

# ~ Strained ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimer #1:** These characters are of my own creation, but if you want to imagine that they look like certain familiar people, I won't mess with that.

**Disclaimer #2:** This story is about two women in love, and all that goes with it. If you find that idea offensive, if you aren't old enough, or if you live where reading such depictions is not allowed, this isn't for you.

**Disclaimer #3:** [Insert favorite other disclaimer here.] Angst-meter very low for this story.

This is the third story in my series with Anna and Lily, the first being [Shaken](#), followed by [Stirred](#). FYI, I worked my way through college as a bartender.

Thanks to my trusted beta reader and fashion consultant, Tami, and to LA Tucker, who also gave it a read. Their contributions made it a better story. Of course, if you don't like it, it was probably because of something they made me change.

This is for my Sweetcakes, who helps me with my grammar and spelling. Without her, I don't think I could write about love at all.

## Strained - Part 1

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### Chapter 1

"I'm so excited about seeing Sarah."

"Shhhh! I love this part! Listen."

Anna Kaklis rolled her eyes indulgently and leaned back into her seat. Her partner was very possibly the only flyer in America who actually paid attention to the safety messages before takeoff.

"...in the unlikely event of a water landing, your seat cushion may be used..." the flight attendant droned.

"Just what exactly is a 'water landing'? I mean-by definition-doesn't a landing have to involve land?"

Anna chuckled. She'd heard it all before, but it never stopped being funny. In fact, even the anticipation of what Lily would say started her giggling. "Maybe it's-"

"Wait, there's more." The blonde woman held up her index finger to shush her again.

"...*seatbelt fastened while in your seat, as unexpected turbulence may occur at any time.*"

"Isn't that what makes it unexpected?" Lily mused.

"I think they mean-"

"Shhh! Here's my favorite part!"

"...*place the mask over your face, tightening the straps by pulling on the tabs on each side...*"

"...and continue to breathe normally," Lily mouthed in unison with the rote instructions. "Like I normally breathe bottled oxygen from a dangling plastic cup in a decompressed cabin at 30,000 feet!"

Anna just shook her head. She'd been flying regularly since she was 11 years old, and had never once questioned the presentation of the safety drill. "Are you through?"

"Well...I am if she is," the blonde answered, gesturing toward the flight attendant. "But I can't make any promises if she starts talking again."

Said flight attendant interrupted the two women to get their drink order and to explain their choices for breakfast entrees. One of the perks of being Anna Kaklis' sweetheart was that they usually rode in first class, a real treat for the young attorney. This morning, the guys in the back got a cold green banana and a soggy cellophane-wrapped muffin.

"Carolyn said she might change her mind about having a baby herself after seeing what Vicki went through. She said she fully expected Vicki's head to turn all the way around on her shoulders in the delivery room," Anna laughed.

"But she was healthy the whole way through, wasn't she?"

"Oh yeah. But apparently, she was miserable the last couple of weeks. Carolyn said she gained a lot of weight and wouldn't go out of the house. I think the actual birth was relatively smooth, but she was in labor a long time."

"It'll be good to see them again." Lily's thoughts went to their last meeting, the camping trip to Yosemite almost a year ago. So much had happened since then: she had lost her mother; she and

Anna had parted briefly while she struggled with her drinking; and three months ago they had committed their lives and love to one another on a beach in Fiji. "I can't believe they asked us up to Seattle so soon after the baby was born."

Anna laughed knowingly. "I think Carolyn used us as an excuse to force Vicki's mother to go back to New Jersey. She sounded desperate when she called."

"Well I don't care why she asked us. I can't wait to see Sarah."

Two and a half hours later, the 737 broke through Seattle's cloud cover. Since they'd packed together in a single roll-on, the pair bypassed baggage claim in search of their friend.

"Anna! Lily!" Carolyn worked her way through the crowd to her friends. The tall redhead-no, her curly hair was a dark brown this time with blonde tips-smiled and waved excitedly.

"Carolyn!" They greeted one another hugging and rocking like the old friends they were. The Seattle programmer didn't do anything halfway. "We're so excited for you and Vicki!"

"Thanks! I can't wait for you to see Sarah. She's gorgeous, just like her mom." Carolyn was beaming from ear to ear with pride. "Is this all your stuff?" She gestured at the rollerboard.

"We're only here one night, you know. I sort of forced Lily to decide before we left home what she was going to wear." Anna teased Lily about her penchant of trying on 10 different things before finally getting dressed.

"Can I help it that I have a dynamic fashion sense?" Lily stuck out her tongue and turned toward their host. "So how are you guys adjusting to having a baby in the house?"

"I'd say it's been very eye opening. In fact, we have to open our eyes around one a.m., then again around 4:30 a.m. I'm not complaining, mind you. But I really had no idea how much it would impact everything."

The three friends reached the 4Runner and loaded their bag in the back.

"I'll get in the back seat," Lily offered, recognizing that both Carolyn and Anna would need lots of legroom. "Try not to crush me when you push your seat back, Amazon."

"Why don't you just sit up here in the cup holder?" Anna countered, earning herself a playful pinch in the ribs. "Ow!"

"Listen to you pick on that poor woman. When did you get over being so serious?" Carolyn asked her friend, amazed at this new mischievous demeanor.

"Oh, about three years ago, when I found myself trapped underground with this imp. I had to learn to fight back," Anna explained.

"Don't let her kid you, Carolyn. She started on me as soon as I pulled her out from under that bookcase. I almost put her back."

Anna reached behind the console to caress her lover's calf. "Don't worry about Lily. You can see she gives every bit as good as she gets." The tall woman turned in her seat to find Lily's eyebrows arched at the subtle innuendo.

"I can believe it. By the way, ladies...there's something I need to talk to you about before we get home," Carolyn said sheepishly. "I'd never lie to Vicki, but I sort of gave her the impression that it was your idea to come this weekend."

"What'd I tell you?" Anna spun back around and winked at Lily. "So you needed an excuse to get your mother-in-law to leave, right?"

The driver was quiet for a long moment as she gazed pensively through the windshield. "Guilty as charged. But it's not what you think. I really like Susan a lot, and she's been a big help."

Anna laid her hand on her friend's shoulder. "For what it's worth, we loved getting the invitation, even on short notice. And we don't even care about your *ulterior motives*."

"Thanks. I really appreciate that. But I'm afraid it would really hurt Vicki's feelings if she found out that I orchestrated all this just to have an excuse to put her mother on a plane this morning."

"How bad was it, Carolyn?" Lily asked from the back seat.

"Like I said, Susan was great. It's just that I had all these fantasies about Vicki and Sarah and me, and they all played out with my mother-in-law right in the middle."

Carolyn was obviously exasperated and in need of someone she could talk to about all this. "Go on," Anna prodded.

"You know, I dreamed for so long about coming home from the hospital and carrying Sarah into the house for the first time. But when the moment actually came, Susan insisted on carrying her so I could help Vicki. I think I could have done both. And the first time Vicki finally let me get up in the night between feedings to see about Sarah crying, Susan was already there, telling me I should go back to bed because I had to work the next day. So I felt guilty about being rested in the morning when Vicki was so tired every day. I know it probably sounds silly and childish, but I really wanted to be part of everything. These are all the things I wanted us to share. I feel like a...husband or something."

"I don't think it sounds silly or childish at all," Anna consoled. "I think it's really sweet that you want to share all this with Vicki."

"And we'll keep your secret," Lily added.

Carolyn and Vicki's home sat in a quiet subdivision in Redmond, not far from the programmer's

office at Microsoft. The homes on their street were new and modern, with lush landscaping that thrived under Seattle's infamous rainfall. That this was a family neighborhood was evidenced by the occasional bicycles and soccer balls that lay temporarily forgotten in the light drizzle.

Their host filled them in on the details of the cover story as they were pulling into the driveway. "And now, you may want to put on your sunglasses before we go in. Between the little angel you're about to meet and her mom, you're going to see the most radiant sight on earth!"

Lily wrapped her arm around her smiling lover's waist as they walked toward the house. She and Anna hadn't talked about the prospect of having children for quite a while, but she knew this weekend would trigger the discussion once again. Undecided about her own desire for children, Lily knew that being committed to Anna meant also being committed to the things Anna needed in her life.

When the proud parent opened the door for her guests, she was immediately greeted by her partner, who held a finger over her lips to shush the new arrivals. The three friends whispered their hellos excitedly, and tiptoed through the house to the small bedroom beside the master suite. Neither Carolyn nor Vicki could conceal their pride and happiness as their guests peeked over the edge of the crib at the beautiful sleeping infant. Anna and Lily silently mouthed their approval, gushing appropriately that this was indeed The World's Most Beautiful Baby.

With that important detail settled, the foursome retreated to the kitchen for proper greetings.

"Vicki, you look fantastic!" Lily couldn't believe this woman had given birth only four weeks ago.

"Thanks. I'm really glad you guys could come. That'll probably save you from getting copies of every single picture this one takes," Vicki gestured to her partner, who was popping a disc into her laptop to load the most recent round of photos.

"That's alright. We understand. Hal and Kim send us about a dozen new pictures every month. When Jonah grows up to be president, his biography will be a piece of cake." Anna was as proud of her nephew as any aunt could be.

"Didn't you tell me that they have another one on the way?" Carolyn asked.

"That's right, a little girl due in about two weeks." Anna secretly congratulated herself on her own role in the conception of her niece. She had insisted that Hal, Kim and Jonah use the Labor Day Maui trip she had planned last year with Lily when it was clear that they wouldn't be able to go.

"So are you guys going to get the baby bug anytime soon?" Now that they had a child of their own, Vicki thought everyone should have such a joyous experience.

Anna and Lily exchanged quizzical looks, each waiting to see how the other might answer. Mercifully, Carolyn broke the impasse. "Okay, so it's not for everybody."

"It isn't that," Anna spoke up. "It's just that we haven't really talked about it. Maybe one of these days. Maybe not." She reached out and took her lover's hand. "I don't know if I'm ready to share this one yet."

Lily answered with a quick peck on the lips. "Is that so, Amazon?"

"That's so, Pygmy."

"Well aren't you two cute! Hey! Let's have a look at those rings." Carolyn had expected to hear news of their commitment soon after their Yosemite trip last year, especially given the conversations she had had with Anna about how to know if Lily was "the one." Not knowing about Lily's problems with alcohol, she assumed that dealing with Eleanor's death had taken a lot out of her friends.

Anna and Lily proudly held out their left hands, boasting identical twisted bands of tri-colored gold. Despite their private nature, they had both agreed that they wanted to share news of their commitment with Anna's family and their friends.

*"Read 'em and weep, George!" Lily goaded the patriarch as she and Anna laid their ringed hands side by side on the dining room table at the elder Kaklis' home. "Looks like we're all family now."*

*"Oh, my gosh!" Martine couldn't contain her excitement, jumping immediately to her feet and racing around the table to embrace the two women.*

*"Would you look at that! My big tough sister is a romantic mushball." Kim was thrilled that her stepsister had taken the leap. Though she knew that Anna truly loved Lily, she had worried that the failure with Scott would prevent her from making this kind of commitment again.*

*"Congratulations, boss!" Hal hugged his sister-in-law, and then turned to Lily. "You know, I've been around these Kaklis people for almost 15 years. Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?" he kidded.*

*"Yeah, I think so. The old guy's a little cranky sometimes," she gestured with a wink in the older man's direction. "But the rest of you make up for it."*

*George was well past his early objections to Anna's love affair with another woman, though the game with the small blonde continued to this day, and probably always would. But remembering how his daughter had expressed her disappointment last year that he had withheld his open approval of their relationship, he passed on the biting comeback this time and quickly reached out to embrace them both. "That's wonderful, Anna!"*

*The tall woman was moved by the unusual display of serious emotions from the staid man. But*

*she fully understood the sentiment: her father genuinely approved.*

*"You're being such a good sport, George," Lily observed skeptically. "What are you up to?"*

*"Now what makes you think I'm up to something?" he answered mischievously.*

*"I don't know. I think you've learned how to get under my BS detector. That worries me."*

Her maternal instincts on high alert, Vicki heard the sputtering first, long before the others had a clue that little Sarah was waking up from her nap. "I'm going to change her and feed her," she announced. "You're welcome to come in. We don't mind visitors."

The others waited until things quieted in the bedroom before slipping in. Carolyn had found the old style rocker at an antique store, restoring its ebony gleam as a gift to her partner. The room was dotted with Seahawks paraphernalia, mostly shower gifts from Vicki's coworkers. The newborn was dressed in a soft green terry jumper with the team's emblem on its back. No one could deny the beautiful sight of the tiny baby at her mother's breast.

"How's my sweetie-pie?" Carolyn leaned over her lover's shoulder to make eye contact with the nursing infant. "Huh? How's my little sweetie-pie?"

Lily nudged Anna, who promptly jabbed an elbow into her partner's side. She knew that Lily was laughing to herself about her observation that people always said things twice when speaking to babies or animals.

"You're so pretty!" Carolyn continued, wide-eyed and smiling. "Yes you are. You're so pretty!"

"She's beautiful," Anna concurred.

Vicki shifted the infant to her other breast. "She always wakes up hungry. Don't you, Sarah? Don't you always wake up hungry?"

"That's because I wanna be a big girl like my mommy. Isn't that right? You wanna be a big girl like your mommy," Carolyn cooed.

Lily was going to pee her pants. The next time a sentence was repeated, she was definitely going to pee her pants. "Is the bathroom this way?"

"First door on the left," Carolyn answered, completely oblivious to the blonde woman's private joke.

When Lily returned, she was happy to see her partner holding the baby to her shoulder, its tiny hands gripping the material on Anna's shirt. Vicki and Carolyn looked on proudly. They were going to be great parents.

"So Carolyn, have you decided whether or not you're going to have a little brother or sister for this angel?" Lily asked.

"Actually, we're thinking maybe next year. I want to take a couple of months off so I can be with Sarah when Vicki goes back to work in August, so maybe about six months after I go back to work would be a good time to get pregnant. I don't want to take advantage of the family leave policy at work, you know, being gone so long."

"You're a braver soul than I am, taking on two little ones at the same time," Anna said. "Of course, if we ever had one, I'd have Lily too. That would be about the same thing."

"Hey! I resemble that," Lily pouted. "Just because you're so much older...."

"Listen to you two! You're acting like an old married couple."

"We are an old married couple," the dark-haired woman grinned. Teasing her mate with the running joke, she continued, "That's what we are, isn't it? An old married couple."

"And some of us are a little older than others," Lily reiterated with a knowing wink.

Anna and Lily, both very sensitive about invading Carolyn's motherly turf, declined Vicki's offers to help change and bathe the baby or to hold her for extended periods of time. Watching the new parents as they fussed in tandem over the infant's every need, Anna couldn't help but envy her friends. On display was a fierce connection between the two lovers, now deepened further by this tiny miracle.

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Lily ran back into the house, wet from carrying their suitcase out to the 4Runner in the rain. She wished she'd packed her green sweater, but Anna was insistent that she make up her mind and choose only one outfit for Sunday. Had she known that her partner would be more dressed up, she wouldn't have opted for this denim shirt. Lucky for her they weren't flying Southwest Airlines, or people might mistake her for a flight attendant.

"We had a great time seeing your little girl," Anna told their hosts as she gathered the rest of their things. "Vicki, thanks for letting us come up on such short notice."

"Oh, we didn't mind at all. To tell you the truth, it was a good excuse to get my mother to leave without actually telling her she'd worn out her welcome." The co-conspirators remained mum as a surprised look washed over Carolyn. "Don't take this the wrong way-I love my mother-but she was here doing all those things I wanted Carolyn to do. I think it's really important for both of us



to bond with Sarah as much as we can, especially in these first few weeks. Mom was kind of cutting into that, you know?"

Carolyn wrapped her arms around the mother of their child and declared, "I love you. Did you know that? I love you."

"Now she's doing it to Vicki," Lily sniggered as she and Anna headed to the car to give their friends a private moment.

"Knock it off, Pygmy! You hear me? Knock it off!"

That sent Lily into a fit of laughter, and despite her earnest attempts at self-control, Anna soon joined her.

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The petite blonde slid through the churning water, coming to rest on the tall woman's thighs and wrapping her legs around the slim waist. Face to face, they held each other tenderly, their smiling eyes a window to the connection they felt. Despite their naked state, this emotional link transcended their sexual relationship; if possible, it was more intimate. And that it would end with lovemaking later this evening was unmistakable.

"Did you have a good time this weekend?" Anna asked. They'd gotten home only an hour earlier, and both decided to forego their usual Sunday night routines of preparing for the work week ahead in favor of a relaxing soak in the cool night air.

"I had a wonderful time. But then, I was with you, and I always have a wonderful time when I'm with you."

"You're such a sweet talker." Anna leaned forward for a kiss. "Mmm. Sweet lips too." Her hands traveled up the naked back to pull Lily closer. "I just love my life with you, Lily."

From her lover's deep, almost wistful tone, she could tell that Anna had much more to say. "Oh yeah? Tell me what you love."

If Anna started a list of all the things she loved about Lily, they'd be out here in the hot tub all night. But that wasn't exactly what she wanted to convey. She'd been thinking all weekend about what their life might be like if they followed in Carolyn and Vicki's footsteps and had a child of their own. It was easy to imagine how happy they'd be with a family, but the reality was that it would dramatically change their life together. "Well for starters, I like this; just being able to be uninhibited about being together. And we have both the means and the freedom to do pretty much whatever we want."

"Uh-huh." Lily nodded in agreement, tucking a fallen strand of dark hair behind her lover's ear. *Anna has no idea how lovely she is with her hair pinned up like this.*

"And we can pick up and go somewhere on the spur of the moment, like we did this weekend."

"Where are you going here, baby?" Anna thought that a conversation like this one set the stage for a serious discussion; Lily would call it beating around the bush. "What's on your mind?"

Anna waited a while before she answered, not sure which way to pursue this now that she'd been busted. "I was just thinking about how much things would change for us if we decided to have a baby."

The question of babies had been a sort of elephant in the parlor since they left Seattle. Lily too been thinking about how it might change things. "How would you feel about all that?" she asked, trailing her fingers across Anna's collarbones.

They had talked last year in more general terms about the idea of having children, but not since they'd made their commitment to one another. Anna knew that Lily had no special urge to bear a child, but that she'd thought about adoption.

"I don't know. It's kind of scary," Anna finally answered.

"You mean because our lives would change so much?"

"Yeah. I just don't feel like we've had enough time together for ourselves, but I'm already 34 years old, and I don't think I want to be having kids when I'm 40."

"Are you sure that you want to be having kids at all?" Lily ducked her head so she could find the wandering blue eyes. She'd be the happiest woman in the world to help raise this beautiful woman's baby.

"I always thought so, but now I'm...I don't know...conflicted. Mostly I'm afraid if I don't have one, I'll regret it."

"Talk to me some more. Why are you conflicted?"

"I guess I just hate to give up what we have. Carolyn and Vicki have been together for eight years; Kim and Hal were married 11 years before Jonah. You and I haven't had that much time together."

Anna was right about a baby changing their lives. Still, Lily worried that her partner would regret it profoundly as they got older if she didn't have a child. "Honey, we have some time to think about this. And 34 isn't too old to put it off a few years."

Anna nodded, almost grimly. It was unsettling, not knowing what to do. Until she met Lily,

nearly every aspect of her life had been carefully planned-studying mechanical engineering in college, following that with an MBA, taking over the dealership, her marriage to Scott. Children had been in that picture too. Then this little blonde came along and turned everything on its ear. It wasn't the fact that she'd fallen in love with a woman that had changed her plans. It was that she'd realized that her plans weren't only her own. For the first time, someone else was the center of her life.

"What do you think you want to do about children?" she asked Lily.

"I...want us to keep talking about it. I don't know right now what I want either, but if we work through it together, I think we'll do the right thing."

Later, the lovers lay in bed catching their breath, Lily resting her cheek against Anna's dark curls. Even after two years together, she still couldn't believe sometimes that she was the person Anna had chosen to touch and taste her this way. Though content to fall asleep in this very spot, Lily knew that her lover would get chilled soon and demand to be covered.

As if on cue Anna asked, "Hey, you. How about coming up here with me? And bring that blanket with you."

Lily chuckled knowingly and slowly crept up to nestle into the tall woman's side, blanket in tow. "I love you, Amazon."

"Mmm," Anna mumbled, already half asleep. "If you should go first, I'm going to have your little tongue bronzed."

## *Chapter 2*

As she backed out of the tight space in the church parking lot, Lily waved through the windshield at Fran, a friend she'd made at the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings during her days last year at the Waterways Lodge. When she'd finished her daily regimen of AA meetings after the first 90 days of sobriety, Lily had made a commitment to herself to continue weekly meetings through the first year.

The church near Playa del Rey wasn't the most convenient location, but it was nice to come back once in a while to see some of the people she'd met in her early days of sobriety. Lily's regular meeting now was a women's group that met on Wednesday evening at a women's health clinic close to her home. She had briefly belonged to a gay and lesbian AA group, but gave that up

after being hit on so often.

The attorney had missed her Wednesday meeting this week, working late to prepare a spate of custody cases that were up for their six-month review. The Methodist Church was her old standby, still hosting meetings seven days a week at seven a.m. With Anna off to work at seven on Saturday mornings, this meeting worked out just fine, but she hated getting up so early on the weekends.

But this weekend was different. This weekend she had promised her services to Sandy and Suzanne, who were repainting the interior of their home. Three times over 24 years, Lily and Eleanor-with their friend Katharine Fortier's help-had done all the painting on the inside of their San Jose home, so the blonde attorney felt like an old hand. This was Sandy and Suzanne's second undertaking in the 12 years they had lived in their Sherman Oaks home.

"One small detour," Lily said to herself as she passed the strip mall on the main street near her destination.

"We're in here!" Sandy yelled from the kitchen.

Lily made her way through the living room, where all the furniture was pushed together tightly in the center of the room and covered with several large drop cloths. "Sorry I'm late."

"Krispy Kreme!" Suzanne cried when she spotted the green and white box. "You're forgiven, my friend!"

"Wow, you guys have really gotten a lot done." Not only was all the furniture moved to the middle in each room, all of the windows were papered over, and the hardwood floors were lined to the baseboards with butcher paper. "It's like a cave in here with the windows covered."

"Yeah, Kevin and Chet came over last night to help with the furniture. Suzanne and I did the windows on Thursday, and we papered the floors this morning."

"Pam and Tina should be here in just a few minutes. And they're bringing Savannah." Pam and Tina were longtime friends of Suzanne's, and Savannah was Tina's nine-year-old daughter from a good-intentioned but misguided former marriage.

"Well the way I see it, we have two choices," Lily explained. "Either we wait politely until they get here, or we each eat four donuts very fast."

"Lord have mercy," Sandy sighed. At 38, she'd been adding pounds at the rate of three a year for the past six years. Four shortening-filled, sugar-dripping Krispy Kreme donuts for breakfast would be a very bad thing. And delicious. And she was planning to work very hard today. "I can only do three, and we have to hurry." Three sets of hands plunged immediately into the box.

"I got you covered, babe." Suzanne was an eating machine, already taking two warm donuts from the box. Though four inches taller than Lily at five-nine, the nurse weighed the same as her

blonde friend.

"It's like having a teenage boy in the house." Sandy had grown up with three brothers. "Right down to the dirty socks everywhere and the snoring on the couch."

"Eat up, Stringbean. It's not like anything's ever going to show up on your bones!" Lily exclaimed, poking the taller woman in the ribs. "I bet you have to run around in the shower to get wet all over."

"I have a high metabolism," Suzanne replied indignantly, taking a large bite of her third donut. "Or worms. Of course, one of these days whatever it is will change, and I'll probably swell up like a blimp."

"Probably not as long as you work at that hospital, the way they run you ragged." Sandy rarely missed an opportunity to disparage St. George Hospital for the demands they put on their nursing staff. Lily knew that she would always hold them responsible for the accident five months ago that nearly robbed her of her partner.

*Lily hated when her phone rang in the middle of the night, especially now that she was working mostly with custody and placement cases. That meant some child was in trouble somewhere, and it couldn't wait until morning.*

*"Hello." Anna's hand reached over and caressed her bare hip as she listened to the caller. "Oh, my god! I'm on my way right now. I'll be there in 30 minutes."*

*"What is it?" Alarmed at Lily's sudden reaction, Anna sat up and turned on the bedside light.*

*"That was Sandy. Suzanne was in an accident. A car pulled out in front of her and she wasn't able to stop. She's at St. George and she hasn't regained consciousness."*

*"I'm coming with you." Anna could hear the fear in Lily's voice. Sandy was her best friend, and tonight she needed their support.*

*Lily spent most of the next three days at her friend's side, with Anna bringing their meals and spelling each of them while they ate or rested. Suzanne had broken her left femur; the seatbelt had snapped her collarbone; and her head hit the windshield when her airbag failed to deploy.*

*"I don't know what I'd do if I lost her, Lily." It was late on the third night and they were sitting with Suzanne in her dimly lit private room.*

*"You're not going to lose her, Sandy. The doctor said her vitals were all good. And there's lots of brain activity."*

*"Yeah, did you hear that part? That's Suzanne we're talking about," Sandy joked, seeking even*

*the smallest outlet for the dread-filled stress she felt.*

*Lily chuckled softly, watching the tears well up in her friend's brown eyes. "Suzanne's tough, Sandy. She's going to be okay."*

*"She's got to be. You know, I really do tease her a lot, but she's so good-natured about it. Sometimes she tries to come off as this big tough butch, but she's such a marshmallow. I tell you, Lily, she's the gentlest person I know. I just love her so much."*

*"And she loves you back," a weak voice murmured from the bed.*

*A week later, the lanky nurse was at home. Six weeks after that, she was back on the job.*

"Eat up! I just heard a car in the driveway."

"Quick! Get rid of the box," Sandy commanded. "Not in the trash can, they'll see it. Take it back to the bedroom and hide it under a drop cloth."

Lily cleaned up the telltale crumbs in the kitchen while Suzanne hurried off to hide the evidence. Both strode nonchalantly into the living room just as Sandy opened the front door. "Hi! Come on in." Pam and Tina led the way, followed by little Savannah, who carried a box.

"We brought Krispy Kreme!" she announced happily.

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"Anna, the guys are here with the new TV."

The car dealer looked up from her desk. "Great. Have them take it to the media room. I'll be there in just a minute." Reaching into her bottom drawer, Anna retrieved the two DVDs she had ordered from Germany. One was a scenic trip through Bavaria, pointing out interesting sights from the inside of various BMW models. The cinematography from that film was such that it almost gave the feeling of being there inside the car on the autobahn, right down to the dashboard features. The second DVD held detailed information-engine specifications, safety features, option packages, and performance-on every single model in the BMW's North American line. The latter was menu-driven, and could be used as a sales tool to educate a potential customer about a specific model.

Joining the delivery crew in the media room, Anna supervised the placement of the HD screen, getting a quick tutorial in the operation of the remote control. The large room held several black

leather couches and easy chairs, with glass and chrome side tables holding recent issues of *Car & Driver*, *Motor Week*, and of course, brochures on the various BMW models. The room was climate controlled to preserve the rich aroma of the leather appointments, mimicking that "new car smell."

Anna had fashioned this room at Premier BMW to introduce new customers to the joys of driving, especially the joys of driving performance BMWs. She looked forward to showing it off to the sales staff on Monday morning. Captivated by her new toy, the executive sat back in a comfortable chair and hit "Play."

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"Have you had any response to any of your grant proposals?" Sandy and Lily were working together sanding the spackled rough spots around the trim in the master bedroom. It would be the next room to get a fresh coat of paint, in this case, pale yellow. The others had started on the walls and ceiling of the guest room, which had been readied last night. Together, the five women were making pretty quick work of their task, with Suzanne using a roller on the walls, and Pam and Tina painting the trim by hand. They were barely two hours into their work day, and already the hallway and guest bedroom were nearly finished.

"No, but I'm hopeful June will bring some good news. A lot of these foundations start their funding cycles July 1st, so they'll be looking more seriously at proposals next month."

Lily had written a grant last fall to have the Braxton Street Law Clinic provide legal services for LA County's guardian ad litem program. When it came through, the program became her primary responsibility at the clinic, accounting for half of her time. With the clinic strapped for cash, the rest of her time was unpaid as she sought additional funding. It was her deal with Tony for taking her back last year following her alcohol troubles.

The guardian ad litem program was a network of volunteers that represented the interests of children who were wards of the state, either in foster care, in juvenile detention facilities, or in residential centers or group homes for physical, mental or emotional handicaps. Without these adult advocates, children could get stuck in the system, sometimes staying in the wrong place just because no one suggested a better option. It was a good fit for Lily, who as a child had spent time herself as a ward of the state of California. Now as a legal advisor to the LA program, she reviewed cases and consulted with the volunteers regarding placement and service decisions. By law, each placement came up for review every six months, so Lily handled about 25 referrals a week.

"How do you like working with the guardian ad litem office?"

"You know, it's pretty rewarding to be the one advocating for the kids instead of the parents. I

had no idea how many kids out there have just been forgotten," the blonde lamented.

"Yeah, it's awful, isn't it? What's your caseload like?"

"It varies. At any given time, there are only about 2,000 kids who are in the system long enough to get assigned a guardian ad litem."

"*Only* 2,000! You're kidding! Who can manage that many kids?"

"It's not all that bad. I don't have to deal personally with all of them. Most of the time, I just advise the volunteer if there are legal issues, and I'm on call for them when they have questions. I do about a half dozen placement reviews myself every week."

Sandy had been a social worker for 16 years, but had resisted being promoted to supervisor. She loved the field work, and felt she could make more of a difference dealing directly with the families. "Well I sure miss working with you, my friend. We don't seem to have many cases in common."

"I miss you too, Sandy. That's why it's so important for us to spend time together on these bonding exercises. And yes, that was a spackle joke."

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"Kim?" Anna called out as she opened the back door of her sister's house.

"Come on in. I'm in Jonah's room," the expectant mother answered.

Anna followed the voice down the hallway to find her sister squatting awkwardly to pick up her son's toys. "Where's my little-I'll get those! Sit!" she commanded. Methodically, Anna gathered the brightly colored blocks and shapes, absently running the wheels of a plastic car across the carpet to make them spin.

"My hero," Kim sighed. "Hal took Jonah to visit Martine. If I go sit on the couch, will you promise to help me up before you leave so I won't be stuck there?"

Anna laughed and guided the very pregnant woman to the living room. "Sure, I'll help you up. Can I get you anything?"

"Did you bring a handgun?"

"No weapons."



"Then smother me or something." Kim was miserable.

"I see. So did Hal and Jonah leave to give you a break, or did you run them off with your cranky mood?"

"They ran for their lives, Sunshine!" Kim barked. "And I looked at my watch when you walked in to see how long you'd last."

To the car dealer, this pregnancy seemed tougher on Kim than the first. Taking her sister's legs, Anna turned her lengthwise on the couch and removed the terrycloth slippers from the swollen feet.

Little by little, Kim relaxed as long fingers began to massage the aching appendages. "Right this minute, you're my favorite person in the whole universe."

Anna smiled as she continued the kneading. "So I'm not in any danger?"

"No, you're safe until you stop," she sighed. "I look like a Volkswagen Beetle."

"Well at least you don't look like a Volvo," Anna deadpanned, showing no tolerance for ugly cars. Kim wore her long auburn hair pulled back, and didn't bother with makeup these days. Still, Anna thought her sister more beautiful than ever, but Kim had threatened to maim the next person who dared to comment on her "glow."

"Doesn't this make you want to have a baby?" Kim remembered when they used to talk about how their children would play with each other.

"Uh...that would be a no. Lily and I have talked about it-last weekend in fact-but I think we're both pretty happy with just each other." Anna surprised herself with the sudden conviction in her words. *Is that what I've decided?*

"You really don't want kids anymore?"

"I doubt it." *There I go again.*

"Will you take mine?" Kim was whining again.

"As long as I can give them back."

"Everybody says that. Will you at least take Hal?" Kim adored her stoic husband, but at this moment held him completely responsible for her miserable condition.

"Look, I keep him on the lot almost 10 hours a day. I think that's more than my fair share."

"So how come you don't want kids anymore?" Kim went back to the subject, a little surprised at hearing Anna's new view. "Is it because you're with Lily instead of a man?"

"No, not at all," Anna answered quickly. "That's just...biology. Our friends in Seattle just had a baby; they used in-vitro. We might change our minds someday, but right now it's like we haven't been together by ourselves long enough. It's only been two years."

"Look, I don't want you to let my complaining sway you here. It'll be over soon, and that little girl is going to make me forget everything about this part." Kim found herself mildly disappointed at her sister's seeming reluctance. As close as they were, she had looked forward to sharing their families too. "It's really not as bad as I make it out to be," she lied. This time, it was awful.

"Don't worry about that. I'm used to you complaining," she teased. "It's hard to explain, Kim. I just don't really have the urge to have a child of my own. Even when I used to think about it, I wasn't sure I really wanted to."

"What about Lily? Does she ever want to have a baby?"

"She says she doesn't. She said something a long time ago about maybe adopting a child someday."

"How would feel about that? Would you want to adopt one?"

Anna had pored over this idea several times after Lily brought it up. Frankly, the prospect terrified her. "I don't know. It seems to me that it might be pretty hard to start loving a certain child just because you decided to. I mean how could you be sure that you would bond?"

"How do I know I'm going to bond with my own?" Kim countered. "It's not like I can send them back."

Both women chuckled, knowing that Moses himself couldn't part Kim from her family.

The redhead continued. "You know, I've found that when it comes to kids and husbands, sometimes love is just a verb. It's something you do as deliberately as you walk, you cook, or you speak. All the feelings that go along with it just seem to grow all on their own."

"When did you get to be so deep?" Anna had never known her sister to wax philosophic.

"I think about these things all goddamn night while I'm lying there awake with hemorrhoids and an aching back."

Anna gave the feet a final squeeze. "Only one more week, Kimmie. Then your little girl will be here, and like you said, you'll forget all of this. Listen, I need to run. Is there anything you need me to do before I go?"

"Oh sure. Go off and be with adults. Adults who aren't miserable."

"Do you want me to help you off the couch?"

"No, I want my husband to find me here and to think I've been trapped all afternoon. Then he'll feel guilty and I'll get him to shave my legs."

Anna hadn't really needed that image, but it was too late. A quick kiss to her gloomy sister's forehead, and she was out the back door.

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Lily concluded that Savannah was about the friendliest, most well-behaved nine-year-old she'd ever met. And in her line of work, she'd met a lot. Not once all day had she complained at being relegated to the kitchen with her books and games and Sandy's small TV. She had asked her mom earlier if she might be allowed to play in the hot tub on the deck, but Tina had reasoned that everyone would have to clean up first, and she doubted anyone would have the energy later. Accepting that answer, the little girl went back to the kitchen to start another book.

Folding the phone and returning it to the side pocket on her painters' pants, Lily shared the good news. "That was Anna. She's got steaks, chicken and burgers, and she's expecting everyone to come for dinner."

"Well I could eat," Suzanne answered.

*Big surprise there.* "You two should plan to stay at our house tonight," Lily went on. "I'm sure you could use a break from these fumes."

"That's generous of you and Anna, and I accept," Sandy replied immediately.

"Maybe we should go on home. Savannah's been so good all day. I think she deserves to choose something special tonight." Tina knew what a blessing her daughter was, and both she and Pam consistently rewarded the child for her positive attitude. Some of their friends had suffered mightily with demanding children as they tried to blend their families.

"Well...if you say so. But we do have a pool," Lily reminded them, remembering Savannah's earlier request. "And a basset hound."

Those details tipped the scale, and soon they were cleaned up and caravanning in two cars to Lily and Anna's Brentwood home. Chester and Anna greeted them at the side gate as they tramped into the back yard.

Lily made the introductions. "Sweetheart, you remember Pam and Tina from the Valentine's Day party."

"Yes, hello again. It's good to see you both." Anna had crowded seven chairs around the six-person table outside. Never shy around food, Suzanne started in right away on the chips, salsa and Lily's homemade guacamole.

"And this is Tina's daughter, Savannah, who is going swimming!" Lily showed the girl to the downstairs bathroom where she could change into her suit.

As she cooked on the grill, Anna watched her partner playing with the child. Lily walked alongside the pool tossing a diving ring to Savannah, who tried to snag it each time before it reached the bottom of the pool. Lily had a gift with children that Anna envied. She'd seen it first with the girls at Kidz Kamp, then with the extraordinary patience Lily displayed when she played with Jonah, who took after his mother in the cranky department.

"One more day and we'll be finished for another eight years," Sandy sighed. She and Suzanne were whipped from all they'd done over the past few days, but they had only the kitchen and bathrooms to do tomorrow.

"I can help tomorrow," Anna offered.

"Great, honey! We won't need the ladder anymore," Lily chimed in as Savannah scurried into the house to get dressed.

"I bet you did the baseboards today, didn't you?"

"Not funny, Amazon," she scowled. As a matter of fact, she *had* done the baseboards today.

Lily and Savannah carried the dinner conversation, with Anna unsure about where to jump in, and the others too tired to talk. Lily seemed to know all about the cool TV shows, the right music, and the best computer games.

But an hour later, even the usually energetic blonde was nearly comatose. Sandy and Suzanne thanked their departing friends for their help, as they had other plans for the next day. Finally, Chester led the way as the two remaining couples turned out the lights and wearily climbed the stairs.

"I don't want to hear any noises coming from your room tonight," Sandy warned her friends. "I'll call the night manager."

Lily chuckled and started to speak, but Anna yanked her into their room before she could reply. "Can't have you giving our secrets away," the tall woman whispered sexily as she pinned her lover behind the door.

"And what would those secrets be?" Lily's lips seized the soft skin at the hollow of Anna's neck.

"Oh, maybe a trick or two we learned in a tent once upon a time." She was remembering how she

and Lily had strained to keep quiet as they made love in Yosemite with their friends in a nearby tent.

"Hmmm, I don't recall us being very successful."

"Now that I think about it, we weren't. That means we have no tricks."

"Or secrets," Lily added.

Anna blushed at the thought. "Maybe we should just get some sleep tonight."

"That might be a good idea. I'm beat," the blonde concurred, tired to her bones. "But I promise to make it up to you."

Anna winked. "Me too."

As they readied for bed, Anna's thoughts wandered back to the sweet little girl who visited tonight. "Lily, how did you know all those things you talked about with Savannah?"

"You mean the singers and the TV shows and all?"

"Yeah. You don't pay any attention to things like that."

"I don't know. I guess I've picked it up from the kids I work with. I usually talk to them about stuff they like before we get down to business. I have to win their trust so they'll tell me the truth, because a lot of the times, someone else has already told them what they should say."

"You're really good with kids. I wish I were that comfortable with them."

"You're very good with Jonah. He adores you."

"Well that's because I spoil him. But I'm not sure how good I'd be if I had to discipline him or tell him no."

"Yeah, but that's the appeal of other people's children," Lily joked. "I personally think you'd be a great mom."

Anna couldn't see that in herself at all. "What makes you say that?"

"Well first of all, I happen to know for a fact that you, Anna Kaklis, have a tremendous capacity to love." That earned her a sloppy kiss on the cheek, and she wiped away the toothpaste before continuing. "And I've seen how well you get on with some of the kids we've taken camping." Anna had come along three times on outings with Kidz Kamp, each time forging a friendship with a troubled child. "You like to have fun, and you're even-tempered. Those are good qualities for being a mom."

So here they were, talking about it again. That afternoon, Anna had been especially mindful of how much her sister's life had changed with having children. Their needs were front and center, and everything Kim did-walking with her friends, going out to eat, even giving up her real estate work-she did with her children in mind. Anna wasn't at all ready for that kind of change. She couldn't just leave the dealerships to run themselves that long, and it was too much to ask her father to do. Maybe Lily....

"Do you still think about adopting a child? Or even having one of your own?"

"Having my own, no." When Lily first realized at 14 that she was gay, it gave her a new perspective on what her life would be like. Without really understanding what her options might be down the road, she'd just gotten used to the fact that babies weren't part of the deal. "Adopting...maybe, but only under really special circumstances. I always figured that if I ever met a child that needed me-not just needed a home, but needed me-that I'd feel it too, like Mom did with me. But I never thought I'd just decide to adopt and go pick one out."

The women settled underneath the sheet and light blanket, both gravitating immediately to the center of the king-sized bed.

Lily went on. "And with you and me together now, it's not a decision I can make on my own. You'd have to feel that need too. I couldn't ask you to do something like that if it didn't feel right for you."

For Anna, that was reassuring, though she was certain her partner wouldn't try to push her into something she didn't want. Still, she knew it would be difficult to deny Lily something she really wanted, even something that would impact both of them as much as a child.

It started just as both began to doze off. From across the landing and down the hall, through not one but two closed doors, it rumbled. Their friend Suzanne was sawing logs.

### *Chapter 3*

"Lily, the blinking line is yours," Pauline shouted across the reception area. The basic phone in Lily's office, which was an oversized closet off the main reception area, was not connected to the intercom system. She had lost her larger office last year to Tony's wife Colleen, who had taken over her caseload while she was suspended.

"This is Lilian Stuart. How may I help you?"

"Wanna see The Big Unit?"

Lily's face broke into a grin as she pushed her door shut for more privacy. "Oh, I'm doing very, very well today, Amazon, and thanks for asking." She and her lover had started their day well before dawn, when Anna awoke and began covering her neck with gentle kisses and nips. Lily sensed an urgent need in her lover for physical closeness, and matched it quickly with her own. They hadn't shared their bodies in almost a week.

"Sorry, my social skills are a little rusty," she laughed.

*The Big Unit?* "So let me guess...either the Diamondbacks are in town or that's the worst pickup line I've ever heard." The Big Unit was Randy Johnson, a pitcher for the Arizona Diamondbacks. Lily had read this morning that the team was in town for a series with the Dodgers.

"Maybe it's both," the car dealer teased. "Would you be interested in two tickets on the third base line for tonight's game?" Anna had gone to work today with the realization that she and Lily had been awfully busy lately with their friends and family, and deserved to spend some time with just each other.

"Well, Ms. Kaklis, since you asked so nicely...." This was fun; it was almost like Anna was flirting. "What time?"

"It's a 7:05 start. I can be home by 6:15."

"It's a date. I'll be ready."

"See you then."

Lily beamed when she hung up the phone. *I have a date tonight with Anna Kaklis!* As was her practice, she began dressing herself in her mind's eye.

*Yes!* Anna picked up the phone immediately to call her Chamber of Commerce friend Jerry Grossman, marketing director for the LA Dodgers. "Jerry, hi. This is Anna Kaklis. Listen, I need a big favor. Any chance I can get two tickets on the third base line for tonight's game?"

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Jerry came through, sending a courier to the dealership with the tickets and a VIP parking pass. At 6:10 Anna pulled her sporty Z8 into the driveway. Lily met her at the side door with a welcoming kiss, all set to go. "Let me just change real quick," Anna said, disappearing up the stairs. When she returned, she was dressed casually like her blonde partner-in faded jeans, a

black t-shirt, and tennis shoes. Appropriate for the occasion, her dark ponytail was pulled through the back of a Dodgers cap. To Lily, she was the most beautiful woman on earth.

Traffic was a typical Tuesday night headache, but they managed to get to the ballpark before the start of the second inning.

"Look at these seats! Did you sleep with somebody?"

Anna laughed aloud at her lover's mock accusation, as did the men sitting behind them. Jerry had delivered alright. Their seats were in the first row, right behind the on-deck hitter.

"Jerry Grossman hit me up last month for a donation to the Dodger's Foundation, their youth organization. I called Tony first, and he said the Kidz Kamp budget was in good shape, so I wrote Jerry a check," Anna shrugged.

Lily was proud that Premier Motors was now the principle sponsor of Kidz Kamp, and especially that Anna was taking such an active role as benefactor.

The dark-haired woman took the menu from the pouch in front of her and waved to one of the attendants that watchfully serviced those in the premium box seats. "I'd like two hot dogs with everything, two curly fries, and two diet cokes, please." Those were Lily's favorites. "You want anything?"

"Touché, Amazon."

The ladies sat back and enjoyed a thriller, a pitcher's duel well into the seventh inning when the Dodgers broke it open with a triple and back-to-back home runs. Anna enjoyed the game, but was even more entertained at times by her partner.

"Hey Blue! You're missing a really good game!" Lily loved knowing that from these seats, the umpire could actually hear her. "Another eye and you'd be a Cyclops!"

As the temperature dropped, the cold-natured car dealer started adding layers, first a V-necked sweater, then a lightweight jacket. When she reached for Lily's unused Dodgers sweatshirt, the blonde woman cautioned, "If you keep piling on clothes, they're going to show you on television."

"But I'm cold!"

"What if I come over there and sit in your lap?" Lily offered in a voice only her lover could hear.

"Then I guarantee we'd be on television."

Three sharp beeps told Anna she had a call. With Kim due three days ago, she carried the cell phone everywhere.



"It's Hal," she said, pressing the button to talk. "Hello...how long?"

The smile told Lily all she needed to know. She began to gather their things from under the seat, not that there was much more to pick up, what with Anna now wearing everything.

"They're at the Medical Center. Kim went into labor about two hours ago. Hal says it's probably going to be a while, if you want to stay and see the game."

"Are you serious?" Lily knew that Anna's head had already left, so it was only fitting her body should follow. "Let's go!"

Walking quickly to the car, the blonde lobbied Anna jovially that she should drive them both to the hospital, given the taller woman's excitement. Lily had only driven the sports car three or four times since Anna got it more than a year ago, and it certainly wasn't going to happen tonight. Finally conceding, she extracted a promise that her partner would drive with due caution.

So if a Z8 leaves a 30-foot strip of black rubber on the pavement and there was no one in the parking lot to hear it, did it make a sound?

\*\*\*\*\*

Kim and Hal were running through their relaxation drills in a birthing room on the third floor of UCLA's Medical Center. The room was decorated much like a bedroom in one's home, with a braided oval rug, pictures on the walls and a homey quilt on the twin bed. Birthing rooms were a popular option for families who wanted a low technology, low intervention birthing experience. Equipment was readily available for any type of emergency response, but Kim was healthy and her pregnancy was considered low risk.

One of the nicest features of the birthing room was that even small extended families were accommodated during the labor process. Anna and Lily therefore proceeded directly to the room to see how things were going.

"Hiya sister!" Kim greeted her actually smiling, the first one Anna had seen in a month.

"Hey yourself. What's this grin about? Did you get drugs?"

"No, we were just talking about how much better tomorrow is going to be. This misery will finally be over." Kim really had been pretty wretched over the last three or four weeks. "And I'm looking forward to seeing my little girl."

"Well we all are," Lily added. "Where's Jonah?"

"He's with Mom and Dad. They were looking for the vending machines. My luck, they're buying him chocolate, and he'll be a wild man."

"I think I'll go try to find them," Lily offered. She knew she was welcome in the room, but still she wanted to give Anna some time with her sister and brother-in-law.

"I'll come with you, Lily," Hal added. "Just for a few minutes, hon. I'll be right back."

Alone for just these moments, Anna sat on the bed, taking her sister's hand. "I love you, Kimmie. You're such a good mom, and I'm so proud of you."

Both women's eyes misted at the tender moment. "I love you too, Sister." She suddenly squeezed Anna's hand tightly as a contraction took her.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, it's normal. The doctor said it would probably be sometime after midnight. Will you wait around?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

Hal returned quietly and took his place on the other side of the bed. "You want anything?"

Kim seized again, this time stronger than the one before. "You know, I just did that. Maybe we should start timing them or something."

Ninety minutes later, the doctor agreed that it was indeed Showtime!

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The Kaklis clan, which according to George's own quiet acquiescence, now officially included one Lily Stuart, waited impatiently for word on its newest addition. Hal's father, Harold, Sr., chatted with Martine while George and Lily took turns chasing Jonah around the couches in the maternity waiting room. It seemed that the toddler never slept; and someone had indeed given him chocolate.

Hal's parents were divorced, and his mother lived in Florida. Father and son hadn't been especially close over the years, but both were trying harder to forge a relationship now that the grandchildren were part of the picture.

Anna stood in the doorway, an eye on the door to Kim's birthing room. No one had come in or

out in the last 15 minutes, so she was expecting news soon. Finally, one of the two nurses stepped into the hallway, pulling off the rubber gloves and tossing them in a nearby receptacle. She didn't look Anna's way, so there was no discerning the news.

"I think something's happening here," the tall woman announced excitedly.

Indeed, the next person to exit was Dr. Beth Ostrov, who had also delivered Jonah. The soft smile on her face caused Anna's heart to soar.

By the time Dr. Ostrov had reached the waiting room, everyone was gathered in the doorway. "Well folks, what can I say? She's a beaut! Seven pounds, nine ounces."

"And Kim?" Anna asked anxiously.

"Doing just great! Even Hal made it this time," she joked. He had hyperventilated when Jonah was born. "The OB nurse is still cleaning up a little, but when she comes out, you'll be able to go in. Just try not to rush the door."

"Thanks, Dr. Ostrov. We appreciate everything," Martine gushed.

"The pleasure was mine." Her smile still in place, the obstetrician turned and disappeared down the hall.

After an eternity of eight or nine minutes, the OB nurse appeared and waved everyone down to the room. "Mom and daughter are doing great, but you don't want to overwhelm them, okay?"

"You got it!" Anna replied, and started through the door, the entire clan in tow. One by one, they stepped closer to the bed, careful not to crowd the family. George passed a squirming wide-eyed Jonah to his dad and started snapping pictures with a digital camera.

Kim was sitting up in the bed, her red hair freshly combed away from her face. In her arms was a dark-eyed, red-faced darling with a shock of her father's jet-black hair. "Everyone, meet Jonah's little sister, Alice Martine Phillips."

Kim's mother was moved beyond words at the honor of her namesake. Anna had been equally honored when Jonah had been given her middle name, Merrill.

George snapped away, first moving Martine into the picture, then Anna and Lily. The blonde felt an overwhelming sense of happiness at her inclusion in this family moment.

With apologies to Carolyn and Vicki, tonight there was a new World's Most Beautiful Baby.

"Oh wait. I have to call David!" Hal remembered his brother-in-law, who was a sophomore at Stanford. Harold took one last picture of the entire Kaklis family-including Lily-as Hal relayed the news on the phone, and finally the group's quiet excitement began to settle down.

Shortly after two a.m., everyone started to file out to let the new mom get some rest. Jonah, who had finally fallen asleep, was spending the rest of the night with his grandparents. Since she'd had no complications, Kim would be going home the following afternoon.

"That was quite something, wasn't it?" Lily asked her partner as they walked arm in arm to the car.

Anna was still giddy with excitement. "Oh yeah! Did you see Jonah's eyes?"

Lily chuckled. "You should have seen your own."

Anna was absolutely delighted with the birth of her niece. In fact, she'd made a very important decision as she looked on at the new addition in her mother's arms. Tomorrow, the car dealer would contact her business attorney. No matter what she and Lily decided about a family, she wanted to share Premier Motors with her sister and brother. Jonah and Alice, and David's children as well, would be among her heirs. That was family.

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"No good deed goes unpunished," Anna muttered, plowed under by the paperwork Walter had delivered Monday morning to distribute the stock in the car company. He had advised a gradual distribution to alleviate the tax burdens her family members would see with the gift. He had also pointed out that Anna's will needed to be updated to reflect this change in stock ownership.

*My will.* That thought took the car dealer on a further tangent, as she realized that the three-year-old document held no provisions whatsoever for Lily. With the home in her name only, her partner was vulnerable to eviction by the mortgage holder should something happen to Anna. *How could I have let this slide?*

Picking up the phone, she placed a quick call to her attorney. "Walter? Anna Kaklis. First of all, thanks so much for that mountain of paperwork you sent over. Do I happen to pay you by the page?" she quipped. "Listen, on the will thing...I need to talk to you about Lily. I want to make sure she'd be taken care of if something happened to me." She quickly jotted down the lawyer's words. "No, what's that?" Anna sat up straight in her chair. "I never knew California had such a thing.... Do you have the paperwork for it? Uh-huh...so what's involved?" She frowned at Walter's next question. "No, absolutely not. It isn't necessary.... No, Walter. Not in this case.... Why don't you send the paperwork over and we'll schedule a meeting, you, me and Lily. I'd like to get this done right away."

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Lily nearly fell out of her chair when her partner laid the form in front of her.

"Registered domestic partners?"

"Yeah, Walter told me about it. I downloaded that off the web. He says if we sent that in, we'd be legally bound in the eyes of the state."

The blonde couldn't believe it. She knew all about the domestic partner statutes, but never would have imagined that it was something Anna might consider, let alone suggest on her own.

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I'd love to be your registered domestic partner." Lily found herself actually blushing, though she couldn't imagine why.

"Good," Anna replied, almost businesslike. "Could you come down to the office with me first thing tomorrow morning to meet with Walter? I need to go over my will and I'd like to put your name on the house and give you a small piece of the company."

Now Lily was stunned. "Anna! I can understand the house, but why give me part of the company? That's your family's company."

"You are my family, Lily. More than anyone else. I want Kim and Hal's kids to have the business, along with David and his kids. But if something should happen to me, I want to know that you're taken care of, that I've left you something that was important to me."

That did it. Stupid tears. Couldn't stop. Lily walked over behind her lover's chair and wrapped her arms around the tall woman's neck. "Just don't ever leave me. That's all I really want."

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"Walter, I said no." Anna was angry that he'd even brought it up.

"Sweetheart, he's right. I'm not offended at all," Lily said, looking over Walter's paperwork with her lawyer's eye. "I recommend it to my clients too when there's prior property involved. He's representing you here, and he'd be remiss if he didn't ask for this."

Anna's attorney had presented her with a standard pre-nuptial agreement that she'd make no claim on Anna's business or singular holdings should they dissolve their domestic partnership for any reason.

"I'm not threatened by it, and you shouldn't be either. Didn't you have Scott sign one?"

The car dealer's face burned at that. The pre-nuptial with Scott had saved her ass.

"Fine. Just sign it and stick it somewhere." Anna sneered at Walter, stopping short of suggesting where. "Did you bring the papers for the house?"

"Yes, of course. You'll be tenants in common. But I should warn you that it isn't likely that Lily could afford the mortgage if something happened to you."

"Then get mortgage insurance that will pay it off," Anna snapped. She was tired of this. Why did they have to jump through so many hoops?

Walter started putting the forms back into his briefcase. "I'll file the stock forms today, along with the domestic partnership papers and the new will. The house papers will probably take until Tuesday."

Moments later, the two women were left alone in Anna's office. The scowl on the car dealer's face told her partner that she was unhappy with the way things had gone. Lily wasn't sure why, but Anna was really hung up on the pre-nuptial.

"What's wrong, hon?"

No answer, just more scowl.

"Are you still upset about the pre-nup?"

"I just don't like what it says about our commitment. If we were both serious about it being forever, why do we need a legal document that spells out what we'd do if we split up?"

"Honey, it says nothing at all about our commitment. I'm not going anywhere. Are you?"

"Of course not."

"Then it's a moot document, so why worry about it?"

"I just don't like what it symbolizes."

Lily blew out a deep breath. She'd try a new tack. "It's there in case something bizarre happens. What if you got amnesia and all of a sudden didn't know me from Eve?"

"That's pretty far-fetched."

"Far-fetched things happen sometimes. Besides, it says something important about how I feel about you. It says I married you for your body, not your money."

"My body?"

"Your body."

"Not my gentle nature? Or my tender heart?"

"Nope. Your body."

"Well, then." Anna stood and walked over to her partner's chair. "If that's the case, then I should have the right to expect you to demonstrate that on a regular basis."

"Very well, if I must."

"Oh, you definitely must."

Where on earth is KG going with all this? [Click here to find out!](#)

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## ~ Strained ~

by KG MacGregor

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**Strained - Part 2**

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*Chapter 4*

Anna sat in the waiting room, dreading the moment they actually called her name. This was one of those rare times she didn't mind waiting. In fact, if there were an emergency with someone else....

"Anna Kaklis?" A youthful technician in white pants and a floral top called her name.

The tall woman grimaced and returned the unread magazine to the table at the center of the small room. *A root canal*, she thought. *No, a root canal without anesthetic*, she bargained with an unseen entity. *Anything but this*.

"You can change in here," the woman handed her a soft blue top and a key, gesturing toward a small private changing room, "and lock your things in the closet. I'll knock in about five minutes to take you in. Don't forget, the ties go in front."

Slipping into the room, Anna pulled the door closed. Thankfully, they'd gotten rid of those flimsy cubicles, where the curtains didn't quite reach from one corner to the other. At least in this little room, she had privacy, and she wouldn't have to step out and wait in a room with three or four other women who were similarly underdressed.

The dark-haired woman removed her suit jacket and hung it carefully in the closet. The sleeveless shell followed, then her bra. Quickly slipping on the loose cotton wraparound, she laced the ties on the inside right, and then on the outside left. This too was an improvement, she thought. Last time, she'd gotten a paper shift that gaped open in the front if she didn't hold it tightly closed. And if you wrapped it too tightly, you had to worry about the position of the armholes.

A soft knock signaled the technician's return. "Ms. Kaklis? Are you ready?"

Anna opened the door and stepped out. She detested this part, where she would be led down a busy hallway to a room at the far end. Why did there have to be so much indignity attached to this procedure? *Because men probably run these clinics*, she answered herself. To her surprise and delight, she was instead directed through a single doorway into a darkened room, lit only by two small spots above the imposing medical equipment. Relaxing new age music drifted softly through recessed speakers.

"Okay, could I have you step over here, please? That's it, all the way against the tray. We're going to do the right side first, so just slip that side off your shoulder. You can leave the other one on."

This too was new. Usually, they just took her paper shift away as soon as she entered the room, leaving her awkwardly exposed for the duration of the procedure.

*And it's warm in here!*

The technician gently positioned Anna's right breast onto the tray and lowered the top slide gradually until the fatty flesh was uncomfortably flattened. "I need you to hold your breath and



be perfectly still." Anna heard a soft buzz as soon as the woman disappeared behind what she assumed was a lead wall. Quickly, the technician returned. "Okay, now the left side." They repeated the procedure for Anna's left breast.

"You've changed a lot of things about this since last year."

"We sure have. We've tried to get rid of as many of the unpleasant aspects as we could. No more bright lights; all the rooms are kept at 78 degrees; and we've tried to give women more privacy. How'd we do?"

"Much better," Anna enthused. "I won't dread this nearly as much next time."

"I have to do the side view now. Let's do the left side first this time." The technician skillfully turned the tray diagonally, this time to capture the breast tissue near Anna's underarm. "This part's still pretty unpleasant, but we'll keep trying to fix what we can. I swear if men had to put their balls in this vise, they'd find a way to make it out of transparent cotton sponges."

Anna chortled at the image, certain the technician was right. A few minutes later they were finished, and the slides were checked for quality.

"That's it. We're all done. One of the doctors will be in touch in a few days."

"Thank you. Really, I appreciate all the things you've done here to make this easier. It makes a huge difference."

"Yeah, I know. I have to get them once a year too."

Anna nodded, knowing exactly what that meant for the technician, since regular mammograms weren't usually prescribed for women their age unless there was a known risk. Having lost her mother to breast cancer at age 35, Anna had been vigilant about self-exams, physician exams, and mammograms since her early twenties. The odds were high-some said one in four-that she too would develop the disease.

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Lily was delighted to find the Z8 already in the garage when she got home. The car dealer usually worked until seven unless they had plans, so this was a rare treat. A scrumptious aroma filled her nostrils as she entered the side door. "Anna?"

"In here," her lover called from the kitchen.

"Hey! This is a nice surprise. What are you cooking?"

"Nothing fancy. Just a roasted chicken. It's almost done."

"It smells great!" Lily wrapped her arms around her lover's waist, unable to resist reaching under the t-shirt to feel the warm skin. "How'd it go today?" Her lover had dreaded this annual exam, brooding about it for the last four days.

"It was alright, actually. They've changed a lot of things there that have always made it such an ordeal." The clinic near their home was the same one that hosted Lily's Wednesday night women's AA meeting. "You should think about having a mammogram sometime, you know, at least to get a baseline."

"I'm only 32, Anna. Most women don't start getting them until they're about 40."

"But how do you know you're not at risk? You really don't know that much about your real mother." That brought a quick frown to the blonde's face, and Anna immediately corrected herself. "I mean your natural mother. Sorry."

Lily had made such a big deal about reinforcing her partner for her vigilance against the disease that she'd left herself with no real arguments for not getting a mammogram herself. "Okay, I'll call the doctor's office and see if I can get a referral."

The attorney was rarely sick, scheduling only sporadic visits to a gynecologist when she felt guilty about not getting a Pap smear for a couple of years.

"Why don't you call my doctor? I'm sure she'd see you."

"I seriously doubt your doctor is on our plan. My preferred providers are mostly these big groups where you're lucky if you see the same doctor more than once." Tony had chosen the basic benefits package for the law clinic with cost in mind. For more money each month, Lily could have chosen an option that let her have the same physician, but she couldn't see paying that extra money when she so seldom needed medical services.

"That's ridiculous! Even Chester sees the same veterinarian. You need to be on my plan. Will you do that?"

"Your plan?"

"Why not? Premier has domestic partner benefits, so we might as well take advantage of them. It's a small co-pay, and no deductible. And we have dental and eye care too."

"But then you'd be paying instead of Tony."

"So what? I'd feel better knowing that you were covered, and that there was a doctor somewhere who cared about you, and not just a billing. And that way, we could see all the same doctors. Wouldn't that be better?"

Lily couldn't believe the verve with which Anna had taken on this "domestic partner" thing. Not that she minded at all-it was thrilling to be reminded in so many ways that Anna viewed their commitment as seriously as she did.

"Okay, I'll make the switch. Tony will be pleased." Every dollar saved at the law clinic was a godsend.

"Good girl. Then you'll make an appointment for a complete physical and give me peace of mind?"

*Well I certainly walked right into that!* "Fine. Just let me know when the coverage takes effect."

"That's my girl. I plan on keeping you many years, you know."

"No trade-in on a newer model?"

"Nope. I'm going to see that you get regular maintenance so you'll last a long time."

"Gonna drive me into the ground, are you?"

"Yep."

"Sounds like fun." Lily's eyebrows went up. "So how soon can we get started?"

"After supper."

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"I appreciate you doing this with me," Lily said, reaching across the center divide and taking her lover's hand. She had skipped her usual parody of the flight attendant's safety message today.

"I wouldn't miss it," Anna answered softly.

"I won't ask you to do this every year, I promise. But since it's the first year...."

"It's okay, sweetheart. Really."

Today was the first anniversary of Eleanor's death, and the women were flying up to San Jose for the day to visit her grave. Bill Mueller had arranged to meet them for lunch downtown, and they would return early in the evening.

For Lily, the visit was both profoundly sad and at the same time cleansing. The last time she'd been back in her hometown, her life had been in shambles. She and Anna were apart, she'd lost her job, and she had yet to get treatment for her alcohol problem. Still, her mom had been a spiritual force in the fight back from the edge, and today Lily was eager to stand before the headstone and symbolically give her reassurance and thanks.

Arriving too early for lunch, Lily gave Anna the nickel tour in their rental car of her old high school and the outfitters store where she worked summers and after school. Although reluctant to drive by her former home, she finally got up the nerve, and was cheered by the sight of a newly erected swing set in the back yard. Briefly, the women stopped in to say hello to the neighbors, Ernie and Charlotte Beck, who were thinking too about Eleanor this day.

Lily spotted the handsome doctor as he entered The Grill and waved him to their table. Quickly standing, she reached up to give a heartfelt hug. "It's good to see you again. Thanks for making some time for us." She couldn't help the misty eyes at the sight of her mother's dear friend.

"Hi Bill," Anna chimed in, standing also to greet the man.

Bill walked around the table to hug Anna too. "I appreciate you asking me. It's...a comfort to be able to share part of this day with people who understand what it means."

Lily nodded, working hard to keep her tears in check.

"So have you been to the cemetery yet?" he asked.

"Not yet. We'll go as soon as we leave here. Our plane back to LA leaves around six-thirty."

Their small talk was awkward for awhile, until Anna asked how he liked his new car. She and her father had browbeaten the man into leasing a new BMW last year.

"Are you kidding? I love it!"

Anna beamed with pride. "Another satisfied customer!"

From that topic, it was easy to move into more casual conversation, as the women caught Bill up on the Kaklis family and its new addition. The doctor spoke of his recent golf trip to Palm Springs, and Anna reminded him to call the next time he was down, just in case she was visiting her two dealerships there during that time.

Warmed by the visit, the friends said their goodbyes and promised to stay in touch. They would surely drift apart over the years, but would always have fond memories of the special role each had played in Eleanor Stuart's too-short life.

It was a gorgeous day in the South Bay, a light wind having blown away the usual haze that hung over the valley. The smooth east hills boasted a few remaining patches of green from the spring rains and the white oleander bloomed brightly along the freeways.

Lily drove to the cemetery in silence. Parking along the designated drive, the women got out and walked hand in hand to Eleanor's gravesite. It was Anna's first visit since the service, but she had helped Lily with the inscription on the headstone. The grass was freshly mown, and someone had placed a bright bouquet on top.

"It's from her school," Lily explained as she read the small card. Her mother had been principal of a large elementary school. "One of the teachers must have come by this morning already."

"That was very sweet," Anna replied. She and Lily had brought three dried sunflowers-one for each of them and a third for Chester-to crumble and sprinkle into the ground. Sunflowers had been Eleanor's favorite, and she had always preached that decomposed plants "brought new life to the garden."

When they'd finished with their small ritual, Anna rose and placed her hand lovingly on her partner's shoulder. "I'm going to go wait by the car now. Take as long as you want."

Lily nodded, smiling softly in appreciation of the depth of Anna's understanding about this day and what it meant to be able to commune with her mother like this. Turning back to the headstone as her partner walked away, Lily began.

"Hi Mom. I sure have missed you. It's hard to believe it's already been a year." Lily was almost overcome with the sense of comfort and familiarity she felt at standing here before her mother's resting place. "I figure you somehow already know all of this, but everything I talked about the last time I was here is all better now."

"I haven't had a drink in about eight months. I'm back at work-Katharine will like that part. It's still part-time but it's just with kids, so it's something I really like. And you can see that Anna and I have worked everything out. In fact, I wanted to show you this." Lily self-consciously held out her hand to show off the ring Anna had given her, as though her mother could see it from where she lay.

"She's more than I ever dreamed, Mom. I'm really glad you two had the chance to know each other, even if it was just for a while. Mostly, I wanted you to know that I have a family again. No one will ever take your place-you know that-but I don't want you to worry that I'm alone. Thanks to Anna, I have in-laws, a nephew and now a new niece. I'm going to be alright. I don't want you to worry about me."

"And I hope it's okay with you, but I probably won't come be coming back here every year. I'll stop by when I can, but don't ever think that I've forgotten you. You're still in my heart every day. I love you, Mom."

Two hours later, their plane took off toward the San Francisco Bay, banking sharply to the right in its southward turn. Lily spotted the municipal cemetery from the sky, finally shedding her first full tear of the day.

Anna took the smaller hand and squeezed tightly as the jet climbed. She felt awful that she hadn't been with Lily on her difficult trip last year, and had been determined to come along on this visit. She would do whatever she could to make certain that her partner never felt alone again.

"Anna, where is your mother buried?"

Startled momentarily by the question, Anna had to think. "She isn't, actually. She was cremated. Dad and I scattered her ashes in the water off Catalina." The memory of that final sailing trip with her father rushed back at her. George had sold the boat soon after they got back, and had never sailed again. To a 10-year-old girl, that had severed an important connection.

"Why there?" Lily couldn't believe she was just hearing this story for the first time. How could she have been so self-centered not to even ask?

"We used to sail together. Mom and Dad both loved it."

"I thought George hated boats." He never went along with Hal.

"No, he just left it behind. I guess it made him sad."

"I can understand that. I didn't want to go hiking last year after Mom died. It took me until January to finally go back up into the mountains. And I thought about her a lot that day."

"Do you feel like she's with you?"

"Every day," Lily answered emphatically.

Anna nodded in understanding. "Sometimes, I still think my mother is with me too, even after almost 25 years."

This time, it was Lily's turn to squeeze her partner's hand in comfort. If she spent the next 60 years with this woman, it would not be enough to know her.

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Chester greeted their arrival with his usual exuberance, barking deeply and wagging his tail with enthusiasm. Lily dropped down to wrestle with him in the family room as Anna went off to the kitchen to prepare his nightly feast. The basset hound had adjusted well to his move to LA, thanks especially to Anna, who spoiled him absolutely rotten. The only thing he was denied was the opportunity to fall asleep alongside the two-legged humans-as opposed to his own four-legged human self-in their bed. But they didn't seem to mind that he joined them in the night.

Overwhelmed with excitement at the arrival of these larger people, Chester detoured from his dinner out the doggie door into the side yard for quick relief. Though genuinely confused at first, he had finally understood after all that they didn't really like it when he peed in the kitchen.

"You know, I'll never get tired of being greeted like that," Anna said. She had bonded with Chester the first time they met in San Jose, and had since become his favorite tall person. "Listen, I have to go into work for a couple of hours tomorrow. What if afterwards we take Chester for a long walk at Topanga? Maybe even take a picnic."

"Are you kidding? I'd love it!" Lily was used to fending for herself most Saturdays, sometimes stopping by the BMW lot just to see her girl in action.

"Then it's a date. What do you want for dinner?"

It was already after nine, which would explain those hunger pangs. Lily scoured the refrigerator and cabinets for something appealing, finally settling on Anna's favorite, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with a glass of milk. "Want to take this upstairs and watch the news while we get ready for bed?"

"Sure. Let me take him for a quick W-A-L-K first, then I'll lock up and come on up."

Chester began his happy dance, running back and forth from Anna to the family room, where she kept his leash. Apparently, the dog had learned to spell.

Twenty minutes later, the dark-haired woman returned to find her lover already in bed, a blob of strawberry jam painting the nightshirt she wouldn't wear for long anyway. "Can I have the rest of that?" she asked, lowering her mouth to the stain just above the right breast.

"Mmm, why don't you hand me *your* sandwich and I'll smear that on me too?" Lily teased. This flirting was probably as close as they'd ever come to actually eating food from one another's body.

*"San Francisco police are reporting two arrests tonight in the murder of Peyton Graves. Details at eleven."*

"Wow, did you hear that?"

"I hope they nail the bastards. That was awful."

Peyton Graves was a wealthy Bay Area publisher, and founder of the Open Lands Foundation, a group of philanthropists committed to buying up land to preserve for public use. He had briefly toyed with an independent gubernatorial run last year in order to force the Democratic incumbent back to his liberal roots. Both Anna and Lily had pledged their support during an LA fundraiser for the Foundation.

A decent man with a common touch, Graves had let down his guard, inviting a strike from

society's worst element. The would-be politician had been killed two months ago, apparently surprising burglars in his South of Market loft upon returning from a Warriors basketball game. He had obviously done something to anger his killers, as he was stabbed more than 20 times.

Her sandwich finished, Anna went into the bathroom to brush her teeth as the news theme began to play. From her position in the doorway, she watched the story unfold on screen: the file footage of the smiling philanthropist, then the crime scene, and now the SFPD news conference. Two shackled and handcuffed suspects-a man and a woman in their mid-20s-were shown at their arraignment.

"Gosh, put a short blonde wig on that woman, and she could be you," Anna said, barely loud enough for her partner to hear.

Lily watched in stunned fascination as the suspects' names appeared on the screen: Kenneth McGinnis and Kristie Parker.

"Oh my god...I bet she's my sister."

## *Chapter 5*

Immediately, the blonde jabbed the remote, hoping to find the story playing elsewhere. Anna raced downstairs to the family room, where their HDTV was equipped with a personal video recorder. In moments, she was tracking the story, taping first on one channel then switching quickly to tape another.

"Did you get it?" Lily asked anxiously, rushing into the room at the commercial break.

"I think I got it on two stations, but only the last part. They were on it both times, though."

Lily hurried into the adjoining office, booting up the computer for an internet search. After what seemed an eternity, they finally logged into the web site for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Sure enough, the story was there, along with mug shots of the suspects, including one Kristie Lynn Parker, age 24, last address unknown.

"What do you think?" Lily asked her partner nervously. It was certainly possible that she was overreacting.

"I don't know. Was there anything about a sister in any of your adoption papers?"



"No, but according to this, she's only 24. I was already seven when I was adopted, so she would have been born a year after that."

Anna shook her head, bemused by this incredible coincidence. "I don't know, hon. There must be thousands of Parkers out there."

"Yeah, but this one lives in the Bay Area near my birth mother, and she happens to look just like me," she added grimly.

"Not just like you...similar, maybe. And Parker was probably her father's last name." Anna could see how this was upsetting her lover. "Is there any way you could find out?"

Lily was already working on that in her head. She had lots of friends in law enforcement that might be able to help her track down information on the suspects, but it wasn't likely any of that information would include a parent's name. "I'll try to call Andrew Shively tomorrow and see if he can help. If she got a driver's license when she turned 16, there's a chance she lived at the same address as Lisa Parker. That's a long shot, though."

"What about Sandy?" Anna suggested.

"How would...? Anna, you're a genius!" Given her own mother's atrocious parenting skills, it was likely that any child of hers would have had a social worker somewhere along the way. "I can't believe I didn't think of that."

Anna was immensely pleased at her contribution. They needed to get to the bottom of this soon, or Lily would go nuts. "Can you call her tomorrow?"

"No, she and Suzanne were going to Vegas this weekend with Pam and Tina. They won't be back until Sunday night."

"Then I guess we'll have to wait." She reached over and wrapped an arm around the blonde woman's shoulder. "You think you can last till then?"

"Guess I'll have to," she said, still in disbelief at the possibilities. "Wouldn't that be something if it turned out she's really my sister? And she's a murderer."

"You don't know any of that yet. She's just a suspect."

"Right." Maybe it all was a mistake. "I suppose we should go on to bed. Are we still on for a picnic tomorrow?" Lily knew she'd need lots of distractions to last until Sunday night when she could talk with her friend.

"Sure." Anna started turning off the lights while Lily shut down the computer.

Hours later, Lily lay awake, the picture of the green-eyed girl in the orange jumpsuit filling her

thoughts.

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"Hello."

"Lily? It's Sandy. We just got in. What's up?"

"Sandy...Anna, it's Sandy!" she called excitedly to her lover. Lily had spent much of the weekend downloading and studying all of the stories from the weekend newspapers, even going to the airport both days to buy a *Chronicle*. Quickly, she related to her friend the story of the woman charged with Peyton Graves' murder and asked if there was a way to go back several years in the system to trace any past interventions. "I think she may be my sister, Sandy. Her last name's Parker, and I swear she looks just like me."

"Your sister? You mean Lisa Parker had another child?" Sandy had gone with her friend to Oakland last year on a clandestine mission to see what had become of Lily's mother. They had found her working as a cocktail waitress at a Holiday Inn near the airport.

"I'm not sure. That's what I need you to find out. Can you look in the system and see if there's anything for a Kristie Lynn Parker?" Lily spelled the name as it appeared in the news reports. "I don't know how far back to tell you to go. She's 24 now."

"I'll give it a shot, but I can't monitor it while I'm out of the office. It may take a few days to get the results."

"That's okay. I'll appreciate anything at all you can do, Sandy."

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Lily resisted the urge to call her friend on Monday, but early Tuesday morning she had left a message with more detail on the Parker woman: her date of birth, which Andrew Shively had gotten from a friend in San Francisco who had a copy of her arrest report, and the correct spelling of her first name, K-r-i-s-t-y. That might possibly narrow Sandy's search.

By Wednesday Lily was beside herself, unable to concentrate on her work. "Sandy Henke please...I see...Has she been in the office today?" She knew it was too much to expect that Sandy would forego her regular duties in the field just to check on her computer output. For all

Lily knew, the social worker hadn't even had a chance to run the request yet.

At five o'clock, she said goodnight to her coworkers and headed to her AA meeting at the women's clinic. Lost in thought in the stop and go traffic of the Santa Monica Freeway, Lily was startled by the beeping of her cell phone. *Anna*.

Anna was worried about her partner. Lily had been totally absorbed in the news out of San Francisco, not eating as she should, and unable to sleep through the night. They needed some resolution to this soon, one way or another.

"Hey baby," she answered.

"Hey yourself. Are you going to your meeting?"

"As we speak. Though judging by all the 'Easy Does It' and 'One Day at a Time' bumper stickers I've seen, there are probably enough of us out here on this freeway to have a meeting on our own."

"What time do you think you'll be home?"

"Probably a little after seven. How about you?"

"I'll try to get there sooner. You want me to pick up Chinese?"

"That'd be great."

"Okay, babe. See ya then."

Lily loved it when Anna called her *babe*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lily booted up the computer as soon as she walked in the door, eager to search for today's news about the Peyton Graves murder case. "Anna?"

"In here. I have dinner."

"Okay. I'll be there in a minute. I just want to check to see if there are any updates."

Anna came into the office and stood in the doorway. There was no distracting Lily from this obsession. Though she hadn't been direct....

"How about you come in and have dinner with me first this time? Then I can go on upstairs with a book and you can stay down here half the night again."

Lily froze. That was a tone she hadn't heard in a really long time. Her first instinct was to bristle and fire off a snippy reply. But better judgment ruled the moment, and instead she simply nodded and followed her partner into the kitchen.

"Anna, I'm sorry I've been so crazy this week. I just wish I knew something."

"It's okay. I understand how important all this is to you, but you need to eat and you need to rest." Anna dished out the shrimp and snow peas onto mounds of steaming rice and set them on the small table in the breakfast nook. "And I was hoping we could spend a little time together tonight."

Lily couldn't help but smile at her partner's admission. She was lucky to have this woman in her life. Reaching across the table, she covered the larger hand with her own. "Tell you what. When we're done here, give me 10 minutes to check the *Chronicle* site, and I'll come upstairs."

Anna smiled as her mind raced ahead. "Deal."

Two quick rings announced a call on Lily's line. "What's your guess? Telemarketer or a survey?" The Laws of Annoyance said if you were eating dinner, it had to be one or the other.

"Uh...survey," Anna guessed. The telemarketers had already called three nights in a row.

"Hello...Sandy!"

Anna got up and went to stand beside her lover at the phone. Though both had been eager for news, now she found herself nervous at actually knowing for sure.

Lily drew in a deep breath and covered the mouthpiece. "Kristy's mom is Lisa Parker," she confirmed flatly, without giving away her state of mind.

Anna put her hand on her partner's back, not knowing at all what to expect when she got off the phone.

"Can I come get them now?" she asked. "Great! I'll be there in half an hour. You're the best, Sandy."

"What is it, Lily?"

"She got the match with the date of birth. Then she found some of the old reports. That's what she printed out, so I'm going to drive over and get them," she stated, her voice now shaking with tension.

"You want some company?"

Lily nodded, relieved that Anna wouldn't make her go alone. She had worried earlier that her partner wasn't going to indulge this obsession much longer.

"Let's go, then. I'll drive."

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Sandy had spread all 11 reports across their dining room table. The record of Kristy Parker's childhood was stark evidence of what might have happened to her friend had social services not aggressively intervened. That someone dropped the ball on the younger sister was evident, but it was clear that Lisa Parker hadn't stood in the way of a better placement. In fact, it appeared as though she hadn't been particularly interested in holding on to this second child at all.

"They're here," Suzanne called, spotting the sports car turning into the drive. Stepping out onto the front porch, she greeted the women as they charged up the steps.

"Hi Suzanne," Anna remembered her manners even if Lily did not. The attorney barreled directly through the door in search of her friend.

"Here it is," Sandy announced. "Pretty classic neglect and abuse. We've got five different interventions where Kristy was removed from the home. Two of them were neglect, two were physical abuse, and the other was suspected sexual abuse by Lisa Parker's boyfriend, but none resulted in any criminal charges."

Lily shuddered at the news, knowing well that few children who grew up like that were capable of a normal life. A silent rage simmered as she picked up the first report. "Is this all?"

"I think so. I started the run on Monday, working backwards through the records, but I didn't have anything when I checked back. When you gave me the date of birth and the new spelling, I put in another query working forward from that date, and that's when I started getting hits. But I had to wait to check them until everybody went home tonight."

"Why was that?" Anna asked.

"Well, technically this kind of thing is a no-no. I could get into trouble for misusing my access to information, but I've been with the state so long, I'd probably have to kill somebody to get fired."

Lily shot her an annoyed look.

"Oops, sorry. Poor choice of words." Sandy wasn't all that surprised that Kristy Parker had ended up behind bars, given her history. That Lily hadn't also was something for which they owed

Eleanor Stuart thanks.

Lily paged through one report after another, noting various social workers' observations that Lisa's parenting-or lack thereof-always stopped just short of criminal. Obviously, the woman was mindful of what might lead her back to prison, and clearly she didn't want to go. "This last report was when Kristy was 14 years old. Do you think you'll find more?"

"I doubt it. If you look at the last paragraph of that one, it says she ran away from her foster home. Lisa denied knowing where she was, but the social worker suspected she was back with her mother. They probably just closed her case on her 18th birthday, without a clue of where she was."

Lily dropped the report in disgust. "And that, ladies, is why so many kids need a guardian ad litem. I can't believe they didn't even pursue it."

The blonde was treading dangerously close to Sandy's turf. "Come on, Lily. You know what the case loads are like. Social workers don't have the means to chase kids who don't want to be found."

"I know, Sandy," she conceded sheepishly. "I just wish she'd had somebody looking out for her back then. Then maybe a good man like Peyton Graves wouldn't be dead."

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"So what do you think about all of this?" Lily asked as they drove home in the darkness. She'd sensed from their earlier near-argument that Anna was losing patience, but she'd seemed very interested in what Sandy had discovered.

"I think it's all pretty incredible. It's amazing to me how you always seemed to know it was her, but I have to admit I had the same feeling that first night we saw her on the news."

"It's really ironic. After all these years, I find out that I have a sister. And, oh by the way, she's a murderer."

"We still don't know that, Lily. Innocent until proven guilty, right?"

"It's supposed to be that way. But I know they don't lock people up and deny bail without having a pretty good case."

Anna had to agree. She'd read every article Lily printed out, and the prosecution was predicting a conviction already. Still, they hadn't released any information on their evidence, and it wasn't clear how McGinnis and Parker had been identified as the perpetrators.

"Maybe I should go see her," Lily wondered aloud.

Anna knew how important this new revelation was to her partner, and she wanted to be supportive. Still, she'd have to admit that the idea of Lily corresponding with a murderer was unsettling, to say the least.

"Why on earth would you want to do that? You don't know this woman at all, Lily."

"You're right, but shouldn't I try to know her? She's my sister."

"Just because you had the same mother?"

Lily sighed in exasperation. How could she expect her lover to understand? "Anna...I don't have any other family."

"That's not true and you know it." Anna reached over and took her partner's hand. "I'm family, and my family is yours too."

"I know, but you know what I mean."

"No, Lily. I really don't. Kim and I don't share a drop of blood, but she is my sister."

"But you were raised together, and you had people in common. I have people in common with Kristy, so in a way we shared an upbringing. Just not at the same time."

"What would you talk about with her? Would you commiserate about Lisa?" Anna was frustrated, feeling that the only thing that could come of Lily's meeting Kristy would be heartache.

Lily was silent for a long time, seeking a way to make her partner understand. "I could have been her so easily."

"But you weren't. And going to her now to show her what she might have been could only hurt both of you."

Anna's mention of Lisa made Lily shudder, reminding her that she was far removed from her life as a Parker. The trip to Oakland last year had affirmed that she wanted nothing to do with her past. Anna was right, and Lily gently squeezed the hand that held hers in silent thanks. "You're right, sweetheart. I don't know what I was thinking."

## *Chapter 6*

"Here's a headline you'll like." Anna tossed the A-section of Sunday's *LA Times* across the patio table.

"Which one?" Lily quickly scanned the front page, watchful of a story on the Peyton Graves case. "Oh, I see it. 'Earthquake prediction model faulty, geologist says'. That's hilarious. You're getting pretty good at this, Amazon."

"I had a good teacher." Anna grinned at her partner, who was buried in the state section. "Did you find anything today?"

"No, not yet. I'm not all the way through it, though." Every day for the past four weeks, Lily had scoured the paper for news. Little by little, evidence had been released that incriminated the two suspects: hair strands at the scene, traces of Graves' blood found on Parker's jeans, and pawn tickets among their things for items belonging to the murdered man. Neither suspect was cooperating with authorities.

"Could I interest you in-"

"Here's something! It's just a snippet, but I bet there's more on the web. It says 'San Francisco. A grand jury indictment in hand, District Attorney Warren Hasner has asked that a trial date be set for Kenneth McGinnis and Kristy Parker, both charged in the death of billionaire philanthropist Peyton Graves. Hasner indicated that the heinous nature of the crime warrants the death penalty for both suspects in the case.' Good god, Anna. Kristy could get the death penalty."

Anna shook her head in disbelief. Neither woman cared much for the idea of capital punishment; the recognition that it could impact someone they indirectly knew made it especially distasteful.

"Easy, babe. She hasn't even had a trial yet."

"You've seen the kind of evidence they have. It's going to be pretty hard to explain it all away." Lily was resigned to her sister's guilt, though in her heart of hearts, she'd hoped it had all been a big mistake.

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The attorney lugged her briefcase into her office and heaved it onto her desk. She'd had 13 placement reviews today, a new single-day record. Funny how part-time work could eat up 40



hours a week like this job sometimes did.

As far as scheduling, it was nice to know in advance that most of her children's hearings would be on Thursdays in Judge Evans' family court. Over the years, she'd developed a good working relationship with the irascible Rusty Evans, a grandfatherly sort with a real soft spot for the welfare of kids. Lily knew better than to enter his courtroom unprepared.

All in all, the attorney's day had been successful. Most of the cases were run-of-the-mill, usually recommendations for continuation of current placements, though a couple were denied and the children were returned to their parents. She'd obtained speech therapy services for a girl in foster care, and gotten two of her charges wait-listed for group homes. The last case was unusual and brought a smile to her face as she recalled Judge Evans' befuddled look as she made her request. She'd managed to secure a special provision that would allow a teenager currently finishing a long stint in a juvenile detention facility the space and time to practice his saxophone. A job in his cousin's weekend wedding band awaited his release and that, she argued, might just be the best way to put distance between the youth and his gang activities.

"Here are your messages, Lily," Pauline said, handing her a small stack of the pink and blue forms. "Sandy called three times, but she was on her way to a training session the last time she called. She said she'd stop by your house tonight about eight if that was okay. Otherwise, just leave a message on her voice mail."

*That's odd.* Lily couldn't imagine what would be so important that it wouldn't wait until tomorrow.

"Okay, thanks Pauline." The attorney deposited the files in her outbox so that their part-time clerk could transcribe her handwritten notes into the electronic version of the case files. With only 30 minutes before the close of business, she sat at her desk to return her other calls.

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"I'm next!" Lily announced from the kitchen as she heard her partner warmly greet the excited basset hound.

"Okay, but for the same treatment, you'll have to lick my face too," the car dealer answered, following her nose to the boiling pot on the stove.

"On second thought, maybe I'll pass. That dog licks his balls, you know, and if he's been licking your face, I don't think...."

"You're disgusting," Anna replied, suddenly snaring the smaller woman and rubbing her slobbery cheeks all over Lily's face.

"Ewww! Lily finally squirmed free of the assault. "Ball face."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"What's for dinner?"

"Meat balls and Brussels sprouts," the cook deadpanned.

"You're disgusting," the car dealer repeated.

"Would you believe pasta primavera?"

"That's better. I'll set the table. Do I have time to change?" Anna carried plates, napkins and silverware to the breakfast nook. Unless they entertained indoors-which was exactly twice in the last two years-the dining room was wasted space, often littered with accounting printouts from Premier Motors.

"Sure, as long as you wash your face. Sandy's coming by around eight."

"What for?"

"I don't know. She left a message at work. Suzanne's birthday's next month, so maybe she wants to talk about a surprise party or something." If not something like that, Lily couldn't imagine the reason for her friend's seeming urgency. "Why don't you set an extra place, in case she wants to join us?"

The hour came and went with no visitor. When they finished dinner, the pair cleaned up the kitchen and settled into their respective routines, Anna with her magazines and the Dodgers game on TV, Lily on the internet looking for news on the upcoming Graves trial.

It was closer to 8:30 when the social worker arrived, waving off the invitation for a bite to eat. Ushered into the family room, Sandy took a seat on the sofa beside her friend, her hand gripping a manila folder.

"So what's up? We don't often get the pleasure of your company." Anna discerned immediately from the look on Sandy's face that this wasn't a social call.

The social worker took a deep breath and began. "Lily, remember last month when you asked me to run that query on Kristy Parker?"

"Yeah." The blonde suddenly found her stomach in knots. She hoped her friend hadn't gotten into trouble because of the favor.

"Well, after I gave you those reports, I never went back to see if there was anything else. So this morning, our IT guy was cleaning out the document queue, and he brought me two reports. There were a couple more hits for Kristy Parker." Nervously, Sandy opened the folder and pulled out the papers. "It looks like she has a little boy of her own, and he's currently somewhere in the foster care system in San Francisco."

## *Chapter 7*

The blonde woman's face went almost white as she digested the news. "A little boy?"

"Yeah, here's the report. His name is Andres and he turns four next month. The first report has him taken out of the home because Kristy OD'd and ended up in the hospital. But he went back after about five months and stayed with her another year or so. The second time was a voluntary surrender."

Lily knew that voluntary surrenders were very rare. Usually they needed police to take children into protective custody. "What happened?"

"It was just over a year ago, it looks like she had to take him to the doctor. According to the social worker's notes, he'd been abused and they involved the authorities. Kristy said she didn't know who did it, but that there wasn't any way to keep him safe. So they persuaded her just to turn him over."

Lily was relieved to think that her sister had at least made a mature decision regarding the child's safety, though she suspected that it had more to do with not wanting the added obligation. That had been her case with Lisa.

"And did they sever parental rights?" That was key to having the child eligible for adoption.

"No, it looks like they left it open for her to get him back if her home situation changed."

"Well it's certainly changed now." Anna finally spoke. She'd been listening to the story, and watching her partner's face, wondering how she felt about this new development.

Lily looked fleeting at Anna then turned back to her friend. "Where is he now?"

"I'm not sure. I'd guess he's in a foster home, probably still in San Francisco, but the specific locations are coded so that the information is secure."

Lily knew that parents sometimes tried to abduct their children from foster care, so it was important to keep their placements secret if possible.

"Can we find him? I mean just to see if he's okay?" She glanced uncertainly at Anna to gauge the woman's reaction. After thinking over her partner's cautions about making contact with Kristy, Lily had conceded that it would serve no purpose. But this was different. *What if this little boy needs help?*

"Maybe, but you'll have to get in touch with the office up there. His social worker is John Moss. I can search the state directory tomorrow and call you with his direct number. But he might not tell you anything. In fact, he could get in trouble if he did."

Lily nodded in understanding, poring over the reports her friend had brought for details on the child. "Well I can try, right?" Nervously, she looked at her partner, pleading silently for approval to pursue this.

"Yeah, you should at least try to find out how he is," Anna agreed. She was rewarded immediately by the relief on Lily's face.

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"I appreciate your help, officers. If there's ever anything I can do for you, just let me know." Anna walked the two uniformed cops back to their cruiser.

Vandals had paid a visit to the VW dealership overnight, leaving 62 flat tires, one for each auto on the front lot. The scene was eerie when she arrived before eight this morning after answering her father's call. Each car tipped slightly, though the direction varied depending on which tire was punctured.

Their insurance would cover the damage, and already a crew was hard at work replacing the damaged tires. At least the video surveillance had captured the entire episode, and one of the teenagers was well known by the officers on this beat. It was just a matter of time before the police apprehended the boy and his cohorts, but Anna knew from Lily's work with troubled kids and families that the solution usually wasn't as simple as arrest and punishment.

As mood modifiers go, this senseless destruction of property was definitely a downer. The car dealer needed a couple of aspirin for the migraine that was threatening.

*"Anna Kaklis, you have a call on line two. Anna Kaklis on two,"* the loudspeaker blared.

*We need to drop the volume on that thing,* she thought, heading inside to the nearest empty

cubicle. "This is Anna Kaklis. Can I help you?"

"Hi hon."

"Lily! What did you find out?"

"I struck out. Sandy was right about the social worker not telling me anything." She had called as soon as she'd gotten Moss' direct number, only to be told adamantly that he couldn't give out that information.

Anna was genuinely sorry for her partner's disappointment. "Well at least you tried, sweetheart. You knew it was a long shot." Anna held the silent phone for 10 full seconds. "Lily, are you still there?"

"Yeah...I made an appointment to see John Moss in person on Monday morning." There, she'd gotten it out. Now she braced for Anna's reprisal, knowing her lover would object to her headstrong action.

A panic rushed through Anna as she suddenly imagined that her partner would return with a small child in tow. But Lily wouldn't make a decision like that by herself. Anna knew that her partner's world had been rocked with the news of Kristy, and now with Andres. Lily needed her support to come to terms with what it all meant.

"You're not...never mind," she said with trepidation.

"Is it okay?"

"Of course it's okay. Why wouldn't it be?" The car dealer's voice took on an agitated intonation as her headache grew more pronounced by the second.

"Please don't be upset, Anna. Can we talk about this tonight?" she asked hopefully. Ever since they'd discovered that Kristy had a child, she could sense a nervousness in her partner. *What's got her on edge?*

Anna sighed, pressing two fingers hard just above her left brow. "Lily, I'm not upset. Well, actually I am, but not with you. You know how annoying a flat tire can be?"

"You had a flat tire?"

"I had 62 of them."

\*\*\*\*\*

By noon that same day, Anna was back in bed, having thrown up three times already. Drugged sleep was the only relief for headaches like this one. It had gotten so bad that her father had driven her home, a salesman following in Anna's Z8.

It was Saturday morning before she and her partner were able to talk at all. Anna was still wary of the tension a serious conversation might bring.

"So how much of that headache is my fault?" the blonde asked, her feelings of guilt obvious.

"It isn't your fault at all," Anna answered quietly, sipping the hot tea with her dry toast. Yesterday's breakfast was too strong a memory to repeat. "I know that the boy is on your mind, Lily, but I'm not really up to talking about it just yet if that's okay."

"Of course. Is there anything I can do?" Lily knew the answer already. Anna's migraines had to run their course.

"No, I'm just going to take it easy today."

"Okay. Maybe I'll take Chester for a walk on one of the trails. That way, you'll have some peace and quiet."

Anna nodded, knowing she'd be back in bed soon to chase away the remnants. They needed to talk, but she just wasn't up to it.

An hour later, the happy hound was walking his mistress around the lake at the Kenneth Hahn Recreation Area. Lily hadn't felt much like gearing up for a rugged hike, even though Chester always managed to hold his own. This mindless meander through a family-filled park gave her time to think about what awaited her in San Francisco on Monday.

Andres Parker. Like Kristy and herself, this child carried only his mother's name. The given name suggested that his father—who Moss had said was deceased—might have been Latino. If history was repeating itself, the boy's first four years had probably been a nightmare.

Lily had decided she would take her adoption papers along to her meeting, hoping they'd help prove that her name too was Parker. That might be enough to convince them to check the state's database, which would show that she and Kristy had the same mother.

John Moss had listened skeptically as she'd told him of her relationship to the notorious criminal. When Andres, or Andy as he was called, was first removed from the home, he had located only one relative, a Lisa Parker Haney, Kristy's mother. Determining quickly that she wasn't a fit custodian, Moss shuffled the child off to professional foster parents. Other than these few details, the social worker hadn't been forthcoming at all, but he was willing to meet with Lily face to face if she was interested in following up.

And she was definitely interested in following up. Something deep inside called to her to see

about this child, if only to ensure that he was alright. It was, after all, her job to monitor the welfare of thousands of children who were unknown to her. The least she could do was see to it that this one, who happened to share her blood, was safe and in a setting that provided the best care.

The rest of Saturday passed without a chance for the two women to talk. Anna slept off and on, her migraine medication stealing both her appetite and affect. Lily knew the drill: dark and quiet.

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Anna awoke in the night disoriented by the darkness, having slept so much of the past two days. Lily lay beside her, the even breaths a sign of her sound sleep. *She needs it*, Anna thought. Lily hadn't slept well at all on Thursday night after they learned of Andres, and she'd probably slept little the night before. *And she'll be a nervous wreck all weekend.*

The dark-haired woman sensed a dramatic response in her partner to this news of a child; and truth be told, Anna too found herself emotionally drawn to the events of the past few weeks, but especially to the discovery of the young boy. Despite her initial reservations about Lily going to San Francisco-why on earth had she thought that Lily would simply bring the child home-Anna was glad that her partner was following up. She hoped Lily would find him healthy and happy, and that he might be able to have the same chance as she to escape a tenuous start in life.

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Anna finally crawled out of bed for good early Sunday morning, leaving her partner sound asleep. After a quick shower, she headed downstairs to forage for food, having eaten very little in the last two days.

Chester was glad to see the tall person up and about so early, as it meant his breakfast was imminent. Of course, he needed first to see a man about a dog.

"You're a good boy, Chester," the tall woman said as he returned through the doggie door. For some reason, the two-legged people really liked it whenever he went, whether on the leash or in the yard. And when he...ahem...they always collected it, presumably saving it for something very important.

"You're up early," came a raspy voice from the doorway.

"Yeah, I think 30 hours of sleep is enough for anybody. Did I wake you?"

"Just by being gone," Lily said sleepily. She had rolled over to caress an empty bed.

"The coffee will be ready in a minute." Anna delivered a kiss to her lover's forehead.

"Great. How's your headache?"

"It's gone now. I appreciate you looking after me."

"You didn't exactly require round-the-clock care."

"I know. But you were really quiet, and you kept Chester busy. And I saw you come in to check on me a couple of times." There wasn't really much one could do when she was in the throes of a migraine.

"Well I'm glad you're feeling better. You want me to fix breakfast?"

"No, I think I'll stick with cereal."

"I'll go get the paper then." Lily walked out the front door to the driveway, a spectacle in her plaid flannel boxers and faded purple tank top with the hand-sized hole in the back. Her blonde hair stood straight up on one side, and was perfectly flat everywhere else. Anna thought she looked adorable.

As was their habit, the women perused the Sunday paper on the patio by the pool, Chester lounging underneath in case they dropped the corner of a muffin or a pat of butter-or even better, the corner of a buttered muffin.

"So what do you hope to find in San Francisco?" Anna asked without looking up from the paper.

Lily dropped the sports page and drew a deep breath. Not wanting to trigger another headache for her lover, she hoped they weren't headed for a confrontation.

"I just want to find out how he is," she offered.

Anna's blue eyes met hers with undeniable conviction. "I'm glad you're going. I think it's the right thing."

Lily had heard wrong, or the mushrooms in her omelet were of the hallucinogenic variety. "You do?"

Anna nodded, smiling softly. "Yes, I do." Setting the paper down, the tall woman leaned back and folded her arms across her chest, looking away in thought for a moment, then back at her green-eyed lover. Serious Talk Time. "I woke up last night and laid there for a long time thinking about it. I don't know exactly why, but I'm anxious about him too. And I can see that this is



important to you."

"It is. I can't explain why, because I don't really know myself. Maybe it's because I know what it was like for him. Anna, he's the same age I was when I was put up for adoption."

Anna nodded again in understanding. "You should go see about him. Do you need me to do anything?"

Lily found herself suddenly overwhelmed at how deeply she loved this beautiful woman. "No, I don't think so. I'm just going to fly up in the morning and come right back tomorrow. I called Tony already to let him know I'd be out all day."

"Okay, but if you think of something, let me know."

"I will. And thank you, sweetheart. For everything."

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Sundays were special. The women did relaxing things, like lingering over the Sunday paper, cooking something adventurous, usually finishing their day in the pool or hot tub. In amongst those things, they usually found time for savoring one another.

Today, it started when they passed one another in the kitchen, the ritual flirtation beginning with a casual touch, a suggestive look, and a promising smile. Then more deliberate, with a firm caress and a passionate kiss. The taller woman led the way to the top of the stairs, her chest pounding hard in anticipation of what was to come.

Lily doffed her clothes the moment they reached the unmade bed, pulling Anna's shirt up as they lowered themselves, locked in a fiery kiss. Somehow, the shorts and panties disappeared as well and soon their naked bodies were sliding against one another across the cool cotton sheets. Two sets of hands pulled the other closer until finally Lily's fingers slid below the curved buttocks, and through her lover's slippery center. "Roll onto your stomach," she whispered, and Anna complied, clutching the pillow that would soon stifle her cries. The blonde woman drew alongside, draping her knee between the long shapely thighs to urge them further apart. "Open for me."

Anna spread her thighs and soon her fervent want demanded that she rise to meet the gently probing fingers, drawing up her knees so she could drive against the pressure of her lover's touch.

"You're so beautiful," Lily told her, taking in the magnificent sight as she watched her fingers disappear inside. Both women relished the intimacy of this exchange, the prone partner fully

exposed in complete surrender.

"God, Lily," she moaned, rocking breathlessly at the three fingers that filled her. "God, you feel so good."

"Tell me when it's time." Lily's breath was now mere inches from the writhing woman's ear, and her whispered words spoke to Anna's very core.

Anna moaned her agreement, trying hard to temper her need. She wanted this to last. Closing her eyes tightly, she climbed higher as her lover continued the rhythmic caress.

"Now," Anna begged.

Lily rose to her knees, circling her free hand underneath to cradle Anna's hips. Finally, she slipped a single fingertip through the curly triangle, stopping when she found the hardened nub that would unlock the imminent explosion.

"Oh god!" The rocking grew frantic. "Li-ly," she moaned, sucking in a final deep breath and holding it while the orgasm hovered.

"That's it, baby. Come for me." Lily felt the sudden sharp squeeze from the walls inside, the rapid pulsing that followed signaling a powerful climax.

Her body shaking, Anna buried her reddened face into the pillow and screamed her release.

Lily slowed her tandem strokes and gently drew her fingers from within.

Inch by inch, Anna lowered herself to the bed as she caught her breath, once again stretching her legs until she was completely prone.

Lily slid closer to rest across her back, her own wet curls nestling against the curve of Anna's hip. "I love you so much," she sighed, feeling at that moment like the most special person in the universe because of what they had just shared.

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The blonde figure rose gingerly from the bed, ever mindful of what "they" say about paybacks. Anna had delivered on her vow to love her until she walked funny, but every twinge would be a pleasant reminder of their afternoon and evening together.

"Honey, are you okay?" the dark-haired woman mumbled without opening her eyes.

"I'm fine. Go back to sleep," she coaxed, rubbing her hand softly across her lover's back.

"What time is it?"

"It's a quarter after four. I need to get in the shower. My plane leaves at 7:05."

Lily slipped into the bathroom and closed the door, hoping to shield the sleeping woman from the light and noise of her morning routine. A simple olive-green dress already hung on the back of door; in fact, everything she'd need sat waiting by the sunken oval tub.

Stepping into the warm shower, her thoughts traveled north to San Francisco. *Maybe I can even see him today.* She hoped John Moss would understand her concern and see her as a potential ally in securing the best placement and care for the boy.

Other than a name and birthday, Lily knew almost nothing about Andy Parker. Who was his father? Was he healthy? Did he have any special needs? Was he a happy child? What did he look like? In just the last year in foster care, he had already lived in four different homes. From her experience with the foster care system, that was a red flag; usually signaling a child who had difficulty adjusting to his or her environment, or a child with unmanageable needs.

The bigger question for Lily was what she would do if she found him? If his care was inadequate, how could she help him? Certainly, if there were legal matters involved, she could advise and assist, but the fact remained that she lacked standing; that is, she couldn't simply insert herself into the decision-making process where this child was concerned unless she formally declared herself a relative. And that might require a face-to-face meeting with a murderer.

Lily shook the excess water from her hair even as she shook off the image of the green-eyed woman in handcuffs. By the time she'd dressed and applied the barest hint of makeup her hair was almost dry, sparing Anna the noise of the blower at barely five a.m. Turning off the light, Lily tiptoed back to the bed to deposit a soft kiss on Anna's temple.

"Lily?"

"Yes, honey. Sorry I woke you."

"It's alright." Anna rolled over onto her back. "I think I'll get up now anyway."

"You can still sleep another hour." Lily felt guilty for robbing her lover of her rest.

"Fly safely, okay?"

"Of course. And in the unlikely event of a water landing...."

Both women chuckled.

"Good luck today."

"Thank you."

"Do you know what you want to find?"

"Yes." Lily wanted for Andy what she wanted for every child. "I want to see him healthy and happy, and surrounded by people that really care about him."

KEEP READING!!! (Don't worry, I'll tell you when to stop.) [Part 3](#)

### [The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

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## ~ Strained ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** [See Part 1](#)

### **Strained - Part 3**

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### ***Chapter 8***

The blonde waited nervously in the reception area of the busy government office, hoping this wouldn't be a wasted trip. John Moss was 45 minutes late, apparently called out this morning by police to a domestic disturbance involving children. Lily understood these emergencies-she herself had worked cases like these as an attorney-but hoped that Moss could resolve the matter and still have time to meet with her today.

Everywhere she looked, people were on the phone or scrolling through information on their desktop monitors. About half the desks were empty, their owners likely in the field checking on

the status of their charges. The waiting area was overflowing.

"Is there a Lilian Stuart here?" A middle-aged woman stepped up to the other side of the long counter.

"Yes, right here." The attorney hurried up to the counter with her purse and folders. *Thank goodness!*

"I have a message for you from John Moss. He's going to be tied up for another hour or two. He apologizes, but he's dealing with an emergency this morning."

"It's okay. I understand." It would serve no useful purpose to complain, and Lily knew from experience that no one else in the office would be able to help. Besides, it was possible that Mr. Moss would feel guilty for having her cool her heels, and would be more cooperative about Andy.

Turning back to the waiting area, Lily discovered to her chagrin that her chair had been taken.

"Excuse me, but would you ask Mr. Moss to-?" Just like that, the woman had disappeared. *Great.*

Lily fished out her cell phone and dialed Moss' direct number, leaving a message that she was going for coffee and would be back in the office at 11:30, one hour from now. Leaving her callback number, she tucked her belongings and headed for the elevator.

No sooner had she stepped from the building than her phone rang, the caller ID registering an unknown local number.

"Lilian Stuart."

"Ms. Stuart, John Moss here. Listen, I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I called right back and was told you'd left, so I was really glad you left your number."

"I'm glad I did too."

"Yeah. So I've been stuck waiting for a policeman to sign a release form but he just did, so I'm leaving the scene now. Why don't you meet me downstairs in 20 minutes, and we'll grab some coffee and talk about Andy Parker."

"That'd be great, Mr. Moss."

"John. Mr. Moss was my dad."

"John. I'm Lily, and I'll be right here in front of the building."

True to his word, 20 minutes later a slender man in his late 30s rounded the corner and strode

toward the pacing blonde. Dressed in khaki chinos and tweed blazer, his striped tie hung loosely from the collar of his denim shirt. The man was only a few inches taller than Lily, and wavy brown hair receded slightly from his forehead.

"Lily Stuart?"

"That's me," Lily answered, locking her best smile in place as she held out her hand. She needed to win this man over.

"John Moss. Nice to meet you, and I'm really sorry I kept you waiting."

"That's alright. I understand. It happens to me in my work all the time."

"Oh yeah? What kind of work do you do?" He gestured with his hand in the direction of the coffee shop.

"I'm an attorney...a family attorney. Mostly I advise the guardian ad litem program in LA." She wanted this man to know that she knew her stuff, but also that she was his comrade, one of the good guys.

The social worker stopped abruptly on the sidewalk. "Uh, would you mind terribly showing me some ID?"

Lily smiled, actually appreciating the level of this man's scrutiny.

Moss inspected the driver's license and handed it back, satisfied that this was indeed the Lilian NMI Stuart who had shown up in his records last Friday afternoon as the adopted daughter of Eleanor Stuart, birth daughter of Lisa Parker.

"So as a family attorney, you're aware of all the privacy restrictions in place regarding the kids in state custody."

"Yes, I am. But we covered that on the phone last week, so I hoped we could move on to why you offered to have me come up anyway. Surely if there was no way I could get information on this child, you'd have told me so then and saved me this trip."

"I was...intrigued."

"Intrigued?"

"Yeah, I actually didn't believe you. I thought you were another reporter. A guy called last month trying to find Andy so he could do some kind of 'bad seeds' story, blaming everything on the failures of the system."

"You thought I was a reporter?"

"Yeah, but I did some checking on Friday afternoon and found your adoption records. They were never sealed, you know, so linking you to Lisa Parker was actually pretty easy. So was linking Kristy Parker. And you kind of look like her, by the way."

"Actually, since I'm older, she looks like me," she corrected cordially. "So now that you're convinced that I'm related to Andy, does that mean you'll tell me about him?"

"I am satisfied that you're related to him, but I'm going to want to know more before I give away any confidential information."

"What do you want to know?" Lily's heart was starting to race. She couldn't believe she was this close to finding out something.

"Mostly I just want to know what's in this for you." In Starbucks, they each got black coffee and climbed the spiral staircase to a small table in the loft overlooking the entrance.

"I don't want anything at all, if that's what you're asking. I just need to know that he's alright." That was the simple answer. The *why* was elusive, even to her. "I've been there, and I can only imagine what kind of parent Kristy Parker was, given that Lisa Parker raised her. If there is anything I want, it's my peace of mind."

"And what if he isn't alright?"

Lily's stomach lurched. "Does that mean he isn't?"

"I didn't say that. I just want to know what you plan to do if you find out...say, that things aren't as good for him as they should be, or even that they could be. What will you do?"

"I...think that I would...try to do whatever I could to make it better. Maybe ask for a new placement, or better services. It would depend on the circumstances." Lily was starting to feel like a dog that had chased a car and actually caught it.

"And would you ask as Andy's aunt? Or as a lawyer? Or as your garden variety critic of the system?"

"I...really don't know the answer to that," she replied nervously. He was really putting her on the spot. "I'm not a critic of the system anymore than you are, though. In a way, I'm a part of it too."

"Let me phrase it another way, Lily. If you found Andy's situation to be lacking, would you be willing to take him into your home...as his aunt?" It wasn't often that Moss talked with relatives of children like Andy who were educated professionals. If the Italian handbag and shoes were any indication, Lily's husband was probably making a pretty good living too.

"You're not trying to clear your caseload here, are you?" she asked, half teasing, half serious. Besides, her question might deflect his, as she definitely wasn't ready to answer his.

"Not at all," the social worker replied calmly, not offended by her innuendo. "You strike me as the kind of person who cares about the kids you work with, and you should know that I'm that kind of person too. I care about Andy, and I want what's best for him."

Lily turned red at the gentle reproach. John Moss had all the traits of a first-rate social worker. If she weren't able to see for herself how Andy was doing, she was at least relieved to know that the boy had this kind of advocate.

"I think I can tell that about you, John."

"So to answer my question...are you interested in custody?"

The shake of the blonde head was barely perceptible. "I'm not looking for that."

"Too bad. I would like very much to place Andy with a relative who can give him some stability. Nobody really knows how all this is going to be resolved, but if Kristy Parker's convicted, we're probably going to move to sever parental rights."

"And then he'll be eligible for adoption, right?" Like she had been at four years old.

"Yes."

"And what do you think of his chances?"

Moss still wore his poker face. "I honestly don't know. What kind of life would you want for him?" The social worker sensed that there was more to Lily's interest than simple affirmation that the child was alright. Her emotions were very close to the surface, and soon she would spill it.

"I want him to be saved from all of this. I want him to be loved, and to be able to grow up without having to be part of his past. I want him to have a chance." She was close to tears, but fought hard to keep them at bay.

The two sat silently, sipping their coffee for several minutes. Finally John spoke.

"My car's in the garage around the corner. What do you say we take a little ride out toward Candlestick Park? There's a house just around the corner...."

Lily stood immediately and pitched her empty cup in a nearby bin. "I'm ready when you are."

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Lunch was the proverbial rubber chicken, with some sort of...sauce. The eight diners at Anna's



table had practically fought over the bread basket, giving up on the main entrée and the too-cooked mixed vegetables. At least the salad had been edible, and all were looking forward to the chocolate mousse.

This was the annual Entrepreneur Awards Luncheon for the Greater Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. As one of last year's winners for her sweeping acquisition of three new dealerships, Anna was seated near the speakers' table with several of the movers and shakers who had made their mark in LA's business community. At the tables near the back, diners networked with one another, meeting as many people as possible to help grow their new or struggling businesses. At Anna's table, the subject was city politics, a topic which in LA was the rubber chicken equivalent of discussion.

A tapping on her shoulder took her mercifully away from an anti-city hall tirade.

"Greg, hi! How are you?" Greg Cahill owned a string of office supply franchises throughout the region. As the Chamber's vice-president, he would ascend to the top job after the next election, two months away. Like Anna, Greg and his businesses were ardent supporters of several projects that benefited children, either in the schools or in the neighborhoods. Anna liked him a lot, and he drove a black Premier 740iL.

"I'm doing great, Anna. It's good to see you. Listen, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I wonder if you'd mind joining a few of us for a short meeting after lunch. I promise it won't take long."

"Sure," she nodded. If Greg was getting behind something, chances were she would too.

"Great. We'll meet in the Palm Room down the hall. Oh, and Geri just ordered a sandwich tray," he added with a wink.

"Then I'll definitely be there."

Anna walked into the room after the luncheon to find a small group of the Chamber's elite members, including several past officers. Anna herself had served as the organization's treasurer three years ago.

"Anna! Thanks for joining us," Greg said eagerly.

Suddenly nervous to realize that all eyes in the room were on her and smiling, Anna thought fleetingly about faking a vibrating page. *This is about me.*

"You're welcome, Greg. Hi everyone," she added, nodding in the direction of the smiling faces. "So what's this about?"

"This is about your campaign for vice-president. We really want you to run, and we'll all do our part to help you get elected."

Anna had worked like a dog the last time she'd served the Chamber. *Well, not like Chester, but*

*maybe like a working dog....* However, she knew from others who had held various posts that no office was as demanding as treasurer, and she'd survived it.

"Why me, Greg?" There were lots of Chamber members with more business experience than she, and Anna was almost certain she wouldn't get much support from the old guard. They'd want one of their own.

"Because you're the kind of leader we need: somebody who has shown that she knows how to operate a sound business and make it grow; somebody who can be a good role model for other women and young people in the business community; and somebody who cares about the whole community, not just her own business interests."

Anna was staggered by Greg's unwavering praise, more so by the way it was echoed by the nodding heads around the room.

"Well I...."

"Just say yes, and we'll worry about the rest," he prodded.

Anna sighed. It was a two-year commitment, as the charter called for the vice-president to automatically succeed the president. That was a lot of time, but it would give her a platform for advocating better business practices and more community involvement.

"Okay. I'll run."

The room erupted in applause, and everyone rushed forward to offer their thanks and congratulations.

*I hope I don't regret this.*

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Moss wheeled his Honda Civic south on 101 toward the infamous stadium on Candlestick Point. Only the sportscasters called the landmark by its corporate name, 3-Com Park. Over the years, Lily had collected lots of memories of sporting events here in the park. In fact, her mother and Katharine Fortier were seated in the upper deck before the start of the World Series in 1989 when the tall lights began to sway from the Loma Prieta quake.

"So what kind of work does your husband do?" the social worker asked, snapping her back from that frightening memory. *Please don't say he's a mobster.*

Lily chuckled, knowing that the ring she wore had led him to that erroneous assumption. "She

sells cars."

Momentarily perplexed, Moss recovered nicely as understanding dawned. "And do you two have any children?"

"No, but we have a basset hound, and my partner and I seem to take turns acting like children from time to time."

"I know what you mean. My wife says I do that too."

"How about you? Do you have children?" Lily was really starting to like this man, and again she was glad that the wheels of fate had landed Andy's case on his desk.

"Two boys, 12 and nine. I tell you, sometimes after a really tough day, I have to go straight to their rooms when I get home and tell them how much I love them."

"Believe me, I understand. We see some horrible things in this line of work. Still, I like knowing that I'm doing something about it."

"Me too," he concurred. "Here we are."

Moss parked and led Lily up the steps to the porch of a narrow three-story house. The garage took up the ground level, so the front door entered on the second story. They were expected, as the social worker had called on the way over.

"Nice to see you again, John. Come on in."

"Hi Mary Beth. Sorry about the short notice," Moss apologized.

"Not a problem. We've just had lunch."

Moss and Lily entered the small living room, where the social worker made the introductions. "Lily, this is Mary Beth Shull. She and her husband have been foster parents with us for about eight years."

"Hi Mrs. Shull. I'm Lily Stuart," she eagerly offered, barely able to avert her eyes from the three young boys huddled around the TV. If one of them was Andy, he was big for his age.

"Call me Mary Beth. Even the boys do."

Taking in the heavysset woman with an abundance of gray hair, Lily surmised that Mary Beth Shull was in her mid-fifties. She doubted seriously that any of the children in the room belonged to this woman and her husband. In fact, besides the actual presence of the boys in the room, there wasn't much evidence that children lived here. There were no toys, games or books of any kind in the room. Everything was neat and orderly, and Lily immediately got the impression that Mary Beth Shull ran a tight ship.

"It's nice to meet you Mary Beth. Thanks for letting us come."

"It's alright. I told Andy that someone was coming to see him, and he slipped upstairs to the bedroom without finishing his lunch. He's pretty shy."

"Can we go up there?" Lily was almost shaking with anticipation.

"Right this way." The blonde woman fell in behind Mrs. Shull and Moss brought up the rear. Straight ahead at the top of the stairs was a small bathroom, the upward toilet seat a sign that its last visitor had been one of the young boys. To the left was a closed door, presumably the Shull's bedroom. The room on the right was open, two sets of bunk beds visible from the doorway. Apparently, all four of the boys shared this small room.

"Andy?" the foster mother called.

Lily stepped into the room behind her, her eyes drawn immediately to movement in the corner behind the tall chest of drawers. A small brown-haired boy squatted low, his green eyes wide as he watched the new people enter the room. Even in his crouched position, Lily could see that he was quite small for his age, probably less than 30 pounds. His complexion was slightly darker than her own, evidence of his Latino parentage.

"Andy, do you remember John?" she coaxed.

If he did, he didn't let on.

"Hi Andy. How are you, buddy?" Moss smiled a friendly greeting to the boy. "I brought someone to see you today. This is Lily. Can you say hi?"

Lily slowly squatted lower, careful not to crowd the child in the corner. From here, she noticed that his hands tightly clutched a small toy car. "Hello Andy. What's that you're playing with?"

The boy didn't answer, but meekly held out the toy for her inspection, as though afraid that she would take it from him. He was dressed in oversized red gym shorts with a faded blue t-shirt, most likely hand-me-downs from children who had stayed with the Shulls over the last eight years.

"That's a nice car. Is it fun to play with?" Lily found herself wanting badly to connect with this child. Simple questions might draw him out.

Andy nodded and pulled it back.

"He really likes to play with cars," Mrs. Shull interjected. "We have about five or six of those matchbox cars here that he keeps hidden under the bed so the other boys won't get them," she added, walking to the lower bunk on the left to retrieve his stash.

Andy followed her with his eyes, anxious that she knew of his secret place.

"One of my friends likes cars too, Andy," she continued, reminded at once of her beautiful partner.

"Behavior-wise, he's not a lot of trouble," the foster mother offered, talking as though the child weren't in the room. "He doesn't talk much and he plays by himself a lot. But he's a very picky eater, and he doesn't wash himself very well."

Lily had learned some of those same things about herself from the papers Eleanor had saved.

"How's his asthma been?" Moss asked.

"He has asthma?" Lily was momentarily startled by this piece of information. She still had a few problems herself with the condition, and knowing its hereditary nature, she wondered if Kristy also had suffered with it.

"From what I can tell from his records, it seems to be a little worse in the summer time. I had to move him down to the couch the other night because his coughing was keeping the other boys awake."

The image of the small boy alone downstairs in the night almost broke Lily's heart. The best medicine for an asthma attack was a double-edged sword at night. It usually stopped the coughing but stimulated the senses, making it difficult to fall asleep.

"Mary Beth, why don't we go talk in the kitchen for awhile and let Lily visit with Andy?" Moss liked Lily's fearless approach to the anxious child, and hoped if they disappeared, Andy might actually talk to her.

Now alone with the bashful boy, Lily adjusted her dress and sat cross-legged in the floor. His wide eyes never left her as she reached out to drag the other cars over to the space between them.

"Which one of these is your favorite, Andy?"

Shyly, the boy leaned forward and crawled the few feet to where she sat, pointing to a small convertible.

"This one?"

He nodded, still not making a sound.

"I like that one too. Can I see the one you have in your hand?"

Reluctantly, Andy gave up the small black Firebird with flames painted on the hood. This was the "Bandit," Lily remembered. "This one's very nice too," she remarked, quickly handing it back to him. It was important that she establish a sense of trust.

"So which bed is yours?"

Andy stood and walked to the lower bunk. "'Dis one," he finally spoke.

"It looks like a fun place to sleep, like having your own little room."

"I can climb 'dis," he indicated, grabbing the ladder that led to the upper bunk. In a flash, he began to demonstrate.

Lily stood instinctively, readying herself to catch him. "Wow, you're a good climber, Andy."

They had finally broken the ice, and the boy spent the next half hour showing his new friend how he could cross his eyes, balance briefly on one foot, and almost reach the top bunk when he clumsily jumped up from the floor. Next, he showed her his other pair of shoes, and the five t-shirts and two pairs of shorts in bottom drawer of the nightstand. Lily delighted in the way he opened up, and genuinely enjoyed watching him show off.

Time flew as he entertained her in the crowded room upstairs. She was surprised when Moss and Mrs. Shull appeared again in the doorway, and he suddenly became subdued.

"We've been having a lot of fun," she stated, still smiling at the shy boy who had retreated to sit on his bed against the wall.

"We've been hearing all that fun," his foster mother admonished, an obvious reference to the jumping they had heard from downstairs. "You haven't been climbing on the ladder, have you Andy?"

The child looked down without answering.

"Uh, that was my fault. I asked him if he could and he showed me. Sorry, I didn't know he wasn't supposed to do that." Lily wasn't sure why she suddenly felt like a co-conspirator, but she wasn't going to let the child be punished on her account.

"Andy knows he's not allowed to do that. Don't you, Andy?"

The boy nodded solemnly.

Thankfully, that reprimand was his only punishment, and Lily shot him a quick wink and a smile to lessen the blow.

"I need to be getting back to my office, Lily. Are you about ready to go?"

An inexplicable panic gripped Lily as she realized that their time together was over. She had really enjoyed playing with the boy, and found herself strangely moved by the connection she felt.

Ducking under the top bunk, Lily started her goodbye. "I have to go, Andy. Do you think I could have a hug to take with me?"

"Oh, he doesn't really like physical contact that much. That's probably from being abused when he was with his mother."

Lily flinched at the mention of Kristy Parker, but was more annoyed that the foster mother had brought that up in front of the child. It was as though she had little regard for his feelings. *Maybe she doesn't.*

Turning back to the child, Lily coaxed him one more time. "Would it be okay if I gave you a hug?"

Slowly he crawled to the edge of the bed, rising up on his knees to wrap his small arms around the blonde woman's neck.

Lily's eyes quickly filled with tears at the tender gesture, and she hugged the boy fiercely to her chest. "Maybe I'll come back to visit you again sometime. Would you like that?" *Did I just say that?*

Andy nodded, and Lily slowly stood. Looking back one last time at the bright green eyes, she smiled and started down the steps.

Moss was quiet as they pulled away, aware that his companion was working hard at composing herself. Finally, he broke the silence.

"So are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied with what?"

"Satisfied that he's doing alright. That's what you came to check on, isn't it?"

"He seems to be relatively healthy, except for the asthma she mentioned."

"His last checkup was pretty good. And the Shulls take pretty good care of the kids that stay there."

"But he doesn't seem to be particularly happy. I guess that's not all that unusual for kids in foster care, is it?" Lily lamented.

"Yeah, he might do a little better if there were fewer kids there. The Shulls are only certified for two children, but they've had four at a time for most of the last year."

"That's terrible. How can you let that happen?" She was immediately sorry at her accusatory tone. "I mean, isn't there somewhere else he could go?"

"You know what it's like. We just don't have enough beds for the kids that need them. All in all, the Shulls are doing a pretty good job."

"She seems nice enough, but you've got to admit she's a little severe. I mean there were four children in the house, and the only toys in the house were hidden under the bed. And Andy acted like he was afraid of her when she said that about him climbing on the ladder."

"Lily, I understand what you're saying, believe me. Our house looks like a toy box in every room. But a lot of these kids come into foster care with absolutely no sense of order or rules. It isn't such a bad thing that they learn a few boundaries."

"But they're still kids, John. And I didn't like how she talked about Andy with him sitting right there in the room."

Unknown to the ranting woman, the social worker was actually enjoying her tirade. Everything she said was a sign that she cared, and when she'd shared the touching hug with the boy, he'd stepped into hall and pumped his fist in the air twice, mouthing a silent "Yes!"

"Do you need to go back to the office, or is there somewhere I could drop you?" he asked, approaching the freeway entrance.

"How about SFO? Would that be too much trouble?" Now that her business was finished, she could probably catch an earlier flight back to LA.

Turning south, they drove in silence once again.

"John, could I ask you a huge personal favor?"

"Sure." He really liked this woman, and he was pretty sure of what she was going to ask.

"Will you keep me posted on how he's doing?"

Moss didn't answer right away, carefully choosing his words. "I will if you'll do something for me," he finally offered.

"What's that?"

"Will you go home and think about taking him in?"

Lily's stomach fluttered at the suggestion. When she'd felt the boy's arms go around her neck, she'd been ready to scoop him up and take him home right then.

"That's not a decision I can make by myself. I just don't think this is a good time for us." The excuse sounded feeble, but she and Anna had agreed that they wanted more time together before they thought about the prospect of children. Besides, this wasn't just any child; he was the child



of a sister she had never met.

"But it's a good time for Andy. He's doing okay, but he could do a lot better with somebody like you." Moss wheeled the small car into the departures lane. "What's your airline?"

"United," she answered, picking up her folders from the floorboard, and hooking her handbag over her shoulder.

Moss maneuvered in front of the United Airlines section and pulled to a stop.

"If I decided to keep him for a while, would Kristy have to know?" The longer she thought about it, the more unattractive was the prospect of actually meeting her half sister.

"I'm afraid so. Under the terms of voluntary surrender, it's policy that we advise the parents of every change in placement."

"But does she need to know that I'm her sister?"

Reluctantly, Moss nodded. "I can't recommend a move out of the county unless it's a relative."

Lily sighed deeply and stepped out of the car, leaning back in to finish their discussion. "I guess you have your answer then, John. I'm just not ready to do that. I'm sorry. I really appreciate all you did today."

"Glad I could help you find out what you wanted, Lily," he said, not even trying to conceal his disappointment. He may have lost Round One, but he was certain that the idea had taken root. They would talk again, and soon.

## *Chapter 9*

Anna was glad to see the X5 already in the garage when she got home. Lily had left a message for her at work that she had seen Andy, and was at the airport. Still, her scheduled flight wasn't until six, so the car dealer hadn't expected her before eight.

"Lily?" Anna strode into the family room, stopping briefly to pet the happy hound.

"In here."

Anna continued into the kitchen, where her partner was running a garlic press over a buttered split loaf. "Hey, baby. When did you get back?"

Lily stretched up for a kiss. "I got to the airport early and walked onto an earlier flight. Good thing you didn't try to sneak your girlfriend home, huh?"

"What? She isn't upstairs?"

"Funny, Amazon. You shouldn't tease the cook, you know." Lily sprinkled the seasoning on a pair of salmon steaks. "You could come down with a serious case of chickenella."

"A case of what?"

"Chickenella. You know, you get salmonella from undercooked chicken, and...."

Anna groaned at the feeble joke as Lily took the steaks out to the grill. "I want to hear all about your day. Is there anything I can do?" The table was set, the salad was tossed, and the bread was in the oven.

"Nope, everything's under control. I'll tell you about it when we sit down."

"Okay. What do you want to drink?" Anna asked, poking her head into the refrigerator.

"Let's see. White wine would be good." Now *that* was a joke.

"Smart ass. Just for that, I'm going to pour you a glass of chocolate milk to go with your fish."

"You're gross."

Anna opened a bottle of ice cold sparkling water and plucked two glasses from the cabinet. Lily was bringing in the steaks just as she finished cutting up a lemon.

"That looks great, hon. Slaving over a hot stove, all for me."

"These are both mine. What are you having?"

"I was thinking about battered pygmy."

"Such a funny girl," Lily answered, crinkling her nose. She thoroughly appreciated her lover's quick wit. Retrieving the bread from the oven, she and Anna sat down at the table.

"So tell me all about Andy. Where's he living?" Anna started in on the warm bread and waited for her lover's report.

Lily described the Shull's crowded home, a two bedroom house with four children and two adults. Borrowing Anna's silverware, she laid out a model of the small bedroom, showing where

the bunk beds were, and where she found the small boy hiding.

"What did he look like?"

"Oh Anna, he was beautiful! He's really small for his age-Mary Beth says he's a picky eater-and he's got curly light brown hair, and big green eyes like mine."

*Eyes like yours? He'd slay me.*

"And he's really bashful, but he finally opened up and started to play with me. He's very sweet. Oh, and guess what he likes to play with most! You'll love this."

"I...have no idea."

"Cars. He loves cars, you know, those little matchbox cars. He has a bunch of them that he hides under the bed." Lily went on to tell about the "tricks" he did, and how he showed off for her until the other adults returned. "He was adorable. And when I had to leave, he gave me a big hug; I tell you, it just stole my heart."

Anna nodded, enjoying her partner's obvious excitement. "I'm really glad you went, sweetheart. It sounds like he's doing okay."

"Well, he is doing...okay. I just wish...."

"You wish what?"

Lily set down her fork and sighed. *How do I explain this?* "I wish that he were...I don't know...happier. Foster care can be a cruel system sometimes."

"What do you mean?" Anna was disappointed that her partner's excitement was now gone.

"It's just the nature of the beast. They move these kids around so much that they actually discourage the foster parents from trying to bond with them because it can cause separation problems for some of them when they have to leave."

"Well I guess that makes sense."

"Yeah, so Andy has a safe place to stay, and a bed, and he gets his meals and his bath. But he doesn't get to laugh and play very much, and I don't think he gets any affection at all. I think I might have been the first person to hug him in I don't know how long."

"That's too bad." Anna knew from her Kidz Kamp outings how much some of the kids craved adult attention. "So how long do you think he'll be there?"

"Probably not much longer. The other kids in the house are older and they start back to school next month. John says that Mary Beth only agreed to keep him until then, because she doesn't

want to have one at home during the day." Lily went on to tell about John Moss, and how glad she was that Andy had been assigned to such a good social worker.

"Where do you think he'll go when they move him?"

"I don't know. John asked me to think about having him come here."

Inexplicably, Anna picked that moment to drop her fork and send it clanging across the tile floor.

The women looked at one another in silence before Lily finally spoke. "Don't sweat it, Amazon. I told him it wasn't going to happen."

The next five minutes brought a serious lull in the conversation.

"So tell me about your day," Lily asked as she pushed back from her unfinished meal. The subject of Andy was now officially closed.

To Anna, the events of her day seemed inconsequential compared to her partner's visit to San Francisco. Nonetheless, she went on to relate the story of the Chamber luncheon and how she'd agreed to run for vice president.

Lily couldn't help but feel proud that her lover had been tapped for such an important position. "You know, sweetheart, that's really quite an honor. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks." In Anna's own mind, business accomplishments stacked up poorly against the kind of work done every day by people like Lily, Sandy Henke and John Moss.

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"Full staff meeting in the conference room! Now, please." Tony strode rapidly from his office down the hall. Something big was happening.

"Good morning, ladies." Tony greeted the clinic's small staff, which included his attorney wife Colleen; Lauren and Lily, who rounded out the legal staff; and Pauline, who pulled double duty as the receptionist and file clerk. "I have three pieces of news for you all this morning. Four actually. The first two items are that our esteemed Ms. Stuart has secured *significant* funding from two organizations to provide specialized legal services, one from the Hispanic Women's Safe Coalition, and the other from the Ryan White Foundation for persons with AIDS."

Lily beamed as the excited staffers clapped and offered their congratulations.

"The next item is that with this extra work, we're going to have to start looking for extra help, so

I want you to put your feelers out there with some of your old professors and colleagues. And finally-and Lily, you're really going to like this part-in September, we're moving into bigger offices on the third floor."

The last bit of news was possibly the best of all, as Lily was still working out of a closet and Colleen felt guilty every single day for taking over her office. The extra work would now mean that Lily would soon be back to full-time, and she could finally quit scouring for extra funds.

"Lily, can I see you a minute in my office?" Tony asked as they walked back down the hall together.

"Sure."

Once inside, Tony closed the door and faced his friend. "I just wanted to say thank you for working so hard to make all this happen. I'm really proud of the way you've handled yourself since you came back. I don't know many people who could have stuck it out like you have." The man was growing awkward at his praise. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I'm really glad to have you working by my side at the clinic, but more than that, I'm glad to call you a friend."

For the first time since she'd started her downward spiral into alcohol abuse last year, Lily felt at this moment like she had finally recovered all the things she'd lost. She was proud that she'd won the grants, but knowing that she had once again earned Tony's professional respect and friendship was worth more than that. *I am not going to cry*, she told herself as her green eyes misted. But in case she did, the speechless woman stepped forward and buried her face in Tony's shoulder as she gave her boss-her friend-a mighty hug.

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"So it looks like I'll be back to full-time in September," Lily told her partner excitedly.

"That's great news! I'm happy for you, sweetheart. Of course, I'm going to miss having you at home already when I get here."

"And my cooking."

"And the times at night when I get to enjoy you instead of you having to get ready for court."

"And my cooking."

"And all the energy you have because you don't have to work so hard."

"And?"

"And your cooking," Anna finally conceded.

The women moved into their bedroom, having locked up and turned out the lights downstairs. It was early, only 9:30, but who knew what might happen in that hour or two before they fell asleep.

Lily clicked on the TV as Anna disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for bed. "Have you kicked off your VP campaign yet?"

"I had a meeting yesterday with Greg Cahill and Geri D'Angelo. They floated it at their committee meetings last week and got a positive response. I need to put together a short speech for next month's general meeting."

"Do you have any ideas for a-?"

*"A development tonight in the Peyton Graves murder case. Next right here on News 26."*

"What do you think it could be?" Anna asked, taking a seat on the edge of the bed beside her lover, whose attention was now riveted to the upcoming nightly news.

The trial was set to start in three weeks, with a handful of pretrial evidentiary issues before the court. Already, the prosecution boasted hair strands from Kristy Parker inside Graves' loft and bloodstains on her pants. Several of his personal items and pawn tickets for others were found in their possession. With the physical evidence directly incriminating Parker, some in the media were even speculating that charges against McGinnis might be dropped for lack of evidence.

Though neither suspect was cooperating, their attorney had already offered an alternate explanation for the evidence. This was an important maneuver designed to prevent potential jurors from automatically accepting the prosecutor's case. The public defender maintained that his clients had found the stolen items-some of which contained the victim's blood-while searching in a dumpster near Graves' loft. Parker, he said, had approached Graves earlier in the day for a handout and he invited her into his home to give her food and a rain jacket, which she was wearing at the time of her arrest. It was admittedly plausible, as the man had a reputation for being generous; he had once made the papers for giving a homeless man a ride in his limousine.

"Aren't you going to go check online?" Anna asked.

Lily had been trying not to spend too much time in the evenings reading about the case ever since her partner had hinted that it had become an obsession. Usually, she checked the internet for updates at work or before Anna got home.

"No, I'll watch it here with you."

Anxious minutes passed before the news theme finally sounded. Art Hanson had become a news

celebrity of sorts during his on-the-scene reports from the Culver City quake, and now anchored the 10 o'clock broadcast.

*"There's a development out of San Francisco tonight in the case against the couple who stand accused of fatally stabbing businessman and political figure, Peyton Graves...."* Police had been alerted by neighbors to an overnight disturbance near Graves' residence, in which a man now identified as Robert McGinnis was observed tampering with a row of newspaper racks. The alert patrolman recognized the name as the same as that of the accused, and summoned investigators to the scene. When the racks were separated, they recovered a nine-inch kitchen knife from a set belonging to the victim, believed to be the murder weapon. Robert McGinnis was later identified as the brother of Kenneth, and was being held pending charges.

"Wow, I'd say that about closes the book," Anna remarked.

"Yeah, it looks like McGinnis sent his brother to find the weapon. Maybe it will have his prints or something." Lily had accepted that her half-sister was deeply involved in this horrible crime, but was unsettled by the suggestion that she had acted alone.

"That would put them both there, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, unless McGinnis were to argue that she handed it to him or something."

Anna placed her hand on her lover's knee and squeezed softly. "Does this change how you're looking at everything, sweetheart?" She knew that Lily had held out hope that the explanation offered by the defense was actually the truth, but the fact that the murder weapon had been hidden-and that McGinnis' brother apparently knew where it was-heightened the likelihood that they were indeed the murderers.

"It sure makes it harder to buy their dumpster explanation, doesn't it? Although I suppose a knife like that would be a real find, and they could say they had second thoughts about it because of the blood." Lily knew she was reaching, but as an attorney she was trained to think in terms of reasonable doubt.

Anna clicked off the TV and started back into the bathroom. "Honey, what happens to Andy if Kristy gets convicted?" Lily had hardly spoken of the child since the night more than a week ago when she'd returned from seeing him. Twice, Anna had asked if she'd heard anything, but Lily had said no and quickly changed the subject. Why she didn't want to talk about him, Anna didn't understand.

Lily had been thinking about Andy, a lot in fact. But after her partner's reaction when she'd told her of the social worker's request, she had purposefully avoided the subject of Andy again. More and more, she felt herself drawn to the boy with the smiling green eyes, and the sweet shyness. And with growing resentment and frustration, she thought of his strict environment and the long nights alone on the couch as he coughed uncontrollably. How could Lily explain to her partner that she simply *needed* to go get this child?

"The state-John Moss actually-will start severance proceedings and he'll be placed up for adoption."

"Like you were?"

"Exactly like I was. Except that my mother didn't murder anyone, let alone somebody famous."

"What does...oh...so you don't think he'll be adopted?" Anna recognized that the stigma would be difficult for a prospective parent to overcome.

"Not likely," she answered glumly. "Moss called me at work and told me that Andy's going to be moved soon, and there's no telling how long he'll stay in the next place. If he's lucky, he'll get to live with a family for a while, but more than likely he'll end up eventually in a group home of some sort."

*So she's been thinking about it, just not talking to me.* Anna suddenly felt guilty, knowing that her earlier reaction had caused her lover to clam up. "You didn't tell me Moss called." It was a gentle reproach. She once again took a seat on the bed, this time draping an arm around the slouched shoulder as Lily stared dejectedly at the floor.

The blonde woman nodded. "Yeah, yesterday. He...asked me again to think about letting Andy stay with us until he found a better place for him."

"And you told him no again." It wasn't a question.

Lily nodded once again, tears forming in her eyes at the frustration she felt.

*I can't believe I'm going to say this. Am I really going to say this? Oh, god help me. Here goes nothing.* "Maybe we should talk about it some more, Lily. I never meant for you to feel like it wasn't even something we should consider," Anna offered, her voice low and steady.

"You mean bringing him here?" Lily's hands began to shake as she weighed the ramifications of what her partner was suggesting. Yes, she wanted Andy with her-that she knew, and she knew it the moment she saw the boy. But it would mean making contact with her sister, and the enormity of that step wasn't to be taken lightly. Nor were Anna's reservations.

"What would we...what would it involve?" Anna was now tentative, unsure of what they were both getting into. This was not just any child they were talking about, but possibly the child of a notorious murderer. And he was Lily's nephew.

"I would have to go on record as being Kristy's sister. Unless she objected, Moss would then draw up papers to have him placed here until..."

"Until what?"

"Until he's adopted, or until we ask to have him placed elsewhere." Lily wondered how many



times the child had been moved at the foster parents' request. She had no idea of the demands he placed on his caretakers.

"So you don't really know how long he would need to be here," Anna asked, the apprehension in her voice now clear.

"No, but it would be up to us, I think." Lily hoped that Anna would be willing to give it a try if she knew it was only temporary. "I mean if it didn't work out, we could ask John to find another placement. Unless of course Kristy is acquitted...then she'd be eligible to regain custody." *I can't believe we're talking about this.*

The more Anna heard her lover speak, the more she knew what was in Lily's heart regarding the small child. Her voice was lighter, excited even.

"Are you ready to acknowledge Kristy Parker as your sister? It's a big step." It could very possibly draw the attorney into the media coverage surrounding the trial.

"Anna, believe me, having anything to do with her is the next to last thing in the world I want. But the last thing I want is for that beautiful boy not to have a chance to grow up better than his mother. If we could help him-even for a little while," she added hastily, "I'd be willing to face her if I had to." Her green eyes were pleading.

Lily needed this for her peace of mind, Anna knew. Like it somehow paid back what she owed Eleanor Stuart for saving her from a life of foster homes.

"So why don't you call that social worker tomorrow and tell him you've decided to do it for a while."

Her whispered thanks barely audible, Lily wrapped her arms tightly around this wonderful woman that she loved more than life.

## ***Chapter 10***

John Moss really *tried* to be cool about the news, but it was no use. He was so thrilled that Lily Stuart had changed her mind that she could actually hear the grin on his face.

"So what do we have to do?" Lily had stayed home this morning to get the ball rolling on this process, which she knew from her own experience with the system, wasn't always a snap. One of

her clients had likened it to getting a mortgage.

"Uh...", *back to business*, "first we have to start the paperwork. I'll need to hook up with a social worker in LA who can handle the preliminaries. They'll have to do a home visit and interviews with all the adults in the house, so that means you and your partner. I can probably find somebody today and have them call you next week to set up the appointment."

"Would it be alright if it was someone I knew?"

"It's alright by me, so long as it's somebody that's qualified to handle it."

Lily gave him Sandy Henke's name and number, assuring him that though they were close, Sandy could be trusted to do a professional job. "I would actually put the two of you in the same league, John."

"Well if she's your friend, I'll take that as a compliment." Moss started pulling forms from the files in his bottom drawer. "I'll need to run a background check on both of you, and you'll both have to get fingerprinted. It's just routine."

"Uh, you're going to find...I got a DUI last year."

Moss was a little surprised at this. Most attorneys were more careful and the ones who weren't usually had colleagues that could fix everything. "Has that sort of thing been a problem for you?" It was best to get all this out in the open.

"No, just a one-time thing. I, uh, lost my mom last year and I didn't handle myself very well. But I got into a program, and I'm sober now. It's not a part of me anymore."

"Okay, thanks for telling me. I don't think it will be a problem." He shuffled the papers on his desk. "Can you fax me a copy of your birth certificate? I may need it when I talk to your sister's attorney."

Lily cringed at the mention of her sister. She hated that they had to involve her in this process, angry that Kristy Parker had any say-so at all with regard to Andy.

"I'll send it right out. Is there anything else you need?"

"I can't really do anything else on this end until I get the papers back from your friend. I'll send her a packet in the mail today. She should have it Monday or Tuesday. When she gets it all filled out and sends it back, I'll set up something with Kristy."

Lily could feel the excitement building. *This was really happening*. "Is there any way you could send the packet overnight? We might be able to take care of it all over the weekend and get it back to you by Tuesday."

Unbeknownst to Lily, Moss was on his feet now, doing the victory dance he usually reserved for

his sons' soccer matches. "Okay, I'll get it out this afternoon. Is it okay to send it to your house?"

"That'd be great, John. I'll watch for it. Thanks."

"Thank you, Lily. I have a feeling this is going to be really good for Andy."

"Yeah...it'll feel good to be able to help him out...for at least a while, anyway."

"Yeah, at least a while," Moss feigned his agreement.

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"Well isn't this a surprise!" Hal looked up from his desk as Kim pushed the overloaded stroller through the office door. His young son followed closely behind, breaking into a run when he spotted his dad. "Hi Jonah!" Hal caught the boy and stood, coming around the desk to kiss his wife and nuzzle his infant daughter as her eyes grew big taking in the new place.

"Hi handsome."

Hal's forehead wrinkled immediately. This was unusual. "So did you come to have lunch with me? How did you get that stroller up the stairs?"

"Brad and Danny carried it," Anna answered, appearing out of nowhere to drop a large white paper bag on his desk. "Roast beef on wheat for you, grilled cheese for Jo-Jo, chips and cookies."

The accountant was extremely confused.

"Gotta have a talk with my sister. You get to babysit, big guy." A quick kiss on her husband's cheek, and Kim followed Anna into the corner office and closed the door.

"I got you tuna," Anna offered as Kim plopped down on the leather love seat.

"Tuna, schmuna! What's this all about?" Her sister, obviously upset about something, had called and begged her to come by the office for a talk.

Anna told her all about the decision to bring Andy to live with them "just for a while" as they waited to find out what would happen to his mother. She and Lily had told the family a little about the boy, but not enough that anyone would have foreseen this.

"I can't believe I'm doing this, Kim. He's not even four years old!"

Truth be told, Kim couldn't believe her sister was doing this either, but since she was, she didn't

need to be second-guessed. "Wow, I can't believe it either! But it sounds like great news, Sister."

"What do you mean great news? I'm going to have a heart attack before it ever happens."

"Anna, come on. It sounds like this kid really needs a good home. You and Lily can do that."

"It's just going to be for a while."

*Uh-huh.* "What if you like it?" The more Kim thought about it, the more the idea of her sister with a small child grew on her. Anna was great with Jonah, and she had a lot to give. Lily would be marvelous.

"Very funny. You know I only like kids when I can hand them back to their parents."

"But that's because you can. If you can't maybe you'll find out that the real fun is the tough stuff."

"I don't have to tell you how ridiculous that sounds," Anna muttered, her skepticism evident in the scowl on her face.

"Look, there's nothing to it, really. You just follow them around 24 hours a day so they don't hurt themselves, teach them to have a conscience, and hope they don't talk about your family's private moments in front of other people." Jonah had told the entire Kaklis family and the wait staff at Empyre's that his daddy's pee-pee was a lot bigger than his...like a giant's.

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"I can't believe you're really going to do this!" Suzanne exclaimed.

*Funny, I keep saying that myself,* Anna thought for the thousandth time since Thursday night, so deep in denial she wasn't sure which part of her was real anymore.

"I have to admit, I was a little surprised when this one here agreed," Lily said, putting her arm around her partner's waist. "But we both felt that it was the right thing to do."

Anna found herself nodding, though she wasn't consciously aware of the decision to do so.

"Well this is all pretty straightforward," Sandy looked up from the kitchen counter where she'd laid out the forms from John Moss. She'd called her fellow social worker on Friday afternoon, after she'd gotten the heads up from Lily.

*"Hi Sandy." Moss was really glad that Lily was already following up. It said a lot in her favor that she was eager to move forward with getting Andy placed in her home. "Lily thinks a lot of you, you know."*

*"Yeah, she thinks a lot of you too, John. I can tell."*

*"So what do you think? Is this a good idea?"*

*"Honestly?"*

*"Of course." He tensed, hoping he hadn't misread things.*

*"I think it could be the best thing to ever happen to Andy Parker. That's my honest assessment."*

*Whew! "That's certainly good to hear. So you think they're able to take this on? I mean, it won't be a hardship, will it?"*

*Sandy chuckled. "No, John. They can handle it."*

*"That's good. I was just...worried, you know, Lily told me she worked with the guardian ad litem program. I know that can't pay much. And her partner sells cars, she said."*

*"Yeah, Anna Kaklis sells cars, alright. She owns the top two BMW and Volkswagen dealerships in Southern California."*

*"Oh."*

*"My whole house would fit in their living room, dining room and kitchen," she exaggerated, but it was the right idea.*

*"Wow, we don't usually like to place kids in settings like that." Unless the children were accustomed to affluent surroundings, the foster care system generally preferred lower-middle and middle class homes, as it made readjustment easier when the children were returned to their own homes.*

*"Under normal circumstances, I'd agree with you. But Lily and Anna are pretty down to earth."*

*"So what's Anna like?" Moss's curiosity was more personal than professional, he acknowledged to himself, wondering what type of partner a woman like Lily Stuart would have.*

*"She's a blue chipper. Good people, as my mother would say."*

*"That's great. So...I guess I'll hear from you next week?"*

*"Yeah, but one more thing, John. You have to promise me something."*

*"What's that?"*

*"If I call you and tell you that you need to move this kid, I don't want you dragging your feet. I want you to hustle and find him a place."*

*"Are you going to have to do that, Sandy?" It didn't bode well for Andy if Lily's friend was already looking for an out.*

*"I hope not, but neither one of them has been around a child before, let alone a child who's spent a lot of time in the system. I don't want their decision to do this to come back and bite them in the ass." Sandy had never pulled a punch in her life.*

"I think I'm going to recommend a few changes to the bedroom upstairs," Sandy started, walking towards the stairs to lay out her plan.

Lily and Anna followed dutifully while Suzanne made herself at home in the family room in front of their state-of-the-art entertainment center.

At the top of the landing, the social worker stopped and asked, "Which room are you thinking of putting him in?"

On the left side was the master suite; to the right were two smaller bedrooms, connected by a bathroom. Straight ahead were French doors leading to a large balcony that spanned the back of the house.

"Maybe that one," Anna gestured toward the room farthest from theirs. "I was just thinking that the balcony might not be safe," she explained. Indeed, the open railings would pose a risk to a very small child.

"Good thinking," Sandy congratulated, walking to the far bedroom. "I think you should get a twin bed for in here. Kids, especially little ones, feel more secure in a smaller bed. And if you're going to have to put this bed in storage anyway, maybe you should get some other pieces that are more...kid sized."

This room held the bedroom suite from Lily's apartment, the first pieces of furniture she'd ever bought new. Sandy and Suzanne had stayed in this room when their house was being painted.

"If you want to move this furniture over to the other room, we can put that other stuff in storage," Anna offered.

"Are you kidding? That one in there was your grandmother's bed, Anna. This is just...functional. As far as I'm concerned, we can pack it off to the women's shelter." Lily was sentimental about people, not things.

"Okay, that's settled," Sandy concluded with satisfaction, taking a quick look at the bathroom to make certain it was safe for a small child. "Now you guys are going to have to decide what to do about the pool. I would suggest something simple, like flip locks up high on those French doors in the back." The women walked back downstairs to the kitchen. "Of course, you'll have to make sure he doesn't try to crawl through the doggie door," she added, suddenly cracking up at the image. "Can you imagine?"

The blonde shot the dark-haired woman a warning look that told her not to go there.

"Suzanne, can I get you anything?" Anna disappeared into the family room before she lost her composure.

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Surprisingly, there had been no word from John Moss. Lily had tracked the overnight package, confirming its delivery this morning. *Perhaps he was out of the office today*, she reasoned.

Leftovers were on tap for tonight, as Anna had called to say she would be late.

"Ready for dinner, you handsome boy?"

Chester lumbered to his feet and thumped his tail.

"Huh? You ready for dinner, handsome boy?" She was infinitely relieved that no one had heard her slip up and say that twice.

Chester sat by his water dish as she prepared his bowl. Lily scraped the foul smelling food from the can and chopped it up with a spoon. "Here you go, boy."

Scratching her nose, Lily discovered to her disgust that a morsel of Chester's dinner had stuck to her finger, and was now smeared across her nostril. "Ewwww!"

Quickly grabbing a paper towel, Lily blew her nose and sniffed, the malodorous brown meal somehow pushed deeper into her nasal cavity. Lily blew again and again, but the odor persisted.

The ringing phone mercifully distracted her senses.

"Hello."

"I have a surprise for you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. But if you want it, you have to go into the family room and sit on the couch with your eyes closed until I tell you to open them."

"Sounds kinky."

"No, it isn't kinky at all." Anna chuckled at her private joke.

"So when do you want me to do this?"

"Well, I'm pulling into the driveway, so right now would be good."

Lily walked into the family room and sat on the couch, picking up the sound of Anna's car pulling into the garage. She had no idea on earth what her lover could be bringing.

"Close your eyes tight. I'll tell you when you can open them."

"Okay." Lily clicked the phone off as she got the dial tone, closing her eyes as she leaned back on the couch. The door opened and she heard Anna walk in.

"You can open them now."

Lily opened her eyes and blinked, expecting to see something in her partner's hand. Tracking now to her lover's face, she took in the stunning surprise.

"You cut your hair!"

Anna smiled almost bashfully as her lover appraised the new do. It wasn't short, but the long locks were gone. Her full style barely brushed the tops of her shoulders, the wispy bangs tickling her eyebrows.

"Anna, I can't believe it. It's...gorgeous!" Lily jumped up to see the back and sides. "What made you do this?"

"Jackie's been after me to do it for awhile, every time I go in for a trim. I figured, you know, I'd been wearing it the same way for the past six years. It was time for a change."

"Well, I love it. Really. It's beautiful."

Relieved, the tall woman wrapped her arms around her lover. Leaning in for a kiss, she suddenly stopped and sniffed, her face contorting. "Honey, you smell like...dog food."

Lily sighed. "I got some of Chester's food in my nose," she groaned.

"What on earth were you doing to get dog food in your nose?"



"Stop it!" She playfully slapped Anna's shoulder. "I'm going to have to take a whole shower to get rid of that smell."

"I still can't imagine how you did that."

"You want supper?"

"I'll just get a sandwich. Any word about Andy?"

"No, nothing. I guess John was busy today." Lily headed into the kitchen to fix her lover's favorite, peanut butter and jelly.

"Do you think there was a problem?"

"I don't know, babe. Everything was in order on our end, I think, so if there was a problem it was with Kristy." Lily didn't even want to think about that. "You want to see the new room?"

"They delivered everything today?"

"Sure did."

The women had visited a furniture store on Sunday, selecting a child's suite that included not one but two twin beds; a small desk and chair; a chest of drawers; and a tall cabinet, which had drawers and shelves on one side, and a place to hang clothes on the other. The salesman had explained that the latter piece would leave the closet free for toys. On that note, Anna's impulse drive kicked in, and she bought a large toy box as well.

The distinct ring of Lily's phone sounded as she was showing her partner the room.

"Be right back."

Anna walked from one piece to the other, running her fingers along the smooth wood. The simple pinstriped bedspreads were folded down to reveal dark blue sheets. She could picture Jonah in this room, playing with toys from the toy box. It was a good room for a little boy, and when her nephew ran away from home, he could always come here.

Anna turned out the lights and followed the sound of her lover's voice to their bedroom, where Lily sat on the bed with the phone pressed to her ear.

"Yes, the 7:05 is fine."

*What?*

"Returning at six...book those please." Lily reached into the drawer of the nightstand for the organizer she kept on hand. Reciting the credit card number and billing address, she completed the reservation. "Thank you."

"You have to go back to San Francisco." Anna put it together easily.

Lily nodded grimly. "Tomorrow. Kristy wants to meet her sister."

Think you got it all figured out? Click here to find out! [Part 4](#)

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## ~ Strained ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** [See Part 1](#)

### **Strained - Part 4**

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### *Chapter 11*

"I tell you, Southwest Airlines might be just a taxicab in the sky, but at least they know how to get the goddamn doors open!"

Lily nodded knowingly at the businessman as they all cooled their heels waiting for a gate agent to drive the jet bridge to the plane's door.

"What? They weren't expecting us?" another man grouched.

"Oh, Marge, look who dropped in! It's a planeload of people!" the first mimicked sarcastically.

As they had taxied to the gate, the pilot boasted of their early arrival into San Francisco International; a clear mistake given the fact that no one was available to greet them. *No one anywhere had ever actually arrived early*, Lily guessed.

Passengers watched through the small windows as the jet bridge finally moved toward the plane, backing up twice so that it actually aligned with the plane's door. By this time, most on board were willing to leap across a four-foot gap, baggage and all.

Lily spotted the familiar Honda in the passenger pick-up line, feeling guilty at the number of passes Moss must have made in this traffic.

"Hi. Sorry I'm late."

Moss handed her a cup. "Me too. Your coffee won't be as hot."

"Bless you!" Airplane coffee was possibly the worst.

"There's a preliminary hearing first thing this morning. Her PD says we should be able to get in to see her right after that. He wants to get this out of the way." Kristy's public defender was irate that his client hadn't just signed the forms. He needed to have her focused.

"So where are we headed now?"

"I thought we'd hang out at the courthouse, then walk over to the jail when it's over. What's all that?" he asked, gesturing at the briefcase she carried.

"Work. Case files. I have to be in court tomorrow for placement hearings on eight kids. I thought I could finish prepping these on the plane."

"We can probably find a quiet bench at the courthouse if you want to work while we wait."

The attorney had already tried working on the way up, but her mind kept wandering to the meeting with her sister. Unable to concentrate, she'd finally put the folders away.

"Do you think we could slip into the courtroom for the hearing? I mean, I know it depends on what they're talking about, but if it's open, would you mind if we went in?"

"You want to get a look at her, huh?"

Since she'd gotten the call from Moss the night before, Lily had played out the jailhouse scene a hundred times in her head. What would she say to this stranger? Would she feel a connection as the woman's sister? Would she even want to?

"I just think it would be easier to face her at the jail if it wasn't the first time."

"I don't have any idea what she's going to want from you. But if you don't mind some advice, I'd

suggest that you try to limit the discussion to Andy. That's what this is all about."

That certainly simplified it. If she could just go in and convince the woman that Andy would be better off living with her in LA, they'd be done. The attorney had been doing just that sort of thing for other children for seven years. But it had never mattered this much.

Moss reached the parking garage and began the circular climb, finally finding a narrow space on the seventh level. At the main door, they passed through the metal detectors and Lily submitted to a search of her briefcase. Elevators took them to the third floor, the criminal court division of San Francisco County, where Judge Madeline Wostyk had been assigned to the Graves case.

Moss gave the tall varnished door a gentle tug and to his surprise, it gave way. Both could see that the door opened at the side of the courtroom, rather than at the back. Their entrance would not go unnoticed.

Taking a deep breath, Lily entered shaking, immediately meeting the expectant green eyes of her younger sister, seated at the defendants' table alongside her attorney and the man Lily recognized as Kenneth McGinnis. Hurriedly taking a seat in a row near the back, the small blonde positioned herself behind a taller man who would shield her from Kristy's view. Sliding in beside her, Moss casually patted her knee as a gesture of support.

Seeing her sister in person for the first time had been a rush. There was simply no other way to describe the sensation. Lily's heart had quickened noticeably as redness crept up her neck. To a woman who was not easily intimidated, the emotion was incomprehensible.

To calm her nerves, the attorney turned her attention to more comfortable ground; in this case, to the matters of the court.

Today, there was no evidence or argument. Judge Wostyk was ruling on several preliminary motions, including whether or not to allow cameras in the courtroom. The case had sparked national interest, as Peyton Graves had served on several business and philanthropic boards. His threatened candidacy for governor had become the model for strong-arming politicians to remember their extreme constituencies. Recognizing this interest, and dismissing out of hand the argument that the case could possibly become more sensationalized, the judge ruled that cameras would be allowed, but under the usual guarded conditions.

Wostyk then handed the prosecution a victory, allowing all of the physical evidence that had been gathered thus far to be admitted during the trial. The public defender had sought to suppress first the pawn tickets and items from the Graves home, which he argued were discovered in an illegal search; and all subsequent discovery of blood and DNA, as they would not have been obtained without benefit of the aforementioned items. Only the murder weapon was left unchallenged.

Moss discreetly approached the bailiff's desk with a business card, asking that it be passed on to the public defender. Lily squirmed uncomfortably as she watched the attorney speak softly to her sister before both turned to look her way.

In a final proclamation from the bench, the trial date was confirmed for a week from Monday. There was no gag order in place, so the parties were free to posture for the press. Four deputies stood to escort the handcuffed prisoners back to the jail.

"You ready for this?" Moss asked.

With a single nod of her head, the attorney grimly walked into the hallway. "How far is the jail?"

"Just a couple of blocks. Let me go firm this up, and I'll be right back." Moss walked back inside to the defense table and spoke briefly with the public defender, who gave his approval.

Kristy's public defender had identified Lilian Stuart as an attorney so that she wouldn't have to wait until evening visitor hours. He was very eager to have this out of the way, and quietly, as negative press about a neglected child would reflect poorly on his client.

Security at the jailhouse was much tighter than it had been at the courthouse. Lily placed her small handbag in her briefcase, leaving it with Moss as she proceeded through a physical search. The San Francisco County Jail wasn't much different from the one in LA, she thought. Following a guard into the gated elevator, then through two locked checkpoints, she finally reached the area set aside for attorney-client consultations.

A simple table stretched across the width of the small room, two chairs on each side. Lily sat with her back to the windowed door, forcefully calming her jagged nerves with peaceful thoughts: the LA beach at night, the San Gabriel Mountains.... The sound of the opening door brought a tingling to her spine. It was time.

The deputy escorted the prisoner to a chair on the opposite side of the table, explaining in an official monotone the procedures for the visit. Kristy would remain seated at all times. When Lily was ready to depart, she would knock on the door. A deputy would be posted directly outside the door, peering in from time to time.

Finally alone, the women silently appraised one another, both fascinated at the facial resemblance. More incongruous were the dissimilarities: Kristy was thin and frail, with an almost white complexion. Lily was muscular, her tanned face and arms evidence of her outdoor life. Lily was a natural blonde; it was difficult to discern Kristy's natural color. Since her arrest, her hair was a dull red, almost burgundy, with lighter roots. *Tough to get the Clairol in here*, Lily surmised.

"So you're my big sister," Kristy started.

"So it would appear."

Kristy smirked, folding her arms across her chest. "Guess Mother had some secrets."

"Lisa Parker went to jail when I was four years old and I was put up for adoption by the state."

After all these years-and last year's cleansing visit to the cocktail lounge where her mother worked-the bitterness about the circumstances surrounding her adoption was gone. Had she not been separated from Lisa Parker, she might well be wearing an orange jumpsuit too. "But just so you know, you're not the only one surprised here. I...had no idea you existed until I saw you on TV."

"I was on TV?" Kristy seemed amused, even proud.

Lily didn't answer, not sure how to address the woman's silliness.

"How did you know it was me? I mean, that I was your sister?"

"Well, first of all was the physical resemblance. Then when they said your name was Parker, I was pretty sure. So I had somebody I knew at social services look you up."

"Social services," she sneered. "What is it they call that? An oxymoron?"

Lily waited for the woman to elaborate, but apparently she felt her statement said it all.

"Lilian...I bet they call you Lily because it's cute."

"As a matter of fact, they do."

"Lilian Stuart. Lily Stuart. Little Lily Stuart." Kristy mocked her sister's name. "So what was it like growing up with the Stuarts? Lots of brothers and sisters around the Christmas tree, I bet."

"No, it wasn't like that at all." How much did she want to tell this woman who seemed to resent her very existence? "I was adopted by my first grade teacher. It was just the two of us."

"Ah, a teacher's kid. And now a lawyer." Kristy was back to her amused tone. "Irony, isn't it? You *are* a lawyer. I *have* a lawyer...Say, how about you being my lawyer?"

"Sorry. Criminal law isn't my thing." *I wish I could have been your lawyer 20 years ago.*

Silence hung for several moments as Lily weighed whether to broach the subject of Andy herself, or wait until Kristy satisfied her curiosities.

"So why do you want Andres?" Now the prisoner's tone had turned suspicious.

"Because he needs a place to live where somebody will care about him." That was the easiest answer, and Lily hoped that Kristy would just accept it.

"I'm told he's doing okay. That's what the social worker says anyway."

"Andy is okay. He's safe. He has a comfortable bed. He gets three meals a day, but nobody cares whether he likes his food or not. Nobody cares that he spends the night on the couch because he

keeps the others awake with his asthma. Nobody cares about much of anything, as long as he doesn't misbehave."

"Why do you care?"

Lily knew she was going to have to answer this question carefully, as the naked truth-that without more caring intervention, Andy might end up in this very jail-might trigger a defensive or hostile response.

"Kristy, I...I don't know what it was like for you at home when you were growing up. I remember some things about when I was there-not a whole lot-but I've read some of the social workers' reports and the court proceedings. The bottom line is that our mother didn't take very good care of me." That was Part One.

Shifting uncomfortably in her chair, Lily continued. "When they took me away from her for good, I lived in about seven different places before Eleanor Stuart took me home. There isn't a day that I don't look back on that and think of it as the luckiest day of my life. It was the first day I can remember getting a hug from a grownup." That was Part Two.

Kristy was listening, but she wouldn't make eye contact with her sister. No doubt she was thinking of her own life with Lisa Parker.

"I went to see Andy at his foster home a couple of weeks ago. He was very shy when I first got there, but after a while, he played with me. He talked to me and he showed off; and when I left, I asked him for a hug. I don't know why, but I got the idea that he hadn't had one in a very long time. That's when I decided that I wanted him to come live with me. Kristy, he's a wonderful little boy. And he deserves to have somebody care about him." And that was Part Three.

The redhead continued to stare at the floor, masking whatever emotion simmered under the surface.

"I never hurt him, not once."

This was the opening Lily had needed. "But somebody did, Kristy. And you did what was best for him then, giving him up so he'd be safe. I'm asking you to do what's best for him now. Let me take him back to LA."

"Who's Anna Kaklis?"

*Shit!* "She's my partner."

If Kristy were at all surprised, she didn't show it. Most likely, she had read the documents carefully-what else did she have to do?-and had already realized that her sister was gay. "Is she a lawyer too?"

"No, she sells cars."

"She must be pretty good at it. Nearly half a million a year?"

*And that's just her salary, kiddo!* "It's family money. They own a few dealerships." It wasn't exactly a lie, now that Anna had completed her stock distribution to include David, Kim and herself.

"Well I'd say you sure landed on your feet."

The resentment had returned to the prisoner's voice. Lily needed to bring her back to the issue at hand.

"So will you sign the papers for Andy?"

"I'll think about it." The wheels were already turning in Kristy's head. Andres was the only thing she had that someone actually wanted. If she and Kenny beat this, like he kept saying they would if they both kept their mouths shut, Lily and her partner might be willing to give them money for the "privilege" of keeping her child. And if they didn't beat it, she didn't give a flying fuck what happened to anybody else. "I'm through here. Call the guard."

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Lily emerged from the secure building feeling as though she'd made her best case. Andy's fate would ultimately come down to what kind of person his mother was.

"How'd it go?" Moss asked. Lily's face was unreadable.

"She's going to think about it...whatever that means."

"That's probably a good sign. If she didn't come right out and say no, I think her attorney will keep the pressure on her over the next few days."

Lily nodded pensively. "Maybe you're right. Listen, would you excuse me for just a couple of minutes. I need to make a phone call."

"Sure."

The attorney removed her cell phone from the compartment inside her briefcase and walked across the courtyard to a bench. When all she wanted was to leave a message for Anna, she would dial the direct number to her office. But when she needed to speak to her partner, she called the receptionist. Carmen always knew where her boss was.



The car dealer took the call in the empty conference room. "This is Anna Kaklis."

"Hi, sweetheart."

"Lily! How did it go?"

"Okay, I guess. It was pretty weird, though."

"What did she say? About Andy, I mean," she asked anxiously. In other words, was Lily bringing home a small child tonight or not?

"She said she'd think about it. I honestly don't know what she's going to do."

Anna could hear the disappointment in her partner's voice. "I'm sorry sweetheart. I know how much you wanted this." If Lily was her usual self, she wouldn't talk about it all once she got home. "So you're going to head on back here?"

"Yeah, I'll probably get a cab as soon as I finish up with John. Listen, I was thinking about something on the way up here, and after the way things went with Kristy, I wanted to call you."

"What is it, hon?"

"I...I was thinking about what would happen if she said no, you know, how I would feel about it. Now that I've actually seen her, I'm pretty sure I'd be very disappointed, probably even angry. But if I get that way, Anna, I don't want you to ever think that it's because what we have isn't enough for me. It is enough. You're the only thing in the world I really need."

Anna was deeply moved by her partner's declaration. She knew in her heart that Lily somehow needed this child too, but that need was for Andy alone, not because she needed to fill a gap in her life.

"Sweetheart...I love you too." That said it all. "So what time will you be home?"

"I'll probably go into the office for a couple of hours to get ready for tomorrow. Maybe we'll just order a pizza tonight. Okay?"

"That's a deal. Safe travels." Anna started to hang up. "Oh, and Lily? It'll work out, baby. If she says no this time, we'll just try something else."

*God I love that woman!* Lily closed her eyes and said a silent "thank you" that Anna Kaklis was in her life.

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Chester announced the arrival of his taller mistress as Lily was putting the finishing touches on their Friday night dinner.

"Lily? Holly's here," Anna called from the family room.

"Hey! I haven't seen you in a while." Lily followed the excited dog in to greet the new arrivals. Holly was the sales manager at Premier BMW, and Chester's dog sitter when she and Anna went out of town. "How about joining us for dinner? We've got plenty. I'll just add another plate."

"No, I can't stay. Ravi's fixing chicken curry tonight." Holly's new husband taught physics at Loyola Marymount. In a joking way, Anna had tried to warn her about those professor types.

"She needs to borrow Chester this weekend," Anna explained. "Is that alright with you?"

Lily was perplexed. "Of course, but why anyone would need a basset hound-especially this one-is beyond me." Oblivious to the insult, the hound presented his soft white stomach for scratches.

"Didn't Anna tell you? We got a new Labrador, and he's driving us nuts. We thought maybe he could use a calming influence. If this works out, we may go to the shelter and pick out an older dog."

"You got a Labrador? I always thought you'd get a dachshund." The blonde was going somewhere with this, but Anna couldn't tell where.

"A dachshund?" Holly repeated gullibly. "Why did you think that?"

"Well, you being from Texas and all."

Neither Anna nor Holly could make the connection.

"Why would my being from Texas mean I'd get a dachshund?"

"Aren't you guys always telling people to get a long little doggie?" Lily stepped back quickly from the swat that would accompany her partner's groan.

"Oh, Ravi's going to love that one," Holly grinned. At least someone appreciated Lily's brand of humor.

"What if you left Chester and took Lily?" Anna suggested.

"Oh, right! Can you imagine what my dog would be like by Monday?"

Lily retrieved Chester's leash and three cans of his food. "Just make sure the learning process only goes one way, Holly. We don't have any use for a basset hound that acts like a Labrador. If

you ruin him, you keep him."

Chester happily dashed out the door to the waiting convertible. The dog had no loyalty.

"What's for dinner?"

"Mmmm...something you like."

Anna spotted the spread on the table first. "Tapas!"

Lily had set out a wheel of brie, Anna's favorite tapenade, a small slab of smoked salmon, and a thinly sliced seeded baguette. As the car dealer took a seat, she added the final dish.

"You made gazpacho!" In the center of the chilled bowl was a tower of finely chopped peppers, tomatoes and onions, with a scoop of guacamole on top. "When did you have time to do all this?"

"I only worked until noon today. We interviewed a new guy this morning for the part-time slot. I liked him a lot." Lily would go to full-time in three more weeks when the funding kicked in, picking up referrals from a Hispanic women's shelter.

"What was he like?"

"He's just out of school at DePaul. He's African-American, he's gay, and he moved here to be with his partner. He'd really like to take over the cases from the AIDS grant. Plus, he did a lot of housing work at the student clinic in Chicago."

"You liked him?"

"A lot. We talked to a couple of people earlier who were just looking for work, you know, anything at all to get started. But they all want to get a little experience so they can move on. This guy-his name's Allen Avery-acts like he really wants to do this kind of work."

"So you think Tony will hire him?"

"Definitely. And if he's good, I'm sure we'll find a way to get more funding so he can come on full-time."

"Sweetheart, how are you going to feel about going back to work full-time? Are you going to miss having time off during the week?"

Ever since the possibility rose that Andy might come to live with them, Lily had been thinking about this a lot. "I've been sort of thinking about...staying at part-time."

"Oh yeah?" Anna was surprised to hear of this new development.

"Yeah. I was just thinking...you know, if Andy comes to live with us, it might be hard on him to be in day care all day. Maybe if he were older, but he's just so little."

Anna hadn't really considered all that. "You mean you'd stay at part-time so you could be home with him?"

"Well, I think it would probably do him some good to be with other children his age, at least some of the time." Lily almost always recommended day care, or a pre-school program like Head Start for the children she dealt with. They needed to learn social behavior. "I thought maybe he could go to pre-school for half a day, and I'd pick him up in the afternoons."

Anna nodded. They sure didn't need the money, and it made sense that it would be good for the child. "But what about on Thursdays, when you're in court all day?"

"We'd have to make some special arrangements for that. Maybe you could take Thursday afternoons off," she teased.

Anna's face went nearly white, her eyes wide with...was that terror? Surely, Lily wasn't suggesting that she be left alone with this boy.

"Whoa! I was just kidding." Lily was surprised, and even slightly disappointed at the reaction on her partner's face. "We could work out something else for Thursdays. Besides, it's all a pipe dream now anyway. I don't even know what's going to happen."

The call came as they were loading the dishwasher. Kristy had signed the papers.

## ***Chapter 12***

Interstate 5 was a desolate stretch of highway, especially from the bottom of the Grapevine to the cutoff for 101.

*Every other time I've driven this, it's taken forever, Anna thought. Today it's like we've gotten here in no time at all.*

"Boy, this is a long drive, isn't it? Seems like it's taken forever today." Lily interrupted her thoughts, reaching across the console to lay her hand in the driver's lap.

"It's going to be a really long day," the dark-haired woman answered noncommittally. They had

left the house at six a.m., two travel cups of steaming coffee getting them as far as Gorman, where they stopped briefly for a drive-thru breakfast.

Lily was plainly excited.

Anna was terrified. This was really happening. On their return trip, they'd have a small child in the back seat, coming to live with them and to change their lives. *It had seemed like a good idea at the time.* Now, she wasn't so sure. What if he didn't like her? What if they were unable to control his behavior or meet his needs? Anna had witnessed a number of behavior problems among the children at Kidz Kamp; Lily had explained that most of these youth had poor role models at home, and that being with other children in foster care often brought out the worst in even the best kids.

"I told John I'd call when we got to San Jose." Lily dug for her cell phone and dialed the number Moss had scribbled on his business card. He would not be in his office on Sunday, but was willing to meet them and handle the exchange at the foster home.

"Hi John. It's Lily. We've just gotten to San Jose, so I guess we'll be there in about 45 minutes. You still want us to come to the house?"

*Forty-five minutes!*

"I remember how to get there.... Yeah, I picked up a few things for him yesterday."

That was certainly an understatement. Moss had called back on Saturday morning with Andy's sizes, recommending that Lily get several items for him. The boy had very little clothing of his own, and no toys at all. The attorney had called her sister-in-law, unsure of where to shop for the right things.

*"Just go to Target, Lily." She used the French pronunciation of the discount department store. "Kids grow so fast, they get dirty, and they don't give a damn about labels. You know who would love to go? Mom! Call her, she'll know just what to get, and she'll have a ball."*

*Lily and Martine had had a field day buying clothes: underwear, socks, shorts, t-shirts, jeans, sports sandals, two bathing suits, two nice shirts and a sweater. Lily discovered that she loved kids' pajamas, and bought five different sets; along with slippers that looked like racecars, right down to the headlights that flashed with each step.*

*Next came the toys. Lily went heavy on the cars, buying two sets of a half-dozen matchbox cars, a plastic dump truck and a long red fire truck with moving ladders and hoses. To service these vehicles was a gas station and garage. Thirty feet of plastic segments snapped together to make roads and intersections; signs and stoplights completed the set.*

*At Martine's suggestion, Lily also picked up a set of three toy boats. "Bath toys," her mother-in-*

*law explained.*

*Lily thought of passing altogether on the standard teddy bear, but Target had a special on bears dressed in Dodger uniforms. That was a must.*

"Just follow the signs toward Candlestick Park." Lily found herself shaking with excitement, Anna with anxiety. At Lily's direction, the driver wheeled the X5 into the open space behind John Moss' Honda.

"You ready for this?" Lily eyed her nervous partner.

Anna nodded hesitantly.

"I love you, baby. I hope you know how much it means to me that you're willing to do this."

Despite her trepidation, a small smile made its way onto Anna's face. She'd do anything for this woman beside her. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

Lily got out and walked around. Together they crossed the street and climbed the steps to the second floor entrance. Mary Beth Shull met them at the door.

"Welcome back."

"Thank you. Mary Beth, this is my friend Anna Kaklis." Friend? That was weird, but Lily found she didn't want to share her personal life with this humorless woman.

"Pleased to meet you." Anna shook the foster mother's hand formally.

"And this is John Moss." From the kitchen doorway, the slender man took two large strides across the living room, holding out his hand to the tall woman.

"Hi John. I've been looking forward to meeting you. Lily and I both really appreciate your hard work." Anna's eyes darted around the room, where two small boys sat quietly in front of the TV. They looked too old to be Andy, she concluded.

"It's my pleasure. I've been looking forward to meeting you as well." Lily's partner was strikingly beautiful, he thought. "Do you two want to go upstairs and meet Andy, or would you like me to bring him down?"

Lily shrugged, imagining that the boy was hiding again.

"Here's his stuff," Mrs. Shull offered, handing Anna a brown paper grocery bag, folded down over halfway, foster care's unofficial suitcase. The boy really had very little. "John said you'd gotten some things for him, so I won't worry about sending the other things. I'll keep those on

hand in case I get another one that doesn't have anything."

That was fine with Lily, but she wanted Andy to have at least a few familiar belongings. "Are his favorite things in the bag?"

"No, his favorite t-shirt is in my rag pile. It's ragged and it has a hole in the side. But he loves it. I practically have to hide it to keep him from wearing it every day."

"Would you mind if we took it?" Lily persisted. "I don't care if it's dirty. I just want him to have something he's comfortable in."

Mrs. Shull left to retrieve the dirty shirt. Moss had started up the stairs.

"You want to come up or wait here?" Lily posed the question to her partner.

Anna looked about anxiously. "*Do not* leave me alone."

Lily chuckled. "Calm down, Amazon. We'll be out of here and on our way soon." Taking her partner's elbow, they slowly followed Moss up to the small bedroom.

*The frying pan or the fire?* The tall woman wasn't sure at all that getting out of here was the answer to her fears.

Entering the bedroom at the top of the stairs, the pair found Andy sitting on the edge of the lower bunk, his feet far from reaching the floor. In his hand was the small matchbox convertible, the one Lily knew was his favorite. From his stained cheeks, it was apparent that he had been crying.

"Hi Andy," the blonde said softly, smiling as she stepped toward the obviously surprised child.

Anna watched the boy's face light up, at once captivated by the red-rimmed green eyes that reminded her of Lily's. He was dressed in dark blue gym shorts, with a white t-shirt and tennis shoes. A small scrape on his knee had scabbed over.

"Surprised to see me, huh?"

He nodded, never taking his eyes off the smiling face.

"So I guess John didn't tell you the big news. I'm going to take you home with me today. Would you like that Andy?"

The boy didn't answer, warring within on whether or not going with this woman that he liked was worth giving up the security of this place he had gotten used to. Worst of all, Mary Beth had told him this morning that he couldn't take any of the little cars.

Lily squatted down to eye level with the wide-eyed youth. "Andy, do you remember when I told you that a friend of mine liked cars? Well, here's my friend. This is Anna, and she knows

everything about cars. How about that?"

Andy shifted his eyes worriedly to the car dealer, then back to Lily.

"Hi, Andy." Anna squatted alongside her partner, gently touching the boy's shoulder to say hello.

*Interesting....* Lily thought. *I don't know which one of these two is more afraid.* "So you ready to go, pal?" The blonde woman stood and held out her hand to the small boy.

"I have a few papers for you to sign," Moss interrupted, "and Mary Beth has written up a few things about this young man here that might help you get to know each other over the next few days."

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Anna's worst nightmare came true: Lily, John and Mary Beth disappeared into the kitchen and she was left alone by the front door with the small boy.

Standing less than a foot away from the towering figure, Andy had to tilt his head straight back to see this other woman who knew all about cars. Anna felt his eyes on her, glancing down then back up. He continued to stare until finally, she spoke.

"Andy, do you like dogs?"

Quickly the boy shook his head, his wide eyes clearly frightened.

*Uh-oh!* Damage control was definitely in order. "Big dogs are scary, aren't they?"

Andy nodded along with the tall woman.

Anna knelt alongside the child. "Even dogs that are only this big are scary, too, aren't they?" She held her hand even with boy's chest.

Again he nodded.

"But dogs that come up to only here aren't scary at all, are they?" This time, she held her hand just below his waist and shook her head no.

Obviously conflicted, Andy didn't answer.

"Especially when you sit on the floor and they...lick you on the face!" Anna quickly trailed two fingers across the boy's cheek, causing him to squeal and cover his smiling face with his hands.

"What's going on in here?" Lily was delighted to hear the laughter, even more so because Anna was undoubtedly the cause.

"Nothing. We were just talking about dogs...licking you on the neck!" This time, she tickled the



boy's neck with those same fingers and he dissolved in giggles, reaching out now to return the favor.

"Andy, you know this is not a playroom," Mrs. Shull warned sternly.

Stunned by the senseless reprimand, Anna quickly stood and held out her hand to the boy.

"Andy, why don't you tell Mrs. Shull goodbye, and we'll go on out to the car?" *Andy, why don't you tell Mrs. Shull to piss off....*

"Bye," he answered, not even turning to look at the foster mother who had kept him in her home for the past two months.

"Thanks, Mary Beth," Moss interjected, steering Lily to the door as well before she could deliver a parting shot. Social services needed people like the Shulls; the alternative was unimaginable.

As they approached the car where Anna and Andy waited, John finished his instructions. "I'll be in touch with Sandy at least once a week. If you need me for anything, you have my number."

"I think we're going to be fine, John," the attorney assured.

Anna opened the back door of the X5 and motioned toward the back seat. "Do you want some help, or can you climb up there by yourself?"

Eager to show off his climbing skills to this new person, Andy gripped the car frame with one hand and the door with the other, pulling himself onto the running board. From there, he scampered easily onto the floorboard, then knee first into the seat, turning finally to face the front.

"Nice job." Anna pulled the seatbelt across his tiny body and matched it to its mate, double-checking the security with a firm tug.

Lily stopped her as she reached for the driver's door. "Oh no, you don't, Amazon. You drove all the way up here."

Anna continued into the driver's seat, snapping her own seatbelt into place. "You know what they say about possession."

Lily rolled her eyes, thanked the social worker one more time, and walked around to the other side. From the passenger seat, she had a direct view of their new charge. Andy squirmed as he burrowed his shoulders into the plush leather of the seat, his hands wandering across the textured bench.

Anna pulled away from the curb and executed a tight U-turn. Waving one last time to Moss, they were headed to LA.

"Andy," the car dealer began. "This car is called a BMW X5. Can you say that?"

He seemed genuinely interested in this piece of information, and Lily helped him repeat the name.

"And now this: BMWs are the best cars on the road."

Lily smiled and repeated it herself with animation, then helped Andy with the phrase. His formal education on cars was officially underway.

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Barely 30 minutes out of San Francisco, the small boy had hardly made a sound. From her vantage point, Lily could see the fear and doubt on his face. "Is something wrong, Andy?"

Immediately, tears sprang to the youngster's eyes, but words were not forthcoming. Thoughts of change could be overwhelming to small children as they imagined themselves in new and different places.

"It's okay. You shouldn't be afraid."

Anna had been watching him in the rearview mirror, and had an idea. "Lily, how about getting on the phone and finding out where the BMW dealer is in San Jose?"

"I know where it is. Why? Is something wrong with the car?"

"No, I just have an idea, that's all."

"Are you going to share or keep us in suspense?"

"Suspense is good." She winked at her partner, who proceeded to direct her along the expressways that would take them to Stevens Creek Boulevard, or "Auto Row" as it was known locally.

Twenty minutes later, they were pulling onto the lot, squeezing into a tight space between a customer's car and a brand new 330i with its hood up.

"I won't be but a minute if you want to just wait in the car." Anna got out and disappeared into the busy showroom.

Andy stretched his neck to see all the cars on the lot, wishing he were tall enough to see the inside of that one right beside them. He had never seen underneath the top before.

Lily took a moment to peruse Mary Beth Shull's handwritten notes on the boy while he was in her care. His last physical was in January, but she had taken him to the doctor three times during his relatively short stay in their home. One of the visits was asthma-related, and Mrs. Shull had concluded that the persistent coughing was—at least partially—attention-seeking behavior.

*What a load of crap!* Lily fumed as she thought again about the child being exiled to the sofa at night because of his difficulty breathing.

The attorney flipped through the pages quickly to find out what the other two visits were for. The physician's word jumped off the page: enuresis...bedwetting. Not a big surprise, really. The boy wasn't even four years old yet. From her notes, though, Mrs. Shull was convinced that this was Andy's passive aggressive response to her demands for discipline. In her mind, the child was both lazy and spiteful, caring nothing about himself or the trouble she went through each morning to dry his bed. As far as Lily was concerned, if Andy was doing it on purpose to protest his treatment, well...good for him!

The tall woman emerged from the showroom with a small white plastic bag, accompanied by a salesman who carried a large box. Opening Andy's door, she reached in and unbuckled the belt.

"Why don't you scoot over to the other side for a minute, Andy?"

The child quickly complied.

The salesman removed the bulky piece from the box, stripping away the plastic wrap to reveal a car seat. Efficiently, he demonstrated how it melded into the seat, securing it by the seatbelt. Anna adjusted the shoulder straps for an older child, and held them back while Andy crawled in. Most four-year-olds were just leaving their car seats, the salesman had explained, but once he saw the undersized child, he realized the advantages of the accessory.

Andy realized it instantly as well. From this new vantage point, he could see the shiny black motor inside the car next to him without having to stretch his neck. It was amazing!

Anna thanked the salesman and climbed back into the driver's seat. "Andy, do you remember what the best cars are?"

Lily helped him by whispering. "BMWs," he answered.

"That's right. And do you remember what kind of car this is?"

Lily waited while he thought. "Five."

"That's close. It's an X5, and this one is Lily's car. My car is different. My car is called a Z8. Can you say that?"

"Z8," he repeated clearly. That one was easy.

"Good." Reaching into the white bag she'd brought with her from the showroom, she drew out a small box and passed it through the console. "This is what my car looks like." It was a matchbox Z8, just like the custom imported convertible that sat in their garage.

His formal education on cars continued.

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Anna pulled into the driveway and pressed the button for the garage door opener.

"I'll come around and get him," Lily said, keeping her voice low so she wouldn't wake the sleeping child.

It was after nine, and Lily thought it best just to let Andy continue his restful sleep. They had stopped for dinner at a family restaurant in Bakersfield, the women unable to stomach the idea of two fast food meals in one day.

Both were on the lookout for evidence of the boy's picky eating habits, and were pleasantly surprised to see him eat most of his fried chicken pieces and French fries. Anna even persuaded him to try a small bite of the coleslaw, laughing as the boy tried gallantly not to make a face.

Andy wasn't at all what the tall woman had expected. Her fear of the child had temporarily vanished the moment his foster mother scolded him for actually having fun. In that instant, she understood exactly what Lily had said about what he needed to thrive. With the car seat and toy car, she had found favor with the boy, but she couldn't bribe him with gifts over and over.

Now that they were home, Anna found herself once again daunted by the prospect that they were now responsible for this small person. Fortunately, Lily seemed willing to take the lead; and it was likely that Anna's role would be minimal. She would leave for work at seven, like she did every day, and come home 12 hours later. If tonight were any indication, the child would probably be asleep soon after that.

Lily unbuckled the shoulder harnesses and gently lifted the sleepy boy from the SUV, drawing him to her chest. Tucking one arm firmly underneath his buttocks, she used her other hand to guide his head to her shoulder, where he promptly returned to dreamland. Anna got the door, then forged ahead of her partner to turn on lights. When they reached the boy's bedroom, Lily knelt down to seat him on the edge of the bed.

"Andy? I need you to wake up for a little while so you can change into your pajamas and go to the bathroom. Can you do that?"

The boy opened his eyes, taking in his new surroundings. There were two beds, but he couldn't

see anyone else. Would he be the only boy in this house, like he had been in the house before Mary Beth? There were two large pictures of cars, one over each bed. There was a desk like the one Mr. Shull had in the corner of the living room, but this one was smaller, and it had lots of books on the shelf over it.

The tall woman walked over and laid the small sports car on the bed beside him. He was glad she had bought it for him to play with while he lived here.

Lily opened the top drawer of the chest and took out a pair of pajamas. "Andy, why don't you go to the bathroom and then wash your hands and face while I get your bed ready?"

Wordlessly, he scooted down off the bed and walked toward the room where the tall woman had just turned on the light. Once inside, he closed the door, pushing against it with his hip until he heard the click of the catch. Mrs. Shull got angry when the boys left the door open.

"I need to get a couple of plastic trash bags from the kitchen," Lily said as she rushed past her partner. Moments later, she was back.

"What are those for?"

"I read the notes from Mrs. Shull on the way down. She says Andy wets the bed. I can go tomorrow and get a plastic liner for the mattress, but these will do for tonight." Hastily, the two women pulled the sheets down and spread the trash bags, retucking them just as the small boy emerged from the bathroom.

"Did you wash your face and hands, pal?" Lily asked.

*She's got this mother thing down pat,* Anna thought.

Andy nodded. He liked the footstool that stood in front of one of the sinks. It was easy to reach the water and he didn't get his shirt wet.

"Okay, why don't you put these pajamas on and I'll see if I can find your new toothbrush." Lily looked at her partner and asked, "Will you help him with the buttons?"

Anna sat on the bed as Andy shyly took off his t-shirt. Clumsily, he slid his arms through the armholes and started to button. Sure enough, he began the task with trying to put the first button through the second hole.

"Let me help, Andy." She reached out and guided the first button home, then the second. "Can you do the rest?"

It was painstakingly slow, but eventually he finished. Anna held out his pajama bottoms and he quickly pushed the shorts over his shoes.

"Andy, why don't you take your shoes off next? That makes it easier to get the pants on."

*Nothing to this mother stuff*, she thought smugly.

The boy promptly sat in the floor and tugged off his shoes, not bothering with the double-knotted laces. Taking the pants from the tall woman's outstretched hands, he pulled them up past his knees, then stood and continued to his waist.

"Here you go, Andy." Lily appeared in the bathroom doorway with a toothbrush and toothpaste. "Let's do this last thing, and I'll read you a story before you go to sleep."

Andy dutifully obeyed, and with Lily's hand guiding his up and down, the job was soon finished. "Good job!" she praised enthusiastically.

Lily was mildly disappointed to find that Anna had left the room. She could hear her lover on the phone downstairs.

"Let me show you a couple of things before you go to bed, okay?"

The boy nodded. He had barely said a word since he had awakened.

Lily bent down and scooped the small child up in her arms. Walking out the bedroom door, she stopped on the landing at the top of the stairs. "If you wake up tonight and need something, just come into this room. But be careful right here. I don't want you to fall down the stairs."

She continued onward into the master suite. "Anna and I sleep in here. If you need something, you can come in and wake one of us up. It's okay."

Walking back down the hall, she heard her partner closing up and turning out the lights. It had been a very long day and they would go to bed soon.

"Okay, pal. Do you have anything you want to ask me before you go to bed?"

"No," came the small voice.

Back in his bedroom, Andy got under the covers as Lily selected a book. Turning off the overhead light, she used the soft light from the bathroom nightlight to find her way back to the bed, where she switched on the bedside lamp.

"Want to sit up a while so you can see the pictures?" she offered.

Eventually the boy settled into her side and she began reading the short book, stopping on occasion to point out pictures or ask questions. She was pleased that Andy was paying very close attention to the tale of the talking toys.

"Okay, I'm going to stop here so you can go to sleep now. I'll read the rest of it tomorrow night. Would you like that?"

"Yes," he answered, sliding down in the bed.

Lily straightened the covers and knelt down low. "Andy, I'm really glad you're here with us. Anna's glad too." With those assurances, she delivered a small kiss to his forehead. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

Lily turned off the bedside light and walked out, leaving the door barely ajar so that a small stream of light would creep into the room from the hall. A nightlight at the top of the stairs lit the entire landing.

The exhausted blonde found her partner in the bathroom getting ready for bed.

"I'm beat," Anna said.

"Me too. Who were you talking to on the phone?"

"My girlfriend. I told her I couldn't get away tonight. I...didn't know you could hear."

Lily popped her lover with a washcloth. "Not funny, Amazon."

"It was Holly. I asked her if she'd keep Chester for a few more days until Andy got settled."

"Chester! I forgot all about Chester."

"Don't worry, I won't tell him." Anna wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and let her lips chase away any thoughts that there could ever be anyone else. "I love you."

"I love you too. You were great today. I think Andy likes you."

"You think?" Anna knew he liked the car, and he had certainly enjoyed their little game that Mrs. Shull had interrupted. Still, she knew it would probably take quite a while for the little boy to loosen up around either of them.

"Definitely. I can't believe you got him to try the coleslaw."

Anna chuckled. "Did you see his face?"

The women traded their perspectives on the day as they finished getting ready for bed. Anna followed Lily's lead and kept her nightshirt on as she got into bed.

"Is this how it's going to be?" she asked, running her fingers along the ragged purple tank top.

"Just until he gets used to being here. I told him to come on in if he had any problems. Later on, we'll teach him about knocking on doors and waiting for permission. I think we'll be able to go back our...natural state then."

"Let's hope he's a fast learner."

Alone in his room, the small boy laid awake long past the time when the adults turned their lights out, knowing with a certainty what would happen if he fell asleep.

## ***Chapter 13***

"And this is the kitchen," Lily told the child as they entered the brightly lit tile room where her partner sat reading the paper and drinking her second cup of coffee.

*Getting Andy up had started out badly. He held the covers tightly as Lily tried to pull them back.*

*"Come on, Andy. Let's go downstairs so we can have breakfast with Anna before she leaves for work."*

*Still, he refused to move.*

*"Are you worried about something, sweetheart? Did you wet the bed last night," she asked quietly, doing her best to keep any sign of rebuke from her voice. Seeing the tears rush to the frightened boy's eyes, she quickly added, "It's okay if you did, Andy. Those things just happen. It's because you're still little. When you get older, it won't happen anymore. It's not your fault."*

*This was definitely a new message. Mary Beth had gotten angry and upset every morning.*

*"Let's clean you up a little bit and get you some dry pajamas, okay?"*

*Andy followed her into the bathroom, where she helped him out of his wet things. He didn't seem to mind when she pulled off his underwear. Gently, she washed his legs and buttocks with a washcloth, finally handing it to him. "Can you wash this part yourself?" She gestured to his private area. "You shouldn't let other people touch you there, okay?"*

*"It's private," he said in agreement. Mary Beth had said the same thing when he took his bath.*

*"That's right." Lily was relieved to see that he'd already gotten some early training on that. Many of the children she encountered in her work were not so lucky.*



"Good morning, Andy," Anna looked up to an adorable sight: the boy holding her lover's hand as he took in his new surroundings. He was wearing fresh pajamas, and his new car-like slippers. She had heard the pair laughing as he walked again and again toward the full-length hallway mirror, where he could see the headlights flash with each step.

"Can you say good morning to Anna?" Lily coaxed. Little by little, they hoped he would open up.

"Good morning," he finally said.

"Go on over to the table and I'll bring you some breakfast."

Anna moved the newspaper from the padded bench that bordered the bay window. "Sit over here by the window, Andy."

The boy's eyes went wide as he climbed up on the seat and spotted the swimming pool for the very first time. "What's dat?"

Almost shocked that he had spoken, Anna followed his pointing finger to the pool. "That's a swimming pool. Do you like to swim?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. He had never been swimming before.

"We'll give a try later, okay?"

Lily brought his cereal and juice, and took the opportunity to tell him that he must never go out to the swimming pool by himself.

Anna checked her watch and stood. "I need to go to work. You two have a good day." Quickly, she gave her lover a peck on the lips, not sure what the new rules were about showing affection. She got her answer when she felt the tug on her shirt.

"I know you can do better than that."

Anna smiled and delivered a loving kiss that Lily felt all the way down to her bare feet. As she pulled away, she felt another pull. Lily jerked her head discreetly to the small boy who was intently pursuing the little round oats in his bowl.

*Okay.* Anna wasn't sure what to do here, but decided just to go for it. Slipping around the table on the padded bench, she gave the child a soft hug and a kiss on top of his head. "I'll see you tonight when I get home, Andy. Have fun today."

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Hal looked up from his desk to see his wife once again navigating the doorway with a heavy-laden stroller and a toddler in tow.

"Again?" he asked, already knowing the answer. Catching the jubilant Jonah as he raced into the room, Hal stood and gave his wife a welcoming kiss. "Hello, beautiful," he cooed into the stroller at Alice. "So where's my lunch?"

On cue, Anna entered with soft drinks. "Your pizza will be here in about 10 minutes. Hi Jo-Jo!"

The boy squirmed down to give his aunt a hug. Anna was suddenly struck by the difference between her reaction to Jonah and to Andy. With her nephew, the show of affection was clearly automatic. She never had to stop and think about what she should do; she just did it naturally. With Andy, she weighed her words, and questioned at each juncture how to show the child affection.

Of course, there were differences between Jonah and Andy, she reasoned. She had been close to her nephew since the night he was born, and he was after all, her sister's child. Is that why Lily seems so natural around Andy, because he is her nephew?

"So you have a little one in your house now, eh?" Kim was excited to hear all about Andy, but sensed that this little emergency session wasn't so that Anna could boast about the new addition.

"Yeah, we brought him home last night."

"How did it go?"

"Okay, I guess."

Kim was almost amused at her sister's discomfort. The very thought of someone who wielded Anna's power and confidence being intimidated by a four-year-old made her itch to be a fly on the wall at the Brentwood home.

"Tell me what he's like."

"Well, he's cute, very cute. He's got curly brown hair and big green eyes like Lily's." That was Anna's favorite part. "He's pretty small, not much bigger than Jonah. He doesn't say much, but Lily says he might open up once he gets used to us. He's got a gorgeous little smile." Anna smiled herself when she thought of the tickle game.

"He sounds adorable. I can't wait to meet him. Maybe we should have a play day next weekend so that he and Jonah can get together."

"Maybe so. That might be fun." Anna twirled a pencil as her thoughts of Andy went on.

"Was there something else you wanted to talk about, Anna? The last time you called me down here, you were panicked about him coming. What is it you're feeling now?"

Anna sighed. What she was feeling was guilty-very guilty about her reaction to having Andy in their home. She wanted to talk, but she was almost ashamed of what she might say.

"Kim, I'm going to tell you some things that I'm not very proud of. I need to know that this conversation will never leave this room."

"Anna, you should know by now that I don't tell your secrets. I never have."

Anna nodded her agreement and sighed again. "I...it's...I think it's going to be hard to get used to having a little kid in the house all the time." There was a lot more to it than that, but that was as good a starting place as any.

"Well, I know what you mean by that. It's definitely different. But Hal and I had a lot of time by ourselves before Jonah. Plus, we had nine months to get ready for him."

"How do you guys deal with it?"

"Well that depends on what you're asking. We still have sex." She grinned, anticipating the blush that her candor would produce. She was not unrewarded.

"But that's just one thing," Anna answered. "We'll figure that part out if I have to set the alarm for the middle of the night." It was pretty high on Anna's priority list to sort that out soon. "But it's more than just having our private time, it's...pervasive. He's going to be the center of breakfast every day, and of dinner every night, and pretty much everything we do together."

Kim was beginning to understand the problem. Her sister was jealous. "You know, little kids are like that. They need things; they need a lot of attention. And they pretty much need it all the time, because they don't understand yet how other people fit in."

"I know, and that's why I feel so...guilty. Andy really needs Lily right now, and I'm afraid I'm going to resent it."

Anna's omission of how Andy might need her also didn't escape the redhead. Maybe that's what her sister needed to confront.

"Do you think it's possible that Andy might need you too?"

"Oh, I don't think so, really. Lily pretty much takes care of everything."

"How do think Lily feels about that?"

"I don't know. I think she likes it."

"You mean she likes doing everything or she likes doing it by herself?"

*Ouch!* That stung a little.

Kim went on. "I love my children, Anna, and no matter how many times I've threatened to sell them to the gypsies, I enjoy doing things for them. But I want Hal to enjoy it too, and not just because I sometimes need his help. I want him to be able to share the feeling with me, and I want my children to know that they can depend on their daddy too."

Anna immediately made the connection to her friend Carolyn, who wanted to share everything about Sarah with Vicki. Kim was saying the same thing about Hal. So far, Anna had gone through all the motions of supporting her partner-agreeing about what was best for Andy, changing things in their home, driving to San Francisco to get the boy-but without a genuine need of her own. No, she did what she did because it was the right thing to do, an obligation to both her partner and her own sense of reason.

"Sister, listen to me." Kim reached out and took the dark-haired woman's hand. "You and Lily said you didn't know how long Andy would be with you. If it's only a little while, it probably won't be a big deal. But if it's longer, you're going to need to work this out with Lily. Otherwise, one of you is eventually going to have to make a choice."

Anna didn't want to hear that part at all. Leaving Lily was out of the question, and she knew she'd do anything to have her partner stay. If Andy lived with them forever, she'd figure out how to make it work.

"We'll work it out, Kim. I just need to grow up."

"Anna, you have a right to your feelings. You made an unselfish choice about bringing Andy into your house, and there may be times that you wish you hadn't. But you can't ever let that little boy think that he's the problem. He won't be able to deal with that."

That much Anna understood. Andy's self-esteem needed a boost, not a blow.

"And I'm here for you anytime you need someone to talk to. Hal's a great babysitter, and we can have a standing Monday appointment, as far as I'm concerned."

"We just might, Kimmie." Anna loved her sister, and just realized that they'd made it through this whole deep conversation without a single sarcastic remark.

"That's fine with me. With a little luck, horror stories about Andy might make me feel better about my own kids."

The car dealer chuckled. That smartass was the sister she knew and loved. "Thanks for coming down again."

"No problem. So ask Lily about all of us getting together next weekend. Jonah has toys, but you guys have a pool."

"We'll do it. Maybe you can bring a few toys. I don't know what Andy likes, except for cars."

"He likes cars?"

"Loves them."

"Sounds like an omen to me, Sis."

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Day by day, Anna, Lily and Andy settled more and more into their new routine. Lily had gotten the boy into a pre-school program near their home, and on Wednesday night after Lily's AA meeting, the three had gone to dinner at the home of Anna's parents. It was important for everyone to meet, since Martine had stepped up to fill in as babysitter on Thursdays when Lily was in court.

Lily had made Allen Avery's day when she asked Tony to take the young man on full-time. For the time being, she would continue at part-time, and would seek additional funding if she decided to expand her work hours.

By Thursday night, the blonde had had the "knocking on the door" talk with the boy, and the lovers enjoyed their first intimate evening since getting their new addition. All in all, things seemed to be going well for everyone.

On Friday, Anna brought Chester home. Despite his initial fears, Andy was delighted with the dog, and the basset hound too seemed to enjoy this new addition. Anna showed the child how to scratch Chester's belly, and sure enough, Andy got the licks in the face that she had promised in San Francisco.

The Sunday play day turned into an all-day family pool party, with Andy finally loosening up a little. He was thrilled when Anna and Hal tossed him back and forth in the water, and Jonah's dinosaur inner tube was perfect for kicking the length of the pool and back.

Sandy and Suzanne stopped by for burgers later in the afternoon as the social worker completed her obligatory "home visit" so that she could report back to the agency in San Francisco.

"You guys did a great job on the bedroom upstairs," Sandy congratulated her friend.

"Everything you said was perfect. The bed, the step stool, the nightlights. I think he's settled in pretty well," Lily said.

"Are you and Anna doing okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. At first, it was...I don't know...like she didn't know what to do, so she just stepped back and let me take care of everything. But look at her now." Both of the women smiled as they watched the tall beauty playing in the pool with the two boys and the others. Even George had joined them, while Martine had volunteered for Alice Duty.

"You guys are going to turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to Andy Parker." Those were the very words she had shared with John Moss.

"I hope so, Sandy. But who knows how long he'll get to stay here. I think that sister of mine could change her mind on a whim."

"Maybe, but with that trial starting tomorrow, I think she's going to be too busy to think about Andy at all. It wouldn't surprise me if you and Anna were driving him to his high school graduation."

That thought both thrilled and frightened Lily. She and her partner hadn't really talked about Andy being here permanently. But in the week he'd been there, she already knew that she wouldn't want to see him go.

Anna was herself loosening up with the small boy today. It was easier to interact with him when she was around the other adults, especially when they were playing with such spontaneity. All of them worked hard to balance their time and attention between the two boys.

Lily had put her on the spot one night, telling Andy to ask her to play with him and his cars on the floor in the family room. There was no way she could graciously decline, but she felt a little self-conscious at first. Eventually, she learned all of Andy's "rules" and began even having a little fun motoring the miniature car through the boy's grid of streets in the make-believe town. The best part was telling Andy that she kept hearing the engine knock on the matchbox Cadillac. He listened again and again, finally proclaiming that he heard it too.

"So how come you're not in the pool?" Sandy asked.

"Well somebody has to cook! And besides, Anna and I went in with him this morning before everybody got here so he wouldn't be afraid. He said he'd never been swimming before."

"That's hard to believe. Look at him. He's fearless."

"Yeah, I think he trusts Anna to keep him safe. Probably the first time he's trusted anybody," she added cynically. "Hey, dinner's ready. Suzanne, you want to see if you can get those guys out of the pool?"

Always eager to eat, Suzanne walked to the water's edge and made the announcement. Gullibly, she offered her hand to Hal as he started up the ladder, and found herself sailing headfirst into the deep end, tennis shoes and all.

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Jury selection in the Peyton Graves murder trial dragged into its second week, not at all unusual for a case with an abundance of pretrial publicity, not to mention the possibility of a death penalty. Lily followed the news faithfully, but little was released during this period. The public would know nothing about the jurors until after the trial.

A 12-person jury, with two alternates, was finally seated on the second Thursday. Amid vehement protests from defense counsel, Judge Wostyk decided to forge ahead with opening arguments on Friday. That put the defense at a decided disadvantage, since the prosecution could use the entire day to outline their case, not giving them a moment's opportunity to rebut what was said. The jury would take home that story-and only that story-for the entire weekend.

Lily concurred with the defense that it was bad news for them, but she couldn't cite a single a case that was overturned on appeal because of a scheduling decision like this one. A tough break was what it was, probably neither the first nor the last for McGinnis and Parker.

The attorney had programmed their PVR system to record Court TV each day from nine a.m. to five p.m., the usual court day minus an hour and a half for lunch. She would watch as much as she could, but she didn't want Andy to see his mother under these circumstances.

Staying home on Friday, Lily was able to watch the beginning of the trial live. The prosecutor first told the jurors that the state would prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Kenneth McGinnis and Kristy Parker had brutally murdered Peyton Graves at his home on the night of March 25th. Piece by piece, he detailed the state's evidence: items belonging to Graves and pawn tickets for other items, found in the possession of the accused; bloodstains that matched Graves' DNA found on Kristy Parker's jeans; hair samples found at the scene that matched Parker's DNA; and finally, the murder weapon, a bloody knife found wedged between two newspaper racks near Graves' home.

The prosecutor went on to hypothesize about what the defense might say with regard to this damning evidence, and attempted to poke holes in what he called "a completely implausible scenario." Lily used this technique sometimes herself, designed to "inoculate" the judge or jury against any evidence they might hear later.

When she returned at 1:30 from picking up Andy after pre-school, Lily played with him for a while in his room, then encouraged him to take a short nap. That gave her a few minutes to catch up on the afternoon court session. The prosecutor was still rolling, talking about the brutality of

the crime, and why it warranted the death penalty. He prepared the jury for the pictures he would show: pictures of a man who had been viciously killed in a rage by two people who cared nothing for the sanctity of human life, "those two people," he said, pointing to McGinnis and Parker.

Lily took notice of her sister's appearance in the courtroom. She was dressed in a simple skirt and round-collar white blouse with buttons up the front and flowers on the right breast pocket. She had probably never worn anything like that in her entire life. Her hair was brown, not the burgundy it had been, and the roots had been freshly dyed.

Since she first appeared in court at the nine a.m. session, Lily had noticed a subtle change in her sister's appearance. At that time, she was calm and collected, sporting an almost defiant air. This afternoon, she seemed rattled, staring at the table and fidgeting with a paperclip. To Lily, she appeared childlike and frightened.

"Lily?"

Startled by the small voice, the attorney fumbled with the remote to turn the TV off before the child spotted his mother.

"Hi there. Did you have a nice nap?"

Andy nodded, obviously still sleepy.

"Come here and sit with me."

Little by little, Andy was getting closer to the women in this new house, especially this one. So far, they had both been pretty nice, and neither one had yelled at him for anything. The tall one was kind of scary sometimes. She didn't say very much, so he wondered if she was mad at him for something that he did. He started to climb up on the sofa beside Lily, but she grabbed him instead and pulled him into her lap.

"Do you like living here, Andy?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. What do you like about it?"

"I like my room, and my toys, and Chester."

"Uh-huh. What else?"

"I like the swimming pool."

"Anything else?"



Andy was in a quandary. He really liked Lily a lot, but what if he told her and she didn't like him?

Lily could see that he was stuck, maybe even too shy to say anything else. "You know what I like, Andy? I like you. I think you're a very good boy, and I'm very glad that you live here."

That got a bashful smile, which in turn, earned him a fierce hug.

"Let's go to the store and get something good for dinner, okay?" For the first time in his young life, the child had a say-so about what foods he might have for dinner. His personal favorite was macaroni and cheese, but he also liked mashed potatoes and gravy. Lily explained that people usually had one or the other for dinner, but seldom both. She allowed him to pick out one vegetable-it was a house rule that he would try at least three bites of a vegetable each night-and she would choose the others. He had chosen broccoli, saying it reminded him of "little trees." That in turn reminded Lily of the Cornish hens she had always called "little chickens."

She was pleased that Andy's appetite had improved somewhat over the past couple of weeks, and had passed this information on to John Moss by email. The best news was that the boy hadn't had a single asthma attack, even after Chester came back home. All of this translated to a healthier, happier, well-adjusted child.

Andy's new chore at dinner time was to scrape the dog food out of Chester's can into his bowl. Both boy and dog liked this, though dog thought it took much longer when boy did it. Dog was right.

"Hello, everybody!" the car dealer called from the family room.

"There's Anna. Go tell her what we're having for dinner."

Andy rushed into the family to greet the tall woman. "We're having pork chops...and macaroni...and little trees...and applesauce...and..." Quickly he ran back into the kitchen to look at the table. "And bread," he announced as she entered the kitchen.

"Hi baby." Lily stopped stirring the macaroni and cheese and gave her lover a welcoming kiss.

"Something smells good...could it be...pork chops?"

"Did somebody tell you that already, or did you just guess?"

"I told her," Andy squealed.

Anna looked in the pot and rolled her eyes. She hated macaroni and cheese. A lot. But it was Andy's favorite food, and since they were trying to get him to eat some of everything, he had asked why she didn't have to eat some of everything too. Very astute lad.

"How would you like to have a couple of visitors on the lot tomorrow?" Lily asked as they were

sitting down at the table. "I think Andy would really enjoy seeing where you work."

"I don't know," Anna teased. "I just work around a bunch of cars. You don't like cars, do you?"

Andy's eyes lit up. Anna had his undivided attention.

"Which cars are the best?"

"BMW's!" he practically shouted.

"Right answer! Why don't you come around two? I'll give you both a tour."

Lily's phone interrupted their dinner-again! "Just let it ring." And ring it did. Voicemail picked up after the fourth ring; but no sooner had it stopped than it began ringing again.

"Fine!" Lily stormed off, ready to give some poor telemarketer an earful.

"Hello!" she barked. "She what? John, you can't be serious. What on earth could she want with me?"

By her lover's tone and the general conversation, Anna put it together that John Moss was on the phone, and this call was about Kristy.

"Did she even say anything about...him? Did she even ask how he was doing?" Lily looked across the room at the child, who was digging into his macaroni and cheese, oblivious to the fact that he was the subject of the call.

"That's just great, John. I don't know what I'm going to do. I have to talk with Anna. I can't believe she thinks she can just snap her fingers like that." Lily was fuming. "What can she do if I say no?"

Anna watched her lover slowly calm as she listened to Moss' reply.

"What do I need to do?" Removing a pen from the drawer, Lily jotted down the public defender's name and telephone number. "Okay John. Normally, I'd say thanks for calling, but I could have done without this one."

Lily returned to the table, no longer interested in dinner. The three made casual conversation until Andy had finished most of what was on his plate.

"Andy, why don't you go set up your streets in the family room, and I'll come and play with you in a little while, okay?"

When he was gone, Anna reached over and clasped her lover's wrist. "She's asking for you?"

Lily nodded grimly. "She wants to talk to me on Sunday night, then she wants me to come to the

trial and sit behind her."

"That's ridiculous. Just tell her no."

"Anna," Lily paused, knowing that she might have to go against her partner's wishes here. "John says she threatened to pull Andy out of here if I didn't come. She told him that she would ask to have him placed with our mother instead." The very thought of that made Lily physically ill.

Oh, nooooo, Mr. Bill!!! [Part 5](#)

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## ~ Strained ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** [See Part 1](#)

### **Strained - Part 5**

**By KG MacGregor**

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### ***Chapter 14***

"Lily, I don't think I can do this." Anna was practically wailing.

"Sure you can. We've been through everything, and I even wrote it all down. It's only for three days."

*And three nights!* "I don't...." Anna was frantic. "What if he has another asthma attack?"

Andy had gotten sick last night, shortly after Lily had told him that she needed to go away for a few days. Still coughing at bedtime, she had asked Anna to bring the rocking chair from the other bedroom into his room, and she had rocked him for over an hour until he calmed down and fell asleep.

"Just hold him and rock him. Try not to let him get excited."

"Lily, how do you know Kristy's not just jerking you around?"

"What difference does it make, Anna? She has the final word on what happens to Andy. If she gets pissed off, he gets to live with his loving grandmother. Been there, done that."

Why was Anna being so difficult? She had sulked for the last two days, all through Lily's instructions on bathing, dressing, bed changing, cooking, and emergencies.

"Has it occurred to you that maybe she's just bluffing? She probably couldn't care less where Andy lives," the tall woman persisted.

"I can't afford to take that chance. There's just too much at stake."

As the time drew nearer for Lily to go to the airport, Anna grew more and more anxious. "You know, this is going to be really hard on Andy."

Lily had had enough. "Is this really about Andy?" She couldn't keep the anger from her voice. "Because I have to tell you, it sounds to me like it's about Anna. I know you're scared to do this. I know you'd rather I didn't go. But I don't really feel like I have any choice. And I don't appreciate you making me feel guilty about it." Her voice was shaking as she finished. It had been a very long time since they'd had a fight of any kind.

Anna knew she was being selfish. Of the three of them, her needs were the least right now. She had a supportive family, and Martine was more than willing to help this week by picking Andy up in the afternoon and feeding him dinner before Anna came for him after work. Lily had patiently shown her everything she needed to know. But she was afraid...desperately afraid.

"I'm sorry. I just..." Her voice trailed off. There was no legitimate excuse for the way she was acting and she knew it.

"Anna, why are you so worried about this?"

"I don't know. I... What if...? Suppose he..." If there was a complete sentence in there somewhere, it wasn't coming out.

Lily felt sorry for the woman as she floundered about, trying to articulate her fears. As she finished her packing, she sat down on the end of the bed and patted the space next to her. "Come here, sweetheart."

Anna moved to her side and immediately took her lover's hand. "Lily, it's just that I'm worried that your being gone will upset Andy, and I won't be able to deal with it. Not for me, but for him. What if I can't reassure him? I'm not good at this like you are."

"Honey, you're better than you think. Andy likes you. He loves it when you play with him. I can see it. His whole face lights up when you get down in the floor with him."

Anna smiled a little at her lover's cajoling. She was ashamed at being such a baby about all this. *Andy likes me?*

"Anna, right now, Andy's afraid too, and he really needs for you to be there for him. I really need it too. You've been wonderful about all this, and I love you more than you could ever know. Please hang in there with me, sweetheart."

"Of course I will." Anna put her arm around Lily's shoulder and pulled her close. "I'm sorry for being such a jerk."

Lily was silent but returned the hug, burying her face into Anna's soft neck.

"You're supposed to say 'Oh, you're not being a jerk.'"

"Oh, you're not being a jerk," Lily complied.

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*Goddamnit!* Lily was fuming as she cooled her heels in the lawyer's conference room. Kristy had sent word that she had a visitor, and would join her "lawyer" when visiting hours ended.

Shortly after eight, the door opened and her sister was escorted to the usual chair. Again, a deputy recited the visitation rules, finally stepping outside to her post.

The women eyed each other, Lily with suspicion, Kristy with the usual amusement.

"Mother says hello," she smirked.

"What do you want, Kristy?"

"Is that any way to greet your sister? The mother of the child you're supposedly caring for?"

Lily didn't rise to that bait. She was waiting to know why she'd been summoned again to this jail.

"Okay, have it your way. We don't really need to have any friendly chit-chat."

Still the blonde sat quietly, glaring at the impish woman.

"What do I want? That's easy. I want to beat this and get out of here."

"What do you want with me?"

Kristy's humor disappeared for the briefest moment as prepared to answer. "Here's the deal. Our lawyer says it looks bad for Kenny and me not to have anybody from our families in the courtroom to support us. The jury will think we're scum."

*And you're not?* The attorney refrained from saying that aloud. The thought of participating in this kind of charade was repulsive.

"So I need for you and Mother to come to court every day and sit behind me. That way, the jury can see that I'm a person who is worthy of being loved." Kristy smiled facetiously, obviously loving this little game.

"I couldn't do that, even if I wanted to...which I don't. You're forgetting that I don't live here. I have a job in LA and in case you've forgotten, a child to take care of."

"Well I can fix it so that the child is not your problem. With me in jail, the state gives a guardian almost a thousand dollars a month for support, and Mom thought that sounded pretty good. And I can do that first thing tomorrow."

Lily was ready to leap across the table and strangle the bitch. Kristy didn't care one whit about her own son's welfare. Still, she held her temper. "And what happens to Andy if I come? We can't both have him."

"No, but you might be able to work something out with her so that you get to keep Andres and she gets a little...financial help from her rich daughter."

"Not going to happen, Kristy," Lily answered adamantly.

"Fine. Then you should get home so that you can start packing his little things. Grandma's going to be so happy," the prisoner sneered.

"I don't think so, Kristy. Because you know all that money you keep talking about? I'm going to use it to hire the very best lawyers I can find. Believe me, we won't have any trouble at all showing what a pathetic mother Lisa Parker would be. And in the middle of all that will be a sidebar next to this trial story about how you tried to use your own child to buy favor with a jury so that you wouldn't look unloved." Lily stood and started for the door. "You want a fight? Bring it on!"

This was not at all the reaction Kristy had expected. She was supposed to be the tough one, not this fancy lawyer who was made soft by a privileged life. And now, her only chance to beat the hangman was walking out the door.

"Wait!"

Lily stopped and turned coolly. If she hurried, she might make the ten o'clock flight home.

"I need your help, Lily. They're going to kill us for this." For the very first time since they'd met, Kristy showed her vulnerable side. The magnitude and seriousness of the trial had suddenly dawned on her when the prosecutor had laid out his case on Friday.

"Why shouldn't they, Kristy? If the DA's story's right, you killed that man like a couple of savages."

"But I didn't do it." The tough façade was gone now. In its place was a frightened woman—a girl really-looking for some kind of lifeboat that might save her from death row.

Lily slowly walked back to the chair but didn't sit, instead placing her hands on the back and leaning forward. "Are you saying that your story about finding those things in the dumpster is true?"

The shaken woman didn't answer right away. Kenny and their lawyer had told her over and over that they had to stick to that story. "No, but it's not what you think. We just wanted some money. But he wouldn't tell us where it was...and Kenny just lost it. I kept yelling at him to stop and let's get out of there. But he just kept stabbing the guy."

Lily absorbed her sister's words, filtering them both as an attorney and as a skeptical sister. "Then why is your attorney saying otherwise?" The public defender could be disbarred for knowingly allowing his clients to perjure themselves. Of course, it still remained in doubt whether McGinnis or Kristy would testify.

"It's the story Kenny told him. Then he said he didn't want to know anymore. I never get to talk to him without Kenny, and they both tell me not to say anything."

More than anything, Lily wanted to believe the woman, wanted badly to believe that her sister was incapable of such a brutal act. If what she said was true, McGinnis and the public defender were gambling with her very life on the slim hope that they would both be acquitted. If they were wrong, her sister would likely die for a crime she didn't commit. But the older sister wasn't convinced.

Besides, even if it were true, it didn't excuse her sister's participation in the crime, or in the cover-up. "Kristy, even if it's proven that McGinnis did the actual killing, that's no guarantee you won't be convicted just the same. But your best chance to save your life is to come forward. If you cooperate, the DA might be willing to settle for a life term."

"Lily, if I tell that story, Kenny could get a needle up his arm," the younger sister said grimly.

"Are you willing to risk dying for him, Kristy? Is he worthy of that? It sounds to me like he's willing to risk your life, but not his own." Lily pushed away from the chair. "You'd better think hard about that. Somebody needs to tell the DA what really happened."

As the words left her lips, Lily realized that she was in deep shit. Had she been here as Kristy's sister, she could do what she wanted with all of these revelations. But in the jail's records, she was here as an attorney, and therefore prohibited from revealing their conversation to anyone without risking disbarment. No doubt, the public defender had been looking ahead.

But the worst part was that her attorney status meant that she could be considered an officer of the court for the case. If Kristy were to testify to McGinnis' version of events, she could be disbarred for not speaking up.

"Will you stay? Please?" The bravado gone, the small voice was pleading.

"What about Andy? I want you to quit jerking everybody around with him. None of this should concern him."

"Fine. He can stay with you." *For the time being.*

"I'll come tomorrow. After that, I won't promise anything."

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Anna bent over the tub, adding two capfuls of Bubble Big to the running water. Her first thought had been to do the bath thing as expeditiously as possible: get in, get clean, get out. But Lily had explained that Andy enjoyed his time in the tub when he got to play a little bit, especially with the bubbles. Dutifully, the tall woman kept reminding herself that it wasn't all about what *she* wanted. Adding two more capfuls, she reasoned that if bubbles were fun, twice as many would be twice as much fun.

"Andy? Are you ready?"

The boy came into the bathroom and eyed the growing white mass excitedly. Quickly, he discarded his clothes and placed them in the hamper behind the door like Lily had shown him.

In the two weeks that Andy had been there, Anna had never seen him completely naked before, avoiding the upstairs altogether when she knew it was bath time. To her mild surprise, he wasn't the least bit modest, far too distracted by the allure of the bubbles, which now surpassed the rim of the tub. *Oops.*

When they got back from dropping Lily at the airport, Anna heated a frozen cheese pizza for Andy's dinner, and threw together a salad for herself. He seemed happy enough with his food, but both struggled awkwardly for conversation. Most of her questions drew one-word answers; attempts to draw him out were met with silent shrugs.



After dinner, he played quietly with his cars in the floor of the family room. The highlight of the night was their usual short walk with Chester through the neighborhood, which the threesome had done together every night since the dog had returned home. Anna couldn't help but smile as the small boy skipped ahead a few yards, then clapped his hands for the basset hound to catch up. Andy was undeniably cute.

Despite her reservations about bath time, the stand-in caretaker found herself having fun. Comically, she piled bubbles on top of Andy's head, even fancying a beard and moustache on the child. As the bubbles started to fade, she helped him scrub his neck and ears, then his back, chest and arms.

"How about poking that filthy foot out here?" she teased, scrubbing and tickling first one then the other, all the way up past his knees. As Lily had instructed, she then soaped the washcloth and handed it to child, asking him to finish up by washing his own private parts. *Thank goodness.*

"Is there a particular story you want to read tonight?" Andy was dressed in his dark blue pajamas with the rocket ship on the front. He shrugged again, the familiarity of the playful bath scene forgotten.

"How about this one?" she asked, extracting a story of children who had stowed away to the moon. "This story has a rocket, just like this one." She started to tickle the appliqué on his chest, but suddenly remembered Lily's cautions about getting him excited. The last thing on earth either of them wanted tonight was another asthma attack.

Grabbing his Dodger bear, Koufax-Lily had suggested the name to honor the pitching great- Andy pushed his feet under the covers and made room for the tall woman to stretch out beside him. A mere twelve minutes into the story, the weary boy was sound asleep.

Anna mentally checked off a day on the calendar. She had survived their first night alone. Only two more to go, and Lily would be home.

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At 10 minutes to nine, the courtroom door opened, allowing the spectators and the press to enter and scramble for seats. Lily's pass, which the public defender had left with bailiff, allowed her reserved seating in the row directly behind the defendant's table. The blonde hoped that Lisa Parker had gotten the message that there was nothing in it for her to show up.

Moments after nine, the public defender appeared, leaning over with an outstretched hand. "I'm Terry Causwell, Kristy's attorney. You must be Lilian Parker."

"Stuart," she corrected icily. No one had ever made that mistake, and she couldn't help but wonder if it hadn't been a mistake at all.

"Of course, I'm sorry. Thank you for coming. I really think it will help your sister."

At that moment, the side door opened and the two prisoners were escorted to the table. Kristy met her sister's eyes and mouthed a silent "thank you," which surprised the blonde somewhat. The last few people filed in, the bailiff waiting for the courtroom to settle before summoning the judge. The last person through the door was Lisa Parker, who quietly took a seat beside the daughter that had been taken from her almost 30 years ago.

"All rise!"

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"Good morning, Anna. Flat tire?" Carmen said cheerily to her boss, who grunted and stormed past on the way up the stairs where she slammed the office door shut.

Anna kept a change of clothes behind the door, ever mindful of the mess one could make when it suddenly became necessary to disassemble a motor. Angrily, she ripped off her tan Tahari jacket and ivory top, both of which now sported greasy black smears from crawling under the X5 for the matchbox car that Andy had dropped. Naturally, the navy top she kept for emergencies clashed horribly with the dark green slacks, so she was forced to change into the matching plaid navy skirt. That move necessitated hose, which she kept in her bottom drawer, and heels, which she did not. The first person who commented on her casual brown shoes would be fired.

The morning had been...somewhat less than ideal. Andy had probably had a restless night due to Lily being gone, and was very difficult to arouse. Twice, Anna had returned to his room to find that he'd fallen back to sleep. *Must be in his genes*, she mused, thinking of how Lily loved to languish in bed.

Finally dragging the small boy into the bathroom, Anna readied the washcloth as Andy stripped from the wet pajamas. She had laid out his clothes, but when he joined her in the kitchen few minutes later, he was wearing the favorite ragged t-shirt with the hole in the side. It immediately brought to mind Lily's well-worn purple tank top. "No, no, Andy. That's a shirt for wearing at home, not for going out."

So back he went to change, but now his mood was no better than hers. It didn't help that she poured for him the same bran cereal that she always ate for breakfast...which he didn't like. After watching the boy push it around in his bowl aimlessly for a while, Anna relented and dumped it out, discovering to her chagrin that they were out of the round oats. In a moment of inspiration, she smeared peanut butter and jelly on a piece of bread and folded it half. Over

Andy's protests that sandwiches were usually only lunch food, he finally finished all but the crust, but not without dropping a large blob of jelly on his clean shirt and shorts. *That too must be in his genes.*

Anna thought seriously about sending him on, but worried that he would tell her mother that he had in fact done this *before* leaving home. So back upstairs they went to find something new to wear. Anna threw the sheets and all the dirty clothes into a single load and started the washer.

Finally on their way out the door, the boy remembered his favorite toy-the matchbox Z8 convertible that Anna had given him on the first day they'd met. Andy rarely went anywhere without it. Twenty minutes later, Anna found it underneath the couch in the family room, but not before Chester had left a dirty footprint on the back of her top because she was, after all, crawling on the floor. A quick change and she too was ready to go.

She didn't have time to switch the car seat to the convertible, so off they went in Lily's car instead. Now 10 minutes late for pre-school, Anna hurriedly pulled him out, which caused him to drop the small car so that it rolled underneath the big one. And the rest, as they say....

"Anna, Greg Cahill is here to see you," came Carmen's voice over the intercom.

"Send him on up, Carmen." *How rude would it be for me to be barefooted when he got here?*

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Lily watched dispassionately as the public defender made his opening statements. In a skilled maneuver, Causwell took advantage of Friday's turn of events, deliberately confusing some of the DA's conjectures. Sure, the jury had had the weekend to mull the prosecution's case, but they would have his statements fresh in their minds when they first began hearing the evidence.

From the corner of her eye, Lily could see Lisa Parker looking at her. The attorney was determined not to engage the woman at all. The very idea that this sorry excuse for a mother thought she could get money from her in exchange for Andy was repugnant.

When the court recessed for its mid-morning break, she quickly scooted to the opposite end of the bench, exiting and walking all the way around to the door. Lisa Parker waited, chatting briefly with her other daughter and the public defender.

Once in the crowded hallway, Lily dug for her cell phone and checked for messages. Finding none, she quickly dialed her lover's office, hoping to leave a message of encouragement about Andy and share the news that Lisa Parker was sitting beside her in court.

"This is Anna." Recognizing the number on the caller ID, the car dealer had excused herself from

Greg just a moment to take the call. "Is everything okay?"

"Peachy. You'd never guess who's sitting next to me."

Anna knew at once. "How are you handling it?"

"Alright, I guess. How did your morning go?"

"Peachy. But I survived, and so did Andy." They had talked at length the night before, and she had assured Lily that she and Andy were getting by just fine, but that both of them wanted her to hurry home.

"Listen, I can't talk long. This is just a break. Will you be around at lunchtime?"

"Yeah, but I don't have much time today, sweetheart. Greg Cahill's here, and Geri's on her way over. We need to put the final touches on my speech for the Chamber meeting. Can we talk tonight?"

"Sure." Lily was disappointed but she understood. Besides, Anna was certainly doing her part to lend support. She couldn't wait to hear how the morning had really gone.

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"Sorry, Greg. Where were we?" The two were sitting side by side on the leather loveseat in Anna's office, poring over the four-page speech she would make next Friday to convince Chamber members that she should be their vice-president.

"I gather that was your...significant other?" Greg had heard a bit of gossip recently from a couple of the members when he'd talked up Anna's candidacy. In a subtle way, he'd chastised their behavior, noting that in a city like LA, their strength was their diversity.

"My partner, Lily. She's in San Francisco today."

"What kind of work does she do? Is she a member of the Chamber?"

"She's an attorney. I think her boss is a member, Tony LeFevre, but his is an individual membership."

"Oh, I know him. He's the guy that runs the legal aid clinic downtown. Nice fellow."

"Yeah, Tony's great. Lily's been working there for almost seven years."

"I hope I get a chance to meet her someday."

"Me too, Greg."

Geri arrived soon after, and the threesome polished the speech for the rest of the morning. Geri suggested lunch at a popular Beverly Hills restaurant, but Anna declined, citing a backlog of work. In truth, it was the shoes.

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"This court will stand adjourned until nine tomorrow morning." The public defender had finished his opening statement by 3:30, and both parties agreed to wait until tomorrow to present the first witness. The judge had given the jury strict instructions not to speak to anyone, to avoid news reports about the trial, and most important, not to form any opinions with regard to the case.

Lily picked up her purse and started again to slide out to the side when she was stopped by a hand on her arm.

"Lily? Aren't you even going to say hello?"

The blonde woman turned and met the eyes of the mother who had failed her, now nothing more than an Oakland cocktail waitress whom she didn't know at all, and didn't want to. "Hello," she said simply, and turned again to leave.

"Lily, wait. I want to talk to you about Andres."

"I think I've already heard your thoughts on the subject, and the answer is no." If Lisa had more to say, Lily didn't hear it, spinning abruptly and walking out, bypassing the elevator for the stairs. At the bottom, she hurried to the revolving door and pushed through, drawing in a deep breath as she exited. *What a piece of work!*

Walking back to her hotel room near Union Square, Lily fumed at Lisa Parker's nerve. The very idea that she had any chance at all for custody of Andy was absurd. There was no way a judge would give her the child, even if it meant sending him back into foster care. *Was there?*

Lily quickly paced through the menu on her cell phone until she found the number for John Moss.

"This is John Moss. Can I help you?"

"Thank god you're there! This is Lily Stuart. Is there any way I could drop by for a few minutes to talk about something?"

"Sure. Are you nearby?"

"Union Square. Give me 20 minutes."

Sooner than that, Lily was sitting in John's cubicle, ranting about the woman who had sat beside her all day. "So I have to sit there and look supportive like one big happy family, or she'll pull Andy out and send him home with that useless excuse for a mother. Can you imagine having yet another child in this world raised by Lisa Parker!"

"Lily, if it's any consolation, I don't think it would happen. Unless her circumstances have changed, she works nights, and the foster care system really frowns on that."

"But she's married to that Haney guy. What if he stays home when she goes to work? Wouldn't they argue that having somebody there all the time was better than putting him in day care? And god knows what she'd make of that DUI thing. And Anna! Wouldn't she have field day with that!"

Moss could only listen as the blonde woman finished her laments. When she finally took a breath, he jumped in. "I wouldn't worry about the Anna thing at all, Lily. If there's any kind of hearing, it'll happen here, and cases like this don't get decided on the basis of sexual orientation. The gay community wields a lot of power in San Francisco."

That was a relief. "But what about Kristy? How much does her opinion count here?"

"Probably not at all if she gets convicted. We'll move to sever rights as soon as the verdict comes down. But if she's not, it's really all up to her. Technically, she can just ask to have him returned, and we're obligated to do that."

That Andy would go back to his mother was unimaginable to Lily. Yet, the only sure way to prevent that could be devastating also. Lily felt no compunctions about holding her sister responsible for her part in this crime, but she genuinely feared that Kristy might indeed be executed for her indirect role. From what she'd read about the case and what she'd heard in the opening statements, the outcome was a simple roll of the dice, and there wasn't much middle ground.

"What happens if you sever rights, John? Where will Andy go?"

Moss leaned back in his chair and smiled slightly. He had been thinking ahead since the first time he met the woman across from him, and he liked giving good news. "I think there's a better than average chance that he could be adopted by the first solid family that speaks up, especially if he's already prospered under their care."

*No, Anna can't handle that, and I can't ask her to.* "That's not what...I just want to know that he'll be alright, and that he won't go to Lisa Parker. That's all."

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"Do you want to spread out your roads again?" Anna reached for the box beside the couch that held all the street segments and accessories. "I need to go take a shower, then I'll come back and play. Is that alright?"

Andy nodded, immediately dumping the box in the middle of the family room and sorting the pieces to build his little city. Anna was impressed that he never seemed to construct the same setting twice, and he had begun incorporating other items, making tunnels by stacking paperback books. *I bet he grows up to be a city planner.*

Just to be on the safe side, Anna left the bedroom door slightly ajar, thinking she could hear if there were any kind of emergency.

A hot shower would feel good. The service manager had popped into her office after lunch wearing a big grin, guiding her to the window where he showed the car that had just been brought in for a tune-up: a 1959 507, BMW's timeless roadster. Unable to resist, Anna changed into her jumpsuit and spent the rest of the day in the garage.

The hot water penetrated her pores, soothing the tired neck and back that had bent over the classic engine all afternoon. Had Lily been home, she would have suggested the hot tub, but she couldn't see going out there with the small boy.

The small boy...was now standing in her bathroom...where she was completely naked. Nervously, Anna wiped a wet circle from the shower door. Yep, that was Andy, alright.

"Is something wrong, Andy?" What should she do? Turn the shower off and cover up with her towel? Just carry on and act like it was no big deal? Tell Andy to leave the room at once?

"Can we go swimming?" he asked innocently.

Anna was still frozen in place. Nothing was wrong. He had asked a question.

"Uh, Andy? Would...would you mind going to sit on my bed until I'm finished? I'll be out in just a minute and we'll talk."

"Okay." She couldn't make out his features through the steamy glass-and hoped that he couldn't make out hers-but she saw him disappear from the room. Hurriedly, she finished rinsing off and stepped out, wrapping herself at once in an oversized towel. Crossing the open doorway to retrieve her robe, she noticed that the child sat obediently on the end of the bed.

"Thanks for waiting out here, Andy." What to say next? "Uh, when you get a little older, you'll

start taking baths all by yourself. For older people-like me, for example, or like Lily-taking a bath is more...private. So I guess what I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't come into the bathroom when an older person is taking a bath or a shower, okay?" *There, that wasn't so hard.* Anna congratulated herself for getting all that out.

"But the door was open. Lily told me to knock when it was closed."

"You're right, Andy, and I know that's confusing. I forgot and left the door open. It's okay."

"Are you mad at me?" He looked as though he might cry.

"No, of course not. You didn't do anything wrong." Anna couldn't help but notice the look of relief on his face. "And you know what? You've never done anything that made me mad. Not once. Or Lily either. Now, what was it you wanted to ask me?"

"I wanted to know if we could go swimming."

Andy asked for very little, so Anna hated to tell him no. "You know, it's kind of late already. I had to work a little late tonight, and we only have few minutes before it's time for your bath."

"But if I went swimming, I wouldn't have to take a bath," he reasoned.

"Oh no, it doesn't work that way. Baths are with soap. That's how you get clean. Swimming is just water-no soap."

Andy nodded as though he understood, though he was noticeably disappointed about not going swimming.

"Tell you what. I'll try to get home a little earlier tomorrow and we'll go swimming for a little while. But you *still* have to take a bath, okay?"

"Okay," he agreed excitedly. Now he would have something really fun to look forward to.

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The next morning was thankfully uneventful. Andy got to pre-school on time; Anna got to work on time; and neither had to change clothes again.

True to her word, the car dealer took the child for a swim when they got home, showing him the lever under the bush that made bubbles in the hot tub.

"It's like a bubble bath!" he exclaimed with excitement.



"Not quite, because it doesn't have...."

"Soap!"

"That's right. And speaking of soap, it's time for your real bath now. Are you ready to get out of this tub and get into the other one?"

Anna agreed to one more trip across the deep end, her hands holding his as he kicked frantically. Lily would be proud of both of them if she could see them now.

As soon as they got inside, the phone rang and both had a chance to talk with the weary woman, worn out already from two days of the trial, followed by two long evenings in her hotel room preparing her cases for Thursday.

Andy got his bath and was ready for his story when the phone rang again. Anna guided him toward the bed, telling him she'd be right back. It was her lover again, calling back to finalize her arrangements for coming home the next night.

"I'm booked on the six o'clock flight. We've been getting out about 4:30, so that should be plenty of time to get my bag from the hotel and get to the airport. Should I get a taxi?"

"Are you kidding? You're going to get a welcoming party." Both Anna and Andy would be very glad to herald her return.

"I can't wait. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too." Anna sat on her bed, smiling as they exchanged sweet words. It was nearly 15 minutes before she remembered her charge in the other room.

"Oh, no. I have to go, sweetheart. Andy's waiting for his story."

The boy was just getting into bed when Anna returned and picked up the book he had selected. Like last night, he was asleep only a few minutes into the story. The hour-long swim had worn him out. Anna stored that information for future reference. She was envisioning already a Sunday afternoon nap for the lad while she and her lover got reacquainted.

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"I got some of that cereal you like," Anna told the smiling boy. "Do you want orange juice or apple juice?"

"Apple!" he sang with glee.

"Boy, somebody's in a good mood this morning. What are you so...." Anna froze in her tracks, looking past the bay window to the stunning sight in the backyard. A pile-no, it was a mountain-of white filled her view. "What the...."

Anna released the deadbolt at the top of the French door and walked onto the patio, the grinning four-year-old in tow. She could hear the pump of the hot tub. She was certain she had turned that off last night. Where on earth did all of these...bubbles...come from?

"Stay right here, Andy. Don't move." Gingerly, Anna navigated the wet mass in the direction of the hot tub, careful not to slip and fall into the pool. Finally, she reached the area where she knew the hot tub must be, stooping down on all fours to grope for the on-off lever. *There!* Turning off the churning pump would halt the production of these bubbles, but how did they get here?

Standing slowly, the confused woman turned to make her way back toward the house when her foot struck something...plastic. Grasping the blue object at her feet, Anna suddenly had the whole picture.

"Andy? Did you pour the Bubble Big into the hot tub?"

The still smiling lad nodded excitedly, rubbing his palms together. He was very proud of himself indeed. "Now we can take a bath in the swimming pool!"

*Count to 10*, she told herself as she marched sternly toward the clever child. *1...2...3...4....* That was as far as she got before her foot slipped off the edge, where her ankle viciously scraped the side of the pool as she fell headlong into the deep end. Her last thought before she hit the water was that they would all surely laugh about this someday.

"Uh-oh," the child uttered softly. The tall woman didn't look very happy as she headed toward the steps, the bubbles covering her head and body. She didn't seem to like his surprise at all. Andy spun around and dashed inside, suddenly terrified of what was going to happen next.

"Andy!" The angry woman stormed into the house. "Andy!" she called again. The child had vanished.

Sure that he had gone upstairs, Anna started in pursuit, not knowing at all what she would do when she finally found the boy. And she *would* find the boy!

The best news for Andy was that the tall, fully-dressed, dripping wet, bubble-covered bleeding woman passed the hallway mirror on her way up the stairs. In spite of her criminal intent, she laughed at the sight, wishing for all the world that Lily were here to see it.

"Andy? Where are you?" When she reached the top of the stairs, Anna continued into her bathroom, noticing now for the first time that she had left a trail of blood from her ankle through the house. First, she shed her sopping wet clothes and wrapped up in her robe, using a towel to

push away the bubbles on her head. Next, she grabbed a washcloth to stop the bleeding, but that worked only as long as she held it in place, and she needed to find Andy.

Entering his room, it was hard not to notice the foot sticking out from under the bed. Chester lay on the floor beside him, his tail thumping wildly at this new game. Anna crossed over and sat on the opposite bed, holding the washcloth to her ankle again.

"Andy, I can see you under the bed. Will you come out?" She could hear the sniffles from his crying.

Inch by inch, the protruding foot disappeared. Now, he was hidden a little better. His young mind didn't process that Anna still knew where he was.

"Come on, Andy. We need to have a talk. I promise I won't hurt you, sweetheart. Come on out."

Whatever he said was incomprehensible as he crawled out from under the bed crying, but Anna was sure that she had heard the words "beat my butt."

"Andy, I'm not going to beat your butt. No one is, and you can forget all about that for as long as you live here. Now sit on your bed. We have to talk." *We're going to laugh so hard about this someday.*

Andy climbed up on his bed and turned to face the tall wet woman in the bathrobe with the bleeding ankle. She didn't look happy at all.

"Andy, putting Bubble Big in the swimming pool was wrong. Bubbles are only for bathtubs inside the house, never for outside. Do you understand that?"

The boy nodded solemnly, looking at his shoes.

"When did you do that?"

"At night," he spoke so softly she could barely hear.

"When I was asleep?"

He shook his head. "When you were talking on the phone."

Good lord, that must have been when she left him after his bath to talk to Lily. It's a wonder the pile wasn't higher than the house.

"Andy, how did you get outside? The door was locked up high. Did you climb up there and unlock it?" She knew he liked to climb on things.

Again, he shook his head. "Through Chester's hole."

Anna raised her hand to her face immediately to hide the smile she was powerless to stop. *Even that was in his genes.* But this was more serious. No child should be out by the pool alone, ever.

"Andy, I'm not angry with you, but I want you know that I'm a little disappointed." She needed to make her point, but not at the expense of breaking his little heart. "Do you know why?"

"Because I put bubbles in the outside tub?" She had said that was wrong.

"That was wrong, and you should have asked first. But the reason I'm disappointed is because Lily and I told you that you were never to go out to the pool by yourself. Do you remember that?"

"But I didn't get in the water," he argued.

"That doesn't matter in this case. We didn't say don't get in the water. We said don't go out to the pool. Isn't that right?"

"I guess so." He had misunderstood.

"And the reason for that is because you're too little right now to be out there by yourself. What if you had an accident and fell in and there was nobody there to help you? Anybody can have an accident, Andy. I even had one today."

Andy felt awful about that, especially all that blood on her leg.

"We don't want anything to happen to you because we care about you very much. We'd miss you if you weren't here."

"Are you going to tell Lily?"

"I think I have to tell her about this, Andy. It's pretty serious. But don't worry, Lily won't be mad either. She'll just be worried that something could have happened to you."

Andy really wished Lily didn't have to know. She still liked him.

"Now let's go get breakfast. We might be a little late for school today because I have to get dressed again."

Was that all? She wasn't going to make him stand in the corner or stay in his room? This was different, and Andy couldn't figure it out, but he liked it a lot.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lily leaned over the rail and caught the public defender's arm as he prepared to leave for the day. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm headed back to LA today. I have to be in court tomorrow. Will you let Kristy know?"

Causwell grimaced. "You'll be back on Friday, though, won't you?"

"I'm not planning on it. I really need to get back to my office. I've missed a lot of work, and I think we've established that Kristy has family." She intentionally left off "that care about her." Lisa had vanished after the first day, realizing there was nothing in it for her to come down here every day.

The public defender steered her into one of the conference rooms off the main hallway. "Lily, you can't do that to us. Don't you see how that will look?"

"Look, I came up here like she asked, and I only promised her one day. I stayed three."

"But the jury's going to think you're giving up on her. If all of a sudden you don't come back, they're going to think you heard something to make you think she's guilty."

"Look, I have a life of my own. I haven't committed a crime, and I shouldn't have to be in court answering for somebody else."

"Do you have any idea what's at stake here," the lawyer's brown eyes were blazing. "Your sister could get the death penalty."

"That's right. And since you brought that topic up, I'd like to know why you think it's a good strategy to gamble both of their lives on this when you and I both know that probably only one of them is guilty."

"Because I don't know that either one of them is guilty," he retorted. "I didn't ask. I'm doing what I think is the best thing to win both an acquittal. I'm not going to sacrifice one for the other. That's not my job."

"And if both of them get convicted, counselor...how are you going to feel about knowing that one of them was just a spectator?"

"And how do you know that spectator was Kristy?" he asked defiantly. "For all you know, she could have been the killer."

"Why don't you ask..." Lily stopped herself. Suddenly, she didn't trust this man at all.

"You're just here for support, Lily. You need to stay out of this case."

"I intend to. Goodbye, and good luck."

## *Chapter 15*

"Shhh," Anna put her finger over her lips as Andy made the car noises on the floor. The exhausted attorney had fallen asleep on the couch with her head in Anna's lap. Lily had gotten in after nine last night, grabbing a cab after all since that was after Andy's bedtime. The attorney worked on her case files until after midnight, the tall beauty curled naked at her side in their bed.

"She's sleepy?"

Anna nodded and smiled. "It's almost time for your bath, Andy," she whispered. "Will you start putting your toys away, please?"

"Okay," he whispered loudly. Volume was a difficult concept for an almost four-year-old, an almost four-year-old who would be four tomorrow. He had no idea that the entire family was coming over after work for a cookout with ice cream and birthday cake. And presents.

Andy had been very excited to see Lily this morning when he woke up. He wondered if she knew about the bubble thing. If she did, she never said.

In fact, Lily had heard all about the bubble incident; and the shower incident; and Monday morning's debacle. She had also heard about how easily he had accepted Anna as his caretaker; and how Martine had reported no trouble at all with his behavior or his picky eating. And she saw how Chester, the faithless basset hound, had taken to following him everywhere, even sleeping on the little bed each night by the boy's feet.

As Andy was putting the last of the street segments in the box, Lily's sleep was jarred by the phone.

"We should have taken it off the hook," Anna groused. It was her partner's line.

"Hello," the blonde mumbled as she stretched across Anna's lap. "Oh, Jesus Christ!" She was fully awake now, stumbling into the office where she closed the door.

"Andy, go on upstairs and pick out your pajamas and a book. I'll be right there." Anna pushed the box to the end of the couch, and cracked the office door.

"Fuck her, John! Fuck them both! Hell, fuck them all!"

This was why she'd closed the door.

"Do I have a choice?" Lily stomped about the small room, wishing all of a sudden that she smoked. "What happens if I don't come?"

Kristy was calling her back.

"How soon?" Her eyes told Anna that the woman had revoked her custody.

"So even if we try to fight this, he has to go back to San Francisco into another foster home until it's resolved. Hold on a second." Lily covered up the phone. "That bitch has asked that Andy be placed with Lisa, all because I left the trial. Her goddamn lawyer put her up to this."

"You should go back, then."

*I know I should, but....* "What? You think I should go back?"

"Lily, it's only for a couple more weeks at the most. Can't you get somebody to cover for you at work?"

"Anna, that means you'll be here with Andy all by yourself again. I can't ask that."

"You didn't. We'll get by, just like we did this week."

Lily couldn't believe her partner was saying this. Just last Sunday, she'd been ready to throw herself under the airplane's wheels to keep her from leaving.

Anna couldn't believe she was saying this either. Just yesterday morning, she had walked out of the house into a mountain of soap suds, wondering how she would survive the day.

"Okay, John. Tell the bastard I'll be there. And you can tell him that I called him a bastard."

\*\*\*\*\*

Lily boarded United's five o'clock flight back to LA. It had been a long day. Once again, she'd caught the 7:05 to San Francisco so that she'd have a pretty good chance of getting to the courthouse by nine. She had told the son of a bitch public defender at the first break that she was leaving at four o'clock to catch a plane, and if he didn't like it, he could shove it up his ass.

Squeezing into the window seat of the last row, she closed her eyes. A nap on the way home would be really nice. Cleared for takeoff, the 737 barreled down the runway. At that moment, someone in close proximity...er... passed gas. A vision of Tony Bennett burst into Lily's head:

"I left my fart...", she crooned to herself. Anna would probably tell her that was disgusting.

\*\*\*\*\*

Martine had agreed to bring Andy home once she got a call that everything was ready. Anna and Hal were hanging brightly colored streamers across the patio when Lily pulled up.

"Hi baby," Anna met her lover at the back gate, delivering a short welcoming kiss. "We're almost ready."

"Did you get his present?"

"It's in the garage."

Lily placed a quick call to Martine and went to visit her niece and nephew. "Kim, this stuff is great. Thank you for doing all of this." Her sister-in-law had volunteered at the last minute when there was a possibility that the party would be postponed.

"It's no problem. You guys are easy. Jonah's been to some of the most elaborate parties for two-year-olds you've ever seen. They all have clowns, or pony rides, and face painting. An artist comes and draws their pictures. They rent those big air slides. I don't know what I'm going to do next month when he turns two."

"I'm sure you'll find a way to put them all to shame."

"Don't bet on it. I'm thinking we'll just buy a house in Riverside and invite all his friends to Chuck E. Cheese."

"Works for me."

The next car in the driveway was Sandy and Suzanne, the latter of whom had brought a change of clothing in case she got wet exacting her revenge on that Hal guy.

Finally, the guest of honor arrived. George opened the gate and led the way. "Come on, Andy. I think Anna and Lily are in the back yard. Don't forget your car."

Andy stretched across the back seat to get his Z8, and pushed hard to close the door on George's brand new imported 750Li. He was the last one through the gate, greeted by a jubilant chorus of "Surprise!" This Birthday Boy had never seen so many happy people cheering for him, and he got so excited that he wet his pants.



\*\*\*\*\*

"Bless his heart, we scared him. Anna, he's probably never been to a birthday party in his life, let alone had one." Andy was finally asleep, and the women were readying for bed.

"Wasn't he adorable?" Andy had gotten so excited by the presents that Lily had to take him in the other room to calm him down so his asthma wouldn't kick up. She and Anna had gotten him a toy jeep that he could really drive. The battery was good for two hours, and would recharge overnight. It was perfect for their driveway and sidewalks, and he loved it.

Lily snaked her arms around the slender waist, touching her lips to the top of Anna's smooth back. "I closed the door all the way."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. So that means we might have a little...private time tonight."

"Is that an invitation, Ms. Stuart?"

"Perhaps. Would you rather it were a demand, Ms. Kaklis?"

"No need for demands." Anna turned and found her lover's lips. There hadn't been many opportunities for this recently, and the dark-haired woman intended to make the most of it. Gently, she raised her hands to Lily's face and trailed her fingertips along the jaw, slipping them tenderly through the short blonde hair to cup the precious head. Breaking the kiss, she murmured, "I really want you tonight."

"I'm here, Anna."

The dark-haired woman took her time, savoring her lover's trembling excitement as she tenderly stroked the bare skin. "Look at me, Lily." The blonde had closed her eyes to concentrate on the feel of Anna's fingernails gently scraping her nipples.

Green eyes were lost in blue as they watched one another react to each sensation. "I love you."

Anna repeated that emotion, but with her eyes, which bore into Lily's as she slipped her long fingers into the wetness below. "You're so wet."

"You do that to me."

Anna was torn, wanting badly to taste her lover, but not wanting to leave the intimate connection their eyes had forged. She would have both, but first one, then the other. Slipping inside, her eyes widened with Lily's; both knew the blonde woman was close.

"Deeper," Lily moaned as she opened herself wide, reaching low to push the searching hand inside.

Anna's long fingers stretched, curling deep to fill her lover. A thumb gently teased the bundle of nerves in a rhythm that matched the rolling hips.

"Yes...oh yes...that's it." The green eyes struggled to stay focused as she felt the first ripples of her release. Anna was looking into her soul.

"Tell me."

"Oh...Anna...you're making me come." Her neck and chest turned crimson as the climax took her.

Anna watched her as she gasped for breath. "God, I love you so much." Finally, the green eyes succumbed, and the dark-haired woman lowered herself to claim her second prize.

\*\*\*\*\*

The guaranteed two-hour battery on Andy's new jeep expired fifteen minutes early, about a quarter mile from the Brentwood home. Anna and Lily took turns bending down to push the little car along the sidewalk, the taller woman suffering a scraped knee when the youthful driver steered them unexpectedly into a neighbor's driveway.

"Uh-oh. I thought this was our house." It was an honest mistake. Both houses had driveways, but they were not otherwise similar.

"Can we go swimming?" the boy asked as the tired pair wheeled the little vehicle into their own driveway.

"Maybe later, Andy. My watch says it's your naptime," Lily answered.

"Then can we go?" He was certainly persistent.

"Yes," Anna jumped in. "After your nap, we'll go swimming." Andy got out of his car and waited on the porch while the women returned it to its power source in the garage.

"You're easy," Lily chided her partner.

"You and I both know we'll eventually say yes. So why not say it now? That way, he won't work us over when we say no."

The blonde's face took on a puzzled look. "Do you do that to me?"

"Ha! When do I ever tell you no?"

That drew a smile. It was probably true, Lily thought. She had asked Anna to take the day off so they could spend it together, agreeing that it made more sense for Lily to return to San Francisco on Sunday afternoon so she wouldn't be so tired. "I'll put him to bed. Why don't you wait for me in our room?"

Fifteen minutes later, Lily found her lover resting on their bed, the scraped knee sporting a new band-aid.

"How's the war wound?"

"It's fine. You know, I didn't get this many scrapes when I was a kid. All of a sudden, I'm accident prone."

"Poor baby." Lily joined Anna on the bed, snuggling into her side.

"So what happens in the trial this week?" They had barely talked about how things had been going in San Francisco.

The attorney filled Anna in on the prosecutor's case. First, they had taken testimony from the officer who received the call that a body had been found; then from the cleaning lady who had discovered Graves dead on his floor. The coroner testified to the approximate time of death, and to the cause-21 separate stab wounds, any one of six that might have been fatal. In his expert opinion, all but one of the wounds had been inflicted from the same angle and all with the same approximate force, making it likely that only one person had done the deed.

Three detectives from the crime scene unit described the disarray of an apartment that had been plundered. A technician talked about how DNA tests were used to determine that several long red hairs found at the scene belonged to the defendant, Kristy Parker. Fingerprint experts definitively identified Parker as the owner of prints found in the apartment.

Next up was the pawn shop owner, who had called police when he took in an item from the list they had circulated of things the housekeeper had identified as missing. He pointed to the defendants as the people who had brought the piece in.

Detectives described how they tracked the pair from the pawn shop to their one-room apartment in the Tenderloin District, arguably the seediest neighborhood in the city. Several of the items missing from the murdered man's home were found in their possession. In addition, police recovered a pair of women's jeans that contained drops of blood.

"The prosecutor's still up. So I guess next they'll do the blood analysis and the murder weapon. If they have anything else, I don't know what it is, but they're going to have to find a way to poke

holes in the story the PD's been floating."

"Do you think it's possible that their story is true? That they found those things in the dumpster?"

Lily had hoped to avoid this type of question from her partner-or from anyone-now that Kristy had told her the story about the murder. She knew she shouldn't talk about it, but Anna was the only person in the world she could truly trust.

"I...Anna, you can't ever repeat what I'm going to tell you, okay?"

The tall woman pulled herself up against the pillows so that she was almost sitting. "Of course I won't. What is it?"

Lily spun around to sit cross-legged on the bed. "Kristy told me that she was there. She told me that McGinnis lost it when Graves wouldn't tell him where the money was."

"What does that mean? Is Kristy innocent?"

"Yes. Well, no. In the eyes of the law, she's guilty if she took part in the act. But she says she tried to stop him. And if that's true, it would mitigate her involvement, which means she could escape the death penalty."

"How do you know she's telling the truth?"

"I don't," Lily sighed. "I just...hope she is."

"So why doesn't she just tell her side of the story and let the jury decide?"

"Her lawyer has them going for broke. I tell you, I think he's taking a big chance, Anna. But if he can tie up all the loose ends with this story about the dumpster, that's the reasonable doubt the jury needs to find them not guilty."

"What are the chances of that?"

"It's...I don't know, fifty-fifty. They can tell the jury the dumpster story from the police reports, because they've been telling it all along. But the jury will want to hear it from Kristy or McGinnis, and I doubt their PD will put either one of them on the stand."

"Why not?"

"Well, if they testify, the prosecutor might expose them on cross-examination. The jury would probably be skeptical of anything they said anyway, so a cross could make them look really bad. But if they don't take the stand, the jury's going to wonder why, even though they're not supposed to consider that."

"So there's a fifty-fifty chance that they're going to get away with murdering that man. That's not

right."

"No, it isn't. But our justice system favors the defendant. If a person's life is at stake, we need to be able to prove they deserve it beyond a reasonable doubt."

"What do you want to happen, sweetheart?"

Lily had had misgivings about the case ever since Kristy had shared her version of events. She had tremendous faith in the justice system and in the wisdom of the jury, but if they didn't have all the information, the outcome was anybody's guess. "I just want justice. Whatever that is."

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## ~ Strained ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** [See Part 1](#)

### **Strained - Part 6 (Conclusion)**

**By KG MacGregor**

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### ***Chapter 16***

"Come and sit with me, Andy. It'll be alright." Anna picked up the wheezing boy from his bed and moved to the rocker near the window.

She was almost asleep when she heard the first sounds of coughing from the room down the hall. Lily had suggested that she first try to calm him down this way, before giving him the medicine that would surely keep him up most of the night.

Anna sat down in the chair, letting Andy settle into a position facing forward, nestled into the

crook of her arm. Slowly, she began to rock, softly brushing the curly hair back from his forehead.

"That's it. It'll be okay soon. Just take it easy."

Andy leaned forward to cough, but relaxed again as he fell back into the warm arms.

"Are you upset about Lily leaving again, sweetheart?"

Andy didn't answer, but both of his attacks since he'd lived there had coincided with her trips to San Francisco.

"You don't have to worry about that, you know. She'll be coming back soon; and besides, you and I have fun by ourselves, don't we?"

The small head nodded. He liked Anna, but he sensed that she didn't like him as much as Lily did. Besides, he caused her to be hurt twice, and she might still be mad at him about what he did with the Bubble Big. What if he accidentally did something else? Then she'd really be mad.

It bothered Anna that Andy didn't seem to feel secure with her. She'd followed Lily's instructions about everything, and she tried not to ever let him feel bad about things. But still, it was Lily that he seemed to need, not her.

It was almost one o'clock before the child finally fell asleep. Anna gently carried him back to his bed, planting a soft kiss on his forehead before leaving him for the night.

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Monday's evidence was damaging to the defense, particularly to Kristy. The forensics expert testified at length about the bloodstains that were found at the bottom of the woman's jeans. He focused on the degree of absorption of the blood into the cloth, apparently to refute the possibility that it was picked up from bloody items found in the dumpster. Congealed blood, he testified, would not absorb as fully.

Lily watched the jurors' faces as they heard this damning testimony. It almost certainly put Kristy at the scene of the murder. On cross, the public defender asked whether absorption rates might vary if perhaps the pants had gotten wet since picking up the stain, or even if they were wet at the time. The expert conceded that the presence of water might alter the results. Again, Causwell had planted reasonable doubt.

Late in the afternoon, the prosecutor called witnesses to begin telling the story of how they had recovered the murder weapon. The public defender had deftly maneuvered to keep from

evidence the identity of the man who had caused the disturbance, as he was not charged with any crime. Tomorrow, the jury would probably hear that the defendant's fingerprints had been found on the instrument.

\*\*\*\*\*

Anna grumbled miserably as she grabbed her car keys from her desk. Poor Martine had broken a crown and needed to make an emergency trip to the dentist. She would not be able to pick up Andy from his pre-school today. Anna would have gladly swapped places with her mother.

The car dealer was scheduled to meet all afternoon with their vice-president for human resources, Janet Mendelssohn, who had headed that department at the BMW dealership in Palm Springs. She was making a special trip from the desert for a conference with Anna and Hal on the company's benefits package. It was too late to postpone, as she was due here in less than an hour.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Carmen."

Andy was surprised when he saw Anna at the door of his pre-school. She didn't look very happy, but he was kind of used to that. He hoped he hadn't done anything wrong.

"We have to leave a little early today, Andy. Martine had something else to do, so I'm going to take you back to work with me, okay?" He had visited the dealership once, and really enjoyed seeing all the shiny cars.

Since she'd picked him up early, Andy hadn't yet had lunch, so Anna wheeled into the busy drive-thru lane of a Burger King on Wilshire Boulevard. "You want a cheeseburger?"

Andy smiled and answered eagerly. "And French fries."

"Okay, and a coke?"

"A milkshake." Lily had bought him his first one ever just a week ago.

*Serious junk food*, Lily would say. What the hell. The kid was in for a long boring afternoon. "Chocolate?"

Andy nodded and the driver placed the order. When she got the bag, she put it on the floorboard of the passenger side, taking the milkshake from the attendant. "Should I put this in the cup holder, or can you hold it?"

"I can hold it." The boy's mouth began to water when he eyed the shake.

"Okay, but use both hands and be very careful." Against her better judgment, she allowed the child to hold the sticky drink between his legs. It was only a few blocks to the dealership.

As they pulled out onto the busy street, Andy began to have second thoughts about holding the icy drink. If he should spill it, Anna might get really mad at him for messing up her car. It was probably better to just set it in the cup holder. Carefully, he leaned forward, but the seatbelt locked with his goal just out of reach. He sat back against the seat, then tried again. Almost....

The light turned green and Anna started forward, not noticing the movement on her right.

"Uh-oh!"

Anna glanced sideways, but was too late to stop the disaster. The drink had tipped from his hands, and of course the plastic top dislodged, sending frozen chocolate goo between the seat and the console. It covered the leather-encased gearshift and for good measure splattered the instrument panel for the sound system.

"Uh-oh is right." *I...2...3...4....* "Andy, I asked you to be careful," she groaned, exasperated at the mess.

The boy suddenly burst into tears. This was the worst thing he could have done.

"Now don't cry! I'm not upset with you, Andy. It was an accident." *I am upset with you, but I can't show it because you get even more upset than I do.*

Anna pulled onto the lot, driving around to the back where Javier and Rudy detailed the cars they took in on trade.

"Hi guys."

The young men were surprised. The boss hardly ever came back to their corner of the lot.

"I have a little emergency here. I need you to stop whatever you're working on and clean this for me before it stains. We had a little accident." Anna walked around and helped the boy out of his seatbelt, handing him the small bag with his lunch.

Anna stopped at the vending machine and got a coke. "Have a coke for now. We'll get another milkshake later, okay?"

Andy had stopped crying, but he was sure the tall woman was really mad at him now, no matter what she said. He couldn't seem to help making mistakes around her. She made him really nervous.

The car executive found Hal and Janet already in the conference room. "Sorry I'm late."



"Well hi, Andy. I didn't know you were going to be in this meeting too," Hal teased.

The little boy let a small smile creep out. He liked Hal.

"Yeah, Martine had to run to the dentist this afternoon, so Andy's going to hang out here." Anna helped him into a chair at the far end of the conference table and spread out his lunch. "Shall we get started?"

An hour into their meeting, Anna noticed a very bored little boy opposite her. He had finished with his lunch, and had absolutely nothing to do but listen to their discussion on health coverage and hiring policies.

"Will you excuse me for a minute?" Anna tossed the trash in the can by the door and held out her hand to the child. "Come on. Let's see if we can find something for you to do."

Anna and Andy walked down the stairs, where she flipped on the lights in the media room. "You want to watch some movies about cars?" She knew it was a pretty pitiful alternative to a Disney cartoon or the show about the dog that he watched on public television, but it had to be better than spreadsheets and numbers. Certain that he couldn't hurt anything by handling the remote, she showed him how to push the buttons so that the pictures would change. "I won't be long, then we'll stop and get another milkshake on the way home, okay?"

"Okay." Andy hit the start button as she walked out of the room. Stopping for a moment by Carmen's desk, she asked the receptionist if she'd mind keeping a watchful eye on the room. Carmen was more than happy to oblige.

*"As its sleek, progressive design suggests, the new 745Li is a marvel of engineering. Inside, the cockpit invites you to sample the exhilaration of an advanced 4.4 litre 325 horsepower...."*

The meeting dragged on, with Anna slipping downstairs twice to find Andy paying close attention to the demonstration films. She couldn't help but be reminded of her own fascination with cars when she was a child and accompanied her mother and father to this very dealership.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I think the DA's going to wrap up his case tomorrow," Lily explained. "He's entering the murder weapon into evidence, and I saw the fingerprint expert back in court today, so they must have found McGinnis' prints on it."

"Won't that be pretty damaging?"

"Yeah, unless they can make the jury think that they found it and decided they shouldn't keep it

because of the blood."

"And then what happens?"

"Well, when the DA's finished, the defense will present its case. That should probably take the rest of the week. Then some of the witnesses will be recalled to clarify things. It'll probably be the end of next week before closing arguments."

"And then it's up to the jury."

"Right." As she'd listened to the evidence today and watched the jury take it in, Lily had found herself depressed about the events. Kristy was in deep trouble; at least tomorrow they'd show evidence against McGinnis. Maybe then the jury would balance the blame.

"You'd never believe who's downstairs watching BMW sales videos."

"Who?"

"I'll give you a hint. He spilled a chocolate milkshake in my car on the way over here."

Lily was glad at that moment that Anna couldn't see her face, because she almost laughed out loud. The Z8 was Anna's most beloved possession, and she could only imagine the look of horror on the woman's face. "Soooo...is it ruined?"

"Nah, they're cleaning it out for me, and shampooing the rug. It'll be fine. But I think it took a year or two off one little four-year-old's life."

"I bet. So what's he doing with you today?"

Anna explained about her mother's emergency. Not wanting to worry her lover unnecessarily, she decided not to say anything about the asthma attack last night. "You know, I should probably go get him and head home. He's used to eating by this time."

"Tell him hi from me. I'll try to call again around eight o'clock."

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Andy was already bathed and ready for bed when Lily called, barely able to hold up his head, but not wanting to miss the chance to talk to her. He had missed his nap this afternoon, and with last night's asthma attack, he was tired and a little cranky.

Anna too was more tired than usual, having gotten up very early to get ready for her afternoon

meeting. Being out of the office on Saturday had put her a little behind.

"You want a story tonight or do you just want to go to sleep?" *Please say you just want to go to sleep.*

Andy answered by plucking the story of the dragon from the shelf.

"Okay, come get in bed." Anna scooted in beside him and propped up on the pillow. The boy sidled up next to her so he could see the pictures.

The story began in a small village, where a little boy....

The tall woman awoke to a very stiff neck, her head having fallen straight back against the headboard. The bedside light was still on, and the dragon book had dropped to the floor. Chester was sound asleep at the foot of the bed. A small boy was still cuddled into her side, now with his arm wrapped snugly around her stomach. She was unmistakably...wet.

Anna looked down at the sleeping child. Only in slumber did he seem to trust her; only then did he reach out to hold her. If one were to watch them together, they'd probably agree that she'd treated him well and that she'd taken good care of him. But they wouldn't have seen the part of her that rationalized that Lily was his caretaker; she was just helping out. In truth, she was the one who had kept her distance, not Andy. Looking at the way he clung to her in his sleep, she knew she'd been missing out on something very special.

With a gentle shake, she called to him. "Andy. Sweetheart, wake up."

Groggily, the boy raised his head.

"We need to get cleaned up, okay?"

His eyes grew wider as he realized what he'd done. Sure enough, when the tall woman stood, she had a dark spot on her shirt and pants.

"Come on, honey."

She was going to be mad at him again.

Anna stopped at the drawer and grabbed a fresh pair of pajamas. Flipping on the light in the bathroom, she wet a washcloth and spread the soap. Andy peeled off his wet things and waited for her. Twisting her neck to ease the kink, she washed him and handed him the cloth to finish.

"Let me go fix your bed, and you can go back to sleep."

Anna quickly swapped the bottom sheet for a dry one and smoothed the covers. "All set."

Now in fresh pajamas, Andy crawled back into bed, still looking at the wet spot on Anna's

clothes.

"Think you can go back to sleep? I can sit here with you if you want."

Andy tucked Koufax under his arm. "I'm sorry, Anna." His quiet little voice nearly broke her heart.

She smiled down at him. "It's okay. I'll just go wash and change my clothes too." She reached out and smoothed his soft hair. "Andy, I like it when you hug me. It makes me feel good. If it's okay with you, I want us to hug each other a lot more."

"Okay." Andy would like that too, but he always thought the tall woman didn't like him very much.

"In fact, I think I'd like to have a hug right now before I leave. Would that be alright?"

The boy nodded and stretched out his arms. Anna leaned down and wrapped her own around him tightly. "I love you, Andy. I'm really glad you're here."

\*\*\*\*\*

The prosecutor had entered the knife into evidence and called his fingerprint witness to the stand. The expert described how the handle of the weapon appeared to have been smudged, as though someone had attempted to wipe it clean. Nonetheless, a few stray prints remained.

"And were you able to match those prints to one of our defendants?" the prosecutor asked.

"Yes, we got a five-point match on three of the prints."

"And to whom did those prints belong?"

"To the defendant, Kristy Parker."

*Kristy Parker? Not Kenneth McGinnis? Fucking hell.* Lily looked to the jury for their reaction. That was a clean sweep. All of the evidence implicated her sister, not the man who had actually done the killing.

Unless Kristy had lied to her! And Lily didn't want to believe that.

When the public defender took over the questioning, he asked the expert to demonstrate how the knife would have been held to leave behind the prints in those locations. The man clutched the knife as though he were pointing it.

"So the prints were not left in this position?" The public defender raised the knife above his head as though he were ready to plunge it downward.

"No, but as I..."

"No further questions."

The prosecutor stood to clarify. "Was it your testimony that the weapon appeared to have been wiped clean before it was handled again?"

"Yes."

The public defender wanted the last word.

"Is there a way to determine when these prints were left on the handle, whether it was at the time of the murder, or perhaps later, when a cleanly wiped weapon was found in a dumpster?"

"No."

"No further questions."

*Nice recovery*, Lily thought.

The DA was clearly frustrated. Each piece of evidence he presented was refuted by the dumpster scenario. The most solid link between these defendants and the crime was the bloodstains on Kristy Parker's pants and shoes.

He had two more expert witnesses to call, both engaged immediately after the "wet clothes" theory was offered. A forensic scientist who had worked late into the night would testify that the absorption levels of the bloodstains indicated that they were not diluted. The second witness, a blood splatter expert, was prepared to testify that the substance was thrown onto the items, not acquired by rubbing against something.

Both witnesses were very effective, and when the second finished his testimony, Lily could see that the jury was now convinced that her sister was present during the murder.

The public defender stood to cross-examine. "In the course of your tests, did you have the opportunity to examine any items belonging to the defendant, Kenneth McGinnis?"

"No."

"And why did you not test Mr. McGinnis' clothing?"

"I was told that there were no bloodstains found on his clothing."

"So the only samples you examined were those belonging to Miss Parker?"

"Yes."

"No further questions."

*What the fuck just happened?*

"Your next witness?" Judge Wostyk addressed the prosecutor.

"Your honor, the People request a recess until tomorrow morning at nine a.m." It was only 2:15.

"Approach." The attorneys whispered with the judge, who finally nodded her agreement. "The court will recess until nine a.m. tomorrow." Jury instructions followed, and the defendants were escorted by deputies back to the jail.

Lily leaned over the rail to catch Causwell's attention. "What was that last bit? Are you just going to concede the clothes? That puts Kristy there."

"But if they can't put McGinnis there, they won't believe she did this by herself."

"But it doesn't matter if they decide McGinnis wasn't there. If they think Kristy was there, they're going to find her guilty."

"Lily, we've got to stick to this strategy. It's too late to change the story or to add anything. The jury would see right through it."

"So you're going to let Kristy go to save McGinnis? You said you wouldn't sacrifice one for the other." Lily was incredulous.

"They've not put on any evidence against McGinnis, other than being in possession of stolen property. Dumpster diving isn't a crime." He put the folders inside his briefcase and started to leave.

"Wait a minute! My sister's going to be convicted and McGinnis is going to walk."

"You don't know that. I've got a witness that will testify that Graves has opened at least his limo to indigents, so Kristy's story about him inviting her in is a reasonable explanation for how her hair got inside the apartment."

"Are you going to put either one of them on the stand?"

"I don't think so."

"What are you going to do about the blood?"

"I don't know," he admitted honestly. "Downplay it as confusing. Stick by the wet story. This jury isn't going to turn on that. It's circumstantial."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then I managed to save one of my clients. And that's a pretty good result for a capital crime."

*Son of a bitch!*

\*\*\*\*\*

"Anna, Causwell's giving her up." Lily had walked through the city for more than an hour, through Union Square, through Chinatown, to Nob Hill. It wasn't fair. Both were guilty, but her sister was a bystander and McGinnis had brutally killed a man.

*Unless Kristy is lying!* Lily couldn't shake the fear that her sister had played her. But she needed a fighting chance.

"They've got her at the scene, and his new strategy is to prove that McGinnis wasn't there. Anna, she could die for this. I need to get her a new lawyer. She needs to tell her side of the story. She can't just give up."

"Sweetheart, can't you talk to her? Make her see what she's up against?"

"She just goes along with what the lawyer and McGinnis tell her. I watched those jurors put it together. Even if they can't convict him, they'll convict her."

"Then get her another lawyer. Call Rick."

"Who's Rick? Oh, you mean Rick Patterson."

Rick Patterson was the husband of Anna's college roommate, Liz, who lived in San Mateo.

"Yeah, I tell you what. Let me call him and call you back."

"Okay, but you can't tell him what I told you at home. He can't hear that unless Kristy agrees to hire him."

Anna made the call and finally got through. Briefly, she explained that someone she knew in San Francisco needed a criminal attorney on short notice. Lily had said that they probably wouldn't need his services for more than a few days. Rick was a partner at one of the larger downtown firms, and was more than willing to push work onto the desks of associates to take a case for his

wife's longtime friend.

"Are you coming to the city?"

Anna thought about it for a moment. The next few days were going to be critical for Lily and her sister, but she and Andy had finally crossed an important bridge and it wouldn't be right to leave him suddenly. "I really can't, Rick. My partner Lily is there, and she can meet with you. Will you see her?"

"Sure, but Liz will be disappointed. You really need to get up here again soon."

*Liz!* "You know, on second thought, if you wouldn't mind a houseguest or two...or three, maybe I'll come on up this afternoon. Lily and I have her nephew living with us right now. He's four."

"The more the merrier, then. Come on up!"

Anna took his office address so she could give it to Lily. "I'll tell her to call you."

The car dealer buzzed the receptionist. "Carmen, I need you to move things around for me for the rest of the week." Anna looked at her own calendar. "I'll be back on Friday in time to do the Chamber luncheon." It was the day she would give her speech asking to be elected vice-president. "Oh, and I need two tickets to San Francisco, first class, about five o'clock today. Return early Friday morning."

Next, she rang her mother, arranging to pick Andy up in a few minutes. Holly agreed to come by and get Chester; Anna would leave a house key under the mat.

Finally, she phoned her lover. "I'm coming up with Andy. I want you to give Rick a call. Talk to him, and plan to stay at his house tonight."

"Are you sure about bringing Andy? Maybe he should just stay with Martine." Lily was worried that a trip would disrupt his routine.

"No, he should be with us. I didn't want you to worry, but he had an asthma attack Sunday night after you left. He's okay, but I think it would be awfully hard on him if we both left."

So Anna didn't want to leave him any more than she did. A warm feeling settled over Lily as she realized that the three of them would be together again tonight.

"I'll call Rick, but I need to go talk to Kristy. I need to get her to change her mind about this and come forward."

"Okay, hon. I'll call you when we land. See you soon."



## *Chapter 17*

Lily waited at a distance from the entrance to the jail. Causwell was in conference with the clients already and she needed to talk to Kristy alone. When she spotted him leaving, she headed in and was shown right away to the attorney's conference room.

"I don't know if you've noticed or not, but I'm a little busy right now. If you need something about Andres, it's going to have to wait." Kristy was clearly agitated, and Lily suspected it had to do with the events of the last two days.

"Kristy, your lawyer's hanging you out to dry. It's time to come forward and tell the DA what really happened."

"No! We're going to beat this. He says our story's still good." Her voice wavered as though she weren't convinced of her own words.

"Your story's still good for McGinnis," Lily spat. "The jury knows you were there, Kristy. If they can't convict him, that doesn't mean they're just going to let you go. He's going to walk, and you're going to die."

"But if I tell them what happened, we'll both die."

"No, you won't. Listen to me." Lily pulled her chair closer to the table. "It isn't too late to cut a deal with the DA. They know they're going to lose McGinnis, and they want him really bad. You're the only one who can put him there. Believe me, they'll bargain to get him."

"But then he'll be executed."

"Maybe, maybe not. But McGinnis doesn't give a rat's ass about you! He's willing to let you take the rap for this so he can walk free. All he's told you all along is to keep your mouth shut. And why is that? Because he knows if you talk, you can hurt him."

The prisoner was flustered. She'd seen the faces of the jurors too, and she knew her sister was right.

Lily almost had her.

"It's not just McGinnis, Kristy. Your lawyer is sacrificing you to save him. He told me so himself. He said if he managed to save only one of you, then he'd be satisfied with that. Kristy, you need a new lawyer!" Lily implored.

"I don't know. They're both going to be so mad."

"Who gives a fuck whether they're mad or not? Look at the way they're treating you! Stand up for yourself."

Still, the prisoner was noncommittal.

"Unless you made it all up," Lily suddenly accused.

"No. It's the truth." Kristy raised her head and jutted out her chin. "I didn't kill that man. Kenny did, and he's the one that ought to pay for it."

Lily had won.

"I'm going to come back in an hour with a new lawyer. You need to tell him everything, Kristy."

The brunette nodded defiantly.

"And don't say anything to anyone else. Do you understand? You can't let McGinnis or Causwell know that you've changed your mind." *Or they'll change it back.*

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"No, you can't take all of those."

Andy had put as many of his toys as possible into the box that they kept beside the couch. Anna had taken some of his clothes to pack and told him to pick out a couple of toys to take. He was leaving again.

When she took the box away, he started to cry. He wouldn't be able to play with the toys anymore, or drive the little jeep. And he wouldn't be able to swim or to play with Chester. And he couldn't go to school anymore. But what bothered him most was that he wouldn't have Lily and Anna to hug him or read to him or play with him anymore. He really liked it here and he didn't want to leave.

"Andy, listen to me." The limo was in the driveway. If they didn't leave soon, they would miss their plane. "You can't take them because we don't have room. They will be here when you come back."

"When will that be?"

"What?"

"When will I get to come back?"

Realization suddenly dawned on Anna what the boy's problem was. He thought he was being moved again. He thought he was losing all his toys, just like he had lost the ones at the Shull house.

"Sweetheart, look at me." Anna used two fingers to tip the boy's face toward hers. "You're coming *with* me, and we're both coming back in three days, maybe even with Lily. I promise."

He still looked doubtful.

"Andy, do you remember what I told you last night before you went to sleep? I told you that I loved you, and that I was glad you were here with us. We're going to visit somebody today, but trust me, Andy. We'll be back."

The child wiped his tears, but he was still afraid. He would try to be very good.

"Now come on. We're going for an airplane ride."

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Andy forgot his fears and had a ball on the airplane, marveling at the G-force when they took off, and peering out the window at the hills and clouds below.

When their plane landed in San Francisco, Anna had a message on her cell phone that Lily and Rick had gone to the jail to talk with Kristy. Liz would be waiting for them at baggage claim.

The old friends greeted each other warmly, and Andy met five-year-old Chloe and two-year-old Ricky. By the time they reached the San Mateo home, the three were already friends too.

The children were fed, bathed, and put to bed soon after the newcomers arrived. Anna and Liz settled down in the kitchen to wait for word from the jail.

"He's a doll, Anna. Will you and Lily have him long?" Liz hadn't yet been told what the visit was about, but was thrilled to be seeing her friend again for whatever reason.

Anna filled her in on the story of Kristy and the trial, and of how they had come to care for Andy.

"Liz, I tell you, that little boy has stolen my heart."

"Like his aunt did, huh?" Liz was remembering a couple of years ago when Anna had first talked to her about this remarkable woman she had met in the earthquake.

"Yeah, something like that."

The women heard the garage door go up, a signal that Rick and Lily were home.

Lily greeted Liz again-they had met on one of Anna and Lily's visits to Eleanor's house-and Anna led her partner down the hall to look in on the sleeping boys. Andy was sleeping soundly in the top bunk, the rails raised on the sides so he wouldn't fall.

"Did you tell Liz about his little problem?"

"Yeah, Ricky has the same problem, so it was no big deal."

Lily stood on the rail of Ricky's bed so she could get a good look at Andy while he slept.

"Was he excited about coming?"

"He freaked out. I think he was afraid he was getting moved again, but I think he's okay now."

"God, I didn't even think about that. Anna, he must have been scared to death."

"Yeah, but he calmed down. He liked being on the plane."

"I bet."

"So what's up with Kristy?"

"Let's go back in here and Rick can tell you."

Rick Patterson had been shocked when he discovered that his new client was the defendant in one of the most notorious murders in the Bay Area. He and Lily had talked to Kristy Parker for two and a half hours, taking down the details of her story. When they finally left the jail, he had called the prosecutor at home, requesting a seven a.m. meeting to discuss a plea bargain. They knew each other fairly well, having worked opposite sides of many cases.

"So Kristy's decided to tell her side," Lily finished. "But everything's going to hinge on whether or not the DA believes her story. If he doesn't, he isn't going to touch this. He won't want to cut her a deal unless he's confident that her testimony will convict McGinnis."

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In a gesture of authority, District Attorney Warren Hasner slid the fourth chair to the end of the table. He would ask the questions, and for this moment at least, would act as judge of Kristy Parker.

When the deputy exited, Hasner began the negotiations. "Miss Parker, do you have information on the Peyton Graves murder that you'd like to share with me?"

"Yes," she replied simply. Rick and Lily had explained that she needed to be forthcoming about what she knew before they could begin bargaining.

"So why don't you tell me what happened." The prosecutor opened up his notebook and took out his pen.

"We went to rob him, that's all. But Kenny got mad."

"Whoa! I need you to back up. I want you to tell me everything that happened, starting with the very first time you ever laid eyes on Peyton Graves or his apartment."

Kristy's story began on the afternoon of the murder, when she passed Graves on the street in front of his loft and asked him for a handout. As she had stated in her police report, he invited her into his home and gave her food, a warm raincoat, and some money. She thanked him and left.

When she met up with McGinnis, she told him the story and he asked about what was inside the apartment. She described some of the trinkets, and said that she thought he had money in his office, because that's where he had gone to get her a few bills.

They watched the building that night until he left and slipped unnoticed into the gated garage when someone drove out. Unable to advance the elevator without a security code, they waited in the shadows until Graves returned, jumping onto the elevator as he pressed the code for his floor.

McGinnis pulled a pocketknife and threatened the man, unless he got some new clothes and money like his girlfriend had gotten earlier that day. Graves told him there was no need for the knife; that he would give him whatever he needed, including all the cash he had.

Once inside the apartment, McGinnis told him he only wanted the cash, and Graves emptied his wallet. McGinnis wanted more, and shoved him into the office, telling Kristy to bring him a bigger knife from the kitchen.

Kristy did, thinking all along that McGinnis was trying to scare the man, pretty sure herself that he had more cash in the office. When Graves said there was no more cash, McGinnis stabbed him in the shoulder and said he would do it again if Graves didn't get the money. Graves fell to the floor....

"How did he fall? Face up or face down?" The crime scene unit had marked a bloodstain on the carpet apart from where the body was found. This might explain that.

"Face down. But Kenny rolled him over and sat on him and yelled at him to say where the money was. He kept saying there wasn't any more money, and Kenny just started stabbing him, over and over. Then he was dead."

This was good, Hasner knew. But before he could deal, he needed to know Parker's role.

"And what were you doing during all this?"

"I was yelling at him to stop. I tried to push him off, but...."

"Where were you standing when you tried to push him off?" They had found smears of splattered blood near Graves' head consistent with someone standing in close proximity.

"I was at the door. And I came straight in and pushed Kenny."

"Draw me a picture."

She sketched it out. She would have been standing where the smears were found.

"How did you get out of the building?"

"The same way. You didn't need a code to go down, and we waited again until a car came in."

"What did you take from the apartment?"

Kristy listed the items she could remember: another coat, two silver candleholders, some figurines from a display case. The Herend pieces had prompted the call from the pawn shop. Police had recovered almost everything; only one of the candleholders was still unaccounted for.

"And the knife?"

Kristy sighed. "That was stupid. I grabbed it when we were leaving because I thought Kenny's fingerprints would be on it. I told him when we got outside and he hit me. He said he'd already cleaned it and I should have just left it there. So we stuck it in between two of the paper racks. Kenny said that was going to get us caught."

Hasner found Parker's tale credible, but knew that he'd need more than just her testimony. The jury had seen the evidence that placed her in the apartment, so they'd be hard-pressed to ignore her interest in shifting the blame.

"Your story is very interesting, Miss Parker. Why should I believe it?"

"Because it's the truth," she declared emphatically. "And because I can prove it."

Even Lily and Rick were startled. Had she been holding out on them?

"Is that so?" Hasner certainly hoped so.

Kristy looked at her sister and lawyer, worried about giving up what she knew was an important bargaining chip.

"Warren, before my client gives you any specific information, I think we'd like to know how that would be in her best interest." *Let's hear the offer, Warren.*

"Your client participated in a grisly murder, Rick. I'm willing to drop the death penalty in favor of life imprisonment, maximum security."

"Not good enough, Warren. Not even close. I'm thinking murder two, 25 years max."

"What kind of proof, Miss Parker?" he demanded.

"Kenny got rid of the clothes he was wearing because they had blood all over them. I know where they are."

The clothes! Of course! It was all Lily could do to keep her cool, not wanting the DA to know that she was just hearing this herself for the first time.

Hasner considered the offer for the testimony. The bloody clothes would indeed prove that McGinnis was there, and that he had done the stabbing. If he declined, Parker could get the death penalty, but that wasn't likely without direct evidence; she could be handed a life sentence; or she could be acquitted altogether. Irrespective of what happened to her, McGinnis would likely go free.

"Alright, we have a deal. I want a recorded statement and a..."

"Wait." Kristy suddenly reminded everyone of who was really in charge here. "I want one more thing."

Rick, Lily and Warren exchanged puzzled looks.

"My offer is very generous, Miss Parker," Hasner chastised. "You should take it and be satisfied."

"No. If I'm going to testify against Kenny, you have to promise that he won't get the death penalty. No matter what."

"I can't promise that," Hasner answered, all business.

"Then you can forget it. You're asking me to help you kill him, and I won't do that."

Though she was here in an official capacity as an attorney, Lily had been nothing more than an observer to these negotiations. She was glad she hadn't missed this moment. What her sister was asking was altogether a fair request. More importantly, it cleared Lily's conscience for her hand in this: She didn't want to be party to an execution.

Hasner was had, and he knew it. "I want the shirt, and I'll need to do tests on it."

"So we have a deal?" Rick confirmed.

"Yes. I'll get my office to write it up. See you in the courthouse at nine."

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Rick and Hasner left to prepare the paperwork they'd need to present to the judge for an extended recess. Lily stayed behind to talk again with her sister.

"Kristy, I'm proud of you for doing this. I know it was hard, but you did the right thing."

"I don't know, Lily," she said dejectedly. "Twenty-five years is a long fucking time."

"But it beats the death penalty. And there's always a chance for parole."

"I guess. Glad I don't have to share a cell with Kenny. He's going to shit the bed!" She stifled a chuckle. When she'd thought about what Lily had said, she'd realized that Kenny was only concerned about himself. It had always been that way. She'd given up Andres because Kenny didn't want him around, and had beaten him for wetting the bed.

"So I'll see you in court later, okay?"

"You're going to hang around? I thought you'd be in a hurry to get back to LA. To Andres."

"Actually, he's here. He and Anna flew up last night. Rick's a friend of hers, and she's the one that arranged for him to see you."

At once Kristy was suspicious. "She did this?" Why would Anna Kaklis want a hand in this?

"No, she didn't do anything." *Oh, fuck!* "I called her after what happened in court and told her you needed a new lawyer. She knew Rick and his wife, so last night they came up here while Rick and I were here talking to you. Anna has nothing to do with any of this."

"I want to see Andres." Kristy still held this card.



*Shit.*

"And I want to meet this Anna Kaklis."

*Fucking shit.*

## ***Chapter 18***

"I don't think he needs to go to a place like that." Anna was adamant. Lily had called her partner immediately after she left the jail with the news that Kristy wanted to meet her face to face.

"I don't either, but she's still got those goddamned papers on John Moss' desk. All she has to do is call him and say give Andy to Lisa Parker. I know you don't want to do this, sweetheart. I hate to ask...."

"I don't care about that, Lily. I'll go see her if she wants. I just don't want Andy to have to go there to see her. Can't Rick arrange to have her meet him at the courthouse or something?"

*What?* "You don't care?"

"No. If she needs to talk to me to satisfy some curiosity, I'll go. I'll see her this afternoon if she wants. But if it's all the same to you, I'd rather Andy never set foot inside a jail."

*This is about what you want for Andy?* "Um...okay. I'll talk to Rick and see what he can arrange. Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely. Tell her I'll be there today."

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"Fucking bitch," Kenneth McGinnis muttered under his breath. He and his public defender had gotten the devastating news when they reached the courtroom.

Causwell knew something was up, since the defendants were not delivered from the jail together. Someone had already summoned Parker, the bailiff said. When Lily walked in with Rick Patterson, he knew his client was toast.

Out of the eyes of the jury, Rick introduced himself to the court as Kristy Parker's new attorney and requested a continuance of the recess so that he might complete negotiations with the District Attorney. Wostyk granted the recess, postponing the trial until nine a.m. on Thursday morning. That would give the DA time to locate the shirt and complete the necessary tests to link it to the crime.

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In her wildest dreams, Anna hadn't expected to be sitting in the visitors' room of a jail, moments from coming face to face with a murderer. A murderer with her partner's face, she acknowledged as Parker was led through the door.

Kristy took a seat at the picnic style table across from the beautiful dark-haired woman. On the far side of the room, an older couple-parents, Anna thought-met quietly with a crying young woman in an orange jumpsuit. Other than that, she and Kristy were alone.

"I'm Anna Kaklis," the tall woman started, almost mesmerized by the familiar green eyes across the table.

"I know who you are. In fact, I know quite a bit about you. You sell cars. And you have a big house in Brentwood. And you make lots of money."

Anna tried to remember what information she had put on the social services forms.

"And you and my sister have rings just alike. Isn't that sweet?"

"Well there must be something you don't know, or you wouldn't have invited me down here for a chat."

"Not a chat, really. I just wanted to see what you looked like. Although I was curious...."

"About what? Perhaps I can enlighten you."

"About why you cared enough about me to ask your friend to be my lawyer."

"Because I care about Lily, and she said you needed a lawyer."

"So you did it for Lily, not for me."

"I'd say that's right. But if justice gets served in the meantime, that's a good thing too."

"So is that how you feel about Andres too?"

"I beg your pardon?" *What does Andy have to do with this?*

"Do you put up with him because you care about Lily and that's what she wants?" That's how it had been when she first started hanging out with Kenny. He liked her and he put up with Andres. But when Andres got to be too much trouble, he had to go.

"No, it isn't like that."

"Tell me what it's like, then."

Anna was almost afraid to say how she really felt, knowing this woman's penchant for using Lily's concern about Andy to manipulate her. But Lily and Rick had reached her last night, persuading her finally to do the right thing in this murder case. Maybe she had one more "right thing" in her.

"I'll tell you how I feel about Andy. I adore him. I think he's sweet, he's smart, he likes to have fun, and he loves my dog. He makes me laugh, he makes me sad when his feelings get hurt or when he doesn't feel well. He makes me feel good all over when he hugs me. Kristy, I want him to live with us from now on. Even if Lily should leave me, I'd want him to stay. That's how I feel about him."

As Anna's words poured out, so had Kristy's tears. She had once had the chance herself to love the beautiful little boy just the way Anna had described. She could never have given him things like they could, but she would have taken care of him. Instead, she had let him down when she chose Kenneth McGinnis.

Unable to deal with this onslaught of emotions, the prisoner suddenly stood. "I need to get back to my cell."

"No, wait." Anna wanted to say one more thing. "Lily says when you go to prison the state will put Andy up for adoption, but it will take a long time. And he might be moved again. If you sign the papers tomorrow, we can start the process now of making it permanent. Will you do that for Andy? For all of us?"

Kristy's tears were unchecked as she nodded. "Can I see him one more time?"

"Of course," Anna assured. "It's already arranged."

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"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to American Airlines Flight 119, service between San Francisco and Los Angeles International Airport. At this time, we'd like to invite our first class cabin to board...."

"That's us, pal," Lily said, crawling under a row of seats in the crowded departure lounge to retrieve the matchbox X5 Anna had given the boy on his first visit to the Premier BMW dealership.

Their business in San Francisco was finished. Early Wednesday afternoon, police recovered a bloody t-shirt and bandana from the flat rooftop of a two-story building four blocks from the Graves loft. Both had been wrapped around a stolen silver candlestick so that they could be easily thrown. Hair samples from the bandana identified its owner as Kenneth McGinnis, sealing the prosecution's case. Unwilling to gamble his fate further, McGinnis agreed to plead guilty on Thursday afternoon to first degree murder in exchange for a life sentence. He was headed to San Quentin.

In accordance with her agreement, Kristy Parker also pleaded guilty to second degree murder and would be sentenced to 25 years at the Valley State Women's Prison in Chowchilla. She would be eligible for parole in 15 years.

The excited boy stomped energetically down the jet bridge to board the plane, Lily guiding him into the window seat in Row 4. Anna followed, taking the aisle seat directly across from her partner.

The blonde had been bowled over on Wednesday afternoon when Anna asked her how quickly they could get papers together for Kristy to resign her parental rights.

*"Well, there are a lot of forms involved but they usually keep them in a packet. It's just a matter of filling in the information and getting her to sign."*

*"So could it be ready by tomorrow afternoon?"*

*Lily chuckled; Anna was in her CEO mode. "I think the papers are the easy part. Who's going to strong-arm my sister in signing them?"*

*"She's ready, sweetheart. I told her we wanted him and that we didn't want to wait and take a chance that he could be moved again."*

*"You told her we wanted him?"*

*"Yeah. We do, don't we?"*

*Oh my god! "Anna, are you sure?"*

*"I've only been this sure about one other person in my whole life."*

*The tall woman's back would probably recover eventually. It wasn't every day she caught 115 pounds of running jumping screaming blonde.*

A businessman gestured toward the window seat in Anna's row. As she stood to let him in, she looked down on the gleeful four-year-old peering out the window telling Lily all about the different colored suitcases being loaded into the hatch below him.

"I can't believe they let kids fly in first class," the man grumbled. "A hundred dollars for an upgrade and we have to put up with jabbering rugrats."

*That's my rugrat, and his ticket cost \$1,100. I'd say he has a right to sit wherever he wants.* Biting her tongue, Anna managed to keep that thought to herself.

Andy settled down, but the businessman persisted. "Listen to him. I bet he doesn't shut up all the way to LA."

*Will you?*

He loved it when he had a chance to make conversation with a beautiful woman like this knockout sitting next to him. "So what kind of work do you do?"

"I sell cars," Anna answered dryly, extracting the headphones from the seatback pocket in front of her. There was no music as yet-they were still on the ground-but that wasn't the point. Headphones in place, she buried her face in the latest *Car & Driver* in an attempt to discourage conversation.

"So does your boss make you read that kind of stuff to keep up with the industry?" The obnoxious man reached into her magazine and pointed at the article she was reading.

"Something like that," she answered, turning back to her magazine.

Lily stretched to retrieve the X5, this time from underneath Anna's foot.

"Can't you at least keep his toys over there where he doesn't bother other people?" the man barked rudely.

Lily looked at Anna, the blue eyes saying *"I'll handle this."* If Andy hadn't wanted the window so much, Anna would have traded seats with him right then.

"I tell you. People have no control over their kids at all these days. They just let them do whatever they want," he went on.

"I bet he's not bothering you half as much as you're bothering me," Anna snapped. "At least he knows to stop talking to people when they cover their ears!"

With the headphones still in place, Anna hadn't realized that she was practically shouting at the man. That is, until the woman behind Lily began to applaud, joined soon by the two men sitting behind Anna and the jerk.

The rest of the ride was peaceful, except for the occasional delighted squeal from the small boy as he discovered new things he liked about flying.

## *Epilogue*

Greg Cahill wheeled his 740iL onto the lot at Premier Motors, excited about picking out his next new car. Ever since Anna had called him with the news that his lease was about to expire, he'd had car fever.

The new president of the Greater Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce was a faithful BMW owner. In a moment of stupidity a few years ago, he had bought a Jaguar, but his friend had taken it in trade and wholesaled it "the hell off this lot" as soon as he handed her the keys.

The car dealer-who was herself the Chamber's new vice-president-had suggested a loaded 745Li, and there was a red one in her showroom right now. As he pushed through the double glass doors, its gleaming elegance caught his eye right away.

"Hi, I'm Greg Cahill. I'd like to see Anna Kaklis, please." He introduced himself to the weekend receptionist.

"I'll page her for you."

The silver X5 squeezed its way through the crowded lot, snaking around the new cars toward the employee parking area in the back. This visit to the dealership on Saturday was a treat for both Lily and Andy; Lily because she got to see her lover, Andy because...well, because he got to see everything.

Saturdays like this were great, but Thursdays were Andy's favorite day of the week. Anna picked

him up from pre-school before lunch, bought him a cheeseburger, French fries and a chocolate milkshake-which always sat in the cup holder-and brought him back to the dealership to spend the afternoon. Sometimes he would sit in her office playing with the model cars while she worked, but most of the time he would watch the videos in the media room. Once, she even let him sit on a stool in the service garage while she worked under the hood on an old car. That had been really cool, especially when she asked him to get down for minute so he could hand her one of the tools.

Sticky handprints smeared the glass door in the back as the pair entered through the downstairs offices.

*"Anna Kaklis, please come to the showroom."*

"Did you hear that, Andy? They must have seen us come in. Let's go wait in the showroom, okay?"

The little boy skipped ahead, wondering if the big red car was still there. Sometimes, there were different cars. Anna said that was because people liked them so much that they bought them and took them home. There it was, a brand new 745Li, and a man was looking at it, probably to take it home. Andy knew all about the car from the video he had watched over and over.

"Hello," the man said to the little boy who had come to stand on his tiptoes so he could look at the engine.

"Hi," said Andy. Anna had told him that he should be extra nice to the people at the dealership. "This car has a B-8 engine."

"A V-8 engine?"

Andy nodded excitedly. "Yeah, with tirty-two balbes." He wasn't quite sure what all that meant, but he knew it was good.

"Thirty-two valves! No kidding!"

"Yeah, you can see it if you look here." He stretched again and pointed under the hood.

"Why it certainly does," the man agreed, having no idea where to look for those valves.

The blonde woman's mouth dropped as she watched the pseudo-sales presentation unfold. *How does he know all this?*

"And the seats have little bitty holes 'cause they have heaters!"

"Heaters? In the seats?"

"Uh-huh, heaters. And it has a on-board caputer, too!" Andy wasn't sure what that meant either,

but it too sounded really nice.

The dark-haired woman approached silently from behind her lover, who was now thoroughly astounded at what she was seeing. "Hi Greg. I see you've met my son."

"Your son?"

"That's right. At least he will be in a couple more weeks. Isn't that right, Andy?"

Andy suddenly grew bashful and sidled up next to the car dealer.

"And this is my partner, Lily Stuart." She held out her arm to the blonde woman, who was still amazed at the scene she had just witnessed. "This is my friend Greg Cahill, who happens to need a new car today."

"It's nice to meet you, Greg." Lily found herself immensely pleased to be part of this scene, getting her first glimpse of what she knew would be a long and loving mentoring of this child in the family's business. "I should warn you, these guys have a reputation for tag-teaming on a hard sell."

"Well if everything this young salesman says is true, then I want this car right here." He looked back at the boy, who was smiling up at both of his soon-to-be moms.

"Greg, if Andy said it, I'm sure it's true, because he knows all about cars." It excited her that this boy she had come to love so much shared her passion. In her mind's eye, Anna could picture that one day a handsome young man with curly brown hair and green eyes would climb the stairs to the executive offices on the second floor.

The End. You can stop reading now. If you like, you can drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com) and let me know what you thought of the tale.

Thanks to all for reading the saga of Anna & Lily, who are going to be taking an indefinite break. I've really appreciated your words of encouragement.

Thanks to those Canadian Uber Addicts who commented on the first draft. I appreciate your help.

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