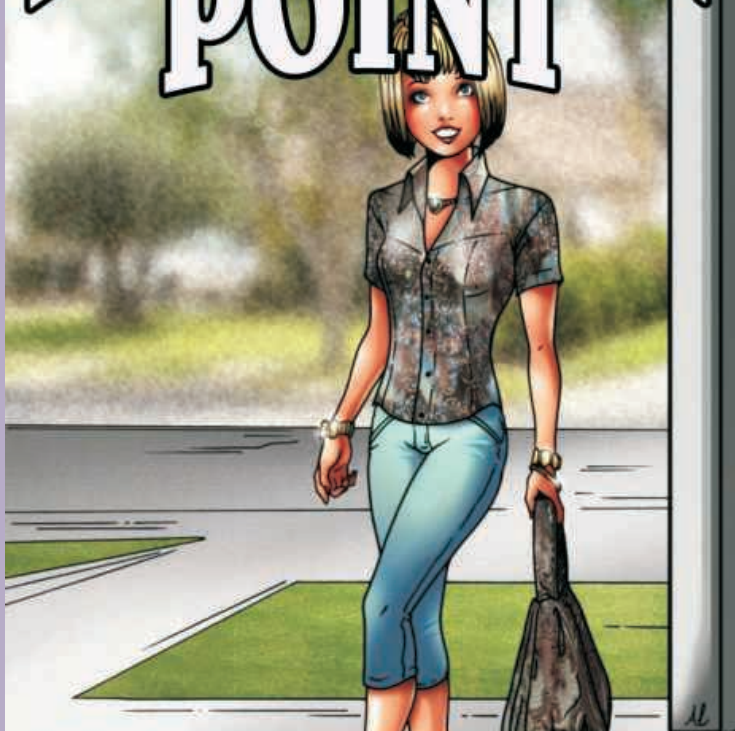


# BREAKING POINT



CAROLYN FAITH  
OLSON

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# Breaking Point

**By Carolyn Faith Olson**

Ambigendered (from Latin, ambo = both+gender = masculine & feminine) –

Having two genders, one masculine and one feminine, and being able to use

both, well and comfortably. Able to think, talk, feel and act in both genders,

independent of each other. Double-gendered.



## **Dedicated to Cynthia Decker**

A true Vanity Club sister

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living, dead or fictional, is accidental.

# BREAKING POINT

## 1

Katie impatiently tapped her fingernails on the top of her desk.

“Answer the darn phone,” she shouted into her cell phone. The call was not that important, or bordering on a national security emergency, but she was unable to contact the one person she trusted and she was frustrated.

“I give up,” she said to herself. “Where is he?”

After calling all the numbers she had, in an attempt to reach her contact, Katie was at her wit's end. Burying her head in her hands, and with her strawberry-blond hair falling in front of her face, she slammed her left fist into the desktop. She wanted to

wrap up her last part of work before leaving for the week-long vacation. Katie Hightower had to catch a flight.

Katie's position, as Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), was becoming more and more difficult every day. Despite the support from The Senator, the most powerful man in Congress, financial cutbacks for national security by the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives and Senate, were hurting her effort to keep America safe. With the United States terrorist-free since the 9/11 attack, the government was becoming more and more lax when it came to protecting the country. As a carry over from the prior administration, Katie felt very little allegiance to the new President, and despite her cabinet position, was often left out of the loop. She was seriously thinking of resigning.

Katie had been in her position for less than three years, following the retirement of her mentor, John Manter, and loved her job. Having worked her way up from an hourly employee to Director was quite an accomplishment for anyone, yet alone a woman from Odessa, TX, whose appearance would be welcome on any fashion runway.

The budget cuts had meant not only less funding, but fewer staff members and the disbanding of an important arm of her operation, the "semi-secret" Vanity Club.

The VC connection was a collection of elite cross dressing men, who as beautiful and engaging women, joined together to help solve a number of DHS cases, which ranged from money laundering to murder. Even though Katie kept in touch with a number of the girls, many had scattered to their homes throughout the

world. Katie's husband Mark (AKA: April) was also a VC member.

Katie planned to return home for her 20th high school class reunion, but being the efficient person she was, she needed to make this one final contact before she could breathe a sigh of relief. She was reluctant, on this rushed Friday, to send an e-mail, but she did. Her contact could always reach her by cell phone.

Katie wasn't mentally prepared to attend her reunion, however, she had long promised her parents a visit and this was a good excuse. And, Mark assured her that he would go as a trade-off to her attending his reunion a few years earlier.

Katie despised Odessa, which was in the heart of oil country, and known for its flat, unflattering landscape, summer heat, the mythical Jackalope (a jack rabbit with antelope antlers), rednecks and "Friday Night Lights" high school football. Someone once told Katie "You can travel two hours in any direction from Odessa and still not get anywhere."

She did not look forward to seeing old friends. Despite the fact she had been the cheerleader at renowned Permian High School, most of the girls did not treat her well because she was a natural redhead, a hair color she changed when she left for college. She had more bad memories, than good.

She was looking forward to seeing her loving parents, who still lived in her childhood home, and her one-time "dream" boyfriend Bobby Joe Crawford.

## 2

Bobby Joe was a two-time All-Texas running back at Permian. He made the Panthers' "Mojo" go for three seasons. Katie had always had a crush on Bobby Joe, but he never gave her the time of day, even though they had attended the same schools for 13 years, starting in kindergarten. She never understood why they couldn't have been friends.

Katie hoped Bobby Joe, a strapping 5-10, 185-pound hunk, with the looks of a teen-star, had turned into a balding 5-10, 250-pound oil monkey. "He'd deserve it," she told herself many times. She couldn't wait to see if her vision was reality.

The flight to Odessa was terrible. Katie and Mark left Ronald Reagan International Airport during a thunderstorm and seemed to bounce all the way to Dallas, where they hopped on a "puddle-jumper" to the Odessa-Midland airport, arriving just after midnight. They had missed the Friday night parade and fireworks at the school's Ratliff Stadium, but Katie could have cared less.

"What a start to the weekend," Katie remarked to Mark as they drove their rental car to Katie's parents' home.

Katie's parents were thrilled to welcome their daughter. The Hightower's had never had Mark come to their home and greeted him with open arms. Katie's father, HT, in his early 70s, still worked in the oil fields servicing well-meters, while her mother, Emma, had always been a homemaker, and raised Katie and her two younger brothers. Katie was a closely resembled her mother, who looked more like an older sister, than a 68-year-old grand-mother.

Saturday was a whirl-wind of activity. Katie and Mark tried to relax and prepare for the reunion, while Mrs. Hightower fussed over everything in an effort to make them comfortable. Katie felt she was becoming a nuisance.

Katie thought: "This is how she acted when I went to my first prom." Mark told Katie not to worry and to enjoy being with her parents. Mark thought the entire experience was funny, but didn't say a thing to Katie, who he could see was on edge.

"I can't wait for this to get over," said Katie, as she and Mark drove towards the Odessa Country Club — the site of the reunion.

"Take it easy," replied Mark. "It's not going to be that bad. Forget about everything in Washington and try to enjoy yourself. Your parents are so happy to see us and I'm sure a lot of people at the reunion will be too."

"I bet," Katie said sarcastically.

Katie and Mark arrived at the reunion right on time. Katie looked glorious, dressed in a short dark blue sequined dress and matching stiletto heels, while Mark was wearing a golf shirt and slacks. Katie recognized a few old friends, but most of the early party-goers did not recognize her.

"Have I changed that much?" Katie asked Mark. "Maybe it's my hair color."

"No," said Mark. "Aren't those are the same bitches you told me about; the ones who don't think their shit stinks? Are you sure we're at the right reunion? Some of these people look much older than us."

Katie laughed, which helped break the ice. Suddenly, Katie felt a pair of arms wrap around her from

behind. Her old neighbor, Samantha Johns, who was voted "best personality" her senior year and always looked younger than her age, was the culprit.

"It's so good to see a familiar face," Katie shrieked. Sam's soft, light auburn, shoulder-length hair, big blue eyes, and perky smile, had not changed in 20 years.

The girls hugged while Mark introduced himself to Sam's husband, Don Stevens.

"You look wonderful," said Sam, who was no slouch in her sleeveless, v-neck black and white patterned mini-dress and strapless heels. "Your parents told me you were coming. I'm so excited you're here. We've got so much to catch up on."

Mark and Don decided to visit the no-host bar since the girls were about to start a serious catch-up session. Don wondered if the Katie and Sam started talking, would they be able to get either of the girls on the dance floor.

As the girls' conversation heated up, Katie eyed a statuesque buxom blonde walking through the doorway with a tall, good looking gentleman.

"Is that who I think it is?" asked Katie, as she pointed toward record-setting quarterback Richie Wilkinson, who looked like he could still play football.

"That's him," answered Sam. "He's just as gorgeous as he was in high school. He's a millionaire, many times over. He's in the oil business."

"Who's his date," inquired Katie.

"Don't you know"? Sam responded, forgetting that Katie had not been home for more than two days in the past 10 years.

"That's his shack-up honey, Bobbi Jo," Sam reported.

"Bobbi Jo, who?" continued Katie. "Was she at our school"?"

"You don't know, do you?" Sam retorted with a frown.

"Know what?" asked Katie.

"I think we need go somewhere and talk," said Sam.

Suddenly, Katie connected Bobby Joe with Bobbi Jo. Feeling faint, Katie grabbed a chair.

Bobby Joe Crawford had been the man-about-town when he was in high school, but after graduation, things changed. Bobby Joe attended the University of Texas on a football scholarship, however, after his sophomore year, he dropped out of school. Soon, thereafter, he dropped out of sight. Nobody, not even his parents, knew where he was.

Bobby Joe had long been confused about his sexual identity. In high school, he had to be the "macho man" and carried his team to the state finals. Secretly, he would have rather been a cheerleader. After two years of college, he snapped and hit rock bottom.

By age 23, Bobby Joe became the voluptuous Bobbi Jo. "He" became a "she" through a lengthy sex-change process.

Sam took Katie to the ladies' lounge and proceeded to explain what the locals jokingly called "The Ballad of Bobbi Jo."

"I thought you knew," Sam exclaimed. "Everybody in town does. Didn't your parents tell you? It was 15 years ago. I guess I just took it for granted."

"I can't believe it," said a still-confused Katie. Neither could Mark, who eyed the 5-10, 145-pound beauty as she mingled with old friends in the crowd of over 300. With her hourglass figure and big, toothy smile, it would be hard for anyone to suspect that Bobbi Jo had once been a man.

"Well, you'd better believe it," Sam concluded.

Katie wanted to know more. So, Sam complied and told her the story and how Bobbi Jo shook up the entire Odessa-Midland area when she returned to town to live with Richie.

"She's one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen," offered Katie.

"She should be," replied Sam. "Richie has spent thousands on her appearance. She's had breast and cheek implants, laser hair removal, liposuction, surgery to remove two ribs and hair extensions. And, who knows what else. She is a 'kept' woman, if you know what I mean. She's become almost as famous as the Jackalope, and she doesn't seem to care what others think about her. As far as I'm concerned, she's a slut.

"I understand that Bobby Joe called Richie in desperation after he quit college and he's been Bobby's confident, sugar-daddy, and now his lover. She owes Richie everything, and he takes advantage of that too, as you might expect."

The reunion became anti-climatic for Katie, after the Bobbi Jo revelation. Katie later had to admit that she had a good time with Sam and Don and the other old friends with whom she renewed acquaintances. Mark even got her on to the dance floor for a couple of songs. And, to her surprise, Richie even asked her to dance.

“So that’s what my stud-muffin has become,” Katie thought as she swung on the dance floor with Richie. She didn’t want to tell Mark that Bobby Joe had once been her heart-throb. He would have laughed all the way back to Washington.

The reunion concluded shortly after midnight, but it took everyone almost an hour to say their “good-byes.” Most of the revelers would meet again in 10 hours for a Sunday breakfast-buffet in the high school gym.

Katie and Mark promised to meet the Stevens’ the following morning.

Katie and Mark spent most of the pre-dawn hours talking about Richie and Bobbi Jo.

“I’d have died to have a dress like hers,” joked Mark — who was also a cross dresser — in an effort to get Katie to smile.

“What’s wrong with you?” he continued, as they lay together in bed. “We’ve met transsexuals before. Don’t you remember that a couple of girls worked with you to solve The Senator’s deception case?”

“I know,” said Katie. “But, it’s Bobby Joe. We grew up and went to school together. I never...”

“You’d have never known,” said Mark. “We never thought about these things when we were in high school. We were all a bunch of macho pigs, looking to score with any girl who was willing.”

“You should talk,” Katie rebutted. “Maybe you did, but I sure wasn’t hopping in bed with anybody.”

“Right,” Mark added. “Don’t tell me that your high school was any different than mine.”

"You were probably a dork anyway," Katie laughed.

"Let's get some sleep," Mark chided, noticing it was close to 4 a.m. "If we don't, we might keep your parents awake all night too. They're probably listening through the walls anyway."

### 3

Sunday breakfast was uneventful as most of the celebrants lacked sleep and/or were hung-over following Saturday night's gala.

After a few "thank-you" speeches by the planning committee, the reunion was adjourned and the most of the participants headed home.

Katie and Mark did not have a flight until Monday morning, so Samantha recommended that "we cruise the drag" in downtown Odessa, "just like we used to do."

"And pick up some girls," Don joked.

"Right," said a doubting Katie. "You and Mark should realize by now, that the grass is not greener on the other side. You already have the best you're ever going to get."

Everyone laughed as they climbed into Don's classic 1965 Ford Mustang convertible.

"I guess Richie and Bobbi Jo couldn't get out of bed in time for the breakfast," remarked Katie in jest. "I was hoping to see them again."

"It probably takes hours to put her back together again," Sam responded sarcastically.

Everyone laughed. With little sleep, the foursome got giddier by the minute. Touring the town and riding in Don's car brought back a lot of memories.

Don cruised along East and West University, and then motored over to the Andrews Highway, to see what was left of the drive-in movie theatre, where many of the town folk watched their first Star Wars movie. They returned to downtown, drove past the Jack Ben Rabbit landmark, which at eight feet tall is described as the "World's Largest Jack Rabbit," the local shopping district and mall and back to the Four Star Drive-In near Permian High.

Katie was amazed how Odessa had grown. With over 90,000 residence, new housing developments and modern shopping areas, Odessa wasn't the same small town she in which she grown up.

"Odessa has really changed," said Katie, who now saw that her hometown was much more modern than she had remembered.

"You can see why we never left," added Sam. "We love living here. I wish you and Mark would move back."

Katie shook her head, knowing that was impossible, due to her government position, and Mark's business interest.

"Maybe, some day?" Sam questioned. Katie had no response.

The four friends walked in to the drive-in for hamburgers, shakes and Sam's favorite, a vanilla Coke. After three hours of driving, they needed nourishment and a potty-stop.

"This place is just like it was when we were in high school," said Katie, admiring the pictures of past football teams on the wall.

"Oh, my goodness, there's a picture of me," Katie exclaimed, spotting a photo of her cheerleading team.

"Gosh, you were cute," commented Mark. "I would've dated you then too."

"Stop it Mark," Katie said, slapping his hand. "You'd have preferred Bobbi Jo."

Everyone laughed.

After more conversation and a near food-fight, the Stevens' and Asher's drove back to the school grounds to say their goodbyes. After hugs, kisses and handshakes, the two couples agreed to keep in touch, and Katie invited their friends to come to Washington for a Spring visit to at "Cherry Blossom time." The Stevens' quickly accepted.

"Aren't you glad you came?" Mark said to Katie, after bidding the Stevens' farewell.

"Sam saved the entire reunion," replied Katie as they walked hand-in-hand to the car. "I'm so happy."

Katie placed a kiss on the Mark's cheek and snuck a squeeze of his buttocks.

"What's that for?" asked Mark.

"You'll find out later," Katie responded, with a wink of her eye. "Thanks so much for coming."

"I'd have never missed this," offered Mark.

If he only knew what was to come.

## 4

As Mark pulled out of the high school parking lot, he noticed a piece of paper stuck under his windshield wiper-blade.

"Must be some advertisement," Mark said to Katie as he stopped the car to remove the distraction.

Upon inspection, Mark noticed it that the note was addressed to Katie.

"What is it?" inquired Katie.

"It's for you," he said. "It must be from a secret admirer."

Katie smiled, but she was not smiling as she read the note.

"It's from Bobbi Jo," she said. "She wants to meet us. She sounds desperate."

The note asked Katie and Mark to meet her at the rabbit statue at 4 o'clock. She needed help. It was almost 3, so instead of returning to the Hightower home, they called to say they'd be back later than expected and not to hold dinner. Katie's mother said they would wait because HT could barbeque ribs at any time.

"Let's take a drive," said Mark, as he steered the car back onto the Andrews Highway and out of town. After about a 10 minute drive, Katie saw what looked like a mirage on the horizon.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Just wait a couple more minutes," Mark replied. "We're almost there."

"Almost there" was Richie's home, a monstrous palace, surrounded by a brick wall, and locked gates.

"It must be 10,000 square feet," replied Katie, eyeing the expansive two-story western-style home, complete with lighted tennis courts, a covered tartan-surface basketball court, a near Olympic-sized swimming pool, a six-car garage and a huge television station-sized satellite dish.

"Don told me where to find the house," said Mark. "I thought you might like to see it. Don told me it was worth over \$10 million. What a palace."

"It's amazing," muttered Katie. "I guess the oil business has been more than good."

Driving back to town, Mark told Katie that he had some reservations about Richie.

"Everything seems to have come too easy, if you know what I mean," said Mark. "He's too slick. Everything can't be so perfect. I just have a funny feeling something isn't right."

"He's always been rich," recalled Katie. "His parents were loaded and Sam said he parlayed everything and turned the family oil fortune into gold."

"I don't know," Mark added. "I just have that feeling that something isn't right."

Katie and Mark arrived at the "World Famous" rabbit with Bobbi Jo nowhere in sight.

Mark heard a whistle, but thought it might have been a bird chirping. Then he heard it again. He spotted Bobbi Jo, hiding at the side of a building, looking quite the opposite from the night before. She had very little makeup, ruffled hair and was dressed in Levis and a T-shirt. She waved and disappeared behind the building.

Mark started to pursue, but Katie grabbed his arm.

"She doesn't look very good," cautioned Katie.  
"Let's drive over behind the building."

Mark carefully drove behind a city building and into the parking lot. Before he and Katie could react, Bobbi Jo jumped into the back seat of the car and shouted "get going!!! Drive!!!"

Mark wheeled the car on to Lincoln Street and headed east toward of Ector County limits.

Katie leaned over the front seat and observed Bobbi Jo, who was huddled in the back.

"What happened to you?" asked Katie. "You look like hell."

Bobbi Jo looked as if she had spent 10 rounds with Muhammad Ali. She had a swollen left eye, had cuts and black and blue marks on her hands, face and arms, and tear-stained cheeks.

"Richie beat me up last night," sobbed Bobbi Jo, as she broke into tears.

"After the party?" inquired Katie. "You both looked so happy, especially on the dance floor. What happened"?

"We were on our way home and he just started hitting me," said Bobbi Jo. "He's become an animal. I need your help. We have to go somewhere safe, some place where we can talk."

Mark reversed his tracks and headed north towards Midland.

"There's a motel at the airport," suggested Mark.  
"Would that work"?

"Let's give it a try," answered Katie, holding Bobbi Jo's hand, in an attempting to get her to stop crying.

"You're the only person I think I can trust," mumbled Bobbi Jo. "We have to be careful. I think Richie and his friends are out looking for me. It's been hell living with him the last few years."

Mark pulled the car to the shoulder of the highway to allow Katie to get in the back seat with Bobbi Jo. Katie took a blanket out of the trunk and wrapped it around Bobbi Jo, who was sobbing and shaking with fright, as she placed her head on her shoulder.

For a second, Katie thought: "This is how it was supposed to be when I was in high school," but just as quickly put that out of her mind.

They drove to Midland with only a few spoken words. Mark found a vacancy at the Airport Plaza Inn, just off Interstate 20. After checking in, Katie and Mark guided the exhausted Bobbi Jo to the room and laid her on the bed.

"I'm going to call my parents and tell them we have a bit of an emergency," said Katie.

"Don't tell them where we are," added Mark. "I'm sure Richie has a lot of contacts in town."

"I'm going to let Bobbi Jo sleep for a bit," Katie added. "Then we'll try to get to the bottom of this."

Mark walked to a near-by fast-food establishment and brought back "dinner for three." It might be a long night.

"Where am I?" said Bobbi Jo, awakening from a deep two-hour sleep.

"You're with us," comforted Katie. "We have some dinner, if you're interested."

"I'm hurting too much to think about food," Bobbi Jo replied. "I'm hurting all over."

“Take your time,” assured Mark. “You’re safe with us.”

Bobbi Jo started crying once again and Katie wrapped her arms around her shoulders. “We’re here to help,” she said. “Well talk whenever you’re ready.”

“I know that,” responded Bobbi Jo. “Just give me a little more time.”

Katie walked into the motel corridor, dialed her secure cell phone and placed a call.

“What’s up?” answered Gina Marie Young, one of Katie’s assistant at DHS.

“I won’t be back at work tomorrow,” said Katie. “Something’s come up. Call Mark’s office too. Don’t ask any questions. I need you to run a profile on Richie Wilkinson, age 38, of Odessa, Texas. He’s big in oil. He owns Midessa Oil. I need to know everything about him as soon as possible. Call me back on the secure line.”

“Gotcha,” said Gina Marie. “Give me about 30 minutes.”

“Hurry,” Katie pleaded.

## 5

Katie returned to the room after a visit to the motel office. After flashing her credentials, she explained to the manager that her stay was “of utmost security” and if anybody came asking about her “she was to be told immediately.” Mark had registered under his assumed name using a fake DHS-issued driver’s license and a

generic government credit card. Being married to Katie has its advantages.

"We're safe so far," thought Katie, who scanned the parking lot, and did not see any suspicious vehicles. She grabbed her laptop out of the trunk of the car. "We can't stay here too long. Somebody has to be looking for her."

It was approaching 7 p.m. when Katie returned to the room. Gina Marie had not returned her call and Bobbi was talking 100-miles-a-minute with Mark, who attempted to take notes on a paper napkin.

"Please, start over," Mark urged. "Katie's needs to hear everything you have to say."

"I'll try," said Bobbi Jo. "Where should I start?"

Katie started her laptop and asked for Bobbi Jo's permission to record her comments. She anxiously approved and Katie told her to start when she was ready.

"When I heard you were coming to the reunion, I just had to see you," said Bobbi Jo. "But, I couldn't let Richie get any ideas. He's a sly bastard.

"I heard you worked at Homeland Security and felt that you might be the only person I could go to. I'm sorry if I was aloof at the reunion. I had to play the roll as a 'happy homemaker/wife.' Well, I'm not. I had hoped Mark would have asked me to dance, so I could get a message to you. But, that didn't happen."

Mark blushed. And Bobbi Jo smiled for the first time.

For the next four hours, Bobbi Jo held court, interrupted only by an interesting return-call from Gina Marie.

Bobbi Jo started with her high school years, expanded to her life at the university, and the desperate call to Richie for help.

"I loved being the center of attention when I was in high school. Richie and I were best friends. Not only did we have a great football team, but we had perks nobody else did. We could have any girl we wanted; free food and clothes from the stores down town; you name it, we got it. We were spoiled.

"Remember, Richie was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He had all the money. I came from an poor-to-average family. I would have been working in the oil fields if it had not been for football. Richie could have done anything, but not me. Somehow we became friends when we played pee-wee football together.

"However, I just never felt right. Football was fun, and so were the other sports I played. I didn't care much for school, but who really did. High school was boring, but, I loved Friday nights and the games. The atmosphere swept me away and helped me concentrate on football, not of my feelings of being different.

"You remember my parents and my older sisters, Megan and Stephanie? If it wasn't for them, I'd be dead."

"What do you mean?" Katie asked.

"I would have killed myself over my sexual identity," Bobbi Jo confessed.

"From the time I was a little boy, I knew I wanted to be a girl. It's the same story you hear all the time. But, I was the 'big-man-in-town' and I would never get away with it.

"My sisters were great. They learned about my feminine desires when I was 13. Stephanie caught me

wearing her clothes. Everything!!! Bra, panties, slip, nylons, shoes, dress and my mother's old wig. She laughed at me and thought I was cute. She told me that if I wanted to be a girl, she would help me.

"When my parents were out of town, Stephanie and I would stay home. She would dress me and teach me how to do makeup, how to walk, talk and act. She was such a big help. She always said that she understood what I was going through. She never told my parents, but told Megan, who was away at college. Sometimes, they would both help me. I got pretty good at being a girl, but I never went outside the front door. We had some great slumber- parties.

"Remember the senior year talent show? I dressed up as a cheerleader in a skit with the other football players. Everybody laughed, but I got a lot of compliments on my appearance. It was almost better than scoring a touchdown."

"I remember," said Katie. "You guys were a hoot. That was one of the highlights of our senior year."

"But I was serious," continued Bobbi Jo. "I didn't want the night to end."

"I dated tons of girls in high school and had sex with just about every one of them, but I was more interested in what they were wearing and how their bodies looked. I wanted to look like them, and I knew I couldn't. So, I always felt there was nothing I could do."

After his senior year, Bobby Joe escaped to Austin and the University of Texas.

"I thought going to Texas would solve my feminine interests," said Bobbi Jo. "Being around the team and the school helped for one year, but after that, my world

began to crumble. I got sick during my sophomore year and was 'red-shirted.' I had a terrible stomach virus. I couldn't eat or hold anything down. The doctors said it was a parasite that I could have picked up on a trip with my buddies to Mexico. I finally got over it, but I lost a lot of weight and dropped from 185 to 155. My strength and body-tone had disappeared.

"I was depressed and flunking my classes. I lost interest in everything. I went to the coach and said I was leaving school. He was nice enough to continue my scholarship with the hopes that I would change my mind. I told him to give it to somebody more deserving."

"How'd you get hooked up with Richie again?" inquired Katie.

"I didn't know what to do," Bobbi Jo continued. "My parents were in no condition to help me and Megan and Stephanie had their own families by then. I felt so alone. I had no place to live. So, I called Richie. He'd always been my best friend."

"Did Richie know about your feminine desires," Mark asked.

"Yes," said Bobbi Jo.

"During my freshman year, he came to visit me in Austin to see the game against Texas Tech. He never went to college, even though he had lots of college offers. He did play minor league baseball, but the family business was too attractive and money was his first name. How many kids had a new Corvette every year in high school? He did.

"Well, one night, we had a little too much to drink. We were talking about some of the girls with whom we had "scored" and I spilled the beans. I told him that I

would love to have been as pretty as some of the girls we knew back home. It just went from there. For some reason, he did not laugh. He said he understood. We talked and talked and talked.

“The following year, after Spring football practice, Richie flew me in the corporate jet to Boston to see Jamie Austin. I think you know her. I had my first complete feminine make-over and spent three days at Jamie’s, being pampered. I dressing up every day and every night Richie and I went out on the town. Richie paid for everything. He was the ideal escort.”

“Do you think he had a plan for you?” asked Katie.

“Looking back, I think he did,” Bobbi Jo said. “I’d told him my inner thoughts and feelings and he took advantage of that knowledge.

“As Bobbi Jo, I went to live with Richie in his newly-built estate. He had become the CEO for the family corporation. The money flowed like oil.

“My transition really went fast,” Bobbi Jo continued. “When we were in Boston, Richie bought me thousands of dollars of clothes and had them shipped home. With his encouragement, I started dressing every day as a woman. I got so spoiled. Richie put me on the payroll but I never worked. I had an unlimited credit card and checking account. All I had to do was look pretty.

“I worked out every day with a personal trainer and my weight dropped to 145 pounds. I was doing female body-toning. I started taking hormones, but they didn’t work fast enough, so I had breast implants, then cheek implants. I had laser treatments on my entire body to remove the body hair. I also let my hair grow too.



“Richie would fly me to doctors all over the country for cosmetic surgery. You know, for a little tweak here

and a little tweak there. I had lots of counseling too. Finally, in 1993, I went to see Dr. Stanley Biber in Trinidad, Colorado and had the final surgery to become a woman. I felt like a queen. Here, I was 23; living with a man I admired and would fall in love with. I was Cinderella, but the clock never struck midnight. I had everything that I wanted in life. It was a dream come true."

"Did anybody know what was going on?" asked Katie. "I mean, you living with Richie and becoming a woman"?

"I guess so," said Bobbi Jo. "My sisters and parents knew. It was really tough on my Mom and Dad. My sisters thought it was great and came to visit me a couple of times.

"I was so sheltered. I stayed in the house all the time, except when we went to see a doctor or have something done. Everything was always done out of town and under secrecy. Richie said he never told anybody, but I bet he did. How else could he explain the attitude people had when I finally came out in Odessa. I was treated like a freak."

"My goodness, you have been through a lot," commented Mark.

"That's the least of it," Bobbi Jo said, taking a sip of a diet Pepsi and nibbling on the KFC leftovers.

"Once I recovered from surgery, I felt great. I loved being a woman. It was like a fairy tale. No longer was I the 'ugly step sister'."

"However, the people in town made me cry every day. I was not accepted. Richie didn't seem to care. I had signed a personal contract with Richie to stay with him for 10 years as a payback for all the surgeries. We

would take care of each other, if you know what I mean. I would be his 'golden girl' and he would provide for me. He insisted I go everywhere with him. He was so controlling. I had a terrible time making friends. Nobody wanted to get to know me. All they thought about was the old Bobby Joe."

"I can understand that," said Katie. "Did you really think people would immediately accept you? You should have known it would take time."

"I was so naive," Bobbi Jo said. "Richie brain-washed me. He said that everybody would love me because I was once a football star and now I was a beautiful woman. What a joke. It took years for people to accept me.

"I did make a few friends, but they were all related to the oil business. I have about two or three girls whom I can really call friends. It's gotten better, that's why we went to the reunion."

Bobbi Jo explained how nervous she was at the reunion and what happened afterwards.

"The reunion was great," continued Bobbi Jo. "Richie drank too much, so I drove the 'Vet home. On the way, he got upset because I danced with a couple of his friends. He started slapping me and just about forced me off the road. When we got home, he followed me to my room, tore off my dress, and expected to have sex. I told him 'no' and he beat me.

"He locked me in my room. I was bleeding from my cuts and I had a black eye. He my threw my dress in the garbage. I curled up in a ball and tried to sleep, but couldn't. I was hurting emotionally and physically. I was a prisoner in my home.

"This morning, he came to my room and said he was going out with his friends and would not be back until late. For my punishment, he locked me in my room. I was so pissed. That was the last straw.

"I heard him drive off; I had to get out. I thought of you, hoping you could help."

"How'd you get out of the house," Katie asked.

"The maids and cooks don't work on Sunday," Bobbi Jo said. "So I was alone. I cleaned my face, dressed and decided to try to find you. I had hidden a room key in the innersole of one of my stilettos, so I found the key, grabbed my purse and left."

"How did you get to town," queried Mark. "That's a long walk."

"I couldn't take a car, so I hitched a ride," said Bobbi Jo. "A nice trucker gave me a ride to town."

"What do you want us to do"? Katie said.

"There's more," said Bobbi Jo.

"What do you mean?" interjected Katie, trying to digest everything Bobbi Jo had said.

"I think Richie's in trouble too," continued Bobbi Jo. "I think I'm on to something he doesn't want anybody to know about."

"Like what?" Mark prodded.

"I think he's doing something illegal in the oil business," Bobbi Jo said. "I have an idea what it is, but I could use your help."

Katie stopped the recording and motioned Mark outside the room.

"We need to get her out of here," said Katie. "Gina told me Richie has some shady business ventures that

we might want to look in to. I didn't want to say anything, but Gina has confirmed much of what Bobbi Jo has told us. I want to get Bobbi Jo to DC as fast as we can."

"How are we going to do that?" pondered Mark. "I bet Richie has the airports in Midland, Dallas, San Antonio and Houston on alert by now."

"I've already figured that out," said Katie as she dialed her phone. "All I have to do is give Gina the go-ahead. She'll set everything up."

Katie returned the room to tell Bobbi Jo a little about the plan, while Mark went to gas-up the car.

"We're leaving tonight, or at least you are," said Katie. "You're going to Washington."

"What?" shrieked Bobbi Jo. "How can I do that? I don't have any clothes or money."

"I'll take care of everything," said Katie. "We're leaving in 5 minutes. Go freshen up and I'll explain once we get in the car."

Mark arrived and the girls slipped out the back motel door and into the car.

"Lie down in the back seat and stay there," ordered Katie. "I'll explain what we are doing and where we are going, as we drive."

It was now after midnight. Mark headed west, taking the back roads to avoid cross through Odessa and finally merged with Highway 385. Meanwhile, Katie explained how Bobbi Jo would make her get-away.

"We're going to Hobbs, New Mexico," said Katie. "They'll never look there. A government Gulf Stream jet will be waiting to take you to DC. On the plane will be a couple of my associates. You will be flown to DC,

where you will meet by assistant, Gina Marie. She will take you to a 'safe house.' You'll have everything you need. Mark and I will be back on Wednesday. You're to do what Gina says. No questions. OK?"

Sitting comfortably in the back seat, Bobbi Jo remained scared, but relieved.

"I'll do anything," said Bobbi Jo. "You guys are angels."

"You can save your thank-yous for later," Katie retorted, as she dialed her parents' number.

"We had an emergency," said Katie to her worried mother. "We'll be back some time in the morning. I'll explain everything later."

Katie's mother assured her nothing abnormal had occurred during the day.

"Just your typical Sunday," said Emma. "We went to church and stayed home all afternoon and evening waiting for you to come for dinner. Dad's ribs were really delicious."

"Don't tell anybody you talked to me," Katie said. "If anybody asks, tell them we went to Austin for an emergency DHS meeting."

"No problem," said Emma. "We love you. Be careful."

Katie felt confident that they had at least a two to three hour head-start on Richie, if he was even looking for Bobbi Jo in the first place. Bobbi Jo said he usually stayed out late with his pals and would probably come home drunk. Little did they know!

## 6

Richie arrived home about the same time Bobbi Jo was whisked out of town. He wanted an apology, went right to her room and found the door unlocked. He became furious when he realized Bobbi Jo wasn't home and searched the house, to no avail.

"Where in the hell is she?" he yelled, as his temper flared. "I'm going to kill her."

Richie called 911 to reach the Odessa police and demanded help.

The dispatcher explained the "48-hour wait procedure" before Bobbi Jo could be listed as a missing person. "We'll put out an alert, but that's all we can do," said the dispatcher.

The explanation provoked Richie's anger to a higher level. He decided to take matters into his own hands.

Richie placed calls to his buddies, who met him within 30 minutes at his estate. After handing each of his friends a recent picture of Bobbi Jo, he dispatched each of them to a specific area airport or bus station. His only problem — the airports and bus depots were closed for the night. The guys hopped into Richie's fleet of fancy cars to search the town and surrounding area. Richie, despite the late hour, even phoned and awoke the few friends Bobbi Jo's had. Nobody admitted to have seen her since the reunion.

He contacted his friends in Dallas, Austin, Houston and San Antonio to stake out the airports, but the airlines were on limited overnight schedules. He soon realized it wasn't very logical to think Bobbi Jo would be sitting in an airport until dawn.

"I can't let her get away, she knows too much," he told himself. "Where in the heck did she go"?

He was stumped.

MARK'S CHEVY MALIBU rolled along Highway 385, getting closer to Hobbs by the mile and minute. The road was lightly traveled, with more coyotes than cars crossing the highway. Twice Mark spotted parked Texas Ranger cruisers, but they were more interested in taking a coffee break than watching the highway.

Upon crossing the Texas-New Mexico state line, the threesome breathed a sigh of relief and when they arrived at the Hobbs airport, and Katie spotted the Gulfstream with its engines running, sitting near the terminal, she felt much better.

Mark parked the car and the trio walked briskly towards the Gulfstream V. The plane door opened, the steps dropped down and out stepped FBI agent Andrea Forbes.

"What are you doing here?" said a surprised Katie. Andrea, one of the Vanity Club members, was dressed in a stewardess outfit with a light blue blouse and dark blue skirt. She was an agent who had played a big part in a prior money-laundering deception scheme involving The Senator.

"I just finished an assignment in Denver," Andrea replied. "I got a call, the plane was in Denver, and so I came along for the ride."

"Right," Katie responded. "Now tell me the real story."

Andrea quickly explained, as they walked up the ramp, how she'd received a phone call from former DHS Director John Manter, who, as a semi-retired con-

sultant, was still authorized by the Congress to serve as Katie's backup.

"How'd he contact you?" inquired Katie. "He's been retired for three years. I tried to reach him before I left Washington."

"I understand he returned your e-mail from last week and Gina saw it," recalled Andrea. "Gina knew you were in a touchy situation and told John. He made a few calls and here we are."

"Who's we?" added Katie.

"I didn't tell you, did I?" continued Andrea. "KC's inside the terminal with a friend of hers. They're a little tied up right now."

Katie sent Mark into the terminal to find KC Tyler, Andrea's FBI partner, and true to her word, there was literally an airport tie-up.

Inside the airport police office was KC, talking with the authorities and questioning Donnie Simpson, one of Richie's contacts.

Katie rushed in to the police center, presented her credentials, gave KC a hug, and asked what was going on.

"This creep was looking for your friend, so I decided to help him," explained KC. "When our plane arrived, I wanted to use the ladies' room and look around the airport. You know, just check out the place. This guy looked suspicious, so I started talking with him. He didn't like the fact I was bothering him. I guess he didn't like talking with me. Who, in their right mind, wouldn't like talking to a babe like me? He was rude and I didn't appreciate it."

Katie smiled and tried not to laugh.

KC, also wearing a flight attendant outfit, added: "Anyway, he got a little huffy, so I decided that was no way to treat a lady. So, I whipped out my badge and asked him what he was doing. He didn't respond, so I grabbed his arm, slapped the cuffs on him before he could react and clubbed him over the back of his head. When he awoke, he was sitting where he is now."

The airport police explained that Donnie was being held for a failing to appear for a speeding ticket in Santa Fe. When asked what he was doing in a restricted part of the terminal, he confessed that he was looking for a lady, but had not seen her. Upon further questioning, he said that he had been contacted by Richie to look for Bobbi Jo. Donnie wouldn't be talking to Richie or going back to Odessa very soon.

Katie thanked the police and motioned for KC to follow her.

"We've gotta get Bobbi Jo out of here," instructed Katie. "Is the plane ready?"

"Yes," said KC. "It's all fueled and ready to go."

"Who's the crew?" asked Katie.

"The usual," replied KC. "Jennifer Williams is the pilot and Kyrie Alexander is assisting. Andrea and I are handling the galley."

"I've got to talk to John," said Katie. "How'd he pull this off?"

"Just another day at DHS," KC laughed. John still had influence in high places.

Andrea escorted Bobbi Jo into the Gulfstream, as Jenn revved the engines and spoke with Katie for a few seconds. Katie said "goodbye," exited the plane and watched the jet taxi toward the runway. Mark and

Katie didn't look back as the plane lifted into the sky en route to DC. They had other things on their mind.

The flight took a little more than 4 hours, which gave Andrea and KC plenty of time to brief Bobbi Jo on what to expect when the plane reached its destination.

"Gina will take you to a place where you'll be safe," stated Andrea. "There you'll get a good meal; a bath; some new clothes, and meet some great people. Richie's not going to know where you are."

Gina was waiting as Jenn touched the jet down on the security-controlled runway at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, instead of Ronald Reagan International. Meanwhile, Mark and Katie, who had switched and were now driving a Dodge Intrepid, reached Odessa just before sunrise, tired, but confident that they had done the right thing. And, fortunately, there was no sign of Richie.

"Did we pull this off without a hitch?" asked Mark.

"Only time will tell," answered Katie, as she programmed John's number.

They would have a couple of hours to find out.

"I've activated the Vanity Club," were John's first words to Katie, when he answered phone.

"How'd you do that?" Katie asked. "I don't have any money in the budget."

"You do now," John added.

"How?" demanded a skeptical Katie?

"You've got a new benefactor," confided John. "I was down in the Cayman Islands when you tried to reach me. Two weeks ago, I received a call from a Susan Delaney. She'd heard about the Vanity Club project

and wanted to help. She's given a very sizable contribution, which is basically an endowment, which will keep the VC girls going for years."

"You've gotta be pulling my leg," quipped Katie, with a questionable smile on her face.

"I'd love to pull one of your lovely legs," laughed John. "It's the truth. I can't tell you the exact amount, but it is breathtaking."

"Who's Susan Delaney," Katie inquired.

John proceeded to formally "introduce" Susan.

"It's a long story," he said.

"I'm tired, but I want to know all about this before I get some sleep," insisted Katie.

John explained that Susan Delaney owned Carson Enterprises, an extremely successful import/export business on the East Coast, with a long history of supporting transgender causes. She now lived in the Cayman Islands with her husband Greg Moore and baby daughter.

"I believe I met her some time ago somewhere, possibly at a government gathering?" John said. "But, I never remembered her."

Being of high standards and unimpeachable ethics, Susan had learned of Manter's work, so she extended an invitation for John and his wife, Brandi, to visit her island home. After two days of in-depth discussions, she was more than happy to sponsor the VC girls. The generous donation would begin at more than seven figures.

"Meeting Susan and Greg was a godsend," added John. "She's quite a story. I had to do a Google search

to make sure she was not putting me on. Her life is well documented."

John continued to explain:

"Susan was formerly Gordon Carson, who literally died in an airplane 'accident.' Gordon's broken body couldn't be surgically repaired, but his brain was still functioning. So, the doctors, at a specialized clinic, transplanted his brain into the body of a brain-dead Susan. It took Gordon a couple of years to truly become Susan. She has quite a story. You will have to read her book 'Emerald Spirit', written by Lisa Harris. I will mail you a copy."

"Stop pulling the wool over my eyes," Katie chuckled. "Now tell me the truth."

"I'm telling you the truth," retorted John. "It really happened."

"If it's true, I'd love to meet her," said Katie. "If not, I'm going to get even with you when I get back to DC."

"Believe me," John added. "Have I ever led you astray? We've a dinner planned for Friday night at our place, so I expect you and Mark to be there. She'll be in DC for a Congressional hearing."

"Sounds good to me, but you'll need to set an extra place," mumbled Katie.

"I'll have Brandi put out the best China," laughed John. "Have a safe trip home. We'll talk again soon. Call me if you need anything else."

"There's one more thing," added Katie as she heard a loud knock on the door. Looking through the thin curtain covering the door window, she could see it was Richie.

"Let me call you back in a few minutes," Katie whispered, as she clicked off her phone.

"What brings you here so early in the morning?" said Emma as she opened the door.

"I need to talk to Katie, Mrs. Hightower," Richie said in an overly polite tone-of-voice. "I need to know if she's seen Bobbi Jo."

Emma closed the door and went to get Katie, who had had just enough time to change into a house robe and muss up her hair.

"Hi Richie," greeted Katie. "Mom said you're looking for Bobbi Jo."

"She disappeared yesterday and I can't find her," said Richie. "Have you seen her?"

"We were in Austin until late last night," Katie yawned. "I wish I could help you, but we've not seen her since the reunion."

Richie appeared to be unconvinced, but apologized to Katie for the early morning inconvenience and walked slowly to his car.

"If you see her, let me know," he said. "I have to find her."

"I will," answered Katie, as she stood in the doorway.

"By the way," said Richie. "Is that your Intrepid? I thought you were driving a Malibu."

Katie had to think fast. "We were. We had to change cars in Austin. The other car had an engine problem."

Katie closed the door, turned around, leaned against the door and took a deep breath. That was close – too close.

“I’d love to know what he knows,” Katie wondered, as she re-keyed John’s number.

John answered on the first ring.

“Problems?” he inquired.

“Yes,” Katie admitted. “I need you to put an agent on a Richie Wilkinson, CEO of Midessa Oil. I’ll explain when I get home.”

“I’ve already done that,” said John. “Gina filled me in on everything. I know all about Bobbi Jo too. If you’d have looked carefully, you’d have seen Espy Lopez stationed in a van about 50 yards down the street when Richie was standing at your door. She’ll keep tabs on him. And, I also have Chrissie coming, from her business trip to California, to help.

“That’s great,” Katie sighed. “Please keep me posted.”

“When does your flight leave,” add John.

“We fly out at noon,” Katie said. “We should be in DC about midnight. Hopefully I can get some sleep on the plane. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Katie felt a bit more relieved, with John coming to her rescue.

“Come, have breakfast before it gets cold,” said Mrs. Hightower.

Katie’s mind continued to wander. Once again, she couldn’t wait to get out of Texas.

Richie was furious as he drove back to his estate, and slammed his fist into the dashboard of his Mercedes convertible.

"I don't believe her," he said to himself, as he reviewed his conversation with Katie. "I'm sure she knows something. I just don't know what it is."

For years, Richie had been running the family oil fortune — a profitable business. However, at times, he had become greedy and drifted into some questionable activities. Bobbi Jo was privy to some of the outside-of-the-normal transactions and he was afraid that she might just tip off the authorities.

Looking back, Richie remembered how he hesitated to take Bobbi Jo to any business meetings or social gatherings. His original thought was not to let her learn anything about his business. But, his huge ego got the best of him when Bobbi Jo evolved from an athletic male to a svelte female. He couldn't help but show off his "trophy." Now he might be sorry.

"Didn't any of you find anything?" he screamed at his six friends, upon gathering his entourage at his home.

Nobody responded. They were afraid to even open their mouths.

"Has anybody heard from Donnie?" Richie shouted. "He's the only one who hasn't reported in."

Again, there was silence.

"I guess I will have to do this myself," Richie thundered as he stormed out of the room. "You guys are useless. Get out of my house, now!"

Richie retired to his office and tried to regain his thoughts. Only Donnie had not reported, and he had been dispatched to Hobbs.

“Could Bobbi Jo have gone to Hobbs?” he queried. “No. Who would go to Hobbs?” Then again, Richie thought, he’d better check it out.”

Richie picked up his cell phone and attempted to reach Donnie, but only got his voice mail. He contacted the Hobbs airport switchboard and was forwarded to the police office.

“Yes, Donnie was here,” said the officer-in-charge, “That’s all I can tell you.”

Richie thanked the officer and set his phone on his desk. It rang immediately.

“Richie here.”

“It’s me, Donnie,” was the response.

“Where are you?” demanded Richie.

“In jail,” retorted Donnie. “I need you to contact an attorney. I got picked up at the airport for an old speeding ticket I didn’t pay.”

“You what?” Richie roared.

“You heard me,” Donnie said, trying to control his temper. “I’m in Santa Fe, sitting in a jail cell. I need help.”

“I’ll call Steve,” offered Richie, referring to his company’s attorney. “He’ll get you out.

“Did you see Bobbi Jo?”

“No,” admitted Donnie. He was too embarrassed to tell Richie he actually got tangled up with a tall red head.

"I didn't see anything, nothing out of the ordinary," he dead-panned. "Now get me out of here. I don't have any money for bail."

"I'll work on it," Richie mumbled, as he wrote down the details and the jail phone number for Steve. "We'll get you out by the end of the day."

"I hope so," Donnie pleaded. "I can't leave town with this hanging over my head."

Richie called Steve with the details, and then dropped the phone on his desk. He was perplexed. How could Bobbi Jo disappear? She had to be somewhere.

That somewhere, was about 40 miles outside the Nation's capitol. Bobbi Jo was now a guest in the home of Eric and Sunny Allen, in Alexandria, VA.

"Don't wake her," said Sunny, as she and Gina peered through a crack in the guest bedroom door. "She's been through so much. She's been sleeping since you brought her here."

Gina had met the plane and hustled Bobbi Jo to the Allen's home where a meal and a warm shower were awaiting. She barely touched her meal, but stayed in the shower for almost 30 minutes, then quickly fell asleep.

"We'll just let her rest," whispered Gina. "Katie will be here tonight. She wants her bright and alert. There's so much to talk about."

## 8

Eric Allen was the Chief-of-Staff and Press Secretary for the most powerful man in the Senate, who was known to all as The Senator. What The Senator did or

said, usually was the rule. He had unabated power, and many gave him more credence than they did the President of the United States.

Three years earlier, Eric had helped Katie, DHS and the VC girls to solve an international money-laundering scheme in which The Senator was a pawn. Through an unsolicited e-mail from Katie, he was drawn into the web and the world of cross dressing.

For years, Eric had quietly worked behind the scenes for The Senator, under the tutelage of his mentor, Dean Walters. A hockey star from Hibbing, MN and the University of Minnesota, Eric loved politics, but never dreamed he would become a centerpiece in The Senator's office.

Eric married his college sweetheart, Sunny, and accepted The Senator's Junior Press Secretary position. Over time, Eric began to suspect Walters of inappropriate behavior, but he never expected to find his boss "joined-at-the-hip" with Senator Marcus Keith as the designers of an elaborate worldwide network, which loaned short-term money with a high-profit margin, to anti-American groups in foreign countries. In many cases, the off-shore conglomerate could double its investment within 24-48 hours.

The Senator had been drawn into the cartel by Keith, at the time his best friend and closest ally. Keith had originally convinced The Senator to invest a small amount in a foreign company — a front for the illegal activities — which include arms sales to Iran. Everyone made money, but when The Senator questioned Keith and Walters about his "investment," the conversation quickly turned to blackmail. The Senator, not wanting to lose his standing with his constituents and his

high-level committees in Congress, succumbed to the threats of his best friends and confidants.

Eric's sojourn into cross dressing was unexpected. At the initial meeting with Katie, when the investigation into the money-laundering mess started, an inside contact was needed. "Somebody who I can trust," Katie had told Eric and Sunny. At first, Eric was hesitant to dress as a woman, despite his perfect height and weight proportions and his soft facial features.

"There's no way I can even act or look like a woman," Eric had said at the time. But after he had consulted with Katie and Sunny and had had a complete makeover/transition session at the I Love It Girl salon, Eric's female alter ego, Keri, was born. The transformation was astounding.

On three occasions, Keri was involved in a delicate maneuver in The Senator's case and played a big part in bringing Keith and Walters to justice. The cross dressing didn't stop after the convictions. The Allen's continued to attend monthly activities and Sunny was elected secretary/treasurer for the Virginia Gems Society. They also attended the annual Southern Comfort Conference in Atlanta, where The Senator, who had become a big proponent of transgender issues, was a regular keynote speaker.

"I'm going to wake up Bobbi Jo," Sunny said to Eric as he walked in the door after cutting his day short at The Senator's office.

"What time is Katie getting here?" asked Eric.

"About 8," Sunny answered. "I want Bobbi Jo to have time to freshen up, get pretty and have dinner. She's been sleeping most of the day. I feel so sorry for her."

"Me too," said Eric. "I'm just not sure if we should sit in on the conversation tonight. Katie said we can if we wish, but I don't know if it's the right thing to do."

"Let's just play it by ear," added Sunny. "We'll know if it's proper or not when the time comes."

"I agree," Eric commented. "What's for dinner? Mac and cheese?"

Sunny ignored the comments, climbed the stairs and knocked on Bobbi Jo's door.

"Come on in," said Bobbi Jo. "I've been awake for about an hour. Thanks for being so kind to me. I haven't been pampered like this in a long time."

Bobbi Jo was wearing a short spaghetti-strap blue and yellow flowery dress and matching blue slip-on heels.

"What do you think?" she asked as she twirled around in glee.

"Very cute," said Sunny. "But I don't think it's appropriate for tonight."

"I know," said Bobbi Jo. "I've been trying on all the clothes Gina gave me. I love everything."

"Would it be OK to wear this?" Bobbi Jo said, as she held up a pair of black slacks and a black and gold tiger-eye top."

"Perfect," assured Sunny. "If you'd like to get ready, we're going to have dinner in an hour. Katie will be here at 8."

"Sounds good to me," Bobbi Jo said, as she clipped her hair up on the top of her head. "I've so much to tell Katie. I can't wait."

After a day of working alone, Chrissie joined Espy to keep surveillance on Richie, who was at work in his Midessa Oil office, in downtown Odessa.

"What's up?" asked Chrissie.

"I don't know," said Espy. "John and Katie just want us to keep our eye on him. If he does anything out of the ordinary, we're to call them."

"I hate sitting around," said Chrissie, as she leaned against the side of a telephone repair truck, munched on a hamburger and sipped a Diet Pepsi. "I want to get dressed up and see what Odessa has to offer. It's one of the few towns I've never been too."

Espy laughed. Like Chrissie, she was wearing blue coveralls and work boots. "We'll have plenty of time to get out of these clothes and into something more stylish. Katie said we might be here for a week or so."

"Maybe we can get Richie to show us some of the hot spots," Chrissie chuckled with a smile.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," cautioned Espy. "That might be something we'll do. Let's see how this plays out."

"Do you know anything about him," asked Chrissie, looking at his picture. "He's sure handsome."

"Calm down," said Espy. "I'm sure your time will come to meet him."

Espy continued to tell Chrissie what she knew about Richie, his popularity, his oil business, and a little about his relationship with Bobbi Jo.

“Wait ‘til I get my hands on him,” Chrissie bragged. “I can handle him in my sleep.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” laughed Espy. “We’ll just wait for the right time.”

“Do you think he knows we’re following him?” asked Chrissie.

“Not yet, but we’ll have to keep our eyes open and stay on guard,” Espy added. “Now let’s go check on that multiple phone box on the corner.”

“What if I break a finger nail?” Chrissie said. Espy smiled.

Up stairs in the three-story office building, Richie, worked the phones like a Wild West oil speculator. With his sleeves rolled up and his Armani suit-jacket over the back of his chair, he barked instructions to his contacts, not on one phone, but four, at the same time.

Chomping nervously on a cigar, Richie bought and traded oil-futures with the best of them.

“What do you mean \$60 a barrel?” barked Richie. “Last week’s price was \$45. Don’t you dare rip me off!”

Richie was notorious at getting his way and pushing the envelope with oil traders. He had been compared to noted baseball agent Scott Boras with his tenacity and ability to get the best deal. Nobody could outsmart Richie, at least, that was his opinion, until Bobbi Jo’s disappeared. And he had not lost that battle, yet.

Chrissie and Espy concluded the work on the phone box and grabbed an ice cream treat at the local sweet shop within sight of Richie’s office, parking lot and his car.

"I'm sorry I'm crying again," sobbed Bobbi Jo, as she sat on the couch across from Katie in the Allen's living room.

"I was at my breaking point and talking about Richie is like driving a knife into an open wound, if you know what I mean. I trusted Richie and look what he did to me. I just had to get out. I couldn't be deceived any more."

Katie reached over and held Bobbi Jo's hand. The two had been talking for over two hours and Katie had recorded every word.

"I think it's time to stop for the night," said Katie. "You've been very open, honest and informative. This'll give me lots to work with."

Katie's digital recorder was bulging with what she felt was pertinent information. Bobbi Jo had repeated much of the conversations in Odessa and en route to Hobbs, but she added some surprising information with the mention of Cuban cigars.

The Cuban cigar connection frustrated Katie. She wasn't sure what Bobbi Jo had tried to tell her and during the questioning, she kept hitting the proverbial wall when she pressed the issue. However, everything Bobbi Jo had said led back to cigars.

"What's Richie doing with Cuban cigars when it comes to the oil business?" Katie pondered. "I don't know anything about cigars, except Cubans cigars are illegal in the United States. I'm going to have to find out more and I know just the person to ask."

Katie's mind was going in circles, trying to put all the pieces together, as she and Mark rode in their Lexus, back to their DC condo.

"You're sure deep in thought," interrupted Mark, trying to snap Katie out of a near trance.

"Give me a couple more minutes," she said. "My mind's spinning. Bobbi Jo told me so much and it's hard to digest everything."

"That's what the recordings are for," Mark added. "Let it rest tonight. Tomorrow you can listen to the recordings again. With your intuition, I'm confident it'll all come together."

## 11

Cuban Dictator Fidel Castro died a week after the new President's inauguration, but Cuban-Americans continued to resist any American political ties with the Communist island as long as Raul Castro continued to rule. Despite heated legislative debate and opposition by the politically strong Florida-based Cuban population, the President opened a "limited" vacation travel agreement with the Cuban government for the first time in more than 50 years. Travel agencies were overwhelmed with Americans wanting to spend their vacations in Cuba.

With the door open even slightly to Cuba and despite strict US government approval and travel requirements, Richie hoped for a chance to establish a relationship with the Castro regime. His goal was to be

the first American company to legally import Cuban cigars to the mainland.

Richie, being a shrewd business man, anticipated Castro's demise, and had set up a secondary business, La Riviera, which was designed to import pottery and tacky merchandise from South America and Mexico, to sell at flea markets and on the company website. However, very little business had ever passed through the faux companies' books in its five year existence. And, he had only one employee – his website designer.

Richie had made one illegal trip to Cuba two years prior. He had dyed his blonde hair black, and using a false passport and underground contacts, he traveled from Venezuela to Havana, where as Ricardo Rodriguez, he made contact with the cigar manufacturers at Romero y Julieta and Partages. Despite US trade restrictions, he began importing cigars through a Canadian connection, who would smuggle the product, with the help of money-grubbing border agents, across the northern border and down to Texas, where Richie had waiting buyers. Although the profits were very minimal at the time of Castro's death, he expected to make "big money" once the trade ban was lifted. He had sown the seed and was waiting for the flower to blossom.

"I've decided to take a vacation starting Monday," Richie informed his secretary, Teri Lynn, as he left his office for the night. "I'm not sure how long I'll be gone, but my brother will run the company as usual."

Teri Lynn never bothered to ask Richie where he was going. In the 10 years she had been his executive secretary, she knew not to ask. However, he always brought her gifts from the exotic vacation spots he and

Bobbi Jo had visited. She wondered what he would bring her this time.

Richie, of course, knew he was heading to Cuba, and not for a vacation. He had been invited by the Commerce Secretary to join a group of prestigious American businessmen and women, on a government charter to Havana to meet with Cuban business interests. The trip was authorized by the President but was to be hush-hush, at least until the contingent arrived in Havana.

## 12

"He's moving," Espy alerted Chrissie as they loaded their work supplies into the van. "Let's go."

"He won't get far," commented Chrissie.

"What do you mean by that?" Espy asked, as she slid into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"While you were taking a cat nap a couple of hours ago, I had a little fun," said Chrissie.

"Now what did you do?" Espy inquired. "I just can't let you out of my sight!!!"

"Don't worry," Chrissie added. "I just walked over to his car and attached a tracking device under the back bumper."

"You what?" Espy screamed. "Katie would never authorize that!!! Where'd you get a tracking device anyway? Oh my goodness, you're going to mess up everything."

“No I’m not,” shouted Chrissie. “Remember, Katie said to keep an eye on Richie. She never said how to do it.”

“The nerve,” thought Espy without saying a word.

“I always carry an extra device with me,” Chrissie continued. “When I find a man I like, I just slip it inside his car. That way I can follow him and see whether what he told me is the truth. I have met so many men who lie and tell me stories. It’s kinda fun too.

“Look here,” added Chrissie, after she opened her lap-top computer. “We’re tracking him right now. Let’s get going. Look!!! I think he’s heading to his house.”

Espy shook her head and started following Richie at a distance.

Chrissie watched the computer and e-mailed Katie at the same time to inform her Richie was being followed. Richie drove at a consistent speed as he headed out of town, but just before the city limits, he made a quick u-turn and headed back into Odessa.

Espy pulled the van over to the side of the road and watched Richie cruise past. He didn’t even bat an eye at the utility van. He had other things on his mind. So, did Chrissie.

Espy also made a u-turn and continued the surveillance. Keeping a distance of about one half mile, Richie’s car suddenly stopped.

“What’s he doing,” asked Espy.

“I’m not sure,” Chrissie answered. “Maybe he’s stopping for gas?”

Espy continued down Main Street and discovered Richie’s car parked in front of the Longhorn Bar & Grill.

“He must have decided to get a drink,” suggested Chrissie, who maneuvered into the back of the van. She decided it was her time to shine.

“What are you doing,” demanded Espy.

“I’m going in,” responded Chrissie, as she began to remove her coveralls.

“No you’re not,” instructed Espy. “Not without me and not without the OK from Katie.”

“We don’t have the time to wait,” replied Chrissie, as she looked through her suitcase for something suitable to wear. Out came jeans, a Western-style blouse, a jacket, boots and her off-colored blond wig. Chrissie had packed her suitcase for the occasion.

“I’m just going to go in to see what’s happening,” Chrissie stated. “I’m just going to do a little investigating. Keep an eye on the place while I change. I’ll be ready in 20 minutes.”

Chrissie was a master of disguise, and in Espy’s opinion, disgust. But, she was one of her dearest friends, and so she kept her opinion to herself. Espy, a Viet Nam Vet and a Commando Squadron Leader, did everything by-the-book, while Chrissie did everything her way. And there was no stopping her once she set her mind to something.

Espy had never seen a man transform into a lovely woman in so fast, but Chrissie was an exception, not the rule. And she was beautiful to boot.

Chrissie attached a microphone to her bra-strap, re-configured the computer and handed it to Espy.

“Now you can hear everything that’s said,” she told Espy. “I’ve set the computer to record, so everything will be saved.”

"Be careful," warned Espy.

"Don't worry about me," Chrissie laughed as she closed the van door. "I can handle anything."

That's what Espy was afraid of.

## 13

Chrissie sundered, in her typical female fashion, into the Longhorn Bar & Grill. She was one of a handful of women in a bar full of men. At first she did not see Richie, but then spotted him seated in a booth, talking on his cell phone. He was alone, just as Chrissie had hoped.

The bathrooms were close to Richie's table, and since Chrissie had not had the chance to check her makeup, she confidently strolled into the ladies' room. She drew a long stare from her intended "victim."

"He's sitting alone," Chrissie relayed to Espy through the two-way earpiece she was wearing. "Boy, did he give me the eye. I think he likes candy."

"Just be careful," responded Espy as she sat in the van, ready to go in to the bar if needed.

"I will. You know me," Chrissie said. Espy rolled her eyes, and then grabbed the melodic cell phone. It was Katie.

"What's happening?" Katie inquired. "I got your message."

Espy informed Katie of Richie's movements and calmly told her that Chrissie was inside the bar.

"She's where?" demanded Katie. "Is she nuts? What is she thinking? It's not the time for that. Go in and get her."

"I can't," said Espy. "She's talking with Richie right now. She's carrying a wire, so I can hear what she is saying. I'll tell her on the two-way to get out of there as fast as she can."

"OK" said Katie. "You tell her that she needs to clear things with me before she does anything like this again. Understand? My goodness, that girl has a mind of her own."

"I'll have her call you when she gets out," Espy groaned with a sigh.

"Please do," Katie demanded as she hung up the phone.

Espy could hear the toilet flush and some rattling and asked Chrissie what she was doing.

"Can't a girl use the bathroom," laughed Chrissie. "I'm going in..."

Espy jumped in her seat when she heard a big bang.

"What was that," she said.

"Don't worry," Chrissie said. "I slipped on the floor and crashed into the door. I'm OK. I'm just not used to wearing cowboy boots. The heels are too low."

Espy laughed under her breath.

## 14

Katie and Mark were running late for their dinner with Susan Delaney.

"Come on Katie," get off the phone," yelled Mark, as he headed out the door to the car.

"It's already 6 o'clock and we still have to pickup Bobbi Jo. Who in the heck are you talking to anyway?"

Katie grabbed her purse and shawl as she followed Mark, still talking on the cell phone.

"OK, OK, OK," Katie continually responded to her yet unidentified contact. "Yes, OK, OK, got it. I'll talk to you again next week."

Katie signed off the call and dropped back into her car seat as Mark started the engine.

"What's going on?" said Mark. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I just got off the phone with The Senator," said Katie. "There's more to Richie than we think."

"Really! I would never have guessed," Mark laughed, as the car rolled out of the driveway and off to Alexandria to meet Bobbi Jo.

"Don't laugh," said Katie. "This is a serious matter. The Senator told me some things that are very disturbing. Richie's under a great deal of suspicion and I'm sure Bobbi Jo's not aware of anything. And, it's not something I can talk with her about tonight either."

During the 30 minute drive, Katie filled in Mark with the details of her conversation with The Senator. Katie's original intent was to inquire about the cigar reference since The Senator was a cigar aficionado. She discovered Richie's interest was smokier than a cigar or two.

The Senator told Katie of the "unofficial" Cuban trip scheduled for the following Monday. Katie was rattled as she had not informed by the White House of the mission. Official prodigal put her at the top of the contact list, but, being left out was nothing unusual by

an arrogant and egotistical President. She wanted to call the President's Chief- of-Staff and give him a piece of her mind, but was discouraged to do so by The Senator.

"We don't want this blown out of proportion," he suggested. "If the word leaks out to anybody, the trip will be cancelled. It's important for this to be completed. Please don't raise fuss right now. I will keep you informed of what happens. Trust me. I will have more to tell you once the plane is in the air, on Monday."

The Senator was one of the few politicians she could trust, therefore, she let the decision to "keep her out of the loop" go for the time being.

Katie continued to explain to Mark about Richie's involvement in illegal cigar shipments from Cuba. The CIA, FBI and the ATF (Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) were aware of Richie's activities and were just biding their time as so not to take any pre-mature actions. Richie's trip to Cuba could be the clincher for his future incarceration.

As they cruised to the Yates' driveway, Katie could see Bobbi Jo waving through the window.

Eric and Sunny greeted Katie at the door and Bobbi Jo was beaming, looking as cute as a bug in a clinging baby-doll top, black pencil skirt and open-toed black heels.

"Are you ready Bobbi Jo?" said Katie.

"She's been ready since 4 o'clock," interjected Sunny with a smile, noting this was Bobbi Jo's first time out of the house since she had arrived in Alexandria.

"I'm so looking forward to this," said Bobbi Jo. "I've been reading Lisa Harris' book on Susan and she's so interesting. I can't wait to meet her."

"Let's go," interrupted Katie, as Mark honked the car horn.

Bobbi Jo gave Eric and Sunny a quick hug and headed to the car.

"This is going to be fun," said Bobbi Jo.

Katie nodded her head in agreement.

## 15

Chrissie brushed herself off after her fall, tidied up her make-up and walked back into the Longhorn bar and literally ran into Richie.

Richie had been sitting in his regular booth and was getting to his feet. As he turned toward the restrooms, he crashed straight into Chrissie, who hit the floor for the second time within minutes.

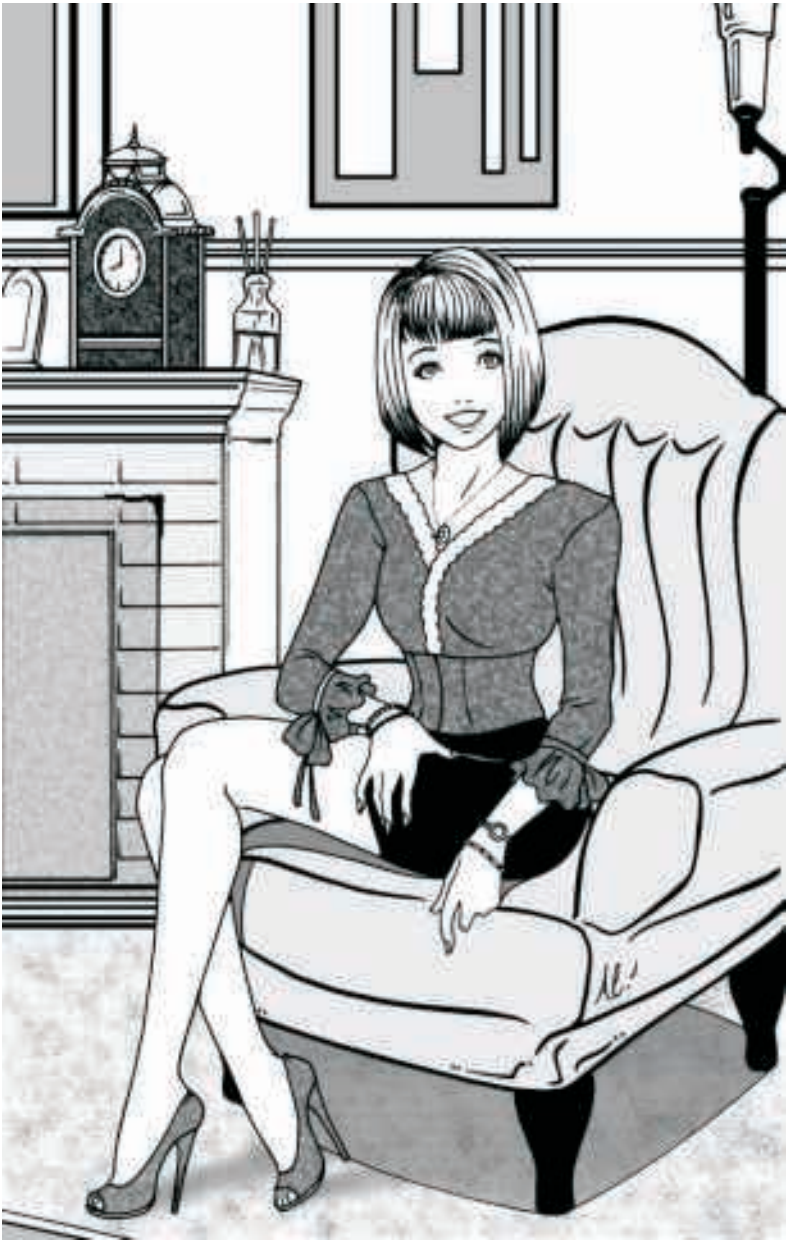
"I'm so sorry," said Richie, as he bent over to help Chrissie and make sure she was not hurt.

"I'm just a clumsy oaf," Chrissie laughed, trying not to cry.

"Let me help you up," offered Richie, extending his hand. "The least I can do is buy you a drink."

Richie helped Chrissie to her feet and into his booth.

"Are you OK?" said Richie, trying to be the ultimate gentleman. "I'll be right back," he added as he walked to the men's room.



“Now what happened?” said Espy.

"I had a little accident," Chrissie said. "I ran right into Richie. He's going to buy me a drink."

"No way," Espy said, not a bit surprised. "I just talked to Katie. She is really upset with you. She wants you out of there immediately."

"I can't leave now," said Chrissie. "I have to have at least one drink with him. I can't be rude."

"Leave now!!!" Espy demanded.

"He's on his way back now," countered Chrissie, even though Richie was not in sight. She wanted to have a little time with him no matter what Katie and Espy said.

"OK," said Espy. "I'll be listening and I'm coming in if anything funny happens. If I do, remember, I'm your fiancé."

Chrissie laughed softly as Richie approached the table.

"What would the lovely lady like to drink," chided Richie.

"Maybe, bourbon and 7," said Chrissie.

"Done," promised Richie, as he slipped into the booth and waived for the waitress for another round.

"I haven't seen you around here before," Richie said. "I know just about everyone in town, too."

"My friend and I are just passing through on our way to California," Chrissie lied as she rolled her eyes at Richie. "He has a job offer in San Diego. We were told at our motel this was a good place to eat."

"So you're attached," said Richie, always on the hunt for women in which to add to another notch to his belt.

"Kind'a," said Chrissie. "We've been good friends for years. You'll have to meet him. He should be here soon."

Espy's temper began to boil. He had just about taken enough of Chrissie's flighty and flirty attitude.

"I'm coming in and you're coming out with me," Espy whispered to Chrissie.

"No," said Chrissie.

"No what?" asked Richie.

"Oh nothing," Chrissie said.

Espy started to get out of the van when she heard Richie ask Chrissie, "How would you like to have dinner with me?"

Espy picked up the cell phone, accessed the number to the Longhorn, and hit the 'dial' button.

"Phone call for a Chrissie," yelled the bar maid.

"That's me," said Chrissie, raising her hand. Getting up from the table, she walked towards the bar, with just about every male patron following her steps with their eyes.

Chrissie was quite a dish, unlike most of the women in the place.

"This is Chrissie," she said into the phone.

"Listen, and listen well," ordered Espy. "I might get in trouble for this, but go ahead and have dinner with him, and nothing more. You are not to leave the Longhorn with him."

"Don't worry about me," Chrissie said, because she had hoped Espy would relent. "What should I tell Richie about this call?"

"Just tell him that I got hung up and will be joining you in about an hour," said Espy. "I'm going to get some gas right down the street, so I will still be in radio contact. When I get there, we're leaving. So you have an hour to have your fun."

Chrissie knew Espy was upset, but thought that having dinner with Richie might get her back in Espy's good graces. And, after filling Richie with a couple more drinks, she might be able to flirt her way into Richie's deepest thoughts. She felt it was worth a try.

## 16

"Greg!" Susan Delaney called to her husband from the foot of the gangway.

No response. She took two bags of groceries from the dock cart and started up the steps. Where was he? At 5-foot-7 and 120 pounds, Susan could use some help getting the rest of the groceries on-board the 42-foot sailboat they had called home ever since they escaped a harrowing adventure in Delaware and Washington that changed Susan's life so dramatically.

"Emerald Spirit" was a beautiful boat that Greg, a master sailor, had lovingly cared for and refinished for his home after his Honorable Discharge from the U.S. Navy. He sailed her out of his home-port in the Cayman Islands, throughout the Caribbean and up the Gulf coast, occasionally taking on charters and acting as Captain on other's boats.

Susan frequently thought he lavished more attention on the Spirit than he did on her, but she knew that wasn't true. She feigned exasperation at Greg and often

made him think she was angry with him for the time he spent working on the boat. She knew, of course, how much work it was to live aboard a boat and really didn't begrudge him the time. Greg was always there for her when she needed him, except when she needed help with the groceries. Besides, Susan, more than any other genetically born female on the planet knew the workings of the male mind.

"Greg," she called again, more softly this time, standing in the galley and not wanting to wake their daughter, Kelly Elizabeth, who was sleeping in the forward stateroom.

Still there was no response. If Greg had gone off to help someone on another boat and wasn't on board she really was going to be angry with him. He should know better than to leave Kelly alone. She quietly peeked into the forward stateroom. Kelly was sound asleep. Good. She smiled at the sight of their perfect little girl sleeping peacefully and softly closed the door.

As she turned to go back for the rest of the groceries, she was lifted off her feet and carried out of the companionway. A hand over her mouth silenced her scream. In a rush she was dropped onto the sofa in the salon and was pinned there. In her fury, kicking her legs and flailing her arms at her attacker, Susan looked up into the grinning face of her husband, Greg Moore. "You called?" he said.

"Let me up so I can beat you senseless." She shrieked. "You scared the hell out of me. Don't do that again. It just brings back bad memories.

"I'm sorry," he said, easily controlling her struggles. "You couldn't have beaten me even when you were a man." He bent over to kiss her.

"The groceries are out in the dock-cart!" said Susan. "C'mon Greg, let me go. We have to get them aboard and into the fridge."

"Not without the password," he smiled.

She heaved a big sigh. "Oh, alright. I love you. There, are you satisfied?"

"Nope"

She stopped struggling and wrapped her arms around his neck pulling him down into a deep and lingering kiss, then another and another.

Greg backed away. "What about the groceries?"

"What? Now you're interested in food?" said Susan. "Typical man."

Greg chuckled and pushed himself off the sofa.

"Coming from you, that's a hoot," he said. "Besides you know I'm always interested in food, second only to sex."

Susan got up and smacked him on his buttocks as he walked up the companionway to the deck. She re-adjusted her halter-top and shorts and started putting away the items she had already brought on board. Then she noticed the letter.

In addition to picking up the groceries, she had stopped at the Post Office for the mail, which consisted mostly of bills. Included, though, was a Special Delivery/Priority Mail letter addressed to her from a very familiar name, Lisa Harris, her book publisher.

"Maybe it was a royalty's check," Susan thought.

Lisa had learned of Susan through a friend and on a lark asked whether she could write a book on her life-changing experience. That book, "Emerald Spirit,"

named for Greg's boat, had been a New York Times Best Seller and had also drawn the attention of some very influential people in the Department of Homeland Security and its secret undercover arm, The Vanity Club. What could Lisa want? She hadn't heard from her since the book tour.

Greg came aboard toting the rest of the groceries and set them on the galley table. Susan was silently reading a letter. Her demeanor had changed.

"Bad news?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "We're going to Washington tomorrow, not next week."

"What?" asked Greg. "Why? I thought the hearing was next week."

"Lisa couldn't reach us by phone," Susan answered, who always complained the cell phone and Internet service in the Caribbean was pathetic. "We've been officially invited to meet with some very influential people in DC tomorrow night. They need our help. Lisa said she will explain when we get there."

"How are we going to get to DC by tomorrow?" asked Greg.

"The travel plans are set," assured Susan. "All we have to do is get to Miami."

## 17

Richie was on his third or fourth drink by the time the Texas-sized rack of baby back ribs and a mile-high stack of fries arrived. Chrissie was starved, but Richie was starved even more for her company.

Since Bobbi Jo had disappeared, Richie had become a bear to work for and with. He got very little sleep, complained about everything, and did not concentrate on his work. His appearance, which had always been immaculate, was disheveled and his clothes look more like early-Goodwill than off-the-rack from the best stores in the world. He was a physical and mental mess, and his drinking didn't help.

Obvious to everyone in the bar, he eyed Chrissie as if she was an animal in the wild for which she would be his prey. However, Chrissie knew, while she could be flirtatious, she must remain as elusive as the Jackalope.

"Have another drink," Richie encouraged Chrissie.

"I haven't even finished the first one," Chrissie mumbled as she bit into a meaty rib. "I'm so hungry. These are great."

"The best in all of Texas," Richie bragged.

The over-sized platter of ribs and fries didn't last long. While they were eating, Chrissie could hear Espy munching down a burger in her ear-piece.

"Why do you get all the good food and I get the crumbs?" asked Espy. This got a laugh out of Chrissie, which Richie thought was directed at him. "I should be there in about 30 minutes. Be ready to leave."

Richie, starting to feel his oats, pulled a cigar out of his jacket pocket.

"Would you like an after-dinner smoke?" said Richie.

"Sure, why not?" Chrissie said to her surprised companion.

"I've never had a woman smoke a cigar with me," said Richie, who seemed to be surprised with Chrissie's answer.

"Why not?" Chrissie responded with a wink. "Don't Texas girls smoke cigars? You must run in a very sheltered crowd."

Richie lit both cigars and handed the smaller to Chrissie, who took a drag.

"This is one of the best cigars I've ever had," said Chrissie, as she rolled the end with her tongue.

"It should be," Richie said. "It's one of the best in the world... a Romeo Y Julieta. And it's not one of those imitations from Honduras."

"Where's it from?" asked Chrissie.

"Cuba," bragged Richie.

"Cuba?" a somewhat surprised Chrissie replied. "Aren't they illegal?"

"Awe, don't worry," Richie whispered. "I have connections."

Chrissie knew nothing of Richie's illegal activities, and as Richie finished yet another drink, he started to tell her about the Cuban cigar trade.

Espy, recording the conversation in the van, encouraged Chrissie to keep him talking.

"I'm getting it all," Espy informed her. "This may be what Katie has been looking for. I'll keep listening, but if things start going bad, I'm coming in."

Chrissie asked and Richie talked. The alcohol was working on him as much as Chrissie, who had unbuttoned the top of her blouse to expose a little cleavage. Richie was impressed and in his swirling mind, hoped

it would result in more “conversation” later at his place. He was so wrapped up in the warped impression of himself he forgot Chrissie’s friend would be arriving soon.

Richie told Chrissie “I’m the 5th richest man in Texas,” about his life-long involvement in the oil business, his trips to Cuba, his cigar smuggling connections and his “unofficial” trip to Havana on Monday with other prominent American businessmen. He even asked her if she would like to become a “share holder” in his venture. His ego was bigger than any man Chrissie had ever met. She also felt sorry for him as well.

“He’s so shallow and into himself,” she thought.

Chrissie saw Richie was on the edge of either hustling her into his car, or passing out in the booth. She felt with a little nudge, he just might do the latter. She cuddled up next to Richie, and stroked her long fingers on his cheeks as his eyes started to close. At the same time, she reached into her purse and dropped a little pill into his drink.

Chrissie continued to tease Richie by nestling her blond hair against his neck and then gave him a kiss on his left cheek. Richie drifted in and out of consciousness. He didn’t need the extra kick in his drink. Seconds later, he passed out.

Chrissie stood up from the booth, informed Espy she was one her way, asked the barmaid to get Richie a taxi, and headed out the door.

Smiling, upon reaching the van, Chrissie and Espy exchanged “high-fives.” Mission accomplished for one night!

Lu, Greg's Navy Seal buddy and sailing partner, flew Susan, Greg and Kelly to Miami in his specially-designed Beechcraft sea-plane. Susan had called Lisa and confirmed the travel itinerary. Lisa told her there would be a private jet waiting for them in Miami. Susan realized that a meeting with John Manter and Katie Hightower must be important. In Miami, they were met by Jennifer Williams and her flight crew and whisked from Lu's plane directly aboard a government Lear jet. They were airborne again within minutes.

Landing at a private area within Dulles International Airport, Susan and Greg barely had time to give Lisa a hello-hug before they were whisked in to a waiting Mercedes. Even before the Lear's engines were spooled down, they were out of the terminal area and heading east toward I-267 and Arlington. Their driver, a tall striking blond woman who introduced herself as Michelle Popkov, negotiated traffic like a Jeff Burton carving up a NASCAR track.

"Years of living here and dealing with Washington drivers helps," said Michelle, as she pushed the speed limit. In no time they were turning off toward Hunter Mill and the home of John Manter.

"It's so nice to see you again," said Susan to Lisa. "We hardly got a chance to say hello. What's the rush?"

"Typical DHS," Lisa responded from the front set, trying to stay in her seat as Michelle weaved in and out of traffic. "The DHS believes they are always five minutes behind schedule, when we really have plenty of time. It's just the mindset."

Michelle laughed.

"You'll see that Katie is much lower key," Lisa said. "You're going to love her."

"Why does she want to see Susan?" asked Greg, as Susan held Kelly tight on her lap and wrapped her left arm inside Greg's right arm.

"I don't know the particulars," said Lisa, who knew more than she was letting on. "All I know is Katie knows all about you; understands you have offered to help finance her special group, and believes you might like to learn more about the program."

Michelle slowed the specially-modified black Mercedes S600 to a less-conspicuous speed and made several turns that her passengers probably wouldn't remember. They'd need her to navigate out of the area later that night.

"We're almost there," said Michelle, as a jack rabbit scampered across the road.

Few houses were visible from the car, most being set back from the road and obscured by privacy-plantings. Finally the car turned left on a long two-lane road which was more expensive than the others they'd been traveling since they got off the freeway. Susan thought she saw a sign that read "Campbell Road," but couldn't be sure.

Without breaking speed, Michelle pulled the car through iron gates which opened in anticipation of their arrival. Up the winding drive, she stopped the car in front of a magnificent old home with sweeping porches, turrets and ginger-board trim. It was stunning! The house was painted in the San Francisco-style of several colors — pale primrose, with coral and mauve trim. Large round-topped windows graced a hexagonal room on the right rear while a three-story

turret rose from the right front corner. Stairs led up the center to the covered porch and back to the mahogany-stained door.

At the massive front door, they were met by a perky blond young lady in black trousers, white tuxedo shirt and black bow tie, who escorted them into the living room. Susan noted the servant's nametag said "Lisah."

"That's a different way to spell your name," Susan pointed out to Lisa. "I like it."

John and his wife Brandi were the first to greet Susan and Greg. Kelly was still asleep, so Susan asked Brandi if she had a room available for the baby. Brandi summoned their nanny, Rene, who carried Kelly to a parlor off the living room.

"She's so cute," said Mrs. Manter. "She'll be fine with Rene. She loves children."

Katie, Mark and Bobbi Jo entered from the dining room and were introduced to their guest.

"I'm so underdressed," said Susan, who was wearing a lime green and brown two-piece skirt set. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't worry your pretty head," said Katie, sporting a floor length spaghetti-strap flowery summer dress and flats. If you'd like to change into something more comfortable, I'm sure Brandi can take you to the guest quarters."

"Please do," said Brandi. "We can wait. We have your room ready. You're staying with us anyway. Lisah has already instructed the staff to take your luggage to your room."

"I'll be OK," Susan said. "Thank you for your offer. It's just been a long day."

Lisah poured a 10-year-old bottle of M & G Cellars Merlot for everyone and excused herself. Katie wanted to get right to the purpose of the meeting, but Manter would have none of it.

“First things first my dear Katie,” he said. “We’ll do business over coffee and dessert.”

“A toast to a successful partnership,” saluted Manter, as he raised his glass in reference to the agreement he struck with Susan and Greg a few weeks earlier in the Cayman Islands. Everyone followed.

Susan wondered: “What partnership?” She hoped John wasn’t expecting more than she had already committed.

Manter turned, took Susan’s arm, and led the group to the dining room. The table was set with fine white china, highlighted by a simple gold line around the edge of each plate, cut crystal glassware and obviously old, but highly polished silver, graced each place-setting. On the side board were appetizer and fresh vegetables with several sauces for dipping.

“We’ll start with a local specialty: Chesapeake Blue Crab in spiced butter.” Manter announced as he stood next to the 100-year-old sideboard.

Susan thought she’d eat only a little bite of the crab to be polite, but it was so delicious she kept going back for more. Greg suffered no such inhibitions. He loaded his plate and ate with obvious enjoyment.

At first, Bobbi Jo was nervous and did not speak. However, Susan, knowing both had taken different roads to womanhood, one involuntary and the other voluntary, found Bobbi Jo to be a delight. They exchanged question-after-question and laughed just like two girls at a slumber party.

The main course consisted of Kobe beef marinated in lemon pepper and grilled to perfection with a warm pink center. The meat was tender and juicy. It was served with twice-baked potatoes and fresh garden salad. Greg went back for seconds and was reaching for a third helping when Susan stopped him with a look that said "Don't embarrass me." He put his fork down and dabbed his mouth with the napkin, making sure that she saw him being just a little too genteel. Susan rolled her eyes and turned to Katie.

"I think it's about time we heard what you have in mind" she said.

Katie held up a finger indicating "one moment," as Lisah served the last of the key-lime pie and fresh Columbian coffee. Katie whispered something to Lisah, who quickly retreated to the kitchen.

But, it was John, not Katie, who spoke first.

## 19

Richie awoke with a terrible headache.

"What did I do last night?" he asked himself as he rolled off the living room couch and fell onto the floor. He was still wearing his work clothes and reeked of smoke and alcohol. He had no idea how he got on the couch or who brought him home.

"Whew," he thought. "That Chrissie was really something. I don't know if I want to run into her again. She's too much for me."

Unknown to Chrissie, once back at their motel room, Espy, too, had compassion for Richie. She phoned the Grill and asked the manager to make sure a cab had arrived to take Richie's drunken sole home. She didn't want him to drive and kill himself or someone else. He was too valuable.

Richie tried to get his head back on his shoulders and recall the female tornado he had encountered. But, his mind was fuzzy and he didn't remember too much about the night before and the lovely blond.

"I hope I didn't say too much," Richie uttered out loud. "What if I did? Maybe I'd better try to find Chrissie."

Richie remembered having dinner with his new friend with hopes of getting her into bed with him. He remembered Chrissie being a natural with a cigar, but very little else.

Still lying on the floor, he tried to get up, but fell back onto the couch as the phone rang.

"Richie?" said the voice at the other end of the call. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm OK," Richie responded.

"Do you need me to come over? You sound terrible. Aren't you going on vacation tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he said. "I had a tough night last night."

Teri Lynn was like a mother to Richie. Even though he often treated her like dirt, she was his most-trusted business confidant and continually fussed over him. In her mid-60s, she had worked for Midessa Oil for over 25 years, and literally ran Richie's office, and portions of his life.

"I got a call from the police that your car's at the Longhorn," Teri Lynn continued. "I've got an extra set of keys, so I'll get the car towed home."

Before Richie could speak, Teri Lynn rambled: "Better yet, I'll have my husband, Clark, drive it out to your place and I'll follow. You need help if you're going on vacation. We'll be there in about an hour."

Richie sighed and agreed. He did need help.

Richie shaved and took a quick shower before Teri Lynn and Clark arrived. He tried to make the house presentable, but gave up. He knew Teri Lynn would give him hell for having his beautiful home look like a pig-pen. But, in his hung-over condition, he could care less.

Teri Lynn, with Clark in tow, used the gate-remote to access the property and drive the Mercedes in to the garage. The doorbell rang seconds later, less than 45 minutes after Richie had hung up the phone.

"You look like you were hit by a truck," said Teri Lynn, as Clark nodded in agreement. "This place looks like a dump. Don't you ever have the maid clean the place, or are you sleeping with her too?"

Richie laughed, but the petite Teri Lynn, who was about a foot shorter than Richie, was serious.

"It's a good thing you have me," she reminded Richie. "What am I going to do with you?"

Richie tried to calm Teri Lynn, but she continued to reprimand him as she grabbed a pile of clothes and headed for the laundry room, saying things that one would not repeat around children.

Clark smiled and rolled his eyes and Richie laughed as his "little mother" continued her tirade. Obviously,

Teri Lynn's actions were part show and part anger. Both Richie and Clark knew she was a dear, compassionate person at heart.

"Now, you've got'a eat," she said as she scampered into the kitchen. "I'm fixing you some breakfast and then we're going to get you packed. Go get your suitcase. Don't you ever clean the kitchen either? Something died in the refrigerator. Gosh, what would you do without me?"

Within three hours, Richie had devoured a good meal, the house was cleared of rubbish, clothes and empty beer bottles, and his suitcase was packed.

Richie gave Teri Lynn a kiss on the cheek and a big hug and thanked Clark for helping him get his act together.

"I'll be here tomorrow, after church, to take you to the airport," said Teri

Lynn. "You can't be late for your flight. And, stay out of trouble tonight. No drinking, no buddies, no women, no nothing!!!"

"Yes mother," said Richie, as he patted Clark on the backside and closed the door.

"Whew," he said to himself. What a day. Richie felt like he had been through the ringer. And, it was only two o'clock.

## 20

In the massive, ornately-decorated sitting-room, Manter opened the long awaited discussion. However,

the information was more than anyone expected to hear.

“There’s a lot going on behind the scenes,” he started. “Katie was not aware of what we are going to talk about until today. You’ve all have received high security clearance and I ask that none of this leaves this room. If any of you are uncomfortable with this, you are welcome to leave.”

Everyone nodded or said “Yes” as Manter took roll.

“First, I would like to thank Susan and Greg for their graciousness and generosity in sponsoring the Vanity Club,” continued Manter. “The Vanity girls have been a very valuable part of the DHS and Katie and I are so happy that the group will be funded properly for a long time to come.”

“It’s my honor and privilege to do so,” confessed a blushing Susan. “It’s the least I can do after all you told me about the girls and what they have done in the past.”

“OK, let’s get to the topic,” he said.

Katie pushed a button and a large backdrop rolled down from the ceiling and a computerized projector lit the screen.

“We asked you here to understand and possibly help with a highly-sensitive matter,” said Katie, looking around the room.

“The President is planning to reverse the trade restrictions with Cuba, within 60 days,” said Katie. “In an effort to get a head start on what could be a landslide of interest by American companies, a Trade Commission has been established by the Department of Commerce.

“Monday morning, a “semi-secret” mission involving American business leaders and high profile entertainers will be leaving on a flight to Cuba. This is strictly a trade mission, but the press will not be informed of the trip until the plane has landed. We expect this to go smoothly as recent Gallup polling has shown most people favor trade with Cuba. However, I’m sure there will be protests from the Florida Cuban community.

“Here’s where you come in, Susan and Bobbi Jo.

“Susan? You’ve been invited you to be part of the entourage to Cuba, not only as a Fortune 500 business-woman, but to keep an eye on one of the other participants.”

Susan gasped.

“You want me to go to Cuba? I’m thrilled and honored to be asked. Is it OK with you, Greg?”

Greg mutter, and knowing once Susan has her mind set there’s no stopping her, reluctantly agreed.

“Who’s going to help me watch Kelly?” inquired Greg.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” offered Manter. “Susan will be gone only three days. Rene will take care of Kelly for you, as well.”

“I don’t understand why she has to go,” Greg protested.

“Greg, stop it,” Susan retorted. “We’ll talk about this later. Our country needs our help. Isn’t that enough?”

Greg crossed his arms and sheepishly nodded in agreement.

Katie continued, "The mission is actually very low-key. The group will be meeting various Cuban leaders and businessmen and touring the country. We must be ready to open every trade-window possible, from imports to exports to oil and even tobacco. This could be a big opportunity for Susan's company."

Susan was still shocked to be included.

"What about the Senate hearings next week?" asked Susan.

"No problem," Katie replied. "There aren't any Senate hearings. It was just a rouse to get you here next week, but the trip was moved up, so we had to rush you here."

"Why couldn't you have just told us?" asked Greg.

"It was too sensitive," Manter shot back. "I hope you understand."

Before further discussion, Lisah rolled a coffee-cart into the room, followed by Rene and Michelle.

"You all met Lisah, Rene and Michelle," stated Katie. "They're members of the Vanity Club. Susan, your flight crew from Miami to DC, was also from the Vanity girls."

"I think you can relate, Susan. They're actually all men."

"No way," Greg sputtered. "They look like women to me!"

Susan was also amazed.

"So, these are a few of the girls I'm sponsoring," she said, extending her right hand. "It's so nice to formally meet a Vanity girl. You are all so naturally pretty – so gorgeous. I would never have guessed."

Lisa and Mark smiled upon the revelation of the cross dressers. Little did Susan, Greg or Bobbi Jo realize that Mark was also a VC member.

"I'm sorry we couldn't tell any of you," said Mark. "It was hard to keep my lips sealed, but top-secret means top-secret."

Everyone shared a laugh and Manter asked Lisah, Rene and Michelle to join the meeting.

Katie continued to explain the trade mission and started the video presentation, which resembled a Cuban travelogue.

"Here's where you come in Bobbi Jo," Katie pointed out. "Richie has also been invited and has accepted an invitation to join the Cuba group.

"Oh, my gosh!" stuttered Bobbi Jo. "He must be in deep do-do."

"He is and he isn't," interjected Manter. "We want to keep an eye on him. The ATF and DHS are concerned about his interest in the Cuban tobacco trade. The trip may tilt the scale one way or the other. That's all I can tell you at this time. You and I will brief Susan tomorrow."

"Susan," continued Katie. "We're asking you to represent the import/export industry, but to also keep an eye on Richie as much as you can. I'm asking Bobbi Jo to tell you all she can about him and his business interests. We have very little time, so we'd need you to tell us all you can."

"I'll do anything you ask," promised Bobbi Jo. "If there's anything else I can do, just let me know."

"Bobbi, you've already been a great deal of help," Katie assured. "Just try to tell Susan everything you can about Richie."

"Let's start after breakfast," announced Bobbi Jo, looking at Susan.

"That's fine with me," replied Susan. "I feel like I know you already."

It was after midnight so Katie concluded her presentation.

"Let's get some sleep and continue in the morning," Katie suggested. Everyone agreed.

## 21

Richie looked around the dreary Langley Air Force Base visitor's lounge, which could not be compared with comfortable hospitality rooms to which he was accustomed. He still wasn't feeling chipper, however, that was of little concern when he spotted Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, in a serious business discussion with Donald Trump and Steve Forbes. In another corner of the room was Oprah Winfrey with movie moguls Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas and Cosmo Magazine publisher Heidi Lower. The secure area was filled with the Who's Who of business, entertainment and sports. Richie wondered what he was doing among the elite.

Richie adjusted his coat and tie and walked over to introduce himself to Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig. He didn't have the nerve to approach Casino magnet Steve Wynn, Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Timmerman, Apple founder Steve Jobs, or the Presi-

dent's Commerce Secretary Marvin Evans, who were standing right next to him. For the first time, Richie felt like a "zero," but that didn't stop him from staring at the striking, leggy red-head on Evans' arm.

"Nice to meet you," said Selig, extending his right hand. "Didn't you play in the Texas Rangers' system?"

Richie was shocked. "How'd he know that?" he thought.

"I sure did, Mr. Commissioner," confirmed Richie. "How'd you know that?"

"I have my sources," he laughed. "You couldn't hit the curve ball. You're in oil now, right?"

"To tell you the truth, when I was asked to go on this trip, I checked the list to see who might have a baseball connection. One can never have enough athletes on a trip to keep the topics lively and to keep me from getting bored."

"So why are you going?" said Richie. "There's no way baseball can expand to Cuba."

"I'm going for the intrigue," added Selig. "The Cubans love baseball. It's their national game. Many of their top players have defected, but they have many new stars. I would love to see a Cuban team in the Major Leagues, but that's a long way off. Someday, I'm sure there will be a team in Havana, maybe even an All-Star game."

"Sounds good to me," Richie agreed, who was still shocked Selig knew he'd had a short stint in the Rangers farm system, as an outfielder.

"Why don't you stick with me?" said Selig. "I'd rather talk sports than business anyway, especially with some of the big shots in this room."

"I'd be happy to," said the surprised Richie, who Selig introduced to some of the others as they maneuvered through the room.

Over in another corner, quietly sat Cristy Garcia, looking over her makeup mirror while powdering her face, and watching both Richie and the crowd at the same time. Sitting next to Cristy was Susan, who was engrossed in the latest *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Cristy confided to Susan.

For Cristy, a beautiful olive-skinned native of Guatemala and the long-time VC ambassador to Central and South America, this would be her first trip out of the U.S. dressed as a female, and she was more than a bit nervous.

"Don't worry about it, relax," said Susan, who as a last minute invitee to the expedition, insisted on bringing Cristy as her assistant, to not only keep an eye on Richie, but to serve as an Spanish interpreter.

Cristy was taller than the average Guatemala women, standing almost 6-foot in her black stiletto style boots. She was not only slim, but curvaceous, with a glowing smile and a personality almost as captivating as her bust-size. She was wearing a red v-neck sweater and a black A-line skirt, and which caught the eye of a number of the men in the room.

"You're going to be just fine," assured Susan, who was wearing a cream business suit, which did little to hide her beauty as well. "Look at it this way, everybody knows about me, but nobody knows you. And there's no way anybody's going to think you're not what they see. You're the prettiest girl in the room and

with all these men you'd better watch who might hit on you."

Both women laughed!

An attractive, tall blond Air Force officer entered the room and asked for silence. Barking orders as if she was addressing recruits, Major Kathleen Sharp gave the 40 or so executives a briefing on the trip.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced the Major. "We'll embark at 1100 hours for a four- hour flight." She did not mention the destination.

"Once we land, our mission will be announced to the press representatives at home. At no time are you to use a cell phone, computer, Twitter, or any other source to contact the press, your family or friends. We will ask for your phones, Blackberry's, I pods and any other communication devise before you leave this room. We will be on the ground for 48 hours and have a very tight schedule. If you miss the return flight, that's your problem. We will not look for you or come back for you.

"Once on the ground, we will be bussed to our hotel and you will receive your itinerary.

The Cuban people are friendly, but we can't fully trust the government. Each of you has been assigned a military escort, so stick with your guard. They will provide you the needed security.

"Each of you will meet one or more representatives from your respective field of interest and he or she will serve as your guide and answer your questions. Tomorrow night we will all meet with el Presidente at a State dinner, which will provide an opportunity for you to mingle with their country's top officials. Future

business is the goal of the entire visit. Do not get side tracked.

"I will provide more information when it is needed, either during the flight or when we arrive. Any questions?"

"My goodness," thought Richie. "I'm glad I was never in the military. She's a bitch."

"Who tightened her panties this morning?" Susan whispered to Cristy, who laughed under her breath. Neither lady felt it was safe to talk.

Major Sharp introduced Evans and left the room. One could feel the air come back into the room as everyone breathed a sigh-of-relief.

"I haven't been spoken to like that since I was an Air Force pilot," recalled Susan, as Evans began his protocol and presented his personal assistant, Vanna Russell, to the group, who responded with a slight curtsy.

"You were a pilot too," said Cristy.

"Yes, I've been a pilot for years," added Susan, "But, that's a story for another day."

Cristy dropped the subject.

"I'm glad Greg didn't hear that rant either," Susan continued, referring to her husband. You know he wasn't thrilled with the invitation and my insistence to go on this trip."

"Why not?" Cristy said.

"He got me out of a life-threatening situation a couple of years ago and now I want to go to Cuba," said Susan. "He just doesn't understand the possible ramifications for our company. He would rather we were on

our boat, doing nothing, sipping wine and enjoying the sun."

"I'd love to do that right about now too," said Cristy. "It sounds better to me than a four-hour flight to the unknown. Let's get out of here!"

The girls laughed as Major Sharp re-entered the room, with papers falling to the floor, to announce the final boarding arrangements.

## 22

"I'm not getting on that thing," insisted Trump, as he examined the humungous Air Force plane he and the others were about to board.

The Lockheed C-5 Galaxy, one of the largest military transports, designed to carry heavy and oversized cargo over long distances, was sitting on the tarmac.

"This thing's huge," Gates uttered, as he looked up the back ramp and into the cargo bay. "I could build a factory in there."

The carrier was packed with humanitarian supplies and boxes, which were offered by the U.S. government as part of the trade agreement.

"Where's the first class?" asked Trump, as he examined the plane finding only military-style seating – side-by-side along the windowless body of the interior.

"This isn't going to be a fun flight," he concluded. "I hope there's a bathroom, I might have to throw up."

The boarding process was orderly as Major Sharp had assigned seating for each traveler, similar to a school teacher separating the good from the bad in her



class. Richie was sandwiched between Cristy and

Vanna, who sat next to Evans. Susan was to the left of Cristy.

"At least I get to sit with to a pair of beauties," he figured. "I could have been paired with Joan Rivers and her obnoxious daughter," who were on the other side of the stacked boxes, but their loud voices were more than audible to all in the belly of the plane.

Richie and his companions exchanged "hellos," fastened their seat belts and shoulder-harnesses, and tried to get comfortable while sitting on folded parachutes.

"I wonder who'll get sick first," queried Vanna. Her comment drew a laugh from those around her.

"You can throw up on the Major," Richie said, loud enough to get Major Sharp's attention.

"Watch your mouth, young man," ordered the Major, who was undoubtedly younger than Richie. "You don't want to get on my bad side."

"Oohs" and "auhs" filled the plane.

"Give her a break," pleaded Cristy. "She's only doing her job."

Richie gave her a dirty look, and chuckled under his breath, admiring not only her appearance, but her feistiness. In the back of his mind, he sized her up for a future conquest.

Right on schedule, the engines roared, the C-5 rolled away from the gate, onto the runway, and as if in slow motion, the giant transport gracefully lifted into the air and climbed to the 30,000 foot cruising level. Havana was on the radar.

Havana's Jose Marti International Airport has been renamed for Fidel Castro, after his death, as were a number of public parks, plazas, buildings, the national baseball and soccer stadiums and theaters. If some thing or some place didn't have the Castro-brand, it wore the seal of revolutionary hero Che Guevara.

The flight was slow, uncomfortable, but on time, arriving in Havana in less than four hours. The entourage was thrilled to be on Cuban soil and escape the confines of the C-5.

Havana looked much more cosmopolitan from the air than it did when on the ground and it didn't take the group long to discover the difference.

"The only person who would have liked that flight would have been Rodney Dangerfield," said Joan Rivers, making a joke out of the comedian whose famous punch line was "I can't get any respect." Only a few of the travelers laughed.

The group could already feel the humidity in the Cuban air and smell the poverty of the third world country. When the transport's doors opened, the heat hit the travelers as if a spatula smacked each of them right across the face.

"We'll be meeting in the airport conference room," announced Major Sharp, who did not need a mega-

phone. "After the plane is unloaded, we will head for Hotel Melia Habana. Please follow me and Secretary Evans."

The back ramp of the plane had been lowered and the visitors could see a line of Russian-made transport vehicles waiting to unload the American cargo. For the first time, Richie noticed two battered, old yellow bus covered by a black tarp in the cargo bay.

"Must be CIA or Secret Service-issue," Richie whispered to Selig. Richie would later discover why the government insisted on supplying the tourists with their own buses.

The group walked to the front of the plane, across the modern, elevated boarding ramp and into the spacious air-conditioned airport terminal where they were greeted by a number of uniformed Cuban military police.

"Everybody has to go through the metal detector," said Sharp.

"You gotta be kidding me," complained Oprah. "I've never been checked going into a country. I think they have things backwards."

"That's Cuba for you, a worker's paradise," Trump emphasized. "They're more worried about what comes into the country than what goes out. I doubt Joan will be allowed through with all her plastic surgery. They may mistake it for C-4 (the plastique explosive)."

Those within ear-shot roared with laughter.

After passing through security, Evans and Vanna directed the Americans to the conference room, where refreshments were waiting the weary travelers.

“Not bad,” said Forbes, a Fortune 500 group member and one of the riches men in the world on the tour, as he eyed the spread of Cuban and American appetizers and beverages.

“The airport’s sure nice and efficient,” he said to Gates.

“Unfortunately, this may be as good as it gets,” Gates responded, relating to Cuba’s vast poverty.

“I’m prepared for the worst, once we get outside of the airport and the hotel,” added Forbes. “But, I don’t think it’ll be any worse than any intercity in the states.”

“Did you notice all the planes on the tarmac from different countries?” asked Gates.

“Yes, I did,” Forbes noted. “I saw Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico and a couple of European countries. They don’t have travel restrictions. I assume we won’t much longer either.”

The visitors enjoyed the hospitality as soft music played in the background and Evans conferred with Cuban officials, one who could not keep his eyes off Vanna and her short skirt. Vanna gave him a wink and left to interact with the crowd.

“What a creep,” she said to herself.

Cristy was practicing her Spanish with one of the lady airport caterers, who insisted on trying her English on an American. The conversation became hysterical due to a mish-mash of Spanish and English and within minutes, Cristy and her new friend, Rita, were uncontrollably laughing, in tears, and becoming best of friends.

Susan, although she knew Spanish, gave up trying to understand what Cristy and Rita were discussing and strolled over to Richie, who was standing alone.

"What'd ya think so far?" she asked. Bobbi Jo had briefed Susan for a few hours on Richie's positives and negatives. She felt it was time to make the first move.

"Interesting," said Richie, noticing Susan's hazel eyes, sparkling smile and huge wedding ring.

"Where's your friend," Richie added, as he looked around for Cristy.

"She's over by the food," Susan said. "After that flight, I'm so happy to get something to eat. I was famished."

"So how do you and your friend fit in here?" Richie wanted to know. "You're the prettiest ladies on the flight."

"Thanks," blushed Susan, who was warned of Richie's flattery by Bobbi Jo.

"My husband and I own an international import/export business," Susan said. "Cristy is my executive secretary."

"I wish my secretary looked that good," Richie said, continuing the flattery and hoping Cristy would rejoin Susan soon.

"She's a good girl," said Susan. "She speaks four languages, handles all my correspondence and keeps my business humming."

"I bet she can keep a lot of things humming," thought Richie, with an impure mind.

"What are your interests, besides Cristy?" chided Susan, who seemed to catch Richie off guard.

"I, I, I, I'm into oil," stuttered Richie, trying to regain his composure. "I own Midessa Oil in Odessa, Texas. We're not a big company, but we control much of the oil production in Texas. I'd love to work out a deal with the Cubans."

"Only time will tell," said Susan. "I hope this trip is beneficial for everyone."

Secretary Evans excused himself from his Cuban guests and tapped a fork on his water glass.

"May I have your attention, please," said Evans, who could barely be heard over the talking.

"Attention!!!" yelled Major Sharp. The room grew silent within moments.

"That's more like it," said the Major. "Now pay attention!"

"Thank you," said Evans, with Vanna again standing at his side.

"Welcome to Cuba," he continued. "As long as we're on land, I will be heading the delegation. Major Sharp will continue to lead the air support.

"Sounds like a military operation," Selig joked to Richie. Both men laughed.

"In a few minutes we will be embarking to our hotel," said Evans. "You'll be riding in one of the two busses you may have seen when we unloaded the plane."

"I'm not riding in a bus," murmured Rivers. "Where's the limo I was promised?"

"Shut up, Joan," shouted Trump, from across the room.

Evans continued: "Your hotel rooms have been assigned and Vanna will give you a packet as you walk to your bus. We are staying at a 5-star hotel, so I'm sure you'll be comfortable. Any problems, please contact me, Vanna or Major Sharp.

"Tonight at 8 we'll be dining in the ballroom. Dress is business casual. We will be sharing our meal with your corresponding Cuban contact, and possibly President Castro. Your security detail will meet you on your bus as well.

"Let me explain about the busses too. They may look old on the outside, but inside are all the modern conveniences. They're designed to blend in with the Cuban's busses, so we don't draw attention. However, they're bullet-proof and as secure as any government vehicle.

## 24

Washington was abuzz with controversy. The President's Press Secretary, Cindy Shelton, was attempting to put out "one fire after another" from the press and indirectly from the Cuban community.

The President, who usually had impeccable timing, had accidentally informed the media of the Cuban venture during his regular afternoon conference, about an hour before the envoy was to arrive in Havana.

CNN's even-keeled Wolf Blitzer was blasting the President, even though the network had been a solid supporter. MSNBC's Chris Matthews experienced another "shiver" down his leg and had literally "blown a fuse" on television. Fox's Bill O'Reilly took a more

practical “wait and see” attitude. The mainstream TV networks dedicated most of their nightly news to what they could find about the Cuban adventure. Newspaper editors were fuming.

The White House switchboard was overloaded with 99 percent negative phone calls. Shelton was ready to resign.

“What were you thinking?” said Cindy, literally scolding the President. “You knew the plane had not landed. We weren’t going to announce anything until they were on Cuban soil.”

For once, the President was dumbfounded. The daily polls had shown Americans were very receptive to better relations with Cuba, despite the opposition of the vocal Florida expatriates. He never expected such a strong backlash.

“I’m so sorry, Cindy,” the President said. “Maybe I should go on TV again to explain.”

“Not now!” screamed the agitated Shelton, who looked young enough to be the President’s daughter. “There’s too much hostility right now. What do you want me to tell the press? The networks are going crazy. They’re all upset they weren’t invited on the trip or given advance notice.”

“Let’s do this,” said the President. “Call a press briefing for 6 o’clock. I’ll explain what’s going on, but will not field questions. I’ll put this to rest so it doesn’t jeopardize the trip. I’ll tell them who’s on the trip and why it’s so important.”

“OK,” said the frustrated Shelton, running her hand through her long brunette hair. “Please think before you speak. You’d better get Dana Martin or one of her staffers in here to write something...and fast. And,

don't deviate from the tele-prompter. That's how you got in to trouble the first place. You think you can speak off-the-cuff, and you can't."

The news of the President's gaff had yet to reach Cuba when the party climbed on the busses and headed for Hotel Melia Habana. However, with CNN and Fox streamed into the hotel, the group would soon learn of the turmoil back home.

The trip from the airport, which was south of Havana, to the hotel was less than five miles, but the scene could have been a National Geographic documentary. The busses cruised on the modern road surrounded by old, unpainted, antiquated homes within easy view. The visitors passed the elaborate government buildings and could see the Havana skyline in the distance. The difference between the ruling Communist party, the airport, the hotel district and the blighted neighborhoods of the populous was like night and day.

"Pretty bad isn't it?" commented Richie, leaning toward the window and across the isle towards Susan and Cristy. "What a difference between the rich and the poor. People complain about the same things in our country, but this is worse. The Mexican border towns are nicer than this, and that's not saying much."

Cristy responded: "The lady at the airport was telling me that most people make about \$10 to \$20 a month, no matter if they are a doctor, a guard at the Museo de la Revolucion or don't do squat. The people try to supplement their income by selling items on the street."

"Kinda like Mexico," added Richie.

"Yes," Cristy said. "They sell old books, cigars, photos and other things that don't make the grade at the

factories. Those who have jobs, like the taxi drivers and waiters rely on tips, so they are a little better off."

Susan spotted the first sign with anti-American propaganda.

"Look at that," said Susan, pointing at the huge billboard condemning the "imperialist" United States.

"Most of the people who live here, don't believe it," said Evans, sitting with Vanna one row ahead of Susan and Cristy. "You'll see that Havana is a bustling city, at least in the downtown area. Our motel is 5-stars with views of the ocean and downtown."

"Where did Castro live?" asked Susan.

"Outside of town on the west side of the island," replied Evans. "He lived in an isolated area, away from the public and surrounded by armed guards."

"Look at all the old cars," said Trump, noting the American-made Chevrolets and Chryslers cluttering the street with a small mixture of newer foreign cars.

"I have a few of those cars in my collection. This looks more like a Saturday night cruise than rush hour traffic. Now I see why we're riding in these busses. They fit right in with the 50s and 60s."

The busses approached the hotel and Evans stood to address his passengers, just as Major Sharp would be doing in her bus.

"Remember, you can't use your credit cards," Evans said. "If you need to exchange dollars for pesos, do so only at the hotel. There's a 20% exchange fee at most locations outside of the hotel and then you get only convertible pesos, not the regular pesos, which are basically worthless."

“And if you still have your cell phones, they’re useless. Don’t expect to watch any Western television either. There isn’t any. I have, though, negotiated with the hotel for access to Fox and CNN. But, that’s all.”

“What about MSNBC,” shouted NBC and General Electric CEO Jeff Emmelt, from the back of the bus.

“Are you kidding me,” laughed Evans. “Nobody watches that network.”

“Do you have any other questions?” queried Evans. Nobody raised a hand despite some mumbling from the back of the bus.

## 25

The Hotel Melia Habana was definitely 5-stars and the welcoming party for the Americans was completely unexpected.

As the Americans exited the busses, they were not only welcomed by Cuban government officials and press, but dancers, acrobats, jugglers and singers. The festival was as elaborate as the encore for a Broadway musical or the conclusion of a Cirque de Soliel spectacular. Performers were everywhere.

“Wow, what a show,” said Rivers, who had emceed a number of awards programs during her many years in show business. “This is better than a Hollywood opening night.”

Entering the hotel doors, the guests were escorted, by their American military guards and Cuban concierge, to their rooms. The hotel lobby full of activity as guests from other countries were also securing their rooms.

The Americans took up one-quarter of the hotel's 409 rooms, including the 67 royal state rooms, 12 junior suites and 4 major suites. Trump, who had demanded a major suite on the sixth and highest floor, put out an invitation to the entire group to visit his 4,000 square foot penthouse for drinks and to enjoy the 360-degree panoramic view.

"Once you get settled, the bar is open," shouted Trump. "Drinks will be on Oprah's account."

Those paying attention, laughed.

"Remember, dinner is at 8 in the convention hall," Evans called out for all to hear. "Please don't be late. We don't want to embarrass our hosts."

Trump's room was booming with CNN and Fox News on the dozen big screen televisions. The President was about to speak of his blunder and the "secret" Cuban trip, which was now news around the world.

A few members of the traveling group, including Richie, Susan and Cristy, had already arrived for cocktails and to confirm the rumors that The President had released the information of the trip prior to its intended announcement time.

"What's the big deal," asked Trump, to anybody who would listen. "The President goofed. He admitted it. The press should just let it go. It won't be the last time. Nobody's perfect. He was going to tell the press about the trip anyway. What's a couple of hours?"

Forbes, Gates and Allen walked into the room together and asked what was going on. Trump gave them a quick update, as most eyes turned toward the televisions.

The usually calm Shelton appears at the podium in the White House press room and announced that The President would speak in 10 minutes. She had tried to put herself back together after scolding The President, but those watching could tell she was upset.

"This must have been a dozy," said Selig, who had joined Richie. "I know Cindy. She worked in our public relations office before joining The President. She's a beautiful person inside and out. I bet she's ready to pull her hair out of her head."

"She's pretty," Richie said, not knowing what more to say, but eyeing the statuesque lady on a 64-inch television, as she conferred with the press corps.

"I hope this won't ruin the trip," Richie lamented.

"No, Evans told me we're a go," Selig assured. "There's no turning back. If we did, it might further damage relations between our two countries. It's up to The President to calm the press."

The President approached the podium with very little applause from the usually friendly reporters. The photo correspondents clicked their cameras in rapid fire and the lights from the television crews was almost blinding.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the President began. "This morning, I literally stuck my foot in my mouth. I apologize to you and the American citizens for announcing something that should not have been said until now.

"Today, 40 of America's most prominent business persons, entertainers and celebrities, left Andrews Air

Force Base for a two-day relations-building trip to Cuba. The plane arrived in Havana at 3 p.m., after a 4-hour flight.”

The murmur from the press was more like a roar.

The President continued over the noise: “The goal of the trip is to establish better relations with the Cubans for importing and exporting of goods. One of my campaign promises was to open relations with Cuba and eventually tourism and trade. This is the first step.

“The trip was to be ‘secret’ until our citizens reached Havana as part of the negotiations with the Cuban government. The group will be meeting with officials of industry, entertainment, sports and other related fields.

“We’ll supply you with a list of those on the trip at the end of my comments. I can tell you, the Americans in Cuba are some of our best and brightest, who under my instructions, are working to establish strong relations for trade and commerce. They are accompanied by Commerce Secretary Marvin Evans and his staff, as well as Air Force security.

“As for the press, within the last hour, I have talked with Cuban President Raul Castro, and he’s agreed to allow press representatives from the major newspapers, television, cable and radio networks to send Florida-based correspondents to Cuba tonight to cover the events. However, since Cuban facilities are not available, stories can’t and won’t be posted or produced until the reporters have returned home. The correspondents have been contacted and will leave from Miami no later than 9 p.m.

“President Castro has also agreed to extend the fact-finding visit for another day. The Americans will return home on Thursday.”

The President wiped his brow with a handkerchief and continued.

“I would once again like to apologize to the American public and the press. I never thought this enterprise would cause such a problem. In the long run, I hope this will be a positive venture for both the United States and Cuba.

“Thank you for your time and God Bless America.”

The President walked out of the press room despite a fury of questions from the still aggravated press.

Shelton moved to the microphone and tried to quiet the reporters, but her announcement was barely heard.

“See Linda Lewis and Sheri Rene at the door as you leave,” said Shelton, of her assistants. “They’ll have the list of those on the trip and an abbreviated itinerary. Thank you for coming.”

In the back room, the President was sipping a bottle of water, as Shelton entered.

“Whew,” he said. “I think it went well. I gave them the truth and the facts.”

“We’ll see,” Shelton said. “The press still has a lot of questions. We’d have been out there all night if questions had been allowed.”

“I think its best we left that alone,” said the President.

“We’ll know soon enough about the press,” added Shelton, as he turned on a television. “I’ll be back in a

few minutes. I'm going to go soak my head in a bucket of water."

The President's briefing and the agreement with Castro to allow reporters in to Cuba appeared to have calmed the TV talking heads. Only time would tell.

In Cuba, the Americans were surprised by the hub-bub in Washington, the news conference and the schedule change for an extra day in Cuba.

Richie smiled with the thought of another 24 hours in Cuba, Susan was concerned about another day away from her daughter, and Rivers worried about what she was going to wear the third day.

"Hope you brought enough underwear," teased Trump to those who were listening.

## 26

The Senator was notably upset with the President, not only for letting the information slip on the Cuban trade mission, but the bumbling of his press conference.

"I don't know what he was thinking," The Senator commented during a hasty phone call to Eric. "I've already contacted a number of senators and congressmen and we're going to have a hearing on this mess. Mistakes like this by the President have to stop. What if this was a national security issue?"

Eric listened, like he usually did, and offered little response. When The Senator had his mind set on something, there was no stopping him. It was set in stone. The hearings would begin before the end of the week.

Meanwhile, Bobbi Jo, in the kitchen with Sunny, was a bit worried.

"I hope he stays out of trouble," she said to Sunny — a question of doubt running through her mind and the first sign of softness towards Richie.

"Don't worry," Sunny responded, as the two sat at the kitchen table enjoying a chocolate mousse dessert. "You're always going to have thoughts about him and for his safety, but remember what he did to you. If it were me, I would forget about him."

"I know," Bobbi Jo continued. "When you've counted on somebody for so long, you can't help but worry, especially with what I know about him. I hope Katie didn't think I was over-reacting."

"What do you mean?" asked Sunny.

"I'm just worried, now that his name has been made public, that the Cuban mafia will make a connection with his illegal cigar dealings," conceded Bobbi Jo. "I'm worried he won't get off the island alive."

"You told Katie, he went to Cuba through Mexico and with a disguise and an alias," Sunny recalled.

"Yes, but Richie was always looking over his shoulder," Bobbi Jo continued. "He was paranoid about other people double crossing him."

"Let's pray he comes home safe," said Sunny, folding her hands.

The ladies bowed their heads and offered a prayer as Eric walked into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt," said Eric. "Did I miss something?"



“No, we were just praying for the safety of those in Cuba and for our country,” Sunny answered.

Eric explained his conversation with The Senator and the potential hearings. He would have to be at work extra early the next morning.

“I’m expecting a title-wave tomorrow,” Eric said, as he whipped his brow. “I’d better give Lena (The Sena-

tor's daughter and Eric's assistant) a call and warn her as well. The Senator sure knows how to shake things up."

## 27

From Trump's suite, the sunset view, reflecting on the ocean, was spectacular. Richie

could see for miles. He easily spotted the cigar factories in downtown Havana, but his attention was to the west, the site of the Cuban tobacco fields.

"How can I get away from here and get to the plantation," he thought, with a plan tucked away in the back of his head. He needed to contact his former associate Hector Villanueva, who he hoped was still director of the Romeo y Julieta fields.

Cristy caught Richie dazing into the distance and tapped him on the shoulder. Richie jumped as if he had seen a ghost, not a smiling Guatemalan goddess in a sheer lime-green dress — which left little to the imagination — and matching stiletto heels, purse and shawl.

"Did I interrupt something?" Cristy asked.

"No, I was just day-dreaming," Richie responded.

"We'll stop day-dreaming for a few minutes," Cristy laughed. "Would you escort me to dinner?"

"It would be my privilege," Richie replied, as he took Cristy's hand and placed it on his arm. "Let's go."

Cristy smiled again and batted her big brown eyes. She had him under her spell. Richie had other ideas.

The Americans were treated to the best Cuba could offer for dinner. The convention center was decorated

in red, white and blue, the entrees ranged from seafood to Kobe beef. The Cuban diplomats were on their best behavior.

The rumor, according to Rivers, was “Do anything and everything for the Americans, or receive a bullet in the back of your head before sunrise.”

Each American was placed at an exquisitely-garnished round table seating 10, which included their Cuban business counterpart, an Air Force security guard, and if needed, an interpreter. Richie and Exxon’s Timmerman were the guests of Cuban Oil Minister, Miguel Rivera.

Rivera, a portly, sun-tanned, leather-skinned, veteran of the Castro regime, took more of a liking to Cristy, than the other Americans. He insisted Cristy join their Cuban gas refinery tour as an interpreter the following morning. She quickly agreed. She didn’t want to anger Rivera, and knowing Susan would approve, she could keep her eyes on Richie as well.

After a great deal of pomp and circumstance, the dinner conversation, for most of the Americans, ranged from necessary to boring. Richie would have preferred sitting at Selig’s table, where he talked baseball with retired Cuban star Orestes Cepeda.

The highlights of the evening were to be a colorful and beautifully choreographed performance by a Cuban woman’s dance group and an impromptu 20-minute comedy routine by Rivers.

“Look at that girl,” Richie exclaimed, as the dance group started its show. “Do you have a twin sister?”

Cristy stared intently at the lady fourth from the left and almost fell off her chair. The girl was her spit-

ting image and as the dancing went on, it was obvious that she was one of the stars.

"I have to meet her after the show," whispered Cristy to Susan, who was also stunned.

"Do you think we can?" responded Susan.

"Let's at least try," Cristy urged. "I've never seen another 'me.' This is blowing my mind."

Richie, noting the conversation between his tablemates, added: "She's almost as beautiful as you, Cristy. I would love to see you in one of those costumes."

Cristy gave Richie a little smile and continued to stare at the dancer.

The 45-minute show could not have ended faster for Cristy. Anticipation of meeting her "twin" was overwhelming.

"What a fantastic show," exclaimed Susan, as the group returned to the stage, following a standing ovation, for an encore.

Cristy and Susan left their table and walked "stage left" as the curtain closed one last time.

Cristy approached the burly Cuban security guard, and in Spanish, described the young brown-haired beauty and explained her desire for them to meet.

"Are you her sister?" asked the guard.

"No, but I wish I was," Cristy responded.

"Well, you could fool me," the guard retorted. After a brief hesitation, the guard disappeared, only to return a few minutes later. Cristy wasn't sure if this was against protocol or not, but it was worth the try.

“Yes, you can see Dania Carbajal,” the guard responded in Spanish. “She said she will be honored to meet you. She needs a little time to change out of her costume. You can only talk for a few minutes as she has a bus to catch.”

“I appreciate everything you have done,” Cristy said, batting her long eye-lashes as an additional “thank-you.”

Dania appeared within five minutes, and the three girls exchanged a traditional hug, as the guard watched intently.

“You could be my sister,” exclaimed Dania, in Spanish, who was meeting an American for the first time. “Are you sure you aren’t Cuban?”

Cristy laughed, introduced Susan, and continued: “I’m originally from Guatemala, but now live in the United States. Your dancing was fantastic. I wish I could move like you do.”

“I’ve been dancing since I was a child,” Dania explained. “It’s one thing I really enjoy. Thank you.”

“You’d be a star in America,” assured Susan, as they continued to pile on the complements.

The security guard interrupted the conversation and told Dania “It’s time to go.”

“I wish you could stay and we could get to know each other better,” Cristy lamented, as she frowned at the guard.

“I’m sorry too,” Dania added. “But, I need to catch the last bus home. I have to be at work early tomorrow morning.”

Cristy gave Dania a hug and whispered in her ear: “Call me.”

Dania did not speak, but gave Cristy an even tighter hug and a kiss on the cheek. She waved “good-bye” to Susan, whirled quickly and disappeared through the stage door.

“Whew, that was a quick exit,” Cristy emphasized to Susan. “I hope we didn’t offend her.”

Following Rivers’ gig, Cristy and Susan returned to their table, while Evans announced the next day’s schedule and the arrival of the American press representatives.

“What happened?” Susan asked Cristy. “You look upset.”

“No, I’m OK,” Cristy responded rubbing her tear-stained eyes. “She was just so nice. She doesn’t belong in this hell hole. Excuse me, but my makeup is running. I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

Cristy headed to the restroom as Evans updated the schedule.

“We’ll all meet here at 8 a.m. for breakfast and then proceed to our respective tours and meetings. Remember, the news reporters will be here as well. Please treat them with respect and feel free to answer their questions.”

“Tomorrow night, dinner will once again be served at 8. This will give us all a chance to share our experiences and to mingle with the representatives of other industries and interests.

“Remember, too, you are welcome to explore Havana, but if you leave the hotel on your own, you must take your passport and the identification card in the packet we gave you, and you **MUST** check with Vanna, Captain Sharp or me. You’re not to go anywhere, ex-

cept for a city bus tour, without your security detail. Is that understood?"

Many of the Americans lingered in the hotel lobby and said goodnight to their Cuban hosts. The following day was to be the most important of the entire trip. And, the press would be there to record almost every move.

## 28

Susan wasn't overly thrilled at breakfast when Cristy informed her that she would be interpreting for Richie's group instead of accompanying the Import/Export contingent.

"Mr. Rivera insisted," Cristy explained. "What was I to do?"

"You could have said 'no'," remarked Susan, half-serious. "I saw Rivera eyeing you last night. First it was Richie, now it's Rivera. What next?"

"But, I'll be watching Richie," Cristy continued. "Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing?"

"I know, I know," responded Susan. "Just watch yourself. You'll be with two questionable characters. And both of them would probably like to get you into bed."

"Boy, would they be in for a surprise," laughed Cristy.

"You bet," Susan giggled, returning a laugh and a big smile.

The girls had had a late night as Cristy reviewed their meeting with Dania.

"Something was wrong, but I can't put my finger on it," recalled Cristy. "She's so pretty, but something was bothering her. She was very friendly, like we have known each other for years, not minutes. I wonder if being watched by the guard was the problem."

"It might go deeper than that," Susan suggested. "Don't worry about it. You probably won't see her again. What can you do anyway?"

"I know," Cristy stated. "I just feel sorry for her and so helpless."

"Time to go," reminded Susan. The girls left their table and walked in to the lobby to meet their respective tours.

Richie and Timmerman headed a group of 10, including Fox News reporter Guillermo Salinas and camera woman Cami Farr, to tour the Havana natural-gas facility. The building and grounds resembled a small American sewage plant, and smelled just as bad.

With Cristy interpreting, Spanish-speaking Rivera explained his country yearned for development of the Gulf of Mexico's oil deposits and American cooperation in the venture. The Minister added that Cuba imported most of its natural gas and crude oil from Mexico, Canada, Russia and Venezuela. However, it would be less expensive, and more profitable, if his country had a working agreement with the United States.

Midessa Oil, which already had wells pumping in the Gulf, would be a perfect short-range partner for the Cubans. And, Exxon, with its world-wide operation, influence and knowledge, could help Cuba move from a third-world country on to the international stage. Lifting of the trade embargo, by the President could

make this all possible. Richie and Timmerman, always looking to expand their company's horizons, were obviously interested.

"I strongly feel we could work together," Timmerman commented to Richie. "I have been taking a look at your company and I believe I can help you, as well as you helping me."

"How can my little company compete with Exxon?" questioned Richie.

"We're always looking to work with smaller companies," Timmerman explained. "We may be big, but that doesn't mean we do everything on a multi-lateral scale. If it weren't for companies like yours, Exxon would never be what it is today. When we get back to the States, we must get together and see what we can do.

"I think we can do more together than we can for the Cubans. From what I've seen, it would take at least 20 years and billions of dollars to make Cuba viable for oil and gas. I hate to say this, but helping Cuba could be a waste of time and money."

"I would love the opportunity to work with you," Richie agreed.

"Let's do something next week in New York," replied Timmerman, as the two men shook hands.

Cristy, watching all this unfold, was inwardly thrilled for Richie, although she did not let either man realize she understood what had occurred. The theme of the trip was to work with the Cubans for future relations, but Richie had unexpectedly fallen into what could be his biggest deal ever.

Susan's group visited the Havana factories and marketplaces, while Trump looked for locations to

build his next hotel. Gates and his computer buddies studied how they could put the internet to good use on an island where communication was still in the mid-1900s. Selig, toured the modern 55,000-seat Castro Stadium in Havana, and met with Cuban baseball brass with hopes of arranging spring training games in years to come. Oprah, Rivers and others visited the local theatres and television stations, with visions of eventually expanding American entertainment options to a country where black and white televisions were still in the majority and government propaganda aired close to 24/7.

As the various trade groups returned to the hotel, Evans asked for individual reports, both written and verbal. He was more than pleased with the progress of the relations between the two countries. "This is why we came here," he boasted to Vanna. She nodded her head in agreement.

Richie had even grander hopes.

As the parties began to disperse to their rooms, in preparation for the evening dinner party, Richie spotted a friend among another group. It was Hector Villanueva.

"Hey, buddy," Richie called across the lobby.

Hector waved and motioned for him to meet him in the hotel bar.

Cristy, who was standing with Susan awaiting an elevator, saw Richie making a bee-line to the bar.

"You go ahead," Cristy said to Susan, as she broke away from the crowd waiting for the elevator. "I've gotta see what Richie is up to."

"Go for it," Susan agreed. "I'll be in my room."

Cristy was happy she was wearing flats, not heels, and slacks and a blouse, instead of a dress, as she literally sprinted across the lobby and skidded through the barroom door. After a quick search, she found Richie sitting with Hector, cigar in hand.

“You promised to have a drink with me,” Cristy semi-demanded. “Don’t you remember?”

Richie, blushing, but not amused with the interruption, asked Cristy to join them. Business with Hector would have to wait.

“And, who do we have here?” asked Hector, before Richie could introduce his friend.

Cristy, a bit out of breath, responded with a self-introduction in Spanish. Hector was surprised, pleased, and impressed.

“Remember, I know Spanish too,” Richie joked. “So, don’t try to slip anything past me.”

Drinks, laughs and pleasantries were dispersed, but Cristy could see Richie was annoyed that he could not “get down to business” with Villanueva.

Cristy, bothered by the cigar smoke, finished her glass of wine, then excused herself and headed for her room. She thought: “Villanueva is very kind and personable, but what connection do they have?”

Only time would tell.

*To be continued....*