

Chapter 1

Keaton Springfield wedged herself between the dumpster and the brick wall of Callaway's, a known hangout for Peru's sleazy underworld. She pulled her Glock from its shoulder holster, positioned the mask over her face, and waited.

The back door of Callaway's swung open and four burly men filled the alley. Each carried a bound woman who had obviously been drugged. "Prop them up in front of the dumpster so they can see what they are getting for their money." A gruff voice commanded. "The blonde one will bring a pretty penny."

A black Cadillac Escalade slowly crawled down the alley stopping in front of the dumpster. Four well-dressed men got out of the vehicle leaving the doors open.

"What do you have for us tonight, Pepe?" the tallest of the four asked.

"Two Americans and two beautiful native girls, Señor Cole," Pepe replied. "All prime. They should bring top dollar anywhere."

"A hundred bucks for the blonde," Cole bid.

"Señor, you are not renting her for the night," Pepe wheedled. "You are purchasing her for resale when you finish with her. Starting bid on the blonde is one thousand dollars."

The four newcomers discussed the price among themselves. "Five hundred," Cole declared.

"Take her back in," Pepe instructed his henchman. "I can make more than that off her in one night and still sell her many more times."

"Okay, okay," Pepe acquiesced. "We'll pay a thousand for her, but no more than two hundred a piece for the other three."

“Oh, sixteen hundred.” Pepe feigned disappointment. “These are classy women, not putas. Take the blonde, we’ll traffic the others.”

“Two thousand for the lot,” Cole bid.

“Prime merchandise,” Pepe reminded him. “I make you a deal, twenty-five hundred cash for the entire group.”

The four businessmen nodded in agreement. “Load them in the back of my SUV.” Cole directed Pepe’s men.

Cole counted the bills as he paid Pepe. “We need eight more to fill the cargo container going out in two days. Can you handle that?”

“Si Señor.”

“I need you to deliver them. Picking them up here is getting too dangerous for us.”

“There will be a delivery charge,” Pepe bargained. “Five thousand for eight of them plus delivery charge.”

“Fine, fine,” Cole grunted. “Deliver them to Pier 12 after midnight on Wednesday. My boys will meet you there and lead you to the container.”

Keaton waited for the alleyway to empty then stepped from behind the dumpster and began speaking into her open body mike. “Black Cadillac Escalade, LP number 25Charlie, Echo, X-ray192, headed to Pier 12.”

“Following them now, boss.” Came the reply.

Calloway’s door swung open and two of the thugs stepped into the alley lighting their cigarettes. “What the hell?” they chorused reaching for their guns.

“Don’t do it,” Keaton warned. “Don’t pull out a gun unless you want to die.”

As if on an unspoken signal, both men rushed her. Keaton fired twice, dropping them just feet from her. *So much for the twenty-one-foot rule*, she thought as she pitched two white chess pawns between the men and sprinted from the alley.

###

“Nice job, Springfield.” Captain Raul Risso entered the observation room. “We picked up everyone involved in tonight’s little sex-trade operation.

“There were ninety-two women in the shipping container. All are in bad shape, starved, dehydrated, and abused. With the recording from your open mike and catching them red handed with the drugged women in their vehicle, we’ll have no problem getting a conviction on these bastards.”

“I love it when an operation goes smoothly,” Keaton replied. “But it seems like every time we take down one operation another springs up in its place.”

“You must be psychic,” Risso exclaimed. “We’ve got a problem at Pontifica Universidad Catolica del Peru in Lima.”

“The private college?”

“Yes, three girls have disappeared in the last four months. We think traffickers are targeting the women attending our local colleges. The University is hosting a fund-raising gala the Saturday after next. All of Lima’s movers and shakers will be there. I want you to attend. Black tie.”

“Sir, you know how I hate black tie affairs. Can’t one of the other units handle this one?”

“I need your team on this. One of the missing women is the daughter of the Mayor of Lima. We need his support. It will be a real feather in our cap.”

Risso held out a scrap of paper. “Here’s the name and number of the woman who filed a report. It seems two of the girls were in her class. I think she’s a Peace Corps volunteer teaching at the college.”

Keaton read the name on the note. “Remi Navarro. Probably some boring academic. I’ll try to catch up with her tomorrow afternoon, Sir. Right now, I’m going to get some sleep.”

###

“Good morning Professor Navarro. She’s waiting for you.” Sister Clara was as old as the hills, but somehow still managed to make her way from the convent to the Administration building every day.

Remi nodded, took a deep breath before lightly tapping on the oversized orange agate door and turning the ornate doorknob. Mother Superior beckoned her and told her to take a seat in front of her desk.

“You sent for me, Mother Superior?”

“Yes, Remi. How is this term going?”

Remi relaxed a bit and said, “It started out about the same as last term, but the girls settled down much quicker. Maybe they will actually learn some chemistry that will help them in their nursing profession.”

“You are no longer so exotic,” grinned Mother Superior.

“I think they are beginning to see me as just another boring professor instead of some mysterious woman from the country where the streets are paved with gold and movie stars. In fact, as I learn about the history of your country, I think that Peru should have the moniker of the country with roads paved with gold.”

Mother Superior was in essence the dean of the newly formed Nursing Program, which right now had about 90 women enrolled. She was a formidable woman and usually very serious, succinct, and lacking in humor. However, she must have gotten up on the right side of her bed today because she was congenial, and a very slight sense of humor was attempting to emerge. That made Remi even more suspicious of Mother Superior’s reason for calling her in this morning.

“Remi, I know you have received many invitations from the families of our students to dinner and other social events in their homes. I have heard that you make a good impression on the parents. Is this something you enjoy?”

Remi knew Mother Superior was setting her up, but she couldn’t quite figure out her motive. She answered

cautiously, “I enjoy getting to know the families; however, I am not one to look for glamor and glitter, and these families are the glitterati.”

Mother Superior’s lip curled upward. “Well, Remi, we’ll have to fix that. You are aware that we have a huge gala scheduled the Saturday after next. Right?”

Remi nodded her head, waiting for the shoe to drop. Mother Superior smiled, took a sip from her coffee cup, and continued. “This gala is an important fund-raising event, and we hope to obtain enough donations to construct a building dedicated to our nursing program. All the glitterati, as you put it, will be there, hopefully with their checkbooks open.”

“Yes, Mother Superior. I can imagine. I’d love to have a real classroom with a well-equipped lab instead of that prison cell I swear doubles as a classroom.”

“Remi you can help make that dream a reality. I’d like you to be the keynote speaker.”

Remi bounced up from her chair and began pacing, all the while saying, “No, no, no, not going to happen.”

Mother Superior sighed deeply and with an air of authority said, “Sit down Remi and listen.”

Remi unhappily complied and said, “Mother Superior, I don’t do public speaking.”

“But Remi, think how impactful you could be. A young woman such as yourself who agrees to give up a promising career and come to some third-world country to help prepare girls for an admirable career, especially during this global shortage of nurses. They will be shamed into writing big fat checks—just what we need.”

“So, the end justifies the means?” Remi was sick to her stomach, but held her tongue, lest she say something very offensive.

“I am afraid that this is what the Rector wants, and you can’t say no to him, Remi.”

“But I don’t have anything appropriate to wear.” Remi knew it was a useless last-ditch effort.

“Not to worry, Remi. Sister Clara’s niece is a top-notch seamstress. Tomorrow you will go with her to pick out an evening gown design, material and get measured. Her niece will custom make a gown that will be the envy of everyone.”

Mother Superior sat back waiting for Remi to try another excuse. When Remi remained silent, she continued. “I also have secured an escort for you. My brother’s son will be at your disposal.”

Just kill me now. Remi repeated those words over and over as she left the office. On her way out, Sister Clara gleefully shouted, “Did Mother Superior dress you down, or perhaps, was it dress you up?”

Chapter 2

Keaton searched through the wastepaper basket in her office. *Please let it be here*, she prayed.

“What are you looking for?” her Uncle Lucho Dapelo asked.

“That invitation. You know the one inviting us to some gala at Pontifica Universidad Catolica del Peru.”

“You threw it away?” Lucho exclaimed. “I told you it was important for us to be represented. The crème of Peruvian society will be there. The people who purchase your extremely expensive Peruvian saddles. Keaton, you must take our social and civic obligations more seriously.”

“Fine, Uncle. I’m going but if it’s so important why don’t you go?”

“I hate those things.” Lucho grinned. “No one wants to be there, but they go for fear someone else will show them up. It’s a zoo.”

“I’ll go.” Keaton sighed loudly. “But I no longer have an invitation.”

“Oh!” Lucho waved an engraved invitation in the air. “I salvaged it from your trash.”

“Keaton,” Office Manager, Ava Calle brandished a memo, “This call just came in. A Professor, Remi Navarro, has invited us to visit the facilities at Pontifica University to see the condition of the wing they are raising funds to replace. I hear it’s very dilapidated.”

“Us? Does that mean you’ll accompany me?” Keaton asked hopefully.

“No dear, I’m just delivering her message. I gave her your email address so she can send you a map of the University grounds.”

Keaton groaned. “When is this show and tell?”

“Tomorrow,” Ava laughed as she left the room.

Keaton carried the invitation and memo into her office, closed the door, and called Stryker Nelson on her cellphone.

“Hey Keats, what’s up?” Stryker answered.

“I want to ask you on a date,” Keaton teased.

“I love you dearly, babe.” Stryker chuckled, “But you’re really not my type. You know I like the dark-haired ladies.”

“That’s why we work so well together,” Keaton replied. “Seriously, the Captain wants . . . no, ordered me to attend a shindig at Pontifica University next week. I need a date, so get your tux out of mothballs and air it out.”

“Why are we being assigned to the University?” Stryker queried. “One of the sisters running drugs?”

“No, but three female students have disappeared recently, and the local authorities have asked Captain Risso for help. I’m taking a tour of their facilities tomorrow as the representative of Springfield Exports. The company will contribute to the fund-raising gala. I’m trying to get my foot in the door and find an excuse to hang around the University.”

“You could enroll at the University,” Stryker suggested.

“I’m a little old for a student,” Keaton pointed out. “And I do need to carry my weight at Springfield Exports.”

“Do you need me to go with you tomorrow?”

“No, I can handle a tour alone.” Keaton laughed. “I just wanted to update you on what I’m doing.”

###

Keaton arrived an hour early for her appointment with Professor Remi Navarro. Dressed in her navy business suit and crisp white blouse, she was the epitome of an American entrepreneur. She pushed back the blonde strands that had escaped her ponytail and now curled around her face, added fresh lipstick, and slipped her dangling earrings into place. She repositioned her rearview mirror, looking around to see if anyone was watching her. She hoped to observe Professor Navarro in a classroom situation. To get a feel for her. Using

the map provided, Keaton quickly located the women's nursing facilities. She slipped into the class and took a seat at the back of the room. Professor Navarro had her back to the class writing an assignment on the blackboard.

Nice derriere, Keaton thought as she watched the five-foot-five woman stretch to add something to the top of the blackboard. She surprised herself by wondering what the professor's hair would look like if she pulled the pins from the French braid and let that glorious dark hair stream down the teacher's back. *It's been too long.*

Navarro talked as she wrote on the board, and Keaton found her voice to be calm yet enthusiastic as she discussed her subject.

“Good morning, ladies. I am happy to tell you that now we have finished our review of basic chemistry, we are going to start learning about Biochemistry.”

Groans and boisterous protesting rose from the class.

Navarro turned to face her students. *Nothing special there*, Keaton thought. Tortoise shell-framed glasses perched atop a perfect nose above generous lips just waiting to smile at her class. *But oh, those lips.*

“Settle down, you'll like this. I promise. You need to remember that the roles of nurses have changed. The expression 'high tech, high touch' reflects the need for you to have the ability to combine humanistic skills with scientific knowledge. What we cover the rest of the term will be very useful in your clinical work, specifically in the knowledge of how the body metabolizes different drugs, dosage and concentration, the disposal of byproducts of toxic drugs, and other bodily reactions to disease or illness.”

Geeze, a snore fest, Keaton thought. *I hope I can keep my eyes open.*

“I can see you all are about ready to take a siesta, so let's talk about some biochemical reactions you might already know. How many of you have a significant other?” Most students raised their hand snickering and giggling.

“Now, promise me that you are not going to talk to Mother Superior about this lecture, because we are going to talk about kissing. Yes, that’s right, kissing. Promise?”

“We promise.” The girls giggled.

“Ready?” Remi took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “Imagine it’s Saturday night and your parents have taken your siblings out to dinner and a movie. You feigned an upset stomach and begged off. Now, as soon as they are out the door, you text your significant other that the coast is clear and you run around the house turning off lights, lighting candles, and putting on some soft romantic music.”

A soft murmur ran through the classroom as the girls became totally engrossed, as did Keaton.

“I see you’ve done this.” Remi laughed. “As soon as your significant other gets to your house, you both scramble to the couch and start kissing. At first you are gentle, tender, enjoying the closeness. Then what happens?”

Keaton discovered she was squirming in her chair.

“Things get heated and more passionate,” one of the girls answered.

“Yes, that’s right. Does your body actually feel warm?”

“Oh yeah!” Someone breathes and the rest of the class laughs knowingly.

Remi continued. “What you are experiencing is a biochemical reaction. Dopamine, an organic brain chemical is released during a kiss and can stimulate the same area of the brain activated by heroin and cocaine. As a result, we experience feelings of euphoria and addictive behavior. Oxytocin, another organic chemical, otherwise known as the 'love hormone', fosters feelings of warmth, affection and attachment.”

A girl shouted, “Yeah, addicted to love!” Sending the class into a riotous laugh session.

“Hold on girls, we’re not finished yet. What might happen next during your necking session?”

A girl from the class interrupted and shouted out, “Something gets hard!” The rest of the class went nuts.

“Settle down. You guys are going to get me fired.”

Remi’s statement set off the class on another laughing jag. Keaton couldn’t stop the smile spreading across her face as Remi’s glance sent a wordless apology to her visitor.

“That isn’t quite what I had in mind, but since you brought it up, that is an example of a combined biochemical and physical reaction. Now go ask your Biology teacher for specifics.” Remi laughed, shaking her head at the girls’ antics.

“Let’s try that again. The question was, what else happens during kissing? I am going to give you the answer and for your homework, you are going to write two paragraphs: why this happens and why it is beneficial.”

The girls groaned at the thought of homework.

“Kissing lowers cortisol levels. Cortisol is another organic compound that you should get to know intimately. Too much or too little can cause serious problems in a human body. Does anyone have a question?”

One of the girls raised her hand.

Remi nodded at her. “Yes?”

“Professor Navarro, do you have a boyfriend?”

“I didn’t mean that kind of question.” Remi blushed. “I meant about your homework.”

“Oh, come on Professor,” the other girls joined in asking for more information about their teacher’s private life. “Tell us?”

“I don’t have time for romance right now,” Remi mumbled. “I’m married to my job and believe me, getting all of you through three terms of chemistry is a full-time job! Class dismissed. See you tomorrow.”

###

Remi picked up her lecture notes and put them into her briefcase while the students were leaving the classroom. Once the room had cleared out, she turned her attention to her visitor. *Wow! Did heaven just send me an angel? Who is that?*

She stepped off the dais, almost tripping over her own feet, but gained her balance before landing face down and making a fool of herself. Gathering her wits, she approached her visitor and extended her hand. “Hi. I’m Remi Navarro. Who might you be?”

Keaton took Remi’s hand and told her that she was Keaton Springfield and before she could explain any further, Remi interrupted her.

“I’m so glad you came. We invited many people to come and look at the deplorable conditions in which we are working, but not many accepted our invitation. Let me take you on a short tour and we can get to know each other. This way please.”

Keaton walked out the door followed closely by Remi, who seemed to be having trouble keeping her attention on the task at hand, which was to emphasize how bad the conditions were and how much better the educational experience for the students would be if they had better facilities.

Keaton stopped and turned towards Remi. “Which way?”

“Let’s start down this hallway,” answered Remi. As they were walking Remi ticked off the statistics, hoping to show this potential donor just how much of an impact her contribution would have. “This is the first year for the Nursing Program. The Board of Regents from the University decided to establish a nursing program to meet the needs, particularly in the rural areas, where medical care is sparse.”

Keaton asked her how many students were enrolled and was surprised to hear that it was close to a hundred. “Why so many students right out of the gate?”

“I suspect the need is so great and the Board of Regents offered tuition free if applicants pledged two years of rural work post-graduation. That is a huge motivator for girls that normally wouldn’t have the resources to attend a private university.”

Keaton wondered if now would be a good time to ask about the girls that disappeared. She made sure she remained relaxed and casually asked, “I heard that three girls disappeared from the school. Did you know any of them, Professor Navarro?”

“Yes, and please call me Remi. All three were in the Nursing Program and came from wealthy families. At first, I thought they had been kidnapped for ransom, but there were no ransom demands. Now I can’t help but think something worse befell them.” Remi started to tear up. “I had been to each of their homes, met their families, and even tutored one of the girls who had a problem learning basic chemistry.”

Keaton took a clean handkerchief she had in her breast pocket and passed it over to Remi. “I’m so sorry. Did you get involved?”

“Yes, to some extent, and thank you for the hanky. The police interviewed me several times, but the only information I had that was relevant was that the girl I was tutoring one evening, never made it home. They asked me if I thought she could have run away from home, but Ms. Springfield, I don’t think she was the type. She was really dedicated to getting through the program.”

“What did the other girls say? I suppose there’s talk after a life changing event.” Keaton reached out and brushed away a tear that had strayed down Remi’s cheek, surprising them both. “I’m sorry Remi, I didn’t mean to startle you and please let’s not stand on formality. Call me Keaton.”

“Thank you, Keaton, it’s fine. I’ve been with these girls for six months and have grown close to them. To answer your question, there was a lot of chatter, but nothing useful

as far as I could tell.” Remi sniffled a bit then composed herself. “So, now we’re going to enter the so-called lab. She held open the door for Keaton, noticing how her pencil skirt hugged her curves.

“This looks pretty dilapidated to me,” observed Keaton. “The benches look like they are made from scrap wood and the chairs look pretty rickety. It’s been a long time since I studied chemistry, but it doesn’t seem like there is enough equipment to go around.”

“You are exactly right. Ideally, we should be able to have teams of two working with one Bunsen burner, but right now, six girls have to share. They learn by doing, not observing.”

“Remi, you mentioned that you had grown close to the girls and I could see that from the rapport you had with them. I meant to tell you that I was impressed by the way you got them to pay attention. Your analogy was spectacular and I for one, will never forget the Dopamine and Oxytocin, or what did you call it, the ‘love hormone’? I bet they won’t either.” Keaton reached out and gently touched Remi’s shoulder. “You have a gift. I wish I had teachers like you when I was in school.”

Remi blushed, and managed a shy, “Thank you.”

Keaton smiled at her. *I wonder what she would look like without those glasses.* “So, Remi, what else is there to see?”

“You have seen one of the better classrooms. Would you like to see the rest, though they are currently in use? Also, the professors in the program don’t have offices and we have to rotate classrooms so there isn’t a permanent place for us to store our materials or meet with students.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Why don’t you show me the plans for the new building?”

“Sure, we can do that. I signed out a copy of the plans and we can go down to the cantina and look at them over a cup of coffee. What do you say?”

“I say let’s go.”

Remi led the way to the stairway. They went down two floors and ended up in a small lobby. The cantina was situated in a room right next to the lobby. As they walked in, several students called out to Remi.

“Hi Professor Navarro! How’s it going Professor Navarro? When are we getting our tests back, Professor Navarro?”

“You seem to be on everyone’s mind, Professor.” joked Keaton.

“Yeah, just what I need. A bunch of 18-year-old girls dogging my every step.”

Keaton, mildly flirting said, “And what’s wrong with that?”

“Seriously? You must be joking! Spend a day in my shoes and you will know exactly what I mean!” Remi chuckled, pulled out a folded packet from her briefcase and said, “Keaton, would you like to open these and spread them out on a table and I’ll get the coffee? How do you like it?”

“Americano, but please let me get the coffee.”

“Really, Keaton, it’s the least I can do, because next Saturday you are going to write a big check, right?” teased Remi.

“Will you be there?”

“Yes, I will. I’ll be keeping my eye out for you.” Remi flashed a smile and headed to the coffee bar where she placed their order. *I wonder if she is going alone or if she has a date.*

After they reviewed the ambitious plans, Remi looked at her watch and apologized to Keaton. “I’m so sorry must cut our time together short, but I have a class in fifteen minutes.”

“Of course, I’ve taken up enough of your time already. You have been very generous.” Keaton helped her pack up the blueprints and as they were about ready to part she asked Remi, “Do you suppose that if I have any more questions we could set up another meeting?”

Remi looked at her quizzically, but in the end said yes, though she had no idea why. *Keaton Springfield is way out of my league.*

Chapter 3

Keaton knocked on the doorframe of Captain Risso's office before entering. "Come in and close the door," Risso instructed. "How did your meeting with the professor go?" Risso asked as Keaton settled into the chair in front of his desk.

"Fine. She has a good rapport with the women in her classroom. If anyone can instill trust, she can. She's low key and very nondescript."

"Not a looker, eh?" Risso laughed. "Comes with the territory, Keats. Old maid schoolteachers are rarely beauties."

"I'm not looking for someone to date, sir. I'm looking for someone who can get the women to open up to them. There is no way three women can go missing and that group knows nothing. They seem to be a close-knit bunch."

"You're usually right," Risso agreed. "Just keep your ear to the ground."

"I will, sir. I need to spend some time at the export business this week. I must carry my weight there."

"Then get out of here. I don't need to see you again until you have something to report."

"Have we identified all the women taken from the cargo container?" Keaton asked.

"Stryker is working on that now. Over half of them are still hospitalized. They were in bad shape, but none of them are the girls from the Pontifica University. As soon as they are strong enough, we'll question all of them."

###

Keaton walked into her office at Springfield Exports to find her uncle ranting in Spanish. "Calm down, Uncle," she admonished. "Tell me what is wrong."

“Your girlfriend,” Dapelo sputtered. “She is a demanding, self-centered—”

“Say no more,” Keaton interrupted. “I’ll handle Carmen.”

“Apparently you don’t handle her often enough,” Dapelo grumped. “She is on her way here right now.”

“Just send her into my office,” Keaton said unlocking the door to her suite and flipping on the light. She left her door open so nothing would stand in Carmen’s way when she stormed into the company.

A sultry dark-haired beauty Carmen Tacona gave a whole new meaning to the term hot blooded. Keaton knew she was about to be lambasted for her failure to return Carmen’s calls.

The doors flew open and employees moved out of her path as Carmen stormed through Springfield Exports. “Keats,” she purred intimidatingly reminding Keaton of a big cat just before it devours its prey. “Why the hell haven’t you returned my calls?”

“I’ve been working night and day,” Keaton explained, closing the door. “I’ve been out of the office for the past four days. Unlike you, I must work for a living.”

For the first time Keaton was thankful for the stacks of mail and work orders piled on her desk.

“No matter,” Carmen walked around the desk and kissed Keaton breathless. “You will take me to lunch, no?”

“I’m terribly busy. I—”

“You will take me to lunch,” Carmen growled.

“Yes, of course.” Keaton gulped. “I’ll make reservations. Where would you like to go?”

“Astrid & Gastón, of course,” Carmen replied. “But, umm, first we stop by my apartment.”

“I only have a narrow window of time,” Keaton pushed Carmen’s hands away from the buttons on her blouse. “I have appointments all afternoon.”

“I also need to discuss business with you,” Carmen smiled salaciously. “Perhaps you can cancel your appointments for the rest of the day, and we can combine business with pleasure.”

“I can’t do that,” Keaton sighed opening her office door. “Ava, please make reservations for two at Astrid & Gastón. Tell them we’ll arrive there in thirty minutes.”

Keaton took Carmen’s arm and escorted her from the building to her Jeep. “Must we ride in that thing?” Carmen demanded.

“Yes!” Keaton smirked. “You know any vehicle will be destroyed in Lima’s traffic. Peruvians consider traffic lights and signs mere suggestions to be ignored. They would rather die than yield to another vehicle. If it were legal, I’d drive a tank.”

“Keats, you are so funny.” Carmen slipped her arm through Keaton’s and hugged the blonde’s arm between her breasts.

Keaton stiffened. “Um, you have missed me,” Carmen hummed.

I’m exhausted, not dead, Keaton thought. Her body jerked involuntarily as the thought of demure Remi Navarro crossed her mind.

“We will discuss business on our way to the restaurant,” Carmen declared. “Then you may spend your time over lunch convincing me that I should forgive you and sleep with you tonight.

“As you know, Papá oversees the National Peruvian Paso Horse Competition at the Mamacona showgrounds every year.”

Keaton nodded.

“He wants everyone that has anything to do with the Peruvian Horses to be represented at the showgrounds the entire week of the show,” Carmen continued, “breeders, trainers and of course vendors.”

“And you want Springfield Exports to be front and center with a huge display of our goods,” Keaton added.

“Of course, darling. You are the largest exporters of Peruvian leather goods in the country. Papá approves of you.”

“Consider it done.” Keaton smiled. “I’ll have Santos arrange it. Springfield Exports will make you proud.”

“But Papá wants you to be there, love, especially for opening weekend. It is the biggest event of the year.”

“Carmen, I will be there opening weekend. Now I have a favor to ask of you. I must represent Springfield Exports at some black-tie event Uncle Lucho has roped me into. I have no choice. I’d like you to meet me there and bring your checkbook. And I’m terribly sorry I haven’t returned your calls.”

“Um, well, you have all night to beg my forgiveness.” Carmen blew softly into her ear.

###

Remi was finished dressing except for putting on her grandmother’s emerald earrings. She had decided earlier to let her hair hang loose. Tossing it to one side, while she put on one of the beautiful earrings, she wished she didn’t have to go, even if she might run into Keaton again. *Stop dreaming, girl.* Finishing with one ear, she draped her hair over her bare shoulder and put on the other earring.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror, she liked what she saw. The glasses she wore at school had been replaced by contact lenses. Her makeup was understated but brought out the best of her naturally attractive features. She was amazed at how perfect the dress was. It was an asymmetrical off-the-shoulder, form fitting dark emerald green cocktail length dress with a moderate slit up the left leg. The left side of the dress covered her shoulder and was capped with a tasteful mini ruffle. Her right shoulder was bare. The back of the dress dipped about a third of the way

down her back, so that if she were forced to dance, her partner would not have his hand on her bare skin.

The doorbell to her flat sounded. She looked out the peep hole before opening the door. Mother Superior had given a description of her nephew. The man on the other side of the door was definitely Rolf. "Come in Rolf. It's so nice of you to come for me and it is a pleasure to meet you."

He offered his hand. "I have been looking forward to this evening for a week. My Aunt Beatriz, or Mother Superior to you, told me what a wonderful teacher you are, but failed to mention how lovely you are."

"Thank you for the compliment, Rolf. Let me get my wrap and evening bag and I will be ready." A moment later she walked out the door, locked it and was escorted to his chauffeured car.

Once settled, Rolf spoke. "I understand that you are giving the keynote speech tonight. Are you excited?"

"More like petrified," answered Remi honestly.

"Don't worry too much. By then everyone will be feeling no pain and all you have to do is show a little leg and cleavage and they will be tripping over themselves to hand you a big fat check."

"Maybe I should get your check now, before you are feeling no pain," answered Remi icily.

"Don't be such a prude, Remi. I was only telling you how these things go. Let's talk about something else. All right?" *Damn, I am going to have to work hard to get her in bed tonight!* Rolf tried to repair his faux pas and began asking her the usual 'first date' questions: Where did you grow up, where did you go to college, what did you do before you came here? Remi answered politely, only out of respect for Mother Superior and what they were trying to accomplish this evening. *How do I get rid of this jerk? He makes my skin crawl.*

The Gala was being held at the Country Club Lima Hotel located in a residential district of Lima. It had been

declared a Peruvian Cultural Monument and was the perfect marriage of architectural charm, history, and modern comfort. One of the gala organizers had told her that many of the attendees had reserved rooms for the night so they could imbibe freely without concern of getting home safely. Remi wondered if Rolf had reserved a room. She shuddered at the thought.

They stopped at the Gala registration table to sign in and receive directions to their assigned table. As soon as they found it, situated next to the stage at the front of the ballroom, Rolf turned down the champagne a circulating waiter offered and left in search of something harder. Remi was content to sip her champagne without him. Her people-watching was interrupted when Mother Superior, Bishop Calabria, the Rector of the University, and two other couples joined her. After the introductions, Rolf, seemingly in better spirits, reappeared. Remi could smell the alcohol on him as he sat next to her, slinging his arm around the back of her chair.

A man came out from the stage wing, walked over to the podium, introduced himself as Monsignor Duarte, and welcomed the attendees. He briefly went over the night's program, then announced that dinner would be served. Remi, good naturedly, withstood a mild interrogation by her table mates until their first course arrived.

While the food was excellent, Remi couldn't eat. Her stomach was in knots. *Is my stomach full of butterflies because in thirty minutes I am going to have to talk to all these people or is it because I don't see her?* Mother Superior must have noticed her looking out over the room and quietly asked her if something was wrong, to which Remi replied, "No, I'm just a little nervous." Mother Superior patted her hand and told her she would be fine as soon as she got up on the stage. *That didn't help much.*

###

“Keaton, I’m so sorry. I think that ceviche I had for lunch was bad,” Stryker explained as the two of them left the banquet hall and were walking toward the Hotel’s main exit.

“Stryker, are you sure it wasn’t the pisco sours you had with it?” Keaton had to agree he looked a little green around the gills.

“Maybe the combination.” offered Stryker shrugging his shoulders. “Look, I don’t want to ruin your fun. I’ll take a cab and leave you my car so you can get home after this shindig winds down.”

“It’s okay Stryker. Let me drive you home.”

“Keats, how long have we been partners? I can get home. Besides, I know you saw something you like? Why don’t you go back in and see if you can get her phone number?”

“I thought she was coming, but I haven’t seen her. Was I that obvious?” Keaton sighed.

“The teacher you met last week?”

“What makes you say that?” Keaton was surprised.

“Keats, you never go out, you never date, except for that wild woman Carmen now and again, so it was just a matter of simple deduction. The teacher is the only woman you’ve recently met.” Stryker gave her a key fob and the valet ticket, both of which she slipped into her evening bag, and he hugged her goodnight. The valet flagged a cab and Stryker was gone.

Keaton went back to her table, which had been cleared of the meal, and turned her chair to the stage where Monsignor Duarte was introducing Bishop Calabria. The old wind bag droned on and on for what seemed like eons. He spoke about the plans for the new building and how much money they had already raised through public support and how much more they needed. He was followed by Mother Superior who talked about the students’ progress for a few minutes, then segued into introducing Remi.

Keaton's breath caught. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Her mouth was still open as she blinked her eyes, making sure they were working properly. *That can't be the same Remi I met last week. My god, what an unbelievable transformation! She's absolutely stunning. Her hair. Her eyes-what happened to the glasses? Her bare shoulder.* She was mesmerized, but as Remi began to talk, her attention was drawn to Remi's words and she became engrossed just as she had in Remi's classroom.

"Good evening everyone. Thank you for coming and thank you Mother Superior for that warm introduction." Remi walked away from the podium to stand in the middle of the stage. She began,

I was born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico. My grandparents came from Colombia during the early years of La Violencia to seek a better life for themselves and the family they hoped to have. I reaped the rewards from their courageous actions. After I went to Nursing School, followed by completing my advanced degree, I was somewhat undecided as to the next steps I wanted to take.

My father said to me, The best way to discover who you are is to immerse yourself in the service of others.

I said, 'Dad, I've worked four years in two different hospitals. Isn't that service to others?'

He said, Yes, of course, but you still seem to be floundering. Maybe the way you get meaning in life is to create something that gives you purpose and a sense of accomplishment.

So, I started looking for opportunities where I could devote myself to a community that needed me. Did I have illusions of changing the world? Of course not, but I believed that I might be able to help a small group of people who did have the capacity to change the immediate world that surrounded them.

"When the Peace Corps offered me the opportunity to come to Peru and be part of a bold new venture that had the

potential to make a significant impact on improving health care for many, I jumped at it. I am proud to say that I am honored to be part of a four-year journey along with your daughters, who are truly thoughtful, committed citizens dedicated to enriching the lives of others.

“You should be proud to have raised daughters who have embraced the difference between what we do and what we can do. They know what they are capable of doing and they have embraced the idea of active charity and willing service to others. These are the young women who are capable of changing the landscape around them.

Remi paused for a moment, looked out at the crowd, and continued.

“We care a lot about our mission, which is extremely important, but I love focusing on understanding the people behind it. You are the people behind this mission. You will make it possible for these students, your young women, to accomplish the goals that are set in front of them.

Tonight, you have the opportunity to make a difference, not only in the lives of your daughters, but in the lives of many people who will be touched by your daughters in the future. I humbly ask you to be as generous as you can so that your daughters can reach their full potential.

Remi looked at the audience, took a breath and continued.

“I leave you tonight with a quote from Winston Churchill: ‘We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.’ Thank you for your gracious attention and your generous gifts.

*Remi stood in the center of the stage for a moment as the applause continued. The audience was on its feet, the clapping encouraging Remi to take a small bow. She kept eye contact with the audience and waved goodbye as she walked across the stage. Just as she reached the podium, she caught sight of Keaton. *Oh my god, could she be any more stunning? That dress...Of course it’s black. Her cleavage—**

I want my lips there. The slit up her leg, oh god, it's just short of X-rated. Remi stumbled slightly and grabbed onto the podium for a moment before hurrying off the stage.

###

Father Duarte helped Remi down the stairs and guided her to an alcove where University employees were receiving donations. She shook hands and answered questions from the donors for about an hour, occasionally looking over the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of Keaton, but she didn't. Finally, she was able to extricate herself from the hubbub and find her way out into the hotel lobby. She decided to go to the coat room, grab her wrap and take a cab home. Rolf was stinking drunk, and she wanted nothing further to do with him. There was no one attending the coat room, so she entered. As she was removing her wrap from a hanger, she felt someone come up behind her and grab her around the waist.

"Finally, I found you," slurred a very intoxicated Rolf. He dragged her over to a dark corner, turned her around in his arms and forcibly kissed her. Remi was able to free one of her arms and slapped him hard.

"Is that how you want it, you tease?" Rolf reached for her dress and in a flick of his wrist, tore the shoulder of Remi's dress and began to slobber across her chest. She struggled and managed to poke one of his eyes. He yelped, but did not let go, moving one hand to her throat and the other under her dress. Remi turned her head, pressed her chin down, and managed to bite the hand that was around her throat. He slapped her. She was scared, more frightened than she had ever been.

"Rolf, let her go right now!" Remi recognized Keaton's voice but thought she was imagining it. Rolf looked over his shoulder, still clutching Remi's throat and pushing her against the wall with a hand on her chest.

“Keaton get out of here; this is none of your business,” hissed Rolf.

“I won’t ask you again, Rolf. You know I’m more than capable of taking you down.”

Rolf relinquished his hold on Remi and whirled to face Keaton. He aggressively reached for her and found himself on his knees with his arm twisted behind his back.

“Rolf, I’m going to let you go if you promise to get out of here and leave Ms. Navarro alone.” Keaton applied more torque to Rolf’s arm, bringing it close to the point of snapping.

“Do we have a deal? You’ll be in a cast for months if you don’t agree.” Keaton tightened her hold just to make her point and be sure Rolf knew she was serious.

“All right, all right! I promise, now let me go.” Keaton released Rolf and stepped between him and Remi. Rolf staggered toward the door, turned, and spat out a threat to Keaton.

“You American women are all alike, whores! You tease and then cry wolf. You just want her for yourself. Yeah, I hear the rumors. Just know that you will pay for this, Keaton.” Rolf whirled and stomped out.

Keaton quickly walked over to Remi, who clearly was in shock. She picked up Remi’s wrap and evening bag from the floor. She draped Remi’s wrap around her shoulders and pulled it across her chest, put her arm around Remi’s waist, and said, “Let me take you home. Okay?”

Remi nodded her head and walked with Keaton without a word. They waited briefly while the valet brought around Stryker’s car. Even after getting into the car, Remi was semi-catatonic. Keaton reached across her and fastened her seat belt all the time wondering if she should take Remi to the hospital. Then she remembered that Stryker carried a flask in the glove compartment. Once more reaching across Remi, she removed the flask, opened it, and told Remi to take a sip.

Remi did as she was told followed swiftly with a sputtering and coughing fit. Keaton told her to take another sip, which she did without any argument. The color was coming back into her face and her eyes weren't quite as glazed over as they had been in the hotel.

"Remi, may I have your address?" Keaton asked. At first Remi just stared at her, but then she seemed to understand and recited her address as Keaton punched it into the GPS. Remi didn't speak again until they were nearing her flat.

"It's on the right, three houses down. You can park in the driveway. It's a pretty safe neighborhood."

Keaton parked and as she walked around to the passenger side of the car, the door opened, and Remi swung her legs out. Remi was still unsteady, so Keaton held onto her until they reached the door. Remi was able to retrieve her keys from her evening bag, but her hands were still shaking, and she couldn't insert the key into the lock. Keaton gently took the keys from Remi, opened the door, guided Remi inside, and locked the door behind her. She helped Remi up the stairs, into her bedroom, and to the bed where she asked Remi to sit.

"Do you want to take a shower or just change clothes and go to bed?" Keaton asked gently.

"Shower please," answered Remi but not making a move toward the bathroom.

Keaton entered the bathroom, found a robe on a hook behind the door and returned to help Remi disrobe—her hands now trembling. Remi let her take her wrap, remove her shoes, and unzip the ruined dress. With watery eyes, she turned to Keaton, thanked her, and said that she could finish. Keaton nodded, went to the door, and said, "I'll wait for you in the living room."

###

While waiting for Remi to finish showering, Stryker called. “Keats, I wanted you to know that I’m in the Emergency Room. I got worse after I got home, and they are keeping me overnight as a precaution. Will you please come get me tomorrow when they release me?”

“Of course, Stryker. Did they say what is making you sick?”

“Yes. Food poisoning. I should be better by tomorrow morning. They have me hooked up to an IV right now. Where are you...still at the Gala?”

“No. You won’t believe what happened. I was calling it quits, went to fetch my coat and walked in on Rolf assaulting Remi Navarro, the professor who gave the keynote speech.”

“Did you tell her about his reputation?”

“I didn’t get a chance, Stryker. She was in shock. I took her home and plan to stay the night in case that drunken bastard shows up.”

“I’m glad she’s okay. I’m going to try to get some sleep now that I am not running to the bathroom every five minutes. See you tomorrow.”

###

Remi walked into the living room, swathed in a bathrobe, her hair hanging loose still wet from the shower.

“Thank you for staying Keaton, but I’m all right now. I don’t want to keep you from the rest of your night.”

“Does Rolf know where you live?”

Remi nodded her head, “He picked me up this evening. Do you really think he’ll come back?”

“Remi come sit next to me,” she motioned to the couch. Once Remi was seated next to her, Keaton told her of Rolf’s reputation, not only of being a player but also of being a date rapist who so far had gotten away with his degenerate actions by bribing police and justices.

“Keaton, how do you know this?”

Keaton was worried that Remi might be homing in on her “secret career”, so she chose her words carefully.

“Remi, the Import/Export business is a small ecosystem here in Lima. Everybody knows everybody’s dirty laundry. I can’t stand Rolf, yet his family’s shipping business is the best and most reasonably priced in Lima. My uncle has been doing business with them for years. When I first came from the States to join the business, he tried to put the moves on me. I kicked him in the groin, and he went down. My uncle witnessed the whole encounter, picked up Rolf by the scruff of his neck and in no uncertain terms, told him what would happen if he tried it again. He also called Rolf’s father. Since then, Rolf has given me a wide berth.”

Remi tried to speak, but she was overcome with emotion again. Keaton took her in her arms and let Remi cry on her shoulder until she regained control.

“I’m sorry Keaton. You must think I’m a baby.”

Keaton wiped the tears from Remi’s cheeks with her thumbs and said, “I don’t think you are a baby. I think you were almost raped, and you are upset with good reason. I’m going to stay here tonight, just in case he decides to come back and harass you. Do you have something that I can wear? I’m thinking that this dress won’t be too comfortable.”

“Keaton, that is so nice of you, but I think I’ll be okay. You don’t have to ruin the rest of your night.” Remi sighed, wishing she hadn’t told Keaton she could go.

“Remi, I don’t have other plans, so if it’s okay with you, I’d feel more comfortable staying. The couch will do fine.” Keaton’s eyes were earnest and sincere. Remi took her hand and led her to the bedroom, where she pulled out clean T-shirt and sweatpants.

“Please feel free to shower if you like. There are clean towels in the linen cabinet and new toothbrushes in the middle left drawer of the vanity. Use whatever you like. I’m going to make tea. Would you like some?”

Keaton gave her a thousand-watt smile and joked, “Only if you make your tea with whiskey and honey!”

“I can do that,” quipped Remi. “See you in a few.”

###

Keaton’s long curly blonde hair was slicked back from her face. Remi handed her a mug of hot tea, laced with whiskey and honey. *She is so adorable, and she doesn’t seem to know it.*

Keaton sipped cautiously, smiled widely, and said, “This is perfect. Thank you.”

Remi grinned, “I’m glad you approve. I made up the couch, but why don’t you let me sleep there and you take the bed?”

“That’s very sweet of you, but if Rolf does show up, I want to be the first one that intercepts him. You don’t happen to have a firearm, do you?”

Remi looked back at Keaton with big eyes, reminding her of a Margaret Keane painting. “You’re kidding, right?”

Keaton shook her head “no” but then grinned and said, “Yes, I’m kidding, Remi,” But she was gravely serious. Rolf was dangerous. “We’re safe. Do you need me to tuck you into bed? joked Keaton.” *I’d like to do more than just tuck her in.*

Remi smiled lightly, shook her head, said good night, and went into her bedroom.

###

Keaton couldn’t get comfortable. She had been tossing and turning for over an hour. *Remi was right. The couch is horrible. I wonder why she hasn’t changed out this torture rack...unless the place came furnished.* The room was too light. The flimsy curtains did nothing to prevent the moonlight from spilling into the room, disrupting her sleep.

A movement in the hallway pulled her from her grumpy reverie. She quickly sat up and was just about to launch off the couch when she caught a glimpse of bronze legs bathed in the interloping moonlight. *Remi.*

“What’s wrong Remi?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“You are perfectly safe.”

“No. Keaton, I can’t sleep with you out here on that god-awful sofa.” Remi took Keaton’s hand, looked into her eyes and said, “There’s room for the both of us in the bed. Besides, it has a new mattress.”

She tugged Keaton’s hand and pulled her toward the hallway and bedroom. Remi pulled back the covers, got into the bed and held the covers open for Keaton, who was trying her best not to hyperventilate as she looked at Remi’s bare legs.

“Keaton, it’s okay. Please get in, it’s cold.”

“Are you sure Remi?”

“Of course, I’m sure. I feel safe with you nearby.”

Keaton climbed into the bed, lay on her back, and tried to get her impulses and breathing under control. *I don’t know what it is about her. I’ve never felt such an instant connection. Being with her is strangely comfortable and at the same time makes every ounce of my body vibrate in need.* Keaton’s thoughts were interrupted by a whisper.

“May I sleep next to you? I’m still a little freaked out.” Remi started to move closer to her without waiting for an answer.

Keaton summoned all her self-control and simply answered, “Yes.”

Without hesitation, Remi curled up next to Keaton, resting her head on Keaton’s shoulder, her arm across Keaton’s abdomen and her leg thrown over Keaton’s. Keaton knew this was not an attempt at seduction. Remi was vulnerable and scared. *Maybe that’s what has me in a lather, her vulnerability and innocence.*

Within minutes, Remi's breathing slowed, became deeper, and her body relaxed. Keaton knew Remi was asleep. *There's no way she is into women*, Keaton thought. *She couldn't possibly be sprawled all over me like this and go to sleep if she liked women.*

Keaton was stunned by what she did next. She slowly lowered her head and placed a soft kiss on Remi's forehead. She was amazed at her own emotional reactions. Keaton took a breath, put her arm around Remi and let herself drift into a deep sleep.

###

Remi woke and glanced at the clock. She couldn't believe she had slept until noon. *Where is Keaton?* Remi got up, cleaned up a bit and donned a pair of jeans and an off-white Henley. Walking through the flat and not finding Keaton, she felt a little deflated. Entering the kitchen, she saw a piece of paper and what looked like a creased check on the kitchen table.

Dear Remi, I'm sorry I had to leave. My friend Stryker called and needs me to pick him up from the Emergency Room. I wish I could have stayed until you woke up; I really do. I hope that you are feeling better this morning. I'm going to have a talk with Rolf later today to make sure he doesn't bother you again.

Also, I never got to leave my check for the building fund at the Gala, so I hope it is okay to leave it with you. Please reach out if you need anything. Keaton

Remi looked at the check and almost fainted. She never expected so much. A million sol was the equivalent of about a quarter of a million U.S. dollars. The Import/Export business must be very lucrative.

###

“Professor Navarro, may I speak with you?” Angela, one of her chemistry students stayed after class.

“Yes, of course, Angela. What’s up?”

“I have been too afraid to tell anyone until now, but I think I might know something about Elena’s disappearance.”

“Sit down Angela and tell me what you know.” Remi took her arm and directed her to the teacher’s chair while she sat on the edge of the desk.

“Professor Navarro, I think I know where she went after class and tutoring. She met this guy...he was older than she. She had been sneaking around to see him for a couple of weeks. I saw them getting into a black Cadillac Escalade. Maybe she ran off with him.”

“Angela, is there a reason why you didn’t tell the police about this?”

“Yes, I’m sorry to say, and now ashamed I didn’t say anything. I had told my parents I was going to be studying with Mariana and then spending the night with her. But I didn’t. I stayed with my boyfriend because his parents had left for a week.”

“All right Angela. I’m glad you told me. I think I have a friend that can help me with this. Try not to worry now and I will get back to you in a few days.” Remi gave the girl a hug and sent her on her way. Quickly she looked up the phone number for Springfield Exports.

“Springfield Exports. How may I help you?”

“May I speak to Keaton Springfield please?”

“Yes, would you mind giving me your name?”

Remi told the receptionist who she was and before she knew it, Keaton was on the line.

“Remi, I’m so glad you called. I felt terrible leaving you Sunday morning.

“Keaton, you did more than I ever expected. Thank you and thank you for the very generous donation to the building fund. I also have another reason for calling. Could you

possibly meet me this evening? I want to get your input on how to handle something I learned today, which may be related to the girls who disappeared.”

“Yes, of course. Where would you like to meet?”

“How about dinner at Café Museo Larco? Do you know it?”

“You have good taste, Remi. How does 6:00 p.m. sound?”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll see you there. Bye Keaton.”

Chapter 4

Where did the day go? Remi had to hustle if she were going home to change, then meet Keaton at the Café Museo Larco in a couple of hours. As she was dashing out the door to grab her scooter, her cell phone rang. Annoyed she answered, “Hello. This is Remi.”

“Remi,” this is Mother Superior. “I was wondering if you could stop by my office before you leave.”

“Oh, I am so sorry Mother Superior, I already left. How about tomorrow morning before my first class?” Remi didn’t think the little white lie would land her in hell, at least not yet.

“All right Remi. I’ll see you at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow. Hope you have a good evening.”

The scooter cranked at the very first try, then Remi was off, flying through the afternoon traffic like a Peruvian veteran. She made it home in fifteen minutes, unlocked her door, flew up the stairs, and started disrobing before she got to the shower. Ten minutes later she climbed out of the shower, ran a comb through her hair, wrapped a towel around her and went to her closet to choose an outfit. She took out three to mull over as she put in her contacts and makeup.

What difference does it make what I wear? She won’t care, but I wish she would. Remi picked up the first outfit, turned it around on the hanger, and threw it down. *Lord no. That looks like a burlap sack.* The next one she picked up was a navy business-like suit. It looked great on her, but she didn’t really want this to be a business meeting, even though that was exactly what it was. *Nope.* Finally, she looked at the third ensemble. *Yes! The suede!* The straight skirt was heather green suede and fell to her mid-calf. *Perfect with my brown suede high boots.* The matching jacket was as soft as

butter and perfect for the cooler weather. She layered it with a simple white, deeply cut V-neck top. *Perfect!*

Remi pulled out a wide belt that matched her boots and picked out a pair of conservative earrings and a necklace that hung perfectly on her chest just above the V-neck of her top. After putting on her Tag Heuer watch, a gift from her father, she gave herself a final once over in front of the mirror. She sighed loudly and summoned up a little self-assurance as she left the flat to wait for the ride share she had arranged earlier in the day.

It wasn't a long ride to the Café Museo Larco. She arrived with plenty of time to spare and decided to go into the attached museum and browse before going into the restaurant. However, the period paintings that had been curated in the museum were not to her liking, so she walked over to the restaurant, gave her name to the hostess, and took a chair to wait for Keaton.

Keaton burst through the doors like a whirling dirt devil that was so common in New Mexico. She seemed a bit frazzled. She caught Remi's eye and briskly walked over to her apologizing for being late.

She looks so good. Okay Keaton, focus.

"Keaton, you are only five minutes late. I think I can forgive that," Remi joked.

The hostess noticed that Remi's companion had arrived and invited them to follow her to their reserved table.

"Is this table okay for you, Keaton?"

"Yes, it's great. I like that it is tucked away from the main traffic. I think it will be okay to talk. Don't you?" Keaton waited for Remi to respond.

"Yes, I'm comfortable here."

A server, with a printed name tag announcing he was Antonio, came by, filled their water glasses, gave them menus, and asked if they would like a bottle of wine or perhaps they would prefer a pisco sour. They both said

“wine” at the same time then began to peruse the wine and dinner menus.

Antonio told them he would give them a minute to decide on their dinner choices and then he could recommend a wine.

When he came back, both Keaton and Remi were ready to order. Remi chose a grilled sea bass in brown butter with risotto. Keaton chose a shredded duck leg accompanied by a pumpkin risotto. Before Antonio could suggest a wine, Keaton told him to bring a bottle of the Peruvian Tacama Gran Blanco. She turned her head to Remi and asked, “Okay?” Remi nodded and Antonio disappeared.

The noise of the busy restaurant fell away, and they were both silent, neither knowing how to start the conversation, yet neither one finding a need to fill the silence with idle chatter. They seemed to be lost in watching each other or maybe in their own daydreams.

Keaton smiled at Remi deciding that the only course of action was to help Remi feel comfortable enough to tell her what she had learned.

“Remi, you look absolutely lovely tonight. That color compliments your eyes beautifully.”

Blushing, Remi answered a simple “Thank you.”

“Remi, you said that you wanted to get my input on how to handle something you learned that may be related to the girls who disappeared. Tell me about it.”

Remi, looked around the immediate area, leaned across the table and lowered her voice. *God, I can't concentrate around her. Concentrate, Remi.*

“Keaton, I don't know how this will help the police, but since you asked me if I had been involved in the police investigation, I thought I would share with you what one of the students told me and see if you could tell me the best course of action. You have been here much longer than I.”

“Yes, of course. I'm glad to help. Tell me what she told you.” Keaton's attention kept wandering to Remi's neck.

She couldn't quite figure out what kept drawing her to look at the left side of her neck. *Hey, you wanted her to talk. Pay attention.*

"This morning, before I called you, one of the students, Angela, asked to talk to me. She told me that the night one of the girls disappeared, she saw Elena, with a man she had been seeing for a couple of weeks. They got into a black Escalade and drove off. I asked her why she didn't tell the police this and she told me that she was afraid her parents would find out that she stayed late at school and then went to spend the night with her boyfriend instead of her study partner."

"Remi, was there anything else?"

"No, but I got the impression she might be able to identify him if she saw him again. Keaton, what should I do with this information?"

"I have a friend in the police department. I'll talk with him and we'll go from there. Is that okay Remi? Will that work for you?"

"Yes. Yes, it will, Keaton. I don't know how to thank you. That takes a load off my mind."

Antonio returned with the bottle of wine, uncorked it and Keaton tasted it. She nodded her head and Antonio poured them a glass.

They chatted easily now that the ice was broken, and they tossed questions about each other back and forth until Antonio served their dinners. Over dinner, Keaton noticed that Remi kept touching her neck and finally decided to ask.

"Remi, I see a mark or something on your neck and you keep touching it. What is it? You can tell me."

Remi took a deep breath and said, "Finger marks. The ones Rolf left behind. I've covered them with makeup, but all that does is cover them up. My neck is still tender."

Keaton felt the anger rise and take control of her. *How could that brute do that to this sweet woman? I just hope he gives me a reason to kill him.* Remi watched her closely,

seeing her eyes burn, but said nothing. Keaton got her murderous rage under control, leaned toward Remi, and took her hand across the table. It was intimate and they both knew it.

“Oh god Remi. I am so sorry. You must go to Mother Superior and tell her, show her what happened. If you want, I will go with you. Please don’t let him get away with this. Remember, you had a witness. Promise me, Remi.”

“How can I possibly tell Mother Superior? She’s his aunt?”

“Remi, you have to tell her. I bet you she will be in your corner. Trust me on this. I know I’m right.”

“All right Keaton. I’ll think about it tonight.” *How can I resist Keaton’s impassioned plea?*

“Will you call me and let me know how it goes?”

“Of course. Now how about some dessert?”

###

During dessert, Remi entertained Keaton with her students’ antics and the politics of the University.

“You know, Keaton, I never thought there could be so much politicking at a University. Boy was I wrong. You either get dragged into it, or if you can resist, the minute your back is turned, you get stabbed.

“Do you get dragged into it, Remi?”

“Pretty much they leave me alone. I’m kind of the wild card and they can’t figure out where my loyalties lie.”

Remi looked up and saw a sexy, dark haired woman closing in on Keaton. If flashing eyes and a fake smile meant trouble, the woman was a walking time bomb.

“Is this your work?” The woman demanded.

Keaton stood. “Carmen Tacona this is my friend Professor Remi Navarro. Remi was the keynote speaker at Saturday night’s fund raiser for the nursing college at the Pontifica University.”

Carmen calmed and was civil. "I'm pleased to meet you Professor Navarro."

"You remember the fundraiser?" Keaton continued. "You were supposed to meet me there but never showed up."

Carmen look properly chastised and Remi's heart fell into her stomach. *She is far too familiar with Keaton*, she thought.

"However, I'm certain Professor Navarro will be happy to accept your check right here, tonight."

Carmen's eyes flashed again, and a seductive smile played on her full lips. "And what will I get for my check?"

"Professor Navarro's undying gratitude." Keaton smiled sweetly.

Why don't you two get a room, Remi thought controlling her own temper.

"What if I want more than the professor's gratitude?" Carmen flashed perfect white teeth and sensually raked her teeth over her lower lip.

"Why don't you match my donation and see?" Keaton lowered her head and looked up at Carmen through long lashes.

Damn, that's the most adorable little girl look I've ever seen, Remi thought squirming in her chair.

Without breaking her gaze with Keaton, Carmen pulled a checkbook from her purse. "How much for what I want?"

"Springfield Exports donated this amount," Keaton pulled a pen from her jacket pocket and wrote a figure on the napkin.

Carmen glanced at the seven-figure donation. Without a blink she wrote a check for the same amount and handed it to Remi. Remi glanced at the check. It was from Buenaventura Mining, Peru's largest silver mine.

"This is very generous of you Miss Tacona. Thank you," Remi said as she thought, *I'd tear it up if I knew it would guarantee you won't have Keaton in your bed tonight*.

“Carmen and her family are very supportive of the Universities in Lima,” Keaton pointed out. “I believe one of your buildings is named after her father.”

Turning her attention back to Carmen, Keaton said, “If you’ll forgive us, Professor Navarro and I were discussing important business matters and it looks like most of your friends have found their way to the bar without you. I believe that one is most antsy about your absence.” Keaton nodded toward a tall, skinny redhead who was glaring at Carmen and Keaton.

Carmen waved her hand to indicate how insignificant her date was. “You were busy,” she huffed at Keaton.

“So, any port in the storm, eh?” Keaton snickered signaling for the server to bring their check. “I must see Professor Navarro home.”

###

“I need to call a ride share or taxi,” Remi said as they stood by the table.

“Nonsense,” Keaton exclaimed. “If you don’t mind riding in a Jeep, I’d be delighted to take you home.”

Remi’s heart sang. “I love Jeeps,” she murmured.

Keaton slid her hand down Remi’s back coming to rest at the small of her back and gently guided her through the now crowded restaurant.

Keaton’s hand on Remi’s back sent fire shooting in all directions through her body. Remi prayed her knees wouldn’t buckle. *God I want to be with her, but it is obvious she is involved.* She tried to drive from her mind the thoughts of Keaton’s firm hands and long fingers strumming her body but failed miserably.

###

Keaton turned to Remi, “You don’t live very far from here if I recall correctly.”

“You have a good memory, Keaton. Do you need the address again?”

“No thank you. Once I have been to a location, I can easily find my way back.”

“Seems like a handy skill to have. I’m just beginning to feel comfortable finding my way around the city,” answered Remi.

“Perhaps you will let me show you around sometime. I like making new friends.”

Remi’s stomach fell to her feet and clawed its way back up. *Well that settles it. She definitely is off the market.* Remi answered politely, “Thank you Keaton, but I rarely have time for sightseeing.” Remi turned toward the passenger window and didn’t say another word until Keaton turned into her driveway.

Keaton felt the icy silence and knew exactly what was wrong but didn’t have a clue how to handle it. She was sure that Remi had realized Carmen and she were involved, and as much as she would like to extricate herself from Carmen’s talons, she knew she couldn’t; not yet at least. She was also reasonably sure that Remi was interested in her more than in a friendly way. And then, a miracle happened.

Remi turned to her, thanked her for the ride, and asked if she would like to come up for a night cap.

Keaton didn’t have to think twice. “Yes, I would, and I want to explain what you witnessed tonight.”

Remi said, “You don’t owe me an explanation. Your life is your life and you don’t have to justify it to me or anyone else.”

“But I want to; I need to explain. Please?”

Remi began walking to the door and stopping to look over her shoulder at Keaton. “Are you coming?”

Keaton made a beeline to the door and stepped inside as soon as Remi opened it.

Remi took Keaton’s coat and her own jacket, hung them in a small coat closet near the top of the stairs. “What would

you like to drink? I have whiskey, as you know, pisco, cerveza, and a Malbec from Chile.”

“The Malbec please. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No Keaton, make yourself comfortable.”

A moment later Remi came into the living room and joined Keaton on the lumpy couch. Keaton could not resist.

“Why do you keep this lumpy couch? Did the flat come furnished?”

“Yes, it did, but honestly, I just haven’t gotten around to exchanging it. I’ve only been here six months, and I have been working nonstop at the University.”

Keaton nodded her head, sipped from her glass, and decided to push forward. “Remi, why did you invite me up here tonight? It was obvious you were upset with me.”

“I was annoyed with the situation, and I want to apologize to you. May I be honest?”

“Please do.”

“Do you remember the night of the gala, the night you saved me from that despicable Rolf?”

“Yes of course. How could I forget? Have you decided to tell Mother Superior?”

“Yes, I have a meeting at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow, but let’s not get off track. Keaton, do you remember what he said when he left?”

“I think he threatened me, right?”

“Yes Keaton, but he also said that you wanted me for yourself, that he had heard rumors.” Remi waited, curious to see if Keaton would admit that she remembered.

“I do remember, Remi. I’m surprised you did.”

“From the very first moment I met you Keaton, I felt an inexplicable connection to you and the night you stayed here to take care of me, I thought you might have felt it too. Even tonight, until your, ah, friend came, I thought we were connecting. Was I wrong?”

“No. You weren’t wrong. I’ve been powerfully drawn to you, but I didn’t know you felt the same, until just now.”

“I would like to see you, explore this, um, ‘thing’ between us, but I can’t, no I won’t as long as you are with someone else, Keaton.”

Keaton seemed to deflate right in front of Remi, who sat immobile while Keaton determined what she was going to say, if anything at all.

Keaton moved closer to Remi and took both her hands in hers. “I want the same thing, but the situation with Carmen is complicated.”

“Aren’t they all? She’s a boor and you know it. Why are you with her?”

“I’m not really with her. She thinks she is with me.”

“Keaton, what does that even mean?”

“Remi, I’m not going to lie to you. Having an association with Carmen has been advantageous to my line of business.” *But not the one you know about.* “I have been trying to let her down easy, but she just won’t take no for an answer.”

“Are you in love with her?” Remi pulled her hands back.

“No. No. It’s never been like that for me and clearly it isn’t like that for her.” Keaton took a big gulp from her glass.

“Then why? I just don’t understand.” Remi shook her head from side to side.

“I can’t explain right now, but I want you to believe me when I say that she means nothing to me.”

Remi got up and paced, whirling around in front of Keaton. “That’s what a lot of people say. How many times have I heard, ‘It’s just sex, she means nothing to me?’”

Keaton captured Remi’s hand and pulled her towards her. “I know you don’t have any reason to believe me. I get that, but I beg you to give me time to fix this.”

Remi let Keaton hold on to her hand, thought a moment, and said, “You can’t have it both ways. You know where I am when you make up your mind, but don’t take too long. I don’t have much patience for cowards!”

Keaton dropped Remi's hand, the words feeling as sharp as any slap ever was. She had two choices. She could storm out and leave Remi in the dust, or she could be understanding hoping that somehow Remi would reconsider.

Getting up, Keaton thanked Remi for the nightcap, retrieved her jacket and said goodnight. She had descended one step, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at Remi, whose hand was still on Keaton's shoulder.

"Keaton, this isn't casual for me. I just wanted you to know." Remi bent her head, placed a tender kiss on Keaton's cheek, and said goodnight. She followed Keaton to the door and locked it behind her. *Well that couldn't have gone any worse.* She sighed and headed to bed.

###

Keaton walked to her jeep and sat down. One thing was certain, Remi liked women. She even liked her. Keaton fought the urge to bang on Remi's door, make her promises and make love to her. But she knew she couldn't. Things weren't that simple where Carmen was concerned.

Keaton had been undercover associating with drug and human traffickers for so long she sometimes forgot that a world made up of Remi Navarros even existed.

She liked Remi's no-nonsense truthfulness. The brunette's straight forward approach to their relationship had surprised her. "I like Remi Navarro very much," she said out loud. "But I don't dare tell her the truth."

The truth would put too many people in harm's way. If the traps the department had been setting the past year were ever made public, a lot of undercover drug enforcement officers would lose their lives. Keaton had to play the role assigned to her or endanger others. No matter how badly she wanted Remi Navarro, she could never speak of tomorrow.

Chapter 5

Remi marched into Mother Superior's office at 7:55 a.m. ready to say "no" to whatever she wanted now. Sister Clara said good morning and waved Remi in.

Remi was astounded to find Mother Superior in civvies and even more surprised when she saw Keaton fixing coffee.

"Remi, come in. I take it you know Ms. Springfield?"

Remi was speechless and wasn't sure she could recover from both shocks. Mother Superior was dressed in a black pant suit and white button-down blouse, looking pretty sharp. Her hair was pulled into a loose ponytail at the back of her neck. *Do nuns even have long hair? I thought they chopped it all off.* All in all, she was a reasonably attractive woman, though Remi couldn't get over the "nun" part. It seemed counter intuitive to think of a nun as a woman.

Keaton was standing to the side like a cat who had just swallowed a canary. *What is going on here?* Remi mused.

"Good morning Remi," Keaton said as she handed her a cup of coffee. "I'm sorry to surprise you like this, but I thought you might want someone to back up what happened to you at the Gala."

Remi's eyes threw daggers at Keaton but pulled herself together enough to politely thank her for the coffee.

"What's this situation that happened at the Gala? Please enlighten me?" Mother Superior asked.

"Mother Superior, there is no gentle way to say this. I wish there were. Rolf got very drunk and assaulted me in the coat room. If Ms. Springfield had not come along when she did, he would have raped me."

Mother Superior was shocked. "Are you sure you didn't misinterpret his actions, Remi?"

"No. Absolutely not. The marks of his fingers on my neck are still visible." Remi rolled down the turtleneck

sweater she had worn and approached Mother Superior, who tentatively touched the bruises and turned pale.

“Ms. Springfield, you were there? You witnessed this?” Mother Superior was ashen.

“Yes, I did. It was exactly how Professor Navarro described it. I pulled him away, brought him to his knees and told him to leave her alone. He left and I took Professor Navarro home.”

“Damn it! That boy is going to be the death of me. I’m so sorry Remi that this happened to you. I will see to it that it never happens again. I thought he had grown up and would treat you like a gentleman, but obviously I was wrong.”

Keaton asked Remi, “Do you want to press charges?”

Mother Superior visibly paled even more. She stuttered while saying, “Let’s keep this in house and I promise I will take care of this and make it up to you.”

Remi didn’t want the hassle and nodded her head in agreement. She remembered Carmen’s check and passed it to Mother Superior. “Ms. Springfield convinced Ms. Tacona to donate to the building fund. Here is her check. Now may I leave?”

Mother Superior accepted the check and looked at it. “Ms. Springfield, you must be an excellent persuader to have Ms. Tacona match your company’s donation.”

“Glad I could help Mother Superior. If you don’t mind, I need to take my leave. It was a pleasure to see you again.”

Mother Superior shook her hand and walked her to the door while Remi uncomfortably waited in the hot seat.

“Remi, please let me say that I am appalled at my nephew’s behavior and rest assured that I will take care of it. I’d like to try to make this up to you. Would you like to accompany me to the Peruvian Paso Horse Show and Competition this weekend? It really is a marvelous event, and everyone should attend once in their life. What do you say?”

Remi knew if she turned Mother Superior down, it would be a huge insult, so she agreed, excused herself, and made her way to her classroom before another disaster befell her. She was surprised to find Keaton waiting in the hallway outside her classroom.

“Remi,” Keaton spoke softly, “may I have a moment of your time?”

Remi made a show of studying her watch then said, “My class starts in five minutes.”

“Remi, I would very much like to date you,” Keaton ducked her head and looked at Remi through long lashes. *Dear God, did you have to let her look at me that way*, Remi thought as her stomach performed a double pike.

“I know you have reservations about me, but please get to know me before you mark my name off your dance card.”

Remi ducked her head trying to hide the smile that threatened to spread across her face. *Damn she is so cute.*

“I thought that perhaps—” Keaton faltered. “That maybe you could accompany me to the President’s Ball in celebration of the opening of the annual Peruvian horse show. I have an invitation for a plus one and I thought you might enjoy the festivities. Err not as a date, of course, that sort of thing is frowned on in high places. Just as a friend.”

Remi watched Keaton’s lips as she spoke. She had never wanted to kiss anyone so badly in her life. “I assumed you would be escorting Carmen,” Remi lashed out.

“I have no desire to escort Carmen.”

“Did she collect her pound of flesh for her donation?” Remi couldn’t stop her bitter tirade.

“I’m sorry,” Keaton mumbled. “It appears I’ve made a mistake.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

Remi watched her. *There goes the woman of my dreams*, she thought.

“Keaton,” she called, “I’d love to be your date for the ball.”

Keaton turned to face her as the school bell clanged and nodded as a huge smile spread over her face.

###

Beatriz stormed through the doors of Berger Shipping. She was livid and it showed. Everyone quickly moved out of her way as she headed toward Rolf's office. She barged past Rolf's secretary, flung open the door, and yelled, "What the hell is the matter with you? Are you a complete imbecilic moron?" She leveled her gaze at him and spat out, "Pendejo."

Rolf stood, nonplused, and said, "Auntie what are you doing here and in civvies too?"

"Rolf, you good-for-nothing imitation of a man, don't pretend you don't know why I'm here. Your behavior was appalling."

Smiling like a Cheshire cat, Rolf said, "To what are you referring, Auntie?"

"I don't have time for games and if you do, I'm going to go directly to my brother about this." Mother Superior's chest was heaving.

"All right Auntie Beatriz don't get your panties in a ruffle. I just had a little too much to drink and misread your precious Professor Navarro's signals. It won't happen again. I'll stay away from her."

"Rolf, you did not misread Professor Navarro's signals. There was a witness, one of our largest donors that came to my office to corroborate the assault. Now, I'm going to have to bend over backwards to repair this, especially if she decides to press charges or even worse report it to her Peace Corps bosses."

"Auntie, you are making too big a deal of this. Water under the bridge."

"Listen to me you sniveling brat, you are going to do exactly as I say, or I am going to make sure that you no longer have a place in this company's activities."

"Okay. Okay. What do you want?"

Mother Superior outlined her plan which included a letter of apology and a huge bouquet of flowers delivered to the University.

Mother Superior crossed herself. “I’ve burned so many candles for you, I could heat half of Lima. Rolf, I pray for you constantly. When are you going to act like a gentleman instead of a prick?”

She shoved him out of the way and left as forcefully as she had entered.

###

Keaton called Remi that evening to tell her the date and time of the ball. “It’s formal.” Wanting to impress on Remi how formal the ball would be she added, “I’ll be wearing a Trumpet/Mermaid off the shoulder evening dress with beading sequins and heels, of course.”

“What color?” Remi asked.

“White.”

“I’ll be sure to wear a different color, so we don’t look like the Bobbsey Twins,” Remi giggled.

Keaton laughed out loud happy to hear Remi’s giggle. “I’ll pick you up at 6:30 p.m.”

Remi hung up the phone in a tizzy. She had nothing to wear. She hoped she could hire Sister Clara’s niece and pay it out over time. *I must wear a dark purple dress or maybe navy blue*, she thought. She hugged herself then thought how good it would feel to have Keaton’s arms around her. She fell asleep planning things that would steal Keaton’s heart and make her forget Carmen Tacona.

###

The next morning Remi approached Sister Clara and spoke with her about the ball dress. Sister Clara shook her head and said, “Child, my niece can sew for most events, but the President’s Ball is a different story all together. I don’t think she sews that spectacularly. I’m afraid you would be embarrassed but let me show you something breathtaking. It was donated last year by the American ambassador’s wife

who has returned to the states. She only wore it once. It is from The Dress Boutique in Miraflores. It is custom made and exquisite!”

“What color is it?” Remi asked following the old woman to the back of her office.

“Deep Purple with exquisite beading on the bodice. It will look stunning on you.”

Remi caught her breath when Sister Clara unzipped the bag protecting the dress. It was indeed unique. “Oh, Sister Clara it is beautiful.”

“And it looks like just your size,” Clara noted. “I’ve been saving this dress for someone special going to a significant event. You fit the bill. Take it home and try it on. If it needs adjustments, my niece can help with that.”

“I should pay for it,” Remi insisted. “The school could sell this for a great deal of money.”

“Ridiculous,” Sister Clara hissed. “You wear it to the President’s Ball, have it dry cleaned, and return it to me. The school will still get its money. Please take it.”

Remi nodded her head and took the dress.

###

Stryker walked around the body and shook his head as he pushed the button on his cellphone designated as boss. Keaton answered on the first ring.

“Gallegos is dead,” Stryker said. “You’d better come.”

“Damn! Where are you?”

Stryker gave Keaton the address. “I’ll wait until you get here to call Mattie,” he added. “You might want to bring a barf bag. It isn’t pretty.”

“On my way.” Keaton hung up searching for an excuse to give her uncle for leaving. She walked into Ava’s office as the secretary was transferring a call to Lucho. *My lucky day she thought.*

“Ava, when Uncle Lucho gets off the phone, please tell him I had to make a sales call.”

Ava nodded and Keaton sprinted from the office to her jeep before Lucho could get off the phone and catch her.

Stryker was waiting for her in one of the seedier parts of Lima. The body was on the roof of an apartment building surrounded by other crumbling structures.

Keaton made her way through garbage thrown on the roof from surrounding buildings and found Stryker standing over the remains of a man she guessed to be over three hundred pounds.

“Tiny Gallegos,” Stryker said.

“He’s the muscle for Buenaventura Mining.” Keaton noted. “What happened?”

“The tenant heard something heavy hit the roof and came up to see what it was.”

Keaton looked around noting the roof was surrounded by taller buildings. “Let’s call Mattie. You know how bent she gets if we rifle a corpse before she has a chance to look at it.”

Stryker laughed as he pulled out his phone to call. “I sure do.”

They walked around the roof looking at debris that had been tossed onto it. “I can’t believe they throw their trash onto the roof,” Stryker commented as he nudged a sack of garbage with the toe of his boot.

“Lima is so crowded,” Keaton pointed out. “Over eleven million people. That’s seven thousand people per square mile. That’s staggering.”

“Yeah, they can’t control the traffic nor the garbage,” Stryker noted.

“Any guess from which one of the rooftops Tiny was chucked?” Keaton asked. “How in the world did he land right in the center of this roof?”

“Maybe he wasn’t tossed off a roof. Maybe he was placed here,” Stryker surmised.

“Do you see how flat he is?” Keaton pointed out. “I’ll bet a month’s pay every bone in his body is broken indicating he was thrown onto this roof.”

The door to the roof opened and Lima’s Chief Medical Examiner Mattie Ramos and her entourage joined them. “Bag everything on this roof,” Mattie instructed her team.

She turned her attention to the two DEA officers. “Thanks for making me the garbage collector today.”

“We didn’t kill him Mattie,” Stryker defended. “I guess it is a good way to get the garbage cleaned up from one’s roof. Throw a body on it and the coroner’s office cleans the roof.”

“Do you know who he is?” she asked as she lifted Tiny’s jacket to get to the inside pocket.

“Tiny Gallegos,” Keaton answered. “He works for Buenaventura Mining.”

She checked the wallet she pulled from his pocket and nodded in agreement. “What’s this?” She held up one of the chess pawns Keaton had tossed between the dead bodies of the human traffickers.

“A turf war,” Keaton huffed.

“They’re beginning to kill off each other.” Mattie grinned. “Life is good.”

“Mattie do you have any idea how the body could land right in the center of this roof?” Keaton asked.

Mattie looked around. “He wasn’t thrown from the buildings surrounding this one. Give my team a chance to go over everything with a fine-toothed comb and I’ll let you know what I conclude.” She slid her hands under Tiny. “Judging from the jelly-like consistency of the body, I can tell you he is pulverized.”

###

Keaton looked at herself in the mirror one more time and thought, *Dress to die for, check. Blonde hair anyone would want to spread out on a pillow, check. Heels guaranteed to make legs look even longer, check.*

She suppressed her thoughts of Remi slowly unzipping her dress, slipping off her shoes and admiring her silky blonde hair as she leaned above her.

She had invited Remi to a function guaranteed to keep Keaton on her best behavior.

Chapter 6

Remi watched out the window and hugged herself as the black limousine pulled to the curb in front of her apartment. “Oh my god,” she breathed as Keaton stepped from the backseat of the car. She had always thought Keaton beautiful but tonight she was heart stopping gorgeous. Remi gasped for air then realized she was holding her breath.

This must be what the vapors feel like, she laughed to herself. She waited until Keaton knocked on her door then walked across the floor, her heels clicking a staccato on the tile.

Remi opened the door and both women burst into laughter. “So much for avoiding the Bobbsey Twin look,” Remi giggled.

They looked each other up and down in open admiration. The dresses they wore were haute couture and identical except for the color.

“So much for originals.” Keaton laughed. “But oh my, Remi you are devastatingly beautiful.”

“As are you.” Remi blushed. “I’ve never seen you in heels.”

“I am even graceful in them,” Keaton teased. “I promise I won’t embarrass you.”

“I don’t think you could ever embarrass me,” Remi said honestly.

“Well then, I hope that what I am going to ask you now won’t embarrass you.”

Remi raised her eyebrows, a small smile spreading across her face and said, “Go for it.”

“You are so gorgeous, and you dress so beautifully, why do you insist on wearing those baggy slacks and sweaters at school... and what about the glasses?”

Remi burst out laughing. “When I first got here and started working at the University, I did dress up, but after

being hit on so many times by rather disgusting male coworkers, I just decided to make myself unattractive.”

“And has it worked?” asked Keaton, genuinely curious.

“Apparently not. I’m here with you,” Remi delightfully laughed.

“Yes, you are, but haven’t you noticed yet, I’m not a disgusting male coworker?”

Remi smiled a bit seductively and answered, “Oh, I’ve noticed. I’ve noticed a lot.”

They both laughed at the good-natured bantering and settled into the back of the limo and asked the driver to close the partition. Keaton turned to look at Remi again. “I can’t take my eyes off you. You’re so beautiful.”

Remi bowed her head. “Thank you, she murmured.

“I wonder if the same person sewed all these beads on your dress and mine,” Keaton mused.

They passed the time comparing the handwork on their dresses and were surprised when the limo stopped in front of the presidential palace.

“I have never gotten used to the tanks and troops surrounding the palace,” Keaton mumbled as they waited for the driver to open their door.

“I know,” breathed Remi.

###

They waited for their identity check then walked to the receiving line where the President and Peru’s First Lady greeted them thanking them for coming.

“Do you know them personally,” Remi inquired.

“Not really,” Keaton admitted. “It’s all about money.”

“Oh,” Remi sighed somehow happy that Keaton wasn’t a name dropper.

Remi’s hand tightened on Keaton’s arm. “Your girlfriend is here.” She spotted Carmen across the room.

“She isn’t my girlfriend,” Keaton muttered. “Would you like a glass of champagne?”

“If you promise not to get me drunk.” Remi grinned.

“What and ruin my plan to get you inebriated and have my way with you?”

Remi glanced at Keaton to make certain she was teasing. The smoldering look in the blonde’s eyes indicated a touch of sincerity.

A server walked toward them with a tray of champagne and Keaton motioned for him to bring them the beverage. They lifted their glasses from the tray and turned to each other. “To the future,” Keaton said as their glasses touched.

“Heads up,” Remi whispered.

“Keaton,” Carmen purred stretching out her name. “And Professor, how delightful to see you again.”

Remi nodded acknowledging the greeting. “I must thank you again for your generous donation, Ms. Tacona.”

Carmen gazed at Keaton as she replied. “It is a small price to pay, Professor, for the excellent program you are heading up at the University.”

“Keaton,” a distinguished looking man approached them. “My daughter tells me you will be present for our entire horse show.”

“I plan to be, Señor Tacona. Sir have you met our new Director over the nursing program at the University, Professor Remi Navarro?”

Señor Tacona made a show of bowing and kissing the back of Remi’s hand. “My daughter has mentioned you my dear. She failed to say you are stunning. I hope the nursing program is progressing to your satisfaction. Peru is eternally grateful to you for making the program possible.”

“Thank you, Señor Tacona,” Remi nodded.

“You must attend our wonderful horse show. It starts tomorrow. You shall be my guest.”

Tacona missed the disapproving glance his daughter shot in his direction.

“Thank you Señor, but I have promised Mother Superior that I will accompany her to the show.”

“That is very kind of you, Professor,” Tacona praised. “Then you will both be our guests. Our show will be blessed with your presence.”

Remi politely thanked him and bid him a good evening.

Tacona took his daughter’s arm “Come Carmen, we must work the room,” Tacona winked at Keaton.

“What a nice gentleman,” Remi commented as the two strolled away.

Keaton nodded then smiled at the couple approaching them. As they reached Keaton and Remi, Keaton introduced the couple. They chatted amiably before they moved on to greet someone else.

After an hour of mingling and three glasses of champagne, Remi was beginning to lean on Keaton. “How much longer do we need to stay,” she whispered in Keaton’s ear.

“Have you had enough of the rich and glamorous?” Keaton smiled.

“Yes. And I may be getting drunk,” Remi giggled.

Keaton pulled her phone from her purse and notified the driver to pull the limo to the front. It took them half an hour to say goodnight and thank those in charge for a most enjoyable party.

###

“My feet are killing me,” Remi declared as she kicked off her heels in the limo. “And I’m starving.”

“Why don’t we change clothes then go to a nice quiet café for a late dinner?” Keaton suggested.

“I’m afraid my slacks will look like clam diggers on you,” Remi snickered.

“I just happen to have a change of clothes in the back,” Keaton wrinkled her nose.

“Oh,” Remi snorted. “Just happen?”

“This is not my first rodeo dear Professor. I always bring something to change into, just in case.”

“Just in case you get lucky,” Remi narrowed her eyes trying to bring Keaton into focus.

“Driver, we need to drop Professor Navarro at her apartment,” Keaton instructed.

They rode in silence to Remi’s apartment. Keaton walked her to the door, said goodnight, and left.

Could I have said anything more stupid, Remi chastised herself as she sprawled across her bed. Keaton was a perfect lady all evening and I had to ruin it by suggesting she had nefarious reasons for what she did.

Suddenly the champagne reminded her she wasn’t used to imbibing. She rushed to the bathroom and threw up. *Maybe it’s a good thing Keaton didn’t come in.*

Remi washed her face and brushed her teeth. *Now I am really starving and all I have in the fridge is peanut butter. God, please let me have bread.*

She opened the jar of peanut butter, sniffed it, placed it, on the counter, and pulled open cabinet doors searching for bread. She sighed as she caught sight of the sliced wheat bread. She pulled a dinner knife from the drawer and began making a sandwich. “Mold! Damn moldy bread,” she whimpered and began eating the peanut butter with a spoon.

A knock on her door surprised her and she stood still for a minute. The knock came again accompanied by, “Remi, it’s me, Keaton. Please open the door.”

Everything in her told her to pretend she was asleep, but her feet started walking down the steps to the door of their own accord. Before she knew it, she had opened the door. Keaton was dressed in tight jeans and a pale blue button down blouse. Her hair fell in wonderful flowing waves on her shoulders. *I never dreamed the devil would have blue eyes and blue jeans, Remi thought.*

“You haven’t changed!” Keaton feigned surprise. “Aren’t you hungry?”

For everything you have to offer, Remi thought but said, “Oh Keaton, I can’t get this darn tight dress unzipped.”

“Turn around.” Keaton slowly slid the zipper down her back past her hips to stop just below the small of her back. “There, now go change. I am starving. Wear comfortable shoes.”

###

The President’s Ball had been glamorous and interesting but the rest of the evening with Keaton Springfield was like a fairytale.

Keaton took her to a nice club hidden in one of the many secret places in downtown Lima. Same sex couples were dancing together to soft, dreamy music. The food was exceptional, and Keaton was her most charming self.

“I’ve never heard of this place,” Remi looked around at the beautiful décor and soft lighting. Booths lined the walls providing privacy for the diners.

“It’s one of Lima’s best-kept secrets,” Keaton said. “Our sexual orientation is no longer prosecuted in Lima, but we don’t flaunt it. There are nice, safe places all over town. One only needs to know where to look.”

Remi watched the dancers imagining Keaton’s arms around her.

“Would you like to dance?” Keaton asked.

“In public!” Remi gasped.

Keaton raised her brows as a smile twisted across her lips. “Yes Professor, in public.”

Remi blushed at her naivety. “Yes,” she whispered.

Keaton slowly pulled Remi into her arms. As Remi relaxed Keaton pulled her closer until each could feel every move the other made. “I knew you’d fit me,” Keaton whispered into her ear. “You feel so good in my arms, Remi.”

Remi had recovered from the champagne and wondered why she was so lightheaded; why her stomach felt like someone was doing cartwheels in it. The feeling of Keaton Springfield’s arms around her took her breath away.

“Will I always be this weak where you’re concerned,” she murmured into Keaton’s ear.

“I can only hope,” Keaton whispered. “I won’t take advantage, I promise.”

They danced and drank coffee until closing time. “I love your Jeep,” Remi snuggled into Keaton as they walked to the parking lot.

“I’m glad,” Keaton laughed. “It serves me well in Lima traffic.”

Remi dozed on the way home and was surprised when Keaton woke her. “You’re home.”

Remi unbuckled her seatbelt. “Thank you for the most wonderful evening of my life,” she said.

“You’re most welcome,” Keaton replied. “It was the best evening of my life too. Should I pick you up in the morning on my way to the horse show?”

“I’m supposed to meet Mother Superior at the show at ten. I would welcome a ride. Saves me a trip on my scooter.”

“Why don’t I pick you up at eight? We can go to breakfast and still be at the show in plenty of time.”

“That would be wonderful.” Remi sighed.

Keaton jumped from the Jeep and walked Remi to her door. “Goodnight, Remi.”

“Would you like to come in?” Remi’s mouth uttered much to her surprise.

“Yes. Yes, I would,” Keaton murmured.

Remi unlocked the door and they stepped inside. Keaton closed the door then leaned against it for a few seconds. She leaned down and brushed her lips against Remi’s. Remi slid her arms around Keaton’s neck pressing the full length of her body against the blonde.

Keaton encircled her waist and pulled her closer as her lips captured Remi’s and her tongue darted between white teeth. As she deepened the kiss Remi responded, heady with desire. She pressed Keaton against the door kissing her feverishly.

Keaton slid her hands down to Remi's hips and pressed against her. "I want you so much," she whispered. Remi crushed her against the door seeking more contact more—.

Keaton gently pushed her away. "I must go while I still can," she whispered. Then she was gone.

Remi leaned her back against the closed door. She was aching all over. "Damn you Keaton Springfield. You are the devil in blue jeans."

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON NOV. 1, 2020