

Angels With Weapons.

Part One.

A fairytale wedding....

Lola Davis stood in front of the mirror, excitement coming off her in warm waves of the light, floral scent she loved. Barely able to keep still, she half-turned, opening and closing her fingers over delicate lacy gloves, shaking her head to watch the dark curls tumble around her face.

“Keep still, honey,” her mother begged through a mouthful of pins as she tried to keep hold of the material in her hand.

Lola grinned “Sorry.” She stood very still while her mother made the last minute adjustments to her wedding gown. “You know, I can't believe it, not even now!”

“Well it's happened in kind of a hurry, I'm not surprised,” Megan observed, pushing the final pin into place. “Right, now if you can bear to take it off while I finish?”

“Alright,” Lola sighed, and slipped out of the dress pulling a terry robe on quickly against the November chill.

“Isn't he just a dream though?” She sat happily on her bed watching her mother's nimble fingers sewing quickly, taking in the seam at the back to accommodate Lola's loss of weight.

“Oh yes, he's a dream alright,” Megan smiled. “Very good looking.”

“But he's not just that, he's so gentle,” Lola explained, as if her mother had never heard it before. “He's a complete angel!”

“He'd better be!” Megan pointed out curtly. “You're very young to be marrying at all, let alone a man almost twice your age.”

“Yeah, yeah, so you said,” grumbled Lola, but her grey eyes still sparkled with happiness. “I know him though, Mom, and you've only met him a few times. We're made for each other, so there's no point in waiting is there?”

Megan concentrated on finishing off the dress, and listened to her only daughter prattling on about her husband-to-be, enjoying the girl's excitement, and hoping that she was doing the right thing.

Lola had brought Barry home less than four months ago, and Megan had been surprised to see that he was in his early forties; Lola was just twenty three. It was easy to see he was used to winning people over, as a politician he needed to be, and he certainly spoke to her with respect. His blue eyes and greying hair added to the old world charm he possessed and Megan was oddly touched when, in the absence of Lola's father he asked her for her daughter's hand in marriage. Still, there was something about him that ...

Megan shook the doubts away. She was being foolish; it was simply a built-in mistrust of men in general and politicians in particular - thank goodness her own father had passed on some years ago, she thought with a tiny smile.

“What's funny?” Lola asked, breaking into her train of thought.

Megan held the newly stitched dress out for inspection. “I was just wondering what your Grandfather would say if he knew you were marrying a politician.”

Lola grinned. “We *know* what he'd say,” she pointed out, and they both assumed cracked voices and stamped their feet.

“Never trust 'em, never trust 'em an *inch!*” they said in unison, and laughed.

“But I do, to the ends of the Earth,” Lola sighed, stepping into the beautiful white gown once more, and pulling it up over her creamy underwear. She turned to allow Megan to fasten the hooks and eyes at the back, and together they gazed at her reflection in the mirror.

“You look absolutely beautiful, sweetheart,” murmured Megan. She felt tears pricking at the back of her eyes, and swallowed hard; her little girl was a grown woman, a lovely young woman, who was about to embark on her own journey through life. More than anything Megan wanted to be able to walk beside her on that journey, to be there when she stumbled, as she inevitably would, to see every smile and dry every tear, to make everything perfect. But she had to let her go.

Lola advanced slowly down the aisle on the arm of her uncle Garth, the cold Chicago wind outside had whipped colour into her cheeks and fluffed her hair under the tiny coronet which perched on the back of her head - there were audible murmurs in the congregation at how beautiful she looked, but she had eyes only for the man at the altar. He turned and smiled, and her heart melted as it always did.

As she passed a pew she felt a hand touch her arm gently and glanced to the side; Jason, her best friend since kindergarten, now married to the stunning Rosanna. For a while both families had been sure that she and Jason were destined to be together, but they had drifted apart for just long enough that the spell had been broken

between them, and now the friendship that remained was something she would treasure forever.

He grinned at her as she passed him, pulling a face to make her giggle and she quickly looked away, but not before giving him a swift punch on the arm, hiding her smile as she cast her face downward. He would always be there for her, she knew, but Barry was waiting to take her as his wife, and Barry was the one she had allowed into her heart forever.

When the couple emerged into the bright daylight outside, it felt as if they had been in the church for hours rather than the forty minutes it had taken. The photographs, were taken, the thanks and congratulations, the excited chatter... all of it buzzed past Lola's head without her really taking any of it in.

All she was aware of was hanging onto Barry's arm, feeling his solid strength beside her as he greeted guests; friends and strangers alike with the practiced ease of a born politician.

A couple of times she glanced around, just to make sure Jason was still there, and he caught her eye, giving her a thumbs up sign, his arm permanently around the waist of his own young wife. She didn't get the chance to speak to him until much later, when Barry had gone to talk to a colleague, and Rosanna was in conversation with Megan.

"Hey," he appeared at her elbow as, for the first time that long, long day she was actually standing alone. "Thought you might like this." He handed her a glass of white wine.

"Thanks." She took the drink and, remembering his attempt at mild sabotage during the service, dipped her finger in it and flicked it in his face.

“Thanks!” he grinned, wiping the tiny drop from his forehead, and pretending to flick it back.

“You're welcome.” They stood in companionable silence for a while, saying nothing.

“So, happy?” he asked eventually, his green eyes suddenly serious as he looked directly at her.

“Of course! Can't you tell?” she laughed at his tone, but he didn't return her smile.

“I can tell you're proud; he's a good looking, powerful guy, but are you *happy*?” he insisted.

Lola frowned. “What kind of a question is that? This is my wedding day!” Her tone sharpened and Jason looked away, she couldn't tell if he was looking for Rosanna or just avoiding her gaze which she knew could burn if she wanted it to - and right now she did.

“I dunno, I guess I shouldn't even be saying this - forget it,” he muttered. He put an arm around her shoulder and hugged her. “I'm just being the big brother you used to need when we were kids. I'm sorry.”

She slipped an arm around his waist, hugging him back, forgiving him immediately; he had always looked out for her, she shouldn't blame him for doing it now.

“I'm happy,” she assured him, and she was. Completely. Barry was her angel, and if he had the odd tense moment then so what? Everyone had bad days.

Barry came back a few minutes later, and Lola was taken aback by the cool look in his eyes as he glanced at Jason. They didn't know each other, but he knew that her best friend in the world was male, and she introduced them quickly so that he wouldn't think she was flirting.

Of course, Jason was nearer her own age and staggeringly good looking - naturally Barry might feel threatened if he misunderstood their relationship.

“Barry, this is Jason. I told you about him.” she said, tucking an arm into her new husband's. The expected thaw did not cross Barry's face, but he inclined his head with his usual politeness, skilfully turning Lola so that she faced in the other direction.

“I'd like you to meet someone,” he said, leading her away. She glanced back at Jason apologetically, and was hurt to see the venomous look directed at Barry's back. Jason saw her and fixed a smile onto his face, but she could see it was an effort.

“I'll call you,” she called back to him, and his expression relaxed a little, tightening again as Barry hissed quite audibly,

“I don't think that's quite appropriate now that you're married, do you?”

Sometime later, Lola was released from her introduction to Barry's colleague and Rosanna came and kissed her cheek.

“Jason's out in the car waiting, we're leaving now. Congratulations, Lola, you make a gorgeous bride, thanks for inviting us. I'm sure you'll be very happy together.” The words were smoothly delivered, but Lola caught a glimpse of a shadow on Rosanna's face as she turned to leave. What on Earth was the matter with her and Jason? And her mother as well, although to a lesser extent.

Of course, Megan had been much more subtle about her reservations, and had spent a long while talking to Barry this evening. But even Uncle Garth had taken her small hands in his large, calloused ones, pressing them to make her look him in the eye as he asked her the same question Jason had asked so seriously; are you happy?

As the evening wore on Lola grew tired; it had been such a long day, she wanted nothing more than to tumble into bed. Her eyes misted as she thought about being with Barry again that night.

They had made once love before, and he had touched her as if she were made of crystal; so gentle had he been with her, his smile warming her as she lay beside him afterwards. That had been the night he proposed to her, the night he had decided they should abstain from lovemaking until they were married in case it jeopardised his career.

It had all happened just a few short months ago, but it seemed as if she had been waiting so much longer now that their time had finally come. Seeing him now, leaning against the door jamb talking to yet another professional friend of his, she took a deep breath and approached him slowly from the front, so he could see her coming and not feel she was sneaking up on him. He hated that.

“Sorry to interrupt, Barry - can we leave soon?” she asked, and as his face swung around to answer her she saw something in his expression that startled her even as it faded and he smiled, his blue gaze tender again.

“Of course, my darling,” he told her. “I’ll finish up here, you go and tell everyone who needs to know.”

“Well sure, but...don’t you think we should say goodbye together?” she asked a little timidly, still not sure what she had seen flicker in his eyes.

“Oh, alright,” he grinned companionably at his friend. “What can you do when you marry a nag?” he joked, and the other man laughed. Lola wasn't sure that it *had* been entirely a joke though, and she tensed slightly as Barry took her arm and together they circulated the room, saying their goodbyes. Soon, to her relief, Barry became his

old, charming self and the annoyance she had caused him by dragging him away from the party quickly melted away.

The car had been sprayed and decorated as per tradition, and Barry and Lola drove away with much waving and yelling. Settling back in the passenger seat, Lola remembered the look of mingled pride and sadness on her mother's face as they hugged goodbye.

"I'll just be a few miles away," Lola had told her with a smile, and Megan nodded, knuckling tears from her eyes nevertheless. It had been a sad moment, but Lola, glancing sideways at the man beside her, felt bouyant and excited at the prospect of life as his wife.

Part two.

A rude awakening...

Two months passed, and Lola had barely seen Barry. He worked long hours at the office, and after dinner he worked late at his computer at home and Lola often went to bed alone. She had given up her PA job at his request, and found that all the free time she could ever want began to lose its appeal rather more quickly than she had expected. She had to do something or go crazy.

“Why don't you work for me?” Jason asked her out of the blue one day. He had dropped around, as had become his habit on occasion, and they sat drinking coffee and watching the snow drifting down, covering the garden and softening its harsh edges.

“Doing what?”

“Well, I don't know,” he shrugged. “I could use a publicist.”

She sat up, enthusiasm firing. “Really? Sure, I'd love to do stuff like that.”

“Stop by the studio tomorrow morning if you like, we'll thrash something out.”

“Great!” Lola leapt up, pacing the floor like an excited parent-to-be. “I could design flyers, write some content for your website, even a biography!”

“Sounds good to me,” agreed Jason, finishing up his drink and putting the empty mug on the table. “So how was Christmas?”

“What Christmas?” Lola tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice as she sat down again. “I saw Mom on Christmas eve, but Barry doesn't like to go visiting, or to have

people in. I guess it's maybe the age difference, but we couldn't agree on anything to do, or even what to watch on TV."

"It'll be different when you have kids," Jason assured her, "They'll bring him back to life."

"Speaking of kids," Lola changed the subject quickly, before he could ask any more about her private life. "When are you and Rosanna going to get started?"

"Not for a while, but we definitely want them. At least three."

"You sound very sure about it."

"Of course we are, aren't you?"

"I am, but I don't know about Barry," Lola admitted.

"You mean you didn't discuss it before you got married?"

Lola dropped her gaze to her lap, twisting her fingers together - how had it got back to her and Barry again already? "We didn't really have time," she said quietly.

"Anyway, I'm sure he'll want them, he's a politician, they love kids, don't they?" She looked up again and grinned, unwilling to admit how pleased she was whenever Jason dropped by.

It didn't matter that he was married to someone else, they both knew that nothing would ever part him and Rosanna, but just to have company - it bothered her that her own company bored her so much. And it also bothered her that she didn't look forward to Barry coming home the way she had thought she would.

His mood swings were getting to be a cause for tension, and when she heard his key in the lock every day, she would find that she was holding her breath until she discovered what kind of mood he was in.

After Jason had left, she sat back in the cushiony sofa, smiling at the thought of going out to work again, and for a musician too - how perfect! She was so engrossed in her plans for the next day that she didn't hear the door open, and jumped as she felt a hand on the back of her neck.

"Hey, sweetheart." Barry bent to kiss her and she felt her heartbeat return to normal; he was in a good mood, thank God. "What's for dinner? I don't smell anything."

"Oh!" Lola's hand flew to her mouth. "I'm sorry, I haven't...."

Barry stepped back, removing the warmth of his hand from her skin.

He scowled. "Dammit, Lola, the one thing I expect from my wife when I get home from work - it's not like you have anything else to do." That was how quickly it happened these days; one moment all sweetness and gentle kisses, the next moment his face had turned an ugly red and he was stalking to the drinks cupboard.

"I'll get started now, it won't take long." Lola hurried from the room as Barry poured a large tumblerful of dark whiskey.

He followed her into the kitchen and leaned against the worktop as she began selecting vegetables. "So, who visited?" he asked, his voice calm, but his eyes glittering as they tracked her every move.

"Huh?" Lola played for time, knowing that Barry would never approve of her having male visitors during the day, and frantically trying to think of a lie.

"Two cups, sweetheart. On the coffee table." Barry's voice was reasonable, his tone light, but the edge was there, and Lola couldn't think of a reply quickly enough before he guessed.

"Was it your "friend" the music boy?" he asked with a slight sneer.

She nodded, then gasped as he slammed down his glass, took a step across the room and seized her wrist. "I thought we understood each other," he said, turning her face up to meet his. "You and he don't see each other anymore, it could hurt my career to have people laughing at me behind my back, I *won't* put up with it."

"I, I don't know what you mean ... no-one's laughing at you," she stammered, horrified at the way he was gripping her. "Barry, please, you're hurting me...."

He let her go, stepping back and picking up his glass again. Lola rubbed her reddened skin and avoided his gaze.

"If word gets out that you're making a fool of me I'm finished." Barry swallowed the contents of the tumbler in one mouthful. "I won't have it, do you hear me?"

Lola knew she shouldn't argue, but her indignation began to build as she thought about the way he had treated her.

She threw down the peeling knife and faced him angrily. "How *dare* you grab at me like that? I've done nothing wrong, and no-one's making a fool of you except you. I'm your *wife*, Barry, not some little tart you can order around. I deserve better than that from you!"

As she looked at him, his face drained of all colour, and Lola's heart began to pound horribly as she realised she had overstepped the mark. Before she could stammer out an apology he was beside her again, and this time he had seized both arms above the elbow, almost lifting her off her feet as he brought his face in close to hers.

He smiled an empty, mocking smile. "Let's get this one thing straight right now, shall we?" he began in a companionable tone, "I pay for your keep, I buy you nice clothes, you live in this big house of mine. So you *will* do as you're instructed, and

you'll do nothing that will risk my career. You'll have whatever you want from me, but you will *not* - I repeat, Lola Chandler, you will *not* - answer me back ever. *Ever!* Do. You. Hear?"

He shook her and her teeth clacked together painfully. Unable to do anything in the face of such fury, she merely nodded and blinked rapidly to clear her eyes of their angry, bewildered tears. Barry let her go then, and without waiting to see her response he left the room. A moment later she heard the front door slam and the car start up in the driveway.

He had gone out, goodness only knew for how long, and Lola had her hand on the telephone to call her mother before she realised that there was nothing to tell her. This was just a marital spat that was all, Barry had had a tough day and she had failed to be a good wife just when he needed her. It was her fault, and nothing to bother her mother with.

With trembling fingers, Lola peeled and sliced the vegetables, her mind whirling as she tried to figure out just what had gone wrong. Barry had been so gentle with her before their marriage, so tender when he spoke of his love for her - she sighed; he had just snapped, that was all, and it more than likely had nothing to do with her, she had just reacted wrongly at the wrong moment. It would pass, just like his previous bouts of ill temper.

Dinner was in the oven keeping warm when he returned three hours later, and right away Lola knew she had been right to trust him.

He came straight up to her, still wearing his coat, and gave her an enormous bunch of flowers. "Darling, I'm so sorry, I don't know what I was thinking," he said, pulling her close. Thankfully, she rested her head against his shoulder.

“It’s okay, I shouldn’t have ...” *shouldn’t have what?* She wondered, thinking again that what she had done wasn’t so terrible, but now wasn’t the time. “I should have thought more about you,” she finished. “Did you have a terrible day?”

“Terrible,” he agreed, taking the flowers from her and tossing them onto the couch.

“Now why don’t you run me a nice hot bath and I’ll try and make it up to you?”

Joyfully, immeasurably relieved, Lola ran upstairs to run a bath for her returned husband.

Part three.

A search for independence

Jason didn't call to ask why she didn't show up for the job, and Lola was glad; on the surface it had seemed like a great idea but there was no way Barry would countenance her working for *him*, especially since he had forbidden her to even see him. Still, she hankered after something to do during the day, something other than the endless charities and tennis clubs that other politicians' wives tried to engage her in.

She and Barry were going through a calm, sunny patch, and she reasoned he had merely been worried about her suitability to this public life, that was all. Nothing must jeopardise his career, especially now it was climbing so quickly.

But she had faithfully provided for his every wish, had curbed her naturally rebellious tongue, had been meek and subservient to the point it was almost laughable, so surely now she had earned the right to seek her own career again?

Right, then. She would go out there and find something to make her what she knew she could be, what she *used* to be. Sometimes she hardly recognised herself in the woman that Barry had created, she needed to rediscover the old familiar Lola.

The snow had given way to watery sunlight on the February morning she made her decision. Making sure that dinner was prepared and merely had to be heated up when she got home, she dressed in a long, bright red woollen coat with a black hat and gloves, slipping her feet into her heaviest black boots and glaring determinedly at her reflection in the mirror.

“Go get ‘em, girl,” she told herself, and set out to find her life again.

By lunchtime she had decided she didn’t want to work in a shop, she didn’t want to waitress, and had found no suitable PA jobs. Still, she enjoyed simply being out searching and her happily wandering feet brought her, at a little after one in the afternoon, to the recording studio where she knew Jason would be today. Without really thinking about it, she glanced over her shoulder to make sure she hadn’t been recognised by anyone who might pass the word to Barry, and slipped inside the door, taking her hat off in the warm reception area.

Before she could open her mouth to speak to the receptionist, a door swung open at the far end of the room.

“Lola! What are you doing here? It’s so great to see you!”

“Hi, Jason, just thought I’d stop by and catch you playing hookey!” she grinned.

“Now what can you mean?”

“Come on, we all know you don’t actually do any work,” she goaded.

“No? You want to come in and see how much work I don’t do?”

“Hell, yeah.” She took his arm and he led her back through the door he had entered from and into his own studio.

An hour later she was totally swept up in the whole thing. She sat, enraptured while he sang two backing tracks to be added to the lead vocal he had recorded that morning, and wondered how she had forgotten the depths of his talent.

“So have you changed your mind about working for me?” he asked as they sipped coffee from styrofoam cups.

“I can’t,” she said, voice heavy with regret. “He’d just go crazy, I know it.”

“Ah, him.”

“But,” Lola suddenly put her cup down, turning to him with an idea bubbling in her mind.

“I know that look!” Jason grinned, putting down his own cup. He took her hands in his, and peered at her, his eyes seeing straight through her, as always.

“I can see what you’re thinking!” he told her in a sing-song voice, and she laughed.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. How’s this: Barry the Wonderguy is out all day, right? And lovely little Lola is home all alone. How does the Wonderguy –”

“Stop calling him that, he *is* wonderful.” Lola interrupted quickly, guilt already tugging at her.

“Okay, how does *Barry* know what little Lola is up to during the day, right?”

“Right!”

“I mean, you *could* be playing tennis, you *could* be having an affair, or... you could be working here, with me. Am I right?”

“Aren’t you always?” Lola leaned closer in her eagerness; she wanted to laugh with the simplicity of her idea. “It *could* work, couldn’t it? I’d have to leave her by five at the latest each day though.”

“Done! The wonderguy will never know a thing, and your sanity is saved. Be here at nine tomorrow morning.”

CRACK.... The flat of his hand against her face made a sound like a bullwhip, she staggered back against the bookcase, sending books tumbling to the floor unheeded. He watched her trying to regain her balance, his breath wheezing in and out through airways tight with rage.

“Liar!” he shouted. She raised her hand to her face and he could barely contain the urge to hit her again even as her beautiful eyes filled with shocked tears.

“You think I don’t *know*? You think I’m *stupid*?” he took a step towards her, taking grim pleasure in seeing the lying little bitch cowering before him. Just what she deserved ... he felt his fury rising again as he remembered the sly looks he had been getting from people in his office.

“She’s spending days there, whole *days* ...”

He had heard the whispers, faces turning away from him in embarrassed awkwardness, but the smiles had been there too; the smug, know-it-all grins they thought he couldn’t see.

Eventually he cornered one of the lowliest office workers and with practiced, easy friendliness he managed to coax the truth from her; Lola had been seen disappearing into a record studio regularly in the mornings, and spotted again leaving at around five pm each evening. Barry had dismissed the news with a light laugh, but all the while, his mind closed up with bitter anger; he knew exactly which recording studio they were talking about, oh yes ...

“Of course she goes there,” he smiled, thinking quickly and making sure plenty of people heard his smooth response. “One of her charities is trying to secure studio time to make a song to sell to raise money. Since Lola is good at negotiating, she’s the obvious choice. And knowing studio executives personally always helps.”

He allowed some of his irritation to tighten his voice. "I know I'm a public figure, but I don't expect this kind of speculation into my *private* life, and I won't tolerate it, do you understand? Right, I'm sure you have real work to do."

He dismissed the relieved secretary and went back into his private office, shutting the door quietly, but once inside, he clenched his fists tightly enough to turn his knuckles white and cause shooting pains up the inside of his wrists.

Bitch, bitch *bitch!* It all started to make sense now; lately Lola had been as attentive as ever, possibly even more so if that were possible, but there had been something else there, something he didn't like and didn't trust. She seemed ... less meek somehow, less desperate for his approval. His dinners were always ready, she knew better than to make *that* mistake again, but they lacked her previous imagination and loving preparation - plain steak and salad, or, more often, casseroles which had been prepared in the morning and spent the day cooking. Now he knew why.

His hand hovered over the telephone, about to call the house and catch her out, but thought better of it and picked up his coat. "I'm lunching with Matt Devereaux," he told his receptionist.

The girl, who had been privy to his conversation with the unfortunate secretary, glanced at the appointments book on her desk. Seeing no such arrangement, she merely nodded and smiled, and told him she'd hold his calls.

"He just called me," Barry explained reading her look. The receptionist nodded again and said nothing, and Barry felt the anger tightening his throat again, but left without further explanation. Another know-it-all bitch... furiously, his temples pounding, he headed home.

All afternoon he had sat, still wearing his coat, in the spotless but empty house. She had made such an effort to cover her tracks, he realised, each new piece of evidence driving his ill temper higher. At a little after five-thirty, he heard her car in the drive, then her key in the lock. Her shock at seeing him was clear on her face, but she covered it well, he noticed - practice at lying really did pay off.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said lightly. “You’re home early.”

“Where have you been?” he asked in a flat voice.

“Oh, just out, you know. Shopping.” She dropped her coat onto the chair, and he saw her flinch as she realised her mistake: no bags.

“What did you buy?”

“Well I was really just window shopping. And lunching with the girls.”

All the things he expected her to be doing; she was good, she really was. She headed for the kitchen and he stood up to follow her, catching her as she stopped to push a stray book back into place on the large mahogany bookcase.

He grabbed her arm and drew his hand back, powering it around in a huge arc and connecting with that bullwhip sound. “Liar! You think I don’t *know*? You think I’m *stupid*?”

She found her balance, and drew herself up before him, blinking her grey eyes to clear the tears which, he suddenly realised, were not only of shock and pain, but the fire there told him that she was angrier than he had ever seen her, angrier than he could ever have imagined her.

He had always known she wasn’t the weak, timid woman she often appeared to be, but he had also known it wouldn’t take long to make her the doll he needed her

to be; she depended so much on his love that she would do anything to keep it, that much he knew, he had made sure of.

She had once told him her father had been violent towards her and her mother, and that little nugget he had stored away for later use, even as he held her close and murmured that he would never let anyone hurt her as long as he was able to protect her.

Now she faced him, delicate of feature and petite of build, but blazing with such fury he actually found himself tempted to take a step back. He fought the urge he could ill afford, he had to subdue her now or his career would be at an end. There were two ways to do it: either calmly placate her as he had in the past, pretending to hate himself, or deal out the punishment the little adultress deserved right now.

He chose the latter. Time for remorse later, when she finally realised who was in charge here, this had gone on for long enough.

Part four.

[three months later]

The way things are..

Megan scooped up the remote control for the video recorder and pushed the button to record the current programme. At first it was difficult to see anyone in the crowds, but then there she was, her little girl, her Lola.

Barry Chandler had won the election easily, trading on his happy family life and flawless political background, and now, as the reporters surged around him he put a protective arm around his young wife, keeping her safe from the crowd.

“Thank you, thank you,” he held up a hand, laughing and waving at the photographers, holding Lola close to his side. As Megan watched, pride blurring her vision a little, she saw Lola smiling up at him as adoringly as ever. The camera shot changed and came in closer, and Megan’s breath stopped in her chest.

She leaned towards the TV as if that would make it easier to see, but of course it didn’t, and as soon as the news bulletin was finished, she rewound the tape, pressing the pause button with trembling fingers as the camera zoomed in on her daughter and son-in-law. Oh, God, there it was ... the too familiar sight of a woman with tear-bright eyes, wincing as her husband gripped her tightly. She remembered the feeling well; Lola’s father had insisted that in public they present the perfect family picture, and woe betide anyone who showed anything other than utter devotion to the head of that family.

In private - well, that had been a different story, and many was the time she had nursed bruises and welts, hiding herself from everyone as she wept herself to sleep.

Surely she was imagining the same fate for Lola? Being over-protective as Carl had always accused her of being before she had ... before he had died.

The news report had been live, so there was no point in calling Lola yet, and the hours passed with agonizing slowness as she waited to catch them at home.

"Hi," her daughter's breathless voice came down the line, as if she'd been running.

"Sorry, did I disturb you?" Megan asked a little sharply.

"No, no - we just got in from a celebration dinner. Barry was expecting a call so we didn't want you to hang up ..." her voice grew muffled as she turned away from the phone for a moment; "No, it's my Mom. Oh, of course, I'm sorry. Sure." She came back strong again as she addressed her mother. "Mom? I have to hang up - this is the only number Barry's contact has, so -"

"Are you alright?" Megan couldn't end the call until she knew.

"I'm fine, really. Just tired. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Please, I want to talk. Why don't you come over?"

"I, I can't, I ... yes, honey - Mom, I've gotta go."

The phone line went dead, and Megan told herself that there was nothing to worry about. Barry was an important man now, more so than before, and if he was waiting for a call then it had to be urgent, and of course Lola would have to hang up.

Megan waited until almost lunchtime the following day, when she knew Barry would be at work, before calling again. This time, as soon as she spoke she was horrified to hear Lola burst into tears.

"I'm coming over!" she said at once.

"No, Mom, I'm okay, really," Lola told her. "We just had a fight, that's all."

"Another one? Sweetheart, did he hurt you?"

"Of course not, Barry would never do that, he's a, he's —"

"An angel, yeah, you said." Megan's voice was grim. "I'm coming over right now, Lola, and you're going to tell me everything."

She arrived at the Chandlers' large house on the Gold Coast a little over half an hour later, and by that time she could tell by the still-damp dark curls that Lola had taken a shower and freshened up.

Megan's throat constricted as she saw Lola had dressed in a long-sleeved jumper despite the warmth of the house, and that the polo neck came to her chin. Always with her sleeves pushed back to mid-forearm, today Lola constantly tugged at her cuffs so that they almost covered her hands, pretending to feel the cold. But she was fooling nobody, they both knew.

"Tell me everything," Megan said gently. Lola hitched a breath, clearly desperate to preserve her hard-won composure, but as Megan reached out and touched her hair, she leaned into her mother and wept.

"It's as much my fault I guess," Lola said, and she actually believed it sometimes. Except at night, when she lay in her bed, listening to the deep breathing of the man who had promised to protect her forever. She would reach up to touch the latest

bruise on her shoulder or throat - always below the face - and she would feel her heart slowly cracking like fragile ice.

She would hear the voices in her head, night after night, telling her to get out, to get away now, before he killed her, but she couldn't. He would find her, and punish her for ruining his career, his good name.

Those voices were so persuasive though, that once she had got as far as the living room, a pile of clothes in her hand ready to throw in a suitcase, before sinking down onto the sofa in utter despair, hot tears of frustrated self-loathing spilling down her cheeks.

She could do it, she knew she could, but how long would she be safe for? She put her hands to her ears, trying to block the voices that cried to her of pain and danger. She had to endure it, she *had* to.

"*Your* fault?" Megan breathed, and Lola heard the bitter hate in that whisper.

"Boy, he's good. He's got you believing that? Come home with me, honey, please! You'll be safe there."

"No!" Then, more quietly, "No, he's right. I went behind his back, I betrayed him, made him look foolish. He thought I was having an affair with Jason, of course he was mad."

Megan sighed, shaking her head. "That business was a long time ago, before the election. Come on, Lola, this is something else, we both know that. What happened this time?"

Lola was silent for a long time, twisting a loose thread in her jumper until the wool pulled tight enough to cut off the blood supply to her finger. Megan reached out and

gently disentangled her, and Lola felt the tears burning again. This was hopeless, Megan knew too much, and if Barry found out it would get worse.

“Mom, it’ll pass, it *will*,” She insisted. “It’s just ... It’s just the way things are, I can’t do anything about it. And you know, he’s always sorry afterwards. He hates to hurt me, I know he does, but he can’t help himself sometimes, and I shouldn’t ...” she hesitated.

Megan stared at her. “Shouldn’t what?”

“I shouldn’t answer him back,” Lola said in a small voice, picking up the thread again and wrapping it around her finger.

“You answered him back? That’s why *this*?” Megan pulled at the sleeve of Lola’s jumper, drawing it back to reveal dark, ugly bruising to the tender flesh of her wrist.

Lola jerked her arm away, pulling the material back down. “It’s complicated,” she said. “You don’t understand, I’m, I’m not being the right kind of wife for him. It’s my fault.”

“You know that’s not true!” Megan cried, tears coursing down her own cheeks.

“Please come home, Lola.” The girl shook her head, and Megan tried another tack.

“I could call the police,” she said quietly. Lola was horrified; he really would kill her if the police became involved, he would never be convicted, not with his contacts, and her life would be over.

“If you do that I’ll deny everything,” she said, hearing a calm determination in her own voice that surprised even her.

After another hour of begging, reasoning and pleading, Megan left. “Call me if you need me. For anything at all,” she added.

Lola nodded and came to kiss her. "I will, but you'll see - everything will be alright, I'll make sure of it."

It wasn't until after she had closed the door that she realised her mother had left a small black purse on the sideboard. She picked it up and ran after the car as it drove away, but Megan didn't stop although Lola was sure she'd seen her.

The strange, unfamiliar weight of the purse piqued Lola's curiosity and she opened it. A moment later, her face pale and thoughtful, she closed the snap top and carried the purse back to the front room.

Part six.

Angels With Weapons.

That night Barry was home late again. His new position in office meant that he often dined out with colleagues, and once more Lola scraped a ruined dinner into the trash. She smiled ruefully as she did it, reflecting on the number of times he had berated her for not providing him with such a meal. She sat down to watch TV, her gaze continually straying to the black purse on the sideboard, her fingers finding the loose thread again, twisting it until it pinched her skin.

The front door finally banged open again at almost midnight, and Lola woke with a start from where she had dozed off on the sofa. Struggling to a sitting position, her heart sank as she saw the dangerously glittering eyes and the tie loosened at the collar.

He had been drinking tonight, the signs were all there, and she suddenly wished desperately that she had woken sooner and gone to bed alone. At least that way she could pretend that she hadn't heard him come in.

"Hello, little Lola," Barry sang, and Lola felt a flash of anger that he should use Jason's pet name for her in such a nasty tone. She fought it, not wanting a confrontation tonight. Instead, she got up and came to him, putting her arms about his neck, hoping to win him over with a show of affection. For a moment he stood still and let her lean against him, then he pushed her away as he saw two cups on the coffee table.

"Again?" he said in dozy disbelief, "You have him over here *again*?"

“That was my Mother,” Lola began, but got no further before he rounded on her, his hands outstretched. “No!” she ducked out of reach. She had the advantage tonight for once; he was clumsy, and slow with drink. She put the sofa between them as he bent and picked up both cups and threw them, splattering cold coffee over her while the cups bounced harmlessly off the back of the sofa. She backed away, edging towards the kitchen.

“Why are you running if it’s not true?” he taunted, and then he was there, lunging at her, grabbing hold of her arm, pulling her towards him. He had moved so quickly that she had not had time to put enough distance between them before his superior strength once more became the victor.

His hand came down into her face, but this time it was not the open handed slap he liked to administer when he felt she had been out of line, this time the fingers were curled into a fist, and lights exploded behind her eyes as the punch landed on her temple.

She cried out and managed to pull back to avoid another punishing blow to the head as he swung again. Caught off-balance, he grabbed at the door jamb and with a shout of triumph, Lola slammed the door, stepping back to avoid the backswing as it bounced off Barry’s fingers.

He howled with pain and bemused fury at her actions, and stumbled after her again as she headed for the kitchen, and the safety of the back door to the garden. If she could just get help ...

Before she got halfway across the kitchen, however she felt a hot, raking agony across her back, and a warm, wet feeling - he had grabbed one of the kitchen knives. She knew the wound was shallow; he hadn’t been close enough to cause any serious

damage, but the sickening sensation of being cut made her light-headed, and the thin, fiery stinging prevented her from thinking straight. This time he meant to kill her, that was all she knew.

Too terrified to turn and see where he was, in case he went for her eyes, she pulled at the back door, realising too late that it was locked and the key was never kept in the lock in this house. To reach the key she would have to turn and stretch up to the top of the unit, leaving herself vulnerable to the thrust of the knife wherever he should care to place it.

Instead she dropped suddenly, bonelessly to the floor, taking him by surprise as he drove the knife forwards, and scrambled past him, presenting a small target for his drink-fuddled eyes.

With a shout of rage he turned clumsily and lurched after her. She managed to gain her feet again, but screamed as she felt the blade tear another wound, this time in her hip.

The front room, the black purse ... suddenly that was all she could focus on, and as she ran, hearing his heavy footfalls, his crazed yelling, she knew that if she didn't reach the purse she would die.

Blood was pooling at her waistband, spilling down her thigh and back, and she was becoming dangerously dizzy. Shock and pain were threatening to take her reason and steal away with it slowly but fatally, and she fought it with all her remaining strength.

Moving too fast for her shaking limbs she tripped and fell headlong, her foot entangled in the edge of the rug behind the sofa. The impact jarred her back horribly, and for a vital second she lay, stunned, watching blood soaking into the pale blue

patterned rug. She felt a flash of grim amusement that this hated rug was being ruined, and knew at that moment that she was losing it.

She had gained a precious few seconds thanks to Barry's drunken lurching, but now she had lost them, and as she turned to see where he was, he fell on her, bringing the knife down in a sweeping arc, burying it deep in her shoulder.

There was no pain, not at first; Lola's arm went numb from shoulder to fingertips, and she greyed out in terror and shock. Then Barry wrenched the blade free and the agony tore her apart. Along with the pain came a blind fury that saved her life; Lola managed to roll to the side as Barry brought the knife down once more, the blade snapping as it hit the floor where her throat had been a second before.

Sobbing, breathless, white-hot pain ripping through her entire body, Lola stumbled to her feet and grabbed the black purse. Hands barely functioning she managed to pull the gun out and level it at her husband.

She had the briefest second to wonder at what her life had come to, before he rose up to his knees, throwing the broken knife at her, and she pulled the trigger. To Lola it seemed as if the bark of the small gun had a louder, deeper echo, and she watched in dazed disbelief as Barry fell to the floor, face down.

The blade thudded against the sideboard, and Lola collapsed to her knees, hearing an awful, heart-rending screaming ricocheting off the walls of her home. Faintly she realised the voice was hers before she crumpled, her left arm hanging dead at her side.

She sensed movement from the corner of her eye and raised her heavy head to look. Tears blurred the shape framed in the doorway of the room, but Lola could see the angel move towards her and knew she was dying. She tried to clear the mist from

her eyes but the effort was too great. With the last of her strength she lifted a blood-stained hand from the floor beside her, reaching out to the vision in white.

“Please - take me home,” she whispered.

Epilogue.....

Lola opened her eyes. A figure stood beside her, her face blurred, but it was a woman.

“Welcome back, sweetheart,” The woman said in a soft voice.

“Mom?”

“Hush.”

“Barry?” Lola’s voice was cracked, her throat dry and sore and her body aching all over, but she had to know, before she allowed the numbness of sleep to take her again.

Megan shook her head. “Gone, Lola. He’ll never hurt you again.”

A single tear worked its way over Lola’s eyelid and fell to her cheek. “I killed him...” she whispered.

“No, you didn’t kill him.” Megan told her, touching her face gently, wiping the tear away with her thumb.

“But the gun ... you left it for me?”

“Yes.

“And I used it to kill him.”

Megan shook her head again, and Lola tried to focus, to read her expression, but it was too hard, she was too tired and confused. Surely she had shot Barry, it hadn't been part of a delirious dream?

"Lola, listen to me - it's important you understand. I left the gun for you, yes. You used it, yes. You shot Barry, but you didn't kill him. I did."

Lola felt some of the numbness she craved start to creep over her limbs, but struggled to fight the cool darkness of sleep, not sure she had heard properly.

Megan spoke clearly, leaving no room for doubt. "I killed him, Lola. Something told me to come back, I saw what was happening. I shot him from behind."

Lola remembered the dim figure in the doorway, the slight confusion that Barry had fallen forwards when her shot had hit him high in the chest. "You ... the angel," she murmured.

Megan nodded. "For you, always," she said.

A sudden, nagging suspicion that Lola had always harboured in her subconscious flowered again. "Dad?" she asked, hardly daring to listen to the answer.

Megan nodded again. "Sleep now, precious girl. I'm here and I won't let anyone hurt you ever again."

Lola's eyes slipped closed, memories of blood and terror fading; her angel was watching over her, and she was safe at last.

The End.