

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

UNTIL NEXT TIME

Xara X. Xanakas

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

UNTIL NEXT TIME

By Xara X. Xanakas

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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UNTIL NEXT TIME

By Xara X. Xanakas

Photo Description

A nude man has been bound with dark red ropes and hung, inverted, from the ceiling.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Fuck, this was supposed to be such a simple assignment. Get in, get the information and get the hell out. It should have been a piece a cake but I just couldn't resist getting a closer look at the guy. There's just something about him that sets me on edge. He was prey that I enjoyed stalking. Whether to kill or fuck I wasn't sure. How the hell did he get the upper hand? Instead of being the predator I'm suddenly the prey. I may be bound, but I'm never helpless. It seems I may have finally met my match, and I'm going to enjoy teaching him a lesson he'll never forget.

Sincerely,

Jen4607

PS. I'm hoping for some rough angry sex with confusing and unexpected tenderness. It doesn't need to be a HEA but a HFN would be nice. :)

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: bondage, private detective, criminal, abduction/stalking, two alpha-males, aftercare, excessive use of codenames, cat-and-mouse games

Word Count: 5,656

UNTIL NEXT TIME

By Xara X. Xanakas

“Let me get this straight: you want us to fly to New York just to go to a party where Spider may or may not be planning to steal something?” Hydra shook her head as she squeezed the apple-shaped stress ball she carried everywhere.

“Look, Boss, I know you have a hard-on for this guy, but this is a bit of a stretch,” Lucky said. Yeti snorted from his spot to Hawk’s left, and Gremlin turned a questioning glance. Hawk shook his head.

“He’s going to be there,” Hawk said.

Gremlin picked up the Tiffany-blue invitation Hawk had laid on the table before he launched into his proposal. He plucked at the white ribbon attached to it while he looked around the table. “How do you know? I mean, we’ve gotten lucky and crossed his path, nearly even caught him a few times over the last few years.”

“You’ve been chasing him for what, four years now?” Hydra asked.

“And that’s three and a half years longer than any relationship you’ve had with something that didn’t require batteries.” Gremlin ducked as Hydra threw the ball at his head.

“Fuck off. Remember that glory hole in Budapest? At least I don’t have to worry about splinters, asshole.”

Yeti and Lucky shuddered. Hawk was tempted to as well, as he remembered Gremlin screaming in pain when a doctor pulled the tiny shards of wood out one by one. He’d been so close to bringing Spider in that time, but he had to let him go to take care of Gremlin. He retrieved the ball from the floor and tossed it back to Hydra.

“Can we get back on track? We’ve got three days to pull everything together. Possible?” he asked to avoid all talk about how long he’d been chasing Spider around the world. It was closer to five years, but who was counting? Spider would mess up at some point, and Hawk intended to be there when it happened.

“You’ve already scored an invite, so we’re in. Lucky and I will join the catering staff,” Gremlin said. “As long as Hydra can get into their systems, the only real problem you’ll have is finding a suit big enough to fit Yeti so he can be your plus one.”

“What? None of you are volunteering to go with me?”

“Nope. Not after last time,” Lucky said.

“I still have nightmares,” Gremlin added.

“About splinters?” Hydra smiled at Gremlin before turning to shake her head at Hawk. “Sorry, boss-man, I’m more valuable keeping an eye on all the cameras.”

“You just don’t want to have to wear a dress.”

“That too,” Hydra said with a grin. She stood up and shut down her laptop and tablet. “I’ll go get started on the access we’ll need.”

“Keep me posted on your status. I’ll need a final go/no-go in the morning.”

“Anyone got eyes on our target?” Hawk asked quietly. A well-dressed woman looked at him as she walked by. He smiled at her and gave her a little wave. Their communication system was cutting-edge technology. Small, unobtrusive bone-induction mics were fitted into temporary bridges they wore on their back teeth, transmitting to tiny receivers fitted to each team member’s ear. Which was all well and good, except you looked like an idiot talking to yourself at a black-tie event.

“Not yet, Boss,” Hydra answered. She was set up on the roof. She’d already tapped into the building’s surveillance system to watch their cameras on one laptop. Another was connected to the city’s traffic cameras. She had at least three touch-screen tablets in her stash of tools.

“Ain’t seen him,” Yeti’s deep voice rumbled through their receivers, tickling the hair in Hawk’s ear. Yeti towered over everyone at the party, giving him a good vantage point to check out the crowd as he pretended to be interested in a socialite’s purse puppy.

“How can you be so sure he’s even going to show?” Gremlin asked. He was moving around the party with a tray of hors d’oeuvres. “I mean, it’s a Bat Mitzvah for some diplomat’s mistress’s poodle or something like that.”

“And that’s exactly why he’ll show. It’s a Bat Mitzvah. For a dog. It’s just the kind of show-off event that would appeal to him. Besides, did you get a look at that mutt’s collar? Trust me. He’ll show,” Hawk said.

“Got him,” Lucky whispered as he refilled champagne glasses at the bar in the back corner. “Near the door, greeting our hostess. White fedora.”

Hawk looked over at the happy couple, and their little dog. They were laughing along with the thief.

“That’s not a fedora. It’s a trilby. You can tell by the brim,” Yeti said.

“Technically, a trilby is a type of fedora,” Hydra added.

Hawk shook his head. “Thank you, fashion police. Obviously your talents are underutilized here.”

“But that scarf. It’s apricot,” Gremlin said.

“He’s so vain. I bet he thinks this op is about him,” Hydra said.

Gremlin started humming, off-key of course, over their comm system.

“That’s going to be stuck in my head all night now. Thanks for the earworm, nerdette,” Gremlin muttered.

“Enough. Can we move on with the task at hand?” Hawk asked. “Did anyone else catch him switching out the dog collar?”

“Yes, Boss. Even got it on film,” Hydra said. Hawk could almost hear her rolling her eyes.

“And where is he headed now?”

“West exit, last I saw,” Yeti said.

“Came through the kitchen to the service elevator,” Gremlin said.

“And now he’s smiling at the security camera, tipping that hat.” Hydra sounded annoyed.

“So we’re made.” It wasn’t really a question, and Hawk started for the back stairwell. He raced down the first four flights. “Where’s he stopping, Hydra?”

“Looks like sub-level two. Parking garage.”

Hawk pushed through the fire door on the ground level. “Which way?”

“Left. There’s a glass door leading to a valet station. The elevator stopped on two, but he’s still on it. Smiling at the damn camera. He really does know this op is about him.”

“Got it.” Hawk slowed down and casually walked out of the hotel and into the garage. The valet on duty approached him, but Hawk waved him off. “I think I’ll stretch my legs a bit.”

“Stairs are to your right, sir, just past the elevators,” the valet said.

Hawk nodded his thanks and tipped him.

Once he hit the stairs, he rushed down two floors. “You still got him?”

“Yep. The elevator is about to stop. You should have a visual in five, four. What the hell?” Hydra said.

“Hydra?”

“Hold the fuck on. Cameras just went dead.” Hawk could hear her cursing and the clacking of her keyboard as she tried to get the feeds back. “Gotcha. I think—” she started, but the rest of her words were cut off by a high-pitched squeal.

“Yeti? Anyone copy?” Hawk asked, as the doors opened in front of him. Spider was leaning against the back wall with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He grinned as he moved forward to close the space between them. He stopped a few steps away from Hawk and took something out of his pocket.

“I don’t think they can hear you,” he said, showing off a little black device.

Something moved in Hawk’s peripheral vision, and he turned in time to see a black van pull up behind him. The side door slid open, and a pair of arms grabbed him from behind.

“Easy now, Hawk. Don’t fight it,” Spider whispered, just before Hawk felt a pinprick in his neck.

“You bast—” he managed to get out before the world went black.

Hawk woke up slowly. His head pounded, and the world spun around him. He blinked a few times to adjust his vision for the low light in the room. He faced a dark wall, but the tall vase that stood in one corner didn’t look right. Hawk shook his head and looked around the room in confusion before he realized everything was upside-down. Soft tiles covered the floor, which floated above his head instead of under his feet. Looking down his body to see the ceiling disoriented him as he pulled on the dark red ropes that bound him.

About two feet of rope separated his wrists, but he still couldn’t move them.

A six-foot-long rod had been threaded between his elbows, bending his left arm awkwardly behind his back. The ropes crisscrossed around his hips and threaded back through bindings to create a harness that attached to a complicated pulley system secured to the exposed beams overhead. His legs were spread apart and bent at the knees, his calves tied to his thighs.

And he was naked.

“Fuck,” he mumbled, as he struggled against the restraints, causing him to spin around and swing back and forth a couple of times. He had to close his eyes to fight against a wave of nausea. “Big mistake.”

He took a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth to center himself before he opened his eyes again. No one was in the area with him, but he could see an outline through the thin paper room dividers as he spun around again. He heard footsteps behind him, and someone trailed a hand along his leg and down his back.

“You’re a lot bigger than the flies I usually catch in my web, Hawk.”

“Untie me, and I’ll show you just how big I am.”

Spider laughed. “Now where would the fun be in that?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure I’ll have a lot of fun once I’m down from here.”

“I’m sure you’ll have more fun just where you are.” Spider moved to stand in front of Hawk, dragging his hand around his hips and back up to the bindings on his thighs. “You like it this way, don’t you? Giving up control?”

Hawk tugged against the bonds again. “I really don’t.”

Spider brought one hand down hard on Hawk’s bare ass. Hawk grunted and swung helplessly. Spider took the chance to give him another smack. “Don’t lie.”

“What do you want?” Hawk’s muscles twitched as Spider rubbed the spot he had hit.

“What do *you* want is the question. You followed me from the party, remember?”

“You’re the one who brought me back here and tied me up.” He took a good look at Spider as he spun back around. He’d lost the jacket and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, but he was still fully-dressed. “Nice shoes. Not planning on staying around a while?”

“Just as long as you hang around.”

“Funny.”

“I do try.” Spider grinned as he pressed a hand flat on Hawk’s chest, making him sway a little. His head swam with the motion.

“Why don’t you skip to the chase and tell me what you’re planning on doing to me?” Hawk asked. He squirmed in the ropes again. “Since you went through all the trouble to get me here and everything.”

“I don’t know, Hawk. What do *you* think I should do with you now that I have you at my mercy?”

“I think you should suck my cock,” Hawk said, glaring up at him.

Spider narrowed his eyes and moved one hand to wrap his fingers tightly around the base of Hawk’s dick.

“All right,” he said with a shrug. He braced his other hand on Hawk’s hip to keep him steady while he sucked the head into his mouth. Hawk’s body jerked as Spider took him deeper, engulfing him in tight, wet heat.

“Jesus,” Hawk whispered. Spider hummed, and Hawk’s body jerked with the sensation. His head felt lighter as blood rushed to fill his cock. He panted as he tried to buck his hips, even though he couldn’t get any traction. Spider held him steady as he worked his cock to full hardness. Spider glanced down at him, smirking around Hawk’s cock. He hummed again, and Hawk groaned.

“I’m—” he started to say, but his head was fuzzy. He couldn’t figure out what he wanted to say. Black spots started to appear on the edges of his vision, and he couldn’t get enough air. Everything turned gray, and the last thing he was aware of was Spider pulling away from his cock and saying his name.

Hawk woke up facedown on a bed. The rod had been taken away to give the rope some slack between his wrists, but his legs were still bent, his calves still tied to his thighs, spreading him wide open. He stretched his arms above his head with a groan, before dropping his hands to rest on the back of his head.

Spider knelt behind him, massaging his shoulders. He put a wet cloth on the back of Hawk’s neck. “How are you feeling?” he asked quietly.

Hawk tried to say something, but his throat was too dry, so he shook his head.

"It's okay," Spider said, pressing a bottle of water and a couple of tablets into Hawk's hands. "Here. Take these."

Hawk took a minute to stare at the bendy straw sticking out of the bottle before he shook his head. "It's not going to knock me out again, is it?"

"No, they're just aspirin," Spider chuckled. He kept up the massage, digging into the sore muscles in Hawk's back. Every so often, he'd move down to Hawk's thighs and test the knots holding him in place. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been knocked out. Twice."

Spider winced. "Sorry about that. It took you longer to wake up than I thought it would. I was about to take you down when you came to."

"Maybe I would have woken up quicker if you started sucking my dick sooner," Hawk grouched. He took another sip of the water and relaxed into Spider's touch. "Do you plan to let me go any time soon?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what?" Hawk watched Spider as he got up from the bed and moved across the room. He was keenly aware that Spider was still dressed, hadn't even loosened his tie while Hawk was unconscious. He groaned when Spider pulled that damn scarf— *apricot*, his mind helpfully supplied, along with those damn lyrics— out of his pocket.

"Why were you following me?"

"Why do you think? I knew you'd show up there to steal something."

"You have such a low opinion of me?"

"No, I just know you too well." Hawk arched his back to stretch his muscles and lift his ass higher. He smirked as Spider's gaze followed the motion.

Spider smiled as he approached the head of the bed. Hawk stared at him until he covered Hawk's eyes with the scarf. Then he crawled onto the bed to cover Hawk's body with his own. He pulled the scarf tight and knotted it behind Hawk's head. Then he took Hawk's wrists to stretch his arms out and hook the rope between them on something in front of him. Hawk didn't look closely enough before he was blindfolded to know if it was on the wall or the headboard. He didn't really care by that point.

"So, now what do you plan to do with me? Or to me?" he asked as Spider settled down on top of him.

“Whatever I want,” he whispered, his breath fanning over Hawk’s ear, making him shiver. “Got any suggestions?”

“Kiss my ass?”

“As you wish.”

Hawk hissed as the cool metal of Spider’s belt buckle dragged down his spine, making him even more aware of his own nudity. His exposed skin pebbled as Spider slid down his body to settle between Hawk’s legs. He pictured him kneeling there, fully clothed, in contrast to Hawk’s bound, naked body.

“Like this?” Spider asked, as he placed a gentle kiss to his cheek. “Or more like this?” He leaned over to bite down on the other one. Hawk groaned and pushed his ass higher. Spider chuckled and smacked Hawk’s ass before grabbing both cheeks to spread them apart. He rubbed his thumbs along the inside of Hawk’s crack.

“No, this is what you wanted,” he said, before licking a long stripe from the base of Hawk’s balls straight up to the base of his spine. He moved back down to run his tongue flat against Hawk’s hole. Hawk moaned and pushed back as best he could. Spider took the hint, buried his face deeper in Hawk’s ass, licking at his opening, and nibbling the tender skin around it before working his tongue just inside the tight ring. He kneaded Hawk’s cheeks as he licked him, moving his thumbs closer together until he could slide one in to spread him open further.

“Fuck me,” Hawk moaned, as he yanked on the restraints and tried to work his legs under himself. Spider chuckled and sat back on his heels.

“You are one bossy bottom,” he said, moving one hand away from Hawk’s ass. Hawk heard a soft click a second before something cold and slick dribbled along his crack. Spider worked the lube in, pushing two fingers in all the way to the knuckles. Hawk gritted his teeth and grunted at the feeling as Spider pulled them almost all the way out before shoving them back in, again and again.

“Just do it already if you’re going to.” The ropes chafed along his balls, but his cock was hard. Spider twisted his hand as he pumped his fingers in and out. Hawk moaned constantly as Spider finger-fucked him, curling his long, thick fingers every so often to deliberately tease him, just grazing over his prostate, then pressing against it. “Please,” he whispered, on one particularly hard push.

Spider’s hands pulled away, and Hawk whimpered at the loss of contact.

“Okay. I’ve got you. You’re all right,” he said quietly, as he brought one hand up to rub gentle circles on Hawk’s back. His clothes rustled and brushed against Hawk’s thighs. He tried not to whine when the bed rose as Spider stood up. “Hey, I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to be right here next to you, okay?”

“Okay.” Hawk nodded, embarrassed at how much he missed Spider’s body holding him down.

“I’ve just got to,” he started saying before he stopped. The slide of his zipper was loud in the quiet room. Hawk groaned and lifted his hips. “Do you want to watch this, Hawk?”

“Oh yeah,” he sighed. “I wanna see.”

“Okay.” He felt Spider move to his side, and the scarf was pulled off. He blinked a couple of times as the light blinded him. Spider rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it lightly. “Easy there. Keep your eyes closed for a few seconds.”

“I’m good,” he said, as he looked up. Spider opened the third button on his shirt to tuck his tie into it before refastening it. He smiled down at Hawk as he reached into his open fly to pull out his cock. It wasn’t quite as long as Hawk’s, but he was thicker, and uncut. The head was flushed a deep red and slick with precum. Hawk licked his lips and shot a glance back up to Spider’s face.

“See something you like?” he asked, as he threaded his fingers in Hawk’s hair and pulled him forward a little. He grabbed the base of his cock with his other hand and rubbed the head over Hawk’s lips. Hawk flicked his tongue out and tried to suck it into his mouth, but Spider held him back. “No teeth.”

“Just—” Hawk said, but whatever he was going to say was cut off when Spider pushed his cock into his mouth. He hollowed out his cheeks and sucked in as Spider pulled back out.

“Christ, your mouth,” he groaned, as he pumped into the suction of Hawk’s mouth a few times before pulling out completely. “So fucking good.” He caressed Hawk’s cheek and ran a thumb over his bottom lip. Hawk wanted to whine, but Spider shook his head. He turned to pick up a condom off the table.

Hawk kept his gaze on Spider’s hands as they ripped open the package. One hand moved to stroke his cock a few times before he fitted the condom over the head and rolled it down his length.

“Still want this?” he asked, looking down at Hawk.

“Fuck yeah,” Hawk said, staring at Spider. He always looked so put together, but now the crease on his pants had flattened over his thighs, and his shirt was wrinkled. He inhaled deeply, but he still couldn’t catch his breath, and his eyes were dark with lust. The image he presented now, with his hard cock standing out from his pants, his balls pulled forward through the opening, made Hawk moan. He’d done that. *He’d* turned Spider into a rumpled mess. That thought made him want it even more. He nodded enthusiastically, lifting his ass in the air. “Fuck me. Now.”

“Pushy,” Spider chuckled, as he moved back around the bed. He tested the ropes securing Hawk’s legs. “How are you feeling?”

“I’d be better if you’d get on with it.”

Spider brought a hand down hard on Hawk’s ass before running a finger under the rope where it went between Hawk’s thighs. Hawk felt his breath as he bent over to look at the rope burn. “Is this bothering you?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Would you tell me if it wasn’t?”

Hawk chuckled. “Probably?”

“That’s not reassuring me.” Spider took a step away from the bed.

“It’s fine. I’ll let you know if it gets to be too much, all right?”

Spider stepped closer and knelt between Hawk’s legs. “It’ll have to do, I guess.”

“Good. Now get the fuck on with it,” Hawk said, earning another smack to his ass. He grinned over his shoulder at Spider and wiggled his ass. Spider rubbed his cock against Hawk’s hole but waited until Hawk met his gaze. He didn’t move until Hawk gave him a slight nod. Then he slammed his hips forward, burying himself to the hilt with one movement. “Fuck!” Hawk hissed.

Spider set a relentless pace, pulling back and shoving in, fucking Hawk hard and fast. Hawk yanked hard on his restraints, trying to brace himself against Spider’s thrusts, but he didn’t have enough give to get any leverage. He growled and rocked back against Spider, forcing him deeper.

“Fuck, Hawk,” Spider groaned and leaned over Hawk’s body. “So fucking good for me. Can you come like this? Just from being fucked hard and fast?”

Hawk’s breath was punched out of him as Spider lifted his hips and fucked

him harder. The change in angle hit Hawk's prostate, and Hawk's body convulsed under Spider as he came with a shout. Spider dug his fingers into Hawk's hips as he fucked Hawk through his orgasm.

"Fuck. You are so fucking tight. You're just sucking my cock in, squeezing the fuck out of it. Fuck!" he shouted. His hips stuttered as he came. He collapsed onto Hawk's back to catch his breath. "Jesus, that's fucking hot," Spider whispered.

Hawk smiled into the pillow, silently agreeing with him.

Spider wrapped a hand around the base of his cock to hold the condom in place as he eased it out of Hawk. Then he moved to sit on the edge of the bed and pull the condom off to drop it into the trash can next to the nightstand. He opened the drawer to take out a couple of towels and a bottle of massage oil. Light flashed off a knife, and Hawk flinched slightly. Spider squeezed his arm to reassure him before he wiped his hands with a towel. Then he tucked himself back in and zipped his pants back up.

"I'm going to start untying you now. Just let me take care of everything, okay?" He unhooked Hawk's hands and passed him another bottle of water. Hawk took a big sip and closed his eyes. Spider didn't bother with the knots; he carefully cut the ropes binding one of Hawk's legs, holding it in place as he kneaded the muscles.

"Let me know if you get any cramps." He carefully massaged Hawk's muscles with the oil. By the time he was finished, Hawk was nearly asleep. "You still with me?" he asked, as he ran his fingers through Hawk's hair.

"Sort of?" Hawk grinned. Spider laughed and pulled the sheet up to cover Hawk before he crawled onto the bed behind him. He wrapped his arms around Hawk's waist and pulled him close. Hawk patted his hand and yawned. "Head still hurts a little."

"Sorry about that," Spider said as he leaned in to kiss Hawk's temple. "We won't invert you next time."

"Next time, you're the one getting tied up."

"Like you did in Barbados? You'll have to catch me first. This makes three times in a row I've caught you. I'm beginning to think you like it this way."

"I'd have caught you tonight, but you cheated."

“Not cheating. All’s fair,” Spider mumbled, as he snuggled into the pillow. “You know what this weekend is?”

Hawk smiled and nodded, surprised Spider was bringing it up. “Five years.”

“Yeah.”

“One of these days, one of us is going to have to quit our job. We can’t keep doing this,” Hawk said with a sigh.

“Maybe. We’ll BASE jump off that cliff when the time comes. Now shut up and rest for a bit.”

“You shut up.” Hawk grumbled, but he closed his eyes and drifted off.

Hawk woke up to an empty bed, as he expected. His clothes were hanging on a hook on the back of the door. A note on the pillow next to him told him the room was paid for, and he could take as much time as he needed. He stretched, feeling the burn in his muscles, and it took him a couple of tries to stand.

“Whoa,” he muttered, as he shuffled to the bathroom. A long, hot shower helped soothe his muscles and went a long way to making him feel human again. Then he dressed and went outside to catch a cab. He had missed his flight home with the rest of his team, but he found a one-way first-class ticket back to Chicago in his jacket pocket.

He beat everyone into the office Monday morning. He found an envelope waiting on his desk when he got there. It had “*Until next time...*” written in Spider’s elegant scrawl on the front, along with a small drawing of the Golden Gate Bridge in one corner.

After he made a pot of coffee, he settled at his desk to watch the window washers on the high-rise across the street. His own building was an old brownstone, with clear windows set into brick arches along the front, not one of the shimmering reflective beasts that filled the downtown area. He absently ripped the envelope open to find the dog collar gleaming inside. Hawk grinned as he pulled it out to look at it in the light.

The door to his offices opened, and he heard his staff filing in for the day.

“We have to go back and look for him,” Hydra was saying.

“He could be anywhere,” Gremlin said. “We need to follow protocol. He’ll surface.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Lucky asked.

“Protocol is there for a reason,” Yeti said. “He’ll surface when he finishes whatever took him off the grid.”

Hawk smiled and let the sounds of his team bickering wash over him for a few minutes before he called out to them.

“Get your asses in here,” he yelled, and the team rushed in, all shouting questions about his weekend.

“What happened to you?” Lucky asked.

“Where the hell were you?” Hydra demanded to know.

“Following a lead.” He tossed the collar to Yeti. “Here. Return this, and get the reward. Give my share to a no-kill shelter.”

“You got it, Boss,” he said with a smirk. Yeti knew he had something going with Spider, but he had the discretion to not say anything to the rest of the team. As long as no one got hurt, and their games didn’t interrupt his cash flow, he’d keep covering for Hawk’s interludes.

“Must have been some lead,” Gremlin said, shaking his head.

“It was,” Hawk agreed, ignoring Yeti’s grin. “Now, we’ve got some work to do. Get me a list of possible targets in San Francisco.”

“Why San Francisco?” Hydra asked.

“Let me guess: you’ve got a hunch?” Lucky asked.

Hydra already had a browser window open on the tablet she carried. “Looking for anything specific?”

“You know the pattern: something semi-public, opulent, and temporary.”

“So flashy, trashy, and dashy. We’re on it.”

The team took off to start pulling their next case together, and Hawk looked back across the street to find one of the window washers looking in his direction.

“Until next time, Spider,” he whispered.

The washer nodded and raised one hand in a half salute, half wave before he

hopped over the side of the scaffold and slid down the rope to the street. Once both feet were down, he stripped off his coveralls and blended into the mass of people on the sidewalk. Hawk shook his head and smiled.

“Until next time,” he repeated.

The End

Author Bio

Xara X. Xanakas decided years ago to embrace her weirdness. A friend first described her that way to the man who's been her husband for over twenty years. That formula fits her, and she figures if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Being Texan, her crush on cowboys comes natural, but the techie in her loves to show nerds a good time. She relishes all things different, and brings saucy style to her writing. Whether wrangling a wayward ranch hand or adding another critter to her were-menagerie, Xara strives to make the outlandish appealing. She'll make you quirk a brow and snort with laughter, and that's all right by her. Xara believes that unique is best and happily ever after is the icing on the cookies.

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