Dream Lover

Louise Glass

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Dedication

My husband Les and daughter April were my sounding boards as I wrote Dream Lover, and I appreciate their feedback tremendously. I also want to thank my Facebook friends who took the time to read and critique excerpts from this book. Their suggestions were invaluable, and their faith in my writing inspired me to do better. Sadly, my father, Larry Friedman passed away before Dream Lover was published. He was always there for me, encouraging my literary aspirations. This book is for you, Dad, with all my love.



A Note from the Author

Dream Lover is a work of fiction and takes place during the years 2009–2010. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Dream Lover is the first book in a series about the characters you will meet on these pages. They have a lot more to say, and I hope that you stay along for the ride even if it gets bumpy at times.



Prologue

It was 2 a.m., and Ali's Sulphur-crested cockatoo began squawking loudly from the second bedroom, letting her know that he needed attending right away.

"I'll be there in a minute, Fred!" She called out to him, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

The bird flew to Ali, landing on her shoulder. "Mommy, hug Fred."

Ali sat down on the chair in Fred's bedroom and settled him on her lap. She cuddled the cockatoo and kissed his head. His yellow crest relaxed as she spoke soft words to him, stroking his white feathers and hoping he would soon be asleep.

Despite the lateness of the hour, Fred was a bundle of energy. The cockatoo hopped to the floor and did a little dance, bobbing his head up and down. Thankfully, Fred tuckered out soon, and Ali was able to put him on his perch. Exhausted, she climbed into bed and was out as soon as her head hit the pillow. While deep in slumber, she felt his first touch. Warm hands began to caress her as he lightly feathered kisses on her face.

This dream was even better than the last one. Ali's fantasy lover licked her neck and lightly bit the flesh with his teeth. She never realized that her subconscious could invent a man who was everything she had ever yearned for in a lover. The nocturnal vis-

its were coming for close to a week now, and Ali craved this man with a hunger, she had never experienced before. Each night his touch became bolder, and his lips grew more demanding as they explored the warm recesses of her mouth, mating with her tongue in a purely carnal way.

Ali sighed with pleasure as his fingers caressed her nipples through the thin barrier of her silk nightgown. “Don’t stop,” she pleaded as his hands slid under the bodice and grasped her breasts.

Strong arms pulled her nightgown off her shoulders and down to her waist. She lay there exposed with her upper body and golden hair spread out over the pale blue sheets. She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, and he had to have her. His arm held her close as he sucked urgently at one breast while caressing the other. Ali was wild with need as she urged him on.

“Speak to me,” she whispered, but he never uttered a word. She yearned to see his face, but the darkness hid him from view. Her legs parted voluptuously, and one hand began stroking where she needed it the most.

Suddenly the dream lover was gone, and Ali awoke shivering, so she adjusted the air conditioning and fixed the straps of her nightgown that had somehow slid off her shoulders. Sleep eluded Ali as she tossed and turned fitfully, desperately hoping the dream lover returned the following evening. An hour passed, and Ali lay wide awake. Frustrated, she turned on the reading lamp and opened her novel, hoping she would fall asleep mid-sentence. When that didn’t succeed, she decided to take a hot shower. Ali stood under the water, feeling the wet warmth flow over her naked curves as she reached for the shampoo. Lathering her hair, Ali felt the emptiness of her life closing in on her. Her tears built to a crescendo, and she let loose with a sob. Grabbing the loofah, she continued to wash, trying to erase the night’s memories, but the taste of loneliness was bitter.



Chapter One

To supplement her income Ali moonlighted as a dog walker. It was only temporary until her interior design business began to take off. Her one client, Mrs. Matilda Throckmorton had a considerable design budget, and she owned homes in both the city and the Hamptons. If Ali could clone the uber-wealthy woman, she would be well on the way to making a name for herself.

Today, as the temperature soared past ninety, all she wanted was to go home and unwind. So after dropping the four dogs off at their respective homes, Ali opted to take a taxi home, even though the ride would cost her a small fortune. She checked on Fred, who was asleep, and poured herself a glass of iced tea. Sipping the drink, she relaxed while perusing the latest issue of Veranda, but soon the "call of the wild" snapped Ali out of her reverie.

"*Squawk! Squawk!* Fred hungry! Feed me!" screeched the cockatoo. His screams could awaken the dead, and Ali felt lucky that so far, none of her neighbors had complained about the noise.

"I'm coming to feed you, Fred!" Ali was exhausted from walking dogs in the oppressive heat, and she stifled a yawn as she entered the cozy eat-in kitchen. Her eyes were at half-mast as she cut up a cantaloupe, adding seedless grapes and slices of orange. Fred loved bananas, so she added them to the mixture knowing the

cockatoo would enjoy eating the refreshing treat. Ali made healthy homemade meals for Fred to supplement the seed mix prescribed by the avian vet. The cockatoo savored everything from banana nut bread to apple and honey cake. Ali enjoyed baking, and she puttered happily around the kitchen, trying out new bird-friendly recipes for Fred.

Unfortunately, the fruit was not enough for Fred. "*Squawk!* Fred want a doodle!" The cockatoo was a junk food addict with one strange craving: Cheez Doodles. Ali would never have allowed her friend Lizzie to feed Fred the first Cheez Doodle if she had known the outcome. Since then, the bird has wanted them all the time. The cockatoo's avian vet allowed Fred to eat them in moderation. Ali followed the doctor's instructions to the letter no matter how much Fred would beg for his favorite treat.

She kept the bird on his meager "doodle diet" despite his fits of pique. It had been several days since Fred's last taste of the cheese-flavored puffs, so she grabbed a bag of the snack. Ali couldn't stand the sight of Cheez Doodles anymore, and she wished that Fred would get sick of them, but he still lived for "doodle days." Fred sat quietly on his perch in the kitchen, eating one doodle at a time and savoring it. Ali couldn't help smiling, watching the cockatoo enjoying them. Cheez Doodles were such a tiny thing, but they meant so much to Fred.

For a cockatoo kept in captivity, Fred was a happy and healthy bird. Ali realized that she tended to spoil Fred, but it made her happy, and the cockatoo deserved it. There was no sterile-looking parrot-sized cage for Fred. His custom-made Victorian aviary took up most of her second bedroom. The room used to be her home office, but now Ali was content keeping her laptop on the dining room table. She stored her design files in an antique hand-painted chest that she found at an estate sale.

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Two years before Fred came to live with her, Ali looked through the newspaper's classified section to see what animals were for sale. Having considered herself a dog person, she planned on getting a canine companion from a reputable breeder. Ali regretted not growing up with one, but her mother claimed that she was allergic to dogs. One day, Ali watched as Cynthia Rosen lifted a friend's Havanese puppy and kissed it, making a big fuss over it. She realized that her mother had lied to her again, playing her for a fool.

As Ali scanned the ads, she saw one that caught her eye. She read it and then moved on to the ads with puppies for sale. But something about the original posting intrigued her, and she reread it: *Young male Sulphur-crested cockatoo. Highly intelligent. Talks. Needs a loving home.* If anyone had love to spare, it was Ali.

It was a leisurely drive out to Stony Brook, New York. A small, quiet college town peppered with quaint Victorian and Cape Cod houses. Ali breathed in the sweet smell of the morning, dew on the grass, and felt renewed. Then she slowed down and stopped to watch a white-tailed deer and two fawns walk across the road. After riding down yet another country road, she suddenly found herself in a seedy-looking part of the hamlet.

Ali parked the rental car in front of a house that was in a sad state of disrepair. Cedar shakes had fallen off the home, and the siding was broken and filled with mold. After knocking, the screen door opened, and Ali found herself standing face to face with a grizzled-looking man, wearing a stained undershirt with a prominent beer belly.

"Are you the gal that's interested in the bird?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm Alexandra Rosen," she replied.

The man scratched under his armpit and chugged a Bud, draining it all down in one long gulp. "Charlie Smith. Nice to meetcha. Come on in."

As they entered, Charlie belched loudly. He scratched so much Ali was worried that fleas or lice might have infested the home. She followed the man into a dust-covered room overrun with cobwebs.

If it weren't for her interest in the cockatoo, she would have raced to her car and hightailed it back to the city.

Against the back wall sat a rusty cage far too small to house a cockatoo or any large bird. Ali's heart broke when she saw how the cockatoo was living. She asked the man if she could pet the bird, hoping it would not bite her out of fear or anger.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Charlie answered.

The cockatoo had small patches of feathers missing. The bird was either sick or plucking the feathers from stress. Peering into the cage, Ali and the cockatoo made eye contact. She would have sworn she saw sadness in the obsidian-colored eyes as they gazed back at her.

"Mr. Smith, I need to pet the bird," Ali reiterated.

"He's a mean motherfucker, and he tries to bite me all the time. Are you lookin' to get bitten?"

"That's a lot of money that you're asking for, and I won't purchase the cockatoo without knowing if he likes me."

"Aw hell. If that'll get you to buy the bird, then go ahead and touch him. But if you lose a finger, don't come cryin' to me," he warned Ali, wishing that his wife had not died, leaving him alone with the bird.

Gingerly, Ali opened the cage door and stroked the cockatoo's matted feathers. The poor thing looked scrawny, and Ali's dander rose higher, knowing the cockatoo was underfed. As she lightly stroked the cockatoo, a miracle happened. The bird left the cage and slowly climbed onto Ali's outstretched arm. Then to her astonishment, the cockatoo gently rubbed his beak on her face.

"*Squawk!* Pretty girl. *Squawk!* Pretty girl."

"He seems very intelligent." Ali was amazed that the cockatoo could speak so well.

"The bird never shuts up," Charlie complained.

"*Squawk!* You are meany! No, like you! Like pretty girl! *Squawk!*"

Ali listened as the bird spoke in intelligent sentences while he continued to nuzzle her. The man looked on, apoplectic at the sight of his late wife's bird making nice to the city woman.

"Well, do you want him?" Charlie asked, running short on patience.

Ali quickly paid the five hundred dollars. Then she rushed to retrieve the travel cage she'd brought along. When the cockatoo saw the clean cage, he pitifully cried out in fear. After taking the time to examine the cage, the bird hopped inside, sensing that it was a safe haven. The cage was secure in the backseat, and Ali fed the cockatoo some parrot food, which it ate quickly. Ali spoke softly to the bird and watched as he began to relax. Soon the cockatoo attempted to open the door with his beak, so Ali let him out of the cage. The cockatoo sat in Ali's lap and looked up at her beseechingly, squawking softly. He put his head in her hand, and she stroked his yellow crest, which he seemed to enjoy.

"You need a name, little guy," Ali told the cockatoo.

"*Squawk!* Never had a name. Very sad. Pretty lady love me."

"I love you very much," Ali answered knowing she spoke the truth. Then she realized that every word the cockatoo had spoken made perfect sense. She had adopted a bird genius! "I want you to choose whatever name you like," she told him.

The cockatoo flapped his wings, and his yellow crest spread wide, making him seem beautiful despite the matted feathers and the patches of raw skin. *"Squawk!* Happy boy! Yipee! Yay!"

"Let's see about choosing a name for you. There's Timmy, Josh, Sam, Jimmy, Bobby, Fred—"

The bird's yellow crest spread wide at the sound of the name. "Fred! Boy, oh boy! I Fred! Yippee!" he screeched, but it was a screech of happiness.

"Fred is a wonderful name." Ali smiled all the way home while Fred chatted happily from the backseat. The bird did talk a lot, but Ali loved listening to him. Silently, she vowed to give Fred the life that he deserved.



Chapter Two

Ali was racing four dogs across Fifth Avenue. She was determined to get them to the other side before the light turned red. Not wanting to chance it, Ali scooped up Maude. The miniature dachshund weighed next to nothing, and she urged the others to keep walking. Winston, the English bulldog, tended to get winded, but today he managed to keep up with the other dogs.

Due to excess weight, Winston had the most health issues, and Ali was worried about the bulldog. She tried reasoning with his owner, but the woman poo-pooed any mention of his weight. She told Ali that Winston was big-boned. Ali looked at the dog's plump rounded middle and knew its owner was overfeeding him. She explained that the bulldog was getting over-exerted and could not walk as long as the other dogs.

"Alexandra, if Winston's need for extra rest breaks troubles you, there is an easy solution to that problem."

"What's that?" Ali inquired.

"Whenever Winston is tired, you can carry him. You're young and healthy, and it shouldn't be a problem."

"You have got to be kidding me," Ali answered incredulously.

That was when Ali realized that her dog-walking days were coming to an end. She'd carry the bulldog when hell froze over.

Becoming a dog walker had been a colossal mistake. She had to quit before she lost her sanity. But first, she had to develop an alternative plan to pay for her monthly bills until she garnered more clients.

Unbeknownst to Ali, someone watched her every move while walking the dogs. While she stopped to look at the cookware in Williams Sonoma's window, a man stood silently and waited. He was careful to keep a safe distance between them, so there was no chance that Ali would see him.

The man first laid eyes on the dog walker while on his way to a business lunch. Her beauty had struck him, but it wasn't only her looks that intrigued him. The city was overflowing with gorgeous, long-stemmed beauties if appearance was all that mattered. The feelings that flooded him for the dog walker went way beyond physical attraction. He felt a strong spiritual and psychic connection to the young woman that ran around Manhattan with her pack of dogs.

Ali's admirer was a workaholic who lived and breathed his job and thrived on its challenges. His foundation did psychic research and more. It was a growing field fueled by people needing help in a world gone mad with terrorist attacks, global warming, and an uncertain economy. He was a rising star in the news and on the talk show circuit.

Under normal circumstances, he would have walked over and introduced himself as they made polite banter. They would go out for dinner and drinks. Then, before the evening ended, she would have inevitably ended up in his bed. But this woman was different. She was not a one-night stand—she was a keeper. So, he bided his time, watching and waiting in the shadows of the skyscrapers that lined the city streets.

There was a problem, though. Whenever he "looked" psychically on the dog walker, there was a block. No amount of concentration could obliterate the invisible wall. The man could predict life and death and ferret out serial killers with his paranormal

gifts—yet this one woman was making him crazed, and he could not see a damn thing on her.

She was on his mind, day and night. When he should have been concentrating on a case, his thoughts strayed to her. So far, he had managed to keep his private life out of the news. It took considerable effort and planning, but it was worth not becoming fodder for the gossip columns. He was considered one of Manhattan's most secretive and elusive bachelors, and he liked it that way.

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The sun was beating down on Ali, and she wiped the sweat from her brow for the umpteenth time. The small park was one of her favorite spots to take a rest break with the dogs. Ali took out the water dishes and filled them, watching the dogs eagerly lap up the liquid. One slender hand held onto the leashes while they lay down and took a much-needed siesta under the shade of a large elm tree. Then, feeling parched, Ali drank the Evian water she always carried, quenching her thirst.

Ali's admirer was glad that she was resting. She should not have been walking the dogs in the heat, but he had no say in her comings or goings until circumstances changed. Then, as was his habit, he glanced at his Rolex. A critical board meeting was coming up, and he had to leave. His eyes followed the dog walker as his taxi pulled away until she was out of sight.



Chapter Three

Since the first encounter with the dog walker, Steve Farrell had become celibate. However, his best friend, Seth, the head neurosurgeon at NYU Langone Medical Center, did not believe that Steve could stay away from the ladies for much longer. He was confident that Steve would crack and bed some gorgeous babe before the week was out.

Both men were commitment-phobes with many notches on their belts. When Steve finally convinced Seth that he had no interest in making love with anyone except the dog walker, his friend wanted to drag him to the nearest bar and force-feed him a sexy brunette to replace her, but Steve would not budge.

Earlier that day, Steve had an appointment with a new client. The fledgling actress was an understudy in an Off-Broadway play, and she needed career advice. She was scheduled for a one-hour life reading. When the hour was up, the actress had learned the reasons for her past failures. She also knew what was needed to get her career back on track. Steve saw her name up in lights on Broadway, and he was happy about her future success.

A life reading delved into all aspects of the client's past, present, and future. Steve prepared the actress for serious health issues she would be facing. In her mid-forties, a mammogram would locate breast cancer. Steve advised his client to take all neces-

sary tests. She had been lax and skipped them, but not anymore. Now the actress would follow a special diet that strengthened the immune system. What could have ended up as a mastectomy would now be a safe lumpectomy and long life for the fortunate young woman.

The client quickly developed a crush on the boyishly handsome master psychic, as had happened countless times before. Not wanting the day to end, she invited Steve out to dinner, hoping for a lot more than food when the meal was over. Under normal circumstances, Steve would have taken the actress up on the offer, eaten a delicious meal, and then made love to her, but he politely declined. He knew that he could not go on like this for much longer. He was pining over a woman who did not know he existed.

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Later that week, while eating Chinese takeout for dinner, Steve's inner guides lit up like the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. He began preparing to astral project and get the answers he desperately sought. Steve concentrated and slowed down his breathing, helping him to relax. A sense of peace took hold, and Steve's soul began rising out of his physical body. Soon he was looking down at his inert form lying on the bed below as his soul took flight.

Earth was far away, and the world Steve entered was a place of serenity and peace. It was the antithesis of the chaotic life he had left behind. With the psychic block now gone, Steve learned the name of the dog walker. Alexandra Rosen. She was called Ali by those near and dear to her. Like Steve, Ali was born with the gift of clairvoyance. She was also an empath, though her gifts had lain dormant since birth. Steve and Ali were soul mates, and when the time was right, their energy would draw them together.

It was time for Steve's soul to merge with his physical body. The Manhattan skyline was beckoning when Steve suddenly found himself back in his bed. He smiled at the sight of his dog waiting

for him. The cocker spaniel began licking Steve with enthusiasm, but he needed to get some rest. The past week his sleep had been fitful at best, and he needed some uninterrupted hours. Yawning, Steve lifted the furry body and deposited Ursula on the floor. The spaniel sensed defeat and padded across the large master suite to her bed, where she snuggled with the pink stuffed bunny that had become her favorite bedtime companion. As he slept, Steve dreamed of Ali. She felt perfect in his arms, and even Ursula's snores could not awaken him.



Chapter Four

Lizzie was meeting Ali for a girl's night out, and she was running late. Their friend Suzanne usually joined them, but she had to beg off. At first, they hoped that Suzanne had found herself a date, but no such luck. Suzanne's mother had come down with the flu, and she was bringing over chicken soup with matzo balls from Katz's Deli and picking up cough medication from CVS to help her mother recuperate.

While waiting in the ticket line for the latest Star Trek movie, Ali suddenly felt a frisson of fear shoot down her spine, and as she stood there, the feeling intensified. Then out of the blue, Ali received her first psychic flash. There was danger hovering around Lizzie like an ominous black cloud. Ali had to stop Lizzie from getting on the elevator in her building because it had turned into a deathtrap!

Ali reached for her phone and called her friend. She had to catch Lizzie before she left her apartment! If she were wrong about the elevator, she would take an extended vacation in Bellevue's psych ward. Lizzie wasn't picking up, and Ali's panic rose. Finally, on the fourth ring, Lizzie answered.

"Hey, sweetie, what's up? I'm sorry I'm late, but the toilet got clogged and—"

"Don't worry about that right now. Just listen to me. I know this is going to sound crazy, but you can't use the elevator in your building tonight—no matter what!"

"Are you nuts? It's twenty flights down to the street. No way am I walking. I just bought new shoes, and they pinch."

"They pinch. They pinch!" Ali's voice rose at least one octave. "I don't care if they make your toes black and blue. Do not get on that elevator!" she ordered.

"But Ali—"

"No buts, kiddo. You'll have to trust me on this, no matter how crazy it sounds!"

Tears were streaming down Ali's cheeks. She didn't know if Lizzie would listen to her or believe her rant was due to a bad PMS day and ignore her pleas.

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Lizzie heard the fear in Ali's voice. She knew there had to be a good reason for the strange request, or she wouldn't be that upset. There was no one in the world Lizzie trusted more than Ali, so she changed into a pair of sneakers and hiked down the stairs to the main lobby. Lizzie stood outside waiting to hail a taxi when she heard a giant blast that sounded like a bomb exploded! She raced back to her building, where a crowd was gathering. The shrill noise of sirens cut through the night, and ambulances pulled up to the curb. Finally, the police arrived, and Lizzie watched as firefighters rushed inside.

Paramedics came out of the building carrying two people in body bags on stretchers. Both were declared DOA. The word on the street was that the cables in the elevator broke. The cab had fallen, crashing into the pit and crushing the occupants who were trapped inside.

Lizzie didn't know the people who died, but she mourned them nonetheless. A neighbor informed her that one of them had been an elderly widow, and the other was a fifteen-year-old kid

delivering a pizza. In a panic, she called Ali back. “Oh my God, you saved my life. But how in the world did you know?”

Now was not the time to try and explain to Lizzie about Ali’s vision. Instead, when they were together, she would try and make sense out of it. “Calm down, Lizzie. Everything will be okay. You’re fine, and that’s all that matters.”

“But elevators are supposed to be safe! How could something like this happen?” Lizzie asked, dissolving into tears. The sirens were blasting, and people stopped to look at the latest catastrophe to befall the city. Lizzie knew that if Ali hadn’t warned her, she would be lying on stretcher number three, on her way to the city morgue. “It’s a mob scene in front of my building,” Lizzie told Ali. “I have to get out of here. Meet me at the café around the corner from my apartment. If I don’t sit down soon, I’ll collapse.”

“Okay. I’m going to grab a taxi, and I’ll be there shortly. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

A blast of air-conditioning felt terrific as Lizzie walked inside the café. The place was small, lacking in ambiance, and overpriced. Despite that, it was bustling with patrons. Thankfully, Lizzie got the last available table, and she sat down on the bent-wood chair with its hard vinyl cushion.

Ali arrived at the café and spotted Lizzie’s bright-red curls. She raced over to the table and embraced her friend, relieved that Lizzie had taken her warning seriously. Both women ordered wine to begin their odyssey into mind-numbing inebriation. The waiter left them with menus, and they sat quietly, sipping the wine and chilling out.

“Let’s eat something. It’s been hours since I had lunch,” Lizzie groused.

“But food will dilute the effects of the wine, and I’m starting to get buzzed.”

“I’m happy for you, but my stomach is demanding sustenance.”

Ali laughed because she knew it was the truth. “Okay, let’s feed you. You’re always hungry, and you never gain an ounce. It’s not fair.”

“I couldn’t agree more. You got the looks, and I have a freakishly fast metabolism and no curves.”

“Bullshit. You look terrific with your red hair, and with your height, you could pass for a model.”

“Hah! You and Suzanne tell me that all the time. I’ll bet you even believe it by now. Ali, you’re a true friend, and I appreciate your efforts on my behalf—but cool it for now.”

Lizzie ordered rye toast, scrambled eggs, home fries, and turkey bacon. Ali skipped the home fries and bacon. She watched as Lizzie ate hers and wished that she could indulge, but the calories went straight to her hips, which she hated.

“So tell me,” Lizzie inquired as she ate the toast, “how did you know about the elevator crashing?”

There was no logical explanation for it. How could Ali explain something that she didn’t understand herself? “I got a psychic flash.” It was all that she could come up with for an answer.

Lizzie looked at Ali as if she had grown another head. “But you’re not psychic. Don’t you think I’d have noticed something like that?”

Ali’s eyes shone with excitement as she explained to Lizzie what was happening to her. “I can see the future now, and I’ve become empathic. The only plausible explanation is that I was supposed to save your life.” Lizzie thought that made sense. “My newfound abilities started with something that didn’t seem important at the time,” Ali told Lizzie.

“What was that?” Lizzie asked as she turned to signal the waiter. “I’d like another order of home fries, but please make them crisper with extra onions. And bring a basket of popovers and butter. Thanks.”

Ali’s mouth was watering at the thought of eating a buttery popover, and she tried not to obsess over what Lizzie did or did not choose to eat. She had been watching her friend eat nonstop since

they were children. Sesame seed breadsticks were in the breadbasket, so Ali helped herself to one and *schmeared* herb butter on it.

"Umm. This tastes good."

"I'm happy that you like the breadstick, but I'm still waiting to hear what made you become a soothsayer."

"When I was getting dressed to meet you, I couldn't find my necklace."

"Which one?"

"The small diamond horseshoe on the white gold chain. I was searching for it when something contacted me. It told me that it was my inner guide."

"You heard someone speak to you?"

"Yes, but without words. It was just random thoughts that went through my mind, like telepathy."

"I don't get it." Lizzie was becoming more and more perplexed by Ali's answers.

"I'm not sure that I do either. It's hard to explain. My inner guide led me to the living room, and suddenly, I had the urge to lift the corner of my Aubusson rug."

"And then what happened?"

"The diamond horseshoe necklace was hiding under the rug. I picked it up and cleaned it. I need to vacuum better under there. It was full of dust bunnies."

"Screw the dust. Go on. I can't wait to hear more."

"Later this evening, I got a strong feeling about you. I was waiting to purchase the Star Trek tickets when the visions started coming. I saw the elevator in your building, and I felt death. I panicked and called you right up, thinking that I'd lost my mind. My only thought was to stop you from getting on that elevator." Ali wiped away some tears. "I was afraid that I might never see you again."

"That would never happen," Lizzie promised, hoping it was the truth. "Ali, I'm a nervous wreck. Could you sleep over? I don't want to be alone."

"That's a good idea because I don't relish being alone either." Ali made a quick call to Gwen, a nineteen-year-old future veterinarian who adored Fred. The pet sitter had no school the following day and could spend the entire evening with Fred. Gwen always looked forward to interacting with the verbose cockatoo, and she would be happy to watch him for free. The college student raced down the subway steps, eager to see the bird.

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Police were patrolling Lizzie's block. The maintenance specialists were working as Ali and Lizzie made their way to the staircase. Danger and warning signs were everywhere as they trudged up the twenty flights to Lizzie's apartment.

With the heat and humidity hitting a record high, both women desperately needed a cool shower, so they flipped a coin to see who would go first. After they showered, Lizzie lent Ali a pair of her pajamas. She turned on the television, and they lay together on the bed, watching repeats of Sex and the City on HBO. Ali fell asleep after one episode, and Lizzie shut the television. Mentally and physically exhausted, Lizzie was out like a light also.

Later, something awakened Lizzie. She heard Ali moaning in her sleep, but it was not the kind of sound you make when you're in pain. If Lizzie didn't know better, she would have sworn that Ali was having down and dirty sex. Then she heard Ali cry out for more. More what?

Lizzie turned on her bedside lamp and screamed loud enough to wake the dead. The shadowy form of a naked man lay atop her best friend, and he was passionately kissing Ali and caressing her breasts! Lizzie's first thought was that a rapist had come in through the window. Her hysterical screams broke through Ali's sensual dream, ending it. Ali was upset because it was getting steamy, and she wanted it to continue. The dream lover was gone, and Lizzie was staring at Ali with abject horror and fear in her eyes.



Chapter Five

Ali was dreaming about the original Star Trek television series. She searched for the prolific furry Tribbles when she felt his touch, making her body come alive in the darkness. All thoughts of finding an intergalactic pet vanished as his lips began an erotic dance on her heated flesh. The dream lover stopped to undo the first button of Ali's pajama top. But unable to wait, he ripped it open to get at the silken flesh he craved. Ali was dying from pleasure as his tongue traced lazy circles around each nipple. He suckled at her breasts and reached down to tease her clitoris, feeling it throb as he stroked it. Ali was desperate for release and needed him inside her. Shadowy hands pulled the pajama bottoms off, and Ali felt his cock pressing urgently. She reached down and touched it, feeling it pulse with life.

"More," she begged, hoping he would finally penetrate her, but it was not going to happen. Lizzie's screams broke through her reverie, and the dream lover vanished into the night.

Lizzie's face was as white as a ghost as she stared at Ali in shock. "Your pajama top is torn and some buttons are missing." Ali began to get frightened. "Look—and the bottoms are on the floor. How did they get there?" Lizzie demanded. Ali looked down and saw them lying in a crumpled heap near the bed and just stared, not knowing what to say. "It was dark, but there was

enough light for me to see that a man was making love to you. And the worst part was that you were enjoying it! I listened while you were moaning and begging him for more."

"Lizzie, there's no way you could have seen a man because he doesn't exist. It was just a dream." Ali was in a state of panic as the evidence mounted up before her eyes. "I call him my dream lover. He is a figment of my imagination. You must believe me. He is not real!"

"Oh, sweetie." Ali heard the pity in her friend's voice. "Please look at this and tell me that this is an illusion."

Lizzie knew she had to get Ali to see the truth, even though she wasn't sure if either of them could handle it. Ali sat there and watched in horror as her friend picked off some curly brown hairs from her stomach. As she stared at the strands, the room started spinning, and she passed out. Lizzie raced to the kitchen in a panic. She grabbed a dishtowel, holding it under the cold water and wringing out the excess. Then she gently placed it on Ali's forehead, hoping to revive her. It seemed to do the trick because her friend's eyes slowly opened. Coldwater dripped down Ali's face, and she removed the wet towel and handed it back to Lizzie.

"Why did you put that towel on me?"

"I didn't know what else to do after you fainted."

"The last thing I remember was seeing you holding the hairs. Holy crap! It wasn't a dream, was it?"

"No." Lizzie shook her head sadly. "He seemed pretty real to me. Are you frightened?"

"What do you think?" Ali looked at Lizzie, her eyes wide with fear. "I need to take a shower. I must wash away everything that's happened to me the past week."

"Whadaya mean, the past week? I assumed it was this one time."

"Don't I wish? But, Lizzie, I've been having these so-called dreams for almost seven nights now."

Poor Ali. All that sex—and with someone that might not even be human. Lizzie was frightened for her friend. She straightened

up the bathroom, trying to make it as inviting as possible. Maybe a little pampering would help to cheer Ali up.

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Ali lathered every inch of her body until the bar of soap was a mere sliver of its former self. When she thought it was a dream, it had been incredible, and she had lived for his touch. Now that she knew the truth, she shuddered with a mixture of outrage and helplessness. Afterward, they sat in the living room, sipping tea. Ali realized that she owed Lizzie an explanation, but she dreaded telling her about the erotic dreams.

"It all started around a week ago. I've been having dreams about a lover who fulfills all my sexual desires."

"Why didn't you tell me? We never keep secrets from each other."

"I know that's usually the case, but Lizzie, there are some things I can't talk about, even to you. The dreams were so steamy that I needed to keep them locked away as my secret fantasy."

"That was all well and good until I caught the live, uncut version in my bedroom tonight." Lizzie cut right to the chase. "So, who or what do you think he is?" She grabbed a package of Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies and started chewing methodically. "Would you like some?" she asked between bites.

"No, thanks." The last thing Ali wanted was to eat. "You think he might be a demon—or worse."

"Don't put words in my mouth. I never said that."

"But you implied it, and you may be right. He could be a succubus coming to ravish me from some dark astral plane. I don't know if he's human or something horrible, and I'm terrified to find out. I'm just thankful that he never made it to third base, or I could be carrying Rosemary's Baby."

"You didn't use protection? Not even a condom?" Lizzie asked, shocked.

"I thought it was a dream. An erotic fantasy. Who uses protection in a dream?" Ali laughed, but it was a shrill sound, and Lizzie knew her friend was hanging on by a thread. "Lizzie, I believed that he was just a dream lover, never realizing that he was my worst nightmare."

Suddenly Ali felt the presence of a spirit sitting beside her. The benevolent being informed Ali that he was her guardian angel. Ali was grateful that someone on the other side cared enough about her to pay a visit. "Lizzie, I have a guardian angel, and he's talking with me."

"Then why don't I hear anything?"

"Because he's using telepathy, and I listen with my mind."

Ali felt wonderful soothing warmth radiate from the angel, and soon it began taking human form. As the features became more distinct, Ali recognized her dearly departed Uncle Charlie, and her heart swelled with love. Her mother's brother had always been there for her until he died of a heart attack, and she still missed him. The angel was trying to calm down his niece about her nightly visitor, though he realized the task would require a herculean effort on his part.

Lizzie's nerves were near the breaking point. Now there was a ghostly apparition in her apartment. She wished the ghost would disappear and take the dream lover with it. "Oh, goody. Now I have an angel sitting in my living room, or is it perchance floating on a cloud?" When things got out of control, a little sarcasm helped her to cope with stress.

"Don't worry, Lizzie. The angel's already left. We're alone now."

Lizzie was grateful the entity had found another person to haunt. She did not take kindly to having dead people dropping by to visit.

"Uncle Charlie told me what he learned about the dream lover."

"Are you speaking about your Uncle Charlie with the bow ties and suspenders who told bad jokes?" Lizzie got thoughtful for a moment. "I liked Charlie. He was so nice."

"He still is," Ali remarked. "Death didn't change his personality."

"So, what did Charlie have to say about your nightly visitor?"

"It seems the dream lover lives and works right here in the city. At least he's not a minion of the devil. He's as human as we are. In fact, the dream lover could be one of my neighbors, for all I know. He astral projects to me when he's asleep. And there is something unique about the way he travels."

"What's that?" Lizzie asked.

"When the dream lover leaves his body, he uses ninety percent of his molecular structure. He is almost a fully formed physical being when he comes to me. That's why I can feel his touch, among other things." Ali remembered the taste of his kisses, berating herself for enjoying them.

Lizzie was relieved that Ali's lover was human. But how had he managed to find her in Lizzie's apartment? Could this man zoom in on Ali no matter where she was? Was he that hot for her friend? Lizzie already knew the answer to her questions.

Ali felt like the world's biggest hypocrite. On the one hand, she hated the dream lover. But until learning the truth, Ali had begun developing real feelings for him. After each encounter, she felt sad and alone when he left—and how crazy was that? She got up and walked over to the window. The view of the city usually had a calming effect on her, but not this time. "Charlie claims my visitor is in love with me. What a crock! How could someone I don't know have those kinds of feelings for me?"

Lizzie had no clue. "Has any man been extra friendly to you lately?"

"No. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Lizzie knew that Ali never noticed the legions of men who lusted after her. Possibly one was the astral projection guy. She

was frightened for Ali, and she had to prepare her for the inevitable. “What will you do when he returns to finish what he started?”

“I’ll reject him, of course,” Ali replied matter-of-factly. “When I get through with him, he’ll be sorry that he was ever born!”

Lizzie saw the fear in Ali’s eyes. Nevertheless, she was putting on a brave front. Wanting to get both their minds off ghosts, ghoulies, and dream lovers, Lizzie reached for the remote and turned the cable on. “Do you want to watch Sex and the City again? Mr. Big goes to Paris to get Carrie back from the Russian in the next episode.”

“Not tonight. Let’s stick to PG-13. I want to get my mind off sex.” So Ali took the remote from Lizzie and channel surfed until she found the movie Marley and Me. Lizzie groaned inwardly. Two hours of having to watch a large, out-of-control Labrador retriever. In a million years, she would never live with one of those large, slobbering dogs.



Chapter Six

Ali's little shadow waddled over to her and rubbed his head against her leg, and peered up at her. "Why Mommy go away all night?" Fred asked.

Ali had been dreading this confrontation. Every time she left Fred for more than a few hours, he tightened the invisible umbilical cord between the two of them even more. "Mommy's friend needed my help, and so I stayed with her," she told the cockatoo.

"Who needs help, Mommy?" the bird persisted.

"Lizzie did. She wasn't feeling good."

"She has pretty red hair. Mommy likes red hair lady more than Fred. Wah! Wah! *Squawk!*"

Fred's crest became droopy, and he stared down at the needlepoint rug while alternating between moaning and crying. He was pushing all of Ali's guilt buttons, and she wished that Fred would give it a rest.

The brilliant cockatoo let out a loud screech filled with angst, and Ali's stomach knotted up at the pitiful sounds he made. After everything that she and Lizzie had gone through last night, she wasn't up to dealing with the cockatoo's histrionics. She loved him more than anything, but she had a life that included humans also. Despite that, Ali saw how sad Fred looked, and she would do her best to cheer him up.

"Who's my best boy? Who do I love so much?"

"*Squawk!* Mommy! Me—Fred!" The bird's chest feathers puffed out with happiness. "Fred, miss Mommy. Give kisses!"

Ali stroked Fred's feathers until he calmed down. Then, wanting to keep the bird happy, Ali put on a nature program featuring seal pups. Fred sat quietly, watching as the seals interacted with each other. As the show progressed, one of the seal pups tried to make friends with two adults, but they gave him a hard time. The more massive seal butted the smaller pup in the head.

"*Squawk! Squawk! Squawk!*" Fred was flapping his wings and hopping up and down in agitation. The adult seals were now ignoring the seal pup. "Baby seal, sad," Fred lamented, and he lay his head in Ali's lap, making sobbing noises that broke her heart. Early on, Ali discovered that Fred wanted to mother the entire animal kingdom, and she found that endearing. Fred suddenly sat up, seemingly happy, and Ali wondered what was going on. "We put baby seal in the tub, Mommy. Fred feed seal food and love baby seal," the cockatoo announced.

This latest request of Fred's blew Ali away. Fred wanted a pet seal, and he would take care of it. His logic was astounding because he realized the bathtub held water so that it would be a good place for a seal pup.

"*Squawk!* Want seal, Mommy! Get baby seal for Fred!" The cockatoo flapped his wings in excitement while white feathers floated down around them. Then Fred hopped to the floor, racing around like a white whirling dervish and demanding Ali get him a pet seal.

Ali had learned it was best to keep her cool when Fred had a tantrum. "I'm sorry, but Mommy cannot get you a baby seal. They need a lot of water to be healthy. If we kept a seal pup inside our bathtub, it would get sick," Ali explained, hoping that Fred would understand. She watched as the cockatoo listened intently to every word she said to him. Fred hung his head in despair and squawked sadly, but then he watched the remainder of the nature program.

When it concluded, Ali left Fred with toys to occupy himself while she took the opportunity to do some online job searching. While perusing the site, one job's description caught her attention. The Farrell Foundation was looking to hire paranormal researchers and investigators.

Ali was exalted! If the pay were good enough, she could give up the dog walking. Being able to work with other gifted clairvoyants and psychic researchers would be a fascinating experience. The position could not have come at a better time because she was now psychically blessed. Ali had not garnered any new design clients, and she needed a job that paid enough money to supplement her meager income. The stack of bills was growing, and they would not wait for Ali to become an overnight sensation as an interior designer.

But did she possess enough clairvoyance and empathic ability to be considered for an interview? Ali reminded herself that she had saved Lizzie's life with her first accurate premonition, which bolstered her confidence. The Farrell Foundation was world-renowned, and it would be a coup to work for them. Ali had a good feeling about securing employment with the Farrell Foundation.

"Look out, Ghostbusters. Here I come!"



Chapter Seven

Ali spent the afternoon at Barnes and Noble booksellers and brought home a wide range of books about the paranormal sciences. One was a sizable 768-page tome about ghosts written by noted parapsychologist Hans Holzer. The author went into great detail about haunted houses and ghostly sightings, making Ali wonder why certain spirits become earthbound after death. If she landed a position with the Farrell Foundation, she knew they would have the answers she sought.

Fortunately, Ali was a fast reader, but she began inserting lubricant drops into her eyes after reading for five hours straight. The words were becoming blurry, so she took a much-needed break. While relaxing, Lizzie called, and the two women made plans to meet and watch the Star Trek film they missed the other night.

The movie boasted a stellar cast of young actors reprising the original roles. Ali watched every Star Trek movie starring William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, and she expected to dislike the film on sight. Lizzie just wanted to relax after a hectic day of work at Bloomingdale's. She was happy to gorge on junk food, and if the movie was enjoyable, that was a bonus. To Ali's pleasant surprise, the special effects were impressive, and the actor playing the role of Spock was hot!

They finally spoke about the dream lover on the way home from the movie, and Ali confessed she was frightened. Her apartment was the taxis first stop, and she was steeling herself to go upstairs and face the inevitable. Lizzie wanted to protect Ali, but there was nothing she could do other than lend moral support.

"Would it help if I stayed over tonight?" Lizzie asked.

Her friend's concern touched Ali. "Thanks, Lizzie. I promise that if things get out of control, I'll call you." That was a lie. Ali knew she had to put a stop to the nightly visitations on her own. She desperately wanted to ask Lizzie to come home with her, but she fought the urge. Once inside her apartment, Ali locked the door and checked to ensure that the window gate was secure, but she needn't have bothered. Even if the apartment had tighter security than Fort Knox, nothing would stop the dream lover from returning.

Suzanne had caught the flu from her mother, and Ali called to see how she was faring. Unfortunately, when her friend answered the phone, she sounded awful.

"Hi, Ali. How was the movie?" Suzanne managed to croak out.

"It was good. We missed you, and as soon as you're over the flu, we'll all watch it together. Young Spock was a major hunk, and the actor playing Captain Kirk was pretty cute too."

As they chatted, Suzanne went through tissues and sipped her umpteenth cup of tea. She was beginning to loathe the stuff after drinking so much of it. "I appreciate you and Lizzie seeing it a second time for me. I saw Zachary Quinto's photo without his Spock makeup on, and yes, he's very sexy—but he's gay. All the good ones are. *Ahh-choo!"*

Ali had to agree. It seemed everywhere she went, all the great-looking guys were with other hotties. She laughed at the irony of their situation. "That leaves us with the ugly, old, married, and certifiably insane men."

Suzanne sighed. “Do you remember, my last boyfriend turned out to be married—and with two kids and a split level in Westchester county?”

“Oh yeah. Roger, the attorney. What a douche bag he was for lying to you like that.”

Suzanne drank more of the tea. Her nose was so stuffy that she barely tasted it. “At least I never slept with Roger, although he did his best to get me in the sack. My rule of thumb of going out on at least three dates before having sex eliminates a lot of losers.”

“It makes sense, and for the most part, I follow it.” Ali frowned, knowing the only great sex she’d had was with the dream lover, and that was a depressing thought.

Suzanne grabbed some tissues as a sneezing attack left her feeling drained.

“You sound awful. I hope you feel better soon,” Ali commiserated.

“Don’t worry. In a few days, I’ll be fine. My mom is already over the worst of it.

“I’m happy to hear that.” Neither woman had brought up the elephant in the room, and Ali had to talk about it or burst. “Suze, I’m a nervous wreck knowing that the dream lover is coming back tonight. Please give me some advice to help calm me down.”

Suzanne was racking her fevered brain to come up with something, and she didn’t dare let Ali know how frightened she was for her. “If I didn’t love you so much, I’d give you my cold. That might keep him away. Snot is a big turnoff.”

Ali managed to laugh at that. “I agree, but he’s so hot for me that boogers or even the bubonic plague wouldn’t stop him from coming tonight.”

“I know that you’ll find a way to end his visits. You’re a lot gutsier than either me or Lizzie.”

“Thanks for the compliment, but I don’t feel very brave at the moment.”

"So, how is Fred doing?" Suzanne knew how much Ali doted on her cockatoo, and she was trying to get her mind onto other things.

"Fred's fast asleep and can't get into mischief," Ali chuckled. "And how's your sweet little girl?"

"Precious is upset with me because she must use the litterbox until I get over the flu. *Ahh-choo!* She wants to be walked outside with the other dogs."

Ali thought it was the funniest thing, watching Suzanne take Precious for a walk. The cat wore a harness and a leash and obeyed most dog commands. "Don't feel guilty. Precious can survive without her walks. Just take care of yourself and get better."

"*Ahh-choo!* I want to be there for you."

"That means a lot to me, but you need your rest to get over the flu. I know it's hard to sleep with a clogged nose and a sore throat, but please try. I love you, Suzanne."

"I love you too." Suzanne paused to sip the tasteless tea. "If I thought it would save you, I'd take your place. Everyone thinks we look so much alike that I might fool him."

"You're a sweetheart, but I would never allow you to sacrifice yourself for me. Anyway, my astral visitor would be able to tell the difference. I think he could pick me out of the rush-hour crowd at Grand Central Station."

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Ali went to check on Fred, and he was fast asleep. He looked so adorable that she put her hand into his aviary and stroked the soft feathers. Soon, the cockatoo yawned and turned his head as he peered at Ali through sleepy eyes. "Mommy sad. Why Mommy sad? Fred give kiss. *Squawk!"* The bird climbed onto Ali's shoulder and began preening her hair, all the while cooing as his beak gently parted the blond strands.

"You are so precious, and I love you very much."

Ali cradled Fred as he lay on his back and sang lullabies to him. Seeing how well-fed and healthy the cockatoo appeared was Ali's undoing. Her eyes grew moist as she remembered how malnourished Fred had been when she brought him home. Even after the hell that Fred endured, he never once showed aggression toward Ali or tried to bite her. All Fred wanted was her love. Soon, the cockatoo began to yawn, and Ali felt guilty for awakening him. Fred's eyes were closing, and she carried him back to his aviary.

The kitchen clock slowly ticked as Ali's fears escalated. She needed to stay busy so she would not have time to think. At midnight she began polishing her collection of porcelain figurines until each one shined. Then she mopped the wood floors, even though they looked pristine.

A four-light chandelier hung over the kitchen island with wrought iron hooks for Ali's copper pots and pans collection. She reached for the largest skillet and thought about braining her unwanted visitor with it. Then she remembered Uncle Charlie telling her the astral visitor was in love with her. With that knowledge, how could she possibly give him a concussion? Dejected, she hung the skillet back on the hook.

By 3 a.m., Ali couldn't keep her eyes open anymore. She'd watched back-to-back episodes of Love it or List it on HGTV, streamed Netflix, and then switched to MSNBC to catch up on the latest news. Right now, Ali did not give a fig about the economy, or some Senator caught embezzling millions of dollars. Desperate, she sipped a glass of wine, taking the edge off her anxiety. Feeling calmer, Ali pulled the duvet around herself, and soon she was dreaming about designing rooms for the Kips Bay Decorator Showcase. Ali was looking at Schumacher fabric swatches when something jolted her awake. The blanket flew off the bed, and Ali grabbed for it, but it was a futile effort at best.

Hoping to dampen his desire for her, Ali wore her plainest nightgown. Now she realized how foolish that was. Clothing had not deterred him before, and she felt the material being ripped apart by hands that were almost superhuman in their strength.

As she lay naked, long male fingers lightly pinched both nipples. They stood at attention to Ali's horror. Her body was betraying her again.

Ali willed herself to have the strength needed to rid herself of this man once and for all. But before she could utter a word of protest, his lips were on hers while one hand moved down to her vulva. "Stop it! Stop it right now!" But he ignored her pleas. His indifference was the last straw. Ali flew into a rage and began hitting him with her fists, unwilling to be a plaything for his lust anymore. His erection was pressing urgently, and Ali screamed like the devil was upon her—and maybe it was.

"Get the fuck off me!" she spat into his face, still hidden in shadow. His marauding mouth muffled her screams as his body held her down. Then, in desperation, she bit down hard on his tongue, and tasted blood. She went wild and clawed at his face, but he was determined to have her.

Ali broke into tears because she never thought that it would end this way. Then to her shock, she felt his fingers gently wipe away the wetness. She held her breath, hoping that she had gotten through to him.

Cool air caressed her body as he stood silently by the bed and slowly walked into the darkness. He turned to look at Ali for one brief moment, and when he finally spoke, his voice was as soft as a summer breeze. "I will always love you," he told her, and then he was gone.

At first, Ali was relieved that he was never returning. But the relief was short-lived and replaced by an overwhelming sadness. When the man awoke, he would have no memory of this night, though it would haunt Ali until the end of her days.

Despite everything that transpired, Ali found that she could not stop thinking about the dream lover. She would never learn the identity of who he was, and she berated herself for even caring. Feeling utterly alone in a city filled with millions of people, Ali sat alone in the dark and cried.



Chapter Eight

The phone interview with the Farrell Foundation had gone better than anticipated. Ali was informed where and when to report for the in-person interview. The next step would either make or break her career as a protégé in paranormal research.

When the big day arrived, Ali stood outside in the ninety-degree heat and attempted to flag down a taxi. She'd brought along her design portfolio. If the interview was over quickly, Ali planned to stop by her client's townhouse to discuss some ideas for the husband's study. She was pleased with the faux zebra trophy head that she'd found for the wall above the desk. There was also a matching zebra-patterned rug for the safari-themed room. Ali suddenly realized that she had slipped into "design mode" and scolded herself. Today was all about getting the position with the Farrell Foundation. She needed to think about ghosts and things that go bump in the night.

The oppressive heat was getting to Ali when a yellow taxi pulled up, and she was grateful to sit in an air-conditioned car. Opening her book about the Farrell Foundation, she stared at Steven Farrell's photo and couldn't help noticing how good-looking he was. Ali had watched his interviews on cable news and talk shows. She enjoyed listening to Steven Farrell's soft southern accent as he spoke about everything from the paranormal to

world affairs. Maybe she would luck out and catch a glimpse of the Farrell Foundation's CEO today.

After tipping the cabbie, Ali entered the building. She followed the instructions and took the elevator straight to the top floor. When she went to the office specified, Ali saw she was alone except for a woman sitting behind a desk, her nose buried deep in a book. "Excuse me. I'm Alexandra Rosen, and I'm here for my interview."

Steven Farrell's personal assistant put her book down, looked at Ali, and frowned. She had no idea why Steve wanted to interview this one applicant out of the dozens of others. He was such a busy man, and in her opinion, he should have assigned someone else to handle the task.

Ali was now proficient at picking up other people's emotions, and she felt animosity radiating from the woman. She glanced at the nameplate sitting on the desk. Mildred Steele. The silver-haired Miss Steele made it a point to ignore Ali's presence in the room. While Ali stood there waiting, Mildred Steele straightened the papers on her desk and busied herself with filing.

"How long a wait do I have?" Ali asked, trying to break the wall of silence that hung ominously in the room.

The woman looked up at Ali with undisguised disdain. "I will be with you in a moment, Miss Rosen." She rose from her seat and systematically began watering the many plants in the room and one lone ficus tree. Ali stood there, watching, shocked by the rudeness of the woman. If she didn't need the position so badly, she would have given Mildred Steele "the finger" and then stormed out.

The assistant finally deigned to speak to her again. "Mr. Farrell is finishing some work and will be ready to see you in a few minutes. Have a seat." Those were the last words uttered from her thin, pursed lips as she returned to her computer.

Ali was surprised that Steven Farrell himself would be interviewing her and was excited at the prospect of meeting him. She made herself comfortable on one of two director chairs, flanking a

chrome and glass table that was piled high with an assortment of magazines. She was reading an interesting article on the future of artificial intelligence when the door to the inner sanctum swung open, and out walked Steven Farrell in the flesh. He ushered Ali into his office, closing the door behind them. Steve clasped both of Ali's hands in his as he greeted her. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Alexandra." Ali felt his big, warm hands holding hers, making it difficult for her to think clearly. Steven Farrell was completely discombobulating her, and she wasn't sure how to handle it.

"For a newcomer to my world, your range of clairvoyant and empathic talent is astounding. Our goal is to weed out anyone who cannot pass muster, and you were heads above the other applicants."

Inwardly, Ali was doing Fred's happy dance. "Mr. Farrell, I've always been fascinated by the world of the supernatural. When my gifts first appeared, I was frightened, but now they've become as much a part of me as breathing."

"Alexandra, I understand perfectly. I would feel lost without mine."

"We seem to be on the same wavelength," Ali told him.

"More than you could ever know." Steve realized that he was still holding Ali's hands and reluctantly let go of them. "Would you prefer being called Alexandra or Ali?" Steve asked, already knowing the answer.

"Ali would be fine. Everyone calls me by the shortened version of my name except for my mother."

Steve noticed the change in Ali's demeanor when she spoke about her mother, and he picked up on the hurt the woman had caused her. Yet, despite that, she had managed to flourish and become the confident woman standing before him.

Not wanting to lose the opportunity, Ali forged ahead with her self-promotion. "Mr. Farrell, I believe that I can be a great asset to the Farrell Foundation. I'm a hard worker, and I'm willing to start with any assignment you feel that I'm qualified for—"

Steve was admiring her spunk when he cut her off in midsentence. "You're hired."

Ali's eyes were shining with happiness. "Thank you so much, Mr. Farrell. I promise you won't be sorry. I will work hard to make a place for myself here at the Farrell Foundation."

"I know you will, Ali, and your first assignment is to call me Steve. We don't stand on formality here, and everyone is on a first-name basis." Steve asked Ali to take a seat while he sat down opposite her, behind an impressive-sized burl-wood desk. Piles of folders littered the desk, and Ali wondered how Steve found anything amidst all the clutter.

"Can I offer you a drink? I know that I could go for something cold and refreshing on a day like today."

Ali felt overheated despite the central air conditioning, and she knew what was making her feel hot and bothered. It was her new boss, who was looking so calm and composed. She wished Steve would do something gross like farting or picking a booger from his nose.

"Thanks, Steve. A cold drink would be nice."

"So, what would you like?"

"I'd love a mocha Frappuccino, but a glass of ice water would be fine."

"Ali, if you want a mocha Frappuccino, then that's what you'll have." Steve Farrell went into the outer office and spoke to his assistant. Mildred grabbed her purse and left in a huff to go to the nearest Starbucks. It was only six blocks away, but it might have been six miles with the unrelenting heat. As she trudged to the coffee shop, she sweated and cursed Alexandra Rosen with every step she took.



Chapter Nine

Ali and Steve were discussing the why's and wherefores of earthbound spirits when the door to Steve's office suddenly burst open. A sweaty and disheveled Mildred Steele walked in, her face a mask of anger, as she ceremoniously dumped the bag of Starbucks onto Steve's desk without saying a word. As she left, she slammed the door loud enough to wake the dead.

Both Steve and Ali did a double-take. "I'm sorry you had to witness that. Mildred Steele is my employee, and that display was unacceptable behavior in the workplace." Steve was madder than a hornet's nest and was ready to fire Mildred on the spot, but first, he wanted answers. "So, tell me, Ali, how did Miss Steele treat you while you were waiting to see me?"

Nervous, Ali bit her lower lip. "I wasn't going to say anything, Steve, but you asked. From the moment I stepped off the elevator, you could cut the tension in the room with a knife. I "saw" that Miss Steele viewed me as the competition for your affections," Ali stated bluntly, "and she did her best to ignore me."

"Well, I'll be dammed. Ali, you must be wondering why I never picked up on Mildred's feelings for me. My only excuse is that I've been putting in many long hours due to a shortage of

psychic investigators. As a result, I've had no time to think about anything other than work."

Steve contacted Human Resources, and the personal assistant was transferred to another division while Ali listened, rejoicing inwardly. "Miss Steele is fortunate that I'm not firing her. But if she pulls another stunt like that, she's history." Steve steepled his fingers under his chin and thought about this latest conundrum.

"Ali, I'd like to ask your opinion. This time around, do you think I should hire a man instead?" Steve was curious as to what her answer would be.

"Well, you certainly don't want another repeat of Mildred Steele, so going with a male assistant sounds like a good idea."

Steve couldn't help but notice that Ali was positively glowing at the prospect of his hiring a man. Was she perhaps a tad jealous of Mildred's desire for him? He hoped so. Steve wanted Ali sitting next to him, so he carried his coffee over to the leather sofa and sat down, sinking into the plump down-filled cushions. He set his Starbucks on the coffee table. "This sofa feels like a little piece of heaven. Come on over and sit beside me. It will be easier for us to chat."

Steve did look comfortable, so Ali sat down next to him. The leather was just as plush as Steve described, and she began to relax for the first time all day. However, when Steve's leg accidentally brushed against hers, Ali felt a jolt of desire. That caught her off guard, and she took a big sip of coffee to calm her frazzled nerves. Steve was far from unaffected, but he forced himself to act as if nothing had happened.

There were countless cases and investigations Steve had worked on through the years, but recently one, in particular, shook Steve to the core, and he wanted to share the experience with Ali. He'd utilized his considerable talents to locate a missing child. Unfortunately, the pedophile molested and strangled the boy within minutes after abducting him. Steve purposely omitted to tell Ali how his throat tightened, reliving the boy's dying moments as he frantically gasped for air. The last thing Steve wanted was

for Ali to become fearful of her empathic abilities. Hopefully, she would never have to go through something that horrific, but if she did, he would be there to help guide her through it.

"Once I located the shallow grave of the child, I brought it to the attention of the police so they could take over, and I stayed on in an unofficial capacity."

Ali sat listening, mesmerized by Steve's recollection of the events. As he poured his heart out to Ali about the tragedy, the intensity of her feelings for Steve continued to grow. She held his hand as he spoke, and her eyes were wet with unshed tears. Steve was grateful for Ali's touch and the way she cared about others.

"Darlin', when the boy's mother identified the body, she broke down completely. Her husband was killed by mortar fire in Iraq on his last tour of duty there. She was newly widowed and in a state of shock from his death. Now her only child by the man she loved was gone. She crumpled to the ground like a broken bird, sobbing."

Ali didn't realize that she was stroking Steve's hand, willing his pain to go away. He felt every loving caress. Ali was bringing the light back into his life, just as Steve knew she would.

"I held the mother as she cried until there were no more tears. Then a miracle happened. A vision came to me, and it was amazing. I told the grieving widow that she was carrying a child. She still held a piece of her beloved husband after the devastating loss of her son."

Steve rose and brought over a framed photograph for Ali to see. "The baby's name is Jenna, and she's two months old in the photo."

Ali stared at the baby, and her heart squeezed. "Miracles seem to happen when we least expect them to. Jenna is a beautiful example of that."

"Yes, she is, darlin.' It's the miracles that make the heartbreak of my job bearable."

"Thank you for confiding in me, Steve. I could see how hard it was for you to talk about it, and I'm glad that I could be there

for you. I've never before met anyone who cares about people the way that you do."

Ali's words touched Steve. "Thank you for that. It means a lot to me."

"Steve, how do you manage to solve those cases and keep your sanity at the same time?"

"There's a driving need in me to make the world a better and safer place. I believe I was born with my gifts to work towards that goal." Steve could not help chuckling. "As for my sanity—well, that's still up for debate."

"I want to help people also, but what can I do? I have to be honest with you. I cannot see myself searching for dead bodies and solving murder cases."

"Ali, don't worry. There are many other ways we can utilize your skills," Steve told her. "You would be surprised by how much-untapped energy you have at your disposal that's lying dormant. But before you get started, you must learn how to protect yourself, and I'll teach you the proper way to do that."

Focusing his energy on Ali, Steve shot white light at her and then waited. Ali felt warm energy, filling her to overflowing. The sensation was indescribable. "What just happened?" she asked Steve, noticing that the headache she had all day was gone.

"I wanted to demonstrate how white light can protect and promote healing simultaneously."

"That felt amazing, Steve. You took away my sinus pain. I want you to know I appreciate the healing and your help and guidance." As Ali spoke, reality suddenly came crashing down. She saw herself with the dream lover. Visions of their naked flesh entwined together haunted her. How could she feel the same way about two different men? Just that morning, she had mourned the loss of the dream lover, and now she was falling for Steve Farrell. What was wrong with her? She would have blurted out the truth then and there, but Uncle Charlie's voice broke through her panic, wanting to help his niece.

"Everything will be fine, Ali. Don't say a word about what happened to Steve. Please trust me on this. I love you, and I will always be there for you."

Her uncle's words calmed Ali, and she was able to push the guilt aside, at least for the moment. Ali noticed that Steve was staring at her with an almost frightening intensity, forcing her to glance away. Steve knew that it was impolite to stare, but he didn't give a rat's ass. Before the day was over, he intended to show Ali that they were meant to be together.

Ali finished her Starbucks, and she noticed that Steve had barely touched his drink. So she asked him if he wanted it.

"I'm not in the mood for coffee right now, so please help yourself."

When Ali finished Steve's coffee, he spotted some foam on her lower lip. The need to taste Ali was overwhelming. Moving closer, Steve kissed her, and the feel of Ali's soft lips was almost his undoing.

Ali's eyes were wide with surprise as she looked at Steve, who seemed incredibly pleased with himself. "Why did you do that?"

"We're friends, aren't we?" Steve asked Ali.

"Yes, we are," she admitted.

"Darlin', what we have together is far more than mere friendship."

That was the truth. Ali had been afraid that the dream lover might have ruined her chances of ever finding passion with another man. But what she felt for Steve went way beyond physical attraction. Ali had fallen in love with Steve Farrell, and her emotions were roller-coasting between exaltation and fear. If only the dammed guilt would leave. Pushing away all thoughts of the shadowy masculine figure from her mind, Ali stood up and looked down at Steve. She needed to make sure that she had not just imagined how beautiful that kiss had been. Steve was sitting on the sofa and looking at her with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" he asked.

"I need another."

"Do you want another mocha Frappuccino?"

She shook her head, too afraid to speak the words aloud.

And I call myself a master psychic. Steve shot off of the sofa and pulled Ali into his arms. As they kissed, Ali rejoiced because these were the same lips she had kissed each night the past week. The passion and desire grew stronger now that she recognized the truth for what it was. It had been Steve all along. He was the dream lover. It all made sense now, and with that knowledge, the guilt disappeared.

They had only spent a few short hours together, but Ali knew the kind of man that Steve was. He was a nurturer and a protector. If he ever found out that his astral body had tried to force itself on her, the knowledge would devastate him. Ali knew that she would take the secret of the dream lover to the grave to protect Steve, so she ended the kiss. "We will be working together, so let's pretend this never happened."

"That kiss we shared was special, so don't try and deny what we have. I won't let you."

"I do not deny anything, Steve, because I feel the same way about you," Ali confessed.

"You do?" Steve asked, wearing his heart on his sleeve.

"I know it's crazy, but yes."

Steve asked Ali if she would come back to his penthouse where they could be comfortable discussing future work assignments. Ali readily agreed. More importantly, Steve needed to solidify their commitment to each other that day.



Chapter Ten

Steve and Ali walked outside, and the unrelenting heat made it feel like Dante's Inferno. Some clouds would have been welcome, but the sun was a giant golden orb in a clear blue sky, radiating its heat on the pavement as well as the pedestrians. Ali and Steve were anxious to get to his penthouse with its central air-conditioning, but more importantly than the lure of cool air was the promise of their being alone together.

"Should we hail a taxi, or would you rather take the subway since it's faster?" Ali asked.

Steve looked at Ali. She thought nothing of getting on the subway on a scorcher like today, but she was in for a big surprise. Steve sent a text, and soon a limousine pulled up to the curb. A chauffeur in full dress uniform was sitting behind the wheel.

Ali stared at the luxurious limousine. "You have got to be kidding me. Do you actually get driven around in that thing?"

"Darlin', I've been working hard for many years, and now I like to partake in the best things that life has to offer."

"I never thought the Farrell Foundation made the kind of money to afford you this type of a lifestyle."

"There are times when it barely breaks even. I help to keep it afloat when the need arises, and I always will."

Ali was perplexed. “But then, how can you afford all of this?” She pointed to his car as if it were an extraterrestrial leper from outer space.

“Later. I promise I will tell you everything about my life in due course. But right now, let’s concentrate on us.”

Ali was about to ask Steve more questions when he kissed her, keeping one eye open to ensure there were no paparazzi around. No one could know about his private life until he was ready to share it with the public, so he ushered Ali into the waiting limo, climbing in behind her.

The leather seats were sinfully comfortable, and Ali stretched out her legs and sighed. The cabinetry and wood finishes were the best that money could buy. “Steve, I’m curious. What luxuries is your car equipped with?”

Steve was more than happy to show her. A plasma television, a Bose stereo system, a well-stocked bar, and countless other amenities made Steve’s hectic life more comfortable. Suddenly, surround sound filled the luxurious vehicle with romantic music. The next thing Ali knew, she was lying flat on her back with Steve’s hand, making lazy circles on her stomach, while his finger zeroed in on her navel and began rimming it. Ali couldn’t hold back a moan due to the sexual feelings from the small hole. When Steve was the dream lover, he had driven her wild with his touch, and now as a fully formed flesh and blood man, he was still doing it.

“I think my navel has gotten enough attention for today. Let’s sit for the rest of the ride.” Ali could not believe that the seat had suddenly turned into a bed, and she wondered whether Steve had limo-sized pillows waiting for the next woman he planned to seduce.

“I swear I was not trying to make love to you.”

“I’ll bet you say that to all the girls,” she responded, trying to sound nonchalant and failing miserably.

Steve guessed that Ali was thinking about all of the women who had come before her. The others meant nothing to him, and he had to make her believe that. “Darlin’, I want you to know I

never cared about any other woman, and if that makes me a heel, then so be it."

Ali believed Steve, and it wasn't as if she was coming to him a vestal virgin. She'd had a few brief affairs, but her heart was never in them. The past was the past as far as Ali was concerned. She glanced out the window, and Madison Avenue was teeming with people. New Yorkers were always rushing somewhere, but they were too close to the limo for Ali's peace of mind.

"Can anyone see inside this thing? I know the windows are tinted, but—"

"This is one-way glass, and I have a privacy barrier that separates us from the driver. He cannot see or hear us," Steve assured Ali. With Ali's worries put to rest, Steve was beginning to feel hungry, and he wondered when Ali had last eaten. "Would you care for something to eat or drink?" he inquired.

At Steve's question, Ali realized she had not eaten anything since grabbing a granola bar on her way out the door while Fred squawked his outrage at her. "Yes, that would be nice." Steve suddenly produced a plate of mini muffins that smelled freshly baked. Famished, Ali ate several apple and pumpkin muffins, feeling very pampered by Steve and the aromatic treat.

"Umm, that hit the spot. They were the most delicious muffins I've ever tasted."

Steve was delighted that Ali liked them. "My chauffeur enjoys baking, and he makes them for me. George always surprises me with his latest culinary concoctions."

Before long, the limo stopped in front of one of the grandest buildings on Park Avenue, and the chauffeur opened the door for Ali. Steve's driver was very tall, towering over Steve, who was not a small man by any means, standing over six feet. George had a plain but pleasant face, topped by a shock of red hair. Ali sensed he was a good person, and she liked him immediately.

The chauffeur smiled at Ali. "It was my pleasure driving you today," he told her.

"Thank you, George. I've never ridden in a limousine before, and it was a treat, but I enjoyed your mini muffins even more. They were so moist that they melted in my mouth." George was beaming from the compliment. "Could you give me the recipe?" Ali asked him. "I like to dabble in the kitchen, and I'm a pretty decent cook."

"It's as good as done, and I hope that I'll have the pleasure of driving you again soon."

Steve answered for Ali. "You can count on that, George."

"I look forward to it." George tipped his cap to the lovely young woman. "Excuse me a moment, miss, but I need Steve to check on a problem that I'm having with the engine." George opened the hood of the car. "Would you come over here and take a look at this, Steve? I think the engine sounds funny." The two men huddled together and stood bent over, staring at it.

"So what's the problem? I don't sense anything's wrong, and I don't remember you ever asking me for advice on cars. That's your expertise."

"That's for sure, Steve. You don't know diddly squat about them."

"And I intend to keep it that way. That's why I have you."

"Nothing's wrong with it. As you can hear, the engine is purring like a kitten. I have to discuss something with you, and I didn't want Ali to overhear us."

"Okay. So, tell me."

"Steve, unless I miss my guess, this one's a keeper."

"Am I that transparent?" asked Steve.

"I've never seen you look at any other woman the way you look at Ali, and I'm happy for you. The days of driving you around with ultra-thin models and their surgically enhanced breasts have finally come to an end." The two men were laughing because George's description of the women Steve dated was right on tar-

get. Ali heard the laughter and wondered how an engine problem could be funny.

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The chauffeur made his goodbyes and maneuvered the limo back into the city's traffic, while Steve took Ali's hand and led her to a private elevator to take them to the penthouse. The door opened, and they walked into an entry hall the size of a studio apartment. Ali had not expected anything quite so grandiose, and she inquired how large Steve's home was.

"It's twelve-thousand-square feet," he answered. "The penthouse takes up the entire top floor, but before you ask me how I came to live here, let me try and explain."

"Go right ahead. I'm dying to know why one man needs all this space."

"When I first began house hunting, I started by looking at smaller co-ops, and my inner guides were not happy with any of them. I kept going larger, but they were still upset with my choices. Finally, they guided me to bigger and better apartments around the city. I would have been happy with a much smaller space, but they wouldn't let up on me."

Ali was fascinated by Steve's tale. "So what happened next?" she asked.

"When I first laid eyes on the penthouse, my guides told me to make an offer. The co-op board approved me, and now this is home."

That made perfect sense to Ali. She had learned the golden rule of parapsychology right away. Always listen to your inner guides because they know what's best for you. Ali glanced around the entrance hall and admired the elegant marble-tiled floor, but where was the furniture? She felt small in the vast environs of Steve's home and wondered why he had not yet furnished it.

"So, how do you like it?" Steve asked. He had to suppress a grin while he awaited Ali's answer. He knew that she had expected

there to be some furnishings. Seth, his best friend, lived in an apartment just as barren, but the physician didn't have twelve-thousand-square-feet to furnish.

Ali didn't want to hurt Steve's feelings, so she tried to be diplomatic as she answered. "It's a lovely marble floor, and I can see that your style is minimalist."

"I'm glad that you like my floor. Now let me give you the grand tour."

The architectural elements in Steve's home were outstanding, and almost every room had a working fireplace. Ali loved the cherry-wood library with its built-ins. Next, they entered another room through French doors. Ali gasped at the beauty before her and stood there transfixed. The room resembled a grand salon from another era. Hand-painted murals decorated the walls, depicting pastoral scenes of the French countryside. Ali felt as if she had been transported to another time and place, mesmerized by the splendor of Steve's home.

An antique Louis XV marble mantel stood proudly in the salon, with a Rococo-style mirror gracing the wall above. The mirror was enormous, as was the carved fireplace. Ali's practiced eye was imagining the room furnished. Looking around, it made her sad to see such beauty not being utilized to its full potential.

Steve was smiling as he watched Ali admiring the antique mirror. "The previous owners left it behind when they moved. Pretty, isn't it?" he asked.

"It's magnificent," she replied as she studied the carved cherubs on the ornate frame.

Steve could feel Ali's joy as she took in everything, and the pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place. Steve had purchased the penthouse because of the woman standing a few feet away, busy taking photos of the room. It was supposed to be Ali's home all along, and he was just along for the ride.

The kitchen possessed top-of-the-line commercial-grade appliances and French-style country cabinets. As Ali took her time looking around, she noticed the beautiful hand-painted tiles

above the cooktop. The tiled mural depicted an Edgar Hunt farm scene. She was charmed and would have been delighted to prepare a meal in Steve's kitchen. "Steve, where do you keep your dishes and cutlery?"

He opened a cabinet, and instead of dishes, all Ali found were paper plates and cups. There were a few boxes of plastic eating utensils. It was a pitiful sight. Fearing the worst, Ali opened the door on the Sub-Zero refrigerator to take a look inside. There were boxes of Chinese food and some cans of soda. One lone orange was fuzzy with mold, and after asking where the garbage was, Ali threw the offending fruit away.

"Don't you ever eat anything but takeout? I would have thought that you would do a better job of taking care of yourself and at least try to eat nutritious food on occasion."

"Don't I look healthy, sweetheart?" Steve asked her.

Ali was not about to be deterred. "Yes, but your fridge is filled with leftover Chinese takeout. Explain to me how you can remain in such good shape subsisting on junk food?" she demanded.

"Nobody ever gave a damn about what I ate before you came along. Do you care about me that much?" Steve asked her.

"Yes, I do," Ali admitted, not realizing how much her words meant to Steve.

"Now, don't go fretting about me, darlin'. Sure, I eat junk food on occasion, but not all of the time. My housekeeper brings groceries from Zabar's, and she cooks enough for days. The takeout is only to tide me over."

"Well, that's a relief. I was worried that you ate fried rice and egg rolls for breakfast with a can of orange soda to wash it down."

"That sounds good. Maybe I'll have that tomorrow."

Ali gave Steve a look to kill, and he knew it was time to stop teasing her. "The only room left is my bedroom." Ali followed Steve into the master suite and saw that the room possessed good bones. There was a separate seating area with a fireplace and an en-suite bathroom. As for the rest of Steve's bedroom, Ali tried her best to hide her disappointment. Steve slept in a king-sized

bed that lacked even a modest headboard. The bed was pushed against a wall, facing a large-screen television and a computer workstation.

There was a dog bed nearby, and Ali smiled at the sight. "That bed is so cute, and I see some chew toys."

"Those belong to Ursula, my cocker spaniel. She is the only other lady in my life." Steve showed Ali a photo of his dog.

"Would you look at that precious face and those big floppy ears? Your dog is beautiful, Steve."

"Thanks, darlin'. Running the Farrell Foundation has me working long hours, so I hired a dog sitter to walk Ursula and take her to the park. When I bring home cases that have me working through most of the night, my dog stays at Mindy's apartment so that I can concentrate without distractions."

"Where is your dog now, Steve? I'd love to meet her."

"I was up past three in the morning, so Ursula is being watched by Mindy." Steve planned to get the spaniel from the sitter, but Ursula's sleepover would last longer if things went the way he hoped.

Hearing about Steve's dog made Ali begin to miss Fred. She knew that the cockatoo was in good hands with Gwen watching him, but she worried anyway. "Would you like to see photos of Fred? He's my Sulphur-crested cockatoo, and he's not like any other bird. At times I have to remind myself that Fred is a cockatoo and not a feathered child." Ali's voice was filled with love when she spoke about Fred.

Because Ali walked dogs to supplement her income from the interior design work, Steve assumed she had a canine companion. He quickly learned that one should never jump to conclusions with Ali. She was too unique an individual to fit into a cookie-cutter mold. Ali proudly showed Steve photos of Fred. There was a picture of the cockatoo sitting on his perch with his wings spread wide. Another one had Fred sitting on Ali's shoulder. Steve stared at the next photo because the cockatoo held a bag of Cheez Doodles in his beak. *Cheez Doodles?* Steve looked over at Ali and asked her why Fred was holding the junk food bag.

"It's his one vice," she admitted. "Fred lives for doodle days."

Steve could not help laughing. Doodle days! He slapped his thigh and laughed harder. It was just too funny. "You were upset about my Chinese takeout, and Fred gets to snack on greasy cheese puffs."

Ali felt the need to explain Fred's odd predilection for Cheez Doodles. "It all started when my friend Lizzie was over, and she was snacking on them, so I gave Fred one doodle to taste. In a million years, I'd never expected that Fred would love them and become a Cheez Doodle addict." Steve could not miss the exasperation in Ali's voice. "Fred's avian vet lets him eat a few doodles several times a week. He assured me that if I stuck to the schedule, Fred would be fine. But, at this point, I cannot stand the sight of Cheez Doodles anymore."

It was evident that Ali was growing upset talking about her bird's junk food addiction, so Steve changed the subject and asked if Fred could mimic words and sounds. "I am so proud of my little guy. Fred converses with me in complete sentences, and he comprehends most of the words spoken to him."

The cockatoo's unique grasp of language was impressive, but now Steve wanted to stop discussing their respective pets. Instead, it was time to put his plan into action. He began by asking Ali what she thought of his apartment.

"I love it. Your home has original architectural details in every room. I especially admired the hand-painted murals."

Things were going just as Steve had hoped. "Darlin', I'd appreciate your advice on how to make my home more inviting. Unfortunately, I'm clueless when it comes to decorating."

That was the understatement of the year, Ali thought to herself. "The penthouse is magnificent, but it is crying out for furnishings. You need rugs and window treatments, and I couldn't help noticing there is no artwork anywhere." Steve had asked for her advice, so Ali forged ahead. "I hope I'm not out of line, but you need to throw away the paper plates and start eating on china and using silverware."

"Ali, your assessment of my home is right on the mark. This place is an empty shell. That's the real reason that I brought you here, hoping you would become my interior designer. The entire penthouse needs to be decorated and turned into a warm and inviting home."

"Steve, except for my one client, I'm still a neophyte to the design world. With all the seasoned pros out there, why did you choose me to decorate your home?"

"Because you are the best at what you do, and you need to know that. I looked through your portfolio when we were at my office."

"I didn't see you—"

"You were in the ladies' room. I hope you don't mind."

"No. I'm glad you viewed my designs."

"One of my clients is the editor of a top decorating magazine, and your work is far superior to the other designers that she showcases."

Ali drank in Steve's words. "That is a wonderful compliment, Steve, and it means a lot to me. It would be my pleasure to decorate your penthouse, and I promise to include all the architectural elements already here." Decorating Steve's home would help Ali to garner more clients. But, more importantly, her stock would rise in the world of interior design.

Steve was thrilled that his plan was working so well. "Thank you for accepting the job. Now let's complete the deal." Ali was expecting a contract, but Steve had other ideas. He pulled Ali to him and took possession of her luscious mouth while she clung to his shoulders. Steve deepened the kiss, reveling in the soft whimpers she made.

When he reluctantly let go of Ali, she almost melted into a puddle at his feet. "Darlin', when you decorate the penthouse, I want you to design it to your specifications as well as for mine."



Chapter Eleven

Ali was puzzled by Steve's request. "Steve, the furnishings should reflect your taste. What I like shouldn't matter. My job is to help you decide what will look best in your home," Ali explained to him. Steve listened while Ali continued speaking to him as if he were just another customer needing her design skills. "It's not only about the furniture," she continued. "Some rooms will require renovations, depending on what we decide to do. I mentioned before that you would need artwork. As we visit galleries and auction houses and make purchases, you will begin to watch your home come to life." Ali was getting enthused about this latest project of Steve's. Never before had she been handed a blank canvas and one of this magnitude.

"That sounds great. I've never visited Christie's or Sotheby's or walked through an art gallery, and it's not because I'm too busy with the Foundation. I have no clue what to purchase, and Ali, I'm leaving all the bidding to you when we are at an auction."

"That's fine, Steve. Just tell me how high you want to go on each painting." Ali was glad that Steve was taking an active role in the design process, and she looked forward to some spirited bidding at the auction houses. "Steve, did you have a time frame in mind for when you want the work completed?" Ali was contem-

plating how best to approach him about the designer fee. Despite their newfound relationship, she still had to earn a living.

"Take as much time as you need." *A lifetime sounds about right.* "We cannot rush decorating a twelve-thousand-square-foot home."

Relieved that there were no time restraints, Ali was ready to get started on the new project. "There is so much for us to go over. First, I want you to view art and design books to learn which styles you prefer. Then, we'll look at wallpaper and fabric samples. By the time we finish, I'll have a better idea about how to design the rooms."

Steve smiled and shook his head while Ali looked on puzzled. What was going on?

"You still haven't figured it out—have you?"

Ali didn't have a clue.

"You wanted to know why you should design this place for your taste as well as mine. It's because you will be living here with me. The penthouse will be our home together."

Ali looked at Steve in happy shock. She had hoped that they would date and possibly live together someday in the future, but she never imagined it would be this soon. But, if this was a dream, she never wanted to wake up.

Steve fumbled to find the right words. "When I wake up each morning, it's your face I want to see lying in bed beside me. Ali, I'm in love with you, and I hope you feel the same way about me."

"Of course, I do. From the moment we first met, I knew there was something special between us."

Steve knew that now was the time to tell Ali about his dreams. "For days now, I've dreamed of you. We're making love, and it's beautiful. But then, each morning, I wake up alone in my bed. "Steve lifted Ali's hands to his lips and kissed them tenderly. "But now we're together, and that's all that matters."

Ali realized that Steve remembered bits and pieces of the times he'd astral traveled to her, and his heartfelt confession made her feel much loved. As they kissed, Steve swept Ali up and car-

ried her to the bed. But when he caught sight of it, he stopped dead in his tracks. The linens were in disarray, and the blanket looked like hell. How could he make love to Ali with this mess? She deserved silk sheets and a luxurious feather-down comforter.

He pointed to the bed. "Don't look at it. It's a mess. Close your eyes, and hopefully, it will go away."

"Do you think I give a damn about the state of your bed?" she asked. "You'd better kiss me right now before I change my mind and demand linens with a high thread count."

Laughing, they began undressing each other. Steve reached around to unhook Ali's bra, and her breasts spilled out. "You are too beautiful to believe," he whispered.

"You're staring at them." It was an accusation. It was a plea.

With his shirt off, curly brown hair covered Steve's upper chest. Ali would never forget the sound of Lizzie screaming at the sight of those same hairs plastered to her sweaty body. Ali ran her hands lightly over Steve's chest and watched his small nipples harden at her touch. To her delight, Steve's chest hairs were clinging to her fingers, and any doubts she might have harbored about Steve's being the dream lover vanished.

Not able to wait any longer, Steve gathered Ali close and began sucking on a breast as he stroked the other one. He was in heaven as he nursed eagerly, and Ali reveled in the nurturing. She ran her hands through Steve's hair and urged him to continue. The lovers explored each other's bodies and shared long drugging kisses that left them wanting more. Soon, Steve positioned himself between Ali's legs. He was larger than the men Ali was used to, but she slowly stretched to accommodate his size. Making love should be about pleasuring each other, so Steve shifted their positions slightly. Now each deep thrust set off orgasmic explosions that were like nothing Ali had ever experienced before. Steve loved that he could make Ali go wild as she screamed with each climax. He loved everything about her.

Later, while they lay together on the rumpled sheets, they talked about their future. "I want you to stay with me for a few

weeks before you and Fred move in permanently. We deserve some privacy now because we'll have to deal with the paparazzi once we go public with our relationship."

"Being alone together sounds wonderful. As for the press, I'm not worried. We'll deal with them when the time comes. However, I do have one concern. What will we do for food?"

"That's easy. Five-star restaurants will provide us with all of our meals."

"Can we order in French food? It's my favorite."

"Whatever makes you happy," Steve told her, lazily caressing a breast and watching the nipple harden.

Ali lay naked and satisfied while Steve called the Farrell Foundation. Speaking to one of his staff, he let them know he would be away for several weeks. There was nothing urgent on the agenda that his best-trained parapsychologists couldn't handle. He lifted himself on his elbow and smiled down at Ali. "My staff will cover for me until I return, and now, I'm all yours."

Ali lit up like a Christmas tree at the news, but then she pictured a feathered head sporting the cutest yellow crest. Guilt weighed heavily on her. While she was there with Steve, Fred was home, missing her terribly. She sat up, and Steve saw the anguish on her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's Fred. I'm sorry, Steve, but he's been with the pet sitter for hours, probably freaking out needing me. I know we want to be together, but it's not going to happen. We can go out on dates, and you can spend the night at my apartment." Ali was becoming frantic. "Call me a taxi or get George to drive me home," she pleaded.

Steve felt his whole world collapsing and all because of a bird!

"I can't leave Fred alone for more than a few hours. Not even with Gwen, who adores him." The last thing Ali wanted to do was leave Steve, but what other choice did she have? She had to make him understand. "When I slept over at Lizzie's, Fred was a wreck when I came home. He told me that Gwen was not his real

mommy, and I should never leave him again. Fred was bawling like a baby, and my guilt was off the charts. I can't do that to him again."

It was one thing to hear about Ali's love for Fred. But watching her go-to pieces like that was a wake-up call about how their life would be from now on. Sure, Steve loved his spaniel, but not the way that Ali doted on her cockatoo. There was no way that Steve was allowing Ali to walk out the door. Maybe he was selfish, but he needed the time alone with her. There had to be a solution to make them both happy—but what was it?



Chapter Twelve

"Give me a few minutes to come up with a solution. I already have some ideas brewing." Steve needed to buy himself some much-needed time before Ali demanded to go home.

"Fred had a hissy fit when I left him to go to the interview today. It would take a miracle for Fred to accept my being away from him."

"I promise to drive you home to Fred this evening if I cannot solve this problem. Do we have a deal?" Ali agreed, albeit reluctantly. Panicking inwardly but trying to maintain a calm facade for Ali's sake, Steve grabbed his phone and called George. Steve came up with the idea that he hoped would work, but he couldn't manage it alone. Luckily, his chauffeur and good friend knew as much about computers and electronics as he did about cars, and Steve was counting on that knowledge to help him. With George on the line, Steve tried to explain the "Ali and Fred situation" as best as possible while walking into another room so Ali wouldn't hear their conversation.

"Fred goes into separation anxiety every time Ali leaves him. Then she gets a major attack of guilt. Ali loves the cockatoo as if he were her child, and I don't know what to do. George, help me find a way where she can view her bird in big-screen Technicolor.

Do whatever it takes because she can't leave me. I won't let her go. Not now. Not ever!"

"Calm down, Steve. You sound as if you're at the breaking point."

"I am. Ghosts have physically attacked me. Poltergeists have set fire to my office, and that didn't faze me. But when I think about Ali walking out the door, I panic." Steve paused to take a deep breath and calm down, but it didn't work. "And get this—Ali said that we could go out on dates, and I can stay the night. Do you believe that crap? I don't want to take her out for a movie and a pizza, for Christ's sake! I want us to live together and get married. She is my soul mate, and nothing can stand in the way of that. Not even her feathered baby boy."

George's emotions were running high from listening to his friend falling apart. Steve was the strongest man he knew, but even the mightiest oak could fall when pushed to the limit. "Steve, go pour yourself a straight Scotch. Then we'll talk."

The scotch might as well have been weak tea for all the good that it did. Steve listened while George explained how he would implement Steve's plan. When he finished, Steve had real hope for the first time since Ali had her meltdown. He went looking for Ali to discuss it with her. Concentrating, Steve felt her energy emanating from the library. He found her sitting on a folding chair with an unopened book in her lap. She looked up at Steve, hope, and despair, both mirrored in her eyes.

"I keep rereading the same page, but I can't concentrate because I'm too worried about Fred."

"Darlin', I hate seeing you so sad, but I have good news. Together, George and I formulated a plan that would solve the problem with Fred. George will install state-of-the-art supersized Panasonic LED televisions here and at your apartment. Each one has a display of one hundred and three inches. At that size, you'll be able to view Fred and most of the room he's in."

Ali gasped. "I had no idea they came that large."

"George keeps up with all the latest in electronic gadgets, and he knows what's coming out, even before it hits the stores." It was going to cost Steve in the neighborhood of $140,000 for two of the giant-sized LEDs, but if it made Ali happy and kept her with him, it would be worth every penny. "Besides the televisions, George will hook up a Mac Pro computer in both locations. In addition, we will have a high-end webcam installed to Skype remotely from our end."

Ali liked the idea of her and Fred being life-sized on the screens. It just might work. "Can George install everything needed this evening? I can't wait until tomorrow to see Fred." Ali paced the room, clearly upset over her cockatoo, despite the promise of the larger-than-life screens. "Steve, there are things about Fred's past that you need to know now. It will give you a better understanding as to why I worry about him so much."

Steve watched as a dark aura settled around Ali, and he braced himself for the worst. "Okay. Tell me everything."

"When I first found Fred, he was plucking his feathers from stress. He was not getting enough food to thrive, and the cage they provided Fred was small and filthy," Ali tearfully told Steve.

It was even worse than Steve had imagined. "What medical problems did Fred have once you rescued him?"

"The muscles in his wings had atrophied from not being used. The avian vet I chose for Fred showed me how to encourage him to flap his wings. At first, Fred was afraid to flap them, and it was heartbreaking to watch. But, because Fred was a young cockatoo, he stood a better chance of recovering. After two months, Fred flew down from my arm to the floor. The following week, he flew a few feet while I watched and cheered him on. As Fred's wings recovered, his confidence grew, and each time, he would venture a little farther. Finally, when he began taking flights around the apartment, I knew we were home-free. The thing that gets me angry is that my friends cannot get it through their thick skulls as to why I allow Fred to fly free."

"Well, I understand, and I want you to know that when Fred is living here, he will have—"

Ali laughed and finished Steve's sentence for him. "Twelve-thousand-square feet to fly around to his heart's content. Please know how much I appreciate that, Steve. Not many men would allow a large cockatoo to soar through their home."

"Ali, this is your home now too, and keep in mind that I am not most men."

"I know, and I'm grateful for that."

Steve was imagining Fred flying around the penthouse and dropping little bird bombs. Nevertheless, he forced a smile for Ali's sake.

"That Fred survived the abuse and managed to keep his loving nature shows what an exceptional bird he is. My Fred is braver than most humans, and I am so proud of him."

Steve believed that people who mistreated animals were in the same league as the vermin who hurt children. "Ali, it is obvious that you and Fred were meant to be together."

"I realized that as he climbed onto my arm and rubbed his beak on my face and then spoke to me."

They were interrupted by the phone, and when Steve finished the call, he was smiling. "George has the equipment loaded onto a van. Let your pet sitter know George is doing the installation this evening. When he finishes the first install, he will come here and complete the job. Soon you'll be talking to Fred on the largest high-definition screen in New York City."

"I'm touched by your generosity, Steve. How much is this going to cost you?" Ali asked him.

"That's not important, darlin'. You can't put a price on love."



Chapter Thirteen

Ali melted at Steve's words. No one had ever cared about her as much as Steve did. Having real hope about Fred now, Ali called his pet sitter. First, Ali explained the Skyping to Gwen and that George would deliver all the equipment. Then she asked how Fred was faring.

"We're having a lot of fun together," the sitter told Ali. "We looked at picture books and watched videos. But before I forget, there is something that I need to discuss with you."

"What is it?" asked Ali.

"I'm writing a school paper, and I'd like to devote a good portion of it to Fred's intellect and his use of language, but I wanted to clear it with you first."

"I'm fine with that. Write a book about Fred if you like. Gwen, I know you enjoy staying with Fred, but it's always been for a few hours and the one overnight. I'm worried about my being away for a few weeks. There's a good chance Fred might become overly upset by my absence."

"Ali, whenever you walk out the door, Fred begins crying. He throws his toys and food, and then it's up to me to calm him down. Fred's tantrums usually last about thirty minutes until he tires out. Then he's ready to interact with me."

"Why haven't you mentioned this to me before? I need to know everything Fred does when I'm not there."

"Ali, I think you're overprotective when it comes to Fred."

"I'm not overprotective. Just wait until you have a child of your own someday." *Talk about Freudian slips*.

Steve went to get himself a beer. For some reason, he didn't like the pet sitter even though they had never met. His vibes were muddy on her, but Ali seemed fine with the college student.

Ali went over instructions for Fred's care and checked on his meal plan with the pet sitter. Gwen had no problem following Ali's recipes which were the mainstay of the cockatoo's diet. Ali had spoken with Fred's avian vet, and he increased the number of doodles Fred could safely eat until Ali returned home. The few extra Cheez Doodles would help to keep the bird calm. "Gwen, make sure that Fred gets fed the larger portion of Cheez Doodles."

"They have no nutritional value whatsoever, so I don't see the necessity—"

"You know that Fred will be distraught until I come home."

"But Ali—"

"No buts. Fred gets his Cheez Doodles as directed. Do you have a problem with that, Gwen?"

"No problem. Whatever you say, Ali."

"I'm glad you understand how important Cheez Doodles are to Fred." Before the call ended, Ali gave a list of clothing and sundries she'd need for Gwen to pack for her stay, and George would bring the suitcase over with the skyping equipment.

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"Darlin', hold the door open for us," Steve yelled out. Ali rushed to help the men and watched as Steve and George began carrying in the huge equipment boxes. George worked effortlessly, attaching the computer to the large screen TV wirelessly. As soon as he finished, Ali sat down and began checking out the new laptop.

"Ali, that bird of yours is smart as a whip," George exclaimed. "I never heard a cockatoo talk before. Fred asked me whether I knew his mommy. I thought that I had heard wrong."

"No. You heard, right. Fred is my little Einstein but without the mustache."

Now that everything was running smoothly, Steve walked George to the elevator. He was relieved that Ali had no idea how much everything was costing him. Knowing how her mind worked, she might feel guilty and hightail it back to Fred.

"Steve, you know that all I want is for you and Ali to be happy. But for Christ's sake, man, get yourself some furniture. Ali should not have to sit on that awful hard-as-nails sofa or your metal folding chairs," George scolded Steve. "A bean bag chair would be an improvement."

"Don't worry, big guy. Ali will be decorating the entire apartment," Steve assured him.

Steve found Ali sitting in front of the large flat screen, looking at Fred. He listened as the cockatoo began speaking to her. "*Squawk!* Why mommy on big TV? Fred want mommy home!"

Ali forced a smile, but inside she was dying a little. Despite Steve's generosity, the Skyping was not enough. Fred was only a large image on a screen. "Fred, your mommy had to go away, but I will be home with you soon." Ali didn't know whether her resident bird genius could differentiate between days or weeks. She hoped weeks would seem like days in bird time to Fred. "I want you to have fun playing with Gwen. She loves you very much."

Fred ruffled his feathers in indignation. "Fred sad. *Squawk!* Boohoo! Wah! Mommy, come home now! *Squawk! Squawk!*"

Steve was astonished at the conversation taking place between Ali and her bird. The cockatoo seemed almost human in his speech and manner. Hearing them converse via Skype gave Steve a better understanding of Ali's strong maternal bond with Fred.

"Fred want a doodle. Mommy come home and give Fred a doodle. Mommy give me kisses," the bird demanded.

Ali blew a kiss at the screen, and Fred let out a screech that almost busted Steve's eardrums.

"I promise I'll be home very soon, bringing you toys and books that we can read together. Won't that be fun?"

If a cockatoo could look morose, Fred did, and it increased Ali's guilt tenfold.

"I want you to go to sleep now. Be my good boy."

Ali watched as Fred's eyes closed and felt a modicum of relief that the cockatoo was asleep. Steve realized how hard the separation was for Ali, and he felt guilty for not missing Ursula.



Chapter Fourteen

They were famished, and Steve ordered dinner from La Grenouille, a posh French restaurant off Fifth Avenue. He enjoyed their cuisine and hoped it would live up to Ali's lofty expectations for French food. He spoke with the maître d' and explained about having their meals delivered. The restaurant was happy to oblige. Sometimes being famous had its perks, and this was one of those times.

The food smelled heavenly, and Ali savored each bite of her appetizer. "Umm. The escargot is delicious." Do you want to try one?" she asked Steve as she held a shell up with tongs, ready to eat another snail.

He made a face that sent Ali into peals of laughter. "You have got to be kidding? I'll leave all the snail-eating to you."

Ali was relieved that Steve didn't want any escargot. She only asked to be polite. After finishing coq au vin with buttered noodles, Ali declared it was perfection and could not eat another bite of food. But when Steve showed her the dessert, a Grand Marnier chocolate soufflé, Ali acquiesced and indulged. As she took her last bite of the creamy dessert, she turned to Steve and told him, "I loved the meal. Everything was perfect."

"I'm glad because all I want is to make you happy."

Sated and sleepy, they went back to the bedroom. Steve sat Ali down on one of the folding chairs, wishing he had something more comfortable for her to sit on. Steve then stripped the linens from the bed and returned shortly with clean sheets and pillowcases. Ali's eyes widened as she watched Steve attempt to make hospital corners.

Steve was hell-bent on pleasing Ali, but he had not made a bed in many years, and honestly, he didn't miss doing it. The woman who cleaned his home was proficient at changing linens, and Steve wished she were there now as he pulled and tucked the flat sheet. It was apparent that this was all new to Steve because two of the pillowcases were inside out, but Ali said nothing.

"I would have helped."

"No. Just rest, darlin'."

While they lay cuddled together in the darkened room, Ali decided it was a good time for their talk, so she cut right to the chase and asked Steve how he became so wealthy. He was leisurely caressing Ali and feeling very content with his life, so he spoke softly, not wanting to break the mood. "When the stock market was booming, I made a lot of money in dot-coms. I invested in startup technology companies that I sold before they bottomed out. I used my psychic knowledge to know when and what to buy and when to sell. I could see the bubble bursting and got out of there just in time. All the money I made went into building the Farrell Foundation. When times are lean like now, with the recession still going strong, I add more of my own money. Until the day I die, the Farrell Foundation will serve as a place to help those in need."

"Steve, I'm so proud of you. But I want you to know that if all of this disappeared tomorrow, I wouldn't care as long as we're together."

Steve blinked back tears, knowing Ali meant every word. He smothered Ali's mouth with his, and soon they were making love. Later, they fell into a deep sleep but awoke to the sound of loud music.

"What the hell is that noise?" Steve demanded, still groggy.

"I'm sorry, honey. It's my iPhone. I'm keeping the volume high in case Gwen needs to reach me." Wide awake now, Ali reached for the device, and Gwen explained that Fred was experiencing massive anxiety and demanding to see Ali. "I have to Skype with Fred. He's in a bad way on his first night without me." Steve was climbing out of bed to help, but Ali told him to go back to sleep. "You need your rest. Fred is my problem."

"But I can keep you company."

Ali explained that Fred needed this alone time with her, and Steve understood. Reaching for the remote, he turned on the television and began channel surfing, but he couldn't concentrate on the screen. Steve was too concerned about how Ali was going to calm down her frightened bird. With time on his hands, it seemed like the opportune time to get some work done, so Steve began reading the details of a recent case, one of several he had brought home with him. This one involved finding a missing wife. The husband suspected foul play because his wife was devoted to him and their children and would not leave of her own volition. After a thorough search, the police had just about given up, but Steve was not about to do that. He was tenacious until he got results—good or bad. Finally, when Steve relaxed, he visualized a small rundown farmhouse. He concentrated on its location while Ali babysat Fred via the computer.

Ali was staring at Fred on the mammoth-sized screen. He appeared forlorn, and his beautiful yellow crest of feathers was drooping. Guilt ate at her, and Ali reminded herself that she would only be away for a few weeks. She and Steve deserved their time together. "So, how is my big boy? You should be sleeping. It's extremely late."

The large white cockatoo lifted his head at the sound of Ali's voice and stared at her. He flapped his wings and then sat very still for a moment before the dam burst. "Mommy, come home to Fred!" The bird hung his head in despair and made pitiful, sad sobs that went straight to Ali's heart, piercing it like a knife. "*Squawk!*

Squawk! Fred sad. Wah! Wah! Mommy, come home. Make Gwen go bye-bye."

It was evident to Ali that Fred feared she might never return. There had to be a way to mitigate Fred's fear so he would never panic again. An idea came to Ali, and she decided to try it. "Fred, show Mommy how well you dance. It would make me very happy."

Gwen played one of the cockatoo's favorite dance tunes, and the bird began hopping and bobbing to the music. "Fred, you are the best dancer, and I love you so much." Fred puffed out his chest feathers, feeling proud and happy. His beautiful crest spread wide at Ali's words. "Fred, will you dance for me when I come home? And I want a big kiss when I feed you Cheez Doodles," Ali told the loquacious bird.

Fred began whistling a happy tune, another one of his many talents. "Mommy, come home to Fred! Yippee!" Fred screeched for joy and continued dancing for Ali.

"That was wonderful, Fred. Now, be a good boy, and go back to sleep."

The cockatoo yawned, and his eyes began to close. Ali thanked Gwen for taking such good care of Fred and shut the computer for the night. As she turned to go back to the bedroom, she saw Steve standing there. "You were watching?" she asked him.

"I was listening to you and Fred converse, and it was extraordinary." Ali managed to smile at Steve, but she was falling asleep on her feet. "You must be exhausted." She nodded and fell into Steve's arms, grateful for his love and support.



Chapter Fifteen

Lizzie was thrilled that Ali was in love, but the green-eyed monster that lived inside of Lizzie was rearing its ugly head, filling her with guilt. She couldn't be happier for Ali, so why was she jealous? Lizzie glanced around her apartment and looked at the lovely floral upholstered furniture and the decorative touches that abounded everywhere. But the joy she usually felt while viewing the room lay dormant, like the soggy noodles in last night's roast pork Lo Mein. Yes, her living room looked like a page out of House Beautiful magazine, but Lizzie could not remember the last time a man had kissed her. The need for physical intimacy was now taking precedence over home furnishings. She went into the bedroom and opened the night table drawer. Inside were various vibrators and erotic paperbacks for when she needed fast relief, but she yearned for a man and not a battery-operated device.

Most evenings, Lizzie sat home reading the latest psychological thriller or binge-watching Netflix. Well, things were going to change because Lizzie made up her mind that tonight she was going on a manhunt. It had to be a place where she would sip exotically named drinks, and more importantly, it had to be overflowing with men. There Lizzie would meet a man who would fall madly in love with her or, at the very least, ask her out on a date. She wanted to turn men's heads by looking spectacular and sexy,

which was going to be quite a challenge. So she went to her closet to find an outfit that would make her tall, skinny, small-busted body look voluptuous. Lizzie was rummaging through her boring wardrobe when miraculously, she found the perfect clothes.

Lizzie held up a gold-sequined bustier and a pair of skin-tight black leather jeans. Usually, her clothing tended to be on the conservative side. But, on impulse, she had purchased the bustier and jeans in a boutique back in her college days. Lizzie's best assets were her mile-high legs. The leather jeans made her slender legs look curvy, and they gave her an ass, which she desperately needed.

When Lizzie tried on the bustier, there was not enough cleavage. So she added foam inserts purchased years ago but never had the guts to wear. Now she looked well-endowed with man-bait tits. With that problem solved, Lizzie sat down at her vanity table and examined herself in the mirror. The face that stared back at her was pale and freckled. Why did she have to inherit her mother's curly red hair? When combined with her freckles, she looked more like a college student than the sexy siren she needed to become.

Both Ali and Suzanne wore makeup that enhanced their natural beauty, while Lizzie only used lip gloss to prevent chapping and pressed powder to minimize the sheen that came from having oily skin. Lizzie was long overdue for a makeover—and not just to catch a man but also for her self-esteem. Green eyeshadow was supposed to look great on redheads, so Lizzie used three different shades. But first, she applied two coats of black lengthening mascara on her invisible eyelashes. It helped, but not enough, so Lizzie added false eyelashes. Staring at her reflection, she was pleased. Slowly but surely, she lined her upper and lower eyelids with black kohl eyeliner. It was a definite improvement because her eyes appeared exotic like Suzanne's, who had beautiful almond-shaped eyes.

Lizzie's co-workers had raved about how great Buddha Bar was. It was located in the very trendy meatpacking district down in the West Village, and it seemed like the perfect spot. Before

calling for a taxi, Lizzie asked Suzanne if she would like to join her. Lizzie was nervous about going to a club alone, dressed in her man-catching skintight outfit. Suzanne was in the same dating slump as Lizzie, and she thought going out was a terrific idea.

"I think Precious can survive a night without me," she told Lizzie, "but I'm not sure about Buddha Bar. It's been getting mixed reviews."

"Shouldn't we judge it for ourselves?" asked Lizzie.

"Sure. Why not? It beats doing my laundry at midnight."

"Suze, when you're ready, I'll call a taxi. What time do you want me to pick you up?"

"Take your time, hon. I still need to do my makeup and hair."

Lizzie groaned inwardly, knowing how slow Suzanne was. She would not step foot out of her apartment without her clothing and makeup looking perfect. "You have twenty minutes tops. I'm antsy."

"Then go have something to eat," Suzanne suggested. "I need at least an hour to get ready."

Ninety minutes later, Suzanne was finally ready as the taxi pulled up to her brownstone. The first thing Lizzie noticed was how sensational her friend looked. Suzanne wore a lovely white chiffon dress, a twenty-year-old Versace she had found in one of the high-end consignment shops she frequented. Lizzie felt like white trash in her flashy gold-bustier when compared to her friend's sophisticated ensemble.

As they rode downtown to the West Village, Suzanne complimented Lizzie's outfit. "You look amazing! Just like a fashion model with your long legs showcased in those snazzy leather jeans. Wherever did you find them?" Lizzie sat there in happy shock from the compliment. "I envy you, Lizzie. Ali and I are both petite, while you look like a runway model. I would kill to have legs like yours."

Suzanne knew that her friend needed a massive boost of self-confidence. She wanted to watch Lizzie walk into Buddha Bar, feeling good about her appearance, so she decided to hide the

truth about Lizzie's outfit. Suzanne could not believe that Lizzie had chosen that gaudy gold-bustier for this evening. She had to bite her tongue not to say anything that smacked of negativity.

"I'm so relieved that you like what I'm wearing. I was afraid that my outfit was a bit much," Lizzie confessed to Suzanne, who was relieved that Lizzie believed her lies.



Chapter Sixteen

Lizzie frowned as she looked at the long line waiting to get into Buddha Bar. It was half-past eleven, and their peak time was not for another hour. A huge bouncer, the size of a sumo wrestler, was standing at the door, deciding who would get in. Suzanne had warned Lizzie that she would wait thirty minutes tops because it was ninety degrees outside, and the humidity was high. It made Lizzie question the leather pants she had worn, but she had nothing else to choose from. Her entire wardrobe consisted of gabardine pants and calf-length skirts. She had taken dull to a whole new level.

The bouncer ignored some preppy-looking men and their dates and went straight to Suzanne and Lizzie. "You girls can go in," he told them. First, his eyes assessed Lizzie's gold-bustier, and then they traveled south, looking at her leather-clad legs with sincere male appreciation. Then he turned to ogle Suzanne, much to her annoyance.

Suzanne grabbed Lizzie by the hand and rushed past the huge man, entering the club. Lizzie's eyes were round as saucers as she took in the exotic interior. Jellyfish floated in suspended aquariums high above the seating areas. Suddenly, both women did a double-take. A designated all-glass smoking room stood before

them. Inside, people were puffing away on the mayor's banned cigarettes.

Even though Suzanne loved Asian decor, she thought Buddha Bar seemed like a futuristic nightmare. However, seeing how Lizzie was enamored of the place, she kept her feelings to herself and hoped the club lived up to its hype. Suzanne stood before a massive statue of a buddha sitting under a skylight. "Now, that would look fantastic sitting in a large house, but my apartment is the size of a pea pod," Suzanne lamented.

Unfortunately, that was the sad truth. Lizzie felt terrible for Suzanne because she and Ali's apartments were significantly larger when compared to Suzanne's brownstone studio with its small sleeping loft. "Would you really want a large buddha if you had space?" Lizzie asked Suzanne.

"In a heartbeat. But not this huge," Suzanne answered, laughing. "A smaller version would be fine. Haven't I ever told you about my fascination with the Orient?"

"No, I don't remember you mentioning it. So when did it start?" Lizzie asked, highly interested in this newly discovered side to Suzanne.

"It began when my parents bought me a vintage geisha doll from Japan. The gofun doll wore a silk kimono with an obi tied around its waist. Since that first doll, I've collected Asian art over the years, but unfortunately, I have nowhere to display it." Suzanne's voice was tinged with sadness as she imagined her collection showcased on glass shelves in a large and airy room. "I want to travel to Japan someday and see the sights." Suzanne began taking photos of the giant buddha. "I've decided to name him Christian. He's my new cellphone wallpaper."

"That doesn't sound very Asian. Why did you pick that name?"

"Because I adore Christian Dior clothing. He's my favorite designer."

That made sense to Lizzie as they made their way to the main bar to order cocktails. "The prices for drinks are outrageous,"

Lizzie whispered to Suzanne, who merely shrugged her pretty bare shoulders.

"It's Manhattan and the meatpacking district. What did you expect?"

"I know. I know. You warned me that the prices were sky-high, but it would be worth it to meet some great guys."

Lizzie was drinking a Black Buddha when a man sat down in the seat next to her. The stools were so close together that their legs almost touched. Lizzie stole a glance at him. He was very handsome in a bad boy way. Lizzie tried not to stare, but his raw masculinity was pulling her in like a lodestone. Even his package was bulging, which made her think of sex. In addition, he sported black wavy hair and at least a day's worth of dark stubble, which only added to his appeal. Lizzie usually went out with bookish men who hung out in museums and read musty tomes, but her heart secretly yearned for a man like him.

Hoping to generate some interest, Lizzie gave him what she thought was a seductive smile, and the man smiled back at her. Then to her happy surprise, he asked Lizzie if he could buy her a drink. She gladly accepted and decided that her man-bait outfit was working. She was smoking hot tonight!

Suzanne slowly drank a martini that cost a whopping sixteen dollars. In case she didn't meet anyone, she intended to nurse it for a while. Inwardly, Suzanne cringed at the muscular-looking goon hitting on her friend. The men she was attracted to had style and class, but it seemed that tonight Lizzie was taking a walk on the wild side.

While Lizzie sipped her drink, she couldn't help noticing that the man with the sexy bedroom eyes was now giving her the once-over. His eyes came to rest on her cleavage, which was popping out of the gold-spangled bustier.

"So, babe, how much do you charge?" he asked her.

"Charge for what?" Lizzie had no idea what he meant by that.

"To enjoy the pleasure of your company, sweet thing." Lizzie was thrilled. She decided he must be asking her out on a date. Men

used all kinds of pickup lines, but that was a new one. Lizzie's eyes sparkled with happiness, and her bust gleamed ivory under the red glass chandeliers. When the man's hand rested on her shoulder, she shivered from his touch.

"Do you have a name to go with those gorgeous green eyes?" Lizzie had become so flustered that she couldn't recall her name.

"It's, uh… Lizzie. Lizzie Stein."

"It's nice to meet you, Lizzie. I'm Jack Ginsberg." Dammit! Why had he given the redhead his real name?

Lizzie finished the remainder of her drink, and Jack ordered her another. She drank the Black Buddhas like greased lightning, needing the courage the liquor provided. It had been far too long since her last date, and she didn't want to say or do anything that might turn Jack off in any way.

While she tried to think of her next move, Jack took the initiative and bent his head to Lizzie's. She felt Jack's tongue lick the seam of her lips, which opened on automatic pilot for him. He tasted and caressed Lizzie's mouth, making her dizzy with desire. Not caring that others were watching, Lizzie threw caution to the wind and wrapped her arms around Jack's neck to get more of his kisses. Suzanne stared at her friend in shock. Lizzie must have lost her mind. She was making out with a total stranger!

As Lizzie sipped her third drink, Jack's hand roamed to her sequin-covered breasts. Typically, Lizzie would have slapped his hand away, but she wasn't thinking clearly. The three drinks packed quite a punch, despite the fruity flavor. "This oriental stuff is beginning to weird me out, and I want to get to know you better," Jack told her. "Let's get out of here so we can be alone."

Lizzie had allowed Jack to cop a feel and in a public place. "You're coming on a little too fast for me, Jack. After all, we just met."

"I can be nice and slow"—Jack paused to run his hand up Lizzie's thigh, and she gasped, but it was a gasp of pleasure. "If that's how you like it, babe." Had she heard him correctly? Jack's arm was around Lizzie's waist, pulling her closer to him, and she

stared at his mouth, which was shiny from their kisses. He whispered huskily into her ear, "How much would you charge me to see what's under all that glitter? I can be very generous when the mood strikes me."

False bravado fueled by too much liquor made Lizzie lose all common sense. Here was her golden opportunity for a boyfriend and great sex. Jack was coming on a bit strong, but he was so damn hunky that she didn't care.

"Do you think you can afford me, big boy?" Lizzie purred, trying to sound sexy. "I don't come cheap." It had been quite a while since she'd flirted either drunk or stone-cold sober.

Jack removed his arm from Lizzie, and a police badge materialized in its place. "Okay, Miss Stein, you are under arrest for solicitation of prostitution."

"You can't arrest me! Are you crazy?" Lizzie asked in a state of shock.

"Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to retain an attorney—"

Suzanne could not believe what was happening. The over-muscled idiot in the tight T-shirt had turned out to be a cop. And he thought Lizzie was a prostitute! Suzanne jumped off her seat and faced him. "How dare you try and arrest my friend! She isn't a hooker, you moron. She hasn't even had a date in over six months! Can't you see that she's drunk, thanks to you?" Then Suzanne took her clutch bag and hit Jack Ginsburg over the head with it.

"Ouch! Lady, I can arrest you right along with your friend. You can't hit an officer of the law."

Suzanne had taken some courses in law at John Jay College and used them to her advantage now. "This is entrapment and not enforceable in the eyes of the law. If you try and detain my friend, I will personally bring you up on charges."

Jack stood there and looked at Lizzie. Tears were streaming down her face, taking her mascara with them, but Lizzie did not even care. The hunk of her dreams had humiliated her in front of

everyone. She wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Suzanne took a tissue from her bag and wiped away the tears and makeup. Then she turned and glared at the cop with a look of pure hatred.

Meanwhile, the fine hairs on the back of Jack's neck were standing on end. Something didn't feel right about the situation, and he had to get to the bottom of it. Jack took a good hard look at Lizzie. With her makeup gone, she looked young and innocent. But he had met prostitutes who looked like angels and still spread their legs for many johns each night. He asked the two women to come outside with him so he could question them in private. A small crowd was gathering, and Jack needed to get them out of there quickly.

One man asked Suzanne how much she charged for a three-some, and she whacked him with her bag, which had become her weapon of choice for the evening.

Lizzie was clinging to Suzanne, and her throat was sore from crying, but she couldn't stop. "How could you think that I was a hooker?" she asked Jack Ginsberg between tearful sobs.

"For starters, look at that outfit you're wearing," he answered. "All the gold-glitter and those skintight black leather jeans. Gimme a break, lady. I'm a vice cop, and you fit the description."

Lizzie bawled and bawled some more, and Jack wondered how such a skinny woman could have that many tears in her. "I was lonely and looking for a boyfriend, and you pretended to like me."

Yes, he had done all that. But, it was part of the job when working undercover. "I offered you money," Jack reminded Lizzie. "When you eagerly accepted, that was the proof I needed."

Lizzie's alcohol-induced fog was beginning to lift at a rapid pace as she stood outside and breathed in the night air. "I was very attracted to you. As for the money, I thought that was some weird new kind of flirting. What my friend told you was the unfortunate truth. I haven't had a date in months." Lizzie looked at Jack Ginsberg through tear-stained eyes, and the hairs on Jack's neck

were now having a field day. “It took a lot of guts for me to come out tonight, and who did I have to meet—you!”

Lizzie was in full fighting form now, and she continued on her tirade. “Because you’re a cop, you think you know everything. Well, you wouldn’t know a hooker from a nun because that’s how I’ve been living! You are an awful, awful man!” It felt good to get some of the hurt and the anger out. “My girlfriend and I are merchandise buyers for Bloomingdale’s, you big jerk!”

Jack felt like the dirt beneath his shoes. She was telling the truth. Dammit. Jack had never screwed up before. There was one last question that he needed to ask. “But what about your hair? Only a working woman would dye her hair that shade of red.”

“Working woman!” Lizzie screamed at Jack. She knew what a working woman was. What an asshole! The booze hampered her aim, but Lizzie managed to kick the vice cop in his shin, and he yelped in pain. “This is my natural hair color. My parents always told me that my hair was beautiful.” Suzanne reassured Lizzie that her hair was lovely and not to pay any attention to the cop.

Jack didn’t know what to do. Lizzie was standing there in the moonlight, pale, freckled, and hurt. She looked beautiful without all the makeup hiding her delicate features. Truth be told, Lizzie resembled a young Nicole Kidman, even prettier.

Her girlfriend was right. It was entrapment, though Jack would die before admitting it. And to make matters even worse, he had enjoyed kissing Lizzie. Jack wanted more of those kisses, but now she hated his guts and with good reason. Wanting to make amends, Jack apologized and asked the women if he could drive them home. Lizzie looked at him as if he were some loathsome creature.

“Drop dead, scumbag,” she answered to his offer of a ride.

Rot in hell,” Suzanne spat at him.

Together, the two women walked off into the night. Suzanne was holding onto Lizzie’s waist to keep her from falling. She was teetering in her high heels as the liquor held her tightly in its grip.

Jack Ginsburg was thirty-six years old, and he was lonely. Sure, he had one-night stands, but that was just fast sex to get his rocks off. For some crazy reason, Jack found Lizzie's freckles to be a huge turn-on. He wanted to kiss each one of them. But first, he had to woo Lizzie and gain her forgiveness so that she would go out on a date with him.



Chapter Seventeen

Jack couldn't believe how badly he screwed up last night. He must have left his brains back at the precinct while working undercover at Buddha Bar. He kept remembering the look of shock on Lizzie's face when he accused her of being a hooker. He had degraded her in the worst possible way, and his guilt was off the charts. He needed to garner the courage to ask her out, and he was worried that Lizzie would reject him, and he couldn't blame her.

There was a florist around the corner from Jack's apartment, and on impulse, he stopped in. He glanced around at all the flowers and decided that something floral was an excellent way to get Lizzie to forgive him. Jack admired the beauty of the colorful rainbow parrot tulips. He knew most men gave roses, but Lizzie's bouquet had to be remarkable.

"I'll take a dozen of the parrot tulips." Maybe a dozen wasn't enough after all that had transpired. "On second thought, make it two dozen."

"That's a smart decision," the shop's proprietor informed Jack. "When you're buying flowers, more is always better. I'm Nora, and if I can be of assistance with anything, feel free to ask."

"It's nice to meet you, Nora. I'm Jack. Any help would be appreciated because this is my first time in a flower shop. Do I need a vase for the tulips?" he inquired.

Nora thought that Jack's honesty was adorable and so typically male. "Two dozen tulips will look amazing in the right one. We carry all types, as you can see." Nora pointed out various style vases to Jack, who was getting more bewildered by the minute. "We have both cut crystal and blown glass. Sweden makes lovely crystal vases."

Jack shoved a hand through his hair. His brain was turning into mush. He had no idea which one to choose, and he knew dipshit about Swedish vases. "Nora, please do me a favor and pick out which vase would go best with the flowers. I need to impress a certain someone, and I'm hoping the flowers will do the trick."

Nora wondered how a man as good-looking as Jack could be having woman problems. If she were ten years younger, she would be flirting with him herself. Menopause had made her feel sexier even though it came with crow's feet. However, Nora knew that she was still beautiful, and she was very attracted to her new customer. Maybe he liked attractive cougars.

Nora tugged down her scoop-necked top, which helped to show off her ample cleavage. She watched as Jack's eyes traveled to her bosom. "Would you be interested in going out for a cup of coffee? I can close the shop for a while. Being the owner has its perks," Nora told Jack, hoping that he would take her up on her offer.

Jack had not expected that, and it took him by surprise. Nora was a stunning woman, despite having a few years on him. She was curvy and stacked in all the right places, but she wasn't Lizzie. "I'm flattered, but I'm hoping things will work out with the young lady I'm purchasing the flowers for," Jack explained.

Despite the other woman, Nora still held out hope. In her experience, men tended to be notorious philanderers. "I certainly hope the tulips melt her heart. But if they don't—well, here's my card if you ever feel the need to talk."

Jack took the card and pocketed it, doubting that he would ever be calling but not wanting to hurt Nora's feelings. She was standing right next to him, and Jack recognized the look in her eyes. Desire. Nora had beautiful honey-colored hair that curled past her shoulders. Her big blue eyes and lush mouth were very tempting. Jack was only human, and there were no guarantees that Lizzie would ever speak to him again despite his best efforts.

Unable to resist, Jack cupped Nora's face in his hands and tenderly kissed her, taking his time about it because she was so beautiful. Nora breathed his name as she kissed him back with fervor. Her hands were ruffling his hair, and Jack realized the kiss was getting out of hand. He pulled away from Nora before he had yet another reason to hate himself. "I shouldn't have done that, Nora, but you're so lovely, and it's been a while for me. I'm sorry."

Nora kept her smile on to hide her disappointment. Her lips were still tingling, and she couldn't help envying the recipient of the flowers. "Jack, it's all right. We were both feeling lonely." Jack had made Nora feel young and vibrant again. Maybe things wouldn't work out, and he would call her, but she wasn't going to count on it.

Jack watched as Nora created a beautiful arrangement with the tulips. "I sincerely wish you luck with your girlfriend. I hope she appreciates what a great guy you are."

"You are a sweetheart, Nora, and I want to thank you for all your help." When Jack went over the bill, he blanched at the price. Who knew flowers and a vase could cost so much? Jack had the tulips sent to Lizzie's office. He wrote a note telling Lizzie how sorry he was for everything and asking her for a second chance.

After paying, Jack felt better about things as he walked down the street, but soon, he began to worry. What if the tulips weren't enough? Jack had almost arrested Lizzie and even made the tasteless remark about her hair color. His stupidity might require a lot more than flowers. Halfway down the block was a gift shop. It had a display of chocolates and stuffed animals in the window. Driven by desperation, Jack bought the heart-shaped keepsake

box of Godiva chocolates and hoped Lizzie would enjoy them. She needed to realize how sincere he was in his attempt to make amends.

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Lizzie slept through the alarm, and she was late for work. Nevertheless, she forced herself to get out of bed, took a few sips of coffee, and headed into the shower. Lathering up, Lizzie remembered every degrading detail of her mortification at the hands of Jack Ginsberg. At least she would never have to see his smug handsome face again.

The subway was packed, but she managed to snag a seat. While riding the train to work, she ate two Dunkin Donuts with a tall iced coffee. No matter what was transpiring her in life, Lizzie's appetite never waned. As she entered her office, the assistant buyer greeted Lizzie with a big smile on her face. "Two gifts arrived for you this morning. I think someone's got a new boyfriend," Marie chirped in her high-pitched voice that grated on Lizzie's nerves.

Lizzie stared at the multitude of parrot tulips arranged in a sleek crystal Orrefors vase. Whoever sent the flowers must have spent a small fortune. Lizzie's mood perked up. Did she now have a secret admirer? Next to the flowers sat a large box of candy. Lifting the lid, Lizzie looked at the delicious Godiva chocolates and ate one. But after she read the card, her face grew pale, and her mouth became a thin, grim line of anger. Marie stood and watched silently, wondering why her boss was so upset.

Lizzie's phone rang, and Ali's name flashed across the screen. "We need to talk about what happened last night at Buddha Bar," Ali told Lizzie.

"How on earth do you know about that?" Then, needing privacy, Lizzie sent Marie on some errands so the assistant buyer wouldn't overhear her conversation.

"I had my first psychic dream," Ali answered. "I know that you're hurting, and I wish I could take the pain away."

Lizzie groaned. “It was bad enough that Suzanne was a witness to my mortification, and now you know about it also. Is nothing sacred anymore?”

Despite her anger at Jack Ginsberg, Lizzie was enjoying the delightful aroma of the tulips. As she inhaled their fragrance again, Ali asked Lizzie if the flowers had arrived. She sat back down in shock.

“You know about the parrot tulips?”

“I seem to be more in tune with the universal knowledge,” Ali explained, “and I’m picking up more information every day. I’m glad that Jack chose Godiva chocolates because they’ve always been your favorite.” That was the truth, and Lizzie ate two more of the delicious chocolate candies. “Lizzie, there’s something you need to know concerning Jack, and it’s important.”

“Whatever it is, please keep it to yourself.”

“But you need to hear this,” Ali insisted.

Knowing that Ali would persist, Lizzie relented. “Okay. So what is it?” Lizzie sat nervously, drumming her fingers on her desk.

Ali took a deep breath and forged ahead with her news. “It seems that Jack has fallen for you. That’s why he sent you the flowers and chocolates.”

Lizzie sat there in a state of disbelief. “Ali, I’m sorry, but you’re way off this time. Maybe you need to readjust your psychic antenna. First, let’s look at the facts. Jack thought I was a hooker and tried to arrest me.”

“It wasn’t all Jack’s fault.”

“Of course, it’s his fault. I hate and despise the air he breathes.”

“I’m your best friend and always tell you the truth. Promise me that you won’t get mad at what I’m about to say. Promise me,” Ali reiterated.

“Okay, I promise.”

“You were dressed like a hooker last night.” Ali hated hurting Lizzie’s feelings, but she had to know the truth.

Lizzie's worst fears about the stupid outfit had been correct. *Damn! Damn! Damn!* The gold sequined bustier and the black leather jeans were trashy looking. "What about my eye makeup? I was trying to look exotic."

"Eye makeup is a good idea when applied correctly, but you overdid the black eyeliner and the false eyelashes. Your eyes reminded me of Liz Taylor when she played Cleopatra."

Lizzie remembered watching that movie as a child. Had she gone that far with the makeup? Yes, she had. Unfortunately, in this case, more was not better. "Then why did Suzanne tell me I looked fantastic? Was she lying to me?"

Of the three friends, Suzanne was the kindest and the most sensitive by far. Ali had no doubts she had lied to spare Lizzie's feelings. "Yes, but she did it out of love."

Lizzie was fuming. "So Suzanne hated the bustier. I wouldn't have bitten her head off if she'd just told me the truth."

"Are you sure about that, kiddo?" There was silence on the other end, and Ali had her answer.

"Let's forget about my fashion *faux pas* for the moment. Do you honestly expect me to believe that Jack Ginsberg is attracted to me?"

"Yes, I do. You and Jack have a powerful connection that could build to love if given half a chance."

After the call ended, Lizzie reread the card Jack sent, and his words appeared sincere. But after last night's fiasco, Lizzie knew that she was not the best judge of clothing or men. So she reached into the heart-shaped box and ate another chocolate, trying to put Jack Ginsberg out of her mind.



Chapter Eighteen

During their Skyping, Ali tried to coax her recalcitrant cockatoo to eat his breakfast. She sat in front of the mammoth-sized LED screen so that Fred could watch her enjoying her blueberry pancakes. "Fred, mommy's pancakes are delicious, and your breakfast looks yummy. Gwen made you the fruit and oatmeal bread that you love so much. Let's eat our meals together," she suggested.

Usually, Fred loved his berry bread, but not today. When Ali kept encouraging Fred to eat, he spread his yellow crest wide and let loose with a barrage of earsplitting screeches directed at her. "Fred want Mommy home! Fred, not eat! Yucky poo-poo!"

The cockatoo picked up some of the bread in his beak and dropped it to the floor. Then he flew down and purposely made a mess of it while Ali watched in horror. "Food go bye-bye. Fred, no eat! *Squawk!*"

Ali's stomach began to churn from the tension, and the blueberry pancakes with real maple syrup lost their appeal. "Please eat something, Fred," she pleaded to his onscreen image. "You must be hungry. Gwen added blueberries and strawberries, and you know how much you like them."

"Fred, no want food! Mommy, come out of TV, and Fred, eat."

Ali set her fork down and tried to find a way to get Fred to eat his meals. She needed to get his mind onto something other than her absence, so Ali asked the cockatoo which animal shows he and Gwen had watched together.

"Oh, boy! We see puppies on TV. Fred want a puppy, Mommy."

"If you eat your breakfast, Mommy will get you a puppy very soon. Not a baby puppy but a full-grown dog of your own. Would you like that, sweetie pie?" Ali asked the bird.

"Fred want a dog! Yippee!" The cockatoo swung himself upside down on his perch, squawking happily, while Ali laughed at his antics.

"Okay, so are you going to eat your breakfast now?" Fred needed to eat all his meals, or Ali could kiss her time with Steve goodbye. "If you want a dog to love, you must be my good boy and eat what Gwen feeds you until I come home."

This time, Fred took some of the berry bread and began eating it. Ali breathed a sigh of relief, and so did Steve, who was sitting nearby and watching the entire scenario. He was glad that Ali had been able to use his cocker spaniel as a bargaining tool to entice the cockatoo to eat.

Skyping was over for the morning, and Ali's pancakes were cold. Steve offered to reheat them in the microwave, but Ali couldn't look at food now. "Thanks, but I'm not hungry anymore."

"My poor baby. You need to relax." Steve thought some sex would restore Ali's appetite, but all she wanted was to relax in a hot bath. Ali dropped a kiss on Steve's lips and hurried off to the bathroom to unwind in vanilla-scented bubbles.

Steve sat down and picked up a book of fabric samples that Ali wanted him to look through, but memories from the past intruded, not allowing Steve to give it the attention it deserved. It was twenty-one years since he'd lived in an honest-to-goodness home, but thanks to Ali, those days would soon end. Sighing, Steve closed his eyes and let himself relax. His mind wandered back to the halcyon days of his youth. Steve and his parents lived in a small white clapboard house in West Virginia. It was a beau-

tiful area, surrounded by woods, lakes, and mountains. Steve and his father enjoyed fishing in a crystal clear stream that ran through their property, teeming with trout. Steve's mother would gut and clean the fish without complaint, frying it up in the big cast-iron skillet. The delicious aromas of his mother's cooking filled their cozy home.

On what was to become the darkest day of Steve's life, he'd awakened in a panic. He dreamed that his parents perished in a four-car collision. Whatever it took, Steve had to prevent them from using their car that day, and so he told them about the dream.

John and Rebecca Farrell were proud of their son's gifts, and Steve was considered a healer in their small town. Even so, Steve could not dissuade them from visiting his aunt, who lay dying in the hospital. Sensing she was fading fast, Steve's aunt called out to see her sister, and Steve's mother could not live with herself if she did not go and visit the one last time.

Rebecca swore to Steve that God was good and nothing terrible would happen to her and Steve's father by driving the family car that day. John Farrell was optimistic that their boy was only suffering from the aftereffects of the bad dream. He assured Steve that this was not like the other predictions that had come to pass. "You had a nightmare, and those can seem very real. Now stop frettin' about us. We would never leave you, son."

Rebecca saw the anguish on Steve's face, and it was breaking her heart. She hugged her son to her bosom, and his adolescent body exploded in pain, stealing the breath from his lungs. As an empath, he was experiencing the horrific pain his parents would suffer upon impact, their bodies crushed beyond recognition. Steve took solace in the knowledge that his parents would die quickly.

His grief was so great that he wanted to perish right along with them, so Steve asked to come and visit with his aunt also. John Farrell was about to say yes when his wife stopped him. She made an excuse about a nonexistent rule where only two visitors were allowed in the hospital room. It was the first time Rebecca ever lied to Steve. She had been witness to her son's uncanny pre-

dictions. On the chance that Steve was right, Rebecca could not put his life at risk because she loved her son more than her own life. Tenderly, Rebecca smoothed the curls back from Steve's forehead and promised to bake an apple pie for dessert that evening. Steve blinked back tears while glancing at the red apples that sat in a wooden bowl on the kitchen table. He knew they would still be there come morning.

The years passed, and the guilt regarding their death-haunted Steve. Now he desperately wanted his parents' approval of his upcoming marriage. He relaxed on the bed and silently called out to them across the astral planes of time and space. Suddenly Steve felt their presence in the room. Rebecca's sweet, soft voice spoke to him, and Steve felt his mother's warm energy surrounding him.

"We love you so much, Steve, and remember, we will always be there for you," Rebecca promised her son, who had grown into a fine young man. She was proud that Steve used his gifts to heal people and would have expected no less from him.

John Farrell ruffled his son's hair, but it stayed in place as ghostly fingers ran through the brown curls. "Son, your mother and I believe that Ali will make you a fine wife, and we wish you many years of happiness together." Steve listened intently, savoring each word, as his father spoke slowly with a deep southern drawl.

Over the years, John had dreamed of becoming a farmer, and now he had endless acres of land to plow and plant. "I have cows to milk and a henhouse filled with chickens that are busy layin' eggs." John paused to scratch his chin. A habit leftover from when he was alive. "I reckon I should purchase a breedin' bull and get myself some calves. It's a lot of work, but now I have all the time in the world."

That was the understatement of the year, Steve thought. His father had an eternity to plant crops that John and Rebecca would never consume. He would breed cows with their silent moos and milk them to his heart's content. Despite that, Steve was grateful that his parents were happy and contented in the afterlife.

As Ali walked into the bedroom, she saw glowing light surround Steve and sensed his parent's spirits were visiting with their son. The love emanating from Rebecca Farrell was so strong that Ali felt its energy from across the room. Steve spoke of them with much love, and Ali had grieved with Steve for their loss. Now standing in an oversized bath sheet, Ali watched as the two spirits floated towards the ceiling and then disappeared. She rushed over to Steve and held him in her arms while he wept bitter tears. He was still the fourteen-year-old boy mourning the loss of his parents.

"I saw their deaths, but there was nothing I could do to prevent it from happening. My parents heard me calling out to them, and they came, but now I miss them even more. Ali, tell me, how do I live with the all-consuming guilt? I keep wondering what I could have done differently to save them. Most of the time, I manage to keep it under control, but today was the anniversary of their death, and I'm losing it, babe."

Ali wanted to help Steve. He carried around the misplaced guilt-like excess baggage. "I don't know why you had to envision your parent's death. Sometimes fate can be cruel, and that was one of those times. Your parents could not have asked for a better and more loving son than you, Steve. I wish I had it in my power to change things, but I don't. No one does."

Ali's words went straight to Steve's heart. "Darlin', after I lost my parents, I did not believe I was capable of loving anyone until you came along. You are my angel, helping to pull me out of my grief. Ali, do you have any idea of how wonderful you are? How I cannot live without your love." Ali wiped away a tear, listening to Steve's heartfelt words. "Will you marry me and share your life with me?"

"Yes, Steve. Of course, I'll marry you."

Two spirits watched their son propose marriage to his beloved, but now they had to journey home. John needed to gather the eggs and plant more corn. Rebecca planned to bake pumpkin and apple pies to treat the children who lived on the neighboring

farms. One six-year-old child had loved Rebecca's baked goods while still alive, before her death from leukemia. She and her parents had lived down the road from Rebecca and John's home in West Virginia. That same child now visited the Farrell's farm and partook of the goodies Rebecca baked. Her heart grieved for the little girl and all the other children who had passed away too soon. She wished she could do more for the children than bake endless pies and cookies and read to them about places and things they would never get to see. But, most of all, Rebecca wished she and John had listened to their son and not gone to visit her sister that fateful day.



Chapter Nineteen

"Lizzie, there's a phone call for you."

The assistant buyer was holding Lizzie's phone, and she snatched it from Marie's hand. "How many times have I told you not to touch my cell phone or any of my things, Marie?"

"But I couldn't just let it keep ringing," she answered.

Lizzie rolled her eyes heavenward and counted to ten, trying not to lose her temper. "After a few seconds, it goes straight into voice mail. I don't, ever—and I mean ever—want you answering my calls and going through my mail. Am I making myself clear, Marie?"

"I'm sorry, Lizzie, and I swear that I won't answer it again. But don't you want to know who's on the line?"

"Fine," Lizzie answered in exasperation. "Tell me who it is."

"The caller's name is Jack Ginsburg, and he sounded nice."

After yesterday's candy and flowers, Lizzie was expecting Jack's call. But why was he pursuing her? Was she the booby prize for his overinflated ego, or was there a fleeting chance that Jack was genuinely sorry, and maybe he actually liked her? The cynical part of Lizzie found that to be highly unlikely.

"I'm permitting you to use my phone this one time. Tell Jack Ginsberg that I'm not here," Lizzie ordered, seething with righteous indignation at the gall of the man.

"Jack Ginsberg told me that he heard every word you said, and despite that, he still wants to speak with you."

"Damn it all to hell," Lizzie muttered as she retrieved the phone and sent Marie on an errand to get some much-needed privacy. "How dare you call me Mr. Ginsberg, and how did you manage to get my unlisted phone number?"

"I dare," Jack replied, all breezy nonchalance. "And as for your phone number—that was a piece of cake. We cops have our ways." Lizzie was at a loss for words. He sounded oh so smug and sure of himself, and it was playing havoc with her emotions. "After that kiss we shared, I think it would make sense for you to start calling me Jack."

"Please don't remind me of the kiss because I'd like to forget that it ever happened. My inhibitions were down, and I was horny from all the liquor. You know the old saying, "any port in a storm."

Ouch! That hurt. Lizzie was going for the jugular, but Jack kept his cool because he realized that she was hurting badly. "Did they deliver the tulips and candy I had sent to your office?"

Lizzie harrumphed and replied that she was allergic to chocolate and flowers and had thrown both gifts into the trash. She was sure that would upset Jack because it was a known fact that cops did not earn much money.

Jack's face grew red with anger, but Lizzie would never know that. "I had no idea that you were allergic to flowers and chocolate. I hope you've recovered from your histamine attack."

"Thank you for your concern. I took some Benadryl for the hives." Then Lizzie gave Jack "the finger," wishing that he could see it.

It was apparent that Lizzie was not amiable to Jack's attempts to apologize, but he forged ahead anyway. "Lizzie, please give me a second chance. I'm not such a bad guy once you get to know

me. Let me take you out to dinner tonight, and you can judge for yourself."

That was when Lizzie recalled Ali's words. She had told Lizzie that Jack was crazy about her, and it gave her pause for thought. "Okay. We can go to dinner, but just this one time. Remember, you're still on probation."

"I'll be on my best behavior," Jack promised. "Is seven good for you?" Lizzie told him that seven was fine, and Jack breathed a sigh of relief. "Do you like Tavern on the Green?"

"That tourist trap! You must be kidding." Lizzie was not ready to let Jack Ginsberg off the hook. In truth, she loved the décor at Tavern as well as the food. The restaurant took on a magical ambiance in the evenings, with the twinkling lights dancing off of the topiaries surrounding the glass-enclosed Crystal Room. Jack had the one chance to redeem himself, and if he screwed up, it was no great loss. At least she'd get a delicious meal out of it.

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The brief conversation with Jack left Lizzie's nerves frayed. She heard that aromatherapy was an excellent way to help relieve tension, so she headed for the perfume counters to see if one of the scents would have a calming effect on her. The salesperson at the Chanel counter gave Lizzie a bottle of Chanel No. 5 perfume to dab on her wrists. As Lizzie inhaled the delightful aroma, she began to relax, and so she purchased a small bottle of the expensive fragrance.

Lizzie needed something suitable to wear for tonight's date. She must have tried on over a dozen dresses. Unfortunately, most of them made her appear too thin and flat-chested. Lizzie was about to give up when she found the perfect dress. It was shimmery taffeta in a dazzling shade of emerald-green. The dress had a low-scooped neckline that would help to emphasize her breasts. It nipped in at the waist and then flared out, ending a good four inches above Lizzie's knees, which showed off her best asset—her

long legs. Lizzie pirouetted in front of the mirror, loving the way the dress changed her appearance for the better.

Now she needed shoes to match because her footwear was as lackluster as her wardrobe. Lizzie found a pair of stunning strappy black satin pumps that would look wonderful with any dress she chose to wear.

Remembering the unflattering clothes that hung in her closet made Lizzie realize that she needed a complete overhaul of her wardrobe. But choosing the right clothes was a huge undertaking to do by herself, so Lizzie went back to the perfume department. At the Chanel counter, she'd become friendly with Hedda, the stylishly dressed middle-aged woman who sold their products.

"I could use your help, Hedda if you have some free time later today."

The saleswoman didn't have a clue as to what Lizzie wanted, but she quickly found out.

"You always look so fashionable," Lizzie complimented the woman. "Now, look at the way I dress for work." Lizzie was standing there, garbed in one of her too-long skirts, coupled with a blouse that did nothing to enhance her looks. Hedda immediately saw what the problem was. "I don't want to dress like this anymore," Lizzie admitted.

"You're in luck. I have a break coming up now, so I'm all yours," Hedda told Lizzie. "When we get done clothes shopping, I'm taking you into the salon. They will wash, cut, and style your hair for only thirty-five dollars."

Hedda retrieved her purse, and the two women began choosing Lizzie's new wardrobe. Hedda had a knack for knowing which colors looked best with Lizzie's red hair, and she was grateful for the advice. When they finished choosing the basics, Hedda took Lizzie into the lingerie department, where she purchased beautiful silky nightgowns. Now she could kiss her flannel pajamas goodbye.

Lizzie was on the high of all highs. She now understood the endorphin rush that Suzanne got out of clothes shopping because

she was beginning to feel giddy with each new purchase. When the shopping spree finally wound down, Hedda took Lizzie to the hair salon and sat watching while the hairdresser turned Lizzie's head of loose red curls into perfection. Lizzie had now officially become a swan, and she embraced Hedda and thanked her for all her help.

Tired but happy, Lizzie made her way back to her office, setting down the many shopping bags. Lizzie noticed that Marie looked upset. "Are you having a bad hair day, Marie?" Lizzie patted her stylish new hairdo. "Maybe you should try the new hair salon. It's quite wonderful." So far, her assistant had not taken her job seriously, so the words flew out of Lizzie's mouth before she could stop herself.

"I don't have the time to treat myself to a wash and blow-dry because I had to take care of all the emails," the assistant buyer told her. "Lizzie, I had no idea where you were." Marie was on the verge of tears, and Lizzie was sorry that she had been curt with her. "I had to go over the last month's purchases with the merchandise manager all by myself."

"How did it go?" Lizzie asked her.

"Okay, I think. I showed her everything that you had selected, and I even lied and covered for you."

"Did you tell her that I was sick?" Lizzie inquired.

"No. I said that it was your time of the month, and you were in the ladies' room with bad cramps."

Not being able to help herself, Lizzie snorted. Marie was a hoot! She hugged her assistant and thanked Marie for her quick thinking.

Glancing at Lizzie's purchases, Marie was wondering what Lizzie had bought on her shopping spree. There were so many brown bags that Lizzie would need help getting them home!



Chapter Twenty

Jack drove his Mercedes convertible to Tavern on the Green and parked it in the lot adjacent to the restaurant. The car was purchased used, saving Jack a lot of money by passing over the latest models. He handled the convertible with tender, loving care, and to his delight, he found that the Mercedes was a great babe magnet.

As Jack waited for Lizzie to arrive, he watched as a stunningly beautiful woman entered the restaurant. Her hair was upswept, showing off a swan-like neck. Her green dress accentuated a tiny waist and showed off her long legs to perfection. Was this Lizzie? His Lizzie? Jack weaved his way through the crowd to get to his date. A group of Japanese businessmen were busy snapping photos. Jack gave them a look to kill, and they parted for him like the Red Sea.

"Lizzie, you look stunning," Jack told her.

Lizzie thanked him for the compliment, feeling confident about her appearance for the first time. Her beauty and poise enchanted Jack, and he felt lucky that Lizzie had found it in her heart to give him a second chance.

Was this Jack? Her Jack? Lizzie took a step back to get a better look at her date. He wore a navy blue blazer paired with a light blue-striped dress shirt. White pants and Italian leather loaf-

ers completed his ensemble. Jack was the epitome of casual chic in those clothes, and the muscle-bound hunk of the other night was gone.

"I'll go and check on our reservation." Jack had requested to be seated in the restaurant's famed Crystal Room. However, the maître d' informed him that there was an approximate wait of thirty minutes unless they opted to dine in a different room, which Jack immediately vetoed.

Jack asked Lizzie if she would like to sit at the bar to wait, and she readily agreed. Her new high-heeled black pumps were bothering her, and sitting down anywhere would be fantastic. Jack suggested they order drinks, and once again, he complimented Lizzie on how lovely she looked.

"I'm delighted that you agreed to come out with me tonight, and I want you to know how sorry I am for what happened." Lizzie saw the sincerity in Jack's eyes and heard it in the timbre of his voice. The soft-spoken man seated next to her was a revelation.

Jack took a chance and held Lizzie's hand in his. To his immense relief, she allowed him to do so with no words of protest and no fits of pique. However, Jack could not help noticing the way that Lizzie was looking at him. "Do you like what you see?" he asked.

"It's a definite improvement, Mr. Ginsburg, but please elucidate me. Which one is the real you?"

"What you see tonight is how I normally dress. When we met, I was wearing my working clothes." Jack explained that his average weight was several pounds less than what he weighed now. Lizzie listened as Jack explained how the latest assignment forced him to change his appearance. "I had to pump iron for months to bulk up and get to this size. No one would have believed my cover, though, if I looked like a stockbroker."

"Or an accountant," Lizzie volunteered.

"Exactly. As soon as I make detective, I'll be assigned the more important cases. Best of all, I can get off the high protein diet that I despise." Jack then told Lizzie that he held a Ph.D. in

psychology. “I was about to set up practice when I made a complete turnaround and decided to join the police academy. I wanted to make the city a safer place to live, and I thought police work was the way to go.”

“I understand, Jack. You needed to follow your dream,” Lizzie told him.

When their table was ready, Jack followed Lizzie as they walked the rose-carpeted path leading to the Crystal Room. He waited while Lizzie was seated, and then he took the chair opposite her at their small intimate table. A candle flickered in a glass votive holder, casting a romantic glow on the pair. Outside the glass pavilion, the topiary lights glowed like diamonds. Jack knew that he had chosen well in terms of restaurant choice and the woman seated opposite him.

“I want to apologize again—”

“There’s no need, Jack,” Lizzie told him. “Let’s make tonight a fresh start for us.”

“You have no idea how much that means to me. I could kiss you right now.”

Lizzie smiled. “We’ll just have to wait and see about that—won’t we?” Lizzie liked having the upper hand for once. Even though she had forgiven Jack, she still wanted to make him squirm a little and let him wonder how the evening would end. If only he weren’t so drop-dead handsome. She didn’t know if she had the willpower to resist him.

“I have a confession to make,” Lizzie admitted. “I’m not allergic to chocolate and flowers. It was just the anger talking that made me say those things.”

“After how I acted, you deserved to bust my chops.”

“Jack, I want you to know that Godiva chocolates are my favorite candy. I shared the box with my assistant buyer and took the rest home. They were delicious.”

After hearing Lizzie’s confession, Jack was glad he had spent the money on the best box of chocolates the store had to offer.

"Are we friends now?" he asked, taking a chance and holding Lizzie's hand again.

"Yes, we are," she answered honestly.

They both ordered salads and prime ribs of beef, with new potatoes and haricots vert. Because of Jack's high protein diet, he skipped eating potatoes, rolls, and desserts. As they enjoyed their meals, Jack regaled Lizzie with tales about some of his most compelling cases. Lizzie's eyes went wide when he described going undercover in a gay leather bar to catch drug dealers known to frequent the place. "I had men coming onto me," he told her. "One tried to grab my package, and I was beginning to feel like Al Pacino in Cruising."

"They couldn't help themselves because you're so cute," Lizzie said, laughing at the imagery. She then told Jack about her work as the home furnishing buyer for Bloomingdale's. She was smiling as she described her responsibilities. It was apparent to Jack that Lizzie loved her job.

Lizzie sipped more of the wine Jack ordered with their meal. He informed Lizzie that it was a Napa Valley Merlot. Lizzie was not knowledgeable about wine, but she enjoyed the rich flavor of this one.

Jack couldn't remember ever having such an enjoyable date. He realized that Lizzie was the one for him at some point between the salad and dessert, and he hoped she felt the same way about him.

Midway through the meal, Lizzie had a sneaking suspicion that her best friend had been right. She was falling hard and fast for Jack Ginsburg.

When they finished their entrées, the waiter brought over Lizzie's dessert. Jack watched as she ate a large slice of chocolate crème pie. After dabbing her lips with the linen napkin, Lizzie asked Jack if he would mind if she had another piece of the pie.

"I realize you can't indulge yet, and if it bothers you, I won't order a second slice," she told him.

"No. It's fine. I want you to enjoy yourself," Jack lied because it was killing him to watch Lizzie eat the chocolate confection, and he wanted to taste the pie more than life itself.

Lizzie glanced up after finishing dessert and saw the bemusement written on Jack's face. "I know what you're thinking. Where does it all go? I have a high metabolism, and my girlfriends are jealous because they need to count calories while they watch me gorging on carbs."

"I don't blame them for being jealous. You have the figure of a fashion model," Jack told Lizzie, and she blushed from the compliment. Then, not wanting the night to end, Jack came up with what he thought was an excellent idea. "Would you care to take a carriage ride around the park? It's such a beautiful night, and I thought we would both enjoy it."

Lizzie sat there, pondering Jack's offer. Those rides were romantic. Jack would want to kiss her, but was that such a bad thing? "Yes, I'd love to," she answered.

Jack had been staring at Lizzie's cleavage with its adorable smattering of freckles. He lost track of what they were discussing. "Love to what, sweetheart?"

"Go on a carriage ride through Central Park. It's been ages since I did that."

After Jack paid for their dinner, he whisked Lizzie through the doors to the first available carriage. The smell of *eau de horse* permeated the night air. Lizzie held her dainty nose as she stepped into the horse-drawn carriage, and Jack prayed for a miracle. The stench did not bode well for romance. Luckily, the odor quickly dissipated once they were on their way.

"It's getting a little chilly out," Jack stated as the horse trotted down the path. "But don't worry. I'll keep you warm, sweetheart."

His arm went around Lizzie's shoulders, and she instinctively snuggled closer while Jack rejoiced inwardly. There was silence except for the clip-clop of the horse's hooves, and romance was in the air. Jack pressed a soft kiss onto Lizzie's lips. She tasted delicious, and he was becoming intoxicated by her. Lizzie was

curious whether Jack's kisses were as good as she remembered, and she wasn't disappointed. "You taste sweeter than any wine," he pronounced.

The carriage leisurely made its way through the park, and Jack deepened the kiss, feeling Lizzie's enthusiastic response. Then, after hesitating for a moment, he slid his hand under the taffeta bodice of Lizzie's dress, and her nipples hardened as he rubbed them.

"Jack, not here in the carriage," Lizzie whispered as her eyes darted around to see if anyone was watching them.

"Don't worry, Lizzie." Jack's passion knew no bounds. His hand kept stroking, and his mouth smothered Lizzie's lips with kisses. "It's so dark that no one can see us. Let me make you happy, baby," he murmured.

The driver paid the couple no heed. He was used to people fooling around in his carriage. They could go at it like cats in heat for all he cared, and the big guy had given him a large tip. He held onto the reins and minded his own business, grateful that the young lady was not his daughter.

"Lizzie, I'm falling for you big time, babe." She felt a rush of happiness at his words. "Can I see you tomorrow?" His lips were now nibbling at her neck, and he couldn't resist sucking hard.

"Ouch! That hurt." Lizzie rubbed her neck where Jack had sucked.

"You smell so good that I couldn't resist."

"It's Chanel No. 5, and I'm sure you gave me a hickey. Now everyone at work will know what we did."

Jack was beaming because he had branded Lizzie as his own. "You didn't answer my question. If you don't go out with me again, I'll give you another hickey," he promised.

"I certainly don't want another one, so my answer is yes."



Chapter Twenty-One

While finishing her grilled chicken salad, Suzanne's phone rang. It was Lizzie, and she was all excited and talking a mile a minute.

"Whoa. Slow down. What's going on? I've never heard you sound this happy before."

"That's because I never was," Lizzie exclaimed. She then proceeded to tell Suzanne how she had gone out to dinner with Jack Ginsburg and fallen head over heels for him.

In a million years, Suzanne had never expected that to happen. She thought Jack was an over-muscled moron, but there was no accounting for taste. "I'm so happy for you," was all she could say, not wanting to put a damper on Lizzie's newfound happiness. Suzanne listened while her friend gushed on about all of Jack Ginsberg's endless attributes.

The shocker came when Lizzie mentioned what Ali had told her. "She said that we have an excellent chance of falling in love. Isn't that great?"

"It sure is," Suzanne replied, remembering how Ali's predictions were spot on for the most part. But what if she was wrong this time? "Lizzie, you know I only want the best for you, but promise me that you'll try and take things slow."

"Suze, that's not going to happen. You need to cool it with being so overprotective. Jack is an officer of the law, so I have my very own built-in police protection. Am I a lucky gal or what?" Lizzie asked happily.

"You sure are. Now you can throw away the purse-sized pepper spray that you carry everywhere."

After the call ended, Suzanne decided that if Jack Ginsberg could help Lizzie feel good about herself, she would do her best to like him. Unfortunately, Suzanne was now the only one without a steady man, and that sucked. Most evenings, she sat at home alone with Precious while the rest of New York was out partying the night away. Sure, she'd had boyfriends, but none of them lasted long because she refused to settle.

Precious jumped up on the sofa and climbed onto Suzanne's lap, wanting to be petted and fawned over. The Himalayan enjoyed the attention and sat chewing a Milk-Bone dog biscuit while rubbing its furry face on Suzanne's cheek and delicately licking her with its raspy tongue. But even Precious could not keep the loneliness at bay. The apartment was becoming claustrophobic, so Suzanne decided to go to an upscale bar. It had worked for Lizzie, so she decided to give it a try.

*****

Suzanne sat in one of the plush leather chairs at the Plaza Hotel's Oak Room. She asked the bartender to make her an extra dry martini on the rocks with a twist. She hoped to meet a nice guy—if such a creature even existed. Usually upbeat, tonight, Suzanne's inner darkness was as black as a moonless night as she polished off her second drink.

A man sat down next to Suzanne. "Is this seat taken?" he asked her.

"No. Help yourself," she replied, hoping he was not one of those obnoxious creeps who hit on everyone they met.

"I will, then. It's always a pleasure sitting next to a beautiful woman."

Compliments were always welcome, but they did nothing to help lift her depression. The man seated near Suzanne was classically handsome with chiseled features. But there was something about his perfect package that bothered her.

He turned to face Suzanne. "I'm John Carson," he told her, smiling all the while.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Carson. I'm sorry if I'm not in a talkative mood tonight, but it's been an exceptionally long day, and I'm just trying to unwind," she responded politely, hoping it would put an end to their conversation.

"I'm here for the same reason," John told Suzanne, and she could not help noticing the divine cleft in his chin and that his voice was as deep and mellow as a fine wine. "Do you have a name to go with those gorgeous blue eyes?"

"I do, but I don't usually give it out to strangers." Suzanne looked at John as she sipped her drink. "But in your case, I'll make an exception. It's Suzanne Turner."

"Suzanne Turner," John spoke her name slowly as if mulling over the sound of it. "Please don't get mad, but I'd like to ask you a personal question."

"I can't promise that I'll answer it. It depends on the question." Suzanne purposely crossed her legs and watched John's eyes zoom in for a close-up. He leaned in closer, studying her with such scrutiny that it made her feel uneasy. Suzanne uncrossed her legs and smoothed down her skirt, unconsciously trying to erect an invisible barrier between them.

"Are you as lonely as I am?" John asked Suzanne.

His question took her by surprise. "How did you know?"

"You shouldn't be sitting here all alone in a bar. It's not safe on the streets at night for a woman as lovely as you."

John was right. The city was teeming with all kinds of perverts. For some reason, Suzanne didn't want John to believe that she frequented bars looking to pick up men. He would be getting

the wrong impression of her. “I never go to bars alone. Tonight is my first time.” Buddha Bar didn’t count because Suzanne had gone there with Lizzie. So this was what her life had come down to, Suzanne thought miserably. Drinking martinis in bars and hoping to get lucky. She held back the tears so that John wouldn’t see how pathetic she was.

John squeezed her hand in reassurance. “I believe you.”

She looked at John and asked, “So what brought you here to the Oak Room this evening?”

John’s face turned grim. “You don’t want to know.” His words held sadness and bitter regret.

Always caring and compassionate, Suzanne wondered whether she could be of help. “Yes, I do. I’m a good listener if you’d care to talk about it.”

Suzanne seemed like a nice person, so John decided to confide in her. “Earlier this evening, I caught my girlfriend cheating on me. It wasn’t the first time, and it won’t be the last. I had to get away, so I drove into the city and ended up here at the Plaza.” John finished his whiskey sour and asked for another.

Suzanne felt immediate sympathy for him. “I’m sorry, John. You deserve so much better than that.”

“I know I do.” He took out his smartphone. “I’d like you to look at some photos of her. You and she resemble each other, but that’s where the similarities end. Suzanne, you seem so nice, while she is a narcissist with no empathy for anyone but herself.”

Suzanne could not understand why John wanted her to look at photos of a woman with whom he was on the outs, but she consented to be polite, and John began scrolling through the images. John’s girlfriend was a brassy blond with long curly hair that looked like a wig. The high cheekbones and almond-shaped blue eyes did resemble Suzanne’s, but the differences became glaringly apparent as she continued to scan the photos. The woman in the pictures had a very noticeable breast enhancement, and her lips were overly puffy from too much filler.

Suzanne's discerning eye spotted creepy-looking skin on the woman's neck. That was a dead giveaway. John's girlfriend was much older than he was. But as he gazed at the photos, a look of longing came into his eyes. It was apparent to Suzanne that despite everything, John still cared about her.

"The woman in the pictures is eighteen years my senior," John admitted.

Always the diplomat, Suzanne told John what she thought would be the polite thing to say. "Well, May–December romances are all the rage these days. If two people are in love, I don't think that age should factor into their relationship." She took a sip of her drink and then asked, "I don't mean to pry, but I'm curious. How old are you, John? Thirtyish?"

He laughed, showing whiter-than-white teeth gleaming in the dim light of the bar. "Thanks for the compliment. I'll be forty-five on my next birthday."

Guessing someone's age was certainly not her forte. John Carson looked to be at least a decade younger than his years. That meant that his girlfriend had to be sixty-three years old. Suzanne said nothing as she digested that piece of information.

John sighed deeply. "I've spent a fortune so she would remain beautiful, and how does she repay me? By having countless affairs with other men."

"You could have your pick of almost any women you wanted. Why choose someone who cheats on you and is so much older than you?" Suzanne asked.

"I don't want to bore you with the details, but I fell in love with her at a very young and impressionable age." Not wanting to offend Suzanne, who seemed to be a true lady, John refrained from mentioning that the sex they shared was incredible. Lately, though, it had tapered off somewhat. He was getting sick and tired of putting his pecker where all the other men had been.

John leaned in as he gazed at Suzanne. "You know you're gorgeous, but I'm sure you hear that all the time."

"I don't but thank you for the compliment."

Apparently, John was interested in her, but Suzanne wanted no part of him despite his good looks and polite demeanor. Suzanne was about to pay for her tab when John stopped her. Ever the perfect gentleman, he paid for their drinks.

"I need some fresh air. The bar scene is not my milieu. Are you ready to leave?" he asked her.

Suzanne looked at her watch and saw that it was already 1 a.m., and she had to be up at six sharp. If she were lucky, she could manage to squeeze in four hours of sleep before she left for Bloomingdale's. "I didn't realize the time, and I must get up early for work. John, it was nice meeting you."

"Thanks. I enjoyed our little *tête-à-tête* also." John was panicking because he didn't want the evening to end so soon. He hoped to get to know Suzanne better once they were away from the bar. "Can I give you a ride home? We could talk in the car, and maybe you would consider going out with me."

Suzanne knew she would never see John Carson after tonight, but the offer of the ride was tempting. "Thank you. It's almost impossible to get a taxi at this late hour." She appreciated the lift and hoped that John would meet a nice woman, but it would not be her.

They walked to a nearby parking garage and waited while the attendant brought out John's Lamborghini. The sleek Italian sports car suited the tall, lean man. Suzanne expected the horrid scissor doors most Lamborghini's came with, but this model possessed standard doors. John graciously held the door for Suzanne, and she climbed in. She was about to buckle her seat belt when John's face loomed over hers. Before she could utter a protest, he was kissing her, and she felt his tongue snaking into her mouth while his hands closed over her breasts and began caressing them.

"Umm. These feel nice and soft. My girlfriend has implants, but yours are the real thing. I can tell the difference."

John tried for another kiss, but Suzanne turned her head away in time. She should have realized that every man expected something, even for a lousy ride home. Instead, Suzanne told him that

she had a splitting headache and asked John to please take her home.

"I'm sorry. I realize now that I was coming on too strong. You're just so beautiful that I lost my head for a moment."

Suzanne felt the need to brush her teeth after John's kisses. She accepted his apology and held onto the knowledge that she would be home with Precious soon and forget that this evening ever happened.

As John came to Suzanne's street, instead of slowing down, he drove right past it. Then he turned to look at her, and there was something odd in his gaze, which frightened her. "You are almost the spitting image of my girlfriend. She lives in a mansion that I pay for, and she fornicates to her heart's content." The hate he felt was evident in the tone of his voice. "Do you sleep around too, blondie? I'll just bet you do. You tramps are all alike."

John did not utter another word as he drove through downtown Manhattan and then over the Williamsburg Bridge. Suzanne was desperate to get out of the car. Unfortunately, there was no traffic late at night, so she sat quietly and waited for a chance to escape. The street sign read that they were entering Brooklyn. Suzanne quickly reached for the door handle when they stopped at a traffic light. John grabbed her wrist hard, and she screamed in pain. Silently, John continued driving until he reached an empty lot under the bridge, stopping the car.

Using both hands, John ripped apart Suzanne's silk blouse. The genteel, urbane sophisticate she met in the Oak Room had been an illusion. In his place was a psychotic sadist who yanked off her bra and roughly grabbed her breasts while Suzanne begged him to stop.

"Shut up! You know you love it, Jolie. How many men have you spread your legs for?" Tears streamed down Suzanne's face. "Lost count, Jolie?" he asked sarcastically. Suzanne's screams made John Carson feel all-powerful. His erection tented his pants. The young woman from the bar was now gone and replaced by the woman who had broken his heart.

John unzipped his fly and took out his cock. “Look at it. It’s nice and big, just the way you like it. I will fuck you faster and harder than the man you were screwing tonight. Go on, Jolie. Show me how much you want me. Suck on it, bitch!”

Suzanne tried, but she gagged as John deep-throated her. Needing release, he yanked Suzanne’s skirt up and tore frantically at her panties. Anger-filled thrusts made Suzanne cry out in pain, and each time she screamed, John smacked her. Then to Suzanne’s astonishment, he began weeping as he lay atop her. Sobs shook his entire body, but he couldn’t seem to stop.

“Why did you have to go and hurt me again Jolie? I love you. I don’t want to hurt you, baby.”

The maniac kept crying, and his salty tears clung to Suzanne’s face. She prayed for him to die, and she prayed for a miracle, but none was forthcoming. While John Carson defiled her in the worst way possible, he continued calling her Jolie until she couldn’t stand the sound of that name anymore.

“Mama, please love me,” John pleaded, and Suzanne had no idea why he was calling her that. Did he now believe that she was his mother? “Don’t spank me again, Mama. I promise to be a good boy and do whatever you want. I swear, Mama.”

Suzanne tried to break through his wall of insanity one last time. “John, I am not that woman. Don’t you remember me? I’m Suzanne Turner. We met this evening at the bar in the Oak Room.” Unfortunately, her words fell on deaf ears. John Carson was still in that other world, and she was trapped there with him.

As his deranged anger escalated, John began hitting her again. Suzanne screamed into the night, but there was no one to help. Just a madman who was intent on punishing her for sins she had never committed. Suddenly his hands were around her neck, and Suzanne couldn’t breathe. She gasped for air, but he squeezed tighter, choking the life out of her. Suzanne’s last thought was, “who will take care of Precious,” before the darkness descended.



Chapter Twenty-Two

Suzanne slowly opened her eyes, grateful to be still alive, but she was in agony. John Carson had used her as his personal punching bag. She hurt everywhere, and her ribs and neck were incredibly sore. Frightened, Suzanne slowly breathed much-needed air into her lungs while her ribs screamed from the sharp pain. She was thankful there was no sign of John Carson anywhere, but her relief was short-lived. Moments later, he returned, gripping a tire iron, and she braced herself for the worst. As her assailant lifted the tire iron high, he stopped to study her features as if preserving them to memory.

"I love you, Jolie," he told her, "and I'm sorry I have to do this, but you leave me no choice." Suzanne's eyes went wide, and she screamed as the weapon descended.

When she came to, the Lamborghini and Carson were nowhere in sight, so she was safe for now. Suzanne watched as a giant rat scurried past, and she prayed the rodent would not bite her. If there were one rat, there would be others lurking around as they scavenged for food. Unfortunately, soon, over a dozen rodents were sniffing the ground, desperate in their hunger, as they devoured an emaciated cat who could not escape their feeding frenzy. Suzanne shuddered with the knowledge that she could be their next meal.

Feeling helpless and filled with foreboding, Suzanne recalled blacking out when the tire iron made contact. Red hot pain shot through her skull, but now miraculously, the pain was gone. She watched as crimson blood seeped from a wound on her forehead, but when she reached out to touch it, nothing happened. Frantically, she kept trying, but it was a futile effort. Then a horrible thought occurred to Suzanne. If her body lay on the ground below, why was she above it, looking down at herself? The revelation was more frightening than anything John Carson had done to her.

Suzanne was all alone in this godforsaken place. She was trapped, listening to the desperate howls of stray dogs, when she noticed a flash of light off in the distance. Her fear escalated as she floated toward it. Suzanne viewed her body becoming smaller and smaller until it was but a mere dot on the barren landscape, and then the light was upon her. Slowly it became a softly hued rainbow of colors like nothing she'd seen before, and she was awestruck by its beauty. Feeling at peace, she forgot about her battered body as a long white tunnel beckoned to her.

Having watched documentaries regarding near-death experiences, Suzanne believed the people who viewed the tunnel were experiencing hallucinations as their brain cells began to die. In addition, Carl Sagan wrote that people were reimagining the birth tunnel. But Suzanne dismissed all the pseudo-scientific explanations when she saw her father waiting for her at the end of the tunnel, his arms outstretched in greeting.

Her father was smiling as Suzanne drew closer. Will Turner had "felt" his daughter's spirit enter the portal to this world and waited to welcome his child. He enfolded Suzanne in his energy, and for the first time since he died, Suzanne felt her father's love, and it was miraculous.

Dreading the answer, Suzanne went ahead and asked the question anyway. "Am I dead, or is this just a bad dream?"

"Suzanne, I never lied to you, and I'm not about to start now. Yes, you're dead. I know that's not what you wanted to hear, and I'm sorry," Will told his daughter. Fear registered on Suzanne's

face, and Will hated seeing her so frightened, but he understood, having gone through the process himself. “I promise I’ll do everything in my power to help you adjust to this new world.”

“I know you will, dad, because you’ve always been there for me no matter what. But first I need to know something. Since you died, do you ever think about mom and me?” Suzanne asked hesitantly, wondering if death changed how people felt about others.

“Suzanne, you and your mother are always in my thoughts. Love never dies even when our bodies do.” Will’s voice was husky with emotion as he watched his daughters energy slowly morph until she resembled the beautiful young woman he so vividly remembered.

“That is a relief because not a day goes by that, Mom, and I didn’t miss having you with us. Your death hit her the hardest. I don’t think she will ever get over the loss. She’s kept your clothes hanging in the closets, and when I suggested she donate them to charity, she got upset with me. You probably don’t remember, but you were reading a Tom Clancy novel when you died. Well, it still sits on your bedside table. It’s almost as if Mom expects you to walk into the bedroom and pick up where you left reading.”

Will grew wistful as he thought about the wife he had to leave behind. He wanted Janet to go on with her life and not spend her time mourning him. But, with Suzanne now dead also, Janet would be all alone, and Will’s heart broke at the thought of the pain his wife would now have to endure.

Over time Will learned to accept his new existence but seeing his daughter made the past come alive again. The longing to return to his earthly existence came back with force so strong that it astonished Will. But Suzanne could never know how badly her father yearned to be with his wife once more. To smell her perfume and to touch her. As for the book she saved, Will wanted to feel the pages beneath his fingers again and finish reading the last three chapters.

Despite the joy of seeing her father, Suzanne did not want to be dead, but she had no choice in the matter. Sadly, she wiped her

eyes, surprised that there was no wetness on her hand, but then she remembered she was in spirit now, incapable of producing real tears. She watched as silver teardrops fell into her palm and rolled around. The strange-looking "tears" reminded Suzanne of the mercury found in old-fashioned glass thermometers. She stared at the tiny droplets and then flung her hand, wanting them gone.

Before Will Turners' death, he had grown painfully thin. Now he was glowing with robust health and looked as handsome as ever. The laugh lines at the corner of his eyes crinkled when he smiled, and Will Turner was a man who used to smile quite often.

"You look even better than before you became ill. How is that possible?"

"Our energy lets us change our appearance. We can choose to look however we please and project that image for others to see."

Suzanne did not believe she would ever learn to accept the concept of having no physical body. "I liked the way I used to look, and I don't want to be energy with no real shape," Suzanne declared to her father, who was not surprised in the least. Many spirits mourned the loss of their human bodies when they first crossed over. Will realized it would take his daughter time to acclimate, and he hoped she would adjust sooner than later because there was no turning back.

Everything was happening too quickly. One minute she was alive. The next, she's dead. She had a body. Now she had none. Depressed beyond all reason, Suzanne wondered why she bothered to exist at all. Then, wanting to see what would happen, she concentrated and watched as her arm glowed with light and began to lose its human shape.

"Stop that right now, Suzanne! I forbid it." Will Turner was reprimanding his daughter, just as he had back when they were a family. "I'm sorry for getting angry, but I must protect you from things you don't understand. I still feel the need to retain the image of how I appeared in my former life. Suzanne, don't go rushing to become one with the universe. When you do, your memories will

be swallowed up in the darkness, never to return. Is that what you want?" Will asked his daughter, his face grim.

"No. I was feeling very down, and I wondered if it might be better to disappear altogether."

Will understood Suzanne's despair and wished his daughter could have lived for more years. She never experienced the joys of marriage and motherhood. And he was worried because there had been no mention of Suzanne's passing in the Archives. Something was remiss, and Will needed to find the answers. Wanting to get Suzanne's mind onto something pleasant, he suggested they go for a walk. Together, they followed a meandering path that led them to a beautiful meadow with the greenest grass Suzanne had ever seen. A fanciful Victorian-style gazebo stood near a small lake, and wildflowers bloomed everywhere, the air sweet with their perfume. White-tailed deer grazed nearby, and a red squirrel peered down from a tree. Chipmunks chased each other in the tall grass, and the sight enchanted Suzanne.

"I can smell the flowers," Suzanne told her father happily.

Will shook his head. "Suzanne, you remember the fragrant smell of the flowers from your other life. We cannot smell or taste in this world, but there's no need to."

Suzanne was beginning to hate this place, but she forced herself to concentrate on the virtual springtime her father had created. Suddenly, she heard a dog barking. To Suzanne's delight, sitting beneath a weeping willow tree was Rufus, the family's Irish setter. He looked to be a young dog again as he bounded over to greet them. Her father patted the setter's head, and the dog jumped up and licked his face. Then Rufus raced over to Suzanne, stood on his hind legs, and rested his paws on her. His tail was wagging to beat the band as he greeted Suzanne. "Look how happy he is to see you. Come on, Rufus. Let's play fetch."

The setter chased after the ball. He caught it in his mouth and ran back to them, wearing a big happy grin on his face. After retrieving another ball, Rufus began barking. Will Turner had an ample supply of liver treats that had been the dogs favorite snack,

and Suzanne watched as Rufus gobbled them down. Miracles were the norm here, and her father seemed to have an endless supply of them. But Suzanne wondered how you fill a dog's tummy when it never feels hunger.

Suzanne tried her best to put a positive spin on things and was failing miserably. Then, while standing near the lake and watching turtles sunbathing on a pile of rocks, she saw the spirit of a young woman gathering flowers. The entity was bathed in a beautiful white light that kept her face hidden from view. When Rufus raced over to her, the woman put the blooms aside and laughed as she lifted the dog, who bathed her face with his tongue.

After getting his fill of affection, Rufus ran off to chase a butterfly, and the spirit turned to Suzanne and spoke to her. "Suzanne, I am your guardian angel, and I am here to bring you wonderful news."

Suzanne had real hope for the first time since she arrived, and she waited in anticipation for the angel to tell her more.

"I am so sorry you had to come here before it was your time." Suzanne heard the remorse in the angel's voice. "You must return to your physical body and continue with your life."

Will Turner felt relief such as he'd never known existed. Now his daughter would have a chance at finding happiness and building a family someday. It explained why there was no record of Suzanne's death in the Archives. Will prayed that his daughter lived many decades before she would need to journey to this world again.

The angel looked directly at Suzanne. "Don't you recognize me?" she asked.

The light surrounding the angel disappeared, and Suzanne stared at the angel's face because it was the mirror image of her own. That's when the truth dawned on Suzanne, and she asked, "Arianna, is it really you?" Suzanne's twin had died tragically before her first birthday, and Suzanne never stopped yearning for the sister she'd never had the chance to know.

"Yes, it is me."

"I want to go home desperately, but Arianna, if I leave, will I ever get the chance to see you again?"

"As your guardian angel, I will always be there for you." The angel's face broke into a radiant smile as she spoke. "Going forth, they will allow me to assume human form when I visit. You won't be seeing tiny sparks of light anymore."

Suzanne remembered the lights that had flashed near her through the years. "Were those you all along?"

"Who else?" Arianna answered.

The thought of seeing her sister when she returned home brought tears of joy to Suzanne. But this time, Suzanne felt the wetness slide down her cheeks. Tentatively she raised her hand and touched the tears, afraid of being disappointed. She tasted salt. That was the proof Suzanne needed to know she was going home.

"I have a confession to make," the angel told her sister. "When I visit your world, it seems quite strange to me. I start to feel human emotions, and they are all-powerful." Arianna's face took on a dreamlike quality as she continued speaking. "I dearly love to watch babies and children. They are so pure and innocent and a delight for the eyes. I see mothers with their infants, and I can't help wondering what it would be like to hold a human baby." Silver tears bounced on the grass as Arianna's emotions spilled forth. "But I know it was not meant to be. Our father gives me much love, and Rufus showers me with constant affection. But he doesn't mind. Do you, my furry angel?" she asked the Irish setter.

The dog leaped up and covered Arianna with kisses while Suzanne watched her angelic sister and very dead dog embrace.

"Arianna, we are very much alike. I yearn to have a child also. It's natural to have those feelings."

"For you, it is normal to want a child because you are human. But I am an angel and cannot even remember drawing my last breath of air. I should not be experiencing maternal urges. This world is my fate, and I have learned to accept it."

Suzanne was at a loss for words. It was not fair that her sister would never experience motherhood, and there was nothing she

could do about it. That was when Arianna told her it was time to leave. Suzanne scanned the horizon and watched her father and Rufus as they walked through the misty, cloud-like formations. Suzanne called out to them one last time, and then she began to feel herself being pulled back into her body.

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Every part of Suzanne ached. But despite the unrelenting pain, she was elated knowing she was alive. Overcome with nausea, Suzanne vomited up the contents of her stomach. She shook with dry heaves, sapping what little strength remained. The rain was coming down heavy, and Suzanne was drenched and chilled to the bone. With one last ounce of strength, she managed to crawl over to her purse, which lay open on the cold, wet ground. Gritting her teeth against the pain, Suzanne reached for it. Hopefully, her phone was still there, and she would call 911. The effort was too much, and she passed out, her fingers mere inches from the phone.

The angel watched over her twin. Gently, Arianna stroked Suzanne's damp blond hair. She focused her energy on her sister's head wound, hoping to staunch the flow of blood. It helped somewhat, but not enough to stop the bleeding completely. Feeling impotent, the angel wept. Arianna wished that her tears were the same as Suzanne's, wet and salty. Then she scolded herself for having such blasphemous thoughts.

A stray dog whimpered and slunk along the ground, making its way toward them. The angel sent her love to the pitiful creature near death from starvation. Arianna watched as its flesh filled out. In its place now stood a German shepherd in the prime of life. The dog licked Suzanne's hand, then it sat quietly, guarding the unconscious woman.

Suzanne was oblivious to her surroundings. Her sister held her hand while the shepherd lay beside them to rest. When a rat ventured near, he growled at the rodent, watching it scurry away to join the others in search of its next meal.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Steve was hanging artwork when the hunger pains struck, and food was not what he craved. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was six hours since he and Ali last made love. Feeling neglected, Steve searched for his fiancée. Her energy emanated from the kitchen, so he headed in that direction.

Ali was busy setting up lunch ordered from the Carnegie Deli. Their sandwiches were monster-sized, perfect for her adorable human garbage pail. She'd be lucky to get even half a sandwich down. Steve came up behind her as Ali arranged the delicatessen and side dishes for their meal.

Skilled fingers that knew Ali intimately began to rub her breasts slowly, the way she liked. She tried to pull Steve's hands away, but he was persistent as a pesky gnat and began kissing her neck.

"Umm. You smell like pastrami. That's my favorite scent."

"Can't you see that I'm trying to fix lunch?" Ali protested, but her plea was half-hearted at best.

"Put plenty of Russian dressing on my sandwich, and don't forget to microwave the mushroom barley soup," Steve added playfully.

While Ali reached for the half-sour pickles, Steve pulled her flush against his erection. "Hey, it's poking me," she laughed. Ali

pressed wantonly against him, leaving the pickles for later. She and Steve made love on the king-sized bed, which now had linens with a thread count that was off the charts, just like their lovemaking. Ali had purchased pillows, linens, towels, and everything they needed from some of her favorite online shops. They ate their lunch in new French-styled counter stools at the kitchen island, and Steve was grateful to have furniture at long last.

After informing Seth that Ali was furnishing the penthouse, Seth asked to borrow Ali to help decorate his modern high-rise apartment. However, Steve was not about to let Ali budge from their love-nest until they were ready. Seth did his best to understand their need for privacy, but he didn't get it, never having been in love.

"Why do you need to be together all the time?" he asked. Seth was genuinely perplexed, and he missed cruising around for women with his best friend. They were together when Steve purchased the custom-designed limousine with the adjustable back seat, and both men were eager to try it out. The two friends used to joke about their portable bed on wheels. Now one woman had Steve toeing the line, and Seth was happy for him. He loved Steve like a brother and couldn't wait to meet Ali. She had to be special to keep his friend faithful and be happy about it.

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Ali was devouring another book about astral travel when Steve sat down beside her. "I've studied every book on the subject until I can recite each one by rote, and I'm eager to begin," she declared.

"Then fasten your seatbelt and get ready for your first out-of-body experience." Ali jumped into Steve's arms and enthusiastically kissed him. She could not wait to astral travel, and there was no better teacher in the metaphysical sciences than Steve. "Darlin', for your first trip, you must stay close to home. Then, after more flights, you can travel farther. Remember, when you are

ready to return, visualize your body lying on the bed, and you will naturally reconnect."

Anxious to begin her journey, Ali lay down on their bed and made herself comfortable. She looked so young and vulnerable with her eyes closed that Steve wanted to call the whole thing off, but he forced himself to get a grip. Ali was a grown woman possessing the knowledge needed to make her first out-of-body experience a happy one.

"Relaxation is the key to successful astral projection. Begin by visualizing the light around yourself." Ali invoked the light and recited some positive affirmations. "You will begin to feel your body becoming lighter. That's it. You're doing great." There was no movement from Ali, which was a good sign. "Now feel your body begin to lift higher and higher."

Steve lightly placed his hand on Ali's body to check her progress, and he was pleased. Her breathing was coming from the abdomen, just as he had taught her. Steve watched as her breathing slowed down even more. Now came the actual test. Steve took one of the two needles he had sterilized and ran it along the slender arch of one foot. Then he did the same to her other foot, and she did not respond to the stimuli. Perfect. Everything was going as planned. Logically, Steve should have been happy now that Ali was beginning to astral project. But because he loved her more than life itself, he was frightened. What if she forgot how to ground herself properly when she returned to her body?

Ali looked down at her body and then at Steve, seeing the worry etched on his face. She wished she could reassure him that everything was fine. Soon Ali forgot about Steve and gave in to the incredible joy of astral travel. Ali had no idea where she was, but she didn't care because she was soaring! The sun was shining, and she was floating free on a halcyon day with no cares or worries. Her soul smiled at a gaggle of geese as they honked their way across the horizon. She glided past the clouds, looking at everything in wonderment. The Manhattan skyline was becoming smaller, and Ali was on a high as she continued her journey.

In the far distance, the sky began to darken, and storm clouds gathered. Lightning zig-zagged, and thunder roared as a storm inched its way closer to her. It was time to come home to Steve, so Ali visualized herself lying on their bed, which looked so pretty with its new linens and ruffled pillow shams. She should have been back in her body, but the visualization did not work.

In desperation, Ali imagined Fred in her small apartment, trying her best to travel home to the cockatoo. But forces beyond her control would not allow her to return. The rain was coming down in sheets, and Ali's visibility was almost gone. Suddenly the sky opened to reveal a lonely stretch of land. Discarded cars lay abandoned, resembling metal skeletons washed ashore on an asphalt sea. Stray dogs howled, sounding lost and frightened.

As Ali drifted toward the earth below, she spied a woman lying sprawled on the rain-soaked ground. Next to her sat a German shepherd. The dog looked up at the sky, sensing Ali's presence, and then the shepherd barked in her direction. Ali watched as the dog gently licked the woman's face. Then it glanced up at Ali and barked even louder to get her attention.

The woman's bruised flesh looked deathly pale, and blood seeped from an open wound on her forehead. As Ali stared at the unconscious figure below, she recognized the face. Silently she let loose with a sob that was almost primal in its intensity. Someone had torn Suzanne's clothes from her body, and the remnants of her skirt lay nearby. Her best friend had been raped and left to die. Ali cried out again, and her terror-filled screams reached Steve.

Steve was out of his mind with worry when Ali didn't return. He sat on the bed, holding her limp body in his arms, tears streaming down his face. Steve visualized Suzanne Turner's unconscious body when he heard Ali frantically calling out to him. Steve knew that he had to get Ali home post-haste, or he could lose both women.

The dog's barks grew fainter as Ali found herself pulled away from Suzanne. The storm was now gone, replaced by a vivid blue sky. A beautiful gold and white barn owl swooped by, and

Ali stared at its heart-shaped face. She would have found joy at the sight of the owl, but instead, she felt guilty at having to leave Suzanne. Ali had almost given up on returning to her body when she visualized it one last time. Miraculously she was back, looking at Steve's beloved face as he held her close.

"I was so frightened I wouldn't find my way back to you," she managed to whisper, feeling incredibly weak.

"I would have found you," Steve told her, willing himself not to cry. But would he have been able to locate Ali's disembodied soul as it traveled through time and space? Steve needed to believe that nothing could ever keep them apart, but doubts lingered, nonetheless.

Everything was supposed to have gone according to plan once Ali merged with her physical body. But instead, she felt her life force draining away, and she had no way of stopping it. "I'm sorry, honey. I did everything you taught me, but nothing worked."

"I know you did, darlin', so stop apologizing. Right now, I need for you to feel better."

Steve took Ali's temperature and blood pressure and found that both were dangerously low. She was hanging on by a thread, the same as her friend. Unfortunately, there were no magical cures or medications to help Ali deal with this paranormal problem.

Time was of the essence, and Steve called 911, giving them directions to where Suzanne lay in a coma, oblivious to everything around her. "An ambulance and medics are on the way to Brooklyn, and Suzanne will survive. She has a twin who died in infancy, and she is watching over Suzanne until help arrives. Your friend will need all your love and strength, so let's start getting you better."

Steve wrapped an electric blanket around Ali and put his warmest socks on her feet. He propped her against the pillows and coaxed her to sip some sweet tea with honey, but she did not possess the strength to swallow it.

"You are an empath, darlin', and until today, I had no idea how strongly you connected to others. Ali, you are experiencing a

good degree of Suzanne's physical symptoms. The love that binds you to Suzanne is draining away every last bit of strength you possess. I need you to separate your consciousness from Suzanne's, or we'll be needing two ambulances instead of one. I hope I'm scaring you because you need to fight to break the connection."

At Steve's insistence, Ali sipped some tea. Then she began to concentrate with whatever strength she could muster. She imagined the cord between her and Suzanne beginning to fray until it had broken completely. An incredible warmth replaced Ali's chills, and the severe lassitude that plagued her was now gone. Steve said a silent prayer of thanks. There would be no more astral projecting in Ali's future. It was not worth the risk.

"Steve, what will happen to the German shepherd?" Ali couldn't bear the thought of the dog left there to die.

"Please stop worrying because I "see" one of the paramedics adopting the dog." Relieved, Ali smiled, closing her eyes for some much-needed sleep.



Chapter Twenty-Four

The pre-honeymoon was now over, but neither Steve nor Ali were ready to say goodbye. They would only be apart briefly while Ali packed up her apartment to move in with Steve, but they were dreading the separation.

During his absence, Steve's staff at the Farrell Foundation had kept things running to the best of their ability. But now, they were overwhelmed and needed Steve to take charge. His private phone was ringing off the hook with calls from Washington and New York City's mayor. Suzanne's father had been one of the mayor's closest friends, and he asked for Steve and his team to work in tandem with the police on Suzanne's case.

Ali was anxious to get home to Fred. Her arms ached to hold the cockatoo and stroke his soft feathers. She knew she was in a bad way when she found herself missing doodle days and looking forward to feeding Fred the cheese-flavored puffs.

Steve wanted to do something special for Ali because she was leaving today. So, with a gleam in his eyes, he led her into the kitchen, where the tantalizing aroma of freshly baked pumpkin pie greeted her. "Steve, this looks delicious. What a nice surprise."

They sat down at the kitchen island, and Ali savored her second forkful of the pie when she suddenly became overwhelmed

with anxiety regarding Suzanne. Not hungry anymore, she set her fork down and pushed the plate away.

"Are you going to be finishing the pie?" Steve asked in between bites.

"No. I can't look at food right now. Help yourself." Ali watched as Steve polished off both slices in record time.

"You're thinking about Suzanne."

"I can't stop worrying about her. You've already spoken with her doctors. How is she doing?"

Steve leaned over to kiss Ali, tasting pie on her lips. "Please don't look so frightened. Things are under control. Suzanne is recovering in a private room at NYU Langone's Department of Neurology. They managed to stabilize Suzanne, and now her vital signs are improving."

"One thing puzzles me, though. How did Suzanne end up at NYU Langone when she was found unconscious in Brooklyn? I'd have thought the medics would have driven her to the nearest hospital."

"I wanted Suzanne in the best medical facility possible, so I pulled a few strings and called in some favors. Now she is getting the best care possible." Steve was smiling inwardly with the knowledge that he had done right by Ali's friend in more ways than one.

"After I spend some time with Fred, I'm going straight to the hospital to see Suzanne."

"That's not going to happen." Steve waited for the fireworks to begin, and he wasn't disappointed.

"What do you mean that's not going to happen? I know you're not hiding anything about her condition, so what's the problem?" Ali demanded.

"It seems that Suzanne's mother doesn't want her to have any visitors. Only the hospital staff and the physician in charge are allowed to see her."

"Who the hell made her God? Janet should do what's best for her daughter. Someone has to talk some sense into her."

Steve left the plates in the sink and tried to calm Ali down. "Janet Turner is the closest living relative that Suzanne has, and as the mother, she rules. I've discussed Suzanne's case with her physician, the head neurosurgeon. She took a blow to her head, and her body is bruised and aching, but given time and rest, Suzanne will heal," Steve told Ali.

"I'm sure she will," Ali concurred, "but having her friends visit with her is just as important as resting."

"Babe, I agree with you, but there's nothing more we can do for now. I have no special powers to control Mrs. Turner's actions. She is a mother hen, and Suzanne is her only chick."

Steve sat down in the large recliner and placed Ali in his lap. He began massaging the tension from her neck and upper back, and she groaned as her muscles unknotted.

"That feels good. Don't stop."

Steve placed a kiss on Ali's lips and continued his massage. "Close your eyes and relax and let me tell you all the good things that I "saw" on your friend." Steve's soothing southern comfort voice flowed over Ali as his hands worked their magic. "Right now, Suzanne is receiving healing of the body and her life, and she will finally receive the happiness she deserves."

"I'm so happy to hear that. Tell me more, Steve."

"Suzanne ran an orphanage in another lifetime, and she showered the abandoned children with her special brand of love. It's ingrained in her karmic makeup."

That made sense to Ali because Suzanne adored children and babies. Ali then realized that Lizzie had no idea what had happened to Suzanne. "Steve, how will I break the news to Lizzie? She needs to know, but there's no way I can handle telling her right now. We all talk every day, so Lizzie will be frantic when she can't reach Suzanne.

"Wait until you get back to your apartment," Steve suggested, "and get settled in with Fred. Then, when you're calmer, it would be beneficial for both you and Lizzie to open up and share your feelings. Maybe have a good cry together."

"That sounds like a good idea. But before I forget, you mentioned that the head neurosurgeon was Suzanne's physician. I'll need his name when I call the hospital to hear how she's doing." Ali watched as her fiancé grew uncomfortable with her request. "What's the matter, Steve? Is Jack the Ripper the doctor in charge?" she asked.

"No. Seth Rubenstein is the doctor in charge," Steve answered.

"Your best friend is taking care of my best friend? That's just a little too coincidental. Something fishy is going on, and you'd better tell me what it is."

"Ali, you're letting your imagination run away with you. We both want the best physician to treat Suzanne, and that person happens to be Seth. No other neurosurgeon can match his skill, and he treats people from all over the world. Seth performs microscopic brain surgery when needed, and he's top-notch when a craniotomy is needed."

"What kind of surgery is that?" Ali asked.

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do. Because Seth is Suzanne's physician, I want to know everything there is about him."

"Okay, but remember that you asked," Steve warned her. "Craniotomy is an invasive surgery where Seth removes a portion of the skull to inspect the patient's brain. Do you want me to go into further detail?"

Ali shook her head. "No. I get it. Seth is the best."



Chapter Twenty-Five

George was thumbing through the latest PC magazine when he saw Ali and Steve emerge from the lobby, and he walked over to greet them. "Good morning, Steve, and good morning to you, Ali. You look especially fetching on this fine day."

"Why, thank you, George."

The chauffeur could not contain his curiosity, so he cut right to the chase. "So, are you two kids engaged to be married yet?"

"Of course, we are," Steve answered. "I'm a fast worker."

George looked down at Ali's hand. "But I don't see a ring. Without the ring, it's not official."

"Rest assured that will be taken care of soon," Steve assured him. "I don't intend to allow my fiancée to walk around the city without an engagement ring on her finger."

"There's no rush," Ali told Steve.

"Oh, yes, there is, darlin'. I'll make us an appointment at Tiffany's so you can choose your engagement ring."

George saw the possessive gleam in Steve's eyes whenever he looked at Ali, so he expected to see a large rock on her finger any day. "Steve, I'm ready to get back to work, so what's on the agenda for today?"

"First, take care of Ali and ensure she gets home safely. Today is my first day back, so I expect it to be hectic. Lord knows when I'll get out of work."

"That being the case, I'll drive you straight back to the penthouse so you can grab a hot shower and relax."

Steve looked over at Ali and felt the familiar stirring in his groin. "Rest is not high on my list of priorities these days," and George now understood where Steve was coming from—the horndog. "When I leave my last meeting for the day, you can drop me off at Ali's apartment."

That came as a surprise to Ali. "Why are you coming over this evening?"

"Because I need to get to know Fred better." Steve gave Ali a look that said it all.

She giggled behind her hand and blushed. "Oh, that."

"Yeah, that. I need some of your special magic to hold me until we're living together."

George began to load the luggage into the limo. Meanwhile, Steve joined Ali in the back seat for some steamy kisses. "I want you and Fred packed up and ready to move in a few days." His hand wandered under her bra to cup a soft breast and rub the nipple. "Promise me you'll be living with me before the week is out."

"I can't do that," Ali told Steve. She was lying across Steve's lap while he suckled at her breasts. The glass was up, so they had complete privacy, and Ali allowed herself to enjoy Steve's expertise. "It's a shame the packing will take such a long time," she managed to say while Steve sucked harder, scattering her thought processes.

"Why should it?" he asked as he reluctantly redid the hooks on her bra. "I hired the best movers to do everything for you. All you need to do is sit back, relax, and let them do their job."

"I've been thinking about it, and I just can't let them pack my porcelain figurines. Please try and understand how much they mean to me."

"I know you cherish your collection. You showed me photos of the Boehm birds and Rosenthal dogs, and every figurine is exquisite." Steve thought through this latest dilemma. "I have an idea that will hopefully speed things up."

"Let me guess. You're going to astral project all of the porcelain to the penthouse?"

"That sounds like a good idea, but unfortunately, it's not in my repertoire of talents. But, seriously, I will help you pack. We can work together as a team."

Steve's generosity touched Ali. "You'll be tired after work, and packing porcelain figurines is a slow, tedious job. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes. I want you to have peace of mind about your collection. Now tell me what supplies we need to get started."

Ali quickly texted Steve a list, and he read it. "George will get everything you need at Staples."

The couple shared one last kiss goodbye, and Steve hailed a taxi to take him to the Farrell Foundation. The adrenaline rush was back as he strode into his office and stared at the piles of caseloads stacked neatly atop his desk.

One file sat alone. The Post-It read, "*Most urgent*." Steve sipped the coffee his new assistant brewed for him. Then he forgot about everything else as he scanned the document and began to formulate a plan.

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The limo pulled up in front of Ali's apartment building, and George came around to get the door. "Thanks, George. Before I forget, did Steve mention that I need packing supplies from Staples?"

"He sent me a message about it. When should I bring the goodies over?" George inquired, not wanting to upset Ali's routine.

"Around four would be fine. That will give me some time with Fred before you show up with rolls of bubble wrap and boxes."

"Then four it is. Now let's get you upstairs. I'm sure that Fred misses you very much."

The weeks spent away from the cockatoo seemed like an eternity to Ali, and she grabbed her keys, opening the door. Fred was asleep on his perch, his head buried in his downy white feathers, looking utterly adorable. Ali wanted to scoop Fred up and hug him forever. The cockatoo's pet sitter looked up and saw Ali. She was about to speak when Ali shushed her. "I want to surprise Fred when he wakes up," she whispered.

At that precise moment, the bird opened his eyes. "Mommy home! *Squawk!* Mommy home! Oh, boy!"

Fred ruffled his feathers and went into paroxysms of joy. He did an enthusiastic, happy dance and flew straight to Ali. She hugged and kissed him, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Mommy, not in TV! Yippee! Fred happy! *Squawk!* Love Mommy!"

Fred was gently preening Ali's hair when he suddenly stopped. His posture became rigid, and his feathers puffed out while his eyes flashed at Gwen in a warning. Ali wondered what was going on between her bird and the pet sitter. With Fred perched on her shoulder, Ali sat down next to Gwen, and the cockatoo returned to preening her hair. But as Gwen began to speak, Fred screeched loudly, and his crest opened wide.

"Gwen is a bad lady! Fred want doodles. Fred, get one doodle a day! *Squawk!* Fred hungry."

Ali was shocked. Fred had never complained about a lack of Cheez Doodles when they Skyped. Knowing how bright the bird was, she decided to test his intelligence even further. "Fred, why didn't you tell me that Gwen only gave you one Cheez Doodle a day?"

The pet sitter wished she had somewhere to go and hide. She saw the anger on Ali's face, but she reminded herself that she had done the right thing, and somehow, Ali would understand.

"Mommy! Gwen, tell Fred you will never come out of TV if I tell. I cry, Mommy. Boohoo! Love Mommy!" The cockatoo

began shaking with fear, and he made soft, sobbing noises that broke Ali's heart.

Ali took Fred off her shoulder and cradled him. She spoke to Fred in a soft, soothing tone, stroking him until he relaxed a bit. Ali realized that Fred truly believed she would never leave the television, so she exploded in rage at the sitter. "What the hell were you thinking, Gwen?" She spoke to the younger woman in a loud whisper to not frighten Fred more than he already was. "You deprived Fred of his favorite snack while he was upset, missing me. Then you had the unmitigated gall to threaten him! I trusted you with his care and well-being. I thought you loved Fred or was he just another science experiment to you?"

Gwen attempted to speak in her defense. She hadn't realized that her prize pupil was intelligent enough to tattle on her. The cockatoo outshone her expectations, which was great for her thesis but bad for her job. She had only been trying to keep him healthy.

"Of course, I love Fred. How could you suggest otherwise, Ali?" Gwen tried to explain away her actions. "I stuck to the diet you prescribed for Fred. But I could not get myself to feed that beautiful bird junk food. It goes against all of my principles as a future veterinarian, so I gave Fred just one horrid cheese puff a day to keep him from biting me."

"It's too bad that he didn't take a chunk out of you!" Gwen turned pale. Ali's ire was a frightening thing to see. "Fred sees the top avian veterinarian in Manhattan, and you of all people know that. How dare you suggest that I would ever do anything that could endanger his health?"

Ali never gave Gwen a chance to answer. "I'm sorry it's come to this, Gwen. Fred used to like you very much, but you terrorized him, and now he's clinging to me for dear life."

Gwen began crying, and Ali didn't give a damn. She had abused her position and terrorized Fred. "I will pay your salary in full, but don't expect to see Fred again. I know you were doing a master's thesis based on his intelligence. Well, you will have to find yourself another bird to torture. You're out of here."

"But, Ali—"

"Shut the fuck up, Gwen, and get out!" Ali turned her back on the former pet sitter. "Pack up your things and leave right now. I can't stand the sight of you."

Gwen had forgotten her Kindle in her haste to leave, and Ali was still in a temper. She picked it up and threw the device out the door. It gave her some satisfaction as it crashed in the tiled hallway.

The cockatoo seemed reluctant to leave Ali's side after their separation. His feet were securely holding him on her shoulder as she strode purposely to the kitchen. She opened a cabinet and retrieved a bag of Cheez Doodles. As Ali held one up to him, Fred grabbed it and began munching on the cheese puff. Ali put a good-sized handful into a bowl and carried it into the living room. Her doodle addict ate all of them in record time while she watched.

Seeing that Fred had finished eating and was now in a good mood, Ali asked the cockatoo to get off her shoulder because she wanted to unpack her clothes.

Reluctant to leave at first, Fred squawked and nuzzled Ali some more. Then, when she asked again nicely, he flew down. Ali watched as Fred waddled into the kitchen and returned with a small dish towel held tightly in his beak. Her curiosity was piqued as the bird pulled it across the floor.

The cockatoo waddled into the living room, dragging the small towel over to the antique Louis XVI bombe chest. Fred was doing his best to push it under the ornately carved bottom of the chest. When he was satisfied with his efforts, the cockatoo flew off and returned with paper toweling. Fred made a mess as he shredded it and added it to the towel.

When Fred finished arranging the torn paper toweling, he flew back to sit beside Ali and began nibbling at her fingernails. It felt like the strangest manicure she had ever received. While Fred was busy with Ali's nails, he made moaning noises that she had never heard before. Then, Fred suddenly grabbed a beakful of Ali's dress and tried to pull and coax her over to the chest. At first, she had no

idea what was going on when the realization came to her. Fred had fashioned a nest for Ali to sit on. The hair preening and fingernail nibbling, accompanied by the strange-sounding moans, were all a part of the parrot mating ritual.

I cannot believe this is happening to me.

Some parrots and cockatoos became possessive in their mating cycle, giving Ali pause to worry. What if Fred considered Steve to be a competition for her affections? The phone rang, and she raced to get it, hoping it was Steve.

"Hi, darlin'. I love you, and I miss you and can't wait for this day to end so I can come over."

"I've missed you too."

"That's always nice to hear. So how is Fred doing?" Steve asked. "I'll bet that he was delighted to see you."

"Honey…" Ali hesitated. "Fred is fine, but there is one small problem."

"What is it?" Steve asked, concerned.

"It seems that in my absence, Fred went into his first mating season. He fashioned a nest for me made from paper toweling and a small kitchen towel." Steve began laughing his head off, which did not sit well with Ali. "You don't understand. Fred might become jealous of you until he's back to normal."

Steve doubled over, laughing even more. That was the funniest thing he'd ever heard!

"This is not a joking matter, Steve."

"I'm sorry, Ali, but it's hysterically funny. When I went over to Mindy's to visit with Ursula, she could not stop licking me, but by no stretch of the imagination did she want to mate with me." Steve tried to rein in the laughter for Ali's sake. "I'll be at your place by seven, barring any unforeseen emergencies at work."

Later, after getting the cockatoo settled in his room, Ali's mind kept drifting back to Suzanne. She had to find out how she was faring. Steve had regaled her with tales about his best friend, Seth. He sounded like a warm and caring person, which Suzanne

needed now in her time of crisis. Not being able to wait any longer, Ali phoned the hospital.

"Hello. I'm calling to find out how my friend is doing. Her name is Suzanne Turner. I want to speak with Doctor Seth Rubenstein about her condition. Yes. Thank you. I'll hold."

The hospital put Ali on hold for ten long minutes when she heard the dreaded clicks and dead silence on the line. Getting disconnected was the bane of Ali's existence. She pressed Redial and waited for another operator, cursing a blue streak.



Chapter Twenty-Six

Dr. Seth Rubenstein had just finished successful neurosurgery. It would be a slow but uneventful recovery for the patient, barring no unforeseen complications. The man was visiting with a friend when his head exploded in a blinding headache, causing double vision and weakness in one arm.

Seth examined him, ordered a CT angiography of the head, and saw a 3-D view of the aneurysm. Armed with that information, Seth did an endovascular repair, which he preferred, as it was less invasive than an open craniotomy. He was grateful that the intracranial aneurysm had not yet ruptured. Now the man would live to spend more years with his family, which was why Seth loved his work. His surgical skills helped save people who otherwise would never have the chance to make it to their next birthday.

Right now, all Seth wanted was a cup of coffee and to get some sleep. It had been back-to-back surgeries for more hours than he could count. But before he could have his caffeine fix, the head nurse informed Seth that a caller wanted to speak with him.

"Do me a favor and take a message. Whoever it is can wait."

"But, Doctor Rubenstein, the woman said it was urgent. Ali Rosen needs to speak with you about your new patient, Suzanne Turner. She sounded distraught, so I put her on hold."

Seth had been anxious to meet the woman who had made an honest man of Steve. His coffee could wait, and he headed to his office to take the call in privacy. Ali would be shocked if she knew that Seth could not stop thinking about her best friend. No woman had ever gotten past his defenses before. But Suzanne Turner had managed to do so without even trying.

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His thoughts traveled back to the previous evening. Seth had been summoned to the ER for a consultation when they brought in Suzanne Turner. Ugly bruises covered the face and upper torso, and she had a gash high on her forehead. What remained of Suzanne Turner's clothes were in tatters, and she'd been raped and beaten. New York City was overflowing with crazed psychos, but why did this young woman have to be one of their victims?

Seth stabilized her head and neck. The patient had lost blood, requiring a transfusion. Suzanne Turner must have had an angel on her shoulder because her CT and MRI showed no fractures, no internal bleeding, or brain swelling. She came out of the attack with only a mild concussion and wound infection. She would be in considerable pain from the multiple contusions to her body and head pain due to the concussion. Her bruised ribs would take time to heal, but pain meds would control the worst of it.

Suzanne Turner was unconscious, and it would be a waiting game to see when she began to come around. When Suzanne finally opened her eyes, Seth took the opportunity to introduce himself to the new patient. He told Suzanne how much progress she had made since she first arrived at the hospital to alleviate as many of her worries as possible.

"Are you thirsty?" Seth asked her.

Suzanne saw that she was in a hospital, and the Doctor, Seth Rubenstein appeared to be genuinely concerned. However, he was frowning as he looked at her. For some crazy reason that Suzanne couldn't fathom, she wanted to see him smile. "Very," she man-

aged to whisper. "I'd like some water. My mouth is dry, and it hurts to speak, and Doctor, my head is aching badly."

"Your concussion is causing your head to ache. We're giving you medication to help alleviate the pain. Meanwhile, I'll get you the water, but only take a few small sips at first."

Suzanne was pleased. The doctor was now smiling, and his dimples grew larger. He was a very handsome man, and his mustache only added to his appeal. Suzanne thought she must be crazy to notice how any man looked—good, bad, or indifferent. But there was something about Doctor Seth Rubenstein that made her feel safe and secure. Maybe it was the stethoscope that he wore around his neck, giving him an air of authority and professionalism, or possibly it was the man himself.

Seth held a paper cup up to her lips and watched Suzanne struggle to try and drink a little of the water. When she finished, he took the cup, and Suzanne blinked back the tears, but it was a losing battle. Soon she was sobbing, and Seth was at a loss at what to do. Then, to his surprise, in between sobs, Suzanne asked Seth to hold her. He told her he would call for the nurse to come in and help.

"I don't want a nurse. I want you," she rasped out.

Gingerly, Seth sat down at the edge of the bed and held Suzanne while she cried out all the anguish she'd been holding in since the night of the attack. Seth was glad he was there for her and that she trusted him. When she calmed down, Suzanne fell back onto the pillows and looked up at Seth with trust in her eyes.

"Doctor Rubenstein, I don't know what came over me, but once I started crying, I couldn't stop."

"You deserved to have a good cry. Suzanne, please know that I will always be there for you. You can count on that." *Had he just said those words to a patient? Yes, he had, and the shocker was that he had meant them.*

Suzanne's eyelids were growing heavy, and sleep was coming fast. She tried to fight the darkness, wanting to control it, but

despite her best efforts, exhaustion pulled her away from the pain, giving her the rest her body required to heal.

When Seth was sure Suzanne was asleep, he left the room and closed the door behind him. The memory of holding Suzanne and reveling in the feel of her haunted him as he walked down the hospital corridor. He smelled the familiar odor of disinfectant and alcohol wipes and felt like a world-class schmuck.

After getting a quick bite to eat, Seth went back to inspect the wound and change Suzanne's dressing. It looked better, which was a good sign. Meanwhile, Suzanne received IV antibiotics in a saline-based electrolyte solution containing essential nutrients directed into her bloodstream.

Despite the hoarseness in her voice, Suzanne could speak somewhat better now, and Seth gave her some warm apple juice to drink. It tasted like the nectar of ambrosia to Suzanne, and she sipped it slowly, not wanting to irritate her throat more than it already was.

Suzanne smiled at Doctor Rubenstein, grateful for his kindness. The world stood still for Seth as he drank in that smile. Suzanne's unbridled sweetness was like a balm to his battered soul, and he knew that Suzanne was the one person in his misbegotten life who could heal him and make him whole again.

Worried sick about Precious, Suzanne asked the doctor if he had any news about her cat. She motioned for something to write with, and Seth pulled out his prescription pad and a pen. Suzanne jotted down that she was frightened because her Himalayan was home alone and most probably starving. Then she wrote down something extraordinary. Suzanne's cat was actually a dog trapped in a feline body. Because it possessed canine emotions, it needed extra love.

"There's no need to worry," Seth told her. "Precious is staying with your mother. She's well taken care of."

Suzanne looked relieved and fell back asleep. Seth stood there watching her, and the memories of a life reading that had taken place nearly six years ago came flooding back. That was the

day Seth met Steve Farrell, who had become the most important person in his life. One of the many things Steve told Seth stood out in their session because it sounded absurd. Steve had described the woman who would be Seth's future soul mate.

"She will have a cat that she believes is a dog. It acts like a dog in many ways, but physically, it is still a cat. Wait. I'm getting a name. It's a psychic flash, and those are always accurate. She calls it either Persian or Precious."

Seth had heard that Steve Farrell was the best at making accurate predictions—but a dog trapped in a cat's body. There was no way Seth was buying that. Steve also mentioned that the woman had a distinct mole at the base of her spine right above her ass. He said it was very sexy looking. Seth had no idea whether Suzanne had the mole or not. He was treating her head wound, so it was doubtful that he would ever learn if she sported the heart-shaped mole.

Over the years, many of Steve's predictions had come to pass, but the last thing on Seth's mind was finding love. Now here was Suzanne Turner with the gorgeous blue eyes asking Seth about her crazy cat. Everything Steve had told him made sense now, and Seth understood why he could not get Suzanne Turner out of his mind. But Seth was not ready for a commitment and might never be. Yet, when he looked at Suzanne, all that flew out the window.

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Seth picked up the phone to speak with Ali. "I'm sorry for the wait, Ali, but I just got out of the OR, and I'm dead on my feet." Exhausted, Seth sat down in the ergonomic chair at his desk. It was supposed to relieve stress, and right now, it felt like heaven as he leaned his head back and stretched out his long legs. "First, before my mind turns to mush from sleep deprivation, I want to wish you and Steve all the best on your engagement." Seth couldn't help chuckling. "I never thought I'd live to see the day." The words slipped out before he could stop himself.

"So, how many women are we talking about?" Ali asked him.

"As Steve's best friend, I plead the fifth, and I'm sorry for what I said. The guy loves you more than I ever thought was possible."

"Don't worry about it, Seth. I knew that Steve was far from a saint when we first met. How many men have a limousine that opens into a bed? I felt like we were in the scene from the movie Pillow Talk, where Rock Hudson's sofa opens with the flip of a switch."

"And Doris Day made the catty remark about the baby-blue sheets," Seth added. They were laughing together, and Seth felt an instant rapport with Ali. "Steve has put that part of his life behind him. He is so in love with you that you're almost all he ever talks about."

"That's always nice to hear," Ali remarked. While Seth was extolling his friend's many virtues, Ali began feeling warm and happy vibes around Seth. Then the oddest thing happened. She smelled the scent of roses. Something paranormal was happening, and it had to do with Steve's best friend. "Enough about Steve and me. I called you to find out how Suzanne is doing, and please don't sugarcoat it. I need the truth."

"Ali, your friend is making a steady recovery, given the nature of her injuries."

"What a relief," she exclaimed. "I was almost afraid to ask. Seth, when you get to know Suzanne better, you will discover that she is an extraordinary person. They do not come any sweeter or kinder than Suzanne."

Seth already knew that they broke the mold when they made Suzanne. After everything she went through, instead of worrying about herself, her main concern had been for her cat. Seth couldn't help wondering how it would feel to have Suzanne care that much about his well-being.

His musings were interrupted by Ali's speaking. "Seth, you probably don't know that I astral projected to where Suzanne lay

unconscious after the attack. I was supposed to find her so Steve could get Suzanne the help she desperately needed."

"I know all about that," Seth told Ali, much to her surprise. "When you didn't come home, Steve lost it completely. He called me up, frantic, but there was nothing I could say that could break through his sorrow. I see how much Steve loves you, and I'm happy the two of you found each other. Unlike Steve, though, finding love is not high on my list of priorities."

Ali's heart broke a little at Seth's words. "Please don't get mad at me for what I'm about to say. I'm an empath, and I "feel" your fear of commitment. Seth, you need to release the past to get on with your future. Can you do that?" Ali asked, her heart aching for Steve's friend.

"The most I can promise to do is try. Whether or not I succeed is anyone's guess."

"Seth, you're going to find love. It's so close now you can almost reach out and touch it." Seth was listening and marveling at Ali's accuracy the first time they spoke. "Seth, I hope you're not upset at receiving an impromptu reading from me."

"Not at all. I appreciate that you care enough to try and help."

"Steve didn't show me any photos of you, and I'm trying to visualize your face. Do you have a neatly trimmed mustache, and are you taller than Steve?"

"Your future husband is a shrimp next to me. I'm six-four and still growing."

Ali couldn't help laughing. The thing she was coming to like the most about Seth was his sense of humor. Steve had never mentioned that side of Seth, and Ali found him utterly charming. "While I have you on the phone, there's a problem I could use your help with."

"Tell me what it is, and I'll see what I can do."

"I must see Suzanne, but Steve told me that her mother isn't allowing visitors. I've always gotten along well with Janet, so I called and left her a message, but she hasn't gotten back to me. Could you get me in to see Suzanne?

Seth leaned back in his chair and thought about Ali's request. "I can't promise anything, but I'll try. Mrs. Turner has been here almost around the clock because she's so worried about her daughter. She means well, Ali. She's even taking care of Precious." Seth shook his head and chuckled as he thought about the Himalayan. "Suzanne explained to me that her cat is, actually a dog."

"She must trust you a great deal to let you know about Precious's peculiar behavior."

"Suzanne needed someone to confide in, and for whatever reason, she chose me. Maybe it's my terrific bedside manner," Seth replied jokingly. Then he looked at his watch and wondered where the time had gone. "I'm sorry, but I have to cut our conversation short. I need to grab a shower and get some coffee, to avoid falling asleep while making my rounds. It was great talking with you, Ali, and I hope to meet you soon."

"You can count on it," she promised, wondering why she began smelling roses while speaking with Seth. Her olfactory senses were on full alert as the smell became stronger.

"There's one last thing I need to ask. Is it true that your cockatoo has the hots for you? Steve told me that Fred even made a "love" nest for you to share with him," Seth said, chuckling, while Ali listened, mortified.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tonight, Ali wanted to wear something special for Steve, but she didn't possess a designer clothes wardrobe to choose from as her friends did. Lizzie had revamped her entire wardrobe after meeting Jack, and Suzanne always looked like she stepped out of a page from a fashion magazine, while Ali opted for comfort over style for the most part.

Ali searched through her clothes closet and couldn't find anything beautiful enough to wear. Then towards the back of her wardrobe, she spotted an ecru lace dress she had purchased not long ago while shopping with Suzanne. The memory of that day was bittersweet, knowing that Suzanne now lay in a hospital bed with a concussion.

Suzanne had taken it upon herself to transform Ali into a more fashionable dresser. The vintage dress had cost far more than Ali wanted to spend, but Suze convinced her to splurge the one time. Ali recalled her friend's words that day when she was looking at a low-cut dress. "When you are trying to attract the male of the species, it's always best to leave a little something to the imagination." Realizing that Suzanne was right, Ali chose another dress with a higher neckline. Suzanne took a few steps back to get a better look at Ali, and then she came over and gave her a warm hug.

"Oh, Ali. You look so lovely in that dress. I hope it brings only good things for you."

Ali smiled at the memory as she stepped into the dress and reached around for the zipper. She pirouetted in front of the long mirror and loved how feminine it made her look. Then she put on a lacy blue garter just for fun, hoping that Steve would like it.

After dabbing on some perfume, Ali spent time with Fred, and she chose a show she knew the cockatoo would enjoy. Fred peered at the screen as they watched a documentary about emperor penguins. One of the baby penguins held out its short stubby wings and took off midair into the ocean depths. It began swimming while the others followed suit and jumped in after him. The cameras captured some of the penguin's antics as it swam underwater, and Fred grew excited when one of them popped its head out of the ocean.

"I do that, Mommy! Fred swim in water too! Fred swim in bathtub!" The cockatoo began hopping around excitedly while flapping its wings. "Fred, swim now. Oh boy!"

The cockatoo waddled into the bathroom and stood next to the empty tub. "Mommy, make water so Fred can swim like baby penguin." When Fred saw that Ali wasn't filling the bathtub, he flew up and stood precariously on the narrow ledge, and Ali panicked at the sight. Then, on autopilot, she scooped Fred up and held him close. Her heart was beating a rapid tattoo from fear.

"Fred, the bathtub is slippery, and you could have fallen in and hurt yourself. Promise me that you will never stand on the bathtub again."

The cockatoo peered down into the empty white bathtub and seemed to be thinking about what she said. "Fred promise no stand-on tub. Mommy save Fred. Yippee!"

Ali hugged her little daredevil close and kissed his feathered head. "You are my best boy, and I love you so much."

Another near disaster was averted. Life was never dull with Fred around, but Ali was left drained. She fed the cockatoo his dinner and then placed him on his jungle gym to keep him busy.

When Fred begged, she fed him a few Cheez Doodles, hoping that someday he would get sick of the flavored cheese puffs.

The beef stew was simmering in the pot, surrounded by new potatoes and fresh vegetables. Ali hoped that Steve liked her cooking. Then, wanting to show off her culinary skills even more, she made biscuits from scratch and baked an apple pie with a homemade crust.

The doorbell rang, and excitement flowed through Ali. She opened the door, and Steve stood there looking very handsome. Ali leaned in for a quick kiss, but Steve pulled her to him for a longer one, leaving her breathless.

"I never thought this day would end. I'm so happy to see you, darlin'." Steve walked around, admiring Ali's apartment and stealing glances at his wife-to-be. Something smelled delicious, and Steve wondered what was cooking. "Is that beef stew?" he asked.

"Yes, and I baked an apple pie for dessert."

The delicious aromas reminded him of his mother's home cooking. The beef stew was a staple in their household every Friday night. Wanting to see Steve's reaction to her cooking, Ali took him into the kitchen and let him sample the gravy while the stew simmered.

"This is mouthwatering good," he declared. "How can I ever thank you for going to all this trouble for me?"

"That's easy. By loving Fred," Ali answered to Steve's dismay.

"I'm sure we'll get along fine. Just like a real father and son."

Shit. It's time to meet the crazy bird.

Steve followed Ali into the second bedroom. They were both greeted by Fred sitting quietly on his perch near the palatial aviary. Ali fervently hoped the cockatoo would take a shine to Steve.

"Fred, this is your daddy, Steve."

The bird flew off his perch and landed near Steve's shoes while peering up and examining the tall human. "*Squawk!* Daddy Steve! I am so cute!"

When Steve bent down to pet the bird, the white feathers felt incredibly soft under his fingers. “What a good boy, you are Fred. I love you very much.” There was no way that Steve loved Ali’s bird yet, but he would try his best to learn to love Fred because it meant so much to her.

Ali was thrilled about how well they were getting along. “Fred, I want you to sit on Daddy’s shoulder and give him a kiss.”

“Come here, Fred,” Steve told the cockatoo while patting his shoulder.” Steve fervently hoped the bird would not poop all over his new sports jacket.

The cockatoo flew to Steve and began nuzzling him, and Steve began to relax by the show of affection. Then to his surprise, Fred began reciting the alphabet, and Steve was impressed despite Fred’s missing some letters.

As Fred began to yawn, Ali carried him to his perch. Soon the bird closed his eyes and buried his beak in his feathers.

“He looks uncomfortable like that,” Steve whispered to Ali as she shut the light and they left the room.

“Don’t worry. That’s how most parrots and cockatoos sleep, and despite Fred’s amazing intellect, he is still first and foremost a cockatoo.”

“With the feathers and all the loud squawking, I doubt that I’ll forget,” he chuckled.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Starving.” Steve pulled Ali’s lace-covered curves flush against him. He crushed his mouth down on hers, unable to wait another minute.

“I guess you are, but I was talking about dinner.”

They sat down to enjoy the meal that Ali had prepared. Steve ate three servings of stew, and he showered Ali with compliments on her culinary expertise, which pleased her immensely. After dinner, she served freshly brewed coffee with apple pie, and Steve swore it was the best pie he’d ever eaten. Sated, they took their coffee into the living room and discussed how their mutual days had gone. Steve was working on an exciting new case and couldn’t

wait to tell Ali about it. A client who lived in a centuries-old historic mansion contacted the Farrell Foundation because he feared ghosts were haunting his home. The man needed Steve to eliminate the earthbound apparition's post haste because they were frightening his family. Twice the past week, a ghostly foot had tripped one of the children. When spirits begin to harm the people who are living in their vicinity, it can become dangerous. Evil entities can bite and even choke a human. Steve had not dealt with unfriendly spirits in quite a while, and he was looking forward to the challenge. After discussing the case, Steve steered the conversation over to Seth and asked Ali what she thought of his best friend.

"I liked Seth right away. He reminds me of you with his sense of humor and his need to heal the world. One thing about Seth bothered me, though."

"What was that?"

"Honey, Seth is lonely, and he's afraid to open himself up to love. I felt a deep hurt going back several years."

"You read him correctly. Ali, your gifts are growing even faster than I ever anticipated."

Ali was about to ask Steve some questions about Seth, but he began unzipping her dress. He caressed her breasts, loving the silky feel of them. Her nipples peaked, and Steve bent his head to take one in his mouth when Ali stopped him. That could wait until she got some answers first. Ali recalled the intense feeling of love surrounding Steve's best friend, and the pungent odor of freshly cut roses lingered even after the call had ended, and Ali had no idea why that was.

"Something's happening to Seth. You know what it is, so tell me what's going on."

"I will when the time is right."

"But, Steve—"

Steve's hands were back caressing Ali's breasts again, and she sighed, which he took as a good sign. "I want to make sure things go as planned. You have to trust me on this."

Steve was making Ali feel so good that, for the moment, she forgot about Seth. He pulled her in for another kiss, and their tongues mated as the kiss grew steamy. Ali unbuttoned Steve's shirt as they kissed, her fingers fumbling with the buttons.

"Are you as horny as I am?" Steve asked.

"What do you think?"

Ali lifted the hem of her dress, showing Steve her sexy blue garter. He slid it off as he caressed and kissed her leg, leaving goosebumps in his wake. The need to merge was growing stronger, and they helped each other finish undressing. Steve draped the blue garter over his erect cock. It was the funniest thing Ali had ever seen, and she giggled as they fell together onto the bed.

Steve was a happy man. Ali had fed him an incredible dinner, and now she lay beneath him, urging him to make love to her. Steve lifted her ass and thrust, and Ali felt him go so deep that she gasped. They were lost in passion when Steve suddenly stopped and pulled out.

"What the fuck!" he yelled.

Something had bitten him, and the culprit was sitting near them on the bed, glaring menacingly at Steve.

"Ali, your cockatoo just bit me on my ass!" Steve rubbed the sore spot, and blood came off on his hand.

"Are you okay?" Ali asked, knowing that the bite must hurt a lot. Then, naked, she stood and lifted Fred off the bed. The enraged cockatoo began screeching and squawking.

"Bad Daddy, Steve! Bad Mommy! Mommy only kiss Fred! *Squawk! Squawk!"*

The cockatoo was frantically trying to escape from Ali, but he did not bite her despite his anger. Ali raced Fred back to his Victorian aviary and placed him inside. This time she made sure to close the door to his room so there would be no more nocturnal flights of fancy for the rest of the evening. When she entered the bedroom, she found Steve examining his posterior in the mirror.

"I'm bleeding from your carnivore. He is no son of mine!"

Ali went to the medicine cabinet and brought over a tube of antibiotic cream and a good-sized Band-Aid, applying both to the wound. “I warned you that Fred was in his mating cycle, and unfortunately, he wants to mate with me. But there’s a bright side to all of this,” she told Steve.

“What bright side?” he demanded.

“The wound is small so you won’t need any stitches.” Ali was grateful that Steve had not ended up in the emergency room. “Until Fred returns to himself, we should not show affection around him.”

Steve looked at Ali as if she had gone crazy.

“Fred loved you despite this slight aggression because he is extra sensitive right now. Please try and understand that we hurt his feelings when he caught us doing the naughty.”

Steve could not believe the way the conversation was going. His beloved seemed to love her bird more than him. “Are you telling me that I must censure myself around you because of Fred?”

“Yes. But it will just be a slight inconvenience. We are the adults, and we will use willpower until Fred gets past the mating cycle and is calmer.”

“I do understand, and I’m not mad at Fred anymore. Who could stay angry at such an adorable bird?” What a load of crap. Steve had lied to keep the peace.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jack told Lizzie to meet him at Vespa on the Upper East Side. The restaurant was well known for its fantastic Italian fare. Lizzie was surprised by Jack's choice of restaurant. On his low-fat, high-protein food regimen, he could not indulge in pasta or pizza. It would torture Jack to watch Lizzie and the other diners enjoying the carb-laden food. Because she cared about Jack, Lizzie tried to convince him to dine at a steakhouse or a seafood restaurant instead, but he would not budge.

As usual, Lizzie's heart sped up at the sight of Jack because he was so drop-dead gorgeous. But there was a problem plaguing her since they began dating. No matter how many compliments Jack fed her daily, Lizzie felt inadequate and insecure in their relationship. In bed, Jack seemed enthusiastic and happy. He even loved her freckles, but despite that, she was still worried about her appearance.

"So, how's my best girl? You look extra beautiful today."

"It must be the dress," Lizzie replied. Why couldn't she take a compliment like the rest of the world? Lizzie wore a turquoise silk dress that belted at her waist and clung to her body like a second skin. She spent thirty minutes straightening her hair with the blow dryer to make it wavy and less curly. Jack preferred long

hair, and Lizzie liked the idea of growing her hair out. Then, hopefully, she would look prettier and more desirable in Jack's eyes.

"It isn't the dress, Lizzie. It's because you're wearing it. No other woman could do it justice," Jack told her in all honesty. Lizzie had the face of an angel. Why couldn't she see herself the way others saw her?

Lizzie almost believed that Jack was sincere, and it helped—but not enough.

Jack suggested they dine outside on the restaurant's patio because it was more romantic. Then he wrapped a strong arm around Lizzie's waist, pulling her in for a kiss. "That was just the appetizer, sweetheart. We'll have dessert at your apartment later, and I plan on taking my time with it. You know how much I like to linger over the last course."

Lizzie was getting used to Jack's double entendres, and they turned her on like nobody's business. Never giving a damn about what others might think, Jack put a finger in Lizzie's mouth, and she began sucking on it. He watched, smiling his approval. But, of course, Lizzie knew what she'd be sucking on later, and it wouldn't be Jack's finger.

The sun was setting, and the sky was beginning to darken. The waiter bent to light the single candle on the table. Then as Lizzie started to open her menu, Jack handed her a small satin box. His eyes lit up as she slowly opened it and stared at the ring nestled inside. For once in her life, she was speechless. Was Jack the best boyfriend or what? He fed her Godiva chocolates by the pound, and now he went and bought her jewelry. The ring was a beautiful fire opal, her birthstone, surrounded by small, individually cut diamonds that sparkled in the candlelight.

Jack slipped the ring onto the fourth finger of her left hand. "This ring is beautiful and delicate like you, Lizzie, and the opal has your inner fire that sets me ablaze every day." He paused, and she saw that he was nervous. That was a first.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

Jack held Lizzie's hand in his and kissed the knuckles. The feel of his lips was making her melt faster than butter in the sun.

"I love the ring. It's so beautiful," Lizzie told him. "But it's way too soon for my birthday."

"I know."

Jack was grinning. Something was up, and Lizzie was beginning to get nervous. "Why did you put the ring on that finger?"

"Oh, I think you'll figure it out," he told her, smiling all the while.

It finally began to dawn on Lizzie, and she started to panic. Without considering Jack's feelings, Lizzie went ahead and said what was on her mind. "I think this ring means that you want to take the big step, but I'm not ready for that kind of a commitment yet."

Jack felt his heart had been ripped apart by Lizzie's words. She sure had him fooled. All this time, he believed that she loved him. "Don't you love me, Lizzie?" he asked.

Why couldn't she think before she spoke? That had been a problem her whole life. Lizzie was lucky because her friends loved her despite her propensity to blurt out whatever she thought—the hell with the consequences. How could she possibly make Jack understand without adding more salt to the wound? In a million years, she had never expected him to want to get engaged that early in their relationship.

"You know how much I love you. It's just that marriage is such a big step. I told my girlfriend that neither one of us was rushing into an engagement. So let's consider the ring as an early birthday present."

Jack's fist came down hard on the table, causing water to splash out of the glasses. Lizzie saw the pain and the anger in Jack's eyes, and she knew that she was the cause of it.

"I didn't realize getting engaged was rushing things when two people were in love. I didn't know we needed a timetable before committing to each other and sealing that love with an engagement ring. What a *schmuck* I am!"

Jack needed to verbalize his pain while Lizzie nervously wrung her napkin under the table, helpless to do anything. “Let me see if I heard you correctly. You want to keep the ring as your birthday present. Well, happy birthday, baby, but this is not your present. It was supposed to be your engagement ring. Then all the world would know that you belong to me, and we’re crazy in love.” Jack took a deep breath and forced himself to continue. “Getting you this ring was the biggest mistake I have ever made. I’ll take it back to the jeweler’s and try to get a refund. But with my luck, I’ll probably be stuck with store credit that I’ll never get the chance to use.”

Lizzie was wallowing in guilt, but despite that, she still didn’t want to get engaged. Just the idea of it scared the living daylights out of her. If forced to give a reason to explain her fear, she would not be able to come up with one.

“Jack, I’m so sorry,” Lizzie told him. “You need to know how much I love you. I’m just no good when it comes to commitment. I can’t even get myself to take care of a goldfish, let alone another human being. If I accept this ring, I’d be committing myself to marriage, and I’m scared spitless that I would fuck it up—just like I do everything else in my life,” she admitted, awash in shame.

Jack sat silently, staring into his water glass. He couldn’t get himself to look at Lizzie because the hurt was a raw, aching wound. Lizzie reached across the table and lifted Jack’s chin to force him to see her. “Jack, I need to make you understand. All of my life, I’ve felt insecure about my appearance. I’m not petite and blond, possessing an hourglass figure like both of my friends. And Ali is a fantastic interior designer. Yes, I know that my job at Bloomingdale’s requires me to choose the home furnishings, but that’s not the same as putting it all together and making a room come alive the way Ali does. She gets the credit for making my apartment look like a page out of a decorating magazine. I was just along for the ride.”

The fog of pain brought on by Lizzie’s initial rejection began to lift as Jack listened to Lizzie’s words of self-deprecation. She

was baring her soul, and he felt her anguish, which overrode his hurt for the moment. "You're beautiful, babe. I love your sexy long legs and wild red hair and especially your freckles." Lizzie perked up at that. The things she despised about herself Jack loved. "But you've got to stop belittling yourself. It kills me when you do that."

"I don't do it on purpose. It's the way I feel about myself." Lizzie hesitantly touched the ring and admired how lovely it was. "Jack, let me ask you a question." Taking a chance, Lizzie put her hand over his, and to her relief, he didn't pull away. "If I were to wear this beautiful ring, could we make it a long engagement? I love you very much, but I'm afraid that you'll end up hating me because I couldn't live up to your expectations." She looked at Jack through tear-stained eyes. "Why do you even want to be with me? If given the choice, I wouldn't want to be stuck with me.

Jack's anger evaporated because poor Lizzie was a mass of insecurity. She needed his love and support, and he would do whatever it took to help get her past her fears. But then he realized that it could take a lifetime, and he drank his wine in one long swallow. "Take as long as you need, Lizzie. I'm in no rush, either." Jack hated lying to Lizzie, but what choice did he have?

"I love you so much, and I adore the ring. Thanks so much for being so understanding."

Since joining the NYPD, Jack had felt insecure about his meager paycheck. His earning potential was dismal even with their so-called promotions. Maybe that was the real reason behind Lizzie's disenchantment with his proposal and the opal ring. "I know it's not a big diamond engagement ring, but we have to face facts. It took a chunk of my savings to buy you the ring. But Lizzie, I promise that when I'm in a better place financially, I will replace the opal with a diamond ring of your choice."

Poor Jack thought it was about the money, and it wasn't that at all. "I've got news for you, Jack Ginsberg. My ring is exquisite. Anyone can wear a plain old diamond. But you remembered my

birthstone, and that means a lot to me. I don't want a large diamond because my ring is perfect."

Relief washed over Jack. He patted his lap and gave Lizzie the "look."

"Here? Now?" she asked him.

"Plant yourself," he told her, knowing that she would comply.

Lizzie obediently sat in his lap. Jack turned her face to devour her lips as if she were the tastiest confection on the menu. His hands began to caress her silk-covered breasts, and as her head fell back against his shoulder, he bit the pale, freckled skin of her neck and then licked it. Lizzie couldn't stifle her reaction, forgetting that they were not alone. Jack had that effect on her.

She was feeling no pain when she caught an elderly lady staring at them from one table over. The woman's husband was openly ogling them. That snapped Lizzie out of her reverie, and she reminded Jack that they were in a public place. Jack was horny, and Lizzie would not put it past him to try and have sex with her while diners sat nearby.

A few days prior, Jack had done just that on the Metropolitan Museum of Art steps. People were busy reading and sunbathing, while Lizzie's long-flowing skirt concealed what they were doing. She was sitting on Jack's lap, and he was systematically fucking her while people rushed around them, never suspecting what was happening under the skirt. One little boy wandered over and asked Lizzie why she was bouncing on the man's lap, and Lizzie's cheeks flamed. The child's mother gave Lizzie a look to kill and dragged the child away by the hand. Jack brought out a wild side of Lizzie that she never knew she possessed.

They picked up their menus, and Lizzie's mind switched from sex to food. Everything sounded so delicious that she wished that she could order one of everything. "Are you getting the grilled chicken with a salad?" Lizzie asked, feeling bad for Jack having to stay on the high protein diet.

His handsome face smiled back at her. "My days of eating rabbit food have finally come to an end. I'm having pizza tonight

and pasta tomorrow. I can eat anything I want now and no more gym unless I'm in the mood. Will you still love me when I'm not a musclebound hunk?"

"Does this mean what I think it does?"

"Yes. I got a promotion!"

"Oh, Jack. I'm so proud of you," Lizzie exclaimed.

"I was made a detective and put in charge of Suzanne's case. But enough about me. We're here to have a good time, so let's order some food. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Jack signaled for the waiter, asking him for a basket of garlic bread. He saw that Lizzie was looking at him with love in her eyes, and Jack knew that the way to win Lizzie's heart was not with jewelry but with lots and lots of delicious food.

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After Lizzie locked the door to her apartment, she saw that Jack had the mother of all boners.

"Take off the panties, Lizzie—now." It was not a request. It was an order.

Jack retrieved Lizzie's bikini panties from the floor and held them to his face while inhaling their aroma. Lizzie was getting very turned on watching Jack sniff her undies. He slowly unzipped Lizzie's dress, and she stepped out of it. Jack deftly unhooked Lizzie's strapless brassiere and saw that ugly red marks marred her tender flesh. Angry, he flung the stupid contraption away. Why did women feel the need to torture themselves to look fashionable for men?

"You are not wearing that again. But don't worry, babe. I'll make it feel all better."

Jack bent his dark head and laved the inflamed flesh where the underwire had dug in. His hands lightly caressed the small, plump breasts, making Lizzie's nipples darken. She was standing there naked and exposed before Jack while he was still fully dressed. Lizzie rubbed against Jack like a cat in heat while he

held her naked curves, sliding his hands down her back to cup her heart-shaped ass.

While they kissed, Jack thrust his tongue in and out of Lizzie's mouth, mimicking the sex act. They were both spinning out of control as the kisses grew hotter and wetter, and Jack ground his mouth down on Lizzie's soft lips. Knowing that she was naked and helpless in his arms felt so good. Then to his surprise, Lizzie was the one to break off the kiss.

"Take your clothes off," she demanded, unbuttoning Jack's shirt as she spoke. "I want you naked—now." Jack's shirt fell open, and Lizzie was caressing his chest. He allowed himself to relax and enjoy the pleasure as her tongue danced over his nipples.

"You are one bossy girl. It must be all that red hair."

Scooping Lizzie up, Jack carried her into the bedroom. He took his time at her breasts and fingered her until she was wet and begging for more. Needing completion badly, Jack thrust into Lizzie, pumping with an urgency that had the bed shaking. His climax was building, and his big body stiffened while Lizzie bucked beneath him.

Jack collapsed atop her, and Lizzie stroked his muscled back. They lay together on the bed kissing and lazily caressing each other, and soon Jack was hard again. "Turn on your tummy, babe."

Lizzie flipped over, and she felt Jack's warm lips, kissing the nape of her neck. Her freckles and her red hair drove him wild. One of his hands slid down to cup her vulva. He rubbed his hand all over it, and Lizzie thought she would explode as he stimulated her clitoris.

"Babe, does this feel good?"

She nodded, unable to form any words, and Jack nipped and sucked on her neck. Lizzie was the sweetest plaything a man could hope to have. Jack licked her ears, sucking on the lobes as Lizzie whimpered with need. "Babe, you make me crazy. I want to make love to you all the time. If I could, I would carry you around in my pocket and take you out to play with whenever I wanted."

Jack smoothed the damp curls off Lizzie's forehead, and she began to cry.

"Why the tears, sweetheart?"

"It's because I'm so happy," she wept.

Jack held Lizzie close and wiped away the tears, his hurt forgotten for the moment. But deep down, he knew it would resurface again to haunt him.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jack and Lizzie were meeting Ali and Steve for dinner and dancing, and Jack wanted Lizzie to cancel. It had been several weeks since the infamous marriage proposal, the glow of their great sex had worn off, and Jack was having mixed feelings about Lizzie. He loved her. That was not the problem. But Jack was hurting badly, and there were times he wished that he could take back the offer of marriage.

Before the engagement, they had gotten along fine, but now even the slightest thing seemed to set either one of them off. Jack was not in the mood to socialize with another couple, but Lizzie said there was no way she would cancel at the last minute. So Jack drove them to the supper club, resigned to being miserable for the entire evening.

The parking attendant took the Mercedes, and Jack and Lizzie strolled into the lobby of the enclave's clubhouse to wait for the other couple. If the food tasted as good as Lizzie swore, the evening wouldn't be a total disaster. But, as Jack glanced around, he saw how expensive the place was, and he wondered how much money tonight's meal would set him back.

Lizzie knew they were living on a tight budget, and she should have insisted on a more modestly priced restaurant. Later, when

they were alone, Jack intended to have a serious chat with Lizzie to try and get her to understand their financial situation better.

Oblivious to Jack's concerns over money, Lizzie was worried about her appearance. "Do I look all right? Is my dress nice enough? Jack, look at me! I need your opinion about my dress. Maybe I should have worn something else."

God give me strength. Lizzie had asked Jack the same question back at her apartment. Now they had to go through the whole "You look so gorgeous" routine once more. Lizzie had no idea how her insecurities were draining the lifeblood out of Jack. She did look beautiful, and Jack told her so in no uncertain terms. He intended to raise his fiancée's self-esteem even if it killed him, and it just might.

"Babe, you look like a supermodel. You take my breath away, and that blue dress looks great with your red hair as it caresses those sexy freckled shoulders." Where did he come up with that stuff? A place called desperation. Lizzie giggled at the description, but she loved the compliments. Her ego soared, which was what Jack intended. "You're stunning. What more can I say?" he asked.

"That's enough. I'm convinced, and may I say that you look very dashing yourself."

Jack wore an Armani sports jacket and white European trousers. No one would have guessed that he had purchased the jacket on clearance, and unlike Lizzie, he was always bargain hunting for his wardrobe. That was another thing they needed to discuss: her impulse spending on clothing and especially her shoes. Who needs that many pairs of shoes? She only had two feet!

Lizzie thought they made quite the couple, but where was the other half of their foursome? So she called Ali to find out why they were running late. "I've got some bad news. Ali said they're stuck in traffic. Because of an accident on the Long Island Expressway, all the cars are merging into one lane. *Damn! Damn! Damn!*"

"I feel bad for them, but worse for us," Jack told Lizzie. "Since we're both hungry, let's go on in and have dinner and leave Steve and Ali to fend for themselves."

"We can't do that," Lizzie protested. She was worried that Jack might make good on his threat. Since his recent promotion, Jack has taken his eating very seriously. "We're here on a double date, and it would be rude to eat without them. Is food that important to you?"

"Look who's talking—the eating machine—and the answer to your question is yes."

*****

On the expressway, Steve maneuvered the Lexus past the two-car collision. The traffic was now moving, and soon he entered the circular driveway of the clubhouse. The valet took the Lexus and they went inside. Steve draped Ali's shawl over her shoulders because the air-conditioning made it feel like the tundra. He spoke with the maître d' to make sure they corrected the problem, and then he casually slipped the man some money to ensure his fiancée's comfort.

Spotting her friend, Ali and Steve greeted the other couple. Steve walked over to Lizzie. She was a striking woman, resembling a high fashion model. Yet, despite her dazzling looks, Steve immediately picked up on Lizzie's insecurity and wondered what was causing it. "Lizzie, it's a pleasure to meet you." She beamed at Steve, and he felt the love Lizzie held for Ali and liked her right away.

Meanwhile, Lizzie was melting from Steve's potent Southern charm. "It's great to meet you too. Ali talks about you all the time."

"Nothing bad, I hope," Steve asked.

"You've got to be kidding. Ali adores you, and that in itself is a miracle. She never gave any man the time of day until you came into her life."

"It was the same for me," Steve said. "I never dated the same woman twice, and my heart was frozen until Ali melted it with her kindness and love."

Lizzie would have bet that Ali's big boobs were as enticing to Steve as her kindness and love were. Lizzie laughed at the thought of Steve latching onto them for hours on end as Ali reveled in the role of a wet nurse.

As they chatted, Steve told Lizzie about some of his most recent paranormal cases. Ali was glowing with pride, watching how animated Steve became as he described how to catch malevolent entities by utilizing specialized equipment. Lizzie glanced over at Jack and could not help noticing him frowning. She knew Jack was upset that their friends had arrived late, and being hungry only added to his bad mood. But this was their first double date, and Lizzie would not let Jack spoil it.

"Smile," she whispered to Jack under her breath so Steve and Ali could not hear her.

"When I eat some of that great food that you raved about, then I'll think about it."

"Stuff it, Jack."

"No. You stuff it, Lizzie."

Lizzie was almost sorry she had accepted the engagement ring because, since then, their relationship had gone downhill quickly. Clueless, Lizzie had no idea that her initial rejection was the cause of their problems.

Ali and Steve were watching the other couple. They saw the anger written clearly on their faces, and wondered what was going on. Then as if by magic, both Jack and Lizzie were smiling at them. Lizzie had dug her long nails into Jack's hand and told him that she would personally turn him into a eunuch if he did not shape up and act cordially to her friends. With all graciousness and charm, she brought Jack over to meet Steve and Ali. He shook hands with Steve and then introduced himself to Ali, kissing her on the cheek. Jack couldn't help noticing that Ali kept looking at Farrell as if he walked on water. Would Lizzie ever look at him that way? He hoped so, but he wasn't going to hold his breath.

The two couples followed the maître d' into an elegantly appointed Art Deco-style restaurant. A piano player and a quar-

tet of musicians were on the dais, opposite the diners who sat in sleek leather horseshoe-shaped booths. Ali glanced around at the Alphonse Mucha life-sized statues and stylized faux palm trees in their mirrored planters and was pleased with the décor.

Steve had the wine captain bring over a bottle of Dom Perignon, then asked Jack to accompany him to the men's room. Jack thought the request was odd, but he stood up and followed Steve out of the dining room.

Lizzie and Ali stared at each other. That was a first. Now the men were leaving in twos to go to the restroom. They laughed and toasted each other with champagne, enjoying their evening out.

*****

"Let's go to the bar so we can get to know each other better," Steve suggested to Jack.

Jack thought that was a good idea. Hopefully, a drink would help take his mind off his troubles. Both men ordered a scotch on the rocks. They sat nursing their drinks when Steve informed Jack that he was picking up the tab for tonight's dinner. Steve was well aware of the measly compensation doled out to New York's finest, and he wanted to help Jack without hurting his pride.

"After this evening, we can split the tab down the middle, if that's all right with you," Steve asked Jack as diplomatically as possible.

"I'm fine with that." Jack was relieved. Steve's generous offer showed that he was a nice guy, and Jack found himself warming up to Steve. Loosened up by the effects of the Scotch, Jack decided to confide in him. "My so-called salary is a joke. I'm going to have a talk with Lizzie about what we can and can't afford. We have a budget to live on, and she can be extravagant at times. If she would let me move in with her, we could split the monthly maintenance. Best of all, I could get rid of my overpriced rental. My lease is ending soon, and I don't want to have to sign

another one." Jack ordered another Scotch. Talking about his lack of money was a downer.

"I wish you the best of luck in getting Lizzie to acquiesce. It makes no sense to live apart when you're engaged to be married. Ali and I can't stand being apart for even a single night."

Jack envied Steve because Ali wanted to live with him. What a difference from Lizzie, who got her dander up every time he broached the subject of their cohabitating. Her answer was always the same—she needed her privacy. Sometimes he wondered if she really loved him or just wanted him for stud service.

The mood at the bar had turned to gloom and doom, so Steve decided to try and lighten things up. First, he regaled Jack with some true-life ghostly encounters. After Steve told him that he and two other parapsychologists were slimed by ghostly spirits while working on a case, Jack let loose with a deep-throated laugh.

"That's quite a story, Steve. Did you take any photos? I'd love to see how you looked after a ghost barfed all over you!" Then Jack told Steve about some of the wild times he'd had while working vice. Both men were having a good time, and now Jack had real hope that the evening would turn out well despite his earlier misgivings. While shooting the breeze, the two men discovered they both enjoyed going bowling, and so they made plans to try out a new bowling alley Jack had found downtown.

While discussing Suzanne, Jack informed Steve that he was now the detective in charge of her case. "But I'm worried that Suzanne won't remember much about the assault because of her concussion. Steve, it's a part of my job to work with rape victims. I've learned that as a form of self-protection, some victims block out the memory of the attack, and I can't blame them. I'm hoping Suzanne can recall something to help us identify the perp. If not, I may need a miracle to help solve the case," Jack admitted to Steve.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your fears are justified. Unfortunately, I'm "picking up" that Suzanne won't recall much about that night. It's going to make it harder for us to crack the case."

"Us?"

"The mayor wants my people to work together with the police. So, Jack, how do you feel about teaming up with me? Just to set the record straight, I've worked with the police department on prior cases."

"Steve, I'm well aware of your talents, and truthfully, I'm grateful to have you on board."

*****

"That was quite a long trip to the little boy's room," Ali announced when they returned. "We're getting hungry and want to order dinner."

Steve leaned in for a kiss, and Ali made a face. "Ugh. Your breath reeks from Scotch. Where were you guys, and it wasn't in the bathroom?"

"Darlin', I invited Jack to have a drink with me at the bar."

Lizzie looked at Jack. "So, did you have a good time?"

"We sure did," Jacked answered and picked up his menu. "Lizzie, let's order. The lobster and filet mignon sounds good."

In between courses, the two couples got up to dance. Lizzie and Jack were swept away by the music, helping them forget their problems for a while. Jack tilted Lizzie's chin up and kissed her softly. Then, feeling relaxed and happy for the first time in days, Lizzie laid her head on Jack's chest as they slow-danced to the love song.

Steve and Ali were dancing nearby as the musicians played. Steve hoped that Ali didn't notice what a terrible dancer he was. Luckily, she seemed oblivious to his missteps, and he hadn't stepped on any of her toes so far.

"That was wonderful! Why didn't you tell me that you dance so well?" Ali asked Steve.

As he held her in his arms, Steve confessed that he was only good at the slow dances. "Didn't you notice that I have no idea what I'm doing out here?"

"You must be a lot better dancer than you give yourself credit for, Steve Farrell. I think you dance divinely, and the slow numbers are more romantic."

The band started playing another song, and Lizzie's eyes closed as Jack held her tight. It had turned into a magical evening, and she wished it could always be like that. Lizzie had no idea that Jack was thinking the same thing as they danced the night away.



Chapter Thirty

Abandoned cars littered the land, picked apart by scavengers that prey upon the weak in hellholes such as this one. A pack of feral dogs howled in the distance, and the ground was covered with drug paraphernalia and refuse. A horrific stench filled the air as Steve and two of his best investigators searched for clues to help them find Suzanne's assailant.

Steve's senses were on overload from the evil that permeated every square inch of the land. There was too much death and despair surrounding them not to be negatively affected by it. So Steve told his people to invoke the "light" and keep it going strong until they left. While carefully combing the area, he received a call from the mayor. Suzanne was now well enough for questioning, and the mayor didn't want to risk the chance of any screw-ups, so he wanted Steve to accompany Jack to the hospital.

"Ginsberg is new to all of this, Steve, but you're a seasoned veteran. We've worked well together since I took office, and I trust you. Please do me a favor and be his backup. I'll be damned if I let Jack Ginsberg cut his baby teeth on this case. It's too important to me."

"I think that you should allow Jack to handle it alone. Suzanne is not strong enough to speak with both of us. I'm sure the physician in charge would want her disturbed as little as possible."

The mayor grew red in the face, just thinking about the doctor. "That so-called neurosurgeon of Suzanne's had the gall to tell me to keep my people away from his patient. I told Doctor Rubenstein that I was in charge here, and he had better learn to cooperate. Do you know what that little shit said to me, Steve? He told me to stay out of things I know nothing about, and then he had the nerve to hang up on me!"

Steve refrained from telling the mayor that the neurosurgeon happened to be his best friend. Sometimes it was better to say nothing, and this was one of those times. He realized that Seth's newly awakened feelings for Suzanne made him behave this way. He would go in for the kill if he believed that anyone would harm or upset her.

"I'll be down to visit with Suzanne soon, but not in an investigatory capacity. Right now, I'm in Brooklyn at the crime scene with two of my best people. We've been here for hours, searching for clues. This place is one step short of purgatory, and it smells like a stinking cesspool."

The mayor respected Steve Farrell and decided to take his advice and let Ginsberg interview Suzanne. "All right, Jack can question Suzanne, but I want answers, and I want them fast. Steve, while you've been combing the area, did you and your team find anything?"

As he was about to answer the question, Steve envisioned a Tudor-style estate. The house sat on several acres of manicured grounds, and possessed an impressive turret. But, unfortunately, there were dozens upon dozens of grand old English manors scattered throughout the East Coast. It was a start, though, and Steve mentioned it to the mayor. That small piece of information seemed to mollify him for the moment.

*****

Jack called, and he sounded worried. "Are you sure you don't want to come with me? Since that night at Buddha Bar, Suzanne might still hate my guts. What if she won't even speak to me?"

Steve assured Jack that he would do fine. Ali had told him that of the three friends, Suzanne was the quickest to forgive. But still wary, Jack headed over to NYU's Langone Medical Center to question her.

The physician in charge of the case took Jack aside to speak with him. Dr. Seth Rubenstein looked to be in his mid to late thirties. He sported a neatly trimmed thick-mustache, and he was even taller than Jack. The doctor reminded him of a young Tom Selleck, and Jack figured he was probably banging every hot-looking nurse in the hospital with his medical degree and good looks. The doctor gave Jack a polite smile, showing deep dimples on his face, but the smile seemed to vanish as quickly as it came.

"Miss Turner is in a lot of pain. She's weak and on medication, so I can only allow you a few minutes with her." The look he gave Jack would have frozen hell over. "I don't believe my patient is up to any questioning yet, but it seems that our esteemed mayor does."

"Get a grip, doc. I swear I'm not going to upset your patient. I'm a nice guy when you get to know me," Jack told the physician, hoping to get on his right side.

"Thanks, but I'll reserve judgment until I see for myself that my patient is not put under undue stress by you," he answered curtly.

Jack wished that he had a cigarette, but he'd quit smoking over a decade ago. Suzanne's doctor was glaring at him as if he'd grown horns and a forked tail, and his surly attitude grated on Jack's nerves.

"Suzanne Turner is under my care now. If I had my way, you would leave her alone until she's regained more of her strength back." Doctor Rubenstein took a step closer to Jack. "I'll be keeping my eye on you, detective. If my patient gets upset in any way,

there will be hell to pay." Then he stormed away in a black mood, cursing under his breath.

Jack had not expected that kind of attack. The anger was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Doctor Seth Rubenstein's outburst was more than just the typical doctor-patient concern, making Jack wonder what was really going on.

A nurse was standing next to the hospital bed, checking Suzanne's vital signs. When she finished writing the details on her chart, she told Jack he could come in. He walked over to the bed as quietly as possible to avoid disturbing Suzanne. She looked like the hospital version of Sleeping Beauty as she lay there battered and helpless in the hospital's metal bed. Jack gingerly pulled over a chair, trying not to make any noise, but Suzanne's eyes opened slightly, and she looked straight at him accusingly.

"Jack Ginsberg. Of all the people in the world, who do I get as my first visitor—you! I guess I'm still on that lucky streak that landed me here." Suzanne's voice was weak, but the animosity came through loud and clear.

"Suzanne, how do you feel?" Jack asked.

"How do you think I feel after being beaten, raped, and choked, Mr. Vice Cop?" she asked him, unable to hide the bitterness she felt at seeing Jack.

"I'm the head detective on your case now. I'm out of vice," he told her.

"Well, bully for you, Jack."

"Suzanne, I'm sorry that you got hurt, and I'll do everything in my power to catch the man who did this to you."

Instinctively, Jack rested his hand lightly on Suzanne's to comfort her.

"Get your paw off of me," she told him.

Hoping to forge a truce and wanting to help, Jack asked Suzanne if she would like a glass of water.

"If I want a drink, I'll ring for the nurse."

Things between them were worse than ever. Suzanne still hated his guts.

"So, how is Lizzie?" Suzanne's voice softened when she asked about her friend.

A smile lit up Jack's face as he thought about all the happy times they had shared until their recent squabbles. "Lizzie and I are engaged to be married. I love Lizzie, and she loves me. In a million years, who would have thought we'd end up together?"

"Not me," replied Suzanne. "You'd better take good care of her," she warned Jack, her cat's eyes narrowing as she spoke.

"You don't need to worry. I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to make her happy." As Jack said the words, he realized that they were the truth—if Lizzie would only give him half a chance. "Suzanne, I want to help you. Please let me know what I can do."

"I'll take that glass of water now, Jack. My throat feels scratchy."

Jack poured some water from the pitcher for Suzanne. Then he pulled the blanket over her because she felt chilly. "Can I get you anything to eat?"

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry, and I couldn't eat even if I wanted to." Suzanne held up her arm to show Jack the IV drip. "This is breakfast, lunch, and dinner for now. I want this damn thing out. I feel trapped, and it hurts." Suzanne looked straight at Jack and asked him, "Have you ever felt very down?"

"Sure, I have. Things get to me, and sometimes I get depressed. Given the circumstances, it's perfectly normal for you to feel that way."

Suzanne found herself softening toward Jack. If Lizzie loved him, he had to be special, and therefore he deserved a second chance. "Jack, I want to tell you about what happened to me before I came here. It will sound unbelievable, so you have to promise me you won't think I'm crazy."

"I swear that would never even cross my mind. You are probably the sanest person I know," he told her.

"I doubt that, but thanks for saying it. Do you believe in the supernatural, Jack?"

"I'm friends with Steve Farrell, and we discuss his paranormal cases, which are amazing. Even before I met Steve, I've always believed that certain people possessed psychic powers and that ghosts and spirits exist."

"I'm glad to hear that because of what I'm about to tell you."

Jack was intrigued. "I'm listening."

Suzanne was grateful that she could confide in Jack. She needed to tell someone, and unfortunately, Doctor Rubenstein was in surgery all morning, and Suzanne couldn't wait anymore, or she would burst. "After the assault, my soul left my body, and I died." Jack listened spellbound as Suzanne explained about meeting her twin sister on the other side. "Arianna is my guardian angel, and she looks the same as me even though she died in infancy. Isn't that the strangest thing you've ever heard?"

"I honestly don't know much about the afterlife. But, once we get there, maybe we can choose how we want to appear."

Suzanne's eyes lit up at Jack's words. "Yes, we can. You do understand."

"As I said, I'm open to anything. You chose the right guy to talk to."

Suzanne paused to take a deep breath, causing her to wince in pain.

"What's the matter? Do you need a nurse?" Jack was halfway out of his chair and ready to find one.

"Sit back down. I'll be all right. Unfortunately, that happens every time I try and breathe deeply because of my bruised ribs. But Doctor Rubenstein assured me everything would heal given time."

Listening to Suzanne was breaking Jack's heart. That she had managed to survive the attack was a testament to her strength and courage.

An angel was hovering near the bed, and she watched Jack conversing with her sister. She saw how much he cared about Suzanne. Arianna sensed there was something exceptional about Detective Ginsberg and she floated closer to where he sat by the side of the bed.

The sight of Arianna was a comfort to Suzanne. “My twin is here with us.” Jack quickly glanced around, but there was no blond-haired ghost anywhere. “Don’t bother looking for her because Arianna is only visible to me.” Jack was surprised by that. “It seems the afterlife has its own set of rules and we don’t necessarily have to understand them,” Suzanne explained to Jack. Her throat still bothered her, so Suzanne asked Jack for more water. Jack gave Suzanne the water, wishing he could make her more comfortable. “Jack, do you believe what I’ve told you so far?”

“How could I not? Thanks to your experience, I will know what to expect when my time comes.”

“Don’t think about that, Jack. I’m sure you have a long life ahead of you.”

“I hope so, but in my line of work, you never know what will happen from day to day.” Once the words were out, Jack realized that he was worried that a psycho with an illegal handgun would take a shot at him or a drug dealer would run a knife through his back. Jack’s raise had come through, and it had amounted to next to nothing. Being promoted to detective had him working days and many nights. He was beginning to hate working for the NYPD. To make matters worse, Lizzie was on his back about the insane hours he needed to work. The way things were going, Jack would have to reevaluate his job situation sooner than later.

Suzanne’s voice broke through Jack’s worries. “Being in the hospital has given me time to think, and I’ve contemplated stopping dating and becoming celibate. Then there would be much less chance that a man would molest me again,” Suzanne declared miserably.

“You don’t need to live like a nun Suzanne. Understand that whoever did this to you was mentally unstable. Most men are sweet and adorable like me.”

“Yes, you are both of those things, and Lizzie is lucky to have you. But, please don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful to be alive, but my life sucks. I’m the poster girl for walking disaster.”

"Hey, I don't wanna hear you talk like that. Suzanne, you're young and vibrant and very bright. You scared the crap out of me the night we met because you were quoting the law verbatim while I was trying to arrest Lizzie for solicitation."

That evoked real laughter from Suzanne, and Jack listened to the beautiful sound. Whoever won this woman's heart would be a lucky man.

"I'd like for us to be friends now, Jack. If you're still interested."

"Of course I am," he responded, grateful for a second chance with Lizzie's friend. Jack had been mesmerized by Suzanne's tale of life on the other side, and he almost forgot why he was there. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask you a few questions. It's a police procedure. Do you feel up to it?"

"I'm ready." Inwardly, though, Suzanne was quaking.

Taking out a small notepad, Jack was ready to jot down any pertinent information that Suzanne might remember. Unfortunately, she kept drawing blanks. Suzanne could not describe the perpetrator or the vehicle that he drove. All she remembered was that it was expensive and foreign-made. Millions of automobiles fit that description.

"What about a name? Does anything ring a bell?" Jack asked her.

Suzanne closed her eyes, and Jack could almost see the steam rising as she concentrated. But it was a futile effort because nothing came to her. "When I try and force a memory, my head hurts even more."

Suzanne looked pale from the pain, and Jack was fearful she would relapse from the stress of questioning. "That's it. We're stopping for now. All you need to do is to rest and get better. Don't worry because we'll catch the perp."

"Thanks, Jack. If I remember anything at all, I'll be sure and let you know." Then out of the blue, Suzanne heard a man's deep voice echoing in her head. "I can hear him," she cried out. "Please make him stop talking!" Frightened, Suzanne reached for Jack's hand.

Jack lightly squeezed her hand, hoping to reassure her. “I promise the voice will go away very soon.”

Suzanne visibly calmed down. “You’re right. It’s gone—but what if it returns?” Jack heard the worry in Suzanne’s voice and knew she was going through hell. “Jack, some of that night is beginning to come back to me now, but in bits and pieces. And this might sound bizarre, but he kept calling me Jolie and then Mama.” Suzanne was perplexed. “Why would he call me Mama and then call me by another woman’s name? It makes no sense.”

Jack agreed that it did sound strange, but they were dealing with a psychopath. There were no set rules when it came to them. He was busy taking down the information critical to the case when who should walk in but the good doctor himself.

“Suzanne, is Detective Ginsberg bothering you?”

“No. I’m fine, Doctor Rubenstein. Jack needs to know anything I can remember to help solve the case.”

Seth’s blood pressure shot up when he saw that the detective was holding her hand.

“He is also a good friend,” Suzanne added.

Jack watched as the doctor’s face turned red with anger.

“Is the detective a boyfriend of yours, Suzanne?”

Jack could not believe the unmitigated gall of the man. But Suzanne, bless her innocent little heart, did not pick up on the jealousy-fueled words.

“No. Jack is engaged to one of my friends,” she answered. “I don’t have a boyfriend. If I had one, I wouldn’t have ended up here in the hospital.”

Doctor Rubenstein looked relieved, but his belligerence was still in top form. “Okay, detective, you can leave now because my patient needs her rest.”

Jack got up, gave Suzanne a quick kiss and left. Her doctor was a complete asshole, and he obviously had a “thing” for his beautiful patient. On the bright side, Doctor Rubenstein would do everything in his considerable power to help Suzanne recover.



Chapter Thirty-One

John Carson was having the same nightmare again. Sweat beaded in a fine sheen on his body as the dream continued. He desperately wanted to wake up and escape the awful memories of the past, but he couldn't. Once again, he watched himself as a young boy on the day that his innocence was lost, and his life irrevocably changed forever.

"Come into my bedroom, Johnny," his mama called out to him.

"I can't," he answered. "I'm playing war, and my soldiers are all lined up. The bad guys are gonna attack with their fighter planes."

"But I need your company. It's been so lonely since your daddy died. Please, Johnny," she implored.

His mother sounded so sad that Johnny stopped playing with his action figures and walked into the large bedroom. He almost ran away at the sight of her, but his feet would not budge. He just stood there and stared, glued to the spot. Mama was sitting atop the covers on the bed with no clothes on!

She patted the bed and told Johnny to sit next to her. He was nervous but curious as well, so he went over and sat down gingerly. He made sure that no part of him touched her naked body. Mama leaned over and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek, and he felt her naked breast brush against him.

"Johnny, with daddy gone, you are the man of the house now and will have to take his place."

"How do I do that?" he asked, worried.

That was the turning point in John's life. First, his mother began to unbutton John's pajama top, and then she watched as he pulled off his bottoms, and no matter how much he protested, his mother was not satisfied until he was as naked as she was. Then despite his protests, she proceeded to educate her young son in the ways of the flesh.

As John sat there, his mother took his hand and moved it onto her breasts. "Please don't do that," he begged. His eyes filled with tears of shame, having to touch her in such an intimate place.

But John's mother ignored his words and continued to teach her son things that no eleven-year-old boy should ever have to learn. John felt tremendous guilt afterward because he had enjoyed everything they'd done together. But he knew he shouldn't be doing these things with his mother. He wanted to run out of the room and hide so the shame would go away. The only thing that stopped him was the fear that his mother wouldn't love him anymore.

"Did you enjoy playing with me, Johnny?" she asked her son after she had taken his virginity.

"Yes, I did, but you're my mama, and it's not right."

Frightened, he started to cry, and his mother admonished him. "Big boys don't cry. What we did together was a good thing. I would never ask you to do anything bad." John looked at his mother, beseechingly, wanting to believe her so badly. "Johnny, you and I have an extraordinary relationship. Do you want to keep having fun with me?" she asked her son as she gave him another lesson in sexual gratification, pleased that Johnny was a fast learner.

"Yes, I do, Mama." But John couldn't stop thinking he was doing something terrible, even though his mother swore that everything was fine. She warned him not to ever tell anyone about the things they did together. It would be their special secret.

"I'll never tell, Mama. I swear."

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When John Carson awakened from the dream, his heart was racing, and his chest felt tight. The anxiety was all-encompassing. He sat up in the fifty-thousand-dollar bed that Jolie had finagled him into buying. Supposedly it was manufactured with three-thousand-plus inner-springs meant to provide exceptional comfort, but John didn't feel any difference from their previous mattress. The one that hadn't bankrupted him with its price.

He worked around the clock to pay for the luxurious Tudor mansion they shared in Scarsdale, New York. Jolie had turned out to be a shopaholic with expensive taste, but her one saving grace was that she was insatiable in bed.

John went downstairs to pour himself a snifter of brandy, wondering why his demons had come back to haunt him. Everything that had happened was a lifetime ago. But they say you get punished for your sins, and he had more than his share. Maybe it was payback time.

Lowering himself into an antique leather chair, John downed one brandy after another to help block the pain of Jolie's latest affair. He had discovered her fornicating with the muscle-bound handyman who worked for them. John went into a rage and battered Jolie's latest lover, leaving him unconscious and bleeding on the road outside their estate. He looked down at the man and kicked him hard, but the man was dead to the world.

In tears, Jolie swore that she would never look at another man. She would be faithful to John. If only he could believe her. John slowly made his way up the magnificently carved mahogany staircase and entered the master suite. He looked down at the blond woman, who was fast asleep. Nothing ever bothered her. She was a narcissist who lied and felt no remorse. After everything she put him through, John wasn't sure if he loved Jolie anymore. The hurt and anger far outweighed any tender feelings he used to have for her.



Chapter Thirty-Two

The booths in the restaurant were cramped, but it was close to the hospital, making it convenient for Seth. He arrived first, and when he spotted Steve, he waved him on over. The waitress came, carrying a tray holding two steaming cups of coffee. She was about to tell them the house specials when Seth told her they were fine for now, so she sashayed over to the following table to pick up her tips.

The doctor with the movie star's good looks always flirted with her. Something had changed because, for over a week now, he hadn't given her a second glance. Was she losing her touch? Just then, one of the regulars pinched her fanny, and instead of being upset, she smiled right back at him. Nah, she was still smoking hot and making the male customers salivate for her bodacious bod. She decided Doctor Rubenstein must be having woman problems and had no idea how right she was.

As they drank their coffee, Steve listened while Seth vented about the bureaucratic morons interfering in his patient's welfare. Steve wanted to get Seth's mind off his troubles, so he told his friend about Fred's latest attempt to find materials to build a nest. "Ali walked into the bedroom and saw that Fred had helped himself to her lingerie. Ali's favorite bra was in shreds and hanging

from Fred's beak when she found him." He waited for laughter, but none was forthcoming.

Seth was too fixated on Suzanne to care about Fred's latest antics. He purposely didn't tell Steve that he was falling for his patient. Until now, they had always confided in one another, but Seth was superstitious, and he wasn't about to say anything until he was sure that Suzanne had returned his feelings. It never even occurred to Seth that Steve already knew how he felt about Suzanne.

After coffee, Seth rushed back to Suzanne's room to see how she was faring. His eyes scanned her chart methodically, looking for even the slightest change in her condition. Instead, everything seemed status quo, which was a relief. Looking at Suzanne's face, Seth noticed that she didn't appear as pale as she had earlier in the day. He knew that natural blondes tended to be fair-skinned, but now Suzanne's cheeks had a healthy glow. Seth watched, mesmerized, as Suzanne blinked owlishly and slowly opened her eyes, emitting the cutest yawn.

"Doctor Rubenstein, I'm so happy to see you. I was worried that I might have scared you away by talking about my problems so much," Suzanne admitted to the physician.

Seth pulled over a chair and sat down. "That would never happen, and I'm glad you trust me enough to confide in me."

Ever since she'd regained consciousness, the doctor and patient had developed an easy rapport, and much to Seth's surprise, Suzanne began opening up her heart to him. She told him how guilty she felt for wanting to meet someone to fill the emptiness in her life. "Maybe some people are doomed to walk the planet alone, and I'm afraid that I'm one of them."

"For God's sake, Suzanne, everyone needs companionship, and there was nothing wrong with your going out and hoping to meet someone."

"You're right. I know that you're right. I'm beating myself up for no good reason."

"So then stop it," Seth told her. "I want you to listen to the words of this Barbra Streisand song."

Seth did his best to sing the song's first two lyrics, hoping to cheer Suzanne up.

"People. People who need people. Are the luckiest people in the world."

His singing was so awful that it was bound to elicit a laugh or, at the very least, a chuckle. Then miracle of miracles—Seth got his wish. Suzanne's face broke into a radiant smile. It lit up the sterile hospital room and made it seem like a deluxe suite at the St. Regis hotel.

"That was wonderful," Suzanne exclaimed. "Please sing some more."

Seth wondered if Suzanne was teasing him, but all he saw was sincerity in those big blue eyes that were pulling him in like a lodestone. "Most people tell me that my singing reminds them of tires screeching, but I'm happy that I could make you smile. I want to see more of those from now on. That's doctor's orders, by the way."

"Then you'll have to break into a song more often, Doctor Rubenstein."

"I'd love to, but I forgot for the moment that we're in a hospital."

"I understand perfectly. This place is the antiseptic version of the public library."

"That pretty much sums it up," Seth answered.

"Doctor Rubenstein, thank you. I appreciate your trying to cheer me up."

"No thanks are needed." It went against hospital policy, but Seth didn't give a damn. He pulled out a prescription pad and wrote down his contact information. "Here, I want you to have this. If you need to reach me, call or text me. If I don't answer, I'm either in surgery or away from my phone. But I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

Suzanne took the piece of paper. “Are you sure you want to give this to me?” she asked. “If I get lonely or feel the need to talk, can I call you even at three in the morning?” Suzanne was testing the doctor’s sincerity. After everything that she had lived through, he seemed almost too good to be true. How had she managed to luck out and have Doctor Seth Rubenstein as her physician?

“Of course you can, and I want your word that you won’t hesitate to call me.”

Blinking back tears, Suzanne promised that she would. Knowing that she could always reach Doctor Rubenstein was the greatest gift that he could have given her. However, Suzanne was beginning to feel emotions that she was not yet ready to handle, so she pushed them aside for the time being.

Seth smoothed the soft blond bangs away from the bandage covering her stitches and lightly stroked Suzanne’s cheek without realizing what he was doing. She looked up at Seth with trust and something else that he couldn’t quite define. “I was just checking to see how your bruises are healing.” That was a lie. Seth needed to touch Suzanne even in some small way, and her skin had felt smoother than silk. “I didn’t hurt you—did I?”

“Oh, no. Your hands have a healing touch. It felt wonderful.”

Seth was relieved to hear that, and he bent down to take a closer look at her face, and her neck, a kaleidoscope of bruises that he knew must hurt like hell. The staff had put cold packs on them immediately to stop the swelling, which worked for the most part. The puffiness was gone, and soon the bruises would fade. What worried Seth was the emotional scars left over from her ordeal.

“Doctor Rubenstein, can we pick up from where we left off earlier?” Suzanne asked him.

“Sure, we can. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I will, but before we start discussing my problems, I could use some help. The IV makes it hard for me to maneuver in the bed, and I need to sit up straighter.”

Seth did his best to make the hospital bed more comfortable for Suzanne. When she still wasn’t high enough, he adjusted it

more and added another pillow. While Seth was repositioning her, the feel of his big, warm hands gave Suzanne the shivers, but in a good way. Logically she should have been afraid of his touch because he was a man, but it was just the opposite. Doctor Rubenstein made her feel safe and secure.

"That's much better," Suzanne told Seth. "As I recall, we were discussing my fear of having a relationship with a man."

"Understandably, you feel that way now, and I'll do whatever I can to help."

"I appreciate that, Doctor Rubenstein. I want to wipe the slate clean and put it all behind me—but no talking to shrinks. I can't handle that now or possibly ever."

"Who mentioned anything about your seeing a shrink?" Seth asked, concerned.

"One of the nurses did. She said there's a psychiatrist on staff who works with the rape victims, but I don't want to talk with a stranger." Inwardly, Seth was churning with anger, but he managed to hide it from Suzanne.

"I told her to please leave me alone, but she wouldn't, and I couldn't get her to shut up. It was like she wanted to torture me or something."

Suzanne looked at Seth imploringly, and his heart squeezed painfully. The nurses knew they could not dispense free medical advice without going through him first. Someone's head was going to roll.

"Everything is going to be fine," Seth assured her. "Do you happen to remember the name of the nurse?"

"She's your hospital's version of Nurse Ratched. Her name was Shelby. Why did she keep after me like that?"

"I honestly don't know, but she will be working in another unit before her shift is over today, and you'll never have to worry about her again." Seth took a deep breath to calm himself. Now he understood why Steve was so protective of Ali because he held those same feelings for Suzanne.

Seth knew the nurse that had harangued Suzanne. Shelby Connors. She was new to the staff and had been coming onto Seth every chance she got. Nurse Connors would find herself working the night shift in another unit, and she would go ballistic. No one upsets Suzanne and gets away with it.

"Thanks Doctor Rubenstein. I knew that you would take care of it," Suzanne told Seth, believing her doctor could solve almost any problem that arose. "There's something important that I want you to know."

"What is it?" Seth asked, wondering what it could be.

"All men frighten me—except you."

He thought he must have heard wrong. Had Suzanne really said that?

"When you're here with me, it's the only time I feel safe. Not frightened and vulnerable. Take that as a huge compliment, Doctor Rubenstein."

"Believe me, I do, and I hope that you'll always feel that way about me."

"I know I will because I'm…"

Seth never learned what Suzanne was about to say. She yawned and fell back asleep with a slight smile on her face. But her words reverberated in his heart. *All men frighten me except you.*

He got up to leave, but not being able to stop himself, Seth lightly brushed his lips over hers. It went against hospital policy, but Seth couldn't stop himself because he was in love with Suzanne.

Seth's long legs strode purposely to the florist, where he picked out a large bouquet of red roses for Suzanne. On the card, he wrote, "*Suzanne, get well quickly. With warm wishes, Dr. Seth Rubenstein."* He hoped that the flowers would help to cheer her up.

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Janet Turner was doing her best to hide how upset she was at seeing her daughter covered with bruises, but it was next to impossible. While they chatted, a young hospital volunteer carried in a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses. “These just came for you, Miss Turner.”

Suzanne was thrilled that someone had cared enough to send roses and not just a few. There were at least two dozen. “They’re so beautiful,” Suzanne said, admiring them. “Could you give me one to hold?” The volunteer pulled one of the roses from the bouquet and handed it to Suzanne. She held it in her hand and inhaled the beautiful fragrance.

Tucked in with the roses was a card, and Suzanne read the message. “That was so sweet of Dr. Rubenstein. Here, mom. Take a look.”

Janet read the card, handing it back to her daughter. “Your doctor sent you the roses. Isn’t that a bit odd?” she asked.

“Mom, Doctor Rubenstein is so sweet. He cares about all of his patients, and I’m sure he sends flowers to many of them. He’s just that kind of a man.”

Suzanne was positively glowing, and Janet Turner was glad that her doctor had been thoughtful enough to send the roses. But despite what Suzanne believed, she was sure that Doctor Rubenstein had never sent roses to his patients before today.

“Mom, how is Precious doing? I’m relieved that you’re taking care of her while I’m in the hospital.”

“Don’t worry. Precious is fine. She seems happy playing with her toys, and she curls up every evening in front of the fireplace.” Janet took a sip of the tea she had gotten at the nurse’s station and found it lacking flavor. On her next visit, she would bring some Earl Grey teabags. “Now that we’re on the subject, I need to discuss something with you about your cat.”

Suzanne felt a lecture coming on, but she could not escape because the IV kept her trapped.

“Precious is an affectionate and endearing creature. But dear, you really should put her on a strict diet. Unfortunately, because

she is overweight, I ended up pulling my lower back out lifting her." Janet winced in pain, hoping to elicit some sympathy from her daughter.

"Are you feeling any better now?"

"I used a heating pad and took some Ecotrin because Advil upsets my stomach."

"I'm sorry you hurt your back, mom, but I don't think it was from lifting Precious. You've had back problems for as far back as I can remember."

"Pish tosh. It was your cat, but I won't say another word about it." *For now.* "Before I forget, your Aunt Maggie has been calling and asking about you. She and Uncle Peter want to visit, and I told her as soon as you're feeling up to it, they could come by the hospital."

"That's nice of them, but I want to see my friends before our relatives start to visit. I miss Ali and Lizzie very much, and phone calls just don't cut it for me."

Suzanne felt more energetic and, therefore, more able to stand up for her rights today. The achiness was abating, and she was not as tired, thanks to Doctor Rubenstein's excellent care and her determination to get out of the hospital. Suzanne thought she was doing pretty darn good for someone who had recently died and returned to the land of the living.

"So when can I see my friends?" Suzanne pressed her mother for an answer.

"Doctor Rubenstein told me that you would be allowed to have visitors in a day or so, depending on your progress. He seems to be a very conscientious physician, and I trust his judgment—to a point. If it were up to me, I'd wait a while longer."

"You worry about me too much, and I understand why, but I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

Janet disagreed with her daughter, but she held her tongue to keep the peace.

"Mom, I'd like to talk to you about dad."

Janet's eyes welled up with tears at the mere mention of her beloved late husband. She opened her Louis Vuitton purse and took out a lace-trimmed handkerchief to wipe her eyes. "I miss your father just as much today as the day he died. Suzanne, what did you want to discuss with me?"

Suzanne wanted to tell Janet about seeing her father on the other side, but she stopped herself in time. Her mother was not yet ready to handle the truth. "That's funny. I forgot what I was about to say. It couldn't have been that important."



Chapter Thirty-Three

After Janet left to go home, Seth stopped in to see how Suzanne was feeling, and she asked him if he could stay and visit. His face lit up in a dimpled grin as he walked into the room. Seth stood by her bedside, and for the first time, Suzanne took notice of him as a man and not just a doctor. He was very tall and extremely handsome, and he exuded masculinity, which was something she had never noticed in any physician before today.

"Doctor Rubenstein, thank you for the beautiful roses you sent me. It was a lovely gesture, and I appreciate it more than you know."

Seth looked at the flowers and was pleased to see how they brightened up the drab little room. "It was my pleasure, Suzanne." Seth paused, wondering how to broach the next subject.

"Suzanne, I'd be pleased if you would call me Seth from now on. No more Doctor Rubenstein."

"Do you give all your patients flowers and ask them to call you by your first name?" she asked.

That was a loaded question. Should Seth lie to Suzanne or tell her the truth? "You are the only patient I've ever sent flowers to, and I hope that's all right with you."

Suzanne's emotions were overflowing. Seth made her feel safe. He was the kindest and most caring person she had ever met, and she felt happy, knowing that she was not just another patient to him. That was the moment Suzanne made the most critical decision of her life. She was not going to let the past spoil her chance at happiness.

"It's very all right with me," she responded.

Seth was in happy shock. He grabbed a chair and sat down next to her. "Suzanne, I've never felt this way about a patient before." Unconsciously he was stroking her hand as he spoke, not realizing how much Suzanne was enjoying the feel of his touch. Suzanne seemed receptive to his overtures so far, so he went in for the gusto. "When you're out of the hospital, I'd like to start seeing you."

"As in actual dating?" Suzanne asked, hoping she had not misconstrued his words.

"Yes. If you'll let me," Seth answered, hoping that Suzanne returned his feelings.

"Of all the places for us to meet, why did it have to be here in the hospital?"

"It doesn't matter how we met. All that's important is that we're together now."

Suzanne melted at Seth's sincerity. "My answer is yes."

"Yes, you'll go out with me and be my girl?"

"Yes, to both things. And I wish—"

"What do you wish, sweetheart?"

"I can't tell you because it's too embarrassing."

"Don't be afraid. You can tell me anything."

Suzanne looked down at the ugly blanket on the hospital bed, avoiding Seth's eyes. She was searching for the right words. It was not something a patient would typically discuss with their doctor, but Seth was so much more than that now.

"It's about kissing," she admitted.

Seth's face broke into a grin. "What about kissing?" he asked.

"I was wondering if I would be afraid when we kissed—or if I'd like it. But we're here in the hospital, so there's no way we can find out."

With the door closed, they had privacy. Seth slowly bent his head and gently brushed his lips against Suzanne's, tentatively, to gauge her response. She had no idea that this was the second time Seth had kissed her.

Suzanne felt Seth's warm lips on hers, and she felt intense joy, like nothing she'd ever known. His mustache didn't tickle. It felt wonderful. As Suzanne's soft lips parted, Seth deepened the kiss. The tentative, experimental kiss had turned into a full-fledged tongue-touching kind of kiss.

"Well, how was it?" Seth held his breath, hoping he was correct about Suzanne's reaction to the kiss. "I want you to know that I'm crazy about you."

"The feeling's mutual, but I don't understand it. I thought I'd be scared, but I didn't want the kiss to end."

"Suzanne, I feel the same way." Seth watched her smile at his frank admission and went in for another kiss. Suzanne matched his ardor with her own as passions fueled by love flared in the small hospital room.

"There's something you need to know, sweetheart."

"What is it?" she asked.

"You were predicted by a psychic," Seth told Suzanne.

"I was what?"

"Steve Farrell and I have been best friends for years. We met when I went for a life reading with him, and he predicted you exactly. Back then, I scoffed at the idea of having a soul mate, despite Steve's reputation as being the world's greatest seer."

"This is getting interesting," Suzanne told him. "Ali is one of my best friends and Steve's fiancée, and you're Steve's best friend. What a small world we live in."

"Isn't it?" Seth replied.

"Now you've got my curiosity piqued. What exactly did Steve tell you about me during your reading?"

"Keep in mind that a lot of Steve's predictions have already come true. His accuracy rate is off the charts. For example, Steve told me a crazy-sounding story about the woman I would meet. He said that she would have a cat that believes it's a dog. Suzanne, when you arrived at the hospital, your throat was too sore to speak above a whisper. You were worried about Precious and wrote that you had a cat with canine emotions. That's when the memories of everything Steve told me about you came flooding back."

Suzanne's mouth fell open. "That is amazing," she told Seth. "It's miraculous. Was there anything else that Steve told you about me?"

For the first time in Seth's life, he was embarrassed. The skirt-chasing womanizer was finally brought to his knees by one woman. Suzanne urged Seth on, dying to know what it was.

"Do you have a heart-shaped mole near your—eh hem—derriere?" he asked her.

Excited by Steve's prediction, Suzanne asked Seth to help her turn onto her side. "Now lift my hospital gown."

Not wanting one of the staff to catch him staring at Suzanne's bare behind, Seth shoved a chair in front of the door so no one could enter. When he lifted the gown, he saw what had to be the most beautiful derriere in the world. There was a cute dimple over each cheek and something more. At the base of the spine was the mole that Steve had described. It looked like a perfect tiny heart. On impulse, Seth kissed it before righting Suzanne's hospital gown.

"It's so beautiful, babe. Even better than I had imagined."

Everything between Suzanne and Seth seemed like a dream come true, and Suzanne was afraid of putting a damper on their newfound happiness, but she had to tell Seth about her experience with death before things went any further. "Something incredible happened to me before I came to the hospital. I wanted to speak with you about it, but the nurse told me you were busy in the OR for several hours. So, when Jack Ginsberg came to question me, I told him instead."

"What happened to you?" Seth asked, concerned.

"I had an after-death experience."

"Are you telling me that you died?" Seth asked incredulously.

"Yes, but thankfully it was a mistake, and they sent me back."

Seth did his best to appear calm when he was anything but that. "I'm glad you had someone to confide in while I was in surgery." But Seth could not help wishing that Suzanne had told him first—and not Ginsberg. "I'm here now, so tell me everything that happened to you."

Seth sat there frozen in shock as Suzanne recalled all the events that occurred after she died. When Suzanne described having no physical body and desperately wanting it back, she became quite agitated. Hoping to release some of the tension, Seth lightly massaged her shoulders. The painful tightness began to ease as his fingers gently worked at unknotting the muscle spasms.

"That felt wonderful. You do have a healing touch in your hands. I noticed it right from the start."

"I'm glad you're feeling better. Whenever you need a massage, I'm your man."

"I'll make a note of that, Doctor Rubenstein."

Seth wanted to do something special for Suzanne. "Are you up to having visitors this evening?"

"Would you dare to go against my mother's dictums?"

"She doesn't have to know."

"Who did you have in mind?"

"I thought that it would be nice if we invited Ali and Steve to come to visit."

"I'd love to see them, but take a good look at me. I'm wearing this ugly hospital gown, and I can't let Steve see me in this rag. If it were just Ali, I wouldn't care how I looked."

Seth wracked his brain, needing to come up with something to make Suzanne feel better about herself.

"I could purchase a bed jacket for you in the hospital gift shop, which would hide the gown's upper half. How does that sound?"

"It sounds wonderful. Seth, could you do me one more favor?" Suzanne asked sweetly.

"Sure. Anything you want. As long as it's something I think is good for you."

"Do you realize that you are bossy?"

"It's my nature to be protective about those I care about," Seth answered truthfully. "You'll get used to it in time."

"If you say so." But Suzanne's eyes were sparkling with delight when she said it. Seth realized that the two of them would be butting heads from time to time, and he looked forward to it.

"Get your prescription pad because there are a few things that I'll need to make myself presentable for our visitors. First, I must have a hairbrush, but don't get me the plastic kind. I only use a boar-bristle hairbrush."

"What's that?" Seth asked.

Suzanne explained about the brush to Seth, and she also added makeup to the list. She was beginning to feel excited at the thought of wearing lipstick and blusher after days of going without it. "Try and find me a bottle of pale-pink nail polish and something to dry the polish. We don't have the time to wait for them to dry naturally, and you'd be stuck blowing on my toenails."

"That might not be so bad," Seth answered, grinning. "I think your toes are sexy." Suzanne gave him a look that said she thought he was crazy. "I know most doctors are supposed to be stuffed shirts, but you'll find I'm not your stereotypical physician."

"That's a big part of your appeal. But, Seth, have I gone nuts?" Suzanne asked him. "It feels like we've known each other for years, even though it's only been days."

"Then we're both crazy because I feel the same way. Steve explained to me how he and Ali fell in love right away. With soul mates, it's the same as speed dating, but with love as the added ingredient."

Suzanne could not believe it had finally happened to her! She and Seth were in love!



Chapter Thirty-Four

Later that evening, someone knocked on Suzanne's door. "Can we come in?"

"Who is it? Do I know you?" Seth wanted to annoy Steve, so he continued. "What's the magic word?" he asked, laughing.

"Open the door, or I will kill you," Steve answered, secretly amused at this bit of nonsense.

"That was the correct answer, so you get the booby prize. A years' worth of the hospital's finest coffee," Seth announced to Steve, knowing how much he loathed the stuff.

Ali was laughing, listening to Seth busting Steve's chops.

"Come on and open the damn door already. I want to meet Suzanne."

Seth opened the door, and Ali rushed to her friend's bedside. She bit back a sob as she saw the ugly bruises covering Suzanne, forcing a smile from somewhere deep down. Ali desperately wanted to hold Suzanne but feared it might be painful. Nevertheless, she asked Suzanne if she could hug her.

"Of course, you can. I won't break, and right now, I need all the love I can get." Suzanne looked up at Steve. "And I expect a hug from you too. I'm feeling much better now despite how I may appear."

Suzanne held onto Ali like a life preserver on a choppy sea. Ali was grateful to Seth for allowing her and Steve to come and visit. Screw Janet Turner. Suze needed her friends now more than ever.

When Steve gently held Suzanne, he picked up on a dull, throbbing ache emanating from the concussion and her bruised ribs. In his mind's eye, Steve saw how Suzanne appeared before the assault, so he used all the energy he could muster to eradicate the discoloration from the bruises and take away as much of her pain as possible.

"Seth has healing hands because whenever he touches me, my pain lessens, but Steve, you are amazing! I felt warmth radiating from you and going straight through me. It was incredible." Suzanne's eyes were filled with gratitude as she looked at Steve. "My headache is gone for the first time since I came here." Suzanne took a deep breath and realized there was no pain. "You healed my ribs, Steve. I don't know how you managed to take away my pain, but I am grateful."

Silently, Steve gave thanks to the universe for allowing him to heal this remarkable woman. "It was my pleasure, Suzanne. I picked up on your pain, and I wanted to help. Unfortunately, my energy doesn't always work, but thankfully it did this time."

Seth was staring at Suzanne's face and neck. Then he walked closer to get a better look. If he hadn't seen it for himself, he would not have believed it was possible. Most of Suzanne's bruises had miraculously vanished.

"Your bruises are a lot lighter," Seth told Suzanne. "They're barely noticeable now."

"Quick! Get me a mirror!" Seth handed one to Suzanne, who stared at her reflection in the glass. "I can't believe it. You somehow managed to get rid of the bruising. I look like me again."

Suddenly, all the events that took place began making sense to Seth. He pointed his finger at Steve. "It was you all along! I should have known. You set everything in motion, didn't you?"

"Guilty as charged," Steve admitted.

Suzanne had no idea what they were talking about, but Ali did. Steve had played coy and refused to tell her anything, but she guessed that Steve was meddling in the best possible way.

"Seth, what's going on?" Suzanne asked.

"It seems that Steve had you transferred to NYU Langone on purpose. He wanted to help fate by steering us in the right direction. That explains everything that's been happening to us."

Seth grabbed Steve in a bear hug. "I can't thank you enough for what you did for Suzanne and me. I owe you big time."

"Forget about it. That's what friends are for."

Suzanne was still perplexed. "But how did you know that we belonged together?" she asked Steve.

"I knew you were Seth's soul mate right from the start. And with your head injury, it made sense for Seth to be your physician because there is no finer neurosurgeon around. But Suzanne, know that no matter where you both met, be it here at the hospital or even in a crowded subway, you would have ended up together."

"So, how do you feel now, knowing that you're stuck with me for a lifetime?" Seth asked Suzanne.

"You know how I feel about it," Suzanne answered as she looked at the man she had come to love.

Ali was watching their auras. Both Seth and Suzanne's auras were glowing. Then Ali thought about their other friend for a moment, and she felt sad knowing that Lizzie and Jack were having so many problems. But after all the hell that Suzanne had lived through, she deserved the happily ever after.

"Seth, after we spoke the first time, the scent of roses haunted me for over a day, but I had no idea why until now. Those beautiful red roses were from you."

"You smelled the roses even before I purchased them?" Seth asked incredulously.

"When you're a clairvoyant empath, you can't turn it on and off like a faucet, though there were times I wish that I could."

Just then, the nurse came in with cups of coffee for the visitors and orange juice for Suzanne. Ali wanted some time alone with Suzanne, so she sent the men on an errand to bring back artificial sweetener and nonfat milk for her coffee. She told Steve to take his time, and he got the hint.

Once they left, Ali got straight to the point. "It's obvious that you and Seth are in love." Ali was nervous about asking the next question, but she had to know. "Has Seth tried to kiss you yet?" she asked, too anxious to "look" on it.

Ali's concern touched Suzanne, and she needed to put her fears to rest. "You're worried that I may be afraid of Seth touching me because of the rape."

"I can't deny that it's crossed my mind."

"Well, let me dispel your fears concerning Seth. I was the one who first asked him to kiss me."

Ali gasped. "Why would you do that?"

"It was a test. I needed to know whether I'd enjoy kissing Seth or be repulsed by it." A smile came to Suzanne's lips as she spoke about the experience. "Words cannot begin to describe how wonderful it was. Kissing Seth is not like kissing any other man," Suzanne told her friend, and Ali felt relief at the news.

Thirsty, Suzanne tried the hospital's orange juice. "This is sour, and I don't believe a real orange ever came near it. Here, try some."

Ali drank a little and agreed. "This is nasty, but their coffee is even worse. Taste it. I know you're not allowed coffee yet, but I won't tell if you don't."

Suzanne took a few sips, craving the caffeine, and she made a face that had her friend in stitches.

Just then, Suzanne saw the faint glow of her sister in the room, and she sensed that Arianna wanted to join them. She silently sent her love to her twin, and the angel held onto it as she watched Suzanne and her friend converse. Arianna wished that she could vocalize her thoughts the way humans did. Feeling lost and alone, the angel floated around the room like a silent specter.

The men returned, and Steve's psychic senses picked up on the ghostly presence. He saw the outline of a woman hovering near the door. She was very faint, and her aura was muddy. Steve knew it was the angel, and he wondered why she was so sad.



Chapter Thirty-Five

Suzanne turned to a morning talk show, but she wasn't paying attention because she was thinking about Seth. She shut the television and picked up the current issue of Vogue, but even the latest fashions couldn't hold her interest. Then, as if divining Suzanne's thoughts, the door opened, and Seth stood there smiling at her.

"Are you in the mood for some company?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

Seth pulled over a chair and sat down. "I have good news for you. I'm removing the IV this morning."

Suzanne glanced at Seth's medical tray and felt relief. It held alcohol wipes, gauze, surgical gloves, and other hospital doodads.

"I have even better news for you."

"What could be better than no more intravenous?"

"Today, you begin to eat solid food."

"You're right. Food is way better." Suzanne had taken to dreaming about her favorite foods since she began feeling better.

Suzanne watched Seth don a pair of latex gloves. She winced as he removed the catheter and disinfected her wrist, placing a bandage over it. Suzanne moved her arm up and down. Then, except for some mild discomfort, she felt free again.

"Now, stay right there because I have a surprise for you."

Seth returned with a tray of food that held a plate of scrambled eggs and crisp home fries. There was a side of raisin toast and packets of butter. Suzanne inhaled the delicious aroma of the coffee—so different from the terrible hospital coffee. There was a glass of orange juice, salt, pepper, milk, and utensils with extra napkins. Seth had thought of everything.

"The juice has pulp, just the way you like," he told her. Seth hoped that Suzanne would eat more than one or two bites, though he doubted it. Her stomach would rebel against food in the beginning. Seth was surprised to see that Suzanne's eyes were wet with unshed tears. She had seemed so excited at the prospect of eating a real breakfast.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Did you want something else to eat instead of scrambled eggs?"

"No. That's not it. It's because you went through all this trouble for me. How did you manage to find the time to bring me breakfast from the outside? Seth, I worry about you working too hard with all the surgeries you perform and the lack of sleep. I know you're not getting enough rest because sometimes you look exhausted even though you try and hide it from me."

"Do you care about me that much?" Seth asked.

"Yes, I do."

Seth bent and gave Suzanne a quick kiss and then watched as she ate some of the scrambled eggs. They tasted terrific, but after the two forkfuls, Suzanne felt uncomfortably full. So she took a bite of the toast and chewed slower than she ever had before.

Seth watched as Suzanne struggled to eat, and he wanted to hunt down the bastard who had hurt her and kill him slowly and painfully. But, instead, he smiled encouragingly at Suzanne. "Do you want to try a sip of the coffee or the orange juice?"

Suzanne opted for the coffee. She drank some, and it tasted like heaven in a cup. Then she tried another forkful of eggs, and it went down easier this time, but she had to stop. "You warned me to expect this, but I was hoping I would surprise you and be able

to eat normally. The eggs and toast are lying in my stomach like lead. I'll wait a while and then try to eat some more."

"Don't push it. In a few days, you'll be eating like a pro again."

Suzanne savored the coffee. "Umm, this is so good." Then picking up a slice of toast, she took another bite. Suzanne felt like she'd eaten a ten-course meal. "I'm sorry, but this is all I can manage for now."

Seth moved the tray aside and sat down beside Suzanne, and tasted the coffee. "This is good. I had the restaurant brew a fresh pot for you. Suzanne, I think you did very well for the first time. You ate a little of the eggs and some of the toast, and I'm sure you'll be able to eat even more at the next meal."

"I hope so. A mouse couldn't survive on what I managed to get down."

Suzanne decided that another cup of coffee would hit the spot, but Seth vetoed it. "Let's not rush this. Baby steps. Soon you can have more than one cup."

Seth removed the tray and knew it was time to talk seriously with Suzanne. They were committed to each other, and she needed to learn everything about him, the good and the bad. Suzanne could not help noticing that Seth's usually cheerful demeanor had turned somber, and the dimpled smile that was so much like her fathers was now gone.

"I want our relationship to be open with no secrets between us. There's something that you need to know about my past."

"This is going to be bad—isn't it?" Suzanne was frightened. She knew that everything had been too good to be true, so she gritted her teeth and waited for the ax to fall. Seth saw how upset Suzanne was, but it was better that she heard about it from him than someone else.

"When I was young, right out of medical school, I was married for a brief time. The woman was a nurse who used to work here. She told me she was pregnant, so I did what I thought was the right thing. Well, it turned out that the so-called pregnancy was

just a lie to entrap me. I found her birth control pills and felt like the world's biggest fool. After discovering the truth, I told her the sham of a marriage was over, and she started looking for her next victim. Suzanne, I got myself a quickie uncontested divorce and never looked back."

Seth saw the anguish on Suzanne's face and hated that he was the cause of her pain. "These past years, I've protected my heart and never let another woman get close to me again. But then you came along, and everything changed."

"How did it change?" Suzanne asked Seth.

"You made me realize that despite my fear, it was time for me to take a chance on love. I swear that I never cared about that other woman. But I love you more than I ever thought was possible.



Chapter Thirty-Six

Getting ready to move to the penthouse had taken more time than Ali expected, but the moving day finally arrived. Ali was rushing around to make sure that nothing was left behind. She double-checked every closet and cabinet. Fred was her little shadow as he followed Ali while desperately squawking out his misery loud and clear. The cockatoo was running in circles around Ali's feet, and she had to be careful not to trip over him.

Fred was frightened at seeing their belongings packed up and taken away, and nothing that Ali could say helped to alleviate his fears. Ali wished that just this once, Fred would act like other birds. But with his high intellect, the cockatoo was petrified as he watched the life he knew vanishing around him. Fred let out a loud wail of despair, and Ali's heart broke at the pitiful sound, but there was nothing she could do to help allay his fears.

The movers were beginning to pack up Fred's giant Victorian aviary. They wrapped huge sheets of foam around the turret to insulate it while Fred watched and tried to squirm out of Ali's arms.

"Mommy, help! Stop! Bad men hide Fred's house! *Squawk!"*

The structure was separated into two sections so that it would fit through most doorways. The prewar apartment had a stan-

dard-sized door opening, and it would never have made it through otherwise.

"I've never seen anything like this before," one of the men observed as two of the movers lifted one-half of Fred's home and carried it into the living room. "This looks like one of those Victorian mansions in Cape May, and a kid could probably sit inside it."

Fred watched as his house separated in two, and he panicked. "Mommy! Bad men break Fred's house! Put Fred's house back! Noooo! *Squawk!* Noooo! *Squawk!*"

The head mover did a double-take when Fred continued yammering at breakneck speed.

"*Squawk!* My house! My house broke! *Squawk! Squawk! Squawk!*"

Fred was in a full-fledged panic. Ali had told him all about Ursula, but he couldn't care less about a dog to love. He was too upset to think about anything other than his home. It was now completely covered and ready to be placed onto one of the moving vans.

The cockatoo left the safety of Ali's arms and landed on the floor in a huff. Screaming nonstop, Fred waddled around the outside of his aviary. He used his beak to try and pull the cover off while Ali watched in horror. She never realized that Fred would become this distraught about seeing his house taken apart for moving, but she understood why. The memory of a rusted, filthy cage still haunted her dreams. The aviary was the only home Fred had ever known, and he was frightened he would never see it again.

"Miss Rosen, please remove your bird now because we have to load this onto the truck."

Ali went over to Fred and spoke softly to him. It seemed to work because he finally gave up his attempts to rescue his home. He allowed Ali to carry him to the other side of the room so the movers could do their job. Fred watched as they tilted the huge-crated house, and his obsidian eyes filled with fear. Ali felt a sneeze coming on, and she released Fred to get a tissue. The

cockatoo took advantage of his freedom, and with wings spread wide, he took to the air. Fred flew around the room, screeching to beat the band. Finally, he zeroed in on one of the moving men who carried his home out the door. Fred was beside himself and was about to bite down hard on the man's tattooed bicep when the mover saw him coming. Panic-stricken, he made a mad dash for safety and picked up a drop cloth, hoping that it would protect him from the wrath of Fred.

"Miss Rosen, please keep that crazy bird away from me!" he pleaded.

While the mover cowered behind the drop cloth, Ali apologized for Fred. She tried to explain why he was so upset. But the moving man could not comprehend that a cockatoo was bright enough to be worried that he might never see his fancy birdhouse again.

"He's a bird, for Christ's sake!" he exclaimed in exasperation.

"Please try to understand that he is not like other birds. Fred is brilliant, and seeing his house carted away is very traumatic for him. He is heartbroken."

The man overseeing the move wisely held his tongue before he said something he would live to regret. He was used to dealing with cats, dogs, and even large birds such as this one. The wealthy seemed to love exotic pets, and he had moved everything from an ocelot to a Burmese python, but none of them had given him the kind of grief that the cockatoo was. Steven Farrell paid extra to ensure everything arrived perfectly, and for that kind of money, Alexandra Rosen could have Godzilla himself as a pet.

After the movers left, Fred calmed down. Ali dressed him in a blue-striped stretchy flight suit with a poop pouch for the trip across town. Fred's outfit had a polka-dot bow tie at his neck, and Ali could not believe how cute Fred looked in it! Her avian vet had recommended that Ali begin to use disposable parrot diapers so she could take the cockatoo more places, and Ali loved the idea.

She texted George that they were on the way down. Soon they were sitting in the limousine with Fred on Ali's lap. George

had taken an immediate liking to the cockatoo and was happy to see him again. “So, how are you doing, Fred? I like your new outfit.”

The cockatoo bobbed his head in happiness. “Fred, look pretty.”

“Yes, you do,” George replied. “I had no idea they made clothing for birds. Fred looks adorable wearing that.” The chauffeur paused to scratch his head as he thought about his initial encounter with the loquacious bird. “Ali, when I first met Fred, he looked straight at me and told me he liked my pretty red hair.” George chuckled at the memory. “In my opinion, Fred belongs in Ripley’s Believe It or Not. He’s a bonafide genius. Steve must be thrilled that Fred is moving into the penthouse.”

Inwardly, Ali was howling with laughter. *If only!* She tried to keep a straight face. “You have no idea. Thrilled doesn’t even begin to describe how Steve feels.”

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Meanwhile, Steve was anxiously awaiting the arrival of Ali and the feathered monster. He needed a miracle if he was going to cohabitate peacefully with Ali’s lovesick bird. The doorman buzzed and announced that Ali was on the way up. She was a vision in a pink dress with a silk orchid in her hair, and atop her shoulder sat Fred. Steve did a double-take when he looked at the cockatoo.

“Am I losing my mind, or is Fred wearing a striped jumpsuit with a bow tie?”

“No. You’re still sane, and what Fred has on is called a flight suit. It even has a poop pouch that holds a disposable diaper.”

“What will they think of next?” Steve wondered aloud.

The cockatoo wanted to be a part of their conversation. “I look cute! *Squawk!* Daddy Steve! Give Fred kisses!”

Fred waited, but nothing happened because Steve had not budged from the spot. Fred could nuzzle him or just as quickly bite

him, depending on the bird's mood. His feathered "son" seemed normal today, so Steve decided to take a chance, and he went over to the cockatoo and kissed the small-feathered head.

The sight of Steve kissing Fred held Ali entranced. "Aw, isn't that the sweetest thing?" She took some photos of them sitting together on the sofa. Fred was cozying up to Steve, and he felt himself beginning to shake off his fears regarding the cockatoo—at least for the moment.

Fred began fidgeting, so Ali undressed him, removing the tiny disposable diaper and throwing it in the trash. Once free, Fred craned his flexible neck to take in the vast space, seemingly a little nervous in his new home. Steve noticed the dark eyes darting around, and he felt sorry for the cockatoo. Frightened, the bird flew back to Ali's shoulder and hid his face in the crook of her neck.

While Steve stood watching, the cockatoo fluffed his feathers and began preening Ali's hair. Fred made crooning noises to Ali and looked at her through lovestruck eyes. Steve was angry. The damn bird was taking over moving day. They had so much to do, and Ali stood there while her cockatoo cooed for attention.

Soon Fred was on the floor preening Ali's toenails. When she tried to shoo him away, the bird began squawking loudly in protestation. Exasperated, Ali looked over at Steve. "Once the movers put Fred's house together, and I get him settled, we'll be able to have some time to ourselves."

Suddenly, Steve's cocker spaniel came running in, and she came to a halt in front of the cockatoo. The dog sniffed Fred and licked his face in greeting.

"*Squawk!* Help! Mommy, save Fred!"

Ursula showered affection on the cockatoo, who wanted nothing to do with her. The look of love shone in the dog's big brown eyes as she bathed Fred's face with her tongue. The cockatoo looked up at Ali to rescue him from the dog's attention. When he saw that Ali wasn't coming to his rescue, he waddled away, with Ursula following right behind him. The cocker spaniel des-

perately wanted to play with her new friend, whether he welcomed her presence or not.

Ali and Steve were watching from a distance, not knowing what the outcome would be. The spaniel finally became exhausted from chasing Fred, and she lay down to rest. Steve scratched Ursula behind the ears the way she liked, and Ali crouched down beside the little dog. She was admiring how beautiful Ursula was, and she wanted to get to know her newest baby. The spaniel made herself at home in Ali's lap while she stroked the soft fur, and Ursula wagged her tail in happiness.

Fred waddled over and watched Ursula as she lay sprawled across Ali, and he began to look at the dog in a new light. "Fred love Ursula. Give a kiss."

Ali carefully set Ursula down and watched as Fred walked over to the cocker spaniel and started preening her fluffy ears. The dog looked at the cockatoo with adoration in her eyes and barked happily.

Seemingly revived by the power of love, the spaniel led Fred to her dog bed, and Fred hopped right in and made himself at home. Steve had moved Ursula's bed and toys out of the master bedroom, so he and Ali could have some much-needed privacy. They watched as Fred nuzzled Ursula and crooned love sounds to her. The spaniel sat quietly while Fred, a bird of many male hormones, made goo-goo eyes at his new lady love. The grown-ups hugged each other as the miracle unfolded before them.

"Fred won't be biting you anymore," Ali declared and hoped that she was right.

Steve was still skeptical and needed to prove it to himself, so he pulled Ali into his arms and kissed her. When they looked up, Fred was happily preening Ursula's tail. Steve kissed Ali again, and they knew all was right with their world.



Chapter Thirty-Seven

Suzanne was going home, and she could not be happier. Seth wanted them to spend time together as a couple, so he rearranged his schedule to take time off from the hospital. Janet Turner brought Precious back to Suzanne's apartment and even bought the cat new Kong toys. She stocked the refrigerator from Fresh Direct and food from the neighborhood delicatessen. Oatmeal raisin cookies, Suzanne's favorite, were waiting for her.

Janet watched as her daughter carefully applied her makeup better than a skilled beautician. Suzanne made the most of her high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. Thanks to Steve, the bruises were almost gone, and Suzanne felt confident about her appearance.

"This will be the first time that Seth sees me fully dressed and all made up. I'm so excited."

"Suzanne, you look like you stepped out of a fashion magazine in your new dress, but remember that Seth fell in love with your inner beauty."

"I know, Mom. That's one of the reasons I love him so much."

As they talked, the door flew open, and Lizzie and Ali waltzed in, carrying colorful mylar balloons and wearing party hats. "It's your going home party," Lizzie announced to Suzanne, who was happily surprised.

Janet watched as the young women embraced Suzanne, laughing as she put on a polka-dotted party hat. Janet was glad she invited Lizzie and Ali to drop by and celebrate Suzanne's release from the hospital. Seeing her child happy was the greatest gift a mother could have.

Ali handed Suzanne a gift-wrapped box. "This is from Lizzie and me."

"That was so sweet of you guys. Whatever it is, I know I'll love it, but my biggest present is getting sprung from here today."

"Who are you kidding," Lizzie teased. "Your real gift stands six-foot-four and has the world's sexiest mustache."

Suzanne opened the box and pulled the tissue paper aside. Inside lay a delicate silk slip trimmed in lace. She held it up to admire its beauty. "What do you think?" she asked her friends. "Should I wear this under my dress?"

"Definitely. It looks beautiful," Janet told her, admiring the gift.

During the celebration, Seth strolled in and greeted the women. Lizzie had a small but potent crush on the handsome doctor and decided never to wash the cheek he kissed. Ali couldn't understand Lizzie's fixation with Seth because, in her opinion, Steve was the better-looking of the men. Lizzie knew her friend viewed Steve through rose-colored glasses. At least she could see the forest for the trees, and Seth was the mighty oak, while Steve and Jack were mere saplings.

Seth brought a wheelchair into the room, and Suzanne blanched at the sight of it. She protested that she was not getting into the wheelchair because she felt fine. But Seth explained that this was one hospital rule that he could not bend. Grumbling, she sat down and allowed him to push her.

"Go faster," she urged.

"Geez, Suzanne. We're in a hospital. Do you want me to get a ticket for speeding? Chill out, sweetheart. You're almost free."

Suzanne got out of the hateful contraption as soon as they were outside the hospital. She stood on the sidewalk for a moment

taking in the sights and the sounds of the city. Suzanne was euphoric as she listened to the taxis honking and watched people rushing around as only native New Yorkers could. Tourists took their time admiring the sights and sounds of the city and snapping photos of everything and everyone.

Janet kissed her daughter goodbye and hailed a taxi to go home, wanting Suzanne and Seth to begin enjoying their time alone together. It was early so that the traffic would be mild, barring any unforeseen problems. With the cat gone and not demanding her attention, Janet planned to curl up with a good book and treat herself to a pint of cherry vanilla Haagen-Dazs.

Suzanne made herself comfortable in Seth's silver BMW. The car came equipped with the same dark-tinted one-way windows that Steve used in the limo because, like his friend, Seth valued his privacy. The two lovers melted into each other, and Seth felt Suzanne's hands in his hair, pulling him closer. He deepened the kiss, tasting every inch of her luscious mouth. Seth kissed Suzanne's neck and sniffed the tantalizing aroma. "You smell delicious, Suze. What are you wearing?"

She could not stop laughing. "It's called *eau de* antibacterial soap—your hospital's finest. Unfortunately, my mother forgot to bring my soap and perfume. Maybe I should have packed some extra soap bottles to take home with me."

Seth hit his head with his open hand. "Am I a jerk or what? Do you see how crazy you make me? On you, even the hospital soap smells like perfume. We're heading out to get some breakfast right now."

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Seth drove downtown to Balthazar. He enjoyed their food and hoped that Suzanne approved his choice of restaurant. The hostess showed the couple to a table, and Seth assured Suzanne that they made the best breakfasts in the world.

Suzanne picked up the menu. “Everything sounds delicious. Seth, have you eaten the scrambled eggs in puff pastry?”

“Yes, and it’s delicious. The pastry is light and flaky. That would be a good choice because you need to avoid heavy foods for a while.”

“I understand, but now I’m craving the hazelnut waffles.”

“Forget about having waffles, and don’t even think about ordering pancakes or bagels. That’s doctor’s orders, by the way.”

“Okay, Doctor Rubenstein. You’re the boss, but just until I feel better. Then I’m taking over and running the show.”

“Whatever you say, dear,” Seth answered sweetly.

Suzanne didn’t trust Seth because his eyes were twinkling as he placated her.

“Oh, before I forget, I put down on your medical leave forms that you’ll be needing a month off from work to recuperate.”

“Why would you do that? I feel so much better already.”

“Sweetheart, you’ve been through a lot, and as your doctor, I believe you could use some time away from work to enjoy yourself.” Suzanne wondered where this was heading, and she soon found out. “We could vacation together somewhere romantic. I heard Bermuda has pink beaches and water even bluer than your eyes.” While Suzanne was digesting that, Seth sprung his next idea on her. “Or maybe we could move in together.”

Suzanne looked at Seth as if he had gone crazy.

“Try me on for size. I’ll grow on you.”

She ignored his double entendre and let him know how she felt. “You must be kidding. You want us to move in together? Today is only our first date.”

Seth leaned over to kiss her lips, and Suzanne noticed that Seth had that intense gleam in his eyes that meant he would not take no for an answer. “I know what I want, and it’s you. Don’t try and fight it, babe. It’s bigger than both of us.”

Suzanne thought about how Ali and Steve co-habituated right away, and now they were engaged to be married. “Living together

might be a good idea," Suzanne told Seth, wondering if she had gone bonkers. "But first, let's see how compatible we are."

"Sweetheart, we couldn't be more compatible."

The waitress came by and took their orders. Suzanne enjoyed the scrambled eggs in puff pastry, and she was eating without a problem, which pleased Seth. He ordered the hazelnut waffles and let Suzanne have a few tastes so she wouldn't feel deprived.

As they ate their breakfast, a woman dressed in head-to-toe black attire appeared at their table. To Suzanne's chagrin, she was staring at Seth with a look of longing in her eyes.

"Eh, hem." She cleared her throat loudly.

Seth continued to eat, hoping the woman would go away if he ignored her.

"Excuse me," she said, never taking her eyes from Seth. The Goth-dressed woman then produced a pen and a journal. "Could I get your autograph, Mr. Selleck?"

Seth placed his fork down and looked at the autograph seeker with a steady gaze. "I'm not the actor," he told her calmly but firmly and hoped she believed him. "Please leave and let us finish our meal."

The woman would not budge. "It would mean so much to me if you signed my book," she persisted.

Seth realized she would never believe the truth, and he wanted to enjoy his breakfast with Suzanne. "Okay, give me your book, and I'll sign it."

"But Seth—" Suzanne protested," angry at the woman for interrupting their meal.

"Suzanne, it's alright."

Seth scribbled the actor's name, and the woman took her book back and stared at the signature.

"Thank you, Mr. Selleck. Could you tell me how you managed to stay as youthful as you looked in Magnum PI?

Seth came up with a crazy idea and decided to spring it on the women, hoping she believed it and left them in peace. The worst-

case scenario was Seth needing the mâitre d' to escort her out of the restaurant.

"I come from a long line of genetically enhanced males, and therefore we age slower than most men."

"Ah, that explains it." The goth woman smiled and left, clutching the book to her skinny bosom.

Suzanne broke out laughing. "Genetically enhanced males! Where did you come up with that?"

"I have no idea. I was desperate, and the words popped out. Now let's eat and hope this never happens again. If it does, I may contemplate shaving off my mustache.

Suzanne blanched. "No. Don't touch a hair of it. I love your mustache. It's sexy."

Seth was grinning while he finished his waffles. Suzanne thought he was sexy. The day was off to a great start.



Chapter Thirty-Eight

There was a parking space right on the street, and Seth took that as a good omen. He got out of the car and opened Suzanne's door for her, admiring her shapely calves as she stepped out onto the curb. Suddenly, Suzanne was swept off her feet as Seth carried her up the Brownstone's flight of stairs. While still in Seth's arms and loving every moment of it, Suzanne opened her bag and handed him the keys to her ground-floor apartment.

"Well, aren't you the Sir Galahad, Doctor Rubenstein?"

"I'm practicing for when I carry you over the threshold, sweetheart."

Before she could react to that shocker—not knowing if he was pushing her too fast or thrilled by his words, Seth's lips took possession of hers. Suzanne had been kissed many times in her twenty-eight years, but no man could kiss like Seth. He made her forget about everything but his feel, smell, and taste.

"Seth, despite loving the view from up here, you have to put me down so I can check on Precious. She always comes out to greet me, and right now, there's no sign of her, so I'm worried."

Reluctantly Seth released Suzanne so that they could begin the hunt for Precious. "I'm sure she's fine, Suze. You know how cats like to hide."

"But she's not a cat," Suzanne reminded him. "Remember, she's a dog trapped in a cat's body."

"Sorry. I forgot." Steve managed to live with Ali's super-intelligent sex-crazed cockatoo, so how bad could one highly neurotic feline be? "So, where do you want to check first?" he asked.

"Let's look in the kitchen. I think Precious might have fallen asleep in there."

Seth followed Suzanne as she led him into what had to be the world's smallest kitchen. It was galley-style, and he could barely fit through the ridiculously narrow space. Whoever had designed the room thought the tenants would be no bigger than a Keebler elf.

They found Precious asleep with her head peeking out of a small-sized doghouse. Seth spotted a Kong toy nearby, and some half-eaten dog biscuits littered the wooden floor. A pastel-pink leash lay forgotten near the food and water bowls. On the kitchen counter was a book about how to train toy-sized dogs.

"Let's not wake her up," Seth whispered as he gingerly made his way out of the narrow kitchen with Suzanne right behind him. The kitchen opened to the living area. It was small like the rest of the apartment, but the furniture made it appear open and airy. A large L-shaped sectional sofa took up most of the space. Warm oatmeal-covered fabric covered the sectional, and the throw pillows also wore neutral fabrics. A striking freeform driftwood table sat atop a white flokati rug, and a tall crystal vase was filled with pussy willow branches. Seth could not help smiling at the sight of a fat brass buddha sitting on a small stack of books. In stark contrast to the contemporary furnishings, an ornate crystal chandelier hung over the table. Seth was very impressed with Suzanne's decorating skills.

"Your living room is stunning. It looks like a page out of a decorator magazine," Seth complimented Suzanne.

"Thanks. I'm happy you like it. Ali and I shopped for everything you see here. My sole contribution was the buddha, but I have many Asian artifacts and dolls stored away until I have the

space to display them." Then and there, Seth made up his mind that Suzanne would have more than enough room for her collectibles, and it would be in a home they shared.

"Seth, get comfortable, and I'll make us some coffee. Suzanne put a pod into the Keurig, and soon she brought over two cups of classic roast because Seth didn't enjoy the flavored coffees that were so popular now. The time flew by as they talked and laughed together when Seth suddenly gave in to his need to kiss Suzanne.

He was glad she seemed responsive, even enthusiastic to his kisses, but Seth wondered what would happen when they eventually made love. After everything Suzanne had endured, Seth was not going to broach the subject. He would bide his time and wait until Suzanne was ready, no matter how long it took. As if divining his thoughts, Suzanne leaned in for another kiss and whispered in his ear, "Seth, please make love to me."

"Are you sure? I don't want to rush you."

"I'm sure."

Together they climbed the spiral staircase that led to the sleeping loft, but then the world exploded in pain when Seth's head collided with a low-hanging ceiling beam.

"I'm so sorry," Suzanne told him. "I should have warned you about the wood beams.

Seth's head was throbbing. "It's not your fault. The builders designed it this way, hoping to rent it out to tiny gnomes. I heard there was a housing shortage in the city for destitute woodland creatures."

Suzanne could not help chuckling because even in pain, her Doctor Rubenstein was funny. She realized that she had never laughed as much as she had with Seth. Suzanne hurried to the kitchen to retrieve a frozen gel pack.

"Here. The cold should help ease the pain."

Seth sat on the bed and gratefully put the gel pack on his forehead. After a few minutes, the dull throbbing hadn't eased up much. "You wouldn't happen to have some aspirin or Tylenol around?" he asked.

Suzanne brought him the Tylenol, and Seth swallowed four pills without water and then managed to dredge up a smile despite the pounding in his head.

"Sweetheart, this was not how I wanted us to start our new life together. Just give me a few more minutes with the ice pack, and I'll be as good as new."

Suzanne sat next to Seth, kissing his neck and nibbling his ear. She hoped some affection might help to take his mind off the pain. As her passion grew, she brushed her lips against Seth's. That seemed to work because he set the ice pack down and pulled Suzanne into his arms, slanting his lips over hers as his tongue sought entrance. If any pain lingered, Seth didn't give a rat's ass about it. His fingers quickly removed Suzanne's clothing along with his.

"I finally got to see your breasts, and they're gorgeous, like the rest of you."

At that remark, Suzanne's cheeks flamed. No one ever made her blush before Seth. Then something began poking Suzanne.

"Your cock is annoying me," she teased.

"That means it likes you. Take it as a compliment."

"I'll try." Suzanne tried not to laugh again, but she couldn't help it. Seth was so funny!

Desire coursed through her body as Seth began caressing her breasts. "Ooh, that feels so good. Keep doing it."

"I plan on it. My mother never breastfed me, so I need to make up for it."

Suzanne was about to laugh again, but what Seth was doing to her overrode the levity. His tongue laved her nipples, and she made an "umm" sound as he feasted on them. Suzanne blushed from her cheeks right down to her rosy-hued chest. Seth had never seen a woman blush all over before, and he was charmed.

Seth knew that Suzanne was enjoying the foreplay from her many oohs and ahhs, and he felt relief that he was not going too fast for her. "Your nipples taste like raspberries, and best of all, they do what I tell them to do." Seth lightly patted the pretty

pinkish-brown nipples. “See what good girls they are. They stood at attention for me.” It wasn’t easy for Suzanne to hold back the laughter. “This is way better than just imagining what they look like,” Seth added playfully.

Gently holding Suzanne’s face, Seth kissed her, stroking her tongue with his own, and she reciprocated in kind. They lay together and explored each other’s bodies, taking their time about it. When Suzanne’s legs parted, Seth reached down, feeling how wet she was. He stroked the hidden nubbin, and Suzanne pushed against his fingers, needing more. Then Seth pressed his fingers flat against her clitoris, and Suzanne cried out as she exploded in pleasure. Patiently, Seth kept up the light touches, wanting to make sure Suzanne was ready.

“I’ll be very gentle,” he assured her, and if you want me to stop at any time—just say the word, and I will.”

Seth’s consideration of her feelings touched Suzanne deeply. She understood the reason behind his words, but there was no way she would want him to stop. Her love and need for Seth overrode any leftover fear she harbored. There was no pain when he entered her, only the fantastic feeling of being filled and joined together. Her hands stroked the muscles of his back as she felt the tension building, and she screamed from the earth-shattering climax that followed. Her fingers dug into Seth’s back as he continued making love to her.

Suzanne never knew making love could be that wonderful. Waves of heat started at her vulva and spread through her body. Her legs wrapped around Seth tighter to increase the sensation, and she lifted herself for his strokes, wanting all he had to give.

Seth’s big body shook as he exploded. It had never been that good with any other woman. It hadn’t even come close.

“I can’t believe it,” Suzanne exclaimed. “I’ve never had an orgasm from intercourse. I didn’t think it was possible.”

“You were never with the right man before. Aren’t you happy that we’re getting married? It’s a good thing, too, since I wasn’t

wearing a condom. I couldn't find any Tutti-Fruity ones in the all-night drugstore."

Suzanne could not help noticing how smug her Doctor Rubenstein looked or how sexy he was. He had their whole future planned out already, and a part of her liked that. Knowing that Seth would be the father of her children was wonderful, but it was way too soon to contemplate having a child. But first, they needed to get to know each other and enjoy life as a couple before taking on such a huge responsibility.

"We can't take chances like that again. It's too risky. I will put the condom on you the next time, and if you protest, I'll make you wear the ones that glow in the dark," Suzanne threatened.

"I promise to use protection from now on, but I'm glad the topic is out in the open. Suze, I'm thirty-seven and want to have kids before I'm old enough to be their grandpa."

Suzanne was glad that Seth wanted to talk about the possibility of their having children. "If things work out between us, I would not be averse to having your baby someday—as long as it's not born wearing a tiny mustache." Her smile gave her away, and this time, it was Seth's turn to laugh. "I think about it also. But we need to live together for a while and get to know each other. Having a baby is the biggest responsibility a couple can take on. Are you okay with that?" she asked him.

"I'm fine with that. It makes perfect sense."

Precious finally made an appearance, and the cat jumped onto the bed, carrying the pink leash in her mouth. Needing affection more than a walk, she dropped the leash and began nuzzling and licking Suzanne's face. Suzanne cuddled her bundle of joy while the cat purred contentedly. Soon Precious picked up the leash again, wanting Suzanne to take her outside for a walk. She removed the leash from the cat's mouth and placed it on the nightstand. "I'm sorry that I can't take you for a walk now, but I promise that we'll go out later."

The Himalayan patted Suzanne's face with its paws while she showered affection on it. Needing a respite from the overly affec-

tionate cat and wanting Seth and Precious to bond, Suzanne lifted the large feline and set it down next to him. Seth began stroking Precious, and it seemed to enjoy his touch. Huge blue eyes stared at Seth, and he hoped that he passed muster.

"I think she likes me."

After getting his face thoroughly licked, Precious turned around and glanced toward Seth's cock, which lay flaccid and content. One paw was stretched out and ready to play with the new toy the cat discovered. Like the speed of light, Seth grabbed the comforter, covering himself up. The thought of what might have happened was too awful to contemplate, and to Seth's relief, the cat jumped off the bed.

Suzanne laughed hard as she watched Seth's eyes follow Precious as the cat padded out of the room. Only then did he take off the comforter.

"Did you see what she planned on petting next?" he asked.

Suzanne nodded, trying not to laugh again. "I'm sorry about Precious. She likes playing with new things."

"So I've noticed." Seth glanced around again to ensure the cat had not returned, and the sleeping loft seemed safe for now. While they made love, Seth managed to forget how uncomfortable Suzanne's full-sized bed was, but now he could not help but notice that the mattress was way too short for him. He usually slept on a California King to accommodate his height.

Suzanne noticed Seth's problem. She frowned at the sight of Seth's poor feet with no place to rest. "What can we do about the mattress? I bought the full-size to accommodate the small space."

"There's an easy solution," Seth answered. "I will move you and Precious into my apartment. It's a two-bedroom coop in a high-rise, with great views of the city. We can stay there until we find the right place to live."

"Seth, I like the idea of us living together now."

"I thought you would."

"Don't look so smug. I might change my mind."

Seth was holding Suzanne in a tight embrace, and the look in his eyes said it all. “I’ve got you now, Suzanne Turner, and I’m never letting you go. And you can’t change your mind.”

“Why can’t I?”

“Because it’s out there now, and you can’t take it back. Suze, I want to make you happy. Tell me where you’d like for us to live.”

That was a no-brainer. “I’d love to move to Ali and Steve’s prewar building. We’re all best friends. It couldn’t be more perfect,” she exclaimed happily. “No offense, Seth, but I hate the new-high rises. I’d rather stay here in my pitiful brownstone apartment than move into your ultra-modern boxy apartment.”

“No offense taken. I’m not exactly wild about my place either. I’ll call Steve the first chance I get. If there’s an opening in his building, I’m sure he can pull some strings and get us in there quickly.”



Chapter Thirty-Nine

Asleep, Suzanne looked like an angel, but she'd turned into a tigress in bed, and Seth had the scratch marks on his back to prove it. He had never been funny while making love before today, but Suzanne brought out the playful side of him, and for the first time, Seth wasn't rushing to get out the door. It was just the opposite. He was in there for the long haul.

While Suzanne slept with Precious tucked up against her, Seth snuck out of bed, pulled on his jeans, retrieved his phone, and went downstairs, making sure to duck his head beneath each beam. He called Steve's private number, and his friend picked up on the first ring. "We haven't had a chance to talk today because I've been busy with Suzanne since we left the hospital. When we went out to eat, she ate almost everything," Seth told Steve.

"I'm happy to hear that. You must be relieved."

"You have no idea."

"Why are you whispering?" asked Steve.

"Because Suzanne's asleep."

"So you tuckered her out?"

"It was mutual," Seth answered, chuckling. "So Steve, how's life now that you and Fred cohabitate?" Have you counted your fingers lately?"

"They all seem to be here," Steve answered, knowing full well he'd come pretty damn close to losing a digit. "I don't have to worry about Fred biting me anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because I had an avian miracle. Ali's cockatoo has fallen in lust with my dog. Fred's trying to mate with Ursula, and she adores Fred. Talk about your weird love matches."

Seth laughed at the absurdity of it. When he told Steve what Precious had wanted to do to his male appendage, Steve's hands automatically went to his crotch. Wow! Fred could have gone for his balls also.

"It's hard to believe that we're both in love with women who are best friends, and each of them has a lunatic pet."

"Believe it," Steve told Seth. "I have a scar on my ass to prove it."

As they talked, Seth's stomach grumbled, so he began rummaging through Suzanne's refrigerator. He found rotisserie chicken and broke two legs off, eating them with potato salad and coleslaw. He liked Janet Turner even more for filling the shelves with delicious food.

"What are you eating?" Steve asked.

"Chicken and side dishes from the deli." Seth licked his lips. "Janet even bought potato knishes. Suzanne must have told her I like them."

"That sounds good. While we're on the subject of food, last night, Ali baked the moistest carrot cake I've ever eaten." Steve opened a drawer and got the cake knife, cutting himself a large slice, and savoring the crème cheese frosting with the first mouthful. "Man, this is good. It's almost better than sex."

"Don't tell Ali that."

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"I'm not going to answer that," replied Seth. "While I have you on the phone, there's something I need to discuss with you. It seems that Suzanne would love to move into your building, and I

agree that it's a great idea. So how would you feel about having us as neighbors?"

"You know the answer to that. Ali and I would love it." Steve remembered that the Goldblum's were trying to sell their large co-op. "Seth, I have good news for you. There's a five-thousand-square-foot co-op available. It was four bedrooms and three baths. One bedroom is now a media room, and there's a wrap-around terrace. Ali and I can meet you there this afternoon to view it, and I'll call you back to let you know the time."

Seth could not believe his good fortune. "Your building is the Dakota of Park Avenue. No one leaves there unless they get carried out in a body bag."

"Not this time. The owners want to go South because they're getting on in age. I think they mentioned something about moving to Boca Rotan."

Seth was beaming from the news as he jotted down the apartment number. "Suzanne will be so happy when I tell her. In all the excitement, I almost forgot to ask. How much are they asking for the co-op? I make a good salary, but it may not be enough to afford to live in your building. Lay it on me, buddy." Seth braced himself for the worst.

Steve hated lying to his best friend. But to ensure Seth and Suzanne's happiness, he would have to tell Seth one hell of a whopper. "The owners are selling it for a song because they're anxious to relocate. They lowered the cost to only three million dollars. These days you can't even get a decent two-bedroom in the city at that price."

"Don't I know it?" answered Seth as he pulled off a chicken wing. "Three million is stretching me, but I think I can manage it once I sell my glass-enclosed aerie in the sky. Do you know anyone who might be interested in purchasing my co-op? If I can't sell it, Suzanne and I will be stuck living there or in her apartment with its minuscule bed."

Steve made a note to contact the real estate agent he worked with who owed him a favor. Now it was time to cash it in and

get Seth's co-op sold post haste. "I know a top agent who can send over prospective buyers. Don't worry because we'll get your apartment sold quickly." Before Steve got off the phone, he casually asked Seth what his monthly maintenance costs were. When Seth asked Steve why he wanted to know, he answered he was merely curious.



Chapter Forty

When the call ended, Steve began setting all the wheels in motion. First, he would purchase the four-bedroom co-op for eight million dollars. It would then be sold back to Doctor Seth Rubenstein at the price that Steve had quoted to Seth: three million dollars. That was the only time Steve deliberately lied to Seth, and he deeply regretted it. But there was no other way to procure the co-op other than utilizing his funds to help pay for it.

The Goldblum's were grateful to Steve Farrell for purchasing their home. Unfortunately, creditors were hounding them, and they didn't want to go through with a foreclosure. Steve's attorney had the sellers sign a non-disclosure agreement. Now there were no worries that either Seth or Suzanne would find out they had a secret benefactor purchasing their new home.

As president of the building's co-op board, Steve would be able to rush through the paperwork and the interview process. His attorney contacted the property management company, explaining what Steve needed from them. The maintenance costs would be higher than what Seth was currently paying but would stay within

his budget. Steve would pay the sizable monthly balance in the care of the Farrell Foundation.

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Ali and Steve did a last-minute walk-through, admiring the comfortable and inviting home. Evidently, the owners had spared no expense when times had been better.

When Seth and Suzanne arrived, Ali and Steve led them into the great room, where they made themselves comfortable. Overstuffed sofas and chairs created a cozy seating area around the fireplace. Recessed lighting illuminated the large room, and tall palladium windows let in an abundance of sunlight.

"Lucky for me, there are high ceilings and no wooden beams anywhere, so my poor head is safe," Seth remarked, winking at Suzanne.

"You know how bad I feel about that beam hitting you," Suzanne said.

"Suze, I was only teasing. You took great care of me. You brought me ice and Tylenol and did all sorts of wonderful things that took my mind off the pain."

Ali watched as Suzanne's cheeks flamed and knew that Suzanne would never lack love or affection with Seth in her life.

"Steve, thank you again for helping us find our new home. We'll name our first child after you if it's a boy, and if it's a girl, we'll name her after Ali."

Suzanne swatted Seth's arm. "He keeps talking about getting me pregnant. For goodness's sake! We just decided to live together." She turned to Seth. "You have a short memory span. We discussed it, and no children until we're ready for them."

"I know. I know. I was thinking about the future."

"Are you sure?" Suzanne saw Seth's eyes twinkling, which didn't bode well.

"Just ignore him," Ali told Suzanne.

"And how do you propose I do that?"

"By taking charge of the situation. Let Seth know who the boss is. Also, keep a lot of condoms on hand."

"My fast swimmers can get past any latex made by mortal man," Seth announced to the room, and Suzanne poked him hard in his tummy. "Hey, I'm delicate!" he exclaimed.

She snorted at that. "You're as delicate as an ox, and now I'm getting the glow-in-the-dark condoms and making you wear them."

Ali changed the subject to decorating, hoping to keep the peace, and to her happy surprise, Suzanne's eyes lit up. "Ali, I would love to add some Asian accents to all the rooms, and I'm so happy that I can finally display my collection of Japanese dolls and art. I love buddha's and want a large buddha as a focal point in this room. Maybe it could sit in an oriental rock garden," Suzanne mused aloud, looking at Ali, hopefully. "So, what do you think of my ideas so far?"

"They sound wonderful," Ali told her, impressed by Suzanne's enthusiasm. Ali was getting excited about working together with her friend on the new project. "We could put a tall bamboo tree over there," she pointed to a perfect spot near the windows.

"I love the idea of a tree. We're bringing nature into our home with the rock garden and the tree."

Ali suggested adding a water feature to the rock garden. "The sound of the water has a calming effect on most people. Suzanne was all for it when Seth yelled out a resounding, "no!"

"The sound of water trickling makes me want to pee."

"Scratch the water garden," Suzanne told Ali.

The ideas were now flowing. "We can renovate the kitchen and give you modern cabinets that will go with your Asian design. Then, we'll go to designer showrooms, where you choose the furniture and accessories."

"I can't wait to get started," Suzanne told Ali, feeling happier than she dreamed possible, knowing that she and Seth would be living there and starting a family when the time was right.

When Seth saw that the women were deep in conversation, he took the opportunity to speak to Steve alone. Then, when they were out of sight, he pulled a box from his pocket and flipped it open.

"So, what do you think? Will she say yes?"

Steve admired the engagement ring and assured Seth that Suzanne would be thrilled. He suggested that Seth propose now while he and Ali were there to watch the happy occasion.

"Are you kidding? Suzanne would kill me. It's way too soon. I was waiting for the right moment to pop the question."

"Well, this is a perfect time, I guarantee Suzanne will be over the moon. Have I ever let you down?" Steve asked his friend.

"No. You've been right on the money every time. Okay, wish me luck."

"You don't need any. Now get your bony ass back in there and propose."

When the men returned, Seth got down on one knee in front of the woman he loved while everyone watched. Suzanne's hand went to her mouth, and she gasped, and her eyes grew moist.

"Yes, I'll marry you," she told Seth.

"But I haven't even proposed yet."

"That's okay. You can skip the formalities."

Seth opened the jeweler's box, and the two-carat diamond engagement ring sparkled in the light. It was an antique ring, fashioned circa 1850. Seth knew that Suzanne would appreciate the setting's charm much more than a modern cookie-cutter ring.

Suzanne adored it, and she loved Seth even more for taking the time to search for the perfect ring. "I've always dreamed of wearing an antique engagement ring, and now you've made that dream come true."

"I want to make all of your dreams come true." Seth placed the ring on Suzanne's finger, and she held out her hand, admiring it, and kissed her fiancé. Suddenly a magnum of champagne appeared. Steve popped the cork on the Dom Perignon and filled everyone's flutes with the sparkling wine.

Suzanne sipped her champagne and looked at Seth. Then her eyes drifted over to Ali and Steve. The love was everywhere. She had come out of the darkness and into the light, and all was right with her world.

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The doorbell rang, and Steve greeted Lizzie and Jack. Unfortunately, the proposal's timing had gone faster than Steve expected, but the couple could still enjoy the engagement party.

"Did we get here in time?" asked Jack.

"I'm sorry, but you missed it by a few minutes."

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" Lizzie stomped one high-heeled boot on the marble-tiled floor in disappointment. She had wanted to watch Seth ask Suzanne to marry him, and she was madder than a hornet's nest at missing it. She glowered at Jack as if it was his fault.

Jack told Steve not to worry despite her little outburst. "It's just her redheaded temper."

Angry, Lizzie gave Jack a dirty look, but he chose to ignore it. Instead, he poured a glass of champagne for Lizzie. "Here, drink this. Hopefully, it will put you in a better mood." He maneuvered Steve away from Lizzie, who was sipping the champagne, still fuming. "Steve, I've been following a possible lead in Suzanne's case, but it turned out to be a dead end. What's next on the agenda?"

"Jack, do me a favor and don't discuss the case around Seth and Suzanne. What's best for Suzanne is to try and forget about what happened. She's not ready to handle reminders of the past."

"I agree with you, but what happens when we catch the perp, and need Suzanne to make a positive ID?"

"We'll worry about that when the time comes. Meanwhile, I'm working on some things, and if any of them pan out, you'll be the first to know." Steve was getting closer to the truth about the man who assaulted Suzanne. The shit would hit the fan sooner than later, and Steve dreaded the fallout that would ensue.

In the master bedroom, Suzanne ran her hand across the marble fireplace, loving the feel of the smooth stone. “That’s a lovely painting they hung over the mantle,” she remarked.

“Yes, it is,” Ali agreed. “Watch this.” The impressionist style painting began to rise, revealing a widescreen television screen mounted directly behind it.

“Wow! That is amazing. Would they sell it to us?” she asked hopefully.

“It comes with the co-op. So you can change the painting if you like, but it’s yours because it’s built-in.”

Suzanne felt like a kid at Christmas. Ali stepped aside, and Suzanne made the painting rise again, clearly enjoying her new toy.

Next up was the adjoining bathroom, and Suzanne gasped as she viewed the tub. “Would you look at the size of that? It looks big enough to be a lap pool.”

“I could get used to living like this. Sweetheart, let’s try it out for size.”

Seth lowered himself into the tub and stretched out his long legs. Then he held out his hand, and Suzanne took it and climbed in. Seth whispered something, and Suzanne blushed again, and Ali knew the tub was a huge success.

Lizzie and Jack congratulated Seth and Suzanne on their engagement. She showed them her ring, and they both admired its unique setting. Afterward, Lizzie took the time to look at her engagement ring with its perfect diamonds surrounding a fire opal. Jack had gone out of his way to make her happy when he chose the engagement ring, and it had taken a considerable amount of his savings to purchase it. How many women were lucky enough to have a man like that? All the petty fights and the bitter words vanished for the moment. Lizzie walked over to Jack, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him. Surprised and happy, Jack pulled her closer to deepen the kiss.

Feeling better about everything, Jack went over to Seth and asked him if they could talk. Not wanting to be rude at his engage-

ment party Seth acquiesced. “Unfortunately, we got off to a rocky start at the hospital,” Jack told Seth. “But you don’t have to worry. There will be no talking about the case today. Believe me. I only want the best for you and Suzanne.”

“I appreciate your telling me that, and I’m sorry about the way I acted to you that day. The mayor and I had words about Suzanne, and when you showed up, I took my anger out on you. Could we start over and forget it ever happened?”

“That’s fine by me,” answered Jack. “It’s water under the bridge.” Jack glanced around the large co-op. “Seth, this is a beautiful home. I’m happy for you and Suzanne.”

When the engagement party was winding down, Ali asked Steve how long he’d known about today’s marriage proposal.

“Darlin’, the date came to me the day I met Seth and gave him a life reading,” he answered matter of fact, and Ali was not surprised in the least.



Chapter Forty-One

"Steve, don't order General Taos chicken again. It's fried and bad for your cholesterol."

"Darlin', it's been months since I last ate it, and I'm going to enjoy every bite. I just had a physical and bloodwork, and I'm fine. Lordy, you are such a worrywart. I'd be annoyed, but I know that you're doing it out of love."

"Okay…okay. You can have it, but no orange soda. It's a chemical factory of food coloring, full of carcinogens. Do we have a deal?" Ali asked Steve, and reluctantly he agreed.

After the takeout arrived, they relaxed, eating their dinner on trays in the bedroom. Jeopardy was on, and Ali was yelling out the answers in between bites of steamed shrimp and broccoli with brown sauce. All three contestants guessed the wrong answer in the Final Jeopardy round, while Ali's answer was correct. She speared another shrimp and smiled triumphantly at Steve.

"You beat them again."

"I sure did, but only because the category was movie trivia. If it were history, I would have fallen flat on my face."

Steve ate more General Taos, while wishing he had an orange soda to wash it down. "Don't put yourself down because you happen to be knowledgeable in many categories."

"Thanks, honey. You always know the right thing to say to me."

Ali went back to eating when suddenly Steve produced two fortune cookies.

"We're in the middle of having dinner, and did you forget that I hate those things. They taste like sugary rocks."

"Oh, come on. Humor me. It will be fun to see what our fortunes say."

Steve handed Ali a cookie, and she opened it, pulling out the thin-white strip of paper. Her eyes were scanning the words. *Good fortune awaits you. Kiss your fiancé, and take a honeymoon trip to Paris.*

Ali reread it, staring at it in disbelief. Overjoyed, she wrapped her arms around Steve and kissed him, tasting the sweet and spicy General Taos Steve had eaten. "You know I love Paris, but how did you come up with the idea of putting that into a fortune cookie?"

"I wanted to surprise you, and it suddenly dawned on me. But you haven't answered my question. I've already informed my staff that I will be away for ten days on my honeymoon, so you have to say yes."

"Steve, I'd marry you anywhere, but I must admit a Parisian honeymoon does sound wonderful."

Despite being overjoyed at the prospect of marrying Steve in the City of Lights, Ali began worrying about how Fred would deal with this latest separation. Of course, the cockatoo now had Ursula to keep him company which was a huge plus. And Fred's new pet sitter, Mindy, would have no qualms about feeding Fred his Cheez Doodles. Despite that, Ali's concerns persisted, and she mentioned them to Steve. He wished Ali would stop worrying about Fred to such a large degree, especially on this auspicious occasion, but that would never happen.

When they finished eating, Steve brought up a subject Ali preferred not to discuss. "I wondered when you were going to tell your parents about our wedding. Before or after the honeymoon?"

Ali's stomach grew tight at the thought of speaking with her mother, but she missed her father dearly, so she reluctantly gave them a call. When she heard her daughter's voice, Cynthia Rosen didn't even bother to ask Ali how she was. Instead, Ali's mother droned on about her latest jewelry acquisitions, and Ali forced herself to listen to the size and clarity of her mother's pink diamond choker. Cynthia had turned shopping into an art form and spent most of her days in Van Cleef &' Arpels and her other favorite shop, Tiffany's. When her mother finally wound down, Ali was able to tell Cynthia about the wedding trip to Paris.

Grabbing Steve's hand for courage, Ali invited her parents to share a private jet to take them all to Paris. As an enticement, Steve already reserved a suite for Robert and Cynthia Rosen at the luxurious historic Hotel Carillon, overlooking the Place de la Concorde, hoping they would stay over for the ceremony. Ali had to hold back the tears when her mother politely declined everything Steve had so generously offered.

"Dear, I've had the most dreadful upset stomach all week, so I'm afraid we will have to pass. Traveling would only make it worse."

"I understand." *Bullshit—you're lying to me again.* "I hope you feel better soon."

"Thank you, Alexandra. Don't worry because a little tea and toast can work wonders." Cynthia Rosen was having conniptions at the thought of her daughter marrying Steven Farrell. He was wealthy, but he was a professional psychic. The ladies she lunched with would have a field day when they found out.

Ali desperately needed to speak with her father. She cherished the many father-daughter days they shared. But things had changed drastically over the past year. Robert Rosen was avoiding Ali, and his flimsy excuses for why he could not see her did not hold water. Ali knew her father loved her, so why was he avoiding her like the plague?

"Mom, can I please speak with dad?" Ali tried to keep the desperation out of her voice.

"I'm sorry, Alexandra, but your father is busy working. But don't worry, darling, because I will make sure and relay the good news to him."

"Please put dad on the phone. I promise to keep the conversation short."

"Alexandra, your father, is putting together an important business deal, and I cannot disturb him." Cynthia's voice rose, and Ali heard the anger directed at herself and stopped pleading. Ali's mother abruptly cut the conversation short. "It was lovely speaking with you, dear, but I'm going to brew a cup of tea. Now go and have a wonderful time in Paris and send our love to your fiancé."

Steve heard Ali's end of the conversation, and his heart was breaking for her. He had hoped that Ali's parents would rejoice in their daughter's upcoming wedding. And more importantly, Steve needed to find out why Robert Rosen had stopped seeing his daughter because Ali's heart was breaking. But when he looked on Robert Rosen, there was a block, and it was a doozy. One way or another, he was determined to get past it.

Steve poured Ali a glass of wine. "Here. Drink this. You need it."

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Darlin', I don't need wine for that."

Ali laughed because it was the truth. But she could not help wishing that her parents would attend their wedding, especially her father. Now there was a dark cloud hanging over what should have been the happiest day of her life.



Chapter Forty-Two

Now that Ali had returned from the honeymoon, she was spending the day with her girlfriends. The women were meeting for lunch at the Loeb Boathouse Restaurant overlooking Central Park Lake.

The maître d' led the women to a table with a fantastic view of the lake. Despite the colder weather, the birds were plentiful that day. Ducks and mute swans floated leisurely on the water, and Ali spotted a beautiful snow-white egret. She took her iPhone and snapped some photos of the waterfowl.

"We're celebrating your new marriage, Mrs. Farrell, so Lizzie and I want you to choose what you'd like to do after lunch," Suzanne told Ali.

She was very touched by the warm gesture and opted for something they would all enjoy. "Let's take a walk through the Central Park Zoo," Ali suggested, anxious to see the penguins. "Afterwards, we can go back to my place and have s'mores and hot cocoa."

"That sounds like a great idea. It's good that we're all dressed for the weather," Suzanne added. The temperature was dropping each week as winter approached and Lizzie welcomed the change of seasons because it gave her an excuse to purchase stylish boots for her ever-growing shoe collection.

While the busboy placed a basket of fresh hot rolls and croissants on the table and filled their water glasses, Ali wondered if she should only order an appetizer. She had gained weight from all the delicious French food eaten in Paris. Yet despite the added pounds, Steve swore that Ali looked even more beautiful. So, throwing caution to the wind, she decided to order an entrée as well.

Suzanne slowly perused the menu, trying to find something she'd enjoy that wouldn't be fattening. "To celebrate Ali's becoming a married lady, I'm going to pig out and have the jumbo lump crab cake with the sautéed sea scallops. I love scallops, and they're low in calories. Should I get them steamed instead of sautéed?" she wondered aloud.

Lizzie groaned. "You call that pigging out? Having Southern fried chicken with mashed potatoes and apple pie ala mode is pigging out. You both have perfect bodies. Forget about the calories and enjoy the food, and for Christ's sake, stop worrying about your weight."

"Get real. That will never happen," Suzanne told Lizzie.

"I think that Lizzie's made a valid point. "We both obsess too much about our weight." Suzanne looked at Ali as if she were crazy. "Why should we worry about every bite we put in our mouths? Steve likes the extra ten pounds I put on from all the rich food in Paris, and he doesn't want me to lose even one ounce."

Suzanne and Lizzie stared at Ali to see where the added poundage had gone. She was the most petite of the three, and Lizzie was the first to notice Ali's more voluptuous body. Her cashmere sweater hugged her curves like a second skin now, and her cleavage was more pronounced. Suzanne couldn't help noticing the plumper breasts, and she knew that Steve was enjoying the new, improved version of his wife. No wonder he wanted her to keep the weight. Suzanne turned and whispered something to Lizzie, who nodded in agreement.

"Hey, what are you two whispering about?"

Not one to mince words, Lizzie told her. "Your tits are bigger, and your ass is curvier. Only you would be lucky enough to gain it in those places."

"I never even noticed," Ali replied.

"Well, I bet that Steve did," Suzanne told her. "Are your bras tighter?"

"A little. But I thought they shrunk in the dryer."

Ali pondered what her friends said. Steve had always been a breast man, but now he was overly obsessed with them since they returned home. Today, despite her protestations, Steve began removing her sweater and bra when she was about to take Ursula for her morning walk.

"But, Steve, we made love last night and this morning also."

"I can't seem to get enough of you, darlin'. So take it as a compliment."

Ali lay across Steve's lap like a virgin sacrifice while he took his time caressing her fuller breasts and complimenting how beautiful they were. Steve sucked each nipple slowly and then with more fervor. As Ali was getting more and more turned on, Steve suddenly stopped. "Sorry, I forgot about the time. There's a meeting at work, and I have to leave." Reluctantly he allowed Ali to sit up and helped her hook the bra, caressing her breasts one last time. "Darlin', you're a temptation I can't seem to resist." While waiting for the elevator, Steve pulled Ali to him for a slow sensual kiss, leaving her all hot and bothered and eager for Steve to come home later and finish what he started.

"I think you're both right about my chest and ass being larger. I may even need to buy new lingerie. But there are added benefits—if you get my drift." Ali couldn't help giggling as she thought about her new curvier body and its effect on her husband.

"We get it, sweetie," Lizzie told her. "Enjoy it for all its worth in case they ever deflate."

"Like that would ever happen. Now, will everyone stop looking at my boobs? I'm trying to decide what to choose as my entrée."

The waiter returned and took their orders. When he left, Ali could not help noticing that Suzanne seemed to be glowing, and it wasn't from the sunlight streaming through the glass. Then she saw the reason for her friends' sudden radiance. Suzanne was pregnant. Of the three friends, Suzanne was the only one interested in discussing babies. She was ready for motherhood, and Ali was delighted for her.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Suzanne inquired. "Did my lipstick smear? Do I have a zit? You're making me nervous."

"Sorry. I didn't realize that I was staring. I was admiring your hair. It looks lovely up in a French twist," Ali told her.

"I'm so glad that you like my new look. Seth prefers my hair worn down, but I feel the need to change it now and then."

"It's very Grace Kellyish," Lizzie remarked.

"Thanks. That's a wonderful compliment. I love her sense of style and elegance. Lizzie, with your swan-like neck, you would look beautiful with your hair up."

"Ya think? I tried it once, and Jack liked it. So maybe I'll do it again."

"You really should."

Lizzie was smiling now. "I will. My hair deserves some pampering, so I'm going to make myself an appointment at your salon instead of the one, I go to."

Ali was bored silly listening to the two of them discussing hairstyles when luckily, the waiter arrived with their food. As everyone enjoyed their crab cakes, Ali's baby vibes grew stronger, and before she could stop herself, the words flew out of her mouth.

"Suzanne, you're pregnant," she blurted out.

Lizzie placed her fork down and stopped eating. Suzanne looked stunned.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes. As sure as I can be."

Suzanne sat there in happy shock. "I can't believe it. I'm going to have a baby. Seth will be thrilled with the news." When

Suzanne tried to reach him, Seth was in the OR, so she left a message and sent a text.

"We all know how accurate Ali's predictions are, but Suze, please take a pregnancy test," Lizzie advised.

"Lizzie's right," Ali concurred. "When it pertains to anything medical, we need to double-check."

Suzanne was grinning. "My period is over a week late now, but I dismissed that because they're not always regular. Of course, I'll take a test to be on the safe side, but I trust Ali's predictions."

They spent the afternoon enjoying their lunch and discussing Suzanne's pregnancy and Ali's Parisian honeymoon. It was a perfect day, and Ali described experiencing déjà vu while walking through Versailles when suddenly a frisson of fear shot through Ali—completely blindsiding her. Somehow, she managed to keep her composure and not let her friends know that anything was the matter. Ali tried her best to ignore the feeling, but it was impossible to dismiss. "The déjà vu was strongest in the hall of mirrors and Marie Antoinette's bedchamber. Is it possible that I lived a past life at Versailles? I realize I was not Marie Antoinette, but everything felt so familiar."

Anything having to do with royalty intrigued Suzanne. "I hope you had a life back then. Maybe you were a friend of the Queen. A grand Duchess even," she gushed.

"Or you might have been in charge of emptying the chamber pots," Lizzie teased.

Trying to keep her mind on the topic was almost impossible, but Ali did her best. "I began speaking French as soon as we got off the plane, and I understood what I was saying. Steve said my accent was spot on, which thrilled me. I believe it's worth looking into to see if more memories surface about a past life."

Suzanne and Lizzie agreed. Past lives were something none of them had given any real thought to, but now they were both intrigued and hoped Ali remembered more.

"Hey everyone," Lizzie announced to the table. "I couldn't finish my meal. I'm bursting!" The sirloin steak, along with the

bread and a double serving of fries had accomplished a miracle. For the first time in ages, Lizzie was not hungry.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day. That leaves more s'mores for Suzanne and me," Ali quipped, trying to sound calm and hoping she succeeded.

Lizzie suddenly let loose with a belch and covered her mouth in embarrassment. "I feel better now, so I'm going to finish my fries."

As the fear escalated, Ali grabbed Lizzie's hand tightly. "Don't you think you've had enough to eat? Let's leave now because I want to get to the zoo." Ali knew she had to come up with a reason for her haste. "The forecast said possible rain showers this afternoon, and that would ruin our day out."

Lizzie scoffed at that. "Who care's if it rains? I want to stay and order cheesecake for dessert." That was when Lizzie noticed how pale Ali had become, and her hand felt clammy. Lizzie then realized what was happening. Ali had seen a premonition, and it was a bad one. Frightened, Lizzie grabbed her handbag and told Suzanne they really should get to the zoo before it rained.

On their way out, they heard two people arguing. Most diners had stopped eating to listen to the couple who had no idea they were now the center of attention in the restaurant.

"Are you crazy? I am not going to marry you, and you know the reason why."

"But if we get married, I swear that I'll never look at another man." The woman's hand moved under the table to touch the man's crotch, and to her dismay, he was soft. She was losing her hold over him.

The younger man swallowed some whiskey, needing the bite it provided. "It's over, Jolie. You ruined my life, but no more. I should have left you years ago, but better late than never."

"You stayed with me because you love me."

"Is that what you call it—love?" John laughed, and the sound was like something from the bowels of hell. "You don't know the

meaning of the word." John finished his whiskey and set it down. "The gravy train's over, Mama."

"Don't you dare call me that! It's not true. I'm your girlfriend. Have you lost your mind?"

"That happened years ago when I was young and naïve enough to trust you. I'm sickened that you had the gall to suggest we get married. Tell me, Mama, in which state would our marriage be legal?" John threw cash down on the table, getting ready to leave. "I'm moving out today, and don't try and stop me."

"I'll kill myself." The older woman threatened.

"Go ahead. I'll dance on your grave."

When Suzanne passed their table, she saw the man's face, and all the memories she had blocked came flooding back. "It was you!" Suzanne saw John Carson as he brutally raped her body, and she fought off a wave of dizziness. Sobbing, Suzanne screamed his name aloud, and now all eyes were focused on her. John Carson forgot all about Jolie and looked at Suzanne as if she were a madwoman.



Chapter Forty-Three

"I have no idea how you know my name, but I assure you that we've never met before. I would never have forgotten someone as beautiful as you."

Suzanne was incredulous. The bastard was flirting with her! She wondered what kind of game John Carson was playing by pretending not to know who she was. Then, fueled by anger, Suzanne confronted her assailant. "Do you expect me to believe that you forgot the night you raped me?" Suzanne lifted her bangs. "Take a good look at this scar. It's from the tire iron you hit me with!"

Suzanne then stared wide-eyed at the grotesque version of what Jolie Carson had become. "He thought I was you. You're the woman in the photos," she stated.

The botoxed blonde was shocked. John was faithful to her. He would never have touched another woman. "You're lying. How dare you accuse my boyfriend of raping you!"

What he'd been dreading was now happening. Steve envisioned the confrontation between Suzanne and the Carson's and immediately contacted Jack, telling him to hurry over to the Boathouse restaurant. Jack called for police backup and entered the establishment. He heard the raised voices of the two women. Admiration and fear commingled as Jack watched Suzanne, still as gutsy as ever, confronting the Carson's. Using skills he had

learned studying psychology, Jack calmed Suzanne and sat her down with her friends at the far end of the restaurant.

"The cops are on the way," Jack informed the women. "Do not let Suzanne go near those people again. Capeesh?"

"Don't worry. We'll take care of her," Lizzie told Jack, wishing Ali had been wrong about her premonition this one time.

Like an overcooked egg, Suzanne suddenly cracked, and she broke down sobbing. "When is this nightmare ever going to end?" she asked. "I don't get it. In a city filled with thousands of restaurants, why did John Carson have to pick this one and today of all days?"

Jack thought that Suzanne made a valid point. Why did Carson and his lady love show up there today? The hell if he knew. Jack walked over to the perpetrator, seemingly nonplussed despite Suzanne's outburst. Sociopaths feel no remorse, and John Carson was a textbook case from the Ted Bundy School of Etiquette. Steve had laid bare the facts to Jack regarding John and Jolie Carson. He explained to Jack that the mother had sexually groomed her son from an early age, and even now, he was still banging her.

It was time to read Carson his rights, and Jack could not hide the bitterness in his voice. "John Carson, you are under arrest for the rape and attempted murder of Suzanne Turner. You have the right to remain silent, and anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to a lawyer, and if you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided before any questioning if so desired." What a crock. The guy was as rich as Midas. When Jack finished, he spotted police backup entering the establishment, and Steve was with them.

"Don't listen to what that woman said," Jolie hissed to one of the officers. "She is lying. John and I are in love, and we're planning to get married."

Listening to her lies, the debonair gentleman in the Armani suit and the hand-knotted silk tie vanished. John Carson snapped and went for Jolie's throat, and she gasped for air as he choked her. The police restrained Carson and put him in handcuffs.

"Let me kill her!" Carson screamed at the officers. "She's evil!"

As the diners and staff watched the drama unfold, the police escorted them out of the restaurant. The Loeb Boathouse had turned into an episode straight out of Law and Order SVU.

Amid the chaos stood an angel surveying the goings-on. Arianna was invisible to the naked eye in the crowded restaurant, but Steve could clearly see her. Jack stood conversing with some of the officers, and Steve watched as a ghostly arm reached out to him. Why on earth was the angel attempting to contact Jack?

Jack did not feel the angel's touch, and sadly Arianna left, turning her attention to John Carson. He had sexually assaulted Suzanne, leaving her to die. The angel experienced a wave of anger, like nothing she had ever felt before. Something miraculous was happening, and Steve was witness to the phenomena. Arianna was crying, and her cheeks were shiny with tears, but how was that possible? Steve gently touched the angel's cheek. It felt almost the same as human flesh. The cheek was thinner and more pliable, but it was solid. Steve lifted his finger to his mouth and tasted salt. He felt buoyed at the new development and would continue to monitor any changes regarding the angelic spirit.

Seth ran in, still wearing his hospital scrubs, and Suzanne brightened at the sight of him. He gently kissed her, feeling her tremble in his arms. Suzanne was frightened, and there was nothing Seth could do but try and reassure her as best he could. "Sweetheart, I promise that everything will be fine no matter how bad things may seem. Try and stay focused on the wonderful life we share and on our baby."

"But you don't understand. I feel dirty and ashamed by what John Carson did to me." Seth held Suzanne while she shook with sobs. He wondered how many times Suzanne would need to cry over that degenerate. "How could you possibly want me now?" Suzanne asked, her voice wracked with pain and sorrow.

Seth's heart was breaking. "Suze, you are the best thing that's ever happened to me, and don't ever forget that."

He motioned for Steve to come over. “Do me a favor and watch Suzanne. I have some unfinished business I need to take care of.” The two men grabbed each other in a quick hug. Then, in a rage, Seth walked over to where Carson sat, handcuffed. He punched Carson square in the jaw, and John cried out in pain. The police stopped Seth before he could land another blow, though they understood the reason behind his actions and let him off with a stern warning.

Despite John’s attacking her, Jolie had recovered sufficiently to try and comfort John. His handsome face was bruised and swollen. She reached out to caress his arm, and he jerked away from her touch.

“Get the hell away from me, you witch,” he managed to rasp out despite the pain. Then he was led to a police car to be taken downtown.



Chapter Forty-Four

Jolie Carson was attempting to hail a taxi to drive her home. One veiny hand waved frantically at yellow cabs as they passed, most filled with passengers. As Jolie waited, she thought about what life would be like now without John. She never gave a thought to the bills because John had always handled the finances. Without his paycheck, she might have to sell her beautiful home and possibly even look for employment. Sweat beaded on her forehead despite the chill in the air. Jolie would rather die than go to work and be forced to move to a small tacky apartment. There had to be another solution to her problem.

With her anxiety spiraling out of control, Jolie swallowed pills to take the edge off. Xanax. Prozac. Valium. Whatever was handy. When things had been good between them, John had gifted Jolie with a diamond-encrusted flask. Struggling with the cap, she finally got it off and drank the vodka to help wash down the pills.

Within moments Jolie's worries seemed to vanish, to be replaced by a sense of well-being. With the help of 100-proof Smirnoff, she felt young and vibrant again. She was sure a sugar daddy was waiting to keep her in the lap of luxury and pay all her exorbitant bills.

Why couldn't she find a taxi? Jolie looked at her watch and saw that it was rush hour. It would take a miracle to find a cab. The

wind was gusting, and she pulled the collar of her sable coat closer around her neck. When she crossed the street, Jolie was unsteady in her Manolo Blahnik's. She was daydreaming about her next benefactor and not paying attention as she staggered in front of a taxi. Upon impact, unbearable pain shot through her body. The driver stepped on the brakes, and the taxi screeched to a halt, but it was too late for Jolie Carson. The cabbie raced out to see how badly hurt the woman was and immediately called 911. Jolie lay lifeless as blood trickled from her mouth. Her face was ashen, and her features softened in death, her hand still clutching the flask of vodka.

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At the police station, they fingerprinted John Carson and took a mug shot. He relinquished all his belongings in exchange for jail clothing. When asked if he wanted to call his lawyer, he refused. He told them he did not want or need one. The memories of the night he raped and left Suzanne Turner for dead returned in great clarity, making John Carson's stomach churn. Suzanne's terrified screams echoed repeatedly, and he remembered her begging him to stop. It should have been Jolie who suffered, not Suzanne, and Carson was overwhelmed with guilt and remorse.

With the police procedure finished, he was taken to a holding cell and left there. Later, when an officer checked on Carson, his shirt was tied tight around his neck and attached to a chair, cutting off the oxygen to his lungs and strangling him. They hadn't figured Carson for suicide, but it happened. Video surveillance cameras watched the inmates, but monitoring them was sporadic at best.

In death, John's tongue swelled to twice its size. His bodily functions had ceased, and his bladder and bowels emptied. The stench was overpowering, and Jack turned away from the gruesome sight. Once again, doubts plagued Jack about his continuing to work for the NYPD. He reached into his pocket, extracting a bottle of tums, and chewed the antacids. The job was going to give him an ulcer.



Chapter Forty-Five

The knowledge of the Carson's death's allowed Suzanne to put their memories to rest. With the baby on the way and a diamond engagement ring sparkling on her finger, Seth suggested they start to make wedding plans. The couple wanted a small intimate affair, while Janet Turner would have preferred a large formal wedding. Being as diplomatic as possible, Seth explained to his future mother-in-law that they needed to keep things simple for Suzanne's sake. Janet Turner only wanted the best for her daughter, and she acquiesced to their wishes. Despite the limitations, Janet knew she could turn even a small wedding into something special. The plans were brewing, and the first item to check off the list was choosing the bridal gown.

"I hope today is the day we find the perfect gown," Janet told Suzanne and her friends. "We've been shopping for three days now, and none of the gowns have been what you envisioned, Suzanne. But at least we're all having fun. There's nothing better than shopping for clothes," Janet exclaimed, her voice filled with happiness.

Lizzie whispered to Ali that she was sick and tired of shopping for bridal wear.

"Join the club. I'm happy living in jeans and tees. I've never been a clothes horse like Suzanne, and I don't aspire to become

one. But, Lizzie, who are you kidding? You have been shopping for "haute couture" ever since you met Jack. Your closets are overflowing with designer clothing."

Lizzie couldn't deny it. Her Ferragamo pumps cost a fortune, and she got a high from looking at her fast-growing shoe collection.

"Let's pray that Suzanne finds the perfect gown today. We need a clothing miracle. Keep your fingers crossed, Lizzie."

"I'm crossing my toes too, and that's not easy in these shoes." Lizzie took off her pumps and wiggled her toes. "I have a bunion on my big toe, and I've named him Herbert."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Herbert," Ali said to Lizzie's toe, loving the bit of nonsense. "I've never seen a more handsome bunyon before." Not to be outdone by Lizzie's bunyon, Ali crossed her eyes, trying to look demented and succeeding. Then Lizzie stuck out her tongue and wiggled it. Being silly helped them cope with the boredom caused by days of staring at designer bridalwear until Suzanne suddenly put a halt to their fun.

"Come on, you guys. Get serious. The first batch of gowns is coming out soon, so cool it."

Something was bothering Janet Turner, and she was paying no attention to Lizzie and Ali's sophomoric antics. She wore her brightest smile, but inwardly she wished that Arianna could be with them on this joyous occasion. Janet always believed the sisters would grow close, but they never had the chance to bond after Arianna died in infancy. Janet wiped away tears for what might have been. She had no idea that the daughter she was thinking about was only a few feet away, closely watching them.

The angel's emotions were becoming stronger with each passing day, and her energy was changing. She was not human, but she was not a spirit either. Who or what was she? Arianna ran her hands over her body and felt her breasts beginning to grow. Her fingers stroked them, and the feeling was pleasurable. Women had breasts for the sole purpose of nursing infants, so Arianna did not understand why touching the mounds of flesh felt good. She

was afraid of the changes, though a part of her welcomed them. It was a perverse dichotomy, and all she could do was wait to see what happened next.

The saleswoman brought out an endless array of gowns from the world's top designers. There were creations by Oscar de la Renta that Lizzie loved, but Suzanne wanted a gown designed by Christian Dior. The saleswoman worked on commission, and time was money, so she hoped that one of the gowns would be the right one. Finally, after another hour passed, she showed Suzanne a Christian Dior gown that was the most elegant one they had in stock.

"Ladies, this gown was made by the house of Dior in 1953. As you can see, it is sleeveless silk chiffon with a netted overlay. It has a timeless classic beauty that today's gowns lack. Notice that the neck and shoulder area is sheer, and the gown has a luxurious silk lining."

Almost two hours had elapsed, and the only happy campers were Suzanne and her mother. Lizzie stayed sane by playing solitaire and bejeweled on her smartphone when no one was watching. Ali was googling, searching for antiques as she tried to stifle a yawn with no success. Then she took a good look at the latest gown and forgot about the porcelain Sevres urns because the bridal creation on display was exquisite.

"The skirt is lovely, gathered chiffon, and Grace Kelly wore the very same gown in one of her movies."

Suzanne's eyes lit up at the news. The actress was one of her fashion icons. Could anything be more fabulous than that?

"I'd like to try it on," Suzanne told the saleswoman, who beamed at her. Ali and Lizzie breathed a sigh of relief, and Janet Turner rejoiced, knowing her daughter might have found the perfect gown for her wedding.

Suzanne entered a dressing room, and the saleswoman helped her into the gown and pulled up the hidden back-zipper. Suzanne stared at her reflection, and she knew that this was the one. She looked over at her mother and her friends for their approval.

"You look so lovely in it," Janet told her daughter. "I do believe you have found your bridal gown."

"Suze, it's stunning. I love the chiffon layers on the skirt. It's a dream gown," Lizzie complimented her. She had never seen her friend look more beautiful.

Wanting to capture the moment, Ali began taking photos of the bride-to-be. "You look radiant," she told Suzanne.

The saleswoman was computing her commission as she spoke. "Of course, it needs shortening, but other than that minor detail, it fits you perfectly. You and Grace Kelly must have the same measurements. How wonderful for you," she gushed.

The gown was bound to be costly, and Suzanne was almost afraid to ask the price. "How much is it?" she inquired.

"This is your lucky day because we marked everything down ten percent. The Christian Dior bridal gown is a mere seventy-five thousand dollars. We do the alterations for free and then deliver it to your home or business."

Suzanne wanted it more than anything, but the gown cost a fortune. She would only be wearing it one time and didn't want her mother spending that kind of money. She sighed sadly as she took one last look in the mirror.

Janet Turner asked the salesperson to please leave the room. She needed to speak to her daughter in private. Janet stood behind Suzanne, her hands on her daughter's shoulders as they gazed at their reflection on the mirrored screen.

"Do you see what I see? How breathtaking you look in the wedding gown."

"Yes, I do, mom, but that doesn't change the fact of how expensive it is."

"Suzanne, I don't have many pleasures in my life, but buying you this gown would make me incredibly happy. I love you more than anything, so please allow me to."

"I love you too, mom, but the cost is astronomical. I can't let you purchase the gown at that price."

"Suzanne, I can afford to buy it for you. I keep telling you that your father provided wisely for me. He ensured that I would never have to worry about money for as long as I live. Your father would have wanted you to wear this wedding gown, so please stop worrying about my finances. I'm only going to say this one last time. I am a very wealthy woman, and I want to pay for this magnificent creation. Please say yes."

Suzanne realized how much this meant to her mother, and she was totally in love with the gown, so she threw her arms around Janet and kissed her. "Yes, and thanks so much, mom. You are the best."

Arianna watched them embrace, and she yearned to be held by the woman who had given her life. She was grateful that she had her father, but Arianna's inner child cried out for a mother's love and a mother's touch.

Janet felt relief, knowing how stubborn Suzanne could be. "You had me very worried. I was afraid this might turn out like the apartment fiasco."

"What are you talking about?" Suzanne asked.

"I'm sure you remember that your father and I offered to help you out financially to move into a larger apartment. We didn't want you settling for the small brownstone studio."

"Of course, I remember, but I needed to prove to you and dad that I could succeed on my own."

"Your father and I never doubted that. We just wanted more for you."

The saleswoman brought out the bridal veil, and it was exquisite. It flowed over Suzanne's blond hair, making it the perfect finishing touch.

"Do you think Seth will like it?" Suzanne asked. Ali showed her Seth's text message. *OMG. She looks so beautiful. Thanx for sending the pix. XOXO Seth.*



Chapter Forty-Six

Janet joined forces with a top wedding planner to make Suzanne and Seth's wedding a day to remember. There was a massive ice sculpture of the bride and groom on display. A harpist played heavenly-sounding music as the guests arrived, and the photographer raced around to immortalize the day.

To please Seth, Suzanne wanted the wedding to reflect both their heritages. Because the groom was Jewish, they held the ceremony under a *Chuppah,* the traditional Jewish wedding canopy. After they spoke their vows, the bride and groom kissed, and everyone yelled, "*Mazel tov!*" as Seth crushed the cloth-covered glass.

Candles glowed, and a small orchestra played music for the newly married couple and their guests. The first selection was their favorite love song, "Lady." Seth and Suzanne were happily surprised as Lionel Richie walked onto the stage. Holding a microphone, the famed singer sang the song straight to the newlyweds as they danced. After the first song, Mr. Ritchie sang "Endless Love" to a round of applause. After placing the microphone down, the singer congratulated the bride and groom. Suzanne realized that her mother had arranged to have Lionel Richie sing at the wedding, and her heart was overflowing with love for Janet.

Feeling pleased with the musical performance, Janet sipped champagne when she noticed a small nosegay of lilacs lying next

to her napkin. Will Turner had brought her lilacs every day of their marriage until cancer left him housebound. Janet held the delicate blooms. As she breathed in the delightful scent, Janet began to feel a delicious warmth surrounding her. An invisible hand stroked her cheek, and Janet felt the whisper-light touch of a man's mouth on hers. She closed her eyes as Will kissed her again. They were together at their daughter's wedding, and instead of being frightened at the revelation, Janet was elated.

After dancing to five songs in a row, Suzanne removed her new high-heeled pumps and sighed in relief. Not caring about decorum, Seth massaged first one foot and then the other. Suzanne held back a moan of pleasure. Her new husband was a man of many talents, and his foot massage should have been X-rated!

As Suzanne ate, Seth asked a strange request of her. "Sweetheart, do me a favor and take a look under your salad plate."

She looked at him quizzically, knowing something was up. "Okay."

Seth's face looked serious, but his dimples grew large as Suzanne lifted the plate. She discovered two airplane tickets and a travel brochure. "I can't believe you did this!" Suzanne flung her arms around Seth and kissed him. "We're going to honeymoon in Japan! We'll visit the Japanese temples and see the botanical gardens." Suzanne was picturing the cherry blossoms and hanging wisteria that surrounded ancestral pagodas. "Seth, Japan is a magical place, and I'll finally get to wear an authentic kimono," Suzanne exclaimed happily. "With all the rushing around, I never even gave thought to our honeymoon," she admitted.

"I know how much you love Japan, so it was the perfect place for us to honeymoon. As for kimonos, I'll buy you a dozen, sweetheart. Whatever my bride wants. I only want your happiness."

"You already did that when you fell in love with me. Seth, you are the best husband in the world."

Suzanne took Seth's hand and raced over to her friends and family to tell them the good news. Ali and Steve were thrilled for them. Lizzie and Jack wished them a fantastic time, but Lizzie

kicked Jack under the table with her shoe toe after Suzanne and Seth left.

"Ouch! What was that for?" Jack asked, his leg aching.

"We never go anywhere. Why can't we ever go away on vacation?"

"When we get married, we'll have a honeymoon. But Lizzie, you know that my salary is not conducive to taking a luxury vacation."

"Yes, I realize that, and it's disheartening. But when we honeymoon, I want to go to the Fiji Islands. We'll stay in one of those cute glass-bottomed huts over the ocean." Lizzie imagined the tropical paradise and all the new bikini bathing suits she'd buy for the vacation. "We can view the tropical fish swimming under the glass floor. But, Jack, you had better start saving your money because I hear it's incredibly expensive, and I won't settle for anything less."

Jack sat there thinking about the astronomical price Lizzie's dream trip would set him back if they ever made it to the altar. Then, he felt a whopper of a tension headache coming on, and he closed his eyes in pain. The pressure in Jack's head increased, and he winced as the throbbing worsened. Lizzie had no idea how upset Jack was, and she went back to eating her filet mignon.

Suddenly soft, warm hands were gently rubbing his temples. Jack leaned back with his eyes closed as the pain slowly ebbed away. The massage continued even after the pain was gone. Jack enjoyed the feel of Lizzie's hands as they caressed his face and then his neck. All the tension was now gone, and Jack was getting a hard-on from Lizzie's tender ministrations. Feeling much better, he looked over at her, and she was busy eating. What the hell had just happened?

The angel examined her hands. Warm human blood flowed through them now. Arianna was happy she had helped Jack, even in that small way. The feel of his mortal flesh under her hands was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Filled with excitement by this new development, Arianna went to join her sister. They

watched together as Suzanne's new husband danced with Janet Turner. Arianna drank in the sight of her mother, committing it to memory in case she never saw her again.

"Arianna, please stay until the reception is over."

"There's nothing I would love more." But all too soon, Arianna felt the other side calling her back. Desperately, she grabbed her twin's hand and held it tight.

"Please let me stay," her soul cried out as salty tears filled her eyes. "Please!"

Will Turner watched as his daughter struggled in vain to remain earthbound, and it broke his heart seeing how unhappy she was. When she vanished, his thoughts returned to his wife. Janet did not fear his presence anymore. Will smiled at the memory of Janet holding the lilacs. He had kissed her for the first time since his death, and it had been beautiful. Will wanted his wife badly, even though he knew it could never be. But he was grateful to have witnessed Suzanne's marriage to Seth. His daughter had never looked more radiant. Time was running out, so Will took one last glance at Janet, who was as lovely as the day they wed over thirty years ago, and then he vanished into the light to join his daughter.



Chapter Forty-Seven

Jack spent evenings shuttling between his studio apartment and Lizzie's larger one-bedroom co-op. He was sick and tired of waiting for Lizzie to decide whether he'd be staying over or sent home, depending upon her mood. Needing to put a halt to Lizzie's machinations, Jack decided to try manipulating her with sex.

Tonight, Lizzie looked dazzling in the backless gown she had worn to the wedding. Jack walked up behind Lizzie and ran his hands through her red hair while pulling her flush against his erection. He lifted the curls off her neck to lay kisses on the alabaster skin, and Lizzie tilted her head to give him better access. Holding her against his body with one arm, the other hand moved slowly across her breasts, stimulating them. Jack spoke softly and seductively to Lizzie, rubbing the nipples until they were hardpoints. Lizzie was breathing faster, and Jack knew now was the right time to strike. "I think it's time we moved in together." He waited for her response. Hopefully, Lizzie had softened on the subject after watching Seth and Suzanne tie the knot.

"But, Jack, that's such a big step."

Jack was so angry that he was ready to turn around and walk out the door, but that would accomplish nothing, so he tried again.

"Lizzie, our friends are all married. Compared to that, living together is not that big a deal in the scheme of things."

Despite his frustration, Jack was horny. He kissed Lizzie's neck again, taking tiny bites that he knew drove her crazy. She began moaning as Jack bit down even harder on her tender flesh. Lizzie smelled of Chanel No. 5, which inflamed his senses as he continued to caress her silk-covered breasts.

"I want to be with you, babe." Lizzie shivered as she felt Jack's warm breath on her face. She had never wanted any man the way she wanted Jack. By cohabitating together, there was a good chance that their sex life would get back on track.

"You may be right about us living together. But not until we go to an animal shelter and adopt a dog. We need to commit to a dog and see how that goes before taking the final step where you move in."

What the fuck? That was the most convoluted piece of crap Lizzie had come up with, and it wasn't going to work this time. Jack shrugged out of his jacket and began unbuttoning his dress shirt.

"Babe, we don't need a dog to begin living together, though it would be great to have one. I love you, and you love me, and I think that's what matters the most." Jack took his belt off and then stepped out of his pants.

Now naked, Jack divested Lizzie of her gown. His hands were everywhere on her body, and she was burning up with desire. "Jack, stop. I can't think while you're doing that." Jack sucked on her lower lip and then kissed her hard and wet the way they both liked. "No. Don't stop."

It was difficult for Lizzie to gather her thoughts while Jack rubbed his hand over the red curls covering her vulva. "Now I remember what I wanted to say." It was an effort to get the words out because Jack's fingers were stimulating her clitoris, but she somehow forced herself to continue. "I want to ensure that we're responsible enough to care for a puppy. As long as we do a good job, I'll feel better about us living together." Lizzie had no idea why she

equated parenting a dog with living together, but that's what came to mind, and she was sticking with it.

Jack stopped making love to Lizzie and reached for his clothes. He was getting into his pants while Lizzie stood there watching him. "What are you doing?" she asked, none too pleased. Jack had left her high and dry when she was on the verge of climaxing.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm getting dressed so I can take you to the animal shelter and get us a dog. I want you in my bed every night, and I'll do whatever it takes to get you there."

Lizzie moved behind Jack, pressing her slender curves against him. "Can't it wait for a while?" she asked, whispering in his ear. Then Lizzie reached down into Jack's pants and began stroking his cock. She kept it up until he let loose with a deep growl, and Lizzie found herself flat on her back on the bed.

"Hell yeah. Let's fuck."

Jack jumped on Lizzie's luscious, pale-freckled body and made love to her until they were both sated. Afterward, they went to Bidawee on East Thirty-Eighth Street to get themselves a puppy. But instead of choosing one dog, they ended up with two. They adopted a seven-month-old yellow Labrador retriever, and also brought home an adorable four-month-old Maltese terrier. Lizzie's heart went out to the little dog because she was losing sight in one eye from a dry eye infection left untreated. They gave Lizzie medicine to prevent the other eye from losing whatever remaining vision the Maltese had left.

They named the Labrador retriever Marlon after Jack's favorite actor, Marlon Brando. The Maltese terrier was Snowball because she was white and fluffy like newly fallen snow. Jack rented a U-Haul and was cohabitating with Lizzie and their dogs the very next day.

Jack lifted Marlon, and a raspy tongue slobbered all over his face, helping him forget about his troubles.

Ahwoo! Marlon let loose with a howl of pure joy as Jack cuddled him.

Lizzie was not used to the noise and the mess of owning pets. She looked on in horror as Marlon took a dump near her new rug. "The shelter claimed the dogs were toilet trained, but take a look at my floor! A few more inches and your dog's shit would have been all over my new floral rug. *Damn! Damn! Damn!*"

Lizzie went on and on about Marlon's bowel movement. Meanwhile, the Maltese grew frightened by Lizzie's histrionics and proceeded to have diarrhea all over her wool gabardine pants. Jack couldn't stop himself from laughing because it was just too funny.

Despite being covered in dog poo, Lizzie couldn't help seeing the humor in the situation, as she tried in vain to wipe the stinky brown goo off her pants with no success.

"PU! This little girl packs a wallop." But she was smiling as she said it.

Together they cleaned up the mess from the dogs. Then they showered and made love again. When the lights went out, there were now two dogs fast asleep in the bedroom, and one was snoring, much to Lizzie's dismay.



Chapter Forty-Eight

The snow blanketed the streets in white powder, making the city resemble a winter wonderland. It was a perfect day for Ali and her friends to sit around a roaring fire and chill out. Lizzie wanted to make cookies, but her idea of baking was to purchase Ben and Jerry's chocolate chip cookie dough and pop it into the oven. If Lizzie didn't burn the latest batch, they would declare it a national holiday. Ali had an extra timer ready to try and avert another cookie dough disaster.

Suzanne was coming over with her ever-present morning sickness. It usually hung on until mid-afternoon when it tapered off, giving her a respite. Because of Suzanne's pregnancy, Ali was taking great pains to prepare a healthy and delicious lunch. Suzanne could not tolerate beef, but she seemed fine with poultry, so Ali baked an herb chicken. In addition, she made a large batch of mashed potatoes, which were Suzanne's latest food craving.

The oven timer went off, and Ali took her long fork to poke the chicken. The skin was golden brown and smelled heavenly from her unique blend of herbs and seasonings. She was getting hungry and glanced at her watch. Where were the girls?

Suddenly, Fred started squawking loudly, which set off Ursula, who began barking. Ali was on her way to check on them when the elevator door opened. Lizzie held Snowball in her arms while

Marlon pranced around her, barking his hellos. The Labrador put his huge front paws on Lizzie's shoulders to reach her chin with his wet, slobbering tongue. Lizzie usually didn't mind Marlon's enthusiastic affection, but today she was not in the mood for it, so she did her best to calm down the perpetually happy lab.

Lizzie firmly admonished Marlon to sit down, but he jumped right back up, licking her with enthusiasm and then showering Snowball's nose with affection. The tiny Maltese promptly bit him, and the larger dog howled in pain and backed away. Ali believed that Marlon needed obedience training because he acted like Marley and Me on steroids.

"Jack doesn't mind being attacked by our giant love machine or living with the mess he creates. Just yesterday, he went to put on his shoes and found that Marlon drooled all over them. But instead of being pissed, he laughed it off. I wish Jack loved me as much as he loves Marlon. He dotes on our big galoot."

Unfortunately, the squawking and barking continued. Marlon looked around to see where the noise was coming from, and he began howling to be part of the crowd. On cue, Ursula barked louder, and Fred kept squawking. It was chaos, and Ali was worried. How would they manage to have a pleasant afternoon with all of the animals running amok?

Suzanne finally arrived with Precious, holding that cat's rhinestone-studded leash in her gloved hand. "It's freezing out. The weather channel said it was twenty-five degrees with the wind chill factor," she informed her friends, but they were too busy gawking at the cat to care about the weather report. The Himalayan wore a bright, pink-cable knit hat with bunny ears that tied under her chin and a matching sweater to ward off the cold. Little pink boots covered its paws.

Lizzie's lips twitched in amusement as she took in the pink sweater, the bunny hat, and the tiny boots. "That's an adorable outfit."

"Thanks," Suzanne responded. "The boots are great at keeping Precious's paws warm when she goes outside. I had to take

Precious for her daily walk so she wouldn't get antsy before we came over."

"The boots look so pretty in pink." Lizzie bit down on her tongue to stop herself from laughing at the outfit. "I'm curious. Does Precious fetch Seth's slippers when he comes home from work?" Suzanne gave Lizzie a dirty look, but Lizzie couldn't stop herself. The cat cracked her up. "What breed of dog is Precious again? I keep forgetting."

"Oh, you! Quit teasing me."

"It's hard," Lizzie admitted.

Ali said nothing because she loved dressing Fred in colorful flight suits. She also bought Ursula the latest in fashionable dog attire. The spaniel's wardrobe now included a faux fur mink coat for the winter, so how could she possibly make fun of Suzanne's cat?

"I love Precious in the hat and sweater. Wherever did you find them?" Ali asked.

Suzanne smiled and visibly relaxed. "I knitted them myself using patterns. I found that making clothes for Precious relaxes me and helps to take my mind off the morning sickness."

While the women chatted, Ursula ran in. The spaniel began jumping up and down and barking loudly to get Ali's attention. Then Fred flew into the room, squawking frantically, and Ali finally saw what the problem was. The cockatoo was dragging a panel of sheer window fabric across the floor. The material was attached to Fred's nails, and he was in a panic.

"Fred! Mommy's here. Don't worry! I'll help you."

The cockatoo landed at Ali's feet. As Fred struggled to be free, he became entangled in the soft chiffon-like fabric and made soft, sobbing noises that tore at Ali's heart.

"Help Fred, Mommy. *Squawk!*"

Ali carried the frightened bird over to the granite-work island. She spoke in a soothing tone to Fred until he calmed down. Then, rummaging through the kitchen drawer, Ali found scissors and used them to cut away the fabric that held the bird trapped.

The cockatoo looked up at Ali, his eyes pleading, and she knew what was coming. Only one thing made Fred's world a calm and happy place. "Want doodles, Mommy. Please? Fred loves Mommy. Doodles! Doodles!"

Ali fed the bird a few doodles and watched as Fred relaxed more with each bite.

"I'm so impressed with Fred," Suzanne said, slightly in awe of the cockatoo. "Precious is special because she is a dog trapped inside a feline body. But she certainly can't verbalize her thoughts the way Fred does." The Himalayan began purring loudly. "Ali, can Precious have a dog treat? She sounds hungry."

Ali fed Precious a treat, and the cat ate it as if she were starving and then meowed for another. "Here you go. Enjoy." Precious finished her treat and then turned over for a belly rub. As Ali stroked the cat's plump belly, the cat groaned, and Ali turned to look at Suzanne, who was smiling triumphantly. Lizzie stared at the Himalayan. For one fleeting moment, Lizzie entertained the possibility that maybe Precious was a dog trapped in a cat's body.

There's no way! It's a crazy cat. Don't get caught up in their madness.



Chapter Forty-Nine

Thankfully, Fred had fallen asleep, and Ursula lay curled up on one of the armchairs near the fireplace in the newly renovated kitchen. Marlon and Snowball sat quietly, occupied with chew toys that Ali filled with peanut butter paste. Hoping for some time to relax, the women entered the den and made themselves comfortable.

Suzanne took off her shoes and leaned against the down-filled cushions of the large sectional sofa. "This feels wonderful," she sighed. "I could stay here forever." The first trimester of pregnancy was tiring, and for the first time in her life, Suzanne began taking naps.

Lizzie added marshmallows to her hot cocoa when one of the dogs began howling loudly. It was a high-pitched noise, and Lizzie chalked it up to the fact that dogs can behave weirdly and tried to ignore it while enjoying the cocoa.

"What the hell is that?" Suzanne asked.

Ali jumped to her feet. She'd heard that sound before and knew what it was. "I've got to go to Ursula!"

Lizzie wondered why Ali got upset whenever one of her animals made a strange noise or acted oddly. "Dogs howl. It's no big deal."

"That was not normal howling, you ninny!"

Suzanne began worrying about the frightening noises the spaniel was making. “I hope Ursula’s all right. You know how much I love her. “As she spoke, nausea returned. “Ali, would you mind bringing me some dry crackers and a cup of tea? I’m feeling queasy again.”

“I’m sorry you’re feeling sick, Suze. I’ll get you the tea and crackers. You rest while Lizzie and I go and check on Ursula.”

Ali raced barefoot to the kitchen with Lizzie following. When they got there, Ali stood frozen in place. Marlon was behind Ursula, humping the small spaniel and thoroughly enjoying himself by the look on his face. The spaniel released another shrill scream, and Ali cringed at the sound.

“Ursula was a virgin, and Marlon took advantage of her!”

“Ali, don’t make a big deal about it.” Lizzie couldn’t help chuckling. “They’re just having doggy sex. Didn’t you or Steve ever bother getting Ursula spayed?”

“We were too frightened to do it,” Ali admitted. “It’s actual surgery.”

“But now, all the male dogs will chase after her. See for yourself. Marlon’s having a grand old time.”

“Quit looking so happy about your dog’s lascivious sexual appetite.”

As both women watched, the lab disengaged himself from Ursula and began sniffing Snowball’s privates. Lizzie could not believe her eyes, and she snatched up the Maltese. “Bad dog, Marlon! No!”

Ali was beside herself, laughing. “Who’s making a big deal now?”

“Jack promised he’d take the dogs to be spayed and neutered. Oh, hell—we both forgot to do it.”

Feeling embarrassed, Lizzie and Ali sat down and held their respective dogs protectively. Then, they watched in horror as Marlon turned his attention to Precious. Ali was closer, so she quickly scooped up the cat.

"Get him neutered this week," she warned Lizzie. "Your dog is sex-crazed. Now he wants to do it with Suzanne's cat!"

"You know the old saying. Any port in a storm."

"That's disgusting, Lizzie, and I'd appreciate it if you'd cool it with the wisecracks for a while. Just keep an eye on your dog while I bring Suzanne tea and crackers."

The lab yawned, farted, and then promptly fell asleep. "All that sex must have tuckered Marlon out," Lizzie remarked.

Ali glared daggers at her friend, then she busied herself arranging crackers on a platter. There would be no time to make Lizzie's cookie dough the way things were going, but Ali didn't care. She was drained and just wanted to relax and forget about the animals for a while.

The tea kettle whistled, and wanting to help, Lizzie brought over a coffee mug and a teabag to Ali as a peace offering. "I'm sorry about Marlon. His neutering is as good as done. I swear that I will take both our dogs to the vet this week. Marlon can be a royal pain at times, but despite that, I love him just as much as Jack does."

"I know you do, Lizzie. I never doubted it." Ali poured the steaming water into the mug and added lemon and honey. "Now, let's take the crackers and tea to our preggie."

They entered the den, and Suzanne was asleep, hugging a pillow. She must have heard them come in because she sat up and stretched like a contented cat. "That nap was just what I needed. I feel a lot better now."

Ali handed her the mug of tea. "This is hot, so sip it slowly."

Looking at her watch, Lizzie saw it was already half-past three. "Let's not forget about lunch. It's getting late."

"Suzanne, I baked a delicious herb chicken, especially for you. And for the sides, I made garlic mashed potatoes along with green beans and almonds. I'll warm the food, and then we can eat."

"That was so sweet of you to go to all that trouble. You stood there peeling and mashing all those potatoes and then crushing

and mixing fresh garlic into them," Suzanne said while her eyes welled with tears.

"That's how I do it," Ali said. "Only the best for my friend."

"I make the instant potatoes because it's faster and easier," Suzanne confessed, sniffling and wiping the tears away.

"What's the matter?" asked Ali.

"I don't know," Suzanne answered, still weepy.

"The pregnancy is making you over-emotional," Lizzie stated.

"I know it is, but it's worth it because Seth and I get to have a beautiful baby."

Ali wasn't worried about Suzanne and her hormones. Her attention was focused on Lizzie. Ali's typically effervescent friend sat quietly, watching the flames dancing in the fireplace while a dark aura settled around her. Things were getting worse between Lizzie and Jack. Thinking quickly, Ali came up with an idea to try and cheer Lizzie up. She suggested they all take turns talking about what the men did that annoyed them the most.

Ali asked Suzanne to go first. "Tell us what Seth does that drives you crazy."

Suzanne pondered the question. "Since we began living together, Seth turned out to be a big slob." She looked over at her friends to gauge their reactions and was surprised that neither of them seemed shocked. "He leaves his clothes all over. I find dirty socks on the furniture and wet towels on the bathroom floor. Seth's turning our beautiful new home into a mess after Ali went to the trouble of helping me to decorate it." Hungry, Suzanne nibbled a cracker while continuing on her mini-tirade. "And Seth's lazy. After we finish dinner, he never rinses his plate before he puts it in the dishwasher. Instead, he leaves the dirty dishes piled in the sink. So, of course, I end up rinsing the dishes, or it would never get done."

Ali was trying hard not to laugh, and Lizzie was practically peeing in her pants.

"And that's your big problem with Seth?" asked Lizzie.

"Yes, it is."

"Then you are blessed."

"You don't think Seth is a slob?"

Ali explained that Seth was displaying perfectly normal male behavior.

"Is Steve sloppy?" Suzanne asked Ali.

"Sure, he is."

"And it doesn't bother you?"

"Yes, it annoys me. Sometimes Steve leaves toilet paper crumbs on the bathroom floor. And I ask you—what could be grosser than that?"

"I have no idea," Suzanne admitted.

"There's more. Steve eats while he's walking, leaving a trail of crumbs. I have to vacuum up after him, and no matter how much I complain, he still does it."

Lizzie was laughing because Jack did that also. "Suze, don't you know that women are here for the sole purpose of cleaning up after men?"

"Oh—I almost forgot. Steve picks his nose while we watch television," Ali told her friends.

Suzanne made a face at that. "That's disgusting! Even Seth doesn't leave toilet paper crumbs in the bathroom or pick his nose."

"He's doing it when you're not around, so you won't catch him," Lizzie swore to Suzanne. "All men pick their nose and scratch their hairy balls. Consider it a miracle if Seth remembers to put the toilet seat down. I always check first, so I don't fall in."

Suzanne admitted that Seth always puts the toilet seat down, and he never complained about taking out the garbage.

"Don't sweat the small stuff," Ali advised Suzanne. "Life is too full of real problems."

Lizzie thought about her and Jack. She'd be thrilled if toilet paper crumbs and nose picking were her biggest woes. She wiped away some tears, and her friends urged her to talk about Jack.

"I don't even know where to begin." Lizzie tried to compose herself and bit back a sob. "Jack and I hardly make love anymore.

It picked up for a while when he first moved in, but that didn't last long. Jack comes home, and we have dinner. When we finish eating, Jack turns on the television to unwind. He watches the news and ESPN. Then he ignores me and stays glued to his precious La-Z-Boy, where he usually falls asleep. I love Jack, but I'm worried he doesn't love me anymore. At least not the way that he used to."

Suzanne had no idea things had gotten that bad between them, and she scooted over to comfort her. Lizzie was grateful for her friends. They were all she had in her miserable life.

"Lizzie, it takes two to tango, and both of you need to work on your relationship," Ali advised her.

"We love you so much," Suzanne added. "And we want to see you happy."

"I want to see me happy too."

"You will be, "Ali promised. "Things will work out, and you always have Suzanne and me to talk to."

"I know, and that helps a lot."

Ali left the room and returned with three crystal goblets filled with chilled sparkling water. "Let's make a toast to our friendship."

The three best friends sipped the water and thought about how the past year had changed their lives. Ali had found the love of her life, and now she was running a successful interior design business. Soon, Architectural Digest magazine would be photographing the penthouse for an upcoming issue. That was all well and good, but the problem with her parents was not going to go away anytime soon. Ali's mother was a lost cause, but her father loved her. At least, she hoped he did. But why wasn't he there for her anymore?

Suzanne was happily married to Seth, and she was carrying their child, but the memory of the rape still haunted her. There were days she never thought about it, and she desperately wanted to forget it ever happened, but how? And she was worried about Arianna. Her sister wasn't happy, and Suzanne suspected it had to do with the changes she was experiencing. She wanted to help her

twin, but she had no idea how to go about it. Arianna's problems were paranormal, and that was Steve's forte. Maybe Ali's husband could shed some light on what was happening to her sister.

Lizzie was happy with her career at Bloomingdale's, and her assistant buyer had turned into an asset, making Lizzie's job less stressful, but her personal life was in shambles. She and Jack were growing apart. Lizzie knew she could be a shrew at times, but Jack had been pushing her buttons to the point where she lost her temper over small things. Would couples counseling help them? Lizzie thought they should give it a try because she wanted to make things work between them.

Pushing their worries aside, the three women sat quietly, arms around each other, watching the sun begin to set over the city. They knew they shared a special friendship, and no matter what happened in their lives, they would always be there for each other.



Chapter Fifty

Going to couples' counseling was a colossal waste of time. So far, Jack and Lizzie had seen three therapists, all of them quacks. The latest psychologist was only interested in discussing their bedroom problems. Jack was fuming because when things were good between them, the sex was phenomenal. He grabbed Lizzie by the hand and hightailed it out of there.

Not one to give up easily, Lizzie tried to persuade Jack to visit one last therapist. Jack told Lizzie to stop trying to drag him to charlatans who only wanted to max out his American Express card.

The experience taught Jack that he was a lot more knowledgeable than the couple's counselors they visited, except when it came to their problems. Now was the time to quit the NYPD and put out his shingle. As a licensed and practicing psychologist, Jack looked forward to steadily increasing his bank account as he built up a clientele. Yet, despite the monetary compensation, he was nervous about making such an all-important life change. Jack had never asked for a reading with Steve, but now he desperately needed one. Steve would know if he was making the right career move.

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"We're sitting in a crowded, noisy bowling alley, and now you want your first reading with me?" Steve asked Jack incredulously.

"I didn't want Lizzie overhearing my plans, so this seemed like an opportune time to have you "look" on me. If we can't do it here, we'll go somewhere else when we finish bowling."

"Don't worry, Jack. I can block out the noise when needed, but first, watch me kick your butt."

"Dream on, Steverino. You'll be lucky to knock down three pins," Jack goaded his friend, knowing that Steve was as good a bowler as he was. Maybe better.

Steve lifted his ball, drew his arm back, and watched as the pins scattered. "Strike!"

The men finished a second game and went to the retro-style restaurant. They grabbed a booth and ordered their usual garlic fries and beer. Jack noticed the noise level was still loud, but Steve reassured him it wouldn't interfere with the reading.

"Ali will hate my breath, but this tastes so good, I don't care," Steve told Jack as he dipped the garlic fries in the ketchup. He listened while Jack explained about wanting to quit the police force and begin working as a psychologist.

"So, what do you think? Is it a good idea, or should I keep working for the NYPD?"

Steve was smiling when he answered Jack. "I have good news for you, my friend."

"Tell me. I'm on tenterhooks. What did you see?" Jack asked.

"Honestly, I've known you would make a career change since the night we met. When it was time, I knew you would come to the right decision, and I didn't want to influence you in any way, so I kept it to myself."

Jack took a swig of beer, feeling relief at Steve's words. "So switching to psychology is the path I was supposed to follow all along," Jack reiterated.

"Your karma is to help others in need, but not by working in law enforcement. You can change more lives for the better by

doing one on one counseling. This career move is an incredibly positive step."

Jack was thinking aloud about the many things involved in setting up a new office, and Steve wanted to allay some of his worries. "Get plenty of seating for your waiting room. At work, I meet dozens of people who need a good therapist. Now I can refer them to you."

"I appreciate your help, Steve. My biggest worry was finding enough clients." Jack ate another delicious forkful of the greasy fries and washed them down with more beer. "I'm so happy I could kiss you."

"I think I'll pass on the kiss. You have garlic breath."

*****

Jack spent the better part of the next few weeks working with a real estate agent. Together they found the perfect professional suite to set up the office. The space met most of Jack's criteria and was within his budget. After handing in his resignation at work, Jack felt free for the first time in ages. There would be no more long hours and pitiful paychecks. More importantly, he would not be involved in dangerous assignments that put his life at risk.

So far, Jack kept his career change a secret from Lizzie. But now, with everything set in place, he was ready to tell her the good news, but unfortunately, she was working late. With this being a special occasion, Jack made their reservations at Tavern on the Green for the following evening. He planned to tell Lizzie everything while they indulged in a delicious meal.

Feeling happy, Jack called a nearby diner that delivered. He ordered two bacon cheeseburgers, onion rings, and French fries for himself. He asked for burgers with no spices and two sides of mashed potatoes for the dogs. When the order was delivered, Jack cut the burgers into bite-sized pieces. Then he placed two dog bowls filled with the delicious treat on the floor.

Marlon and Snowball had a field day eating the hamburger, and especially the mashed potatoes. Marlon looked up at Jack with mashed potato all over his muzzle. The big galoot had the biggest doggy grin Jack had ever seen. After licking the bowl clean, he was already begging for more.

Snowball was not the dainty miss as she chowed down on the meal. Jack had cut her hamburger into small pieces, and she was yapping happily in between bites. Mash potatoes stuck to Snowball's long white fur, and Jack thought the Maltese looked adorably messy. He was finishing his second burger when Lizzie suddenly appeared. She stood silently, her face a mask of anger as she took in the mess they had made. Then, still fuming, she walked over to Jack.

"Are you out of your mind giving the dogs mashed potatoes? Snowball has clumps of potato stuck to her fur! Now I'll have to bathe her, and I'm exhausted from work. How could you be so irresponsible, Jack? And look at Marlon. He's getting the food all over my kitchen floor."

"Shut up, Lizzie! Just shut the fuck up!" Jack had finally been feeling good about his life, and Lizzie had to go and spoil everything again with her big mouth.

Lizzie turned as white as a ghost, never having seen Jack that angry before.

Jack saw the look of disgust on Lizzie's face as she looked at the porcelain tiled floor. "I intended to clean up the kitchen and both our dogs before you came home. You were supposed to work late tonight. Remember? Is it my fault you left work early without even bothering to call and let me know? Lizzie, I cannot take your nagging anymore. You're driving me crazy!" he screamed at her.

Jack rubbed his temples as another tension headache began building. Lizzie was standing there in shock, knowing she had gone too far this time. But there was no way she could take the words back. "I want my old Lizzie back. She wouldn't have minded the mess. She would have joined in and eaten the burgers and not given a damn about the kitchen. Where did that Lizzie go?"

Lizzie cleaned the floor with a roll of paper toweling and a bottle of Windex. What Jack said was the truth. She used to be fun, but now, all she did was nag him, and he had every right to lose his temper. Lizzie could not bear to look at Jack. He would see the shame written on her face, so she continued wiping down the tiles. After cleaning the floor, Lizzie lifted Snowball and carried the small terrier to the bathroom to bathe her. The Maltese struggled to get free, wanting to return to the kitchen and eat more potatoes.

"Come on, Marlon," Jack told the Labrador. "We're not wanted here."

It was freezing with the wind chill, so Jack grabbed his sheepskin jacket and retrieved Marlon's coat and leash. He needed a long walk to clear his head and forget about Lizzie's latest temper tantrum. Marlon tugged at the leash when they got to the dog park. The Labrador had made friends with a tiny, dappled dachshund and a large Irish wolfhound that frequented the park. Jack thought watching the canine trio was the funniest thing he'd ever seen because the pack leader was the little wiener dog. Marlon and the wolfhound followed the dachshund around as it barked orders at the two larger dogs.

The park was one of the few places where Jack could relax. He threw a Frisbee, and the lab leaped high in the air to catch it. Jack threw it again, and Marlon barked as he chased after it. After countless tosses, Marlon began panting, and Jack didn't want to overexert him. The dog kept jumping and begging for Jack to toss the Frisbee again.

"Later, boy. Let's go find a bench and take a load off."

Jack loved the lab more than he had thought possible. Sensing his sadness, Marlon smothered his face in wet kisses, and Jack hugged his best buddy, needing the love the dog provided.

*****

When Jack got home, Lizzie was not there. He'd been hoping to sit her down and discuss their relationship. Unfortunately, that

would have to wait, so Jack opened the fridge and brought an ice-cold six-pack of beer over to his favorite chair. He leaned back in the recliner and sighed as it surrounded his body with its buttery soft leather. It was the one piece of furniture Jack had contributed to the co-op. Of course, Lizzie had protested and wanted to replace it with another chintz-covered chair, but Jack had put his foot down. He was entitled to have at least one piece of his furniture in the living room.

Jack channel surfed until he found an Indiana Jones movie. He leaned back and sipped can after can of beer methodically as the film progressed. He needed to forget about their latest fight, but Budweiser and Hamilton Ford weren't helping, so Jack shut the television and decided to do some deep breathing to help him relax. It was working, so Jack kept it up. Soon he felt lighter than air, and it was a fantastic feeling, and he closed his eyes as sleep came.

Someone was kissing him. Jack felt his shirt opening, and warm hands began massaging his chest. "Umm. That feels good," he mumbled.

Lizzie led Jack to the bedroom. At the sight of the bed, all he wanted to do was to go back to sleep, but Lizzie had other plans. "I'm so sorry about what happened earlier. You were right. I used to be fun, and I've changed. But Jack, I'm going to try my best to be the girl you fell in love with. Please let me make it up to you." Her voice was pleading.

Jack couldn't believe his ears. Lizzie was asking for his forgiveness. Would wonders never cease? As Jack watched, Lizzie removed her clothes. He was cognizant enough to know that sex was not the answer to their problems. He told Lizzie that they needed to talk, but Lizzie ignored his words. She pushed him back against the pillows, and Jack was too exhausted to stop her. Her fingers fumbled with his pants zipper and pulled it down. To her dismay, Jack was not fully erect, but Lizzie quickly took care of that problem.

"I need you, Jack."

Lizzie rolled a condom on him. Then she slowly lowered herself onto Jack's erection. He held her hips while she rode him, but he became soft and slid out after a few short minutes. That had never happened before, and Jack was embarrassed. Lizzie should not have demanded sex after what happened earlier. Fueled by anger, Jack grew hard. He tossed Lizzie onto her back and thrust home. Lizzie was moaning and crying out. Jack knew he should stop, but he couldn't. Lust and anger were a powerful combination.

He surged toward completion and cried out as he climaxed. Lizzie expected an encore performance, but that was not about to happen. Jack was physically and mentally exhausted, so he turned onto his side and fell asleep. Lizzie bent over to kiss him, but a snore emerged from his lips.

Feeling dejected, Lizzie went to shower and thought about what had just happened between her and Jack. She was the one to initiate their lovemaking, and Jack couldn't keep his erection. Their old passion was gone, replaced by bitterness and anger. As Lizzie stood under the hot water, her eyes filled with tears. Jack was right. Sex was not the answer to their problems.

After drying her hair, Lizzie looked over at Jack. Needing to touch him, she moved tentatively toward the bed and lightly ran her hand across his shoulder. She bent down to kiss his cheek, and he didn't stir. Lizzie lay beside Jack and moved closer to feel his body heat and smell his unique scent. She lay there, crying softly into her pillow until sleep mercifully came.

Snowball climbed the dog steps to the bed and snuggled against Lizzie as she slept. Unconsciously she cuddled the small white dog to her. More tears escaped as she dreamed about what she and Jack had once had. But then she'd thrown it away like the leftovers that lay stale in the kitchen trash.



Chapter Fifty-One

Jack awoke, feeling like crap. Too much beer after eating a great deal of fried food had upset Jack's stomach. He opened the medicine cabinet, searching for an antacid. Finding some, he drank it straight from the bottle. As Jack waited for the chalky-tasting medicine to work, he remembered how Lizzie had refused to talk to him and only wanted sex, and his anger escalated.

As Jack wallowed in morbidity, Marlon bounded in and almost knocked Jack down in his enthusiasm. "Sit!" he ordered the overeager lab, but Marlon jumped up again, desperate for affection.

Ahwoo! Woof! Woof! Ahwoo!

Keeping his voice steady and calm, Jack ordered Marlon to sit and stay, and this time the lab obeyed. He whined, hanging his head in sorrow, and then lay down. Jack bent to scratch Marlon behind the ears and told the dog what a good boy he was, rewarding him with a treat.

Jack was not leaving the apartment until he and Lizzie had their talk. Then, gathering his courage, he went back into the bedroom. Lizzie was still asleep, so he gently nudged her. Snowball peered up at Jack, and he lifted the little ball of white fluff and hugged the affectionate Maltese. Like Marlon, she wanted more

cuddles, but Jack set her down on the floor. He needed the time alone with Lizzie.

"Lizzie. Wake up."

"Whatsa matter?" she mumbled. "I'm sleeping."

"We need to talk."

Yawning, Lizzie rubbed her eyes, trying to wipe away the last vestiges of sleep. Finally, she forced herself to sit up and pushed back the covers. Now cognizant and fully awake, she saw that Jack was looking at her with a serious expression on his face. Lizzie was afraid Jack might have packed up and left during the night, but he was still there, thankfully.

She hugged Jack to her and sobbed on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Jack. I should never have forced you to have sex with me last night. Please forgive me. I'm begging you and ready to talk about our relationship."

"Really?"

"Really and truly. Cross my heart and hope to die. Feeling overwhelmed with guilt, I did some soul searching and realized that almost everything that went wrong between us was my fault."

"And when did you come to that momentous conclusion?" asked the cynical psychologist that lived inside Jack.

"This might sound strange, but it happened while I was down on my hands and knees, cleaning the kitchen floor. The realization of how badly I had screwed up hit me like a ton of bricks. I was wrong and should never have lost my temper. What you said was true. In the past, I'd have grabbed a burger and eaten along with you and our dogs. I wouldn't have cared about the food on the floor." Jack looked at Lizzie skeptically, and she knew what he was thinking. "That's not entirely true. The mess would have bothered me, but I'd have cleaned it up later. Can you forgive me, Jack?"

Jack saw real fear in Lizzie's eyes for the very first time. "Baby, I can forgive you for last night, but what about all the other times? Let's face it. You never wanted to become engaged to me. I forced you into it."

The tears were coming fast and furious now. “I wanted to be engaged because I love you, but I was frightened, so I tried to postpone it. Jack, I’ve spent most of my entire adult life running from commitment. But I don’t want to lose the best thing that’s ever happened to me because I’m a neurotic fool. I can change. Please believe me.”

“Promises are all well and good, but I can’t live like this anymore, and I’m sure you don’t want to either.”

Lizzie glanced at the bedside clock and saw she was running late for work. She gave Jack a quick kiss and told him that she’d leave work early to continue their talk. Rushing, Lizzie pulled on the first clothes she found. In a panic, she skipped doing her makeup and didn’t bother running a brush through her unruly curls. Grabbing her handbag, she rushed out the door and never even noticed that her shoes were mismatched.

Jack went into the living room and collapsed on the sofa. Closing his eyes, he remembered the night they first met. After humiliating Lizzie in the worst possible way, she found it in her heart to forgive Jack and give him a second chance. Now Lizzie was the one doing the asking, but Jack didn’t know if he had the strength left to give it another try. Needing something to eat, he got down a box of cereal. He heard the front door open as he spooned sugar in his bran flakes, and Lizzie walked into the kitchen.

“I need to change my shoes.” She looked down at her feet. “They don’t match.”

But instead of heading to the bedroom to switch out her shoes, Lizzie sat down at the kitchen table. Despondent, she held her head in her hands and began weeping. In between sobs, she lifted her eyes and looked at Jack. “That was a lie. I couldn’t wait until this evening for us to talk. Jack, you are what matters most to me. Not my job at Bloomingdale’s.”

Jack pushed his cereal away. “I’m listening.”

“I know I’ve put both of us through hell because I’m the world’s biggest fool.” Lizzie’s emotions were in a state of chaos,

but she forced herself to continue. “Oh, God! Talking about this is so much harder than I thought it would be.”

Jack placed his hand over hers. “Come on, Lizzie. Please tell me what you want to say. It’s now or never.”

Steeling herself, Lizzie forged ahead. “I love you more than I ever thought possible.” Jack looked at her skeptically. “I know my actions haven’t shown that. All I can say in my defense is that I’ve been worried that my endless insecurities would drive you crazy. That you would tire of needing to build up my self-esteem and want to end things between us, and honestly, I couldn’t blame you. The more I worried you would leave me, the more I nitpicked over unimportant things. But, Jack…” Lizzie stroked his cheek tenderly. “Today was a wake-up call for me. I could not imagine going through life without you. Is there some way to put this behind us and make a fresh start?” she asked, realizing it might be too late for apologies and promises.

Lizzie’s confession filled Jack with tenderness. “Don’t cry, babe.” He pulled Lizzie into his arms and held her, stroking her soft-red curls. “Despite all the fights and the recriminations, I’ve never stopped loving you. Nothing’s ever going to change that.” Jack lifted Lizzie’s face for his kiss. “Don’t put all of the blame on yourself. I kept you at a distance, both emotionally and physically, to punish you for the night of the proposal. In retrospect, I should have let you know the truth about how hurt I was. We’re both at fault here, sweetheart, so stop berating yourself.”

Lizzie could not believe what she was hearing. She had thought everything was her fault, and here was Jack shouldering half the blame. All the barriers were now down. Holding Lizzie by the shoulders, Jack looked directly at her as he spoke, needing to understand her reaction. “I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer honestly even if you think it may hurt me.” Lizzie had no idea what Jack would say, and so she waited nervously. “Babe, are you ready to marry me and set a wedding date?”

Jack held his breath. Marriage was a lifetime commitment, and despite Lizzie's promises, her fears could still keep her from taking their relationship to the next level. Just then, the dogs ran in, barking, and Jack admonished them to be quiet. To his surprise, they obeyed and sat there quietly.

As Lizzie looked at Jack's beloved face, she felt the old trepidation that used to hold her firmly in its grasp slipping away, and with that revelation came relief and joy. "I couldn't be more ready." Jack was holding Lizzie's hands. When she was frightened or upset, her palms sweated, but now they were dry, and he took that as a good sign. "Jack, I'll use some of my sick days so we can get a license and be married. It's about time we tied the knot."

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

In answer to his question, Lizzie threw her arms around Jack and kissed him. Then she called Marie. Lizzie had to come up with a reason for taking some sick days, so she told the assistant buyer that she had suddenly come down with a stomach virus.

"Jeez, I'm sorry that you're ill," Marie told Lizzie, her voice filled with sympathy. "The stomach flu's been going around, and many people are out with it. Lizzie, don't worry about a thing. I've got everything covered. Take care of yourself and get well."

She thanked Marie and hung up, feeling euphoric. "I'm all set. Now it's your turn."

"I don't need to take time off because I handed in my resignation at work. I'm beginning a new career as a psychologist."

Relief washed through Lizzie, and she hugged Jack tight. "Thank God. Now I can stop worrying if you'll come home to me each night."

"You never told me how frightened you were."

"When we met, you said it was your dream to work for the NYPD, so I kept my mouth shut, which wasn't easy."

That was the truth. Lizzie tended to say whatever was on her mind. This one time, Jack wished she had told him how fearful she was for his safety. Maybe he would have decided to quit sooner—maybe not. He'd never know, but it wasn't important anymore.

"Lizzie, I signed a lease on the office space, and Steve will send me more than enough patients to get my practice started. I wanted to tell you last night, but I thought you were working late, so I decided to order in food and celebrate with our dogs."

"Oh my God! And I went and spoiled the best day of your life. *Damn! Damn! Damn!* I'm so sorry, Jack. I screwed up big time."

"Lizzie, don't worry about that because it's water under the bridge now. We're getting married, and I'll be working in a profession that pays well and has normal hours. So, babe, we're on the right track now, and nothing could possibly go wrong."



Epilogue

Janet Turner was fast asleep when she first heard the sound of knocking on her front door. The noise continued nonstop, loud enough to awaken the dead. Glancing at the bedside clock, Janet saw that it was 3 a.m. No sane person would be outside in the dead of winter at that ungodly hour. As she wiped the sleep from her eyes, the noise grew louder and more frantic, and Janet began to panic.

She remembered that Will kept a Glock 19 for protection, but thankfully he never had a reason to use it. After his death, Janet turned the handgun into the police. She didn't like the idea of keeping a firearm at home, but now she was rethinking that decision. After putting on a robe, she grabbed her smartphone and was about to answer the door when she stopped. What if a deranged person was waiting downstairs? Thinking quickly, she saw the antique letter opener lying on her desk. Janet clutched it tightly and slowly made her way down the winding oak staircase, doubting she would have the guts to stab a dangerous intruder but ready to call 911 if the need arose. Standing at her door, she peered through the glass peephole.

To her shock, a young woman stood there, shivering in the cold, while icy, wet snow dusted the streets and clung to her hair. Janet opened the door a crack, and a blast of cold air hit her.

Without giving thought to her safety, she ushered the stranger into her house. "You must be freezing," Janet blurted out.

"I am," the woman answered, hugging herself in an attempt to get warm. "I never knew what the cold felt like until now."

That remark made no sense to Janet, and she chose to ignore it for the time being. She turned up the heat and pointed the remote at the gas fireplace. The young woman was still shivering, so Janet took the cashmere throw from the sofa and wrapped it around her slender shoulders. The stranger rubbed her face on the soft wool and sighed in bliss, and Janet's heart squeezed at the sweet sound.

A mother's instinct was as much a part of Janet as breathing. She knew she had to get the woman warmed quickly, or she could end up with hypothermia and a trip to the ER. Janet led her through the darkened room to the overstuffed down-filled sofa. The woman seemed so young and vulnerable that she reminded Janet of a lost fledgling looking for its nest.

"Come, sit down. The heat's on, and soon you should be feeling warmer." Then Janet raced upstairs and grabbed the thick chenille bathrobe that belonged to Suzanne and one of her daughter's flannel nightgowns, plus a pair of angora wool socks to provide some much-needed warmth.

When she returned with the clothes, she handed them to the woman, who quickly peeled off her cold, wet garments and gratefully put the nightgown on. Then she wrapped herself in the robe, loving the feel of the soft chenille, and put the socks on her icy cold feet. She sat back on the sofa, wondering if she would ever get warm enough.

"I'm going to make you a nice hot cup of tea with honey. Young lady, I have no idea why you were outside my house in the dead of night, but there will be time for answers later after I know you are alright."

In the kitchen, Janet filled the teapot with water, setting it on the burner. When it came to a boil, she added an Earl Grey tea bag and a dollop of honey with a squeeze of lemon. The stranger stared at the mug of tea as Janet set it down before her on the

coffee table. But instead of sipping the tea as Janet believed she would, she seemed frightened at the sight of the mug filled with amber-colored liquid.

"I never drank anything before. Does it taste good? Will I like it?"

That remark was even odder than the one she made about never having felt the cold before, and Janet was at a loss for words. Could exposure to the elements have addled her senses? "Sip it slowly. The tea is hot."

"Umm, I like this drink," the stranger told Janet, who looked on approvingly.

As she continued sipping the tea, her shivering lessened, and Janet felt a modicum of relief. "Drink some more," she encouraged her guest.

The young woman finished the tea and ate a large slice of apple crumb cake that Janet convinced her to try. She licked the fork clean and asked if she could have another piece.

"Of course, you can. My daughter will be so pleased that you enjoyed the cake. Suzanne has become a proficient baker since she married and moved into her new home."

"Thank you for the food. It was delicious." The young woman glanced around the room and became visibly frightened. "It's so dark in here," she remarked. "Where I come from, the sun shines all the time. Could we have more light?" she asked, fear evident in her voice.

Janet shook her head in wonder. The woman was an enigma with the odd things she said, but despite that, Janet wanted to make her feel as comfortable as possible. The visitor was afraid of the dark, so Janet flipped on the light switch. Recessed lighting illuminated the living room with its coffered ceiling and built-in bookcases surrounding the fireplace. She and Will furnished it together years ago, and everything in the room carried warm memories. Janet and her late husband owned several homes, but the Forest Hills Gardens house was their first purchase as newlyweds, and it held a special meaning for Janet.

The room was charming with its large bay window and warm woods. The furniture was a mixture of plaid and floral fabrics, and a thick plush rug covered the newly polished oak floor. The fireplace mantel held cherished family photos, several from Suzanne and Seth's wedding. Janet looked forward to adding pictures of her first grandchild to the collection. One photo was of her and Will on their wedding day, and Janet's eyes lingered on their image. Everything was new and wonderful back then before cancer entered their lives, shattering it and taking their joy away.

The firelight had cast shadows over both women, hiding their features from view. With the room now bathed in light, Janet could see her visitor clearly for the first time. She gasped as she gazed upon the young woman who had shown up at her door, seemingly out of nowhere. The almond-shaped eyes seemed so familiar. The lips were full, and she had a perfect oval-shaped face with high cheekbones. The woman was lovely, and looked so much like Suzanne it was startling.

Overcome with emotion, Arianna drank in the sight of her mother. She desperately wanted to fling herself into Janet's arms and cling tight but refrained for fear of frightening her. "Don't you know who I am?" Arianna remembered asking her twin almost the same question when they first met in the afterlife.

Janet shook her head no. That was when she noticed the visitor's eyes were a vivid blue, the same unique shade she and Suzanne shared. Janet gripped the arm of the sofa and wondered what in God's name was happening.

Arianna moved closer to Janet. Tenderly she held the older woman's hands in hers. She felt exaltation at touching Janet for the first time since infancy, and her eyes welled with tears. "They decided to give me a second chance, Mother. I've come home."