

Little Miss Straight Lace

*A Novel of Mystery
and Romance*



by Maria E. Romana

*** Best Romantic Suspense, 2010 Readers Favorite Book Awards ***

Praise for **Little Miss Straight Lace**:

*"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."*

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"...a great beach read...all the ingredients for a story that's hard to put down..."

—Author A.J. Braithwaite, Inside Hawley Lodge ([full review](#)).

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Maria Elizabeth Romana

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Prologue

June 14, 1979

Clarkston, New Mexico

Tears stung Bobby Prescott's eyes, making it even harder to see in the near blackness of the dank hallway, as he ran stumbling, one hand blindly seeking the doorway he knew was there, the other gripping the waistband of his faded blue jeans. 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 second of illumination, moving across the hallway, showing him the crooked thick wooden doorframe that led to the room in the final 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 concrete 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. It was Johnny's idea, but they hadn't done anything to him, 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 God-awful 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 all 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, but 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.

"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, 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

May, 2007

Religious freaks! Goddamn zealots! Hmm...was that an oxymoron? He'd have to ask Josie about that; she was almost as good with words as she was with numbers. Dr. Shawn McKenna tumbled his curly red mop with one hand as he stared at his computer monitor. He didn't know what to think—junk e-mail, tasteless joke, or some truly twisted religious nuts out there in the ether? He swiveled around in his high-backed leather armchair and looked out over the campus of Research Triangle Technologies, the private research firm where Shawn headed up the Hormonal Products Division in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Shawn wasn't a crusader. No, not him—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, messing with his handsome government contracts.

Six floors below, he could see a few 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's caboose scooting past his partially open 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, yeah. 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 actually 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 she pissed off the clients, and bitch to her about it later.

As if she cared. Yes, promptness, professionalism, and respect were the qualities a man looked for in his employees. Good damn thing Josie wasn't one of them. She was a private contractor. 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? Nope, 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 memo? Write an email? Oh no, that would've been too easy. She brought it up, right in the meeting with the study sponsor. "Know what, Fred?" —Josie called him Fred, *nobody* called the man 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 balls, 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 32DD's. Shit. Shawn laughed at himself for even thinking it. Not like anybody could help noticing. He suspected that that whole why-this-old-thing? look she favored in her business attire was actually the result of careful calculation. In the Chiroan meeting, for instance, Josie had worn 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 piece of ass. The whole time they were staring at her, watching her move, they knew she was fucking 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.

"May be. But first, I've got a few things for ya. Sit." She did as he commanded, setting her bag on the floor. "This—" He tossed her a business-sized envelope with RTT's logo on it, "—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 Right* 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, and

she opened it in her lap. “So, what does it say?”

“He expresses his undying gratitude...” She held up what had been a much-folded piece of paper and smiled, “...with a whole lot of zeroes.”

“Nice work, kiddo. And you realize, of course, that when you kick ass 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. Jesus, 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?”

She rolled her eyes. “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 reached in her bag and started pulling out her laptop. “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-that jerk. 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.”

“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? Make a pass? 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 narrowed his eyes and 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, and 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 piece of internet trash—”

“Wait a minute, slow down. What makes you think this has anything to do with you personally? This is just some kind of random extremist group 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. They’re cancer trials and depression trials and menopause trials—all after-market 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 or something? 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?”

“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. Who knows?” She looked up at him, “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 Henry’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 Maggie can’t stand him.”

“She has great instincts, Jos.”

Josie walked back around the desk, saying only, “I’m unspeakably late.” She picked up her bag and her flowers, and then started out the door.

“Say, uh, Jos—don’t mention any of this Warriors of God crap to Maggie, okay? 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 Henry, 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.

As Josie hurried through the RTT parking lot to her jade green Acura, clutching the flowers in one hand, she fished in her bag with the other. Where was her damn phone? She needed to call Toral; she was supposed to be there already. She finally found it and flipped it open. Blank screen—crap. She pressed the power button. Zippo—double crap. Why, oh, why was she such a loser with these things? Maybe she could get it charged in the car—didn’t want Beni and Rosa worrying about her. Any more than they already did.

She quickly pulled out of the lot and over the overpass onto I-40 towards Raleigh, pressing the pedal all the way down and reveling in the surge of power the Acura’s three-hundred horsepower engine gave her. She reveled in the surge of power given to her by the 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 asshole Gary Goldman had set her back a bit. She hoped she hadn’t let it show. Didn’t want Shawn worrying about her, either, or worse, thinking she was a wimp or a chickenshit.

She settled the car into fifth and eased down into the seat a bit, smoothing the skirt of her navy linen dress. Glad she’d worn this outfit today. She always liked to look neat and conservative when she saw the Torals. Never wore those killer meeting outfits designed to keep all the men shaking in their boots. She didn’t like wearing all that Fifth Avenue crap, but she needed to make them think she was tough, hard as nails, unbreakable. Didn’t need any more Jacks in her life. Or Gary Goldmans, for that matter.

Yikes—eighty-five! *Slow down, Josie. Take it easy.*

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

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 street. 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 insomnia market. 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.

Should have, except for a 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, fatigue, memory lapses, confusion, and even complete emotional breakdowns. But these problems occurred only after 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 found 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 said, "Gary."

He was a big man, forty-five or fifty, 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 Ortho 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 caused 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?"

"Jesus, 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 certainly couldn't tell him that 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 all 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 the 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 demanded, "Do it!"

She wanted to do *something*—run, scream, hide—but nothing came.

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 control 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 at her 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 fucking reports. Hell, no. No way was she doing anything for that bastard. 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 creep. 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. Fuck him. Fucking bastard.

A big green sign warned Josie that she'd soon be in Garner. Shit. She'd passed the damn exit. Five miles ago. Shit! She was already forty-five minutes late. She checked the 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 didn't slow in time to avoid 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, 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?"

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 snickered. "Yeah, that sounded pretty hilarious." Then, thinking about it, 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 response was heated, "Oh, so now I am supposed to go 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. 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."

"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. Benito 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. "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 sports car? ¿En coche? ¿El azul?"

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."

Oh, 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, when 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, Josephina, 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. 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, “I hated to call you at the last minute, my dear, but you must help me with something.”

“It’s okay. What’s up?”

“There is something wrong with the computer. All the data we have been collecting for the big cancer 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.” Josie 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 Henry. 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, Josephina, 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. And that Shawn, her dear, loyal old friend, did, too—even willing to “kick some guy’s ass” for her. Wished her own damn mother had cared that much.

Chapter Two

With her eyes closed, the late afternoon sun that streamed through the slats of the thick wooden blinds of her bedroom window had Josie soaking up rays on her daddy's sailboat, somewhere off the North Carolina coast. 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, while her daddy whistled a sailor's ditty from his perch at the wheel in the back, and feel 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 late May and with the windows open halfway, memories of that summertime sweat became very real. A slightly fishy smell was coming up from the lake. If she had heard a seagull caw, she could've given up on reality altogether. Henry, poised above her, his white 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-aming..."

Henry 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 a moment, while he nuzzled the sides with his lips. Josie felt only the gentle rocking of the waves and the steam heat of the southern shore. When Henry 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!" Henry 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 Henry'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, big, powerful arms ending in monstrous hands. One of the hands was wrapped firmly around the base of 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 too-long 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. *Josie, get a grip! Control it. Push it away. Open your eyes, Josie.* 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 Henry'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.

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

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

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.

Henry 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. Christ, at twenty-eight, he was still a young man with a young man’s appetite, but it had become easier over time. And he had found her a lusty and willing partner, once they’d gotten past that interminable waiting period—whatever that was about. But, hey, he could afford to wait. Of course, every once in a while, she’d get a little weird on him—cold, withdrawn, even crying maybe—but women have those moods, right? If he just left her alone for a while, it always passed. Overall, 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 Annette Funicello—than the bony, starving actresses so much in favor these days. As he observed her movements, he felt himself warming again. Damn! He had to close his eyes. He was supposed to be asleep.

But after a moment, he couldn’t resist watching again. 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?), both in green, and then some silky green dress with a deep v-neck. The matching four-inch heels, he knew, would be back by the door. 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 face paint. As soon as he heard the door close behind her, he hopped up, threw on his own clothes, and headed out.

“Where is that stupid prick?” Gary Goldman glanced around impatiently, then flipped open his box of Marlboro Reds, and banged 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—and leave their cash cows in the can a little 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, and the glint in Gary's eye as he'd responded, "Damn near, Oscar, damn near." Somehow, that little interchange had snowballed into Gary's latest ideas—the chemical activator and the "borrowed" data. Brilliant ideas, really. Gary was a brilliant man, after all—Columbia and Princeton and all that shit—but they'd needed a lot of help to pull those ideas off, 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 the 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 gotta 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 a fuckin' 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; they work hard every day; 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 benefits 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. "Here he comes," 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—"

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

Chapter Three

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 Henry? He'd been out of town—out west somewhere on business, he said—for the last three days, and he'd left her a message the day before confirming 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 impatiently around 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 chatted with a hundred different people at once. 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 Henry, but sheesh, she was starving. Maybe she should try to call again; she'd tried several times that day, and only got "out of the service area". She hated that. No doubt other people hated it when they were trying to reach her.

Oh, why did she care if he showed, anyway? It wasn't like she came here to socialize, right? The club was supposed to be about business, as she reminded herself every month when she wrote that painful dues check. And it was great for that. It was one of the finest country clubs in North Carolina, and while all the members were certainly upper crust, they were also warm, genteel folk, not stereotypical snobs. Josie found it much easier to "network" in this welcoming atmosphere, surrounded by friends and neighbors, than at any stuffy old Chamber of Commerce meetings downtown. She didn't have to be Josie Natale, tough, hard-nosed businesswoman, here. She didn't have to wear killer business attire. She could just be herself. And besides, the food was out of this world.

"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, "I'm Josie. Josie Natale." Seemed like a good 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 indicated table.

He turned to look. "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 looking for Henry. She started to get up from where she and Dr. Loggia had been sitting. Who-o-o-a. She sat back down. Must’ve had more than she thought. She wasn’t a big drinker—usually just a couple glasses 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, did she? Maybe she should do that now.

Or not. All of a sudden, she wasn’t feeling so great. Maybe she should head straight for the ladies’ lounge. There were some nice soft couches in there. Josie got up again and turned in that direction.

Uh-oh, trouble—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 with some muscle-headed blonde boy. *Sorry, Rosa, not tonight.*

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

Josie took a deep breath and headed for the Venetian table. She gave the server a polite nod. Gee, now that she thought about it, it seemed like an awful lot of times that he had poured those little samples for her and Dr. Loggia.

“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.

“Y-you want to 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 judgment. 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 her, 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 porch, 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 Maggie would be looking for her, she decided it was time to return to the party. Aloud she said, "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!"

Suddenly, 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 it 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. 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 were starting to take 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—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?"

"I...I did."

"So you were out here the whole time?"

"I was."

"Watching me? And you didn't say anything?" Knowing it would appear odd not to face him at

that point, Josie finally turned around, hoping the dim lighting would prevent him seeing 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 print. 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. Looked like he'd actually 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, 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?" She asked, one 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."

"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. "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. 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 actually 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 to 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—I—”

Were it not for the injustice that 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...ah...let’s 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. “Henry!”

Maggie wrinkled up her nose, “Another Henry?”

“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 Henry?”

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.

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

“Wait! My shoes!”

“Never mind, 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? Henry’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 Henry like they’re old friends. Oh, I get it, he’s pretending to be roaring drunk. Hey, he’s pretty funny. And Henry 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 Henry, he spilled red wine on him. Boy, is Henry 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 Henry 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 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-blond hair behind her ears and batted her blue eyes fervently.

“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.” She 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, ya 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 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.

The section of the lake path from the clubhouse to the McKenna’s house was only a half-mile, but Josie had never been big on “sharing” anyway, so she was more than happy to condense 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 the forty-two-inch plasma screen TV. Josie watched, grinning, while Maggie searched every crevice of his 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 hell 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. 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 certainly didn't expect a great guy like Shawn to want her.

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 immediately pushed the bowl of grapes toward Josie and then 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 am pretty hungry."

"It's what I do, Jos." She began to chop the ends off the celery stalks. "But it's not just your nutritional status I worry about. You know, I try to keep my mouth shut...okay, no I don't, but sometimes I just can't figure out what you're thinking 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 lately, Henry's become an exception even to that rule, and..." She wrinkled her brow, "You didn't want to talk about this, did you?"

"It's okay—you care. I get that. You just don't understand, Mags." 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 before turning back to face her. "I just can't be that picky. You know how it is—all kinds of guys ask me out, but then, after a few dates..." Josie focused her attention on the bowl in front of her and started playing with the grapes.

"Yeah..." said Maggie, encouragingly.

"Well, then, they figure out what a freak I am, and they don't want to go out with me anymore."

"Jos...that's not true. What about Trey? 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, "See, Maggie, most guys just don't have the patience to deal with me, and I have to settle for the ones who can."

"So then, patience is the ultimate Natale 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."

“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 Henry, 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-one. Say, uh, Mags...” She 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 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 Henry, 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. He must go for that whole ‘Fresh off the Hurricane Express’ look.”

“I don’t look that bad, do I?” Josie checked her reflection in one of the shiny appliances behind Maggie before continuing, “Mags, don’t you get it? It’s not that simple. If I break up with Henry, then I’ll be alone, and I’ll have to start all over again, and who knows how long it’ll be before I find another guy who can...tolerate me? Besides, Henry’s a good boyfriend, and I’m...fond of him.”

“Fond—mmm. And ‘good boyfriend’. Define that, please.”

“You know: candy, flowers, cards, nice dates, dependable—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. Have you been watching those nighttime soaps again? Look, sweetie, Henry 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 you can share your soul with? Someone you can share your dreams with? 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, “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 finally and took the stool Josie had intended for her. She turned sideways against the counter to face her friend. “You took care of it? Nightmares aren’t like warts or bad teeth, honey. You can’t just have them removed.”

“I can do anything I put my mind to.”

Maggie threw up her hands. “Okay, fine. 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. It’s over and done with. And I did talk to you about it. You and Shawn—you’re the only ones I ever confide in.”

“Jos, one sentence? That’s for Reader’s Digest. It 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 one night, too.”

“He did?”

“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.” 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 walked up between the two women. He brought his arms down and wrapped one around each of their necks, pulling their heads into his chest. He kissed them both on the tops of their heads, 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?”

Both women laughed, 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, “Rough night?”

“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 were not 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 party.

“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-striped 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’re 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.

Josie rolled her eyes. “Oh, you sly dog, you.”

“Daddy said we shouldn’t wake Mommy, because she needs her beauty sleep to stay so radishly gor...gorgeous,” pronounced Camryn 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.”

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

Josie grinned. “Didn’t imagine so. What was your story going to be?” she asked, then instinctively

grabbed little Nate by the behind as he tried to dive off the side of the bed.

"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. Henry Clarkston today. But, uh, what do I get for my trouble?" She raised 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 bedclothes. "Thanks, Jos. You're the best."

"De nada, amigo."

Henry'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 door. 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 Henry. 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 bastard was he. Though once she'd finally let him in the door, he'd never stopped coming. Hmm, she had to grin at her own wicked little pun.

She opened the door, and stepped back to let him inside. Henry 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 pulled back, grinning. "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 pulled her to him, 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. "Oh, sorry, almost forgot. I brought you something." He pushed away from her and pulled a small box out of his pants pocket.

"Henry. 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."

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. Hand-made."

"Why Henry, 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 Henry 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 teen-ager. 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 them and turning them, just as the sun always would, like on the deck of her daddy's boat. And as she had watched the sea lions 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 Henry away.

"Jos?"

"I-I'm too tired right now. And I'm all dirty and sweaty..."

"But Jos—" He looked bewildered, then he scowled at her.

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 Henry was right—the "outdoorsy" scent was indeed erotic. But Henry 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.

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