

**Rating:** R for language and subject matter

## THE OTHER QUESTION

"Why didn't you ask her the other question?"

"I chickened out," Deaq replied in a low voice. "What did you think? Can't get into that lady's business. Why didn't you ask her?"

"You said *you* were going to!"

Billie listened for a few minutes before she let the door fall shut behind her, cutting off the voices. A smile tugged at her lips. They were so predictable, her guys. She'd been surprised for a moment when they called her back; had she misjudged them after all? Would they really have the courage to ask the questions that had been leaving blisters on their lips since she returned from her night out at the Girl Bar, a few days ago? But then Deaq said they wanted to know if she missed the undercover work, and Billie had let out a quiet sigh. She'd been right after all. For all their swaggering bravado, they were too chicken-hearted to ask her what they really wanted to know.

*Well, that wasn't totally fair*, she reprimanded herself while she tiptoed away from the door. Tiptoeing wasn't truly necessary; they never noticed she was listening and she could hear Van and Deaq bickering even through the thick wood. But caution was the better part of valor, and her high heels could make quite a racket on the asphalt. It wouldn't do for them to know she overheard their squabble.

Van and Deaq weren't lily-livered. Although the SWAT guys called her team *Billie's Pretty Boys* and looked down upon them for what they saw as making easy money, Billie knew for a fact that those machos in their body armor and kevlar helmets and H&K rifles were dead wrong.

Granted, Van and Deaq *were* pretty. But that was one of the reasons why her team was so successful: they didn't look like cops. They were chameleons, who fooled the mark with their attitudes, their flashy clothes, and the fast cars. The gangsters and drug-dealers they hunted failed to believe that this mismatched pair could be the law. If it looked like a rapsheet and acted like a rapsheet, it had to have a rapsheet, right? Nobody at the Candy Store was making easy money. Van Ray and Deaqon Hayes put their lives on the line every day to make the world a safer place. They were the good guys. If they weren't, she would have booted them out of the Candy Store so fast that it would make the Porsche Carrera resemble a golf cart.

So, calling them chicken-hearted wasn't even in the vicinity of fair, especially when you

took into account that a same-sex relationship was much harder to consider for a straight man than it was for a woman. The mere thought of sharing a kiss had Van and Deaq freaked for days, which, in itself, had been good for a couple of laughs on her part.

Of course, as improbable as the thought of two men sharing a kiss was, as alluring would be the idea of two women making out.

Billie had no idea why the male half of mankind did react the way it did, and quite frankly, she didn't care. Chalk it up to a Mars-and-Venus thing, and leave further analyzing to the shrinks and profilers. What mattered were facts. And the fact was Van and Deaq were dying to hear her stories. Those questions, which they didn't dare ask, were clearly legible in their eyes and on their faces. Was she a lesbian? What was it like? Did she enjoy it; what had they done? There was no doubt in Billie's mind that the duo's imaginations ran wild, enhancing her missing night with fantasies of long legs and curvy hips and full bosoms.

She chuckled as she put the key into the ignition and started her car. Their flights of fancy could never live up to reality.

The disk with the surveillance footage from the camera hidden in her purse, however, would.

Billie suppressed a yawn while shifting gears with one hand and turning the wheel to steer the car around a corner with the other. The one thing she regretted was that she was too tired and worn out to stick around and watch them find that disk. But then, she didn't need to watch. She knew how it would go down: Van and Deaq would spend long minutes agonizing over whether to watch it or not. They would argue back and forth, and weigh their options, until, finally, the temptation would prove too much. Boys will be boys, after all, and the opportunity to see pretty girls naked would be too good to pass up on.

If it were just Deaq, the scales could still tip in favor of propriety. But she could always count on Van. Any compunction the younger man might have about watching a confidential disk left so carelessly on her desk would dissipate like grease stains before the Shopping Channel's cleaning products once he read the tiny label stuck onto the surface of the jewel case: *CONFIDENTIAL. Surveillance records of Sara Matthews, 01/15/03.*

And come tomorrow, those questions they didn't dare ask would no longer be scorching their tongues, and her team would follow her every order, like meek little lambs.

Van waited until Billie reached the door. "Why didn't you ask her the other question?" He kept his voice low.

"I chickened out," Deaq said. "What did you think? Can't get into that lady's business. Why didn't you ask her?"

"You said *you* were going to!"

They argued for several more minutes, until they both tired of the word-banding. Billie wasn't going to answer such questions no matter what, so the who-should-asks and why-didn't-yous were moot anyway.

"Wanna go have a beer or something to celebrate?" Deaq changed the subject. "Inez is doing better, and we got the perps. Did you really send her a card?"

"Sure," Van said. He could go and have a beer with Deaq. They were buddies, after all. Partners. As long as they didn't end up in an all-girl bar with beefy bouncers who demanded they kiss. Van shuddered at the memory. "Just a sec." He grabbed the guitar (once the property of the late Jerry Garcia before it ended up in a truckload of stolen collectibles and Billie confiscated the instrument to be another item on the Candy Store's list of toys) by its neck. "Let me put this away first. You know how Billie gets when I let her treasures lay around."

Van walked across to the storage locker where he put the valuable guitar back in its case. He had no idea what sort of undercover role would require a six-stringed collector's item, but he loved to strum a couple of chords to wind down after a taxing job. Who knows, perhaps he might have to pose as a musician some day. Yeah, some rock-n-roll star on his way to top the Billboard Rock Charts. That'd be fun.

He engaged the lock and turned to walk back to his partner. Deaq was tapping one foot against the floor, impatient for his beer. From the corner of his eye, Van caught the reflection off of something on Billie's desk. That was weird. Billie's desk was always immaculate, spotless and without clutter, and he wondered if she ever used it to work at. Curious, he took a step closer. The object was a square, shiny box. A jewel case. A white sticker was pasted on the lower left corner. He squinted at the label. Confidential. That word alone would have been enough to pique his interest, but when his eye caught the next phrase, Van's breath caught in his throat. " Surveillance records of Sara Matthews." That was the chick they put away today, the lesbian-turned-burglar!

"Yo, Deaq, check this out!" he yelled.

Van picked up the case. His hands trembled. Surveillance footage of the Matthews girl; taped material of all those hours Billie'd spent at the lesbians' villa. What could those ladies have been up to, besides plotting how to clean out Van-the-dirtbag-husband? Oh shit. He couldn't believe his luck; he felt as if he'd just hit the jackpot.

"What you got?" Deaq ambled up beside him, curious despite his impatience to get out of the Candy Store and enjoy some downtime.

Without a word, Van handed him the case. He reached with his other hand to switch on Billie's computer.

"Woah..." Deaq breathed as he read the label. Then, panicked. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Van snatched the case back out of his partner's hands, opened it and took out the disk. "I'm gonna play it."

"Oh, no, you're not!" Deaq grabbed for the CD, and Van pulled it out of his reach, holding it behind his back. "Billie'd go ballistic on your ass if she found out you watched it. Man, she'd take your badge."

"Yup." Van's eyes were sparkling with excitement. "But the keyword here is *if*. *If* she finds out. Who's gonna tell her? You? You wouldn't roll on your partner, would you? I might miss my next hook shot. Would be bad news for your kneecap."

Deaq mumbled something below his breath.

Van slipped the CD into its slot. "C'mon dude," he pressed. "Don't tell me you don't want to see it. Billie and the lesbians? This could be the answer to all our questions. Besides, if she's careless enough to leave stuff like that about on her desk for all to see she can't really blame us for watching it, can she?"

"Oh hell," Deaq sighed. Clearly, he was torn between yielding to temptation and doing the right thing.

Van shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He pressed 'play' and waited for the CD to start spinning. The movie player opened and a black and white image filled the screen. Van leaned forward to see better. Definitely spy cam material, he decided. The image was grainy, jittery and not very sharp. He wondered dimly why Billie made the record in the first place.

The screen showed a spacious room, with a carpeted floor (the carpet being some dark color), curtained windows (the curtains a lighter gray) and a four-poster bed with a frilly spread in the center of the room. A large teddy bear slouched against the headboard. Judging by the angle of the picture, the camera had been placed on a drawer or table. The upper right hand corner was filled with a rectangular, dark blob. He couldn't make out what it was, since the object was so close to the lens that it was out of focus. Had the camera been placed a little more to the right, the footage would have been useless.

As it was...

"Hot damn," he mumbled.

"What is it?" Deaq appeared at Van's shoulder, shoving him to make room in front of the computer screen. Reluctantly, Van shifted a little, allowing his partner to take a look.

"Damn is right," Deaq agreed after the first glance.

Two women had wandered into the camera's field of vision. One was a blond, the other dark haired. Their hair was slicked back, damp, as if they just stepped out of the shower. Or perhaps out of that hot tub in the backyard. The fact that both women were wrapped in thick terrycloth towels and most likely not wearing anything else reinforced this assumption. Despite the blurry quality of the picture Van recognized them instantly.

"Is that...?" Deaq said.

"Yeah."

"And the other is..."

"Yeah."

"Sheez..."

The camera was apparently equipped with a lens only, because the video was lacking sound. But the two men didn't need sound to know that the two girls were giggling and whispering, the way their heads pressed together.

"Who do you think is going to top?" Deaq asked casually. He leaned closer down Van's shoulder.

Van didn't need to think it over. "That Sara chick, definitely."

Deaq made a dubious sound.

"I'm right, you just watch. You didn't see the look on her face when she threatened to blow my balls off. Bitch has butch written all over her."

"So has Billie," Deaq disagreed. "The way she can make you wilt with just a look--"

"Hey! I resent that!" Van protested. "And fifty bucks says it'll be the blond on top."

"Deal. Now hush. I wanna watch this."

Van suppressed a snort but turned his attention fully back to the screen. Not that his eyes had ever left it. His gaze, like his partner's, was glued to the pixels as if the secret to the universe could be found within.

The girls on the screen, in the meantime, swaggered across the room. Their hands were groping each other through the towels, and their lips pressed against one another while their legs made their own way to the bed. They reached the side of the four-poster and Billie pulled away from Sara. They exchanged a glance, and slowly, as if prolonging the moment for their audience, they tugged on each other's towels. Almost as one, the towels let go and slipped to the floor, revealing what the men already suspected: beneath the white cloth each girl was as naked as the day she was born.

"Yow!" Van slammed his fist on the table.

Deaq whistled in appreciation. "Oh man, I'm gonna need a long cold shower after this."

Van could only agree with his partner. Even without the body-hugging clothes Billie always wore, their boss was one fine looking lady. *Especially* without the clothes. Although, he admitted to himself, the Bitch was a vision for sore eyes too. Damn shame she had her priorities all messed up.

He let out another cheer, echoed by Deaq, when Sara ran a hand down from Billie's left shoulder and cupped a breast. Dimly, he realized that he and Deaq caused enough ballyhoo to make a football team proud -- their whistles and catcalls echoed around the empty Candy Store and bounced off the hoods of the cars. But he didn't care. And he never stopped to consider the wrongness of watching the footage. Perhaps later, when the surge of adrenaline had faded. But now? No. Live for the moment, right? After all, how many times in a man's life did this sort of opportunity come across? To see your female, incredibly bossy boss naked? Naked, and about to be ravaged by a blond, lesbian cat burglar?

Exactly never.

"Holy shit, this is hotter than The Playboy Channel at 1 AM." Van gasped for air.

"Aye." Deaq sounded as breathless as Van, like they had just gone several rounds in the ring with the gloves off.

On the screen, Sara drew back from her partner, and Billie leaned forward to nuzzle the blond's throat. She giggled, and pushed Billie away, gently yet firmly.

"See?" Van pointed. "Told you she'd be the one in charge."

"Hmm. You obviously haven't seen the glint in Billie's eye. She gets that same look when she is preparing to let you have it."

"What? You can't see no glint in her eyes. Picture is too damn shitty for that."

"We'll see," Deaq murmured. "We'll see."

A collective gasp escaped from the men when Sara turned away from Billie and looked straight into the camera. She walked toward the lens, filling the screen and growing larger as she approached until only her abdomen was visible. Then the camera lost focus, and with a disappointed sigh, the two men watched a pale, flesh-colored blur fill the screen.

The image shook.

"Oh god, please, no," Van pleaded in a whisper.

Apparently, someone was listening. The image steadied again, and a few frames later they had a perfect view of Sara's backside as the woman walked back to her partner.

"What's that she's got? Toys?" Van pointed and leaned forward, his nose nearly touching the glass of the monitor.

"Dunno. Can't really make anything out on this damn screen. This blurry stuff is giving me a headache."

Van chortled. "Thought you didn't want to watch in the first place?" However, dissatisfied with the quality of the video they were watching himself, he tore his eyes away from the girls on the screen and hit a couple of keys on the keyboard.

"Oh noooo!" Deaq howled. "You fucked it all up!"

Van's head whipped up and with a shock he noted that the entire screen had gone black.

"Undo it!" Deaq poked Van's shoulder.

"Ow!" Van protested. "Watch it, bro." He smacked several keys in a feverish hope it would reverse whatever he had messed up in the computer's settings. He heaved a deep sigh when the monitor lit up again.

Van decided to leave the keyboard alone, and not tempt the fates any longer. What did they say? Never look a gift horse in the mouth. The quality they got should be good enough.

"Did we miss anything?"

His attention shifted back to the screen.

Van's mouth dropped open. Contrary to his predictions, it was the blond, Sara, who lay on her back on the bed while Billie was straddling her. The teddy bear rested on its round muzzle on the floor, discarded and uncared for.

"Are those handcuffs?" Van's voice had lifted half an octave with shock.

"Looks that way. You owe me fifty bucks."

Van grunted and dug for his wallet.

"Later!" Deaq hissed. "I don't want to miss a second of this."

Billie had finished tying Sara up, and blindfolded her. The blond woman was writhing on the bed in unmistakable invitation. Billie ran a slow hand down the other woman's thighs and up her body, her teeth bare in a wicked smile. Van shivered. He knew that grin on her face. For an instant, he forgot that the blond was a law-breaking bitch who had threatened to de-man him, and felt sorry for her. She had no idea whom she was in bed with.

He chuckled. Make that literally.

"What's she doing now?"



Billie stepped away from the bed. Her back was turned to the camera, and since she was on the other side of the four-poster, it was hard for the guys to see what she was doing.

The mystery was solved when she turned back to face the camera.

Filled with horror, Van and Deaq recoiled.

"Woah... Is that what I think it is?"

Van gulped. "I always wondered how lesbians did it. I mean, they do lack some of the necessary equipment."

"Not any more, they don't." Deaq gasped audibly for breath. "Damn, that thing is humongous! Oh shit, this is bound to give me nightmares!"

White lettered words popped into view and overlaid the image of Billie wearing her strap-on. "Warning. Battery low. Warning. Battery low."

"Oh fuck, no!" Van yelled, shaking his fist at the screen.

Deaq moaned. "Please, not now. Not yet. C'mon baby. A few minutes more."

Beneath the blinking letters, Billie climbed back on the bed. She straddled Sara again. The dildo, which looked to be at least nine inches long, poked up and out from her hips. She shifted, preparing to spear Sara with its latex tip. The two men leaned forward, closing in on the screen until the picture blurred and they had to pull back an inch to keep the image in focus. Billie took a deep breath. Van and Deaq held theirs.

A sudden hiss filled the office.

Van blinked stupidly at the pixelized snow that swirled on the screen a few heartbeats before the movie player shut itself down.

Air left their lungs in a collective sigh. Van slumped in Billie's chair, and Deaq tottered backwards until he slouched against the wall that screened off Billie's office space. Silence reigned, broken only by the hum of the computer.

Van exchanged a look with Deaq. Deaq raised one eyebrow. Van's lips twitched. A giggle escaped him. And another, quickly changing to muffled guffaws, then full-blown, howling-his-ass-off laughter. An instant later, Deaq began to holler too. Again, the Candy Story was filled with noise.

At last, wiping tears from his eyes, Deaq gasped, "Fifty bucks, V. You owe me fifty bucks. Fork over."

Hiccuping with the last remnants of wordless mirth, Van dug up a fifty-dollar bill and handed it to Deaq. "Just promise me one thing: remind me to stay on Billie's good side."

"Yeah." Deaq put the bill away. "You wouldn't want Miss Bull Dyke to come after you with... with that fake johnson!"

Van shivered with revulsion, setting off another bout of laughter in his partner. "That was way too much information. She better never find out we saw this footage."

Deaq sobered instantly. "Let's put things back the way we found them."

They made short work of slipping the CD back in its case, shutting down the computer and replacing the disk exactly where Van found it.

"So, how 'bout that beer? Damned if we don't deserve one!"

oOo

Billie whistled the tune of Charlie's Angels while she opened the door and entered the Candy Story. Her heels clacked on the concrete as she briskly walked in. "Good morning!" she called in her most chipper voice.

Van and Deaq jumped up from their seats. "Morning, Billie," they said as one.

She let the silence stretch for a few seconds. Deaq studied his fingernails. Van met her eyes briefly before his gaze skittered away. Billie struggled to suppress the smile that threatened to curl her lips. Amazing. They could lie through their teeth when dealing with the toughest gangsters in LA, and yet here they were, looking guilty as hell. She was pleased though to find they hadn't let her down; they'd been incapable to resist watching the disk. And by the anxious looks on their faces, it had the desired effect. They would eat out of her hand. At least today, and possibly all of next week.

"So," she said, satisfied to see them both give a little start at the sound of her voice. "What was the other question?"

Van and Deaq exchanged a startled glance, and they looked everywhere except at her. Billie waited. At last Van glanced at her sideways. "Wha-- what other question?"

"The one you guys wanted to ask me. Last night. I heard you two arguing about Deaq not asking me the other question. What was it?"

Again, the two men exchanged a look, then proceeded to do that thing that she normally found so annoying but which today only amused her. With their eyes, minute dips of their heads and little flutters of their fingers they communicated, trying to encourage the other to take the plunge. Billie waited.

At last, Deaq took a deep breath. His eyes met hers briefly before darting away as if searching for inspiration. "Right. The other question..." He gulped, lifted his head and met her gaze head-on. "Billie, really... Wilhelmina?"

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