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Divine Intervention Series III

*Triple Play*

JENNIFER MCKENZIE

*Divine Intervention Series III:*

*Triple Play*

*By*

*Jennifer McKenzie*

## **Triple Play by Jennifer McKenzie**

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### **Triple Play**

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-143-5

Cover Artist: CoverVan

Editor: Leanne Salter

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Cobblestone Press, LLC

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**Dedication**

To the Napa Blackbirds, who taught me everything I know about teamwork and the joys of riding in the back of a truck with fifteen other girls.

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“That call was bogus!”

Christopher Jeffers winced as the shout drifted across the baseball diamond. It was that Laskey woman again. Wasn't it bad enough that she fought the school board to get her daughter on his baseball team—and won? Or that her daughter could out pitch anyone on the team? But did she also have to be a walking, talking, annoying as hell sex symbol?

The sun had set, and the halogen lights glared in his eyes as he glanced up at the stands. There she stood, her long black hair tucked into a baseball cap, and her jeans hugging that luscious ass. Her Portuguese heritage showed in her dark coloring and hot temper. That woman was nothing but a pain in his butt.

“Hey, batter, batter. Hey, batter, batter. Hey, batter, batter *swing!*” she called out.

Chris faced the fact that Danielle Laskey was a great parent, but that didn't mean he had to like her. She yelled encouragement, but never went too far. Her daughter was her whole world, and it showed.

When Maria Laskey wanted to play baseball, her mother fought to make it happen. The school board didn't want it, Chris hadn't wanted to coach a girl, and the guys on the team gave Maria a bad time. But mother and daughter weren't made of putty. Danielle fought the system, and Maria fought the stigma.

Now, Maria was one of his best players and an outstanding pitcher. Once they let her on the team, she'd worked hard, hustled all the time, and never mouthed off to any of the guys. She let her talent speak for her. What other fifteen-year-old girl could do that?

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Danielle Laskey, however, was pushy and hostile. The fight with the school board hadn't been pretty. Chris wasn't responsible for a lot of opinions that got tossed around, but he hadn't stopped them either. The expression of hurt and anger on her face when the details of her wild youth were made public fodder at a school board meeting—with fifty parents in attendance—was burned into his memory. Her single parent status had been debated as if it were the budget. Her relationship with a high school boyfriend, which led to unwed motherhood and raising her daughter alone was presented and discussed to death.

And she blamed him for it.

It wasn't his fault, but as he watched Maria take out another pitcher with her killer curve ball, he knew he hadn't helped.

Maria read the call the catcher sent her. She shook it off. Chris frowned. She rarely shook off a signal.

He shot a glance at Danielle. She looked startled.

Chris studied the batter. Was there something special there?

Maria nodded at the second signal. What had they agreed upon? One thing about Maria; her repertoire of pitches was huge.

The fastball whistled through the air, steamed across the plate, and whacked into the catcher's glove.

"Striiiiike three. You're out," the umpire called, and the team erupted in celebration. Last inning, last pitch, last out. They'd won.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was that Tracer kid. Maria had struck out Derek Tracer, and the boy was pissed. Adrenaline pumping through her blood, Danielle jumped down the bleachers toward the field. Where was that damn coach?

Derek was almost to the pitcher's mound with his fists clenched, and Danielle was too far away. Panic flooded her veins. Her daughter wasn't even looking his way.

*Turn around, Maria! Turn around!*

"Lucky pitch," Derek sneered loud enough for Danielle to hear.

Maria turned around at the sound of his voice. "Thank you," she

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responded just as Danielle reached her daughter's side.

"Everyone knows your mother slept with the coach to get you on the team, bitch. Don't think you can play baseball. You can't. They're just letting you on the team so that your mom and the coach can fuck." Derek turned on his heel and stalked away.

"Jeez, Mom, I don't know what his problem is. We broke up over a year ago."

Maria didn't cry. Like her mother, she never cried. Danielle studied the hurt in her daughter's face, even though her words were brave, and wondered if lack of tears was a good lesson to pass on.

"I don't know, honey." *Lighten it up, Danielle.* "Just for the record, I'm not sleeping with your coach. If I was, I'd be in a much better mood."

To her relief, Maria laughed. "*Way* too much information."

With her arm around her daughter's shoulders, they headed for the dugout. The team was packing up and heading for the pizza parlor for the victory dinner. Most of Maria's teammates were already in the parking lot.

"Maria, you go on ahead. Here's the keys. I want to talk to Coach Jeffers."

Maria put a hand on her mother's arm and protested, "Mom—"

"It's okay. I promise I won't hurt him." *Yet.*

Maria didn't look as if she wanted to believe her mother even though she took the keys and headed for the car, but threw her one last pleading glance over her shoulder.

"Coach Jeffers, I have a bone to pick with you."

The tall, broad-shouldered man towered over her five-feet-four-inch frame. He intimidated most people. But not her. Well, not too much. The fact that he made her hormones rattle for the first time in years wasn't exactly welcome.

"You usually do," he replied shortly, his blue eyes expressionless.

She glared at him. "I know you didn't want Maria on this team, but the boys follow your example, and I expect you to take care of it." She let the contempt ring in her voice. "Any other pitcher would have had teammates to back him up when a batter goes after him, but your team scattered."

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"You pushed to get her on this team which means there's going to be resistance."

"I'm not stupid, Coach. I'm not asking you to change how people feel. Can you just provide a little physical protection before your best pitcher ends up with a baseball bat to her head? Or is that just too much trouble?"

"I can't protect her all the time."

"I'm not asking you to. On the baseball diamond, I expect you to be her coach, whether you like her or not. Whether you like *me* or not. I'll protect her everywhere else. That little byplay between Maria and Derek isn't the first, and I'm sure it won't be the last."

His eyes narrowed, and his shoulders went stiff. "I don't like being pushed around."

"I'm not trying to push you around." She sighed and rubbed her hand over her face. "Look, I don't mind if my daughter breaks her leg as long as she's sliding into second doing it. I fought for her to be on this team because she's damned good and deserved a shot. We would have settled for softball if there was any. All I'm asking is that, until the whole mess dies down and gets forgotten, can you keep my daughter from getting bushwhacked on the field?"

For a moment, she wondered if he was going to give her more trouble. Her shoulders tightened, and she braced herself for another battle with Christopher Jeffers. Instead, he nodded. "I can do that. Maria doesn't stir up trouble."

Danielle took that to mean Maria wasn't like her mother. Her chin shot up, and she met his gaze with her own. "No, she doesn't. She takes it on the chin. I'm proud of her."

She turned her back on the coach and strode toward the parking lot.

"Everything okay, Mom?" Maria asked as they piled into the truck.

"Great, honey. That was a fantastic game, and that fastball was brilliant. You've been practicing." She smoothed her hand over her daughter's hair as pride welled through her.

"I've been working on that one for a couple of weeks. You know



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we always wrote off my fastball because it wasn't very fast." Maria grinned. "Charlie showed me a way to make it *look* fast, even though it isn't."

"Well, it looked fast enough to me." Danielle was so thrilled her daughter was getting to play. All that talent, and a love of the game, too. It didn't get any better than that.

Nothing was going to stop Danielle from giving Maria a chance to play the game she loved. Especially not the sexy Christopher Jeffers.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pizza parlor was packed with kids, their families, and the whole baseball team. Danielle wove through the crowd, carrying two pizzas, and plunked them down on a table in the corner.

"These two are loaded. Four more are on their way." She tossed some napkins on the table.

When she whipped around to go back to the counter, she found a solid wall of muscle blocking her path. Coach Jeffers hands shot out and gripped her shoulders to steady her.

"Oops. Sorry," he said, grinning, his voice laced with amusement. "I thought you knew I was behind you."

Danielle closed her eyes for a brief moment as his unique scent of male musk and baseball mitt oil wound around her. "Excuse me," she murmured.

Escape seemed impossible as the crowd around them shoved him even closer. Her breath caught, and she met his dark blue eyes. Heat climbed from her belly, up her neck, and over her face. She gave silent thanks that her dark coloring kept most people from realizing she blushed.

When his hands squeezed her shoulders, she caught an odd expression on his face; almost as if he'd never seen her before.

He stepped aside, and she bolted for the pizza counter. She tried to collect enough cups for the team as her hands shook. What was wrong with her? He was just a man. A solid, good-looking man, but a man. One

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she'd been fighting with for over three months.

She shook her head to clear it. She was obviously losing her mind if she was attracted to Christopher Jeffers.

The cups balanced perfectly in her grip, she brought them over to the rest of the team.

"Hey, Mom! Did you get some diet for us?" Maria's glance swept the team with a teasing gleam. "None of these guys understand that regular stuff rots your teeth."

One of the boys chuffed her arm. "You afraid of getting fat, Laskey?"

"Watch the pitching arm, Stodler. I'm not afraid of getting too fat to outrun you." She socked him back.

Danielle allowed herself to smile. Her daughter was amazing. She knew how to take the teasing from the boys on the team, and she knew how to give it back, too.

"Knock it off, you monsters," Jeffers told them, his face serious.

"Yeah! Knock it off. You all know you can't outwit me." Maria's flashed a smug grin.

The boys all groaned and laughed. It was nice to see them beginning to accept her. Worried that she wouldn't get respect, Maria did her best to outdo the boys without destroying their fragile egos. Danielle was never certain how her daughter managed it.

"What did that jerk say to you on the pitcher's mound?" Kenny Stodler asked Maria as he grabbed another piece of pizza.

Maria shrugged. "The usual. He has issues." She wrinkled her nose.

"Well, if you need us to take a baseball bat to him, just let us know," Kenny stated.

"No way. I've seen what you can do with a bat," Maria joked. The rest of the team laughed, and Danielle lost the thread of the conversation as it turned to stats and averages.

Her own thoughts were full of worry. The fight to get Maria on the team had been nasty, and Danielle didn't want her to pay the price for it. That confrontation on the pitcher's mound was only one in a series.

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She shot a glance at the coach. He wasn't paying attention to the team conversation. His eyes were gazing in another direction. Danielle almost snorted out loud when she saw the object of his perusal.

Ina Stodler.

Everyone in town knew the coach and Ina had been an item last season. No one knew what happened, but Ina started showing up at the games with a new guy.

The woman was dark, with her Mexican heritage stamped all over her face. Big boobs, soft curves, and black eyes made Ina the center of attention. No surprise the coach still carried a torch for her.

Why did it matter? But it did matter. An unusual pang of jealousy rolled through Danielle's stomach. Apparently, she was more attracted to Christopher Jeffers than she thought.

She really needed to get laid. She smirked a little. Since she'd gotten pregnant with her daughter, she hadn't had sex. Fear kept her single and unsatisfied. She sighed.

"Something wrong?" Coach Jeffers startled her out of her thoughts.

Danielle was sure her face grew red as the heat spread over her cheeks. "Not really." But her gaze slid over to Ina standing at one of the tables, staring at them.

The coach followed her gaze, and then raised an eyebrow as he turned back again. "Has Ina been giving you trouble? She's gets mean when she's tipsy."

"Not so far. She gives me dirty looks, but she's never been one of my best friends or anything." No one was. Who did she talk to? There was no one she could trust.

He smiled at her, and she couldn't help but stare. His whole face changed, softened, when he smiled.

"Ina doesn't have women friends."

She grinned back at him. "That's been said about me, too."

He cocked his head to the side. "I don't notice that you have any friends, now that I think about it."

Her gaze dropped to the table. She had no answer to that, so silence was the best response. She started when his finger touched her arm.

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"What secrets do you keep to yourself, Miss Laskey?"

She opened her mouth to tell him to mind his own business, but a motion in the corner of her eye caught her attention and she looked up. Ina swayed a little, and the smell of stale beer wafted from her.

"Isn't this cozy?" Her words slurred a little.

"What do you want, Ina?" The coach seemed irritated by the interruption.

"I heard the rumor that you're fucking this little bitch, but I didn't believe it until now." Ina glared at Danielle.

"Mom—" Kenny started to speak, but Danielle caught his eye and shook her head once.

She clenched her teeth and struggled to keep her mouth shut. So, everyone was talking about the rumor that she and Coach Jeffers were fucking? Great. Just what she needed.

"You're drunk," Jeffers said.

Danielle rolled her eyes. Stating the obvious to an angry, drunk woman was probably asking for trouble.

"I'm not too drunk to see that you're pawing that slut. Everyone knows that her whore spawn is just like her."

That was it. Danielle would take a lot of heat for her own past, as perceived by the small town she lived in, but no one said nasty things about Maria.

"Would you care to clarify that, Ina?" Danielle asked, her voice dangerously quiet.

The woman leaned down, and the stench of cheap perfume almost choked Danielle. "I mean, Maria Laskey is a slut, just like her mother."

With a flick of her wrist, Danielle dumped the contents of her glass down the front of Ina's low-cut blouse.

"You bitch!" the woman screamed.

In a heartbeat, Danielle was standing, blotting the mess with a napkin. "Oh, I'm so sorry about that. It just slipped out of my hand." As she dabbed Ina's chest with a napkin, she hooked her foot behind Ina's high heel and swept the woman's leg out from under her, dumping the indignant Ina on her ass.

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“Come on, Ina,” one of the men from the table she’d been sitting at said as he hauled her up by the armpits. “You’ve had too much to drink.”

“That slut tripped me.”

“Sure, honey. Whatever you say.”

Danielle managed to keep an innocent expression on her face as they led Ina away among the woman’s loud protests.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chris started his car and drove out of the parking lot at the pizza place. What inspired him to compare Ina Stodler with Danielle Laskey, of all people? Worst of all, Ina came up short. And on the floor. Containing his laughter as Danielle tripped the drunken woman had been difficult.

Last season, Ina had been fun, but baseball was just a game to her. He couldn’t imagine Ina fighting as hard as Danielle did if their positions had been reversed. Somewhere along the line, Danielle had earned his respect.

What happened in there? She ran into him, and she seemed to be a perfect fit in his arms. His body’s reaction was instant, and her embarrassment was evident. The dusky rose color that had crept up her neck and face was charming. Then she maintained her cool as Ina abused her, but put the woman in her place when she attacked Maria. He’d almost asked her out on a date right then and there. How crazy was that?

Ina had stood across the room, and Chris noted her assets, but they all seemed to pale in comparison to Danielle Laskey.

He really needed to get laid.

As he parked in his driveway, the emptiness of his life slammed into him. Two marriages, no kids, and a legacy of bitterness seemed to be all that awaited him inside. Oh sure, he had the house set up the way he wanted it. There was a big screen television and baseball paraphernalia all over the place, but there wasn’t any warmth. Loneliness was his constant companion these days.

Maybe that explained his attraction to Danielle. She appeared to be lonely, too. With a glass of milk and a biography on Mickey Mantle he’d

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picked up, Chris wandered to bed still wishing there was more to his life than an empty bed and a silent house.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"This isn't going to be an easy assignment, Thomas."*

*The big boss had called him out of the blue. Thomas had been balancing three other second timer assignments, but now, those were all on hold for this one woman. He wondered why.*

*"None of them are really easy, sir," Thomas replied, studying the computer file on Danielle Laskey. "I've dealt with hostile clients before."*

*"Not like this one."*

*An uneasy feeling worked its way along Thomas' wings. What was the big boss getting at? Silence was the only answer. Maybe he would explain a little more.*

*Sure enough, the big boss sighed. "There is more to this story than their differences about a girl on a boy's baseball team."*

*Searching the files, Thomas couldn't see anything listed that would give him a clue. "I don't understand."*

*"Her past is a huge barrier."*

*"There's nothing here. Unwed mother, single for the last fifteen years, parents live far away, and she's a hard worker. What else is there?"*

*"It isn't listed in her file because it's confidential."*

*A cold rock settled in Thomas' stomach. "What do I need to know?"*

*"Her daughter was a product of rape." The big boss dropped the words over the line like ice cubes.*

*"What? Why wasn't I told this sooner?" Thomas' hands fisted on the keyboard as a feather drifted down to land on his desk. He always shed feather when he was stressed.*

*"She's never admitted it. She blames herself, and her daughter doesn't know. Danielle Laskey has allowed the whole town to believe she was sleeping around rather than tell the truth. This may keep her from connecting with her soul mate."*

*"No kidding," muttered Thomas.*

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*"Your job is to help her deal with this. She's hidden it so deep she doesn't even know she's reacting to it when she is. You'll have to help her."*

*"How can I do that? She doesn't even think about it. I had no idea."*

*"For her sake, she has to admit it. For Maria's sake, Danielle has to face her demons."*

*"Yes, sir. Do you have any suggestions?" He'd need all the help he could get.*

*"I do, Thomas. It's going to take some finesse, and you'll need help again."*

*"Christopher Jeffers' angel?"*

*"Yes, and Maria's angel as well. This isn't going to be easy, as I said."*

*"Well, sir, you never promised me it would." And it certainly hadn't been so far. The last time he collaborated with other guardian angels, they'd been twins. At least that complication didn't seem to be part of this case.*

*"We know you'll do your best. You've done a wonderful job so far."*

*Thomas' heart warmed. The big boss didn't hand out compliments very readily. It was encouraging to hear. "I'll get right on it."*

*He only hoped the other two guardian angels were willing to work with him.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Danielle woke up screaming in the middle of the night. Again. Sweat poured off her body.

It had been fifteen years, and the nightmare still came. Always the same. In the backseat of John Perry's car, adrenaline from that night's football win flooding her veins, she was enjoying the make-out session.

Then John turned into a monster, demanding she lay still, saying ugly, horrible things to her. He ripped her bra and tore her panties. From there, the nightmare didn't spare Danielle anything. The pain, the fear, the agony of losing her virginity to a boy who took it from her careened through her. She relived the entire horrid night again and again.

It didn't come every night, but often enough to keep her on edge. She only hoped her daughter hadn't heard the scream. It had been particularly bad tonight, thanks to Ina Stoddard triggering the memory.

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Because of that one night, she had a beautiful daughter and a black reputation. Everyone in Fortuna believed she slept around, and she did nothing to dispel the rumors. It seemed pointless. The truth would help no one—people would pity her, and no one would look at her daughter quite the same again. No, she could never destroy Maria that way. Her daughter was her whole life.

She threw the covers back and went to her bathroom sink. Splashing cold water on her face would wake her up, but also wash away the shame and the guilt. Nothing washed away the fear. Part of her knew there was nothing she could have done to stop John. At sixteen, however, she believed she'd asked for it, encouraged it. She didn't tell her parents or her friends. She sucked it up and saw John Perry everyday at school. He never spoke to her again, and for that she was grateful.

As she stared in her bathroom mirror, the vision of her younger self and the reflection of the woman in the glass blended. Silent tears ran down her cheeks.

For a moment, when Coach Jeffers touched her arm, she thought she might be able to be normal, attractive. The reality was that she couldn't be normal. She was damaged, baggage ridden.

The clock read five in the morning. She might as well start her day. Stepping into the shower, she got ready to go to her job as a cashier at the grocery store. She couldn't afford to be late.

\* \* \* \* \*

For four days, Christopher agonized and contemplated his options. He wanted to ask Danielle out for a date, but he didn't want to seem over eager. Something about the woman brought out his irritation, and his compassion. He stared at the phone every night, wondering what would happen if he picked it up and called her.

At the next practice, he caught himself scanning the parking lot for her car. One of the kids poked him. "Hey, coach. Look who's here." The boy pointed, and Christopher was pleased to see his star player from the year before.



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"Kurt! What are you doing here? And Elisabeth, it's nice to see you." Elisabeth Muldoon—Anderson now—was a wonderful woman with twin boys and a knack for fundraising.

"I'm taking Michaela out for some fresh air." She hefted the little girl in her arms.

"How's Stanford?" he asked Kurt.

The young man smiled. "It's great, but I miss Mom and Jerod a lot."

Elisabeth grinned at her son. "I'll bet you get more sleep there than you do here. Michaela isn't exactly quiet about her needs."

"That's true. So, Coach, I hear you have a girl on your team. What's up? You going soft on us?"

"Kurt," his mother scolded. "That's not nice."

Michaela babbled. "Kwert meanie. Meanie. Meanie."

He held up his hands in surrender. "I'm not being mean. Is she any good?"

"She's better than you," Christopher said with a grin.

He scoffed. "That's not cool, Coach."

"Stick around and watch her practice. See what you think."

"I will. Mom, do you want to stay? I can get a ride home with the Coach."

"If Coach Jeffers doesn't mind?" She cocked her head to the side, her daughter squirming and yelling, "Down, down, down."

"I don't mind. You'd better get that little spitfire home." He ruffled the tiny girl's hair, a little stab of envy shooting through him.

"Thank you."

When Elisabeth started toward her car, Kurt punched Christopher in the shoulder. "Want me to help you get these kids in shape, old man?"

Christopher rolled his eyes. "Whatever." They headed for the baseball diamond. The weather was perfect. Not too hot, not too cold.

Maria was there and ready to play. Infield practice was first. Christopher let Kurt hit some balls to the players. He wasn't surprised to see Kurt hitting vicious line drives to Maria, trying to throw her.

Without batting an eyelash, Maria fielded the balls and threw them

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to first base with grace and ease.

Kurt's eyes narrowed. "Okay, we'll change it up a bit. Man on second."

He hit a line drive past the third baseman. As the third baseman chased the ball, Maria was there, on the base to receive his throw.

"Alright," Kurt called out. "Let's practice the triple play."

Maria hustled to the mound. She crouched down, ready for Kurt's hit.

Kurt pointed to a couple of the outfielders. "I need some runners. Let's see if you really get them out or you're just playing around."

Christopher was surprised to see Maria glare at Kurt, a challenge in her gaze. Somehow, Kurt was getting under her skin the way no other kid had. Curious.

With the runners in place at first and second, Kurt popped off a fly ball deep into the infield. It pulled the second baseman off the plate. Maria was there as the runner on second flew towards third, stopped as the ball was going to be caught, and sprinted back to the base. The second baseman caught the ball, and an underhand toss to Maria had the second base runner out. Firing the ball to first, Maria nipped the first base runner by seconds.

Perfect.

Kurt shot him a disgruntled look, and Christopher allowed himself to smile.

"Told you she was better than you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Danielle arrived late for the baseball practice and hurried to the stands. The scene that met her eyes made her nervous. A strange boy was hitting line drive after line drive to her daughter, and the coach was standing on the sidelines with his arms crossed just watching it and saying nothing.

She seethed with resentment. No other player would be tested like that. Normally, she would've jumped into the middle of the situation, but

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this time she stood behind the benches and observed Maria working and hustling. When the triple play was called, she held her breath. As Maria fired the ball, her heart burst with pride, and she let go of the breath she'd been holding.

About to give everyone a piece of her mind, she stopped dead in her tracks as Christopher Jeffers made his comment. It was clear the kid hitting the ball was someone Jeffers had coached before. And it was clear that the coach had respect and admiration for her daughter.

She sat down on the corner of one of the bleachers. Had she jumped in, guns blazing, she could have sold her daughter short. It occurred to her that she might have done that too many times. Maria could defend herself if need be; maybe it was time for Mom to back off a little.

Her thoughts whirled through the rest of the practice, and when the coach called a halt, Maria waved to her. Jeffers shaded his eyes and noticed her for the first time.

He called the kid over to him, and they crossed home plate to where she sat. Danielle recognized the boy now. Kurt Muldoon. He was one of the best pitchers the team had ever had, and he'd graduated the year before.

"Miss Laskey? This is Kurt Muldoon. He's been helping me with the practice today." He nodded his head to her. "Kurt, this is Maria's mom, Danielle Laskey."

"Your daughter is awesome, Miss Laskey." Kurt shook her hand, all politeness.

Now was the time she would normally launch into a defense of her only child. Instead, she shook Kurt's hand and smiled. "That was a tough practice out there. Nice job." She was gratified by Coach Jeffer's startled glance. With an inward wince, Danielle realized he might have never seen her be polite.

"Mom! Did you see it? It was so cool to really pull off the triple play. We've practiced it, of course." Maria's face was flushed, and she was out of breath. "But it was so awesome to actually do it with runners."

"That's great, honey." Danielle smiled at her daughter. "We need to

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get home and get your homework done. Thanks, Kurt." She put her arm around her daughter and started for her SUV as Maria kept talking to her about every minute of the practice with Kurt Muldoon.

"Danielle, do you have a minute?" Christopher caught up to them.

What could he possibly want? She hadn't exploded or raked him over the coals. She'd been a good little parent. Did she do something wrong? "Sure. Here's the keys, hon. I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay, Mom." Maria skipped to the car.

She faced the coach and braced for an ass chewing.

"What are you doing Friday night after the game?" he asked.

"What?" That was not what she was expecting at all.

"After the game. Friday night. If you're interested, I'd like to take you to a movie."

She just stared at him, completely speechless. A *date*? The coach was asking her on a date? But he hated her, fought her. She was a pain in the neck for him, wasn't she? "Friday night?" she repeated like an idiot.

"Friday night." He looked serious. She shook her head and tried to summon something intelligent to say.

"I'd love to." Where had that come from? It was her voice. It just slipped out before she knew what she was doing.

"Great." He smiled. "Do you want to go directly after the game or give me a chance to clean up first?"

"Um...whatever you like."

"There's a nine o'clock showing. If the game doesn't go into extra innings, I can take a shower and pick you up."

Warmth spread in her belly. A date. She was going to go on a date. "That sounds wonderful, Coach."

Her pulse jumped when he grinned at her. "Call me Christopher."

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Well, that went well." Thomas breathed a long sigh of relief.*

*Paulinis nodded. "I didn't think he was going to do it, but I finally leaned hard enough to get results."*

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*"You did a great job."*

*"How did you get her to say 'yes'?"*

*"Part of her wanted to accept. I just leaned on that part and gave it a little more room in her heart." Thomas twitched one of his wings. "Now, we have to make sure she doesn't back out and the date goes well."*

*"What are you going to do about the big issue she has?" Paulinis had been informed of Danielle's conflict and brought on board. Having struggled to get Christopher to the point of asking Danielle on a date, the angel was happy to help.*

*"I'm not sure. What happened to Racine? She was supposed to be in on this, too." Racine was Maria's guardian angel and Thomas wanted to get her in on the plan.*

*Paulinis shrugged. "She's a regular guardian angel. Her focus is to keep Maria's esteem up, not deal with her mom's stuff."*

*Remembering Kurt and Kevin's twin guardian angels, Thomas nodded. They'd been young and inexperienced. Leaning was an art to master. Racine probably wouldn't think she needed to be involved until something went wrong.*

*"Well, I'll talk to her. I don't want to have to clean up a mess later. I've done that before. It isn't pleasant."*

*"Everything happens for a reason." Paulinis patted Thomas' arm. "The big boss is in charge. We're just guiding them."*

*"I know. I just don't like it when a plan goes wrong."*

*His fellow angel grinned. "It makes the ending so much more rewarding."*

*"You're right, but the getting there is a bit stressful. I really can't afford to shed more feathers."*

*Paulinis laughed.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Friday was a blur. Danielle's nerves stretched and snapped a million times that day. She could barely keep her mind on her work of ringing up groceries and dealing with customers. The details of the game were hazy, though she was pretty sure they won. It ended at about seven that night, and Maria was going to a friend's house overnight.

Danielle still hadn't told Maria she was going on a date.

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As the rest of the players shuffled off the baseball diamond, Christopher found her. "I'll be there at eight-thirty. Are we still on?" He fidgeted with his belt buckle, and she found it kind of sweet that he seemed as nervous as she felt.

"We're still on."

He nodded and started to walk away.

"Christopher." He turned around, and she bit her lip, unsure of herself, of going out with him. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." He waved goodbye and started for his car.

"Mom! Come on. I told Amber I'd be there in twenty minutes," Maria called from the SUV.

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

As Danielle prepared for her date, she stared at her reflection. Dark, curly hair, deep, sad eyes the color of polished onyx, and a straight nose were the only assets she seemed to have. She was too athletic looking, too mouthy, too fiery. He'd spend two hours alone with her and find out she wasn't very interesting.

All she did in her life was work and take care of her daughter. She didn't have hobbies. She didn't have friends. What did she have to talk about with Christopher Jeffers?

Everything in her wanted to call him and cancel. She stretched out for the phone.

*Are you going to let John Perry keep you from having a life forever?*

Her fingers stiffened and retracted from the phone. *No*. She was going to try a date with Christopher Jeffers. It may fail, but her past wasn't going to keep her from living anymore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christopher took the quickest shower he'd ever taken and dressed with frantic movements while keeping one eye on the phone. She might cancel. He knew he was no prize. He'd fought her, argued with her constantly, and his ex-girlfriend had tried to start a catfight. He didn't look too appealing at the moment.

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But she'd said yes. The trick was to show up early and get her out the door before she could think about it and change her mind.

His nerves were raw. He'd dated a lot of women, casually and seriously, but the chemistry he noted between himself and Danielle was different. Most of the women he dated never earned his respect. Often, they were looking for someone to take care of them.

Danielle was a departure from his usual choice in dates. Staring in the mirror as he shaved off his five o'clock shadow, he took stock. Brown hair that usually seemed messy, blue eyes that had a bitter, distrustful expression he didn't like, muscles he worked hard to keep in shape, and a solid jaw that clenched when he was pissed off. He didn't think he had much to offer in the looks department. Women were usually attracted to his easygoing flattery. What could he attract Danielle with?

As he drove to her house, his adrenaline pumped, and fear she'd close the door in his face when he got there skittered along his nerves.

He arrived half an hour early, but when he knocked on her door, she flung it open. Even so, her nervousness was palpable, and she wouldn't meet his gaze.

"I'm early."

She still didn't look at him. "That's fine. What movie are we seeing? I didn't even ask." She retrieved her purse, still avoiding his gaze. Somehow, that made Christopher feel a little better. At least he wasn't alone.

"Well, you have your choice of two. One is an action movie. One is a fantasy, I think."

Her eyes widened as they finally met his. "Which one do you want to see?"

Christopher could practically smell the fear on her. What was she afraid of?

"I thought the fantasy might be more fun."

"That's fine." She followed him to his truck, and he opened the door for her. She seemed to shrink into the seat, avoiding contact with him.

After months of listening to Danielle Laskey speak to committees

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and boards and parents, it seemed odd she would be so quiet and nervous. After a silent five minutes, he broke the ice.

"You look...nice," he stammered. *Jeez, how old am I? I'm thirty-five, not twelve.*

But she did look nice. Every time he'd seen her, she was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Tonight, she had on black pants of some silky material and a red blouse with flowing sleeves. And her hair. It was long and black, draped down her back. He'd never seen it down. It was a crime she hid that beautiful hair under a baseball cap most of the time.

"Thank you. So do you." Her voice cracked.

"Maria played great tonight." Christopher was rewarded with a little loosening of her clenched hands and a smile.

"Yes, she did. You've really improved her pitching. That was something I couldn't do."

"You gave her a great start. She told me you drilled her until she could face a line drive without flinching."

"It was the only time she was afraid of the ball. Any other time, she was cool as a cucumber, but those hit directly to her had her ducking. I'm the same way. I just drilled her until she got over her fear."

"How many goose eggs did she get?" he asked with a grin.

One side of Danielle's mouth lifted. "A couple. She always got right back up and kicked my ass."

By the time they arrived at the movie theater, Christopher thought he'd broken through her nerves, but when they entered the building, her tension was palpable. It was then he noticed the stares of everyone around them. Fortuna was a small town, and he was the high school coach. He'd forgotten about Ina's loud altercation with Danielle and the gossip that followed such things.

She started like a nervous horse when he put his fingers on her elbow and bent down to whisper in her ear, "Never let 'em see you sweat."

That worked. She stiffened her spine and gave him a dazzling smile, which bowled him over. "Thank you."



## Triple Play by Jennifer McKenzie

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The movie was great, and the coffee and conversation afterwards had put her at ease. They talked about baseball, their parents, and a little about their pasts. The closer they got to the ride home, though, the more Danielle's nerves returned.

She was alone. There was no one at her house to protect her. What if—but she kept trying to remember that Christopher wasn't John Perry.

As she slid into the passenger seat, her mouth went dry, and her hands shook so much she twisted them together to keep them still. Her fear slammed into her body, and waves of it crashed over her. She tried to keep it at bay, but it careened out of her control.

They arrived at her house, and she bolted out of the car. He followed her.

She fumbled with her keys, and he reached around and took them from her. "Let me get it."

*He's just being nice. He's just being nice. He's just being nice.* Her breath came in short gasps, and her chest burned.

He opened the door and leaned down into her face.

As his lips met hers, terror spiraled through her body. She pummeled his chest, struggling to get away.

He held onto her and spoke to her, but she couldn't understand what he was saying.

She couldn't breath, couldn't scream. He was going to do it. Just like John did. She couldn't stop him.

Her feet went out from under her, and he carried her into her home and laid on her couch. Her fists continued to beat against his broad chest, but it didn't seem to faze him.

The room swirled and spun, and then she slipped into blessed darkness.

When she opened her eyes, he was gone. Standing in her living room was a woman she barely knew. Elisabeth Anderson.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was weak and strained. She struggled to sit up.

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"No, lay back down." Elisabeth sat on the couch with her and touched her shoulder. "Christopher called me. He said he didn't trust anyone else, but that you had a panic attack."

Danielle moaned. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be. I asked him what happened, and he said that something he'd done had triggered a panic attack, and that you needed a woman friend."

"I—" The words wouldn't come. She was so close to tears, they burned her throat.

Elisabeth studied her face. "I promise whatever you tell me won't leave this room. What did Christopher do? Did he hurt you?"

"Oh, no! This has nothing to do with him." Tears filled her eyes. "I just can't tell anyone. He'll never want to speak to me again." One of her tears slid down her cheek and dripped to her ear.

"I don't know about that. Are you alone tonight? Can I stay with you?"

"I don't want to be alone." Danielle sniffed. "But what about your daughter?"

Elisabeth snorted. "I'll get more sleep here, believe me."

To Danielle's surprise, she was able to laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

The nightmare came, of course. The tearing hands, the thrusting penis that tore her apart, all happened again in Danielle's mind. In her dream, she opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out. But in her mind, she screamed and screamed.

She startled awake when Elisabeth shook her. Sobs wracked her body. It would never end. The torture would go on and on.

"Shh. It's going to be okay." Elisabeth held her as if she were a child and rocked her back and forth.

Danielle sobbed, tears spilling over her cheeks. "No, it's not. It's never going to be okay." Her throat was raw and sore.

She was grateful that Elisabeth didn't ask questions. She just held

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her until Danielle slipped into blissful oblivion.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, Danielle pried her sticky eyes open. Her head hurt, and she was exhausted. She splashed cold water on her face and stepped out of her bedroom, down the hall to the kitchen.

Elisabeth was there and held a hot, steaming cup of coffee out to her. "How do you feel?"

"Awful," she mumbled and grasped the coffee cup with both hands.

"It would help if you talked about it."

"Probably."

Elisabeth studied her, and her eyes were sympathetic. "I know you don't know me well, so let me tell you a little about myself."

Danielle glanced at her and then back to her coffee cup as she slid into one of the kitchen chairs. Elisabeth sat down across from her with her own cup.

"I don't know if you know that my husband was killed in a work accident." Though Danielle wasn't sure she wanted to start a heavy conversation this early, Elisabeth's voice was pleasant and soothing, so she said nothing, but nodded her head.

"I spent two years letting myself, and my life, go down the drain. I didn't talk about it, or deal with how I really felt." Lost in the past, Elisabeth stared into her cup. "I neglected everything, including my boys." She took a deep breath and met Danielle's gaze. "When Jerod tried to tell me the truth, I kicked him out of my life."

Danielle's eyes widened. She hadn't heard the details. She only knew the happy ending, which resulted in the marriage between Elisabeth and Jerod. What she'd heard about it had made her a little envious. It seemed that their love affair hadn't been as simple as it appeared.

Elisabeth continued. "I missed him. When he came back, it still took a while for all of us to work out our problems. The thing is, we had to work them out. I had to face the truth."

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Caught, Danielle lowered her eyes to contemplate her coffee.

"The longer I kept it all stuffed inside, the worse it got. I was lucky. I had Jerod and Michaela Johnston. Who do you have?" Elisabeth reached across the table and touched Danielle's wrist.

She squirmed in her chair. "I don't have many friends."

"Well, you have at least one now. Let me help."

She looked up and met Elisabeth's earnest gaze. "I don't know if you can."

"Who's John?"

Elisabeth's question made her jump. "What?"

"You were crying out to someone named John to stop. Who is he?"

Years of silence piled behind her, but she was exhausted from keeping the secret. It had eaten at her for so long. "John Perry."

Elisabeth nodded. "Big quarter back about twenty years ago?"

"Fifteen."

After a moment's silence, Elisabeth said, "He's Maria's father."

"Yes."

"And he raped you, didn't he?"

"Yes." Her voice dropped to a whisper. She'd admitted it. She'd said it.

"Shit," Elisabeth whispered, too. "Does Christopher look like John?"

"No. Not at all. But contrary to popular opinion, I don't sleep around."

"Let me get this straight." Elisabeth stared at her. "The only sex you've ever had was a rape fifteen years ago?"

Danielle nodded, her head ached, and her stomach rolled.

"No wonder you freaked out when he touched you. I'm amazed you went on a date at all."

Elisabeth understood. This woman she hardly knew understood. "I couldn't tell anyone. John Perry was popular. His parents and mine were friends."

"Jeez. Did you go to therapy? Anything?"

"I couldn't."

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"You couldn't, then. You can now." Elisabeth patted her hand.  
"That's where you're going on Monday."

"What's going on?"

Both women started as Maria broke into their conversation. Danielle hadn't heard her come home. How long had she been standing there? How much had she heard?

\* \* \* \* \*

*"I don't understand why I'm here." Racine pouted, which was probably attractive to younger guardian angels. Thomas just found it irritating.*

*"How do you think your charge is going to feel when she finds out she was the product of a rape?"*

*Her ruby red lips dropped open. "What?"*

*"Maria's mother just inadvertently spilled the beans."*

*"Well, Maria has no idea. She loves her mom. This will flip her out."*

*"Now do you see why we'd like to have you here?" Thomas knew his tone was sarcastic, but jeez, the girl was slow.*

*"Yes, I see." Racine suddenly seemed about ten years older. "I'm sorry. I spend a lot of my time keeping Maria calm. I didn't realize this was such a heavy issue."*

*Thomas relaxed. "I know. I forgot that regular guardian angels have different priorities than second timers."*

*"I don't know what she's going to do now." Racine bit her lip as she clued into her charge's anxiety.*

*"She's going to have to deal with this. It's a mess, but we'll get them all through it."*

*I hope, Thomas thought.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Fear lodged in Danielle's throat. Had Maria heard her confession to Elisabeth?

"Maria, this is Elisabeth Anderson."

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"Kurt's mom, right?" Maria's face was solemn. "He's an awesome ball player. That doesn't explain what I just heard."

"Maria—" Danielle started, but Maria cut her off with a slash of her hand.

"I heard you say it. You said that my father raped you. Is it true?"

Tears choked Danielle, but she wouldn't let them fall. "It's true."

"And you never told me? Didn't you think I had a right to know? Is that why you slept around? I know the rumors, but I never cared that you were a party girl in the past."

Danielle winced.

Elisabeth was the one who defended her. "Your mother just let everyone believe that. You're old enough to know your mom doesn't sleep around."

"I'm old enough to know that she isn't going to tell me. Why are *you* here, anyway?"

"*Maria*. Don't be rude."

Elisabeth shook her head. "It's okay, Danielle." She faced Maria. "I'm here because your mother had a date last night—"

"A date?" Maria interrupted and turned a furious glare on her mother. "You didn't tell me that either. What happened?"

"Your mother had a panic attack."

Maria's eyes widened. "Like the one you had two months ago?"

Elisabeth raised an eyebrow, and Danielle nodded. She explained to the other woman. "A man approached me after work. He just wanted to ask me a question, but I was frightened. I came home and couldn't breathe, just like last night."

Elisabeth nodded. "So this has been going on for a while."

"Off and on since that night."

"And the nightmares? Do you have them a lot?"

"When I'm stressed or afraid." She managed a weak smile. "Which is quite often."

"Let me get this straight." Maria's voice grated, and her furious gaze snapped at her mother. "You were raped by my father?"

"I wasn't going to tell you until the time was right."

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“And when was that going to be? I wondered why you never really talked about him. I didn’t mention it because I didn’t want to hurt you. But why couldn’t you tell me?”

The agony in her daughter’s voice made Danielle’s stomach churn. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

Holding Maria’s gaze, she saw the rejection of what she’d said even before her daughter spoke the words. “I don’t believe it.”

Danielle’s shoulders sagged. Her daughter didn’t believe her, just as she’d always feared. No one would believe it. She put her face in her hands as tears squeezed out her eyes and through her fingers. Elisabeth put her hand on her shoulder.

When the front door slammed, Danielle raised her head. “Maria! Wait!” She bounded out of her chair and ran to the front door, but Maria was gone. “Oh, Elisabeth. What have I done?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Christopher answered the phone on the first ring. “Elisabeth?” He’d begged her to call him and keep him updated.

“Christopher, we need your help.”

“Is she okay? What happened?”

“It’s more complicated than you thought.” Elisabeth’s voice sounded strained.

“Tell me.”

Fifteen minutes later, Christopher had to sit down. “So, Maria overheard all this and didn’t believe her? Shit.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Listen, tell her I’ll find Maria. And tell her—”

“Tell her what?”

“Tell her she owes me a goodnight kiss.” He slammed down the phone and grabbed his keys. Where would Maria go? Where would he go if he’d just heard something as awful as she had?

The batting cages.

He was barely able to keep his speed down as he barreled his truck across town to the batting cages at the city park. He parked his truck and

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scanned the cages for Maria's familiar stance.

When he spotted her, she whacked a ball for a spectacular home run. And then again. Her swing was vicious, and a steady stream of obscenities poured from the kid's mouth.

"I didn't think you knew words like that." He leaned into the metal fence surrounding the cage she occupied.

She spun around and a ball whizzed by her. "What do you want?" she snarled and then turned back to face the automatic pitching machine.

"I'm looking for you."

"You found me. Now, leave me alone." She pounded another ball, slamming it out into right field.

"I'm not leaving you alone. Your mom needs to know where you are."

Maria turned on him. She flung the bat across the plate and into the fence, then faced him with fists clenched and eyes blazing.

This didn't seem like the kid who always kept her cool. She was more like her mother than anyone knew.

"My mother. She can go to hell! Everyone knows what she was, and everyone says—" She stopped and clenched her jaw.

Christopher's fingers tightened on the metal fence. "What if everyone is wrong? Everyone said you are just like your mom. Are you sleeping around?"

"Fuck you."

"Nice mouth. You'd better clean it up. We may not be on school time, but I'm still an adult. Show a little respect."

"Why? Who shows me respect?" She glared at him. "My mom lies to me for years, the team treats me like I'm some kind of freak, and the whole town trashes me. Why should I care?" She retrieved the bat and shoved more quarters in the machine.

"You earned the respect of the team. And when was your mom supposed to tell you? How old is old enough to tell a kid that she was conceived during a rape?"

Another ball flew out deep with a *thwack*. "So, you know, too. Does everyone know? It's bad enough to follow my mom's reputation, but now



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I get to have a rapist for a daddy?"

"I'm not going to tell anyone. Your mother has hid it for fifteen years."

"You can't hide anything in this town." She smacked another ball.

"No. But consider this. Your mother could have had an abortion. Your mother could have screamed about this all over town. Instead, she had you. It's clear to everyone that she loves you more than anything. She let the whole town bring up her past and talk about her to make your dream come true."

"What? So now I have to feel guilty?" She kept hitting the balls out into the field.

With a jerk, he pulled open the gate, strode over to her, and shook her by the shoulders. "No. But perhaps you could feel a little compassion. I know it's tough to take, and you need some time to deal with it, but you don't get to crush your mother while you do it."

Maria stared into his face. "What business is it of yours?"

Christopher knew what she was asking. He wasn't sure he had an answer. For a moment, he thought about avoiding the question, diverting her. He took a deep breath and decided to be completely honest.

"I care a lot about your mother." He ignored her snort of disbelief. "I don't know what that means yet, and I'm not sure how it happened, but I'm not going away."

"So you've got the hots for my mother, and that means I have to be a good little girl and go home?" The sarcasm dripped from every word.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "You've got your mother's gift for verbal evisceration. I care a lot about you, too. It's all part of the package. Your mother wouldn't want anything to do with a guy who didn't want the best for her daughter."

"She lied to me."

"So, tell her how you feel about that, but don't punish her. Don't you think she's been punished enough?"

Maria stepped away from him, and he dropped his hands from her shoulders. "Tell her I'll be home in an hour. I have some things to work out."

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He nodded and left the batting cage. Flipping open his cell phone, he called Danielle's house.

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*Thomas eyed the other two angels in the room. "We've got our work cut out for us. This is going to be a long process."*

*Racine nodded. "I'll get Maria in the right place, but she's not going to be hearing me for a while."*

*Paulinis twitched a wing muscle. "Christopher isn't going to be easy to handle either. It took a lot of leaning to get him to ask her on a date. I'm not sure how he's going to handle all of this."*

*Nodding, Thomas fanned his wings and stretched. "We'll have to keep meeting about once a month. I don't know how long this will take, but they're going to need us every step of the way, and we're going to need each other."*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Four Months Later*

*"How are we progressing?" Thomas eased back in one of the leather chairs in the conference room. The last few months had been difficult. With Danielle and Maria in therapy, and Christopher throwing himself into his job, Thomas chafed at the slow progress.*

*"Christopher misses her, but he understands. He's actually surprised me," Paulinis said with a sheepish grin. "I didn't give him enough credit."*

*"Maria is doing well." Racine folded her beautiful wings, flexing her slim shoulders. "She's struggling, but she trusts the Coach. What's the plan now, Thomas?"*

*"I think it's time." Thomas nodded. He was certain. Danielle was doing well and thought about Christopher many times.*

*Paulinis' forehead furrowed in a concerned frown. "Do you think she's ready?"*

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*"I know she is. I don't even have to lean on her. She wants to try a relationship with Christopher." Thomas smiled. "I'll get her to practice. You guys know what you need to do."*

*They both smiled, and Racine's wings unfurled in an excited twitch. Tonight was the night.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The August sun slipped behind the horizon as the Friday night game came to its last inning. Christopher stood observing Maria throw the last pitch. The last four months had been tough on the kid. She'd had good days and bad days. Today was a good one, and she pitched her heart out.

With an involuntary glance, he swept the stands. Danielle hadn't been there since that night. Of course, he knew why. Elisabeth kept him informed but no details. He knew Danielle was going to therapy and that Maria went with her. Working with Maria in the middle of all this had been both torture and pleasure.

He went back to studying his pitcher. Concentration knitted her brow, and she wound up for the pitch. The stands were quieter without Danielle there yelling encouragement.

The ball whooshed through the air, and the batter swung and missed.

The crowd erupted, and the rest of the team cheered, throwing their mitts in the air in celebration. The infield rushed to the pitcher mound and patted Maria on the back. It was a gift to see the smile on her face.

They did the usual *good game* pass with the opposing team and headed over to the dugout to meet the parents and get rides to the pizza parlor.

Christopher had slipped into the habit of driving Maria to the after-game pizza celebrations. It was their time to talk and get to know each other. He'd looked forward to it all week because it made him miss Danielle a little less.

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“Mom!” The smile on Maria’s face was brilliant. Christopher whipped around, hungry to catch a glimpse of Danielle.

She was thinner, quieter, and somehow different. She hugged Maria and met his gaze over her daughter’s shoulder. He couldn’t read her expression, but the bitter anger he’d always noted in them seemed to be gone.

“I’m sorry I missed the game, sweetie.”

“It’s okay. I know you had an appointment with Dr. Laynard.”

From his conversations with Maria, Christopher knew Dr. Laynard was the therapist they were both seeing. Maria’s sentences often began with, “Dr. Laynard says...” He could see the difference in both mother and daughter.

“We’re going to pizza. Are you going to go tonight?” Maria leaned back to study her mother’s face.

Danielle nodded. “I think I am.”

“Why don’t we all go in my truck?” Christopher offered. Just sitting in a car with her would be enough to keep him going for a while.

The expression in Danielle’s eyes was puzzling; he couldn’t read it. But she nodded and said, “That’s a great idea.”

His nerves skittered with excitement and fear. It was as if she was opening a door she’d kept firmly shut for four months, and he wanted to make sure he got his foot stuck in it before she could close it again. He opened the passenger side door, and Maria hopped in the back seat of his king cab. Danielle stepped into the truck, but there was no shrinking from him or avoiding his touch. In fact, she brushed by him to get in. His body went on instant alert, and he inhaled her fresh scent. God, he’d missed her.

Maria kept chattering as they drove to the pizza parlor, and Danielle responded with calm responses. Tongue-tied because of the dramatic change in Danielle, he didn’t say very much.

The pizza parlor was packed with people, but Danielle greeted the boys on the team with a smile. Within five minutes, it was as if she’d never taken a break from them.

He was surprised to see a bright smile cross her face as she greeted

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Elisabeth and another woman who walked into the restaurant.

"Elisabeth! Michaela!" Danielle bounded out of her seat and hugged them both. Shock kept Christopher still as he watched her chat and giggle with the other two women. It was clear that Danielle now had friends.

The two women sat down at the crowded table. Kurt also joined them, making a beeline for Maria and engaging her in a quiet conversation.

"So, Christopher." Michaela was a woman he didn't know, but she spoke to him as if he did. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief. "I've heard so much about you."

"Have you? I've heard about you from Elisabeth."

"Well, I heard about you from Danielle."

"Michaela." Danielle's neck and face flushed with a dusky red color that had his eyebrows shooting up to his hairline.

"Really? I hope it was all good things."

Michaela wiggled her eyebrows and lowered her voice. "Oh, definitely good things."

Danielle looked as if she wanted to sink through her chair and into the floor. Christopher studied her face until she met his eyes. Shy and warm, they communicated more to him than he'd ever hoped.

"I'm glad," was all he said.

Danielle's gaze slid away, and Elisabeth jabbed Michaela in the shoulder. "Knock it off, matchmaker. They'll work it out on their own."

"Hey, it worked with you. If I hadn't set up that lunch date..." Michaela shrugged.

"Jerod would have come and found me." Elisabeth had a smug smile on her face.

"That's true. He loved you, so he wasn't going to let a good thing slip away." Michaela said it to Elisabeth, but her blue eyes were focused on him.

Elisabeth rolled her eyes. "I knew I shouldn't have brought you."

"Shut up, Michaela." Danielle laughed, and her eyes sparkled, which took the sting out of her order. "I'm a big girl. I don't need you to

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“speak for me.”

“Well, don’t waste time. There’s always Ina Stodler or someone like her ready to jump in. If one hasn’t already.”

“I’m sitting right here, ladies. Can you not discuss me as if I wasn’t?” He threw his hands in the air.

Danielle pinned him with a glance. “Is there one?”

“No.”

“Then what are you doing next Friday night?” Danielle’s expression went wary. It was clear she expected him to say no.

“I’m not doing anything after the game.” Excitement burned in his belly. She was reaching out. Fear shared space with the excitement, but he was clear about what he wanted now. Four months showed him that she’d become essential to him. He didn’t want her to get away.

Her smile shot right through his heart. “How about a movie, then?”

“I’d love that.” Their eyes locked, and something special, something warm, passed between them. He knew she was still terrified, but she wanted to try.

“Well, now that’s settled, where’s the rest of the pizza?” Michaela searched the table.

\* \* \* \* \*

This time was so different, so much better. Danielle attended the game and yelled encouragement. All the tension and fear she’d felt the last time she’d gone on a date with Christopher seemed far away. Maria hugged her after the game, which they won, and held her close.

“Have a good time tonight, Mom.”

“You’re going to Elisabeth’s right?”

Maria smiled. “Kurt is going to take me out to pizza.”

“Really?” Her eyebrows rose.

“With his mother.” They laughed, and then Maria ran across the parking lot. With a quick wave, she was gone.

Christopher approached her. “Are we still on?”

“I’m game if you are. I promise I won’t freak out this time.” She

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wrinkled her nose at the memory. "Besides, I have a debt to pay off."

He groaned. "Knock it off. I won't make it through a movie if you talk like that."

She laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "I know you can handle it."

His face was serious as he stepped closer to her until she had to tip her head back to keep eye contact. "I can. I want you to know that."

She nodded, but her heart wasn't so sure. They would have to see.

He picked her up early, as he had before, but the nerves that plagued her that first night weren't there. Danielle relaxed and enjoyed herself. They saw a comedy and had coffee after the movie.

On the drive home, she took the plunge. "Can you come in and talk for a little while?"

"Sure. I promise to be a gentleman."

She cleared her throat. "I'm sure you will. I think you ought to hear it all from me. I know this is our first date—"

"Second." He interrupted her.

She stared at him. "That first night was a disaster."

"Only the end of it. The rest of it was wonderful."

"It was?"

"I've been living on little else for four months." He kept his eyes on the road, but she observed the strain around his mouth, and his voice was sad.

"I didn't think..."

His gaze flicked to her face then back to the road. "I know that." His mouth quirked up in a smile. "I missed you."

Those three words came out of him like a sigh. Tears pricked her eyes. She'd thought he wouldn't want her or like her after all that happened, but he'd missed her. She hugged the sweet thought to herself.

When they got to her house, she didn't tremble as she unlocked her door. She offered him coffee, and they sat down in her kitchen.

"I'd like to tell you what happened." She held his eyes and tried to read his face.

All she could see was compassion and worry. For her. "Are you

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sure?"

"You ought to know before we go any further." She stared at her hands twisted in her lap.

"If you're willing to tell me, I'm willing to listen."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Talking about it in therapy and with Elisabeth and Michaela made it a little easier to share, but this was different. What would he think of her after this?

"I was seventeen, and John Perry and I were dating. It wasn't serious, but his parents and mine were friends, so we spent time together."

A smile crossed her face. "I have to admit that being with the star quarterback was a thrill." The smile dropped away, and her hands turned white as she twisted them tighter. "Then, one night, we were making out and he—" She stopped and sipped her coffee, unable to watch Christopher's reaction to any of it. "We were in the backseat of his car, and I wanted to stop. He ordered me to lay still and stop moving. I trusted him, so I did. I didn't realize he was angry until he tore my clothes off of me. He said very ugly things; that I was a prick tease and needed to be taught a lesson about who was in charge. I cried and told him I was a virgin. He only laughed and said he would take care of that." Her voice cracked. She took another deep breath.

Christopher stirred across the table, but still she couldn't look at him. "I struggled, but he held me down and raped me. It hurt like hell." Tears burned her throat. "When he took me home, he shoved me out of the car and threw my shredded clothes at me. He told me that I was a lousy fuck and a drama queen. I was too stunned to do anything."

She almost jumped out of her skin when one of Christopher's hands touched her elbow. He'd moved to sit beside her, and she finally met his gaze. His eyes were so warm and sympathetic it gave her the courage to go on.

"I couldn't tell anyone. I didn't even know what happened at first. I told my parents that I was sick and stayed in my room for three days." With a shuddering breath, she went on. "Then I found out I was pregnant. John was gone. His parents sent him to a relative's house after football



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season was over. I don't think I was the only girl he'd done this to. I was a month pregnant when he left, and I didn't know it."

Christopher spoke into the silence that stretched between them. "Then what?"

"I didn't tell anyone who the father was. John had spread the word that I was a slut and slept around, so everyone believed I just didn't know. I could have ended the pregnancy. My parents wanted me to get an abortion, but I wanted that baby. I can't tell you why, and I don't care why. I got to have Maria, and I'll never regret it."

"I'm glad you did have her. She's wonderful."

She let out a breath and met his eyes. "You were the first man I wanted to—" She stopped, and her face grew hot.

"I'm flattered." His voice was gentle.

"I don't know what will happen, but I want my chance." She searched his face, wondering if he would reject her.

The smile he gave her sent joy streaking through her. "I want that chance, too. But we'll take it real slow."

Danielle wound her arms around his neck. "Screw going slow." And she reached up to kiss him. She was out of practice, but she wanted this man. When her lips pressed to his, he was absolutely still. She ran her tongue along his lower lip, wanting a taste of him.

With a muffled curse, he opened his mouth and cupped her face. The fear she thought would rumble through her never came. Only passion and need poured through her and from her.

He gentled the kiss, his fingers tender as they stroked her face. When he broke the kiss, she made a sound of protest. "Jesus, Danielle." His face was dark, and his features were tight. "We have to go slow, baby. I want it to be right."

"It is right. I've missed you so much." She kissed his face, his cheeks, his neck.

"Danielle." He grabbed her hands and held her away from him. "I don't know what to do. I don't want to scare you or do anything wrong. We should ease into this."

She cocked her head at him. "Do you want to go slow for me or

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you?" Maybe this was too much for him.

"For you. Are you ready for this? It's a big step. You don't know me all that well."

Her eyes searched his. "I know you, Christopher Jeffers. I know that no other man would have been so good to my daughter. No other man would have treated me so well. I've thought about this for four months, getting myself ready before I saw you."

His finger slid down her cheek. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Then let me do it right." He stood up from the chair and held out his hand. A thrill careened through her body, and warmth spread along her skin. She took his hand, and he wrapped his arms around her.

With his mouth inches from hers, he whispered, "Tell me if I do anything that makes you uncomfortable and, if you want me to stop, say so. I'll stop no matter what. I promise."

A sigh escaped her lips, and she closed her eyes, indicating surrender. His lips brushed hers as gentle as falling leaves. He didn't grab her or force her. She opened her mouth under his, and his tongue only touched hers with a gentle slide. There was no force, no pressure. He invited her to be the one in charge. Her hands threaded through his hair, and his stayed still on her back, holding her loosely.

She explored his mouth at her leisure, and the heat pulsating from his body streamed through to hers. As she stepped closer into his arms, the bulge in his pants pressed against her, but she didn't feel fear, only need. She twisted so the junction between her thighs cuddled that bulge, and his hands dug into her back. He didn't quicken the pace or take over. His hands began to move in slow strokes along her spine.

She moaned, and he answered against her mouth with one of his. She squirmed and increased the pressure of her tongue in his mouth. When his finally thrust in her mouth, sweeping inside and twining with hers, her breath left her body.

One finger along the hem of her shirt stroked the skin beneath it, and she arched to give him better access. She wanted those warm, big hands on her skin. He placed his palms on her bare back, under her shirt,

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and didn't move them. Her own hands clenched in his hair as her hips stroked his upper thigh. Even as she lost herself in sensation, she marveled at his restraint.

Inch by inch, his hands slid up to the clasp on her bra and, with a minimum of fumbling, undid it. As it came loose, he held his hands still on her upper back, seemingly content to stroke her shoulders. Her breasts, free from their constraint, pressed against his chest. Her nipples stiffened and beaded at the contact.

She broke their kiss, sucked in deep breaths, and met his gaze. "I want—"

"You want me to stop?"

"No! Please. I just want to do this in a bed."

He chuckled. "I was working in that direction."

"Well, you're taking your sweet time," she grumbled.

His smile was wicked and full of promise that sent heat spiraling between her legs. "That's the idea, darlin'."

With exquisite care, he picked her up, cradling her in his arms.

"I'm too heavy," she protested.

"We aren't going far." He didn't rush, but carried her tucked into his shoulder to her room.

When they reached the bedroom, he laid her on the center of the mattress, but he didn't pounce on her. Instead, he lay beside her and kissed her neck, her shoulder. She took the lead, yanked her shirt off, and flung her bra to the floor. When she faced him, lying by his side, she resisted the urge to cover her breasts. The admiration gleaming in his eyes as he stared at them made her nipples tighten, and the sharp intake of breath from him told her he like what he saw.

Still, the feather-light touch of his fingers on her aching peaks was so incredible that she moaned as sensations she'd never experienced slammed into her. She arched into his hands, and he palmed her breasts with slow rhythm. He kissed her neck and the dip where her arm met her shoulder, then lower still until his hot breath wafted over one of her rigid nipples. As he slid his hands down to grasp her hips and slide her toward his body, he flicked his tongue over one aching peak. When he took it

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fully in his mouth and sucked, wetness flooded between her legs, stunning her with pleasure.

“Oh, God.” Her breath came in short gasps, and her hips scraped along his body with urgency. He clenched her hips to still them, while his mouth worked magic on her breast, always tender, always gentle.

His fingers dipped along her waist, stroking at the edge of the material of her pants. She squirmed to wiggle out of her pants, knowing that he would never take them off without her permission. Together, they slid them down, but he left her panties on. His mouth moved from her breast to travel down her stomach. He slid his tongue in her belly button. She whimpered with need, but his pace was perfect. Nothing fast. Nothing violent. All silk and honey. She never knew how sexy a belly button could be until his tongue found hers.

“I want to touch you,” she managed to get out.

His head rose from her belly, and the stark desire flaming from his eyes took her breath away. He lifted his shirt over his head, but left his pants on. She stroked his bare shoulders as he licked her hipbone.

But when he reached her panties, she stiffened. A whiff of fear blew through her, and he seemed to know. He stopped immediately.

His eyes met hers. “Danielle? Tell me to stop, baby.”

And he *would* stop. Wonder spread over Danielle’s heart. No matter what, he would stop. Tears filled her eyes, and she reached down to touch his face. “No. Don’t stop. I trust you.”

He leaned into her hand and closed his eyes. “Whatever you need. Just tell me.”

He was so kind and slow as he slid her panties down her thighs. There was no ripping or tearing. He unwrapped her as if she was precious, a gift. He laid kisses inside her thighs, and his warm breath blew over her mound. What was he doing?

Then, all thought flew from her mind as his tongue flicked a spot and sent electricity shooting through her body. Her back arched, and she cried out as he stroked that nub with his tongue. Bewilderment and pleasure washed over her. Pressure built, and she clutched the comforter in her fists. Then she exploded, white lights dancing inside her eyelids as

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her body gyrated.

So that's what it felt like. Her first. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

In an instant, Christopher stopped what he was doing, moved up beside her, and wiped away her tears. "What did I do? Honey, talk to me."

"I've never—I didn't know..."

He stared at her. "That was your first orgasm?"

"Yes." She turned her head away from him as shyness overwhelmed her. He gently gripped her chin and brought her face back to look at him.

His voice was gritty when he said, "I think that's the most erotic thing I've ever heard."

Heat flooded her face. "But you haven't—"

"God, I love it when you blush." His perusal traveled over her face and down her neck. "No, I haven't. But I can wait."

"I don't want to wait." She wrapped her legs around his waist, letting the rough material of his jeans cause friction that sent sparks along her sensitive nerves.

He groaned, and his fingers dug into her hips. "I don't know if I can."

She fumbled to get the zipper of his jeans open. When she finally did, she reached into his underwear and tentatively circled his warm, hard flesh with her fingers. She watched his face as his eyes closed, and she stroked his cock from tip to base. He was big. Her mouth went dry, and some of the fear returned. What if it hurt?

His hand clasped her wrist, and her gaze met his. "We do *not* have to do this. I can feel your fear."

She shook her head. "No, I want to. I know you'll take your time."

"Take my pants off, Danielle." His harsh, yet sexy, tone of his voice mesmerized her.

She did as he asked, and her nails scraped his butt as she shoved his jeans to his ankles. Along with his underwear. His penis seemed huge and hard. Her nerves jangled.

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He seemed to know what she needed. One finger stroked the bundle of nerves that had sent her over the edge earlier, and her fear receded a bit. When he slid one finger, then two, into her slick channel, she thrust against his hand. His thumb rotated along the erect nub, and his fingers stroked inside her. This time, the explosion was intense, rippling through her whole body and clenching every one of her muscles.

As she still pulsated from her orgasm, he removed his fingers and slid his penis inside her. Just the tip of his cock sent her reeling again, a roar echoing in her ears. When he was embedded up to his balls, he stopped.

She opened her eyes to see him staring down at her. Her body pulsed around him, his erection completely embraced by her flesh. It was the most wondrous feeling she'd ever known, except for when she held her daughter for the first time. He was completely still, and his expression was strange. She reached up one of her hands and touched his cheek. "What is it?"

"I love you, Danielle."

"You do?" Her heart burst with bewildered joy. She didn't know how it happened, but she was thrilled it had.

"I do." And then he stroked her aching flesh with his, the friction sending sensations tingling along her nerves. She lifted her hips and met every thrust. Faster and faster, they collided together until she convulsed around him, and he answered with his own release. She clenched and pulsed as he spent himself inside her.

It was the most beautiful thing in the world to her.

Not that he gave her pleasure, but that he gave it to her so openly, so gently. Tears slid from her eyes.

"Did I hurt you?" The worry in his voice warmed her even more than the great sex had.

"No. No, you were amazing. Thank you." Through tear-filled eyes, she saw him smile.

"The pleasure was all mine."

She grinned at him. "Not all of it."

He kissed her. "Good."

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"I love you, too, Christopher." She rushed out with it.

He raised his head and stared at her. "You do?"

"I do."

The smile on his face was so wide she thought his face would split. "Well, it's a miracle. I'm not asking you why. You might rethink it." He tucked her along his body.

"I could say the same about you."

"Nah, I was pretty much lost when you yelled *Hey batter, batter.*"

She punched him in the shoulder, and he grabbed her in a big bear hug. Safe, warm and loved, Danielle relaxed in his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

*One Year Later*

"There's the heartbeat." The whirl of the background noise was punctuated by the thumping of a heartbeat. "Wait." The doctor seemed absorbed in the grainy black and white picture.

Danielle held her breath. Was something wrong? Her hand fumbled out, and Christopher, as he always did, caught it. His arm crept around her shoulder.

"Well, Mrs. Jeffers, you're going to have twins."

"What?"

"Two of them."

"Two of them," she repeated stupidly.

"Well, Mom, that makes our family a real triple play," Maria said, her voice full of laughter.

"But I don't have twins in my family." She desperately wanted the doctor to say he was wrong.

"Honey," her husband's voice sounded hesitant. "Didn't I ever mention that twins run in my family?"

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*Thomas checked in with Danielle and Christopher and reveled in the heartbeat of life growing. They wouldn't have a smooth road all the way, but they were tough people who would make it. With a small twinge of regret, he closed the file.*

*The phone rang with a nerve-shattering shrill. It was the big boss. "Yes, sir?"*

*"Thomas, that was some nice work you did there."*

*"Actually, sir, I didn't do all that much. Paulinis and Racine were a big help, and Danielle was a willing charge."*

*"Well, I'm giving you a promotion."*

*"Sir?"*

*"Yes. You can start having regular charges next week."*

*For centuries, Thomas had been stuck in the Second Timers division with no hope of escape. In the last few years, he'd grown to respect and love his charges. They were stubborn. They were difficult. But they were real. He didn't have to think that long before he knew what he wanted. "Sir, if I could, I'd like to stay with the Second Timers."*

*The silence that followed made Thomas nervous. Maybe he'd offended the big boss?*

*"Thomas, you've grown so much. I'm very proud of you." The phone went dead, but Thomas burst with pride.*

*His computer started beeping. With a light heart, he got back to work.*

The End



### **Author Bio**

Jennifer McKenzie lives in extreme northern California with her two kids and her redneck husband. She began to write seriously when her father passed away without realizing his dream of being a published author. She enjoys reading as much as she loves to write.