much worse than my father's lawyers did on national television." Kerry remarked. "Good luck with that."

"Mari warned them not to play any games." Dar shook her head. "Theres too much public press out there about me for them to say it was due to any issue with my performance. Or yours. Or the fact that we're married, because that's been a fact for a couple years."

Kerry frowned. "Huh. They're kind of idiots, Dar. They could have just asked us to resign early, couldn't they?"

"Not without saying why." Dar sat back and hiked one foot up on her opposite knee. "I think they had a knee jerk reaction to what Alastair told them about the contracts, and didn't think it through."

"Can they not say anything?"

"After having the CEO walk out and the CIO, and the VP of operations fired? Hon, they are a public company. I figure the words already out and they're getting calls from stockholders."

"Ugh."

"Ugh." Dar repeated. "I'm guessing I'll get a call from someone at some point about it." She got up. "Back to the legal paperwork. Glad I have a lawyer doing it. I'd have just filled it all out in random crayon by now and submitted it." She pushed herself to her feet. "I'll tell Richard you're okay with using that to start up operations." She indicated the sheet, and winked, then sauntered out and back down the steps.

Kerry picked the paper back up and looked at it, then shook her head and put it away in a drawer. Then she went back to her list of things to do, picking up a pen and making another note.

**

"Dar, we're almost done here." Richard Edgerton said, sorting through the stack of papers. "Then I'll go right over and file these, and open up your accounts." He looked across the desk at his client. "The irony of you using your options payout to start up your own biz isn't lost on me, by the way."

"Me either." Dar agreed. "I wasn't looking for this to happen this way, but.. " She shrugged. "Might as well just take advantage of an early start and get things in motion."

"Okay." He replied. "So now, we talked about the differences between a general corporation, and S Corp, and an LLC. All of them give you and Kerry protection in terms of personal finances, the difference otherwise depends on if you want to issue stock, and so on."

Dar nodded. "LLC seems to be the best choice for now, since I don't want to get involved in any stock, and we're self financing." She said. "I want it to be as simple as possible at the start, because with my luck it's going to get a lot more complicated fast."

Richard chuckled. "Definitely keep it close to the vest for now. I don't know what those idiots at ILS are going to end up releasing, and the less public you are, the easier it's going to be to deal with whatever that is." He finished up the last paper. "Now, being as I'm a lawyer, I have to say, Dar... have you considered filing suit against ILS?"

"For?"

"Firing you? You didn't do anything to initiate that, you know. Based on what you told me, all you did was tell them the truth, which you really didn't have to do." Richard said. "You didn't solicit either of those offers. You've got a case, y'know."

"Don't want it." Dar shook her head. "Kerry and I talked about it. It's not worth it, Richard. What would it get me? Is my retirement package worth what we'd spend in legal fees?"

"Oh, sure." Richard said. "Considering if they lose they pay them." He smiled. "Listen, Dar, I know money isn't on your priority list and – given this stock windfall, it's not something you need to get this company started. I just wanted to ask the question because you know, it rankles me. As a longtime family friend, as as your lawyer."

"Let's get it going then. I want to get all this in motion before Ker and I take off for some R and R." Dar said. "I don't want the thought of lawsuits and attachments hanging over us. They lose far more than I do by firing me – I just lose cash."

"Well, being fired is not exactly good for your rep." Richard suggested, gently.

Dar shrugged. "I'll let my rep stand for itself. There's enough people out there in the industry who know the truth. Enough customers whose asses I pulled out of the fire. It might throw people off at first, but in the long run, performance talks."

"Take the high road?" He smiled.

"Something like that." Dar assented, with a return smile.

"Okey dokey." Richard got up. "I'll get the bank accounts open, your general account, and both payables and payroll. I've got your power of attorney, and I should be able to get all this filed by the end of the day."

Dar smiled. "You will be our corporate lawyer, wont you, Richard? I only know two of your kind and the other one works for ILS and is probably trying to find a way to screw me, if only to get ILS's ass out of the fire."

"Baird?"

"Yeah. He's sharp."

"He is." Richard agreed. "Matter of fact, I know him. Know the family."

"Hamilton and I had the perfect love hate relationship. He loved my results and hated my personality and attitude"

"I'll keep an eye out for him, Dar, and absolutely I'll be your counsel." Richard smiled back. "I haven't had this much fun in years."

Dar's cell phone rang and she opened it with a sigh. "Dar Roberts."

"Hello, Dar!"

"Hey Alastair." She glanced at Richard and grinned briefly. "How's your first day of retirement?"

"Well you know, it's been good so far" Alastair said. "Been able to watch the circus and not have to be the ringmaster, as it were."

"Uh oh."

Her former boss chuckled wryly. "I've gotten a lot of phone calls, matter of fact, and I think there are some folks who are regretting some hasty action the other day."

"Little late for that."

"That's what I've been saying." Alastair agreed. "But there's some talk of cutting a deal, as it were, to prevent all that public messiness."

Richard sat back down and cocked his head to listen.

"You really think I'm going to go for that?" Dar asked, in a quizzical tone.

"Well, the board obviously hopes so, that's why they have me asking." Alastair answered dryly. 'The deal would be, you and Kerry, and me for that matter, gets the package they were working for us, in return for saying you left early to concentrate on family life or raise goldfish or whatever canned BS it is they say for this sort of thing."

Dar tapped her thumb on her desk. "We'd have to abide by the non compete, though. Right?"

"Sure."

"Really is too late, Alastair. We've already leased office space and my lawyer's on the way to file my incorporation papers." Dar said. "Sorry about that."

There was a moment of silence. "Wow." Alastair said. "You don't screw around, do you lady?"

"Never have."

"All righty then, I'll pass that along." Her former boss said.

"If they're willing to drop the non compete, I'll consider it." Dar countered. "Listen, Alastair, I gave almost twenty years of my life to ILS. I didn't deserve to be fired because of someone's jackass reaction."

"I know that, Dar." Alastair said. "Apparently the board's been getting angry phone calls ever since the news leaked out. Not to mention operations are pretty well disrupted across the board."

"Not my fault"

"Not your fault at all. They told you to walk away, and that's exactly what you did, Dar. Cut the cord, broke all the ties, turned in your gear.. Mariana said it was textbook." Alastair said. "Board isn't stupid, really. They knew you were the brains of the outfit, but they figured they could find more brains. What they didn't know, and what apparently has become obvious is that you also were by way of being the company's heart, and there's a lot of broken ones there today."

Dar stared at the phone in silence, caught off guard by the sentiment.

"Dar?"

"Yeah, I heard you." She muttered.

"Anyhow, I'll see if they'll bite on that." Alastair cleared his throat. "Call ya back."

Dar closed the phone and looked up as Kerry entered, her eyes flicking around the room. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Okay." Richard got up. "I'm heading out to file papers. Thanks for the pass for my car, ladies. I'll be back soon as you're a company." He picked up his briefcase and ducked out of the door, giving Chino a pat as he headed out.

"Something happen?" Kerry came over and sat on the desk. "You look weird."

Dar got up. "Lets get a drink." She led Kerry through the dining room and into the kitchen. "Alastair just called. The board wanted him to cut a deal with us."

"What?"

"Apparently someone realized they might have screwed up a little in firing us." Dar got herself a glass of milk. "So they wanted to give us our packages in return for us saying we left to go pursue other things."

"And.. that's bad?" Kerry hazarded.

"Still have to have the non compete."

"Ah. That is bad." Kerry nodded. "So I get it.. you told him no?"

"I told him no, unless they wanted to drop that." Dar turned and looked out the window. "But it wasn't that.. something he said just made my brain twitch."

Kerry stepped closer and put a hand on her back, rubbing it gently. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Dar took another swallow of milk. "You know I just got a mail from the cleaning lady on 15." She said. "She sent me a blessing, through her son who actually wrote the email, and said she'd miss me so much."

Kerry gave her a hug. "Well, I'll tell you, Dar. If we weren't partners, and I had come in this morning to find you gone, I'd have been a hysterical mess. So I know how those people feel."

Dar returned the hug and smiled. "I'm glad Maria and Mayte took time off. Wouldn't want to have them there having to deal with all the chaos."

"Me too. Colleen called me before from her cell. Duks had a department meeting and Col said you could tell he was pissed off."

"He was never in to the politics." Dar acknowledged. "Never got the whole ego thing, just wanted everyone to come in and do their damn job."

"No wonder you two always got along." Kerry leaned against her and exhaled. "Okay. I'm going to go back and continue working on finding equipment vendors, setting up accounts with telecom providers, and deciding what color your desk is going to be." She gave Dar a kiss. "I've got a bunch of them already falling over themselves to work with us. Our favorite network vendor said she was glad we finally broke off on our own."

"Really? We won't be giving anyone multi million dollar orders for a long time."

"True." Her partner acknowledged. "And they know that, but they also know if they put a new piece of technology in front of us, we'll find something profitable to do with it."

"Ahhh. Yeah, that's likely true." Dar walked Kerry back to the stairs and watched her trot up them. "You go, hon."

Then she returned to her desk and settled behind it, as Chino jumped on the couch and curled up in a ball. She picked up her new PDA and looked at it, scrolling through the page of new messages that had appeared since she'd gone to the kitchen.

"Wow." She muttered under her breath. "Who'd have guessed?" She opened one and read it.

Dear Ms. Roberts,

You probably don't remember me, but during the September attacks you showed up and defended me from a very angry customer and I have never forgotten that. All of the people in the New York office are up in arms, and in fact, they just walked out and I am going with them soon as I send this. I hope the company knows what a bad thing it did.

Charlene, the receptionist in the New York sales office.

“I do remember you, Charlene.” Dar mused. “Glad you enjoyed that. Really was just my period cramps taking themselves out on some nitwad.”

She opened another one.

Dear Dar - it's Francois from the European office. I just want to say to you, we should be very ashamed. I am ashamed. There is no honor in this.

“Ah, Francois.” She put down the gizmo and turned her attention to her computer, browsing the code archive she'd unearthed. “Glad I'm as disciplined as I am, Chi.” She commented to the Lab. “Every time I did a compile and push to production, I iterated a copy here to my repository. You know what that means?”

“Growf?”

“It means we've got the latest versions of everything I wrote. Including Gopher Dar.” She sorted through the files and checked the dates with a sense of satisfaction, stopping to take some notes on her pad of the programs she thought they would be able to use.

Then a thought occurred to her, and she hit the intercom key on the phone. “Ker?”

“Yeah?” Her partner's voice echoed softly.

“I just realized my desk and laptop are locked down with that new security program they made us start using.” She said. “The one that requires my hash code and retinal display?”

A soft snort of laughter came through the phone.

“And if they deactivate my network account, half the running systems in the company are probably going to stop working. Mark was going through a project to transition those to a regular service account before I left.”

“Oh crap, Dar!” Kerry sputtered. “Is Mark in the office?”

“Oh, no. He's down in the keys again with Barbara. On a fishing charter.” Dar scribbled another note on her pad. “Barbara sent me an email telling me she's going to name her firstborn child for me for getting him out of ILS.”

“He stayed because of you.”

Dar paused, and tapped the pen on the pad. “Yeah, I know.” She said. “So anyway, you pick my desk yet?”

“How about clear glass?”

Dar's brow lifted. “I'll feel like a goldfish.” She complained. “What if I want to wear shorts to the office?”

“Clear glass top, hon. Wood and brass frame.” Kerry started laughing. “Though.. I'm kinda thinking about that see through top and those shorts...hmmmmmm”

“Kerrison.”

“Okay, I've got AT&T on the other line. Gotta go.”

Dar released the intercom and chuckled, then the chuckle faded as her phone rang and she saw the caller ID. Ten seconds to make a choice, and she took a breath, then released it, then keyed the answer button. “Dar Roberts.”

“Ms. Roberts, this is Dr. Bridges assistant, he would like to speak to you.” The woman's voice was crisply professional. “Are you available for a call at this time?”

Might as well. “Sure.” Dar said. “Put him on.”

A buzz and a click, and a clearing throat “Roberts?”

“That's me.” Dar said, putting her pen down and concentrating on the call. “Having a good Monday?”

"No idea yet. You thought about my offer?"

There was, Dar acknowledged, a straightforwardness about the advisor that she appreciated. "I have." She said. "I don't think I'm either qualified or suited to be your czar."

"Huh." Bridges grunted. "Thought you would be interested in the power part of it." He probed. "Trust me, lady, it doesn't take much qualification to run things in the government."

"Not a talking head." Dar said, briefly.

"So it's no?" Bridges asked.

"To the job." She agreed. "The programming on the other hand, that maybe we can discuss." Dar went on, quietly. "I've got some experience doing that kind of system."

The smile in Bridges voice was very evident "Well now, the day's getting better. Mind you, I don't want that organization of yours involved." He said. "You'll have to do this on the side or some such. I'm sure that's gonna be a legal nightmare, but it's too big an exposure for us, you got me?"

"I no longer work for that organization." Dar said. "So that's not an issue."

"Better and better." He responded. "You quit?"

Dar smiled. "Actually, they fired me. But I was going to resign in any case."

"Ahh. Figured you were getting too big for their britches." Bridges chuckled softly. "So you don't want a government job, Roberts? Got good benefits."

"I'm opening up my own company. But thanks." Dar said. "If we can agree on the framework, we might be able to do business together."

"We might do at that." Bridges now sounded dourly delighted. "Roberts, that's good news. Let me get together a paper from these idiots here and we can set up a meeting. For what it's worth, I agree on the czar thing. You'd be the biggest pain in the ass around here. Maybe this is a win win."

"Maybe." Dar said. "I'll be looking for that meeting request."

He hung up.

Dar regarded the phone and sighed. "That's going to end up all right, or a complete disaster. Let's hope we get lucky."

**

The board room was full of very agitated men, seated around a long, teak wood table dressed in business suits. They all looked up as the door opened, and then started to take seats as a man dressed in a faded flannel shirt entered, followed by a tall, urban figure in a well fitted suit.

"Hello there boys." Alastair went to the end chair, which had been obviously left free, and sat down. "I've got a rodeo my grandkid's riding in to go to, so let's make it short if we can, huh?"

"Try not to be so fucking smug, huh Al?" John Baker glared at him.

"Kiss my ass." Alastair answered, in the most congenial voice possible. "Boy have I been waiting years to say that." He turned his head and winked at the man who followed him in. "Right, Ham?"

Hamilton Baird, ILS's senior corporate council, gave him a wryly amused look, and sat down, having arranged some papers to his satisfaction. "No doubt, having heard it often enough, Al."

"Okay, so." Baker ignored them. "We're not going to get any cooperation from Roberts, so what are our legal options?" He looked pointedly at Baird. "I hope you found something we can use for leverage."

"Well now." Hamilton leaned back in his chair. "What all would you fine gentlemen have liked me to find?" He said. "You all did fire her." He lifted his hands. "You all want me to turn back time?"

"We have to have legal options. You're a lawyer." Baker said.

"I am, indeed, a lawyer." Hamilton agreed. "So as a lawyer, and as the senior legal hack here at ILS, I will tell you there is not much you can do about our ex employee doing whatever it is she pleases, because you all, like wet noodle idiots, decided to fire her. It's a little late to be calling in Mr. Louisiana Lawyer now."

Alastair chuckled. "If you all had a single piece of sense, you'd just go with her offer. Let her go open a business. Take her package, and not end up being a thorn the size of a space shuttle in your ass."

"Well said, Al." Hamilton complimented him. "What he said." He pointed at the ex CEO. "That is also my legal recommendation."

"No way." Baker said. "I'm not giving her a fucking cent."

Hamilton lifted his hands, and then let the drop. "All righty then, we could have done this over a text message. Al, you free for dinner?"

"Sure am."

"It's your job to find a way to nail her" Baker said. "Or did you sleep with her too?"

Baird's demeanor changed. He stood up and put his fingertips on the table, leaning on them. "Listen, you moron." He said. "It is my job to keep ILS out of trouble and make sure we do things in a legal way that keeps out of the eyes of regulators. It is not my job to make up stuff and then have it crammed back down my throat in a court of law."

Baker stared at him in frustration.

"Dar Roberts and I have a long, long history of hen and cock fighting the likes of which God has not seen the end of. But." Hamilton held up his hand. "There is no person in this company, not you, not the rest of you morons, not even Al, that I respect more as a person, and as an employee who gave 200 percent for this crack shack, then her."

Alastair smiled to himself, twiddling his fingers and regarding them as he nodded along with the words.

"So if you do not want to have my size elevens shoved so far up your ass you'd have to tie my shoelaces with your uvula, then do not repeat that statement." Hamilton sat down. "Now. I have given you my legal advice. You got any other idiotic thing to say?"

Jacques leaned forward. "'You are serious, aren't you, Hamilton?'"

"As a heart attack." The lawyer responded. "It's a damn disgrace what you people did. Not only was it stupid, not only was it knee jerk, and shortsighted, and counter to the BEST INTERESTS OF THIS DAMN COMPANY." His voice lifted to a yell, then paused, to let the echo fade. "It is against the grace of god what you did to someone who gave so much to make ILS what it is. You all should be damned ashamed of yourselves."

"She was going to take those contracts!" Baker yelled.

"She earned them." Alastair spoke up. "Those contracts were ours because of her raw talent and ability." He folded his hands on the table. "But even in that, she didn't ask for them."

"Oh, bullshit."

Alastair shrugged. "Let's go get that beer, Ham. I've not got much more to say. I'll save what I do have for the press, and for the shareholders when they ask me."

Hamilton's eyes twinkled. "Nice being retired, ain't it?"

"You betcha!"

"Okay, hold on." Jacques held a hand up. "Yes, it is true. We over reacted."

"Now you too?" Baker fumed. "None of you have balls!"

"That is not true." Jacques said. "I have a right to speak my mind, as you have, John, and has Pier, and Richard, and Toby, and also our two friends here. It takes a big person to admit fault. We did overreact."

Baker stared at him. "The shareholders are going to lynch us. That what you're bucking for?"

The Frenchman lifted his hands and and then put them back on the table. "That is what comes with the responsibility. We have to stand behind our decisions. Perhaps this was a bad one."

Baker just sighed and shook his head, leaning it against a fist propped against the table. "Fuck."

"Dar said to me." Alastair spoke after a small silence. "She'd go along with a package, and public silence, but she couldn't stop her business since it was already in place and going forward." He paused, and reflected. "Gentlemen, that's the best offer you're going to get."

"Sure she agreed. She gets money, and freedom and we just get shit." Baker said.

"John. You fired her." Alastair said, in a gentle tone. "She did not ask to be fired. She gave us 6 months notice she was going to retire from here."

Baker sighed again. "I just hate her." He said, bluntly. "If I had a gun,I'd have shot her the last time I saw her."

"Uh huh. Better hope you killed her on the first shot then, you weaseling jackass." Hamilton said. "Cause she'd break you in half otherwise, and if that didn't happen, then you'd get a knock on the door by her very Southern, very black and white, very Navy Seal father and we would never find your body."

"Mm." Alastair nodded. "That's true. Y'know, the most relaxing time I had during that whole mess in New York was taking that train ride out to Long Island with papa Roberts."

"Did I tell you I got cornered by those no neck lovelies from the Governor downstairs." Hamilton asked him. "They were doing me a grand old Mafia family discussion with me up until Andy showed up and short sheeted them right on out of there. Gorgeous old salt."

"If you let her take this deal." Alastair said. "She will honor it, and not entertain the press with what will be hundreds if not thousands of stories about how we did business."

"You really believe that?" Baker sighed.

"With all my heart." McLean replied. "I've been in business all my life, John. I can count on my one hand's fingers how many people I would say that about across the length of my career." He pondered a moment. "And by the way, John?"

"Yeah?" Baker sighed again.

"Me personally? I won't ever forgive you for making my last act as an employee of this company firing those two." Alastair said placidly. "So do yourself a favor, and don't get in front of my truck when I'm driving on out of here."

"Alastair, the decision was all of ours." Jacques said, quietly. "It is not fair to let it stand on John's back."

Alastair merely smiled at him.

Toby Peterson cleared his throat. "Gents." He said. "It's hard to swallow. I was one of the first ones to agree with John on the firing, because it seemed to me that we were in danger of letting someone who was leaving take our customers with her."

"And that might be true." Hamilton remarked. "But firing her sure as hell wouldn't stop that."

Toby held a hand up. "We were mad. If we lose those armed forces contracts we'll have to go back and re-forecast the entire year. You think that's going to be fun?"

"If you treat Dar fairly, she might just tell them to leave those contracts with us and move forward with something else." Alastair said.

"Oh please." Baker rolled his eyes.

"He's right." Hamilton shrugged. "If Al asked her to do that, she would."

Alastair glanced at him.

"She would." The lawyer insisted. "C'mon, Al. She could have sat in that hotel and watched you fry. You pulled that whole team off the job. Didn't have to do no crazy stunts, or nothing. No harm to her at all – you told her to do it."

"True." Alastair said.

"That was for you." Hamilton stated. "Kerry risked arrest, and bodily harm to get that cable in place, with old Dar sitting on the floor with a pair of rocket scientists typing so fast you could not hear the keys. I saw it, sweat flying everywhere."

Alastair nodded, but didn't speak.

"Okay." Toby said. "I get it. You don't have to keep hammering me over the head, Hamilton."

"Don't I?"

"We should take the offer, the deal." Jacques said. "Really, we have no choice, if, as you say, there is nothing we can present to anyone as an excuse for what we did."

"You don't." Hamilton said. "The minute you all agreed to let those two women have a relationship and not say anything about it you lost any ability to put that card on the table. That is, boys, the only thing on either of their dance cards that could possibly have given you leverage, and you let that go on for years, and gave them both bonuses, and all that."

"That was your fault." Baker pointed at Alastair. "You told us to ignore it."

"I did." He agreed. "It was the best thing to do for the company at the time, and the yearly results that came after that validates the decision."

Jacques sighed. "You know what the worst of it is?" He said. "We will not have that.. how do you call it? The magic to rely on anymore. We will have to do our jobs." He held his hand up "I vote to accept the offer."

"Seconded." Toby backed him up. The rest of the board grumbled but lifted their hands.

Baker looked at them. "I want it on the record I object." He said. "I will not vote for that."

"Unfortunately, you ass, we just need a majority." Hamilton said. "I will record that this board voted to accept the offer from old Dar, and I suggest that Al deliver the message, even though he doesn't actually work for us anymore."

Alastair nodded. "Sure." He said. "I'll do it."

Baker rolled his eyes. "So have we found anyone to go take charge of that nut house in Miami?" He asked. "The agency that's looking for us said they had one candidate, but they called and said they got another position."

"Steak?" Hamilton leaned over and whispered. "I think our work here's done."

"Sounds good." Alastair stood up. "Folks, I'll deliver your message. If you keep your tempers, and be nice, I might even agree to go over to Miami and hold the fort there until you can find a new CIO. Those people there trust me at least."

"That mean we have to pay you again?" Baker said, but his expression was mollified. "Least it'll give us some breathing room."

"Thank you Alastair." Toby said, with a brief smile. "That would be nice."

"Right. Ham, let's go." Alastair dusted his hands off. "You ever see a rodeo?"

"Lord, I am in deep cheese grits." Hamilton picked up his papers and followed as Alastair made his way towards the door.

**

Kerry brushed a bit of dust off the sleeve of her sweater, and took a breath, letting it out as she stood in line to go into the courtroom. She had a folder with papers clasped in her hand, and she glanced at the clock, as the doors opened to let them in.

There were about twenty people with her, and they all had sheets of paper like hers, and she watched them all start shifting and moving as the clerk of the courts stepped back to let them go forward.

Thursday. Hard to believe it was already Thursday. They'd had two days of hurry up and wait, as things jerked into process from their standing start and now, finally, she was reasonably confident they could actually have Mayte and Maria come in on Monday and be able to do the things needed to make them employed.

Sort of. They still had a lot of stuff like medical benefits to work out, and policies. Kerry rubbed the bridge of her nose, and wondered if Dar would go for bringing an HR person on board yet.

She followed the line of people inside, and found a seat, barely getting into it before a tall figure hopped over the row of chairs and joined her. "Oh. Hey!" She felt a smile appear as she recognized her partner. "Didn't expect to see you here.. thought we were going to meet at the office?"

"Hey." Dar settled into the seat. "Didn't think I'd let you do this by yourself didja?" She asked. "C'mon, Ker."

"Well." Kerry ran a hand through her hair. "Its just a five minute thing, they said. I thought you were busy with Richard."

"All done." Dar leaned back and folded her hands on her lap. "We just got back from the bank picking up the checkbooks." She smiled briefly. "We better get that electronic fast. I can't remember the last time I actually signed a check."

Kerry smiled, feeling both more relaxed and happier now that she had Dar at her side. She'd been halfway hoping her partner would show up for the court proceedings, but she hadn't wanted to ask since Dar had been crazy busy for the last three days getting everything rolling.

And so had she, of course. "AT&T will be out this afternoon for a site survey." She said. "I said I'd meet them when I was done here."

"Good." Dar regarded the courtroom with some bemusement. "Alastair said the board meeting was called for this afternoon. He thinks Hamilton might try to convince them to shut up and cut a deal."

"Hamilton?"

"Yes." Dar looked slightly embarrassed. "Apparently he came down on our side."

"Really?" Kerry had to smile. "I think you grew on him."

"I think he didn't want my father to show up at his townhouse with a baseball bat." Dar demurred. "There's going to be conditions I'm sure. Just remains to be seen if we'll agree to them."

"Hm. When's the meeting with Brigg's suppose to be, tomorrow afternoon?" Kerry pinched the bridge of her nose. "Things are moving really fast, Dar. Sheesh."

Dar patted her back. "By the way, Gerry's due here tomorrow morning to talk about the contracts, and deliver our puppy. He just called me before I walked in."

Gerry. Puppy. "Bu.. wh..."

"Kerrison Stuart?"

"I need a beer." Kerry stood up and edged past Dar's long legs. "Be right back, hon."

"You'll get one." Dar promised, watching Kerry make her way up the aisle and show her papers to the clerk, who stepped back and allowed her to go forward to face the judge.

Her PDA buzzed and she pulled it out to glance at it.

Hey boss – found a rad datacenter all the way south near the cutoff to card sound. Empty, the guys who were supposed to take it went bankrupt and it's ours for a song. M

Ah. Dar grunted softly, putting the device away and returning her attention to her partner. Kerry was now standing up near the judges bench, her hands clasped behind her, fluorescent lights reflecting slightly off her pale hair.

She had her blue sweater and her dark khakis on and in Dar's eyes, she looked adorable. Nervous, but adorable. Dar saw her square her shoulders and nod, and then reach up to take a piece of paper from the judge, who was regarding her with a mild and tolerant expression.

It's done. Dar got up and moved down the aisle to greet her partner as she came even with her, exchanging a grin as Kerry waved the paper at her. "That was fast."

"It was." Kerry agreed. "Let's go." She exhaled happily. "Kerry Roberts. You like how that sounds?"

Dar laughed. "What exactly are you expecting me to say to that?" She draped her arm over Kerry's shoulders as they exited the courtroom. "No?"

"Do you think it was weird of me to do this? Now that it's done?" Kerry asked, after a pause.

Dar considered that as they walked down the steps and stepped out into the bright sunlight of a Florida winter's day. "I have to say I never really thought anyone would do that.. I mean, want to change their name to mine." She said thoughtfully. "Back in the day, before I realized I wasn't going to get married, I think I'd decided I wasn't ever going to change mine."

"Really.. no, never mind. Retract that. Of course you wouldn't." Kerry said. "You have every right in the world to be proud of that name."

"Mm.. well, my dad's family isn't exactly something he's proud of." Dar said. "But yeah, that never bothered me because he's my dad."

"Lucky you." Kerry paused, then smiled. "Lucky us."

"Let's walk over to the Thai place." Dar suggested. "They have beer."

"Now that I'm not in knots, they also have sushi." Kerry admitted. "I don't know why I was so nervous about that, all he asked me was something about was I changing my name to escape the law?"

"And you said?"

"I said no, just to escape the lousy taste of my upbringing."

"Nice." Dar drawled. "So lets get some sushi, then go to our new digs, and see if I can beat the butt crack in punching down our circuits."

"Oh boy."

**

At last there was some peace in her day. Kerry was perched on an old wooden stool in what was becoming her office, leaning a clipboard on her lap and writing some notes on it. It was almost sunset, and the light was glancing past the window, putting a golden glow on the leaves of the trees just outside.

There was a lot going on. She could hear hammers and circular saws going in the offices to either side of her, and the distinctive jingle of the cable runners as they worked their way down the hall.

There were two sawhorses and a piece of plywood serving her as a desk, and she could smell the sea coming in the window along with a spicy scent from some restaurant down the way.

She'd changed out of her sweater and slacks that she'd worn to the courthouse into jeans and a sweatshirt, and she had the sleeves pushed up over her elbows as she worked.

"Ma'am?"

Correctly assuming she was being addressed, Kerry looked up. "Yes?" She motioned the figure at the door to enter. It was one of the maintenance people from the landlord's management company, who'd been detailed to assist them in moving in.

"There's a delivery for you downstairs." The man said, apologetically, wiping a bit of sweat from his forehead. "Boy, this is a busy place all of a sudden."

Kerry slipped off her stool and put her clipboard down on the makeshift desk. "Lead on." She said, following the man out and along the hallway. It was open to the outside, though there were shutters that could be slid down in bad weather. It overlooked the inner square, and Kerry glanced down to see the newly contracted landscaping company busy at work.

"Nice to see the place being made up though." The man said, as he ambled along at her side. "Thought the kid was gonna have to sell it off for a bit. Pity. Been in that family a while."

"It's a nice building." Kerry offered. "We liked it as soon as we saw it. Nice area, and the space worked for us."

The man nodded. "Lot of history around here. It's nice. I live over there in that apartment building." He pointed. "You can walk to everything."

They went down the steps to the ground floor in the back of the building, where there was a truck waiting. "Hello." Kerry greeted him. "What do you have for us?"

The driver unlatched the back door of the truck and opened it. "That's yours" He pointed at the contents.

Kerry peered inside. "Ah." She said. "Furniture. Cool."

"Sign?" The driver handed over the clipboard and a pen.

She scanned the packing list, mentally checking off the items, then nodded and started to sign the manifest, pausing after her first name. Then she smiled and continued to write, finishing with a slight flourish and handing it back. "There ya go."

The driver and his helper hopped inside and extended the rear gate, preparing to get a pallet jack into position to move the delivery.

Kerry turned to the building supervisor. "Is there an elevator?"

The man nodded. "Freight, over there."

"Okay, let's wait for it to come down and I can separate what's first floor and what's second." Kerry stepped back to give the room and folded her arms over her chest, regarding her first purchases for their new place.

Nothing very exotic. The nicest piece of furniture she'd reserved for her partner's desk, with a top that was adjustable to height, with a wraparound design that would be comfortable for Dar to sit at while she worked, and yet, would allow her to raise up part of it to stand if she wanted to

Sometimes, she did. She got tired of sitting down like anyone else would and Kerry had found her more than once with her laptop on the drink credenza at the old office pecking away while she stood there.

There was also a smart board for Dar's office, and, for the corner, a nice zero gravity chair and a reading light in case she wanted to chill out for a few minutes.

She'd spent a lot more time on Dar's office than her own. Her furniture was more or less the same but she'd added a small work group table and chairs for the corner of her office rather than the relaxing chair.

For the rest of the offices they would have people for in the short term – she'd gotten modular desks and comfortable chairs, and the floors had been covered and lined with rubber surfaces. "Okay, so, those two

pallets – they go upstairs.” She pointed. “Those three stay here, and the ones in the back, they go upstairs too.”

“All right.” The driver agreed. “But y’know, we’re just supposed to drop it at the dock” He eyed her. “Don’t suppose you want to be hauling that all yourself, huh?”

Kerry smiled at him. “I sure don’t.” She responded. “But I’m open to a delivery fee. Interested?”

The driver grinned. “Now that’s my kinda customer.” He motioned to his helper. “C’mon, Jake. We’re gonna get us some beer money. It’s our last stop anyhow.”

Kerry chuckled, taking a breath of the cool air and exhaling in contentment. There was a pallet jack and she thought she could figure out how to use it, but having two big strong men who already knew how to do it made a lot more sense to her, especially since she had some cash in her pocket to reward the with.

Sometimes, it did not pay to play the butch card.

“Hey.”

Kerry turned, to find Dar approaching. Her partner was in jeans and a sleeveless sweatshirt, with a tool belt full of punch down paraphernalia strapped around her waist. “Hey. Furniture’s here.” She indicated the pallets.

“So I see.” Dar said. “What do you want to do about telephones?” She asked “I’d rather use the twisted pair for data, and not have to split off a pair fro phones.” She folded her arms over her chest, and regarded the pallet now making it’s way down to the floor. “Huh. Nice chair.”

“Glad you like it.” Kerry reached over and brushed a bit of pull string fuzz of Dar’s bare shoulder. “Let’s see what we can do about using an IP phone system. Let me call and see what revolutionary stuff is available we can prototype.”

“Okay.” Dar agreed. “Let me go back to installing that demarc. “Looks like we can hook into the same pops for a ring that ILS did.” She hitched her thumbs into her work belt and winked at Kerry, then sauntered back into the building.

“Scuse me, ma’am.”

Kerry put her lustful stare on hold and backed up out of the way, looking down the service ally and spotting a small cafe on the corner opposite the end of it. “Be right back.” She circled around the building super and strolled down the lane, which had the wall of their building on one side, and a thick leafy hedge on the other.

It was nice. Even the dumpsters she was walking by were relatively clean. She got to the corner and crossed the street, exchanging brief smiles with two women seated at a table outside before she entered the cafe.

It was mostly empty, but the staff were obviously getting ready for a busier evening. “Hello.”

“Hey.” The girl behind the bar greeted her. “Whatcha want?”

“Two lattes, extra shot of espresso, to go please.” Kerry slid onto a stool to wait, as the woman busied herself with her order. The cafe had a coffee bar, with a case full of the usual pastry selections, and about ten small tables with menus stuck in table tents on them.

There were also tents on the bar, and Kerry removed a menu and studied it. After a moment she put it back, having found a couple items she could foresee herself ordering for lunch in the weeks to come. Next door to the cafe was a pizza shop, and next to that a Thai place.

Nice. At the old office, unless they wanted to take a car out, it was pretty much restricted to the cafeteria downstairs, or the executive lunch room upstairs.

This ramble of choices seemed more fun.

"So hey." The girl that had taken her order came back over to her and leaned on the other side of the counter. "You working around here? I saw you go by a few times the last couple days."

One of Kerry's very blond eyebrows hiked a little. "Yeah." She agreed thoughtfully. "The next building that way." She pointed. "We just moved in."

"Oh! The old Supertravel place."

Kerry nodded.

"That's been empty a while." The girl commented. "The last people there, the nail people.. they were cool. Had piercings and all that stuff."

"Ah."

"But no one wanted to go in there. Too much of a bummer, you know? Just them in that little space and everything else empty."

Kerry nodded again. "Yeah, I know what you mean – they would have been rattling around in there. It's a pretty big space for a small operation like that."

The girl waited for her to go on, but Kerry merely sat there, with her hands folded. "So did your company rent part of it, or.." Now her eyebrow lifted in question.

"All of it." Her patron cheerfully supplied.

'So what do you guys do?"

Kerry cleared her throat. "It's high tech." She said. "Computer services, networks, that kind of thing." She observed the body language across from her and decided her interrogator was pleased with the information. "We're a new startup." She fished gently.

No need. "Oh, that's very cool." The girl said immediately. "You hiring? When are you going to get that all going? Most of the companies that move in here already have all their staff." She reached behind her and secured a stack of paper to go menus. "Want to put these out? We love free advertising."

Kerry chuckled. "Sure." She took the menus. "We're probably going to start taking applications in a couple of weeks. We've got lot of work we're doing on the building first, getting furniture and stuff in."

"Good to know. Is it all tech stuff?"

"Tech stuff, sure, but also regular office positions. Accounting, logistics, you know." Kerry said. "Spread the word? We don't mind free advertising either."

"You bet." The girl smiled. "I'm Janine." She offered a hand. "What's the company name?"

"Kerry." Her customer replied. "And it's Roberts Automation."

She took her coffees, paid for them, then retreated back towards their building with a sense of satisfaction. She could hear snatches of music, and smell something barbecuing somewhere nearby, and she was smiling as she trotted up the back stairs and headed down the hall towards their new offices.

Yeah. This was good. She edged around the pallets in the hall and squeezed into her space, going over the interconnecting door when she heard Dar's voice drifting through it. "Hey hon." She poked her head inside, then proceeded as she saw her partner by the window.

Dar turned, and spotted the coffee. "Ah. You rock." She took hers. "I was just thinking about who to call to have a coffee machine installed here."

The building super was standing there, having been the other half of that conversation. "Well, we used to have a service, you know, one of those Continental or somethings." He said. "The last people, they just had a Mr. Coffee drip machine." He added. "Used to leave em on all the time. Smells bad, burnt coffee."

"It does." Dar agreed "I'd rather have a small local company in here. Anyone around who'd be up for stocking dorm refrigerators with drinks and maybe do single cup coffees?"

The man looked at her in surprise. "You mean like one of the shops around here?"

Dar nodded. "Nerds need caffeine, sugar, and protein." She said. "It keeps the brain cells spinning."

He put his hands on his hips. "Now that's an interesting question. Lemme ask around." He gave Dar a look of respectful appreciation. "I guess all them vending machine people and stuff will be asking to talk to you. They pulled all that stuff out after the travel people left."

"Not fond of them, especially the ones that take your money." Dar responded.

"Well." Kerry took a sip of her coffee. "We really think we should set a better example than candy bars."

Dar just started laughing, shaking her head and wandering off back to where the drivers were unpacking her desk.

"Anyway." Kerry had to chuckle, acknowledging the irony. "We'll figure out something. We're going to have a few more people showing up on Monday to work."

The man nodded, then they both turned as a soft knock sounded on the door frame. "Hello, sir."

Their landlord came in, looking around with appreciation. "You folks don't waste any time."

"No we don't." Kerry said. "We've got our papers and our checkbook. Why not come over to my space and I'll square that away with you." She went back to her office followed by Marcus, putting down her coffee on her plywood temporary desk and pulling over the leather case full of documents. "Sit."

He pulled over a stool and parked himself on it, hooking his leather booted heels on the rungs. Today he was dressed in a Ambergcrombie and Fitch zipped hoodie, and jeans, and had on a leather wristband to compliment the outfit.

Kerry wondered briefly if he was gay. Her gaydar was unreliable at best. "Okay so – here's a copy of our incorporation documents, and a check for the first month. You did say we'd get half off, right?" Her eyes twinkled a little, as she handed it over. "I think we're making up for it in renovation."

"No argument." Marcus took the papers cheerfully. "I'm getting a lot more out of this deal than I thought I would. I looked you guys up on the Internet. You're kinda famous."

"Sorta." Kerry agreed, with a brief grin. "In a notorious, fifteen minutes of fame kinda way."

"Why'd you decide to cut out on your own?" He asked in a curious voice. "Seemed to me like you all were doing great."

Kerry rested her elbows on her knees, as she watched the drivers diligently delivering her desk across the room. "Yeah, back to the wall, facing the windows, guys." She paused, then returned her attention to their landlord.

"I'm just being nosy." He offered. "You don't have to answer that."

"I don't mind." Kerry replied. "ILS fired us. So we walked down the street, and opened our own company." She felt a sense of curious satisfaction saying it. "Stuff happens, you know?"

"Sure do!" Marcus sighed. "More than you know. I just got fired from Sedanos. They said they wanted someone more Latino to be their marketing head." He eyed her. "You don't seem Latino. Want someone to do your marketing for you?"

Kerry was caught between sympathy and laughter. "Don't you think that's a conflict of interest?" She queried.

He shrugged. "It's Miami."

Yes, that was true. "Let me talk to Dar about it." Kerry said. "I am not sure we're ready for a marketing department yet, but we will when we're up and going."

He grinned at her. "I like you guys. My mother would have liked you guys. You're family and you're not cheapskates."

Ah. "Guilty both charges." Kerry answered easily. "From what I've seen around the Grove so far, we should be comfortable here."

He nodded. "No problem. Most of the businesses that move in here – they're looking for an audience, you know? But no one around here needs high tech.. at least, the kinda stuff you were talking about. So you're not competition."

"Ah. That's true." Kerry hadn't thought about it that way, but now, the interest of their neighbors made more sense. "We'll be clients. Trust me. Nerds that work here will go and eat, and drink and buy stuff if it's walking distance. I know my kind."

"Exactly." Marcus agreed. "And you're not a pawn shop." He exhaled in satisfaction. "But I was kinda curious.. what kind of customer do you have? Who buys that stuff?"

"Today? Almost everyone." Kerry said. "High tech, meaning computers, and wireless, and high speed Internet, and websites.. pretty much everyone needs it. At ILS, we had to deal with the biggest of companies to make the financial model work. Now, we can take small customers we'd never have looked at there."

Marcus had been nodding the whole time she talked. "You get it."

"I get it." Kerry said. "But.. " Her eyes twinkled again. "We could get some bigger clients that might surprise you."

"Ker?" Dar poked her head in the door. "If your desk is here, can we borrow your sawhorses to set them up in the conference room so our friends have somewhere to meet with us tomorrow?"

"Sure." Kerry got up and picked up her things off the plywood. "Does that mean we need to rent folding chairs for them?" She stood back as two of the building people entered and started taking away her table. She let them remove it, then she walked over to her now assembled desk, where the drivers were waiting patiently. "Thanks guys."

"No problem." The lead driver said. "This stuff went together easy. Not like that cardboard stuff."

Kerry offered him a folded bill. "I really appreciate it."

The man glance down, then up at her with a broad grin. "Lady, so do I." He motioned to his partner. "Lets go. We got beer to drink."

She waited for them to go, then she set her things down on the surface of her new desk, and perched on a corner of it. "I think we're going to like it here."

Marcus grinned and bounced on the stool. "Think the feeling's mutual!"

**

"Ahh." Kerry spread her arms out on their jacuzzi, gazing up at the night sky full of stars. "What a day."

The doors to the condo slid open behind her, and the smell of chocolate emerged. She glanced to one side to find a steaming cup being set down by her, joined by a plate of freshly cut fruit. "That looks awesome."

"So do you." Dar joined her in the tub, settling into the hot bubbling water with a contented sigh. "So, how many goons you think Bridges is going to send to talk to us?" She picked up a slice of apple and munched on it.

"Hopefully not more than we have chairs for." Kerry closed her eyes and savored the rumble of the bubbles against her skin. "Can you believe it's been less than a week, Dar?"

“Crazy.” Her partner agreed, glancing at her new cell gizmo as it rang. She reached over and picked it up, then opened it as she saw the caller ID. “Evening, Alastair.”

Kerry slid over to listen.

“Tell Hamilton I say hi.” Dar said. “Yes, the sound you hear is the jacuzzi.”

“Well, glad you’re getting a chance to relax, Dar.” Alastair’s voice came through the speaker. “So are Ham and I, matter of fact. We’re in that steakhouse near the big office. Just got out of the board meeting.”

“And I was of the opinion, Maestro, that I was owed a beer.”

“He got it for us.” Kerry whispered. “Or he wouldn’t be calling you that.”

Dar covered the mouthpiece and smiled, nodding at her. She then removed her hand. “So what can I do for you gentlemen this evening?”

“Here’s the thing, Dar.” Alastair said. “It took some convincing, but we got the board to agree to your terms. You can go on about your new business, and they’ll finish out the retirement package, including paying you until your resignation date.”

Dar’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “And.. I have to do what?”

“Stay clear of the press.” Alastair said. “Don’t solicit existing ILS customers, or employees.” He added. “Except for the two customers who have already approached you, that is. Can’t do anything about that, I suppose.”

Dar and Kerry exchanged a long look. “Alastair, I can see what I can do about Gerry and the existing contracts.” She said. “Bridges, that I have limited control over.”

“Understood.”

“Three existing employees are already coming to work for us.” Dar went on. “Two of them solicited us before we left, and I asked Mark Polenti to come with us the night you fired me.”

“And the other two are?” Alastair didn’t sound very surprised.

“Our admins.”

Dar heard Hamilton laugh in the background. “I mean, c’mom, Alastair. I’m probably only going to hire fifty people.” Dar said. “You’ve got a quarter million of them.”

“Not me.” Alastair protested. “I’m retired.”

“Well.” Alastair mused. “It is a right to work state, isn’t it? If they come to you, as in, if they resign and decide to go elsewhere, not much we can do about it.”

“True.”

“But Dar, please, don’t solicit people.” Hamilton’s voice edged in. “Why would you have to? They all want to come work for you and live in your garage. We all know it. You even offered Al a job. I could get a complex.”

“I don’t think I can afford you, Hamilton.” Dar started to smile again. “We’ll be judicious, I promise. I mean, hell, Alastair. We don’t even have benefits or anything set up. Those people aren’t stupid. They have families.”

“I would have come to work for you without benefits.” Kerry commented. “Hell, you were the benefit I was interested in. I didn’t even know what you were paying me until I got my first auto deposit.”

Dar gave her a droll look.

“I heard that.” Hamilton cackled. “And I totally do believe it’s true.”

Dar sighed. “Listen, we don’t have the scope to handle most of ILS’s customers. We’re starting small, and see where it all goes. I’m not out to put them out of business. I just want to make a living.”

"Maestro, do you not realize those men in that boardroom are scared to death of you all doing just that?" Hamilton said. "They are pissed off, because they have become used to rolling in the dough based a good part on your work, and now they ain't got that."

Dar sighed again. "They'll find someone. I'm not a rocket scientist."

"Yes you are." Kerry objected, at the same time both Alastair and Hamilton did.

"People!"

"All right, Dar." Alastair chuckled "Its your own damn fault."

"Yeah, I know." Dar responded in a resigned tone. "But you know what, Alastair? That goes both ways. I hear them out there talking crap about me, all bets are off."

There was a momentary silence "I'll make sure they know." Alastair said, after that pause. "We'll send the papers down for signature. IN fact, I'll bring em myself. I told the board I'd go down there and try to sooth some feathers. Lot of still very upset people in that office."

"Nice of you."

Alastair sighed. "Well, I'll give them someone to yell at, anyway." He said. "Talk to you later, ladies."

"Night, Alastair. Night Hamilton." Kerry had her chin resting on Dar's collarbone. "Enjoy the beer."

Dar closed the phone and put it down. "I should feel like that was a win. Why don't I?

"Strings."

"Ugh."

**

The island gym was mostly empty, the early morning light pouring into the spinning area and casting long, and still shadows across the floor.

Kerry finished her set of sit ups and paused, wiping her face off with her towel. She lay back down and felt the chill of the board against her back as she relaxed, feeling some of the compression come off her spine.

Off to one corner, Dar was busy doing some punching bag work, her hands encased in blue leather gloves as she batted at the hanging ball with a steady rhythm.

Kerry watched her for a minute, then she crossed her arms over her chest and started another set, twisting a little to each side as she pulled herself up to give her trunk muscles a little workout as well

It felt good. Tiring, but good. She finished the set and unhooked her legs, swiveling around and putting her feet against the ground, stretching as she stood up.

"How's your ribs?"

Kerry turned to find Dar boxing in place nearby, bouncing back and forth from one foot to the other.

"Fine." She said. "Haven't had a twinge for weeks."

"Good." Dar tapped her gloves together. "If you were going to have one, it would be on that board."

"Uh huh." Kerry hung her towel around her neck. "Don't remind me."

Dar batted her playfully on the shoulder, then she bounced back over to the boxing area, leaving the hanging bag behind and going for the big body bag instead, unleashing solid hits on it.

Kerry went to the shoulder press instead, and seated herself, pausing to adjust her grip as the door opened and two other residents came in to join them, making the crowd in the gym now equal to four. This early, it was usually like that. The place would get busier as the day went on, and was positively really crowded just after work hours.

Dar really enjoyed the boxing stuff. Kerry had positioned herself to keep her partner in view, and she enjoyed watching her graceful rhythm as she worked around the bag, trading hits with kicks, the impacts loud enough to raise a small echo.

She, on the other hand, stuck with her shoulder presses, leaning forward to keep proper form as she shoved the handles up over her head, sucking in a breath as she lowered them back down and felt the ache.

Again, it felt good. She'd been stuck for a while with just some light swimming, while her ribs healed and though she'd gotten enough out of it to keep herself in trim, it wasn't the same as the exercise she got from the weight training she preferred.

Weird, since she'd taken so long to decide if she liked the exercise or not, but now that she'd gotten used to it, skipping it made her feel a distinct lack of energy and she was happy to get back to her regular routine.

She finished her presses, and went on to the line of leg machines, giving her upper body a rest as she hooked her feet under the quad bar and settled back to start flexing, folding her hands across her stomach. "Hey Dar." She called over, now that she was much closer to her partner.

"Yes?" Dar paused in her assault on the bag and turned, putting her gloved hands on her hips and raising a brow in question. She was wearing a pair of threadbare sweatpants and a sports bra, and the effect was curiously sexy. "Did you need to ask me something?"

Did she? Kerry wrestled her thoughts back around. "What do we want to name the puppy?"

"Brownie?"

"Dar."

"Cupcake?"

"Dar!"

"How about Chocolate Chip."

"Didn't I feed you breakfast this morning?" Kerry said, in fond exasperation. "Seriously."

Dar sauntered over and rested her arm against the machine Kerry was seated on. "I was serious. It's a brown dog." She said, reasonably. "We named our cream colored dog Cappuccino, didn't we?"

Kerry finished her set and let the weights down. "We did." She confirmed. "But Brownie?"

Dar deftly unlaced her gloves with her teeth, and pulled them off, flexing her hands. "How about Coffee?"

Kerry covered her eyes and mock sighed. "Paladar Katherine."

Dar chuckled, reaching over to ruffle Kerry's sweat drenched hair. "You name him." She said. "I'm going to go take a shower and finish puppy proofing the house."

"Oh, right behind you." Kerry got up off the machine, feeling the all over ache of muscles well used.

"How about Mocha?" She asked, as she tagged along towards the changing room. "Chocolate and coffee. Brown dog. That work?"

"Mmmmmooocha." Dar burred. "I like it." She went to the teak doored locker they shared and opened it. "I hope Chino doesn't decide to chew us in our sleep for this though."

Kerry chuckled. "I was trying to remember how I felt about getting a baby sister." She admitted. "But I was too young. I don't even remember what it was like when Mike was born."

"Mm." Dar tossed her gloves and boots inside, then grabbed her towel and headed for the shower.

"Sometimes I think about what having a sibling would have been like." She said. "But my parents I think were pretty sure one was enough."

"And I agree."

"I'm sure you do."

**

"C'mon, Chi." Kerry motioned for their pet to hop up into the truck. "We're going to the office, and you're going to meet a new friend."

"Growf." Chino settled on the big bench seat, her tail wagging, delighted to be included again in their travels.

"I think she likes coming with us." Kerry got into the passenger seat of the truck, while Dar was leaning over the front window, putting their new sticker on. She leaned back and hiked her leather booted foot up to rest on her opposite knee. "Feels good to not have to worry about what's going on in that old office, you know, Dar?"

"Yes, I know." Dar swung back into the truck and closed the door. "I never really realized how it hung over me until it wasn't there." She started up the trucks engine. "I know we're going to be involved in our own stuff, but it's not the same thing."

"No." Kerry idly petted Chino's head as the Lab stood up on the back seat and shoved her muzzle between the front seats. "I always dreaded my cell phone ringing. I knew it was something down, something broken, some customer pissed off.. you get tired of the I'm really sorry and I'll try to get that fixed for you type of conversations."

"Yeah." Dar pulled out and drove slowly around the golf course, going between trees and bushes, bright flashes of flowers, and a brief glimpse of a peacock before she reached the turnoff to the ferry terminal. "I feel like a weight's off my shoulders to tell you the truth."

Kerry smiled at her, turning half sideways in her seat to watch her partner's profile.

"Its like its all brand new." Dar parked, and leaned back in her seat, giving Chino a scratch under her jaw. "I didn't think it would be like this."

"Me either." Kerry admitted. "Oh crap, forgot to tell you. I got a call from Colleen while you were getting dressed. She's got all our stuff."

"Ah." Dar grunted. "Cool."

"Including your fish." Kerry said. "She said she fed them some corned beef."

"Aw." Dar smiled a little. "I sort of missed them. They were nice to look at. Want to have her meet us at the new office with all of it?"

Kerry smiled back. "Already asked her." She said. "She's meeting us there. She said Duks told her to take the rest of the day off."

Dar watched the channel go by. "Gerry's going to meet us there at one? I think that's what he said."

"Yes." Kerry agreed. "Having Chino meet the puppy in a neutral space is probably a good idea." She regarded her pet. "Not that she's got an aggressive hair on her body, but you never know." She tickled Chino's ears with her fingertips. "We can watch them play together before we bring him home."

"Mmmmmocha." Dar drawled. "Mocha and Chino. It's trendy precious, but I don't care."

Kerry chuckled.

The ferry docked, and they rolled off, heading along the causeway in the bright noon sun.

**

Friday, even at lunch time, already had a sense that it was a downhill slide into the weekend. There were more people on the streets, and the cafes seemed fuller. Kerry was in her office getting things sorted out, boxes of her knick nacks and office stuff sitting on her new desk.

"You know, I like this place." Colleen remarked. "Much less hooliganism going on."

"Well for now." Kerry studied the built in shelves between the window, and brought a box over to start populating them. "But yeah, its quieter over here, and more relaxed." She glanced over her shoulder. "How's it going over at the other place?"

Colleen made a face at her. "Kind of a wreck, really." She perched on Kerry's desk. "Not so bad by us, you know we bean counters keep to ourselves, but it's a riot on ten, and on fourteen."

Kerry nodded. "Yeah. I figured." She said. "There were a lot of things in flight there. I had about ten projects in motion when they cut us loose, and God only knows what Dar was into." She removed a stack of pictures from a box. "Thanks fro getting all this stuff in case I haven't said it twice already."

"No worries, m'dear." Her friend waved the thanks away. "I was glad to do it. The two of your offices were like tombs, with the Burritos gone and all that." She indicated the box. "I put in that brass name plate they gave you at that party. Dar's was glued to the door, but yours was in those holders and I could get it out."

Kerry lifted it out and studied it. "Well." She smiled. "I got promoted out of this firing, and got a better name. But it's a nice keepsake. Thanks."

"You got the name done?" Colleen asked. "Already?"

"Yesterday." Kerry affirmed. "So when our new business cards get here, it'll be Kerrison Roberts." She grinned at Colleen. "You think it's weird?"

Colleen shook her head. "For you? No. You've been stuck like duct tape on Dar since you met her."

Kerry's face reddened a little.

"Oh, c'mon. You know you were."

"I was." Kerry reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "And damn, my family's been a pain in my ass the last couple of years. Feels good to leave that name behind."

"Ker? Gerry's here." Dar stuck her head in the office, and gave Collen a smile. "Stick around." She said. "We can grab a cup of something after we finish these meetings."

Colleen looked pleased. "Surely." She said. "And I want to meet this new puppy, since I get to sit your place so often."

"C'mon, Chi." Kerry scooted through the door and joined her partner, as they went to the window to watch the long, dark car drive up. "Ah. Formal."

"Well, he is a general."

"Yeah, I know."

It parked in the very front of the building, as close to the door as possible, and the front doors opened as two uniformed officers jumped out. They opened the door and Gerry Easton emerged, with his aide, who had a wriggling armful of Labrador puppy to wrangle.

"Lets go." Dar led the way down the stairs and they got to the door at the same time the military party did, and she pulled it open and stepped back. "C'mon in."

"Ah, Dar! Excellent." Gerry hustled inside. "You boys look around, hm?" He directed. "Don't break anything."

The two officers disappeared.

"This way." Kerry indicated the left conference room. "It's not fancy, but we're trying to get things going here." She opened the door, displaying the newly painted and carpeted room, with it's makeshift table and mismatched chairs inside.

"Growf!" Chino spotted the puppy and got up on her hind legs to investigate, nearly knocking the aide down. Her tail started wildly waving.

"Put that little man down." Gerry said, as they squashed into the conference room and he closed the door.
"Whoof! Quite a travel day!" He said. "Pretty weather here though. Very nice."

The aide put the puppy down and he immediately raced over to Chino, touching noses and starting a tick tacky dancing paw wagging tail lickfest with her."

"Growf!" Chino crouched down on her front legs.

"Yap!" The puppy let out a squeaky bark. "Yap yap!"

"Oh my gosh that's so cute." Kerry sat down on one of the chairs they'd scabbled together for the room. "I think she likes him!"

The general had taken a seat across from her and was watching with a look of beaming content. "Sure looks like it."

The puppy scampered over to where Gerry was sitting, attacking her boot with enthusiasm. Chino came after him, slamming into Gerry's knees as she got her nose between the puppy and Gerry's shoe.

"Ow. Easy!" Kerry leaned over and picked the puppy up. "What do you think you're doing, huh, little man?"

"Yap!" The puppy scabbled up her chest and tried to get to her chin, poking his u shaped tongue out.

Dar started laughing, as she sat down next to Gerry, watching the show. "I think that one's yours." She advised her partner. "Chino, come over here before you knock her down."

"Growf!" The Lab trotted under the table and came out next to Dar, to receive an ear scratching.

"Did you say hi to your grandpa?" Dar asked.

"Heh." Gerry folded his hands on the table, and motioned the aide to sit down. "So you're moving very fast here eh? Been only a week?"

"Only a week." Dar agreed. "Been a little crazy."

The general nodded. "So, what happened?" He asked. "I thought you were going to run it out as it were."

"You happened. "Dar said bluntly. "I told them about the Joint Chief's not wanting ILS in the mix due to our international setup, and between that, and the executive branch wanting me to work for them board lost their minds and booted us. Figured to cut their losses, or something like that."

"Insane." Gerald Easton tut tutted. "Like little boys."

Dar lifted her hands and let them drop. "Just got this started faster." She said. "Didn't think you would mind."

"Not in the least!" The general reached down to pat Chino, who had poked her nose into his elbow for attention. "Well, madam... didn't you grow up to be a pretty girl." He stroked her head. "Look just like your mother, how d'you like that?"

"Growf!" Chino's tail wagged at the attention, then she turned her head and spotted the puppy upside down in Gerry's arms, getting his tummy rubbed. She scooted under the table to investigate.

"So we finished the incorporation work yesterday. I just got my checkbooks." Dar said. "And we rented this space, talked to a few people about coming on board... it's been nuts."

"I can appreciate that." Gerry said. "But it's a good move for us, if you know what I mean." He pulled out an envelope and put it on the table. "That's the specification they want. Had a bunch of the boys, couple from each service, sit down and pow wow, and that's what they came up with."

Dar opened the envelope and pulled the clipped papers out, scanning them quickly.

"Dar, how about some coffee?" Gerry still had the puppy in her arms, and he'd calmed down and was blinking sleepily. "General?"

“Sure.” Dar murmured distractedly.

“Joe would do me good.” Easton said. “Jennifer, give a hand, eh? You know how I like it.”

The aide got up. “I’ll bring in the dog things too, sir.” She went to the door and opened it, holding it while Kerry went through ahead of her. Chino trotted after them and after the door closed, it seemed overwhelmingly quiet inside.

Dar had unclipped the papers and she was reading them. Easton waited in silence, playing with his wedding band a little as he sat there, apparently content to simply wait for her to finish.

The writing was dense. Dar scanned it stolidly, reaching the point where she started thinking ahead of the words, the comprehension of the subject in place as her head started to shake back and forth a little.

“Problem?” Gerry hazarded.

“Ungh.” Dar rested her head on her hand and continued reading, and Easton leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his uniformed chest as he regarded the blank wall.

“Okay.” Dar finally said. “Done.”

He started a little, and turned his head to look at her. “So? What do you think, Dar. Something you can do?”

Dar straightened the papers out and clasped her hands over them. “I can but I won’t.”

“Eh?”

“I won’t. It’s the wrong idea. Wrong structure.” She said. “The general idea is okay, but the structure isn’t scalable.”

Easton blinked at her. “Haven’t got an earthly what you just said, Dar.” He remarked. “Good? Bad? Yes? No?”

Complicated question. “Can we set up a meeting for me to talk to them about it, maybe do a white board session?” She countered. “Present a different way to get the same results?”

“Ah.” Easton nodded. “They came up with nonsense. I get it.” He patted the papers. “Long as you commit to getting this rolling, do it how you want to. Right? I’ll send these boys down here to talk to you. They’d love the break from the weather.”

She put the papers back in the envelope. “Deal.” She said briefly. “Oh wait. We probably have to sign something now since we don’t have a preexisting contract.”

Easton made a snorting sound.

Dar chuckled softly. “It’s going to have to wait until I get home anyway. I don’t have a typewriter, a computer, or a printer here yet.”

“No problem.” Easton took a pen out of his pocket and turned the envelope over, scribbling on it for a long minute. “We know how to do things like this in the Army, don’cha know.” He remarked. “Can’t tell you how big a weight this lifts off me, Dar. Was told to find someone else to do this, and hadn’t clue one where to start looking.”

“There are other companies who do what we do, Gerry.” Dar said. “I could have given you names.”

“Would have been second best though” He continued writing.

Dar twiddled her thumbs. “Wasn’t like that the last time I did a job for you. I thought you were going to have me whipped on the yardarm, or whatever that saying is.”

Gerry snorted again. “Navy.” He said, finishing his writing and signing underneath. Then he turned and looked at Dar. “I know that ended up in the crapper.” He said. “My fault.”

Dar’s brow lifted.

"My fault, because I should have stood fast on it." Gerry leaned on the table and regarded her. "We sorted it out, sure. People got punished. Press would have been bad. But we'd have survived it."

"And now it doesn't matter." Dar said, quietly. "Because of the attack."

He nodded. "Right."

"I'm sorry I was a part of that project. Wrecked a lot of old memories." Dar admitted. "No matter how big of a jackass Jeff turned out to be, I still remember growing up playing with his kid."

Easton frowned. "You were too close." He said, after a brief pause.

"I was." Dar pulled the envelope over and took the pen from Gerry's hand. She spent a minute reading the hand written contract, then she just smiled and signed it, her slanting script distinct from her old family friend's. "Water under the bridge though. Now it's a new day." She put the pen down. "So thanks for becoming our first customer."

Easton looked relieved. "Glad you feel that way." He held his hand out, and she clasped it. "Listen, now. This thing, it's important." He watched her nod. "Fool us once, shame on you, fool us twice, shame on us. We let them get us. Failure in intelligence they said? Well it's true. I know it and you know it. Embarrassing all around. But it can't happen again."

"Got it." Dar said. "I'll do my best, Gerry. But I'll need a chance to get this company up and going. Don't expect me to deliver anything overnight."

"No worries." He waved a hand. "Now, about those other contracts. The ones from before."

"Leave them with ILS." Dar said, then after a brief pause, she smiled faintly. "For now."

He studied her face. "You sure, Dar? Got an opportunity to get the whole enchilada."

"I'm sure. We don't have structure for that. Yet. ILS does a good job of support. Let them keep it. They renew next year anyway."

He nodded. "All right."

The door opened and Kerry and the aide, followed by Chino and the puppy entered. "Coffee all round." Kerry put the tray down. "You all wrapped up?"

Dar handed her the envelope. "Our first contract." She said. "Stick around, Gerry, a team from Bridges is due here any minute."

"Hah. Fancy boys, most of em." He moved his chair to play with the dogs. "Probably run from these two." He picked up Mocha and let him chew his finger. "Look at that vicious little man."

Kerry leaned over and gave Dar a kiss on the head, and patted her shoulder. "Might have been nice to get the sign on the door first, hon." She whispered.

Dar chuckled, and shrugged.

"And a couple of employees.. maybe a PC or two..." Kerry chuckled with her. "I know, we'll make it work."

"We will." Dar exhaled. "One way or another, we will."

**

When the next car came, though, there were secret service agents in it, and instead of a fancy boy it was Bridges himself. He swept past the reception area and glanced around, then took his sunglasses off and regarded the two of them. "You may think I just used this as an excuse to take a few days off in Florida at the government's expense."

Kerry had just come down the stairs with a cup. "Well, glad we didn't open an office in Michigan then." She held the door to the conference center open. "C'mon in and join our little circus."

Bridges eyed her, then he motioned one of the agents forward. "No offense, Stuart."

"None taken. I've had secret service agents peek in my bedroom since I was six." Kerry responded mildly.
"My sister had a crush on one of them I still tease her about."

The agent paused and looked at her, then grinned and moved past, glancing quickly around the room. "Just some Army people and a couple dogs, sir." He reported, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Bout what I'd expect to find here." Bridges pushed the door open and entered. "Ah, Easton."

"Hello there." General Easton had his jacket off, and he was tossing a ball to the end of the room. "Didn't figure to see you here."

"Back at you." Bridges regarded him, then looked around. "Damn spook was right. Couple of Army people and some dogs. Where the hell is Roberts?"

"Yap!" The puppy saw a new target and galloped over, attaching himself to Bridges' shoes and tugging a lace. "Yap!"

"Dar'll be right back." Kerry sat down at the makeshift table.

"What in the hell is this?" Bridges took a seat and picked up the puppy. "This one of yours, Easton?"

"Both of them are, matter of fact." The general said. "Pups of my Alabaster."

Bridges held up the puppy and examined it. "Cute." He put the puppy down, and watched as Chino came over, snuffing at the creatures and giving Bridges a doubtful look. "Growf." She took a hasty step back when the puppy started chewing at her feet. "Growf!"

"Entertaining." Bridges dusted his hands off. "You just moving in to this place, I take it?"

"Signed the lease Monday." Kerry agreed, sipping her tea. "By next Monday, we might even have a few employees and toilet paper in the bathrooms."

He chuckled dryly. "A little too much chaos to suit you?"

Kerry pondered that question, her ears catching the rhythmic sound of Dar coming down the steps. "No, not really. I was looking to make a change, after September."

The advisor nodded, looking up as Dar came in the room. "There you are, Roberts."

"Hello." Dar came over and sat down across from him. "Sorry. Had to talk to the electrical inspector." She put her hands on the table. "I didn't expect you to be here. Thought you would send someone from your staff."

"And waste a trip to Miami in the winter?" He responded. "What kind of fool do you take me for?"

Dar lifted her hands in a faint shrug. "I live here."

"Well." Easton got up. "I know you lot have things to discuss. We'll be getting on, getting on. Back to the hotel and then a few days of R and R." He winked at Bridges. "No fools here either."

Dar stood back up. "Gerry, give us a call tomorrow. We'd love to have dinner with you." She extended her hand, which he gripped and released.

Easton gave her a genuine smile. "Absolutely, Dar, I will." He reached down to give the puppy one more pat. "Little man, you take care of these ladies, all right? Be a good boy."

"Yap!"

"We'll take good care of him." Kerry said. "And I think he and Chino are going to get along just fine."

Then the general was gone, and the door was closed, and they were facing each other around the table. Bridges studied them in silence for a moment. "Well, here we are, people."

"Here we are." Dar had been carrying a portfolio and she now opened it. "I've had some time to study the requirements document you sent." She studied a page thoughtfully. "It's an ambitious project."

She looked up at him, and he lifted his hand and rotated his finger, brow lifted.

Dar folded hr hands. "The technology, the algorithms that this would take don't exist."

"Yet." Bridges said, dryly. "Listen. Cut to the chase, Roberts. I know this thing is outlandish. I had ten people in my office yesterday telling me it was pie in the sky. Can it be done?"

"Did they say it couldn't be done?"

"Yes." Bridges said. "That's why I'm here. The last time everyone told me something couldn't be done you ended up doing it."

Dar exhaled. "I don't know if it can be done."

"That's what you said the last time."

"Last time I was encouraged to find a way by the fact you were going to railroad a friend of mine and destroy the company who paid my paycheck." Dar replied, bluntly.

He shrugged. "End justified the means." He said. "You can call me an asshole all you want, Roberts, but no matter – it was worth it." He indicated the portfolio. "You going to try it or not? I've got a pool and a scotch and soda calling my name."

"Two conditions."

He rolled his eyes.

"One, no one tells me how to write this." Dar said. "No one has a say in how it's done but me."

Bridges raised his eyebrows.

"Not going to have a committee instructing me how to design." She countered. "I didn't put up with that at ILS, and I won't with you."

Now he smiled. "As it happens, Roberts, I agree with you a hundred percent. Done. G'wan."

"Two, you give me access to all the systems you want to parse the data, so I can write filters for them." Dar said. "Giving them raw access is useless. It's too much data. I need to narrow focus the intelligence to what they need to look at."

Now he looked serious. "Maybe they don't know what they're looking for." He objected. "I don't want anything held back from them on some namby pamby privacy crap."

Dar shook her head. "If you don't focus this, it's a waste of your money and my time. Last thing you want is to have this system that does fracture all that privacy crap, but doesn't find a bad guy who blows up Penn Station."

Bridges grunted. He eyed Dar for a moment, then shifted his gaze over to Kerry who was sipping her tea with a mild expression. "You're both undergoing a security profiling, y'know."

"We already have top secret clearances." Kerry replied.

"This is more than that." Bridges said. "Everyone you bring into this thing is going under a microscope. You get it, I'm sure."

Kerry nodded.

Dar nodded.

Finally he sighed. "All right, Roberts." He said. "You get what you're asking for. Now here's my condition. I find out you're scamming me, or you go public with what you're doing, you both go to Guantanamo and you're never coming back." He looked quickly at both of them, but neither flinched. "Understood?"

"Understood." Dar responded quietly. "You get billed for my time, and for any resources, at a cost plus twenty five percent for the development period. I'll hand over a set of milestones to you, and before it goes into production, you and anyone you want comes here to get a demonstration and sign off. If it's what you want, we'll agree on a price for it. If it's not what you want, you don't owe anything more than that."

He relaxed visibly. "Now that's a deal I can shake on." He said. "Most companies would have asked for ten mil up front to squander. It's a deal, Roberts." He held out his hand, and slowly, Dar took it and they shook. "For the record, the fact that everyone else told me this wasn't do-able is in inverse proportion to my confidence that somehow, you can."

Dar gave him a skeptical look.

"They told me what you did." He remarked in a conversational tone. "With the cables, the NASA guys, little miss butter wouldn't melt in my mouth breaking into the exchange.. " He looked amused. "Woulda made a decent movie. Pissed off a lot of politicians, and gave me a laugh for the day when that bell rang and all that crap started flashing."

"I didn't break into the exchange." Kerry protested. "My mother got me in."

Bridges laughed. "Did she know why?"

"No."

He laughed again. "They would have arrested the lot of you if it hadn't worked. Had all the charges ready, sabotage, and the rest of it. You got lucky."

"And we're dealing with you again, why?" Kerry inquired.

"Wasn't me." Bridges said, surprisingly. "You can call it bullshit, but believe it or not, Stuart, I was on your side. Told them it was stupid, not to mention dangerous playing that game. You knew too much. Your company knew too much. That's why we need to back them off from the tricky stuff."

"From what Hamilton said, we'd never have gotten to testify so what was the danger?" Dar asked, quietly.

"You can only go so far with that. You can put Arab looking me and dirty turban heads in jail and no one much cares. But you two would have caused a lot of fuss." He admitted. "You look too good on TV."

Kerry rolled her eyes.

"Think about it." He retorted. "Roger Stuart's kid, and the daughter of a well known artist and a war hero? Would have been easier just to have them shoot you."

"And we're dealing with you now why?" Kerry asked again.

"Because you know it has to be done." He answered, straightforwardly. "And your both idealistic enough to think you can do it the right way." He eyed Dar. "Don't think I don't know that. You'll try to do all that left wing protect the individual crap and with any luck I'll just be able to take what you give me and get enough out of it to justify the pain in the ass and the cost."

"Why us then?" Dar asked. "Hire some redneck right wing hot shot who will do it without any conscience. Be cheaper, and you probably can blackmail whoever you want then."

He paused and looked at her. She looked right back at him. "I could get offended." He said.

"Go fuck yourself." Dar replied. "That help?"

Bridges paused, then chuckled. "Okay, we can stop the asshole Olympics." He said. "You give it a go, we'll see where it takes us." He stood up, glancing at the corner where Chino was curled up in the corner, her head on her paws. The puppy Mocha was curled up against her, his head resting on her elbow. "I have a deer hound." He commented. "More temperamental than those things."

Kerry got up. "Interested in a cup of coffee?" She asked. "There's a nice little cafe down the road."

He gave her a dry look. "Not dressed for it, but thanks for the offer." He indicated his neatly pressed suit. "I'll gather up my spooks and leave you to enjoy your weekend." He stood up and then paused. "Do we need to sign anything?"

Dar shoved the portfolio over. "G'wan. That's what Gerry did. I won't have printed contracts, or pens, or even a printer for another week."

He chuckled and pulled the packet over, scribbling his name on the top of it. "Glad you decided to get out of ILS." He said. "If anyone asks, we'll say you preferred not to have your motives mixed." He winked at them and pocketed his pen. "Later, people."

Then the door was closed, and he was gone.

Kerry sat back down. "Holy crap, Dar." She said. "We just booked enough business today to catapult us into some Gartner quadrant."

Dar regarded the two packets of papers on the table, and shook her head. "No kidding." She said. "Fortunately, both of these contracts can be handled by small teams, so we can get started before we really get things rolling. I'll need to hire a team of database analysts and a pile of lamp stack people and front end designers."

Kerry regarded her. "We probably need to hire someone for HR and accounting first." She said. "So we can give them some kind of benefit package and of course pay them."

Dar nodded meditatively. "Have you figured out how we're going to make an offer to Colleen without breaking our promise to Alastair?"

Kerry smiled.

"I probably can't manage approaching Mari." Dar continued, in a regretful tone. "Colleen's been there a relatively short time, and she wasn't management yet."

"She will be now."

"You know who I'd like to find a way to bring in?" Kerry said. "Your buddy in NYC."

"Scuzzy."

"Yeah."

"She'd never move to Miami." Dar said. "But we could find a way to ask." She got up and gathered the papers. "Let me go run a compile on the financial sys... oh, wait, I can't. I don't have a computer here yet."

"Let's go, hon." Kerry went over and picked up Mocha, who woke up with a sleepily startled look. "Hey there, little man. We're going to take you to your new home."

"Growf." Chino looked up at her.

"You too madam." Kerry patted her thigh. "I'm not picking you up."

They moved into the hallway, and Colleen was there waiting for them, leaning against the wall with her car keys in her hand. "Is that the new pooch?"

"This is Mocha." Kerry agreed. "He's Chino's little brother." She handed over the pup to her cooing friend. "Isn't he cute?"

"He is.. just like she was when she was a baby." Colleen cradled the puppy in her arms and tickled his belly. "So how did things go?"

"Really well." Kerry glanced at her partner. "Dar.. do you.."

"Want to take the dogs and get the car? Sure." Dar took the puppy from Colleen and whistled for Chino. "Be right back." She left the office and headed for the parking area, feeling just a touch overwhelmed and a bit lightheaded after yet another whirlwind day. "Glad it's the damn weekend, Chi."

"Growf" Chino was trotting beside her, sticking at her heel like the well trained dog she was. They had never needed to leash her, she came when called, and stayed when told, one of the few things in Dar's life that had proven utterly reliable.

Once she'd stopped chewing shoes, that is.

It was good to have a minute to just think, as she walked to the truck. Things had been happening a such a breakneck pace, it was a relief to be able to regroup while Kerry made her offer to Colleen and hopefully it would end up with them having dinner together back on the island.

"Hey there."

Ah crap. Dar looked up to find their landlord just about to open the door to his own car. "Hey. We're just leaving."

He paused. "Yeah... um." He leaned on the frame. "Did I see soldiers here before?"

Dar opened the back door to the truck and waited for Chino to jump up, then put the new puppy down next to her. "You did." She closed the door. "Customers of ours."

"Ah."

"Don't worry. Just for IT services." Dar got in the driver's side of the truck. "They won't be here often." She rolled down the window as he came over.

"So you have customers already?"

"We do." Dar acknowledged a moment of relief. "But they were people we knew before. We still have to find new clients."

"Sure." He agreed. "I was just a little surprised... I guess you guys are going to go full out next week, huh? My brother said he was putting a whole bunch of stuff in for you."

Dar nodded. "More employees will be around. We're looking for someone for HR. You know anyone?" She turned as Mocha scrambled up into the front set, clawing at her leg. She lifted him up and set him down. "With any experience?"

"Hm." He leaned on the door "I might." He reached over and gave Mocha a pat. "He's cute."

"Yap!" Mocha put his paws up on the inside of the window and made himself heard.

"Send them over on Monday if you do." Dar said, spotting Kerry and Colleen strolling out of the building, Kerry with a knapsack over one shoulder, Colleen with a big grin on her face. "We gotta go."

"I will." He stepped back, then waved at the other two. "Have a great weekend."

Dar tickled Mocha under the chin. "Are you gonna last till we get home or are you going to piddle on me, huh?" She leaned on the windowsill as the two other women came up. "We set?"

"We are." Kerry responded. "Coll, follow us home? Let's do the Italian place and we can fill you in on the two contracts we just signed."

Colleen crossed her arms and leaned against the truck. "That I will." She said. "After I call me mother and tell her about my new job and a promotion to boot." She looked really happy. "And that I can get rid of those linen suits. My life just got so much better, I can't tell you."

"Okay, see you over there." Kerry went around and got into the truck, taking the puppy from her partner. "We'll celebrate."

Colleen went for her car, and Dar started up the truck. "What a damned day."

"Uh huh." Kerry said. "I've got those contracts. Lets hope like hell the PC's and printers get there Monday. Can I get the specs for the servers you need to run all that software on?"

“Sure.” Dar pulled out of the parking lot and started heading for home. “We need to get that, plus all the network components for the office.”

“Sheesh.”

“Some retirement, huh?”

Kerry exhaled. “Are we getting in over our heads already?” She asked. “Dar, we’ve got two major contracts already and we don’t even have employees yet.”

“Not true.” Dar said. “We have admins, and we have an operations director, and an accounting director , and us.”

“Ho boy.”

“Listen.” Dar said. “Just call up a placement agency on Monday, and give them our requirements for everything else. Let them do the investigations and the work, and bring in qualified candidates.”

Kerry considered that, then grunted. “Ah.”

“It’ll be fine, Ker.”

They were quiet for a while as they drove, Kerry letting the puppy chew on her finger as she cuddled with him. “Bridges creeped me out.” She said finally, as they were pulling onto the ferry. “That whole passive aggressive Guantanamo thing.” She sighed. “I didn’t mind the stuff for Gerry. That’s all pretty straightforward.”

“That’s why I left us an out.”

“You really think they’ll let us take an out?” Kerry looked uncharacteristically pessimistic. “What if they just decide to take the code and do what they want with it?”

“Won’t happen.” Her partner relaxed, reaching out and circling Chino’s head with her arm, giving the Lab a friendly rub. “Besides, weren’t you the one who asked me to think about doing it?”

Kerry sighed. “That was before we talked to that guy just now again.”

“Relax.” Dar wriggled into a more comfortable spot as the ferry took off for the island. “Look at it this way Ker, at least he was out in the open jackass. No pretending.”

“Mm.”

“I think if I can do it, it’ll be fine.”

“I hope so.” Kerry sighed. “Next time though, I’ll just keep my mouth shut... oh, crap.”

“What?”

“Glad you got leather seats.”

“Yap!”

**

Kerry sipped her coffee as she watched the sun rise outside the kitchen window, remembering standing exactly in this place, exactly at this time, a week ago before her entire life had radically changed.

She took another sip, and then smiled.

Or, well, to be honest, not really. She felt the motion and the nearness and then the warmth as Dar came up behind her, circling her with both arms and just leaning against her in silent content.

Not really. Her external life might have changed but the important part, this part, hadn’t budged an inch. She lifted her cup and offered Dar a sip, hearing the slurp right in her ear as her partner sucked some from the cup.

"The puppy managed to follow Chi down the steps." Dar commented after she swallowed. "Glad we took the pebbles out of that rock garden of yours." She hugged Kerry a little tighter, rocking back and forth slightly from one foot to the other."Keeerrryy... I lloooooovvveee you."

"Mmmmm." Kerry smiled. "I'm so glad you saved Gopher Dar. I'd have missed that little sucker, you know that?"

Dar chuckled. "I packed up that repository and I'll bring it in on Monday." She said. "I can throw a tower under that desk and compile it on that."

"Mm." Kerry agreed. "Looks like it's going to be a pretty day" She indicated the soft glow of dawn streaking across the sky. "Got anything in mind you want to do, Dardar?"

"Chill."

"I can go with that."

"It's been nuts all week. Lets enjoy our puppy and two days to do nothing. Time enough on Monday to rejoin the circus." Dar pronounced. "We have six weeks to get everything up and running before we disappear for two months."

"You think we can still do that?" Kerry asked, after a moment's silence.

"We're going to do that." Her partner stated firmly. "I can compose code in my head just as easily going down a river as I can sitting in that office."

"Really?" Kerry turned her head to regard the taller women.

Dar nodded. "Most of Gopher Dar was done while I was in staff meetings."

Kerry's blond eyebrows lifted right up.

"I want my vacation." The dark haired woman wrapped her arms more firmly then lifted Kerry off her feet, making her squawk. "Want want want." She hopped up and down a bit, forcing her partner to hastily put her cup down. "Want!"

"Okay!" Kerry reached behind her and gave Dar a pinch in the butt. "Stop that!"

Dar did, releasing her after biting her earlobe. "Mmmmmilk." She eased around Kerry and got a glass, retreating to the refrigerator as her chuckling companion picked her coffee cup back up. "Actually, we should go get those new laptops today. I want to have something current with me next week."

"And two big screen monitors?" Kerry asked. "I got used to the one in my old office. "

"You bet." Dar took her milk and went to the back door, which was standing open. She peered outside. "Hey you guys!"

Chino and Mocha were playing in the garden, barking at each other, while the bigger Lab backed off and the puppy chased her.

"Yap! Yap!" Mocha pattered after the big cream colored tail heading for the steps. "Yap!"

Chino trotted up the steps and nosed Dar's bare knees, giving her an affectionate lick as Dar reached down to pet her head. "Growf!"

"Aw." Dar moved down the steps to where the puppy was gamely trying to climb up them, the stone a little too tall for him yet. "C'mere, rug rat." She picked him up and tucked him under her arm. "Enjoy it while you can." She looked down at his small, rounded head, and he looked back up at her, his tongue hanging out of his mouth.

The stone steps were cold, and she retreated inside, where Kerry was buttering some whole wheat toast. "Is that our concession to health today?" She brought the puppy over and let him sniff Kerry's shoulder.

"Hah hah." Kerry smiled. "Yeah, the whole wheat is going to overcome the quarter stick of butter and slice of swiss cheese all right. No, they just sent the wrong kind this week and I didn't have a chance to go over and change it."

"I like it." Dar accepted her toast and cheese, pulling her head back when the puppy realized there was something edible nearby and scrambled against her hold, his dark nose twitching. "Hey. Not for you, kiddo."

"Here." Kerry put some puppy kibble in a dish, and offered it to him.

"Let me put him down before he eats my fingers." Dar set the animal on the floor and he engulfed his kibble, scattering bits of it across the kitchen floor.

Chino watched him with a worried, Labrador frown, then she applied her tongue to the errant kibble, gathering up the spillage while the puppy fixed his attention on the dish.

"He's really cute." Kerry said, after a moment of silent observation. "He's more feisty than Chino was when she was that size."

"Yap!" Mocha looked up at her.

Kerry put her hands on her hips. "Excuse me, sir?"

"Yap!" The puppy stood up on his back legs and pattered at her leg. "Yap! Yap!"

"Growf!" Chino came over and nosed him, tumbling him onto the floor. He rolled over and got back up, galumphing over to her and scooting between her legs, making her whirl around and bark in surprise.

"I can see we're going to be entertained." Dar was leaning against the refrigerator, munching her toast. "We should take them down to Lincoln Mall. Get our new lappies down there and have some sushi outside."

"Sounds great to me." Kerry agreed readily. "We've never done that before."

"First time for everything." Dar's eyes twinkled. "We'll be the center of attention, with a brand spanking new lab puppy with us."

"I like it." Kerry finished her toast and picked up a strawberry, taking a bite and chewing it. "And I like not having to arrange for and pick up our dry cleaning."

Dar chuckled.

"So, shower, gym, shower, Lincoln Road?"

"Well." Her partner took hold of her again. "We can start with the shower. Sure."

**

Kerry looped Chino's leash around her wrist as they strolled along the road, enjoying the sunny day, and the active area. On both sides of the walking mall were small cafes, and there were many others out taking advantage of the nice weather.

She was in jeans and a hoodie, and so was Dar, the puppy cradled in her arms as they wandered. Mocha seemed quiet satisfied to get what was for him an eagle eye view of his surroundings, his pink tongue poking out as he looked around.

"I didn't realize the brown ones would have such light eyes." Kerry commented.

"Almost the same color as yours." Her partner agreed. "I didn't know that either."

"You know what? I just realized there aren't any computer stores down here, Dar." Kerry groused. "Except the Apple one."

"Yuk." Dar said instantly. "I hate that operating system. It sucks camel wang."

"Dar!"

"What?" Dar glanced down. "You think the puppy's gonna get corrupted?"

"No, camel wangs are gross."

Dar's brows hiked. "How would you know?"

"Punk."

"Takes one to know one."

"Just for that, lets go inside." Kerry steered her towards the store. "Maybe I'll like these kind of computers."

"Bet you won't." Dar amiably followed her, and they entered the quiet, mostly white interior that had lots of screens and computers to peruse.

They drew attention immediately, or, at least Dar did as every female employee immediately gravitated to the puppy, making cooing noises that drew round eyed reaction from him.

"Chick magnet." Kerry gave her a poke, as she guided Chino over to where the desktops and laptops were. There were a number of different kinds, one sort of roundish and weird looking, and another that was square and looked like a regular tower case, only in silver with pretty piping.

"What do you think of these, Chi?" Kerry touched the tower keyboard admiring the large screen. "It's kinda nice, huh?" She looked over at her partner, who was still surrounded by admiring girls. "Wish I had my camera."

"Growf." Chino stood up and put her paws on the table, peering at the screen.

One of the girls took Mocha from Dar, freeing her to inspect the laptops on the table she was standing near. She poked a key with one finger then glanced up and met Kerry's gaze, shrugging her shoulders. She walked around the table and came over to where Kerry was standing. "They're not bad looking." She grudgingly admitted. "I just hate how they work."

"Why?"

"Candy assed operating system." Dar replied promptly. "Hides everything from you like you were a two year old."

"Well." Kerry navigated the nearest mouse. "It doesn't seem that different from a regular one." She opened up an icon. "I mean, that shows you what's on it, right?"

Dar's brow was creased. She took over the mouse. "Wait a minute..." She opened a black screen. 'Is that a terminal window?'

"Is it?" Kerry stepped back out of her way as she edged in front of the tower. "More to the point, is that good or bad?"

"Hang on." Dar typed in a command, her eyes popping open a little at the response. "What the hell?"

"What?"

"Son of a bitch." Dar straightened abruptly. "That's Unix." She looked accusingly at a sales boy who had wandered over. "That thing is running Unix?"

He nodded. "It's a BSD variant. Darwin kernel." He said. "It's not an official fork, but it's pretty solid."

Dar put her hands on her hips. "When the hell did that happen?"

"Does that mean you like them now?" Kerry nudged her. "I like that laptop. Its sexy."

Dar eyed her.

"Like you are." Kerry completed the thought, with a smile.

"They switched to OS X last year." The salesman provided amiably. "We like it. It makes the screen a lot nicer." He said. "This model, it's got full length PCI slots. The laptops just got DVI out."

"So there's no more of that weird interface anymore?" Dar asked.

"You mean OS 9 and those things? You can run an interpreter and run those old programs if you have them." The sales boy said. "'But I don't think it will do that forever. They're trying to get people to switch everything over to the Cocoa framework.' He added. "I do some development work on the side. It's pretty cool."

"If it's called Cocoa, it must have your name on it." Kerry commented, from her peanut gallery position alongside Chino.

"Ha ha." Her partner responded.

"Coders like the because they're true multitasking." The boy said. "And a lot of tools can run on Darwin. You can also

"Huh>" Dar folded her arms. "All right. Get me one of the laptops with the most ram and hard drive space. I'll give it a try." She said. "You want one?" She asked Kerry. "If it's got a Unix base, I can probably get my compilers to work on it."

Kerry considered the machines. Then she shrugged. "Let me try one of the smaller ones.. those white ones there." She pointed. "Whatever the nicest one is, I'll take it."

The sales boy beamed at them. "That's cool." He said. "I like customers like you, who even bring puppies. It's like Christmas."

Dar started laughing.

"Let me go get them wrapped up for you." He trotted off.

"See?" Kerry bumped her hip against Dar's. "Not so bad, huh?"

"Remains to be seen." Dar disagreed. "They still could be absolute crap, even with Unix on them." She played with the keyboard some more. "That's a pretty crisp screen though."

"Better for your eyes." Kerry kidded her gently.

"Since I have a lot of code to look forward to, probably not a bad thing." Dar surprisingly admitted. "Been a while since I spent more than a minute here and there with my head in a text editor."

She clicked a few more things, then abandoned the mouse and circled the table to go and rescue Mocha. "C'mere, critter, before they squish you to death." She took back the reluctantly given up puppy and curled him into the crook of her arm. "No laptop for you."

"Yap!" Mocha squeaked up at her.

Kerry spent a few more minutes playing with the desktop, admiring the screen and the acrylic surround. "Y'know Chi... these are actual pretty cool."

Chino hopped up and looked at the screen, her tongue sticking out of the side of her mouth. Kerry spotted a camera, and she clicked on it, delighted to see a box open and display Chino's nose. She clicked the picture, and smiled, as it transferred to the box. "Look, Chi. You're there for posterity."

"Growf."

"Is that what the puppy is going to look like grown up?" One of the girls wandered over. "They're cute, even big."

"They are." Kerry put her arm around her pet, and got an affectionate lick on the arm. "They're gorgeous, funny dogs with a lot of personality."

The girl came closer and patted Chino. "They're not like pit bulls, right?"

"Right."

Chino's tail wagged at all the attention.

"I think they're about as far from pit bulls as you can get in a species. Except for maybe, cocker spaniels." Kerry mused. "Just very sweet, gentle dogs."

The sales boy came back with two white bags, and a swipe machine. Dar traded him her credit card for the bags, and handed one back to Kerry. They had strings in them, and could be worn almost like backpacks and Dar got hers situated as one of the girls helpfully held Mocha for her.

Kerry came over and took the puppy as Dar signed the slip, waving goodbye to the gang as they left with their new toys. "That was painless." She held the door for her partner then followed her back out into the sunny weather.

"Yeah, and we'll get to try something new." Dar took back Mocha as they strolled along the street. "Let's find a likely spot for lunch."

They found a nice cafe with tables outside and settled into one of the corner ones. Kerry set her bag down on the table and relaxed, stretching her legs out and crossing them at the ankles.

Dar had put Mocha's little puppy harness on, and he was busy exploring under the table, sniffing everything. He came around and sat down on Dar's foot, watching the passersby with wide puppy eyes. "Yap!"

"Yap." Dar barked back at him. "Do you know how nice it is to just sit here, and not worry about anything going on at work?" She asked Kerry. "Two glasses of white, and the sushi boat." She added, to the goth looking waitress who had sidled up.

"Yes, ma'am." The waitress responded. "Would you like a bowl of water for the dogs?"

"Sure." Kerry smiled at her. "Thanks." She waited for the woman to disappear. "You're right. This is nice." She agreed. "I mean, we've got stuff to do next week, but right now, there's nothing going on, nothing we need to worry about."

Dar nodded.

"That's cool." She watched Mocha chew the laces on her hiking boots. "Kind of a shame the new business is taking off as fast as it is."

Her partner chuckled. "Hon, you can't have it both ways."

Kerry sighed. "I know. I sound like a schizo. I told you I was all hot to open our own business I just thought we'd have a little time to chill out before we did it. I should have known better. Our lives just don't work that way."

"Meh. After we get things rolling, we can relax again." Dar said. "Once we bring in people to do the work."

Kerry gave her a droll look.

Dar returned it with a brief, wry grin.

"So. Aside from our first two clients." Kerry paused, as the waitress returned with a big bowl of water and put it down by the table. "Oh my gosh, guys see that?"

Chino got up and went to the bowl, lapping at it and sending a splash of water out to darken the pavement. Mocha rambled right over and then jumped back as another mini wave came over the edge of the dish. "Yap!"

Chino lifted her head and looked at him, water dripping from her mouth, then she went back to drinking.

Mocha inched forward, dodging a few more drops before he got close enough to try sticking his tongue in. Chino paused and regarded him, droplets of water from her mouth hitting him on the head and making him sneeze. "Growf."

The waitress laughed. "They're so cute."

"Thanks." Kerry settled back and took a sip of her wine, newly arrived with the bus boy. It was cold, and crisp, and she was content to lean back and watch the crowds walk by, a mixture of tourists and locals, no one in a hurry, jewels and casual affluence evident.

Lincoln Road wasn't a cheap place. Besides the store they had just left, there were plenty of couture boutiques, jewelery stores, and high end cafes.

Made for great people watching.

Her eyebrow crawled upward as she regarded a woman walking past. "Holy cripes."

"Fake." Dar said, knowledgeably. "Look at that one." She pointed casually.

Kerry's head swiveled, and she paused, looking at the figure passing by and then looking at Dar, then back at the figure, then back at Dar. "What was that?" She lowered her voice.

"I think it was a guy." Dar said. "With breasts and long hair."

"And a nose ring and a tail."

The sushi arrived, distracting them from their people watching. Kerry smiled with pleasure and wielded her chopsticks with skill, selecting a bit of sashimi and adding some soy and sesame seeds to it. She put it in her mouth, then looked down to find Mocha on his hind legs with his front paws scrabbling at her knees, whines escaping from his mouth.

She swallowed. "Little man, you do not need to eat raw fish." She tapped him on the head with the ends of her chopsticks. "Get down."

"Yap!" The puppy barked at her.

They both chuckled, then Dar glanced up. "Ah."

Kerry caught the word and looked to see what Dar was looking at. "Ah." She concluded. "Hey, Eleanor." She greeted their former co-worker and sometime antagonist. "Want some sushi?"

Eleanor pulled up a chair and seated herself. "I can't imagine bumping into you two like this, but you know, I'm glad I did." She said. "Let's talk."

Dar and Kerry exchanged looks.

**

"So look." Eleanor said. "We've never been best friends."

"No." Kerry responded. "You were one of the more hateful people I met at ILS, matter of fact."

Eleanor stopped, and regarded her in some surprise.

"Be fair, Ker." Dar maneuvered another piece of sushi into her mouth. "I gave her good reason to be."

"Dar."

"It's true. I never hid for a minute when people pissed me off." Her partner chewed thoughtfully. "Not even with you."

Eleanor chuckled dryly. "No, that's very true. You never had to wonder what you were thinking. It came right out your mouth." She paused. "But you know, I came to actually appreciate that."

Kerry grunted, and returned her attention to the sushi.

"Right around the time with Ankow." Eleanor said. "After Jose and I realized the potential of that new arrangement of yours. We were at a bar, having a drink, and he'd just sold some crazy amount of contracts on it and he said to me, Shit, the bitch was right."

Dar chortled softly.

"I stopped caring that you made me nuts." Eleanor went on straightforwardly. "So did he."

“Back at you.” Dar said, taking a sip from her glass.

“You knew how to make the right decisions.”

“I always knew that.” Kerry said.

Eleanor gave her a droll look.

“Aside from our relationship.” The blonde woman said. “I have total trust in Dar’s choices.” She wiped her lips with a napkin. “I don’t always understand them, but they always prove out.”

“Not always.” Dar protested.

“Hon, they do.” Kerry gave her a fond look. “Even if it takes a while to unravel the clusterfuck ball, they end up right.”

“Exactly.” Eleanor said. “So.” She leaned forward. “I’m not one of the people who’s going to come running to you for a job.” She said. “I’ve worked all my career for ILS, and I intend on retiring gracefully from them and go on to spend my elder days playing craps in Vegas.”

Dar smiled. “I can picture that.” She said. “Size of company we are isn’t going to need your panache.”

Eleanor regarded her. “That might be the only nice thing you ever said about me.” She remarked.

“Fantastic.” She said. “So you’re not going to build ILS V2?”

Both Dar and Kerry shook their heads firmly in perfect unison. “We figure it’ll maybe end up being... forty, fifty people.” Dar said candidly. “I’m aiming at custom solutions, systems that make new things happen. I don’t want to be ILS. I want to go home at the end of the day and not think about work for a change.”

Eleanor looked profoundly relieved. “We. And I mean me and Jose, don’t want you for a competitor. Its going to be hard enough to replace you where we are.”

“That might be the only nice thing you ever said about me.” Dar replied, with a faint twinkle in her eyes.

“We’re going to concentrate on systems design, and software as a service. Maybe put up a datacenter down south.”

“Maybe we’ll end up subcontracting you.” Eleanor said, after a pause. “No hard feelings, Dar. Everyone in that building misses the both of you. I’ve never seen so many..”

“Pissed off people? Kerry suggested.

Eleanor shook her head. “Sad people.” She replied. “It’s like someone in the family died around there.”

Dar got caught off guard, and for a moment it showed. Then she drew in a breath and lifted both hands up, then let them drop in the table. “Wasn’t my choice how it happened.”

“You could have lied.” Eleanor said. “But we all knew that wasn’t your style.”

“No.”

Kerry studied her lover’s face. “You know.” She cleared her throat a little. “Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to just say...” She paused. “Maybe arrange a company get together.. maybe down at Crandon Beach or something and we could stop by so folks to get some closure.”

Eleanor smiled. “Thanks for not making me work for that, Kerry.” She said. “Think we could arrange that? Maybe next weekend?”

“You can’t say we’re showing up officially.” Dar said, though she looked a lot happier. “I agreed I wouldn’t contact anyone. Part of the deal to not have to announce to the press we were fired.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “Alastair told us yesterday. I think he was trying to be consoling. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t expecting one of the security guards to ask why they did something so stupid in the first place then.”

“Poor Alastair. He’s taking one for the team, I think.”

“He’s taking one for you.” Eleanor disagreed. “Or at least, that’s what he said. Said he owed you one.” She exhaled. “Anyway, thanks for agreeing to do a drive by the party. Unofficially. We’ll put the word out through the usual channels.. though I heard your admins were AWOL.”

“Absent with leave. They’re on vacation.” Kerry supplied. “We were pretty close to them, and I think the whole thing affected them more than most people.”

“And Polenti.” Eleanor smiled briefly. “I was in the room when they asked him if he wanted to step up into Kerry’s slot and he told them to fuck off. Nicely done. I don’t blame him. You know they asked Michelle Graver, right?”

“Really?” Kerry’s brows lifted.

“She just laughed. Five or six others from Fortune 100’s, the same. Some board member’s nephew? The same. Had more sense than his uncle.” Eleanor glanced up as the waitress hovered. “Can I get a glass of Chablis, please?”

The waitress glided off.

“Maybe they should bring in someone from another industry.” Kerry suggested. “Someone who has no idea about ILS, or us.”

Eleanor leaned back in her chair, crossing her pant suit covered legs. “That was Jose’s idea too.” She agreed. “Just bring in some egghead with no clue about what we do. Make it much easier for the two of us, you know?”

Dar chuckled dryly, and picked Mocha up to sit him on her lap. “That infrastructure should hold you for a few years. Just get someone who can keep things even keeled, and who’s service oriented.” She said. “Who knows what’ll be on the table in three or four years? Tech moves at light speed.”

“True.” Eleanor sipped at the wine the server had just delivered. “So. Haven’t ever seen you two down here. What’s up? Slumming?”

“Shopping.” Kerry indicated the boxes. “And we wanted to show off our new puppy.” She reached over and tickled Mocha on his chin, getting a lick on the hand for her pains. “Right, Mocha? Aren’t you brand new?”

“Yap!”

Eleanor rolled her mascaraed eyes. “What are those, anyway?”

“Labrador Retrievers.” Kerry leaned back as Chino hopped up and put her paws on her lap, sniffing interestedly at the sushi. “No raw fish for you madam.”

Dar picked up a small bit of rice ball between her chopsticks and offered it, watching with an indulgent grin as Chino delicately nibbled it off the end of the wooden implements. “They’re really good dogs.” She told Eleanor. “So long as you can survive them being chewing machines for two years.” She let the wriggling puppy down to explore, but kept hold of his leash.

“I have cats.” Eleanor replied “They’re declawed.”

Of course. Kerry dodged past Chino’s head and captured another piece of sushi, popping it into her mouth then almost burst into laughter as the dog investigated where the fish had gone, sniffing at Kerry’s lips with an intense, worried look.

“Growf!”

“Hey!” Eleanor let out a yell, jerking her feet off the ground. “That thing just pissed on me!”

“Yap!”

**

"I think that was a successful day." Dar wiped Mocha's feet off and set him down in the kitchen. "We got laptops, we got sushi, had a nice walk, and our puppy piddled all over Eleanor's Prada's."

Kerry was in the living room with her box and bag, busy unpacking her new laptop. "He's a good judge of character already." She called back. "Sorry, I know you said you were hell on wheels to her but she was still an ass, Dar."

"She was never that bad to you." Dar wandered in from the kitchen and sprawled on the love seat, pulling over her own box. "I think you just hated her because she hated me."

Kerry considered that. "Well." She opened her box and studied the sleek machine inside. "That certainly pissed me off hon, but even beside that, she's a viper."

"Mm." Dar had her new laptop out and on her lap. "These are nice." She opened the top and pressed the power button, her brows lifting at the piano like chord sound that resulted. "Huh."

Chino came over and jumped up next to her, turning around twice and then curling up in a ball. She exhaled with an almost human expression, her eyebrows twitching as Mocha came over and stood up, putting his nose against hers.

"Aw." Kerry looked up over her new screen. "They're so cute." She reached over and grabbed the camera on the table and lifted it up, switching it on and snapping a picture of the two dogs, and her beloved in her sweatpants and very white socks. "So are you."

Dar looked up at her. "Me?"

"You." Kerry smiled, and set the camera back down. The laptop had booted and she ran her fingers over the touch pad. The screen was somewhat similar to what she was used to but the interface was sleeker. She connected the laptop to the condo's wifi and opened a browser.

Dar was busy pecking away at the keyboard. "Huh.. there's a Darwin version of my compiler. Let me go grab that, and see if I can bring up my analytics on this thing." She settled with her back against the love seat arm, and one leg slung up over the back of it, with the other propping up the laptop.

Kerry was doing some browsing. "You going to write a mail server or are we going to go commercial?"

"Let's run an IMAP server. If the firewalls and all that gets there next week I can work on that." Dar said. "Actually, Mark can work on that, and we need to get some Linux admins in because I'd rather use lamp stacks than IIS."

"I love it when you talk all sexy like that." Kerry commented. "Want some cherries?"

"Already have yours. What more do I need?"

Kerry started laughing. "I got a call back from that employment service. They'd totally love to work with us, and can bring in a turnkey package."

"Good." Dar tapped away. "Hey Ker? Thanks for getting that thing next weekend together. Be good to just go and say hello to everyone, but in a neutral place."

Kerry smiled. "You should have seen your face when she said that stuff about someone in the family dying. I almost got up and hugged you."

Dar blushed, blinking a little as she typed. "Hmph."

"It would make me feel good to see you feel good about seeing all those people." Kerry went on. "I want to see them all hugging you.. promise me you won't wig out."

"No promises." Dar muttered, but there was a smile tugging at her lips.

"Okay, I have a bunch of software downloading." Kerry got up. "Let's go start dinner. The general's going to be here at six?"

"Uh huh. He's a steak and potato guy, by the way."

Kerry paused at the entry to the cobalt and white kitchen, and regarded her partner. "Oh my gosh, what I am going to do? I've never ever had to deal with one of those before." She parked her hand on her hip. "Guess I've got to throw away all those soy burgers and alfalfa sprouts."

Dar looked up and grinned, lifting both hands off her keyboard and turning them upward, and then letting them drop. "That was a dumbass thing to say, huh? Sorry about that. I didn't really think you'd feed him rabbit food."

Kerry chuckled and retreated into the kitchen, thinking a little about how their relationship seemed to have morphed these last couple months. She wasn't sure if it had been the trials they'd been through, or just the process of their growing up and into each other, but she'd gotten the feeling that they had gained a stability in each other that hadn't been so evident before.

She felt like she could say anything to Dar now.

Humming lightly under her breath, she opened the refrigerator and removed three T-bone steaks from the meat compartment, already dusted lightly with spices. She set them on the counter top and went back for the small, thin skinned golden potatoes, dumping them into the little basket in the sink and running water over them.

"Yap!"

Kerry paused in scrubbing the taters as she got a visitor. "Yes?" She watched the puppy's tail wiggle furiously. "What can I do for you, little man?"

Mocha sat down and looked up at her. "Yap!"

"Oh my gosh you're so cute." Kerry grinned at him. She got a little puppy kibble and put it in his dish, watching him inhale it, tail wagging almost continuously.

"Ah. He's got you trained already." Dar came in, sliding a little in her socks. "Good boy! I figured he might be hungry since he just tried to get milk out of Chino."

Kerry eyed her. "Really?"

"Well, she does look like Alabaster." Dar retreated with her mug of milk, giving Kerry a wink.

"That's true." Kerry went back to her scrubbing, ending up with a bowlful of potatoes she set aside and covered with a paper towel. "Let's see. String beans will be pretty safe, huh?"

"Yap!"

"Not for you." Kerry shook a bean at him. "Has Chino taught you how to use the doggy door yet?"

Chino had just appeared in the doorway, and now she looked at Kerry with a quizzical expression.

"Go on, show him how to go outside." Kerry instructed her pet, who had now attracted Mocha's attention. The puppy pattered over to her and walked between her legs, coming out from between her front ones and sitting down. Chino soberly licked the top of his head, then she walked over to the dog door and pushed her nose through it.

Mocha looked astonished. Then he bolted forward and tried to get through the door with her, ending up tumbling outside with a startled yelp.

"Growf!" Chino barked, pulling her head inside to give Kerry a look before she continued out the dog door in pursuit of the smaller animal. "Growf!"

Kerry chuckled. "Sorry, Cheebles." She went back to preparing her fresh string beans, cutting the ends off and enjoying the scent of the vegetables, one of the few Dar would eat willingly. She did manage to get her partner to try others in stir fry, when they were either covered in sauce or wok fried and therefore not vegetable tasting.

Carrots were also successful, along with baby spinach, especially when she folded the latter into cheese omelets. Her partner amiably tolerated this adjustment of her ingestibles, understanding that Kerry had her best interests in mind and she'd really gotten pretty good about trying new things.

But there was nothing new today. Kerry nibbled on a raw bean as she reviewed her ingredients, satisfied that she'd produce something completely acceptable especially considering she had, hidden in the refrigerator, one of the death by chocolate cakes her partner was so fond of.

She heard barking outside, and she peered out the kitchen window that overlooked the garden, spotting Chino down on her front legs as Mocha charged her with puppy enthusiasm. They had a rope toy between them and they both grabbed it, tails wagging.

Too cute. Kerry leaned on the counter and idly watched. The sun had started to go down behind them, and it lit the oceanfront with a golden glow that was very different than the light they got in the summertime. Less moisture, she reasoned, letting her eyes track a circling gull.

She opened the window, letting in the rush of the surf and the distinctive scent of the winter air, and heard the sound of children playing down the beach as she tasted a hint of salt on the back of her tongue.

She heard the sound of the sliding glass door and then spotted Dar going to sit down on the swing with her new laptop, tucking one long leg under her as she concentrated on the screen. The breeze was tangling her hair, and as she watched, Dar pushed it behind her ear, displaying a brief flash of her blue eyes.

Then another flash, as if sensing the attention, her partner looked up and right into her own eyes, a smile appearing along with a gentle twinkle.

Oh my gosh. Kerry leaned her chin on her hand and savored the moment. "What a lucky son of a bitch I am."

Dar crooked a finger at her, and Kerry abandoned her preparations, picking up a bottle of ice tea from the refrigerator as she made her way outside, feeling the breeze as it blew in through the open glass doors.
"Yeeesss?"

"C'mere." Dar patted the seat next to her. "Let's try the photo booth."

"The what?" Kerry sat down anyway, leaning an elbow on her partner's thigh.

"Photo booth." Dar clicked in something, then a moment later Kerry was looking at herself on the screen. "C'mere." She pulled Kerry closer and they were both in the frame, and a click later their slightly skeptical and bewildered looks were frozen in perpetuity. "Heh."

"What is that for?" Kerry stared at it. "Is that an application just to take pictures of people sitting in front of your laptop?"

"Yep." Dar looked fondly at it. The resolution wasn't great, but picture made her smile, and she saved it. "I like this thing." She said. "I got my repository mounted to it, and I just compiled Gopher Dar." She sounded satisfied. "This keyboard's comfortable to type on too."

"And it has crazy little apps that let you take pictures of yourself." Kerry mused. "I'm glad you like it, sweetie." She patted Dar's belly. "I'm going to start with dinner. I'll cook the steaks medium rare."

Dar felt the swing move as Kerry got up and she paused to watch her partner retreat back inside the house, leaving the sliding glass doors open as she disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Yap!" Mocha scrambled through the dog door and raced around into the patio with Chino close behind him, a bit of cloth trailing from his teeth. "Yap!"

"Whatcha got there?" Dar grabbed him as he ran past, picking him up onto the swing and inspecting his prize. "Hey Ker?" She rescued the fabric. "We need to buy an underwear hamper."

"Yeah?" Kerry called from the kitchen.

"Yeah. With a top that locks."

Dar heard the footsteps and looked up to find Kerry with her hands on either side of the sliding glass door, leaning out to look at her. She held up the fabric, and grinned.

"Good grief." Kerry rolled her eyes, and retreated again.

Dar balled up the underwear and stuffed it in her pocket, then she put the puppy back down on the floor.

"Now, where did you find that, huh? I hope you didn't find that out in the garden." She inspected one of the puppy's paws, already a healthy size and promised a lot of further growth. "C'mon, let's go see if there are any more out there."

She picked up the laptop and brought it back inside, dropping off the machine on the counter before she opened the back door and went down into the little garden. There was a flight of stairs down from the house, terracotta stone with a 45 degree turn in the middle that ended up at ground level.

It was quiet there, the area surrounded by a stuccoed wall around a space of about thirty square feet, filled with grass, and little beds of flowers and herbs in raised crates and baskets that Kerry puttered with in her spare time.

The grass was trimmed and tended, and high tech. It was planted over a filtration and irrigation system, that drained to the sewer and was sprayed down at night to rid the turf of both salt and dog piddle. There was a door in the middle back of the wall, a wrought iron gate that allowed the gardening staff to come inside, and tidy up on weekday mornings.

Dar pulled out one of the biodegradable bags and attached it to the neatly hanging scooper, roaming around the yard and cleaning up while she searched for more clothing. There were big river rocks outlining the flower beds and in one corner, a little fountain that Kerry had made from a slew of the stones piled up was sedately splashing water out that ended up in a bowl Chino headed right over and drank from.

Dar liked it. Before her relationship with Kerry, the place had been very plastic and boring, with ficus hedges and sea grapes planted around a central area that had a stone table in it. Now, there were metal flat sculptures fastened to the walls, and two hanging chairs that were fastened to the underside of the kitchen, and dog toys in various states of shred scattered around.

There was even an installed speaker system so they could play tunes outside, and fans that they would turn on when it was muggy to stir the air around.

If they'd lived a little further north, she figured they could swing a fire pit. Dar sat down in one of the swing chairs and regarded the space, deciding maybe she would get one to surprise Kerry anyway. It would be nice to sit out here, and have some hot cider in the couple of months they had of decent weather outside.

Birds fluttered over head, and she could hear a peacock off in the distance.

The phone rang inside, and she heard Kerry answer it, supposing it was the ferry terminal telling them of Gerry's arrival.

She watched the dogs play, and took a breath, and when she let it out, the sense of odd surrealism she'd felt since the prior weekend dissipated and this new reality took its place.

It didn't feel so weird anymore. She could think about being fired, and it no longer felt embarrassing, or made the pit of her stomach tense up.

Chino came over and nuzzled her knee, and she stroked her head, watching Mocha attack a leaf that had the temerity to float into the garden and land near him.

She thought about the get together next weekend, and smiled.

Kerry trotted down the steps and joined her, wiping her hands off on one of her kitchen towels. "You'll never guess who that was." She dropped into the other chair and swiveled around in a circle. "My mother."

"Ah. She coming to dinner too? At least she eats steak, unlike mine." Dar remarked.

"She was just coming out of an intelligence committee meeting. Apparently they were being briefed on this new Internet counter terrorism system the president's commissioning."

"Ahh." Dar grunted.

"Annd apparently some of my father's old friends said they'd never support it if ILS were involved."

"Hoisted on their own petard, I'm guessing."

"Mom admitted she had a hard time keeping a straight face, especially when Bridges reluctantly agreed to remove them from any consideration." Kerry said. "It's going to be hilarious when they find out it's us doing it."

"Let's hope I can." Dar said. "Gerry on the way? I thought I heard a car outside."

"Yep." Kerry got up. "She said she liked being the only one in the room who had all the facts, for a change." She held out her hand to Dar, and they walked up the steps together, with the dogs rambling after them. "But she said the whole privacy thing was freaking them out."

"Points for them."

"They wanted to know if the system could identify people specifically who were going to sites like.."

"Like porn." Dar said. "All of them were imagining their next campaign having to explain why they were glued to www.poledancinggirls.com"

"Might make politics more popular then, huh? I can picture those debates on TV."

**

"Okay." Kerry came into the conference room with a small box. "I've got us some communication until we get a phone system in here."

Mayte and Maria were sorting through papers with the employment agency, and Mark was opening some boxes on the other side of the table, sorting through cables and packing peanuts. All of them were visibly tanned, and equally visibly in a good mood, dancing a little to the music from the radio Kerry had plugged in.

They were all in jeans or cargo pants, and Maria was even wearing a pair of Ugg boots she would never had worn in the staid ILS offices.

She could almost sense the lightness in the room. "One for each of you." She handed out boxes. "It's this new thing from Handspring. Dar and I were testing it and we like them."

"Cool!" Mark broke off from his unpacking and opened the box. "Hey I saw these on Tech TV the other day." He glanced up. "We going to set up personal mail on them?"

"Until Dar gets the mail server compiled." Kerry agreed. "She's been working on that today."

"Saw her. Got a Mac, huh?" Mark chuckled. "Freaked me out."

"She likes it." Kerry looked up as the door opened, and her partner stuck her head in. "Hey, we were just talking about you."

Dar grinned. "Mark, give me a hand will ya? They delivered the racks."

Mark put his hands on his hips. "Hey, so when heavy stuff has to be lifted, I'm the guy around here?"

Dar looked at him, then looked down at herself, then back at him, both eyebrows lifting up. "What?"

"You don't count, boss." Mark nevertheless stuck his new gizmo in his cargo pants pocket and headed for the door. "You've got bigger biceps than I do."

Kerry snickered.

"Don't you start." Dar informed her. "I got the accounting module running. Colleen's looking at the table structure." She winked at Maria, then she disappeared after Mark and the door swung shut behind her.

"Okay!" Kerry finished handing out the gizmos. "How are we doing here?"

"I think we're set!" The woman from the agency said. "My gosh you people know how to fast track!"

"Of course." Maria said. "Did I not say we were the bomb?"

Kerry sat down at the table, which was actually a table now, the furniture van having arrived about an hour ago. "Great. The personnel office is pretty much set up down the hall, and I think the office supply truck just showed up outside so we'll have clipboards and pencils and all that stuff coming in."

"Does that mean our things are here too, Kerry?" Mayte asked, looking up from examining her new phone. "We can get all of our desks settled."

"Yep." Kerry said. "So we can abandon our little cave here and get rolling." She led the way out and down the hall to the room they'd set aside on the first floor for personnel, across from the suite of newly repainted offices that would be the accounting department.

"Ah, I've got me some neighbors do I?" Colleen, having heard them approach, popped out of her inside wall office that had huge windows opening into the garden space in the middle. "Hello there!"

"Colleen, this is Mary Jo Bensen, she's from the staffing company." Kerry said. "She'll be bringing in candidates for us, including your startup group."

"Comin thru!" Mark interrupted them, pushing a cart in front of him that had computers and monitors. "Got your PC's here..." "

"Hey, flat screens!" Colleen looked approvingly at them. "Nice!"

"Yup." Mark started to pick up the screen. "A lot less workman's comp with these things. They weigh like nothing." He entered Collen's office and disappeared.

"Great. I'll leave you here to get settled." Kerry pointed at the office set aside for the staffing company. "Mark'll get you set up with a machine, and a printer."

"Great." Mary Jo stuck her head inside. "Nice space." She shouldered her big case full of papers and went inside.

"Okay, now back up to our offices." Kerry said. "All the office supplies are there." She led the way up the steps. "Lot of progress today."

"Yes." Maria agreed. "And Kerrisita, it's so much fun."

"A lot of fun." Mayte chimed in.

"Starting from scratch, you mean?" Kerry asked. "That's what's so cool for me. Everything we're doing we decide on. We don't have to put up with anyone else's ideas."

"Exactly, yes." Maria said, as they reached the top step and entered the big office suite on the corner. "I am so glad there is no gray, and no moron."

"Maroon, mama." Mayte grinned. "Yes, it's nice." She looked around the outer office, which was bigger than her space had been at ILS by far, and had steel and glass furniture that was sleek and modern looking. "Let me go unpack those boxes." She went over and picked up the first one, opening it and peering inside.

Maria smiled, and folded her hands, with a contented expression. "It is good." She said to Kerry. "We make the rules, yes?"

"Yes." Kerry half turned to face her. "You know, Maria, Dar and I were talking and we really thought that for this new office, we should have someone in the position of office manager, don't you think? To be in charge of all the arrangements and things."

Maria considered. "Yes, I think that is a good idea. Someone who everyone can call, to get correct answers." She nodded, then looked up at Kerry, who was smiling at her. "Is that not correct, Kerrisita?" "Will you be our office manager, Maria?" Kerry asked, after a slight pause. "We're only bringing people to work here as managers we really love and trust, and you were on the top of the list. We don't want you to be an admin, or Mayte either."

Maria put her hand on her chest, her eyes going wide. "Kerrisita!" She said, on an intake of breath. "You want me to do this?"

"Absolutely." Kerry said. "In fact, we thought that office right over there would be a nice spot for you." She indicated the corner space across from their suite, which had windows that let the sun in from both the central open space and the outside. "What do you think?"

Maria still had her hand on her chest. "Jesu." She glanced past Kerry at her daughter. "Mayte, did you know of this?"

"No mama." Mayte peeked over the box at her. "But I like it!" She added, with a grin.

"Let's go check it out." Kerry guided her across the hall to the new office, pushing the door open as she caught sight of a moving shadow inside. "Ah, look. A tech is here setting it up for you."

Dar straightened up, a handful of cables clutched in her fingers. "Ah." She said. "Almost done." She watched Maria's stunned face. "This okay for you?"

Kerry had picked a half round desk, in wood and chrome and glass like Dar's was, and it had a big, executive size leather chair behind it.

Maria went over and touched it, then looked at them. "This is for me, truly?" She asked. "Dar, I did not expect this. Are you sure?"

"We're sure." Dar finished connecting the cables and adjusted the angle of the monitor. "I remember you once telling me that back in Cuba you'd had a managerial position, but here, no one respected that." She coiled up a cable with gentle, precise motions, as she looked up at Maria. "Well I respect that."

"You and Mayte were ready to come to work for us without even asking what you'd be doing." Kerry said. "That's a lot of trust, Maria. We want to make sure we pay that back."

Maria sat down on the chair and put her hands on the desk. "I am thinking for sure it is you who are the bomb." She said. "Yes, I will do this. I will be in charge for you."

Dar grinned. "Sweet."

"We're going to make Mayte our operations manager." Kerry told her. "But don't tell her yet. I've got her nameplate being made up."

"Ee!" Maria clapped her hands together, then put them on her cheeks. "It is like Christmas, again."

Dar chuckled. "For us too." She admitted. "I didn't think owning a company would be this much fun, to be honest." She turned on the PC she'd just installed. "Now I'm gonna get back to building us a computer system. Marks hooking up the routers and we've got a temporary Internet circuit in, just a DSL, but it'll be something."

"Dar." Maria got up and came around the desk, opening up her arms. "You are such an angel." She gave Dar a hug, which the taller woman returned. "We will do a beautiful job for you."

"I know." Dar released her, smiling, as Kerry stepped up and got a hug in turn. "We'll get both you and Mayte assistants to boss around. It's going to be a blast."

They all started laughing, though Maria's eyes were bright and wet with tears. "Dar picked this office for you." Kerry related. "She's really good at that. I remember finding out she picked mine."

Dar blushed a little. "Well, I didn't get assistants often." She muttered.

"Oh yes." Maria said, immediately. "Jesu, we spent so many days making sure the furniture was just so, and getting a pretty leather desk pad, and so on to make sure you felt welcome, Kerrisita."

"And I did." Kerry took hold of Dar's hand, bringing it up to her lips and kissing the knuckles. "So we hope you and Mayte feel welcome here, because we want to have a lot of fun, and be successful together."

A knock at the door made them turn to find Mayte looking in. "Oh mama, it's so nice." She said. "You can put a plant over there in that corner in the sun."

Dar and Kerry eased out the door, leaving the two of them to plan the decoration of the space. They walked together hand in hand back to their own space, moving from the sunlit hallway into Kerry's office. "That was cool." Kerry said. "Dar, they never actually even asked me what we were going to pay them."

"You didn't ask me that either." Dar chuckled. "Let em be surprised on payday."

"Like I was."

"Like you were. Hell, like I was. I never asked either, when they made me VP." Dar wandered from Kerry's office to her own, sitting down in her chair and resting her forearms on the table. They weren't being crazy really - the salaries would be in line with industry standards but they were already known quantities, and they knew what kind of work they could expect from them.

Same with the rest of the startup team. There were no unknowns there. Dar leaned back, feeling the leather warm to her skin. The outlines of this new office were already becoming familiar – the built in cabinets, freshly painted, already had some things from her old office, and from home on them.

Stuff she'd never have had at ILS, Dar acknowledged, spotting a teddy bear on one shelf dressed in a cutoff shirt and wearing sunglasses she assumed was supposed to represent her.

She smiled at it, since it had attitude even for a stuffed animal.

Her fish were perched on the low shelving behind her under the window, seemingly pleased they had something to look at besides her inbox. Someone had extended their little tank, and now there were six cubes they could swim in and out of and not contact each other, and even some colorful gravel and a water plant for them to hide in.

Her desk had a big monitor on it, and a mouse and keyboard waiting for her to bring up a tower system to plug into them, all sitting on the glass top of her new desk, which was sleek and with an angled surface that let her rest her hands comfortably while typing.

Chair was nice too. Dar settled back into it, feeling support along her spine. She swiveled the chair around and put her boots up on the low shelves, holding her hands over her thighs as though a laptop were there. "Good."

"Hey Dar?" Mark poked his head in. "We're grabbing tacos for lunch. Want some?"

"Sure." Dar crossed her ankles and let her hands rest on her legs. "They get those racks in?" She watched him nod. "After lunch we can get the network up then."

He nodded again. "This is pretty cool." He admitted. "It's like.. we always had to deal with stuff that had been put in before our time. You know? Here, if it's fucked up, it's our fault."

Dar chortled softly. "Veeerrry true." She acknowledged. "Go grab lunch."

Mark disappeared, and she waited to hear his steps on the stairs before she got up and went into the admin area that Mayte had claimed. She could see evidence of the young woman's personalizing of the space, something that she noticed was absent in their old office.

Everyone seemed to be expanding to fit their new roles. Dar grinned, as she walked out and into the hallway, imagining it already full of people, working on their projects.

"Ma'am?" A delivery person dodged into her view. "I have some boxes here? Can you sign for them? No one's downstairs."

"Sure." Dar studied the clipboard. "Ah, the rush order." She took the box and handed back the signed form, then she took the box over to a windowsill and perched on the edge of it. "Hope they spelled everything right."

She opened the box, and sorted through the contents. Desk and wall plates, the desk ones carefully carved hardwood, and the wall ones chased steel backs with solid black fronts.

Down near the bottom, the company name. Dar let her eyes run over it a few times, a smile tugging at her lips. "Roberts Automation. Would you look at that." She touched the icon she and Kerry had decided on, a dark, solid blue ball bisected with a silver four compass points, and the name in slanted serif font.

Above that, names and titles. She took the box and went back in her office, putting down her two on her desk, then going into Kerry's space to drop off hers.

Then she started making the rounds, taking advantage of everyone being out at lunch to put her little surprises on desk pads for her startup crew to find when they came back. She put Mayte's down, then went over to Maria's office, then she started down the hall to the big space that Mark had settled in.

He'd been surprised at the big, windowed space she'd assigned him, but after he read the plates, maybe he wouldn't be. Dar whistled melodically under her breath, enjoying the moment fully as she passed the empty offices waiting for their new occupants, and trotted down the steps to get to Colleen's space.

She passed the new server room, sticking her head in to find the workmen finishing the walls, and one side of the raised floor already in and sporting ten brand new racks that had just been assembled.

"Hey." The nearest put his square in his tool belt and came over. "Electrical guy said for me to tell you all they brought in the new service. Those lines are hot" He pointed at the thick, black cable running up the sides of the racks, terminating in plugs for the new machines. "30 am per leg he said."

"Good." Dar held her hand up to the air conditioning vents. "We'll see if this tonnage will hold us for now. Might need more."

"Locksmith'll be in later." He simply nodded. "Said you wanted some special locks on the door there?"

"Yup." Dar agreed, sticking her head in the small room behind the server space, where an old telecom backboard rested, along with cables and pipes that came in from the outside. On one side, a single box was alive, blinking lights flickering sedately. Underneath it, was a cardboard box full of gear, waiting to be installed. "That's for later." She took the last of the items out of the box she'd been carrying, and put the empty container down next to the gear. "For twist ties."

She waved at the workmen and left the room, pausing to drop off Colleen's new name plates and getting around to the back stairs just in time to meet the gang on their way back in, their hands full of paper bags.

Kerry was bringing up the rear, laughing with Colleen at something, and then, after a second, she sensed Dar's presence and looked around until she found her. "Hey babe!"

Something she definitely would not have done back at ILS, unless they were in private. "Hey cute stuff." Dar responded. "Find someplace good?"

"They got bacon on their tacos." Mark said. "Dude."

"Bacon?" Dar repeated. "Nice!!"

They took the bags through into the central open space, setting up camp on the plywood trestle table that had been moved out from the conference room. There were folding chairs scattered around and soon they were ensconced and munching.

"Wow." Dar swallowed a bite of her taco. "That's good."

"Skirt steak, bacon, cheese, and hot sauce." Kerry said. "Had your name all over it, Dardar."

"Ay, yi yi." Maria sighed. "Kerrisita!"

"Look who's talking, Senora Carnitas with mojo." Kerry pointed out, grinning when Maria stuck her tongue out at her. "Dar's been eating like a rock star on tour a lot longer than I've known her. She has lower blood pressure and cholesterol than I do."

Mayte giggled.

Dar merely licked some steak juice off her fingers and waggled her dark eyebrows.

"These are really good." Colleen said. "Real stuff, y'now? Not Taco Bell."

Mark pulled something out of his pocket and set it on the table. It was buzzing softly. "I should, like, mail this back to them, huh?" He commented. "I gave em my two weeks today. I could have waited another week, but screw it."

"What did Mari say?" Kerry asked, wiping her lips.

"She wasn't surprised. She knew what was up." Mark said. "She told me about the meet up at the beach on the weekend I said maybe me and Barb would stop by."

"Yes." Maria sipped on her ice tea. "I also have called, and told them that Mayte and I will be leaving. Mari was very nice about it."

"Si, she was." Mayte nodded. "She called me and wanted to ask what we would do for the health insurance."

Everyone glanced at Dar, then at Kerry.

"Well." Kerry said. "I'm waiting for a call back from two of the providers that we used at ILS. I know we can't get the rates they got, because they're so much bigger, but I think we can get a plan that makes sense. You all will keep your benefits until ILS terminates you."

"Righto." Colleen agreed. "My dad's construction company has a small business plan. Not bad! He's got some better benefits than I got either at the bank or ILS."

"I'm cool." Mark spoke up around a mouthful of taco. "I'm on Barb's plan. I never used our stuff anyway."

"We bumped into Eleanor on the beach." Dar said. "She told us about the beach thing. We said we'd swing by to say hi to folks."

"I heard." Mark's eyes twinkled a little. "I got texts from half the department."

Dar grinned, but kept munching.

"Well, back to work." Mark pushed his wrappers into a bag and stood up. "See ya inside." He got up and the others did likewise, straggling back towards the door to the inside while Dar and Kerry remained outside, finishing their lunch.

Dar took out her last taco, enjoying the taste. "Door plates came in."

"Yeah?" Kerry wiped her fingers on her napkin and washed down her last bite. "Did they come out nice?" She watched her partner nod. "They in the office?"

"I went around and put them on people's desks."

"Ooh. Mark and Mayte are going to be surprised." Kerry laughed in delight. "This is so much fun."

A loud voice made them both turn around to locate it. Through the propped open door they could see the rear entrance, where a man was standing pointing in the opposite direction.

"Get outta here! I told you once, I ain't telling you again."

"Hm." Kerry folded up her napkin. "Wonder what that's all about?"

"Shut the fuck up, you asshole." A voice yelled back. "I'm just checking for some boxes in the trash. Leave me the hell alone!"

They exchanged glances, then got up and headed for the door together, almost bumping as they went through the opening. "Let's find out." Dar said, as they crossed the hall and emerged on the loading dock, to find one of the building maintenance man facing off against a scruffy, bearded man in a wheelchair.

The maintenance man turned "Scuse me. Let me go call the cops for this jerk." He pushed past them and went into the small facilities office just off the dock.

That left Dar and Kerry regarding the man in the chair, who stared back at them and scowled.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" He said. "Get your asses back to the beauty parlor fore I kick them."

Dar put her hands on her hips.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Kerry sighed. "And it was such a nice day, too."

'You hear me?' The man shouted. "Get outta here!"

"Hey!" Dar responded after the echo faded. "Shut up." She dropped her hands and walked over to him. "Shut up, before I knock that chair over and you with it."

Kerry blinked a little in shock. Dar wasn't usually that blunt with people she didn't really know, and was sympathetic to the disabled as far as she'd ever seen.

"What?" The man stared at her, apparently as shocked as Kerry was.

"You heard me." Dar stopped within reach. "Who the fuck you think you are making trouble for the guys here. They're just working stiffs. They don't need you pulling crap out of the dumpster and making a mess for them. Take off."

He backed himself off from her. "You serious?" He asked. "I'm just looking for some fucking boxes, bitch. I'm homeless."

"And?" Dar blocked the way to the dumpster. "Try asking for them. People usually respond better to that."

"You ain't got no respect." He said. "Go to hell." He turned and started off, wheeling himself along with short, savage thrusts of his hands.

"Wow." Kerry came over and eyed her. "You were kind of tough on him."

"Being disabled, or being homeless for that matter, doesn't get you a free asshole pass." Dar said. "Besides, he'll just come back after we leave." Dar went over and inspected the dumpster, which, in fact, had plenty of flattened boxes in it. "I should have them come empty this."

"Hey." Kerry bumped her shoulder against her own. "Chill, hon. They're just boxes."

"I know. I just don't like people being idiots for no reason." Dar turned as the maintenance man came back, with a second, much larger man. "Hey."

"Where'd he go?" The man asked. "I got the cops coming."

"Dar scared him off." Kerry said. "Who was that guy?"

"You scared him?" The bigger man said. "You should be careful, lady. That guys a nutter." He told her in an earnest tone. "Got him a gun, some kind of veteran or something. He rams cars and stuff in the lot, makes trouble around here too with the cafe and stuff."

"Yeah." The other maintenance man said. "You nice ladies should be careful. We don't want any trouble with this guy. Gonna have the cops go find him and chase him off." He assured her. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not." Dar said, mildly. "I just don't like jerks." She put a hand on Kerry's shoulder. "C'mon. Let's go finish unpacking."

They walked inside, and up the back staircase. “Let’s ask Marcus about that guy.” Kerry suggested.
“Sounds like he’s been around for a while.”

“Mm.”

“Remember we don’t have a slew of security guards here, hon.”

Dar eyed her. “You really think I ever depended on the security guards at ILS for anything?”

Kerry chuckled wryly. “I know, but we’re not in a huge building surrounded by them anymore and I’d hate to see someone take a shot at you in the parking lot, you know?”

Her partner considered that as they got to the top of the stairs. She took a breath, then she visibly let it out.
“Yeah, I get it.” She admitted. “Sometimes I just don’t think before I talk.”

“Especially when someone challenges you.” Kerry tucked her hand inside Dar’s elbow, and bumped gently against her.

They walked along the upper hall and paused, as Mark came out of his office, having heard them. He had his name plate in his hands, and he held it up, pointing a thumb at his own chest. “You’re kidding right?
Me, a director?”

“Expensive April fool’s joke.” Dar smiled back at him. “Don’t like the title? You can make up one if you want.” She suggested. “You guys took a risk coming with us. I want to make it worth your while.”

Mark grinned, and gave his plaque a brief hug. “I never gave a shit about titles.” He said. “But my family’s gonna get a kick out of it. Specially my dad. He’s said for years Barb wore the pants in the family cause I was just some grunt geek and she had the degree and fancy job title.”

“Your dad’s an ass.” Dar responded. “You haven’t been a grunt geek in a long long time.”

“No, I know.” He said. “He’s stuffed shirt that way. Banker.”

“Enjoy it.” Dar gave him a slap on the shoulder, and she and Kerry continued along the hall, not before Kerry gave Mark a wink before she followed. “Saw the DSL was in.” Dar called back over her shoulder.
“Let me know when you want to mount the WAPS.”

“Speaking of grunt geeks.” Kerry kidded her. “I think you secretly like power tools.”

“Secretly?”

Kerry shook her head in mock despair as she parted from Dar, and entered her own office. It smelled like new computer inside, and she went to her desk, sidetracked when she spotted the wrapped items sitting on the surface. “Ah hah.” She sat down and pulled them over, unwrapping the larger of the two and turning it around so she could see it.

For a moment, she studied it in silence, feeling a prickle of surprise, and a very slight shortness of breath.
Just her new name, over the logo, and the word owner, but seeing it there was almost a shock.

Almost.

She put it down on the smooth glass surface of her new desk, admiring the beautifully carved wooden letters.

A knock softly came at the door, and she looked up to find one of the carpenters there. “Oh, hi.”

He pointed at the other wrapped item. “Want me to put it on the wall for ya? Been doing that for the others.”

“Sure.” Kerry handed over the wall plaque to him. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He retreated back into the antechamber, shutting the door as he worked on it.

She could hear Mayte talking to him, but the words burred out as she returned her eyes to her desk plate, resting her chin on her fist and smiling.

"Like it?"

She looked up to find Dar in the doorway between their offices, leaning against the jam. "Do you really have to ask?" She demurred. "C'mon, Dar."

Her partner strolled across the room. "You know one thing I don't like about these desks? I'm not sure I want to sit on them." She perched on the windowsill instead. "We should get them to make these sills a little wider, and put a cushion on them for when we visit each other."

"Anything you want, hon." Kerry turned in her chair. "I'll go buy a recliner for you if you want. Spend your whole day chilling out with that laptop next to me. I'd love it."

"So would I, but I'd probably spend most of my time messing with you instead of working." Dar acknowledged mournfully. "Or tweaking Gopher Dar."

Kerry chuckled gently, watching the sunlight outline Dar's tall form. "You need a haircut." She leaned back and parked her boots on the sill. "Though the shagginess kinda sexy."

"There's a haircut place down the street next to that cafe. Maybe tomorrow I'll go." Dar said. "It's nice to have a lot of stuff around in walking distance." She got up off the sill. "Glad you like the paperweight. I'm going to go finish installing the mail server."

"Nerd."

Dar's eyes twinkled. "Takes one to know one." She gave Kerry's ankle a pat and sauntered back through the door into her own office.

Kerry's gizmo beeped, and she looked down to see a text message waiting. She scrolled over and clicked on it. "Ah." She got up. "The replacement for the phone company. Let's go see what that's going to be like."

She took a moment to position her new desk plate on one end of her desk, making sure it was aligned with the edge of the glass surface. She backed up a step and regarded it with a happy grin, and then she went to the front door, opening it cautiously in case the carpenter was still working.

He was, but not on her plate. He was putting Mayte's plate up on the half wall that fronted her desk and he looked up as she entered. "You getting these for everybody?"

Kerry paused. "Everyone will get a name plate, sure. But these are special since this is the startup group for the company, like a day one kind of thing."

The man nodded "Nice. He said. "What d'you people do?"

Always a tough question. "Computer stuff." Kerry fell back on her usual description. "Programs, and things like that."

He stood up, and put his hammer into his work belt. "Yeah? You hiring? My kid loves computers but he don't want to go work for no big company. He's a little different."

"Send him over." Kerry said. "We are hiring for a whole bunch of positions." She steadfastly refrained from asking him to quantify the difference, figuring if ILS could survive Scuzzy, there wasn't much she couldn't handle. "First floor, down the hall from the conference rooms, there's a recruiting group there with all the paperwork."

The man smiled. "See if I can get him off his computer game to come down here." He sighed. "Kids." He eyed her. "Got any?"

"Dogs." Kerry responded. "Two of them. That's enough for me."

"Yeah, my wife says we shoulda stuck with cats." He dusted his hands off. "Thanks ma'am, see you all later."

Kerry continued down the steps to the front door, where two men were waiting, one in a polo shirt and cargo pants, the other in a suit. "Hello."

"Uh.. Ms. Roberts?" The man in the suit hazarded. "I'm Juan Carlos Jimenez, and this is Alfredo Rojas. We're from Fortinet.. you asked to see some information about an IP PBX?"

"Yep." Kerry only just barely remembered to answer to the name. "That's just what we need, and in the short term. Let's sit down in here, okay? I think we've got some coffee and drinks on the cart too."

They followed her into the conference room, now tided and starting to resemble a business space. A projection system was piled against one wall waiting for installation, but a white board was already fastened to the opposite flat surface and the small Rubbermaid cart did, in fact, have some coffee ready on it.

"Kerry?" Mayte poked her head in, eyes lit. "Oh, I am sorry. You have visitors." She said. "I had the cafe come in to do a service to see if you liked it, yes?" She pointed at the cart.

"Yes." Kerry said. "Looks great. C'mon in and sit in on this meeting, Mayte. I think I'll ask you to take charge of the phone system implementation."

Mayte gladly complied, closing the door behind her and joining them at the table. She put her pad down, and took a pen from her sleeve pocket, waiting for them to go on.

"Great." Juan Carlos said. "So let me make sure I got all the details in. This building, its your only location?"

"For now." Kerry smiled.

He nodded. "Sure. You said maybe 50 people?"

"Yes. Right now we have about a half dozen. But we're hiring, and we'll eventually have we think around 50 people in this office."

"Okay, so." The man looked at his notepad. "So we figure a phone for every person, yeah? Plus ten public phones? You gonna want them in the hall? What about in the conference space... right?"

"We should have some nice phones in here, to make the teleconferences." Mayte spoke up, unexpectedly. "Many people will want to hear and speak clearly, and also, to put video."

Kerry could hardly manage to stifle a surprised grin. "Right." She agreed.

"Right." Juan Carlos also agreed. "Now, you understand, this isn't an old style PBX, right? It's IP?"

The other man with him reached over and put his hand on Juan Carlos wrist. "JC, don't embarrass us. These people know what IP is."

Kerry chuckled.

"Oh." The salesman blinked. "Okay."

"You may not know who Dar Roberts is, but I do." Alfredo's eyes twinkled a little. "Though I don't think the industry's heard she's parted ways with ILS yet."

"They haven't." Kerry agreed. "Couple more weeks for that. We just hung up our own shingle, so to speak." She turned to Juan Carlos. "So yes, we do understand this isn't a traditional PBX. What I really want to know is, how soon can you install it."

"Oh." JC repeated himself. "Well, sure. So you want to place an order then?"

"We do." Kerry nodded.

"We have to do some paperwork." The salesman seemed flustered. "We have to get the business side done, I mean, the contracts, and I guess they will want to do a profile, and get credit check done and all that.. it could take a few weeks."

Kerry leaned her arms on the table. "If I pay cash up front, how much can I shorten that?"

Alfredo smiled. "Let me go make some phone calls. See what availability is." He said. "Can I assume you want whatever the top of the line is?"

"You can, but I don't need anything with mahogany inserts or gold trim. Put all the value in the hardware."

"JC, pack your stuff up. We don't need you." Alfredo patted his shoulder kindly. "Just go book the order. I'll take care of the delivery..." He glanced up at Kerry. "You're going to need SIP circuits?"

"I have Metro E being dropped." Kerry said. "But if you can source yours, I'll take them." She said.

"Coordinate with Mayte, she'll get you the node counts and she can sign off on the dial plan. Shouldn't be too hard, with only 50 people."

"Shouldn't be."

"Got any cool new toys you want us to test out for you?"

Alfredo smiled. "Maybe."

"We're trying out these." Kerry pulled out her Handspring and showed it to him.

"Huh." He took it and examined it.

"Could you make it so our phones at the desk go to these when we are not there?" Mayte asked. "And we would also like to find a way to take the faxes, and put them in our emails. Can you do that?"

Alfredo was nodding. JC just sat there, his eyes going from one to the other. "Can I buy you all some cupcakes or something? Do an errand?" He finally asked, with a slightly embarrassed laugh. "Hold the door? Maybe carry a box?"

"That's a good idea, with the faxes." Kerry said. "Then we won't need analog lines."

"Okay we'll work up a deployment plan." Alfredo said. "I'll work with Mayte and we'll get it done." He handed back the gizmo to Kerry. "Any chance of getting to meet her?"

Kerry laughed. "Sure." She got up and went to the door, opening it and walking out into the front hall. She looked both ways, then spotted her partner on a ladder halfway down the long corridor. "Hey hon?"

Dar's head turned. "Yeees???"

"Come meet our VOIP providers. One of them a fan of yours."

With a faintly exasperated snort Kerry could hear from where she was standing, the taller woman got down off the ladder and headed in her direction, seating a screwdriver into her tool belt as she walked.

Kerry watched her dust her hands off, and noted the contented expression on her face and understood this hands on work really was something her partner enjoyed, and always had. When she thought of the times Dar seemed the happiest, it was when she was in the thick of things, cables wrapped around her neck, making things work.

Not when she was being an executive, having to deal with the politics of that. "C'mon tiger." Kerry took her by the hand. "Want to see the specs for the new phones?"

"You bet." Dar agreed. "They got gig pass through? What class PoE?"

"Let's find out."

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Dar locked the door behind them as she zipped up her jacket, waiting for Kerry to move forward a little before she followed her down the path towards the parking area. "Good day." She commented, as they walked between the thickly planted hedges. "Want to go swimming tonight?"

"Absolutely." Kerry shifted the strap on her briefcase. "They've got a slew of resumes for programmers they want you to look at tomorrow, make sure they're looking for the right people."

"Sure." Dar hit the door opener for the truck, and opened the cab door, putting her own briefcase in and grabbing Kerry's to join it. She closed the door as her partner walked around to the passenger side, then got into the driver's seat herself. "Who was the kid with the skateboard and the piercings I saw in the hall?"

"Ah. One of the construction guys sent his son over. I had Mark talk to him." Kerry settled herself, with a satisfied sigh. "He's a hacker."

"Really a hacker, or a script kiddie?" Dar started the truck, glancing around her out of long habit. They were almost alone in the parking lot, the rest of the staff having gone about fifteen minutes prior.

"Really. Mark liked him." Kerry said. "Said he'd be good for security as long as you made sure he didn't turn the mainframe into a gaming server and put it out on the Internet." She mused. "I think you should talk to him before we decide to take a chance."

"Takes one to know one, that what you were thinking?" Dar chuckled. She backed out and was about to pull out of the lot when something caught her peripheral vision. "Heh. There's our belligerent friend"

Kerry peered across the trunk and spotted the man in the wheelchair. "What's he doing?"

"Arguing with someone, again." Dar was about to pull out again when the argument suddenly escalated and the man the disabled man was arguing with grabbed him and pulled him out of the chair, dumping him on the ground and starting to kick him. "Whoa! Son of a bitch!"

Kerry released her seat belt at the same time she felt the truck shift into park. She had her door open a second after Dar dove out of hers, and she was on the ground and running only a step behind her partner's taller form.

"Hey!" Dar let out a bellow. "What the hell are you doing?"

The attacker paused and turned, visibly surprised to see two women charging at him. "Get the fuck out of here!" He yelled, taking a step away from the disabled man and bringing his fists up. "I'll kick your ass!"

"Not before I call the police you won't." Dar pulled up in front of him, both her own hands balling into fists. Her knees bent a slight bit as her weight came over the balls of her feet. "Leave him the hell alone."

"Lady, this ain't none of your fucking business. So go back to your truck, and go the hell home." The man said. "Stay out of my face."

"Or?" Dar asked, after a brief pause. Her voice dropped and she tilted her head slightly to one side, watching him.

The man was caught flatfooted. "What?"

Kerry circled him and went to the disabled man's side. He was rolling over and trying to get to his chair cursing under his breath. "Can I help you?"

He froze, and looked up at her.

"You said, stay out of your face. I said, or, as in, or what?" Dar edged to one side, drawing him away from Kerry. "I enjoy pointing out to gutless jacktards their own lack of knowing what the hell they're saying."

"You calling me gutless? Bitch? I just got back from Afghanistan. You want to see guts? Let me cut you open so you can see yours." He pulled a knife from the small of his back.

"This is not Afghanistan." Dar held her ground, studying the angle of how she'd have to move if he did something stupid. "This is a public street, in the city of Miami, and you can't kick the shit out of people, or stab them, without getting your ass thrown in jail."

'He'll cut her.' The disabled man said, suddenly. "He doesn't give a shit."

Kerry righted the wheelchair and swung it over. "She'll kick him in the head first. Can I help you get up?"

The man struggled upright and grabbed the edge of the chair. "Just hold it still, m'kay?"

Kerry did, moving around so she could keep her partner and the knife wielding man in sight. "Dar, I'm calling the cops." She said, in a loud tone. "I'm not putting up with this nonsense outside our office."

"Screw you all." The man with the knife glanced behind him, then he shoved the knife into hiding and took off, running down the street and disappearing around a sharp bend in the road.

Dar went over and helped Kerry hold the chair still, while the disabled man hauled himself up into it, showing a significant strength in his upper body. "Thanks for fucking nothing." He told them. "Now I have to deal with that asshole calling me a pansy cause some girls came and helped me."

"He's the one who ran away." Dar pointed out.

"You said you were calling the cops. Sure he ran. I would have too if I had legs anymore." The man adjusted himself. "Fucking cigar eaters. Don't need them patronizing my ass either."

"If you all weren't always fighting in the street they'd probably leave you alone." Dar suggested.

"Right." Kerry released the chair and stepped back. "But we really aren't going to put up with this outside our office, so the next time I will call the police."

"So keep your jackassery away from us." Dar added. "You and the rest of your buddies find someplace else to argue."

The disabled man looked from one to the other. "Who the fuck are you people? What the hell are you doing here?" He asked, rolling forward a foot or two.

Both women took a step back.

"My name is Kerry, and this is my partner Dar." Kerry felt a sense of the ridiculous that almost made her lightheaded. "We own the company that rented that office building." She pointed at it. "That's what we're doing here."

"And we're not going to have our staff tripping over people fighting on the sidewalk." Dar concluded, glancing up as she caught sight of a patrol car slowly cruising toward them. "Better take off if you want to avoid the cops."

He stared at them for a minute more, then got his hands on the rails of his wheelchair and turned it around. "I need a drink anyway." He shoved himself away from them, shaking his head repeatedly until he disappeared into the distance.

Dar took a breath, then released it. "Let's go home and play with our new puppy." She said. "I've had about enough pointless idiocy for the day."

"You're such a crusader." Kerry felt the shaking in her knees relax, as they walked back to the idling truck. "But you know, we really need to talk to Marcus tomorrow. Stuff like that's just not cool."

"Got that right."

The cop car cruised past, slowing to watch the get in the truck and close the doors before they sped up again and continued down the road, pausing at the corner, then turning right and heading the direction both the men had.

Dar regarded the disappearing tail lights then she turned and looked at Kerry. "Maybe we do need to think about having a few security guards around."

"Mm." Kerry buckled her seat belt. "At least until your dad gets back in town."

"Mm."

**

There was enough done, and enough installed by the following afternoon for Dar to settle in at her desk, her new laptop on one side, her desktop on the other, and an 11 x 18 size pad of graph paper in front of her ready for her to start considering structure for their two projects.

It felt exciting. She was relaxed and comfortable, glad to be in jeans and a sweatshirt with its sleeves pushed up above her elbows looking forward to an afternoon of high level design.

They had extended offers to five people, the network was all patched and ready to go, the DSL link was active, the WAPs were installed and working, and she was starting to hear the faint rattle and buzz of activity echoing softly in the halls.

She had light coming in behind her, and she uncapped the dark blue pen and sat for a minute, hand holding up her head as she considered how she wanted to start building these new things.

Across the room, on the shelf, there was a new music player that Kerry had installed for her, with a little remote control she could use from her desk. It was playing some quiet new age music now and she felt her body moving gently to it as she started to sketch out her design.

Logic symbols and boxes, shapes and arrows in a mental shorthand that truly only meant something to her as she put down how this system should talk to that system, at what level, with what language. It wasn't something she'd learned in school, rather, it was something she'd invented to be able to put down on paper her own way of getting things done.

Part diagram, part logic flow, part high level structure. It felt impossibly good to be sitting here in the quiet, with no screaming people or ringing telephones to interrupt her concentration.

Nice.

She started with Gerry's project, boxing in the services he commanded and scribbling in their names, along with the systems each used to collect their data in a veritable cornucopia of neatly formed shapes. Then she paused and regarded them, before she put a bigger box in the top center, labeling it with neat, precise capital letters.

Then she drew lines between the services and their programs and the box, turning her head a little sideways to write in the data stream types and languages the systems would be speaking.

Another box went below that, and she spent five minutes or so writing in the intent of the system, along with lines that ended in circles, with names applied to all of them.

Then she sat back and studied it.

Wasn't really that difficult a design. She drew in a makers box on the bottom and added the name of the system, her name, and systems architect after it, a smile appearing on her face as she filled in a few more details, glad she hadn't seemed to have lost her touch during the years she's spent running things.

You could. She'd seen designers become project managers and lose the ability to go back to initiate things. But she'd done enough development and stuff on the side that she thought it wouldn't take all that long for her to get that edge back.

"Whatcha doing hon?" Kerry came in, sipping from a bottle of ice tea.

"Making Gerry's plan." Dar replied. "C'mere and I'll show ya."

Needing no prompting, Kerry came over and perched on the window sill. "You're writing it out longhand?"

"Sure." Dar said. "Despite what Visio would have you believe, it's actually easier to do this from scratch with a pen and a pad. So look."

"I'm looking."

"Six services. Each of them use different databases." Dar said. "SQL, MySQL, Oracle, DB2, Sybase, and Informix."

Kerry regarded the pad. "Are you actually telling me that they couldn't decide on using the same database, any of them?" She asked in patent disbelief. "No way."

"Yes way." Dar contradicted her. "So, having then all talk to each other is pointless. We'd spend our entire time writing interfaces that stopped working as soon as they patched or upgraded."

"Huh." Kerry studied the paper. "So they all talk to the big box."

"Mm. So we use this." She pointed at the first square. "We use an enterprise service bus. It's a universal translator." She added. "Takes input from all those systems, and rewrites it into a common structure."

"Hm. I remember learning about them in school. We didn't have one at ILS though." Kerry commented. "I remember seeing a test system at the college that let them bring in data from fake fast food joints."

"No we didn't." Dar agreed. "I wouldn't allow systems to be installed that weren't a common interface. We used Oracle across the company because I told everyone if they tried using anything else they were going to pay for the enterprise support group out of their salaries."

Kerry nodded. "I can picture that meeting." She remarked. "There's a point to standardization."

"There is. You reduce your support matrix if you limit the needed skill sets." Dar said, then paused. "Boy do I sound like a talking head or what?"

"I love your talking head." Kerry smiled. "Feel free to try out your lectures on me anytime."

Her partner smiled. "Uh huh. So then, we put in a data warehouse." Dar pointed to the second box. "The genius of this, is that we strip the data of source, so it's pure data. Then we can run analytics on it, and I'll write a natural language report generator so they can just ask it questions, and it will make the connections for them."

Her partner studied the page, then looked at her. "You can do that?"

"I can do that." Dar smiled. "Listen, I know you're more used to seeing me in an operations role, but I started as a programmer."

"No, I know you did." Kerry sat back. "I mean, I realized, Dar, just going day to day in the company that there was an awful lot of stuff there that you personally created." She said. "I was just going wow in my head about the natural language thing. That's hard."

"It's hard." Her partner agreed. "But I've been thinking about it for a while – you have to make it so that it's not so hard for them to interact with these systems, so they feel comfortable with it. Otherwise they'll just ignore it and go back to writing everything down on library cards."

And of course, Dar would know that from the inside. Kerry drew in a breath, appreciating this newly revealed facet of her lover intensely. It was like getting to know her way back when, before she went on a personal track that would get her kudos and prestige. "That's totally cool." She said.

Dar grinned. "Glad you think so." She said. "I'm going to scan this in and put it in an official structure, then send it over for Gerry to run by his ops team. I don't expect they'll give me any grief over it."

Kerry leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Awesome." She said. "So how long would it take a normal person to figure this out?"

Her partner chuckled. "I've been doing this a while. Give me some credit for experience." She said. "Feels good to be doing it again. I missed being an architect. I figured that out after I did that new network." She leaned back in her chair. "That's why this whole new thing's been so much fun."

Ah. It was like music. "Totally glad to hear that, my love." Kerry smiled. "I knew you weren't happy there. You were in a box you didn't much like but you weren't sure how to get out of. You couldn't have gone back, there."

"Right." Dar nodded. "Crazy making." She admitted. "Only thing that kept me from going nuts was you."

Kerry ruffled her hair and then kissed the top of her head. "Love you." She meandered around the desk and headed back for her own office, where she could hear her gizmo ringing from where she'd left it. "Be back in a minute."

Dar watched her until she disappeared, then she returned her attention to her pad, adding a few more details before she got up and went to the scanner on the wall shelf, picking up the top and putting the pad on it face down. She triggered the scan and went back to her desk, watching the paper appear on her monitor.

It had come together fast, but then, she'd been thinking about it since the meeting, putting together ideas in her head she wanted to try and use to give Gerry the best result.

Because she really wanted to do that. The contract would have been hard to sell for ILS – they'd have had to build in far too much overhead to cover the contract costs – here, it was much simpler, and she could work on building a support team after they got to a certain point.

She filtered the drawing into her diagramming program, a custom written set of code that did block and character analysis and produced a digital version of the drawing she'd done, complete with the writing, converted into a font that was a reasonable facsimile of her handwriting because she'd coded it that way.

She cleaned it up, and removed the grid lines, then opened up the newly started mail program and connected it to the equally newly christened mail server.

Very raw, and very basic. It wasn't the pretty mail they'd used at ILS, but it encrypted the mail, and gave them email addresses in their new company domain. She looked up Gerry's dot mil address in her phone, then she attached the plan, and rattled off a few lines of basic explanation.

Then she sat back and studied the mail, unable to suppress a smile as she clicked send, and watched the server obediently move it along its way.

"Hey boss." Mark stuck his head in. "I got the website set up. Figured we'd just go with NetSol and let them deal with the hassle until we got a datacenter to house production stuff in."

Dar nodded.

"So, it's just basics." Mark came over and pointed at the PC. "Dub dub dub RobertsAutomation.com. G'wan and hit it."

Obediently, Dar typed in their domain name, pleased when it came back with relatively snappy response. "Ah." She regarded the screen, which now showed a page in what was becoming their corporate colors, with the company logo on it, and contact information. "Short and sweet."

"We need a web guy to do stuff with it." Mark said. "I just wanted to get the page up and secure the domain."

"We'll get that going." Dar studied the generic page. "Give it some personality."

"Yup." He agreed. "You want anything added to that page? I still got my notepad open."

Dar considered. It really was just a splash page, with a contact number she recognized as Kerry's. That would change once their phone system was in, she reasoned. The address of the building was there, and under the About Us page, just a listing of the startup crew with their titles.

"Had to." Mark grinned. "I wanted it to be out in the world so I can tell my relatives to hit the page if they didn't believe me."

Dar chuckled. "Looks good for now." She said. "Custom application and system design. I like it." She pushed the pad over to him "I just sent our first spec out to Gerry Easton. Let's see if they like it."

Mark sat down on the chair across from her desk and studied the pad. "You know what the coolest thing is?" He asked her. "Not getting 2 am phone calls yet."

"We'll set up support groups for the service groups." Dar said. "With some crossover, maybe contract a few overseas groups for follow the sun."

"Yeah – but it's gonna be freak-out city if they have an issue and we've got to call up ILS and bitch them out for network problems." Mark's eyes twinkled. "At least, for now."

Dar's eyes also twinkled. "For now." She conceded. "Though, I really don't want to be ILS. I want us to stay a little small, so we can react to what's going on. Look at all the businesses that tanked after 9/11 – couldn't change."

Mark looked around the office. "I was thinking that myself before." He admitted. "How cool it was just to have a little crew here, and everyone tight."

"Nice to just be sitting here working on this stuff." Dar smiled quietly. "Really nice to know my phone's not going to ring and have some board jerk on the other end chewing my ass." She drew the pad back and flipped the page over, considering the new clean space waiting for her imprint. "I was getting really tired of that."

"Bet you were." Mark got up. "Let me go get the backups going. We just got the library hooked up." He circled the chairs and ambled out. "Later!"

Later. Dar smiled and tapped her pen against her pad, settling down with her chin on her hand again as she pondered the teal squares.

Bridges project would be different. She'd have to be very careful how she structured it, and there would be the issue of access. It would also require a natural language interface, but instead of the regulated structure of the databases, this would need to be able to handle the free form fire hose of data that was the Internet.

Slowly she sketched in several squares. Then she drew a mesh between them, but after a minute, she pulled off the page and crumpled it up. No, it couldn't be modular. "Has to scale." She muttered, drawing a bunch of circles, as she bounced in the chair a little, making it squeak.

Another crumple. The Internet. was a distributed system. There was no central point, no one place it all went through.

Dar got up and went out to the antechamber, where Mayte was busy assembling a set of files behind her desk. "Hey Mayte."

The young woman looked up, and smiled. "Did you need something?"

"Just going to get a drink." Dar rambled down the stairs, emerging on the bottom floor and ducking into conference room where the drink cart had been set up. She observed her choices, then selected a cup and got some coffee into it, adding a little cup of flavored creamer and stirring it.

"Uh hey."

Dar turned, to find the kid with the skateboard she'd seen the previous day standing in the doorway. "Hey."

The kid looked half embarrassed, half annoyed. "I came here yesterday?"

"Right." Dar focused on him. "Your father's one of the carpenters .He sent you here to get a job."

The kid looked relieved. "Yeah, right. So I was here yesterday, and they told me I had to come back today and talk to somebody about working here."

Dar took a seat and waved him in. "I'm the somebody. C'mon in."

He eyed her dubiously, but entered the room and put his skateboard down, sitting down in a chair across from her. "So I talked to this guy yesterday."

"Mark." Dar nodded.

"Yeah." The boy agreed. "So he talked to be about some security stuff."

Dar studied him. "You want to do security stuff?"

He shook his head. "No not really." He said. "It's all cool the hacker stuff and all that, and I guess it would be okay to look around for that stuff happening, but it's kinda boring." He said. "If I want to do that I can just sit on the Internet. at home or at the library."

Dar counted herself highly entertained. "So what do you want to do?" She asked. The kid was about Kerry's height, and had sandy blond hair and hazel eyes, and a smattering of freckles across his nose, and his body under its cotton t shirt and jeans was gawky and angular. "Or, what do you like to do?"

He considered her for a long minute. "I like to make stuff."

"Hm." Dar tilted her head a little. "Stuff like what? Like programs?"

He shrugged.

"Got some code with you?"

He held up a thumb drive.

"C'mon." Dar got up and motioned him to follow her up the steps and back across the hall into her office. The antechamber was empty now, but she could hear Mayte's voice coming from Maria's new office.

She circled her desk and held her hand out, taking the drive and stuck it into the usb port in her laptop.

"They won't run on that." The kid commented.

"Don't want to run anything." Dar sat down and pulled up her editing system. "I want to see the code." She scanned the drive and selected a file, bringing it up in the editor and studying it.

The kid gave her a more interested look. "You program?"

Dar glanced up at him, and nodded, then went back to the screen. She bumped the desk slightly with the chair, and her desktop screen came to life, but she ignored it while she concentrated on the text.

A soft chitter distracted her though, and she looked up to see Gopher Dar appear, doing a little dance across the screen. She chuckled softly and went back to the laptop.

"What's that?" The kid asked, after a minute of silence.

Dar looked up. "Whats what?"

"That." He pointed at Gopher Dar. "Is it a game?"

Dar leaned away from the laptop screen. "That's a program.. doesn't really have a purpose. Just a recreational thing."

The kid got up and came over, peering at the screen. "Wow." He watched Gopher Dar sashay across the desktop, wagging a finger at the two of them while it rambled around in a circle.

Dar moved her desktop mouse and clicked on him, and he jumped, turning and scowling at her.

"That's some killer graphics." The kid moved his nose almost up to the screen. "Look at the fingers! No jags or pixellation at all."

"No, it's all mathematic. Vector based." Dar said. "Sees the screen as a grid, and interacts with everything it finds."

Gopher Dar sat down and folded his arms over his chest, sticking his tongue out at them. Dar captured his tongue with the mouse and he grabbed at the pointer with both hands.

"Holy shit." The kid almost crawled on top of the desk. "So this isn't a game or anything?"

"No." Dar regarded the little beast. "Just entertainment."

"You could make a rad game with that." The kid said. "Is it a wrapper? Could it work with like, a swordsman or something?"

Dar chuckled. "Probably. I'm not sure why I picked a gopher. Just because it was goofy looking probably."

The kid slowly turned his head to stare at her. "That's your stuff?"

"Yeah."

"No way."

Dar leaned back. "No way what?" She asked. "No way I wrote that because I'm female, or too old or.. ?"

The kid blushed. "Sorry, didn't mean to dis you." He sat back in his seat. "Thats' the kind of stuff I like to do. Making characters and games and stuff. I've got this idea.. " His voice grew animated. "It's this game console idea where the characters interact with you and you can make them do stuff."

"That what this is?" Dar pointed to the laptop. "I can see the decision tree metrics."

The kid grinned. "It's a simple version of it. The whole thing's too big I didn't want to drag my external hard drive with me here."

Dar turned and switched to her keyboard, calling up the program that had been running in a background window. She typed out a dozen lines and cut and pasted a few places, then recompiled the program and restarted it.

Gopher Dar blinked out, then reappeared, this time with a sword in his paw, and a Robin Hood outfit on. He looked around and waved the sword, chittering loudly at them from behind the glass.

"Sweet." The kid said. "Can you show me how to do that?"

"Depends." Dar rested her elbows on her desk and laced her fingers together. "That's decent code" She indicated the screen. "You want to develop it for us? Get paid to write on it?"

He stared at her for a silent moment. "For real?"

Dar nodded.

His reaction was unexpected. He sat back in his chair, looking stunned, an unfocused look to his eyes.

Dar waited.

"My dad thinks this is all kid stuff." He finally said. "He wanted me to get a job at a bank."

"What's your name?" She asked, quietly.

He made a face. "Don't laugh. It's Arthur."

"I never laugh at anyone's name, given that mine's Dar." Her eyes twinkled a little.

"That's not a girls name."

Dar half shrugged. "Okay, Paladar Katherine."

"Really?"

"Really. So you want to come work for us, Arthur? I'll hire you as a programmer and that can be your first project. If you get it how you like it, I'll write some hardware code to make it run on a platform and maybe we can both make a few bucks." Dar folded her hands, watching his jaw drop a little. "Yes? No?"

He paused then he grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Fuck yeah." Then he clapped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry."

Dar pulled the thumb drive out and stood up. "No problem. Let's go down to the HR office and get your paperwork done. Can you start on Monday?" She handed him the drive

"Not today?"

"Sure, why not?" Dar waved him ahead of her. "Let's go surprise your dad."

**

Kerry and Mayte strolled along the street together, heading for the coffee shop. It was another bright and sunny day, and the sidewalks were full of people. "I think having them do the drink service is going to work out." Kerry said, as they neared the cafe.

"Yes. They are close to us and also, they agreed to charge us just for what was used." Mayte said. "So it is not just spending money and wasting things."

"And they have relatively healthy snacks." Kerry noted. "I like that idea better than a vending machine with chocolate bars in it."

'You do not like chocolate now?" Mayte looked confused.

Kerry chuckled. "You know I do. It gets delivered to my office on a regular basis. But if someone's missed lunch, I would rather they have something that's actually nutritious instead of pure junk food."

"Not so much the chips and pretzels."

They entered the cafe, and the girl behind the bar looked up and waved, already used to seeing them "Hey girls!"

"Hey." Kerry took over one of the stools and sat down. "Latte, for me."

"Some tea chai for me." Mayte perched on the seat next to her.

"No problem. Hey, Gary wanted to talk to you if you get a chance." The girl said. "And there's a guy, Robier? He carves really cool wooden business signs. Wanted to know if you wanted one for that big old barn over there."

Kerry's ears perked. "Hand made?"

"Sure."

"Absolutely." She handed over one of her brand new, just off the press business cards. "Tell him to give me a call."

The girl grinned. "You betcha." She tucked the card away. "Hey, did you guys have a problem with that old scrounger yesterday? We heard something like that, and he and some buddies of his were around here trying to get Gary to give them our day old bread."

"You mean the guy in the wheelchair?" Kerry asked.

The girl expertly frothed milk for Kerry's latte. "Yeah. I don't even know what his name is. But he's around here a lot, trying to snitch stuff. We've got to watch the condiment trays outside if he's around."

"He was looking into our garbage." Mayte offered. "For some boxes."

The girl put down Kerry's coffee, and started fixing Mayte's chai. "He gets stuff out of all the dumpsters around here. I used to feel bad for him, and for some of the other homeless guys, but if you don't give them what they want they get all asshole on you."

"That's pretty much what happened. "Kerry agreed. "The maintenance men chased him off and he was rude and angry with them. Is he actually a veteran?"

The girl shrugged. "Gary thinks he is." She admitted. "I mean, it sucks a little, that they went to war on our behalf and now they're living in the streets, you know?"

"Yes." Kerry nodded soberly. "My father in law's retired Navy."

"Bet he doesn't live in the street." The girl eyed Kerry.

"No, he lives on a big yacht now his kid bought him." Kerry admitted, with a smile. "But he did live in the streets for a little while I think, when he got back from the middle east, before he and Dar hooked back up."

"Dar's papa is a very nice man." Mayte said. "Not rude like those others were."

The girl nodded "So anyway. This guy, Wheels, or whatever his name is, he got back about six months ago. There's a shelter thing near by here, and they hang around that place."

"The building men told us he was dangerous" Mayte accepted her cup of chai and offered up several bills for it. "Is that true, do you think?"

The girl shrugged again. "People can be creepy. He stares at me, sometimes, It makes me uncomfortable." She admitted. "I try to make sure someone's around when we close at night, to walk me to my car."

"I get that." Kerry sipped her latte. "They were outside when we left the other day and they started fighting." She said. "Normal people would have hit the gas and left but of course we stopped and tried to help."

"Kerry!" Mayte sounded dismayed.

"Yes?" Kerry gave her companion a wry look.

"You should be careful."

She shrugged "Anyway, I get that they can be rough. I told them I was going to call the cops if they messed around outside our building again." Kerry said. "I hope they took me seriously."

"They call the cops on them all the time." Cheryl said. "Sometimes they chase them off, but they're kinda sympathetic to them, you know?"

Kerry did know. She could see the police officers feeling bad for the veterans. "If they start taking stuff, it's not about being sympathetic."

Just then, the kitchen door swung open and Greg, the owner of the cafe entered. He was a short stocky man with grizzled red hair and an explosion of freckles all over his head. "Hey!" He came over. "There ya are. I just got back from your place looking for you."

He leaned on the counter. "So you liked the setup, right?"

"We did." Kerry agreed.

"So when you get going there, can we talk about doing catering for you, for meetings?" Greg asked. "Like when you get clients in, that kinda thing. My cousin runs a shop down on South Beach and he does that for some of the biz down there. Better than bringing in pizza, yeah?"

Kerry considered that. "Okay, so - we can make a deal for that, and try it out." She said. "I like the drink service, and the tray your guys brought over today was perfect."

Gary beamed at her.

"Only thing is, we can't make it an exclusive because you don't have stuff like pizza and cheeseburgers." Kerry concluded. "So if we make it that you're our first call for catering, but you are okay if I bring stuff in from fast food joints sometimes, I am okay with it."

Mayte looked a little confused, but she stayed quiet.

'Sure." Gary readily agreed. "Not sure why you'd want to bring in McDonald's, but heck no accounting for tastes."

"I know my audience." Kerry acknowledged, with a rueful smile. "In that case it's a deal." She held out a hand and he took it. So now that's decided, can I get a large mocha to go please? And two of those chocolate chip muffins."

Kerry clasped her paper bag and her to go cup as she walked alongside Mayte back towards their office. "I really like this area."

"Me too. But there is no McDonald's." Mayte grinned briefly.

"No, I know. But two things." Her boss said. "One, you never want to give any vendor an exclusive unless you have to. They stop wanting to compete if they know they don't need to."

"I see." Mayte nodded.

"Two, sometimes you just need a cheeseburger. Even a vegetarian one." Kerry said. "Other cultures have their comfort foods – I guess yours might be black beans and rice, or yucca, right?"

"Si, yes. It is what we have many times, with limes, and also, roast pork." Her companion said. "Though not too much. It makes you very heavy."

"For those of us with a long line of American ancestors, it's pizza, cheeseburgers, BBQ ribs, or fried chicken. None of them are particularly healthy but they all sure taste good." Kerry smiled. "Or, for instance I make Dar grits all the time with her breakfast."

"Grits??"

"Yeah. Ground hominy. I'd never heard of it before I started living with Dar. Never even had it in a restaurant down here, but it's something she grew up with and loves. It's like a cereal." Kerry explained. "But you have it with biscuits and gravy, and maybe eggs for breakfast."

Mayte pondered that. "I cannot even think about what that might be like. Is it good?"

They entered the office building and climbed the steps, hearing voices on the 2nd floor. "I've acquired a taste for them." Kerry answered. "By themselves they're kinda tasteless, but if you put enough stuff on them they're pretty good."

"You must be talking about my favorite breakfast item." Dar had heard the last sentence. She was standing on the second level with a gangly young man with a skateboard. "Meet Arthur. He's going to be doing some programming for us."

Arthur was carrying a folder along with his skateboard, and he shifted it to under his arm and extended a hand to both women. "Hi."

"Hi." Kerry returned the clasp. "So he's the first programmer? He gets to pick his space then. You done that yet, Dardar?"

"Nope. Just finished with HR." Dar said. "Want to do that? Mayte can you get desk stuff ordered for him, and a desktop and monitor? He'll run Linux."

"Sure." Kerry motioned him forward. "Let's get you a home away from home, Arthur."

Mayte scribbled a note and trotted off to her desk, and Kerry led their new acquisition off down the hallway towards the office space they'd laid out for the programmers. She remembered the conversation yesterday about the kid, and wondered about the change in his job assignment. "You do some programming now?"

"Yeah." He said. "Games and stuff. I showed some of that to that other lady, and she was okay with it."

Kerry chuckled. "If Dar was okay with your stuff, everyone else will be okay too." She pushed the door open to the programmers area and casually kicked a doorstop to hold it there, making mental note to ask her beloved partner what her thought processes had been on this one.

She wasn't nearly so hypocritical to wonder about the hiring choice. Dar made those by instinct, and she'd been a prime example of it.

"Yeah, she's got skills." Arthur volunteered, looking around the room. "This is cool."

Dar had designed the space, having the best insight into the psychology of its inhabitants. The room was on the inside wall, overlooking the garden and each cube space had window real estate and walls high enough and enclosing enough to allow for a blocking out of the surroundings.

The desks were wide and had adjustable levels for monitors and keyboards, and there was task lighting built into the overheads to allow the overhead fluorescents to be turned off. There was enough space in

each cube to permit a worktable, or a beanbag chair, or a small refrigerator, all of which Kerry explained to Arthur as they toured all the spaces.

“That's rad.” Arthur became steadily more cheerful as they talked. “My brother does system design and his place is like a three by three desk and potted plant.”

“No we know from experience that you can't get creative work out of people if they're in a box they can't personalize” Kerry said. “We're going to be a small company... everyone's going to be important.”

They had stopped at the last cube, in the corner where a little angle in the room had given this workspace an angularity the others didn't have. Arthur peered around it then he put his folder down on the desk and leaned his skateboard against the wall. “This is okay.”

Kerry pulled out her gizmo and tapped out a message to Mayte, glancing at the cube number. “Sounds good.”

“What's that?” Arthur eyed her phone. “That a Handspring?”

Kerry nodded. “We're testing them.” She pocketed it. “Did HR tell you about the security check?”

“They said something about the government.” He responded. “I didn't really get all that.”

She perched on the edge of the desk. “Not a big deal. Everyone we hire gets a background check. We do work for the government, sometimes.”

“Yeah?” He looked interested. “Cool. What do they look for? I got busted for tagging once.”

Kerry smiled. “That'll probably pass. Just tell your family and friends if they get a call don't freak out.” She advised. “You might want to reread the page in there about confidentiality when you get home. Did Dar say when she wanted you to start?”

“She said Monday, but I can come in tomorrow.” Arthur supplied. “I was doing some work with my dad, but I suck at it and he'll be glad if I stop.” He admitted. “I power stapled him in the leg the other day.”

She laughed out loud. “Yeah, I really suck at what my dad did too.” She said. “Then sure, we'll see you tomorrow. Give us a chance to get you some gear in here.”

Arthur gave her a thumbs up.

Kerry pulled one of her new cards out and handed it to him. “Give me a call if you have any questions.”

He glanced at the card. “You and that other lady sisters?” He asked .”You don't look alike.”

Kerry casually stuck her hands into her front jeans pockets. “So we should probably get this out of the way now since you asked.” She said. “No, Dar and I aren't sisters. We're domestic partners. We live together.”

She paused and waited, watching his facial expression carefully.

He looked up after a second. “Oh, you mean you're gay?”

Kerry nodded. “Sometimes people find that uncomfortable.”

He shrugged. “I don't care.” He said. “Maybe I would if you were my girlfriend.” He concluded. “You guys aren't all political about that? I don't like all that stuff.”

“We try not to be political at all.” Kerry smiled gently. “I had enough of politics growing up. My father was a Senator.” She added. “So if you're expecting rainbow flags and all that, probably not going to happen.”

“Okay that's cool.” Arthur said. “The guys I game with would give me shit if I was a part of that and I don't want to deal with it.”

Really, refreshing honesty. “Then we're good.” Kerry concluded. “We will have dogs here though. That okay by you?”

Arthur grinned wholeheartedly for the first time. “I like dogs.” He said. “What kind?”

"Labrador Retrievers." Kerry motioned him ahead of her.

"Saw that other lady has fish. Can I bring in my iguana?"

"He live in a tank or on your shoulder?"

**

Dar shut her systems down, leaning back as the silence took over the room, allowing her to enjoy the spears of golden sunset peeking through her window.

She could hear Kerry in her office talking, and the soft, easy chuckle that drifted through the open door.

She was looking forward to going home, and having a light dinner with her partner, then spending a little time in the island gym together.

They were the last to leave, and that, too, felt a little funny since she was used to knowing that though they were gone, in the building somewhere there were night operators and off shift workers, keeping their eyes on things throughout the night.

Here, when they left, they locked the door, and that was it. Dar got up and slid her laptop into her backpack, zipping it up and slinging it over her shoulder as she heard her partner finishing up her conversation. She turned off the little desk lamp and walked over to the interconnecting door, leaning on the sill.

Kerry grinned at her, and held up one finger.

Perfectly content to wait, Dar went over to the window and sat down on the wide sill with its fabric covered padding. She leaned against the window and watched the foot traffic outside, seeing some groups of young men and women strolling down the road heading for the waterside.

She halfway wished they had the boat docked. She felt like putting the bow to the wind and wanted the crisp breeze in her face and wondered briefly if Kerry would be up for a night dive.

"Okay, so let's plan on that tomorrow." Kerry was saying. "I need to wrap this up, I've got an appointment I'm late for."

The appointment smiled, watching her reflection in the glass. She pulled out her Handspring and reviewed it, then accessed a little program she'd downloaded earlier that day. The hourglass spun for a while, then delivered her up the marine forecast and she had to regretfully forget her idea of a dive when she noted the ten foot seas offshore.

Ah well. Maybe they'd end up swimming.

"Bye." Kerry finished her call and came over to the window, putting her knee on the padded bench and leaning against Dar's back. "Hey love of my life."

"Hey." Dar turned around and circled Kerry's knee with one arm. "I was going to suggest going out for a float tonight but the water's too choppy."

Kerry peered out the window, then at her. "And you know this how?"

Dar held up her device.

"Ah." Kerry smiled. "Want to stop by the sporting goods store to see what we're going to need for our trip instead? I know we could just look it all up on the interwebs but I'd like to see what it all looks like up close."

"Sure."

"Then lets go." Kerry leaned over and gave her partner a kiss on the lips. "That was our phone provider on the line. They'll have a shipment for us in by Friday. I'm letting Mayte run with it."

Dar returned the kiss, standing up and pulling Kerry upright with her. "I got a note from Gerry." She said, when the parted a little. "I think his guys like the plan, but I need to go up there next week for a day and talk to them."

"Good. By then we should have a little gang of programmers for you to get to work with." Kerry kept herself pressed against Dar's body, content to absorb the warmth and affection soaking into her.

"Yup." Dar rocked them both back and forth a little. "This is so cool." She exhaled happily, then squeezed Kerry one more time before she released her and draped an arm over her shoulders instead as they headed for the door together.

This time there were no fights going on outside and they were able to get to Kerry's car and settle themselves without incident. Dar peered both directions, but the road was clear, no sign of anyone loitering, and she leaned back in satisfaction as Kerry got the car started and they pulled out of the lot.

They headed west, crossing through the city and out to the western suburbs, pulling off the highway into one of the big malls on the edge of the county. "We can grab dinner here too." Kerry said. "They've got a lot of restaurants.. and a Dave and Busters.

Dar snickered. "You just want to try and beat me at Ski ball again."

Kerry gave her a look, one blond eyebrow arching up. "Try? I beat you like egg whites the last time Dixiecup."

'I got you back on the basketball."

"And I had no handicap at that, huh?"

They parked and walked inside the mall, bypassing various stands and kiosks as they steered their steps into the big Bass Pro Shop that took up a large percentage of one side of the complex.

"Oh wow." Kerry paused, as they studied the inside of the store. "There's a lot of stuff here."

Dar's eyes were already twinkling. "This is going to be an expensive trip." She eyed the boating section. "You think we should actually put together a real hurricane kit?"

"You're not looking at that bucket of MRE's are you?"

**

Kerry reviewed the notes on her desk with a sense of bemusement. She selected one and dialed the contact number, pausing to wait for it to connect. "Hello, I'm looking for John Chavez?" She paused and considered a brief second. "I'm returning his call. From Roberts Automation?"

She listened to the hold music then detected the sound of a receiver being picked up in haste. "Hello?"

"Hello? Is this.. Kerry, is that you?"

"Sure is." She agreed. "What can I do for you, John? I assume by your note you know I'm not with ILS anymore so I'm not sure I .."

"No no, I know. I know." He broke in hastily. "I guess word's getting out and I saw your new website. So I wanted to call and see what you guys were up to."

"Well." Kerry responded slowly. "I guess we're up to opening up our own business. Dar and I just incorporated two weeks ago or so.. got an office going and all that."

"Great."

"Great?"

"Great, as in can we meet? I'd like to talk about some projects."

Kerry pulled her phone away from her ear and stared at it, then returned it to the side of her head. "Okay, John, but you don't even know what we're doing so I'm not sure.."

"You're not going into the cleaning business are you?"

"No." Kerry said. "It's technology, naturally, but.."

"Great." Chavez broke in again. "That's what I figured. We've got a bunch of projects – blue sky stuff – I'd love to have you look at them and let me know if we can contract you guys." He paused. "I wanted to make sure I get on the list first."

Kerry blinked. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Then she shook her head a little. "Sure John, I'd love to talk to you. Want us to come down there or you want to visit our new offices? They're in the Grove." She checked her watch. "What day's good for you?"

"You free today?" He asked. "I'll bring lunch in."

"How's 2pm for you? I can't do lunch, Dar's already picking mine up." Kerry demurred.

"You got it! Me and Manuel will be there at 2. Looking forward to it." John sounded happy. "Later!"

Kerry released the line and studied her phone with a quizzical expression. Then she turned over that note and picked up the next one. "Cherise Montez. All Dade Paper." She tapped the note against her chin.

"That's another one I had in my contact list." She dialed the number. "Hello, I'm looking for.. oh hi Cherise. Yes, it's Kerry. I got your note and I..." She listened and hurriedly called up her calendar. "Well, sure I can do Monday... what's this ab... ah, yea, I guess it's going around. " She listened again ."Infoworld email alert. I see."

"Anyway, glad I got in touch with you, Kerry." Cherise said, echoing slightly through the phone. "My senior management called me the minute they saw that, and wanted me to just sit down and talk with you about some things."

"Sure. Looking forward to it." Kerry said. "See you on Monday."

She disconnected the line, then looked up as she heard a sound and found Dar's lanky frame in her doorway. "Honey, I think words gotten out about our leaving."

Dar came over and put a piece of paper down on the desk. "It has." She agreed. "Glad that website had your phone number on it not mine."

Kerry picked up the paper and examined it. "Oh, that email alert. Cherise from Dade Paper just called me." She read through the article. "It's pretty noncommittal on why we left." She observed, noting the almost complete lack of details, but the addition of a link to their new web site.

"Hamilton keeps his word." Dar said. "And so will we."

"Wonder how long it will take for the Herald to call us." Kerry put the paper down. "We said we wouldn't go after their customers, Dar, but what are we supposed to do when their customers come after us?"

"Mm." Her partner waggled her eyebrows. "I'm sure they're not going to ask us for the same things they asked ILS for." She said, reasonably. "Maybe we'll catch those little projects that ILS wouldn't even quote."

"Uh huh. Kind of how that whole thing with Gerry and the president worked out." Kerry said. "I don't want us to have to worry about delivering all this stuff when we're just only barely open."

Dar ruffled her hair. "Then we say no." She said. "Not even ILS bid on everything, remember?"

That was true. Kerry had even made that decision a time or two herself, when the numbers hadn't made sense, or when the requirements were very specialized and they would have had to incur unreasonable startup costs for it.

Hm. "Okay, well lets see what all this chatter gets us." Kerry finally said. "Who knows? Might turn out to be nothing." She picked up the next note, and examined it. "City of Miami. Do we want to talk to them?"

"Mm." Dar evaded the question and meandered off. "I'm going to go program something."

"Chicken."

"Speaking of, come get your lunch." Dar winked at her, as she disappeared.

Kerry put the note down and selected a different one, putting it next to her phone before she got up to go retrieve her share of what smelled like chicken curry. Dar had discovered a tiny Thai place down the road and if the scent was any indication, it was a winner.

She didn't resent Dar for assuming she'd handle the calls. They'd agreed from the outset she'd be in charge of the customer contact side of the house, with the exception of those two little special deals with the government that were pointed directly at her partner.

Dar trusted her to keep them from getting into contracts that were outside the scope they'd defined for themselves, and to keep them going in the right direction where she herself might go off into unprofitable tangents just because a project interested her.

Kerry chuckled as she crossed the floor and ducked into the adjoining office.

Dar had put the bags and boxes on the small work table across from her desk, and Kerry opened the containers and set out two plates to fill, since her partner had gotten tied up in a conversation with the maintenance chief. She sorted out the brown rice and the fragrant red curry, and brought one of the plates over to the desk with a tall cup of Thai coffee.

"Thanks, gorgeous." Dar came back in the office and went to her desk. "Lock company'll be here Monday to do the install. I got them to agree to let us put biometrics on the offices, but they need access to the outer hallways and the maintenance rooms."

"We can do scan cards." Kerry said. "But we should put cameras in." She took her own plate and perched on the window ledge with it. "Especially if we're going to have to pass the government's security standards."

Dar nodded, her mouth full of chicken and rice.

"You want to try those eyeball scanners again?"

Dar shook her head.

"Palm locks, then?"

Her partner shrugged and swallowed. "Better than thumb prints. That never did work for me." She examined her thumb. "I think all that typing wore the ridges down."

Kerry got up and came over, putting her plate down and peering at the digit. Then she leaned over and kissed it. "If the darn thing can't read it, too bad."

Dar grinned in response. She reached up and chucked Kerry under the chin then she went back to her plate, while her partner settled back on the window bench to chew in silence.

"Y'know." Dar said, after a little while. "Maybe we should have shared an office." She studied Kerry's relaxed form, legs extended on the bench, sun splashing across her chest. "We spent more time in each others anyway."

Kerry tilted her head and smiled. "We're such kooks." She admitted. "What are we going to do for Valentine's day, by the way? It's coming up."

Dar tilted her seat back and put her feet up on her desk. "Mmm... let me think about that." She mused. "Is it my turn this year to come up with a surprise?"

"Yeees."

A soft knock came at the door. "C'mon in." Dar remained where she was, waving a fork at Maria when she came inside. "Hey Maria."

"Si, hello." Maria said, bringing over a set of folders. "There are many things to take care of, but before this all gets in the box I would like to ask a favor."

“Sure.” Dar said. “Whatever you want, yes.”

“Dar.”

Kerry chuckled. “My god you’re in a good mood.” She told her partner.

“I am.” Dar confirmed. “Seriously, Maria, what do you think you could ask me for that I wouldn’t say yes to?” She asked, in a reasonable tone. “You want to paint that office black or something?”

“Tcha.” Maria clucked her tongue. “No it is this, my neighbor has a young daughter, and she is looking for a first job. Could she work with us, to make things in order?”

“Sure.” Dar repeated. “The last person you recommended was Mayte. You’re batting a thousand.” She chewed a mouthful of curry chicken and rice and swallowed. “Bring em in.”

Maria smiled at her. “Thank you, Dar. This girl, she is very nice, but also, very shy. It would be good for her to work with some nice people.” She put the folders down and then trotted out, closing the door behind her as she started to talk to Mayte in Spanish.

Kerry let her plate rest against her knee for a moment, as she glanced outside. “Ah,”

“What?”

“Our friend is back.” Kerry watched the man in the wheelchair come along the road, glancing either way before he turned in and started to make his way through the parking lot.

“Yeah?” Dar’s voice was suddenly much closer, and then she was leaning over Kerry to look out the window. “Yep, there he is all right. Not with anyone this time.” She watched him move between the cars and end up popping up onto the sidewalk, pausing before he started along the edge of the building.

“Heading for the dumpster I guess.”

“Do we really have such interesting garbage?” Kerry mused. “Hey, we just had those big servers come in. Can we give him those boxes?”

“Mm.”

“I mean, it’s not like we get those kind of things all the time, and they’re pretty solid.” Kerry said. “If he could use it, why not?”

Dar scratched her nose. “Yeah, I guess.” She said. “Seems weird though. Wouldn’t it make more sense – if were going to give him anything, that we find out if theres something more permanent than a cardboard box we could do?”

Kerry turned her head to regard her partner in some bemusement. “You want to help him?”

“Mm.” Dar shrugged a little. “Not really.” She answered honestly. “I just think I’d feel like a jackass just saying ‘hey buddy, you want a box?’”

“Huh.” Kerry scooped up the last of her chicken and chewed it in thoughtful silence for a minute. “Yeah maybe you have a point there. I think I just feel bad, mostly because I know your father.”

Dar leaned on her knee, bumping against Kerry’s shoulder lightly. “I feel bad about feeling bad about that. Because the guy was a jackass.”

Kerry wound her arm around her partner’s thigh and squeezed it. “Our consciences can be a bitch sometimes.”

“Sometimes.” Dar agreed, pushing off the sill and stepping back. “Anyway, I guess its okay to get him those crates, but we should put them in there when he’s not around, and let him think he’s snitching them from us.”

She went back over and dropped into her chair, pulling her laptop over and getting it arranged on her knees as she tilted back and put her feet back on the desktop.

Kerry got up and put her plate in the garbage, adding Dar's to it before she gave her a kiss on the top of her head and headed, not back to her office but out the other door.

The outer office was empty, and she crossed through it and walked along the hallway around to the back and down the back stairs. She crossed the hall and went out the back door, pausing to look around from the top step of the loading dock.

The area was empty, the dumpsters undisturbed. She waited a moment, then walked down the concrete steps and circled the big green disposals, seeing nothing but fallen leaves around them, the token South Florida acknowledgement of winter.

She walked along the edge of the service area, and looked down the long path between the back section and the front sidewalk, each side bounded with Chinese cherry hedges that were thick, and almost head high on her.

On one side, the hedges went flat to the building edge. On the other, they were a barrier to a slim open space between the property the building sat on and a wall to the next structure.

Kerry cocked her head to one side, and listened, then she slowly strolled along the path, glad for the warmth of the sunlight drenching her as she walked.

It was quiet. She could see butterflies hovering over the hedge tops, and in the trees that overlooked the wall of the next yard she could hear birds singing.

Midway down the path she paused, and regarded the hedge on the wall side. It had thick leaves, but she could see several broken branches, and there seemed to be a not quite natural gap in the otherwise lush foliage.

She strolled on, kicking the few loose leaves from the path with her boots, until she got to the front of the building and came around again to the entrance. Here she paused, and regarded the little front porch, overhung with iron lattice that held baskets of sturdy winter flowers.

“Interesting.” She commented to the empty space. Then she went in the front door and paused, surprising Mayte and a slim, red haired woman who was behind the reception desk. “Ah, hi there.”

“Kerry, hello.” Mayte turned. “This is Angelina, who has come today to start with the reception area. She is from the staffing group.”

“Hi there Angelina.” Kerry extended a hand.

“It's good to meet you.” The girl said courteously. “You're the owner, right?”

“One of them, yes.” Kerry agreed. “Welcome to the gang. I think by Monday you'll actually have a phone to answer.”

The girl smiled, showing cute dimples. “They said you were just starting. They weren't kidding I guess.” She said. “I just came in to fill out my paperwork today, they said I could start Monday.”

“Great.” Kerry waved, and moved past, trotting up the steps to her office.

She found Dar talking to a tall, tattooed man with a pony tail, dressed in jeans and a leather shirt and she made bets with herself regarding his reason for being there. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Dar said. “This is John Robier. He makes custom signs.” She paused. “He's looking for you.”

“Ahhh.” Kerry held out a hand. “Yes, the folks at the cafe down the road told me about you.” She regretfully lost her bet, and studied the man, who had a rugged, powerful looking face with a beard and mustache in a mix of gray and brown.

He nodded. “Said you wanted a sign?”

“We need a sign.” Dar acknowledged.

He put a much thumbed through portfolio down on Dar's desk and opened it. "This is the stuff I do." He said. "See if you like it."

Dar went around the back of the desk and settled into her chair, pulling over the portfolio as Kerry came around to join her. There were pictures in the notebook, of signs of varying vintage, and size. "I like that one." Dar pointed at a shot, of a relatively square one, with the background carved back and stained and the letters prominent and almost three dimensional. "Can you do a logo, like this?" She indicated desk plate.

He picked it up and examined it. "Sure. How big you want it?"

"Good question." Dar got up "Lets go look at the front door, and you tell us what size it should be."

The carver gave her a quick, appreciative look. "That's different." He followed her out the door and Kerry followed him. "Usually customers want me to shut up and carve."

"If we wanted that we'd just mail order it from signs R us." Kerry said.

They walked outside and down the sidewalk a little, then turned and regarded the front of the building.

"Could put it above the door." Kerry said.

"Mm." Dar folded her arms.

"I think it would look better on the second level there, like a four by three, or a five by three foot." Robier suggested. "See it better from the road." He looked at her. "You're the only tenant, right?"

"Right." Dar closed her eyes and pictured that in her head. "Over the door it would be too narrow." She said. "And by the side there, the iron lattice would block it."

The man nodded.

"I like the idea of it up on the second floor, Dar. That's right under our window." Kerry said.

"Okay, we like it." Dar turned to the carver. "Make it as big as you think would look good."

"I need the logo." He said. "And I'll get working on it."

They turned as they heard footsteps, and Kerry recognized her afternoon meeting. "Hey John, hey Manuel." She extended a hand. "See? We're so new we're still arranging for our company sign."

"Great! We're the first ones then." John smiled at her. "Hi there, Dar. How's it going?"

"Busier than I thought it would be." Dar drawled, with a wry look.

"Hope we can add to that." John didn't miss a beat. "Can we talk?"

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "Sure, c'mon in." Kerry escorted them past and into the office.

"Conference room's first door on your left."

Dar waited for the door to close then she laughed and shook her head. "Okay, so you need a deposit from me?" She turned back to the carver.

"You didn't ask how much it is?" Robier countered.

"When I have to file my first corporate financial results I might care." Dar said. "Right now I don't. I've never started up a company before, so I want things done right, and getting a local artist to do a sign seems right."

Robier studied her, then he smiled suddenly, shifting his face from wary and slightly skeptical to warm and friendly in a heartbeat. "Seems like you're doing all right already." He jerked his head in the direction of the door. "Gary said you guys do high tech?"

"We do high tech." Dar agreed. "I know its kind of weird location to put high tech but I spent the last fifteen years in an office on Brickell and I was over it."

He nodded. They walked over to the little patio in the front and sat down on the iron chairs. "I did high tech, for a while after I got out of the service." He said. "Telecom install, you know?"

Dar chuckled. "Oh yes I know."

"Worked out of a central office near Doral. Just day after day of same old same old, until Andrew hit." He said. "I think I worked two months straight, no time off, almost 20 hours a day."

"Sucks." Dar said. "You can only do so much of that."

"Right. I got to where I was having flashbacks. Felt like I was back in the service with all that stress. So I just stopped. Quit one day, and went to work on construction the next" He sniffed reflectively. "Got to learn how to use band saws, and something about the smell of sawdust got into me so I started carving."

Dar studied him for a long moment. "That's a good story."

He nodded again. "Could have ended up like some other people, sweeping the street or on meds, or gone crazy but that was an anchor. Then when I got good at it, it became something a lot more, because then, you create things."

"Computer programmings like that." Dar said, briefly. "You start with nothing but an empty page and end up with something that does things." She leaned her elbows on her knees. "I wanted to get back to that, and that's what ended up with this." She indicated the building.

He regarded her. "You been in the military?"

Dar shook her head.

"Funny. You kinda have the look." He said. "No offense or anything intended."

Dar's lips twitched. "I grew up on a Navy base." She admitted. "My dad's retired Navy."

It seemed odd, to be this forthcoming to a stranger, she suddenly realized. Odd, but not really wrong. There was something about the wood carver she instinctively liked or at least, that's what she was telling herself.

"Okay, that's probably it." Robier grinned. "My dads' retired Marines. Never lets me forget it, since I went Army." He cleared his throat. "One thing I learned, doing my own thing, is how sweet it is to be your own boss."

Dar nodded emphatically. "That's what I've been learning the last couple weeks." She admitted. "I never really expected it to be as different as it is." She leaned back in the chair and hiked one boot up onto her opposite knee. "Been a revelation."

"Sure was." He said. "Well, I don't need no deposit. The materials hardly cost me anything, it's all in the work. So I'll go get started on it, and let you know when you can expect it." He stood up and waited for her to stand as well. "Good to have you in the neighborhood."

He held out his hand and Dar clasped it. "Glad your neighbors recommended you." She returned.

"Thanks."

He lifted his hand and waved, then made his way down the sidewalk, turning left at the end of the path and starting back down the road in the direction of the cafe.

Dar stuck her hands in her front pockets and watched him go, leaning back against the wrought iron and enjoying the afternoon breeze.

A soft knock on the glass nearby made her look up, to find Kerry looking back at her from inside the conference room. Her partner crooked a finger at her, and she smiled, pushing away from the lattice.

"Getting fired was the best thing that ever happened to me." She chuckled and opened the door, catching a hint of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies in the air.

**

"Ah." Kerry finished her laps and stretched her arms out along the edge of the heated pool glad to keep most of herself submerged and not exposed to the chilly air. "Damn that feels good."

"It does." Dar had just surfaced after doing a few underwater somersaults and turned over onto her back, stretching her body out with luxurious thoroughness. "Hey."

"Hey." Kerry extended her legs and crossed them, sinking down in the water and feeling the pull against her shoulders.

"What do you think about taking the boat up to Crandon Marina tomorrow for the party?" Dar asked. "We could take some people for a ride maybe."

"You know what I think?" Kerry asked. "I think you're really getting into driving that boat."

Dar grinned, taking up a position and stretching her own arms out along the coral stone verge. "Me wanting to take the boat out twice this week make you think that?"

"Mm." Kerry tilted her head and gave Dar a kiss on the shoulder. "Sure I'd love to take the boat hon, long as we stay near the Intercoastal if things get rocky. I've had a chancy stomach with that thing since we got back from the islands."

"We can take Chino and Mocha." Dar said. "I bet they'd like to meet everyone."

"I bet everyone would like to meet them." Kerry countered. "We should have taken them to work today – you might not have lost that laptop case."

Dar chortled softly "Little terror."

"I don't know how he got out of that laundry room." Kerry said, with a sigh. "And left the gate intact. That's what I don't get."

"Opposable paws." Dar said. "He opened the gate, then closed it behind him."

"Dar."

"Okay, Chino closed it."

"Dar!"

Her partner lifted her hands up and put them down. "What do you want me to say? They have psychic powers?"

"Urgh." Kerry let her head rest against the stone. "Want to go down to the cabin after the party?" She asked, after a moment's quiet.

"Yes."

"Was that part of the plan too?"

"Maybe. Depended on what you said to it." Dar eyed her. "We have to introduce Mocha to the cabin anyway. Don't we? There's not that much for him to chew down there I don't think."

Kerry smiled, her mind already moving ahead to waking up on Sunday to a run on the beach, maybe a ride on the bike.. "I'm so up for that." She exhaled happily. "Before we get attacked by another dozen customers next week. Sheesh, Dar!"

Her partner chuckled. "That was pretty out of the box." She admitted. "I like the idea of some of those initiatives, though. Most of them are in our scope."

"Most of them are in ILS's scope too." Kerry grew serious. "Are we going to be in trouble with this? I know we didn't solicit them, but if someone looked at it from the outside, it looks pretty bad, doesn't it?"

Dar detached herself from the edge of the pool and started a slow backstroke across the surface. "No." She said as she crossed back over towards Kerry. "I really don't think so, Ker. It's not existing business, and

they approached us. I'm not going to turn down legitimate work because they happened to get introduced to us at ILS."

"They could say we were stealing work from them." Kerry said, launching from the wall and swimming alongside her. "Should they have the right of first refusal?"

Dar stroked cleanly through the water, pondering the thought. Overhead, the stars were crisp and bright, the sky completely clear as it almost never was. "Should they." She mused. "I don't know Ker. Let me ask Richard on Monday. See what he thinks."

"Not that I mind getting business." Kerry turned over on to her back and blinked the warm water out of her eyes. "I just want us to be clean in this. I don't want a confrontation with them."

"Yeah, I get that. Problem is – we're in the same industry. They could make the case any work we do they had prior art on." Dar said. "So if that's going to be an issue, I'd rather put the work ahead of it and deal with the fallout."

Well, that was true. Kerry had to admit privately. After all Dar had really only worked for ILS, so by definition, anyone approaching her would have known her in that role, with the exception of the military contracts. Those she'd earned the hard way, very young, coming sideways into the industry.

But these guys? And the ones visiting her on Monday, and Tuesday, and then the City of Miami?

"Relax, Ker." Dar caught up to her, swimming with that sinuous grace Kerry always envied. She wrapped her arms around Kerry and kept flexing her legs, driving them both through the water. "Truth is, we brought a lot of value to them. People recognized that, and want to exploit it."

"Mm." Kerry let her legs drift down to the bottom now that they were in the shallow end. "I just think we should be careful. We want to be successful, but in a legitimate way." She poked her partner in the belly. "As much fun as it would be for us to toss them head over heels in the marketplace."

Dar grinned. "You know what their biggest problem is? It's not that we're competing with them." She rested her forearms on Kerry's shoulders. "Their biggest problem is the gap we left. How much of their current service offering was my intellectual property?"

Kerry studied her face. "What do you mean?" She said. "Your programs?"

Dar shook her head. "The way we did business. The way we structured accounts. The way a new service was laid out, how we sized things. That whole matrix."

Kerry blinked.

"That was all mine." Dar said, in a mild tone. "Not sure I ever mentioned that."

"Not sure I ever thought about where that came from." Kerry muttered, after a minute. "I mean, I knew the analytic schemas were yours, but..."

Dar smiled. "So. Like I said, let's see what Richard says. I think if it ever came down going into court, if they lost business to us they would have to admit why they were successful all those years."

"Ah." Kerry exhaled. "I see what you mean."

"But it might not come to that. They might compete and win. Some clients might not want to risk a startup. Lot of deeply conservative people in the client list."

And that, Kerry thought, was true to a point. "Maybe they'll go after all those really conservative ones that wouldn't have anything to do with them with you in charge." She pointed out. "Use it as a selling point."

"Maybe they will." Dar suddenly grabbed her, and lunged off to the side taking the both underwater. She pinched Kerry in the butt then let her go, whirling in mid water and kicking off in the other direction.

"Bmmfph!" Kerry let out a squawk underwater and chased her. They splashed across the pool until they reached the other side, when Dar got her hands on the side of the pool and pressed herself up ward and out of the water just a whisker ahead of Kerry's grabbing fingers. "You punk!"

Dar chuckled, going over to the table they'd left their towels on and quickly wrapping herself in one of them, handing Kerry hers when her partner climbed out after her. "Here, polar bear."

Caught in the act of shivering, Kerry mock glared at her as she got the soft terry cloth around her. "No one in Michigan would even think about standing around at night in a wet bathing suit in winter."

"Frostbite." Dar remarked simply. "You have to put up with a lot in Florida but this one one of the upsides. It's just a little chilly."

They strolled up from the pool area onto the path where they'd left their golf cart and got in. "See now, if we were in Michigan, this would need to have heated seats." Kerry turned the cart and sped it along the cart path, winding around the side of the old Vanderberg Mansion and then along the beach front to where their condo was perched over looking the sea.

As they pulled up to the outside gate, a chorus of barks and yaps marked their approach, and then the sound of the dog door bursting open and the patter of toenails was heard.

"Ah, the family is coming to greet us." Kerry tapped in the code to unlock the back gate and squeezed inside as Chino and Mocha reached them. "Hey guys!"

"Yap!" Mocha's tiny nails scurried at her knee, and she picked him up and cradled him in her arms.

"Enjoy this while you can, little guy. I won't be able to do this for long."

"Yap!" Mocha licked her chin with great enthusiasm, then nibbled on it.

Dar pulled the gate shut behind them. The lights were on in their little garden and the wall cut off the brisk breeze, making it more comfortable to walk. She could smell the scent of mesquite wood, and the little grilling area near the wall bore evidence of use. "Did you leave something on?"

"I did." Kerry agreed, giving Mocha a hug before putting him back down on the ground. "We have some fish fillets in those little packets and sweet potatoes and wax beans."

"Yum."

"And a bottle of white wine chilling. So let's go change and come enjoy it." Kerry herded the dogs up the steps and opened the door, following them inside.

**

Dar adjusted the throttles as she piloted the boat through the narrow entrance to Crandon Marina. It was busy, and she could already hear the sounds of the beach front across the road from the basin they were going to park in. "Did you get us a slip on the far eastern side, Ker?"

"Yep." Kerry was on the back deck of the boat, Mocha's little harness leash clamped firmly in one hand. The puppy was almost beside himself with excitement, standing up on his hind legs and staring out over the transom with wide amazed eyes. "On the pontoons there, to the right."

"Cool." Dar eased through the clustered vessels and headed for the spot indicated, which only had a few boats moored to it. It was the furthest from the marina, but easier to maneuver. "Glad we decided to map the place out. That would have been a long ass walk on the west side."

It would still be a walk, but there was a path Dar could see up through the trees that would lead them to the main road, where they could cross over and enter the beach front park area the shindig was being held in.

Twenty twenty hindsight would probably have indicated driving, but they'd decided to manage the hike as a trade off on taking the sea route out after the party was over.

Dar spotted the slip number Kerry had given her and she put the engines into idle as the light current took them towards the pier. There were bumpers over the pontoons, and as they approached, a young man in light sweatpants and a short sleeved shirt trotted over and waited expectantly for them.

She skillfully played the throttles to counter the current, slowing their forward motion to almost nothing before nudging the bow into the slip as the dockside helper reached over and grabbed the forward tie line and got it around a well used cleat. "Thanks." She called out to the man, who waved, as he moved aft and took the other line Kerry was holding out to him.

She kept the boat against the dock until he tied them off, then she cut the engines and secured them.

"Hold on there, you guys!" Kerry called out. "Just hang on!"

Dar moved quickly to the ladder and slid down it, in time to grab Chino's leash as the Labrador started to try and jump off the boat onto the dock. "Got her."

Kerry picked up Mocha and stepped onto the dock, waiting for her partner and Chino to do likewise. "Whew." She put the puppy down as Dar got Chino's leash straightened out. "Next time, let's think this through a little more."

"Mm." Dar wryly grunted agreement. "Live and learn. C'mon guys."

They walked down the floating dock and onto the path, then headed up through the trees towards the road. It was another pretty winter day, but the high seventies temperatures made their short sleeved shirts comfortable, and Kerry exhaled in contentment as they made their way through the trees. "What are these, Dar?"

"Sea grapes." Dar responded. "This entire area used to be full of those Australian pines, but Andrew cleared them off over in Boggs park at the tip of the island and they replanted a lot of grapes and sawgrass in its place."

They emerged on the road and went to the nearest crossing, waiting for the traffic to clear before trotting across. On the other side was another path, and this one lead east towards the ocean and the picnic area just beyond the first fringe of trees.

They had just barely entered the area when yells started going up, and Dar looked ahead of them to find people running and waving. "Here we go."

"Yap!" Mocha stopped in the path and barked at the oncoming crowd. "Yap! Yap! Yap!"

"C'mon, little man." Kerry patted her leg. "Let's go meet people."

"Growf." Chino chimed in, her thick cream colored tail wagging gently back and forth, as the crowd swirled around them and they moved forward into it.

**

"Glad you stopped by, Dar." Alastair was sitting on a piece of the seawall, dressed in khaki shorts and a golf shirt. "Nice shindig."

Dar was sitting next to him, with Chino curled in a ball at her feet, damp and exhausted. "It is nice." She agreed. "We should have done this more."

"Mm." Her former boss agreed. "So how's it going?" He glanced sideways at her. "Hear you've got the new office space up and going."

She folded her bare arms over her chest, her skin absorbing the sunlight and drying the seawater from her bathing suit. "Full speed ahead." She admitted. "Aside from Gerry and the government, I've had some nibbles for some new projects from six or seven potential clients."

Alastair chuckled. "I figured you would after that piece ran." He said. "Board's a little uncomfortable with the idea that reporter put forward about innovation."

"There are plenty of innovative people left there, Alastair. I only took myself, my wife, and four people with me." Dar protested in a mild tone. "And that's all. I gave my word on it."

He scratched his nose. "I think it's you they're uncomfortable about." He said. "As in, was that guy right, and were you the driver behind a percentage of the success we've had in the last decade?"

Dar rolled her eyes.

Mari approached them and took a seat next to Dar, giving her a pat on the leg. "Had a lot people come up and tell me they were really glad you came." She said. "Not that it should be a surprise to you, or to Kerry."

They both looked over at a nearby cluster of picnic tables, where Kerry was surrounded by her former staffers, a smile on her face. She had a t-shirt on over her suit, and some board shorts on against the chill, and she was more than a little windblown.

"It's a nice party." Dar agreed. "I was just telling Alastair we should have done this more often."

She nodded. "Hard to get budget for it but you're probably right."

"How much could this cost, Mari?" Dar asked. "It's all burgers and dogs, and condiments from the local warehouse store. You don't rent the space, do you?"

"No, I know." She said. "You just get tired of fighting when you want to do employee recognition stuff. No offense, Alastair, but I kind of had it up to hear listening to you all in budget meetings telling us we had to tighten up when we know the whole board had golf memberships and tickets to ball parks."

Alastair regarded her soberly. "Executive perks." He admitted. "But that comes with hiring executive talent."

Mari looked at him, then looked at Dar, then got up and walked off, shaking her head.

"Now what did I say?" He sighed. "Can't make anyone happy down here it seems."

"I think her point was, you never offered me any of the perks." Dar said, hiking a knee up and resting her elbow on it. "I was never one of the good old boys."

"You never wanted any of that." He accused. "Don't tell me now you did."

"No, I didn't." Dar agreed readily. "But the discrimination was a pretty evident. If you have a VP of HR, that matters to them and Mari and I go back a ways. Maybe she thinks one less golf membership should be translated to a couple more beach parties for the rank and file."

"You came from the rank and file" Alastair observed

"And I would way rather have had beach parties. Maybe I should have initiated that." Dar responded. "I realized lately that my support in the company always came from the ranks. Not you all."

"And that's why the board wants to make sure your replacement is one of them, not one of the gang." Alastair said. "Tried to talk them down off that ledge, but they weren't having any of it. So they're bringing in some guy who worked as CIO for one of our competitors for three or four years. I hear he's a hard ass."

"Brook Higgs?" Dar guessed.

He nodded.

"Alastair, he's an idiot." She said, bluntly. "He got the job with those other guys because his daughter was screwing around with the CEO's son."

Alastair regarded her in surprise. "Didn't know you followed gossip, Dar."

"I don't." She said. "He told everyone in that think tank high level tech exec meet last August." She said.

"The one you made me go and speak at."

"He said that in a panel?"

"He said that at dinner, with eight of us at the table" Dar said. "Too much free booze in play. But he must have put in a decent team because they're not doing all that bad."

Alastair sighed. "Well, he starts in two weeks. The board likes him, he's on the membership committee of two of the big clubs in Houston. Think they're going to base him there, not here."

"Uh huh."

"He's got a hot young guy he's bringing in to take Kerry's place." Alastair went on, after a moment. "He'll be in Miami. No one's really looking forward to it." He added. "Except for me, since I told the board I'd hang around here until the new guys were in, and then I'm back to my ranch."

Dar exhaled. "Well, sorry about that." She looked over as the crowd around Kerry burst into laughter. "Uh oh. That's probably an embarrassing story about me getting told."

Two of the building security guards came over, waiting hesitantly until Dar noticed them and waved them forward. "Hello, Ms. Roberts." The taller of the two said. "We just wanted to come over and tell you how much we missed you."

"Hm." Dar smiled at them. "Given that the best thing about me you could say is I know your names, why?" She asked.

"Because you know our names." The man said immediately. "Hardly anyone else does." He glanced at Alastair. "Excuse us, Sir."

"No problem, people." The ex CEO said. "I never had any illusion as to who exactly ran the company up until last month. I'm glad Dar got the personal respect she did, and that so many of you spoke up about that to me." He said. "Loudly."

The two guards returned the smile. "Ms. Roberts, I know you said you can't take a lot people with you, but if you ever need security people at that new place of yours, please let us know." The man said, firmly. "Because I'd leave ILS in a heartbeat."

"Me too." The woman with him agreed. "I still remember the night we had that guy in the lobby yelling at us in some language, and everyone we called just told us to call the police." She looked at Alastair. "Then Maria called you and you came down and took care of him and it turned out all he wanted was to get hold of his wife because his daughter was giving birth before her time."

Dar blinked. "That was a long time ago." She commented.

The woman nodded. "It was my first week at work." She explained. "And I was so scared because he was so upset, but then people told me, no matter what the problem was, you would solve it."

"Poor guy." Dar said. "He had just moved here, he and his wife relocated from Europe. He had no idea what to do and neither did his wife." She glanced at Alastair. "I ended up driving them to Jackson and interpreting for them. No one in the emergency room spoke German."

"When was this?." Alastair asked.

"95? 96?" Dar guessed. "I remember telling the desk not to tell anyone I'd done it."

The woman nodded. "That's right."

"Why?" Her ex boss asked, in a curious tone.

"Wasn't what you paid me for." Dar felt more than a little embarrassed, and she was pretty sure she was blushing. "But anyway, you two – you're right. I can't ask you to come work for us. But if you happened to find yourselves unemployed, come see me. Can't guarantee theres a place, but we can always talk about it."

The man grinned. "Thank you." He said. "And thanks for coming over today. We all.. " He looked vaguely behind him and gestured with one arm. "We wanted to get to say goodbye."

Unexpectedly, Dar felt a lump rise in her throat, and she paused a minute for it to ease. "Me too." She said. "Sorry it went down like that. Wasn't really fair to anyone."

"No, ma'am it wasn't." The man agreed. "But we're glad you're doing okay."

They waved, and turned to leave, scuffing through the sand heading back over to where an ever larger crowd was gathering around the picnic tables.

"Y'know, Dar? You're right there. Wasn't really fair to anyone." Alastair said, after a long pause. "Wish I had a chance to go back and do it all over again."

Dar paused thoughtfully, then she shook her head. "Water under the bridge." She stood up. "C'mon, let's go get some of those marshmallows and enjoy the party." She towed Alastair over to crowd, with Chino trotting behind them. "Let's have fun."

**

Kerry leaned back in the deck chair and put her feet up on the aft well wall of the boat, idly watching the sun sliding towards the sea as they traveled along. Chino was curled up in a ball on her bed nearby, and Mocha had just given up watching the spray and was snuggling up next to her.

It was later than they'd planned, and Dar had the gerbils scrambling trying to get them down to the cabin before it got dark. If she tipped her head back the other way she could see Dar's back as she sat at the console, hands on the throttles and bare feet curled around the captains chairs footrest.

Was Dar ready for some coffee? Kerry felt like she was, so she got up and went into the boat's cabin, holding the door open as Mocha noticed her leaving and bolted after her. "Want to help me get your other mommy coffee, little man?"

"Yap!" Mocha seemed amazed at everything. He skittered across the boat's deck, barking at the moving sunbeams, and astonished when the surface under him rocked suddenly as Dar moved across a wake.

"Yap!" He looked at her with wide eyes.

Kerry started laughing. "What's it like to be so brand new, huh?" She went behind the counter in the galley and got some coffee working. "Every thing's just so cool."

Mocha came behind the counter and sniffed everything including her feet with earnest thoroughness. He sat down and looked up at her, his tiny u shaped tongue hanging out.

Thus appealed to, Kerry reached down and picked him up, cradling him in her arms. "Oooo.. you're so cute." She scratched him behind his ears and examined his brown paws with their inky black pads.

A big shadow crossed over the boat and she glanced outside, seeing them moving past the bridge that linked the mainland to the start of the Keys. "Ah, we're crossing into the gulf." She put Mocha down. "I need to get some coffee upstairs, kiddo. Don't start chewing anything."

"Yap!" Mocha bounced off and found a Chino sized nylabone that he pounced on and claimed with a paw, applying his baby teeth to the partially chewed surface.

"Good boy." Kerry filled the thermos with sugar, milk and coffee and capped it, then shook it vigorously to mix the ingredients. Then she hung the container around her neck by its strap, and went to the door, slipping out and then climbing up the ladder.

Dar was just putting her sunglasses on, since they were heading into the westering sun, and she turned around as Kerry arrived, her face creasing into a grin. "Hey beautiful."

"Flattery will get you hot coffee every time." Kerry slid into the chair next to her and uncapped the thermos. "Almost there."

"Almost there" Dar agreed, taking the cup and sipping on it. "That was nice, today."

"It was." Kerry took a mouthful of coffee directly from the thermos. "I really enjoyed just hanging out with all those folks, and talking like we were just regular people." She pondered the horizon. "I lost count of the people who came up to me and told me how sad they were to see us go."

"Me too." Dar adjusted a throttle a little. "But the new guys may make a go of it. Different outlook. Might not be all bad."

"You said you knew the guy taking your place?" Kerry asked. "Higgs? I think I read about him in one of the industry papers. Seemed like he was pretty well regarded."

"Met him at a conference last summer." Dar acknowledged. "Reminded me a little of Bob. Very status conscious, spent a lot of time talking about his Mercedes Benz."

"Nice." Kerry sighed. "What did those people do to deserve that?"

"The other one, who's taking your position – Mark sent me a brief on him." Dar said. "David Willerson. He's from the oil industry, was the CIO of some drilling company who's got family ties to Higgs."

Kerry sighed again. "I don't really care what happens to the company. I do care about what happens to some of those people. Especially the ones we managed."

"Mm."

"On the other hand, maybe rearranging everything we did there will keep them too busy to care about what we're doing" Kerry said. "And I hope they have some kind of success, Dar because I'd like all those people there to keep getting paychecks."

"Because we can't harbor all of them." Her partner said, pragmatically. "I have to tell you though that Mark said, when he sent me back that brief, that after reading it he felt like whatever it was that pushed him to come talk to us that night we left was pure karma. He's so damn happy."

Kerry smiled.

"He said he'd been really wanting to make a change, to go in a different direction, but it was hard to take the risk. This forced him to." Dar fell silent and put the thermos cup to her lips.

Kerry waited a bit, but there seemed to be nothing more forthcoming. "Hit home a little?" She asked.

Dar shrugged. "Not really." She said. "Because we'd already made that choice, Ker. I keep losing sight of the fact that before they fired us, we quit." She laid on a turn to the left, a lazy arc that would bring them around the end of Key Largo and into Blackwater Sound.

The water here was flat and calm, typical of the Gulf side. The water was alive with boats though, criss crossing through the shallows, many coming back from days out fishing.

That had never really caught Dar's interest. Going under the water had always seemed preferable, spending her time watching the fish and seeing the coral structures far more enticing than sitting on the boat on the surface waiting for a bite.

Her father spearfished. Dar had tried that a few times, but though she'd had moderate success at it, she'd decided she'd rather get her fish at Publix and leave the living ones alone under the surface.

Never had been any question for Kerry. She hunted with her camera only, though Dar wasn't entirely sure if the fish or herself got more attention. "Want to do a night dive?" She asked. "Just off the dock? I'll turn the big lights on and we can see if we can find your earrings."

Kerry grinned, her face reddening a little. "Sure. I still feel like an absolute idiot for having them in that pocket." She admitted. "I'd love to go on a little treasure hunt with you."

Speaking of lights, Dar turned on the boat's, though the sun was not quite near the horizon just yet. She checked the channel markers and aimed a course down the center of them, lifting a hand and waving at a sailboat turning off and going in towards shore.

"Is that Marvin?" Kerry asked. "I owe him a half gallon of milk."

"Since when do we ever get mmmmk in half gallons?" Dar inquired.

"We don't. It's all he had." Her partner patted her on the back. "Let me go downstairs before our puppy decides to chew a hole in the fiberglass." She filled up Dar's cup up from the thermos, kissed her on the lips and then retreated down the steps to attend to the frantic yelps that were coming from the boat's cabin.

Dar smiled, looking ahead to the horizon where she could already see the spit of land that held their cabin and the dock she was aiming the Dixieland Yankee towards. She took another sip of the coffee, convincing herself she could taste the love Kerry had put into the making of it.

She could, right?

"Dar?" She cocked her head as the boat's intercom crackled, and Kerry's voice echoed softly through it.

"Yep?"

"Did you know this new gizmo has a piece of software that lets me control the systems in the cabin?" Kerry said. "I just turned on the aircon and the lights."

Dar shaded her eyes, and chuckled. "Yep, you sure did." She could see the dock halons popping on. "That's pretty cool." She admitted. "I forgot to do that from the condo."

"Heh." Kerry clicked off.

The sunset spilled across the hull as she slowed for the approach to the cabin, the bow coming down in the water as she cut power. The dock itself was just big enough for the Dixie, and she maneuvered carefully past it, putting the engines into reverse to bring them to dead slow, then letting the mild current carry them back against the wooden pylons.

For a moment she let herself imagine a life where she piloted a boat for a living instead of what she actually did.

No high tech, no conference calls, no miles of wires to worry about. Just day after day of laying down float plans, and keeping the boat in condition, spending her days with her hands on the throttles and the sun in her eyes.

It was enticing, but she knew enough about herself to know that it would be interesting only for a little while, and then she'd wish she was doing something more challenging. There were only so many routes, so many soundings, so many people to take out fishing, or diving or just sightseeing.

Dar smiled, as she heard Kerry come out on deck, already reaching for the lines. Just a daydream.

But it was a nice daydream, and since she was lucky enough to own a boat that required a little skill to drive, she got to indulge in it from time to time when docking the yacht in places like this. She put the engines into drive and held the boat against the dock while Kerry walked along the side wall and tied them up to the standing posts.

Easier than floor based cleats. "We tied?"

"Yep." Kerry came back to the rear of the boat and then went to the door opening it to let Mocha and Chino out. Chino immediately recognized a favorite place and she leaped out onto the dock and trotted towards the cabin.

"Yap! Yap!" Mocha was too short to follow, and he stood up and scabbled at the fiberglass, hopping a little bit until Kerry picked him up and stepped shore ward with him. "Take it easy, Mocha." She put him down and watched him ramble up off the wooden pier, starting a through sniff fest of the sandy back yard.

Kerry followed him, pulling the keys to the cabin from her pocket as she joined Chino on the porch, unlocking the door and pushing it open. "G'wan, madam."

Inside, the cabin was already a comfortable temperature, and the lights were on. "Second home sweet home." Kerry walked past the kitchen and entered their bedroom, taking a deep breath of the scent of clean linen. "Want to grab a sandwich before we go diving, hon?"

"Sure." Dar was busy in the kitchen. "Just giving the mooch pooches some grub."

Kerry took a swimsuit from one of the drawers and traded her shorts and shirt for it, then adding a light dive coat over that which went to her knees.

It was terry cloth lined, with a water resistant exterior and a good compliment to a night dive in chilly weather. She walked back out and found Dar watching the dogs hoover up their kibble with an indulgent smile on her face. "I have some pita pockets. You up for a couple of gyros?"

"Yum." Dar agreed. "I'll go get the gear ready."

Kerry flipped on the music system and went to the fridge, removing two carefully packed bags of shaved lamb from the freezer. She tossed them in the microwave and punched the defrost, then got a pan out along with a sealed container of chopped tomatoes along with a can of fried onions and a bottle of ranch dressing. "Sort of gyros, anyway."

"Yap!"

She looked down to find Mocha attentively at her feet, with Chino sitting behind him, her tail sweeping over the tile floor. "Excuse me? Your other mother just fed you, children."

"Growf." Chino responded, sniffing the air as the lamb defrosted.

Kerry chuckled, taking the lamb out and opening the bags into the pan, already hot with a little oil. She quickly warmed the meat, then assembled the pocket sandwiches with their personalized substitutions, putting the fried onions in instead of chopped fresh ones, and drizzling the definitely un-Greek dressing over it. "Sorry kids. No gyros for you."

"Growf."

She went to the fridge and got two bottles of root beer, putting them in her coat pockets before she picked up the sandwiches and headed for the door with both dogs trotting after her.

It was now twilight, and the dock was lit up, the Dixie's white hull gleaming and reflecting into the water. Dar was sitting on the side of the boat, her phone to her ear, and as Kerry got closer, she could hear a wary tone in her partner's voice.

"That's the general idea, yes." Dar said. "The idea is to build intelligence into the filters, so you can let the processors do the heavy lifting and deliver possible vectors to your analysts."

Kerry handed over a sandwich and sat down on the gear locker on the pier, gaining an instantly attentive pair of soulful eyed watchers. She took a bite of her gyro and took a piece of the lamb out, offering it to Chino.

"Right, I get that, but it's a fire hose." Dar said. "There's such a thing as too much data. You need to find a way to channel it so you're not looking at every byte."

Kerry thought probably it was the government. She wiggled out a tiny piece of the lamb and handed it over to Mocha, who was standing up with his front paws on her knee. She knew Dar had sent over a rough top level plan several days back, but having her get a call on a Saturday about it was surprising.

"Right." Dar paused, then nodded "That's what I.. yes." She took a bite and chewed as she listened, then hastily swallowed. "I'm due up to see Gerry Easton on Wednesday. I can stop by." She listened again. "Exactly. You got it. Bring them in, and we can white board the whole thing."

Kerry could hear relief in her partner's low tones and if she turned, she knew she'd see that tall body relaxing, and sure enough there came the soft thumps of Dar's heels idly hitting the side of the boat.

"Okay, then, see you on Wednesday afternoon." Dar concluded. "Thanks for reviewing the plan and getting back to me." She closed the phone and took a big bite of her gyro. "Yum." She hopped off the side of the boat and took a seat beside Kerry. "Looks like I get to deal with both our government clients next week."

"So I heard." Kerry contentedly munched. "I have four potential new clients scheduled for that day or I'd come with you." She took a sip of her root beer. "By the time you get back we might not need that contract if they give you a really hard time."

Dar was busy giving Mocha some of her lamb. "Did I tell you recently you rock my world?"

Kerry put her head against Dar's shoulder and grinned.

"These are really good." Dar indicated her pocket. "I love those fried onions."

"I know." Her partner said. "Okay, let me get these guys inside while we go diving, because I know for sure we'll end up chasing them around in the water the whole time otherwise." She stood up and displayed a bit of remaining sandwich. "C'mon, kids, first one back to the cabin gets a treat!"

Dar dusted her fingers off and went back to the equipment storage locker, built onto the dock along with the housing for the air compressor to fill the tanks. She removed two of the tanks and checked their pressure, then got out their gear and put them all up on the bench they sat on to put everything on.

She checked everything then jumped on board the boat to go and get into her swimsuit.

By the time she finished and came back out Kerry was there, checking her mask. She joined her partner and they geared up in companionable silence, pulling on full wetsuits and in Kerry's case, a hood.

"Polar bear." Dar settled the back of the hood under her suit, and zipped it up. "For someone from the frozen north you sure put on a lot of rubber."

"Pfft." Kerry stretched her arms out to settle the neoprene. "I haven't spent half my life in the ocean, Dardar." She sat down and got her arms into her BCD, clipping everything up and fastening her camera in its case to one of the D rings. "Especially not in the middle of winter."

Dar stood up in her minimalist rig and tightened the straps, then picked up her fins and walked to the end of the pier, regarding the water. She reached over and flipped the underwater lights on the structure, then held on with one hand and put her fins on with the other. "Let me go check things out first."

"Yes, grandma." Kerry smiled, though, and continued to rub no fog on her mask.

Dar inserted her regulator and put her hand over that and her mask, and stepped off the dock, landing in the water with a healthy splash.

The depth off the end was about fifteen feet, and Dar went down about half of that before she leveled out and relaxed, floating in mid water as she adjusted the fit of the gear and tightened everything down. The lights outlined the rough coral formations just off shore, and startled and bewildered fish were flitting around, not expecting the return of the sun quite so soon.

It was nice, with very little current and relatively clear. Dar inflated her vest and went to the surface, sticking her hand up and giving Kerry an OK sign.

Her partner was seated on the edge of the dock in her gear, kicking her fins. Seeing the sign, she leaned forward and just tumbled into the water with a less spectacular splash, sinking down to join Dar as she dipped again below the surface.

The water was cool, and it penetrated her wetsuit quickly, but just as quickly it warmed to her body and she relaxed as she felt the chill fade. The lights under the dock made the bottom as visible as daylight would have, and she adjusted her gear and followed Dar as she moved over to the end point of their part of the beach.

They started slowly searching the bottom, drifting along side by side as Dar gently fanned the sand with her fingers.

Kerry didn't really expect to find anything. She had already written off the baubles, marking it down to something she'd know better about the next time so though she dutifully peered in all the crevices and used her hand light to inspect the holes in the coral, her enjoyment was mostly based on spending time at one of her favorite hobbies with her very favorite person.

So it was fun for her to spend as much time watching Dar as she was hunting. She unclipped the camera on her shoulder and spent a few minutes taking pictures, getting shots in this unusual light of the coral before she casually swung the lens at her partner.

Who had divined her intention and was now laying on the bottom on a sandy area, body fully extended on her side, hand propping up her head.

Oh, nice. Kerry cheerfully shot the pose, getting a nice stream of tiny bubbles trickling up from the regulator in Dar's mouth. Then her partner cooperatively gave her another shot, by taking the regulator out and sticking her tongue out of her mouth as far as it could go.

Kerry managed to capture it, then she started laughing, bubbles emerging from her own gear in thunderous spurts.

Dar grinned and replaced the mouthpiece, then she elevated off the ground and started hunting again.

They were now directly under the pier where once upon a time Dar had gotten bitten by a fish, the illumination past it broken up by the large shadow cast by the Dixie.

Dar pointed as she spotted a lobster darting across the coral, hurrying out of sight as they cruised over it, and Dar put on a burst of speed and stretched one long arm out, getting a hold of the creature mid shell.

It's tail flicked rapidly, but Dar's grip proved it's match and she stuffed the animal in a mesh bag clipped to her BCD.

Lobster linguine for dinner, Kerry reckoned. She was about to swing around and go back under the pier when a flash caught her eye and she hovered, spotting something shiny where the lobster had emerged from. She dove down and got her hand flash out, flicking it over the rocks and finding the item.

Hot damn. Kerry was truly surprised. She felt Dar come over the top of her, and she pointed with her light at the sparkle, reaching down to capture it with her hand.

A spurt of surprise came out of her partner's regulator, a cloud of bubbles heading upward as Dar tilted her head to examine her find. Then she made a double OK sign and grinned visibly.

Kerry held both hands out in a motion of mock modesty and put the earrings, which had been tangled together and stayed that way safely into the palm of one hand and closed her fist around them.

Dar pointed her thumb upward and raised her eyebrows.

Kerry nodded, and they started up for the surface when they both paused, hearing boat engines nearby. Engines that didn't move past, but circled in an idling motion complete with a sudden, powerful beam of light that pierced the already halon lit depths.

Dar sighed visibly, and moved closer to the pylon, clipping her lobster bag to a ring before she breached the surface of the water.

Perfection, it seems, was too much to ask for.

**

Dar pulled her mask off as she climbed up the dive ladder onto the pier, spotting the coast guard cutter idling offshore without difficulty. She took the time to go sit on the gearing bench and unclip her BCD, putting her fins down and standing up in her wetsuit and booties.

She ran her fingers through her wet hair and walked to the end of her dock, putting her hand on the last pylon as the searchlight swung over and, to her mind since she was fully lit by the dock lights, unnecessarily blinded her.

She put her hand up to shield her eyes, opening up the radio box mounted near her hand and punching in the coast guard frequency. "Cutter offshore bayside MM 98 can I ask what your problem is?"

The search light cut off, and now she could see figures on deck. The cutter swung around and motored over, as Dar heard Kerry divesting herself of her tank behind her. She put the radio handset back onto its holder and waited as the vessel eased closer.

"Did we do something wrong?" Kerry asked, handing Dar a dive jacket.

"No." Dar shook her head. "Lobster's even in season. I just left it down there because I wasn't sure how long this was gonna take and I like mine fresh killed."

Kerry grimaced just slightly.

The cutter dropped a small rubber boat with two figures in it and it roared over and came to the end of the dock. "You people have permission to be diving out here?" The taller of the two figures asked.

Dar glanced around, then back at him. "I own the dock, the land, the cabin up there and this boat." She indicated the Dixie. "Who am I supposed to be asking for permission?"

The figure relaxed. "Okay, no problem. Can we come up?"

"Sure."

"I'll go make some coffee." Kerry zipped up her jacket. "And get out of all this wet rubber." She patted Dar on the butt and retreated down the pier, heading back to the cabin where dog barks were now loudly evident.

"Sorry about that." The coast guard officer said, as he got to the top of the ladder and stood up. "We've had reports of trespassing up and down this area, and we weren't sure what was going on." He held a hand out. "Lieutenant Davis. And you are?"

"Dar Roberts." Dar replied, giving his hand a shake. "Sorry for the wet."

"We're used to it." The man smiled. "So were you folks doing work under there? We saw the lights."

Dar shook her head. "Just looking for something we lost the last trip." She said. "What kind of trespassing? We don't get down here a lot. I have an alarm but there's always a way to get around that."

The coast guard lieutenant was already nodding before she stopped talking. "This area's got a lot of unlivied in coastline, just up north of here. Got people living wild, and after 911, we don't like that so much anymore."

"Ah."

"Not that everyone's dangerous, but you don't know, and we're not in a mode to take anyone for granted." The man said. "Even nice ladies like you."

"Got it." Dar said. "Well, we've got some identification inside. Want to see that, and have some coffee?" She asked. "The last thing we want is to have you guys think we're troublemakers."

The lieutenant and his petty officer attendant grinned, and followed her to the cabin. "Can't be too cautious, right?" The lieutenant said. "Bet you make a better pot of coffee than our cook does."

Dar grinned wryly at the mild flirting and took it for the compliment it was. She led the way up the walk and opened the door, standing back for them to enter. "Careful of the dogs. They lick."

Kerry already had the coffee perking, and was dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie, her wet hair brushed back to dry. She smiled as they entered, and indicated the stools at the breakfast bar, which they took after unzipping their heavy sea jackets.

"I'm going to get out of this suit." Dar said. "Give them our ID, wouldja?"

"Sure." Kerry went over to the messenger bag she'd taken off the boat and rooted in it, while their visitors fixed themselves some coffee. She removed their driver's licenses, and Dar's captain's license just in case, and brought them back over. "Here you go."

"That's good coffee." The lieutenant said, taking the IDs and studying them. Then he handed them back. "So this is a weekend place for you gals?"

Kerry took a cup for herself and leaned against the counter "Something like that. We work and live up in the city. It's nice to get away from there sometimes."

"Where you live? Thats not the city." The lieutenant smiled. "I've been to the Coast Guard functions out there."

"Close enough. We work in Coconut Grove." Kerry, however, lifted a hand and half shrugged in acknowledgement. "It's still way more laid back down here."

The petty officer hadn't said anything but now he nodded in agreement. "My family's place is ten minutes down from here. I liked it, growing up." He said. "Just long summer nights of cracking open coconuts and grabbing land crabs for dinner." He had the flat, not quite accent that some Miami natives did, and by the faint smile, the memory was in fact a good one.

Kerry couldn't quite imagine doing that, though she knew her partner had. "It's really nice here in Key Largo. I like the small town feel to it. I grew up in a fairly small place in Michigan."

"People here know you." The lieutenant agreed. "That's what we want to key into, if you catch my drift. We want people to tell us when things are out of place. Someone saw the lights on here, and called us. Didn't know what was going on."

"We just had the lights put in a few months ago." Kerry admitted. "Sorry if it alarmed anyone. I didn't really think about it."

Dar emerged from the bedroom, pushing the long sleeves on her t-shirt up past her elbows. "So you're crowd sourcing info?" She came over and stood next to Kerry.

"Something like that." The lieutenant said. "We've only got a limited set of eyeballs. If people had known what to look for, they might have noticed things like those men getting pilot's licenses, you know?" He said. "So we're asking citizens in the area to keep their eyes open, and let us know when they see something they just think doesn't look right."

Dar nodded a little. "That could make people say things that might not be true, about neighbors they just don't like." She suggested. "People can be assholes, that way."

"Its true. But the last time we had too little information. It's better to have too much." The officer said. "Well, thanks for the coffee, ladies. Sorry to have bothered your diving. I'll make a note in our logs that you checked out, so if we get a call next time, we can let them know not to worry about it." He lifted a hand, and he and the petty officer retreated out the door, closing it behind them and heading back to their ship.

"Huh." Kerry eyed her partner. "I get his point, but why do I feel like that's not really a good thing?"

Dar took a sip of her coffee. "Calling the authorities on your neighbor because you think they may be a terrorist isn't a good thing, Ker."

"Unless they really are a terrorist."

Dar grunted, and nodded. "I'm going to go get our lobster. Got your earrings?"

Kerry pointed at the two items on the counter. "I can't believe we found them."

"Glad some fish didn't swallow em." Dar ambled out of the kitchen. "Or maybe they did." She winked at Kerry as she opened the door. "And that's just where they got pooped out."

"Oh." Kerry regarded the two items. "Well, they can always be washed." She picked them up and went into the bedroom, pausing as she saw both dogs snoozing comfortably on their bed. Chino was curled up in a ball, and Mocha was tucked up next to her, his head resting on her elbow.

Aw. Kerry put the earrings down and picked up her camera instead, freshly released from its watertight case. She took several shots of their sleeping animals, then went back into the living room just as Dar entered with the lobster bag. "Pan fry it and toss it with linguine?" She asked, getting a grin in response. "You get to kill it."

Amiably, Dar did, and about twenty minutes later they were seated on their couch, with two very attentive dogs, sharing a plate of seafood pasta.

"You don't get any of this." Dar informed the watching dogs. "This spicy sauce will make you both sick to your stomachs." She put her feet up on the coffee table next to Kerry's. "This is awesome."

"Thank you, my dear." Kerry absorbed the compliment with a smile. "I'm always happy to try and make something yummy from your hunting and gathering."

Dar chuckled. "I'm going to finish this then see if I can work up a presentation for the feds."

Kerry turned her head and gently nibbled her partner's bare shoulder. "Really?" She asked. "Let's not start working on the weekends so fast, huh?"

"You have something else in mind?"

"Matter of fact I do." Kerry finished up a final bite of dinner and put the plate down on the table. "Starting with a hot shower to get the salt off, and a tumble into our very comfortable bed."

They heard a clank, looking over to see Chino placidly licking out the plate, and Mocha scrabbling with his paws to try and get at the edge of it.

"But first, we rescue the crockery." Dar got up and swiped the plate. "Stop that you pirates!" She straightened up and went into the kitchen, rinsing the dish off and putting it on the drainboard as Kerry came in behind her, circling her with both arms and laying her head down on her back.

Dar turned around and returned the hug, absorbing the intensity of the affection almost radiating from her. "Keeerrrry." She warbled softly. "Yoooure the best."

"Not sure about that, but I am the luckiest." Kerry exhaled in contentment. "C'mon. I can taste the salt on you." She licked Dar's collarbone, then released her and led the way to the shower.

The hot water and scrubby sponges felt good. Dar's sensual touch felt even better and in a well choreographed movement from the shower enclosure to the towel rack ended with both of them wrapped in a bath sheet, pressed together.

Steam from the shower, cool air from the cabin. Kerry felt like she was on something of a sensual overload, as Dar's fingers laced behind her neck and she circled her partner's waist with her arms, pulling her closer and savoring the emotional and physical charge as their bodies meshed.

Dar half turned and tried to move, but the towel was binding them and half laughing she removed it and they got from the bathroom into the bed in a tangle of arms and legs and comforters.

The lights were dim and they had the windows open, allowing the fresh breeze and the sound of the sea to wash through the room, brushing over their bare bodies as they stretched out and started a leisurely exploration of each other.

Only to be interrupted by a wild yapping and an invasion of paws and tiny teeth, which nearly made them levitate off the bed. "Holy crap!" Dar yelped. "He bit my.."

Kerry started laughing, burying her face in Dar's shoulder as her partner got hold of Mocha and lifted him up and over her body.

"Stop that ya rug rat!" Dar tapped him on the head. "Who said you pups were allowed up here?"

"What the hell is so damn funny?" Dar sat up and defended herself from the wildly wagging tailed puppy. "Mocha, cut that out!" She picked up the animal and put him on the floor. "You too, madam!" She pointed at Chino. "Down!"

Chino obediently hopped off the bed and barked at Mocha, who was balancing on his hind legs trying to get back up. "Growf!"

Mocha fell over onto his back, with a yelp of surprise. Then he pounced on Chino's paw and started biting it.

Kerry was still laughing. She wiped the tears from her eyes and sat up herself, bringing her legs up crossed under her as she leaned her elbows on her bare knees. "Sorry hon." She put her hand on Dar's back. "I don't know why that struck me so damn funny but it did."

Dar sighed and got up as the dogs both raced out into the living room, and went to stand by the back door, looking expectantly at her. "Want to have some warm milk and start this all over again?"

“Sure.” Kerry got up out of the bed and pulled on a t shirt, handing one over to Dar as she followed her out the door. “It’s a little early for bed anyway and at least I’ll get a chance for my hair to dry or I’ll look like a chia pet in the morning.”

Now Dar snickered. "Kerry the Chia Pet. I think I'm going to add that to Gopher Dar."

"Wench."

"I'll make it a hedgehog." Dar continued, as she went to let the dogs out into the fenced area in the back that led towards the pier. "Stay away from the water."

“A hedgehog?”

"Sure. They're adorable."

Kerry gave her a skeptical look. Then she turned and went into the first of the two offices in the cabin, sitting down behind her desk and turning on her PC. She waited for it to boot, then brought up a browser and did a search for hedgehogs.

She studied the results, then bit off a grin and went back to the living room. "Okay. She joined Dar at the doorway. "You're right. They're really cute."

Dar affected a mock hurt look. "You didn't believe me?"

"I just had no idea what they looked like," Kerry evaded the question. "They're cuter than gophers."

"As they should be, since you're cuter than I am." Dar whistled softly. "C'mon guys."

Kerry circled Dar's body with her arms and leaned against her. Then she gave her a kiss on the shoulder, and retreated back to the kitchen, getting out the fixings for some honey laced warm milk.

"I'm going to end up chasing that dog into the water." Dar predicted. "Mocha!"

"Growf!" Chino paused in the act of trotting back over to the door and barked at the puppy, who was snuffling at something on the beach. "Growf!"

"Whose idea was this?" Dar asked, sighing as she went down the steps to the sand.

"That would be yours, Dixiecup." Kerry said to her retreating back. "But I agreed to it, so I guess next time I get to chase down the little sucker."

She got the cups out and warmed them, then filled them with milk and popped them into the microwave, leaning on the counter while she waited for them to heat. The living room was a comfortable place, couches facing the windows so they could watch the sunset and a television mounted on the wall to one side.

They had cable here, but they seldom watched it. They occasionally turned on the news, or, when it was that season, watched the hurricane coverage. Cabin time was mostly spent on the water, near the water, enjoying the town, riding the bike....

Dar's yell spurred her to come around the counter and head for the door, poking her head out. "What's up?"

Dar had Mocha under one arm and she was slogging through the sand heading back up to the cabin. "He was fighting with a damn land crab!"

Kerry stifled a laugh as her lover arrived at the porch. "Did he get hurt?"

"No, but the damn thing bit ME when I tried to save it from him." Dar gave her an aggrieved look, getting into the light and displaying a lurid red mark across the knuckle of her index finger. "Ow!"

"Wooow" Mocha let out a puppy yodel.

Kerry bit the inside of her lip to keep from laughing again. She leaned over and gave the spot a kiss "Aw, my brave Dardar. You saved the puppy!"

Dar came inside and put Mocha down. "Stupid crab." She grumbled, going over to the sink and running cold water over her finger. "It was guarding its hole." She said. "Mocha was trying to play with it."

Kerry eased around her and got the cups, adding some honey to them and mixing the liquid. "Well, he's a puppy." She said. "He's never seen a crab before. Or a beach, or most of anything else. Can you imagine what it must be like to be so new and not know what anything is?"

"Yap!" Mocha had recovered from his crab battle and pattered over to the water dish, licking at it with somewhat erratic enthusiasm.

"No, actually I can't." Dar dried her hand off.

Kerry took her cup and went over to the couch, sitting down on it and stretching her legs out across the tile floor. "What do you think about an electric fireplace for the corner there?"

Dar took a seat next to her and sipped at her cup. "Sure." She agreed. "So long as we puppy proof it so we don't come back in to find our dog with no eyebrows."

"Point taken. I was listening to an infomercial the other morning and I saw these little fireplaces that are supposed to be handmade by Amish people."

Dar turned her head and looked at her partner. "You don't for one second actually believe that, do you?"

"No. I don't. But it gave me the idea of getting an actual real and nice one for here." Kerry replied. "And hey, I completely forgot this, but I meant to tell you about it. I was walking around the back of the office building and I found a break in the bushes."

Dar remained silent, sipping her milk.

"It looked like something big had been going in and out of there, behind the hedges where that other property line is." Kerry went on. "I think maybe something or someone went through there."

"Behind the hedges?"

Kerry nodded.

"You think it was the homeless guys?"

Kerry shrugged. "I don't know. It just looked weird."

"Okay, let's have Marcus check it out next week. I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to have people living in his bushes." Dar decided, then eyed her partner. "So that's why you put those leftovers from the cart on that iron table in front." She saw the blush rise on her companion's face. "You sneaky little bugger."

"Well, it was better than leaving them for the bugs inside." Kerry muttered. "The cleaning people had already been through."

Dar chuckled, draping her arm over Kerry's shoulders. "It's fine. It'd just end up in the garbage, and besides, I had them put all the server crates out in the back with the pallets too."

"That's enough wood to make a Huck Finn raft." Kerry watched the stars outside twinkle. "You know, we're sitting here in this nice cabin, with our dogs, and each other, and pretty much anything in the world we need taken care of – not to mention having each other, and.."

She paused, and shook her head.

"We're lucky people." Dar concluded for her. "You and I."

"We are."

"Yap!" Mocha put his paws up on the couch and looked at them expectantly.

"And you're a lucky puppy!" Kerry put her cup down and picked him up, putting him in her lap and scratching his ears. "He's so darn cute."

Chino jumped up on the couch on the other side of Dar and put her head down on the taller woman's leg, letting out a long sigh.

"So what do you think about the little punk, Chi?" Dar asked, stroking her head. "You jealous of all the attention we're giving him?"

Chino's eyebrows twitched and she peered up at Dar soulfully.

"Don't worry." Dar smoothed the fur over her soft ears. "You're still our favorite girl." She smiled when Chino's tail thumped on the surface of the couch. "I'm sure you're gonna enjoy him a lot more when he gets a little older and stops chewing on you."

"Yap!" Mocha looked up from chewing Kerry's fingers.

"And you too." Dar leaned over and gave her a kiss on the lips.

"Mm. Feel like I'm floating in a big vat of marshmallow goo." Kerry sighed. "Between those two pairs of Labrador eyes, and you kissing me I almost expect to hear the theme from the Love Boat starting up any minute" She looked up to find one round, blue eye peering at her, the other obscured by Dar's hair.

"Yeeeess?"

"Is that a good or a bad thing?"

"Being completely surrounded by love? What do you think?"

Dar smiled. "So." She tickled Kerry's ear. "Valentines Day."

"Mm?"

"Pack a bag for three days."

"Really." Kerry nibbled Dar's shoulder. "What do I pack?"

"Beads."

Kerry's eyebrows hiked. "Beads?"

"We have reservations in New Orleans for the last weekend of Mardi Gras." Her partner explained. "That okay with you?" Dar noted the look of delight on her companion's face with satisfaction. "Good surprise?"

"Hell yes!" Kerry bounced up and down in her seat, making Mocha yelp and bat at her with his paws. "Oh my god, Dar! I've always wanted to go!" Her eyes lit up. "You are awesome!" She put the puppy down on the floor and threw her arms around her partner. "Eeeeeee!"

Contentedly, Dar drained her cup and put it down, very pleased with the reaction to her plan. "Now." She turned and cupped Kerry's cheek, leaning over to kiss her. "Where were we?"

"In the bedroom." Kerry tugged her upright and giving her a nudge. "Go go go."

**

"We got phones." Mark announced, sticking his head into Kerry's office. "And let me tell ya, Mayte's rocking it as a PM." He entered, carrying a desk phone and put it down on her desk. "She's got those guys controlled."

Kerry put her pen down and shifted her attention to her new phone. "Oh. Nice." She waited as Mark ran the cable down and plugged it into the second network jack under her desk. The phone lit up and started through its boot up process, scrolling through its various options on the square, color screen. "I'm glad Mayte's doing well."

"So, it's got a built in phone book." Mark perched on the desk and pressed the buttons. "And we're all in it. They got this module we can use to link it to email? So you can see who's online or not."

"Do we want to do that?" Kerry asked.

"We can play with it." Mark evaded the question. "Sure would be slicker than me using Pinger to see if you guys were here."

Kerry chuckled. "That's true." She admitted. "Okay, put it in. What the hell. If Dar doesn't like it she'll just hack into it and re-write it or something."

"Yup." Mark got off the desk. "So that's it. I'm running all the phones out on the carts, I got two guys maybe starting tomorrow so I can get back to some planning stuff again." He waved. "Later!"

"Thanks." Kerry amused herself for a few minutes punching the phones buttons, and looking up names. She hit the entry for her partner, hearing the phone in the next office start to ring.

"Yees?" Dar's voice rumbled through the speaker. "Playing with your new toy, Kerrison?"

"Can I record you saying that and use it as my ringtone?" Kerry asked. "I'm really getting into these ringtones."

Dar started laughing, audible both through the phone and through the open doorway. She hung up the line and a moment later appeared at Kerry's side, dropping onto the window bench that had become one of her favorite spots. "Like the phones." She commented.

"Me too." Kerry said. "Did you get your travel all sorted out?"

"I did." Her partner agreed. "Maria set up a deal where we get first class upgrades in return for ten hours of consulting time a week with a travel agent consortium she knew of."

"Hon, I wouldn't book you anything but first class anyway, even if I had to bake and sell cupcakes on Brickell every week to support that." Kerry told her in a mild tone.

"I know." Dar smiled. "But Maria did a great job with the negotiation, so as much as I love your cupcakes we won't need them." She winked. "I'm off to my first programming team meeting. Wish me luck." She got up and cracked her knuckles, then wandered out.

"You need no luck, Paladar Katherine." Kerry chuckled to herself as she sorted out the listings of service offerings she was developing. "All you need are those brain cells and the baby blues. Everything else falls in place around you like metal filings around a magnet."

"Pardon?" Maria poked her head in. "Were you speaking to someone, Kerrisita?"

"Just myself." Kerry scribbled a note. "Great job on the travel account Maria." She glanced up and smiled at the older woman, who danced in place and snapped her fingers. "That's exactly the kind of thing we need."

"You are very welcome." Maria said. "I am having such the good time here, Kerrisita, you have no idea." She continued her little dance out the door, salsa-ing away in her Ugg boots and leaving Kerry with a big grin on her face.

"Now that's cool." She said, resting her hands on the desk.

Her new phone buzzed. "Huh. Already?" Kerry glanced at the device, and pressed the answer button. "This is Kerry."

"Yes, ma'am." The receptionist downstairs said. "I have a visitor for you? He says he has an appointment, a Mr. Bott?"

Kerry checked her calender. "Yes, please walk him up, Angelina, thanks." She released the button with a feeling of satisfaction, then reached for her cup of tea and sipped it, sitting quietly unit she heard the sounds of approaching footsteps outside.

A soft knock came at her door. "C'mon in."

"Hello, Miss Kerry?" A doe eyed, dark haired girl opened the door cautiously. "Someone is here to see you."

"Thanks Ana." Kerry said, giving their new junior admin a smile Maria's family friend had turned out to be a gentle, slight girl, as shy as Maria had said she was,with a look of perpetual astonishment on her face.

She had a slight speech impediment, and she limped a little, and Kerry could see there would have been several reasons for her to be a little on the wallflower side. But she was sweet and very willing to learn, and so far she'd done all right.

A man entered behind her and crossed the floor, extending his hand to Kerry as she stood to greet him.
"Hello there."

"Mr. Bott? Thanks for coming over." Kerry indicated one of her visitor chairs, and she seated herself as he did. "Thanks for coming to see me." She studied him briefly. He was a little above average height, with curly brown hair and hazel eyes, and a tapered, athletic frame. "I appreciate it."

"No problem at all." He said. "Your message said you were looking for some security services. That right? How can I help you?" He said, in a direct sort of way. "My company doesn't do the traditional security guard kind of thing, if that's what you're in the market for."

"I know." Kerry said. "I wasn't really looking for security guards." She got up and went to the door, closing it before she came back to her desk. "After all, it's not that big a building, and we don't transact in cash."

He nodded, but remained silent.

"What we do is provide IT services." Kerry sat back down. "To some very average clients, like Dade Paper, and some not so average ones like the Federal Government."

"Ah." He nodded again.

"So I need some help in developing a security plan, that will keep our intellectual property secure." Kerry said. "I need someone to strategize with us about how to put in place data security also."

Now, Bott smiled. "Well good. Then I see you did your homework before you called me." His eyes twinkled a little. "Because that is what we do. So let me do my sales spiel and lay out what our services are, and then we can decide if we can do business with each other."

Kerry nodded, and leaned on her elbows. "Pitch me." She said. "Just one thing – don't put any software into the sales job. My partner won't allow any third party in here."

He paused, and regarded her. “You write all your own?” He seemed surprised. “That’s unusual, even for a tech company.”

“That’s unusual, especially for a tech company.” Kerry agreed. “But that’s how it is.”

Bott shifted and hiked one knee up, resting his arm on it. “Fair enough.” He said. “So let’s start at the beginning, with physical security.”

“Let’s.”

**

Dar waited until the chatter died down and then she regarded her little pack of programmers.

Mixed bag. Mostly young, though one of the most recent hires was a old timer, a grizzled gray software architect with a long history of project work. Mostly a little restless and outspoken, none of them so far afraid to voice an opinion.

All of that pleased Dar. She suspected the attitude was likely going to rub her the wrong way at times, and she also suspected she would need to earn her stripes with this new group, but she much preferred that to a bunch of earnest yes men.

Or women, as it were, since two of the coders were.

“Okay folks.” Dar said. “Let’s get this going, and keep it short.”

The gang amiably settled down and focused on her.

Dar cleared her throat. “First off, welcome to the company.” She said. “At this point, most often you’d be given a little rundown on the history and all that, but we don’t have any history. The company started up a few weeks ago, so we have to kinda make it up as we go along.”

She paused, and everyone looked at her in silent attention. “Any questions about that?”

Mostly head shaking.

“Okay. So.” Dar said. “Our first project is going to be in two parts. One, a universal database, and two, an enterprise service bus that will feed into it, from a variety of different systems.” She paused. “The project is enterprise grade, and has to handle a very high rate of throughput.”

The programmers all exchanged glances. Most of them had started just that morning, and were still getting settled into their cubes. One of the females held her hand up. “Which database are we using for that?”

“We’re writing it from scratch.” Dar responded, with a faint smile. “But I have a base code for it.”

Another one raised his hand. “And the ESB? Are we writing that from scratch too?”

Dar nodded

“Wow.” The man said. “Can I ask why?”

“Sure.” Dar said. “Because the customers who come to us are looking for something that’s very specific, and designed for them. Not a product that’s off the shelf components stitched together.” She said. “And the other reason is, some of our customers want 100 percent assurance that every line of code is known.”

“Like... for security?” The woman ventured.

“Something like that, yes.” Dar agreed. “Sometimes the contracts we sign require confidentiality. Sometimes you do it to make it a differentiator between us and our competitors.”

“So another company can’t come in and tell your client, hey we can do that too, only cheaper.” The older man spoke up. “Custom. I like that.”

Dar grinned at him.

"Company I was at last, they did it the other way." The man said. "Put together some off the shelf stuff, then sold it with a support package cheap enough to convince the customers they'd be saving a lot of money." He shook his head. "Didn't work out. Fifty percent of us got laid off after eight months."

Stan, his name was. Dar recalled. Stan Ruffelhouse, who had worked for one of ILS's competitors and probably she reckoned, had some small idea of who she was.

"Company was all about sales. What's the next sale? How can we sell more?" Stan said. "Never about keeping the customers, just getting new ones."

"Sales is like that." Dar said. "It's part of the culture."

"Here too?" The woman spoke up. "You need sales, right?"

Dar paused and considered a moment before she answered. "Right now, Celeste, we don't have a sales department." She admitted. "To be honest, I never got along with sales in my prior job. But you do need to put your products out there if you expect your company to grow. So we will have one, but I'll have to figure out how to do that."

"If you.. I mean, we, don't have a sales department how'd we get a project?" Stan asked.

"Long story." Dar said. "But that's why we don't have a sales department yet. I've got enough projects lined up to keep us busy until that all gets sorted out."

The door bumped open and Chino wriggled into the room, trotting over to Dar and nosing her knee.

"Growf!"

"Hey Chino." Dar greeted her pet. "You coming in to see my lecture too?"

The Lab wagged her tail, going over to the corner and settling down into a ball there.

"That's a nice dog." The woman commented. "It's cool you bring her here. Can we bring animals too?"

Dar leaned on the back of her chair. "I love animals." She said. "But if your animals are going to take up more time to watch after, or chase after, or keep from fighting after than your work does, we've got a problem."

Celeste smiled and lifted her hands. "Point." She acknowledged. "I was thinking more like a small fish tank."

"Fish are fine. I have some in my office." Dar said, taking her seat again. "Since that came up, lets talk about work hours." she leaned her elbows on the table and tapped the wood lightly. "I expect people to be productive." She let her eyes track to each new face. "So you'll all have delivery dates and product schedules."

They nodded in understanding.

"Generally speaking, the doors'll be open from seven or eight am to seven or eight pm." Dar said. "So figure out how you can get your work done in the hours we're open. Everyone understand me?" She asked. "Not everyone's a morning person. As we continue to build the company, the hours will change, and get later, depending on support groups."

Slowly, faces creased into smiles.

"Don't work from home though." Dar said, after a pause. "One, we don't want the code out of the building, and two.. " She felt her lips twitch. "You should have a life outside work."

Stan leaned back in his chair with a satisfied expression. "And if we like being early birds?"

"Have at it." Dar said. "I am."

"Good." He said. "So lemme ask you. All this about security, and all that. Who's the customer?" He asked. "For this project, I mean?"

“Department of Defense.” Dar said, in a mild tone. “You probably guessed that from the security clearance requirement.”

“Wow.” Celeste murmured.

“But we have other customers that are a lot more mundane.” Dar said. “So don’t worry about it.”

She waited for more comments, but there were none. “So.” She said. “Heres how it’s going to work. We’ll start on the database. The raw code is already in the repository and I’ll be posting a structure plan there on what needs to be coded to work. Everyone will check out an assigned section, code it, then check it back in.”

She studied the group. “Any questions about that?” She paused, and then went to the white board, picking up a marker. “So let’s go over the basic data structure, so you’ll have an idea of what we’re aiming at.”

**

Kerry relaxed in the outdoor chair, one of several they’d bought and put into the central garden area. She kept one eye on Mocha’s scampering, while she waited for Dar to arrive, enjoying the sunlight as it counteracted the cool breeze.

A lot nicer than going down to the cafeteria. It felt like she was really taking time out in the middle of the day, and the outdoor space felt relaxed and private, though she did suspect it would lose some of its appeal once the weather turned hot.

But for now, it was lovely. She let her hand rest on her denim clad knee, taking a deep breath and exhaling as she heard a set of distinctive footprints heading towards her from the back alley. She tilted her head and looked past her leg, spotting Dar strolling across the grass with Chino in tow.

Mocha spotted them and raced over, yapping excitedly as he reached Dar and went in circles for a minute, then fell down.

Kerry chuckled as she watched her partner carefully step over their new pet, her hands full of paper bags that held their lunch. “Hey hon.”

“Hi.” Dar put the bags down on the stone table nearby and took the seat next to Kerry. “How’d your meeting go?”

“Pretty good.” Kerry said. “I think I want to interview a few more companies though before doing a contract. This guy talked a good game, but there were a couple things he said that made me wonder.” She folded her hands over her stomach. “I have two people from county government coming over this afternoon about a traffic light synchronization program. Can we do that?”

“Sure.” Dar was fishing around in the bags, pulling out a sandwich and handing it over. “But are you telling me those lights I always suspected were completely roll dice random really were?”

“Apparently.”

“Nice.” Dar removed her own sandwich and sat back with it, extending her legs and crossing them at the ankles. “Mark tells me we need to get a few help desk people on board already.” She said. “So I have the HR team looking for them. I figure we can put them in that small office next to the server room.”

“Did his new assistant start?”

“Yeah, I saw him running cables in the programmer’s cave.” Dar said. “Nerdy little guy.”

“Oh, he’ll be out of place here.” Kerry took a bite of her curry chicken salad and enjoyed the crisp bite of granny smith apple in it. “How’s your skateboarder doing? I saw him bringing in his iguana this morning.”

“He’s doing all right.” Her partner said. “This is his first job. He’s never had to code on a schedule before.” She added. “I’ve got him doing small code sections and then running tests on them.”

“And he’s writing a game?” Kerry seemed bemused at this.

Dar waggled her hand. "It's more of a gaming system." She said. "It's a framework you can use to underlay different kinds of games. Once he's got to a certain point, I'll write a controller console for it and we'll see if we can get some game people on board to market it."

Kerry chewed thoughtfully. "That wasn't something I saw us branching out to." She admitted. "I never even saw you play a video game."

Dar's face creased into a brief grin. "I did in my younger years. Just ask Mark." She offered a bit of her sandwich to Chino, and immediately got a very attentive puppy clawing at her kneecap. "I'm not sure we want to go into the games themselves, but the system could be interesting."

"Okay, so. I got an email earlier from the local small business group. They've got a convention next week – they know it's short notice but they were wondering if we want to participate? I guess someone gave them our names." Kerry said. "I've got the booth prices on my desk.. they're not bad."

Dar looked thoughtful. "We ready to go public like that?" She asked. "I wouldn't mind going, but I don't know that I want to put a booth up."

"Really?"

She shook her head. "Booth makes you one of many." She said. "Give them a call, see if they've got any panels or talking opportunities. Look for a place where we can stand out and shine."

Kerry stopped chewing and regarded her partner. She swallowed, and washed down her mouthful with a sip of the bottled tea Dar had brought her. "Y'know, you still manage to surprise me sometimes." She admitted, seeing the wry twinkle in her partner's eyes. "This is going to sound ridiculous but sometimes I forget who I'm married to."

Dar chuckled. "That's because you're used to me sending a gopher to torment you and singing in your ear." She looked pleased with the compliment anyway. "All jokes aside, if you get me an opportunity to do a keynote or something like that, it would work better for us."

"Absolutely, Maestro." Kerry agreed. "I'll give them a call when I go back inside." She succumbed to the entreating brown eyes at her knee and fished out a piece of chicken. "Only a little bit, you monster." She offered the piece to Mocha, who nibbled it.

They ate together in companionable silence for a few minutes. Then Dar got up and balled up her wrappings, putting them in the bag she'd brought. "I'll be upstairs building my presentations for Wednesday." She moved behind Kerry and leaned over, kissing her on the top of her head. "Later."

"Later." Kerry smiled, reaching behind her to pat Dar's leg as she moved off. She slowly finished her sandwich, sharing bits of it with her two attentive friends as she listened to the snatches of salsa music she could hear coming out of the windows.

That lasted all of five minutes, then another pair of footsteps approached her little haven, and she looked up to see their landlord coming at her at a trot. "Hey there."

"Hey there!" Marcus sat down in the seat Dar had so recently abandoned. "So, you asked me about the homeless guys around here, right?"

"Right." Kerry agreed.

"Are you having a lot of problems with them?" Marcus asked. "I know the cafe said they were causing some issues around here."

Kerry sipped her tea, watching his face. "To us? Well, it's just that they were fighting with the maintenance men and then with each other. I don't want the people who work for us to be nervous or anything going in and out of the building. Especially in the evenings."

Marcus was already nodding. "I know." He looked uncomfortable. "It's just hard, if you know what I mean. I don't want to get a rep that I'm against vets, or anything."

"No one does." Kerry said. "Dar's from a military family. I'm just not sure what the deal is, because people are having to deal with them being rude, and yelling and all that, even the cafe gals are nervous about walking to their cars at night. I'm not against vets, I'm just for civil behavior."

Their landlord sighed. "See, those guys, there's like, six or eight of them, right? They grew up in the neighborhood, and most of them went off into the service together." He explained. "They were in my brother's high school class, in fact. So everyone around here knows them."

Kerry continued to sip her tea. "And?" She prompted. "Does that give them a free pass to harass people?"

"Well." Marcus glanced around, and then back at her. "Yeah, actually. People are sort of.. they feel bad, and they're sort of embarrassed, because their families kinda moved off when they went into the Army and left them no place to go."

Kerry blinked. "What?"

Marcus nodded. "It wasn't like a planned thing." He hastily reassured her. "I mean, it's not like they moved away and didn't tell them, but there were some houses and the shopping center bought them up, you know? The families all moved upstate."

"And they didn't want to go with them when they came back?" Kerry stared at him. "So they just stay here, on the streets?"

"Yeah." He said. "Scott, that's the guy in the wheelchair, says this is his home, he's not going up to Melbourne. He hates it there. That's where the family moved to. His buddies call him Wheels. I think he kinda hates it."

Kerry was still a little stunned. "Yeah. I can see that." She said. "Like if they were calling him Stumpy or something. So isn't there something that can be done for them? The military can't do anything?"

Marcus shrugged. "I have no idea. Not my area of expertise." He said. "I think he likes living on the street, to be honest. He said he tried programs and things like that, but everyone there told him what to do, and he doesn't want anyone to tell him what to do. He gets a check from the government, and all that."

She remembered something Andrew had once told her, way back when, at the very beginning of their relationship and she nodded thoughtfully. "Well, so what are we supposed to do then? We tried talking to them. Told them to stay clear of the building."

Marcus's eyes widened. "You did?"

Kerry nodded. "I don't really want to call the cops on them. I just don't want our staff to be uncomfortable leaving at night. I've got some younger women working for me that I don't want hassled."

Their landlord looked thoughtful. "Let me talk to them." He sighed. "See what I can do. They don't usually listen to me though, they think I'm a punk."

Kerry folded up her wrappings and put them in the bag Dar had left. "Marcus." She said. "Just between you and me? Try to get them to see reason. Dar's father is on a trip right now, but when he comes back, if they're still causing a problem he's going to make them really wish they hadn't."

"Okay." He said. "I'll try. Gotta keep my clients happy." He got up. "Wish me luck."

Kerry waved, as he trudged off, looking apprehensive. "Good luck." She called after him.

"Growf!" Chino added, as they started back inside the building.

**

Dar adjusted a frame on the screen, studied the result, then shifted it a bit with her mouse. She compiled and ran the little script she'd just finished and observed the motion on the monitor, nodding after a minute in satisfaction and saving the presentation.

It was dark outside, and quiet in the office. She could hear the soft rattling of Kerry's typing next door, and near the window curled up in the big dog bed Chino was in a Labrador dream, paws twitching and faint grunting whines coming from her chest while Mocha was sprawled across her legs in blissful abandon.

The music system in the corner was playing a soft tune and absently, Dar started singing along to it as she transferred the presentation from her desktop system to her laptop, starting the program up to make sure it would run correctly on the new machine.

While it was moving through its assembled bits, she took out the hard copy of her proposal and thumbed through it, scanning over the pages to make sure she hadn't misspelled anything, and that the sections were in the right places. With a nod of approval she closed the folder and put it in her backpack.

In the other room she heard the faint sound of the zipper on Kerry's soft sided briefcase, and with a smile, she shut down the laptop and got ready to leave.

Outside, she could hear the wind in the trees, and now that the building was empty there were shifts and creaks in the walls and floors that belied the age of the building. She glanced out the window, and saw the branches bending, indicating the storm that the weather channel had predicted had, in fact, arrived.

"Glad we brought our jackets." Kerry commented, shrugging into hers as she came to stand in the doorway between their offices. "Nasty out there."

"So I see." Dar slid her laptop into the backpack. "Oh well. Even Miami has to have winter storms sometimes." She got into her own jacket and shouldered the pack. "Let's go home."

They got the dog leashes arranged and walked down the steps, snapping off lights as they went. Kerry walked over and armed the building alarm, giving a nod as she keyed it.

Dar opened the front door, hearing the long beep as they went through and she locked it behind them. "You think we'll be twenty four seven at some point, Ker?"

"Depends." Kerry answered as they walked down the path to the parking lot. "Do we in source a NOC and support desk, or outsource it? How many accounts do we need to have to need that to make it economical to keep it in house?" She pondered. "I know you don't like outsourcing."

"Never did." Dar admitted. "No one cares as much about your business as you do."

"And yet, we were the outsource for so many support areas."

Dar smiled. "I was arrogant enough to tell customers that we did care more about their business than they did." She confirmed. "And in some cases, that was true."

"We were different."

"That's what I told myself." Dar said. "And you know, if you're not a technology company, there's a point to paying a technology company to do your technology for you."

"True." Kerry opened the back door to her car and put her case inside. "But we are a technology company so... c'mon, Chi, up you go."

"So it probably behooves us to watch our own stuff." Dar concluded, sliding into the passenger seat and setting Mocha on her lap. "But not just yet. Let's wait till we deliver some product first." She settled back and glanced out the front windshield of the Lexus. "Ah."

Kerry was just closing her door, and she looked up, following Dar's gaze. "Ah." She echoed, seeing the group of huddled figures near the street lamp. "Well at least they aren't fighting." She started the engine and flicked the lights on. "Nasty night to be out, huh?"

"Mm." Dar studied the ragged looking group. Two of them turned and looked at the car, then turned back around and put their back to the light. After a moment, they all turned and walked down the path between their building and the next, quickly disappearing past the hedges, the man in the wheelchair going last.

"Did you tell me you saw a break in the leaves around back there?"

Kerry nodded, resting her hands on the steering wheel. "You think they're hiding in the trees back by that other building?"

"Maybe." Dar said. "There's enough space there for a shelter, sort of."

Kerry drummed her fingers. "What do we do about that?"

"Hm." Her partner grunted softly. "They're not hurting anything being back there, are they?" She asked, as Kerry shifted the SUV into gear.

"Maybe we can talk to our security vendor about it once we have one." Kerry suggested. "Changing your mind about having guards in the building?"

"Mm." Dar grunted again, propping her elbow against the window and resting her head against her fist. "I don't know, Ker. I can secure the data – that's not a problem."

Kerry left off the questioning and concentrated on driving instead. She wasn't really in the mood to start a disagreement with her spouse, and she sensed they were on sort of different sides on the question. "We'll work it out." She said, after a brief silence.

"I'm sure we will." Dar wriggled into a more comfortable position. "Feel like Italian tonight?"

Did she? Kerry pondered the idea as she headed east along the causeway towards the ferry base. "Yeah." She agreed. "Seafood pasta maybe, and a salad. It's kinda late to start cooking."

"Mmmeatballs." Dar rumbled, going nose to nose with Mocha. "You want mmmeatballs, Mmmmocha?"

"Yap!"

"Growf." Chino poked her head between the seats, as they pulled onto the ferry.

"See what you started?" Kerry put the car in park and relaxed. "Now you have to cough up the meatballs, darling."

"We can order them some."

"Spoiled dogs."

"Along with ice cream for me." Dar chortled.

"Spoiled human."

**

Two days later Kerry was pulling into the parking lot early, after letting Dar off at the airport. She got her laptop case and closed the door behind her, having left the two dogs in the condo since she lacked enough hands to wrangle them without Dar's help.

It was very quiet. She unlocked the door then slipped quickly inside to turn off the alarm, kicking the front door closed behind her as she went past. The receptionist wasn't due in for another half hour, and she hesitated, then left the alarm off as she went up the steps to her office.

It felt strange, to be in the place all alone. Kerry shrugged off her sometimes admittedly overactive imagination, and dropped off her laptop bag, then went to the little kitchen on the second floor to put some water on to heat.

She was aware of the silence around her, and now she wished she'd brought at least Chino along to keep her company. The Labrador was not really a watch dog, but she was big and had a loud bark. "Am I getting paranoid?" She asked aloud, putting a teabag in her cup and pouring the hot water over it. "I hope not."

She carried the cup back to her office and put it down, pausing the start up her PC before she sat down. She took a sip of the tea, then paused, as she heard the door downstairs open and close.

Her heartbeat picked up. She got up and pulled her cell phone from her pocket, walking out of her office and through Mayte's to the top of the stairs before calling out. "Hello?"

No answer. Kerry cursed silently at herself for leaving the door open and paused, trying to decide what to do. She retreated back into Mayte's space and quickly texted Dar a message, then she went into her own office, locked the connecting door between her space and Dar's, and then went back into the outer room and stood in the entrance, giving her a view of the upper corridor and the stairs.

Her throat felt dry, and she could feel her heart beating in her chest, as she strained her ears to see if she could hear someone moving around below. Her device buzzed gently in her hand and she glanced down, thumbing open a message from Dar that said "*Called the cops. Lock yourself in your office I'm getting a cab.*"

"Oh, Dar no." Kerry started to dial, then stopped, when she heard a creak on the stairs. She hesitated, caught between wanting to see who it was who was and being afraid it was someone she didn't really want to see.

Macha overrode common sense, and she abruptly walked forward and went to the top of the stairs, bracing her legs at shoulder length apart and looking down. "Hey!"

The figure walking up stopped and stared at her. He was a man of medium height, with a muscular body and short, almost crewcut brown hair. He was dressed in old, faded camouflage pants and a black shirt, and there was an expression she could only describe as insolent on his face.

Okay, so now she was glad Dar had called the cops. "You're trespassing." She stated.

He spread his arms out to either banister. "You the bitch who told that fag to tell my friends to stay away from this place?" He had a deep, husky voice. "Are ya?"

Kerry kept her voice even with a good deal of effort. "Yes." She said. "I told our landlord we don't want people fighting out side the door."

He started climbing up towards her again. "I don't appreciate that."

"I don't actually care." Kerry shot back. "You're not above the law any more than the rest of your friends are."

He stopped again about three steps down from her. "You call the cops?"

"Yes." Kerry said.

"I didn't hear anyone call the cops." He stepped up one more step towards her. "Bitch."

"That's not my problem, asshole." Kerry wasn't entirely sure where all the faux courage was coming from, but at least her voice wasn't shaking, and her knees were holding her up so far. "You've got no business being in this building, you're trespassing, and the cops are on the way to haul your ugly ass out of here."

He stared her in the eye. Kerry stared right back, hoping like hell her legs would both continue to hold her up and obey her if she had to do something crazy like defend herself.

She had the skill to do that, a little. Her mind knew what to do, or at least, she hoped it did.

He stepped up one more step and his head was even with hers. "You've got more guts than sense, you know that?" He asked. "I could rape you blind before those fat fucks at the doughnut shop could get here."

"You can try." Kerry replied, in a quiet voice, barely hearing her words over the thundering of her own heartbeat. She could feel the fear winding up in her and it was really hard to keep her breathing even.

Then the door slammed open and a moment later Mark's voice was yelling out a wordless warning, as he came barreling into the office on his way towards them.

The stranger stepped back and held his hands up. "All right, take it easy buddy."

"Take it easy?" Kerry suddenly felt her fear turn to outrage. "You come in here and say you're going to rape me, and you want us to take it easy?"

"Get the fuck out of here!" Mark yelled, at the same time. "Who the fuck do you think you are coming in here, jackass!" He had just taken his motorcycle helmet off and was swinging it from one hand, coming up the steps like a homicidal care bear.

The door opened again, and a breathless Mayte and Maria half walked, half ran in. "Merde!" Maria yelled. "What is this? I will get the police! Mayte! Get the base ball hat and go there!"

The intruder kept his hands up, and slowly slid down to sit on the stairs. "Okay people." He said. "Don't get all civ crazy on me. I'm not going to do anything."

Kerry felt herself relaxing, as Mark scrambled up to stand in front of her, looking as dangerous as a thirty something nerd could. "Thanks, Mark." She patted his shoulder. "Glad you came in early."

"Early hell!" Mark said, catching his breath. "Dar called me. I broke like twenty red lights getting here. The damn cops are probably going to chase my ass right through that door."

Mayte had climbed up the steps and was now standing next to Mark, and they all turned to stare at the intruder. He was sitting quietly, his hands on his knees, looking from one of them to the other.

Kerry put her hands on her hips. "You're messing with the wrong people, buddy." She said. "We don't intimidate easily."

"Yeah I get that." The man said. "I thought you were just a bunch of nerds."

"We are." Mark said. "So you shouldn't mess with us. We can do shit like send your food stamps to Tibet."

The man's eyebrows hiked up. "Shut up."

"We can. And you should be glad we showed up before her SO did." Mark continued, pointing at Kerry.

The door opened yet again, and Maria re-appeared, with two policemen behind her. "There!" She pointed. "That is him."

The intruder sighed. "Fuck."

"You?" The first policeman headed up the stairs, hauling a pair of handcuffs from his belt. "You stupid son of a bitch .We told you to keep your nose clean."

"I'm just trying to protect my guys." The intruder said, in an angry tone. "Why can't you all just leave us the fuck alone? Why do you all have to be such assholes?"

The policeman grabbed him by the arm and pulled him upright. "Because we have to enforce the law, inconvenient as it is for you. So your 'guys' can't just do what they want and you can't just go into offices and threaten people." He yanked the man down the steps. "Sorry about this bubba, folks." He said. "We'll take him down and get him out of your hair." He glanced at Kerry. " You want to press charges?"

"Absolutely." Kerry said. "Especially since he threatened to rape me."

The cop glared at the intruder in disgust.

"I was just trying to scare her!" The man yelled. "I wasn't gonna touch her! I could have already done it if I wanted to long as it took you to get here! Might as well have since.." He stopped as the cops and his progress was halted by Dar entering and coming to a halt right in front of them.

"Excuse us ma'am." The second cop said, reaching around Dar to grab hold of the intruder. "We're just getting this guy out of here."

For a moment, Dar didn't budge. She stared hard at the intruder, who met her eyes for a second, then looked away. "Thanks." She said, in a clipped tone. "I'd like to make sure he doesn't come back so whatever you need from us, we'll do it."

The cop nodded. "Yes ma'am, we'll put him in the car, then we'll be back to take some statements." He maneuvered the now silent intruder out the door, his partner following him.

Dar exhaled. Then she trudged up the steps, clapping Mark on the shoulder as she came even with him. "Thanks." She half turned. "Thanks Mayte and Maria, too."

"Anytime, boss." Mark wiped the sweat from his forehead. "What a way to start the morning."

Dar reached Kerry and opened her arms, enfolding her in a hug as she bumped her backwards off the stair verge. "I'll book a later flight." She said, as Kerry leaned against her. "Son of a bitch."

"Dar, I will take care of that for you." Maria patted her arm, and slipped past into her office.

"Ugh." Kerry finally took a deep breath and released it. "My stupid fault. I left the door unlocked when I came in." She murmured. "I feel like such a jerk."

"Don't." Dar bumped her further back away from the stairs as the door opened and voices started echoing through the hall again. "But bet your ass we're going to have physical security here before the end of the god damned day." She finished that as they cleared the doorway into Kerry's office and she closed the door behind them.

Then Dar simply held onto her. "I think I'm going to throw up." She admitted. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry." Kerry rubbed her side gently. "Dar, I'm so sorry." She could feel the shivering in her partner's tall body and it brought on a flood of intense shame. "So sorry."

Dar took a breath and released it. "It's okay." She rocked them both back and forth a little. "I'm pretty sure I left some kind of security panic behind me at the airport." She sniffled a little. "I'd just gone through x ray when I got your text."

"Oh boy." Kerry winced.

"Knocked over a bunch of TSA agents, and the x ray machine, and a bunch of stanchions." Dar agreed mournfully. "I bet I'm on some list now."

"Dar." Kerry rested her head against her partner's collarbone.

"But you're okay." The taller woman said. "And believe me, that's all that matters to me right now."

A knock came at the door, and they reluctantly parted. "Let's get the cops out of the way, then we can go tell HR to get us some big, boofy security guards." Dar said. "You were right about that."

"I'd much rather have been wrong." Kerry muttered as she went to the door and opened it. "Stupid jerk." She exhaled. "Hi, officers. C'mon in."

The cops came in, and one of them took out a pad. "Sorry about that, ma'am. We've been having a lot of problems with these guys lately."

"Yeah, we've seen them around a lot." Kerry said. "Is that guy one of their old captains or something? He seemed to be responsible for them."

"That guy?" The cop snorted softly. "Lady, he's a priest."

Both Dar and Kerry swung around and stared at him in unabashed disbelief. "Uh... what?" Kerry managed to get out. "That guy?"

"Well, he's a chaplain, from the service or something." The cop acknowledged. "That's what he says anyway, he was over in the Middle East with them, and I guess he's working at the halfway house down the road trying to get them some help or something."

"I think he's the one who needs help." Dar said. "Is he nuts?"

The cop shrugged. "Hard to say. You know, those guys had to deal with a bunch of stuff over there, not real nice stuff. My brother went through that. It's tough. They come back and no one gives a damn, you know?"

"My father's retired Navy."

"So you get it." The cop said. "They did service, then they come back and no one wants to help them out."

"No I don't get it." Kerry said. "It's no justification for him coming in here and threatening to rape me." She had gathered some of her wits around her. "So we are going to press charges."

The cop was making some notes. "We can probably get a restraining order to keep him away from here." He commented. "Thing is, these guys feel like they're owed." He sighed. "So, let's hear what happened."

Kerry went to her desk and sat down. "Sure." She folded her hands as Dar took a perch on the windowsill behind her. "I came in early.. around seven. I opened the front door and came inside, and about... I guess ten minutes after that I heard the front door open and close."

"Uh huh."

"So I went to the stairs and called out – I thought our receptionist had come in a little early, or one of the other staff, but no one answered."

"Right."

"So a couple minutes after that, I heard someone on the stairs, and I went to the top there, and found this guy coming up towards me."

The cop regarded her. "It occur to you to lock yourself inside the office?" He said. "And call 911?"

"Actually, not really, no." Kerry admitted. "I did close up the back door there, so there was only one way into the office here. But then I saw him and he started threatening me."

"So you called the police." The cop said.

"I called the police." Dar interjected quietly.

The cop looked over at her. "You were here at the time?"

"No. I was at the airport."

The cop blinked at her in confusion.

"I texted her when I heard that sound downstairs." Kerry explained. "And Dar sent the cavalry. He just stayed on the stairs yelling at me and saying he was going to hurt me until Mark showed up and then everyone else did too."

"Uh huh." The cop nodded. "So we got this guy in the car, and we're going to take him down to the station. His story is, he was just trying to scare you off from complaining about his buddies." He studied Kerry's pale face. "He was saying that they should be able to go on the sidewalk if they want to, you know?"

"They can walk all over the sidewalk." Dar said. "We objected to them fighting with each other on our doorstep." She said. "Not to mention, rummaging in our garbage, and giving the maintenance guys a hard time when they complain about the mess they're making."

The cop nodded, and his partner nodded as well. "Yeah, okay. I know they do that a lot. We'll see what we can do about it." He said. "For the record I don't think he'd have hurt you" He said. "I've known these guys for a few months." He glanced at Kerry. "And besides, he said the scaring didn't work. Thinks you have brass ones, no offense."

"Well." Kerry said. "I've met my share of assholes. But if it had been one of our staff, it would have been different, and I am not going to subject them to that. They have a right to come to work and not worry about that."

The cop nodded again ."Fair enough. We'll be in touch." He lifted a hand in goodbye, and he and his partner left Kerry's office, closing the door behind them.

Kerry sighed, and turned to look at her partner. Then she got up and went to perch on the sill next to her. "Big boofy guards, huh?"

"A dozen of them. One of them right outside your door." Dar wiped her hands off on her jeans. "Jerks."

Kerry rested her head against Dar's shoulder. "Next time I'll lock the damn door."

**

"Okay, let's try this again." Dar exhaled, as they pulled up to the airport for the second time that morning. "Do me a favor?"

"Anything." Kerry put the car into park. "Have I said how sorry I am about being so dumb?"

"A dozen times." Dar leaned on the console between the seats. "Please don't be the last one out tonight." She studied Kerry's face. "Please?"

"Okay." Kerry put her hand on Dar's cheek. "I promise."

Dar covered her hand and then gently kissed it. Then she released her and got out of the car. "Let me go talk to someone in security. Hopefully they won't try to arrest me." She put her hands on the door frame. "See you tomorrow."

"Call me when you get there." Kerry said. "And good luck, hon. Though I don't think you need it."

Dar smiled briefly, and waved then shut the door and reluctantly turned her back on the car and trudged into the entrance of the airport.

Kerry sighed, and watched her disappear, then she put the SUV into drive and carefully maneuvered her way out of the drop off area and onto the exit road. She was still somewhat sick to her stomach from the morning's events and she took a sip of water from her water bottle as she eased into traffic trying to settle herself.

She was glad Dar was only going to Washington overnight. She already missed the convenience of the private jet they'd enjoyed, and as she drove, she pondered the possibility of managing their own in the relatively near future.

Less stress, less trouble with security, flying on their own schedule. Huge benefits, the only issue being the cost. Kerry exhaled. Well, if they got some decent business, maybe it would work out financially.

She settled back in the seat and headed on the relatively short ride back to the office. The highway was busy, but not packed, and she turned on the radio as she headed for the exit, her mind going back to her scary morning experience.

No doubt, it had shaken her. Shaken Dar, who had gotten into that truculent gruff mood she tended to when she'd taken a scare. Having extracted a promise from Kerry that she would be really cautious, and not go walking around outside without taking someone with her, Dar had finally agreed that they could wait to engage the security group after Kerry finished her review of them.

Didn't make her happy, Kerry knew. Dar would have much preferred to have stayed around, or taken Kerry with her, but they both had jobs to do and after all, it was only one day.

Yeah. Kerry sighed as she pulled into the office parking lot. Just one day. Twenty four hours, pretty much. She got out of the SUV and locked it, stuffing her keys in her front jeans pocket before she started up the path heading to the door.

She'd been spotted, apparently. The door opened and Mayte trotted out, coming to join her and walk her up the path. "Hey." Kerry said. "My afternoon appointments here?"

"The first one, yes." Mayte agreed. "They just arrived, I have put them in the conference room."

"Thanks."

"The police also have called." Mayte continued. "There will be one to see you here later."

"Okay." Kerry pushed the door open, and paused. "Let me go get my portfolio." She started up the steps. "Is the coffee service in there?"

"Yes." Mayte said. "I will go and offer them some."

Kerry went into her office and to her desk, hoping her partner was having a much smoother afternoon herself.

**

Dar leaned against the counter, waiting for the flight to be called. She'd gotten through security with only a small bit of trouble, deciding to try using her charm instead of her kick ass for a change and getting the lightest of scoldings from the airport security supervisor.

Now she just wanted to get on the flight and get the trip over with.

Her phone buzzed, and she stepped away from the desk, pulling it out and glancing at it. "Hello?"

"Hello there, Dar."

"Hey Gerry." Dar said. "I missed my flight, about to board a second."

"No worries, lady." The general said. "Just wanted to give you a heads up, heard from the boys up the road that the president wants to meet you. Tonight, after your pow wow."

Dar's eyebrow shot up. "Me?"

"Yes, lady, you." Easton sounded pleased. "Didn't want to you to be shocked out your knickers don't you know. I'll let you be then, have a good flight."

"Gerry.."

"Bye, Dar. See you in a few."

Dar stared at the phone after it went dead. "I don't want to meet the president." She stated. "I'm going to end up insulting his ass and they're going to throw me in jail."

"Ma'am?" The check in agent behind the desk leaned towards her. "Did you need something?"

Dar sighed "No, sorry. Just talking to myself." She muttered, shifting over as the agent started announcing the boarding of the flight. She debated calling Kerry, then shrugged and dialed her partner's number.

It rang twice, then was answered. "Hey babe." Kerry's voice sounded wryly amused. "I made it up the sidewalk into the building. Mayte guarded me."

"Maybe she should come guard me." Dar said. "Gerry just called. Apparently the president wants to meet me."

Brief silence. "Oh." Kerry's mental track changing came across audibly. "Ew."

"Mm." Dar watched the agent step over to the ticket turnstile. "Anyway, I gotta go on the plane. Just thought I'd let you know what's waiting for me on the other side."

"Want me to have my mother show up to guard you?" Kerry asked.

"Ker."

Her partner chuckled softly. "Now you made me want to rush over there and hide in your suitcase, instead of be laughing that I thought you were checking up on me. We're full out nut cases, honey."

"We are." Dar smiled. "Okay, let me let you go." She shifted off the counter and got into line, handing over her boarding pass as the woman scanned it. "Thanks."

"Know something?" Kerry asked, as Dar walked down the jet way. "I really do wish I was going with you."

"I wish you were going with me." Dar admitted. "So let's get off the call before I run out of this airport for the second time and get gang tackled. They're not going to take my excuses a second time."

"Bye hon." Kerry said. "Call me later."

Dar put her gizmo in her pocket and entered the plane, sliding into her seat in the front row after putting her backpack up into the overhead. She settled back and gazed out the window, watching the activity of the hard working people outside. She had a change of clothing in the pack, but it occurred to her that she'd be meeting the president in a pair of jeans.

Would that matter? Dar considered, and decided it probably wouldn't, and even if it did, she was going to convince herself she didn't care.

With that in mind, she pulled out her gizmo again and typed off a quick message to her parents, in case it turned out to matter and she ended up somehow either on the news or in a tabloid paper.

You never knew. She sent the note, then turned off the gizmo as the plane finished loading, and the crew went to close the door. Dar glanced behind her, seeing a lot of empty seats, including the one next to her. She buckled her seatbelt, then leaned on the center console as the flight attendant came over.

"Hi. Can I get you something to drink before we take off?" The woman asked.

"Orange juice if you have it." Dar said. "Pretty empty, huh?"

The woman glanced back and shook her head. "People still don't like flying." She said, somewhat sadly. "Much as I hate working overbooked flights, this is just scary." She confided. "How can they keep going, you know?"

"I think people will start traveling again." Dar said. "It'll just take some time."

The flight attendant smiled briefly. "I sure hope so." She left to get Dar's orange juice, as the plane gently backed away from the jet way and the safety video started to play.

Dar settled back into her seat and removed the copy of Skymall from the pocket, leafing through it as the plane taxied. She studied the several varieties of dog beds, wondering if Chino and Mocha would like one for their garden.

Then she had to pause, and enjoy a moment of self deprecating humor at the thought that she was sitting here shopping for pet beds and pewter giraffe toilet paper holders. What was it Alastair had told her once? That she'd become a good family person?

Wacky.

Nevertheless, she kept browsing, spotting several more items she could envision invading their collective personal spaces. She paused on one page, considering, as the plane started its takeoff run. Garden gnomes. Did they need a garden gnome? What about one that recycled drinking water for a dog dish?

Her mind imagined Chino drinking from it, then the image morphed to Mocha sitting in the bowl, with water pouring over his head. "Maybe not." She flipped the page, then tucked the magazine aside as the plane took off and headed skyward.

**

Kerry scribbled a set of notes, the last of several pages of them after this last meeting of hers for the day. "Okay, Charles, thanks." She said. "Wow, those are a lot of projects."

Charles Suarez, the man seated across from her nodded. "I know." He said. "There was a lot of pent up demand internally, for these smaller projects that we don't have personnel bandwidth for, and which the bigger guys had no real interest in working with it on." He looked apologetic. "No offense to your former employers."

"None taken." Kerry scratched her jaw with the edge of her pen. "I turned down smaller projects myself in my past role. There's a break even point where you can recoup enough revenue to match the resource spend and since all the groups were sized for enterprise, there wasn't much point in having them work on stuff like this." She indicated the pages. "But that's not the case here."

Charles smiled. "Exactly." He said. "My company had me contact you soon as we heard, because our operations group really liked working with you."

Kerry smiled back. "Thanks for that compliment." She said. "I'm glad you got to me early though, I've had potential clients in here the last couple days with all kinds of requests. I'm a little surprised, given the economy."

"You shouldn't be." He shook his head. "It's because of the economy. No one wants to take big risks, and everyone's looking to keep costs down. Engaging the big guys meant big costs, and engaging an unknown small firm meant big risks."

"Ah." Kerry tapped her pen on the desk. "I didn't think of that. We always were going to open our own business, it just wasn't the timing we'd anticipated. But here we are."

"Here you are." Charles agreed "So if you could quote all that, I'll take it to my leadership group and we can see if we can budget to get it done."

He stood up, and so did Kerry. They shook hands, and Kerry stepped around her desk to walk him back over to the stairs. "I really like some of the things you guys want to do with mobile communications.

"Kerry commented, removing her gizmo from her pocket and showing him. "I think these things are going to get more popular."

"Is that the Handspring?" Charles asked, eagerly. "Can I see it?"

Kerry handed it over. "We've been using them, testing them really, for the past couple of weeks. I really like it. It lets me mix text and mail with a phone, and only have to carry one thing. I used to carry a cell phone and a PDA, this is better."

"You bet!" Charles tapped on it. "Oh, I see there.. are those programs?"

"Basic ones." Kerry took it back. "Dar has one on hers that tells her the tides and sea conditions."

"Cool." Charles nodded. "That's what we think too, that people are going to like having things like that. So we want some programs that let people with phones like that interact with us. We want to be able to send them notes about specials, and have them text us back to hold one for them, or things like that." He said. "We're a specialty grocery, you know? It's all about local for us."

"I get it. I live out on Fisher Island." Kerry said. "We have that kind of personal relationship out there, where you can call and talk to a butcher whose name you know, and who knows you. It's sort of like recreating a small town thing."

"Exactly!" Charles agreed. "So these ideas, how to really boost up local business, and not so much on a national level, is where our local management thinks we can take advantage of the consumer mindset right now."

Kerry saw him to the door, and waved, and then detoured into the conference room to get a cup of coffee. "Hey." She smiled, at the cafe runner who was replenishing the cart. "Just in time."

"Hey Kerry." The man smiled at her. "Heard you had a scare this morning." He said. "What a bunch of jacktards those guys are. Gary told them not to come around asking for leftovers if they were going to act like that." He offered her a small tray of neatly sliced pound cake. "Try the lemon. It's really good."

Kerry selected a slice and bit into it. "Oh." She swallowed hastily. "That is good. Really moist."

He nodded. "Exactly – I don't like it when it's all dense and dried." He put the tray down and swapped out a hot thermos of coffee. "Your honey around? They sent over this chocolate chocolate chip muffin for her."

Kerry started laughing, perching on the conference room table. "Boy, it didn't take you long to zero in on her, did it? Dar's on her way to DC at the moment. She'll be back tomorrow." She took the muffin. "I'll try it for her. But yeah, this morning wasn't much fun. I have to take a lot of blame for it though, I left the door open. Kinda dumb."

"It's a company. You had the right to? We leave ours open when we're in there." The man protested. "Guy had no right coming in here and messing with you. Especially that guy."

Kerry cocked her head. "Why? I heard from the police he's some kind of minister?"

The man handed her a cup of coffee. "That's what he says. From what I heard, he picked that position so he wouldn't have to get shot at, but still get all the perks of being in the military." He wiped around the cart.

"Anyway, gotta get back to the shop. Enjoy the muffin." He winked, and took the old coffee thermos as he left her to ponder.

Kerry dropped into a seat and leaned back, breaking off a piece of the muffin and chewing it as she sipped. She checked her watch, then as if in response, her gizmo buzzed in her pocket. She put her coffee down and removed it, smiling when she saw the caller id. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar's voice echoed softly, with the background of a busy airport behind her. "Heading to the Pentagon. How'd your meetings go?"

"Really well, and glad you got there all right." Kerry said. "Call me after you meet Dubya."

"Ah heh. Yeah." Her partner sighed. "Later."

Kerry released the line and put the gizmo down on the table, a smile still on her face. "Hope someone takes a picture." She said. "Hey, wonder if that's going to be a publicity thing?" She asked aloud. "That would be crazy publicity."

She finished the muffin and dusted her fingers off, then picked up her coffee and returned to her office.

"What a day." She commented to Mayte as she crossed through the outer office. "I've got two more meetings, right?"

"Yes." Mayte agreed. "Florida Power and Light, and someone to see you from the Qwest."

"Ah yes." Kerry went to her desk and circled it. "Someone who wants to sell me something rather than hire us." She checked her mail, and opened one. "Ah."

Her security presenter from the previous day. She propped her chin on her fist and regarded the note, viewing it now from a slightly different perspective. There was something in her that resisted having security at the door, no matter how creepy the morning had been, and, as she reminded Dar, despite what the man had threatened he really hadn't done any more than talk.

Just talk. Hot air.

Would he have done more? Kerry felt instinctively he wouldn't have, though she really didn't have any solid hard reason why she did.

A soft knock came at the door and she looked up. "C'mon in."

It opened, and Mark's head poked inside. "Hey."

Kerry motioned him forward. "Come. Did I say thank you to you for rushing in here to save me this morning?"

Mark chuckled and came inside, walking over and dropping into one of Kerry's visitor seats. "So listen." He said. "No problem about the ride in. Dar was pretty freaked out."

"I know."

"I got this guy who's a family friend." Mark said. "He's a freelance security guard."

"Uh huh." Kerry let him talk it out, though she could plainly see where it was going.

"He's also an artist." Mark pushed his train onto an unexpected track. "He likes painting and stuff, and he does security to pay the bills. Anyway, I thought maybe you might want to bring him on for now, until we can sort out the alarm systems and monitoring and all that stuff."

Kerry leaned back. "Like a freelance?"

Mark nodded. "He's not real corporate." He said. "I wouldn't have suggested him for the old place, but he's a real good, solid guy, and he's got some buddies he can bring in to trade off."

That seemed more appealing to her than bringing in a security firm. "Okay." Kerry decided. "I like that idea. I don't really want uniformed guys marching around in here. I don't want us to have that kind of culture in this place."

Mark nodded, and grinned. "Yeah thought so."

"So bring your guy in and let's meet him." Kerry said. "And his buddies."

"Will do." Mark stood up. "I called him earlier, so he's waiting for me to call back. Okay for him to come over now?"

"Yup." Kerry leaned forward. "I would love to tell Dar we worked out security while she was in DC." She said. "Before she has to go and meet the president."

Mark stopped in mid motion and looked at her, both dark eyebrows hiking up. "Say what?"

"Yeah. She's bummed. But maybe if they make it a photo op we'll make the Washington Post and get some business out of it." Kerry winked at him.

"As long as she doesn't pop him one." Mark said. "That could be more publicity than we need, y'know?"

"Oh I'm sure she won't do that." Kerry said. "She's way too smart, right?"

Mark eyed her skeptically, then disappeared out the door, shaking his head.

"Right?" Kerry asked her faint reflection in the monitor.. "She won't hit the president. She's way too smart for that."

**

"All right, boys. Now pay attention to Dar, and lets get this rolling." Gerry looked pointedly at the half dozen men sitting in the room, then nodded briskly at the one woman standing at the front of it. "Go on then. I'll go get some chow arranged." Gerry walked to the door, which was opened by his aide, and disappeared.

The men all looked at Dar, who looked back at them in a long moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Well." Dar finally broke it. "I guess we can start with hello, my name is Dar Roberts and I'm the solutions architect for your new database system."

The eyes watching her were dubious, to say the least.

Dar absorbed that wryly. "I know none of you are deaf mutes. Gerry would have warned me."

She could see the wary shift at her casual use of the General's first name. "So what is it? You don't trust civs, you don't trust women, you don't like girls who are taller than you are? I won't bite you."

The one on the far left, a brown haired man with a scar under one eye cleared his throat. "I'm John Duggan." He said. "Senior technical officer for the Coast Guard."

Aw. Leave it to the coasties to speak up first. "Hi John."

"We really don't know who you are, ma'am." He said. "Except some civilian woman from some civilian company we've never heard of, who we're supposed to cooperate with."

The other men looked guardedly grateful at the words but kept their eyes on Dar.

"Fair enough." Dar said. "I am some civilian woman from some civilian company you've never heard of because the company was just formed a couple weeks ago. Prior to that, I was the CIO of ILS. Which is also a civilian company but one you might possibly have heard of." Dar observed the nods. "I left there and started my own company and the very first contract I signed was the one that has me here in this room."

"You know the General." John stated.

"I do. Or more to the point, the General's known me since I was born." Dar stated mildly. "My father is retired Navy. So though I'm some civilian woman from some civilian company the service isn't as alien to me as you might think."

A thin, middle aged man with dark hair and glasses regarded her. "You're Andy's kid." He stated flatly.
"You look like him."

Dar nodded again, and smiled. "I am, and I do."

"Ken Charles." The man said. "Head of Naval intelligence systems. So that explains why you're here, but doesn't really explain what the hell we're supposed to do with you." He stated. "I know all about this scheme of the Joint chief's to get us all communicating but what they don't know, and what I assume you do know, is it ain't that easy."

Dar rested her chin on her hand. "True statement."

"Our systems aren't compatible." John agreed. "We all know it, we all live with it. Those goompahs up top think they can just wave their arms around and make that not the case. Well, they can't."

"We'd have to all change to new systems." A third man spoke up, young and blond and with a ferocious crew cut. "Aside from money, which ain't coming to do that, we're at war. No time to mess around with intelligence systems." He gave Dar a truculent look. "Dan Draper. Army." He added, pointing with his thumb at a fourth man. "This is Daddy Perkins He's my tech lead."

Daddy was a cherubic looking man of middle age, with round, astonished eyes and pink cheeks. "Hello." He said. "What he said." He pointed back at Draper. "These guys don't know what they're asking."

A little silence fell. Dar waited, to see if anything else was going to be offered. She had her arms folded over her chest and she was leaning against the white board. "You all finished?" She asked, after the silence had lengthened enough to be uncomfortable.

They nodded, after glancing at each other.

"Okay." Dar turned and picked up one of the white board markers. "So let me just run down what I committed to Gerry to get done, then we can sit and argue about it."

"Gonna be a long day." Draper commented.

"That's all right by me." Dar responded, as she sketched. "I just need a break to go meet the president. Then I'll be back to argue all night if you want."

"Ah." John grunted. "What's he want from you?"

"That was my second contract."

"Holy crap."

"That's what I said."

**

Kerry regarded the man sitting across from her with some bemusement. "So, Carlos, Mark tells me you're an artist?"

The big, square jawed man across from her dwarfing her chair nodded. "I paint." He said. "And I do .. three dimensional stuff? Like metal sculpture and carved leather."

"Really." Kerry said. "That's impressive. I'm always blown out by people who can do art. My mother in law's an artist."

"Yeah?" The man said. "Local?"

"She lives off South Beach. Cecilia Roberts." Kerry saw the start of recognition. "I see you've heard of her."

"Sure. Seen her stuff in the galleries down there. Nice." He said. "But y'know, unless you're mainstream it don't always pay the bills."

"That's what she says too." Kerry agreed. "So you freelance as a security guard?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I lift weights and stuff, and I look the part." He grinned. "But I'm always booked for late shift, or mids, y'know? And I like to work on my stuff at night. Doesn't work for me during day hours for some reason."

Kerry leaned forward and rested her elbows on her desk. "Well, that would work for us, because at least right now, we're closed at night. We work pretty much eight to eight. We kinda need someone around."

"Mark told me. He was freaked."

"I was freaked, he was freaked, my partner was freaked.. it was just a full on freak show here." Kerry agreed. "But also, we're working on some government contracts, and we think it would be a good idea to have some security around." She tapped a pencil on the desk. "You interested?"

He nodded. "I like Mark. We went to school together." He said. "I knew he was tied up with that big company and that's not my style. This is different."

"Not most of our styles, apparently." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "So we can do this one of two ways. We can hire you on direct, or, if you want, if you have a company of your own, we can contract you."

He was already shaking his head. "Don't ask me to do all that company stuff. I can't even do my paperwork for my art." He said. "I'll come work for you, and I've got some buddies, if you get like you need night guards, that would love to do some hours too, this is a nice area."

"Most of the time."

"Those vet guys... I seen them." Carlos said. "I think I can handle them."

"I think you can too." Kerry agreed. "To be honest, I'm pretty sure Dar could have handled them, but you know we're business owners and respectable women, so I think it's better to hire some nice, big strong guys instead."

Carlos chuckled. "I've been hearing about Dar for like twenty years." He admitted. "Be cool to finally meet her. Mark's got all kinda stories."

"Yes he does." Kerry smiled. "She'll be back tomorrow. But for now, let's walk you down to personnel, and we can get you started, and, also, we can talk about what kind of money you want."

"Right on." He stood up, towering over her. "Mostly us contract guards, we get minimum wage. No one sticks around real long."

"Probably that's why." Kerry led the way towards the stairs. "I think someone with your experience should be worth more than that, don't you?"

"Oh, lady, I like you already."

**

Dar leaned back in her chair and folded her arms, rocking her head back and forth a little to loosen the muscles on either side of her neck. "Next objection?"

The door opened, and Gerry poked his head in. "Dar? Car's here from the White House for you." He looked at the scribbled full white board, and the scattering of notepads with boxes and lines on them on the table. "We doing all right, boys?"

Dar stood up and pushed her chair in. "Let me go meet with them, Gerry, so these guys can answer you honestly." She winked at the group, then slipped out past Easton where an aide was waiting. "You for me?"

The aide nodded, and smiled. "I've been assigned to accompany you, Ms. Roberts." He said politely.
"Please follow me."

Dar amiably did. "Least I have my drivers license this time." She commented.

"Ma'am?"

"Last time I went to the White House, I had no ID." Dar said. "Day or two after 9/11."

"Oh my goodness." The aide said. "What did they do?"

"Well, they wanted to talk to me bad enough to let me in but they sure as hell weren't happy about it." Dar followed the man out a side door, to a black sedan, whose driver opened the back door for them. The aide slid in, and Dar joined him, as the door was closed and the driver got in and started off. "This is going to go a little better I suppose."

The aide eyed her. "You're pretty calm for someone being taken to meet the President."

Dar half shrugged, deciding not to admit to the stomach flutters and lump in her throat. After all, it was just another person, and one she didn't really much like.

Her handspring buzzed and she pulled it out, finding a message from Kerry waiting. "How does she know when to do that?" She wondered, selecting it.

Hey hon!

Guess what? I hired a security guard. Here's a picture of him! His name's Carlos, and he's a friend of Marks.

Dar studied the picture, her eyes widening at the massive figure. "Holy crap."

"Ma'am?" The aide leaned forward.

"No, sorry." Dar went back to the message. "Just a note from home."

He's an artist, who does this on the side, but I hired him full time because he wanted to work day hours, not night like everyone else wanted him for. I gave him a benefit plan, and brought him in on a salary, since I want him to be in charge. He has friends who would be interested if we needed to go 24/7 or something like that.

Dar felt a sense of relief, looking at the big, rugged, honest face in the picture. "Dad'll like him." She muttered under her breath, then keyed in a reply.

Good job! He looks like a tank. Now I feel better about sleeping alone in Washington tonight. On my way to meet the Prez, wish me luck.

She sent the note, then relaxed back in her seat.

"Was the meeting going well?" The aide asked, after a few minutes silence. "The General was wondering."

"I think it'll be fine. I was about halfway through convincing them." Dar said. "Lot of objections, but I like that."

"You do?"

She nodded. "Means people are thinking, not just going along for the ride. That's always good for everyone. The more questions, the better."

The aide eyed her. "You've never been in the military, have you?"

Dar smiled. "No. I think that's why Gerry hired me for this."

"I think you're right."

**

The first meeting was with Bridges, in his office again. He had a group of four men with him, and he wasn't about to let them have the kind of free for all that Dar had just experienced with the military IT staff.

"All right people." He sat down behind his desk. "So now that I've told everyone we're doing this, let's do it." He looked across the table at Dar. "You got your plan ready?"

Dar nodded. "I have a blueprint, and a starting point." She said. "I have data base designers working on the frame work."

Bridges grunted. "This got higher profile than I thought faster than I thought, even though I'm the bastard who's supposed to think of all this crap." He admitted. "Laughed my ass off when I was told not to use your former company, by the way."

"So did Kerry's mother." Dar said.

Bridges chuckled dryly. "Bet she did." He said. "But because of that, this thing has to show results PDQ."

The other men in the room just listened quietly, notepads at the ready, waiting to be given directions. Dar found them annoying.

"How long will it take for that?" Bridges asked her.

Dar thought about it. "I can probably prototype it in sixty days." She concluded. "It'll mostly be raw and wire frame, but you'll have an idea of what it'll do."

Bridges considered that. "Might need to be sooner."

"Do you want it to work?" Dar asked, bluntly. "Or just be smoke and mirrors. I can do smoke and mirrors in two weeks but it'll do zero useful crap for you."

He chuckled dryly again. "Let me get back to you on that one." He said. "I see you remember our last dance."

Dar smiled briefly.

"You really think you can do this?" Bridges asked. "No one wants to look like an ass. I don't want this to be paraded around CNN for a year, then turn out that we wasted our money and got nothing for it."

Dar steepled her fingers and rested the tips of them against her lips as she considered. Finally she exhaled. "If you are asking – can I create a system that lets you intelligently search a massive data flow, then yes. If you want to know if I can pull some magic rabbit out of my ass, and prove it works by catching a bad guy? I don't know."

Bridges lips twitched. "We can fake the second." He said, with blunt honesty. "What I don't want is some smart ass to get into that system and find out it doesn't actually work."

"What I give you will work." Dar stated, then stopped talking.

Bridges waited, then as he realized nothing more was forthcoming, he grunted. "Okay." He looked at the four men. "Your jobs, people, are to give this woman whatever it is she asks for in the way of access, data, people, authorizations, keys to the executive bathroom, you name it. She's got carte blanche, to use an out of data saying that doesn't mean much anymore."

Dar, having come to the meeting expecting to have to sell her design again, was silently startled.

"Yes sir." The oldest of the four said. "We understand."

"Do ya? If this thing works, it means there's a chance..." He looked at Dar. "A chance, that some jackass somewhere in some government building sitting at a screen might find something that will prevent 9/11 from happening again. You all got that?"

They all nodded.

"The bloody idiots on Capital Hill know about it." Bridges said. "It was not my idea to tell them." He added, as an aside to Dar. "In fact, the next time I'll know who not to tell who wasn't supposed to tell but did. But they did, and they know, and now I've got congress-idiots calling me every ten minutes worried about privacy. Privacy!" He lifted his hands. "Idiots! They're all worried their damn affairs are going to end up in the Washington Post!"

Dar remained silent, her hands folded on the table.

He turned to her. "So what are you going to tell them about privacy?"

"I'm going to tell them the truth." Dar said. "If they ask me."

"Nice." He sighed. "My next career's going to be on a farm somewhere feeding chickens."

Dar shrugged slightly. "You can't search through all that data manually. It's just not possible. So either you know what questions to ask, and the system finds what you're looking for, or you trust the algorithm to make the connections and toss up something you hadn't anticipated."

Bridges frowned at her. "Are you telling me something like, this thing will have intelligence?"

"To a degree, yes."

All of them were staring at her. "Is this... some kind of science fiction?" The older aide asked, hesitantly. "Because it sounds like it."

"Rockets were science fiction once." Dar answered. "At some point, you reach the Turing test, and the programs become so advanced it seems like there's intelligence. Once you have something that can judge and evaluate data points, and return a result based on their weighting of them, how different is that than how you, or I, decide what to have for breakfast every morning?"

Bridges pursed his lips and made a sputtering noise with them. "Think I'll just tell them I hired a voodoo practitioner and they're killing chickens in some back office of the Pentagon. It'll scare em less." He stood up. "C'mon, woman. Let's go get the dog and pony show over. I'm guessing you got some work to get done."

Obligingly Dar stood up and followed him out the door. They walked down the hallway of the executive office building, heading down some steps and through what appeared to be a tunnel.

"Lay off the scifi with him." Bridges advised. "He doesn't like it."

"No problem." Dar said.

They walked down the long hall and up another flight of stairs, then through a door and they were in spaces she'd seen on television. Dar just tried to keep her mind blank, and let the flashes of whitewashed walls and tall ceilings just move past her, very glad she had Bridges leading the way.

Then they were down another hallway and in front of a door, and her guide was rapping on it. "Bridges." He called out.

"C'mon in, Mike." The answer filtered through the wood.

"Ready? Doesn't matter." Bridges worked the latch and shoved the door open, entering the room and drawing Dar after him.

It was one of the smaller offices, Dar realized. Not the big Oval one, but impressive enough. There were pictures and hangings on the wall, a plush carpet with the seal of the President on the floor, a huge desk, and behind it a somewhat scruffy looking man in a pullover with blinking eyes and a folder of papers in one hand

"Mike, hey. Who've we got here?" The man asked, his expression brightening on seeing Dar and his posture straightening up. "Hello there, ma'am."

The irony was so crunchy Dar felt like she was chewing on year old Frosted Flakes

"This is... " Bridges turned. "What the hell is your real name?"

"Paladar Roberts." Dar supplied. "But everyone calls me Dar."

The President put his folder down and stepped around his desk, extending a hand. "Well, hello there." His grip was dry and firm. "You're the computer lady, right?"

"Right." Dar agreed, releasing him. "Nice to meet you, Mr. President."

"Hey, great. Thanks for coming over." He pointed to a pair of wingback chairs in the corner. "Lets sit down a minute and you can tell me what this is all about. I want to understand what we're tryin to do here." He glanced at Bridges. "Tell them to send one of the photogs in, Mike. I never like to lose a chance to get a picture of me with a good looking woman."

"Sure." Bridges gave him a droll look. "Be right back, Roberts. Remember, no scifi."

Dar accepted the surrealism, and took a seat in one of the chairs, hiking a knee up and circling it with both hands as the President took the other chair, wishing belatedly she'd brought Kerry with her.

Without a shadow of a doubt, her partner would know far far better how to deal with this. "So."

"So." He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees in an oddly adolescent posture. "What did you say people called you? Dar?"

She nodded.

"Mike tells me that you're going to work up something for him that will let him find bad guys, living here." The President said, in a straightforward way. "Call me George, by the way."

"All right." Dar responded. "It was explained to me that you want some way of delving into the public Internet, and sifting through all that data to find things that could harm us."

The President smiled. "You got it." He said. "So you're doing that?"

Dar cleared her throat. "I'm going to try." She said, honestly. "I'm going to develop an intelligent set of automatic filters that will be programmable by the people who work for Mr. Bridges, and you, to try and do that."

Bush thought about that for a minute, and Dar let him, remaining silent. Finally he looked back up at her, with an unexpectedly sharp stare. "People ain't gonna like us messing with the Internet." He stated. "They don't want the government sniffing all up in their business, you know what I mean?"

"I do." Dar agreed. "They won't like it at all. Just the idea, from an ISP, got everyone in an uproar and all they wanted to do was target advertisements."

"Yeap." Bush said. "But this thing.. you said it was automatic?" He questioned. "Like machines are doing it?"

Dar nodded. "The idea was.. " She found herself to her surprise laying it out for him as she hadn't for Bridges "The programming algorithms are designed to find connections."

He started nodding, but remained silent.

"And they deliver the connections to analysts, who can decide if they really are connections, or not." Dar said. "You can't have someone looking at everything, it's too much."

Bush was still nodding. "So the machines are looking, and they only kick it to a human when they find something they don't like."

"Yes."

The President smiled and gave her a thumbs up. "Got it." He said. "So we can tell people – we ain't' snooping on you. It's just a machine, looking for patterns. No one's watching you look for porno." He

winked. "See, Mike just cares about results. I care about results too, but I'm the one who has to put their mug on television to take the blame for all of it."

"More or less, yes. The interface will look on its own for things that fall out of baseline." Dar said, smiling at him. "So if, it sees.. a larger number of airline tickets being purchased one way, in a short period of time, it'll assemble that for review – but also.. " She lifted a hand. "It's to give the analysts a way to look for something in natural language."

"Like, anyone buying a lot of fertilizer components today that never did before?" Bush asked.

"Yes."

He smiled again. "You're a smart lady." He paused, watching her. "Your dad's a war hero, huh? I heard that." He glanced up as the door opened and a slim young man entered with a camera. "Hold off a minute, Josh." He put his hand up, then waited for the man to back out. "Thanks." Then he turned back to Dar. "Navy was it?"

"Yes." Dar responded. "Though he probably wouldn't call what he did heroism. Just a job."

"My daddy says that too." Bush responded. "And I always told him he'd be a hero to me if he'd done nothing but catch crabs off the coast of New England."

So odd, to find a synergy in this, the most weird of places and strangest of people. "Well, that's how I feel about my dad also." Dar admitted. "I think we're lucky that way. Not a lot of people are."

He smiled briefly, and looked away, then stood up. "C'mon in, Josh." He put his hand on the chair back. "Mike tells me you've got a lady friend, is that right?"

Dar stood as the photographer came back in. "Yes, if by that you mean I'm gay." She responded mildly "And I have a life partner."

He nodded. "Good. This'll do good for my demographics." He waved the photographer over. "And they won't think you're sleeping with half the lot of us." He grinned rakishly. "Don't tell anyone I said that. Everybody assumes I'm clueless." He pointed at the desk. "Should we take a shot there, Josh? What would look best, you're the expert."

Bridges came back as they started to get arranged, and Dar had a moment to pause, shake her head, and think about the long, long message she was going to type to Kerry.

Who would not, absolutely not, believe it.

**

Dar lay flat on her back on her acceptably comfortable hotel bed, her eyes closed as she listened to the voice on the other end of the phone. "That's what I said, hon." She agreed, as Kerry finally wound down. "I just walked in the hotel twenty minutes ago. Finally got done arguing with Gerry's boys."

"Holy crap, Dar!"

"Mm... didn't figure of the two appointments his would be the gnarlier." Dar agreed, mournfully. "But I finally got through it, so we can move forward with the high level design."

"Did you get dinner?"

"I got a subway meatball sub for late lunch." Dar said. "That's what they have at the Pentagon, apparently."

"Better than Burger King I guess." Kerry sighed. "I sent chocolate."

"So I smell and see." Dar tipped her head to one side and regarded the festive looking basket. "Thanks. Definitely better than Burger King. I think I see Kit Kat bars."

"They had that, and peanut butter cups." Kerry exhaled. "Mocha and Chino have been running me crazy all night. They finally just settled down, and I'm going to have a bowl of soup or something."

“Want some of my Kit Kats?”

“I want you.” Kerry’s smile was audible. “Do you have to go back over there tomorrow?”

“In the morning, yes. Need to set up the delivery time line.” Dar said. “And, I guess, the ILS team there wants to get a handshake in.”

“Aww.”

Dar chuckled softly. “Wish you were here.” She said, unexpectedly. “I’m so used to having you around, it’s weird when you’re not.”

“Funny. I was just thinking that.” Kerry’s tone warmed. “It’s crazy isn’t it? I lived by myself for a long time here before we met, and now I can’t even remember what that felt like.”

Dar thought about that for a minute, as she listened to Kerry breathe gently in her ear. She did remember what that had been like, those long years of living alone, and how quiet it had been. Quiet like it was in the hotel room, just the creak of the building around her and the far off sound of street traffic.

“Dar?”

“Hm?” She dismissed the memory. “Just thinking. Been a weird day.”

“Having to meet the president?” Her partner laughed softly. “You handled it really well, hon. I don’t think I would have, and I’m sure you were a lot more comfortable talking about your dad than I would have been about mine.”

“Mm. I did okay. Hey, you think room service would have hot dogs? I feel like a hot dog.” Dar rolled up onto her feet and went over to the small desk in the room, flipping through the menu. “Why in the hell would someone want to eat the heart out of a palm, Ker? That sounds brutal.”

“It’s just a vegetable.” Kerry answered in an indulgent tone. “You’d probably like it if they dumped peanut sauce on it.”

“I like everything with peanut sauce. Especially you.” Dar chuckled .”Oh, here we go. Two hot dogs, a bowl of chili, and a plate of nachos. I can make my own chili cheese dogs.”

“Oh, Dar.”

Dar imagined her beloveds pained expression without effort. “Nah, actually they’ve got snapper fillet. I’ll get that.” She pushed the menu aside and dropped into the chair. “So we got a security guard, I sold two designs, you wrote three contracts and I met the President. All in all, a good day.”

“Except how it began, and the fact you’re not here.” Kerry said. “Aside from that, we’re good.” She said. “Okay, let me let you go get dinner. I’m going to get my soup, and go for a walk with the kids.”

“Okay. Talk to you tomorrow.” Dar said. “Kiss the kids for me.”

Kerry chuckled. “I will. Night hon.”

“Night.” Dar hit the key to hang up and juggled the Handspring in her fingers, then let it drop to the desk. She glanced at the phone, then got up and went back to the bed, sitting down and pulling her boots back on. “Let me go find a real hot dog.” She decided. “Better than hanging out in this boring room.”

She shrugged into her jacket and slipped her key card in her back pocket, then ran her fingers through her hair before she went out the door. The hotel lobby was sparsely populated, and she only glanced into the restaurant before she went outside and braced herself against the chilly wind.

Turning up her collar, Dar stuck her hands in her pockets and strolled down the road, glancing at the store fronts as she passed. There was a scattering of other walkers on the street, and she crossed with some of them, seeing a few couples walking together hand in hand and talking.

Now, she really did wish Kerry was there with her, and she flexed her hand almost able to feel the warmth of her partner’s as she imagined folding her fingers around hers. They had started doing that in public,

lately, or sometimes Kerry would ease over and slide her hand into Dar's front pocket, bumping lightly along with her in somewhat clumsy comfort.

The sudden scent of garlic distracted her, and she noticed two of the couples heading towards a restaurant on the next corner. She trailed after them, and found herself at the door, pulling it open and entering.

It had a typical brick and wood interior, and smelled great. Dar patiently waited her turn, then followed the very busy hostess to a table near the window, passing between much bigger ones surrounded by large groups.

Busy restaurant on a weekday, good sign. Dar relaxed in her chair and opened the menu the woman had left. There would be no hot dogs, but she not only recognized most of the dishes, she'd eaten a number of them before.

"Getcha something to drink?" A waitress was standing at her table, with an inquiring look.

Ah. Dar regarded her choices. She really wasn't much of a drinker – Kerry could easily put her under the table – and she usually indulged when they were out mostly to keep her partner company. However.

"Beer?" She ventured. "Draft?"

"Foreign or domestic?" The woman asked.

"Foreign." Dar decided. "Nothing dark."

"Sure." The woman whisked off. Dar figured out what she wanted and put the menu down, then half turned in her chair to study her fellow diners.

Well, it would be better than having a hot dog. Dar leaned back and exhaled. And better than consuming the contents of her gift basket. She smiled briefly as her beer was delivered. Maybe she'd even end the night by taking a walk.

**

Kerry towed her hair dry, and stuck her head out of the bathroom, hearing a growl fest going on in the living room. "Hey, what are you guys doing?"

Chino came trotting into the room, her tongue lolling out. "Growf!"

Mocha galloped in after her, spotting the towel Kerry had wrapped around her and seizing on the corner of it gleefully. "Yap!" He backed up and tugged the fabric with him.

"Hey! Cut that out!" Kerry tossed the towel in her hands back into the bathroom and made a grab for her modesty. "C'mon now! I ran with you guys for an hour. Aren't you tired out?"

"Yap!" Mocha stood up on all fours and peered at her, his tail wagging furiously.

"Oh my gosh." Kerry traded her towel for a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, and ducked back into the bathroom to run a brush through her hair. "Give me a second, okay?"

Nearly midnight, and she had to admit she was tired out. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror, then blew her damp bangs back out of her eyes. "Ugh."

Then she emerged, and leaned against the wall, regarding the water bed pensively.

Choices. She could sleep downstairs, here in what was once Dar's bedroom and was now both of theirs. The water bed was comfortable, and it was where she usually slept.

However, she was never so aware of Dar's absence as she was when she was in that bed, alone. A little silly, she knew, or probably a little crazy, but she counted' help feeling the way she did and so, with a sigh she abandoned the room and trotted up the steps with the dogs right behind her, moving down the upstairs hall and into the condo's master suite.

Big and with high, arched ceilings, tall glass doors that opened onto a broad, shaded patio, soft sea foam green walls, and light wood furniture she almost never used.

Had done, for a little while, when she'd first moved in with Dar and she'd put her things up here, in the plethora of drawers and cupboards, and in the walk in closet that was half the size of her original apartment. She still had clothes hanging in that, her business suits and formal wear, but the rest of her stuff was and had been mingled with Dar's for a long time now downstairs.

She would occasionally spend a sunny winter afternoon on the big porch, reading for a while but more often she'd go down into the garden, or out onto the two person swing chair on the main patio where likely as not Dar would join her.

There was another guest room upstairs, and the room she used as her office, and sometimes she would work up there, but never for long. It was just as easy to take her laptop and sit on the big leather couch in the living room, or in Dar's office downstairs where they would work together in companionable silence.

But tonight, here in the big room she pulled back the soft, fluffy comforter and got under it, as Chino leaped up onto one side of the big king size bed and turned in a few circles before settling down.

She reached down and picked up Mocha before he could start yelping, putting him down and giving him a kiss on the top of his head. "Chill out, and go lay down by Chino, okay?"

"Yap." He nibbled her chin and lay down on his back, waving his paws at her as she indulgently rubbed his belly.

"I'm glad you guys are here with me." Kerry informed them. "Even if you're running me ragged." She leaned over and rubbed her nose against Mocha's and he licked her face. "It's nice to have something to distract me from missing your mother mommy."

It really was silly, she knew. Kerry leaned over and shut the bedside light, sliding down and pulling the covers up over her. Dar would only be gone a little over 24 hours, and the fact that she was so occupied with thoughts of her really probably was not quite sane.

A pleasant insanity, to be sure. She settled down on her pillow and then reached over to pick up her Handspring as she spotted the flashing red light that meant a message.

And.. it was a message from Dar. Contentedly, Kerry opened it, delighted to find a picture attached. She reviewed it, turning her head slightly to one side. "What the hell is that, Dar?"

I decided to go out to eat and found this Italian place. It had these. Inside out pizzas It's full of stuff inside.

"Ah, that's what that is." Kerry went on to the next picture. "Tiramisu, nice."

Now I'm out riding on the subway trains.

Kerry sat right up. "What???"

I'm so stuffed if I go right back to the hotel and go to sleep I'm going to be sick to my stomach.

"Y'know, Dar, much as you're the most macha woman I know, riding on the train after midnight in a strange city isn't the smartest thing I ever heard." Kerry rapidly typed out the same message. "Can't you just go walk around your room?"

She hit send, and waited, but not for long as thirty seconds later the phone rang. She answered it. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar's voice came through clearly, but there were street sounds behind her. "Worried about me?" She chuckled. "I'm around the corner from the hotel, so relax."

"Nutball." Kerry snuggled back down into bed, and exhaled, as Mocha curled up against her. "You said you were riding trains. I thought you got drunk at dinner."

"Can you get drunk on beer?"

"Oh yes." Kerry advised her. "And I have, and you've seen me."

"But you're so cute when you're drunk." Dar said. "I'm going to walk around the block twice, then go inside. It's cold here. G'wan to bed."

"I am in bed, upstairs." Kerry admitted. "With the kids." She put her head on the pillow. "Please be careful, okay? I don't want anything to happen to you."

Dar was quiet for a few moments. "You doing all right?" She asked, in a more serious tone. "You sound bummed."

Did she? Kerry frowned briefly. "I'm fine, just been a really long day."

"Sure." Dar's tone didn't alter. "Did those guys, any of them come back near the office?"

"No." Kerry felt her body relax a little. "Mark was keeping an eye out for them, and he put a webcam on the back loading dock."

Dar chuckled softly.

"He was really freaked out about this morning. He said he had no real idea of what he was supposed to do once he got here except start yelling and calling the cops."

"That was enough."

"It was, but you know when I finally felt safe? When you got there." Kerry admitted. "Even more than the cops."

Dar chuckled again. "Here you are telling me to get off the streets of Washington at the same time as you tell me I showed up like Thor, god of the internets this morning."

Now Kerry had to laugh a little. "Yeah, schizo. I know." She said. "I don't know. I should just shut up and go to sleep. I'm overtired."

"Sounds good." Dar said. "See you after lunch?"

"You got it. I'll be there waiting." Kerry felt an odd reluctance to hang up, but she pushed that to one side. "Talk to you later, hon."

"Bye." Dar said, then disconnected.

Kerry put the phone down on her stomach and studied the ceiling, surprised by the sudden sting of tears in her eyes. It felt like there was a tension gripping her chest, and she sucked in a deep breath, and then released it, glancing to the side as Mocha squiggled up between her arm and her ribs, snuffling at her. "Hey baby boy." She allowed his cute eyes and button nose to charm her up out of her unexpected doldrums.

"You going to keep me company, huh?"

The puppy had light green eyes, almost the same shade as her own. Now he was putting his small muzzle down on her arm and peering up at her. After a moment, his mouth opened and his pink u shaped tongue appeared.

Chino, apparently jealous of the attention, got up and came over to sprawl over Kerry's legs, resting her chin on Kerry's knee, and exhaling.

Kerry sniffled a little, and rubbed her eyes, clearing the moisture from them. It was hard really pin down what she felt bad about, and now that the moment was over, she felt a little embarrassed about it. "I think I really am overtired." She informed her attentive pets. "So let's go to bed. Right?"

Chino exhaled again as Kerry pulled the covers up a little, and closed her eyes.

Right.

**

Dar pondered the phone, leaning back against the wall of the hotel as she thought about her partner. It had been a long day, no doubt. The morning's stresses had bothered both of them, and that could be reason enough for Kerry's melancholy, but Dar was disturbed about it, and now was wishing the night would go faster.

And the morning would go faster. With an aggrieved sigh, she finished her stroll around the building, trotting up the steps then and into the lobby. Late as it was, on a weekday, the space was mostly deserted, the bar with only a few single patrons sitting and watching a game she could hear the echo of as she passed.

The desk clerk, busy with some papers, gave her only the briefest of glances as she crossed in front of him and angled towards the elevators. Then he straightened up. "Oh, Ms. Roberts?"

Dar stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"Sorry, ma'am, there's an envelope for you." He went to a cabinet and opened it. "It just came in about thirty minutes ago." He turned and came over, holding it out. "Here you go."

Dar took it, and regarded it. "FedEx."

"Yes, ma'am, late delivery. You can get FedEx here in pretty much anytime you want."

"Thanks." Dar noted the address, and tucked it under her arm before she continued on to the elevator bank and took one up to her room

She put the packet down and changed into a pair of shorts and a t shirt, going to the mini bar and retrieving some milk chugs she'd ordered after she'd checked in. Then she sat down in the leather easy chair and opened first the milk, then the package.

It was from the Herndon office. Dar opened the folder inside and paused, looking at the large, in fact oversized greeting card tucked into the covering and acknowledging the lump it brought to her throat.

Made it hard to swallow the milk. She did, then she opened the card and paused, then started reading the many handwritten messages inside.

She remembered going to that office, enjoying a rare bit of laughter in that time when Kerry had to convince the building to let her in. Her face tensed into a smile as she remembered, too, going into the control center, and having all those people there look up at her like she was some kind of celebrity.

There were messages there from the Pentagon staff too. Dar's fingertip traced the one from Danny, who'd gotten his arm bone cracked in the attack and she remembered the handful of people they'd lost in it, people she hadn't really known, but whose names had traced up to hers in the organizational chart.

There was a note from Nan.

Dar slowly sipped her milk and continued reading, a wistful smile appearing on her face. When she'd run through the notes twice, she got up and went to the small desk, sitting down at it and reaching for her laptop, then she paused, and took a piece of the hotel stationary out instead.

She took out a pen from her backpack and propped her head up on one hand, thinking briefly and then starting to write.

Hello people.

Big surprise to get to my hotel and find a card from you all waiting. I appreciate all the time you took to put down a few words so I thought I would take some of my own time and send a note back to you.

Dar paused and considered. Then she smiled a little and put her head back down on her hand

I know we only met a few times, in a bad situation. But sometimes, bad situations bring out the best in people, and from what I saw here, and across ILS, the best of ILS was truly extraordinary and you all were definitely a bright spot on a dark day.

A lot of you wrote, that you were honored to work for me. That's hugely flattering, but to be honest with you, it was always my view that I worked for all of you rather than the other way around. That'll surprise people to hear but if you think about it, I expected 110 percent from people because it's what I gave.

A part of me will always live at ILS. There are things that are written into the DNA of the place that came from my blood and sweat, and those of you in Netops are going to run into crap with my initials on it for a

long, long time. Likewise, a little bit of my head and heart will always be wondering how it's going, and how everyone is.

She had to stop, and sit back, surprised to find herself in tears. It was a little overwhelming, and uncomfortable and she waited it out, until her chest relaxed and her throat eased.

“Wow. Where did that come from?” She slowly finished her milk, feeling embarrassed. “Am I really that sentimental?”

Dar didn’t think she had a reputation for soft heartedness, especially among these people. She looked down at the letter again, half minding to throw it away.

Then she sighed, and put the empty chug down, and picked up her pen again, wiping the moisture from her eyes and continuing to write.

At any rate, I hope you all go on being successful at what you do, and take the company to new places. Maybe we'll meet sometime down the road – thanks again for the note, and good luck to all of you.

She paused again, then she smiled, and signed her name, getting up and grabbing an envelope, and the FedEx pack that had the Herndon office’s address and headed for the door.

**

“No!”

Kerry jerked awake with a yell, sitting up and groping out with her hands to fend off the remnants of a nightmare that had her heart pounding so fast she couldn’t count the beats.

“No.” She uttered, covering her eyes with one hand, her entire body shaking. “Just a dream. Jesus.”

After a moment she caught her breath, and then she felt for the table light and turned it on, just as Chino started anxiously licking her ear.

“Ahh!” Kerry stifled a yelp until she realized what it was, then she was shoved backwards by her upset pet, and Mocha climbing up into her lap. “Stop! Stop it!” She yelled, sharply. “Hey!”

Chino’s ears went back as she stared in wide eyed alarm, while Mocha cowered down flat on the bed.

“Sorry guys.” She got herself upright again and leaned against the headboard, a violent headache making red flashes against the inside of her eyelids. “Shit.”

She still felt short of breath, from a nightmare of being trapped under the half collapsed wall with everything pressing against her and air growing short, and no way out because she was alone and Dar wasn’t with her.

Just herself, and the smell of burning, and far off screams, and being aware that she couldn’t move and no one knew she was there.

No one to hear her screaming, just darkness, and pressure and a terrible, terrible fear. Of dying. Of being alone.

Her hands were shaking. She tucked them under her arms and rocked forward, putting her head against Chinos. “Sorry I yelled, honey.” She watched Mocha squirm closer. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I was just scared myself.”

Chino whined, and licked her cheek.

“Thanks Chi.” Kerry closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of fur and the clean linen around her. “Oh boy. Glad that doesn’t happen often.” She straightened back up and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, blinking a little into lamplight.

Mocha made a little burbling puppy noise, snuffling at her fingers.

"Yeah." Kerry sniffled a little. "You guys want some cookies? Let's go down and have some cookies and milk, how about that?" She waited for the animals to move and then pulled the covers back, getting out of bed and heading for the steps. "I need some hot milk anyway, and some aspirin."

She glanced at the wall clock as she reached the bottom of the stairs, its luminescent face displaying 3:00 at her. "Great." She muttered, crossing the living room and entering the big cobalt blue and white kitchen, flipping the light on as she cleared the arched entryway.

The tiles were cold against her bare feet, but she ignored that as she went to the cookie jar and opened it, removing a few of the biscuits and offering them to her attentive furballs. She watched them crunch for a minute, then she went to the refrigerator and opened it.

Hot milk. She closed the door and went and got a cup, then went back and filled it from Dar's beloved milk dispenser. She drizzled some honey in it, then put it in the microwave and started it heating.

That gave her time to do something about her headache. She shook out a couple of pills from the bottle in the cupboard and swallowed them down with a mouthful of water. "Shit." She turned and leaned against the counter, folding her arms over her chest.

Aside from the headache, and the still perceptible chill in her body, she was now very wide awake. The thought of going back to bed was exceptionally unappealing to her and when the milk was done warming, she took it into the living room and turned on the TV instead.

She sat down on the couch, wincing a little as the cold leather surface hit her skin, then relaxing as it warmed up. She picked up the remote and surfed through the channels, bypassing a veritable cornucopia of infomercials and settling on a cartoon instead, turning the sound down a little as the colorful figures danced across the plasma display.

Chino jumped up onto the couch and curled up next to her and Kerry reached over and scratched her behind her ears. "Chi, that really sucked." She said. "I hate nightmares. Why do I always have them when Dar's gone?" She asked the dog, who lifted her ears in response.

Which wasn't really true. She didn't always have them, and she had one or two with Dar right next to her. Kerry felt herself calming down, and she flexed her hands, the tension easing out of her. The thing was, when she had a bad dream and Dar was there, well, Dar was there and she'd wake up and hug her, and that chased all the shadows out fast.

Dar was very dependable that way. "Cornerstone of my life." Kerry murmured, ruffling Chino's fur. "What would I do without her, Chi?"

"Growf." Chino put her head down on Kerry's leg.

"Damned if I know." Kerry let out a breath, rubbing her temples. Then she opened her eyes and looked around. "Where's Mocha?"

Chino's eyebrows twitched.

"Mocha!" Kerry called out, then cocked her head to listen for puppy toenails. "Oh crap." She hauled herself to her feet and started looking around. "Mocha!"

Chino hopped down and trotted after her, sniffing around in a puzzled kind of way.

"Where is he..." Kerry checked around the kitchen, then went back and stuck her head in Dar's office, and then the bedroom. Nothing. "One place left to check." She went back into the kitchen and opened the back door into the garden, immediately regretting it as the brisk air hit her lightly clad body. "Oh crap.. Mocha!"

"Growf!" Chino bolted down the steps and across the grass, being met halfway to the gate by a small, dark form. "Growf!"

"Yap!" Mocha galloped towards the steps, his small ears flapping

"Get up here." Kerry patted her leg, waiting for him to patter past before she closed the door again. "You little bugger!" She rubbed her arms "It's cold out there!"

"Yap!"

Well, at least it had taken her mind off her nightmare. Kerry went to the hall closet and got out a sweatshirt, pulling it on over her head and then laughing softly as it came down to her thighs and the sleeves went past her hands. She pushed the sleeves back up to her elbows, then went back to the table where she'd left her hot milk.

Only to find a white stained brown face looking at her, licking its lips.

"Mocha." Kerry put her hands on her hips.

Mocha licked his lips again, and got his front paws down off the table, seating himself and looking innocently up at her.

Kerry picked up the cup and took it back to the kitchen, rinsing it out and refilling it. She put the cup back in the microwave then crossed her arms, trying to figure out what to do next.

Finish the milk, she decided, then maybe catch a nap on the couch. Maybe think about the first time she'd slept there, on that stormy day way back when.

She smiled, remembering how carefully she'd printed out all the material she hadn't even really looked at, just to prove to Dar that she'd stuck around for legitimate reasons. What had they been? She still didn't remember, and looking back she was pretty sure neither of them were fooling either themselves or each other as she pictured those blue eyes watching her as she entered that kitchen wrapped in Dar's blanket.

Nothing of business in them. That faint little smile, that knowing arch of that dark brow and Kerry had known herself lost. Even now, as she exhaled she could feel it, a rolling, sweet richness of the soul and she somberly realized she might have found the genesis of her nightmares, this understanding of what she had and was unconsciously so afraid of losing.

Well. Kerry removed the cup of milk and brought it back into the living room. At least that was a damn good reason. She sat back down on the couch and put her bare feet up on the low table, idly watching Chino and Mocha play with a tug toy. She sipped from the cup and put her head back against the cushions, feeling the last of the twisting leave her guts.

Her mind shifted to another track. Would Dar have felt it, when she woke from the dream? Sometimes, it seemed like she could, in that odd, rarely spoken of synergy between them. But surely her partner had been sound asleep herself, tucked into bed up in Washington.

Surely. But Kerry wondered, if she went up and retrieved her new gizmo, if there wouldn't be a note there for her. With a wry grin, she put the cup down on a higher side table this time, and got up, stepping over the tussling Labradors and walking up the steps.

She felt a tickle of anticipation in her stomach as she went into the bedroom, looked at the Handspring on the bedside table, and saw the stuttering red light of a message waiting. She picked up the device, and glanced at it, shaking her head a little when she saw Dar's name outlined in the back light. "Maybe it's just a coincidence."

She opened the note, saw the single word, 'nightmare?' on it, and abruptly sat down as her knees threatened to unlock and refuse to hold her. "Holy shit."

Dar had known. Without a question, no doubt at all this time, sharp as a laser point. "That's so creepy." She whispered. "But I guess in a good way." She hit reply and answered the note. *Honey, I don't know how you know this stuff, but yeah. Freaked me a little, so me and the kids are downstairs and I'm drinking hot milk and thinking about you. I was remembering that first day I fell asleep on this couch, and it made me feel a lot better. Go back to sleep!*

She sent the note and studied the device, shaking her head a little. For someone as relentlessly logical as Dar was, to have this odd sense be a part of her .. well, really, be a part of both of them did seem weird and strange. It went against everything her mind told her was rational, and edged into the sort of thing she regarded as 'out there'.

Dar, of course being the logical person she was, simply accepted it and said it didn't bother her since it wasn't like something she had any control over.

Kerry wasn't bothered really by it either, she supposed, she was just curious about how it all worked. "I wonder." She mused. "Maybe when we go out to the Grand Canyon, around those places a lot of people are into that stuff. Maybe we could ask someone."

The Handspring sputtered red again. She chuckled and opened the response from her apparently still awake partner.

I don't know. I just get this feeling in my gut when you're freaked out and given what time it was, and the fact you were safe at home I figured it had to be a dream.

Elementally logical. Kerry smiled.

I remember that day. I remember watching you sleep there and wanting to crawl into the couch with you. You probably would have freaked out.

Ooh. Hon, maybe, maybe not. Kerry laughed silently By the time I was offering to cook for you I'd sorta figured it out.

I probably would have freaked out. But it ended up all right anyway. You go back to sleep too. See you tomorrow, hon. Miss ya. Love ya. DD

Kerry read the words a few times. "Cornerstone of my life." She mused "Okay well, I should get back to bed because otherwise tomorrow morning's going to be a real bitch. " She got up and went back downstairs to rescue her milk, draining the cup and bringing it back into the kitchen.

Then, with a soft grunt of decision, she turned and crossed the living room again, but this time she went into their bedroom, and rolled herself into the water bed, turning up the heater a trifle before she pulled the covers over her and closed her eyes.

**

Waking up a few hours later was still a little crunchy, but a cup of coffee resolved most of that and Kerry got herself, and the dogs into her car and on the road in relatively good order, though a bit later than the previous day. She settled her sunglasses on her nose for the ride, the weather being bright and sunny, with just that winter chill that convinced South Florida it did, too, have seasons.

There were already a half dozen cars in the parking lot by the time she got to the office, and as she pulled up Mayte came out to greet her. "Morning."

"Hello, Kerry. May I take one of the doggies?" Mayte promptly responded. "You have your hands so full." "Sure." Kerry amiably handed over Mocha's leash, not in the least fooled by the excuse. "Things quiet this morning?"

"Oh yes. Much more than yesterday." Mayte said. "The new security man is here, and he is very nice."

They walked into the building, which was filled with a low buzz of activity that surrounded them as they walked up the steps to Kerry's office. She spotted Mark and Carlos talking in the hall, and waved at them, then crossed through Mayte's office into her own.

Chino trotted obediently after her, going over to the dog bowls in their raised platform and drinking from one.

Kerry put her messenger bag down and took her seat.

"Kerry, would you like some coffee?" Mayte poked her head in. "I am going to take the little one down the stairs, and I could bring some back for you."

"Sure, thanks." Kerry sat down and started up her desktop. A soft knock at the door and she looked up to find Mayte and Maria's new assistant peeking in. "Hi. Good morning."

"Pardon, ma'am, but you have a delivery. Is it okay?" The girl said, in a soft voice.

"Sure." Kerry folded her arms as the woman backed up and allowed a man to enter, carrying a basket.

"Ah."

He came over and put it down on her desk. "Here you go, ma'am. First delivery of my day." He handed her an envelope. "Enjoy."

Kerry regarded the basket after he left. It was completely covered in multicolor cellophane and she decided to open the envelope before she risked unwrapping it.

There was a very good chance it was from Dar. But there was always a possibility it was from a prospective vendor, or even from her friend from the previous morning, in which case there could be anything including road kill inside. She'd gotten something like that more than once from business rivals, mostly full of vinegar and sour grapes.

She opened the envelope and took out the card inside, opening it to find a simple message, that put a smile on her face. *Thought you could use breakfast. C ya. DD* "Aww." She put the card down and got up, taking a pair of scissors from her drawer and slicing through the cellophane.

Mayte entered with coffee. "Oh, that is so nice."

"Yeah." Kerry was folding back the wrapping, exposing a big package of pastelitos. "Lets pass them around. I can't eat all these." She chuckled. "Dar decided to send breakfast in." She selected two of the treats and handed off the rest of them to Mayte.

"Dar is very sweet." Mayte ventured. "So thoughtful of you."

Kerry smiled in acknowledgment as she sat back down. "She is. I am a very very lucky woman, and believe me, Mayte, I know it."

Mayte grinned, but just waved as she took the tray of pastelitos out.

"I sure as hell know it." Kerry took a contented bite of her pastry and turned to her computer, only to be interrupted again by a knock. "Yes?"

"Miss Kerry?" The new girl was back. "There is a policeman to see you."

Oh well. Couldn't expect pastelitos baskets every time. "Send him in, thanks, Ana." Kerry took a sip of her coffee as the policeman entered, and she recognized one of the officers she'd spoken to the day before.

"Good morning." She gestured to one of her visitor chairs. "Officer...?"

"Rudolfo Sanchez." The officer sat down and pulled out a notepad. "Good morning, Ms. Roberts." He said. "I just wanted to circle back with you on the situation we had here yesterday." He cleared his throat. "Was going to drop by here late yesterday, but I had a call I was on."

"Sure, no problem." Kerry leaned back in her chair and took a sip of coffee. "It's been quiet so far this morning, my staff said."

Sanchez nodded. "Yeah, we kept Patterson.. that's the guy, overnight in the holding station. Figured he could use a night under a roof anyway." He glanced at Kerry. "Joe, by the way. Joe Patterson."

"Good to have a name to put to the face." Kerry replied, in a mild tone. "Roof or not, I'm sure he probably didn't appreciate the hospitality."

The officer half shrugged. He was a man of medium height, and curly black hair, going gray at the temples. “He’s been in before. You know these guys? They come back and they think the rules are like over there. That they can do what they want, because they’ve got guns, and a cause.”

Kerry leaned on her elbows. “That’s kind of what’s bothering me, because since my father in law’s a retired SEAL, I’m sort of predisposed to be sympathetic to veterans. I don’t want to mess with them or give them a hard time.”

Sanchez scratched his chin with his pen top. “Yeah, none of us do.” He admitted. “I tried talking to that guy, but it’s all like a permanent road rage, you know?”

Kerry studied him. “So, what do you think we should do?” She asked. “I don’t want to escalate this, and I can see where it could get like that.”

The policeman looked relieved. “Glad you see it that way.” He said. “Cause I was thinking sort of the same thing. With these guys, you push them, they push back, you push harder, they push harder. Know what I’m talking about?”

Possibly better than he imagined. “My partner’s very much like that too.” She responded. “She absolutely does not, and will not back down, and I think that’s going to end up a bad combination if we keep this up. So – what do you think we should do?”

He regarded her seriously. “You really want to press charges?” He asked. “You seem like a really bright lady. I think you kinda know he wasn’t going to really touch you.”

Kerry thought about that in silence for a few minutes. He let her, merely sitting there across from her with his pad, waiting. “Can we use it as a bargaining chip?” She countered. “They leave us alone, I don’t press charges? Or are they going to think I chickened out if I say yes.”

Sanchez was thoughtful. “How about this.” He returned the counter. “What if I put it like, you agree to hold off for a while, and we see what happens? I don’t know if they’ll deal.”

Kerry didn’t know if they’d deal either. “What actually do they want?” She changed the direction of the questioning. “You said they were working at some half way house.. these guys don’t have a place to live, or a place to go. In the best possible case, what happens to them?”

He shook his head. “Now that, I don’t know. You heard about that one guy’s family moving out? These guys feel abandoned. By their family, and by the service too. It’s a hard thing.”

“That doesn’t seem right.” Kerry said. “Can you get me their names? I’d like to find out why they ended up the way they did.” She saw his wary look. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to publicize them on the Internet or anything like that. We do work for the Department of Defense.”

“Oh.” Sanchez said. “I didn’t know that. What is it you people do?”

“We work with computers. But Dar was just up having a meeting at the Pentagon, so at least we know the right people to ask the questions of.” Kerry explained, in a mild tone. “If we could help these guys out, I’d like to, even after the trouble we’ve had.”

The officer closed his pad. “I heard from those guys, that some military cars were here the other day.” He said. “Maybe that’s why they were sniffing around?” He suggested. “They’re always looking for an angle.”

“Military cars... oh, right.” She nodded. “General Gerald Easton, from the Joint Chiefs, and then Michael Bridges, the president’s advisor.” Kerry responded, with a brief smile. “They’re clients.”

The police man stared at her.

“So, really, we’d rather not get into a tussle with some veterans.” She continued. “Makes it kind of awkward, you know?”

Sanchez tapped his pen on his knee. "Okay." He regrouped. "Let me see what that tack gets me. I'll tell them I talked you into holding off, and that they'd better steer clear if they don't want their benefits chopped."

"We wouldn't do that." Kerry objected. "That wasn't my point."

"No, but they don't know that." The officer stood up. "Brass? That they get." He said. "Who knows? Maybe they'll be offering to carry your briefcase to the car." He winked at her. "Don't worry, ma'am. It'll be fine." He lifted a hand. "Have a good day."

Kerry waved in response, more than a little disturbed. "That wasn't what I was going for." She sighed. "Crap." She glanced down as her Handspring buzzed, and looked at it. "Ah." A text, from Dar. "Glad you're on your way home, hon. I think I just got us in deeper than I thought."

Her phone binged. "Yes?" She hit the speaker key.

"Hey, Kerry." Mark's voice sounded amused. "Check your email."

"I just did?" Kerry glanced down. "Oh, on my PC?" She looked over and spun her trackball, then clicked on the new mail on the screen with Marks name on it. "What is it... oh."

"Sweet pix." Mark said. "At least she didn't whap him one."

Kerry blinked at the screen, which had a cap of a newspaper article, with a picture of her partner and President Bush, the former drawing something on a pad on a desk, the latter standing by leaning on the surface and studying it. "Oh gosh." She said, after a brief pause. "That really is a nice shot." She glanced at the headline. "And I guess we got our publicity."

'Sure did.' He chuckled. "Barbara just called me, someone at her office saw it. Didn't take us long huh? Three weeks and we're famous."

No, hadn't taken long at all. "You got that right." Kerry had to laugh a little. "Let me forward this to her parents. They're gonna die." She scanned the article briefly, but it was bland, and general in tone. "Least they spelled the company name right... Mark, you probably should beef up the web server."

"On it." He said. "Top of the roller coaster.. here we go!" He hung up, still laughing.

Kerry sighed, as she forwarded the mail to the rest of the company, and to her mother, and Dar's folks.
"Yeap.. here we go."

**

Kerry passed Dar a copy of the paper as she pulled away from the arrivals terminal at Miami International Airport. "There you go, rock star."

Dar unfolded the paper as she settled into the passenger seat. "I knew they were taking pictures but I figured... ah hell, yeah, there I am." She exhaled. "I look like a dork."

"Oh you do not." Kerry objected. "Did they have you leaning over that table so you wouldn't tower over him?"

Dar studied the picture, then started laughing. "You know, maybe they did." She admitted. "I still think I look like a dork. Stupid ass posed shot. I was drawing a cow on that pad."

"Did you really?"

"Yeah." Dar folded the paper and put it in the side pocket of the door. "He kept it." She looked mildly embarrassed. "He was all right."

"Bush?"

"Yeah."

"Glad I have my sunglasses on so my eyeballs can't fall out." Kerry commented. "Because I would never in a million years have guessed that would come out of your mouth."

"No me either." Her partner agreed mournfully. "I don't know. I don't know what I was expecting." She propped her elbow against the window and rested her head against her hand. "Anyway, I'm glad I'm back." She reached over the center console and curled her fingers around Kerry's arm.

Kerry released the hand on that arm off the wheel and moved it back so she could clasp her fingers around her partners. "I'm glad you're back too. Now maybe I can get a good night's sleep."

Dar brought their joined hands up and kissed Kerry's knuckles, waiting for her to stop at a red light and turn her head so their eyes met as her partner's sunglasses slipped down a little.

"Or maybe not." Kerry managed a wry grin.

Dar winked at her. "We should always travel together." She suggested. "Sorry you had a crappy night last night."

Kerry looked back at the road as the light changed and pushed her sunglasses back up on her nose. "Where you go, I go, baby. Sounds good to me." She left her right hand clasped into Dar's left, and felt the squeeze as Dar's long fingers contracted gently.

"Did Mark goose up that web server?" Dar asked, after a minute or two of quiet. "We'll get some traction from that dumb ass picture anyway."

Kerry chuckled. "Oh yes. He was already working on it before I left to get you. I can just imagine the teeth grinding going on over at the ILS boardroom though."

"Eh." Dar grunted. "They knew that contract wasn't on the table for them. Bridges told me he was told in no uncertain terms that he was prohibited from giving it to any company with a multi national presence."

"I know that, but can you imagine the scene?" Kerry shook her head. "Every single one of them would have wanted to be in that picture with him."

"You know, I don't feel bad about that." Dar said, suddenly. "We earned that contract, Kerry. We came to his attention because of who we are, not what ILS was."

Kerry decided not to correct her beloved, since there hadn't been any 'we' involved.

"We did an impossible task for this guy." Dar continued. "We didn't have to, but we did, and he knows that, and he trusts us because of that. ILS would have thrown Alastair to the wolves, and he knows that too. Why should he trust them?"

"That's all true, hon." Kerry pulled into the parking lot of their building. "But it won't stop them from being pissed off about it."

"Peh."

They walked towards the building, and as they did, they clasped hands again, walking up the path side by side, then pausing as they spotted a tall ladder blocking the way. "Oh." Kerry said, in surprise. "Our sign is here. Wasn't when I left."

There were two men beneath the ladder, preparing the large wooden panel, and they looked up as the two women approached. "Be just a minute, ladies." The nearer of the two men said. "Boss just sent us over to get this ready to mount up."

Kerry kept her hand clasped around Dar's as she studied the sign. It was a honey colored wood, with the company's logo carved into it in a relief. The background of the sign was stained a dark blue, and their compass point logo had been painted white and silver. "I like it."

"Me too." Dar smiled. "Once it's up I'm going to take a picture and send it to mom and dad."

"Between that article and this, your dad's going to explode." Kerry could imagine her father in law's expression without much effort. There was just no prouder father anywhere, and she spared a moment remembering coming back uptown with him after they'd managed to get the stock market working.

She, half dazed and aching. Andrew sitting next to her in the limo and both of them listening to Alastair explain what had happened to Cynthia Stuart, and ending it with the statement *I can tell you this, Senator, I seriously believe with all my heart there's nothing his kid can't do.*

Andrew hadn't said anything, but Kerry remembered with extraordinary clarity the glint of tears in his eyes, and the paradoxical grin on his face and despite the pain, she remembered smiling too, if a bit wistfully.

Or yours. Alastair had given Kerry a gentle pat on the knee. *Saved our asses.*

Cracked ribs or not, it had felt good.

The two workmen finished preparing the sign, then they mounted the big dual ladder and walked the panel up, positioning it on the second level ledge and clamping it in place so they could drill the bolts in.

Kerry nudged Dar. "Wave, honey. We're on candid camera."

Dar glanced up to the 2nd level windows, where there were faces watching them, and waving. She lifted her hand and waved back, then made a beckoning motion to the people there. "Let's get a group picture." She draped her arm over Kerry's shoulders. "Only get a first sign once."

True. Kerry grinned as the staff started emerging from around the side of the building, having gone out the back to avoid hitting the ladders. They gathered around to watch, making a careful circle around their two owners.

Mark eased forward. "Hey Dar."

"Hey." Dar responded amiably. "This our new security chief?" She delivered a smile to Carlos, whose head was roughly even with her own, and extended a hand. "Hi, I'm Dar."

The big man blushed a little, but took her hand. "Hi." He said. "I've heard a lot about you."

"I bet." Dar gave Mark a droll look. "Welcome. Glad you decided to give us a try."

Mayte came over. "Kerry, I have some messages for you. I left them on your desk." She said. "Welcome back." She added to Dar. "My mama also has a package for you, and some notes."

"Thanks." Dar pulled Kerry a little closer. "We just want to get a picture with everyone and the new sign." She pointed at the second level, where the workmen were climbing down off the ladder after finishing with the bolts.

"Oh! That is so nice." Mayte's eyes lit up.

They cleared the ladder away and Kerry retrieved her camera from the SUV, taking a few pictures of it, before everyone had come down from the office and gathered in front of the entrance. "Okay, now.. " She glanced at the workers. "Could I impose on you guys to take a picture of us with this beautiful new sign?"

'Sure." One of them came over and took the camera. "Just press that to focus, and then to take the picture?" He asked. "My son's got one of these. He really likes it."

"Yep." Kerry crossed over to where the group was and paused long enough to pick up Mocha, turning and coming up next to Dar who put her arm back over her shoulders. "Everyone ready?"

The workman smiled, and focused, and then it was over and everyone was swirling around again, this time coming up and asking Dar about her meeting.

Kerry took a step back and gave Mocha a hug, walking over to reclaim her camera. "You guys did a great job." She said. "It looks really good."

The man nodded. "He's a good carver." He said. "Said he'd be by later to check the install, and pick up the fee." He scratched Mocha's ears. "Glad he got a commission. Been a while. People don't want to pay for stuff like this in these times."

Kerry nodded. "It's tough." She said. "I was really glad they referred him to us."

The man glanced around, then back at her. "I heard you had some trouble with some of those guys, that hang around in the streets round here. That' true?"

Kerry wondered if it wasn't just a little more small town like than she was strictly comfortable with. "Yes." She said, briefly. "But I really think it was more of a miscommunication than anything."

The man nodded. "Be careful with them guys. You seem like nice ladies, and we heard they like to hassle women."

Kerry sighed. "I sure hope they don't." She said. "But thanks for the warning."

The man lifted his hand in farewell, then shouldered his tool kit and picked up his end of the ladder, he and his partner moving off down the street together.

Kerry went back to the crowd who was now sorting themselves out to re-enter the building through the front door. Dar was waiting for her and they walked back in together, and headed up the steps to their offices. "Did you get any lunch?" She asked, as they reached the top of the stairs.

"They fed us on the plane." Dar remarked.

"Take that as a no, then. We probably have some of those pastelitos left." Kerry bumped her with her hip.

"I've got some kit kats left in my backpack." Dar bumped her right back. "We can trade."

**

The sun was setting as they gathered in the conference room, Dar and Kerry, Mark and Carlos, Maria and Mayte. Dar had a copy of the newspaper article and she put it on the table as they all sat down. "Okay, so." She folded her hands. "We seem to have acquired some additional notoriety over the past day."

Mayte was taking notes. "It is a very nice picture." She said, diplomatically.

"Well, a lot of people think so, because four of those five messages you left me were from people who'd seen it, and who want to come in and talk to us." Kerry said. "So we have a couple issues here. One, we've become very visible very quickly."

Carlos was nodding. "People might see you as a way to get in on the government."

"Exactly." Dar said. "That kind of influence is in a business sense, priceless."

"But Dar.. you always had those hooks." Mark said. "I mean, they came after you the last time, remember? Like, right out of the blue."

"That's true. I'm not worried about that part of it. My links to the military are what they are. I can't change that." Dar said. "But we need to think hard about how we're going to secure ourselves because other people might want to find out what we're doing for them."

"Cams." Mark said, then looked pointedly at their new security man.

Carlos pulled out a folder from where it had sat on his lap, and opened it. He was dressed in neatly pressed cargo pants and a blue pullover sweater that had a faint look of the military about it. "I think we should use these." He pushed a data sheet over. "They're expensive, but they're PTZ, IR, night scope, and 10X zoom."

Dar pulled the sheet over and studied it. "IP?"

He nodded. "The last place I was at, they did the wired and wireless, so if someone got some smart idea to cut the cable it would go over the radio."

"Good." Kerry agreed. "That's nice."

Maria folded her hands. "If you tell me the places you want these things, I will have the electrical man make the connections for them."

Dar's eyes twinkled, as Carlos passed a diagram over to her. "Thanks, Maria."

Mark grinned. "Good job, buddy." He complimented Carlos, who grinned back.

"I like that." Dar said, passing the page off to Kerry. "Get them and get them installed. I'll write a program that takes the input from them and parse alerts."

Kerry eyed her. "We do have programmers, hon."

The pale blue eyes pinned her with ferocious intent. "When it comes to the safety of the people here and especially you, I want absolute perfection."

"Got it." Kerry muffled a smile.

"Anyway, I'd like to get the cams in before next week ends if we can. Kerry and I will be out of town this weekend, I'd like to start on the program after we get back from New Orleans."

"Business there, boss?" Mark asked.

"Valentines Day." Dar responded without missing a beat. Her eyes twinkled a little at his blush. "Back at the old place, Ker and I were pretty low key. This isn't ILS. We own this joint for better or worse, so I don't see any point in not being open." She glanced at Carlos. "If you have an issue with that, speak up now."

Carlos shook his head, undisturbed. "I'm fine with it. Mark told me."

"Okay, so." Dar cleared her throat. "Cameras. Now we've also got to secure the data. I can write the encryption into the database schema, but what about the physical side?" She looked over at Mark. "I don't want people to be able to load up external hard drives, or thumb drives, and walk out of here."

Mark nodded and cleared his throat. "I got a schematic to protect the server room." He pulled out his own page and pushed it over to Dar. "And it's gonna be a pain in the ass, but we're going to certify all the local storage, and not allow any transfer to any device that ain't coded in."

Dar studied the page, and grunted in approval.

"The big data store, here?" He pointed at one of the racks. "We should only allow remote access to. Work in a virtual session, with sandboxing. No local transfer at all."

"So the work will actually take place on the main system?" Kerry asked.

"Yeah. I have dot1x on the net, and it'll be an encrypted session." Mark said. "They can check code in and out, its like they're working local, but everything stays inside the big box."

"I like this." Dar said, after a long silence. "Good work, Mark."

"Once we get an off site datacenter, I'll do a real time sync over the wire to it." Mark went on, a pleased expression on his face. "That place I told you about? It's lit from three directions."

"Nice." Now Dar was smiling. "Thanks guys. You made me feel like I can take Kerry on a month vacation in a little while and not worry about things back here."

Kerry acknowledged all the smiles with one of her own, and then leaned back in her chair in a relaxed pose.

"Yeah, so then I can look forward to shooting the rapids with Dar coding in her head." She remarked.

"Someone remind me to not let them give her a paddle."

A round of easy laughter went around the table.

Dar's phone rang and she pushed back from the table a little, pulling the device out and answering it. "Dar Roberts." She paused to listen. "Hey dad."

Kerry chuckled and picked up the paper, pointing at the picture.

Dar rolled her eyes. "Thanks." She spoke into the phone. "It was all right. Got good press from it."

The group tactfully got up and busied themselves at the coffee station, giving Dar at least a facade of privacy. "Dar's mama and papa must be so proud." Mayte said, as she got herself some tea. "It was the paper calling the last one, wasn't it, Kerry?"

"Yep. Business section of the Herald." Kerry also got some tea. "They remember us from the cruise ship debacle." She added wryly. "I blocked off a two hour session for them tomorrow morning." She glanced over at Dar. "Probably with more pictures."

"Good thing we got the sign up then." Mark said. "Boy I tell ya this is so much damn fun."

Kerry smiled. "It is, isn't it?" She said. "I mean, we've been lucky, so far. Things have fallen in place in our favor."

"But even if they had not, it would still be more interesting than the other place." Maria spoke up. "It is so in the energy yes? To have to make everything new and not to be listening to the same things the same complaints all the time."

"You got it." Mark agreed. "Not have to be in the same old box all the time. This is great."

Kerry thought about that as she leaned against the wall, listening to the chatter and watching her partner from the corner of her eye. Dar had a distinct blush showing and had that look of half pleasure and half embarrassment that meant she was getting praised by her parents.

It was good. She decided. She was glad she didn't have to suffer the same routine day after day, meetings and conciliations with Marketing, and taking customer complaints about service. It was nice to have everything be new all the time, though she knew eventually that, too, would change and there would be another set of routines to get used to.

"Hey Ker?" Dar held the phone out. "They want to talk to you." She got up and passed the phone over as she traded places with her, pulling open the small refrigerator under the coffee station and issuing a satisfied grunt as she removed a chocolate chug from it. "Good job, people."

"We aspire to take after our bosses." Mark grinned at her. "Your pop see the pic?"

Dar opened her milk. "Yes, he did." She said. "He's not really a fan of the current administration, but he did say he was glad I learned my lesson well from him about at least pretending respect to authority"

Mark started laughing so hard he almost choked.

"Yeah, Thats pretty much what my mother's reaction was." Dar agreed. "I could hear her through the phone. They're out in the BVI's right now at some tiki bar."

"They coming back any time soon?" Mark asked. "I figure if your pop shows up, we won't have to worry about those guys much after that."

"They'll be back in a couple weeks." Dar said. "They're going to stay at our place while we're gone. My mother said she painted a few canvasses for our walls here."

"Oh, Dar." Maria held a finger up. "Uno momento, por favor. A person from this area came in this morning, and gave me some informations about a bed, and that we must get in and ride in it."

Dar blinked at her. "Uh.. what?"

"Down the street, yes. All of us together, but not until September. So we have time for it."

"Oh the bed race." Carlos said. "Yeah, that's a lot of fun."

"Bed race?"

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"Okay, Col, you got everything you need?" Kerry finished zipping her overnight case. "Thanks for staying over."

Colleen was seated on the love seat, her own overnight bag next to her. "No problem at all, Ker." She was flipping through a People magazine. "It's never a hardship to stay here on Fantasy Island you know? But you'll do me a favor while you and the Mrs are partying in Mardi Gras and see if you can find me a man who can buy me a place out here."

"Do my best." Kerry promised. "What happened to that guy you were seeing... Arthur?"

"Meh." Colleen glanced up. "He's all right, but he's a bit of a bring to church on Sunday, if you catch me."

"Ah. Yeah. Kind of like Brian was for me." Kerry's eyes twinkled a little. "I've never been to Mardi Gras.. .hell, I've never been to New Orleans but I'll see what I can find for you there."

"Take pictures." Colleen said. "Hey, you intending on flashing your tatas to get some of those lovely beads?"

Kerry stopped in mid motion and looked at her. "What?"

"What what? Haven't you seen those programs about Mardi Gras?" Colleen chuckled. "All those tourists standing on the sidelines, lifting their shirt up to get the laddies on the floats to toss sparklies at them?"

Kerry blinked, putting her hands on her hips and staring at her friend. . "Colleen." She said. "It took me months to casually take my clothes off in front of Dar, alone in our bedroom. I don't see me doing it on the street for the Travel Channel for plastic beads and coconuts."

Her friend snickered, and covered her mouth to stifle a laugh.

"What was that about plastic beads and coconuts?" Dar entered from her office, carrying her own overnight bag. "Are we talking about what I think we're talking about? Our hotel's on one of the parade routes, and we've got second floor balcony rooms."

"Nice." Kerry said. "So that means I don't have to take my shirt off to get party favors right?"

Dar stopped in mid motion in unconscious mimicry of her partner. "What?" She gave Kerry an incredulous look. "Babe, I'll buy you a whole damn float if you want. You don't have to take off anything, honest."

Colleen at this point had fallen over on the couch, guffawing silently.

Kerry mock sighed. "Oh, good." She said. "C'mon lets get out of here before I get myself into any more trouble." She shouldered her bag. "Bye kids! Be good for auntie Colleen."

They escaped out the front door and got in Dar's truck, throwing their bags in the back seat. "This is going to be fun." Kerry said, as Dar started up the engine and backed out of her spot. "Especially after this week. Holy cow. Dar, we're going to be out of space for new employees at this rate in six months."

Dar waggled her eyebrows and grinned. "I figure, once we get the data center going, we can move the IT people there." She said. "The support groups we're going to need.. unless we can get more space around our office. To be honest I had no idea we were going to take off like that."

"Six new clients in the last two days." Kerry shook her head. "Unbelievable. Even with that press." She said. "Wait until the Business Monday piece runs."

"And none of them current or previous ILS customers." Dar looked satisfied. "Which is a good thing, since we don't need any more hot pokers to shove up the ILS board's collective ass."

"Was that Alastair that called you before we left?" Kerry asked. "I guess they saw the story."

"They saw the story." Dar confirmed. "He's about tied up everything there, figures he'll be out by the end of next week. From what I got from him, we are very persona non gratis." She pulled up to the ferry dock and put the truck in park, to wait for the next ferry. "They're fuming over not getting a piece of that action."

"They wouldn't have gotten it anyway." Kerry objected.

"No, I know, and besides, that's not really the direction we'd been taking the company. They stopped doing a lot of custom software a few years back." Dar said. "They really don't have much to be pissed about,

especially since Gerry renewed those support contracts with them. Alastair said he made sure they knew why."

Kerry was quiet briefly. "How are the new guys doing?" She finally asked.

"My replacement has been busy shooting off hot air in Houston. Sees himself as a tech evangelist." Dar said, in a mild tone. "Your replacement brought in about a half dozen of his own people, and is cleaning house."

Kerry exhaled. "Damn."

"If it's any consolation Alastair said Jose told him in the men's room he really misses us." Her partner smiled. "He said he thinks this guy's a bigger ass than I was."

"Oh Lord." Kerry covered her eyes with one hand.

"The test will be the first major issue they have." Dar concluded. "Lucky for them, we built up a lot of resilience these last few years but problems will happen eventually. Once that happens – either they'll be able to handle it and start making things their own, or they'll lose it, and the shit will hit the fan."

"Well. If they're cleaning house, chances are they're going to be letting go the people who were closest to us." Kerry remarked.

"And we need people. Synergistic." Dar took the truck out of park and drove onto the ferry. "Sometimes things work out like that."

"Sometimes they do." Kerry settled back in her seat. "But let's worry about it next week. After Mardi Gras."

"Sounds good to me." Dar folded her hands over her stomach.

**

"Taxi, ladies?"

"Sure." Dar steered Kerry towards the proffered conveyance. "Royal Sonesta."

The taxi driver smiled. "You bet." He gently closed the door and then jog trotted around the front of the cab to get in the driver's seat. "Beautiful night to be flying into Nola."

"Its really busy." Kerry was looking around, at the packed airport pick up area.

The driver glanced in the rear view. "You all did know you were comin in last weekend of Mardi Gras, right?"

Dar chuckled. "We knew." She said. "We've just never been here before."

"Ahh! Now." The smiled again. "First timers. Lordy lordy"

"Got any recommendations?" Dar asked. "Hate to be a typical tourist if I don't have to be."

"Well now, see." The driver cleared his throat. "My view is, first time you're here, be a tourist." He said. "See all the stuff, do all the stuff, specially if you're here for Mardi Gras. Ain't no other purpose for that then tourism, know what I mean?"

"Okay." Dar looked out the window, hearing the blare of music that fell behind them quickly. "Good point."

"Second time? Then you can start being choosy."

"Oh Dar." Kerry had been reading the plastic covered map fastened to the back of the seat. "They have a ghost tour. Can we do that?"

The driver laughed throatily. "Careful with that one if you get scared easy. There's plenty of old spirits here."

Dar eyed the advertisement. "Sure." She said. "Why the hell not?"

"Why do you have a lot of old spirits here?" Kerry asked. "Because the city's so old?"

The taxi driver met her eyes in the rear view. "You fooling with me? You ain't never heard of all the hoodoo and voodoo and things like that here? For real?"

Kerry looked over at Dar, who shrugged and lifted her hands in supplication. "No, you know, I don't think I have. I don't know that much about New Orleans. Do you, hon?"

Dar remained silent for a bit, then cleared her throat gently. "Well. I've heard a little bit about it. My father's folks come from Alabama, remember."

'Whereabouts in Alabama?' The driver asked, with interest. "Got family there."

"Small place near Ozark." Dar replied. "Nearest big town is Montgomery, I guess."

"Lordy that is deep woods Alabama." The driver chuckled. "My folks are just north of Mobile. "

"Ah yeah, I remember that story he told us when he came back from his sister's wedding." Kerry recalled. "You know, maybe we should have brought him and your mom here. Between his ghost tales and her being a pagan, we could have had some real fun on this tour."

"Next time." Dar remarked as they slowed down, turning into a part of the city that had narrower streets, and a lot more people. "Is this the French Quarter?"

"Yes, ma'am, it sure is." The driver relaxed, as the pace slowed to a crawl. "Just get yourselves a good look now, we got plenty of time before we get to the hotel."

Kerry felt like a kid, her eyes falling on another after another scene on either side of the car. The streets were filled with revelers, dressed in everything from casual clothing to lurid masks and paint.

Or just paint. "Dar.. is that.. "

"Woman naked? Yes." Her partner was busy peering out her own window. "Is that legal?"

"That's what them Fleur d lies are for there." The driver replied with a chuckle. "You got to have the illusion of something, see what I mean?"

"Oh. Yeah. I see what you mean." Kerry put a hand on her cheek. "My Midwestern roots are curling up and screaming."

Dar patted her on the leg. "Breathe, babe." She could hear music through the window, brassy and penetrating, a rhythm she knew only slightly, new and raw. "Here's the hotel."

Kerry glanced outside, her eyes lighting up. "Oh wow." She studied the building, which wrapped around a corner and had old style wrought iron railings on the floors overlooking the street. "We're in one of those rooms, Dar?"

"We are." Dar opened the door as the driver got hastily out. She handed him a folded bill. "Keep the change."

"Yes, ma'am, and thank ya." He gestured to the hotel as he handed them out their overnights. "You all have a good old time now, hear?"

"I am absolutely sure we will." Dar paused as a man on stilts rambled by between them and the entrance.

"Wow." Kerry tucked her hand inside Dar's elbow and they advanced cautiously through the crowd. "Hope you packed earplugs or we're not getting any sleep."

"Didn't figure we would anyway." Dar remarked, as they got inside the door. "I'm sure there's coffee here."

The lobby was filled with people, but it was quieter inside. Kerry kept her grip on her partner as they eased through the crowd to the check in desk, turning when they got there to survey the interior while Dar attended to the necessary procedures.

The space was full of old fashioned furniture and trim, heavy velvet draping and chandeliers. Everyone in the lobby seemed to be holding a drink of some kind, and some had layers and layers of beads around their necks.

Wow. Kerry turned back around as Dar put a hand on her arm, and indicated the stairs to their left. "Might as well walk up." She commented, regarding the crowd around the elevators.

They climbed up the old fashioned sweeping stairs and walked along the hall until Dar stopped at a set of double doors. She opened them and they went inside, presented with a suite of rooms as traditionally decorated as the lobby had been. "Wow." Kerry put her bag down and went to the French doors, which opened out onto a long balcony. "This is all ours?"

"Yep." Dar looked out, to see Bourbon Street stretching out in front of them, filled with people and music and parties, along with the smell of garlic and sugar. "Hungry?"

"Hell yeah." Kerry walked out onto the balcony and put her hands on the cold, dark wrought iron, looking out over the crowd. "This is wild."

"Let's go to that place." Dar pointed. "I can see the sign that says shrimp and grits."

Kerry started laughing. "Okay, shrimp and grits, and then we go ghost hunting." She regarded the busy street with a relaxed, and totally engaged grin. Then she turned and put her arms around her partner and squeezed hard. "Thanks."

Dar returned the hug with a happy grin of her own. "Let's go have fun."

Kerry added a festive burgundy silk scarf to her leather jacket, and ran a brush through her hair, then followed Dar out the door of their snazzy suite and back down the steps.

The crowd was dense, and the restaurant packed. But Kerry negotiated that with ease and fifteen minutes later they were seated and examining a rustic menu. "Holy pooters. I can see I'm going to be putting on ten pounds this weekend." Kerry remarked. "I want one of everything."

"Milk punch." Dar regarded the drink menu. "Do I have to try that?"

"I think you do."

A waiter arrived shortly, with no pad or pen, just an inquisitive eyebrow. "We'll share a large seafood plate to start." Kerry told him. "I'll have the catfish pecan, and my friend here wants the red fish on the half shell."

The waiter smiled at them. "Good picks." He said. "Drinks?"

"I guess I have to try the milk punch." Dar said. "Ker?"

"I'll try a Bluegrass sunset." Her partner decided, handing the menus back to the waiting server. "And some water, please."

The waiter half bowed, and disappeared.

"Do we need to make reservations for that ghost tour?" Kerry relaxed in her chair, regarding the busy restaurant contentedly. "And I thought you were going to get shrimp and grits?"

"Tomorrow." Dar had her phone out. "Let me get reservations. I'm sure they're packed tonight." She looked up the number on the gizmo, then pressed it to dial. "I really like these things. Wish the Internet was faster though."

Kerry caught sight of a group of musicians outside, and as the door opened to let in more diners the sounds of a saxophone blared inside, a background to the group of garishly dressed faux skeletons moving past. Way different than she'd expected, but in a good way. "This is cool."

She took a sip of Dar's milk punch when it arrived and licked her lips. "Bet these are popular."

"Yes, the ladies really like them." The waiter winked at her. "They go down easy."

"Oh yes. I can see why a lot of people end up taking their shirts off in the street in that case." Kerry settled back with her drink. "That's very good."

Dar sucked cautiously at her glass. "Hardly tastes like there's alcohol in there." She remarked, as she hung up the phone. "We're set for ten pm. We lucked out. They usually only go at 8."

"That's why they're dangerous." Kerry pointed at the glass. "There's a shot and a half of bourbon in that thing."

"Ah." Dar eyed it. "Okay. One for me then." She put her gizmo away. "I don't really want a picture of me showing up somewhere with my shirt off in the streets of New Orleans."

"Somehow, I don't think that would hurt sales any." Kerry enjoyed the look of self deprecating exasperation on her partner's face. "Hey, I've seen you with your shirt off."

"Wench."

"Hehehe."

**

If anything, it was even busier on the street when they emerged, making their way slowly through the crowds. "Uf." Kerry put her hands into her jacket pockets. "That was awesome. But I'm stuffed." She sighed. "Glad we're on a walking tour now."

"Me too." Dar agreed. "They said to meet up at Reverend Zombie's Voodoo Shop." She gazed reflectively down the street. "Two blocks from here."

"Reverend Zombie's Voodoo Shop?" Kerry repeated the name carefully. "Really?"

"Mmhmm." Dar nodded. "I'm sure there'll be a shopping opportunity there. We could get a skull or something for my desk."

"We could get your mom some crystals I bet." Kerry countered. "No skull, hon. It'll freak Maria out." She tucked her hand inside Dar's elbow again and slowed her pace, looking around at everything in the chaos they were walking through. "Do you believe in any of that magic stuff?"

"No." Dar replied promptly.

"Even after what happened with your dad?"

"No." Her partner repeated. "Do you really think the ghost of his daddy rose from the grave and was chased off by some demon?"

"Well, sweetie, he's not really an oogee boogie kinda guy, you know? If he said he saw creepy things like that, I'm inclined to think **something** happened." Kerry objected. "I really can't picture him making up a story like that and telling us."

Dar sucked on the mint she'd taken from the restaurant in silence for a few minutes. "Well." She cleared her throat gently. "He might have done that to avoid telling us what really might have happened to those guys who disappeared."

Kerry digested that as they walked along, turning a corner and heading for where a group had already formed on the sidewalk outside a shop. "Oh." She finally said. "You mean, maybe he did something to them?"

"He kinda makes up rules sometimes." Dar said, in an almost apologetic tone. "So I think he'd rather tell us about ghosts, than he would about how he maybe took those guys out."

"Oh." Kerry said, again. "Huh. I never really thought about that. I just never could imagine him lying to us in that kind of way."

"I'm not saying he definitely did." Dar said. "It's just possible, y'know?"

"Mm."

"Or, what the hell. Maybe he did see ghosts." Dar sighed. "I don't know. But no, I don't really believe in that stuff. All that psychic mumbo jumbo just never rang true to me."

Kerry eyed her, but said nothing, a brief faint smile appearing on her face.

Dar caught it. "Except for that stuff with us." She acknowledged. "I'll find a scientific reason for it sometime." She had to chuckle though, shrugging a little wryly. "But that's not ghosts."

"No, it isn't." Kerry pressed her head against her partner's shoulder. "Let's go see if Nola can cough up some ghosts for us. Here we are."

They slowed to a halt as they joined the group outside the voodoo shop, which was, in fact, closed. Dar went to the window and peered inside curiously, since the guides were still getting their paperwork sorted out. She studied the objects then gave a side glance at Kerry as her partner came up to join her. "Nice."

"Oh. Dear." Kerry's brows contracted. "Huh. That's some weird stuff, but hey, look. They do palm readings." She took Dar's hand in her own and turned it up most. "We could come back and get our fortunes told, right?"

Dar cleared her throat. "Sure." She answered after a brief pause. "Or maybe get our Tarot cards read." She pointed at the sign inside. "I've wondered over the years how many people have stopped in Nola and gotten voodoo dolls for me." Her eyes flashed with sudden humor. "I always imagined Jose's inner office to have a picture of me on the back of the door filled with dart holes."

"Or bee bee holes." Kerry chuckled. "Didn't seem to have done you much harm."

Dar moved over to the guides to confirm their registration, leaving Kerry to peruse the window. She let her eyes run over the candles, incense, herbs, charms, trinkets.. it seemed to be a veritable cornucopia of magic inspired products including books and magazines she imagined were devoted to the practice.

"If you go in there." A woman who had been leaning against the wall turned to speak to her. "Don't take pictures and don't ask questions about black magic. It pisses them off." She advised. "I went in there today and they threw this guy out because he opened one of those books."

"Really?" Kerry turned and leaned her shoulder against the window surface, folding her arms. "Not very customer centric, I guess."

The woman shrugged. "Mostly tourists, I guess, so they get tired of it." She acknowledged. "I did get my palm read though, and that was amazing."

"Really? I was thinking of doing that tomorrow."

The woman nodded emphatically. "It was really amazing. Probably.. eighty percent accurate? I was blown away. So weird. But I enjoyed it and my husband did too. It's our first time in New Orleans."

"Ours too." Kerry decided she'd somehow wrangle her partner into the place. "So far it's been a lot of fun. We just got here tonight."

"We came this morning. It's our wedding anniversary." The woman smiled. "Something different! Last year we went to Vegas."

The woman was middle aged, and about Kerry's height, with curly brown hair. She was stockily built and had a knit pull on cap on her head to ward off the night chill. "I can't wait to see the ghosts. Some people take pictures of them."

The husband came back over with Dar right behind him. "All right, Sarah, you ready?" He looked good humored about the tour. "Let's go find you some spooks."

The woman beamed at him, and they moved off to get in line as the tour guides got ready to lead them off.

Dar and Kerry joined the queue, and Dar put her hands behind her and rocked up and down a few times on the balls of her feet.

“Are you going to kill me?” Kerry asked, slipping one hand into Dar’s front pocket.

Dar chuckled. “Only if you keep me up all night yelling about ghosts.”

“Well.” Kerry started forward as the group did. “You’ll have to find something else to distract me with then.”

“Heh.”

**

Kerry felt that it would likely seem far spookier on the tour if she couldn’t hear people partying a street or two over. The stories behind the haunted or so called haunted places were interesting, but she didn’t feel even a twinge of creepiness as they moved along from the Lalaurie Mansion to the next tale of the Octaroon Mistress.

The tour guides were dramatic and fun, and everyone was having a good time though. Kerry was standing in the front part of the circle around the guide, and Dar was behind her, casually resting her arms on Kerry’s shoulders.

“That’s right ladies and gentlemen, right up there, on that ledge, only in the coldest nights you can see a figure... a wispy figure.. of a woman mostly naked, up there on the roof!”

Kerry fastened her eyes attentively on the spot. “You think it’s cold enough?” She whispered to Dar.

“I think if we see someone, it has to be a ghost because it’s too damn cold to be up there naked.” Her partner responded practically. “Even piss ass drunk.”

“Can you just picture it?” The guide said. “As the moon rises over the building, as the mist comes up from the river..”

A gasp went up, as motion was detected across the roof, and for a brief moment, a dark shape could be seen. Then it was gone

“Did you see it!” The guide said, excitedly. “Anyone get a picture?” He moved over to look at one woman’s digital camera. “You did!”

“Mm.” Dar grumbled softly. “Did you see it?”

“I did.” Kerry admitted. “I’ve got no idea what it was... at this distance it could have been a cat for all I know, but I saw it. Did you?”

“I saw something.”

The excitement around the group was now electric. Many gathered around the woman with the camera, others shaded their eyes from the street lamps, peering up at the ceiling.

“The ghost is Julie.” The guide said. “She was an octaroon. Does anyone here know what that is?” He looked around, but no one answered. “It is someone who is one eighth black, seven eighths white. In the old days, there were many of these women in New Orleans and legend says they were very beautiful.”

Kerry listened with interest.

“These women were much desired by the Creoles and the Frenchmen who made their home in New Orleans, but because of their social status, they could never marry.” The guide motioned them closer. “The Octaroon Julie fell in love with a Frenchman, and very much wanted to marry him. But he refused her, because of her status.”

“Prick.” Dar enunciated softly, making her partner smile.

"So one night the Frenchman thought he would put Julie's love to the test, and if she met the test, he would think about marrying her. He brought many friends to his house, and told her if she would take all her clothes off and wait for him on the roof, he would come get her, and bring her down to introduce her to society. He never thought she would take the dare."

The wind seemed to get colder, all of a sudden. Dar lifted her head and felt her ears twitch, as above the revelry streets over she thought she heard a moan through the trees.

"But she did." The guide said. "She went up on the roof, and took off her clothes, and stood up there, waiting for her love to come meet her."

"Ugh." Kerry muttered.

"But he never did. He finally went to bed, and was surprised not to find here there warming the sheets for him. So he rushed up onto the roof, and there, on the roof, in the cold, was her dead, frozen body."

The crowd murmured.

"He died himself, several months later." The guide said. "Many say, of a broken heart."

"Don't really have much sympathy for the guy." Dar commented quietly. 'But it says something about how it was back then."

"If they were that hung up about one eighth of someone's blood I can only imagine how they would have felt about us." Kerry responded. "Sheesh."

"So often, today, those who work in that building say they hear Julie running around the top floor, where her rooms were, and hear her laughing, and too, they see the Frenchman in the garden, a sad and lonely figure." The guide continued. "Of course, the fact that a palm reading and tarot company owns the building probably makes the encounters all the more interesting."

"And a good advertisement." The middle aged woman's husband commented.

"That too." The guide agreed, with a cheerful smile. "Let's move on to see the garden, shall we? Maybe we'll see the Frenchman in there." He led the way across the street towards the shadowed, gated space.

"Oh my gosh, this is so exciting!" Sarah said, reviewing her camera. "I can't believe I got a picture of it!"

Kerry glanced up at her partner. "You're not buying this, are you?"

Dar remained silent for a moment then she coughed a little. "There was something behind us back there."

Kerry almost came to a halt, so surprised was she to hear that. "What?" She looked back the way they came, seeing nothing more interesting than a lamppost. "What?"

Dar put her hand on Kerry's back to keep her on the path. "There was something back there watching us. I could feel it behind me."

"Something like... a stray dog or a cop or..." Kerry asked, hesitantly.

"I don't know. I could feel cold breath on my back." Dar said, with devastating calmness. "Sort of like in the condo, when you' stand in that spot outside the kitchen? Under the vent?"

Kerry looked behind them again, and stared up at Dar, unable to come up with a response. "Uh."

"Anyway." Dar said. "Maybe I just imagined it all. Let's go in there and see what we find." She focused her attention on the crowd, which had filtered in through the wrought iron gates into the garden. "Maybe it was just a draft from between those two buildings."

Kerry latched onto her arm and collected her scattered wits. She edged into the garden and peered around, half expecting to see a tall, spectral figure watching them from between the bushes.

The guide was speaking, relating some details about the life of the Frenchman as they walked between the high hedges, but Kerry was convinced she kept seeing whispers of motion in her peripheral vision and as she realized that, she felt her heart start to beat faster.

Dar was strolling along at her side, turning her head to look between the flowers, and reaching out idly with her free hand to touch the petals stained gray by the night gloom.

A frog croaked to the left, and Kerry almost jumped into Dar's arms, bumping her partner abruptly and making her take a little hop. "Oh.. sorry." She muttered. "Stupid frog."

Dar moved, shifting her hand off Kerry's back as she draped her arm over the smaller woman's shoulders instead. "No problem, babe." She looked up into the sky. "Was that a bat?"

"Are you trying to freak me out?" Kerry said, after a pause.

"No...am I?" Dar responded. "I really just did think I saw one."

Kerry looked up herself, and sucked in a breath as a shadowy figure fluttered overhead, moving from one tree to another. "Oh!"

"Yeah, that's what I saw." Dar had also been watching. "That's a bat, right? Not a bird?"

Kerry looked at the tree, then she let her eyes drop and she jerked as her gaze fell on a translucent form, with moonlight pouring through it, staring at them. "Ah!"

Then it was gone. "Did you see that?" She whispered to Dar.

Dar was half turned, her blue eyes grayish silver in the gloom. "I just saw some fog." She said, after a moment. "What did you see?"

Kerry looked back over, and saw fog too. It was just a light mist, drifting between the bushes and she hesitated, now doubting what she herself had seen. "Well."

"So sometimes, people walking in the garden so encounter the Frenchman." The guide was saying, enjoying the wide eyes of his audience. "He's always dressed in a cutaway coat, and a cravat. Let's move on and see if we can find him."

Had she seen something? Or was her imagination just working in overdrive? Kerry tried to recall what she thought she'd seen, but the more she looked at the fog, the less she was convinced she'd seen anything at all. After a moment, she relaxed and walked along with Dar after the group, most of whom were starting to huddle together.

They could hear the sounds of music getting louder, and as they reached the other end of the garden, the guide was almost having to shout over it. Kerry looked quickly behind her as they moved out back into the street, but the garden was quiet, and empty of anything but moonbeams and some fog.

But she felt strange. She took a breath and let it out, following Dar as they caught up to the back of the tour group on their way to the next station. Despite the empty trees she had the uncanny sensation that she was being watched, and no matter how quickly she glanced around she couldn't find a concrete set of eyes pointed in her direction.

"Ker?"

"Yeah." Kerry cleared her throat and tucked her hand inside Dar's elbow again. "Hon, next time just tell me to go find an ice cream parlor, okay?"

Dar chuckled.

"What in the hell was I thinking?"

Dar leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Relax." She told her partner. "Whatever comes out of the ether at you, I'll take care of it, promise."

Kerry was glad of the reassurance when the guide took them down a narrow lane, and between towering buildings to stop at one, with a wrought iron balcony not too different from the one at their hotel. It was dark, and the wind was chill, and she kept hearing things being blown around behind her.

Leaves? She moved a bit closer to Dar. Sure. Leaves.

She heard a scuff and a crunch, and she half turned, to see a shadowy form that nearly made her guts come out of her ears before her brain sorted it out and she realized it was a dog. "Hey, looks like Chino."

Dar turned her head, and smiled. "It does." She agreed. "Glad it wasn't the Hound of the Baskervilles?"

Kerry cleared her throat and focused her attention forward. "Yes."

Dar pulled her closer. "Chill, Ker, chill."

"I feel kind of like a dork." Kerry sighed, as they came up to the back of the group who had stopped on the sidewalk.

"So, we come to the tale of the Mad Butcher." The guide began. "Many cities have a legend of a Mad Butcher, but here in New Orleans it takes on a different tune because of course, it also includes sausages, and a mistress. So here we go."

"Hm." Dar grunted softly.

"Back in the day, there was a butcher who lived in that house, with his wife, and his factory. He made the best pork sausages in town, and everyone bought from him. The butcher was happy, but as the years went on, and he and his wife got older, he began to tire of her."

"I don't think I want to listen to this one." Kerry said, with a faint grimace. "I can see where it's going."

"You want to duck out?" Dar asked. "It's just a short walk back to the hotel."

Kerry thought about it, then she nodded. "It's late, I'm really tired and my mind is going in circles." She apologized. "Maybe we can try another tour tomorrow night."

"No problem." Dar guided her away from the back of the crowd, and down the next side street. As they moved along it, the music got louder and they saw bright lights and something big moving. "Hey, a parade." She pointed. "That's a lot more cheerful than creeps."

Kerry was glad to leave the spooks behind as they turned at the corner of Canal Street and saw a long cavalcade of floats and marchers, all in lurid, pungent colors, brass instruments blaring. "Oh yeah, this is better." She eased in beside Dar near the edge of the street, smiling as one of the floats came even with them, full of revelers in masks. "Oh, those are pretty."

It was all very frenetic. Kerry wasn't sure who or what the float was supposed to represent, but there were members on the floats and they were throwing things to the crowd with distinct enthusiasm. Strings of beads, round metal bits, cups, stuffed animals...

"Look out." Dar's reflexes saved her from being bonked by a flying disk. Then she put her hands up and found them ringed by strings of beads that wrapped around her wrists.

"Hey babe!" One of the float members yelled, looking right at her. "Smile!"

Kerry did, and was rewarded with a tossed cup. "Holy crap." She said, as the float passed. "What the hell is all this?"

"They're called throws." Dar was laughing. "Hey, at least they didn't ask you to take off your shirt." She dropped the disk into Kerry's cup, and took the beads from her, putting them around her neck "C'mon, hot stuff. Let's see what other swag we can get."

Kerry felt the shadows fall away from her thoughts, and she grinned, seeing rows and rows of spectators also covered in beads, necklaces, and a range of other gaudy decorations. They were also yelling at the parade. "What are they all shouting?"

“Morpheus.” Dar said, knowledgeably. “That's the group that's doing this parade.” She explained “Each parade is sponsored by a society of volunteers.. they're called krewes.”

Kerry studied the oncoming marchers. “They just all do this for fun?”

“Yup.”

“They don't get paid?”

“Nope. It's all just to party.”

Kerry blinked. “Wow. I think I like New Orleans.”

The band marched by, all playing their hearts out, sending brassy tones up into the night air as unicycle riders wove in and out of their ranks, tossing beads and glowing necklaces as they passed.

“Jesus!” Kerry glanced down the road for the next float. “Oh look at that. I want a stuffed animal.” She pointed at two women throwing the objects randomly.

“No problem.” Dar responded gallantly, starting to unbutton her shirt.

“No wait.. not.. Dar!” Kerry grabbed her clothing hastily. “I don't want one that bad!”

“I thought you liked me with my shirt off.” Her partner complained.

“Dar!”

Dar chortled softly and put her arms around Kerry, giving her a hug. “Okay hon.” She rocked them both back and forth. “How about a beer?”

“Sure.” Kerry steered her towards an outdoor cafe. “That's a lot safer than plush toys. All I need for this place is cash.” She fished a bill out of her pocket and pinned the waitress with an intent stare. “I don't have to share my eye candy.”

Dar started laughing out loud.

“Pfft.”

**

It was very late when they finally wandered back into the hotel lobby, arm in arm. Kerry felt amiably overstimulated, her ears still ringing from the brassy music and a sense of pleasant displacement insulating her from the several mugs of beer she'd consumed.

It smelled of wood and candles in the hall, and there was a sense of age and decorum about the room, historic and different and reminding her oddly of some places she'd been in the Capitol. “Shouldn't have had that last beer.” She remarked mournfully. “Time to park my ass in bed.”

“That's where we're going.” Dar guided her up the steps, giving a brief smile and nod to the room service waiter on his way down.

“Evening, Ladies.” He returned the greeting with a smile. “Anything I can bring you lovely gals tonight?”

“Please don't say ice cream, Dar. I've got too much beer in me.” Kerry muttered. “Not a good mix.”

“How about some nice hot tea.” Dar suggested. “And a couple bottles of water.”

“Surely!” The waiter smiled. “Be right up with it.”

“Mmm.. nice hot tea.” Kerry sighed. “You're the best.”

Dar unlocked the door and steered them both inside finding their bed turned down and chocolate truffles placed neatly awaiting them.

“Boy, that looks good.” Kerry kicked off her shoes. “I don't know if I'm going to last for tea. I'm wiped.” She carefully untangled the many strands of beads from her neck and put them on the desk, adding the coins to them. “That was wild and crazy.”

Dar pulled something from her pocket and dropped it next to Kerry's booty. "There"
"Oh, you got one?" Kerry picked up the plush animal with a look of surprise. "I didn't see you do that."
Dar chuckled.

"Did you have to flash them for it?" Kerry peered at her from under very disheveled bangs. "Tell me the truth."

Dar obligingly came over, wrapping her arms around her partner and gazing down into her eyes. "The truth is, I'd have stripped naked and covered myself in honey if it would make you happy." She smiled at the gentle shift in Kerry's expression. "But the truth also is three people from the ILS New Orleans office were on that float and nearly split their pants rushing over to give me their toys."

"Bwahahahahah!" Kerry fell against her and savored the hug that followed. "They recognized you?"

"Oh yeah." Dar laughed easily along with her. "Actually they told me someone told them we were going to be here and they were on the lookout for us." She said. "You were getting beer at the time, and they had to keep up with the float. They were bummed they missed you."

Kerry closed her eyes, glad the windows were sufficiently insulated that only a faint blare of horns and yells filtered through to them. She felt Dar start to peel her shirt off and merely smiled, enjoying the sensation of the room air hitting her bare skin between her shoulder blades.

There was a slight sound as Dar tossed the fabric over the back of the nearby chair, and she pushed the edge of her partner's shirt up and savored the skin to skin contact. She pulled the sweater over Dar's head and it went somewhere, as she felt Dar's fingers cradle the back of her head and their lips met.

She let her hands slide down and work at the button on Dar's jeans, the well worn and broken in fabric yielding easily to her fingers. The loosened denim slid down revealing the taller woman's briefs, a pair sedately decorated with Unix commands Kerry had gotten her for Christmas.

Some people shopped for lingerie at Victoria's Secrets, she shopped at Thinkgeeks. So did Dar, who had gotten her the Darth Vader boxer shorts she was currently in the process of losing, believing the statement 'come to the dark side, we've got cookies!' seemed to fit her.

Rampant nerdism.

She had just removed the spots from Dar's hips, and they were making a slow move towards the bed when there was a knock at the door.

"Ah, crap."

"Tea." Kerry banged her head gently against her partner's chest. "Why did we do that?"

"We're drunk." Dar nudged her over to the bed and pulled the covers back. "G'wan. I'll get it." She pulled her shirt back on and tugged it down to an almost modest length and trudged over to the door.

Kerry watched with a faint grin and half closed eyes, as Dar opened it to accept the tray, setting it down on the credenza and walking the bill back over to the waiter and closing him out of the room once he took it. Then she went back to the tray and opened one of the bottles of water, her figure outlined by the light from the window.

"Here." Dar brought two glasses back over. "I've been told if you stay hydrated, you get less of a hangover." She sat down on the edge of the bed and offered Kerry one. "True?"

"Never tried it, no idea." Kerry drank the liquid anyway. "But it sure as hell can't hurt, right? I figured you'd find some way of making that chocolate fizzy thing if waking up tomorrow's too bad."

"Mm." Dar put her glass down, then took Kerry's and got rid of that too, pulling off her shirt and giving it a toss in the direction of the credenza. She licked her lips and slid under the covers. "Now. Where were we?"

"I was taking off your spots." Kerry rolled over and put a hand on her hip, getting her thumb under her waistband. "And you were... ah, yeah."

She felt the straps on her bra come loose and then Dar's thigh was slipping between hers, and she gave herself over to the growing passion that burned its way through the alcohol and brought life into sharp, sensual focus. It brought a lightness to her thoughts, and any memories of earlier shadows vaporized as Dar put her knowledge of Kerry's body to good use.

They were part of each other in this moment, and this moment was the only thing she knew or cared about. Kerry felt the aching tension start to escalate and it brought a rush of adrenaline with it, making her ferociously happy.

Hangovers and ghosts be damned.

**

Dar opened her eyes, half lifting her head off the pillow. After a moment of silence she blinked, not sure what had woken her up.

It was dark and quiet in the room, soft creaks and pops sounding at irregular intervals. It was raining outside, and she could hear a faint rumble of thunder, but that was it. She glanced over at her bedmate, finding Kerry curled half on her side and half on her stomach, her arm wrapped around her pillow, very sound asleep.

"Hmph." She settled back down on her side, resuming her spot against Kerry's back and putting her arm back around her waist. Without waking, Kerry seemed to sense the pressure, and she shifted a little, moving closer and pressing against her partner with a faint sound of contentment.

That made Dar smile. She blinked a few times and closed her eyes again, glad at least that her head seemed to be fairly clear, and there were no obvious aftereffects of their fun evening. She'd had a hangover once or twice in her life and hadn't enjoyed it, but she also didn't regret spending the night letting her hair down with Kerry either.

Sometimes, you just had to do that. Dar exhaled and let her body relax, but halfway through that she stopped as she got the uncanny sense that something was watching her, a prickling of the shoulder blades that made her nape hairs lift.

Imagination? Dar lifted her head back up and turned it, looking back over her shoulder at the window, fully expecting to find nothing and shocked breathless when what she did see was a shadowy figure on the balcony looking in.

For a long moment, she froze. Then some instinct took over and she slid out from under the covers, getting her feet under her and standing up to put herself between the window and Kerry.

She straightened up to her full height and squared her shoulders, flexing her hands a little as she took a deep breath and a step forwards towards the window. The figure was dark, and tall, and indistinct, and though she couldn't see the features, she knew the head was looking right at her.

It occurred to her, somewhat belatedly that facing an unknown intruder stark naked wasn't the smartest thing she could do, but she had no intention of taking the time to put clothes on when that same intruder could burst in the doors and...

Well, it would have to go through her to get to Kerry. Expecting fear, but finding only fierce determination instead, she flexed her hands again and took another step forward, spreading her arms out to present as threatening a defense as she could, blood rushing to her skin and sending a warm flush through her muscles.

The figure moved as she did and she drew in a breath to let out a yell when thunder interrupted her, and lightning followed, a sudden and startling crack, making her jump. It bathed her in silver over flash and she blinked from it, and when it faded, the figure was gone.

Gone.

Dar walked to the double French doors and put her hands against them, looking out onto the long balcony beyond. She could see the length of it, and the emptiness echoed in her senses as her heart rate started to slow back down.

“Dar?”

She stifled a yelp, sucking in air abruptly before she turned around to see Kerry sitting up in bed, her bare upper torso visible in the faint light outside. “Ah.”

“What's wrong?” Kerry cleared her throat of its huskiness. “You okay?”

Dar came back over and sat down on the bed. “Yeah, I'm fine. Storm out there. Woke me up.” She ran a slightly shaking hand through her hair. “Whew.”

Kerry touched her arm, closing her fingers around it. “That last blast woke me up too.” She said. “You sure you're okay? You look a little freaked out.”

Dar turned and pulled one knee up, resting her hands on it as she studied her partner's face. “I thought I saw someone out on the balcony.”

Kerry jerked in surprise. “What?” She looked in reflex at the window. “I don't see anything out there.”

“No, not now.” Dar responded. “When I woke up.. I looked over there and saw someone standing outside. Then after that big flash, it was gone.”

“It.” Kerry repeated, after a pensive moment of mutual silence. “What did it look like?”

Dar lay back down and pulled the covers up, the cool air of the room giving her goosebumps. “Couldn't really see detail. Just something tall and dark, and maybe in an overcoat or something.” She responded. “But it might have just been a shadow, Ker, because it wasn't there when I went to the window.”

Kerry studied the glass. “Or maybe whatever it was got scared when they saw a six foot plus tall buff naked woman lunging at them.” She gave her soul mate a fond look. “That'd be enough to scare off a robber, don't you think?”

Dar's dark eyebrow hiked.

“But you know.” The blond woman continued quietly. “I think I saw something like that in the garden we walked in.” She said. “Just really tall, and all shadowy.”

They regarded each other in silence again. “You mean, not a real thing?” Dar said, hesitantly. “As in, a ghost?”

Kerry shrugged. “It was there, then it wasn't.” She said. “I don't know. I don't know what you saw, but it sounds like what I saw, and it was full of creepitude.” She paused. “So what's creepier? A ghost, or some guy following us around and climbing up on our balcony?”

“Hmph.” Dar grunted softly. “That puts it in perspective doesn't it?” She gave Kerry a wry look. “I don't know, Ker. Maybe it was neither. Could have just been my imagination.”

“Mm. That's what I thought in the garden too.”

Dar pondered the idea quietly. What had she really seen? Had it been shadows? Her imagination? Nothing? A real intruder trying to get in their hotel room? Should she call the front desk, the cops, or a psychiatrist? “I dunno.” She finally concluded. “And I don't really want to get dressed and go out in the rain to see if whatever it was left footprints.”

Kerry settled back down next to her and put her head down on Dar's shoulder. “What exactly were you planning to do running out like that in your altogether, sweetie?” She asked, consciously trying to lighten the conversation. “I mean, what if it actually had been a burglar?”

"Damned if I know." Dar admitted, with a faint smile. "All I was thinking about was staying between whatever it was and you."

"You're such a super hero." Kerry tickled her navel, feeling the motion as Dar chuckled silently. "I'm going to get you those Superman panties I saw on the Internet the other day." She looked over to find herself being watched by those pale eyes almost glowing with affection. "And besides all that, you sure are my hero."

Dar stuck her tongue out.

"Anyway, we'll check out the floor out there when we have coffee tomorrow." Kerry concluded.

"Hopefully this headache I've got'll be gone by then." She muttered. "Teach me to mix bourbon and beer."

Dar tucked the covers around the both of them, and firmly shut her eyes, letting the rumble of thunder slowly lull her back into some level of relaxation, while she even more slowly allowed her mind to ponder what had happened. She could feel the warmth of Kerry's breath against the side of her neck, and the gentle motion of the edge of her thumb making idle patterns against her bare skin and she knew a moment of deep echo, a wash of familiarity that seemed ancient and new all at the same time.

Weird.

What, really had she intended on doing? Rushing out onto the balcony and drop kicking the damn thing? Dar had to smile at herself, if only in self depreciation. What if it had been a ghost? Should she have been afraid of it? She hadn't been. Or maybe it had all just happened so fast she hadn't had time to be scared either way.

Oh well.

New Orleans was known for odd things. They'd gone out looking for ghosts, half jokingly, and she was now ready to internally accept that maybe they'd seen something unexplained.

Or maybe they both just had good imaginations. Dar dismissed the events, and snuggled up tighter with Kerry, content to leave any other analysis until the morning, when sunlight and coffee might put a completely different slant on things.

One eye opened and she regarded Kerry. Unless she had to go find an egg cream. Her eye closed again and now the silence returned, broken only by two sets of quiet breathing.

**

As it happened, no egg cream was needed. Kerry picked up her cup of coffee and sipped from it, watching benignly as the early morning strollers cruised by on the street below. She was dressed in a pair of ragged old jeans and a royal blue sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows, enjoying the cool air and the completely ghost free balcony.

There was no scuff or footprints, but then, it had been raining all night and she doubted if there would have been any anyway. Kerry studied the long stretch of empty ground as she sipped her cup, trying to sort out in her head really what had gone on.

Dar was not an easily suggestible person. She had an imagination, certainly, but she was so logic driven, Kerry often suspected her daydreams were formed from Ethernet packet encapsulation schemes where her own mind tended to be far more flexible in that regard.

So what had Dar seen? Since her imagination tended to the prosaic, Kerry was pretty sure she'd seen something, and something that was alarming enough to get her out of bed, and ready to.. She glanced inside the open French doors, where her beloved was studiously stirring her coffee. Ready to defend her from whatever it had been.

Which was really sort of charming. Kerry picked up her Handspring and reviewed her mails, which had been refreshingly few and mostly focused on acknowledgements for pricing she'd provided, and a note from their landlord praising their new sign.

It was really nice, she realized, to not have to have a knot in her guts every time the new message alert went off, and then she thought about how long it had been that she'd been living with that tension. "Hey hon?"

"Yees?" Dar came out and took the seat next to her, extending her denim covered legs with her socked feet out and crossing them at the ankles. "So I went to the front desk on my way back from getting this coffee and those dough nuts."

Kerry licked her lips. "They were good."

"First time I saw carnival food presented in a French style cafe, but yes." Dar said. "Anyway, I asked about tours and stuff and said we'd had a good time last night and the desk clerk mentioned this hotel was on one of the other outfit's tours but they didn't like it."

"Because they say this place is haunted?"

"Yes." Dar said. "So I told them I saw something on the balcony last night."

"Ah hah."

"I think she was waiting to see if I was going to freak out about it and when I didn't, she coughed up the fact that maybe some other people that have stayed here have mentioned that, and it's why they usually rent out these rooms to big groups who want to have a party."

"I see."

"Mm." Dar sipped her coffee. "I said I didn't care."

"Do you?" Kerry watched her lover's profile curiously. "You really weren't scared, were you?"

"I wasn't. Not really sure why." Dar responded readily. "Maybe I was still drunk. I should have been scared, either by some damn robber on the balcony who might have had a gun or a ghost. But I wasn't."

"Dar, you're never scared when it's go time." Kerry said, in a placid tone. "I've watched you for years throwing yourself into situations starting with the night you saved my ass from being carjacked. You have more guts than sense sometimes."

Dar's dark lashes fluttered a little, and she watched Kerry from the corner of her eyes. "Is that a bad thing?" She countered. "I remember you doing some crazy ass stunts too, like diving in the water after that guy."

Oh. Erg. "Well..."

Dar shrugged. "We're two of a kind. Someone once said that. Maybe Alastair." She rested her elbows on her chair arms. "So what do you want to do? Go find Madame PooPoo and get our fortunes told?"

"Absolutely." Kerry smiled. "I don't think they have daytime ghost tours, so let's stick to stuffed animals, tacky beads and beignets today." She suggested. "In fact, can you show me where you got them?"

"Sure. And I found this." Dar handed over a pamphlet.

"Boos and Booze tour?" Kerry started laughing. "Of the French Quarter. You really want to do that, hon? Ghosts more interesting now?"

Dar grinned, and shrugged "Yeah, maybe." She admitted. "I'm kind of wondering. As in, how is that possible?" She mused. "Is it an energy anomaly?"

"You're looking for a logical explanation for ghosts?" Kerry smiled, watching her partner nod. "Okay, Boos! And Booze it is." She checked the number, then dialed it on her phone. "My treat."

Dar rocked back and forth a little in contentment. Kerry had woken up without her headache, and they'd enjoyed a shower together using the shower attachment in the charmingly old fashioned tub installed

bathroom. "I think I want to go find a little protein with my funnel cakes." She said, as Kerry hung up.
"Shall we?"

"Absolutely my little ghost busting chickadee." Kerry finished her coffee and got up, extending her hand.
"Come. Let's go find out what the future has in store for us." She said. "And get you some bacon."

"Mm. Bacon." Dar joined her and they went inside, closing the doors behind them, the chair Dar had been sitting in continuing to gently rock.

**

They strolled along the street in the sunshine, having consumed a few more beignets and then ducked into the street market to wrangle a baguette and some cheese they shared while strolling along to Jackson Square where a crowd was already gathering.

"Beautiful day." Kerry commented, peering along the wrought iron fence they were walking by. "Oh look, Dar. Artists."

Obligingly, Dar looked. "If we get a picture of us done by someone other than my mother, you get to explain it to her." She said promptly. "Since we keep saying no."

Kerry put her hands behind her back and clasped them. "Good point."

Dar chuckled.

"But we can get one of New Orleans." She pointed. "See? Isn't that pretty? It's the parade."

Dar willingly followed her over to the artist, who had several examples of his art propped up against the fence. She wandered down the row as her partner bargained for the piece, enjoying the antics of a street performer who was juggling while riding a unicycle.

That took a lot of skill and balance and she appreciated that. She'd made one abortive attempt at unicycling herself way back when in college on a long weekend down in Key West, and even now all the years later, she winced at the twitch in her tail bone that well remembered that colossal fall.

"Hello dere, pretty lady."

Dar turned from watching the juggler to find a man at a folding table, covered in a tie dye cloth straight from Haight Ashbury. He was reviewing some tarot cards, and watching her with one bright, deep hazel eye, the other covered in a weathered patch.

"Hi." Dar responded, after a brief pause. "Are you a fortune teller?"

"Oh my no." The man smiled at her. He was probably in his sixties, with curly gray hair, and a spare frame. "Sounds so carnival, does it not? Should I have a monkey, then, and man in the front calling people into the sideshow?"

Dar folded her arms over her chest. "Didn't mean that as an insult." She said. "What do you call yourself then?"

"I call myself Charles." The man's eyes twinkled. "And you, pretty lady?"

Dar allowed herself to be charmed, and drawn in. "Dar."

"Now that's a very unusual name." Charles said, sorting the cards together and putting them away. "Is this your first time here in the great N'awlins?"

"It is." Dar confirmed. "I thought I lived in the craziest place in the US until I saw this town. Impressive." She indicated the chair across from him. "Mind if I sit down?"

Charles's nose crinkled up in a surprising grin. "Usually I have to coax people to take a seat." He said.
"Please sit, Ms Dar." He cleared off the table in front of him and leaned his elbows on the table as she sat down, and they regarded each other. "What can I answer for you? Is there a question you want to ask me?"

Dar considered. "Tell me about this place." She indicated the city with a brief hand gesture. "Why is it so different? What's with all the ghost stories?"

He blinked.

"I've got some time, and cash." Dar added, with a twinkle of her own. "My wife's over there wrangling prices. I figure I can at least get some local information from something other than a tour pamphlet that'll be worth the price." She glanced at a passing cart. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Ms Dar, I do not know what our conversation will be leading to, but I will surely use my professional skills to predict I will be having a very good time." Charles laughed. "And I would love a drink. It's been a thirsty morning already."

Dar pinned the cart pusher with a direct blue gaze, and pointed, then raise two fingers. "Do you use those cards to tell people what's going to happen to them?" She asked, as the vendor hurried over. "Or, what they want you to tell them about what's going to happen to them?"

Charles studied her while she paid for the drinks, and when she turned back around he was smiling. "Ms Dar, you are an old soul." He said, briefly. "I don't see too many of those round here these days."

"What does that mean?" Dar settled in to listen, curling her hands around the cup.

"What does that mean." The man mused. "Sometime you all meet people, talk to people, and they're all on the surface. They ain't been around, see what I'm saying?"

Dar let her chin rest on her fist. "Not really... well.. " She thought about the question, and Charles gave her space to do that. "Hard to say." She finally concluded. "My life mostly puts me in a space with high achievers."

"Not about smarts." Charles said. "Can be the most no count, no school, depressed and raised in a trailer person but they got a story in them. They got practice at this life thing."

" You talking about reincarnation?" Dar asked, curiously.

"Am I?" The man said. "Could be. Don't cotton much to that, I more look to the old ways, where earth's part of you, you're part of earth. But when I say I see an old soul, I mean there's a piece of the earth's history there in you."

That didn't really make sense to Dar, but she kept quiet, waiting to see what else would be forthcoming. She certainly didn't feel like she had any old knowledge in her.

"So anyway, to your question." Charles said. "Na'wlins is an old place. Old place, and been a place full of hurting, and bloodletting from all way back." He looked up at her. "Know what that's about?"

"My daddy's people are from east Alabama." Dar said, then paused.

Charles nodded. "See that?" He said. "You got history in you. Go through places like that and the trees weep from it."

"They've been there a long time." Dar allowed.

He took a sip from the drink and put it down. "N'awlins is like that too. Been a lot of heartache in these parts. Wars. Slaves. Pirates. Drowning. Magic." He waited for her to react, but the angular, intent face across from him remained still. "Black magic. Things them people being put on used to make their lives a little less hell."

"Hmph." Dar grunted. "A way for them to take a piece of themselves back?"

Charles smiled. "Yes, Ms. Dar. When you ain't got no power, you make your own."

"That I get." Dar said.

"So you have all this emotion." He said. "All this misery, and so they say, it sticks. Them people who didn't have joy in their lives, they stay around after, to find it." He gestured around him. "It's a pretty place, no?"

"It is." Dar smiled.

"Some people say, all them who die here, stay here, cause Heaven ain't no better." Charles smiled back.
"But it's true that you walk here, you look round a corner, behind a tree, up in a window... you see things."
He laced his fingers, his single eye watching her. "Foggy mornings walking here, I see things."

Dar caught sight from the corner of her eye of Kerry's distinctive little swagger heading her way. "You ever been to an old battlefield?" She asked him. "Valley Forge, or Antietam, or one of those?"

"This here square was named for Andrew Jackson. He and a bunch of men done beat the British not far off. War been here, but not so it's like what you mean." Charles answered, slowly. "You been?"

"I have." Dar said. "And a lot of people say they feel an atmosphere there. But I always wondered how much of that was because they did, and how much of that was because they expected to, because they knew what happened there. My college did a psychological study of that."

He cocked his head. "And?"

Dar shrugged, lifting her hands. "I wasn't included. I knew. I'm from a military family." She replied honestly. "But I never felt anything there."

"So Ms. Dar, you're a skeptic." Charles said, after a brief silence. "That what you're saying?"

Was she? "I live in a very rational world." Dar said, sounding even to herself slightly apologetic. "I'm an engineer in the technology space. Logic comes with the territory."

"Whose territory?" Kerry arrived at her side, and gave Charles a grin. "Hello." She draped a hand on Dar's shoulder. "They're sending that picture home for us."

"Well, hello there." Charles half rose, and bowed. "Please join us, ma'am." He glanced at Dar. "Is this your lady?"

"This is Kerry." Dar looked up at her. "Charles and I were just talking about why there are so many supposed spooks here." She informed her partner as she took a seat.

"Did you tell him about your ghost last night?" Kerry asked, pressing her knee up next to Dar's. "Maybe he knows about it."

Charles sat back down, looking from one of them to the other, his brows contracting. "Does Ms Kerry live in your rational world, Ms. Dar? This is coming along to be very interesting."

Dar sighed. "There's always exceptions."

"Maybe we should ask him about our thing." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "I think that's an exception too."

**

Charles, it turned out, knew a guy. Or more to the point, knew a woman who he said would give them their money's worth in terms of getting their fortunes told.

They were headed across Jackson Square, down one of the side streets that led to it and past a big, and bustling market to a small store that had a sign plastered simply with a star bisected hand and a window fully covered with dusty red drapes.

"Right this way ladies." Charles pushed the door open and went inside, holding it for them to follow him.
"Hallo, Marie!"

Kerry paused inside the door and looked around, her eyes widening. "Wow." She uttered. The inside of the very small storefront was cluttered in the extreme, and the ceiling was hung with what looked like bird and bat wings and bones. "Watch your head, hon."

"No kidding." Dar was ducking, her own eyes somewhat wider and rounder than normal.

"Hallo, Charles." A tiny woman in a purple crinoline dress came out from a back room, wiping her lips.
"Who you got here, eh?"

Dar was immediately distracted by a skull mounted on a tall umbrella as a handle.

"These here nice ladies stopped and passed the time of day with me over by the square, and they're interested in having their fortunes told." Charles said. "You busy?"

"Oh, yes. Can't you see all the people in here lined up waiting?" Marie chuckled. "Too many people at too many parties last night for sure." She turned her eyes to Kerry. "Hello there."

"Hi." Kerry edged closer. Marie had a relatively high table with a stool padded with worn denim behind it, and two more on the other side. She glanced up at the ceiling. "Are those bird bones?"

Marie slipped onto her stool. She had, now that she'd entered the lamp light, a lined and weathered face, indeterminate tan to brown shaded and silver gray hair that was pulled back in a tight bun with a pair of flying monkey chopsticks holding it in place. "They're all sorts of things." She said. "I pick things up when I walk around, you know? Its like they're looking for homes, so I bring them here."

Kerry seated herself on one of the stools. "I pick up rocks when I walk." She admitted. "They remind me of places and times, is that the same kind of thing?"

Dar kept her head ducked to one side as she examined the book case that lined the entire short length of the side of the shop. The books were varied and old, all hardback, some with barely legible titles in a number of different languages. There was a scent of dust and aging paper that wafted out from them, lit by a candle sconce flickering gently nearby.

"Oh, something like that." Marie agreed. "Charles, there's some coffee in the back if you want some."

Charles smiled, and availed himself of the offer, disappearing behind the thick bead curtain that separated the front of the shop from the area behind.

"So what's your name?" Marie asked.

"Kerry." Kerry responded, hooking her feet around the stool's supports and resting her arm on one knee.
"Charles said you were a fortune teller."

"Oh, something like." Marie said, with a brief grin. "Do you want your fortune told, Kerry? You looking for riches or gold, or a sugar daddy?"

Behind her, Dar chuckled, while examining a round crystal.

"None of the above, actually." Kerry said. "I've got everything in the world I need."

The old woman studied her. "Yes, you know you seem like that." Marie said, after a pause. "You are someone who has their hearts desire. But it was not always so."

Kerry felt a faint shiver. "No, that's true." She said, slowly. "Took me a while to find what I was looking for."

"Took me about thirty seconds." Dar commented from her idle browsing. "Came around the corner, stopped in the doorway, done deal."

"Dar." Her partner gave her an affectionate look. "C'mere and pay attention to my fortune."

Dar put down the rock she had been examining and walked the few steps over, seating herself on the second stool and regarding Marie benignly.

"Marie, this is Dar." Kerry said. "Dar isn't really into palm reading and that sort of thing. She's humoring me."

Marie studied the taller woman, glancing briefly into Dar's pale, intense eyes. "No, I don't figure that." She said, with a smile. "You're someone who makes their own future, and needs no telling from me." She wagged a finger at her. "Not often someone brings a crusader into Marie's store, that's for sure."

"I'm no crusader." Dar chuckled.

"Of course you are." Kerry disagreed. "We were just talking about that, Dar. A creepy ghost shows up on our balcony and what happens? Do you scream?"

Dar cleared her throat.

Marie watched them with interest. "So you've seen one of our honored guests, have you? Where is that, you said on the balcony?"

"Of our hotel. The Sonesta." Kerry agreed. "I woke up last night to find my modest friend here facing off against some ghoul outside scaring him off." She put a hand on Dar's leg, seeing the blush even through her tan. "I freak out about them, Dar just wants to kick their asses."

"That true?" Marie studied Dar. "You know, the departed ain't something you really want to mess with."

Dar cleared her throat again. "I don't want to mess with them. Assuming they exist. But they also don't scare me, and I'm not going to let them scare her."

"See, I told you, Marie." Charles had reappeared in the doorway, with a steaming cup. "That's an old soul you got there." He came over and took the last stool at the table. "Most times, the departed don't take much interest in the living, you know? They got other things to do. Some of them replay their ends, over and over, some of them don't realize they're gone, so they keep trying to get done whatever they had to do when they died."

"That's kind of hard for me to wrap my head around." Kerry admitted. "I had a pretty conservative upbringing."

"You brought up in the church, that what you mean?" Marie smiled. "My daddy was a preacher, here in N'awlins. Didn't stop him from consorting with the spirits. He used to hire out for exorcisms. Made some good money at it."

Kerry blinked at her. "Exorcisms?"

"Sure." The old woman said. "You got people who come here, and buy them a house, you see? Old houses, and they like that, cause they're pretty. But they find out there's creaks and bangs, and stuff moving round, and hearing voices, so they call up the local priest, and he takes care of all that."

"Really?" Dar asked.

"Honey, I seen things. I done grew up in this town, and things I seen, you can believe or not believe but I don't doubt." Marie said, firmly. "You said yourself, you saw something last night. You know what it was?"

Dar considered the question seriously. "No, I don't know. But it looked like a tall male figure, wearing an old style hat, and a trench coat." She said. "Couldn't see a face, just the outline." She paused. "I thought it was someone trying to break in our room at first."

"Ah huh." Marie frowned. "You sure it wasn't?"

"If it was, he jumped off the balcony after I went to the window." Dar replied. "There was a big crack of thunder and lightning, blinded me a little, then he was gone."

Marie and Charles exchanged looks. "They got some ghosts up at that Sonesta, but the ones I heard, ain't like that one." Charles said, slowly. "They got the library ghost, and the butler one, walks up and down those big stairs they do have, and then the cook what done hung himself in the kitchen. They don't like to be in that kitchen after hours."

Marie nodded. "That tall one, that sounds new." She said.

"Is it possible it was just imagination?" Kerry asked. "We took that night ghost tour earlier in the night."

"Could be." Marie said. "You all see anything on the tour? Some of that, you know, ain't all together on the up and up." Her eyes twinkled a little. "We got a living to make, after all."

Charles chuckled. "That rooftop woman, and then do have a projection they do in the garden."

"That's fake?" Kerry's eyes widened. "Really?"

Dar patted her leg, and grinned. "There ya go, babe. I figured there was a logical answer."

Kerry felt, suddenly, like she'd been cheated. "Wow. That's a bummer." She said. "So I guess they were probably blowing cold air down your neck from that alley." She looked chagrined. "But I don't get it.. you said before that ghosts were real, and that New Orleans was full of them. Why would they need to fake it?"

"Well now.." Charles put his cup down.

"Because ghosts don't perform on schedule." Dar said. "And those tours depend on people seeing them."

Marie lifted her hands and put them back down. "All those stories have a grain of truth, see." She said. "But like your crusader friend here says, you can't depend on them. Those tour companies, they need consistent visions so that people get on the Internet.. you know the Internet?"

Both Dar and Kerry chuckled. "We're familiar with it." Dar said. "But I get it. People see those things, and take pictures and that kind of thing, and the word spreads." She added. "Good marketing."

"Yes." Marie said. "But this thing you saw? That's new to me. You?" She looked at Charles.

"Never heard of that one." He agreed. "So what you say, Marie? You going to tell these ladies their fortunes?"

Marie studied them thoughtfully in silence. "I don't think I can." She said. "I think you and I could lead them to some beautiful place for lunch, but when I look to see what road these two are taking, I don't see anything at all."

Kerry felt a weird prickle go down her spine, and she felt Dar's thigh twitch under her fingers. "Is that good or bad?" She finally asked.

"For me? Terrible." Marie laughed. "Honey please don't be telling everyone I said that. I got my reputation to think of." She sobered, and paused briefly. "But you? I talk to people and I kind of guess where they're going, if you know what I mean. What they said, what they do, what they want.. when people come to ask for their fortune, they want what they want, you know?"

Dar nodded. "Yeah."

"That's what she asked me." Charles said. "If I told people their future, or what they wanted their future to be."

"Mm but people who go chasing off big scary ghosts? I don't know where to begin to tell you what you're going to get yourselves into." Marie said. "So what about that lunch? I got me a place you can get the best fried chicken in New Orleans. That do you?"

"Fried chicken? Always." Dar amiably agreed. "Let's go."

Kerry slid off the stool, with a strong sense that the two fortune tellers were diverting their attention away from the arcane. She could tell they were both a little uneasy with her and Dar, and as she followed them out the door, she also had the sense that someone inside the store was still watching them.

Or maybe it was just her imagination again.

**

"Well." Kerry sucked on a bit of sugar candy as they walked down the sidewalk back towards Jackson Square. "That was, for sure, the best fried chicken I've ever had."

"For sure." Dar agreed wholeheartedly. "And I'm willing to bet I've had more of it than you have."

"Probably true." Kerry agreed. "Wow, it was good." She felt pleasantly stuffed, and equally pleasantly surprised at the southern style sides that even seemed new to her partner. "I've got to try making that corn bread."

"You can try any of that on me any time you want." Dar said. "So, more shopping then back to the hotel to get ready for our Boos and Booze tour?"

Kerry snickered. "Now that I know it's all fake, I'm going to have a much better time." She admitted. "That was fun, Dar. I'm glad we ran into those two. Except it was kind of weird that they just decided to go to lunch with us and left off all the fortune stuff."

"Did we freak them out?" Dar wondered. "Hey, want a cup of coffee?" She pointed. "There's a cafe, and I think there's a parade coming." She pointed down a side street, where the sounds of music were suddenly loud and present.

"Mm. I see cheap plastic beads in my future." Kerry contentedly followed her over to the cafe, mounting the steps and taking a small table off to one side. "Have I told you how much fun I'm having at our Valentine's day celebration? I'm going to have to work my butt off to match this next year."

She sprawled in a chair, glancing around at the rapidly filling up cafe as others heard the approach of the parade and decided to get a good spot to watch it from. "I think you freaked them out." She said, after the waiter left with their order. "With all that old soul stuff. What did you think about that?"

Dar leaned back in her chair and hiked one boot up onto her opposite knee. "I don't know. I'm not sure what that was about. I don't feel like an old anything right now." She rolled her head to one side and gave her partner a grin. "Didn't make sense to me. I think they were trying to tie that into reincarnation, but I don't think I've been here before."

"Mm." Kerry considered that, as she watched a young couple at the next table sharing a kiss. The other onlookers watched with wry bemusement, but she wondered if that would still be the case if she and Dar were to copy them. "I don't feel like I've been here before either.. " She mused. "Well, except for when I met you."

"Me?"

Kerry nodded. "Remember when we met, we were racking our brains to figure out where we knew each other from?" She reached over and curled her fingers over Dar's. "But we never could, because we never had met." She watched Dar's pale eyes intently study her. "But when I met you, I felt like I'd always known you."

The parade was getting closer and louder, and the street was filling with watchers. Dar's gaze went internal for a few minutes, until the waiter came back with their cafe au laits accompanied by small crunchy biscuits She nodded absently, then returned her attention to Kerry. "Yeah, maybe." She conceded. "I definitely felt a connection to you. Always have."

Her phone rang, and she pulled it out and answered it, holding her other hand over her ear, as she rolled her eyes at Kerry. "Yeah, I'm here. It's loud. Sorry about that."

Kerry leaned back and watched the parade, the crowd near the street all cheering and reaching towards the floats, who were again tossing things at them with cheerful abandon. Rather than stand up and attract them, she settled for watching the street side participants instead as she listened with one ear to Dar's conversation.

"Alastair, they're out of their minds." Dar spoke, after a long period of listening. "There is no way I'm going to agree with that, much less the client. Why should we? You know perfectly well how I got involved in that, hell, Hamilton was there."

She listened again. "They did? Okay, well, then they're more brainless than I figured." She shook her head, and glanced at Kerry. "They fired Hamilton."

Kerry wasn't surprised to hear it. After the last round between the Louisiana lawyer and ILS she'd figured him for short term. "Is he coming here for Mardi Gras? Maybe we can have dinner with him."

Dar paused in mid word, and her eyes twinkled. "Good point. Is he coming to visit the family? He know we're here?" She grinned. "I'll text him. Anyway, Alastair, they need to just move on. They probably don't want any part of it anyway, it could get a little squirmy for them from a publicity standpoint."

She listened for a minute. "Because the contract involves domestic surveillance." She said. "That enough for you?"

Kerry could hear the exasperated sound coming from the phone. "Didn't he know that?" She frowned. "Have him tell them from me that as the ex VP of operations, I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole."

"That's just what Kerry just said." Dar said into the phone. "Or better yet, have your friend the vice president explain it to them, because I saw that memo about who could or couldn't bid. Doesn't he owe you one?"

"Poor Alastair. Isn't he retired yet?" Kerry sipped the rich, fragrant coffee.

"Exactly." Dar said. "It's a contract based on delivery objectives, they're not funding anything. I just gave them a framework and brought on some programmers. I don't even know how much margin its even going to end up having."

"You sound so sexy when you talk like that." Kerry commented.

"They did?" Dar sounded surprised. She looked back at Kerry. "Mariana and Duks resigned." She told her. "That's why Alastair's still around."

"Poor Alastair." Kerry repeated, shaking her head. "Maybe they'll open their own accounting and HR firm and we can outsource to them." She winked at her partner. "Hey, didn't you say Alastair was a pilot? He want to come be our private plane guy?"

"Are you listening to this?" Dar started laughing. "Kerry's got a business plan for everyone." She gave her a fond look. "I don't think Alastair wants to move to Miami, hon."

"Pfft." Kerry saw another float heading their way and she stood up and went to the rail to see better. "Oh wow. Look at those costumes."

Dar leaned back and admired her partners profile. "So anyway." She said. "I'm sorry it's such a Mongolian, Alastair. Seriously, anything I can do to help?"

"Well Dar." Her ex boss sighed. "Call me crazy, but I did think of suggesting they contract you as a consultant."

"Oh fuck." Dar clapped her hand over her eyes. "Kill me now."

"No, listen." Alastair chuckled. "It's really not so funny, because the problem is these people just don't know what to do. They leaned for so long on you, and probably me a little, that they're striking out in panic now, Dar. If I could get you to come in and talk to them, maybe that'll help."

"How? So I can tell them what to do and they can throw their cobalt blue ceramic cups of piss and vinegar at me?" Dar asked. "Alastair, I've got my own company to run here."

"Whooo!" Kerry snagged a tangle of beads out of the air, then grinned as one of the men on the float hopped off and danced through the crowd, ducking and weaving as people thrust their hands out to him begging for the trinkets he carried.

"Well, that's the point, Dar." Alastair said, placidly. "You start a company, and before the paint's dry on your business card it's a success. Remember what we said, about them figuring out how much of ILS's success was you?"

"Oh for Pete's sake. I'm just one person." Dar sighed. "Ker, watch out!"

Kerry had her thighs braced against the railing, and was leaning over as the float runner danced over to her and leaped up, handing her a coconut as he grabbed onto the rail to hold himself in place for a moment. "Thanks!" Kerry grinned at him, pulling herself back.

"I know you're just one person, Dar, but you made a difference, and maybe, if you talk to these guys, they'll figure out how to move along instead of sitting there stewing, and plotting to send lawyers after you." Alastair said. "Worth a try?"

Dar sighed. "Sure." She shrugged. "You're the one suggesting it and in the line of fire."

"Atta girl."

"Anyway, let me go grab hold of Kerry's belt before she ends up being pulled onto a parade float." Dar said. "Whatever you want to do, Alastair, I'm good with it. Just don't promise I'll come back to work there."

"Will do, lady. Have fun." Alastair sounded pleased with himself. "Talk to you next week, and if you see Ham, buy him a bourbon on the rocks for me will ya?"

"Will do." Dar said. "Later." She closed the phone and got up, tucking her fingers into the back of Kerry's jean waistband as she leaned over to talk to the still hanging float man. "Complications, Ker."

"They'll wait for Monday." Kerry handed her the coconut. "Say hi to the Zulu folks. They like to party."

Dar smiled and toasted the man with the coconut, getting a waggle of his eyebrows and a stuck out tongue in response. "I guess it'll wait for Monday." She agreed. "Cheers!"

**

Several hours later it was late, and they were back in the hotel, and free of beads and bangles and mostly drunken tourists that had accompanied them on their tour.

"That was way more Booze than Boos." Dar was flat on her back, regarding the slowly circling ceiling fan. "Way funnier than last night though." She admitted. "That guide was hilarious."

"He was. My stomach still hurts from laughing." Kerry responded. "That one story about that pub owner who told everyone he heard voices telling him to tap the kegs...."

Dar chuckled.

"So I didn't see any ghosts. Did you?" Kerry emerged from the bathroom and joined Dar on the bed, squirming over and using her partner as a pillow. "Like, not even one."

"Nope." Dar stretched her body out, then relaxed again, and closed her eyes. "Hungry?"

"Oh no." Kerry shook her head. "I'm still full from lunch."

"Good. Me too." Her partner agreed. "Maybe later I'll be up for ice cream."

Kerry chuckled. "Dar, I've never heard you not be up for ice cream regardless of what we've eaten."

"No, that's true." Her partner admitted. "But they had cappuccino mint chip hand churned on the menu and it caught my eye."

"Uh huh." She gave Dar an indulgent look. "Should I get an ice cream churn for the cabin?"

Dar's brows hiked up and she returned the look with interest. "We can get one that actual real people can use, not chefs?"

"Mmhmm."

"Hot damn."

"Done deal. It's healthier to use all fresh ingredients anyway." Kerry said, virtuously, glancing up and seeing the devastatingly droll look had to laugh. "Well, that's the theory."

"The front desk said they could get us tickets to some ball somewhere. You interested?" Dar listened to the derisive snort in response and smiled. "Okay, so we've had our fortunes not told, been on two ghost tours, seen parades, have throws from at least.. I think five different krewes, eaten the best fried chicken on earth and have had around a half ton of beings. What next?"

"You forgot the picture I bought." Kerry stifled a yawn and snuggled closer, wrapping her arm around Dar's. "How about we just hang out here together and listen to the music from outside."

Dar stretched out her other hand and began scratching Kerry's neck gently, moving along her scalp as she squirmed in pleasure. "That sounds really good to me. We can chill out on our balcony too." She smiled, as she felt Kerry's breath warm the skin on her stomach through her shirt. "Or we could just lay here."

"We could do that."

Dar gave her a hug. "You're so easy."

"I love you." Kerry said, simply.

Dar lifted her head a little and peered down at her. "I love you too." She said. "And I think this is a completely appropriate discussion for Valentines Day, don't you?"

"You bet." Kerry sighed contentedly. "You know what's cool too? That we're both here, and not having to worry about anything or anyone saying anything because we're both here."

"Did they ever do that?" Dar mused. "Not after the first year or two, right? No one cared after that, did they?"

Kerry pondered that for a minute. "Well, I cared I guess." She admitted. "I always was thinking about what people would think if both of us took off at the same time. Which doesn't really make sense now that I'm hearing myself say that, but I think there always was a little bit of guilt there for me. "

"You mean, how you got the job?" Dar asked.

Kerry nodded. "Even though you told me a thousand times." She gazed up at her partner. "I'd been in that spotlight too long."

Dar nodded. "Yeah, I know. When I actually pressed all the buttons to hire you, and sent you that email, I thought about that."

"You did?"

"For about five seconds." Dar grinned sheepishly. "I knew you'd be rock star at the job, so that never bothered me, but I also knew if we ended up where I thought we would it was going to be a little awkward."

Kerry smiled in response. "I remember being in a meeting one day, after we'd started sleeping with each other and I swear I was convinced everyone was both staring at us, and knew." She mused. "Then I realized that everyone was staring at us and they probably did know because we were wearing each other's necklaces since we'd gotten up late that morning and just grabbed and ran."

Dar started laughing silently, shaking Kerry a little.

"And then, I kinda did stop caring." Kerry mock sighed. "I said, what the hell, Kerrison. If they're going to think that then just thank God it's true."

Dar was still laughing. "I remember that day." She got out. "I realized it when I went to the bathroom and I was washing my hands and looked up into the mirror. Should have seen my face. I felt like such a goofball."

Kerry enjoyed the low, musical sound of Dar's laughter. She had remembered the day too, because Dar had ended up coming into her office and sprawling onto her desk pointing at her throat in eloquent silence.

Too funny. "So, I do love you." She slid Dar's shirt up and then nipped her on her navel. "Not only do I love you, but I love being in love with you. It's like Christmas every single day."

Dar folded herself around Kerry and hugged her. "My birthday everyday." She exhaled in contentment. "Do you know how nice it is to know that I don't have to worry about half the IT planet going down? I never realized what a drag that was until now."

"Were you reading my mind?" Kerry rested her cheek against the soft skin on her partner's stomach. "I was just thinking that before."

"Want to dance?" Dar asked incongruously, as the music got louder outside.

"Not really." Kerry traced a light line down Dar's skin. "I'm just having fun laying here and messing with you."

"Okay."

"You could sing for me."

"I could. But I don't know the words to whatever that is they're playing and I can't compete with the volume." Dar responded, in a practical tone. "Want to go find a pool and swim in it?"

"Hm."

"Just want to lay here and mess with me?"

"Yup."

That was okay with Dar. They'd gotten up early, after a long night, and spent the day running around. There were some concerts on tap for the next afternoon and a carriage ride planned and it felt good to just chill out and enjoy the rich, sexy sound of the music and let her mind drift.

Kerry felt Dar's breathing even out and slow after about ten minutes of their just quietly laying there. She watched the tension in her body go slack, and she hesitated, not wanting to wake Dar out of sleep when she'd just slipped into it.

Moving would. So she let the tension run out her, and settled down to wait until she was sure her pillow was deeply asleep before shifting.

It was very peaceful to lay still, watching the easy rise and fall of Dar's chest as the sounds outside started to fade off a little. She could hear people laughing, and the clink of glass and she shifted her gaze to look out the window at their balcony.

It was empty, just the backs of the chairs visible. Beyond that, she could see the splash of light from the street, and the outline of leaves from the trees in front of the hotel, moving in the breeze as she watched.

It was windy outside. She could see the outside shutters moving too, and then, as she lay there, she saw the rocking chair outside moving gently as well.

Was that the breeze? Kerry watched the chair, feeling her heart rate pick up a trifle. The motion was regular and casual, just as if someone was sitting in the seat and enjoying the view.

So maybe it was the wind. She slowly let a long held breath out, watching that motion, which remained steady, despite the variable breeze she could see outside in the movement of the trees.

"Hey." Dar's voice broke the silence, making Kerry jump. "What's up?"

"Urf." Kerry put her head back down. "I was trying not to wake you up." She muttered. "But I saw that chair out there moving and it was giving me the creeps."

Dar lifted her head slightly. "The rocking chair?" She asked.

"Yeah."

Dar studied it. Then she hiked herself up on her elbows, waiting for Kerry to lift up off her before she swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. "I'll check it out." She rubbed her eyes. "Bleah.. I was just heading into a dream."

"I know. Sorry about that." Kerry patted her hip. "I saw you twitching a little." She got out of bed and followed her partner across the floor over to the balcony, putting her hand on Dar's back as she opened one half of the French doors and looked out.

The chair stopped rocking.

Kerry eased her head around Dar's shoulder and looked at her.

Dar regarded the piece of furniture pensively. She walked out and circled the chair, putting her hand on the back of it and giving it a tentative push. It rocked back and forth twice or three times, and then settled down to a mild creaking. Dar paused, and then she half shrugged and sat down in it, putting her hands on the chair arms.

Kerry sat down in the regular chair next to her. "I was really expecting that chair to squeal when you sat on it."

"So was I." Dar admitted frankly. "But this is our porch, for the time being and I'm not going to surrender it to a moving chair. " She leaned back, hiking one knee up and folding her hands around it. "So now that I'm wide awake again, how about some ice cream?"

"Absolutely." Kerry leaned over and kissed her shoulder. Then she got up and went back inside, picking up the room service menu and studying its possibilities.

**

The next evening, after a long day of parade and concert watching and a distinct lack of any weird stuff or creepies, Dar and Kerry were seated at a table on the outside deck of a Mississippi river paddle wheel steamer cruising slowly past the dockside festivities as they waited for dinner.

"This is nice." Kerry leaned back and regarded the scene with a smile. "Beautiful way to end up our Valentines day celebration."

"It is." Dar was sipping at a glass cautiously. "Holy crap." She put the drink down. "You could take the paint off the hood of my new truck with that."

Kerry chuckled. It was a bit chilly on the water, but she had a pair of heavy jeans on, and a thick woven pullover on, and she was comfortable out on the deck. Dar had a newly bought hoodie encasing her tall form, and neither of them really fit into the more formally dressed couples around them.

Her mother would have been completely scandalized, and she actually could not have cared less. The seating hostess hadn't batted an eye either, and she was glad they'd opted for the cruise rather than one or the other of the balls the concierge had tried to entice the with again.

Tomorrow morning they would fly home, and probably go into the office in the afternoon. She took a sip of her own drink, and luxuriated in the sense of freedom. She hadn't scheduled anything for Monday, and if they were in the mood when they landed, they could just go home and stay there if they wanted.

"Too bad Hamilton's up in Boston." Dar said. "Since it's snowing there. But I'm glad he suggested this." She indicated the cruise. "I could picture him on this, in his tux, with a mint julep."

"I'm kind of surprised they fired him, but kinda not." Kerry responded, giving their waitress a smile as she put down two bowls of golden colored gumbo down in front of them. "Those guys are in a place where they don't want to be told what to do."

Dar was munching thoughtfully on a spoonful of the gumbo. She swallowed, and took a sip of her drink. "Hope so. Then they'll tell Alastair to get lost when he suggests I talk to them and he can finally get loose of the place."

"Oo." Kerry wiped her lips. "I've got to figure out how to make this. It's awesome." She poked around in the bowl. "Are those shrimp?"

"Crawdads." Dar supplied knowledgeably. "Also known as mud bugs." She watched Kerry's eyes lift and pin her. "Or crayfish." Her eyes twinkled.

"Ah." Kerry then recognized the animals. "Same as we had at the Zydeco festival last year?"

"Right, but just the tails."

They were cruising along the river, right now passing a wooded section that came right down into the water giving the impression that the trees were marching right down the bank and under the surface. They were outlined in the moonlight and as Kerry looked at them, she suddenly thought she saw something moving.

Then she was sure she did, a human shaped figure appearing at the water's edge between the trees, going into the river up to their knees. "Dar..."

"I see him."

Kerry continued spooning her gumbo into her mouth as she watched the shadowy form. He appeared to be a black man, of middle height, dressed in pants, rubber boots, a collarless shirt and a ragged denim jacket. She could see the appearance of suspenders under it all, and he stood with a long walking stick propped in the water in front of him that he was leaning against.

There were no features to his face, but his dark skin, and the night illumination could just be obscuring them. Then she recalled what river she was on, and her school reading and smiled faintly. "Could be Jim from Huckleberry Finn, huh?"

"Could be." Dar agreed. "Probably some guy they pay to dress up like that and give the tourists a thrill." She remarked. "Coincidence he shows up right when the boat gets there."

"Cynical."

"Realistic." Dar's blue eyes twinkled at her, as she looked up across the table. "C'mon Ker, you heard those guys."

True. Kerry sat back as she finished her gumbo and watched the bank as it ambled past, the figure on it turning its head to follow the boat as it went past. So Dar was probably right, and he was probably a bit of window dressing. She lifted her hand and waved at him, and the figure tilted its head and looked back at her.

There were eyes there, she was sure of it. But they seemed too large, and too luminous. She felt a shiver go down her back and then the trees were between them, and she could no longer see the figure on the bank.

"Maybe fake, but sorta creepy." She folded her hands, as the waitress removed the bowls and set down their main courses.

"That could sort of describe Mardi Gras." Dar investigated her plate. "You still seeing ghosts, Ker?"

Kerry wrinkled up her nose in reaction.

"I think the whole idea of ghosts is pretty sad." Her partner continued, carefully separating her shrimp from her grits.

"Sad?"

Dar consumed a few bites. "Yeah." She eventually responded. "The whole idea is, if you subscribe to an existence after death that you go on to some other place. Do something else, whatever. But ghosts, if you agree with the idea, are stuck here."

Oh. "Yes, like those stories they told us the other night." Kerry agreed. "They're looking for something, or whatever." She thought about that as she slowly detached forkfuls of her blackened catfish. "Just left behind." She paused. "You're right. That is sad."

"Not something I'd ever want to have happen to me, you know?" Dar said. "I'd rather not have anything happen than that."

Kerry stopped chewing and merely sat there for a moment, staring slightly past Dar's shoulder. She thought for a moment what it would be like to be separated for eternity from Dar and the food lost all its taste and appeal.

She put her fork down and sat back. "Boy so would I." She said, after a long pause. "I think I'm going to go throw up now."

Dar swallowed hastily, setting down her utensils and reaching across the table to clasp Kerry's hand. "Sorry, hon." She said, sincerely. "I didn't mean to get you crazy."

No, of course Dar hadn't. Kerry sniffled a little and lifted her free hand up to wipe her eyes and rub the bridge of her nose. "I just imagined what it would be like to be without you."

Dar got up and came around the table, crouching down at Kerry's side and putting her hand on her leg. "Totally dumbass of me, Ker." She watched her partner give her head a little shake. "Don't worry. There's nothing that's ever going to keep us apart, no matter where we are."

Kerry peeked down at her.

"I won't let that happen." Dar gave her a wry smile. "Ghosts or angels or dust, you won't ever be without me."

At the words, the sounds around them rushed back in, and the music struck up, and Kerry felt her body relax as some part of her understood the truth being spoken that had nothing to do with what had been said. She glanced around, feeling a little foolish as she saw the other diner's eyes quickly go elsewhere. "Thanks, sweetie." She managed a grin, patting Dar's hand. "Go finish your grits before they solidify into plaster."

Dar waited for a moment. "You okay?" She asked, head cocked slightly to one side.

"Yes." Kerry offered her a bit of catfish on her fork, which Dar accepted. "You knew just what to say."

"For once." Dar got up and went back to her chair, settling into it and returning her napkin to her lap. She looked up and past Kerry to find the people at the next table staring at her. "Is there a problem?"

"Only that people like you should keep their unnatural behavior behind doors." The man answered straightforwardly. "Not ruin other people's dinners with it."

Kerry took a breath to turn and answer, but Dar lazily lifted one finger and wagged it slightly at her and she subsided.

"Buddy." Dar said, in a tolerantly amused voice. "If you thought that was unnatural, you've got a lot to learn about life. Better get started on that before you try breeding." She shook her head and went back to her shrimp and grits, ignoring the continued stare.

The waitress came back. "How is everything ladies?" She asked, standing with apparent randomness between their table and the next. "Can I get you a glass of bubbly to wash that down?"

"Sure." Dar agreed. "Got any Cristal?"

The waitresses smile went from indulgent to dazzling in a flicker of an eye. "We do. A flute each?"

"Bring a bottle." Dar countered. "And two nice big glasses."

Kerry chuckled under her breath.

"Yes, ma'am." The waitress left with a cheerful wave, moving past the other table without a glance.

They were passing a brightly lit area and finally that drew the other people's attention and they were left in peace in their corner. Dar quickly consumed her grits, which had in fact started to stiffen in the cool night air. She'd already dismissed the jerk at the next table, but she could tell by the furrow in Kerry's brow that her partner hadn't.

Jerks were jerks. Dar didn't waste her time on them. "Chew, hon." She advised. "It's too good to waste." Kerry paused, then smiled and went back to her plate. After a minute, though, she picked up her gizmo and tapped on it briefly, reviewed the results, then texted Dar a message.

Dar fished her device out and regarded it, then looked at Kerry, her brows hiking. She watched her partner shrug, and reviewed the note again, before answering it. *What are the odds we'd end up sitting next to one of the heads of Aryan Nation?*

Kerry put her fork down and typed back. *About the same as him ended up sitting next to Roger Stuart's kid and a descendant of the American revolutionaries.*

Dar laughed. *Could be worse, could have been Pat Robertson.*

And that was also true. Kerry put her phone down and finished off her catfish, just in time to smile at the waitress who had returned with a gently off gassing bottle and glasses. "Can we get a couple of pieces of the strawberry shortcake too?"

"Absolutely." The waitress finished pouring their bubbly, and then tucked the bottle into an ice filled holder against the wall of the ship. "Be right back."

Dar lifted her glass, and they touched rims. "Happy Valentine's day, sweetheart." She said, slightly louder than needed for Kerry to hear her.

"Same to you, my love." Kerry responded with a wry grin, before taking a sip. "But boy, am I ever going to have to bust my ass to beat this the next time."

They toasted each other again, then settled back to wait for their cake, and watch as the boat slowed to give them a good view of the waterfront road and a big, boofy parade that was making its way along it.

**

"Good morning, Kerry." Mayte looked up from her desk as Kerry entered. "Did you have a good time in New Orleans?" She put down what she was working on and focused on her boss.

Kerry grinned, walking over and depositing a handful of beads and trinkets. "I had the best time." She said. "I've got some pictures I'll show you – it was a riot. What a party that is, between the music and the parades and everything. Nonstop craziness."

"I was watching the news on television last night, and they had some video and it looked amazing." Mayte replied. "I was hoping maybe we would see you but we didn't."

"Oh, we might have been in the crowd." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "We got to see some parades, and went on ghost tours, and did a riverboat dinner on the Mississippi... we had a great time." She exhaled in contentment. "We got home just after lunch yesterday – the flight was late, but that was the only issue we had."

"My mama said it looked like a crazy place." Mayte remarked. "But papa said he'd like to go there sometime, only maybe not so close to the carnival." She added placidly. "But I think he really wants to go because there are all those pretty ladies with no clothing."

"Hehehe." Kerry chortled under her breath. "Well, there were those there for sure. Some of them take their clothing off so that the people on the parade floats will throw favors at them. Dar threatened to take her shirt off to get me a stuffed monkey but I made her stop."

Mayte clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

Kerry removed the monkey from her pocket and wagged it. "She managed anyway."

"Am I being made fun of?" Dar entered, carrying her jacket over her shoulder. "You were the one hankering after that coconut."

"I would never make fun of you, hon." Kerry bumped her affectionately as she passed. "I was just telling Mayte how you got me my monkey."

Dar paused at the entrance to her office, looked over her shoulder, smiled and lifted one eyebrow in silent, yet sexy eloquence. Then she shook her head and chuckled, disappearing from view as she headed for her desk.

"Mm." Kerry muffled a halfway embarrassed grin, and moved along into her own space, tossing the monkey up and down. She went over to the built in shelves and plopped the memento onto one of them, next to a stuffed pig she'd won in a baseball toss at a street carnival a few months past.

She studied it, then retreated back to her desk and set her briefcase down, aware of Dar's low tones next door. She sat down and started up her desktop, pulling out the laptop and setting it down on the desk. While she waited, she brought up her calendar on her gizmo, reviewing her appointments as the machines booted.

Busy day.

She was glad they'd decided to go straight home instead of coming in the previous day though. It had been nice to settle back into their space, and play with Chino and Mocha, and deliver to Colleen the presents they'd bought for her. Even nicer to take a late night swim, and relax in the quiet of their home.

No loud bands, no drunk people, and no weird visions of potential ghosts around anywhere, not even around the Vanderbilt Mansion they'd passed on the way back to the condo.

She'd had no bad dreams, no spooky visitations, in fact she'd managed to mostly forget completely about any of the odd things they'd seen as she'd curled up in their water bed wrapped up in Dar's long arms.

So it was all good.

She put her gizmo down and stretched her body out, feeling the mild ache of well used muscles from their session at the gym that morning. A little longer, perhaps, than their usual but a natural reaction to having spent the preceding three days in nonstop indulgence.

Worth it though.

Kerry smiled, and opened her mail, then she removed the contents of her inbox and began to sort through them. Four contracts to review, three new hires, and a report from their real estate agent on possible expansion options in the area. She set aside the report and pulled the contracts over, picking up a two ended pen and focusing her attention on the text.

**

Dar wrapped her legs around the base of her chair, and leaned on the small worktable in the programmers area. Two of the database coders were across from her, and they had a structure diagram spread out between them.

"So, we started with the base platform, but you said you wanted it to be really flexible." The younger of the two was saying, a clean cut and dark haired Latino with broad shoulders and power lifter arms. "So we want to use relational, but we're going to need a big box, maybe one of the IBM P Series to run it."

"Okay, Fidel." Dar said. "Here's the problem with that. The customer's good for the cash, we know it, but this is a step by step delivery project. We'd have to shell out for the hardware, then hope they'll accept it."

"Why wouldn't they?" The other coder asked. "It's not like we're getting it second hand from North Korea. It's IBM."

"True." Dar agreed "But those guys always have tech lists. We need to see what's on theirs, or get their buy in on the box before I sign the check for it." She studied the diagram. "You always have to pre-buy to some extent, but you try to limit it wherever possible. It's a gamble otherwise."

Fidel propped his chin on his fist. He was restless and aggressive, and actually reminded Dar a little of herself, back in the day. “Maybe we can get IBM to give us one for a POC?” He said. “So the deal would be, if it goes, then we buy it, and they get paid.”

“Why would they do that?” Dar suppressed a smile.

“We tell them we’re going to buy a box from someone else. Like HP.” Fidel said. “I bet they would do it. They did on my last gig.”

Dar tapped her thumbs on the table. “If I’m going to play that game with them, might as well up the stakes” She said. “Let me see if I can get them to use us as a platform for whatever experimental they’ve got on tap.” She decided. “No sense in going for a mid range.”

Fidel looked surprised. “Experimental?”

“Like that Big Blue thing that beat the chess guy?” Mike, the second programmer spoke up again. “That would be cool.”

“Something like that.” Dar said. “I like the idea of leveraging them. But I’ll bring in the guys from Cray in too, and see if we can get a high level pissing match going.”

“Cray? Wow..” Mike said. “You think they’ll play ball with us?”

Dar smiled briefly. “We’ll find out.” She said. “It’s worth asking at any rate. Good ideas, people.”

Both men looked pleased at the acknowledgment. “Okay, so.” Fidel put his finger on the grid. “Then I can work out some three dimensional dynamics for the database structure. I’m going to need a crapload of table space.”

“And a bigger SAN.” Mike said. “We’re going to run out of LUNs.”

Dar sighed. “Yeah, Kerry’s already looking for more space for us.” She shook her head. “Mark’s working on bringing up a datacenter – I can’t put in any bigger systems until we get that done. Won’t fit in that server room.”

“No way.” Mike said. “This all going faster than you thought?” He asked Dar.

It was strange, yet refreshing, Dar thought, to have these people treat her so casually. Regardless of how long she’d worked with people at ILS, they never had regarded her the way these men were. “It shouldn’t have.” She admitted straightforwardly. “But yeah, I was expecting a little more runway.”

“Well, we can work out the structure on paper anyway.” Fidel said. “We could use that new coder they interviewed yesterday.”

“Kerry’s working on it.” Dar said. “Okay, thanks for the recap. I’ll go give the big boys a call.” She pushed herself to her feet. “Onto the next group.”

“Thanks, Dar.” Fidel collected the printouts. “Check back with you later.”

Dar headed across the programming bull pen over to the other side, where she could hear a spirited argument about search metrics. The overhead lights were out, flashes of neon impacted her eyes as she went past desks covered in wall hangings, and over in one corner she could see the outline of a bean bag chair.

It all made her smile.

“Hey Dar?”

She paused and looked around a cube wall. “Yes?”

“Can you check this code progression?”

Even more so. “Sure.” Dar pulled up a rolling stool and cracked her knuckles. “Lemme see.”

**

Kerry signed off on the contracts and dropped them into her out bin, then paused. "Well, since you made your admin a manager, who are you expecting to come pick that up, Kerrison?" She asked herself wryly. "Get out of that big company mentality and get off your ass and take them down instead."

She got up and retrieved the contracts, then made her way out through Mayte's space to the main corridor. She waved at Maria through her open door, then continued on to the suite of offices taken up by the accounting group. "Hey Col."

"Hey girl." Colleen was supervising the installation of a set of file cabinets, which lined the walls of the good sized storage area her department had been assigned.

Kerry came over to where she was standing. "Wasn't technology supposed to get rid of all this paper?"

Colleen laughed. "Oooo sure." She held her hand out. "When you bits and bytes types are 100 percent sure you can't lose them in the ether, we'll stop printing."

"Point made." Kerry handed her over the contracts. "Can you execute these, please? I'll stop by HR with the personnel requests for them."

Colleen studied the contracts, whistling softly under her breath. "Good gracious." She glanced up at Kerry, who returned the look with a wry, slightly sheepish grin. "I was telling my brother about this place. He thinks it's really that you and the tall dark and dauntless one have the touch."

Kerry cocked her head to one side. "What touch?"

Colleen rubbed her thumb against her first two fingers. "The money touch, or really, success." She said. "Most people would have been out there pounding the pavement handing out fliers looking for work. Not you guys."

"Oh, that won't keep up." Kerry shook her head. "We caught a break because of the government projects."

"And these?" Colleen held up the contracts.

"Well, we're lucky in that, we've got a history in this industry." Kerry put her hands behind her back and rocked up and down a few times. "And we've got a history of success, between the two of us. If we didn't, we probably would be out there pounding pavement."

"Lucky for the rest of us." Colleen winked at her. "Let me get these squared away and filed, in these bonny new cabinets of mine. Half a drawer already with documentation." She indicated one set, which carefully labeled drawers.

"We should talk about off site storage." Kerry said. "Set up an account with Iron Mountain, at least."

"Already did that, m'dear." Colleen said. "But it would be better if we could transfer it all digitally. The tapes.. I never much did trust them."

"Me either." Kerry confessed. "Let me see what I can come up with, okay? I'm going to go grab a cup of coffee."

"Surely." Colleen went into the office with the folder, leaving Kerry to emerge back into the hall and head for the stairs dropping down them in an easy rhythm.

"Roberts Automation." The receptionist was answering the phone, as she got down to that level. "Yes? Oh, yes, let me put you through to our accounting department." She gave Kerry a little wave. "I'm sure they're interested in a new stationary vendor."

Kerry rolled her eyes and chuckled as she ducked into the downstairs break room, newly finished and equipped with tables and microwaves and two big refrigerators. The coffee service had been moved inside and off its cart, and she nodded in approval at the newly plumbed drink machines and the box with its selection of teas.

The refrigerator was already full of lunch boxes when she opened it, and jars of various condiments in the door pockets as well.

They had a smaller kitchen upstairs, but Kerry had decided to keep things on the lower level, to encourage people to get up and move around not get stuck in their chairs all day long. She opened one of the cabinets, stepping back as she spotted lines of neatly logo'd mugs inside, in their blue, gray and buff colors.

"Nice." She took one down and examined it, then put it down and selected a green tea bag rather than the coffee she'd intended on making. She added some honey to the beverage then took her cup and strolled around the lower level. She could hear carpenters and other workmen near by, and she stuck her head inside one of the nearly finished staff work areas whose door had a ladder parked next to it.

The room was empty and looked large, but Kerry knew once they got the modular furniture inside, it would rapidly shrink and she counted in her head how many cubes it would hold. "Sheesh."

This would be the room for the support group the HR firm was busy hiring. They would report to Mark, but as she imagined the space she made a mental note to set aside the back section – which had a little angle to it and windows that overlooked the garden - for a supervisor.

Yet another person they'd have to hire.

Wow. Kerry moved along the corridor and headed around to the back side of the building, where the HR group had moved having expanded to require more space. She entered their new office, finding six people there with modular furniture, all busy on the phone.

She looked around, but the supervisor had spotted her and hurried over. "Busy in here."

"Boy is it" The woman said. "Let me tell you something Ms. Roberts, I've been doing this for fifteen years and I've never seen a company come off the blocks like this one has."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Kerry smiled. "But I've got another set of requests for employees. We're going to need four more web developers, and two mobile specialists."

"My goodness."

"And next week, the support area's going to be ready, so we need to fill it." Kerry said, almost apologetically. "Six tech support people and a supervisor. That's all for us."

"Wow." The woman seemed slightly overwhelmed. "I'm going to have to call up some other agencies. Our pools are almost empty." She grinned though. "But that's the kind of problem I like to have."

Kerry remembered something. "Let me send you a list of possibles. I had heard of some layoffs in the recent past that could end up working in our favor." She patted the woman on the arm. "See what I can do."

She left the HR people in a buzz of activity, and went along the back side hallway heading for the other set of steps leading back up to the 2nd floor.

Going past the loading dock though, she paused when she heard voices outside. She turned and went to the dock, sticking her head out of the big rolling door to find Carlos there with their persistent antagonist, Wheels. "Hey."

Carlos was standing on the dock, his big, muscular arms crossed over his chest, regarding the disabled man at street level. "Hello there, ma'am. Was just having a discussion with this guy." He indicated Wheels. "He doesn't like that I had Waste Management put a locked hatch on the garbage dumpsters."

Ah. Kerry hadn't realized their new security manager had done such a thing. "Well, it's s shame that people couldn't just abide by our wishes, but there ya go. Good job." She returned Wheel's dour glare with a mild expression. "I'm not really sure what your problem is."

"It's just garbage." Wheels said. "Why do you care if someone roots in it?"

"Cause it makes a mess we gotta clean up." Carlos answered him. "I saw what you did yesterday. That's why I had them come out today and lock it. Guy had to spend two hours cleaning up after you."

"There ya go." Kerry started to pull her head in.

"Hey, chick!"

Kerry debated on responding. Then she leaned against the door frame. "Hey, jackass." She called back.

But Wheels held up a hand. "I'm not trying to be an ass that's what we call women."

"I'm not trying to be an ass either That's what I call men who call women chicks." Kerry responded promptly. "So now if we've got that clear, I've got work to do."

Carlos chuckled, and started to follow her inside.

"Hey wait." Wheels yelled after them. "I just want to ask you a question."

Kerry paused just inside the door, exchanging a look with Carlos who was filling the opening. "I'm going to regret going back out there, aren't I?"

"Not with me around." He responded, with a faint grin. "G'wan if you want to. I was trying to get him to talk before you came out but I think maybe he's just a jerk."

Kerry sighed and eased around him and out the opening, emerging back on the loading dock with Carlos at her heels. She walked over to the edge of the concrete and sat down, dangling her legs and leaning her elbows on her thighs. "Yes?" Her eyebrows lifted in question.

Carlos leaned against the building wall, watching them closely.

The disabled man stared at her for a minute, apparently surprised that she'd come back. "Okay, yeah so." He now looked embarrassed, and he checked around him carefully before he looked back at her. "I seen new people around here all week."

"Yes. We're growing." She studied his face, which had scars on it that she could see now, this close. They reminded her a little of the ones Andrew had. "Why do you ask?"

He looked away furtively. "Just wondered." He muttered. "Stupid queer that owns the place said you were hiring. Just wondered why we never get a piece of that."

Kerry felt a warmth between her shoulder blades and she somehow knew if she looked behind her, she'd find Dar there watching them. Either from the dock door or the windows above, but she knew it as surely as she knew going down the road this disabled vet was heading on was likely going to bring them nothing but trouble.

But that had never stopped either of them. "Piece of that." She repeated slowly "As in, why we wouldn't consider hiring you?"

"Us. Any of us." He waved a hand in a vague circle. "All I heard was crap about bringing jobs in here. But not for us." He repeated, refusing to look at her.

Ah. Kerry regarded him in silence for a moment, until he looked up, and she had just that long to decide what she was going to do. "Well, the jobs are open for anyone who's qualified for them." She said. "We didn't tell the agency to not look around the neighborhood."

He stared truculently at her.

"We're an information technology company." Kerry went on, in the same mild tone. "So if anyone around here is interested in that kind of job, they're free to apply. I can give you a list of the openings we have, and you can show people."

"You're just saying that." He accused.

Kerry sighed. "You want to see them or not? Honestly, I wouldn't bother just saying that. I've got enough to do as it is, but we're expanding and we need people, and if there's someone around here who is qualified and wants a job, better for me."

There was a long silence in which they just looked at each other. Then Wheels finally lifted his hands off the arms of his wheelchair and put them back down. "Yeah okay. I'll look at them. You're probably way to snoozy for the likes of anyone here but what the hell."

Kerry started to get up, but she heard steps behind her and looked over her shoulder to see Mayte trotting out, with a folder in her hands. She took the time to top her head up, finding the windows overhead empty but the swinging plastic curtain of the main entry swayed enough to give her a glimpse of a tall figure just inside.

"Thanks Mayte." She took the folder and then hopped off the dock, landing and walking over to offer the disabled man the papers. "There you go."

He grabbed them from her and shoved the folder between his body and the side of his chair. "Yeah, okay thanks." He muttered, turning the chair around and starting off. Just past the garbage dumpster he stopped and turned, looking back at her. "Sorry about the mess. We didn't think anyone cared."

Kerry crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the dock wall, watching him go, and as he turned the corner at the end of the alleyway she heard the scuff of footsteps behind her and a moment later Dar was landing next to her, coming to stand at her side with her hands planted firmly on her hips. "Hey sweetie."

"Hey." Dar responded. "Was that a good idea?"

Kerry shrugged. "We do need people, and you never know, hon. You manage to find skills in the weirdest places. Maybe one of those guys has tech experience."

"Maybe." Dar said. "But do they have a bank account we can drop an ACH into, and will they pass the security review?" She took the cup Kerry still had on one hand and drank a sip of her tea. "At any rate, that was a lot better outcome than last time, and we don't need to call the cops."

"True."

Dar handed her the cup back. "Think I'll go get some java and apologize to my coders. I hauled ass out of their crib like the schizoid overprotective nut case I am and knocked some sodas over."

Kerry eyed her. "You didn't really."

Dar made a face. "Maria came hauling past me saying you were out here and she was going to get the security." She explained. "I didn't really have super secret psychic powers this time."

"Ah." Kerry smiled. "I think that was a good choice, Dar." She said, in a sober tone. "Halfway through escalating a bitch fest with him, it occurred to me that we weren't going anywhere with that attitude. Then he took a step in. I took one too."

"Trust your judgment one hundred percent." Dar offered her hand. "Let's go back to work."

"You got it."

**

Kerry whistled softly under her breath as she folded another pair of underwear, bopping gently to the song playing in her ear buds as she worked. Chino and Mocha were sleeping in Chino's bed nearby, after being run to exhaustion by Dar earlier in the evening.

Now her partner was diligently upgrading the wireless in the condo while she got two washes done, just a typical weeknight at the condo taking care of chores.

Dar poked her head in the bedroom a few minutes later. "Hey." She entered, removing one of the ear buds. "Dinner's ready."

Kerry finished folding the pair of fire engine red panties in her hands and removed the other bud. "What are we having?" She asked, turning off the digital player clipped to the waistband of her shorts. Dar had offered to cook, or actually, had offered to obtain a meal from them and that pretty much could end up anything from corn dogs to filet mignon from the island's restaurant.

Never was the same thing twice.

"Chicken and rice."

Kerry removed the ear buds and put them down on the dresser. "Well, you haven't had time to cook that so did it come from the Italian place?"

Dar smiled. "Haven't had time, and have no idea how to." She agreed. "Would you believe the Cuban place across the channel delivers here by boat?"

"I do now." Kerry followed her back out of the bedroom and over to the kitchen, where there were carefully aluminum foil wrapped packages on the counter top. "I don't even want to know what the delivery charge is." She unwrapped the items as the clatter of toenails sounded on the tile. "Ah, our children heard the crinkling."

They retreated to the living room with plates of fragrant chicken and rice, and sprawled on the couch next to each other as Dar flipped on the television.

"This is good." Kerry forked up a bit of the tender chicken. "You get the wifi all worked out?"

"Yep." Dar slung one long leg over the couch arm, and studiously ignored the two pairs of Labrador eyes watching her every move. A nearby handset rang, and she set the plate on the side table and reached over to answer the house phone. "Don't know who the hell this might be. Hello?"

"Hey Dar." Mark's voice echoed through the handset. "Just heard from one of our old workmates, so I thought I'd give you a buzz since I figured you could use a laugh."

"Sure." Dar put the handset on speaker. "Kerry's listening too. What's up?"

"Remember you said, eventually they'd have a fuck up, and then we'd know how screwed up they really were?" Mark sounded amused. "Happened sooner than later. Pete, the guy who took over my spot? He just called me. Total cluster. They did some change that the new ops VP told them to do, and half every thing's cocked up."

"Oh. Damn." Dar mentally pictured it. "What kind of change?"

"Pete was in too much of a flop sweat to tell me. He was just praying to cheezus I could tell him what to do, because everyone's screaming at him."

"Did you?"

Mark hesitated a trifle, then cleared his throat. "No." He said. "Not... I mean, if I could have given him a quick answer, ten words, I might have you know? But I don't know what they changed."

"Sounds like a mess." Kerry contributed, fishing out a small bit of chicken breast for each of her two furry acolytes.

"Yeah, it is." Mark said. "So besides thinking you'd think it was kinda funny, I thought I should warn ya because Pete knows, and probably everyone else knows there's only one person they could call who maybe could help them."

Dar sighed.

"Would you?" Kerry asked, curiously.

"I would tell them just revert their damn change." Dar said. "Shouldn't take me to do that though. It's common sense, Mark."

"Hundred percent, boss." Mark agreed. "That's what I told Pete. Problem is, so many cooks were in the kitchen and making changes to try to fix it, they never recorded the start state and they don't know what to do to put it back."

Dar frowned. "Pull the configs from the repository and push them."

"They tried that. Pete said something went wrong with it." Mark said. "He's kinda freaked."

Dar paused thoughtfully, taking a forkful of her dinner and chewing it. "Someone making things worse on purpose?" She asked, after she swallowed. "Big coincidence the repository going down in the mix."

"Mm. I kinda thought about that, but the guys left there want their jobs. I don't think they'd do that. Bigger gain for them if they run smooth, and get in good with the new dude." Mark said. "So anyway, like I said, just thought I'd let ya know because you never know, they might swallow the pill and pick up the phone."

"Huh. I doubt it, but thanks Mark." Dar said. "Let us know if you hear any more tidbits. Pays to be in the know."

"You got it, boss." Mark sounded satisfied. "See ya tomorrow."

"Later." Dar hung up the phone, and for a long few moments they simply ate together in silence, deep in thought.

"It's so weird." Kerry finally said. "Knowing that's going on and not getting any calls for it."

"Uh huh." Her partner agreed. "They won't call me. Too much loss of face." She decided. "They'll bring in specialists or someone from the vendors to sort it out."

"I think you're right."

Dar handed over a bite of chicken to the patiently waiting Chino, then provided a smaller piece to Mocha who stood up on his hind legs and pattered on her knee with his front paws. "When they get through this, maybe they'll start forgetting about us, and move on."

"I sure hope so." Kerry wiped her lips and got up, putting her plate down. "Watch that for me will you? Want some ice tea?"

"Sure."

Kerry went into the kitchen and got a couple of glasses out, pausing a moment to think about how she felt about ILS being in trouble.

Part of her felt a little gleeful, and she wasn't sure if she was altogether happy about that since she'd spent the time she had on the other side of the coin. But there was a resentment there too, of how ILS had treated her and Dar and it would be folly to pretend that didn't exist either.

And if they did call Dar?

Hm.

She opened the refrigerator and poured the beverage out from a jar on the top shelf, the tea itself having been made using the sun method by her before the weekend. It had tea, of course, but also raspberries and blackberries in it, and it was murky and weird looking but tasted fine.

Sweetened with honey. Kerry took an experimental sip, then grunted approval and filled the other glass. She brought them back into the living room where Dar had found a special on penguins to watch. "Oh, cute." She settled back on the couch, this time with her shoulder right up against her partners so she could let her head rest there too.

Dar shifted and touched her head to Kerry's. "I was just thinking about what I was going to do if they do decide to call me." She said.

"Naturally, since I was just in the kitchen wondering the same thing." Kerry observed. "Hon, tempting as it is to be the knight in shining armor that saves them, I think those bastards will just use that as leverage to say you deliberately crippled the company by leaving."

Dar smiled. "Now who's being psychic?"

"Seriously. I think the reason they fired Hamilton is because they want to come after you no matter what our agreement was, and they'll take any excuse."

"They're businessmen." Dar said. "I would hope that would mean they'll do things just to continue the company's success. Coming after me doesn't do anything for anyone."

"I think some of them don't care."

Dar shrugged. "Could be. Anyway, it's a moot point unless they do call." She paused, thoughtfully. "As I said, I don't think they will. I think it'll kill them to have to. But if they're desperate enough to do that, then if I do help, I get one up on them."

"Hm." Kerry grunted softly. "I don't know, Dar."

"Wait till it happens. Or not." Her partner said. "They don't have idiots there. I'm sure they can figure it out."

Kerry snorted, but remained silent, finishing up her chicken.

**

"Kerrisita?"

Kerry looked up from her desk, to find Maria in the doorway. "Hey Maria. What's up?"

"The receptionist, she has someone downstairs who wished to speak with you." Maria said. "I think it might be one of those terrible men."

"Oh really." Kerry tapped her pen on her desk. "Can you ask Carlos to bring him up?"

"Surely." Maria smiled in agreement, and ducked out.

"This might be interesting." Kerry mused, cocking her head to one side to listen for Dar in the next room. There was nothing there but silence, but she figured if Carlos was bringing the guy, it should be all right.

A couple of minutes later, Carlos knocked softly at the door frame, then stood back to let his charge enter, following him closely inside.

Kerry was waiting, her desk cleared, and the folder she had of the job openings off to one side. Not to her surprise, the man who came in was the guy who had stalked her, and she remained neutrally silent while he crossed over and sat down in one of her visitor's chairs.

Carlos went over and stood on the other side of him, hands clasped in front of him. "You be polite to this lady, or you're going out the window, bud." He remarked in a mild tone.

The man looked at him, then looked back at Kerry without commenting.

"So what can I do for you?" Kerry finally broke the silence. "Mr. Patterson, is it?"

"Yeah." He said, clearing his throat. "Wheels told me you gave him a list of open positions."

"I did." Kerry agreed. "He asked me why none of the jobs had been offered to you and your friends – and the real reason is none of you are registered with a technical placement agency. But I gave him a list of openings in case he was qualified for one of them."

"Seems like he can talk just fine." Carlos commented. "Not sure why you're all in his business."

Patterson turned and looked at him. "Why don't you get out of here?"

"Cause I don't have to. I work here." Carlos replied, in a mild tone. "And my job is to make sure that this lady doesn't have to deal with jackasses. So don't be one."

Kerry was really getting to like Carlos. He stayed relaxed, leaning against the wall and maintaining a benignly friendly expression that was at complete odds with his words. He didn't see any need to bluster, there was just a calm confidence about him that reminded her a little of Andrew.

"Whatever." Patterson turned back to Kerry. "So here's the deal." He said. "All of us come in together."

Kerry folded her hands. "Do all of you have IT experience?"

"Wheels knows that stuff. And Doug, too. But it's all or nothing. We're a team."

"Mr. Patterson." Kerry cleared her throat. "I do not hire gangs." She paused. "If any of you have experience, I would be more than happy to have you apply, and if you qualify for a position, I'll hire you. But no one gets to work here on someone else's back."

"That's not how it works." He said.

"That's how it works here." Kerry interrupted him. "Because I get to make the rules. I own the company." She had to stifle a smile as she said it because it was impossible to suppress the shiver of pride that went through her. "So if you or any of your friends, individually, are interested in a position, c'mon in, and fill out an application."

Behind him Kerry suddenly caught sight, in her peripheral vision, of Dar coming to stand quietly in the doorway between their offices, leaning on one jamb, arms crossed, watching Patterson like a hawk.

"So what's it going to be?" Kerry asked, since Patterson was just glaring at her. "I don't really have the time to debate with you about it."

"Okay look." He grudgingly responded. "We all of us been friends since grade school. If we could do civ stuff we woulda. But we ended up going into the service, and had each other's backs there. Same thing here. We want to stay together, and e call all do useful stuff. Just not all that tech crap."

"I get that." Kerry said. "But it's just not how we do things. We're a small company, and every person has to be here to help us go forward. I can't just hire people with useful skills, because they might not be useful to me."

"Yeah well I figured you'd say that." Patterson stood up. "Screw it. We'll go find someone else that appreciates veterans who served their country." He turned his back and started out, pausing when he saw Dar watching him. "Too many queers around here anyway."

Dar looked him up and down. "Takes one to know one." She drawled, with a smile. "Carlos, see the gentleman out, please."

"Yes ma'am!" Carlos caught up to Patterson at the door and bowed him through. He followed him out into the hall and their boots were heard going down the steps.

"That was icky." Kerry commented, as Dar sauntered over and parked herself on the windowsill behind Kerry's desk. "Was he serious, Dar? Did he really think we'd just hire a bunch of guys like that?"

"Should have offered to take all of them but only pay for the guys who were qualified. Let them share that." Dar commented, muffling a smile when her partner turned all the way around and stared at her. "Just kidding."

"Jesus."

"I think." Dar folded her arms. "I think those guys are in a place where it's them against everyone. You let someone get ahead, like Wheels maybe, and the group breaks down. I can see why they'd want to stick together."

Kerry eyed her thoughtfully. "Isn't that sort of a fantasy land?"

"Well. I think they're looking at it like, that's all the family they have. They don't have anything else." Dar said, in a gentle tone. "I don't agree with the request, and I think they're a box of assholes in a pink paper wrapper, but I remember what my dad used to say about his team mates and it is what it is."

"Mm. Wish Dad were here." Kerry sighed. "Maybe he could talk to them since he's been there."

"I think we should talk to Wheels on the side, if he's the one with tech skills. Not fair to him to hold him back." Dar said. "Maybe we can force a split there. Might be a good thing for all of them." She pushed herself up off the sill. "But I wouldn't hire this guy that was here even if he was Charles Babbage himself."

"Booyah." Kerry agreed, giving her a wry grin as she retreated back to her office. "Okay, next." She picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Charles? Hey, it's Kerry." She said. "Just wanted to make sure you got those quotes."

**

Dar dropped into her chair and leaned back, glancing at the darkening sky over her shoulder. Mark had just settled in her visitor chair and they both had bottled drinks they were sucking on. "Hear from your buddy?"

Mark rolled his eyes. "Six times." He admitted. "I'm feeling it for the guy. They're roasting him." He related. "They got like three contractors and half the tech staff from two vendors and they're still in the weeds."

Dar frowned. "What in the hell could they have done to screw things up that badly? Network was stable for two god damned years before I left."

"Well, from what he told me." Mark muffled a smile. "That new guy, the one that took Kerry's spot? He said we'd been doing it wrong, you know? So he had them switch all the routing protocols, because he told them it would make everything faster."

Dar covered her eyes in eloquent silence.

"Boss, it's a mess." Mark agreed. "They literally had to static route stuff in the main office just to keep systems up."

"Oh my fucking god." Dar muttered. "Are you kidding me?"

"Pete didn't want to tell me. He's sure it's gonna get out he was talking to me and he's gonna get fired, but he said today, he's probably gonna get fired anyway because the new guy's got Teflon boxers and he's throwing them all under the bus."

Dar lowered her hand and stared at him. "What?"

"He told the big cheeses Pete and his team screwed up the change and he's doing his best to fix it." Mark watched his bosses face alter from exasperated bemusement to a dark, cold anger in the flash of an eye. "I felt bad for Pete. He was kinda losing it. Said he never thought his boss would do that."

"No." Dar said, in a clipped tone.

"We never had to worry about that." Mark added, gingerly. He could see Dar was totally pissed off, her body was getting restless and she was breathing a little faster. 'Sorry boss, didn't mean to tick you off.'

Dar took a deep breath and released it. "That sure did tick me off." She confessed. "What an asshole."

Mark grinned wryly at her. "I kinda hope they call you." He admitted right back. "I want to be there when you finish fixing that crap and tell that guy what he's going to die of."

"What's that?" Kerry came in, sorting through a handful of papers. "Charles signed the letter of intent, Dar. He got funding for about ninety five percent of the quotes we gave him." She glanced up at her partner, and saw the storm clouds. "What's up?"

"Just filling Big D in on stuff at the old place." Mark explained. "Anyway if I hear any more, I'll clue you." He got up. "Time to go get on the bike and ride." He lifted a hand and waved, then left.

"What's got you so torked?" Kerry put her papers down and went around behind her partner, reaching over the back of the chair to start massaging her neck and shoulders. "They still screwed up?"

Dar exhaled again. "Yeah, but.. Mark found out what they did, that new guy told them to make that change, then when it went south he blamed them."

"Oooo. Yow." Kerry winced. "They would never see that coming."

Dar braced her elbow on the arm of her chair and rested her head against it. "Yeah that's what Mark said."

Kerry leaned over and gave her a kiss, along with a compassionate hug. "Aw, hon." She felt Dar reach up and take hold of her hand. "Hey maybe those guys will figure out how to fix it, and turn the tables."

Her partner shifted and looked up at her, eyebrows hiking.

"You never know."

**

Dar tapped her boxing gloves together and studied the big hanging bag, determining what to pound the crap out of next. The release of the pent up aggravation had come as a relief, and now that she'd spent forty five minutes just whaling at the bag, she had gotten enough out of her system to make her back off, and take it easier.

Kerry was wisely across the gym, doing sit ups. They'd been together long enough at this point for Kerry to know when to leave her alone for a little while, and she knew that Dar would come over to join her at some machine once she felt better.

She was almost at that point.

Dar switched bags, going from the big body bag over to the speed bag and starting a slow rhythm on it. She could feel the stretch in her shoulder muscles, and as she sped up the routine, finally, the stress released out of her and she was able to focus on the exercise and not wish it was a human being taking the punishment.

She spent ten minutes on a rapid patter battering of the bag, then slowed it down and finished, feeling a pleasant ache in her arms. With an exhale of satisfaction, she turned and left the boxing area, working the gloves off her hands.

The island gym was mostly empty at this hour, and she was unimpeded as she crossed the floor and zeroed in on her partner, who was just at that moment taking a break from her routine. "Hey."

"Hey." Kerry wiped sweat from her eyes. "Feel better?"

Dar smiled. "Yeah." She shadow boxed at Kerry. "When you're done, want to take a swim?"

"Sure." Kerry stretched her body out, one way, and then the other. "Let me just do the leg press, and we can go splash." She got off the incline board and moved to the next machine, while Dar took her place and hooked her feet under the holders and started a set of sit ups herself.

Kerry settled on the leg press and unlocked it, adjusting the weight and slowly starting the exercise. She could see Dar's profile as her partner moved up and down, and was glad to see the furrow gone from between her brows and a relaxed expression on her face.

Much better. "Guess what I have when we get back?"

Dar eyed her. "Does it start with ice cream?"

"It does."

"Mm." Dar looked contented. "Y'know, something you said before gave me an idea."

Kerry paused at the top of her extension. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Is that good or bad?"

Dar smiled, and boxed a little with her hands as she continued her sit ups. "We'll just have to find out."

"Ah."

**

The sun was just thinking about peeking over the horizon as Dar was closing the door to her truck, clicking the lock on the door before she shouldered her backpack and started for the building.

Hers was the first car in the lot, as she'd expected it would be, and she paused at the front of the walk just to look up and regard the sign on the wall for a moment.

Her face scrunched up into an unapologetic grin. Then she shook herself a little and continued up the path towards the door, reaching into her jeans pocket for the hard key as she walked. A bird started warbling in one of the olive trees on either side of the walk, and she pursed her lips and warbled back, the sound fading off as she came around the last bend and saw the figure crouched on the front porch.

"Ah. Nice way to start the day." Dar muttered under her breath, as the figure heard her boots on the path and straightened up a little in his wheelchair. "Morning." She said, in a normal tone as she climbed the few steps up to where he was seated.

He blinked at her, bruises evident on his face, one hand wrapped in a makeshift bandage. "That other lady coming?"

Dar put her backpack down on the small wrought iron table and sat down on one of the little chairs next to him. "If you mean my partner Kerry, she's taking our puppy for his checkup at the vets." She answered. "Something I can do for you instead?"

He avoided meeting her eyes. "I'll wait."

Dar rested her elbows on the chair arms, glad she had a hoodie on when the chill of the metal transferred even through the cloth. She laced her fingers together and studied him from the corner of her eyes, knowing a moment of unexpected compassion for him. "Your buddy came to see us last night. He was trying to sell all of you as a package."

"Yeah, I know."

"That your idea?" Dar kept her voice light and mild. "That's not how civ works, generally."

He peeked up at her briefly, then looked away. "Wasn't my idea. I showed Joe the jobs. He thought maybe it would be good for all of us." He shrugged. "Told him you all'd say no way."

"We did." Dar acknowledged. "He said it was all or nothing... he change his mind or did you?"

The disabled man stared dourly at his hands for a long moment. "Told him I was going to come back anyhow. No one else round here will even talk to any of us."

"He hit you for saying that?"

He looked up again, more sharply. "Nah, we just scrapped." He said, this time keeping eye contact with her. "Not on your fucking sidewalk either."

Dar smiled. "Thanks. I really do appreciate that."

He looked away again, a flush rising up his neck up to his ears.

"So. You here on the porch waiting to ask us for something particular?" Dar said, after a moment of silence. "Whatever it is you're going to ask Kerry for, she'll tell me before she answers anyway."

The man studied her in silence. Dar sat there waiting, returning his gaze in mild neutrality.

He shifted in his wheelchair, his face old before it's time, lines of pain etched across it. He pulled out a folded piece of paper and offered it over to her. "Wanted to ask about this here."

Dar unfolded the paper and studied it. "One of our tech support positions. Okay." She said. "This something you do? You do that in the service?"

He shook his head. "Infantry." He responded. "I did that before I went in. In high school. I was the guy who messed with all the computers, in the lab and all." He shifted again. "I used to set up the machines from scratch, reload them after all the classes, you know?"

"Yes, I do know." Dar said. "You fix printers and that sort of thing too?"

He nodded. "I can take apart and fix a laser fuser." He remarked. "And solder components, that stuff."

Dar's eyebrows lifted a bit. "Why didn't you stick with that instead of the army?" She asked. "You can make a living with that. Or why not specialize in it? Army uses tech."

He looked at her. "Went with my buddies. They all wanted to go into the army, and I went too. Stayed with them when we all got picked for grunts." He scowled a little. "Guess you think that's stupid."

Dar folded the paper and ran her fingers over the edges. "Not really, no." She said. "I was a signature away from the Navy myself, mostly because my dad was in and I grew up on a base." She cleared her throat. "So no, I don't think that's stupid. But I bet you think so now."

He flushed again. "Didn't think about coming back like this." He indicated his lower body, one leg missing mid thigh and the other below the knee. His pants legs were drawn closed with twine, dirty and ragged. "Dead's one thing. This?"

"No you don't think of that when you're going in. I saw people coming back with half their guts missing, and saw my dad hurt, and I still didn't think about it. When you're that young, you think you're invincible."

She saw his neck muscles relax, and he straightened up, looking at her. "Yeah." He studied her briefly. "What made ya back out?"

Dar smiled briefly. "They wouldn't let me get a berth where I wanted it and I wasn't going to settle for anything else." She said, honestly. "I'm a hard ass that way, and always have been even back then."

He considered that. "Ballsy." He said. "You want intel or something?"

"Special forces." Her eyes twinkled a little at his reaction. "So I ended up doing technology instead. Worked out better for me in the long run."

"Fuck." He snorted a little.

Dar pulled her Handspring out and studied it, then tapped out a message. "Are your friends going to be pissed off by you coming here to talk to us?" She glanced up at him.

For a moment he didn't answer, then he took a breath. "Yeah."

"That going to be a problem for you?"

For a very long moment he didn't answer, his eyes going past her and unfocused. Then he looked back up at her with his most straightforward, honest expression yet. "Don't care."

She glanced down at the phone, as its message light stuttered red. "Well, we'll try to make it worth the hassle then." She looked back up at him. "Let's go inside." She stood up and went to the door, keying in the alarm code and opening the door with her hard key.

"For what?"

Dar's brows lifted and she held up the folded paper. "You want a job? I'll give you a try at one."

He looked around with a stunned expression. "Don't you have to talk to that other lady?"

"I did." Dar held up the Handspring as she pushed the door open and held it. "C'mon Let's get the ground rules settled before everyone comes in and freaks out."

He stared at her for a very long moment. "Sorry I was such a jackass then." He said, as he swiveled the chair and started rolling in the door.

Dar smiled. "Takes one to know one." She closed the door after them and indicated the right hand turn down the hallway "Let's go to the HR office. You can start filling out paperwork."

"You're really going to hire me?"

"Yup."

"Somebitch."

**

"Ho boy." Kerry tucked Mocha under her arm, and got the door open to her SUV. She put the puppy down on the seat and hopped inside, getting the door closed before Mocha could get any clever ideas in terms of jumping out. "C'mon, Mochie. Let's go to work and see what trouble mommy Dar's gotten into."

"Yap." Mocha sat down on the passenger seat, his tongue hanging out.

It hadn't really surprised her in the slightest that her partner had hired their crippled veteran troublemaker. She had sensed a sympathy in Dar for the guy, and it had been she, herself, who had handed him the list of open positions. She was a little surprised though, that he'd showed up after the grandstanding play by his buddy last night.

She navigated the busy city streets carefully, not wanting to spill Mocha on the car floor with a sharp stop. They'd been the first ones at the vets, and Mocha had passed his exam with flying colors, happy to be the center of attention even when that center meant various things being stuck in him and in unpleasant places.

So now this new employee. It hadn't surprised her, but her mind had started to count up the issues she figured they would need to face which would start with, did this guy actually have a place to live?

Did he have a place to shower? Did he have clothes to wear to work? If he stayed around with his buddies, would he be reliable?

Was she being a little too WASPy about it?

Kerry pulled into the office lot and parked, sticking her sunglasses up in the visor and opening the door.

"You hang on there, Mocha. I'll come get you." She got out and shut the door, walking around to the passenger side as the puppy raced around inside, barking excitedly.

"Relax!" She chuckled, as she got the other door open and collected the bouncing fur ball.

"Hey Kerry!" Mark appeared at her side, two cups of coffee in his hands. "Crazy morning already huh?"

Kerry put Mocha down and looped his leash around her wrist. "You mean our new employee?" She grinned. "Hey I never argue with Dar's hiring."

Mark chuckled too, as he walked alongside her up the path. "He kinda surprised me. He's got some skills." He admitted. "I thought Dar was just being.. like she was humoring him. But he knows what end of a cable to plug in stuff."

"Dar sees things in people." Kerry acknowledged. "Sometimes she sees things other people don't and sometimes she sees things the people she sees them in don't"

Mark grinned, as he pushed the door open for her with his elbow and stood aside to let her enter. "I had you pegged the second I saw your file."

Kerry eyed him. "You did, did you?"

Mark nodded. "Yup." He winked, and headed up the steps to his office.

"Good morning, ma'am." The receptionist greeted her. "Only one dog today?"

"Only one. Chino was very upset I left her behind, but if she'd known we were going to the vet, I bet she would have laughed." Kerry headed up the steps herself, carrying Mocha since his legs were still a little short to handle the stairs well. She got to the top and waved hello to Maria, then ducked through Mayte's office towards her and Dar's. "Hey Mayte."

"Good morning, Kerry." Mayte grinned at her. "I have some messages for you, on your desk."

"Thank you!" Kerry went in and put Mocha down in the puppy playpen Dar had constructed, which had a plethora of toys and bones and a dish of water and one for kibble inside. "There you go, little man. Chill out for a while so I can get my phone calls done."

"Hey."

Kerry paused in the middle of sitting down to look up and find Dar in the inner doorway. "Hey hon."

"Hey, beautiful." Dar responded amiably. She came over to the play pen and leaned over to give Mocha a pat. "Our new employee is going through the typical orientation routine." She commented. "His name's Scott Brewer, by the way."

Kerry leaned back. "So how did that all come about?" She asked. "Did you know he was going to come back here?"

Dar stepped inside the playpen at Mocha's urgent, paw scrabbling request and sat down with the puppy. "He was on the porch when I got here." She glanced up at Kerry. "Had one of your job requests on him. I wasn't expecting to see him there, but I wasn't surprised either."

"Isn't that going to piss off his obnoxious friend Joe?"

Dar nodded. "He said it was, but he didn't care. That's why I hired him. That and the fact he actually was his high school nerd with the projector, and knows how to disassemble and reassemble a laser printer." She grinned briefly. "Naturally he also brings complications."

"Of course." Kerry agreed. "At least the tech support office is going to be on the first floor, though he can use the freight elevator."

"He wants to use the stairs."

Both of Kerry's brows shot up. "Our liability insurance is going to skyrocket."

Dar chuckled. "No kidding. If he loses his grip halfway up he's going to take out our reception desk on the way back down. I said I'd see what we could work out." She gave Mocha one last scrubble and got up, stepping over the fencing. "Sorry buddy, gotta back to my programming."

"Does he live at the halfway house, or under our hedges?" Kerry asked. "He kinda does need to come in with relatively clean clothes and all that Dar. Not fair to the rest of them otherwise."

"He has a room at the church house, but he doesn't like going there." Dar came over and sat down on the bench behind Kerry, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees. "He says maybe after some paychecks he can get his own place, but I had an idea."

"Of course you did." Kerry reached out and gently ruffled her partner's dark hair.

"I threw in a membership for that little gym around the corner." Dar said. "It's got showers and all that. Told him until he got everything sorted out, he could go there in the morning, and get ready for work."

Kerry thought about that, honestly impressed by the suggestion. "So it's not like charity." She hazarded. "You could have offered to get him a place."

"Didn't want that." Dar shook her head decisively. "He's tired of begging for handouts and getting the government runaround. He wants to try and make it himself."

"You like him."

Dar smiled briefly. "I could have ended up just like him."

"No, never. Your parents would never have left you to live on the streets, Paladar Katherine Roberts."

Kerry put her fingertip on Dar's nose. "There is nothing in the world you can say that would make me believe that."

"When you met me, I could have been living on the streets and they would have never known." Dar gently refuted her. "Don't color my childhood in rainbow snow cones, hon. There was a time, after we thought Dad was gone, that I was just as alone as this guy is, even more so since at least he thinks he has friends."

"Hm." Kerry grunted softly after a long pause unable to refute that because she knew it was true.

"So anyway." Dar went on. "We'll have to put up with his ratty clothes until he gets his first paycheck. Mark checked him out and he says he'll be okay on the tech side."

"Good enough for me."

Dar nodded, and glanced around before lowering her voice. "Now on another subject."

"Uh oh."

A soft knock interrupted them. "Yes?" Kerry projected her voice towards the door. "C'mon in."

Zoe poked her head in. "Miss Kerry, your ten am appointment is here."

Kerry sighed. "Rats. Yeah. Can you get them a cup of coffee and give me five minutes?"

The junior admin nodded positively and backed out, closing the door behind her.

Kerry turned in her chair and scooted closer to Dar "So."

"Mark talked to his buddy today. They're on the verge of doing something idiotic." Dar said, quietly. "I don't think they're going to call me."

"Good." Kerry said, seriously.

Dar nodded. "But I feel for those guys. I don't think it would be a good idea to contact them."

"Good." Kerry said, again, with a faint smile. "So far, we're in one hundred percent agreement."

"Here's the deal. You know that network forum I mess around in sometimes?" Dar asked. "The one where people post questions and all that crap?"

Kerry frowned. "No, I.. .oh. " Then she nodded. "Yeah, you showed me that once. Nerdfest."

"Nerdfest." Her partner agreed. "Everyone posts there, engineers, and nerds, and wannabe nerds, and trolls and interested onlookers I don't post often, and not under my real name, but every once in a while I throw a hat in."

"Ah. I am beginning to see the light."

"So I told Mark, if his buddy wanted to, post a few questions in that forum, and if I can answer them, I will. He doesn't have to give his name, and I don't, and he can make them general enough not to identify ILS."

Kerry was silent for a moment, thinking. "Will it stay anonymous, though?" She asked. "Dar, I really think they'll use any excuse they can find no matter what it is to make you responsible for whatever bad's going on there."

Now it was Dar's turn to be quiet for a bit. "I don't know." She answered finally. "But it's the only way I can think of to give them help if they want it, without causing a riot." She said. "I don't necessarily know who this guy is, and I do occasionally give answers on there."

Kerry watched the planes of Dar's face shift, as she looked briefly away, then back at Kerry. "You really are a crusader, you know that?" She smiled, leaning forward to touch her head to her partner's. "Be careful, Dar."

"I will be. And anyway, the guy might not want to go that route. It's a risk for him too, maybe he just wants to wait it out and see what happens."

That was true. "Okay." Kerry patted Dar's knee. "But you might want to..."

"Go through a proxy, so they can't track the IP back here?" Dar's eyes twinkled. "Good idea."

They both laughed, then Dar got up and sauntered back to her office, turning to give Kerry a wink before she disappeared.

Kerry pressed the intercom button. "Zoe, please bring my visitor in." She released the button and shook her head. "Crusader Dar. Boy did that woman nail her."

**

"All right Roberts." Bridges voice sounded bemused. "So remember that conversation we had about smoke and mirrors?"

Dar leaned back in her chair. "I do."

"Senate Intelligence Committee wants to see this thing before we go any further with it." The president's advisor said. "Now, understand this doesn't change anything between us and you. It's going forward regardless."

"Uh huh."

"But we have to show these mental midgets something so they'll shut their yaps up and go mess with something else, like voting themselves a raise."

Dar pondered that. "When?"

"Soon as you can."

She sighed. "I can mock up a prototype by next week. That soon enough?"

There was a brief silence, then Bridges chuckled. "That'll do. Will it show them what they expect to see?"

"Will they understand what I show them?" Dar countered. "I'll lay out for them how it's going to work, and what the agents on the other end will see when they make a query."

"No Internet snooping? By the way." Bridges said. "You nailed that with George."

"It'll be rough." Dar warned. "Just command line. But it should be enough to give them an idea."

"Good." He responded firmly. "Now, a completely different subject. Your old friends are screwing things up."

Dar looked at her phone with a puzzled expression. "What?" She said. "Are they still making waves about the contract?"

"Hell no. Somethings screwed up over there, and things aren't working, according to what I hear from the Pentagon. Got a bunch of pissed off medal pushers out there yelling about it."

"Ah."

"Know anything?"

Dar drummed her fingers. "I had heard some vague rumors there was some kind of incident." She answered carefully. "But I don't know any details about it."

"They haven[t called you?"

"No." Dar said. "I don't expect them to."

"Idiots."

She smiled in reflex. "Last thing they want is to have to call me in to fix something." She said. "Embarrassing all the way around."

Bridges cleared his throat. "Might not have a choice. If you catch my drift."

Dar grimaced. "Don't do that. Not good for them, and not for me."

"No offense, Roberts, but we don't really care if it's good for you, or for them, because it's screwing up stuff for us." Bridges said, bluntly. "Know what I mean?"

Dar sighed again. "Yeah."

"Anyway if you hear from them, grudgingly, might be because someone here told them to get their heads our of their asses and get some real help." He said. "Or, alternatively, you might get a call from someone at that rock pile wanting you to take over the contracts."

"We're not setup for that."

"Well then, put on your big girl panties and get a move on getting set up." He said. "Because this is serious stuff, Roberts. We don't have the time or people to be running around doing things the hard way because their crap isn't working. Got me?"

"Yeah, I get it. But I hope they can straighten themselves out without my interference." Dar said. "I don't really want to get back into that arena."

Bridges grunted. "My gal will set up a time next week for your cat and donkey show. Stay by the phone. Answer it if it rings. Later."

Dar released the line and exhaled. "Well, shit." She half turned and looked out the window, where the sunset was splashing a deep gold light along the window. "This is going to be a huge pain in the ass."

"What's that, hon?" Kerry came in with Mocha in her arms. "You ready to go home?"

Dar told her the latest.

"Ew."

"Yeah." Dar got up and put her laptop into her backpack. "I'm going to concentrate on doing the mock up. ILS is going to have to let their chips fall as they may."

"You think Bridges will actually force them to call you?" Kerry already had her messenger bag over one shoulder. "Holy crap, you think they'd make them give us those contracts? Dar we can't handle that."

"I know." Dar slung the pack onto her back. "I'm sure they won't end up doing that. It's far too intrusive, and probably illegal." She shut her desk lamp off, and bumped Kerry towards the door. "C'mon. I need to chill out. Mark said there's no sign of his buddy posting."

They walked down the stairs, waving at the people still left working. Mark was standing in the lower hall, his helmet in his hand and he waited for them to reach the bottom.

"Hey." Kerry shifted Mocha to her other arm. "How's our new guy doing?" She asked, as they headed out the front door. "I think I got the HR people to stop freaking out about him."

"Not bad." Mark said. "He's still back there, reading manuals." He looked and sounded surprised. "Left field pick, boss. How'd you see any cells under all the grunge?"

"Just a hunch." Dar said. "His fast pass come through all right? Since we left him in that room?"

"Oh, yeah sure." Mark said. "Just waiting for his military records to come back, but his civilian stuffs okay, what there is of it. He went into the Army at like 18." He tossed his helmet up and caught it. "Know what he told me? Said he was digging in that garbage container for manuals and crap, thought we would toss them with the boxes."

"You think that's true?" Kerry asked.

Mark shrugged. "He's in there reading manuals." He said. "He said he knew we were a tech company, when he saw the deliveries."

"Well, that could be true enough." Kerry admitted. "But I told Carlos to just keep an eye on things, because I don't want him bothering people."

"Yeah, he said." Mark agreed. "My other guys are going in and talking to him too. I told them to give him some room, but make sure he knew the rules."

Mark's cycle was parked next to Dar's truck, and Kerry's SUV was right behind that. So they paused and stood a moment, watching the sun go down as the cool breeze rustled the leaves over their head. "Pretty night." Mark commented.

Kerry got Mocha into her SUV and tossed her messenger bag in after him. "It is." She said, turning around and leaning on the car door. "Mark, the problems at our old place are starting to affect customers we have in common."

Mark paused, taking a seat on his bike sideways and regarding her. "Yeah?"

Dar opened her truck door and hopped up onto the seat. "Yeah. Apparently the Pentagon isn't happy with whatever's going on."

"Wow." Mark put his helmet on his lap and rested his arms on it. "I tried to call Pete twice, but he's not answering his personal cell. Maybe because its me. Didn't want to get in any deeper."

Dar sighed. "Wonder if I should call Alastair." She mused.

"I'm really kind of surprised he hasn't called you." Kerry said. "Unless, like we suspect, he wants to keep you as far out of it as he can."

"Damn it, I don't want to get in the middle of this." Dar exhaled. "At first it was just dumbass on their part. Now it's getting serious."

"Crazy they haven't gotten it fixed yet." Mark said. "I just can't figure out what the hell they did, you know? I mean, even if the repository's tanked, we had hard copy of the configs in the files. Even if they restored a 30 day out copy, it would bring everything back."

"Unless he's determined to make it work his way." Kerry said. "The new guy, I mean."

They all stood there, thoughtfully, for a minute or two. Then Dar cleared her throat. "It won't work any other way." She said. "The metrics.. they're all balanced based on the mesh of those routing protocols."

Mark and Kerry stared at her.

"Convergence, hop count – it's all predicated on using the protocol metrics I designed." The dark haired woman added, folding her arms. "It's in the architectural diagrams and overview."

"And that thing you put in." Kerry spoke up at last. "When we were getting hacked."

Dar nodded. "It's a crude kind of artificial intelligence. Something like what I'm going to use for Bridges."

"Shit. I should tell Pete that." Mark said. "They probably have no clue what all that is. Hell, I had no real clue of what all that was."

"I documented it." Dar protested.

"Sure, big D, you put all the words in there but how many people could understand them if they read them?" Mark asked, seriously. "You're like a little rocket scientist y'know?"

"Ooh boy." Kerry exhaled. "That's all proprietary and you probably are the only one who can fix it, aren't you?"

Dar spread her hands out. "They're ILS's patents!" She said. "They have all the paperwork on it."

"Yes, hon, but it's your name on those patents. I saw them." Kerry said. "Actually, I kept a copy of them so you could look back at them sometime and chuckle."

"I'm not chuckling now." Dar responded dourly.

"No me either." Kerry sighed. "You know, that's probably what happened. That jackass decided he wanted to put his stamp on the system and wanted your stuff taken out." She gave Mark a shrewd look. "You think?"

Mark scrunched his face up. "Crap."

Dar exhaled. "We're not going to solve it here in the parking lot." She said. "Let's go home, Ker. Maybe I'll get a brainwave on the ferry." She slid around in the seat and closed the door. "Maybe I will give Alastair a call. I'm really surprised he hasn't given me one. Maybe he walked out and doesn't know what's going on."

"Ugh." Kerry got in her SUV with Mocha, who was scrambling all over putting tongue prints on everything.

"Is it okay for me to tell Pete about that custom stuff?" Mark asked, as he straddled his bike. "I'll text him."

"Sure." Dar started up the engine. "But if they really did take all that out, it probably won't help."

"Ugh." Kerry put the SUV in reverse and started backing out of her spot. She caught motion in the corner of her eye and turned her head, to see a group of figures standing in the twilight on the road watching them. "Double ugh." She glanced forward at Dar's pickup, seeing by the angle of her partner's head that she saw them too.

"Yap." Mocha sat down on the passenger seat.

"Yap." Kerry repeated, shaking her head. "Not going to be a good night, Mocha. I can just feel it."

**

Dar exhaled, watching the screen refresh on her computer as she pondered again what to do. There'd been no answer on Alastair's cell, and her message hadn't been returned yet. Mark said, he hadn't gotten a response from his buddy, so she was left to drum her fingers on the desk, and listen to Kerry's stir frying from the kitchen nearby.

Well. She got up and circled the desk, going out into the living room and passing the big, new, double sized dog bed with its snoozing occupants. "Ker?"

"Yees?" Kerry half turned, briefly shifting her attention from her wok to her partner. "Nothing yet?"

Dar shook her head, and came over, peering over Kerry's shoulder at the stove. "Yum."

"Well, maybe they did figure it out." Kerry went back to stir frying. "I sure hope so."

"Mm." Dar moved aside her hair and kissed the back of her neck. "Me too." She moved away and went to the cupboard, removing a pair of plates and setting them down on the counter. "What I don't want is them turning this around and blaming their screwup on my design."

Kerry glanced at her, then back at the stove. "Could they do that?"

Dar added two glasses to the plates. "Well, it's unconventional." She admitted. "But that was the whole point. I wanted to make something that set us apart from the rest of the pack."

"Hon, you did document all that." Kerry said, as she added a pile of cooked rice noodles into the wok and tossed them with the rest of the ingredients. "It was part of the sales portfolio. I think if they want to bitch about it, they also have to go back and discount all the money they made selling your design."

"Yeah, I know." Dar got a bottle of sparkling cranberry apple juice from the refrigerator and poured both glasses full. "But it can make for some really bad press right when I'm up on Capitol Hill showing off another unconventional design."

Kerry sorted the stir fry out and divided it across both plates. "We've survived bad press." She remarked. "We survived your vice president of global operations being exposed as your lover who threw her father to the wolves. On national television."

Dar paused, then chuckled wryly. "Good point."

"C'mon, Dixiecup." Kerry picked up the plates and carried them into the dining area, putting them down at the two places closest to one end of the table. "Just let it roll."

Dar put the glasses down and took her seat on the short end of the table, while Kerry took the chair to her right. "Not much choice in the matter. Balls in their court right now." She picked up her chopsticks and maneuvered them into the stir fry, which seemed to have shrimp and scallops in it, along with sauce covered vegetables of some kind.

Baby corns and bamboo shoots, Dar decided, munching on them. They both tasted more or less the same, with the sweet and spicy sauce on them. "This is really good."

"I'm glad you like it. I threw some different things in this time." Kerry smiled. "They had fresh scallops at the market."

"Yum."

"Yap."

Dar looked down, to find Mocha standing on his hind legs, his front paws scrabbling at her leg. "Excuse me, buddy. You got dinner already." She tapped him on the top of his little dome shaped skull. "Get down."

Chino came over, tail wagging. "Growf!"

"Neither of you get any of this." Dar said. "You'll be sick all over the tiles."

"How about a walk down the beach after dinner?" Kerry suggested. "It's nice out."

"Sure."

And so they did, getting Mocha's little puppy harness on him, but letting Chino free as they walked across the garden and let themselves out the back gate, and down the rock lined path to the water.

It was a nice night. Dar looped the leash over her wrist and slowed her pace, gazing out at the dark Atlantic ahead of them. There were lights on the horizon – a cargo ship, maybe – and the sky overhead was brilliant with stars. They strolled along the beach front in companionable silence, only the snuffling of the dogs and the soft hiss of the waves to be heard.

After a while, Kerry cleared her throat. "So, you saw those guys in the lot before we left?"

"Yeah." Dar agreed. "I don't think they made any trouble, or we'd have probably heard."

"Mm."

"They're so angry." Kerry remarked, in a thoughtful tone. "Isn't there anything the government can do for them?"

Dar exhaled, and walked along for a few paces. "You know, the problem is they don't like to showcase the fact that people who go into the military can come back in pieces. Either physically, or in their heads. Screws up recruitment."

Kerry peered at her in some astonishment.

"They want their funding to go to great new weapons, and sexy hardware." Her partner continued. "Not paying medical bills. That's why it's so hard to get them to admit to being responsible for things like PTSD. It's also why they don't like to admit stuff like that happens, because watching a soldier break down in tears and not be able to shoot is embarrassing to them, and, really bad for morale."

"That's..."

"Crappy. Sure." Dar agreed. "But it's universal. Look at New York. All those people, those workers and first responders having health issues and absolutely no one wants to say it's because they were down there breathing asbestos and ground glass for months."

Kerry thought about that for a few steps. "Your dad was so insistent we wear those masks."

"He knows."

Kerry sighed. "Humanity sucks sometimes."

"So I think they could and probably are doing some things to help those guys." Dar spoke up again. "But I think maybe it's not what they want to have done for them. Or not what they expect." She clarified. "I think they want what they see everyone else have, a home, a car, a job.. whatever – but there's no way to get them from where they are to there."

Long speech, for Dar. "So they come from having this job.. I mean, the military is like a job, right? You get paid, and you are valued for what you're doing, and they feed you and house you, then you come back here and..." She lifted a hand and let it fall. "It doesn't translate."

"Yeah."

"Wow."

"I mean, there's the GI Bill, and programs like that." Dar said. "But you go in and you're infantry, like those guys were. What do you do with that when you come back here? Even if they'll pay for you to go to college, you're starting from scratch, and you still need to live when you're in school."

"Wow." Kerry said, again. "I never thought about that."

"I saw that, when I was growing up." Her partner admitted. "Me.. I always had skills." She said, straightforwardly. "I knew that. I had a technical aptitude, and I was smart. For me, coming back wouldn't have been that much of a problem. I could find a job."

"You started working when you were what.. fourteen?" Kerry said. "So I get that. I was talking to my mother once about you, and going into the Navy, and she was just puzzled as to why you'd have wanted to, since you were so smart." She looped her arm with Dar's. "But maybe these guys didn't have any other options but either go into the military, or flip burgers?"

"Maybe." Dar said "But really, if you're skilled like I am, the military can be a good career. It's not a dead end, not for everyone."

"Like Gerry."

"Like Gerry. Or even my dad."

Dar's Handspring rang, and she fished it out of her pocket. "Hey." She said, after glancing at the caller ID. "What's up, Mark."

"Okay, so I'm here at Dave and Buster's with Pete." Mark said. "I ducked outside to call you so the noise wouldn't kill the reception."

"If you're at Dave and Busters, is he celebrating? Everything squared away?"

Mark sighed. "I wish." He said. "What a fucking mess. So, he met me here because he was afraid to even text me. The maniac over there told everyone if anyone leaked what went on they'd be fired, and then arrested."

"Not really possible, on being arrested." Dar said.

"No, I know, but you know?"

"I know."

"Anyway, so, of the two hundred people in ops IT, a hundred and fifty quit."

Dar's eyes popped wide open. "What?"

"That's who's here at Dave and Busters. They all just walked out." Mark said. "Its like old home week here – they saw me and went nuts."

"Holy shit." Dar covered her eyes, then glanced at Kerry. "Most of the IT department at ILS Miami walked out."

"Jesus!" Kerry sucked in an audible breath.

"Not only that." Mark said. "The dipshit told everyone that this whole mess was your fault."

Dar sighed. "That was expected."

"That's why people walked out." Mark said, a smile evident in his voice. "My whole old gang just said fuck you and wrapped their creds around that guys neck and left."

"Wow." Dar wasn't sure really what to say to that.

"And, they booted out the big cheese."

"Alastair?"

"Yeup – told him to take a hike, and he said he was more than happy to." Mark said. "That's why, I guess, he hasn't called ya."

"Holy shit." Dar repeated. "What the hell are they going to do?"

"Beats me. Beats Pete. He's the only one who stuck it out and he only did it because he's got this hard on to prove that jackass wrong and make the thing right"

"Uh huh." Dar thought a moment. "Does he want me to help?"

Mark muffled the call. "Yeah, I'm here.. hang on I'll be right back in there." He uncovered the mouthpiece. "Sure he does, but he's scared."

"Understandable."

"He's got a wife that's nine months preggers, and about to pop. They're living on his salary – he said that was the only reason he agreed to do my gig, it gave him a bump."

"Mark. If something happens to this guy because of something we did together, I'll take care of him." Dar said.

"I know. I told him that." Mark said. "But he's scared they're going to see that online forum thing. He wants to talk to you in person, see if there's something you can tell him to do."

"Oh. Sure." Dar said. "You want to bring him by the office tomorrow morning, early? I don't seriously think there's surveillance watching us."

"Can I bring him by your place tonight?"

Dar glanced at Kerry who was plastered to her chest listening, watching the blond head nod. "Sure." She said. "I'll leave your name at the ferry."

"Great. See ya soon." Mark said. "All right! I hear ya! I'm coming back!" He closed the line, and Dar hit the release button on her end.

"Holy crap." Kerry commented. "This is nuts."

"Total nuts." Dar exhaled, shaking her head. "Let's just hope I can give him some useful advice."

"Ugh."

**

Dar was back in her office, with Kerry perched on one end of the desk, and Mark and Peter sitting on the couch. She leaned on her elbows, mostly just listening as the young, tow haired man in jeans and a hoodie talked.

"So." Peter exhaled, taking a sip from the glass he held in both hands. "That's how it happened. Nobody really.. I mean, we looked at what he wanted us to do, but no one realized what it would.. I mean, do."

“Uh.” Dar grunted softly.

“So then.” Peter continued. “He made us reload all the routers from scratch. So we didn't have anything left to roll back to, and he said, he wanted to make this work, so he dumped the repository so we couldn't reload from backup.”

Kerry leaned forward a little. “That is criminally idiotic.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Peter nodded. “I tried to argue with him.”

“What you shoulda done is copy the repository off to an offline storage before you dumped it.” Mark said.
“What a fucking moron this guy is.”

“Well.” Dar spoke up for the first time in a while. “If what he thought was, that the configs were so proprietary he couldn't wrap his head around them, it would make sense to do it from scratch so he knew everything.”

The other three in the room stared at her.

Dar folded her hands. “I'm guessing he thought he could put his own configuration in, and it would work.”

“Uh.. I suppose, ma'am.” Peter said, meekly.

“I might have done the same thing.”

“Yeah, but the difference is your stuff would work.” Mark said. “Because you actually know how to do this.”

“That's true. But I'm guessing he thought he did too, because though I think he's an idiot in terms of management, no one is stupid enough to take down their whole company and put all their clients at risk a couple weeks into a new job.”

Peter nodded. “What pissed everyone off is, he tried to blame us first, then you.” He said. “He refused to man up and say it was him that caused the problem.”

Dar pondered that. “So. What does he want to do now? He want this fixed, or he want to sit there and have his ass on fire until he ends up having to redo everything which is going to take probably a month?”

“Up till today I'd have said he wanted to rig it.” Peter said, promptly. “But after everybody walked out, I saw him in ops and he was really freaked out. He told me I wasn't supposed to tell anyone but he needed to get this stuff working because some big customer was yelling.”

“Okay, that's good.” Dar said. “Because if he was going to stick to his original plan it would have never worked. The layout's not designed for anything but the metrics we had.”

Peter exhaled, and nodded. “I sorta thought maybe that was it.” He said. “That guy thinks you did something.”

“Well, I did.” Dar said, with a brief smile. “But everything I did is written down in the design documents. He didn't erase those too, did he?”

Peter shook his head. “No, he said he read those, that's why he wanted to make that change, said it would make things better.”

Dar studied his face, then she sighed. “All right. Ker's on the money. He's a moron.”

“We're you really trying to give him the benefit of the doubt?” Kerry gave her a puzzled look.

“Yes.” Dar leaned back in her chair. “If he had half a brain, then I could call him up and we could maybe just get this taken care of. But that kind of idiot doesn't back down – at this point, he can't. He has to go all the way with it or he's done.”

Mark nodded strenuously.

"Yeah." Peter agreed. "But at this point he's freaking. I think he'll let me get in there and try to fix stuff if you can tell me how."

"Should you?" Kerry asked, seriously, half turning to face her partner. "I know there's the issue with the military contracts, Dar, but honestly, should you go in there and make this right? Considering that they already are trying to blame you?"

Dar hitched her knee up and circled it with both hands, pondering in silence as the rest of them waited. "It's a valid question." She finally said. "I don't feel like I owe them anything, at this point." She took a breath and released it. "But I will be damned if my legacy at that place is going to be a colossal fuck up they're trying to paint my name on."

Everyone nodded in agreement, even Kerry. "I get it, hon." She said. "So let's figure out how to get it done."

"That's the hard part. I don't have any copies of the configs." Dar said. "I left everything in the repository so we'll have to depend on my memory to rebuild them."

"Sorry about that, ma'am." Peter looked glum. "Mark's right. I should have copied everything off before I deleted it."

"You guys really just made those changes without copying the config on a notepad at least?" Mark sounded incredulous. "What the hell, man?"

"Notepad." Dar muttered, suddenly, her eyes shifting off to one side. "What did that remind me of?"

"Well, let me go make some coffee. I'm guessing we're gonna need it." Kerry got up off the desk and headed for the kitchen, with Chino trotting behind her.

"You know, all of us probably did." Peter was saying mournfully. "But with all the crazy making, stuff was moving and systems got rebooted, and you know."

Mark got up. "Let me get my lappie. Maybe I did something illegal and crazy like left some copies on my personal external."

Dar made a clucking noise with her tongue.

"Hey boss, I know where that code repository came from." He gave Dar a wry look. "Even if it was all yours." He ducked out, and that left Dar and Peter alone in the office.

Peter looked profoundly uncomfortable.

Dar leaned forward again and rested her chin on her hand. "Weird, huh?"

He made a face. "Yes ma'am." He admitted. "Too much strange for me."

"Yeah, I can imagine." She responded, though she really couldn't. "Listen, let's start off by you calling me by my name, okay? I never was much for the ma'am stuff."

Peter smiled, uncertainly. "I sort of feel like I'm stuck between that rock and a hard place." He said. "I don't want to be a troublemaker, you know? I just want to go in and work and go home and enjoy my family."

Dar nodded. "I get that." She said. "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

He nodded vigorously.

"You could get nailed here, doing this." Dar went on. "But you don't have much of a choice. At least not until things start working again."

Peter relaxed visibly. "You get it."

Dar smiled at him. "Sorry, Peter." She said. "One way or another, I'll make this right for you. Promise." She watched his expression become more open. "I made things there the way I did so it would give the company an advantage. Not to be a jackass."

Now he smiled. "Yes ma.. I mean, yes. We all knew that. Even Mr. Jose said that, in the big meeting we had yesterday. He said no matter what that guy said or what he thought, you did the right things."

Ah, Jose. Dar felt a little tickled. "He should know, because no matter how much he and I disagreed he did the right things too, for the company."

Peter nodded. "The guy said Mr. Jose was stupid, then everyone started yelling, and we all just left."

That, unfortunately, Dar could easily imagine. She'd been in enough of those meetings. With a sigh she leaned back, and her knee bumped the desk drawer, nudging it open. She reached over to shut it, then paused, when she saw the edge of something inside the drawer and pulled it all the way open.

"Huh." She took out the old Palm inside, and examined it, then fished around in the drawer for the charger. "Now I wonder." She plugged it in and waited for it to start up. "Wonder if I left any notes in there from last year."

Kerry came back in with a thermos and some cups, setting them down on Dar's desk. "Whatcha got there, hon?"

"My old PDA." Dar said. "I might have saved some of my notes from when I was doing the rig at the Rock."

Mark came back in with his laptop and a small case hung around his neck. "I think I've got the mesh diagram." He said, sitting down and opening the laptop. "I was gonna have it printed out and laminated."

Dar looked up at him and frowned. "What?"

"Keep surfing." Kerry nudged her.

Peter got up and timidly started fixing himself a cup of coffee "Been a really long day." He said, by way of explanation. "It's really nice of you all to let us come over here. It's a really pretty place."

"No problem. Dar would tell you most likely that she prefers our cabin down south" Kerry said, handing over a small ceramic jug of creamer. "And, actually, so do I."

Dar focused past the conversation and started to root through the PDA as it finished booting up. She took out the stylus and tapped around, looking at the mail, then closing that and calling up a note program she remembered using. There were several folders, randomly named and she clicked on one.

After a moment, she blinked and closed it. She shook her head and opened a second, tilting the screen so she could read the text. She closed that, and clicked on the next. "I keep the weirdest crap." She muttered. "Ah." She sat back and regarded the PDA. "I think this might be... yeah. The config for the two big routers in Miami."

"Cool." Mark came over and looked over her shoulder. "Yeah, that's them."

"Mm. I saved a copy before I did the changes to make the reroute at the Rock work." Dar gave him a droll look. "So at least I can't feel hypocritical about it."

"Those were a lot of changes."

"They were." Dar sent the note to her private email from the PDA and waited for her desktop to pick it up. Then she regarded it, and sent it to the printer. "Okay, let's see what this gets us."

**

Kerry was laying on the couch, her head resting on the arm and her legs extended out and crossed at the ankles. Mocha was sleeping on her chest, and Chino was curled up just past her feet, and she was listening idly to Dar giving Mark and Peter some last instructions at the door.

Then the door closed. She turned her head and opened one eye, to see her partner heading her way. "Think it'll work?"

"Probably not." Dar came over and paused, as Kerry sat up and she slid into the empty place on the couch then pulled the blond woman back down on top of her. "If they let him make the changes, there's probably even more changes in there that I haven't seen that'll screw things up."

"Ugh."

"I need to just go in there and do it." Dar acknowledged mournfully.

"You need to concentrate on making that demo for Congress." Kerry objected. "Dar, I know you want to make this right, but there's only so much you can do."

"Ugh." Dar sighed. She put her arms around Kerry and hugged her. "Well, we'll see what happens. Maybe he'll work it out, He's a bright kid."

Kerry patted her leg. "Then lets go to bed. It's two am. Tomorrow is going to suck."

Dar remained in place. "You pissed off that I'm doing this?" She asked. "You seem like it."

Her partner sighed. "I'm not. I mean, I'm not pissed off at you." She clarified. "I'm just pissed off that ILS can't seem to let go of us. I want out of it. I don't want to worry about them sending lawyers after us, and blaming us for stuff, and.. you know."

"Mm. Sorry."

"It frustrates me." Kerry admitted. "I just want that part of our life to be over, and it seems like all they want to do is suck us back into it." She looked up at Dar's profile. "But I get it, Dar. I know you spent a good part of your life there, and you can't just let it go so easily."

Dar smiled at her, with open and sweet affection. "I love you." She said. "I'm glad you get that because I don't want us to fight with each other over it."

"I don't want us to fight over anything." Kerry responded.

"Yeah, that's no fun."

They untangled themselves and got up, Kerry carefully letting the sleepy eyed Mocha down on the ground. "There you go, little man. You want a piddle stop before we go to bed?"

"Growf." Chino jumped down and yawned, stretching her paws out. Then she trotted over to the dog door and through it, with Mocha galloping behind her.

Kerry wandered into the kitchen and leaned on the counter, watching the dogs in the garden as the motion sensitive lights came on. She turned her head as Dar entered, coming over to stand next to her, gazing outside with her arms folded over her chest.

Kerry edged over and let her head rest against Dar's shoulder, pausing to give the skin there a kiss. "Can I come with you to Washington?"

"Want to come with me to DC?" Dar asked at the same time. They looked at each other, then started chuckling.

"We're sappy useless poster children for bad romance novels, you know that?" Kerry sighed. "I sometimes feel like our lives are set to Disney princess music."

"Aw."

"Though, I'll keep you company right up to the door to the senate chambers. I don't think my presence will win you any points at all in there." Kerry leaned on the counter with her elbows. "I'd like to talk to Bridges team about implementation."

"Sure." Dar agreed. "Let's get the pooches, and sack out. Maria can make the arrangements tomorrow."

Back in the bedroom, Kerry put Mocha down on the floor after wiping his dew drenched feet, watched him march over into Chino's bed and curl up in it, then did the same as she listened to Dar humming in the bathroom.

It was really late, and she was tired. Kerry got under the covers and turned out the bedside lamp, putting her head down as Dar came back in and joined her, making the water bed rock a little. She waited for her partner to settle, then she eased over and curled up against Dar's right side.

They had three hours to get some sleep and... Kerry paused, sliding her arm across Dar's stomach. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar replied, her resonant tones making Kerry's ears tickle just a trifle.

"Can we be late to work tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"We own the company."

"We do." Dar agreed. "Once you teach Mayte how to handle your stuff, you can spend the day with your feet up on your desk writing poetry and no one's gonna say word one to you."

Kerry had to stop and think about that for a minute. "Except that someone I know taught me one of the golden rules is to lead by example." She felt Dar chuckle silently. "So I really can't do that unless you're going to use those poems as the basis of a new client offering."

"True, but we can still go to work late tomorrow." Dar said. "It's not always a bad thing to let the staff work things out on their own. Y'know."

Kerry lifted her head and gave her partner a wry look.

"Yeah, okay, let's wait to see how we feel when the sun rises."

**

As it turned out, the morning wasn't nearly as painful as Kerry had feared. They woke only a half hour later than the alarm would have normally sounded and with mutual shrugs, they got up and got about their usual routine.

"C'mon kids." Kerry zipped up her light jacket, waiting for Mocha and Chino to come trotting over. "Let's go in the car, for a ride to the office. You ready?"

Chino twirled around in a circle and barked, while Mocha eyed her warily.

Dar got her backpack on her shoulder and joined them, her head bent as she texted a message on her Handspring. "Asking Mark if he heard anything." She picked up Mocha and followed Kerry out the door.

They were taking Kerry's car and she hopped up into the driver's seat, after letting Chino up into the back seat where she curled up on the fuzzy dog blanket attached to the leather that conveniently kept her from sliding around.

"It's fun taking these guys with us." Dar commented, as Mocha stood up on her knee and looked out the window. "You know what I was just thinking? For the demo I think I'd like to tie in to a simulated Internet node back here."

"Like, fake traffic?" Kerry asked.

"Yeah, we don't really have any way of tying in for real yet."

"I have a call in to AT&T and Level 3. They aren't happy, but they knew this was coming." Kerry remarked. "Do we know yet where they're going to want the private circuits dropped, and who's paying for them?"

Dar let her head rest against the seat. "They're paying for them, but that's a good question. I have to find out who's supposed to order them, and make sure they're the right size." She glanced at Kerry. "Good thing you're going with me."

Kerry grinned.

"Same thing for Gerry's project, but that will be a mesh. We already talked about it. They're going to house the central database in the Pentagon."

"Good." Kerry headed west on the causeway. "I'll work with them in a remote support circuit for you."

Dar grunted in contentment, then glanced down as her Handspring buzzed. "Ah."

Hey boss. Pete's in with the big dude now, he's going to text me when he gets out. He told him he found an old config saved to a switch NVRAM.

She reached around Mocha and typed a response. *If the dickwad kicks him out, have him come over.*

You got it.

Dar thumbed through her messages, and frowned.

Now that it was the light of day, Dar realized her attitude towards the problem had changed a little. Maybe Kerry's uncertainty had affected her, but she had to acknowledge that there was a sense of irritation in her when she thought about having to dedicate her personal resources to a company that now really held very little affection in her heart.

It felt fickle. She wasn't entirely happy with her motivations. She felt caught between guilt and outrage and it was giving her a stomach ache. "Hey Ker?"

"Yes, o love of my life?"

"What do you think about us just getting a datacenter for test systems? Not ever hosting clients there?" Dar asked. "I don't know that I want to be in the services side of the house."

Kerry considered that as she turned into Coconut Grove, and headed for the office. "You mean, just do what our web site claims – custom systems and solutions?" She asked. "Deliver it, and the only support we do is for the software itself?"

"Uh huh."

"Hm. Let me think about it."

"If we did that, there's no way ILS could ever come back at us, because we're really not doing anything they do." Dar continued. "Matter of fact, I don't really want to do any of the stuff that they do, because I'm kinda tired of being on the hook for everyone's bottom line."

"You're just deciding this now?"

"This router thing is pissing me off." Dar admitted. "I was thinking about it since we got up and its just getting me madder and madder when I think about that warthog trying to weenie waggle to make his bones and then becoming a neuter when it comes to taking responsibility for it."

Kerry pulled into one of the parking spots. "Colorful." She said, as she put the car in park and turned it off. "Let's just get past the next seven days, then we can talk about it, okay?" She patted Dar's leg. "I am going to call Richard though and let him know what's going on."

Dar got out and put Mocha down, then retrieved her backpack and got it settled. "Maybe we'll get lucky and it'll all go away."

"Really think that's going to happen?"

"Meh."

**

Dar rolled her trackball a little, moving the wire frame diagram across the screen and observing the results. She switched over to a command line session and pecked out a few commands, then switched back, issuing an approving grunt and rerunning the process.

It wouldn't be an elegant demonstration. Dar looked at the plain screen, which was a simple black background with fields in magenta, green and yellow. It used very straightforward instructional text, and the boxes and outlines around it were only there to make it look relatively functional.

She typed in a query and ran it against the test repository in the server room, and the screen chewed over it for a minute, then spit out a response.

"Hm." Dar went back into the command line screen and revised some of the lines, then recompiled it, and tried the query again. This time the results were more acceptable, and she moved on to her next task.

She could hear Kerry talking with someone next door, and after a moment, she recognized the other voice in the room as Colleen's, their relaxed tones and the crinkle of paper meaning that lunch was probably going to be delivered to her any minute now.

"Hey hon." Kerry entered, carrying a bag. "Tacos."

"Yum."

"Making progress?"

"Yep." Dar slid her chair sideways and moved over to the open area of her desk. "I've got the query engine working at least. I still have to figure out how to demonstrate the autonomic parser."

"Oo. Sexy." Kerry sorted out her tacos and put her drink down. "That small business conference called back. They already have a keynote speaker, but I think this guy must have seen that Miami Herald piece because he told me he'd like you to do a half hour presentation on anything you want if you want."

Dar chuckled.

"Do you want?"

"I want." Dar said. "Tell them I'll do.. " She pondered a minute as she unwrapped a taco. "Thirty minutes on using B to B networking to boost business between small business owners."

Kerry eyed her. "Really?"

"Sure." Dar licked a bit of sauce off her fingers. "C'mon, Ker. It's a small business convention. I can't go in there and start talking about routing tables or database structures."

"No, that's true." Kerry said. "But I think that's more a speech I would give."

Dar's eyebrows twitched. "So then you give it?" She suggested. "Think up a topic for me and just let me know what it is." She swallowed, then chased the mouthful down with a sip of ice coffee. "I can do one that's IT related, but I think general's better."

"Let me think of one." Kerry reached over and ruffled her hair. "It's next Monday and Tuesday, then Maria has us flights booked for Wednesday for DC."

"Cool."

"I've got a project management meeting with two clients this afternoon. I'm going to have Mayte sit in with me, and see if I can let her run with them."

Dar lifted one hand with her thumb pointed up. "You should see if we can get her PMO certified, and then get her some baby PM's to work with her."

Kerry smiled, then she wagged her fingers good bye and went back to her own office.

Dar finished her tacos and sucked the last of her coffee down, disposing of the wrappers in her cobalt blue garbage can before she turned back to her screen and started up her program again.

White on black or black on white? Dar pondered the difference, calling up an image in her head of doing a presentation. For the military guys, white on black. For the politicians? "Hey Ker?"

"Yes?" Kerry stuck her head in the door opening.

"What's your mother's favorite color?"

"What?"

**

Dar set her backpack down near the receptionist's desk and diverted around the hall, walking around to the side corridor and past the closed door to the HR department. She went a little further, and slowed, pausing at the door to the tech support office and sticking her head inside.

Scott was there, at his desk. He was still the only support person on staff, so the other cubes were empty, but there were a few things on the shelves of his, a cup, and a little canteen, and a rock. He didn't hear her stop, his head was bent over an open PC case and he was carefully assembling the parts inside.

Mark so far had been reasonably satisfied with his new guy. Scott had performed the several maintenance tasks he'd been given with competence, and he'd been on time every morning.

More than on time, actually. Mark said he'd been on the front porch waiting when the first person had gotten there, freshly showered and ready to work.

Even more than that, Dar leaned against the door frame, folding her arms. Watching him work on the PC, there was a sense of contentment she couldn't have imagined seeing before.

Not wanting to disturb that, she silently pushed off the frame and stepped back, turning once she'd gotten past the accounting office and heading back to the empty receptionist's desk where she spotted Kerry and their pets waiting for her. "Hey."

"Potty break?" Kerry asked.

"No.. wanted to see how our new tech was doing." Dar picked up her backpack and slung it on her shoulder then took Mocha from Kerry's arms. "Seems okay."

"Col said he doesn't talk much." Kerry opened the door for her. "Just comes in and sits there and fiddles with things."

"Exactly what you want a tech support guy to do." Dar closed the door behind her. "Mark said he was working on something, that he'd close up."

"Any word from Peter?"

"Nope." Dar opened the back door of the SUV for Chino, and then got in the passenger seat with Mocha. "He knows how to get in touch if he needs to. I don't want to push it."

"Wise woman." Kerry opened the driver's door and paused, as she caught motion from the corner of her eye. She turned and hopped up onto the seat, half closing the door against her legs. "Dar."

"I see." Dar was already putting Mocha in the back seat and opening her own door, sliding out and coming around the front of the SUV to stand between Kerry's door and the oncoming figures.

"Who said chivalry was dead?" Kerry leaned her arms on the door frame.

Dar cleared her throat. "What can we do for you, folks?" She addressed the group of veterans, who had come just close enough for her latent defensive instincts to prick, making her hands flex.

"Got the cops on the speed dial." Kerry commented. "So don't get too spunky."

"Okay, so look." Joe, the group leader aka pastor said. "We're not gonna hurt you."

"No, you're not." Dar agreed readily. "I'm not in the mood for you, you're standing between me and a romantic dinner with my spouse, and I'm going to kick you in the head if you don't clear out."

The pastor put his hands on his hips. "Look, lady, cut the crap, okay I just got a question for you."

Kerry saw it start to happen and debated closing her eyes. She heard Chino bark in outrage just as Dar moved, and the next moment the Labrador squirmed past her and out the door, racing over to get in front of her partner with a growl.

Joe jumped back and held his hands up, and Dar made a grab for their unexpectedly ferocious pet. "Chino!"

"Growf!" The large blond dog bared her teeth, and the thick fur along her spine lifted up.

The other men just blinked at her. "Holy shit you weren't kidding." The one who had been fighting in front of the office said. "Keep that dog away from us."

"I'm not kidding." Dar said, as she warily watched them. "I'm tired of you all messing with us. Leave us the hell alone."

"You're the one who keeps screwing with us!" The man said, edging in front of Joe. "What did you do with Wheels, huh?"

"His name is Scott." Kerry spoke up from her perch in the driver's seat.

"What?"

"His name is Scott." She repeated. "And what we did with him is we hired him."

"That little son of a bitch.. he crossed us." The man said to Joe. "You said he was going to hold out."

Dar got her hand on Chino's collar and backed up, until she hit the front of the truck with her butt and stopped. "He didn't. No reason for him to. This is a right to work state. I can hire whoever I want."

"He said..." Joe started, then stopped. "We ain't seen him for a few days."

Dar shrugged. "Not my problem."

The other man eyed her. "You really hired Wheels?"

Joe stepped up and got in front of him. "Never mind that, Cliff. If he screwed us, he did. Just let him know not to come back around looking for us, lady. He won't get anymore help."

"Great." Kerry said. "I bet that'll make all of us happy." She grabbed Mocha, who had climbed up onto her lap to see what was going on. "But in answer to your question, Cliff, we really did hire him to do tech support for us, and so far he's done a good job."

"Let's go." Joe turned and shoved him back, and pointed back the way they'd come. "We found out what we come to."

Dar stayed where she was until they disappeared, then she turned and regarded her partner. "They made our dog growl." She looked down at Chino, who had seated herself on the tarmac, tongue lolling. "I never heard her do that before."

Chino looked up with innocent brown eyes.

"They did." Kerry said. "And you know, I think we might have done some good this time. Maybe these guys'll leave him alone now."

"Mm." Dar didn't sound convinced, but she opened the back door again. "Get in there, madam ferocious."

Chino jumped up and sat down, wagging her tail, and sniffing at Mocha who scrambled back to join her.

Dar had gone around and gotten in the passenger seat, her head bent as she texted. "Just want Mark to know what happened, so he can tell his newbie to watch his back."

"You think they'll do anything? I think they're all talk." Kerry started up the engine. "Just like that guy was when he broke into our office. All bullshit."

"That could be." Dar said. "Let's get out of here before something else happens."

"You got it."

"Ker, they made our dog growl."

**

Dar walked to the bow of the boat, using the freshwater hose to rinse off the fiberglass as the early morning sun bathed her. She whistled softly under her breath, glancing around at the crowded marina as she continued to work.

In the winter season, a lot of residents brought their boats in – or – more accurately, had their boats brought in from the Mediterranean, or from South America and almost every slip was filled. That made the docks crowded, and Dar was glad she'd gotten out early before everyone started moving about.

Seas looked good offshore, and after she finished cleaning, and stocking the boat she and Kerry planned on a reef trip off Key Biscayne and a picnic lunch on the water.

She finished rinsing off the deck and stowed the hose, walking around the side and down into the back section of the Dixie. Their gear was already out on the bench seats, and there was a basket of grapes and apples sitting on the waterproof table awaiting her attention.

She worked a grape off its stem and popped it into her mouth, enjoying the crisp coolness of it as she bit into it. She paused to take a second, then stood quietly as she noted a man walking down the dock with a purposeful stride coming in her direction.

Wasn't someone she knew. He had a pair of dark blue sweatpants and a white sweatshirt on and he came right up to the slip and put his hand on one of the piers, leaning in towards her. "You Roberts?"

A number of answers occurred to Dar, who didn't feel like she wanted her Saturday morning to start with an asshole. She sighed inwardly, though. "Yes." She answered, briefly.

He nodded. "My name's Roger Post. I know you've got no idea who I am, but a friend of mine who works for AT and T said he knows you, and said I should talk to you." The man said. "And coincidentally, I was in the market and heard you call in for supplies so I asked them where I could find you."

Well, that could be damn near anything. "C'mon aboard." Dar said, in a genial tone, indicating the two chairs on the deck. "I'm going to head out in a while, but I've got a few minutes to talk."

The man nodded, and stepped over onto the transom, then onto the deck with the skill and ease of someone well used to boats. "Thanks." He held a hand out. "Sorry to just barge in here. Thanks for being decent about it."

Dar took a seat and he did also. "What can I do for you?"

"Here's the thing." Post said. "I won't waste your time, or mine. But I'm bankrolling a startup who's going to offer private networking, and Internet surfing, to high end clients."

"Okay." Dar said, slowly. "For what purpose?"

"Avoid the snoopers." Post said promptly. "You've seen the headlines, people wanting to be able to watch where people are going, snoop into their business. I want to make systems that let people go where they want on the Internet, and not be afraid of someone watching them."

The irony made Dar smile. "I can see there would be a market." She said. "Why hunt me down? In case you missed the story in the Herald, the government's one of my clients."

"I know." He said. "That's why I wanted to talk to you. I want to hire you to tell me how to get around things."

Dar studied him. "Around what things?"

"C'mon." The man smiled at her. "We all know they're tapping the Internet. My buddy at ATT told me they've got those big black boxes looking at everything."

Dar was almost shocked until she remembered who had suggested that to the government "Well." She laced her fingers. "If they have big black boxes in line at the ISP level, you can't get around it."

Post gazed at her. "Can't?"

Dar shook her head. "Can't. If the data stream goes through those boxes, you can't avoid your traffic going through them. The only way to get around that is buy point to point circuits between your clients and whatever they want to connect to."

"That's expensive."

"Yup." Dar said. "And not very practical if you want to surf the Internet."

"Damn. That's what Chuck said." He sighed.

"Even if you encrypted the channel." Dar said. "A good hardware based decrypt encrypt card with spoofed certificates could get around it. My advice to you, and your clients? If you want something to stay private, don't let it out of your control. Don't use the Internet to send it."

He frowned.

Dar studied him for a moment. "Or have their porn or pirated stuff delivered on a hard drive. I mean seriously." She said with a smile. "Just don't do it."

"They're not doing illegal things." He said. "They just don't want anyone to see what they're doing. They think that's a right, you know?"

"I do." Dar agreed "Why not talk to my former employers? They can set up a private net if they're serious about that, and can pay for it. With a proxy out to the Internet, on their own backbone."

"Yeah?"

"ILS." Dar said. "They absolutely can do that."

The man thought about that for a minute. "Would they want to do that?"

Dar lifted her hands and then let them fall. "Depends on what the project scope was. There's nothing illegal in setting up a private Internet. They would want common carrier protection though. They wouldn't want to know what you were running over it."

He paused and thought again. "Can't we just do... what do you call them, a virtual private thing?"

Dar's eyebrows twitched a little. "Sure. You can make a VPN to a specific end point. That encrypts the traffic from you, to that endpoint, but then you still need to go out onto the Internet."

"Huh."

"Mm." Dar's eyes twinkled a little bit. "Most of the time, people we... I mean, that I used to deal with when doing projects for ILS were more concerned about not letting their people surf things on the Internet than protecting them while they were doing it."

He nodded. "There's just not a lot of trust out there these days" He said. "People want their privacy and they don't want anyone in their business."

They both heard footsteps and the patter of dog toenails approaching, and Dar looked over to see Kerry heading their way. "I'm not sure you can have it both ways." She said. "All the freedom of the public Internet and privacy too."

Post sighed. "There has to be a way." He said. "Some way to make just looking around anonymous." He got up as Kerry neared the boat. "But I know you've got things to do, so thanks for the chat at any rate." He offered his hand, which Dar took and pressed. "Have a good morning."

"You too." Dar agreed, as he hopped off the boat onto the dock, and gave Kerry a brief smile as he passed her.

"C'mon, Chi." Dar got up and walked over as the dog gathered herself and hopped on board. "Glad you showed up." She added to Kerry.

"What was that all about?" Kerry stepped over onto the deck, putting Mocha down to go sniff. "New neighbor?"

"Something like." Dar opened the door to the cabin, stepping back as Chino hustled inside ahead of her. "Guy was looking for someone to build him something that lets people Internet surf without being eavesdropped on."

Kerry stopped and regarded her in surprise. "Really?"

"Mm."

"Interesting coincidence?"

Dar shrugged. "I'm going to get the hamsters going. Untie us?" She headed up the ladder onto the flying bridge and got herself settled behind the controls. She started up the engines and checked the gauges, listening to the sound as they rumbled to life.

"Okay, we're clear." Kerry climbed up and sat down next to her as she gently applied power. "I locked the dogs inside in case they get any funny ideas about jumping overboard."

"So I hear." Dar swung the bow out as she got clear of the dock and started out of the packed marina. "Here we go."

Kerry put her feet up on the lower shelf of the console and leaned back, as the breeze picked up around them. "So that was an interesting visit."

"It was. Not sure if it was a legit question, or something someone's floating out because of the press we just got, or someone fishing me from inside the CIA."

"CIA?"

Dar smiled. "You never know. I told them to go talk to ILS about building his clients a private network."

Kerry started laughing. "You didn't"

"I did. Why not? They do that." Dar replied. "I figured regardless of the reason for the question, that won't get me in too much trouble. He said someone from ATT sent him. Think that was your buddy?"

"I think I should ask him." Kerry said. "I don't really like the timing of that, Dar. Maybe it was someone from ILS wanting to cause us trouble."

"Ker."

"You never know, right?" Her partner said, pointedly. "Frankly, I would rather it have been the CIA, testing us to see if we were going to spill some details on the project. That, at least, would make sense to me."

"This guy said he knew about the black box they've got tapping everything." Dar said, after a brief pause. "I told him there's no way to get around that."

Kerry frowned. "Is that really true?"

"The box being there, or not being able to get around it?"

"Yes."

Dar nudged the throttles forward as they cleared the entrance to the marina. "I think the first one's true since you told them to go do that." She eyed her partner, who made a face. "Yeah, I know. As to the second? From a technical perspective, given that it would be an in line tap, there is no physical way to avoid it."

"But?"

Dar remained silent for a moment, as she adjusted the engines. "Should I be looking for a way around it?"

Kerry merely looked at her.

"Good point."

**

It was long past dark as Dar piloted the boat back into the harbor, the engines rumbling softly as she made her way between the lines of yachts to either side.

There were a few people still out on the piers, some coiling up hoses, others moving boxes of supplies from the land onto the boats, and there was a cascade of light but curiously musical clanking of the riggings as the boats moved slightly on the tide.

Their slip was one of the outer ones, and Dar had no problem maneuvering the boat into it, cutting the engines and sliding in a little sideways as they eased against the bumpers and Kerry hopped off to tie them up.

It was quiet once she shut power down, the soft creak of the wooden pilings and the scuff of Kerry's footsteps sounding loud and distinct. Dar relaxed a moment, flexing her hands out and letting them rest on her thighs before she got up from the console and turned to head down the ladder.

At the top of it she paused, hearing her pocketed cell phone start to ring. She pulled it out and answered it. "Hello?"

"Hello, Dar?"

She hesitated. "Yes... Jacques?"

There was a faint sigh on the other end. "Yes, it is me. May we speak for a moment?"

Dar went back over to the console and sat down. "Sure." She said. "So long as you're not calling me to threaten me with a lawsuit, in which case I'll give you my lawyer's number or call me an asshole."

Jacques chuckled briefly. "No, it is neither. Though I am sure you know my colleagues wish nothing better than to try and throw some legal trouble your way."

"Nice thanks for a job well done." Dar remarked dryly. "Hope they all step off a cliff and croak."

He sighed again. "Let us put that aside for a time as at this moment there are other things occupying their attention. I suppose you know what is going on?"

Dar leaned back and considered. "Yes." She said, briefly. "I know what's going on. But if you're wondering if I had anything to do with it the answer is no."

"No, we know that." Jacques responded, surprisingly. "If that was the case, so much as I respect you there would already be legal filings in process. You understand?"

"Sure."

"So there has been an investigation, yes? In no way was it found out that you had any part in this massive failure." He said. "In that, you did not participate, that is what is understood."

Kerry climbed up onto the flying bridge and paused, looking questioningly at her. "Trouble?"

Dar shrugged. "Jacques." She mouthed silently.

Kerry rolled her eyes. "Going to take the dogs in and get dinner." She patted Dar's leg and retreated down the steps again.

"Okay, so why the phone call then?" Dar asked. "Jacques, honestly, I'm sorry someone screwed things up so colossally, no one wanted that."

"Yes, I knew you would think so." Jacques said. "The mistake that was made, was underestimating your influence. So let me ask you a few questions if I may do so?"

"Sure."

Jacques paused to compose himself. "This thing that went wrong, do you think it was a thing done on purpose?"

Dar's brows contracted a little. "Not sure what you mean." She said. "If someone went in and made changes, sure that was on purpose. It's very hard to accidentally log yourself into a device and type things into it."

"No, no, yes I understand that the action was purposeful." Jacques said. "But do you think that the intent, the changes being made, were done on purpose to cause us harm?"

Oh. Completely different question. "Ah. You mean, was the change done to screw things up on purpose?"

"Yes."

"Have no clue." Dar said, honestly. "From what I heard, it was done to put someone's mark up. You know what that means?"

"Not so much."

Dar considered. "There's a lot of me in those systems." She clarified. "Seemed to me like someone wanted to take that out and put their own stamp on it."

"Ah."

"So, was it done on purpose? Sure. But was it done maliciously?" Dar shrugged. "I don't know the guy and I don't want to guess at his motives. Seems like a stupid, and very public screw up though."

Jacques considered that in silence for a moment. "The investigation, it was just finished earlier and the report I was given said there was bad intent in the action."

Dar folded her arms and leaned back against the console. "Making the change I could believe was honest desire to take my rep down." She said. "But making it impossible to go back? Either that was ego way larger than mine, Jacques, or.. yeah, maybe there was something behind it."

Jacques grunted softly.

He was one of the few board members Dar liked. She had developed a respect for his practicality, and what she'd felt was an honest desire to simply attend to business, caring more about share value and making money than any politics behind it.

"What are you going to do, Jacques?" Dar asked, after a long silence.

"I have taken the chairman's slot, yes?" He said. "After some contention."

Dar could only imagine that. Jacques had been one of Alastair's biggest allies on the board. "Would have liked to have seen that dogfight."

He chuckled dryly again. "I believe you can fix this problem, yes?"

"Probably. But I'm not going to." Dar responded, a little surprised to hear herself say the words. "That would be bad for both of us."

"Yes, exactly so." He agreed in a mild tone. "I had no intention of asking you to do so. Which I would think maybe surprises you?"

"Depends on how desperate I think you are." Now it was Dar's turn to chuckle a little. "C'mon, Jacques. You didn't call me just to pass the time of day."

He cleared his throat. "To be sure, I did call just to advise you of my new position." He said, in a careful tone. "And also, to see if you would speak with me and not just hang up the telephone."

"I would never do that Jacques. You were always fair with me." Dar said. "I'm glad you took charge. You've got an even hand and you've been in the mix a long time." She pushed off the console and went to the rail, looking out over the harbor.

"You were very close with Alastair." Jacques said. "He continually defended you, and that's what was the reason for his leaving."

"And Hamilton's I'm guessing." Dar said.

"Now that is an interesting story. Hamilton was let go yes, because he refused to follow the board's directions. But..." Jacques paused. "He is also a large stockholder, and threatened to bring suit against the board if they brought suit against you."

Dar was charmed. "Good for him."

"So this brings me to the real reason for this conversation." Jacques said. "I would like to ask you for your opinion. I would like you tell me, Dar, what you would do if you were in my position, to resolve all these difficulties."

"Huh."

"We have many people who have left. We have systems that are not doing well. We have customers who are very upset at us, and contracts at risk. What would you do to resolve that?"

Dar was silent for a few minutes, thinking. "You need those people who left more than you need anyone's egos, or to save face." She said, finally. "You'll never get them back if you keep your new guys. Get rid of them, and call the people who walked out and ask them to come back. Including Hamilton."

"It would be very difficult for me to get the backing enough to do that." Jacques sounded regretful. "There is quite a lot of pride involved."

"Money trumps pride." Dar said, bluntly. "They want to lose money? They keep going down this route you'll lose everything. One of your customers has already called me and said they were thinking of terminating your contracts."

"Do they want to offer them to you?"

"Yes, but I don't want them. It's not the direction I want my new company to go." Dar told him honestly. "I would rather you repair that relationship and keep them."

Jacques sighed. "Your opinion in fact walks side by side with mine. I just do not know that I can make this collection of people on the board go along with it." He said. "Dar, I thank you for taking your time on this Saturday night to speak with me. I wish you good luck with your new enterprise, though it seems to me you don't need it as you are doing quite well."

"We are." Dar said. "At the rate we're going, we're going to be able to hire all the people who walked out on you so if you're smart, get those board asses turned around before you lose the chance to make things right."

He chuckled softly. "Do you need an investor?"

"When we're ready for that, I know who to call." Dar replied. "Gotta go. I just parked my boat and it's getting nippy out here."

"Thank you, Dar. I can't say I will be able to follow your advice, but it's good to have it." Jacques said. "Good night to you, and please give my regards to your house mate."

House mate. Dar pinched the bridge of her nose. "Well, I've heard her called worse. I will." She said.
"Good night, Jacques. Good luck."

She hung up the phone and stuck it in her pocket, before she closed the weather proofing around the console and retreated back down onto the main deck. She checked the door to make sure it was locked, then she hopped off the boat and onto the dock, walking along the wooden pier past the rows of gently bobbing yachts.

As she came up onto the marina side, she detoured past the path leading back to the condo and went into the little island store instead.

"Good evening, ma'am." The cashier greeted her as she entered. 'We have fresh stone crabs, and hand churned chocolate ice cream today."

Dar paused, and eyed her. "You sure have us pegged." She remarked, with a smile. "Give me a pound of each."

"Yes'm." The cashier smiled back, a fresh faced young girl with dark streaked blond hair pulled back into a neat pony tail. "We like to keep track of our nicer residents."

Dar brought the box of dog biscuits up to the counter and put it down, waiting as the cashier put together a goodie bag for her. "Are there residents who aren't nice?"

"Oh sure." The girl put the bag on the counter and took Dar's resident's card, sliding it into her system. "I mean, there are all kinds of people everywhere, you know what I mean?"

"Sure." Dar took her card back. "I've run into some idiots here. But most everyone minds their own business."

"Most people do, but some people act like because they live here, it gives them carte blanche to treat everyone who works on the island like servants. We're not."

Dar blinked. "Do they?"

"They do. A man was in here about twenty minutes ago." The girl said, obviously remembering with irritation. "He got all ticked off at me because we didn't have fresh goats milk." She handed over Dar's package. "He actually took a bottle of the stuff we had and threw it against the wall. Can you believe it?"

Dar took her items and shook her head. "There are jerks in the world." She said. "That seems like a crazy thing to get mad about though."

The girl shrugged. "He's rich." She said. "His family owns like ten properties, and they go from one to the other. He's got a big sailboat, and a personal assistant. His name's Grossner – do you know him?"

"Nope." Dar said. "I don't think we travel in the same circles." She smiled. "I actually work for a living."

"Right?" The girl waved. "Good night ma'am. Have a nice weekend."

"Thanks." Dar pushed the door open and started down the path, with a thoughtful expression. The gravel crunched under her sandals, and she hooked the bag by one finger and slung it over her shoulder.

How narrow a life did you need to have to worry about goats milk? She pondered that as she passed between the ring of trees and started to cut across the golf course towards their home. Or was that a different perspective you got when you had so much that worrying about the basics of life never happened, and so you focused on the sharp points of tiny details.

Was that part of what was wrong with the board members? Dar began to whistle softly under her breath. Had they become so used to constant success and plenty that being faced with what amounted to corporate

mutiny left them unable to figure out what to do, so what they did was flail around and fire bullets in a circle hoping to hit something that would make them feel better?

Hm.

She heard the soft chatter of the sprinklers on the course and glanced ahead to see if they were going to douse her. The path ahead was clear of water, but there were two tall figures moving in her direction and she shifted to one side of the gravel to make space for them to pass.

"I'm telling you, Tom, that kid was asking for it." One of the men was saying as they came even with her. He glanced briefly up at Dar, then lifted a hand. "Evening."

"Evening." Dar responded cordially, moving past.

"Yeah, she might have been, but you should keep in check, Billy." The man said as they moved away.
"This is a small place. Word gets around."

"Like I could care? We'll just pay whoever's in charge off. I'm going to go get what was coming to me." The voices echoed softly, trickling back to Dar's ears from where she'd come to a halt on the path.

Coincidence? Or was that goat's milk boy on his way to bring more trouble to the kid in the store.

Dar regarded the sky overhead with a somber look, then she smiled a little, acknowledging that old crusader label maybe wasn't so far off after all. With a sigh, she turned around and started after the men, pulling out her Handspring and typing in a brief message as she walked.

**

She got to the door and pushed through it just as the shorter man was reaching across the counter and grabbing the cashier's blouse, twisting his fingers into the fabric and yanking her close to him.

"Hey!" She barked, as both men turned at the sound of the door and a moment later the man released the girl and stepped back. "What the hell are you doing, buddy?"

The taller man stepped back uncertainly, looking at the door and edging towards it. "Just a misunderstanding." He said. "No problem here, lady."

"Fuck that." The shorter man came at her. "None of your fucking business, you bitch. Get the fuck out of my way." He reached to shove her and Dar reacted instinctively, swinging her arm around to block him and forgetting what she had in her grasp.

The ice cream and crab smacked him in the side of the head and he reeled backwards, stumbling to one side and crashing into the counter.

The other man took off, bolting out the door.

Dar dropped the bag and got over her center of balance, bringing her hands up into a defensive position as the other man shoved off from the counter, sending bags of potato chips flying all over the floor.

He pulled his hand back and curled it into a fist and then paused, taking in the still, balanced posture, and unafraid expression of the woman opposite him.

"I'm calling security, Ms. Roberts." The cashier called out.

"Get out of my way." The man came at her, and swung, and Dar ducked out of his way and let him go past. He walked rapidly away and yanked the door open, nearly smashing full into Kerry who was coming it with some speed.

Dar felt every hair on her arms lift up as he reached out to push Kerry and then next thing she knew she was hauling him down from behind and turning with his arm in her grasp, yanking him backwards and pulling him over to the ground. "Don't you touch her."

He twisted in her grasp but Dar felt her temper snap and she got a knee hard into his groin, then slammed her elbow into his chin and knocked his head backwards.

He stumbled and went down and she almost went after him, but then she backed off, as Kerry got in next to her, breathing hard.

"What in the hell is going on here?" Kerry asked.

"Security's coming" The cashier came out from behind the counter. "Thanks a bunch, Ms. Roberts. This dumbass said he was going to take me into the cooler and teach me a lesson."

The door opened and two uniformed security guards came in. "Whats the deal here?" The nearer one asked, giving Dar and Kerry a glance. "Ladies."

"Hello, Charles." Kerry responded. "It seems this guy was causing a problem in here."

The man got to his knees. "Everyone here is gonna pay out the ass for this." He said. "I'll sue every single one of you" He glared at the cashier. "Especially you, little cunt. I didn't do anything to you. I was just talking to you."

Kerry looked at him, then at Dar. "I don't think you hit him hard enough, hon." She remarked mildly. "I don't know who you are, mister, but my partner doesn't smack around people for no reason."

He stared at both of them. "Oh, that's right. You're the queers my brother was talking about. That'll make an even better lawsuit."

"Okay." The security supervisor said. "Let's just settle down and we'll do a report."

"Screw that." The man got up and shoved past them. "You can't hold me here you rentacops. You want anything from me call my office." He walked out the door, still a little hunched. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer in the morning."

Charles sighed. "Can I get some info from you ladies?"

"Sure." Dar sat down on one of the stools near the small lunch counter, pausing the pick up the bag and putting it down on the counter surface. "Wasn't the way I was looking for this night to go."

"I'll put these in the cooler" The counter girl said. "And, thanks, Ms. Roberts. I mean that really. That guy was scaring the crap out of me and I didn't even have a chance to grab a radio."

Kerry leaned her elbow on her partner's shoulder. "Crusader Dar."

"I knew you were going to say that." Dar muttered. "Listen, Charles – if he's going to call a lawyer, we probably better get Metro-Dade over here."

Charles sighed. "Do we have to?" He asked. "Listen, Ms. Roberts, That guy's nothing but a jerk. He's already sued Mrs. Christoff for her dog barking, and Doctor Ed for washing his car too early in the morning. He's a pain in the ass, but it's usually a bullshit pain in the ass if you know what I mean."

"You saying he's just a spoiled white rich boy?" Kerry asked, with a wry twinkle in her eyes. "As in, someone my father would have wanted me to marry?"

Charles shrugged sheepishly.

"He's a jerk." Christie said, having put the bag in the freezer. "He was in here before, making trouble about some milk. I was telling Ms. Roberts about it."

The security guard nodded, making some notes. "So then he left?"

"He did."

"He and his buddy were coming across the golf course path." Dar said. "I heard him saying to his buddy he was going to come here and make trouble and so I followed him."

Charles eyed her. "You coulda called us."

"I could have." Dar agreed. "In fact, I should have. But I didn't, and when I came in here he had Kristie by the neck and was about to pull her over the counter."

Both security guards looked over at the cashier, who nodded in confirmation.

"Wasn't going to stand there and let them." Dar said. "I yelled and told them to stop, and then that jackass came at me."

"Was he drunk?" Charles wondered. "Guy gets caught doing something like that, he should just beat it."

"Well, he didn't. He swung at me and I went to block him and smacked him in the head with the bag I was carrying" Dar said. "So he got clocked with a pound of stone crabs and a lump of chocolate ice cream."

Kerry eyed her. "Was that dinner, Dardar?"

"Ouch." Charles commiserated. "I've been hit with lobster tails. Hurts." He scribbled a note. "So then?"

"Then I let him past me and he hit the door."

"And hit me." Kerry said. "And Dar hauled him back like he was a sack of wheat and kicked him in the nuts for that." She gave her spouse an affectionate look.

"Ah." Charles said. "Well, Ms Roberts, chances are that guy's gonna file charges against you, and Kristie, and probably me, because he's got more money than sense. But Kristie here.. you'll step up and testify?"

"Sure." Kristie agreed at once. "Listen, my dad's not going to like hearing about this guy, and if he knows what's good for him he'll just keep out of here. He doesn't want to mess with my father." She glanced at Dar and Kerry. "He owns this place."

"The store?" Kerry asked.

"The island." Kristie smiled. "He owns the development company. We live here. He just never believed in raising us kids to be rich feckless brats."

Revelation. Kerry smiled at her. "You going to college?"

Kristie shook her head. "Not my thing. I like to do graphic artistry. Dad says he'll maybe hire me to design our ad copy."

"You like computers?"

"Want a job?" Dar and Kerry said at the same time, and then exchanged looks.

"Okay folks, can I just finish here before we start something else?" Charles begged. "So that's all that happened? Then we came in?"

"Yes." Dar said. "Sorry to ruin your night, fellas."

The other security guard grinned briefly at her. "I've seen you in the gym, Ms. Roberts. Sorry we missed the dust up. Kristie's right. That guy's nothing but stupid bad news."

"So are we going to call the police?" Kerry asked. "We have a lawyer, but I'd rather not have to use him for this."

"Let me have my boss go talk to that guy." Charles said. "I'm thinking, he's pretty new around here. Been here only three months. He probably doesn't know who Kristie is." He gave the girl a smile. "She's right. He don't want her daddy to get involved. He's got a temper."

"Okay by me." Dar said. "You guys handle it. I've got stone crab and ice cream to get home."

The guards left, talking in low tones together and looking at the pad of notes. The door closed behind them and the three women were momentarily silent.

"Okay, so." Kerry finally cleared her throat. "Sorry that had to go down. It was a really cool Saturday before that." She said. "Want to get home and get the salt water out of your hair?"

"That was really cool." Kristie said. "Don't worry about that guy. My dad'll take care of him." She added, confidently. "He knows about you."

Dar's brows lifted. "We're computer nerds."

She nodded. "Yeah, he knows that, but I also heard him telling someone.. I guess someone had a problem with your dog? Or something? The gym maybe? Anyway he told them to shut up and leave you alone."

Dar still looked surprised.

"You have some contacts with the government?" Kristie prompted.

"Ah." Kerry smiled. "Yes, we do have some contacts with the government. So anyway, Kristie – you interested in a career in computers? We run a consulting company and we sure could use some help in the media department."

Kristie made a face. "It's kind of gross for me to say this, but I don't think my dad would let me."

Kerry's eyebrows shot right up.

"He doesn't' like gay people." The girl said, in a matter of fact tone. "So like I said, he knows about you guys, but he'd really go apeshit if I said I was going to work for you. I think he'd think you were recruiting me, you know?"

Dar blinked a few times, then shrugged. "His loss." She said, "And maybe yours."

"Are you mad?" Kristie looked wistfully at them. "I don't want you to be, I just don't want to lie about it."

"We appreciate that." Kerry recovered her balance. "But tell your dad to do himself a favor and never say anything like that to her dad." She indicated Dar. "He won't care if he owns this place."

Kristie cocked her head to one side. "Is that the tall guy, Andy?"

"That's my dad." Dar said. "He's a retired Navy SEAL, and I'm his only kid." She glanced at Kerry. "Well, his only blood kid."

Kerry smiled at her. "Anyway, no hard feelings, Kristie." She said. "My father felt the same way about gay people. He went to his grave hating me for it." She leaned on Dar's shoulder. "That's why I'm glad I found Dar and her family."

Kristie nodded, looking more serious. "He just is like that." She said. "It's not a religious thing, he just thinks a family should be a man, and a woman and kids." She glanced at the clock. "And, it's time for me to close this place up before any more weird stuff happens."

They got up and Kerry retrieved their bag, then tucked her arm inside Dar's as they headed for the door.

"Night." She glanced back at Kristie. "Hope that guy doesn't give you any more trouble."

Kristie herself looked troubled, but she waved. "Night."

They made their way out of the store and headed once more along the path toward their home. "Yuk." Dar said, after a pause. "That didn't end the way I figured it would."

Kerry shrugged slightly. "People are like that." She acknowledged. "it's just getting more evident I think. " "Yuk." Dar repeated. "My conversation with Jacques was more interesting. He took charge of the board. Seems like there's a big fight going on there."

"Big surprise." Kerry said. "You give him any advice?"

"Yes. But I doubt he's going to be able to take it." Dar said, with a sigh. "It's not our issue anymore. Let's go have some crabs and chill out."

Kerry accepted the change of subject and remained quiet for the rest of the short walk, pondering the stars visible over the tops of the buildings as she thought about the evening's surprises.

Yuk, about covered it.

**

The next day, it rained. Kerry was very content to watch the heavy clouds disburse their contents across the seawall as she stood at the kitchen window, enjoying an early morning cup of coffee.

She could hear Dar playing with the dogs in the living room, and there were cartoons playing on the television to complete the background noise.

The kitchen floor had towels on it, mopping up from the wet dog footprints and she carefully stepped over them as she went back into the main part of the house.

Dar was sitting on the floor, legs sprawled out with a knotted towel in her hands being tugged at by both Labradors.

It was adorable. She put her cup down and grabbed her camera, focusing quickly and snapping a few shots of the action. "You guys are hilarious."

"I'm not sure who Mocha's helping more." Dar watched the puppy get in Chino's way, then grab the end hanging from the bigger Lab's mouth and hung off it.

"Growf!" Chino let go and barked at him in outrage.

Kerry chuckled, perching on the back of the love seat. "You all set for the conference?"

"Yup." Dar rolled onto her back and let the dogs clamber all over her. "Got the demo done too. Going to spend the rest of today just relaxing."

"I'm up for that." Kerry agreed. "It's going to rain all day, and I'm going to enjoy it, now that I sent an email to Richard warning him about little Billy Jacktard."

"Peh."

Kerry put the camera down and joined them on the floor, grabbing the towel and waiting for Mocha to latch onto it. "What are you doing there, little man?"

"Grrrr yap!" Mocha tugged fiercely at the fabric.

Chino plopped down next to Dar and put her head down on Dar's shoulder, exhaling and stirring the dark hair on the side of her face.

"Hey Chi." Dar curled an arm around the dog. "What are you up to, huh?"

Chino licked her ear, making it's owner chuckle.

Kerry played with Mocha for a minute, then glanced at her partner. "I was thinking of making a big pot of barley soup. You up for that?"

Dar peered past Chino's furry body at her. "Whatever you make, I'm up for." She said. "You have yet to produce something out of that kitchen that I haven't liked."

"Is that true?" Kerry pondered. "I've made some kooky things in there."

"It's true. I grew up on a Navy base." Dar said. "And you know how my mother cooks."

"Hmm. So are you saying you'll eat anything, and so whatever I make is okay?" Kerry's eyes twinkled at her.

"I won't eat anything." Dar evaded the question. "You know that."

No that was true. Kerry edged over so she could lay down and put her head on Dar's stomach. "Dar, can I tell you something?"

"That stuff last night is still bothering you." Dar responded confidently.

Kerry looked at her.

"The part about us being gay." Dar clarified. "I don't usually care about that, but it bothered me too." She acknowledged. "I've lived here for years. You've lived here for years. Finding out people don't like our lifestyle is like sandpaper on the ass."

"No, it's not that." Kerry said. "I always assumed there were people who didn't like it. But that everyone now feels so comfortable saying that does kind of bother me. It's become okay to diss our relationship in public."

"Ker, it always was." Dar said. "C'mon. It's only been a damn short time where anyone's accepted it."

"Mm. It still feels weird." Kerry said. "It's like we've become a target, lately."

Dar studied her briefly. "Does it make you uncomfortable living here?"

Kerry was silent for a bit. "You mean, because the guy who owns the place doesn't like us?"

Dar nodded.

Kerry shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I'm just in a mood today." She admitted. "Why should it matter? We've never even met the guy. It makes me feel a little weird about Kristie though."

"Mm."

"Do people really think we recruit?" Kerry wondered. "Like we're some creepy vampire club or something?"

"Sure. Didn't your dad think I turned you gay?" Dar asked, in a reasonable tone. "People believe what they want to believe, and it's easier to think someone is making your loved one change than it is to believe they were born that way."

Kerry frowned. "Yuk."

Dar ruffled her hair gently. "Go make your soup, Ker. It is what it is."

It was what it was. Kerry rolled onto her side and then got up onto her hands and knees, leaning forward and giving her partner a kiss on the lips. Then she yelped as Mocha bit her on the toe and then grabbed the tail of her old t shirt and started pulling it.

Hopefully it would be a nice and quiet, rainy Sunday.

**

Dar was in her office messing around with her demo when the doorbell rang. She glanced up to see Kerry cross the living room to answer it, and wondered who the hell was calling on them this late on a Sunday evening.

“Oh hi.” She heard Kerry say, then heard the sound of footsteps coming and the door closing. Dar looked up to see the entrance to her office filled with her partner and their two security friends from the previous night. “Hey Charles.”

“Hi, Ms. Roberts.”

Dar leaned back and propped her knee up against the desk. “C’mon in. What can we do for you?”

The two men came in, standing awkwardly until Kerry guided them to the sofa, then went back behind Dar’s desk and leaned on the credenza behind it.

“Okay, so.” Charles exhaled. “Sorry to bother you ladies so late. But we just finished all the paperwork and I wanted to come over so we could tell you the low down.”

Kerry extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles. Her reading of body language made her think the message wasn’t going to be all bad, and she produced a faint smile. “Would you guys like some cold apple cider? I was just about to bring some in here for Dar.”

“Sure.” Charles said, at once. “We just walked all the way across the island. Gets you thirsty.”

Kerry eased past the desk and headed for the kitchen.

“So.” Charles cleared his throat. “That guy, Billy, he kicked up a big fuss. He went to the island admin offices and wanted to get them to throw you ladies right on out of here.”

Dar blinked at him. “He wanted to get us evicted?” She queried. “For me defending myself with shellfish?”

“Not so much.” The guard captain said. “He said, it was a moral thing, you know?”

Dar rolled her eyes as Kerry came back in with a tray. “You know.” She eyed her partner. “I’d really like to know, in a graphic way, what breeders think we do with each other that’s so different than what they do.”

Kerry put the tray down and handed glasses out. “I’m not even going to comment.” She took her cup and went back to leaning against the credenza. “So what were they told? Since I know evicting us wouldn’t be legal.”

Charles nodded. “So that’s what the association secretary said. That you ladies mind your own business and don’t hardly cause no trouble.” He said. “So then he went in to talk to Kristie’s dad, only he didn’t know he was.”

“Oh, I can see this coming.” Dar covered her eyes with one hand.

“So Big Jim broke his arm.” The other guard nodded. “They took him off in an ambulance.”

“That’s right.” Charles said. “Broke his arm and his nose too. He shoulda stuck with you ladies. All he got from that was a bump on the noggin.”

“Wow.” Kerry said. “So – is he going to sue Kristie’s father now?”

“I’m thinking he’s gonna be evicted himself.” Charles said. “But I did hear Big Jim say he was going to come talk to you ladies so I thought I should let you know that.” He paused, looking a touch uncomfortable. “He’s an old fashioned kind of guy.”

“Here we go again.” Kerry sighed. “You know, it’s not against the law to be a homosexual.”

Dar cleared her throat. “Not so much with our variety no. But I think sodomy is still illegal in Broward county.”

Kerry covered her eyes, and the two guards blushed in embarrassment.

"Anyway, he can come talk to us all he wants. But this place is paid off, and we own it, and there's not a damn thing he can do about it." Dar said. "Thanks for the heads up though, guys. We appreciate it."

The guards finished their cider and got up. "Well, you ladies have a nice night" Charles said. "And keep out of trouble."

Kerry saw them to the door, then returned, dropping onto the couch with a frown. "I'm not sure I liked that conversation."

"Mm. " Dar grunted. "He really can't do anything to us."

"No, I don't think so either, but it's just not cool, Dar."

"No." Her partner sighed . "It's really not. Its not even cool that he'd try it with that buttload. Guy has a right to live where he wants to live – most he should do is file charges for him grabbing Kristie."

"You're defending him??"

"I'm saying he needs to be deal with via the legal system if that's how you feel. Kicking him off the island for what he did is the same as kicking us off for being gay." Dar said, in a mild tone. "I'm not saying I wouldn't cheer if he got tossed into Government Cut."

"Mm." Kerry sighed. "Yeah."

"Let's wait to see what he says to us." Dar said. "I can hold my own in any verbal ass kicking contest."

That brought a smile to Kerry's face. "And most other kinds." She got up and collected the cider cups.

"I'm going to get in the hot tub. Interested?"

Dar got up and flipped off the monitor, leaving it behind without a second glance. "Go baby go."

**

The Coconut Grove convention center was small but stylish, and Kerry found herself liking it a lot more than the Miami Beach facility which was huge and echoing and gritty. She picked up a cup of hot tea at the café and wandered over to the presentation area, where Dar was getting ready to speak.

It was all small companies. No one probably knew who they were. Kerry found that she liked the idea of that, and she exchanged smiles with another woman about her age in a business suit standing nearby.

There were a lot of booths set up, representing a lot of small companies. Kerry had already earmarked three or four she wanted to talk to, and she was planning a route through the hall after she listened to Dar's presentation.

Quite a few people were gathering, and Kerry imagined she could feel her partner's nervousness building up, seeing the restless motion of her tall frame up behind the podium.

Dar wasn't fond of public speaking. Kerry actually didn't mind it, and of the two of them, she was the admitted more skilled. They both knew that. But Dar had volunteered for the event and if there was one thing that overwhelmed any nerves it was her standing tall in defense of her own ego.

Kind of adorable, actually. Kerry gave her partner a thumbs up, and saw the rakish, wry grin that told her Dar knew perfectly well what she was thinking about. Adorable, because Dar was, that glance through the dark bangs right at her making Kerry smile in pure unconscious reflex.

They were both dressed relatively casually. Slacks and collared shirts, in Dar's case an embroidered vest and in Kerry's a long sleeved sweater she had draped around her shoulders at the moment.

The morning was half over, and they'd just come out of the keynote speech. Kerry was of the opinion that Dar would have done a far better job at it, but she'd clapped with the rest as the owner of the local television station went on about innovation and the American dream.

Now the crowd was settling down, and Kerry carried her cup of juice into the auditorium, taking a seat in the back row which was a little elevated, and gave her a view of her partner. Dar had stepped up to the podium and was now standing there quietly, waiting for everyone to focus on her.

Just as they did Kerry felt her Handspring start to buzz, and she quickly removed it and got up, ducking out of the room to answer it. "Hey, Maria."

"Ah, Kerrisita." Maria's voice came over the wire. "I am so sorry to disturb you at your meeting, but there is a person here who is insisting on speaking with you. It is a customer? Mayte has told me she thinks they are interested in doing a program."

"Sure, put them on." Kerry positioned herself in the doorway so she could keep an eye on Dar, finding another smile appearing as her partner's rich and just slightly melodic voice emerged from the microphone. "I didn't think information technology was that sort of spur of the moment on demand thing, but you never know."

"Si, you never do know." Maria agreed. "Please wait one moment."

Kerry watched Dar put her hands on the podium, knowing how much self control it was taking for her to leave them there, and not fidget with them. Dar did that, when she was nervous. She would flex her hands and crack her knuckles, stick her mitts in her pockets and tap her thumbs on any flat surface.

She gave Dar a thumbs up for her discipline, and got a smile back in return, along with the slightest cock of the head that made her realize Dar was wondering what she was doing on the phone.

Ah well. "Yes this is Kerry." She said into the phone as a voice came on. "Sorry, it's a little loud here I'm at the small business conf... what?"

"Yes, hello? Kerry? Did you hear me?" The voice said. "This is Evelyn Chambers, from Dade County public schools? "

Kerry paused and frowned, then shook her head a little. "Yes.. um.. oh, right." She said. "We met at the gym a while back."

"Right. My sister's son works for you here, and he was talking about your company? We want to hire you. I mean, the school system does. We were given a lot of money to upgrade all the computers and we can't think of a better person to do it than you."

Kerry pulled the Handspring away from her face and stared at it. Then she put it back to her ear. "Okay, Evelyn – sure. I'd be glad to talk to you about that... but you know we're not really hardware vendors."

"But your new company is about computers, right?"

"Well, sure. All the things we do generally involve computers but we don't ... I mean, let's talk about it." Kerry said. "I'll be in the office tomorrow morning, and we can sit down and look at what you need, okay?"

"Oh but... could it be really early?" Evelyn said. "We've got a meeting about the budget at nine. Can I see you before then? I really want to have you ladies do this because I am so freaking tired of the men in the office telling me only guys can buy computers they are driving me out of my cotton picking mind!!!!"

Ah. The light bulb went off over Kerry's head with an almost audible bing. "Gotcha. No problem, Evelyn, I'd be glad to meet you at 7 or 8, or if you want, we'll be back in the office this afternoon after Dar's speech so..."

"Oh perfect! I'll go get some lunch and come back." Evelyn sounded utterly relieved. "See you in a little while, Kerry! Thanks!!"

"Uh.. no problem. Bye." Kerry removed the handspring from her ear and peered at it, then she put it back in her pocket and started back into the auditorium, only to halt when she spotted Peter and Mark entering the building from the other direction and looking around.

"Oh, bet that's not good." Kerry backpedaled and waved, and sure enough the two men looked relieved on seeing her and headed quickly in her direction. "Poor Dar."

**

"Okay, so." Mark had steered them all over to the snack area, where there were high top tables he put his laptop down on. "Pete, you want to start?"

"Not really." Peter looked glum. "Mark said I should come over if they booted me, and they did." He said. "There was some big huge blow up again today and that big jerk came in and told me to clear out."

"No problem, Peter. We said we'd take care of you and we will." Kerry reassured him.

"Thank you, ma'am." He looked a little more confident. "My wife about gave birth prematurely when I told her. She gave up her job when she got pregnant and this whole things been near killing her." He stuck his hands in his pockets. "I don't even know what I did to tip the scales.. I didn't make any changes, you know? I just gave them the configs and said what I thought we should do."

"The man you worked for is an absolute moron." Kerry said. "They had one chance to turn it around. Dar even told the board of director's new head what to do. I guess they didn't do it."

Peter's ears visibly perked. "Whoa you know, maybe there was something going on with that because that guy, David, was totally torked off. He said something like if they think they can just throw us out they're mistaken or something like that."

"Hm." Kerry glanced up as she sensed Dar's presence, to find her partner emerging from the room and heading their way. "Save the story for Dar." She said. "Let me get her some milk looks like she's going to need it."

"I could get a complex." Dar looked from Mark to Peter. "What's going on?" She glanced behind her. "I have to go back to finish a question and answer session."

"Pete got booted, boss." Mark got to the point. "You put a cat in the chicken coop? Sounds like they freaked out this morning."

Dar cleared her throat. "I had a conversation with Jacques Despin." She allowed. "He just took over the chairman's position. Wanted to let me know about that." She put her hands on the high top as Kerry came back with two large cups. "What happened?"

"Here." Kerry handed over the milk.

Dar's eyes grew round and alarmed. "How bad is this, that you got me a quart of milk?"

"Well, that guy sounded really pissed off." Peter said. "It was like a tomb in there this morning. There was only like five of us there and they threw us all out."

Dar put her hands on her hips. "That leaves no one there to run the place."

"Except the dorks." Mark said. "Maybe we'll be getting a bunch more customers along with more employees."

They all looked at each other for a moment, then Kerry sighed. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Dar took a long swallow of milk. "Let me go do ten minutes of Q and A, and we'll get back to the office.

"Just in case?"

"Just in case."

**

But the afternoon was almost preternaturally quiet. Kerry munched her spicy chicken sandwich at her desk, glancing at her email as she listened to Mayte talking to their phone vendor in the outer office.

Or really, her own office. Kerry thought about the open spaces they still had, pondering whether or not to move Mayte out and into her own space. She was working on three projects now, and it was probably time for her to get her an Dar an actual admin since they'd promoted theirs.

"Hey Kerry." Mark came in the door with a fistful of papers. "I got Pete through his paperwork. You mind if I make him my assistant?"

Kerry swallowed hastily, and wiped her lips. "Not at all. You're a director. Make him a manager if you want to. We've got more than enough projects to need one."

Mark nodded. "Yeah, no kidding!" He sat down. "You think they're doing funky stuff back at the old place? Or maybe they're just bringing in a whole new crew?"

"I find it really hard to believe that they'd be doing something malicious." Kerry said. "I mean, it's a business, Mark. They probably promised they'd turn everything around, and they wanted to clear out anyone who could tell them any different."

Mark nodded. "That's what I figure too. Pete was the one who was pushing back on them. He's pretty sharp. I think he'll be okay for us."

"And now that they've done that, I'm fine with putting the word out to anyone who left there to come talk to us." Kerry decided. "We can't hire everyone, but with these four new contracts, and the Dade County schools thing, we need bodies."

"Will do." He got up and handed over the papers. "You and the boss going up to the Hill Wednesday?" Maria said."

"We've got to demo the database for the feds." Kerry agreed. "Not the real thing, a mock up. Politics."

"Kinda creepy."

"Kinda. But worse comes to worse, Dar will tell them to kiss her ass, and we can not worry about it. With this new business we don't really need it." Kerry looked at the folders on her desk. "It's a lot of prestige but yeah. Creepy."

"Kerry?" Mayte poked her head in. "There is a reporter here to speak to you? It's from the paper."

"Speaking of creepy." Kerry muttered. "That didn't work out so good last time." She drummed her fingers. "Okay, give me ten minutes to finish this and I'll see them."

Mark made a face and mimed tip toeing out of the room, almost bumping into Dar as she appeared in the doorway between their offices. "Whoops"

"Got a reporter outside." Kerry had her head propped against her fist as she chewed.

"Got CNN on the phone wanting an interview." Dar responded. "Trade?"

"Nope."

"Wench."

**

Dar had her boots up on her desk, and her eyes closed, her hands folded over her stomach. It was dark outside, and the building was almost empty. "Ker?"

Kerry poked her head in from her office. "We got another fifteen minutes to wait for CNN. Want some coffee?"

"Unguh."

"I'll take that as a yes. Be right back."

Dar remained where she was, just letting her mind to blank as she waited. The Herald request had been innocuous – the small business editor had been at the conference and seen her speak, then apparently had done a Google search and decided they might make an interesting blurb.

Kerry had handled it.

But CNN wanted to know about the government project and that was far more dicey an interview. It involved a film crew, and one of the high profile talking heads, and she would really rather have dove into a vat of peanut butter than go through it.

However. Dar could hear Mayte still rattling around in the outer office, and there were creaks and footsteps that indicated to her that others were still hanging around as well, the lure of television cameras and quasi-famous people irresistible.

Peh.

Her desk phone rang. She reached over and keyed it, still keeping her eyes closed. "Dar Roberts."

"Hello Dar, Gerry Easton here."

"Hey Gerry." Dar responded. "We'll be out there tomorrow night. Got a meeting with Bridges on Wednesday. You free for dinner?"

"Well, sure. Be happy to and I bet the missus will be happy to also. But that's not why I'm calling. We got some big problems here, Dar, and I need you help."

Dar's eyes slid open and she regarded the ceiling. "What kind of problems, Gerry? We're not actually doing anything for you yet."

"It's that other thing." He said. "The connections."

"Ah." Dar slowly shifted her feet off the desk and sat up. "You mean, the stuff ILS is doing for you."

"That's right. It's all screwed up." Gerry confirmed. "Now, I know you don't work for them anymore, Dar, but we're in a pickle, and I mean a real dill pickle, if you catch my drift. Been trying to call them all afternoon, no one's answering the phone."

"Oh boy." Dar muttered.

"Anything you can do to help us out?" Gerry asked. "I got people chewing me up and down over it. Stuffs not working, we can't get reports, they can't send files... Dar they're driving me crazy. It's been off and on, but just around lunchtime it went down the tubes, y'know?"

Kerry entered with some coffee, and spotting Dar's expression quickly put it down on the desk. "What's up?" She mouthed.

"Gerry." Dar mouthed back. "Network problems."

"Oh boy." Kerry took a seat on the windowsill.

"Gerry, I don't know if there's anything I can do but let me make some calls." Dar temporized. "All the people I knew there are gone."

"Eh? What?"

"Long story." Dar said. "Let me see what I can do. I'll call you back."

"All right. Anything at all you can come up with, huh Dar? This is really serious."

Dar sighed. "I know it is, Gerry. I'll get back to you. Bye for now." She hung up and swiveled to look at Kerry. "They must have really screwed it." She said. "Right around the time Peter showed up here, it all went to hell."

Kerry folded her arms. "Wont be long until that hits the news." She said. "Not necessarily the Pentagon, but everything else."

"Surprised it hasn't already." Dar got up. "Let me call Jacques. He's the only one I can think of that might be able to... well, hell. I have no idea what he's going to do but he should know his customers are calling me."

Mayte appeared in the entrance to Dar's office. "The news people are here." She said. "Where do you want to speak with them? I think the conference room?"

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "That'll be fine, Mayte. Let them set up in there. We've got to discuss something then we'll be right down."

Mayte nodded and disappeared.

"I'll go keep them occupied." Kerry said. "Are you going to offer to go fix it?"

Dar shook her head.

'Hope we can swing that. " Kerry patted her on the arm then headed for the door, shaking her own head as she disappeared.

"Yeah." Dar sat down on the edge of her desk and pulled her phone out again, keying through the memory. She found the number she was looking for and hit dial, holding it to her ear as she waited. It rang six times, then voice mail picked up. "Great."

She waited for it to finish and beep. "Jacques, this is Dar. I just got a call from a mutual customer of ours, saying his services with you were down and he wasn't able to get hold of anyone to talk about it. He's in a big non square office building in DC. Just letting you know in case you want to do something about it. Later."

She released the line, then studied the phone. Was there anyone else she could really call?

Anything else she could really do? Dar stood up and shoved the phone into her pocket. Was there anything she really wanted to do?

She trotted down the steps, hearing voices in the conference room and seeing shadows in the lower hall, accompanied by the smell of electronics and duct tape, with a waft of oil makeup on the fringes. She paused for a moment to ruffle her hair into some kind of fluffiness, then forged ahead into the conference room. "Evening."

There was a man there, with a thin, angular face Dar thought she sort of recognized, and two women who had over the shoulder messenger bags with pens and pads and stopwatches hanging from them on one side of the room and two men with cameras and gear on the other side.

"Ah, Ms. Roberts." The man half waved. "You probably don't remember me."

"I do." Dar produced a smile. "You interviewed me in New York." She did remember that, in a hazy surreal kind of way that most of the events were enfolded in. "We talked about cupcakes."

The man grinned. "We did." He said. "So we're a galaxy away from that moment huh? You're not with ILS anymore."

"Nope." Dar took a seat at the head of the table. "Hung up my own shingle." She indicated the building around her.

"Okay, Pete." One of the women interrupted. "Why don't you sit down here, and we can shoot from that angle across the table."

"Sure." The interviewer amiably came around the table and sat down. He was wearing a pair of jeans, and a leather jacket. "To be honest, Ms. Roberts, that interview with you got me interested in the technology biz. So now I do in depth stuff for CNN about it. Nice change."

Kerry came over and sat down on the other side of Dar. "This has been a nice change for us too." She said. "Getting to start everything from scratch and all that."

The cameramen busied themselves getting a tripod arranged behind Pete's shoulder, and settled a camera on top of it, flicking on the battery packs that powered up with a soft, faint whine. "We got sync to the truck?" One of them asked.

"Eyup.. got a signal back to base." The other responded. "Cathy, we're good."

"Thanks." The producer put her pad down, with notes. "Let me just make sure I've got everything accurate here, ladies, then we can get this, and let you get on your way. I know it's late." She glanced up at Dar and Kerry. "Thanks for hanging out and waiting for us."

"We were glad to." Kerry said. "I suppose you tracked us down from that picture in the paper?" She smiled briefly. "Dar enjoyed her visit to the White House."

"Actually." Pete cleared his throat. "We did pick that up on research, but really you popped up on my radar because I'm local here, and I was home on some vacation when my brother in law's scatterbrained son got hired to write games and I wanted to see who'd be crazy enough to hire him."

Dar chuckled. "Ahh. I see." She leaned back. "He's got good programming skills. I always look everywhere for talent. Your nephew once removed might turn out to be the Bill Gates of the family."

"He loves this place. He was at dinner at our house a week ago talking nine to the minute about some program you did with a hamster in it."

"That would be a gopher." Kerry correct him. "Gopher Dar, in fact. It's an animated program Dar writes on sometimes."

They all chuckled "So then I ran a scan on headlines and found the picture of you with the president, and figured, hey, it's time for me to get back in touch with Dar Roberts." Pete concluded, with a smile. "I guess you just recently left ILS?"

"About a month or so ago yes." Dar agreed. "After the time we spent in New York, Kerry and I decided we wanted to retire and go do our own thing."

"Get out of the spotlight?" Pete said, his eyes twinkling. "Didn't work out so well for you on that front I guess."

Dar shrugged.

"Okay, we're ready." The blonder of the two women said. "Pete, you're on."

The interviewer folded his hands on the table, and paused, clearing his throat. "We're rolling to archive, Dar, not live to the channel."

"Now that's a good idea." Dar said. "Especially if you remember what I said the last time about not asking me anything you don't want to hear the answer to."

One of the producers pulled a phone from her pocket, and held a hand up, moving to the door and slipping outside.

"Okay. So we're speaking here today with Dar Roberts, who is a well known business person in the technology field. " Pete said. "Ms. Roberts, you recently left the big corporate world and opened up your own IT related business. Tell me about that."

Kerry quietly got up and eased back, glad enough to give Dar her moment in the spotlight. She ducked outside the door and went across to the small kitchen, pausing when she almost bumped into Scott in his wheelchair. "Hello."

"Hi." He was removing a small container from the refrigerator. "Whats up with CNN?" He rolled out of Kerry's way and put the container on the table, opening it up and revealing what looked like a fruit salad.

Surprising. Kerry got one of the cold ice teas and opened it. "Their technology desk saw Dar's picture in the paper and wanted an interview." She responded straightforwardly. "How's it going with you? Mark says you do good work."

"I like it." He responded. "Its good to do stuff that's just normal."

Kerry sat down at the table. "I remember when I got back from New York after 9/11, it was a relief to just be able to sit down and have a boring staff meeting."

He glanced briefly at her. "You were in there when that went down? I was in the hospital in Frankfurt."

"No, I was at my family's home in Michigan. But I went there the next day." Kerry said. "The company we worked for had people in the Pentagon, and also in downtown New York."

He ate several pieces of the fruit with a spoon, chewing it thoughtfully. "I saw pictures. That was a mess."

"It was." Kerry agreed. "We did some work down by the stock exchange. The destruction down there was incredible."

"Yeah. Only thing I was glad I got half blowed up because I knew I wasn't going to have to go back there." He said. "We're going to go back there and beat the shit out of them for that. Everybody knows it."

"Mm." Kerry sipped her tea thoughtfully. Their new tech had gotten himself some polo shirts and work style chinos, she noted, remembering they'd been paid the previous Friday. "Everything working out for you?"

He was silent for a long moment, then nodded. "Glad I came and asked for that paper."

Kerry smiled. "I think we're glad too." She said. "Sometimes you just have to take a chance, you know?"

He looked up at her, for a moment expressionless. Then he smiled .

Kerry started to speak again, then paused as the CNN producer stuck her head in the door. "Hi."

"Hi." The woman looked harried. "Listen, I'm really, really sorry. And I mean, really really sorry, but we've got to pull out of here. There's some big issue in the banking industry and they need us on it."

"Oh. Wow sorry to hear that," Kerry got up. "A technical issue?"

"Something to do with how they talk to each other. Somethings gone wrong. " The woman said. "Hell, you want to come with us? You probably understand more of it than we will."

Uh oh. Kerry managed an apologetic smile. "Sorry, we've got plans." She said. "But I'll be watching tonight to see what it was."

The woman rolled her eyes. "We'll get back to you." She said. "Let me go get my guys packed up." She hustled out and left them in contemplative silence for a moment.

"Hm." Kerry leaned against the wall. "Wonder if I should start ordering pizza." She listened for the reporters and their staff leaving then a moment later Dar came into the room, leaning one long arm against the door frame. "Hi."

"Inter bank's down." Dar said.

"Yeah, I figured."

"Should we just stay here?"

"I was just considering ordering some dinner in." Kerry sighed. "Let me go tell Mark what's going on."

Dar exhaled, and went to the refrigerator, removing a chocolate milk chug and opening it. She turned and leaned against the appliance, eying Scott.

He watched her in silence in return, chewing his fruit salad.

"Your buddies still giving you a hard time?" Dar asked, after a bit.

He nodded. "I keep clear of em." He said. "Stay around that gym a lot. They let me work in there too a little, at night."

"Make friends with guys in there." Dar suggested. "I've seen some of the dudes that go in there. They look like ass kickers."

He nodded again. "They got a pool in there. I like that." He said, then paused. "There some kind of problem here?" He asked, bluntly. "With them press people, and then everyone running out?"

Dar sat down and rested her elbows on her knees. "No, there's no problem here." She said. "There's a problem where we used to work." She took a sip of her milk and looked up as Mark skidded around the corner and came barreling into the room. "Hey."

"Hey." Mark said, glancing at Scott then back at Dar. "Kerry told me, and I got a call from our old guy at the NAP. Craps coming down"

Dar nodded agreement. "It is."

"You think they're gonna call you?"

"I think they're going to have to." Dar said. "I'm just sitting here trying to figure out how to tell them all no."

"Why? This point, it's all in the crapper, Dar. They can't blame you for any of it." Mark said. "You could go in there and show them all up."

"I know that, but where does it get us? I don't want to go back in there. I want them to figure out their own problems and leave us the hell alone." Dar got up. "I fix this, they'll never let go of me in the short term, and I've got better things to do, Mark." She drained the chug and tossed it in the recycle bin. "I'll be in my office."

"K, boss." Mark shook his head. "Man, I remember the days when I was glad to just be a tech yonk. End of the day, you just go home."

Scott had finished his fruit salad, and he put the container carefully back in the plain, dark blue holder.

"Gonna finish that printer." He said. "Someone bent the frame, that's why it keeps jamming."

"We've only had it two weeks. Who had a chance to do that?" Mark allowed himself to be distracted.

"Probably the delivery company."

"Probably." Scott put the container in his lap and prepared to roll out. "Might need some tools."

Mark opened the door for him. "Give me a list." He said. "I'll get em ordered."

They emerged into the hallway. "We'll be here a while so take your time with the printer." Mark added. "Let you know when chow gets here."

Scott nodded, and headed off down the hall to the support office.

Mark watched him go and then turned towards the stairs, pausing when Kerry came around the corner to join him. "This gonna be a long night?"

Kerry lifted her hands and let them drop. "Mark, I've got no idea. Maybe those guys will find a way around having to call for help. I sure would if I were them."

"Kerry" Mark eyed her. "Trust me. I lived in that place for long as she did. If its this fucked up, no one's gonna be able to fix it but her."

Kerry sighed.

"Pizza?"

"Chinese buffet."

"Whoof."

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"So, are we kidding ourselves, and no one's not actually calling us, or considering calling us?" Kerry was seated on the windowsill, manipulating a shrimp with her chopsticks. "How long are we going to hang out here?"

Dar was chewing a very red spare rib. "Well." She paused, and licked her lips. "We just saw them go over the Interbank outage on CNN, and they said they were searching for a senior spokesperson from ILS. Either they're crapping their pants and trying to find my phone number right now, or they're going to blow them off."

"They cant be that stupid."

"They can. So either they're going to call me in the next fifteen minutes or we'll just go home." Dar took another bite of her rib. "They can't afford to have all their customers start calling CNN."

"Well, maybe they'll figure it out themselves." Kerry suggested philosophically. "I don't really want to end up with my ass parked in that mausoleum lobby tonight anyway."

"I hope they do." Dar picked up her bottle of green ice tea and took a swallow. "Then we can finally leave them behind."

Kerry leaned against the windowsill and hiked one boot up on the wooden surface. She fished out another shrimp and bit it in half, swinging her other leg a little to the soft new age music playing in the built in nearby.

Everyone else had gone home, in some cases at their insistence. They were alone in the building and they had the doors locked with the security system in place. The street outside was quiet, befitting the middle of the weekday night it was and she could hear the faint sounds of a softball game going on at the field down the street.

"We could form a company softball team." Kerry commented, after a moment. "That would be fun. Want me to see if there's a league around here?"

“Sure.”

“I’d like that I thought that league we started to be part of before 9/11 was going to be fun but it would be more fun if we had our own team. We can get uniforms in our colors.”

“Sounds good.” Dar munched thoughtfully. “You look adorable in those baseball pants.”

Kerry rolled her head around and gave her partner a droll look.

“You do.” Dar insisted. “You’ve got a really cute butt, hon. Those pants show it off.”

Kerry actually blushed. “Dar.”

Dar opened her eyes wide in mock hurt, and lifted her hand up and spread the fingers out in question.

“What?”

Kerry stuck her tongue out.

“Same to you.” Dar finished up her ribs and put them in the silver lined bag they’d come in. “Let’s go home. Screw it.” She got up and shut her laptop down. “I’m out of patience. With any luck they’ve solved everything themselves and I won’t get shanghaied when I walk into the Pentagon tomorrow.”

Kerry was more than ready enough to leave. She wrapped up the remains of her meal and Dar’s and took them downstairs to store them in the refrigerator. She glanced around, nodding in approval at the neatness from the cleaning service, then she went back in the hallway just in time to see Dar trotting down the steps with both their bags.

She took hers, then waited as Dar triggered the exit allowance for the alarm system. She opened the door and they walked quickly out, Dar locking the door behind them as they heard the alarm reset softly inside.

It was a nice night. Kerry drew in a breath of cool air, savoring it since they were on the long downhill slide into summer, and in a month or so, any chance of outdoor comfort while fully dressed would be gone.

So she enjoyed the crispness, and the smell of the leaves in the trees around the building. She waited for Dar to join her and then they walked down the sidewalk together towards the parking lot. “Glad we left the pups home today.” She commented. “Would have made a late night for them.”

“Mm.” Dar agreed. “I think they like it though, being with us.” She beeped open the doors to the truck. “Everyone pays attention to them in the office.”

Kerry opened the passenger side door and put her bag inside, then hoisted herself up after it. “We should have gotten a running board for this thing. I feel like I’m doing a vault.”

Dar chuckled. “I’ll call the dealership tomorrow.” She promised, then paused, looking out over the steering wheel through the front window. “Oh crap.”

Kerry looked up quickly and spotted the group near the trees on the side of their building. “Is that.. oh, yeah. It is.” She recognized their rowdy antagonists, and in the middle, the shorter outline of Scott in his chair. “Well, poots, Dar.”

Dar opened the door and slid out. “He’s one of us now.” She remarked, as she hitched up the sleeves on her shirt and started towards the gang.

“Wouldn’t have stopped you in any case, Crusader Dar.” Kerry reconciled herself to some after hours conflict and got out on her side, shutting the door and trotting quickly after her partner.

The group was clustered around Scott, and it was obvious they were pissed. Kerry caught up to Dar just as they came up next to the group and she got her balance set, and squared her shoulders.

Not that either activity really would come off as imposing. Not nearly as much as Dar’s did when her six foot plus partner stood up straight and glared at the men.

“What the hell’s going on here?”

The men turned abruptly, one of them letting loose of Scott's chair arms. He looked up in surprise and saw them, and Kerry saw that brief moment of relief that almost put a smile on her face.

So yeah, he'd crossed that line too.

"What the hell is it your business?" The closest man responded, turning and facing them revealing himself to be Joe, the group troublemaker.

"You're messing with an employee of mine." Dar responded. "In front of my office. I thought I made it clear to you people I wasn't going to put up with that." She stood square on to him, her hands in her pockets.

"You don't own him, you bitch." Joe said. "Get out of here."

"No." Dar took a step closer to him. "I don't own anyone. But I value people which is a lot more than you do. You want to get away from me? You leave." She suggested. "And it's his choice to leave with you, or stay."

"I'm not going to take that from you, lady." Joe hauled back and swung on Dar and in a second they were grappling as she blocked his punch and put an elbow into his chin.

Kerry watched the gang carefully as she looked around for something to use as a weapon, not nearly as confident in her martial skills as her partner was.

Joe backed off and touched his jaw, watching Dar's tense figure and flexing hands. "You know how to fight." He sounded surprised.

"I do." Dar answered shortly. "I don't want to, and I don't like to, but if you push me I will."

Joe studied her for a minute. "I want to, and I like to, but I don't like fighting with women." He answered with surprising honesty. "My daddy didn't raise me to hit girls."

Dar really had no answer to that, but as it turned out she didn't need one.

"Wall." A voice came out of the darkness with more than a hint of amusement in it. "Y'all are out of luck then, boy, cause I didn't raise her to care about what was in the pants she was kicking."

Dar relaxed, and smiled. "Hey dad." She said. "Didn't know you guys were back."

Andrew Roberts sauntered into the lamplight, hands in the front pocket of his hoodie but the hood pushed back to reveal his scarred and rugged face. "Hey there, Dardar. We done just tied the boat up at that there marina down there." He said. "We gave your other place a call and didn't get no answer so we thought we'd try this here one."

He observed the men, who were all now watching him with extreme wariness. "What all's going on here?" He asked, after a moment of silence.

"Hi dad." Kerry chimed in, moving past Dar to put her arms around her father in law. "Glad to see you. Is mom around?"

He returned the hug. "On her way up here. She done passed one of them little knicky shops on the way and stopped to look." Andrew allowed. "You boys standing around here for some reason?"

"Scott here works for us." Kerry indicated the man in the wheelchair. "These other people are some friends of his."

Andrew observed them closely. "Ain't that nice." He said, in a flat tone.

"We'll be going." Joe lifted a hand and started walking off. "Night."

Andrew caught him by the back of his jacket and hauled him backwards. "Now." He looked him in the eye. "Do not be here hanging around no more bothering my children." He said, clearly. "You find yourselves some other place to do nothin."

Joe looked at him. "That some kind of threat?" He asked.

"Yes." Andrew answered, then he stopped talking, and went very still.

"Okay." Joe held his hands up. "I got it. We're leaving."

Andrew released him, and stared at the rest of them until they all backed off, leaving Scott to sit there quietly in his chair watching them go.

"Peh." Dar's father shook his head. "What the hell they teaching these kids these days."

"Thanks dad." Dar remarked in a mild tone. "I wasn't looking forward to soaking a sore hand tonight." She looked down at Scott. "Sorry if we embarrassed you."

Scott was sitting there with his hands clasped in his lap, with an expression of mixed amusement and thoughtfulness on his face. "I'm all right." He said. "They were just being assholes. I'm used to it." He put his hands on his chair wheel rims. "Maybe they'll clear out of back behind there. Easier to bunk there than the church."

"In the bushes, behind the office?" Kerry asked. "I thought there was an opening in there."

Scott nodded. "Little house back in there, in the other property, but you can't get at it from that side. Just was a.. " He shrugged. "Maybe a kid's place? Has some bunks and stuff."

"Y'all living in there?" Andrew asked, with interest.

Scott nodded again. "Sometimes." He clarified. "When the rest of them are someplace else." He started around them. "Night."

"Night." Dar responded.

"Night, Scott." Kerry echoed.

They watched him roll past, and turn up the small path that went between the buildings, then Andrew folded his arms across his chest and regarded the two of them. "Y'all gonna show me this new place?" His eyes twinkled. "S'got my name all over it?"

Dar grinned back at him. "Sure. Glad you caught us before we left." She started to lead the way towards the door. "We stayed late because.. well, it's a long story."

"Figure it can wait for your mom."

"Yeah, it can. I'd hate to have to go through it twice." Kerry agreed. "I'm so glad to see you. I wasn't looking forward to how that was looking at ending either." She put her hand on Dar's back. "Not that I had any doubt in what the result was going to be, still."

"Jerks." Dar muttered.

"What's up with them boys?" Andrew asked as they came around the corner and they paused, looking at the sign and the small front porch.

"They're a bunch of veterans who are out of work and something homeless." Dar said, as she put her hands on her hips. "Like the sign?"

"Ah surely do." Her father said, with some immense satisfaction. "Looks better than it did in them pitchers." He glanced at Dar. "So you done hired one of them fellers?"

"Part of the long story. Let's go inside and sit down." Dar led the way to the door and opened it, then ducked inside quickly to silence the alarm. "C'mon in." She said, as she flipped on the recently doused lights.

Kerry was the last in, and then she turned as she heard light footsteps behind her. "Hey!" She waved at Ceci, who had stopped to admire the sign in her own turn.

"Well, hello yourself." The short, pale haired woman waved back. "What a trip across the gulf stream." She caught up to Kerry and scooted inside the door. "How are you?"

"Where do I start?" Kerry gave her a quick hug.

"Uh oh."

"So many things have happened since the last time we saw you... holy cow." Kerry said, as they followed Dar and Andrew inside, her partner giving a running commentary of their space. "We were late here tonight because we were pretty sure Dar was going to get a call from the people running ILS now."

"Oh?" Ceci seemed surprised. "Are they different people from the ones that were doing that before we left?"

"Oh yeah. Most of the company, at least our part of it, quit." Kerry said. "Anyway, they did something to screw things up there and we started hearing about it in public earlier on."

"Really."

"Yes, the CNN crew that was here had to go run and find out about it." Kerry cleared her throat. "Where was I?"

"CNN?"

"They were interviewing Dar." Kerry pinched the bridge of her nose. "And we knew things were going south because Gerry Easton called from the Pentagon, saying they were having problems. So we figured they'd finally cave in and call Dar but they didn't."

Ceci started to whistle softly under her breath.

"So I guess maybe they sorted things out." Kerry concluded. "I'm glad if they did, because I don't want to have to deal with that when we go to Washington tomorrow."

"Washington?"

"Dar has to go explain advanced heuristics to Congress."

Ceci stopped and burst into slightly hysterical laughter, falling back against the wall and holding her stomach.

"Yeah, I know." Kerry smiled, and waited. "I'm going to bring a camcorder." She said. "So with that we don't want the government all of a sudden to stop in the middle of it and ask us to fix what is now, not our problem."

Ceci let her laughter peter off. "You're probably screwed, in that case."

Kerry sighed.

"There isn't a problem on the planet that doesn't end up on your platter, kid." Ceci patted her arm. "C'mon. Let's go finish the tour, and find a beer."

"Erf."

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They ended up at a café a short walk down the road, seated outside as Kerry ran through the whole catalog of recent events.

Dar contented herself with her spiked coffee, listening to her partner and watching the expressions on her parents faces react.

"They did what?" Ceci leaned forward. "You mean this guy deliberately screwed everything up?"

"Well." Kerry lifted her hand off the table and turned it palm up, then put it back down. "Depends what you consider deliberate. Like Dar said to someone, the fact that they did something was deliberate but she doesn't think the intent was to screw everything up."

"Had me some Navy jobs like that." Andrew commented.

"Unintended consequences." Ceci said. "Frankly. I think you two should go hike the Himalayas for a couple months and stay as far away from this thing as you can."

"Yeap." Andrew nodded.

"We think so too." Kerry said. "That's what we've been trying to do but because we've got customers in common, and not just the guys down the street kind of customers, it's tough."

"Gov'mint."

Dar gave her father a wry grin, at the dour comment. "Maybe we should start our vacation early." She suggested. "I don't reall..." She paused, as her cell phone rang. With a sigh, she fished it out of her pocket and looked at the caller ID. "Mark."

"This could be good, or bad." Kerry said, as she watched her partner answer the phone. "Hopefully, it's good."

Dar sat listening, her elbow propped against the table, brows twitching a little.

The other three fell silent, watching her and waiting.

"Okay, so, that guy called you?" Dar said, after a long while. "What does he want you to do?" She paused again. "Oh. He wanted you to call me . What a little smarmy chickenshit."

Kerry sighed.

"That doesn't sound promising." Ceci said.

"He said what?" Dar's voice rose.

"Uh oh." Kerry pulled out her Handspring "Let me get a note off to our lawyer."

"Rich Edgerton?" Ceci asked.

Kerry nodded.

"He must be having the time of his life. He once said going into investment management was almost as boring as being a library card sorter."

"Well, well, what do we have here." A new voice interrupted them. "I do believe I know you people."

Kerry looked up in surprise. "Hi, Hamilton." She indicated a seat. "Join us. I'm sure you want front row center at this circus."

Dar had also looked up and smiled. "Never guess who just showed up here." She said into the phone.
"Hamilton Baird."

ILS's ex legal council took the chair, raising his finger at the waitress who was watching him like a hawk, and pointing to the beer mug in front of Kerry. "I just dropped by your new place and was told I might find you here by a man in a wheelchair on your front porch. Never is boring around you ladies I will say that."

"They collect personalities." Ceci remarked, in a dry tone.

"Mark, we're at the café down the road from the office. C'mon over." Dar said. "Bye." She disconnected the call. "Smarmy little jacktard said he 'found' Mark's number on a sticky note." She took a sip of her Irish coffee. "Said he was willing to pay him to contact me and get some technical information. "

"Million dollars a word, maestro." Hamilton smiled. "Want me to negotiate that for you?"

Dar sat back and hiked one knee up. "Hello, Hamilton." She said. "What brings you to Miami?"

"You." Baird responded promptly. "Ah am now representing a consortium of ILS investors who want to stage an unfriendly takeover since they have seen their shares plummet in the last month."

The waitress arrived and put a cold mug down in front of Hamilton. "You folks like anything else?" She asked. "We've got a bar snack platter special tonight."

"Sure." Kerry responded. "Bring enough for everyone."

The waitress smiled at her, and vanished.

"Hamilton, I want no part of it." Dar said. "Not that I don't sympathize with the investors. I do."

"Hear me out, Maestro." He leaned back and took a sip of his beer. "These are the smart people who tossed money at ILS, not the dumb people. I would not be bothering my coon ass self with the dumb people. I had enough to do with them when I was still drawing a paycheck."

Andrew chuckled under his breath.

"Why do I get the feeling there isn't enough liquor in that bar to cover this." Ceci said.

Dar sighed again. "Let's wait for Mark to get here." She decided. "It'll hold another ten minutes." She caught the waitress's alert eye and pointed at her mug, now empty. "If I have enough of these I can use it as an excuse not to put my hands on a keyboard."

"Darlin, even drunk off your ass you have to be more competent than those idiots in there right now." Hamilton drawled. "Jacques just got off the phone with me on the way here, and he's ready to do whatever."

"Whatever?" Kerry eyed him.

"Whatever. As in, whatever it takes to get the wolves eye teeth out of his buttocks." Hamilton clarified. "Where they are verily implanted."

"I don't get it." Ceci said, after a moment. "They're the ones who decided they wanted to get rid of these kids here. So why now is everyone losing their minds and wanting action? They did it."

"Yes, they did. And they were told what fools they were." Hamilton agreed. "But that, for some reason does not spur in them a desire to get down on their knees and apologize to the world and God for it."

Dar pondered that in silence for a moment. "Doesn't spur in me a desire to help them regardless of the scheme you're going to pitch me."

"Now Dar..."

"I'm not kidding, Hamilton." Dar cut him off. "My first advice would be – put everything back the way it was before you broke it. There were safeguards in place that stored copies of everything so that could be done. This person, this moron they hired, deliberately circumvented and deleted them. They should be arresting him."

Ceci was nodding. "What she said."

Hamilton steepled his long fingers together and tapped his lips with the tips of them. "You sure about that, maestro?"

"Am I sure? I'm sure when I left there was a configuration repository that was configured to save a devices configuration every time a change was made, yes." Dar responded. "And I'm sure that the operations directives for infrastructure had that requirement in writing."

"It did." Kerry confirmed.

"So if that fella said there wasn't no record of how things were set up before he got there, he's not telling the truth?"

"No." Dar and Kerry answered at the same time. "He's lying." Kerry added.

Baird made a little face. "I don't suppose you kept a copy of that stuff somewhere?"

Dar took a breath to respond.

"Like your head?" Hamilton gently interrupted her.

Dar exhaled. "The only old copy of configs I had I already turned over to one of the guys who was trying to help, but they never let him use it. They fired him."

"Moron upon moron upon idiot." Hamilton sighed. "Okay, cut to the chase, Dar. If you had to, could you go in there and go into those things and make them right?"

They paused, as the waitress returned with a big, round platter full of exceptionally unhealthy things. She put it down in the middle of the table and handed around long handled forks and napkins. "Go for it, folks."

"Thanks." Andrew said. "Get me another of these?" He held up his mug, and the waitress scooted off.

Then all eyes went back to Dar.

After a moment she shrugged. "Sure." She said. "I designed it. It would take me a while to undo whatever it is they did, but I could."

"What's your price?"

Dar shook her head. "Hamilton, I won't do it. Not can't, won't."

"Why not?" He asked. "Dar, these men are literally willing to give you whatever in the world you want to save their shorts. How many times do you get that kind of opportunity?"

"What I seen, ever other month." Andrew said. "They done got her saving some damn thing or other thing cause some dumbass made some bad choice."

"Hamilton, I appreciate that." Dar said. "There's just nothing I want that they could give me." She glanced briefly at Kerry. "I've got everything I need pretty much right here at this table."

Her parents smiled. Kerry smiled. Hamilton looked wryly exasperated.

"There's nothing and no one left there for me to even feel like I would want to do it to make their lives better." Dar concluded. "Even Jacques, whom I like and respect, was ready to throw me down the river a few times. Hell." She half shrugged. "Even you and Alastair were. I had no friends there."

Hamilton's face shifted into a quiet, serious expression. "That's not one hundred percent true, Dar." He said. "But I get it."

"Ah remember being in that big old place." Andrew spoke up. "Listening to them fellas want to fire her that last time. She's right. Ain't no one was on her side in that place."

"I remember when I started working there." Kerry chimed in. "How many times people there tried to throw Dar under the bus. I remember hearing what they said. I remember seeing what they did. ILS didn't deserve her."

Dar looked from one to the other. "Sometimes I was driving the bus." She suggested.

"No, Dar, that's not true. Every time you made a decision, no matter who got hurt or in the way, it was the right decision for the company. For all of us." Kerry stated firmly. "You don't owe anyone there, especially the stockholders, a god damned thing."

The sound of a motorbike ended conversation briefly as Mark arrived, parking his bike in the front of the café and stashing his helmet before joining them. "Hey." He sat down next to Kerry, who handed him a fork, and a napkin. "Um.. thanks."

"No, darlin, you don't owe them anything." Hamilton said. "You produced value for the company for a good long time. That's not the issue here. No one's saying you should do this, no one's saying you have an obligation."

"Well." Mark had retrieved a mozzarella stick. "That guy says he's going to tell everyone you broke in and sabotaged the company unless you make things work." He chewed thoughtfully, watching Dar's face. "I told him to fuck off on your behalf."

Hamilton sighed, and covered his eyes.

"So. That's why I'm not going to do anything." Dar concluded. "Because if I do, no matter what anyone says, or does, or infers, everyone on the planet will believe I screwed it up."

"Glad I sent that note to Richard." Kerry muttered. "If that asshole ever comes near us he better hope I'm not driving Dar's truck because I will so help me god run him over with it."

"I told Jacques he needed to fire those guys." Dar said.

"They have contracts." Hamilton responded. "Very expensive ones to buy out, and it will be, as you don't need me to tell you, a publicity nightmare."

Dar lifted her hands up. "What are you having now? CNN took off to go cover the Interbank outage. I'm surprised they haven't called me back for commentary on it."

Her cell phone rang, and she glanced at it, then held it up before holding it to her ear. "Hello, Dar Roberts."

"This." Ceci scooped up a bit of ranch dressing with a celery stick and munched on it. "Is one big fat mess."

"Yeap." Her husband shook his head. "This is a squad with the trots and one outhouse kinda mess."

"I told em Dar wouldn't do it." Mark said "Matter of fact, since I had him on the phone I told him exactly what kind of no brain ears out the sides of his asshole jerkwad he was."

Dar had one hand over her ear, and the phone pressed to the other. "Yes, I hear you. No, I really don't have anything to comment on about that since it's not my problem anymore." She took a sip of her coffee. "I'm sorry they're having issues, but I suggest they direct their questions to the management at ILS. I don't know what's going on."

"Lord." Andrew sighed. "This ain't never gonna end good."

"You got that right, daddy Roberts." Hamilton said. "Let me go call those poor idiots who sent me and tell them they should go off and buy some banana plantations in Curacao and get out of this damn technology business."

Kerry reached over and put her hand on Dar's thigh, feeling the tension under the fabric of her jeans and the slight vibration as she jiggled her foot restlessly. She met Ceci's eyes across the table, exchanging a faint shake of the head with her mother in law as she tried to reason a way through the problem.

There was no reason, though. That was the problem. She could only consider the actions of their replacements as some kind of ego driven insanity and she agreed with Dar one hundred percent that she should stay the hell out of it.

"Yes, I agree it seems odd that a system that was working well stopped working, but again, you would need to ask the current management." Dar said, in a firm tone. "I don't want to speculate on what would have caused it." She listened, then glanced at Kerry and rolled her eyes. "Do I think it's a cyber attack? I have no idea. I have no data at all to base any theory on."

"You're actually being extraordinarily kind to those people." Ceci said. "They're lucky its you their talking to not me."

"That guy really was an ass." Mark said to Kerry, lowering his voice. "I mean, like really. Just all snide and creepy. He made it out like he knew we'd planned this all out, and when I called him on the whole change thing he did, he said he'd sue me if I told anyone else that."

"Wait. He called you for help and then said he was going to sue you? Really? He must be nuts." Kerry said. "What in the world is wrong with these guys? They think this is some kind of stupid game?"

Mark shook his head. "I felt so slimy after talking to him I took a shower."

"Well, yes, I could do that." Dar was saying into the phone. "If it's a general interview on how that type of technology works, sure." She glanced at her watch. "I'm at a café down the road from our offices. If you want to come back over, I'll give you a few minutes."

"Lord."

"C'mon Dad, don't you want to be on CNN?" Kerry smiled at him.

"No, I do not."

"Okay see you in a little while." Dar released the line and let her head drop back against the back of the chair. "Son of a bitch."

"Wouldn't take no for an answer?" Ceci guessed. "Well, I've seen you on television, kid. You draw eyeballs." She regarded her tall offspring and smiled at the droll expression directed back at her. "Make sure you get a nice plug in for the new company."

"Kill me now." Dar sighed. "Mark, where did you leave it with this jackass?"

"Told him he needed to clean up his own shit." Mark said. "Sorry, Dar. I just wasn't going to let him talk smack to me, especially when he was calling me to beg for help."

"Didn't have the guts to call me directly?" Dar smiled briefly. "I know my home number's in the records there. Hasn't changed in years. He wouldn't have even had to search for a sticky note."

"Well, the angle he took was, he was doing this as like a favor to me, sort of letting me come back in and help you help him so you didn't have to get dragged in the mud." Mark said. "He said if he went public, you could kiss your new business goodbye."

Hamilton had been listening. Now he turned his head towards Andrew. "What do you say, we go visit this gentleman? He's from the North, y'know."

"Wall." Andrew looked thoughtful. 'If that there feller is making threats at my kids, I do believe I should go talk with him.'

"Let's wait until after CNN interviews Dar for that." Ceci took a sip of her wine. "Because that would be too much excitement for them to handle and I want to put a deposit down first on that little cottage in St Johns for us to escape to first."

Dar leaned forward and put her elbows on the table. "Hamilton." She said. "Can you get me the number of the jackass who replaced me?"

"He didn't." Hamilton said, straightforwardly. "But I can get you his phone number, sure."

Dar made a come hither gesture at him. "Let me make one stab at giving him some advice. Jacques wouldn't take it, maybe he will."

Hamilton started fishing in his cell phone, shaking his head all the while. "More chance of getting a pig to sing." He lamented. "But what the hidey hell. Let's give it a whirl."

**

"Okay." The CNN lady producer turned her ball cap around and settled it back on her head. "So just for some prelim, we went over and tried to get some information about this outage that's apparently affecting a good portion of the banking business."

"Interbank." Dar agreed. She was seated behind her office desk, leaned back in her comfortable chair and had her hands wrapped around one hiked knee. "It's a central clearinghouse, a meet point for a lot of the large banks where they exchange information."

"Right."

"Lets you use some other bank's ATM from your own." Dar said.

"Exactly." The producer said. "So ILS runs it." She watched Dar shake her head. "No?"

"No. Interbank runs itself. It happens to have contracted a third party to carry the connections instead of building their own network. Lot of companies do that. Building and maintaining a wide area LAN is hellish expensive and complicated."

"Ah." The woman took a seat across from Dar. "How does that work?"

"Same way as you buy telephone service for your house." Dar's eyes twinkled a little bit. "Or to be more familiar to you, it's how you buy satellite transponder space from Intelsat to send your signals to and from Atlanta."

"Ah!" The woman nodded. "So they buy transport."

"Yes. Transport and the management services that goes with it. Making sure there's enough bandwidth, tracking outages, rerouting, all the things that go with keeping the data going from point a to point b." Dar said.

"So what'd they screw up, Dar?" The woman asked. "I know you know. I heard them talking in the background in a different room than we were in. Didn't know we were listening."

They were alone in the office. Kerry and the rest of the gang were entertaining the camera team and the on screen talent downstairs, serving them gratefully received strong coffee. Hamilton had driven off to go have a meeting with someone, and Dar was hoping as soon as they were finished talking she could take her partner home and fall into bed.

Long ass day. "I can't discuss that on the record." She said, candidly.

"Why?" The woman asked. "You don't work there anymore. It's a cock up, we know about it. Why not give me a scoop?"

Dar shook her head. "Sorry, Cheryl." She said. "If they decide to go public, I'll comment on it, but I'm not going to talk about someone else's problems."

"That's an interesting bit of integrity." Cheryl responded. "Because I'm pretty sure if you'd been the one who caused the problem they would have outed you in a heartbeat." She smiled a little bit. "I tried to make them."

Dar smiled faintly back. "It's always better to stick to the truth." She said. "Or nothing at all."

They studied each other in silence for a bit. "So no, huh?" Cheryl finally said, with a sigh. "It's frustrating for us, because we know there's news here. You get a sense for that after you do what I do for a while."

"There is." Dar said, straightforwardly. "Unfortunately, it's not my news to discuss. It's their issue, it's their customers."

Cheryl eyed her thoughtfully. "We could make this off the record. I could make you an anonymous source. They don't have to know."

"I'd know."

The producer lifted her hand up and let it drop down. "Okay, fair enough. Mind if I ask you one more question?"

"Nope." Dar glanced at her Handspring, hoping Higgs wouldn't pick now to call her back.

"How did ILS deal with your being gay?" Cheryl asked. "I assume they knew."

"They knew." Dar responded. "There were people who probably cared and were disgusted, but as a corporation ILS didn't care. Even when Kerry and I became an item, they didn't care. They put an exception in our employment records and we carried on."

"Because you were important."

Dar nodded, after a brief pause. "If I was working in the mailroom, probably would have been a different reaction. I was useful to them. They needed my skillset, and, in fact, they appreciated Kerry's."

"Practical."

Dar stood up and stretched. "We did a good job for them. Now we ready to do this interview? My day's about to end." She pondered taking the following day off before the flight to Washington, the idea becoming rapidly very appealing.

"Sure." Cheryl said. "The reason I asked about that is the guy we talked to over there inferred that you left because you felt you were being pressured to leave due to your lifestyle."

Dar laughed.

"No, huh?"

Dar took a step back and leaned against the windowsill, folding her arms over her chest. "I've been out of the closet for a lot longer than I was being strategic for ILS." She said. "The only pressure I was feeling in terms of getting out of there was the pressure to be my own boss."

"Hon?" Kerry poked her head in the office. "Can we get this show on the road? The kids are waiting for dinner."

"We're heading down." Dar pushed off the sill and waved the producer ahead of her. "I was just being grilled on the nerve wracking consequences of our bedroom."

Kerry stopped in mid motion and looked from Cheryl to her partner. "Uh what?"

"You have kids?" Cheryl went with the flow.

"Dogs." Kerry held the door open. "Two Labrador Retrievers.. now what was that about our bedroom?"

**

"Think he's going to call you back?" Kerry had the car seat pitched back and she was sprawled across it, eyes closed as the ferry rumbled its way across the channel. "At this point I sure hope not."

"Don't care." Dar responded, eyes also closed. "We're taking tomorrow off."

"I love you."

Dar smiled into the darkness of the interior of the trunk. "Did I do okay with that interview?" She turned her head and looked at Kerry. "I felt kind of dorky."

"Actually, you came off as reserved yet mysterious." Kerry rubbed her nose, pinching the bridge of it. "I liked when you started talking about BGP routing metrics after he kept asking you about what could cause stuff like that to go down."

"Mm. Well, that is one reason it might stop working. Wrong metrics." Dar said, stifling a yawn. "Maybe that is what that monkey did. Skewed the metrics. That would fit the symptoms."

"Well great, Dardar. When that guy sees the CNN report maybe it'll give him a brainwave and he'll fix his problem." Kerry patted her partner's leg. "Tell you what though, I'm glad mom and dad are back."

"Me too."

Kerry smiled at the prompt, and immediate response. "I hope we get this contract all settled out in the next couple days. I don't want that hanging over us when we head out to the Grand Canyon." She said. "This is going to be so much fun, Dar."

"I think I'm going to wear those new hiking boots to the gym tomorrow. Break them in a little." Dar decided, as the ferry pulled up the dock and she moved her seat upright. "I don't want to mess with blisters on the trip."

"We can hike around the island too." Kerry said, straightening up her own seat as they got ready to drive off the deck. "That's a really good idea."

Dar put the truck in gear and drove up the ramp, giving the man directing traffic a casual wave. They got up to the top of the slope and she was about to turn left onto the perimeter road when a figure in a security uniform trotted towards her, waving his arm. "Ah."

"Oh please no drama." Kerry moaned. "It's too damn late, Dar."

Dar pulled the truck to a halt and opened the window. "Hey Charles."

"Ms. Roberts!" He leaned on the side of the vehicle. "Glad I caught you. Listen, have you heard from that guy, that Billy, since the other night?"

Dar shook her head. "Not a word. Why? He suing?"

"We don't know." Charles said. "We haven't heard a peep from him and Clemente went over to do his cleaning service and there's no sign of the guy. We were just wondering if you'd seen him, or if he'd contacted you."

Dar looked at Kerry, who was leaning on the console. "Maybe he took off for a while?" She suggested. "Figured he'd let things cool off?"

"Maybe." Charles said. "But we don't have record of him going off island and he didn't have a boat."

"Could have gone on someone else's." Kerry said. "Or he could have been in someone else's car going off the island. You all don't check everyone in the back seat, do you?"

"That's true enough ma'am, but it just seems strange, you know? He was around and about the island for weeks before that, kinda bothering everyone, now poof. He's gone."

"Well, in a week or so we'll be gone so if we see him before that, we'll let you know." Dar said. "Ker and I and the dogs are going on vacation."

Charles smiled. "We'll keep an eye on the place for you, Ma'am. Don't worry." He tapped the door, and stepped back, giving them a wave as Dar rolled up the window and they proceeded on.

"That was weird." Kerry said, as they pulled into the lower level parking, and Dar tucked the truck into the spot next to her SUV. "Dar did it sound to you like they thought we might know if something happened to that guy?"

Dar rested her hands on the wheel and considered. "No." She said, after a moment. "I think they were just asking everyone they knew was involved with him." She opened the door to the truck and slid out, shutting the door and heading for the steps up to their home.

As she reached the door her Handspring started ringing, and she pulled it out as Kerry reached around her to key the door open. "You know what?"

"What?" Kerry pushed the door inward and stepped in quickly to greet Chino and Mocha's excited wigglings.

"Fuck him." Dar hit the ignore button and shoved the phone back in her front pocket, sending the call to voice mail. "I gave him a chance. I'm done." She followed Kerry inside and shut the door, reaching down to pick up the frantic Mocha puppy. "C'mere, squiglet."

"Are you glad to see us, kids?" Kerry knelt and gave Chino a hug. "Did you take care of the little man today, Chi?"

"Growf." Chino wagged her tail gently.

"Time for dinner." Kerry stood up and moved towards the kitchen, picking up the mail on the dining room table and sorting through it as she walked. She put the stack down and went to the cupboard, taking out two portions of dog food and retrieving a mixture of chopped beef and chicken from the refrigerator.

"Yap! Yap yap!" Mocha hopped up and down at her feet, his front paws scrabbling at her kneecap. "Yap!" "Yes, I can see you're hungry." Kerry assembled the meal and put it down, getting back hastily out of the way as the two dogs hoovered the contents as though they were being chased down by wolves threatening to take it away from them. "Take it easy, guys."

Dar wandered in behind her and draped her arms over Kerry's shoulders. "I turned off my phone." She said. "I think we should just move on. Let's go to DC tomorrow, and just leave ILS behind."

It sounded good. "I'm all for that hon. I just hope ILS doesn't chase after us given our mutual customers." Kerry enjoyed the warmth surrounding her. "You want some tea?"

"Sure." Dar said. "I'm going to go change and chill out. " She gave Kerry a squeeze, then released her and stepped over the dogs, busy licking their dishes clean. "Like little vacuum cleaners."

"Growf." Chino left her empty dish and went to the dog door , bustling through it as Mocha first made sure she hadn't left any food behind, then chased after her, yelping as the door flap swung back and nearly knocked him over.

Kerry chuckled and went to the door. "I'm going to stretch out a little." She opened the door and went out onto the landing, watching the dogs bolt down the steps and into the cozily lit garden. "Nice night."

It was clear overhead and the stars were vivid against the darkness. Kerry went down the steps and walked over to the seating area, going into the work space and putting water on to heat.

She could have done it inside, of course, but there was something sweet in the air that made her want to savor the night, and she got out the small tea set she kept in the outdoor cupboard as she hummed softly under her breath.

"Yap!"

Kerry glanced over her shoulder, giving the dogs an indulgent smile as they chased each other in a circle. She set the pot on the burner and stepped to one side, reaching up and grasping the chinning bar Dar had installed there and letting her back stretch out.

It felt good, easing muscles that were cramped from too much sitting around during the whole of the long day. She slowly let her knees unlock and relax, taking her weight on her firmly gripped hands and feeling her shoulders rotate and pop into place. "Ah."

Chino spotted her and paused, then picked up a sadly bedraggled stuffed lamb and came racing over.

Kerry pulled herself up, getting her feet under her as she was nearly knocked off them. "Hey!"

"Growf!" Chino pushed the sodden toy into her thigh.

"Yuk." Kerry took it and tossed it across the garden, then retreated back to the little outdoor stove to measure out some dried green tea leaves and added a handful of mint leaves along with it into the ceramic teapot.

"C'mere."

Dar's voice echoed softly over the garden, along with the rasp and scuff as she trotted down the steps.
"Give me that."

Kerry smiled, as she poured the heated water over the leaves, then set the top on to let the herbs steep. There was something charming and old fashioned about the beverage, and she enjoyed mixing the tea leaves with other things to mix it up a little.

"Got orange peel in there this time?" Dar cocked her arm and tossed the ragged lamb. "I brought out the cookies."

"Mint this time." Kerry left the pot alone and went over to the bar again, gripping it and steeling herself for the effort of doing a chin up. She paused a moment then lifted herself off the ground, and letting her legs relax.

"Nice." Dar sprawled in the canvas bucket chair, watching her. She took the lamb Chino had just tossed onto her stomach and threw it again. "You're getting better at that."

Kerry managed a grin as she got through a couple more of the exercises, feeling the burn in her arms.
"Thanks honey."

"And you look sexy doing it."

"Dar, no one looks sexy doing pull ups." Kerry let herself down and released the bar, shaking out her hands. "At best, you don't look like a wuss."

Dar chuckled. "When I was in school they always tried to make me use the girl's bars." She related.
"Idiotic."

"Cause you were too butch?" Kerry leaned over the chair and gave her a kiss on the head.

"No. I was nearly six feet tall at the time. The bar was only a foot over my head." Her partner said. "I could hop and get my chin over it. I finally just started using the guys high bar."

"And your gym instructors didn't realize this? Where did they park their guide dogs?" Kerry asked. "Or were they just oblivious?"

"I was a smart ass. They didn't like me."

"That's my favorite part of you." Kerry grabbed the lamb and sent it flying. "Their loss." She went over to the table and retrieved the teapot, pouring out two cups and adding honey to them. Then she came back over to where Dar was sitting and set the tray down. "Of course, I never got the chance to try that in high school. We did do the uneven bars when I messed with gymnastics though."

"Bet you were cute." Dar picked up her tea and blew cautiously on it, then sipped.

"Bet I was a complete dork, and I have pictures to prove it." Kerry disagreed. "I think I hold my school record for falling flat on my butt or worse on my head." She handed Dar a cookie and took one, then sat down and leaned back as the dogs came trotting over. "Ah, the cookie monsters heard us chewing."

Dar broke off a bit of her cookie and offered it to Chino. "Want to turn on the news?"

"Nope."

"Me either. Turned off the phone, and I'm just going to enjoy the rest of our night."

Kerry lifted her tea cup and they touched edges with a soft clash of crockery. "Sounds good to me."

**

Kerry tapped her boxing gloves together and paused, then edged around and started punching the heavy hanging bag in front of her from a slightly different angle.

It was midmorning, and she was thoroughly soaked in sweat, but satisfied with her efforts so far, feeling a deep burn in her shoulders as she pounded the bag's surface.

Dar was doing bench presses nearby, flat on her back on the pressing bench, steadily lifting a bar in an easy rhythm up from her chest.

Kerry moved around to get a better look, and amused herself by watching the play of the light on her partner's near bare body, admiring the sculpted shape as she studiously exercised.

A moment later the swinging back swung a little further than she'd expected and whomped her backwards, making her rock back off her feet and land on her butt , arms flailing. "Whoa!!!" She yelled. "Ouch!"

"Hey." Dar racked her weight bar and got up, scooting over to where Kerry was now flat on her back, knees hiked up and one arm over her eyes as she laughed silently. "You okay?" She went down to one knee and put her hand on Kerry's stomach. "Ker?"

"Hahahahahahaha.." Kerry chortled softly. "Yeah, I'm fine." She wiped the sweat from her eyes. "Serves me right for lustng after you in public."

"Huh?" Dar sat down next to her. "When were you doing that? " She glanced around, but the gym was empty save the two of them. She reached over and smoothed the sweat dampened hair form Kerry's eyes and watched them close briefly, then open again.

"Just now." Kerry extended her legs out on the padded surface, and folded her hands over her stomach. "I was so busy watching you I didn't realize the bag was swinging at me and it smacked me in the head."

Dar leaned over and kissed her on the lips. "You really give my ego a boost." She smiled. "But try not to do that, hon. You'll end up with a bruise."

Kerry contentedly absorbed the look of affection in Dar's eyes as she regarded her. "My ego raises your ego one" She exhaled. "What a couple of goofy saps we are."

"We are." Dar said. "Want to go for a swim?"

"Yes." Kerry sat up and started to untie her gloves by tugging on the strings with her teeth. "That would feel absolutely awesome right now. I'm soaked."

Dar gently removed the strings from her incisors and untied the gloves for her, both of them sitting there on the padded ground splashed in warm sunlight from the windows. "Indoor pool, then hydro, then shower."

"Then lunch." Kerry got up and collected her gear. "I'm so damn glad we took today off." She followed Dar through the gym towards the changing area. "Its so nice just to chill out and spend some time just doing stuff."

"Uh huh."

"Just during the week, when it's really quiet here instead of on the weekend, when it's packed." Kerry exchanged her boxing outfit for a swimsuit. "Not having to be at the office."

"Tired of our new one?" Dar came over and leaned on the teak wood locker.

Kerry thought about that as she got her towel out, and laid it around her neck. "I like our new place." She protested, as they walked towards the gym's indoor pool. They passed through the door into a humid, chemical scented space with thick plastic panels surrounding a placidly lapping concrete lake.

"I do too." Dar said, after a long silence.

Kerry put her towel on a ring hung on the wall. "I just like spending time like this not working." She admitted, with a wry grin. "Maybe after our vacation I'll get it out of my system. I think I got the idea of not working in my head after we got let go that minute of 'oh cool!'s still in there."

Dar nodded, in a thoughtful sort of way. She hung her own towel and stretched her arms out, flexing her hands and then putting them on her hips. "Yeah." She eventually responded. "Is what it is I guess." She walked over to the side of the pool and dove in.

Kerry folded her arms over her chest and thought about that for a long moment, long enough for Dar to surface and stroke across to the other side of the pool with an easy motion. Then she shrugged, and went to the side of the pool, preparing to dive in herself.

Almost there, her attention was drawn by the sound of the door to the pool room opening and closing and she glanced over to see a tall, heavily built man entering. "Good morning." She said, vaguely remembering the man's face but not entirely sure of from where.

He paused, and regarded her. "Morning." He responded, changing direction and heading her way. "Been wanting to speak to you two people."

Kerry wasn't surprised to hear the motion of water and a splash as Dar came up out of the pool, and the slight rasp of her bare feet on the concrete verge, sensing the compression of the air as her partner arrived at her back.

The man's voice had been gruff but not threatening, but it was nice to have that presence behind her anyway. "Sure." Kerry responded. "What can we do for you?" She remembered who the man was just as he closed on them.

"Hello, Jim." Dar spoke up. "What's up?"

The man nodded at Dar. "My daughter told me all about what happened at the store." He said. "I appreciate your getting involved, Roberts, because I don't like people being jerks to anyone on this island much less my kid."

"He was a jerk." Dar said. "I didn't appreciate that either."

The man nodded again. "So thanks for that. But now we come to this, I don't like the way you people live, and I don't want my kid exposed to it."

He stopped speaking, and regarded them.

"Too fucking bad." Dar responded promptly. "Grow up and come into the twenty first century. Kerry and I don't bother anyone." She put her hand on Kerry's back, feeling the tension under her fingertips.

"I know that." The man said. "Or I'd have already had you kicked out of here. I'm not into bullshit and I don't think you are either. But my daughter means everything to me."

Kerry put her hands on her hips. "What exactly do you think we're going to do to her?" She asked. "She told us you didn't like gay people. Okay. I get it. My father didn't either. But you think we're going to sell her tickets to a Melissa Etheridge concert and turn her gay or something?"

He paused and looked at her.

"I was gay before I met Dar." Kerry said. "And I was brought up in a very conservative family, went to Sunday school, went to Christian high school, you name it. Didn't stop me from being gay."

"We don't recruit." Dar looked and sounded faintly amused. "Jim, I grew up on a Navy base. If proximity to testicular overload could have kept me straight, it would have Trust me. I saw more well hung naked men before I was ten than you probably have in your life."

Kerry pinched the bridge of her nose. "That was a mental image I didn't really need." She muttered.

"That's not the point." Jim said. "I don't want her getting any ideas."

"Well, all I can tell you is, any ideas she might get won't be from us. We're in a closed relationship." Kerry said. "I've never talked to your daughter about anything other than artisanal cheese and French bread."

Dar leaned closer. "I get the protective father thing, Jim. I've got one too." She said. "Lucky for me he's not a closed minded bigot like you are."

"I'm not a bigot." He said. "I just don't like gay people. I don't want them around my family." He didn't seem angry, just resolute. "So my advice to you is, find some other place to live, because I've got ways to make it very uncomfortable for you here. Don't push me to that."

Kerry felt Dar's whole body stiffen up and she put her hand out to stop her forward motion as she started to come past her. "Not worth it, hon."

Dar stopped and went still, taking a few breaths. "No you're right." She said, in a flat tone. "Jim, you better find yourself a new place to live. Because if it's the last thing I do on earth, I will ruin you, and you will truly regret ever saying that to me."

It put a chill down Kerry's spine, the ice in Dar's voice she'd only heard a time or two before. She stayed still, watching the developer and her partner lock eyes, keeping her jaw locked shut on the torrent of angry words piling up behind her tongue.

Jim's eyes narrowed. "I don't take threats well, Roberts."

"Neither do I." Dar responded instantly, a rasp on the edge of her voice. "Especially not a slimy, pointless threat like yours is. I've lived here a decade and paid your residents fees and you took them and you knew damn well what my lifestyle was. So now I save your damn daughter from being raped and you threaten to have me evicted? Fuck you. Fuck you and everyone like you."

Dar was furious. Kerry had never actually seen her partner this angry, and she was at a loss to know what to do to defuse it. Or if she should, because that anger felt clean, and right to her.

It was at that point where dangerous things could happen, and for a moment she was sure they would. Dar's body was vibrating with tension, and Kerry knew there was a potent actual threat in the tall frame next to her.

Maybe Jim realized it. Or maybe he was smarter than he appeared, because he took a step back and lifted one hand up in a holding gesture. "I can see this has the potential of getting very unpleasant for both of us."

"Are you used to having people just run away or cave in when you threaten them?" Kerry found herself asking, with a note of curiousness in her voice. "Please don't expect that from us."

He turned his eyes to her. "I am used to that, and people usually do back off. I've got a lot of power on this island and most people who live here really want to."

"Listen." Kerry felt Dar shift next to her. "I appreciate that. It's a very nice place to live. But the business Dar and I are in? You don't really want to get in that kind of fight with us."

He exhaled, and put his fists on his hips, shifting his attention from Kerry to Dar's set, cold expression. "Know what? You're right." He said. "You did me a big favor. I'm just scared, and my wife is scared, that you're going to influence our daughter. Especially that she told us you offered her a job. I get crazy."

Kerry felt Dar slowly relax next to her. "That was my screwup." She said. "She said she wasn't going to college, and we just started a new business, and she's a bright kid. I had no idea you were a homophobe until after I asked her."

He shook his head. "She's going to work for me." He said. "But I'm.. " He lifted a hand again and then let it fall. "Apologies. Just stay away from her." He turned and walked hurriedly out of the pool area, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Dar let out a long, shaking breath. "Mother fucking son of a bitch."

Kerry inhaled. "What you said."

"I think I'm going to throw up." Dar folded her arms over her stomach, hunching her shoulders and blinking. "Holy crap."

"We absolutely are going to move." Kerry said, after a moment, putting her hand on Dar's arm.. "But at our time, and when we feel like it not his."

"Yeah." Dar went over and sat down on one of the high top chairs scattered around, leaning back and covering her eyes with one hand.

"You okay, hon?" Kerry went over to her and took hold of her free hand, chafing the cold fingers between her own. "I thought for a minute I was going to be a witness to murder there. I don't think I've ever seen you that mad."

"Close. I was seeing blood red." Dar admitted. "What an idiot."

Kerry could see the pulse point fluttering against the skin of Dar's neck and she shifted her hands, moving them to her partner's shoulders and gently massaging them. "Easy, babe." She murmured. "Just breathe, huh?"

"Ungh." Dar grunted. "What a jerk."

"Maybe we should have gone into work instead." Kerry said, mournfully. "This wasn't what I was expecting to get out of our pool session." She continued to knead the skin across Dar's shoulders, feeling the tension very slowly ease. "Dar, Dar, Dar."

"Holy crap he pissed me off."

"Yeah. I know." Kerry leaned over a little and kissed the damp skin right behind Dar's right ear. "Really not worth you getting so worked up, my love. There are always idiots in the world, you know?"

Dar exhaled. "I know. I just didn't expect..." She leaned to one side, resting her elbow on the chair arm and letting her head lay on Kerry's shoulder. "Didn't expect to get that kind of reaction for doing something I thought was right."

No. Kerry sighed, and draped her arm over Dar's shoulders. She remembered, with somber vividness the moment in her own life when she had to face that hatred and she knew in the gut what Dar meant.

"Why the hell do people have to be so damned stupid?" Dar asked. "At what point is humanity going to grow the fuck up and stop inventing reasons to hate?"

"C'mon. Let's go back home and play with our kids." Kerry said. "I've about lost my taste for the facilities here today."

"Urmph." Dar got up off the chair and took Kerry's hand in hers, as they walked across the concrete deck back towards the gym. "You know what we could do?"

Kerry cleared her throat a little. "Find a place in the Grove?"

"Mind reader."

**

Kerry finished packing their overnight bags and set them down near the door. She glanced over her shoulder at the couch, where Dar was curled up with both dogs draped over her as she studied a small notebook.

She was wearing a pair of dark cargo pants and a rugby shirt and looked quite adorable to her partner's appreciative eyes, especially with Mocha curled up behind her left knee resting his small head on it.

It was quiet and peaceful, and the stress of the morning had slowly dissipated, though the feeling of disappointment hadn't. Looking around at this place she'd called home for the last few years now made her a little sad.

Ah well. Kerry sighed and leaned against the door, dismissing the thoughts as unproductive.

It was late afternoon. They had about a half hour before they would have to leave for the airport, and she'd just gotten a call from the marina letting her know that Andrew and Ceci were pulling into a guest slip and tying up.

"Hon?" Kerry went over and perched on the arm of the couch. "We going to tell your folks about Jim?"

"Yes." Dar said, without looking up. "In case he decides to try something stupid while we're gone I want them to know what's up."

"You think he will?"

Dar shrugged. "Depends. Did he really back off or did he just not want to end up in a boxing match with me?"

"Eh." Kerry got up and went to their laptop bags, her briefcase and Dar's somewhat retro looking messenger bag and started putting the folders full of presentation material into them. "Are we letting your dad drive us to the airport?"

"Nah, I'll just park the truck there."

Dar got up and set Mocha down on the floor, then walked over to the dining room table and handed over her notebook. "I'm glad we're going out of town tonight."

"Me too. I still feel kinda slimy after what happened this morning." Kerry tucked the notebook into Dar's bag along with a sack of hard candies, then she fastened the flap and stood back, resting her hands on a chair and considering if she'd remembered everything or not.

"Thanks." Dar nibbled her ear, sending her thoughts rapidly off track. "For taking care of all the details so I don't show up there with half my gear forgotten."

Kerry smiled. "My pleasure." She lifted Dar's hand and kissed the knuckles, then ducked past her as the front door bell rang. "I'd get some beer ready. I think they're gonna need it."

"Mm." Dar detoured to the kitchen, listening to Kerry's voice as she greeted Andrew and Ceci as she opened the refrigerator and studied the contents. "Beer, or milk?" She mused. "Maybe a beer for mom, and a chocolate milk for dad?"

"Dar?" Kerry's voice echoed softly from the dining room.

"On the way." Dar plunked a choice of beverages on a round wooden tray and headed out into the living room, where Andrew and Ceci were now occupying the love seat, having gained the rapt attention of the two dogs. "Hi."

"Hi" Ceci eyed her. "What exactly are we going to hear about that you're bringing everything from seltzer water to vodka out?"

"Vodka's for me." Dar said, putting the tray down. "It was that kind of morning."

"Lord." Andrew sat up and stared at her. "What in the hell happened? You get drafted? By the Army?"

"Don't give them any ideas, Andrew"

**

Dar watched the lights go past through the window of the hotel room, idly listening to Kerry talking to her mother in the background. It was dark, and they'd just landed a half hour prior and now it seemed that a sushi dinner was in her future with a senator and probably some aides.

That was all right. She didn't even mind the thought of spending some time with Kerry's mother, at least it would keep her mind off the stresses of the day and keep her from thinking about their morning presentation tomorrow.

"Okay, we'll meet you there in twenty minutes." Kerry concluded. "Bye mother."

She hung up and came over to where Dar was sprawled, perching on the arm of the chair she was sitting in. "We're going to that little Japanese place I told you I went to with her the last time I was here."

"Sure." Dar amiably nodded. "Round of Saki and a platter to share is just about what I'm in the mood for right now." She let her head bump against Kerry's hip. "Don't even mind that it's with your mother."

Kerry chuckled. "Yeah, the world sure has changed."

"You going to tell her your name has?" Dar inquired.

"Oh hmm... you know I sort of forgot about that." Kerry said. "What do you think her reaction's going to be?"

Dar thought about that for a minute. "Damned if I know." She responded. "On one hand, she's pretty up on the whole family thing, but on the other hand..."

"She was married to my father and changed her name to his." Kerry said. "So yeah, she shouldn't have much to say about that, but sometimes my mother is oblivious to hypocrisy."

"Up to you, babe." Dar folded her arms over her stomach. "I'll go along with whatever you tell her." She half closed her eyes as Kerry gently ran her fingers through her hair "Today sucked my brain out. Hope it soaks back in overnight."

"C'mon." Kerry got up and plucked Dar's sleeve. "It's only a couple blocks from here. Let's walk over."

So they did. Dar zipped up her leather jacket and stuck her hands in her pockets, following Kerry out the front door of their hotel and out onto the sidewalk.

It was cold and windy, but as Kerry had promised the walk wasn't long, and in under ten minutes they were turning in to the entrance of the restaurant, Dar pulling the door open and standing aside to let Kerry precede her inside.

"Thank you." Kerry said, hooking a finger into one of Dar's pockets and pulling her along as they entered the small restaurant and stopped at the seating station. "Hello." Kerry greeted the young woman standing there. "I'm expecting at least one more person, so maybe a table for four?"

"Yes." The woman picked up some menus and gestured to them to follow her. She led the way through the mostly empty restaurant to a lacquered table in the center. "Okay?"

"Fine" Kerry took a seat and picked up the menu as Dar went around the table and sat down to her right.
"Can we get two glasses of white wine to start?"

"Yes, sure." The waitress whisked off to the bar.

Dar leaned back in her chair and looked around. The restaurant had booths around the edges, and a square sushi bar where five or six patrons were seated with plates in front of them. It looked like a thousand other sushi joints she'd been in but the customers here were a touch more conservatively dressed and there was no big fish tank.

The restaurant door opened and Kerry's mother entered, with an aide at her side. Dar lifted a hand in greeting, gently nudging Kerry's knee under the table.

Cynthia Stuart brightened, then evaded the hostess and came over to the table, slipping her fur lined jacket off and settling it on the back of the chair The aide remained behind, slipping past them and taking a seat at the end of the sushi bar. "Hello there. Kerrison, Dar, how nice it is to see you."

Kerry felt the slightly squirmy discomfort of not knowing exactly how to respond, but she stood and took her mother's outstretched hands, giving them a squeeze. "Hello, mother. Thanks for agreeing to subject yourself to sushi again for our sakes."

"Oh, but it's no sacrifice." Cynthia released her and sat down, settling the small white napkin on her lap. "I have been coming here quite often since your last visit. I do quite enjoy it now."

"That's really cool." Kerry responded. "I'm glad I introduced you to it then."

Dar just cleared her throat and kept quiet, feeling more than just a little zoned after the long day. She listened to Kerry and her mother exchange pleasantries, content to sip her wine, and ponder the menu.

"The intelligence committee is so looking forward to hearing you speak tomorrow, Dar." Cynthia caught her attention away from the unagi. "There has been quite a lot of debate about this new program of the administrations."

"I can imagine." Dar said. "Hope they feel the same way after I stop talking. I tend to get pretty technical."

"Oh I'm sure it will be fine." Cynthia protested, then paused, seeing the wry look on her daughter's face.
"Won't it?"

"There is no doubt, Dar does get technical." Kerry said. "But it's a really technical subject so I think you'll all have to muddle along. I'll be there to translate for you though if you want, mother."

"Oh." The senator blinked a little. "Yes I'm sure it'll work out just fine then." She said, in a determined tone. "It's quite amusing you know." She added, with a smile. "There were some of my colleagues who were fit to be tied about whole thing until the president showed his support."

"They probably swallowed so much bile they turned the color a salamander." Kerry smiled briefly, looking up as the waitress returned for their order. "What's it going to be, Dardar?"

"Mm... spicy tuna roll and a chef's choice." Dar said, after a pause. "And some hot green tea, please."

"Same." Kerry stacked her menu on Dar's and leaned back a little, as her mother ordered and the waitress zipped off. "How's Angie doing? I got an email from her the other day, sounds like she's having some fun with the kids."

"It's been quite active." Cynthia said. "She and Brian have just finished some house hunting, and I think they're going to make a decision soon." She said. "Though I have enjoyed having the children around the house, it's right for them to want to start their own I think."

"Given Kerry's tendency to smash your furniture I'm sure it's probably safer that way in the long run." Dar remarked, ignoring the droll look she was getting from her partner. "I think that was the only comic relief to be had that night."

Cynthia looked uncertain, then she smiled apparently deciding Dar was making a joke. "Yes, that was a terrible, long, and stress filled day. I hope I never see another like it."

"Oh, me either." Kerry agreed at once. "Never want to go through that again. I think that's one of the reasons Dar and I decided to participate in this new program. Maybe something we can do can prevent that."

Her mother was nodding already as she was speaking. "That's exactly what the administration said in the proposal. That we had to find a way to make the technology work for us to give us a way to stop this sort of thing before it happens."

"Well, that's the idea." Dar said.

"You can do that then?" Cynthia inquired.

"Dar can do pretty much anything when it comes to technology mother." Kerry took a sip of her wine.
"I've gotten a whole new appreciation for that after the last month of us starting up our own business."

Dar produced a charming smile at that. "Flatterer."

"Not really." Kerry said. "All these people are calling us, wanting all these different things and Dar is just like, 'yeah, I can code that, no problem.' She flicked her fingers in a throwaway gesture. "Want an accounting system? I got that, no problem. Do we need a customer database? Give me a minute I have that on a hard drive here somewhere."

"Ker." Dar started laughing.

"Sweetheart, it's just true." Kerry mock sighed. "Somehow ILS had you so busy being management they forgot to take shameless advantage of you as a programmer."

"Well, isn't that nice?" Cynthia rallied gamely "If that's so, then I think this project will be successful. It would be nice to have a political scene become something useful for a change."

"We'll do our best." Dar said.

Cynthia nodded. "And how has it been going with your new business?" She asked. "It must be strange after working for that other company for so long, for you Dar?"

"A little. We'd already tendered our resignation though." Dar said. "So in the end it was just annoying with all the garbage going on." She leaned back as the waitress returned to deliver their sushi. "After all that time, it would have been nice to have a graceful exit."

"Many of my colleagues feel the same." Cynthia said. "And very often end up being chased out of their offices by newcomers with very little ceremony."

"Wonder what that's like at the White House?" Kerry mused. "That must be really weird."

Dar wielded her chopsticks, tapping the tips together. "Wonder if they do things like leave an old fish in a garbage can in the Oval Office."

Kerry snickered.

"I'm sure they don't." Her mother frowned. "After all, these are professional people." Then she paused in thought.

"Thinking twice about that?" Kerry's eyes twinkled a little. "But seriously, I think in the past even though there was a lot of head bashing and competition there was a sense of .. um.. "

"Decorum." Dar supplied.

"Yes. That you didn't always get to hear exactly what everyone was thinking." Kerry nodded. "That's faded."

Cynthia slowly nodded.

"But anyway.. " Dar paused, as her phone rang. She pulled it out and glanced at it and then gave Kerry an apologetic look as she stood and pushed her chair in. "Be right back."

"Oh boy." Kerry watched her step outside, and exhaled. "I'm sure that's not good."

Her mother eyed her warily. "Is there something the matter?" She asked in a diffident tone.

Kerry used a piece of sushi to give herself a moment to think about answering. Then she swallowed. "Where do I start?" She answered wryly. "So much has happened in the last month. But what Dar's worried about right now, and me too, is that our former company is kind of in the crapper."

Cynthia's eyebrows lifted. "Kerrison."

Kerry chewed another piece of sushi and swallowed it. "Actually I was going to say it was a Technicolor clusterfuck but I thought you'd freak out."

Her mother stared at her, chopsticks half lifted in one hand.

Kerry winked at her, then went back to her plate. "Want to hear the details?"

**

Dar waited for the door to swing shut behind her before she answered the call . "Dar Roberts." She leaned against the wall of the restaurant, watching the cars go by.

"Hey Dar, it's Mark."

"Hey."

"So listen, I know you guys are up in DC, but that skanky guy called me again." Mark said. "Only this time, he wasn't slimy, you know? He was just scared shitless."

"Well, that's better than slimy, I guess." Dar hitched one knee up. "So what'd he want now?"

"Yeah I thought so too, about him being slimy. Anyway. What he said was, okay, so, no bull, he'd be very grateful to any information me, or you, would be willing to give him to get this fixed."

"That is better than slimy. It's borderline honest." Dar responded. "So, I assume you told him the obvious – put things back?"

"Sure. He didn't go so far to say he'd tanked the repository, but he said it was down, and far as he knew, unrecoverable."

"Idiot."

"Yeah."

Dar studied the road in front of her. "Shit."

"You came to the same conclusion I did, then." Mark said, with a mournful tone. "Hey, you're pretty close to Herndon, right? That's got both sides, you can get to everything."

Dar considered walking.. no, being walked into the control room and seeing all those people again and it made her stomach churn. "I don't want to go to Herndon." She said. "I don't want to put my hands on a keyboard, matter of fact."

"Dar, they're not going to be able to fix that shit." Mark said. "We both know it."

"No, I know."

"So?" He said. "Like, no offense, Big D, but I really want to get this crap to bed. I don't want it hanging out over you, or me, you know? I'm done with them."

"Okay." Dar exhaled. "You can call him back, and tell him if he'll send me the current configurations of all the master routers, I will look at them, and make whatever changes seem reasonable to me, and send them back. See what he says to that."

"Unless his brain's migrated back to his ass I bet he'll cry like a baby." Mark said. "Okay, send you what I get if he even knows how to pull them."

Dar nodded to herself. "Okay. Talk to you later, Mark. I'm having some dinner with Kerry and her mom."

"Ah.. huerm.. have fun?"

"Yeah. Bye." Dar closed the phone and folded her arms, trying to decide how she felt about the new development. On one hand, it seemed like some sense was returning to the situation, but on the other hand she thought there was still an opportunity for her to get screwed in the process of trying to help.

After all, trying to help on the island hadn't ended up too good for her, had it?

Dar sighed, and pushed off the wall, heading back into the restaurant. Maybe she could get away with providing the minimum of help - or – she wondered if she could just look at the configs, and send them back saying they were hopeless and she couldn't fix them.

Dar paused, with her hand on the door, and watched her own eyes reflect back from her from the outside surface. She gave herself a wry, knowing, smile, then opened the door and went back inside.

**

"Ah am some pissed." Andrew sat squarely in the chair on the porch, arms folded. "Ceci, ah know no good deed done go unpunished but Jesus P Fish."

"Yeah." Ceci was in the other chair, and a tray with rum punch sat between them. "Dar didn't deserve that. She did the right thing helping out that kid." She hand one knee hiked up and her arms wrapped around it. "I'd have done it. You would have too."

"Jackass."

"He would probably have invited us for dinner." His wife sighed. "Instead of being so stupid as to wave a red flag in front of us and threaten to evict us from his preciously pretentious rock pile."

"Kids should go live on down in that little place in the keys." Andrew stated. "Ain't a right place for Dar here anyhow."

Ceci smiled. "It fits them better." She agreed. "But that's one hell of a commute, you know? Especially in weather."

"Mmph" Andrew grunted softly. He reached down and picked up Mocha, who had taken a seat on one of his boots and set the puppy on his lap. "Cute little thing."

"Yap." Mocha seemed to enjoy his new perch, his small pink tongue emerging as he looked around.

"He is cute." Ceci accepted the subject change. "I wonder what made Dar decide to get another one?" She gingerly patted Chino on the head. "To keep this one company?"

"Could be." Andy said. "Social critters."

Chino wagged her tail. Then she got up and walked over to where Andy was seated, putting her nose up against Mocha's nose and giving him a lick. She moved past and went to the edge of the porch, standing up and putting her paws on the rail and peering out over the ocean.

Ceci regarded the animal, watching her upright but folded ears twitch as she sniffed the ocean air. She'd never considered dogs to be interesting, but now, having minded Chino so many times she'd come to the conclusion that there was some kind of intelligence in the beast that surprised her.

When the big dog looked at her, there was definitely something going on behind those soft, brown eyes. Thoughts, though not human kinds of thoughts, but thoughts none the less. "Hey there Chino." Ceci waved at her.

"Growf!"

"Dar said they had been bringing these two into the office with them." Ceci remarked. "Must be cozy."

"Think it's good." Andy said, after a reflective pause. "Dogs love those kids, and no politics about it." He held his hand out and Mocha put his paw in it, then turned his head and looked at Andy. 'Crazy things that happen to them, that's all right."

"Yeah." Ceci leaned her arms on the chair and regarded the horizon. "We going to go talk to that guy, Andy?"

Andrew pondered that in silence. "Ah am not sure talking will do much for the situation."

"Well, you could be right, sailor boy, but I'm not really in the mood to be put in jail tonight, and we promised to watch the dogs until Dar and Kerry get back." Ceci pointed out. "So maybe we could try talking first, and then, after the kids get back, find other ways."

"All right." Her husband agreed. "We can go have us some pizza pie anyhow."

"We can take these dogs for a walk over there and sit outside." Ceci warmed to the plan. "We'll look like a total set of snoots."

Andrew gave her a very droll look that reminded Ceci strongly of their daughter and she grinned. "Okay well, a pretend pair of snoots." She got up. "Let me go get the leashes."

Chino's ears perked. She went to the sliding door and stood waiting, her tail lashing back and forth.

"That dog understands what I just said."

"Yeap."

"Is that normal?"

**

Kerry stood with her hands on Dar's shoulders, peering over the left one as her partner studied a series of printed pages in front of her. "Is it a mess?"

Dar settled back and folded her arms. "It's a mess."

"Ah huh."

"They all have to be rebuilt." Dar said. "It's a lot of work."

"You don't want to do it?" Kerry guessed, leaning forward a little and pressing her body against her partner's. "Well, let me rephrase the question. Of course you don't want to waste your time fixing someone else's screw up."

Dar sighed.

"But you don't want to do it just because you don't want to do it." Kerry clarified.

"I don't." Dar admitted. "I keep looking at these and knowing what effort was put into designing them and the thought some moron just screwed them up is making me nuts."

"Well, hon..."

"Yes, I know. I offered. We should make it a rule that you stand next to me when I'm on the phone with a roll of duct tape ready." Dar pushed the sheets aside and pulled over her laptop. "Let me get started on this."

Kerry just kept up her massage, reasoning that no words were really appropriate. She glanced over Dar's shoulder as she started to setup a work session on the large, crisp screen, her body relaxing after a few minutes as she pecked at the keyboard.

Dar was a fast typist. She seemed to not need a connection between her eyeballs and what she was typing and it was a little odd to Kerry to watching those flying fingers and not hear the rattling smack of their older style keyboards. "These laptops are a lot quieter."

"They sure are. Softer on your fingertips too." Dar nudged one of the sheets over with her elbow. "I could probably work on this all night and not keep you up."

"Like I would let you?"

Dar glanced up over her shoulder and smiled, and got a kiss on the top of her head. Then she went back to typing.

"Can I help you with the setup?" Kerry asked after a few minutes of quiet. "I can see what you're' doing there, Dar. Send me the rest of those files and I'll get them ready for you."

Dar opened up her mail program without even a grunt of protest and Kerry went over to get her own laptop, settling in the round, almost comfortable hotel chair next to the desk and flexing her hands. "Glad we picked a hotel with wifi."

"Maria put it in our travel profile." Dar answered absently. "Wifi, room service, and big, fluffy king size beds."

Kerry looked up over the screen of her laptop, one eyebrow lifting. But it seemed Dar was serious, so she just chuckled and shook her head.

She retrieved the files from her mail, and opened them, placing them onto her desktop while she prepared to work with them.

Plain text files. There was nothing complicated about the configuration in that sense. It was just something edited in a text editor, full of lines of cryptic commands that made the routing system work.

But they were exact and unforgiving. Kerry sighed. "Are you commenting these?"

"No. Fuck them. If they want to know why I do things the way I do them they can read the design archives." Dar said, in a cranky tone. "Unless they deleted those too."

"Want some hot tea?"

"Meh."

"How about some ice cream?" Kerry tapped at her keys. "Or a milkshake?"

"That has possibilities."

**

Ceci and Andrew were tucked into an outside table at the Italian restaurant on the island, with both dogs sitting patiently nearby. "Do you suppose that fellow is going to come out and meet with us?" Ceci nibbled on a bread stick, looking forward to a vegetable lasagna and some minestrone soup.

Andy shrugged. "Knows what's good for him he won't." He said picking up a frosty mug of root beer and taking a swallow of it. "What the hell's he going to say about it, Cec?"

"Well, maybe he'll reconsider how unwise it was for him to threaten the kids." Ceci reasoned. "I mean, you can say a lot you don't mean in the heat of the moment."

Andy was quiet for a moment then he nodded. "True thing."

"Well if he doesn't, we can just take a walk around the golf course and enjoy the weather." Ceci decided as their dinner was delivered. She had taken her first spoon of soup when the door to the restaurant opened and a stickily built man came out and approached them. "Ah."

"You people want to talk to me?" The man said, stopping at the table. "Jim Beakman."

"Have a seat." Ceci indicated one of the empty ones. "Thanks for taking the time to chat. I'm Cecelia Roberts, and this is my husband, Andrew." She waited for him to warily take a seat. "We're Dar's parents."

Andrew had picked up a piece of his pizza and he was chewing it, content to let Ceci do the talking for the moment. He knew the man vaguely, from seeing him around the island, usually on a gas powered golf cart.

Looked like a construction type of man. He was heavily built, and had dark hair, with hard, intent eyes and big, squarely made hands. Acted like a fellow who'd been in charge of things with no contesting it for a good long time.

Andy had known men like that, long timers, in the service. Fellas who had gotten used to command, and had carved themselves out a patch where their word was law.

He smiled a little. None of them had much liked him, and he didn't figure this feller was going to end up liking him either.

'You must be real proud then.' The man said.

"We are." Ceci said, aware of the sarcasm but answering at face value. "You always hope for the best for your kids, but to have Dar become the very successful and stand up person she is makes me very gratified, as a parent."

Beakman regarded her. "So you don't care she's gay?"

Right to the point. Ceci rather liked that. "No. Why would I?" She responded. "I don't want to sleep with her. She's my daughter. That would be horrific and probably immoral and perhaps even illegal in Broward County."

Andrew chuckled.

"You really don't care?" He turned his attention to Andrew. "Bet you would care if she was a boy."

Andrew chewed his pizza thoughtfully. "No point in wondering, cause she ain't." He said. "But ah probably woulda gotten into a half ton more fights over it if Dar'd been a boy." He added. "Ain't so bad the way it turned out."

The construction manager shrugged. "So what did you want to talk to me about? She ready to back down on the threat she made against me?"

Now it was Ceci's turn to dryly chuckle and she did. "Dar never backs down. My reason for wanting to talk to you is to ask you what the hell you thought you were doing threatening her, and Kerry, with eviction."

He studied her warily.

"Because while my husband here is not a legally inclined man, I come from a family with a very very long history of litigation who holds very long grudges." Ceci said, leaning on one elbow and regarding him with a cold eye. "And I know just how illegal what you said to her was, even here."

"I don't care what's legal or not." He responded frankly. "I just care about protecting my family."

"Wall." Andrew put down the bit of crust he'd been chewing and dusted his hands off. "Now that there's something you and I can see eye to eye on." He focused his attention on the man. "Cause Dar's my child. There ain't nothing at all in the world I won't do to keep her safe, and defend her from jackasses making threats at her." He paused. "Buddy."

They stared at each other in silence.

Ceci cleared her throat. "Let me part the machismo for a moment." She said. "This is an idiotic conversation. It's idiotic that you want to evict my kid because she's gay, and it's idiotic that my husband is having to state the fact that he's ready to shoot you in the head if you keep on doing that."

Beakman sat up straight and looked over at her. "What?"

"That is what he was just saying." Ceci advised him. "We do not play games in this family and we're more nuts than otherwise. Really. So look." She leaned towards him again. "I don't know what you think that either my daughter or the daughter of the late Roger Stuart is going to do to your kid, but just stop it. It won't happen."

Andrew looked at her, then back at Beakman. "That what you all think?" His voice lifted in surprise. "Dar didn't say that."

"I read between the lines." Ceci muttered.

The ex-seal snorted. "Boy, let me tell you, Dar ain't got eyes for nobody else but who she's married to. She ain't made that way." He shook his head. "If that all was what this here thing was about, nothing but a big old waste of evr'body's time."

He got up. "Let em go take these here dogs walking." With another shake of his head he collected both leashes and headed off down the patio, both animals trotting eagerly after him.

Ceci finished her soup and set it aside. "So." She said, to the silently watching Beakman. "What's your real problem? Since Dar's been living here for a bunch of years and she hasn't molested anyone yet, and you apparently didn't care about her lifestyle all that time."

"That's right I didn't." He said, after a long pause. "Kept to herself, didn't make much trouble. But now she's got my daughter all interested in things she has no business being interested in."

"Huh?"

"Since that other night, now she's some kind of hero. I don't want my kid thinking no pervert is a hero." He said. "It's got my wife upset, and we're not going to risk her running off and getting herself into trouble."

Ceci blinked at him for a long moment. "Oh." She finally said. "So the problem isn't Dar, it's her."

"This is my patch." Beakman said. "You get that? She belongs here."

"I get it." Ceci said, who did. "So the fact that Dar saved your kid from being raped or worse doesn't matter."

He shook his head. "You can call me a shithead for that and I probably am." He admitted. "But I'm not having her think something like that should make her turn into a freak." He got up "I'm not afraid of you people. I'm not going to have my family chased off my patch. You understand?"

"Better than you could possibly imagine." Ceci responded. "Had a great great grand something who fought with Washington at Valley Forge, and Andy's great great grand something was a Confederate general in a place that war hasn't quite ended yet. I get it."

He paused and regarded her somberly.

"That's what Dar's heritage is." Ceci said. "So while I do get it, and on some level as a parent myself I have a sympathy for wanting to protect your family, think about evils and the lesser of them before you do anything."

They looked at each other in silence.

"We're better friends than enemies" Ceci concluded, lifting her glass of wine and raising it in his direction.

He nodded briefly, then turned and walked away, around the corner of the porch and out of sight.

Ceci sighed. "Well, mother goddess, I tried." She went back to her plate, shaking her head. "Complete and utter waste of my time, and a pizza I think."

**

"Is that all of them?" Kerry was lying on her stomach on the bed, her head resting on her arms. "It's almost five am, Dar."

"Couple more pecks." Dar glanced at a page on the desk, then back at her screen. "I think I'm getting too old for this all night crap anymore."

Kerry opened one eye and regarded her partner drolly. "Let me go order you a bowl of prunes, grandma."

Dar chuckled and finished her amendments, running her eyes over the scripts one last time. "What a pain in the ass this has been." She saved the last changes and lifted her hands off the keyboard, flexing them and then cracking her knuckles.

"Done?"

Dar assembled the group of new files into an archive and then opened up her email program. "Let me just send these to Mark." She attached the archive and sent it on its way. "That is, I hope, the end of that." She announced with a relatively satisfied tone.

Kerry snorted softly.

The light in the room altered as Dar shut off the lamp, and got up from the desk, moving over to join her partner on the bed. "Ugh."

"Alarm set?" Kerry mumbled indistinctly.

"Yeah." Dar got the covers over them and Kerry wrapped up in her arms all in the same unlikely motion. "Let's hope tomorrow is short and easy."

"Like me?" Kerry started chuckling silently as she felt Dar do the same. "Let's get through your demo and come back here and take a nap."

"Sounds good to me."

**

Dar towed her hair dry, and regarded her reflection, making a face at herself and sticking her tongue out after a moment. "I'm not a morning person today."

Kerry edged in next to her, dressed in only a towel. "I'm never a morning person." She leaned both hands on the sink basin and eyed Dar through damp, very disheveled pale hair. "I definitely am too old for all this all night crap."

"Funny." Dar drawled. "You kept me up all night just the other mphf."

Kerry removed her hastily clapped hand from her partners mouth. "That's different."

"It sure was a hell of a lot more fun than editing router configs." Dar ran a brush through her hair and pondered if using a dryer was in the cards. She felt a nibble on her arm and looked down to find Kerry leaning against her, eyes half closed. "Oh, you are tanked."

"I need some stronger coffee." Kerry admitted, straightening up and pulling over her toiletry bag. "I think it's mostly that I keep thinking about having to sit in the room and listen to two dozen people like my father deliberately misunderstand every single word you say."

"Just think." Dar said. "Next week at this time we'll be picking up the RV and heading out on the road."

Kerry visibly perked up. "Boy I can't wait for that." She admitted. "Dar, I'm really looking forward to that rafting trip. I just want to flush the world out of my head for a while and see new stuff."

"Me too." Dar decided against the blow dryer. "Let me go get my duds on, and I'll call down for some double shot espressos."

"Oohhhh... that sounds wonderful." Kerry brushed her own hair out and started to put on the light makeup she now very seldom used. She listened to Dar ramble around in the outer room, hearing the low whistling.

She got into fresh underthings and went out into the other room, going over to their joint suitcase and taking out the linen, conservatively cut business suit that had been back in the back of her closet for at least a month.

"Know what I forgot to throw in?" Dar was buttoning the sleeves on her silk shirt. "Hose. Oh well. Guess they'll just have to deal with my tan."

"I've never seen you wear hose. You have some?" Kerry adjusted the belt on her skirt. "Oh wait, I remember seeing a pair stuck back in the back of your sock drawer I thought they were just a token."

Dar chuckled. "They are." She tucked in the shirt. "I like that teal color on you." She studied her partner. "You want to do this demo? You look better than I do."

Kerry glanced at her reflection in the mirror. "I don't think so." She disagreed. "You look good in burgundy and I really like that shirt."

They both fell silent as they finished fastening and buckling then Dar looked up . "We done being girly now?"

"Hehe." Kerry pulled on her jacket and tugged the sleeves straight. "Hey we are girls" She walked over and straightened the collar on her partner's shirt. "Are you going to wear your microchip pin?" She asked. "We can stop in the coffee shop downstairs. We don't need them to bring something up."

"Sounds good." Dar removed her jacket from it's hanger. "I didn't bring the pin with me. But let me get my earrings."

Kerry went over and made sure Dar's messenger bag had all her notes in it, then buckled it shut as the windows took on a pink glow from the rising sun. They had the presentation scheduled at the White House, then the grilling from Congress, hopefully a break in the afternoon, then dinner at Gerry Easton's.

Then an early morning flight the next day back home. Kerry got her sunglasses and tucked her them into the belt on her skirt, and got the messenger bag over her shoulder, as Dar finished fastening her earrings. "Ready?"

"Let's go." Dar put the key to the hotel room in her pocket and went to the door, opening it and stepping back to let Kerry go through. "Mark should be sending off those files right about now." She said. "Glad that's behind us."

"You think that's enough information for them to fix the problem?" Kerry headed down the hall to the elevator stack. "Is there anyone even left there to fix it?"

Dar shrugged. "Any competent engineer could apply those configs, and would understand them. I'm sure if they offer enough money they can get some hot shot in there to do it."

They offered their valet ticket up on the curb, and waited. Kerry opened the back door and put the bag inside, then went around to the driver's seat and slid behind the wheel. She got her sunglasses settled as the valet closed the door and spent a moment adjusting her position.

"Sorry about that." Dar eyed her. "Should have adjusted the seat when I got out."

"No problem hon." Kerry got the car into drive and started off, pulling out and turning right onto reasonably well remembered streets. "Better for me than you anyway. You always end up cracking your chin on your knees,"

"There's a Starbucks" Dar pointed. "And it has a drive through."

"Awesome." Kerry turned in the driveway. "Double double mocha?" She didn't wait for an answer, just rolled down her window as she pulled up to the ordering station.

Dar settled back and took out her Handspring, thumbing through the messages. She saw a new one from Mark and opened it, reading through it and making a noise of disgusted irritation. "Doesn't it just figure?" She said. "I stay up all night fixing that crap and they boot the guy."

"Huh?" Kerry turned and looked at her.

"Mail bounced back as non existent." Dar held the phone up. "They deleted his inbox. Can you believe it?"

"Augh."

Dar shook her head and started typing. "I'm going to tell Mark to find someone.. I don't care if it's the god damned cleaning supervisor – and get them those files."

"Jesus." Kerry set the cups down in the console between them and paid for the coffee, then rolled the window back up and pulled back onto the street. "That is really kind of ridiculous, Dar. How could that have happened between last night and this morning?"

"We got fired between a Saturday morning and afternoon, Ker." Dar finished her note and sent it.

"Actually that's kind of a relief, because this guy was no good news for anyone."

'Hmph.' Kerry headed down the road that eventually lead to the White House. "Yeah, but who knows how long it's going to take to get it fixed now."

"Do we care?"

Kerry glanced at her. "Dar, don't pull that on me. We both know you care."

Dar sighed.

"Of course you care. You built that whole system byte by byte." Kerry softened her voice, seeing the sudden tension in her partner's face. "C'mon, hon. You put a lot of blood and sweat into it. You were damn proud of that design, and so was everyone else."

"Mmph. I just keep getting the feeling you think I'm an idiot."

"What?"

"I think you want me to keep way clear of them." Dar restated her words. "That it was a mistake to work those files."

Kerry was silent for a few minutes, as she turned into the administrative gate to the executive building. "Yeah, maybe I do." She admitted, as she rolled down the windows and took Dar's and her own identifications into her hand. "Maybe I'm so pissed off at them because of how they dissed you I hope they all go down in flames no matter if some of our customer suffer."

"Morning, ma'am's." The guard took their ID respectfully. "Be right back."

Dar had relaxed back into her seat. "Sorry Ker. You're probably right." She rested her elbow against the arm rest and her head against her fist. "It's like a knee jerk."

"I know. "Kerry reached over and patted her knee. "Let's wait until later to fight. We've got enough on our plate right now."

"Go right through there, ladies." The guard was back, handing them their ID. "You're expected. Park in that first lot, and it's the second gate, right hand side."

"Thanks." Kerry smiled at him, then rolled on when the barrier lifted. "Let's get this show on the road." She drove inside and found a parking spot, then joined Dar in getting out and gathering their things.

It was cool, and overcast, and she was glad she had her suit jacket on. Kerry followed Dar up the path, and to the gate, which was opened readily to admit them. "Good morning."

"Morning, ladies." The guard at the gate said. "Can I direct you somewhere?"

"No, we're okay." Dar said. "Thanks."

They entered the building and Dar led the way down the hall to the briefing room she was becoming familiar with. The administrator sitting at the entry desk glanced up, then focused attention on them. "Good morning."

Dar fished out one of her new cards and handed it over. "I think I'm expected."

The woman took it and looked at it, then consulted a book on her desk. "Yes, Ms. Roberts, you are." She said. "You can go on in and set up, Mr. Bridges is in a briefing right now, but he'll be back down in a minute."

She glanced past Dar to where Kerry was patiently waiting. "Are you.."

"With her? Yes." Kerry said, in a deadpan voice. She gave the woman a smile and followed Dar past the desk to the big conference room, which was empty and quiet and full of teak furniture and a big screen.

Dar put her messenger bag down and pulled her laptop out, sitting down near the front of the table and opening the hatch in it where the connections to the overhead projector were.

Kerry took a seat next to her and simply sat waiting, knowing enough about Dar's prep methods not to bug her with inconsequential talk. She wasn't fond of public speaking and there was a certain amount of self psyching she had to do in order to do it successfully.

The admin came in and opened up a roll up cabinet in the back, exposing urns of coffee and other liquids. "Please help yourself." The woman said. "The technical committee is on its way down and if I were you, I'd get a cookie first before they get here." She gave them both a smile and left.

"I don't think I can get down any more coffee." Kerry said mournfully. "My kidneys are going to come out my ears."

"That's an attractive thought." Dar murmured, obsessing over her keyboard.

"I love you too, honey." Kerry got up and went over to the credenza, selecting a glass and a bottle of fizzy water and bringing them back over to set next to Dar's elbow. Then she resumed her seat and half turned as the door opened and people started to file in.

Mostly men, but two were women. They all had the slight harassed and slightly impatient look of people who had too much to do who were being asked to stop doing what they had to do in order to listen to someone they didn't know about something they really didn't care about.

Kerry was used to the look, she'd seen it enough times in conference rooms at ILS. She gave them all a brief smile as they settled into chairs, some detouring over to the credenza with low, muttered words to each other.

One of the men had sat down next to her. "You the people doing the new system?" He asked.

"Yes." Kerry said, extending a hand. "I'm Kerry."

"Paul." He took it and gripped firmly. "So is this going to work?"

"It'll work."

"Not like everything else lately?" Another man had taken the seat next to him and was leaning against the table. "Our whole reporting database's been down for three days. Last thing we need is some new complicated thing that craps out."

Dar looked up from her keyboard and peered at him. "The statistical analysis collator? That's down?"

"Uh oh." Kerry muttered under her breath as she swung around to face her partner. "I don't think we're supposed to know about that." She mouthed silently.

Dar lifted both hands in a shrug and put them back down. "Is it?"

"Yeah.. you know something about that?" Paul asked. "I didn't know you people were involved in that.. hell, I'm surprised they don't have you in a little padded room upstairs getting your kneecaps whacked."

Dar sighed. "Actually we're not involved in it. We just know about it." She went back to her keyboard.

"And that's all I'm going to say about that or I'll get MY kneecaps whacked by my partner here."

Kerry looked mildly abashed. "We used to work for the company who handles that system for you." She explained to Paul. "So that's how we know."

"Oh." He leaned back in his chair. "So why'd you leave?"

"They pissed us off." Dar said. "Okay, I've got this set now." She looked up and then stood up, twitching her jacket straight and flexing her hands. "We just waiting for Bridges?"

"He's getting a briefing on all the outages." Paul said. "He's in a really bad mood."

"Oh boy." Kerry folded her hands on the table. "Well, hope we can show him something that makes him feel better."

"Mmm." Dar made a low noise in her throat. "Is it too late for us to find some coveralls and cross dress? Pretend we're someone else?"

"You're the one who said we knew about it." Kerry sighed.

The door opened and Bridges came in with two aides, and he did, as promised, look like he was in a very bad mood. "Roberts!" He barked, as he came around the table. "What in the hell's going on?"

Dar put her hands in the pockets of her skirt. "We're about to do a demonstration for you." She answered calmly. "Want to sit down so I can start?"

The president's advisor paused and put his hands on the back of the chair at the head of the table and regarded her.

"It's not my problem anymore." Dar said, gently. "I know it's a complete cock up there, but I don't' even have any way of thinking about trying to help."

"Don't want you to help. I want you to take it over." Bridges tossed a folder on the table and slid it over to her. "Now. Sign."

"We don't have the infrastructure to do it." Dar objected, as Kerry pulled the folder over and opened it.
"You'd be in the same state until we could spool up. Find someone else – I'll give you some names."

The others in the room had been watching them, heads turning back and forth like those at a tennis tournament.

"I don't want any god damned names." Bridges said. "I've already talked to half a dozen half assed nit brained nerd heads and you know what every single one of them told me?"

"They said they can't do it." Kerry spoke up, still leafing through the folder's contents. "And probably some of them at least told you to call Dar." She closed the folder and pushed it back across the table.
"Unfortunately, we really, honestly, no bullshit, really can't do it either. You need time and a ton of facility and we don't have either one."

Bridges sat down in the big chair and glared at her.

"Really." Kerry repeated. "I'm not making that up. If I thought we could pull it off, and yank it out of ILS's hands, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

Dar turned and looked at her, both eyebrows hiking up.

"I would." Kerry saw the look and suppressed a smile. "They don't deserve you as a customer. They have been absolute morons over the last month. I would take that contract like this." She snapped her fingers.
"But we really can't do it."

He steepled his fingers, tapping the ends of them against his lips. Everyone else in the room was dead silent, very still, just waiting.

Even Dar stayed quiet, her hands still in her pockets, eyes slightly unfocused.

"What do you mean, they were morons?" Bridges finally asked. "They do this on purpose?"

Kerry folded her hands on the table, the light briefly catching her wedding ring and reflecting off it. "A lot of people have asked us that. No, I don't think they did this on purpose in the sense that, they were trying to sabotage anything."

"It's worse." Dar spoke up at least. "Someone trying to make their mark made some changes, and it went very south."

"That so?" Bridges mused. "So it was stupid rather than treason?"

"Far as we know, yes." Kerry said, in a quiet voice.

He got up. "Go on and give your talk, Roberts. I'll be back shortly. Everyone take notes." He waved a hand at the room. "There'll be a test later on."

He motioned the two aides, who had stayed standing near the door out ahead of him like he was shooing chickens and followed them out, slamming the door behind him.

Kerry let out an audible sigh.

"Who in the hell are you people?" Paul finally asked, with a touch of awe in his voice. "Do you know who that guy is? He could have you sent to Mars."

Dar switched the screen to her output. "Who are we." She said. "Well, I'm Thor, God of the Internet and this is She Ra. So I guess Mars doesn't scare us much." She got her remote out and moved to one side.
"And on that note, let's get this started."

Kerry was busy typing a message into her Handspring, shaking her head repeatedly.

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"That's how the algorithm works." Dar clicked to a new screen. "What we did was tried to write the front end to the enterprise service bus so that it was a more natural way for people to interact with the data."

“What does that mean?” One of the women in the back spoke up. “Do they talk to it?”

Dar brought up the very basic, simple input screen. “I can write a plug in that’ll take voice commands. But right now it’s just keyboard.” She pointed at the woman. “C’mon up here and ask it something.”

The woman hopped right up and came forward. She put her hands on the keyboard as Dar took a step back. “Ask it.. what do I ask it?” She looked up at Dar.

“If you were an analyst, and your job was to find something wrong, what would you ask?” Dar had one hand on the back of Kerry’s chair. “Don’t look at me. I don’t know what to ask. I’m a systems architect.”

The woman thought for a moment, then started typing. “Okay. Tell me about anyone who wants to shoot the President.”

She hit enter, and straightened, looking first at Dar, then at the screen.

A spinning star took over the middle of it, and twinkled for about thirty seconds. Then typing started to fill the screen, plain white on black, san serif font.

Email ; Parsed header returns ‘He makes me so mad I want to kill him.’ Content contains keywords: hate, revenge, under the radar, politician, POTUS. Return extended header?

The people in the room stared at it “Is that real?” Paul asked.

“It’s real in the sense that, I created a database that had random records in it, with different source types.” Dar said. “Its not real in the sense that the thing you’re looking at is a real threat to the President.”

“But.. that’s the kind of thing it would come back with?” The woman asked. “Really?”

“Really.” Dar smiled a little at the reaction. “The information I used to make this test database is a dump from the actual Internet, scrubbed to remove personal information and then mixed to provide you with some hits to questions.”

“So it wouldn’t really say whose email that was?”

“It would come back with a fictitious name.” Dar confirmed. “But since it’s a fictitious email, that would be appropriate. It could have originally been an email from someone who was pissed off at their SO, and the keywords could be from six different other emails.”

The woman stepped back to the keyboard. “Tell me about anything threatening Yankee’s Stadium.” She hit enter, and they all looked at the screen expectantly.

The machine chewed over that for a bit, then started spewing out listings.

1.) *Invoice: Industrial: Phosphorous, Deliver to Yankee Stadium, volume plus 1,000 lbs.*

2.) *Legal: Resident: Lawsuit filed against Yankee Stadium over parking fees.*

3.) *Email: Parsed. Text includes ‘going to make a killing at Yankee Stadium’*

Enter item to retrieve additional data.

There was a moment of silence. Then they all exhaled at once. “Holy shit.” The oldest man, who had been standing in the back of the room spoke up. “So that thing can just read all that stuff on the Internet and it’ll know all this?”

Dar seemed pleased. “It will.” She said. “This is, of course, a test database. It’s only half a terabyte in size, and this demo program is a very simple model. The real system will be a lot bigger, a lot more powerful, distributed, and it’ll probably take longer to return a response because it will be looking at a hell of a lot more raw data.”

She regarded the screen. “But that’s the idea. It also will employ a flexible heuristic framework that will learn over time to know what to look for - so – eventually it will start suggesting things rather than wait to be asked.”

Dead silence. "W.. what?" Paul stuttered. "You mean.. it has artificial intelligence?"

Dar nodded. "It continually parses data, so it will start looking for connections." She said, her voice getting a touch more animated. "So if it sees, for instance, a pattern of telephone calls between places that also show deliveries of gunpowder, that's something it will bring up as part of a generated briefing. Could mean something, might not mean anything, but the operators will have the choice to follow up or not."

"Humans have to make the real connections." Kerry spoke up after being silent for a very long time. "But they can't look at all this data – it's like a firehose. But a computer can, and it just tries to find patterns and that's what it returns to us."

"Oh my god." The woman sat down. "I thought this was just an intelligence budget scam. You actually made this."

"In two weeks." Paul said. "You really are Thor God of the Internet."

"Have at it." Dar sat down next to Kerry and waved them towards the laptop. "But remember, it's just a demo system. I just wanted to give you all an idea of where we were going with it."

She slid backwards out of the way and watched in contentment as they all gathered around her machine and started peppering it with questions, the woman finally ending up being the typist.

"Rock star." Kerry smiled.

"Meh." Dar shrugged. "It's just a test system with a lot of spaghetti code and duct tape in there. They ask it the wrong thing it'll probably croak."

"Dar, stuff a sock in it. I know how long you worked on that." Kerry poked her in the ribs. "You're a rock star."

Her partner shrugged modestly, but smiled.

The door opened and Bridges came back in, pausing as he saw the crowd at the head of the table.

"Sir!" Paul turned and spotted him. "You should come see this! It's boss!"

"Whoop de fucking hoo." Bridges said. "You and you, come with me." He pointed at Dar and Kerry. "The rest of you stay in nerdgasm." He turned and headed back out, waving them after him. "Let's go people."

"Why do I suddenly wish I was an actual rock star?" Dar sighed as she and Kerry followed him out and the door shut behind them. "And all I had to worry about was tuning my guitar?"

"What?" Bridges glanced at her. "Never mind. You two are going to help me solve this problem here and then we can go back to talking about whatever the hell it is that has those goops so excited."

"This doesn't sound good." Kerry muttered.

"No." Dar agreed.

Bridges led them through two hallways, and up a staircase, then through a padded door and down another hallway, stiff arming everything out of his way until he got to pair of double doors that he grabbed the knobs to and shoved them open.

Beyond him they could hear angry voices, and as they cleared the door and could see the interior of the room Kerry heard Dar make a low, grunting noise that she knew meant nothing but trouble.

It wasn't really a curse, but it might as well have been one.

"I don't know what you're talking about but we've got our best.... What the hell is she doing here?" A tall, crewcut man was speaking at high volume.

"She's here to help us figure this out." Bridges said. "Now sit your ass down."

"Help us? She caused this!" The man pointed at Dar.

"Is that.." Kerry muttered.

“Yes.”

“Leeeet me start texting.”

Bridges turned to look at Dar. “You cause this, Roberts?”

“No.” Dar responded in a flatly calm voice. “Moronic male ego caused this. I had nothing to do with it. Assuming what you’re talking about is the fact that a company I used to work for maliciously and deliberately disrupted your systems.”

“Now Dar.” Jacques stepped out from behind a block of angry bodies. “That’s not really true..”

“Fuck you, it is.” Dar said. “I told you what to do and you didn’t do it. All of you put pride in front of your customer and from my perspective, that makes you all useless sacks of shit who frankly deserve to be taken into some green painted cell somewhere in the basement of this place and beaten to death.”

Then she stopped talking and sat down, resting her elbows on the big conference table. “Please get this over with. I have a demonstration to do in a half hour.”

There were very few times that Kerry had been prouder of her partner than she was at this moment. She quietly sat down next to Dar and folded her hands on her lap.

“Dar..” Jacques regrouped. “I was just..”

“Shut up. You’re a goat bag. I have no respect for you.” Dar said, in a clipped tone. “I have no respect for any of you, Be men. You fucked up. Own it.”

Bridges sat down with a grunt.

A tall, dark haired man with a green linen suit on put his hands on the back of the chair directly across from where Dar was sitting. “Can I ask who you are?”

“My name is Dar Roberts.” Dar said. “Can I ask who you are?”

The man sat down. “You’re Dar Roberts.” He repeated. “Funny. From what I was hearing I expected you to have a horn and a long red tail.” He said. “I’m Steve Booker.”

“Ah. We’ve spoken.” Kerry spoke up. “He’s the governmental systems technical coordinator, Dar.”

He peered at her. “I know that voice. Kerry Stuart?”

Kerry drew a breath, then just merely nodded.

“You going to sit down?” Bridges stared pointedly at Jacques and the man with the crew cut. “Or do you want me to call the goons to have you dragged down to the not nearly as fictitious little green room downstairs?”

Reluctantly they sat.

“All right.” Bridges leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach. “I do not have time to screw around with you people any more.” He said. “Shut up and do not speak until I tell you to.” He said, as Jacques drew breath.

“What.” Bridges said, looking now at Dar. “Is the actual fucking problem, Roberts, since I know deep in my complete lack of a heart that you know.”

Kerry put her hand on Dar’s arm, applying gentle pressure. Then she cleared her throat. “We don’t know specifically what happened.” She said. “Because only the people who actually did it know what they did.”

Bridges rolled his eyes.

“But what I believe happened is that the people that ILS hired to replace Dar, and I, decided to put their imprint on the systems that were in place there, and made changes to them that caused a pretty serious degradation in performance.”

Higgs took an angry breath. “That’s a..”

“Don’t.” Kerry said, sharply and powerfully. “Stop playing games. This is the government of the United States you are messing up, and the consequences of that are a lot more important than you understand.”

“You are liable for this.” Dar said, in the small silence that followed. “What you did, will take ILS down. You will lose the company.” She was looking directly at Jacques. “And you will deserve to lose it. I am so disgusted by you and what you allowed to happen here I am about to throw up on this table.”

‘Dar..’ Jacques’ face twisted into a grimace.

“We risked our lives for this customer.” Dar cut him off, but in a very quiet, gentle voice. “And you allowed this moron to knowingly and deliberately put them in jeopardy.”

“You made that system so impenetrable you caused this!” Higgs stood up. “Don’t blame this on any body but you you fucking immoral piece of shit!”

“So you did make some changes?” Bridges asked, in a mild tone.

“To make things better! Sure!”

Bridges sniffed reflectively. “John, get the MP’s up here.” He said. “I want this guy put in lock up.” He turned to Dar, leaning on his chair arm. “Can you fix this, Roberts?”

“She’s not touching anything!” Higgs said. “I’ve got our lawyer coming over here and he’s going to serve the damn papers we’ve been trying to serve to this bitch for two weeks and then we’ll see who’s going to jail.”

“Brook, sit down.” Jacques said, quietly.

“The hell! I’m not going to sit down, and I’m not going to stand by while my reputation and yours gets tossed in the garbage!” Higgs started around the table towards Dar. “Wait till I get my hands on you..”

The door opened in front of him and he stopped abruptly, taking a step back as a man walked in with rolled up sleeves and a casual pair of slacks on. “What’s all going on in here?” He asked, looking around. “Oh there you are .”

“Hello, Mr. President.” Bridges said. “Just having a meeting.”

“With all that yelling?” Bush seemed surprised. “Hello there, ladies.” He gave Dar and Kerry a smile. “Hey, is this your lady friend?” he asked Dar.

“It is.” Dar agreed. “My partner, Kerry.”

“Hi there. Call me George. “ The president extended a hand, which Kerry took. “I just heard from someone down the hall that your new thing’s really something.”

“Looking forward to demonstrating it to you shortly.” Dar said. “So far, so good.”

“Well now that’s great.. so what’s all the yelling about?” Bush asked, a touch more sharply. “Something wrong?”

“Just getting some issues ironed out.” Bridges said. “Nothing too tough.”

“Uh huh.” Bush nodded. “Well, you all try not to keep Ms. Roberts too long. We’ve got an appointment “ He eyed them, then slipped out the door and closed it behind him.

Higgs went back to his seat and sat down, looking like he was trying to pass a gallstone. Jacques leaned back and half hid his eyes with one hand.

“Okay now where were we. Roberts? “ Bridges ignored both of them. “Can you fix this thing or not?”

“In point of fact, she’s been trying to.” Kerry said. “Except these bimbos keep firing the people she was trying to help.”

“Pst pst pst” Bridges tapped his lips. “Roberts?”

"I won't do it to help them." Dar finally said. "But I will do it for you. Pull their contracts, and after that, you get me access and I'll fix it."

"What?????" Higgs yelled.

"Dar, please don't be so hasty.."

"Done." Bridges said, with a brief smile. "Steve, call the GAO and make it happen. Cut the new contracts to Robert's company, and mandate the gizmos and gears and whatnot that makes it all up goes to them too."

Kerry grimaced. "Oh lord. That honestly won't work."

"Then go with him and figure out how to make it work." Bridges told her. "You've got a shitload of your father in you. Go prove it." He nudged her with his elbow. "G'wan."

Dar leaned past her. "You keep insulting Kerry and I'm going to tell you to fuck off too."

"No, it's okay." Kerry was surprised to find that it actually was. "He meant it in a good way." She stood up and patted Dar's back, then circled the table and pointed at Steve. "C'mon."

"Let's clear the room." Bridges said. "Except you, and you and me." He pointed at Jacques and Dar.

"John, keep that bozo entertained." He indicated Higgs. "Move, people."

Five minutes later they were alone in the room.

"So." Bridges said. "Explain to me why you turned into such an idiot?" He asked Jacques.

Jacques merely shook his head. "There becomes a point." He said, after a pause. "When all the bad decisions make of so much weight, you cannot push them off."

"You could have." Dar disagreed. "I told you what you needed to do."

"You did." He said. "But I am only one man, and there were so many on the board who refused to go along with that, because it meant to the world a total failure."

"And this is?" Bridges brows hiked.

"Now? It is in fact a total failure." Jacques said. "We will all be cast out."

"You should be." Dar said. "You butchered that company."

"Dar."

"Jacques, that's why they pay you the big bucks." Dar said. "The buck stops with you. Just like, when I was there, the buck stopped with Alistair."

"We were very sure we knew what to do." Jacques said. "We were absolutely sure we had picked well to replace you."

Dar regarded him. "You are a moron." She said. "That guy could no more replace me than I could flap my arms and fly to Mars."

'Yes, well Dar, that is the problem isn't it? You made yourself un-replaceable." Jacques said. "I think you knew that. You arranged things so that anyone who followed you would be lost."

Dar regarded him thoughtfully. "I did." She agreed, surprising everyone. "Not on purpose." She added. "It's just who I am. I'm a leader. An Alpha if you want." She exhaled, and nodded. "I did things my way. But you all knew that, and you let me. If that wasn't what you wanted, then you should have stopped me a long time ago."

Bridges nodded in turn.

"So yes, I knew I was impossible to replace. I just wasn't going to sacrifice my life because of that. I was hoping you'd find someone who would study what I did, and then make a plan to make it their own. Not do something as mind bendingly stupid as make some random change then make it impossible to recover from it."

"So now you will wreck us." Jacques said.

"Yes. I can't let you wreck both the company's reputation and mine." Dar said. "So I will take you down, and force a replacement of the board, and if the company's very lucky Alastair will agree to take over again until things can be made right."

"They will not stand still for that." Jacques shook his head.

"They won't have a choice. " Bridges spoke up. "Considering how much of the operations of the government you goat heads are disrupting I could have all of you held as suspected terrorists. You do realize that, right?"

Jacques look at him in startlement.

"You do realize where you are, right?" He pointed at the desk. "You do realize the guy who walked in here a while back in the chinos and button down was George Bush, right? Leader of the free world and all that crap?"

Dar sighed.

"She gets it." Bridges pointed at Dar. "If I were you, I'd start catching up before the best thing that will happen to you and all your Wall Street buddies is they'll end up in Guantanamo." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "And I don't even need a warrant. Your families will never see you again. You'll never get a lawyer. You get me?"

Jacques was silent for a moment. "Yes." He said then. "I understand you."

"Good." Bridges looked satisfied. "Today might end up all right after all." He leaned back and twiddled his thumbs, humming softly under his breath.

Dar waited a moment to see if anything else was going to happen, then she pulled out her Handspring and started to type.

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Kerry found herself in a rectangular office, with desks against the walls and old fashioned drapes over the windows above them. There were two men behind one of the desks with big ledgers open in front of them, and her new friend Steve on the phone next to her.

"We can't." She answered Steve's question. "We don't have anything close to the space, people, systems, all that, to be able to actually manage the contracts."

"But Ms. Roberts said..."

"Yes, I know what Dar said." Kerry sighed. "I'm totally with her on getting that board out of there and getting people into position not to mess everything up again but there is just no way for us to take over the service like that." She snapped her fingers.

"So what do we do?"

Well, that was a good question. Kerry leaned against the desk behind her. "What are the ... wait, why am I asking you that? I wrote the damn contract." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "It's a three year, and it was renewed about eighteen months ago, wasn't it?"

"Yup."

"Got a penalty clause." One of the accountants said.

"Yes, it would. But it also has SLA's in it. Can you pull them?" Kerry said. "And the monitors that prove they were broken?"

Steve scratched his head. "Do we do that?"

"You should."

"I think they depended on ILS to tell us." He responded with a grimace. "But really all that doesn't matter. Bridges said to just make it happen so that's what we need to do, you know?"

"I know but it's not that easy. The stuff that's running your stuff is on pieces of gear that other people's stuff is running on."

"That's not right." Steve said. "You can't mix top secret stuff like that."

"I can if the other stuff is just as top secret." Kerry said. "There's an awful lot of government stuff on the .." She paused and pondered the options. "Okay wait. The government nodes in the area are segregated... "

"We should take over everything. It wasn't right to have some company doing it." Steve said. "I told everyone that."

"That's it." Kerry straightened up . "We can't do it because we don't have the people."

"Well, we sure don't have the people. That's why we hired ILS." The accountant said, in a practical tone.

"But you could." Kerry said. "You could put your own people into all the places where the connections are, and you monitor them."

Steve's eyes literally lit up. "Yeah!"

"We don't have those people." The accountant repeated. "Where do we get them?"

"You hire the people that are already there." Kerry's pale green eyes twinkled, just a little. "The ones that work for ILS. That would be out of a job if you took away the contracts."

"Ahhh." The accountant smiled, thinly. "I see."

"That way they're not cutting the contracts to another company you're in sourcing." Kerry said. "You just terminate the contracts for non performance and conscript the equipment due to national security reasons."

"You bet.." He paused. "Can we do that?"

"Sure why not?" Kerry smiled. "They all have government security clearances." She said. "And they know what to do with your stuff."

One of the other accountants looked up at the words. "Wait, we're hiring people?"

"That's a super idea." Steve said. "Kerry, you are the bomb."

"Don't say that." The other accountant said. "You know they don't like it."

The first accountant started shuffling through papers. "We better get someone to rubber stamp a budget then.. let me get the forms." He shook his head a little and went over to a filing cabinet. "Bridges will sign this, right?"

"Right." Steve said. "He said whatever it takes."

The accountant rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that's what they all say when it involves taxpayer dollars."

"So now what?" Steve turned to Kerry. "Should we go over to the place where all our stuff is?"

Kerry drew in a breath then released it. "Let's get all the paperwork in line, then yeah. I'll go over there with you. I know the people there." She was hard pressed to know whether to be relieved or apprehensive about it. She knew there were a lot of long timers in the Herndon office.

Loyal people. Competent people who had welcomed her leadership with open arms in very tense times. How would they feel about this?

Would it be a betrayal?

A rescue?

"Should we tell them we're coming, or just go over there?" Steve asked. "They could screw things up worse if they get pissed off, right?"

Kerry was briefly silent. "We'll just go." She said. "I don't think they'd do anything but there's no saying ILS won't."

Steve clapped her on the shoulder. "Right on." He said. "Let's get some coffee. I'm thinking it's gonna be a long day."

**

Dar opened the message on her Handspring, ignoring Jacques's staring eyes. "Well, crap." She sighed. "There is not one single solitary person left in IT in the Miami office." She looked up and across the table. "Mark is there. He said there's not one person he can give a new set of configs to, to maybe, maybe solve this."

Bridges was spinning around in his chair and now he stopped. "Tell him to go fix it himself." He said. "Can he?"

Dar dialed Mark's number. "Let me talk to him."

"You'll get him inside whatever that is, right?" Bridges looked pointedly at Jacques.

"Yes, of course." Jacques answered instantly. "Dar, is that Mark Polenti?"

Dar nodded. "I spent last night revising your fucking router configs because your brainless idiot called him and begged him for help."

Bridges chuckled under his breath. "You should have gone into the service, Roberts. You've got the mindset for it."

"I would have ended up court martial-ed for insubordination before I left basic." Dar responded crisply. "Mark?"

"Yea boss." Mark said, somewhat indistinctly. "They just brought me a tray of pastelitos. Hang on." He swallowed. "Okay, so, here's the deal – ain't no one for me to give this stuff to. Like, no one."

"I know. They want you to go in and put them in yourself. You up for that?"

Long silence. "Are you shitting me?"

Dar sighed. "I'm sitting in the briefing room at the white house with White Fang here crouched over me and Jacques with a gun to his head. No. I'm not shitting you. "

Bridges chuckled dryly. "That was my favorite book as a kid." He said. "That and some Zane Gray Indian stories."

"They won't let me in there, boss." Mark said. "They pulled my creds as fast as I pulled yours."

"They will if Jacques tells them to." Dar said. "You willing to do it? It's up to you."

There was a long silence, and Dar endured it, keeping her eyes on the table and refusing to meet either men's.

"I don't think I should, Dar." Mark finally said. "I think they're just looking for a scapegoat, and I'll end up being sued. I don't have the bankroll you do to stand up to that."

Dar nodded. "Okay. I get it." She said. "Leave the files in an envelope with security."

"Hey!" Bridges sat up. "What?"

"Wait.. I said I would get them to let him do this!" Jacques said, at the same time.

"Shh." Dar held up a hand. "Hear that Mark? Make sure you write on it what the contents are."

"Will do." Mark sounded profoundly relieved. "I'm gonna head back to the office. Call me if you need me for anything but this."

"You got it." Dar hung up and looked at Jacques. "He won't do it, and I won't make him." She said. "He's afraid, with good reason, that you'll turn around and sue him."

"Dar!" Jacques threw up his hands. "Please!"

"You have no trust." Dar said. "I am not going to stand proxy for you and tell him you won't do that because you know what, Jacques? I don't know you won't."

"Jackasses." Bridges rolled his eyes. "You people make me nuts."

"Yes, sometimes I am and do." Dar agreed. "But that man on the phone trusts me. That means more to me than your contracts, or threats, or your little padded green room." She exhaled, and rested her elbows on the table. "So if he won't do it then I guess I'll have to."

"What?" Jacques put his hands on the table. "Now this???"

Dar pushed herself to her feet, just as Kerry pushed the door open and stuck her head inside. "Hey." She greeted her partner.

"Hey." Kerry said. "I need to go to Herndon. I'm going to have the government hire all those people and take over the systems."

Even Bridges blinked. "Hey what?"

"You said to solve it." Kerry eyed him. "Careful what you ask for."

"Good, because I have to go there too, so I can fix the damn thing so when the government takes it over it works" Dar said. "Did you say there was a Wendy's around here?"

"Yeah."

"Great. I need a cheeseburger."

"Wait." Jacques stood up. "You cannot just do this."

"Sure they can." Bridges apparently decided to roll with it. "I like that, Stuart. So we're buying out the contracts and bringing it in house? Security group'll be very very pleased. Intelligence jackass committee will too."

"Taxpayer's won't." Kerry said, in a droll tone.

Bridges smiled. "Oh, they will." He said. "When George finishes telling them how much safer they'll be. Good press for him." He got up. "Get going, people. I'll tell him you'll be back later to show him your new whoo hah."

"I think I should..." Jacques stood up.

"No you shouldn't." Bridges turned serious. "Sit your ass down and don't move. In fact, give me that cell phone." He held out his hand. "I don't trust you either."

Kerry had it in her to feel sorry for Jacques, in that moment. She could read desperation, and fear and an overwhelming anxiety in his face, and she knew here was a man in a very bad spot who hadn't either expected or prepared for that.

But then in the next moment, she remembered that he, and his henchman had been here trying to throw them under the federal bus, and she didn't feel sorry for him at all. "C'mon Dar." She held a hand out to her partner. "Let's go make things right."

Dar handed a piece of cardboard to Bridges. "Call this guy." She said. "Tell him to take over ILS. Tell him what we're doing. If anyone can pull their corporate head out of their corporate ass, it's him. And tell him to call Hamilton the lawyer, who's got a whole crapload of investors ready to back him."

Bridges took it. "Will do, Roberts. Now go get this crap done. I've got a headache from all the bitching and I don't want to hear it anymore." He waved them out. "Take Steve with you, he's got credentials and shiny badges and things that'll keep you out of trouble."

Dar was glad enough to escape the room and she willingly followed Kerry to where Steve and two Federal Marshals were waiting. "Okay.. oh crap I need my laptop." She turned and started back down towards the briefing room. "Be right back."

"I could have.." Steve started after her.

"Bssspp." Kerry pulled him to a halt. "Let her go." She said. "She's going with us to try and fix what's wrong."

"Oh.. really? Will we have to do all this then?" Steve said. "I really want to do it anyway. No offense to you, since you used to be in charge of all that, but I don't trust private companies when it comes to this stuff."

Kerry folded her arms. "I understand what you mean, but honestly? Before this last truly Technicolor clusterfuck ILS was very good at what it did and kept the government on the top list of it's priorities."

"Mm... if you say so." Steve said, in a dubious tone.

"I say so, since it was my job to make it that way." Kerry responded with more than a slight edge to her tone. "And I don't appreciate being accused of incompetence while I'm on my way to save your ass."

He lifted his hands and took a step back. "Okay okay! Sorry!"

"And don't bring that attitude with you to Herndon." Kerry warned. "What happened here, wasn't their fault. The idiot you had in that room did it.. or at least was responsible for it."

"Okay, I get it. I'll shut up." Steve relented. "Let's go meet her coming back. The car's outside that middle door anyway." He pointed. "C'mon, guys."

They walked down the hall and had almost reached the door when Dar came around the corner of the hallway and headed back towards them, her messenger bag slung over her shoulder. She had her Handspring in one hand typing on it and was dodging people in the hall by some sort of nerdic radar.

Kerry pulled out her own as she felt it buzz and glanced at it, then hit the answer button. "Hey Maria." She took a step back and half turned away from Steve and his goons. "What's up?"

"Have you finished the demonstration to the government ? I was just hoping it went so well, and also, that you and Dar have enjoyed the hotel."

"Where do I start?" Kerry sighed. "Let me get back to you Maria. I think the demo went fine but everything else just went to Hell."

"Ay yi yi."

**

It was a long ride, and traffic was atrocious. "Last time we went here, no one was on the road." Kerry commented as she studied the buildings going past.

"Yeah, people got back to normal. Whatever that is." Steve agreed.

Dar remained silent, as she was wedged against the other window, her sunglasses on and her eyes closed behind them.

Kerry suspected her partner was asleep, and she spared a moment of affectionate envy for her ability to shut out the world that way. Her own eyes felt tired and sore, and she was looking forward to the day being over in the worst way.

Maybe this, maybe now, they'd get some closure.

Or something.

"So, we're going to hire everyone, and all that, and then she's going to fix stuff, right?" Steve asked, after being quiet for a long time.

"We'll probably have to play that a little by ear." Kerry admitted. "I don't really know how they're all going to react to us showing up like this. Everythings been pretty chaotic.. matter of fact, I hope they let us in."

"They'll let us in." Steve said, confidently. "Nobody says no to the GAO and Federal marshals. Really."

No, that probably was true, and as they drove down the long, tree lined street that would end at the Herndon facility, Kerry suddenly wondered if this mixture of anticipation and dread was what Dar had felt when she'd been the one to go in and give the news of never wanted change.

She remembered suddenly, vividly, being that person in that place and looking up and facing that change, all unaware of how much more personal it would be for her than she'd ever anticipated.

They slowed to turn in at the gate, and Kerry reached over to gently touch Dar's leg, watching her profile as Dar's eyes opened and turned her way. "We're here."

"So I see." Dar flexed her hands and straightened up, leaning against the armrest and looking out the window. "Wonder how this is going to go?"

Steve had rolled down his window and was talking to the guard, handing out his business card and indicating the back of the stretch sedan they were riding in. The two federal marshals were in the back of the car, and they were hanging their credentials around their necks and checking their side arms.

The guard at the gate bent down and looked in the window and his eyes met Dar's and the look of relief on his face made her feel sad. She lifted a hand and waved and he backed away and gestured the way forward, pulling the gate aside rapidly.

"Think he recognized you, hon." Kerry said, quietly.

"Yeah." Dar pushed her sunglasses up on her nose and folded her arms.

"That was easy" Steve said, glancing behind him. "Just mentioned your name."

Dar exhaled, and got her messenger bag strap over her shoulder as they pulled up in front of the building and she opened the door and got out, stepping back to let Kerry slide out after her.

They walked to the door and pushed it open, coming into the public entrance where two people were at the desk, already straightening up as they entered.

The receptionist let out a gasp of recognition and her eyes widened. "Oh my gosh!"

After a hesitant moment, Kerry took charge. "Hi Stacy." She walked forward and held her hand out. "Wish this was under better circumstances." She took a breath. "Can you ask Paul to come out here please? We need to speak with him."

"Yes ma'am, right away." Stacy turned to the other woman standing there. "Go get Paul – he's in the break room. Hurry!"

The girl looked confused, but left, badging through the door and disappearing.

"I know he'll be glad to see you." Stacy said. "It's been horrific here this week. A dozen people walked out... it was just too much. All those screaming phone calls."

"Yeah, I know it's been tough." Kerry said, quietly. "Shouldn't have fallen on you all though. Nothing of this was your fault."

"That's just it. " The woman said. "It wasn't the customers yelling.. .you know, that's part of the job. It was those people who took over from you. They were so nasty."

Dar removed her sunglasses and tucked them into her bag. "So I heard."

Stacy looked from one of them to the other. "So did you come back?" She asked, hopefully. "We heard they fired that one guy, and we haven't heard from that man that replaced you, Ms. Roberts, now for a while."

Dar was spared from answering by the door abruptly opening to reveal a harassed looking man in chinos and a long sleeved buttoned shirt. "Hello Paul."

He stared at them "Oh lord it is you." He looked about to collapse. "Whats happening?"

Kerry moved towards him. "Let's go into the conference room, Paul. We'll explain what's going on." She saw the apprehension come into his face and internally winced, remembering what that felt like.

He came around the desk though, and preceded them into the public conference room, taking a seat at the table as the rest of them entered, and Dar closed the door behind them.

Kerry went over and sat down next to him. "So, okay, I know things are rough right now."

Steve sat down across from them, and the two accountants they had brought also took a seat to either side. The two marshals went to opposite corners of the room and stood there, not quite at attention.

Dar dropped into the seat at the head of the table, content to let Kerry handle the meeting.

"Rough." Paul sighed. "Yeah." He rested his hands on the table. "So what's going to happen now? We all getting fired?" He looked at her. "Are you guys back with us or what?"

"No." Kerry said. "Here's the deal. We know something got horribly screwed up. That affected a lot of customers."

Paul nodded. "All of them have been chewing my ass for days." He said. "I ran out of things to say to them and when I called exec ops, all they told me was to shut up."

Dar made a low, grunting sound.

Paul glanced her way. "They told me it was my job to handle the customers." He said. "I didn't know what to do."

Kerry exhaled. "Well, one of the customers was the government as you well know." She said. "To make a long story short and get this on the table, the government ordered the general accounting office, which these gentlemen represent.. "She indicated Steve and the others. "To terminate the contracts and take control of the systems."

Paul thought about that for a minute. "I guess I can't blame them for that reaction." He said, glumly. "They bringing in a team? I'm too tired to even feel bad about it. I guess I'll get my deferred vacation now anyway."

Kerry rested her head on her hand. "I've got some bad news, and some good news. Which do you want first?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "They have no team to take over, Paul. What they do here is very specialized, and it would take months to replace the people."

He eyed her warily, but remained silent.

"So what I told the government was, they should just hire all of you, and let you keep doing what you're doing."

"But what we're doing isn't the screwed up part!" Paul burst out. "Ms. Stuart, it doesn't mean anything who's in here, it's the whole system!"

Kerry was nodded. "We know. That's why Dar's here."

Paul swung around to face the figure at the head of the table. "They're going to let you make this right?" He asked. "Because we were told under no circumstances to even talk to you."

" They have no choice." Kerry said. "The government stepped in. They asked us to help get this straightened out."

Dar cleared her throat. "It's not a matter of them letting me do anything, it's a matter of you letting me." "Pohsh." Paul made a spluttering noise and stood up. "Let's go." He said. "We can talk about becoming civil servants later. If you can make this right we're wasting time here."

He headed for the door as Dar stood up and followed him, and a moment later the rest of them did as well. They crossed the lobby and Paul slid his badge into the reader, hauling the door open as it clicked and standing back. "After you, ma'am's."

"Paul.." The receptionist had stood up. "Don't they need to sign in?"

"No." Paul waited and followed the last of the marshals. "Fuck it. There are no rules today."

**

It was strange and somewhat uncomfortable to enter the ops room, where tired frustrated people were clustered around one of the consoles, arguing.

"Just do it, Bill! What the hell are they going to do, fire you?" Someone was urging the man at the keyboard, only belatedly looking up as the door opened then closed. "Oh shit.."

Everyone swung around to see what he was looking at and then everything went still and quiet for a long minute.

"Hi." Kerry broke the silence, with wry irony. "Everyone want to sit down and chill out for a minute?"

Slowly, the group dispersed and went back to their stations. "Someone clear space on the government side please." Paul said. "Our clients took matters into their own hands it seems and sent some help."

Bill stood up and stepped back "My station here's on net." He said. "Boy they sure knew who to call, huh?"

Dar walked around the marshals and went to the console, setting her bag down and regarding both the console and its operator. 'Hi Bill.'

"Hello, ma'am." He answered quietly. "I'm really sorry about everything."

"Me too." Dar responded. "So here's the thing. You have two choices. If you're a level 15 and above, you can create me a login to make some changes, or I can use yours. Pick."

Bill smiled briefly. "You can use mine, ma'am. No problem." He hesitated. "Is it okay if I watch you?"

Dar sat down. "Sure. Pull a chair over." She regarded the green and black screen. "What were you about to do that they were yelling about?"

He cleared his throat nervously and pulled another chair over. "Well..."

Kerry went over to the supervisor's desk and motioned Paul over. "Steve, why not have your folks sit down. This will probably take a while."

The two marshals found convenient corners to stand in, and the rest of them sat down at the round conference table in one corner. Kerry waited for them to get settled then she turned back to Paul. "So."

He had sat down behind the desk and let his elbows rest on his knees. "How did this happen?" He asked softly. "How did it get so bad so fast?"

Kerry leaned against the desk, her back to the room, and her arms folded over her chest. "Good question. I hope you know this wasn't anything Dar and I wanted."

He shook his head. "They told us she did something." He glanced up at the console, where Dar and Bill had their heads together in low conversation. "We didn't believe it. No one here did, anyhow and then we heard about all those people leaving... it was like 9/11 all over again but this time we failed."

"Yeah, I know." Kerry said. "It was hard for us to believe, with everything going on. But I think maybe things will turn around now. I hope so. We want to move on."

"I guess we all will end up doing that too." Paul said, after a pause. "I thought I was going to retire with them. You know?"

Kerry sighed. "I think Dar did too, at one point." She glanced around. "Any chance of some coffee? I'd like a chance to go over the options with you without an audience."

Paul managed a smile. "Sure." He pushed himself to his feet with an obvious effort. "Let me get our ops team in there too. Might as well save your voice and not say it more than once." He motioned her to follow and went to an inside door she remembered leading to the ops center break room.

Might as well get it over with.

**

"Okay." Dar studied the screen. "That wouldn't have done anything but it wouldn't have hurt anything either. She opened up her laptop and waited for the screen to come on, then clicked on the folder she'd put the files she'd worked on in. "So let me show you what they did."

Instantly, she felt motion at her back and she glanced around to find most of the operators out of their chairs and leaning over their workspaces to watch. "C'mon over here. Maybe if I let you all in on what happened it won't happen again."

Thus invited the entire team came trotting over, making a solid circle at her back. "We knew they did something." One of them said. "They said it was you, Ms. Roberts, but I've been working here for ten years and I know what your stuff looks like." He was shaking his head. "Your changes are scary sometimes but they work."

Dar suppressed a smile. "Thanks." She said. "I think."

"So what did they do?" Bill asked. "We were going along like normal that one day then all of a sudden it all just gummed up."

Dar brought up the configuration of their local router, and the file on the screen that mirrored it. "This." She touched one line with her index finger and drew it down the screen. "The idiot who did this didn't have any understanding of situational routing."

"Is that ... what is that?" Bill asked. "Is that how all the traffic knows how to go?"

"Yes." Dar indicated the file on her screen. "You see all this? That's the configuration that used to be in this router that would tell it how to know where to send things, and would flexibly reroute if it saw congestion or an issue."

"That's custom scripting." One of the other operators said, folding his arms.

"Yes." Dar repeated. "I wrote it."

"But.. that's actually calling the firmware." The man said.

Dar nodded. "We worked in conjunction with the firmware vendor to make it work that way." She glanced past him. "It's in the architecture workbook."

"They took that offline." Bill said. "Same time as the repository. They said it was for security."

"So, all we have to do is put that all back in and it'll start working again?" The first tech said. "It's just typing? Holy crap Ms. Roberts, we can type. Give each of us one of those and we'll get this knocked out and we can go get a damn beer with a clean conscience and I'm buying your first one."

Dar smiled, just a little. "That's all. I rewrote these last night." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "We tried to give them back to the stupid bastard who did this but they fired him before we could give them over."

"Holy crap."

"Holy crap!"

“Someone grab some thumb drives! “ Bill turned around and yelled out. “Hurry!”

**

Kerry had sat at many tables like this one, facing many faces like these and she understood the heavy sense of fear and dismay in the room. “I know it’s crazy.”

“No, well..” Charlese Harrington lifted one hand up. “Look, Kerry, I know you got dragged into this. But it IS crazy. Someone somewhere else make a huge screw up, and we have to pay the price?”

Kerry sighed. “That does happen.” She said. “None of this was anyone here’s fault, but the fact is, it impacted some people who aren’t very forgiving – what was worse, they weren’t being given good information.”

“That’s not our fault.” Paul said. “We weren’t getting ANY information from exec ops. Just bullshit. All they kept doing was either blaming you, or telling us to suck it up.”

“And, like don’t even mention Ms. Robert’s name.” Charlese added. “They sent an email out that said they were fixing years of screw-ups and we’d just have to sit tight until they were done. Figure out something to tell the customers.”

“And what’s happening now? I know they let you all in here.” Paul said. “But I know that broke security regs, and we should be getting a call from the PTB any minute screaming.”

“You won’t.” Kerry said. “Jacques is under guard at the white house, and they put Dar’s replacement into a holding cell.”

Silence. “Whhhwhat?” Paul stuttered. “Are you kidding me?”

“I’m telling you they screwed around with the wrong customers.” Kerry said. “The president’s advisor is the one who sent us over here. Dar and I were there demonstrating a new project for them. We didn’t intend on any of this. I just..” She glanced around. “They wanted us to take over this contract.”

The reaction surprised her. Everyone sat up and their eyes brightened. “That means we’d work for you?” Paul asked. “Hot damn.”

“Guys.” Kerry sighed. “Thank you, that’s a big compliment, but the company Dar and I started can’t handle this.” She said. “At least, not yet. We’re fifty.. no.. wait. Seventy people in Coconut Grove doing database design.”

“Who are at the White House demonstrating programs for the president.” Charlese eyed her. “I saw that picture of Ms. Roberts and Dubya.”

“But still, we’re small.” Kerry said. “ILS is a quarter of a million people. It’s not our scale for this. So when they started talking like that, like maybe they’d bring in a squad of marines in here, I thought a better route would be to get them to hire you all, and let you keep doing what you do.”

“Weren’t you the one fending them off from us the last time? The government, I mean?” Charlese asked. “I don’t mean to be rude.”

“Situations change.” Kerry said, evenly. “If you’d rather not accept the offer, that’s okay too. My aim was to get a working solution in place for as many people as I could.”

“If Ms. Roberts fixes that stuff, can’t we just go back to being normal?” Paul asked, plaintively. “I mean, it’ll work again and everyone will stop yelling at us.”

“I don’t think they’ll let that happen.” Kerry said, then paused as the receptionist opened the door and stuck her head in. “But hell. You never know. I’ve seen stranger things.”

“Oh, good. Ms. Stuart, there’s a phone call for you. They say it’s urgent.”

Everyone looked at Kerry, who stood up and sighed. "And I'm not supposed to be here, and I don't work here anymore. What the hell." She went to the door and followed the woman out, shaking her head as she heard voices raise up in agitation behind her.

**

"Okay go ahead." Dar folded her arms and watched as the techs got to work, eyes flicking from the notepad files to their consoles as they confidently typed in commands.

It was insane, really. The level of change control they were violating would have dropped internal audit at two paces, and there was no doubt that all the concurrent changes would be skewing already faltering services across the wide network.

Couldn't be helped. Dar flexed her hands, resisting the urge to take over one of the consoles to make the work go faster. It was right, she acknowledged that the techs be the ones to do this, and not her. She had no business touching a keyboard.

"Wow." One of the supervisors was watching the big board that showed mostly reds and yellowed flashing luridly overhead. "I don't think that's making things better."

"No, it won't. Until they're finished." Dar agreed. "Classic case of busting eggs to make pancakes."

"Isn't that omelets?" The man glanced at her.

"I like pancakes better."

"Well, I'd call ops but there's no one there but this one guy that's just answering the phone and taking messages." The man said. "I heard they got some temp company to send some people in but that won't happen until tomorrow I think."

Dar just folded her arms and leaned against one of the consoles.

"There goes my phone." The supervisor said, mournfully.

"Want me to answer it?" Dar asked, with a wry smile. "That'll confuse everyone." She pushed off from the console and went to the desk, settling behind it and picking up the receiver. "ILS Mid Atlantic ops. How can I help you?"

She listened for a moment. "Yes, matter of fact I do know. There's a recovery operation going on to try and restore performance to the network. Your service will be down until that's finished."

She listened again. "I understand. But when it's done, you'll have the same service level as you did several weeks ago before the problem started. " She glanced up to find everyone not typing watching her in fascination. "About twenty minutes."

"Can you tell them that?" The supervisor mouthed. "Holy cow they'd fire me for saying that!"

"Who'd fire you?" Dar mouthed back. "Me? No I wouldn't. There's no one left to fire you and the government's going to hire you anyway. Chill out."

She went back to the phone. "Absolutely I'm sure the service is going to get a lot better. I promise you that." She paused. "Roberts. First name's Paladar. Yep, with a P. Thanks. Goodbye." She put the receiver down, then punched the button and picked it up again. "ILS Mid Atlantic ops, how can I help you?"

"Someone should record this." The supervisor said, with a sigh. "No one's gonna believe it."

**

Kerry was standing at the receptionists counter, leaning against it with the phone pressed to her ear. "Alastair you're not making any sense." She repeated. "Listen, I realize that was probably a shock getting the phone call but..."

She paused to listen. "What were we supposed to do?" Her eyes lifted and met the receptionists, and she shook her head. "Okay, put yourself in my place. You're in the white house, you have the senate

intelligence committee breathing down your neck, Bridges hauling you into a room with Jacques and that jacktard and telling you to fix it. What do you do?"

She paused. "No, I'll tell you what you would do, god damn it, you would have picked up the phone and called Dar."

"Don't listen Kerry me. That's exactly what you would have done and so we just shortened the process. So now Dar's in there doing what we all agreed was the last thing on earth she should do because we ran out of god damned options."

She heard the sound of tires outside and looked up and through the door. "Oh great. Here's CNN." She sighed. "Well, I can't help it that those jerks you just tossed on their ass decided to go public." She rubbed her temple. "So now we have the press here rabid about some story that is just bullshit."

"Should I let them in, ma'am?" The receptionist eyed the gathering crowd outside the door.

"Not yet." Kerry said. "Alastair, what is it you would like me to tell the national press? You want me to refer them to you?" She listened. "That's not my place to tell them. In fact, you can't even tell me to tell them that because I don't work for you anymore."

"There's another news truck out there, ma'am?"

"Jesus." Kerry covered her eyes. "Alastair, you need to put out a press release. Is Hamilton there? He's on his way. Okay, well I'm sure the PR people didn't quit so you should have plenty of them there to write a press release explaining you've replaced the board."

"Is that Alastair McLean?" The receptionist whispered. "Is he back in charge of things?"

Kerry nodded. "Against his will." She whispered back. "He's not really happy about it. I volunteered him."

She listened again. "Well." She exhaled "I can't do that. I know things are moving too fast, and I know... what?" She paused. "Okay so they'll file lawsuits, big news there but.." She paused again. "Oh hell, Alastair. It's too late. We're here. Dar's changes are already going in."

Kerry shot a quick glance at the door. "Alastair, we're out of time. You need to deal with the press. I need to get Dar out of here before they make an honest to god Federal case out of this. Get off your ass and call CNN. I'll try to get things normalized here." She hung the phone up and circled the desk. "Holy crap."

"Ma'am, you have brass ones." The receptionist said, in an awed tone.

Kerry stopped at the door and turned. "They already fired me. What exactly do you think he's going to do? Stall the press as long as you can." She yanked the door open, resetting the bolt so it would shut after her and headed down the corridor.

"Yes. Ma'am." The woman turned and put her hands on her desk as the door opened and a cavalcade of press and cameras and over coated handsome men and women stumbled inside. "Hi." She said. "Welcome to ILS Mid Atlantic. What can I do for you?"

**

Kerry got to the door to the operations room and peered through it, seeing techs very busy at their desks, and her partner seated at the supervisor's raised platform on the phone. One of the supervisors was perched on the edge of the desk listening, the other was on the far side of the room, watching the monitor board.

She could see the board, and it was looking ugly. "Ugh." Kerry knocked on the glass, attracting the attention of the supervisor near the desk. He hopped up to come open the door, and Dar looked up as well, meeting her eyes.

Kerry smiled briefly as those blue orbs rolled expressively. She pushed the door open as the lock clicked from the other side and ducked past the supervisor on her way to the raised platform. "Hon?"

Dar held up one hand. "Yes, that's right. Just give it another fifteen minutes. Thanks." She hung up the phone and then ignored its insistent ringing as Kerry came up next to her. "Hey."

"What are.. never mind." Kerry refused to let herself be distracted. "That was Alastair out there. He called here because we're not answering our phones."

Dar glanced at hers. "Not getting signal in here. Not surprising with these metal walls and EMF." She said. "So what does he want?"

"What doesn't he want?" Kerry lowered her voice. "They kicked the board members out and they went public."

"Morons." Dar didn't look perturbed.

"Yes, who are intending on filing suit against him, against us, and against the Pope for deliberately disrupting operations."

"Can't prove any of that." Dar responded.

"No, except here we are." Kerry said. "They told the press we did this just so we could disgrace them."

Dar rested her hands on the desk and drummed her fingers against its surface. "Hm. You know, that's the one single reason I might actually have done it." She admitted. "Unfortunately for them, we didn't."

"But we're fixing it."

"They're fixing it." Dar pointed at the consoles. "I just provided copies of the previous configuration to them."

"You didn't go in there?" Kerry's voice sounded surprised.

"Nope. Haven't touched a keyboard." Dar confirmed.

Kerry sighed. "There are about a hundred press people outside. They told them we were here, and that we also deliberately did this so we could swing the contract away from ILS and make points with the government."

"Except for the deliberately, that's what we're here doing." Dar mused. "You know, Ker, I don't know what else they could have done to preserve their reputations."

"Tank ours?" Kerry said, sharply.

Her partner lifted both hands up and let them drop again.

"So what are we supposed to do?" Kerry half whispered. "Dar, we could get into some serious political and financial crap here."

Dar put her hand on Kerry's knee. "We might." She said quietly. "But right now, we're in flight here. We can't just turn off the engines."

Kerry looked around, at the absorbed faces of the techs, and their quick shifting of attention from the scribbled on pages to their screens. "Yeah, well that's what I told Alistair." She admitted. "I told him to get off his ass and have someone in PR call the press."

"Did you really tell him to get off his ass?"

"I did."

"Good girl." Dar took hold of Kerry's hand and brought it closer, giving the knuckles a quick kiss. "That's exactly what he needs to do. It's not our place to solve this press problem."

"Hmph." Kerry grunted softly. "But that doesn't help the fact they're all out there." She said. "Or what the bastards told them."

Dar leaned back in her chair and lifted her shoulders in a mild shrug. "First things first. Let's get this fixed." She glanced up at the monitor. "Type faster, folks." She raised her voice. "There's light at the end of the tunnel there, I see some greens."

The supervisors turned and looked. "Holy crap there are."

Everyone looked up at the board, and fell silent. The only sound in the room was the rattle of computer keyboards. It was odd and discordant, the heavy clicks echoing softly.

"Good old IBM keyboards." Dar commented, after a long moment. "Noisiest input devices on the planet. I think the sound's patented."

Kerry kept watching the board, listening to the noise of the typing and as that slowly started to wind down, and become less a solid continuous sound and more of a more erratic clicking the map started to change.

"Ah."

"What's going on?" The supervisor leaned towards her. "Is it... oh."

Reds and yellows were morphing into yellows and greens, and then, as they watched, the yellows faded, and as silence completely fell, and the keyboards went quiet, a flow of blue swept across the big status monitor, and started a gentle pulse.

"Son of a bitch." The supervisor standing at the desk said, into all that quiet.

The techs all turned around at their desks and looked up first at him, then at Dar, who stood up and put her hands on her hips.

It seemed anticlimactic. All those problems, and all that trouble, and now.... "Nice." Dar said. "Very nice."

"And that, people." Kerry exhaled. "Is why they pay her the big bucks."

"I haven't seen the board look like that in weeks." One of the techs said. "Did we really do that?"

"You did." Dar said, walking down from the desk and moving in front of the consoles. "And really, what you did was put things back the way they were before they got cocked up." She rested her hands on the steel edges of the old fashioned workspaces. "Good job, guys. Make sure you save the configs, and put these someplace safe."

"Ms. Roberts, is it true those guys who made the change deleted everything?" One of the techs asked.
"For real?"

"For real." Dar said. "To be fair to them, because I want to be fair, I do believe they did think the changes would make things.. not necessarily better, but different, and their own." Dar said. "We architects are arrogant bastards, and we are totally invested in our way of doing things."

Kerry blew a raspberry at her.

"It's true." Dar smiled anyway at the sound. "I completely believe with all my heart that's it's my way or the highway. Anyone here think that's not true?" She looked around at the techs, who smiled back.

"Well, so did they."

"Yes ma'am." Paul had re-entered. "But you were right, and they weren't." He exhaled as he watched the board, and saw the slow relaxation of bodies into chairs around the room. "What was worse though, at least from our side, was that.. " He paused. "When something would go wrong before, you all over in ops would own it."

Dar nodded. "Yes." She said. "I don't believe in shifting blame, just from a personal standpoint. That is why they paid me, and Kerry, in fact, the big bucks because those bucks stopped at our desks. If something got screwed up, if I rooted through it enough I could get it to come back to some decision I'd made that just hadn't been right."

"Even if that actually hadn't happened." Kerry interjected dryly. "Dar tends to be chivalric sometimes."

Dar blushed slightly. "I wouldn't say that." She demurred. "But I understood where my responsibility was." She looked up at Paul. "And that was to take the hit for things that happened in my organization. It's what management is for."

Paul shook his head. "It's what leadership is, ma'am. There's a difference."

"Yeah." One of the techs said. "That's it."

They all stood up, a spontaneous reaction that surprised Dar and made her take a step back, her brows lifting a little as they all started applauding. "Ah c'mon."

"That really was pretty ace." Steve had been sitting in a corner, and now he approached Dar. "So it should all be working now? Can I call back to the office and tell em?"

"Sure." Dar smiled, as the techs all surrounded her, offering handshakes and soft congratulations. Some brought up the notes they'd worked off and started asking questions.

Kerry smiled at the reaction, folding her arms across her chest and waiting, as she watched her partner sheepishly accept the accolade. "Might as well enjoy the moment." She commented to the supervisor standing next to her. "I'm sure CNN's not going to be clapping."

"Do you have to talk to them, ma'am?" The supervisor said. "We could sneak you out the back door, couldn't we? And then pretend we don't know what they're talking about when they ask us stuff?"

Kerry looked at him. "I've got six people from the government here and their limos parked outside. It's a little hard to miss." She said. "But thanks for the offer. I do appreciate it. Steve?" She motioned the man over. "We've got a problem outside."

He reached for the phone and started to dial. "Let me just call back there... what kind of problem?"

"When you're done there, let's get Bridges on the line and find out what he wants us to tell the press outside."

"Oh." Steve grimaced. "That kind of problem"

"Mmhm."

**

They were in the small office that once upon a time, Kerry had borrowed in her last visit to the office. Just a desk, and a phone, and a TV mounted on a wall that had never been changed since she'd left.

"Standby please, for Mr. Bridges." A quiet, female voice emerged from the speaker phone.

"Sure." Dar was sitting behind the desk, her chin resting on her fists.

Kerry was seated on the surface, a cup of water in her hands. If she stood up and looked out the small window, she knew she would see a parking lot full of television trucks, and the feeling of being under siege was undeniable. "Should I call Richard?"

"Not yet." Dar said. "Let's wait to see what he says."

"Regardless of what he says, Dar, the board's going to sue us." Kerry said. "Shit. We'll be lucky if they don't end up making us shut the company down."

"Mmph." Dar made a low noise in her throat. "Eh. Maybe it won't be so bad, now that everything's fixed."

"Dar." Kerry heard the exasperation in her voice.

"Yes?" Her partner looked up at her, with more than a hint of annoyance.

"Roberts?" The line opened abruptly. "You there?"

"We're here." Dar answered. "In the middle of a shit storm unfortunately." She focused on the phone instead of the woman at her side.

Briggs grunted. "Just heard from the computer people. They are whoop de doing all over the place here because crap's working again. So congratudamnlations."

"Yeah, thanks." Dar said. "The jacktard former board members of ILS went to the press and blew their story out. So now half the planet's in the front parking lot wanting the rest of the story."

"Ah."

They waited in silence for a bit. "So what would you like us to do, since whatever we say will involve your organization." Kerry said, after the quiet had gone on too long. "And we are due back there for a demonstration."

"Hold your shorts, kid." Brigg growled. "I'm writing a memo. You'll go with the goons I sent there and don't say a damn thing. Just 'no comment' your asses out the door."

Dar and Kerry regarded each other somberly. "Just leave?" Dar said.

"What, did I start speaking Russian? Yes." The presidents advisor said. "Go get the rest of those chimps and head back here. I'm including all of you in a national security memorandum. Move it, people." He said. "Goodbye!"

The line went dead. Dar leaned back and folded her arms, her face twisting into a disturbed expression. "Well." She sighed. "I guess that would get us out of this for now."

"It would." Kerry got up off the edge of the desk and went to the window, peering outside. "We don't say anything, and we can go back there and let the government cover it all up. They seem pretty good at that sort of thing."

"Mm."

"After all, it's just going to be a we said, they said anyway, Dar. They can't prove we touched anything, but we can't prove we didn't get someone else still there to do it."

"Yeah."

Kerry heard the tone and grimaced a little. From the corner of her eye she could see the TV trucks, antennas angled up and it reminded her of the time when they'd been dependent on the technology.

Working in desperate times in service to what they considered the greater good. She turned and leaned against the wall, watching Dar shift and steeple her long fingers, tapping the ends of them against her chin.

She remembered Dar working for hours, testing cables, providing leadership to their team and refusing to stop until they'd found the right ones, putting them in the right place. The only credit they'd gotten for it was the heartfelt thanks of the men they were helping – but it had been the right thing to do.

Just like today, fixing the screwup had been the right thing to do. Kerry had known it the moment the moment they'd headed to Herndon, the moment she'd seen the security guards relief, the moment she'd seen that board clear, and calm and seen the faces of the techs who'd done it.

It was right. It felt good. She watched the motion as Dar drew in a breath, and her shoulders straightened up. It wouldn't have made sense to do anything else, no matter what the consequences eventually were.

Dar, instinctively, understood that. Kerry could see the contention coming, in the tension in Dar's back as she prepared herself to stand up, and turn around and argue about something Kerry knew she wasn't going to win at.

Shouldn't win at. Sometimes consequences really didn't matter. If they ended up out of business, ran out of town, living on the boat...

Shoot. How bad really would that be?

She smiled, and felt a sense of odd acceptance flow through her. "So are you going to give the interview, or you want me to?" She broke the silence and savored every word as she watched Dar's whole body relax, and her shoulders jerk in a faint, silent laugh.

Dar turned around in the chair, meeting Kerry's eyes with a smile in return.

"We've been trying to walk away from this from the start, hon. That was wrong." Kerry admitted. "I was wrong in wanting you to stay clear. This was ours and we need to own it until it's done."

"No matter what happens."

"No matter what happens." Kerry echoed, feeling a sense of relief that almost made her sleepy.

Dar extended one hand. "'C'mere, and lets go to hell together.' She got up and as Kerry came over she wrapped her arms around her. "I could no more walk away from this." She let her head rest against Kerry's. "Than I could walk away from you."

Kerry leaned against her and let it go. "Wherever we go from this, I'm right there with ya," She said. "So let's go get on camera."

Dar shouldered her messenger bag and took Kerry's hand in hers, heading for the door and what waited beyond.

**

"So what are we doing?" Steve asked, as a pod of reporters filed into the ops center, glancing around curiously. "My office said we were supposed to be going back to the White House."

"We will." Kerry said. "We just need to do this short interview, to wrap things up then we can head back."

"Okay." The government IT manager agreed amiably. "I called back there, and sure enough, everything's running great. That sure was something to watch." He leaned back against the console. "Have to say, those guys are kinda okay. I'm glad now we're gonna hire them."

"They are okay." Kerry said. "Be right back." She left Steve by the wall and headed across the room to where Dar was standing with a reporter from CNN and one from the Washington Post. Two photographers were a few steps back, taking pictures and the camera crew was setting up to shoot the supervisor's desk, where Dar had taken up residence.

The techs were watching covertly. Paul, and the two supervisors were around the far raised desk, content to just watch the action as they stood under the big monitor board with its newly placid twilight shades.

There was a faint scent of garlic and cheese in the room, and Kerry felt her stomach rumble as she recognized the smell of fresh pizza nearby. She detoured over to the far desk and climbed up the tiers, returning the smiles as she approached. "Hi there."

"Ms. Stuart." Paul had a cup of coffee clasped between his hands. "Can I tell you this is the first time I haven't had my guts in knots for weeks?"

"What he said." One of the supervisors said. "Look. My phone's quiet." He pointed at it. "No calls, no calls waiting, no notepad full of names and numbers for me to call back with excuses. God bless you guys."

"It was a team effort." Kerry smiled. "And speaking of team efforts, do I smell a team pizza somewhere?"

Paul chuckled. "Yup.. in the break room, c'mon." He motioned her towards a side door. "I had it brought in.. wasn't sure what we were going to end up with this afternoon. Thought I'd have to have the guys on the desk without a break."

Kerry followed him into a back room where a refrigerator and coffee machine held pride of place, along with several tables, one of which was covered with pizza boxes. "Ah. Score."

Paul handed her a plate and took one for himself. "Feels like twenty pounds off my shoulders." He said. "It's been so bad."

"I know it must have been." Kerry said, pleased to have a whole veggie pizza to herself. She bit into a piece and chewed it. "I wish the whole thing hadn't happened."

"Yeah, me too. " He answered. "I don't know if I want to work for the government." He added. "My parents met at Woodstock. I don't think they'd forgive me for working for the Repugs."

Kerry swallowed reflectively. "I'm a Republican" She commented. "I'm not sure it matters when you do what we do, and I'm not sure there's much of a difference between working for the government or working for ILS."

"You're a Republican?"

Kerry nodded. "Dar's agnostic. She doesn't much like either party." She picked up another plate and plunked a piece of meat covered pizza on it. "And Paul, nothing says you have to work for the government. I'm sure there's a spot for you in ILS if you want to stay with them. They've lost enough staff over the last month."

"Yeah I know."

Kerry saluted him with her snack, then picked up the plate and headed out the door with it. She dodged a few cameramen as she made her way over to where Dar was getting settled behind the desk.

"So, Ms. Roberts, we do appreciate you sitting down and talking to us, especially after that press release from the former board of ILS." The reporter was saying. "I know you understand that I have to address the allegations they made."

"Sure." Dar glanced up as Kerry approached, her eyes lighting up a little at the sight of the plate she was carrying. "Whatcha got?"

"Pizza." Kerry put it down. "Take five minutes and scarf it. You know what that tastes like cold."

The door opened and two more journalists came in, joining them up on the dais. They were carrying microphones and had backpacks secured to their backs with gear inside. "Okay, we ready?" One of them asked, his microphone flag declaring him from USA Today. His companion had a local television station patch on his jacket.

Dar had wolfed down several bites and she now set her plate aside and wiped her lips with the napkin Kerry handed her. "Ready." She said. "You've got fifteen minutes. Start talking."

"Start rolling." The CNN reporter said. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"All right. Dan Gartersberg here at the ILS facility in Herndon, Virginia. " The man said, facing the camera. "Earlier today, ousted board members of ILS issued a press release accusing former employees of engineering a malicious attack on their systems, causing widespread outages across the US, and internationally, even affecting our armed services."

Dar waited for the camera to turn to her, folding her hands on the desk and taking a deep breath.

"We were tipped off that those ex employees were, in fact, here in this facility and we've come here to ask them what their response is to these allegations, and an explanation of what, actually, is going on. " The reporter turned smoothly and stepped back, and the camera focused on Dar. "This is Dar Roberts, one of the accused. Ms. Roberts, what do you have to say about these allegations?"

Dar smiled at the camera. "A lot." She said. "But we don't have all day, so I'll just say they're untrue, and we can move on to your next question."

The reporter nodded. "Very well then. Tell us about this supposed attack then." He looked around, and the camera panned with him. "Here at this headquarters, it seems very quiet."

The camera swung back. "Sure." Dar said. "Let me lay out the data points for you. I'll start with who I am, then move into why ILS got itself into this situation, who was responsible for it, and why I stepped in here today to make things right."

The reporter smiled, off camera, and gave Dar a thumbs up. The print reporters were scribbling furiously, one whispering into a voice recorder.

"So lets get started."

**

The ride back to the White House was very quiet. The two marshals were playing cards in the back section, and Steve was riding with them in the front, the two accountants busy studying papers spread out on their laps.

Both Kerry and Dar were sitting next to each other, lost in their own thoughts. The interview had lasted a half hour, and at the end of it they'd found it hard to tell if the reporters bought the story or not.

They'd ruined the story, Kerry realized, by having fixed it before the press arrived. It would have been so much more satisfying to them to have found things in chaos. Sweating men and red alerts going off were much better television than calm monitors and relaxed techs munching pizza.

Oh well.

They both had their phones turned off. Kerry had quickly sent a message to Richard Edgerton though, and one to Maria. Now she wondered if they would even be let inside the Executive building, much less get to demonstrate anything. "Hey Dar?"

"Hm?"

"Anything you want to see here? As in tourist stuff?"

Dar pondered that as they pulled into the White House parking lot. "The Air and Space Museum?"

Kerry smiled. "Just won ten bucks off myself."

They got out of the car and filed through the gate, the guards giving them respectful nods as they went past, and into the building. Steve led them to the presentation room, then ducked out and left them without further word.

Kerry put her hands on the back of a chair. "Should I turn my phone back on?" She asked. "I'm pretty sure that low thrumming sound you hear is shit hitting the fan."

"Sure." Dar pulled her own out and switched it on. It had just synced up when the door slammed open and Bridges stormed in. "That didn't take long."

"You stupid son of a bitch." Bridges said. "What in the hell did you think you were doing? I told you to come straight back here! Do you have any idea what kind of chaos you caused by opening your yap to the press? When I told you not to!"

'I decided otherwise.' Dar responded, flatly.

"Oh you did, did you? Well take your decisions and get the hell out of here. Contract's scratched." Bridges said, visibly fuming. "Forget it. With that publicity there's no way you're going to do anything at all for this government."

"Okay." Dar picked up her bag. "C'mon, Ker. Glad we could fix everything and then get fucked up the ass as usual from some two bit moron with no sense." She indicated the door. "Let's go have dinner and go home."

He was between her and the door and she walked right at him, expecting him to move to one side. When he didn't she stopped, looking him right in the eye, her head level with his. "You said to get out. Mind moving your ass so I can?"

One of his gray eyebrows cocked upward. "Did you really just call me a two bit moron, Roberts?"

"Yes. Move." Dar said. "I've got things to do."

Kerry had come around the other side of the table, and now she stood watching them. "Yeah, no win scenario." She said. "We weren't going to walk out of there and not defend our reputations."

Bridges swung around on her. "Reputations?" He looked from her to Dar. "You two are idiots. You have no idea what business you're into."

"No, we do." Dar said. "I completely understand why you wanted us to just come back here. I'm just telling you I wasn't going to let that go unchallenged. That's my ego. My problem. Now get out of my way so I can get started on hiring lawyers for the crap that got shot my way for solving YOUR problem."

"So you decided your reputation was more important than a bunch of major contracts your new business is based on?"

Dar looked him right in the eye. "Yes."

"You're an idiot." Bridges stepped aside. "Get the hell out."

Dar brushed past him and reached for the door, hauling up short as it swung inward, and revealed the highly inconvenient and slightly rumpled form of the president. "Ah." She took a step back. "Hi there."

"Well, hello there, ladies." The president came inside and shut the door. "Second time today I heard yelling coming from this room. What's the scoop?" He looked at Bridges. "Thought we were supposed to see that new computer thing today."

"Not today, sir." Bridges said. "I've decided to change companies. Didn't like what I saw from these here people."

"Yes, excuse us." Dar went to step around the president, stopping when he held a hand up.

"Now hold on." Bush said. "All I've been hearing this morning is how nifty this new thing is. Sounds like it was a success to me. So why make a change? What's the deal here?"

"Sir, we can discuss it later." Bridges said.

"Or we can discuss it now." The president countered.

Bridges looked frustrated and annoyed. Kerry got the sense he was used to getting his own way, and was also used to having his suggestions accepted without question. She felt her Handspring buzz in her pocket, but she left it where it was, waiting for Bridges to answer.

She didn't really feel apprehensive either way, which was a little strange.

"Ladies, why don't you sit down here, and let's just hear this out." Bush said. "Mike? I'm sure we've just got some kind of misunderstanding. Right?"

He pulled out a chair and waved Dar into it, then repeated the process for Kerry, seating himself between them as Bridges very grumpily took a seat across from them. "Now." He put his folded hands on the table. "What's the scoop?"

Bridges just stared moodily at him.

"You want the short version or the long one?" Dar finally said. "The short version is we were instructed to do something and we chose to do otherwise and Mr. Bridges did not appreciate that."

"How come?" The president asked, in a mild tone. "I mean, how come you didn't follow the instructions?"

"Because she's an idiot." Bridges said.

"Now Mike, I don't really think that's true." Bush said. "I know all about idiots, after all. I get called one often enough." He smiled at both Dar and Kerry. "So how come?"

Dar cleared her throat gently. "Because it went against my honor to do so."

Kerry felt the silence drop over the room, and watching the faces of the two men at the table, she sensed that her partner had selected just the right words. She saw the president's expression shift, and Bridges move in his chair, settling more square on to them and folding his hands on the table.

"Well then." The president said, after a long moment. "I know a little about that too." He eyed Bridges. "So Mike, did this cause us a real hassle, or you just ticked off because you didn't get listened to?"

Bridges frowned. "It's a publicity thing." He admitted. "Could be a problem with Congress."

Bush shrugged. "Full moon rising could do that. Tell you what. Let me let these ladies show me their new computer thing, and we let things lie quiet for a little while, see what shakes out." He said. "Something'll come along to distract em, and if it doesn't, we'll make something up."

Bridges sighed.

"Ladies?" Bush stood up and stepped back. "Don't you all worry. Mike's just got his nose out of joint. He gets that way some times. They don't give him enough bran in the staff mess." He opened the door and lifted his hand to wave. "Talk to you later, Mike."

"Sir." Bridges rested his head against his fist, letting out a grunt of irritation as the door closed behind them.

**

Andrew stood beside the love seat Ceci was sitting on, watching the big screen television mounted on the far wall. His eyes were fastened on the angular face the camera was pinned on, listening intently to what his daughter was saying. "Huh."

"I have no idea what the dickens that kid's talking about." Ceci said. "And neither does that reporter."

"Wall." Andrew cleared his throat. "I do believe she just told that there feller something about that bank thing that broke yesterday."

"Hm." Ceci regarded the familiar figure. "She looks good on television, Andy. Maybe we should have taken her to acting class. Remember that agency that wanted her for commercials?"

Andy looked around at her, both eyebrows hiking up.

"Okay maybe not." Ceci chuckled, as Dar stopped talking, waiting for the next question. She was at some desk somewhere, and she looked relaxed, her elbows resting on the surface and her hands folded.

She did look good on camera, the blandness of the cubicle walls making her dark hair and pale eyes stand out, and picking up on the focused intensity her kid tended to project. When she started talking, her speech was crisp, and confident and you just got the feeling she knew what the hell she was talking about.

Dar always had, even in the wretched youthful arrogance that had driven Ceci insane there was always an understanding, at least on her part that annoying and aggravating as it was there was always truth in what came out of that mouth. "Did she just tell that reporter the guy who replaced her there was a one balled unicorn?"

"Yeap."

"CNN's getting bold in it's old age."

"Yeap."

Ceci shook her head and went back to watching Dar field questions, shrugging off the accusations of the former board members, downplaying the chaos her mother knew had been going on as long as a few hours previously.

Master of her element. Ceci smiled. "Sharp kid, our daughter."

Andy grinned wholeheartedly. "Sharp as mah old boot knife."

Ceci extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles, feeling a new sense of contentment as she watched the screen, the sight of Dar's face no longer igniting in her any feeling of regret over their mutual mixed history.

Dar glanced off camera briefly and smiled, and it was easy to guess who she was looking at. "I thought she said they weren't going to get involved in all that stuff." Ceci said after a bit. "But that... they said they're at an ILS building, right?"

"That Virginia one. I recognize it." Her husband agreed. "Dar probably went out there to fix ever'thing up. Got tired of all the yapping."

"Maybe they'll leave her alone now."

"Maybe that there dog'll turn that tail around and fly off."

"Idiots."

Andrew snorted, then glanced up as he heard the doorbell ring. "Who all's that?"

His wife craned her head around him and peered towards the door. "Oh damn it, my x ray glasses are on the table. Can you toss them to me?"

"Lord." Andy got up and went to the door, opening it and moving forward to stand in the opening.

"Yeah?"

The young, copper haired girl on the landing took a step back. "Oh. Hello." She said, in a doubtful tone. "I was looking for Ms. Roberts."

"She ain't here." Andrew said. "What'cha want with her?"

"Andy, stop scaring that kid." Ceci edged her slim form around his. "Well, you're the young lady from the Island Market, aren't you?"

The girl nodded. "My name's Kristie." She said. "Sorry to bother you. I'll come back." She started to back up. "Thanks."

"Eh eh eh." Ceci held up a hand. "Hold on there, kiddo. I think we need to talk to you."

Kristie stopped, and eyed her uncertainly.

Ceci crooked her finger at her. "Don't worry. I won't kill ya." She said. "I just want to talk to you. I think you owe me that after the trouble you got my child into."

"I didn't mean to." The girl said instantly. "That's w.. I mean, I wanted to apologize."

"C'mon in." Ceci pushed the door open. "Maybe you can do more than that."

**

"All right now, let's see what we got."

They were seated around the small work table on one side of the big office. Dar was showing the demo on her laptop, her screen turned so that the president could see it.

The surreal nature of the moment wasn't lost on Kerry. She was seated on the other side of the table, watching the man alternate his attention between the computer and Dar, head cocked slightly in an attitude of listening.

"So you can just ask it whatever you want to, right?" He finally said, once Dar had finished her explanation.

"Right." Dar agreed.

"Sounds easy." The president inched over. "Can I try it?"

"Sure." Dar turned the keyboard over and pushed back in her chair, extending her legs under the table.

Kerry watched him peck out a question. "Eventually Dar wants to make it so you can just talk to it." She commented. "Speech recognition is a little tough."

"Specially when you sound like I do." The president looked up and winked at her.

"Any variance is tough." Dar conceded. "Unless you talk like Kerry does. But you can write algorithms that can deal with tonal variations." She glanced at the screen, where the database was pondering a response. "I'll have it practice on my dad."

The screen cleared and returned some data. "So, what it says is, it found nothing in the current data flow that referenced your name, and the world jackass." Dar said. "Remember this is just a random test database."

The president chuckled. "Okay how about this." He pecked the keys again. "How about, tell me something about rockets and the US East Coast." He hit enter. The screen hesitated, then responded, this time with a full page of detail. "Well now, look at that."

Dar nodded. "So it found some email that referenced those terms, and some song lyrics. The human operator will probably want to see some additional detail about the first, but maybe not the second."

Bush nodded, and hit the key for the first return. "So this'll show me that actual mail, huh?"

Dar nodded.

"That's going to freak everybody out." He studied the screen. "Ain't it?"

"Well." Kerry sat forward and rested her elbows on her knees, looking past Dar at the screen. "In reality, it's something that any Internet service provider can do right now." She said. "They see all your data so if the police wanted, they could have them capture all the traffic you send and receive and turn it over."

Bush blinked. "Really?"

"Sure." Dar said. "It's what I could have done when I was at ILS. Capture every bit of information going in and out of the Pentagon, and sold it to the highest bidder."

The president sat back in his seat and regarded her. "I don't think I like that idea." He said, after a pause. "Here's the problem with all this technology stuff. We don't have a handle on it. It's too wide open."

Dar considered the question. "It's true the Internet changed everything." She said. "It connected the world in a way that I don't think anyone was really ready for. But the truth is, bad people do bad things and use whatever is available to do what they do."

Bush nodded. "That's right. I did a study on that, if you can believe it. Telegraph, telex, morse code, fax modems, all that. But now this here everyone connected thing makes it too easy for them, too hard for us."

"So this is a tool to help counteract that." Kerry said. "But you have to put it in the hands of trusted people. Really trusted." She added. "This would be so easy to use for someone to persecute people for a lot of reasons not related to national security. You know what I mean?"

He produced a wry smile. "Lot of things can be used for good or bad." He remarked. "But I thought someone told me all this stuff was .. what did they say..." He frowned. "Encrypted? So you can't see it?"

"Technically that's true." Dar said.

"But there's a way around that?"

"Yes."

Bush nodded slowly. "Tell me something." He hunched forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. "What do you ladies think? This thing a good thing for us to do?" He looked from Dar to Kerry. "This right?"

Silence fell, as they all sat there, thinking.

Finally, it was Kerry who cleared her throat and spoke first. "The truth is, if someone wants to hurt us bad enough, they will. They'll find a way, and if it's known that we can do this." She pointed at the computer. "They'll find a way around it."

Bush glanced aside, then back at her. "That's probably true." He said.

"So what I think is, you should tell everyone you decided not to do this." Kerry said. "Tell them either it can't be done, or it's not right, or whatever you want to make people think it's not being done."

The president watched her face thoughtfully. "But do it."

Kerry nodded. Then she smiled faintly. "That's what my father would have said to do. He would have called this playing to the beliefs of the people."

"What about you?" He glanced at Dar. "You think that's the thing?"

Dar had her hands folded on her stomach. "I think you should do it because it can be done, and if we can do it, whoever's against us can do it too. It's stupid not to." She remarked. "But I don't disagree with Ker's slant on it."

Another silence fell. Dar found herself wishing they were home, all the excitement she'd felt about demonstrating her program evaporated away into doubt, and uncertainty of where they would be tomorrow and what new problems she'd face.

She felt a little down. She wasn't sure if she really cared what they did with the app now, in fact, if they decided to just cancel it she sort of felt like she might be glad. In fact, if they finished up now here, she and Kerry could go see the Air and Sea Museum.

That sounded like a hell of a lot more fun than doing a demo for Congress.

"Well." Bush finally said, after pondering to himself for a long time. "Here's what I think. " He straightened up in his chair and leaned back, hiking up one ankle and putting it on his knee. "I think we're going to have to show this off, because if we say never mind, they're all going to think we're lying sacks of marbles."

Ah well. Dar sighed inwardly.

"I'll just have to come up with a good story about how we're gonna lock this up in the depths of the Pentagon and only allow access to it with a gun and a court order by Eagle Scouts." Bush concluded. "Or something like that."

"Will they buy that, sir?" Kerry asked, quietly.

"Doesn't matter." Bush shook his head. "She's right, about the cat being out of the bag. Can be done, so we gotta do it." He scratched the bridge of his nose. "Sometimes politics are a mess."

Kerry almost laughed. "I think my mother agrees with you."

"When I demo this for the senators, I'll skew it to show how the automatic processing works rather than have them ask questions of it." Dar said. "How it finds connections. I think that's less intimidating."

"Mike was right on that." The president said, in a rueful tone. "I shoulda kept my yap shut. One of them poked the bear one too many times about us not knowing enough to stop those planes and I told em we had something to make that up now."

"I remember when it happened, right after, everyone was so angry and.. I guess embarrassed." Kerry said.
"I remember thinking, how could we let this happen."

Bush was staring past her. "Just be glad you weren't sitting in my chair." He said, then he straightened back up and clapped his hands together. "But that's water under the bridge, right? How about some coffee, ladies? Bout that time of day."

"That would be great." Kerry said. "We didn't get any sleep last night trying to fix that problem. It's been a long day."

The president got up and picked up a phone, which connected with out him having to dial. "Hey, get me a tray with some coffee and some cookies in here, willya? For all of us? Thanks." He put the phone down. "Now, we got a minute here, tell me about that whole thing with the press. What's up with all that?"

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "It's a long story." Kerry temporized.

"Hey, I like stories." The president sat back down. "Specially when they're being told by good looking women. Have at it."

**

"That was weird." Kerry smiled politely at the guards as they left the office.

Dar eyed her. "Given what we've gone through in the last few hours I don't know what part of that you're referring to."

"Yes." Kerry had to admit. "This is one of the stranger days I can recall."

They were being led down the hall by an aide. Dar finally took her phone out of her pocket and looked at it. "Ten missed calls. Glad this thing has a silencer."

Kerry was checking hers. "Yeap." She thumbed through the numbers. "Here's Richard.. I better call him back once we're outside."

"Did you know you used to be able to listen to analog cell phones by tuning in a radio scanner?" Dar asked, as she put the phone away. "They were radio transmissions in the clear."

"You know this personally?"

"Yeap."

Kerry digested that as they left the building and started down the sidewalk to the parking lot side by side.

"Roberts."

They turned, to find Briggs jogging after them. He waved them forward. "Let me walk you ladies to your car."

"Bout to get weirder." Kerry muttered as they cleared the gate. "I can just tell."

**

Ceci took a seat in the little garden, while Andy collected the dog toys and started tossing them. "So." She regarded the girl sitting uncomfortably in the other chair. "You know we talked to your father."

She nodded, relaxing visibly. "Yeah he told me. I got really pissed off at him." She said. "I was so mad. He told me he was going to get them out of here, and.. you know that's not fair."

"No, it isn't." Ceci agreed. "That wasn't a nice way to pay Dar back for a good deed she did."

"That's what I told him, that it was so cool for her to come in and get in this guy's face, so he should be thankful, you know? Not get all mean with her." Kristie looked around, then back at Ceci. "But he didn't get that. He thought maybe she did it just to get in with me."

Ceci shook her head. "Not my kid." She said, flatly. "Let me tell you from the perspective of someone who had to deal with raising Dar. " She leaned an elbow on the table. "She's nuts. Not really in a bad way, but she does crazy things for people because she's got some weird internal chivalry that makes her do it."

Kristie frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She would step in front of a bus for a complete stranger." Ceci said. "She got into that guy's face on your behalf just because jackasses offend her sense of what's right." She watched Christy's face closely "Sorry to disappoint you."

Kristie looked away. "Well, that's not what my dad thinks."

"Therein lies the crux of the problem." Ceci said. "Because it's true, and it's not fair of you, or your father to make assumptions like that. The idiot who was going after you – he could have had a gun. She could have been shot getting involved in that and you know what kid? You aren't worth it."

Kristie stared at her.

"Not to me, not to my husband, not to Kerry Stuart." Ceci said. "I would rather have seen you raped and beaten than have to have her get hurt doing something like that."

"That's harsh." The girl said, bluntly.

"Life is, sometimes." Ceci agreed. "Your father telling us he intends on making hard for us to live here until we leave is harsh too, especially since the only reason he's doing that is because he thinks Dar's going to turn you gay."

The girl turned bright red.

"You do know that's not how that happens, right?"

"I..." Kristie said. "I don't know anything about it, but that sounds really stupid." She added. "You can't make people any way like that."

Ceci regarded her. "No, you really can't." She said. "But you know, you can't all the time help who you're attracted to either."

The girl gave her a suspicious look. "What do you mean?"

"Well, take me." Ceci suppressed a smile. "I grew up in a very rich family, up north. My parents were willing to provide me with pretty much anything I wanted, and they took a lot of pains to introduce me to young men who were in the same station of life I was, and give me a chance to find a partner among people who were like we were."

Kristie paused, and then nodded. "Yeah, I get that. My dad does that too. He has me go with him to his club meetings and stuff like that."

"Right. So what did I do? Ran away to a Greyhound bus station and fell in love with the first guy in uniform waiting for a ride I found."

"Really?"

"Really." Ceci glanced fondly at Andrew, who was chasing Mocha across the grass. "Andy's from a very poor family in Alabama. We have exactly nothing in common. But that never stopped us from loving each other and making a life together. So when my daughter told us she wasn't going to have a conventional love life it never fazed either her father or me."

"Did your parents freak out?" Kristie asked, curiously.

"They certainly did. I was disowned." Ceci said. "But I never cared. Andy was more important to me than they were. So I sympathize with you about your father."

"He's so stupid." Kristie said, suddenly. "That's all he can think of- about that gay stuff. . It had nothing to do with .. that.. with sex or anything I just thought it was really cool what she did and I said so." She got it all out in a rush of words. "I didn't think he'd freak out like that."

Ceci studied her in silence, glancing up when Andy wandered back over and sat down next to her. "He's not religious?"

Kristie shook her head. "No, we don't go to church or anything like that. That's what I told them. " She gestured vaguely in the direction of the condo. "He just doesn't like gay people."

"How come?" Andy spoke up.

"What?"

"How come he don't like gay folks?" He repeated. "He grow up with the church or what all?"

Kristie shrugged. "Most people don't. Right?" She said, in a straightforward way. "It's weird. It's not .. I mean it seems really weird."

Andrew shrugged back. "I guess we got a different view on it. Never much bothered me." He cleared his throat gently. "Not with Dar, anyhow."

Ceci turned her head. "But you didn't like it when they hit on you. I remember that."

The girl's eyes widened. "Hit on you... what do you mean?"

Andrew rested his elbows on his knees, one hand stroking Chino's head as the Labrador nuzzled him. "Had me some problems with that in the Navy." He said, briefly. "I got het up when folks talked bad about gay people, cause of Dar, and some folks took that to mean I went that way too."

Kristie frowned. "But you.. you were married, right?"

Ceci raised her hand. "E-yep." She agreed. "We're an old fashioned couple. We got married before I had Dar, strange as that probably seems to you young uns."

"And they still wanted to.. uh.. have you? " Kristie made a face. "Now see what I mean? That's gross."

Well now, Ceci had to internally agree that the kid might actually have a point there. She remembered the feeling she'd gotten when Andy had indignantly told her of the advances, and she had to admit.. "That is kind of gross." She admitted. "But at the time, I told Andy to just ignore it."

"But I did feel something bad. So I thought maybe your father had something like that go on." Andy said. "Put people off."

"I don't know." Kristie shook her head. "He never said anything like that. I think he just – " She paused and fell silent. "He just wants us to be normal."

"Ain't no such thing." Andrew said.

"Okay well." Ceci said. "I'm sorry we all got into this mess, especially since it all started with a relatively good deed. " She added. "Any ideas on how we can get everyone's shorts out of a knot?"

They regarded each other in silence.

**

"So look." Bridges folded his arms and leaned back against their rental car. "Here's where we stand."

They were standing outside in the late afternoon sun, a cool breeze moving past. Dar was seated on the hood of the car, and Kerry was leaning next to her.

"I know where we stand." Dar said. "But if it means anything, sorry we pissed you off." She shifted a little on the hood. "Didn't really mean to."

"What? Never mind that." Bridges waved his hand. "That boat's down the river. Something else came up." He said. "You'll be a footnote in an hour. Everyone got focused elsewhere."

"Great." Kerry sighed. "This needed to get more complicated."

Bridges peered at her. "You should be used to this, Stuart."

"I'm not. I went into high tech for a reason." Kerry told him. "I'd rather be home installing servers for the Dade County school system."

"What?"

"I want to go home." Kerry rephrased her speech. "You can keep Congress."

"Thanks for nothing." Bridges turned back to Dar. "How close is this thing to being able to do something useful?"

Dar folded her arms. "Six months." She said. "We could start a limited deployment in probably four."

"Not fast enough."

"Do you want it to work?" Dar said. "I think I asked you that in our last meeting. If you want it to be this, a canned demo, you can take this and use it. Won't do anything useful though."

Bridges looked around. "We need this thing. Situation just came up, just after you left off talking to POTUS." He said. "I can't give any details, but let me tell you after that piece aired on Turner's butthole I got a call from some people who want to see this, as in, now."

Dar shrugged. "I'd be glad to show whoever wants to see it this demo. But the real thing's just not ready. Writing code takes time."

"Not only that, its going to take time to get all the taps into all the ISPs for the collecting to start." Kerry added. "This can't happen overnight."

Bridges pinched his lips with his fingertips. "Will throwing money at it help?" He asked. "Buy a bunch of bodies for you to use?"

"To an extent, sure." Dar said. "More people can code segments. But it's still not going to be overnight."

"I could find some other bunch of idiots to do this."

"You could." Dar's voice remained mild. "That's capitalism. There's always competition."

"Smart ass." Bridges said. "Tell you what, I'll quadruple the contract price. You get me something in four weeks."

Four weeks. Kerry looked at her partner, mentally doing the math and feeling a touch lightheaded at the amount they'd clear from it. She saw the thoughtful look in Dar's eyes, and remembered their upcoming vacation, feeling a pang of regret.

Regret which lasted barely more than a microsecond.

"No." Dar said. "I've got something scheduled the next couple weeks I'm not going to back out of. I'll have my team work on it, but they'll finish it when they do." She got up off the car hood and unlocked the doors. "If that's not good enough let me know. We'll move on."

Bridges studied her. "You actually mean that." He seemed slightly amazed.

"I do." Dar said. "I don't want to put my life on hold right now. Kerry and I are going to the Grand Canyon."

Bridges stared at her. "You are shitting me." He said. "You're going to blow me off for that?"

"Yes."

'What in the hell is wrong with you?"

"Excuse me, we've got an appointment with Congress." She opened the car door and slid behind the driver's seat as Kerry scooted around and got in on the other side. "Do me a favor, and let us do this right. It's going to be damned embarrassing if you don't."

"Huh." He put his hand on the door. "Roberts, if something happens that this thing could have prevented and didn't, it's on your head."

Dar met his eyes without flinching. "It is." She said. "Which is why I'm going to deliver it to you when it's ready. It's my reputation on the line."

For a moment she was sure he was going to slam the door on her. She made sure her body parts were inside, in fact, but he merely shut the door gently and patted it. Then he lifted a hand and walked off, heading back towards the gate with its stern guardians.

"I have no idea how that ended." Kerry admitted.

Dar started the car "I think we're okay." She said. "And if not, screw it."

"Well, I don't know, hon." Kerry settled back in her seat. "This is pretty deep."

"Honestly I don't care." Dar backed up and started out of the lot. "I'm going on my god damned vacation and I don't care if the whole Western world falls on it's ass while we're gone."

Kerry started to make a comment, then she saw the line of Dar's jaw tighten and she merely reached over and tucked her hand around her partner's arm. "Can we stop and grab a snack?" She said, instead. "I'd like to get something in my stomach first before I start returning these calls or talking to Congress."

"Sure."

Kerry leaned over and let her head rest against Dar's shoulder. "What a weird day"

It had been. Dar was diligently searching the passing buildings for something edible, wishing the demo for the Senate was behind them and more than that wishing they were on the way home. The events had left her more than a little unsettled. "Tacos okay?"

"Mm."

"How about fried chicken?"

"Mm."

"Jamba Juice?"

"That's the ticket." Kerry said. "My guts not really willing to deal with that other stuff right now." She kept her head where it was, as Dar pulled off into a small strip mall and into a parking spot. "Thanks."

"Anything for you." Dar patted her cheek. "And there's a chicken wing place next door. Meet you back here?"

Kerry gave her arm a squeeze and released her. "You bet."

They got out of the car and split up, Kerry ducking into the smoothie shop and Dar making her way into the wing joint. It was moderately busy in both, and Dar got in line and waited, thumbing through her messages.

One from Maria, hoping things were all right. Another from Colleen, congratulating her on the interview.

Dar smiled a little, at both of them. She opened a third, that had an attachment and she opened that to find a set of code snippets for her to review.

"Ma'am?"

Dar looked up to find the cashier waiting for her. "Sorry." She put the Handspring away. "Dozen wings hot and a large coke."

"Sure." The woman said. "Naked?"

"Yes." Dar responded, ignoring the sniggering of the two teen boys behind her. She paid the woman and moved down the counter, hearing the door open. Without turning, she felt a sense of warmth on the side of her body facing the entrance, and she knew without looking that Kerry would be there.

"Hey." Kerry bumped her with an elbow. "I got you one too. I thought it might counteract the wings."

Dar collected her wings and they went to a back table, sitting down together on the bench seats. Dar pushed the basket of wings in the center of the table, and Kerry handed over a tall, blended smoothie. "Is there peaches in that?"

"Of course."

Dar pulled the cup over and contentedly sucked on the straw. "Thanks."

"Anytime" Kerry had picked up a wing and was nibbling on it. "I called Richard while I was waiting. I thought he'd have stacks of subpoenas for us so I figured I might as well find out the worst before we fly home."

"And?" Dar was divesting a wing of its meat, sucking at the bone with single minded intensity.

"And nothing." Kerry said. "He called the lawyer that was in that press release and the guy hung up on him."

Dar looked up and frowned.

"He thought it was pretty weird too."

Dar's phone rang and she sighed, putting down her wing and fishing the gizmo out. "Dar Roberts." She said. "Who's this? What? Oh." She cleared her throat. "I've said everything I've got to say already about that."

"Uh oh." Kerry picked up another wing. "Hope they don't get cell signal in the Grand Canyon."

**

They sat in the car parked in the lot outside the congressional office building, finishing up their fruit smoothies, the windows rolled down as the late afternoon sun streamed through them.

They had ten minutes before their appointment. Dar was leaned back in the driver's seat, one knee hiked up with her elbow resting on it. She had her head tipped a little back, and she was looking out the window, watching people walk down the sidewalk and turn up the steps to enter.

"Ready?" Kerry asked, putting her cup down. "Let's get this over with."

Dar nibbled on the straw from her smoothie and remained quiet for a moment. "Hm."

Kerry half turned and regarded her. "Hm? Hm what?"

"Not sure what I should tell these people." Dar said, slowly. "I've been thinking about that since we left the White House." She shifted a little and also half turned, so they were facing each other. "I keep wondering if we got ourselves into something we shouldn't have."

"It's a little late for that, hon." Kerry responded, in a gentle tone. "We made a commitment to them."

"I know."

Kerry watched her profile, which was thoughtful and sort of somber. "Well." She finally said. "Regardless of what we end up doing, we probably should do this thing here and not blow them all off."

"Yeah." Dar responded. "You're right."

Kerry waited. "But?" She prompted after another silence between them.

"But I realized.. when he was typing in questions in to it, that I'd overlooked something about this system" Dar said. "I've been thinking about it.. in the terms of, having trusted people use it."

Kerry exhaled a little. "And you realized that trust is relative?"

"Outside you and me, yes." Dar said. "It's too enticing. You could find out anything about anyone that uses computers with this."

"That's true. But you also said, that it's technology that is out there, in the wild. So its going to happen anyway."

"Yeah." Dar said, briefly. "I don't know, Ker. I don't know what to do. My perspective's all turned around now." She put her cup down and opened the door, pressing the buttons to roll the windows up ."But you're right. We do have to go show them something."

Kerry got out and pulled her messenger bag from the back seat. She slung it over her shoulder as she joined Dar in the front of the car, and they walked towards the building entrance. They walked up the steps and through the door, walking across the floor to the reception desk.

Dar handed over her business card, and the woman nodded, handing it back and pointing to the door behind her that had, once upon a time, been guarded by some big, hungry Marines. Kerry followed her partner through it, then took the lead on the way to the big room the intelligence committee met in.

Just outside they paused, and Kerry reached up to twitch Dar's collar straight. "So, I'm sure .." She paused, as Dar put two fingertips against her lips, and looked up at her partner in surprise.

"Don't do that." Dar said, quietly.

Kerry's fair brows contracted. "Hmm?"

"Be straight with me. You've been telling me what you thought I wanted to hear all day. Stop it."

Kerry was stunned speechless. She stood there, just staring into Dar's eyes. Finally she took a breath. "I ju.."

"I know." Dar cut her off gently. "You just didn't want to piss me off and I was in a crap mood. I get it." She moved her fingers and cupped Kerry's cheek instead. "But don't do that. I don't want that between us. I don't want to wonder what you're thinking."

It was painful and not. It poked a pin in her heart, and yet she felt a certain relief at Dar's words that surprised her and yet as she thought about that, it didn't surprise her at all. She put her hands in her pockets and exhaled. "I think maybe this place does that to me."

Dar looked around, then back at her.

"I lived most of my life inside the mirror fun house of politics." Kerry said, looking past her at the wall behind them. "Reality was whatever you convinced people it was." She felt her skin flush as a skittering of past memories flashed into her mind's eye. "I had to learn how to pitch everything."

Dar reached over and unexpectedly tweaked her nose. "Not with me, okay?"

Kerry hesitantly looked up, to find herself being watched with wry affection and a mature understanding that made her feel suddenly like a high school kid again. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I just don't want to ever start down that path with us."

Kerry's eyes dropped, then lifted. She reached over and took Dar's hand, lifting it to her lips and kissing the knuckles. "Thanks for being such a grownup."

Dar's eyes twinkled. "If my mother were here to see that, she'd be peeing herself."

"If anyone else in this building were here to see that they'd probably be peeing on us." Kerry admitted wryly. She released Dar's hand and took a breath.

"So level. What's your take on the demo?" Dar asked. "How should I play it?"

Kerry studied her face for a moment. Then a faint smile appeared. "Okay." She said. "What I think you should tell these people is the truth. Just lay it out. They're not idiots. They know the politics. Don't whitewash what could happen."

'Even if that kills the project?' Dar watched her intently. "They're going to freak out."

"Yes." Kerry said. "Because it's going to come out anyway. I'd rather get that out up front."

"Bridges is not going to be happy."

Kerry shrugged. "At some point – I think what matters is what makes us happy. Isn't that what this whole crazy last month has shown us?"

"Could be." Dar smiled. "But thanks. Glad to hear you say it."

"That's what you were going to do anyway, wasn't it?" Kerry smiled back, then sobered "It's the right thing for us to do. What stresses me out is that we have all those people back there depending on us now. It bothers me that we could do something that would result in them getting hurt."

"Isn't that what we just did though?" Dar asked. "You and I decided to retire. Whole fucking planet stops in mid spin, and half the country floats off into space. I think it's just part of our mojo."

"Mm." Kerry grunted.

'Anyway.' Dar leaned forward and touched her forehead to Kerry's. "Don't ever hold back, okay? If you feel it, say it."

"Even if it pisses you off? I really was trying not to do that, with all the craziness." Kerry admitted. "I wasn't really bullshitting you, I just figured there was a better time to mouth off."

"Even if." Dar looked up as footsteps approached. "Ah."

Kerry glanced over her shoulder. "Ah." She repeated. "At least this wasn't in a dusty old stairwell. Hello mother."

"We'll continue the talk later." Dar squeezed her shoulder, and turned as well. "Hi."

Cynthia Stuart arrived at their side, and produced a smile. "Hello there. How did your other meeting go?"

Dar turned and pushed open the door to the hearing chamber. "It went well." She said, standing back to let the other two enter. "It's been a busy day. Hope everyone's on time here."

"Oh, I have no doubt. Everyone is most interested in hearing about this." Kerry's mother assured her. "In fact it was the topic of conversation at a luncheon I just left. One of the senator's sons is part of the technology office in the White House and he was quite enthusiastic about it."

"Uh huh." Dar walked over to one of the tables and put her bag down, opening the top of it and pulling out the laptop. "Do you have a.." She looked around at the room "No, probably not."

"I think they last retrofitted it with electricity in place of gas lamps." Kerry felt a flood of humor come through her body, making her feel giddy. "So if you're looking for a projector hon, give it up."

"Mm."

"Did I tell you they had the Titanic hearings in this room?"

Dar looked up at her, hands still on the keyboard, eyebrows lifted.

Kerry winked at her, then she went over and leaned against the table, facing the slowly filling room. She remembered the last time she'd been here, and the face off she'd dealt with.

An evening of utter aggravation stress and anxiety that had ended peacefully in Dar's arms and as she thought that, she turned to watch her beloved partner mess with her demo , thinking about their conversation just moments ago.

Dar sensed the attention and glanced at her. "Something wrong?"

"Not a damned thing." Kerry said. "I was just reflecting on the fact that there is no luckier son of a bitch than me anywhere."

Dar's left eyebrow hiked up.

Kerry just smiled and turned around, moving away from the table and into the center of the chamber.
"Ladies and gentlemen, if we could please get seated since we have a limited time for this demonstration and I know you all want plenty of time to ask questions."

There were some surprised looks, and some annoyed looks, but Kerry returned a smile to all of them, waiting for the group to settled down behind their desks and grudgingly give her their attention. "The last time we had a conversation you were all wondering how we knew what we knew when we knew it." She said. "This time, we're going to show you how much information is out there that people like us have access to, and people like you want access to."

Now she had their attention. ""Or you think you do." She added. "So lets get started."

**

It was late, and it was dark outside the airplane windows as they flew along the east coast on the way home. Dar had the hood on her hoodie up surrounding her face, and she was sound asleep in her seat, her long body relaxed.

Kerry was close to being the same, but her mind was slower in winding down and so she was quietly sipping some Kahlua and cream as she listened to the drone of the engines in the mostly silent plane.

The demo had gone fine. Dar had answered questions in a calm and straightforward manner and therefore had scared the living crap out of everyone in the room up to and including Kerry's mother.

Outrage, shock, disbelief, and calculated interest all wound up in a ball as both the positive and negative of the systems ability occurred to the distinguished audience in turn.

They had shared all that with Gerry Easton, who thought the whole thing was hilariously funny and she'd gotten a chance to meet Alabaster the Labrador who had made her fiercely miss home and Chino and led to them taking a red eye home instead of waiting until the following morning.

So here they were, content to leave the politics to the politicians and she had come around to the decision that whatever happened did. Dar had said, if they lost the contracts, there would be others and the staff they had on board would shift over to those.

And if no other contracts were found, and it turned out they needed to shrink rather than grow, then that's what would happen.

They would go on their vacation. They would let the chips fall where they may, and since they both tended to potato chips and not gambling chips, the fallen ones would be taken care of by the tongues of two Labradors so in the end –

What would be would be. Kerry put the cup she was drinking from down, and let her eyes close, turning her head to the right to face her sleeping partner.

The sounds around her shifted a little, and took on a hint of echo and she could feel herself start to fade out glad of a chance to get a nap before they landed and would have to drive home.

Two flight attendants in the galley just forward of their seats were talking in low tones, and now, curiously the words sharpened in her hearing as she hovered on the brink of sleep.

"Boy, I'm glad that computer glitch got cleared up."

"No kidding! It's been a nightmare with flight ops the past two weeks. What was it, two hundred cancels, and those four near bang ups on the ground? Sheesh."

"They couldn't schedule half the planes yesterday. But it was smooth tonight."

"Sure was. Don said everything's running like normal again. Glad they figured out what the problem was but damn it took them a long time."

"Sure did."

Kerry let her eyes open and she studied Dar's sleeping profile as the words faded, and the attendants moved off down the aisle. They had done that, she and Dar. Two anonymous women sprawled in seats at the front of a half empty airplane, and

Should they have done it sooner? Could they have? Kerry sighed, and closed her eyes, shaking her head slightly. It didn't really matter, did it?

Water under the bridge. That was in the past. She couldn't change it, so they just had to carry on and take each moment as it came.

**

'Good morning, Kerrisita.' Maria waved at Kerry as she passed the open door to her office. "Did you have a nice trip back?"

"We did." Kerry paused in the doorway, a cup of coffee in her hand. "Very quiet flight, and no traffic when we drove back to the island." She paused to take a sip. "Which reminds me, I've got to find a real estate agent and have them come in this afternoon. Dar and I are going to find a place somewhere around here to live."

Maria looked surprised. "I thought you very much liked the place you have?"

Kerry shrugged. "It's a condo." She said. "We want some place more like a house, with a yard. Some place the dogs can run around, and we can personalized more. Dar used to live around here, matter of fact."

"That is so nice. Would you like me to make those arrangements?" Maria asked. "I have how you call them, the contacts?"

"Sure." Kerry smiled. "That would be awesome, Maria. You know us." She said. "Something on the waterfront, with a slip for the boat and a yard."

"Si." Maria nodded. "I will have my cousin come in to talk with you. She and her husband have many clients in this town, and also, Coral Gables."

"Sounds good." Kerry toasted her with her coffee cup and headed off to her own office. "Good morning Mayte." She said, entering the outer chamber. "You ready to move down the hall?"

There were boxes scattered around, half full. "Ah Kerry yes." Mayte paused in the act of putting papers in one of them. "I like the new office very much but I will miss being around here with you and my mama."

"You needed your own space." Kerry said. "Dar and I will be just fine here, right Zoe?"

The younger girl smiled, from her place kneeling in front of another box. "Yes, ma'am" She answered slowly. "I will do my best."

Kerry smiled and walked past, entering her own office and it's sedate sunniness. There was a distinct scent of waxed wood from the floors and fresh paint from the walls and as she crossed through the beams of light from the window she felt a sense of contentment.

From the room next door she could hear Dar's voice on the phone, and a moment later her presence was detected and Chino came trotting in with Mocha at her heels. "Hey kids."

"Growf." Chino came over and sat down next to her chair, tail wagging.

Kerry sat down behind her desk and put her cup down, reaching for her mouse to wake up her desktop system. She studied her screen and chuckled, starting on the first of her list of new mail, glancing up at footsteps to see Mark entering. "Hey."

"Hey." He came over and sat down, picking up Mocha to pet him as the puppy came pattering over.

"Guess what?"

"What?" Kerry started sorting through her mail.

"Pete got a call from the old place." Mark said. "Said they were straightening stuff out, and did he want to come back." He scratched Mocha behind his ears, and the puppy yowped, tilting his head back and poking his tongue out. "He said he told them thanks but no thanks, but at least they sounded sane again."

"Well, it must help that things are working again." Kerry said. "And boy am I glad that's done."

Mark nodded. "The way the big D did it – that was slick, you know? Got those guys in Herndon to do it. And they recorded the whole thing."

Kerry nodded. "I don't' blame you for not wanting to touch that, by the way." She said. "I was glad Dar didn't either though at the time I was ready for it to get done any way she could."

"I felt like a chickenshit." Mark admitted. "But man, I so didn't want to go in there. It gave me creeps just standing at security, even though those guys were totally cool, and would have let me up if I asked them to."

"The guys at Herndon were pretty glad to see us too." Kerry said. "Until I told them the government wanted to hire them." She shook her head. "Not sure how that's all going to work out."

"They really going to take all those contracts?"

Kerry glanced up at him and nodded. "They lost trust." She said. "I still can't believe they were that stupid."

"Wow." Mark said.

"Speaking of stupid." Dar came to stand in the connecting door, leaning against the frame of it. "Hamilton just called. He said he's got a meeting with the lawyer from the ousted board members in about a half hour. He'll let us know what comes out of it."

"Tell him to tell Richard." Kerry took a sip of her coffee. "Maria said no process servers have shown up here yet so who knows what's going on." She pushed a folded newspaper across the desk towards her partner. "No sign of anything in the news."

"Which is probably good news." Dar said. "So lets move on." She winked at them then returned to her office, with Chino at her heels.

"She's right." Kerry said. "So, I got your note about the data center. Dar and I had talked about not doing that, but now I think we should. Talk to me about the location."

"Sure." Mark got up and came over to the desk, putting down a folder. "So here's the deal, it's a giant freaking datacenter one of the big boxes put up and then the county tanked em. So it's all ready for us..."

"You guys can get this rolling while Dar and I are on vacation, right?"

"You bet."

**

Kerry wriggled a little into the base of sand she was lying on, gazing up at the canopy of stars overhead and listening to the breeze stirring the sabal palms and palmetto bushes nearby, surrounding the small beach on Dar's little offshore island.

She felt mellow and relaxed, tired from a long day of diving and swimming, content to lay where she was being warmed by a nearby campfire and waiting for the sounds of Dar coming up out of the ocean, where she was busy collecting them some dinner.

That would mean she would need to stir and go cook whatever it was Dar came up with, but until then, it was just her, and the salt tinged night air and the gentle sounds of the Dixie riding at anchor nearby.

The weather was perfect. Not too cold, but not muggily hot either, the air full of the smell of the ocean and the seaweed on the shore, and the wood smoke from palm branch fire.

Here there was no sound of civilization to bother them, and only the threat of a curious crab to disturb them and Kerry was glad of the isolation and the opportunity to spend some time with her family without interruption.

She stretched her arms out and her fingertips brushed Chino's damp fur, feeling the twitching of the sleeping animals dreams as she looked up at the stars and thought about the past little while.

What had Ceci called it? A cycle of change. Kerry pondered for a moment whether the change had now ended for a while, or would continue on.

But only for a moment before the sound of something emerging from the waves made her lift her head and peer past the fire, smiling a little as the moonlight revealed the outline of Dar's tall form as she trudged up out of the surf, crossing from shadow into the firelight as the ruddy gold mixed for a moment with silver. She had a shortie wetsuit on, and a tank, and she turned and sat down on one of the picnic benches to take them both off, dropping her fins and mask on the table's surface.

"Ah, the primordial huntress returns." Kerry commented.

Dar gave her a droll look, then held up her catch bag. "I have critters for you."

Kerry amiably got up and brushed herself off, then walked over and took the bag, handing Dar a towel in return. "It feels like there's a lobster in here."

"Dos." Dar roughly towed her head dry, walking over to the folding table and donning the dive coat laying across it. "Nice under there. You can see the moon almost to the bottom." She draped her towel over a hook under the umbrella covering the table and ran her fingers through her hair.

Kerry hung the bag on another hook, then turned and shifted a big pot of water onto the fire's sturdy grate, stepping back as the flames bathed the bottom of it and it hissed gently.

The heat of the fire toasted her, a counterpoint to the cool breeze coming off the water and through the rough underbrush of the little island that had once been Dar's hideaway and still had no real name.

Dar fished a bottle of ginger ale from the cooler under the table and opened it, then settled into a hanging rope chair with a satisfied sigh. "Nice." She rested her hand on one knee and took a swallow of the cold soda, rinsing it around inside her mouth before swallowing. "What a beautiful night."

Kerry looked up from taking out covered side dishes that had come with them on the Dixie and grinned. "Glad you thought of coming out here." She kept an eye on the pot, waiting for it to boil, and got out the plates and cups they'd likewise brought.

"C'mere, little man." Dar picked up Mocha and set him on her lap, where the sleepy puppy yawned and plopped down, idly chewing on her fingers. "I saw an octopus."

"Did you? Damn. Now I'm sorry I didn't tag along." Kerry observed the water starting to bubble and took the catch bag off the hook, positioning it over the pot and turning the lever that let it latch on to the edges. "Wish I'd remembered my ear plugs."

Dar chuckled as she swiveled a little and watched Kerry grimace in reflex as she unlocked the bottom of the catch bag, dumping its contents into the pot. The glow from the fire outlined her beautifully, catching highlights in her hair as she cautiously removed the bag.

There were no sounds save the hiss of the water droplets hitting the fire, and after a moment, and a grunt of satisfaction, Kerry popped the lid onto the pot and went back to fixing their plates up.

"No screams?" Dar asked.

"Pfft." Kerry came over with a plate of cut fruit and offered her some. "One more week, and we're off to river rafting. Dar, I can't wait. Even if we end up sleeping on rocks I don't care."

"I care." Dar selected a piece of watermelon and bit into it. "These are supposed to be high class campsites. We better the hell get air mattresses at the least."

"Sissy."

"Hey, shortie. I've camped rough. Have you?"

Kerry chuckled. "Closest thing to rough camping I've done is sleeping on the floor of your office. So no." She admitted. "But I'm sure we'll be fine. I was thinking before about going to sleep and being able to see all the stars in the world overhead. Not like here. I want to see the Milky Way."

"Me too." Dar rested her head against the rope and rocked back and forth gently. "My dad once told me he'd been to places where you could see stars like that. In the desert and all – but he said you would always wish for clouds because for them it was the darker the better."

"Sure." Kerry rocked along with her in the next chair. "But I can't wait to just go do that. Spend time looking at stuff I've never seen, and the rafting. I want to get out of my head space for a while."

Dar remained quiet for a bit, just nodding slightly as she scratched Mocha under the chin.

The wash of the waves was broken suddenly by the sound of a boat engine, growing slowly louder. Dar looked over her shoulder, then she got up out of the rope chair and went to the shore, walking along it and peering out over the ruffled waters.

"Of course, our life can't stay perfect for more than fifteen minutes." Kerry sighed, getting up and going over to the fire. She removed the pot lid and peered inside, then put it back down, going over to the table and getting it set.

"Cutter." Dar called back, over her shoulder. "Heading this way. I'm going to go over and get on the boat radio before they assume we're illegal aliens."

"Okay." Kerry got the tops off the side dishes and portioned them out. "Don't take too long. Lobster'll be ready in about five minutes."

"Won't take more than 2." Dar jogged along the shore and hopped up onto the floating dock that extended out to the anchored yacht bobbing at the end of it. She got to the side of the boat and vaulted up and over the railing, moving quickly across the deck and into the cabin where the inside radio system was.

She'd just reached out and picked up the microphone when searchlights lit up the outside of the Dixie and she stepped halfway out of the boat, shading her eyes from it. "Dixieland Yankee to Coast guard cutter, coast guard cutter off my port side. What's the problem?"

The light outlined her a moment more, then cut off, and the radio crackled. "Cutter Avalon – sorry about that Dixieland Yankee. Is that Captain Roberts?"

Dar felt her brain quietly explode at the title. "Uh. Yes." She said after a moment. "It is."

"Standby, Captain. We're coming in."

Dar put the mic down and went onto the back deck, standing with her hands in the pockets of her dive coat as she watched the cutter rumble closer.

She could see several men standing on deck, and two were getting into their pontoon launch, which was lowered into the water and shortly speeding her way. "Over here." She pointed them around the front of the Dixie, and a moment later they were alongside the floating dock, and hopping out.

Dar got onto the dock to meet them. "What's up?"

One of the men stepped forward. "Lieutenant Davis, we met a bit ago down south."

"I remember. Did I look suspicious again?" Dar asked, with a smile.

"Well." He half shrugged "You know how it is."

Dar nodded. She did. "We were just having a cookout. I've been coming to this little spot in the ocean since I was around fifteen."

He nodded. "I have a spot like that about ten nautical south from here. But ah.. " He glanced past her to the fire lit beach scene. "Mine's not nearly so nice." He had his own hands in his pockets. "But I'm glad I bumped into you, because your name came across the wire not long ago."

"It did?"

Davis nodded. "One of our other ships picked up a body the other week. Guy apparently drowned, but no one seemed to know how he got into the water." He said. "It was just off that island you live on, apparently he lived there too."

Dar felt a chill. "His name Billy?"

The lieutenant looked hard at her. "Yeah. So you did know him?"

The dock rocked slightly and they looked over to see Kerry approaching. "In a manner of speaking, I guess." Dar said. "He was a jackass I ran into on the island and had an argument with."

"What's up?" Kerry asked

Davis was nodding again. "Well, we heard that some guy on the island told the cops about that, and that they should find you and ask about it." He said. "About that argument, I mean. He told the cops there was bad blood there, and maybe you knew what happened to him."

"What?" Kerry said, sharply.

"They found the missing guy. The one who was after Kristie." Dar told her . "And I'm willing to bet it was her father who told the cops to come looking for me about it."

Kerry looked at her, then at the two coast guard officers, then back at her. "Son of a biscuit." She pronounced in a crisp clear tone. "If there's anyone who might have done something to him it would be that bastard Jim. The developer, who owns that place."

To both of their surprise, the coast guard officer nodded again. "That's why I'm glad we ran into you, because I've got some intel on that guy and it's not good. You should watch out. The cops ran everyone's records and the guy who was talking to me told me that guy's bad news."

"What kind of bad news?" Dar asked. "Criminal background?"

Davis shrugged. "That I don't know. He didn't say."

"What a bastard." Kerry exhaled. "What happened was, Billy, the guy, was threatening Kristie the cashier in the island market. She's Jim's daughter. Dar happened to be there, and got in his face, and he left."

The officer frowned. "Okay, well..but why is that guy Jim sending the cops off after you then? Sounds to me like you did him a favor."

Dar sighed. "Long story." She said. "But thanks for the warning." She said. "I'll be sure to keep my eyes open. Do the cops want to talk to us?"

Davis shrugged "Not my area. It was just coffee machine convo, you know? At the base, because anything that happens on that island gets chewed over. I listened because I heard your name and we'd just met."

"I appreciate that." Dar said. "Jim has a problem with us, and so I guess he thought this was a good opportunity to get us in some hot water."

"Is it possible the guy just actually drowned?" Kerry asked. "He seemed like a guy who liked to party."

"Yeah, that's what the cops said." Davis agreed. "Who knows? Anyway, just be careful, okay? Especially out here like this in the middle of nowhere." He lifted his hand in a wave and got back in his pontoon boat, making a gesture to the seaman who was driving it.

Dar and Kerry watched them putter off, and then they both sighed. "Well, poo." Kerry said. "I didn't need to hear that."

"Me either." Dar put her arm around Kerry's shoulders. "Let's go have our lobster."

They walked down the dock back to the beach, where Chino and Mocha were waiting, both animals not fond of the floating dock and wary of walking on it. Kerry went over to the pot and took its top off, releasing a cloud of bay leaf and spice scented steam into the air.

As she worked she thought about Billy. To hear something had happened to him seemed sad, in an impersonal kind of way, because as much of a jerk as he had been, jerkiness didn't often deserve death.

To hear that they'd been blamed didn't surprise her at all. From the time the security guards had asked her and Dar if they had seen him that time, in the back of her mind she'd suspected something was in the works.

Sucks. Kerry got their dinner plated, then glanced up to see Dar standing on the shore, hands in pockets, staring off at the dark horizon. She put the plates down and covered them, and walked over, nudging Chino aside as she put her arm around Dar's back. "Hey."

"Hey."

Kerry looked up, spotting tears rolling down her partner's face. "Oh, hon."

Dar shook her head and lifted one hand to wipe her eyes. "Last time I do someone a favor." She said, clearing her throat. "Bastard."

Kerry put her other arm around her and gave her a hug.

"What's the point in doing the right thing if all it gets you is kicked in the ass?"

"Ah, Dar." Kerry felt the ache in her heart for her. "It's not always like that." She rocked them both a little. "A lot of people love you for your doing the right thing. I sure do."

Dar sighed.

"Your mom picked the right name for you, honey. You are a Paladin." Kerry said. "You have such a polished, white soul."

Dar blew a raspberry at her. "I tried to do right by ILS, and it gets me lawsuits. I do a favor for some kid, and I get thrown under the bus when some guy croaks. What's the damn point?"

Kerry patted her on the stomach and hugged her again. "The point is, it's who you are."

"Ugh."

"You told me not to talk smack at you." Kerry said. "So I'm not. Dar, you are who you are. Don't even contemplate changing that."

"Growf." Chino added commentary.

"Ahh. Screw it." Dar wiped her eyes again. "Let's go have dinner." She walked arm in arm with Kerry back up the beach, circling the fire and dropping into the chairs dug into the sand on either side of the table.

Kerry uncovered the plates and handed her one, then pulled her own over, and they ate in companionable silence for a few minutes. "I've got apples baking over there when we're done."

A faint smile appeared on Dar's face as she concentrated on divesting her lobster from its' shell. "I can smell them." She said. "Thanks, Ker."

"Anytime. I can make them in the oven but theres something about a campfire that makes them extra good" Kerry replied. "Not sure what it is."

"Everything tastes better over a campfire."

"Well, that's probably true but I have to admit I'm glad I don't have to gather wood every time we make coffee."

Dar chuckled softly.

"Feel better?"

Dar shrugged. "I just decided to hell with it. Let them come talk to us. By the time we're done with Jim and that island they'll be sorry they messed with us."

"You mean because we're giving the condo to your folks?" Kerry chuckled.

"My mom'll run for condo association president, and my father'll use that golf course for target practice. They're screwed. All we did was bring our dog in the gym."

"And love each other." Kerry reminded her. "That's our biggest offense."

Dar picked up the cup of apple juice and toasted her with it. "That, I plead guilty to." She waited for Kerry to lift her own cup and touch it to hers. "For all time."

"Likewise." Kerry smiled. "To hell with what anyone thinks about it."

**

The End. (for now)