



Maria  
Romana

# Little Miss Straight Lace

The Unbreakable Series, Book One

**Little Miss Straight Lace**  
**Book One of The Unbreakable Series**

**by Maria Elizabeth Romana**

Copyright 2010  
Research Triangle Publications  
A Division of At Your Command Computing, Inc.  
Durham, NC, USA  
[TrianglePubs.com](http://TrianglePubs.com)

Cover Design by Spice House Designs

**License Notes**

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the copyright owner and publisher of this book. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. It may not be resold or given away to other people, except as your ereader's lending function allows. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, then you should purchase your own copy (see [TrianglePubs.com](http://TrianglePubs.com) for sellers). Thank you for respecting the author's work.

## *Prologue*

*June 14, 1984*

*Clarkston, New Mexico*

Tears stung Bobby Prescott's eyes, making it even harder to see, as he ran stumbling in the near blackness of the dank hallway. One hand blindly sought the doorway he remembered being there, while the other gripped the waistband of his faded blue jeans to keep them from slipping down. He was forced to pause and wait for the flash of bright light that he knew would pass by, regular as clockwork, in just a moment. There. A full two seconds of illumination, moving across the hallway, showing him the crooked thick wooden doorframe that led to the room in the furthest corner of the basement. He could still see the light in his mind long after it was gone.

He staggered in, making it clear across to the back wall, and when he felt the cool stone against his palm, sank to the dirt floor, gasping and sobbing. Nausea swept over him. He wrapped his arms around his belly,

trying to still the pain. It wasn't physical pain, not really, but it hurt just as much. He wished it was physical. Wished they'd beaten him, beaten him like the time he had stolen food from the warehouse. Or the time he and that stupid kid Johnny had skipped off the compound to see what it was like down in the town, where the regular people lived. The whole thing was Johnny's idea, but they hadn't punished Johnny, because he was younger, and because he was Father William's son—real son, that is, as in flesh and blood. But they'd beaten the tar out of Bobby for it. That was a while ago, though, when he was just a kid, like twelve. He was a man now—fourteen. That's what they told him anyway.

And this was worse. Much worse. U-u-u-gh. God Almighty. Puke. Oh, how he wanted to puke. Kimmy. God, Kimmy. He could still see her face. Her sweet, pretty face. All screwed up in horror.

A-r-r-r-g-g-h-h! Those sounds again! Those Godawful noises. Blaring, always blaring. Bobby slammed his hands over his ears. And then the light came again. All night long, it kept coming. Constantly, over and over. He squeezed his eyes shut, kept his hands pressed over his ears. Could he possibly shut it out? Could he ever shut it all out?

Not Kimmy. He knew better. He knew, right then and there, until the day he died, he would be seeing her face, staring up at him, eyes wide and wild with terror, pleading for his help, unable to comprehend.

The nausea was coming in waves now. Saliva was rapidly forming in his mouth. They made him do it.

Not like he had a choice. They said he was a man, and a man needed a wife. But he wasn't a man, and he wasn't big enough or brave enough to disobey them.

The sounds outside were growing in intensity. Sirens. Trucks. People shouting. Was that smoke he smelled? Ugh—adding to his desire to puke his guts up. To empty his body of every last drop of fluid it contained. But he'd already done that now, hadn't he? He cringed, pain jabbing into his belly.

Kimmy was his friend, his playmate since they were little children, running in the fields inside the compound walls in happier times. Climbing trees, building forts, damming the brook. He'd even kissed her once, though he'd been pretty sure he'd be beaten for that, too, if they ever found out. Kimmy had smiled at him that day. There were no smiles tonight.

Bobby crawled to the corner of the room and retched violently until nothing more would come up. Then he crawled toward the doorway in need of water. But as he neared it, he heard voices and heavy, running footsteps. He should have been afraid, but he was past caring, and so, was more startled than anything else when he saw the group of large, unfamiliar men, uniformed and heavily armed, approaching him.

“Take it easy, son.”

“Don't move.”

“Keep your hands where I can see them.”

He stayed still, on hands and knees. One of the men, a tall, rangy fellow, with light brown skin and jet-black hair, stepped forward. His accent was light, but

distinct, “Amigos, he is just a kid.” The man knelt beside Bobby and looked into his red-rimmed eyes. “You okay, buddy?”

“Watch it, Miguel, that ‘kid’ could be packin’.”

“I don’t think so.”

The other men stayed aloof and alert, weapons drawn, but Miguel put a hand on Bobby’s shoulder and started helping him to his feet. “Come on, there, fella. Let’s get you out of here while we still can, eh?”

Bobby stood with the man’s help. He was weak and dizzy from vomiting. And so grateful that someone was helping him. As the soldier ushered him outside toward a waiting van, he strained to see through the confusion and swirling smoke, searching for any sign of Kimmy, but there was none. The building they’d been in only an hour before was engulfed in flames, and emergency vehicles and water hoses and shouting personnel surrounded it, making it impossible to tell if the people inside had gotten out. And no one gave him a chance to ask. The doors closed on the van with Bobby and several other young people inside. Then the vehicle raced off the property.

Bobby didn’t know where they were going—where “out of here” would end up being—but at that point, any place was better than where he’d been.



## *Chapter One*

*Twenty-seven years later...*

The sun had been down for ten or fifteen minutes already, and it would soon be pitch dark. Well, pitch dark behind this ten-foot wall of creeping ivy and kudzu anyway. The copious vines covering the chain link fence provided the perfect screen—hiding his presence, while permitting his view. Meanwhile, a single aging lamppost offered decent lighting to the area he was watching, the door at the rear of the house.

There was also a bit of light coming through the window of the first-floor room where the two women were working. The shade was drawn, but there were occasional shifts in the pattern of light as they moved around in the office. Perhaps “office” was a strong word. The Durham Women’s Health Center was actually run out of a rehabbed turn-of-the-century Victorian-style home.

He checked his watch—almost seven thirty. He



wondered exactly how much time he had before they were through, because he was dying for a cigarette. He could almost taste that heavenly tobacco flavor and feel the gentle rush of nicotine cooling his nerves. He knew he needed to resist, though, not only to keep the smell out of his hair and clothes, but because he couldn't take a chance on giving away his position. He pushed a few more leaves aside and peered through the fence again. Aha! The office light had just gone out. It was almost time.

In another moment, the building's rear door swung in, and the women's chattering voices floated out into the night. The older woman, red-headed, tall, and gently rounded, was speaking, "So I'm like, Shawn, seriously? You think I'd be happy working in some stupid data lab all day, bossing around a bunch of twenty-something data grunts, and never seeing a live human patient again? And he's like—"

"Crap."

"Huh?" The older woman looked back at her younger companion.

The petite brunette was digging in her oversized business bag. "Oh, sorry, Di, but I can't find my key. I swear, I had it in here last night. I checked." She glanced out toward the parking lot. "Got yours handy? I want to get out of here. It's getting really dark."

"No problem, hun. I'll get mine. Here." Diana handed over the armload of files she was carrying and dug into her own bag. She pulled out a key, then pulled the door closed behind them and began fiddling with the

lock. “Oh, for God’s sake, this is the stupidest door and the stupidest lock...” She gave it a few more twists and shakes, then finally said, “Okay, got it.”

She took the files back, and the two women started heading for their cars. The younger one walked quickly, checking all around them. “Geez, I hate this parking lot at night. It’s creepy as hell.”

Still hidden behind the wall of vines, their silent observer smiled a small smile. Apparently, the girl’s instincts were pretty sharp. And as good as she looked in that silky pink dress, she really shouldn’t be hanging around poorly-lit parking lots at night.

“Ow, dammit!” The brunette appeared to stumble, catching herself against the side of her car.

“What happened, Jos?”

“Would you look at that? I broke my heel and ran my stocking in one fell swoop.” She hiked her dress up and indicated a place on her shapely thigh. “Brand new, too.” She slid her finger around the lacy top edge of the stocking, adjusting it somehow.

The taller woman gave her a friendly jab. “Well, maybe you should consider wearing something other than four-inch heels when walking in gravel parking lots.”

“Oh sure, so I can strain my neck looking up at you?” With that, the petite woman pulled off the broken shoe and stood flat on her stockinged foot, cleverly illustrating the seven or eight inch height differential that separated the two.

The tall woman grinned. “Okay, point taken.”

She started unlocking her car door. “I’ll see you soon, Jos. Tell Shawn his big sister says hello when you see him tomorrow.”

Josie slid her broken shoe back on and climbed into her car. “All right, sure thing. Bye, Di.”

He waited until he could no longer see or hear their cars, then pulled out his phone, popping off a quick text, “Coast is clear.”

The response was “Just parked. C U in 5.”

He played with the phone a minute, admiring its multitude of advanced features. This little treasure was one of his new favorite toys. Of course, it helped to have decent cell service. He wondered if they’d ever get service like this back home. It just made everything so much easier, especially these type of activities, where speed and discretion were paramount.

He looked up from the phone, toward the building. All was still quiet, not that he’d expected anything less. So far, their five prior missions had gone flawlessly, and he assumed this one would do the same. His brother was a genius with his planning; nothing ever seemed to go awry when it had his special touch on it. Their trip to the Women’s Center tonight was to be their final “installation”. Starting tomorrow, he’d be learning about the ongoing maintenance phase of this endeavor.

He thumbed the phone a couple times, pulling up his calendar. On tap for tomorrow night was Dr. Benito Toral’s OB/GYN office on the south side of Raleigh. Sure, he remembered the place—been there two or three times before—tiny office in the crappy, er,

socially disadvantaged, section of the city.

Clinkety-clink-clank.

Ah, the five minutes were up. He stuffed the phone back in his pocket and peered through the leaves again. Yep, there was John, just walking into the parking lot and yanking on the chain link a bit to get his attention. He could have walked the whole way around the fence to meet up with John, but instead decided to exercise his skills. He reached up with both hands and grabbed openings in the chain links. In less than a minute, he had scaled the ten-foot fence, swung his legs over the top, and dropped down the other side, catching himself neatly with flat feet and flexed knees. He landed no more than a foot in front of his brother.

John stopped suddenly at the sight of him, then shook his head and laughed. “Show-off!”

“Hey, there’s not much I can do better than you, so I gotta take advantage when I can.” He grinned at his big brother, then embraced him. “Johnny. Good to see you, man.”

“You, too, kid. You know, I actually miss you sometimes.” John stepped back, then reached out and ruffled his brother’s dark hair. “When’d you do this?”

Oh, yeah, Johnny hadn’t seen the super short cut. “Ah, recently. For her.” He shrugged. “She doesn’t like long hair.”

John grinned. “Guess I wouldn’t be her type then.” He ran his fingers through his long blonde bangs.

“Guess not.”

“Say, you got a picture of her? I don’t even

know what she looks like.”

“Uh, no, I don’t.” Wouldn’t show him if he did, either. He loved his brother, and he was happy to see him, but he wouldn’t mind if Johnny never got to see or meet this one. For once, he wanted a girl all to himself. It was tough enough having an older brother who was bigger, stronger, smarter, and better-looking.

“Okay, let’s get on with it. What you got for me?” John held out his hand, palm-side up.

Little bro dug in his pocket, pulled out the key and slapped it in John’s hand. “The lock’s a bit tricky. It sticks. You have to pull up on the knob while you turn the key.”

“Okay, got it.” John closed his fist around the key, then straightened the bulky backpack on his shoulder. He looked up and down the parking lot, then toward the building. “You check the perimeter?” He motioned toward the sides of the house, which led back to the main street.

“Yeah, I did, but I’ll go again while you’re inside. Don’t worry, Johnny. I’ve got your back.”

John laid a hand on his shoulder. “I know you do. Thanks.” He turned again and headed for the back door.

After John went inside, his younger brother started across the gravel lot toward the side of the house. A colorful stone caught his eye. Oh, not a stone—the broken heel, from the bright pink shoe. He stopped to pick it up and turned it over in his hand. The curvy little figure in the matching bright pink dress and the lace-

edged stockings nudged into his noggin. His brain shifted gears, imagining for a moment what she'd look like in those pretty stockings *without* the dress. He quickly shook his head, trying to stay focused on the task at hand. Then he made a mental note to return to that delicious stocking idea later. Not like he wouldn't have the chance; he had to return the key, after all.

###

Religious nuts! Freakin' zealots!

Dr. Shawn McKenna tumbled his curly red mop with one hand as he stared at his super-sized flat-screen monitor. He didn't know what to think—spam, tasteless humor, or some twisted cult crazies out there in the ether? He swiveled around in his soft leather office chair and looked out over the campus of Research Triangle Technologies, the private research firm where he headed up the Hormonal Products Division in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Now Shawn wasn't a crusader. No, not him. He was never the picketing or marching on Washington type. Shawn was a scientist. He just wanted to peer through microscopes, mix chemicals in test tubes, dissect the occasional lab rat, nothing more. He didn't need this crap. Didn't need religious fanatics interfering with his projects or messing with his handsome government contracts.

Six floors below, he could see some of his colleagues taking an afternoon walk on the property,

strolling along the edge of the pond, neatly shaded by the last of May's cherry blossoms—picturesque, peaceful, calm—just the way he liked things. He didn't need any colorful controversy to stir things up. It had to be a prank.

But what if it wasn't?

Shawn gave the windowsill a hard enough shove to spin himself back around, just in time to see Josie Natale scooting past his office door. He barked at her, "Jo-SIE!"

A second later, her head appeared, preceded by a swinging mass of long, wavy dark brown hair. "Shawn. 'Sup? I'm late..."

"Stop by when you're done, doll. I need you. Few things to talk about."

"Yeah, sure. Later," came the return, tossed back from already some distance down the hall.

Shawn shook his head. Josie Natale would be late to her own funeral, and even God wouldn't be surprised. Well, not really late, rather, just sliding in as the door was closing behind her—that was Josie's style. Kind of an attitude thing, and that attitude caused difficulties at times, but her work was impeccable, so Shawn would suck it up when folks complained, and yell at her about it later.

As if she cared. Yes, promptness, professionalism, and respect were the qualities a man looked for in his employees. Good thing Josie wasn't one of them. Nope, she was a private contractor, and she never let him forget it. The best and most expensive

around, too. And whenever her attitude made it difficult to remember why they paid her so much, Shawn would remind himself of those little golden moments, like at last week's Chiral-T meeting.

The drug's manufacturer, Chiroan Industries, was hoping the latest research would show that a higher dose of Chiral-T resulted in improved patient outcomes. That way, they could recommend the increase and jack up the price—pretty standard stuff for these guys—but Josie refused to budge on her statistical conclusions.

Okay, fine, she could stand by a sound scientific decision; just turn in the report, sign it, and hand in an invoice, right? Oh no, not Josie. She had to go the extra mile. She had “found something” in the data. And what did she do about it? Send a text? Write an email? Nah, that would've been too easy. She brought it up, right in the meeting with the study sponsor. “Know what, Fred?”—yeah, she called him Fred; *nobody* else called the guy Fred—“I just happened to notice that people taking the higher dose were having twice as many heart attacks as people taking the lower dose. And it was statistically significant. *Very* significant. And it's all right here.” Then she tossed a data disc at him, like she was freakin' Woodward and Bernstein. “This is hardly valid, of course, just off-the-cuff, but I certainly wouldn't recommend the higher dose without further investigation. Don't you agree?” Oh yeah, Fred agreed.

And none of Josie's in-your-face attitude crap was from lack of knowledge or sophistication. Uh-uh. It was deliberate, outright rebellion. She had them all by



the short hairs, and she knew it. She was like this biostatistical-computer-whiz-kid, which in and of itself was not so rare, at least not in the Research Triangle area, but that she could crunch all those numbers, get it right, and do it all in clear, comprehensible English was what made her so special.

Well, that and those 32DDs. Shit. Shawn laughed at himself for even thinking it. Not like anybody could help noticing. He suspected that her entire wardrobe of business attire was as carefully calculated as her statistical reports. In the Chiroan meeting, for instance, Josie was sporting this mauve-colored silky dress with a loose, swingy collar. At first glance, it was pretty conservative, but every so often, when she moved ju-u-ust so, it revealed the slightest hint of this lacy little underthing. Every man in that room, from the poor kid pouring the coffee to Fred McGuire himself, had taken note of that fact and couldn't keep his eyes off her. The coffee kid probably had third degree burns by the time the meeting adjourned. And it wasn't like they thought she was just some sparkly little piece. The whole time they were staring at her, watching her move, they knew she was freakin' brilliant. They knew they could barely comprehend all the alphas and thetas and whojama-whajama-jiggies she was talking about, as she pointed at her charts and graphs.

Shawn was just damn glad to be her friend and not subject to falling under her spell like the rest of those bozos. Heck no, not him. Been there, done that. Ancient history. Nah, he had Maggie. Who was, as it happened,

Josie's best friend, and in a lot of ways, her polar opposite. Wonder's how those two ever ended up together. Probably about the same way he and Josie had ever ended up together, those few times it had happened. Of course, that was before he got serious with Maggie, and never after. Yeah, ancient history.

###

BANG!

An hour later, Shawn's office door hit the wall behind it without so much as a knock. "Okay, Tiger, what's up?" Josie bounced back into the room, her crazy hair bouncing right along with her, atop a perfectly fitted navy blue dress.

Shawn stifled a grin, looking at her. It had been ten years since he'd met Josie and Maggie, when the two were just starting out in grad school at UNC, and he was working on his second doctorate, yet they both still looked like babes. So how come he was starting to look...uh, less young?

"Hey, Jos. Will you close the door?"

"Ooh, sounds serious." She reached back and gave the door a shove behind her.

"May be. But first, I've got a few things for ya. Sit." She did as he commanded, setting her bag on the floor, and he tossed her a business-sized envelope with RTT's logo on it. "This is from us. Larry wanted me to hand-deliver it; I think it has a nice little bonus in it."

She tore open the envelope and looked inside.

“Mmm, I like to be appreciated.”

“Yeah, well, it seems Fred McGuire called him up and went on and on about how great you are and insisted on having you on every project Chiroan does with us from now on, yaddah, yaddah, yaddah...” Josie smiled broadly. “But wait! There’s more. Apparently, Fred wanted to show his thanks a little more personally.” Now Shawn was grinning. He held up his hands like the prize display girls on *The Price is Nice* and indicated a lush flower arrangement on his desk.

“For me?” she said, in a falsely impressed tone.

“Uh-huh.”

“I save the old coot a few hundred million in lawsuits, and he sends me flowers? I mean, they *are* lovely, but gee whiz, you’d think diamonds would be more appropriate.”

“Maybe this’ll help.” Shawn handed her the small envelope that had come with the flowers. “So what does it say?”

“Like you haven’t already opened it.” She rolled her eyes, then held up what had been a much-folded piece of paper. “He expresses his undying gratitude...with a whole bunch of zeroes.”

“Nice work, kiddo. And you realize, of course, that when you kick butt like this, it reflects very well on me, and I take all the credit for it.”

“Of course.”

“Oh, another thing. Larry mentioned that McGuire asked whether you were ‘involved’ with anyone.”

“Oh, puh-lease!” Josie bent over in the chair like she was throwing up.

“I figured you’d react that way, but I felt I had to pass that on.”

She sat back up, narrowing her eyes at him. “You did not. You just thought it was funny. Geez, what would an old geezer like that think I would see in him?”

“You mean besides the multi-billion-dollar pharmaceutical corp, the private jet, and the villa in Milan?”

“Shawn, he’s old enough to be my father!”

“His third wife was younger than you.”

“Eew.”

“Awright, moving on. Item number two. Susan Grabowski asked if they could get you to do a couple days stats work for them on a little project that’s part of that whole Women’s and Children’s Health Initiative thing next month...”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Let me check my calendar.” Josie pulled out her phone and started scrolling. “Wait a minute...Grabowski. Doesn’t she work for Goldman? Shawn?” She eyed him suspiciously.

“She’s a friend, Jos. We go way back. C’mon. It’s just a couple days. They’ll pay your top dollar.”

“No. Absolutely not. Dammit, Shawn. You know I won’t work for that...for Goldman. Friend or no friend, sorry.”

“Look, Jos, you don’t have to work for *him*. Do the work through us, we’ll charge them; do it as a subcontractor.”

She glared at him. “N.O.”

Shawn whined, “Why not? It’s for a good cause.” He studied her. “What is your problem with Gary Goldman anyway? You won’t ever tell me. Wha’d he do? Hit on you? Chisel on a check? Corner you in the conference room? Tell me, sweetheart, ’cause if he did, I’ll kick his ass.”

Her face softened. “I know you would, and I appreciate that. I do.” She shifted her gaze away from him. “But I told you—it was just a...a professional difference of opinion. He wanted me to change some numbers, compromise my ethics, and I refused. End of story.”

Shawn pointed his pencil at her. “Uh-uh. That happens to you every day around here. All these bozos want you to bend the truth a little, and you always refuse. There’s more to the story, and I’ll get it out of you someday.”

Josie just glanced at her watch and started to pick up her bag, apparently late for something else. “Wait, Jos, I need you to look at something for me.” Shawn rolled his chair aside to make room for her behind his desk, then tapped on the computer screen.

She got up and came around, put her hands down on the desk, and leaned toward the monitor. “Okay, I see some...junk e-mails?”

“Read, tell me what you think.”

“Steamy Sexy Co-Eds do it with—”

“Not *that* one! The next one. There.”

“Oh, sorry.” She read the message aloud:

*Sir:*

*We are aware of the nature of the work you are involved in. We know that you are promoting the murder of innocent unborn children, the children of God. You must act to end this indecency and begin your repentance today, lest you face the wrath of God Almighty for all Eternity. For only He will mete the final punishment for acts committed while on this Earth. Act now before it is too late.*

*The Warriors of God in Christ*

“What the—”

“Jos, it’s the third one like it in the last two months. I didn’t take it seriously at first. I mean, sheesh, I get a hundred, two hundred bogus e-mails every day from porno sites, Egyptian princes, multi-level marketing schemes, you name it. I usually just delete the whole lot in one fell swoop. I probably deleted a bunch of these before the first one caught my eye. I’m not even sure why I read it, and maybe I’m wrong; maybe it’s just another stupid email scam—”

“Wait a minute, slow down. What makes you think this has anything to do with you personally? This is just some kind of random spam, right?”

“Jos, think. Progestilone-C ring a bell? It’s got to do with you, too. You know how many contracts we have going on that drug right now? Prog-C research is

gonna put my kids through college.”

“Okay, sure, the drug causes spontaneous abortions, but we’re not working on abortion trials. We’re studying it for cancer research and depression and menopause—all after-market, extend-the-patent stuff. I mean, the drug’s already approved for ending pregnancies, so why would any of these whackos care what other kind of research you’re doing with it?”

“*We’re* doing with it, Jos. You keep leaving yourself out.”

“Hey, I’m just your hired gun, remember? Uh...no pun intended. So, like I said, if they’re all up in arms about killing babies, why don’t they go picket a clinic like everybody else? Why harass you?”

“Because pretty soon, there won’t be any clinics to picket. Josie, Progestilone is catching on like wildfire. Last year, it was used for like a third of all abortions. In another decade or so, surgical abortions will be a thing of the past. And any doctor that’s using Prog-C for breast cancer or Grandma’s hot flashes can just as easily prescribe it to end a pregnancy. Look, honey, I don’t know if this e-mail thing is legitimate at all, but I’ve got a family to think about. Can you tell me anything about it?”

“All right, I’ll try.” She hopped up on his desk, turned his computer monitor in her direction, then picked up his keyboard and laid it in her lap. She started clicking away. “Let’s see if we can get a look at the headers on these e-mails and trace...hmm....no, these are coming out of a European server somewhere.”

“They’re based in Europe?”

“Probably not,” she said, still typing away. “It’s a bunch of fakey-out stuff that spammers do to cover their tracks. They run the e-mails all over hell and back, so you can’t trace the source. Could’ve originated from somewhere right around the corner.” She shrugged. “Who knows? Sorry, I wish I could tell you more. It’s not really my thing. You need like a network or security guy, or a comms specialist.”

“You know, once upon a time, a computer geek was a computer geek. You didn’t have all these sub-specialties.”

“Yeah, well, we needed a way to charge more. Like doctors,” she said with a grin.

“Got any recommendations?”

She thought a moment. “As a matter of fact...I know just who you need.” She set the keyboard back down and hopped off the desk. “Last week, Beni Toral told me about somebody he knows. His nephew, I think. No, his friend’s nephew...or was it his nephew’s friend? I forget. Anyway, it’s these two guys—government contractors—they’ve been working up in D.C., but they’re relocating to this area. Anyway, this is like their specialty—PsyOps.”

“PsyOps?”

“Psychological operations. You know, when the government tries to manipulate people, especially weird little groups of people, like these Warriors of God, by doing freaky stuff to their heads. Like blasting music or lights or repetitive messages to drive people crazy, or



dropping flyers into enemy territory telling people to surrender—that kind of stuff. Only now, they’re starting to do a lot of it with computers and satellites and what have you, and these guys are all into that stuff. I think they could probably help you. I’m going to see Beni and Rosa right now; I’ll tell them you’re interested. They’re trying to introduce these guys to some folks around here for business and...you know...” She rolled her eyes.

“What? Oh, let me guess. They’re single, right?”

“At least one of them is, apparently. And, like I said, he’s some friend or relative of theirs, so they’re just dying for me to meet him. It never seems to bother them that I’m already dating somebody.”

“Well, maybe they don’t think Theo’s good enough for you.”

She met his eye. “A sentiment that would, perhaps, be shared by others?”

“Hey, did I say a word?”

“You didn’t have to. And I know Maggie can’t stand him.”

“She has great instincts, Jos. She’s just looking out for you.”

Josie walked back around the desk. “I know. Look, I’ve got to go. I’m so late.” She started picking up her bag. “Oh, by the way, Diana said to tell you hello.”

“Oh, when’d you see her?” Shawn stood then and helped her manage the gigantic vase of flowers from Fred McGuire.

“Last night. Women’s Center.”

“Night, as in after dark? I hate it when you guys do that.”

“Sorry, Shawn, I know. I hate it, too, but sometimes, it’s the only time I have for them...”

He gave her a frown, but then added, “Say, uh, Jos, you won’t mention any of this Warriors of God crap to Maggie, will ya? I don’t want her to worry.”

“She’d want to know—” Josie shook her head. “Okay, if you can keep your mouth shut about Theo, I guess I can do the same about this...Tiger.” She left him with a wink.

Huh. Maybe he wasn’t looking that much “less young”, after all.

## *Chapter Two*

Josie hurried through the RTT parking lot to her jade green Acura, clutching the flowers in one hand, and fishing in her bag with the other. Now where was her phone again? She needed to call Toral; she was supposed to be there already. She finally managed to dig it out. Uh-oh, blank screen. Crap. She pressed the power button. Zippo. Double crap. She must've left the statistical analyzer program running in the background again. That stupid thing was always sucking all her battery power. Maybe she could get the phone charged in the car; she didn't want Beni and Rosa to be worried about her.

She quickly pulled out of the lot and over the overpass onto I-40 heading towards Raleigh. She pressed the pedal to the floor and reveled in the surge of power she got from the Acura's three-hundred horsepower engine. She reveled in the surge of power she got from those thousands of dollars in checks she now had in her bag, too. All because she did a little extra homework for a client last week. She needed it right now, needed that

power boost. Just thinking about that creep Gary Goldman had set her back a bit. She hoped she hadn't let it show. She didn't want Shawn or anyone else thinking she was a wimpy little girly-girl...even if she was.

She settled the car into fifth gear and eased down into the seat a bit, smoothing the skirt of her navy linen dress. Good that she'd worn this outfit today. She always liked to look neat and conservative when she saw the Torals. She never wore those killer meeting outfits designed to keep all the men shaking in their boots. In meetings, she wanted to reek of toughness. She didn't need any more Jacks in her life. Or Gary Goldmans, for that matter.

She glanced at the dashboard. Yikes—eighty-five! *Slow down, JoJo. Take it easy.*

She lightened the pressure on the pedal and tried to relax, but she couldn't help it. Goldman. The last project she'd worked on for Goldman Pharmaceuticals had been eighteen months before. She knew when, because it was just before Christmas and right around the time Nate, Shawn and Maggie's third child, was born.

Goldman Pharma had been small potatoes for a long time, producing a bunch of copycat hormone therapies, but then had made a name for itself with a very successful twilight sedative known as Twilex, used for light sedation in outpatient surgeries, dentistry, etc. But at the time Josie was working for them, the patent on Twilex was running out, and the huge margins would be dwindling as soon as the generics hit the marketplace. Like any good businessman, Gary had a new product in

the works to pick up the slack, Twilinol. Twilinol was really just a reformulation of Twilex with a different delivery method—capsules—aimed at the insomniac crowd. Because the chemistry behind them was basically the same, Goldman Pharma should have been able to get the product through the FDA without the time and expense of a full-blown New Drug Application, or NDA.

Should have, except for one very thorough lead biostatistician on the project. Instead of the slam dunk Gary was hoping for, the project stalled out when Josie uncovered a small, but significant number of cases of very negative long-term outcomes. For the majority of patients, Twilinol was a dream drug, allowing them to sleep deeply, then wake up particularly alert and chipper. For that minority, however, that Josie discovered by looking closely at patient records, serious problems were reported, including nightmares, flashbacks, memory lapses, and even complete emotional breakdowns. But these problems occurred only after excessive or extended use, so Gary chose to limit the time period of the study dataset to exclude that information. Technically, since it wasn't part of the official dataset, Josie could have ignored what she saw and still been ethically correct, but she'd had her share of nightmares and flashbacks, and she wouldn't wish them on anybody. She summarized what she'd seen in the patient records and added it to her final biostat's report, effectively ruining Gary's chances of getting the drug approved.

The day of the presentation, she cheerily made the case that Goldman Pharma had the beginnings of a

solid product with great market potential, but they needed to go back to the lab and either reformulate, or do the research necessary to select out those patients who shouldn't use Twilinol. She knew this was not what Gary wanted to hear. He needed his NDA, and he needed it quick.

After the presentation, when everyone else had left, Josie walked around the conference table, cleaning up, stacking presentation folders and picking up odd pencils and agenda sheets that had been left behind. She heard the door close and looked up. Startled, she spoke his name, "Gary."

Gary was a big man in his late forties or early fifties, always well dressed, and, she had to admit, handsome—dark brown hair and green eyes, just like her dad. Normally, Gary exuded confidence, almost to the point of arrogance, but that day...

He walked toward her, carrying one of the presentation folders and nervously running his hand up and down the plastic spiral-bound spine. "Josie, uh, Miss Natale. Can I talk to you?"

She knew what was coming, but she was used to it. "Josie's fine. Sure."

He set the folder down on the table and pulled back one of the chairs. For a moment, she thought he intended for them to sit, but instead, he took off his jacket and hung it over the back of the chair. "Look, Josie, I heard what you said. I really did. But I need you to hear me, too." He was unbuttoning his cuff. She cringed and resumed stacking and straightening. "This is

a small company. It's not Glaxo or Arthro or one of those big guys. They can take a little disappointment. We can't. We live and die by these little drugs. We *need* this NDA."

Looking only into her bag as she shoved the extra folders into it, she replied, "Yeah, Gary, I get that, but—"

"No buts, Josie. I've got five hundred people upstairs at a Christmas party right now that need their jobs. You want to be the one to tell them they're all fired?"

Her indignance drove her to raise her head and look right at him. "Now, wait just a minute. That's not fair—"

"Josie, please. I'm not asking for anything untoward here. You and I both know you went beyond the call looking at those patient records. Just take it back. Pretend you never saw them. Other statisticians might not have looked. If the data grunts didn't put it in the dataset, you can say you never saw it. No one's the wiser. Do it for those folks upstairs. Please."

Too late—she'd seen the rolled up sleeves. At least he was halfway round the table. She swallowed and worked to keep her voice even, "Gary...you don't know what you're asking. You're asking me to hurt people. You're asking me to look the other way while some poor, unsuspecting patient walks away with nightmares and flashbacks of who knows what for who knows how long. I can't do that. Don't you see? I'm between a rock and a hard place here."

“Josie!” His pitch was rising. “We don’t know how common that really was. We weren’t looking for it. Maybe those people already had those problems. We’ll screen for that stuff next time, I promise. But for now, those are theoretical people with theoretical problems. My employees are real people with real families that need real food on the table tonight. They have kids! Kids who are expecting presents from Santa. I have a daughter; I know what it’s like. Do you have kids?” She gave her head a little shake. “I didn’t think so.”

Now what the hell was that supposed to mean? How dare he! Acting like he was Mr. Bleeding Heart Liberal. Didn’t he have some Ph.D. in finance or some damn thing? She was the one who cared about the people in the study, not his cold, callous ass.

He looked hard at her. “Can you think about my employees and their families? Do you care about them at all?”

“Geez, Gary, of course I do, but...” Images flashed in her mind of waking in bed, soaked with sweat, heart pounding, gasping for air, desperate to separate dream from reality. She put a hand on a nearby chair and steadied herself. Her voice was just above a whisper, “I can’t do it. I just can’t.”

His smooth demeanor was rapidly giving way. “Why then, Josie? Tell me why!”

Well, she couldn’t very well tell him now, could she? Josie turned away, looking out the window, into the darkening sky high above RTP. There were colored lights here and there in the distance. “I’m sorry, Gary. I have to



think about...my professional reputation.”

He quickly crossed the space between them. “Your *reputation*? Your fucking reputation? That’s what you care about?” Suddenly, his large hand was around her throat, her back against the whiteboard, her feet only lightly touching the floor. The railing for the dry-erase markers was cutting into her back.

“G-Gar—” Her eyes shot down to the arm clutching her throat. The rolled-up sleeve revealed muscles swelling under the strain of her weight. The skin color brightening. The dark hairs beginning to stand on end. Her breath caught. Her hands clawed at the wall and the marker railing behind her. She bumped a marker, and it popped off. It hit her calf on the way to the floor.

Gary pressed toward her and brought his face close to hers. “Now you listen to me, you stuck-up little bitch. Get down off your high horse and change those reports, or you won’t have a reputation to worry about.” With that, he let loose of her and turned away.

She stood where he had dropped her, her eyes glued to his back, her hands dangling at her sides, shaking uncontrollably. He looked back over his shoulder at her expectantly and barked, “Do it!”

She wanted to do *something*—run, scream, hide—but nothing came. She was frozen to the spot.

He turned all the way around and came toward her again. When he was near enough to touch her, she sucked in her breath, smacking her own back against the board this time. A slow smile spread across his face. “Well, well, well, what have we here?” He stuck his

index finger under her chin, raising her head a little, forcing her to look up at him. She swallowed, unable to stop the quivering she knew he could feel. “Not so tough now, are we?” He ran his finger down her throat, to the nape of her neck and below, just to the top of her dress, before he withdrew it.

Then he stepped back from her and began unrolling his sleeves, his mood seemingly casual now. “Do it, Josie. Change those reports. Leave them under my tree.” He re-buttoned his cuffs, while he walked to his jacket. As he pulled it on, he looked her over one more time. “Do it, and let’s keep this little meeting just between us, okay?”

Josie didn’t say a word, and she didn’t take her eyes off him until he’d left the room, closing the door behind him again and leaving her alone. She didn’t move, in fact, until long after he’d gone.

But neither did she change his stupid reports. Hell, no. No way was she doing anything for that animal. Never, ever again. Screw him. She didn’t need his money. It had been a long, hard project, but she’d rot in hell before she’d take a dime from that pig. Even if it was enough to buy another one of these cars.

And somehow, he managed not to go out of business. She didn’t know how. Didn’t look into it. Maybe his company was never in that much trouble to begin with, or maybe he got another statistician to change the reports and submitted anyway. Or maybe he got a loan or angel money or who knew? Who cared? Not her. To hell with him. Bastard.

A big green sign warned Josie that she'd soon be in Garner. Crap. She'd passed the damn exit. Five miles ago. And she'd forgotten to call. Double crap! She was already forty-five minutes late. She checked her mirror, pulled across three lanes of traffic, took the exit and the bridge over the freeway and got back on in the opposite direction, cursing the whole way.

By the time she neared Dr. Benito Toral's meager south Raleigh office, a one-story brick building, where he worked only Tuesdays and Thursdays, she was frazzled and worn and very nearly missed hitting the blur of perfect blue sports car that was just pulling out of his lot. Embarrassed, she turned her head away from the sports car driver and simply raised a hand in admission of fault.

###

“¡Mierda! Robert, did you see that? That crazy lady almost hit us.” Nicolas Remedian ran a hand through his wavy jet-black hair, revealing flecks of gray, as his partner and friend, Dr. Robert Prescott, watched with a mildly amused expression.

“Take it easy, Nic. Chill. She knows, she stopped in time. It's all good.”

Nic shifted gears and placed his hand back on the steering wheel. “Oh, sure. It is not *your* car.” Then he shook his head quickly. “Uh, sorry, buddy. I am just on edge today.”

Robert couldn't hold back a grin. “Rosa was

working you pretty hard back there, wasn't she?"

"Between her and Mamá...I am under so much pressure." He glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. "It is these damn gray hairs. They were leaving me alone until the grays started coming in. Now they think I am a lonely, desperate old man."

Robert didn't comment, because, while he certainly didn't think his friend was old at thirty-nine (and being a few years older himself), he did think Nic lacked for decent female companionship, though he would never add to Nic's stress by saying so.

"Maybe I should get a dye job," Nic postulated, though the corners of his mouth were turning up before he even finished the sentence, and in a moment, both men were laughing at the thought of Nic, who never had his hair cut by anyone but Robert's wife, ever setting foot in a salon. Still chuckling, Nic went on, "I guess the poor girl felt the same as me, since she never showed up."

Robert brushed his long, blonde bangs out of his eyes. "Sure you're not disappointed? The Torals seem to think she's the bee's knees."

Nic scowled as he turned onto the freeway. "A woman who is an hour late for a professional appointment and does not have the decency to phone? I do not think I am missing much."

"Well, it sounded to me more like she was doing him a last minute favor."

"...and who cannot follow the instructions on a bag of microwave popcorn?"

Robert chuckled, “Yeah, that did sound pretty hilarious.” Then he added with concern, “I didn’t realize you could actually blow up one of those ovens like that.”

“Oh sure, but only if you are a real genius.”

“Hey, Linda was a real genius, and look where that got you.”

Nic’s tone became a bit heated, “Oh, so now I am supposed to find some beauty pageant airhead to go around with? I don’t think so. Why don’t you go out with her?”

Oops. Robert grimaced. *Way to go, Bobby—just can’t resist mouthing off about Linda.* After all she had done to him, Nic still seemed to have a soft spot for his ex, and though Robert knew it, he always managed to say something nasty about her. Maybe he just didn’t like seeing his best friend skewered, stomped, and strung up, all in the same day. He was funny that way.

“Nic.” Robert sighed and shook his head. “You know me and my big mouth. It’s that whole Abnormal Psych degree thing—I just can’t keep a sock in it. Sorry, man.”

Nic softened, “You know, Robert, I have never had a problem finding my own dates.”

True enough. With his dark, quiet, South American charm, Nicolas Remedian never failed to attract the attention of the loveliest ladies wherever the two of them went together, and, fortunately for Robert, at least back in his single days, Nic’s sloppy seconds still managed to find him palatable. No, the real problem was finding a woman who was worthy of Nic. Beauty

pageant airheads need not apply. And, as it turned out, brilliant D.C. power brokers needn't, either.

“Oh, good, look,” said Nic, pointing to a sign. “The airport exit. Now I can be rid of you for a few days. Thank God.” But the corners of his mouth were turning up again, as he pulled off onto the ramp. “Give my love to Nina and the kids, okay?”

“Sure, Nic. The kids miss you like crazy. And I miss my running partner.”

“Oh, yeah, right. You miss dragging me away from my morning coffee and the paper. I have been enjoying my rest down here. Please do not rush to sell the house.”

“No such luck. Nina’s talking to the realtor this week.”

“I suppose I will have to start looking for the box with my running shoes in it, then.”

Robert rolled his eyes. As if Nic didn't know precisely which box in which room every single item he owned was in.

A tinny salsa tune chimed from Nic's phone sitting in the console between them. Robert picked it up and read the screen for him, “Toral's office.”

“I am not going back there to meet her.”

“Voice mail?”

“Uh-huh.”

Robert set the phone back down in the console, grinning and shaking his head.

###

María Calavaras jumped back from the glass doors of Dr. Toral's South Raleigh office.

“¡O, María, perdóneme!” squealed Josie, realizing she had practically toppled the six-months-pregnant patient in her hurry to enter the office. Though her accent was marginal, Josie tried to use her rudimentary Spanish skills in the South Raleigh office, since most of the patients Beni saw there didn't speak much English.

María seemed too preoccupied to care about the near collision or Josie's Spanglish. “Miss Josie, did you see? Dos muchachos, muy guapos.”

Josie glanced around. “Huh? Who? ¿Dónde?” She saw no men anywhere, let alone good-looking ones. It was an OB/GYN office; generally, Beni was the only man in the place. “You mean the guys in the blue sports car? ¿En coche? ¿El azul?”

Just then, Rosaria Toral appeared from the back of the office. She opened her arms. “¡Josephina! Hola, niña. We have been waiting. You just missed them, sweetheart.” She looked genuinely disappointed.

“I'm sorry to be late, Rosa. I got hung up. Who did I miss?”

“The boy we have been wanting you to meet—Nicolas. The one from Chile. Very nice boy, sweet, polite. Nice family. Good to his mamá.”

For once, being late had paid off. “From Chile? Your nephew lives in Chile?”

“No, angel. He is not *our* nephew. He is the

nephew of a friend, and he is from Chile, but he lives here now. Just moved from Washington. I tell you this already, honey.”

Josie grimaced. *Nice going, JoJo. Rosa Toral is the closest thing to a mom you've got in your life, and you can't even remember what she said?* Josie had been working for Beni and Rosa since she was their office intern ten years before, during grad school. She got the job because she was the only biostat geek who knew any Spanish.

Josie tapped her head with her index finger. “So sorry, Rosa. Crazy day. Aren't you glad my head is attached? I promise I'll meet him next time.” Josie didn't relish it, but Rosa deserved better from her.

Before Josie headed to the back, she glanced again at María Calavaras who was still hanging on the entrance door, staring out at the parking lot after the two “muy guapos”. Of course, María was six months prego—progesterone level off the charts—anything sprouting facial hair and bringing home a paycheck would look muy guapo to her, right?

“Ah, Josie, there you are. Please come on back.” Beni's booming voice came down the hall, as she turned the corner. His command of English was perfect, but the accent still remained.

Josie smiled and headed toward him. The sharp, clean resonance of the Spanish language and Spanish speakers, even when they were speaking English, was so much prettier to her than the sloppier, slushier sounds of her own language. “Sorry to be late, Dr. T, but I can stay



as long as—”

He waved off her explanation and pulled her into his office. He sounded panicky, “Josie, I hated to call you at the last minute, but you must help me with something.”

“No problem. What’s up?”

“There is something wrong with the computer. All the data we have been collecting for our big Progestilone study...something is wrong. It is ruined, corrupted or something. The study coordinator was here earlier; she is breathing down my neck. You can fix it, right?”

“Corrupted? Are you sure? Everything was fine last week.” She sat down at his desk and started typing on his keyboard as she spoke, “We have loads of backups; I’m sure I can get you back up to snuff. No worries.” He was probably overreacting like most people did to computer problems, but these pharmaceutical studies brought a lot of money into the clinic and enabled patients to receive treatments they couldn’t afford, so she took his concerns seriously.

“Whew! That is a big relief, Josephina. You are a life saver, little girl.”

Josie grinned as she stared at his computer monitor. She may be only five-foot-three (on a big hair day), but from up there, he could surely see the grays poking out around her temples. Little girl indeed.

“Hmm, this does seem rather bizarre. I’ll take a look at it, Beni. You’re not having any problems like this in the downtown Raleigh office, are you?” Downtown

Raleigh was a whole different ball of wax—stylish architecture, elaborate furnishings, expensive artwork.

“No, just here.”

“And, no one touches your machine except you, me, and Rosa, right?”

“Right. Well, except for just now. Our friend Nic, you know, the young man from Chile? He put the latest new security programs on for me, so, he said, if my problems were being caused from the outside, that should stop it.”

“Oh, well, that sounds good. And, while we’re on the subject...”

“¿Sí?” Beni sounded hopeful.

“As it turns out, Shawn McKenna would like to meet him, well, both of them, to maybe do some work for him. You’ll give Shawn their number, right?”

“Sure. That’s great, Josie. I appreciate you talking to him about them.”

“De nada.”

“Of course, we were also hoping you two—”

“Beni...”

“Okay, okay. I am not saying a thing. I leave that up to Rosa. But, uh, if you happen to be going to the wine tasting Friday night...we were going to bring Nic with us. He is big on wines. Perhaps we will see you there?”

“Perhaps.” As a matter of fact, she was going to the wine tasting. With Theo. Sounded cozy.

“All right, then, I will let you work. I have kept my patients waiting long enough.” Beni stepped out into

the hall, but then poked his head back in. He shook his finger at her. “And, Josie, no forgetting to send the invoice this time, eh? I mean it, honey.” She nodded obediently, thinking grimly how it was liking invoicing your own parents, even when she kept the hourly rate low.

A moment later, Rosaria’s head popped through the doorway. “Sweetheart, how long will you be staying?”

“Uh, probably a couple hours at least. You two can go on when you’re ready. I have my cardkey and this month’s security code for the building. I can set the alarm.”

Rosa’s lip were tight. “Okay, but don’t stay too late, and if it is dark—”

“I know, I’ll call the security service and have them walk me out. I always do.”

“Good girl.”

Josie bit her lip as Rosa pulled back out of the room. She didn’t want them to worry about her, didn’t want anybody to know how jumpy and fearful she got working alone in clients’ offices at night. Heck, some of those guys from the security service made her pretty nervous, too. But she had to admit, it was nice knowing the Torals cared enough to worry. She wished her own damn mother had cared that much.

###

Josie glanced at the clock again. It was almost

eight. Where was the guy? The security service was usually a lot more reliable than this. She was annoyed with him for not responding to her calls and texts, and annoyed with herself for caring whether he did. She had her laptop and all her gear packed up and ready to go, and she was tired and *really* hungry. She didn't feel like waiting for that stupid security guy any more.

She looked out the glass front doors of Beni's practice. Sheesh, what a hassle. Not like it was even late. It was dark out, but eight o'clock isn't exactly the witching hour. She shifted her angle in the doorway. She could see her car from here. It wasn't more than a hundred yards away. She hadn't actually parked in the OB/GYN lot, because of that near-miss she'd had with the sports car earlier. She'd been too embarrassed to put it in reverse right in front of them, so she'd just gone on to the next entrance and pulled in there.

While Beni's lot was now deserted, the place where she'd left her car, a Mexican restaurant and bar, was still hopping. She'd eaten there with Beni and Rosa a few times. The queso fundido was like, to-die-for. Hmm, there were lots of people going in and out of that place. Surely, it was safe to just hike on over there. Anyway, if someone did approach her, the sound of her growling stomach would probably scare them off.

She grabbed the card key from her bag, slid it through the magnetic strip, and punched in the code. She waited for the click of the door unlocking, then pulled it open and stepped outside. The door closed and locked automatically behind her as she started across the lot.

She hadn't made it fifteen paces when she heard a strange sound behind her—something metallic, like a pipe or a trash can lid, hitting the ground. She hesitated. Her head was spinning with a hundred different explanations for what she'd heard. An animal, right? Messing with Beni's trash? Sure, that's all it was.

A-and voices? Yes, she was hearing voices. Real ones, not just in her stupid head. Somewhere near the back of the building.

All of sudden, it seemed like a really, really long way to that Mexican restaurant. A long way out in the open, with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. She was a whole lot closer to the office than the restaurant. She could just turn around and go back in there. But she'd have to dig out that card key again, and punch in the code. *Think fast, JoJo. Come on!*

She decided to go back. She forced her legs to move and spun herself around. But before she could take another step, she saw them. Two men standing near a couple of cars, parked at the very back. She wouldn't have been able to see them from inside. And so far, they hadn't noticed her, but if she started running, or God knows, screaming, they surely would.

Stay or go? Office or Mexican restaurant?  
*Dammit, just pick one!*

“Jos? Is that you?”

What the—it was one of the two men. He had moved out of the shadows of the back of the building and was coming toward her. She was frozen to the spot. He was crossing the space between them quickly. “Josie,

what are you—I mean, where are you going?”

Theo. Jesus. Where the hell did he come from? She blew out all the air in her lungs. Cripes, she was such a scaredy-cat. “Th-Theo. Um, I, um...” She gave him a weak smile and motioned toward Toral’s office. “I was working late. I was going back in.”

“Oh. Uh, where’s your car?”

“I parked it over there.” She gave a vague wave in the direction of the restaurant. Then she furrowed her brow. “Why are you here?”

“Well, I...came to take you to dinner. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Oh. Well, you did. You definitely surprised me.”

“Sorry if I scared you, baby.” He stepped closer, wrapped his hand around hers, and gave her quick kiss on the cheek.

By then, the other man was coming towards them—the security guard. “Sorry, Miss Natale. I just checked my phone and saw that you were trying to reach me. I ran into your boyfriend here a few minutes ago, and we just started talking, ya know?” He leaned in a little too close, studying her face. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head. “No. I mean, yes, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. I’m just a little tired. And hungry.” She looked at Theo. “Thank you, Theo, for coming, and for wanting to surprise me.” She smiled. “That was really nice of you.”

He smiled back and tugged on her hand a bit. “Well, let’s go then. I’ll take you to your car, and then

you can follow me.”

“Sure.” As they started to walk toward Theo’s car, she threw back at the older man, “And thank you, Mr. Williams. Next time, I’ll try to be a little more patient.”

He just smiled and waggled his fingers at her. Okay, he still creeped her out.

As they were climbing into Theo’s car, he pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I just remembered something. Work. I need to make a quick call first.”

“Sure, no problem.”

He tapped on the phone a couple times, then held it close to his ear. He paused a moment, obviously waiting for the recipient to answer, then plowed ahead, “Yeah, hi. Listen, I can’t make it tonight. Can you finish that project up without me?” He paused again. “Uh, something came up. Yes, exactly. Something *really* important.” She looked at him with concern, but he just grinned and winked at her.

While he finished up his call, she looked out the window, finally letting herself relax. Man, it would be great when she could ever stop being such a paranoid dork and being so afraid of everyone and everything.

When Theo was done, he set his phone in the console between the seats, but instead of returning his hand to the wheel, he laid it on her thigh. “Wow, these are sexy. I love it when you wear these things.”

She looked down. She had her bag sitting in her lap, and her dress had gotten hooked on it, pulling the skirt way up her leg. Theo was playing with the band of

pretty lace at the top of her stocking. She flushed and pushed his hand away, then pulled the skirt back into place. “Oh, you! Will you just drive?”

He laughed, but then she noticed his outfit. Huh. Black jeans and a long-sleeved black t-shirt? If he was coming to take her to dinner, why’d he change into that outfit? Why not just keep his nice work clothes on?



### *Chapter Three*

With her eyes closed and the late afternoon sun streaming through the slats of the thick wooden blinds of her bedroom window, Josie was transported to her daddy's sailboat, somewhere just off the coast of North Carolina's Outer Banks. She could feel the heat and humidity so oppressive there in the dead of summer that anywhere besides a briskly moving craft was unbearable. At the tender age of twelve or thirteen, long before she could have possibly known, she would lie in her bikini on the bleached white deck at the front of the boat, feeling the intense rays of the sun pummeling and penetrating her skin so fiercely—its white heat exhilarating as it pierced through to her core—and wonder if that was what sex felt like.

Twenty years later, she knew that it was.

It was unseasonably warm for May, and with the windows open halfway, memories of that summertime sweat became a reality. There was even a slightly fishy smell coming up from the lake to complete

the idyllic scene of summer at the shore. Theo, poised above her, his pale skin stretched tightly over his spare frame, ran the fingers of one hand over her smooth, soft belly. She giggled, barely raising her eyelids.

“Still with me, Jos?”

“Mmm...don’t interrupt...I’m dre-e-eaming...”

Theo laughed, and then, blowing gently on her chest and stomach, created a cooling breeze in the light glaze of sweat that had formed there. It blended perfectly with the scene in her head. He lightly brushed each of her cheeks with the back of his hand, and then laid it gently at the base of her neck, while he moved slowly inside her.

Josie felt only the gentle rocking of the waves and the steam heat of the southern sun. When Theo shifted his position, though, his weight-bearing hand slipped, and the brunt of his mass fell to the hand that rested on her neck, momentarily blocking her throat. “Huh!” Josie instantly tensed, gasping in shock.

“Ooh, sorry, baby!” Theo quickly shifted the weight back away from her throat.

But it was too late. The reverie was broken. The images began to drift. The warm glow of the setting sun became a dimly lit parlor with outdated furnishings. The fishy smell gave way to the smell of stale beer. A much larger, more athletic man took Theo’s place—a Pretty Boy, with a chiseled face, fair skin, and blue eyes. His green plaid button-down shirt hung partially open, revealing a hairless, muscular chest, and with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, big, powerful arms ending in

monstrous hands. One of the hands was wrapped firmly around her neck, pressing into it just enough to make breathing less than comfortable and moving less than possible, while the other alternated between pushing his overlong blonde bangs out of his eyes and clumsily fumbling and grasping at her breasts through a tangle of disheveled garments.

A familiar knot formed in her belly, and her pulse began to race. *JoJo, get a grip! Control it. Push it away. Open your eyes, Jo.* She opened her eyes wide to banish the offending images. In those few moments, the sun had sunk, and the room had darkened considerably. It took a second for her eyes to adjust. She searched for Theo's face. There—brown hair, brown eyes, protruding ribs—not remotely the same guy.

She pushed his hand away from her neck, then reached up behind his head and pulled him down close to her, so she could smell him, taste him, feel him. Steeping her senses, she assured herself of his identity, then closed her eyes again, relaxing, drifting away.

*Now, where was I? Oh, yeah...blistering sun, rolling waves—oh, oh wait! No...NOT YET!*

Shit.

Theo nuzzled her ear, then whispered into it, “Wow. Mmm. That was awesome, baby.”

Josie turned her head away, mumbling in reply, “Mm.”

She didn't expect it to be perfect. The Earth didn't have to quake into a thousand shattering pieces every time. It only bothered her when it was Pretty Boy's

fault that it didn't.

###

Theo rolled off her, draped his arm around her waist, and feigned sleep, knowing she would soon leave the bed if he did so. He knew her pretty well after so many months. And it wasn't that he hadn't come to enjoy snuggling against that warm, soft skin, burying himself in that voluptuous flesh—more so than he'd ever imagined he would—but he did have somewhere else to be today.

It had seemed an impossible request at first—one woman only, for an indefinite period. God knows, at twenty-eight, he was still a young man with a young man's appetite, but it had become easier over time. Monogamy wasn't as awful as he'd expected. He'd even found Josie a lusty and willing partner, once they'd gotten past that interminable waiting period—whatever that was about. And to be honest, her grace, her kindness, and her gentility had taken him by surprise. He had never known his own mother, but he imagined that she would have been a lot like Josie.

After several minutes, probably when she felt sure he was asleep, she slipped out of the bed, carefully extricating herself from beneath his arm. He rolled over, as if slumbering deeply, so that he'd be facing toward the closet while she dressed. He liked to watch. She was picking up scattered pieces of clothing as she went, stopping at one point, hand on well-rounded hip, to

ponder a missing piece. Her figure was from a bygone era; much more the pin-up girls of the fifties or sixties—Brigitte Bardot or Marilyn Monroe—than the bony, starving actresses so much in favor these days.

She was pulling her clothes on quickly, right back into what she'd been wearing before, probably late for something or other. Quick, quick, quick: some fancy lacy excuse for a bra, those thong underwear things (how could they *not* be uncomfortable?), and some silky green dress with a deep v-neck. The matching four-inch heels, he knew, would be back by the door, kicked off the minute she stepped inside. Why did she wear the damn things if they hurt her feet so much?

He closed his eyes and dozed for a few minutes, waiting for Josie to finish in the bathroom, though he couldn't imagine what it was she did in there. Her hair usually looked like the sorry end of a mop, and she didn't wear a lot of makeup. As soon as he heard the door close behind her, he hopped up, threw on his own clothes, and headed out.

###

“Where *is* he?!” Gary Goldman glanced around impatiently, then flipped open his box of Marlboro Reds, banging one out against his fist. He offered the box to Oscar Teslar, who shook his bald head rapidly, with something of a grimace. Gary stuck the cigarette between his lips, held up his lighter and drew in. He puffed, glancing from side to side, as the two men waited,

looking ridiculously out of place dressed in full business attire, sitting at one of the picnic tables alongside the Eno River. Oscar hoped for Gary's sake that the cancer portion of the Progestilone research would continue unabated. He might be needing it in the future.

“Nobody respects the value of punctuality anymore. Just like that little bitch.” Oscar shifted uneasily at Gary's reference to the clever, attractive biostatistician they were both thinking of. Sure, they were under pressure, increasing pressure, thanks to Gary, but did he always have to be so crass?

It had all started out rather simply. Screw with a little clinical trial data and toss out a few red herrings to slow up the pace of the new kid on the block—Progestilone—in order to leave their cash cows in the can a while longer. And what happened? Josie Natale, that's what. Girl must have some kind of computer chip in her brain or something. Here they were busting their tails just to buy their companies a little breathing room, and in every case, she would be called in and save the day. She wouldn't figure out what they were doing, of course, but she'd always end up solving the immediate problem. Apparently, the girl was very big on backups.

Oscar had asked Gary one day, did she work for every damn body in the whole of Research Triangle Park? He still recalled the strange little light that seemed to go off in Gary's head as he'd asked that question, and the glint in Gary's eye as he'd responded, “Damn near, Oscar, damn near.” Somehow, that little exchange had snowballed into Gary's latest idea about “borrowing”

study data. Brilliant idea, really. Gary was a brilliant man, after all—Columbia and Princeton and all that—but they'd needed help to execute his idea, and that help had come from the oddest place. Gary sure had some weird connections. Kind of creepy, weird connections.

And those connections had Oscar worried. How long before Josie Natale or one of those bleeding heart free clinic types started noticing something fishy? Or how long before somebody got hurt, really hurt? Gary kept assuring him that wouldn't happen.

Too late now, though—in for a penny, in for a pound.

Gary took a long final drag on his cigarette, then pitched the butt into the Eno. He checked his watch again. “Son of a bitch. Disrespectful son of a bitch. What’s he doin’? Squeezin’ in a quick eighteen? Between him and that little witch, my life is a living hell.” He got up, stuffed his hands in his pants pockets and stomped around in the short grass a bit.

“I don’t understand what you have against the girl, Gary. I mean, I realize she’s not on your Christmas list, but you’ve got to admire her. She’s smart as a whip; she works her ass off; she always delivers; and let’s face it, she’s cute as hell.”

Gary turned and glared at him, then took out another cigarette and lit it, before answering. “Drool all over yourself, Oscar. In my book, she’s an ungrateful bitch. You’ve no idea what’s she done to my company. *My* company, get it? I have five hundred people working for me. Good, honest men and women. They’re smart

and hard-working, and most of them don't make anywhere near her Goddamn three-hundred dollars an hour. They've got kids to feed and clothe and send to college. Does she care about them? Hell, no. Know what she said to me when I asked her about that? She said she had a reputation to maintain. Her Goddamn reputation. That's all she's worried about—where her next three-hundred dollar an hour contract is coming from. And it's not like she's hard up for contracts. She's got McKenna and RTT in her pocket. Fred McGuire follows her around like a puppy dog. All the non-profits are eating out of her hand, and the NIH, the NIEHS—all the government outfits. Shit, she writes her own ticket, but for me? For one lousy study that means the whole world to my company, she can't change a few little lines. Wretched fuckin' bitch."

But Oscar knew this wasn't really about Gary's five hundred employees and their families. It was about his own family, specifically, Gary's seven year old daughter, Lottie, who had, as of today, right now, an incurable blood disorder that a modest percentage of those five hundred employees were entirely dedicated to researching and discovering a cure for. That blood disorder was what was known in the industry as an orphan disease—one so rare that no company would bother researching it, because discovering a cure would never reap the profits to pay back the research cost. Unless, of course, the benefits considered were not purely financial. Maybe Gary should have told Josie Natale about that.



The sound of a car crunching through the stones caused them both to turn. “Finally,” grumbled Gary. “Jesus, that car!”

“We don’t tell him how to spend his money.”

“Oh, sure, he can buy whatever—booze, blow, women...”

“Hey, he’s supposed to be clean, right? Gary, we’re in enough trouble as it is—”

Gary laughed. “Take it easy, Oscar. I’m only kidding. Believe me, I keep an eye on him. I’m not gonna let anybody screw this up for me.”

## *Chapter Four*

The rickety wooden floor creaked beneath his feet, so Theo tried stepping more gently to avoid alerting anyone to his presence. Apparently he managed it, as no one even flinched when he darkened the doorway.

Across the room, he could see her standing by the old cracked window, holding the tattered curtains aside and staring out at the mountains in the distance. Even in that shapeless grey dress that hung below her knees, and with her hair pulled back at the neck, she looked pretty to him. Some people just seemed to have an inner glow that all the clouds in the sky couldn't shadow.

The others in the room—two young girls and an old woman—were too preoccupied with their activities to notice him standing there. All three sat around a wooden table, each quietly minding her task. The older of the two girls appeared to be sorting and tagging a collection of colorful pieces of jewelry, while the younger was engrossed in a colorful drawing she was

creating with her crayons. The old woman squinted through her reading glasses, carefully selecting tiny stones, beads, and fine metals for her project.

The trio finally looked up when Theo ventured into the room. Before any of them could say anything, he grinned and held a finger up to his lips. He crossed the room noiselessly and snuck up behind the woman at the window, then tweaked her waistline on both sides.

“Oh!” She jumped and whirled around to face him, a sharp look instantly dissipating when she saw who it was. “Theo.” She tilted her head to the side and smiled. “I had no idea you were coming today.”

He shrugged. “Wanted to surprise you.”

“And so you did,” she said, her eyes brightening. She reached around and hugged him warmly then.

As she stepped back, he said simply, “Hi, Ty.”

“What a wonderful treat to have you here, Theo. How long are you staying? Can you have supper with us?”

He checked his watch. “Well, I shouldn’t...”

“Please?” She batted her eyelashes and gave him a pitiful look.

He laughed and said, “Okay, sure, I can stay. But, uh, before that, I need something from you.” He turned them both back toward the ladies at the table. “Well, actually, from all of you.”

“Sure, anything.”

###

The Latta Lakes Country Club ladies' lounge was more than just a bathroom. It was truly a ladies' respite, designed for the original Southern Belle, who simply couldn't survive an entire evening of socializing without a complete inter-event makeover, and, possibly, a nap. The decor was a bit too "Gone with the Wind" for Josie's personal taste, but she supposed the "Brady Bunch" stylings of Casa Natale didn't particularly qualify her opinion in that area, so she never registered a formal complaint with the club's Board of Directors.

As she touched her lips with a bit of clear gloss in one of the gilt-edged mirrors, Josie's stomach rumbled uncomfortably. She glanced at her watch. Eight twenty. Long time since her afternoon snack. Where the hell was Theo? He'd been out of town—out west somewhere on business, he said—for the last three days, but he'd texted to confirm that he would meet her at the wine tasting.

She straightened one of her chunky red earrings, then headed back out to the party. She looked around impatiently at first, but the sight of the glittering room relaxed her. The theme for this month's tasting was Italy, and no expense had been spared: the wait staff was costumed; the walls were adorned with posters and paintings; and even the tableware was thematic.

And, there, in the center of the room, her best friend, Maggie "The Magpie" McKenna looked gorgeous, sparkling in silky beige slacks with a matching sequined top, as she chattered away with a hundred

different people at once. Oh, and behind her, the buffet of salad and pasta and sausages and—oh, God, was that Veal Marsala?—looked gorgeous, as well. Josie wanted to be polite and wait for Theo, but sheesh, she was starving, and he was *really* late. Maybe she should try to call him again; she'd tried several times that day, but kept getting "out of the service area". Where the heck was he that he had no service?

Oh, why did she care if he showed, anyway? It wasn't like she was there to socialize, right? The club was supposed to be about business, networking, and meeting potential clients, and that was easier without her (admittedly) socially awkward boyfriend hanging on her arm.

"Josie, dear. Have you met Dr. Loggia?"

Josie whirled around to find one of her clients presenting a very frail looking old man. "Why, no, Anita, I don't believe I have." She smiled brightly and extended her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Dr. Loggia."

"Er, how's that, dear?" asked the old man, bending his ear toward Josie.

"PLEASED TO MEET YOU, DR. LOGGIA."  
Josie shook his hand vigorously.

"Oh, I'm pleased to meet you, too, Miss. I'm Randolph Loggia. What did you say your name was?"

Josie grinned. "Josie. Josie Natale." Maybe it was time for a drink. "You know, I was just going over to the Sicilian table, would you care to join me?" Knowing he couldn't possibly have gotten all that, she made a drinking gesture and waved a hand toward the

appropriate table.

He followed her motion. “A little wine? Capital idea, young lady. Shall we?” He crooked his arm for her to slip her hand into, and she accepted with a surprised smile. Anita mouthed a relieved “Thank you” and headed off in another direction.

The old man started, “Why, lookie here—Santorini Cellars Cabernet. I remember drinking this wine with a beautiful young Italian girl during the early days of WWII—”

“Hey, I’m one quarter Italian!” Josie burst in, pointing to herself.

“Well, are you now? And you are a beautiful young girl, so let’s recreate some history, my dear.”

Before she knew it, Josie and the good doctor had made the rounds of the tasting tables. His failing hearing became less of an issue, since he did most of the talking, regaling her with stories of the days of his youth for almost two hours, until his daughter, who apparently thought he was lost, drunk, or dead, came to claim him.

As she led him away, giving Josie a glare, Josie recalled that she was supposed to be meeting up with Theo. She started to get up from where she and Dr. Loggia had been sitting to go look for him. Who-o-o-a. She sat back down. Must’ve had more than she thought. She wasn’t a big drinker—usually just a glass of wine, but they hadn’t had much. All they’d drunk were a few little samples, right? She’d never had an actual glass of wine. So how come her head felt like it was stuffed full of cotton? Oh wait, she never did make it to the food

table yet. Maybe she would do that now.

Or not. All of a sudden, she wasn't feeling so great. Maybe she should head straight for the ladies' lounge. She got up again and turned in that direction.

Uh-oh. Between her and the ladies' lounge stood Beni and Rosa Toral. They had said something about coming here tonight, hadn't they? And they were talking with some big muscular blonde guy who had his back to Josie. That had to be the nephew's friend, right? The guy they wanted to introduce her to. Geez, he needed a haircut. But blonde? Wasn't he supposed to be Latino? Mmm, maybe not. She'd gotten it all mixed up that day...who knew anymore? Regardless, she was way too tipsy to make small talk. *Sorry, Rosa, not tonight.*

Josie looked back toward the Venetian table. Right next to it was the door to the veranda. It looked pretty dark out there. If she could make it out there, she could collapse into one of those big high-backed rattan chairs, get some fresh air, and clear her head. Maybe she could even sneak out by the circular staircase at the other end and never be missed.

She headed in that direction and gave the server a polite nod.

"Miss Natale, is there something else I can get for you?"

She was thinking, "large metal bucket", but instead waved a hand toward the door.

"You...wanna go out there?" It was reasonable that the young man was puzzled by her request. In the summertime, the veranda was used for parties and

luncheons and other functions, but it was early in the season and still cool at night. The porch probably wasn't set up, hadn't been swept, and the lights weren't on. But while Josie didn't want to seem impatient, she didn't need a college kid in a bolero jacket questioning her judgement. She started to push on the door herself. "Uh, okay, here, let me." The youngster held the door for her.

She walked quickly through and mumbled her thanks as she stepped out into the crisp night air.

###

CLICK. As the door to the veranda closed behind Josie, relief was instant. The sounds of the party faded, and the hoped-for breeze caught the skirt of her dress and lifted her hair. The only artificial lighting on the veranda was what shone through the windows from the party. It was enough to guide her walking, but not much else. She moved to the end of the veranda to make sure she was beyond the view of anyone inside, then stepped to the curved railing and slipped off her new red shoes. She stood barefoot on the wooden floor, now three inches shorter, and wiggled her toes, relieved to be free of those constricting high heels.

A half-moon had risen over the man-made lake. Beautiful. The wonder was that no one else had found his way out there to enjoy the sight. Josie leaned on the railing, propped her elbows, and dropped her chin into her hands. The view from there, three stories up, coupled with the wine buzz, was hypnotizing. Her eyelids sank.



She contented herself to sound only. From the party inside, she heard muted laughter, glasses clinking, and music playing, and from the world outside, the wind badgering the trees, and the water nudging the shore. She sucked deeply of late spring's night air, an intoxicant in its own right, and felt it clearing her head as she blew it back out. She stayed like that some minutes, inhaling and exhaling, wondering idly, as she had on similar nights, if North Carolina Springtime could be bottled and sold, and if so, how a price could ever be set.

Soon feeling much recuperated and sure that people were looking for her, she decided to return to the party. She spoke to the night sky, "Okay, one more, and I'm done." She inhaled sharply, held the breath a moment, and then flopped her upper body over the railing as she blew out, letting her arms and her long hair dangle freely below.

"¡Ay, Dios mío! ¡Señorita, permítame ayudarle!"

Huh? What? Out of nowhere, a man was behind her, on top of her, all over her, grabbing at her arms, around her waist, a hand in her face, covering her eyes and mouth, pulling at her, backing her away from the railing.

She gasped. Her heart jumped. Her thoughts scrambled. No, no! NO! Somebody help! Please! HELP! She wanted to scream, but his enormous hand was in the way. She tried to concentrate, but he was everywhere, struggling against her.

*Josie, stay calm. Don't panic. Get a grip. Use*

*your head, genius!* What had she learned in Mary's self-defense classes? What was that acronym? SMILE? No. KISS? No, no, that wasn't it. GRIN? Yes! Now, what the hell did it stand for? Oh, yeah: Groin, Ribcage, Instep, Nose—the most vulnerable spots to hit an attacker. Now if she could just muster the courage to act on it.

He was behind her, right up against her. Ribcage. Yes, she could do that. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, bent her arm at the elbow and jabbed back violently, digging squarely under the man's ribs.

“Oof!” came the response, and the man let go of her.

Hey, it worked! Okay, so now what? Run? She was already at the end of the veranda, and it was three stories up. Scream? The folks inside wouldn't hear her over the music. Turn around and face him? Heck, no! She could never do that.

The fear and the panic started taking over. She was frozen to the spot, her arms pinned to her sides, her hands balled into little fists. The wind was picking up. She could feel her dress blowing up around her legs. Why in hell hadn't she worn slacks like everyone else? Tears began swimming in her eyes. What was going on? Was he still there? Was he getting ready to kill her, because she had fought back? Maybe he would just throw her over the balcony! Oh, why didn't he just do whatever he was going to and get it over with?

Finally, there was a sound behind her, a slight groan, then the man cleared his throat and began to speak. As he did, she noticed a distinctly Spanish accent.

“Sorry to have startled you, Miss. I did not mean to frighten you. I was trying to help...”

Josie’s eyes flew open. ¡Permítame ayudarle!— Let me help you! Let me help you? Yes, that’s what the man had said to her, in Spanish, but she’d been too freaked out to translate. Dios mío, indeed. She stammered without turning around, “Y-you spoke in Spanish. I...didn’t understand.”

“I did? Oh my God. I am sorry. I do that sometimes, when I am excited...or angry or upset. I thought...well, I thought you were falling...or, or jumping? I thought you were a little...um, that you had perhaps...sampled a few too many wines this evening?”

*Idiot! Chickenshit idiot! He wasn’t attacking you—he was just trying to help!* Josie hurriedly brushed the tears from her cheeks, and then, anxious to appear merely stupid, rather than utterly ridiculous, she responded, still with her back to him. “Y-you thought I was drunk?”

“Um...I did.”

“So you were out here the whole time?”

“I was.”

“Watching me? And you didn’t say anything?”

Knowing it would appear really odd not to face him at that point, Josie finally turned around, hoping the dim lighting would prevent him noticing her red nose and tear-stained cheeks.

“I am afraid so. I should have...said something, made myself known. I am truly sorry.”

In the low light, everything was shadowed, like

a black and white photograph. She could see the high-backed rattan chair that he must have been sitting in. She had walked—or stumbled—right on by and never even noticed him there. Maybe she was a little drunk.

As he turned slightly and was caught in a stream of light from the party, she could see the handsome outline of his face. Rugged, worn, thirty-something, maybe forty, he could have looked weary, but only looked kind. No chiseled Pretty Boy was he. He looked like he'd spent some time outside in his life, like on a farm, or maybe on a boat, like her dad. His eyes, at least in this light, were almost black, matching his short, dark, wavy hair. He was tall, close to Shawn's height. Six-two? Six-three? And in his perfectly tailored dark suit, he looked lean, but not skinny, with a marvelously broad chest.

He grimaced slightly, massaging the spot where she'd routed him with the elbow, then continued with his explanation. "I did not want to disturb you. You seemed to be enjoying your solitude. Enjoying the view."

"As were you?" Josie queried, eyebrow raised, as she considered the fact that his view would have been primarily of her red-skirted rump.

He averted his eyes. "I was."

She softened, "Well, I'm sorry, too. I overreacted. I may, in fact, have had a few too many...samples, and you were just trying to help. I see that now." She pointed to his rib cage. "I hope I didn't break anything."

He immediately straightened up and quit

holding the sore spot. “Oh, this? It is nothing. Old football injury. I am fine.”

She couldn't help grinning at his command of American humor. “Well, if you need an x-ray or want to sue or anything, there's a roomful of doctors and lawyers in there...” She flicked her thumb in the direction of the party.

He smiled, apparently accepting her joke as a sign of forgiveness, but then acted as though he was taking a hint. “Well then, I will give you back your privacy.” He nodded to her, and started to turn toward the door.

“No, wait. Don't go. It was, after all, I who intruded on you.”

“But it was not right for me to—”

“You're not from around here, are you?” she asked with a wry grin.

“No, Madam, I am not.”

“Yeah. That's pretty obvious. See, most of the guys I meet—uh, never mind. It's just nice to be in the company of a bona fide gentleman for a change.” She looked up in her head. “Too bad my first successful self-defense move was on the wrong guy.”

“You were most impressive.”

She sighed. “Well, thanks, but I'm not usually. I've taken a bunch of those classes—a friend of mine has a studio—and I'm a total flop. I'm fantastic in practice, by myself, but as soon as there's an opponent, I just fall apart. I get all nervous and flustered. Even my best friend, who's only ninety-five pounds, can take me

down. And last time, she was pregnant.”

“Fighting pregnant?”

“She didn’t know, of course. Oh, but the baby’s fine. He’s beautiful, really. Fat as a pig. They named him after me.”

The man started laughing at that, so Josie joined him, then extended her hand. “Hi, I’m—”

“Aha! There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Josie and her new friend turned toward the sound of Maggie McKenna’s high heels rapidly clickety-clacking down the wooden veranda. The sound was still far away, as though she was coming from the distant end of the porch. It was too dark to see her yet, but Josie knew that in the moonlight, she, who was standing so close to the railing, would be visible to Maggie.

“One minute, you’re getting poor Dr. Loggia drunker than a skunk, and the next—”

“Wait a minute! *Me?* Getting *him*—”

Maggie stopped short as she reached them. “Whoa! I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you had company. I didn’t mean to interrupt.” She lifted her eyebrows at Josie, and then, rolling her eyes toward the tall man, said, “And I can just go right back where I came from—” Her tone changed suddenly. “Jos?” She laid her hand alongside Josie’s face, turning it more directly into the moonlight. “You’ve been crying, honey. What’s wrong?”

Without giving her time to answer, Maggie turned toward the tall stranger, planted one tiny little hand on one tiny little hip and stuck a finger of the other

in his face. “What is going on here? Why is my friend crying? What did you do to her?”

“What did I—”

Were it not for the injustice the poor man had suffered not once, but twice in the same quarter hour, the scene would have been wholly hilarious. Maggie McKenna, all five feet and ninety-five pounds of her, could create a presence that even men two and three times her size found imposing, and, much as Josie normally enjoyed the show, she knew she could not let this fine gentleman suffer the indignity of false accusation yet again, so she quickly jumped to his defense. “Mags, Mags, chill. It’s okay. He didn’t do anything. I mean, he did, but he was trying to...um...” She shook her head out. “Wait. Let’s back up, start over. Maggie, I’d like you to meet...” She looked up at the man, realizing she hadn’t yet learned his name. He, no doubt realizing that as well, had his mouth open to fill in the blank when Josie spotted something through the window behind him. “Theo!”

Maggie wrinkled up her nose. “Another Theo?”

“No, there, inside.” Josie pointed into the clubhouse. “He’s here, and he’s obviously looking for me.” She looked plaintively at the two of them. “I really don’t want to see him right now. Not like this.” She indicated her generally war-torn appearance and added, “Not tonight.”

Her new friend peered into the clubhouse and spoke up, “Okay, which one is Theo?”

Maggie grinned and pointed through the window. “Skin and bones, cheap suit.”

“Ah, yes, I see the one. And he is coming this way.” He began loosening his tie. “I will take care of this, ladies.”

“What are you going to do to him?” asked Josie with concern.

Maggie grabbed Josie’s arm. “Who cares? Let’s go.”

“Wait! My shoes!”

“Never mind them, c’mon!” The two women took off running down the old wooden porch, while Josie’s new friend stepped back inside.

###

At the far end of the clubhouse, the two women bent over double, trying to catch their breath from running and laughing at the same time. Josie spoke first, her words intermingled with gasps, “Oh, God, Mags, that was fun.” She took a couple deep breaths. “Can you see inside? What’s going on? Theo’s not still looking for me, right?”

Maggie was laughing too hard to answer, but raised up on her tiptoes to look through a high, narrow window that was propped open from inside. She gasped for air. “Uh, wait, I see them.” She bent back down for a deep breath, then up again, straining to make herself tall enough to see. “Let’s see, okay, your Spanish buddy has his arm around Theo like they’re old friends. Oh, I get it,



he's pretending to be roaring drunk. Hey, he's pretty funny. And Theo looks really annoyed. Man, that guy's a hottie, Jos. Where'd you find him? Why didn't you tell me about him? Did you just meet him tonight?"

But Josie was pulling at her sleeve. "Let me see, Mags."

"Wait a minute! What's he doing? Omigod! He-he's stabbed him!"

"WHAT? MAGGIE! Let me see!" Josie practically ripped Maggie off the wall of the clubhouse so that she could get a peek through the high window. "Oh, Maggie, get some contacts! He didn't stab Theo, he spilled red wine on him. Boy, is Theo pissed." Josie dropped down from the window with a devilish grin on her face and plopped into one of the cushioned rocking chairs nearby. "Hah! Serves him right for standing me up."

"Well, technically, he didn't stand you up, Jos. He is here, but he gets zero credit for showing up near midnight. What's the deal with that jerk, anyway? I assume you're not going anywhere near his condo—or yours—tonight, right?"

"I guess not. Not if I can stay at your place, that is."

"Well, of course you can. You know that." Maggie dropped into the chair next to Josie. "I'm sorry, honey, I don't mean to be harsh. And I know I sound like a broken record, but are you absolutely sure Theo isn't like...married or something?"

"Oh, Maggie, not that again. I told you, his

work keeps him away. He's very busy, and so am I, and so it all works out, and..."

"...and you don't want to talk about it, right?"

Josie just leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes.

Maggie brightened, "Well then, let's talk about Antonio Banderas back there."

Josie opened her eyes again and sat up straight. "He is pretty adorable, huh? And yes, I did just meet him tonight—right out on the veranda."

"Total hunk. And all dark and mysterious like you like 'em."

"Yeah, none of that Aryan-Pretty-Boy crap."

"Oh, right, God forbid on the blonde hair and blue eyes." Maggie tucked a piece of her white-blonde hair behind her ears and fervently batted the lashes of her blue eyes.

"Sorry, that's different—you're a girl. And he's got a nice sense of humor."

"Well now, that *is* something special. Let's have another look." Maggie popped up to the window again. "Damn, where did he get off to?"

"Oh no, is he gone?"

"I'm afraid so, Jos, but don't worry, I'm sure he'll call. He obviously likes you. I mean a guy doesn't dump wine on a complete stranger for a girl he doesn't intend to call, you know."

"Well, he does if he didn't get her number."

"So he calls the club and sweet talks Sadie at the desk to get your number. Nothing new there."

“Not if he didn’t get my name.”

“He didn’t get your *name*? Just what were you two doing down there before I came up? Apparently, not a lot of conversation was involved.”

Josie sighed. “It’s a long story. Shall we?” She indicated the circular staircase leading off the veranda and down to the ground, where the lake’s edge path awaited them.

## *Chapter Five*

The section of the lake path from the clubhouse to the McKenna's home was only a half-mile, so Josie condensed the veranda mishap into an eight-minute tale. Once inside the house, she and Maggie found Shawn snoring loudly on the couch as re-runs of a European golf tournament filled their fifty-two-inch flat screen. Josie watched, grinning, while Maggie searched every crevice of Shawn's body for the remote control to turn the set off. "Aha!" Maggie proclaimed, when at last she recovered the missing remote wedged under his right arm. She aimed it at the box just as a mustachioed man was about to putt for birdie in a dreary drizzle.

"Hey, I was watchin' that," Shawn mumbled, his eyes momentarily blinking open.

"Sure you were, honey." Maggie patted his chest. "Find him a blanket, would ya, Jos? I'm going up to check on the kids."

As she carefully laid a multi-colored afghan over his enormous frame, Josie smiled at the sleeping

man. She'd known from the minute she introduced them that Shawn and Maggie would end up together. The chemistry between the tiny woman and the big man was undeniable. At six-foot-four and a somewhat soft two-hundred-fifty pounds, Shawn was the kind of man women affectionately referred to as "a great big teddy bear". And that was just what Josie thought when her first work-study assignment made her the data grunt on his post-doc grant project ten years before. After six months working with him, she'd experienced the thrill of solving her first medical research mystery.

It happened when they were working late in the lab together one night, and he was badly stumped by some inconsistent results that were holding up his grant approval for the next year. Josie noticed a funny pattern in one of the variables that no one was paying any attention to—eosinophils, whatever the heck those were. She took it to him. He stared at it a moment, then jumped up from the old gray metal desk and swung her around. "Josie, you're a fuckin' genius!" he declared, bubbling with excitement. She really had no idea what she'd done, but his elation was contagious, and when he grabbed her face between his hands and suddenly kissed her, well, it just felt like part of the celebration. And on top of the desk sometime later, with research papers and computer disks and broken test tubes on the floor around them, and him plucking paper clips off her bare back, well, that did, too. But it wasn't like she didn't know the score. Even though he hadn't worked up the courage to ask her out yet, Josie knew Shawn was really interested in her

roommate Maggie, and that was okay. She wouldn't expect a great guy like Shawn to put up with all her baggage.

As Maggie came back down the stairs into the kitchen, Josie was already set up at the counter with a bottle of water for each of them. Maggie went to the fridge and pulled out a block of cheese, a bunch of celery, ranch dip, and a bowl of green grapes. She pushed the bowl of grapes toward Josie and started washing the celery. "The grapes are clean, go ahead."

"What are you doing?"

"You said you never ate."

"I tell you the story of the most embarrassing night of my life, and your first concern is nutritional deficiency." Josie smiled and grabbed a couple of grapes. "Thanks, Maggie. I'm starving."

"It's what I do, Jos." She began to chop the ends off the celery stalks. "It's not just your nutritional status I worry about, though. You know, I try to keep my mouth shut...okay, no I don't, but sometimes I just can't figure you out when it comes to men. You seem willing to settle for whoever comes along and pays a little attention to you and isn't a complete jerk, and Theo doesn't even meet that rule..." She wrinkled her brow. "And you didn't want to talk about this, did you?"

"It's okay, Mags. You care. I get that. But you don't understand..." Maggie waited as Josie took a swallow from the water bottle and then stared down the length of the long granite countertop for a moment. She turned back to face her friend. "I just can't be that picky."

You know how it is—all kinds of guys ask me out, but then, after a couple dates...” Josie shrugged, focusing her attention on the bowl in front of her and started playing with the grapes.

“Yeah...” said Maggie with encouragement.

“Well, then, they start to notice all my hang-ups, and they lose interest.”

“Jos...that’s not true. What about Trey? A-and that other guy? What was his name? Charlie? He liked you a lot.” Maggie paused. “Okay, he did think it was a little strange that you wanted to leave the door open during that last ice storm, but I told him—”

“What? What did you tell him?”

“Oh, you know, that you’re just a really concerned neighbor, and you wanted the people in your building to feel welcome to stop by if they needed anything.”

The two shared a giggle over that before Josie continued, “You know, Mags, most guys just don’t have the patience to deal with me, so I settle for the ones who do.”

“So then...patience is your ultimate mating criteria?”

“As usual, Maggie McKenna, your analytical skills have me cornered. Now I see why they hated to lose you from that big marketing job over at Glaxon.”

“Posh. I was wasted there.” Maggie pointed a small carving knife at Josie. “I’m far more valuable right here, trying to straighten you out. So you’re telling me Theo, who’s like, what—twenty-five?—is Mr. Patience,

and has thus been rewarded with the pleasure of your company for the last, what is it now, three or four months?"

Josie sighed. "Something like that. And he's not twenty-five. He's thirty-three. Say, uh..." Josie motioned toward the cheese block which Maggie was carefully dissecting into miniature Mickey Mouse heads.

"Oops, force of habit. Sorry."

"That's okay. I like 'em that way. I can hold Mickey's face and eat his ears first."

"Huh, so that's where little Nate gets it. Tell me again why I named my son after you."

"'Cause you love me." Josie grinned and began nibbling a Mickey ear.

"And speaking of that, do you love Theo, as in want to marry him?"

"God, no!" Josie spit the words out, then popped Mickey's face in her mouth.

"Well then, break it off. Move on. Get a date with Antonio Banderas back there. Apparently, he goes for that whole 'Fresh off the Hurricane Express' look."

"Geez, I don't look that bad, do I?" Josie checked her reflection in one of the shiny appliances behind Maggie before continuing, "Sweetie, don't you get it? It's not that simple. Theo's a good boyfriend. I trust him, and that's not easy for me. And I'm...well, fond of him."

"Fond. Wow. There's a resounding vote of approval." She gave a Josie a wry smile, then went on, "And 'good boyfriend'. Can you define that, please?"



“Well, you know—candy, flowers, cards, nice dates, reliable—well, okay, not lately, but he’s been very busy with that-that thing he’s working on out West...whatever it is.”

“Jos, first of all, the candy is a matter of survival. If he didn’t bring you chocolates, he knows there’d be no food in your house at all, and the flowers and cards and stuff are all just signs of a guilt-ridden cheating spouse.”

Josie rolled her eyes. “Maggie, please. You’ve been watching too many chick flicks again. Look, Theo may not be the man of my dreams, but—”

“But nothing, Jos. Don’t you want more? More than candy and flowers? More than a ‘good boyfriend’? Don’t you want someone who can appreciate you for your mind? Someone you can share your soul with? Share your dreams with? Share your nightmares?”

“Nightmares!” Josie laughed, casually dipping a celery stick in the little cup of dressing Maggie had poured for her.

“Hey, no double-dipping. It’s not polite.” Maggie lightly tapped Josie’s hand, then softened her voice, “Yeah, nightmares, like the kind I listened to back in grad school, when we lived together.”

Josie stopped chewing and spoke with the food still in her mouth. “I don’t have those anymore, Maggie. I took care of that little problem.”

Maggie came around the counter and finally took the stool Josie had intended for her. She turned sideways against the counter to face her friend. “You

took care of it? Screaming night terrors aren't like warts or bad teeth, honey. You can't just have them removed."

"I can. I can do anything I put my mind to."

Maggie threw up her hands. "Okay, fine. Maybe the nightmares are gone, but what about the underlying problem?" She looked Josie in the eye. "I'm your best friend, honey. Why won't you talk to me about this?"

"Because it's ancient history, Maggie. I was a kid. It's not part of my life anymore. And I did talk to you about it. You and Shawn—you're the only ones I've ever confided in. You know that."

"Jos, one sentence does not constitute confiding. And for the record, you didn't tell Shawn; I did. Which, by the way, I only did, because he heard you wailing one night, too."

"He did?" Josie looked mortified.

"Yes, one night when we were up late studying, and you'd fallen asleep on the couch. We both heard you: 'Jack, don't! No, no, no! Stop, don't!' Quite an earful really; I'll never forget it." Maggie shrugged.

"Oh God, just shoot me now." Josie folded her arms on the countertop and dropped her head onto them.

A groan came from the living room. "You two still up? What time is it?" A sleepy, disheveled Shawn stumbled into the kitchen.

Josie quickly picked up her head and pasted on a smile. "Hey, sleepyhead. All rested up now?"

"As a matter of fact, I am." He stretched his arms up high and stepped between the two women. He

brought his arms down and wrapped one around each of their necks, pulling their heads into his soft belly. He kissed them each on the top of the head, and then said, “Now, which of you two steaming hot mamas is going to follow me back to my bedroom and make hot monkey love to me ’til the sun comes up?”

They both laughed, and then Josie peeled his arm from around her neck and pushed him toward Maggie. “Take her. I’ve had all the excitement I can stand for one evening.”

Shawn looked at Maggie for an explanation.

“Tell ya later.”

“Works for me.” He bent over toward her, grabbed her, and threw her over his shoulder.

“Shawn! Put me down! You’re going to hurt your back again!”

“Carrying *you*? Doubt it. Carrying Josie maybe...”

“Hey, I heard that!” Josie hurled a piece of celery after them, then waved to Maggie as they rounded the corner into the great room, relieved to have escaped further cross-examination.

###

“An Jo, An Jo!”

“Aunt Josie, wake up!”

“Hey, Aunt Jos! Can we go to the zoo today?”

Josie felt, rather than saw, the three little munchkins she lovingly referred to as her twin nieces

and nephew—even though they weren't really any blood relation to her—as they boisterously bounced on her in the McKenna's guest bed the morning after the Italian wine tasting.

“Huh? What?” Yow, who had clubbed her in the head with a brick the night before? Josie rubbed her forehead, as she tried to recall the reason for that fuzzy, dull ache in her brain. “Ooh, take it easy there, Case. Apparently, I still need my liver.” She gently moved five-year-old Casey McKenna a few inches to the right, preserving that precious organ to filter toxins for another day.

Shawn McKenna appeared in the doorway, smartly clad in a golf shirt, shorts, and a full-body, candy-stripped apron. In his right hand, he held a metal spatula, still greasy from the pan. “Now, kids, no jumping on Aunt Josie. Sorry, darlin’, held ’em off as long as I could.”

“It’s okay, Shawn. What time is it?”

“Uh...almost eight.”

“How almost?”

“Seven thirty.”

She laughed. “You are such a liar. Is Maggie still in bed?”

“Yeah, I thought I’d give her a break. I, uh, had her up kinda late last night...” He looked up toward the ceiling and pretended to buff his fingernails on the front of the apron.

“Oh, you sly dog, you.”

“Daddy said we shouldn’t wake Mommy,

because she needs her beauty sleep to stay so radishly gorgeous...gorgeous,” Camryn said proudly.

“I see, and what did he say about Aunt Josie? That she was a hopeless case, and to have at her?”

“No,” answered Casey, “he said he wanted to con you into taking us to the zoo today, so we should act really nice and sweet.”

Shawn jumped in, “I, uh, wasn’t going to present it quite like that.”

“Didn’t imagine so. What was your story going to be?” Josie asked, then instinctively grabbed little Nate by the behind as he tried to dive off the side of the bed.

“Well, the Angiers called, and they want Maggie and I to play eighteen holes with them today, and my sister’s tied up, and I already called—”

Josie held up a hand. “Say no more. I am just looking for an excuse to avoid Mr. Theo Clarkston today. But, uh, what do I get for my trouble?” She pushed herself up on her elbows, and exaggeratedly sniffed the air.

Shawn grinned and rattled off the menu. “Western omelettes, heavy on the cheese, easy on the onions, and bacon, hash browns, and...” he paused for effect, “blueberry pancakes.”

Josie turned to the children, who were by now laying on top of her. “Whaddya say, guys? Bacon? Blueberry pancakes? Polar bears at the zoo?” All three were screaming with delight and racing down the hall before Josie could even make her way out of the covers.

Shawn hung back, watching her disentangle

herself from the sheets. “Thanks, Jos. You’re the best.”  
“De nada, amigo.”

# # #

Theo’s knock was impatient. Josie had no choice but to open the door; she’d said it was okay for him to come over when he called. She dragged herself to the doorway. Oh, why didn’t she have the guts to break up with him? Because if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, that’s why. He *was* a good boyfriend, like she’d told Maggie. He was sweet and attentive and thoughtful. Other girls dreamed of dating a guy like Theo. He knew her favorite flower, her favorite color, her favorite music. He knew what she liked to eat, and he knew that life with Josie meant never having a home cooked meal, and he was okay with that.

And, of course, he had waited. And waited. And waited. A patient, but persistent little fellow was he.

Josie opened the door, and stepped back to let him inside. Theo rushed in as though he hadn’t seen her in a month, kicking the door closed behind him. As soon as the doorknob clicked, he practically slammed her against the wall, burying his face in the nest of brown waves that was her hair. “Mmm, you smell so...”

“...much like the zoo?”

He grinned, then pulled back slightly. “I was gonna say, ‘outdoorsy’. I like it. It’s sexy. Like something out of an African safari. Turns me on.”

Like there was anything that didn’t?

He moved in again, running his hands all over her backside, and beginning to suck on her neck.

“Uh, I hate to be rude, but...is that a gun in your pocket, or you just glad to see me?”

He laughed. “Sorry, almost forgot. I brought you something.” This time, he pushed away from her and pulled a small box out of his pants pocket.

“Theo, you didn’t have to do that.” Every time she tried to hate him, he would do something surprisingly sweet.

“I know. I wanted to. I was thinking about you, missing you.” He played with her hair while she opened the box. In it was a pair of beautiful silver and turquoise earrings. “I got them in...Santa Fe. They’re one of a kind. Handmade.”

“Why, Theo, thank you.” She held them up to look at them in the light. “They’re exquisite. I love them.”

“Good. Maybe you can wear them tomorrow.”

“Maybe I will.” She studied him. His face was full of pride and delight. There were times when Theo Clarkston had a harshness about him that made him seem aged and cold, but at moments like this, he was almost child-like.

His sexual appetite, however, made her think of nothing other than a teenager. He took the earrings and the box from her and set them aside, then he grabbed her again, sliding his hands up inside her shirt. As he began mauling her neck again, her mind drifted back to the zoo, where she’d been feeling the heat all day, even though it

was not yet summer.

There were bears at the zoo, and tigers and rhinos and panthers and, of course, her favorite, the sea lions, who swam quickly, quietly, effortlessly through rushing water. They lived a cool life, in stark contrast to those who observed them. The zoo's visitors had to endure the sun beating down on them, wearing and tearing into their skin, basting and tasting them, burning and turning them, just as the sun always would, like on the deck of her daddy's boat.

And as she had watched the animals that day, she had seen *his* face again. The handsome, rugged face of the stranger on the veranda. The Latino Gentleman. Yes, she could feel his lips on hers now, his hands caressing her, that broad chest up against her, those long arms...

Abruptly, she opened her eyes and pushed Theo away.

“Jos?”

“I-I’m too tired right now. And I’m all dirty and sweaty...”

“But Jos—” He looked stunned and bewildered. A scowl stole across his face.

No matter. She herded him back toward the door without another word. As it closed behind him, she relaxed and smiled to herself. She wasn't too tired, and Theo was right—the “outdoorsy” scent was indeed erotic. But Theo wasn't the one she would be making love to this evening. She headed back towards her bedroom, pleased that only she knew what went on in her



head.

###

Damn her! What the hell was her problem?

Theo trudged across the golf course fairway that separated his building from Josie's, the scowl never leaving his face. He'd said he was sorry on the phone earlier. He'd given her that nice gift. What more did she want? You couldn't get those snazzy handmade earrings just anywhere, and he was pretty sure they'd cost a lot, if he'd actually had to pay for them. Did she think he was made of money like all the rich folks in this hoity-toity neighborhood with their big houses and fancy cars and expensive country club memberships? If it weren't for a certain arrangement his brother had made, Theo would probably be mowing fairways or waiting tables here, instead of living on the course.

Not that he was exactly blending in. Josie's friend Shawn had even tried to give him a few golf lessons, but Theo found the game slow and boring and all those rules really confusing. Frankly, he preferred certain indoor sports. And right now would have been the perfect time for that, if Josie hadn't tossed him out. Bitch.

He followed the short staircase down, unlocked the door of his condo, and stepped inside. His was probably the least expensive home in this entire "exclusive, gated community". It was partially underground, with a glorious view of the parking lot

from his bedroom window. At least he knew for sure when anybody around him was coming and going. But more importantly, whenever he sat on his cheap, lumpy rental couch, he could see directly into Josie's top floor palace, where both the big bedroom windows and the huge sliding glass door in the living room looked out over the lake.

Her place was at least twice the size of his and a whole lot nicer, though, he had to admit, not much tidier. For a girl, she wasn't much of a housekeeper. Or a cook. Or anything else a man might want in a wife. Except in bed. He had no complaints there.

He grabbed a beer from the fridge and his briefcase from the table. He shoved his partially unpacked suitcase aside to make room for himself on the couch, placing the briefcase in his lap. He managed the key combination and opened it, then slid his hand down into his pants pocket and pulled out his phone and a tiny data stick. He carefully placed the stick into a particular slot in the briefcase, then closed and locked it again.

He laid his phone on the coffee table, and reached for his beer, but before he could pick it up, the phone buzzed. He tapped it once and put it to his ear.

“Theo?”

“Yeah.”

“You got it?”

Grumbling, he replied, “No.”

“What? Why not? You promised me. We need that stuff, *now!*”

Theo sighed. “Sorry, can't. Not yet anyway.”

“Why the hell not? I thought you said—”

His voice rose in frustration. “I’m sorry! I was wrong. I’ve had...a little setback.”

“Like what? You know, if you spent half as much time doing your job as doing that little bitch—”

“Hey—”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry.” The caller backed down a few notches, “Look, Theo, it’s just...this is important. We’re close to a breakthrough.”

“You want me to take a chance on ruining everything we’ve got going?”

“No, no, you’re right. Forget it. Just get some sleep and see what you can do tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah, sure, tomorrow. You got it.” Theo pushed the button to break the connection, then set the phone down. Sheesh. He owed the guy a lot, and he was grateful, but that didn’t mean he had to listen to him badmouth Josie.

Maybe she could be a bitch sometimes, but she was *his* bitch—the only woman he’d ever had all to himself. And sure, he knew it was a sin to be so selfish, to covet a woman in that way, but he couldn’t help himself. There was a devilish pleasure in not having to share.

Theo grabbed the beer and took a few quick swallows. As he set it back down, his eyes drifted upward, out the window to where Josie’s condo was now dark. He stretched his legs out on the coffee table in front of him, sinking into the couch. He thought about how she had looked, how she had smelled, how she had felt up

against him in her condo this evening. That crazy, unkempt hair, the fresh bronze of a day in the sun, and the slight scent of sweat...

His hand wandered down towards his crotch. Whoever said you couldn't mix business with pleasure?

## *Chapter Six*

A single glass slipper—that was all Prince Charming had to go on. At least Nicolas Remedian had *two* shoes, red ones, and fortunately, not made of glass, or they probably would've ended up broken by the end of that crazy night several days before. He looked the shoes over again, as he sat in the window seat of his penthouse apartment: Italian leather, reflecting a certain taste for quality; unmarked soles, no doubt purchased new to perfectly match the shade of the dress, showing an eye for detail; and size six and a half, exhibiting, well, pleasing proportion—a little foot for a little lady. Five-foot-three, if he made his guess. Really quite a bit of information from just a pair of ladies' pumps.

Nic set the shoes next to him in the window seat, leaning his back against the side and looked out through the glass. The moon was waning now, but he could still see for miles from up here, though it was nothing like seeing for miles up in Sterling Heights, near D.C., where he had made his home these last ten years.

Up there, it was a sea of lights; down here, a sea of trees. He was so glad to be getting out of that rat race, and away from all those memories, even if he barely knew anyone down here. Hard to believe there were a million people living among those tall, full trees, but that's what he'd read. He'd also read somewhere that his new home had the highest per capita density of Ph.D.s in the country, like the guy they were meeting tomorrow, Dr. Shawn McKenna. Certainly Robert, with his Ph.D. in Abnormal Psychology, would fit right in with all these bookworms. Nic hoped he would, too.

He turned his head back into the room and pulled his glasses off. He closed his eyes and massaged them, trying to make them relax, but there she was again. Fiery red, dancing in the wind.

Like the Prince, Nic hadn't had high expectations of the evening. Benito and Rosaria Toral were as dear to him as the aunt and uncle of his that they were friends with, but he did tire of the endless inappropriate match-ups they were always trying to make for him. He went to the wine tasting with them, because it was an opportunity to make business contacts, and because he loved fine wines, not because he wanted to meet the girl they were trying to set him up with.

Sure, he knew he'd been incredibly picky since Linda. It had been over four years already, and he did want to start over. He very much wanted a family. He just wanted to pick his own girl and be really sure this time; he didn't think he could survive that kind of pain again. So when Beni and Rosa said they had spotted the

girl they were looking for, he had made an excuse and snuck away. He didn't mean to stay away so long; he'd just slipped out on the veranda for a breath of fresh air. And he had found one.

He had seen her through the window at first, tasting wines and listening to an old man's stories—this odd little fireball in a silky red dress. Not slacks, not a smart suit, not a business dress, but a real dress, with cleavage, and a full, swingy skirt that skimmed the knee and exposed, if not long, at least shapely, muscular legs that did a lot of walking. Then there were shiny red earrings, dangly obnoxious things you could never wear anywhere else, and full red lips, long, loose hair, and finally, those painfully high heels that even she had given up on. She had the attention of every solitary man at the party, and probably a lot of the coupled ones, too, whether she was aware of it or not, and yet, she let the old man lead her around on his arm, smiling and laughing, making him feel like a king. She was kind-hearted and selfless.

So Nic could hardly believe his good fortune when she stumbled out onto the porch, in need of a little fresh air herself. He had tucked himself into the chair to watch her, hidden in darkness, while moonlight illuminated her, dulling her bright reds like a faded photograph. The wild hair kicked up in the wind; the skirt swirled around her thighs; the lake and the moon became her backdrop. He wanted so much to approach her, but it seemed the equivalent of scribbling with crayons in the middle of a Monet. When she flopped

over the banister, though, he acted instinctively; something so superb about to fly away, blow away, or fall away—he didn't know which—but he had to stop it. When he realized his mistake, she caught him off guard yet again.

One minute, gentle and kind, the next, untamed beauty, after that, a quivering child, and finally, a brassy, witty sparring partner. One woman, so many faces. To say he was intrigued—the epitome of understatement.

###

“So the point I'm making here, Dr. McKenna, is that while ninety-nine percent of these protest groups are entirely non-violent, a few folks on the fringe—the real whackos—see it as their mission to take out anyone they think is acting against their cause. In this case, that appears to be you.”

Shawn reached for his coffee mug. He took a sip, then tapped his fingers along the side of it in a rapid, repetitive motion.

Dr. Robert Prescott resumed the diatribe he'd been giving on protest violence, at the conference table in Shawn's spacious office, “And they don't necessarily strike just where the work is being done, like at the office or out in the parking lot. Remember Dr. Carrington in Seattle? He was shot through his kitchen window one night while emptying the dishwasher with his wife.”

Shawn pulled on his collar, picturing Maggie



and the kids laughing in the breakfast nook, surrounded on three sides by smoked glass, and started wishing he hadn't had the RTT cafeteria special—extra-spicy beef barbeque with slaw and hush puppies—for lunch.

“Now we'll need a list from you of the offices involved in the clinical trials,” Robert went on, while digging through a folder in front of him. “Can you give me a ballpark on how many total institutions we're talking about, as well as a breakdown of the larger clinics, major hospitals, and individual practitioners, like Nic's friend Toral.” Robert motioned with his thumb toward Nic, then continued, “Also, what is the geographical area—”

The office door opened a few inches, and Nancy Daniels, Shawn's administrative assistant, a heavy-set woman with gray hair, stuck her head in. “Uh, Dr. McKenna? I hate to interrupt, but they've got a problem downstairs in Enzymes. Something with their data. They say they're desperate, big presentation due, and they need Natale. No one seems to know how to find her. Do you know where she is?”

“She's not answering her phone?”

Nancy rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“What is it with her and that damn phone? Did you try Maggie?”

“I did, and she said—”

Shawn held up a hand. “Gentlemen, can you excuse me for a couple minutes? Minor emergency. I'll be right back.”

“No problem, take your time.” Nic answered

for both of them, and then as soon as the door closed, he turned to Robert. “Hey, man, lighten up a little. You are scaring the life out of him.”

“I am?”

“Yes, you are. He has a family, kids.” Nic motioned toward some children’s artwork posted on the side of a filing cabinet. “All your talk about being shot in the kitchen at night...geez.”

“Well, it’s true. He needs to understand the reality of it, Nic. These people are seriously disturbed. He *should* worry.”

“Yes, Robert, if the threat is for real. Which it most likely is not.” Nic took a long look at his friend. “I know how real it is for you, amigo. But for Shawn McKenna, why not wait until we have looked into it? If it looks serious, we can terrify him together, okay?”

Robert sighed. “You’re right, as usual—the voice of reason, keeping the demons at the door.”

“Well, you are usually the one keeping my feet on the ground.”

Robert lightened up. “Oh, I don’t know about that. Somebody’s had their head in the clouds all week. Any luck with Cinderella?”

“I have not had time to look...” said Nic, with a slight shrug.

“I still can’t believe you took her shoes.”

“Hey, it worked for Prince Charming.”

“Yeah, but you can’t make all the women in three counties try them on.”

“Ah, but the Prince was not an expert in

computer security systems.”

“Which will come in handy if she’s a convicted felon, a postal worker, or a NASA scientist...”

Nic laughed, “I was kind of leaning toward the NASA thing myself...”

“Good luck, buddy.”

“You don’t think I can find her,” said Nic, with an air of injured pride.

“With only a pair of shoes to go on? I’ve got twenty bucks that says no.”

“You are on. And double it, if I find her before the end of the week.”

Robert laughed and held out his hand, “Sucker.” Nic shook it, just as the door swung back open.

“Whew! Sorry about that, guys. Hate to waste your time.” To himself, Shawn muttered, “Can’t find that girl anywhere.”

“Excuse me?” asked Nic.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just...the woman my assistant mentioned—my biostatistician. They could really use her help downstairs, and she seems to be AWOL this afternoon. I was kind of hoping she would stop by for a few minutes while you guys were here. She comes up with some great ideas.” He tapped his temple. “Real out-of-the-box thinker, ya know? Anyway, where were we?”

Nic spoke up again, “As Robert and I were just discussing, we don’t really know anything yet. It could be a couple of kids playing a trick. You know these little geeks—they think everything is so funny. That is

probably all it is. So, we are just going to collect some information from you, look into it a little and see if there is anything to be concerned about before we start to worry, okay? If there is, well, my friend Robert here, he is very good at worrying, so you will be in the most capable hands.”

Shawn nodded. Yeah, that was reassuring. This smooth-talking Latino seemed like a pretty cool guy. Maybe the Torals were right for once. Maybe he should do the guy a favor and introduce him to Josie after all. Time to pry a little. “Uh, say, are you boys staying in town right now?”

Robert was absorbed in reviewing the papers and folders in front of him, so Nic responded, “Robert will be traveling back and forth for a few months until he and his wife sell their house in Sterling Heights. I am holding down the fort here until then.”

“Oh, really? Where’re you staying?”

“The Triangle Corner Residences—have you heard of it? Some corporate apartments, just a few miles from the airport. It is all right, I guess...convenient to all the companies in the Research Triangle, of course, but I want to find a house. Out in the country somewhere.”

“So, uh, you prefer the quiet country life?”

“Most definitely. I grew up that way. I have lived in Sterling Heights for almost a decade. I am so tired of it.” He paused, as if debating how much detail to share, then went on with a shrug, “My ex-wife liked the big city. I am hoping for a fresh start.”

Ex-wife? Ouch. How old was the guy, anyway?

Gray hairs. Reading glasses. Old. A lot older than Shawn, certainly, and Shawn was seven years older than Josie.

Robert picked his head up out of the papers, and added with a grin, “Nic needs a little ‘reboot’. He can be kinda Old World when it comes to women, and Linda was a power broker on the fast track.” Robert then made his hands into fists and smashed the knuckles together, saying, “Collision course.”

Shawn nodded grimly. “I see.” Yikes. Old World? A black and white image of Josie in a starched apron, hair in a neat bun, slaving over a hot stove, popped into his head. Yeah, right—not in this lifetime. What a mismatch that would be.

Shawn looked over at Nic, who had removed his glasses and was rubbing his eyes. When he caught Shawn watching him, Nic glanced toward the ceiling and said, “Fluorescents. They bother my eyes.”

Nic put his glasses back on, and Robert quickly returned to business mode, “Uh, so anyway, we were saying we need a list of—”

The door swung inward again, but just a tiny amount, apparently on its own. From what sounded like a long way off, Nancy’s voice could be heard, “Wait, he’s in a meeting!”

Shawn looked at the two men. “Must’ve found her.” He called toward the door, “Jos, c’mon in.”

“Not Jos.”

“Maggie! What are you doing here?” Shawn jumped up and went immediately to greet his wife, wrapping an arm around her. Interruption or not, Maggie

always warranted a warm welcome. She had fixed herself up beautifully—silky blouse and pretty skirt, hair pulled back in a bow. He couldn't resist at least pressing his lips against her cheek, even with two strangers in his office. And even that small amount of contact sent a little shock wave through his system.

“Hi, honey,” she whispered, turning her eyes on him. Another little shock wave. Then, louder, she said, “I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to barge in. I tried to call, but Nancy was away from her desk, so I took a chance. I just came to...ask you something. It can wait.” She started to turn away.

“No, wait! Mrs. McKenna,” Nic called to her, rising.

Maggie turned to look at him, as she hadn't before. For a moment, her face was blank, then her eyes widened. “You! It-it's you. Antonio!” She turned back to Shawn, while pointing at Nic. “It's him. It's the guy. The guy from the veranda. Josie's guy.”

Shawn looked at Nic, then back at Maggie. “You mean...” He made a slight jabbing motion with his elbow.

“Yes, that guy!”

With that, Robert, who by now was standing as well, snickered and covered his mouth. Nic jabbed *him* in the rib cage, then said, “Yes, Mrs. McKenna, I am that guy. Only not Antonio. Nicolas Remedian.” He held out his hand, palm side up, entreating Maggie's, to which she willingly responded. He bent and lightly brushed her hand with a kiss. “So pleased to formally make your

acquaintance.”

Shawn hoisted an eyebrow. How was it that these two seemed instinctively to have skipped past the handshake? Maybe he wasn't liking this smooth-talking Latino so much after all. Or was it just that every man who looked at Maggie saw the same purring lioness that he did?

“Please, Nicolas,” she said, almost giggling, “Call me Maggie.”

Anxious to break it up, Shawn continued the introductions. “And this is Nic's partner, Robert Preston.”

“Uh, Prescott, but please, call me Robert.” He reached over and shook Maggie's hand, and then, with a glint in his eye, said, “So, I hope your friend is feeling better?”

“I suppose I could ask you the same question.” There was only the briefest pause before she and Robert could no longer contain their laughter.

Nic patted his “wound” and said, “There was no permanent damage.”

“I'm glad to hear that. Josie feels badly about your little misunderstanding.”

Sensing Maggie's agenda, Shawn stepped in, “Uh, honey, I hate to shoo you out the door, but Robert has to get back to D.C....”

“You boys are from out of town?”

Nic answered, “Yes, Maggie. Robert and his family are still living in Sterling Heights, while I am staying in a corporate apartment here until I can get

settled.”

“A corporate apartment? Why, I can only imagine how lonely that must be. You must be dying for a home cooked meal.”

Shawn rolled his eyes up into his head. No stopping this freight train.

“Home cooking...madam, I lie awake dreaming of that very thing at night. The McDonald’s wrappers are piled to the ceiling.”

Robert interjected, “McDonald’s? You never eat McDonald’s.”

“Shhh. I am trying to sound pathetic.”

“Uh, Maggie—” Shawn tried again to stop her.

She ignored him. “You don’t have to sound pathetic. We’d love to have you. Can you come tonight? We’re having some family over and grilling pork.”

Robert answered for him, “I believe Nic is free every night this week.”

Nic flashed his friend a sulky look. “Thank you, Robert. Now I do sound pathetic. But, yes, madam, as it happens, I am monumentally available right now.”

“Well, it’s all settled then. We’ll see you at six. Shawn can give you directions.”

“I will be there.”

Maggie started for the door, but stopped as though she were going to say or ask something else. “Maggie!” blustered Shawn, pushing her out into the hall. He tossed back, “One more minute, guys.” He pulled the door closed behind him. “Honey, I’ve been trying to slow you down the whole time. This is a



disaster.”

“Why? This is perfect. I was afraid we’d never see the guy again—”

Shawn sighed. “Maggie, my beautiful, romantic wife.” He ran his hands from the sides of her neck, across her shoulders, and down her arms. “I know you just want the best for everyone, especially Josie, but...this guy’s not the one.”

“What? Why would you say that? He likes her. Trust me, he’s not coming for the food. He knows I’m her friend, and he wants to see her again.” She looked up in her head. “God knows why. All she’s done so far is beat him up and cry and run away...”

“Honey, I pumped him.” She gave him a surprised look. “Just like you taught me. You’d have been proud. But he’s not her type. He’s old-fashioned. Looking for a happy little homemaker. Can you see Josie, the girl who burns water and makes laundry a semi-annual event, with a guy like that?”

Maggie folded her arms and flashed him a look. “Shawn, trust me. I have a really good feeling about this guy. So just give him the directions, okay?” Shawn slumped and nodded, smelling defeat.

Then Maggie looked slyly into his eyes, and added, “I actually didn’t have any good reason for stopping by today.”

“I was afraid of that.” He glanced right and left—too many people in the hallway for even one good kiss. He looked into her eyes, a marvelous cool gray-blue, yet always on fire. “Get outta here, Maggie. I’ll see

you at home. Soon.”

He turned back to his office and pushed open the door. Nic was grinning and stuffing a couple of bills into his wallet. Now what was that all about?

## *Chapter Seven*

Two Margaritas down, and Nic was finally starting to relax. He usually drank wine, but apparently, the McKenna clan really liked to enjoy themselves at their family gatherings, and since frozen Margaritas were the beverage du jour, Nic thought it best to blend in. And with Shawn's sister Diana running the blender, and her husband Lester keeping everyone's glasses filled, it was easy to do. Even Shawn's Great Aunt Rebe seemed to be holding her own with the frosty green tequila drinks.

Nic was trying hard to think green himself, listening to Shawn talk about golf courses in the area—which ones he liked, which had the best-kept surfaces, who designed them, where the best pros were—and Nic was genuinely interested in the subject, because his whole family played, and because golf courses and clubs were an important source of networking, after all, but he just wasn't seeing green. Only red. Specifically, “the lady in red”, “the red shoe girl”, and “the little red flame”, as he'd been thinking of her since the night they met. At

least now, she had a name—Josie. He was kind of hoping she'd be wearing a different color today.

Nic had been feeling the tension build ever since Maggie had left her husband's office earlier that afternoon, so anxious was he for another opportunity to meet the mysterious lady from the veranda, but he was starting to realize he knew nothing about her. All he had gleaned so far was that she was Maggie's friend, and that she was "at the pool with the kids", and apparently, was expected for dinner, though no one seemed able to reach her to confirm this. Something about her cell phone not working. Who would wander around with a non-functioning phone? And whose kids were they? Hers? Theirs? Somebody else's? Maybe she was an au pair? Couldn't be *that* young. Or could she? Was she divorced, or maybe widowed? Couldn't be that old. But how old was she? He really had no idea. Too young for him, maybe—the lonely old man with the graying hair.

That creepy dude Theo she was involved with sure looked young. Probably twenty-seven or twenty-eight. No way was he a day over thirty. And what was up with him, anyway? Angry little fellow—he was so annoyed when Nic spilled the wine on him, he looked like he was ready to take a swing. Fortunately, he had enough brains in his little head to realize he ought not engage a man six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than him. But she was obviously involved enough with him to want to run away that night. Maybe she was afraid of him. A boyfriend, right? But current, or former? Kind of made Nic question her judgement, but then

again, look at how long he'd hung around Linda.

He glanced at his watch while Shawn was poking around inside the grill. Six forty-five. It would probably be a while still before Josie would turn up from what Maggie had said. Something about her not being the most punctual person. "Laid back" was the expression Maggie had used. In fact, she had suggested that Nic borrow a golf shirt from Shawn so he could be a little more "laid back" himself, and not have to sit out on the porch in a dress shirt all evening with his sleeves rolled up. Mighty nice lady that Maggie. Kind of skinny, but cute, in a little spitfire sort of way—as long as it wasn't him she was spitting fire at, the way she had on the veranda. He grinned, remembering it; definitely a woman to have on your side.

He stretched his long legs out in front of him, as he sat on the bench that formed the railing around the large back deck of the McKenna's home, and breathed deeply of the early summer air. It was peaceful out where they lived. He had followed Shawn home, somewhere south and east of Raleigh, only about a half hour from RTP, yet it felt like it was way out in the country. A half hour out of D.C., one would have barely traveled a single freeway exit. Shawn and Maggie had a decent view of a nice little lake, and if Nic leaned back, he could just see a piece of the golf course behind the neighbor's yard. He turned his head in the opposite direction and spotted an odd little parade coming up the path that led around the lake.

Shawn must have seen it, too. "Oh, there they

are, Nic.” He motioned toward the group with his grill fork.

Two adolescent boys led the crew, running back and forth, obviously making some game out of the trek. Behind them, an older man and woman followed, with a little tow-headed girl between them, holding the woman’s hand. The man had a matching blonde girl riding on his shoulders, and just behind them, somewhat hard to see, yet unmistakable, was Josie, lugging what looked like an enormous satchel across her upper body.

Nic squinted in their direction. “Beni and Rosa Toral?”

Shawn squinted, too. “Huh. You’re right. Josie must’ve found them at the pool. We’ll need to set a couple more plates. The more, the merrier, right?”

So Josie knew the Torals, too? Funny coincidence, eh?

“Uh, you need a refill, Nic?”

Nic looked down at his empty glass. “Oh, um, I guess so. I am afraid this warm air has me a little dry.”

“Warm air? Or a little nervous maybe?”

Nic ignored the remark and looked back at the approaching group on the path. As he watched, a plump little arm swung out of the satchel on Josie’s chest. She quickly scooped it back in, then gently patted the round bottom of the sack. Unable to hide his surprise, Nic stammered, “She has a-a-a baby in there?”

Shawn laughed. “Yeah. It’s called a sling. It’s very comfortable, actually, even with a good sized kid like that.” Nic stared at him. “He’s *my* baby, Nic. My

son.”

“Y-your baby?”

Shawn rolled his eyes. “Yes, mine and Maggie’s. As are the twins. And the two older boys are Diana’s, my nephews. Josie has no children. And she’s thirty-two. And she has a master’s degree in biostatistics from UNC. And she’s never been married, divorced, or even engaged. Anything else you want to know?”

Nic swallowed his embarrassment. *Dumbass!* Of course the baby was Shawn and Maggie’s. Did he suppose Shawn was running his own religious commune right here in the middle of North Carolina? “Oh no. Thanks, Shawn. Sorry. I was just confused for a minute there.”

Shawn gave him a slightly annoyed look.

“Uh, you said biostatistics? Like the person you were—”

“Yeah, Josie was the person we were looking for earlier today. Now I know where she was—at the pool with my kids. Hard to say where her talents are more valuable.”

“So she works for you?”

“Oh, no, never make *that* mistake. Josie is no one’s employee. And she reminds me of it frequently. She’s an independent contractor, like you and Robert. But she does a lot of work for RTT. I personally put her on every project I’m in charge of, because I like things done right. Not everybody agrees with me...”

“No?”

“Well, some of my colleagues would prefer to

save a little money, cut corners or...maybe they just don't like having some brainy, bull-headed chick show them up."

"Bull-headed?" Nic turned to look up the path again. The group was just about at the steep staircase leading up to the deck.

"Yeah, bull-headed," said Shawn, commanding Nic's attention again. "And also incredibly kind and generous and caring." Shawn looked hard at Nic for a moment. "Look, muchacho, we don't know each other yet, but you seem like a decent guy, so I'm just gonna say this once. Josie Natale's a very special lady. And she's not just my wife's friend. She's *my* friend, too. Very good friend. More than a friend, really."

Uh...huh. Nic waited for the punch line.

Shawn plucked the empty Margarita glass from Nic's hand, and spoke with a cockeyed smile, "She's like a sister to me, Nic. Just as much as Diana over there. Get it?"

"Oh—oh, yeah, I get it." Nic nodded vigorously, and Shawn turned and headed for the door that led into the McKenna's kitchen. So, while Nic had barely met this lovely lady, he already had Theo, the kinda-sorta-boyfriend guy wanting to take a swing at him, and Shawn, the kinda-sorta-brother guy watching him out the corner of his eye, and now Nic, the wanna-be-asking-her-out guy, was getting more nervous and a whole lot more thirsty by the second.

Shawn stopped and turned back around, holding the Margarita glass up. "Oh, Nic, a tip—don't



get wasted. Josie won't like it."

Nic nodded and sighed. Neither would Big Brother Shawn, he imagined. Maybe it was time he switched to wine, or for that matter, water. He started to follow Shawn inside, but before he could pass the top of the stairs, Maggie, and Diana, tall and red-headed like her brother, came out the kitchen door to meet the party on the way up the stairs.

The boys bounded up the stairs first, almost knocking the two women over, and were quickly herded off by their mother to wash up and start shucking corn. Josie's voice preceded the Torals appearance, "Hey, guess who we ran into at the pool? Dr. and Mrs. T.! I told them they should join us for supper. That's okay, isn't it?"

Maggie was hurrying to help the two little girls climb the stairs. "Uh, yeah, sure. Hi, guys, but, Jos, honey..." she appeared to be trying to signal Josie, probably to make her aware that Nic was there.

As Josie climbed the stairs, though, she seemed oblivious to the signaling, and kept on talking in a rapid, bubbly fashion, "So, Maggie, I saw on my phone you left me about a zillion messages. Sorry, we were in the water—having so much fun—what's the big deal? What's going on? Nothing's wrong, is it?" She started lifting the baby sling, with the baby still in it, over her head, and passing him to Maggie.

Well now. He'd gotten his wish—no red today. Instead, purple. Purple bikini. Purple earrings. And some kind of violet-colored flowered sarong thing wrapped

around the hips. And another color, too—bronze. As in skin. Whole lot of it. Awfully early in the season for so much skin, er, bronze.

Just then, the Torals, who had crested the stairs behind Josie, spotted Nic. Together, they called, “Nicolas!”

Maggie sighed, and, looking at Josie, inclined her head in his direction. When Josie turned to see, Nic waved and said brightly, “¡Hola!” Josie’s face registered the initial shock, then she let out a sound that could only be described as a cross between horror and dismay, before she turned tail and ran into the kitchen.

Nic looked at Maggie and said dryly, “That went well.”

Maggie just grinned as she hoisted her sleeping child up onto her shoulder. “Don’t worry, she’ll be back. Soon.” Then she followed Josie into the house.

Rosaria Toral came rushing over, all smiles. “Well now, Nicolas, finally, we can introduce you two.”

Nic smiled warmly and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. He nodded. So...Josephina, the girl they had told him about—been pestering him for weeks to meet—was Josie. For once, they had gotten it right. And they had not exaggerated her beauty. This day was just chock full of coincidences.

Nic looked toward the smoked glass windows that shrouded the kitchen. He could barely see Josie, Maggie, and Diana in there. Josie appeared to be railing at them. She was embarrassed, poor girl. Couldn’t blame her. Not very fair of him, catching her off guard like that.

Maybe, if he could get a chance to talk to her a little, find out if she was really all she seemed, and lose that creepy Theo guy, they could go on a real date. Like Robert had said, Nic was a little Old World; his mother had raised all her sons to be perfect gentlemen—to call on ladies, take them nice places, pay for things, open doors, send flowers—in short, to always treat them like queens. Showing up at their friends’ houses for dinner without warning was not on that list.

As Nic was peering at the ladies through the kitchen window, he didn’t notice Shawn returning with his freshened Margarita until the big man stepped between him and the smoked glass. “Oh, uh, thanks, Shawn.” Shawn didn’t respond verbally, just raised an eyebrow at Nic, and then returned to tending his pork loins. Nic couldn’t be sure, but he thought he caught the slightest hint of a grin tugging at the corners of Shawn’s mouth. He wondered whether the guy liked him or was making room for him on the upper grill rack.

###

“Papa K”, as Shawn’s father Patrick was lovingly referred to, was positively obsessed with modern military technology. Josie hoped the topic was not boring Nic out of his skull, since, from her vantage point peering out the window of the McKenna’s guest bedroom above, it looked like Papa K had Nic cornered. Nic certainly was a good sport, though, acting like he was sincerely interested, asking a lot of questions, and

sipping Margaritas in the sun.

So go figure—the mysterious gentleman from the veranda was actually the guy the Toral's had been wanting her to meet. Now if she could just find the courage to go down there.

She'd have to, though. All that time at the pool...she was about to starve. She looked over at Shawn tending to his grill and breathed deeply of the smells wafting up through the screen. Smoky and strong, two thick, juicy pork loins battled a couple dozen ears of corn, all buttery and sweet, for space over the coals. Mmm, incredible. Just beyond that, Shawn's favorite new toy, an outdoor fireplace—a three-foot hollowed-out terra-cotta cube—glowed and crackled a delightful campfire near the end of the deck, and three tiki torch lamps, placed in strategic locations, minimized the mosquito threat. In the section of the deck that jutted out to the best view of the lake, the twins, Casey and Camryn, were organizing what looked like a Barbie wedding, while Mama K and Shawn's Great Aunt Rebe looked on.

Josie checked herself one last time in the mirror. Her nose was slightly sunburned, her hair was hopelessly knotted, and the weathered UNC Tarheels shirt she had thrown on over her bikini certainly didn't make for a nicely matched outfit with the flowered purple sarong, but it would have to do. She scraped up a little courage and headed back down to the kitchen, where she found Maggie, Diana, and Rosaria Toral impatiently waiting for her.

“Maggie! How could you’ve not warned me he was here? Where—I mean, *how* did you find him? And look at my hair...and my outfit. I’m a mess!”

Maggie was just grinning. Uh-huh. Right, as usual—Josie was as ga-ga over this Nic fellow as he was over her. Hmph. Show that idiot husband of hers.

The idiot husband’s sister laughed at Josie’s panic. “Jos, relax. It’s a barbeque.”

“No, tell me the truth, Di. My butt looks as big as a barn in this sarong—”

Diana laughed out loud. “Josie, just get on out there. The man’s been waiting hours to see you. Go!”

“Sí, niña, Nicky likes you. Rosa knows,” the older woman nodded confidently.

With a big push from behind, Josie finally made her way out onto the deck, but despite the per capita square footage, which should have made it virtually impossible for them to avoid each other, she barely managed to rub elbows with Nic in the chaos. Every time they got within two feet of each other, someone waylaid one or the other of them before they had a chance to connect. First, it was a loose basketball from the court below the deck that nearly took Josie’s head off. Then Nic jumped in to turn the pork loins while Shawn rescued Nate from climbing into the fire pit. And in another case, Josie had to run down the stairs to fetch half the wedding party when they were inadvertently knocked off the porch by a sweeping hand gesture during one of Mama K’s stories.

As time for the actual meal drew near, the

women began to move toward the kitchen. Up and down both sides of the long granite countertop, the ladies were busy with various duties—tossing, chopping, stirring, slicing. All the ladies, that is, except Josie, and knowing that the answer would be no, but feeling that it was only polite to ask, she stepped up to the countertop. “Uh, hey guys, is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, thanks.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Nope.”

“Sorry, all set here.”

“Okay, then.” She turned to leave.

“Oh, Josie, honey, here. You can do me a favor.” It was Maggie. “Take these rolls out to Shawn, and tell him to warm them on the grill for a couple minutes before we eat.”

“Sure.” Glad to be contributing, Josie strode back out to the deck. But Shawn was not around. In fact, all the men were gone. “Girls,” she asked Casey and Camryn, who were still tied up with Ken and Barbie’s reception, “Where’s your daddy? And our new friend Nic and everybody?”

Casey answered, “Oh, they went down to play basketball. Aunt Josie, do you like Nic? We do.”

“Yes, Case, I do. He’s pretty cute, huh?”

“Mmm hmm,” said Camryn. “He’s been real nice to us. We like him better than Theo.” She paused, then looked up at Josie as she continued, “Is Nic gonna be your boyfriend now?”

“Um, I don’t know, sweetie.” Then Josie

crouched down and whispered to them, “You wanna know a secret? I think I like him better than Theo, too.”

The two girls grinned gleefully at having been included in Aunt Josie’s secret. Then Casey returned to the dolls, “Okay, this guy’s gonna be Nic now.” She held up a brown-haired boy doll, who was dressed in a ruffly pink ladies shirt with a pair of brown and green plaid pants.

Josie stood up, suppressing a grin. “Oh my, yes, that’s a very good likeness.” Huh. Whaddya know? Even the kids liked him.

Then she returned to her mission with the rolls. Hmm. Seemed silly to drag Shawn away from the game just to have him do something she could perfectly well do herself. She did have a genius IQ, for heaven’s sake, not like she could screw this up. She would just put the rolls on the grill, and tell him they were there. It wasn’t even real cooking—just “warming up”. She walked over to the grill, examined the array of dials and switches, and opened the lid. The upper rack was lined with tinfoil, and the lower rack was not. All the food had been taken into the kitchen already, but the grill still felt warm, though the coals were no longer red. Was the grill still turned on? Did rolls go on tinfoil or not? Upper rack or lower? Was it possible to burn the house down by doing this? Hmm, it was all starting to seem rather more complicated than she’d expected. Almost as complicated as those darn microwave popcorn things. Well, heck, Shawn would be back soon. Josie dumped the bowl of rolls on the bottom rack and closed the lid. She set the bowl on the side table

near the grill, and went back to Camryn and Casey.

As she sat on the railing bench, she listened with one ear to the excited sounds of the girls' make-believe world: who was dancing with whom, what fine food was being served at this party, what marvelous gifts the bride and groom would receive. With the other ear, she absorbed the noises of the boys' game below her. The squeak of athletic shoes against the pavement, the thwang of the ball rebounding off the rim, cheers and hand-slapping when it sailed effortlessly through, and the pained "Ugh!", "Oof!", or "No-o-o!" when something went awry.

She thought about going down to watch, but she knew if she did that, she'd ruin it for them. Nic would be wondering what she was thinking about him; Shawn would be wondering what Nic was thinking about her; Beni would be wondering what they were thinking about each other; and Lester would be wondering what the heck everyone was thinking about besides basketball. No, better just to let them play and have their fun.

After several more minutes, the sound of clattering, clomping feet on the staircase warned her that the older men had tired out. The red-faced group staggered up the long flight of steps and plunked themselves down in various spots around the deck like weary soldiers. Nic came directly toward her and sat down next to her on the railing bench, wiping a light glaze of sweat off his forehead. Unlike the other "old guys", who were breathing heavily and sweating profusely, Nic looked like he had barely walked to the



mailbox and back. Not bad for a guy with a few grays hairs, huh? Addressing all of them, Josie teased, “Oh my, we’re not going to have any coronary episodes, are we?”

“Not us, Aunt Jos,” answered the younger Shawn—Diana’s son—speaking for himself and his brother.

“Well, no, I didn’t think you two. You look like you’re ready to go again. It’s the rest of these old geezers I’m worried about.” She inclined her chin toward Beni Toral. “Ya hangin’ in there, Beni?” Unable to speak, the older man merely raised a hand in response. Josie nodded and continued, “How ’bout Uncle Shawn there, whose face is now redder than his hair?”

“Hey, watch it girly!” Shawn stopped to suck in more air. “Bet I can still whip—” He stopped and breathed again. “—your sweet ass.”

She merely grinned at him and stole a sideways peek over at Nic. His eyebrows were raised slightly as he looked toward Shawn and ran a hand through his slightly damp hair. The wetness was making it curl up on the sides, right where those shimmery little grays stuck out. Boy, was that ever cute. Josie shifted her gaze away, not wanting to get caught staring.

Just then, Maggie emerged from the kitchen, leading the other women, each of whom was carrying some platter or tray of foodstuffs, trailing a wealth of endearing smells along behind them. Altogether, sixteen people gathered around the McKenna’s long outdoor picnic table, with Shawn at the head, near his grill, and his guest of honor for the evening, Nicolas Remedian, at

the opposite end, near the kitchen door. Plates of food were soon circulating, arms crossing, clashing, crashing, passing, with no real conversation to be heard, save that regarding the acquisition of edibles.

“Could I have the corn, please?”

“Who’s got that apple raisin stuff?”

“Please pass the butter, Mom.”

“Salt? Has anyone seen the salt?”

“Rebe, your drink okay?”

All was going smoothly until Maggie, the eagle-eyed hostess, noticed the lack of one small item. She held both hands out over the spread. “Wait. Something’s missing.” She scanned the table from her seat in the center. “Oh, I know—the rolls.”

Diana started to get up, saying, “Left them in the kitchen.”

“Please, sit,” insisted Nic, as he rose. “I am closest, let me.”

“No, no,” said Maggie. “I remember now—Shawn put them in the grill to warm up. They’re right there. I can see the bowl from here.”

Everyone looked where Maggie indicated. Everyone except Josie, that is. The color draining from her face, she began to slide down in her chair.

Shawn shook his head. “Huh? No, I didn’t.” Now everyone was looking at Shawn.

Mama K spoke up, “Oh, no, Maggie, you gave them to *Josie* to give to Shawn.”

And then everyone was looking at Josie.

Josie grimaced, then reached her arm straight

out to the side, pointing toward the grill. Shawn leaped from his seat, and, staying to one side, no doubt from fear of violent raging flames, threw back the grill cover.

Daniel, Diana's older son, who was seated near to it, jumped up to look. "Whoa, those things are toast!"

Shawn picked one up with his grill glove and added, "Literally." He called down the table, "Hey Nic, go long." Into the air he hurled the blackened sphere, which sailed and spun like a perfectly honed baseball.

SMACK!

"Ow!" said Nic, reacting to the impact of the ball in his hand. "Like a rock!" The table erupted in laughter.

By now, Josie was slumped in her chair, covering her face with one hand. "I'm sorry, Maggie. I forgot all about them."

Maggie appeared to be struggling to keep herself from laughing. "Don't worry about it, honey, there's more food here than we could eat in a month...and...uh...the kids can play with those things after dinner."

"Oh yeah," said little Shawn. "We could make like a bowling alley or something. That'd be way cool. Thanks, Aunt Josie. You're the best!"

Josie dared to peek out between her fingers in Nic's direction. He was sitting again, grinning at her, still holding the little black baseball in his hand.

She quickly recapped. The guy had nearly suffered a broken rib at her hands, knew she had some kind of funky boyfriend situation going on, ignored this

evening's really bad hair and clothes, politely conversed with three hundred of her closest friends, and even managed to find her lack of culinary prowess amusing. Was he for real? Uh-uh. Couldn't be. Guys like that didn't happen to Josie Natale.

###

“Oh, Maggie, please sit down. Let me get that.”

“Why, thank you, Nic.”

“De nada.” Nic took the serving platter and a couple of empty glasses from Maggie's hands and headed toward the kitchen. He felt a little guilty accepting her thanks when he was really just looking for an excuse to go into the kitchen at the moment. He had seen through the smoky glass, miracle of miracles, that Josie was actually alone in there just then. But Maggie probably didn't need to be handling the glassware at that point, anyway. Once she'd finally gotten dinner on the table, she'd relaxed and joined her Irish in-laws in a few rounds of Margaritas. In fact, among the adults, Nic, and Josie, who appeared to have been sipping from the same glass of wine the entire time she'd been there, were the only ones not obviously tipsy. Not that he saw anything wrong with it—looked like everyone on the McKenna's deck was having a marvelous spring evening. Reminded Nic of his family back home.

When he stepped into the kitchen, Josie looked up from the sudsy sink. “There's *more*?”

“I am afraid so. Please, let me help.”

“Okay. I won’t argue with that, and I do like to argue.” She threw a towel at him and motioned toward some wet pots and pans, sitting upside down on the countertop.

“I have heard that this evening,” he said, as he caught the towel and picked up one of the pans.

“You must’ve been talking to Shawn.”

“To hear him tell it, you are a force to be reckoned with.”

“I am...around the office. Around here, I’m not so bad.”

“That has been my impression so far.”

She scrubbed aggressively on a clump that was stuck to a large tray while she spoke. “It’s just, you know...being a woman, and, um, looking a certain way...”

He glanced at her out the corner of his eye. Did she mean pretty? Or sexy? Or just petite?

“Well, you have to dress and act all tough and snotty and haughty, or nobody takes you seriously. You know—they’ll be asking you to go get them a coffee or something.”

“To be honest, I never thought about that before.” As he looked down at her, the corners of his mouth twitched; with his shoes on and hers off, she didn’t even come to his shoulder.

“Well, maybe that’s because you’re the kind of the guy who would offer to bring *me* a coffee.”

“Of course I would.”

She sighed as she returned to washing and murmured, “How did I know he would say that?”

He didn't quite understand what she meant by that, or why she had referred to him in the third person, but what he really wanted to get at was the Linda issue. Shawn had remarked that it was hard to tell whether Josie was more valuable at his office or with his kids. Nic knew which he would choose every time. So what about Josie? He couldn't figure out how to ask without sounding like a throwback male chauvinist. But before he could say anything, the kitchen door flew open. Damn. Their five minutes alone together were obviously up.

“An Jo! An Jo! Wan' An Jo.”

Shawn's mother stood just inside the door, holding a crying, screaming baby Nate around the waist. The boy's arms were outstretched and his legs were kicking furiously. “Josie, I'm so sorry to interrupt,” she said, with a quick glance at Nic. “I tried to calm him, really I did, but he only wants you right now. Maggie and Shawn just stepped next door, and—”

Josie was already hurrying down the length of the counter, drying her hands on the flowered sarong as she went. She reached for the boy. “Hey, little buddy, what's wrong?” She gathered him up from Shawn's mother, and he instantly folded himself into her chest, implanting his thumb in his mouth and grabbing a clump of her hair with his free hand. Josie looked apologetically at Mama K. “You know, he's just overtired. He wore himself out at the pool. He gets like this...”

Nic watched with amusement. Clearly, the older woman was just relieved not to have a screaming

child in her arms any longer, but all Josie was worried about was soothing the woman's feelings that the baby preferred her to his own grandmother when he was upset. Mama K just sighed and headed back out to the porch. Nic resumed drying, and Josie returned to the sink, but only to lean her back against it, while she held Nate, still comforting him, stroking and kissing the little red curls on his head, and patting his behind. The boy remained alert and awake, but gradually his tense muscles loosened and drooped, one of his legs flopped, and the hand firmly gripping Josie's hair finally released.

"He is unusually attached to you."

"Attached, yes. Unusual? I don't think so. He's just used to having me around. The twins were still really little when he came along, and twins, as you can imagine, are very demanding. Especially those little girls. I mean, it was just boobs, boobs, boobs, twenty-four-seven." Nic laughed out loud, and then Josie did, too. "Oh, but I'm serious. Poor Maggie. And then to find out she was pregnant again so soon..." Josie looked up in her head and muttered, "Shawn—horny bastard." Nic quirked an eyebrow at her, and her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, I didn't mean to say that out loud."

Nic had to fight not to laugh again. Boobs, twenty-four-seven. Horny bastard. Being around Josie was like putting on your favorite old pair of slippers.

"Anyhow, there was no way Maggie could handle all three kids with Shawn gone to work all day. He's a great dad and all, but he works really long hours, and it was just a zoo around here, so I came to help. I

pretty much moved in for the first six months of Nate's life." She touched the boy's cheek gently, and he pulled his thumb out of his mouth to clasp onto her fingers. "Granted, I'm not much use in the kitchen or the laundry or whatever, but what these guys need, I got." She lifted the boy up, so they were face to face, and grinned at him, wrinkling up her nose. He reached gleefully toward her face, then snagged one of the bright purple earrings she was wearing. "Ooh, oh, ouch! Honey, Aunt Jo needs that ear. Sweetie, let go, please..."

Nic quickly set down the drying and turned to them. He gently lifted the hook out of Josie's ear, leaving the earring in Nate's hand. "Is it all right if he has it?"

"As long as he doesn't poke it in his eye." She lowered the boy so he sat around her waist while he played with it.

"But how did you work while you helped Maggie with the children?"

She tipped her head slightly. "Oh, I just cut down on my contracts for a while...way down." She seemed far away for a moment, then came back, "I'd been working too much. I needed a break."

"You were not worried about your business, or your reputation..."

"No. I'm good at what I do. I figured they'd call back, and most of them have. The ones that haven't —" She shrugged. "Their loss. Besides, what's more important?" She looked straight at him.

"The family, of course."

"You agree?"



“Completely.” He smiled, then intercepted the earring just as Nate was about to shove it up his nose.

Nic nodded to himself—question answered. Five hundred points to the little lady in the t-shirt and sarong. It would be a cold day in hell before Linda Coleridge put family before work. And a bitterly freezing one before she shrugged her shoulders at the thought of losing a client over a friend’s child care needs. Hey, wait a minute—Linda Coleridge? Linda Remedian! He hadn’t thought of her as Linda Coleridge in years...

Nic picked up the towel again. Wasn’t there something else that needed drying?

Josie shifted Nate around to the other hip. Whew, the little tyke was gettin’ to be a heifer. Clearly taking after Daddy. Daddy—who had caught Josie earlier in the evening and made a few cryptic remarks about how he thought Nic was a nice guy, but maybe was looking for the kind of girl who would darn his socks. So, was he just drying the dishes to impress her? If so, it was working.

Nate leaned away from her then and started tugging on the bottom edge of her shirt. “Bay-buh, An Jo. Bay-buh.”

She jiggled him around to distract him, whispering, “Not now, honey.” She pushed his hand away. Then she put her hand on her lower back, massaging for a moment.

Nic said, “He is getting heavy, huh?” Nic reached out and fluffed Nate’s red curls. “He is certainly his father’s son.”

As if on cue, Nate again grabbed the bottom of Josie's shirt and yanked it upward, demanding, "Bay-buh."

Nic looked curiously at Josie. She sighed, not fighting the toddler this time, and said, "It's a recent fascination." They both watched as Nate proceeded to stick one after another of his fat little fingers in and out of Josie's belly button. She could feel her cheeks reddening under the scrutiny. Well now, wasn't Nic getting a fine show?

When Nate had finished with all five fingers, he lurched around suddenly and pointed at Nic. "Bay-buh."

Nic looked at Josie with alarm, and a broad grin spread across her face. "You'd better show him, or he'll think you're a genetic freak."

"And what if I am a genetic freak?"

She laughed and waved toward his torso, "Up." Nic obliged, lifting the shirt halfway up his abdomen, and Nate cheerily began poking him, beginning with his thumb.

Now who was getting the show? And he was looking pretty good for thirty-five. Or forty. Or whatever. Lean, but not scrawny—nary a rib in sight. Good color, too. Apparently, not only his face spent time in the sunshine.

Josie glanced out the corner of her eye toward the oven. No, she was wrong, Maggie had not left it on. It only felt that way.

When Nate had completed his ritual, Nic

dropped his shirt and asked, “Do you think he would let me hold him? I’m sure your back would appreciate it.”

“You wouldn’t mind? He seems to like you.”

“Not at all. I have dozens of cousins and nieces and nephews. I am an old hand at this.” He opened his hands for Nate and spoke directly to the boy, “Nate, would you like to see the top of Aunt Josie’s head, like I do? It is a very nice view from up here...all that hair...” The idea was instantly appealing to the lad, and he reached for Nic. Nic lifted him easily to sit on his shoulder and pointed back down toward Josie. “There now, see, Nate, we are much taller than leetle beety Aunt Josie, huh?” Nate laughed and clapped his hands.

“Okay, Mr. Macho Muchacho, very funny.”

“Oh, and lookie there, Nate.” Nic pointed to a spot near Josie’s temple. “Is that a *gray* hair I see?”

“Where?” Josie reached self-consciously to the spot where she knew there were several. Then she reached up above Nic’s ear, and fluffed out a few of his grays. “And what about yours, Mr. Salt ’n Pepper?”

Nic turned his face directly toward Nate’s and made an expression of mock horror that started the little boy giggling uncontrollably, but all Josie was thinking about was how thick and soft and silky that stuff between her fingers felt.

## *Chapter Eight*

“Here, Di, let me try.”

“Be my guest.” Diana stepped back from the old wooden door, leaving her keys hanging from the lock.

Josie gave the key a few turns back and forth, pulled, pushed, and even tried jiggling the key. Finally, she lifted on the knob a bit as she turned the key, and they heard the tell-tale click, allowing the knob to turn and the two women to enter the Durham Women’s Health Center.

“Sheesh! Talk about security. I pity the poor fool who ever tries to break into this place.” Diana shook her head. “Not that there’d be anything worth stealing. That’s the one upside to running a business out of a hundred-year-old house.”

As she closed the door behind them, Josie motioned toward the space in front of them. “But you have to admit, Di, the place has loads of charm. I mean, look at that woodwork, those stained glass windows. It’s

gorgeous. Think of how comfortable it must feel for your patients, as compared to some shiny, sterile clinic where everything is made of metal and plastic and glass.”

“But it’s a clinic, Jos, not a bed and breakfast. I’d take brand-new metal and plastic over this old tomb any day of the week. And you can tell me all about how ‘comfortable’ it is the next time the air conditioning goes out on a ninety-five degree day in July.”

Josie grinned, “Okay, I see your point. Still, I like it here. I find it cozy.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you say that, because we certainly don’t have the money to go anywhere else, and I hope you’re going to tell me we’ll have the money to stay here for another year.”

Josie lifted her bag in the direction of Diana’s office. “You’ll be fine. C’mon, let’s get through these reports before it gets too late.”

As they settled into Diana’s office at the Durham Women’s Health Center, Diana spoke up, “I wish I could offer you a cold drink, but unfortunately, the ice maker’s broken—”

“I’m fine. I don’t need anything.”

“Not even these?” asked Diana with a grin. She pulled the lid off a decorative tin of homemade chocolate chip cookies, and thrust it toward her friend. It wasn’t much, but she wanted to offer Josie *something* in return for her help. She knew the kind of rates Josie charged her “real” clients, while she did everything pro bono for the Women’s Center.

“Yum!” Josie grabbed a large cookie and

immediately stuffed the whole thing in her mouth.

“So you’re feeling good about our Progestilone-C trial data? You think Arthro will renew us for another year?”

Josie, still chewing, nodded, then swallowed. “Mmm, thanks! Okay, your contract. Yes, I do think so, but I have to tell you, Di, there’s something going on—”

“What? You know something about the contract that I don’t?”

“No, no, I mean, going on with the data.” Josie reached down and yanked some papers out of her bag. “Look,” she pointed to a colorful graph with multiple lines on it. “These red lines are error rates from the Women’s Center, while the blue and purple are from two other Prog-C sites I work with.”

“Okay...”

“See how similar they are?”

“Uh, sure, is that good? Or bad?”

Josie was chomping on another cookie, but started talking anyway. “Neither, just not normal. Error rates should be normal, that is, random...so random as to form a normal curve, like grades, ya know?”

Diana shook her head, “You lost me.”

Josie brushed a trail of cookie crumbs off the paper, then traced the lines with her finger. “See, all three of these Prog-C sites have abnormal error curves, yet all those curves are really similar to each other, and that’s not normal.”

“English, Jos! I’m not my geeky baby brother Shawn, for God’s sake.”

“Sorry, look, all I’m saying is this same abnormal pattern couldn’t occur in three independent study centers naturally. Something weird’s going on. Do you have any new data grunts? I know you use a lot of student interns and volunteers here. Maybe somebody’s on loan from one of the other sites? Maybe they got some paperwork mixed up?”

Diana thought a minute, then shook her head. “No, I’m pretty sure we don’t have any data entry folks in common with any other sites. We get all of ours free from the university; they get course credit for helping us.”

Josie looked up in her head. “I guess it could be some kind of error in the data entry software. I can call MediSoft and talk to their tech guys, but I’m sure they’d have caught something like this by now.”

“So-o-o, this isn’t going to affect our contract, right? Are we gonna be in trouble with Arthro? You know we need that money.”

Josie gave her head a little shake. “Ah, sorry for dragging you off on my little stats tangent. No, you won’t have a problem. Your reports look great.” She handed a bound stack of papers across the desk. “I’ll email the PDF’s to your Director first thing tomorrow morning, and you should be on your way to another year of Prog-C funding. This is more about me being a total dork and looking at stuff nobody else ever would.”

“Ok, good, that’s a relief. I mean, about the funding, not about you being a dork.”

As Diana began glancing through the report,

Josie thought for a moment. Shawn had asked her not to talk to Maggie about the threatening emails, but he'd hadn't mentioned his sister. She decided Diana was fair game. "So...do you guys ever get any threats of violence here? I know abortions are just a small part of the work you do here, but..."

Diana looked up, apparently caught off guard by the question. "Well, when I first started with the Center, there was a standard contingent that would picket and protest at least once a week, but really, Progestilone has put a dent in all that. In the past, someone who'd had an abortion at least looked a little ill or frail on the way out; now with Prog-C, you can't tell if a woman's been in for a pregnancy termination, a pap smear, a support group, or directions to the cantina. Makes it hard to know who to yell at."

"Yeah, Shawn was saying something like that the other day, about how Prog-C was kind of a threat to the whole Pro-Life movement..."

"Really? What brought the subject up? He's not still whining about me working here, is he? You don't know how many times he's told me how I should come work for him in Pharma-Heaven and make three times as much money and blah, blah, blah."

Josie laughed, "No, no, I think he's given up on that. He respects your commitment to working with women who can't afford high-priced medical care. We were just jawing about protest groups in general."

"Oh, well, like I said, we haven't had any rocks come through our windows of late...although, come to



think of it, the Director did mention getting some funky emails recently.”

“Really?” Josie tried to act nonchalant.

“Yeah, I don’t think it was a big deal. You’d have to ask her; to be honest, I was too busy to pay much attention to what she was saying.”

“Sure,” said Josie with a nod, not wanting to make too much of the news. She motioned toward the report. “So...does everything look the way you want it? Do you have any questions?”

Diana pushed the report aside and leaned in closer across the desk. “The report looks great, but I do have a question for you.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“I know you hate to talk about your personal life, Jos, but come on, spill! How’s it going with the Hunky Hispanic, and when are you dumping the dirt bag?”

“Diana! Geez, Theo’s not that bad. And that was two questions. Maggie put you up to this, didn’t she?”

Diana raised her hands in defeat. “Busted. But please, give me a little something, okay? If I go back to Maggie empty-handed after tonight, I’ll be disowned as a sister-in-law.”

“Well, there’s not much to tell. Nic has tried to call me a few times, but we never quite connect, and Theo...well, I’m just not sure what to do.”

“What is the problem, Jos? Just end it. Slip out the back, Jack, make a new plan, Stan...”

Josie laughed at the old song lyrics, but then said, “It’s not that easy. He can be really sweet, and I don’t want to hurt him.” She fingered a third chocolate chip cookie.

“Josie, honey, take some advice from an old broad. You’re not doing him any favors. If you’re not serious about him, and I know you’re not, you need to let him go and find someone who can love him for who he is, however difficult that may be. The real hurt is caused by you keeping him around, thinking he has a chance for long-term happiness with you.”

Josie was silent a moment, taken aback by her friend’s unusually stern and serious tone. And sage advice. She set the cookie back down and spoke slowly. “You’re right, Di. You’re absolutely right. I’ve been acting like a stupid schoolgirl. It’s time to grow up.”

###

Nic finished the cryptic message and sent it off, hoping he’d hear something back before the end of the night. Then he returned to the list of IP addresses before him. Based on information that Shawn had given him, he’d been able to trace a series of communications concerning Progestilone, despite their being buried beneath layers of IP hops that spanned the globe. It was pretty clear that the source was somewhere in the Blue Ridge mountain range, but he’d have to get a lot more specific to satisfy Shawn McKenna.

And that wouldn’t be easy, considering the

intricacy of the security protocols employed. This was nothing the average home hacker would be capable of creating; it was clearly the work of a professional. Well, if one could call high-level hacking a profession. He wrinkled up his forehead a moment. Technically, that was a good bit of what he did for a living, and he was highly compensated for it, so yes, he supposed it was a profession, even if it wasn't always done within the strictest letter of the law. And that was why sometimes, like today, he had to rely on sources who didn't always act within the strictest letter of the law.

He turned away from the table and surveyed the room. He should probably tidy up the place a bit, if he was going to have guests tomorrow. There was plenty of room in the large living area for the three of them, but he would have preferred not having moving boxes lining the walls, if he was to be entertaining. He found it odd that the meeting was to be in his apartment, but a certain degree of secrecy had been the request. He pushed himself away from the computer and walked to the sitting area. He straightened a few books and magazines into a neat pile, folded an afghan to perfect hospital corners and laid it over the back of the couch, then plucked his reading glasses and a colorful info sheet off the side table where he'd earlier laid them.

As he tucked the brochure into his briefcase, he narrowed his eyes a moment. It was a product sheet on Progestilone-C that Shawn had given him. It wasn't like Nic knew nothing about the drug, but he hadn't realized it was being researched so extensively for so many

different uses. He worked hard to separate himself from the business at hand and his own personal feelings about Progestilone.

He returned to the living area and scanned quickly. Yes, he had gotten everything—oh wait, not that. With a grin spreading across his face, he stepped over to the window seat and snatched up the bright red high heels. Definitely not something he wanted visitors stumbling across by accident. He went into his bedroom and opened a box of winter clothes. He tucked the shoes way down inside, beneath his sweaters and wool shirts.

As he closed the box back up, of course, he couldn't help but think about the lady the shoes belonged to. He hoped he'd get the chance to return them in person some day, but he was starting to wonder. He felt like he'd made some progress that evening in the McKenna's kitchen, but then it seemed like she'd been avoiding him since. Well, at least that was his interpretation. Maggie had assured him that Josie was always a difficult person to reach, but seriously? No one was that bad at keeping up with their cell phone's battery status, were they?

He plunked down on the edge of the bed, replaying moments of that evening in his mind. He'd been wishing she would show up in something other than red that night, and now he couldn't get that deep purple bathing suit out of his head. How could anyone look that good after spending hours in a swimming pool with children? No makeup, hair twisted and knotted, an aroma of sweat and sunscreen, and all that luscious skin...

The salsa tune from his phone yanked him back

to the present. Maybe she was finally calling him back! He dashed out to the dining table and picked up his phone. He read the screen and sagged a bit. Then he sighed and raised it to his ear. “Auggie, hi. Thanks for getting back to me.”

“No problem, man. I never forget a favor. Must say, though, a little surprised to hear from you...”

Nic just smiled. He tried not to be judgemental of others’ life choices. Nic and Auggie had different agendas, but there was much they had in common, too. And right now, August Asher was probably the only person in the world who could answer Nic’s questions.

## *Chapter Nine*

“Ma’am.”

“Gentlemen.” Josie nodded her slightest cool-as-a-cucumber nod at the two thousand-dollar suits holding the doors for her as she entered the Triangle Corner Residences building. She didn’t need to look back to know they were still watching her, long after the glass doors closed between them; she was at her presentation best today. The dress was royal purple silk, v-neck, fitted, but not too tight, with a three-quarter length jacket that could be closed up if she felt uncomfortable, or removed, if she wanted to make anyone else feel uncomfortable. A long silver chain hung almost to her waist, and groovy silver triangles dangled from her ears, if anyone could spot them under all that hair. She was smart, confident, in control. No t-shirt, no lingering scent of suntan oil, and hey, look at that, she even had shoes on today—the perfectly matched shade of royal purple pumps, of course.

As she stepped further into the building, her

eyes were drawn upwards. The interior was open all the way to the very high roof, which was made of glass. Each floor was encircled by balconies of stucco, dripping with ivy, overlooking a set of glass elevators that ran down the middle, ending at some hip little gathering place for the beautiful people, down on the ground floor. Cool. Way cool.

Josie approached the pleasantly plump young woman seated behind the reception desk. “Hi, I got a message about a meeting here. Should be under the name Shawn McKenna. I think. Not sure...it was last minute, and not too clear. I’m Josie Natale.” The woman checked a clipboard, looked perplexed, then flipped back a page. Josie added, “I’m running a little late.”

“Oh, yes, here you are...quite late. I’ll buzz you up.” She set the clipboard down and pointed. “The elevators are right behind me. Use the one on the left for the penthouse.”

“The penthouse?”

“Yes, twenty-eighth floor. Lovely view.”

Josie looked all the way up again. “I’ll bet.” She headed for the elevators. Poor Shawn. The place probably had a nice open balcony for sitting outside, too. She pressed the button for up. The elevator dinged, and the doors opened. A well-dressed couple stepped off, followed by a twenty-something pretty boy, decked out for a tennis match. He moved slowly, giving her a long look. Josie rolled her eyes. *Gimme a break.*

After the doors closed behind her, she followed the mounting numbers above her head, trying to guess

what Shawn needed her for. Had to be some big client meeting, but why here? She'd never been in this building before. Wasn't it like some corporate apartments or something? He'd left her a really cryptic message, half of which she'd accidentally deleted, about needing to meet him here and something about security programs. If she could ever get her damn phone charged and turned on and not muted and not on vibrate and not in "driving mode" (whatever the hell that was) all at the same time, she might get something useful out of it, like an intelligible message. Or maybe a date.

Poor Nic. The guy had really been trying since dinner at the McKenna's last week. He had so little luck reaching her, he finally gave up and called Maggie, sure that he had Josie's number wrong (he didn't). Had to give the guy points for trying so hard. Lots of points. When Josie had finally worked up the courage to call him back, however, they had a great, long talk. So long, in fact, that *his* phone battery died before he could ever get around to asking her out. Poor Josie.

DING.

The elevator stopped, and the doors parted. Josie saw the door marked "PH" at the end of a narrow walkway. As she approached it, she was too short to see over the stucco side rails overflowing with flora, but she imagined that for a much taller person, like Shawn, it would be easy. He must've hated it.

She took a moment to smooth her dress, made sure her laptop bag was solidly placed on her shoulder, then knocked firmly but politely. In a moment, the door



opened.

Nic!

“Josie, how good to see you. Welcome.” A bright smile spread across his face. He leaned quickly toward her, and, taking her hands, kissed one cheek, then the other.

Immediately, cool-as-a-cucumber melted into warm-bowl-o-pudding. “N-Nic,” was all she managed to say.

“Please, come in.” He stepped back and held out his hand.

“This is *your* place?” she asked, without moving.

“Why, yes. Shawn did not tell you?”

She shook her head quickly. No, as a matter of fact, he didn’t. But she could worry about that later...while she was killing him.

Nic took her hand and led her into the apartment. She was glad for the assist—walking with pudding legs wasn’t easy. As he brought her into the living area, Shawn gave her a quick wave from his chair, which formed part of a group surrounding a coffee table in the center of the room. A couch with its back to her stood on the opposite side of the table from Shawn, and an enormous window with a wide seat as its sill was on the far side, behind him.

“You’re late,” Shawn stated simply.

“Yes, um, sorry.” Why was she late? Pudding for brains made it hard to think. “Oh, we had some problems over at Toral’s again. Data problems. I left you

a voice mail.”

Shawn nodded, then gave her a slight grin, acknowledging that she appeared to have been blindsided, and he found it rather amusing.

Nic let loose of her hand and instead pressed on the small of her back, gently directing her toward the sitting area. “Would you care to sit here?” He indicated the couch. “It affords the best—”

“View, yes, I can see that.” Josie glided all the way across the room and leaned against the window seat, peering out a moment. Payback time. “Wow! Shawn, did you see this? The view from up here is amazing. You can see forever.” She stepped back to where Shawn sat, and he glared at her out the corner of his eye. A smirk snuck across her face. Nic looked puzzled by the interaction. Josie pointed at Shawn, and then, wrinkling up her nose, stage-whispered, “Heights.”

Nic’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh, I did not realize...”

Shawn grumbled, “I’m fine as long as the windows are sealed.”

“I guess I should not tell him about the balcony in the bedroom then?” Nic gave Josie an exaggerated wink.

She stifled a laugh. Yes, Nic did have a marvelous sense of humor—corny, cerebral, just like hers. And she supposed she had gotten even with Shawn now. She went back to the originally offered seat on the couch. “So, um, what’s going on? Is this about—”

“Yeah. Those Warriors of God, Jos,” Shawn

filled in. “We were just meeting with Nic and his partner Robert, but he had to catch a plane back to D.C. Too bad you missed him. Look, honey, the reason I wanted you to come is that Nic is doing a security check on all our machines. He was telling me about this new kind of virussy thing that infiltrates your machine and leaves no trace, but constantly sends data back to some mother ship somewhere. He’ll need to do that to yours, too.”

“The program takes a good while to run; perhaps you can leave the machine with me?” Nic suggested.

Shawn laughed, “Like that’ll be happening. Josie and her little titanium lover are never separated, except maybe when she’s in the shower. Maybe.”

Josie reached down and pulled a thin silver laptop, no bigger than an ordinary spiral-bound notebook, out of her bag. She hugged it to her chest protectively and pouted, “Did you have to tell him we sleep together?” She looked at Nic. “You think I’m kidding, but I do sometimes fall asleep in bed with the machine on top of me. Used to be a real pain when the battery would run down and that incessant warning beeping would wake me up in the middle of the night, but then I got a super long-life battery, so it’s not a problem anymore.”

“Well, we could let the program run while we are talking now.”

“Okay, sure, that’ll work.” She opened the laptop, then reached under her jacket and into the side pocket of her dress. She pulled out a slender item that

looked like a credit card and scrutinized its tiny screen.

“You use a DigiEnsure card?”

She wasn’t surprised that he asked—the monthly fee just to maintain the card was pretty high. “I have to. My clients wouldn’t trust me to cart around their data otherwise. Pharmaceutical research can be cutthroat.” She patted the pocket from which the card had been pulled. “I carry it on my person wherever I go.”

“Wish you would do the same with your cell phone,” Shawn grumbled.

Josie ignored the remark and logged into the machine using the instantly generated passkey provided by the DigiEnsure card. Then she passed the machine to Nic and slipped the card back into her pocket. As Nic began typing on her laptop, Josie started flipping through one of a stack of decorative hardcover books sitting on the coffee table in front of her. She turned several pages, then lifted the book up sideways, bending her neck to try to make sense of what she was seeing. “What in the world—”

Nic quickly retrieved the book from her and replaced it on the stack, saying, “Those are Robert’s. He must have left them.”

She leaned over and read the title aloud, “*Torture Practices of Indigenous Asian Cultures.*” She slid that book off the pile and reported on the next one, “*Mind Control Techniques Through the Ages*”, then, “*Aberrant Sexual Beh—*”

Nic snatched the entire pile away from her and put them out of her reach, while she giggled at his

annoyance. “These are his research books, Miss Natale. They are very important to him.” He returned to the laptop.

“Mmm hmm. A real party animal—I can see that.”

Shawn grinned, “Aw, you’d like him, Jos. He is a bit of an egghead, but he’s cool. Remember that teenage girl that was kidnapped last year by those religious nuts in Texas? Robert helped them find her.”

“Susan Sonderlay? Really?”

“Yes,” said Nic, with a note of pride. He slid her laptop a few inches away on the coffee table and settled back on the couch. “He used his knowledge of different religious cults to help narrow down which group was likely to have her and isolate the most probable locations where they were hiding.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. How wonderful to have helped someone like that. To bring a child back to their family. I can’t imagine...”

“He was rather ‘jazzed’ about it,” said Nic, emphasizing the American slang. “Though I must say, he became quite obsessed with the case until it was solved. Very distressing for him.”

“Well, that’s what he does, right? I mean, I tend to get a little obsessive about my work sometimes, too,” offered Josie.

“Yes, but...his wife, the kids...” Nic shook his head, as if he was equally distressed by that.

Anxious to see him smile again, Josie changed the subject, “What all kids does he have?”

“He has a son, seven, and a girl who is four—just like Casey and Camryn. She is a little doll...blonde curly hair and dimples, like Shirley Temple.” He was smiling again.

“We’ll have to get them all together, huh?” said Josie, imagining the fun the three little girls would have.

“And speaking of kids...” said Shawn, tapping his watch.

“Oh!” Josie’s hand flew to her mouth in mock horror. “He is paying us by the hour, you know.”

Nic gave Shawn a serious look. “I apologize for digressing—”

Shawn laughed, shaking his head. “Nic, I only meant that you two can chat all night if you want, but like your friend, I have a wife and kids at home, so we need to wrap this up. And you,” he said, pointing his pen at Josie, “I’m not paying anything. You can live on Fred McGuire’s money for a year.” She knew her eyes were sparkling at the backhanded compliment. Nic looked curious, but didn’t ask.

“Anyway, Jos, so far, what his friend Robert told me is that these Warriors of God are either not a real organization, or they’re a new one, and he hasn’t been able to trace their roots yet—”

“Roots? Like the miniseries from the Seventies?”

“No, Jos. It means like their history, where the members came from. Robert said groups like this don’t just pop up out of nowhere. They form, and then break off into factions and start up new ones, and then get back

together again, and break up again...kinda like cliques in a high school.”

“Right,” Nic agreed. “So, he’ll have to track down who some of the leaders are and see what other groups they have been part of, what their beliefs are, what, um...activities they are known for...”

“Yeah, uh, Robert kinda filled me in on all the crazy shit these guys might be into, but, uh...” Shawn looked at Nic and shook his head quickly. “We don’t need to go over that again.” Then back at Josie, “Point is, honey, these are some scary people.”

Maybe, once again, being late had paid off.

Nic started speaking, his voice darker than what she had become accustomed to, “Unfortunately that is true, and I was hoping when we met with Shawn last week that his emails were just silly pranks, but now that we have looked into it, there appears to be some legitimacy to the threat. Those emails were sent specifically to him from what I can tell. They are not any kind of random, hit-and-miss spam, and there do appear to be similar messages that have gone out to people in similar positions in the Triangle area, Wilmington, and Winston-Salem. Fairly isolated.”

Josie asked, “What about the source? Were you able to trace where they were coming from?”

“Mmm...” Nic switched to a different piece of paper. “Yes. Well, narrowed it down, anyway. They originated somewhere on the East Coast, probably mid-Atlantic, so...relatively local.”

Josie shifted in her seat. “Geez, that’s kinda

creepy. So, how did they find out about Shawn and these other people? I mean, specifically what he does, what drugs or diseases he's working on? He's a researcher in a big company with zillions of projects. And our work is tightly locked down—that's part of the protocols. Plus, there are hundreds of Prog-C trials going on all over the country. Shawn's really just a cog in the wheel."

"A pretty big cog," Shawn added.

"Sorry dear, my fault. You really are one great big ginormous cog."

Josie and Shawn laughed, while Nic watched with an odd smile. Then he responded to her original query, "Actually, Josie, you pose a very good question, one we will be working on. Someone went to a lot of trouble to find out who to send these emails to. No legitimate religious group would ever make that sort of blatant threat or snoop through private files or anything like that."

"So you think maybe it's not really a religious organization?"

Nic raised an eyebrow and grinned at her. "I did not say that, but yes, it had crossed my mind. I don't know what other motivation there would be, though..."

Josie waved him over to Shawn, who explained, "Well, plenty of motivation, because interrupting pregnancy is really just a nasty little side effect of Progestilone-C. The real power of the drug is a long way from that. See, with the exception of Prog-C, most hormone treatments work by providing synthetic hormone to the body, which causes all kinds of problems,



like what you see with cortisone treatments, HRTs, birth control pills, etcetera. Prog-C works instead by modifying the hormone *receptor*; but still using the patient's own hormones. That's a lot less problematic, and so causes fewer adverse reactions. The concept has enormous potential; we've barely scratched the surface. In the near term, Prog-C-type drugs will probably replace most artificial hormones, but in the long run—cancer, AIDS, who knows? You can imagine how high the stakes are.”

Nic nodded, while making notes on what Shawn had said, and kept writing as Josie picked up where Shawn left off, “And everybody who doesn't currently have one, is scrambling around right now trying to come up with their own copycat versions of Progestilone.”

Shawn added, “Assuming they have the resources. Like I said, Prog-C is ground-breaking stuff; it's truly innovative. Developing and testing a copycat of this drug will be a lot more complicated and therefore a lot more expensive, than copying traditional drugs. The only companies that are going to keep up on this one, are the ones with the deepest pockets.” He looked up in his head a moment and added, “Like Josie's clients.”

While Josie accepted another backhanded compliment, Nic joined in the fun. “So if one wanted to learn about the latest research on Prog-C and its copycats, he would have to...wait for you to take a shower?”

She laughed, “Yeah, something like that.”

Nic's phone buzzed on the table in front of them. He picked it up and looked at it, then said, "Excuse me, I will just be a moment." He stood up, stepped away from them, and answered the call, "¡Hola, Mamá! ¿Cómo estás? Mamá, no puedo—" He paused a moment, listening, then spoke again, "No, no, Mamá. Momentito...¿*Momentito, eh?*" Nic covered the receiver, and looked at them. "I am so sorry. I have to take this. She has been trying to reach me...it is not so easy to get through from Chile sometimes. Do you mind? It will not take long."

Shawn waved him on, "Go ahead, Nic, talk."

Josie added with a smile, "Take your time." A phone call from Mamá during a business meeting? Totally adorable.

Nic nodded and closed himself into the adjoining room, behind windowed French doors. Muted sounds of intermittent Spanish bounced through the glass. Shawn grinned at Josie. "Sorry if you didn't get the whole story about coming over here, doll. I wasn't trying to trick you, but, uh, Maggie did say he was having a little trouble reaching you..." Shawn rolled his eyes and added, "Imagine that."

"It's okay, Shawn. I guess having a bunch of matchmakers around isn't so bad, after all." Then she wrinkled her forehead. "Though I still have to deal with Theo when he gets back..."

"I could make a few suggestions there."

"Don't."

Shawn laughed, then started gathering his

papers together and packing up his briefcase. The slightest tension began to build in Josie's stomach. As he stood and pulled on his jacket, Shawn glanced toward Nic through the French doors, then back at Josie. "Should've seen the way his eyes lit up when I mentioned bringing you over here. The guy digs you, chiquita." She knew he meant that kindly, but her stomach knotted up tightly. Shawn motioned toward the cardboard moving boxes that lined the walls of Nic's apartment. "Good chance for you to snoop through his stuff now, Jos."

"Oh, ha ha." Then, twisting her lower lip, she asked, "You, um, leaving already?"

"Yeah, it's past six, darlin'. Told Maggie I'd be home by seven."

"Mmm." She pulled her jacket tightly closed and wrapped her arms around her waist.

Shawn turned toward his chair, looking into it and patting his pockets, as if he'd lost something. Then he plucked his favorite pen from the edge of the seat cushion and stuck it in his pocket. When he turned back around, he looked at Josie and wrinkled his nose. "You okay?" She didn't answer, but gave him a weak smile. He set his briefcase on the coffee table, walked around it, and slid next to her on the couch. "You're not like, nervous about staying here, are ya?"

Ugh, so embarrassing. She looked over toward Nic. He had the phone crooked between his chin and shoulder and was loosening his tie. She turned back to Shawn and lifted her hand, showing her thumb and

pointer finger pinched tightly together. “Um, just a teeny little bit.”

“Jos...” He looked into her eyes. “I’ve seen you whup Fred McGuire into a malted milk ball, and you’re afraid of this bozo?”

“I wasn’t alone in the penthouse suite with Fred McGuire.”

“Hmm. And neither would I want you to be. Hell, *I* wouldn’t want to be alone in the penthouse suite with Fred McGuire.” She couldn’t help laughing at that. “Look, honey, Nic is a good egg. He’s a classy guy. He’s not some drunk frat boy—” Josie winced. “Sorry, not helping. You want me to stay? I could stay til this thing’s done.” He motioned toward the program running on Josie’s laptop, then started pulling out his phone. “I’ll call Maggie—”

“No. Go. I’m being stupid. I know he’s okay. I’m such a dope.” She stood and waved Shawn toward the hallway with both hands. “Go! Get out of here.”

He got up slowly, but then suddenly brightened. “You know, you don’t have anything to worry about, Jos. I had a little talk with Nic about you.”

“You had a talk...”

“Yeah, sure. Man to man. Hombre to hombre. The other day, at our house.”

“You did? What about? I don’t—”

“I told him you were like a sister to me.”

“You said that? That I was like a sister? Gee, Shawn, that was sweet.”

“It’s true,” he said with a shrug. “And then I

told him if he touched one hair on your head, I'd rip his dick off and shove it down his throat."

She laughed out loud, but then stopped suddenly. "Y-you didn't *really* say that, did you?"

"Well, not in so many words..."

She gave him a tentative smile. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Hell yeah, and I meant every word. You, Maggie, and Di—you're my girls. I'd never let anybody hurt any of you."

She put a hand on his cheek. "I love you, you know that?"

"Right back at ya." He reached for his briefcase. "Tell you what, Jos. You walk me out to the elevator—across the Great Bridge of Death there—" She started giggling. "And you can accidentally leave the door wi-i-ide open on your way back in. How's that for a plan?"

She grinned devilishly. "I *like* it!"

###

Shawn's face was drained of color, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead as he descended in the glass elevator. Josie shook her head, grinning, and waved to him. Poor guy. She supposed everybody had their demons.

But Shawn's "little chat" with Nic—how funny was that? And how incredibly sweet. Where the hell was Shawn when she was fifteen? Or sixteen or seventeen,

for that matter? She would have killed for a big brother back then. Glad she had him now, though. And maybe it wasn't so awful that he knew she wasn't so tough.

She returned to the penthouse door and studied it for a moment. Since the door had no formal stopper like hers, she had wedged the doormat under the threshold to hold it open while she walked Shawn to the elevator, and she was leaving it that way. Okay, she would feel really stupid if Nic saw it, but stupid was better than scared. She just hoped he wouldn't feel insulted.

Nic was still on the phone when Josie walked back into the sitting area, so she started wandering around, aimlessly fingering objects, trying to resist "snooping through Nic's stuff", as she waited for him to finish. She watched him through the French doors, nodding and gesturing, as though Mamá could see his body language on the other end of the line. When he looked at Josie, she grinned, showing sympathy for his plight. He pointed toward his kitchen, made a drinking motion, then pointed at her. She nodded, and walked that way. She opened his refrigerator and was surprised to find it well stocked: meat, eggs, cheese, fresh fruit and vegetables. Hmm, so Nicky could cook. Cool. She spotted an open bottle of Chardonnay and pulled it out. Without too much effort, she discovered clean wine glasses, as well. She poured two and replaced the bottle.

She carried the glasses out and set one on the coffee table. The other she raised in a brief toast, looking at Nic through the doors. He responded by holding up

two pleading fingers. She tossed back a dubious look. She spotted a couple of photo albums, sitting on top of a box marked “Den: Remedian family photos”. She tapped on them and looked to him for permission. He waved his assent. She carried them over to the coffee table and began to thumb through. Every page showed pictures crammed full of people. There were no shots of just one or two people; it was always four or six or ten or a stadium-full. People of all ages, from babies to great-grandparents. Lots of tall, beautiful people, some with blonde hair and blue eyes. Were all these people really his family, or did it include some from that ex-wife she had heard about?

She heard the French doors open and looked up. “¡Ay, Josephina!” Nic dropped to his knees beside the coffee table. “I am begging your forgiveness. That was incredibly rude of me.”

“No problem. It was Mamá—I get it. Those things are important.”

“You are an angel. Thank you for understanding.” He climbed up onto the couch with her. “I would have told her I had a lady waiting, but then I *really* would have been stuck on the phone.”

She laughed. “Well, I can imagine at least part of the conversation. Let’s see...something about being over thirty and not yet having produced grandchildren...am I close?”

“How did you know?”

“It’s pretty standard stuff. It’s in the Mom’s Handbook, English or Spanish version.”

“So you get the same from your mother?”

“Mmm, not so much...” Okay, time for a subject change. Josie turned quickly from his luxurious dark eyes to the photo album again. “So, who are all these beautiful people? This book looks like Vogue magazine. Nothing but tall, handsome models. Where are the maiden aunts and wart-nosed cousins?”

He gasped, “Why, I have no such thing.”

“I’m starting to think that. Like, who is this gorgeous woman here? Miss Chile?” Josie tapped on an eight-by-ten wedding portrait of a woman with dark brown eyes, olive skin, and golden blonde hair, posing in a strapless lace wedding gown.

“Ah, my sister Angela. Is she not stunning? She actually did some modeling several years ago. Of course, that picture is old. She has four children now. Not that she is any less beautiful.” He flipped a few pages. “There. Those two, and those two there, are hers. The little one is a devil.” He grinned broadly, obviously thinking about some games or pranks with the child.

“Um, not meaning to impugn her honor, but is she really blonde? There seem to be an awful lot of blondes for a South American family.”

Nic flipped back a couple pages. “Mamá,” he said proudly, “and those are her parents.” He directed Josie’s attention to a beautiful fair-skinned blonde woman with enormous blue eyes, a photo that looked to be from the 1950s or ’60s. The man, Nic’s grandfather, was a tall, blue-eyed blonde, while Nic’s grandmother looked Latino. “My grandfather was from Germany.



There are many of European descent in Chile, more than you would think. I look like my father, who is of Spanish descent, but my older brother, Juan Carlos—he is a Grisholtz.” Nic began to search for a picture of him.

“A Grisholtz?”

“At least we did not get stuck with the name. Ah, here he is.”

Josie blinked, looking at the picture. It was eerie. The man bore a strong resemblance to Nic, but with lighter skin tone, blonde hair, and blue eyes. She looked up at Nic, then down at the picture, and then up at Nic again.

Nic rolled his eyes. “Growing up, Carlos got *all* the girls with his pretty blue eyes.”

Josie softened and shook her head. “Not this one. I never went for that type.”

“No?”

“Nuh-uh. Tall, dark, and handsome. That’s more my style.” She turned back to the album.

Nic also turned back to the book, flipping another page. “Well then, I will not introduce you to any of my three *younger* brothers.” He pointed to a picture of five handsome men in tuxedos—Carlos, Nic, and three others, all similar in looks and coloring to Nic, but varying degrees younger—with their arms around each other.

“Oh my, no, I wouldn’t recommend it,” Josie said, as she stopped him from turning the page again. “What a great picture. It must be...wonderful to have a big family like this.” She ran her fingers over the photo,

wanting to absorb the feeling of what it must have been like to be in that moment.

“Josie, do you not—”

“You must miss them terribly. Why did you leave Chile? Don’t you want to be with them? I mean, why do you stay here? Not that I want you to leave—”

“Whoa, slow down.”

“Sorry.”

He took a long swallow of wine, then leaned back against the couch, staring out the window, where the sun was starting to dip. “I came originally only to study for a few years. Then I was going to go back and work for the family business—copper mining.”

“Copper mining? Is that big in Chile?”

“Uh, yes, very, but when I finished school, and I had just learned all this fascinating, cutting edge computer security stuff that was not going to be available to me back home, I decided to hang around for a few years—work, and get some experience, you know? And I had friends here, like Robert and Nina, but still, I did not intend to stay forever.” He sighed, “But then...I met Linda.”

“Linda.” The ex-wife, no doubt.

“Linda.” Nic pulled himself up and walked over to the pile of boxes from which Josie had originally selected the photo album. He dug into the box a bit until he withdrew a large picture in an intricate crystal frame. He blew some dust off of it, then carried it back to the table and laid it down in front of Josie. He picked up his wine glass and walked over to the window seat, where he

stood staring out at the pink and orange sky. His posture was stiff, tense.

When Josie looked at the wedding photo, she felt a surprising pang of jealousy. So that was Linda, huh? Gee whiz, why was he sitting here talking to her? Linda was tall, looked like five-nine or five-ten. She had straight, neat, shoulder length hair, sandy colored, and big brown eyes. She was thin, really thin, like Maggie-thin, and her makeup was perfect, like a New York model. The gown looked like something out of a fashion magazine, and her parents? Well, they did, too. Nic looked about the same as he did now, minus the gray hairs and crow's feet. Everyone looked very happy, as they always did in those pictures.

Nic turned back around to face her, and with a shrug, said, "I heard she got remarried last year."

"Ouch."

"I do not care."

"Sure 'bout that?"

"Quite sure." He crossed back to the couch and sat down next to her. He took the last swallow of his wine.

"Wanna tell me what happened then?" Josie asked with a lilt.

"You are a nosy little thing."

"Mmm, that's one way of looking at it. Maggie says I have a gift for getting people to spill their guts without ever doing the same." She took a sip from her nearly full glass.

"You would do well in PsyOps. You should

look into it.”

“I’m gonna take that as a compliment.”

“So it was intended.”

“So you’re changing the subject. Linda? Don’t want to talk about it?”

He stood and headed for the kitchen. “You are like a bad cold.”

She fell back against the couch and spoke over her shoulder to him, “Hey, you don’t have to answer the question. I’m not using any ‘Indonesian Torture Practices’.”

He called back, “That’s ‘Indigenous Asian’, Josie, not ‘Indonesian’.”

“I thought they were Robert’s books.”

He returned with the wine bottle, pretending to glare at her, then refilled his glass. He sat forward, his arms resting on his knees and his large hands cupping the wine glass.

“I’m sorry, Nic. I’m being a jerk. You don’t have to—”

“No. I want to.” He took another long swallow of wine, then set the glass on the table. He pulled his eyeglasses off and rubbed his eyes. He motioned toward the wedding photo. “Linda is beautiful, no? And she was smart, educated, ambitious. She was so...compelling. I was overwhelmed by her. But she was young, twenty-six; this was almost ten years ago. I just assumed...” He stopped, as though it was painful to continue.

Josie gave him a moment, then gently prompted, “What did you assume?”

“That she would eventually want to settle down and have a family.”

“That doesn’t sound like an unreasonable assumption.”

“I did not think so, and...you have seen my family.” He tapped on the family photo album briefly before picking up his wine glass again. “I am accustomed to large groups.” He took a sip of his wine. “I did not expect we would have eight or ten children, but two or three, sure.” The words seemed to be flowing more easily for him now. “Perhaps she was seduced by the power and the glamour of Washington...I do not know, but she just kept putting me off. ‘Maybe next year’, she would say. And then next year would become the next year and then the year after that. And then,” his voice turned disdainful, “She started working as a lobbyist.” He belted about half the glass of wine, then looked at Josie. “Now, you cannot very well run around the halls of Congress with a baby strapped to your body in one of those, those...*things*, can you?” He motioned up and down across his chest.

“You mean a sling, like I carry Nate in?”

“Sí, the sling.”

“No, I don’t suppose you can.”

“No.” He got quiet for a minute, as he drank from the glass. Josie watched him thoughtfully, taking another sip from hers. Nic set his glass on the table again, and picked up the bottle. He topped off Josie’s glass, and then refilled his own, but held onto the cork.

“So you...” she prompted him again.

“So I waited. I guess I am a hopeless optimist. I kept thinking she would wake up one day and have that, what do you call it? Nesting instinct?” He played with the cork, turning it over, studying it as he spoke. “Instead, one day *I* woke up and found...” His voice trailed off, and he suddenly pitched the cork across the room with such force that it pinged off the large picture window and shot back at them.

“Nic!” shrieked Josie, ducking. “What? Found what? She had left you? She was in love with another man? What?”

“No.” He put his glasses back on, lifted his wine glass for a big swig, and said with decided sarcasm, “A patient discharge sheet.”

“Huh?”

“Sí. She was out jogging—always had to maintain that model-thin figure.” His tone was cold now, almost spiteful. “I was getting ready for work. I accidentally knocked over her briefcase, and some papers slid out. As I started to put them back in, I read the top one. Said something about what to do after receiving injections of...Progestilone.” Josie’s hand flew to her mouth, but she held her tongue and let him continue. “I did not even know what it was. I thought it was an antibiotic or something. I thought she had an infection. I guess to her...that was about what it was. If I had not asked about it, if I had not found the sheet like that, she probably never would have told me.”

“Oh, Nic, I—oh, God.” Josie shifted her gaze down toward the coffee table. “I’m sorry. That’s awful.

Truly awful. When you wanted...” She looked up at him again. “When you wanted a baby so much. Your baby. What did you do?”

“I did what I should have done long before—I left.” He threw back more wine. “She wanted me to stay. Can you believe that? She begged me to stay. She did not understand why I was insane with hurt and anger.” His pitch was heated and intense; it seemed voyeuristic to intrude. “She admitted she had lied to me, but, she argued, she knew that I would not want her to have an abortion if I knew about the child, so she felt it best to do so without telling me. What kind of logic is that?”

Josie said softly, “She wanted you, but not your child?”

He looked at her with surprise, coming down a few notches from his fevered high. “Yes, Josie, that is exactly the thought I had. She killed what I wanted most in the world, and expected me to still love her.” He shifted his gaze to the darkness outside, bringing the glass to his lips once again.

Josie watched him, wanting to give him solitude for his grief, but the moment was interrupted by an audible rumbling in her stomach. She plastered a hand over it, as though it would silence the sound.

He looked over at her and cracked a small smile. “Well, my goodness, I am being so rude, yet again. You are starving. Here I am, bending your ear in half, and I have not offered you so much as a cracker.” He stood up, and then pointed at her computer, still sitting on the coffee table. “And the program has long since

finished running. Please, let me order—”

She shook her head, picking her bag up off the floor and placing it in her lap. “No, I’m sorry, Nic. Thank you. I would like to stay, really, I would.” She gave him a soft smile. “Really. But I’ve got a huge project due this week, and I’m going to be up half the night as it is. I have to go.” She closed her laptop, and slid it into her bag.

“Of course. I understand. But um...” He put a hand to his forehead, looking a little dazed. “Are you all right to drive?”

She stood with him and cocked an eyebrow at the empty wine bottle. “*You* drank the bottle of wine, amigo, not me.”

“I did?”

“Sí, señor.”

“Damn. And Shawn told me not to.”

“Not to drink wine?”

“Not to drink too much around you. He said you would not like it.”

She laughed out loud. “He likes you, Nic. He’s looking out for you.”

“I thought he was looking out for you.”

“Yeah, so did I.”

Nic looked confused. “I will have to think about that in the morning.”

“You do that,” she said. Then, noting the glassiness in his eyes, added, “And get yourself something to eat.” She started to lift her bag, but he stopped her.



“It is dark. I will walk you out.”

Mmm, and get a good look at that creative door stop? Maybe not. She smiled at him. “Very thoughtful, Nic, but who would help you find the way back here?” He looked at her crossly, so she said, “I have a better idea. C’mere.” She took his arm and led him to the window seat. She pushed him into it, which, in his languid state, was not difficult. She pointed out the window. “There I am, second row, right under the big, bright lamppost. Jade green. See it?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“You’ll watch me all the way out, okay? Promise?”

“No, I would feel better if—”

“Promise? ’Cause I’m gonna look back up here and make sure you’re watching.”

“Okay, I promise.” Sitting in the window seat had brought him down to her height. He reached out and pushed some of the thick unruly hair back from her face, letting his hand linger in it.

Oh my. Now, wouldn’t it be nice to be folded up in those long arms? To run her fingers through that soft hair again? To feel that rugged face against her cheek? To...*hey, hold on a minute there, JoJo!* Josie reached up and pulled his hand out of her hair. “Nic, I have to go now. Really I do.”

But he held onto her hand. “Josie, wait. There is something I must say. You are too lovely and too valuable to toy with.”

Huh?

He picked up her other hand, so that she was standing in front of him, looking eye to eye. “Miss Josie Natale, I find you...most exhilarating, and I would like to see you, not professionally or coincidentally, but...romantically.” He paused, studying her.

Holy crap. Talk about straightforward.

He continued, “But I am too old and too tired to play games, and I have far too much pride to play second string to anyone. I know you have at least one other man—Theo—who has your attention right now. If you should become free of other entanglements, I would like to know.”

Whoa. Was she really hearing this? Was he serious? And would he remember saying it once the buzz wore off? She stared at him a moment, looking into his glazed eyes. Her heart was fluttering.

She wet her lips. “Nicolas.” Mmm, fabulous just to say his whole name like that. “*You* have my attention. All of it.” He looked somewhat skeptically at her. “Theo is...a non-issue, believe me.” Then, recalling his words from the veranda, she added, “I will take care of him.”

Brightening, Nic asked, “You are not going to dump wine on him, I hope?”

“Nothing quite so dramatic. But, um, he’s been traveling a lot lately, so I haven’t really had a chance to see him. I’m not even sure when he’s due back right now, but I want to talk to him in person...you know...”

“Of course. Take all the time you need.” His smile was spreading, and his eyes were dancing, as she

was sure hers were.

“Well then, I...I really must go now.”

He started to get up again. “Then please, let me walk you—”

“No. I told you—sit.” She pointed at him in a commanding manner, and he backed down, hands raised in defeat. She moved to the couch for her bag. As she lifted it to leave, she tossed back, “*After* I talk to Theo, I’ll let you walk me to my car.” Then she added with an elfish grin, “And maybe even kiss me goodnight.”

## *Chapter Ten*

“Nic, how about a drink while you’re waiting? Shawn should be here any minute. A glass of wine?” offered Maggie, opening her refrigerator.

Nic waved her off. “Oh, no. I am not falling for that ‘soften him up with the wine’ routine again.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your friend, Josie. She fed me a bottle of wine and had me pouring my heart out like a lovesick puppy dog the other night. Cruel girl.”

Noting the sparkle in his eyes, Maggie laughed. “And I’ll bet she never said a word about herself.”

“So it is not just me? She does this to everyone?”

“Mmm hmm. Sometimes I swear she’s secretly a KGB agent.”

“I suggested PsyOps.”

“PsyOps?”

“Never mind. But, um, I was wondering...she is not an orphan or anything, is she? She seemed

particularly fascinated by my large family, so I was wondering—”

“Oh no, not an orphan, but, uh...” Should she tell him? Awesome guy, needed to stack the deck in his favor...yeah, she should. “See, when she was thirteen, her dad got sent to prison for a few months—”

“Prison?”

Maggie’s eyes flashed. “Totally a bum rap. Assault charges. Kind of a bar brawl thing. But anyway, her mother divorced him shortly thereafter and ended up marrying the guy Ted beat up.”

“Oh...I see.”

“Anyway, the stepfather was some real rich guy, and apparently, he and Josie’s mom used to go off traveling all the time after that, and Josie got left alone a lot. No brothers or sisters, you know. And after he got out, Ted spent most of his time on his boat. Josie does see him, though, at least a few times a year.

“Ever since we all met in grad school, Shawn and I both sort of adopted her. I mean, Josie’s my best friend, but she’s Shawn’s, too, I think. Josie and I do girl stuff together, but she and Shawn—they share this kind of egghead bond. You know, all that math and science stuff they do together.” She shrugged. “And, you know...Josie does lunch with Diana, visits with the Torals, hangs with the folks in her building...and hell, the staff at the club adores her. I think Chef Luigi plans the weekly menu around Josie’s schedule. She has a big family, Nic. They’re just not blood relatives.”

He nodded. “She must consider herself

fortunate.”

“It’s mutual, believe me.” She studied his warm, dark eyes. How much to say without betraying a confidence? “Uh, Nic...”

“Yes, Maggie?”

“Be patient with her, okay?” He looked questioningly at her. She leaned over the counter a little and added, “Just...patient.”

He smiled and laid a hand on hers. “Of course.” He wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but who could be more patient than Nic? Look how long it was taking him just to get a date with the lady.

The door to the garage slammed, and Nic quickly withdrew his hand. It was only a friendly gesture, of course, but why push his luck? Shawn seemed like the kind of guy who might have a quick temper. And a jealous streak. Kind of like Josie’s dad, maybe? Nic liked Shawn, though. Really respected the way he stuck up for his “little sister”. And he was pretty sure from what he’d heard so far, that he would also like Josie’s dad.

“Hey, Nic. Sorry I’m late, but it was worth it.” Shawn turned to Maggie, “Hi, sweetheart.” He grabbed her around the waist from behind, and kissed her largely and roughly on the neck.

She laughed, trying to push him away, “Stop it, you big ape, we have company.”

Nic held up a hand. “Please, do not stop on my account. I hope I no longer qualify as company.”

Shawn grinned and turned her around in his

arms. “See honey? He’s no longer company.”

“You’re going to miss your tee time.”

“Oh, if we must.” He kissed her once more, then released her and turned his attention to Nic. “I’ll tell you what took me so long. I hope you don’t mind a foursome.” He started taking off his tie.

“Not at all,” answered Nic.

Shawn continued talking as he unbuttoned his dress shirt. “I scored a couple of heavy hitters to pair up with. I thought you could stand a few handshakes. Randy Carlino, Associate VP of Satellite Systems in Raleigh—heard of him?”

“Yes, I have. We will be playing with him today? Shawn, that is terrific. I would love to meet him.”

Shawn smiled and went on, “Randy’s an old friend. I thought you two would hit it off. And Fred McGuire, president of Chiroan Industries. It’s a pharmaceutical in RTP. Not as relevant to your field, I know, but he’s a big deal around here. Certainly won’t hurt to know the man, and he’s been kissing my ass for weeks now—” He paused long enough to hand his white dress shirt to Maggie and take the brightly colored polo she was handing him in return. He pulled the golf shirt over his head and his soft, untanned belly, well covered with curly red hair.

“Fred McGuire? I have heard that name...”

“Probably from me. I was teasing Josie about him the other day at your place. She pulled a big coup working on a project through RTT for the guy—probably saved him a mint in lawsuits—and now he can’t do

enough for us.”

“Mmm.” Oh yeah, something about enough money for a year.

“One thing, though—don’t call him Fred. McGuire’s okay, but nobody calls him Fred.” Then he laughed, “Except Josie.”

She does, huh? Must be pretty chummy with the guy.

Shawn asked, “Where’re your clubs? Mine’re out here.” He nodded toward the deck door, and Nic pointed in the same direction. “Good. The first tee is just over a couple houses.” He leaned over and smooched Maggie’s head one more time. “See you later, honey.”

Nic added, “Thank you, Maggie. Always a pleasure.”

“Have fun, boys.”

Once out the door, Shawn got down to business, “You play much golf, Nic? I’ve been playing for about ten years. Ever since I finished school. I could have stayed in school forever, but after I got my second doctorate, Maggie forced me to get a job. Once I discovered golf, though, I decided the real world wasn’t so bad.”

Nic answered, “I play a little.”

“What’s your handicap?”

“Worried?”

“Hardly. I own this course,” Shawn said with a sidelong glance at Nic. “Besides, who plays golf in Chile?”

“The Remedians.”



“No kidding.”

Nic readjusted the clubs on his shoulder. “My youngest brother Eduardo attended the University of Florida on a golf scholarship. He is very talented. He plays a lot in South America, of course, but he comes to the U.S. quite often, as well. I have not beaten him in many years. My younger sister Carmela is pretty good, too, but she never played professionally.”

“Uh-huh. Why didn’t you tell me about this before I invited Randy and Fred?”

Nic just laughed, “I thought no one called him Fred.”

###

“You sure McGuire’s not gonna code out on us?” Randy Carlino squinted in the waning sunlight, as he looked back down the sixteenth fairway.

Shawn stifled a laugh. “Nah, man. My new friend there is keeping an eye on him.” Randy and Shawn waited under the shade of a thick clump of Magnolia trees close to the sixteenth green, as Nic walked patiently alongside Fred McGuire, who seemed to be laboring to keep up with the younger players. McGuire was the one who insisted they all walk the course in the name of fresh air and sunshine, even though June offers only haze, heat, and humidity in North Carolina. At least the walking had added enough time to the round that it was now approaching dusk, as they were approaching their final holes.

“Yeah, well, I’m a little worried about your new friend, too. I’m worried he’s gonna clobber us both. Since when do you bring a scratch golfer out on our course, buddy? I thought you liked winning. He’s three strokes ahead of you, and I’m so far behind, it’s hopeless. How do you plan to pull out of this one? I know you hate losing money on golf. Nice guy, though. Really knows his satellite-based GPS systems.”

“I thought he was a nice guy, too, up until about the fifth hole. You’d think he’d let me win after I fixed him up with Josie.” Shawn bent down and picked up a couple of discarded cigarette butts. “Man, I hate when people do that.”

“*He’s* going out with her? I thought she was with that skinny dude—whatsisname?”

Shawn laughed, “Theo. But Maggie’s working on that. Hey, that gives me an idea.” He turned toward a set of attractive three-story condominium buildings, nestled a short way from the green, facing the edge of Lake Latta. “Hmm, I could win this yet.” He turned with a sly smile toward Randy, “Sorry, friend, this might get ugly. Ready to swing?”

“Sure.” The two men stepped away from the trees as Nic and McGuire approached.

Nic was pointing out McGuire’s ball, “There it is, Mr. McGuire, just off the edge of the fairway.”

And Shawn pointed toward Nic’s ball, which had been resting comfortably, about six feet from the hole, for quite some time. “Mark it, Nic?” Shawn stood near his own ball, on the other side of the hole from

Nic's, about fifteen feet from the flag.

“Right,” answered Nic, as he marked the spot and scooped up his ball, allowing the less successful players a clear shot at the hole.

As Randy was studying his ball, which lay on a narrow patch of rough about 10 yards from the green, Shawn motioned the other two to follow him to a high spot just behind the green, positioning them in easy view of the condominium building he had been looking at earlier. “Say, uh, McGuire, you see the light on in the third floor window of that building over there? The one with the beige curtains?”

McGuire squinted a little, then said, “Yeah, sure. Why?”

“Your hero's place—Josie Natale.”

Both McGuire and Nic looked quickly at Shawn, then all three looked up at the indicated window. The second and third floor condos had balconies with triple-width sliding doors. As they watched, a shadow moved across the beige curtain, as if proving Shawn's claim. *Thanks, doll, perfect timing.*

“Huh, no kidding,” remarked McGuire, spitting a wad of tobacco from between his lips. “I didn't know you kept your best people so close.”

“Well, you know, Josie and I go way back. She and my wife are like this.” Shawn held up a hand, wrapping his first two fingers tightly together.

“You don't say? I didn't realize. I thought you two were just, ya know, professional acquaintances.” He reached up and scratched the thin layer of hair that was

combed-over from just above his right ear to way over on the left side of his head.

Randy's shot rolled to within a foot of the hole. He marked it, then stepped over to join the others in their survey of Josie's condo. As McGuire moved into position to take his swing, Randy quirked an eyebrow at Shawn, implicitly questioning the logic behind his strategy. McGuire's ball skipped past the hole several feet, but stayed on the green. Shawn commented, "That'll work. But I'll give you guys a tip. You want to watch out for the back side of the green here. It's more of a slope than it looks like. If you go too far, you'll end up in the creek." For a moment, attention turned in the direction of the creek, which was in a steep drop-off just beyond the group of Magnolias Shawn and Randy had been standing under earlier.

As McGuire considered Shawn's advice with regard to his ball's position, Shawn squatted behind his ball and checked his line, then he returned to the topic of Josie. "So yeah, McGuire. Known Josie for years."

After McGuire putted, he walked around the perimeter of the green, so he was closer to Shawn. "So, uh..." McGuire glanced quickly at Randy and Nic, then lowered his voice a bit, "Wha'd Josie think of the flowers I sent her?"

Shawn positioned himself and took a practice swing, but before advancing for his actual stroke, he stopped and looked up at the three men watching him. He spoke loudly and clearly, "Oh, the flowers? Loved 'em. Josie's a real sucker for flowers. She's probably got

'em out on the table with her right now.” He raised his putter, pointing it towards her balcony, dragging all three pairs of eyes with it, as if they could see the flowers for themselves. Shawn shook his head. Yeah, guys, like those flowers haven't already been dead for a couple of weeks. Sheesh. Bozos. Shawn looked down at his ball again and carefully swung the putter.

POP!

The sound of the ball connecting with the cup drew the men's attention back to the game. Randy reacted first, “Nice birdie, Shawn.” Then he stepped around the green, so he'd have a better angle to watch Nic putt.

“Yes, beautiful,” added Nic, who seemed a bit distracted as he walked toward his mark. Shawn just nodded at him after plucking his ball from the hole, then headed over to where McGuire stood.

Nic was surveying the hole and appeared to be eyeballing the steep slope that Shawn had warned them about. Shawn kept his eyes on Nic as McGuire approached him again, hoping Nic's hearing was better than his eyesight. “So Shawn, you and Josie and your wife being such good friends and all, I was wondering, uh, you know, I mentioned to Larry...that is, ya think there's any chance she, I mean Josie, would be interested in...ya know...maybe goin' out sometime?” Recalling Josie's reaction to the suggestion in his office a couple weeks earlier, Shawn had to exert some effort to keep his face straight, but the effort was worth it when he saw Nic's back stiffen in response to McGuire's query.

Shawn paused before answering him, giving Nic a chance to consider the question, too. As Nic stepped up to his mark, Shawn lowered his voice, enough to indicate politeness for the player, but not so much that he couldn't be heard, "I don't know, but she sure did like those flowers. You could always drop by her condo when we're done here and ask her yourself."

Nic's swing, of course, was much too hard. His ball flew past the hole, rolled down the steep backside of the green, and a moment later, could be heard plopping into the creek.

Shawn tried to look pained. "Ooooh, Nic, tough break." As Nic slowly straightened his body, he turned his head with a glare in Shawn's direction. Shawn, once again, struggled to suppress a grin.

Even more effort was required a few minutes later, when he and Randy stood among the trees again, watching Nic straddle the creek, trying to rescue the unfortunate shot. Randy whispered to Shawn, "So I gather the South American boy's got it pretty bad for the pretty girl?"

"Oh yeah, real bad," said Shawn, smiling with delight at his own shenanigans.

"You're a sonofabitch, you know that, McKenna?"

"Yeah, I know that. But all's fair in love and golf."

###

Oscar Teslar debated about putting his golf cap back on. As a bald man, he had to carefully manage his cranial sun exposure, lest he stray too far towards either the flaming red beacon or sparkling white chrome dome ends of the spectrum. As he crossed the eighteenth fairway in search of his errant tee shot, he decided the sun was low enough to brave the final rays of the early evening, and so remained hatless.

“I think I see it, Oscar. Over here.” His friend Pete waved him towards a grouping of trees that stood between the seventeenth and eighteenth fairways of the Latta Lakes golf course.

He joined Pete in surveying the patch of ground wherein his ball lay neatly tucked, partially obscured by distinctively shaped leaves. “Oh, hell, is that poison ivy?”

Pete leaned over and took a closer look. “Nope. I think it’s sumac.”

“Sumac?”

“Yep, poison sumac is way worse than poison oak or ivy.”

“Oh, great. How’d you get to be such an expert anyway?”

Pete laughed. “Boy Scouts.” He motioned toward the ball. “Maybe it’s time for a mulligan.”

“Hell, no. If I ever want to join this club like you, I need to play by the rules.”

Pete shrugged, “Suit yourself, but you know you’re always welcome to play as my guest, and you know I *need* you for the summer match-play

championship, so we can keep on creaming Shawn McKenna. I never want to see him get that trophy back.”

Oscar grinned, then stepped closer to the ball. As he did so, though, something caught his eye over on the seventeenth fairway. “Hey, speaking of McKenna, isn’t that him over there?”

Pete walked to the far edge of the trees and squinted in the direction of the dipping sun. “Yeah, I think it is. With Randy Carlino, right?” Then he motioned toward a ball that was resting a good thirty yards ahead of where Shawn and Randy were standing. “So who’s tee shot was *that*?”

“Huh. I don’t know. They must have a third with them somewhere, and he sure is a long hitter. Oh, hey, I think I see a couple guys coming up behind them.” Oscar turned toward Pete with a grin, “Maybe Shawn’s trying out some new partners.”

“Hmm.” Pete looked genuinely concerned and started peering down the fairway to inspect his potential competition.

Oscar shook his head. He certainly enjoyed playing golf and was reasonably skilled at it, but he didn’t take it nearly as seriously as his friend did. Nor as seriously as Shawn McKenna apparently did. He pulled a club out of his bag and took a whack at the perilously positioned ball. It hopped about ten yards, clearing the roots, rocks, and poisonous plants, and landed, thankfully, in the rough grass, close to the fairway.

As the two men progressed toward the final green, Oscar berated himself for not getting around to



asking what he needed to ask. It was a rather difficult question, and he had struggled mentally with various approaches. Pete's remark about being a Boy Scout hadn't encouraged him. He had to get on with it, though, since Pete was the only person either he or Gary knew who could help with this particular problem.

"Oh, tough putt, my friend," Pete commented, as Oscar purposely missed his second putt to give Pete the win.

"Yeah, well, after that poison ivy thing, I guess my concentration was shot."

"Sumac."

"Right, sumac." The Boy Scout thing again. Maybe a little alcohol would help get the words flowing. "Say Pete, you wanna get a drink?"

"Sure. Let's grab a spot on the veranda."

Once they were seated and had drinks in hand, Oscar gathered up his courage and plowed ahead. "So, Pete, remember that guy you were telling me about last fall? The hacker guy? Whatever happened to him?"

"Auggie? My super genius techie? The one the Feds were after?"

Oscar nodded, trying to act nonchalant. "Yeah, that guy."

"Well, like I said, they tore through everything in his office *and* his home, and they could never find anything incriminating. Couldn't prove he so much as hacked into the local library, let alone the kinds of things they were accusing him of."

"But you're pretty sure he did it—tapped into

those brokerage house files and made those illegal trades on behalf of...who was it again?"

Pete grinned, "Housing for Humanity, the Pets' Protection Society and...Bats and Balls for Boys, I think." He sipped his whiskey. "Did he do it? I don't doubt it. I mean, he never admitted it to me for obvious reasons, but he had a way of letting you know..."

Oscar nodded, "Right." So even Pete the Boy Scout thought Auggie was a safe bet for illegal activity.

Pete shook his head. "Too bad we had to let him go. He really was brilliant at that stuff. We've got the tightest security in the Triangle thanks to Auggie, but you can't keep a guy on your staff with three branches of the Federal Government looking over his shoulder all the time." He leaned back in his chair and shrugged, "So why do you ask? You want him over at Nova?"

"Uh, no, but you think he might be interested in a little freelance work?" Pete cocked an eyebrow at Oscar, so Oscar quickly added, "I have a friend...he's looking for some advanced security training for his tech folks. You know, how to spot loopholes, avoid breaches, that sort of thing..."

"Oh, sure. I don't know if training is his cup of tea, but he can probably recommend someone. You know, all those geeky hacker types hang pretty tight. I will tell you this, though—whoever you get, he won't come cheaply."

Oscar pulled the stirrer out of his drink and sucked on it momentarily. "Yeah, kinda figured that."

Pete reached for his phone, but then stopped,

looking over the side of the veranda to where the eighteenth hole came back to the clubhouse. “Oh, I see now...McKenna’s got some old geezer with him—”

Oscar looked, too. “I think that’s Fred McGuire. Doubt he’s any threat.”

They both laughed, then Pete asked, “So who’s the tall guy with the dark hair? You know him? He’s in the bunker, but it was a hell of a shot to get there.”

Oscar threw back the last of his highball and shook his head. “Nope. Never saw him before in my life.”

Pete picked up the phone, then exclaimed, “Eight thirty? Shit, I didn’t know it was so late. It’s still light out.”

“That time of year—”

“Sorry, Oscar, I gotta run. My wife’s gonna be P.O.’d. I’ll send you Auggie’s number when I get home, okay?”

“Huh? Oh, right. Thanks, Pete. Uh, you think it’s okay if I just hang out here a while?”

Pete was already hurrying toward the veranda staircase. “Yeah, of course, make yourself at home. See ya.”

Oscar sat back in his chair, stretching his legs out in front of him. He studied the foursome on the green, then waved toward the server, indicating that he wanted a refill on his drink. He needed to kill another half hour or so before he could finish his business at Latta Lakes, so why not?

###

Nic waited until Randy and McGuire had headed into the clubhouse before he approached Shawn, who was cheerily folding twenty-dollar bills into his wallet. “Shawn.”

“Yeah, Nic?”

“I would very much like to thank you for introducing me to your friends today. And for an excellent game of golf. It was a pleasure.”

“You’re welcome, Nic. I think Randy liked you a lot. I’m sure he’s gonna call you about that South Carolina thing.”

“Yes, I think you are right. That sounds like a fascinating project. But, uh...” He raised an eyebrow at Shawn. “Do you think Mr. McGuire will call on Josie?”

Shawn looked a little sheepish. “Uh, Nic, you should know—”

“I am not too worried about it. I think perhaps you brought up Miss Natale’s name during play to intentionally cobble my game.”

“Would I do a thing like that? To a friend? For twenty bucks?”

Nic grinned, “I think you might.”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“It did not. Do you think I believed for one minute that Josie would prefer Fred McGuire to me?”

“What—just because he’s a billionaire?”

“A-a billionaire?”

Shawn laughed and laid a hand on Nic’s

shoulder. “Take it easy, Nic. When I told Josie he was interested, she practically threw up on my desk.”

Nic smiled and dropped his shoulders. “Of course. Like I said, I was not worried.”

“Yeah—that’s why you bogeyed the last three holes...”

“No. That was because I was so worn out from kicking your butt on the first fifteen.”

Shawn just laughed. “You know what? I like you Nic, so I’m gonna do you a favor.” Shawn reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet again.

“You are giving me back my twenty dollars?”

“Better.” Shawn pulled out something that looked like a green credit card. “My club card. Run in there, grab a shower, and go visit the lady.” Then he pulled out his keys and separated a tiny one from the rest of the group. “Get anything you need out of my locker. Name’s on it.” As he took a step closer to Nic to hand the items to him, Shawn wrinkled up his nose. “You could always stop by the pro shop and pick up a clean shirt. They’ve got some of those nice Jack Nicklaus numbers in there.”

Nic picked up his shirt collar and sniffed. “That bad?”

Shawn shrugged, “Warm night.”

Nic still looked unconvinced about the whole idea. “But to drop by unannounced...so late?”

“She stays up late. Just stop by for a few minutes. Number three-sixteen E. She’s been working her butt off all week. I’m sure she could use a study

break. Bring her a cup of coffee; she can't make that, either." Nic looked like he was considering it, so Shawn added, "Do it before Fred McGuire gets the same idea and goes running over there with a diamond bracelet and two tickets to Milan, will ya?"

Nic scowled at him, snatched the key and the green card out of his hand, and headed for the clubhouse.

Shawn smiled watching him go. A decent guy *and* a decent golfer. Now that was the kind of fella Josie needed, and if he could do anything to help make it happen, well, so much the better. Not like it was easy finding a guy worthy of her, and that she would actually like, too. Heck, he remembered how it felt for him all those years ago, when he'd gone to her to break her heart—tell her that he was nuts about her roommate Maggie. He'd expected a little more than, "Yeah, I knew that." It had been a bit of a blow to his ego to realize that the pretty little genius wasn't in love with his brilliant scientific mind; she'd only wanted him for his body after all. He'd felt a little hurt—used, perhaps—but he'd gotten over it. Ancient history.

###

Almost an hour later, a cleaner, fresher-smelling Nic found his way to building number three-sixteen with a large double cream cappuccino and two strawberry nut muffins from the Latta Lakes Country Club kitchen. The kitchen, he'd learned, usually closed at nine o'clock on Monday nights, but when he

mentioned Josie's name, everything changed. As it turned out, not only were Josie's personal dietary preferences well known among the staff, but it also seemed that meeting her alimentary needs was something of a local human interest project. Whether that was sparked by a fondness for her bubbly personality or simply a concern for neighborhood fire safety, Nic couldn't be sure, but either way, his tardiness was overlooked.

He parked his blue Aston Martin just outside three-sixteen, then walked past the elevators, through the breezeway, and out the other side, so that he could view the building from the golf course side as he had earlier that evening. He stepped far enough back that he could see to Josie's third floor condo. It was now dark behind the beige curtains, and he could see only a dim light in what was probably a bedroom window on the side facing more toward the lake. Had she gone to bed? It was only nine thirty, and Shawn said she stayed up late. Maybe she was working on her laptop in bed, or up reading? Hmm, Mamá would never approve—most ungracious to knock on the lady's door under these circumstances.

He sighed and stepped back into the breezeway. As he did so, he almost ran into two women holding hands, one, slender and attractive, the other, heavy and rather plain, as they were coming down the stairs at that end of the building. "Ladies," he nodded politely and paused to let them pass. When he did, the slender woman smiled at him, but the heavier one eyed him with suspicion.

After they had gone, he took a longing glance up the staircase. He could easily see the doors on the second floor, marked with the letters “C” and “D”, and less easily those on the third floor, marked “E” and “F”. Feeling like a foolish schoolboy, he leaned against the staircase railing, staring at what he could see of door E. As he was about to leave, door E slowly and quietly opened. His mood brightened, and he was about to start up the stairs, when he realized the person coming out was a man. Skinny with brown hair, modest height. ¡Dios mío! Theo. Ugh! Glad he hadn’t arrived five minutes earlier.

But good then—she must have broken up with him. He certainly didn’t look like a happy man. His face was taut and stern. He was dressed casually and was carrying a big backpack. Kind of strange. Just come from the airport? Theo proceeded to lock Josie’s door from the outside—locking and locking and locking. She had four separate key locks on her door, and he had the keys to all of them. But, hey, if she had just broken it off with him, why was *he* locking the doors? Why did he still have all those keys? And come to think of it, if that’s what they were doing in there, why were the lights only on in the bedroom, not in the sitting room? Nic’s temperature started to rise.

*Nic, be rational.* Maybe she was asleep, and he didn’t want to wake her. No, that didn’t make sense—if she had gone to bed, she would’ve used a safety chain or bar, so no one could get in. Maybe she was gone somewhere, like to get something to eat, or to a client’s



office. Shawn said she had to work at night sometimes. He hadn't seen the jade green Acura in the parking lot just now. Sure, she was not at home. Of course, there were garages attached to these condos, too.

Being rational wasn't helping. It seemed awfully warm for damn near ten o'clock at night.

Knowing Theo might remember the man who spilled the Chianti on him, Nic stepped back out of the breezeway, and behind some hydrangea bushes. Theo came out the golf course end of the building and cut across the sixteenth fairway, disappearing into the breezeway of another building. Nic exited Josie's building through to the parking lot side, tossing the coffee and muffins in a trash can as he passed.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Ten hours of sleep, and she was still beat. Josie stepped wearily out the front door of the RTT headquarters building. Too tired to even stop by and ruffle Shawn's feathers before she left—a rarity for her. She paused before starting down the steps. Her car was near the back of the lot, as there hadn't been a decent spot when she'd raced in at the last minute for the presentation. It was way too warm this time of year to make the hike in her pretty silk jacket, so she set her bag down, and slipped the stylish, swingy, hot-pink number off her shoulders. The matching dress had that trendy is-it-a-dress-or-is-it-a-slip thing going on, so she wouldn't have dared peel off the jacket while she was still inside. Well, not unless the situation had demanded it.

She draped the jacket over her arm, lifted the hair that was sticking to the back of her neck, and was about to pick up her bag again when she heard her name.

“Josie?” The voice was tentative, unsure.

“Nic!” Her response was warm and excited,

despite her fatigue.

“How...how are you?”

“Better now,” she said, her smile spreading. “I just turned in all the stuff I’ve been working on this week. I’ve done nothing but eat, sleep, and work since I saw you last, and precious little of the first two.”

“Shawn mentioned that you had been working very hard.”

“You saw him?”

“We played golf yesterday.”

“You did? Did you beat him?” she asked with a grin.

Nic smiled and shook his head, “Mmm, no. He took my money.”

“Well, gee, that was mighty unfriendly of him.”

“On the contrary, Shawn has shown me a great deal of friendship in a short period of time.”

She softened, “Shawn’s good people, huh?”

Nic nodded, then he asked with a hopeful note, “So, you have spoken with Theo?”

She made a gloomy face. “No, I’m sorry, Nic, I haven’t. I mean, I spoke to him on the phone, but he’s not back in town yet. I think he’s coming home tomorrow.”

Nic’s face changed. “Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, he called me last night around eight. I was just putting the finishing touches on this presentation, and I admit, I was pretty distracted, but he was still in Dallas, and he said he would be back tomorrow.” She looked up in her head feeling a bit

confused. “Unless he was talking about today. But I think he meant tomorrow tomorrow.” She faced Nic again, “Anyway, I just told him I was tired, and I was going to bed.”

“So you...went to bed?”

“Yep.”

“At eight o’clock?”

“Well, more like nine.” She grinned, “I usually stay up later than that, but I was wiped.” He still had a question in his eyes, so she added, “Why?”

“Josie, I was there. I saw him.”

“Where? Who?”

“At your condominium last night. I saw Theo.” His dark eyes looked intense, almost shiny. The lashes weren’t long, but they were thick.

“What? Huh? You don’t even know where I live.”

“Shawn told me.” His face was starting to flush. He looked warm, animated.

“O-okay, but if you were there, you couldn’t have seen Theo. Like I said, he’s in Dallas. He called me \_\_\_”

“Josie, no. I’m telling you, I saw him. Quite clearly.”

She furrowed her brow. Why was he being so insistent on this odd point? “Nic, you’ve only seen him once. Maybe you saw someone who looked like Theo. Or maybe you were in the wrong building.”

“Number three-sixteen E? And you have four locks on your door?”

“Uh, okay, you were in the right building. Why are you getting so upset?”

“The lights were off, he came out your door, and was locking your locks.”

“Wait—he was locking my locks?” She stopped to consider that fact.

“Yes, locking your locks. Josie, I just want you to be honest with me. I don’t care what happened. We can start over, from the beginning, today, okay? Just tell me the truth.” His face was quite red now.

She looked at him, confused. What truth? What was his deal today? Who *was* this guy? She just knew he wouldn’t remember all that stuff he said when the buzz wore off.

She set her jaw. “I just did. Theo called me. He said he was in Dallas. I said I was going to bed, and that’s what I did. What more do you want to know?”

His expression turned cold, his tone snide, “What happened, Josie? He came from the airport with a big bunch of flowers like Fred McGuire?”

“Fred McGuire? From Chiroan? What’s *he* got to do with this?”

“And you were a bit happier to see him than you thought you would be? And one thing led to another?”

His words punched her in the stomach. “Wh-what?” The tip of her nose started to tickle. Uh-oh. Not gonna cry! Not again, not in front of this jerk.

Nic stopped, took a couple breaths, then began again in a more controlled tone, “I...apologize, Josie.

That remark was entirely out of line.” He shook his head. “I am sorry. I-I should not have said that. But as I told you, I will not play games—”

But Josie wasn’t listening. She swallowed hard, knowing that a wide-open bawlfest awaited her the minute she got inside her car, with the air conditioner on full blast. She steadied her gaze at him, gritted her teeth, and said, “Please excuse me, Señor, I must have you confused with this terrific guy I met on a veranda a couple weeks ago. *Good day!*” She leaned down and picked up her bag. Then, biting her lip, because it was still an awfully long way to the car, she marched past him down the steps.

As she reached the bottom, she heard him once again. “Josie, wait. Wait a minute. Don’t go. Let’s talk about this. Please.” She couldn’t stop now—her face was covered with tears.

# # #

Shawn answered the knock on his office door without turning away from the window, “C’mon in, Nic.”

“Shawn,” Nic said simply, laying some papers on Shawn’s desk. Shawn turned around and eyed him carefully, as Nic was digging in his pocket for something. In a moment, Nic pulled out the green club card and the locker key. He laid them on Shawn’s desk on top of the papers. “Thank you for that.”

Shawn sat down and motioned for Nic to do the same. “So, you did stop by then?”

Nic glanced away. “I tried, but she already had company.”

Shawn couldn’t hide his surprise, “McGuire?”

“No. Theo.”

“Theo? I thought he was in Dallas.”

“Yes, well, that is her story.”

“Excuse me?” Shawn’s tone was sharp.

Nic looked up quickly, his face registering immediate regret for his choice of words.

“Look, Nic, I don’t know you well enough to go getting all up in your business, but don’t ever make cracks like that about Josie Natale around me. The girl’s got more integrity in her big toe than all the rest of the people I know put together, so if she said something, it’s so. Got it?”

Nic sat up straight. “A thousand pardons, Shawn. I did not mean...I am not myself today. You must forgive me. Please. Let’s just talk business, shall we?” Nic gave him a weak smile and moved closer to the desk, turning his attention to the papers he had set there.

Another knock on the door turned both men’s attention in that direction. “Yo, Shawn!”

Shawn’s tone was acerbic, “Tom. What is it?”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize—”

“Whaddya need?”

Tom hesitated, then began, “Uh, I was wondering if I could...cut out early today? The kids have a swim meet, and the wife’s gonna kill me if I don’t spend a little Q.T. with ’em. See, your man Natale’s been kicking my ass all week on that Germack-147 deal, and

when she finally cut me loose last night, what do I do but crash on the couch at seven o'clock and sleep straight through til morning. Ellen's ready to throw me in the crock pot and serve me up to the in-laws."

Shawn couldn't help but grin. "Sure, Tom. Go ahead." But as Tom started to leave, Shawn stopped him, "Uh, hey Tom, let me ask you something. What is it that took you guys so long on that project?"

Tom looked surprised by the question. "Well, you know, Shawn—the usual. I mean, the usual when you're working with Natale." He made a prissy face and pulled his hands up under his chin like a cat's paws before saying, "Dot every I, cross every T, check every number to the billionth decimal place—whatever Little Miss Straight Lace wants."

"Little Miss Straight Lace?"

"Oh, uh, sorry, thought you knew..." Tom glanced over at Nic, as if wondering how much to say in front of a visitor. "That's what the data grunts call her, 'cause she won't cut the tiniest corner. No fuzzing, no fudging, everything the God's honest truth, even if it takes three all-nighters to track that one digit down..." He shook his head wearily. "Sorry, Shawn, it's been a tough week. Sometimes I wish you'd use someone else."

"Well, Tom, that's why *you* work for *me*. Tell Ellen I said hi."

"Yeah, sure." Tom backed out of the room.

Shawn looked over at Nic, who had sunk down in his chair, and was eyeing Shawn suspiciously. With a wry look, Nic mimicked, "Little Miss Straight Lace."



Then he blurted, “Fine. I am a total shit.”

Shawn started to laugh, not so much because he agreed, but because coarse language mixed into Nic’s otherwise refined speech sounded so odd, and because “shit” in particular sounded like “sheet” with Nic’s Spanish accent.

Nic stood up, and motioned toward the papers on Shawn’s desk. “This is pretty self-explanatory, Shawn. If you will excuse me, I have some things to do now. Places to go. People to see.”

“Go.” Shawn waved dismissively, and Nic stepped into the hall. When he was out of sight, Shawn grumbled into his desk, “I’d take my kneepads if I were you.”

The unexpected response from the hall came back, “I plan to.”

###

Big bunch of flowers? Hmph. Big, stupid jerk!

Josie stopped at the base of her building’s breezeway. She looked up the stairs, trying to imagine how the scene had played out the night before. How could Nic have thought he saw someone coming out her door the night before?

She started weakly up the steps. It had been a debilitating afternoon. She was tired enough just from the argument with Nic, but then there was the twenty minutes crying her eyes out in the RTT parking lot, forty-five minutes in traffic on I-40, and then the angry,

indignant stomp along the lake path to the club, in her four-inch heels. She knew she should've gone up to her condo and changed first, but she was seriously in need of sugar at the time.

She had not expected the onslaught of questions from the club staff about her “new boyfriend”, however. Apparently, he had stopped by there the night before in order to secure coffee and pastries before his visit to her, which was incredibly sweet of him, but then he never delivered them due to his delusions about her and Theo. Big, stupid jerk! She was too upset to answer their questions, but had to admit, a couple glasses of milk and three of Gina’s freshly baked apple fritters had raised her spirits—and her blood sugar—a good bit.

Josie reached the top floor landing and paused, leaning against the railing. “E” and “F” don’t look that different. Maybe he had mixed up her door with Mary and Rosemary’s? Okay then, but why didn’t he just believe her when she told him? Why would he think she would lie about seeing Theo? Josie didn’t tell lies. Nic’s ex-wife did, though. She was a big fat liar who broke his heart. But he shouldn’t fly off the handle and take it out on Josie, now should he? Big, stupid jerk.

She’d always heard that Latinos were highly emotional and hot-tempered. Yeah, hot-tempered—just what she needed in her life. If he just wasn’t so freakin’ cute while he was doing it. Especially right when he was getting all heated up and red-faced. Big, sexy jerk. Hey, wait a minute...

Josie stepped up to the door and took her keys

out, but as she started to work with the first lock, she realized the door was already unlocked. She pushed it open. Her condo opened into a hallway, at the end of which stood her dining table. She could see an attractive flower arrangement on top of the table. So Theo *was* back. And with a big bunch of flowers, just like Nic said. Great, ju-u-ust great. Well, too bad—Nic or no Nic, she had made up her mind to finally break up with Theo.

Maybe it would be a long time before she found somebody else, but Maggie and Diana were right. Being with the wrong person for the wrong reasons was no way to live.

She steeled herself for the confrontation. She would handle it, even if he started begging or crying or whatever. She let the screen door close, set down her bag and her jacket, kicked off the snazzy pink high-heels and squooshed her toes into the thick, soft carpet. She started to close the big metal door so they could speak privately. That door was heavy and virtually soundproof, so closing it would keep her many friendly neighbors from listening in.

Suddenly, Theo appeared at the end of the hall, lacking his usual exuberant greeting style. Josie's head snapped up. She certainly wasn't afraid of Theo—he had never been anything but perfectly nice to her—but something in his stance, his manner gave her pause. “Uh, hi, Theo. Good to see you. How was your trip?” She walked down the hall toward him.

“Josie.” He had obviously been waiting a while. He still had his dress shirt on, but jacket over the

dining chair, tie off, top buttons open, and, ugh—sleeves rolled up.

She motioned toward the bouquet of flowers. “Th-they’re lovely, Theo. Thank you.” Why the hell was she stammering? *JoJo, you wimp! Just say what you need to say. Get it over with.*

“Yes,” he said, “aren’t they?” His voice was surprisingly cold. “Those are from me.” He held his left hand open toward the pretty bouquet like a salesperson exhibiting his wares. Then he stepped back, and with a grand, sweeping gesture from his right hand, directed her attention to the sitting room. “While all of *these...are from...*” He paused, then said, “Nic,” biting the word off like a chunk of ice from a slow-moving glacier.

Josie gasped at the sight of the room, temporarily forgetting the irate boyfriend who was showing it to her. Every flat surface in the place had balanced on it a beautiful vase filled with roses, each in a different shade of purple. Royal purple, lavender, maroon, plum, and eggplant. Grape, violet, mulberry, periwinkle, and wine. Plus one white and one champagne bouquet, edged to match. All were adorned with sprigs of lilacs, violets, and bluebells. It was breathtaking. Incredible. Her hand moved to her mouth, as she slowly shook her head in disbelief. She spoke involuntarily, “My God.”

Theo’s angry response snapped her back to reality. “Yes, Josie—my God. Who the hell is *Nic*?” His wrath was so intense it knocked her back a few feet.

“H-he’s a friend. We just met. Look, Theo, it’s

—”

“Bullshit!”

Her eyes flew open. Theo had never spoken to her like that—language or tone of voice. Was there something in the water today?

“No man sends twelve dozen roses to ‘just a friend’, Josie. And what’s he so sorry about?”

“Sorry? What?” She backed up a couple more steps, recoiling from his spit and fury.

“The card says he’s sorry. What’s that all about, huh? It must be pretty intense to send all these fancy flowers.”

She spotted the open envelope and card on the coffee table. “Theo, that’s enough. Now, calm down. Be rational. Let’s just talk, okay?” Jerk. None of his damn business, anyway. Not anymore.

“I know I’ve been gone a lot lately, Jos. You must’ve gotten pretty lonely, huh? I never figured you for the cheating type. You were always so ‘nice’.” Again, a word bitten off a several million-year-old glacier. “You disappoint me, honey.”

She rolled her eyes. Not this again. Been there, done that, once today already. An uncharacteristic bitterness and chill came over her. “Theo, just get your shit and get out.”

He looked stunned, as though her throwing him out was the last thing he’d expected. “What? What the —”

She raised her voice, “You heard me. I said, get out. Now. I’m going across the hall to see Mary and

Rosemary for a while. Be gone when I get back.” She turned and started down the hall.

But he strode after her and grabbed her arm, spinning her around, so her back was to the door. His face was angry, red. The veins showed on his forehead. “You little *bitch!*”

She gasped in surprise. Her mouth went dry. The pressure on her arm was intense. She swallowed and tried to sound strong, “L-let go.”

Theo’s face relaxed. He smiled amiably, as though her request amused him.

Bastard! Why was he doing this? He’d never acted like this before. Ever. Never been anything but perfectly kind. God, she had done it again. Was she the world’s worst judge of character or what? Her lower lip quivered ever so slightly.

A tiny smile tugged at the corners of Theo’s mouth. His eyes twinkled with a kind of delight. “Scared, baby?”

Her pulse quickened in his grip. She could feel it beating against his hand. She was sure he could, too. *Josie, stay calm. You’re the smart girl—think! Talk him down. Tell him...what?* What could she say? He obviously thought she was lying. She would just make him crazy, make him lose control. As if he hadn’t already. Her muscles tensed. Her hands began to tremble.

His eyes narrowed.

She heard voices. Voices in the breezeway. How was that possible? Hadn’t she closed the—

SQE-E-E-A-A-A-K. BANG.

“Say, Jos, you wan—*Yo, jerk-face*, get your hands off her!” The words had been preceded by the screen door opening and the metal door hitting the wall. Josie craned her neck around to see Mary, her rather plain, heavy-set neighbor from across the hall, with Rosemary, Mary’s attractive, slender partner, standing in the doorway.

Theo immediately let go and stepped back. “Beat it, Mary. This is a private conversation.”

“Doesn’t look like a conversation to me, big guy. You okay, Jos?”

Josie hurried over to join her friends. “I-I’m fine.” Then, looking back at Theo, she pulled on her game face. “Like I said, I’m going to visit my friends. *Don’t* be here when I get back. And leave your keys.”

## Chapter Twelve

Idiot. Dumbass. Swine. Big, stupid jerk.

Nic railed at himself as he hiked up the stairs he had looked upon the night before. When he got to the top, he stopped to breathe, not from the physical effort, but from a case of the nerves. He leaned for a moment against the railing and studied her door—the great big “E” and the four locks, behind the screen. He glanced across the hall. Door F was open behind its screen door. He could barely hear some female voices coming from within. He stepped up to E, pulled open the screen, and knocked. No answer. He tried again. *She is probably looking at me through the peep hole and laughing.* Time to lose the pride. “Josie. Josie, are you in there? If you are, please open the door. I just want to talk to you. Please.” He knocked again, then hung his head in defeat.

The increasing volume of chatter and women giggling caused him to turn around. Through the screen door on the other side of the hall, he could see the two women he had seen on the stairs the night before—the



slender, pretty one, and the plainer one—coming his way. The pretty one looked at him with surprise, and proclaimed, “He’s here!”

*Oh, great, they’re her friends. Probably have instructions to throw me down the stairs.*

Josie’s head popped up from behind the two women, and with a tentative smile, she said, “Nic?”

He looked confused and pointed behind the trio to door F. “You live *there*? I-I guess I *was* confused.”

She shook her head, and pointed behind him. “No, I live there. We were just visiting. I got the flowers, Nic. They’re...really lovely. Thank you.”

“Josie, can we talk?”

“Mmm hmm.” She turned to her friends. “You two go on without me, okay? I’ll be all right.”

The heavier one answered, “Okay, Jos, but you better make sure Theo’s outta there first.”

“Theo was here?” Nic asked with concern.

“Uh, yeah. He was here when I got home. But I told him we were through, and he should be gone now. Hopefully. For good.”

“Oh, I-I did not mean—” Nic began.

The heavy girl interrupted him, “Jerk didn’t take it real well, either.”

Nic looked quickly at Josie. “Josie, did he—”

Josie blurted out a “No!” before either of the other girls could offer their version of events, but then tempered it with an explanation, “He was pretty mean, but I think that was just...”

“The flowers!” Nic put his hand to his

forehead. “Oh, God, Josie, I am so sorry. I did not think of that. He must have been angry. I am just making one mess after another today.” He looked at her pleadingly. “I am not trying to make you miserable, really I am not.”

She gave him a devilish grin, “Imagine if you were!”

She turned to her friends, “Girls, thanks for everything. You two are lifesavers.”

The slender girl took the heavier girl’s hand, and spoke softly to Josie, “All right then, sweetie, we’re going on down.”

The heavier one added, as a command, “Leave your door open.” Josie smiled and nodded. Then the heavy one looked at Nic and pointed straight down. “We’ll be at Greg and Aviva’s, having pizza. That’s right downstairs, under ours.”

Nic’s eyes widened, and he, too, nodded. Add that lady to the list of people watching him out the corner of their eyes. Maggie said Josie had a lot of friends.

After the two women left them, Nic held the screen door open while Josie tried her doorknob. “Ah, nuts.” She let her head rock back on her neck.

“What is it?”

“I’m locked out.” She motioned toward the door. “My bag’s inside. I left in a bit of a hurry.”

*Oh, sure. The angry little man—lucky he didn’t take a swing at her. Nic Remedian, are there any other possible ways to screw up this lady’s day?*

Josie stepped toward the stairs in her stockinged feet. “Mary and Rosemary have a key. I’ll go

get them.”

“No, wait. Do you think it is just the knob?”

“Should be. I told him to leave his keys.”

Nic reached in his pants pocket and pulled out a thick, elaborate Swiss Army Knife. “May I try?”

“You can unlock a door with that?”

“I can try.” She waved him on. He knelt down, flipped through a few options on the knife, then settled on the tool he wanted. In about twenty seconds, they heard the telltale click, and he tried the knob. The door popped open. He stood and pushed it in for her.

She looked at him with surprise. “Wow. On the one hand, that’s really cool. On the other, you just creeped me out big time.”

“Huh?”

“Well, could just anybody with one of those knives do that? I mean, open my door in like, a minute?”

“Well, not just *anybody*. And it was more like twenty or thirty seconds—I am pretty good at it. Did a lot of mechanical stuff in the army. But yeah, sure, if a guy knows what he is doing. That is why you have chain locks and bolts and other types of locks that are not accessible from the outside.”

She just looked at him without going in, and slowly shook her head, as though perhaps she didn’t understand, so he stepped through the doorway to show her what he was talking about on the other side. “See, here...” He looked all around. No chain, no bar, nothing. Only key locks.

She came in after him and took the door from

his hand, pushing it back to the wall, and propping it open with its drop-down rubber stopper. “I don’t have any of those things.”

“I can see that. Why not?” He wasn’t meaning to pry. None of his business, of course, but heck...young woman, living alone, marginal taste in men (not counting him)...just not smart.

“Well, Theo did that. I used to have the knob, the deadbolt, and a chain, like everybody else I guess, but Theo got rid of the chain and put the extra key locks instead. He said that chain locks were...um, really not very useful and could easily be broken or something, and that this was better.”

“Hmm. It is true that chains can be broken, but that does not mean they are not useful. And having all those key locks just leaves you standing out in the breezeway that much longer, locking and unlocking, right?”

Josie furrowed her brow. “I never thought of it that way before.” She made a wry face. “He even redid the lock on the sliding glass door. Said it was really lame or something. I thought he was being helpful and caring. Before today, I’d never seen him be anything but nice. I didn’t know he had a mean bone in his body.”

Nic gave her a small smile. Seemed like Theo had gone to some effort to make Josie’s home, not safer for her, but more convenient and accessible for himself. Yeah, Nic had had the guy pegged in five minutes, while Josie, clearly, was the kind of person who only saw the good in people, until they went out of their way to show

her otherwise.

Uh, kind of like Nic had done earlier that day. He decided to quit talking about locks and get on with what he'd come for: apologizing for being a big, stupid jerk. He held his hand out, indicating a move further into the condo. "Shall we?"

Josie started walking ahead of him, and, motioning toward untended trash bags, pizza boxes, unread newspapers, and disorderly piles of computer printouts and data discs, said, "Uh, I've been really busy this week..."

"Josie, please do not apologize. I came here to do that."

She turned and met his eyes. "Look, Nic, I think I understand what happened."

"You do?"

She took his hand and led him to her couch, but then stopped suddenly with a look of horror. "Uh, just a minute." She quickly scooped up a huge pile of laundry that was topped off with three different bras, all satiny and adorned with lace or tiny beads—pale pink, deep red, and jade green.

Hmm, pretty. Very feminine.

"I'll just...get this out of here, so we can sit." As she carried the pile away, she bumped the edge of the coffee table with her knee, sending a loose stack of CD's spraying onto the floor. Nic bit back a bubbling burst of laughter, and offered to pick them up, as she disappeared into what he assumed was her bedroom. When she returned in a minute, he was on his hands and knees,

restacking the CD's and curiously studying a few other items he'd found. He held up a Barbie doll ice skate.

“Oh, the girls have been looking for that! I'll tell them you found it. Now, please sit. I'd offer you a drink, but I don't think I have anything. Unless you like pickle juice.”

He climbed up onto the couch, grinning and shaking his head. “I came here expecting to get battered and bruised, and instead I find myself...in stitches.” She grinned at his pun and sat down beside him. “Josie, please let me apologize for what I said to you today. I was awful. I was feeling hurt and jealous...I don't know what I was thinking. It was stupid and cruel—”

She held up a hand. “Nic, I get that you're sorry.” She swept her hand, gesturing toward the many flower arrangements around them. “Really I do.” Then she looked at him steadily. “I know you were here last night. Mary and Rosemary saw you. I don't know who you saw that you thought was Theo, but I'm sure you think you did...”

Oh, yeah, he was sure. Especially now that he knew she had no interior locks, but he wasn't gonna “creep her out” any more than he already had.

She went on, “You don't know me very well, and you told me about Linda—how she lied to you and betrayed you. You've got great big tire tracks all up and down your back. Tends to make one a little mistrustful.”

“Wow. Excellent analysis, Miss Natale. Do you charge by the hour for that?” It came out a little harsher than he intended, but she had caught him red-handed.

“Sorry. It, uh...takes one to know one, I guess. I can be a little mistrustful myself sometimes.” Her eyes dropped as she said it.

*Yeah, Nic, you idiot. You're not the only who's ever been hurt, you know.* He lifted her chin and looked straight into her eyes. “Well, tire tracks or no, I was wrong not to trust you.” She looked straight back at him for a few seconds, her silence telling him she thought so, too, but all was forgiven.

Finally, she smiled. “Okay then. Hungry? Because I’m starving.” She got up and walked into the kitchen.

Yikes! Nic tried to keep his face even, but it must have reflected the trepidation he felt, for when she looked back at him, she said, “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Nic, I’m not gonna cook.” She held up a green flyer. “The weekly menu from the club. I haven’t had a meal there in days. Chef Lui’s probably ready to quit.” She proceeded to read from it. “Pacific Rim Salmon, Carved Prime Rib, Grilled Pork Loin with Apple Butter, Broccoli Polonaise, Cantaloupe Bisque—”

Nic stood up, too. “Okay, I am hungry.”

She gave him a playful grin. “And you didn’t even let me get to dessert.” She closed her eyes a moment and pretended to be inhaling something. “Cannolis,” she said with a sigh. “Gina—the pastry chef—she’s a genius.”

Nic grinned. Yeah, right—like Josie ate cannolis. With that cute little figure, who was she kidding?

Josie looked at her watch. “Seven forty—plenty of time. It’s three-quarters of a mile down the lake path, twelve minutes exactly, if you keep up the pace.”

“You have this down to a science.”

“If I didn’t, I’d be dead. When I’m not swamped like this week, I eat there two, three times a day. Unless Shawn and Maggie are feeding me, but that’s another half-mile.”

Nic nodded. That explained the muscular legs.

She started for her bedroom. “Just let me change.”

“Why? You look fine. Very nice.”

“For a business meeting,” she tossed back, as she stepped up the three steps that led to her bedroom, slightly elevated from the rest of the condo. “I’ll be quick.” She pushed the doors mostly closed behind her, but then almost immediately pulled them back enough to stick her head out. “Nic, look around. See if you see any keys anywhere. I asked Theo to leave his. I forgot to see if he did.”

He glanced around, then walked over to the table, picked up a simple chain of four or five keys and held them up for her. “These?”

“Yes!” she said with delight. “Good. Just leave them there. Thanks.”

Yes, good. No more creepy Theo going in and out while Josie was sleeping.

She shut the doors again most of the way, but kept talking. “Hey, Nic? How did you know purple was my favorite color? Shawn?”



He turned around and looked at the sitting area blooming in the sea of violets and lavenders he had specified in the shop. Impressive. He'd have to stop by and thank them in person. He noticed an obnoxious purple bean bag chair to the left of the mauve leather sofa, and little lavender picture frames of Maggie and Shawn's children lined up on top of the stereo cabinet. "No, just a little bird," he answered. He wandered over to a very messy CD rack and began to look through it.

"Maggie then?"

"I am not giving up my source." He read names off the rack. The Rolling Stones. Suzanne Vega. Nat King Cole. Trailer Bride? Never heard of them. Eclectic taste. And what kind of order was there to it? Branford Marsalis, Jimmy Buffett, and Carlos Santana all on the same shelf? No rhyme or reason to any of it. He pulled out the Santana to look at the liner notes, but was surprised to find, instead of the expected music disc, a gold data disc marked in handwritten permanent ink, "Chiroan T3101".

"C'mon, Nic. I'm just curious."

"Okay...Shawn's secretary told me."

"Mrs. Daniels? She hates me." Her voice was in the room again.

"Maybe so, but she likes me." He turned around. Wow. She was right—the businesswoman was gone again. She had replaced the hot-pink business dress with a soft, filmy white thing. Long sleeves that started off the shoulders and fell below the wrists. Gauzy material punctuated with zany designs of multi-colored

embroidery, picking up matching stones in the toes of her strappy white, flat-soled sandals. Glimpses only, of sparkly earrings, poking out from her bountiful hair. Barely any make-up. Why waste? A natural beauty.

He smiled at her, “That is very pretty. It...suits you. Better than the suits. I mean, they look nice, too, but...”

“Thanks. I know what you mean. The business wear serves its purpose, but this...” she indicated her current outfit, “...is the real me. You can take your jacket and tie off, if you like. The dining room’s not formal tonight, and it’s pretty warm out.” She motioned toward the CD he was holding. “You like Santana?”

“Oh yes, very much, but, uh, I guess I will not be listening to him here.” He held up the open case for her inspection, and she crossed to him and took it.

“Chiroan? So that’s where that went. One of my clients...”

Nic was pulling off his jacket. “Yes, I met him. Mr. McGuire played golf with Shawn and me yesterday. He spoke highly of you.”

Josie snorted. “Fred? I’ll bet.”

“Then you are aware of his...interest?” Nic asked, as he laid his tie and jacket carefully over a chair at her small dining table.

“Puh-lease. Let me see...he asked Larry to ask Shawn to ask me if I might, maybe, sometime, go out with him?” She grinned and shook her head. “He’s harmless enough. A nice old man. And he pays well.”

A nice old man, huh? Nic grimaced, wondering

what her cutoff for “old” was.

###

Josie thoroughly enjoyed her dinner with Nic. Among other things, she made him tell her all about his time in the army, about copper mining in Chile, and about Easter Island off the coast there, but when she started picking his brain about the slow progression of free market policies in his country, he crooked a brow at her and asked when she had become such an expert on the Chilean economy. Then she had to admit she had spent a few minutes that week surfing the Internet, instead of on her work. He just grinned and asked if she wanted another glass of the incredible wine he had chosen from the club’s list. Whatever that stuff was, Renaldi, the wine steward, got so excited about it, he spent half an hour with them, discussing wines with Nic. It did taste divine, but she had to say no to the second glass—couldn’t let her guard down.

For Josie, though, the best part of the meal was when the waiter brought the check for her to sign. Poor Nic. Apparently, he’d bought something in the pro shop the night before and mistakenly thought that meant he could pay in the dining room. He practically passed out when she explained to him that the only method of payment there was by monthly billing to the club members, namely, her. The tragic look on his face wiped out any lingering resentment she may have had about his nasty little tirade on the RTT steps that day. It seemed, as

he tried to get her to understand, it was practically a capital crime where he came from to let a lady pay for dinner. Then he muttered something in Spanish, which she didn't get at all, except for the word "Mamá". He rebounded, though, and managed to turn it back around on her—said since he was now so deeply in her debt, she would have no choice but to go out with him again, so he could make it up to her. Pretty slick, huh?

Still, pleasurable as it had all been, with each step closer to home, Josie's giddiness was giving way to the tremulous inner dialogue that plagued the ends of all her first dates. And second dates. And most of the third, fourth, and fifth ones, too. When she ever got to have those. Leaving for dinner at eight o'clock, she had never imagined that they would not return until almost midnight, a time that really didn't seem logical to leave a door wide open, the way one might in the afternoon or early evening, when a friend or neighbor could happen by.

In a day and age when most of her generation were just as pleased as punch to hop into bed with people whose last names they didn't know and would never find out—heck, whose first names they didn't know and would never find out—Josie Natale, a woman with a master's degree, her own business, and a healthy retirement account, broke into a cold sweat at the thought of a goodnight kiss.

Even while she kept up her end of the conversation as they ambled slowly down the lake path back to her condo (far below the twelve-minute pace),

Josie was planning how she could gracefully avoid asking Nic in, and if possible, even avoid having him come up the stairs. Not that she wouldn't have enjoyed another hour or two of his company—she was pretty sure they could talk all night and never run out of things to say—but not if it meant being closed up indoors with him. So when they reached the bottom of the staircase, she turned to Nic, smiled politely, and said, “Well, I hate to drag you all the way up the stairs again. You don't have to walk me up.”

“Um, my jacket and tie...” He pointed up.

“Oh, right, I forgot.” *Nice work, JoJo. You suggested he take them off. Idiot. Now you have no choice but to ask him in.* She started up the stairs.

Plan B. Had to leave the door open. Yeesh. First *and* last date, no doubt. It always looked so stupid and paranoid, like the “one foot on the floor” rule or something. If she could just get him to walk in first, maybe he wouldn't notice. She sagged going up the final flight. He was gonna think she was such a baby. Or just plain weird. Or that she didn't trust him. Which she didn't, but it was nothing personal.

Nic was such a nice guy, though, a real gentleman. Even Shawn said so. Why couldn't she just relax and let him in, like a normal person? Maybe she should. Maybe she would. Her stomach started tightening up. And it was really full. Pretty uncomfortable. Her hands felt clammy. Her heart beat started to drown out his voice. Jack was such a nice guy, too. And so was Theo. And Gary Goldman. Couldn't tell

a book by its cover. At least Josie Natale couldn't.

They were at the door. Nic pulled open and held the screen for her while she started unlocking. Her fingers fumbled nervously with all those locks, and when they were all unlocked, and she turned the knob, he pushed evenly on the metal door, guiding it back to the wall, without banging it, and holding it for her so she could walk in first—but of course, he was a real gentleman, right?

Okay, no way to be subtle about it. She took a few steps in, then turned around, ready to knock the door stopper down, right in front of his face, dented pride or no. But wait! What was this? He was dropping the stopper himself. Yessiree, propping the door wide open. At midnight. After a nice date. With her. She quickly whirled back around, as if she'd hardly noticed. As if that happened every day. Yeah—as if. As if in all the years she'd lived there, as if in all the years she'd dated members of the male species, even one of them had gone out of his way to make her feel comfortable about being alone with him.

*Okay, Nicolas Remedian, just marry me now.*

He followed her to the dining table and set a small white paper bag on it. “Uh, here is that last cannoli, case you want it later.”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh yeah, thanks, I almost forgot. I guess I bit off more than I could chew tonight. I can usually eat three, but I suppose all that business with Theo put a real damper on my appetite.”

Nic furrowed his brow a bit then, but didn't say

anything.

“So, can I offer you something? Tap water? Pickle juice?”

He laughed, “No, thank you, dear. I will not keep you. I know you are tired.” He picked up his tie and draped it around his neck.

*And he knows that because...you tried to run him off downstairs, klutz.* Suddenly she wanted very much to feel those long arms around her and to taste those lips and to touch that marvelous soft hair one more time—knowing the door was open, of course. She grabbed the ends of his tie in each of her hands, and peered playfully up at him, “I did say I would let you kiss me goodnight...”

He cast his eyes to the side. “Well, I was not going to hold you to that—”

“No,” she said, wrinkling up her nose, “You wouldn’t, would you?”

He looked back at her quizzically. “Of course not.”

She tugged on the tie just enough to urge his head down toward hers, and it came, but his arms, instead of wrapping around her, slid up into her hair, his great hands gently cupping her head, as though it were one of the oversized coffee mugs from which they had drunk at the end of their meal. When she closed her eyes and their lips met, instantly, she felt those miniature acrobats turning little somersaults in her stomach. Who were those guys anyway? And they rose up inside her, making her want more. She parted her lips, and the force

of his became stronger. She responded in kind, and he acquiesced. And she wanted more. Her fingers dropped the tie and crept up around his neck, seeking that pretty, silky hair she had encountered so briefly the other day at the McKennas. Ah, it was still there. It was still soft. And as she let her fingers explore it, she sensed his chest rising in search of oxygen. And then one of his hands did drop, finding the center of her back, urging her closer. And then she wanted no more.

She gently narrowed her lips, and he quickly pulled his head upright again, smiling down at her with sleepy eyes, his hands still in her hair and on her back. "I...guess I should be going now."

She let her arms slide from his head to his chest, and after rubbing her lips together a second, said, "Uh-huh." He stepped away from her, turning in the direction of the door. "Uh, Nic?"

He turned back around, and when he saw her holding up his jacket, mumbled, "Oh, yes, of course." He took the jacket from her, and proceeded to the door, lifting the doorstop with his foot when he got there. She followed, taking the door from him as he stepped out. "Goodnight...Josephina." He lingered a moment, studying her.

"Mmm hmm," she mumbled, reluctantly closing the door behind him, and slowly locking the knob and the three deadbolts. Then she started imagining what their children would look like.



Eleven fifty-seven. Hah. Less than ten minutes. Damn straight. Look at that idiot—practically skipping down the steps. Probably thinks he’s gonna get somewhere with her next time. Or the time after that. Good luck, big fella.

Theo Clarkston dropped the burning butt onto the pile and crushed it out with the ball of his shoe. The pile was huge now. He’d smoked more cigarettes in the last five hours than he had in the last five months. He’d just about given up that nasty habit. For her. Couldn’t smell like an ashtray around Josie. Couldn’t get drunk around Josie. Couldn’t cuss like a sailor around Josie. Not that she didn’t herself sometimes. But that was how it was—it was all about her. All about what she would like in a man. That was supposed to be him.

Nic—what the hell kind of name was Nic? Wasn’t it supposed to have a “K” at the end? Him and his damn roses. Jesus, must’ve been five or six hundred dollars worth of flowers. Who the hell spends that kind of money trying to impress a girl? Purple roses, no less. Didn’t even know there was such a thing. Knew her well enough to know her favorite color, though. But Theo knew she wasn’t lying about having just met the guy. She was too damn honest.

If he just could’ve thought of that a few hours before when he was so angry he was seeing purple. If he hadn’t lost it—yelled at her, said all that nasty shit to her, grabbed her arm like that—he’d be in there with her, and Nic would be standing out in the trees. Damn it! He

didn't want to be like that. Didn't want to be that kind of guy.

Well, not to worry. It wouldn't last. No way. Hard to see from here, but that Nic looked like a pretty slick dude. He wasn't gonna hang around for months, waiting. And by the time he got tired of the tease, she'd have forgotten about the yelling and the arm-grabbing.

For the time being, though, life was gonna be just a bit more difficult. Theo stepped out onto the sixteenth green and headed for home.

### *Chapter Thirteen*

“Security service! Honey, no. I have seen that guy. ’Bout a hundred years old and blind as a bat. Uses a cane, I think.”

Robert Prescott snickered as he listened to Nic railing at Josie on the phone. Even Shawn couldn’t stifle a grin, as he took another swallow of beer. Nic and Josie had been dating all of two or three weeks, and already they were arguing like an old married couple.

“Okay, fine, no cane. But please, sweetheart, just wait for me. We are almost through here. After I drop Robert at the airport, I will come pick you up, all right? One hour.”

Shawn gave Robert a quizzical look, “She’s at Toral’s office, right? Doesn’t she have her car?”

“Probably, but you know—it’s not a great area, and it’s after nine, and well, Nic can be a little...protective, ya know? Some might even call him controlling.” He appeared to be eyeing Shawn’s plate as

he spoke. “Say, you gonna eat those celery sticks?”

Shawn shook his head and pushed his otherwise empty plate toward Robert. Good thing Robert wasn’t dating Josie. Their grocery bills would be more than the mortgage. Wait—groceries? Who was he kidding? The poor guy would starve to death.

Nic tucked his phone back into his pants pocket, looked at Shawn, and said, “Bull-headed.”

“Can’t say you weren’t warned, amigo.”

“No, I cannot, but...” A smug tone accompanied his grin, “She is going to wait for me.”

Robert flipped a page in a stack of papers, quietly sing-songing, “Con-trol-ling.” Then he looked up at Shawn. “Uh, okay, so let’s recap. We’ve determined that these Warrior of God emails were sent directly to a handful of facilities that are running clinical trials on Progestilone-C. Given the specificity of the addresses used, for now, we’re taking this threat seriously, and assuming the source is some kind of religious group that opposes Prog-C, because of its use as an abortifacient.”

He went on, “Since I can’t find anything on them in our archives, we know they’re not a mainstream group, which is bad news for you, Shawn...” He shifted his gaze to Nic, “And...I guess you too now, buddy.” Nic gave him a slight nod.

Robert dug through some pages. “I put together a list of possible locations in the region where they could be setting up shop. Most are up in the mountains—North Carolina, Tennessee, or Virginia—places that have had either large land buys without permitting or

development, or purchases of abandoned facilities, like old schools or hospitals and even a few old plantations.” He shrugged. “You know, any place suitable for a group living situation. I’ve also tracked down a few reports of spots with an influx of new people into the area, folks keeping to themselves, buying supplies in bulk, stuff like that. I’ve tried to get the local authorities interested, but they don’t want to hear it.”

“Why not? You’d think they’d want to know —” started Shawn.

“Not so much. It’s really touchy. These guys aren’t breaking any laws. I mean, not that anyone knows about anyway.” Robert looked down at his papers a minute, running his hand beneath his bangs, then back up. “And they bring a lot of commerce to the area, so many times, the townsfolk will look the other way, even if they do suspect something. So what can you do? Except watch and wait.”

Shawn tightened his lips. “Not really my style.”

“Not mine, either,” Robert agreed. He played with a celery stalk. “Anyway, I’m trying to isolate which group I think these Warriors of God could have been part of. There are a couple groups, going back to the seventies and eighties, that dried up and could have reformed or joined together to start up fresh. I don’t know anything specific yet, but I’ve got some ideas. Nic is trying to help me track down a few missing bodies.” He glanced at Nic a moment, then back at Shawn, adding, “Finding people is one of his specialties.”

“Really? That and locked doors, huh? Well,

good. I don't need this stress. I'd love to find these ba—uh, jerks.”

Robert raised a hand, “Hey, you can call 'em whatever you want around me. There aren't enough words—”

Nic threw him a look, cutting him off, then smiled kindly at Shawn. “Don't worry, Shawn. We will figure this out. We don't want anyone getting hurt, do we?”

Robert smiled too then, and with a nod in Nic's direction, went on, “Yeah, what he said. So here're the lists...oh hell, I left that folder in the car. Nic—”

Nic pulled the keys out of his pocket and tossed them at Robert. “Long walk, buddy. Maybe you should call the security service.”

“Yeah, right. And if the old guy has a heart attack or something? You're the one knows CPR.”

Shawn waited until Robert was gone, then looked at Nic, “He's pretty sensitive about this religious cult stuff, isn't he? I mean, I thought guys like him were supposed to be, ya know, objective.”

“Guys like him. You mean researchers, academicians, and the like. Yes, well, the thing is, Robert is more than that.” Nic paused, as if considering how much to say. “He does not like to talk about it much, but I don't think he would mind you knowing. Robert was raised in a religious commune, a cult, whatever you want to call it.”

“What?”

Nic nodded. “Yes, until he was fourteen. Do

you remember hearing about the ‘Star of Heaven’ back in the eighties? The place that was destroyed by fire in a confrontation with government officials?”

“Uh, yeah, vaguely. Sure. He was there?”

“Mmm hmm. He was one of very few people in the group who are known to have survived. Many people blame the government for the deaths of the members, and some feel that the cult was in the wrong, and the government saved the day...who is to say? But all Robert knows is that some U.S. soldier pulled him out of a basement and put him in a van with a bunch of other kids that left the compound before the fire got completely out of control. He feels that man saved his life, and...” Nic grinned, “Apparently, the guy was Latino—Mexican or something. Robert claims the day he saw me wandering around UVA’s campus like a lost puppy, he decided to return the favor.”

They both laughed, then Shawn said, “But what happened? I mean, what about his family? His parents? Were they killed?”

“His mother, who he lived with at the compound, was confirmed killed in the blaze. His father...uh, he does not actually know...relationships, parentage in those cults...well, it is a little vague, you know?”

“Oh. Uh, yeah...didn’t think about that.”

“Whoever he was—most likely, he’s dead. Almost all of the adults were killed, and a lot of the children, including a good friend of his, a girl. He is still quite bitter.” Nic glanced toward the door of the

restaurant, then grimaced a bit, “Trust me, Shawn, his stories are not pretty. You remember we talked in our earlier meeting about some of the stuff these groups are into...” Nic closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Oh yeah, I remember. Guess the leaders are pretty much whack-jobs, huh?”

“Mmm, some yes, but not all. With the Star of Heaven, it was later found that the leader was actually a very affluent, well-educated man. Two doctorates—just like you, Shawn.” Shawn wrinkled up his nose at the comparison. “Which is not to say that he was not a very twisted individual, just a very intelligent, twisted individual. They think he was killed in the fire. Never actually found his body, though, and if he was still alive, he would be a very old man now. Of course, those people use all kinds of fake names and identities to hide from the law, so who knows? Theoretically, he or any of his followers or progeny could be...” Nic glanced from side to side in the busy, crowded restaurant, “...anywhere.”

Shawn found himself once again reconsidering his meal selection. Did he really have to have the super-blaze wings tonight? *With* the bacon-cheddar fries? “Uh, so, what happened to Robert afterwards? I mean, where did he go? How did he live?”

“Well, that is the happy ending part. They located his mother’s parents in Richmond, who knew about him but had never even met him, and they were thrilled to have him. They helped him a lot. They are terrific people.”

Shawn was relieved to find the image of the



loving grandparents settling his stomach, just as the buxom bleached-blond waitress returned to the table and resumed batting her eyelashes at Nic. “Anything else for you gentlemen? Dessert, maybe? Blackberry cobbler tonight. We make it ourselves, right here, fresh blackberries...”

Nic asked the woman, “Could you make one of those to go?” He shrugged at Shawn, “Josie loves that stuff.”

Just then, Robert returned, and put in, “Mmm, me, too. I’ll take one.”

Huh. Looked like Josie and Robert had more than just Nic in common.

###

A cane. Ha. Nic’s sense of humor always made her smile. Of course, he was totally exaggerating—the Toral’s office security guard wasn’t that old or that feeble, so she’d pretended to argue with Nic, as if she minded him being a little bossy and protective, when she was actually quite relieved not to have to deal with that creepy old dude. She’d even gotten this weird sense that Theo and the security guard somehow knew each other that time Theo came to surprise her.

Oh well, no more worries about any of that. Theo was out of her life for good, and as long as Nic was around, it appeared the security guard was, too.

And she was almost starting to let herself believe that Nic *would* hang around. After several fun

dates over the past few weeks, he had never once appeared hurt or even surprised that she always left the condo door open, and he had certainly never made her feel uncomfortable or pressured when she inevitably put a stop to their, er, most romantic moments.

She grinned as she heard the smooth sound of the Aston Martin's engine pulling into the parking lot. She didn't think of herself as materialistic, but she had to admit, riding around town in that snazzy blue sports car was just a bit of icing on the cake that was dating Nic Remedian.

She watched through the glass doors as he approached, his lanky frame quickly crossing the space between them. When he was near enough, she unlocked the door and pushed it open.

"Hello, lovely lady," he said, pulling her hand away from the door and bringing it to his lips.

"Hello yourself, handsome." She kept hold of his hand and pulled him further inside. "Thanks for coming to get me. I didn't mean to stay so late—"

"No thanks necessary. It was either that or spend another hour with Robert and Shawn." He stepped closer to her, wrapping his fingers more tightly into hers. "You are so much easier on the eyes."

"Well, I'll have to take your word for that, since I've yet to meet this illusive partner of yours. From what Shawn says, Robert is not a bad looking guy."

"And maybe that is exactly why I am keeping you all to myself." He looked directly into her eyes.

Oh dear God. Those deep, dark eyes staring

down at her. Perhaps she should dive right into them and never come up for air.

He grinned at her and teased, “Anyway, I thought you said you did not care for blondes.”

“He’s blonde? Oh, well then, you have no worries.” She grinned, but then broke away from his grasp, and started dragging him into the reception area, where her bag and laptop were positioned on a coffee table. “Nic, I hate to take advantage, but can I ask a huge favor while I’ve got you here?”

He straightened up, clearly understanding from her tone that she was asking a favor of a business, not a personal, nature.

“Look at this with me.” She plopped down on a couch behind the coffee table, and he followed. She slid her laptop in front of them and pointed to a colorful graph on the screen. “A couple weeks ago, I ran a meta-analysis across several of my study sites, and noticed this strange pattern. Tonight, I confirmed that the same thing is happening here in Beni Toral’s office.”

“A meta-what? Looks like a string of Christmas lights to me.”

“A meta-analysis.” She explained to Nic, as she had explained to Diana at the Women’s Center, about the abnormally normal error rates. He didn’t understand, either.

“Sweetheart, you are way over my head.”

“I’m sorry, I know this is seriously geeky stuff, but here’s the thing. I’m seeing a connection between several different study sites that can’t logically exist.

What I want to know from you is if there's any possible way a security breach could exist such that someone could be accessing the data at all these different centers."

Nic sat back, thinking a moment. "Anything is possible, of course, but in this case, I don't see how. Even though they are all working on the same drug, they operate independently, on isolated networks, with disparate security systems. That is the whole idea, right? Independent research assures accuracy of results."

He had obviously been listening when she explained her work to him.

"Still..." he began.

"Yeah?"

"Well, there is one thing I have read about, but seems highly unlikely. Give me a couple days to look into it?"

"Oh, no, I don't want to trouble you, Nic. You've got plenty to worry about with Shawn already, and I'm probably the only person in the world who would ever care about this. Please don't lose any sleep on my account."

"Ah, too late." He lowered his head into her hair and whispered into her ear, "You are already keeping me up at night."

O-o-oh dear. Speaking of drug studies, somebody needed to research the effects of this warm, dark, hunk o' human on Josie Natale. She turned to meet his lips and began drinking in his sweet flavor. Before too long, she found herself slipping into a Nic-induced coma, losing all track of time and space...

“What was that?!” Nic’s head jerked up suddenly. “Is there anyone else here?”

Josie looked at him, a bit dazed and confused. “What? No. I didn’t hear anything. No one’s here but us.”

He jumped up from the couch. “Stay here! Lock the door behind me!”

In less than a second, he was out the front door. She followed orders, locking up after him, then stood watching as he darted around the parking lot. Their two cars were the only ones there. What on earth did he think he had heard? He disappeared for several minutes from her view, somewhere around the back of the building, then returned from the other side. He was still clearly on high alert, when he finally gave up his search and came toward the door again.

She let him in. “Nic, what was it? Is there someone out there?”

“Come on, honey. Let’s get you home.” He reached for her bag.

“Ok, sure, but why?” She snapped her laptop closed and hurried after him to the door. “Hang on, I have to set the alarm.” She took her bag back from him and dug around inside until she found the card key. She ran it through a slot, then typed in a code. “Ok, go.” She waved him out the door.

As they started across the parking lot, she demanded again, “So what was it, Nic? What happened?”

“Probably nothing. Just some kids, I guess. At

least I hope so. I need to call Beni.”

As they neared his car, she stopped cold. “Nic! Omigosh! Your car!”

He had obviously already seen it. “Yeah, I know. Like I said, I hope that is the extent of it.”

“Oh, Nic, I’m so sorry. This is awful.” With her finger, Josie traced the long, ugly mark that someone had scratched into the side of his car. “This is all my fault. I shouldn’t have let you come get me. You can’t bring a fancy car like this into this neighborhood without attracting some negative attention.”

“Sweetheart, no.” He put his hands on her shoulders and looked directly at her. “I am so glad I was here. Promise me you will not stay here after dark any more. Not unless I am with you, okay?”

She wrinkled up her forehead, “Nic—”

“No. Promise me.”

She shrugged. “Okay, whatever. I promise. But your car...”

“Honey, it is just a car. It can be fixed. You cannot be replaced.” He unlocked the passenger door and ushered her in.

###

“Here you are, Mr. Clarkston.”

Theo didn’t bother to look up as the server set down his third Bourbon, though he did grumble out a quick thanks when she traded out his overflowing ashtray for a clean one.

It was way too hot and way too humid to be sitting outside today, at least in this part of North Carolina. Back home, where mountain breezes blew year round, even July could be pleasant. But there was no smoking allowed indoors at the Latta Lakes Country Club, so he was stuck out on the veranda. At least he could be pretty much alone out here and didn't have to be nice to people he couldn't stand.

Like that annoying Maggie McKenna. From where he sat in one of the high-backed rattan chairs, he had a nice view of Lake Latta spread out in front of him, but his eyes were trained in the other direction, toward the pool, where he could see that little skinflint, decked out in some teeny weeny bikini thing. What the hell was she thinking? She was somebody's mother, for God's sake. He could see why they called her the Magpie. She flitted all around, looking like a little white ghost with her pale skin and blonde hair, chatting up everyone she could find. Probably telling them all about how she had finally convinced Josie to dump him.

His phone buzzed on the table next to him. He tapped the screen, then grudgingly picked it up to talk, "Yeah."

"Theo! Where've you been? I've been trying to reach you."

He closed his eyes, took a breath, then answered. "Uh, sorry. Been busy."

The response was flippant, "Doing what exactly?"

Since he had no good answer, he just kept

quiet.

“Well, listen, we’ve got something for you. We need your help.”

He perked up. “Really? What can I do?” He’d been worried he’d soon be completely out of a job, so he was anxious to hear how his unique talents might still be of use.

“Your brother’s coming to town to take care of a little problem for us at that Women’s Center in Durham. I know it’ll be challenging, but can you get us everything we’ll need?”

“When do you want to do it?”

“Thursday night.”

“Thursday? Hang on, let me check...” Theo pulled the phone away from his ear and tapped and scrolled on it a few times. Then he resumed talking, “Okay, yeah, you’re good to go for Thursday night. Just send me the details.”

“You’ll have them within the hour.”

They ended the call without further niceties.

Theo sat back then, feeling a bit better. Everyone wants to feel needed in this life, and performing this little service would show them that he was still valuable. Just because he was on the outs with Josie right now didn’t mean he would never get her back, and it certainly didn’t mean he couldn’t be useful in the meantime.

Hey, speaking of Josie, there she was, running in through the pool gate, no doubt late to the party. She stopped to chat with Maggie, but was soon waylaid by



Shawn and Maggie’s children, who began dragging her toward the water. Laughing with them, she hurriedly dropped what she was carrying into a lawn chair and peeled off her cover-up. Ah, now that was more like it—deeply tanned skin, lots of long, thick hair, and of course, those soft, fleshy curves. Theo’s afternoon was looking up.

He took a long swallow on his bourbon and was just about to light up, when his phone buzzed again. He grabbed it and read the the screen. Well, that was fast; the encoded request was already in. He hated to leave, now that there was something worth watching, but the timing couldn’t have been better.

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a thick set of keys. He flipped through, looking for a particular one. Upon finding it, he inspected it more closely. Hmm, he’d have to be sure and clean that up first; there were some tiny blue paint scrapings caught up in the grooves.

###

“Jos, honey, are you sure you don’t need a break?”

No response.

Well, sure, there was a lot of noise and confusion. Maggie raised her voice, “Jos. Josie.”

Still nothing.

Maggie took a few steps further along the edge of the pool, then cupped her hands around her mouth and

tried again, quite a bit louder, “Josie Natale!”

“Huh?” Josie finally popped up above the water, then stood up in the middle of the shallow end of the pool, still holding Nate on her shoulders. “Did you say something, Mags?”

Maggie grinned and repeated her earlier question, “Do you need a break?”

“A break? What?” Josie looked perplexed, but then her face relaxed. “Oh, a *snack*? Sure, love one. I’m starving. Order me something.” She gave Maggie a wave, then dropped back down under the water, leaving Nate’s head above, as she resumed chasing his twin sisters.

Maggie mumbled to herself, “I guess I’ll take that as a ‘no’ on the break question.”

Sometimes she felt a little guilty about the amount of time Josie spent with her and Shawn’s children, freeing the two of them up for work, errands, social events, and even (gasp) the occasional date, but then she’d get over it and decide to just be thankful for what she had.

Like today. She dragged a lounge chair up next to the one that Josie had claimed for herself earlier but never actually sat in. She spread her towel out, sat down, and then beckoned to one of the servers.

“Something from the bar, Mrs. McKenna?”

Well, that hadn’t been her thought exactly, but with Josie occupying the kids in the pool...what the heck. “How about a Margarita, rocks, no salt, for me, and one of those coco-whatchamathingies for Josie.”

“Ma’am?”

Maggie sighed...new guy. If he wasn't, he'd know Josie's order without asking. “You know, that frozen thing with loads of calories but no booze?”

“A Coco Colada? Pineapple juice, coconut, and heavy cream?”

“Yeah, that's gotta be it. Sam knows how she likes it.”

“Coming right up.”

“Wait. I also need three orders of chicken fingers—”

“You want the kiddie cups of juice with that?”

Maggie wrinkled her forehead a minute. “Oh, no, no, no. Not for the kids; I already fed them. The chicken fingers are for Josie.” Then the server wrinkled up his forehead. Maggie ignored the look and continued, “With fries and extra ranch dip. Oh, and whatever Gina's baking this afternoon—just grab two or three. Okay, that's it, thanks.” She gave him a dismissive wave before he could ask any more questions.

She was about to grab her little reading device when she heard her phone. She pulled it out of her bag, read the screen, and tapped the button. “Diana, what's up?”

“Hey, Maggie. Do you know where Josie is?”

“Yeah, right here, in the pool with the kids. Is her phone dead? You need me to get her?”

“No, not yet. I really need *your* help.”

“My help? Okay, what's going on?”

“Well, Josie and I had planned to meet on

Thursday night to work out some bugs in my data, but then she sent me a text this morning and asked if we could post-pone til the weekend. Thing is, I have an important report I need to finish before Friday, and I really could use her help—”

“And you’re not telling *her* this, why? I’m sure she’d be happy to—o-o-h, wait, Thursday night...”

“She’s got a date with Nic, right?” Diana sounded pleased, yet deflated.

“Yeah, she does. She was telling me about it earlier. Some friend of his got them box seats for the ballet over in Raleigh. Some traveling group out of Europe, I think. She’s super excited about it.”

“Darn. I was afraid of that. I knew she wouldn’t cancel if it wasn’t something juicy. Okay, never mind. Don’t tell her I called. If she even suspects I need her, I know she’ll rearrange her plans with Nic.”

Maggie grinned as they ended their call. Finally, she wasn’t the only one scheming behind Josie’s back to try to make a relationship work out for her. Nope, this time, it was more like a group conspiracy. She settled back into the lounge chair, stretching out her legs. The end was in sight now—her ten year mission was almost complete. She crossed her fingers and hoped nothing would come along to derail the whole thing.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Josie pirouetted under Nic's long arm, sending the widely flaring skirt of her deep chocolate nylon dress spinning around her legs. Her perfectly matching high heels looked oddly out of place against the cobblestones of Raleigh's downtown City Market, an eclectic collection of restaurants, art galleries, and quaint shops selling quaint things.

"How can you move like that after eating so much food?"

"Why, sir," answered Josie, batting her eyelashes rapidly, "I am the lovely Coppelia—light as a feather." She referred to the ballet they had seen earlier that evening at Raleigh's Fine Arts Center a few blocks away.

He pulled her in. "So you are the dancing doll, then? But you are so much more lovely than her." His eyes scanned her face a moment, and then, as his hands encircled her smooth but soft waistline, he added, "And so much more substantial." He wrinkled his nose up,

grinning, “She had all these ribs sticking out. I hate ribs.”

Josie pushed away from him, stomping off. “Hmph. Then why’d you eat a whole rack of them for dinner?”

He caught up to her, laughing, and slung his arm around her neck. They continued ambling up the narrow cobblestone strip between two rows of darkened shops toward an outdoor cafe, filled with chattering guests and lit up by miniature white lights. He stopped her suddenly, drawing her attention to a display in one of the windows. “Now *those* look like you.” He pointed to some handmade earrings on a shelf covered with velvet.

“Like me, huh?” She studied the shelf through the glass. The earrings he had noticed were a collection of large, funky, artsy styles, each uniquely designed by an artist, about whom a brief bio and picture appeared on a card sitting on the shelf. “You’re right, Nic. Those do look like me.” She raised an eyebrow, studying him. “Very observant of you.”

He shrugged slightly, then began fishing in his front jacket pocket. “Let us see who this guy is.” Coming up empty, he switched to digging in his inside jacket pocket.

“Pants, right front,” Josie said, as she pressed her face against the glass.

“What?”

“Your glasses. They’re in your right front pants pocket. With your wallet.”

He reached into that pocket and pulled them out with a surprised look. “How did you know?”

“They were on the table during dinner. You put them both in your pocket at the same time.”

“Now who’s being observant?”

She shrugged. “Details—it’s a stats thing.”

“That and matching colors, I suppose, but why then can you not keep CDs organized or cell phone batteries charged? Ay! Cell phone! You are rubbing off on me, Josie.” He pulled out his phone and tapped on the screen. “I forgot to turn it back on after the ballet.” He pushed his glasses onto his nose and studied the screen. “Ah, I have been waiting for this. Momentito, honey.” He turned away from her, and lifted the phone to his ear.

Josie went back to the window while she waited. Another shelf caught her eye. The earring styles were very similar to the turquoise ones that Theo had brought her from Santa Fe shortly before they broke up. In fact, yes, the artist was the same—she recognized the little initials from the back of the pair she had. She read the bio card. It said the lady lived in the mountains of North Carolina. Red River Falls. Only sold her creations at a little shop there and a few places around the state. However did Theo find a pair way out in New Mexico?

“Ah, muchas gracias, Rodrigo. Hasta luego.”

As Nic finished up the call, he motioned Josie toward a bench and sat down with her. He held his phone out in front of both of them. “Please forgive me, honey, for bringing up business while we are supposed to be enjoying ourselves—”

“It’s all right, Nic. What is it?”

“Remember last week when you asked me

about those-those graphs you had? About whether there could possibly be a security leak across multiple different networks?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s been driving me crazy. Did you find something out?”

“Well, yes. I did some research and still had questions, so I contacted a friend of mine back in Washington. He is with the NSA.”

“The NSA?! Geez, Nic, you didn’t have to call in the cavalry.”

Nic laughed and put his arm around her, “Honey, it is no trouble; he owed me one. But listen, I am afraid we came up empty. The one possibility I thought of—which was a duplicate in-line—Rod assured me that with even rudimentary safeguards in place, it would not be possible.”

Josie made a face, “And now you’re losing me...”

“Sorry, let me explain.” He pulled up an image on his phone. “You see this little wire coming out of this machine? This is really the only way someone could do what you proposed. They would have to have had physical access at least once to the machines they are trying to break into. If they have that, they can install this secondary in-line. It can be as thin as sewing thread. You would never see it unless you were looking for it. Then, they simply run the line out of the building along with all the other cables and wires, and they can access it anytime they want. This type of breach is particularly insidious, because it can go both ways—the hacker can not only



read the target's data, but also write to it, destroying the data, or worse, making changes so subtle that no one ever notices."

"Wow, that's scary, but why do you say it would be impossible for this to have happened to my clients?"

"Well, as I said, even rudimentary security would prevent this, and all of your clients have very sophisticated security systems—card keys and codes, cameras, fingerprint readers, human security guards. It is not like someone could just walk in and manhandle the machines. You could certainly never do this at RTT or Chiroan or to a machine like yours that is protected by a DigiEnsure card."

Josie shook her head slowly. "But not all my clients have that kind of security." She paused, thinking. "Toral's South Raleigh office has the electronic card key and a security guard, but some of the others..." She dug in her bag and pulled out a small key ring. She raised the single, rather old-fashioned-looking key to show him. "This is the key to the Durham Women's Health Center, where Shawn's sister works. This is all the security they've got."

Nic wrinkled his forehead, "That is a non-profit organization, right? I did not realize...I mean, how do they pay you?"

She shrugged. "Cookies and muffins, mostly. Sometimes a nice homemade fruit pie."

Nic laughed, "I see." His face turned thoughtful, "I am sorry, honey, I was not aware of your

philanthropic efforts. Are there others?”

“A few, yeah. There’s St. Anne’s Free Clinic over in Chapel Hill, and this hospice down in Garner, and then...” She bit her lower lip. “Nic, now that I’m thinking about it, all the places where I saw this weird error pattern are places with less than stellar security. Toral’s place is probably the tightest of the bunch.”

“And that is not exactly Ft. Knox.” They looked at each other a moment, tacitly sharing the thought. “Jos, I know this is not the most romantic idea ever...” He looked up in his head, “...and Mamá would kill me for even suggesting it, but—”

Josie grinned and held up the key again, “Let’s go!”

###

Damn! Forgot the alfalfa sprouts again. She knew that little twit wasn’t paying attention. Diana McKenna O’Shea studied her three-cheese vegetarian on sunflower bread under the dim light of her desk lamp. She had half a mind to take the darned thing back and demand her alfalfa sprouts, but it was almost ten o’clock, and the Green Bean Market closed early on Thursday nights. Besides, the parking area behind the Women’s Center wasn’t her favorite spot at night. Of course, she wasn’t usually there by herself after dark. In fact, she rarely went to the Center at night, unless Josie was meeting her there.

This time, though, when Maggie confirmed that

Josie had another date with Nic, she had to tell a little fib. She knew Josie would cancel to keep her from having to come to the Center alone, so she had told Josie she wasn't coming in.

She smiled to herself as she spread the little packet of spicy mustard on the inside of the bread. She was proud of her little maneuver, if it helped Josie's romantic life in any small way. Not that she needed a lot of help, now that she was dating Nic. They were always doing something interesting together—an outdoor concert, a street fair, an art show, a play—never just “dinner and a movie”. Not that that would suck. The last time she and Lester had done anything romantic together was, well, before the boys were born. So okay, maybe she was living vicariously through Josie, but she saw no reason to stop now, just so she could have a little companionship in the tomb tonight.

Diana squinted at the fuzzy numbers on her computer monitor while she bit down on her sandwich. She was working on their grant proposal renewal, and she needed to review the latest Progestilone results. Like she told Josie, participating in new drug trials made so much of their other work possible—support groups, parenting classes, violence prevention, but something had been looking funny to her lately. She leaned in closer. The numbers on the screen didn't jibe with what she remembered of that particular case. She'd worked with that patient herself. Those values were way out of range. She would've noticed a result like that...

Ahhh, maybe it was just the crappy old

computer monitor. She loved working at the Center, but did everything have to be such a struggle? She surveyed the furnishings around her. Filing cabinets purchased from Duke University Salvage that had come complete with Anti-Vietnam War stickers on them. A couch in olive green—a color that nothing had been produced in since before Josie was born. The desk she was sitting at probably qualified as an antique, and these computers...sheesh, they didn't even have USB ports.

She thought about the security measures that Nic and his partner had recommended for all the clinics and facilities that were doing sensitive research, that is, like research with Progestilone. Most of the big operations already had that stuff—all kinds of gee-whiz, high-tech equipment like barcode readers and strips on chemical bottles and test tubes, keycard access and fingerprint scanners, and of course, video surveillance inside and out for the buildings...all things the Women's Center would never be able to afford.

She shook her head, took a few more bites of sandwich, and went back to squinting. After a moment, she unscrewed the cap on her Jensen's All Natural Strawberry Soda. She took a swallow. Bleah. Not cold at all. She picked up her big coffee mug, the one her boys had made for her with their smiling faces on it, and inspected the inside. Clean enough. She got up and ventured into the hallway. She stepped to the right, aiming for the kitchen. Oh, wait—the damn ice maker'd been broken for a month on that fridge. She switched back to the left and headed for the lab; she could always

score a little ice from the specimen freezer.

As she walked down the long hallway toward the lab, she was guided only by the minimal light of a single lamp she had turned on in the entranceway—just there, to her right—when she came in. No reason to turn on dozens of overhead fluorescents and run up the Center’s power bill.

She neared the lab. The door was closed, of course, but it had a big frosted glass window in the top half. Hmm, there was some kind of light coming through that window. There shouldn’t be any lights on in the lab. She reached the door. Yes, she was sure of it—there was an odd glow coming from the back, where the data entry computers sat. And wait, was that movement? Was someone there?

She turned the knob. Movement, yes. She pushed the door open.

A large man in a heavy dark sweatshirt stood over the machines. His back was to her, his form illuminated only by a small lantern he had with him.

She gasped, and he spun. Glass shattered everywhere around him. The large coffee mug slipped from her hand, making a loud, clean crack when it connected with the hallway’s hundred-year-old parquet floor.

Her heart lunged. She whirled in the doorway. Back toward her office? No, no, out the back door. But oh, the sticky lock—might take too long to open. Up the stairs and hide somewhere? She knew this place like the back of her hand. But he would hear her going up and

moving around. Creepy, creaky old house. Where to go?  
*Where?*

She took off, running back down the hall, but then hesitated at the crossroads of her options—staircase to the right, back door left, office still ahead. Her phone was ringing in there. Someone was trying to reach her, help her. Office—GO!

The office door was less than five feet away. Her desk, with the phone atop it, just another foot or two beyond that. If she could just make it...

His sneakered feet were soundless until he was almost on her. He caught her blouse by the collar, tearing it and making her stumble. She lost her footing and fell back into him. Her phone stopped ringing.

Still behind her, he pulled her up by the collar and pressed her into the wall with his body. Big body. Huge. Solid. Powerful. Her heart pounded against the wall.

“Don’t move. Don’t make a sound.” The voice was gruff, a low growl, directly into her ear. He was doing something with his hand, low, around his waist. No idea what.

She was doing something, too. Shaking. Uncontrollably. And gasping for air. She needed to think, needed to plan, needed to do something. She had to make it stop! Make it be over with!

She squeezed her eyes shut, and she saw them—her kids. Her boys. Her beautiful boys. The babies she loved with all her heart and soul! They needed her. They needed their mom. She had to get away. She had to see

them again! Just had to.

But he was there, and she couldn't move. Couldn't get away. Couldn't make it stop. Please God, please God, please God, please God—

When he finished doing whatever he was doing, he spoke again, "Sorry, lady. You're just too damn smart for your own good." But he didn't sound sorry. With one hand gripping her roughly by her hair, and the other clutching her torn blouse at the center of her back, he pulled her a few feet back from the wall.

Her eyes flew open. No-o-o-o-o-o-o! She opened her mouth to scream, but before any sound came out, there was a sudden sensation of rapid acceleration, and then the fading flowered wallpaper came flying toward her head.

###

"Well, darn. She's still not answering." Josie checked the time on her phone. "It's almost eleven. Maybe she's gone to bed. I'm sure she won't mind us going in there, but I wanted to clear it with her first."

"Oh, Jos, maybe we should not..."

"Are you kidding? We've got to find out."

"I have to admit, my curiosity is piqued, though I hope we are wrong."

"Turn left there, Nic."

"Here?" His voice was incredulous.

"Yes. It's down that street. These old houses are mostly converted into businesses now."

“Looks like it was a nice area, once upon a time, but, uh...”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. It’s a bit dicey now.”

“I trust you never come here by yourself at night?”

She responded in a dutiful tone, “No, Nicolas, I don’t come here by myself at night.” Then she added, “But I do meet Diana down here every couple weeks, to help her with her reports for Arthro.”

“Hmm.” Nic wasn’t sure he liked that, either. Shawn’s older sister, even if she was close to six feet, wasn’t exactly the bodyguard he had in mind for Josie, but he decided to keep his mouth shut for now.

He saw a sign and pointed, “Is that it?”

“Uh, yeah, the one with the pretty windows. We usually park in the back, but it’s late. Let’s just park here in front, so we can keep an eye on your car.”

“Good thinking.” He had just spent a small fortune getting that nasty scratch removed. He wasn’t excited about the prospect of another parking lot incident. He stopped the car and reached in front of her to open the glove box. He grabbed a flashlight and dropped it in Josie’s lap, then hopped out of the car and walked around to the passenger side to help her out.

She was playing with the flashlight. “I think the batteries are dead.”

“No, honey. It is a survivalist tactical light. It is multifunctional and requires no batteries. See?” He showed her how a little hand crank powered it up.



“Cool!” She snatched it back from him and started fiddling with the hand crank.

He caught her hand and pulled her out of the car. “Sweetheart, focus.”

“Oh, right.”

At least now he knew what to get her for her birthday. He looked up at the handsome old house. “So what part of the house would have the computers in it?”

“Well, Di’s office and the director’s offices both have computers. Those are in the back. The reception desk has one; that’s here in the front. And then there’s a bank of data entry machines in the lab.” She motioned toward the right side of the house. “That would be over there.”

Nic took a few steps to the right and looked down the side of the house. “Come on, honey. Bring the light. Let’s see if we can find the junction box.”

After a few moments of searching, Josie pointed with the flashlight. “Is that thing it?”

Nic stepped to the indicated spot and inspected. “Yes, honey, good eye.” He pulled on a little lock at the bottom. “We will just take care of this...” He dug his Swiss Army knife out of his pocket, and in seconds, had the lock sprung and the box open. “More light, please.”

Josie slid in closer to him, aiming the light more directly into the box while he pulled out his glasses. He hoped they wouldn’t fog up. Being this close to her was causing him a few “focus” issues of his own.

He began poking around amongst the various colorful cables and wires, finally settling on one. Then he

flipped through a few selections on his knife again and chose a blade not much wider than a paper clip. With the blade, he tapped on a thick black cable. “See this here? There is a thin layer of sheathing over the top of this cable. It could be hiding something.” He gently worked the sheathing with the narrow blade until it separated from the rest of the cable. He examined it, then blinked a couple of times. “Ah, I don’t see anything. Do you?”

She pushed up on her tiptoes for a closer look. “Well, I’m not sure...” She dug gently at the cable with a long, perfectly manicured fingernail. “Wait! Yes, I do!” Her nail raised a fine, thin wire from between the sheath and the cable itself.

“Well, what do you know? This could be it. This could be exactly what we are looking for. We will have to go inside to verify, but I don’t know what else it could be.” He took a step back, shaking his head. “Honestly, I did not think we would find anything. Sweetheart, this is extraordinary. I mean, this is seriously high-tech stuff. If this *is* a dup in-line, we are on to some very clever data thieves.”

“Well, good then, let’s cut it off. Right now! I don’t want—”

Nic stopped her with a finger held up to his lips and a nod toward the back end of the house.

Josie whispered, “What? Is someone there?”

He turned her around so she was facing back toward the front of the house, then whispered into her hair, “Honey, go inside and lock the door behind you. Wait for me.” He gave her a slight push in that direction.

“Nic, what—”

“Go!” He made sure she was heading where he’d pointed her, then began moving toward the back, as quickly and quietly as he could. It could have been anything, but he wasn’t taking any chances. A moment before, he had seen some sort of movement, a shadowy shift in the light coming from the area behind the house, which he assumed was the parking lot for the building.

He crept close to the corner of the house, which was adorned with a few Azalea bushes, then peered around it. Nothing. Just a quiet gravel parking area, backing up to a vine-covered fence. A single, rather weak lamppost cast crazy shadows around the one car in the lot. He waited a moment, scanning for any sign of movement. There was none. Perhaps the junction box findings had made him paranoid.

He was about to turn around and head back when...wait! What was that? Through the windows of the vehicle he saw it—the slightest change in the pattern of light and dark. As he leaped over the Azaleas, he called out, “Hey! Hey you, stop right there!”

Without hesitation, a large form sprang up from the far side of the car and took off running. Nic kicked into high gear and gave chase, as the bulky figure sprinted toward the distant end of the lot. Soon, Nic’s long legs were closing the gap between them. In another second, he would be within reach, but just as he stretched his arm out to hopefully grab the man, he heard another sound.

“AIIIIEEEEEE!!!!”

The high-pitched scream stopped him in his tracks. He spun around and looked back toward the rear entrance of the house. The door was slightly ajar. “Josie!” He forgot about the man in the parking lot and bolted for the door.

###

Josie ran toward the crumpled body on the hallway floor. “Diana!” She dropped to her knees beside her friend. “Diana! Diana, wake up!” There was an enormous gash splitting the woman’s forehead and blood covered half her face.

Josie’s head swam. What had happened? Who did this? Poor Diana! Was she alive? Would she be all right? Why was she even here? Why would anyone want to hurt her? “Diana, are you all right? Diana, can you hear me?”

Suddenly, Nic was there, pushing her out of the way. “Call 9-1-1!” He pulled off his suit jacket and began balling it up. Josie stumbled to her feet and stepped back to where she had dropped her bag in the hallway. Nic looked over at her as he stuffed the jacket under Diana’s head. Josie was still fumbling in her bag, trying to find her phone. He appeared frustrated with her inefficiency and yanked his own phone out of his pocket and tossed it at her. “Call them, *now!*”

Josie managed to execute the order, trying to keep her head clear enough to respond to the operator’s questions. Name. Location. What is your emergency. All

the while, she kept her eyes on Nic as he moved swiftly, deftly, like he had done this a million times before.

He dashed into a nearby exam room and came out with bandages, bottles, and cloths. In moments, he had cleaned Diana's wound and bound it. He checked her pulse, her breathing, her lips, her eyes. Without looking up from what he was doing, he barked at Josie, "Find me a blanket! Then call Shawn. Get him over here!"

A blanket? Okay, she could handle that. She ran into Diana's office and noticed Di's phone and a half-eaten sandwich on the desk. Like the waiting area and the hallway, the room was trashed—furniture upended, papers strewn about, and red paint splashed on the walls. She couldn't make sense of it all.

She grabbed the afghan off the old couch and brought it out to Nic. He carefully tucked the blanket all around Diana, while Josie struggled to find Shawn's number on Nic's phone. Her brain felt like mush.

Shawn sounded bleary when he answered, "Jos? Jos, is that you? It's late, woman. What's—"

"Sh-Shawn. Yes, i-it's me." She tried to keep her voice steady, but she obviously failed, as his response was immediately alert.

"Jos, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Sh-Shawn, it's Diana. W-we're at the Center. You've got to come...Now!"

He asked no more questions. "I'm on my way."

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Shawn arrived at the Center just in time to see his sister being wheeled into an ambulance in the back parking lot. There was no time for explanations, so Nic simply said, “Go, Shawn. We will stay and talk to the police.”

“The police?” There was a note of panic in his voice.

Perhaps the blood smeared on Nic’s shirt had something to do with that. Nic spoke calmly, “It is all right, Shawn. She should be fine. Just go with her.”

Josie gave Shawn’s hand a quick squeeze. “Go ahead, Shawn. We’ll meet you there—Durham Regional South. I got it. Everything’s gonna be fine.” She wasn’t at all sure of that last bit, but Nic seemed to think so, and he had managed to stay so calm and cool this whole time, she decided to play along.

After an annoyingly lengthy interrogation by the Durham City Police, during which Nic did ninety percent of the talking, and specifically left out the part

about searching for and breaking into the junction box, they were finally able to leave.

As he started the car, he waved toward the road, “Now how do I get there?”

“Oh, uh...” God, her head was in a fog. Why couldn’t she keep it together like Nic? No doubt about it, the guy was good under pressure. She rubbed her forehead a bit. “Uh, back the way we came. Onto the highway, but south this time.”

“Over there?”

“No, no, that’s going toward Chapel Hill. That exit there.”

Josie leaned back and closed her eyes. An image popped in her mind of spunky, saucy Diana sitting alone in her office in that damn rickety old building. Some horrible creep climbing in a window or something. And then Diana, lying on the floor, clothes torn, all bloody and battered. Was she tortured? Beaten? Raped? Please God, not that.

And why had she been there in the first place? She wasn’t even supposed to be there tonight. She said she wasn’t going. *She wasn’t gonna go, if I didn’t go.*

“What did you say?”

She must have spoken the thought aloud. She opened her eyes and repeated it numbly, “She wasn’t gonna go, if I didn’t go.”

“You were supposed to be there with her?”

“No, not really. We had originally planned to meet tonight, but then you had the tickets to the ballet, so we decided to do it another night. Only she must’ve

come anyway and didn't want to spoil my fun." Josie felt her eyes filling with tears. "It's my fault. I should have been with her. None of this would have happened—"

Nic looked over at her. "Honey, take it easy. It is not your fault. It is the fault of that man in the parking lot. And if we had not gone there and found her, who knows what would have happened?"

Geez, did he always have to be so rational? And so calm. And so in control. Didn't he ever lose it? The tears were running down her face now. "Just drive, Nic. Faster."

"I am going very fast."

"Doesn't feel like it."

"It is a fine sports car, Josie. It is not supposed to feel like it."

###

Emergency Department. Nurse's Station. Waiting Area. Cardiology. Oncology. Ophthalmology. Red arrows, yellow stripes, blue lines—running in every direction. And Nic and Josie, standing, holding hands in the middle of all of it, reading signs, looking down hallways, wondering which way to go, hoping to find someone to ask.

Nic glanced over at Josie. He wished he was not so lost. This whole thing had turned her upside down, and he wanted to be there for her. To be honest, he was surprised at how she had reacted to all of it. He had come to have great respect for her intelligence, her analytical



abilities, and her “out of the box” thinking, as Shawn called it. Yet this evening, finding Diana in the Women’s Center had transformed Josie into a helpless child, much like the night he’d first met her on the veranda. She could barely make a phone call, for heaven’s sake, so Nic knew he needed to step up and carry the ball.

“Josie, Nic! There you are!” Maggie came racing up from around a corner, beckoning them to follow her back down one of the blue-lined hallways. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you guys...where’ve you been?”

Josie sniffled a little. “Sorry, Mags. My fault—I gave Nic a wrong turn on the freeway. I just can’t think straight...”

Maggie threw a scowl back at Nic as they moved down the hall. He answered with an apologetic face, tacitly accepting responsibility for the current condition in which she found her best friend.

Josie asked, “So where’s Di? Is she, um...is she...”

Maggie stopped by a windowed room and wrapped her arms around Josie, giving her a reassuring hug, then pulled back. She smoothed Josie’s hair and wiped away a few tears. “She’s gonna be fine, Jos. She’s in there.” Maggie pointed through the window, which was lined on the inside with mini blinds that were slatted partially open. Josie and Nic adjusted their positions so they could see into the room. Diana was now awake, partially sitting up in a hospital bed with a large, fresh bandage covering most of her forehead. The beginnings

of severe swelling and bruising could be seen around her forehead and eyes. Her husband and sons were with her, as was Mama K. They all looked relatively cheery, under the circumstances.

“S-so she’s okay?”

Nic spoke up, “They’ve checked her out? No concussion?”

“No, nothing permanent,” Maggie said. “She said the guy—”

Shawn walked, or rather, stomped up to them, and growled, “Bastard bashed her head into a wall.” Papa K came up behind him, setting a hand on Shawn’s shoulder.

Nic jumped in, “What else did she say? How many were there? Did she recognize anyone?” Then he stopped, distracted, and asked, “Shawn? What happened to your hand?” He indicated a bandage wrapped around the knuckles of Shawn’s right hand, showing a little blood.

Maggie rolled her eyes. “Nothing. He’s fine.”

Josie, whose mood appeared to be lifting, said, “But I’ll bet there’s a door, a wall, or a window somewhere that’s not doing so well.” Then she walked over to Shawn, and taking his uninjured hand, led him a few steps away.

Nic had observed that Shawn was a bit hot-tempered, as Nic could be himself, but in this situation, Shawn had obviously lost his self-control. Nic prided himself on always keeping his conduct in check. A gentleman would never lose control, no matter how

much his anger raged inside—like with Linda, for example. Of course, neither did Nic want to be judgmental; nobody had ever bashed any of his sisters' heads into a wall.

As he watched them together, Nic found himself slightly uncomfortable with the way Josie interacted with Shawn—whispering, touching, looking into the eyes—there was an intimacy to it that made him, well, jealous. He glanced over at Maggie. She was talking to her father-in-law, and seemed not to notice or to care. Josie and Shawn had been friends, after all, for a very long time. Just friends, right?

After a couple minutes, Josie came back over to Nic and reached an arm up around his neck, pulling his head down closer to hers. She whispered, “Go and talk to him.” She nodded in Shawn’s direction, then kissed Nic lightly on the cheek. “I’m gonna go see Diana.” The jealousy instantly dissipated, and he ruffled some of the hair on the back of her head, before leaving her.

“Nic. Buddy. Walk with me,” said Shawn, as Nic approached. But before commencing the walk, Shawn looked back behind Nic, as if ensuring that they were alone. And as they started ambling down one of the yellow-striped halls, he lowered his voice. “The cops were here, Nic. They told me—it was those friggin’ Warriors.”

“Yes, I know. I saw the writing on the walls.”

“The Warriors of God. Can you believe it? I thought they were full of shit. I mean, I brought you guys in to cover my ass, ya know, because I have to do those

things. But I never really thought anything would happen, and now...dammit! My sister.” He mussed his red curls with the fingers of his bloody-knuckled hand.

“Did she say how it started? How they got in? Were they already there when she arrived?”

“That’s the weird thing, Nic—there was no sign of forced entry. Diana said the door was locked when she got there, and she locked it again behind her. She’s sure of it.”

“Well, key locks are not very challenging to overcome,” Nic said, running his hand through his hair. “But Shawn, there is something we did not tell the police —”

“What?”

“The reason we were there. Josie has mentioned to you about having some troublesome data issues with some of her Progestilone clients, right?”

“Yeah.” He looked questioningly at Nic. “Is that related?”

“I am pretty sure it is.” He proceeded to tell Shawn about the duplicate in-line theory and what he and Josie had found outside the Women’s Center.

“So what now? Can we use that line-in thing to track them down? Just let me get my hands on those guys —”

“In-line,” Nic corrected. “And probably not. That guy in the parking lot most likely saw Josie and I at the junction box. By now, they know we are on to them and have probably already cut off any communication with any sites they had used it on. We will check all the

other sites, but I doubt we will find anything useable. Now that we know what they were doing, of course, we can put safeguards in place to be sure this does not happen again.”

Shawn looked at once annoyed and relieved. “Okay, fine. Even if we can’t catch them at it, at least we can stop them. But I gotta tell ya—I never would have imagined all this. Geez, what a way to slow down the progress of a drug you don’t like. Screw up the clinical trial data so nobody can get their product through the FDA. If it wasn’t so terrifying, it would be brilliant.”

“I know, that is what is bothering me. This whole thing...” Nic motioned back in the direction of Diana’s hospital room, “...it does not fit with what we know about anti-abortion protest groups. The in-line? That is expert-level technology. It is not something you can buy in a kit at Radio Shack.”

Shawn looked up toward the ceiling. “Who’d’ve thought these crazies had that kind of brains or skills at their disposal? I thought they were just a bunch of hard-core religious nuts.”

“Exactly. It makes no sense. It is really not in keeping with their principles.”

“They have principles?” Shawn sneered.

“You know what I mean. Historically, when these groups go after someone or someplace, it is never with all this clandestine hocus-pocus. It is all about show. They want people to know what they are doing, to sympathize with their cause. They want to be seen as the Good Guys, not sneak thieves or hoodlums. They are

trying to make a statement about their beliefs.”

Shawn stopped walking. “That *was* a statement, Nic. It was ‘Go to hell, bitches!’ to all those little liberal ladies that run that place, and whether you or I or anyone else agrees with what they do down there, this is still a damn free country, and those gals have a right to—”

“Sh-a-a-a-w-w-n...” It was Josie’s voice, quietly sing-songing behind them. She stuck her head in between them. “Let’s take it down a notch, boys. We’re in a hospital, remember?” She nodded toward a cutesy little sign that read “Quiet Zone”.

“Sorry, honey,” said Nic, slipping his arm around her waist. She recoiled slightly, pointing toward his shirt. Oops, he’d forgotten he was still wearing a crime scene on his chest.

She reached down into her bag, “Here, I brought you a little memento of our evening.”

“What—”

She grinned, holding up a large surgical scrub shirt, emblazoned with letters that said ‘Property of Durham Regional Hospital South’.

“Jos! You stole this?”

“Well, not stole exactly. Borrowed. One of the nurses here is a friend of mine from St. Anne’s. She passed it to me.” Josie made a sour face, “I think she just wanted to watch you change into it.”

Both men laughed at that. After this whole long adventure, during which he’d watched her ride a roller coaster of emotions, she still had her sense of humor—one of the things he loved, er, really, really liked about

her.

She spoke directly to Shawn then, “Go and say goodnight to your sister. They’re kicking everybody out. They want her to sleep now.”

Shawn started walking back, grumbling, “Oh, yeah, sure. Like they won’t wake her up every twenty minutes to check her blood pressure or something.” Then he stopped and looked back at them. “Hey, if I forgot to say so, thanks, you two. For everything. If you guys hadn’t shown up when you did...you probably saved her life.”

Josie pointed at Nic. “That would be him. All I did was...supervise.”

Nic nodded at Shawn, “De nada, amigo. You would have done the same for me.”

When Shawn was out of earshot, Nic asked, “So they are keeping her overnight?”

“Yeah, they just want to observe her and make sure everything’s okay up here, ya know?” She tapped a finger on the side of her forehead.

“And is everything okay up here?” Nic asked, tapping his finger on the other side of her forehead.

“With me? Yeah, fine.”

“Sorry. It is just that earlier...you were very upset.”

Josie shrugged and started walking back up the hall. “I was just worried. Now I’m not. I won’t let it happen again.”

“You won’t...”

“I mean, I told Di she better not lie to me about

working alone there at night again. If she's going, I'm going, too, and that's all there is to it. After they get it all cleaned up and everything, of course."

"Of course." Nic glanced at her out the corner of his eye. Nope, nobody had ever bashed his sister's head into a wall, or his girlfriend's, either. Would he be able to maintain his self-control in that situation? He didn't want to find out.

###

Bashed her head into a wall. Geez. Oscar Teslar rubbed his bald head nervously. Nobody was supposed to get hurt. They were just playing a little game of research roulette, with a bit of romance roulette thrown in for good measure. No harm done, not really. Sheesh, it wasn't like Progestilone was some miraculous, life-saving drug. Nobody was gonna die waiting for its approval as a joint pain reliever.

But a head through a wall? Now that wasn't supposed to happen. Still, what else could he have done? She caught the guy red-handed. It wasn't like he could just run out of there and hope for the best.

Oscar drummed his fingers on the glass-topped umbrella table, then swatted at a mosquito on his left elbow. Summer nights in North Carolina—warm, humid, and full of bites. Nice out here by the pool, though, under better circumstances. He'd have to bring the kids, next time he had them, and when Lottie was feeling better. Nice place to do it, too; it was very private here. The



house surrounded the pool and patio on three sides and a wall of fifty foot trees shrouded the fourth. Gary sure liked his privacy.

The door to the kitchen opened and Gary came out, glancing around, as though anyone could possibly be nearby watching or listening. He sat down across from Oscar.

“Sorry, Oscar. Lottie’s having a bad night.”

“The nurse told me. What’s going on?”

Gary turned away from him in his chair and looked toward the trees. “She’s just...it’s just...” He gave his head a quick shake. After a moment, he added, “A couple of the lab guys found something last week that they think might be a lead, you know?” He turned back toward Oscar. His voice was rough, “There’s always hope.”

“Yeah, sure.” Oscar tried to sound upbeat. What he was thinking was, “Thank God it’s not one of my kids.”

Gary cleared his throat, then began, “So, tell me, what the hell went wrong tonight?”

“He didn’t realize anyone was in the place. No lights on, all quiet, door locked. All of a sudden, there she is, staring at him, with her coffee cup in her hand. Why the hell she was looking for coffee in a specimen lab, I’ll never know.”

“But he got everything cleaned up, right?”

“Yeah, he thinks so. He cut the line, pulled the discs. Then he put that ‘Warriors of God’ crap all over the place. There’s no way they can trace it back to us.”

Gary nodded, “Good then, everything’s fine. And he’s gone back home, right?”

Oscar nodded slightly, but then said, “Look, Gary, you should know...the lady was Shawn McKenna’s sister.”

“*What?* Are you kidding me? I didn’t know she worked there. I thought they were a bunch of Irish Catholics.”

“Guess she’s the liberal arm of the family.”

Gary sank back in the chair and ran his hand through his hair, “Jesus. Shit.” He sat up again, “She okay?”

“Yeah, they’re keeping her overnight, but it sounds like she’ll be fine.”

“Well, okay, that’s good.” Then he looked concerned, “No chance she would recognize him, right?”

“Doubt it. He said she got one quick look at him, but it was from a distance, and he had his head covered with one of those sweatshirt-hood things. Besides, they don’t look anything alike.”

“True. Okay, listen, I’m going up there again. Next week. I think we need to make some changes. I don’t want to lose our ace in the hole.”

Oscar wrinkled up his forehead, “Isn’t it a little late for that? Haven’t we already lost our little ace?”

Gary looked straight at him, “Oh no. I’m just getting started.” Then he swatted at a mosquito on his neck. “I think I’ll take the kid with me. He hasn’t been up there for a while. He needs to get his head screwed back on tight.”

“What? You think he’s...losing his focus?” Oscar smoothed his bald head as though there were hair on it to smooth.

“Don’t you?”

Oscar sighed and nodded. “She really got to him, didn’t she?”

Gary settled back in his chair, facing out toward the yard. He seemed mesmerized by the water moving gently in the pool. “Who’d a thunk it, right? Just when you think a guy’s a cold-as-ice bastard, you find out he’s all soft and spongy inside.”

Oscar studied Gary’s profile. “Yeah, Gar, just when.”

###

After stopping at an all-night diner to pick up a couple of sandwiches for her, Nic finally brought Josie back to Latta Lakes. He pulled the car into a spot just outside her building and looked over at her. “Feeling better now, honey?”

She was wolfing down the second sandwich. “Mmm, yes.” She swallowed the bite she was currently working on. “Thanks for stopping, Nic. I know it’s so-o-o late, but I was starving.”

He grinned, “Yes, I can see that.” He picked up the coffee he had gotten for himself and took a long swallow. Strange how those divey little places always made the best brew. When she was finished with the sandwich, he said, “Shall we get you upstairs now?”

She gave him a little smile. “Yeah, let’s go.”

He walked around the car to let her out, then rested his hand on the center of her back as they ascended the stairs. With most women, Nic knew exactly what he would say or do, but with Josie, the woman of many faces, he was always second-guessing himself. He chose his words carefully while she unlocked the door; he didn’t want to upset her again. “It has been a long night, sweetheart. I am sure you want to get to bed, but if you would like—”

“I would like.”

He took the cue and followed her inside. While she kicked off her chocolate brown high heels, he propped the inner door open with the stopper, as he always did.

“Perhaps a glass of wine?” he suggested.

“That sounds good.” She waved toward the kitchen, “That same bottle you brought over last week —”

“—is still in the fridge? Yes, I figured as much.” He smiled as he made himself at home in her kitchen. Only a month into this relationship, and he had probably spent more time in her kitchen than she ever had. He pulled down the wine glasses, grabbed his favorite Chardonnay from the refrigerator, and poured.

As he came around the counter with the glasses, he met her coming back up from the hallway again, shoes in hand. “Your shirt and my shoes,” she said, “ruined.” She turned one of the shoes upside down, showing him the long, pointed heel. It was terribly

scuffed and caked with mud. “I guess that happened while we were looking for the junction box.”

“Oh, what a shame.” He shook his head, “This evening really did not turn out the way I planned. Mamá will have my head if she ever hears about this.”

Josie laughed, “I won’t tell if you won’t!” She set the shoes down on the table and took the wine glass from him. “Because if I did, I’d have to admit that I’d do it all over again, well, except for the part about Di anyway.”

He grinned, “Me, too.”

She took a quick sip of wine, then set the glass down. She laid one hand on his chest and looked up at him. “Nic, I have to say this: you were amazing tonight. Between all the whiz-bang-techie stuff and then, with Diana...geez, I was just standing there shell-shocked...” She rolled her eyes, “For someone who works in medical research, I can’t stand the sight of blood. But you? You were—”

“Honey, it was nothing. The army...” He shrugged, “I had lots of practice. And besides, it is a whole easier to be calm when the wounded warrior is not one of your best friends.”

She gave him an odd look.

“Sorry, poor choice of words.”

“No, no, it’s all right. You know, when I first saw the place, it didn’t register. I was too worried about Diana, but once I realized it was those freaky Warriors of God people...wow.” She gave a little shivery motion. “I’m just so glad we were there.”

He set his wine down and massaged her shoulders and arms, hoping he could take away the chill those thoughts had put in her head. “And speaking of amazing—we would *not* have been there nor would we have figured out what they were doing, had it not been for your little meta, uh, meta...what was that again?”

She looked embarrassed, “Meta-analysis. First time my ultra-geekiness has actually paid off.”

“Well, from what Shawn tells me, it is not the first time.”

“Maybe, but still, you—”

Nic pressed a finger against her lips, “Let us just say we make a great team, eh?”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll go along with that.” She slid her hands up the length of his chest and pulled his head down to meet hers.

Ah, yes, this was more how he had envisioned their date turning out. He caught her head in one hand and met those succulent lips with his own. Oh, indeed, much more like it. The ballet and the cobblestones, the junction box and the in-line, the red paint on the walls and the woman on the floor, the blood on his shirt and the bandage on Shawn’s hand...all drifted away. Now there was only Josie. Warm and soft and bronze and...pressing up against him in a way that made his thoughts jumble and his heart beat so much faster.

Yet, something was different. Yes, what was it? The temperature. And the humidity. Whenever he’d been there before, Josie’s condo had gotten rather warm and stuffy on these summer evenings, but tonight, it was

neither. It felt pleasantly cool, which was impressive considering the heat they were generating between them.

Nic couldn't help himself. He lifted his head slightly, letting her lips drift across his neck and just below. Oh, that was quite nice. He struggled to lift his eyelids just a bit, so that he could see down the hall from whence she had fetched the tattered brown shoes. Aha! It was not his imagination—the condo *was* cooler...because Josie had closed the door.

\* \* \* End of Book One \* \* \*

*Author/Publisher*

***Message from the Author***

If you had fun getting to know Nic and Josie, and you'd like to read more of their story, please pick up the second volume in the *Unbreakable* series, [Little Girl Lost](#). In that book, the mystery, action, and romance really heat up as the brainy but beautiful Josie finds herself being sucked deeper into Gary's greedy and vengeful web.

If you would like notifications of new releases, please sign up [here](#), and you will be the first to know when new books and series are available.

Also, if you enjoyed the book, please [leave a review](#) or tell your friends, or Facebook or Tweet about it. Reviews don't have to be long, complex, or eloquent. Just give your honest, spur-of-the-moment reaction. Your review helps other readers find books they will enjoy.



If you'd like to learn more about me and my work, please visit my website, [MariaRomana.com](http://MariaRomana.com). You can also contact me directly through the contact page on the site.

## **Current Titles:**

### *The Gifted Ones Series*

[The Gifted Ones](#) is an episodic series, with each book running 60,000 to 90,000 words in length (250 to 350 paperback pages). Each episode is a complete story in itself, but leaves “dangling threads” to be resolved in later episodes. The stories are chronological and connected with recurring characters, so you will want to read them in order, similar to many action/adventure/mystery series on television.

[The Gifted Ones: A Reader](#) is the first book in the series and follows Elodie Eggleston's introduction to the Gifted Ones. Elodie is nerdy, awkward, and shy—just like a lot of other teenage girls. Or so her overprotective Aunt Grace would have her believe. But a frightening encounter with the handsome new boy in town starts Ellie on a path to uncovering her true identity and a certain genetic gift she never knew she had. In less than twenty-four hours, Ellie and her aunt are whisked away from their staid city life to a mysterious mountain retreat...where nothing and no one is quite what they seem. At first, Ellie embraces this enchanting new world and her new, Gifted friends and can't understand why Aunt Grace is so anxious to leave, but soon, Ellie learns

that “special” isn’t always better, and sometimes, it means running for your life.

In Book 2, [The Gifted Ones: A Learner](#), Daniel Holybear, a Native American Gifted One, finds himself at odds with a development company that is threatening the peaceful seaside town he grew up in. When the company’s construction project unearths a mysterious stone tablet, Daniel calls on his Gifted friends to help secure the stone and uncover its secrets. Their efforts to assist him, however, are complicated by a peculiar kinship Ellie senses between Daniel and the project’s lovely manager. As the relationship deepens, Ellie finds her Gift bringing more pain than pleasure to those around her, and ultimately leading one of them to the brink of tragedy.

### ***The Unbreakable Series***

If you’re a fan of medical mysteries or romantic suspense novels, you will enjoy Maria Elizabeth Romana’s *Unbreakable* series, a 2010 Readers Favorite Gold Medal Award Winner, consisting of [Little Miss Straight Lace](#), [Little Girl Lost](#), and [Daddy’s Little Girls](#).

Synopsis: When a dedicated researcher learns a bit too much about her client’s new drug, the horrors from her past seem destined to return. As her life begins to spin out of control, a dashing computer security expert arrives from South America and seems the perfect antidote. But is his sudden appearance just the happy coincidence it

seems? Find out in this series of novels which combine romance, mystery, and suspense to take the reader on a roller coaster ride of murder, mayhem, sex, and drugs—of the pharmaceutical variety, of course—until the very last page.

*“Romana’s characters are portrayed with skill, each is a credible person filled with foibles, warts and gaffes...the various twists and turns are handled with skill, are easily followed, and add depth and dimension often lacking in works provided by newer writers...Maria Romana’s Little Miss Straight Lace is a fast paced, keep ’em guessing and turning the page type read sure to intrigue readers who enjoy good writing, a bit of romance, a lot of action, and a downright good read.”*

—Molly Martin, [Midwest Book Review](#)

### Book Sample:

Josie pulled her laptop toward her, but peered out the corner of her eye. Damn it! They were sitting right up at the bar. Probably waiting for a table for dinner. Six o’clock, too. Why didn’t they make reservations? Losers. She watched Gary shift in his seat, opening his view to the room. Then, as he glanced around, acting casual, he caught her eye and grinned ever so slightly. A twinge poked in her belly. She quickly shifted her focus back to her laptop. *Ignore him, Josie. Your club, your friends, not his.*

“Jos!”

She looked up. It was Shawn, grinning from ear to ear. She grinned back. “So...did you work it out?”

“Better.” He plunked down in his seat and picked up his wine. “Guy was kissing my ass.” He tossed back the last of his glass. Josie leaned in to hear the scoop, but before Shawn could say any more, they were interrupted.

“Shawn, Josie, how are you two?”

Shawn answered for both of them, “Gary. Is there something we can do for you? Josie and I are in the middle of a very important meeting.”

Gary brushed the top of their empty wine bottle with his thumb. “Looks like it.” He turned to Josie. “Shawn tells me you’re just back from a little vacation with your boyfriend. I was kind of hoping I might get to meet him. Oscar says he’s a real swell guy. Nic, right? Not gone to South America again, is he?”

Pins and needles started pricking the back of her neck. Why was Gary asking about Nic? How was it he cared enough to remember Nic’s name and where he was from? An image flashed in her mind of the day at the airport, of Gary watching Nic load his bags in the trunk of the car. Was he going to do something to Nic? Try to get back at her by hurting him? Not while she was alive! Josie looked up and faced Goldman as she hadn’t before. Stupid sardonic grin. Ice cold green eyes—

nothing like Daddy's. She looked Gary in the eye and answered him, "None of your damn business."

Both Shawn's and Gary's eyebrows shot up. After a second, Gary recovered and reached out toward her, running his finger along the top edge of her computer. "Well now, that wasn't very friendly."

*Not very friendly, is she? Three guys standing around her and one behind—surrounded!*

Huh? What was that? What was she thinking of? Josie felt the color draining from her face.

Before anyone could say anything else, Gina reappeared at the table. "Josie, hun, sorry to interrupt, but would you taste test these for me? New recipe I'm trying. It's called chocolate covered golden hearts. See, it's these little flaky pastries with a layer of..."

But Josie wasn't listening. Chocolate covered golden hearts. Chocolate covered. Chocolate covers. Gold hearts. Josie could see it—a bed with a chocolate brown coverlet. Windows with chocolate brown drapes. A bathroom with chocolate brown towels. All with gold accents. Where? When? And Gary Goldman. Huh? Why was all this crap floating around in her head today?

"Josie? Will you, hun? Will you try them for me?"

She tried to focus on Gina's face and her pretty red hair, but Gina was standing right next to

Gary, who was still grinning his stupid grin and no doubt seeing the confusion on Josie's face. The voices in the room were pulling away, sounding distant. Someone had lowered the lights. And turned up the thermostat.

“Jos, you okay?” Shawn's voice.

“What is your name? Where do you live? Do you know who I am?” Gary's voice. But the words didn't match his lips. How was he asking that? *Why* was he asking that?

“Doctor, should I increase the dose now?” Gina's voice. But her lips weren't moving at all. And why would she call him doctor? Well, he was a doctor—of finance, right? But Gina didn't know that.

The room was getting darker still, and the voices in it further and further away. Crap—she was losing it. No, no, no. Not now. Not right in front of world's biggest jackass. Not right after she'd finally stood up to him. Josie pushed herself up from the table. *Just need to get out of here, get some fresh air.* She backed away from the table, knocking her chair down as she went, and ran toward the veranda door.

## ***The Birds Christmas Carol***

This illustrated edition of [\*The Birds Christmas Carol\*](#) is a remastering of the 1912 version of the timeless

Christmas classic, originally written by Kate Douglas Wiggin in 1886. It tells the story of Carol Bird, a wealthy but sickly young girl, who decides to bring the joy of Christmas to a neighboring family with nine children who have very little but each other. Despite its serious undercurrents, the story is lively and even comedic at times, as Carol endeavors to pull the holiday celebration together from her sickbed, while the Ruggles children struggle to learn how to behave in “fine society”.

The ebook version of *Birds* contains more than 30 original illustrations by accomplished artist Katharine R. Wireman. The book’s text has also been modestly rewritten to eliminate antiquated terms and writing conventions, making it more accessible to young readers, while preserving the charm and flavor of Ms. Wiggin’s original tale. Children and adults alike will fall in love with this story and want to read it year after year.

### ***Food, Glorious Food: The eBook Carb & Calorie Counter***

[\*Food, Glorious Food\*](#) is a comprehensive guide to nutrient values for more than 12,000 natural, packaged, and restaurant foods. Unlike other food count books, however, the information has been specifically formatted for ebook readers. Rather than squeezing numbers into narrow rows and columns, each entry is presented in the familiar nutrition label format, with resizable font and reflowable text. The book is easily searchable with with

active links and multi-layered indexes.

Features:

- Nutrition label format
- All the nutrient counts you need: calories, fats, protein, and carbohydrates, including fiber, sugar, and “net carbs”, cholesterol, and sodium
- Active (clickable) Table of Contents, Main Index, and Chapter Indexes
- Multiple serving sizes for most foods
- Weights and measures in both US and metric formats (ounces/grams and fluid ounces/millilitres)
- Fully searchable with the Epub search function

### ***About the Contributors***

*Story Author:* Maria Elizabeth Romana has a background in research statistics, with experience in psycho-social, pharmaceutical, and marketing research. She also spent six years as a volunteer and board member at the women’s center in Durham, NC. She has published articles on several websites and has two book series out. Her educational background includes degrees in mathematics and business. Maria lives in the Research Triangle region of North Carolina with her husband and two children.

*Story Editor:* Madeline P. Plimpton is managing editor of Research Triangle Publications in Research Triangle Park, NC. Maddie has over 30 years experience in



writing, editing, and publishing in a variety of industries in North Carolina and Virginia. She currently lives in the Raleigh-Durham area with her husband of 30 years, and enjoys visits from her three grown children.

*Publisher:* Research Triangle Publications is a small, independent press, specializing in works by authors local to the Research Triangle region of North Carolina. RT Pubs was formed in early 2010 as a wholly owned subsidiary of At Your Command Computing, Inc., a data analysis and software services company, established in 1995. The company currently has nine titles available, focusing on both fiction and non-fiction that reflects the scientific and analytic backdrop of this unique part of North Carolina. You can reach us through the [Research Triangle Publications](#) website.

### The End ###