

Destiny's Women by Morgan Elliot

Destiny's Women

By

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Edited by Melissa Barker
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DEDICATION

I am thankful to my wife, whose encouragement and genial tolerance keep me on track. But most of all, I am grateful for not being booted to the curb for my endless proofreading requests and constant questioning, “Do you have any ideas for new stories?”

Much appreciation goes to Erin Wade, who gave me my start, and opened my eyes to how much I loved to write.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very sincere “thank you” to my wonderful Beta Readers Mayra Luria and Angela Jost whose diligent and thoughtful comments made *Destiny's Women* a better story. I appreciate all that you do.

PLAYLIST

Enjoy this specially curated playlist to accompany each story in “Destiny’s Women.” Hopefully, these songs will enhance your overall reading experience. Simply click on it or, copy and paste into your browser.

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4BpA2ANkiwgH3BEwOU86qc?si=0b5e89c619fe42d3>

COVER DESIGN

B. Wyc

PROLOGUE

Destiny's Women is a multi-genre collection of Sapphic Short Stories that will remind you that love is the ultimate force in shaping our destinies, and the actions we take can lead us to the most unexpected outcomes. In this remarkable collection, you'll be drawn into the lives of women whose choices outline the course of their lives and lead them on unforgettable journeys as they navigate the complexities and consequences of their decisions, redefining what it means to be true to oneself.

Each tale is witness to the strength of the human spirit, the magic of serendipity, and the transformative power of love. Whether navigating the challenges of modern life or facing the unknown fantastical worlds, these women are bound by one common thread—their unwavering pursuit of self-discovery.

Destiny's Women dares to delve into the complex emotions that come with taking chances in the face of the unknown and each story is a testament to the beauty of sapphic love and the questions that we all ask ourselves. *What happens when we follow our hearts? Can love conquer all obstacles... even fate itself, and what does it mean to be truly free?*

Prepare to be moved, enchanted, and inspired as you embark on a journey through these beautifully crafted tales of love, adventure, and destiny. Whether you're a romance enthusiast or simply a lover of beautifully written stories, this collection will stay with you long after the final page is turned.

Morgan

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DREAMSCAPE

I looked across the small lake where I had been sitting all afternoon pondering how to move forward. I had spent weeks nursing a blow to my ego, feeling like an envelope without an address.

There was no one else around. Everyone had left as it got closer to sunset. The sky changed from minute to minute. The wisps of flamboyant pink were overtaken by flaming orange-yellow streaks. The clouds were painted with gray-blue creating a dazzling contrast as the sun dipped its toes into the water.

In my periphery, I caught a motion and turned to look at what had drawn me away from the dazzling sunset. All I could see was a black dot, but I could see it was moving. As the sun sank lower, beginning to slip behind the line of the horizon, I could see the dot swimming toward me.

Curious, I stood up, walked across the narrow beach, and waded into the water up to my waist. I still couldn't identify it, but it was moving like a bullet aimed toward my chest. I moved a little deeper into the water, almost robotically, as if something else were governing me.

It was now fifty yards from me, which is about half the length of a football field. I could see it was a swan with its white-tipped wings pulled tightly against its body. As it approached me, it uttered a musical bugle-like sound, stopped swimming, and glided to a halt two feet from me, its head at my eye level.

Its short orange-red bill with a white band near its tip was a stark contrast to its black feathers. It studied me for a long moment, as I studied it. The more I gazed at the swan, the more beautiful it became, and for a moment my heart felt content. Somehow, I knew the swan was a female. She started softly crooning as if she were trying to soothe me, and I let myself be lulled into a relaxed state. I don't know how, but I could understand her swan-talk.

“You, my dear, Azara, must always remember that the idea of love can unexpectedly be like a shot to the heart and you never know if it will light you on fire or scar you.”

There was no other word. I was ‘stupefied.’ Responding in her language, I replied, “How did you know when I was watching you I thought about a bullet to the heart?”

“Her words to you were bullets to your heart. They left emotional scars that haven’t healed. I can feel the deep longing that clouds you.”

For a long moment I stood still, at a complete loss of what to say. She swam around me, then stopped in front of me again, saying, “It is our ability to be grateful in the face of adversity and sadness, that in the end brings us hope and courage.”

She turned and began swimming away from me. I called out to her, “Wait!”

Turning, she said, “Why?”

I asked her what her name was. She trumpeted and shot toward me so fast, I didn’t have time to get out of the way. Purposefully, she rammed into my chest knocking me over backwards into the water. Spitting out water, I righted myself not knowing what to think about her seemingly aggressive behavior.

Suddenly, she looked at me with softer eyes. For the slightest moment, she transformed into a glowing, captivating woman, golden hair flowing around her shoulders. “I am Valsora, Queen of Sonomi.” A moment later, the swan swam away from me, leaving me with a depth of emptiness I didn’t think possible.



The first sounds I heard were beeps echoing through my head. Then I heard another sound from a distance reverberating, louder and louder. Pain seemed to cleave my

head in half. Amidst the throbbing, I began to identify the sound. It was a voice calling my name.

I willed myself to open my eyes, but the light seared my brain, and I closed them tightly. After hearing some movement around me, I tried once more .

“Azara, try to wake up,” said the kindly voice. The light dimmed. I squinted and moved my eyes toward the voice. There, next to me, stood a woman dressed in a blue scrub top. She touched my cheek and asked, “Do you know where you are?”

“Near the lake?” I whispered.

“No, sweetie, you are in the hospital.”

“Why? I was wading in the water.”

“You might be a little confused because you have been unconscious in the hospital for three days.”

“Did I have an accident in the water?”

“Not in the water, but in the Faber Building. You were in one of the elevators. The cable broke and the elevator crashed to the basement. You were seriously injured.”

The woman now held my wrist while she looked at her watch in the dim light over my bed. She lowered my gown a bit from my neck. Her fingers were soft and warm. I winced when she put her cold stethoscope on my chest and wondered if she heard a heartbeat.

“Your heart and pulse seem okay. You didn’t have a very strong heartbeat when you got here. We didn’t think you’d last the night.”

She moved away from me and typed something into a computer near my bed. When she finished she said, “Would you like some water?”

I didn’t understand. I had been in water and swallowed several mouthfuls when the swan rammed me.

“To drink,” she encouraged as she moved a plastic cup with a straw to my mouth.

I drank a little then asked, “Where is Valsora?”

“There isn’t anyone here by that name, and I don’t think you have had any visitors.”

“I saw her. She was here with me,” I insisted.

“Maybe she came before my shift. I’ll go check. Everyone that visits a patient in this Intensive Care Unit must sign in.” She adjusted the pump that controlled my IV, affectionately squeezed my shoulder, and left.

I wanted to wait for her to come back, but my eyes became heavy as the roaring of the waves broke and crashed to the shore.



“Azara, Azara, come back to me,” crooned the swan.

I couldn’t see her, but somehow, she was in my head.

“Stop and listen to me,” the voice commanded. “If you insist on keeping the ties to your outer world intact, they will sweep away what you really want.”

Turning slowly, I strained to see her, but all I saw was the gray sky eager to fade into night. *Maybe that is where dreams hid love*, I mused. Sadness invaded my heart and coiled around it like a python squeezing the life out of its prey.



I drifted in and out of consciousness that night, being pulled by some unseen force into a world I didn’t recognize. I swear I could feel the force with my hand, just as I used to feel the heartbeat of my beloved when I laid my hand upon her chest. This force was like a living, beating heart expelling wisps of love in a warm spring night. I heard the swan’s whispers as they moved across the distance. I surrendered and floated on the lake, peacefully, ceasing to be who I was, wanting only to know her, Valsora.

Shouts, an irregular high pitch sound, and feverish movement around my bed, dragged me from my dream just long enough to hear, "Clear." I felt an immense jolt, a burning sensation, and then nothing. I opened my eyes to see the woman in the blue scrubs and two others looking down at me.

"What happened?" I stuttered.

"Your heart went into an unstable rhythm. We had to shock it back into a normal rhythm. That's all. You are okay now."

The two people I hadn't seen before, left with the equipment. The woman in the blue scrubs stayed.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"I'm Marley, your night nurse," she answered. "Azara, is there anyone we can call for you?"

"No, I'm alone, just a cousin in Europe, but I had better let my boss know. Do you know how long I will be here?"

"Umm, it may be a while. You had a brain bleed which required surgery to fix. They also had to operate on your arm, your legs are banged up, and you are badly bruised. We are watching for internal bleeding."

"Is there a possibility I can get someone to send my boss an email for me?"

"I can do that for you. Do you want to do that now? It's 4:30 a.m."

"Yes, I would like to do it now, if that is okay with you." Marley pulled out a phone from her pocket and asked, "what is the email address?"

It took me a moment to remember the address, but I did. I told Marley what to say and when she was finished, I reached for her hand with my uninjured arm, tubes trailing and tangling. She let me hold her hand while I thanked her for her kindness. When I let go, Marley offered, "You can have another pain injection now if you want."

I liked Marley. She was kind, gentle, and accommodating, but I wanted to drift off into a morphine

induced sleep. I knew it was ridiculous, but I was pining for the black swan. I knew she was Valsora. Maybe she would reveal herself again.



I was a child sitting near the patch of Lillies of the Valley that grew in my grandmother's backyard. Surrounded by their intoxicating scent, I sat under the shade of a huge Norway Maple. I was fond of that generous tree. It never complained all the years I had leaned against it, reading book after book.

A light, cool breeze blew through my hair, bringing with it the scent of old-fashioned, repeat blooming roses which made their home year after year against the south side of the house. From a very early age, I had associated these fragrances with being safe, being loved. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply letting the scent permeate through me.

When I opened my eyes, no longer was I in my grandmother's yard. I was at Mt. Olivet Catholic Cemetery. It was the final resting place of my parents, aunts and uncles, and my grandparents. No longer was I a child, but I was feeling the loss of my grandmother just as acutely as when she passed years ago. Now, I was standing in front of her gravestone and heard my mother's voice on the wind.

"Don't you dare cry. She wouldn't have wanted that," she scolded.

"She was my grandmother!" I sobbed loudly as tears streamed down my cheeks. My mother was gone now, and I let my tears flow freely. It was my grandmother whose love shaped me even when my heart was breaking.

Wandering aimlessly, I walked along a path that led to a contemplation pond. A small waterfall spilled streams of water into the pond, making a "whoosh" that was oddly calming. There were benches scattered around the pond, but they were as vacant as birds' nests once the fledglings learned to fly.

An immense exhaustion settled around me. I chose a bench opposite the waterfall and soon became absorbed in the play of the water droplets as they were tossed high, glimmering in sunbeams. My vision dropped to the surface of the pond for a moment, and I realized that my wish had been fulfilled. The swan was languidly swimming toward me. In what seemed like no time at all, she was waddling up the grassy shore. She trumpeted in greeting, flapped her wings in a most ferocious way, and right before my eyes, transformed into Queen Valsora. She was flawless and beautiful, though 'beautiful' was a word that would never capture her exceptional majesty, her countenance, and her arresting deep purple eyes.

Valsora sat next to me, her thigh pressed against my own. I couldn't contain my emotions. I had to know.

"Queen Valsora, why did you first appear to me as the black swan?"

Taking my hand in hers, she answered, "The swan is my sacred spirit creature and I often take its form to observe and influence the mortal realms. Sometimes I borrow the form of a familiar person in your life. I came to you this way so that I would not frighten you."

Entirely captivated, I looked deeply into her eyes and said, "Your eyes...they remind me of orchids."

Valsora smiled and told me they were her favored flowers. "Do you want to know how they became my favorite?"

"Yes, please."

"A very long time ago, I met a dream seer, Lira. She fell in love with a priestess named Orchas. Lira was so in love, she spent decades of constant adoration of the priestess. I took notice of her, and when she was nearing death from a poison potion from King Celani, who hated dream seers that could see his evil ways, I whispered to her the formula for the antidote. Its main ingredient was a flower with three petals, three sepals, one column, and a single protruding lip.

It was a beautiful flower with unmistakable symmetry, but it was yet to be named.

“Lira and the priestess Orchas sought out the blossom, and with Lira’s life-breath fading, found the purple flower. It reminded Lira of her beautiful priestess and she named it after her to symbolize love, power, and wisdom, all the qualities Orchas possessed. The priestess consumed the antidote to make sure it wouldn’t cause further harm to Lira. Then Lira drank and it released both their souls to the dream realm to spend eternity together.”

“But why is it your favorite flower?”

“Do you remember I told you I was Queen of Sonomi?”

“Yes.”

“Simply put, Sonomi refers to dreams. I am queen of the dream realm.”

“And it is your favorite because the flower brought deserving souls to you to live in eternity?”

“Because two beautiful souls chose to come to Sonomi after being saved by the flower,” Valsora whispered. Moving her body toward me, she caressed my cheek, smoothed my wind-blown hair, and brushed my lips with hers.

Even as brief as the kiss was, my heart pounded wildly. I sat there feeling desire explode throughout my body. When her fingers touched my neck and moved my hair away, chills ran through me while my heart skipped beats and my belly turned somersaults. Yet I felt safe, utterly protected.

As our lips met a second time, I felt her hands gently cup my face. She deepened the kiss, her lips moving with urgency, and nothing else mattered— not my bruised ego, not painful memories, not loneliness. There was no past and no future, only the now of the kiss.

When Valsora released me, the world had faded away and all that was left was a dance with two hearts in perfect harmony.



“Wake up, Azara. Come on, honey, wake up.” The voice was Marley’s.

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes to her leaning over me with her stethoscope on my chest, her face within inches of mine.

“What is it, Marley?” I asked in confusion.

“Your heart was doing its funny little dance again.”

“Is it okay now?”

“Yes, it has settled now. I looked over your records for the last few days, and it only seems to act up when you are sleeping.”

I almost said out loud, *not while I am sleeping, while I am dreaming*. It was a moment I would remember forever. The dream was so real, and the kiss would stay with me to my last living day.



Moon Brook...that’s what it was called. The water was cold and deep at the bend where a fallen tree spanned the stream. I straddled it and recalled how I escaped from the incessant nagging of my cousin who wanted to hunt garter snakes. It was still, quiet, and very humid. As drowsiness worked its way through my body, I heard what I thought fairy dust sounded like as it danced gracefully through the air.

“Shall I tell you about Shea?” It didn’t seem strange to see Valsora straddling the tree trunk, facing me, our knees touching.

“It is too painful,” I responded.

“I know, my dear Azara, but it will help you see what it really was.” She did not wait for me to agree and began the side of the story I never wanted to admit.

“Shea appeared harmless, a specimen of brilliance, with devilish wit, dazzling and irrepressible. For a while, you

watched her from afar, wishing she would stand at your bedroom door. She was like a wild orchid growing in the air, inviting you to attach yourself to her high tree. Your heart was ensnared.”

Valsora paused and reached over to wipe away my tears with her thumbs. She kissed me gently and continued. “It wasn’t her beauty that sang to you. Promises were made, hidden in a dance of seduction, simultaneously enchanting and entrapping, coloring your sky with what you thought was love.”

“Wait,” I stammered. “How do you know this?”

“When you are in my world, I know everything. You see, you are an old soul, pure and innocent, and you never imagined that there would be danger in her touch. You were not capable of understanding that your laughter and adoration would cost a fortune, a thousand moments of pain.”

No longer could I hold back the sobs. Valsora moved closer to me, and embraced me as I fell forward, my head on her shoulder. “Azara, she enjoyed the chase more than the prize. Can you now see the mask covering her heart? I offer you a chance to awaken from your stupor, to escape the pain, and though the journey is uncharted, it promises freedom.”

A bitter-sweet memory uncoiled from the outskirts of my mind. My anger was exhausted. Entrapment’s grip had been consumed and the clouds no longer warred with the sky. “What do you want from me?”

“To choose.”

“But why me?” I wailed, breaking away from her embrace.

“Because you love purely and with a child’s faith. I will leave you now to decide, but I will be here always.”



“Azara, open your eyes.” Marley’s voice floated on the air, reaching the wisps of consciousness that still remained. “Are you awake? I need to explain something to you.”

“Yes,” I replied drowsily.

“You’ve had another bout of those funny little heart beats. The cardiologist ordered a Holter monitor.”

“What is that?”

“A Holter monitor is a type of portable electrocardiogram. It records the electrical activity of the heart continuously for several days. Here, let me show you.”

Marley held up what looked like a butterfly with a square device in the middle. “I’m going to stick this on your chest, and it will send a record of your heartbeats wirelessly to the cardiologist. It should help us find out why you are having the arrhythmias when you sleep.”

“But aren’t you already monitoring my heart?”

“Yes, but the Holter will stay on you when you go home.”

In a few minutes, Marley had placed the monitor, confirmed it was working, and left. I desperately wanted to go back to sleep, but I didn’t understand Valsora’s offer. *Was she offering me her love? Would I have to die, or be in a coma state. Would I be living in the dream world? Would I be able to regain my consciousness if I chose to go with her? Was there a way back?* Over and over, these questions assaulted my mind. It would be a costly investment, bartering my sorrow for a drop of true love, but I craved it.



When I awoke, the blinds were open. I could see the blue sky splattered with white puffy clouds. Before I had time to question why Valsora had not come to me in my dreams after Marley had placed the Holter monitor on me, the day nurse came striding in.

“Good morning, Azara. You have been scheduled for a series of tests today. Your attending physicians had a meeting late yesterday and are considering letting you go home soon, pending the results of the tests. It may also mean that you get stepped down to a regular room instead of staying here in the ICU.”

I thanked her for the information and instead of concerning myself with what tests I would be subjected to, I worried Valsora might not come to me at home. Yes, I realized an attachment to a dream fantasy was dangerous.



Marley settled me for the night. I had asked for pain medication, not because I was in terrible pain, but that I wanted to sleep. *Why had she not come again last night? Had she given up on me? I felt a terrible longing in my chest. It was a hundred times more intense than the longing I had for Shea when I fell in love with her. Was I in love with Valsora?*

Riding in a car, I was looking out the window trying to grasp the achingly beautiful mountains in the distance. They were craggy and covered with snow. The vertical walls and sheer cliffs rose majestically above deep valleys.

“They are the Sensoria Mountains,” a voice next to me replied. Startled, I turned to find a youngish man dressed in a royal blue tuxedo next to me. “You look surprised. Don’t be alarmed. Valsora sent me to fetch you.”

Stammering, I asked, “Who are you?”

“Ah, my sister has failed to tell you about me.” He laughed and shook his head, feigning annoyance. “I am Prince Nestor, Valsora’s younger brother.”

Truly, I had no idea how to react. I felt I was in a dream, but I also felt I was still in my physical consciousness.

He smiled gently and sighed. "I am guessing you feel that you have one foot in the outer world and one foot in the inner world."

Gasping, I asked, "How did you know?"

"Because there is a very powerful spiritual place here in the Sensoria Peaks where the two worlds merge. Nothing is superficial. Everything is taken in and becomes 'luxury for the soul'."

"I'm sorry, Prince Nestor, I do not understand."

"You will. My sister will explain further. By the way, Azara, you look stunning in your tuxedo."

Looking down at myself, it was the first time I had noticed how I was dressed. The suit was exquisite, made from a cloth I could not place. It gave off an energy that seemed to weave with my own.

I stayed quiet for the remainder of the ride until the driver turned onto a narrow road that wound through a lush landscape filled with flowering trees, bushes, and flowers. Minutes later, the car crested a small hill and began its journey toward an expansive building surrounded with gardens, walkways, and sparkling pools. It was a stunning sight to behold with its towering columns and numerous balconies overlooking the green, rolling hills.

Its intricate architecture was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was as if every piece of the construction was blended to create an awe-inspiring opulent experience... everything seemed to be floating though it was anchored with brick and mortar. Prince Nestor came around to my side of the car, opened the door, and helped me out.

We walked through a small manicured garden to an expanse of stairs. The scent of roses and lilies of the valley hung in the air. As if by magic, once we reached the massive door, it opened to expose the mansion's grand entrance with its sweeping staircase and a grand foyer crafted with shiny marble. The intricate details gave a sense of majesty and splendor.

“This way, Azara,” said Prince Nestor, as he grasped my elbow and led me down a corridor that made me feel as if I had stepped into some sort of fairy tale. *I was deeply embedded in a dream tale.*

“Just through here is Valsora’s private library. She will be with you shortly.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

“No. I must attend to some final details for the gathering that will start in a while. People will be arriving soon.”

Nodding, I walked through the door Prince Nestor held open for me, and what I saw, or perhaps, what I felt, was awe. When the prince had mentioned “library” I had envisioned a dark space that one often sees in British Victorian films— with floor to ceiling shelves filled with bound books. Those libraries were what I often envisioned to be “gentlemen’s” parlors with their ever-present cigar smoke that permeated the leather of the wing chairs scattered throughout the room.

It was nothing like that at all. It was spacious, properly ventilated, and well lighted from the floor to ceiling glass doors that opened to a huge outdoor courtyard with rolling gardens, fountains, and the Sensoria Peaks in the background. The shelves were on a second-floor open catwalk decorated with ornate metal work. On one side of the main floor, there was a raised platform with a desk, sideboard, and chairs. The room was paneled with light woods, a cream wall to wall carpet, and traditional chairs and sofas were placed in the center.

As I walked from one end of the room to the other, dragging my finger along the highly polished woods, I heard Valsora’s voice calling my name. Turning, I saw her standing by the desk. “Do you like it?” she asked.

“Yes,” I breathed back. Walking toward me, I waited to see what she would do. Stopping a foot or two short of where I was standing, she said, “I know you have been wondering about many things. After tonight, I will answer all your

questions.” She embraced me and pulled me close to her, looked deeply into my eyes, and then kissed me for a long while.

“I don’t want to let you go, but we must attend the gathering that is starting outside.”

I had failed to notice that people were arriving, and the courtyard was filled with movement and chatter. “Will you tell me what the gathering is for?” I asked.

“Yes.” She continued to hold me close while she spoke. “Do you remember the story I told you about the dream seer Lira and the priestess, Orchas?” I nodded and she continued. “And what about King Celani?”

“Yes, Valsora, I remember. He wanted to destroy the dream seers in your kingdom.”

“I may have forgotten to tell you that the priestess Orchas was from King Celani’s realm. He wanted to take her for his own bride, and since he was denied, he has waged attacks against the dream seers and others from his kingdom who have sought refuge in Sonomi. Now, the dreamseers on the Council have foreseen King Celani’s sporadic attacks blossom into a full war.”

“Do your intelligence sources confirm this?”

Valsora smiled indulgently. “If the dream seers are foreseeing this, it will come to pass. We know this from hundreds of years of experience thwarting his attacks.”

“Then, the gathering? What is it for?”

“The good souls that are here tonight are the Council of Sonomi. They are my trusted advisors and will provide their input of what actions we should take to protect our realm.”

“And for some reason, you want me to attend.”

“I do. You do not know it yet, but you are important to the kingdom of Sonomi and to me.”

I reached for Valsora’s face, placed my hands on each side, and kissed her. “I can’t imagine why anyone would think I am important, but if I can help you, my dear, dear Valsora, I will.”

“Then come. Let’s eat, drink, talk, then we will spend the night together.”



Valsora’s bedroom was expansive, just like every other space in the mansion. The carpet was royal blue, so thick that I thought my bare feet would be swallowed up by it. The bed was huge and round, covered with a lighter shade of blue. The silk coverlet was turned down for the night, exposing a blindingly white sheen of the sheets.

We sat on the edge of the bed, she with a drink. I was too nervous to hold a glass and had set my drink aside when we retired to her room.

“You have been very patient, Azara, and now I will answer your questions, one by one. Then if you have more, you can ask.” She stretched her body and arm to place her glass on a nightstand, turned toward me, and took my hands in hers.

“You want to know why I did not come to you the other night. I thought you needed some time to decide if you wanted to continue having my visits. I had definitely not given up on you. I wanted to be sure that the longing you felt was not just a loneliness that settled around your heart when Shea left, but that it was for me and my world. And yes, I am offering you my love and devotion.”

“Valsora, what about the other things?”

“You would not have to die or be in a coma to live or visit here. My brother told you about the intersection of the dream and physical worlds. You have the freedom to do exactly what you want to do...to do what feels right in the moment. I will show you how to move between the two worlds if that is what you want, or you can stay with me for all of infinity.”

I had a gnawing feeling in my stomach and I asked the question that was causing my uncomfortable physical

reaction. "What if I don't want either? What if I want to remain in the physical realm?"

"Do you remember I told you that you were important to Sonomi?"

"Yes, I do, though I don't understand why."

"I will explain, but first, you must believe that any decision to remain in the physical realm, visit, or stay here is your choice and yours alone. I will not force you, nor will I manipulate you. If you come, you must come out of love."

I paused a moment, then asked, "Love for you?"

"Love for love's sake."

"I still do not know what you want from me."

Valsora's purple eyes flared for a moment and became deeper purple. "I need you to help with the counteroffensive against King Celani's forces." She let go of my hands, stood up and moved in front of me. Turning to face away from me, she looked over her shoulder and said, "You will understand in a moment."

I could tell she had started to unbutton her gown. She let it drop. It pooled just below her waist, exposing the beautiful curve of her hips. My breath caught in my throat. Her skin was smooth, golden in color. Her shoulders were strong, yet decidedly feminine, unlike my own which were broad and muscular from all the swimming I had done throughout my life.

As if seeing her reveal part of her body wasn't enough to arouse every cell in me, there were symbols from her neck down to her waist on each side of her spine. I didn't know what they meant, but they were glowing, pulsating. Not able to help myself, I traced the symbols on one side of her spine with my fingers and then the other side. She threw her head back and moaned.

"Did I hurt you?" I blurted out.

"No," she whispered, her back still toward me.

"What then?"

“You aroused me. You empowered me. Run your fingers over the symbols again...just like you did before.”

“I am confused, Valsora.”

“Please, Azara, just do it.”

With trepidation, I repeated the movement. Again, she threw her head back and moaned as each symbol burst into flames as I touched it.

“You have set me on fire. Can't you see that?”

“Yes, and I am scared I have hurt and scarred you.”

“You have not. Your love is expanding the power of the symbols. You are giving me the strength and power I need to defeat King Celani.”

Shaken, I walked around to face her. I beseeched her to explain what was happening. Valsora placed my hands over her bare breasts and covered mine with her own. “Will you trust me? I need us to become one and then I can tell you.”

“Tell me what you need,” I heard myself saying.

She reached for my jacket, slipped it off my shoulders, and let it fall to the floor. After she took off my tie, she pulled my shirt out from my pants and unbuttoned it. Putting her hands, one on each side of the shirt's placards, she slowly pushed it off my shoulders and let it fall to my wrists. Then Valsora ran her hands from my bare shoulders down my arms to my hands. It felt like a thousand rhapsodies playing all at once. Pulling her close to me, I removed her gown and knelt to steady her as she stepped from where it had fallen around her feet.

The rest of my clothes disappeared quickly. I stood before her slightly uncomfortable with her gaze. Taking me to the bed, she sat me down and knelt before me. I leaned over and kissed the top of her head as she glided her fingers across my thighs. Every place she touched me was like a rapture... a feeling of intense pleasure and joy. I was in a state of elated bliss as she raised her hands to caress my breasts. I had never been as intoxicated as I was now as she knelt in front of me.

We wrapped ourselves around each other kissing deeply and passionately, swooning with the ever-increasing arousal our lips and hands were inciting. Her mouth was on one of my breasts, and her fingers were teasing the other. My body was no longer mine. It moved to Valsora's sensual commands.

"Azara, touch my back." Her voice was lush, carnal, dripping with passion. I reached around her and moved my fingers over the columns of symbols that were alive. They were hot and seemed to expand and raise themselves.

Valsora used one hand to pull my leg between hers. As she rode me, I reached for her mouth with mine while I continued to move my fingers up and down her back. I felt my fingers burn, but there was no pain. It was beautiful, like watching the sparks of a fire dance through the air. The beauty of the breathing flames sent colors of blue, yellow, red, and orange twirling above the bed. With each stroke of my fingers, the fire grew and expanded. It seemed to crave, wanting its own life, stretching, and expanding. No longer was I afraid. Somehow I knew that the lovemaking was what would equip Valsora's forces to defeat King Celani, leaving only glowing embers that would dissipate, birthing beauty in the destruction.

"Don't stop!" Valsora cried out.

The fire I felt was of a different nature. Blood pounded through my veins. I could feel the fullness of Valsora on top of me, pressing her hand into my arousal. Her breasts crushed mine as her tongue plunged between my lips searching for endless waves and footprints in the sands of time. I cried out a half sob of pleasure as she touched my delicate, aching flesh. Something was moving inside of me, and I heard whispers telling me to leave my feet behind. For a split second I was weightless, flying, floating, tumbling in endless gyrations. Trembling, all I could feel was her touch and all Valsora knew was the heat that elevated her to the heights of her power.



We lay in each other's arms, connected with our bodies, our emotions, and our feelings. For a long while, neither of us spoke, until Valsora raised herself on her elbow and looked at me with her now quieted eyes.

"You want to know if our love making will always be like this."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Yes, it will. Each time you touch the symbols on my back, it will be like this."

"What do they say?"

"There is an old teaching that talks about the day that Sonomi would come under attack by a wicked king who tortured and oppressed people across the realms for eons. The symbols reveal that a Queen with markings on her back will be the one who defeats once and for all the wicked king, but that she must have her strength activated by one who has been wounded, one who loves purely, and one whose name is Scarlet. She will light the fire that allows the Sonomi to defeat the torturous king and his army.

"But Valsora, my name is not Scarlet."

"I know, but when I first saw you, I knew you were the one. I felt it. The symbols began awakening and what just happened between us, proves it."

Shaking my head, I wasn't convinced. "What if I am some sort of false, oh...I don't know what you'd call it?"

"A false champion?"

"Yes, sort of."

"Do you know where your parents got the name 'Azara'?"

"Yes. They told me there was a famous Arabian horse named Azara and she carried her master, who I guess was a soldier, to many victories. They said that when I was born,

they were sure I would carry myself to many victories, but so far, nothing spectacular has happened.”

Valsora chuckled. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. ‘Azara’ is an old Persian word meaning red.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Now you need to sleep so that when I come to you again, you will be ready.”



Two days after the dream at Valsora’s mansion, my doctors agreed that I could go home if I had round-the-clock care. The arrhythmias were not lasting very long and hadn’t caused any problems, but I still had to wear the monitor for another ten days. The hospital social worker came to visit me and worked with my insurance company to have a full-time caregiver stay at my house until the doctors felt I could care for myself.

I was looking forward to going home and knew that someone would arrive this afternoon to accompany me, but I didn’t know what I would wear. When I asked about my clothes, Marley told me that when I arrived at the hospital they had been blood soaked. The hospital had disposed of them.

It was nearing 4:00 p.m. when there was a light knock on the partially opened door. I called out “come in” and was surprised to see the person who entered my room . She was carrying a large shopping bag.

“I’ve brought you clothes.”

“How did you know my size?” I asked.

“Ha! Have you forgotten? I’ve had my hands pretty much all over your body!”

“Oh stop! You are embarrassing me.”

“Good. You have been way too serious lately.”

“Maybe so, and I’ll try to work on it, but what are you doing here? I expected a battle ax with an old-style nurse’s uniform bustling in snapping orders at me.”

“That could be arranged if that is what you really want. I wouldn’t want to dash your expectations.”

“Now that’s just unkind,” I quipped. “Hand me those clothes, please, and then you have some explaining to do!”

I couldn’t help smiling, looking at the woman standing in front of me. I hadn’t noticed how truly lovely she was before today.



She helped me out of the Uber and I was able to walk on my own steam with a little support. The building manager was waiting in the lobby and accompanied us to my apartment. He opened the door and handed me a set of keys, explaining that he had the locks changed, in case I had lost my keys during the accident. I thanked him and he left us.

“Where is your bedroom? Let’s get you settled for a little rest.”

“Maybe I was wrong. Perhaps you are the battleax in disguise. You are already ordering me around. If I go willingly, will you tell me how you orchestrated this?” I noticed what a wonderful smile she had. I also noticed how good the skinny jeans she wore looked.

As she covered me with a blanket, I knew she was right. The trip from the hospital home had drained me, but not enough to sleep without knowing how Marley had ended up looking after me.

“All right, now tell me how you are here.”

Marley sat on the edge of the bed, took my hand in hers, smiled, and said, “I was burnt out having worked in ICU units for most of my career and had decided to go into private nursing. Before you came to the unit, I had handed in my two-week notice and signed up with an agency. Then, I ran

into Ellie, my friend and the social worker that worked with you. She mentioned that she might have a patient for me if I were ready. When I found out it was you, I accepted immediately. That's it. Just a right place, right time, thing."

"Marley, do you really believe in coincidences?" I asked.

"No, not really, but regardless, I'm happy to be here with you. I like you."

"And I'm happy that you are here and, just so you know, I like you too—a lot. You were so kind to me. Please make yourself at home. The guest room is just down the hall."

Marley squeezed my hand and before she had left, my eyes were already closed. I was feeling safe and out of harm's way.



Valsora did not come for me for several days. I wondered if I had disappointed her in some way, but Marley kept me busy with physical therapy, massages, short walks to a nearby park, and a visit to my hairdresser. We either played chess, watched a movie, read in the evenings, or shared childhood stories with each other. It was comfortable and I was growing more and more fond of Marley. I wondered if maybe that was why Valsora didn't come for me.

I felt guilty as my feelings for Marley grew. How could I leave Sonomi to be ravaged by King Celani? My restlessness grew and my powers of concentration dwindled, as evidenced by Marley's killing me at chess this evening.

After Marley had helped me wash up and get into bed, she perched on the bed, looking at me with her green eyes. She swept her blond locks over her shoulder, sighed, and asked, "Do you want to tell me what is going on?"

Mustering as much innocence as possible, I answered, "What do you mean?"

“Seriously? I haven’t once won a chess game against you. Tonight, it was as if it were the first time you played. Tell me, what’s going on.”

“I can’t. You’ll think I’ve lost my marbles and maybe I have.”

Marley got up from the bed, held open the covers and asked, “May I?”

I nodded yes and she slipped into the bed next to me, propping herself up on an elbow. “Look, I know something serious is bothering you. I’m a pretty open person and won’t jump to conclusions.”

Taking a deep breath, I asked her if she had ever had a dream that seemed so real that she questioned whether or not it happened.

“Yes, I have, especially when I was a youngster. I used to dream that I was in the basement of a hospital with my grandmother and we were being chased by a Nurse Ratchet type who held a huge hypodermic needle. She wanted to kill my grandmother and I was the only one around who could protect her.”

“Why did you feel like it was real?”

“The fear I felt was real. The responsibility for protecting my grandmother was real. She and I were close. Her love for me was perhaps the greatest love of my life.”

“Oh Marley, I can relate to that. I too was very close to my grandmother and I have always felt that she was the only one that never expected me to be more than who I was.”

Marley smiled, leaned over, and kissed me on the forehead. “Are you having dreams that are causing you emotional turmoil, Azara?”

“Yes, but it’s not fear that is causing my emotions to churn. It is duty, and maybe love.”

I decided that a reality check might be a good thing, so I told her everything that had happened. She listened quietly and attentively, without judgement, and with great empathy.

She thought for a moment after I had finished and offered, "The dreams were causing the arrhythmias, weren't they?"

"I think so. I haven't had any dreams since we have been here."

"Are you missing the dreams?"

"Yes, in a way."

"Are you in love with her?"

"I don't know Marley. It felt like it, but now I'm not so sure."

"Azara, I don't pretend to know how to interpret dreams, but could it be a way your subconscious mind and heart are healing from your accident and a past relationship?"

"Maybe. It's like I have been living two lives, not exactly fitting into either."

I felt the tears well up in my eyes and begin to trickle down my cheeks. Marley shifted her body and took me into her arms. As I rested my head on her shoulder she stroked my hair, rubbed my back, and dried my tears. We stayed like this for a long while until Marley softly spoke.

"Maybe you need to go back and play this out."

I admit I was surprised and lifted my head to look at her. "Really?"

"Yes, really. It seems you need closure, though I have no idea how that would look. Petition Valsora to come for you. Then you can decide what to do in either case, that is, if she comes or if she doesn't."

A great sense of peace and love washed over me. I impulsively kissed Marley, then lay back in her arms, falling into a deep sleep.



Valsora was wearing a breast plate made of a reddish metal. It contrasted with the gold sword that lay against her

hip and leg. She held out her arms to me and I walked into them.

“For days I felt like I woke up in a world that had walked out on me.”

“Yes, I know. You were caught between the two worlds.”

“Valsora, I thought I was looking into a mirror and I was afraid it was going to crack, leaving me without either world. Then I understood I was beholding a heart who sought me out, so I came back to finish what has already been put into motion.”

“Then if you have chosen, we should attend to our duties.”

We were on top of a hill with a small group of Valsora's guards. On an opposite hill there were hundreds of King Celani's minions. Valsora's contingency was far outnumbered, yet they stood in complete stillness, irrefutably trusting their queen.

Valsora serenely spoke to me. “Behind me and wait for my command.”

She took the hands of her brother, Prince Nestor, who stood to her right, and a very tall, fierce looking woman, Lozen, on her left. She ordered the rest of the guards to line up and join their hands.

The sound of a horn ruptured the calm. Valsora looked over her shoulder at me and spoke. “It's time. Don't stop until I tell you too.”

When I moved behind her, I saw the breast plate she wore only covered her chest. Her back was completely exposed. I could see the symbols moving, beginning to give off sparks.

King Celani's soldiers began hurling rods of tonitri, a collection of evil thoughts, vile desires, and dark energy far more dangerous than thousands of the most poisonous snakes in all the realms.

My fingers began dancing across Valsora's back, seemingly knowing exactly where to touch. I suspended all thought and let some invisible force control what my fingers were doing. Soon, there was fire brimming from her back. The flames leapt upwards, twisting themselves into flaming bolts. Valsora swung her gold sword above her head, directing the bolts across the gully toward the king's soldiers. She was moving her sword with supernatural speed, sending thousands of bolts into the hearts of the opposing enemies.

Prince Nestor shouted an incantation of some sort. Over and over, he repeated the same words: "Abiosis, cerastes, hemipter, amanita, uroboros." A barm began to rise from the earth in front of the guards. The enormous bubble-like shield grew with each repetition of the incantation until it formed a protective shield in front of Valsora and her guards.

The battle raged for a very long time. As the fire bolts crashed into the tonitri mid-air, loud eruptions filled the sky with ear-shattering explosions. The Sonomi shield held, though pierced in several places by the tonitri, injuring three of Valsora's guards. Valsora's fire bolts laid waste to the knoll held by King Celani's soldiers. One by one, they fell to the ground until the King himself was pierced by several bolts at once.

Smoke rose from the hill and swirled in a huge tornado-like funnel that rose into the sky, disappearing from view. The landscape was silent. Valsora's guards did not cry out with victory. They continued to stand quietly, holding hands, preparing for a second attack. Valsora commanded me to stop touching her back.

Lira, the dreamseer that had been saved by the orchid antidote hundreds of years before, came forward. She stood in front of Valsora, closed her eyes, and opened her arms to the universe of realms. A short time later, she dropped her arms and offered a hand to Valsora. Holding Valsora's hand, Lira spoke, "My queen, they are no more. Trees will rise

from each of the fallen soldiers and Orchas' children will come and live in them.”

Valsora collapsed into the arms of Prince Nestor, who began the walk back to her mansion. I too was wearied. Lira put her arm around me and let me lean on her as we followed. Valsora's guards trailed behind us, carrying their fallen comrades.

Once in Valsora's bedroom, I helped her shed her breast plate and wondered if I should stay. *Would she want me now that King Celani had been defeated?*

“Shall I stay?” I asked tentatively.

She answered, “You are a reminder that there is light in the night.”

“No, Valsora. It is you who is the light in the night. You came to me when all that surrounded me was darkness.”

She held me while she whispered, “Then let us lie together and finish this night so that our light can illuminate Sonomi.”



When I awoke, it took a few moments to realize I was in Marley's arms, not Valsora's.

“You are awake,” she said with a smile in her voice. “You must have had quite the dream. I had my hand on your chest near the monitor. Your heart was racing. Are you okay?”

“Yes. I think I am right where I am supposed to be.”

Marley pulled me closer and continued, “When you are ready, will you tell me?”

“Yes, I will tell you. I promise.”



It was months after the fierce battle that was known in the inner realms as the Battle of Nishat. I learned in my

occasional visits to Sonomi that Nishat means energy or vitality. Smiling, I rolled over into waiting arms.

“You were with her, weren’t you?” asked Marley without a hint of jealousy.

It amazed me that Marley felt no jealousy at all. She never was begrudging of the time I spent with Valsora. I knew I could answer her honestly. “Yes, I was with her for a while. Sometimes she calls on me to...well, you know.”

“Yes, I know, honey.” Marley looked deeply into my eyes. I let her see everything because I felt safe and loved by her. Simply put, she added beauty to what might otherwise be desolate landscapes. There was no doubt that I would always come back to her, for she loved me without constraint, without conditions, and without limitations.

“You know, my darling, Azara, I don’t mind that you see her and think of her now and then. Who am I to question your dream destiny?” Marley chuckled, then said, “You are in my arms now and that is all that matters.”

I kissed her, feeling privileged to have this exceptional creature in my life. At first it was a delicate brush of our lips, filled with affection and warmth. My eyes closed as our kiss deepened and our emotions stoked our passion. For a moment, Marley broke from the kiss and whispered, “Look at me, Azara.”

Drawing back a few inches, I looked into her eyes and felt a deep connection that transcends words. It was a moment of trust, vulnerability, and a profound understanding that words could never convey the depth of emotions in my heart.

Marley’s gaze held me captive. Her eyes sparkled for a moment, then a mesmerizing transformation took place. Her eyes shimmered with an otherworldly light, transforming into the deep purple hue I knew so well. It was as if the two worlds merged for me. As Marley revealed her true essence, I could feel the magic that coursed through my veins. It brought a sense of belonging, peace, and unconditional

acceptance and love for the woman in my arms who had graced my dreams, leaving me with the belief that the bond of love transcends time and space.

THE END

AMBUSHED

“Ride,” shouted the masked rider, the tan duster flapping in the wind. Gang members galloped away from the bank with bulging sacks slung over their saddles. The masked rider stayed behind to deal with a deputy running after them with a Winchester repeating shotgun. The rider leveled a Colt Six-Shooter and squeezed the trigger. The deputy collapsed, gripping his leg and howling in pain. Turning the horse, the leader of the gang galloped after the other gang members, knowing that an avenging posse would be hot on their tails within the hour.

The Santa Fe National Bank, the repository for the wealth of Santa Fe’s clergy, society elite, and the “Santa Fe Rosca” had been the last of the gang’s planned robberies before Christmas.

The Santa Fe Rosca, or Ring as the non-Spanish speaking people called it, was started by two lawyers who came to Santa Fe after the American Civil War. Their “club” became an influential group of prominent businessmen and cattle ranchers that made their fortunes in oil and real estate. Over time, it became a form of organized crime which infiltrated the New Mexico Territory’s executive, judicial, legislative, and law enforcement branches for participants’ mutual gain. Corruption was rampant, laws were not enforced, and land grabs were common. This Ring was almost exclusively the target of the gang.

Gang members were meticulous planners, and everything had gone smoothly until the eleventh hour. They had waited until dark when the last of the customers was long gone and the lone teller was closing up.

Two members of the gang waited for the lone teller to come out the front door. They stuck their revolvers in the teller’s ribs, quietly made their demands, and nudged him inside. They watched as the teller nervously stuffed greenbacks into flour bags that the gang had supplied. The

third gang member stayed with the horses, and the fourth served as a lookout.

The “Silent Night Gang,” as they had been dubbed by law enforcement, never used their real names. No one had ever gotten a whiff of their names in the few years they had been operating. In keeping with their moniker, they named themselves after four of the reindeer in a poem from 1823 called, “The Night Before Christmas.”



Riding hard for thirty minutes, Dunder, the gang leader, gave the signal to veer off east toward Glorietta Pass. As the dust churned up by the gang’s horses settled back to the hard earth, the first sign of snow appeared. Pulling out a telescope, Dunder scanned the area, surprised that the posse had not yet made an appearance.

“Anything?” asked Comet, who was waiting nearby.

“Nope. Maybe the snow scared them,” chuckled the leader.

“Hey Dunder!” shouted Prancer. “We gotta get going. The snow is going to make the pass slippery.”

“I’ll lead,” chimed in Dasher, the newest member of the gang.

Careful to slow their horses down the steep slope, they were approaching the last curve through the pass, when a bunch of men on horseback stormed out from behind a tall bluff that had concealed them. The gang’s egress was blocked. After a couple of the ambushers lit torches, Dunder recognized one of the men. Marshall Tim Rutledge, who had been hunting the gang for three years, had a serious obsession to string them up.

Rutledge ordered the gang to drop their pistols, get off their horses, and put the bags of money on the ground. Dasher and Prancer dismounted, dragged the bags of money down from their saddles, and lined them up, each bag

touching the other, between the posse and themselves. A member of the posse rode around and positioned himself behind the gang to block them from reversing their direction and escaping.

Dunder and Comet dismounted and set their bags in line with the others. Dunder, facing away from the marshal, surreptitiously lit them on fire with a cigar lighter acquired in a poker game a few years back. In a flash, the evidence was up in flames lighting the night sky.

The marshal and posse members jumped off their mounts and tried to save the bags of greenbacks. The chaos provided the gang with the opportunity to remount and reverse direction. As the evidence went up in flames, the deputy that had blocked the entrance to the pass, panicked as he saw four masked riders thundering toward him. He spurred his horse out of the way to avoid being trampled.

The gang split up into pairs and took two different, but longer routes to their hideout deep in the rugged Pecos Mountains. Dunder and Comet went northeast and had to skirt a large lake. They didn't dare chance crossing the ice. Prancer and Dasher headed south for several miles, then east along an old mining route until they could go north again.

Dunder and Comet arrived at their hideout exhausted and soaked, but they took care of the horses first. When they finished, they carried their saddlebags into the small, unassuming and well-hidden cabin. Stripping off their wet clothes and falling on their bunks, neither voiced their concern that the other two hadn't made it back.



The fire was waning and the damp cold woke the leader. Quickly pulling on pants and shirt, which had been left drying by the fire, Dunder peered out the window. An anguished gravelly voice was coming from the barn. Grabbing a rifle, and nudging Comet, they both listened.

Comet got up and dressed in record time and the two of them pulled up their bandanas and exited the cabin through the back door.

Cautiously, they surveyed the area between the cabin and the barn. Agreeing that the coast was clear, they quietly moved toward the small barn until they were positioned on each side of the door.

“I’m going to kill you all,” grunted a low raspy voice. “Let me out of here you bastards!”

Jerking open the doors, Dunder and Comet barreled into the barn ready for a fight but were surprised to see a blindfolded and hog-tied person on the dirt floor. The other two gang members were going about their business rubbing down and feeding their horses without paying any attention to their prisoner. The captive was incensed and struggled to escape the ropes. Comet nudged his leg and pointed out the wound. The prisoner screamed in pain and fainted.

“What the hell is going on? Who is this person?” groused Dunder.

“Well, I reckon it’s a member of the posse who thought we wouldn’t notice being followed,” answered one of the late comers.

“How’d he get shot?” asked Comet.

“That’s the *hombre* who blocked our retreat and, he was stupid enough to try to follow us. When we passed Pigeon’s Ranch, we hid behind some boulders. When he came through, I shot him with my rifle. That stupid marshal made us drop our revolvers but forgot about the rifles on the saddles.” Dasher sported a smug smile.

“Why’d you bring him back here?” gruffly asked Comet.

“His horse skedaddled away. He was unconscious and would have frozen or died from blood loss out there. Besides, you said we never were to kill nobody,” quipped Prancer.

“Okay, finish up with your horses and we’ll figure out what to do with your reluctant suitor.”

“He ain’t no suitor of mine. Got the wrong equipment. I like me the softer sex.” Prancer walked away laughing.



“Dunder, what do you want to do?” asked Comet.

“We’ll tend to his wound and tomorrow, I can take him down near Hot Springs in that old buckboard behind the barn and deposit him near the Painted Post mine before I head home. Someone will find him.”

“I don’t like this, Dunder. This spells trouble in double time.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m not gonna kill a person unless it is in self-defense and there is no other choice.”



“Put him up on the table. Tie a rope around one of his wrists and loop it under the table to the other wrist. Dunder, be ready to hold his legs just in case he is stupid and tries to get up,” ordered Comet.

Comet lifted the wounded leg and turned it slightly eliciting a welp of pain from the unwelcome patient. He roused momentarily then dropped back into unconsciousness.

“Looks like it’s a through and through. Dunder, boil some water and put a knife in it then get me a bottle of whiskey.”

“He ain’t in a drinking mood,” said Prancer. He dead yet?”

Comet answered, “No, and don’t you go getting any ideas on how to fix this little problem.”

Dunder came back to the table and began unbuckling their captive’s belt. Once the pants were unbuttoned, Dunder

yanked them down. The cowboy was left in his long johns. A low whistle filled the cabin. "Well, I'll be damned."

"What is it?" asked Comet who was readying the supplies needed to sew and bandage the wound.

"Hold on." Dunder began unbuttoning the man's soaked shirt. Pulling it aside, the undershirt was next.

"Huh," mumbled Dunder.

"Now what?" asked an impatient Comet.

"I think he's got a chest wound. Seems like someone wrapped him all the way around the ribs and back."

"Dunder, cut open the binder and let's see how bad the wound is." Comet handed scissors to Dunder who cut up along the sternum until the bandage had been sliced in two. By the time the chest bandage had been opened, all four of the gang members were looking down at their prisoner. They were dumbfounded at what they saw.

"Holy shit," whispered Prancer. "We got ourselves a gal pal!"

Prancer and Dasher backed away from the table as if they had been burned. Comet's head was shaking in disbelief. Dunder was thunderstruck.



As the gang's leader finished removing her soaked clothes and bandage. As much as Dunder tried not to violate the woman's privacy any more than necessary, brushing her soft velvety skin could not be avoided. Dunder felt a deep wave of sadness flooding every cell that lived and breathed.

Untying the bandana covering most of her head, Dunder was struck with the color of her chin-length cropped hair parted down the middle. It was a warm blend of sunlight with a hint of ginger resembling the color of a special variety of sunflowers that Grandma grew in the backyard.

Dunder's eyes traveled from her face to her collar bone, delicate in the low light of the cabin, then lower. Lying on

her back, her breasts were flattened out, yet each one perfectly molded. Her pale nipples puckered in the cold air and caught the light from the flickering fire. They were achingly beautiful. Dunder's hand hovered with restraint, trying not to brush a nipple.

The woman's taut stomach ended in a slight flare of the hips. Her legs were long, well-muscled, then tapered from the thighs down. When Dunder's eyes passed over the wound in her thigh, a wave of grief clutched at the heart which had been frozen for so long. With great reverence, Dunder covered her with a blanket.



The cheap whiskey that was going to be used to sterilize the captive's wound, was passed around to each gang member, all of them taking deep swigs. The same thought was running through each of their brains...*What in damnation are we going to do with this woman?*

Comet took control of the group and said, "I am going to fix the leg. Dasher and Prancer, find something for the woman to wear, and Dunder, come help me. The plan still stands."



"All right, let's get her into one of the bunks." Prancer, the biggest and strongest, carried the woman to the bunk closest to the fire, tied each wrist to the bed posts, and covered her, hoping she would sleep the rest of the night.

There were two bunk beds in the cabin. Years ago, it had been used by wranglers who seasonally drove the cattle herds up from the valley to the high mountain pastures in the summer. Prancer and Dasher scrambled up into the two top bunks, tucking in their rifles before they dropped off to sleep.

Dunder got into the remaining lower bunk, scooting over to make room for Comet.

“You’re crowding me,” complained Dunder, as Comet got into the narrow bunk. “You hoping to turn me on or what?”

Comet chuckled and lobbed back, “You wish.”

Minutes later, the only sounds in the cabin were Paul Bunyan snores, but not everyone was asleep. The image of the vulnerable woman lying on the table equally tantalized and tormented Dunder.



The next morning, they said their goodbyes, each heading in a different direction. As Dunder drove the old buckboard, two things still nagged. *How did Rutledge know where to wait for us? Is it possible that one of the gang members had sold out? I suspect the only way to find out is to set a trap, but what kind of trap?* It burned a hole in Dunder’s brain.

The other thing that had consumed Dunder during the long ride home was the woman, now riding in the back of the wagon. The plan was to leave her in the dilapidated wagon near the Painted Post turquoise mine so she would be found. Then Dunder would ride out on Rebel. The gang’s leader wrestled with a conscience that was screaming so loud, logic could no longer be heard.

In the end, Dunder left the woman, wrapped in several blankets, where she was sure to be found before she froze to death. Dunder’s heart ached all the back to town.



Antonia Roybal, at five feet two inches, a diminutive woman in stature, but a giant in attitude, was giving instructions to her kitchen staff for the Christmas-day dinner

that would take place in about a week. It was a long-standing tradition to invite all the Roybal Ranch employees.

A Land Grant made by Mexico to her great, great, great grandfather in 1794 and had been passed down through several generations. Up until five years ago, Antonia's brother was the official property owner, though she took care of most of the ranch's business. He preferred to breed steers and herd cattle. She was raised there and not only knew its 350,000 acres inside and out, but also its vast operations.

Antonia inherited the property when her brother died from a gore wound caused by a feisty Texas Longhorn he had recently acquired. Since he was unmarried, the land passed on to Antonia. Women in New Mexico were allowed to own property starting in 1839 and she was one of the few that wielded the power, though she rarely used it, that came from cattle, land, and money.

She was a bit of an outcast because she didn't hob-knob with the elite ranchers, mine owners, and business people in the area, preferring not to dip her hands into the corrupt well of the Ring. Plus, she did not attend church and was judged wickedly for that. Finishing a brisk morning walk, she went to her office in the front of the house. No sooner had she sat down than she heard her name being called.

"Miss Antonia, the blacksmith is here, in the kitchen waiting for you."

"Thank you, Nelda. Would you please tell the blacksmith to come through to my office?"

"Of course, Miss Antonia."

A tall, sturdy blond woman knocked on the door jam and waited for an invitation to enter. She was dressed in denim breeches, a long-sleeved heavy linen shirt, and a leather apron that covered her shoulders, chest. It extended down to her knees. Her outfit was complete with a belt that usually held tools of the trade. This morning it was empty.

"Come in, Minnie. What can I do for you?"

Minnie strode into the office and parked her almost six-foot frame in front of the fire, rubbing her hands together.

"Cold out there today," she mumbled to no one in particular.

"Pour yourself a cup of coffee," encouraged Antonia, who never lost the irony of Minnie's name compared to her physical stature.

As a female blacksmith, she was an oddity but could correct any gait problem with the proper fitting of horseshoes and the decorative iron work she did in the off season, was highly sought out. Antonia had hired her full time a few years back when she realized the extent of Minnie's talents.

"I hate to admit it, Antonia, but I reckon, I didn't estimate right on the iron supplies needed to get us through the winter."

"Does Clement's have what you need or do we have to telegraph an order to Texas?"

"Dunno. I would have to ride into town and give it a gander."

"If they have what you need, how much are we talking about?"

"Probably four or five hundred." Minnie winced at the cost and mumbled, "Sorry."

"No need. You've had a lot on your mind lately, right?"

Minnie's cheeks flushed bright red as she averted her eyes. "Well, that ain't gonna go no wheres."

"Why not?" asked Antonia with genuine interest.

"Well, I knows your stand but not everybody sees it the same, including them there cowboys running around the ranch."

"You forget one thing, Minnie. I own this ranch and I pay the wages of everyone who works here. If you want to invite your friend to Christmas dinner, you should. I'd be happy to have an extra guest."

Antonia thought for a moment, then continued, "I have an idea. What do you say to you and me leaving for town to check on your supplies? While you are doing that, I'll visit the dress shop. And, if you decide you want your friend here, you can go by the saloon and make the invitation. We can be back before dark if we hurry."

"That's right nice of you, Miss Antonia, but I don't think you know who we're talking about."

"No, I don't know exactly who you mean but I think she's part owner of the saloon."

Minnie was flustered. She didn't know how to tell Antonia her friend's background and, in her frustration blurted, "You really want an ex-whore at your dinner table?"

Antonia was momentarily surprised at Minnie's outburst. She paused a moment, then gently continued. "Minnie, is your friend a good person?"

"Yes, better than most, I reckon."

"Then that's good enough for me."

"But in the past, she's lain with some of the cow pokes."

"And they will behave as gentlemen or they will be looking for other jobs come the day after Christmas. You do what you want, but she is welcome at the Roybal Ranch. Now let's go."



Grace raised her head as the bell on the door tinkled and a cold wind swept through the front of the dress shop.

"Hello there, Antonia. I didn't expect to see you today."

"Well that's a fine howdy to your best customer!" Antonia laughed as she removed her gloves and muffler. "Can't I just stop by and wish you a happy Christmas?"

"Of course you can, but I thought..." Grace did not get a chance to finish her sentence. The bell on the door tinkled again and in strode Mr. Canterra as if he owned the shop. Grace rushed to the entryway and as soon as Mr. Cantera

saw her, he started yelling, jabbing his finger in the air near Grace's face.

"I'm not paying your jacked-up prices for any more of my wife's dresses. Hear me loud and clear. She is not authorized to order anything else from you, not even a piece of lace!" He turned on his heel and stormed out, rattling the glass as the door slammed shut.

"What was that all about, Grace?"

"Apparently his wife overspent her budget when she ordered a half dozen new dresses for the holiday season. You know, Antonia, sometimes I get lonely, but I would rather be by myself than saddled with a person as despicable as Raul Canterra."

"Amen to that!" voiced Antonia.

The folks in Hot Springs knew very little about Grace Garabaldi. All anyone knew was that Grace had come from Philadelphia in a cloud of silence, bought the dress shop, hired seamstresses, and seemed to have plenty of cash. Antonia had resisted the temptation to find out as much as possible about the area's newest resident, but finally gave in, contacting a private investigator in Philadelphia. She never shared with anyone, including Grace, what she had discovered.

"Grace, I had better let you get back to finishing up whatever is on your agenda today. I'll see you soon."

"Are you by yourself, Antonia?"

"No. I came in with Minnie. She needed some supplies and now I had better go find her before she spends all the ranch's profits from this year."



It was a week after the Silent Night Gang dispersed from a cold, wet night in their hideout. Now they were meeting again at the hide-out. Dunder was the last to arrive just as daylight embraced the inky blue and gray night sky.

Comet held the window curtain aside and peered out confirming that the boss had arrived. Several minutes later, Dunder swung open the door and was hit with a wave of welcome warmth and a waft of something cooking.

"You sure took your sweet time getting here," commented Comet.

"Sorry. Just wanted to make sure no one was following me. As it was, I had to make up a reason for leaving mid-morning so that I wouldn't arouse suspicion."

"And what reason did you invent?" asked Dasher.

"That I had to see the doctor. As soon as I mentioned 'private parts' no one asked any further questions. Told them I'd be staying overnight in town."

Prancer, always irreverent, blurted, "And just how're your private parts fairing? You ain't used them in a long time!"

Dasher and Comet held their breath waiting for Dunder's response.

"My privates are just that...private, but just so you know, they are perfectly functional." Dunder feigned annoyance then announced, "Let's eat."



"All right then. Are we agreed?" asked Dunder.

Three heads nodded simultaneously.

"Same territories as the last couple of years?" questioned Dunder.

"Yup," all three of the others agreed.

"Shame we had to torch the last haul, but I think we still have enough from that uppity Independent Mining Bank in Cerillos." Dunder stood up and picked up the saddlebags. They were stuffed with letter-size manilla envelopes.

"We got enough to put a hundred in each envelope," declared Prancer.

“Yes we do,” answered Dasher. Opening a safe that was wedged behind the wood stove, Dasher took out pile after pile of “greenbacks.” Earlier while waiting for Dunder, the other three gang members counted out stacks of one-hundred dollars. They now stuffed each pile in an envelope. Finishing around midnight, they packed their saddle bags, said their goodbyes to each other, and rode out in four different directions.



Two hours later, Dunder rode into Rainsville. It was a small ramshackle town that during the week was inhabited by mostly women and children. The men were away working in the turquoise mines. Dunder’s horse, Rebel, came to a full stop in a little plaza and stood quietly as Dunder discharged three shots into the air.

Slowly, cautiously, women dressed in night clothes and shawls came out of their dilapidated houses, and as if by rote, lined up close to the horseman. It was no surprise to Dunder. The gang had been passing out money to needy families for several Christmases. When the last person had received an envelope, Dunder’s horse reared before he and his rider were off to Mora, then Sapello, where indigenous people traded their wares at a trading post.

This scene was duplicated by the other three gang members in nine other settlements. This pre-Christmas ritual was guarded by the townspeople who often mislead law enforcement officers as to what they knew about the Silent Night Gang. The gang was as revered by the poverty-ridden locals as much as the 13th century’s enduring folk hero, Robin of Loxley, better known as Robin Hood.



It was almost daybreak when the reindeer-named gang members congregated at the cabin. After watering and feeding the horses, they ate and rested for a while, agreeing they were lucky for not having encountered any overzealous trolls Rutledge had roaming around. Always varying the night and routes they took, it was hard for law enforcement to mount an effective undertaking to capture them, but what they did was getting riskier and riskier each year. By midday, they were heading back to their respective towns, no longer dressed as outlaws.



Antonia was finalizing the year-end bonuses she would give to the ranch's employees at the Christmas dinner tomorrow evening. She stuffed the white embossed envelopes carrying the Roybal family crest with cash until her fingers were hurting. She heard a loud knock on the front door and got up to answer it, waving off one of the kitchen staff who was coming into the foyer.

"Umm, ma'am. This here letter is for Miss Antonia Roybal. Are you her?" asked the dusty cowboy. There hadn't been much snow or rain recently and the wind, along with the dry air, stirred up dirt devils at every turn.

"I am Antonia." She accepted the letter and asked the rider if he wanted coffee. He nodded and followed her through the house to the kitchen.

"Nelda, would you please get ...ah, I'm sorry I didn't get your name..."

"I'm Armando Vasquez, ma'am. I work at the stables in town and do odd jobs."

"Nelda, would you please get Mr. Vasquez some coffee and something to eat? When he is finished, have him stop by my office on his way out. Thank you."

Antonia double-timed it back to her office and ripped open the envelope. She looked at the signature and saw it

was from her friend, Trudy. Reading the short letter, she sighed, and in sotto voce, mumbled, “Shit. How does she get herself into these situations?” She penned a response, stuffed it into an envelope, and sat there thinking about Trudy’s request.

When Mr. Vasquez left with Antonia’s response, she asked one of the house staff to set up her mother’s sitting room next to her office room as a guest room. Now, she would have a house full. She didn’t mind Grace and Trudy, staying in the main house Christmas night, in fact she liked it. They could gossip, tell tall tales, and drink whiskey without prying eyes. But a stranger? Nope. She didn’t like that at all.



Trudy, or Doctor Osler, had come to Hot Springs right out of medical school in Chicago six years ago. She was an altruistic soul that cared for her patients and often treated people without charging money. If she were to be believed, the way she ended up in Hot Springs, was at the fate of a dart she threw at a map of North America. She often joked that it was destiny’s hand that drove that dart smack in the middle of New Mexico.

At first, she was met with resistance, especially from the men, but over time, she gained a reputation as being compassionate and competent. She was a hell of a horsewoman too, riding through severe storms to tend to patients was not uncommon. Antonia found it exciting to learn that Trudy was doing some experiments on a substance she called “Cyanase.” She had discovered that the bluish discharge isolated from injured patients’ bandages inhibited the growth of other microbial infections such as gangrene.

Trudy’s first success was with one of Antonia’s ranch hands whose leg sustained an open wound caused by the sharp edge of a water tank as he and others were unloading

it from a wagon. Within forty-eight hours, gangrene had set in. The Cyanase stopped the infection and saved the ranch hand's leg, perhaps his life. Chagrined, Antonia realized she shouldn't begrudge Trudy's request to have a guest stay at Antonia's ranch. *But who was the guest? Why was she so mysterious in her letter? Hmm, guess I'll find out.*



Once again, someone was banging on the front door with such force that the glass was rattling. She stormed out to see who the rude interloper was.

"Antonia," said a tall man dressed in black pants, a white shirt, a heavy black jacket, and a well-worn black hat. A marshal's badge was pinned to his left lapel. Antonia checked her attitude as Tim Rutledge brushed past her and stepped into the house without being invited. *What the hell does he want?* She had little patience for henchmen of the Ring and bullies, and the marshal was both. She also knew for a fact, he took payoffs from wealthy folks who got themselves in trouble, including those that raped and killed.

He faced her and gruffly said, "Where can we go to talk?"

"Follow me," she answered trying not to let her impatience show.

She walked into her office ahead of Rutledge and sat behind the desk, motioning him to sit in one of the guest chairs. "What is it you want to discuss, Marshal?"

"I have reason to believe that two of your ranch hands might belong to the Silent Night Gang."

"What?" said Antonia sharply. "That's impossible! These people are hard-working. I can't see anyone doing what you are suggesting. Why would you think that?"

"See here, Antonia, even if I believed that you knew every single one of your ranch hands, and I don't, how could you possibly know what they were doing on their off time?"

“I do know each and every one of my seventy-five employees. I make it my business to know who is on my payroll. Now tell me why you think one or two of my wranglers are involved with this gang?”

“Sorry, girlie, I can’t divulge my sources.”

Antonia wanted to slap him into next week, but she checked herself and said, “I don’t care who your source is...they are one hundred percent wrong. However, to quell your wild ideas, let me send for my foreman. Juan approves all time away requests. We’re pretty strict around here and do a nightly count of ranch hands in the bunkhouses.”

It was a woman who was trying desperately not to lose her temper that walked out of the office. When Antonia returned, the marshal was rifling through the papers on her desk. “What on earth are you doing?” said Antonia, trying to control the contempt she felt.

“Just curious,” Rutledge said with a smug smile plastered on his face. “Aren’t you going to offer me a refreshment while we wait?”

“What would you like?” asked an annoyed Antonia.

“Got any whiskey in the handsome sideboard behind you?”

Antonia turned her back to the marshal, opened a door, and pulled out a bottle of Kentucky whiskey and a glass. She poured a short drink and passed it to him.

“Aren’t you going to join me, darlin’?” scoffed the marshal.

“No thanks. I don’t drink when there is work to be done.”

After questioning Juan Marquez, the ranch’s foreman and learning that no one had asked for time off in the last two weeks or was missing, the marshal took his leave, and none too soon. Antonia’s patience was at its breaking point. Juan asked her if she really thought any of their hands might be part of the Silent Night Gang. Her answer was an unequivocal, “No, but good for them if they are.”



It was Christmas morning and there was a buzz around the house. Antonia was still bristling about the marshal's accusations yesterday and tried to keep herself busy. She was putting the final decorating touches on a native silver spruce tree she had dug up and planted in a huge tub. She loved having a live tree that could be replanted after the holidays.

Glancing out of the front window, she saw a wagon approaching and recognized Trudy driving a team. By the time Trudy pulled up in front of the house, a ranch hand was there to help her get down. Antonia watched as a person in the back of the wagon struggled to sit up. Both Trudy and the ranch hand helped the blanketed guest out of the wagon and into the house.

Once inside, Antonia saw that Trudy's guest was a woman. Surprised, she had her ranch hand and Trudy take her to the room that had been hastily converted into a bedroom the day before. After settling her on the bed Trudy introduced her.

"Antonia, this is, Lucy Rutledge."

It was a godsend that Lucy was doped up and didn't notice Antonia's shock. It took a few seconds for Antonia to recover. "It's nice to meet you, Lucy. Please let us know if there is anything you need, but I suspect after the long wagon ride, you must be tired and want to rest."

Lucy's words were soft and slow. "Thank you Miss Antonia. I won't be any trouble." She turned her head and in a minute, was out cold. Trudy barely had time to cover her before Antonia grabbed her arm and dragged her into her office next door.

"For heaven's sake, how did you end up with Tim Rutledge's wife?"

"Not his wife, Antonia. His sister."

"Okay, fine, but what the hell is she doing with you?"

“Someone from the turquoise mine near Painted Post found her and brought her to me in Hot Springs. She was running a fever. I saw that her leg was infected. There was no choice... I thought I might have to amputate the leg, but she responded well to my Cyanase. I didn't find out until later when her fever and delirium broke, what her name was.”

“Did she tell you how she got the wound?”

“No, and I didn't ask.”

“You know, he was just here yesterday!” yelled Antonia.

“Who?”

“Rutledge.”

“No, I didn't. What did he want with you?” her friend asked gravely.

“He thinks that a couple of my ranch hands are in the Silent Night Gang,” replied Antonia with a roll of her eyes.

“What did you tell him?”

“The short of it was that I told him he was crazy. But now, I am wondering why isn't he searching for his sister.”

Trudy sighed and offered, “because he has a black, evil heart.”



Most of the festivities were in the indoor training arena of one of the horse barns. It was close to 9:00 p.m. when Antonia, Grace, and Trudy left the party and walked back to the house. Antonia had invited Minnie and her friend to join them, but they declined. She ruefully smiled with the thought that perhaps Minnie and her friend planned to get further acquainted, most likely without their clothes on, in Minnie's small cottage not too far from the house.

All three women were tipsy from the liquor that had been flowing freely since dinner. It was snowing hard and by the time they reached the porch, they were covered with

heavy wet snow. Brushing off each other, they paraded into the house, heading directly up to the second story. A short time later, Grace and Trudy went into a large drawing room connected to Antonia's bedroom. It had belonged to generations of Roybal men, and now, sported more feminine furnishings.

In their floor-length nightgowns with shawls wrapped around their shoulders, Trudy and Grace sat near the huge hearth and relaxed in the heat of the roaring fire. Antonia opened a bottle of Macallan Scotch Whiskey her brother had bought before his demise. By the time the Grandfather Clock in the room struck twelve, Trudy and Grace had joined the Sandman. There had been no magical dust sprinkled in their eyes to lure them to sleep—just 86% proof.



Antonia donned an old wool robe that had belonged to her brother. She couldn't bear to give it away. They would often meet in the drawing room, her in her dressing gown and he in this robe, to discuss pressing problems. She missed him and often found herself lonely and ignoring her own needs because of her substantial responsibilities.

Cracking open the door to Lucy's room, she saw the woman was asleep. There was something about the woman that drew her into the room. Even while sleeping, the woman radiated an energy that made Antonia forget the sadness and shame she felt now and then at having lived so long in a self-imposed jailhouse.

She sat in a chair next to the bed quietly watching Lucy. The snow had blanketed the ground and intensified the light of the full moon. The heavy drapes were open and the reflected light sifted through the filmy sheers, casting patches of moonlight on her face and neck. Lucy was serene, her chest rising peacefully under the patch-work quilt. Whatever worries Lucy carried had faded.

Antonia looked away, nostalgic as she watched the moon, and day-dreamed about how she wished sleep came to her, like a lover, carrying her to oblivion. She startled when she heard, "Miss Antonia, is that you?"

She leaned forward in the chair and answered, "Yes, but it's just Antonia. I'm sorry I woke you."

"You didn't wake me. I think the Laudanum has worn off. Is there something wrong? Why are you here?"

"No, Lucy. There is nothing wrong. Dr. Osler fell asleep and I thought I would check on you and make sure the fire was still burning. Do you need anything?"

"No thank you. The pain in my leg isn't too bad."

Antonia, curious about her guest, got up from the chair, moved to the side of the bed, and asked, "May I sit?"

Without hesitation, Lucy answered a low breathy "yes." She removed a hand from under the covers and reached for Antonia's. "I don't know how to thank you for your generosity. I really had nowhere to go."

"What do you mean? Couldn't you stay with your brother?"

"Do you know him?"

Antonia nodded her head but held her tongue.

"Do you know how I got this wound? I was staying with him and he made me ride with his posse that was hunting the Silent Night Gang. Have you heard of them?"

"Yes, I have. In fact your brother came here to tell me he thinks a couple of my ranch hands belong to the gang, which of course is preposterous. How did you get wounded, Lucy?"

"The night the gang robbed the Santa Fe National Bank, I was part of the posse. They escaped, but I followed two of them and then got ambushed. They could have killed me, but they fired only one shot, which hit me in the leg. I woke up in Dr. Osler's dispensary."

“Wow! I’m glad you ended up with her.” Antonia thought for a moment then continued, “Lucy, how did the posse know where the gang was going?”

“I’m not sure. My brother told me that someone had overheard a conversation in the saloon.”

“I see and if you don’t mind me asking, why did your brother make you ride with the posse?”

“No, I don’t mind you asking, but the answer might shock you.”

“Not much shocks me. Tell me, Lucy.”

“He said that if I insisted on dressing and acting like a man, then I darn well could do a man’s job.”

A moment of silence passed between them, each staring into the eyes of the other in the moonlight as if hoping to find a cure for the heartache both carried. Still holding Antonia’s hand, Lucy spoke first. “Do I know you? Have we met? Your eyes seem so familiar. I swear I remember those soft brown eyes specked with gold.”

“Not sure, but you are not a woman I would easily forget.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Antonia trembled at her own unexpected openness.

“It’s all right, consoled Lucy. Maybe it isn’t your eyes that I recognize, but who you are.”

Shaken, Antonia stammered, “I don’t know what you mean,” but she did know. She had spent her life bolstered by a determination to improve people’s lives, often ignoring her own, and now, she sagged under the weight of this woman’s penetrating eyes. She could no longer hide who she was.

Tears welled up in the corners of Antonia’s eyes and she drew her hand from Lucy’s as she started to rise from the bed. Lucy reached for her arm and gently pulled her down. Their faces were inches from each other, Antonia feeling as if she were in the eye of the storm, not trusting the peace and calmness Lucy exuded.

Lucy wiped the tears from Antonia's cheeks and stroking her hair, asked, "Have you acted on your feelings before?"

"Yes...almost...no," whispered Antonia.

"Hmm, care to explain?" smiled Lucy.

Antonia shivered with fear wondering if she could trust this woman. Her rational side knew it was dangerous to confide in a stranger, even in the dark of the night, but the invitation to unburden herself was too much to resist. She plunged ahead sensing that Lucy understood and perhaps even had been through what she had experiencing.

"What I mean is that I wanted to but couldn't go through with it."

"When was this?"

"When I went to college."

"You went to college?" asked a surprised Lucy.

"Yes, I went to New Mexico State University when I was eighteen. They had started admitting women two years prior. I pestered my father relentlessly until he agreed."

"Tell me what happened, I mean if you want to."

"My father had rented me rooms near the campus with a nice, but strict old woman that was a relative of someone he knew. As I was walking back to my rooms one afternoon, I heard a girl calling me. I turned and saw it was a classmate from my accounting class. I waited for her and over time, we struck up a friendship. She lived in the female dormitories and one night when we were there studying for our finals, she just leaned in and kissed me, more than once."

Lucy remained silent, giving tacit permission for Antonia to continue or not. After a few moments, Antonia sighed and shared, "I was shocked, probably more so because I liked it, but I knew it was considered by most as unnatural and an evil permutation, so I ran away."

"Did you see her again?"

"I did everything I could to avoid her. I know I hurt her, but I just couldn't...I just couldn't talk to her again."

Antonia, feeling terrible remorse and dishonor, tried to get up and leave, but Lucy put her arms around her and held her tightly, making escape into the safety of the night impossible.

The most powerful woman in the region surrendered to the exhaustion that often comes from an emotional outpouring and drifted into a soft sleep encircled by Lucy's arms. Lucy, understanding the trust that had been placed in her hands, looked down at the sleeping woman and whispered, "You would be so easy to fall in love with."



Antonia awoke slightly disoriented. When she realized where she was, she gasped with embarrassment.

"It's all right, Antonia."

"I'm sorry, I have to go. No one can see us like this. Please don't make this hard for me."

Lucy released her saying, "Don't worry, you and your secrets are safe with me."

Antonia nodded her head as she tossed wood on the fire and stirred it up into a roaring blaze. Without saying a word, she moved to the door. She paused, and with her hand on the doorknob, turned to Lucy, took a deep breath, and said, "I'll be back."

Lucy wondered what that meant, exactly.



Trudy, Grace, and Antonia were lingering around the breakfast table when Minnie came through the kitchen. "Morning Ladies. I trust you had a good sleep. Sorry to intrude, but I wonder if I can speak to Miss Antonia for a minute."

Antonia got up and followed Minnie into the butler's pantry.

"What is it, Minnie?"

"Oh, nothing bad, I was just hoping to escort my friend back to town and if there was anything you needed while I was there."

"Of course you can take her back. You could pick up some ammo and would you please ask Nelda if she needs anything for her pantry?"

"The usual ammo?"

"Um-hmm. By the way, I hope the two of you had a good time last night."

"Oh yes. The dinner and dancing were great and thank you for the bonus." Minnie was shuffling her feet hoping Antonia would dismiss her.

"That's not what I meant and you know it," teased Antonia.

"Miss Antonia, I mean no disrespect, but I am not the kind of woman that kisses then tells." Minnie's face was bright red and it was clear she wanted to bolt.

"So then there were kisses?" asked Antonia innocently.

"Yes, and now I am going to take my leave."

"All right, off with you. Be careful," advised Antonia.



"Is everything all right," questioned Grace when Antonia returned to the table.

"Yes, she wanted to take her girlfriend back to town. Speaking of which, do you want me to have one of the ranch hands escort you back into town? It snowed about six inches last night, but it might have drifted in several places."

Trudy spoke up. "I think that's a good idea. Let me go check on Lucy, then I'll be ready. Grace, did you come on horseback?"

“Yes. If you don’t mind, I’ll ride with you and tie Mami to your wagon.”

“Trudy, before you go, can you give me instructions on what care Lucy will need?”

“Just as soon as I check her out. You going to be okay with her staying here a few days?”

“I think so. I sent Minnie to buy ammo. There should be plenty if her brother comes stomping in looking for her.” Antonia had a wicked smile on her face.

“You had better be careful. Don’t get into a pissing contest with that sidewinder.”

“Don’t worry, Doc, I’m immune to his venom.”



Knocking on her guest’s door, Antonia waited to be invited in. Once Lucy had called out “come in” Antonia strode into the room, all business-like.

“So, Lucy, Dr. Osler told me that I should be getting you out of bed and sitting you up in a chair at least twice a day. Shall we do that now?”

Lucy laughed lightly. “You’re still shook up about last night, aren’t you?”

“What about last night?” quipped Antonia bustling about. “I recall that it was just two friends divulging their deepest, darkest secrets. Why on earth would that cause me to be shaken up?”

Bursting out laughing, Lucy good naturedly countered, “Indeed, what is there to be flustered about?”

“Listen Luce, are you going to cooperate and let me help you out of that bed and over to the armchair by the window or do I have to call in the big guns?”

“Just who are the big guns?” asked Lucy with feigned distress, and did you just call me Luce?”

“Umm, yes. Sorry. Do you not like it?”

“On the contrary. I like it a lot. My mother used to call me that when I was little.”

“So I remind you of your mother?” Antonia teased.

“Ah, no. Hardly, if you catch my drift.”

Antonia’s cheeks flushed poppy red. “Okay, I’m calling in the big guns.”

“No, no. Don’t do that. I promise I’ll behave,” begged Lucy with merriment.

“All right then. Let’s get you sitting up.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Lucy faking contrition for her attempted flirting.

“Okay. Now, we need to get your legs over the side of the bed. I’ll move your left leg for you. Tell me if it hurts.”

Lucy felt a slight discomfort, but no pain. Antonia, put Lucy’s arm around her neck and told her to stand and put her weight on her good leg. Upright with the help of Antonia, Lucy tested a little weight on the wounded leg. It hurt, but not as much as she had expected. Slowly, Antonia guided Lucy to the chair, helped her turn, and then supported her as she sat.

Noticing that Lucy was sweating from the exertion, Antonia grabbed a cloth from the wash basin stand and wiped Lucy’s face and neck. When she had covered her lap and legs with a blanket, she said, “Now, you just sit here and look out the window at the birds or whatever else is brave enough to poke its head out today. I’ll be back. Do you want hot tea or coffee?”

“How about a hot toddy?” wistfully asked Lucy.

With the door to the hallway open, Antonia turned and said, “Not with the Laudanum you are taking.”

“Damn,” answered Lucy good naturedly.

Antonia hesitated a moment, then said, “Luce, I like you,” before she left the room.



Nelda had just left a tray of hot tea and cookies with Lucy and Antonia when she returned with a worried look on her face. "Ah, Miss Antonia, Miss Lucy, the marshal is here again."

Before Antonia could rise, Rutledge pushed past Nelda, strode over to the two women, anger etched in his face. Nelda did not leave, rather stood next to the door in case things went from bad to worse.

"So you are here, Lucy, and have you infected this woman with your perversions?" He was like a spitting cobra spraying his toxic secretion onto anything in its way.

Antonia stood up and faced the marshal. She was seething with rage. "How dare you break into my house and accost us with your venom! Miss Lucy is a guest. She was shot as a result of you forcing her to ride with your posse. Dr. Osler patched her up and now she is convalescing here, since you made it clear you didn't approve of her."

Rutledge put his hand on his pistol, a movement not lost on Nelda who slid out of the room silently and just as quietly slipped back in with a shotgun pointed at the marshal. Antonia raised her arm and pointed to the door. Rutledge looked over his shoulder and removed his hand from his pistol.

"I think you have worn out your welcome, Marshal. Now, here is how this is going to go. First of all, your sister is not a prisoner here. She can leave anytime the doctor says she is fit, or she can stay. It's her choice. But you, you cannot return to my property without a Search and Seizure Warrant—you know that little piece of paper which has been the *modus operandi* of law for a hundred years."

"You don't know what you are talking about. New Mexico isn't a state so we don't have to follow that ridiculous federal law," sneered the marshal.

"As a matter of fact, you do," lobbed Antonia. "If you check you'll see that all territories under the control of the

federal government are considered part of the United States for purposes of law.”

“So, now you’re an attorney,” mocked the marshal.

“She may not be, but I am, dear brother.”

“Then maybe you should go back to St. Louis and hawk your wares there,” yelled Rutledge. “You’ve been useless to me here!”

“Marshal, you should leave now while you can still do so on your own steam.”

Rutledge glared at Lucy and Antonia, then turned and tromped out the door. Antonia hurried after him, taking the shotgun from Nelda and following the marshal out of the house.

“I mean it, Tim. Don’t show up here again.”

“This isn’t over.”

After the marshal and his two deputies that had waited outside left, Antonia went down to Juan’s office and asked to have guards placed at strategic locations. Juan readily agreed, then asked, “Is he still on that Silent Night Gang kick?”

“Yes, and more. Tell the crews to be very, very careful.”



The rest of the afternoon, Antonia was not fit for company, but her curiosity was wreaking havoc in her brain. *Just who was Lucy Rutledge?* All she really knew was that she wanted to learn more. After a light supper, she decided to go and talk with Lucy.

“Lucy, may I come in?”

“Yes,” came the answer.

Antonia didn’t say a word until she sat in the chair next to the bed and then when she did, she averted her eyes at first.

“May I ask you some personal questions?”

“Go ahead.”

“Did you really go to law school?”

“Yes, I did... in St. Louis.”

“What brought you out here?”

“My brother,” she said with the disgust in her voice. “He said there were few lawyers out here and I could make a good living. Unfortunately, it wasn’t more than a couple of weeks before I realized he wanted me here for his own benefit.”

“What was that?”

“He thought that there might be some charges against him for accepting donations—if you get my drift, and he wanted representation he could trust. Plus, he wanted me to represent all his corrupt wealthy cronies. I told him that I wouldn’t do his or his pals’ bidding.”

“Are you planning to go back to St. Louis?”

“I’ve sent letters of inquiries to various locations and have received a couple of letters from firms that seemed interested, but I haven’t made any decisions yet.” She looked at Antonia and pointedly added, “This place is growing on me.”

“I am sorry to say that what you have told me about your brother doesn’t surprise me.”

“You have no idea, Antonia. He is furious with me and now with you because I am here. If I had known he would be so irrational, I never would have agreed to come here.”

“Don’t worry, Lucy. I have security all over the place.”

“Oh, I doubt he would come here again, but he might go after a friend, or your animals, or someone you love. Is there someone you love?”

“I have friends and staff, but no one like what I think you mean,” replied Antonia evenly, ignoring her wildly thumping heart.

“Tim knows that third-party retribution often hurts more than a direct attack.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. Dr. Osler left today to visit with some friends in Chicago. I’ll have a couple of

guards sent over to Grace's in the morning. She may be staying in Santa Fe tonight.

Antonia sat quietly for a moment, gathered herself, and continued, "I suspect that you haven't had a bath since you left Dr. Osler's or maybe even before. Maybe it's time to freshen you up a bit."

"Are you telling me that I am beginning to smell like a compost pile?"

"No, no. Not at all," laughed Antonia. "Just thought that maybe you would feel better. I brought everything with me if you would like that, but it has to be a sponge bath since I don't think you can immerse your leg yet."

"Maybe you're right. How do we do this?"

"Well, I'll bring a basin of warm water over here, then I'll start washing. Seems pretty straightforward, don't you think?" asked Antonia tongue in cheek. "But first you'll have to take off your nightshirt."

Antonia turned and walked to the wash basin, poured warm water, slung a cloth and towel over her forearm, and took a deep breath. She had never seen a completely nude woman. Equal amounts of terror and excitement coursed through her.

Seeing that Lucy had not taken off her nightshirt, Antonia asked if she needed help. Lucy, with an impish glimmer in her eyes answered, "Yes, please."

Antonia pulled back the covers and reached for the hem of the nightshirt. She raised it over Lucy's legs, stopping to observe the bandage that covered the gunshot wound. "Hmm, I see that your wound has stopped bleeding. There is no more blood on the bandage."

Her hands were trembling as she asked Lucy to lift her hips. Lucy complied and Antonia lifted the gown to her waist. The idea of seeing bare breasts made her dizzy. "Umm, I need to have you sit up now. Let me help you." She put her arm around Lucy and pulled her into a sitting position, stuffing pillows behind her.

“Lift your arms, please.” Antonia averted her eyes for a moment, but the temptation was too great as she dragged the night shirt up and over Lucy’s breasts. They were magnificent. She had seen breasts like these only in her dreams.

Her heart was pounding and she realized that she was breathing faster and harder. She was sure that Lucy was aware of her reaction and tried to reel in her emotions but they had other ideas. Grabbing a cloth, she submerged it in the warm water, wrung it out, and added some soap that smelled of elderberry and roses. Antonia had bathed many a time with this soap, but tonight its scent was intoxicating...or perhaps it wasn’t the scent at all. Without a word, she gently washed Lucy’s face. Lucy did not take her eyes from Antonia’s face.

When Antonia took Lucy’s hand and raised her arm, Lucy’s breath caught. She allowed herself to surrender to the slow, sensual movement up her arm, across her chest and down the other arm. Antonia felt Lucy shudder as she ran the warm soapy cloth over her breasts, first one, then the other. Even though there was a cloth between Antonia’s fingers and Lucy’s skin, Antonia’s senses were on overload. This was like nothing she had ever experienced in her life.

Antonia continued with the bath, first drying Lucy’s arms and chest, then washing and drying Lucy’s legs, careful not to disturb the wound. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she pulled Lucy against her and began washing her back. She savored the chance to feel Lucy’s bare breasts pressed against her and wondered what it would be like if she too were naked.

Still holding Lucy against her, Antonia dried Lucy’s back and reached for a clean nightshirt waiting on the nightstand. Lucy’s head was resting in the crook of Antonia’s neck. She pressed her lips to Antonia’s neckline. In a flurry, their lips came together, and Antonia, wanting

more of her, pulled Lucy closer, crushing their upper bodies together in a tango of wondrous give and take.

A knock on the door dragged them from each other's hands and mouths. Antonia got up, covered Lucy and answered, "Come in."

"Is it okay if I take Miss Lucy's tray?" asked Nelda as she poked her head through the partially opened door.

"Yes, and you can take these towels and cloths too. Thank you."

Once Nelda left, Antonia thought it best that she leave too. It wasn't a good idea to start rumors with the marshal snooping around.

"Luce, I, ah, I think I should go."

"Did I do something wrong?" asked a disappointed Lucy.

"No, you didn't. The problem is that you did everything right. I, umm, just have to..."

"You don't have to explain, Antonia. I know this is new for you."

Antonia nodded, squeezed Lucy's hand and left.



Antonia was already in her night clothes and had secured the house. She was ascending the stairs to her room when she heard loud pounding on the door along with boisterous shouting. She recognized the voice of Juan. She ran to the door, unlocked it, and stood aside for Juan, who came in like a bull who had been taunted with the matador's cape.

"Juan, what is going on? Is anyone hurt?"

"No, no, Miss Antonia. The marshal has arrested Miss Grace and taken her to jail!"

"What? Are you sure?"

“Sí, sí. I am sure. The husband of one of her seamstresses came to tell you, but the guards wouldn't let him pass, so they came for me.

“Tell me everything you know, Juan.”

“I don't know any more than what I told you. I questioned the man, but all he knew was that she had come back from Santa Fe, went to her shop, and was dragged out this evening by the marshal.”

“All right, Juan. There isn't much we can do tonight, but we'll ride out at first light tomorrow.”



Hearing the Grandfather Clock in the drawing room, Antonia knew it was 1:00 a.m. Restless, she had not slept and the bed looked like a couple of mountain lions had held a wrestling match on it. Lucy's words of warning reverberated in her head.

She huffed, swung her legs over the side, and got up. Walking down the stairs in her nightgown and bare feet, she paused in front of Lucy's door before she headed to her office. Once the kerosene lamp was lit, she opened the bottom drawer to her desk, and spun the combination lock on the built-in safe.

She opened a large manilla envelope that said, “For Your Eyes Only,” and removed a sheath with multiple sheets of paper inside. Reviewing the documents once again, she wondered if they had something to do with Grace being arrested. Locking up the documents, she turned down the lamp, and left.

As she was passing Lucy's room, she paused. She was trying to work through her conflicting urges when a voice startled her. “If that's you Antonia, please come in.”

Opening the door, Antonia answered, “Did I wake you? I'm so sorry.”

“No, you didn’t wake me. The night wind was rattling the windows and it’s cold in spite of the fire. I couldn’t sleep. Come here. Lucy held the bed clothes open for Antonia, who hesitated only a few seconds. “I know this thing about my brother is upsetting you. I am so sorry I brought this mess to your door.”

“Luce, you couldn’t have known. Besides, I have a plan.”

“You do? Care to enlighten me?”

“Not right now. I just need to find some courage.”

“How about I just hold you and keep you safe for a few hours?”

Antonia settled her head on Lucy’s shoulder, but the nearness to her interrupted any attempt to sleep. Lucy brushed light fingers over Antonia’s back in an effort to calm her, but the sweet gesture only served to inflame Antonia’s desire for Lucy. Feeling an excitement in her lower belly, Antonia could no longer ignore wanting to touch Lucy.

“Luce, may I touch you?” whispered Antonia.

“Take off your nightgown,” answered Lucy.

They both sat up and helped each other disrobe. They were skin to skin for the first time. Feeling Lucy against her, holding her with her entire body, was the most sensual thing Antonia had ever felt. Each kiss brought with it a fiery ardor that ramped up their longing for each other.

Antonia softly caressed Lucy’s face with her fingers until she was sure she had memorized it. She let her fingers trace down Lucy’s arm, leaving a trail of tenderness and devotion. When she reached Lucy’s hand, she intertwined their fingers, brought both hands to her mouth, and kissed the back of Lucy’s hand, her fingers, and her wrist. Lucy moaned with pleasure. When Antonia had kissed every single finger on Lucy’s hand, Lucy used her lips to unfurl Antonia’s index finger. Hungrily, she closed her mouth around it, drawing it in as her tongue caressed it, slowly and sensuously.

Antonia felt a jolt of electricity and without withdrawing her hand, rolled on top of Lucy. Staring deeply into her ice blue eyes, Antonia murmured, "Luce, I'm not sure what to do."

"Do what you want. Touch me like you want to be touched."

Antonia cupped Lucy's cheek, gave her a quick kiss, then ran her fingers through Lucy's hair. She traced the outside of her ear with a finger, pausing to caress Lucy's ear lobe between her thumb and forefinger. She swooned at the velvety feeling and Lucy's reaction to her touch.

Sliding down Lucy's body, Antonia kissed the tops of her breasts, moving from one to another. As Lucy arched into the contact, Antonia covered a nipple with her mouth, sucking gently. While Lucy was content to give Antonia free rein to explore and discover, she was throbbing with passion and yearning. She wrapped Antonia in a firm embrace and deftly rolled them over.

When Lucy's lips covered Antonia's nipple, she cried out in an ecstasy she never imagined possible. As Lucy continued caressing Antonia's body, she became dizzy with desire. Lucy's hands and mouth seemed to be everywhere and Antonia was unable to think, only to feel.

Lucy too was lost in the heated sensations. Never had she before felt such unabated eagerness to please. As they moved together, entwined and connected, both experienced a sensual release that took over their bodies and left them shaking in the wild wind of the night.



Holding Antonia, Lucy whispered, "Are you all right?"
"Yes," responded an emotional Antonia as she snuggled into Lucy's body, "but I'm real sleepy."

Lucy laughed gently and said, "Then let's go to sleep."

“Yes, but I have a question first,” responded a sated Antonia.

“Ask it,” replied Lucy.

Antonia hesitated for a moment then shyly asked, “Is it always like this?”

Lucy looked deeply into those milk chocolate brown eyes and simply said, “No, it’s not.”

Pulling back from Lucy’s arms, Antonia was dismayed. “Was it my lack of experience? I mean I thought everything was wonderful, but if you didn’t, I’m so sorry.”

“Oh Antonia, honey, I meant that it was perfect. You are amazing and there is really no way for me to describe how you make me feel.” She kissed Antonia on the forehead feeling a sense of peace she hadn’t felt since she was a child.



At least the sun is out this morning, silently groused Antonia as she added wood to the fire in Lucy’s room.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought you were still sleeping, Luce.”

“No, I was watching you. You move so gracefully, even with a pile of cedar in your arms.”

Lucy sat up and hung her legs over the bed. “I’m coming with you this morning. No way are you going to walk into the jail by yourself, and besides, Grace is going to need a lawyer.”

“Maybe it’s not such a good idea for you to come. You are still healing.”

“I don’t have any pain and you, yourself told me the wound had stopped bleeding. I can ride a horse. I just need some breeches and a shirt.”

“I’m not so sure about this but let me see what I can find for you to wear. You’re tall. I think some of my brother’s clothes might work. Do you have any objection to that?”

“No, Antonia. Not at all. I’d be honored.”



Juan accompanied Antonia and Lucy to town. After two hours in the frigid weather, all three were chilled bone deep. While Juan was taking the horses to the stable to warm up and munch on some hay, Antonia, followed by a gimpy Lucy, opened the door to the marshal's office.

"Morning Miss Antonia, Miss Lucy," said a surprised Pete, one of the marshal's deputies. "What can I do for you?"

"We're here to see Mrs. Garabaldi, Pete."

"I'm sorry, but the marshal gave orders that she wasn't to have any visitors."

"Pete, I can appreciate that, but you are a smart man and probably know that Mrs. Garabaldi is entitled to see her lawyer whenever she wants."

"Yes, Miss Antonia. I know that, but she ain't asked for her lawyer."

Lucy spoke up. "Pete, I am Mrs. Garabaldi's lawyer and would like to see her now."

"Mmm, Miss Lucy, if you are sure you are a lawyer, you can see her. Just don't tell your brother. I don't wanna lose my job."

Lucy nodded her head, turned to Antonia, and whispered to her as Pete walked towards the jail cells. "You had better stay here."

"Why?" mouthed back Antonia.

"Lawyer-client privacy and I want you to keep Pete busy so he can't snoop. Okay?"

"All right. Just tell her I'm here and we'll do whatever we can to get her out."



"Grace, how are you?"

"Lucy, I'm fine, but what are you doing here?"

"I'm your lawyer and I assure you I am a bona fide lawyer with a piece of paper to prove it."

"Really? That's outstanding."

"Now tell me what happened."

"The marshal said that they have extradition papers to send me back to Philadelphia but he wouldn't let me see them. I know he is lying." Grace knew she would have to reveal the tawdry details of her east-coast arrest.

"What happened in Philadelphia?"

"I killed my husband."

Lucy seemed not to react at all to the blunt confession. Instead, she asked, "What were the circumstances around you killing him?"

"He beat me, raped me, and abused me in other ways for years. One night he came in drunk, hit me with his fists several times, tore my blouse off, and threw me to the floor. He told me to stop struggling or he would kill me. I didn't stop struggling and managed to gouge his eye. It inflamed him more, so he took his pistol out of his holster and put it against my head. I was able to push his arm away when he was unbuttoning his pants. We struggled and the gun went off. The bullet pierced his heart."

"Were you actually arrested for the murder?"

"Yes, Lucy. I was. I spent months in jail until the trial. The jury acquitted me when Mrs. Rosetti, the neighbor across the hall, came to court to testify what she saw. Apparently, my husband was so drunk he forgot to close the door to our apartment and when she heard yelling, she came out of her flat and witnessed everything."

"So you were acquitted?"

"No, the jury found me guilty, but the judge overruled them. The man that prosecuted me believed that I had paid off Mrs. Rosetti to lie for me. It turned out that her son was visiting and he backed up his mother's story."

"Grace. I'm guessing that there is no extradition order. Did my brother have people search your shop and house?"

“Yes. He told me they found a half dozen stash of six-shooters which just proved that I was a murderess.” Grace sighed and wondered if she should tell Lucy why she had the guns.

“Grace, where did you get the guns?”

“Santa Fe yesterday. They were in the house.”

“Why did you have the pistols?”

Grace took a breath for courage and said, “Come closer.” Grace pressed her face up against the bars, reached through them with her arms, and positioned Lucy’s ear next to her mouth. She whispered into Lucy’s ear. Grace paused for a moment then continued their intimate conversation for the next few minutes.

“Listen Grace, do not, under any circumstance, say anything to anyone about our conversation today. Let me do my job. I will have you out as soon as I confirm the story with the Philadelphia police. I’m going to go now and start working.”

“Are you sure your leg is all right?”

“Yes, thank you. The cold numbed it up pretty well and Antonia has taken good care of me.”



When Antonia and Lucy left the marshal’s office, Pete bade them goodbye and held the door open for them. They met Juan at the café across the street. Over hot coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs, Antonia handed Lucy a manilla envelope. “You will need this and I’m giving it to you now in case we get separated on our way back,” she said. Antonia was being hypervigilant. It wouldn’t surprise her that someone who saw them in town reported back to the marshal and that he might try and set a trap for them.

Lucy replied, “Thanks. I’ll put it in my satchel.”

Antonia was relieved that Lucy did not want to open it in front of Juan and that she was savvy enough to know why she had given it to her now.



It was midafternoon when the trio reached the ranch. Antonia thanked Juan and helped Lucy back into her room. Her leg was hurting like crazy. Antonia poured out a spoonful of Laudanum that Trudy had left, set the envelope down on the nightstand, and left her to sleep.

Hours later, Antonia checked on Lucy and was surprised to see that she was sitting up in bed, a sandwich in hand reviewing the papers.

“Antonia, however did you get these?”

“I hired a detective in Philadelphia to find out what he could about Grace when she first moved here. She was so mysterious and secretive about her life back east.”

“You are something. These will blow my brother’s charges out of the water. We should be able to get her released tomorrow. It would be a good idea to ride into Santa Fe first to find a judge to order her release.”

“I know one that was a friend of my father. I’m sure he’ll help.”

“Getting her released is just part of the issue. I don’t think my brother will be sanctioned. He can argue that he didn’t know about her exoneration, but at some time, he’ll try again.”

Antonia grimaced. “I guess it’s one thing at a time.”

“Yes, I think you are right. A small win is better than no win at all. Now how about the sleeping arrangements...”

“What about them?” asked Antonia curiously.

“Are you going to keep sneaking into my room, or do I get to move into your room sometime in the near future?”

“Let’s get that leg totally healed before we talk about you climbing stairs. Since both my legs are in pretty good

working order, I'll go up, change, and come back here. Can you live with that?"

"Umm, I think so, but just so you know, I am feeling no pain right now, so maybe you should hurry so that we can take advantage of that."

Antonia placed a chaste kiss on Lucy's lips and thundered up the stairs. In fifteen minutes, she was snuggled into bed with Lucy.



The next morning, Lucy and Juan headed to Santa Fe to obtain an order to release Grace from jail. The weather was crisp and cold, but the roads were fairly dry. As Juan and Antonia were passing through a deserted portion of the road, a shot rang out. Antonia's hat blew off her head and tumbled along the side of the road.

Juan, who was riding behind Antonia, came up alongside of her and guided both their horses off the road into the wooded area on the east side of the road. Another shot rang out but missed both of them. Waiting behind the trees, Juan and Antonia quickly dismounted and pulled out their rifles. A third shot hit the tree trunk where Juan crouched behind. He thought he knew where the shooter was. There was a hill opposite where he and Antonia had taken cover. It rose gently above the road and was peppered with large rocks and boulders. Juan was pretty sure the sniper was hiding there.

"Antonia, fire some shots towards those boulders," pointed Juan. "I'm going to try to circle around. Keep him occupied."

Knowing that she wouldn't be able to talk Juan out of his plan, she agreed with a nod and the cocking of her rifle. She rested the rifle on a low hanging branch, aimed and fired off two shots in hopes of distracting the shooter. The sniper returned a volley, the bullets landing in a tree several feet

away. Antonia paced herself, knowing that it was her job to distract the shooter so Juan could get to a better spot.

Reloading her rapid-fire Winchester, she got off several more shots from slightly different places in the tree stand, each time drawing return shots from the shooter. When the prolonged volley had finished, she heard two rapid fired shots coming from a different location. *Was the shooter moving?* She waited and observed a moment but could not see anything. Finally, she decided to send off another volley in the direction of the boulders. When no shots were returned, she waited anxiously until she heard Juan yell, "I think I got him. Wait for me."

Antonia waited for Juan to give her a signal that she should follow. She could see him now, waving his rifle over his head yelling for her to come up. On her way across the road, she picked up her hat, which now was permanently ventilated.

There were loose rocks and Antonia moved cautiously. She scrambled the last few yards to reach the spot where Juan had been. When she came around a boulder near the top of the hill, he was standing over a man crumpled on the ground. They both looked down at the man for a moment. Juan turned him over while Antonia trained her rifle on the fallen man's head. Neither were shocked with the man's identity. It was the Marshal.

Very few words passed between Juan and Antonia as they dragged the dead man over to his horse. They slung him over the saddle and tied him with his own rope so he wouldn't fall off. Antonia picked up his rifle. It was fitted with a telescopic sight. Juan took the offered rifle and said, "Even with the telescope, he couldn't hit us? The hole in your hat must have been a lucky shot. What now?"

Antonia thought for a moment. "We take him to Santa Fe and tell the judge what happened. I imagine that he will send someone for the sheriff."

"Do you think they will believe us?"

“I think so. We’ve got his rifle. By the smell, the sheriff should be able to tell it was fired. We’ve also got the ammunition sling he was wearing which shows several bullets are missing.”

“Umm, Miss Antonia. Maybe it would just be better to bury the body and never speak of this.”

“The thought crossed my mind, but I think his sister would live the rest of her life wondering if she was safe. You know he hates her.”

“Yes, Miss Antonia. I got that impression. Okay, let’s take our chances in Santa Fe.”



It was nightfall by the time the duo rode through Hot Springs. They stopped by the jail and delivered the release order from the judge. Pete read the order by the kerosene lamp, shrugged his shoulders, and went to get Grace.

He accompanied the three outside, and as Grace mounted one of the horses, he yelled, “Ain’t that the marshal’s horse?”

Antonia answered, “Yes. You might soon be receiving a promotion, Pete. The sheriff from Santa Fe will be here tomorrow.” The three of them rode off at a gallop, Pete’s last words, lost in a swirl of dust.



After a hastily pulled together supper, Grace retired to the second-floor guest room. Juan went back to his quarters near the barns and Antonia invited Lucy to come up stairs to her room.

They sat in front of the fire, sipping whiskey. No one spoke for a long while. Finally Antonia, who was not as calm as she appeared, said, “I’m so sorry Luce. I know you didn’t get along with him, but he still was your brother. If there had

been any other way..." Antonia trailed off not really knowing what more to say.

Lucy got up, limped over to Antonia and offered both hands. Antonia took them and let herself be pulled up. "I know that. There is no doubt in my mind that he made any other choice impossible. Please, don't feel guilty even for a second. He brought this on himself."

Even though Antonia had not pulled the trigger that killed Lucy's brother, she felt responsible and knew that there was no way to make it up, even if Lucy did not blame her.

"Antonia," Lucy whispered as she took her face into her hands, "I know I don't know you well, but I know you are feeling responsible. I need you to promise me that you will let this go. There are things I haven't told you about Tim. Just believe me when I tell you he was a despicable man. I thought that he had changed, but I was wrong. After all, I saw the hole in your hat before you took it off. Luckily he was always a lousy shot."

Antonia allowed a few tears to cloud her eyes before Lucy's lips were upon hers. The kiss bespoke of Lucy's sincerity and acceptance. As Lucy walked Antonia into her bedroom, she banished all thoughts of her brother. All she wanted was for Antonia to feel safe and loved.



As Antonia slowly came back to herself, Lucy lovingly looked down upon her face, illuminated by the moon outside the window. "Look at me, darlin'."

Languidly opening her eyes, Antonia looked into the eyes of the woman she had fallen for. "Yes?"

"I have never seen anything as beautiful, never felt anything as exquisite as you letting me touch you. You know that don't you?"

“Yes, I do. The look on your face, in your eyes, when you make me... well you know what I mean, says it all.”

Lucy continued to stare into Antonia's eyes with adoration. “Do you remember when I told you I thought I recognized your eyes?”

“Um-hmm,” I remember.

“Well, I do recognize your eyes.”

“Oh? You think so?” tempted Antonia.

Lucy kissed her deeply, held her with tenderness and love and said, “I've fallen in love with you, my dearest, darlin', Dunder.”

THE END

THE TRAVELER

“No Lizzie!” Jeremy screamed. “You can’t be serious. There is no way I can allow this!”

“There’s no other way, Jere and you know it!”

“I don’t care, mate. You are insane if you think I am going to take part in this!”

“You don’t have a choice. I’m the lead scientist in this venture and I’m your boss.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll resign first and report you for your recklessness,” he stammered, unsure of himself.

“And I’ll give the administration a bulky paper on why we should do this, highlighting the financial benefits the University will receive. You know those hawks will agree. Look how much money they got when we won the Nobel prizes. Investors were chomping at the bit to be a part of this. Can’t you just see them salivating? There will be a never-ending source of benefactors lining up!”

“Listen. At least promise me you won’t do anything foolish until we plan for every possible disaster. Promise. I mean it.”

“All right, Jere, I promise, but you had better not stall with all your calculations and permutations of ‘what ifs’. Remember, I know what that quantum computer can do.”

Jeremy sat down on the stool nearest him, holding his head in his hands. Lizzie stood with her arms crossed in front of her chest, tapping her foot against the cement floor.

“What now, Math Boy?” said an impatient Lizzie.

“There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t and you know it.”

“Fine, give me a couple of weeks to either decide it will be relatively safe to go forward or torch this ludicrous plan of yours.”

“Two weeks, Jere. That’s it. Just two weeks.”

Lizzie turned on her heel and walked out of the huge building where their lab was located. She got on her bike and

pedaled home as if she were in the Tour de France bicycle race.



Dr. Elizabeth Adama was one of the most respected physicists in the world. She had been obsessed with time travel ever since she was seven and happened upon the TV series “Time Riders.” Then she stumbled across an episode of Dr. Who which was set in Japan during the time of the Samurai.

Attracted to the Samurai code of honor, she engrossed herself in their history, later acknowledging that she had a very romantic view of an era that was fraught with widespread bloodshed. Since a young age she tried to emulate their courage, respect, loyalty, and care for the elderly. Lizzie had cared for her grandmother up until about six years ago, when she passed.

While all those shows she watched were fiction, it lit an insatiable desire to explore time travel. Now, almost thirty years later, most scientists agreed that travel through time was possible, but that you had to go really fast to accomplish it— more than the speed of light, to be exact. But even if you could accomplish that, you could only go into the future and there was no coming back. No one was eager to try it.

But Lizzie wasn’t interested in traveling to the future. She wanted to travel back to the past. She had a love affair with 15th century Japanese culture— the last hundred years the Samurai roamed the lands protecting their shogun’s interests.

The rub with the idea of time travel to the past was the concern that history could be changed, so no current scientists were undertaking this feat. Fears had been encapsulated in was called “The Grandfather Paradox.” This involved going back in time to meet your grandfather, intending to kill him for whatever reason. If you were

successful, how would it be possible that you would be alive? Wouldn't you have changed history?

She and her team at Strayer University set out to prove that indeed one could travel to the past and that the universe would self-correct to avoid inconsistencies. The University of Queensland in Australia thought there was merit to her postulations and funded a multi-year, multi-million dollar project including a quantum computer which could do multiple calculations at once, far beyond state-of-the art traditional computers. They sent Dr. Jeremy Balstraum, a brilliant mathematician and physicist, to assist and report back to them.

Lizzie, Jeremy, and a team of bright scientists worked on the project for two years. They won the Nobel Prize for what was called quantum deterministic processes. Lizzie was certain that since they had proved that every event is continuous, time travel to the past with free will is logically possible, and it would not disrupt history. It was the getting back that still needed work.

Money poured in from both private and governmental agencies and Lizzie's team was able to design and construct a large enough accelerator capable of hurling large masses through time and space. Previously, accelerators only were able to accelerate subatomic particles. With quantum entanglement, which is the transfer of an object to another location without alteration of its physical state, they had hurled small inanimate objects, then mice, and finally rabbits, through time. It was no longer a theory!

In order to return the objects, they based their calculations on Einstein's theory of general relativity. They constructed a wormhole by building a black hole and connecting it to a white hole to form an invisible tunnel to reach in and retrieve the objects they sent back in time. The returned animals showed no signs of harm and they acted completely normal months after their trip.

While the cages had been outfitted with cameras and other sensing instruments, the videos they retrieved once the objects were returned to the lab never caught another human or animal. The successful experiments were enough to win additional Nobel Prize recognition, but she wanted more.

The fact that they had failed to be able to control where the “object” landed and in what time era, continued to keep Lizzie in the lab long nights. Her obsession was the cause of her live-in girlfriend finally leaving a year ago. Mia had not left a note. She had simply cleared out her belongings and left Lizzie’s house keys on the kitchen counter. It was two days before Lizzie even noticed.

Home now, Lizzie had soaked in the hot tub on her back patio until her skin looked like prunes. Once in the bedroom, she swallowed a Xanax with hopes of reducing her anxiety so she could sleep. In a hazy state, she reached out to the side of the bed her girlfriend had slept on, and murmured, “I’m sorry Mia, but it’s better this way.”



Lizzie startled awake the next morning. Her mood was somewhere between agitated and excited. She reached for her phone and dialed Jeremy’s number.

“Lizzie, are you nuts? It’s five o’clock in the morning...on a Saturday to boot. What do you want?”

“Jere, I think I know where we’ve gone wrong. The Twin Paradox.”

“What?” asked Jeremy as he sat up, turned on the bedside lamp, and put on his glasses.

“The Twin Paradox. I’m sure of it. I’m coming over right now!”

“Shall we figure this out in my bed?” quipped Jeremy, half joking, then realizing it would infuriate her. Lizzie had slept with him once and he was sure that she thought he had taken advantage of her state of mind.

“That was a onetime thing, Jere. You know I wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t been thrown when Mia left without warning and I was very drunk. Do you recall who kept filling my glass?”

Jeremy hung his head. Lizzie’s voice confirmed her irritation with him, but he couldn’t help it. He was in love with her and had been for years.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I’ll never bring it up again. I promise. I’ll put the coffee on.”



Twenty minutes later, Lizzie leaned on the doorbell.

“All right, all right, I’m coming,” yelled Jeremy.

He opened the door of his rented duplex and she hustled past him into the kitchen where she poured herself a cup of coffee. She probably didn’t need the caffeine, but the weather had turned cold already and she was chilled.

“Stop pacing, Lizzie. Sit down and enlighten me, but first, let me confirm what you are talking about. The Twin Paradox refers to one member of a pair of twins going on a time-travel journey at the speed of light, and as a result, experiences slower aging than the other twin who stayed home.”

“Yes,” answered Lizzie impatiently. “That’s the one.”

“I don’t see that it had anything to do with our situation. You know the Twin Paradox is specific to time travel into the future and no one has been able to succeed in doing that yet. It is all theory.”

“What if it isn’t? What if it applies to time travel into the past too?” Lizzie was jazzed. Her anxiety had morphed into excitement. “Okay, listen. We know our own biological clocks run at a certain pace. When you speed up, or accelerate a human body, it ages slower. We saw this with space travel.”

“Yeah, okay. So?”

“I know, I know,” uttered an annoyed Lizzie. “We’ve proven that there has to be acceleration of speed to accomplish time travel, and we figured out that to bring the objects back we had to accelerate the object back in the opposite direction through the wormhole. That was logical, right?”

“Yes, of course, but that’s old news. We’ve proven that a half dozen times.”

“Just hold on,” voiced Lizzie. She was ready to explode. “But, what if in order to control where the sphere lands we can do it by controlling the velocity? To get the object moving through time, we first have to super-accelerate it. Then,” she said dramatically, “what if we decelerate either in the same or opposite direction for a time period without knocking the object out of the speed we need?”

“That is so contra-intuitive, Lizzie. We would have to somehow make sure that we didn’t deaccelerate enough to abort the time travel. We can’t let the deceleration go below the speed of light. Not only that, how would we know where we should start a deceleration, in which direction, and for how long?”

“I don’t know, but you are the mathematician in this circus. Maybe we have to find someone who knows about time fragmentation or time slips. Are you up to it?”

“Sure, first thing Monday morning,” replied Jeremy with a big dose of sarcasm.

Lizzie kissed him on the cheek, flew out the door, and pedaled back to her house where she spent the weekend cleaning out the attic. She had to be prepared.



Lizzie tackled the basement the next weekend and now had boxes of trash lined up on her curb. She saved various items from the attic and basement, planning to donate them to the local returned-veterans organization.

She dressed in business attire, drove her car to campus, and sat waiting for the Dean of Science. She was sure Dr. Susan Cruz would see her without an appointment. Susan was one of the few female Deans of Science that graced the halls of academia not only in the U.S., but across the globe. She was tough, but fair, and was all about bringing money and prestige to the University.

Lizzie was waiting outside her office when Dr. Cruz arrived. "Lizzie, did we have an appointment this morning?"

"No, Dean, but I thought I had information important enough to share. It might mean big bucks for the University."

"Hmm, that usually means you want more funds, but I'm up for a sales pitch, so come in."

Lizzie followed the Dean knowing full well that she was doing an end run on Jeremy and his pals back in Australia. Her raw ambition and obsessiveness drove the drastic step she was about to take.

Lizzie laid out everything, including her theoretical assumptions and asked for an additional two million dollars. At the end of Lizzie's breathless presentation, Dr. Cruz told her that she had great faith in her based on past deliverables, but that she was concerned. She asked only one question.

"What if it fails? I can't allow you to do something like this."

"But Dean, what if it succeeds?"

"You're going to have to bring more than a theory before I okay this, but I'll see what I can do to get you the funds."

"Thank you. I know neither of us will be sorry."

"Have you developed a time frame yet?"

"I'll have preliminary data to you in a month, if I can have funds for additional personnel and some incidentals post haste.

"Lizzie, if there is the slightest risk..." The Dean trailed off. She knew Lizzie loved to live on the edge. "Okay, then. I'll see you in a month for an update."

“Thanks for squeezing me in this morning, and please don’t rat me out to the Aussies, not yet anyway.”

“What about Jeremy? Won’t he report back to his mates in Queensland?”

“No, he’s in love with me and will do whatever I tell him.”

“Careful Lizzie...you are playing with fire.”

“Yeah, Susan. I know, but I’ve got it under control.” Lizzie had worked with Dr. Cruz and was pretty certain she would come through. Another candle on her excitement cake had been lit. She hoped it didn’t get doused with her next appointment— her lawyer.



Two days later, Lizzie received confirmation that funds had been allocated for additional personnel and incidentals. She was now ready to put parts two and three of her plan in motion. Driving to the lab, she had a folder in her satchel that contained the bios of the top three time-fragmentation scientists. One had caught her attention immediately. Dr. Wilma Gallo, a retired brilliant physicist, who was credited with the development and expansion of geospatial metadata in 2008, was at the top of Lizzie’s list and, she was geographically closer than the other two.

However, the part that had caught Lizzie’s attention was her work in time fractionalization and time stamping. She was perfect for Lizzie’s project, but would she want to come out of retirement— she was almost seventy— to work on a project many thought was doomed to end in disaster? She planned to run all three candidates past Jeremy, but her mind was already made up.

After greeting her team, talking briefly to Jeremy about the candidates, she sat at her desk and dialed Dr. Gallo’s number. She released a breath when she heard, “Hello, this is Wilma.”

“Dr. Gallo, this is Elizabeth Adama from Strayer University. Do you have a minute to talk?”

There was a prolonged silence and Lizzie thought she might have lost the connection. She was getting ready to hang up and try again, when she heard, “Are you really Dr. Adama or is this some prank, or worse yet, some slimy journalist wondering about my love life?”

Lizzie liked her humor. She laughed and replied, “Yes, it’s really me. I promise.”



Lizzie was over the moon. Dr. Gallo’s imminent arrival had injected endless ergs of energy into Lizzie’s already anxiety-fueled, hyperactive countenance. *Now, for part three*, thought Lizzie. She dialed the Japan American Society of Santa Clara County and scheduled herself into one-on-one and group classes in Japanese.

Less than a week later Dr. Gallo arrived and took up temporary residence near the lab at Strayer University. It turned out, she was bored out of her gourd in the five years since she retired and was looking forward to the challenge.

After several months, they felt they were ready. Dr. Gallo had stayed for the duration of her part in the project and now was returning to San Francisco where she would consult via a secure video link when necessary.



Weeks later, they were ready to go, all details and contingencies worked out and put to bed. Dean Cruz had given the thumbs up. The only impediment was Jeremy.

“Lizzie, why on earth can’t we trial this with something bigger than a rabbit?”

“Don’t you trust your and Dr. Gallo’s work?”

“Yes, but still, we don’t have real data on how this kind of acceleration will affect a larger mass.” Jeremy quickly added, “Not that I’m saying you are...um...well...you really are perfect, but you know what I mean.”

“I get it. The heaviest thing we hurled through time was a rabbit and now we’re going to try it with twelve times the weight.”

Lizzie’s patience, of which she had very little to begin with, was quickly evaporating. She adopted a tone somewhere between conciliatory and threatening. “If you don’t want to act as launch director, I’ll understand. I can always have Dr. Bikram do it.”

“Riya?” yelped Jeremy. “You would choose her over me?”

“No, but if you don’t want to do it, she’s an excellent choice and you know it. It’s your decision, but you better let me know by this afternoon. You know that Dean Cruz has invited a small cadre of the press to witness the launch. You tell me. Do you want your name on this or not?” She left him standing in her office.



Lizzie awoke to a black morning. She was surprised that she had slept at all. In three hours she would be hurling back though time to 15th century Japan, near current-day Tokyo, they hoped. It was an era when Japan splintered into dozens of independent states constantly at war with one another. Consequently, warriors were in high demand, including female Samurai. It would be a dangerous time for Lizzie, especially because she would not be carrying any type of self-defense weapon, and of course, she was the wrong race. At least she didn’t have blond hair and blue eyes.

Dressed in a simple kimono with tubular pants gathered at the knee by garters and a rough linen tunic underneath, Lizzie positioned herself near the control console. In front of

them in a glassed off room was the “Kangaroo,” the nickname they had given the accelerator. Lizzie shifted her weight from one foot to another, simultaneously excited and nervous. Closing her eyes, she tried to relax, but it was futile. Giving up on calming her nerves, she looked at Jeremy who stood at the main control center and gave him a thumbs up.

He looked at her, nodded, and started a ten second countdown, giving her a chance to abort. At zero, he pushed an over-sized green button that started the accelerator humming. The quantum computer was already ready to go. He slumped into a chair shaking his head in despair. Dr. Bikram noted Jeremy’s distress and stepped in to monitor the instruments. It would take approximately thirteen minutes to ramp up.

When Riya motioned that “Kangaroo” was ready, Lizzie walked into the room and stood within a foot or so of the arches. She had been outfitted with various sensors that would work until the moment in time she was swept up into a vortex and hurled through time and space.

Drops of perspiration were rolling off Lizzie’s brow and she could feel her underarms drenched with sweat. Her body began to quiver being so near to such a huge nuclear energy field. Her heart rate had accelerated and was beating furiously in her chest. She felt nauseous and dizzy.

“Geez, Riya,” prodded Jeremy. Her temperature is up to one hundred four degrees and she’s not even in the “Kangaroo” yet! Her heart rate is a hundred twenty-nine, more than double her normal rate, and her blood pressure is in stroke range. We have to abort!”

“Let’s give it another minute,” calmed Riya. We knew this might happen. Let’s not act prematurely.”

Seconds later Lizzie stepped under the arches. At first she didn’t feel anything but the quivering, her fast heartbeat, and nausea, but then a high pitched electrical whine made her wince as it sliced through her head. The quivering turned into an overwhelming crawly sensation throughout her body.

Moments later, she had a sensation that all the cells in her body were vibrating at an accelerated speed.

Lizzie knew that as long as she was in the same time strata as her team, they would be able to see her and monitor her life signs. Reluctantly, she had agreed that if certain dangerous thresholds were reached, the experiment would be aborted. She also knew that as soon as she left the strata, they would not be able to monitor her, nor receive any video or audio transmissions.

The vibrating was faster and her heart was pounding furiously in her chest. She thought she would pass out, but she didn't. A strange sense of peace came over her. Then waves of bright and brilliant colors materialized all around her. It was as if a living, pulsating, dynamic power had taken control of her body.

Seconds later, the launch team lost all sensors and had no idea if Lizzie was dead or alive.



Lizzie was alive, though she felt her body being pulled in a bizarre way. Noticing that her head seemed to be two feet in front of the rest of her body, she continued to deep breathe. The feeling reminded her of how the character called "the Flash" was depicted as he was running through the streets. Streaks of his body stayed behind him as he moved forward. Moments later, her body seemed to catch up to her head. All noise stopped, her racing heart slowed down, and the vibration in her body ceased. She felt like she was floating on water. Realizing she had no concept of time; she wasn't able to gauge how long she had been traveling.

A moment later, she felt herself falling and a second later, she crashed through some low hanging tree branches and fell to the ground. Stunned, she slowly moved her body parts, took some deep breaths, and looked around. She was in a mature bamboo forest. There were five or six gigantic

bamboo forests near current-day Tokyo, but which one was she in? Was she even near what is now Tokyo?

As the sun's rays danced between the branches of the bamboo, she took out a small compass and a specially made titanium Swiss army knife that had been in a hidden pocket of her kimono. She notched a series of marks four tree trunks, noting the precise location of where the wormhole would appear at the agreed upon return time.

Quickly, she moved away from the landing spot and wondered what she should do— wait for someone to come upon her or strike out. Deciding it was better to move away from her landing spot, she looked at the compass and started walking south through the bamboo. Why she chose to walk south perplexed her, but she decided that it was the hand of fate that pulled her.

In a short while, she came to a worn footpath. Following that, she came upon an area with large boulders surrounded on three sides by bamboo and what looked like a well-worn path about the width of a hand cart. She decided to climb up to the smaller boulders and rest.

Just as she reached the top, she felt herself being pulled backwards and knocked to the ground. The fall had momentarily stunned her and when she opened her eyes and looked up, she thought she was dreaming. There were six women surrounding her, all with their *katana* swords drawn and they were squabbling. Lizzie didn't move. Finally, one woman stepped forward, waved her sword in the air, ending with a flourish to the middle of Lizzie's abdomen. She said, "Jo!" Lizzie recognized the command as "get up."

Gingerly, Lizzie rose, brushing off the dirt from her clothes. She looked at the woman who had told her to get up. In her halting Japanese she said, "*Tsumari, anata no gaig was arimasen*" meaning that she would cause them no harm.

The women looked at each other in confusion. She suspected that none of them had seen a Westerner, but the truth was that they were about to laugh at the notion Lizzie

could cause them harm. The woman in charge addressed her. Her name was Akemi. She wanted to know Lizzie's name.

Lizzie said her name and waited to see what would happen next. Akemi appeared to be distracted, then held her hand up, asking for silence. Hearing a faint noise, she quietly issued a command. Two of the women warriors prodded Lizzie to hurry behind the boulders and stand next to Akemi, who whispered in Lizzie's ear, *shizukani*, meaning "be silent."

A short time later, Lizzie heard horse hoofs. Akemi put her *waskizash*, a short sword, under Lizzie's neck. Once the horses had passed, she removed the blade. No more questions were asked. It seemed more important that they leave the area quickly. Single file, they threaded their way through the bamboo. There wasn't a path, but they seemed to know where they were going. Lizzie snuck out her compass a few times. She would have a hard time getting back to the wormhole unless she was able to chart their walk.

One of the warriors had been given the task of keeping Lizzie moving. She kept spurring Lizzie along with her short sword. Lizzie was very tired. She didn't know if it was due to the emotional and mental stress, or what her body had been through. It seemed like they had been walking for days.

The group had stopped to rest and drink water only once. Just when she thought she couldn't walk another step, they broke through the forest to an area that had been partially felled and outfitted with a sort of stockade made with bamboo trunks. A group of women came out to meet them. Lizzie was the center of attention, but Akemi waved the women away and rattled off some commands, way too fast for Lizzie to understand.

There were several small buildings made with bamboo and some sort of thatching on the roofs. The woman behind her, directed her toward one of the larger shelters. She sat inside with her until Akemi entered with two bowls and spoons made from carved wood. She handed Lizzie a bowl,

sat next to her, their shoulders touching, and motioned for her to eat.

Lizzie had never been so grateful for a dish of rice and vegetables. Akemi retrieved a bottle of rice wine from a bamboo table, and Lizzie, who hadn't taken a sip of alcohol since Mia left, did not want to appear impolite, so she drank sparingly.

Akemi had been watching her closely and now spoke. "You do not look like us."

"I know I look different, but I have the same blood and heart."

That seemed to surprise Akemi. Lizzie had tried to anticipate questions, both those she might have to ask, and those asked of her, while she was taking Japanese classes. She was prepared for the next.

"Where do you come from?"

"Akemi, do you know the sea?"

"It is very far from here. Nihon is a vast empire," responded Akemi.

Recognizing that "Nihon" was what Japan was called centuries ago, she smiled and offered, "I come from across the sea."

"In a boat?"

"Yes, a very big boat."

"How did you get from the sea to here?" asked Akemi, becoming more and more curious.

"I got separated from my people who were traders. Then I got lost. I walked a long time."

"Are your people the ones they called Westerners?"

"Yes." *So she had heard of Westerners*, thought Lizzie. "Have you met any before?"

"No. I heard people talking about the big boats and how smelly the Westerners were. They don't bathe." Akemi wrinkled her nose to emphasize her point.

"Do I smell bad to you?" asked Lizzie.

Akemi leaned toward her, buried her nose in Lizzie's neck, and after sniffing a few times, said, "No. You smell of fruit."

This seemingly unimportant data was of extreme value. Lizzie's body lotion had a strong lemon scent that stayed with her skin for hours. She estimated she had walked an hour to the boulders and then, by the position of the sun, five or six hours through the forest with her captors. She realized that the actual time travel was miniscule!

"Akemi, I noticed that there are no children or men here. What is this place?"

"We are *Onna-musha*, or offensive combat female fighters. We do not mix with Samurai men."

Akemi stood up and went over to a *tansu*, or chest. Next to it, was something like a seamstress model, made of wood and metal. She took off her chest plate, shin, thigh, and sleeve armor, and draped them over the mannequin, giving the impression that a soldier stood at attention in the corner of the room. After removing her pants, similar to the ones Lizzie wore, she removed her socks and leggings.

Now, only clothed in a thigh-length simple shirt, she faced Lizzie. As she released her hair from the bun it had been coiled in, she reached out her hand and said, "Now we go to bathe. Leave your kimono here."

I hope it's not in a cold stream, thought Lizzie, but she knew she didn't have much choice. She removed her belt and kimono, making sure the compass and knife were still hidden, took Akemi's offered hand, and left the hut. They walked through the settlement hand-in-hand until they came to an area that was screened by bamboo tree trunks driven into the ground. It was a three-sided building. Entering through the open side, Akemi let go of Lizzie's hand. She could see that there were a half dozen wooden soaking tubs, three occupied.

The attendants bowed to Akemi and scurried to a corner that was partitioned off from the main structure. One of the

attendants moved behind Lizzie and reached for the hem of her tunic. She was startled and moved away, clearly giving off the vibe that she didn't want to be touched by strangers.

Akemi dismissed the attendants and approached Lizzie telling her not to be fearful. She gently removed Lizzie's tunic and began to unwind the binding Lizzie had chosen to wear instead of a bra. Standing half naked in front of a stranger increased the overall vulnerability she felt. Her host, or her captor as it were, removed her garters, pants, and loose-fitting baggy underpants, before removing her own tunic.

One of the attendants returned and tried to wash Lizzie with a frothy mixture of water and something that smelled like woody musk. She balked, stepping away, not fully understanding what was going on. Akemi took the sponge and wooden bucket from the attendant, and turning to Lizzie said, "Give me your arm."

Lizzie held out her arm and let Akemi wash it. It felt good so she let Akemi wash the entirety of her body. When she was through, the attendant poured warm water over her. Akemi gave the sponge to Lizzie and said, "You wash me now."

Was this a show of mutual trust? Lizzie took the sponge, nodded her understanding, and followed the same routine Akemi had used. Lizzie had been around the block a few times and bathing with another woman wasn't a novelty, but this was vastly different. Akemi had battle scars on her back and ribs, but they did not detract from her beauty. In some ways, as Lizzie traced them with her fingers, they led to the allure.

Akemi was extraordinarily beautiful. She was taller than most of the women she had seen in the encampment and her features were almost Eurasian. Her muscles were defined and hard, but perfectly balanced with her womanly curves.

Lizzie had not been aroused in a very long time, and now, centuries from her own life, this woman made her breath catch and her heart flutter.



The steaming water felt wonderful. She closed her eyes for a moment savoring the fragrance that rose with the steam. Opening her eyes, she saw Akemi studying her. “Where is your husband?” she asked.

“I do not have a husband,” Lizzie answered.

Akemi moved closer to her. “Why not? Even though you do not look like us, you are pleasing to the eye.”

“I don’t have a husband because I don’t want one.”

Akemi nodded, smiled, and replied, “I prefer the company of women too.”

Lizzie knew that pre-modern Japan was exceptionally accepting of bisexuality and homosexuality, unlike in modern times. She decided to take a chance and asked, “Do you have a special woman?”

“No, not now.”

“What happened?”

“She was a warrior like me, but I was not able to protect her. She was killed by a Wazu archer.”

Lizzie held Akemi’s hand and replied, “Tell me how it happened.”

“Do you know about the rice wars?”

“I do. Clans are battling for territory where vast rice fields are located.”

“Yes. We are part of the Minamoto Clan and fight to keep our lands. There is a constant battle with the Wazu Clan. Those were the horsemen that crossed our path this morning.”

“So, she died in battle. How long ago?”

“Three years. I never should have let her get on a horse. She was a bigger target for the archers.” Akemi hung her head.

“I did not see horses here,” responded Lizzie.

“No, they are at our shogun’s compound. Horses leave too many tracks and clues to where we go. We can go on foot and leave no footprints.”

“I am so very sorry about your woman. Is there no one else that holds your attention?” Lizzie saw Akemi masking her face, so didn’t pursue that line of questioning further. She feared the answer. Surprised when Akemi reached over and touched the vintage white shell opal pendant she was wearing, she held her breath.

Turning the pendant over in her fingers, Akemi asked, “Is this from your woman?”

“No, I don’t have a woman. My grandmother gave it to me, but it belonged to my great, great grandmother and was passed down through generations.” Lizzie wondered if Akemi understood what she was trying to say in her choppy Japanese.

“Ah, from the ancient ones,” voiced Akemi. “What are the scratches on the back?”

“They are western writing that shows the pendant belonged to my ancestor.”

“Do you have family?”

“Maybe somewhere, but my parents have gone to the ancestral grounds, and my grandmother joined them six years ago. Do you?”

“I have a sister and niece, who live in the shogun’s compound. My sister is one of his concubines.”

“Are they safe?”

She smiled and said, “As long as I serve my master well, they are safe.”

The water was cooling and Akemi directed the attendant they were ready to get out. She got out first, stood on the wooden grate next to the wooden tub, and quickly dried

herself. She dressed in a simple white cotton kimono one of the attendants had brought. Holding her hand out to Lizzie, she helped her out of the tub and down the stairs. Akemi dried her with unexpected tenderness and affection.



Lying on Akemi's sleeping mat, close enough to hear the rise and fall of Akemi's breathing, Lizzie was struck with a paradox of a different kind. It wasn't scientific, but none the less, enough to provoke thought. Akemi was clearly a self-assured, accomplished warrior who could decapitate an opponent with one stroke of her sword, and at the same time, she was this emotionally wounded, gentle person, who had loved and lost.

Lizzie thought about what it would be like if she were to be with Akemi in the 21st century. She was sure she would fall in love with her. Drifting off, she knew that she could never actuate her fantasy.



Morning dawned with a flurry of activity. Akemi was gone. Lizzie's tunic, pants, and undergarments had been washed, folded, and placed on the table. She dressed quickly, poked her head outside, and was greeted by the woman who was keeping watch over her.

"Come," she said. She did not prod Lizzie with a sword this time.

They entered a large room filled with women. Akemi was at the front, speaking rapidly to a pair of women who looked bedraggled. All Lizzie caught was that the women were scouts and had seen a group of horsemen from the Wazu Clan amassing. Akemi solicited input, and when everyone who wanted to talk had had their chance, she issued orders.

Yesterday Lizzie had learned Akemi's *kumi*, the small group of women she had run into at the boulders, had been lying in wait for the Wazu scouting group. Her appearance derailed their plans to capture and interrogate them.

Akemi excused herself, approached Lizzie, and told her that they were going to attack the Wazu, who were getting too close to the shogun's compound.

"I will leave Keiko, the woman who guarded you this morning and a few more to protect the compound. You will be safe."

"I have to keep traveling to find my people. You can just let me go. I can find my way back to where you found me."

"No!" shouted Akemi. "You will be in danger. The Wazu have their spies, and they may already be roaming around. I will not lose you this way!"

Surprised at the passion in Akemi's voice and the fire in her eyes, Lizzie acquiesced. "All right, I will stay, but I worry about you. You will be at a disadvantage on foot against a calvary, even a small one."

Akemi took her *katana* out and drew in the sandy ground. She detailed her plan, which seemed tactically sound, as far as Lizzie could tell. They planned on sneaking up, stealing the horses, and dividing the regiment into two. Classic divide and conquer. It might work if the men's egos were so inflated that they hadn't taken precautions to guard their horses.

A short while later, Akemi, dressed in her armor, turned to Lizzie and embraced her. "I will see you when the moon is high. If I don't, Keiko, will take you back to the boulders."

Impulsively, Lizzie kissed Akemi briefly on the lips, then watched her go off into the fog of the pre-dawn morning. She felt intensely sad. In a moment of emotional honesty, she admitted Akemi leaving was a greater pain than when her girlfriend Mia had left her. But she couldn't dwell on this. She had to turn her attention to getting back to the wormhole at the agreed upon time window.

The Japanese had mechanical clocks, but there were none here. Her team in California would rely on the number of sunrises and sunsets, taking into account the time difference of twelve hours. She had to be back at the wormhole tomorrow by sunset or she might be stuck here forever.

After spending hours walking around the compound and running different scenarios in her head, she was faced with the harsh fact that she couldn't get away today. The guard that Akemi had left for her protection was never out of sight. If Akemi came back, she could appeal to her to let her go back to the boulders, but what if Akemi didn't come back?

It was hopeless trying to escape and she had resigned herself to wait when the sound of men's angry voices disturbed the peace. She rushed outside in time to see a half dozen men fighting with five women, including Keiko, her guard. Pulling herself back into the hut, she spied a *katana* mounted on one of the walls. She thought it might be a ceremonial sword, but that's all she could find.

Rushing out, she ran toward the group of men, yelling like a banshee, waving the sword above her head. Two of the men turned their heads. It was just long enough for the women warriors to relieve them of their lives. The others continued to fight with the women, except one man who ran like an enraged bull toward Lizzie. Both Lizzie and he stopped short of engaging each other. She was certain that he had never seen a Western woman. His curiosity was what got him killed. Keiko came at him from behind and swung her *katana* inflicting a deadly blow to his neck.

Lizzie was still running on adrenaline, her heart beating rapidly, and her breathing labored. Keiko took her back to Akemi's hut and told her to rest. Before she left, she said, "You are a brave woman. I will go to scout the forest for more Wazu men."



Keiko had come back just before sunset, not finding any more of the Wazu foot soldiers. She sat in the doorway of Akemi's hut until she heard a bird whistle. Lizzie heard it too and wondered if it were some sort of signal, but she stayed put. A few moments later Keiko helped Akemi into the hut. She had been wounded.

The two women helped strip off Akemi's armor and clothes so that they could see the extent of the damage. Thankfully, none of the cuts on her body were life threatening, though a lucky slash on her thigh left her a long, but shallow, wound. Keiko called for the *kinso*, a person who was specialized in the treatment of sword, knife, and arrow wounds.



Akemi had been sleeping on her back next to Lizzie, who occasionally felt her forehead, hoping Akemi would be spared an infection to the wound. She awoke and rolled over to face Lizzie.

“They told me what you did. Why did you?”

“Because they were in danger.”

“But they are not your people,” replied Akemi.

“No, but I like you, and they are your people. That was enough.”

In a very soft voice, Akemi said, “They are your people now, if you wish.” She raised herself on her elbow and brought her mouth to Lizzie's lips. At first Lizzie did not kiss her back, but when Akemi pulled away with rejection on her face, Lizzie took Akemi's face in her hands and drew her close. That was enough for Akemi to boldly kiss her again. When she broke the kiss, Lizzie closed the distance between them, pressing their lips together, this time the contact lingering as they continued to explore each other's mouths, both moaning with mounting passion.

It had been a long time for either of them, and neither could hold a clear thought in her head. Akemi snaked a hand into Lizzie's kimono and was met with a soft moan as she caressed the skin just below Lizzie's waist. Akemi moved her uninjured leg between Lizzie's thighs searching for physical and emotional closeness as she continued to kiss her deeply.

Lizzie's brain was on overload and it felt like it was caught in a dryer—tumbling with a jumble of thoughts, all coming too fast to sort, except one. *Why did I have to go back six centuries to feel this kind of passion for a woman?* She was aroused more than she had ever been. The relentless touching and kissing from Akemi eclipsed everything else, so she surrendered herself to the moment.

Akemi pulled Lizzie on top of her, Lizzie's pelvis between her legs. She moved gently against Lizzie while she continued to stroke and caress every inch of Lizzie that she could reach.

The Samurai was strong, even in her injured condition. She put her hands under Lizzie's arms and smoothly moved her up until Lizzie's breasts were where she could reach them with her mouth. When Akemi circled Lizzie's nipple with her mouth and tongue, all Lizzie could think of was having Akemi inside her.

Soon, Akemi moved a hand down to the small of Lizzie's back, rubbing gently. She felt Lizzie shudder, as she caressed her buttocks, alternating between squeezes and light caresses.

When Akemi took Lizzie's other breast in her mouth, tonguing the hard nipple, she reached down between her legs and ran her fingers through Lizzie's arousal. Lost in the moment, Lizzie fell forward, rolling off Akemi. Together they pleased each other until their passion quieted and a safe and loving feeling lulled them into a deep sleep.



Lizzie woke first, filled with warmth and tenderness. She stroked Akemi's cheek and was relieved that she didn't have a fever. Akemi turned her head and looked at Lizzie with affection.

"You are going to tell me you have to go."

Lizzie placed a kiss on Akemi's lips and whispered, "Yes, I must go." Lizzie's voice faltered and broke. "I'm sorry."

Akemi sat up and lowered her head in defeat. Lizzie reached for her, pulled her close, and kissed her wildly and desperately, as they clung to each other. The kiss gradually slowed until they parted, tears streaming down both of their cheeks.

"I will take you to the boulders."

Lizzie nodded her head, slipped off the sleeping mat and began dressing. When she was fully dressed, she turned to see Akemi staring at her, resignation in her eyes.

"We need to leave." Akemi walked toward the door, hesitated a moment, then went outside. Lizzie followed closely. Keiko, carrying a small sack, fell in behind Lizzie as they left the stockade and entered the forest.

Hours later, they reached the boulders and after a quick look around, the two Samurai were satisfied that no one else was lurking about. Lizzie, tears in her eyes, expressed her thanks to both Keiko and Akemi. Taking Akemi aside for a moment, she reached behind her neck, and loosened the clasp on her necklace and put it into Akemi's hand.

"This is precious to me. I give this to you in hopes that when you look at it, you will remember how dear you are to me." She hugged and kissed Akemi for the last time.

Akemi was overwhelmed with Lizzie's show of affection. Reaching under her chest armor, she captured something in her hand. As she slowly opened her fingers, Lizzie saw a white milky oval stone, about an inch and a half

long. She recognized it as Imperial Jade, a highly sought-after form of white antique jade.

The Samurai placed the gemstone in Lizzie's hand, embraced her, and said, "My people are your people and will always be. Our hearts are the same." She and Keiko quickly set off through the forest and became invisible within moments.



Lizzie brushed aside her tears, checked her compass, and set off at a light trot until she reached the foot path that would take her back to the where the wormhole would appear. She stopped a few times to scan the area because she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. However, she didn't catch sight of anything and arrived at the wormhole location without incident.

It was almost sunset. There was a window of one hour before the sunset and one hour after when the wormhole would be open to bring her back. She looked up into the treetops uttering a silent prayer, and stepped onto the precise location she had marked. Shortly, she began to hear the electrical hum and feel the quivering in her body. Taking a last look around her, just before she was grabbed by a huge surge of energy, she saw Akemi standing nearby, her arms outstretched in front of her, as if she were asking Lizzie to come back.



It was 6:00 a.m. They had been there since 3:00 a.m. and an air of apprehension filled the control room. Scientists, university big-wigs, selected members of the press, and other invited guests waited anxiously to witness perhaps the greatest scientific accomplishment in the history of time. Dr. Gallo had driven in with her niece and kept trying to reassure

Jeremy and Riya that everything would work out. However, none of them really knew if Lizzie were dead or alive. They had already waited an hour and concern began to weave its way through the room.

Twenty minutes later, Riya nudged Jerney and Dr. Gallo. "Something is happening. Look at these readings. There are small surges."

Exactly at 6:23 a.m., a burst of energy shook the room. Jerney left the control panel and paused in front of the door to the glass enclosed accelerator room. Even outside of the room, he felt the extent of the energy around him. As he turned to look back at Riya, who was sitting at the control panel, he heard a crackling sound. Turning, he witnessed two huge arcs of blue light shooting over the accelerator arches and up toward the ceiling. The arches lit up with an otherworldly glow and began pulsating.

Against protocol, he opened the door to the accelerator room and took three steps inside. The amount of energy was massive, and he fell to his knees. Holding his head as the high-pitched sound slashed through every cell of his brain, he tried to get up, but was unable, and before he knew what was happening, he passed out, falling backwards to the floor.

Riya and Dr. Gallo thought Jerney was unable to withstand the amount of energy being dispersed by the accelerator and it caused his collapse. What both scientists and spectators witnessed in the next few seconds was mind blowing.

Another body appeared out of nowhere, remained suspended in midair under the huge arches, then slammed to the floor and lay there in a heap. Riya hit the "disengage button" to shut down the accelerator and the wormhole. After a series of whines, the room became quiet. There was still no movement from Lizzie's body that lay crumpled on the floor. They feared her dead.

Riya and the paramedics, who had been standing by, rushed into the glass enclosed room. One paramedic

attended to Jerney and the other began assessing Lizzie's life signs. Riya knelt next to Lizzie's lifeless body.

After waiving an ammonia capsule under Jeremy's nose, he came around, not fully comprehending the situation. The paramedic working on Lizzie shouted, "I can't get a pulse, but she is ventricular tachycardia."

She took out a portable defibrillator from her trauma bag and turned Lizzie over so her chest was facing toward the ceiling. She ripped open Lizzie's kimono, cut her shirt and binding open, and turned on the defibrillator. Pressing the adhesive patches to Lizzie's chest, she prayed that the electrical current she was about to administer would shock Lizzie out of the life-threatening cardiac arrhythmia.

The jolt of current that passed through Lizzie was strong enough to lift her off the floor. When there was no sign of a normal cardiac rhythm returning, the paramedic jolted her again, following it up with an IV administered drug to combat Lizzie's cardiac arrhythmia.

The sound of that began to echo through the room seemed like a miracle. Lizzie opened her eyes, only to close them again, as photographers' cameras continued to flash from the other side of the glass enclosure. Riya rushed out of the room and ordered security to remove everyone except essential personnel. When she returned, Lizzie was fully conscious.



Lizzie, who was now sitting up as the paramedics wheeled her toward the back exit where the ambulance was waiting, was flanked by Jeremy and Riya. Something caught Lizzie's attention and she turned her head toward two people standing in the hallway, just outside her office.

How can this be? It's impossible! I must have whacked my head and am now hallucinating, or I am in some sort of alternate universe. As thoughts raced through her mind, she uttered a few words, but the routine sedative administered by

the paramedics, kicked in full force, and even with all her will power, she couldn't prevent her eyes from closing.



When Lizzie awoke, Riya was sitting in the lounge chair next to the bed reading.

“How long have you been here?” asked Lizzie.

“Most of the night. You’ve been out almost twenty-four hours. How are you feeling?”

“A little groggy and sore, but overall, pretty good for having traveled over six thousand five hundred miles in a nano second,” joked Lizzie.

“I’m so glad to hear that. Is it okay if I notify Dean Cruz? She keeps calling me every hour.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Oh, before I forget, I found something on the floor of the accelerator room.” Riya rose and reached into the pocket of her slacks. She held Lizzie’s hand and placed a stone in her palm. “I might be mistaken, but this doesn’t look like some ordinary stone.”

Lizzie had tucked the gemstone into her kimono when she said goodbye to Akemi. It must have fallen out when she returned. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she turned the jade over and over with her fingers.

“It was a gift from a female Samurai I met in my time travels.

Riya had enough emotional intelligence to know that this was something very special and sensitive to Lizzie. She gave Lizzie time to let whatever had evoked the tears wash over her.

A minute or so later, Lizzie said, “When you call Dr. Cruz, you should probably call Jeremy too.”

Riya sat on the edge of the bed, and sighing deeply, responded, “Lizzie, he left this morning.”

“What do you mean?”

“He returned to Australia.”

Lizzie was stunned. She tried to speak but nothing came out of her mouth.

“It was too painful for him,” offered Riya.

The time traveler hesitated, then asked, “What was too painful— my almost dying?”

Riya nodded her head. “Yes, that, but it was something else that pushed him over the edge. The man has been in love with you since day one. That’s no secret.”

“I know. I told him multiple times that there wasn’t any chance of me being able to reciprocate his feelings. He knew about my sexual orientation.”

“Yes, but he still harbored some hope. I don’t know why, because you never hid anything from us, but he clung to hope like a drowning person clings to a rescue buoy.”

“Okay, how does that play into him leaving, especially now when we have succeeded in doing the impossible?”

“Do you remember anything that happened when you were being wheeled out of the lab?”

Lizzie thought for a moment. Riya could see a puzzled look on Lizzie’s face. “No, I don’t think so.”

“May I speak freely?” asked Riya.

“Yes, of course. Don’t keep me in suspense.”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Slowly the door opened and Dr. Gallo poked her head in and asked permission to enter. Riya used Dr. Gallo’s visit as an excuse to slip out to make a call to the Dean and the rest of Lizzie’s team.

“Thank you for coming, Wilma.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it! You do realize the magnitude of what you’ve done, right?”

“I do realize the magnitude of what *we’ve* done and as soon as they disconnect me from all these wires and tubes, we can celebrate.”

“We would like that.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Wilma with an air of a forgetful professor, though she was anything but, “My niece. She lives near me and drove me down instead of me taking the train. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, not at all. I would like to meet her.”

Lizzie and Dr. Gallo chatted for a few more moments before she said her goodbyes. As she was leaving, Riya returned.

“Can we please get back to what you were going to tell me about yesterday morning?” asked Lizzie impatiently.

“Yes. When we were going through the hallway to the back door, your attention was pulled away. You turned your head and looked at Dr. Gallo and her niece who were in the hallway. Then you mumbled something in what I think was Japanese.

“Really?”

“Yes, then you asked the paramedic to stop the stretcher and said something along the lines of how impossible everything was.”

“Hmm, I think I remember having those thoughts go through my head.”

“The medics stopped for a moment and you looked at Dr. Gallo, or maybe her niece. I’m not sure. Then, you quietly said, ‘I think I love you’.”

Both women sat in silence as Lizzie tried to force her brain to recall what happened during the drug induced haze she had experienced yesterday morning.

“And you think that those were the words that dragged Jeremy into reality?”

“Yes. The way you said it...the way your face looked...clearly you were taken with whomever you meant.”

“Poor Jeremy,” whispered Lizzie.



A day later, Lizzie was home. She had made a short statement as she left the hospital and since had been dubbed “The Traveler” by both local and national news media. She had spent the morning writing down everything she could remember and anticipating what kind of questions she might have to field tomorrow. It was quiet now because the University had hired an armed security service to keep journalists and other media mongrels from invading her property prior to the press conference scheduled later in the week.

Lizzie was sitting quietly when the landline phone she had stubbornly refused to get rid of rang. It surprised her, as the number was only known by her closest colleagues. She answered it with a simple “hello.”

“Dr. Adama, I’m Vivian, Dr. Gallo’s niece. She said you knew I had accompanied her here.”

“Yes, of course,” responded Lizzie. Listening for a few more moments, she answered, “I would enjoy that very much. Would you like to come by shortly?”

About an hour later, the doorbell rang. Lizzie knew it would be Dr. Gallo’s niece, who was a professor of Japanese Studies at the University of San Francisco. Opening the door, Lizzie froze, unable to speak or move.

“Dr. Adama, is everything all right?” asked Vivian.

“I’m so sorry...it’s just that you look exactly like a woman I recently met. The resemblance is striking. Please come in.”

After hanging Vivian’s coat, Lizzie took the flowers she had brought and invited her guest into the kitchen where she put the flowers in a vase with water. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes. That would be nice.”

Lizzie put the tea kettle on, and asked, “Do you like Sencha tea?”

“Very much. I find it bucks you up without the dreadful caffeine crash.”

“Yes, exactly,” echoed Lizzie, as she sat next to Vivian. “Tell me, “How are you Dr. Gallo’s niece?””

“I was wondering when you would ask,” smiled the professor. “My mother was Wilma’s sister. She married my father, Kenji Nakamura. They met at college.”

“I understand now why...”

Vivian cut Lizzie off. “Why I look Asian?”

“No, Vivian. Why you are so beautiful.”

Vivian was at a loss of words and embarrassed that she jumped to a wrong conclusion. All her life she had faced some sort of racial discrimination with small minded people and now she had jumped the gun, assuming Lizzie’s comments were a precursor to more of the same.

Vivian began tearing up as she apologized. Lizzie waved off her apology and told her not to worry, that she understood perfectly. Lizzie got up and attended to the whistling tea kettle. When she turned around with two cups of steaming green tea, the sunlight caught the reflection of Vivian’s necklace that was now visible between the open plackets of her blouse.

Placing the tea on the table, Lizzie moved her eyes to Vivian’s chest. Nestled against her sternum was a beautiful piece of antique jewelry, one that Lizzie recognized immediately.

Sitting down next to Vivian, Lizzie said, “Vivian, that is a stunning pendant. Is there a story behind it?”

Surprised, Vivian replied, “Yes, there is. How did you know?”

“I’ve seen one like that before. Please, tell me the story.”

“Sure.” As she fingered the pendant, she began. “This is a family heirloom which has been passed down through generations on my father’s side of the family. You know, my father was an incorrigible romantic, so I don’t know if the legend he repeatedly told is true or not, but it is entertaining.”

“Now, I’m really curious. Come on, Vivian, tell me.”

Vivian laughed, took a sip of tea and said, "Only if you promise not to make fun of me."

"I promise."

"Okay. Here goes. My father insisted that he could trace his origin back centuries. I'm not sure it's true and sometimes I think he made up the story when he gave it to me as a tween, shortly after my mother had passed. She had worn it for years. Are you sure you want to hear this fantasy?"

"Yes. I'm positive," answered Lizzie as she sat forward in her chair and leaned in toward Vivian.

The professor shrugged her shoulders, smiled wryly and continued. "My father thought he was descended from a woman who supposedly was related to a famous female Samurai. You undoubtedly are aware that there were female Samurai, right?"

"*Onna-musha*," whispered Lizzie.

"Yes! My aunt had told me that you were a student of Japanese culture, but still, I'm impressed."

"Mm-hmm. Tell me, Vivian," responded Lizzie as she covered one of Vivian's hands with her own, "why don't you believe him?"

"Well, because when I got a little older, I took it to the father of one of my classmates. He was an antique jewelry dealer and told me that the piece was a very, very nice pre-Victorian antique, but not a piece of jade or any other gemstone from feudal Japan."

Lizzie thought a moment before she responded. "I think I like the legend better. Tell me the rest of it."

"Oh, I think you are an incorrigible romantic too, just as my father was." Vivian smiled at Lizzie, squeezed her shoulder and sighed, "Okay, but you'll laugh. He said that a Western woman who was visiting Japan had given it to a famous female Samurai as a token of her affection. Later, the Samurai bequeathed it to her niece, who was the daughter of

an important shogun's concubine. You see how totally ridiculous that is?"

Lizzie got up from the kitchen table, excused herself for a moment, and left the room. She returned shortly, pulling up her chair close to Vivian. Laying something on the table, she said, "Vivian, do you know what this is?"

Vivian's eyes opened widely, as she picked up the stone, and examined it from multiple angles. Slowly, she offered, "This is a piece of white Imperial Jade. It is centuries old. How did you get it? Pieces like this are only found in museums or private collections."

"It was a gift to me— from a woman named Akemi Gozen. Do you know who that was?"

"Yes," whispered Vivian. Her face drained of all color as she pushed back from the table, stood up, and walked to a nearby window. She was stunned with the enormity of the revelation Lizzie had just made. Lizzie sensed this and knew Vivian needed a moment to process the information. Though she stood up, she hung back until Vivian turned to face her, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"How can this be true?" she cried.

"Are the initials E.M.G. on the back of the pendant?"

"How do you know that?" questioned Vivian.

"Because they are the initials of my great, great grandmother— Elizabeth Margaret Gil— and it belonged to me."

"This can't be. It is impossible. How am I supposed to process all of this?" moaned Vivian.

Lizzie took the distraught woman into her arms and held her closely, cheek to cheek. She felt familiar. Only after Vivian had calmed, did Lizzie pull back from her so she could look into her eyes.

"Did you know that my middle name is Akemi?" breathed Vivian.

"No. I didn't."

“When I was young, I asked my mother where the name came from and all she said was, ‘Ask your father’.” I did and he told me that the name belonged to a famous warrior and he knew I would be one too the moment he laid his eyes on me when I was born.”

“This must all seem so surreal.” Lizzie pulled Vivian closer. “I have not told anyone of my experience a few days ago, and even when I do at the press conference, I will be leaving out much of the personal experiences I had during my days in feudal Japan, especially the time I spent with Akemi Gozen.”

“Then it is all true?” murmured Vivian.

“What is?”

“What my father told me about his heritage and the pendant.”

“Um-hmm. It’s all true. I promise you.”



Months later, Lizzie, Jeremy, and Dr. Gallo were awarded a Nobel Prize in Stockholm, Sweden. Vivian and Lizzie returned to their room after the Nobel Banquet, looking forward to some quiet time after the whirlwind activities from the last few days.

“Darling, I have something for you,” said Vivian.

Lizzie had slipped out of her gown and was standing barefoot in her bra and panties. “Oh, what would that be?” Lizzie flirted, cocking her hip seductively.

“Well, you certainly don’t need me to buy you anything with that cash prize you are taking home,” replied Vivian as she walked up behind Lizzie, encircled her with her arms, and placed a kiss on her bare shoulder. She kissed Lizzie’s other shoulder and went to the dresser, opening a drawer. Removing a box wrapped in shimmering white paper with an elaborate red bow she said, “I thought you might like this.” She passed the box to Lizzie.

“Did you wrap this yourself? It’s lovely.” Lizzie sat on the bed, pulled open the ribbon, and carefully unwrapped the package. Opening the box, she parted the tissue paper, and gasped.

“It’s spectacular, honey. Really stunning.” She carefully pulled out an antique red and gold wedding kimono. “Where did you find this? It must have cost a fortune!”

“Here, let me help you put it on.” Once Lizzie was wrapped in the silk, Vivian told her to put her hand in the left pocket.

Lizzie looked at Vivian quizzically as she reached into the deep pocket of the rare kimono. She gasped as she pulled out a ring. She was stunned when the light bounced off the perfectly pear cut diamond. Vivian took her other hand and knelt in front of her. “I think destiny dictates that we can’t let this wedding kimono go to waste now, can we? Elizabeth Margaret Adama, will you marry me?”

Lizzie looked at the love in Vivian’s eyes and replied, “Vivian Akemi Nakamura, I would marry you every day of every year and every century until time comes to an end.”

THE END

THE DEVIL'S HACIENDA

Running down the concourse in an attempt to make my Friday evening flight from San Francisco to Albuquerque, I gave silent thanks that my roller bag didn't tip over as I frantically weaved in and out among the frenzied travelers. I was what people called a "Road Warrior," spending two to three weeks a month in flying-metal tubes, driving rental cars, and staying in hotels.

I suppose I was an anomaly. About six months ago I accepted a promotion as the western territory manager for the largest electrical and electronic components supply house in the nation and moved to New Mexico. I was the only woman doing this job, which was to teach our distributors and partners how to use the complex equipment we supplied.

Working in a male dominated field had its challenges, but I lived for the moments when even the most arrogant male colleague registered the breadth of my technical know-how. Most of the time, that crushed his superior and dismissive attitude, at least for a moment or two.

As I careened around a group of drunk men blocking my gate, I raced toward the agent just as he was beginning to close the door to the alligator ramp. I startled him when I yelled "wait." He stared at me not at all disguising his contempt and impatience before he said, "You're cutting it close." I did not apologize as I handed over my phone with my digital boarding pass and pushed past him as soon as he scanned it.

The plane was not as crowded as I thought it would be and being the last to board, I had a clear path to my aisle seat over the wing where I wouldn't feel the turbulence as much. Albuquerque was notorious for its rip-roaring surface winds that evoke fear and the use of a barf bag.

After stowing my carryon in the bin above my seat, I plopped down, took a deep breath, and looked toward the

window. There was a woman with a fussy three or four-month-old baby. The woman seemed tired, stressed, but when she focused her sapphire blue eyes on me and said, "I hope we don't disturb you too much," I melted. Right then and there, I thought I would turn into a puddle of butter and ooze down the aisle.

It was a three hour plus flight, but I thought I could stand just about anything if I got to talk to this beautiful woman. Oh God, she was so my type; straight dark brunette hair falling past her shoulders, golden and olive skin tones that spelled exotic in capital letters, and a mouth that was warm, ripe, and inviting. I jerked myself away from the fantasy that was already forming in my sex-starved brain and said, "I don't think you two will disturb me in the least." Holding out my hand, I announced, "I'm Dani—Dani Shay. Who might this lovely baby be?"

"Her name is Olivia, but we call her Ollie, and I'm Aria."

"You and your husband call her Ollie?" I countered.

"Umm, no. My father and I call her Ollie. I don't have a husband."

I know, I was grasping at straws. I don't know what it was, but I was taken with this woman. I felt such a pull, or maybe she had some strange power. It was as if I were being reeled in, like a fish on a line. "I'm sorry, Aria, I didn't mean to pry."

"You are not prying. It's no secret that I only slept with her father to get pregnant. I have no use for a husband."

A slight smile crept over her lips and I knew she was waiting for my reaction, and react I did. Reaching across the empty middle seat, I touched her arm, gave her a gentle smile, then replied, "I don't know if you are serious or if you are just trying to get a rise out of me."

"Both," she laughed.

Rarely am I at a loss for words. I am the "queen of the comeback," but she had managed to leave me with my

mouth slightly agape. I wondered if I was the only one feeling the molten chemistry.

Gathering my wits I said, "Aria, I have nieces, so I know my way around babies. If there is anything you need help with, please let me know."

"Dani, are you saying you are a baby whisperer?" she asked with a mocking grin.

Tongue in cheek, I responded good-naturedly, "I'm just saying I'm good with all women, babies and grown-ups alike."



About three quarters of an hour into the flight Ollie began to cry. No amount of bouncing, patting, or sips from her water bottle calmed her down. I could see that Aria was distraught. I stood up, reached across the seats and said, "Give her here. I'll walk her up and down the aisle."

She hesitated for a moment and I wondered if Aria had a fleeting thought that I might take off with her baby, but finally realized there was nowhere for me to go. She passed me a screaming Ollie and as soon as I put her to my shoulder and started walking, she stopped her shrieking. Fifteen minutes later, she was dead weight, sleeping with her little mouth puckering against my neck.

Slipping back into my seat, I held on to Ollie, not breathing, waiting for the screaming to start again, but it didn't. Aria made no move to take her from me. She too understood the risk of disturbing the baby's hard-won slumber. A moment later, Aria raised the armrest between her seat and the middle seat, and slid over next to me, whispering into my ear. "Do you want me to fasten your seat belt in case we hit some unexpected turbulence?"

Was she taunting me on purpose or was she just being thoughtful? I so wanted her to fasten my seatbelt. I imagined her delicate fingers brushing against my abdomen, her hand

resting on my thigh, and I felt a flood of estrogen igniting a flash of arousal. At the same time, I was a little spooked, causing me to stammer at first. "I... think...we're okay...right now... until we turn north heading into Albuquerque."

My mouth was dry and my breathing was a bit ragged. No one had ever affected me as she did, and she knew it. I was appreciative that she didn't comment. Instead, she started asking me questions...you know, the kind strangers often ask each other when forced to share the same space.

"Do you live in Albuquerque, Dani?"

"Yes, I moved from Atlanta about six months ago."

"Have you had a chance to get to know the area?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I'm on the road two to three weeks of the month. It doesn't leave too much time to explore. How about you? Do you live in Albuquerque?"

"No, I live just northwest of Albuquerque in a town called the Devil's Backbone."

"That sounds eerie, or maybe just downright ominous."

She gently giggled and said, "It's a town of about six thousand people, mostly artisans and skilled craft people. It is named after a small mountainous outcropping that most likely some inebriated conquistador thought looked like the devil's back. The name has stuck for over six centuries."

I turned my head to look at her and I was pretty sure there was something more she had skipped over. "Aria, what is it you aren't telling me?"

"Mmm, you are very observant. Do you always read people this well?"

I didn't answer her question. Instead, I offered, "Tell me."

"Okay, if you promise you aren't afraid of ghosts."

"I don't know if I am," I answered, "because I have never met one."

"Fine, Dani," she snickered. "I'll tell you, but don't blame it on me if you can't sleep tonight."

Chuckling, I said, "Hurry up and tell me before Ollie wakes up and wants a midnight snack!" She saw my eyes inadvertently drop to her breasts. I was embarrassed.

After closely appraising me, she began her tale. "So, the story centers around a murder that took place at a very prosperous hacienda on the outskirts of the town. It was called Hacienda Diablo. *Diablo* means devil in Spanish, in case you don't know."

"What happened?" I asked, keen to hear more of her story.

"A tragic family affair seems to be the cause behind the rumored haunting of the hacienda."

"Hmm," I interrupted. "You say haunting?"

"Yes, haunting. The young son of the Escobar family, who owned the property, shot and killed a young woman he thought was his father's mistress. The father denied that the young woman was his mistress, but no one believed him.

"The son was never taken into police custody because the father was wealthy and the word on the street was that he paid off the police to keep his son from going to jail. Then three years later, the father killed his own wife in an apparent jealous rage and barricaded himself in the hacienda, finally committing suicide days later."

"Aria, how long ago did all this take place?"

"The son killed the young woman in October of 1865. That's about time the Civil War ended. New Mexico was just a territory then."

"Did anyone ever figure out who the young woman was and why the father killed his wife later on?"

"Yes. When the son put the hacienda up for sale, he was cleaning out some items and came across a bundle of letters stashed in a chest in the attic. He recognized the handwriting and read them, shocked at what he had found."

"What did he find?" I whispered, completely invested in the story.

“The letters were love letters from his mother to the young woman he had killed years earlier.”

“Damn,” I mumbled under my breath.

“That’s an understatement! Right?”

“Yeah. So what happened to the hacienda?”

“The son sold it to an adjacent landowner who moved into the hacienda and lived there a few years. It came out later that he and his family swore they heard strange noises and saw ghostly figures of two women roaming the halls. While the so-called apparitions did not harm any of the people who lived there, their presence unnerved them.

“The land the hacienda was built on was severed from the entire land grant estate and sold on its own over and over until the early 1900s, when it was purchased by a family who turned it into a restaurant and an event center. Instead of trying to tamp down the rumor, they had a slick public relations and marketing campaign and took advantage of its notoriety with tours, reenactments, and ‘Who done it’ mystery suppers.”

“And is it still standing today?”

“Part of it burned down about twenty years ago, but it has been restored and still operates as an event center and restaurant—a very good one, I might add. Some of the rooms that were originally servant quarters were converted into a small bed-and-breakfast. Perhaps you will meet me there over the weekend for a meal and we can test out the rumors.”

Her Mona Lisa smile was just too much for me. I immediately agreed.



We landed without incident and as the plane was taxiing to the gate, Aria called her father. After deplaning, I said goodbye to Aria and Ollie and headed two levels down that connected with the parking garage where my SUV had been collecting dust for two weeks. I was thinking of the ransom

I would have to pay to bail it out when I heard her calling my name.

“Dani, Dani. Wait up! I want you to meet my father.”

Stopping, I turned toward her. I smiled and waited as she and a tall handsome man with dark hair approached. He had the baby in his arms and looked the part of the dutiful grandfather.

Aria took my free hand and said, “Dad, this is Dani. She’s the one that held Ollie almost the entire trip. Dani, this is my father, Edward Moreno.”

I offered my hand to Mr. Moreno and he clasped it tightly as he said, “I want to thank you so much for helping my daughter. This trip has been difficult for her and your kindness was a godsend.”

He released my hand and reached into his inside suit coat pocket and pulled out a card. “Here is my card. I would like you to be my guest tomorrow for dinner if you don’t have any plans. Aria’s number is on the back and you can call her tomorrow morning to let her know if you can come.”

I stuffed Mr. Moreno’s card into my bomber jacket pocket without looking at it, thanked him, gave Ollie a pat on her bum, and Aria a brief side hug before I left the heated area of the ground floor for the cold and damp parking garage.

Once in my SUV, I started it and let it warm up. The weather had turned cold in the high desert. While waiting, I fished the card out of my pocket and looked at it, not once, but twice, more than a little stupefied. “Damn,” I muttered, followed by a host of other expletives.



It was past midnight when I pulled into the garage of my town house. I felt like a leaky hose hemorrhaging water and barely had the energy to drag myself into the house.

Stripping off my clothes, I took a quick shower and fell into bed, dead to the world as soon as my head hit the pillow.



It was late and the night was dark, the moon obscured by heavy clouds. A layer of fog had settled in the valley bathing the house in an eerie quality.

Staccato footsteps echoed through the broad hallway. A woman frantically called out, “Where are you, Valeria? We don’t have much time.” Her voice pierced through the cold walls of the mansion. “We have to leave now!”

A figure hidden behind the heavy curtains in the vast anteroom, moved out of the shadows and raised an arm toward the far corner of the room. His voice, dripping with venom, horrified the woman pressed into the corner. She raised her hands in front of her face.

“Martina, Martina, help me!” she screamed. A loud crack followed by another shook the crystal chandelier. The thump of a body falling to the floor echoed in the immense vestibule as the shadowy figure disappeared into the night.

The first bullet punched its way through the woman’s chest. The second ripped through her brain, splattering bits of blood and bone onto the wall behind her. She now lay slumped on the floor. A gaping hole was left in her chest and blood spurted out soaking her white bodice until her heart stopped beating. Her eyes fluttered open once and then she was gone.

A desperate “No, no, no!” reverberated in the huge vestibule, as Martina ran to the young woman and cradled her in her arms. Wild sobs that would be heard for centuries escaped her lips and filled the desolate mansion.



A scream woke me up—my own, I think. I had never witnessed a violent murder and I was having trouble shaking off the feeling that what I experienced was just a nightmare. It seemed so real. I pulled myself from that twilight place that lives between sleep and consciousness.

What the hell was that? I asked myself when I had shaken off the initial shock. I rationalized that my overactive subconscious had digested Aria's ghost story and put its own spin on the events of 1865. Bathed in sweat, I lay awake and watched until the cold morning light washed away the darkness of the gruesome dream.



It was close to 11:00 a.m. and I was sipping coffee while mulling over the intense irrationality of my dream when my phone rang. Groaning, I reached for it expecting some sort of work emergency that historically ruined my weekends.

Sighing, I answered, "Hello. This is Dani Shay. How can I help you?"

"Dani, this is Aria. I thought I would follow up and see if we could have dinner tonight."

Aria? How did she get my phone number? I wasn't sure I wanted to pursue an evening with her after the nightmare I had had, but her voice, that silky smooth voice that sent chills up my spine, weakened my reserve.

"Aria, thanks for the call, but how did you get my number?"

"You gave me your card when you introduced yourself on the airplane."

I was pretty sure I hadn't, but I was tired, and truth be told, very distracted, so it was possible. Brushing aside the doubt, I replied, "I have some work to do this afternoon, but I could meet for dinner. You choose the place since I don't know the area well."

“Come here. You are aware of where ‘here’ is, right?” She didn’t wait for my response and continued, “It’s a short drive, and you can spend the night in one of the B & B rooms so you don’t have to drive back in the dark. There is a big Halloween party going on tonight. It will be fun!”

Only then did I realize it was the day before Halloween. I hesitated. My pause must have been longer than I thought because she countered, “What’s the matter? Black cat got your tongue, or are you afraid you’ll see a ghost, or... are you afraid of me?” She laughed and continued to tease me until I relented.



Aria had texted directions to the Devil’s Hacienda and as I turned into a narrow dirt road, I felt a strange energy prickling my back and chest. I tried to ignore it, but it was a mystifying blend of excitement and dread that had me imagining all sorts of things, some of them not having anything to do with ghostly occurrences.

I could see lights a quarter of a mile down the road and was glad that the dark spooky lane would soon be behind me. I mean, it was exactly how I imagined the famous Sleepy Hollow Road in Kentucky, the one haunted by the ‘Headless Horseman’—trees devoid of leaves, branches that looked like long tentacles waiting to snatch an unsuspecting mortal, and all the bad things attributed to the supernatural lurking in the shadows. I was hoping that I wouldn’t see an old hearse appear out of nowhere because I would be turning my Jeep around and hightailing it out of here.

When I was nervous, I always reverted to humor, and this time was no exception. I laughed at myself and shook my head that I had let an old tale upend my equilibrium, and just in time, I might add. I passed through a wide opening flanked by a low wall on each side and continued up the drive. A very tall person dressed in a women’s voodoo

priestess costume, waved me over to the front of the hacienda.

The mansion was impressive. It was two stories with white stucco walls, red clay roof tiles, and heavy rustic wood accents. Most of the windows were rectangular with decorative spindles. There was also a small bell tower or lookout perch on top of the second floor.

I was mesmerized with the expansive archways that framed the front of the mansion. The architectural elements of this centuries-old hacienda were nothing short of miraculous. I couldn't wait to see the inside.

The cool air on my face pulled me from my short reverie and I turned to my left. There she was. No, not Aria, rather the person in the voodoo priestess costume. She had opened my door without me realizing it.

"Will you be staying the night with us?"

"Yes, I will."

"May I have your name, please?"

"Umm, Dani Shay."

She consulted a tablet, nodded her head, and a small attached printer spit out a ticket. Passing it to me she said, "Keep this claim check. Someone will bring your luggage to your room."

She held out her hand, helped me out, and said, "I hope you enjoy your evening...just don't go wandering around alone. There are ghouls and ghosts abound!" She laughed, slipped into my car, and drove off.



As I walked up the lit stairway to the arches, I caught a movement in my periphery. Turning my head, I didn't see anything, but then a sixth sense caused me to tilt my head upward. That's when I saw a movement in the bell tower. I couldn't make out what it was. It could have been a person, or more likely, a large bird. Shrugging, I continued through

the archway to the double doors. A vampire opened one of the doors for me and directed me to a welcome area where a man in a pirate costume stood behind me and helped me off with my coat.

He lingered salaciously and said, "You must be Aria's friend. Right? I can see why she would like you. If I were a vampire, I would start nibbling your neck right this instant."

I turned and gave him a long daggeredstare before I coldly spat out, "And you would choke on my blood. It's much too rich for the likes of you."

Suddenly there she was, grinning, no doubt noting that I was rankled. My irritation melted at the vision in front of me. She gave me a light hug, kept one arm around me, and moved me away from my irritant.

"I see pirate boy got under your skin. Don't be too upset, he was just playing out the Halloween theme. Come on, I'll give you a tour before dinner."

She grasped my hand and led me through a roundish doorway into a large room with exposed beams, white plastered walls, intricate wall carvings, and a huge crystal chandelier. A fireplace was built into the far end of the room and flames were dancing from the burning wood. The room also had a bar tucked into one of the corners.

"Dani, this is one of our bar areas. Would you like to sit and have a drink, or do you want to continue our tour?"

The room was peppered with comfortable cream-colored chairs and dark wood tables, but I didn't want to sit. My nightmare flashed back. I replied, "I'd like to continue, but first I have a question."

"Okay, I'll do my best," answered Aria indulgently.

"What was this room in the original hacienda?"

She continued to hold my hand but cocked her head before she answered. "It was part of the foyer where you came in. Originally it was a large vestibule or anteroom where people were greeted. When we rebuilt, we decided to make them into two distinct areas."

I measured my words carefully before I continued. “You know the ghost story you told me on the airplane, the one about a woman being killed here by the owner’s son?”

“Of course. Why?”

“Could this have been the room where she was killed, perhaps in that corner?” I pointed to the left of the fireplace and held my breath.

She looked at me curiously while I tried not to shuffle my feet in anticipation. “How do you know that? Can you feel some sort of energy?”

“I didn’t know it. Just a hunch.”

“Hmm, I think you are holding out on me. Did you do some research?” she asked teasingly.

“No, Aria. I didn’t.”

Just as she was about to respond, pirate boy interrupted and asked to speak with her. She dropped my hand and stepped away. I missed her warmth.

When she came back, she found my hand again and remorsefully explained that there had been a mix-up in the B & B scheduling, which resulted in a double booking. “Would you mind terribly staying in our family quarters’ guest room tonight instead?”

She was so sincere and apologetic that I nodded yes then asked, “Is that where the Escobar’s lived?”

“Yes, I think so. The family quarters were and still are on the second floor.”



She led me through a hallway with brick floors. I heard the clipped footsteps from my dream. “Aria, are these the original bricks from the hacienda or were they laid when you rebuilt?”

Grasping the handle to a double door, but not yet opening it, she answered, “They are the original. None were damaged in the fire. What’s going on Dani?”

I hemmed a little, only responding, "They look old."

Just nodding, Aria pulled open the door to a good-sized room that was being used for a private Halloween party. People were dressed in all sorts of costumes making the rounds between the dance floor, the scrumptious buffet tables, and the open bar. A few people greeted Aria. She was warm and welcoming to her guests and made a point of introducing me to those who had approached her.

After taking a peek at the B & B area, the kitchens, and a ballroom where a murder mystery dinner party was in full swing, we passed through a private outdoor courtyard that rivaled nothing I had ever seen in-person or in a magazine. It was breath-taking. The water from the fountain danced in the low-level accent lights, the blue tiles shimmered from a translucent glaze, and the lush gardens released their intoxicating fragrance into the night air. I wanted to linger.

"Shall we sit here for a moment or do I hear your stomach growling?" Aria chuckled.

We sat next to each other, holding hands, our thighs touching, and just listened to the night. I could feel the crackling in the air, and as I turned to face her, her lips brushed against mine ever so gently, slowly, seductively. I caught my breath and whispered, "It's not just me?"

She was stroking my hair, her lips still hovering near mine. "I felt it the moment I laid eyes on you in the airplane. Was it really only last night?" she smiled.

"Do you believe in past lifetimes?" I asked.

"I do. It really is the only thing that explains so very much."

"Then maybe, Aria, we have met before."

"Perhaps, but all I want is that we meet again and again and again." She kissed me making me believe that what she said was true.

Our connection was growing rapidly, and the intensity was undeniable. I was about to say something, when all the

lights across the hacienda went out. It was a black night—just what you might expect for “All Hallows Eve.”

“Come with me. I know the way,” she whispered. I followed closely behind, my hand in hers until we reached some sort of cove or grotto built into the wall. She pulled me in against her, waiting for me to catch my breath.

“I...this...I don’t do this...but I feel I know you.” She crushed her lips to mine as we clung together totally focused on each other, forgetting the world around us.



The lights flickered off and on several times during dinner but did not detract from the superb Halloween and autumn menu we enjoyed to candlelight. I opted for a pumpkin soup served in a hallowed out mini pumpkin, soft shell crab made to look like a giant tarantula and puff pastries disguised as bite-size eyeballs. Along with her meal, Aria had ordered a forbidden rice pumpkin salad with blood orange vinaigrette to share.

Mr. Moreno joined us for a short while during dessert, then excused himself to take care of some kitchen disaster. I was not at all disappointed. I liked having Aria to myself. After dinner she asked if I wanted to have a *digestif*, but I turned down the after-dinner drink and suggested we go someplace more quiet. Without a word, she took my hand and led me to what could only be called a “grand staircase.” It was near the entrance foyer and it was nothing short of imperial. I don’t know how I missed it when I came in.

It was about ten feet wide and curved gracefully upwards. The ornate balustrade of hand-carved wood gleamed from the reflection of well-placed ceiling lights. At the top of the staircase, there were horizontal rail sections that formed an overlook to the foyer below.

I felt like I was floating up the stairs, but that was probably just the lightness I was feeling from being with

Aria. She had cast a spell on me. Would the spell last only tonight or would I be ruled by her magic forever?

Reaching the second floor, we walked to a door which was outfitted with a modern electronic lock. She entered a code and the door swung open to reveal a short hallway with doors on each side. She stopped in front of a door at the far end of the hallway, opened it, reached inside, and flicked on the lights. Chivalrously, she stepped aside so that I could enter.

It was an exquisite room. Whoever had decorated it had managed to blend old world with contemporary and the effect was stunning. Hues of blue contrasted with richly stained woods created a calming, quieting, and intimate environment. Aria pointed toward an en-suite bathroom, but my attention was drawn to a portrait of an extraordinarily beautiful and elegant woman that hung over the fireplace mantle.

I felt arms reach around me from behind and I leaned against her as I absentmindedly murmured, "Martina."

Flabbergasted, she slowly turned me to face her and said, "How do you know?"

I ignored her question and asked, "Aria, have you ever seen the ghosts or has anyone else here?"

"No, I haven't, though some workers say they have seen a ghostly woman in the belfry."

The bell tower. Now I really did wonder what I had seen when I first arrived. I pursed my lips together, made a decision, and said, "Come sit with me and I will tell you my own ghost story."



When I finished recounting my nightmare, she was pensive for a minute or two before she spoke.

"Dani, supposedly, and I mean it is only tall tales passed down over time, ladies of the house had their own quarters

separate from their husband's. When we rebuilt and renovated after the fire, we found the painting in the attic. A little research led us to believe that it was Martina Escobar and this was her room."

"Where was the fire concentrated?"

"Mostly in the servant's quarters, kitchens, and pantries. No cause was ever discovered by the arson investigators. It was after that fire, that my parents bought the place."

Aria paused and as an afterthought continued, "Hmm, it seems you have a connection to this place."

"I don't know if that is true, but I feel I have a connection with you."

"Yes, that seems to be so, as impossible as it may seem, but you know, I don't believe in coincidences."

I wanted nothing more than to have her in my arms, to possess her, and was about to tell her this when we heard shouting outside the room. She rushed to the door, opened it and went into the hall. Her father had Ollie in his arms and was shepherding a young woman ahead of him toward the front staircase.

"What's going on Dad?" cried an alarmed Aria.

"A fire broke out in the secondary kitchen beneath Ollie's and your room. I didn't know where you were, so came up to move her just in case the fire extinguishers don't put it out."

"Here, give her to me so you can go back down and get things under control. Dani, you had better come with me too."



Settled in Aria's office on the first floor, I was introduced to Silvia, the baby's nanny, before she dismissed Silvia for the night. Ollie slept through the commotion on the couch between the two of us. As we waited for her father, I chatted easily, though God knows why. The thought of

another fire in the same place as years ago was ghastly and I was experiencing a little anxiety.

Holding Aria's hand I asked, "May I ask you some personal questions?"

"Of course. Go ahead."

"Your father mentioned that your trip from San Francisco was an ordeal for you. What caused that to be the case, I mean besides having to deal with a baby on the plane?"

She sighed and said, "Well, you'll find out sooner rather than later, so I might as well tell you now."

"Only if you want to."

"Ollie isn't my baby."

"What? But you said..."

"I know what I said...that I only slept with her father to get pregnant."

"You didn't?"

"No. I don't know why I said that. Maybe the whole situation just unnerved me."

"You who live in a haunted mansion were unnerved?"

"Well, yeah."

"Please explain."

"I grew up in this town and had a childhood friend who was a constant in my life for many years. We did everything together and I thought we would spend our lives in each other's company. Then the summer after we had graduated from the University, she met Charles, a dashing young race car driver, and that's all she wrote."

"What do you mean?"

"She fell out of love with me and in love with him. They got married and moved away. He got a job at the Sonoma Raceway, north of San Francisco, test driving racing cars."

"Oh Aria, that must have hurt a lot."

"It did, but I wanted her to be happy, so I decided to put my heart aside and be her friend. No expectations. I went out there shortly after Ollie was born. One weekend I offered to

stay with the baby so that she and Charles could get away for a couple of days.”

Aria winced, then continued. “They were on their way home and got into a crash. Their car was hit and knocked off a bridge by a semi that was out of control. They both died.”

As tears pooled in her eyes, I got up and took her into my arms. “I’m so sorry, Aria.” I can’t begin to imagine what that must have been like for you.”

When she pulled back, she continued, “Charles was raised in the foster care system and had no relatives. Julie was a change-of-life-baby. Her parents were quite old when she was born and had since died. The short of it is that my father and I decided to try to adopt Ollie. It took weeks to straighten things out with the State of California and right now, our custody is temporary pending a bunch of hoops we have to go through during the next year.”

I didn’t have time to say anything before Mr. Moreno tapped on the office door and walked in. “All clear, ladies, but such a strange fire.”

“What do you mean, Dad?”

“No one knows how it started. There were no spills of anything flammable. Nothing caught fire. It just spontaneously combusted and engulfed one of the walls. The kitchen staff is sure it was one of the supposed ghosts angry about something or other. Luckily, quick thinking and several fire extinguishers made short work of it. I’ll have the fire department come in tomorrow and figure out what happened.”



By the time everything was sorted and we were in our respective rooms, it was the bewitching hour. I once read that it refers to the belief that it is the time witches are active and at their strongest. Let’s see, there was a voodoo priestess who took my car, something in the belfry, a pirate boy who

wanted to nibble my neck, the corner in the anteroom where a woman was killed, a painting of one of the ghosts, and a ghostly fire. I hadn't encountered any witches, so I guess I was safe. I dropped off to sleep, my body and mind acutely aching for Aria.



I picked up my phone. It registered 3:10 a.m. What woke me? I had had enough excitement for the evening and thought I would sleep through the night. But something had roused me. I got up and went to the window, and as I was peeling back the curtain to look outside, a crack of thunder followed by a bolt of lightning startled me. There was a diaphanous woman running toward a tall man. She caught one of his arms, turned him toward her and started waving her other arm in the air. It looked like she was shouting at him. I couldn't see her face, but I was sure that the tall man was Mr. Moreno. A huge blast of wind whipped her long skirt around her legs. She was struggling to stay upright and finally fled as Mr. Moreno dropped to the ground.

I thought about getting Aria up, but passed on the idea and decided to go down myself and see what was going on. Maybe that was stupid, but there was something very compelling about the situation.

Halfway down the staircase, I saw that the front door had been flung open. It was blustery and big claps of thunder threatened buckets of water, but it hadn't started to rain yet. I hurried outside then realized what I had seen from my window was on the side of the house, not the front. The grass was cold and wet from the dew against my bare feet, but I couldn't resist. I was being drawn to something I didn't understand.

I sidled up against the side of the house and slowly crept toward where I thought Mr. Moreno and the woman had been. Several more steps and I was stunned to see Mr.

Moreno on the ground wrestling with something, but there was nothing there. I blinked rapidly, rubbed my eyes, and looked again. He was writhing, clutching his chest in pain. I ran over and knelt next to him, calling his name. It took a few moments for my voice to make an impact. He looked up, dazed to see me.

"Mr. Moreno, are you all right? What is going on?" I helped him sit up.

He seemed like he wasn't all there, but finally said, "I don't know. What are you doing out here?"

I was still bracing him up. "I saw you out here through my window and I came to see what was going on."

He replied, somewhat more coherently, "Was I alone?"

"Not when I saw you through my window. You were struggling with a woman."

"Oh shit," he expelled with a deep sigh.



As we walked up the portico steps, my arm still around Mr. Moreno to steady him, Aria was waiting just inside the front door.

"What on earth are you two doing? It's almost four in the morning."

Mr. Moreno quickly replied, "Nothing to worry about. I couldn't sleep and went out for a walk, then fell. It appears that Dani was up too and saw me through her bedroom window."

I did not contradict him but gave him a look that told him he had to tell Aria the truth later or I would. I was not going to be part of some strange family business that obviously was taking place. He nodded his head slightly and headed upstairs leaving Aria and me alone in the foyer.

"Let's go back upstairs and try to get some sleep," Aria sighed. Her bathrobe fell open as she started up the stairs.

The sight of her smooth thigh and the curve of her breast made me want her all over again.



I was up and dressed when I heard a light tapping on the door. Calling, "Come in," I was surprised to see Aria carrying a tray.

"I brought breakfast. Are you hungry?"

"Not that hungry," I countered with a smirk.

"Well, I thought you might invite me to join you," she said. "Coffee?"

As we sat on the bed eating croissants, jam, and cheese, Aria asked me what had really happened last night.

"Your father hasn't told you?"

"I asked him this morning and he said he didn't remember anything except you found him on the side lawn."

I gathered myself up and said, "Something woke me and I got up to look out the window. I saw a woman accosting your father. When I got outside, the woman was gone. There was something strange about her. She looked semi opaque, but maybe it was just the light playing tricks on my eyes."

"How curious." Aria looked perplexed. I was positive she was just as bewildered as I was. *What was he hiding?* I shook my head to rid myself of the ridiculous thought that the woman might have been one of the ghosts.

"Dani, I know things have been a little out of the ordinary, but would you consider staying today? I really want to get to know you and I'll be free once the lunch traffic has cleared out. We could take a picnic lunch and hike along the creek that's on the property. There is a beautiful little waterfall and pool we used to swim in as kids. Please?"

"Normally I would say yes, but it seems like there are a lot of things to sort out here. I wouldn't want to be in the way." Okay, in truth I was ready to cut my losses and flee, but something in her eyes kept me from leaving.

“Let me make it up to you. I promise, no more ghosts, voodoo priestesses and pirate boys.” Her sincerity won me over.



A few hours later we spread a blanket on a mossy knoll that overlooked a natural pool in the creek. Upstream from us, there was a small waterfall, perhaps ten to fifteen feet tall, cascading into the water scattering rays of sun and dispersing a ballet of droplets rising and falling in the air. We had not spoken much on the trail, and now, we were content just to bathe ourselves in the midafternoon sun.

I lay back on the blanket and let the sounds of the falling water and the birds lull me into a relaxed state. Soon Aria who was lying next to me, put her head on my shoulder and casually tossed her arm across my abdomen. Despite the early morning events, I felt peaceful and began to stroke Aria's hair with my free arm.

When she kissed me, her lips felt warm and plush. They parted slightly, inviting me to slip my tongue inside. I could taste our shared breath and feel the thud of my heartbeat as her fingers ran through my hair. Warmth blossomed in my chest at the scent of her perfume and sparks ignited as she drew me in with her mouth, each kiss different from the other, yet uniquely Aria.

As we breathed each other in, she nudged me with her nose and wrapped both arms around me, her breasts pressing into my chest. Waiting for each other, already soft and open, our mouths fell together in a fiery kiss. No words were needed, we seemed to be in sync with each other's thoughts and actions. She began unbuttoning my flannel shirt and slipped her fingers inside skimming across the lace that covered my breasts. I was lost in a heart-fluttering kiss when I heard a cry—a woman's cry, “No, don't!”

Aria pulled back as I tried to sit up. A woman across the creek was outlined against a thicket of trees. She was

translucent. I could partially see through her. There was something behind her that she seemed to be holding back. A smaller woman, less opaque, broke free and hurried to the bank of the stream. She was waving her arms and calling out something that sounded like “wall.” From her body type, I was inclined to believe that this was the woman I had seen with Mr. Moreno early in the morning. She clutched both hands over her heart and when she removed them, I saw it—the crimson stains.

As I stood up, my feet felt heavy. Aria must have seen the blood drain from my face because she anxiously asked, “What it is Dani? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Two, I’ve seen two,” I shuttered. “Didn’t you see them? One was with your father last night.”

“I don’t understand.”

I looked down at Aria who was still sitting, “I think I just saw Martina and Valeria who was trying to tell us something.”

Aria peered at me as if I had lost more than one screw. “You can’t be serious. I didn’t see anything except the saplings across the creek starting to bend from the gusts of wind that have kicked up.”

“How could you not have seen them?” I insisted. “I saw them Aria! There were blood stains on Valeria’s blouse.”

I sank to my knees and Aria put her arms around me, cooing, “It’s okay, we’ll figure this out.”

“She kept repeating ‘the wall.’ What do you think that means?”

“I don’t have any idea, Dani, but I think we should pack up and head back to the hacienda. It feels like it is going to storm, and it will be dark in a couple of hours. We can talk more when we get back.”

Nodding, I got up, lifted her with me, and helped fold the blanket, all the time wondering if I had indeed lost my mind.



Aria invited me to stay for dinner, but I declined. I was flying out Tuesday morning and I needed some time to clear my head before stepping back into the rat race. I said my goodbyes car-side, promising to call, though I wasn't sure I would. I was clipping along the long driveway at a moderate speed and as I approached the opening in the wall, something large ran in front of me. I slammed on my brakes to avoid what I assumed to be an animal. It had been raining and my SUV slid on the mud. A moment later, I crashed into the low wall, my head hitting the steering wheel. The front end of my old, but classic Jeep was toast.

I got out and swore, inspecting the damage. The rocks used in the construction of the ancient wall were strewn all over, many now adorning my hood. Hearing another car engine, I turned and saw Aria in a BMW racing down the driveway. She did a better job of stopping than I did.

“Are you all right? Oh my God, your forehead is bleeding!”

I thought it had started to rain again and drops were dripping down my face, but when I touched my head, it was sticky. She sat me on the passenger seat of her car and rummaged for a first aid kit. After cleaning me up, she said, “You are not going anywhere tonight. You might have a concussion. You'll stay with me.”

Aria moved away from the door and when she did, I saw something poking up from the mud. I tried to stand but was dizzy and went down on one knee. “Aria, what's that?” I pointed, my head spinning.

She helped me up, sat me back down, then bent to pick up the object. After wiping the mud off with her hand, she passed it to me. It was a rusty flat tin box outfitted with a lock of sorts.

“This must have been stashed in the rocks of the wall and fell out when I banged into it.”

“It looks old. Come on. We’ll go back to the house and see if we can open it.” Aria settled me in her car, closed the door and headed back up the driveway. Once in her office, she pulled out a small tool kit from the credenza.

She was poised to break open the lock when I said, “Wait! This is what Valeria was trying to tell us. The wall. Remember, you said you didn’t believe in coincidences!”

Nodding her head, Aria pried the lock off and opened the box. Peering over her shoulder I saw there was something wrapped in a piece of old oilcloth. She lifted the cloth out of the box and laid it on her desk. Opening it, she gasped. It was a stunning piece of Victorian jewelry.

I reached for the necklace and spread it out. A huge blue sapphire pendant surrounded by diamonds stared up at us. The chain was heavy gold interspersed at intervals with more diamonds. There were also matching earrings, some rings, a few loose gemstones, and some paper money.

I grabbed the necklace and ran from Aria’s office, shouting, “We have to get to Martina’s room!” I reached the door to the family quarters before Aria and stood impatiently waiting for her to catch up.

Bursting into the room, I grabbed Aria’s hand and pulled her to the portrait over the fireplace. Pointing, I uttered, “Look!”

“Oh my God! Can it be?”

I held the necklace up so we could compare the one in the portrait to the one in my hand. They were identical.



Later that night, Aria came to check on me. I had a long soak and was now tucked in bed trying to make sense of the weekend. She perched on the bed, took my hand, and said, “Do you have a theory?”

“It’s sad that they loved each other so much and couldn’t be together. I think Martina hid the jewelry when

they were planning on leaving and they were going to pick it up on their way off the property. However, I can't think of any reason Valeria would accost your father in the middle of the night."

"I think I can," smiled Aria.

"You can? Why?" I uttered in complete disbelief.

"Dad had talked about bulldozing that old wall and replacing it with a more modern structure. It was forever falling apart and needed constant repair."

"Wow! This all sounds so crazy. I wonder what was so special about that necklace that Valeria and Martina stayed around for decades?"

"I don't know, Dani. Maybe it was their ticket to freedom. It symbolized their being together and Valeria wasn't leaving without it being found...and, if Martina loved her so much, maybe she stuck around too."

"Do you hear us? We sound like we are off our rockers! How do we know if any of this is true, unless, of course, Martina and Valeria come and tell us?" I shook my head and smiled. Then, shrugging my shoulders, I offered, "But oh what a story for Ollie when she gets older. By the way, is she sleeping?"

"Mmm, yes. Silvia is with her. I thought I should stay with you tonight. You know, just to make sure you don't need medical attention. That's a pretty big egg on your forehead."

Aria didn't seem to be flirting, so I wasn't sure exactly what she was offering, but I plunged ahead and held the covers open so she could get into bed if that is what she wanted. Slowly, she opened her robe, let it drop from her bare shoulders, and fall to the floor.

As the rain continued to pelt the windows, she came to me gently, openly, and I felt she was everything I had longed for. Our lovemaking was beautiful and the passion we shared reached its height when a bolt of lightning lit up the room. For a moment, I had a clear view of the portrait over the

fireplace. What I saw was nothing short of a miracle, or else I was totally deluded.

Aria was still sleeping. For a moment, I listened to her breathing and snuggled into her for much needed rest. Smiling to myself, I thought tomorrow was soon enough to find out if what I saw was true. Had the painting changed? Was Valeria really standing behind Martina, her hand on her lover's shoulder, fingers touching the necklace?

THE END

AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

“Hello.”

“May I speak to Halle Serrano, please?”

“This is Halle.”

“Hello, this is Ivy Martin. I am an attorney in New York City representing the estate of a woman in Spain. Her name was Mara Bellarosa.”

“Excuse me, Ms. Martin, but I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“I suspected you didn’t, but please hear me out.”

“Look, Ms. Martin, how do I know this isn’t just another one of the dozens of scam calls I get in a month?”

“Ah, I understand your reluctance. Unfortunately, New York State does not issue Bar numbers, but you can use the ‘attorney search’ feature on the New York State Unified Court System Website to verify my license. I’ll text the URL to you. Would that be sufficient for you to call me back?”

“Would you please give me your firm name and general phone number?”

“Sure. It’s Rosenberg, Fontana, Peterson, and Martin.”

“Are you saying you are a named partner?”

“I am.”

“Okay. If everything checks out, I will call you back tomorrow.”

“Thank you, and I’m looking forward to talking to you.



Halle spent the better part of the evening researching the legitimacy of Ms. Martin and her law firm. While everything seemed to be in order, she had a funny feeling about the “out of the blue” call. She could call a local attorney who she knew, but she decided to call her ex-partner, who was an awesome lawyer, but who never had grown out of her “sow

wild oats” stage. Halle hesitated before dialing but willed herself to make the call. On the fourth ring, the call was forwarded to voice mail. She breathed a sigh of relief after she left a short message.

Halle and Brianna had met in college years ago and lived together while Brianna went to law school and Halle went for her architecture degree. They spent the next several years together, but eventually, they separated. The breakup was messy, and although Brianna was the one who cheated multiple times, she held a great deal of resentment toward Halle for not giving her another second chance.

Getting ready for bed, Halle mused to herself, *I wonder if even after all this time she is still pissed with me*. She shrugged her shoulders, got into bed, and as she was reaching to snap off the light, her phone rang.

“Halle, you left a message to call you. Everything all right?” breathed Brianna’s raspy voice.

Halle recalled a time that she had thought Brianna’s voice was the sexiest thing she had ever heard, but now, it just irritated her.

“Yes, Bri. Thank you for calling back. How have you been?”

Halle wanted to get past the small talk and get right to the reason she called, but she felt obligated to break the ice. After all, it had been almost ten years since they last spoke.

“Been well, Halle. I’m a partner and making tons of money. Life is good.”

“Congratulations, Bri. I always admired that ambitious side of you.”

“So, Halle, we’re not exactly close anymore, so why did you call? What do you want?”

There it was— the condescending arrogance that had always been a part of Brianna’s personality. But now, it was like a blowfish— capable of inflating itself to three times its normal size.

"I had forgotten how direct you can be, but in all fairness, I did call you. I need some legal advice."

"Mmm, why me? You don't live in Florida, or maybe you came back and didn't tell me."

"No. I'm still in Santa Rosa, California. I went back east to see my parents once a year and then when they passed. If you have a minute, I'll tell you why I called."

Brianna interrupted, "I'm sorry. I didn't know about your parents. Is your issue related to their estate or is it some sort of sentimental issue? You know I am not very good with emotions."

Halle laughed and said, "I remember that quite well. No, Bri. No emotions. Just your thoughts on a situation that has arisen."

"What situation?"

"I got a call from a lawyer in New York City today. She told me that she was calling about an estate of some woman in Spain I never heard of."

"That's curious. What do you need from me?"

"I looked up the lawyer and her firm. They seemed legit, but I still don't know if it's some kind of scam."

"Hmm. Do you want me to call?"

"Would you?"

"Yeah. I can do that for you, but just to rule out a scam. Estates aren't my area of expertise."

"Thank you, Bri. I really appreciate it."

"Send me the information you already have and I'll do it tomorrow then get back to you."



It was noon when Halle's phone rang. "Hello, Bri. Let me close my office door." Halle got up from her desk, shut the door, and returned to her chair. "Okay, I'm back."

"Well, first of all, the law firm is legit and so is the woman who called you. Their firm specializes in certain

subsets of international law and has offices in London, Barcelona, and Milan.”

“I did see that on their website.”

“I talked to Ivy Martin who told me that the New York office doesn’t usually handle estates, but that the estate is that of a long-time business client of theirs in Barcelona. She was asked to help with you because you live in the States.”

“I guess that makes sense. What else did you find out?”

“All she would say to me is that you were named in the will of this woman, Mara Bellarosa. You need to talk to her to get more.”

“Well, thank you for taking time out of your day to do this for me. I truly appreciate it. Please let me know if there is something I can do for you to return the favor.”

Bri hesitated, then said, “Halle, are you with someone now?”

“No, I’ve been single for a long time, and liking it just fine.”

“Maybe I’ll take some time and come out to see you...you know...for old time’s sake.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea— too much water under the bridge.”

“Guess you’re right. Good luck on whatever adventure comes from this situation.”

“Thank you and once again, I appreciate your help. Bye, Bri.”



No time like the present, thought Halle. She dialed the main number of the New York firm, asked for Ms. Martin, and waited a short time.

“Hello Ms. Serrano. Thank you for calling me back.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I had an attorney friend call you earlier today.”

“Not at all. I am glad to know that you are cautious.”

“Okay. So I’m here now. Would you please explain to me what this is all about, Ms. Martin?”

“Yes, I would be glad to, but why don’t you call me Ivy?”

“Sure. Then call me Halle.”

“Delighted. Now, let’s get down to business. I know your friend told you that our Barcelona office handled the business affairs of Mara Bellarosa for years, and normally they would have handled her estate too, but there was a bit of a wrinkle in the will.”

“Oh, and what was that?” asked Halle.

“You. You were the wrinkle,” responded Ivy good naturedly

“How is that possible?”

“I’m going to tell you. Ready to have your world rocked?”

Ivy began by telling Halle that their Barcelona office began executing the will they had on file in their offices. They sent property and art appraisers to Mara’s mansion on the Mediterranean, northeast of Barcelona. One of the appraisers found a carved wooden box in the drawer of an antique desk in her bedroom. When he saw what was in it, he immediately called the attorney in our office who had ordered the appraisal.

Ivy stopped to ask if Halle had any questions. Halle didn’t, so she continued the story. “There was a short note in the box instructing anyone who found the contents of the box to turn it over to Jorge Delgado, from our office. He had handled all of Mara’s business for years, and putting it mildly, he was stunned with what he saw. Inside, neatly typed and notarized, was a new last will and testament. He was named executor and you were named in the will.”

Halle was flabbergasted. She still had no idea who Mara Bellarosa was or why she was in the will. Ivy further explained that the will found in Mara’s house was dated a

month before she passed and superseded the will their law firm had on file.

“Ivy, I don’t understand. Why would this woman whom I have never met or even heard of until now, leave me anything? What about her family?”

“Halle, she didn’t just leave you something, she left you almost everything, and I have to admit, the heirs who were named in the original will are hopping mad and poised to sue.”

“Me? They want to sue me?”

“Not exactly. They want to sue the estate but are waiting to see how it all shakes out.”

“What do you mean ‘how it all shakes out’? Was she competent when she signed the new will?”

“To the best of our knowledge, she was. She ran her business up to the day she died of a brain aneurysm. Her employees said she was sharp as a knife, even at eighty-four years old.”

“What business did she have?”

“Have you heard of the Andorra Group?”

“No. What do they do?”

“Well, first of all, it belonged to Mara. It was privately held. Second, it’s the largest lingerie manufacturer in Western Europe.”

Halle sat stupefied at her desk trying to process all the information she had received in the last fifteen minutes. Halle was minority owner and business manager of a commercial architectural and construction company in Northern California. Why would anyone leave her a lingerie business? She didn’t know anything about it.

Ivy gave Halle a few moments before she continued. “Let me outline the next steps. First, I am going to fly you to New York, where you will spend a day with me sorting through options. If you decide to forgo the inheritance, you’ll have some paperwork to fill out, then you’ll be done. If you

decide to pursue it, I will accompany you to Barcelona, where Jorge Delgado will get you up to speed.”

“Ivy, will you please give me the weekend to sit with this? I will call you Monday.”

“Yes, of course. Let me give you my cell number in case you have further questions.

Halle took down the number and said goodbye.



As soon as Ivy hung up from her talk with Halle, she called Jorge to bring him up to date.

“Well?” asked Jorge.

“I don’t know whether she will accept the inheritance or not, but I will tell you one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“She never asked how much the inheritance was worth.”

“Unlike the bastard nephews that are just waiting to liquidate everything,” replied the Spaniard.

Ivy heard the disgust in Jorge’s voice. “She is also honest and might just be the person to run Andorra.”

“We’ll see, once she is here and finds out the rest.”

“Okay, *amigo*, I know it’s close to midnight for you. I’ll keep you posted. *Hasta Luego*.”



“What do you mean you’re not sure you are going to accept the inheritance?”

“Bri, it seems like a huge hassle. I assume after what Ivy told me that the original heirs are crazed about the money and just waiting to pounce.” Halle was scornful.

“Sometimes I really miss you, Halle. That sardonic bent you have still gets me all gooey,” laughed Brianna.

“Ha! If that were true, you wouldn’t have had such a hard time with monogamy.”

Halle knew Brianna didn’t want to rehash the sins of her past, not because she was embarrassed or shamed, but she liked to be in control. It was not surprising she offered to accompany Halle to New York City. She hadn’t had sex in a long time, and knew Brianna would be good for it, but a few moments of pleasure could not wipe out the years of hurt she had suffered from Brianna’s infidelities.



Through a Dramamine induced haze, Halle heard her name being called. It was a sweet voice— one she had heard before but now couldn’t place it. Her brain was struggling to wake up from a deep sleep. Through her light sweater, she felt a warm hand on her shoulder gently shaking her.

“Ms. Serrano, we’ve landed. You have to deplane now.”

Halle’s eyes fluttered open for a moment, just long enough to recognize the woman leaning over her.

“Ms. Serrano, can you wake up for me? We’re in New York.”

Halle wished she could wake up to that voice every morning but her fantasy faded as she roused and realized the woman perched on the seat next to her was the flight attendant—the only one on the private plane she boarded in Sacramento. She remembered her name was Amanda.

“I’m so sorry. Do you remember when I boarded, I asked for a weather report?”

“I remember,” smiled Amanda. “It wasn’t very good. Lots of surface wind and turbulence.”

“That is exactly why I took another dose of Dramamine.”

“Do you get motion sickness every time you fly?”

“Yes, I do. From the time I was a little kid, I got motion sick every time my parents loaded me into anything that moved. I never grew out of it.”

Amanda was kind and gracious. “Ms. Serrano, it was probably a good thing you took the Dramamine, because the descent was abominable. Even I almost reached for a sickness bag a couple of times.”

Now fully awake, Halle bantered back. “I highly doubt that, but thanks for making me feel better and you can call me Halle.”

The flight attendant laughed lightly and asked, “Are you okay to get up now?”

“Yes. So this is your final stop today too?” Halle inquired.

“It is. My parents live in Brooklyn. What about you?”

“I grew up in Pennsylvania, but moved to California years ago.”

“So are you spending time with your folks or do you live here?” asked Halle.

“I’m spending a few days with them. My mother had surgery a couple of weeks ago and my dad needs a break, but I live near this airport.”

“Oh dear, I hope everything is going to be all right with your mom.”

“I’m hopeful. Thank you.”

Amanda stood up and held out her hand. Halle took her hand and slipped out of her seat replying, “I wish you and your mom the best.” She turned and started to walk the short few steps to the open door and stairway when Amanda called to her.

“Halle, wait a minute, please. There is a driver waiting for you. Your luggage is being loaded now, but I want to offer you something.”

Amanda handed her a business card. “Forgive me if I am wrong, but you seemed upset at the beginning of the

flight. If you need anything while in New York, call me. I am a good listener.”

Halle reached for the card, thanked her, and replied, “I think you might be in the wrong business Amanda.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“You were right. I was upset when I boarded. Maybe you should be a therapist.” Halle laughed, side-hugged Amanda, and continued down the stairs.



There was a driver standing next to a town car. He whisked her away and deftly maneuvered through the congested traffic until an hour later, pulled up in front of The Beekman, a swanky hotel in the City Hall district of Manhattan.

She had a quick room-service dinner, a shower, and went to bed. It was light out when Halle awoke. She flicked her wrist and gasped. It was almost 9:00 a.m. and her driver was supposed to arrive in thirty minutes. Throwing off the comforter, she leapt from the bed, applied some makeup, dressed in a business pant suit, which was a far cry from her jeans and oxford shirts that she wore to work most days. She charged out the door, slowing down only to make a sharp turn into the hallway with the elevator banks.



“I’m here to see Ms. Martin” voiced Halle.

“Do you have an appointment, ma’am?”

“Yes. I’m Halle Serrano.”

“Just a moment please,” answered the law firm’s receptionist.

Halle sat down expecting the usual power-play of making the client wait but was surprised to see a woman with midnight black hair tumbling over her shoulders as she

walked toward Halle. She had a cheerful demeanor as she extended her hand and introduced herself.

“Good morning. I’m Ivy. Pleased to meet you, Halle. Let’s go back to my office so we can chat.”

Halle stood up and took her offered hand. Not even the firm hand-shake could disguise the velvety palm that fit perfectly into Halle’s. *Whoa, girl*, cautioned Halle to herself, but as she followed her down the hallway, she couldn’t take her eyes off Ivy’s shapely figure. The pencil skirt left little to the imagination. *Careful, Halle*, she silently mused. She was well aware of her tendency to fall too hard and too fast for younger, good-looking, smart women.

Once they were settled into a richly appointed office, Ivy took the lead. Opening a file folder, she said, “I want to go over some of the details in the original will and the one that superseded it. That will give you a better idea of what is going on and maybe help you decide if you want to accept the inheritance.”

“Okay,” remarked Halle. “Do you speak Spanish?”

“Some, but we had the wills translated into English.”

Once Ivy was finished, Halle paused for a moment, a look of intense concentration on her face before she asked, “Ivy, do you have any more information on how I got embroiled in this situation?”

“Yes and no. Let me explain. Jorge, our attorney in Barcelona, tracked down the person who notarized the will. From there, we found out who the attorney was that drafted the new will. However, all he was able to tell us was that Mara came to him and asked him to draft a will. She was very specific. When he asked her if she had a previous will, she answered yes, but that she wanted to make sure this new one would revoke the old one. He told us that nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He guessed that Mara had fallen out with her nephews and was just an old woman who wanted to change her will.”

“Then the new lawyer was legitimate, right?”

“Yes. All he does is wills, trusts, and estates. He has a good reputation.”

“Okay. What else?”

“One more thing before we get some lunch. I want to be clear that I am part of the legal team representing Mara and the Andorra Group. That means I can’t represent you, so if you want your own attorney to advise you, then I can put you in touch with a couple of firms that could do a good job representing your interests. If you decide to accept the inheritance, once the papers are signed, then my firm will represent you, just as we did with Mara.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Ivy. However, I don’t think we are far enough along for me to seek counsel. I will keep that in mind for the future. Thank you.”



After lunch, Halle had a difficult time focusing. As she observed the attorney closer, she took in her burnished complexion and perfectly shaped eyes. A pair of arched eyebrows looked down on sweeping eyelashes that seemed to reach to her cheek bones. No doubt Ivy was smart, accomplished, and ethical. She pegged her at early-forties, young for a name partner. She was also very attractive and had an endearing quality about her. Halle was jolted back to the present when she heard, “...So, with that, Halle, I think we are all caught up. I’ll have the driver take you back to your hotel and then I’ll meet you for dinner later.”



They were seated in a quiet corner in the hotel restaurant enjoying a glass of wine, getting to know each other.

“Halle, I know you are currently living in Northern California. How did you end up there?” Ivy brought her glass to her lips and took a small sip.

“My degree is in architecture. I stayed on the east coast for over a decade until my partner decided to take a job in Miami. I tried living there for a couple of years, but couldn’t stand the scorching, humid summers.”

“Your business partner?” interrupted Ivy.

“No, my domestic partner. When I left, I took a job at an architectural firm in San Francisco. A few years later, an opportunity nearby came up which seemed to be custom made. I’ve been there ever since.”

Ivy liked Halle and had learned a lot about her before she made the first call to her. A comprehensive background check was made to assure that the Andorra Group would be protected. Ivy found Halle to be accomplished and well-respected in her field, but what Ivy liked best, was her humility. She found her to be open, responsive, and quite attractive in a boyish sort of way. Reaching across the table and putting her hand over Halle’s she replied, “And is your position still custom-made or is it time to try something else?”

Halle placed one of her hands over Ivy’s. “I don’t know yet. I guess I’ll see when we get to Spain.” She flashed Ivy a big grin. “When do we leave?”



Halle returned home, spent three intense days in the office, delegating most of what was on her plate, and discussing with her partner the time off she needed. She told him that she needed to deal with an inheritance overseas and would probably be gone for a month. Truly, she had no idea how long she would be gone, but she didn’t want to get into the details of the trip. Her partner did not begrudge her the time off, as Halle rarely took any time for herself. She was a classic work-a-holic.

She and Ivy were now on their way to Teterboro Airport to board a private flight to Barcelona. It was a dreary pitch-

black morning. Sunrise was two hours away. Neither she nor Ivy felt the need to chat. It was going to be a long day with an eight-hour flight.

Waiting in the Fixed Base Operator Building where private planes took off and landed, Halle sipped her coffee, distracted with the thought of being on a plane for so long. She felt a cold breeze across her feet and turned to the door that led to the tarmac. A familiar person came through the door. Amanda walked over to Halle, greeted her warmly and announced to both Halle and Ivy that the plane was ready for take-off.

“Amanda, what’s the weather going to be like?”

The flight attendant laughed, put her hand on Halle’s shoulder and said, “Smooth flight today, plus we’ll be flying at forty thousand feet, well above anything that might come up. No second dose needed,” she joked. “Now, last chance to visit the restroom before we get you on board.”



In no time, they were winging their way over the North Atlantic. Ivy was sitting across the aisle working on her laptop. Halle was looking out the window at the clouds and ocean when she heard, “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Halle smiled and replied, “No, not at all, Amanda. You’re welcome to sit with me if it doesn’t interfere with your duties.”

“Thanks. My only duties are to take care of you and Ms. Martin. Is there anything you need?”

“No thanks. I’m still sipping on the ginger ale you brought me five minutes ago.”

Amanda slipped into the seat that faced Halle. Ivy looked up from her laptop and observed the two of them chatting easily. Her reaction surprised her and she refused to admit it to herself she was a little jealous. Shaking it off, she went back to working.

Hours later, they landed in Barcelona. Amanda gave Halle a big hug before she deplaned and told Halle that she would be in Barcelona for a day and hoped to hear from her soon.

The drive along the coast was beautiful. Streetlights and neon signs gave off a soft glow that made them inviting rather than garish. The sound of traffic humming along was barely discernible in their hired car.

Opening her window slightly, Halle felt a breeze from the sea that was so gentle that it hardly moved the fronds of the palm trees that dotted the coastal beach. She thought that even though the city had a population close to one and a half million, it was intimate, inviting, and a little mysterious.

They followed the highway which turned to the left and took them over a bridge that crossed a river or perhaps an inlet from the sea. The further north they went, the number of vehicles on the road lessened. When they exited the highway, the road the driver took was quiet and lined with palms. There was a sweet, slightly pungent smell of hibiscus and jasmine which overlaid the smell of the crisp salt air from the sea.

Winding through a residential area adjacent to a beach, the driver suddenly turned sharply and pulled into a driveway of what seemed to be a private house. Halle thought they would stay in a hotel. When Ivy got out of the car, Halle asked, "Is this where we are staying?"

"Umm, yes. The firm owns this property and it is used for clients when they come to the city for business with our law firm. It opens up right on the beach and there's a pool too. Hope you brought a swimsuit. I think you'll find this place quite comfortable."

As they walked to the front door, it swung open, and they were greeted by a woman in a uniform. She spoke to them in accented English and showed them to their rooms on the second floor.

After a light supper, Halle asked if it was safe to walk on the beach after dark. Ivy told her it was a private beach that was patrolled, so she invited Ivy to accompany her. The beach was quiet and they walked in silence, letting the tide roll across their bare feet, until Ivy commented, "It seems like you hit it off with Amanda."

"Oh? She was very nice to me on my trip from California to New York."

"I think she likes you," countered Ivy.

"Well, I like her too. She's very sweet."

"I mean I think she *likes, likes* you."

"Is that so? What makes you think that?"

"The way she looked at you...holding on to every word you said, plus she was touching you a lot, and that hug at the end of the trip, well, it was sort of intimate."

"I didn't know you were watching," teased Halle.

"Umm...I really wasn't but when she sat with you, I looked up and I may have observed for a while," Ivy confessed sheepishly.

"I see. Even if she were interested, she is way too young for me. She can't be a day over thirty." Halle knew she was divulging something about herself that she rarely did to people she didn't know, but she thought she could trust Ivy.

Ivy stopped walking and blithely said, "Well, she is a blond goddess, and no one is too old for a night in Barcelona."

Halle smiled and responded lightheartedly, "Isn't that a song?"

"No, I think you have it confused with 'One Night in Bangkok'," laughed Ivy, "and I think I just dated myself."

"Hmm, I was just starting college when that song was the rage! You were probably twelve, and there's one more thing."

"And what is that?" shot back Ivy.

"This may be Barcelona, but a line of the lyrics still fits," harrumphed Halle.

“Tell me,” goaded Ivy.

“And if you’re lucky then god’s a she...I can feel an angel sliding up to me.”

Ivy’s surprising guffaw was so loud and full of joy that it filled the desolate beach. When her laughter died down she stammered, “Halle, you are one wicked woman.”

“I think you invited it; wouldn’t you say?”



“Good morning.”

“When did you come down?” asked Halle as she walked up the pool steps. She stopped at a nearby table and took a towel from the stacked pile.

“About ten minutes ago. You are quite the swimmer.”

Halle continued to dry herself off, then grabbed a second towel and wrapped it around her waist. “I try to swim as much as I can. It keeps me fit and isn’t as hard on the joints as jogging.”

“I can see that...I mean that you’re fit.” Ivy embarrassed herself and tried to recover quickly. “Shall we have breakfast out here and I can go over the plans for today?”

“Sounds great.”

“What would you like?”

“Coffee, whole grain toast, scrambled eggs, and some fruit, if possible.”

Ivy leaned over to what looked like an intercom on the small table between the two lounge chairs they were occupying. After ordering their breakfasts, she turned to Halle.

“Today, we are going to take it easy and I’m going to give you a tour of Barcelona.” Ivy knew that getting Halle to agree to accept the inheritance, she would have to make Barcelona as appealing as possible.

“That sounds fabulous, but I didn’t realize that you knew the city.”

“I spend time here. I have clients in the fashion industry in New York that have business interests in Europe. The big fashion cities are Milan, Paris, and London, but Barcelona is up and coming, and I like it here a lot.”

“Hmm, you are surprising, Ivy. What other surprises do you have in store for me?” flirted Halle.

“They won’t be surprises if I tell you. Right?” teased Ivy.

“Sounds like a lawyer’s answer,” chuckled Halle.

“I thought we would skip some of the tourist trap attractions, and let you see the Barcelona the locals see.”

“So no dragging me to all sorts of architectural sites?”

“Maybe just one or two today,” she jested. “The first is called the Casa Batlló. It’s a UNESCO World Heritage site and many people call it one of the jewels of the Modernism art movement. However, I want you to see it because it is a masterpiece of architecture and design. The second is a home designed by Gaudi.”

“I would like that a lot.”

“Then, I will take you on a tapas and Cava tasting tour through the Old City of Barcelona. In the Gothic Quarter, not only will you get to sample local street fare, you’ll see plenty of historic churches and Roman ruins.”

“That sounds wonderful. I don’t know how you can top that.”

“Ha! Ye of little faith. We’ll finish out the day by touring the waterfront on a solar powered catamaran— no noise and no vibrations. How does this sound?”

“It sounds like the perfect day. When do we leave?”

“Right after breakfast. Dress in lightweight slacks and a blouse. We’ll come back here to change for the cruise.”



“Oh, Ivy. This is spectacular”

Looking down from the terrace, the view of the city was remarkable. "I can't believe I am standing in the home of the legendary architect Antoni Gaudi. First you take me to the Casa Batlló, and now this."

"Which do you like better?" Ivy moved closer to Halle, their shoulders now touching.

Turning to face Ivy, Halle responded, "How can I choose? The architecture is so different. I mean, we came from the Casa which looked like it was made of bones from a dragon and with the colorful ceramic glaze and fragments of glass, it looks like an aquatic landscape and makes me think of the reflection of twilight clouds on the water."

"I take it you were inspired," laughed Ivy. "But what about here?"

"Even if there were nothing more, this view is a killer and Gaudi's love affair with the world of nature can be clearly seen here. Just look at the gardens and how he has used elements in the iron, carpentry, and mural decorations. Even when we are inside, it feels like being outside."

Halle hugged Ivy and placed a sweet kiss on her cheek. "Thank you so much. You really are a thoughtful person."



"We're here," smiled Ivy, as the driver pulled the car over to the side of the street. "Let's get some lunch."

"What did you have in mind?"

"We'll start here and then eat our way through Old Town. Come on."

Ivy slinked her arm through Halle's and began walking up the street until they came to a small red striped awning. It was busy, but they were led to a table out on the back patio. The smells were enough to make a serious dieter lustful.

They sat in the shade of a large oak tree and listened to live music until a waiter came to take their order. Ivy had asked if she could order for both of them. Shortly, three

different kinds of tapas arrived: *Patatas bravas*, which are potatoes fried in oil and topped with a spicy sauce, *Escalivadas*, which are smoky grilled veggies, and *Salmón ahumado*, which is smoked salmon. They drank Cava, a sparkling wine, with their lunch.

After their first stop, they wandered arm in arm through the streets for several hours, stopping once in a while to window shop. A turn off the main avenue brought them to a smaller street lined with café-like outdoor restaurants. Suddenly, Ivy removed her arm from Halle's and took Halle's hand. She began walking faster, almost dragging Halle along.

"Come on, sit down," cried Ivy. They had stopped at what looked like an old drugstore counter with stools. "We are going to eat Bikinis!" snickered Ivy.

"You had better explain that!" laughed Halle.

"What, you don't trust me?" retorted Ivy.

"Umm, maybe 90%, but ply me with more of the Cava and it might nudge me up to 95%."

"Okay, fine. Bikinis are one of the most sought-after street food in Barcelona."

"Well, good to know it's a food."

A counter person came over to take their order. Ivy asked for two Bikinis and two glasses of Cava.

"As I was explaining, a Bikini is a ham and cheese sandwich, similar to a "croque-monsieur" that the French make, but the Barcelonans are very particular about the ingredients which are Manchego cheese, portobellos and truffle aioli, and of course, Serrano ham."

"Serrano?" quizzed Halle.

"Umm, yes. Do you like ham?"

"I do, but I seem to like the Cava best of all.

"Well, then, since the vast majority of Cava comes from the wine region northeast of Barcelona, maybe it's a sign or omen that you should stay." Ivy's eyes were sparkling as she

gently touched Halle's arm. She was rewarded with one of Halle's wide grins.



After walking and exploring late into the afternoon, they sat down at an outdoor café to cool off. While the temperature was temperate, the sun's rays were scalding everything in sight. They quietly shared a black sesame ice cream while they waited for their hired car to arrive.

Both women seemed to be lost in their own thoughts. Halle felt like the day was a movie, where everything around you stops, and you see how wonderful things are through the eyes of another person. She was enraptured with Ivy, who went out of her way to make the day special for her. Ivy was fun-loving, playful, and kind-hearted. It wasn't often that someone brought joy, positivity, and warmth into Halle's life.

There hadn't been a recent day in Ivy's life where she got to spend it with someone so authentic and genuine. Halle always came from a place of honesty and sincerity, and that was a rarity, especially in the legal profession. She had a feeling that Halle could make her life better simply by being in it, but sadly knew this was not the time to explore that option.

Taking their last spoonfuls of ice cream, they gazed into each other's eyes and it felt as if they were sharing an intimate moment. It was a pure and unguarded instant that made them both feel connected in a powerful way. They let the moment pass as they heard the horn of their ride.



They had eaten a late dinner and had been standing on the deck, leaning over the railing, as the boat made its way

back to the harbor. In fifteen minutes or so, their cruise would end. A strong gust of wind chilled Halle.

“Are you cold,” asked Ivy, as she moved closer and put her arm around her, drawing her to her own body heat.

“That gust chilled me for a moment, but may I stay like this in case another one comes along?”

Ivy recognized that Halle was being mischievous and decided she would be equally as impish. “Maybe I should put both arms around you to make sure you’ll be nice and toasty.”

“I dare you,” chuckled Halle.

Ivy moved behind Halle and held her from behind. “Cozy, no?”

“Oh yeah. I can feel the heat,” giggled Halle.

They both started laughing and Ivy backed away, realizing if she continued to hold Halle, she might do something more she would regret in the morning. “Look,” she said pointing toward the harbor. “We’re slowing down and will be docking in a few minutes. Let me call our driver to let her know.”



Both women rode back to the guest house in silence. Halle was finding it hard not to reach for Ivy’s hand and Ivy couldn’t take her mind away from how Halle’s body had felt against her.

They lingered in the upstairs hallway, neither of them really wanting the night to end, but they both knew that nothing more could come of the chemistry they had experienced during the day. They clumsily hugged goodnight and retired to their own rooms, wishing they had met under different circumstances.



Halle and Ivy arrived at Andorra's headquarters and were met by Jorge and Mara's second in command, Lucia. After touring the office and manufacturing facilities, they had a late lunch and then retired in Mara's office.

Jorge had an excellent grasp of Mara's business and Lucia seemed eager to help. It was late afternoon by the time all of Halle's questions about the business had been answered. Jorge and Lucia excused themselves, leaving Halle and Ivy alone.

"Halle..." Ivy hesitated only a moment, then continued. "Jorge thought it would be better if I stayed with you while you read the letter that Mara left for you."

"She left a letter for me, specifically?"

"Yes. It has your name on it."

"Is this what the assessor found?"

"Mmm hmm, among other things."

"Why did Jorge think he should leave?"

"I think he thought you would be more comfortable with just me, in case the letter was emotional."

"I see."

Ivy handed Halle an oversized envelope. Halle opened it and pulled out a small white envelope and a larger one with her name hand-written on the front. Ivy handed Halle a letter opener and nodded. "Go ahead."

Halle sliced open the envelope and removed a sheath of blue papers, unfolded them, and began reading aloud.

My dearest Halle,

Please read this letter first, then open the small envelope. It will make more sense once you know what I have to tell you. Thank you.

Now, if you are reading this, then you are about to make a very big decision in your life, perhaps the greatest. I would very much like it if you consented to running Andorra because I am sure that it will thrive under your leadership.

It is now time to tell you what was withheld from you when my lawyers reached out to you for the first time. I also have withheld this information from my entitled nephews. I'm sure they have threatened to sue for control of Andorra. Once this information becomes public, they will not have a claim to my legacy.

I am of Basque descent. The Basque Country is located on the border of Spain and France. Between 1936 and 1939, the Germans and Italians carried out a brutal campaign of bombings that resulted in thousands of airstrikes, causing innumerable casualties among the civilian population. In addition, the occupation of the Basque Country by German troops gave rise to concentration camps, forced labor, imprisonment, and executions.

My parents and other relatives were killed the first year of this offensive. My older sister and I were sent off to a Catholic orphanage in Southern France. We were just babies. She was eighteen months old and I was about three months old. I was adopted by a French family, but I didn't know I was adopted until years later.

When I was just fifteen, I was assaulted and ended up pregnant. My father refused to let me keep the baby boy and turned him over to an international adoption agency that arranged for him to be adopted by a family in the U.S.

When my father died two years later, my mother became so depressed she took to her bed and I had to handle the arrangements. Going through his desk, I found my adoption paperwork. My mother confirmed that I was adopted and told me I had a sister who had also been adopted.

To condense the story, the papers lead me to the orphanage in Southern France, then defunct. Luckily, the Catholic church in the village had kept all of the records. I was able to find my sister, Izar, who had been adopted by a young English couple. By the time I found her, she was married with two little boys. She had a good life and wasn't interested in returning to Spain. I asked her for a loan to

start a business and came back to Barcelona. That's how Andorra had its beginnings.

After I had expanded the business and was earning good money, I searched for my son but the agency that had handled his adoption was no longer in business. So for a while, I put that aside and concentrated on growing the Andorra Group. When my nephews were in their early thirties, my sister passed away. She and her husband had been supporting them because they couldn't hold jobs. I made the mistake of taking them into my business and trying to make productive people out of them.

Trying to get them to do anything worthwhile was futile. They only things they wanted to do was drive fast cars, date the models, and drink. By the time they were in their mid-forties, out of sheer frustration, I banished them from the business. I was tired of running behind them and cleaning up the messes they left. Out of respect for family, I had my attorney set up trust funds that would support them in a moderate fashion for the rest of their lives.

Now, let me regress. I found a man who was considered the best private detective in Europe and he led me to a well-respected investigator in the U.S. Through a stroke of luck, the detective was able to find an immigration record that helped trace my boy to a family in Pennsylvania.

My son was thirty-five years old and had just been married. I did not wish to disrupt his life, and honestly, I was afraid of rejection, so I continued to watch from afar. Two years later, I learned that his wife had given birth to a child.

I reached out to my son via the detective and was told that he did not want to know me. He told the detective that I had given him up and he didn't care about the circumstances. A year later, I made the trip to Pennsylvania to try to explain the circumstances around his adoption. He turned me away, but not before I saw a toddler playing in an adjacent room.

He had a daughter. I couldn't just walk away, so via the detective, I followed her from afar as she grew up. I was proud that she had made something of herself and thought that perhaps she would be more forgiving, maybe even accepting of an old woman. I planned to reach out and see if she might want to meet me.

However, I held off getting in touch with her because I wanted to put things in order, just in case I didn't get the chance to make the trip. When you are eighty-four, every day is a roll of the dice.

By now, I think you know where this is going, Halle. You are my granddaughter. I know this must come as a shock and I hope you can understand why I didn't act sooner. You probably want to know why I didn't want you to know that I was your grandmother when you were first contacted. It's simple. I didn't want you to feel pressured to come because I was your flesh and blood. I wanted you to do it because you felt it was the right move for you.

Now, if you want to sell the business, it is your legacy and you can do what you want. The only things I ask are that you be happy with whatever choices you make and you forgive a foolish old lady.

The letter was signed “*Your grandmother, who has loved you since the day I saw you.*”

Halle reached for the small white envelope, opened it, and pulled out several photos. Most were old and faded, but the people in them were easily recognizable. She thumbed through them, pausing at one of her father and mother walking alongside a pony. Halle, maybe seven or eight, was perched on top of it, clearly delighted with her cowgirl experience. As she looked at more photos, she became overcome with emotion. There were photos of birthday parties, school plays, softball games, graduations, and more. The final photo was of Halle in jeans, a denim shirt, and a

hard hat, reviewing plans on a work site. Halle recognized the site. It was a new project she began less than a year ago.

When she put down the photos, she was weeping. Ivy took her into her arms and held her close, imagining the breadth of emotions Halle must be experiencing.

“How did she get these?” Halle stammered.

“Oh sweetie, I would guess the P.I. she hired took them. We can try to find out if you really need to know.”

Sniffing, Halle, responded, “No, I don’t need to know.”

“What are you feeling? Please tell me so I know how to help.”

“I don’t think anyone can begin to imagine how Mara suffered. I wish she had had the courage to reach out to me sooner. I would have been thrilled to have a living relative, instead of just a legacy.”

As Ivy held Halle, she asked, “Are you angry?”

“No. I’m feeling overwhelmed and deeply sad. If I had known her, my whole life might have been different.”

“What she said in her letter leads me to believe that she wanted you to live your own life, the life that made you happy. I think she wanted you to create your own destiny and not live a life you might have felt obligated to live.”

Halle pulled away from Ivy, put the photos back into the envelope and said, “I think I know what I want to do, but I’d like to think about it a little longer.”



After dinner, Halle and Ivy walked the beach again, arm in arm. Neither of them spoke, both coping with being irresistibly drawn to each other, their connection growing stronger with each passing hour. Despite the powerful chemistry between them, each of them silently agonized over whether acting on their feelings would compromise the trust and integrity of their professional relationship.

Halle was facing the biggest decision of her life, one that could impact hundreds of people in both California and Barcelona. That, layered with the attraction she felt toward Ivy, had sparked a constant internal struggle. She wondered how she could possibly navigate the delicate balance between her heart's desire, her commitment to Andorra, and at the same time, stay true to her own set of ethics. Halle was overwhelmed.

The weight of professional ethics hung heavy in the air making Ivy agonize over her feelings. In her twenty plus years of practicing law, she had never been in this situation. She wondered how to steer through this complex moral terrain. Her emotions and desires added a heightened tension to their interactions.

Ivy began think of ways to circumvent the situation. She rationalized that she wasn't actually Halle's attorney, but she knew that would change the moment Halle signed the paperwork transferring Mara's assets to her, if that is what Halle chose to do. She didn't know how, but she had to temper her desire.

"Halle, we've been walking for quite a while. We should turn back."

"Okay, let's head back."



Once back at the house, Ivy asked Halle if she wanted to take a swim before going to bed. Halle agreed and they met poolside. The lights were dimmed and the water shimmered from the under-water lights. Halle jumped into the water and began swimming laps. A moment later, Ivy walked into the water and sat down on the pool steps. She watched as Halle cut through the water with strong strokes and kicks.

Swimming up to Ivy, Halle asked, "You going to swim or just sit there all night?"

“Mmm, I haven’t made up my mind yet,” chaffed Ivy.

“You do swim, don’t you?” replied Halle.

“I do, but I’m not as strong a swimmer as you are.”

“Come on, I’ll swim next to you, okay?”

Ivy immersed herself in the water and began a slow crawl. Halle swam next to her, noting that Ivy’s form was good. *Very good, indeed*, thought Halle, and she wasn’t thinking about Ivy’s arm strokes. They swam several lengths together until Halle stopped and stood up in the shallow end of the pool.

“Are you finished?” asked Ivy.

“Yes, for tonight. I’m feeling a little waterlogged, but I would like to talk to you about something, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Let’s sit on the steps.” Ivy sat next to Halle. She had a thoughtful expression on her face, her eyes soft and inquiring. She felt a sense of anticipation in her chest, wondering if Halle wanted to talk about what was happening between them. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Halle turned to look at Ivy. She wondered if this was the right time to talk to Ivy about her feelings and began to backtrack. “Umm, I think maybe I’ll wait until tomorrow. All of a sudden I’m feeling tired.”

Ivy decided not to let the moment pass, but she knew if she brought up her feelings, it would be a pivotal moment in their relationship.

“Halle, I don’t know what you wanted to talk about, but I want, no need, to tell you how I am feeling. Would that be all right?”

Halle nodded her head and waited for Ivy to take the lead.

“I might be wrong, and please forgive me if I am, but I think we have been developing feelings for each other.”

Halle felt a mixture of relief and apprehension that Ivy had taken the initiative to open up about their attraction. She didn’t know what to say, but Ivy’s voice was calm and her

touch was reassuring. Together they began to navigate the conversation, their words becoming a delicate dance around the subject of their attraction. Each of them tested the waters, unsure of how to proceed and how much to divulge.

Emotion was flowing between them. They knew they were on the precipice and the only question that remained was whether or not to indulge in their desires. Halle saw Ivy's silent plea for something more. She drew Ivy toward her and leaned in to kiss her, her heart pounding in her chest. Ivy had been feeling a subtle but undeniable connection deepening every hour they spent together since the day they met. Her cheeks were flushed as she struggled to find the right words to express her thoughts in the air now electric with promises.

Halle pulled back, and with a look of forlornness, said, "You know this isn't quite right. No matter how we feel, the timing is wrong. Even if we were to put the ethics aside, the idea of you and me doesn't seem tenable. I mean, I am either going to return to California or maybe come here, and you are going to be in New York. It would be one heck of a commute. I just don't see how this could work."

"I know we don't know each other well, but I want to know you...more than I ever wanted to know anyone. Maybe we only have tonight, but do you want to let that go by the wayside because of geographical complications?"

"I want more than one night in Barcelona with you, Ivy, but I don't see how that can happen."

Ivy didn't want to accept this. It seemed that Halle had put closure to their story, but she wasn't going to give up.

"I know you are feeling what I am...those feelings that seem to grow so big in your chest that it aches. What if we really were meant to happen?"

"My heart aches longing to know you, be with you, touch you. I am so grateful that our paths crossed, but I don't think it is in the cards that they will cross again. I'm sorry Ivy, truly I am."

“Why does it seem that the person you have longed for all your life comes at the wrong time?”

“Maybe I am not that person.”

Anger colored Ivy’s cheeks, “And how do you know that? You won’t even think about staying to find out.” She rose, stared at Halle, said goodnight, and left.

Halle waited until Ivy entered the house before she got out of the pool and dried herself off. Had she just dispatched the woman who only comes around once in a lifetime? She reasoned that it was inevitable, but the pain she felt overwhelmed her and transported her to an entirely different universe, a place where she stored all the grief and losses of her life, always following her around like reflections of a mirror.



With a thread of loneliness running through her, Halle spent the day at Andorra’s headquarters. Ivy had not accompanied her. At the end of the day, Jorge was scheduled to meet with her to see if she was ready to make a decision.

Halle was tempted to accept her grandmother’s legacy. The company had a progressive culture, people seemed to like working there, and the company’s commitment to excellence was unparalleled. In the end, Halle did not have the confidence in herself she would need to take over the reins of Andorra. She rationalized that she knew nothing of the fashion industry, especially the specialized lingerie niche and declined the inheritance.

The next day, the air felt heavy with the weight of the impending farewell with Ivy, who was not returning to the States with her, rather she would take the “bullet train” to Milan to meet with clients of hers. Halle found Ivy outside, sitting under a tree. Its yellow leaves rustled, merging with the ambient sounds of the waves breaking on the beach. Halle took a deep breath, the tepid breeze carrying the scent

of autumn. With a mix of sadness and acceptance, Halle approached Ivy. Ivy looked up, sorrow etched across her face, acknowledging that the time had come for their paths to diverge.

Neither spoke a word, allowing their eyes to meet for a fleeting moment. A bittersweet smile played across Ivy's lips reminding Halle of the beauty that once bloomed between them.

"The car is here, waiting for me," sighed Halle as she sat across Ivy for the last time.

Ivy traced her finger around the rim of her coffee cup, trying to focus her attention on something other than the heartache she was feeling. She let go in a moment of resignation and reached across the table, her hand finding Halle's.

"I remember the first time we met. I knew my world was about to change, but sometimes love is knowing when to let go, even when it hurts. You know I want you to be happy, truly happy, even if it is not with me. If you need anything, well, you know..." Ivy smiled wryly, trying to stave off the tears she felt welling in her eyes.

"I want the same for you, Ivy. Our time together has been beautiful, and I truly wish the circumstances had been different. You are..." Halle's voice cracked and with a lingering touch and gaze that spoke of her aching heart, she kissed her and left.



Four weeks had passed since Halle had returned to her business in California. Immersing herself in new projects, she found solace, and work became a sanctuary where she could momentarily escape the weight of grief she awoke with each morning.

Halle's business partner strolled into her office and was taken aback at the clutter strewn around. "Halle, what's up

with you? Your desk looks like a tornado hit it. You are usually super organized.”

Halle looked around the office. Papers were strewn across every horizontal surface, takeout containers littered her desk, and schematics were rolled up and tossed helter-skelter throughout the room.

“Seriously, Halle, you’ve been hitting the midnight and weekend hours. What are you trying to avoid?”

“Nothing, Stu. Nothing at all.”

“Look, we’ve known each other for years. I know when something is eating you. If you don’t want to tell me, go and talk to someone, because burning the candle at both ends is going to land you in the hospital with a nervous breakdown or compete exhaustion...or both!”

Halle slumped at her desk. She knew that immersing herself in work had become a coping mechanism, a way to channel the emotional turbulence which came from not accepting her grandmother’s legacy and walking away from Ivy. Her regret was like a heavy fog that had descended around her heart. Ivy’s absence had created a void much greater than Halle had imagined. The silence that echoed in her head, laden with the memory of laughter and intimate conversations, could only be silenced with the pouring of her emotions into work. Her job had become her companion, a steadfast ally in the process of trying to rebuild a life fractured by loss.

“All right, Stu. I’ll tell you.”

Stu cleared off one of the visitor chairs and sat quietly waiting for Halle to speak.

“I didn’t explain fully why I went to Spain.”

“Mmm, you just said you had to settle a distant relative’s estate.”

“Yes, that was true, but it wasn’t the whole truth.” Taking a deep breath, Halle recounted her time in Barcelona. When she finished, Stu remained quiet. Halle could tell he was thinking. “What, Stu?”

“Well, partner, maybe you have given up the inheritance, but perhaps you haven’t lost the woman. I’m booking you a flight to New York.”

“No! There is no way it would work!”

“Why not?”

“Are you like most Americans that can’t find New York on a map?” she shot back.

“I’ll have you know I am an ace at geography. What’s your point?”

“She is three thousand frigging miles away!”

“So?” asked Stu defiantly. “Maybe you live in New York for a while and if it is to be, then we’ll work it out. We can get you an office in New York so you can work remotely.” Stu had a smug smile on his face. “Give me a run down of what needs to be done for the next few days, then go home and pack and I don’t want an argument.”



“Hey Jorge, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Has she gotten in touch with you yet?”

“Nope.”

“Not even on a personal level? I could feel the energy between the two of you.”

“No, again. Not a word.”

“And you haven’t reached out?”

“Jorge, she made it perfectly clear that she didn’t think we could be together.” Their goodbye flashed through Ivy’s mind, leaving her melancholy.

“Well, then she’s the one on the losing end. You know how much I adore you!”

“Yes, I remember well. You adored me so much that you were insistent on match making me with your wife’s brother, Diego, who lives in New York.”

Jorge laughed. “Yeah, I was clueless. You had to spell it out for me. Do you remember how that conversation went?”

“How could I forget? I was in Barcelona and we were having dinner. You kept talking about Diego, really doing a sales job until I finally said, “I really prefer the company of women.”

“Mmm, then I said, ‘I like the company of women, but men are ok too.’ You laughed your head off and I had no clue why that was so funny, until you took my hand, leaned in, and said, ‘Jorge, I like the company of men too, sometimes, just not in my bed. I prefer women.’”

“Oh my gosh, the look on your face, Jorge...the confusion was evident. You tilted your head and your gaze was of pure puzzlement. Then, as comprehension dawned, your eyes widened slightly, and it was as if a mental switch had been flipped. It was priceless, my friend.”

Jorge, trying to avoid any more embarrassment, quickly returned the conversation to where it had started. “Do you think we should reach out to her?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“And what about the offer the company made you?”

“Still thinking about it, Jorge.”

“Okay, Ivy, I won’t badger you anymore.”

“Night, mi amigo.”



Halle was on a nonstop flight from San Francisco to New York City, arriving around 5:00 p.m. She was a nervous flyer anyway and the idea of showing up at Ivy’s office without an appointment made her feel like she was in a state of complete chaos. *What if she won’t see me?* Halle would never be described as impetuous, so this was way out of her comfort zone.

With a double dose of Dramamine and a glass of wine, she slept most of the way, giving her mind time to regroup so she wouldn't come completely undone. Once she landed, she took her suitcase and hurried to the taxi stand. She was fortunate to not have to wait in line too long. Traffic into the city was exactly what you would expect during the evening drive time.

The cityscape was a kinetic maze of buses, taxis, and cars jockeying for every available space. Horns blared and echoed in the narrow streets lined with towering buildings. It seemed that her taxi driver was engaged in a perpetual negotiation, switching lanes and squeezing into tight spaces, while dodging pedestrians as they rushed across streets hunkered down under their umbrellas.

Despite the challenges of the evening rush, Halle arrived unscathed at her hotel, the same one she had stayed at when she came to New York to meet Ivy the first time. Once in her room, she felt as some of the weight of the world had been momentarily lifted. Pulling down the bedspread, she threw herself across the bed, willing her muscles and mind to relax.

A while later, she took a shower, further calming the persistent hum of anxiety she had been feeling for two days. Her plan had been to order room service, then sleep, but the shower had invigorated her and she decided to have her dinner at one of the hotel's restaurants.

Halle could have cared less about fashion, but "when in Rome..." so she dressed in a finely tailored suit that exuded confidence and a sense of empowered femininity. The rich navy wool blend, perfect for the changing seasons, added texture and depth to the overall look. Under the jacket she donned a perfectly tailored silk blouse, adding a look of sophistication. She was seated right away, as the dining room was not crowded.

"Have you decided, ma'am?" As Halle looked up from the menu at the server, her gaze was drawn to a man and woman being escorted to a nearby table. She was

overwhelmed with a mixture of astonishment and awkwardness. As the woman and man drew closer, the woman's eyes locked with hers and a moment of surprise registered on her face. The woman quickly spoke to the man then rushed to Halle's table. The initial shared astonishment morphed into a realization that fate had orchestrated this unplanned reunion.

"Halle, what are you doing here?" asked Ivy as she cautiously placed her hand on Halle's shoulder. She had an overwhelming sense that destiny had provided them with a collision of the past and the present.

Standing up, Halle took Ivy's hands in her own, nervous with the uncertainty of the moment. She whispered, "I'm here to see you."

Ivy embraced Halle. They clung to each other, longing to bridge the gap of time and circumstance which had been created between them.

"May I see you later?" Ivy was still holding Halle, reluctant to let her go, though she knew she had to. "I'm sorry, I have this business meeting right now, but afterward, I could stop by your room, if you think that is okay."

Putting her lips near Ivy's ear, Halle whispered, "Yes. Room 612." She kissed Ivy on the cheek and watched her walk off toward the man who had come in with her. Their encounter left her feeling a combination of vulnerability and anticipation.



A knock roused Halle from her reverie. As soon as she opened the door, Ivy embraced her again. "I thought I would never see you again and yet, here you are, right here in my arms."

They gazed into each other's eyes for long moments. A complex interplay of sadness, residual affection, and longing

was wordlessly exchanged. Finally, Ivy asked, “Will you tell me why you came?”

“Yes,” breathed Halle. She directed Ivy to a couch by a window that overlooked the bustling city, streets filled with activity and energy.

Sitting knee to knee and holding hands, Halle said, “I’m not sure what to say. I just missed you so much. I felt so much pain that the only way I could cope was to throw myself into my work. It drown out the non-stop thoughts about the grave mistake I had made, not so much about the inheritance, but about you. The weight of my regret was crushing. My business partner, Stu, who saw how miserable I was, booked me a flight. I had to see if you still wanted to explore what we had experienced between us.”

“Am I hearing that you want to see what one night in New York feels like?” Ivy gently jested. She was trying to diffuse the tension and vulnerability that she knew Halle was experiencing.

Halle smiled and without hesitation answered, “Yes, but not just one night, several nights.”

“I have always been sure we could work that out.”



Above the noise of the city, Halle and Ivy lay next to each other. Ivy’s eyes glistened in the soft light as she looked at Halle. Gently, she cradled Halle’s face, her touch as tender as a whisper. Words were unnecessary. They were content to let their eyes speak for them, louder than any language could.

Ivy leaned over and brushed her lips softly against Halle’s, igniting a feeling of belonging and resonating deeply within their souls. Halle moved closer and rested her head on Ivy’s shoulder, listening to her heartbeat, inhaling the scent of her skin. Ivy held her as if she were a precious

sculpture, running her fingers up and down Halle's back, kissing her endlessly.

They were not in a hurry. The whole night stretched out before them. Immersed in movements guided by an unspoken understanding, they shared infinite moments of tenderness, passion, and complete surrender.

Exploring each other's bodies, they rose and fell to a rhythm that bespoke the beauty of shared intimacy. Each one filling the other with brushstrokes of sublime connection and pleasure, they journeyed into a world of promises of a shared future.



They had slept entwined in each other's arms and awoke with a renewed sense of hope. Talking quietly, Ivy asked Halle what she intended to do with Andorra. Halle seemed confused. "What do you mean? I thought I signed something saying I had given up the inheritance."

"Well, technically you did, but Jorge had instructions not to file it for two months."

"What? The inheritance is still available? Is that what you are saying?"

"Yes. Do you want to go and run the company?"

"Just give me a minute so I can think. I wasn't expecting this."

"I know. It must come as a surprise. Take all the time you want. I'll just kiss you while you make up your mind." Ivy repositioned herself and started kissing Halle's breast.

Halle swatted her away. "How can I think when you are doing that?"

"You're not supposed to think when I am doing that," teased Ivy.

"Ivy, stop! I think I have it!"

Ivy had Halle's nipple in her mouth and without letting go, mumbled, "What do you have?"

"I'm going to accept the inheritance, but I am going to sell the company back to the employees. Lucia is more than capable of running it and I'll sit on the board of directors. I can make periodic visits to Barcelona to oversee the company, at least for a while. Can some of your financial wizards put something together?"

"Of course. We can meet with people in the firm if you can spend a couple of days here. What about the house?"

"Offer it to the nephews. If they don't want it, sell it and put the money into their trust funds. If there are any other assets, you can liquidate them and donate the proceeds to Mara's favorite charities."

"I'm proud of you, Halle. I really am. What an inspired solution."

"Thank you."

"What about us? You said you wanted more than one night."

"I can stay here and work remotely, going back and forth when necessary."

"Nope. You can't do that." Ivy looked down at Halle and said, "I won't allow it," replied Ivy with mock sternness.

Panicked, Halle pushed her off and sat up. "What do you mean? I thought you wanted this."

"I do. Last week, I was offered a new job as 'chief cook and bottle washer' of a new office we are opening."

"And?"

"And, it's in San Francisco, not very far from Santa Rosa. Maybe we don't see each other every day, but driving two hours to spend the weekend together seems doable—geographically, right?"

Halle couldn't contain the joy that flooded her as she absorbed the life-altering news. She was hopping up and down on the bed, the sound of pure delight reverberating through the air.

Ivy, eyes sparkling with joy, watched the woman she had fallen in love with. She hugged Halle tightly, as if

attempting to share the sheer ecstasy that was about to burst from her chest. As she held her close, she said, "Did you ever expect destiny to give you such an unexpected gift?"

"No, but I remember reading somewhere that 'the key to a woman's heart is an unexpected gift at an unexpected time.' I think destiny delivered on both."

THE END

CHESAPEAKE BAY BLUES

The sweltering heat was unstoppable. I thought I would never get used to the crippling humidity even though I had been back for a year. There was something else I would never get used to. I was fifty-four years old and I still couldn't forget her, especially now, being back here on Chesapeake Bay.

My feelings never faded. I just learned to live without her. Don't believe anyone if they tell you that feelings of love fade—not the kind of love that you feel so deeply in every cell of your body that even the wildest emotions you have experienced in the past pale in comparison.

She is not a distant memory, though it has been almost thirty years since I have seen her. I could still feel the fiery emotions from those steamy summer days. I will always remember where it started, the little world we created for ourselves, the place where we said we loved each other for the first time, and regrettably, the day she left.

The memory of our summer together often left me hoping someone would invent a time travel machine so I could go back in time, though for the life of me, I didn't know what I would do differently. She was simply unforgettable.

When I first laid eyes on her, all I saw was a young woman who was just beginning to come into her own. I never dreamt for a moment she would turn my life upside down. Before long, she let me in and I saw all that she was and all that she could be. It was this last part—all that she could be—that would prove to be the blade that severed the cord between us.

She was so smart and wise beyond her years in many ways, but she was also impatient, impetuous, and irritable when met with perceived incompetence. I grounded her, made her think about the consequences of her actions, and in

her earnestness to learn and improve herself, I fell deeply in love.

I was finishing up my dissertation that distant summer and was one step away from a coveted job offer at a university in California. I had it all planned out. Nothing was going to interrupt my march along the career track I had laid out for myself.

I held my feelings back for weeks, but her innocence, emotional intelligence, exuberance, and the manner in which she engaged me, made her irresistible. One dark stormy night I put my fears behind me and laid my heart on the line. There was no way around it, and I tell you now, the magic happened in taking that risk.

And now I was back on the East Coast after working and living in the heart of Northern California's dynamic "Silicon Valley." I did get that job I coveted three decades ago and was perfectly happy until two former students of mine, who had founded a tech start-up, promised me an unprecedented future and financial security. It was enough to lure me away. I got to apply my degree and experience in a company that catered to a data-hungry society. Even today, my former employer has sustained a double-digit year-over-year growth rate.

Now semi-retired, I was teaching applied psychology, which is the study and ability to solve problems within human behavior, to the next generation of movers and shakers at Georgetown University. Being back on a college campus had deepened old wounds. I caught myself looking everywhere and hoping I would see her rounding a corner of a building, but I knew that was impossible. We had tried to stay in contact for a while after she left, but it was too painful for the both of us. The aching drained us; I was wishing for something that couldn't happen and she, was agonizing over something she couldn't give me.

There were times I saw young women who looked like

she did thirty years ago and each time my heart would break again. It was like a knife thrusting powerfully through my bruised heart, plunging it into shock each time. It was like experiencing over and over the exact moment my heart was broken the day she left.

I don't know how many times I told myself that I had to let it go, but try as I might, the knife dragged over my skin for years, pressing even more when I tried to date other women. I understand it when people who have been destroyed by a breakup tell me that their heart is left fragile with cracks and pieces missing.

It is true that the heart tries to heal as time passes. But the holes in the heart start to fill only because the heart knows it cannot continue to suffer the torment. I let mine fill with steel, and while that gave me some protection and allowed me to live without her, no amount of it, heavy as it is, ever tamped out her memory or the deep love I felt. Some would say that I was pathetic. Others would say that a broken heart is the most beautiful thing on earth. Truthfully, I've never understood that particular perspective.

It's ironic though. My shattered heart gave me the ability to relate to people heart to heart. I worked at turning the ache into compassion, kindness, and empathy. I knew what pain was and I could see it in others. Throughout my years in working in education and the tech industry, I offered countless people understanding, feelings of empowerment and inspiration, and in doing so, every day was a small step until I was ready to stop waiting for something that would never come.



As I sat correcting final exams from the first summer school semester, my mind wandered to a summer long ago. She and I were walking down a tree-lined path near the bay's water one evening. Arms entwined, we were quiet, simply

listening to the sounds of nature; the chittering of the squirrels jumping from branch to branch, the pure liquid whistling tones of the orioles as they sang duets with their mates, and the yipping of the coyotes calling their yearlings to the den.

She pulled me closer and pointed to a marshy area on the side of the path. There in the sky was a Great Blue Heron, cruising over the edge of the marsh with slow, deep wing beats and stick-like legs dangling behind. We watched it glide gracefully over the cattails and land silently in shallow water. It stood motionless as it scanned for prey. We too remained immobile, not wanting to disturb the splendor of moment, being so close to such magnificence.

It was that moment when I felt everything fall into place. I wasn't giddy, but I knew I was falling in love—hard. I craved her; the quirkiness, the playful teasing, the way she made me laugh, and the simplest exchange of glances. Her exuberance pulled me out of my reserved nature.

She touched my chin and turned my head toward her. I felt vulnerable as she looked into my eyes with openness and trust. I couldn't say it. We both let the moment pass, too afraid to give words to our feelings.



I followed her career, but quietly. I did not reach out to her. I tried to convince myself that it was destiny that separated us; that fate had taken the reins of our lives. But truthfully, I didn't pursue a reconnection because I was afraid of rejection. After all, she knew how to find me and if she wanted me, she knew where to look. Unlike the devastation I felt when she left, this was a different kind of torture.

The words "I love you" reverberated in my head. I know what I meant when I said them, but did she mean the same thing? Those three little words carried a lot of weight for me

and brought me closer to her, but perhaps my proclamation of love scared her away. I'll never know, and I don't want to risk finding out. It was better to be in love with a memory than to have that memory desecrated. Cowardly, right?



I finished correcting the last student final, then pulled out an old-fashioned photo album—no digital albums thirty years ago. Opening the book, I caught myself experiencing a host of different reactions. There were photos of my parents from the early days as well as ones from a few years ago. I loved my parents and when I looked at those pictures of them holding me as a baby, they always flooded me with love and gratitude. Never was I spoiled, but being an only child did have some advantages, like having a car when I got my license, not having to take out back-breaking student loans to go to school, and other material things that now meant so little.

Thumbing through photos of my undergraduate years, I felt an undercurrent of anger. Societal climate precluded any real freedom for me. I had a few clandestine affairs with women, but always under the threat of discovery and expulsion from the university. I knew what it felt like to have to compromise my integrity for moments of affection. When I looked back, I felt antagonism not only for society, but also for myself. I was unable to experience my authentic being for many, many years.

I shook off the feeling and knew when I turned the page I would be inundated with feelings of love and loss, but I did it anyway. There we were, sitting on the dock, fishing for Speckled Trout late one afternoon. A neighbor had come over and snapped a few photos for us.

We were happy, perfectly comfortable in each other's orbit. Even when we were apart, we could feel each other. Now, I swear I could feel the love radiating from the

snapshot. At that point, we were not yet making love, nor had we even kissed, but there was an aura of inexplicable intimacy that was evident in the photo. Being with her was the first time in my life that I experienced being my true self without any restraint.

Then there was a photo taken a week before she left. Though she was smiling at me, I could still see the sadness in her eyes. I had really thought that we were so in sync with a common purpose. We were here to make a difference in the world and our skills complemented each other. We both did that—made a difference in the world, but I always thought we would do it together. I think everyone's destiny is to fulfill those things that speak to them most intently. That's what she did, perhaps not knowing how her choice would affect my destiny for years.



It was late and I decided to call it quits for the night until my phone rang. A cheery voice said, "Tess, I have someone I want you to meet."

"Why are you calling me so late, Jen?" I wasn't annoyed, but curious why my friend who usually was in bed and snoring away by 10:00 p.m. next to her indulgent wife was calling me near midnight.

"I just got home from that book club I was telling you about and there was this new woman. I think you might hit it off with her." Jen was out of breath, more excited than I was to hear her latest attempt to match-make me.

"Jen, I told you to stop doing that. I'm too old to change my ways. I'm used to my solitude."

"Please, Tess. Just this once and then I'll quit. I swear," promised Jen.

"Okay, Jen. Tell me what she's like."

For ten minutes Jen gave me her best sales pitch and I reluctantly agreed to meet the woman, if only to get Jen off

my back. Over the years, I had tried dating, even had a few liaisons, but I never clicked with anyone the way I had with Evan. I suppose it was unfair to compare every new prospect with what we had that summer. I went to bed fearing the “meet cute” that Jen was going to arrange.



The weekend came too fast and I was dreading my date tonight. Jen had arranged for us to meet at Luigi's Bistro in the city for a drink, and depending on how that went, dinner. I seriously considered bailing, but I knew that Jen's disapproval and subsequent haranguing would be far worse than a couple hours with the “new woman.” Busying myself with writing lectures for next week, my rising anxiety quieted.

Before I knew it, it was time to get dressed for this date I didn't want. I had no idea what to wear. Luigi's dress code was “anything goes” as long as shoes were part of one's outfit. Jen told me that Parker was dressed casually the night she met her, but maybe that was just for the book club. After trying on three outfits, I settled on a pair of dark tailored slacks and a red silk blouse. She should be able to find me easily I thought, as I added a gold chain and pendant.

It was early when I arrived. Luigi's was still quiet, but in another hour, it would be banging with the after-work Friday night crowd. Sitting at the bar I ordered a glass of red wine. I had taken a few nervous sips and just put the glass down when I felt a light touch on my shoulder.

“Might you be Dr. Madison?”

I turned, took her in the best I could in just a few seconds before I answered yes, shook her hand, and told her to call me by my first name. As she settled herself on the bar stool next to me, I realized she was quite a bit younger than I. Guessing she was in her early forties, I wondered what Jen was thinking. Willing myself to relax, I began asking polite

questions all the while appreciating her lithe body with curves in all the right places. She was the kind of woman who could wear a flannel shirt and not have it look like she had pilfered it from her dad's closet. She was sexy...no doubt about that. I wondered what she thought of my older and heavier body.

Parker's profession was fascinating. She created and restored large installations of stained glass all over the world. She told me she had worked on restorations in Rome, Barcelona, and Amsterdam, as well as creating original pieces for buildings across the country in her studio. I was impressed and drinks turned into dinner, dessert, and more drinks.

She walked me to my car, made sure I was okay to drive, kissed me, and asked to see me again. Flushed with the unexpected kiss, I said yes.



Dating Parker wasn't difficult. She had this confidence about her that drew people in and I was no exception. I found myself looking forward to spending time with her, and not just to break up the monotony of my life, but I was genuinely growing fond of her. She had been respectful and easygoing, but the best part was that she wasn't intimidated by me. Lots of people think we psychologists are constantly analyzing them and it is off-putting, especially to those who hide behind carefully crafted masks.

I was driving to her house tonight. It was our fourth date. She said she liked to cook but didn't do it often just for herself. The prospect of a home cooked meal and a tour of her studio was inviting.

Her studio work was exquisite as was her seafood risotto and tiramisu dessert. After cleaning up, she took my hand and said, "I want to show you something." Unquestioningly, I let her lead me into her bedroom. She sat me down at the

foot of the bed and walked to a set of closed draperies hanging in soft folds. I caught my breath when she opened them and the light from the setting sun poured in.

I was speechless. Parker had showed me several works in progress in her studio, but this was different. With the light of the setting sun streaming through, it was stunning. The glass seemed multi-dimensional as it fractured the rays into hundreds of beams. She had explained when we were in her studio that she embedded minute particles of different minerals or metallic salts into the glass. It is these particles that give the refracted light its different colors. The room was filled with hues of sapphire. It was almost overwhelming.

I rose from the bed and walked toward the floor-to-ceiling art form. Standing there, I marveled at the use of light and color to depict a stunning geometric pattern. It was magical, or at the least, dazzling. Parker came up behind me and put her arms around me. I leaned into her, rested my head on her shoulder, and soaked in the dozen different hues of ethereal blue light. We stood there for a while, my imagination reaching into the heavenly atmospheres.

Turning me in her arms she said, "I want to sleep with you tonight."

Earlier, it had crossed my mind that the invitation to dinner at her house may have come with an implied invitation for physical intimacy. However, she hadn't been pushy in previous dates, so I discounted it. Now, I froze for a moment, finally saying, "I'm not sure I remember what to do. It's been a long time."

I met Parker's gaze as she held me loosely. Mentally I tried to list the pros and cons of spending the night with her. I wasn't in love. I wasn't even sure I could fall in love. In the end I decided that the only course of action was to be completely honest.

"Parker, I don't think that this is a good idea."

"Why not?"

I sighed and took a deep breath. "I don't find it easy to have casual sex. I'm not saying that I haven't done it, but at this stage in my life, I want to have an emotional involvement first, and I don't think we are there yet."

"Look, we've made out and it seemed like you were into it. You are so very smart, charming, and lovely. I want to see how it will be with you. However, if you don't want to, then I'm not going to beg you."

I stepped back from her, thought a moment, and against my better judgement, decided to stay. Maybe she was right. I had to admit she was physically appealing. She exuded a wanton sexuality that piqued my physical senses. I began unbuttoning my blouse while I wondered where my courage was coming from.

With my blouse hanging open, Parker pulled me to her and ran the back of her fingers lightly against my face before her thumb skimmed over my lips. She leaned in and firmly pressed her lips to mine. I felt faint and slightly nauseous as we kissed. I still wasn't sure I could go through with it. The idea of what was to come was overwhelming.

Parker slowly pulled away from me and began unbuttoning the cuffs on my blouse. She hurriedly pushed the blouse off my shoulders and down my arms, letting it fall to the floor. I stood there nervously.

Impatiently, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"I'm just nervous," I replied as I watched her take off her polo shirt. She found my lips again and kissed me over and over, each contact longer than the last. As Parker plundered my mouth with her tongue, she reached behind me and undid the hooks on my bra, quickly pulling it off from me. She caressed my back, kissed my neck, and moved her hands down to cup my breasts. She placed a small kiss to my cleavage, straightened up and removed her bra. Being half-naked, I felt exposed, but when she pressed up against me, the feel of her breasts against mine gave me goose bumps as I felt her nipples get hard and tight. Even though I did not

have an emotional attachment, my body was responding. There was no denying that I was a breast woman.

Pulling back, I touched her nipples, rubbing them gently between my thumb and forefinger. Parker gasped, arched into me, and took my head in her hands, bringing it to her breast. She firmly held me there, encouraging me to give her the attention she wanted. I tried to tamp down the rising feeling that this wasn't what I wanted to do, but a cascade of physical sensations washed over me as I heard and felt her reactions to my tongue.

Minutes later she began caressing my backside through my clothes until I felt her hands unbuttoning my slacks and pushing them down over my hips. She steadied me as I stepped out of them. Parker grabbed me roughly and kissed me deeply as she squeezed my buttocks.

I was woozy as she slipped her hands inside my panties and continued caressing my bare skin, teasingly dragging a finger down the cleft between my buttocks. She repeated this taboo gesture going lower and lower until her finger glided further down. I gasped and immediately pulled back giving myself a moment to recover from the intensity of physical reactions I was experiencing.

She seemed annoyed that I had stopped her and pulled away from me. In a moment she began unbuckling the belt on her jeans and hastily popping the snap open. I heard the rasping sound of the zipper as she dragged it down. She pulled her jeans and underwear off at the same time.

In between kisses and caresses, she removed the last wisp of my clothing. A moment later, she ripped off the comforter and top sheet on the bed, pushed me down, and got on top of me. Parker surged over me, seemingly wanting to touch everywhere, even in places I did not want to be touched. Her caresses became more and more aggressive, and I was about to slow things down when her fingers ventured between my legs. She found my opening and began rubbing there, teasing for a moment. Then, without warning,

Parker thrust her tongue into my mouth and at the same time plunged inside of me.

I was battling with my emotions, or more accurately, the lack of emotional attachment. I knew one didn't have to be in love to have sex, even good sex, but my mind was clouded. Parker increased her efforts, her thumb rubbing against me, and in a short while, the physical sensations were too much to ignore and she pushed me over the edge.

As the convulsions subsided, tears rolled down my cheeks. Parker, sprawled out next to me, asked why I was crying. How could I tell her the truth? I choked out that it was just a release after so long. Her response was cold and uncaring. "Well, I hope you can get your emotions under control soon so you can return the favor."



When I awoke, she was gone from the bed. I planned to tell her that I didn't think I was comfortable continuing to see her. I needed a deeper connection, but I didn't get the chance. After a quick shower, I dressed and made my way toward the smell of coffee. She asked me to sit, then placed a cup of coffee in front of me.

As she sat, she said, "Tess, there is something I have to tell you."

Warily, I replied, "Okay. What is it?"

"The day before yesterday, I got an email from the Cathedral of Saint-Pierre and Saint Paul in France. They have hired me to restore a section of stained glass made in the 16th century. I have to leave in a week and I'll be gone for months."

My head was spinning. She knew this and hadn't told me before taking me to her bed. Memories of the brilliant blue light coming through the stained glass in her bedroom was replaced by a dirty window, where hardly any light

shone through. All I could manage to say was, “Why didn’t you tell me last night?”

Not unkindly, she replied, “Do you want the truth?”

“Of course I do,” I responded, not at all sure I really wanted to hear her version of the truth.

“I knew you were the kind of person who didn’t bed hop. Jen told me, but I wanted to be with you and didn’t think you would stay if I told you I was leaving. I thought that if we had a real physical connection, I would ask you to come with me, or at least visit me while I was in France.”

Her answer did not come as a complete shock, none the less, I felt used. I couldn’t reconcile the beauty she was capable of creating with the callousness of her actions. Wrestling with whether I should express my feelings toward her for not telling me beforehand, I chose not to. It was my own stupidity that had got me into this situation. I should have listened to my gut.

All I said was, “You are a very talented artisan and I hope all goes well for you.”

I got up, walked to the foyer, grabbed my keys from the console table, and walked out.



“Thanks for meeting me so early, Jen. I hope Hildy will forgive me for taking you away from your usual Sunday morning jaunt to the farmers’ market.”

“You know that’s not my favorite activity. I yearn for winter,” she snickered. “I just do it to keep the peace. She’ll get over it. Now what’s going on?”

After I recounted what happened with Parker Friday night and the next morning, Jen looked stunned. It took her a moment to speak.

“Oh Tess, it’s unbelievable. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I am now.”

There was a long silence between the two of us. She twiddled her teacup while I lightly drummed my fingers on the table.

“Tess, may I ask a question?” She was hesitant.

“Of course you can, but don’t be brutal,” I teased.

Jen is one of the sweetest and gentlest people I know. I knew my comment would elicit a long eye roll.

“Okay, now you’re in for it,” she scoffed.

“Ask away, Sweetness,” I countered good-naturedly.

Her look was intense, so intense that time stopped in my head. I had no idea how long I had waited for her to speak, but when she did, what she said rankled me.

“Why don’t you call her?”

“Why would I call Parker?” I said indignantly. “Did you not hear anything I told you?” I couldn’t believe that Jen hadn’t digested what I shared.

She smiled indulgently, took both my hands in hers, and replied, “Not Parker...the one you love.”

My jaw slackened and my eyes widened in disbelief. I felt like an unexpected clap of thunder reverberated in my head, leaving me momentarily stunned. Jen knew about Evan. I finally had confessed my feelings when she asked me why I kept resisting being set up with candidates for my lack-luster love life. As a result of sharing this confidence, I had endured many of her lectures: “Stop comparing women, let go of the past, and stop blaming destiny for your broken heart.”

Meekly I answered, “I wouldn’t even know how to contact her.”

“Right. You, who were part of the executive leadership team for years at the most popular search engine company in the world, can’t figure out how to find her? Baloney, Tess.”

“Fine, even if I did find out where she was, what is that going to accomplish?” I knew I was going to lose this argument, but I plugged on anyway. “What would I even say?”

“You’d tell her that even after all these years you still think of her.”

“And then what?”

“And then you let your heart lead. What if she’s been feeling the same all these years? Don’t you think you deserve to know one way or another?”

“I’ll think about it,” I offered in the spirit of trying to shut Jen down.

“Look, girlfriend, I know you and I know you are trying to weasel out of this conversation. I’ll let you, if you promise me you will seriously consider reaching out to her.”

“Okay, I’ll give it serious consideration.”

“Really? You don’t have your fingers crossed under the table?” she laughed.

“Really. I promise serious and in-depth consideration starting as soon as I get to my parent’s house on the bay. I’m leaving in a couple of days. I’ll call you when I get settled and maybe you and Hildy can come down for a weekend or two.”



I had been at my parent’s summer home on Chesapeake Bay for almost five weeks. They had decided to spend the summer in Canada with friends of theirs who had recently moved to Calgary.

For a long time, I had stayed away from the place Evan and I fell in love. It was just too painful and gave me the blues for weeks after every time I had gone to visit my parents. Now being here, drinking in the summertime salt air, walking along the clusters of brightly blooming wildflowers, and sitting on the dock, dangling my feet into the cool water, proved to be good for my soul.

It also made me think about those times in my life that were bittersweet, and not just with Evan. This place, the blue house on Chesapeake Bay, brought to the surface emotions

I experienced through the years. Now they felt sharper, stronger, and tugged at my heart in a strange and uncomfortable way. It was a challenge to sift through the multiple layers in spite of the familiarity of it all. I don't know what forces were at work within me, but I was able to embrace the concept that life is a quirky balance between pain and pleasure. Often times, destiny was like a swinging pendulum, alternating between the good and the not-so-good.

It was my last morning here for a while. I had buzzed around yesterday, getting ready to head back for the fall semester that started next week. This week would be full of department meetings and other bloviating activities that ate up time and gave very little in return.

Standing at my car, I looked back at the blue, unassuming house sitting on the edge of the azure bay. Before getting into the car, I patted my back pocket to confirm it was still there.

Last night, as the loons' haunting calls drifted over the bay, I wrote to her. I knew she had left Italy, but I didn't know where she had gone after coming back to the States. I was resolute to send it once I had an address. No longer was I conflicted. I loved her; I was still in love with her, and I wanted to know if she loved me. Either way, I would finally be able to release the pain of loss.



It was the end of the day and I was walking back to the faculty parking lot on my way to meet Jen and Hildy for a cocktail. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the sun was still roasting the landscape late in the August afternoon. I felt a prickle at the back of my neck and rubbed it with my free hand, wondering if I had pinched a nerve. A momentary rush of butterflies stormed my stomach. I glanced ahead of me and to the sides but didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

The intense rays of the sun blocked the view behind me. I shrugged my shoulders and continued to my car.

As I started the engine, I had a fleeting thought. Were the prickles and the butterflies because I sensed she was near? I shook my head and told myself I was silly—no, more like pathetic—for indulging in an impossible scenario. I left the lot, headed for Clydes in the heart of Georgetown, and found myself stopped at a traffic light on M Street next to the river.

I happened to look up through the windshield and caught sight of a large bird. I instantly recognized it as a Great Blue Heron that most likely made its home on the Potomac River. Its slow wingbeats, its dangling feet, and its unsurpassed grace reminded me of the one Evan and I had seen years ago on the Bay.

It's true that many people believe in fate, but over the years I came to believe that we create our own destiny. Choices we make shape our lives, sometimes bringing great joy or years of regret. I had experienced both and I wondered as I watched the Heron, if I had a chance, would I be brave enough to write a new ending to our story.

Moments later, I caught myself whispering to the ethers, “Where are you, Evan?”

THE END...perhaps not

SUMMER HEAT

It had been a hot, humid May on Chesapeake Bay. The impending storm teased a respite to the cloying summer heat. As I opened the glass door from the second-floor master suite to the balcony, a bolt of lightning splintered through the atmosphere. Heavy rain clouds across the bay painted a dreary scene. The distant rumbling seemed to be playing a gloomy symphony in concert with the choppy waves as they slapped against the rocky shore.

I had been waxing melancholy for days. Perhaps it was my fiftieth birthday, which was looming large. Oh, don't get me wrong. I had had a wonderful life and exciting career as a foreign service officer, living all over the world. Retired now, I lectured part time at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

Maybe fifty is when people look back and begin to wonder if they really accomplished anything of note. I guess I was no different. Observing the churning water below, I looked back, starting three decades ago when I had been accepted to a post graduate summer program at the International School of Diplomacy in Maryland.

This was a pretty big accomplishment for a small-town hick from Idaho. No, really. It was. Imagine a naïve girl who had never been out of her ultra conservative town wanting to travel the world. My parents were flummoxed, and that is putting it mildly, but since I had been granted an all-expense paid ride, they finally relented and packed a bible in my luggage to ward off the evils of the big city liberals.

I was barely nineteen when I touched down at the Reagan Washington Airport mid-May thirty years ago. I had skipped two grades, not because I was super smart—I was, but rather the nuns at Sacred Heart Catholic School couldn't wait to get me out of their orbit. They were tired of my endless theological questions and debates and well, I never was one to just accept a "because I told you so."

Taking a deep breath as I left the arrival gate, I was grateful to be on solid ground. Moments later I was swept up into the late Friday night horde of travelers scampering to make it home to loved ones or to the closest bar.



A blue bolt of lightning pulled me from my thoughts. I took a generous sip of wine, shook my head in amusement at how totally unprepared I had been for that summer. It was a summer of firsts, starting with my first flight ever. Flying over a tornado ravaged Oklahoma gave me my first experience of severe turbulence. Fortunately, the school had arranged transportation which was waiting for me. I was whisked me away from the frantic energy that had unsettled my nerves and stomach.

I was deposited in front of a medium rise building that looked dark. I asked the driver if he was sure this was the right place. He nodded impatiently and yanked my luggage from the trunk, plopping it down on the sidewalk. The heat and humidity were suffocating. I wasn't used to it and quickly offered a prayer in hopes of an air-conditioned building. Dragging my suitcases to the door, I was surprised when it swung open.

"You must be Evan. Come in. I can only imagine how tired you are," she said with brightness in her voice.

Yes, I was tired and yes, my stomach was still roily from the airplane turbulence, but that wasn't what kept me from being able to utter more than a simple "thank you."

Standing framed in the open doorway, stood the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. I was so taken with her, that I forgot my manners until she smiled, introduced herself and reached for one of my suitcases.

"Come with me. I'll get you settled in your room."

I nodded and dutifully followed her to a bank of elevators. The view from behind was exquisite. Her long,

tanned legs made my mouth go dry and the heart flutters I experienced, were my first ever—just two more things to add to my list of firsts.



The storm continued to brew. I could hear my neighbor's wind chimes dancing to a furious fugue. The thunderclaps grew closer and the giant sparks of electricity amassing between the clouds morphed into jagged strikes of lightning rivaled only by 4th of July fireworks.

I flicked my wrist and noted it was a little after 8:00 p.m. My wine glass was empty, and though I wasn't much of a drinker, I went inside and poured a splash more. I had intended to stay in, but something compelled me to go back outside. The storm reminded me of her. *What if? Why couldn't I have been braver? Would my life have been different? Was it destiny that took hold of me or was it just my stubbornness?*

Many people would have killed to have had the experiences I did. My career was plenty exciting. After getting my ticket punched in several grunt jobs across the globe, I served as liaison with what was called the Cultural Attaché Department in our Jordan Embassy. We all know that was a not-so-secret cipher for CIA. However, there was where I learned that the CIA had an alternative spelling—'CYA' — for Cover Your Ass.

Because I spoke some Arabic, I also served in Embassies in Bahrain, The United Arab Emirates, and Tunisia...all countries considered to be the most progressive in terms of gender equality at the time. You'd never know that now. Things had changed and they were now bastions of misogyny.

Finally, I served as ambassador to Italy for four years. My paternal grandparents were from Rome, so I learned

Italian as I was growing up. I think it was my mother and grandparents who passed along the wanderlust genes!

I liked to think that working in concert with Gabriella Rossi, the first female Prime Minister of Italy, I had played a part in crafting legislation for same-sex unions that passed in 2016, one year after gay marriage became the law of the land in the U.S. You wonder how a closeted ambassador had any input into an Italian law that provided legal protections for same-sex couples? Suffice to say, for a time, I was very, very close to Gabriella. However, a few years later when political factions shifted toward the ultra-conservative in Italy, I decided to retire.



I awoke in a blessedly cool dorm room that was to be my home for the next three months. I showered, dressed, and was about to open the packet Ms. Madison had left on my desk the night before, when there was a knock on my door. After looking through the peephole, I quickly swung the door open. *How is it possible she can be more beautiful than last night?* I willed myself to say, “Good morning. What’s up?”

“I thought I would stop by and see how your first night went. You and one other fellow are the only ones who have arrived so far. The rest of your classmates won’t be getting in until tomorrow, so I have some time to spend orienting you and Gary.”

“Thank you, Ms. Madison. I appreciate it.”

“Evan, you can call me Tess, okay?”

“Umm, yes, of course. Thank you.”

Tess made herself comfortable on the side of my bed while I stood near the desk, nervously fidgeting with my grandmother’s ring I wore on my right hand. She crossed her tan legs and swept her long dark hair behind her neck then over one shoulder before she spoke.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but isn’t Evan typically a boy’s name?”

God, I had gotten that question at least a thousand times in my short-lived life, but for some reason, I wasn’t annoyed with her. Nope, she could ask me anything.

“My mother was sure she was having a girl and wanted to name me Yvonne. My father was positive they were having a boy, so he was stuck on Evan. When it came time to fill out the form for the official birth record, he wrestled it from the nurse and filled in Evan Amelia Cardinale.”

“Uh, didn’t your mother object?” asked Tess.

“My grandmother told me that after much ‘discussion,’ which I am pretty sure was code for heated arguing, she acquiesced only when my father promised to let her name the next child.”

“And did she?”

“Oh yes! Three years after I was born, my little brother made an appearance. She named him Samir, an Arabic name, telling us it was after some relative she had in Jordan. She loved watching my father have conniptions each time she called my brother ‘her little Samir.’

“She kept this up for a year until she decided that my father had paid enough penance and showed him the birth certificate. Baby boy was named Sammy Peter Cardinale, after my father, Peter. Believe me, Tess, I never ever crossed my mother.” I laughed and began to relax.

“So, Evan, I noticed in reviewing your dossier...”

I interrupted and said, “Wait! I have a dossier?”

“Yes, yes you do. You were investigated by the Secret Service.”

“What?” I sputtered in complete surprise.

“Oh yes, but don’t worry, they didn’t find any secrets,” she joked. “It was mostly because your mother was a Jordanian national.”

“Are you kidding me? She’s a U.S. citizen. True she was born in Jordan, but her parents settled here when she was six,

and,” I noted with more than a bit of indignation, “she has top clearance from the National Labs in Idaho Falls. She’s an alternative energy scientist.”

“I know, Evan, but here’s a suggestion. If you are going to work in the Diplomatic Corp, you’ve got to get used to protocol and getting your ticket punched.”

I harrumphed a bit and she let me settle before continuing.

“I saw that you are only nineteen. Most of the participants in this program are twenty-two or older. How come you are so young?”

“Because I drove the nuns nuts in middle school.”

Tess cocked her head. Her cobalt blue eyes sparkled. Chuckling, she asked, “Were you some kind of rogue Catholic?”

“Mmm, yeah, I suppose you could say that. I’m pretty logical and I just couldn’t swallow the religious hocus pocus. I mean, Tess, how could anyone believe that the Catholic religion was the only true religion when there are over four thousand two hundred religions in the world? And those are only the ones we know about!”

Her laugh was melodic, and it made me feel good that I could elicit that kind of reaction from her, but not as good as when she quipped, “You are a girl after my own heart. I’m going to have to keep my eye on you.”



I had been out on the balcony about thirty minutes and not a drop of rain had yet fallen. Most summer days, I am in love with every dazzling hue and sound...the cornflower blue sky spattered with ultra-white clouds casting shadows over the grass, the blue jays with their whistles, clicks, and jeers, and the gentle lapping of the water as it comes home to the shore.

Tonight, watching the storm clouds, I admired the sepia colors swirling, fighting for a place in the sky. I was built for the fight, but realized it too late. *Why didn't I fight for her?*



The elevator doors opened to a room full of chairs, couches, and tables. Beyond, was a small cafeteria. Standing just inside the cafeteria was a goofy-looking guy well over six feet tall, tipping the scales at three hundred pounds. His eyes darted nervously between Tess and me. He was in desperate need of a haircut and his Foo Manchu mustache made it seem as if he were frowning. I presumed this mountain of a man to be Gary.

Standing next to him as Tess introduced us, I suppressed a giggle thinking we must look like “Mutt and Jeff,” definitely a pair of mismatched humans. I was only five feet three inches tall and tended toward the slim side.

Gary was from Alaska. He too had spent all of his life in one place. Over breakfast, we learned that Tess was twenty-seven years old and a doctoral candidate finishing up her dissertation. When Gary asked in what field, she hesitated before saying, “Clinical Psychology.”

“So, you’re more than the resident director here. You’re the in-house shrink,” accused Gary, “and I suppose we’re your guinea pigs.” He crossed his arms and sat back defiantly. He didn’t seem to be joking, but then I didn’t know him. I could see Tess measuring her words before she spoke, so I chimed in with hopes of breaking the tension.

“Hey Tess, you can analyze me all you want, on one condition.”

This got Gary’s attention as well as Tess’. Tongue in cheek she replied, “And just what is this condition?” Her smile was dazzling.

“That whatever you break, you have to fix.” All three of us laughed and got through breakfast amiably.

On my way back to my room to don my running gear, I thought about a saying that my father had applied to his plumbing business. He used to spout, "Doesn't expecting the unexpected make the unexpected expected?" I know, it was dizzying, but I had a feeling that I was going to get an advanced course in the unexpected this summer.



The stifling humidity and heat were killing me. I was used to the weather in Idaho. Summers were dry and the temperature rarely exceeded ninety degrees. Normally I could easily run a couple of hours, but after forty minutes I was drenched and decided to head back to my room. Nearing the dorm, I heard an insistent horn. Turning to look who was making all the ruckus, I saw Tess in a red Honda Accord. She pulled over, rolled down her window, and asked if I wanted to go on an adventure this afternoon.

"Just the two of us?" I asked hopefully.

"Gary is coming with us too."

"Where are we headed?" I tried to hide my disappointment.

"You are just going to have to trust me," she replied with a big grin that knocked my socks off.

"Okay. Let me get a quick shower, and I'll be down. Do I need anything?"

"Yes. A swimsuit and towel."

I liked the sound of that. I definitely wouldn't mind seeing her in a swimsuit.



The run had sapped my energy, so I curled up in the back seat of Tess' car and snoozed until an hour later, when we pulled up to a huge gate that said, "Oyster Harbor: Private Community." After showing something to the guard, Tess

drove down a winding tree-lined road and in a few minutes, pulled into a driveway behind a blue house.

"Here we are," she announced.

"And where is here?" asked Gary with trepidation.

"This is my parent's summer place. We're not too far from Annapolis. They usually come out on weekends, but they are in Europe this summer, so it's all mine. Gary, can you get the groceries from the trunk, please?"

He nodded, but I could tell he didn't like being thought of as an errand boy. Too bad. I had my fill of white-boy entitlement while running on my high school's cross-country team. There had only been a boys' team, so I ran and competed with them. I was used to their sullenness when I beat them. I grabbed my backpack and hurried to catch up with Tess.

"What's up with him? Why is he so moody?"

She unlocked the back door, took my arm, and pulled me in. "Could it be possible that he is afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Failing, Evan. Failing."

"At what?" I earnestly asked, eager to understand.

"At whatever he is trying to prove, honey."

Yikes! She called me honey. I mean, I knew she didn't mean anything by it, but still...thoughts of rubbing sunscreen on her back had my heart pounding.

"Evan, haven't you been afraid of failing?"

"Hey, Dr. Tess, no analyzing at the bay!" I laughed and hightailed it toward the front of the house in hopes of sidestepping any more questions, but off and on the rest of the afternoon, I thought about what she had asked and had to admit I was afraid of failing at one thing— love.



The six-week semester was over in a snap, but then time flies when you're trying to change the world, or at least I

thought that was what I might do with my chosen career. I was attending the last lecture of the semester before exams. It was dull. I thought the professor was rigid and vapid, offering nothing stimulating or challenging. Her lecture on “Big Stick” diplomacy burned my butt and I was shaking my head when she must have seen me and made me stand up in front of the class.

“Listen young lady, if you don’t think that negotiation supported by the threat of a powerful military with nuclear weapons has a place in the Diplomatic Corps, then I suggest you pack your things and get the hell out of here now.”

I knew I should just take my lumps and leave things alone, but I couldn’t. In my youthful arrogance, I replied, “With all due respect, Professor, I think that Dollar Diplomacy is much more effective. Don’t you think using economic power has been much more successful post World War II?”

“Lucky for you, Ms. Cardinale, we don’t have time to pursue your naïve assumptions right now. You had better put in some study hours for your final tomorrow because I will be sure and pay very close attention to yours.”

Okay, it was time for me to retreat. As I was leaving the lecture hall, an arm looped through mine and a familiar voice whispered, “Come with me, now.”

I loved how she looped her arm through mine. It was intimate and I craved the closeness. Often times on weekends on the bay, we would walk the shaded paths arm in arm talking about everything and sometimes nothing, just listening to the sounds of nature.

Once in Tess’ apartment, I threw down my books, started pacing, and began a rant.

“Did you hear that not-so-veiled threat she made about my exam? How on earth can this program keep someone whose ideas come from the Jurassic Age?”

“Yes, I heard, Evan. I was in the back of the lecture hall. Now sit down. Did it ever occur to you to go to her office to

have that discussion? Why have you been so impatient and hot under the collar the last couple of weeks?"

"No! She's a dinosaur!"

"Yes, maybe she is, but..."

"Ha! You agree with me!"

"I do think that her ideas have lost some of their popularity in modern day. However, I don't agree with how you handled it. When you are dealing with other superpowers like China, Russia, and North Korea, her theories still play an important role. I suggest you get your butt down to her office tomorrow before your exam and apologize. You have some major sucking up to do!"

"Fine, Tess. I will, but only because you are telling me to do it." I started to leave, but she got up and blocked my exit.

"I want to know what is going on with you."

I hurriedly answered, "Nothing, Tess. It's just the pressure of exams."

"What are you afraid of, honey?" she said more gently. "You can tell me."

We had spent a fair amount of time together over the last six weeks and it always unnerved me when she looked right through me. I choked out, "I can't right now. Please let me go."



Standing on the balcony thirty years later, I remembered how the shame in my heart masked my true self. I had been on an emotional rollercoaster, and it felt like someone had a megaphone announcing I was a fraud. I suffered endless tears for years.



I was reclining on my bed studying for my last exam in cross-cultural communication. It was after 11:00 p.m. and I

was ready to call it quits when a rap on my door took me by surprise. I called, "Come in."

"I saw the light under your door. Ready for your last exam tomorrow?"

"Mmm, yes," I answered as I scooted over so she could sit next to me.

"Since you aren't going back home for the ten days between semesters, I thought we might spend some extended time at the bay. What do you think? We can leave day after tomorrow."

"Anything to get out of this insufferable heat! Besides, I love the cool waters of the bay and you have me hooked on water skiing."

As soon as I answered, Tess said, "That's my girl!"

She laid her hand on my bare thigh and rubbed it gently. I was totally unprepared for what I felt. A current ran through my body and sent a thunderbolt to my groin. I jumped up, careened down three flights of stairs, and dashed out into the night.

Usually, I warmed up with a slow jog, but tonight I ran flat out. I didn't want to think. I didn't want to feel. I didn't want to have to acknowledge what I knew in my heart to be true. I ran until my chest heaved from the effort, and I would have kept running regardless of my burning lungs, but the crashing sounds of one lightning bolt after another scared me.

The air became an anxious whirl of drops dragged from the heavens by gravity. I only realized the rain was cold because it contrasted with my heated skin from Tess' touch. I turned around and raced back to the dorm.

As I yanked open the front door and stepped into the foyer, Tess' hand closed around my upper arm and pulled me into her apartment. I knew I was in for a lecture, but I was too tired to defend myself. She took me into her bathroom.

"Come here. Sit down on the toilet seat," she said sharply. She began to dry my head with a towel. "Whatever

possessed you to go out in a storm like this? You could have been struck by lightning! You should know better!” She was tweaked. I kept quiet.

“Lift your arms up,” she commanded as she began to pull my T-shirt over my head.

I was shaking. She probably thought I was cold.

“Here, let’s get this sports bra off you. You are soaked to the skin.”

She lifted it over my head and draped me with an oversized bath towel. Kneeling in front of me, she removed my waterlogged shoes and socks and dried my feet. “Stand up. We’ve got to get these shorts off too.”

I did as I was told. When she finished, she turned on a recessed heat lamp and told me to wait while she tossed my clothes in the dryer. When she returned, no longer angry at my reckless behavior, she knelt on one knee and took my hands in hers. Looking at me with those eyes I had come to adore, she finally spoke.

“Tell me, baby, what’s going on? You can trust me.”

Tears flooded my eyes, each one reminding me of the treasured moments and comforting love she had given me. How could I lie but I didn’t think I had the courage to tell her.

She patiently waited for me to answer and when I didn’t, she whispered, “You feel it too, don’t you?”

In a split second, I was prepared to breathe life into those parts of me ready to live. “I’ve never felt this way and I don’t know exactly what it means.”

“It’s love, Evan. It means you’ve been in love for weeks.”

Embarrassed, I groaned and tried to pull my hands from hers but she held on tightly as she stood up, pulling me up with her. Her arms were wrapped around me. I could feel her strength and acceptance. Laying my cheek against hers, I let myself melt into her body. It felt like no place I had ever been. It felt like home.

She pulled back slightly, took my face in her hands and brushed my lips with love. It was only a moment that her lips had touched mine, but it felt like a lifetime, an eternity I didn't want to end.

"Spend the night with me," she murmured. "I just want you near me."

Taking my hand again, she led me to her bed. She sat down and gazed up at me, waiting for me to make up my mind.

"I want to stay," I said as I leaned down and placed a tentative kiss on her lips. She reached up and put one hand in the middle of my chest just above the towel that was still wrapped around me. With the other, she held my hand, brought it to her lips, and kissed the inside of my palm.

"Look at me, Evan. Have you done this before?"

"No. I never wanted to."

"And you want to now?" she asked gently.

"I want everything with you," I beseeched, thunder roaring in my ears, heat screaming through my body.

She laid back and pulled me on top of her. I moved my body slightly to the side, one of my thighs wedged between her legs. She caressed my back, ran her fingers through my still damp hair, and slowly kissed my lips over and over. My chest was heaving and she slowed things down for a while, just holding me and talking to me.

After a while, she put her arms around me and rolled me over. She straddled me as she unbuttoned her blouse, her eyes never leaving mine. Reaching behind her back, she unhooked her bra and let it fall slowly from her shoulders. I was inflamed. I couldn't help myself and reached up to touch one of her breasts. As I cupped her and grazed her nipple with my thumb, she threw her head back and moaned, "Yes, just like that."

Feeling a little more confident, I stroked her shoulder, and moved my hand down her collarbone to her chest, until my fingers skimmed across her other breast. I felt her nipple

harden and her pleasure became mine. Still pinning me down, she loosened the towel, leaving my body bare. Tess whispered to me the entire time she kissed her way down from my neck to my chest. Her mouth was warm as she circled my nipples with her tongue sending thrilling spasms throughout my body.

I don't remember how or when she took off her shorts, but as she lay on top of me, I was enthralled by the softness of our bodies sliding against one another. It felt as if I were floating. I became lightheaded with every electric caress. As she kissed her way across and down my tummy, I felt a rawness of emotion, a vulnerability that scared me, but I trusted her and the emotional fireworks I experienced came from knowing I was wanted.

Tess lay next to me cradling me against her breast as she moved her hand down along the inside of my thigh. It seemed like she was touching me everywhere, learning every inch, discovering the smallest detail that gave me pleasure. She took her time, talking to me, making sure I was all right, that I wanted this experience with her.

"Touch me, Tess," I pled. I couldn't seem to get close enough to her even though I was entwined with her, my hips moving against her thigh. I gasped at her first touch. It was pure eroticism, sending chills up my spine. I kissed her deeply, letting our tongues speak a sensual language that inflamed our passion.

The rhythmic movement and pressure of her fingers felt like a symphony so stunning it brought me to tears. When she leaned down and took my nipple between her teeth, the floodgates opened. My abs clenched and my legs twitched.

I heard her say, "Baby, look at me. Stay with me." I wanted her to draw deeper into me and without me asking, she knew. The explosion I felt shattered everything I had denied as I convulsed for the first time admitting who I was.



Gary had not been invited back for the second semester of the program. I felt bad for him, but I was relieved not to have a third wheel around. For the next six weeks Tess and I spent as much time together as possible. She was defending her dissertation and I was immersed in classes, but those mornings I awoke wrapped around her body felt like I was coming up for air after swimming underwater too long. She was the oxygen I needed.

As the semester drew to a close, she successfully defended her dissertation and was offered a professorship in California. She begged me to go with her. Our last conversation didn't go well.

"Evan, baby, I love you and want a life with you. There are plenty of things you can do in Palo Alto."

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She was destroyed. I was devastated.

"You're breaking my heart, Tess," I sobbed. "I love you more than anything, but I have to go. You know I signed a contract at the beginning of the program. It's something I have to see through."

Our love had been passionate, tender, and all-encompassing, but the timing tore us apart. The last night we spent together we lay in each other's arms, exchanging kisses and caresses until the sun came up and I had to leave. As I left her apartment, I already felt that walking away was the birth of my regret.



I was still on the balcony thinking about the many times I wanted to reach out to her over the years. I felt like I had wasted so much of my life. I had written at least fifty different letters and emails but did not have the courage to send any of them. But now, life was different.

Wrapped in my wife's robe, enveloped in her scent, I felt her warmth, her soothing touch. Almost three years ago, I saw her. The sun was in my eyes and I couldn't make out who she was. I had to stop and catch my breath. I put my hand over my heart to keep it from jumping out of my chest. Nothing like this had happened since I had fallen in love thirty years ago.

Yes, I had had a few adventures, but none of those approximated what I felt when I saw this woman from a distance. I breathed in slowly and knew I had to meet her. Destiny must have been working overtime, because a few days later, we literally bumped into each other on campus. A year later, we were married.

I felt the first drops of rain and then warm arms encircling me. She pressed her lips to my neck and between kisses murmured, "Sorry I'm late. What are you doing out here, baby? It's storming."

Smiling, I quietly answered. "I was remembering a hot stormy night like this thirty years ago."

"Oh, and what exactly were you remembering?" she teased.

I turned in her arms, looked into her deep blue eyes, and murmured, "How much I loved you then and how much I love you now, my beautiful, darling Tess."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan Elliot is an Award Winning and #1 Bestselling Author living in New Mexico with her wife, an adventurous dog, and a raven named, Poe, who thinks it is fun to dive-bomb all of us. Morgan's first book was published in 2020. "Destiny's Women" is her eighth book.

Her books have received outstanding reviews on Amazon, Goodreads, Instagram and TikTok by readers and professional reviewers alike. Her age-gap romance, "Stroke of the Brush" won first place Firebird Literary Award in 2022 in the LGBT Category and her action/adventure book, "The Crying Chair" won two Firebird Literary Awards in 2023.

Morgan's books are lush with deep emotions, life-altering decisions, and the courage to open up to love. Each of her works, regardless of the genre, is splashed across a background of adventure, mystery, and romance. Currently she is working on a love story steeped in a murder mystery, "Secrets of the River."

You can find her books on her website, www.morganelliot.com or on Amazon Kindle, available in paperback and ecopy.