

GUESS WHAT SHE DID

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To Dan, Robert and Julia, with love

Chapter One

Georgina Graham inhaled sharply. Mark Weber was sporting a new look—his head was freshly shorn bald, in the vaguely menacing style popular on Wall Street with men with thinning hair. She watched him stride briskly across the forty-fourth floor elevator lobby, expertly elbowing his way through the throng of early morning arrivals. Mark's reputation as a serial destroyer of young careers was legendary at the storied investment bank in Lower Manhattan where Georgina worked, and, of particular concern to her, of late his behavior was becoming increasingly erratic. Georgina took this overnight change in Mark's personal grooming as a sign of (yet another) difficult day ahead. She slowed her pace to avoid encountering him at the firm's high security entrance. Before she had time to settle into her office, Mark's assistant called to summon her. Georgina's shoulders slumped. Not today Mark, she thought. Please, not today.

Waved in by the assistant, Georgina entered Mark's spacious corner office with its expansive cityscape view and lowered herself into one of the sumptuously upholstered club chairs in front of his desk. Purposefully, she sat up straight in the chair and folded her hands neatly in her lap. She fixed her gaze on Mark's mouth, to avoid the appearance of inspecting his scalp. Mark did not greet her. Instead, he took his time as he read through the contents of a thin manila folder laid out on the desk.

Looking up at Georgina at last, he asked what she knew about Rios Capital.

Georgina allowed herself to relax slightly into the chair. This unscheduled meeting was about a new assignment, not a reprimand. "Alejandro Rios," she said. "Buys and sells high tech companies out in California."

"Have you met him?" Mark asked. When Georgina shook her head, no, he went on, "You will, tomorrow. He's planning a takeover, some biotech startup. I'm giving you the deal. You can handle it by yourself, right?"

"Of course," Georgina replied evenly, a shiver flooding from her head to her toes. Ever since rejoining Mark's group she had wanted to get the lead on a transaction, but Mark had been very hands on, watching over her every decision, and second-guessing most of them. "What's Rios like?" she asked. "I've heard some things."

Mark scowled at her. "You know better than to pay attention to what people say," he said. "If Rios wants this startup, your job is to see that he gets it, and at his price. Didn't you major in hardball at business school?"

"No, Mark, I didn't," Georgina replied, coolly returning his gaze. "Everything I know about hardball I learned from you."

Mark abruptly closed the folder and handed it to her. "Here's everything you need to get started," he said.

Georgina recognized that she had been dismissed. "Thanks for letting me have this one," she said. "I'll make it work." Mark had already returned his attention to his computer screen and did not reply.

Georgina walked hurriedly back to her office. She closed the door and called Nick Fitzgerald, but the call went to voice mail. He would be airborne now, she remembered, disappointed. She was about to leave Nick a message, but, recalling their tense conversation earlier that morning, she decided that she should give him this news in person.

She called Pearl Blumenthal. "You won't believe what just happened," she said excitedly. "Mark has done me a huge favor."

"Hmm. Mark and favor in the same sentence," Pearl said. "Somehow I doubt that Mark Webber will ever do you, or anyone else, a favor. It's part of the investment bankers' code of conduct. No favors, ever. Mark's idea of rewarding your loyalty and hard work is to not demolish you. Helping you out has never crossed his mind."

"Pearl, why are you always so cynical?" Georgina protested.

"Because I'm a lawyer and I deal with the species on a daily basis," Pearl said.

"OK, I get it," Georgina said. "But it's all in how you handle them, and I know how to handle Mark. Remember, I'm a banker too."

"Putting aside your troubling career choice for the moment, what's this about anyway?"

"Mark has given me a deal! My *very own* deal. Please, Pearl, try to be more positive. This means a lot to me."

"All right, I'm *positive* that you will be very successful, and you will make a boat load of money. Does that help?" Pearl said, her tone softening. "Look, I'm happy for you, but I have to get back to work. Let's get together tonight and you can fill me in on the details. I'll call Millie and ask her to join us."

Mollified by her friend's conciliatory tone Georgina said, "Thanks, I'd like that."

After the call, Georgina sat at her desk and took a moment to calm down. When she was able to focus, she opened the file that Mark had given her. As she read, she learned that the company with the misfortune to draw Alejandro Rios' attention was called ZIFIX, and it was trying to commercialize a discovery made by its founder, Dr. Nathaniel Carmichael. Dr. Carmichael's credentials were impressive; he had risen swiftly in the professorial ranks at the medical school located near the startup, and he held a patent on his invention. The contents of the patent were described in the file but Georgina lacked the expertise to understand its significance. Stymied, she called in her assistant. She ordered him to have the bank's intellectual property group review the patent at once; then, she told him, he was to write a synopsis of its main ideas in lay language, to be in her hands before her flight to California early the next morning. She ignored the young man's stricken look.

Turning to the startup's financials Georgina saw that in less than three years Dr. Carmichael had burned through most of the capital that he had raised from a handful of local investors, largely family and friends. The company was running short of money and there was no product in sight. Georgina's confidence mounted. Dr. Carmichael was clearly a rookie. Skewering neophytes in deals was almost too easy, she thought, but this could not have come at a better time for her. She guessed that Mark had thrown her this plum as payback for returning to his group. In any case, Georgina sensed that Dr. Carmichael's struggling startup was shortly to be in the more capable—or a least better capitalized—hands of the formidable Alejandro Rios, and that she was on her way to a quick score.

Dr. Nathaniel Carmichael drove up the graveled driveway to his former home, a tidy, low-slung adobe in the style of early California. The house and the two-acre parcel of land on which it stood now belonged to his ex-wife Katy. Nate lingered for a moment behind the wheel, looking out over the garden and beyond to the eucalyptus forest that bordered it. It was the first peaceful moment that he had had all day. He got out of the car and walked up the brick pathway to the front door, already open in anticipation of his arrival. Poking his head inside he called out, "Is Gordon ready?" He heard the familiar sound of Katy's high heels on the terracotta tile floors.

"Almost," Katy replied from somewhere inside the house. "Gordon, hurry up. Your father's here." The tapping of Katy's heels on tile floor got louder and then she stood before him. She was dressed for an evening out, her softly curled auburn hair and trim figure enhanced by a perfectly fitted, teal-colored dress. Nate thought that she looked beautiful, younger than she had in years and more like the vibrant girl who had attracted his eye in medical school. "Gordon's coming," she said. "How have you been?"

"OK," Nate replied. He detected that Katy was wearing an unfamiliar perfume. "You?"

"I'm good," she said. "So, any news about more financing for ZIFIX?" Nate had continued to keep Katy informed about the startup, even though under the terms of the divorce she no longer had any financial interest in it.

"I've been talking to Rios Capital," he said. "We're close to making a deal."

"Rios?" she said. "Alejandro Rios?"

"You know him?"

"I've heard of him," Katy said. "He lives here in the Ranch. The talk is, he's a very tough customer." Katy was more attuned than was her ex-husband to the goings on in Rancho Secreto. A regular reader of the local newspaper, Katy often saw photographs of Rios' two teenaged granddaughters dressed in full English riding gear, jumping horses at the shows that were a prominent feature of Ranch life. Since Rios himself attended few social events, he was rarely photographed. But as one of the Ranch's wealthiest residents his activities, both business and personal, were a staple of the grapevine on which locals shared gossip with other locals but never with outsiders.

“Rios has cash and I need cash,” Nate said defensively.

“Better count your fingers after you shake hands with him,” Katy warned. “I mean it, Nate, you need to be very, very careful.”

Gordon appeared, backpack in hand. An energetic six year old, he dropped the backpack and reached up to his father, who gave him a hug. Nate gamely wished Katy a “good time tonight.” She waved them off.

As he drove to his apartment Nate listened absentmindedly to Gordon’s long-winded narrative about events at school that day. His thoughts wandered to Katy. How had it turned out like this?

Nate and Katy had married in their final year of medical school. After surviving grueling residencies and fellowships they had spent their early years on faculty striving to make their marks. But after Gordon was born Katy had changed in ways that Nate did not understand. She had seemed happy in her new role as mother but, at the same time, she had become increasingly out of sorts. Ominously, much of her newly found resentment had focused on Nate. Even though he had been on notice about his wife’s unhappiness, Nate had been stunned when Katy asked him to move out. Bewildered and hurt, he had moved to a rental apartment at the beach.

Nate blamed Katy for ending the marriage, but he nursed his bitterness in private. His day-to-day existence and his outward demeanor continued much as before. Consumed with juggling his commitments at the hospital, the medical school and the startup, he was seriously overextended. But he told himself that everything would work out, just as soon as he got an infusion of cash into ZIFIX.

Gordon had stopped talking. Nate looked in the rear view mirror and saw that his son was nodding off. He wondered whether Gordon was troubled by all the changes in his young life. It was after all Gordon who had first told him about Katy’s new man, when he displayed a toy from “Mommy’s friend.” Katy had confirmed that there was someone in her life, but she had been guarded about sharing much about him. Nate debated whether he should ask Gordon how he felt about this man. Gordon might be confused, he thought. But what would he say to him if he wanted to talk? Nate suddenly came to the disquieting realization that he did not know how he felt about Katy’s new relationship himself.

Chapter Two

Her friends were already seated in a booth near the back of the bar. Narrowly avoiding misadventure with a cocktail attached to an inebriated woman in a designer suit, Georgina weaved her way through the boisterous happy hour crowd.

“What’s this I hear about you going to California to make your fortune?” Millicent Garrett asked Georgina as she sat down next to Pearl. Millie had become friends with Georgina in business school, but lacking Georgina’s stellar connections, Millie had had to settle for a position with a somewhat less prestigious investment bank. Although Georgina’s firm paid considerably more than Millie’s, Millie’s firm competed favorably with Georgina’s in terms of intolerable job stress.

“I’m not going to California to make *my* fortune,” Georgina replied. “I’m going to help someone who is already very rich add to *his* fortune and, while I’m at it, I’m going to ensure that whoever is on the other side of the deal is relieved of any hope of acquiring wealth whatsoever.”

“And why are you doing this dastardly deed?” Millie asked, raising her eyebrows, playing along.

“Because if I do this, the rich man will pay my bank handsomely, and just enough of the booty will trickle down to me that I can continue to live in Manhattan and share life with the two of you,” Georgina said.

“Great attitude,” Millie said. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Stop it, you two!” Pearl interjected, exasperated. “How did I manage to find *two* friends in the same crazy business?”

“You found us because your fancy white shoe law firm is only too happy to take our banks’ money,” Millie retorted, with a smile.

“And we are *so* very grateful to you for keeping us out of the slammer,” Georgina added. Then she turned more serious. “It’s just starting to hit me that this is really happening,” she said.

“You deserve it, after all you’ve done for Mark,” Millie said. “And you’re going to *slay* this deal. You have real killer instincts and that’s what it takes.”

“If you say so,” Georgina said.

“Wait a minute, is that new?” Pearl asked, eyeing Georgina’s handbag. “I don’t think I’ve seen that one before.”

“This?” Georgina said. “Well, yes, it’s new. It’s nothing special, just some low-level retail therapy.” In fact the purse was from a luxury goods purveyor that had recently opened

a store near Georgina's bank. She had been smitten with the bag for the better part of a week before she succumbed to its charms, following a particularly contentious client meeting that had left her nerves raw.

Unconvinced by Georgina's answer Pearl nonetheless decided not to press the issue. Instead, she leaned forward and asked in a lowered voice, "So, what's going on with Nick and the job in D.C.?"

"He had another round of interviews today," Georgina replied. "He doesn't know where it's going yet. He's not even sure that he wants it."

"He wants it," Pearl declared. "Would you move to Washington with him?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Georgina said. "He may not get an offer."

"But he's keeping you in the loop about the decision, isn't he?"

"Of course," Georgina said. "Look, it's complicated. If Nick decides that this is the right thing for him, then we'll have to figure out what it would mean for us to live in different cities. I haven't even begun to come to grips with that yet. Anyway, what I need from you two right now is a lot, and I mean *a lot*, of moral support. Rios Capital is one of Mark's major clients, and I *have* to deliver this deal for him. And from what I hear around the office, Alejandro Rios is a major league S.O.B. So, you guys have my back, will you?"

"You got it," Pearl and Millie said in unison.

Alejandro Rios watched impatiently as the ornately framed, antique landscape painting rotated slowly off his office wall. When the painting stopped moving, he punched in the code to the safe hidden behind it. He carefully inspected the contents of a large clasp envelope and then placed the envelope inside the safe. Feeling the need for a break, Rios left his office and descended one side of the dual staircase that lead to his home's capacious foyer. Spying her employer from her cubbyhole office just off the foyer, Lupe Gonzales, the head housekeeper, scurried out to open one of the heavily carved mahogany front doors. Rios strode through the opened door without acknowledging Lupe and quickly traversed the flagstone-laid entry courtyard. He stopped in front of a large rose garden that sprawled for half an acre on the other side of the courtyard.

Rios was a rose fancier. He admired the flowers for their complexity, especially for how their form and even their colors changed as they opened to reveal themselves to the observer. Roses were a metaphor for life, he believed—by turns elegant and thorny, giving back only what they received in care, and gone too soon. Years ago, when he had first acquired the Rancho Secreto property and set out to build his private oasis, he had instructed the architect to site his office to overlook the rose garden. He often stood at his opened office window, admiring the garden and taking in the sweet air. He had done some of his best thinking standing at that window.

Rios was a man with a feel for the big picture. He bought and sold companies dispassionately, much as traders did stocks. He despised details. To free himself up to act like the bird of prey that he was, spotting firms ripe for the snatch, Rios paid people to take

care of the details—people like Mark Webber, who could wring the last drop of blood from the victim and then produce a mountain of paperwork that made it legal. As he walked the gravel path that meandered among the roses, Rios contemplated his conversation earlier that day with Mark. Used to having his way, Rios had been aggravated when Mark told him that he could not come out from New York to help him with the ZIFIX takeover. Now he would have to make do with one of Mark's underlings. But the deal was small, Rios acknowledged, and Mark had assured him that the young woman he was sending out was more than equal to the task. She would be arriving tomorrow. That was none too soon for Rios, because he relished swiftness in a takeover. Experience had taught him that he made the most money when things went down fast.

Rios was in his late sixties but looked much younger due to a rigorous program of diet and exercise supervised by a longevity clinic in Los Angeles, a not-so-secret retreat for Tinsel town's many aging celebrities. A man of discipline, he adhered strictly to the teachings of the clinic's founder, a lifestyle doctor who frequently appeared in the media. Because of his efforts to maintain his vitality Rios was fit and strong. He dressed in form-fitting clothing to better show off his still-muscular physique. Not classically handsome, he radiated a certain masculine air that many women found appealing. He was three times divorced, but his last split was now many years in the past. As Rios saw it, his lack of success in marriage, which he did not feel keenly, was more than compensated by his outsized success in business. He had discovered that as his fortune grew, so did his access to agreeable female companionship, free from the uncomfortable bonds of matrimony.

Rios left the rose garden and continued along a newly laid flagstone pathway that led to an imposingly large barn. His enviable monetary position gave him free rein to indulge his passion for thoroughbred horseracing. The recent recession had presented him with several gratifying opportunities—frightened, financially distressed companies desperate for a bailout—and therefore profits were up at Rios Capital, way up. To celebrate the good times (for him), he had used the financial windfall to tear down the modest original barn, built on the site at the same time as the house, and constructed in its place a grand new one that was state-of-the-art. He had also upgraded his racing stable with the purchase of three superb young colts, personally acquired at enormous cost at the spring yearling auction in Kentucky, and he had hired a new trainer to ensure that his equine athletes were properly developed.

Once inside the barn Rios walked at a leisurely pace up and down the rows of horse stalls, taking in the sights, sounds and smells that he so enjoyed. He paused periodically to look inside a stall, assessing the condition of the wary animal inside. Refreshed, he was about to return to his office when his daughter, Adela Rios, entered the barn, leading an exquisite bay horse by the halter. A petite, slightly round woman in her mid-forties, she was wearing a black velvet riding helmet cinched under her chin, black leather boots, beige jodhpurs and a black T-shirt.

"Give me a hand with Diamante, would you?" Adela called out to her father. "He's a handful today. He almost bucked me off." She motioned with one gloved hand for her

father to open the sliding gate to the horse's stall. Together father and daughter managed to get the balky animal inside. Rios took off the horse's halter, placed one hand on his neck and nudged him towards the rear of the stall.

Suddenly the horse, whinnying and snorting, reared up on his hind legs. One flailing hoof narrowly missed Rios' head. Frightened, Adela ran out to the corridor. Keeping the halter in front of his face to fend off the horse's thrashing legs, Rios calmly walked backwards towards the stall door. As soon as her father reached the corridor Adela slid the stall's gate shut behind him. The loud clank produced by the engagement of the latch further aggravated the horse, prompting him to pound the gate with his front legs.

The clamor of hooves hammering against wood brought several grooms rushing into the barn to investigate. A minute later the barn manager, Jose Rodriguez, joined them. A paunchy, middle-aged man with a day-old beard, Jose was gasping from the short run from his office in a shed next to the barn. "What's going on?" he asked as he caught his breath.

"Diamante is *loco* today, and I don't know why," Adela shouted at Jose, trying to be heard above the din.

"Did something spook him out on the trail?" Jose peered through the grate in the stall door. The horse was now pacing rapidly back and forth and grunting loudly.

"Nothing that I could see. He's just all hot over nothing," Adela said. "What should I do with him?"

"Maybe he needs more exercise," Jose said. "He's spending too much time indoors. These stalls are big but they're dark. In the morning I'll have someone put him on the line for you before you take him out. For now, let's give him some quiet."

The group disbanded. Rios accompanied his daughter to her car. "I'm glad I have Jose to help me with Diamante," Adela told her father as he opened the door for her. "I don't know what's going on with that horse, but I know Jose will figure it out."

"About Jose," Rios said cautiously, "I've been meaning to talk to you about him."

"Is something the matter?" Adela furrowed her brow.

"I'm afraid there's something not quite right with Jose right now," Rios said. "He's been making a lot of noise among the grooms about the changes I've been making at the barn. He's not happy. I want you and the girls to be careful what you say when you're here. Best for you all to keep a little distance from the barn staff, until things settle down a bit." Adela was surprised by her father's admonition but she promised to be tactful, kissed her father on both cheeks, and drove off.

Rios walked briskly back along the flagstone pathway to the house. The episode with Adela's horse had not caused him any distress; in fact, he had enjoyed the excitement. But as he walked upstairs to his office his mood became more somber. He was still impatiently awaiting Detective Samantha Mori's callback. She usually responded to his calls the same day, but this was already the second day, and he had left *four* messages. What was the problem? Women were so ridiculously unpredictable, Rios mused. But he had to find a way to reach her, and it had to be today. He desperately needed a read from her on his options

before his hand was forced. Up until now, his entrée to her had allowed him to pass on information about the murky financial world in which he held sway, without any personal repercussions. Typically these revelations improved his circumstances by clearing the field of troublesome competitors, but today's matter hit uncomfortably close to home.

He had called again. Flinging the message into the nearest wastebasket, Sam Mori walked quickly past the reception desk and entered her small office, one of more than a dozen that lined the perimeter of the Detective Division. With an ever-so-subtle hint bubbling just below the surface of her dazzling smile, Sam was adept at charming the men she cultivated as tipsters. Typically, her sources enjoyed the flirtatious repartee with her and left it at that. But recently Alejandro Rios appeared to have become overly engaged with her. While she was ready to get together with him for a drink and some friendly banter, she needed Rios to understand the true nature of their relationship—it was strictly a business transaction. And she needed Rios to understand that in this particular business transaction, the only currency was information. Nothing more.

In their last encounter, less than a week ago, Rios had surprised Sam with a present: an over-scaled jade brooch carved into the shape of a leopard, its eyes set with small rubies. Sam had softly demurred, citing police department policy. To soften the blow, and to maintain Rios' interest, she had let her hand linger for a brief second in his as she handed the brooch back to him. The information that he had given her that day was of little value and obviously a pretext to see her. Annoying behavior of this type cropped up periodically in Sam's line of work, especially from rich, entitled men like Rios who chose to believe the impossible fiction that a much younger woman would actually be interested in them.

Sam was attractive to men and she knew it. She enjoyed the attention that men paid to her. Although she believed that most men were self-absorbed, and therefore boring, she nonetheless enjoyed exercising her feminine powers over them. It pleased her to create an illusion that sparked men's less explicit fantasies. She never showed cleavage—she had none—nor did she do anything obvious to call attention to her sexuality. Instead, she focused on making herself into an interesting tableau, an exquisite, if somewhat atypical, walking piece of art. To accomplish this illusion she concentrated on a simple, even stark, wardrobe and flawless grooming. Her jet-black hair, cut short and worn swept back from her face, was held in place by a generous application of gel. She applied makeup with a heavy stroke and trimmed her brows in a line that was almost horizontal. And there was something else, something that always caught the male eye. Located, oddly, on the back of her neck was an enigmatic lure—a bold, black V-shaped tattoo that extended well down into the nape.

Sam was well aware that, on their first encounter with her, many men were simply intrigued by her uniqueness. But the artifice that informed her outward persona was only the first act in the seduction. She had a way of making men feel that they commanded her complete attention. She left them with the impression that she wanted to know everything there was to know about them; when they divulged more, she telegraphed how much she

admired them for their disclosure. Once fully engaged by her intellect, more than a few men found Sam irresistible.

Rios, it now appeared to Sam, was one of those men who had fallen too deeply under her spell. She detested having to titrate her game. If she paid too little attention, the informant dried up, and if she paid too much, things could get personal, and, if not handled properly, unpleasant. But she could ill afford to lose Rios. His access into the upper reaches of fast money was unparalleled among her sources; it would be impossible for her to penetrate that world so completely without him. Whatever her misgivings, Sam knew that she had to keep Rios talking. She would return his call. But first—she would make him wait.

Chapter Three

The town car was at the curb, waiting for her. The cars and their attentive drivers were one of Georgina's favorite perks at the bank. When she worked late—and that was most nights—she appreciated being driven home through the dark Manhattan streets by a uniformed driver in a well-appointed car. Even though she lived in a doorman building, the drivers would watch until she was safely inside the lobby. Georgina handed her carry on luggage to the driver and slid into the back seat. As the car sped in the light early-morning traffic towards Kennedy airport she tried to focus on the new file that Mark had sent to her apartment by messenger one hour earlier.

Georgina had gone to work for Mark straight out of college. Her position as a financial analyst had entailed tracking down whatever information he needed for his rapid-fire decision-making. She had managed to survive Mark's frenzied pace and overblown expectations, and over time had even gained his grudging admiration. More to the point, every year Mark had given Georgina the largest bonus among her class of analysts. The bonus money had made possible a lifestyle that included beautiful, high-end clothes and bi-weekly salon hair. For the first time in her life Georgina had liked her reflection in the mirror. But the rent on her tiny studio apartment had consumed an inordinate proportion of what was otherwise a considerable income for someone her age. Her net worth hovered precariously just above zero. Eventually Georgina had concluded that she needed to move up to a better paying position. But after several years as an analyst in Mark's group, there was no promotion in sight. And Mark was getting on her nerves.

The next step, Georgina decided, was to get a Master's of Business Administration. An MBA would open the right doors for her; once she had the degree, she believed, her upward mobility would be assured. Squeezing in study time whenever she could, Georgina had prepped hard for the admissions test, and, as soon as the test was behind her, she had written and rewritten her applications until they were polished like a Tiffany diamond. Her efforts had paid off. She was admitted to one of the best business schools in the country. She had learned the good news of her acceptance while at work; elated, that very hour she had walked unannounced into Mark's office and given notice. The look on Mark's face as he digested her coup was her favorite memory from her entire time at the bank. On the day that she left for business school she had vowed that she would never again work for Mark.

Why then was she, MBA now in hand, back in the fold? Mark had reached out to her, asking her to rejoin his group, not as an analyst this time, but in a much better management position. She was brilliant, a natural, one-of-a-kind, he had told her. Georgina could easily have resisted Mark's pitch if the economy had not been in free fall when she

graduated. There were other offers, but none from firms with the cachet of the celebrated investment bank where Mark worked. The clincher came when he had promised that he would make her a star. Mark had read her just right. Georgina wanted to be a star.

As the peak performer in the group Georgina was spared the worst of Mark's daily tantrums. But his mistreatment of the lesser-esteemed members of the group had begun to weigh on her, because it fueled the collective angst that churned among her colleagues like a lobster in boiling water. Coming to work each day was for many of them an act of misguided sacrifice, whereby they gave up the last of their dignity in return for compensation packages the size of the overpriced island on which they lived. Working side by side with these dispirited people depressed Georgina, in large part because she suspected that her eventual fate might not be so dissimilar.

The town car entered Queens. Traffic picked up. Georgina checked the time; there was still more than an hour before her flight. Reading through the new file from Mark she noticed that she was booked into a hotel called the Inn at Rancho Secreto. A quick check through the documents showed that Alejandro Rios' address was in Rancho Secreto. She guessed that the firm's travel office had booked her into the nearest hotel. She used the map feature on her cell phone to see where the titan of industry lived. Rancho Secreto was a few miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, in what appeared to be a semi-rural area. A hotel search showed that the Inn was a luxury resort property. Georgina brightened at this prospect.

At the terminal the driver opened the car door for her and held out her carry on bag. Georgina mentally prepared herself for the mind-numbing airport routine that she had grown to loathe. But today things went smoothly and she soon sank into her first class seat. The airplane rumbled down the runway, gaining speed. Georgina looked out the window, anticipating the aerial view that always pleased her on take off. The airplane lifted off and New York lay below.

Adela Rios rolled up her yoga mat and placed it under one arm. She looked eastwards across the patio, taking in the rising sun and the pink glow that it scattered on the clouds floating above the horizon. The still-cool morning air moved softly over her; she felt its weight. Although the sun's rays were too shallow to generate much warmth, she sensed the light strengthening on her face. Her gaze fell on a small bird sitting on the rim of a stone birdbath at the edge of the patio. The bird cocked its head slightly to one side, fixing a watchful eye on her. Adela stood motionless. Taking a single hop into the bath, the bird sank down into the water; it flapped its wings vigorously, splashing water in all directions. Adela watched, transfixed, as the morning sunlight reflected off the water droplets, creating a shower of color in all directions.

"Hey, what about breakfast?" Adela's daughter Consuelo called out from the kitchen window. "I don't want to miss the bus."

Jolted back into the morning routine by her daughter's voice, Adela left the patio and entered the house through the French doors that led to her office. She put the yoga mat

away and then crossed the family room into the kitchen. Reaching up to an iron rack over the kitchen island, she pulled down a skillet. She began to heat corn tortillas on the oversized gas range. Consuelo was already making coffee. "Did you sleep well?" she asked cheerfully as she left the stove to get eggs and salsa from the built-in refrigerator.

"I did," Consuelo replied. Gauging from her mother's tone that she was in a good mood, she went on to ask, "Would it be OK with you if I have some friends sleep over on Saturday? I thought we could stay in the guesthouse."

Adela frowned when she heard the word "guesthouse." Three years earlier the guesthouse had been the site of an impromptu party hosted by Adela's older daughter, Pilar. Pilar was now away from home, a sophomore in college. Returning earlier than expected from an evening event, Adela had noticed several unfamiliar vehicles parked outside the guesthouse. Concerned, she had entered it unannounced. Her discovery of Pilar's foray into a forbidden pleasure of the Rancho High crowd had led her to rule that the guesthouse was strictly off limits to both daughters.

"It's fine with me if you have friends over, but let's have them stay in Pilar's room," Adela replied. "It has a trundle bed. They'll be very comfortable there."

"Fine," Consuelo said, her voice betraying mild annoyance. "Pilar's room, then."

"Do you want *queso fresco* with your eggs?"

"Mom, it's bad enough that we eat eggs for breakfast," Consuelo groaned. "Let's not layer on the cheese."

"Eggs are good for you," Adela said. "You need fuel to keep up your energy for riding." They sat down in the breakfast nook off the kitchen. Adela picked up her fork, and then put it down again. "Speaking of riding, I need to tell you something," she said. "When I was at the barn yesterday your grandfather told me about some tension there. He wants us to keep our distance from the staff for a while, so please be careful what you say when you go there after school."

"I haven't noticed anything unusual when I've been there," Consuelo said. "What sort of tension was he talking about?"

"Apparently Jose isn't too happy with the changes that your grandfather has been making with the racing stable," Adela replied.

"Did he say anything about the new trainer?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I've started to get to know his daughter a little," Consuelo explained. "She helps out at the barn. Actually, she's one of the girls that I was planning to invite on Saturday."

"Hmm. What's her name?"

"Sonia Rousseau," Consuelo said. "Her father's made a name for himself taking small stables and growing them, which is what Grandpa wants to do, I guess. I've noticed that there's a lot more activity around the barn since he arrived."

"Jose isn't much used to change," Adela said.

“Jose’s been great with our horses, but he’s had everything his way at the barn for quite a while. Maybe it’s time to shake things up a bit,” Consuelo said. “But I don’t want to do anything to make Grandpa angry. Do you think that I should still invite Sonia?”

“Does she know about your sleepover yet?”

“No, I was waiting to talk to you before I invited anyone.”

“Then it’s probably best to invite someone else this time,” Adela said. “You can have her over later, when whatever it is that’s going on at the barn has blown over.”

After breakfast Adela walked Consuelo to the property’s gate and waited with her until the school bus arrived. Later she changed into riding clothes and drove the short distance to her father’s barn. She found Diamante’s stall empty. Guessing that Jose had arranged for him to be taken out, Adela went to look for him at the exercise ring. She found Diamante trotting around the perimeter of the ring, guided at the end of a long rope by a girl who looked to be about Consuelo’s age. Adela leaned against the wooden fence that enclosed the ring and gripped the top with both hands.

“Hi, I’m Adela Rios,” she called out to the girl. “I see you’re getting to know Diamante.”

“I’m Sonia,” the girl replied. “Mr. Ramirez asked me to give him some exercise before you came to ride him today. He told me that he was too hot yesterday, but this morning he’s being a good boy.”

“He was a royal pain yesterday, that’s for sure. I almost ended up on my backside,” Adela laughed. “So, your father’s the new trainer, is that right?”

“Yes, we just came out from Kentucky,” Sonia replied.

“You’re a long way from home.”

“Home to us is wherever we happen to find ourselves,” Sonia said. “But I like it here already.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Adela said. “The Ranch is a good place to be if you like horses. Are you in school?”

“I’m at Rancho High,” Sonia replied. “I help out here part time, depending on my class schedule,” Looking over Adela’s shoulder, she added, “Oh, here comes my Dad.”

Adela turned to see Jose and another man walking towards the ring. She took a moment to size up the new trainer. He had the weathered visage common among those who worked outdoors, and his eyes were intelligent and open. His upright posture conveyed the air of someone with a purpose. Adela sensed that he was a comer who would make the most of his opportunity at her father’s barn. She also sensed that Jose would find this type of person threatening. Jose made a perfunctory introduction of Jake Rousseau.

“I’ve just had the pleasure of meeting your daughter,” Adela said to Jake, offering him her hand. “I must say I’m impressed by how well she has Diamante under control. He’s not that easy to handle.”

“Sonia’s great at reading horses,” Jake said proudly, shaking Adela’s hand with a firm grip. “I swear she knows what they’re going to do before they do.” As Jake spoke with her,

Adela watched out of the corner of her eye for Jose's reaction. Jose was paying close attention.

The teahouse had only one room. Its thickly plastered, pure white walls were devoid of ornamentation. Filtered through a paper-lined shoji screen at the window, the early morning light cast an amber glow on the room's sparse furnishings: a single bed covered by a white linen duvet, a plain, whitewashed wooden desk and chair, and a long pine dresser on which stood a large doll held in a metal stand. In one corner of the room a low table painted black served as an altar.

Sam Mori knelt in front of the altar. Five white spider chrysanthemums lay in a basket at her side. Slowly, she poured water from a clear glass pitcher into a round, flat black ceramic container on the altar. The container was a traditional *suiban* for the practice of Ikebana, the art of Japanese flower arranging. She then placed a *kenzan*, a heavy needlepoint holder, in the water, locating it off to one side of the *suiban*. Turning to the basket beside her, she picked up one of the chrysanthemums and carefully measured the length of its stem in relation to the diameter of the container, aiming for a particular ratio. When she was certain of the length, she cut the stem, using the type of forged steel loop handle scissors traditionally used for Ikebana. She repeated the process with each of the four remaining stems, achieving a harmony of proportion by careful measurement. She took her time artfully positioning each chrysanthemum in the *kenzan*. When she deemed the floral arrangement to be complete, she positioned the *suiban* next to a group of ceramic miniature bonsai, each one of which represented a departed family member. Sam closed her eyes and began to meditate. She lost herself in the moment.

Sam still lived with her parents on the Rancho Secreto property where she had been raised. Her parents and younger brother, a student at a local community college, lived in the main house while Sam had the use of the teahouse, located across a broad, bricked patio surrounding the pool. Her older brother had moved out of the family home when he found work at one of the realty firms whose offices lined the main street of the Ranch village; he frequently dropped by after work for the evening meals that all three grown Mori offspring enjoyed taking with their parents. Sam found her domestic arrangement very much to her liking. She felt no need to move away from her parents, who respected her privacy. Continuing to live in Rancho Secreto made it easier for Sam to stay in touch with the protected life that she had experienced growing up there; she wanted to stay in touch with that vanishing part of herself. Given her line of work, she was no longer innocent. There were too many days when she actively mourned her loss of a belief in goodness.

Sam rose up from the altar and threw off her cotton *yukata*-style robe, leaving it in disarray on the bed. She went out to the pool and dove in. The coldness of the water was jarring after the relaxation of her meditation. Fully alert now, she swam briskly, changing her stroke with each lap. The slight morning breeze caused her to shiver when she got out of the water. Reentering the teahouse, she wrapped herself tightly in a towel and ran her fingers

through her wet hair. Once warm again, Sam dropped the towel and looked at her body in the mirror over the dresser. Pleased with what she saw, she bent down and pulled out one of the dresser drawers. For a minute she focused intently on its contents. Then, raising herself up to her full height, she looked again at her body's reflection in the mirror. She imagined the coming evening. She closed her eyes, visualizing.

Chapter Four

Turning off the freeway that followed the Pacific coast, Georgina drove east for several miles, eventually crossing a scrubby patch of chaparral. At the edge of the chaparral, she entered a forest of eucalyptus trees. Inside the forest the road became narrower and began to wind. Private driveways, many with imposing gates, lined the road; from time to time Georgina glimpsed estate-sized homes behind the gates. Breaks in the trees revealed that the road traversed the top of a mesa. A flat plain stretched out for miles below. Across the plain, in the distance, she saw several low, dark mountains, including one that resembled a pyramid.

The drivers ahead of her on the road were in no hurry; uncharacteristically, Georgina accepted the slower pace. A horse trail ran alongside the road. Several riders took their horses at a walk on the trail, and one pair of riders held forth at a trot, posting elegantly in their saddles. At one point Georgina had to bring her vehicle to a complete stop for a group of riders that crossed the road at a stately pace. Further along, the trees on the right side of the road gave way to reveal a golf course that was laid out invitingly in a broad, green valley. The hills surrounding the golf course were dotted with large homes. Eventually the road led to a picturesque village comprised mainly of low buildings in the Spanish Revival style; most of the buildings had thick, whitewashed walls and red tile roofs.

Her destination, the Inn at Rancho Secreto, sat atop a small knoll near the center of the village. Its wide, closely clipped lawn rolled gently down to the main street. Off to one side of the hotel a lushly foliated grape arbor shielded an inviting pool area. An expansive, terracotta-tiled patio at the front of the hotel hosted several smartly dressed people at tables shaded by market-style umbrellas.

A bellman rushed out to greet Georgina as she pulled her car up to the entrance. He ushered her through the lobby, exquisitely furnished with antiques from the Spanish era, and showed her to the discreetly understated reception area. An elegantly dressed young man sitting behind a writing desk invited Georgina to sit down to fill out the registration form, and offered her a choice of beverages.

She had just finished checking in when a tall, thin, middle-aged man in a dark grey suit approached her. He introduced himself as Philip Wahl, from Rios Capital. "Mark Webber gave a good description of you, Ms. Graham," Wahl said, handing her his business card. "But he did not do you justice."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Georgina said, surprised that she had not been forewarned. She took Wahl's card and reached into her purse to retrieve her own.

"Mr. Rios sent me over," Wahl explained. "He wants to see you as soon as possible. He asked me to offer you a ride."

“Of course, the sooner the better,” Georgina said. “Just give me a few minutes to put my things in my room.”

Wahl glanced briefly at Georgina’s card before putting it inside his suit jacket. “I’ll wait for you here,” he said. Georgina nodded to the bellman that she was ready. Wahl smiled pleasantly and took a seat in the lobby.

As soon as she was in her room Georgina called Mark, to find out what he knew about Wahl. “He’s not a decision-maker,” Mark told her. “Rios calls the shots, and Wahl does the legwork. By the way, do you like the Inn?”

“Why yes, it’s lovely,” Georgina said.

“I stay there myself when I see Rios. I told travel to put you up there. Thought you would like it.”

“Thanks for the upgrade,” Georgina said, momentarily taken aback. “I’ll be in touch again, right after I meet with Rios.”

When Georgina reappeared in the lobby Wahl jumped to his feet. He escorted her outside, to where a granite-grey Maserati coupe awaited them. “Have you been to Rancho Secreto before?” he asked, as Georgina settled into the car’s sumptuous cabin. She indicated that it was her first visit, with one hand involuntarily stroking the car’s butter-soft seat leather. Wahl revved the engine. “Let me give you a little tour on our way,” he said, as he drove out onto the street. At the first turn, he pointed out the post office, an unprepossessing structure at the back of a grocery store parking lot. “The local people go there every day to pick up their mail,” he told her.

“There’s no mail delivery?” Georgina asked.

“People here like to keep their home addresses private,” Wahl explained. “Running into your neighbors at the post office every day is part of the Rancho culture. It’s how everyone keeps up on the local gossip.”

“I can’t imagine that Mr. Rios has time to pick up his own mail.”

Wahl laughed. “No, no,” he said. “He has someone who does that for him.” He paused for a moment for effect. “That person would be me,” he said proudly. Georgina took this peculiar piece of information under advisement. Was Wahl gratified to run Rios’ errands? As Wahl took a circuitous route through the village he drew Georgina’s attention to other points of interest; he described the community with a pride that Georgina found oddly touching. Wahl, Georgina thought, did not seem to be the cold-blooded warrior type that she had expected, based on the reputation of Rios Capital. They drove out of the village and turned up a steep hill. Georgina gripped the edge of her seat as the car took the road’s sharp curves. “We’ll drive by the house that I’m building,” Wahl told her. Then he added, “Some days I wish I could just forget it.”

“I’ve heard that building a home can be a trial,” Georgina offered sympathetically.

“There it is,” Wahl said, pointing to a clearing in the eucalyptus forest where a large house was under construction. “My wife convinced me that the time to build is during a

downturn. I put her in charge of watching over the construction. My hands are too full at Rios Capital to do it.”

Sensing an opportunity to steer the conversation towards business, Georgina asked Wahl how Rios Capital first came to be interested in ZIFIX. Wahl gave a curt and unrevealing account of how they had become aware of the financially troubled startup. Georgina understood that she would be given no more information about the deal than what Wahl wanted to provide her.

The car pulled up to an immense pair of wrought iron gates. The words *Casa Feliz* were spelled out in iron letters at the top of the gates. Georgina knew just enough Spanish to understand that Rios had named his estate “Happy House.” How much more refined the name sounded in Spanish than in English, Georgina thought. The gates swung open to reveal a long, serpentine driveway flanked by dozens of sycamore trees, and, at the end of the driveway, a magnificent, hacienda-style house surrounded by stone archways. The rambling structure was largely one story, with a two-story section in the middle that overlooked the flagstone-laid front courtyard. A tiled portico held up by massive stone pillars marked the entry.

Wahl stopped the car under the portico; Georgina got out and waited while he parked. As she looked around the entryway, she saw that the portico connected on both sides to a veranda that encircled the house. The veranda’s roof was composed of exposed beams that held up the clay barrel tile roof. Through openings in the archways on the exterior wall of the veranda, she could see an enormous rose garden beyond the courtyard. There were two sets of entry doors, a decorative wrought iron pair left open and, behind them, a closed pair of carved mahogany doors with hefty Spanish-style iron hinges. Daunted by the scale of her surroundings, Georgina felt her confidence begin to falter. Recognizing an old pattern and determined not to let it rule her, Georgina drew in a deep breath and then slowly, and completely, exhaled.

Alerted by the noise of a car’s engine, Rios got up from his desk and went to his office window. He watched Wahl park the Maserati in the courtyard below. Wahl’s Maserati irked Rios. He believed that the manner in which one displayed one’s wealth was a test of one’s shrewdness, and Wahl had failed the test when he bought such an ostentatious vehicle. The house that Wahl was building nearby was another grating annoyance. Every time Rios drove past the construction site, he was repulsed by the obvious extravagance. Although he believed that he and Wahl shared the same objective, namely, ego gratification and the intimidation of others, Rios preferred a more nuanced approach to showing off his superior net worth.

He went downstairs and encountered Georgina and Wahl just as Lupe was ushering them inside; Lupe disappeared back into her office without saying a word. Rios was immediately taken with the willowy young woman who now graced his foyer. With her fine bone structure, peach-toned skin and lustrous strawberry-blond hair, Georgina Graham was

very appealing indeed. In stiletto heels she towered several inches over him, but to Rios this only added to the interest. He reminded himself that she worked for Mark and was therefore off limits. "Delighted to meet you, Ms. Graham," he said cordially. "I hope you had a pleasant journey on your way to be with us."

"I did, thank you," Georgina replied. "Mr. Wahl was kind enough to tell me a little about Rancho Secreto on the way over."

"Did he now?" Rios said. "The Ranch is a little piece of heaven where I have had the privilege of living for many years. Now, before we get down to business, I hope you will do me the honor of letting me show you around my property." Rios took Georgina by the arm and led her across the foyer towards the entrance. Uninvited, Wahl followed them a short step behind. Without being summoned Lupe reappeared to open the heavy front door.

For the first stop on the tour Rios showed Georgina the rose garden, where he held forth about the lineage of its most rare, heritage varieties. He beamed when she complimented him on the beauty of one of his most prized specimens, a striking, ruffled yellow rose tinged with green at the edges. Producing a pair of small cutting shears from inside his suit jacket, Rios ceremoniously cut a single, perfect yellow blossom and gallantly offered it to her. Then he took her to see the Olympic-sized swimming pool where, he told her, he did laps daily, to the tennis court where he played singles with a teaching professional twice a week, to the putting green that he largely ignored, and to the horse barn to see his new colts. For the finale Rios led Georgina to the recently constructed, full-sized racetrack located just behind the barn.

Two men were standing at the rail of the track, watching a young rider exercise a horse at a leisurely pace. Rios introduced the men as his trainer, Jake Rousseau, and his barn manager, Jose Ramirez. "Together these two gentlemen are going to take my racing stable to a whole new level," he told Georgina. "We're going to put horses into major races all over the country."

Jose looked at Rios with an amused expression. "*Major* races?" he chuckled. "That's going to cost you more money than you can possibly imagine."

Rios appeared taken aback. "You sound like Philip here," he complained, acknowledging Wahl's presence for the first time. "He's always telling me that I'm spending too much money on horses."

"Well, sir," Wahl spoke up hastily, "what I've said is, the racing operation needs to be run more like a business, you know, for tax purposes."

Rios turned to Wahl and looked him fully in the eye. "Perhaps we should talk about your new house," he said, "if we're going to talk about spending too much money."

The approach of the horse and rider interrupted the conversation. "Hey, kiddo," Jake called out to the rider, who smiled at him in return. "This is my daughter, Sonia," he said to Georgina, as Sonia dismounted and led the horse to the rail. "She helps out here by exercising horses."

“Glad to meet you, Sonia,” Georgina said. “I have to say, I’m impressed that you can ride a racehorse. How long have you been riding?”

“I was practically born in the saddle,” Sonia explained, stroking the horse’s neck as she spoke. “I ride the horses for their easy workouts. When they need to be run harder, there are other riders who do it.”

Rios leaned across the rail to give the horse several firm pats on the flank. Then he turned back to the group. “Thank you all,” he said. “I must take our visitor to the house to do some business.” As he turned to leave, he added with a wink, “She’s going to find a way for me to keep all of you employed.”

Back in his office, Rios led off the meeting. He told Georgina that Wahl had already negotiated the outlines of the deal with Dr. Carmichael, who was ready to sell them the startup outright. All that remained was settling on the price. What he needed from her, he said, was verification of the market valuation of ZIFIX and a plan for financing the sale through her bank. Georgina explained what she had already done regarding the startup’s valuation. The major outstanding issue, she said, was the value of the patent; she expected to be able to give him a figure on its value by tomorrow. She then proposed a financing model that Mark had used in similar deals recently. Rios nodded from time to time as she spoke. When she was finished, he asked what she thought their next move should be.

“I’ll meet with Dr. Carmichael tomorrow to verify the hard assets of the company,” she said. “I understand they are relatively minor, just a few rooms of laboratory equipment. As soon as we get the estimate on the patent’s market value, then we can decide on what the offer should be.”

“As far as timing goes,” Rios said. “I want to fast track this, because there’s not enough money to be made here to justify prolonged negotiations. The deal must close in the next three days, or we don’t do it at all. Do we have an understanding on the time frame?” When Georgina concurred, Rios thanked her effusively for her presentation. He asked Wahl to take her back to the Inn.

Once Georgina and Wahl had departed Rios called Lupe on the intercom. He asked her to bring him the yogurt and fruit that he took each afternoon at that time, as specified by his longevity program. While he waited for her, he leaned back in his chair. Mark was scheduled to call him shortly. He would let Mark know that he was already very pleased with the performance of his young associate. But Rios was not at all pleased with the conduct of one Detective Mori. Sam’s baffling failure to return his calls was putting him and Rios Capital in jeopardy. Her behavior towards him was completely unacceptable, Rios decided, and he would need to persuade her to change it.

Chapter Five

"I believe that *I* am the one who came up with that financing strategy," Mark told Georgina pointedly. "I trust that you will make it clear to Rios that, when we close this deal, *I* will handle the money side of the transaction."

"I'll emphasize that to him, of course," Georgina said, mentally kicking herself for her careless misstep in referring to *her* financing plan. Mark proceeded to give Georgina the rundown on some reports about ZIFIX that his analysts had posted on the firm's secure Web site. He told her that she needed to review them before she met with Dr. Carmichael the next day.

"But why don't you have a nice little dinner before you tackle such heavy reading?" he said. "There's a wonderful restaurant right near the Inn, just off the main street, in a little courtyard. It's called Martin's. Great French food, as good as anything that you can get in Manhattan."

"Here?" Georgina asked. She belonged to that class of New Yorkers who thought that people who lived anywhere else were unsophisticated in culinary matters. More to the point, Georgina assumed that people who lived anywhere but Manhattan were unsophisticated, period.

"Check it out," Mark said. "Treat yourself to something special, on the firm."

"Thanks," Georgina said, barely disguising her astonishment at Mark's largess with the firm's expense account. "I'll take you up on that." Mark's recent benevolence towards her was mystifying. First he gave her the deal, then he arranged for her to stay at a luxury hotel, and now he was suggesting dinner at a fine restaurant instead of ordering room service while she worked. What was up with him anyway?

After Mark hung up Georgina called Dr. Carmichael. She introduced herself as one of the Rios Capital bankers, and asked when it would be convenient for her to come by to see his company's physical assets. "You could come by tonight after seven," Nate said. "I'll be there past midnight."

Georgina's antennae went up. She was not interested in a nocturnal visit to the startup. "That's very kind of you, Dr. Carmichael," she said, "but tomorrow morning would work better for me. How about around eight?"

"You got it. Need directions?"

"No, I'm good. I'll see you tomorrow," Georgina said. She shook her head in disbelief at what she had just heard. She dialed Millie who was at work but eager to talk.

"So, tell me about Alejandro Rios," Millie said expectantly. "Did he live up to his billing?"

"Meeting with him was completely uneventful," Georgina replied. "He was clear about what he wanted with the deal, but no fireworks. He took me on a tour of his property and even gave me a rose from his garden."

"That's not what I was expecting to hear."

"You sound disappointed."

"No, I'm glad that it went well for you," Millie assured her. "I just thought that Rios would be rather unpleasant in person."

"Not the case, at least not yet," Georgina said. "But just before I called you, I had the strangest conversation with the doctor that I'm going to be negotiating with. He seemed overeager to meet with me. He actually invited me to go to see his company *tonight*."

"He sounds desperate," Millie said. "That's good for you, isn't it? If he's desperate enough, he'll grab the first offer that you make. So go ahead and lowball him."

"I don't know whether he's desperate or not. He may just be clueless about how business is done. But I'll lowball him anyway, you can be sure of that. And another weird thing, Mark had me put up in a really nice hotel, *and* he told me to have an expensive dinner on the firm. I'd say I was feeling the love, but I know that he's not capable of it."

"It's not like Mark to think about another person's creature comforts," Millie said. "But he knows how to pile it on with clients when he wants something, doesn't he? Maybe he's setting you up for some reason."

"How Mark acts with clients is so scripted," Georgina said. "No, it's not like that. The way he's behaving towards me right now doesn't fit his M.O."

"If he doesn't want something from you, then it's probably just an aberration. Even Mark can slip up and appear to be human," Millie said. She turned to a subject that interested her more. "What's new with Nick? Any word on the job in D.C.?"

"He expects to hear something tomorrow. I'm on pins and needles," Georgina acknowledged.

"What will you say to him, if he gets it?" Millie asked.

"I wish I knew," Georgina replied. "One minute I think that I should tell him to do whatever he thinks is best for him. You know, I could say something about how we'll work out a distance relationship, if we have to. Then the next minute I'm thinking that I don't want to deal with it—that's it's too complicated as it is, with both of us working such crazy hours. If he wants to be with me, then he should stay in New York and *be* with me, right? But what if this is a great opportunity, and he always regrets it if he turns it down? He might blame me forever. I wish there was something for me work-wise in D.C. but there isn't. Honestly, Millie, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Maybe he won't get an offer," Millie said.

"I don't want that either. I don't want him to be disappointed," Georgina said. "So this whole affair is shaping up to be the mother of all lose-lose situations."

"Not necessarily," Millie reassured her friend. "You've figured out tough things before. You'll figure out this one too."

Later, Georgina stretched out on the comfy Inn bed and closed her eyes. She let her mind empty out; as she lay still, the adrenalin fueled by the day's events gradually subsided. Her thoughts turned to Nick. She wanted to talk to him, but at this hour he would be about to go on the air. She propped herself up on two overstuffed pillows and turned on the television, changing channels until she found FNBS, the financial news channel where Nick worked.

Most days Nick reported from the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, but today he was to appear on a show that aired after the markets closed. He had developed a niche for himself assessing the impact of federal regulation on the economy, and because of that, the show's anchor, Melanie Orr, had invited him on as a guest, to discuss a piece of legislation that was going to be voted on in Congress that evening. Melanie began the broadcast with her regular panelists in a roundtable discussion of the day's trading action. After the first commercial break she introduced Nick and asked him how the legislation could affect the markets in the morning. Georgina watched as Nick engaged Melanie and the panelists in a lively debate. Georgina felt pride as she watched her man perform. Nick could match wits with the best of them, she thought, and he looked really good on camera.

Christopher Wahl knew to avoid his father Philip Wahl when he came home agitated. Christopher assessed his father's mood by the way he drove the Maserati into the garage—by how firmly he applied the car's brake and shut the car's door. There was no screeching of brakes or slamming of doors when his father was upset; he just took both actions with slightly too much energy. Christopher's concern for his father's mood was not the result of fear of his temper. Philip Wahl was placid by nature, almost to a fault. He never showed belligerence towards Christopher or his younger brother Brett. In fact, he was keenly involved in his sons' lives; he attended as many of their sports events as he could and he kept abreast of their progress in school. He encouraged his sons at every turn.

Christopher's sensitivity towards his father's frame of mind was not due to his father's behavior, but instead, his mother's. At her best, Lauren Wahl was a difficult woman. At her worst, she was spiteful and silly, a particularly malignant combination of character traits. When Lauren got what she wanted, peace reigned in the Wahl household, but when she was thwarted, even in a minor way, the quality of domestic life rapidly deteriorated.

The list of what was required for Lauren to be happy was a lengthy one. The home that they were building had to be sumptuously grand. Her person had to be appointed with only the trendiest—even if garishly flashy—apparel, all purchased from exclusive boutiques. Her social calendar had to be crammed with invitations to local A-list society events. Lauren had no doubt that she deserved her extravagant lifestyle, although the basis for her conviction on this point escaped her husband.

Until recently Philip Wahl had maintained the status quo in his marriage by slavishly appeasing his wife. But, as the expenses for the new house spun wildly out of control, he had become less generous of spirit towards her. For the first time in their married life he had

begun to question her expenditures. He had also come to be concerned that his wife's preoccupation with her gilded lifestyle was taking precedence over her caring for their sons. He attempted to bring this apparent abdication of maternal responsibilities to Lauren's attention on several occasions. Each time his criticism prompted heated denials on her part, denials that were soon backed up by bouts of extreme shopping.

Sensing that his father was indisposed this evening Christopher stayed in his upstairs bedroom. His discretion proved prescient. His parents' angry voices soon filled the house. Brett, who had been doing homework in his bedroom next door, joined Christopher and together the boys listened as their parents rehashed their familiar litany of complaints against one another.

Then, something new happened. Wahl shouted at his wife that unless she stopped spending, he was going to quit his job. He had just about had it at Rios Capital, he told her, and how would she like it if they had to move somewhere else and downsize? She would never get to live in that monster house, he said, and she would never get to throw parties there to show it off to her ridiculous friends. And, he added, his voice rising to full volume, he would be just fine with that. Silence fell, followed by the sound of Lauren's rapid footsteps on the stairs, and then of her violent sobbing all the way to the master bedroom.

Christopher put his hand on his brother's slumping shoulders. "It'll be all right," he said. "It always blows over." His reassuring words smoothed over the awkward moment and Brett returned to his room. But Christopher was not telling Brett what he really felt. Christopher was not at all confident that it would blow over. Something in his father's intensely angry voice told him that this time, it was different.

Sam Mori's obsession had begun innocently enough. When they were growing up, Sam and her brothers had been the only Asian children at school. Families living in Rancho Secreto in those days were typically white, a legacy from the 1920's when the original restrictive covenant that defined the community specified who could buy property there. When the restrictions were lifted, after the California courts declared the practice illegal, a curious self-selection along ethnic lines continued for decades, resulting in a homogeneous character to the Ranch that persisted into Sam's childhood years.

Her parents had encouraged Sam and her brothers to embrace their Japanese heritage; they told their children to emphasize their individuality. Ignoring this parental advice, her brothers had assimilated as completely as they could but Sam, an obedient daughter, had endeavored to honor her parents' wishes. Although neither Sam nor her mother recognized it at the time, the turning point in Sam's cultural education was the doll. Her mother had presented it to her on her ninth birthday. Painted with the traditional white make-up and red bowed lips of the Geisha, the tall porcelain figure was dressed in a red kimono and obi and carried a red silk parasol. The doll's stylized beauty had greatly intrigued Sam.

Her mother had told her many stories about the “flower and willow world” of the Geisha. It was, she said, a magical world, dictated by ancient tradition, in which girls left home at an early age to be trained as entertainers by adult Geisha to whom they would remain apprenticed for years. The girls learned to sing, dance and play musical instruments. Most importantly they learned the art of conversation with men because, her mother told her, Geisha entertained men only. The girl apprentices, called Maiko, were taught the secrets to capturing a man’s attention. They learned how to make a man feel that he was the center of their universe—at least for the period of time that he was paying them—all the while maintaining complete control of the situation. To accomplish this, Geisha used an elaborate costume and a set of verbal and non-verbal skills handed down over the generations.

At first Sam’s interest in Geisha lay only in their adornment and sense of refinement. As she entered puberty, however, she became more curious about their relationships with men. Her research into Geisha life revealed that the flower and willow world stood apart from Japanese society and was completely dominated by women. Geisha did not typically trade in sexual favors as some supposed, although some Geisha, once established, might take a patron on a long-term basis. If a Geisha married she would be expelled from the community. Typically a woman made a life long commitment to the lifestyle, moving from Maiko to working Geisha, and then on to teacher or manager and finally into retirement, living out her days in the Geisha house.

Sam came to understand Geisha as early feminists, finding a measure of freedom in an otherwise male-dominated society. What most fascinated Sam was how these women, who appeared submissive in their outward demeanor, came to have so much power over men. Sam marveled at how men were willing to pay large sums of money for the temporary companionship of a Geisha, while paying much less for actual sex with prostitutes.

As a teenager Sam discovered that she, too, could attract and hold boys’ attention by using the techniques of the Geisha. As she perfected her skills, she was soon able to have almost any hormone-laced boy well in hand. This led to distressing complications with the son of a local pastor, prompting her parents to remove her from Rancho High and send her to an all-girls boarding school on the East Coast. But it was already too late. What had begun as a harmless exercise in self-esteem had turned into an all-consuming passion.

Once at boarding school and away from parental restraints, Sam had had the V-shaped tattoo applied to the nape of her neck. The tattoo was inspired by the style of the Maiko, who wore the back of their kimonos low to expose a W-shaped sliver of skin artfully left bare in the white make-up coating the nape of the neck. Sam had almost chosen a W for the tattoo, but she feared that the device would be recognized. No one, not even her mother, had ever made the connection between the V-shaped tattoo on her neck and the W of the Maiko.

When she got her first earnings as a patrol officer Sam had visited Little Tokyo in Los Angeles to buy white rice powder makeup and a Geisha-style wig. She had studied photos of Geisha to learn how to apply the traditional makeup and spent hours in front of

her mirror until she mastered the technique. As time went on she had made more visits to Little Tokyo, ostensibly to take part in Japanese cultural activities, but in reality to shop for kimonos and obis that emulated the elaborate Geisha style. On her return from these visits to Little Tokyo, she had kept her purchases hidden in the trunk of her car until no one was at home. Then she would bring the items into the teahouse and conceal them in her dresser drawers.

Sometimes, late at night when everyone in the main house was asleep, Sam would lock the door and close the shoji screens. She would take items from the drawers one by one and examine them. At first only rarely, but with time more frequently, Sam dressed in the full Geisha costume. In Japan Geisha had makeup artists and dressers to help them create the effect but, with practice, Sam learned how to make a good approximation on her own.

Tonight was one of those nights when Sam became a Geisha. She carefully applied the white rice powder makeup and put the wig in place. She selected a purple silk kimono from bottom drawer of the dresser. After wrapping herself in the kimono and tying a silver-colored obi around it, she stepped into black wooden shoes. She stood in front of the mirror over the dresser for a very long time, looking intently at herself. Then she waved a fan at an imaginary patron and pretended to talk.

“I miss you,” Nick said. “Please tell me you’re coming back to New York tomorrow.”

“I miss you too, but what if I get back to New York and you’re in D.C.?” Georgina said good-naturedly.

“Would it help if I promised that if I move to Washington, I’ll spend every weekend with you in New York?” Nick countered.

“I don’t know how that would help, since I plan to spend every weekend with you in D.C.,” Georgina said. “Oh, wait, on second thought, I can’t go to D.C. on weekends. I work weekends. And you can’t come to New York either, because you work weekends too.”

“OK, truce,” Nick said. “We’ll figure it out if it happens, trust me. Just give me a chance. And neither of us works every weekend.”

“We each work enough weekends to make living in two different cities a logistical nightmare,” Georgina said. “And *you* are the one thinking of moving.”

“Which one of us is not in New York right now?” Nick teased.

“OK, I travel on business more than you do,” Georgina conceded. “I’ll give you that one.”

Chapter Six

“I’m here to see Dr. Carmichael,” Georgina announced to no one in particular. A woman wearing a white coat motioned her towards an office at the back of the laboratory. Through the office’s open door Georgina saw a man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties looking intently at a computer screen. When she knocked on the door he turned his head towards her; his grey-blue eyes looked directly into hers.

“You must be Georgina Graham,” he said, rising from his chair. “I’m Nate Carmichael. Did you have any trouble finding us?”

“None at all,” Georgina replied. “Thanks for putting my name on a parking space. Nice touch.”

“Take it as my opening salvo in our negotiations,” Nate said. “Let me show you around ZIFIX.”

As he gave her a tour of the laboratories Nate introduced Georgina to every member of his small staff, mentioning each employee’s unique contribution to the enterprise and pointing out, twice, that every one of them had been with him from the beginning. After the tour Nate took Georgina to a small break room where they got coffee and sat down at a metal table, across from one another.

Without prompting Nate began to talk about how he came to found ZIFIX. He had started his research career, he told her, in the laboratory of a scientist who had published a torrent of papers on a particular type of activity within cells that he believed promoted cancer. Nate suspected that the major function of trainees such as himself in this man’s laboratory was to produce results that supported this one idea. When some of Nate’s experimental results cast doubt on this theory, his mentor dismissed his findings as “aberrations” and refused to let him submit them for publication. Later, Nate established his own research laboratory at the medical school and followed up on his earlier “failed” experiments. He quickly identified a molecule that blocked the transformation of cells into cancer. But he had trouble getting grant money to fund his new project. Frustrated, he decided to raise money privately and launch a startup to continue the research.

“How did you come to call the company ZIFIX?” Georgina asked.

“The molecule is called ZIFI,” he explained. “I added the ‘X’ for sex appeal.”

Georgina was taken aback by Nate’s answer but let it pass. “How do you plan to turn what you know about ZIFI into a product that you can sell?” she asked.

“When ZIFI is increased inside the cell it stops cancer growth in its tracks. Most treatments work by attacking something inside the cancer cell, but there are harsh side effects because normal cells are damaged too. What’s different about my approach is that I’ve designed a compound that stimulates an increase in ZIFI production in cancer cells but

not in normal cells. The compound triggers the cancer cells to die but not the normal cells. So, the cancer is cured with no side effects.”

“Sounds promising, but getting a drug to market can take a long time,” Georgina said. “How far are you from testing it out in people?”

“I’m still working with cell lines,” Nate said. “I’ve got some mouse studies planned for next year.”

“I see,” Georgina said. The analysts’ reports that she had read the prior evening had warned that most cancer treatments that work in cell lines do not work when they are tested in mice, and, of the few that do work in mice, most fail to work in humans. “I have all the information that I need for now,” she said. “Thanks for the tour.”

Nate walked her to her car. “I’m hoping to get this deal done as soon as possible,” he said. “Any idea about a time frame?”

“It’s up to Mr. Rios,” Georgina said. “I’ll be in touch with you as soon as I hear something from him.” After Nate went back inside, Georgina called Mark. He had good news. The consultant had given a much more favorable estimate than anyone had expected for the market value of the ZIFIX patent. In the consultant’s opinion, several pharmaceutical houses would be interested in buying the rights. Georgina felt a surge of anticipation. There was more money to be made than she had expected. Mark gave her the figure that he had in mind for the valuation of ZIFIX; Georgina immediately called Wahl and relayed it to him. Wahl said that he would get back to her before the end of the day with a decision about the price that Rios Capital would be willing to offer for the startup.

As Georgina drove back to the Inn she thought about Nate. His introductions of his staff had shown her that he knew personal details about every person who worked for him. He had made a point of sharing credit with them for whatever progress they had made, while asserting that the problems that they were experiencing were solely his fault. Georgina concluded that Carmichael might be a refreshing exception to the rule that startup founders were narcissistic jerks. And there was something else. Nate obviously believed that his discovery would make a difference in people’s lives, and this belief had propelled him to do something bold in setting up his own company.

Georgina’s initial impression of Nate as overeager and perhaps desperate was being replaced by a more nuanced assessment of him as a man caught up in the romance of his own discovery. Mark referred to this type of entrepreneur as “road kill.” He regarded such people as dreamers who were easily fleeced—by him—of whatever assets they had managed to acquire. But Georgina believed that visionaries, as she preferred to call them, had much to offer, provided they were properly managed. After all, wasn’t turning the entrepreneur’s vision into reality what investment bankers were supposed to do?

Later that afternoon Wahl gave Georgina the green light on the deal. Even knowing the cutthroat reputation of his firm, Georgina was shocked at how much below market value Rios had decided to offer for the startup. Wahl told her that the offer would be valid only until 10 o’clock the next morning, at which time Rios would meet with them in his office to

sign the documents. Georgina updated Mark, who said that he would set up the financing and have the legal papers sent to her by early the next morning. Georgina then telephoned Nate and invited him to dinner at the Inn that evening, saying only that she wanted to continue their discussion. By not sharing that she planned to present an offer for his company, Georgina could maintain the element of surprise that she believed was important to force Nate's speedy capitulation. Shortly after setting up the dinner with Nate, Georgina got a text message from Nick:

got the job will talk tonight luv u

Lauren Wahl was not a woman who tolerated being kept waiting. She was unhappily cooling her heels in the crowded parking lot at Rancho Secreto High School. The fact that the day had turned blisteringly hot made the situation all the more maddening; even with the car's air conditioning turned up to the maximum, the car was far too warm for her liking. Brett had already climbed into the back seat. Typically it was Christopher who was the first to arrive at the car, but he had not yet appeared. Lauren strained to locate him among the teenagers streaming down the ramp that led from the school to the parking lot.

Why did Philip insist on sending their sons to Rancho High? she fumed. She had repeatedly brought the advantages of a private school education to her husband's attention, but he continued his worn-out argument that it was best for the boys to mingle with people from diverse backgrounds. Lauren found this egalitarian concept patently ridiculous. However, mindful of her husband's threat the prior evening to quit his job at Rios Capital, she knew better than to raise the issue of private schooling, or anything else involving money, at this time. But Phillip would give in to her eventually, she knew. She would bide her time, wait for him to cool off, and then up the pressure. It always worked.

Her attention drifted to two teenagers standing together at the top of the ramp. She realized that one of the teenagers was Christopher and the other, a girl she did not recognize. Her son's attitude towards the girl, the way he tipped his head forward as he talked with her, made Lauren instantly alert. She turned to the back seat and casually asked Brett if he knew the girl who was talking to this brother. Brett leaned forward between the front seats to get a better look; seeing Sonia Rousseau, he told his mother that she was new to the school and that her father was a horse trainer who worked for Mr. Rios.

Lauren watched as Christopher waved goodbye to the girl and made his way towards the car. She decided that she would not say anything to Christopher directly about this new girl, but there was no way that she was going to permit her son to become involved with the daughter of someone who worked at Rios' barn. Tonight, she would find an opportunity to remind her husband of his high rank at Rios Capital. Then she would suggest to him that he advise Christopher to avoid friendships with the children of people who work for Rios. That should do the trick, she thought.

Nate was waiting for her outside the entrance to the Inn's dining room. "I was afraid that the wind had blown you away," he said.

"Sorry I'm late," Georgina apologized. She had been in the hotel's business center, finalizing the offer letter that she now carried in her purse. "What's up with the weather anyway?"

"It's called a Santa Ana," Nate explained. "Usually the wind comes from the ocean, but several times a year it reverses and comes in from the desert instead. It can get very hot and windy for a few days."

"Good timing on my part," Georgina said. The maitre d' escorted them to a table for two by the window. They made small talk and then, at Georgina's suggestion, Nate began to elaborate on his plans for developing his company. Georgina listened attentively, occasionally asking questions. Her plan was to enjoy the meal, gain Nate's confidence and then make her move over coffee. But, as they were finishing their entrees, Nate said something that surprised her.

"I'm not the right person to lead the company forward," he said. "What ZIFIX needs at this point is someone with a track record in bringing a biotech product to market. The problem is, I don't have the money to bring in someone like that."

Georgina was dumbfounded. She had assumed that Nate would resist giving up any power at the startup, but perhaps he was not blinded by ego as founders so often were. He appeared to see more clearly than she had at first understood that he lacked the necessary business expertise to make his young company a success. Georgina decided that that this was the right moment to present the offer. Telling Nate that she was in a position to help him bring in the talent that ZIFIX needed to grow, Georgina reached into her purse for letter and handed it to him.

As he read, Nate appeared shaken. "There must be some mistake," he said. "This offer is for 100% of the company. Wahl told me that Rios Capital was interested in making an investment, maybe buying 20% of the company. Wahl never said anything about Rios Capital buying me out."

Wahl's deception shocked Georgina. She had come to the dinner prepared to justify the valuation of ZIFIX to a willing seller, not to carry out a double cross. Why had Wahl not warned her that Nate did not expect to sell his company outright? But, mindful of what was at stake for her and her career, Georgina let her professional instincts kick in. She forged ahead, informing Nate bluntly that the offer was valid only until 10 o'clock the next morning, and that it was the only offer that Rios Capital was going to make.

"I've been set up," Nate protested, his lower lip quivering. "This isn't what I was led to believe was being negotiated. I won't do this."

"How do you plan to make payroll next month?" Georgina asked pointedly. Nate had no answer. "Look, you and I both know that you're going to be completely out of cash very shortly. This way, at least you get something. It's making the best of a bad situation, and it may turn out better than you expect right now."

“Once Rios Capital owns 100% of ZIFIX, where would that leave me?” Nate complained bitterly. “They could sell it to a bigger outfit.”

Oh, Rios will sell it, Georgina thought. “They might sell it, that’s possible,” she allowed. “But being sold to a larger biotech company would be good for ZIFIX. Think of it. A larger enterprise can invest more, and it would have the seasoned pros that know how to develop the product and sell it. Any company that bought ZIFIX would certainly want to retain you, because you are key to moving the science forward.”

Nate sat still for an uncomfortably long period. He read and reread the letter. Finally he looked out the window into what was now complete darkness. When he turned back to Georgina, his face was contorted. “I’ll level with you,” he said. “This hurts.”

“I’m sorry,” Georgina replied. “But don’t forget, this is how your employees get to continue working on the project. If you do nothing, they are going to be unemployed very soon.”

“I guess we both know how this ends,” Nate said. In fact Georgina did not know what Nate was going to do. She felt a moment of intense anxiety. Was he going to walk, leaving her to explain to Mark how she had blown the deal? Then Nate extended his hand across the table. “Deal,” he said wearily.

“Deal,” Georgina replied, relief washing over her like warm rain. She shook Nate’s hand. “You’ve made the right decision. You won’t regret it.”

“I hope not,” Nate said, looking unsure. “Would it be OK with you if I headed out now?”

“I’ll stay to settle the bill,” Georgina said. She handed Nate a card. “Here’s the address for tomorrow morning.” Nate put the card in his pocket and left the dining room without saying goodbye. Georgina remained seated at the table with her unfinished dinner in front of her. When the waiter discreetly inquired whether she wished to order dessert, she requested the check. After paying, she returned to her room and called Mark.

He denied knowing anything about Wahl misleading Carmichael, but he was unperturbed by her revelation. Rios was, he said, well known for stretching the boundaries in his business dealings. He reminded Georgina that she was responsible only for her own representations to Carmichael, and not Wahl’s. When Georgina confessed that she had never before felt so conflicted, Mark advised her to get over it and close the deal. He ordered her to call Wahl with the news. Reluctantly, Georgina complied. She said nothing to Wahl about his ruse.

Her evening’s work concluded, Georgina called Nick. They had not spoken since he sent the text message about getting the job in D.C. Nick insisted on hearing about her California adventure before giving her the details of the offer. Georgina was grateful for the opportunity to vent. Nick was one of the few people who could put himself in her place. They had worked together in Mark’s group for one year, her first and his last, and during that time they had developed a cordial working relationship but had not become social friends. When Georgina returned to New York after business school, she had reached out to

Nick for advice about Mark's proposal for her to rejoin the group. Over drinks at a bar near the Stock Exchange they had hashed out the pros and cons of being in Mark's orbit, and then they had decided to continue the discussion at Nick's apartment. They had been a couple ever since.

Georgina told Nick that she felt like a pig at the trough for going along with Rios Capital's shakedown of Nate Carmichael. Nick gently reminded her that her obligation was solely to her client, and that client was Alejandro Rios. If the deal smelled, it was Rios who had stunk it up, not her. And if the good Dr. Carmichael didn't have enough business sense to know the value of his company, Nick said, then he should have hired an investment banker to advise him.

Chapter Seven

The wake up call roused Georgina from a fitful night's sleep. She slowly came to full awareness. Sometimes, when she awakened in an unfamiliar hotel room, she became disoriented; it could take a minute or two for her to remember what had brought her to that place. But this morning, in spite of her grogginess, Georgina had no trouble remembering where she was, or why she was there. She immediately recalled presenting the offer letter to Nate and witnessing his pained reaction. And she remembered Nick's support for her when she told him what she had done.

Georgina went out onto the balcony to see what the day was like. The sky was cloudless and, like the day before, the air was dry and hot. Georgina detected some haze and a faint smoky smell. She watched as hotel guests and staff passed beneath her balcony, going about their business and showing no signs of alarm. But Georgina was troubled by the hint of smoke. She called the front desk to inquire. "There's a small brushfire nearby, but the firemen are on the scene," the woman who answered the telephone told her. "By the way, Ms. Graham, a messenger service left a package for you a few minutes ago. Would you like me to have someone bring it up to you?" Knowing that the package contained the sale documents, Georgina said yes. She turned on the television and found a local channel that was covering the brushfire. A reporter pointed to a charred area along a riverbed; he said that the fire was almost completely contained. In the background there were several fire trucks lined up along a dirt road. The reporter urged the viewing audience to remain vigilant because the fire danger would remain high until the Santa Ana was over.

A bellman delivered the sale documents. Georgina debated whether to look them over while having breakfast in the dining room, or to order room service and do this chore in the company of her unmade bed. Knowing that Mark would have examined every word in the documents as they were faxed to him in batches during the night, and that he would have threatened the worthless—his words—lives of the lawyers who had prepared them if there were any mistakes, Georgina did not feel the need to put her full effort into the task of document review. She went down to the dining room.

Seated by the window, Georgina watched two men, their loose work shirts rippling in the wind, as they took the market-style umbrellas from the patio area and stored them on the side of the hotel. She could hear the flapping of the umbrellas that still remained on the patio. When a waiter came to pour coffee Georgina asked him how close the brushfire was to the hotel. He told her that it was five or six miles to the east. Georgina found this information reassuring. After breakfast she returned to her room and called Pearl and Millie.

They were already at work. "Lots of news," Georgina told her friends. "Nick got the job in D.C. and I'm closing the ZIFIX deal this morning."

"Wow, a double-header," Pearl said. "I guess it's condolences on the former and congrats on the latter."

"Not exactly," Georgina said. "Nick hasn't decided whether he's going to take the offer, so I still have hope on that one. And as far as the deal goes, I may have done too well for my client."

"You can't be serious," Millie said incredulously. "There's no such thing as doing too well for your client."

Katy Carmichael looked up at the kitchen clock. "Gordon, hurry up. We're leaving for school in five minutes," she called out to her son, who had disappeared into his bedroom after breakfast. She added, "Don't make me have to come get you."

Katy could not get Nate's late-night call out of her mind. He had carried on about how Rios Capital had double-crossed him and forced him to sell ZIFIX outright. Annoyed at being called when she was already in bed, Katy had offered some generic expressions of concern while she listened to Nate's rant. But as soon as the call was over, long-suppressed emotions erupted inside of her like lava surging from a volcano. How did Nate *dare* turn to her for support, when he knew that ZIFIX had been the last straw in their marriage? Here she was, struggling every day to make it as a single parent, and why was she in this position? Because *he* had been too preoccupied with *his* success, that's why. And now that his own stupidity was about to cost him the startup, he had the gall to expect *her* to console *him*! Katy had spent a restless night rehashing the thousand little murders of her marriage.

Gordon came into the kitchen. He picked up his lunch from the counter, put it into his backpack and headed out the side door to the attached garage. Katy pressed the button to the garage door opener and followed Gordon to the car. She was about to strap him into his booster seat when she smelled smoke. She stepped away from the car and looked about for the source. There was nothing inside the garage that appeared other than normal. Realizing that the smell was coming into the garage from its open door, Katy walked a short way along her driveway and peered up into the sky. She saw some haze overhead, but no dark plume that would indicate something burning nearby. She returned to the garage, strapped Gordon into his seat and set out for Rancho Elementary.

The siren's piercing wail drew Georgina's attention to the rear view mirror. A fire truck was fast closing in behind her. She steered her car to the side of the road and stopped. Three fire trucks and a paramedic van passed by in quick succession. Georgina waited until all the emergency vehicles were gone before getting back on the road. The wind had picked up considerably since she had left the Inn. Leaves blown from the trees lining the road skittered in front of her car and bounced off the windshield. Georgina turned up the air conditioning to counter the smoky odor that was seeping into the car.

No one was at work at Wahl's construction site. Too hot and windy for them today, Georgina thought. At the gates to *Casa Feliz* she looked for a buzzer or an intercom. Locating a grate on one side of the gate, she pressed the button below it. The wind was howling so loudly that she had trouble hearing the voice that answered. "I'm Georgina Graham," she shouted into the intercom. "I have an appointment with Mr. Rios."

"You're expected," a woman answered in a voice that was barely audible over the roar of the wind. The gates swung open. The sycamore trees that lined the driveway were moving in several directions at once; Georgina turned on the wipers to clear the leaves that had begun to pile up on the windshield. She parked her car in the courtyard next to Wahl's Maserati. Leaning into the wind, she crossed to the portico, where she retrieved a tissue from her purse and wiped her irritated, watery eyes.

Lupe let her in. Wahl was waiting in the foyer. Nate arrived moments later, looking tired. They engaged in awkward small talk about the Santa Ana winds until Lupe announced that Rios was ready to see them in his upstairs office. Georgina introduced Nate to Rios; without further conversation Rios directed his guests to a conference table near the window. He explained that Lupe was a notary public and would be notarizing the sale documents as they signed them. Georgina pulled the documents from her tote and placed them on the table. She began to describe the first document for signature.

Suddenly, an urgent voice rose up from the courtyard below, calling out "Mr. Rios, Mr. Rios." Rios got up abruptly from the conference table and rushed to the window. Jose Ramirez was standing below, his hands cupped to his mouth. "Fire's coming from the canyon," he shouted up at Rios. "It's half way to the barn already. You need to get out right away."

Rios flung the window open. "Can you save the horses?" he shouted at Jose.

"The grooms are already loading them up," Jose shouted back. "We're taking them to the Fairgrounds."

"Philip and I will help you," Rios said, motioning at Wahl to join him. "We'll be right there." His face red, Rios barked at Lupe to get the servants evacuated from the house immediately. Then he ordered Georgina and Nate to go to their cars and leave. "Do you know the Horseman's Club at the racetrack?" Rios asked Nate. When Nate said that he did, Rios said, "After I get the horses moved, I'll meet you there to finish this." Rios headed swiftly out the door. Wahl followed a step behind him.

Georgina stuffed the sale documents into her tote. "Where's the Horseman's Club?" she asked Nate as they hastened down the stairs. "I'll need directions."

"You're coming with me in my car," Nate told her. "It's too dangerous for you to be driving alone in an area you don't know." Georgina offered no dissent. Smoke now filled the foyer. Lupe was standing at the entrance, ringing a hand bell to alert others in the house to the emergency. When Nate asked her if she had a way to get out, Lupe replied that the staff had an evacuation plan and had even rehearsed it. She said that she would be leaving as soon as she had accounted for everyone.

As they headed across the courtyard to Nate's car, Georgina looked towards the barn, now a scene of frantic activity as men hastily loaded horses into trailers. Through the thickening smoke Georgina could just make out the figures of Rios and Wahl among the people running in and out of the barn. Georgina also saw a girl leading a horse; she recognized Sonia Rousseau. Suddenly, brilliant orange flames engulfed a eucalyptus tree less than forty feet from Sonia.

"There's a girl at the barn and the fire is almost there," Georgina told Nate. "We need to take her with us." Nate started to object but Georgina took off, running as fast as she could in high-heeled shoes. Shaking his head in disbelief, Nate ran after her. By the time they reached Sonia she had already loaded the horse and was closing the trailer door. "The fire's too close," Georgina cried out to Sonia. "We have a car. You had better come with us."

Sonia pulled down the latch on the trailer door and fastened it shut. "I've driven this rig before. I'll be safe," she told them. She climbed up into the cab.

"Where's your father? Shouldn't he go with you?" Georgina asked, terrified to see Sonia alone in the truck. She could feel the heat of the approaching fire and hear the crackle of brush burning nearby.

"He went back into the barn for another horse," Sonia said as she put the truck into gear. "He'll be right behind me. Don't worry about us." She eased the truck forward and joined the line of trailers that were heading off the property by the back road.

"We need to get out of here, *right now*," Nate said. Fiery embers began to rain down on them. Georgina could no longer see more than a few dozen yards in front of her. They hurried back along the walkway towards the courtyard. As Georgina got into Nate's car she looked again towards the barn. The eucalyptus trees behind the barn were now fully engulfed by fire; flames reached fifty feet up into the blackened sky. At ground level the smoke was too opaque for her to see either the barn or the road behind it.

Nate drove quickly towards the entrance gates. Brightly burning ashes swirled in a dizzying array around the car, creating the only light in an otherwise night-like landscape. The gates failed to open automatically. Seeing the way forward blocked, and with no prospect of using the back road as a way out, Georgina started to panic. Involuntarily, she took several deep breaths; her lungs filled with smoke, provoking a coughing fit.

"Are you all right?" Nate asked.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Georgina croaked between coughs.

Chapter Eight

In spite of the rumors of an approaching wildfire that were sweeping through the salon, Lauren Wahl insisted that the hairdresser, the salon's owner, complete her blow-dry. These fire scares were always overblown, she told the aggravated man. While her over-processed locks were being coaxed into her over-done hairdo, Lauren read a racy tabloid, raising her freshly manicured fingertips high above its glossy pages to dry. The tabloid's absorbing content rendered her oblivious to the actions of her fellow patrons, who were hastily departing the salon.

Her blow dry completed, Lauren admired herself in the mirror. She watched her hair swirl as she rocked her head from side to side, turning in the swivel chair to see herself from every angle. Perfection, she thought. The hairdresser was now on his cell phone, speaking to his wife. Lauren overheard him say that he was closing the salon because of a fire and heading to Rancho High to pick up their daughter. Lauren was baffled. How could a hairdresser afford to live in the Rancho High School district?

After she signed her tab, adding her customary 10% tip, Lauren left the now-deserted salon and headed towards her car. With a touch of discomfort she noticed that there was more smoke in the air than was typical from a small brushfire, and the wind was also more intense than she recalled from previous Santa Anas. The eucalyptus trees around the parking lot were swaying alarmingly in the wind and small branches skittered along the asphalt surface of the parking lot. Most disconcerting to her, however, was that she had forgotten to have the hairdresser get her car key from her purse; she would now be obliged to risk her manicure in order to retrieve it. Gingerly, she fished at the key with one finger while keeping the rest of her hand as much as possible out of harm's way.

The earsplitting crack was followed instantaneously by a thunderous thud. Lauren recoiled, uttered a shriek and raised her hands to cover her ears. A massive tree limb was sprawled across the pavement no more than five feet in front of her. After a few seconds she regained her presence of mind. She took her hands from her ears and placed them on the hood of her car to steady herself. When she felt ready, she opened the car door and got inside. Through the windshield she saw a tree leaning over her car; halfway up its trunk a massive gash showed where the fallen limb had been attached. Fearing that the tree would fall on her car, she hastily backed out and drove to the lot's exit.

Before getting on the road, she stopped; she decided to call Christopher on his cell phone. No answer. She tried Brett, with the same result. She texted both boys, but still got no response. Why did Rancho High require its students to turn off their cell phones when in class? she seethed. To make matters worse, they refused to send messages into the classroom. How was she to reach her sons, if this really was an emergency? The

inconvenience of just this one rule, she believed, more than justified the cost of sending the boys to a private school with more accommodating policies. Lauren determined that she would use this event to prove to her husband, once and for all, how wrong he was about private school. But first she would have to go to Rancho High to find the boys.

The drive took twice as long as usual because of snarled traffic. Lauren had to pull over, twice, to the side of the road to let emergency vehicles pass. When she got to the school parking lot she encountered a crush of parents and students seeking out one another. She maneuvered her car as close as possible to her usual pickup spot. Christopher and Brett were waiting for her. Christopher gave his mother the bad news.

"We can't go home," he told her. "The whole of Rancho Secreto is under mandatory evacuation. We have to go to the shelter at the Fairgrounds if we don't have someplace to stay outside of the evacuation area."

"Mandatory evacuation? What are you talking about?" Lauren snapped. "That's ridiculous. We'll just go home and wait this thing out."

"Mom, you need to listen," Christopher said. "This is the real deal. We were told on the public address system that there are roadblocks to prevent anyone from going back into the Ranch. We need to figure out where we're going to stay."

Lauren glared at her son. "We're not going to any shelter, I can guarantee you that," she said. "We'll find someone to stay with. I'll call..." Lauren paused, running names through her head. But everyone she knew lived in Rancho Secreto. Flummoxed, she called her husband. When he did not answer, she left him an urgent message, emphasizing the importance of his calling her right back, *right this minute*.

"We'll find a hotel," she said to the boys. "The Belvedere would be nice, don't you think?" Lauren liked the luxurious ambiance of the Belvedere. She envisioned herself spending the afternoon getting a massage and facial at its wonderful spa while the boys did their homework. She would get a suite with two bedrooms, and she and Philip would have dinner at the hotel's elegant restaurant. As she approached the Belvedere a police officer flagged her to a stop. When he asked where she was going, she said that she was checking in. She beamed in anticipation.

"Sorry, ma'am, not today," the officer said. "The Belvedere is booked up. You need to go to the Fairgrounds if you don't have anywhere to stay." Beginning to feel queasy, Lauren asked the officer if he knew what hotels still had rooms. "From what I hear, all the hotels are full," he said. He waved her on.

"The electricity to the gate is out," Nate said. "There must be a manual release. I'll find it and get us out of here." Nate pulled his jacket collar up against the falling embers. Georgina watched nervously as he scoured the perimeter of the gate. Locating the release mechanism, Nate cranked the lever and pushed one of the gates open. When he got back in the car Georgina whispered a raspy "thank you," but the act of speaking triggered more coughing. Nate reached into the compartment between the front seats and produced a bottle of water.

Two fire trucks drove up to the gate. A fireman asked if anyone was left on the property.

"I'm not sure," Nate said. "There were people at the house and the barn. Is there fire in the village? Has the school been evacuated?"

"No fire in the village yet," the fireman replied. "If you've got someone at the school you might still have time to pick them up. Otherwise, they're busing everyone to the Fairgrounds." The fire trucks drove at full speed towards the house.

His voice hoarse from inhaling smoke, Nate told Georgina that he needed to get his son from school. Georgina nodded her head, remaining silent to prevent more coughing. They drove past Wahl's construction site. The eucalyptus trees surrounding the property were now fully engulfed by fire but the cleared area around the house and the house itself were unscathed. When they reached the main road they found that it was jammed with evacuating vehicles. They inched along the road until they came to the village, where Nate turned off and drove to Rancho Elementary. The school grounds and environs were crowded with parents attempting to pick up their children. Nate asked Georgina to take over driving the car so that he could go inside to find his son.

Georgina's mind raced as she drove around the perimeter of the school. She wanted to call a taxi and go directly to the airport. That would get her out of harm's way. But Rios would be waiting for her at the Horseman's Club and, as much as she wanted to get out of this situation and back to New York, she knew that she had to finish the deal. On her fourth pass around the school she spotted Nate waving to her from the sidewalk; a young boy held his other hand. Since there was no place to pull over Georgina stopped the car in the middle of the road. Ignoring the angry honking coming from the cars behind, Nate opened the rear door and strapped the boy in. Georgina retook the passenger seat and Nate got back behind the wheel. "Thanks for helping out," he said. "Meet my son, Gordon."

Georgina looked back over her shoulder at the boy in the back seat. "Hi there, Gordon," she said. "Exciting day, huh?"

"Got out early," Gordon said with a grin.

"Where are we going now?" Georgina asked Nate.

"The Horseman's Club," Nate replied. He joined the line of cars on the main road, heading west out of the village. Fishing a headset from the compartment next to his seat as he drove, he made a call. "Hey, Nate here," he said into the microphone. "Have you heard about the fire in the Ranch? Don't worry. I've got Gordon. The Ranch is evacuated, so you can't go home tonight. No, I'm not kidding, it's true. Listen, I'll call you later and we'll figure out what we'll do with Gordon. He can stay with me tonight, if that works out best." Nate took off the headset. "My ex," he explained to Georgina. "We'll have to take Gordon with us to the Horseman's Club but he won't be any trouble."

Sam was alone in her office in the Detective Division. She was tempted to log on to one of her favorite Web sites, a Japanese retailer that specialized in goods for discerning Geisha.

She enjoyed looking at pictures of the merchandise on this site, but she had never placed an order because her command of Japanese was too rudimentary to navigate the process. But, concerned that the police department might be monitoring activity on its computers, she checked out the local news instead. A breaking news report flashed across the screen. Within the hour, it stated, a small brushfire in the backcountry had escalated into a full-fledged wildfire and was racing at breakneck speed towards the coast. It had already entered Rancho Secreto.

Terrified, Sam called home. Her mother answered; she told Sam that her brother had come from his office in the Ranch village to take her to safety. They were about to leave in his car. She offered to retrieve some of Sam's belongings from the teahouse before they left. Sam urged her mother to forget about saving any possessions and to leave immediately. She grabbed her keys and sprinted to her car.

At the coast the air was less smoky and the wind less intense. Georgina's breath came more easily; she was able to talk without coughing. The tension brought on by the morning's events started to lift. California Highway Patrol officers were directing the mass of vehicles that had descended on the Fairgrounds into its cavernous parking lot. Nate parked the car. Gordon jumped out, whooping, "We're going to the Fair!"

"Sorry, Gordon," Nate cautioned his son. "I don't think there are any rides today."

"No rides?" Gordon said, looking up at his father with disappointed eyes. "Why not?"

"Because it's not the right time of year for rides. Maybe we'll get to see some horses. That would be fun, wouldn't it?" Nate smiled encouragingly at Gordon, who continued to look let down.

Wave after wave of people washed past them, on their way to the Fairground's entrance. Judging by the number of vehicles in the parking lot Georgina guessed that there were already several thousand people inside the shelter. She asked Nate how far it was to the Horseman's Club. Running to the barn in high heels had made her feet hurt; she was not looking forward to a long walk. When Nate told her that the Club was about a quarter mile away, Georgina flinched. She took her purse and the tote containing the sale documents from the car, willing herself not to think about her feet.

After more than a half hour of jostling through the crowd they reached the Horseman's Club. Georgina was dismayed to find it closed. She called Wahl with the news. He was with the caravan of horse trailers, he said, and they were just entering the Fairgrounds. Once he got the horses to the racetrack area, he would call her back with a new location.

When her cell phone rang a few minutes later, it was Nick. "You can't believe how relieved I am to hear your voice," he said. "I was worried about you being in the fire."

"I'm OK," Georgina said. "But how do you know about the fire?"

Nick explained that there were wildfires burning all over Southern California. The fires were so big that the national news media was covering them. Georgina was shocked. Until that moment she had understood the fire to be a local event.

“FNBS has an affiliate station in Los Angeles. I’ve been watching the raw feed from them in our control room,” Nick said. “They have a helicopter up over Rancho Secreto, and from the footage they’re showing, it looks really bad there.” Nick described what he had seen—fire racing up low hills covered by dry scrub, trees turning into torches, and the rooftops of houses smoldering and then erupting in flames. He told Georgina that he had become concerned about her safety when the helicopter had begun to circle over a property with a full-scale racetrack. From her description of her visit to Rios' private racetrack, he had guessed that it was his estate. “I almost don’t want to tell you this part,” Nick said. “The helicopter was circling the property for a reason.

“Why?” Georgina said. “What’s happened?”

“Georgina, the firemen found a body.”

Chapter Nine

Sam descended the freeway off ramp. The eastbound side of the access road was devoid of traffic; vehicles were still heading west towards the freeway. Ignoring the traffic signal at the end of the ramp Sam turned onto the road to Rancho Secreto and pressed the accelerator almost to the floor. At first she could see clearly enough to keep up the speed, but less than a mile east the visibility dropped so sharply that she was forced to slow down. When she reached the expanse of chaparral that bordered the Ranch she saw a tower of smoke billowing up from the blackness of the eucalyptus forest beyond. Gripping the wheel tightly, she drove across the chaparral and plunged into the darkness.

In spite of her familiarity with the Ranch roads Sam had trouble navigating, because of the dense smoke. She looked anxiously for signs of fire but saw only wildly gyrating trees. Beyond a few feet on either side of the road, she saw nothing. Within minutes a roadblock stopped her progress. She waved her detective badge at the nearest uniformed officer; the man, a California Highway Patrol officer assigned to the Ranch, recognized her.

“Hold up, Detective Mori,” he said. “It’s not safe past this point. Wait here a minute while I get you an escort over to the Rios property. Forensics is already there, but no one from the Medical Examiner’s office yet.”

Sam stifled a gasp. An ominous premonition gripped her like a vise. She hesitated, unsure of what to do next. Continue on to the teahouse, to save her hidden Geisha treasures? Or go to the Rios estate, to find out who was dead? When the Highway Patrolman returned with the news that he could personally escort her, Sam made the decision to follow him. They reached the open iron gates to *Casa Feliz* several minutes later.

Although she had a long history with Rios, Sam had never before set foot on his property. Fallen tree branches rendered the driveway barely passable. She followed the Patrolman on a circuitous route among the sycamores to reach the house. The courtyard was crowded with emergency vehicles; their lights flashed dimly in the gloom. The house appeared intact. Further away, and almost obscured by the smoke, Sam could make out a large barn that had sustained a partial roof collapse. The Crime Scene Investigation vehicles parked outside the barn indicated to her that the body was to be found there.

She parked beside two burned out cars in the courtyard. She thanked the Patrolman for the escort. Smoke began to burn her eyes, and her throat and lungs began to feel tight. She picked her way through the charred debris that littered the walkway. As she neared the barn a familiar voice called out to her. It was Ray Agostino, an older detective in the Division. She regarded Agostino as competent and methodical, but not insightful.

“What brings you here, Sam?” Agostino asked.

"I was in the area and heard about the body," Sam replied. "I know the man who lives here."

"The firefighters found it in the barn," Agostino said. "There's a wound on the back of the head."

"Hmm. So someone took advantage of the fire," Sam said, "hoping the body would burn and it would look like an accident."

"Looks that way," Agostino replied. "But the barn has a sprinkler system. The water bought enough time for the firefighters to get here and put out the fire."

"Do you know who the victim is?" Sam asked hesitantly.

"It's an older man," Agostino replied. "No ID on him yet. Since you know the homeowner, why don't you go in and have a look?"

Gordon announced that he was hungry. Georgina realized that she, too, was famished; she had last eaten hours earlier at breakfast. Nate suggested that they go to the area where the Red Cross was serving food to the evacuees. While they waited in line Georgina listened to the easy banter between father and son. Excited by seeing so many uniformed officers, Gordon announced that he wanted a gun. Georgina was curious to see how Nate would handle his son's fascination with firearms. Nate tried to distract Gordon, but the boy was not to be deterred; he used his forefinger and thumb to imitate firing a gun, aiming at people in line and making noises to simulate gunfire. Gordon's gestures attracted the attention of another small boy who used his finger to fire back several rounds of his own. Nate bent down and said something to Gordon that Georgina could not hear. Then Gordon waved at the other boy.

"I see you've disarmed your son," Georgina said. "I was about to run for cover."

"You're safe with us," Nate replied, rubbing Gordon's back to show his approval. "But what's taking Wahl so long to call back? There must be some other place for us to meet."

"Perhaps getting the horses unloaded is more of a priority for Rios and Wahl right now," Georgina said.

"At this rate I won't be going in to work today," Nate complained. He had been on his cell phone talking to people at the hospital and at ZIFIX, neither of which had been evacuated.

"Sorry this hasn't gone as planned," Georgina said.

"Plans are subject to change," Nate said with a shrug.

They reached the food serving area. Unsure of what was going to transpire as the day progressed, Georgina filled up her plate. She joined Nate and Gordon at a table shared other evacuees. Georgina was unexcited about the food, a hot dog on a white bun and some soggy potato salad, but it felt good to get something into her stomach. As they ate, she and Nate talked about nothing in particular. They included Gordon in their conversation to his chatty delight.

Georgina began to feel somewhat restored physically. But Wahl's lengthy delay in calling her back made her increasingly uneasy. In spite of what she had said to Nate, she knew that Rios would not have prioritized unloading horses over finalizing a lucrative business deal; the horse chores would be left to the barn staff. And she knew that Wahl would have contacted Rios as soon as he learned that the meeting location needed to be changed. He would not have risked Rios' anger if he went to the Horseman's Club, only to find it closed. So what was the reason that Wahl had not yet called her back? She concluded that Rios and Wahl had become aware of the death at *Casa Feliz*.

After she finished eating Georgina scanned several local media websites from her cell phone. No deaths related to the fire had been reported so far. She excused herself from the table and called Nick, to get the latest. Nick told her that the TV affiliate was not yet reporting on the body at the Rios estate because there had not yet been any official confirmation. "What does Mark have to say about all of this?" Nick asked her. Georgina was startled when Nick spoke Mark's name. In all the upheaval, she had forgotten to call him.

The air inside the barn was warm and wet and smelled of char. Two Forensics technicians were setting up mobile lighting; parts of the barn's interior were already brightly lit, while other areas remained in semi-darkness. When disturbed by people moving about, the dense smoke inside the barn drifted in gentle swirls. Although seven or eight technicians were working the scene there was little conversation among them. A uniformed police officer examined Sam's detective badge and then motioned her towards a stall near the rear of the barn. Preoccupied with taking photographs, the technician inside the stall did not acknowledge her when she approached.

Sam looked into the stall. The body of Alejandro Rios lay sideways on the floor. His arms were flung open, palms up. She had prepared herself for seeing Rios dead, but the emotion came anyway. He looked so helpless, she thought, no longer the virile man that she had admired in spite of herself. She berated herself for putting him off, for ignoring his repeated calls. Now he was dead, and she was left to find out why.

She drew the technician's attention with a slight cough. When he looked up at her, she raised her badge to indicate that she wanted to come closer. The technician cautioned her not to touch anything. Entering the stall, Sam moved her head slowly from side to side to take in the environment in its totality. Deep cuts in the planked walls bore testimony to the activity of a metal-shod horse. Patches of concrete were visible beneath her feet, but most of the floor was hidden under wet straw. Water pooled in puddles where the concrete was exposed. The stall had not been mucked out, and the air smelled strongly of manure.

She stood over the body. The straw around Rios was undisturbed, she noticed, evidence that he had not been moved. She looked back towards the stall entrance, trying to gauge the ability of anyone in the corridor to witness what had happened. Where Rios lay, in a front-facing corner, was virtually out of sight. As she drew closer to the body she saw that

Rios' head was supported by a clump of blood-spattered straw. She bent down to get a better look. Since Rios lay sideways, she could observe only one outer corner of the wound on the back of his head. Disconcertingly, she saw that Rios' eyes were open. She wondered what he had seen in his last moment.

Sam left the barn and went looking for Agostino. She found him with a group of people who had newly arrived from the Medical Examiner's office. She pulled him aside. "It's Alejandro Rios," she said. "He was one of my sources. He called me a few days ago, but I didn't have a chance to get back to him."

"Was he involved in anything recently?" Agostino asked.

"Not that I know of," Sam said. "As far as tips go, he hadn't given me much lately."

"Did he think he was in any danger?"

"He didn't mention any threats the last time I saw him," Sam said. "But he had enemies. Lots of enemies."

"What do you know about relatives, for the notification?"

"There's a daughter," Sam said. "Her name is Adela Rios. She lives here in the Ranch. She must have evacuated nearby."

"Any idea how I can track her down?"

"Rios used Lindstrom and Spencer for his legal work. You should be able to locate her through them."

Agostino told Sam that, because she knew Rios, he would appreciate her help with the case. They agreed that he would remain on site, to secure and search the property, while she would go to the Fairgrounds to interview everyone who had been at the barn that morning.

Chapter Ten

"There's a police officer waiting for you at the entrance to the Horseman's Club," Wahl said. "He'll bring you to me."

"I'm on my way," Georgina said. She checked her watch. If all went well she could get the documents signed and still catch a late flight to New York. "There's just one thing," she said, looking tentatively at Gordon. "Dr. Carmichael has his son with him. Will that be a problem?" Wahl told her to bring the boy along.

Georgina alerted Nate to the good news, and together with Gordon they walked the short distance to the Horsemen's Club. Officer Manuel Garcia greeted them and ushered them into an elevator. They descended two floors; the elevator doors opened onto a dimly lit underground tunnel. Gordon declared the tunnel "spooky." Nate took his hand and coaxed him forward. Minutes later the group emerged on the side of the racetrack across from the grandstand, into an area of temporary horse stalls that was bustling with evacuated horses and their rescuers.

Officer Garcia led them to a low, beige-colored building. Inside, in a small, dusty office, an exotic looking young Asian woman was seated behind a desk. A single battered chair, its scuffed finish attesting to years of service, was set in front of the desk. Officer Garcia introduced Detective Samantha Mori.

Georgina's stomach turned. So it was true. Someone was dead inside Rios' barn. Let it not be Rios, she prayed. She glanced apprehensively at Nate, whose baffled expression showed her that he had no idea why he was being introduced to a detective. Georgina felt a twinge of guilt that she had not given Nate a heads-up about the body.

Looking up at Detective Mori, Gordon blurted out, "Are you a real detective? You sure don't look like one." Nate grabbed Gordon's shoulders to restrain him; he offered Sam a stammering apology. Sam smiled at Gordon and said that she considered not looking like a detective to be a compliment. She told Georgina and Nate that she had some questions for them about what had happened that morning at the home of Alejandro Rios. She wanted to interview them individually, she said. Georgina detected a hint of urgency in Sam's voice, and some agitation in her demeanor. Nate and Gordon followed Officer Garcia out of the office and Georgina sat down in the battered chair.

Sam asked Georgina why she was at the Rios estate that morning. Georgina said simply that she was there because of a business deal; her instincts told her to answer only what was asked, and to volunteer nothing. But, under the pressure of Sam's aggressive follow-up questioning, she soon found herself elaborating on the specifics of the deal, including the fact that Rios and Wahl had used a ruse to get Dr. Carmichael to sell them ZIFIX at a price considerably below market value.

When Sam asked her to describe everything that she had observed at the barn that morning, Georgina tried to recall as much detail as she could but to her chagrin, she found that her memory was sketchy. Perhaps, she thought, her panicked state had jumbled her perceptions before they were laid down in her brain. When Sam pressed her, Georgina became aware that her answers to the detective's more repetitious questions were inconsistent.

Finally, Sam put down the pen with which she had been taking notes. Georgina sensed that the interview had reached a critical point. "There's something I must tell you," Sam said, looking Georgina fully in the eye. "Something very unfortunate happened in the barn." Georgina tried not to betray that she knew something about what was coming. Her palms began to sweat. "Someone died there," Sam said, continuing to fix her gaze on Georgina.

"Died?" Georgina said. Sensing Sam's scrutiny, she feared that she had somehow signaled to the detective that she already knew about the body.

"Yes, died," Sam said. Georgina's heart was pounding in her chest. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this," Sam continued. "Alejandro Rios is dead."

When she heard the words, "Alejandro Rios," a strange combination of unreality and detachment enveloped Georgina. "Rios?" she gasped. "Oh, no. Oh, that's..., that's.... shocking."

Sam picked up her pen and began to write again in her notebook. "Yes, shocking," she said.

"What happened?" Georgina asked.

"I can't discuss that with you," Sam said. "Sorry, that's our procedure." She continued to jot down notes. "Can you give me your cell phone number?" she said. "I may need to talk to you again." After Georgina gave her the number, Sam raised her hand to summon Officer Garcia, who had been watching the interview through the windowed door to the office. "I appreciate your speaking with me," she told Georgina. "Please don't share what we talked about with anyone."

Georgina barely heard Sam's admonishment. Her mind was in a dither, trying to comprehend what Rios' death would mean for the ZIFIX deal. Officer Garcia brought Nate and Gordon inside the office. Georgina and Nate exchanged places in the chair and Gordon sat down on the floor. Saying that she needed to make a call, Georgina left the office and walked along the hallway until she was sure that she was out of Officer Garcia's hearing. She called Mark. To her surprise, Mark already knew that Rios was dead. Wahl had told him, he said.

"Our first priority is to make sure that we keep the Rios Capital account," he said. "Wahl thinks that his daughter Adela is his successor. I hope that's the case, because I have a good relationship with her. I've been handling her charitable foundation and her personal investments for some time."

“What should I do about the ZIFIX deal?” Georgina asked. She was not surprised that Mark showed no signs of distress that his long time client was dead. After all, Rios was of no use to him anymore.

“Hold off doing anything,” Mark replied. “We’re going to have to wait until we know who has the legal right to sign.”

“So what do I tell Carmichael?”

“Tell him that the deal is still on but there will be a brief delay.”

“He’s talking with a detective now. I’ll let him know when he comes out.”

“Why is a detective talking to him anyway?” Mark asked. “Any police investigation into this is just window dressing. Rios had nerves of steel, and this time it worked against him. He stayed too long in the barn and he paid the price.”

“Of course,” Georgina said.

“Rios Capital had a lot of deals going on right now, and this puts them all up in the air,” Mark said. “I’m coming out there to take over.”

Georgina’s heart sank. “When will you be here?” she asked.

“As soon as travel can find me a place to stay,” he said. “The Inn is closed, and every hotel within a hundred miles is booked full because of the evacuation. Where are you staying anyway?”

The text message on her pager notified Katy Carmichael that the hospital’s disaster plan had just gone into effect. It ordered her to report immediately for emergency room duty. She took the elevator down to the ER. At the triage desk a nurse told her that there was no major trauma yet, just some people coming in with minor mishaps or trouble breathing. Since all the clinics in the evacuation zone were closed, she said, the volume of patients had taken an uptick in the last few hours. Katy saw that all the waiting room chairs were occupied, and the line to sign in for treatment stretched twenty people deep.

The conference room next to the triage area was full beyond capacity. Katy recognized most of the people there as physicians from the primary care departments, plus a few from surgery. She joined those who were standing along the walls. The Chief of the ER, a burly man in a continual state of motion, made his way to the front of the room.

“The evacuation area has more than doubled in size since this morning,” he told the assembled physicians. “This is a major event and we need to staff up to handle it. What’s being passed out is a new shift schedule. You’ll need to trade off with each other to follow your patients in the house while you’re here in the ER. Any questions?”

“Chief, some people that you have on this schedule aren’t here,” someone called out. “Not everyone got into the hospital before the roads closed.”

“Let me know who needs to come off the schedule and I’ll rework it,” the Chief replied. He was already heading towards the door. “If you know where people are, give me that information too. I’ll ask law enforcement to help us get them in here.”

How typical, Katy thought. Nate had not made it in, so instead of pulling an all-nighter in the ER as she would be doing, he would be with Gordon, eating popcorn and watching TV in the comfort of his apartment. Getting the better deal, as usual.

Georgina walked back along the hallway to where Officer Garcia was standing outside Sam's office. After talking to Mark, she had let Nick know about Rios; he had promised to see what he could find out from his contacts. She watched through the window in the office door as Sam interviewed Nate. Because she had been so preoccupied with controlling her reaction to Sam's questioning during her own interview, Georgina had barely noticed the detective's unusual appearance. But now that she was at some distance she became aware of Sam's elaborate makeup and fashion-forward look. Only in California, she thought, a police detective with a stylist.

As the interview with Nate progressed, Georgina noticed that Sam smiled frequently, tilting her head slightly to one side as she spoke. She could not recall the detective smiling even once during the interview with her. As she watched more of Sam's interaction with Nate she noted how uncomfortably long she held his gaze. Georgina found Detective Mori's behavior oddly reassuring. If the police had any real concerns about the cause of Rios' demise, she reasoned, surely they would have sent a more serious person to investigate.

The interview over, Nate and Gordon came out into the hallway. Officer Garcia asked them all to wait while he spoke with Detective Mori. "Did she tell you what happened?" Georgina asked Nate.

"She told me that Rios is dead, if that's what you mean," Nate replied. "She's suspicious about how it happened, judging from the questions she asked."

"I think she's just following protocol," Georgina said. "Rios must have felt that he had to be the last one to leave the barn, the captain of the ship sort of thing. The police have to rule out foul play whenever they find a body."

"This is not just *any* body," Nate said.

"All the more reason to make a thorough investigation."

"At least we have each other as alibis," Nate said with slight grin. "What happens with the deal now?" Georgina explained that the signing would have to be put off until they knew who had inherited Rios Capital. Nate took the news calmly.

Officer Garcia came to inform them that the roads around the Fairgrounds were now closed to non-emergency traffic; no one could leave until further notice. He said that he would take them to join the others from the Rios estate, and then escort them as a group to the shelter, where they would be obliged to spend the night. Gordon began to whimper; Nate tried to cheer him up, telling him that they were going to have a great adventure camping out. Officer Garcia led them to the temporary stable area where they met up with Wahl and the barn staff. Georgina was relieved to see Sonia and her father among the group. She expressed her condolences about Rios' death to Wahl.

"I can't figure out how he got left behind," Wahl said. "Just before I left I checked with Jose, and he told me that Rios had gone out in Rousseau's truck."

Jose spoke up hastily. "When I was about to leave," he said, "I spotted a horse running loose, so I ran after it to catch it. I thought I saw Mr. Rios sitting next to Rousseau in his truck. By the time I caught the horse and got him inside my rig, Rousseau had pulled out. But it turned out that it wasn't Mr. Rios on the passenger side, it was one of the grooms."

"Don't feel bad, Jose," Wahl said. "It was a mistake that anyone could have made."

"What's going to happen to the horses now?" Jose asked. "I don't even know who owns them."

Thinking that this might be an opportunity to find out something about Adela Rios, Georgina said, "I've heard there's a daughter. Maybe she'll be the one taking over."

"I hope so," Jose replied. "Adela loves horses. The horse that I chased down belongs to her. If the new owner is Adela, then I can keep my job." Jose's comment reminded Georgina that, with Rios' death, there were now a number of people with uncertain futures. She briefly weighed the possibility of layoffs in her group if the Rios Capital account were lost.

Officer Garcia led the group to the shelter at the Fairgrounds. They checked in with the Red Cross and were assigned to Exhibit Hall B, a building that during the Fair season was used for displaying model trains. Outside the hall portable toilets were lined up against one wall. Inside, the tables that held the trains had been taken down, and in their place stood rows of cots, each cot having sheets, a pillow, and a thin blanket folded on top.

Feeling drained, Georgina sat down on the cot assigned to her and assessed her circumstances. She had her purse and tote; her carry on bag with most of her useful possessions was in the trunk of the rental car she had left at the Rios estate. There was no prospect of getting out of the shelter and into a hotel until tomorrow at the earliest, and even that seemed increasingly unlikely. She was stranded in a strange place with several thousand people in various states of agitation. Mark was coming and her client was dead. And her feet hurt. In a funk she called Pearl. "You won't believe what happened to me today," she said.

"Are you caught up in the wildfire?" Pearl asked. "I've been following it all day on the Internet."

"Yes, but I'm safe at a shelter," Georgina said. "I've been so focused on getting through the day that I haven't checked the news. Tell me what's going on."

"There are huge fires burning all over Southern California, all the way from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border. The governor has declared a state of emergency and he's called out the National Guard. The biggest fire is where you are. There's over half a million people evacuated already."

"Half a million?" Georgina was astonished at the number.

"And counting," Pearl said. "It could go over one million, or so they're saying on the news. Are you sure you're OK?"

"Physically, yes. I'm not so sure about mentally," Georgina replied. "Pearl, my client is dead."

"You have *got* to be kidding me!" Pearl exclaimed. "He's *dead*?"

"Dead," Georgina said. "The firemen found his body in his barn. Smoke inhalation, I guess. He didn't sign the papers for the sale, so I don't even have a deal. And now Mark's coming out here to take over."

"Oh, Georgina, I am *so* sorry," Pearl said, genuinely distressed. "And the worst of it is, you're all alone."

"Not exactly alone. Some of my client's people have ended up here at the shelter, and we've all been assigned to the same building. Oh, and the fellow on the other side of the deal is here too."

"The one whose bones you're planning to pick clean? That must be interesting."

"It's awkward," Georgina said. "And he has his son with him."

"His son? How did that happen?" Georgina told Pearl the story of her morning's adventure. "Hey, don't go soft on the kid," Pearl cautioned. "He'll have you renegotiating the deal."

"No chance of that," Georgina declared. "Mark will be here as soon as he can book a room and he'll see to it that there are no renegotiations."

Later, Georgina checked in with Mark to let him know that she would be spending the night at the Fairgrounds. She did not mention that Nate and his son were also there; she was too tired to have that discussion. Mark expressed no interest in her welfare. When he realized that she had nothing to report other than her location, he abruptly hung up. So much for Mr. Nice Guy, Georgina thought. Mark's uncharacteristic thoughtfulness towards her appeared to have run its course.

Looking forward to acquiring a toothbrush and some soap, Georgina joined the people from *Casa Feliz* in the line to get hygiene kits. "At least we'll be able to scrub off some of the smoke," Georgina said to Wahl. He introduced his family. "Pleased to meet you all," Georgina said. "I wish it were under better circumstances."

Lauren Wahl made a sound resembling a low hiss. "It's awful here," she said. "I can't believe I'm in such a dump. They're treating us like cattle. Herd us to get this, herd us to get that. And where were the authorities this morning? Why didn't we get more warning?"

"Fires spring up all the time during Santa Anas but usually they don't spread as fast as this one did," Jose explained. "That's the difference. The fire spread so fast there was no time to get a warning out."

"If it keeps being this exciting," Jake said, "I may rethink my California dream."

"Well, you like the Kentucky way of doing things," Jose replied.

Chapter Eleven

Sam often had the unpleasant task of talking to family members who were freshly grieving the loss of a loved one. She did not relish this part of her work but she had developed a technique to make it less upsetting, at least for her. When she introduced herself she talked in a soothing voice to give the impression that she had compassion. She would tell the family members that she was prepared to take as long as was necessary with them, to explain the situation to them and to answer their questions. Aware that her presence would be reassuring to some and disquieting to others, Sam had trained herself to detect subtle signs of anxiety in those she interviewed. Even small things could give someone away.

Detective Agostino had tracked Adela Rios to a beachfront mansion located outside the evacuation area. Sam now sat in its spacious living room across from Adela, who was relating her morning's activities. Adela said that her father had called her that morning and asked her to join him for a late breakfast. Since she had already taken breakfast with her daughter, she told him that she would come over to have coffee with him while he ate. They had discussed the family's philanthropic affairs for about forty-five minutes, she said, and afterwards she had stopped briefly at the barn to check on her horse.

On the way home she had noticed smoke in the air and a lot of wind, she said, but she had not seen any fire. She had been home, alone, for less than an hour when she got a reverse 911 call telling her to evacuate immediately. She had left the house without packing up any belongings and had driven immediately to her daughter's school; together, she and her daughter had sought refuge at her father's beach house. She had tried repeatedly to reach her father, she said, and when she was unable to do so, she had called his legal firm. Shortly after, she had learned of her father's death from Detective Agostino.

Sam asked Adela what she knew about her father's business dealings.

"I'm not involved in Rios Capital," Adela replied. "I was part of the business before I married, but that was years ago."

"Did your father mention any problems that he was having lately?" Sam asked.

Adela paused for a fraction of a second. "My father had made some changes in his horseracing operation recently," she said. "He built a new barn and bought some racehorses, and he also brought in a new trainer. A couple of days ago he said something to me about the barn manager not being too happy about how things were going. And this morning he complained to me about what he called 'runaway expenses' at the barn. He showed me an audit that he said revealed some, ah, irregularities."

Suddenly alert, Sam asked, "Did he say what sort of irregularities?"

"I just glanced at the audit. I'm not really sure what it showed," Adela answered. "My father said that he was going to take care of the situation personally, but he wanted me to be aware of it, because my daughters and I keep our horses at the barn. I think he planned to make some personnel changes in his organization because of what he found."

"Do you know where the audit is now?" Sam asked.

"He had it with him when he went up to his office after breakfast," Adela replied. "I suppose it's still there."

"Do you know if he told anyone else about the audit?"

"I don't think so," Adela said. "Since it was an internal issue, he wanted to handle the problem quietly. He told me not to mention the audit to anyone."

"I see," Sam said. Then, more softly, she said, "There's one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Your father's body has been taken to the Medical Examiner's Office," Sam said. "Someone from the family will need to make the identification." Adela's eyes widened. "I know that seeing the body of a loved one is difficult," Sam went on. "If you don't feel up to it, perhaps there's someone else..."

Adela clasped her hands tightly in front of her. She took a deep breath. "No," she said. "It should be me."

Sonia picked up two hygiene kits from the pile; she passed one to Christopher. She asked him if he had seen anyone from Rancho High. "Not yet," he replied. "Mainly I've been keeping my mother company. She's a little stressed out."

"Me too," Sonia said as they walked towards Exhibit Hall B.

"I can't imagine what you went through this morning," Christopher said.

"It was really terrifying," Sonia said. "I've never been more frightened in my life. I was grooming a horse at the ties behind the barn when my Dad came running to get me. He said that there was a fire and we had to get the horses moved out right away. We loaded the horse I was grooming into a trailer, and then we both went into the barn to get more horses. Once I got outside with the second horse I could actually see the fire, and the smoke was getting so thick that I could hardly breathe. My Dad told me to hurry and get out. I loaded up the horse and drove out the back way." Sonia was so absorbed in telling her story that she did not notice that they had reached the exhibit hall. "Oh, we're here," she said when Christopher stopped. "Thanks for letting me get that off my chest."

"Any time you want to talk," Christopher said. "I guess I'll go clean up now. Maybe after dinner we could take a look around and see who's here."

"Let's do that," Sonia said. Sonia believed that Christopher had sought her out at school initially as an act of kindness, because she was new and because their fathers both worked for Rios. Lately, however, it seemed to her that Christopher was developing a different type of interest. Sonia had not yet dated, and the prospect intrigued her. At her previous schools she had readily made friends among the girls, but these relationships were

always severed when her father moved on to his next job. Now she was the new girl again, but this time she had not even tried to find girlfriends. The cycles of putting forth the effort to make friends and then losing them abruptly had taken their toll. A boyfriend, however, was an appealing new concept.

Sonia found her father inside the exhibit hall. He was talking to Wahl, trying to find out how he was going to be paid, now that Rios was dead. The company's law firm had authorized him to pay everyone for a month, Wahl told him; after that, he didn't know what was going to happen. Jake proposed to Wahl that they move the horses to a training facility with the type of track and other amenities that he thought were needed to keep them in top racing form. Wahl looked unsure when he heard this from Jake. He said that he favored Jose's plan to put the horses out to pasture while they waited out the change of ownership. Sonia winced when her father told Wahl that Jose may have presented his plan to pasture the horses as a way to save money, but it was actually designed to eliminate the need for his services as a trainer. Wahl cautioned Jake not to take Jose's suggestion personally. He reminded him that the final decision about the fate of the horses would rest with the new owner.

As Wahl walked away, Jake became aware of his daughter's presence. "Hey, how's it going?" he greeted her, touching her windblown hair affectionately. "You look a little the worse for wear."

"I stink," Sonia replied frankly. "I picked up this kit so I could shower, but I don't have anything clean to put on afterwards. My clothes smell of smoke."

"The Red Cross has put out racks of clothes," Jake said. "I'll go with you and we'll both get some new things. Once you're cleaned up, you'll feel better."

Sonia wanted to feel better. Her nerves were frayed. And it was not only the fire and the Rios' death that had upset her. Her interview with Detective Mori earlier in the day had fueled even greater anxiety, because she had seemed inordinately interested in something that Sonia had witnessed the previous afternoon.

After finishing up work at the barn Sonia had gone to the rose garden to cut flowers, something for which Rios had explicitly given her permission. While she was in the garden Wahl had driven up in his Maserati. When he noticed Sonia in the garden he had reprimanded her for picking the flowers. He had raised his voice to her. Rios had been standing at his office window, looking out at the garden. He had yelled down to Wahl to "wait a minute." Clearly incensed, he had rushed down from his office and confronted Wahl, shouting angrily that Sonia had his permission to pick the roses. Stunned and contrite, Wahl had apologized profusely to Sonia. In spite of Wahl's apparently sincere expression of regret Rios had continued to upbraid him, saying, "This isn't the only problem that you've caused." He had ordered Wahl up to his office. Since Rios was often brusque with people, Sonia had not thought at the time that it happened, that the incident was anything out of the ordinary. But when Sam asked her to describe it twice over, she had become very concerned.

Philip Wahl approached his Lauren Wahl, who was sitting glumly on a cot. "Where are the boys?" he asked.

Lauren looked up at her husband impassively. "They're around here someplace," she answered. "I don't know where. Getting showered or something."

"We should find them," Wahl said. "I haven't had anything to eat all day and we need to get in the food line."

"You go look for them, Philip," Lauren said. "I'm too tired to get up, and I'm too tired to stand in another line. You bring me back something to eat." Wahl looked at his wife and, saying nothing more, walked out of the hall.

Georgina was resting on a cot nearby. Hoping to learn something about Adela, she approached Lauren. "When I was leaving the Ranch this morning I saw the house that you and your husband are building," she told her. "From what I could see, it was all right. The clearing around it made a good firebreak."

Lauren frowned. "I have two houses to worry about and no one can tell me anything about either one. I've called the police four times already and they don't know a thing. They should be out checking on the houses but they're not. They won't go out just to check on a house, they say, only for an emergency. Well, the firemen are out there."

"The firemen are equipped for it," Georgina said. Lauren ignored her comment and continued to lament her circumstances. After listening for a few more minutes, Georgina decided that Lauren was unlikely to provide any useful information about Adela. When she saw Nate and Gordon enter the hall, she excused herself and caught up with them.

"Look, I got new PJs," Gordon squealed, proudly displaying the blue polyester pajamas that the Red Cross had given him.

"Neat, Gordon. They're cute," Georgina said. "It looks like we're going to have a slumber party tonight. Won't that be fun?"

"A very big slumber party," Nate said. "Hey, Gordon, let's show Georgina where we'll be sleeping." Georgina followed them to the back of the hall where it was relatively empty of people. Nate sat down on his cot and Georgina sat on the one assigned to Gordon. Gordon amused himself by wrapping himself in a sheet, playing ghost. Nate asked if she had heard anything about the deal. Georgina replied no, adding that she did not expect to hear anything more today. Her only goal at this point, she said, was to get through the night. She volunteered that the shelter reminded her of summer camp and not in a good way. Nate laughed at that. Then he turned more serious.

"I've been thinking about what happened," he said. "If there's anything suspicious about Rios' death, could that hold things up, legally?"

"I suppose it could," Georgina said.

"Can you find another buyer for my company?"

Is this guy completely clueless? Georgina thought. She hesitated a minute before replying, trying to find the right words. "You have to understand that Rios was a client of my

bank,” she said at last. “I can’t work against the interests of Rios Capital by helping you find a way out of the deal.”

“But there is no deal,” Nate countered. “Nobody signed any papers, remember?”

“Strictly speaking that’s true,” Georgina acknowledged. “But you and I did shake on it.”

“That was when I thought I was getting the money right away,” Nate said. “My company might collapse while I’m waiting, and I’m not willing to let that happen.”

“I see your point,” Georgina replied. “But my boss is on his way out here and he’s going to expect me to present the deal to the new owner of Rios Capital, whoever that is.”

“When you know who the owner is, you can do that,” Nate said. “But I need to line up another option, a backup plan. I should have done it before. I jumped at the first offer I got because I let myself get too far behind on the finances. You know a lot more about this than I do. Just steer me in the right direction. Can you do that?”

Alarm bells should be going off right now, Georgina thought. But they weren’t. Maybe the day’s events had given her a different perspective on things, or maybe she was just too tired to think straight. She heard herself telling Nate that she couldn’t promise anything, but she would raise the issue with her boss to see what could be done.

Chapter Twelve

Alejandro Rios lay on a gurney in a brightly lit basement alcove at the Medical Examiner's Office. A white shroud covered the body. Thru a gap in the drapes behind the gurney Adela could see a bank of morgue refrigerators. She felt cold. The morgue attendant asked her if she was ready. When she nodded "yes" he pulled back the shroud. "That's my father," Adela said through taut lips. Sam raised her hand to signal that the proceedings were completed. The morgue attendant replaced the shroud.

Adela followed Sam down the corridor and into the elevator. When the elevator doors opened onto the main floor Sam guided Adela to an empty conference room and sat down with her at a long table. "When you're ready, I can take you to the car," Sam said when she judged that Adela had sufficiently regained her composure.

"Thank you," Adela said. "Seeing him was harder than I expected." She retrieved some tissue from her handbag and dabbed at her eyes. "What happens next?" she asked.

"There will be an autopsy in the morning," Sam explained. "I plan to attend. I'll call you afterwards to let you know the findings. Later in the day the Medical Examiner will release the body to whatever funeral home you chose."

Adela sighed. "Funeral home," she said. "I suppose I'll use the one that took care of my husband."

"You've had a trying day," Sam said. "Let's get you home." Sam walked Adela to the waiting patrol car.

This had not been Adela's first visit to the Medical Examiner's Office. Two years earlier she had been there to identify the body of her husband, Carlos Navarette. Carlos had been killed when the single-engine aircraft that he was piloting crashed shortly after taking off from a local airfield in bad weather. Adela's anguish at seeing Carlos's battered body came back to her now. She tried to conjure up an image of her husband from another time, one that brought her joy instead of sorrow, but none appeared. Her thoughts drifted to what she had just seen—her father lying on the gurney, motionless. She wondered whether she would miss him.

Adela felt no real affection for her father. All his life he had demanded whatever he wanted from the people around him, while giving as little as possible in return. As a child Adela had tried to please him but, as she grew older, she realized that trying to connect with him on anything other than a superficial level was futile. After she met Carlos she had consciously undertaken to detach from her father. Over the years of her marriage she had focused her needs for emotional intimacy on Carlos and her daughters. Carlos' unexpected death had opened up a void in Adela's life that was still unfilled. But this circumstance had

not caused her to reach out to her father for support. Adela had known Alejandro Rios far too well for that.

“Don’t you *dare* let this guy shop his company around,” Millie said. “You have to keep up the pressure on him. Mark will lose confidence in you if you let this deal slip away.”

“How do I tell Mark what he said?” Georgina asked. “Do I soft-pedal it by saying that Carmichael may want to look at other options and then change the subject?”

“He would pick up on that dodge right away,” Millie said. “You don’t want Mark to think that you’re hiding something from him. He trusts you for a reason, and that’s because you’ve been forthright with him in the past. You need to keep on being that dutiful informant. Remember, it’s not the substance of what you say; it’s the style. It’s your manner of speaking and the expectations that you set. You need to tell Mark everything, but tell it in a way that says—what’s happened here is only what would be expected. Then express a lot of confidence in your own ability. Leave Mark thinking that you’re on top of the situation and not at all concerned about the outcome, which you believe is assured.”

“Millie, you missed your calling,” Georgina said. “You spin like a politician.”

“If you don’t think business is political, you haven’t been paying attention,” Millie said. “So, you’re actually going to sleep in a room full of strangers tonight?”

“Surrounded by a hundred people that I don’t know, plus a handful from the Rios estate that I don’t trust.”

“Why don’t you trust them?” Millie asked. Georgina confided her concerns about the circumstances surrounding Rios’ death. Millie did not dismiss the possibility of foul play as readily as Mark had done earlier. “Keep your wits about you,” she cautioned her friend. “Rios made enemies. Someone could have seized the opportunity to kill him, thinking that his body would be burned and all the evidence destroyed.”

“I know, I know,” Georgina agreed. “That’s exactly what I’ve been stewing about.”

“Keep your distance from the whole lot of them, Georgina,” Millie counseled. “If one of them is a killer, you don’t want to become any more involved than you already are.”

“No sign of that audit yet,” Detective Agostino said into the telephone.

“Keep looking,” Sam said. She had left the Medical Examiner’s Office immediately after Adela had departed; she was now on the freeway, heading to the Rios estate. “Adela said that Rios had it with him when he went up to his office this morning. It must be in there somewhere.”

“I found a safe behind a picture,” Agostino said. “How badly do you want me to open it?”

“Call Lindstrom and Spencer before you do any permanent damage,” Sam replied. “There’s a good chance Rios left the code with them.”

“All right,” Agostino said, sounding slightly disappointed. “I’ll do that.”

As she approached Rancho Secreto Sam saw a line of fire climbing up a ridge to the east; she could not tell whether it was the wildfire or a firebreak set by firefighters. She turned on the radio and learned that the fire was newly resurgent. At the roadblock at the entrance to the Ranch a National Guardsman checked her identification and waved her in, cautioning her to keep a close eye out and to turn back if she spotted any active fire. Sam saw nothing but the occasional fire truck as she drove to *Casa Feliz*. She found Agostino and two Forensics technicians busy packing up the contents of Rios' office.

Rios' law firm had provided the code to the safe; Agostino had already gone thru its contents. He handed Sam a large clasp envelope. She sat down at Rios' desk and opened it. Inside, she found a folder containing three sheets of paper. "CONFIDENTIAL" was stamped in large red letters at the top of each sheet, but there was no letterhead. The format did not conform to that of a typical audit; instead, each page consisted of a list of what appeared to be ledger entries. There was no signature.

Sam was still trying to grasp what the document meant when a National Guardsman appeared at the office door. He said that fire was once again threatening the property and ordered them to evacuate immediately. Reluctantly, Sam put the folder back inside the envelope and handed it to Agostino, who placed it into an evidence box. While Agostino and the technicians stayed behind to load the boxes into the Crime Scene Investigation van, Sam set out alone, planning to retrace her route where she had seen the emergency vehicles.

A reddish glow from the renascent fire broadly illuminated the eastern sky. By the time Sam reached the main road leading to the Ranch village, burning embers had begun to shower down on her car. She saw no other vehicles on the road; the fire trucks had disappeared. As she neared the outskirts of the village she saw first one house burning, then another and then another. She sped up. Trees burst into flame as she drove past; a fiery branch dislodged by the wind fell onto the roadway right in front of her, forcing her into a dangerous evasive maneuver; she swerved across the median and onto the bicycle path along the other side of the road. Regaining control of her car, Sam willed her heart rate to drop while she held the steering wheel in a tense grip.

At the edge of the village she saw what appeared to be an entire battalion of firefighters massed together with their trucks. Lined up in tight formation, the firefighters had raised their hoses straight up into the air to create a massive wall of water that reached thirty feet into the air. Sam grasped the steering wheel even more tightly and drove straight through the torrent. Her head bounced backwards and forwards as falling water rocked the car.

Once on the other side of the wall of water Sam saw that the village was in complete darkness and largely deserted. The only people on the street were a few National Guardsmen. She encountered no other vehicles until she got on the freeway.

She decided to spend the night in her office in the Detective Division. Among the emergency supplies kept in the basement she located an air mattress and a coarse wool blanket that smelled of mothballs. When she was sure that her colleagues who had also

decided to spend the night were all asleep, she went to the women's restroom and washed up. As a precaution against being seen without her makeup, she held a paper towel to her face as she walked back to her office. She spent a restless night on the floor.

She awakened early the next morning. Dressing in the same clothes that she had worn the day before was distasteful but unavoidable. Since the downtown area had not been evacuated, the stores would be open for business later in the morning; she decided that she would visit a department store to resupply as soon as Rios' autopsy was over. The prospect of a shopping expedition momentarily lifted her spirits. The terror that she had felt the night before, when she had witnessed the full force of the fire bearing down on the Ranch village, began to recede. And today's news was encouraging. The wall of water had worked. The village had been spared, and firefighters were beginning to get the upper hand.

When Sam arrived at the Medical Examiner's Office the autopsy was already in progress. A pungent chemical smell filled the white tiled room, and the cold, humid air made Sam shiver. The pathologist who was performing the autopsy, Dr. Fay Dugan, greeted her cordially. Dr. Dugan introduced the burly autopsy assistant simply as Gus.

Alejandro Rios' unclad body lay face down on the autopsy table. Dr. Dugan explained that she had completed the examination of the surface of the body and had taken photographs. The only notable finding so far, she said, was a wound on the back of the head. Sam watched Dr. Dugan as she took tissue samples from the wound and placed them in formalin for the microscopic analysis that she said would determine the timing of the wounding relative to the time of death.

Gus warned Sam that he was going to make some noise. Using a power handsaw he made a clean, circular cut around Rios' head. He lifted off the upper part of the skull in a single piece. Dr. Dugan removed the brain from the skull, placed it on a green towel on a stainless steel side table and examined its exterior. Noting nothing remarkable, she lowered the brain into a large-mouthed, formalin-filled jar. Any internal bleeding or other brain pathology that contributed to the death would not be discovered until later, Dr. Dugan explained, because brain tissue needed to fix in formalin for several weeks until it was firm enough to be sliced. Gus repositioned the body face up for the dissection of the internal organs. Dr. Dugan used a scalpel to open the chest. She pointed out that the lungs showed no signs of smoke inhalation. Rios had already died by the time the barn filled with smoke.

As Dr. Dugan began her examination of the heart, Sam looked dispassionately at Rios' body. When she sat before her altar, at home in the teahouse, and contemplated the people whom she had lost, Sam was comforted by her belief in an afterlife when she would be reunited with them. But in this autopsy room, she had a very different experience of the finality of death. She was confident that she would never see Rios again. She looked at his open skull. How ironic, she thought, that Rios would be buried without his brain. The clever maestro of the deal, the man who outsmarted everyone, was destined to lay in his grave for all eternity, completely empty-headed.

Chapter Thirteen

"I'm sorry to wake you," Nate said gently. He was kneeling by Georgina's cot, with Gordon in tow. "I need your help."

Rolling over to face Nate, Georgina murmured, "This better be good." She had not slept well. The exhibit hall had been noisy throughout the night. About 3 a.m. she had felt the need to seek out the portable toilets. As she stood in line, fierce gusts of wind had swirled around her, hurling the accumulated detritus—paper, plastic, random bits of food—of several thousand evacuees against the exterior walls of the exhibit hall. Flying debris had assailed her from every side.

"I'm wiped out too," Nate commiserated. "But I need to get to the hospital. There's a police officer here to take me in, but someone has to take care of Gordon. Can you do it?"

Suddenly fully awake, Georgina swung her legs over the edge of the cot and sat upright. "Take care of Gordon? Um, well.... I don't know," she stammered. "What's going on with the fire? Maybe I'll be leaving today."

"No chance," Nate said. "The fire is still out of control. I know this is a lot to ask, but I need to relieve some folks in the emergency room. The police have promised that they can get me back here by early evening."

"Is this all right with you?" Georgina asked Gordon. "Do you want to stay with me today?"

Gordon looked up apprehensively at his father and said nothing. Nate was undeterred. "It's fine with him," he said, placing one hand on his son's shoulder.

Georgina did not see a way out. "I guess I can do it," she said.

"You're the best," Nate said. "You've got my cell phone number. I owe you one." Nate gave Gordon a hug and headed out.

Adela sipped hot tea with lemon while she waited for Mark to come on the line. She had been fielding telephone calls, emails and text messages since news of her father's death had spread. Family members, friends, her lawyer, and her father's lawyers—everyone wanted to talk to her.

"Adela, Mark Webber here. I'm so sorry to hear about your father," he said. "It's such a great loss, I really can't put it into words."

"Thank you for your concern," Adela said, fingering the edge of the teacup as she spoke. She was growing weary of rote condolences from people who cared nothing for her father. "I'm reaching out to you because I know how much my father valued your advice. He left Rios Capital to me, but I haven't been involved in the business for years. Now I'm

going to have to make decisions that I fear I'm ill equipped to make. Can you come out here and give me a hand?"

"Of course," Mark replied. "I've been trying to get out there since yesterday, but all the hotels are booked because of the evacuation."

"Don't bother finding a hotel," Adela said. "You can stay with me. I'm at the beach house."

"I'll take you up on that," Mark said. "Actually, someone from my group is there now. She was working on a deal for your father. It would be a big help to me if she could stay with you too."

"I have room for one more," Adela said. "What's her name?"

"Georgina Graham. I'm not sure how to get her to you. She's at the shelter where the people from your father's estate are staying. She tells me that they aren't allowed to leave because the roads are closed."

"She must be at the Fairgrounds," Adela said. "I'll work from my end on getting her here. I know someone who can help us."

"Let me give you her cell phone number."

"I'm going to pass you on to my father's housekeeper for that," Adela said. "Her name is Lupe. She'll be your contact person. I'll see you when you get here." Adela covered the mouthpiece of the telephone and called for Lupe, who had shown up at the beach house the previous afternoon. Following the evacuation procedure written by Rios, she had brought along with her the cook and two other staffers from *Casa Feliz*.

Adela went to look for Consuelo. She found her daughter in the dining room eating breakfast. "How did you sleep?" Adela asked. "I tossed and turned all night."

"Sorry to hear that," Consuelo replied. "I had some trouble getting to sleep but then I slept right through. When is Pilar getting here?"

"Her flight gets in around noon," Adela said. She sat down next to her daughter. "Once she gets here I want to talk to you both about the memorial service. I need your input on some things."

"How are you holding up?"

"Just hanging by a thread, to tell you the truth," Adela said. "It hasn't sunk in yet that he's dead."

"Where did you go last night?"

"What are you talking about?" Adela asked cautiously.

"Lupe told me that a woman came here last night to see you. She said that you left with her and then later you came back alone."

Having grown up with live-in help Adela was all too familiar with the lack of privacy that it brought. At her own home she had only day help and even that on a limited basis. In addition to her other problems she now had to figure out what to do with Lupe and the rest of her father's household staff. "It's nothing to concern yourself about," Adela said.

"Lupe said the woman was a detective."

"When someone dies unexpectedly there's always an investigation."

"I don't remember hearing about any detectives when Dad died," Consuelo persisted.

"There was an investigation of the plane crash. Perhaps there were detectives involved and we just didn't know about it," Adela said. "Listen, last night I went to the Medical Examiner's Office to identify your grandfather's body. That's all it was. The detective is going to call me today with the results of the autopsy. As a matter of fact, when she calls I am going to ask her to help me bring someone here."

"Another guest? We have enough people here already with Grandpa's servants," Consuelo complained.

"Actually we're having two more guests," Adela said. "I've asked my father's banker to come out from New York to help me with Rios Capital and the other person is his associate. I need their help right now."

Katy Carmichael had dealt with burn injuries before, but nothing had prepared her for the sight of the three injured firefighters who had just been brought to the ER. When the paramedics lifted one of the firefighters onto the bed in front of her, and she grasped the full horror of what had happened to him, Katy felt sick to her stomach. She stiffened her jaw and approached the bed, preparing to examine the man. But the ER Chief stopped her. He told her that she had been there too long for this one; the relief people were checking in now, he said, and he was going to use them instead. He told Katy to get some sleep. Except for a brief catnap taken sitting upright in a chair, she had been on her feet and working since the previous afternoon. Looking down at the burned man, Katy thought that he was lucky that she was not going to be taking care of him, because she no longer had the strength. She went to the main desk to sign out. Nate was there, signing in. "I was hoping I'd run into you," he said. "How's it been?"

"Where's Gordon?" Katy asked sharply.

"He's at the Fairgrounds," Nate explained. "He's OK. I found someone to watch him for the day."

"Really? And who is this person?"

"Relax," Nate said. "Gordon's with the banker from the deal. She's very nice."

"Nice? That's so reassuring," Katy said. "Thank you so much for leaving our son with someone you hardly know. But at least she works for Rios Capital. That speaks well of her. What's her name?"

"Georgina Graham, and she doesn't work for Rios Capital. She works for a bank in New York. Gordon has gotten to know her well enough to be comfortable with her. I needed to get in here to help. I had to leave him with somebody."

"I want to talk to Gordon. Do you have this woman's number?"

“Sure,” Nate said, reaching into his pocket. He fished out the scrap of paper that contained Georgina’s cell phone number. “Are you off now? You can’t go home, you know.”

“I’ll crash in the call rooms.”

“You look like you could use some sleep.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Katy said. She resolved to have it out with Nate about this woman, as soon as she could muster the energy.

“I miss Mommy,” Gordon said plaintively.

“Of course you do,” Georgina said. Moments earlier Georgina had promised Katy that she would call her immediately if she had even a minor concern about Gordon. But she had no intention of doing so; she would call Nate first. Georgina was not in the business of handling ex-wives. “We’re going to have fun today, Gordon, you’ll see,” she said. “Sonia’s taking us to visit the horses. She got special passes for us to go to the stables.”

“Cool,” Gordon said. “Can we go now?”

“We’ll go after lunch. Just a sec, Gordon, the phone again.”

“How are you holding up?” Nick asked.

“I have one piece of good news,” Georgina replied. “I’ll be getting out of here tomorrow. Mark has arranged for me to stay with Adela Rios.” Gordon was pulling on her arm, trying to get her attention. She motioned for him to keep quiet, but he was insistent. She leaned down and whispered to him, “Gordon, I’m on the phone. I’ll be with you in a minute, OK?”

“Who’s Gordon?” Nick asked.

“Believe it or not, I’m babysitting,” Georgina said. “Someone here at the shelter had to go to work, so I’m helping out.” She did not want to complicate matters by telling Nick that Gordon was Nate’s son. “Any news on your end?”

“An interesting development,” Nick replied. “Someone called in a tip to the TV station last night. Apparently Rios had done some sort of audit, and he was going make some personnel changes because of it.”

“Now I’m getting freaked out,” Georgina exclaimed. “This could mean something about motive, if Rios’ death wasn’t an accident.”

“Exactly,” Nick said. “The station hasn’t put anything about it on the air because they haven’t been able to get a second source to confirm the tip.”

“Should I tell Mark about this?”

“You should,” Nick advised. “It might sound odd, but I’m glad that Mark is going out there. He may make your life miserable at times but at least you’ll have someone there with you that you can trust.”

Sonia Rousseau and Christopher Wahl were standing in front of the jumbo television screen that had been set up at the Red Cross command center, watching footage of the burned-out barn at the Rios estate. The commentator said that the body had been identified as that of Alejandro Rios and an autopsy was being performed that day to determine the cause of death.

"The autopsy will clear up what happened," Christopher said. "It's weird that Mr. Rios didn't leave the barn when everyone else did. My Dad thought that he was so focused on loading up the horses that he didn't pay enough attention to what anyone else was doing. He thinks Mr. Rios got left behind in the confusion."

"But all he had to do was run outside," Sonia said. "The firefighters were right there and they saved the house and the barn."

"It is hard to understand why he stayed inside the barn," Christopher acknowledged. "He must have been overcome by smoke."

Georgina and Gordon came up to join them. "We've been looking for you, Sonia," Georgina said. "We want to take you up on your invitation to see the horses."

"Now would be a good time for that," Sonia said. She escorted the group to the temporary stables, where she tracked down her father.

"Glad you brought us some company," Jake said to Sonia.

"It would be fun for them to feed carrots to the horses," Sonia suggested. When her father said that that was fine with him, Sonia held out her open palm to demonstrate the correct technique. While her guests were preoccupied with their task—and she was sure that Christopher could not hear—Sonia spoke to her father. "I need to get your take on something," she said.

"Sure," Jake said. "What's up?" Sonia told her father about the incident in the rose garden. Her father listened attentively but he did not appear concerned. "Rios chewed people out over nothing," he reminded her. "He was on Wahl's case as much as he was on anyone's. I doubt there's any significance to what you saw."

"But the detective seemed so interested in it. She asked me a lot of questions, about what I knew about Wahl, about the barn, everything."

"You think that she asked you a lot of questions?" Jake said. "She was with you for twenty minutes, right? She grilled me for over an hour, going over and over what happened at the barn when we were loading up the horses. Then she asked the same questions all over again and a whole lot of new questions about how the barn was run, who was responsible for this and that. That woman is a bulldog."

"I'm worried that Rios' death might not have been an accident," Sonia confided. "And I think Christopher's father might be involved in it."

"Oh, come on, Sonia," Jake scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous."

Chapter Fourteen

“We’ll can’t hold the memorial service until the fire is over but I want to get as much done as we can now,” Adela said. She was eating lunch in the dining room with her daughters. “I’ve decided that it will be by invitation only.”

Pilar looked up from her salad. “Invitation only? Why?” she asked.

“I want to keep it intimate,” Adela replied. “And I want to avoid media coverage.”

“Who are you going to invite?”

“Family, and a few people from Rios Capital, the senior ones,” Adela said.

“But what about the staff from the house and the barn? Some people worked for him for years. I’m sure they would want to attend.”

Adela looked uneasily over her shoulder. Seeing that Lupe had left the room she said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to invite the staff. I’m going to have to lay them off, you know.”

“What about his business contacts and people he knew from the Ranch?” Pilar asked. When Adela reminded Pilar that her father was not really close to anyone, Consuelo jumped in, supporting her mother’s idea to keep the event small.

“If you open it up,” Consuelo said, “it will turn into a networking event. And who knows what people might say at the open mic segment.”

“There will be no open microphone,” Adela declared firmly.

“Pity,” Pilar said, sharing a knowing look with her sister. “I was rather looking forward to hearing some unscripted remarks about dear Grandpa.”

“Pilar, please be more respectful,” Adela scolded. “I want to bury your grandfather with dignity. And I want each of you to say a few words about him at the service.”

“Are you going to speak?” Pilar asked.

“No, I think not.”

“Then why do we have to?”

“Don’t you want to say something about what he meant to you?” Adela asked.

“We could ask the same about you, Mom,” Pilar replied. “We hardly knew him. When I came home from college last Christmas he didn’t even realize that I had been away. If anyone from the family speaks, Mom, it should be you.”

“Let me think more about that,” Adela said. “In any event, I was thinking of holding the service at the golf club, assuming that the fire doesn’t damage it. They’re good at putting together an event on short notice and it will be easier to keep it private there.”

"If we're going to do it at the golf club I'd like to invite some friends," Consuelo said. "Maybe we could have something separate for the younger crowd in one of the smaller rooms."

"We're talking about a memorial service, Consuelo, not a party."

"Who do you think will be in mourning, Mom?" Consuelo said. "You?"

"Don't make this situation any harder than it has to be," Adela said. "I'm having a hard enough time right now. You girls don't know what pressure I'm under. And it's not just this memorial service. I have to come up to speed on the business. After so many years away, I'm not sure that I'm up to taking it over."

"You would be great running the business," Pilar said. "You put so much energy into these charity things that you do, but honestly, Mom, you could do so much more with your talents."

"Rios Capital is a much bigger commitment than what I've been doing with the charities," Adela said. "And remember, girls, our lifestyle is at risk here. The wrong management at the business would be a disaster for our futures."

"That's a sobering thought," Pilar said. "For all his faults, Grandpa did provide, provide, provide. I guess we relied on him for financial support, if nothing else."

"No 'guess' about it," Adela said. "Our money has always come from your grandfather. Your father was a wonderful man, but he never made much of a living." They fell silent for a moment. "I have to step up and run Rios Capital," Adela went on, "or find someone who can do it for me. And I don't have much time to make that decision. Your grandfather was not a long-term investor. The way he ran Rios Capital kept a lot of balls in the air and they are all going to come crashing down on me if I don't move quickly."

"Can these bankers from New York take over the business?" Pilar asked.

"They don't run businesses," Adela replied. "They run money. But they can find new management for Rios Capital if I decide that it's too much for me to handle."

"Don't sell yourself short, Mom," Pilar said. "You have wonderful business instincts. Grandpa always told us that you were the only person that he would fear facing in a deal."

"He told me the same thing, many times," Adela recalled. "You know, my ability to close a deal may well have been what he most liked about me."

"Maybe that's why he left you the business," Pilar said.

"And here I was thinking that he left it to me because he loved me." Adela laughed.

"Something tells me that your favorite color is blue," Georgina said.

"I like red better," Gordon said.

"Really? You picked blue clothes yesterday and today."

"Because they didn't have anything red. Duuuuh," Gordon said cheekily. "Can I get washed up now and put on my new clothes?" Georgina hesitated, recalling Katy's sharp tone on the telephone earlier. There were portable showers nearby, but she was reluctant to undress Gordon and bathe him. She told Gordon that he would have to wait for his father

to return. “No, *now*,” Gordon protested in a whiny voice. “Daddy’s always late. I don’t want to wait.”

“Your father will be here soon,” Georgina told him. “Look, we’re both tired. Let’s go take a rest and I’ll tell you a story.”

“You know stories?” Gordon looked up at her hopefully.

“One or two,” Georgina said. She led Gordon to his cot and suggested that he lie down. When he was comfortably settled in, she sat down on the floor next to him. “Would you like a story about a dragon or a story about a dog?”

“A dragon, please.”

Soon after Georgina began the tale, a staple from her childhood, Gordon drifted off to sleep, his mouth growing lax and his pudgy hands hanging off the sides of the cot. Not long after, Nate appeared at the entrance to the exhibit hall. He waved a small package in the air and walked quickly towards her. “I brought you something from the gift shop,” he said.

“The shelter has a gift shop?” Georgina said incredulously.

“No, the hospital gift shop,” Nate said, grinning.

“Of course, the hospital gift shop,” Georgina said, embarrassed at her gaffe. She opened the package; it contained an assortment of nuts and dried fruits. “Thanks,” she said. “These will hit the spot.”

“I wanted to thank you for helping me out with Gordon,” Nate explained. “And I hope I can persuade you to do it again tomorrow.”

“Sorry, I can’t,” Georgina said. “I’m leaving in the morning.” She took a piece of fruit from the box and put it in her mouth.

“Leaving? How did you pull that off?” Nate asked. “Where are you going?”

“Adela Rios figured out a way to get me to the beach house where she’s staying,” Georgina replied. She offered Nate something from the box. “By the way, Adela is the heir to Rios Capital, as we thought. Mark will be here tomorrow and we are going to work on the transition with her.”

“I really need to know where the deal is going,” Nate said. “When are you going to talk to her about ZIFIX?”

“I’ll bring it up with her as soon as I can but I can’t promise that it will be tomorrow,” Georgina replied. “Your deal is small compared to most of the ones Rios Capital has going right now. It won’t be the first thing that Mark and I discuss with her.”

Roused from his nap by the conversation Gordon lifted up his arms towards his father. Nate hoisted his son up. Still drowsy, Gordon rested his head heavily on Nate’s shoulder. Georgina told Nate about Gordon’s request to take a shower. “I’ll take him,” Nate said. “Could I persuade you to join us later for some fine dining? I’ve heard the shelter cooks are preparing something special for this evening.”

“Sure, you know where to find me,” Georgina said.

After Nate and Gordon had departed, Georgina called Pearl and Millie in New York. They were relieved to hear from her, but concerned for her welfare. She told them that she

was becoming numb to the conditions at the shelter. That morning, she said, she had accepted a T-shirt from the Red Cross because she could not bear to wear the same blouse another day. The T-shirt had turned out to be two sizes too large and it hung unattractively below the hem of her suit jacket. She had been tempted to take a pair of jeans as well but her desire to preserve her dignity by wearing her suit had prevailed.

“Now imagine the total picture,” Georgina said. “It’s not just my clothes. My hair’s a mess. I let it air dry after I shampooed last night and it’s going its own way. And on top of straggly hair, I’m bare faced because most of my makeup is in my carry on bag and that’s in the car I had to leave behind at the estate. What kind of first impression am I going to make with Adela tomorrow? She’ll think I’m a bag lady, not a banker.”

“Adela can’t possibly mistake you for a bag lady,” Millie teased, “because you will arrive at her house without a bag.”

“Thank you for treating my misfortune with the seriousness it deserves, Millie,” Georgina retorted.

“I’m sure Adela will cut you slack on how you look,” Pearl reassured Georgina. “She’s a woman and she’ll understand.”

“You’re probably right about Adela,” Georgina agreed. “Mark, however, is another matter. He expects perfection regardless of the circumstances. Well, I’ll do what I can to fix up before I see them tomorrow. I’ll wash the blouse and hopefully it will be presentable enough to wear. And tomorrow morning, no matter how long it takes, I’ll stand in line until I get a turn at a hair dryer.”

“What’s happening with the deal?” Millie asked. “Has the doctor backed out?”

“No, he hasn’t,” Georgina replied. “And I’m really not worried about that any more. He hasn’t raised the issue after that one time.” She did not add that Nate had reached out to her and asked her to babysit his son. “I think he understands that this deal is his only option. He’s on board.”

“What did Mark say when you told him that Carmichael might bolt?”

“I wimped out and sent him an email about it. I’m just too tired to match wits with Mark on the phone,” Georgina confessed. “He shot an email right back warning me not to screw it up. His words.”

“And you haven’t,” Millie said.

Georgina signed off with her friends and called Nick. He had news. The anchor of the after market show, Melanie Orr, had tipped him off that FNBS was planning to do reverse recruiting in his case. A network executive had approached her, she said, and asked her how she would feel about Nick becoming a regular panelist on her show. Nick was surprised when Melanie told him that she had assured the executive that she would not only welcome him as a panelist but she even proposed to have Nick fill in for her as anchor when she was on vacation. “This could be huge,” Georgina said, elated at the prospect of Nick staying at FNBS, and in New York. “I didn’t realize what an ally you have in Melanie.”

"I didn't either," Nick said. "I told her I wouldn't let on that she had mentioned the idea to me."

"Except you told me."

"You're my special case," Nick said. "Since I'm not supposed to know about it, I can't make any moves myself to promote the idea. Even if FNBS make me a counteroffer, it might not be as good as the one I've already got in Washington. We'll have to see how this plays out. Anyway, enough about me. How are *you* holding up?"

"I'm hanging in there," Georgina said. "Anything new from your sources? Have you heard what the autopsy showed?"

"Apparently nothing leaks from the Medical Examiner's Office," Nick replied. "And no new tips called in to the station either. A lull in the action, I guess."

"Or the calm before the storm," Georgina said.

"What? She's saving someone she doesn't even know from this hellhole and she's leaving us here to rot?" Lauren Wahl was livid. Her entire face was quivering. "Why don't you tell her a thing or two, Phillip? Put it to her!"

"Calm down, Lauren," Wahl said. "This is no time to aggravate Adela. Remember, my job is on the line."

"And your family, Phillip?" Lauren hissed. "Aren't you going to stand up for your family?"

"I have to go," Philip said. "That detective wants to talk to me again. In the meantime, why don't you put a lid on it."

"Put a lid on it?" Lauren was screaming at her husband now. "Nice, Philip, very nice. And should I keep a lid on Christopher hanging out all day with that horseman's daughter? I told you there was something going on there. I told you. You need to put a stop to whatever your son is up to with that girl. Do you hear me, Philip? DO YOU HEAR ME?"

Phillip Wahl walked away without so much as a backward glance at his wife.

Chapter Fifteen

The people from *Casa Feliz* were seated together at a long table. Georgina searched the shelter's eating area until she caught sight of Nate and Gordon seated at a smaller table nearby. "Good morning you two," she said as she sat down.

"Hey, good morning," Nate said. "So, when are you leaving us?"

"Right after breakfast," Georgina said. "Detective Mori is driving me to Adela's."

"Detective Mori?" Nate said, surprised. "How did that happen?"

"She called me last night and said that she could give me a lift," Georgina replied. "I'm guessing that Adela Rios asked her to do it. Adela has been in contact with Mark, and he's coming in today to stay with her."

"You should pump her for information on the way to Adela's. You know, casually ask her if she knows who killed Rios," Nate suggested with a laugh.

"I don't plan to go there."

"Do you know who's on her interview list today? I heard that yesterday it was Philip Wahl. For three hours."

"Really? I didn't even know that she was here yesterday," Georgina said. "Sorry, I have no idea who she's talking to today."

"Her look is rather striking, don't you think?" Nate asked. "I only saw her up close that one time, when she interviewed us. Maybe I'm just used to women who work in hospitals, but I thought that she wore way too much make-up. It was as if she was wearing a mask."

Georgina thought about her own face and its lack of cosmetic enhancement. At least, she reassured herself, her hair was nicely blown out this morning and her freshly washed blouse looked presentable enough under her suit jacket. Gordon, who had been listening in while he ate his cereal, declared that he thought the detective lady was very pretty. Georgina marveled at how young they start to notice. The conversation veered to the wildfire's progress. Nate had checked out the news before coming to breakfast. The fire was now almost completely contained in the Rancho Secreto area, he reported, but further to the east there were still flare-ups. A lot would depend on how the Santa Ana winds blew that day.

While they ate Georgina kept one eye on the people at the *Casa Feliz* table, watching for a sign that they were ready to leave. She wanted to say goodbye to Wahl before she left for Adela's. Wahl, she saw, appeared to be in a serious conversation with Jake. Sonia was seated between the two Wahl boys; the three teenagers were having a lively exchange punctuated by bouts of laughter. Lauren sat sullenly next to her husband, saying nothing. The others from the Rios estate, including Jose, talked among themselves.

Officer Garcia approached Georgina's table. He had become a fixture in the shelter environs. Georgina was convinced that he was keeping a watchful eye on everyone who had been at the barn that fateful morning. "Detective Mori sent me to track you down," he said to her. "She needs to take care of some business here before she can give you a ride. Can you meet her in an hour by the command center?" Georgina said that she would be there.

Officer Garcia then walked over to the *Casa Feliz* table. He greeted everyone jovially and engaged in a few minutes of small talk. Then he leaned down and whispered something into Jose's ear. Jose's face fell. Without a word, Jose got up and followed Officer Garcia out of the hall.

After Pilar and Consuelo left to show Georgina to the room where she would be staying, Adela and Sam sat down in the living room. Adela told Sam that, since they had last spoken, she had recalled something. "When I told you about the audit," she said, "you asked me whether anyone else knew about it. I've been doing some more thinking, and I believe that my father may have mentioned it to Philip Wahl."

"Did your father say *when* he talked to Wahl about it?" Sam asked.

Adela frowned. "I don't recall him saying anything about that. But I'm almost certain that he told me that last morning at breakfast that Wahl knew about the audit."

"Have you spoken to Wahl about this?" Sam asked.

"I've only spoken to him briefly since my father died. The audit didn't come up."

"I would appreciate it if you did not discuss anything related to the audit with him," Sam said. "Is there anything else you would like to tell me?"

Adela rose from her chair. "No, that's it. Oh, here's Lupe. She can show you out."

After Sam departed Adela joined her daughters and Georgina in one of the guest bedrooms. "Georgina has no clothes with her," Consuelo said. "She was at Grandpa's when the fire came and she had to leave her luggage behind. Why don't we have Covet send over some things for her, like they did for us yesterday?" Covet, a local upscale boutique, was a favorite with the Rios women.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Georgina said. "Perhaps I could just borrow some things."

"We don't have much here for you to borrow," Adela said. "Consuelo and I arrived with nothing and Pilar came with only one bag. We're all wearing new outfits from Covet. Really, Georgina, it would please me to arrange for you to get some new clothes. My treat."

"It would be great to get out of what I'm wearing," Georgina said. "That's very generous of you, Ms. Rios."

"Please call me Adela. I don't stand on formalities," Adela said. "So you were at my father's that morning?" Adela's only first-hand account of the events at *Casa Feliz* had come from Wahl, who had been less than forthcoming in his description. Adela assumed that Wahl's defensiveness derived from his concern that she might blame him for leaving the scene before he was sure that her father was safe. She was eager to learn what Georgina had

observed. "I had breakfast with my father that morning," Adela told her. "When he left to go up to his office he said that he had a meeting with some people. You must have been one of those people, right?"

"We were signing papers for an acquisition that he was making, a local biotech company."

"So now I own one of those startups over by the university?" Adela asked.

"It's a startup and it's near the university but you don't own it, at least not yet," Georgina said. "We had to leave before the papers were signed, so the deal is up in the air for now. I was hoping that I could present it to you, when you have the time. The terms are very favorable to you."

"If you work for Mark, I'm sure that you're a formidable negotiator, Georgina," Adela said. "But I don't know anything about biotech. We'll have to see about that. Right now I'm more interested in hearing about what happened the morning of the fire. Can you tell me what you saw?"

"Hey, it's Nate."

"Hi," Georgina said. She was in the guest bedroom looking over the clothes that had just arrived from Covet. "How are you and Gordon making out?"

"We're doing all right," he said. "We're still at the Fairgrounds. Gordon wants to hear the end of the dragon story."

"You can tell him he has a rain check, good anytime."

"Anything happening with the deal?"

"I spoke to Adela about it, but only briefly," Georgina said. "Basically I told her that it involves a biotech startup. But I won't be able to tell her any more specifics about it today. Mark is due any minute and we're going to meet with her about the big picture for Rios Capital."

"Thanks for at least bringing it up with her," Nate said. "I don't know if you've heard, but the evacuation order is going to be lifted at noon tomorrow."

"That's great news," Georgina said. "I'm sure you and Gordon will be glad to get out of the Fairgrounds."

"You can bet on that."

"I'll be in touch when I have anything for you about the sale."

"That's all I can ask," Nate said.

Georgina returned to her examination of the clothing that was spread out across the bed. The items were surprisingly refined, she thought, considering they were from a California boutique. She put on a sapphire blue silk blouse and tailored white pants. She was admiring herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door when Lupe came by with the news that Mark had arrived. Georgina followed Lupe to Mark's room, located a short distance away on the same hallway.

"Well, look at you," Mark said approvingly when he saw her.

“Adela had these sent over for me,” Georgina explained. “I’ve been living in the same clothes since the fire started and she took pity on me.”

“Adela’s like that,” Mark said. “Bighearted. Sometimes I have to caution her to put on the brakes in her charitable giving. She can be swayed by a sob story. So, what have you talked about with her so far?”

“Very little about business. She wanted to hear what happened at her father’s on the morning of the fire and I told her what I knew. I did mention the ZIFIX deal.”

“Let’s not discuss that one with her today,” Mark said. “It’s too small.”

“Right,” Georgina agreed. “But before we meet with Adela, could you hear me out about one thing?”

“As long as it’s not another conspiracy theory. Nothing more about audits, please.”

“This is new and I think that you should know about it,” Georgina said.

“I’m listening.”

“That detective who has been asking questions, Detective Mori, drove me here from the Fairgrounds. On the way she asked me what I knew about Rios’ racing stable,” Georgina said. “I was surprised that she asked me about that, and then I remembered something. The day I met Rios, Wahl made a remark about wanting the racing operation to run more like a business, for tax purposes. I brushed it off at the time, but now I wonder.”

“None of this sounds even remotely suspicious to me,” Mark said.

“Do you think we should discuss any of this with Adela?”

“Certainly not,” Mark said. “She has enough on her mind. From here on out, I want you to focus on our number one priority, which is keeping the Rios Capital account. I don’t want to hear any more about how Rios.”

Later, at dinner, Georgina watched as Mark talked with Adela. Listening to the caring way that he spoke to her reminded Georgina of how skillfully Mark was able to modify his approach to match each client’s personality. With one client he would be the commanding general holding forth with an authoritative air, while with another he would be circumspect and respectful. He had chosen the latter approach with Adela. As Mark continued to offer her reassurances about the future for Rios Capital, Georgina saw Adela visibly relax.

Over coffee and dessert Mark raised the question of who should assume the helm at Rios Capital. He threw out several scenarios for Adela to consider. When he asked her if Wahl could step up into this role, Adela scoffed. Her father, she said, had regarded Wahl as a competent operations manager but a nuts and bolts type of thinker who lacked the vision required for the top job. To Georgina’s astonishment Adela went on to declare that Wahl’s wife was an ostentatious, social-climbing shrew. No man as hen-pecked as Wahl, Adela said, had any business running Rios Capital. Georgina could not suppress a knowing smile. Seeing her reaction, Adela said, “Something tells me that you have had the pleasure of meeting Lauren Wahl.”

“She was at the shelter,” Georgina said.

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but picturing Lauren in a public shelter is a trifle amusing,” Adela said. “She must have been a handful.”

“She did make her presence felt,” Georgina acknowledged.

“No,” Adela said, “I will most certainly *not* be making Lauren Wahl the First Lady of Rios Capital. But that means bringing someone in from the outside or, dare I say it, with me taking it on myself. I was very active in the business years ago and it’s tempting at this time in my life, with my daughters almost grown, to think about getting back in.” Adela went on to describe what it was like to work at Rios Capital in the early days. Her father had been a great mentor, she said. He had often remarked that he was grooming her to take over one day. She had loved being in business. But, she admitted, dealing with her mercurial father had taken its toll. When she married she had decided that she wanted to live in a less stressful way. She had stepped back from Rios Capital completely. She told them that she had never regretted her decision.

Georgina was impressed by how open Adela was in sharing such personal details with them. At first she had been concerned that Adela might be her father’s daughter. But after less than a day’s acquaintance, Georgina now believed that Adela was very much her own woman. She felt a bond with her, recognizing in her account of her early years with her father much of what she was experiencing now with Mark.

As soon as the evacuation order was lifted the temporary residents of Rios’ beach house readied themselves to resume their everyday lives. Unable to find anything more suitable in which to pack her new clothes, Georgina stowed them in kitchen trash bags and deposited the bags into the trunk of Mark’s rental car. Georgina suggested to Mark that they pick up her car at the Rios estate before checking in at the Inn. Adela instructed the staff, with the exception of Lupe, to return to *Casa Feliz* to assist with the clean up. She asked Lupe to go to her house to field calls and to help with the plans for her father’s memorial service. As she said goodbye to Mark and Georgina Adela told them that she planned to stop by the racetrack on her way home, to see how the horses were faring. She added that she wanted to hear more about the biotech deal in their next meeting, scheduled for the following morning.

As they drove to the Ranch Mark impressed on Georgina how important it was to seal the ZIFIX deal immediately, now that Adela had expressed an interest in it. He asked Georgina how certain she was that Nate was going to sign. Georgina said that she was completely certain, but Mark was not reassured. He told her to invite him to join them for dinner that evening, so that he could see for himself.

When they entered Rancho Secreto Georgina saw that the fire had not touched any of the homes west of the village. A number of National Guardsmen and firefighters were gathered near their vehicles on the side of the main road; they were acknowledging the appreciative honks from returning motorists. Once past the village and on the road east to *Casa Feliz*, Georgina saw the first evidence of the fire. Many homes were gutted to their concrete slab foundations, with only the remains of fireplaces recognizable. The landscape,

however, was not one of universal destruction. The fire had been capricious. It skipped over whole sections of the Ranch as it blew west towards the ocean. At one turn of the road there was nothing but blackened earth and the charred outlines where homes had once stood, while at the next turn there was little amiss, with only a tree or two singed at the top.

When they reached the Rios estate Georgina directed Mark to where she had parked her car, next to Wahl's Maserati. Wahl was standing in front of the charred remains of both vehicles. "I see the fire has deprived you of your car," he said in greeting to Georgina. "As you can see, mine has met the same fate."

"I'm so sorry," Georgina said as she joined him. Looking at the two burnt out hulks, she decided against trying to pry open the trunk of her car to see what was left of her carry on bag. "Mine was just a rental, but yours was special."

"Fortunately I had very special insurance on it," Wahl said. "I'm driving my wife's car now. I suppose I should look on the bright side. Since she's stranded at home, she can't spend any money."

"There's always the Internet," Georgina said helpfully.

"I forgot about that. Nowhere is safe." Wahl managed to laugh. He held out his hand to Mark. "Good to see you again, Mark. Sorry it isn't under better circumstances."

"Good to see you too, Philip," Mark said. "Thanks for keeping in such close contact with me these last few days. It couldn't have been easy for you, with all the commotion you've been dealing with."

"It's been a major hassle," Wahl agreed.

"The house doesn't look too bad," Georgina said. "Have you been inside yet?"

"I just took a quick tour. There's some smoke and water damage but otherwise it's in good shape," Wahl said. "One thing has me worried, though. Rios' office has been cleared out."

"Cleared out?" Mark said, suddenly interested. "What do you mean?"

"Someone has gone through his desk and file cabinets," Wahl replied. "All his papers are gone, and the safe has been emptied out."

Georgina and Mark exchanged concerned glances. "When we were leaving the housekeeper said that she was carrying out an evacuation plan," Georgina recalled. "Perhaps someone on the staff was assigned to save the papers from his office."

"Could be. I'll check that out with the staff," Wahl said. "I've got copies of all the documents related to the business but I want to be sure that Adela gets everything she needs. Anyway, I'll see you both at Adela's tomorrow morning. Hopefully I'll have found the papers by then." He said goodbye and walked across the courtyard towards the house. Georgina waited until Wahl had gone inside the building before speaking.

"That audit is with the missing paperwork," she said. "I'll bet you anything."

"Which someone on the staff has already given to Adela," Mark said, "I'm sure nothing is actually missing."

“I know you’re skeptical but you have to admit this is strange,” Georgina said. “Someone with something to hide could have cleaned out Rios’ office. If Wahl doesn’t find out where the papers are by the time we meet with Adela tomorrow, I’m going to give Detective Mori a call.”

“You will do nothing of the sort, Georgina,” Mark said firmly. “If anything is missing, Adela will decide what to do. *You* are staying out of this.”

Chapter Sixteen

“You know what, Nate,” Katy said briskly into her cell phone, “I’ve been inside this hospital for four straight days working my butt off. You have been here all of one shift during the entire fire. One shift! Wrap your mind around that. So *you* can figure out how to take care of Gordon until I’m off.”

“Katy, be reasonable,” Nate pleaded. “I’m catching all kinds of heat for not being at the hospital now that the evacuation order is lifted.” He tried to keep his tone measured to avoid upsetting Gordon, who was listening in to his end of the conversation.

“Really? You’re taking heat, are you?” Katy huffed. “I’m *so* sorry that being a parent is complicating your career. But since this is the first time *that* has ever happened to you, frankly, I’m underwhelmed.” She hung up.

Nate considered his options. Gordon’s school would not reopen for another day and he could not take him to the hospital. He would either have to work from home or go to ZIFIX. With Gordon there, working from home would be largely unproductive. But if he took Gordon to ZIFIX he would have to face his employees, who were urging him to provide clarity about the company’s future. Nate had not yet informed them that the investment from Rios Capital had turned into an outright sale of the company. He felt guilty that he had not been completely candid with the people who worked for him.

Gordon had finished putting his PJs and a few small toys that he had received from the Red Cross into his backpack. Exhibit Hall B was now almost completely empty except for a few workers who were loading folded cots onto palettes for storage. Nate decided to go to ZIFIX. He would tell his employees that he was still working with Rios Capital on the terms of the deal, which was technically correct, he told himself.

Nate and Gordon left the hall and joined the throng moving towards the parking lot. Gordon was full of questions about where they were going and when was he going to see Mommy again. Nate was distracted and did not answer him.

As he drove along the coast road towards the startup Nate ruminated on his increasingly precarious situation. Was Adela going to buy ZIFIX, or was she going to cut him loose? And if there was no deal, what other options did he have? Feeling unsettled, he pulled over at a beach. While Gordon ran ahead, dodging the waves that splashed up onto the sand, Nate mulled over the events of the past few days. He had never before felt so adrift. He was used to being focused, to knowing what his next step was going to be. Up until now his life had unfolded largely according to his own dictates. But Katy’s harsh words that morning had reminded him how much his life had changed.

At first, after the divorce, Nate had held out hope that he and Katy would reconcile. But over the last year, as Katy's demeanor towards him grew more distant, he had reluctantly concluded that she was only interested in him as a co-parent to Gordon. The new man in her life was even more evidence that Katy had moved on. But Katy had always been his anchor, the one who cleared the decks for him so that he could pursue whatever was most important to him at the time. Without her, his life had become disordered. He felt as if he were falling through a series of tiny fissures in the fabric of reality, in a fully disorienting, downward spiral.

Nate's cell phone rang. It was Georgina.

"Have you left the Fairgrounds yet?" she inquired.

"We have," Nate replied. "In fact, Gordon and I are at the beach. What's up?"

"Mark wants you to have dinner with us tonight to discuss the deal," Georgina said. "We're going to present it to Adela in the morning."

"That's terrific," Nate said. "Just tell me when and where."

"Do you know Martin's?"

Martin's was Katy's favorite restaurant, the place where Nate had always taken her to celebrate their anniversary. "Sure do," he said. "What time?"

"Let's make it seven thirty," Georgina said.

"Seven thirty it is."

Nate called out to Gordon that it was time to go. Gordon made a mischievous face and scampered off. Nate chased after him, following him to a rocky outcropping that lay at the base of a low cliff. Gordon crawled up the rock. Nate watched with amusement while his son taunted him from his lofty perch, four feet above the beach. When Gordon failed to comply when he was asked to climb down, Nate said goodbye to him and began to walk slowly towards the car. Gordon quickly appeared at his side.

Nate left the coast road and drove up a pine-forested bluff that rose up from the ocean. At the top of the bluff he turned into a technology park. He entered the plain, two-story stucco building that housed ZIFIX, along with several other scientific businesses. Nate settled Gordon into the break room, leaving him with a stack of blank copy paper and some pencils. Avoiding his employees for the moment, he went directly to his office and called Katy. He asked if by chance she would be home before 7 p.m., and, if so, would it be convenient for him to drop Gordon off? He was relieved when Katy said that she would be home by six.

Nate leaned back in his chair and pondered his next move. From what Georgina had said, Mark Webber was a tough customer. He would need to be in top form at dinner. But he had one thing going for him, he thought. Georgina. If anyone could convince Mark that the deal should go forward, she was it. After all, she had persuaded him to take the offer from Rios Capital in the first place. He recalled how angry he had been with her that first night when she had handed him the offer letter over dinner. But Nate's anger towards Georgina had long since dissipated.

Diamante whinnied at the sight of Adela. "Oh, Mom, that's just too much," Consuelo laughed. "You must be spoiling him."

"He's just happy to see me," Adela said, rubbing her horse's neck affectionately. "Now I want to make sure that he gets to our little barn as soon as possible. Let's go find Jose and make that happen, shall we?" Adela and her daughters poked around the temporary stalls until they found Jose. He was kneeling over a bale of hay, engrossed in cutting away the twine. When Adela called out his name, he startled. He stammered out a greeting as he rose to his feet. "Sorry to give you a scare," Adela apologized. "The girls and I decided to check on the horses on our way home."

Jose hastily pocketed the knife that he was using to cut the twine. He wiped his hands on the side of his jeans. Respectfully, he shook Adela's hand. "I can't tell you how sorry I am for your loss," he said.

"Thank you," Adela replied. "And thank you for saving the horses, especially Diamante."

"He's a great one, that Diamante," Jose said. "But I have to tell you, since he's been here he's been off his food. Probably it's from being in strange surroundings."

"If you can manage it, Jose, let's get him and the girls' horses moved to my house today," Adela said. "My barn has only three stalls, but they will be more comfortable there. I'll get the vet out tomorrow to check on Diamante. And send over some feed with them, will you?"

"I'll get right on it," Jose promised. "We can keep the rest of the horses here for another week but after that, we'll have to relocate them. There's a pasture that I have my eye on that would be a good place to keep them, while you decide what you want to do with them."

Recalling her father's caution about Jose, Adela chose her words carefully. "I'll want to talk more to you and to Jake before I decide what to do with the horses," she said. "Where's Jake anyway?"

"He's here," Jose said. "He's had bad news. The place he was renting burned, so he's calling around trying to find somewhere to stay."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Adela said, immediately concerned for Sonia's welfare. "Why, I have an idea. They can stay in my guesthouse. It's perfect. Jake can look after the horses and Sonia can get to know my daughters better. She already knows Consuelo."

"What a generous offer," Jose murmured.

Adela found Jake and Sonia on the track, working out two thoroughbreds. Jake was thrilled by Adela's offer; he proposed that he would continue to work with the racehorses at the track while also caring for her family horses at her estate. Adela invited Sonia to come along with her and the girls. As she drove home Adela listened to her daughters chat with Sonia. What a stroke of luck, she thought. The distraction of someone their own age would be useful for her girls, since her own time would now be consumed with preparations for

her father's memorial service and with taking over Rios Capital. The arrangement would also allow her to better assess Jake, away from Jose's prying eyes.

Adela and her daughters showed Sonia around the guesthouse. Adela and Carlos had purchased it as newlyweds and had lived there while they designed a larger house for the property. They had not anticipated that finding a suitable site for the larger house would be difficult. But as they grew more familiar with the land, they had realized that the existing house stood on the very best site. They had decided to demolish it. Their decision had not been simple to implement. Since the original architect of Rancho Secreto had designed the house, it had historic significance in the eyes of the committee that approved new structures in the community. Bowing to the committee's strong opposition to its demolition, Adela had arranged to have the house moved, intact, to another site on the property. Although at the time she had been exasperated about the expense involved, later she had come to describe this turn of events as providential. She had grown to appreciate the elegant Spanish design of the old house and its link to the community's past. The guesthouse had become especially important to her after Carlos died, as a visible reminder of the happy days of their early-married life.

Adela and Sonia were standing in the guesthouse's small library. Adela asked Sonia if she was a reader. "My two things in life are riding and reading," Sonia said. She looked over the crowded bookshelves with interest. "When I'm not at school or on a horse I have my nose in a book." Adela was pleased to learn that Sonia shared not only her love of horses but also of literature. If only she could have inspired her daughters to love reading, she thought. While they embraced everything equestrian her girls came up short when it came to intellectual interests.

After inviting Sonia to join them for dinner, Adela and her daughters walked the short distance to their house. The girls retreated to their rooms. Adela went into the kitchen to find Lupe, who presented her with a basket overflowing with messages. Sighing, Adela went to her office. But before she could return any calls her cell phone rang. It was Detective Mori. Adela felt a chill.

Chapter Seventeen

Gordon ran full tilt towards Katy. He threw his arms around her, ecstatic to see her again. Then he disappeared into the house to greet his many possessions. Katy remained standing in the doorway, her arms crossed in front of her.

"I'd like to talk," Nate said. "May I come in?"

"Is it important?" Katy asked. "I need to get Gordon something to eat."

"I understand that you're busy, but yes, it's important," Nate said. He followed Katy into the living room. Being in the familiar space gave him the odd feeling of being a guest in his own home. "The last few days have made me do some thinking," he began.

"About...?"

"I want to spend more time with Gordon."

Katy's eyes narrowed. "More time? In what way?"

"In whatever way works best for the three of us," Nate said. "I'm not here to cause a problem. I'll work with you on this. I just want to take more of a role in raising Gordon, which should make life easier for you by the way."

"What's going on here?" Katy asked. "Why suddenly do you want more time with Gordon? So he can watch TV by himself while you work?"

"I want to be a bigger part of his life," Nate replied. "And I'm not talking about parallel play. I want to really *be* with him."

"You've never had time for anything but work," Katy said. "If you're serious, something would have to give. Maybe you should cut back on your time at ZIFIX. We were at least treading water in our marriage before you threw that startup into the mix."

Nate winced at Katy's dig but he replied evenly, "Right now I've got a responsibility to the people that I hired there. I have to see this deal through. When Rios Capital takes over, maybe I can take a step back."

"Once they take over, you won't have anything to say about what happens," Katy said. "So much for taking care of your employees. Remember, I warned you about Rios."

"I hear that Rios is no longer with the company," Nate said dryly.

Gordon reappeared and asked what there was to eat. Katy invited Nate to follow her into the kitchen. Nate sat at the counter and watched the familiar scene as Katy made supper and Gordon played.

Nate had avoided talking to Katy about his predicament at the startup because his time commitment there had figured so prominently in their final arguments. But now that he was leveling with her, he experienced some of the same emotions that he had in their early years together, when she had served as his sounding board. He admitted to her that he

would not have taken his eye off the startup's finances if he had been able to talk things over with her day by day, the way he had done when they were married.

Katy let Nate talk. When he was finished she wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and came to sit beside him. "We've all been through a big upheaval the last few days," she said. "You need to take a deep breath and think more about this before you make any big change."

"I need to know if you're open to letting me have more time with Gordon," Nate said.

"We can talk about that," Katy said, putting one hand on top of his. "I'm happy for you that you want to be with Gordon more. That's a hopeful sign."

Pilar and Consuelo appeared at Sonia's door, laden down with shopping bags. "Are those all for me?" Sonia asked.

"You bet," Pilar replied. "And you don't have to thank us. You have no idea how badly we needed to clean out our closets."

"This gives us an excuse to go shopping," Consuelo added, "so we should be thanking you." The three girls set about sorting through the contents of the bags. Moments later, Lupe poked her head thru the door to ask if they needed anything from the village market. Sonia asked her to pick up a few toiletries.

After Lupe left, the girls asked Sonia to tell them about her experiences on the horseracing circuit. The hunter-jumper competitions in which they competed were genteel affairs, and the people they met through riding were typically from the same background as themselves. Both girls were curious about the rough and tumble world of thoroughbred racing that Sonia knew. Sonia did not disappoint, telling them story after story about the colorful people that she had encountered at racetracks around the country. The girls found that they had much in common, and just enough differences to make it interesting.

Lupe returned with the items that Sonia had requested; she said that she was going to start dinner shortly. Taking Lupe's cue, Pilar and Consuelo said goodbye and went back to the house with Lupe.

Christopher's call minutes later came as a welcome surprise. He had just heard that Sonia had been left homeless by the fire, and he wanted to know what he could do to help. Sonia explained that she and her father were staying in Adela's guesthouse. "Wow, that's great," Christopher said. "You sure landed on your feet."

"We did," Sonia said. "How about you? Is everything all right with your family?"

"Both our houses are OK, but my Dad's car is toast."

"Bummer. That was a major automobile," Sonia said. "He must be really upset."

"He's upset, but not about the car," Christopher said. "All the paperwork is missing from Mr. Rios' office. At first my Dad thought that the housekeeper saved it from the fire, but it turns out that she didn't. He's worried that some things may have fallen into the wrong hands."

“Does your boss bolt every time a client calls?” Nate asked.

“He certainly doesn’t,” Georgina replied. “I can’t imagine what Adela could have said that would make him rush out of here like that.”

“He looked anxious.”

“He did, didn’t he? That’s so unlike him,” Georgina said. “He’s usually Mr. Cool.” Georgina and Nate finished dinner. Then Nate volunteered to accompany her on the short walk back to the Inn.

“I suppose I should know something about the person who’ll be calling the shots at ZIFIX after tomorrow,” Nate said as they walked. “What’s Adela like anyway?”

“Of course that begs the question—since you were willing to sell to the father, how much worse could it be to sell to the daughter?” Georgina replied good-naturedly. Not wanting to discuss Adela, however, she went on, “How’s Gordon? I still owe him the rest of the dragon story.”

“I have to get the two of you together so he can find out the ending,” Nate said. “You know, in spite of all the hassles, these last few days have actually been the best I’ve had in a long time.” As they made their way up the hill towards the Inn, Nate opened up to Georgina. He told her how he wanted to make adjustments in his life so that he could be a better father. Georgina was surprised by how candidly Nate was speaking to her about his private life. She recognized that at some level he had come to trust her. Perhaps, she thought, the shared experience of the fire and the time together at the shelter had made him feel comfortable with her. Listening to his hopes for his future with Gordon, however, she could not suppress her skepticism.

“You have some very serious work commitments,” she said. “You have to be realistic about how much you can do.”

“That’s what Katy said when I told her about this,” Nate said.

“Sorry to remind you of your ex, but maybe she’s right.”

They had arrived at the grape arbor at the entrance to the hotel pool. Nate stopped and turned to face Georgina. “Actually, Georgina, you don’t remind me of my ex at all,” he said, looking into her eyes. “I have a very different feeling when I’m with you.” Georgina was instantly ill at ease. Nate lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers.

“This can’t be,” Georgina said, pulling away. “Please.....”

“I know it’s complicated.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Georgina said. “I have someone in my life. And I have a responsibility to my client. So, this never happened.”

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Nate said, chastised. “I thought that we had made a connection the last few days. I’m sorry. I guess I misunderstood.”

“The fire has stressed everyone out,” Georgina said. “No one is in their normal state of mind right now. Are you OK?”

“I’m OK if you’re OK,” Nate replied.

"I don't want anything to interfere with the deal," Georgina said. "Can I still present it to Adela in the morning?"

"Of course," Nate said. "You know how to reach me." He quickly retreated along the pathway towards the village. Georgina stood by the arbor for a few minutes while she collected herself. What had just happened? she wondered. Unsure of what she was feeling, she walked slowly towards the Inn. She became aware of Mark as she neared the main door. He was seated in one of the patio chairs.

"What a touching scene," Mark said as he stood up to confront her.

"It's not what you think," Georgina said. "Carmichael came on to me and I said no. End of story."

"Really? I saw you kiss him."

"No. You saw *him* kiss *me*."

"Getting involved with someone on the other side of a deal is a serious breach of ethics," Mark said. "What has gotten into you?"

"There is *nothing* going on between Carmichael and me," Georgina protested. "And the deal isn't compromised in any way."

"*You* are compromised, Georgina, *you* are compromised," Mark said, his voice rising. "Tomorrow morning you will present the deal to Adela and right after that, you will be on the next flight out. And when I get back to New York, you and I will be having a very serious discussion about your future with the firm."

Chapter Eighteen

An acrid odor permeated the nighttime air. Sam strained to see in the dim light of the half-full moon. Her parents' house had suffered almost no damage; the firefighters had arrived just in the nick of time. As she crossed the patio she noticed that soot blackened the pool coping and the water below was grey with ashes. She stopped in front of the massive pile of charred debris that was piled up on the far side of the patio—the burnt-out remains of the teahouse. It would be futile, she knew, to sift through the rubble. Everything that she owned, every remembrance of the people that she had lost, everything of beauty from the flower and willow world, was gone. Clenching her hands she dug her fingernails into the flesh of each palm and closed her eyes. She let the pain wash over her.

When she opened her eyes a small object drew her attention. It had come to rest on the pool coping, poised as if it were about to drop into the charcoal-colored water below. Even in the semi-darkness, Sam could make out that the object was red. With a start she recognized the object as the silk parasol from her Geisha doll. How extraordinary, she

thought—the tiny parasol had been saved, blown out of the teahouse by the same ferocious wind that had borne the fire to it.

“He *kissed* you?” Millie exclaimed, horrified.

“I didn’t see it coming,” Georgina said. “Usually I get a feeling if a guy is going to try that and I can defuse the situation, but not this time. For the life of me, I can’t figure out what he was thinking. I didn’t send him any signals.”

“Perhaps when you hung out with him at the shelter, he took that to mean something,” Pearl guessed.

“But we were thrown together by circumstance,” Georgina said. “You would think that he would have understood that.”

“Who knows what makes men do what they do?” Millie said. “With some of them you could strip naked and they wouldn’t see you, and with others you just go about your business and they think that you’re into them. This guy is recently divorced, isn’t he? He’s probably just flailing about to see what happens.”

“His business situation might have had something to do with it,” Pearl said. “You know, he’s in trouble with his company and looking for a deal, and then you show up to make it happen. Like a patient falling for their doctor.”

“It gets worse,” Georgina said. “Mark saw him kiss me.”

“You have *got* to be kidding,” Pearl gasped.

“I’m sure Mark took *that* in stride,” Millie said.

“Mark most certainly did *not* take it in stride,” Georgina said. “He accused me of violating the bank’s ethics. He threatened to fire me.”

“He can’t fire you,” Pearl said angrily. “I’ll help you sue him if he tries that. There’s nothing that I would relish more than getting Mark Webber on the witness stand for a discussion of your bank’s business ethics.”

“Whoa, hold on there, Pearl,” Georgina said. “There’s no need for escalation. Mark is more bluster than anything else. He’s always threatening to fire people, although this is the first time that he’s threatened to fire *me*. But I’m more annoyed about it than I’m concerned. I’ll close the ZIFIX deal tomorrow and the whole incident will blow over.”

“I wish I were as sure as you are about that,” Millie said. “If things don’t go well with Adela and the bank loses her account, Mark will be looking for a scapegoat. You would be a tempting candidate.”

“That could happen, I guess,” Georgina acknowledged. “But right now all I can do is make sure that the ZIFIX deal goes through. After that, it’s up to Mark to deliver on the other deals that the bank has going with Rios Capital.”

“Have you told Nick about what happened?” Pearl asked.

“No, and I don’t plan to,” Georgina replied. “He’s still trying to make up his mind which job to take and I don’t want him to think that I’m trying to make him jealous.”

“Don’t hold your fire on that one,” Millie advised. “Men need to be reminded every once in a while.”

When the conversation with her friends was over, Georgina went to get ready for bed. But the words that she had just spoken began to echo in her mind. She realized that she had just put on a show of bravado in front of her friends to bolster her flagging ego. In truth, she was very worried about Mark firing her. If she did not convince Adela to buy ZIFIX Mark would certainly turn on her and let her go. And what about Nick? With Nick so consumed with advancing his career, how much was he really weighing their relationship in his decision? He was saying the right words to her, but, after all, he had the gift of the gab. He could be taking her for granted, believing that she would willingly sacrifice herself and accommodate to any career choice he made.

Georgina’s head began to pound. She looked in her purse for something for headache but discovered that she had taken the last capsule while she was at the Fairgrounds. She dressed and went downstairs to the hotel’s sundries shop where she bought a bottle of aspirin. When she returned to her room she was restless. Then it came to her. Why was she being such a goody two-shoes? Given the stakes, she realized, dangling Nate’s kiss in front of Nick might not be such a bad idea after all.

“I saw something last night.” Sonia and her father were in Adela’s guesthouse, eating breakfast. “The girls invited me to watch a movie in their home theatre, and afterwards we went into the kitchen to get some snacks. I looked out the window and saw that detective outside with Adela. Adela looked *really* upset.”

“Could you hear what they were talking about?” Jake asked, slightly furrowing his brow.

“No. I’ll bet that’s why they were outside, so no one could hear them. And then a man joined them. The girls told me that he’s a banker Adela brought out from New York. He listened to the detective for a few minutes, and then he took Adela by the arm and led her inside the house. The detective walked away into the dark. What do you make of that?”

“I have no idea,” Jake answered.

“I thought it was really strange,” Sonia said. “And there’s more. Christopher Wahl told me that Mr. Rios’ papers are missing from his office. I’m more convinced than ever that something’s going on.”

“Whatever it is, it doesn’t concern you,” Jake said.

“I suppose that’s true,” Sonia said, disappointed by her father’s lack of interest. “Anyway, I need to put Diamante on the line before I go to school.”

“Change of plans there,” Jake said. “The vet is coming over to look at him this morning, so you can skip his exercise. I’ll take him out on the trail later if the vet thinks it’s all right. Adela asked me to stay here this morning instead of going to the track, to hear what the vet thinks we need to do with Diamante.”

“It says something that she’s keeping you in the loop with her horse.”

“She’s having Jose come over too,” Jake said, pursing his lips.

“Jose knows Diamante best,” Sonia reminded her father.

“We have to move the horses soon and that’s going to force Adela to decide whether they’re going to stay in training or not,” Jake said. “It wouldn’t surprise me if she listened to Jose and gave me notice.”

“But I just got settled in at Rancho High,” Sonia complained. “Please don’t make me move again so soon. At least try to find a job here, so I won’t have to change schools.”

“Trainer work isn’t that easy to find right now,” Jake said. “I know how hard moving is on you. I’ll do the best I can but I can’t make any promises.”

Sonia looked at her father impassively. Why was it always like this?

Georgina walked out onto the balcony of her room at the Inn. The distant hills were charred black; a grey-blue, smoky haze drifted above them. The temperature was much cooler than it had been during the Santa Ana but a burnt smell lingered in the air. So much has happened, she thought, since the morning when she first looked out on those hills. That day, when she visited ZIFIX and met Nate, now seemed like eons ago, not less than a week. She called Nick. “I’m glad you’re coming back today,” he told her. “I need to thank Mark for getting you away from my pesky new rival and home to me.”

“Carmichael is not your rival,” Georgina said, pleased that Nick had taken the bait. “Are you going to thank Mark if he fires me?”

“Maybe,” Nick replied. “Then we’d both be in play, career-wise. There are banks in Washington, you know.”

“There are no *investment* banks there, just branches of retail banks,” Georgina said. “Nothing in D.C. comes remotely close to any New York bank, and I work for the best one in the city. You wouldn’t want me to take a step down, would you?”

“No, you deserve to be tormented only by the best,” Nick said. “By the way, there was a new tip to the TV station last night. Adela got a visit from Detective Mori and apparently she wasn’t very happy about it.”

“Hmm, that explains why Mark dashed off to see her,” Georgina said. “Do you think I should ask him what happened?”

“Since you’re in such good standing with him right now, go ahead. I’m sure he would appreciate you asking more questions.”

“You’re right. I’ll pretend that I know nothing.”

“Just close the deal and head for the airport,” Nick said. “Once you’re back here, you’ll forget all about the fire and your dead client and whatever else happened out there, and we’ll figure out how to get back to normal. Does that sound good to you?”

“Yes, it does,” Georgina said. “I’ll call you after I pitch the deal and let you know how it went.”

Georgina contemplated how to get her new clothes back to New York. She called the front desk and asked for help in making a shipment. Moments later a bellman appeared

with flattened boxes in different sizes, a roll of packing tape, scissors, and forms from a shipping company. He packed up her clothes and carried the boxes out. Georgina ordered a continental breakfast from room service. She drank the juice and coffee and picked at the fruit but her stomach turned over at the sight of the sugary pastries. She covered them with a napkin.

Mark sent a text message telling her to meet him at 8:45 a.m. outside the hotel's front door. Just before the appointed time Georgina went down to the lobby. She checked out, composed her face and walked outside. Mark was already there, standing beside the passenger door of his rental car. Without saying a word to her he opened the car door; after she was seated inside, he closed the door briskly. They drove to Adela's estate in complete silence.

Chapter Nineteen

The completeness of the teahouse's destruction was fortunate, Sam thought. If the fire had been less aggressive the accouterments of her hidden Geisha life might have become visible to her family. Sam stepped back from the bedroom window and surveyed the room where she had spent her teenaged years. She felt no connection to the space now. The sounds of her brother getting ready in the bedroom next door reminded her that she would again be obliged to share the outmoded bathroom down the hall with him.

The Geisha doll's red silk parasol lay on the bedside table. She picked it up. As she twirled it in her fingers she thought about what the doll had brought into her life. At first there was the joy of possessing a beautiful object, and later a child's curiosity about the flower and willow world. But as her identification with the Geisha lifestyle grew, there had been a moment when she changed. In that moment she had dissociated from part of the real world and substituted a fantasy, one that over time had taken over more and more of her consciousness. She knew that what she had been doing in the teahouse was not healthy. She recognized that she was now more isolated than she had ever been as a child, and she had done it to herself.

Her thoughts turned to the previous evening. Her visit to Adela had not gone as she had expected. Nonetheless, her investigation was now complete. Later in the morning she would carry out the arrest that would bring her relationship with Alejandro Rios to its proper conclusion. She thought back to the last time that she had seen Rios alive, on the day that he had presented her with the jade brooch. She had been tempted, fleetingly, to accept the gift. What might have transpired if she had kept the brooch, and if Rios had lived? She could have cultivated him as a patron as a Geisha would, or she could have married him. Sam was confident that she could have led Rios to a quick proposal. When they were with him, Rios' wives occupied a special, prominent place in the Ranch social hierarchy, and later, as ex-wives, they enjoyed luxurious lifestyles courtesy of generous divorce settlements. But Sam had rejected Rios' gift and its gilded promise. Why?

The two of them were, after all, kindred spirits. Like her, Rios was an "other" in the Ranch and like her, he was defined by a singular obsession. In his case the obsession was with winning; his frenzied deal making had never been about money, but about victory. It was clear to Sam that Rios had paid too high a price for his victories. In the end he possessed nothing of real value. Rios' obsession with winning had crowded out everything that was truly meaningful in life and he had died alone and unloved. As she twirled the tiny red parasol in her fingers Sam could wonder whether the life, and death, of Alejandro Rios was a cautionary tale for her.

“So, what should I do about this startup?” Adela asked.

“Georgina will walk you through the financials,” Mark replied. He nodded his head toward Georgina but did not make eye contact with her. Looking only at Adela or her notes as she spoke, Georgina presented the ZIFIX deal in a clear, calm voice. When she was finished she asked Adela if she had any questions.

“Just one,” Adela said. “I gather that the major asset of this company is the patent. How did you value it?”

“I can explain that,” Mark said. “A consultant gave us the initial estimate. But before I left New York I got a firm bid from a pharmaceutical house. The bid is for several times the amount that Rios Capital has offered to pay for the entire company.” Georgina scowled. Why had Mark not told her about getting a bid?

“Does this drug company plan to absorb the startup or are they just buying the patent rights?” Adela asked.

“They’re only interested in the patent,” Mark replied. “I’ve lined up a liquidation firm to close down the existing operation.” *Liquidation*. Georgina’s stomach flip-flopped.

“Very well, it’s a go,” Adela said. “How do we proceed?”

“We’ll get Dr. Carmichael over here today to sign,” Mark said.

“Do that,” Adela said. “Now if you will excuse me, I need to go see what the vet has found to be ailing my horse.” Adela walked briskly through the French doors of her office and out onto the patio. As soon as Adela was gone Georgina demanded to know why Mark had not told her that he planned to liquidate ZIFIX.

“Rios made that decision,” he said. “I didn’t tell you because you had no need to know. I gave you a role on the *acquisition* side of this deal. I never intended for you to be involved with ZIFIX after the sale was completed.”

“No one told Carmichael that Rios Capital was going to put his staff out on the street,” Georgina complained.

“Let me remind you of something,” Mark said. “Dr. Carmichael is a grown man who has agreed to sell his company to Rios Capital. Once the ink is dry on the papers, Rios Capital can do whatever it wants with ZIFIX. Carmichael is free to give his employees a severance package out of what he gets from the sale.”

“It’s unethical to negotiate like this.”

“That’s rich,” Mark snorted. “Now *you* are lecturing *me* on ethics, after what I saw going on between you and Carmichael last night.”

“There is *nothing* going on,” Georgina exclaimed. “You have to believe me. When have I ever lied to you?”

“There’s always a first time.”

“*Come on*,” Georgina said angrily. “If you don’t know me any better than that, then I’ve been wasting my time working for you.”

“We will discuss your future in my group at a later time,” Mark said crisply. “Right now you will act like the professional that you are and you will get Carmichael over here. And then you will go to the airport, because your work here will be done.”

“I’ll put you on the list for a hauler but it may take a couple of weeks to get someone out here,” the insurance adjuster said. “The people that we use are all backed up.”

“Do I get any money for temporary housing?” Sam asked.

“Sorry, no, you don’t,” the man replied. “This type of structure is considered an outbuilding. We only cover living expenses when the main house is uninhabitable. We’ll cover rebuilding and give you something for what was inside. You’ll have to list every item that you had in there to get reimbursed.” Sam’s shoulders slumped. Her Geisha treasures had been expensive but she could never disclose their existence. “You may not think so right now but your family was very lucky,” the adjuster went on to say. “Your neighbor’s house burned down to the slab.”

Sam looked briefly towards the property next door. A dense acacia hedge hid the house from view. Sam knew that its cedar shake roof had attracted the fire. Sam’s mother was over there now with a group of neighbors, sifting through the rubble for any mementos that could be salvaged for the owner. Sam asked where he had taken refuge during the fire. The adjuster said that he had gone to the football stadium. Sam volunteered that a lot of people from the Ranch had ended up at the Fairgrounds. A faint smile crossed the adjuster’s face. “That must have been a real change of pace for these folks,” he said.

“Did you lose anything?” Sam asked.

“I lost everything.”

Sam was astonished. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “How are you managing?”

The adjuster explained that his employer had insisted that he get right back to work processing claims from fire victims. His wife, a nurse, was working extra shifts to deal with the backlog of patients at her hospital. Since neither of them had any free time to look for temporary housing they were still sleeping at the football stadium.

After the adjuster had left Sam called Agostino to find out if the arrest warrant was ready. Agostino was in his office at the police substation near the Ranch; he confirmed that he had the warrant. Sam asked him to find a uniformed officer for backup. Agostino said that he would look into it. Sam carefully checked her service revolver and then concealed it in the shoulder holster that she was wearing under her jacket.

She set out for the substation. At the top of the street a Highway Patrol Officer waved her through the roadblock that had been set up the previous afternoon, before the evacuees were allowed to return to the neighborhood. He was stopping cars as they tried to enter the street to verify the legitimacy of the visit to the neighborhood, but he was allowing cars to exit freely. On the main road Sam was obliged to wait for a few minutes for a construction crew that was shoring up a burned out hillside against the winter rains that would bring mudslides. Sam was grateful for the extra manpower in the neighborhood. The

authorities had moved quickly to protect the burned out areas from gawkers and looters and had even restricted the air space above the Ranch.

She found Agostino in his office. He introduced Arturo Lopez, a recent Police Academy graduate. Displeased, Sam asked Agostino to step out into the hallway. “Not a rookie,” she said. “I don’t want someone who might get flustered and blow it. And I need someone who can be trusted to keep quiet.”

“Arturo’s level headed. He can handle it,” Agostino said. “And he’s a doer not a talker.”

“Isn’t there anyone else?”

“I’m not going to ask anyone else. You’re not exactly going by the book and I don’t want to call attention. Arturo will follow your instructions and he’ll do it without asking any questions.”

Sam looked at her watch. She had to leave shortly, or she would risk upsetting the choreography that she had laid out for the arrest. Agostino stood impassively in front of her. Seeing no alternative, Sam went back into Agostino’s office and told the young officer the plan.

Georgina could not will herself to dial Nate’s number. When she had first discovered the subterfuge that Rios used to engineer the ZIFIX takeover, she had looked the other way. She had absolved herself of responsibility because she had not lied to Nate herself. But this time it was different. If she called Nate now, she would have no excuse. She was *in* on it.

She called Nick. Her mouth felt dry but her words came pouring out. She couldn’t bear to set Nate up, she told Nick in a rush. But if she refused, Mark would make the call himself. Nate would sign and the deal, and the damage, would be done. Mark would call her out for insubordination for refusing to make the call and legitimately fire her. Georgina told Nick that she was considering doing the unthinkable—telling Nate about the plan to liquidate his company.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?” Nick challenged her. “If you do anything to kill the deal Mark will not only fire you, he will make sure that you never work in finance again.”

“I know, I know,” Georgina said in a shaky voice. “But I can’t hang Carmichael out to dry.”

“And why not?” Nick demanded. “It happens every day in business. Is this really about principle? Are you sure that there’s nothing going on between you and this guy?”

Georgina immediately regretted telling Nick about the kiss. “There’s nothing going on between me and Carmichael,” she said.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Nick said. “I think you might be interested in him.”

“I’m not interested in anyone but you.”

“I know I’ve stressed you out with this job thing,” he said. “But blowing up a deal and destroying your future because you’re attracted to someone new is just ridiculous.”

“You have it all wrong,” Georgina said. “Why can’t you believe me when I tell you I don’t have feelings for anyone else?”

“Maybe this is for the best,” Nick said. “It’s time we got some clarity about us.” The line clicked dead.

Georgina was stunned. This is not the time to fall apart, she told herself. Nick was under pressure over which job to take and he had understandably overreacted; it would not help matters if she overreacted too. Georgina decided to put Nick’s anger aside for the moment. She needed to concentrate on making her own decision.

She called Millie and Pearl. Millie was horrified that Georgina would even consider telling Nate about the liquidation. She was adamant—Georgina should do exactly as Mark asked. If she were in her shoes, Millie said, she would get the deal done ASAP and fly back to New York with a notch in her belt. She reminded Georgina that the deal was perfectly legal, and, if she went along with it, she would keep her job. Even better, she would help Mark keep Adela’s account with the bank and that was a sure fire way to a bigger year-end bonus.

Pearl had a more nuanced view of the situation. She told Georgina that her conscience was giving her good advice. At the end of the day she had to live with herself, and no job was worth losing her self-respect. She advised Georgina to tell Mark why she couldn’t call Carmichael and then hand him a gracious letter of resignation. If she handled the situation skillfully, Pearl said, Mark would give her a good reference and she could get another high-paying job in finance somewhere else. But Pearl joined with Millie in warning Georgina against tipping Nate off about the liquidation. It was too late to salvage the startup, she said, and Georgina would gain nothing from ruining her career. She urged Georgina to look at the silver lining in the situation. If she quit, Mark would be out of her hair for good.

Her friends’ conflicting advice confused Georgina. In a fog, she let it slip that she had dangled Nate’s kiss in front of Nick. Her gambit to make him jealous had backfired, she told them, and now she feared that she had stupidly provoked a tipping point in their relationship. She wailed that she might have given Nick the reason he needed to leave New York.

Millie tried to comfort her. “You’ve been through a lot in the last few days. You’ve lost perspective, that’s all,” she said kindly. “There’s a way for you to keep your job and Nick too. Just call Carmichael and get the deal signed. When Nick sees that you didn’t do any heroics for this guy, he’ll realize that he was mistaken.”

Millie was right, Georgina thought. She had lost her perspective. “I guess that’s the way to go,” she said. “I’ll make the call.” At first, after she signed off, she felt a surge of relief. But then she found herself staring at the cell phone in her hand, unable to make the call. The release of tension that she had felt only a minute earlier had completely dissipated.

She had put forth so much effort—so many years of education and so many long hours at work—in order to have choices in her life. She had always believed that having choices was a good thing, especially for a woman. But this choice was unlike any that she had ever faced. Several more minutes passed. Then she dialed Nate’s number.

Sam stopped her car in front of the gate. Officer Lopez pulled his marked patrol car up behind her. Philip Wahl was waiting for them on the other side. He activated the manual release.

Chapter Twenty

Jose murmured an apology for being late. Jake saw Adela give him a sharp look. The veterinarian was assuring Adela that Diamante was not ill but was only out of sorts from the recent upheaval. With a little tincture of time, he said, the horse would be back to normal. In spite of the veterinarian's benign report Jose proceeded to pepper the man with trivial questions. Jake kept his eye trained on Adela. Her furrowed brow suggested to him that she was not buying Jose's performance.

After the veterinarian had departed, Jake judged that it was as good a time as any to ask Adela what she planned to do with the horses. Before Adela could answer, Jose snapped that Jake was out of line for putting Adela on the spot like that. Adela looked weary but did not respond directly to either man. She ordered Jake to take Diamante out for some exercise. Then she invited Jose to walk back to her office with her.

Smarting from what he perceived as a rebuke from Adela, Jake saddled Diamante and led him outside the barn. As he mounted up he looked towards the house. He saw Adela and Jose standing very close to one another, on the patio outside her office. They were engaged in an animated conversation.

Nate flashed Georgina an expectant smile. His expression changed to a frown when she motioned for him to follow her to the side of Adela's house. "There's something that you need to know before you go in there," Georgina said hurriedly as they walked. "Mark has lined up a drug company to buy your patent, and he's hired an outfit to liquidate everything else."

"Liquidate?" Nate said angrily. "Nobody said anything about liquidation. I can't have my staff thrown out of work. How did this happen?"

"Rios was planning it all along. I didn't know anything about it until this morning," Georgina said. "And there's more. Your patent is worth many times what Rios Capital is offering you for the whole company."

"Why are you telling me this?" Nate asked. "Mark will fire you if he finds out."

They were about to turn the back corner of Adela's house. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure why," she replied. "Something about these last few days...."

Suddenly, loud voices rang out from behind the house. Georgina put one finger to her lips to signal Nate to be silent. She reached her head around the corner. She saw Jose Ramirez, holding a switchblade knife to Adela's throat. Jose's left arm gripped Adela tightly from behind, while his right arm held the knife dangerously close to her neck. He was shouting at a police officer who was standing only a few feet away from him. The officer was aiming his service revolver directly at Jose. Georgina's heart rate skyrocketed. Quickly

withdrawing her head she steadied herself against the wall. Nate leaned across her and peered around the corner.

“Drop the gun or I’ll use the knife on her,” Jose shouted at the officer. “Don’t come any closer.”

Nate pulled his head back. Georgina motioned for him to crouch; then, she looked around the corner again. This time she saw that Jose was slowly backing away from the officer and moving towards the corner of the house where they were hidden. Then Georgina saw Sam.

“Don’t make this any worse than it has to be,” Sam called out softly to Jose. “Come on, easy now, Jose, let Adela go.” Sam motioned for Officer Lopez to lower his weapon. “Easy, easy, Jose. You don’t want to hurt Adela. I know you don’t want to hurt her.” The officer dropped his weapon to his side. Sam slowly advanced towards Jose. “You’re a smart man, Jose,” she told him. “You know what you have to do. Put the knife down and we can work this out.”

“I had nothing to do with Rios’ death, nothing at all,” Jose shouted at Sam. “You can’t frame me for that. No way.”

Jose was now very close to Georgina and Nate. Georgina whispered in Nate’s ear.

Chapter Twenty-One

The clattering noise overhead caused Sam to look up. Her eyes squinted in the noonday sun. The helicopter flew in low and then turned back around to make a second pass; gaining altitude, it began to fly a tight circular pattern above the house. Sam cursed under her breath. Jose was seated, handcuffed, in the back of the patrol car. "Do you want me to take him in for booking now?" Officer Lopez asked.

"Not yet," Sam said. "Our friends in the media have decided to pay us a visit. We'll need to set up a perimeter around the house. Call for backup." Sam did not need any more aggravation today, not after Jose Ramirez's carefully planned arrest had gone so painfully awry. She should have insisted on arresting him at the racetrack as she had originally planned. But feeling that she owed Rios' family something for all the tips that he had given her, she had unwisely acquiesced to Adela's request to arrest him at her home. Her fatigue from the fire must have impaired her judgment. And, just as she had feared, Officer Lopez had proved too inexperienced for the task. Jose had become agitated when he realized that he was about to be arrested, and Officer Lopez had unwisely drawn his weapon. His sudden move had prompted Jose to pull out a knife and take Adela hostage.

The citizen heroics that followed had almost turned a manageable situation into something tragic. Just when Jose was about to hand her the knife, here comes Georgina Graham lunging forward, hitting him full force in the back of his knees. And then Nate Carmichael grabs at Jose's right hand for the knife. It was sheer luck that Carmichael had been able to wrench the knife from Jose's grasp before Adela was hurt. Now the media was sure to turn the episode into a major story. Sam could already see the headline: "Heiress rescued from knife-wielding assailant by plucky citizens while police stand idly by." She wanted to throw up, thinking about the mess that she had created.

Aware that the helicopter news crew was filming her from above, Sam walked into the house without looking up again. She found Adela reclining on a loveseat in her office. Georgina, Nate, Mark and Wahl were seated around her. "There's a news chopper overhead," Sam told them. "I'll have to ask you all to stay here while I set up outside for crowd control."

"Oh, no," Adela groaned. "How did the media find out?" She raised herself up on her elbows. "The whole reason I wanted to arrest Jose this way was to avoid publicity. What are we going to do now?"

Mark took Adela's hand. She laid her head back on the loveseat's plump pillows. "You could send a written statement out to them," he told her. "I can draft something if you like."

Sam knew that a written statement would not satisfy the media. "May I make a suggestion?" she said. "They want a sound bite and a picture and they're going to stay out

there until they get it. If we hold a press conference they will go away. I can say what happened from the law enforcement perspective and someone else could say something from the family's end of things."

"Wouldn't speaking out publicly just add fuel to the fire?" Adela asked.

"A press conference might be a good idea," Mark said. "I can stand in for you. If we do this right we can put an end to the media's interest." Adela looked unsure but nodded her head in agreement.

Less than an hour later Sam and Mark approached a bank of microphones set up outside the gate to Adela's property. Three large video cameras were positioned in front of the microphones and a crowd of photojournalists knelt down in front of them. Sam read from a prepared statement. "I'm Detective Samantha Mori. That's M-O-R-I. This morning Mr. Jose Ramirez was arrested at this address on suspicion of embezzlement of funds from his employer, the late Alejandro Rios. Mr. Ramirez resisted arrest and took the owner of this property, Ms. Adela Rios, hostage. Two citizens intervened to subdue Mr. Ramirez—Ms. Georgina Graham of New York City and Dr. Nathaniel Carmichael, a local resident. Ms. Rios was unharmed and Mr. Ramirez has been taken into custody. At this point I would like to introduce Mr. Mark Webber who will speak on behalf of Adela Rios." Mark also read from a prepared statement. He said that Adela Rios was grateful to Ms. Graham and Dr. Carmichael for her rescue and to the police for making the arrest. Sam returned to the microphones. She said that she would take a few questions.

"What was Jose Ramirez's job with Alejandro Rios?" a reporter asked.

"Mr. Ramirez managed Mr. Rios' barn," Sam replied.

"Rios was found dead in his barn," another reporter said. "Was Ramirez involved in his death?"

"Mr. Ramirez is charged only with embezzlement," Sam replied.

"But what about Rios?" the reporter persisted. "Are you investigating his death as a homicide?"

"No," Sam said. "The Medical Examiner's Office has determined that Alejandro Rios died of natural causes."

Adela watched the news conference on a small television in her office. When it was over she swung her legs to the floor and placed her hands on the loveseat cushions to support herself. "You must be wondering what the all the fuss was about this morning," she said to Georgina and Nate. "Since you saved my life, I feel that I owe you an explanation."

"Last night Detective Mori came here to inform me that Jose had been stealing from my father's racing operation. That distressed me because I've known Jose for years and I trusted him. Detective Mori asked me whether I wanted to press charges. I wasn't sure what to do. I called Mark and asked him to come over to advise me. I was reluctant to go the route of a trial. It seemed easier to fire Jose and write off the loss. But Mark told me that if I did that, I would jeopardize my authority as the new owner of Rios Capital. He said that

these things always end up on the rumor mill. If I let Jose off the hook, then I should expect fraud from other employees in the future. So I decided to go ahead and press charges.”

“Jose has been staying in the groom’s quarters at the racetrack and Detective Mori wanted to arrest him there, but I opposed doing it in such a public place. I was worried that word would spread and generate publicity on the eve of my father’s memorial service. So I came up with the idea of using the veterinarian’s visit that I had already scheduled for this morning as a pretext to ask Jose to come over here, where he could be taken into custody in private. It never occurred to me that Jose would panic. Apparently he thought that he was being arrested for murder.”

“Why Jose thought that my father was murdered is beyond me. Detective Mori told me on the day of the autopsy that my father had had a heart attack while he was getting my horse from his stall. His head hit a watering basin as he fell, and that caused a wound on the back of his head. The pathologist who did the autopsy wanted to examine his brain to determine whether the fall contributed to his death. The Medical Examiner’s Office is waiting for that report before they make the results of the autopsy public.”

“So that’s what led up to this morning. I can’t thank the two of you enough for rescuing me and to show my appreciation, I want to give each of you a reward. Dr. Carmichael, the reward will be in addition to the sum that Rios Capital has already agreed to pay you for your company.”

Georgina looked apprehensively at Nate. She had not talked to him since the encounter with Jose and did not know what he was thinking.

“You’re very generous,” Nate said to Adela, “but I learned something this morning that has made me change my mind about the deal. When I negotiated to sell my company to Rios Capital I didn’t know that your father planned to liquidate it. I thought that he was going to invest in the company and grow it, or at worst let a larger company buy it and do the same. But shutting the doors and laying off my staff was never discussed.”

“No one told you about the liquidation?” Adela asked, perplexed.

“Philip Wahl talked to me about various scenarios,” Nate replied, “but he never said anything about closing down the company.”

“Philip, what’s going on here?” Adela demanded.

“Your father did not run companies,” Wahl said uneasily. “His business model was to buy distressed companies and sell them immediately, either to another company or piecemeal in a liquidation.”

“Wasn’t it also my father’s business model to divulge this strategy when he made an offer for a business?” Adela countered. “It certainly was when I was working for him.”

“When the offer is for 100% of a company, there’s no reason to say what will happen to the business once it’s acquired,” Wahl said.

“There’s no *legal* reason, Philip, I understand that,” Adela said impatiently. “But what has happened to integrity at Rios Capital? Did Mark know about this?”

“Mark was fully apprised of the situation,” Wahl replied. “He never raised any objections. And in fairness, Adela, no promises were ever made to Dr. Carmichael about what would happen to his company after he sold it. He chose to believe what he chose to believe.”

“Philip, you discussed scenarios with Dr. Carmichael that you knew would never happen, and then you deliberately failed to discuss the very scenario that you knew would happen,” Adela said. “That’s not how I do business.”

“That’s not how I do business either,” Georgina interjected. “When I negotiated with Dr. Carmichael I was unaware of the liquidation plan. I first heard about it this morning when Mark discussed it with you. *I* was the one who told Dr. Carmichael about it, because I felt that he had the right to know that his staff would be laid off if he signed the sale documents.”

Adela rested both elbows on her desk and interlaced her fingers. She let Georgina’s revelation hang in the air. “You have come to my rescue twice today, Georgina,” she said finally, “and this time you have prevented me from doing a deal that violates my principles. However, I expect Mark will have a very different opinion about what you’ve done. Now, how are we going to get out of this predicament?”

“I think I can solve the problem,” Georgina said. She turned to Nate. “Dr. Carmichael, may I have a word with you, privately?” They stepped outside on to the patio. “How serious were you when you said that you wanted to have more time with Gordon?” Georgina asked. “Because if you’re serious, I can make it happen.”

“I’m completely serious,” Nate replied. “What are you talking about?”

“Here’s my idea,” Georgina said. “What’s been wrong with this deal all along is the price. I can get Adela to pay you top dollar for ZIFIX, because she’s an honorable person and we just rescued her. I will tell her that neither of us wants a reward. but we would like to renegotiate the deal. A drug company would own your patent, that’s true, and ZIFIX would be liquidated, but I promise you that I can get you more than enough money for you to move your staff to your research laboratory at the medical school and keep your project going for years. And with all your work effort in one place and no need to write grants, you’ll free up lots of extra time for Gordon. So, what do you say? Deal?”

He’s not a bad person, Adela thought, as Wahl pleaded with her to keep his job. He’s just insecure and trying too hard to please other people. Her father had exploited these traits in Wahl to make him do his bidding and, she guessed, his wife played on the same vulnerabilities to achieve the upper hand in the marriage. So the poor man had it coming and going. But in his favor, Wahl knew the business. Under her guidance some use could be made of him.

Adela cut Wahl off. She informed him that things would be done differently at Rios Capital, now that she was in charge. Deals would be carried out in a more ethical manner, and therefore might be less profitable than they had been on her father’s watch. There could

be a place for him in the new organization, she said, but on two conditions. One condition was that he would have to forgo this year's bonus. Wahl swallowed hard when he heard this but he nodded yes. And the second condition was, she said, that he must never reveal to Mark that Georgina had told Dr. Carmichael about the plan to liquidate ZIFIX. Wahl looked surprised at the second condition, but he agreed without comment.

The French doors to the patio opened. Georgina asked if she could present a proposal.

Adela quickly embraced the new plan. Buying ZIFIX at a higher price offered her a graceful way out, and she was more than ready to do it. But it did not solve the entire problem. There was still the issue of Georgina's vulnerability, now that she had admitted to disclosing the liquidation plan. Adela wanted to protect Georgina, because she saw in her much of herself when she was a young woman starting out in business. Adela knew that Mark would fire Georgina if he found out what she had done. Assuring Wahl's silence would not be enough. Mark was sure to question such a dramatic change in the price that she was willing to pay for ZIFIX. Adela she needed to come up with a plausible explanation for changing the terms of the deal.

She recalled how Mark had often cautioned her against her "overly large" charitable contributions. The fact that he saw her as a soft touch could be the key to smoothing over the situation. She decided that, when Mark returned from the press conference, she would be a bit of an actress, emoting over how Dr. Carmichael had saved her life. She would then tell Mark that to properly reward him, she wanted to give Dr. Carmichael her share of the profit from the ZIFIX deal. As long as Mark got his cut, she knew, he would not care who got the rest.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lauren Wahl could not process what her husband was saying. He must have gone mad, she thought. Why, there was no earthly reason that they couldn't move into their wonderful new house. It was almost done! How could he be putting it on the market? Weak-kneed, Lauren sank into the sofa and watched her husband pace the living room. He was in a full-on rage. Being forced to grovel for his job in front of Adela had pushed him over the edge.

Her free-spending days were over, he shouted at her. He was never again going to be chained to a job for the money. He was replacing the Maserati with a normal car, and if he had to, he yelled, he was replacing *her* with a normal wife. He stood over Lauren as she cowered on the sofa. Was she on board with the new program, he asked, or did she want to go it alone?

Summoning a contrite smile, Lauren looked up at her husband and whispered a sweet, "yes, dear."

Lupe stood sullenly in front of Adela's desk. "You were the one who tipped off the media, weren't you?" Adela demanded. "But why? Do they pay you? They claim that they don't pay sources but I wonder. I know you were eavesdropping when I talked to the detective. But you jumped to the wrong conclusion. You spread a preposterous story among the staff about my father being murdered. That rumor got to Jose. The poor man must have been out of his mind, thinking that he was going to be found out for stealing and then be accused of a murder he didn't commit. No wonder he flew off the handle when he was arrested." Lupe's face reddened. "Do you realize what's going to happen to Jose?" Adela asked. "I was prepared to offer him a way out. If he made even partial restitution I was going to drop the charges. But now what happens to Jose is not up to me. The District Attorney is going to decide. Jose will be charged with a violent crime because he held a knife to me. He may get jail time and he'll have a felony on his record. His life is changed forever."

"I didn't mean for this to happen," Lupe said. "When Mr. Rios died I knew I would be let go. I called a lady that I worked for before, to ask her if she would give me a reference and maybe pass on some leads about jobs. She's a TV reporter. She asked me a lot of questions about Mr. Rios and about what happened. When I told her about the audit she got all excited. After that she kept calling me. She was so interested that it made me think something was wrong. Now I know that my imagination got the best of me. I should have kept my mouth shut."

"I know that you didn't intend to hurt Jose," Adela said. "These last few days have been very difficult for everyone. When people are under pressure, sometimes they do things that they later regret."

“Should I tell the police what I did?”

“You should,” Adela said. “Maybe when the District Attorney gets all the facts I can persuade him to bring lesser charges against Jose.”

“I’m staying here!” Sonia said excitedly into the phone. “Adela offered my Dad the barn manager job.”

“That’s great,” Christopher said, genuinely pleased. “My Dad told me what happened with Jose. In fact, he helped out with the arrest.”

“How so?” Sonia asked.

“It’s a bit of a long story, and you were involved. Remember that afternoon before the fire, when he chewed you out about picking some flowers? By the way, I hope he wasn’t too awful to you.”

“It really wasn’t anything,” Sonia said. “Just a misunderstanding. But Mr. Rios was really upset with your father.”

“He was,” Christopher agreed. “He took my Dad up to his office and told him that he had hired a private investigator to make an audit of the expenses at the barn. The investigator had discovered that someone was embezzling, but he didn’t know who it was. Mr. Rios was angry that my Dad hadn’t noticed what was going on. He ordered him to find out who was responsible. But the next day the fire came. After that my Dad wasn’t able to do anything more about it. Then last night Adela called him at home to say that it was Jose. Adela told him about the plan to arrest Jose and my Dad agreed to help out by opening her front gate for the police, so they could come on the property unnoticed.”

“That explains a lot of things,” Sonia said.

“You know, Sonia, before today I was concerned for you.”

“Whatever for?” Sonia asked.

“My Dad told me about the audit. He said that he suspected your father, because Jose kept telling everyone that he was spending too much money.”

“You’ve been awfully nice to me then, considering you thought my father might be a thief,” Sonia said.

“I think my Dad told me about his suspicions because I was getting to know you better. It was his way of waving me off being friends with you,” Christopher explained. “But I don’t judge people by their family.”

“Since you’ve been honest with me,” Sonia said, “I’ll tell you that I was concerned for you.”

“Why?”

Sonia told Christopher about Detective Mori’s interest in the incident in the rose garden. “It crossed my mind that your father might be in some kind of trouble,” she confessed. “I even wondered if he had something to do with Mr. Rios’ death.”

“Wow,” Christopher said. “I’m surprised you were willing to hang out with me at the Fairgrounds.”

“I don’t judge people by their family either.”

The taxi approached the airport. Georgina began to unwind. She reached into her purse for her cell phone. She was ready to call Nick.

Adela’s timely intervention had not only spared Georgina from Mark’s wrath, but it had a fortuitous side effect—it cleared the way for her to tell Nick a sanitized version of events. She would simply say that the ZIFIX deal was signed and she was on her way back to him. He would assume that she had gone through with the original deal, and she would let his assumption go unchallenged. He would apologize for accusing her of being interested in Nate and she would gracefully accept his apology. They would go on. Whether it was together as a couple in New York, or in a distance relationship if he moved to Washington, they would go on.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mark knocked on Georgina's open door. She had not seen him since he had returned from California the previous day. "Is this a good time to talk?" he asked. Without waiting for her response he entered her office and sat down. He cleared his throat. "I have good news," he said. "Adela wants to keep the Rios Capital account with us."

"Congratulations," Georgina said.

Mark shifted slightly in the chair. "As it turns out, *you* are the one who is to be congratulated," he said. "Adela will keep the account with us on one condition. She wants *you* to serve as her liaison to the bank. She appears to have taken quite an interest in you. Since the Rios Capital account is a major one, I told the partners that the best way to handle the situation is for you to start up your own group and they have agreed. Your promotion is effective immediately." Georgina stared at Mark. "This is where you thank me," Mark said.

"I don't know what to say," Georgina stammered. "Of course, Mark, thank you. Am I really going to head up my own group?"

"Yes, you are," he said. "You will have the same job title that I have."

"Are you sure that you're OK with this?" Georgina asked. "I need you to level with me, Mark. Tell me if you're going to resent me."

"I don't resent you at all," Mark said evenly. "The client must be kept, and therefore the client must be kept happy. Actually Georgina, I'm proud of you. You impressed the right client at the right moment, and now the bank has kept an important account. That makes you a star at this firm. Remember, I promised to make you a star."

"So you did," Georgina agreed.

Sam put on athletic shoes and a wide-brimmed hat and slung a daypack over her shoulders. She walked for a stretch along the beach and then followed a steep trail that wound its way up a bluff. By the time she reached the top she was thirsty. She got a bottle of water from the daypack.

The view from the crest of the bluff extended for miles in both directions. Ocean waves rolled endlessly towards the shoreline, their whitecaps glittering in the noonday sun. Surf crashed on the rocks below and seagulls called out to one another as they circled above. Sam scanned the built-up area that lay due north of the beach, looking for the apartment complex where she was going to live. Seeing it, she smiled.

She reached into the daypack and pulled out the Geisha doll's tiny red silk parasol. With a sweeping motion, she released it into the air.

End.

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