

SNIFFING *out* MURDER

Mina #Seven



CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

Maria Grazia Swan

BEST SELLING AUTHOR

Sniffing Out Murder

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I would like to dedicate this book to all the volunteers, here and everywhere. These selfless people are our hope to stop the daily killing of countless, innocent pets.

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CHAPTER 1

Kalinda's newly remodeled home offered its shiny terracotta roof tiles to the morning sun. "That song 'It Never Rains in Southern California' turned out to be a big, fat lie." Mina said to the three cats atop the cushy bed lazily watching her every move. "We had enough rain last night to kayak down the road."

She stepped away from the bedroom second-story window, the only spot in the house that allowed a peek at Kalinda's old Santa Barbara style home. "Okay guys, let's go if you want to eat. You know the rules—we eat in the kitchen, even guests." She shook her finger at Zeus, the guest.

Aria and Houdini scrambled off the bed, catching up to her on the way down the stairs, but poor declawed Zeus moved slowly. Mina stopped and waited then picked up the shy calico and carried him down to the kitchen. She still couldn't get used to the way Houdini and Zeus looked alike. Two male calicos with similar looks and opposite personalities. In Millie's absence, Zeus stayed at the house. All three cats shared the same pet drinking fountain, but with their food, it wasn't so simple. Millie left enough dry and canned food for Zeus to fill a pantry shelf.

The first day had been chaotic, with Aria, ever the princess, nibbling on the guest's moist morsel, probably out of curiosity. She'd lost interest pretty fast. Houdini

was different, at first he'd acted more like an alpha dog than the house cat. Thanks to Zeus's submissiveness, he quickly settled on just chummy. Good kitty.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the sunny kitchen, yet it wasn't enough to offset the smell of tuna coming from Zeus's gourmet canned food. *Eww.*

Note to self—*put aside all that stinky cat food.* Millie can give it to her cat when she's back.

Mina headed for the front door to get her newspaper. It should be by the mat slightly to the left but not too close to the bushes. Burgeoning spring leaves on the tall tree reflected in the puddles lingering on the driveway. Reminders of the night rain and of sunny days ahead. But no newspaper.

She tipped the carrier enough to make sure the paper hadn't landed on her precious geraniums. One of the few potted flowers she'd managed not to kill.

These days newspapers were delivered by car. A rolled down driver window and a strong arm, and voila. With some luck the flying object would land on the targeted spot—or not.

Must have been the substitute, an older woman who couldn't throw with enough strength to get it over the low wall. A quick glance told Mina the road was clear. She clicked on the gate and rushed outside to collect her precious newspaper—messenger of news, good, bad, and anything in between. It must have hit the wall and bounced back into the street.

There she was, once again, running around in her pajamas and bedroom slippers. After living in the house for four years, all the neighbors and their friends had seen her in her night attire at least once.

Beep-beep. Bent over, gripping the paper—the honking felt close and personal and above all, loud. She

jumped up, and a side glance told the story. The shining front bumper of Detective Dan De Fiore's black Ford purred inches from her silk pajamas bottom. She shook her head and approached the driver's side, leaning toward the open window.

"Well, well, look who's paying a visit. What's up De Fiore? Chasing bad guys in this little corner of paradise?"

Strange, the top button of his shirt was unfastened with no tie. The detective had a thing about ties, imported silk ties.

"What happened to your tie?" she asked.

"You don't miss much, do you?" Still sitting in his car. "I didn't get a chance to go home and change, spent most of the night at the office, but I promised Kalinda I'd stop by her place."

"Come on in, De Fiore. I just made coffee."

"*You* made coffee?" His Asian eyes smiled.

"Hey, I'm Italian. You can always count on coffee and wine, okay?"

"Can I leave my car here?" He paused. "Mina, don't turn around. We have a visitor."

"A what?"

"It's Houdini, your cat. He's walking along the top of the wall. Will he run if we call him?"

"Damn, again? How does he do that? I'm sure I closed the door."

"He's coming this way. Very close. What do you want me to do?"

"I have to catch him. I'm cat sitting Zeus for Millie." She turned around just as Houdini leaped through the air and landed on the car, inches from the open driver's window. Nuzzling here and there to De Fiore's amused grin.

“Good boy, Houdini, greeting our guest.” She grabbed him with both arms, dropping the newspaper. “De Fiore, can you bring in the paper? I’m not letting the escape artist go.” She hurried toward the house.

They had coffee in the living room to dodge the lingering smell of tuna.

“How is Kalinda?” Mina asked.

“Well, she’s learning to stand. Imagine that—she can stand.” Emotion hampered his voice. “I can’t tell you much because everything is at the experimental stage. She’s a volunteer guinea pig if you want. She insists it isn’t prosthesis being used, but a magic prosthetic.” A bashful smile. De Fiore bashful? Totally unexpected. “With advances in the biomedical sciences, the devices have been integrated with body tissues, including the nervous system. Very sophisticated and responding closely to approximating normal movements. She chided that she’s growing new legs. Do I sound like I know what I’m talking about?” He shook his head.

“Wow. Wouldn’t it be great if she could actually stand? She’d be so tall and regal. I will never forget that evening, before the—accident. When she got out of her DeLorean, she looked like a movie star... that was when I found out she actually was known as the Matchmaker to the Stars.”

“Funny you should mention her height.” He set his coffee cup on the low table and petted Aria who was rolled up next to him. “She keeps saying how sorry she is to have made all those changes to her home. If she can stand, she may not need them. Perhaps that’s the reason she stopped the remodeling when she left for Texas Medical facilities.”

“Yes. That created a chain reaction,” Mina said.

“A chain reaction? What are you talking about?”

“We, I mean Millie and I thought it would be the perfect time to get the Ritzys Cats B&B spruced up. You know, paint, a bit of remodeling. Millie planned her vacation around the chosen time, and I didn’t book any cats for the two weeks we had scheduled, and then, just like that, the workers disappeared. Kalinda left, and the house is all locked up. Any idea how I can get in touch with the crew she had there working? And what about the service dog? Is she moving forward, or is it also on hold? I suppose you’re aware you’re the only soul she communicates with. Right De Fiore?”

Did he blush?

“Huh, no. Did not know that. She wants the dog. She’s hoping he will be fully trained by the time she’s back. Don’t you have her phone number? Certainly she must stay in touch with Diego. It was your boyfriend, who helped her land that coveted spot for the experimental rehabilitation.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? My so-called boyfriend keeps anything and everything related to his *profession* as hidden from me as possible. I’m learning to accept that. *Maledizione*, how did we get on that subject? Now I’ll be thinking about him all day. Thanks a lot, De Fiore.”

“Stop complaining. I bet he’s only a phone call away.” Zeus appeared at the top of the stairs, quietly sat, and looked at them. “This is the first time I’ve seen both calicos together,” De Fiore said. “Hard to believe it was what? Two years ago? You went from one cat to three, reconnected with Diego, and ended up with a fat check for your foundation from that Greek spitfire. What was her name again? Can’t remember.” He looked at Zeus up on top of the stairs. “Hope you feed daily caviar to that Houdini of yours, he was the one to help you catch the

catnapper. Hey, I've got to get moving. I have a meeting down in Oceanside." A sigh. "It's going to be a long day. I'll ask Kalinda about the company doing the remodeling. Thanks for the coffee. You stay out of trouble. You hear me?"

He petted Aria one last time and got up to leave as Mina's phone chimed. "Work," she said to the Detective before closing the front door behind him and acknowledging that once again she couldn't figure out if De Fiore and Kalinda were lovers, or friends, or maybe both.

She sighed. Relationships were so complicated. Her eyes on Houdini busily grooming himself, or pretending to. Little weasel. Her thoughts on Diego, the love of her life, and even more unpredictable than her cat.

CHAPTER 2

“When did they call?” Mina kept her eyes on the road. Maybe she should pull over, park somewhere, and take notes. “Give me a minute to find a place to stop, write this down. Call you back.” She parked her silver Ford LTD in front of a Mobil gas station and called Linda at the Furry Friends Foundation, the animal rescue shelter Mina had started a few years back. “And we are sure it’s one of our own? I’m confused. Are they saying one of our dogs ran off and ended up there? Are we missing a dog?” It had happened before.

“No, Mina,” Linda explained. “It’s a dog that someone adopted from FFF. It was found roaming the streets of San Clemente and turned over to Coastal Animal Service. That’s where they discovered the microchip, but the phone number associated to it is disconnected. They called us as a courtesy. What do you want to do?” Linda was highly efficient—one big reason Mina gladly had her manage the shelter.

“Hmm, let me think. We don’t know which dog. Do we?”

“No, only that’s a male. They were very busy, and I didn’t want to take up too much of their time. They suggested we get it right away so they don’t need to do intake and then release papers. Can’t blame them really.”

“Good point. Oh, what the heck, small detour. I’ll go pick him up. If he’s rambunctious I’ll ask to borrow a

small cage and put down my back seat. Maybe I'll get lucky, and it's a Chihuahua. See you. Is everything okay?"

"Peachy smooth and wet." Linda laughed and hung up.

One look and it all came back. Aspen was the name they had picked for him at FFF. No way of knowing what name he went by now. Names changed but not the dark eyes with their sad, pleading expression many hounds were known for. Would he remember her? Mina offered her hands for the dog to sniff. The volunteer holding the leash seemed impatient. "One of yours?"

Mina nodded. "Was... and yes. I'll take him. Is he okay? Any problem?"

"He was limping when we picked him up. Back leg." She pointed to Aspen's bandaged right rear leg. "Nothing serious, small cut, scrapes. He seems quiet, sad. Collar, nothing else."

Mina showed the collar and the leash she brought with her. "I keep a supply in the car at all times, you never know when it will come in handy." She smiled at the volunteer who smiled back.

Less than thirty minutes later, Mina had Aspen sitting quietly in the back seat. She had a copy of the papers turned in by the worker who'd gone to pick him up. They'd found him by the train tracks in proximity of the San Clemente Pier. He'd been wet, may have been wandering around all night. This wasn't the first time the two shelters had collaborated, so transfer was somewhat easier.

She didn't get to Interstate Five Northbound until around noon, having taken the quickest route to the office in case the rescued dog needed to go. Mina

glanced at him from her rear view mirror. Quite a nice looking dog, medium size, and by the luster of his reddish coat he couldn't have been on the streets too long. He should be what? Three years old?

She seemed to remember that Tom, yes, Tom the security guard, had found Aspen, a puppy back then, hiding by the bathrooms in a rest area off Interstate Five. Tom had happened to be driving back from San Diego after visiting his wife who had been undergoing cancer treatments at Scripps. The puppy had been in bad shape, had what looked like buck shots on his back. Not open wounds, more like pellets' grazing. That had Tom wondering if it could be accidental, with the proximity to Camp Pendleton and all.

And that was how Aspen ended up at FFF.

Every volunteer had fallen in love with this coonhound mix, the eyes full of sorrow, the endless sweet attitude. A puppy that never barked or complained. Always ready for a walk, easy on the leash, the only time he acted spooked was when a dark-skinned, burly man would approach. They had all decided that was a reminder of the tormentor? In less than three months Aspen was healthy, neutered, and vaccinated. Unfortunately Mina couldn't remember when he was adopted or who had adopted him. No biggie, the shelter's records were but a click of the mouse away and went back years. She looked at the dog again and met his eyes. *How can anyone abandon such a soulful creature?* With a little bit of luck, she hoped to find out.

Both Linda and Leigh remembered Aspen and were oohing and aahing at how much he had grown and how handsome a dog he'd turned out to be. They offered him a bowl of water, and he drank with great enthusiasm and

much splattering on the concrete floor decorated with painted black paws.

Did he remember? The barking coming from the back rooms where the largest dogs waited for their forever families to find them didn't seem to faze Aspen. Neither did the churning of the loud and overworked washing machine behind the closet door. "Can't wait to see Tom's face when he finds out that Aspen is back," Linda said. "He always regretted not adopting him. Of course with his wife dying, it would have been a difficult decision. Well, here is his second chance."

"What are you saying? We need to locate the rightful owners. Aspen, or whatever his name is, doesn't look like a pet who's been abused or abandoned. For all we know, they could be going nuts trying to find him. Let's ask one of the kids to do an Internet search. Who should we ask?" Mina looked at Linda for answers.

"Sky is coming in at four. She'll be in the cats' room. I'll ask her. We should post a few pics. Let me take him for a quick run, and then we can put him in the large crate. What do you say?"

Mina nodded. "We have to isolate him until we're sure he's clear. I don't want to bug Roger. He was just here. First things first, do we know who adopted him from us?"

"Let's switch places. Mina, you check the old records, and I'll take him around the block. I'll be back before we open officially to the public. I doubt we'll get super busy on a Monday, but you never know."

"Good idea. Oh, keep an eye on his leg. See the bandage? It may be nothing, but we won't know for sure until we get him checked out. Okay, let's see who Aspen's family was."

There were two ways of searching, alphabetically or by date. She tried under A because she simply had no clue as to when Aspen had been adopted. And she felt guilty about it. She who always bragged about knowing all the four-legged friends that ever crossed the shelter's doors. When Aspen's file popped up it all became clear—April 30. National Adopt a Shelter Pet Day. Of course. The busiest day of the year, every year. Extra help would pitch in. One year they had a group of Boy Scouts helping parade dogs in and out from the back yard to the front parking lot. And two years ago there'd been a television crew showing dogs all prettily groomed, with bows and bandannas... that was when Aspen had been adopted. He'd gone home with a single mom of two boys. No other pets in the home. Isabel Cordero could afford the adoption because all fees were cut in half for that special event. Leigh had done the paperwork. Mina had kept busy giving tours of the shelter, and Linda had done the interview. As usual, she was the best at pitching the foundation's importance for the community. With her smooth, saucy presentation she was so good. They did very well that year, indeed.

Mina snapped out of her reverie when Linda came back with Aspen in tow.

"The leg seems fine. Find it?" Linda asked.

"Uh-huh, I think the phone number we have on the application is the same one connected with the microchip. It's a San Clemente address on Mariposa. Makes sense since the dog was found wandering around the train track in San Clemente. Let me make a copy of this, and I'll go pay a visit. If no one is there I'll talk to the neighbors in case they moved and the dog got lost. What do you think?"

"Works for me. I still think we need to do the Internet search first, especially if there were teenagers in the home." A loud crash came from the cat room..."Darn, I bet it's that new tabby. She's terrorizing all the kittens. Here take this. I'm going to check." Linda handed Aspen's leash to Mina and took off to the cat room. Mina found herself smiling. The cats often acted like little brats regardless of age, too busy competing with each other to get into serious fights.

With the dogs it was very different. Some of the small dogs yelped constantly. Others became depressed and refused to eat, just sleeping or pretending to. The few large dogs were in a room by themselves because they were indeed loud. On a scale of one-to-ten, Aspen was as close to a perfect ten as possible, based on rescued-dogs scale of course.

She could drive to the address on the original adoption papers after five, better chances of finding people at home. "Come on, sweetie, let's find you a cozy place with a soft blanket and some dry food." Better avoid calling him by his old name so as not to confuse him.

She walked him to the small room with the Dutch door where they provided low cost vaccinations on weekends. By closing the bottom part and leaving the top open Aspen could see people and pets coming and going from the front office to the back rooms without getting out. He had plenty of dry food, water, a blanket, and a tennis ball to keep him entertained. Instead, he made himself comfy on the blanket and went to sleep.

One of the older women who fostered kittens came by with a plate of freshly baked brownies, so Leigh made coffee, and they all sat around the table where most of the adoption papers were signed, eating, sipping coffee,

and discussing Aspen. But only Linda, Leigh, and Mina were familiar with the dog's past.

This was the perfect day for catching up with the never-ending laundry—towels, blankets, and the washable toys dogs of all sizes liked to chew on. Most items were donated.

"I wish I could find some affordable handyman to come and take care of the Ritzy Cats B&B before Millie gets back," Mina said. "What a fiasco my poor planning got me. Wasted a whole week. Millie is coming back Saturday convinced she'll find her place freshly painted in the pale, sunny yellow she picked. Will she be unpleasantly surprised! And then the Tuesday after that we're booked to start taking in cats for boarding again. Ah! What a mess. Help?"

"Are you serious?" the brownie baker asked. "What happened? Didn't you hire the construction people working on your friend's home?"

Mina nodded, still chewing. "Kalinda left in a hurry, and so did the workers. Have no idea how to contact the workers or Kalinda."

"Ask Tom," Linda suggested.

"Tom? Security guard Tom? Why? Is he a house painter?"

"Nooo. You see, he's old, but not too old and has many retired friends. Most of them sit home getting bored. I bet they'd jump at the chance to make some money. What have you got to lose?" Linda said.

"You're right. You're absolutely right. I'll do that. What time does he come in?"

"He's usually here around six. By here I mean in the complex. Since his wife died he's alone, so he comes early, picks up fast food and goes to sit with the people at the janitorial service office. He hangs out with them, and

he starts his shift once they're done. If you leave early to go down to San Clemente, I'll lock up and keep an eye out for him. If he's interested I'll have him call you, how is that?"

"That would be terrific, Linda. Great idea. Thanks." Mina got up and gathered the dirty mugs and paper plates, thinking it better to clean up in case someone showed up to look at some sweet pet.

Linda went back to the front desk while Leigh and the volunteer toured the cats' room.

Sky was taking photos of Aspen to post on social media when Mina left to go try to locate the dog's rightful owners.

CHAPTER 3

Too early for sunset, too late for sunbathing in spite of it being a glorious day. Meanwhile, back home in Italy it may be snowing. All those silly thoughts danced in Mina's head while she drove down Avenida Palizada on her way to West Mariposa.

This was the somewhat older part of San Clemente, with houses built before zoning was invented or enforced. Two-story houses with tiled roofs, three-car garages, and front lawns, luscious enough to compete with Encinitas meditation gardens, sat next to modest bungalows with more front doors than windows and no covered parking anywhere. The expensive homes should be the ones with commanding views, or so it seemed.

The address on the original adoption application belonged to one of the bungalows. Well, the street number did, but the letter B—*unit number*—was on one of the many doors that possibly opened into a small rental place hatched from a former garage. Faded shingle roofs and no double pane windows here. But it was neatly kept with even a few *de rigueur* blooming geraniums in colorful clay pots, perhaps crafted by some of the little cash, big dreams artistic souls living in the neighborhood. A *For Rent* sign hung on door B. The phone number on the sign wasn't the same as the one on the adoption papers.

In front of door A sat a pink tot's size tricycle with purple flowers painted on the metal frame. It looked new. Mina parked her LTD on the street, trying to decide what to do next. She rolled down the window. This was certainly a quiet street. The loudest noise seemed to come from car engines on nearby roads. Rock music escaped from door A when it opened and a young woman came out, holding a child in her arms. Mina hopped out of the car, leaving the engine idling.

"Lady, excuse me, young lady?" *Young lady? Seriously?* She waived Aspen's adoption file while approaching the woman who didn't look very interested in whatever Mina wanted. "Sorry to bother you, I'm trying to locate"—she glanced at her papers—"Isabel Cordero and..." *If looks could kill, I'll be dead.*

The tot's mother frowned. "Do you think it's funny? Who the hell are you?"

"Huh, funny? No. Why? I'm confused. Only try to help."

"Oh, really? And just how are you planning on doing that? Helping someone who's been dead and buried for months?" The child pulled on the mother's long stringy hair while making sucking sounds. The woman pushed the chubby little fingers away, and her expression softened a little. "Wait, were you here to donate to the funeral GoFundMe? It was shut down, but you could leave the money for the kids. They can use it." A pause. "I would make sure they get it."

Mina felt like dirt. *But a dog is never just a dog.* And in this case a dog may be precisely what *the kids* needed most. "I am so sorry, I don't know anything about the family. I'm here about the dog and—"

"Buddy? What about Buddy?" The little girl with pink lacy socks was now kicking hard, trying to get down

on the ground. She seemed—sickly? Pale face and dark circles under the eyes. Mina couldn't recall seeing that in little kids, usually those were signs of lack of sleep in adults. Then again, she was no child expert.

"Oh, is this Buddy?" Mina pulled up the pic of Aspen that Sky had taken with her phone and showed it to the woman. *Did she recoil?*

"Yes, that's him. Nice dog. Where did you get this picture?" She glanced at the idling silver car then at Mina still holding the phone. She opened her mouth—to say something? Must have changed her mind. Her face morphed into a blank expression. The kid yanked the mother's hair with all her might, determined to get her attention, and then she saw the photo and mumbled something like, "Nice doggie."

"Buddy here was found wandering the streets. He is safe at the shelter, our shelter, where Mrs. Cordero originally had adopted him. I'm trying to reunite the pet with his rightful owners. I..." Mina ran out of words, a rather unusual phenomenon.

"Do you have a phone number? I need to feed my kid before she pulls out what hair I have left, but I can try to locate Simon. He's the oldest boy."

Mina nodded. "I'll be right back." She went to get a business card from her car. "Here, this is my direct line don't hesitate to call me, regardless of the time. I mean it."

The woman didn't seem to hear her; she took the business card. The shaking of the hand was hard to miss. "Yeah, I remember now. She got the dog for half price because of some television commercial. So, you're the owner? Good for you. When my little brat here is old enough we'll pay you a visit, and maybe we'll get us a nice

doggie, a white one. I like white and... stop it, Lizabeth. Sorry, got to go, but I'll call you... Ms. Calvi?"

"Mina, call me Mina, and when you're ready we'll find you the very best fluffy white doggie. I promise." She promised to the woman's back and realized she didn't even know her name or phone number.

Mina drove away slowly, very slowly, half wishing the young mother would come running after her to share real info like her name or where Isabel Cordero's kids were. How could she have failed so miserably? Why hadn't she asked how Cordero died? Or when? Anything? Why drive all the way here and then get stumped because of some kid's dark circles. Maybe the child had allergies. That would explain the sucking sounds.

Right now the sensible thing to do was to drive home, feed her cats, find out if Tom and his pals would come over and paint her cat-boarding facilities before Millie came back and wondered why nothing had gotten done. Then she could sit at her computer and try to find out a little about the life and death of Isabel Cordero.

If only Kalinda had been home, she would dig out every little piece of info on the woman—from birth to death. Kalinda was a wiz when it came to computers. Well, all right, that was her profession, but she did it with such enthusiasm. The deeper she had to dig, the more excited she became. When her cell chimed Mina jumped on her driver's seat, totally oblivious of her surroundings.

"De Fiore? This is spooky, I was thinking about Kalinda and how great she is at digging up people's info, and you call. You're next in line when it comes to digging up people's info."

"Hey, only because she works with live ones. I dig up the dead ones. Much harder."

“True, true. The one I’m interested in happens to be dead.”

“Wait a minute. I called to see you if you can ask your gardener to trim Kalinda’s out of control vegetation, and you’re wanting me to dig up dirt on dead people? Who died?”

“Huh. Isabel... Isabel Cordero is—was—her name and—”

“You’re serious, aren’t you? Who was she? And why do you care?”

“It’s complicated. I’m on my way home. Do you want to stop by for a drink?”

“Mina, I just passed Nellie Gail Ranch, I’ve been up twenty-four hours. Tell me the name again. How did she die? Suspicious circumstances?”

“I tell you what, De Fiore. We keep on driving, and I share what I know. Then the first one to arrive home says good-bye to the other, and that’s it. Oh, I will talk to the gardener. He’s coming Thursday. And after you get some sleep, wake up relaxed, you can tell me how Kalinda is doing.”

“Deal. Talk, kiddo, I’m listening.”

She told him what little she had, ending with, “The neighbor promised to try to locate the older boy and have him call me.”

“So? People die every day. That’s what happens to people. Didn’t you ask the neighbor how Cordero died?”

“I got sidetracked by the kid. She looked... sick.”

“Who looked sick? Are you implying child abuse?”

“No, no, not that. I don’t know what I’m implying. The whole thing was... I can’t explain. It’s not what was said, it’s what wasn’t...”

“Kid, I don’t like your tone of voice. You sound that way when you’re about to go stick your nose into

other people business. As soon as I get to the office in the morning, I'll run a quick search. That is if you promise to stay out of trouble. You know what I mean. Clear your mind, and let me check. If something isn't as it should be, we can revisit the conversation. Okay?"

"Oh, okay."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Because you're too tired. Go home, and call me in the morning. I'll get you an estimate from the gardener. Ciao." She clicked off without giving the detective time to reply. Life was short—she was going to look up San Clemente obituaries on her own.

Sundown wasn't just a word—it was a fact. Most of her weekdays ended at sundown when she would be driving home after a workday well spent. None of that applied this evening. She hadn't accomplished a thing regarding Aspen, and going back home meant being the mistress of a silent, dark house as the occasional meowing of cats hardly made up for the lack of human sounds.

Kalinda was in rehab somewhere in the vast state of Texas. Millie, her co-worker and trusted confidant, was on vacation, location undisclosed. Hmm! And as for her former roommate, Margo, she was blissfully spending her days helping Gino, the love of her life, run a restaurant in Long Beach and being the perfect Italian lover by night. In reality, Mina was driving home to her two cats plus one feline guest. Whoopee. Who could ask for more? Maybe, just maybe, Diego would call. By the time she reached her slice of paradise atop the low hill, the sun had set, and it was too dark to go poke around Kalinda's yard to check the growth of her vegetation. It could wait until morning. Mina clicked the gate's opener and drove into her dark but safe harbor.

CHAPTER 4

Tuesday morning...

The need to keep on moving had nothing to do with getting things done. Mina recognized the symptoms.

Diego hadn't called in four days. Something wasn't right.

"I bet he's only a phone call away." De Fiore had said. If only he knew that she never once called Diego. Sort of a mental block. Always waiting for his calls. Wanting to feel needed, missed. Maybe the time *had* come to actually call him. He probably wasn't at his office now. What time would it be in Italy? If he were in Italy.

Okay, she could call him in the evening—the way he did, around nine, when all was quiet, and only the sounds of crickets spoiled the silence surrounding her home.

Why wasn't he calling? Could he be sick? *Gino*. She didn't like to get Gino involved, but she would tonight. The man was the only direct connection available. He had to know where Diego was. She set the stack of paperwork on the passenger seat of her LTD. Might as well go take a look at Kalinda's house and see if De Fiore's concern was justified. The cats had been fed and accounted for, well except for Houdini, as usual. Houdini and Diego, they stole her heart and often her peace of mind.

Instead of driving to Kalinda's on her way to work, she opted for the back way, a pleasant walk through a hardly used path shielded between the homes. The old, rusty gate groaned and resisted, but she finally pried it open. Maybe she could ask Tom and his buddies to take a look at that too. Once she crossed the threshold it was like stepping into nature. Weeds and wild mustard marked the sides of the narrow trail. The recent rains had left specks of yellow petals scattered over the ground. Pebbles skittered under her heels; the air smelled clean. A flashback of the first time Diego held her sneaked up on her

"You smell of rain," he had said. Seemed like a lifetime away.

Oh, Diego, I miss you.

As soon as Mina cleared the bend she could see what De Fiore had meant. Indeed the vegetation around the front of Kalinda's house looked more like a mini forest than the manicured landscape that had been so carefully designed to fool the eyes into assuming it was nature's work at its best.

The house, the last one in the vast *cul de sac*, sat back from the road, and the main entrance was to the side, the one facing the back wall of the Ritz Cats B&B. Kalinda's place was lower than Mina's at the top the hill. At the time Kalinda had purchased the one-story structure, it had seemed like the perfect fit for Kalinda's wheel chair, and Mina had no clue as to what improvements to Kalinda's everyday life the new prosthetics would bring.

She stood at the edge of the driveway, no need to go any closer to know that the gardener's service was a must. And then that sense of dread dropped on her.

Someone was watching—she just knew it, sensed it. Yet nothing had moved or changed.

A large oleander bush shook, and Mina jumped back in time to see a black bird fly out of it. She sighed in relief. Enough already. She walked back to her car and headed to the office. A place where she didn't seem to think about Diego so much, possibly because he had never been there.

De Fiore called just as she backed out of her garage.

“Well, Isabel Cordero’s death was unusual but not nefarious.” Straight to the point, as usual. “Can’t say I’m surprised, anything suspicious would have landed on my desk. And she died on December 28th, on her way to work.” He waited. “Kalinda is doing well, hopes to be home in about six weeks and sends you love. Are we good?”

“Oh, no. Not so fast, Mr. Detective. I could have found that info on my own on Google if I hadn’t fallen asleep watching the news... *how* did she die?”

A long sigh. “Run over by a car and before you start hyperventilating—by her *own* car. And yes, she was driving it. And no, I’m not playing silly games with you. There is a simple explanation. Care to listen? I’ll make it quick, the time it takes me to drink my coffee, and then I have a meeting about a really nefarious death.”

“How does one run over oneself with...”

“Shush. Wasting precious minutes.”

Mina shut up.

“Here we go, wait—Cordero—Caucasian, female, 38 was found on the morning of December 28 in the parking lot of the Ole Hansen Beach Club by the groundkeepers. The authorities were called, and a quick investigation concluded that Cordero had been dead for a few hours, apparently she got out of her car to check

on a flat tire, front passenger side, the driver door was wide open and all her belongings accounted for. She stopped the car on an incline, and it appeared to have rolled, striking her. She fell backward and hit her head. Her body wasn't visible from the street, possibly the reason she wasn't found earlier. She was on her way to work at the coffee shop just up Bocca De La Playa. Her boss was interviewed, said she was an excellent, dependable worker, and it had been her turn to open that morning. They also interviewed friends and neighbors. Apparently everyone had nice things to say about her, and they all agreed that her car was a piece of junk. Sorry, kid, I've got to run. Whatever questions you have burning your tongue, suck on a piece of ice until this afternoon when I can return your calls." And he was gone.

Mina was too stunned to even think. The honking of the car behind her snapped her out of her stupor and through the intersection where she hadn't budged in spite of the green light. She drove at a snail's pace, trying to make sense of the load of information De Fiore had just dumped on her. Not that she doubted him, like he had pointed out, it was his job to look into anything suspicious, and he took his job personally.

How come he didn't mention Isabel Cordero's kids? Or any other family member? Maybe because the kids were underage? Best thing to do was to jot down her questions and ask him later, like he suggested. Yes, she would call her landscaper and get a quote for Kalinda's yard, and that would be a great excuse to get De Fiore on the phone. Perfect. She stepped on the gas and headed for the shelter.

Tuesday at the shelter was known as procrastination day. Leigh had come up with the concept, and it was

accurate. Many people would see the adoptable dogs and cats on the weekend when they were out shopping at malls or at pets stores where the volunteers had adoption spots set up with lots of cute puppies sporting *I'm available* bandannas and kittens chasing colorful balls of twine. All such sites were designed to attract attention and pull at the heartstrings. But people had millions of excuses not to act on impulse, so the next best thing was to send them home with an adoption package. And often the procrastinators would show up on Tuesday with the form completed, ready to take a more close up and personal look at their future four-paws family member.

Leigh sat at the front desk, answering the phone and setting up appointments for the prospects. Linda, the best closer, would take over once a pet had been chosen. As for Mina, she spent most of her time organizing new ways of taking the pets to the public instead of waiting to be discovered, and Sky, even if so young, was terrific with her camera and with the Internet.

"How is everything?" Mina asked, her arms full of all those files she would have to organize before meeting with Adams, her lawyer and father figure, and the new accountant he was so fond of. "How's Aspen/Buddy?" she asked.

"Calm, but sad." Was Sky's answer.

Linda stuck her head out of the cats' room. "Tom offered to take him home, sort of fostering if you will."

"You think it's a good idea? What if he gets attached and Cordero's son shows up asking for his dog? It would be such a disappointment. By the way, Tom didn't call last night."

"Yeah, he wanted to make sure he had enough friends helping out before making promises. Here."

Linda pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket. "He left this scotch-taped to the front door."

"We can be at your place this afternoon after four, start getting the rooms ready, and get the sample of the paint you need. Then we'll come back and paint tomorrow, Wednesday. Here is my phone #. Let me know if it works for you. Tom." He'd added his number at the bottom.

"This is great. Did you read it, Linda?"

"I did," Linda answered from the cats' room. "Feel better?"

"Oh, yes. Owe you one."

"Good we can do dinner after Millie's back. When is that?"

"Saturday. I tell you, it has been a long time since I felt so lonely. Suddenly both Millie and Kalinda are gone, and I'm left with the three cats. I'm beginning to see monsters."

"Under the bed?" Leigh laughed from her front desk.

"No, from Kalinda's place. You would too if you had to walk through the forest that her yard has become. That reminds me, I need to call the gardener. Leigh, I'll be in the back office if you need me." She stopped by the room where they kept Buddy in makeshift isolation until they'd determined he wasn't a threat to the rest of the canine residents.

The dog raised his head and must have recognized her because his ears perked up, and she saw a ray of hope in his sad eyes.

"Hi, Buddy, how are you? Your paw feeling better?" She petted his head, checked to make sure he had plenty of water and comfy blankets to lie on.

"Hey Mina," Leigh called. "Sky is on the phone. She needs to talk to you."

Sky?

“Coming.” She turned to Buddy. ”Fingers crossed, we may have found your owner.” She rushed to answer.

“I found him.” The enthusiasm in Sky’s voice was hard to miss.

“You found the owner? That’s terrific. Did you tell him we have his dog?”

“No, I didn’t talk to him. I posted Buddy’s pic on Facebook, and this morning a friend called and said he was pretty sure the dog belonged to Simon, a senior at San Clemente High. He said something about Simon’s mom dying a few months ago. Is that true?”

“Yes, yes, it is. Good job Sky, so did you get Simon’s phone number? How can I get in touch with him?”

“Huh, don’t know. I never really asked.”

“That’s okay, I can drive over to the school and ask to see him, right?”

“I guess so, but school is in recess until next week. Remember? Spring break?”

“Right. Seems like this poor pooch isn’t catching a break, is he? I tell you what. You see if you can get more info from the Facebook friend, and I may pay another visit to the neighbor. She’s bound to know where this Simon lives.”

The bell above the front door chimed, and by Leigh’s tone of voice Mina knew they had someone ready to give a good home to one of the pets.

By two she was so tired of paperwork she gave herself a break by taking turns with a volunteer folding blankets and taking dogs for walks. She tried to reach De Fiore twice without luck. She finally left him a voicemail regarding the estimate for Kalinda’s yard. In spite of all her best intentions, the tax papers were making her

sleepy instead of productive, and she was glad to have to meet Tom at the house by four. Great excuse to put the paperwork aside. By the time she left, one cat and two dogs had found their forever homes. A good day after all.

CHAPTER 5

Tom and his band of fellow retirees had left hours ago. They'd arrived, all piled in a Cadillac Escalade, hardly the type of transportation Mina envisioned anyone who was accepting painting for such low wages could afford. And they had seemed to be in perfect sync, measuring, moving furniture, taping edges, and collecting the samples Millie had smartly pinned to the corresponding walls.

It was all jokes and good humor, like a big party.

She'd handed Tom the keys and a cash advance for the paint, they'd left, promising they'd be back sometime in the morning, and she knew they would. That was a good feeling. But even good feelings only lasted so long.

Nine o'clock. The numbers on her digital clock the only bright spot in her dark bedroom.

To call or not to call?

She paced by the window, gazing into the inky sky. Black clouds ran across the slit from where a pale moon attempted a failed escape.

To call or not to call?

When the phone rang her soul soared, then plummeted. It wasn't *his* phone, but her landline. Mina dragged herself away from the window. "Hello."

"He's going to Greece. Tonight." A rumble in her ears.

"Margo? Calm down. Who's going to Greece? What are you talking about?" Margo's dramas often amounted

to small hiccups in her relationships, even when she screamed and hollered like now.

"Like you didn't know. It's all his fault—that boyfriend of yours. And it's always a last minute decision, no, last minute command and—"

"First, his name is Diego. Diego Moran. And he happens to work with Gino, your live-in boyfriend. So no, I have no clue what you're talking about." She kept her tone even while her heart bounced in her chest.

Greece? Nadya Veggos, the heiress from hell, was in Greece. That would explain his silence. He must have grown tired of asking Mina to go on vacation with him and found Nadya ready and willing. She probably offered him her villa on some sandy beach. After all he had once been her "darling."

"Mina? Mina, are you even listening?" Margo's high pitch brought her back to the gloomy present.

"I'm listening, and I don't have an answer. What about the restaurant? Who's going to be running it while Gino's gone?"

"Oh, that. His assistant, Vito, he has been working the kitchen two days a week already. I don't give a damn about the restaurant. I should have been invited to go to Greece instead of staying home to work. Are you going?"

"Me? Nooo. I told you, I know nothing about this. Must be business."

"What kind of business? The boss called around noon, and my Gino is packing all his fancy Italian suits and ties, and he's not is usual self. Whatever it is, they obviously don't want us girls around. What are you going to do about it?"

She fought the knot stifling her breathing. "What I usually do, go to sleep. We can talk tomorrow, maybe you'll have a better idea about the situation." She heard a

male voice in the background asking, “Margo, who are you talking to?”

“It’s Gino. Got to go. Don’t tell him I called you or he’ll think I don’t trust him—coming Gino, coming.” And she was gone.

The call wasn’t that unusual. Margo would phone just to vent. Except this time it wasn’t Margo’s generic whining—this time the complaint was specific. Gino was traveling to Greece—in a great hurry, and she wasn’t invited.

If Diego was planning a vacation in Greece with Nadya, why would he need Gino? While the man had many qualities and talents, bodyguard wasn’t one of them. For starters his prosthesis somewhat limited his walking, and then Gino spent his days running a smooth restaurant business. Whatever the reason, it would make sense to assume it had more to do with Gino’s brainpower than body strength. Unless Diego needed a very special chef for their dining pleasure.

Once again, images of moonlight shimmering on the Mediterranean Sea and soft guitars playing in the background...

Stop it, Mina.

One didn’t need to travel to California to find a good chef, plenty of them in any resort town. Except... Gino would be very discreet. After all, Diego was his direct superior.

Dio Mio. Margo had nothing on her when it came to mistrust. She pitched the phone onto her bed and heard the cats stirring in the dark. What was wrong with her? She could have hit one of them. Maybe she had.

Moonlight fought and lost, leaving the sky as dark as her mood. She rested her forehead on the windowpane, letting the coolness soothe her skin. Nothing could

soothe her broken heart. An arbitrary tear rolled from her eye, landing on her hand.

Enough.

She turned to go to bed when in the corner of her eye, she noticed a light moving around in—Kalinda’s house? Impossible. It lasted the length of a blink, and it was gone. Mina couldn’t budge, remembering that strange morning feeling of being watched. If only Millie had been home.

Too frightened to move. Maybe she should call—who? Her friends and co-workers all lived miles away. She’d grown accustomed to having Millie so close... and later Kalinda.

Mina kept her eyes on the spot where she thought she’d seen the moving light. A flashlight perhaps? It could have been some teenagers walking around in the dark. No. The movement was too contained. Slowly her breathing relaxed, she willed herself away from the window.

In the dark she moved toward the bed when her doorbell chimed. Once, loud and precise. And now her shaking was real and unstoppable. The stranger with the flashlight was at her door. Maybe if she stood still the stranger would go away. The bell chimed again.

This time whoever was at her door kept a finger on the button a lot longer. She had to do something. Call 9-1-1? Where was her phone? Somewhere on the bed, among her cats. She must find her phone. She took a step and the pounding began. Someone pounded on her door.

Okay then, she wasn’t going to wait for the door to be forced open. She descended the stairs, turning all the lights on as she walked by heading to the kitchen where

she could get a knife. The mental picture of stabbing someone stopped her. Aware she couldn't do it.

Before clearing the corner to the entrance she called out "Who's there?"

Silence. No more pounding or bell ringing. Only silence.

"Diego." A muffled voice came from outside. *Diego?* How could that be?

"If you're Diego, how about you call me on *our* phone?"

Long pause. "I can't."

"Of course you can't because you're not Diego." Keeping her voice calm took all her concentration. She held her breath and listen. Hoping for a word, something to get her to believe in the miracle of Diego there and then, to take her in his arms and tell her all was going to be okay.

Instead she could hear a soft chuckling behind the locked door. Diego or not, the man was laughing at her. *Laughing.* Her fear turned into anger as she searched for a chair, a table, something to anchor against the door. Too late, she watched the doorknob turn and—Diego.

An unexpected sob escaped her as she offered her arms and her soul to him. Houdini picked that very moment to get in the middle, and she stumbled, landing into Diego's embrace. He caught and held her. His right foot kicked the front door shut on a disappointed meow.

"It's you. Why didn't you call?"

Diego's lips rested in her hair, his fingers moved up her spine to the nape of her neck and paused, igniting the ever smoldering fire, allowing her nostrils to fill with his familiar scent. Her arms tightened around him. The safest place on earth, against his heart. No words needed, her eyes closed. She savored the wave of tender

surrender fully aware it wouldn't last. Her face felt the unusual crispness of the fabric rubbing against her cheek. She backed a little and noticed the starchy formal shirt, the dark silk tie, and the soft wooly suit.

Something felt out of place.

"Are you staying?" She slipped it there, an arousing dare, and waited.

"Mina," a long sigh, "I can't. It's morning in Greece. The wake will be in the afternoon, I must be there."

The wake? As in a funeral? She couldn't find the right words, any words. They all died in her throat. She kept her hands on his chest, over his heartbeat. They hadn't even kissed, and he was leaving? He must have read the pain in her eyes.

His eyes looked tired, spent. "I came to pick up Gino, a reasonable excuse to steal a few moments with you." A shadow clouded his face, "She was like a mother to me. My mentor, my trusted confidant. You would have loved her, and she liked you a lot." He attempted a smile. "I spoke of you, often. She also helped Gino after his accident, gave him back his self respect."

And Mina understood who he was talking about. *La Madonna delle Collane*, The Madonna of String Pearls, as Gino affectionately called her. Mina had only met the powerful woman once, long ago, the very night Kalinda had lost her limbs in the bloody murder plot.

She shook her head to clear the sadness away. Now it made sense, and she should be thankful for the stolen moments. *She should.* "Diego, I am so sorry. How did you get here? Why didn't you call me?"

"We flew into Long Beach airport, and I drove straight here. They are picking me up at John Wayne airport. It's a private plane. We'll be okay. Oh, the phone. How could I forget? Mina, the one you have no longer

works. Bad stuff happened. Days ago. With all that was going on in Greece, I got sidetracked, but that phone no longer works. Wait, here.” He searched the inside pocket of his formal coat and handed her a cell phone. “This is a new prototype, far superior, you know the drill, more so now, keep it close? Don’t hesitate to call me. By the way, I was concerned Millie would mistake me for a prowler and shoot me.” He smiled and kissed her lightly.

She held the new phone in her hand, not quite sure what to make of it. “Millie isn’t here, she’ll be back on Saturday.” In spite of her efforts, her voice quivered, like her soul.

“Oh, now I get it, all your concerns about opening the door.”—his lighthearted tone as forced as hers. “You were so cute, if only I could have recorded your voice... *you’re not Diego.*” Something buzzed in his coat. He turned serious; his eyes darkened. “I’ve got to go; they are ready. I’m so sorry. Hope to fly back with Gino, but will call first.”

They stood, their shoulders touching, rising and falling to the rhythm of their breath. Diego cupped her face and they kissed. Once again Mina was jolted by a sense of imminent loss she couldn’t fathom or ignore. She moved back, gave him space to move, and walked him to the door from where she watched his dark shadow disappear as he effortlessly hopped over the locked front gate.

He was going to Greece for a funeral.

The funeral of his former boss, whose favorite niece was none other than Nadya Veggos.

CHAPTER 6

Mina woke to the soft kneading of Aria's paws on her neck. A rather unusual event as Houdini had promoted himself to morning pain in the neck since day one. What time was it? Barely seven a.m. She tried to figure out what time it would be in Greece, even counted on her fingers, gave that up when she heard a scurrying of paws up and down the stairs.

That would be pain in the neck changing his daily routine. What was he up to now? Another hour of sleep would have been wonderful. All she did most of the night was torture herself with all kind of *ifs*, and as usual, every scenario had the same main protagonist: Diego Moran. Everything had happened so quickly, leaving her with a ton of unanswered questions and a carload of pure guilt for mistrusting him.

Now a loud meowing underscored the running of the stairs. Better go find out the reason for such behavior, strange even for Houdini. Aria switched from massaging her neck to nuzzling her cheek while Zeus, at the foot of the bed, surveyed the whole scene without even curling a whisker. Smart cat.

Her bare feet hadn't found her slippers when *the phone* chimed. Diego?

She reached under the pillow. Yes, it was his phone. This morning was becoming like something out of a science fiction movie, not that she knew much

about science fiction. “Hello?” Her tone cautious. No, suspicious.

“Mina? Did I wake you? I’m sorry.”

“No, no, the cats saw to that. Are you okay?”

“I am now—I miss you. I should have brought you here with me. To see you, even in a crowd, makes the rest bearable.” A catch in his voice told his pain. “I’ll be back in the States soon. And I—sorry, they’re ready. Got to go.” She didn’t get a chance to ask what *the rest* meant.

Houdini’s claws couldn’t be ignored. Something very disturbing must be going on. Mina couldn’t remember her cat ever using his claws to get her attention. He clearly didn’t mean to hurt her, and soon even Zeus and Aria showed up. Houdini suddenly darted down the stairs as if his tail were on fire.

Mina heard the strange clattering even before reaching the last step. But the noise came from the back of the property, where the Ritzy Cats B&B and Millie’s quarters were located. *Better check that out.* She tightened the belt of her robe and marched through the garage to see what was going on. The cats followed her like a small parade, probably because they expected breakfast regardless of where she would be serving it. Okay, not all three cats. Houdini, the leader of the trio, acted more like a predator than a hungry feline.

When she unlocked the door between the garage and the adjoining building, a slice of anemic sunshine lit the narrow passageway, and then she saw them—Tom and his band of jolly retirees all busy at work, the windows and door wide open, blue masking tape on their frames. A folding table had been set up against the outside wall with boxes of donuts and bagels, but what hit her most of all was the fabulous aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

“Good morning, Mina. Hope we didn’t wake you, but we needed to get going while the natural light is good in order to be done by five. I’m working tonight and—”

“I’m fine, Tom, don’t worry. I’m impressed at your well-organized project—very, very impressed. Wait until I tell Millie. Did you make the coffee?”

Tom shrugged and pointed to one of those commercial coffee thermoses or whatever they were called. This one was dark blue with fancy white lettering saying, *Life is short. Stay awake for it.* She couldn’t help but nod and smile. Before she could say no he put a Styrofoam cup in one hand and a napkin in the other and pointed for her to help herself. She could hear voices inside the B&B, joyful voices and soon some of the helpers peeked out and greeted her.

Their cheerfulness was hard to resist. Zeus recognized his home and walked right into the front room, but Aria stuck by Mina’s ankles and made it clear she expected breakfast. As for Houdini, he had disappeared, as usual.

“Mina, the picture of the woman at the shooting range, a friend of yours?” Tom asked.

“Shooting range? Oh, you mean Millie. Yes, it’s her place you and your buddies are painting. She takes care of the whole Ritzy Cats operation. Okay, I still talk to customers and make a point to greet and meet especially new ones, but yeah, she is very efficient.” She smiled knowingly. “And I’m told she’s good at hitting her target.”

“Where is she?”

“She is on vacation and due back on Saturday. Now you understand my panic when the crew working on my neighbor’s home took off without leaving a phone

number or a way to get hold of them. You saved my neck.”

“This is the best spur of the moment thing I’ve done in a long time, and my friends are also having fun. Beats sitting at home watching TV. And I hear Aspen is back at the shelter. Who knows? I may have a four-legged companion riding in the truck with me one of these days.”

“Hey, Tom, are you done flirting with the boss? Roll up your sleeves and get back to work.” one of the men called from inside the cats’ room.

Tom winked at Mina. “Help yourself.” He pointed to the table with the food and the coffee.

“I intend to, but I need to get Zeus, the calico that went inside, and bring him to my place to eat. No clue where Houdini went, that vagabond. He’ll be back.” Just then Zeus reappeared by the same door where he had disappeared. She went to get him, very aware she was still in her night clothes, but no one seemed to notice, and if they did they were too polite to mention it.

As usual she spent her driving time organizing her day. Today was E day. Enough dogs had been adopted in the past few weeks they now had room for ten more. And it was Leigh’s turn to go pick them out of the E-list. The euthanasia list. At the Orange County Animal Shelter.

Mina forced herself not to dwell on the subject because it was simply too hard to handle or justify how such a wealthy and educated community could still have regularly scheduled euthanasia, and it wasn’t just the old and sick.

Clear your mind, Mina.

Over the years they had worked out a rotating schedule, taking turns on who was to go and play God,

deciding who would live and who would die. By alternating between Leigh, Linda, and Mina, they assured a variety of dogs as each tended to pluck her favorite types of dogs from the death roll. When Linda went they ended up with a carload of small curly dogs. Any combination possible of poodles and other breeds stole Linda's heart. On a positive side, once they were vaccinated, micro-chipped, neutered, groomed, and taught acceptable behavior, they easily found forever homes. Leigh liked medium-sized dogs and spent time teaching them tricks and basic commands. As for Mina, she always fell for the ones no one else wanted. The not so pretty or not so young, the ones with the sad eyes that told a story. Like Aspen/Buddy. Something had to be done. She would see if Sky could mine more information regarding Buddy's owners from the Facebook friends.

She spent the afternoon scrubbing dog carriers to stack in the van they used to transport animals to adoption shows or to and from vet visits. Then she went to spend a little time in the free-roaming cat room. That was always fun and uplifting. Even if cats couldn't escape missing previous owners or their own cozy home, they somehow managed to play and get into mischief—like the big grey tabby found roaming the streets (or so said the young boy who'd dropped him off). The cat had quickly discovered how to turn on the sink faucet and had nearly flooded the place. Often some of the dogs that had been at the shelter for an extended period of time and were well behaved were allowed to roam around the lobby and by the front desk. Buddy could be one of them once the vet cleared him.

She went into the room where the poor dog sat all by himself, petted him, and scratched behind his ears, deciding that the next day she would take him to the vet

herself. The shelter was closed to the public on Thursday mornings, so Linda and one of the volunteers could keep everything running smooth. She would take the dog to the vet and perhaps make a little detour to that neighbor's place to see if she'd heard from the kids. The neighbor should know where they were, at least that was the impression she'd given.

Most of the day Mina managed not to obsess over Diego, but once she got in the car and was on her way home, she couldn't help but replay his phone call over and over in her head. That was such unusual behavior, she just knew there was a lot going on that he wasn't saying. He was in Greece, and funeral or not, Nadya Veggos was the favorite niece of the deceased. The right combination for a bright spelling of T-R-O-U-B-L-E.

Even before getting to her garage Mina could see Tom and the men busy packing up, so she walked their way instead of going to her place.

The morning table rested against the wall, neatly folded along with a box containing the coffee thermos, paper plates and other disposable items, one of the men was hosing down the concrete walkway between the adjoining buildings. The smell of new paint lingered in the late afternoon air. "Whoa, you're already done? Can I take a peek?"

"Of course, of course, watch that Hank there don't give you an unwanted shower," Tom said to Mina and the man with the water hose. Then he guided her inside the cat room and Millie's living quarters, warning her not to touch the walls as they might still be wet. Everything looked light and bright. What a difference a few gallons of paint could make.

"This is great Tom. I'm so grateful. You got me out of a big jam."

“I’ll stop by tomorrow to remove some of the tape left because the paint isn’t quite dry, and I don’t want to take a chance. It may be close to noon by the time I get here. Is that okay?”

“Sure, no problem. I should be here also, need to meet the yardman regarding my neighbor’s yard.”

“Oh, we met one of your neighbor’s kids today. He must have seen the pizza delivery vehicle, and he joined us for lunch. Boy did he ever enjoy it.”

“Really? I don’t know which one of my neighbors has kids. How old was he?”

“I’m pretty sure he said he was almost ten, didn’t he, Hank? You know, that pizza lover? We teased him about being Italian. Leo, yes, his name was Leonardo, he said his mom was a big fan of the movie *Titanic*, and that’s how he ended up with the name.”

Still Mina had no idea to whom the boy belonged. Then again, this was spring break week, probably a visiting relative.

“Tom, don’t forget to figure out how much I owe you. If you want, you can leave the bill at the shelter before leaving work tomorrow morning, and I’ll bring you a check when we meet back here. Would that work?”

“Yes, that would work. Can’t wait to see if Miss Millie will be pleased.” An intriguing smile lit his eyes as he said that. Huh? Millie and Tom? It was Mina’s turn to smile.

CHAPTER 7

By 10:30 Thursday morning, Mina had already received a clean bill of health for Buddy. His leg had healed just fine, and she was cruising down Avenida Palizada in the hope of finding enough information to reunite the dog with the Cordero kids. If all attempts failed there, wasn't much choice but to let Tom have the pooch.

Buddy had been pleasantly quiet the whole morning, garnering a *good boy* treat from the vet, but as they approached his former home he began to stir. *How did he know?*

Mina watched the morphing through the rearview mirror. At first he straightened his upper body as if listening to a call only he could hear. Then his ears went up, stiff as a bishop's miter. By the time the LTD cleared the bend and approached the sidewalk by the former Cordero's home, Buddy stood on the back seat, balancing his tense body and anxiously glancing from the car windows. *Better make sure his leash is tightly secured.*

Mina parked in the same spot as her previous visit. The *For Rent* sign was now gone from unit B. And no pink tricycle by the door of unit A. She hopped out of the car and walked around to get Buddy who was frantically pacing and trying to jump over the front passenger seat.

"It's okay, Buddy, it's okay. We are going to say hello to your old neighbors." For the first time since she picked him up at the San Clemente rescue center, the dog wasn't listening to anything she said. He yanked on the leash so hard, he nearly sent her flying.

Well, that was a strong willed dog, better be prepared. He headed straight to unit B and started scratching, jumping up on his hind legs, and pushing against the locked door with all his weight and his might. Broke Mina's heart. He caused enough ruckus to get the neighbor's attention. When door of unit A opened ever so slightly, it wasn't rock music filtering out but angry voices. A man and a woman. *Fighting?*

Mina could see the little girl with the pink socks and the dark circles under her eyes peeking at Buddy from the narrow opening of the door.

"Doggie," she said out loud at the precise moment the grown up voices quieted. A minute later the door was yanked open, and the mother rushed on them faster than a bird of prey. "Lizabeth, get in the house." She pushed back the tot who had headed toward Buddy with open arms and a big grin.

The dog pinned his ears and snarled in such a quiet threatening way the hair on Mina's spine bristled. It took both her hands to hold Buddy back while the woman shrieked, "Get that beast out of here. Get him out of here before someone gets hurt." She backed away, dragging the little girl along. When the man's voice joined in from inside unit A, Mina made a quick retreat, pulling Buddy along, and he resisted every inch of the way.

She couldn't get out of there fast enough. Even after the place was out of sight Buddy kept on barking and circling in the back seat. Talking in soft tones while glancing at the rearview mirror to make sure he didn't

jump to the front was all Mina could do. He finally sat on the back seat minutes before the exit to her house. Her hands were still shaking way after the barking ceased. What was that all about? Something was very, very wrong. Instead of driving into her garage, Mina drove through to the B&B where she could see Tom's truck. She was right on time as they had agreed. She would give him a check and then head back to the shelter, enough excitement for one day. She shut off the engine and turned to look at the dog.

He wailed softly, the cry of a mourning soul. Mina sat there, stunned. Could he be acting strangely because he was in pain? But only a few hours ago Roger the Vet had checked him out and declared him well and fit. No, he didn't seem in pain while pawing with eager anticipation at the door of unit B. If only Buddy could talk.

Mina hesitated to get him out of the LTD. What if Houdini came prancing by? Tom walked over to the car, a curious look on his face, probably wondering why she was sitting in the car for so long. She rolled down the window enough to speak to Tom and gave him the short version of the morning events while slipping him his check.

"Don't you want to take a quick look at the work we did before you pay me?" A smile. "Hey there, Asp—Buddy—how you doing?" If the dog recognized his former benefactor he didn't show it. "Mina, maybe he needs to do his business. Get out of the car. Do you want me to take him?"

She shrugged, torn about what to do. "You may be right. I need to go meet the yardman down at Kalinda's place. Did he come by yet?"

“Don’t know. I got here few minutes before you drove up. Let me get some water for this poor dog. It’s warm today.”

“Good idea.” Out of habit she fished Diego’s phone from her purse and slipped it in her jean’s pocket. *You never know...*

She let herself out of the car and went to help Buddy who had finally quieted down. Tom brought a plastic dish with water and rested it on a plant stand by the door of the B&B.

Good call. Buddy made a beeline for the water and Mina watched Tom’s smile stretch wide. What a wonderful sight. It wasn’t often that she’d seen the lonely man happy. Maybe it was meant to be.

“I’m collecting the last of the trash and paint rubbish to take with me. I’ll drop it in the commercial bin down at the office. No need to leave it around here.” He squatted by the large plastic bag, now almost full, and suddenly Buddy’s ears went up again. The dog quickly spun and went to sniff the trash bag. He sniffed and clawed. “What do you have in there, Tom? A dead body?” Mina joked.

“Empty pizza boxes.” Tom answered.

Voices came from outside the wall. The yard people must have arrived to take care of Kalinda’s front yard. “Tom, I’m going over to talk to the gardener. I’ll take Buddy with me in case he needs to poop, and then I’m heading back to the shelter. See you then? And, Tom, great job. I’m so grateful.”

She left Tom to finish up cleaning and forced Buddy to go with her, grabbing a ripped plastic bag that had come with the pizza delivery in case she needed to clean up after the dog. The two of them left through the rusty gate with Buddy pulling on the leash and Mina practically

jogging to keep up. He seemed to follow some imaginary trail, nose to the ground, moving faster and faster. The landscapers were still unloading the tools from the truck at the edge of Kalinda's long driveway when Mina came by or more accurately, when Buddy came by, dragging Mina along. The men laughed. They all knew Mina.

She waved while keeping up with the dog's frantic pace. He headed down the driveway toward the main entrance. As he zipped by the overgrown vegetation, low branches hit Mina's face, and her breathing labored as she struggled to control this unpredictable creature. He kept going. She was hardly dressed for a run and tripped on her own feet, but none of her pleas to stop seemed to reach Buddy.

He cut through the thick oleander edge, and Mina's hair became entangled. Loose pink petals stuck to her moist skin. Her heart thumped in her throat, and suddenly a shadow leaped from a large bush and started to run downhill.

Buddy vaulted after the moving target with such force either the collar or the leash in Mina's hand snapped, and the pulling ended as the dog took off. Mina watched him disappear, chasing after the shadow as she tumbled backward onto the rocky ground. Something exploded inside her head. Voices and sounds came from far, far away.

Buddy, must get Buddy.

She moved her lips, made no sound. Her body relaxed, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the silent darkness filled with the scents of earth and grass like the mountain meadows of her childhood.

CHAPTER 8

Embarrassment. Mina couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so utterly embarrassed. Standing in front of her bathroom mirror she studied the scratches left on her face and neck by the branches that had hit her while running. The sleeve of her top had a rip and dried blood where her elbow hit a rock in the fall. What a mess.

The ER doctor had cleaned her minor wounds and put Band-Aids on it. Her head however was a whole different story. Prognosis: mild concussion. Linda had driven her back home and sat with her until nine o'clock when the low dose sedative put Mina into a semi-conscious state of manufactured bliss. With the cats fed and Millie due to arrive in a day, Linda left, and Mina felt free to unleash her pent-up self-pity.

Margo, who obviously knew nothing of Mina's misfortunes, picked that late evening hour to call. "Turn on PBS, they have that thing, you know, about the funeral. Gino phoned and said BBC covered the whole show, I mean—ceremony? Shit, you know what I mean. And it will be part of tonight's World News. It starts in about five minutes. Couldn't call you sooner, had to work." Long sigh. "The restaurant was freaking busy tonight. You'd think Thursday night would be a slow night, but noooo. Hurry, turn it on, can't wait to see how good my Gino looks with his suit and tie, so tired of him in cooking rags. Your boyfriend should give him a

promotion, you know, like a director or something like that, and we could fly around with that jet like your boyfriend does. How come he never takes you along? Oh, oh. It's starting. Are you watching? I'll call you when it's over."

She was gone before Mina could slip in a single word. Concussion or not now she really did have a headache. But curiosity won, and she sat on her bed and turned on the television. What had Margo said? PBS? She surfed channels until the somber tone and British accent of an older lady with impeccable hair and a dark outfit caught her attention. Yes, Margo had the correct information.

This was BBC World News, but not a live broadcast. It must have been recorded earlier in the day. Again, Mina couldn't quite figure out the time difference, nine hours, give or take one? The cameras showed what could have been a large church. It seemed like most of the shots were taken from up above the main floor and often lingered on a coffin covered by hundreds of white flowers—calla lilies maybe? Hard to tell.

Music could be heard, and Mina couldn't tell if it was part of the eulogies or if it was after the fact. Either way, it sounded lovely. Soft classical music, no organ here. The British commentator named names of people who must have been well known, but who meant nothing to Mina until the Minister of Italian Culture came up, and Mina had to admit she was completely out of touch with anything and everything from her motherland. She had to learn from BBC that Italy had a Minister of Italian Culture. Most of the people crowding the pews or sitting on rows of raised upholstered chairs appeared unmistakably European. Either blonds from

the Northern shores or darker skinned from the Mediterranean beaches, they were all Europeans.

The Madonna of the String Pearls must have been a very popular and beloved woman. A little voice in Mina's head added *powerful* to the list. Just then the camera lingered on a lovely if sad young lady dressed in black, a hat with a veil shadowing her features.

The commentator mentioned the mourner to be the deceased's beloved niece and just then said niece rested her head on her companion's shoulder, while he patted her gloved hand that rested on his perfectly creased slacks, on that iffy spot between his knee and his groin.

A veil thick enough to hide Nadya Veggos's real nature had yet to be invented, and Mina could recognize that masculine hand patting the Greek heiress from hell even with a double concussion.

She clicked the television off and pitched the remote across the room, hitting her open bedroom door. The remote ricocheted into the stairwell, and Aria must have thought it was a new toy because she rushed over and accidentally pushed it over the step. Mina could hear it rolling down and probably coming apart before landing on the living room floor.

Her fingers pressing her temples, Mina stared at the blank screen not sure why this wave of jealousy flooded her brain. She thought she'd gotten over that. Why? Why? Might as well go find the remote and hope it still worked. She stepped off the bed and saw Houdini observing her with those eyes that never missed a thing. Maybe Diego had cast a spell on the cat and could see what Houdini saw. *Maledizione*. Now she was downright hallucinating.

Moving around made her feel better. If the funeral had been nine hours ago, he should be back at his hotel

or wherever he stayed—along with Gino, she hoped. There was that jealousy again.

She should call him, comfort him. He must be devastated; he'd worshipped the woman. That was no secret. She started down the stairs and found the battery from the remote first, the rest on the living room floor. By now the night had descended, and the hills surrounding her home were as dark and silent as her soul.

If she could make it to morning, maybe Millie would be here to cheer her up. The sun would be shining; birds would be singing. All that mental pep talk wasn't helping much. What better time to call Diego than now? He had lost a loved one, and she had a concussion. Plenty of reasons.

She went to the kitchen, poured herself some sparkling water, and marched back to her room to call the love of her life. She hadn't touched her purse since parking her car in the driveway while talking to Tom and then taking Buddy for a walk.

Buddy.

Her mind had blocked the name and the memory of what happened after that, but it all came hurling back. Panic darted up her veins, her breathing shallow and quick. Buddy, chasing a human shadow. Where were they now? Someone must know. The dog ran off with the collar and the broken leash still on him, and who was he chasing? A man? A woman? Friend or foe? Someone must know the answer. *Think, Mina. Think.* Her house phone rang. Please don't let it be Margo. Not now.

"Did you see him?" Margo.

"No, I didn't see much, something happened—to my television I mean. Not sure what, I'm sorry."

"You seem to have all kind of misfortunes lately, don't you?" *If she only knew.* "My Gino looked so handsome. I didn't see your boyfriend. How come? And you know what's funny? Gino was sitting with the Italians. I'm wondering if they are the ones with the yacht."

Yacht? "Not sure what you're talking about."

"You never are. You used to be fun. Since you started that pet rescue, you're sad and depressed most of the time. Maybe you need to find a different career. Get a pet parlor or something, or get a boyfriend that takes you places and—"

"Margo, I have a bad headache. I'm happy you got to see Gino, and maybe he's trying to call, and you don't want to miss his phone call. Let's call it a night." She hung up before Margo could call her a bad girlfriend or another one of her favorite accusations. Her purse sat on top of her dresser. Linda must have put it there. She clearly remembered leaving the purse on the driver's seat of her LTD when she'd decided to take Buddy with her to meet the yardmen.

She opened it and right away located her cell phone. It looked like she'd missed twelve phone calls. *Great. Not.* She searched the side pocket, the one with the zipper, but no Diego's phone. She always kept it there when in her car. Now her panic escalated. She couldn't stop her whole body from shaking. She'd left her car outside the garage in the driveway. Could it still be there? Yet someone had brought her purse in, and her car keys were hooked on her purse the way she always did. Why couldn't she remember? And then she did. Diego's phone was tucked safely in her jeans pocket. She sighed in relief and went to look for the jeans.

Her memory returned in bits and pieces. The jeans had dirt and grass stains mashed into them. After they came back from the ER, Linda had helped her get into her nighty and said she would put her dirty clothes... in the laundry room. Yes. At the speed she rushed down the stairs, she could have given Houdini a run for it.

She found the jeans and a lot more—but no phone. Not possible. It had to be there, somewhere.

After going through everything in sight without results, she tackled the car. Linda or Tom must have parked the car inside. With all the lights on she searched the seat, over and under, nothing. By the time she was done it must have been midnight in California and morning in Greece. The only hope left was the driveway outside the garage where the car had sat for a while. That or...

She wasn't going to think about that, no way. She couldn't possibly have lost the phone, not *his* phone. She needed a flashlight. The flashlight and candles were in the kitchen.

Might as well start from the back of the garage. Mina walked the length of the garage to the locked door connecting her place to the Ritzy Cats B&B and Millie's place. Her hand grabbed the doorknob when a strange noise sent her heart to her throat. Someone was outside her garage side door, someone who was trying to break in? That noise again. Louder, like a heavy metal container being dragged. Images of coffins and dead bodies flashed in her mind's eye.

She couldn't move. Could they hear her labored breathing from the outside? They? Who?

The element of surprise worked in her favor. If she moved quietly, she could swing the door wide open, and point the bright light in their eyes, and they'd probably

take off running. Yeah, that sounded like a good plan. But what if they'd found *his* phone out in the driveway?

Here is your chance, Mina. Do it.

She took a long breath. Flashlight in her right hand, she quietly unlocked the door, mentally counting to three when something brushed against her leg. She screamed and dropped her flashlight.

“Meow.”

She hit poor Houdini?

“Mina, is that you in there? What’s happening dear?”
Millie’s voice had never sounded so delightful.

CHAPTER 9

Millie convinced Mina to go back to bed. “After all,” she explained, “it is the middle of the night, and if I leave my car parked outside the garage, no stranger will dare snoop around to look for a cell phone, not on such a dark, moonless night.”

Maybe it was the lingering effect of the sedative, but Mina agreed to go back to bed, and the minute her head met the softness of the pillow, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The ringing of her home phone awakened her. She reached over Aria who'd slept curled up next to her. “Hello.”

What time was it?

“Did you hear from your boyfriend?” *Margo?* Again? Her former roommate had called more times in the last twenty-four hours than in the past twenty-four days.

“Margo, I just woke up. Why do you keep asking me about Diego? Do you know something that I don’t? Did you talk to Gino? What?”

“If I had spoken to Gino, would I be calling you?” Mina had to smile. Margo didn’t even realize she’d just insulted her.

“Why don’t you calm down, and tell me what’s bugging you? Talk fast because I have three hungry cats staring at me.”

“You still have Millie’s cat? Never mind the spoiled pets. The funeral and all that stuff is over, and I figured Gino should be headed back. Well, he isn’t. He’s staying there.” Her animosity gone, she sounded sad, defeated.

“There—where is there? Greece?” Now Mina felt the same sense of loss she had gathered in Margo’s voice.

“I don’t know. He’s traveling by yacht.” *The damn yacht again...* “I think they’re headed to Italy, up the coast. Help me out, you know where—I’ve never been to Italy, to your and Gino’s town.” Fear of the unknown?

“Margo, I get it. He’ll probably get to Venice the same day, and it’s a chance to see his family. He can catch a flight from Marco Polo airport, just outside Venice. I’m not sure if they have direct flights to Los Angeles. Did he tell you when he’ll be back?”

“No. I could hear voices. Women’s voices in the background when he called, and they didn’t speak English. Not sure what those laughing cows spoke, but it wasn’t Italian either.” *Laughing cows?*

“Do you really think that if he intended to cheat on you he’d bother to call and keep you posted on his whereabouts?”

“Yes, he has to. I’m in charge of his beloved restaurant. I could burn the place down if he pisses me off.”

“Dear God, Margo, don’t even joke about things like that, please.” Her headache was coming back. “Maybe he ran into old friends, colleagues. Don’t forget the deceased woman was his boss. Many of the mourners work for the same—company.” Was all of this to appease Margo’s fears or her own?

“Can you tell your boyfriend to send him home? What is he saying? Is he also on the yacht?”

The last thing Mina wanted to do was mislead Margo. What could she say without fibbing? Aria to the rescue.

"Margo, I really need to feed the cats, and then I have to get to work. If I hear from Diego I promise to ask about Gino, and then I'll call you. But really, the man loves you. How can you doubt his loyalty?" said the woman who wished Nadya Veggos a slow death every time she even thought of her.

Margo didn't call often, and she obviously missed Gino, needed him by her side. Mina should be more understanding, more sympathetic. What were friends for? Apparently to bring breakfast as the door joining the house to the garage opened, and Millie came in holding a tray of freshly baked, heavenly smelling biscuits.

The minute she said, "Good Morning," slow moving, sweet Zeus, hopped out of nowhere and acted like a crazed cat, running in circles, meowing, and rubbing against Millie's legs. When she bent to pick him up, Mina, who was washing her hands after having fed the feline population, noticed the dark glasses for the first time.

"What's with the glasses? Did you hurt your eyes?"

"Nope, made them better as a matter of fact. Yes, Zeus, I love you too." She scratched the calico's head. "That's what I did on my vacation, Lasik surgery, both eyes. I have to wear special dark lenses when I'm out in the sun or under bright lights but not for long."

"Wow, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't want you to feel obligated to go with me or take care of me. I stayed in a wonderful hotel in Palm Desert, had an old friend, retired navy nurse, stay with me, and we had a wonderful time. We visited places where Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope used to live and play.

Great old restaurants still serving martinis the old fashioned way. But eat these biscuits before they get cold. We can talk later. How are you feeling? If you're up to it, you can walk over to the B&B. Now that we have fresh paint we may need to update a few more things. But no hurry really and I haven't forgotten about the missing phone. There's nothing on the driveway."

The phone. *His* phone. And all the bad memories of yesterday came crashing down on Mina.

It had to be a side effect of the fall or the sedative. Otherwise, why was she crying in her coffee? Even the homemade biscuits Millie baked tasted like sorrow. Whatever was eating at Margo's heart must have been catching because Mina had begun to wonder whose yacht Gino was traveling on, and she had no doubt he was headed up the Adriatic Coast to Venice. And it made sense too. His sisters all lived around the Veneto region, a short ride to Piazzale Roma and then hop on a *vaporetto*, the Venetian version of public transportation.

She sighed, images of her sleepy Italian town filling her mind. Her cell chimed. Her office. Fingers crossed all was fine. They must all be excited with the new arrivals, the rescued furry friends pulled from the death roll. These were the days that made everything else worth doing, and she'd missed it.

"Morning, Linda, thanks again for your help yesterday. Guess what? Millie came back last night. I have a few things to take care of around here, trying to catch up all the hours I squandered yesterday. By the way, has anyone reported a sighting of Buddy?"

"Well, you sound like Mina again. I'm glad. You had all of us worried yesterday. Don't be too hard on yourself. We'll find Buddy, that rascal. By the way, Sky sort of located Simon, Buddy's owner. He's out of town.

He works part-time after school with some building contractor, and he took a full-time job during spring break, some resort around the Bay Area. He'll be back by Sunday since school starts again on Monday."

She laughed before continuing. "Wait until you see the new dogs. Such charmers. Roger is stopping by this afternoon to check them out. I have one in isolation, kennel cough." Linda sighed. "Everything is under control, no need to worry about us. I'll be here until closing if you need to reach me."

By nine thirty Mina's kitchen was back to normal. One thing she had to do—go see if the gardener had taken care of Kalinda's yard and then search the grounds where she'd fallen to see if she could locate the lost phone and call Diego. She picked easy, comfy shoes, clean jeans, and a long-sleeved sweatshirt with two cartoonish cats howling at the moon and headed to Millie's place. It was then she realized she hadn't even picked up her newspaper from the front door. A first, for sure.

"I have to say, those old guys did a very nice job," she said to Millie. "This is the first time I've seen the final results by daylight and without mountains of painters' trash. What do you think?"

"I agree. It turned out just as I had imagined, bright and cheerful. What did you mean by old guys? Did you not hire the same construction crew from Kalinda's remodeling job?"

"No, I couldn't get hold of them. De Fiore is the only one who communicates directly with Kalinda. And he seems to really, really cherish that, so I never had a chance to ask her for a phone number or an address. All my bugging Mr. Detective didn't do any good. Either he forgot or he didn't care." Millie was looking at her, and

Mina realized she'd veered off the subject. "Anyway I hired Tom. You know, security guard Tom. And he gathered some of his retired friends and *voila*. Come to think of it, Tom was the one who first brought Buddy to the shelter. Small world, wouldn't you say?" Mina turned away but turned back when she remembered. "Oh, yes, and they saw the pic of you at the shooting range. You were a hit!" A deep breath. "I have to go check out if the landscapers took care of Kalinda's shrubs and trees. And I may as well look for my cell phone. Hope I remember where I fell."

Millie spoke up then. "Wait, let me get my dark glasses. I'll walk with you. Four eyes are better than two, especially now that I see better."

They used the rusty gate. Mina hoped to retrace the path her mad dash with Buddy had taken and find the precious phone, her only eavesdrop-proof direct link to Diego. When they rounded the corner from the side trail to the driveway, Mina had to admit the pruning of all those overgrown branches had made a dramatic transformation—so much so that her sense of direction was thrown off.

She concentrated to orient herself. "Buddy pulled on the leash, wouldn't slow down. He walked, darted really, nose to the ground, like a dog possessed, so strange. We walked this way—I think—down the driveway. The landscapers were unloading their tools and waved. I couldn't pause to chat. The dog dragged me along, my feet barely touching the ground. I held the leash in one hand and fought back all those tree limbs coming at me when a shadow appeared out of nowhere, flashed in front of us and took off before I could call out or react in some way."

Mina stopped walking and studied the yard. Millie stopped beside her.

“Buddy yanked away so hard and suddenly, I fell backward, about—there.” She pointed to a low, rocky mound. “I’m pretty sure. So that’s where we should look. Or you can watch me doing it.” She went to the area and knelt down. Then remembering how she lost his phone in the first place, she patted her jeans pocket for her regular cell. *Damn.* She’d left it at home. First she forgot to bring in the newspaper, and next she left her cell on the kitchen table. *Not good, not good at all.*

She kept moving around on all fours, growing more impatient with every inch covered, every grass blade bent. Millie walked around in larger circles around the same spot. After twenty minutes of searching they had found nothing and deciding they needed a cold glass of water headed back to the house.

CHAPTER 10

She laid the newspaper on the kitchen table and picked up her cell, three missed calls. None of the numbers looked familiar. Probably annoying marketing calls. Her headache had not improved, and with all her high hopes of finding the phone now fizzled, all she wanted to do was go hide in her room and sulk.

And then what? Problems didn't get solved by sulking, and somehow it was extremely important for Diego to know that someone else may be using *his* phone. The snoops-proof phone, or so he thought. Reality only made her more miserable. She couldn't even be trusted with a phone. *A phone.* With her limited knowledge of anything electronic the only thing she knew how to do was touch the answer button. So far she had never been the one to call him; She always waited for Diego to call her. What if whoever found the phone wasn't as technically challenged as she? Now she felt sick at her stomach.

Kalinda.

If she could talk to Kalinda, everything could be straightened out in a second. No doubt about it. Five minutes—that's all it would take for computer whiz Kalinda to get hold of Diego, explain the innocent mistake, possibly nab whoever was playing dial T for trouble, and set them straight. Yes, she'd found her champion. Now all she needed to do was convince De

Fiore to either do a conference call with the three of them or simply share Kalinda's phone number so Mina could beg her personally. Yes, simple. Problem solved, or not.

First things first—call De Fiore. Lucky for her Mina had his personal number, the one she used on the occasional emergency when she found herself in a jam. But since that hadn't happened in a very long time, she couldn't remember the number and had to look for it. After she found it, handwritten on a Post-it she kept in her wallet, she realized it was one of the missed calls on her cell.

How about that? Perfect. She could pretend she was returning his call. *Pretend?* She *was* returning his call. He probably wanted to know about Kalinda's landscaping. Good, De Fiore would be the one to bring up the Matchmaker to the Stars, not Mina. She was so busy congratulating herself that the chiming of the doorbell made her jump. Nearly noon. Her morning wasted on scheming silly plots. The doorbell chimed again.

"Coming..." *I bet it's De Fiore.*

She opened the door and found herself staring at Tom, security guard Tom.

"Oh, hi, Tom. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, yes. I heard about your fall, wanted to see if you needed help. You know, I live alone, and sometimes it gets downright lonely. I know you have your cats, but still."

Somehow Mina felt that in this case Tom was still lonelier than she was. She invited him in. "I'm lucky. Millie got back late last night. She even brought me breakfast. It's hard to feel lonely with that sweet woman around." She couldn't help notice the sparkle of interest lighting Tom's expression at the mention of Millie's

name. *What do you know?* He has the hots for Millie? He's never even met her.

"She's back? How does she like her place? Did you tell her we did the painting?" Old Tom looked like a kid on Christmas morning. Might as well let him close to the tree. "Well Tom, why don't we walk over there and ask her?"

"You don't think it would be—you know—imposing?"

"If we are imposing, she'll let us know. Trust me on that. Let's go."

His smile made her forget about her headache. She pulled the front door closed behind her, and they walked down the driveway to the B&B.

Mina couldn't tell if Millie had seen them coming or if it was just a coincidence, but when Millie opened the door she didn't act a bit surprised, just a smile and, "Please, come in. You must be Tom, the gentleman who, as they say, saved the day."

That was one of the best icebreakers Mina had ever heard.

Those two chatter-boxed, walking around the Ritz Cats rooms first, discussing other potential changes like a new doorknob or a countertop of a different color. More like two old friends than strangers who had just met.

Mina kept wondering if Lasik was the only thing Millie had done to her eyes because she looked and acted ten years younger. Mina felt somehow invisible, so she sat next to Zeus and realized she once again left the house without her cell phone. *Maledizione.* What if there was an emergency at the shelter?

If she could come up with some good excuse to leave, she would. But since she owned the business and was the one to write the checks she sat patiently until

Tom and Millie finished their walkthrough. That way she could see the complete to-do list. The way the two had hit it off, Mina felt pretty sure Tom wouldn't be feeling lonely for a while.

Millie offered to put together lunch, but Mina wanted to get back home and call De Fiore as soon as possible. Kalinda's rehab was in Texas, which meant a two-hour difference. "Tom, if you feel like having lunch, it's fine. I'm sure you can find your way back to your car. You know what? I meant to ask you while you were painting, and somehow I forgot. Do you think you can do something to salvage our rusted little gate?"

The blank look on Tom's face told her he had no clue what she meant. Millie however did.

"Good idea, Mina. Why don't you show the gate to Tom while I fix a bite to eat?" Mina got that as her cue to leave. *Perfect.* "Oh, sure, want to walk out with me? Then I'll have to go back home, but you two can have lunch. And, Millie, don't forget. Next Tuesday we are open for business. I expect three furry guests the first day."

Millie nodded, "Of course, I can't wait." Mina and Tom walked out and headed to the far corner of the property and the rusty, neglected gate.

"It got so bad because we never used it until Kalinda moved next door. It's a practical short cut, and I sort of like the narrow path with all the wild flowers, and good smelling shrubs. Makes me feel closer to nature."

Who was the chatterbox now?

Tom bent to examine the hinges, and Mina decided to gather a few of the yellow flowers to bring back home to brighten her breakfast table. She picked them randomly here and there, and before she realized it she had reached the end of the path and had a clear view of Kalinda's driveway. A black car sat there, driver's door

open. The car had parked in a peculiar way, slanted instead of straight. It sure looked like De Fiore's Ford. Maybe he was checking to make sure all was as it should be. He did that occasionally, and being in a hurry maybe he left the car running? He could see the good job the landscapers did.

"Mina. Where are you?" Tom called from the gate. She hesitated an instant, took another quick look at the idling car, and walked back to talk to Tom. Certainly De Fiore would stop by her place to ask how much the yard job was, right?

"How attached are you to this gate?" Tom asked.

"That bad?"

"Honestly, it would be more cost effective to buy a new gate and stain it to make it look distressed. That way you can keep the appearance without spending a lot of money and time on this one that's about to fall apart. I can get you some catalogues, or better yet you can find them on the Internet and—" He stopped suddenly, his gaze bypassing Mina as he stared at something behind her. "What is it?" She turned to see what Tom found so fascinating. She noticed the dog at the same time Tom mumbled "Aspen?"

Oh my God, he was right. Aspen/Buddy lead the small parade. He was still wearing the same collar and leash he had on when he ran off after a moving shadow. Would that young boy holding the leash be that shadow?

"Leo, you found the runaway dog?" Tom said.

Leo?

"I—" You know this kid?" That was Detective De Fiore asking Tom. A not a very friendly Detective De Fiore who walked closely behind Buddy and the boy. The whole scene felt surreal, but Mina could only think of one thing, once again Buddy was safe. The commotion

brought Millie out. She stood to the side, watching mostly.

“he kid and the dog.” Tom was all fatherly smiles patting Leo’s head. The dog’s tail told the world he was happy to be there. “Where did you find him? I should tell you the story of how I first ran into this dog here when he was just a puppy and—”

“You knew Buddy when he was a puppy?” Now it was the dark haired kid Tom called Leo who got all animated and apparently forgot about the detective. Unfortunately for Leo, De Fiore wasn’t nearly as excited or forgiving. He was mad. Very mad.

“Whoa... slow down there. Tom, how do you know this kid? Leo is it? Better yet. Leo, how do you know the name of the dog?” De Fiore glanced at Mina, “Is the dog’s name on his collar?”

She shook her head *no* while waiting for some answers. Tom and Leo started to talk simultaneously.

“Oh, no, no. Tom, you first,” De Fiore said.

“Leo lives around here. Not sure which house. The other day he stopped by to say hi. Coincidentally we just had a few pizzas delivered for lunch while we were painting the rooms of the B&B.” He winked at De Fiore. “So he joined us. We had plenty, and the guys were happy to share.”

Leo kept his head down, staring at his shoes, one missing the shoelace. Mina noticed his skinny arms and how he tightened his fist around Buddy’s leash as if afraid someone would take it away from him. And Buddy, with his eternally sad eyes, shifted his body slightly closer to the kid. All that while De Fiore paced like a tiger in a cage.

“Well, thank you for finding Buddy and bringing him back. We have been so worried,” Mina said with the sweetest tone of voice she could muster.

“We need to talk.” De Fiore encompassed everyone in his sight. “And I need to go get my car.” He looked at Mina.

“It’s better if we do it at my place. We shouldn’t bring Buddy in the B&B right after we painted. It’s not good for the cats to pick up the scent when they first get here.”

“Fine, everyone can go to your place, I’ll be there in two. Millie, you make sure this kid and the dog don’t take off.” He turned on his heel and headed to Kalinda’s place.

They walked in silence, the kind of suspenseful quiet that precedes a burst of thunder.

Mina, who led the group, spoke to Millie. “I’ll go in first. Give me a couple of minutes to get the cats upstairs? Not taking any chances.”

Millie nodded; she didn’t have her dark glasses on and seemed to squint a lot.

De Fiore didn’t need any announcement; the squeal of brakes took care of that. What was eating at him? This wasn’t like him at all. Where did he find the boy? It felt like—this Leo and the dog, hit close to home, very personal.

Out of the blue Mina found herself offering food to Leo. “Are you hungry? I can get you a Nutella sandwich and a glass of milk.”

“What’s a Nutella?” he asked. What? He looked to be ten years old and had never tasted Nutella? Time to fix that.

“It’s like peanut butter, but better. Unless you’re allergic to nuts?”

He shook his head, and she could tell his mouth watered. The kid must be really hungry, and probably Buddy was too.

She rushed to the kitchen while De Fiore ordered everyone to sit. Her cell chimed; she recognized Margo's number. *Sorry girlfriend, not now.* In a jiffy she was back and handed the sandwich to Leo, setting the glass of milk on a coaster on the coffee table. While everyone watched in disbelief, she put a paper plate with cheese and crackers on the floor next to Buddy.

A smile lit De Fiore's eyes for an instant just before he snarked, "Do you ever answer your phone?"

She shrugged. He'd heard her cell?

"How did you get in the house?" De Fiore stood in front of Leo's chair, speaking in a firm tone.

"The—huh—dog door—because..." A mouth full of Nutella made Leo sound funny. Not that anyone looked amused. Puzzled, doubtful, and surprised maybe. Perhaps a combination of the three reflected on everyone's face—well, excluding the detective and Leo who Mina felt was now a Nutella fan.

"Wait, wait. Are you saying you found Leo and Buddy in Kalinda's house?" Millie, squinting even more, got up and went to the kitchen. She came back with a bowl of water for Buddy. The bowl Mina used for Zeus. "I have the feeling neither of these two have eaten a regular meal in a while."

"This is good. Did you make it?" Leo asked Mina.

"The Nutella? No, it's Italian. I grew up eating that."

"Your mom made you sandwiches for school lunch? My mom did too." When he said that his whole face morphed into that of a sad, lost soul. It passed just as quickly. Leo wiped his mouth with the back of his arm. "Buddy is my dog." He added proudly.

“But you could leave the money for the kids. They can use it.”
The words of Isabel Cordero’s neighbor flashed through Mina’s mind.

“Oh, my God, you’re Simon’s little brother.” It slipped out before she could stop it.

The kid’s face brightened up. “You know my brother?”

“Who’s Simon?” Millie asked.

Tom’s eyes ricocheted from one face to the other one, except not De Fiore’s so much because at that moment he was looking at Mina. Their eyes met.

“Cordero?” De Fiore mouthed.

She nodded yes.

His anger seemed to deflate. He moved across the living room, still shaking his head. He sat and again looked at Mina. “I should have known. It never fails.” He turned to Leo, his voice a notch kinder. “Where is your big brother?”

“Working.”

“Working where? How did you get to Kalinda’s? I mean how did you end up in that house?”

Leo drank his last sip of milk. “It’s like this. Simon was working to help the lady get the house good for her because she had an accident and like, you know.” He swiped his hand in front of his knees, and they understood he meant to show she’d lost her legs from the knees down. “She was getting this big dog. That’s why there is a doggie door, but then she had to go away to a place where they give you new, better body parts. Simon thinks she may be like, you know, a super hero when she gets back. Simon is going to be eighteen years old next month, and then we won’t have to worry that the social workers take me to a foster home, just one month.” He waved his index in the air. “Right Buddy?

One. My brother went with the people fixing the lady's house. It's spring break, and he needs money so we get our own place."

"Are you saying your brother told you to stay in that—that lady's house?" De Fiore asked. He was the only one who could speak clearly. Everyone else was choked up over the innocence in Leo's storytelling, and of course neither Millie nor Tom knew about Isabel Cordero's strange death.

Leo's smile disappeared. "No, that was only for emergencies. Simon said the lady would understand." He had an endearing way of rolling his Rs as if it took all his concentration to get it right. "He told me about the doggie door and made me promise I would be very careful because we are not thieves or criminals. That's what he said. Me and Buddy were to stay with the woman next door where we used to live, until Simon got back. He gave her money, and all was good until the woman's boyfriend got out of jail. He took my phone, so I couldn't talk to Simon anymore." He paused, scratching his nose. "He must be so worried. And then he—" He stopped and swallowed hard, concentrating on his shoes. "I cried, and Buddy got mad, so they locked Buddy outside. I waited until they went to sleep and went looking for my dog. I kept walking, and Simon always told me not to talk to strangers or to police because they have to take me to the foster home. But I had to find Buddy. Guess what? Buddy found me. Didn't you boy?" He rubbed the dog's head, and Buddy burrowed his muzzle on the kid's chest.

Millie was fishing around for some tissues, and Tom blew his nose in a very noisy way.

De Fiore pointed a finger at Mina. "You. I should have known."

“Leo, where are your parents?” Tom asked before Mina could stop him.

The boy shrugged, kept rubbing his dog’s head. “My mom—she had an accident like. She died, and Simon said we are going to get our own detective as soon as he makes enough money because that wasn’t an accident.”

“Why do you say that?” De Fiore asked, and Mina knew him well enough to understand that something in what Leo said had sparked his curiosity.

“The lunch. The police said she had the accident on her way to work. She always packed our lunch before going to work, always. There was no lunch. Simon said he wrote everything down and not to forget. He thinks the police was too busy with the Christmas stuff. He said the police got—what’s that word? Sidetracked?”

“Oh, you poor, poor child, you can stay with us until Simon comes to get you.” Millie looked at Mina, waiting for a yes.

A yes she couldn’t give. It wasn’t about Leo—Buddy had to be part of the deal. You can’t have a strange dog when you live and work in a high-end B&B for cats.

And just like that Tom saved the day.

“Leo, you and your dog can stay with me. I have a big house with a nice fenced yard. I used to have a dog.” He stopped to blow his nose again. “And Simon can stay with us too until he is eighteen at least. What do you say?”

Surprisingly enough, instead of giving a cheerful yes, Leo looked at Detective De Fiore, seeking approval? Mister I’m-so-tough had a hard time hiding his emotions, and Mina didn’t dare open her mouth, too busy fending off her own tears.

CHAPTER 11

De Fiore stared at the only living room wall deprived of artwork. They hadn't exchanged a word since Tom loaded Leo and Buddy into his truck, and after promising a small detour to pick up dog food, headed home to his large place with the fenced yard.

Millie had walked back to her small place, her eyes red rimmed from the suppressed crying and the exposure to bright light.

The mood was anything but pleasant. Why? She had no way of knowing a kid was squatting in Kalinda's house. She hadn't set foot in there since the woman left weeks ago. But De Fiore should have known. He checked out the place often, and he was a detective after all. Apparently he didn't detect squat until—until what?

"De Fiore, how did you catch Leo? How long had he been hiding there?"

"He wasn't there the other day when I stopped by to check on the landscape."

"That was the same day Buddy was spotted wandering around the train tracks in San Clemente. Yes, that fits. Leo said he ran away to go looking for his dog. Poor kid. We need to find his brother, let him know what's going on."

"Tom is going to try to locate him. I'll call Kalinda and ask her how to get in touch with the construction crew. He's obviously traveling with them." He glanced at

Mina, his voice slightly mellower than his attitude. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Turn something as uncomplicated as transferring a rescued dog from one shelter to another into a possible murder investigation and a big hot mess that touches many lives here and abroad?”

“Oh, wait, wait. What are you talking about? I get the murder investigation, and you can thank me later. But hot mess? Here and abroad? Seriously?”

He kept staring at that same wall. Avoiding her eyes. Why?

“The phone.” He slipped his hand inside his jacket and pulled out a phone from the breast pocket. *Diego’s phone.*

“You found it. You found it. Oh, thank you, thank you...” She leapt from her chair to grab the phone. The detective moved it out of her reach. “No, I didn’t find it. It’s the other way around, and I can’t let you have it. Sorry. Gave my word.”

“Come on, De Fiore, stop with the games. I’ve been searching for it. It’s very special. It’s the one I lost yesterday when I was chasing Buddy. I fell, hit my head, and it must have slipped out of my jeans pocket. Where was it?”

De Fiore shook his head, and there was not a trace of a smile when he said, “That’s how I found Leo. He had the phone.” He paused and then spoke in a slow and staccato pattern. “He-was using it. Your boyfriend’s super special, high-tech, state-of-the-art phone was being used in random efforts to reach—friends? Family? Except that’s not what the phone is programmed to do.”

He kept it at a certain distance from himself, as if afraid the device would cause him bodily harm. How

ridiculous was that? Probably trying to give her a guilt trip. *She* who thrived on eternal guilt.

"This cell has now been disabled and will be picked up at my office tomorrow and properly disposed of, after being dissected and carefully analyzed of course. If you don't get the dozen of nefarious consequences that may have been set in motion by the kid's actions, I suggest you ask Diego to explain it to you." He sighed. "All the calls originated from Kalinda's house."

It all sounded preposterous, right off some B spy movie, which in turn made the whole thing even more plausible.

"Is he mad at me?" she asked, troubled by De Fiore's accusations.

His answer left no doubts. "You'll have to ask him yourself. There are lots of rumors floating around with the passing of the Gran Dame. And none are good." *What did he know about Diego's deceased boss?* "I need to get going. You behave kid, and let me do my job. Look at me, Mina. I mean it. You need to lie low. It was suggested that you go about your usual routine but avoid at all cost going anywhere near Kalinda's place. Got that?" He paused, waiting for her answer. "I was asked to relay the message to you. And I promise I'll keep you informed regarding the Cordero case." He shook his head. "What am I saying? What case? See what I mean? Your disease is contagious. Didn't even get to say hi to Aria. I'm leaving; don't get up. Sit and stew on that promise you just made."

Mina sat until she heard the front door close. What promise? He did all the talking. She never agreed to anything. She headed upstairs to let the cats out of the bedroom.

Couldn't make it to the top. The wave of painful reality hit her all at once, without warning. Her hands grasped the banister, to slow her crumpling on the steps. She blinked back the treacherous tears free-falling on her cheeks. Certainly the misunderstanding could be corrected. Diego would never cut her out of his life over a silly accident she had no control over. He wasn't that kind of man; they had years of history together.

She would explain to him. Explain what? How she may have put lives in danger to chase a runaway dog? It wasn't so black and white, everything happened so fast. If only she could talk to him.

Suddenly the truth became clear. Kalinda was somewhere in Texas isolated from the outside world. Gino, according to Margo, was happily floating down the Adriatic in a luxurious yacht, surrounded by women, and Diego—*Oh, Diego*.

She sat, resting her head on her knees folded against her chest. She ran out of tears while the sky faded from blue to slate. The phone no longer rang, and the furious scratching and meowing of her cats had subsided.

Only the guilt remained—guilty for everything, past, present and future.

“Mina, dear, where are you?” Millie’s voice came from the door between the garage and the kitchen. “Why is it so dark in here?”

“I’m here. Got caught up in one of my guilty crises, haven’t even fed the poor cats.” She stood and had trouble moving. One of her legs had gone to sleep.

Suddenly the bright chandelier over the stairs came on, Millie, of course.

“You poor thing, what can I do to help?” Mina noticed that Millie had brought Zeus along. “Hope you don’t mind; he was restless. I think he misses his two

friends. He'll be okay once we are back in business and he can play with the guests."

Mina nodded and forced herself to go let her poor hungry cats out. Aria rushed down to greet Zeus, but Houdini took his sweet time and made it clear that he wasn't happy being locked up. He walked past her, tail in the air, ignoring her presence. His displeasure was so blatant she couldn't help but smile and grabbed him and carried him downstairs in spite of his mild attempts at resisting.

She sat at the kitchen table next to Millie, and they watched the three cats devour their smelly food.

Mina's stomach growled.

"I bet you haven't eaten a thing all day," Millie said.

Millie shrugged.

As usual Millie took charge. She went back to her place and returned with cheese and bread. Ten minutes later they both had grilled cheese sandwiches and some Pinot Grigio, the one thing Mina always kept stocked. Having someone to talk to helped. Plus, Millie needed to be put up to date with so much. And of course Leo and Tom became center focus until Mina told the background events that lead to De Fiore finding the kid and Buddy in Kalinda's house.

She avoided the subject of the telephone, too painful. It was almost ten by the time Millie collected Zeus and they headed back to their place. "Mina, I meant to tell you, we have baby birds in that old nest. First time since I've been living here. I'm not sure, but I counted at least three babies. Keep an eye on Houdini—doesn't matter how well fed a cat is, it's their nature."

"You know what? I'm not sure how he does it, but I'm convinced he sneaks out when I'm not around. Do you think he could get to the nest?"

Millie nodded. "It would be too bad. Have you considered putting a small collar on him? You know, with a bell, so that mommy bird, maybe even rabbits could hear him coming and have a better chance to run or fly away?"

"Millie that's a terrific idea. I'll get one tomorrow on my way to the shelter. Good idea." She looked at Houdini who was busy grooming himself on the living room couch.

Well aware of her resistance to checking the messages, there was still one more painful chore before going to bed—she had to see who'd called. Part of her prayed for a call from Diego—the other part dreaded finding one.

Linda had called just to check in, and Tom sounded elated, announcing they'd made contact with Leo's brother, Simon. She could hear Buddy barking in the background. A playful bark at that. And Margo. Again and again. Three messages, all lengthy, all unhappy. All about not knowing when Gino would be back. Might as well bite the bullet and call her back, but first she needed to wash her face, brush her teeth, and get into comfy clothes.

Thirty minutes later, in the quiet of her bedroom, with her heart somersaulting in her chest, she hoped against all logic that Margo may have news to share of Diego or Gino or both. She dialed the number, listened to the hollow ringing of the phone. Over and over. Margo never picked up, and the voice mail never kicked in. Perhaps she was mad as hell, and having recognized the number she had decided to serve Mina a generous helping of her own medicine.

CHAPTER 12

The lunch. Leo and Simon didn't believe their mother's death had been an accident because she hadn't fixed their school lunch. The kind of detail no one else would have known about. The kind of small, personal details that are the cornerstones of any solid relationship. Was she thinking about the Corderos or herself? The thought of the two orphans going through all those adversities to be able to stay together remained with her.

Pure love. Mina could learn a thing or two. When was the last time she'd changed her schedule to fit Diego's time off? She was always too busy, too self-important to let someone else take charge, so she could spend some quality time with the man she called the love of her life. She couldn't remember ever having called him. Even if more than once he had encouraged her to do so. "*Bella, why didn't you call me?*" He had reminded her so often he was but a phone call away. *Was.*

Stop, it Mina.

On this Saturday morning the traffic on Crown Valley moved at a pleasant pace. All that would change once beach season arrived, but for now she could drive in what she called her mindless style, meaning she could let her feelings rage, getting all the anxieties and regrets out of her system before arriving at the office.

Not that it helped much. Linda and Leigh would see it in her eyes the minute she said hello. The three of them

had gone through good and bad times and had always supported each other regardless of who, why, or when. On the plus side, she would finally get to meet the latest group of furry friends Leigh had rescued from the E-list.

When she parked her LTD, she noticed Roger's SUV in the staff assigned space. He must be there in his official role of veterinarian. Good, maybe some of the dogs with a clean bill of health could be groomed and pictures posted on social media. That part was Sky's assignment.

Mina gathered her stack of files, the top one had a Post-it, *Houdini's bell* scribbled on it. Good thing she did that last night; she wouldn't have remembered otherwise. Too many odds and ends twirling in her head. And Margo never did return her call.

That wasn't like her at all. She usually would get very angry, lash out, and then hug you and say how sorry she was. Thank God for the shelter. Going there always cheered Mina up, and it had nothing to do with being the boss.

The front door of the FFF was propped open because Roger was standing there saying goodbye to Linda. Such a happy couple. In spite of the iffy beginning, they had settled into a loving, committed relationship, or so it appeared. Mina waited patiently until Linda must have noticed her because Roger moved to the side, apologizing.

"Oh, I didn't see you, sorry. You could have coughed or tap-danced, or simply said hi and..."

"Nah, I enjoyed the back view," she chided and had to laugh when Roger, who towered over her, blushed. She heard Linda chuckling and knew all was good.

The barking was deafening, which was pretty normal after one of Roger's professional calls. Some of the dogs

were frightened, others defensive, especially the newcomers not used to being manhandled. Linda gave Mina the tour. One of the female dogs was pregnant. *Ouch.* That meant extra bills and a litter of puppies that would need homes. They would probably start a betting pool regarding what mix the puppies would be. The mother appeared to be part Lab and part... who knew?

“She’s so young,” Linda said. “Has to be her first litter.”

“And her last,” Mina added. And for no apparent reason the thought of her future with Diego flashed in her mind’s eye. A future without children.

“What’s wrong?” Linda glanced at her. “You look so sad all of a sudden.”

Wearing her feelings on her face, as usual. Better change subject. “Did you hear about Buddy?”

“Tom called, said the dog was with him? Are we giving up on locating the kids?”

“Oh, no, no. Buddy and Leo, one of the two Cordero brothers, are staying with Tom until the high school kid, Simon, gets back in town—tomorrow I guess. I’m giving you the shortened version.” She set the pile of paperwork she’d brought from home on the desk and again noticed the Post-it note. “Shoot, almost forgot again.”

“Forgot what?”

Mina removed the sticker and showed it to Linda. “Need to get a collar with a bell for Houdini. We have birds.” She shook her head.

“He still manages to sneak out, doesn’t he?” Linda laughed. “We have about half a dozen left in the cats’ room.”

“Half a dozen what?”

“Those collars with the bells. All donated. Owners don’t like them because of the noise when the cats hop around the house, especially at night. Cats don’t like them, well, for obvious reasons, and so we have a variety of them. Go take a look and see if you find one that works.”

“I’ll do that, and then I need to forget paperwork and do manual labor. I must.”

“Manual labor? Like shoveling manure?” Linda laughed so hard at the thought that Leigh stuck her head out of the office door to see what all the commotion was about, and just then some prospects looking to adopt a medium-sized male dog showed up. The couple had already filled out and turned in their application online. Linda rushed to greet them. Show time.

The free-roaming cat room had that ever present smell of ammonia mixed with various odors cats can’t help produce. Mina only noticed when she’d been absent from the room for a while. She went around petting the oldest ones, playing with the kittens, then cleaned the litter boxes, and was ready to refill the water dishes when one of the old cats seems to choke. It had happened before; the vet hadn’t seemed too concerned.

“We need to find you a nice home, huh baby?” She cradled the cat until it breathed normal again. And she remembered the collar. Sure enough, they were held together by a rubber band on the same shelf as the treats. Mina picked a black one with a very small silver bell. Might as well put it in her purse before she forgot.

The couple wanting a dog were in the back room. Linda had brought out Clyde, a Chow mix that everyone loved. He had some formal obedience training and could even perform tricks. Mina didn’t want to distract the dog during the meet-and-greet encounter, so important for

everyone involved. She sneaked back into the cat room and then walked out into the fenced yard where a few dogs were playing.

Might as well scoop the poop, she decided. Not an easy task with three young dogs full of energy banding together to attack her ankles. Too bad she'd left her phone in her purse; she could have taken a few funny pics.

The yard could use some grass, which should be the next project, way too much dust with the dogs running around like that. Time to come up with some fund-raiser gimmick. Next meeting.

Twenty minutes later she felt it was safe to go back inside. Certainly the couple should know by now if Clyde was the one or not. She guessed right. Linda, the couple, and the lucky dog had moved into the small conference room where the final adoption papers would be signed.

"Hey, Mina, how about some Chinese for lunch? Sky can pick it up on her way here," Leigh said.

"Okay by me. How about Linda?"

"I'll order the usual; she can eat when she's done. Okay to use cash from the drawer to pay back Sky?"

"Sure. We need to call a meeting this coming week, gather our volunteers see if we can come up with some good idea for fund raising. What do you think?"

"We were just talking about that. With Mother's day coming soon, maybe mugs or T-shirts?"

Mina nodded. "Depends on the cost. Too bad Kalinda's not around. She always had such fun ideas."

"When will she be back?"

"No clue," Mina said, and suddenly she missed Diego more than ever. She walked back to her office, no need to mope around the shelter.

"Your phone was ringing," Leigh shouted.

Two missed calls—Margo and De Fiore. A little voice in her head told her neither one would be bearer of good news, so which one to call back first? She sat, took a long breath, and prepared herself for Margo's outburst.

It never came. Her former roommate spoke in such a calm tone Mina wondered if she was on some sedative. "Haven't heard from you in so long, I was concerned," Margo said.

Something was definitely wrong, since when was Margo concerned about others? Especially the ones not returning her phone calls pronto?

"I'm sorry. We—I—had problems with one of our rescues and—well, don't want to bore you with shelter's stories. Anything new with Gino? Is he back yet?"

Long pause. Mina didn't like it at all, and De Fiore's remarks about the dozens of nefarious consequences the wrong use of Diego's phone may have unleashed sent shivers up her spine. Could something bad have happened to Gino? Was that why Margo acted so unlike herself?

"He may not be coming back." *Did she really say that?*

"What are you saying? What happened?"

"I don't know. Was hoping you did. What's your boyfriend saying?"

"Margo, I haven't spoken to Diego since he flew out with Gino. I don't know, and that's the truth. You probably know more than I do. And no, I can't call Diego. I guess we are on our own. What about the business? Will it close down?"

"This week all the paychecks were direct deposits, so I assume we are staying open. What would you do if you were me?" Margo's voice—a devastatingly sad whisper.

“When did you last spoke to Gino? What did he say? More important, what did you think about the general conversation?”

“Just before I left you those mean messages. He sounded very concerned, mumbled something about bad things happening, having to get answers. He wasn’t mad at least not at me, but he didn’t say he was on his way back either.”

“Margo, okay, he didn’t say he was on his way back, but did he say he wasn’t coming back at all?”

“Huh, no, he didn’t say that. You think that’s a good thing?” The old Margo was coming alive.

“Listen to yourself. He never said he isn’t coming back, and bills and salaries are getting paid. Seems to me he’s keeping the boat afloat while he takes care of some business problems. Seriously, Gino isn’t the type to mislead you. He’s as straight talking as possible. Agree?” She crossed her fingers waiting for a reply.

“You’re right. Of course. I knew you’d have the answers. I better keep this restaurant running smooth, so he’ll be proud of me when he gets back. Yes, you make sense. Let’s make a deal—the first one of us who hears something tells the other one. Okay?”

“Absolutely, deal. Now go and do your things. Don’t worry. Gino will be back soon.”

Mina wished there was someone who could tell her such sweet made-up, feel good lies, so her heart didn’t hurt so bad.

One down, one to go. Maybe De Fiore could wait until after lunch. She kept replaying in her mind Leo Cordero’s description of why he broke into Kalinda’s house. Did he walk all the way there? What had the neighbor’s boyfriend done to him to make him cry?

Maybe the boyfriend was the reason the woman was so upset the last time Mina paid her a visit.

Leo sure wasn't your typical ten-year-old. He didn't use slang words and didn't appear to be too much into computers or Internet, then again, neither did she. She fought the urge to call Tom and ask how everything was. Better lay low like De Fiore suggested, see if the phone mishap blew away on its own. Apparently the detective was now the only one in contact with Diego, or was he? She had to keep on moving, sitting and thinking only made her even more aware of her loneliness and how badly she wanted to talk to Diego.

Always wanting what we can't have.

Sky arrived with Chinese carry out for everyone and with a new volunteer she had recruited at Saddleback Community College where she studied to become a medical assistant.

Before eating, Sky made sure to capture the happy smiles of Clyde's new family. She would then post it on Facebook on the shelter's page. Good publicity. It was about one o'clock when they locked the front door and posted the *Be Back Soon* sign. Then they all sat in the same room where the adoption took place, and they ate and started writing down their bets on the soon to be born litter. The majority was for Lab-Chihuahua mix, only because Chihuahua had been showing up in more and more mixed litters. Those little dogs had a way to charm the larger breeds.

"That's right. Never judge by size," Mina said. She was the shortest one there.

And now it was time to call De Fiore.

CHAPTER 13

So much for self-assertiveness.

De Fiore managed to convince her to meet him at that French bistro in Newport Beach where they used to get together back when Brian Starr was her one and only—a lifetime away.

But if the detective was telling the truth, the circumstances surrounding Isabel Cordero's death were about to get revisited. With a little help from Mina. How could she refuse? First step—provide a copy of the dog's adoption papers to De Fiore. How that mattered she didn't know. However she would do anything in her power to help because she just knew something was amiss. And the feeling had been there all along. Leo's touching testimonial about the lunch and the mother's devotion were equal to what Americans liked to call icing on the cake.

She drove home to feed the cats, change clothes and perhaps bring Millie up to date. She also hoped in spite of everything that maybe, just maybe, it was all a trick to give her some news about Diego. He had said that someone was going to pick up the now useless phone at his office. She sighed and clicked open the gate.

Hope never dies.

The day didn't feel like a Saturday at all, not that it mattered much. And everything would change starting Tuesday when the Ritzy Cats B&B would officially

reopen for business, with new paint, and a bit of a new and improved look. And that included Millie, dark shades or not. Just then Millie walked up to Mina's open garage door. She wore a nice dress, black with very small white polka dots. It felt sort of out of place seeing Millie in a silk dress and heels. Only two inches, but still heels. Something was up.

"Hi Millie, you'll be proud of me. I got the collar with the bell. Can't wait to see how easy it's going to be to get it on Houdini."

Millie smiled. "He's right behind you. Want to give it a try while I'm here to offer help?"

"No way, not with that lovely dress you're wearing."

"Thanks." She avoided Mina's eyes, and she wasn't wearing any dark glasses. Okay, it was five o'clock, and the sun was on its last hurrah. "I'm actually headed North... to Lake Forrest."

"Oh, I love Lake Forrest, was so tempted to buy a home there but couldn't. Adams, my lawyer, explained about the zoning and all that legal mumble jumble." She waited; somehow she knew there would be more to Millie's evening.

"Tom... security guard and painter... he... lives in Lake Forrest."

"No kidding, had no idea."

"Yes, well, you see, Leo and Buddy are there at his house. He called to tell me they had located the big brother. Simon will be back in town tomorrow, and Monday is a regular school day for both children. Tom will have to drive them all the way to San Clemente and then pick them up. Anyhow Tom asked me if I could drop by and perhaps give him some pointers on how to set up the bedroom the brothers will be sharing. I happen to have some extra bedding, and I figured I'd

bring it over. I find myself bored waiting for our precious fury boarders.”

How about that? Tom and Millie? Good story and even better for the orphans.

Not again, always jumping to conclusions. “Guess what? I’ll be driving up to Newport Beach to deliver some paperwork to Detective De Fiore. He agreed to take a new look at Isabel Cordero’s accidental death. Why don’t you bring Zeus over so he doesn’t get lonely while we are both out? I need to wash up, change into real clothes. Anyway, your call.”

“It’s a splendid idea. I’ll be right back with Zeus.”

Millie was right. Houdini sat on the step of the door opening to the kitchen. Now, how did he manage to get from inside the house to the garage?

Mina shook her finger at him. “You’re going to get yourself in trouble if you keep roaming around. Some hungry big monster is going to get you.” He quietly followed her into the house and didn’t put up too much of a fight when she put his new collar on.

She let the valet take care of her car and walked slowly toward the main entrance. Since her last visit, the enclosed patio sported what appeared to be new awnings and several large potted plants dotted the few steps. Nice.

De Fiore waived at her from his table. He sure didn’t look like a homicide detective. Like she was an expert on the subject. He wore a dark silk tie. *Midnight blue?* With lighter blue and grey paisleys. Very, very nice. He caught her looking at it and smiled, that shadow of a smile that told her he was somewhat relaxed but still working some angle she didn’t quite understand.

“What happened to the small dance floor?” She sat across from him.

“The dance floor? Ancient history. You haven’t been here lately I guess. Somehow I thought you liked this place.”

“You’re correct, *liked*, in the past. Anyway, here is the file with all the papers pertinent to the dog’s adoption. That day I was working the media circus and didn’t really have anything to do with the adoption. I’m glad you’re doing this. From the moment I heard of the boys’ mother’s death I felt like something wasn’t right, and—”

“I’m hungry.” De Fiore pushed the adoption file to the side. “Mind if we order some dinner? I haven’t had a chance to eat at all.”

What? “Huh, I guess. Thought you wanted me to drive here because you were in a hurry to go somewhere?”

He paused for a nanosecond too long. What was he really up to? She was dying to ask if Diego’s phone had been picked up and by whom. Instead she reached for the menu and opened it.

“Yeah. That was cancelled. How about some Prosecco?” He studied her with those slanted eyes of his that gave him a sense of mystery even when he chewed a *pomme frite*. He motioned the waitress over and ordered the wine.

“How come you don’t have any grey hair?” she asked him, and he looked at her like she had asked to see certain parts of his anatomy.

“I have Asian genes. Besides, what do you care?”

“Diego’s temples are grey. I’m sure he’s younger than you are.”

"Oh, that's easy. Diego happens to have you in his life, and that alone explains the grey hair." Her kick under the table was pure reaction. "Hey." He winced.

Mina let him order some chicken cordon bleu and a salad for her while he had a ten-minute consultation with the manager regarding some fancy cut of meat he wished prepared for himself. She wanted to eat and get home but without appearing rude. Of course when she had agreed to bring the file this wasn't what she had anticipated.

She thanked De Fiore for a wonderful meal, and that part was true, so much so that she asked for a doggie bag for the leftovers. But then she had to pace around while waiting for the valet to fetch her car. Apparently the bistro didn't have adequate parking space, therefore the parking attendant was driving patrons' cars to a different lot. Her LTD got cornered between two other vehicles, and the valet was working as fast as possible to get it out.

De Fiore snickered a lot, but always the gentleman he waited until she got her car before taking off in his black sedan.

It was after nine by the time she hit the 405 South. She couldn't shake the feeling that the whole evening had been a set up, but for what? She had known De Fiore for over six years. Over time they forged a close rapport, maybe not a full-fledged friendship, but certainly mutual respect.

De Fiore hadn't mentioned Kalinda or Diego either.

The better she got to know De Fiore, the more convinced she was that he didn't like to share much about his personal life and nothing about his profession. Strange man but always true to his word.

The late evening was pleasant. She drove with her car window down, thinking about Houdini, who hadn't

seemed too pleased with the black collar and the silver bell. When she left he'd been busy trying to rid himself of it. She was cruising down Old Ranch Road when she first noticed it. The smell of fire. Faint, off and on. She slowed down and looked around. She couldn't see any fire, and yet it was a clear night, stars in the sky, zooming cars on the road. A sense of urgency crept up her spine. The smell now more distinct. Something was burning somewhere. What? Where? She couldn't hear any fire engine or ambulance. No, only the constant buzzing of the cars on the freeway below.

Wait. She turned up her familiar road and noticed cars parked on the side of the street. In the dark she couldn't tell if the vehicles looked familiar or not, and now the urgency was real. Just then a fire engine came rolling down the road, away from the dead end and from where her home was. The cats... Millie... Mina stepped on the gas. Her hands shook; her fingers gripped the steering wheel. But she couldn't see any sign of fire, no flames, no smoke plume. Just overwhelming smoky smell.

Her headlights bounced off a small group of people walking toward her car. Probably the owners of the vehicles parked below. Gawkers??? When she cleared the last turn she found her answers. The neighbors' homes had all the lights on, and she recognized familiar faces. People lingering in small clusters. At the sight of her home looking as it did when she left hours ago she finally let go of her fear. She drove right up to the gate, clicked it open, and inched her car in but didn't proceed to the garage. Instead she killed the engine and walked out into the clear night to talk to the neighbors about the yellow tape and the makeshift blockade preventing cars from

entering the end of the cul de sac and the driveway to Kalinda's house.

"What happened?" she asked her neighbor from down the street.

"I'm not sure, but I overheard something about electrical fire? There were two fire engines originally. They are both gone, and they left a few men behind to board up the place. I suppose to keep looters away until morning when the real fence will go up. I've seen similar cases before. This one isn't so bad, at least from up here, and it seems like the fire department got everything under control pretty quick." She looked at Mina, "You missed the whole exciting show. And the house is vacant, right?" Mina nodded.

The only dark place in the whole neighborhood was hers. Apparently Millie had also missed the whole exciting show as the neighbor put it. Pounding came from down by Kalinda's main entrance, possibly more boarding up of the premises. Had anyone alerted De Fiore? Probably not.

"Better head on home to make sure the cats are not frightened out of their minds. Luckily our B&B is still closed for vacation. That's a lucky break."

Most people headed home, show over.

Just then Millie arrived, probably as stunned and anxious as Mina had been minutes ago.

Mina followed Millie's car inside the gate. The motion light outside her front door came on just as Millie slipped out of her car.

"What happened?" she asked.

Mina shrugged. "I beat you by maybe ten minutes, crossed paths with the last fire engine leaving the scene. Have no clue about any of this. Let's go inside and make sure our babies are okay. They must be so frightened.

Can you imagine? With the roaring of the engines and the sirens..."

Mina unlocked her door and turned on her lights as she walked by. All was quiet for about thirty seconds, and then a rush of little paws came from upstairs. Aria zipped down first. Next came Zeus. He sounded like a bowling ball, very unusual for him. Millie grabbed him on the last step. "Where is Houdini?" she asked.

"No clue. Let me get them some food in the kitchen. I want to know how your evening in Lake Forrest went. I'm baffled that no one called De Fiore about the fire. Then again, it's not his house. Strange."

Her foot hit something and sent it rolling, she bent to see what it was, a tiny silver bell.

She looked up and saw Millie smiling. "Looks like someone isn't very fond of your collar."

Mina stared at the bell. "Looks like he chewed through the leather lace." She sighed. "Where is he? Dear God, I hope he didn't get himself in the mess out there."

"I wouldn't be too concerned, dear. Cats are not attracted to fire. The older boy called while I was at Tom's. They were to set up a meeting place that won't be too inconvenient for the people he works for. They'll be the ones dropping him off. I'm going back home—not much we can do about Kalinda's place now."

"Millie?"

"Yes, dear, what is it? You look—troubled—you know Houdini. He'll be back."

"It's not Houdini. It's... don't you find it strange that we both got invited away from here and didn't get back until after the fire was out? How many times has it happened since we have been working together that we're both gone and..."

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Millie stepped back, her arms still holding Zeus. “For what purpose? Tom hardly knows De Fiore, and he has never met Kalinda that I know.”

“I don’t know, Millie, I have a bad feeling, had it since this afternoon, like I’m being set up. But by whom? For what?”

“Do you want me to sleep in your spare bedroom?”

“No, no. Of course not. Go on, go home, I’ll see if I can find Houdini, that vagabond.”

She walked Millie out through the garage, so she could get directly home without going around the outside of the house, and just as she was locking the side door, Houdini made his grand entrance—tail up straight. He reeked of smoke.

She quickened her pace to keep up with him. He paused in the kitchen where Aria had just finished her dry food. Mina could see he still had the collar on, so he’d just chewed off the leather holding the bell. She had to hand it to him; he was a bright cat.

And she was exhausted, mentally more than physically. She couldn’t shake the eerie feeling of being watched... in her own house? In the dark of the night? She walked upstairs and glanced from the window. She could barely make out the roofline of Kalinda’s place. That was good. Maybe the damage was minimal. The neighbor had said the firefighters were there quickly.

Houdini hopped on the bed and rubbed his head against her shoulder. “You bad boy. I can smell the smoke on your coat. You’ve been snooping around the fire, haven’t you?”

He purred.

She stroked his head, felt the collar without the bell. How did he do that without ripping off the collar? She

examined a little closer. Something felt stiff, no, not stiff, more like, plastic? Did she forget to remove a tag? She slowly unfastened the small buckle and removed the collar. Sure enough, it looked like... plastic tape? Strong plastic. But there was something else pressed between the inside of the collar and the transparency of the tape. What was it?

Regardless of how absent-minded she could be, this she would have noticed. She began to remove the tape, careful not to damage what appeared to be a slim, folded piece of paper. It reminded Mina of the messages found inside fortune cookies. This was folded three times lengthwise to make it fit the width of the cat's collar.

She had trouble unfolding it, her whole body trembling, her fingers having a mind of their own. The writer had used an ordinary ballpoint pen, but the slanted cursive was unmistakable.

Absence is to love as wind is to fire. It extinguishes the small; it enkindles the great.

CHAPTER 14

Daylight played peekaboo with the departing darkness.

She should have known. Unless it was a hoax. That sense of pending doom still lingered in her soul. Diego, her Diego, only yards away from her. Now De Fiore's request made sense. Keeping her as far as possible from Kalinda's place, from the fire.

The fire.

Where did Diego fit in? Did he start the fire, or did he help put it out? Perhaps both?

He could have been in that Orange County Fire Department engine she crossed down the road or in the small truck that followed. He would have recognized her LTD. She looked at Houdini asleep at the foot of her bed. *Why can't you talk?*

Then the guilt kicked in... the phone, the exposure caused by her carelessness. Just how bad could it have been to call for such drastic and swift reaction? His message had no words of anger, no accusations. It spoke of love.

Clear your mind, Mina.

De Fiore's trickery made sense; he had a vested interest—Kalinda.

But what about Millie and Tom? Was there a connection, or was she projecting her paranoia on everything and everyone? Ever since Diego had given her

that new phone it had been a roller coaster of strange coincidences—and disappointments.

The first thin sunray tiptoed into her bedroom, and suddenly her mind could see; identifying a broader pattern that hadn't started with the loss of the phone. No, more like it had peaked then. Something deep inside told her the next call from Margo would be to announce Gino's homecoming. Just how big was this—whatever it was? How much of it was real? The funeral?

Get serious, Mina; you've seen the direct TV report from Greece. How about Kalinda's impromptu miracle therapy? De Fiore said she only landed the spot thanks to Diego. And she didn't take phone calls from anyone. For all Mina knew, Kalinda could be staying in one of the hotels up the coast. Then came the remodeling crew, with Simon Cordero, all working on Kalinda's home, the same home that just went up in smoke, well sort of. And by sheer coincidence it was Leo Cordero who started the madness by using her lost phone.

Okay Mina, at this rate you may include the dog in your conspiracy theory. The only thing she had a problem justifying was Tom who'd first brought the dog to the shelter and now had become part of the dog's and the kid's lives. She shook her head. That didn't help; she still felt as clueless as before.

Time to get up, make coffee and read the paper. The *paper*. Maybe it would have something about the house fire... from a reliable source? Of course, why not?

The smell of smoke wafted in the morning air. She grabbed the newspaper and went back inside. No way of seeing what was going on at the end of the cul de sac anyhow except for a few people in jogging gear busier gawking than jogging.

The fire made the front page of *The Register*. How about that? The headline stated: *Suspicious Fire Damages Vacant Summer Home of Wealthy Jordanian Socialite*. Kalinda was from Jordan? So the fire was of suspicious nature?

In spite of the suspenseful headline that screamed *Read me*, the reporting team called the quiet street a secluded county island surrounded by busy freeways and shopping centers. Apparently the authorities had been told that the house was temporarily vacant, and neighbors had reported seeing teenagers smoking and drinking late at night. What? That was a fat lie. A convenient and well-thought-out lie. The fire department's speedy response and swift action had managed to contain the damage to the east part of the house. East part of the house? That was Kalinda's huge office or her sanctum sanctorum, as she liked to call it. Her computers, phones, and God knows what else was all there.

Poor Kalinda, her whole business up in smoke? Mina's home phone rang as her toast popped up. *Maledizione*. Never failed.

She recognized Margo's number and could hardly conceal her anticipation. She was about to test her theory. "He's coming home. My Gino is on his way back." *Bingo*.

Margo's conversation was all in a high pitch and with no pauses for breathing. Happiness doesn't need a friend's empathy, and apparently Mina's former roommate didn't know about the fire next door. And Mina made sure not to say a word.

They hung up as Millie came knocking.

"Good morning, Mina. I figured you'd be up early. Who can sleep with all that banging?"

"What banging?"

Millie frowned. She wasn't wearing her dark glasses, so she looked more like dear old Millie. "They've been installing a Rent-a-fence, sort of mandatory after a fire to keep looters out. I'm surprised you didn't hear a thing. So why up so early?"

Mina's glance fell on the folded paper with Diego's message. She'd been carrying it with her since finding it. Millie followed the eyes. "What's that? De Fiore took you to a Chinese restaurant?"

To tell or not to tell? "No, as a matter of fact, I forgot my doggie bag in my car all night. Now it will stink of French food for a week, damn. Did you see the article in *The Register*?"

"No, I didn't."

"Here, let me get you some coffee and read how we live in this *secluded* slice of paradise next door to a rich social butterfly from far away Jordan."

"Is that what it says? Let me see."

Mina pushed the paper over to Millie and quietly pocketed Diego's note.

"How was Lake Forest?"

"Interesting, as always. Tom lives in the older part, you know, far back from the 5—larger lots and the eucalyptuses, so gorgeous, almost like a canopy around the home. He's lived there for the last thirty years of his life. A nice man." She sipped her coffee and had a sort of, well, not dreamy look but close to it. "Leo spoke to his brother, and they will meet today. As a matter of fact, they discussed getting together next door, you know... Kalinda's."

"They are? That's strange. Did they know about the fire?"

"I doubt it. What time did the fire, I mean the house..."

"I know what you mean, and I have no clue. When I drove back the firefighters were leaving. I don't even know how bad it is. Maybe we should take a walk from the side path through our old gate." She winked at Millie.

"Maybe we should. Are you going to be around today or do you have plans to go to the shelter?"

"I'm due at the shelter at three, and then it's my turn to close. Let me get organized, put on some walking shoes. Then let's stroll over to the home of our wealthy socialite." They both laughed thinking about Kalinda and her down-to-earth ways.

The house felt so quiet. No phones ringing, no cats playing, just Mina, wondering where Diego could be.

The brief walk with Millie was a bit disappointing. The two workers were done with the fence and packing to leave. From the outside, Kalinda's place didn't show much damage, except for two windows that had been boarded up. The most puzzling part was De Fiore's silence. He had to know—so did Kalinda—that the fire damage was centered where all of her business took place. No coincidence, of that Mina was sure. And it had taken some planning for the whole thing to be carried out so smoothly.

De Fiore's sedan pulled up just as Mina headed up the driveway after pulling her car into the garage. She watched him park by the yellow tape that was now loose at one end and flapping in the breeze. He waved her over. This was about to get interesting. Would he pretend he knew nothing about the fire?

Nah, too calm and collected, he even gave her a smile.

"You're too late for the marshmallows."

She watched him frown for a second. Then he got it, and his smile broadened into a knowing grin. What a

relief; he wasn't going to play clueless. "Kalinda knows?" she asked.

He nodded, well, sort of. Still playing his cards close to his chest. Would she dare ask about Diego? Not yet, not now. "When did you find out?" she persisted.

"What's this? You sound like you're interrogating me. Kalinda called. You've looked at the damage?"

"No, no. Wait, Kalinda knew before you did? How?"

He stepped over the tape and walked toward the front door that wasn't enclosed by the temporary fence, "Her brother. His phone number is the emergency contact."

"Kalinda has a brother?"

The detective stopped and cocked his head to look at her. "Mina, what's with you? You've known Kalinda a lot longer than I have. Right?"

"*Touché.*" If this was a team effort, they had every detail covered. Except for the message, that was the only detail that proved Diego's presence there the night of the fire. He risked a lot to make her feel loved.

"What did I say? Suddenly you look like you won the lottery," De Fiore said.

"The lottery? Like I care about money. You should know me better than that."

He nodded, that grin again. "Got it. Let's call it even." He unlocked the front door, and once again she knew that he had to know. He didn't seem the least bothered by the strong smell of smoke and the blackened walls around the double doors opening into the office. He moved toward those doors without hesitation. She followed a few feet behind because she felt like she was infringing on someone's privacy even if the house was vacant and something told her anything holding the

slightest personal information had been removed or destroyed by the fire or some handsome and mysterious fireman. What would Diego look like in a firefighter uniform?

“What’s so amusing?” De Fiore asked.

“Huh???”

“You’re smiling.”

They both stood in what was once a light and bright room with several computers and a whole series of phones and a huge screen on a wall that Kalinda used for remote conferences. The screen was still there, mangled by the heat—the rest, gone. She watched De Fiore walk around, check under burned desks, push around damaged chairs, open and close the few cabinets with drawers still intact.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I’ll talk to her insurer. It’s not as bad as I anticipated. All her data is gone, but that’s okay. She’ll make it work somehow when she’s ready. She suggested we rehire the people who did the remodeling, so the home will be totally functional by the time she gets back.”

“Any idea when that will be?”

“Soon, soon. Now that the major concern has been met and conquered, everything will happen faster.” He took a few photos with his phone.

She had no clue if he spoke about Kalinda’s therapy or whatever dark secret had festered in that office that only fire could cure.

Voices could be heard up the driveway where De Fiore had left his sedan. Young, joyful voices. He locked the front door and rubbed his hands as if ridding himself of bad vibes.

They walked up the slope and could see people looking at them. Mina recognized Tom... and Leo? Had to be since Buddy was there also. Tom's truck was parked next to De Fiore's sedan. The Detective and Tom there at the same time? This was getting weirder by the minute.

"Did you ask them to meet you here?" she asked him.

"No, but it's okay. I have a few questions regarding the car, the one Cordero, the mother, drove that night, day, I'm not sure about the time. I would rather speak to the older brother."

"Hello, Mina, Detective." Tom nodded; he looked happy. A kind of happy Mina couldn't quite explain, but she felt this was probably the happiest smile she'd ever seen on Tom's trustworthy face. "We are waiting for Simon. His boss is driving him here. They heard about the fire while coming down the coast and of course felt compelled to offer their help. They should be driving in any moment."

"I'm sure Kalinda will be happy to know that they care," De Fiore said. "By the way, is the whole crew coming back?" Was he asking Tom?

"Well, I don't know. I never met them, Sort of eavesdropped on Leo's conversation with his brother." Leo held on tight to Buddy's leash, and that was a good thing because suddenly the dog became very agitated and started to pull. They heard the engine before they saw the SUV.

"They are here—they are here." Leo was as excited as his dog, and they ran toward the vehicle. The back passenger door opened before the SUV came to a complete stop, and a slim, medium-height young man hopped out. Simon, of course. He hugged Leo with one

arm while fending off Buddy's energetic loving display consisting of jumping on the poor kid and slobbering all over him.

The driver got out of the vehicle and introduced himself all around. He already knew De Fiore, and quickly the conversation centered about the fire. De Fiore offered to show him the inside damage. The two of them headed back to Kalinda's house while Leo, Simon, and Tom all spoke at the same time.

Mina felt totally out of place. She overheard Leo mention De Fiore to his brother, something about, "...a real detective like on television... with a real gun."

Perhaps this was a good time for her to say goodbye, to convince her even more was the sight of Millie, all prettied up in dark jeans and a cute, long-sleeved navy blue top heading their way.

CHAPTER 15

Mina glanced into her rearview mirror at the brothers busily devouring the burgers they'd picked up at the drive-through. Everyone was pitching in to help Tom until he could rearrange his schedule to fit the boys' school hours. Mina had chosen Monday because on Tuesday the Ritz Cats B&B would have the official reopening, and she just had to be there to welcome clients, new and old.

By the time the LTD turned into Avenida Palizada, the boys' attitude changed dramatically. Anticipation or painful memories? Mina couldn't tell. They seem to inch closer to each other, no more laughing, not even talking. Their old place now in full sight, the B side of the bungalow looked empty still. A fancy motorcycle with lots of chrome shining in the afternoon sun was parked at the curb. The door of unit A looked ajar, no pink tricycle in sight.

Mina slowed down and parked on opposite side of the road. "You want me to go with you?" she offered.

A pause. "No, thanks. Mrs. Somer is ok. We'll get our things and be right back." Mrs. Somer? Must be Lizabeth's mom. She sat back and waited—plus, she had full view of the unit A front door. The same door now being yanked open by a huge, unshaven guy in shorts, no shirt.

Mina couldn't hear the conversation, but there was no ignoring body language. Simon and Leo stepped away from the door, and she could tell the big man was yelling. At some point he put his fist close to Simon's face.

Enough.

She was halfway between her car and the unit door when the brothers walked back, shoulders slumped, expressions sad. Mina counted to ten. This was not the time or the place for a scene, although inside she was oh-so ready to go and confront that brute, whoever he was.

After they'd told her they were eager to get Simon's cell phone back as well the clothes and personal belongings Leo had left behind when he went chasing Buddy, she had to watch them get into the LTD empty-handed

Poor kids. What should she do? Most of her days were spent facing pets' crises. She had no idea how to talk to kids. No, not kids, teenagers, orphan teenagers. Leo's hands shook. That man must be the one who took his phone and kicked Buddy to the curb. She did a U-turn and came very close to the motorcycle.

"Mom used to park her car there." Leo pointed, and then looked away, and she understood.

After a few minutes of painful silence Mina asked, "What happened to the car? You know, your mom's car?" She couldn't bring herself to say the one that killed her.

"It's at Tio Gordo's." *Tio?*

"You have an uncle in town?"

"No." Simon spoke for the first time. "That's his name and the name of his shop. He's a mechanic. His wife works, I mean, worked with mom at the coffee shop. He always took care of mom's car, you know, kept it running. After I'm eighteen I can try to get insurance."

“Simon, you have a driver license?”

“I do, but I don’t have the money to get the car fixed and then the insurance.”

“What’s wrong with the car? Lots of damage?”

Again she couldn’t bring herself to say *from the accident*.

“No, it may need a new battery and of course tires.” He shrugged.

“By the way, what happened with that man? Who is he? How come he didn’t give you your things?”

“That’s Tony. He’s Mrs. Somer’s boyfriend, I think. He’s mean, but he’s mostly in jail.”

“Is Mrs. Somer Lizabeth’s mom?” Mina was driving back to the shelter where Tom was to pick up the boys.

“Yes. You know them?”

“I spoke to her when I was trying to find the owner of, you know, your dog. The first time she was helpful. When I went back looking for you two, she slammed the door on me. How come? You guys didn’t get along?”

“We weren’t allowed to go there. Mom said Mrs. Somer did drugs and was mean to Lizabeth. And the two times Tony was there, they fought, a lot. The police came and after that Mrs. Somer no longer spoke to any of us. She said we called the police. We didn’t.”

“But didn’t you leave Leo and Buddy with her?”

“It was an emergency,” he mumbled. She could see how embarrassed he was, “Tony was in prison, and I gave her all the money I had. I’m sorry Leo.” He avoided looking at his brother.

“It’s okay, Simon, it wasn’t so bad. See, we got to meet all these nice people and Buddy has a yard now.” His face lit up when he mentioned his dog.

Mina was dying to ask about the mother’s accident, but she figured they’d had enough heartache for one day.

“Simon, if you make a list of the things you need to get from Mrs. Somer I’ll make sure to send a grown-up to get them.”

“Like who? I don’t want to get Tom in trouble. Tony is a bad man. I’ve seen him threaten people. He has a knife. You think that was his motorcycle?” he asked his brother.

“Maybe. Who else would park there?”

“Does Tony have a last name?” Mina drove into the small plaza where her Furry Friends Foundation was located. Tom was already there, and again she couldn’t help noticing how happy he looked. He walked up to her car, announcing to the boys that they were going to go grocery shopping on the way home and also that take-out pizza was on the dinner menu. They were in the truck and heading out before she’d even locked her car. Boys!

Most of the spaces assigned to the shelter were occupied. It looked like the place had gotten very busy suddenly. Good.

Sky sat at the front desk, camera in hand for the good-bye pic of a lucky furry friend and its new family. Then she would post that on social media. She was such a terrific young lady.

“Well, where is he?” she asked Mina.

“Where is who?” *Awkward.*

“Simon. Everybody is talking about him, not even eighteen and he’s taking care of his little brother, has good grades, and a job. I was counting on finally meeting in him, I did help with his dog and...”

Mina could hardly hide her smile. “Okay, okay, I get it. He went home with Tom, but you’ll probably get a chance at meeting him tomorrow since I won’t be here at all and he may be stranded waiting for Tom to get off work. I understand Tom will now work days instead of

nights. Wonder who his replacement will be." Tom had been there from the beginning. He was like family.

Sky didn't seem interested in speculating—probably already planning what to wear tomorrow. "You are aware that he's not even eighteen, right?"

The young woman shrugged. "Age is just a number. How old is your boyfriend?"

What?

Luckily, Linda came from the meet-and-greet room, a young couple in tow, each carrying a kitten. Perfect. Romeo and Juliet were brother and sister, and it was so wonderful they were getting adopted together.

Mina walked to her back office to get her stuff together for tomorrow's grand reopening. It had only been two weeks but felt like forever. She missed the activity, meeting new people, new cats. It filled her days, leaving less hours to ponder on how empty her life felt at times. The only creatures needing her were her cats—well Aria did. Mina had no doubt that Houdini was perfectly capable of surviving on his own.

She even missed Margo's annoying and needy phone calls. Gino must be home because she didn't call to whine about a single thing for twenty-four hours. And as usual her thoughts ended up at the same place, the void in her heart. Diego. Like the old saying, so close and yet so far. She swirled her chair around and started to open drawers and files, might as well get things done tonight. No one waiting for her at home.

From the front door the parking lot of the FFF appeared empty except for her LTD. It felt more like a Saturday night than a Monday. Most of the office type businesses in the small plaza were closed at night and on weekends. She loaded her papers onto the back seat, having decided a stop by the Ralphs on the way home

was a must. And she should have asked Millie if more snacks and beverages were needed for the opening, just in case more than one guest arrived at the same time. Mina called on her cell, but her call went directly to voice mail. Okay then, she could call back if she needed something. This really was a quick stop. Even so, the smell of the rotisserie chicken had her mouth watering. She resisted temptation and settled for some sliced turkey and Brie, the triple cream one. A sourdough baguette—and dinner was in the bag.

The motorcycle appeared in her rearview mirror as she neared the off-ramp. It approached at such dizzying speed she felt hypnotized. Motorcycles weren't common on this side of town, and yet this was the second one she'd seen today. Or was it? Simon's words swirled in her mind. "*Tony is a bad man—he has a knife.*" She kept an eye on the fast advancing bike without turning her head as if anyone could see inside her dark car while driving at such speed.

The red light stopped her cold. She waited, her hands gripping the steering wheel, looking straight ahead, trying to comprehend her sudden wave of fear. And just like that, the motorcycle turned right and was gone before she even had the chance to lift her foot from the brake. She sighed in relief. *Scaredy-cat.* Pretty pathetic for a grown woman to fall apart at the sight of a motorcycle. For all she knew a female could have been riding it. Not to say that women couldn't be as dangerous as men. Mina smiled at her own distorted sense of equal opportunity wickedness and pushed on the gas with renewed zest.

Her secluded neighborhood was as quiet as ever. The street lamp at the end of the cul de sac provided a

quick glimpse of tattered yellow tape, a reminder of the fire.

All was calm, not a soul in sight, so she found it strange seeing her gate wide open. Perhaps Millie had been out and just returned? Sometime the gate took its sweet time closing again. She crossed it into the driveway and noticed the light in Millie's windows.

Good. It always gave her a sense of security knowing that her capable assistant was home. That Millie owned a gun and knew how to use it was an added bonus. She reached above the sun visor to click on her garage opener as she cleared the corner and slammed on the brake while her heart walloped in her chest. A black motorcycle with lots of chrome reflecting the motion lights of the garage door blocked her entrance. The most frightening sight wasn't the dark bike, but the missing rider.

CHAPTER 16

His finger pushed back a strand of hair covering her face. “I need a haircut.” She blurted out.

“Shhssh.” The same finger played with the contours of her mouth. “No talking,” he whispered in her ear and continued exploring the outline of her face with his lips. “Bella, how I missed you.”

She moved her leg. It had gone numb, entangled in some of the clothes they had shed on their mad rush to the bedroom. They hadn’t quite made it to the bed.

The only light came from the automatic plug-in night-light in her bathroom.

“Can you stay?” She hated herself for asking.

He pulled her closer; their bodies stretched and intertwined. Time apart hadn’t hindered the perfect fit. While her hands explored the curve of his shoulders and the old familiar scars on his back, she knew he wouldn’t stay the night.

“Thank you for the note.” Missing him already.

“I wondered if it reached you. Didn’t have a thing to bribe the messenger with.” He chuckled softly, his warm breath sending heat waves up her spine.

“I’m so sorry about the phone. I really am. I still don’t understand about the fire.”

“Mina, don’t be sorry. If only I could explain to you the ripple effect that kid and that phone launched... I would call it a miracle if I were religious.”

“No need to explain. De Fiore took care of that. He said that dozens of nefarious consequences may have been set in motion by the boy’s actions. He meant by Leo using or trying to use the phone to reach his brother. The phone you had trusted me with, and I carelessly lost.” She buried her face in the hollow spot between his neck and his shoulder, felt his heartbeat throb against her cheek.

“De Fiore.” He sighed. “His grumpiness can be forgiven. He cares very much about you and Kalinda, and what happened with the phone, was—well... was way above the knowledge most of us have in regard to cyber—spying.”

Did he notice her puzzled expression?

He must have because he began to speak softly, his voice next to her ear. “Mina, somehow the kid triggered the phone GPS. The first time I assumed it was you. After all it came from Kalinda’s place. The nonsense went on for a while, we—myself and an expert—couldn’t tell for sure if you were trying to warn me or if you didn’t know what you were doing. Then suddenly, a third party joined in. The only human voice was that of a kid, and there was a barking dog. For weeks we’d suspected unauthorized activity in our system. That’s the reason your first phone was shut off. We didn’t know who or where the interference originated. The kid playing with your phone helped us zoom in and gather information. Getting inside Kalinda’s house and cleaning the mess without raising suspicions was paramount. De Fiore lent his help, so we moved quickly, and now Kalinda’s place and anyone connected to it are again safe. I’ll have a new phone brought to you as soon as I get back to my office.”

“Your office?” That was the only thought in her mind. Where was his office and how had he ended up on the freeway next to her car at the perfect time?”

“It couldn’t have happened at a more auspicious time. With everyone involved out of the area, I had no way of warning you or somehow letting you know what was happening without contacting you directly, and that wasn’t an option. So you see, your dropping the phone was a blessing in disguise.” He smiled in the dark, his lips on her skin. “I have to pick up Gino at LAX in about ninety minutes and deliver him to the restaurant in Long Beach. I’ll brief him on the situation during the drive there. He will be so relieved knowing we cleaned up the mess and no one on our side got hurt or exposed.”

She barely listened to his long explanation. He wasn’t upset, quite the opposite. Good enough for her. “Were you in the fire engine? Did you see me?”

“I was in the smaller vehicle with the fire Chief.” He pulled her closer. “Yes, I saw your LTD, but there was nothing I could do except pine for you.” The huskiness in his voice told more than words ever could.

“How about this evening? How did you know when I would get on the freeway? I didn’t know myself. I decided to stop for groceries at the last minute. Oh, no. The groceries are still in my car.”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her ever so slowly. “No, or I would have brought you flowers. I happened to be driving up from Miramar when I spotted what looked like your car. I wanted to surprise you, just say hello, but when I came up eye to eye, you never looked my way, totally ignored me. I was puzzled. Had to know why. I checked in and was told Gino’s flight had been delayed. I called Millie. She opened the gate for me,

and then, well, here we are. Why were you ignoring me? Wait, did you know it was me?"

Mina shook her head. "I thought you were Tony, because of the motorcycle."

"Who is Tony? Why would he be chasing you?" A new emotion tinged his voice. Concern or jealousy?

"Huh, he is..." *Awkward.* "He's not a nice man, and yes, he has a black motorcycle, and I was worried."

"Are you afraid of this Tony? What is he to you?" She tried to glimpse past his sudden mood change.

"No, not to me. It's the kids, the brothers."

"Mina, does this Tony have anything to do with their mother's death? Dan tells me you're insisting he take a second look at the mother's accident. That's one of the reason he's grouchy. He feels like you are dragging him into situations out of his comfort zone and worse yet, cases already closed by his subordinates."

"Well, I shouldn't have to if the people who investigated it, the ones working under his leadership, had done the job right the first time around, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Mina," his voice a notch softer, "you're getting yourself mixed up in some crazy situation again, and now you tell me this man Tony is involved?" He had moved away from her and was sorting through the pile of clothes, pulling his out.

Time's up—he would get dressed and leave.

Now her nakedness felt dirty. She went into the bathroom and grabbed her robe. She also turned on the lights. Houdini stood on the bed, looking at Diego and her.

Were they being judged by a cat?

Diego glanced at her alarm clock on the night table and tucked his shirt in. He searched for a sock but gave

up, grabbed his motorcycle boots and headed downstairs. He sat on the last step to put them on. That's where his leather jacket lay.

Mina felt so useless. *Pit stop* flashed through her mind. She tried to chase those words away, but they resisted. Their life together had become a series of pit stops and quick goodbyes. Soon he would head off to meet with Gino and God knows who else while she would go back upstairs, still wearing his scent like a second skin, and cry herself to sleep in the big, sad bed where even her cats had a mate.

He stood up from the step and took her hand. “Would you walk me to my bike?” The raw emotion in his voice as real as her sense of loss. They took the garage exit. Diego didn’t want her walking outside in the dark alone.

Alone. What a curious word. So fitting and so heartbreakingly true.

His black, shiny helmet sat on the bike, waiting. “It would be better if my detour remained our little secret,” he said, kissing her goodbye.

The garage door slid closed, muffling the rumble of the departing engine. Nothing could muffle the crying of her soul.

CHAPTER 17

Cats and the people who love them provided Mina's peace of mind.

On this back to business Tuesday Millie had outdone herself. She'd baked little muffins for the humans and bowls full of tiny treats in the shape of fish for the four-legged friends. The idea for cat's treats she'd found surfing the Internet. Zeus sat on a huge pillow in the front room and behaved like a pro. Millie must have convinced or bribed him to wear what looked like a bow tie. *Bravo Millie.*

That first impression was priceless. More than one of the regulars insisted on taking pics to either post on their Facebook pages or to show to some of their cat owner friends. By two o'clock the scheduled boarders had checked in and a few humans lingered.

The fast pace of the day helped Mina forget her broken heart at least for the moment. The worse part always came as the sun went down and the long reaching hands of solitude found her soul. For weeks, no, for months, she'd been hoping and wishing to have at least one day with Diego. In her mental ping pong bargaining with the universe she finally settled for a few hours. The universe had delivered and instead of feeling thankful, she felt—duped. *Duped?* In her anger and disappointment she'd discovered a word she didn't know she knew.

“I will say we had a very successful reopening. What do you think? Mina? Helloo?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Millie. Indeed it went well, thanks to you of course. Are you sure you don’t want some part-time help at least once or twice a week? We could hire one of the shelter’s volunteers, I can think of at least two who would be delighted to work with you, and they could use the money. Don’t say no right now; think about it. Once we get to ten cats it’s going to be a lot of work.”

“Mina, if you think you have a mature woman who could help out and could use the money, I will consider it. But then we should intake twelve cats. After all that’s what the place is designed for anyhow.”

Mina stifled a yawn. “Sorry Millie, it’s not you it’s...”

Millie gave her an impish half smile. “No need to apologize, I was young once—and in love.”

“It’s not what you think. He left in a hurry and strongly suggested that, ‘his detour be our little secret.’” If the words didn’t convey her frustration, her tone of voice did.

“Oh, that’s so not like him. I don’t know Diego as well as you do, of course, but he always struck me as a no nonsense man totally devoted to you.”

A loud hissing came from the cat room, and Millie rushed to check it out. Mina looked at Zeus, now spread out on his sumptuous pillow, munching on the last few fake fish treats, his bow tie perfectly balanced on his neck, his coat as smooth as hours ago. He raised his head from the crumbs and looked at her with the same eyes as Houdini. “You too? You’re judging me? Hey, I’m the good person; you should be on my side.”

“Mina?” Millie called from the cat room. “Who are you talking to? I didn’t hear the phone ring.”

“It’s all good, Millie. It’s all good. I’m going home. I think the Cordero brothers may come by after school. Yell if you need me.” She turned to Zeus. “See you later, partner.” Talking to a cat... really.

No new messages on her land line. Not even from Margo? Now, that was not normal. On impulse she called her former roommate’s cell.

“What’s going on, did you hear from Gino?”

“Yes, yes. He got home last night, well this morning really because the flight landed in Los Angeles, and then he waited to get picked up. Wait... is this a prank? Your boyfriend’s limo drove him home, and I’m sure your man was in the car. You don’t know about it? How come? Now that I think about it, maybe they flew in together? I have to ask him. He was very tired, and he has to work tonight. But you were right; he met his sisters in Venice and...” Mina heard a man’s voice in the background. “I’m talking to Mina,” Margo said. “Mina, wait, Gino wants to say hi.”

“*Ciao, Mina, come stai? Che c’è di nuovo?*” Gino suddenly speaking Italian couldn’t be a good sign, unless...

“Gino, I do the same thing when I come back from Italy, I find myself speaking Italian without meaning to do that. What news are you talking about?”

He went on in her native tongue. “I’m speaking to you in Italian for good reason, no need to get you-know-who all worked up, at least not yet.”

“Why would she be upset? What are you up to?”

A long silence. Then he spoke in a much lower tone, which was funny because unless Margo had taken a crash course in Italian, she couldn’t have the first clue what he

was telling Mina. "It's my kid sister. She would like to visit, spend some time in California, you know... Los Angeles, Hollywood."

"So?"

"So her aim would be to get a permanent visa if that's possible, but I don't know how you-know-who would react."

"How about you ask her?"

"Ah, Mina, Mina, you make everything sound so easy. It isn't. I was hoping you would sort, of... feel around, you know. Woman to woman. Friend to friend."

"And how was Venice, still sinking?" she said in English, loud and clear. Woman to woman? Right. "Oh, got to go, tell Margo to call me when she gets a chance. *Ciao, Gino, buona fortuna.*" The good luck, just slipped out. She found herself smiling and picturing Gino's expression. The man had been a brilliant lawyer, and she assumed he must have been some kind of government spy when she met him in Vicenza where he conveniently ran a bar next door to Caserma Ederle, home of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Yet he needed help telling his live-in girlfriend that his kid sister wanted to visit? Men.

She went to her desk to double-check the info sheets of the cats they boarded today, and it hit her—Gino never mentioned Diego. How odd was that? They had spent time in Greece for the funeral and other related duties, and Diego picked him up at LAX and drove him home, Margo confirmed that. And yet Gino hadn't mentioned his name once. Something wasn't right.

Her phone chimed. De Fiore.

"Oh, my favorite detective..." she cooed.

"Knock it off. I'm the only detective that... let's make that the only Detective willing to give up precious

time to follow your hunches... and this one isn't going anywhere fast. Dead end. Just as I suspected."

"Are you talking about Isabel Cordero?"

"Of course I am, why? You found some other investigations needing revisiting, Miss Fletcher?" Miss Fletcher? So Detective De Fiore watched television reruns, good to know.

"De Fiore, what got into you? If you don't want to do this, just say so. I'm a big girl I can take no for an answer."

"Sure you can, until I turn my back or hang up the phone, and the next thing I know someone is calling in about some crazy Italian chick sticking her nose where it doesn't belong. I looked at the Cordero file. There is nothing suspicious. The car had a flat tire; it appears Isabel Cordero owned a vehicle prone to flat tires. The neighbors said she must have been on her way to work. Everyone liked her. I couldn't even find a nearby security camera with a glimpse of the car. Or the driver. That's another thing—there is no car. So what do you suggest I do? Don't say it. Of course the kid doesn't want to accept that the mother is dead, it's called denial. Got to go and—"

"Wait, wait. What do you mean no car? The car is stored at Tío Gordo, as a matter of fact I'm supposed to meet the boys there to see how much it would cost to get it functional again."

Long sigh. Now Mina knew she had de Fiore's attention. "Tío Gordo? What is it? A Mexican restaurant?"

"The garage that took care of Cordero's mechanical problems, we'll be there at five, let me get you the address."

"I can get my own address, wait. See what you just did? You railroaded me... like I said."

“See you at five, and afterward I’ll take you to dinner down at the pier if you behave.” She hung up very fast before he had a chance to say no.

Mina drove her own car to the mechanic’s shop. Tom’s truck was already there, parked under a lonely tree. No sign of De Fiore’s sedan, but it was barely five. The front of the building had signage in English and Spanish, a reflection of the neighborhood ethnicity. The overhead steel door was rolled up, and Mina walked into the large, cavernous shop. A car sat on jack stands; piles of old and new tires rested against the walls. A strong smell of old motor oil?

Mina wasn’t sure but thought she heard voices coming from the back of the building and called out, “Helloo, anyone home?”

The voices stopped, and a rush of feet followed. Buddy reached her before Leo could. The dog was off leash, and he actually jumped on her in a rather playful way, even so she was very surprised and not in a pleasant way. That’s how pets ended up in shelters.

“Oh, hi, we are all in the back,” Leo said, completely oblivious to her disapproving expression.

She followed him, keeping an eye on Buddy walking close to her. “How’s school?” she asked.

“Fine, really fine. Thank you.” He wore what looked like brand new Nikes. Tom, no doubt.

They made a slight right turn and were in a different room. It looked like an old patio that had been enclosed by large bay doors. And Tom, Simon, and a couple she didn’t know were standing around an old faded maroon car. As she got closer it appeared to be a Chevrolet Malibu—not because Mina knew much about cars, but because this old thing said just that on the back end of the car, right next to a huge dent.

The males present seemed enthralled by the Chevy. The woman not so much, and she was the first one to greet Mina.

"Hellooo, you must be the young lady from the cats and dogs place." She spoke with a slight south of the border accent, and Mina liked that. It reminded her of Paco, and it had been a long time since she'd spoken to her mother's old loyal former employee.

"Guilty." She smiled back.

The silver haired woman walked around the car and shook Mina's hand. "I'm Silvia, Gordo's wife. I used to work with Isabel, such a loss, such a wonderful person."

Mina nodded and felt the man talking to Tom looking at her. When she returned the glance he nodded and introduced himself from the other side of the Malibu. "I'm Gordo, nice to meet you, Mina. Good thing you're doing helping out these young men."

So this was Gordo, a short, feeble-looking man with kind, watery blue eyes and white hair. So much for her mental image of Tio Gordo being a husky man with a thick black mustache... ah.

"Is this the car?" she asked, and there was a consensus of head nodding. It was a two-door. "How old is it?"

"1981," Gordo said. "It runs okay. Isabel only used it to drive around town, you know, to work, groceries, kids. She was well aware of the slow leak on the passenger side tire, every two days she would stop by, and I would put air in it for her. I did it for her that very morning—the tire couldn't have gone flat like that."

"Like what?" De Fiore asked.

They all turned to look at the detective. How long had he been watching them? He looked the detective

part—a dark suit, white starchy shirt, and one of his trademark silk ties. Impressive.

Leo stepped back, intimidated, but Simon stared at De Fiore like he was some kind of rock star. Seriously? Only Buddy wasn't very interested and stayed close to Silvia and Leo.

"How long have you been storing the car?" De Fiore asked Gordo.

"I towed it back here about a week after—you know—"

The detective nodded, and for a split second the place went quiet, dead quiet.

"Anything inside?" He moved closer to the front of the car.

Gordo shook his head—no. "Her personal belongings were returned to the family by the cops. I mean, I—"

"You're okay. I know what you mean." Another step closer, he put his hand on the driver's door handle and swung it open, quickly running his hands in the side storage. Then he walked around the back, and as he opened the passenger side door, Buddy jumped into the front seat.

Mina had never seen one like that. Instead of two seats it was just one long bench with the safety belt buckles in the middle. The dog rubbed his head against the back of the seat and let out a soft whimper.

Simon got very sad. "He loved to sit in front with my mom. She called him her guardian angel."

Leo put his head down and wouldn't move, meanwhile Buddy lay on the whole length of the worn velour bench and sniffed around. He was probably responding to scents from Heaven.

Even Mina's throat started to close, and she had never met Isabel Cordero. Someone had to get the dog out before everyone started to weep. Tom walked up and gently grabbed the collar, trying to coach the dog out of the car. Easier said than done. His front paws seemed glued to the seat. Even his toes seemed to grab onto the fabric as he resisted Tom's attempts.

"I'll get him." Simon slid into the car, started petting Buddy, and slowly pushed him backward. Finally the paws began to slide off the seat, the left front one was stuck in the crack between the bench and the back and when it finally came lose, snagged in the toenails was a child's pink lacy sock.

CHAPTER 18

They sat around the large, sturdy dining room table that could easily accommodate a football team. Maybe Gordo and Silvia Hunt were parents to a large brood. Their residence was an extension of the garage and felt lived in. While Gordo didn't fit Mina's stereotype image, their kitchen did. From the worn Saltillo tile floors to the inexpensive trinkets and the colorful pottery filled with paper flowers—it all screamed Mexican bazaar. The kitchen sink was made of beautiful tile and also had a leaky faucet that Mina found annoying and had a hard time diverting her attention from it.

Silvia had quickly served bowls full of corn chips and salsa and beer for the adults and soda for the boys. De Fiore nursed his lonely beer, probably torn between being Mr. Detective and acting friendly to encourage people to talk.

After Mina pointed out that the pink sock surely belonged to Lizabeth, Mrs. Somer's tot, and Leo confirmed that, a few annoying details surfaced. Apparently on occasions when Isabel Cordero worked a few hours of overtime, Leo watched the little girl in exchange for candies Mrs. Somer bribed him with. Leo knew the pair of lacy socks were a Christmas gift from Lizabeth's grandmother who lived in Chicago, but he had no idea how one of them ended up in his mother's car. That the sock remained in the car long after Cordero's

death investigation was over was perhaps more disturbing than it being there at all.

“Gordo, could you do me a favor and wait a few days before working on the Malibu?” De Fiore asked in his most folksy tone.

That told Mina he’d finally seen the light, and was going to take a second look at the circumstances surrounding the *accidental* death of Isabel Cordero.

Maybe it was his friendly manner or the fact that De Fiore had taken the time to get to know them, but Simon got into the act. “My mom wasn’t on her way to work when she died,” he said matter of factly.

“I understand your doubts, Simon.” De Fiore kept his eyes on the older boy as he spoke to him. A man-to-man sort of thing Mina thought. “Leo told us about the lunch. That she always made your lunch before going to work.”

Simon swallowed hard. “It’s not just that. She wasn’t wearing her uniform or her name tag.” He held De Fiore’s stare.

“That’s right.” Silvia’s excitement was hard to miss, “I had forgotten about that. Isabel always wore her uniform with her name tag pinned on. She was such a responsible, caring person. Twice she made employee of the month, and everyone loved her.” Her voice trailed, sadness overtaking the excitement.

“Maybe she forgot to wash the uniform?” De Fiore suggested.

“It was clean and hanging on the bathroom door when I got up.” Simon’s tone sported an edge hard to ignore. “I made notes.” He rested his elbows on the table and stretched a little toward De Fiore. “I wanted to make sure I didn’t forget a thing for when the time would come.”

“The time would come for what?” The whole table went silent waiting for Simon’s answer.

“The time when a real detective would listen and make it his mission to find who killed my mother.”

The implications weren’t lost on most of those present and certainly not on Mina. Her eyes were on De Fiore. *Let’s see how he gets himself out of this one.*

“I read the report, didn’t find anything out of the ordinary. Why would an investigator ignore telltale signs? They are professionals, and there is nothing personal that I can tell.”

“Sir,”—Simon’s upper body stiffened, sitting directly across from the detective made the whole scene sort of awkward—“our last name is Cordero, and my mother was driving an old beat up 1981 Chevy.”

Drip, drip—the faucet the only sound in the room.

“Simon, you’re very observant.” If De Fiore was upset he knew how to hide it. “You would make a good detective. As for last names, forty percent of our officers come from minority backgrounds. I will take a second look.” His cell buzzed; he glanced at it, and Mina knew him well enough to notice the sudden changes.

He didn’t answer the call, just pushed his beer slightly away and repositioned his tie while standing. “I apologize. I have to go.” He turned to Gordo. “Remember, don’t work on the Malibu yet. Thanks. I’ll take a rain check on dinner,” he said to Mina as he pushed back his chair and headed out through the shop, just as he had come in.

“Is he your boyfriend?” Leo asked?

“What? Oh, no, no. I met him when he investigated my mother’s—death. And we sort of became friends.” She hoped her answer would end there. No such luck.

“How did *your* mother die?” Simon asked.

After all those years, it should have been easier. It wasn't. Maybe it was the time of the day, or being around De Fiore who reminded her of Diego. Her voice wasn't cooperating, and she summoned all her concentration not to break down when she said it. "She was murdered, but it was staged to look as suicide. Thanks to Detective De Fiore, the murderer didn't get away with it." Maybe they hadn't heard her. No one moved or spoke.

"Is it true?" Simon finally asked. "You're not just saying that to make us feel better?"

"Simon, look at me. Do you think I'm making this up?" Tears welled up, and her voice caught. Silvia reached over and took her hand. "You poor thing, I'm so sorry."

"She's telling the truth," Tom said. "I didn't know Detective De Fiore was in charge of that case, but yes, I knew about her mother." He cleared his throat. "I think he's a good man. Let's give him a chance." Buddy had been sitting quietly under the table. He suddenly got up, walked over to Mina, and put his head on her lap.

"He used to do that with my mom," Leo said. "I guess he likes you."

"She sort of reminds me of your mom," Gordo said. "I don't know, maybe it's the hair, same color, same length. I would sure like to know how that kid's sock got into the front seat of the Chevy."

"How come the policeman took it with him?" Leo asked.

Tom explained that they would probably try to find an answer to everyone's question, not only how, but more importantly *when* the sock found its way to the front seat. They all agreed to wait on getting new tires and what else the Malibu would need to make a safe ride

for Simon. Tom was going to talk to his insurance about prices for male drivers under twenty-one.

Mina left, not much she could do there anyhow. The Hunts seemed like a nice couple who cared about the boys. That raised even more questions in Mina's mind. Why would Simon leave Leo and Buddy with that awful neighbor instead of Gordo and Silvia's place? The Hunts' home was halfway between the kids' rental on West Mariposa and the coffee shop where Isabel Cordero and Silvia worked. Strange, very strange.

By the time she drove into her garage the moon had checked in full regalia. She sat in her LTD, looking at her old Volkswagen Bug, hidden under the car cover. All that talk about the 1981 Chevy brought back memories of her beloved old car. Why was she hanging on to it? It had been years since she'd even removed the cover. Maybe the time had come to sell it to some car collector who would restore it, give it a second life. A second life, sounded like a good perspective. Too much talk about death; she felt so desperately alone.

Houdini picked that moment to hop onto her hood and walked the length of it to the windshield where he put his nose against the glass. It was as if the cat knew she needed a friend. Or maybe he was just letting her know, he was hungry. Her landline was ringing when she got to the kitchen.

"Mina, I heard your car. I saved you some supper, just in case."

"Millie, how did you know?"

"Know what?"

"I had planned on taking De Fiore to dinner, but he got a phone call and split. So, yes, whatever you have would be welcome. Want me to come get it?"

“No need, all our guests are taken care of. Kick off your shoes and make yourself comfortable. I’ll be there in five.”

Mina followed Millie’s advice, went upstairs and changed into her nightgown and slippers. She couldn’t figure out why she felt so tired when she hardly accomplished a thing all day. Perhaps sadness could do that.

They sat in the kitchen and watched the cats eating. Mina poured some wine in two glasses. Millie had already eaten but kept her company while bringing her up to date with the new cats and the activities taking place in Kalinda’s house.

“I can’t figure out if they are moving stuff in or out,” she said. “A big truck came a little after five. They made enough noise it was hard to miss. They opened up the fence and drove down to the end of the driveway, so I have no idea what they did. I saw two men. They left about an hour later. Strange. How was your evening?”

Mina gave Millie the short version.

She’d noticed her answering machine had a message, and her heart had leaped for an instant. No, Diego would have called her cell. She hit playback. It was Linda, calling from the shelter.

“Hey, guess what. We made the short list. Oh, wait. You probably don’t know what I’m talking about. Furry Friends Foundation is one of the five finalists for the best nonprofit, no kill shelters in Orange County. The newspaper runs a survey every year, and people vote, so we got enough votes to make the top five. Is that exciting or what? You can read the official letter tomorrow when you get to the office. Bye.”

“That’s wonderful, Mina, and well deserved.” Millie had overheard the conversation.

“I’m—I don’t know what to say. I guess it’s good for the shelter, right?” she said to Millie.

“Absolutely, I’m sure the sponsors of the contest are going to donate pet food and other necessities. You were due for some good news. I can tell you’ve been feeling a bit down lately.”

“I feel—isolated—don’t know how to explain. Thank God you’re here. I even miss talking to Margo—that should tell you how bad it is. Maybe Kalinda is due back soon, and the truck was from the insurance company Workers maybe? The house must be repaired, right?”

“I’m sure it will be, those things take time, you know how it is with insurance.”

CHAPTER 19

The construction sounds coming daily from Kalinda's place had replaced Mina's alarm clock. By Thursday, even Millie, always so mellow and conciliatory, had grown annoyed. Mina called De Fiore, hoping to find out what was going on. Either he wasn't around or pretended not to be.

Every day the working crew arrived early and left after lunch. According to the neighbor down the street, the insurance company hired them.

And things weren't any better at the shelter. Making the top five no kill shelters in Orange County was both an honor and a curse. People who had never heard of FFF now came by at the strangest hours just to snoop and waste everyone's time. And if that wasn't bad enough, the pressure was on to be the best, number one. Both Mina and Linda sat down for a lengthy interview to be published by the glossy and prestigious O.C. Magazine. Of course the publication date was scheduled for *after* the final tally of the contest was revealed.

Stress had become the word of the day, every day. And in the middle of all that Roger asked Linda to move in with him. That called for girl talk. After Leigh agreed to stay and close up on Friday, Linda and Mina headed to happy hour at the San Clemente Pier. The last time they'd done that was when Roger showed up unannounced, and his romance with Linda heated up.

Moving in with Roger, the veterinarian, would cut Linda's travel time to work, and that was the good part. It would also mean giving up much of her lifestyle, and that seemed to be her major objection.

It all felt foreign to Mina who, in all her years of her romance with Diego, had never spent more than a few consecutive days with him, and she would like that more than anything in the world. All her friends were settling down, some had families, regular lives. She went home to her two cats. Nothing new of course. Since they'd first met she'd been made aware there would never be children. Diego's decision had been made before he ever met her, and the subject had only been discussed once. One by one her friends and loved ones had moved on, Paco, Margo, even Kalinda. The past two weeks had been so hard. She felt totally alone. She remembered what Emilia, the wise older woman who'd met her and Diego back in Italy, told her.

"If you can accept him as he is you may have a future, but not the typical life of other couples. It's your life, your decision."

Emilia was so right. She missed her old friend. Maybe she should call her, better yet visit her. Millie reminded her a little of Emilia. The point was that after all was said and done, Mina was and apparently always would be alone. And time wasn't on her side.

She'd had the same discussion with herself many times before and just when all hope faded, there he was, reigniting the flame. Until now. Something was different, as if little by little anything and everyone connected to him was being removed from her life. She couldn't even reach him by phone. A total disconnect. Coincidence? She didn't think so. Even De Fiore who had always played straight with her seemed to avoid her. Why?

“Mina, what’s wrong with you? It’s happy hour, not sulking hour. Did you even hear what I said about the banquet?”

“Uh, I guess I didn’t.”

“Figures. The banquet or gala, however you want to call it is at the end of the month, last Saturday of the month to be precise. That’s when they announce the winner, we both have tickets. Roger would like to come and so would Millie. What do you say we just purchase a whole table? It’ll be fun. And I told Roger, I would move in after that but on a trial base. I’m not giving up my place yet; we’ll see.”

“Linda, why do you want to ask me? You have your act together a lot more than I ever will. Want another glass of Prosecco?”

“What’s going on with the boys? I heard Simon tell Sky that your buddy the detective gave the mechanic his blessing to put the Chevy back together. Pretty soon they’ll drive themselves to school and back home, hope that happens before Sky puts the squeeze on the poor kid.”

“Sky? Our Sky? She’s after Simon? She’s in college, he’s a senior in high school.”

“So? Haven’t you had this conversation before? When she asked you how old your boyfriend is?” Linda laughed, “By the way, how is your mystery man? Will he be escorting you to the banquet?”

Mina shook her head and avoided Linda’s eyes.

“Ouch, that bad, eh? What happened? You guys have a fight?”

“No, no fights. It’s hard to fight with someone you don’t see or communicate with.”

“Girl, you need a vacation. I’m serious. Let’s eat these *calamari* before they get too cold.”

She cried driving home. Realized that what had changed mostly wasn't Diego's behavior as much as her own. She had given up hope. No longer rushing to the phone in case it was Diego, not searching for a black motorcycle in her rearview mirror, just in case. Hope may have subsided, but the pain hadn't.

Friday morning came, and no construction sound awoke her. All was quiet. She walked over to Millie's, coffee mug in hand, to discuss the cats that would be picked up that afternoon. Millie was also pleased and surprised by the silence next door. They sat, drank coffee, and chatted with a lot less stress—until some new pounding, loud and consistent and a lot closer, interrupted the morning peace. The sound came from the other side of the low wall. They walked out to take a look just in time to see a man installing a post with a *For Sale* sign smack on the edge of Kalinda's driveway. The two of them watched the man and the truck make a U-turn and disappear down the road.

Mina held her hands tight, not wanting Millie to notice the trembling. "Another one bites the dust." The line from the popular song fit the situation perfectly.

"Mina, did you know about this?"

She shook her head and didn't trust herself to speak without sobbing.

"Well, ask De Fiore. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him around in a while. How bizarre. What's Gino saying about it?" All Mina could do was keep shaking her head. "Let's go inside. Seems like things have gone south since their former boss's demise, or am I wrong?" Millie asked.

A mental picture of Nadya Veggos's lovely head resting on Diego's shoulder flashed in Mina's mind. Was it possible? Millie *was* right. That's when everything

changed—at the funeral. “Looks to me like they are circling the wagons so to speak, right?”

Mina found her voice. “More like they are pulling up camp and moving out.”

“Now, now, dear, let’s not jump to conclusions. You must talk to someone. There may be a very simple explanation. I can’t believe Kalinda isn’t coming back. I had grown fond of her and her Internet gimmicks.”

“*Maledizione*, Millie, you’re so right. I need to find out what’s really going on. You don’t think maybe something bad has happened to Kalinda? If De Fiore doesn’t take my calls, I’ll drive to his office.” And she meant it.

Finally something important to do. She marched back to her place and called Margo’s cell. *Coward*. She really wanted to talk to Gino. What for? His loyalty was to Diego first and foremost. She hung up before the second ring.

Enough nonsense. Time to pay De Fiore a visit. Driving out of her gate she glanced at that real estate sign at the end of the cul de sac. How was it possible? Five minutes later she entered the Interstate 5 freeway, heading north.

What if he wasn’t there? Worse yet, what if he refused to see her? She would sit and wait until he changed his mind. She called the shelter and let Leigh know she had to stop to see someone, but would be at the office within an hour.

It had been such a long time since she’d set foot in De Fiore’s workplace, it felt a bit intimidating. No one paid attention to her, until she asked to see Detective De Fiore, then the questions came flying. She somehow convinced a young woman to call him, let him know she

needed to talk to him. But first she had to show her driver's license. Sheesh.

To De Fiore's credit he not only agreed to see Mina, he actually came to escort her to his office. She wished she'd worn better clothes, not just jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Mina, I must say, what an unexpected—surprise. What's up?"

What? No sarcasm? No picking at her? What was wrong? Regardless, she wasn't going to beat around the bushes as Americans were so fond of saying. "What's happening with Kalinda?"

He held her stare. "Would you like to sit down before you start asking about things that aren't any of your business?"

She sighed and sat directly across from him. "What's with the *For Sale* sign? And that is my business. Kalinda is my friend too."

He sat back, fiddled with a pen on his extremely neat desk, "Would you like some coffee?" For an instant something lit up his eyes. "A cappuccino?" Ah, the Orange County criminal division must have scraped together their change to purchase one of those machines where you put a tinfoil mini cup on the top, and you get what Americans call *cappuccino* out of the bottom. Revolting. "No thank you."

"I have a real Italian espresso machine in the other room. It was a gift," he added quickly.

"Oh, from the Mafia?" Finally a real smile.

"Mina." He cleared his throat, the pen he was fidgeting with escaped his fingers and rolled off the desk, he kept his eyes on Mina. "She's not coming back." The words hung in the air for a second or two. Then they crashed onto her chest, right where her heart beat. *She's*

not coming back. She needed more. She hadn't driven all the way to Santa Ana for this. What did she come for?

Hope.

"Oh. I'm so sorry. Was it my fault? The phone that..."

He kept shaking his head no, no, no.

"Nothing to do with you. Something that had been—festering for a while. Don't go on a guilt trip on me now, okay? I assume the sign went up this morning? That was fast." He exhaled, gave her half a smile. "And you hopped in your car and drove all the way here? I'm impressed. Would you like a real cappuccino for the road? Yes, I'm trying to get rid of you, but in a nice way. I do have a meeting." He got up and waited.

"I'll take a rain check on the cappuccino, but, De Fiore, don't you think I've earned a bit more than, 'She's not coming back?'"

He nodded. "It's not my place. By the way, the Chevy was a dead end. I'll call you later. If you can't wait, ask the Hunts. My people spent about twenty hours going through everything." There was a soft knock at the door. Time up.

CHAPTER 20

Diego Moran.

Kalinda, Gino, De Fiore. All avoiding his name? Why? Mina felt like a dolphin in a fish net. Would she drown or be set free? She could free herself.

I will move on. I can do this.

The excitement was palpable the minute she stepped into the tiny front office of the FFF. Leigh, always full of restraint could be heard humming. What was going on?

“Hey, Mina, our top five ranking is already paying off.” Linda called from the back room.

“What do you mean?” *Still thinking about Diego... and dolphins...*

“We are invited to bring two of our adoptable dogs to the *Hair to The Crown* salon grand opening. Imagine the exposure. Local television channels and media, and who knows what else? It’s next week. Need two people, one for each pooch.”

“That’s terrific. It’s in Laguna Beach, right?”

“Yes, it is, and *they* called *us*. We must decide on the dogs and get them groomed, what else?”

“How about you go, and if possible take Sky with you? You are the better communicator, and she’s so damn cute. What do you think?”

“What about you? It’s your work, sweat, and tears.”

“This isn’t about sweat and tears. It’s about getting people to open their hearts and their homes to our rescues.”

“And their wallets. Don’t forget the wallet. Let’s go look at our dogs.”

The day got better and better. They decided on Cleo, a three-year-old female labradoodle. Well, they assumed she was a labradoodle but might have had some other genes in the mix. Her white coat was the sticky point of debate—nothing the groomer couldn’t fix, of course.

Cleo would fulfill the cuteness factor. Now they needed a male dog for the all-weather companion kind of image.

“What about Dutch?” Mina suggested.

Sky had just arrived and joined the search. “The blind retriever mix?” she asked.

Linda shook her head. “He’s not blind. He lost the eyesight in his left eye. He functions just fine, and he’s well trained, he can do tricks.”

“The poor thing has been here for what? Eleven months? If there is one dog in need of a lucky break, that’s him.” Mina got so passionate about it—maybe she was describing her own need for a break?

But her plea touched Sky. “We can have him wear a patch over the eye, you know, like a pirate? And I can get dressed up like Captain Jack Sparrow. Oh, that would be awesome. I bet I can rent the costume in that shop off Crown Valley.”

Terrific. Not only would the pooches be adoptable, they would also be adorable.

The three of them got more excited than kids in a playground until Leigh reminded them there was work to do. Sky let some of the dogs out into the yard and Mina

went to clean the cat room. That was her favorite stress reducing occupation. She hadn't seen Tom the security guard since he'd changed his schedule in order to help out Simon and Leo. In fact, she hadn't seen any of them since that day at the Hunts' place. She should have asked De Fiore for more information. Instead she'd made it all about her... and Diego. Damn.

"Hey, Sky, how is Simon doing? Do you know if he'll be able to get the Malibu working soon?"

"He'd better. That's his transportation to the prom." The prom?

"Oh, well, I was thinking about more imminent needs, like—you know—driving to school?"

Sky walked around the room with a feisty Chihuahua on a long leash, "Yes, that too. Why are you so concerned? Are you getting annoyed with him and his brother waiting here?"

"Not at all. I'm more interested on making sure all is well and proceeding well. That's all." She didn't know how much Sky had been told about Isabel Cordero's death, and it certainly wasn't her place to discuss it with this young girl. According to De Fiore it wasn't her place to discuss it period.

Mina was determined to stay until closing. It had been too long since she'd done that. She went around collecting piles of dirty towels and blankets they used for the cages. Doing laundry would be perfect—she could chat with everyone in between loading and folding.

Simon arrived first. Leigh was on the phone. He must have heard the washing machine because he came to the laundry room possibly expecting to find Sky.

"Hi, Simon, how are you? Are you hungry?"

He shrugged. "Thanks, Miss Mina. I guess Tom was right. He said Italians are always offering food, regardless of the time of the day or where they are."

Mina laughed. "First, drop the Miss. You make me feel old, and second, while it's true that Italians use food as a cure-all, you can rest easy, I'm not much of a cook."

He smiled. "I usually sit in the conference/adoption room and do homework while I wait for Leo. Is that all right?"

"Sure, what are you going to study—as a career, I mean? Or haven't you decided yet?"

"I'm hoping to get a bachelor degree in Criminology. I have applied to UCI"

"Really? I'm impressed. Somehow I had assumed you were interested in construction... architecture."

"I was, but after my talk with Detective De Fiore... well..."

"Wait, wait, De Fiore? Talked to you? You like him?"

Simon chuckled. "I respect him and, yeah, I guess I like him. You weren't there when his whole crew showed up at Gordo's garage and literally dismantled the Malibu."

What?

"Detective De Fiore came in at the tail end. His disappointment was hard to miss. I understood that he cared, well, so do you..." Simon's voice broke..

Mina patted his shoulder. "It's not over until it's over. You go study." It was her turn to get choked up.

Tom came by around five to collect both kids, and no doubt about it, he looked happy. Ten minutes later they all piled up in his truck and left for the Hunts' place. Apparently they were hoping to get the car put together before the late evening news. Good for them.

Linda and Mina were the only two left. It felt like old times, in spite of everything. Then Roger called, and it was time to go separate ways.

Alone again, in her LTD, heading home to cats, Millie and more cats... only a month or so ago that would have sounded like heaven. Not tonight.

Gino's call came totally unexpected. She had taken a detour through Dana Point, hoping to feel better by the time she got home.

"*Ciao*, Mina." Hmm, he was still speaking Italian? Why?

"*Ciao, Gino, come va?*" Asking how is everything was okay in any language, she figured.

He switched to English. "Good, good. It's all good." *Why didn't she believe him?* "I hear Kalinda is selling her house. Right?"

"Are you asking or telling?"

Gino laughed. A short, nervous laugh. Strange. "Either. Doesn't matter." Wow, his English sure improved... "Well, my sister changed her mind about visiting... no need to talk to Margo after all." More forced laughter.

"Gino, better talk to Margo. She asked me about your sisters in general a few days ago. And no, I didn't call her."

He sighed. "*Si*, I think her Italian is getting better. Maybe too much better..." Another sigh.

She felt sorry for the man. "Look, I don't know much about anything. That's the truth. Maybe you should ask De Fiore about Kalinda. He told me she wasn't coming back."

"So it's true." *He already knew?* "Wonder who's next?"

“Excuse me? Gino, you sound awful. What’s really going on?”

“I was hoping you had the answer.” He meant it. She could tell. There was nothing left to say. They both knew.

A sense of dread descended on her, filled her mind and her soul, and suddenly she didn’t want to go home, didn’t want to face her daily life. She approached the south end of Dana Point where the PCH blended with the 5 and headed north, taking her home.

Not tonight. The thought of her big, empty home made her crazy. She crossed the bridge and headed south, to Capistrano Beach and San Clemente. It was as if her car had a mind of its own, and before she could talk some sense into herself, she’d parked her car next to Tom’s truck in front of Gordo’s garage.

The metal roll-up door was closed, and Mina wasn’t sure how to get in without going through the main entrance, but she could hear voices inside. Feeling like a major lunatic, she put her ear against the heavy metal door and listened. Leo’s high-pitched laugh was hard to miss, and someone else’s—perhaps Gordo’s?

She’d come this far, why quit now? Her fist hit the metal, and the repercussion came totally unexpected. Wow. She recoiled, not fast enough. All human voices had gone quiet but not the dog. Scurrying paws and deafening barks reached the other side of the metal panel.

“Hi, Buddy, are you barking at me? After I saved your life twice?” She felt stupid speaking to a closed door. The dog grew quiet, although she could hear him breathing and snorting at the bottom of the door where a thin ribbon of light shone through. Before she could come up with more lame ideas, a side door opened, and

Gordo peeked from the open slit. "Mina? Are you the one making all that racket and getting the dog all worked up?"

She found herself laughing. *Laughing!* "That's me, but I promise you that wasn't my intention. Can I come in?"

Gordo looked perplexed, checking her out as if any minute now she would change into some witch or worse yet into a nosy neighbor. Her smile must have changed his mind. He smiled back and opened the door wide. "Care to join us?"

Humidity hung in the stale air. Tom, Leo, and Simon looked sweaty and dirty while Gordo didn't since he was giving instructions while the other three did the manual work. As for the car? Well, to her it looked like a car.

"What happened? Is something wrong?" Tom asked.

"Nothing's wrong, I just wanted to see how cars get reconstructed. You never know when I may need to do that." She kept a straight face, but of course they all laughed. "You sure got this done quickly."

"That's because when they came to check out the Malibu they didn't touch the engine. I mean, they looked at it but without taking it apart. Otherwise it would take us a week of working on it only in the evenings. This way, the car will be good to go in a few hours." Gordo lifted his hands to show his crossed fingers.

Leo seemed to be the more excited. "Look, we got new tires." *The tire.*

"Gordo, what are the chances of the car left idling to get moving all by itself?"

All eyes were on the mechanic as he took his time answering. "If I had to write the answer for a test I

would say slim to none because cars are designed with safety in mind. With that said, anything can happen. Maybe Isabel left it in neutral. Or maybe something snapped in the system, or the transmission... You see what I mean? I don't know. My answer to you is—very improbable, but not impossible."

After that, the mood went from lively to spiritless, and Mina felt directly responsible for it. Might as well get out of there before they kicked her out. What a party pooper. Just then Silvia appeared, with a pitcher of what looked like ice-cold lemonade and a stack of plastic glasses.

"Oh, hi, Mina. When did you get here?"

"Not too long ago, was on my way out actually."

"Without saying hi? Why don't you come to the kitchen with me? It's like a sauna in here." The way she pronounced sauna put a smile on Mina's face. She could remember when her accent was much stronger and how difficult it was pronouncing some words. Five minutes later she was drinking freshly squeezed lemonade in Silvia's kitchen. "I'm so thankful those kids found you and Tom. We were already on our cruise when Simon got the call for that job. Poor kids, they are holding it together well considering all they went through." So the Hunts were on a cruise. Now it made sense. "And that awful woman, that neighbor. I'm convinced she had something to do with Isabel's misfortune. When I saw that little pink sock, I told myself, that's it. That's the sign. It was as if Isabel pointed us in the right direction. She was always asking for rides. But Isabel wasn't going to get caught in that woman's messed up life. I wonder where that crazy boyfriend of hers was that night poor Isabel died. Violent man, in and out of prison."

"Is he Lizabeth's dad?" Mina asked.

“No, no. I don’t know who the father is. She moved next door to Isabel when the little girl was maybe six months old. The crazy boyfriend came around much later. I think she gets money from the state, and her mother sends her stuff, helps her with the bills. Not sure why she doesn’t work.” An engine noise came from the direction of the shop. The women exchanged glances and smiles. The Chevy was good to go.

CHAPTER 21

Sunday brunch.

How would you explain that to an Italian? A Catholic Italian? One over fifty?

Mina smiled. She didn't even know if there was a correct translation for brunch. The Italians and their meals. Sunday lunch was family time. As far as she could remember. Huh, did Gino do lunch like Italians or brunch like Americans? Probably neither if Margo got to decide. She was more into life after dark than morning food.

Sitting in the cool peaceful front room of the Ritzys Cats felt almost like a vacation. Two of the furry boarders were ready to go. Millie had done all the work before joining Tom for brunch. They both tried very hard to give a casual spin to the whole brunch thing.

Mina found it all very sweet. She knew Tom was a widower, but Millie had never shared her love life past or present with Mina. Still, she was happy for them. The excuse was that Tom had to drop off Simon and Leo to work on the Malibu, and then after brunch he was going to measure the old rusty gate, and they would pick the replacement from one of his catalogues.

Oh, someone was at the main gate, no doubt one of the caring owners.

By the time Millie and Tom came back both cats had been picked up and Mina was leafing through a

February issue of *Sunset* magazine. After handing over all the usual signed forms for the cats leaving, Mina headed home. She promised Tom she would be back in thirty minutes to look at his catalogues, but she wanted to check on her cats and on her messages. Just in case.

She walked through the garage and paused to look again at the spot where her old Volkswagen had sat under the custom-made cover for about three years now. Just one more reminder of *him*.

Clear your mind, Mina.

The boredom assault continued once she got home. No messages and both cats were sprawled on the floor, bathed by sunshine filtering through the patio door. A preview of the rest of her life?

No. From now on she would start working adoptions on weekends. That was the best way to interact with people and not let this wave of discontent overtake her.

True to his word, Tom was measuring the gate, and Millie had a stack of brochures with pictures of gates, some ready to go, others to be special ordered. This wasn't like browsing for clothes or handbags. No, it was complicated, with hinges and the direction the gate opened. Millie must have done something similar before because she was arguing with Tom about two versions of the same model when a loud truck came barreling down the road and stopped at about the spot where Millie, Tom, and Mina were working on the gate. But the truck was on the street side of the wall. The truck door was clearly marked Gordo's Garage. And Gordo was at the wheel.

Gordo rolled down his window and said, "Here are the kids. They ran into trouble. You better listen to their story, and we can talk tomorrow. Silvia is waiting. We

have a family thing to go to.” While he spoke, Simon and Leo walked around the back of the truck. They didn’t look too happy. Before anyone could say a word Gordo made a U-turn and rushed down the street as if his exhaust pipe was spitting fire. Then again, maybe it was.

Leo lead Simon around the side and up the path to the gate and after a few exchanged glances, Millie suggested they go inside to talk. Mina offered her place. Millie excused herself saying she would join them soon. Mina had absolutely no idea what this was all about, still she felt sorry for the brothers, and as soon as they got into the living room she offered them some soda since they looked hot and sweaty. Tom accepted some ice water. Before the ice cubes settled in the glasses Millie arrived through the garage, a plate of cookies in her hands. She rested the plate on the coffee table and went to sit on a side chair.

“So, what happened?” Tom’s question opened the gates, and both Leo and Simon started to talk at the same time. “Shh , one at the time, please. Better yet, I’ll ask questions. Is this about the car?”

They both nodded.

“Did you get into an accident?” Tom asked.

“No, we didn’t.” Leo said. “It was all her fault.”
Simon added.

“Her?” Tom paused. “Who are you talking about?
Were you driving the car?”

Simon nodded yes. “Gordo said we could take it for a test drive, he even had a temporary license plate, you know, like when you buy a new car?”

“We wanted to say hi to Luis. He’s going back to San Diego and—”

“Who’s Luis?” Tom asked.

The two brothers looked at each other. “A kid I went to school with,” Leo said. “He lives on the same street like us. I mean lives where we used to live, you know.”

Mina looked at Millie, clearly neither knew where the conversation was headed. Did Tom?

Leo took a deep breath and went on. “We parked the car where mom used to. I mean there was no one around, and we walked down the street. But then Luis and his cousin wanted to see the Malibu, so we were just, like, you know, just walking. And Mrs. Somer is coming out her door, and she’s screaming and screaming, and we don’t know why. She threw something—a rock I think—and barely missed the car and hit Luis’s cousin, and he don’t even know her because he lives in San Diego, and someone must have called the police and...”

“Oh, dear, is Luis’s cousin all right?” Millie asked.

“Yes, the rock hit him on the shoulder. He got a bruise, but nothing broken.” Simon took over the storytelling. “But the cop asked to see my driver license and the paperwork on the car including insurance.” His voice barely over a whisper.

“So when Gordo said you two got into trouble, exactly what did he refer to?”

“Mostly about the paperwork for the car. I got a ticket for lack of proof of insurance. He didn’t say anything about the registration. It’s still valid, but it’s in my mom’s name.”

“You’re sure that’s it?” Tom insisted.

“I have the copy of the ticket.” He started to search his pockets.

“What happened to Mrs. Somer? Why was she throwing rocks at the car? Wait, was she aiming at the car or at you kids?” Mina asked.

“We have no idea. She kept screaming about someone stalking her,” Leo said. “Her boyfriend arrived after the policemen, and he spoke to them, and the policeman who wrote Simon’s ticket said something about pressing charges, and he was pointing to Luis’s cousin. But Luis and his cousin are leaving for San Diego, and we just wanted to get back to Gordo’s place as fast as we could. Everybody was outside their doors looking at the scene. It was so embarrassing, and the boyfriend was a real... asshole.” Tom hid a smile. “He was lucky Buddy wasn’t with us.”

Millie got up and started to pass the plate of cookies around. Mina refilled the glasses.

“Did you leave the car at Gordo’s?” Tom asked in a very calm voice. Mina was quite impressed by the way he was handling the whole thing.

“We did, and the car actually drives very well. Although Gordo thinks it needs an alignment because of the new tires.”

Thirty minutes later, the kids and Tom got into his truck and headed home. The gate could wait Mina decided.

Millie called on the landline, “Mina, did I miss something? I had this strange feeling that you were—I won’t say happy—but validated by the incident with Mrs. Somer? Do you know something that Tom and the kids should know?” Nothing got by Millie, of course.

“It’s just a feeling. I can’t help but think that Mrs. Somer had something to do with Isabel Cordero’s death. I shared my suspicions with De Fiore, but I guess either he disagrees or he hasn’t been able to gather proof. Plus, he must be devastated with Kalinda’s decision not to come back. Poor man, he doesn’t have much luck when

it comes to affairs of the heart.” *But you do? Who are you kidding?*

“I see. Mina, you know, any time you feel like talking or running scenarios, I’m your gal. It has been a very exciting day, and tomorrow we have a new arrival, right? So, I’ll call it a night and maybe read a little. Don’t hesitate to call. Good night, dear. Remember, never give up.”

Never give up? What was she talking about? Her suspicions regarding Mrs. Somer? Or the lack of news from Diego? She heard her cats chasing each other upstairs, and then Aria appeared. Time to feed her babies. They didn’t much care about Diego or Mrs. Somer. Right now their priority was their dinner.

Her landline rang as she rinsed out the last glass and put it in the dishwasher. Must be Millie.

“You’re home.”

“De Fiore? What do you care? You coming over for a drink?”

“I sort of expected you’d be out celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?”

“Scaring the panties off Mrs. Somer.”

“What? Sorry, Detective, you need better spies. I had nothing to do with what happened this afternoon.”

“And yet you know exactly what I mean.”

“Of course I do, the boys were sitting right here in my living room when they told the story.”

“Do share how they got from San Clemente to your house and why they would tell you about it, unless you coached them on how to casually park the Chevy where their mother used to and—”

“Stop it. They told the story to Tom. Gordo dropped them off here because that’s where Tom was.”

“What was Tom doing at your house on a Sunday afternoon?”

“None of your business. Look, I’m only talking to you because I consider you a good friend, but don’t push your luck. Tom came by to measure the gate, or so he said. He really came to take Millie to brunch. Simon got a ticket, and one of his friends got hit by a rock thrown by the crazy Mrs. Somer. Just what makes you think I have anything to do with it?”

“Because you’re convinced she’s hiding something about Isabel Cordero’s death. I’m not saying it’s impossible. I’m saying I have nothing—and I mean nothing—to tie her to the incident. Her boyfriend was in jail at the time, and no, the pink sock proves nothing. I have the slim file right here in front of me.”

“Did your spy tell you what she was yelling?”

“Not yet. I haven’t seen the full report. Probably won’t get it until Thursday.”

“Why? I can pick it up at the San Clemente office and drop it at your place tomorrow morning.” Pause.

“I’m on vacation.”

“Huh? You? On vacation?” She heard some muffled laughing. Was he with a woman? So soon after Kalinda?

“Yes, so? You don’t think detectives deserve vacations?”

“It’s not that, it’s—in all the years we have known each other I’ve never heard you mention a day off.”

“Well, there is always a first time for everything. Ouch, hey—wait.” *Who was he talking to?* “Here. Mina, someone wants to say hi.”

“Hi, Mina, why are you giving poor Dan such a hard time?” Giggles.

Kalinda.

“Kalinda? *Mio dio*, Kalinda, so happy to hear your voice. How are you?” She heard a loud knocking.

“Dan, I think it’s room service. You taking care? Oh, okay. Mina,”—suddenly a whisper—“Babies on a Monkey Tree. Chicago.”

“What did you say?” Mina asked.

“Our food has arrived, now you behave girlfriend, and don’t think about pink socks. *Ciao*, Mina, Dan sends his love, right Dan?” A laugh and she was gone.

Mina stood, holding the phone. Stunned. What had just happened? Dan De Fiore was somewhere on vacation with Kalinda? Room service? And what was that about babies and monkeys? Chicago? *Maledizione*. Chicago. Mrs. Somer’s mother lived in Chicago. She sent the pink socks to Lizabeth.

Kalinda, I think I love you.

There it was, on her screen—*Babies on a Monkey Tree*. An upscale children’s boutique in Chicago. They had a wonderful website, and she could order directly. The socks came in boxes of three pairs. Mrs. Somer’s address would be the same as Isabel Cordero except for the letter. The Corderos lived at B and Somer at A. She went to retrieve Buddy’s adoption papers from her desk, copied the address. The computer asked if there was a message for the gift card. She wrote *A gift from out of this world!* Signed *Isabel Cordero*. She paid with the FFF credit card, requested overnight delivery, and then went to bed, dreaming that Diego purchased Kalinda’s old house and moved next to her.

CHAPTER 22

It happened on Tuesday. Mina had spent most of the afternoon at the retirement home off Coast Highway. It was her turn to bring Mocha to the elderly people's place. The ten-year-old scruffy mongrel was one of the residents' favorites. Mocha was the perfect comfort dog, never hesitant to leap onto someone's lap, and she loved the attention.

Mina enjoyed every minute of it. She never got tired of listening to the personal stories, and often wondered why some of the older residents ended up there at all. They seemed so full of life and love. She stayed until dinner was announced. Of course they ate their evening meal way before sunset.

Instead of taking the freeway, Mina decided to drive back along the panoramic route. Traffic moved slowly once she passed San Clemente metro link station. Distant fire truck horns may have been part of the problem. It also reminded Mina how close she was to the spot where Isabel Cordero lost her life. *Maledizione*, end of the peaceful day.

Twice in a few weeks that she stumbled onto emergency vehicles—bad omen. Of course right along thoughts of Isabel Cordero, came the ones about Diego Moran. She looked into her rearview mirror. Mocha slept peacefully after a day well spent. Time to get her back to the shelter.

It was Leigh's turn to close up. She'd kept the shelter open an hour longer to meet with a family who wanted to adopt two cats, siblings hard to place. Mina could see her in the meet-and-greet room talking to an older couple. The two tabbies, one orange colored, were parading on the conference/lunch table. So cute. All in all, a good day.

Once she left the office and was alone in her car, she couldn't keep on pretending. Did Mrs. Somer get the socks? Why was everyone calling her Mrs. Somer? Where was Mr. Somer? But the real question was would she know who sent the socks and what would her reaction be? Mina parked her car in the garage and walked over to Ritzy Cats first. Millie was on the phone; she motioned her to come in. Mina sat next to Zeus and petted the calico who responded with happy purrs. He was getting chubby; she could feel it as she stroked him.

"Oh dear." Millie repeated the *oh dear* mantra a few times.

What was going on? After hanging up she turned to Mina, a somber, absorbed look in her eyes.

"Millie, what's up? You look... worried."

"That was Tom. He's in San Clemente, with the boys and..." *The fire engines.*

"Oh, no, did the Chevy catch fire?"

Millie suddenly snapped out of her strange mood.
"Why would you ask about catching fire?"

"Huh, I heard the sirens as I was driving back from the retirement home."

Millie let out a long sigh. "Oh, good. You had me concerned there for a minute because the fire was started by that woman, the boys' mean neighbor... Mrs. Somer?" Mina sent mental thanks to the power above for

having already sat down. She found herself swallowing air a few times.

Of course Millie noticed. “Mina? You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Dear, what have you been up to these days that you always seem so deeply disturbed? Care to share?”

Maybe it was Millie’s soothing voice or maybe her sense of guilt defeated her righteousness, but she told Millie the whole story about the Babies on a Monkey Tree purchase. She left out the part about Kalinda’s help, mostly because she didn’t know for sure if that could be public information or not.

“Oh, my. You think she burned the socks? No, it can’t be the socks. Who would call the fire department for some baby socks?”

“I don’t know for sure. But if that’s the case, I bet I’ll get a call from our favorite detective.” Her tone was light, her conscience not so much. “Better see what my cats are up to.”

“Almost forgot, sorry.” Millie frowned, “We had quite the traffic over at the house for sale, a car with a family and lots of kids. I was hoping for a quiet older couple. Anyhow, here. I signed for you.”

She handed Mina a large box.

“What’s this? I didn’t order anything.” She shook the box. “Hmm, no ticking.”

Millie smiled. “It came by regular mail delivery, and it clearly says it’s from a major international company. Italy maybe?”

Mina looked closer. “Oh, The espresso machine company. This is sooo strange. De Fiore has one of these in his office. They aren’t cheap. You don’t think he’d send me one, right? What for? It’s not my birthday or anything else. Well, what a weird day this had been. I

really need to get home. I'll see if I can get this to do what it says it does, and maybe tomorrow we'll have a real espresso. Millie, thanks. Oh, suppose that Mrs. Somer did set fire to the socks and somehow—just in case—would they know I was the one to send them?"

"Dear, you're asking the wrong person. Things are very different since I left my job on Pennsylvania Avenue. You know who you should ask, right?"

Mina nodded. "If only I knew how to get hold of him."

She sat at the kitchen table, with real china and silverware because for a change she had real food in the house. A microwave-ready cheese and spinach quiche for one, a green salad, and a glass of Pinot Grigio from back home. Across from her table setting sat the big, unopened box with what she assumed to be the fancy espresso machine.

Lately her life seemed to be a continuous parade of senseless incidents with serendipitous common elements. And the quiche tasted a lot better than anticipated. Her cats lingered around the kitchen, probably confused by the sight of their mommy actually sitting quietly and alone when it was dark outside. Or maybe they'd picked up Mocha's scent.

The fire set by Mrs. Somers was eating at her. All the cops had to do was to call the Chicago store and track down the credit card used to pay for the items, and her whole career as the great avenger would be over in a nanosecond. But the worse part was that she used the official FFF credit card. Maybe she should call Adams, her lawyer. It was after seven, ten at night in Chicago. Adams' call could wait until morning.

Why would De Fiore send her such an expensive gift? She was pretty sure they ran over \$500. The one he

had shown her was higher end, possibly close to a \$1,000? She tried to remember their conversation regarding the espresso machine. What did she say to have him assume she couldn't live without one of those? She wasn't a big fan of the trendy ones where people would put little tiny foil things to get whatever beverage they picked—coffee, flavored no less, cappuccino, tea. She vowed never to use one of those for sure. The little modules had to be stuffed to the brim with chemicals. How else could you explain a large mug of steaming coffee from such a little *pod*?

The more she thought about it, the more silly she felt—sort of like having a conversation with a box and pretending she was speaking to De Fiore instead. With a sigh she got up, and soon she was cutting the box open. What she removed from the box seemed like a prop from a *Star Wars* movie set. All shiny chrome and sort of square but not really, with knobs. Electric, hmm, could an Italian brand work with American power, or would she need a converter?

Wait, this wasn't at all the same thing De Fiore had in his office. Inside the large box there were two smaller boxes. Confusing and intimidating. The box didn't show any return address except from the shipping warehouse. Maybe there was a note? She started to empty everything from the box—bubble wrap, foamy like paper, more shiny gadgets and a glass carafe? No, not a carafe, it was shaped like a glass tube, okay with a handle and a top and—manuals. A booklet with pictures and instructions. In so many languages. She'd given up reading assembly instructions in Italian years ago. She wasn't going to start now. The English translation could be found by starting at the end of the brochure. And no note. Well, no assembly anything. Probably shipped to the wrong

address. Besides, she had better things to do than learn how to make espresso. The opening quote, in large letters caught her eye. *If you prefer drinking espresso and could care less about making it, then this is for you.*

Huh, what do you know? What else? She kept on reading. *Easy-to-use unique digital touch screen control panel with programmable menu settings: adjust start time, auto off, clock, temperature, coffee strength.* The whole paragraph was underlined in blue ink, *manually.* The same ink was used to write *importantissimo.* Next to it. *Very important?* In a very slanted, unmistakable handwriting.

Diego?

He sent her the espresso machine? Why? She had no doubt that was Diego's way of reaching out, letting her know he was okay and most importantly, thinking about her. After all her mental scenarios of abandonment and downright disloyalty, she felt like dirt. She would make it up to him. She had to, but how?

At some point Diego must have spoken to De Fiore. The detective who was on vacation in some unknown hotel. With Kalinda. They had to know how to get in touch with Diego. Why all the secrecy? Okay, enough already. She was going to call De Fiore right now. She had his personal number. One way or another she would get some answers.

Wait. She would feel better if she knew more details about the afternoon fire in San Clemente. Chances were pretty good that it would make the local news if the fire department had been called. She could wait thirty minutes. She started to clean up her dinner plates, moving around the kitchen, her eyes on the espresso machine. A work of art, too bad it didn't talk.

So deep in contemplation she was, that when her landline rang, she nearly jumped out of her skin. She

recognized De Fiore's number and froze. How would he know she just opened the box? Was someone watching her? The phone kept on ringing. She dried her hands, switched off the kitchen light and headed upstairs to wait for the evening news.

CHAPTER 23

Oh my god! What was happening? The images on the television screen were blurry phone pics sent in by passersby. No audio. Probably nothing worthy of national news. All Mina could see was a bright yellow dumpster on fire. Next shot, no fire, a dark plume of smoke. Lots of commotion, a few firefighters, one trying to hold Mrs. Somer. A visibly upset Mrs. Somer.

At first, Mina couldn't tell where in San Clemente the drama unfolded. Then the newscaster came into view explaining the unidentified young woman emptied a small can of gasoline into the dumpster followed by a lit cigarette. Mrs. Somer smoked? The dumpster was a rental some neighbor up the street just had delivered the day before to use for a construction project. However, new renters in the process of moving in—the reporter pointed to a low building—had dumped their empty boxes in the large garbage bin. Mina recognized the low building as door A and door B, the newcomers were moving into the Cordero's former home.

And Mina had no doubt that in the yellow dumpster along with the discarded cardboard, were the box from Babies in a Monkey Tree and the lacy socks that came with it. First came a sigh of relief, followed by a wave of first-rate guilt for all the commotion her anonymous *gift* caused. The reporter closed with the announcement that

the woman who had started the fire was being taken in for mental evaluation.

What? But what about Lizabeth? It was after ten o'clock, too late to try to get information? If anything happened to that little sweet girl it would be Mina's fault. She fought the temptation to call De Fiore. The fire happened at around four? Five? She tried to cheer herself up with the idea that it could have been so much worse. The woman could have set fire to her place. Gasoline and a lit cigarette? She could have burned both sides of the building to the ground.

Good girl, Mina, you should be up for a medal for saving the whole block from going up in smoke. Not. She kept hoping Diego would call her. At this point she was willing to settle for De Fiore. In a way it was lucky for her that the detective was God knows where on vacation. Had he been around, he would have had some expert figure out what else Mrs. Somer plopped into the dumpster before setting it on fire. De Fiore was many things but stupid wasn't one of them.

It was near midnight when she finally turned off the television. She had searched every station in an effort to find more detailed information, but as anticipated, it only made the news on this minor league local station. Aria settled in next to her, and Houdini, rolled up in a ball at the foot of the bed, seemed to look at her and shake his head disapprovingly.

Mina parked her LTD in the assigned space before the clock stroked eight AM. Inside, things were just getting started, so she marched into the large dogs' room and asked Leigh which ones needed walking. She had to keep moving, keep busy, keep her head above the river

of guilt threatening to drown her. Linda wasn't due until nine o'clock, and the only other person there was one of the volunteers, also helping with the dogs. Mina figured she could call Adams after nine and find a way to explain about the credit card and the anonymous gift. How could she be so irresponsible? Drag the Foundation into her ill-conceived sense of justice? Her stomach growled. No breakfast, not even coffee. She'd only gone into the kitchen to feed the cats, and couldn't even look at the gleaming espresso machine still sitting in the middle of the kitchen table, reminding her of how unfair she had been in judging Diego.

And then the front door of the shelter opened to let Tom in, who for no reason had made a small detour from his new patrolling location and brought freshly baked muffins from the nearby newly opened bakery. And the volunteer made coffee and somehow the day didn't feel so gloomy.

"How are things with the boys?" Mina asked Tom.

"Good, good. Keeps me busy." He paused, and a smile lit his eyes. "Busy and needed. This evening after work we'll go take the Malibu for a spin, see if we can bring it home."

"We should have some kind of celebration. Don't you think so?" Leigh suggested.

Tom shrugged. "Yeah, Leo is still not ready. He misses his mother a lot, and the car is a constant reminder. We'll see. Got to get to work. It was good seeing the old hang out. Next time I'll bring Buddy around."

"We should save a muffin for Linda," the volunteer said just as Linda's car drove in.

Saucy voice and a bundle of energy pretty much described Linda. “What did I miss? You had a party or something? Muffins? What’s the occasion?”

Leigh brought her up to date.

“This afternoon we have to do our rehearsal for the beauty shop event. Sky is bringing the props. Some she rented; others we are borrowing.” She talked, moved around, and munched on the muffin all at the same time. “Before I make myself too comfortable, I’ll go check the mail.” She picked up the mailbox key from the desk drawer and walked out, still eating, crumbs dotting her fitted knit top.

Nine o’clock came and went. Mina rehearsed in her mind what to say to Adams. All the dogs had been walked and fed, cat’s cages cleaned. No more excuses.

“Here.” Linda dropped a pile of mail on Mina’s desk. “Have fun.”

“Do we always get this much junk mail?”

“Yes, but sometime I dump the most obvious offenders in the recycle bin outside before coming in. Can I borrow this?” She waved the latest issue of *Bark*, the magazine for dogs and dogs’ owners. “I want to show Roger an article about organic food for pets.”

“Sure, but bring it back. The subscription was a holiday gift from one of our volunteers.”

Linda was walking away, completely absorbed in the magazine.

One more cup of coffee while I sort the mail and then I will call Adams. She pulled the wastebasket closer and quickly separated junk from business mail to the not-so-sure about it. “Hey Linda, you can let Mocha out, she’ll just come and sit under my desk.”

Her cell chimed, it clearly showed American Express as the caller. A sense of panic fell over her. *Breathe, Mina,*

breathe. She answered. A polite male voice identified himself as part of American Express and after assurance he was talking to *the* Mina Calvi, he asked her to call the number in back of the American Express card, the same one used by FFF. No other explanation. Her hands shook so hard she had to stand up and calm herself before dialing. After a series of questions she finally found out what it was all about. The credit card had been *compromised*. She was asked not to use it. A replacement card was in the mail.

When the call was over, Mina rolled her eyes to the ceiling, meaning to look at the sky, and mouthed, “Thanks.”

“Thanks, *Mamma*,” she said to no one there. No need to call Adams after all. Her escape hatch had just been delivered, courtesy of some hacker.

Leo arrived first. Since the conference room was occupied by prospective adopters checking out the available canines, Mina offered to share her desk with Leo. He always did his homework while waiting for Simon and Tom. The refrigerator was also in that room. Without much fanfare, she went to get Leo a soda and see if there were some snacks.

And that’s how Mocha got adopted. She quietly followed Mina into the room where a young professional couple leafed through the photos of available dogs. Of course Mocha, used to befriending the old people at the retirement community, made herself at home on the woman’s lap. And after that, it was just a matter of getting the paperwork done. Two hours later, after having walked Mocha and played with her and made notes about her habits, two people and a pooch left the shelter for the forever home.

Meantime Leo was done with his homework and had gone to watch the old TV monitor in the waiting room of the makeshift infirmary. There weren't any pets quarantined. And the local channel reran the segment of the burning dumpster. Mina found Leo in tears. She got there at the tail end of the news and tried very hard to talk to him, soothe his pain.

He said something strange. "Mrs. Somer hates my mom. You know, she calls her the devil."

"Leo, who said that? I saw the news last night. She didn't say anything about your mom."

"Simon's friend was there. He saw and heard what the television isn't showing." Mina handed him the box of tissues. She remembered what Tom had said about Leo missing his mom. She also remembered how her life had been after her mother's death.

Leo's efforts to rein in his crying couldn't be missed. Mina felt so powerless. Maybe she should keep on talking. "Leo, you said it yourself that your mom and Mrs. Somer hardly spoke to each other. What does that woman know about your mom? Nothing. Don't think about it, really." She hugged him.

"Do you think maybe my mom really had an accident? You know, maybe she didn't fix our lunch because she was mad at me?"

"Was she mad at you? Why? What did you do?"

"I accidentally spilled the milk. I didn't mean to. I was helping her with the groceries. You know, like it just slipped out of my hands, and half the container ended up on the car seat. I could still see a little bit of the spot when we went to Gordo's."

"Oh, Leo, maybe she acted mad at you on that moment. I'm sure it was all forgotten by bedtime. Right?"

"I guess so, she did come kiss me goodnight." *Poor kid.*

"What do you say we go take a few dogs out for a walk?"

He quickly closed his books and gave her half a smile. Blessed youth.

They didn't make it far from the front door. Simon and Sky arrived together. Mina wondered if it was a onetime thing or a lot more. She was dying to ask Simon about the fire, but didn't feel comfortable about it.

Finally she gave in. "Simon, do you know who will be taking care of Lizabeth while her mom is—you know—away?"

"Away? Oh, you mean for the psychiatric examination? I'm not sure. I heard the grandmother from Chicago was flying in. That woman wasn't very friendly when we lived next door, but nothing like this. The whole street is hoping she goes back to Chicago with her mom before she kills someone." He shrugged and went to get a soda from the refrigerator.

Before she kills someone. What if she already had? If the mother flew in last night chances were Mrs. Somer had spoken to her earlier in the day about the gift from Babies on a Monkey Tree. She would have assumed the socks came from the mother, Lizabeth's grandmother, like the first batch. And if the grandmother were an intelligent, observing person chances were pretty good she would be asking why her daughter started the fire. What was she trying to burn?

Shivers traveled up and down Mina's spine faster than a rollercoaster. None of this made sense. Maybe she was the one who needed her head examined. Why would Mrs. Somer want to harm Isabel Cordero? They were both single mothers, one worked, the other one? Mina

didn't know. Cordero's only possession seemed to be the beat up Malibu. Mrs. Somer had a boyfriend with a fancy motorcycle. The day at the shelter was winding down, and Mina's head hurt. All that double serving of guilt felt like she should be the one burning in hell. What if Mrs. Somer had nothing to do with Isabel Cordero's death? Mina had to get out of there, go home, talk to somebody. Talk about what? She started to collect her things from her desk, her hands shaking. Her notes from the American Express phone call still on the desk. She looked at the date. According to that, her card had been *compromised* the day after she ordered the socks. Coincidence? Luck? Or a little help from a friend? She folded it and put it in her purse. On her way out she bumped into Tom there to pick up the boys. Orphan boys, Mina, don't forget. Orphans, like you.

CHAPTER 24

Obsession. Isabel Cordero's death had become her obsession. Memories of her mother's murder? Need to right a wrong? Mina couldn't explain it, not even to herself. She had to talk it over with some neutral party before she unintentionally hurt some innocent life.

Aria and Houdini would have to wait a little longer for their supper. She parked her LTD in the garage and made a beeline to the Ritzy Cats B&B. Millie was finishing up prepping the boarders for the evening. There were three left until the weekend. Then others would arrive.

Zeus walked side by side with his adopted mom and seemed happy and well fed. No longer shy either. Mina sat on the couch. The place smelled of baked bread. Regardless of how busy she was, Millie always managed to have something wonderful cooking. Reminded Mina of her other older and wiser friend, Emilia. Emilia and her cat, Fufa. The whole time Mina was in Italy she'd eaten more meals cooked by Emilia than she had in restaurants. Emilia, Millie. Ah, how about that? Emily in English, very close to Millie if you pronounced it fast. Back in Italy she had been obsessed with Diego. Maybe it was her destiny to just obsess over someone.

"Why so pensive? Problems?" Millie asked from the small kitchen. "I have some freshly baked bread and some French Brie that melts in your mouth. Tempted?"

She peeked at her from the open arch between the rooms. “I take your nodding as a yes? Oh, wine and a green salad are also on the menu.”

Mina walked over. “Can I run some scenarios by you while we eat? I’m afraid to make a mistake that may mess up someone’s life.”

“Do I know this someone?”

“Yes. Not personally. I’ve told you about the socks, remember? Well, yesterday Mrs. Somer set fire to a dumpster and was taken in for a psychological evaluation.” Mina told her what she’d found out from Simon about the grandmother coming in from Chicago. “Chances are pretty good that the box and the socks were in the fire and that the grandmother may have questions. I’m assuming all this, and I’m convinced Mrs. Somer had something to do with Isabel Cordero’s death and she may be very close to being scared enough to confess. I have a plan.”

“A plan? Oh dear, a plan to scare the woman even more?”

Mina nodded. “If I’m going ahead with it, I must do it before tomorrow when De Fiore gets back. I don’t know how he does it, but he seems to always guess my intentions.”

“Let’s eat before the bread gets cold and the wine warm. Don’t stop talking, you can tell me all about it.”

Mina helped her carry the food to the table, watched her get a bottle of Pinot Grigio from the refrigerator. “I can’t tell you about it. If it ends badly and I get in trouble, I don’t want you to get caught in my mess. I’m concerned about the human factor. Suppose the woman has nothing to do with Isabel Cordero’s death and really is emotionally unstable. My next move may send her over the edge and ruin her life; the state may take away her

child. And it would be my fault. Millie, why can't I just let it be? Why?"

"I can't answer that, dear. Search your soul and whatever you do, make sure your intentions are good because right or wrong, many lives will be affected forever. Seems to me you had already made up your mind before asking for my advice. Are you looking for validation? Why?"

"I don't know, Millie, honestly. More like absolution than validation. I can't stop thinking about it. And when you take a close look, I have nothing to do with any of this. It all started with a rescue dog found wandering the streets of San Clemente. My goal was to locate the owners. I did that. I should be moving on, like they say in the movies—mission accomplished."

Millie kept eating, spreading luscious Brie on her warm and tempting bread. "So was there an espresso machine in the box?"

The question took Mina by surprise. Better that way. Change of subject. "Yes, and it was from Diego, I'm pretty sure. I just don't get it. Why? It's not like I'm that domestic. Or anxious to change, at least not in the kitchen. Why an espresso machine?"

"That's a very expensive brand dear. Some cost more than a diamond ring."

Diamond ring? Where did that come from? "Funny you should mention that. Linda thinks Roger is getting close to proposing to her. I bet he's not giving her a coffee maker. I have no clue how that expensive thing works. It will end up as a kitchen accessory to be admired and dusted once a week."

"If you dislike it so much perhaps you can repack it and give it as a wedding gift to Margo and Gino if they

decide to make it official. I bet Gino would truly appreciate it.”

“Oh, Millie, I’m sorry. I’m bringing my bad mood to your table. You know what? That’s an excellent suggestion, and it would make a very nice wedding gift. And... in case I end up in jail, could you take care of my cats until I post bail?” Mina tried to make a joke out of it, but somehow it didn’t seem to be working.

For a few minutes the only sounds came from their chewing. Then Millie asked, “You’re positively sure you don’t want to run the plan by me?”

Mina shook her head and kept on eating.

Like a trapped fly, her plan on getting Mrs. Somer to confess to Isabel Cordero’s death still twirled in her head. Probably why she had a major headache. Might as well go to bed. On her way out of the kitchen her glance lingered on the shining, large object in the middle of her kitchen table. She blew it a kiss. *“Buona notte, Diego Espresso.”* *More than a diamond ring.* The thought really annoyed her.

Today was the day. No need to rush in, she may need to stay late at the office because Sky and Linda were going to the Hair to the Crown to rehearse for the big event. The surrender papers and adoption papers for Cleo and Dutch were at the shelter. Did Houdini sense her edginess? He stayed close to her instead of running up and down the stairs as he did most mornings, maybe just to annoy Aria.

She should eat breakfast and look at the thing on the table, *“Buongiorno, Diego Espresso.”* She snickered to no one there. *First get the newspaper.* Her cell rang as she closed the front door. So early? Strange.

“Mina, where are you?” Millie.

“Home. Why? What’s wrong?”

“You must get to a television, the local channel. Hurry, you don’t want to miss this. It’s her—I’m pretty sure.”

Her? Mina scrambled to turn on the living room set. Must be serious, Millie wasn’t the type to lose her cool over trivial stuff. The local channel had a morning show, copycat of *Morning in America* or something. Not being an early riser, Mina wasn’t familiar with it.

The two women hosting the show were middle-aged local celebrities, a bleached blonde and a dyed redhead. Both wore dresses a size too small and were interviewing a woman in her late fifties, nicely dressed in a Chanel suit, grey hair in a bob, and bright red lips.

“Who is she?” Mina asked Millie.

“You’re about to find out. You better sit down.” On the phone Millie’s breathing sounded a bit labored. Something out of the ordinary.

“So how did your daughter feel about sharing her name with the main character from your book?” Asked the blonde talk host.

“She loooved it,” cooed the Chanel suit. “I would read her a Mrs. Somer story at bedtime, and my daughter was tickled pink to share the same name. She insisted on using the Mrs. too.” *What?*

“Millie, is she?”

“Yes, Mina, she’s the mother of Cordero’s neighbor. She’s a writer and named her daughter after one of her fictional characters.”

“Oh, my God. Is it even legal?”

“Shh, let’s listen.”

“Kids will be kids.” A sigh and a smile from the writer. Nodding from the two local interviewers. “She’ll be home from the medical facility later this morning. There is nothing wrong with my child that a change of

address can't cure. I'm sure you heard about the unfortunate circumstances. I should have insisted for my Somer to come back to Chicago when my granddaughter was born. She's named after me you know. Lizabeth is just precious. Anyway, we'll be all going back tomorrow morning and put all that awful mess with the deranged neighbor, God bless her soul, behind us."

"Were you aware that this Cordero person was doing such hateful things to your daughter? Do you know why? Shouldn't your daughter have her reported to the authorities?"

Chanel suit smiled condescendingly. "The woman had children. My daughter didn't want the boys to get hurt. In the meantime she was the one suffering in silence, and now she's paying the price. She'll be fine as soon as I get her away from that awful place. We could have left in the evening, but Barnes & Noble, the one at South Coast Plaza, found out I was in Orange County and begged me to do a book signing. I didn't want to disappoint my readers so we postponed departure until tomorrow. I'll be heading to South Coast Plaza after lunch."

More smiles and shaking of perfectly coiffed heads. "Have you had a chance to ask Somer why she set fire to the dumpster?" Now the sweetness of the smiles was enough to give anyone a sugar overdose. But Chanel suit didn't let that derail her redeeming campaign. "She wanted to burn the last reminders of the woman's bad behavior. Unfortunately my daughter got a little carried away." She sipped from a large mug that said Morning Sunshine. While Mina held her breath waiting to hear about the *reminders*. Please don't say lacy pink socks.

"Somer wanted to get rid of a dress. She said that Cordero dropped some liquid on the back of her new

dress just out of spite because she looked so cute in it. Imagine the wickedness of that woman. My daughter was going to file a complaint, but all that happened the evening before Cordero's death. So poor Somer was out of a nice dress and left with the bad memories every time she looked at it. The drycleaners couldn't get the spots out, they said something about enzymes had dried, maybe it was bad milk that Cordero threw on the back of the dress, I don't know for sure. But enough about that. Let me tell you about my new book due out in two months."

Mina was speechless. Did she say milk? *Mio Dio.* Her mind refused to accept it.

"Mina, are you still there?" Millie asked.

"Huhh, yes." Leo had spilled milk on the Malibu seat that very evening of his mother's death.

"Are you okay?" Long pause.

"I'm more than okay. Millie, I need to know that you will take care of Aria and Houdini if I don't make it back tonight."

"Dear, you worry me when you talk like that. What happened? Something this pompous woman said must have triggered something. Maybe we should discuss it. Talk it over with Detective De Fiore?"

"Can't. It must be done today. Didn't you hear? They are leaving town in the morning. Got to hurry. Everything will work out. Ciao for now."

Mina hung up and called Tom, security guard Tom. Next she called the office to warn Linda that she may not be able to close up, better ask Leigh to stay late. *Just in case.*

CHAPTER 25

Tom circled the block one more time. The scorched dumpster had yet to be moved. “Do you think she really burned the dress?” Mina asked.

“I’m no detective, but I doubt it would matter. You said the mother told the story on public television. What more proof does one need?”

“It’s hearsay,” Mina said. “There she is... there she is...”

“The skinny woman with the stringy hair? What’s she doing?”

“I’m not sure, moving everything out of her place? I bet she’s going to have a yard sale or something.”

“Aren’t they leaving town tomorrow?” Tom asked.

“Yes, according to her mother. I wonder where her little girl is. If we’re lucky she went to the book signing with her grandmother.”

“We can’t keep circling. She’s bound to notice the truck, this is a rather quiet street.”

“Tom, you’re right. Let’s do it.”

“You’re sure now?” he asked.

Mina nodded—adrenaline already kicking in.

Tom stepped on the gas, and within minutes they were out of sight of door A on West Mariposa. With Simon and Leo expecting to be picked up at four, Mina felt twice as responsible for the end results. The whole thing was her idea, although Tom didn’t argue much.

She wanted to make sure he would be able to get back to the boys as scheduled. Especially today. Today's plan was to finally drive the Malibu home. Tom said that was all they could talk about the evening before.

Buddy must have recognized Tom's truck because he rushed to greet them, tail wagging, ignoring Gordo's calls of, "Wait, boy, wait."

The Malibu was the only car in Gordo's shop. It looked better than most of the old classics Mina glimpsed in magazines. Not that she considered herself an expert of course. Far from. She had never driven a car with a stick shift on the steering wheel, and in spite of not openly acknowledging it, it made her nervous.

They had only shared bits and pieces of the plan with Gordo, but Silvia, his wife, knew all about it. Mina joined her in the kitchen and then went into the guest bathroom to get dressed. The uniform was too big, as expected. After all, Silvia was at least three sizes bigger than Mina. It didn't matter as long as they could make it work.

"I have to say, the uniform is quite cheerful," Mina said.

"It's a matter of taste I suppose, this bright orange looked better on Isabel than it does on me. You want some padding on the top?"

"You think I should? When I'm sitting in the car I assume the only part visible to passersby will be from my shoulders and up. Right?"

"You're right. Let me work on your hair. The length will work fine. Isabel's hair was a little darker. Maybe I should use some spray gel, it will make it look shinier, and we can part it to fall on the side of your face that will show. We can hide your profile. Anyone who knew Isabel and comes close to you will be able to tell the

difference. Remember that. Keep your chin down as much as you can without getting into an accident. How did I let you talk me into this?"

Silvia shook her head as if chasing away bad thoughts but kept on fiddling with Mina's hair until it felt right. They used a tight belt to keep the dress from falling and touching the ground—it was that big. A few safety pins to the middle helped. Finally they walked back to the shop.

Gordo made no attempt to hide his displeasure. He was very concerned with the legal aspect of the gamble. Mina took her seat behind the wheel of the Chevy. The car was idling. They let Buddy get in the car on the passenger side but with the leash on and Tom hooked the leash to the back of the seat so Buddy could move but not enough to perhaps hop out the car window...

All the pent up anxiety caught up to Mina, and her hands shook so badly she silently questioned her sanity. *Can I do this?* This time around there wasn't Diego or Detective De Fiore. And all Tom could do was give her moral support. From a distance.

She thought about her mother, how her death had been ruled suicide at first. But Mina had never believed it, and in the end the murderer had paid with his own life.

Justice, that's all she wanted. Justice for Leo's mom. Her cell went off in her purse. On instinct she fished for the phone and looked at the number. *Nooo.* De Fiore. How was it possible? He must be back in town. Too bad.

She ignored the call and turned to the men. "Let's do it. Huh, the Malibu is legit, right? Tags, insurance?"

"We're good," Tom said. "I'll be right behind you in the truck with my phone next to me. If you change your mind, it's okay too." He waited.

She didn't say anything, just checked her look in the rearview mirror like Isabel may have done hundreds of times before her.

After carefully putting the car in reverse, the Malibu slid smoothly out of the shop and onto the main street.

Show time.

While rehearsing their moves, Tom and Mina had decided the best way was for her to take her time and drive up to the spot where the boys said their mother used to park her car. That way if Mrs. Somer was watching she would see mostly the orange uniform Isabel always wore to work. That and part of the hair, the part hiding most of the face would help create a little distraction. Of course Buddy, sitting next to her, was bound to bark out loud at the sight of his old home.

The closer Mina got to the place the harder her heart clamored in her chest. Buddy sat up straight on the seat, ears back, making whimpering sounds. And then the oh-so carefully rehearsed plan blew up like an overinflated balloon.

The boyfriend's motorcycle sat in the exact spot Mina had planned on parking the Chevy. That wasn't the only unexpected twist. Door A was wide open, well, more than open. It appeared half off the hinges, and furniture and clothes were scattered on the ground, outside the door.

Mina slowed the car and rolled down the window just as the boyfriend rushed out and headed for the shining bike. She could tell he was muttering and didn't seem to have noticed her or the car. Not until Mrs. Somer came hollering and apparently chasing after the man.

What was she screaming? *Mio Dio.* Dear God, was that a gun she was waving around?

“You want your stuff? I’ll get you your stuff, starting with the gun and a bullet. Where do you want it? In your head?” She held the gun with both hands.

Mina prayed there weren’t any bullets in it because by default, as she aimed at the back of the boyfriend she was also aiming directly at Mina who sat in the idling car parallel to the motorcycle. The boyfriend and Mrs. Somer noticed her at the same time. He smirked. Mrs. Somer stopped. She was so close that Mina could see the woman’s eyes get bigger and bigger, then the screaming changed pitch and tunes, and the gun redirected to the Malibu.

“You, you...” Was all Mina heard that made sense. Sort of.

Hard to understand since Buddy’s barking covered most of the screaming, but Mrs. Somer stepped closer.

Mina knew she had to get out of there. Her whole being begged her to. Move, now. Her hands shook so hard she couldn’t shift gears, and Mrs. Somer was so close Mina finally understood clearly the words erupting from her mouth, or perhaps her conscience.

“You’re dead. You’re dead. You can’t be real. I saw you under the car. You’re dead. Stop tormenting me.” The boyfriend and the motorcycle where the only barriers between the crazy woman and Mina. He stood there unmoving except for eyeing Mina and Mrs. Somer and possibly trying to figure out how he could get out of there without getting hurt.

Too late. Mrs. Somer pointed the gun directly in Mina’s direction, and Mina saw a flash of light, heard glass shatter, showering her in sharp slivers and piercing pain on the left side of her face. After that, everything turned fuzzy yet loud and searing.

She sat in the ambulance, depressed. The young EMT insisted she keep calm and go willingly to the emergency room. Everything had happened so quickly. Her heart kept hoping for Diego Moran to appear on his black Harley and whisk her away to a place without pain, without orphans and lost dogs, a place where true love cured all ills. Whatever the ambulance technician gave her must have been working. She no longer shook or blabbered about Mrs. Somer finally going to jail after she loudly described how dead Isabel Cordero was when she left her there alone under the Malibu, being crushed by the car's tires.

Mina could swear the woman said that Lizabeth killed Cordero. Lizabeth, her two-year-old little girl. A mother without a conscience or a heart.

Amid the flurry of activity on Mariposa, Tom told Mina the gun belonged to the boyfriend, a felon out on parole. Buddy was okay. The bullet that grazed Mina's cheek had shattered the passenger side window, but thankfully that was the extent of it.

"Very lucky," Tom said.

All Mina wanted to do was close her eyes and go to sleep. Her fingers touched the mountain of gauze on the side of her face—at least that's what it felt like. The ambulance was ready to leave for the hospital. Why was the back door still open? What were they waiting for?

A black sedan arrived in a squeal of tires and stopped feet from the back of the ambulance. De Fiore? He rushed out and headed straight for where Mina sat, groggy and frankly annoyed by his presence. Nowhere to hide. He marched up shaking his finger at her.

Ah, dear Dan De Fiore, so predictable.

Before speaking he exchanged glances with the EMT who said, “She’s going to be okay. May need a stitch or maybe not, not sure.”

Her brain worked just fine, her mouth not so much. Must be the shot, and the blob of gauze or whatever was stuck on half her face. She caught the detective checking out her orange outfit, three sizes too big, and her glossy hair too. He kept shaking his head. There was so much she wanted to say, but all she did was roll her eyes.

“I should have known,” De Fiore spit out. He wasn’t happy.

Like she cared.

“That’s why you weren’t answering my phone calls. I should have known. Vintage Mina Calvi, of course.” He turned to the EMT. “Go ahead. Take her to the hospital and thank you for giving me a chance to see her.”

The young ambulance technician helped Mina lie down on the gurney as De Fiore closed the doors of the emergency medical vehicle. She closed her eyes; the vehicle moved ahead slowly. Mission Accomplished.

CHAPTER 26

Wet sand clung to her bare legs. Her body rested on the thick beach towel she had purchased long ago when she still believed in the power of youth and the magic of love. Or maybe it was the other way around. It didn't matter now.

Hole-in-the-fence, her forever favorite beach. The hole had been fenced off years ago, and Mina couldn't remember the last time she'd come by, if only for a stroll at low tide. With the grey sky and the early morning hours, the only brave souls were locals, mostly older folks walking a dog or small groups of friends on a daily jog. The doctor had warned her to keep her face away from the sun, so this was perfect. The cut in her cheek stopped throbbing days ago, no stitches needed, and even the smaller cuts on her arm had healed.

But a Band-Aid for her heart and soul had yet to be invented.

The surf, constant and predictable, once a source of comfort, was now a cold reminder of her loneliness. What a long, endless week it had been. Some kid had captured a picture of her wearing Silvia's uniform, being pulled bleeding from the Chevy.

That started the media circus. A bonanza for the Furry Friends Foundation, a curse for her desire to stay out of the limelight. After the second day of people in and out of the shelter and trying to crash the gate of her

home to go snooping around the Ritzy Cats B&B, the decision was made for Mina to take a few days off.

Officially she needed some well-deserved rest to recoup from her injuries. But *liar, liar, pants on fire*, echoed in Mina's head every time she heard that excuse. De Fiore called. Asked her not to believe a thing the newspapers would be writing about the incident on West Mariposa and the arrest of Somer Carr. *Carr was her last name?*

She'd read it anyway, every single word. According to Somer Carr's story, late on that December evening she'd begged Isabel Cordero for a ride, telling her Lizabeth was sick and she needed to get her some medicine. In reality she wanted to meet the man who supplied her with illegal OxyContin.

When they'd approached the meeting place she made a scene saying Lizabeth needed air, was throwing up. Isabel stopped the car, and at that point it became confusing.

Mrs. Somer claimed Cordero wanted to take a look at her front tire while Mrs. Somer was trying to unfasten her seat belt. Somer felt her dress soaking up the wet spot on the seat and became upset. In her haste to get out of the car she thought she may have pushed Lizabeth against the steering wheel—she didn't remember. But as they got out of the car from the driver's side to meet the approaching dealer, the Malibu had started to roll. She claimed she screamed and heard Cordero also screaming.

The dealer refused to get out of his vehicle, so she hopped into his car with Lizabeth, and they left. She assumed Cordero *may* have been under the tire, but wasn't sure.

Ah. Mina remembered distinctively what Somer had screamed as she shot her. "I saw you under the car. You're dead."

Simon and Leo were never mentioned by name, probably due to their ages.

The story didn't say a thing about the other Carr woman. According to De Fiore, the author/grandmother had hired a pricey defense lawyer and claimed her daughter was innocent for reason of temporary insanity. Mina felt so sorry for Isabel Cordero who'd died such an unnecessary death doing an act of kindness. And she couldn't think of poor, poor Lizabeth and Simon and Leo... all the children, the real victims.

Clouds began to scatter, and the sun announced its arrival by putting a new shine on the waters of the Pacific on this lovely Saturday morning. Mina got up, brushed the sand off her skin, and crossed the PCH to get to her car.

She was almost home when it hit her; Saturday, *the Saturday*.

Tonight was the dinner/gala when the winner of the best no kill shelter in Orange County would be announced. *Oh, Mio Dio!* Depressed or not, she couldn't be a no-show. Why hadn't someone reminded her, why? They had reserved a full table, that part she remembered. Linda booked the table way back so that they could all sit together.

What was she going to wear? How dressy was it? She needed a haircut something fierce. Who was coming? Would she drive herself? What about Millie? Everyone involved with the shelter had decided that the snafu with the shooting and the arrest was the thing they'd need to tip the scales in their favor.

If she missed it they would never forgive her. She parked her car in the garage and rushed inside. Like at this point rushing could make a difference. *Get real, Mina, and get your head out of La-La Land.*

Her cats were in the kitchen, pacing. Did she remember buying cat food? Her stress level rose. The pantry, maybe she had some in the pantry. While rummaging through her kitchen she caught a glimpse of a red light blinking on her landline. Now she remembered turning off the ringer, when? She had seven missed calls. But she did find the cat food.

Aye. Every call was in regard to the dinner and the awards. The oldest one was from De Fiore, apologizing for missing the event, wishing her luck, although he felt in his heart she would win, with or without luck. *Sweet.*

The other calls were all from Linda, Leigh, and even Sky. Time to make herself some coffee, grab the phone, and start apologizing. She glanced at the gleaming espresso machine in the middle of the kitchen table. By now it had become part of the décor, and she called it Diego Espresso, and caught herself talking to it. But she made her coffee with the old five-cup brewer she'd bought on sale years ago at Walgreens for \$12.

Was Diego trying to tell her she made lousy coffee? Never mind that, first things first, tonight's dinner.

So she dialed Millie and found out that Tom would be escorting her and one of the volunteers from the shelter would cat sit for the evening.

Next she called the shelter, and there was no hiding the fact that everyone was excited about the event. Everyone but Mina. They had to be seated by seven o'clock. Sky was bringing her mother. Mina liked that idea, so she wouldn't be the only one without a male

escort. And everyone she spoke to insisted it was cocktail attire. Great.

By midmorning she was upstairs opening and closing drawers, moving around hangers to see if maybe she had a dress or a fancy top she'd forgotten lurking about somewhere.

In Margo's old bedroom she did find one of those gizmos her roommate used to put in her hair to make it look curly. Didn't seem too complicated. Hey, what could she lose? She brought the plastic box and the pink curlers back to her bathroom.

No matter how many times she shifted through her closet she always came back to the same dress. The red Valentino she'd purchased for that ill-fated party, the night that Kalinda lost her legs. It gave her goosebumps just thinking about it. She couldn't possibly wear it again—it would be bad luck. Except no one would know because she never told Margo and Gino about the dinner.

Not that it mattered, they had a restaurant to run, and Saturday night was one of their busiest nights. The only other people who knew about the dress were Kalinda and Diego. Both—whereabouts unknown. She remembered Diego telling her how much he liked that red dress on her. She tried it on; strapless dresses just weren't her thing. Made her feel exposed, vulnerable. And with the evenings still on the colder side, bound to catch a cold. Back to searching the closet. By noon Millie called again. Roger didn't want to take his car, something about pet transportation. Anyway, he had rented a private limo and offered to give Mina a lift to the event since her home was on the way there anyhow.

Great, one less worry.

“Mina, he said it’s a black limo.” Poor Millie, why wasn’t Roger calling himself? “Keep an eye out for it, around six, or six fifteen. Don’t be late because he’ll still have to pick up Linda. I’ll see you there.” She hung up before Mina had a chance to ask what she’d be wearing.

By three o’clock she’d managed to get everything figured out. She’d wear the red dress with a short black jacket she’d owned forever; part of a suit except the skirt had a broken zipper. She sat at her makeup table and began to roll her hair on the curlers. Not as easy as she thought... especially with Houdini sitting near and looking at her without a blink.

She hadn’t heard the limo, but she looked out her kitchen window, and there it was. Mina grabbed her black evening clutch and headed out the door. A last glance at the mirror to see the horrible hair job. Made her look like a grown-up version of Shirley Temple, minus the dimples.

The car idled just outside the gate. The driver, an older man with uniform and hat—*seriously Roger?*—rushed to open the limo for her.

She bent a little to get in, noticing his polished black shoes first, and anticipating a funny remark regarding her hair, she said, “The groomer messed up,” and balked at his hand tucking a curl behind her ear.

Then she looked up to meet Diego’s eyes, soft and blinking at her. “Bella.” He found her mouth. She couldn’t move, lost in a state of lusty bliss. Then the car moved, and she fell into his chest, inhaling his familiar scent and telling herself if this was a dream she never wanted to wake up.

In the fleeting game of light and darkness of the speeding car he searched her face. “Are you all right?”

Am I all right? Oh, the shooting. She nodded. Still trying to make sense. He kept her close to him, then did a peculiar thing, felt for her left hand and interlaced his fingers through hers, hesitant. “How is the espresso?”

She heard the words, didn’t understand the tone. “Huh, well, I don’t know.”

He let go of her hand. He was concerned about the espresso machine performance?

“You did get the espresso machine, right?”

She wished she hadn’t.

Wanted kisses not coffee-tasting quizzes. “I did. I couldn’t figure out how to get it to work, so to answer your question, I don’t know how the coffee would taste because I never assembled the thing.”

He bristled a little. “What did you do with it?”

“Nothing. The main piece, shiny, and with buttons is sitting on my kitchen table. I named it and have long conversations with it, but no coffee.” She could tell he was chuckling by the way his body throbbed against hers.

“What did you do with the rest, the smaller boxes and—”

“N-o-t-h-i-n-g. I left them in the main box, in the pantry, I figured if Gino comes around... I know, I’m sorry, really. It’s a nice espresso thing. Millie reminded me that it may cost more than a diamond ring and...”

Chuckles? No, he was roaring, laughing so hard she was sure the driver must be wondering what she was doing to the poor man. Tickling him to death?

“Millie said that?” She nodded in the dark. “That Millie—a diamond ring.” More laughing. “And you’re sure you didn’t open the rest of the boxes?” He laced his fingers with hers again, no more laughing, held her against his heart. “It’s okay, *bella*. We’ll open the rest of

the boxes together, and I'll stay until you can make your own perfect espresso."

And suddenly she knew that those neglected little boxes might be hiding something more interesting than the recipe for a perfect espresso. "I'm a very slow learner," she said lips to lips.

Aspen



Dear friends and readers, the dog in the above picture is the real Aspen, the rescue from Home Fur Good, the inspiration for my story.

I met Aspen while working an adoption event. He was quiet and well behaved. He sat next to the handler the whole time, watching the world around him, with those sad, sad eyes. And yes, he did have marks of old buck shots on his back. It was a windy afternoon and we were outside, by a mall. At some point I took him for a long walk, trying to keep myself warm. After that he seemed to want to sit or stand close to me. When it was time to pack up, the van from Home Fur Good came to get the dogs and suddenly Aspen didn't want to go and kept hiding behind me, and begging with those sad eyes. After the van left I was so heartbroken I couldn't function. Ended up walking around, crying my eyes out until I was calm enough to drive home. Couldn't get the dog out of my mind, and no, at this stage of my life I cannot adopt a pet. Lucky for both of us, he quickly found his wonderful, loving forever family. Still, I had to write about him.

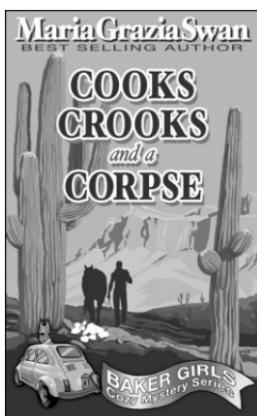
This is for you, Aspen, or whatever your name is now. For you and for Home Fur Good, the greatest rescue shelter I've ever had the privilege to work as a volunteer.

Thank you for reading our story, I would be grateful if you could post a review, and thrilled if I hear from you, mgsweb1@gmail.com.

If you feel like reaching out to the shelter, here is their link, www.Homefurgood.org remember, they survive on donations alone. Most of the dogs they save are pulled from the E list, *euthanasia*.

As always, *mille grazie* and *ciao* for now

Please enjoy Chapter One of *Cooks, Crooks and a Corpse*, a new series by Maria Grazia Swan



I parked my Fiat 500 inside the open gate and headed up the long driveway of the Dumont residence. My skirt swayed to the beat of my high heels pounding on newly laid pavers. I could see a group of guys huddled in front of the house, talking. Supremely aware that I was the only woman in sight, I pretended to check the place out, totally in control.

Sure.

Why was the front door wide open? Oh, of course, construction workers. The hard hats should have been my clue. I hated, hated construction workers. My legs felt like polenta, the corn mush of my Italian childhood, but I kept on walking. After all the years in the United States, memories of Italian laborers, their whistling and catcalls, still made me uncomfortable and self-conscious around construction sites.

Not a single hard hat had looked at me. Until now. Having noticed me coming up the driveway with the large manila envelope tucked under my arm, two men

turned away to talk to each other, one husky the other slightly slimmer, though I could only see their backs. When the slim one cocked his head to look at me, I caught a glimpse of rolled up papers. Blueprints?

I had no idea the house renovation wasn't done yet. Escrow closed twenty days ago. I was there to deliver documents pertaining to the sale, and I hoped to get a peek at the finished product. I had first seen the home when Sunny Novak, my boss, listed it. A sprawling ranch-type residence on two acres of precious land, zoned for horses.

The house, built in the seventies, needed serious renovation, and the asking price had reflected that. The Dumonts paid the full price. Cash. Like the last name suggested, they were originally from Europe. Sunny had been a friend of the family forever, so she knew what they were looking for. All went quickly and smoothly.

I was dying to take a closer look, but the slim, young man, walking briskly, caught me before I made it to the front terrace, a brand new terrace.

"Can I help you, miss?" His tone of voice rather polite than friendly.

"Hi, I'm Monica Baker, Ms. Novak's assistant and—"
"Oh, yes, Sunny called."

His unsettling eyes, a rare amber color, glanced at me without really looking at me. I could tell. He acted bored, distant. His out-stretched arm offered an open hand. I set the manila envelope on his palm.

He nodded. "Thanks." Then he turned around and strode back toward the group of waiting hard hats.

His black ponytail bobbed against the collar of his jacket as he walked. I wondered what kind of crude remarks he elicited from his co-workers regarding that ponytail? Nah, those times were long gone. Nowadays no

one cared about the length of your hair, unless it interfered with your job description. Ponytail or not, the guy was a bit peculiar. His hands didn't look like the hands of a construction worker. Maybe he was a boss and only gave the orders, or he wore gloves.

I sighed. Everything in America was so different from back in Italy.

Damn. I'd forgotten to ask his name. Those were important legal papers I'd handed over. Ouch. Well, he obviously knew about the delivery; he'd said Sunny had called. Okay then, mission accomplished. Funny. I felt insulted by Italian men because they whistled and called out, so shouldn't I be delighted at being ignored by this amber-eyed ponytail guy? I didn't feel delighted.

As I walked back down the driveway back to my car, I noticed the bright red bougainvilleas that marked the property's boundaries, and how they contrasted sharply with the soft purple hue the fading November sun had brushed on the northern face of Piestewa Peak in the distance. Another typical, gorgeous Phoenix sunset. I could never tire of them.

Five o'clock. No need to go back to the office. Happy hour at Z'Tejas sounded like the perfect place to unwind. I was circling in front of the busy restaurant looking for a parking place, when my cellphone chimed. What now?

"Hey."

Brenda. "What's up? You sure pick the most annoying times to call. What do you need?" I asked, more sharply than I'd intended.

"Why are you assuming I need something? I'm your aunt—"

"No, you're not. And now I'm sure you want me to do you a favor. You only pull the aunt crap when you need something from me."

I could hear Brenda chuckling, that low, rough laugh of lifetime smokers. "Hey, little girl, show some respect. It was Tommy, not me, who divorced you. And besides, I'd take you over my irresponsible nephew any day, which is why you live with me and he doesn't."

Aw shucks.

"But you're right. Can you pick up Dior?"

I knew it. "Pick him up? Where?"

"Doggie day care, usual place. I'm still at work and it's on your way home from the office."

"I'm not at the office."

"Oh, and where are you then, Miss Monica?"

Brenda, always full of sass. "Nowhere, really. I was planning on stopping in Z'Tejas, but I was just driving around hoping to spot an empty parking space when you called."

"Oh, stop whining. Dior needs to be picked up before six. If you can't make it, I need to get cranking."

"Never mind, I'll go get your precious dog, but you're feeding me when you get home."

"I feed you five times a week anyway." She coughed once. "See you. Drive carefully with that can of sardines you call a car."

She hung up before I could think of a zinger of a comeback.

The Nice Day Spa, for pets, where Brenda dropped off her Great Dane, was close to home, so I headed in that direction. She only took Dior there a few days a month, days when we were both away working. They were days when Brenda was planning healthy gourmet meals for the Scottsdale retirement resort where she was

a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist consultant, and I was doing an open house for one of Sunny's listings or running errands for her.

Between my day job and evening real estate classes, Brenda and I didn't see each other very often. But she always had extra food if I came home hungry. And Brenda's food made it definitely worth coming home hungry.

Dior leaped into the back seat of my Fiat, plopping down his massive body, making my little car shake. The dark bluish gray of his short hair meshed well with the black leather interior of the car. He stretched to lick the side of my neck before I had a chance to shift gears.

As usual, I got all giggly. Thankfully Brenda wasn't there to see it. She would have been upset, claiming I was ruining all of Dior's expensive hours of training to teach him not to slobber on people. I didn't care. I was sure Dior considered me his playmate and Brenda the disciplinarian.

Okay, she was a lot more than that. She had become the reluctant rescuer of the young Great Dane when the dog's owner, a longtime resident of the luxurious retirement community, had died. Unbeknownst to Brenda, the dog's owner had Brenda listed as one of her beneficiaries, slated to receive a bounty in addition to the dog. While the dead woman's relatives, all from out of state, fought over the money, Brenda had brought the pup home. By then the poor thing had already been named Dior, something to do with the owner's past and, according to her, glorious career in the French fashion industry.

All that was two years ago and taking care of Dior had turned out to be a very rewarding decision, in more

ways than one. I'm sure the judge had taken into consideration Brenda's care of the animal when he decided who should inherit what.

We used to joke that the unexpected inheritance could be Brenda's trousseau once prince charming came calling. With Brenda in her late forties and locked in a long, destructive relationship with a married man who wasn't about to leave his family any day soon, the joke was sort of lame, but she was a good sport.

Besides, we avoided talking about that situation as much as possible. I'm sure it was painful for her and it was awkward for me, having grown up in Italy, daughter of staunch Catholics. My family was still in denial regarding my two-year-old divorce and the fact that my ex had been caught kissing one of the high school girls he met while working as a substitute gym coach. Every time we spoke long distance, my relatives reminded me to relay to Tommy their undying affection and they prodded me to "see the light because boys will be boys" and all that nonsense.

I turned south on 36th Street, in the opposite direction of the Dumont house. Geographically, Brenda's home and the Dumont house were only a few miles apart, but value wise, well, the distance was a million dollars or so. That's what being on the good side of a street can do. In this case the street was Shea Boulevard. And the good side was the south side.

The Dumont's residence was south of Shea in the foothills of the Phoenix Mountain Preserve, with access to miles and miles of trails. Brenda's home was north of Shea, closer to the 51 Freeway. She lived in the main house, and I occupied the guest cottage in the back. A seven-foot deep body of water divided our places, the

pool she'd built with part of the inheritance from Dior's original owner.

Even before reaching our driveway I noticed the truck with the blue dolphins painted on the doors. No telling how long it had been parked in front of the house. What now? I bet Max saw me coming. My car was hard to miss. What it lacked in size, it made up in the flash factor. My Fiat was hot pink.

I held firmly onto Dior's leash. The dog was hard to control. Max had that effect on him. Maybe because he was one of the few men hanging around regularly. The jumping and whining began even before I killed the engine and opened the car door.

"How's my boy?" Max was by my car before I killed the engine.

He patted Dior's head trying to calm him a little, then pulled the usual treat from his back pocket. The dog's enthusiasm reached a new high. Max squatted next to the Dane and scratched behind his ears, talking calmly until Dior started to settle down, then rewarded him with the treat.

"Brenda isn't here?" he asked.

"No, she's working late. You need to talk to her?" I kept my fingers superstitiously crossed for luck while asking that, since I was not in an entertaining mood.

"Not really, just wanted to stop by and say hello." As he talked he kept his blue eyes steady on me. Cerulean my mother would say of the color. And she would be right, although I had only seen eyes that color on dolls, never on humans. So intense was that blue, it looked fake.

"Oh." The crossed fingers had not done the trick. He waited to be invited in.

I fiddled with my keys, avoiding the subject. Dior was done with his treat, so he pulled me toward Brenda's house.

"I need to take care of Dior. The poor guy was at day care all day."

"Sure." Max moved in the same direction.

Damn, he knew Brenda wasn't home, I had just told him. That's what happens when you sleep with a guy, they think they own you. Now what?

"Want me to take his leash?" he offered.

I handed it to him without a word. I just couldn't think of a nice way to tell Max to get lost. If there was one thing I was good at was playing the victim. Then again, he didn't force me, didn't coerce me. I can't even say I'd had too much to drink. Nope. I missed sex, was in a funk, and Max had been there, pretending to service Brenda's pool, staring at me with those cerulean eyes that I was sure were well trained in the art of cajoling women into dropping their bikinis, or whatever they were wearing, and throwing themselves into the arms of the eyes' owner.

The funny part was that I'd found out that Max really didn't know much about pools. It was just one of his creative ways to pick up women. The pool company was owned by his family. Max had his own career. He ran a successful karate studio for little kiddos, and the word on the street was that he was always available to teach a few moves, free of charge, to the young moms who signed up the little ones.

And believe me, moves he had a-plenty, and then some.

After the years of slam-bang-thank-you-ma'am with my ex, sex with Max was like a well-choreographed dance, worth getting your heart broken for. Mine never

did, get broken that is. It was pure lust, at least from my end. But lately Max had been coming around too often for my tastes. The more often he showed up, the faster I wanted to hide.

He may have been perceived as a great catch by some women, but I wasn't one of them. Max was a few years younger than me, and I'm sure he was promiscuous. I made it very clear this thing between us wasn't anything to go pick out a china pattern for. He never spent the night because as I told him, I'd become used to sleeping alone, and I liked it.

Maybe he was a glutton for rude behavior, because he came around more and more often, and that made me quite nervous. What was it he was looking for? Whatever it was, he wouldn't find it in my bedroom. I had to tell him. The sooner the better, for both of us.

I unlocked Brenda's back door and of course Dior muscled his way in and headed for his water bowl. I moved swiftly, mainly because I didn't want Max to get any ideas just because we were alone in the house. I really, really wished he'd go home.

"Here Dior, let me remove the leash and get you some fresh water. Your mommy will be home soon. Okay sweetie?" I petted his head right between his large floppy ears.

"The yearly award night is in two weeks."

Max was right behind me. I hadn't even heard him move. That was another one of his annoying trademarks. He was like a smooth predator.

"Looks like our studio is up for a few awards."

"That's great," I said. "Congratulations." Now go home.

“Thanks. I was wondering... it’s — sort of formal — cocktails and dinner before the ceremony... and... I mean... would you like to go with me?”

“Go with you? Where?”

He looked confused for a second. “To the dinner and the awards. Weren’t you listening?”

“Huh — oh, yes...”

“Yes, you’ll go?”

Oh, the relief and joy in his voice. “No, I meant yes I was listening.” Che strega What a witch my mother would say, rightfully so.

“Then you’re not going?”

I couldn’t look at him. I had to stop the nonsense. “I don’t know. When is it? I may or may not be free.” Chicken.

“It’s the Saturday after next.”

I moved a few feet away from him, avoiding looking at his face and the cerulei peepers.

“Saturday — after next — I see. I’ve sort of promised Brenda I was going to the opera with her.” Fingers crossed behind my back there was even an opera on that weekend. “Can I get back to you on this?” Coward. “I’ll call you after I talk to Brenda.” Dior acted impatiently, pacing and pushing the empty water bowl with his nose. Good boy, Dior. “I really have to take care of Dior here and then I have to study for my real estate classes, okay?”

Max stood there in the middle of the room looking at me with such intensity I wanted to disappear and stop being a bad person. All I had to do was tell him how I really felt and stop the charade. Before I worked up the nerve Max nodded slightly.

“Okay.” He turned around and left.

I sighed in relief even though I had only postponed the unavoidable moment of truth. I couldn't decide if I should run over to my place to change clothes and check my email. Oh, heck, it could wait. I kicked off my high heels and went to pour myself a glass of cold Pinot Grigio. Brenda bought it by the case, and always kept a bottle in the refrigerator. It would help to wash away the bad taste in my mouth left by my own cowardice.

Brenda's home phone rang. Might as well answer it, very few people had her personal number and I knew most of them.

"Hello..." A recording. A collect call from the corrections department. "Push nine to accept the call." I didn't wait for the rest of the message. I didn't need to. This wasn't my first collect call from jail.

"Hello, Tommy."

A pause. "Monica? I thought I called Aunt Brenda."

"You did. She isn't here. What did you do this time?"

Breathing, labored breathing. "Well, f**k, I need her to get down here and bail me out. Tell her I'm good for it. She knows. I can't call back. Did you hear me?"

"Loud and clear. You still haven't told me what you've been arrested for."

"What the f**k." He must have realized I was his only hope of Brenda getting his message. "Monica, come on, sweetie, it's nothing. A DUI. Just tell Aunt Brenda, okay?" Sweetness coated his voice like caramel on apples.

"I will."

He hung up before I'd even finished speaking the two short words.

About the Author

Bestselling author Maria Grazia Swan was born in Italy, but this rolling stone has definitely gathered no moss. She lived in Belgium, France, Germany, in beautiful Orange County, California where she raised her family, and is currently at home in Phoenix, Arizona—but stay tuned for weekly updates of Where in the World is Maria Grazia Swan?

These days her time is devoted to her deepest passions: writing and helping people and pets find the perfect home.

Maria loves travel, opera, good books, hiking, and intelligent movies (if she can find one, that is). When asked about her idea of a perfect evening, she favors stimulating conversation, Northern Italian food and perfectly chilled Prosecco—but then, who doesn't?



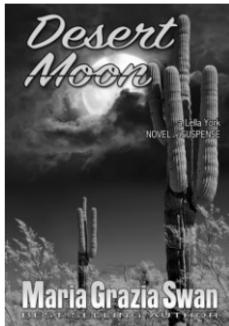
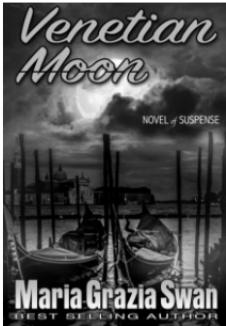
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Lella York series



Mina's Adventure series

