

# Butterflies in the Field

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**Dedication ...**

To Rob and Bridget for inspiring the corny title that started this book. And as always, to F.

## **Butterflies in the Field**



## CHAPTER ONE

It was supposed to rain. Just like the rhythm said, 'Happy is the bride that the sun shines on; happy is the corpse that the rain rains on.'

But that wasn't the case on this day. The sun streamed through the strained glass windows of Our Lady of Grace Church. The rays, like messengers of hope, beat straight onto Jordan Wyatt as she sat in the very first pew.

Even though the light struck upon her, no amount of hope would saturate through. She leaned against her father, Roy Colbert, clutching tightly to his hand as the priest delivered a sermon. Her light brown hair dangled across her tear streaked face.

The church was crowded, as expected, filled with sniffles that rang out with the occasional cough. All eyes were upon the priest, very few were on the small white coffin that rested in the aisle.

What was entirely said that service, was a blur to Jordan. No words of comfort were heard, in fact, everything was a blur to her.

A day she longed to forget, but would always remember.

It wasn't second into the arrival at the cemetery that the winds began to blow, the sky darkened and the rain started to fall.

Meg Colbert commented on that. Of course she would, Jordan's mother never missed a trick.

"Thank God," she whispered to Roy, "We needed it to rain."

Roy asked with edge. "Why is that, Meg?"

"Good luck."

"Good luck?" Ray questioned.

Jordan heard the exchange, and pulled her daughter Amy, who was seven, into her.

Amy stared as blankly as her mother. Fr. Benson took his place at the gravesite. Standing before the casket, he recited his prayers and sprinkled the holy water.

"Eternal rest grant upon him oh, Lord," said Fr. Benson.

The crowd responded, "And let your perpetual light shine upon him."

"May he and all the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen."

Jordan lowered her head and whispered in her daughter's ear. "Stay with Pap. OK?"

Amy nodded.

In the midst of Fr. Benson inviting those in attendance to Jordan's home for a reception, Jordan turned and began to walk. The crowd hadn't even dispersed yet, and she was leaving.

"Jordan," Roy called out to her. He was a bigger man, huskier in the middle, gray hair. He trotted as best as he could to catch up to his daughter. "Jordan, hold up."

Jordan stopped.

Roy caught his breath. "Gees." He coughed. "Where are you going? The limo ..."

"I want to walk."

"Sweetheart, it's two miles. It's raining."

"Daddy, please. I just want to walk." Her eyes moved to her daughter, who stood with Meg. "Take care of Amy, I'll meet you at the house."

"Are you gonna be alright?"

Jordan gave a sad smile, leaned into her father, and kissed him on the cheek. "For the time being. But right now ... I really need to walk." Arms folded tightly, Jordan turned and slowly, in the drizzling rain, began to walk away.

Roy watched her until she was no longer in his sight, and his wife beckoned for him to return.

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Jordan loved her house. It was a bit out of the way from the rest of the homes in Redbird, Ohio. A wooden farm house, old, set on its large lot property. Cars lined up the driveway and on the lawn.

Everyone was already there, and she hated the thought of talking to anyone. But she had to. She waved to her daughter who was on the swing. She wanted to panic, tell her to be careful or maybe get into the house, but she stopped. Her brother Carl was there. Her older brother, a younger replica of their dad.

It was obvious Carl spotted Jordan. He gave a 'hold on' finger to Amy, and trotted Jordan's way as she went to the side entrance.

"Sneaking in?" he asked.

"Yeah, I want to change." Jordan referenced her dress. "I'd rather change into what I'm comfortable wearing."

"Before you feel comfortable with everyone."

"That will never happen, you know that."

"Are you OK?"

Jordan shook her head. "No, tired, sad, and cold."

Carl rubbed his hand down her arm. "If you need me ..."

Jordan nodded, shifted her eyes to Amy. "Watch her."

"Always."

"Thanks." She slipped in the side door, and walked down to the basement. She knew she had clothes down there, and she changed into a pair of jeans.

She hated, absolutely hated the thought of going upstairs. She could hear the footsteps in the kitchen, and her mother's commanding voice.

Of course, her mother would take charge of the after-funeral reception. Her mother always took charge.

Meg's mouth cried, barking out order for 'more ham.'

Jordan wondered if she could hide out a little longer, but when she heard her Aunt Lorna ask, "Where's Jordan?"

And Meg responded, "I saw her slip in the side door. She'll be up in a second."

Jordan knew she couldn't hide out any longer.

Taking a breath of courage, she went up the stairs.

The door opened directly into the kitchen. She caught glimpse of her mother darting out with a tray. Aunt Lorna was doing the dishes, and another woman, Jordan wasn't quite sure who she was, was slicing tomatoes.

"Look, there she is," Meg said in another entrance into the kitchen. "Jordan, honey, you need to thank people."

"Don't you think they need to thank us, they're here eating."

"Enough with the attitude. Come on."

Jordan rolled her eyes.

Lorna turned from the sink. "You look better now."

"Thanks."

She prepared to slip through the kitchen into the dining room. Multitudes of voices carried in, chatter. Clanking of dishes. Just as she stepped forward she saw Lorna reach for it. A blue cup sat on the corner of the kitchen counter, right by the back door. Lorna's hand reached.

Jordan panicked. "Don't! Stop."

Lorna halted mid reach and gave a curious look.

"Don't touch that cup." Jordan rush to it, hovering by in some protective mode. "Don't touch it."

Amidst the confused glances, Jordan's mind flashed back.



"Mom?" Trevor called her. "Mom."

Jordan stood at the stove, she was stirring something, and the phone was wedged between her ear and shoulder.

"Mom," Trevor called again.

"Trevor, what?" Jordan snapped. "Hold on" she said to the person she was speaking to and turned to face her twelve year old son. He was small for twelve. Dark wavy hair. He stood innocently holding that blue cup. "What is it? I'm on the phone."

"Can I go to the store?"

"No." Jordan told him.

"Come on, please. I'll take my bike. I won't be long. I promise."

"Trevor ..."

"Mom."

Huffing, Jordan spun around. "Fine. But hurry. Supper's almost done."

"Thanks, you're the best," Trevor smiled. He finished off his drink, set the blue cup on the counter, and darted from the door.

The blue cup stayed on that counter, and Jordan snapped from the memory. She sighed with sad look to Lorna. "The cup can never leave this spot."

It didn't matter that Loran and the other woman gave her odd looks. Meg said it all in her entrance telling Lorna that whatever she did, she was not to move that cup.

Of course, Lora responded with, "I know, I know already. Christ. What's up with the cup?"

Jordan heard Trevor's name whispered and she eked her way into the crowded dining room.

Why was it Danny Connor that she spotted immediately? Of all the people there she spotted him. A brawny police officer in their town. Danny was just about to sip his coffee when his eyes met Jordan.

He gave that look.

Flashback ...

The rain pounded hard against the window. Even with the lightening, Jordan could see the flashing red lights. She was in the kitchen when the knock came. She tossed a dish towel, and ran down the long hall to the front door.

Through the draped door window she could see the shadow of a figure. He wore a hat. The backdrop was the lights of the police car.

With urgency, Jordan threw open the front door.

Danny stood there in uniform.

"Danny," She sighed out in relief. "Oh, God, Danny, tell me you heard something about Trevor."

Danny removed his hat and raised his eyes with a sad look. "Jordan," his voice cracked. "Jordan, I am so sorry."

Megs voice jolted Jordan from that night that occurred only days before. "Jordan?" her mother called.

Jordan jumped and spun to her. "Huh?"

"You don't need this. Not now, not here."

Jordan was confused. Was her mother speaking about Danny? "What?" Jordan asked.

Meg gave an upward motion of her head as indication.

Jordan followed the lead. In the corner of the dining was Michael, her ex husband. He huddled with his new and very young wife as she cuddled a baby.

"Want me to tell them to take it somewhere else?" Meg asked.

"No." Jordan shook her head. "He can be here. He lost his son, too. At least he has someone."

She knew her mother meant well. Meg was only trying to secure a 'safe' environment for her, but Jordan needed something else to make her feel safe. She slipped out of the dining room to find her father. Roy sat on the sofa. His strength, him just being there was what she needed. She took it by taking the spot next to him on the sofa. And there she stayed until everyone went home.

## CHAPTER TWO

Manhattan, New York - Five months later

Had he not been so tall, or his body toned, Victor Artulla, from behind could have easily been mistaken for a woman. Not that his hair was all that long, but it was perfect. Light brown hair, with natural blonde highlights, he wore it in a straight style to the nape of his neck, and often was harassed by Max Henderson, that he tucked it like a female behind his ears.

In fact, Victor was on his way to see Max in the heart of downtown Manhattan. Taking the preferred transportation of his bike, Victor weaved in and out of the crowded sidewalk, hopping off the bike at the rotating doors to the exquisite forty story building.

He got a lot of odd glances, but Victor didn't mind. He pretty much lived in his own world and played by his own rules. Including, ignoring the sign on the doors that said, 'Leave all bikes outside.'

In his usual upbeat manner, Victor pushed the bike through the handicap entrance and approached Estelle, the overly healthy black security guard, with a bright smile.

"My, Dear, Essy." Victor winked. "Can I leave it here?"

"You know it, sugar."

"You're the best." Victor rested his bike against her counter and moved toward the elevator. "He didn't sneak out yet, did he?"

"Nope. But called down here three times to see if you were down here watching the dogs piss on the hydrants again"

Victor snickered. "That was funny."

"Sweetie, you really need to watch some television. If you think that's funny, there are some reruns of Friends that will kill you."

"I might do that. I think I have a television. Not sure." Victor pressed the elevator button. The carriage opened and Victor stepped in. Before the doors closed, he popped his head out. "Hey, Essy. You ordering lunch?"

"In a few minutes. Why?"

"Still got that list I gave you of places that Max has an account?" Victor asked.

"Sure do."

"Why don't you order from one of those places, and put it on Max's account."

"I can do that. Ain't you sweet."

Another wink from Victor. "I try." He slipped inside the elevator.

Not that he was extremely short, but next to Victor Max looked a lot less than his five-foot nine inch frame. He was a thick man, but dressed well, to hide it. Balding head, and glasses, he sat in a black leather chair. Behind him a wall of windows exposed the city of Manhattan His desk was huge and rested on a platform in the obnoxious size office.

He fiddled with a pencil, and rocked back and forth while speaking to a gorgeous brunette who sat in a chair on the opposite side of his desk.

"Prints are expensive." Max said. "The company is willing to cover that cost."

She sighed out, "But they aren't going high quality, Max."

"Who cares? They aren't the ones being published."

"Low quality photos show my facial irregularities." She argued.

"Airbrush. They air brush the good prints of you, too."

She gasped. "They do not."

"Yeah, Liddie they ..." Max paused when his phone buzzed. He held up a finger to Liddie, and pressed the intercom button. "Yeah."

"Max," a female voice carried through the speaker. "Victor is here."

"Send him right in," Max said as she stood and walked around the desk.

The office door opened "Hey, Max." Victor started to enter but stopped. "I'm sorry, you're busy."

"No, I'm not." Max reached down to Liddie's arm and edged her to a standing position.

"Wait." Liddie said. "What's going on?"

"You don't mind waiting," Max told her as he led her to the door.

"Actually, I ..."

"Good. Good. Thanks." Max gave her a slight inching out. "I'll be right with you." He shut the door. "Vic." He smiled, opened his arms, and gripped Victor's arms with a greeting squeeze. "I thought you weren't going to show today."

"Me? I always show. It's just a matter of when." Victor said, following Max to the desk. "I'm pretty busy, you have those contracts ready for me to sign. I'm in a rush."

"Absolutely," Max sat behind his desk and opened a folder. "Right here. So, where you of to?"

"No where in particular, just in a rush. Ever had one of those days where you just felt the need to keep moving."

"No. Never. Sign." Max turned the papers toward Victor and handed him a pen.

Victor didn't take the pen. Instead he sorted through the pencil holder on Max's desk for just the right one.

"While you're here. I need to ask you something. I want you to be straight with me."

"Shoot." Victor looked up from his signing.

"I don't mind taking your phone calls since you have decided to protest the phone company."

"That's awfully nice of you, too. I hate the phone company." Victor returned the contracts.

"Yes, I know." Max said. He reviewed the papers. "But I do mind taking phone calls from an agent named Ruth. Who is she?"

"Ruth from Triple tree."

"That's the one."

"Real estate agent."

"Oh," Max sighed out. "I thought you were getting rid of me."

"Nah, never. You're the best agent, Max." Victor returned the pen. "Is that all?"

"Yep."

"Good. Gotta rush." Victor turned.

"Vic. Wait."

"Huh?" Victor stopped at the door.

"A real estate agent. For?" Max asked.

"Real estate."

"I know that," Max quipped. "For what. You getting a new apartment?"

"No, actually, I bought a house." Victor smiled.

"Wow. That's great. Where at? Connecticut?" Max asked.

"Nope. Ohio." Victor raced for the door handle.

"Wait. Whoa. Stop." Max slightly rose from his chair. "Ohio. As in the state."

"That's' the one."

"Vic, Ohio? Ohio. Why Ohio."

Victors shrugged. "That's' where the dart landed." Without saying anymore, he walked out.

Max mouthed the word 'Ohio' with question as he plopped back to his chair.

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Redbird, Ohio

Meg Colbert never boasted her home was anymore than modest, but it was. The smaller home was picture perfect, decorated straight from Home and Gardens. She played the perfect flashback of Donna Reed, the fifties sitcom mom.

No matter what was going on in life, she always had her family at the dinner table. The meal was placed there, no television was on, and everyone ate as a family.

Meg prepared every single meal from scratch, expected everyone to eat and compliment her cooking.

As the three children got older and hit their teens, it was a struggle to get them to show up on time. But Jordan, Carl, and their sister hated hearing their mother bitch, so they were there.

When they turned into adulthood, Meg knew having family dinners would be difficult, so she played the guilt card with them all to get them to show up as much as possible.

Except with Jordan. Jordan didn't cook since Trevor's death. And even though it was a sad event that caused it; Jordan was back at her mother's dinner table pretty much nightly. Jordan and Amy.

Meg enjoyed that. It gave her back a sense of being needed.

The dining room table was set for the meal. A six seater table, Roy was in his position at one end of the table, an empty chair waited Meg.

Jordan and Amy across from each other. Meg had just set down the salad, and left for the kitchen again, when Carl walked in.

"Hey," Roy called out a greeting. "You staying for dinner?"

Carl held his finger to his lips and shook his head. He spoke low. "No, I brought something for Jordan." He walked to the table, greeted Amy with a kiss, and plopped a manila folder by Jordan. "Chapters one and two, I just started writing it."

"Excellent," Jordan said. "I'll read it tonight."

"Good. Well I'm gonna ..." He started to back up when Meg entered. "Too late. Spotted."

"Carl." Meg smiled. "What a nice surprise." She set the bowl of rolls on the table, and noticed the envelope. "Jordan, honey, move that, please, we're getting ready to eat." Meg arranged the food items. "Carl, you standing, sitting, eating, what?"

Carl replied, "Actually I was ..."

"Sit." Meg ordered as she took her seat. "Eat with us. I made chicken."

"Fine." He sighed out.

"Remove the coat."

"Fine." Carl took off his coat and walked it to the coat tree. He returned to the table.

Meg dished up the potatoes, and she passed the bowl to Jordan. "Get your bother some. And the folder, dear"

Jordan laid her hand on the folder. "Mom, isn't this exciting. Carl started a new book."

"Yes," Carl said. "I wanted to get Jordan's opinion of the beginning before I move on."

Roy interjected. "What's it about?"

Meg asked, "It's not another one of those Gay books is it?"

Smug, Carl replied, "As a matter of fact, it is."

Meg shook her head. "You keep writing gay stories, people are going to start to think you're gay."

"Mom, I am."

Immediately, Meg dropped her fork, leaned to her left, and covered Amy's ears. "Carl, please, the baby doesn't need to hear that."

Amy giggled.

Meg removed her hands. "Amy, sweetie, chew with your mouth closed, and use a napkin."

Carl leaned into Jordan whispering. "Watch your daughter mom's already doing her thing to her."

"I heard that," Meg said as she fixed her plate. "So, Carl, if you're gonna write a book. Why don't you write something I can read."

"Because you won't read it anyhow," Carl said. "You don't read my stuff."

"I tell people about it. But of course, I leave out the ." Meg dropped her voice to a whisper. "Gay part."

Carl smiled.

Roy reached for the folder. "I'll give this a read. Is it gonna embarrass me?"

“Probably.”

Roy opened the folder.

Carl continued. “See I put limited sex ...”

“Ranch!” Meg shouted as she jumped to her feet. “I forgot the ranch dressing. Excuse me.” She walked behind Carl and gave him a light smack to the back of the head. “Do not mention that word at my dinner table.”

“God” Carl hunched. “I feel like such a masochist every time I come to this house.”

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Manhattan, New York

It was a loft many would envy, especially the size for a New York apartment. Huge and airy, Victor’s loft had no walls; every room was open and exposed except for the bathroom. Art, which consisted, of paintings, and sculptures spewed about the walls and floor, covering more square footage than furniture.

His home presented warmly, and the lights weren’t too bright.

The music helped that as well. Classical music played, but not too loudly. It was occasionally drowned out by the horns, sirens, and other motor noise from outside.

Where was Victor?

Victor was where he always was that time of night. The front window, oval and huge was open. Victor sat on the ledge of the open window his back against the arch, knees bent up, and sketch pad rested on his legs. His hands moved frantically in creation. His eyes went from the paper to outside. More so to the heavy, older woman who sat along on the bus stop bench. On her lap was a huge bag.

Victor drew. His hand was non stop until he made the final dramatic stroke. Almost exhausted like he dropped the charcoal pencil, and rested his head back. He sighed, blinked long, then looked again at the sketch. Where the woman outside sat alone, in the picture a man sat next to her.

Victor tore the image from the pad and tossed it inward to his apartment. He closed his eyes tightly in frustration.

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Carl snuck out.



While Meg was fetching pie, Carl put on his coat and hit the door. Jordan followed. She walked with him down the path to the driveway. It was small cul de sac street.

"Never fails." Carl said, and then mid path, he stopped.

"What's wrong?" Jordan asked.

"They sold the spooky Munster house." He gave an up lift of his chin as a point.

Jordan glanced quickly, but didn't show any care or concern over it.

"You know," Carl said and continued walking. "You can never just stop by Mom's house. I can't believe how late it was. One more story about Aunt Lorna's new boyfriend and his bad toupee, I was gonna freak. So what." They arrived at his black car.

"You didn't just stop by, though did you?" Jordan asked.

"You know me."

"Yep. What's up."

"Dad asked me to stop by."

Jordan nodded.

"He said ... he said you had an episode today."

Jordan shook her head with a chuckle.

"No, Jordan he said you were bad."

"I couldn't find Amy."

"She was in the house. She's always in the house."

"Still, I couldn't find her. I called and called. She didn't answer. She was sleeping so I was justified."

Carl sighed out.

"No," Jordan gave him a serious look. "Not you, too."

Carl paused then shook his head. "No, not me, too. Never me too. Dad just wanted to know what I thought."

"And?"

"And ... I'll tell you what I told him. You just need more time."

Jordan gave him a peaceful partial smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," He opened his car door. "And I must go. My students always know when I have been here. They say I look more bald the next day."

Jordan giggled. "It's a stressful situation."

"It's Mom." Carl slid into his car. He peered up to Jordan before closing the door. "It'll get better. I promise."

"I know." Jordan closed his car door and stepped back. She waved as Carl pulled from the driveway. Turning, she paused when the 'Spooky'

house at the end of the road caught her eyes. She rubbed a chill from her arm as she focused on going back into her parent's house. She didn't know what made her shudder more. The spooky house down the road, or the idea of spending the rest of the evening with her mother.

### CHAPTER THREE

Max never really liked taking a taxi, but it was better than removing his car from the lot, and driving cross town to see Victor. Of course, he could always take Victor's advice and ride a bike ... nah.

It probably would have been easier to check on Victor by picking up the telephone, but since Victor protested the phone, that was out of the question. The five O'clock in the morning call from Victor's landlord, telling Max that Victor really plunged deeply, made Max concerned ... a bit. And first chance he had he went straight over.

Usually, upon exiting a taxi, Max was greeted with homeless people and pigeons. Victor had a problem with tossing money out along with food. But not this day. A huge moving truck parked directly outside of Victor's building.

It really didn't phase Max until the movers carried out a huge wall size painting, that Max recognized well.

With that, Max raced in. He couldn't fit in the elevator, there was way too many statues on there ... Victor's. So Max took the stairs.

He was out of breath as it was when he made it to the top floor, but when he walked into Victor's near empty loft, he lost all ability to inspire air into his body.

There were a few boxes scattered about, and there was Victor, scratching his head center of it all.

"Oh, my God." Max stated. "You're really doing it."

"Doing what?" Victor asked. "Hey, Max. You're face is red."

"I ran up the steps."

Victor chuckled. "We have an elevator. Gees."

"No, it's out of commission. The movers have it packed."

"Oh." Victor said.

"Oh? So, you're really doing it."

"Doing what?" Victor asked again

"Moving."

"Uh, yeah, Max, I told you this like, what? Last week? Gees." Victor snapped his finger, raced across the loft, and grabbed an armful of art supplies.

"Where are they moving your show pieces, Victor?"

"To storage." Victor took the supplies to an empty box. "Should I mark the supplies and separate them?"

"No, you'll dump them on the floor of the new place anyhow. Storage?"

"What about it?"

"You said the show pieces were going to storage."

"Ok, not really storage, but a place closer to you. It'll make it easier access for you to move them to the shows."

"Uh-huh." Max nodded. "And where will you be?"

"My new home."

"When did you plan on telling me where that was?"

Victor snickered. "Are you overworked, Max? I told you. Ohio."

"Yes, I know, Victor. But where in Ohio?" Max questioned. "An address maybe."

"Oh, I'll call you as soon as I get it. I have to meet Ruth in town. Oh! Check this out, Max." Victor stated proudly. "I'm gonna be living by a lake. Or is it a river. I don't know." He shrugged. "Water definitely."

"And you'll call me. Victor you protested the phone company."

"Yeah, but not the cell phone company."

"All this time you had a cell phone and I was taking your calls."

"I don't want to give my cell phone out." Victor smiled. "Right?"

"Of course not." He sighed. "Ohio?"

"A little town called Redbird. A place where everyone knows everyone. That's what I need, Max. Out of the city." Victor sealed a box. "Do you know people look at me like I'm crazy when I ride my skateboard in Manhattan."

"I got news for you Victor, you're thirty-seven years old, people are gonna look at you crazy riding that skateboard no matter where you go."

"Not in Redbird."

"How can you be sure?"

"Max, please. Everyone knows everyone. That's my dream. I'm gonna live the green acres life." He snapped his finger again. "Clothes. Shit." He rushed across the loft.

"Green acres?" Max tried to keep up with Victor. "Green acres. Victor, Ohio isn't Green acres ... it's .. Ohio is just ... Ohio. You're an Artist." Max huffed when Victor kept whizzing by him with items to pack. "Victor, you're an artist. I'm not even sure Ohio knows what art is. Their most renown artist probably graduated from paint by numbers 101."

Victor shook his head. "Ah, now, see, Max, that's not nice. It's insulting. You're talking about my home. My people."

"Your people." Max laughed. "It is not New York."

The statement stopped Victor cold and changed his whole demeanor to a serious one. "Exactly, Max. Exactly. I need to create. I really need to create. I can't do that here anymore. Not in the city." Victor walked to the window and leaned against it peering out. "There are too many people. Too many ... too many souls." He faced Max. "And it's driving me insane."

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The last of the children entered into the grade school, and the final bell sounded off. At the edge of the path, by the car, Jordan stood with Amy.

They held hands.

Staring to the school, Jordan released a deep breath. "We can do this."

"We can do this," Amy said.

"Are you scared?"

"Are you?"

"No," Jordan replied.

"Neither am I, Mommy."

"Good." Jordan clutched her daughter's hand just a bit tighter. "Then ... let's go."

"Let's go."

"We can do this."

"Yes."

Jordan took a step, stopped, and picked Amy into her arms. "I can't do this. Let's go home." She placed the child back in the car and drove off.

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The tree lined road welcomed, Victor, and he pulled his shiny new blue truck to the side of the road. A bit further ahead he could see farm land. With a 'wow', and totally amazed by the view, Victor stepped from the truck. "This is great. This is what it's all about. Yeah ..." he paused. After looking around, he lifted his cell phone and dialed. He placed it to his ear.

Nothing.

It didn't ring.

"Shit. It's broke. Figures." Ready to toss the phone, Victor stopped when it rang. He answered "Hello?"

"Victor," Max said. "I have been waiting for your call."

"Check this out, Max, I just tried to call you."

"I was here."

"I know. But the phone wouldn't work. It wouldn't ring. It was just empty air. I dialed the number and nothing."

"Did you press the green 'send' button?"

"Hold on." Victor pulled the phone from his ear and chuckled. "How do you like that? There's a button." He put the phone back to his ear. "No, didn't press the button."

"There you have it."

"I think I might protest the cell phone companies now"

"You can't protest the cell phone company over your ignorance of using a cell phone."

"I can't?"

"No." Max said. "Now where are you?"

"In Ohio. I think. Not sure."

"What do you mean you aren't sure?"

"I'm lost."

"Where?" Max asked

"Uh, Max, if I knew that then I wouldn't be lost."

"Let me go on the Internet and see if I can map it and figure out where you are."

"I think the Internet is gonna be the downfall of our society."

"Your ass."

Victor smiled.

"O.k., Do you see any street signs?"

"Uh ...." Victor looked around. "No, It's a back road. I see some trees. And a farm. I see a farm."

"That doesn't help me, Victor."

"It doesn't help me either."

"All right. Do you remember, even remotely, where you last turned off? What exit?"

"No, and never mind." Victor said, and reached into his truck. He pulled out a map.

"What do you mean 'never mind'?"

"Never mind, I see someone. I'll call you back."

"You see someone on a back ..."

Victor didn't finish listening to Max. He hung up, tossed the phone in the car, and chased after the vehicle that went by him.

The horse and carriage moved at a steady pace slow, too, and that enabled Victor to catch up. "Excuse me." Victor stated as he ran side by side with the carriage. "Excuse me."

The driver finally stopped. He wore black, and gave Victor a non expression glance.

"Whew. Thank." Victor hopped in the carriage. "I'm lost. Can you help me?" he asked as he pulled out the map.

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There were only two reason that Meg visited her husband at work. Two. One was if there were a family emergency, and two, if she needed money.

Roy Colbert had owned his own automotive shop for thirty years. His passion was cars and working on them.

He had three employees who were all very good. Including, Roy they all wore uniforms picked out by Meg, and according to Meg, they looked pretty darned spiffy too.

Upon walking into the garage, she was greeted by the men, all wearing overalls, and bent into a vehicle, as they worked on it.

Recognizing Roy by his rear end, Meg walked to the white truck he repaired and pounded on the hood he was under.

Roy jolted with a 'bang,' to his head. "Goddamn it."

"Language." Meg commended.

"Meg," Roy grumbled, "What is it? I'm busy. You need money?"

"No, we have a problem."

Roy emerged from under the hood. "What kind of problem?"

"Your daughter."

"My daughter?" Roy laughed. "As if she wasn't yours."

"Not when she acts like this," Meg said.

"Which daughter are we talking about?" Roy asked, "I have two."

"Which one do you think?"

"Jordan."

"Yes."

"I don't have time for this."

Meg huffed. "Don't you take that tone with me. This is your daughter we are talking about and she has a very serious situation. She promised, Roy. She promised me today that Amy would go back to school. She promised."

"And I am assuming Amy didn't go to school?"

"No," Meg shook her head. "Not at all"

"Unfortunately, Meg. With this our hands are tied." Tool in hand; Roy went back under the hood.

Meg banged on the hood.

"I'm ignoring you." Roy called out from under.

"Like you're ignoring the problem?"

"No, Meg. I'm not ignoring it. There's nothing that can done."

"You don't think?" Meg asked. "Well, unlike you, I can't sit idly by. I had to do something."

The tool clanked as it slipped from Roy's hand and fell to the ground. He came up from under the hood. "Meg, what ... what did you do?"

\*\*\*

Jordan was reading to Amy. They were both on the couch in the living room when the door bell rang. After finishing the sentence, Jordan set down the book and walked to the front door.

She could see the outline of a figure through the drapery, a woman, and Jordan opened the door.

The woman was tall, fuller figured, and she carried a briefcase in her arms, instead of by the handle

"Can I help you?" Jordan asked.

"Are you Jordan Wyatt?" The woman questioned.

"Yes, I am."

"Good afternoon." She extended her hand. "My name is Melanie Radovich. I'm from Children and Youth services. I am here to discuss Amy."

Jordan was reluctant to let her in. But she did.

"Your mother phoned me this morning ..."

"My .. my mother?" Jordan asked shocked. "My own mother?"

"Yes, usually we don't give the names of those who called, but she had no problems with you knowing."

"I'm killing her."

"Be that as it may," Melanie continued. "We need to discuss the fact that your daughter isn't in school. May I sit down?"

"No." Jordan answered, she aimed her voice to the living room. "Amy, honey, come here."



"Ms. Wyatt. We were very understanding when Amy didn't return to school last April. But that was last year. School has been in session for three weeks and, Amy has yet to return." Melanie's eyes followed as Jordan searched for something on the table.

"Amy is not going back to school," Jordan said.

"Amy has to go to school."

"I'm teaching her here." Jordan dramatically lifted her car keys.

"That's fine, but you have not filed the needed home school application. Until you do, she has to go back."

"She's my daughter." Jordan grabbed hold of her daughter's hand.

"I don't think you quite understand the situation here," Melanie said.

"Look, Ms. Radovich ..."

"No, you look." Melanie held up her hand. "You need to look at the reasons you aren't sending your daughter to school. If you have a problem with the district, the policies, that's one thing. But you don't send her because you don't let her out of your sight. That is wrong. Perhaps it's time your problems don't become your daughters."

Jordan gasped out and flung open the door. "Just for that comment, my mother is really dead."

Without shutting the door, without saying anything further, Jordan flew from the house with Amy.

\*\*\*

"Dude, I arrived." Victor said on his phone.

"Dude?" Max asked. "Victor, don't hang up on me ..."

Victor hung up.

"Wow," Victor commented, put his truck in park on the middle of the street, and got out. "Sweet!" he blasted. "This is it. This is life. I feel it." He said out loud then walked to the sidewalk. "I feel it." He stopped a man. "Sir. Hi. Do you know Ruth?"

"Who?"

"Ruth."

"Ruth who?" the man asked.

"I don't know her last name. But Ruth from Triple Tree."

"No." he answered and kept on walking.

Victor shrugged and grabbed the next person. "Ma'am, hey, hi. I'm looking for a woman named Ruth. I was supposed to meet her at Kayla's or Coyles Coffee shop."

"I don't know a Ruth, but Coyle's It's the new espresso shop. Two blocks down."

"Thanks, espresso, that's it. I love espresso."

"Really?" The woman said sarcastically.

"Yeah, I'm supposed to meet Ruth there when ..."

The woman walked away before Victor finished talking. "Maybe they don't take kindly to strangers." He chuckled at himself. "Listen, I got the Ohioan lingo happening already." He sighed out. "Two blocks. I can walk." Victor started to do just that until he finally noticed the loud honking from many cars on the street. Hunching, and thinking to himself that maybe he'd better move his truck first, Victor raced to his pickup.

\*\*\*

If what Melanie said to her wasn't blood pressure rising enough, the traffic backed up for blocks by—as Jordan told Amy—the asshole who parked his truck in the middle of the road, compounded things.

She finally arrived at her father's garage where Carl said her mother was. Hiding out, she guessed.

Amy in tow, Jordan stormed into the shop. "Mom!" she called out.

"In my office," Roy answered from under the hood.

"Thanks." Jordan said, and went to the office.

Roy emerged fully from the hood, wiped his hands, and cocked an ear.

"Mom." Jordan burst into Roy's office.

Meg was behind a computer. "Did you know your father had high speed Internet access? I didn't." she said nonchalantly, and then smiled at Amy. "Hey, baby, come here."

"Grandma" Happily Amy raced to Meg and hugged her.

"Mom." Jordan tried to complain. "What are you up to?"

"I told you looking at the Internet. My God do the images download fast on Dad's computer. Look at this, Jordan," she said.

"That's not why I am here."

Meg stood up and took Amy's hand. "Come on Amy, let's go ask Pap for Pizza money. You know it's my bingo night. I'm not cooking."

"Mother," Jordan attempted again. "Look." Her voice was firm. "You have really pissed ..."

"Stop." Meg held up a hand and spoke annoyingly calm. "Don't you dare raise that voice to me. I don't care how old you are, you are still my child and I am still your mother."

“But ...”

“But nothing. You want Amy to talk to you like that? No. She will, if you talk to me like that.” Meg said. “What you do comes back. The mother’s curse. It works. Whatever I did, I did out of the best interest for you and the baby. Come on, Amy, let’s find Pap.” Meg walked out.

Jordan growled in frustration, wiped her hand across her face, and spun around. One of her father’s employees stood there. He was laughing. “What!” Jordan snapped.

“Nothing.” He snickered, walked in the office and to the desk “Your dad needed his wallet.” He snickered. “Ain’t you learned yet, Jordan? Ask your dad why he doesn’t argue with her.”

“Why, because he’s afraid of her.”

“Nope. Because it’s too frustrating and not worth it. Wallet. Found it.” He held up the wallet and smiled.

\*\*\*

Ruth Smith. A plain name that Victor found humor in. She was a little woman, attractive and very business like. She was in her forties and in the business quite a bit of years. But to Ruth she had never met anyone like Victor Artulla.

Aside from her children ... when they were toddlers.

She took Victor in her car to the old Victorian style house in the cul-de-sac. He laughed at the ‘sold’ sign, made a quirky comment about the widow’s peek railing on the attic, and ran so fast in the house, Ruth never got a word in.

She was bound and determined, though to keep up with him.

If she could find Victor in the huge house.

The house was huge.

Three floors not including the basement. Six bedrooms not including the three large rooms in the attic.

Victor was somewhere in the house, Ruth just had to find him.

Using her keen sense of hearing, she listened in to the sound of running footsteps. It reminded her of her children when they use to run amuck about the house.

But Victor wasn’t a child ... or was he?

Ruth had to keep reminding herself. The sale was done. Papers signed, money paid. No mortgage. She should have even worried about it, but she

did. Even just for herself, she wanted to make sure Victor was happy with the property.

"Victor!" she called out from the hallway slash foyer. "Mr. Artulla!"

"Yeah!"

"How do you like the house."

Thump-thump-thump.

Ruth looked up.

Victor leaned over the second floor railing. "This house is so great. Wow. Thanks."

"Good."

"It'll need furniture, don't you think?"

"Sure, but I'm sure you have that."

"Not yet. I will. I didn't think it was needed to move."

Ruth blinked long. "I can see what I can do for you."

"What do you mean?"

"As far as furniture. I may be able to get you some."

"Nah, I can buy some. You don't have to give me anything."

"That's not what ...." Ruth grumbled, Victor took off again. "Mean." She sighed. "Mr. Artulla!"

"I'm checking out the attic." His voice drifted further away. "I want to see if I can get to the roof from there."

"Shit." Ruth took off for the stairs.

"Alcoves!"

What did he expect? Ruth wondered, it was an old Victorian house. He had to have seen the alcove peeks all around the attic.

She made it to the attic, out of breath, and she called out. "Mr. Artulla."

"Out here."

Out here? Reaching the top step she saw the open window. "Oh my God." She whispered. "That widow's walk isn't wide enough." She moved to the window. "Mr. Artulla be careful."

"I am. Wow this is an awesome view. Look at the lake. I have a lake for a backyard."

"Yes." She cautiously peered out the window. He wasn't on the widow's walk. "Mr. Artulla?"

"Up here."

"Up here?" She turned, looked up, and had to stop herself from shrieking.

On the triangle part of the alcove, Victor balanced himself in a squat like a bird on a perch. "Amazing view." Victor stood.

"You're gonna fall."

"Nah, I'm fine." Victor folded his arms. "I'm gonna build like a captain's look out. What do you think?"

"I think you're insane."

"Nah, just excited. I mean what more can I ask for? A great house. A great view. Espresso shop right in town."

"I don't think you need espresso."

"Sure, I do." Victor took a deep breath. "This is breathtaking, and you know what else?"

"What is that?"

"All that water. I can't even smell the sewage." Victor smiled.

Ruth pulled back into the window.

\*\*\*

"Oh, for the love of God, Roy, hurry up." Meg hustled down the path to her car. "If I don't get my seat at Bingo, I will get mad."

"You'll get your seat," Roy said.

Meg walked around to the passenger's side. "The jackpot is high and ..." she just stopped.

"What? What's wrong now?"

"Take a look at the unbalanced nit that bought the house down the street."

Roy glanced to see Victor standing on the roof.

Meg shook her head. "Tell me he's not practicing for suicide."

"Yeah, and bet me you watch for it everyday."

"Yeah, because I'd have to talk him down or out of doing it."

This made Roy pause "You're kidding."

"Kid you not. Someone kills them self on this street." Meg opened the car door. "Watch the property value depreciate."

Mumbling, 'figures', Roy got in the car after another look at Victor.

\*\*\*

"No, Mom, we were fine tonight." Jordan spoke on the phone. "Glad you won the jackpot. Well, yeah, I'd like that. Yeah. Night." With a long wind filled 'whew', Jordan hung up the phone.

A book was tucked under her arm, and a cup of coffee on the table by the phone. She looked at her watch, and after setting down the book, walked upstairs.

She stopped in Amy's room. The night light was on, adding a slight orange glow to everything. Amy was tucked in tightly between her bed and cartoon covers. Jordan walked over, stared for a few moments kissed her daughter, and told her that she loved her.

Amy's response was a groan, and she rolled over.

Jordan didn't shut out the night light. She never turned it off until the next day. Before heading down stairs she had one more room to check It was something she had always done.

With a deep breath, like she did every night, she opened the door to Trevor's bedroom.

She took in that breath before hand because the cent of him still lingered and she had a hard time taking that in. She only stepped a few feet into the room. He eyes went to the bed. She imagined Trevor laying there.

Never was he sleeping when she went into check on him. Never. He was always wide awake, nervous about something. If it wasn't school, it was baseball, or a friend, anything. He was always a caring child and a bundle of nerves.

Jordan basked in a moment of reflecting. She walked to Trevor's bed and lifted his pillow. Bringing it close to her chest, she lowered her head in inhaled deeply.

"I miss you, Trevor." She whimpered. "Mommy misses you and loves you so much."

A routine she did nightly.

And this night was no different. She held his pillow, said her own silent goodnight, and cried.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Chuck, the owner of Coyle's Coffee shop made a comment to his employee when he saw Victor ride up to the shop on his skateboard. Something to the effect of calling Victor a 'live one'.

Little did he know.

It took Victor about twenty minutes to decide what he didn't want out of the pastry case. Twenty selections, and Victor not only purchased them all one at a time, he took a bite, opted against it, and moved on to the next.

"You know," Chuck said. "You can always get eggs at the Choo-Choo diner."

Victor chuckled. "Choo-Choo diner. That's cute. I get it. Choo-Choo. Chew-Chew."

Chuck just started.

"Eggs. Hmm. Who eats eggs at this time of day?" Victor asked.

"Seeing how it's morning, I'd say a lot of people."

"I guess, But you know what? For some reason I'm not even hungry now."

Chuck looked at the long line of tested pastry. "I wonder why."

"Me, too."

"Here's you quadruple espresso."

"Wow, great, thanks." Victor sipped it. "Hey, this is good. Very New York like."

"How many of those do you have a day?" Chuck asked.

"Not many, three."

"Three?"

"Or more. Don't worry, I'll keep you in business."

"I have no doubt."

"So, uh, hey, Chuck, where is there a place I can draw round here. I want scenery and people." Victor asked.

"We have a park. Go down a block, at the post office make a left. Can't miss it," Chuck replied.

"A park. Bet it's safe."

"I should think so."

"No muggings recently?" Victor inquired.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Thanks, see you in a few." Victor, toting his coffee, grabbed his sketch bag from the table, lifted it over his head, and picked up his skateboard.

Chuck went to the window and watched. Victor jumped on his skateboard, and rode it while not only holding, but occasionally sipping his beverage. Chuck shook his head and commented, "Tell me how someone that off kilter can be that balanced on a skateboard." He exhaled. "Well, with him we'll make third quarter costs."

\*\*\*

Even though the leaves were falling early, it still took Jordan and Amy a good bit of time to find the right amount, and just the right texture of autumn leaves.

They found their spot in the park, Amy had construction paper before her and glue. Jordan read from a book right next to her.

"Shoot." Amy whined. "Shoot."

"Shoot?" Jordan questioned. "What's wrong?"

"I keep messing up."

"Ah, honey, here." Jordan set down the book and scooted closer "Let me help you. I think you're just using too much glue."

"What's the reason for this?"

"Art for Grandma's fridge. She said if I won't send you to school for refrigerator art, I'm gonna have you make her some anyhow."

Amy giggled.

Jordan lovingly nudged her.

"Mommy, what's that man doing?"

Jordan peered up. The wind blew her hair all in her face, and when she cleared it from her eyes, she saw Victor. He seemed to be watching them.

Victor sat on a park bench not ten feet away. Sketch pad in hand, he smiled at Jordan.

She didn't return the smile. "Stay here, Amy." Standing, arms folded from the chill, and in defense, Jordan walked over to Victor. "Excuse me."

"Hi," Victor said.

"What are you doing?"

"It's a great park. All the kids. I thought I'd draw some kids. You know."

"No, I don't. Is my daughter one of the kids you're drawing?"

Victor hesitated, he swallowed. "Yeah. She is." He lifted the pad to Jordan. "See, I was ..."

"Don't." Jordan smacked the pad away. "No one gave you permission. I certainly didn't and I certainly wouldn't. That is my daughter. You have no



right to even look at her, let alone sketch her.” With an air of hostility, Jordan stormed off.

She didn’t hesitate either to gather her items along with Amy and move on from the park.

Victor watched. He stood, startled, even debating on calling out to her. But he didn’t. He just stayed in one spot watching as Jordan and her daughter left the park in such haste. A single note whistle caught Victor’s attention. He turned to the man on the next bench. The man read a newspaper and shook his head.

Victor walked to him. “Did you see that?”

“Yes.” The man answered.

“Do you by chance know who that was?”

“That was Jordan Wyatt. Meg and Roy’s daughter.”

“Jordan Wyatt.”

“Yep.”

“Thanks,” Victor spoke dazed. When he looked back up, there wasn’t even a speck of Jordan, she was gone.

Victor felt bad. Really bad. He didn’t quite know why, or even if he should. But he did. It didn’t take him long to find out where Jordan lived, but it took him a while to figure out what he was going to do. He knew what his gut said to do. But was it the right thing?

After several trips to Coyle’s, a few video games, and a painting later, Victor made up his mind.

Consequences be damned.

That night he sat in the middle of his dimly lit living room. A large sheet of paper was rolled up and Victor tied a string around it. Then he took a small folded square of paper, and slipped it under the string.

On the paper it read ‘Jordan.’

He watched a little bit of the ten pm news, and then grabbed the rolled paper, his truck keys, and left his home.

\*\*\*

The cookie making incident didn't only breed bad cookies, but a mess as well. Jordan shut off the kitchen sink twice thinking she heard something, but it was only thunder.

The third time she shut off the water, it was because she was finished, and as she grabbed a dishtowel, she heard the knock at her front door.

It was late, and Jordan wasn't really in a hurry to find out who was knocking on her door.

She made her way from the kitchen down the hall, but as she approached the front door, she couldn't see any figures. She parted the curtains only to see the taillights of a truck pulling away.

Jordan slowly opened the door, when she did, the rolled paper fell inside, and her name was predominately seen.

Jordan lifted the rolled paper and slipped the note from it.

"Jordan, I am very sorry. I meant no harm. Victor"

Curious, Jordan carried the paper to the kitchen and untied the string. She slowly unrolled the paper on the table. As the entire sketch came into view, Jordan lost her breath, stumbled back, and dropped the sketch.

"Oh my God." Shaking, she looked down to the partially rolled picture. "Oh my God."

She turned on her heels and ran. Straight down the hall, flung open the door, out of her house and down her driveway. She didn't stop running until she reached the end of her property where it met the road. She turned left and right, looking.

Thunder blasted, and with a crack of lightening, it immediately started to rain. Jordan raced back to the house.

Her wet feet slipped on the hard wood floors in route to the kitchen. Her shaking hands picked up the phone and dialed. But her eyes couldn't stop looking at the sketch.

"Carl," she said exasperated.

"Jordan what's wrong?"

"Carl, I have to go somewhere, I need you to come over and watch Amy."

"You're leaving the house without Amy?"

"Yeah, it's important."

"I'll be right there."

Jordan blindly hung up the phone. She dried her hands on her jeans, because for the life of her she didn't want to even remotely ruin the sketch by touching it with damp hands, and she had to touch it to look at it again.

To her view she lifted it, opening it completely. She repeated her earlier sentiments with a gasp. She figured she would do that for a long time when looking at that sketch.

It was a picture of Amy at the park. But the quality of it wasn't what moved through Jordan. It was the fact, that in the sketch, positioned behind Amy was Trevor.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Carl was soaking wet and wasn't allowed to touch the sketch, but he looked at it closely. "I can see why you want to find him," Carl said.

"Yeah. And I want to go now. Just on the outside chance he doesn't live in Redbird, which I don't think he does, because I know everyone. So I doubt it, but I'll try."

Carl blinked "Did you just ramble? I swear to God that is the first I have heard you rambles since ....since."

"I know. Don't say it. But I have to find him. I also don't want this to get ruined, so I have to protect it. I'm taking it with me."

Carl was leaning over the table viewing it when Jordan reached. "Wait."

"What?"

"Stop. Oh, My God."

"What?" Jordan took the sketch. She rolled it up.

"Do you ... do you know who drew that?"

"Victor."

"No, Jordan, Victor Artulla. His signatures on the sketch."

"Oh, good, that will help." Jordan reached under the kitchen sink and pulled out a garbage bag. "This will stop it from getting wet, right."

"Do ... do you even know who Victor Artulla is?"

"Should I?"

"Uh, yeah," Carl sputtered. "He's only being called the next Michelangelo. Only the guys spits out the art. He slipped into seclusion a couple days ago."

"Then he didn't do it well," Jordan said, as she placed the sketch in the bag.

"Don't you get it? His signature is worth a hundred dollars a pop. Jordan, that sketch is a family income for two years."

Jordan shook her head. "No, Carl, it's worth much more than that. It's worth more than any amount of money in the world. I'd starve before I gave it back. I have to find him. Thanks for watching Amy." She moved to the door.

"Wait." Carl called out. "How? How do you plan on finding him?"

"I don't know. But I will do what it takes, but I will find him." Sketch in hand, Jordan left her home.

\*\*\*

It hadn't been that long, but Carl called twice asking if Jordan had any luck. She hadn't, but she wasn't giving up. She had a plan of action, and if it took her all night, she would succeed.

Rain beating against her windshield, Jordan leaned into the steering wheel to get a view of where she was. She threw the car in park, stepped out of her car, and into the residential street.

"Victor!" she screamed her loudest. "Victor Artulla! Victor!"

She yelled out for two minutes straight, her calls muffled by the pouring rain. After failing there, Jordan returned to her car, and continued on.

\*\*\*

Roy had the television on mute and was fully taking advantage of the 'closed caption', he wasn't supposed to be watching television in the bedroom, but Meg had been in the bathroom for a bit of time, and Roy needed something to keep him awake.

On top of the covers, in his boxer shorts and tee shirt, Roy propped his pillow.

"Ready?" Meg called from the bathroom.

Roy shut off the television. "Yep."

The bathroom door opened, brightening the room. Meg posed in the doorway. She wore a white nightgown and her thicker figure was a mere silhouette against the bathroom light.

Roy whistled.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well worth the wait. You look beautiful."

"See, told you I'd put that jackpot money to good use." Meg walked seductively to the bed.

"Ya' know," Roy winked. "Your breasts look awfully good."

Meg ran her hands up her own hips in a route to her breast, just as her hands opened to grab her breasts, she froze.

"Victor!" Jordan's voice called from out side. "Victor Artulla."

Meg's eyes widened. "Please don't tell me that is our insane daughter screaming out there."

"Nah," Roy snickered and waved out his hand. "Jordan doesn't leave the house. It's the rain. Come to bed." He patted the spot next to him.

"Victor! Victor Artulla!"

Meg ran to the window and parted the drapes. She shrieked.

Jordan was soaked. Her hair was plastered against her face, as well as every ounce of her clothing. But she didn't care. "Victor!" she screamed out. "Victor!"

Through the burst of rain, Meg's scream carried to her. "Jordan Marie Wyatt! What the hell is the matter with you!"

Jordan turned to her right to see her mother standing in a white nightgown in the door way. "What!"

"Get out of the rain!" Meg cried. "What's the matter with you?"

Jordan scoffed, and waved out her hand. Ignoring her mother, she called out again, "Victor! Victor Artulla!"

"Fine stay out there!" Meg screamed, then slammed the door.

"Victor! Victor Artulla!" Jordan tried once more. After two more calls, she gave up. Swiping the water from her face, she turned to go back to the car. A crash of lightening brought a bright white flash and the sudden appearance Victor.

Jordan jumped and grabbed her chest.

"Hey," Victor smiled. "You looking for me?"

"Yes. Yes," Jordan said exasperated. "Yes." She raced to the car and pulled out the garbage bag. "I need to talk to you about this." She held it up.

Victor looked at the garbage bag, then to Jordan and gave a quirky look.

\*\*\*

It was as if Victor's double front doors were sound proof. As soon as he closed them the sound of the storm was deafened. Jordan wondered how he even heard her calling.

"This way, the fireplace is going, it's pretty decent." Victor led her to the living room. "My home."

Jordan immediately stopped upon entering the large room. It was filled with art. Wall to wall. The floor. "You have no furniture."

"I'm getting there." Victor lifted a cloth canvas, smelled it, and tossed it to Jordan as he continued to move across the living room. "Here, dry off, get warm. I'll see if I can find you something to wear. It may not fit you, you're awful big."

Jordan smiled, but didn't show Victor she was too engrossed in looking at the multitudes of art.

"I made coffee want some?"

"Yes, that would be great. Is this all yours?" Jordan turned. But Victor was no where to be seen.

\*\*\*

Victor's coffee was absolutely the best coffee Jordan had ever tasted. Wearing old clothes of Victor's that swam on her, she sipped on the brew in Victor's kitchen.

It was large like every other room in the house. Long, galley like, old plumbing, charm.

Stacks of empty pizza boxes rested by the garbage can.

Victor pulled the sketch from the garbage bag and chuckled.

"I didn't want to ruin it." Jordan said.

"Thanks," Victor smiled and unrolled the sketch.

"Oh, Victor. You don't know what this sketch has done to me." She inched next to him, and extended a point, touching upon Amy. "This is my daughter. This boy here, over her shoulder. He wasn't there. You've given him wings."

Victor lifted his head and looked elsewhere.

"Victor?"

After clearing his throat, Victor took a nervous breath. "I sometimes add... I some times add a guardian angel to pictures. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"Offended me," Jordan gasped out. "Oh, my God, no." She stepped before him and lowered the sketch. "This boy is my son."

Victor looked at her.

"He died, Victor. He died six months ago. I need to know why you did this? Was it a vision? Did you see him? Is this what you see? What? Please."

After staring in hesitation, Victor took her hand and led her back to the living room.

"Stay here," he instructed.

Jordan sipped her coffee, and looked at the art surrounding her. Victor was only gone a few moments.

When he returned he asked her to sit on the floor, after he returned her sketch to her, he dropped an overflowing box of sketches on the floor.

"This is what I call the 'odd' art." Victor joined her on the floor, the proceeded to dump the sketches. They made a huge pile. "There's more, there is so much more."

Jordan hand gently sifted through the pile. She lifted picture of people in parks, on the street, in restaurants. All of them had one common ground. All of them had angels.

"This is the reason I had to leave New York," Victor said. "I couldn't draw anything without something slipping in. And let me tell you something, people say that New York is full of sinners. You wouldn't believe how many fuckin' angels there are running around. Sorry for swearing."

Jordan glanced up with a short laugh. "That's fine, Victor."

"And they know I see them. Because boy, can they ham it up."

"And do you see the all the time?" Jordan asked.

"No, I can't control it. When I draw it happens. This one was one of the first." Victor showed her a sketch. "Scared the hell out of me. Started about eight years ago That's why I left, you know, people for a while."

"Like now."

"You can say that."

"So this only happens when you draw?"

"Yep. I slip into some weird mode. I know angels. But sometimes ..."

Victor grabbed another sketch. "Like with him. I didn't even know this guy wasn't there until I finished the picture, looked up and saw only one person. See, early on I couldn't tell the difference. I know most of the time now."

"My son. You drew him with wings."

"I'm ... I'm sorry."

"Stop that. Don't you dare apologize. Oh my, God. Oh Victor ..."

She laid her hand on her chest. "I'm the one that's sorry. I am so sorry for yelling at you. You saw my son. What I wouldn't have given to see him again, and you gave that to me." She peered back down to the art and touched it. "This is all so amazing. All of it. I want to look at every single piece."

"Go right ahead."

"I can't," Jordan said then noticed the curious look Victor gave. "I can't. Not now." She grabbed her sketch. "I left my daughter with my brother long enough. I have to get back home." Lifting her mug, she took one more sip, and set it down on a lamp table. "I would really like to continue this another time. Can we?"

"Absolutely. When?"



“Any time.” Jordan moved toward the door and stopped. “Victor, again ... thank you. Thank you so much for this gift. I’ll see you soon.” She gave him a warm smile, and as she walked out the door, she held up the sketch as if it were her trophy of hope.

And actuality, it was.

\*\*\*

How long was it? Maybe forty minutes after Carl had left. Amy was sleeping, Jordan was hyper, and she supposed it was the coffee Victor served. Of course it was so good; Jordan made a pot for herself snatching up a cup as soon as it was brewed.

It wasn’t as good as the brew Victor made.

She was engrossed in staring at the sketch when she heard the knock on the front door.

Something told Jordan it wasn’t bad news. She saw the tall person as she approached. She flicked on the porch light and opened the door.

Victor stood there. He toted a filled box.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

“I know it’s late. Maybe it’s not. Is it?” Victor asked.

“Not really,” Jordan said.

“And I know we just left each other. But you said you wanted to continue. Um, anytime. Feel like continuing now?” Hair wet and dangling, Victor tilted his head with an innocent smile.

Jordan opened the door wider with a welcoming hand.

## CHAPTER SIX

Amy knew her mother didn't have much money. She knew they weren't rich, and didn't mind not having the full cable television like her grandparents. Only on Sunday morning, because that's when the cartoons and shows were bad.

Usually Amy would get up and try to watch something before they went to church and to her grandmother's house for breakfast. She'd do that while her mother got ready.

Amy wasn't really good at telling time, if she had been she would have realized the time for church had come and gone.

She just thought it was really early. She snuck past her mother's room and went downstairs. Not one step into the living room Amy, stopped, turned, and raced back up the stairs.

Jordan was definitely dreaming, and for the first time in a long time, the vivid dream was not a nightmare.

She dreamt of coffee flavored ice-cream and how there were signs all over the place in Redbird about this new fantastic flavor. A 'scoop of Victor'

Everyone was talking about it, and it was served by Victor.

A silly dream, but something sweet.

"Mommy, can I have more ice cream?" Amy asked.

"Honey, you had enough."

"Mommy, please?"

"No."

"Mommy."

It was then Jordan realized the calling of her name was not in her dream, but outside of it. She opened her eyes.

"Hi Mommy?"

"Hey, Sweetie." Jordan sat up.

"You have to see this. Look what I found." She tugged on Jordan's hand.

"What?"

"Hurry, look what I found." After one more tug, Amy took off running.

Jordan got her bearings together, and followed the traveling footsteps down stairs. Amy stood in the living room door.

"Look." Amy pointed.

Jordan chuckled. "It's Ok. I know." She walked in the room and stood by the couch. Victor slept there. Partially covered, his body turned into toward the inside of the couch, and a sketch pad rested on his chest, a pencil in the hand that was above his head.

Jordan removed the pencil slowly, and then lifted the sketch pad.

"Mommy?" Amy questioned.

"Shh." Jordan set the pad on the table. "Come on, he's sleeping. Let's make breakfast."

With Amy, Jordan began to leave, but not without taking one more look back at Victor.

\*\*\*

"Carl." Meg spoke into her cell phone. "Carl, this is your mother."

Ray, irritated as he drove, grimaced. "He knows our voice. Trust me."

Meg swatted her hand out. "Carl. Carl, wake up. Carl!" she started to yell. "Carl! This is mom! Get up. Get up! Carl. Call me!" she hung up. "Where is he."

"Sleeping," Roy answered. "And why do you do that."

"Do what?"

"Yell into the voice mail."

"Maybe he'll hear and pick up."

"He won't hear, Meg. It's voice mail. There's no machine. Then again, with the way you yell he just might."

"Thank you for that."

"You're welcome for that. Now tell me again why we are going over to Jordan's house. It's nine in the morning. I can't believe we're doing this."

"Roy, she didn't show up for mass."

"So."

"So, she never doesn't show up for mass." Meg said. "If anything else, our daughter goes to church."

"Maybe she slept in."

"No. No. Something is wrong. You heard her screaming in the street last night."

"Meg ..."

Meg held up her hand. "I ignored her. I yelled at her."

"Meg."

“No.” Meg took a shivering breath. “What if she did something crazy? I only have myself to blame. What if Roy. My God, what is she killed herself.”

Roy gave a cross look, and turned up the radio.

\*\*\*

Max didn't go out on Saturday. He had some legal papers to handle, and stayed in, watched a movie, had a few drinks and passed out.

He really didn't think he'd miss anything.

He knew when he saw the answering machine, something happened. “Thirty two messages?” The light blinked and Max questioned. For that he needed coffee.

He brewed a pot, grabbed a notepad and a pen, and pressed ‘play’.

He paused in drinking.

Beep.

“Ok, I'm back.” Victor said on the machine. “It's only ten thirty, I know. I'm on my way out. Are you out? Probably. Do you have a date? Anyhow, hope she's not there and I'm interrupting. Max, something's happened.”

Beep.

“Me, again. I said something happened. Yeah, something happened, but I don't want you to think something bad happened. But something happened. I'll call you when I get back.”

Beep.

“Hey, Max it's me.”

Max tossed his pencil and rubbed his eyes.

“I'm back. Gees I hope I'm not dampening your date. Where are you? Call me.”

Beep.

“Max, it's me. Don't call me right now. I'm leaving again. Call me tomorrow.”

Beep.

A woman's voice. “Max, it's mom. Were you on line all night, every time I tried to call it was busy.”

Max shut off his machine. “I hate Victor sometimes.” He picked up the phone and dialed. “Figures.” Max waded through Victor's odd voice mail message. “Victor, it's me Max. I should leave you thirty-million messages like you left me. But I won't. I'm reasonable. Obviously ...

something happened. Call me. But call me when you're less hyper. If that's possible." Max hung up and rubbed his temples. "I need a Valium."

\*\*\*

Panic struck Meg when she and Roy pulled onto Jordan's property. She reacted vocally and physically. Grabbing her chest, gasping, and cocking her body back.

"Whose truck?" Meg asked. "Whose truck is that? I recognize it."

"Maybe it's Danny's." Roy suggested.

"No, Danny has a gray truck."

"Yeah, but that truck is spanking new. Maybe he just got it."

"Drive faster, Roy. Hurry."

"We're in the goddamn driveway, Meg." He shook his head.

No sooner did he stop the car, Meg jumped out. Purse tight to her, church dress still on, she hustled. However, she did wait on the porch for Roy.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Roy said, getting out of the car.

"Forget it, I'm going in." Meg opened the door. Moving at a good pace, eyes forward to the kitchen, she walked down the hall past the huge archway entrance to the living room. She had just cleared the archway, when she came to an abrupt hall, and arched herself way back to peek into the living room. After raising one eyebrow, she walked to the couch. She took an intimidating stand there over a sleeping Victor, and then she poked him.

Nothing.

She poked him again, and did so until he opened his eyes.

"Morning, Sunshine," she said crass. "Who the hell are you?"

\*\*\*

There was plenty of mumbling in Jordan's kitchen, especially by Meg, who had pulled Jordan over by the stove.

Roy sat at the table reading the newspaper enjoying coffee, while Amy watched Viktor create art out of the sausages and pancakes.

Jordan, frazzled spoke through clenched jaws "Mom, will you please ..."

"Please what? Stop being concerned. Stop worry? How can I do that, I am your mother. You, Jordan, you let this man into your home. A man you don't even know."

"I'm Victor," Victor spoke from the table.

"Oh, like I care," Meg snapped. "And can you please put on a goddamn shirt? My granddaughter doesn't need to be staring at your nipples."

"Mom," Jordan said embarrassed.

Amy giggled. "Nipples."

Meg's hand covered her eyes. "Now she's talking about them."

Jordan shook her head. "She wouldn't be talking about them, if you didn't mention them."

Victor stood up. "I have to go."

Meg turned to him. "Maybe you should. Danny will not be happy about this."

Victor asked, "Who's Danny?"

"Maybe Jordan should tell you." Meg said.

"All right," Victor turned to Jordan. "Who's Danny?"

"No one," Jordan replied, "And Victor, do you really have to go?"

"Yeah, I do. I want to call Max so he can give me my phone number so I can give it to you." He ran his hand over Amy's head as he started to leave. "And thanks so much for last night." He walked from the kitchen.

Meg shrieked about the same time Jordan followed Victor out. She covered Amy's ears. "My God, Roy, she slept with the man."

Roy only raised his eyes.

"Victor, wait." Jordan caught him as he walked out the front door. "Wait. I'm ... I'm sorry. I am really sorry about my mother. She ..."

"It's funny." Victor smiled. "And she's not the reason I'm leaving."

"She's not?"

"No. I tend not to want to be around a lot of people. I ramble. When I ramble I sound crazy, and I'd really rather not sound crazy to more than one person at a time. Or two. No more though. Or in front of you. But I'm doing it so I'm gonna go." He flashed a smile, took a breath, and before Jordan could even form words, the door slammed.

At the kitchen counter, Meg poured a cup of coffee. She shook her head. "He's gone." She made her way to the table, and sat down. Suddenly

Victor's plate caught her attention. It wasn't pancakes and sausage. It was an intricate landscape created out of them with a water fall of syrup.

Meg shook her head in disgust. "Will you look at this? Not only does the man waste food, he plays with it."

\*\*\*

Victor paced. He told Max he was pacing because Max always wanted to know if Victor was fidgety on the phone so he knew what mind set to be in.

"I'm getting a headache here," Max told him. "I shouldn't have worked out before I took this call. I should have said for you to wait."

"This is important."

"Victor. Take a moment. Take a Valium. Be less hyper and listen. This is not the homeless man's dog here. This is not the parrot with one leg. This can not be another one of your humane rescue league project. Wanna know why? This is a human being we're talking about."

"I know that. But this could be really interesting."

"No." Max said.

"Max, weren't you listening?"

"How can I not listen, Victor, I'm on the phone with you."

"You could put the phone down."

"I wish I had the balls to do that."

"Why?"

"Victor!"

"Max," Victor chuckled out his name. "Did you hear me when I said I showed her? I showed her about a third of the odd art. No one, not even you has seen the odd art."

"OK, I'll give you an immediate comfortableness there. A closeness."

"No, there's more. There's just something about her. Something different about Jordan." Victor sat, then stood, paced, and then sat. "For eight years I have been wrapped up in my art. Eight years that was all I thought about and did. And you know what? I can still create, but for once I want to be wrapped up in something else."

"Jordan."

"Yes."

"No." Max was firm. "This is a person, Victor. A person with feelings. Real feelings. An Ohio person."

"I know."

"I don't think you do. You can't show multitudes of interest and the when the problem is solved, you walk away. Dogs, parrots, chickens, cats, they don't care. People do."

"Why are you being so argumentative about this."

"I know you."

"This is different."

"You said that about the endangered squirrel's nest in Central Park."

"No." Victor took a deep breath and left a silence on the phone.

"Victor? You there?"

"Yeah."

"You went silent. You're never silent," Max said.

"I'm thinking of the words."

Max coughed. "You?"

"OK, hear me out. This is different because she is different."

"In what way?" max asked.

"I don't know. See, that's what makes this so cool for me. I want to know her. Learn everything about her. Her likes, her dislikes. What she did for a living what she does now. Religion. Her life. Everything."

"Now, see," Max said pleasantly. "This is what I like to hear. This is a good start. This gives me confidence in your motives."

"Yeah, and I want to start right away."

"You won't smother the girl, will you?"

"No, but I still want to learn her. As much as I can."

"Good."

"So, I need you. First thing tomorrow morning, to find me the best and fastest private investigator who can find me all that I need ..."

Click.

Victor pulled the phone from his ear. "Max?" he shrugged. "See and he wanders why I protest the phone company. I keep losing connections." He shook his head, placed the phone down. He waited a moment and redialed.

"Hello?" Max answered.

"Hey Max. We lost connection."

"We didn't lose connection, Victor. I hung up on you."

"Why?" Victor asked.

"I listened to you talk. I listened to you say how you wanted to get to know this girl. Then I listened to you proceed to tell me that you want to hire a private investigator."

"How else am I going to learn her."



Max growled.

Victor pulled the phone from his ear for a second and replaced it.  
“Max, you just made this really weird noise.”

“It’s frustration, Victor. The same frustration I had that caused me to hang up on you. I don’t want to freak out.”

Victor chuckled. “Max, you’re stressed. Why would you freak out on me.”

“Because you don’t get it.” Max snapped. “You want to know her, get to know her. The old fashion way. Ask questions. Hang around her. You can’t hire a private investigator you moron.”

“Did you just call me a moron?”

“Yes!” Max blasted.

Victor laughed.

“I’m glad you find this amusing.”

“Why not? And why can’t I hire one. I have money.”

“It’s not the money.” Max said. “It’s just plain wrong to do. Especially if you like her.”

“OK, so, does this mean you won’t help me?”

No answer.

“Max?”

Click

Victor nodded. “OK, now I know he hung up this time.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

To fully understand the Colbert's, why and how they operate as a family, one really has to get to know them and their motivations.

The best way to know them is to learn them.

From youngest to oldest.

Two years separated each of the three Colbert children, Christine, Carl, and Jordan. Jordan was the youngest. She was the one without any real goals after school. She worked odd jobs, probably a total of twenty in her life. Her 'ace in the hole' was marrying Michael Wyatt at a young age. Not only did Michael make a great living, was a supportive husband, Jordan adored him. She was the housewife who did or didn't have to work. Usually, just for herself, she'd work at the toy store during the Christmas holidays for extra cash to buy presents for Michael.

She banked on a rich and fulfilling life with Michel forever, but fate placed their relationship into Chapter Eleven. Unaware, thinking she had the cozy life, Jordan was slapped hard with reality when Michael came home one day and said he had some news.

"I've been seeing someone else."

Slammed. Ok, Jordan could handle it, therapy maybe for them; Fr. Benson worked wonders with marriages.

"I want a divorce. No, I need a divorce," he said.

Guilt, Jordan assumed. It had to be guilt. They had two small children, a great house. He wasn't thinking.

Then he offered Jordan the house, and a pretty decent monthly child support amount Jordan wouldn't have to really work until the kids got older.

Good deal. Fast Deal. He needed the divorce, not wanted it. Fast.

Why?

He had to marry the mistress before she gave birth.

Jordan pummeled in the self esteem department, but didn't let it drag her down. She picked up the pieces and moved on.

Michael Wyatt burdened Jordan more after Trevor died, often calling Jordan with remorse and questions. Was his sin the reason, Trevor was killed. Was God paying him back?

Jordan found that laughable. If God wanted to make Michael pay, then he would have killed Michael, not Trevor. Michael wasn't that important in the scheme of things, his sin wasn't that big that it would cause so much pain for so many people.

Trevor though, was the tragedy that she couldn't bounce back from. She couldn't pick up the pieces so easily. They were scattered everywhere.

Carl was the reasonable Colbert. He knew what he wanted to do with his life since he was eight years old. He also knew at that age he was very gay. He never hid it, wasn't flamboyant or effeminate, he was just a gay man.

His passion for reading grew a passion for teaching, and he pursued that out of high school and was teaching locally within three months of graduation. His writings were published in many monthly magazines, and his resume was working its way to the big book deal.

His students loved him. People loved him. Although Carl never really found true love. He attributed that to the fact that when ever he brought anyone home, his mother made it impossible.

Of course, his father's response to that way, if they cared, they'd ignore your mother.

Easier said than done, and Carl buried his Saturday nights into his written word.

Anyone that read his work enjoyed it.

He also admired his sisters both very much. Jordan for her perseverance, and Christine for her ability to break free of the she-monster they called 'mother'.

Christine was always labeled the intelligent and independent Colbert. Mainly because she wasn't afraid to rebel against her mother. Christine went to college, married, always worked a successful job, and married a pizza delivery man named Jeremy.

Some say it was to irk her mother

Roy Colbert thought he'd serve in the United States Navy for the rest of his working life, and retire with a hefty pension. Unfortunately, combat railroaded all that.

He got hit with a mortar round and ended up blind in one eye. The compensation he received enabled him to open the automotive shop that he kept fruitful for years. He enjoyed it and ended up being franchised by Michelin tire which helped him even more. An even keeled man who raised his voice only when needed, and most of the time it was needed when Meg got out of control.

Meg, however, was a complex matter. Always more than met the eye with her. When she was thirteen her mother was killed by a trolley, and Meg was suddenly left to help raise her three younger brothers, all under nine. She also had to take care of her father who had never done anything other

than work. Meg cooked, cleaned, did laundry, reared the kids, and went to school. But at the age of sixteen Meg had to drop out to work full time. Her father passed away from a heart attack and in order to save her brothers from a home, Meg hid the fact from the authorities that her father had died. When the news finally broke she was eighteen and then legally responsible for her brothers.

They all grew up looking at Meg as no less than a mother, and Meg felt that closeness to them. Two of her brothers moved west, and one died in the gulf war.

Meg met Roy when she was a dance girl at the OSI, and she married him right after the last of her brothers turned eighteen.

Meg always worked. Aside from being home when the kids left for school she was there when they got home, and they came home to a clean house, and food on the table. She worked at the nurse's office at the high school, not as a nurse, but as a diverting secretary. Kids hated Meg because they could never get away with faking an illness and going home. Parents loved her. The frequent calls home to pick up 'falsely ill' children were cut in half.

In fact, the one cold and flu season, Meg intervened so much, that the parents named her Woman of the Year.

Quite an honor.

Meg reminded the family of that frequently.

One thing remained, no matter how much they sought the independence of their own lives, unless something happened, all three of the children showed up for Sunday dinner.

Every Sunday was as close to Christmas dinner as it came. Down to the perfect preparations.

"Thin, Roy, thin." Meg nit picked. "The roast beef has to be thin. You know how Jeremy likes to stack it on this bread."

Roy huffed, looked over shoulder. "You wanna slice it."

Meg was ready to answer, but she heard the front door open. And the sounds of children laughing. "Jordan?"

Jordan who was making salad with Amy peered up. "Yeah."

"Ashley and Abby are here, why don't you encourage Amy to play."

"She's making salad."

"No, she's watching you make a salad" Meg walked over. "Amy honey, go play with the twins."

Carl poked his head in the kitchen door. "Jeremy just came in and shut off my show. Can you tell him? He does this every Sunday."

Meg sighed out. "And you complain every Sunday. You know Wrestling is on."

Carl began to retreat and Meg stopped him.

"Carl, take Amy to play."

Carl extended his hand; Amy gave a glance to her mother for approval then darted out with Carl.

Meg sighed out. "Better. Thinner, Roy, thinner."

Christine, who looked more like a younger version of Meg, stepped in the kitchen, head only. "Jordan. Danny just showed up. Did you invite him?"

Jordan looked lost.

Christine shrugged. "Guess not." She backed away.

Jordan turned to Meg. "Why is Danny here?"

"I invited him," Meg said as she separated the rolls for the oven.

"Mom, he broke up with me two months ago."

"He wants you back." Meg shrugged. "He loves you. Look how good these rolls are gonna be."

"Mom. He does not."

"Yes, he does and you want him back."

"I do not," Jordan said. "Daddy, tell her I do not."

"She does not," Roy said.

"Does, too." Meg instead. "If she didn't why else did he spend the night there a couple weeks ago?"

"Contact," Roy answered. "Human contact. People need that once in a while. If you were more human you'd know that."

Meg gasped, and as she turned to dramatically make a move from the kitchen, she stopped and grinned, Danny walked in.

"Danny!" Meg said brightly, "Ask her."

Roy questioned. "Ask who what?"

"Ask Jordan." Meg explained.

"Ask me what?" Jordan questioned.

Danny cleared his throat. "Well, the Captain gave me ..."

Meg interrupted excitedly. "I'll do it. Jordan, Danny wants you to go to Cleveland with him next weekend. He got tickets to that special rock and roll Hall of Fame show." She nodded with a bright look. "Invite only. Not everyone gets to go. A good deal."

Carl walked in the kitchen. "What's a good deal?"

Meg replied, "Danny has tickets to that special rock and roll show in Cleveland."

"At the hall of fame?" Carl asked.

Meg nodded. "He wants to take Jordan."

"No way?" Carl asked brightly. "Hey, Danny, if she don't go, I'll go."

"She'll go." Meg said. "Right Jordan."

Jordan shook her head. "I can't go. I don't leave Amy. I'm sorry Danny."

Meg grumbled. "I'll watch her."

Again, Jordan shook her head. "No. I won't leave her. Sorry, Danny."

"Jordan," Meg spoke firm. "You are gonna have to start living life again."

"Not yet."

"Then when?" Meg asked.

Jordan didn't have an answer. Her mouth opened and closed, then she lifted her hand. "I'll get back to you on that. Right now, I have to get something from the car."

"What?" Meg asked.

"Something."

"What? What is something?"

Roy slammed the knife. "She's not ten. She needs to get something from the car." He dropped his voice. "Maybe a nice stiff drink to deal with you."

Meg snapped. "I heard that."

"Corrections," Carl called out.

Queerly, Meg looks at him. "Correction what? What are you correcting?"

Carl hummed. "Mother, corrections. Plural. If you paid attention to my writing you'd recognize that word."

"Don't talk down to me."

"Sorry." Carl cleared his throat. "Anyhow, Jordan has my corrections in the car and since I can't watch TV, I'd rather review those than wrestling. Can you get them Jordan?"

"Yes," Jordan smiled "His corrections are in the car. Excuse me."

"Wait." Meg stopped her. "You were leaving for the car before he asked you."

"Psychic connection," Jordan said, then after a wink of thanks to Carl. She made her hastened escape.

Air.

Jordan wheezed it in when she went outside. It was if she were suffocating. Why was her mother pushing Danny on her? Why was he there?

Outside, Jordan paced, stomped, and moved her mouth as she mumbled. Turning, she stopped. Her face lost all expression.

With the sky an orange sundown, Victor was a mere shadow as he sat on his roof. Jordan watched him; there was something about it. Watching Victor was addicting.

Then she saw him turn. Did he see her? She wondered. She started to wave but stopped herself, and folded her arms closer to her body. Returning to the porch, she glanced back at Victor again, before emerging in the house.

\*\*\*

"You know they are," Meg said. "Ask Jordan, she knows they are. Gemma will say they aren't. Who needs more potatoes?"

Carl coughed. "Mom, why are you staring at another woman's breasts?"

Meg buttered her roll as she spoke nonchalantly. "You can't help it. They are so fake. And large. Come on, natural?" she chuckled. "When she bends over they don't move. Real breasts move. They hang. The sheer weight of them would make them hang like baseballs in a sock. But not ..."

The doorbell rang, interrupting Meg.

She set down her roll. "No one move, it's dinner." She stood and walked to the door. After peeking out the curtain, she faced the family. "For the love of God, the roof goof is out there."

Jordan rushed. She jumped from the table, not caring about the glances, and bolted to the door, opening it. "Victor"

Victor peered in, smiled at Meg. "Hey."

Jordan opened the door wider. "Did you want to come in?"

"Nah, I have to give you something."

"OK." Jordan slipped outside and closed the door. Together they stepped from the porch onto the yard.

"My phone number." Victor handed her a slip of paper. "Max gave it to me."

"Thanks," Jordan slipped it in her pocket. "So, uh, how did you um ... how'd you know I was here."

"Your car." Victor pointed.

"Oh." Jordan smiled.

"And, I was painting on the roof. I saw you."

"Really?" Jordan gave a lightly blushing smile. "How's the painting coming?"

"Very well. It's done. Speaking of which. I think you might like it. It's a combination of real art and odd art. I don't usually show my work to anyone, but once you know. You and I are becoming friends. Wow How strange?"

"What is?" Jordan asked.

"Saying you and I are becoming friends. I hope you don't think that's forward."

Jordan shook her head. She would have said something but Victor spewed into rambling.

"I don't have many friends. Actually, I don't have any fiends. No. Wait. I do. Max. He's my friend. He'll say he isn't. But he is. You?"

"Me what?"

"Do you have a lot of friends?"

"No. I kind of pushed them all away." Jordan waited for a response; she didn't expect to see Victor looking behind her.

Jordan turned.

Danny had opened the screen door.

"Jordan, everything OK?" Danny asked.

"Yeah, Danny, everything is fine. I'll be right in." Jordan watched him slip back in and when she faced Victor, he was stepping back.

Nervously, Victor smiled "Danny. I'm sorry. I'll let you ..."

"No. Victor." Jordan reached out. "Wait. This painting you want to show me. Is it mobile?"

"You mean can it walk or drive?"

Jordan laughed. "You know what I mean. I'll be leaving here soon. A couple hours. I'd love to see it. Can you come by my house with it tonight?"

"Really?" Victor asked shocked. "You're inviting me over to your house again. Wow. No one ever really invites me over. No. Wait. Max does. He never let's me stay long. He says I drive him nuts. I do that to people. Are you sure?"

"Positive," Jordan answered gently. "You don't drive me nuts. I like looking at your work. I like the stories you tell about each piece. I like listening to you talk."

"I like you," Victor blurted out.



It brought a moment of silence, and in it, Jordan lowered her head in a flattered blush.

Victor stepped back with a nervous chuckle. “Now, see. I ramble. I say things ...” he paused. “OK. I’m walking away now. I’ll be by tonight.” He took one more step and turned. He looked over his shoulder as he walked away. “Thanks.”

Jordan waved. Just a simple wave, a lift of a hand, and she went back into her mother’s house. She was on a bliss feeling, warm, and happy, and she really wasn’t thinking too much about her leaving the dinner table, in fact, she thought she wasn’t even missed. Until she returned to the dining room and learned her quick departure was questioned. The second she entered all chatter stopped.

Jordan looked at the silent faces and just played dumb. “What?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

No. She wasn't. Jordan couldn't believe herself. She was actually wondering what she should wear. And it wasn't the only odd thing she did. She put Amy to bed early, convincing the child that she was tired.

But after changing her clothes a bunch of times, and brushing her hair, then pulling it back, then letting it down, Jordan stopped. It wasn't who she was. Victor did say he liked her, but what did he mean?

She promised herself she wouldn't get wrapped up. She picked up the house to make it neat, made herself look 'everyday' presentable, and then like a school girl, anxiously awaited Victor's arrival.

\*\*\*

Victor's creativity may have been new to Jordan but it amazed her at every turn. Victor, on the other hand, kind of found it amusing how thrilled Jordan got over things that he did. Things he wouldn't have even thought as creative.

The painting wasn't as exactly as mobile as Jordan thought. She quickly learned how un-mobile it was when a twenty-foot moving truck pulled up the driveway to her home.

"I thought you were working on this painting on your roof?" Jordan said as she stepped outside with Victor.

"I was. I just wasn't physically working on it on the roof. I go up there to think. Besides, I saw your car and was hoping I would see you. I did." Victor nudged her.

"Is the painting in there?" Jordan asked.

"Uh, yeah. As much as Mel and Bob would probably like to come in and hang out with us. They can't, they're working."

"You got two movers on a Sunday night?"

"It's easy. They were hanging out at the diner waiting for a call. I scooped them up, told them it would be a half an hour tops. So, we have to show you fast."

"Totally understand. Victor I'm excited about this."

"Cool, so am I." Victor led her to the back of the truck.

Both Bob and Mel stood there. Typically truck driver appeal. Mel opened the back of the truck, while Victor and Jordan stood on the lift. It jolted as it started, Victor clutched Jordan arm. And they rose to the bed of the truck.

It wasn't quit as big as the interior of the truck would have led Jordan to believe, but it big.

"Oh, Victor," Jordan wisped out as soon as she saw. "Oh, Victor. This is ... This is amazing." Her hand covered her mouth at the oddly shaped triangular painting. It nothing but angles, all angels swirling about, meshing, into one being. "Victor."

"So, I'm gonna take it you like it."

"Oh, it's beautiful."

"It's still tacky." Victor said, "Not tacky in the Wal-mart trailer park hair tacky, but tacky as in wet."

"Wal-mart trailer park hair?" Jordan asked.

"Was that tacky of me to say?"

Jordan didn't answer.

Bob did, "Yes," he said.

"Sorry," Victor said. "But you like it?"

"I love it." Jordan said.

"Excellent. It's yours."

"Mine?" Jordan asked in surprise. "Are you serious? Mine?"

"Yeah, yours." Victor said. "I was hoping you'd like it. I designed it for your house?"

Jordan tilted her head in question.

Victor continued, "You have that huge stair case in the hall, right? Well you have that wall under it."

Jordan smiled. "That's why it's a triangle."

"Yep. I figure, instead of that table, which really it's not too bad; it just covers that white wall. Now you have this. People will no longer walk down that huge hall and not notice your steps."

"I don't think they're gonna even look at the steps. Now I wish I had people to come to my house to see it," Jordan said.

"You'll see it. Your daughter will see it. That's what matters."

"Thank you, Victor."

"You're welcome." Victor sighed out. "Now, we'll just get Bob and Mel to bring this in. I'll mount it and we're set for our evening. Wait. Stop. That wasn't too forward was it?"

"What?"

"I'll leave." Victor led her to the lift.

"Victor, what are you talking about?" Jordan asked.

"You invited me over to show my painting. I showed it. I just presumed I could hang out. But really you didn't mention if that ..."

“Victor.” Jordan silenced him. “I want you to stay.”

“Actually want me to stay?” Victor asked. “Wow, wait until I tell Max. You want to spend time with me. That’s probably a first. He’ll probably send you a sympathy note.”

Jordan laughed as Bob pressed the ‘down’ button and lowered them to the ground.

\*\*\*

Like a spy, or a police officer on a stake out, Meg stood in the dark bedroom. She stood by the window, but off to the side, and only slightly did she part the curtains.

She started looking out about nine PM. She went down stairs a few times to converse with Roy, and claim she was working on a project up stairs.

It wasn’t a lie.

By eleven PM she was still looking out the window.

“Oh, shush, Carl.” Meg said to him on the phone. “I’m concerned. I know you have to teach in the morning but ...fine. Fine. I’ll worry all by myself. No one else seems to care.”

“Meg,” Roy said as he entered the bedroom. “What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing. Do we have binoculars.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Are you spying?” Roy asked.

“No, Roy, I’m holding back the curtains to give them a new crease What the hell do you think I’m doing.”

“Get away from the window.”

“His truck is still gone.”

“Get away from the window, Meg.”

“What do you suppose he wants from her? Huh Roy? What?”

Roy sighed out. “Get away from the window.” He turned on the light.

“No! Shut it off.”

“No, Meg, I want to read. Our son wrote some more chapters.” He pulled down the bed.

“Of the gay stuff?”

“Of his writing.”

“I’m going to worry about you if you keep on reading that.”

“Too bad,” Roy said. “Come to bed. Get away from the window. Fox news has that special on.” Roy didn’t get a response. “Meg?”

“It’s awfully late. Why isn’t he back yet.”

Finally, Roy had enough. He barked out a strong and stern, “Meg!”

Meg peeped a shriek, grabbed her chest, and spun around. “Don’t yell at me like that. You’ll make me have a heart attack and kill me. Then who will look after our children.”

“Get away from ...”

“The window,” Meg said. “Yes, I know. I heard you.” Then, ignoring Roy’s dictate, she returned to looking through the parted drapes.

\*\*\*

After the painting was mounted, Victor made two comments.

“I’m really hungry, I don’t think I’ve eaten today. I may have. Not sure. I had coffee though.”

And.

“That’s a great fireplace in your living room. Too bad it doesn’t work. It would be a great place to hang out and talk. Wait. I got an idea.”

Then he left.

He informed Jordan he’d return in a few minutes. Jordan had every intention of fixing him something to eat while he was gone, but she was just trapped in awe staring at that painting in the hallway. So much so, she was still in the same position when he returned.

Victor was going to fix the fireplace while Jordan fixed the sandwiches, that was the plan. Jordan was a bit fearful that maybe Victor brought a sledgehammer and was going to unblock the fireplace, but he assured her it was a temporary quick fix.

Once again, Victor amazed Jordan with his creativity.

Red and white Christmas lights, orange cellophane cut like flames and a small pocket fan created a pseudo fire effect inside the fireplace.

Victor had brought wine, and Jordan pulled out the care package of roast beef her mother gave her and made sandwiches for them.

A floor picnic in front of the fire.

“I can’t remember the last time I had wine.” Jordan sipped. “This is awesome.”

“Max says I pay too much for wine,” Victor said. “But I figure since I don’t buy it much, then really, for a yearly total it isn’t that much.”

“How much do you pay?” Jordan asked as she brought the lass to her lips.

“Three hundred a bottle.”

It was a good thing Jordan wasn't drinking, she probably would have choked. "Victor that's ... that's ridiculous."

"It's worth it, don't you think? It's good."

"It's good yes, but not three hundred dollar good."

Victor shrugged and finished his wine. "You won't get a headache from it, I can promise you."

"That's odd."

"What is?"

"How did you know I get a headache from wine. Did I tell you?"

"No, it's a known fact that people with blue eyes tend to get headaches from wine," Victor explained. "They don't know why, but that's what they say."

"Really?"

"No, I'm joking."

"Victor," Jordan playfully chuckled out his name.

"I like when you smile."

"You've managed to make me do that, Victor, and that's a hard task. I ..." Jordan paused to refresh her glass. "I haven't smiled a lot since Trevor died."

"How did he die, Jordan?"

Jordan stared off.

"I'm sorry, that was wrong and forward. I shouldn't have asked."

"No. No, it's all right." Jordan shook her head. "It's just that people ask, but then after I tell them, they really didn't want to know."

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

"I'll tell you. But here's the deal. After I finish, there will be an awkward silence afterward."

"Really? How do you know?" Victor asked.

"There always is. So when I'm done telling the story, you change the subject."

"You want me to change the subject."

"Yes."

"But what if you want to talk more about it?" Victor asked.

"I won't."

"How do you know?"

"I just do." Jordan shrugged. "Been there, done that. So I'll tell you and then you change the subject."

"But wouldn't that be rude of me?"

"No. Absolutely not." Jordan shook her head. "You'll want to. I'll explain. Ready?"

Victor nodded and drew himself into more of a comfortable position and watched Jordan with all of his attention.

"Trevor didn't just die." Jordan explained. "He was murdered. No ... he was brutally murdered. He was twelve. He was my boy. My oldest, brightest, special boy. Anyhow, he walked out the door. He said goodbye. That was the last I spoke to him."

"So was it close to home?"

"Yeah, very close. In fact, you'll probably be hearing about it on the news. It was all over the news right after it happened. His killers are coming to trial here soon. I think."

"I don't watch television. That's probably why I haven't heard."

"The newspaper?"

"No, too depressing," Victor said.

"Like this." Jordan commented. "So that's what happened to Trevor."

"That had to effect you in a way I couldn't possibly imagine."

Jordan nodded. "My mother says it's too much. But she never lost a child. They say a child is the hardest loss to encounter. That is an understatement. You don't want to breathe, live, or do anything. His death effected me in so many ways."

"Like how?"

"Like .... I'm deathly afraid of something happening to Amy." Jordan took a big gulp of wine.

"That makes sense."

"Does it?" Jordan asked. "Because I'm psychotic about it. I don't let her out of my sight. Ever. That day you left the sketch and I went after you. That was the first time since Trevor's funeral that she had left my side. It'll probably be the last time for a while, too. I go nowhere. Absolutely no where without her. People think I'm crazy."

Victor refreshed her glass a little.

Jordan continued, "I know people, and my mother, they have me pegged as a loon that should be running around chasing butterflies in a field somewhere. I don't know. I'm so bad, Victor."

"No, you really aren't. I haven't seen anything like that."

"Not yet," Jordan said. "Wait, you did. There's the cup. The blue cup on the counter in the kitchen. Have you seen it?"

Victor nodded.

"I won't move it. I won't touch it. No one is allowed to even go near it. Why? It's the last thing Trevor touched. It's the last alive thing about him. He had taken a drink from it, set it down, and walked out the door. And there it has stayed. I want it to stay there and never move. Neurotic, huh?"

"Nope," Victor answered with confidence.

"Nope. You don't think the cup part is crazy?" Jordan questioned with a confused look.

"Not at all," Victor said. "Hell you may not see it. But I do. You will. When you are ready to move on. Ready to face everything. You'll move that cup. That will be your symbol. That will be your goal."

Jordan parted her lips in awe, staring at Victor.

"And with that, I'm going home now." Victor set down his glass, and jumped up. "Night." He hurried to the door.

"Wait." Jordan flew after him. "Stop."

"Why?"

"You were only supposed to change the subject. You weren't supposed to leave."

"I have to." Victor said.

"Why?"

"Because I think I said something good. Not sure. But I think I did. And before I can ruin it, I'll go. That way, instead of thinking, 'won't he ever go away', you'll be thinking, 'wow, Victor is cool and deep', and then you'll be hoping that I come back."

"I do."

"Really?"

"Yes," Jordan nodded. "I do."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, any time. I'll be here. Please."

"Then I'll be back tomorrow. Excellent." He opened the door.

"Victor, I loved the painting."

"Thanks."

"And ..." Jordan stopped him again. "I really enjoyed this."

"Me too, and your mom's roast beef. I would say tell her, but I think your mom might get mad that I was eating her food. And there I go, rambling, and I have to go."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"You said 'anytime' right?"

"Anytime." Jordan smiled.



“Oh, hey, you won’t be mad if I don’t bring another painting will you?”

“No,” She chuckled. “Why would you ask that?”

“Well, the first time here I brought a sketch. Today a painting. I could probably get one done, not sure, more than likely yes. But I wouldn’t wanted to give you rushed art.”

“You don’t have to give me any art.”

“But that’s my best gift.”

Jordan looked at him peacefully. “Yeah it is. You’re right.”

“And I’m leaving. See ya’.” Victor darted out the door.

Jordan’s mouth opened to say goodbye, but the door had already closed. After leaning against it briefly, she went back into the living room not only to clean up, but to get some more of that three hundred dollar wine.

## CHAPTER NINE

Victor was right. Jordan didn't get a headache from the wine. Even with the extra glass she consumed, no headache emerged, and that was a first.

She felt good, but not refreshed. It was far too early for her to get out of bed. Six thirty to be exact, but the sounds of 'clanking' woke her.

Stumbling out of bed, she placed her hair in a pointy tail, and left her bedroom. She glanced in Amy's room, and Amy was sound asleep.

Who was making the noise?

Was she being robbed?

She highly doubted that considering that the noises were pots and pans, and she could smell coffee brewing.

Had her mother stopped by?

Nah.

Jordan made her way downstairs and to the kitchen. She leaned in the arch of the kitchen watching Victor.

"Victor?" she spoke surprised "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, hey, you said to stop by any time, right?"

"Yeah."

"You're not mad, right. I mean, you didn't give a specific time. I took it is anytime meant anytime."

"It does."

"Cool." He grabbed a mug and poured her coffee. "Here. I brought the coffee over that you like."

"Really?" She sipped it. Heaven. With closed eyes she sipped it again.

"You really need a better lock on the back door."

Jordan choked. "You broke in?"

"Yeah, I didn't want to wake you."

"What are you doing?" she asked as she sat at the table.

"Making you breakfast. Actually, pasta. You hungry. It's almost done."

"Pasta. Victor. It's six in the morning. People normally eat breakfast food for breakfast."

"Key word, Jordan," Victor sat down "Normal. Jordan, when you live life normally, you aren't really living life."

"That's ... that's profound."

Victor shrugged. "I'm a profound guy. You look real cute in the morning. You don't have that shocking effect."

Jordan snickered, "What?"

"Women without make up, tend to have that shocking effect. But you don't really wear make up so why would you have it. You know that, 'Oh man she's beautiful' first reaction then you see her in the store, and when she's facially naked, you get shocked."

"I see."

"Did I ramble too much?"

"For first thing in the morning, yeah. Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I'll try not to ramble as much."

"How many cups of coffee did you have, Victor."

"One, plus a triple espresso."

Jordan nearly choked again.

"The espresso thing doesn't even phase me."

"You don't think."

Victor shook his head.

"Do you sleep?" she asked him.

"No. Well. Yes. I do. Not much. Not enough to constitute a good night's sleep. But to me it's a good night's sleep. Others would call it a nap. I rambled again."

"That's Ok."

"I hope you like pasta."

"I do," Jordan said.

"It's sort of the Victor surprise," Victor said. "I surprise myself by what I'm gonna put in there." He lifted his hand and waved.

Curious, Jordan squinted her eyes. "Why are you waving?"

"There's some guy at your door waving."

Jordan turned around. Carl was there. "That's my brother."

"Does he normally come by this early?"

"No," Jordan waved Carl in. "Hey."

"Morning," Carl shut the door.

"Everything OK?" Jordan asked.

"That's why I'm here. Our mother called my house a dozen times worried about you," Carl said.

"Did you tell her I was fine?"

"No, I didn't answer the phone. I let her leave messages." Carl stepped to Victor. "Carl Colbert."

"Victor Artulla."

Carl gasped and grabbed his chest. "So you're you."

"I'm me."

"I adore your work. You are brilliant."

"Thanks."

Jordan interjected, "Carl is a teacher at the high school."

"Wow, no way. Cool job." Victor nodded.

"We would love to have you speak to the classes. Would you be interested?"

"Sure." Victor shrugged. "I'll bring some pieces."

Again, Carl gasped. "I'll speak to the principal today to set up a day. As I said, I love your work."

Out of character for her, with enthusiasm, Jordan popped out an, "Oh!"

Carl blinked with surprise. "Oh? Oh what?"

"You have to see the painting he did for me," Jordan said.

Carl's eyes shifted to Victor. "You did a painting for my sister?"

"Yeah, it's in the hall" Victor said. "Well part of the hall. See if you notice it."

Carl immediately rushed to the hall. Obviously, he had no problems spotting it. His shoes squeaked loudly against the hardwood floors when he halted abruptly.

"Oh my, God!" Carl called out.

Victor and Jordan joined him in the hall.

Carl spun to Victor "This is brilliant. Brilliant. You did this for my sister?"

Victor nodded. "So you like it?"

"Love it." Carl stepped back, folded his arms, and took in the painting, while rubbing his chin. "Amazing. So ... How much do you think you would get for this in the Victor Artulla Market?"

Jordan's mouth dropped open. "Carl!"

Victor snickered. "Not much. I think the odd shape would depreciate it. Then again Max my agent would say the shape would make it more worthy." Victor shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you know how much you get for paintings? Or do you not care?" Carl asked.

"Carl!" Jordan snapped.

Victor didn't mind the questions. "I don't pay attention. But I usually get a ball park figure. Too much, I'll tell you." He nudged Carl. "People are insane for what they pay for my work. My father used to say if he had known how much my art would be worth he would have never painted over when I draw on the walls as a kid."

Carl laughed an appeasing laugh. "How much?"

“Carl,” Jordan warned.

“Not much,” Victor shrugged. “Ok, I really am not wanting to say because I don’t want Jordan to think I would give her a piece of cheap art.”

Jordan, in shock, faced Victor. “I would never think that.”

“Thanks,” Victor smiled. “About a hundred, Carl.”

“Hmm,” Carl blinked. “That’s not a lot. A hundred bucks?”

“Hundred thousand.” Victor corrected.

Carl coughed.

Jordan’s eye widened. “You think this is worth a hundred grand?”

Victor looked at her. “You don’t?”

“What? No. I mean. I don’t know. A hundred grand?” Jordan asked.

Victor nodded.

Carl muttered, then finally pulled his composure together. “I’d say you increased the value of your property.”

Jordan said, “I don’t plan on selling the house. And if I ever did, I certainly wouldn’t sell it with Victor’s painting still here.”

Victor grinned. “That’s really sweet. Thanks. Hey, Carl, we’re about to have breakfast. I cooked. Would you like some pasta?”

“Pasta for breakfast?” Carl asked. “Oh, that must be one of those eccentric artist trademarks the magazines always talk about. Yes. Yes. I would love to stay for pasta.”

“Cool. I’ll set the table.” Victor turned and went to the kitchen.

Carl whispered to Jordan. “A hundred grand. A hundred grand.” He winked and mouthed the words ‘keep him’ before he followed Victor to the kitchen.

\*\*\*

Meg played her cards well. She made Roy breakfast; claiming she was tired and said she was going back to bed. But as soon as Roy left, Meg got dressed, and was out of her house.

First she made sure Victor’s truck wasn’t in this garage. It wasn’t. Then she drove to Jordan’s home. If nothing else, she would use ‘school’ as an excuse.

It didn’t take much length into Jordan’s driveway for Meg to see. Victor’s truck was there. Without wanting to cause confrontation in front of Amy, but knowing she had to get to the bottom of it, Meg turned her car around and never went into Jordan’s house.

\*\*\*

The exasperated breath held excitement when Carl released it. "I can't help it," he told his students as he leaned against the desk. "I'm excited. I had to share." He closed the textbook. "Now that I have proceeded to show you the historical painting Victor did, let's get back to our history studies. Shall we? Page forty-three."

He waited until his students had opened their books.

"Ok, who can tell me where we left off on Friday?" Carl asked. "Joey?"

"Caesar."

"Very good, the reign of Caesar. Now, If I remember correctly we were talking about his power. Caser was a very powerful and feared man. Not quite the visual of the salad that comes to mind now."

The class laughed.

Carl then, too, laughed at his own joke, Enjoying a moment in his stand up comic spotlight. "Anyhow, back ... yes, Dan?"

Dan lowered his hand, and then pointed to the door.

Carl looked. Then Carl shrieked when he saw his mother waving through the glass. "Excuse me" he walked to the door and opened it slightly. "Yes."

Meg stepped in and further into the class room, waving.

"Mother? Yes? What is it? I am conducting class."

She held up a brown bag. "I brought you lunch."

Carl's eyes widened, when the class giggled. He took his mother's arm and brought her closer to the door. "You haven't made me lunch since the sixth grade."

"I know. I felt bad. I thought it was time."

"I'm thirty-five years old."

"Never too late."

"Why are you really here?" Carl asked.

Meg sighed out. "Did you get my messages?"

"Yes."

"I'm bothered. May I sit?"

"No," Carl snapped. "I'm teaching."

"They don't mind." Meg looked around Carl. "You don't mind if he talks to his mother for a minute, do you class?"

The class mumbled out 'no.'

"See?" Mega asked.

"No" Carl shook his head. "I can't talk now. Later."

"I may be dead later."

"You won't be dead later."

"But I'm bothered." Meg complained. "It's your sister, Carl. Jordan. That brush fluff was there all night again."

"Mother, if you are referring to Victor."

"Victor? Is that his name?"

"Yes." Carl tried to remain in control. "Victor Artulla."

"Oh, my God. Is he Italian? Or is that Spanish."

"Mother ..."

"He doesn't look very ethnic, Carl. Maybe he was adopted."

"Oh my God."

"What?" Meg asked clueless. "Genealogy is important. Most ..."

"Stop." Carl held up his hand. "Just ... stop."

"What does he want from her, Carl."

"Now is not the time." Carl said.

"Now is the time." Meg retorted. "Stop it before it gets too far. She's been through enough. She doesn't need to be carrying some man."

"Carrying some man?" Carl asked shocked.

"Yes, I don't think he has a job. He sleeps all day, is at Jordan's all night."

"Mother, he is an artist."

"Oh, swell, that's great." Meg tossed her hands in the air. "An artist."

"He made her a painting."

Meg rolled her eyes. "So that's what he does? He makes paintings. You can't feed a family off a painting."

"Actually ..."

"He's a bum, Carl. The man doesn't even earn an income. You want this for your sister?"

"Mother!" Carl nearly yelled. "Do you even comprehend who he is!"

Meg's eyes widened, she stumbled back for the visual effect. "Did you just ... Did you just raise your voice to me in front of all these students."

"You wouldn't ..."

"I ... I am your mother." She laid her hand on her chest. "A mother deserves respect. Yes, Carl. Wonderful. What a wonderful example you just set for your students. Bet me half of them go home and mouth off." She held up her hand. "Fine. Fine. This isn't important. Fine, I'll leave." She sniffled a fake hurt. "You always had to be the show off anyhow." Meg opened the door and walked out. After a moment, the door reopened and

Meg extended an arm inside, shoving the brown bag lunch into Carl. "I even made you a lunch. I hope you feel good about yourself now."

The door closed.

Carl breathed out and faced a silent room. "Ok." He clapped his hands together once "Where were we?"

\*\*\*

Jordan had spent a good hour on line downloading the first week of curriculum for Amy. With Carl's help—when she told him—Jordan was certain she'd be able to educate Amy properly. At least she hoped.

What was it about coffee, anymore? It had to be Victor. His appreciation of a good brew had Jordan making more pots of coffee than she ever had. In fact, she had just made another pot. Not that she had drank the previous one, but the moment it stopped tasting fresh, she stopped drinking it.

Wanting to impress Victor with her newly found Java skills, Jordan carried a mug into the living room.

He sat on the floor, Indian style, side by side with Amy watching television.

"I made you coffee," Jordan said.

Victor didn't answer.

"Victor?"

"Huh? Oh. Sorry." He looked over his shoulder. "What was that?"

"I made you coffee."

"Thanks." He went back to watching the television show.

"Are you enjoying it that much?"

"What? The show?" Victor asked. "No."

"Why are you watching it?"

"I'm trying to understand the point of this show? Why do you let Amy watch it."

"She enjoys it. I always let her watch it."

"It's a badly dressed man and his cartoon dog." Victor said.

"You of all people, I thought would appreciate the art."

Victor chuckled. "That's funny."

"OK, well ... how about this." Jordan suggested. "It's educational."

"Educational?" Victor playfully nudged Amy, and made her giggle. He then stood up and accepted his coffee from Jordan. "What? Amy is gonna learn to get excited when the mail comes? How is this educational? I don't



get it. I have been watching it for fifteen minutes and I didn't learn anything."

"Victor ..."

"Plus, getting back to you art comment. The artwork sucks."

"Oh, notice. Now Amy's getting an education in good vocabulary."

Victor shook his head. "Like she doesn't know the word 'suck'."

"She may not have. I do know for sure, between you and my mother, the last two days, she's learned nipples, breasts, and suck."

Victor grinned. "Education. She learned the art of nursing a baby."

Jordan grimaced; then looked shocked when her doorbell rang.

"Someone's here," Victor said.

"Really?" Getting a 'kick' out of Victor, and leaving him with Amy, Jordan went to the door and opened it.

Melanie Radovich stood there.

"Miss Radovich." Jordan said surprised. "I ..."

"Ms. Wyatt." Melanie halted her. "I'm not here to argue. That time has come and gone. Since you refuse to listen to those who have Amy's best interest at heart, perhaps you'll listen to the courts." She slapped a piece of paper in Jordan's hand. "You have been served. Good day."

Holding the paper, Jordan stood dumbfounded, as Melanie left. She closed the door, and then slowly opened the notice. After reading it she returned to the living room with a very subtle, and borderline sad demeanor.

"What's wrong?" Victor asked.

"Unbelievable." Jordan mumbled.

"What is?"

"Trevor's murderers haven't even seen the inside of a court room. It takes nearly a year to bring them to justice, but a mother who only wants to protect her child ..." She handed Victor the paper. "It takes less than a week to take her to court."

Victor looked at the paper. He then set it down with his coffee and clapped his hands together once. "Field trip!" he said brightly.

Amy jumped up. "Yeah! Field trip."

Jordan asked. "Field trip?"

"Yep." Victor nodded. "Akron. I want to go to Akron. Wanna come? We can view it as an educational field trip."

"Akron?" Jordan questioned. "When?"

"Now."

"Why now? And why on earth would you want to go to Akron?"

"Oh, my God." Victor said offended. "It's Akron. I've always wanted to go to Akron. It's the home of 'Devo' you know."

"Who?"

"Devo." Victor said. "The band. Whip it." He bobbed up and down. "Whip it. Whip it good. Yeah. I want to see the sign."

"Victor, what sign?"

"Uh, Jordan, the 'Home of Devo' sign. Gees." He spun to Amy. "Hurry, Amy, get on your shoes, we're gonna go see the sign."

"Victor," Jordan walked up to him. "I really don't think there's a sign."

Victor tossed out his hand at her with a non-believing look. "Please, It's the home of Devo. Devo is their claim to fame. Devo, Jordan. There has to be a sign."

\*\*\*

"There's no sign," the waitress said as she set down the plates of food before Victor, Jordan and Amy.

"Are you sure?" Victor asked.

"Positive." She replied.

"Maybe you just never seen it," he continued.

"No." She shook her head. "I have lived here all my life. I never seen a sign."

"There has to be a sign."

"Why?" The waitress asked, ignoring the glances of Jordan for her to forget it.

"Why?" Victor laughed. "It's the home of Devo. Devo."

"Are you for real?" she asked.

Jordan answered that. "Oh, he means it."

"Devo," Amy said. "Whip it."

Victor was thrilled by Amy's comment and perked up even more. "Even the child knows Devo."

"No one really cares about Devo," the waitress said. "Honestly."

Doing a 'Meg', Victor covered Amy's ears. "Please."

The waitress shook her head. "Anything else I can get you folks right now?"

"Direction to the Devo sign." Victor said.

"There is no sign," the waitress reiterated then turned and walked away.

"It's an Akron conspiracy," Victor began to eat. "We will find it."

Victor bought a loaf of bread, and three individual chocolate milks. He wanted to be armed, and not thought of as a solicitor when he approached the cashier.

"Home of Devo sign?" the cashier asked. "What's Devo."

Victor nudged Amy. "Tell her."

"Devo." Amy bounced up and down. "Whip it. Whip it good."

The cashier looked confused and Jordan winced in embarrassment.

"It's a band." Victor explained "Gees. They're from here. They started the punk slash disco revolution. So there has to be a sign."

"I don't know of any sign." The cashier turned to her right and to the checker in the next lane. "George, is there a 'Home of Devo' sign in Akron?"

"Devo the band?" George asked.

Victor pointed. "He's got it. Yeah, the band."

George shook his head. "I don't think there's a home of Devo sig. Ask Bert, he's lived here forever."

"Good idea." The female cashier pulled the store microphone to her. "Bert. Call lane four please."

Jordan closed her eyes.

The phone rang and the cashier picked it up. "Hey, Bert. Is there a 'Home of Devo' sign in Akron? Yeah, the band. A sign. Thanks." She hung up and looked at Victor. "He says no."

Victor shook his head. "There has to be."

The cashier shrugged. "Sorry."

"Someone knows." Victor tapped his foot, thought, and then grabbed the store microphone. "Attention Shoppers ..."

Jordan quickly grabbed Amy and raced from the store.

\*\*\*

"Met a lot of people in my life," an old man said to Victor. He sat on a park bench with another elderly man. "Met a lot. Never met a single man like you."

"Thanks," Victor said. "So do you know where the 'Home of Devo' sign is?"

"Nope. There is no sign."

Victor grumbled, grabbed Amy's hand, and walked away. He whispered, "There's a sign."

\*\*\*

Passed out, sound asleep; Amy curled up close to her mother in the truck. Jordan held her close as she waited for Victor to emerge from the video store. Waiting, she spotted a boy. He hopped on his bike, looked at Jordan, and rode off.

Something about that boy made Jordan reminisce in a positive way about Trevor and she smiled. Lost in thought, she was startled when the truck door opened and Victor got it.

"Any luck?" she asked.

"No."

"What did they say?"

"They said there's no sign."

"Victor, we have been looking for eight hours. I told you this."

"I know." Victor tapped his hand on the steering wheel while peering through the windshield in defeat. "Do you wanna stop?"

Jordan looked at Victor, so innocent, and then she looked at her watch. "No. It's still early, keep going."

Immediately, Victor perked up. "Yes!" he stared the truck. "We're on a mission."

\*\*\*

It was an odd feeling for her. Actually, an odd thing. When was the last time Amy fell asleep before bed? Entrance hall dark, Jordan stood there peering up the steps.

Victor walked down. "All tucked in." he said.

"Thank you for doing that."

"No, thank you." Victor said as he reached the last step. "As weird as it sounds, it was something I always thought would be neat to do."

"And how was your first experience?"

"Better than I expected." Victor smiled. "She was an easy subject. Out like a light. Boy, was she exhausted."

"You took her on a sixteen hour, wild goose chase in Akron."

"Field trip." He opened the door. "But think of the valuable lesson she learned. Persistence pays off." Victor dashed out.

"Persistence pays off?" Jordan followed, "Victor." She called as he was getting in his truck. "Persistence pays off?"

“Yeah. We found the sign. Good night.” Victor got in and closed the truck door.

“Found the sign?” Jordan stepped back as the truck started. “Victor you made the sign. It doesn’t count.”

Victor waved and pulled away.

“And then ...” Jordan dropped her hand. “He just leaves.”

## CHAPTER TEN

A single strand of hair kept dangling in Jordan's face, causing her to crinkle and rub her nose.

"Stop that." Carl smacked her hand away from her face.

"I can't help it. I'm nervous and the hair is tickling me." A tad antsy, Jordan looks at the hall that led to the court room.

Carl licked his fingers and stuck her hair back with the rest that was pulled back.

Jordan gagged.

"Stop that."

"Sorry."

"You look very nice. The single mom, poor, yet confident look works for you."

"Thanks." Jordan grumbled. "I wasn't striving for that look."

"You know what to say, right?" Carl asked.

"Yes," Jordan nodded. "The application is filled out. I have a copy of the curriculum and objectives. I just got a copy of my high school transcripts, and I'll file everything today."

"Very good."

"And if worse comes to worse?" Carl quizzed

"I ask for time so I can get an attorney I can afford."

"Bingo. You got it."

"Hopefully, the judge will see my point."

"He will," Carl said.

"Thank you so much for coming with me today."

"Oh, I wouldn't be anywhere else. We'll beat this. Now ... let's go." Carl placed a hand on Jordan's back and grabbed Amy's hand. They proceeded down the long hall of justice.

\*\*\*

It was going to be something. A man, animal, object, something, Victor was certain. He just didn't know. But at that moment, it was a four foot tall mound of wet clay that set on a tarp in Victor's front yard.

He had been manipulating it. A few curves and bumps were there. But it was only the start of a project. More or less something to do to pass time, while he waited on Jordan to return from court.

His hands were covered with both dry and wet clay; still Victor held a sheet of paper while the phone was wedged between his ear and shoulder.

"Max, listen to me." Victor said.

"No, Victor. I refuse. I thought you liked her."

"I do."

"Then this is wrong. It's the wrong route to go. You are making a huge mistake by doing this."

"Nah," Victor proclaimed. "It's an easy route. Hey, did I tell you Jordan used to be a bank teller. Well, temporarily, part time."

"No, you didn't. Did she ..."

"And now, she makes money stuffing envelopes at home. Stuffing envelopes. Wow. Isn't that weird. I never knew anyone could actually do that. I'd see that ads, you know, and think, it's a scam. But it's not. What do you think?"

"I think you're whacked. But ... did Jordan tell you this information. Did you ask her?"

"No, I didn't think it was any of my business."

"Victor!"

"Why do you shout at me?"

"Because you can be an idiot. None of your business? Yet you hired a private investigator?"

"It's the ..." Victor's eyes widened. "Shit. Gotta go." Without waiting for a response from Max, Victor hung up. He dropped the phone and the report, and then began to work again on his sculpture. Meg was approaching, and the closer she drew, the louder he whistled the Devo song.

"Morning, Victor," Meg said.

"Oh, hey Meg, morning." Victor faced her. "Do you like Devo?"

"Devo, the band?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"That's a shame." Victor shrugged. "They have a 'home of Devo' sign in Akron."

"All the more reason for me to stay away from Akron."

Victor snickered.

"I wasn't being funny. Anyhow, I am sorry to interrupt your play dough hour, but ..." She stopped and looked down. "Where in the hell are your shoes? You're barefoot."

"I am."

"It's forty five degrees out here, You're gonna get sick. What would your mother say?"

"She'd probably yell like you just did. But, unfortunately, she can't do that. She and my dad died a while back."

"Oh." Meg was taken aback. She paused. "Anyhow. You've been hanging around my daughter ... a lot."

"I know."

"So do I. Everyone knows. I've been giving this a lot of thought. If .. if you insist on doing so, you have to get a job."

Victor's mouth dropped open to speak, but Meg halted him.

"No. Look at it from my point of view. As a mother. I don't want a leech latching on to my daughter. She likes you for some odd reason. I'm sure it's a phase."

"I hope not."

"Well .... We'll see. However, in the meantime ... Job. And ..."

Meg stooped, She breathed out heavily and dramatically. "I'm helping you out."

"Oh, yeah?" Victor continued to work on his statue.

"Yes. Against my better judgment, I spoke to Father Benson. I told him how you like to doodle. I also went out on a limb and told him you were good. He agreed to hire you as a caricature artist at the fall bazaar."

"Really?" Victor asked.

"Yes. It doesn't pay much. But it's an honest day's work, and you'll work for four days. OK?"

"Um, great, yeah. Thanks."

"Don't let me down, Victor you better be good. Go on back to your play dough." Sighing out through her nostrils to project her frustration, Meg, barely waving turned and walked away.

Victor waited until she was out of earshot. He picked up the phone and dialed. "Max, hey, it's me again. Check this out. I got a job as a caricature artist. Do I have to pay you your agent fee?"

\*\*\*

So many things went through Jordan's mind as she sat at the table in the courtroom. She tried not to look at Melanie, who sat with a state attorney at the next table. But she kept staring. She wondered how bad they would slam her, or if the judge would be nice.

Every few seconds, she turned around and got a reassurance glance from Carl. She needed that.



Hours had passed, and she finally was going before the judge ... whenever he or she emerged.

She had just slipped into her 'excuses' phase of thought, when a briefcase, dropping on her table, snapped her out of her daze.

"Sorry, I'm late," he said. A suited, well mannered, forty something man, opened the brief case. "Whoops. Sorry." He extended his hand to Jordan. "Thomas Sinclair."

"Who are you?" Jordan asked as she shook his hand.

"Your attorney."

"I don't have an ..."

The clerk called out, "All rise."

Jordan stood "I don't ..."

"Shh." Thomas told her.

He didn't look threatening, but the appearance of the judge made Jordan's stomach twitch.

"Be seated," the judge said, and then took his seat behind the bench. He shuffled some folders, lifted his glasses, and said, "Ashtabula county versus Jordan Wyatt. Are all parties present?"

Thomas responded, "Defense is present."

The county attorney rose slightly from his seat. "County is present, your honor."

"We'll proceed," the judge said. "Ashtabula County Children and Youth services alleges that Jordan Wyatt is in violation of truancy codes, and in violation of conduct and welfare codes." He lifted a sheet of paper. "The allege she defiantly keeps her daughter in seclusion. No medical reason. No home schooling application has been received. Procedure has not been followed. Ms. Wyatt?"

Before Jordan could answer, Thomas made his response. "Your honor, Thomas Sinclair, Attorney for the defense. We believe the county has wasted enough of the court's time this morning, sir." He lifted a folder. "May I approach?"

The judge nodded.

Thomas along with the county attorney, Brad Hensley, approached the bench.

"What's going on?" Brad asked. "Your honor, we weren't even informed that Ms. Wyatt had counsel."

Thomas shook his head. "Yet, another example of how they want to run right over my client, your honor. They banked on no attorney."

The judge shook his head. "Enough. What do you have?"

Thomas handed the judge the folder. "Sir, Ms. Radovich served my client Monday morning. No chance was given by my client for her to explain procedure done. In fact, several calls from my office yesterday went unanswered by Ms. Radovich. As you can see ..." Thomas pointed in the folder. "Ms. Wyatt secured a private tutor for Amy on Friday, Sir. Immediately following her first confrontation with Ms. Radovich. No home school application is needed because Amy Wyatt will be educated by Constance Welch, a state certified, private educator. Ms. Welsh will file all the necessary educational updates as required by the state. Also, as you can see, in a letter from Ms. Welsh. She has been a certified educator for fifteen years. Her qualifications alone ensure that Amy Wyatt will not only meet, but exceed all educational requirements."

"Thank you." The judge nodded and reviewed the documents.

Thomas and Brad returned to the respective tables

"What's going on?" Jordan asked in a whisper.

Thomas held up his finger, watching the judge.

The judge shut the folder and looked up. "It appears, Ms. Radovich, had you taken a simple moment on Monday Morning to speak to Ms. Wyatt, you wouldn't have wasted this court's time, and I wouldn't have lost what is probably one of the last good days for golf." He slammed the gavel. "Case dismissed."

The judge stood and walked off.

Jordan stood, too. But she also stood baffled.

\*\*\*

Thomas had paperwork to finish, plus a case he had to file while at the court house. Jordan could wait for him, or she could call him later in the day.

Jordan opted to wait. She wanted to know what had happened in the courtroom. The whispers at the bench were hard to decipher.

Carl wanted to know as well.

En route out of the court house, Thomas informed them of everything that was said at the bench. He concluded his interpretation just as he arrived at his car.

"Did we lie in there?" Jordan asked.

"Absolutely not." Thomas replied, "The dates for the hiring of Ms. Welch may have accidentally been changed. Other than that . . . All true. Oh," He snapped his finger and reached into his coat pocket. He handed Jordan

a card and then opened up his car door. "My number. Call me if you need anything. Constance Welsh's number is on the back. You need to call her and set up a tutoring schedule. The sooner the better."

"But I didn't hire a tutor, or an attorney," Jordan said as she stared at the card.

"No, you didn't." Thomas replied. "Victor did."

\*\*\*

Jordan didn't want to stop for lunch, even though she was hungry and Carl suggested a victory meal.

Later maybe. But she wanted to find Victor right away.

She drove directly to his house, pulled in his driveway, and wasted no time getting Amy from the car.

They sped up the walk, just about at the door, Jordan paused to look at the fountain shaped like a dog in the front yard.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Amy asked.

"Was that fountain always there?"

Amy shrugged.

"Oh. Never mind." She hurried to the front door and rang the bell. A few seconds passed, no answer, and Jordan rang again.

After another lag of no response, she knocked.

Still nothing.

Giving up, Jordan tried the knob. It was unlocked, and she and Amy entered.

"Whoa." Amy called out. "Look how big." She started to run. "And messy." She looked into the art-filled living room.

"Yes, it is. Wait down here. Don't touch anything. Don't move. Just sit ..." Jordan looked about. "The man needs a couch. OK. Stand. I'll be right back down." She went back into the hall and began to call out, "Victor!" She moved about the first floor, and then aimed her voice up the staircase. "Victor! Victor, are you home!"

From above, Victor responded. "Oh! Hey! Shit! Yeah. Up here. Shit!"

Thinking, 'what the hell was that response,' Jordan gave a 'wait a second finger' to Amy and headed up the stairs. Halfway up, she heard the sound of video game music, the further up she climbed the louder the music became.

Down the long hall she followed it, and the noise led her to the master bedroom. She assumed it was Victor's bedroom, it was huge. It had a large

Victorian style fireplace, a bed, and Victor's clothes, well, they were just folded on the floor.

And where was Victor?

In front of a large TV. He sat on the floor before the set, playing a video game. His body twisted and turned, arms flailed.

Jordan smiled.

A screen she had witnessed before.

Trevor. At that instant she saw Trevor sitting there, Trevor playing the game. Trevor pausing, then Trevor turned to see her with a smile.

"Hey, Mom." Trevor said.

"Hey, Jordan." The reality of Victor's voice hit her. She jolted a tad, then stepped in the room.

"Victor, I have to talk ..."

"How was court?" he asked, and paused the game.

"Fine. I need ..."

"Are you dating Danny?" Victor asked.

"No. Why would you ask that?"

"Did you?"

"Victor?"

"I mean, did you jilt him or something?"

"No." Jordan shook her head. "He broke up with me. Why do you ask?"

"I got a ticket today. From Danny."

"For speeding?"

"For building."

"What?" Jordan laughed.

"Seems he was at you Mom's, and he saw my statue or rather saw me building it."

"Oh my god!" Jordan gasped. "I saw that. It was awesome You did that today?"

"Yep. And I found out I needed a building permit. So I went and got one. The fine wasn't much."

"That's weird." Jordan said.

"Tell me about it. Not as weird as the ordinance that I have to clean up my mess, to. Got hit with another fine."

"By Danny?"

Victor nodded.

"I'm sorry."

"Nah, don't worry about," Victor said. "I thought it was funny. Hey ..."

"Victor, before you continue ..."

"I got a job."

"Wh .. what?" Jordan asked shocked. "A job?"

"Yeah, your mom got it for me. The church bizarre artist. Four days of honest work." Victor nodded.

"Are you upset about this? I can't tell." Jordan tilted her head.

"No. Not at all. Amused. I think it's funny. Plus, the bizarre thing will be fun."

"Victor. Before you proceed to jump on another subject there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Is it about my statue in the backyard?"

"See? You're doing it again."

"Sorry. Ok. Talk." Victor reached up, and shut off the game.

"Thanks, I ..."

From the game insignia to the news. Jordan was encapsulated.

"After a series of postponements ..." The television reporter spoke as three men in orange jumpsuits were shown on the screen. They were escorted by police. "The three were taken to Ashtabula Courthouse this morning awaiting the impending hearing in the brutal slaying of twelve year old Trevor Wyatt. While two proclaim their innocence ..."

Jordan shut it off. She stood close to the television, hiding her deep breath and anxiety. She mumbled, "I was there, too. I'm so glad I didn't see them."

"Jordan." Victor called out solemnly.

Jordan turned to face him.

"Jordan, I'm ..."

"No." She held up here hand. "Don't. Anyhow, I'm going to be you, right now."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm changing the subject. What are you up to?"

"Level four," Victor answered. "I think. Not sure. I'm losing. I know that. Why? You wanna play? You can."

"You know what I mean. Today. Court. I didn't retain a lawyer, and I certainly can not afford to have a private tutor for Amy."

"No one's asking you to afford anything, Jordan. I'm paying for them. It's my gift to you."

"I can't take it."

"You will take it." Victor said firm. "Don't insult me by not. OK? Besides, they're non-refundable. I lost the receipts."

Jordan's face said it all. She flinched, trying not to laugh. "What would make you do this?"

"First." Victor held up a finger. "You can't go into court without counsel, no matter how cute you are. And ..." His finger covered her mouth to silence her. "While Constance is teaching Amy, I am hoping to snatch you way."

"I won't leave Amy."

"Don't have to. Not with what I have in mind. She can be in the same house as you. Maybe not yours."

"What ... what do you have in mind?"

"Two things. One, I want to hire you as my assistant. I had one in New York. I don't remember his name. Little guy. George. No. Stew. Yeah. No. Phil. That's it. His name as Phil. He wasn't gay."

Jordan shook her head in disbelief, smiling. But she didn't interrupt Victor.

"I put out a lot of work," Victor said. "I need someone to photograph it, register it, fill out those stupid insurance forms Max insists upon. Oh, yeah, deal with Max." Victor fluttered his lips. "Talk about a challenge. I can't deal with him and be creative. I can't. Pieces need moved to shows, and to galleries. It's a lot of work." Victor paced, stopped, and paced some more. "But I pay well. I think. I do. Not sure. Ask my accountant, he'd tell you. He handles it."

"Second thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said Two things you wanted me for?"

"Yeah ..." Victor smiled, stepped to Jordan, and became serious. "I want you to pose for me."

"What?" Jordan laughed. "Me? Oh, Victor, I'm not a model. I'm not attractive."

"Don't. Don't say that. You know that's not true. OK? You're very beautiful. I ..."

"Why? Why are you doing all this?"

Victor inhaled, and then gripped Jordan's arms. "I'm getting this part out of the way. OK? Long before Max can say anything, because I know he will. Jordan, I'm a cause man. I see a cause, I see something that needs fixed, it then becomes my cause and I chase it."

"So I'm your cause. You see a struggling, single mother ..."

"No. No. Yes. In a way you're my cause. But rather my cause." He released her arms and started pace again. "You're so different, Jordan. So very different. And no matter what you need, you deserve. No money, gifts, attorneys, teachers, can repay that single moment you gave to me."

"Victor, I don't think anything I have done was worth that statement."

"You don't think? You looked at my art, Jordan. The way my parents did. You didn't judge, you didn't see a master's work; you didn't see a dollar sign. You saw my work. In this society, I'm a price tag first. You looked at the artist first. You listened to my crazy experiences without batting an eyelash. I showed you pieces of art that I only told others about. And when the others made me feel insane. You made me feel gifted. And I am gifted. But not with art." He stopped pacing. "With a vision that comes out only when I draw. I see this now, I accept it. I hated it before. Hated it."

"Why?"

"I thought I was crazy. I thought it was a curse. I never had reason to think it was special or to put it to the best of use. I can now." Victor stepped strongly to her. "Jordan. I want to draw you. And I want to keep on drawing you until that moment when my visions work for me, and I can look up to you and say, Jordan ... your son is in the room with you."

Jordan frozen, then her top lip quivered and she let out a soft, emotional breath. Stepping to Victor, she laid her hand on his cheek; tip toed some, and kissed him softly on the lips.

Victor, surprised, stepped back. "I wish you wouldn't have done that" he brought this finger to his lip. "I have a cold sore starting ..."

"Victor." Playfully, Jordan smacked his hand away for his mouth.

"Was that kiss a kiss of agreement?"

"Yes. Yes!" Jordan clenched her fist. "Oh, Victor, I will happily be your model, your assistant and I'll even be your cause. Anything. Although ..." she winked. "I think you will make me crazy."

"No, Jordan. I won't make you crazy." Victor lowered his head, placing his face close to hers. He grinned. "I'm going to make you live again."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Triple Grande latte, no make that two" Victor said to Chuck at Coyle's, and "One wuss, Chai Tea skim latter, no foam for Max."

"Who's Max?" Chuck asked.

"My agent."

"I thought Ruth was your agent."

"Real Estate agent. Max is my agent."

"Are you a singer, or in a band."

"Nah," Victor snickered. "Artist."

"Didn't think artists needed agents."

"We don't. Max just thinks we do."

Chuck finished making the beverages and placed them in a carrier. "Now, you brought your car today, right?"

"Oh, no, got the skateboard."

"Gonna ride home on that board with those drinks."

"Got the carrier, will be easier than holding one. See ya'. After leaving the money on the counter—Victor didn't even wait for the total—he left the coffee shop.

Stepping outside to do his usual 'grab his skateboard' Victor stopped. He looked down, bent over and grabbed the flapping whit paper taped to his board. "A parking ticket?"

\*\*\*

It was Victor's intention to time it perfectly. Ride home from the coffee shop, arrive at his house with coffees before Max showed up. He knew that wasn't gong to happen when Max pulled along side him, and asked if he wanted a ride.

"No, but can you not get to my house yet?"

"Why?" Max asked.

"I want to get there before you."

"Victor this is ridiculous, get in. We'll get there together."

"I have a point to make."

"You're carrying lattes."

"That's not my point." Victor said. "Meet me there?"

"Fine, I'll just hang back a few minutes ... what am I doing. Go I'll follow you."

"Thanks."



Victor rode home and Max pulled up in the driveway right behind him. Well refined in doing seem Victor soared up the driveway, hoped of, flipped up his board and caught it all without spilling a drop.

But he had to ring the doorbell.

Jordan answered the door. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"My hands were full." Victor shut the door with his foot. "Anyhow . I ..." he grumbled when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it,"

"I'll take these to the kitchen." Victor showed the carrier.

After nodding her understanding, Jordan opened the door.

"Victor, you asshole," Max sputtered as he stepped in. "Shit. Sorry."

"That's fine." Jordan opened the door wider. "Max?"

"Yes, I am." He extended his hand. "Jordan."

"That's me. How was your trip?"

"Good . Very little traffic. Great to finally meet you" Max said.

"Same here. Victor is in the kitchen if we want to get started."

"Great. But ..." Max dropped his voice to a low one. "Where is the bathroom? I'd like to make a pit stop there before we begin."

"Upstairs second door on the left."

"Thanks." Max took off his coat, placed it over the banister, and started up the stairs.

"Hey, Max." Victor called out as he returned. "Where are you headed?"

"Bathroom. Is it safe?" Max asked.

"Oh, sure. I have a child in the house now."

The response from Victor caused a brief puzzled look from Max, but he continued on.

"We'll be in the kitchen waiting!" Victor yelled to him as he disappeared upstairs. He turned to Jordan. "Where's Amy? Did they start already?"

"Just did. They are in the study."

"Cool. Wait. I have a study?"

"Off the kitchen."

"Shit. I wanted to wish her luck her first day of home school. Anyhow, I'll catch her at recess."

Jordan chuckled at that.

"Anyhow ...Speaking of kitchens. Come into the kitchen." He took her arm and led her there. "I got something for you, Jordan."

"Really?" Jordan asked. "I got something for you too."

"Like a gift?" Victor questioned.

"Sort of. Yes. It'll be here in an hour or so. It's not brand new, but it's a gift."

"New, old, doesn't matter. I like getting gifts. But mine's not a gift." He handed her the latte. "Not that. That isn't it. It's just a latte."

"I know," Jordan chuckled.

"What I have for you, it's something as my personal assistant you need to take care of."

"Sure. What's that?" Jordan asked.

Victor reached into his back pocket. He handed her three white sheets.

Jordan looked at them. "Tickets?"

"Yep. Parking. That was on my board when I got out of the coffee shop. Riding on the sidewalk, I got a minute later. Then this one ..." he pointed.

Jordan nearly choked. "Speeding?"

"Going Twenty one in a twenty zone. I thought I got a ten percent margin of error or something. But the officer told me that ten percent was courtesy and he wasn't being courteous."

Jordan further examined the citations. "Victor, Danny wrote all these."

"Yep. Yes he did. If you can just write the checks, I'll sign them."

"This is five tickets in two days."

"Yes it is."

"Borderline harassment," Jordan said.

"Pretty much."

"I'll talk to Danny."

"No, you won't." Victor shook his head. "The last thing I need you to do is defend me to your ex boyfriend. No."

"It's not defending you. It's telling him to leave you alone. He has no reason."

"No, he doesn't. But, I'm not complaining. See?" Victor smiled. "It will eventually irritate him that I'm doing nothing but paying his fines."

"Maybe. But ..."

"No buts." Victor backed up. "I'm going to create, and let you get to work. See ya'." In a usual Victor manner, he left.

"Victor ..." Jordan call out. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do." She shook her head. "Exit stage left."

\*\*\*

"And here ..." Max moved the mouse on the computer. "Here is out best location. It's in New York. They ask, they get."

"You have this all set up."

"Pretty much." Max replied. "We'll get your email situated, then we'll just direct all the orders your way. Did you get the insurance forms?"

Jordan shook her head.

"I'll have my secretary send them to you."

"Max, I have no clue what I'm doing."

"Here's a hint. When he creates, you insure." Max stated. "Then take a picture, send me the stuff. That's it. If a gallery wants a piece, you OK with me, then ship it out. We have people that will come and move it."

Jordan nodded her understanding.

"And for God's sake, please have the cable company come and hook up Internet. Using the cell is torture, I have dial up."

"Got it."

"And ..."

"Sorry to interrupt." Constance knocked on the archway of the dining room. "May I come in?" An older woman, hair jet black and natural, didn't quite portray the prim and proper school marm that Jordan had envisioned. Though she presented herself professionally, Constance Walsh was very causal

"Sure," Jordan said. "Something wrong?"

"Yes. I ... I, Mr. Artulla didn't tell me he had a computer."

Max replied. "He didn't. I brought this today."

"Oh, will we be able to use it for schooling, Ms. Wyatt, or should I make arrangements for the library?"

Jordan didn't answer, Max did. "Jordan will be using this one, but I don't see why Victor won't get another. I'll put her order in."

"Thank you. Anyhow, my point for interrupting." Constance said. "We have a problem, and I was wondering if I could bother you to yell at Mr. Artulla."

"Me?" Jordan laughed. "Why me?"

"Well, I struck out." She waved her hand for Jordan to follow.

When they arrived in the foyer, Constance yelled out. "Mr. Artulla! Please. We need to learn. We have a schedule."

Victor's voice carried down. "We are. It's gym class!"

Jordan looked at Constance and questioned, 'Gym class?' just as she did, she heard Amy giggling above. She peered up to see Amy on her bike, following Victor as they rode down the long upstairs hallway. Enjoying the

happiness her daughter exuded, Jordan turned to Constance. "It's gym class."

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"Lunch is here." Victor returned to the living room and plopped back down on the floor. "They're putting it in the kitchen." He lifted a pencil.

"Thanks," Max told him. "All at once, huh?" he asked Jordan.

"When it rains it pours." She said then waved her arm. No over there." She instructed two movers who put the couch by the window. "Great. Perfect. Thanks. Did you want to stay for lunch?"

"No," the one replied. "We're good. Thanks."

After telling them to have a good day and seeing them out, Jordan returned to her conversation with Max. "Where were we?"

"Assisting Victor 101, part twelve." Max replied. "How Victor spits our art like Krispy Kreme Donuts."

Victor mumbled, "That's gross. I hate Krispy Kremes."

Max ignored him, "Anyway let's break for lunch. It's late already."

Jordan looked at her watch. "Shit I didn't know it was two."

Victor spoke from the floor. "You should have eaten with me and Amy. We had lunch lady lunch. Little chocolate milks, soggy spaghetti, it was great. I ..." he peered up. "I have couch? When did I get that?"

Max huffed. "They delivered it right in front of you."

"Sorry, I was busy sketching," Victor said.

"Yeah, and why are you following us around. I thought you wanted to work on a painting," Max said.

"I did." Victor shrugged. "I'm sketching Jordan now."

"Were you sketching her before?" Max asked.

"Yeah, why do you think I was in the room with a pencil?" Victor snickered as he stood up.

"Still?" Max was shocked. "You must be having a hard time with it. I've never known you to take so long on a sketch."

"What are you talking about, Max?" Victor shook his head. "This is the tenth one today."

Jordan looked at Victor. "Any luck?"

Victor shook his head. He noticed the dropped expression on Jordan. "No. Don't worry it'll happen. I promise."

Max didn't really pay too much attention to their exchange. He was still stuck on the number of sketches Victor had done. "Ten? You did ten of Jordan today?"

"Yes."

"That's unnerving. Not to mention annoying. Jordan ... can I have a word with Victor, I'll meet you in the kitchen."

"Oh, sure." Jordan replied. "Victor are you joining us?"

"Yep. But not to eat. I ate lunch lady spaghetti. I'll be there to sketch."

Jordan nodded and walked out.

Max shook his head "What are you doing, Victor?"

"What do you mean?"

Max looked to the kitchen then back to Victor. "Why are you obsessed with Jordan? This is borderline committable."

Victor laughed. "Is that even a word."

"Who knows? This isn't a joke. Ten times? You have drawn her ten times. I have never seen you so obsessed with a woman. Wait. No, scratch that. I've not seen you even care about a woman. Caring is one thing Victor, this is scary."

"Max, calm down. Gees. It's not what you think."

"I think you're drawing her too much."

"Nah," Victor waved out his hand. "You know I have gift."

"Your art is ..."

"Not my art, Max. My ... gift." He raised his eyebrows.

Max stepped back.

"You know the one I'm talking about right?"

"Yes." Max answer, his emotions were hard to tell.

"I hated that gift, Max. It scared me, bothered me, it never had a purpose."

"There it is."

"What?" Victor asked.

"He word. Purpose. Cause. I told you ..."

"No, it's more than that, Max." Victor said.

"Victor, I know you say you see ..."

"I do." Victor was adamant. "I see them."

"But you .... Wait. No. No," Max shook his head. "Victor, tell me you aren't drawing her in hopes of seeing her ..." Max paused. "Does she know you are doing this?"

"Uh, I follow her with a sketch pad. She should know."

"You're wrong." Max pointed strongly.

“What? Why do you say that.”

“Because you aren’t dealing with an animal or object, this is a person. This is a person whose suffered a tragedy. Victor, you could crush this woman.”

“I won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I won’t.” Victor insisted.

“You can’t be positive. Just because you see things Victor doesn’t mean her son will be one of them. You’re wrong, because if you fail.”

“I won’t.” Victor repeated again.

“How ... How can you be so sure.”

“Because I saw him once already.”

Max froze.

“Yeah, I saw him once, I drew him once. If I did it once, I’ll do it again.” Victor was at his most serious. “And I don’t appreciate you making me feel bad. So stop. OK? Thanks.” Victor gave a saw to Max’s arm and sighed out. “Lunch.” He turned and walked off.

Max just stood there.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"I hate stopping at the store on Sunday." Meg complained in the car. "It's always so packed. It's as if no one has anything to do but go to the store on Sunday. And people drive slow, too."

"You're the one who forgot whipped cream," Roy said.

"Jeremy likes his whipped cream."

"And you cater to what Jeremy likes."

"Well, Chrissy's husband, and I like him. He's funny," Meg said.

"You always liked him, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Roy, I did. Why do you sound so shocked?"

"It's just that you have a problem with Victor."

"Victor doesn't have a job. Jordan's life is complicate at times as it is. She couldn't afford that electric bill last month. Now he's gone and talked her into hiring a tutor for Amy."

"He says he's paying for it," Roy said.

Meg scoffed loudly. "Please. Oh, yeah, he says it. But will he?"

"Carl says he sells his art."

Meg looked at Roy. "Sells his art? Roy, you have heard the term 'starving artist', someone didn't just make that up. They have that phrase for a reason. Artists don't make that much money off their art. And back to Jeremy. He may not have made a lot of money, but he worked. He always worked. Plus, from what Chrissy tells me, he makes decent money as a pizza delivery guy."

"Really?" Roy asked.

"Last week she said he made something like four hundred bucks in tips."

"Four hundred in tips. You're shitting me."

"I shit you not and ... Dear God, what the hell is going on."

Roy's did a quick jolt to see what Meg was walking about as they pulled in their driveway. After deducting it wasn't his home, he saw.

Meg was focused on Victor's home. As soon as she opened the car door, loud music and laughter carried their way. "What the hell is he doing?"

"Looks like a combination of dancing meets the Karate kid." Roy said of Victor. Who, in his front yard, music blaring, was on top of the large pottery wheel, spinning around and around. "No wait he's being a figure skater, yeah." Roy smiled.

"He's being a spectacle, and Jordan isn't helping."

"Nope. No she isn't. Look. She's laughing. When's the last time you heard her laugh like that? Huh?"

Meg raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe, Meg, it's time you made an effort?" Roy nudged her.

Every chance Victor had, he took time to sketch Jordan. Whether she was cooking or on the phone. He sketched her. But yet, no Trevor. He couldn't figure out why, but he wasn't going to give up. No way.

Trevor would appear somehow, some day, and Victor would catch it.

"Why is he toting around that sketch pad?" Asked Meg when Victor arrived with Jordan for Sunday dinner. "He's lucky I invited him, can't he leave his hobbies at home?"

"He asked if he could bring anything," Jordan said.

"I thought he meant food. Here take the salad to the table." Meg handed the bowl to Jordan.

Of course Jordan hadn't been there ten minutes and Meg dragged her in the kitchen. Victor followed but Meg kicked him out. Jordan didn't feel too badly for Victor since Carl was there, but when Christine and her crew arrived, Jordan was sure, Victor, not the big people person would want to dash out. He didn't. He sat there, glancing at the television and to wrestling every once and a while

Jordan was on mashed potatoes duty, while Roy cut the chicken, and Meg made the gravy.

The kitchen had a swing door. Meg made Roy install it years before it gave her privacy in the kitchen, yet enabled her carry things and not have a door to worry about opening with her hands.

"Why does Christine never help?" Roy asked. "I don't get it. Carl, Christine, they never help. Jordan has company visiting, and she has to be in here."

"Jordan enjoys it," Meg said. "Don't you?"

"Well, yeah, I do. It's a special bond we have that Carl and Christine don't." Jordan said.

"See?" Meg lifted the whisk.

After a single knock on the swinging door, Victor poked his head in. "Hey, Meg, dinner smells good."

"Thank you." Meg replied. "It'll be done in a few minutes."

"Can I sketch Jordan while she does the whatever she is doing?"



Meg reached over and pushed closed the swinging door. "No. Go." She shook her head. "Why does he want to sketch you so much?"

Jordan debated on telling her mother, but she didn't. "I don't know." Jordan shrugged. "He just does."

"Well, it's freaky." Meg said. "I saw him drawing you the other day when you were outside. I told Danny ..."

"Mom, don't tell Danny things. Danny's being a dick."

The whisk clanked again the pan, when Meg dropped it. "Did you just say the word 'dick' in my kitchen?"

"Yes, because he is" Jordan said. "He keeps giving Victor tickets."

Roy asked. "To what?"

"Not 'to' what," Jordan explained. "For what. He gave Victor twelve tickets the past five days. Twelve. Speeding. Parking. You name it."

Meg shook her head. "Well, if Victor was more of a law abiding, up standing citizen, Danny wouldn't have to do that. Put the potatoes in the bowl, Jordan. The gravy is done." Meg reached for the gravy boat.

Jordan accepted a look from her father that all but said, 'ignore her' Jordan tried. She put the potatoes in the bowl, and placed it on the counter. Meg enjoyed being the one to bring the items to the table, so Jordan excused herself to the living room.

She wanted to steal a few moments, to warn Victor for what he was about to face.

Sunday Dinner, the new guy at the Colbert table.

"Are you ready for this?" Jordan asked him.

"Jordan, please piece of cake." Victor responded. "Can I sit next to Amy?"

"No, Amy sits at the kid's table."

"No, really?" Victor checked out the card table. "It's like Thanksgiving. Can I sit at the kids table?"

"No. Sit next to me."

They made their way to the table. Meg was making a pass, and in one motion, she set down a bowl, turned, took Victor's sketch pad from under his arm, and went back into the kitchen.

Jordan looked at him. "You were saying." She took her seat.

"It's fine." Victor sat next to her.

"How do you think the drawing thing is going?" Jordan whispered.

"Don't get discouraged. It'll happen. I have some ideas." He winked.

With an exhale of exhaustion, Meg took her spot, scooted in her chair and folded her arms. "Victor, you're the guest tonight. Would you like to say grace?"

Meg wasn't putting Victor on the spot; it truly was part of the family dinner tradition. The guest always had the option of saying grace. Once they returned three times, they were no longer considered a guest. Until then..

"Um ..." Victor stammered. "Wow. Great. What an honor. I'll pass though."

"Why?" Meg asked.

"Meg," Roy passed a slight warning to her.

Victor responded, "I don't know what to say. We didn't really pray at the dinner table, and I only remember stuff from church. We did go to church."

"Then, say something you remember from church."

"Meg," Roy moaned out.

"Mom," Jordan said. "Victor doesn't feel comfortable."

"Well," Meg said offended. "I'm sure God doesn't appreciate Victor not feeling comfortable giving thanks to him."

"I remember a prayer from church," Victor said. "I can do that."

"Please." Meg folded her hands.

Victor cleared his throat. "We .... We ... shoot. Can I stand?"

"Can you stand?" Meg asked. "Why?"

"It was a prayer we said while standing," Victor responded and stood. "Got it. We believe in one God, the father of the Almighty ..."

Suddenly, the Colbert's looked at each other while Victor recited a prayer well known for being said during a Catholic mass.

Meg started to say it with Victor, but stumbled on her words, and stood up.

Carl racked his brain. "I say this every week," he whispered to Jordan, after a beat, he stood and was fine. He recited it without problems.

One by one, through the long prayer, the Colbert's rose to their feet to join Victor.

Victor's 'amen' brought everyone back down to their seats.

Carl spoke out, "At least we know he's Catholic."

After speaking a soft, 'thank you,' to Victor Meg went silent as she readjusted. Only for a moment, she reached for the potatoes and stopped. "Question. Did you all stand out of respect, or was I the only one other than Victor who didn't know that prayer sitting down?"

Almost like approval given. Everyone sighed out, and a brief round of laughter ensued at the table.

Christine was telling a story about a recent pizza delivery that Jeremy made to the old folks home. How he had recently busted a couple 'engaged' in some heavy activity while waiting on pizza.

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "It was fucking great."

"Jeremy," Meg said playfully. "Language."

"Sorry."

"You know we ..." Meg shifted her eyes, Victor had opened up a napkin, pulled a pencil from his tee shirt pocket and started to draw. She quickly snatched the pencil from his hand. "Not at my table. Eat." She pushed his food to him. "And quit playing with your food. Must you make scenery out of a meal."

Victor shrugged. "It makes it fun to eat."

"Eating is not supposed to be fun," Meg sighed. "Besides, you'll have lots of time to have fun and doodle at the bizarre. Did you need us to supply the pens and paper."

"No, I'm good, thanks," Victor replied brightly.

Carl spoke up. "I don't get it. Why are you doing the caricatures at the bizarre."

Meg replied. "Carl, please, it's an honest days work."

"Exactly," Victor nodded. "It's an honest days work."

"Are you being sarcastic?" Meg asked.

Victor shook his head. "Not at all. Am I, Jordan?"

Jordan shook her head as well. "He really is looking at this as a honest day's work."

"A challenge," Victor said. "I never did caricatures, before."

Jeremy spoke, "Jordan says you're pretty good. We've been wanting to get a picture of me, Chrissy, and the kids."

"Oh, yes," Chrissy said. "Like a painting. We'd be happy to pay you."

Victor shook his head. "I'll do it, you don't have to pay me."

"Victor," Meg said. "Never turn down work. If someone wants to pay you, never be too proud to take it."

Carl lifted his fork as he spoke, "How much are they paying you for the caricatures?"

Meg answered. "Fifty dollars a day."

Carl choked.

Victor smiled. "I never got paid per day. Plus, the real pay is getting to meet the people of this town. And maybe, Office Danny Conner will stop getting me tickets."

Jordan commented, "Danny has given him twelve citations so far for various things."

"Thirteen," Victor corrected. "I got one this afternoon for spinning on the pottery wheel."

"God." Jordan shook her head in disgust.

Roy, who was silent, finally interjected. "Meg and I can talk to him if you'd like. Get him off your back. See what the problem is."

Meg nodded. "I can do that, Victor. He's due for an oil change at the shop."

Roy winked. "I can raise our oil changing prices for him if he doesn't knock it off."

"Wow. That's cool," Victor said. "But, no thank you. He'll get tired of it and quit."

"Very passive of you," Meg said.

"I'm a pretty passive guy."

"Redbird is the place for that," Roy said.

"So, Victor," Meg prepared to question. "What brought you to Redbird in the first place."

"A dart." Victor replied and watched everyone look at him. "I was trying to figure out where I was going to move. And since I'm not a good dart thrower, I figured, who knew where it would land. It landed on Ohio. Then I got a map of Ohio and the dart landed here. Well, Ok, not here. A bit north, but I didn't want to live in the lake."

"You moved here from New York?" Meg asked.

"Yes."

"What part of New York?" Meg questioned.

"City," Victor answered. "I wanted out of there, too. I wanted to be where there were less people. Less city. I wanted a place where everyone knew everyone's name."

Carl chuckled. "Or like Mother, everyone's business."

Meg reached over and smacked Carl's hand. "I know, Victor, that you told ..."

"Mom," Embarrassed, Jordan interrupted. "Why are you interrogating Victor?"

Meg gasped. "Excuse me, is this not my home? I do this to all new people. You know this."

Victor gave a smile to Jordan. "I don't mind. Go on, Meg, ask your question."

Meg did. "You mentioned that your parents had passed away. When was that?"

"Ten years ago."

"Both of them?" Meg asked. "At the same time, or the same year?"

"Same time." Victor explained. "They were coming home on Fourth of July, and a truck driver fell asleep at the wheel. They were killed."

A silence engulfed the table.

Meg cleared her throat. "That's terrible. What did your father do for a living?"

"He was a farmer," Victor said. "Corn and livestock. Pigs mainly." He picked up his soda and took a drink.

"A farm?" Meg was a bit taken aback. "In New York."

"No," Victor chuckled. "I grew up in Kansas. Actually, the story goes I was born in Italy, and my parents stowed me away in their luggage. But ... I later found out I was adopted." He sniffed. "I kind of figure that out in my teens when I looked nothing like my parents."

"Italians in Kansas?" Jeremy snickered. "Didn't think they had Italians in Kansas. I was in Kansas one time and they didn't even have Italian dressing."

"My parents were from Philadelphia. Farming was my father's dream." Victor aid. "He did it well. I was never the farmer type."

Roy shook his head "Shame, what happened to your parents' farm."

"Lloyd Harrison and his wife live there. They do a good job. I went to high school with Lloyd."

Carl had to ask, "When did you start drawing? I mean when did they realize how good you were?"

"I never really thought I was any good," Victor explained. "Are you sure you guys want me to talk about this stuff. It's awfully boring." He waited until he got everyone's attention and agreement that they wanted to hear. "I started drawing as early as I could remember. I used to make Lego art like no one's business. In fact, my dad entered a piece of mine in a Lego competition they had in Kansas City. They didn't believe I made it, because I was so young."

"How old?" Carl asked.

"Six." Victor shrugged. "My art really did drive my father crazy. I was always in art shows, he was proud though. Except when I decided to paint walls, or the side of the barn, the one time. I painted a pig ..." Victor

whistled. "Boy did I get in trouble on that one. Until I sold my first piece to a dealer in Kansas City, then my dad was like," Victor proceeded to change his voice and do a country accent. "Welp, that boy of mine he might be on ta' something there."

Carl asked, "Is that when you turned professional?"

"Pretty much," Victor nodded. "But not in the sense you thinking. I started doing portraits, then landscapes for chain restaurants. It wasn't until I was twenty that I started coming into my own with the art, and started breaking lose, that's things started happening."

Jordan choked. "You did all this before you were twenty?"

Victor nodded. "Yes."

Meg, with folded hands, leaned into the table. "So, Victor, you talk about selling pieces. I know artists have a hard time making a living off of this. Do you sell many pieces?"

Carl's mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you are asking him that. Of course he does."

"Hush," Meg said. "Anyone can sell art, it's selling and making money that I'm curious about. Have you made some money off your pieces?"

"Yeah, I have," Victor answered. "I do pretty good."

"Really?" Meg seemed shocked. "What was the best price you got for a piece?"

"Mom!" Jordan snapped. "That's none of our business."

"It's mine," Meg said. "I got him hired at the bizarre. If he sold some pieces before, and does good at the church fair, I'm thinking the Christmas Craft show, Jordan. My ideas, his hands, him and I could make a killing at the show."

Victor grinned. "Christmas craft show. Hey, that sounds like fun."

"They are," Meg said. "Tedious though. A very long day. But Mary Beth Willis made, what, Roy? Six hundred bucks last year on those door knob Santa's. Six hundred bucks. That kind of money comes in handy at Christmas time."

"Cool," Victor said. "We'd have to be pretty original, Meg."

Meg pointed to her temple. "I got ideas. Just not the hands. Anyhow, what was the best you did, Victor? Share with us, I'm curious. What was the best price you got for something?"

Victor replied, "Are we talking a painting, sculpture, commissioned work ..."

"No, a single piece. Doesn't matter what it was." Meg reached for a slice of bread and began to butter it as she spoke nonchalantly. "Drawing.

Sketch, anything. Something you created and someone thought it was good enough to buy. Best price."

"Best price." Victor paused to think. "Oh, I got it."

"What?" Meg asked.

Victor rattled fast, "I did this painting. It was big, about six foot by four, of this woman. I didn't think much about it. In fact, I didn't think she was very attractive. I wasn't even gonna sell it, it was only for show. Then ... man, some prince of Saudi Arabia came in, wanted it so bad, he didn't even ask how much I wanted, he just ..." Victor fluttered his lips. "Like it was nothing, gave me seven million dollars."

Meg stammered. "Seven ... Million ..." She froze.

"Dollars, yes, Mother." Carl finished Meg's sentence, as he reached over with an index finger, push on her chin, closing her mouth.

The butter knife dropped from Meg's hand.

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A simple click silenced the living room when Victor turned off the television in Jordan's home. The dining room light cast just enough light in the room. He slid a chair to the center and tapped it.

Jordan walked in; she wore only a long police shirt. "So, um, is this, Amy is asleep let's do erotic art, time?"

"You could say that." Victor chuckled and sat on sofa. "Sit."

"I'm sitting." Jordan crossed her legs as she rested her hands on the arms of the wooden chair. "How's this?"

"Works for now." Victor lifted the sketch pad. "I like the shirt."

"It's Danny's."

His fast moving hand slowed down. "You do his laundry?"

Jordan giggled. "No, he left it here when ....when we used to date."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"That's personal."

Victor kept his eyes on the paper, lifting them every once and a while. "I'm just making idle talk, that's all. So did you?"

"Sleep with him? Well, yeah, of course we were dating for a while."

"Your mom implies that you still do."

"This is really personal, Victor." Jordan switched her crossed legs.

"Sorry ..." Victor paused. "So do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Still date him?"

"I did. I don't now."

"Did you love him?" Victor asked.

"No, I liked him a lot."

"But you slept with him." Victor continued to draw.

"And I suppose you loved every woman you slept with."

"Absolutely."

Jordan laughed. "Then you must have loved a lot of women."

"Very few," Victor said. "I was a recluse for eight years, remember? Besides, to me, you know, sleeping with someone is intimate. The body is a temple, to protect and respect. I don't want to share that experience with just anyone."

Jordan stood up. "I'm done."

"Wait. What?" Victor stood as well.

"Now that you have proceeded to make me feel cheap."

As Jordan started to leave, Victor grabbed her by the waist and, while laughing, gently brought her back. "I'm sorry. Sit down"

Jordan hesitated.

"Please."

"Fine." She walked back over to the chair, and sat.

Victor headed back to the couch, sat, lifted his sketch pad and then put it right back down. He stood and walked to Jordan.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Posing you."

"Posing me."

"Yep."

Victor stood there for a moment, staring, figure out, and then as his eyes shifted about her body, he lifted them to make eye contact with Jordan. He passed a silent smile, and then reached for her shoulders.

After turning her slightly in the chair, he laid his hand on her knee, ran it down slightly to her calf and lifted her leg. He crouched before her.

Jordan swallowed; she tried to hide her anxious breathing as Victor reached for the first button of her shirt. He undid that, moved to the second ... then the third. His fingers trailed down the outside of her shirt, oh-so lightly and he opened it some.

His hands stayed there, then locked in a stare, he moved them down. He lifted the edge of the shirt so it fell between her legs.

"There," He whispered, and rose to his feet. He took a step back, tilted his head, and then reached down to Jordan again. This time, he lifted the shirt to expose more of her leg.



With an ornery, yet gentle smile, he nodded, winked, and turned to his drawing spot.

When she felt it was safe and unnoticed, Jordan released the breath she held, through her slightly parted lips.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Meg didn't hide the fact that she was peering out the living room window. She didn't part the curtains, and stand off to the side any longer. She stood front and center. "She's there again," Meg said.

Roy exhaled as he sat at the dinner table. "She told you Victor had plans for them tonight."

"It's eight o'clock Roy, the baby should be getting ready for bed."

"It's Friday night. And I know it's eight. Dinner's two hours late."

"Hush." She waved out her hand.

"Carl's here, you know." Roy said.

"Yes, mother," Carl spoke up, "I came for dinner."

"I need to see them. I hardly do anymore." Meg said. "She used to be here for dinner every night."

"Speaking of dinner," Roy said. "It's getting cold. Come and eat."

"It's salad."

Carl said, "I used to watch reruns of Bewitched. I remember Mr. Cravits."

Meg peered over her shoulder. "Is that crack about me looking out the window?"

"Yes." Carl unfolded his napkin on his lap. "I do have a solution if you want to see Jordan more."

"What's that?" Meg asked. "Do you suppose he is meditating when he stands on the roof?"

"Mother." Carl snapped. "Please I am one of your children as well."

"Fine." Meg released the curtain and went to the table "Now, what's your solution?"

"Invite Victor for dinner."

"I haven't figure out his gain," Meg inched her chair to the table.

Roy shook his head. "First he's a blush fluff, that doesn't have a job. Meg, the man is very rich. What's wrong with him now?"

Meg huffed. "You think I'm that shallow, Roy?"

Roy looked at Carl.

"I'm appalled," Meg said. "Money isn't everything. It isn't. Stability is, and how my daughter is effected is important. I want what's best for my daughter."

"How do you know that's not Victor?" Carl asked. "In fact, I spoke to Michael today. Check this out. He called Jordan to ask if he could have Amy on Thanksgiving, and Jordan said she'd think about it."

That caught Roy's attention. "Think about it? My God, a month ago Jordan would have said 'no' flat out without hesitating. Wow."

Meg shook her head. "Doesn't mean anything. That tells me Jordan may be getting wrapped up in them. You know, it's not romantic, I don't think. So what is it?"

Carl chuckled "How can you say it isn't romantic? She's dating the guy."

"Oh, no she is not." Meg said. "No, no. No. I watch enough. I've not seen a spark of affection come from that guy; Jordan looks at him like a lost puppy. And that's where my concern lies now."

Carl tossed his hands outward. "I give up."

"I want my daughter happy. She has been through enough in her life. And the fact that the spin nin is a millionaire, makes matters worse. What does he want from her? Why Jordan? Until I start seeing proof of his intentions, I won't be satisfied."

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Boots, drinking, trucks, and trashy women were there themes that covered the country music that played on the jukebox in Lange's bar. It wasn't a rough and rowdy place, but it had character and Victor had been wanting to go there.

A dark atmosphere hid the wood trim walls, and hard wood floors. Peanut shells sprawled out everywhere, and Victor swore they were decorations. Jordan claimed laziness. A small dance floor with mid high wood railings one each side, separated the pool table area and patron area.

There was one bartender, Jim, no waitresses, two pool tables, and a loud juke box. Every table was round, and probably could do with a good cleaning by the end of the day.

The bar was located in the pool table section, which was more crowded than the rest. One couple danced, and they were in their sixties.

Pretty much Jordan, the dancing woman and Constance were the only females there. Correctively, the only females over twenty-one. There was one more female ... Amy.

She was tucked away with Constance in the corner of the bar. Usually Constance stayed at home and did her nails on Friday, but Victor offered her such an nice bonus to be an on-site, evening teacher, that she couldn't turn it down.

Constance told Victor she would make it into some sort of learning experience, and settled on 'health' when she saw how greasy the food was.

"Oh, no, this is good stuff," Victor told Constance as he squeezed more ketchup into Amy's French fry basket. "Do you know this is the first time I ever had bar food? This has got to be the best burger I ever had. It just drips everywhere. How's that hamburger, Jordan?"

"It's good." Jordan said. "Big."

"Amy?" Victor asked. "How's that pizza?"

"It's good."

"See." Victor pushed some fries to Constance. "You really should eat."

"I'm concerned about my stomach Mr. Artulla, the grease, not to mention, I'm not so sure about the fact that the same man serving drinks is cooking the food."

"You know his hands are clean," Victor said. "He always has them in the dishwasher."

Constance slightly rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I'll just eat when I get home."

"Then you'll risk gaining weight, eating at night."

"Mr. Artulla," Constance refrained from showing annoyance. "You brought me here to spend time with Amy."

Victor snickered "You know, Constance, you shouldn't call me Mr. Artulla when we're out hob knobbing with the locals," He looked at Jordan. "Is that a correct Ohio term? Hob Knobbing?"

Jordan shrugged. "I haven't a clue."

"So, Constance," Victor said. "You ought to ..."

"Mr. Artulla. Again, I will reiterate. You brought me here to be with Amy. Go do what you told me you want to do. Please?"

"OK, that's right. Thanks." Victor stood up and grabbed his beer. "Come on, Jordan."

"Where are we going?"

"Constance is with Amy, let's shoot pool. I'll buy you another beer."

Jordan gave a debating look but received a confidence 'go on' from Constance.

They went over to the pool table area, and Victor purchased Jordan a beer from Jim. He handed it to her, and 'clinked' bottles.

"Isn't this great." Victor held his beer bottle. "I'm drinking from a bottle. I look OK, doing that, don't I? I don't look unnatural. Do I?" He

watched Jordan take a drink. "You look good drinking from a bottle. But don't take that as a sexual reference."

Jordan choked and beer spilled over his lip and down her chin.

"OK, I take that back."

Jordan laughed. "Victor, are you sure it's OK to have Amy here?"

"Positive. I checked." He began to rack up the pool balls. "Ohio law states that we can have her in here. Basically it's up to the owner, and he said it's fine as long as you're here. In fact ..." he gave Jordan a cue stick. "Did you know Ohio law is vague too? I mean, it says any parent can serve their minor child alcohol. But it doesn't say how minor they have to be. So really, if we wanted to have Amy tie a few ones over, we could."

Jordan just blinked. "That's ... That's good to know."

"Yeah, do you shoot pool? I didn't ask."

"Not well."

"Oh."

"But I do OK. I just can't break."

"I'll break," Victor said. "But if I knock any in we won't double my turn."

"Why?"

"Because you're letting me break." He smiled and grabbed the chalk. "Besides, I wouldn't drag you all the way over here, a distance from Amy, just to kick your butt in pool." He handed her the chalk. "That wouldn't be good on date night."

Jordan paused before chalking up her cue. "Date night? Victor, is this a date?"

"I like spending time with you."

"You evade the question. OK, I won't ask."

Victor set down his cue stick and walked up to Jordan. He stood close, probably the closest he had ever stood to Jordan before. "It can't be date night officially. We not alone," he whispered. "But it's a semi date night. Which means if I'm lucky, and the date goes well, I may get to semi kiss you? If you know, that's OK."

Jordan smiled.

"I'll take that as an 'OK'," Victor sighed out. "In fact, it wouldn't be our first kiss." He lowered his head nearer to hers, speaking smooth.

"When did we kiss, Victor?"

"You kissed me in my room? Remember."

"That doesn't count."

"Why?"

"It just doesn't"

"Did your lips touch mine?"

"Yes, but ..."

"Then we kissed."

"Victor."

"What?"

"Kiss me."

Victor grinned. He bit his bottom lip, lowered to Jordan, but never quite made it there. A nudge to his back, sent him forward, nearly knocking into Jordan had he not caught himself.

It didn't bother Victor someone accidentally bumping into him, but he grew a bit angry when he turned around and saw it was Danny.

"Whoops," Danny said with arrogance. "Didn't see you, there."

Victor hesitated, and then instead of speaking only nodded. He started to turn.

Danny instigated. "I hope you're not driving Artulla. You are drinking."

"Nope, we're walking," Victor said with an exhale. "But I'm pretty sure you'll test me for public intoxication. Unless of course, you want to get me on something right now? Hey, I'm here."

Danny chuckled and shook his head. "Jordan, please don't tell me you're out with this guy."

Victor turned to Jordan. "He's a bright one. Of course you're out with me; we're here, aren't we? Gees."

"Hey, Artulla."

Victor turned back around. "What?"

Wham.

Danny decked him. Flat out decked Victor, sending him back into the pool table.

Jordan screamed. As she reached for Victor, Danny lunged.

Victor didn't even have time to get to his feet; Danny had grabbed a hold of him.

Wanting to intervene, to stop it, and knowing that screaming and shouting would be in vain; Jordan did the only thing she could. She grabbed an empty beer bottle, and with all her might, hit Danny.

The problem was, Danny was bent over, so she couldn't exactly reach his head, instead she hit his shoulder. But she didn't break the bottle, nor hurt him, she managed to annoy him.

He released Victor and spun around to Jordan. "Did you just hit me with a bottle?"

"Leave him alone!" Jordan grabbed another bottle.

Danny reached for it to take it from her hand.

Victor was ready to step in, all prepared, until Danny shrieked. What had happened? His attention went from Jordan to Amy, who had slipped into the commotion fast, and without being seen, had proceeded to lock her jaws into Danny's calf.

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Meg had just put on her night clothes when she got the call. A silky, yet practical, two piece ensemble, with burgundy spots, and a pair of slippers that matched. That was exactly what she wore under her winter coat when she barreled into the police station.

"Grandma!" Amy called out excitedly and raced to her.

"Oh, my gosh, Sweetheart." Meg bent down to her and hugged her. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. Mommy's in jail."

"I know." Meg ran her hand down her face, and then looked to see if Roy ever caught up to her. He did he was walking in. "Roy, did you bring the Visa so we can pay for bail."

"Got it." Roy pulled out his wallet.

"Are you paying for Mommy, too?" Amy asked. "Victor just paid for her."

"He did? Why isn't he in jail?"

Amy shrugged. "Maybe because they got his name wrong?"

"What do you mean?" Meg asked.

"The policeman behind the desk wasn't calling him Victor, he was calling him victim."

Meg stood up. She cased the station for him, and spotted him at the counter. His back was to her, as he leaned forward seemingly waiting on the desk sergeant. "Roy, watch the baby." She hustled over to Victor and tapped him on the shoulder. "Victor."

Victor was on the phone. "I'll call you back, Max." he hung up and turned around. "Hey, Meg, I heard Amy calling for you. I kind of figured you were here."

"What ... in the world ... happened to your mouth?" She asked of the cut that graced his swollen top lip.

Victor shrugged. "It's embarrassing."

"Embarrass yourself. What? Is this the reason Jordan got arrested?"

"You can say that, but she didn't slug me."

"Who did?"

Victor looked away.

"I'll get that out of you in a second. Did you put ice on that? Clean it."

Victor motioned his head to the desk sergeant. "I asked him about fifteen minutes, ago, I didn't want to leave Amy. He's busy."

"Is that so?" Meg slammed her hand down on the counter four times fast. "Hello, Garret. If you are going to call this boy a victim then you'd better treat him like one. Get me a clean wet cloth, and some ice. Now. Now!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Meg exhaled. She tapped her fingers on the counter as she waited for Garret to return. He did in under a minute. She took the rag and ice. "Sit, Victor."

"I'm OK."

"Sit." She pointed to a chair.

Victor hustled and sat down.

Meg stood over him, and began to wipe off the wound. "This is bad. She touched it with her fingers. "You need a stitch or two."

"No, I'm fine."

"I'm telling you this needs stitched. I have three children, and I worked in the nurse's office. You better see the doctor."

"I'm more worried about my tooth." Victor reached into his mouth for his incisor.

"Let me see, hand down," Meg instructed then felt the tooth. She exhaled heavily. "It's loose. Not real loose. You may only need to avoid eating on it for a few days, and it'll settle back, but you can't be sure. Is your dentist in New York?"

"Yeah."

"I'll call Doctor Brumer tomorrow morning, he'll squeeze you in. You have to see a dentist, too."

"Thanks."

She handed him the ice. "Now what happened. Tell me."

"As Jordan told you when you called the cell, we were out. Amy and Constance were eating, and Jordan and me went to shoot pool. We were having a good time, Meg. And here comes Danny."

"Danny hit you?" Meg asked.



Victor nodded. "He bumped into me, playing the bully. He said something snide, I made a sarcastic comment, and he decked me." He shrugged. "Surprisingly enough I didn't get a ticket tonight. I was sure they'd find reason. But then again, Danny didn't get into any trouble because technically they say I started it." He pulled the ice from his mouth and touched his tooth. "This really hurts."

"Quit playing with the tooth, Victor, you'll make it worse." Meg smacked his hand away. "What are you gonna do about this?"

"I'm not a fighter if that's what you mean. I'm not gonna try to beat him up."

"That's not what I meant." Meg snapped. "I mean this has surpassed harassment. You have an agent, don't you have a high priced lawyer as well?"

"My agent is my lawyer."

"Maybe it's time you sent him after Danny."

Victor shook his head. "For what? To sue him? No. He doesn't have anything that I want. Certainly not money. To get him to loose his job? He has a kid. I'm not gonna do that. He'll stop."

"You're too passive, Victor. Now how did my daughter end up getting arrested?" Meg asked.

"Danny hit me, and before I could do anything, she hit Danny. With a beer bottle."

Meg cringed.

Victor shook his head. "It didn't break at all."

"OK, wait." Meg held up her hand. "Jordan hit Danny. They arrested her for that? Was it disorderly conduct? Assault? What?"

"Assaulting a police officer and ..."

"Boy, that's ridiculous." Meg said. "You know what, I'm going to talk to the Chief. We went to school together. It's ridiculous, she shouldn't; be charged at all."

"That charge was dropped, Meg. That's not why they're holding her. I tried to post bail, but they wouldn't let me. They said I have to wait until they move her to county and have an arraignment ..."

"County?!" Meg blasted.

"I called an attorney, he should be here in a minute."

"But county." Meg turned round and shouted to Roy. "They're taking her to county, Roy."

"For what?" Roy asked.

"For what?" Meg asked Victor.

"OK, well Amy was there, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, when Jordan jumped to my defense, and saw the bottle didn't work, she grabbed another bottle. Danny grabbed her hand, and Amy rushed to help her mother. She looked a bite on Danny that I had a hard time breaking."

Meg covered her mouth as she snickered.

"That's when I suppose, Danny got the bright idea to charge Jordan with child negligence and endangering a minor."

Megs' face grew cold and her hand slowly lowered. "Danny did what?"

"He had her charged with negligence and endangering a minor. Both offenses are felonies and city ordinance requires her to go to county."

"I can not believe he did that to Jordan. Jordan of all people. And where is Danny now? Do we know?"

Victor pointed backwards with his thumb. "In the back."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Thank you." With a huff, Meg straightened her coat and self and walked around Victor.

"Wait. Are you going after Danny?" Victor asked.

"I certainly am, and he ..." Meg pointed to Garret. "Isn't going to stop me."

"Can I watch?" Victor asked. "I mean, I bet you'll tear him up better than any attorney."

"Oh, you better believe it. I'm a mother enraged. And I won't cost you a dime." Meg in charge, pushed open the door, ignored Garret's warnings, and stormed in the back.

Danny was in the break room standing by the candy machine when Meg stepped in.

"Danny," she called his name stern.

Danny turned. "Oh, hey, Meg."

"Don't hey Meg me." She marched to him. "Did you have my daughter arrested for negligence and endangering a minor?"

"Well, yes, Meg, I did."

"That's all I needed to know." Meg nodded once, and then with a tightly closed fist, she nailed him. The crack was loud, and she had hit

Danny with such force, and such surprise he actually spun face first into the candy machine, cracking the glass.

"Dude! Yes!" Victor clenched his fist and giggled in excitement. "Sweet!"

Meg shook off her fist and walked out.

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The back police door opened and Jordan stepped out. She rushed to Amy, and hugged her and then embraced Victor.

"Thank you." She hugged him.

"You're welcome. How are you? How was serving time?"

Jordan stepped back from the embrace. "I'm scarred," she joked. "But not as badly as you ... Oh, Victor, look at that mouth."

"Yeah, my tooth is loose, see." He wiggled it.

Jordan winced. "Stop. Don't you'll make it worse."

"Yeah, I'm going to your mom's dentist tomorrow. I think. I hope. Yeah, I will. She should be able to make the call, do you know his number if she doesn't?"

"Um, yeah, sure," Jordan said. "Just go in. I'll go with you. He knows my whole family."

"Cool. Are you tired?" Victor asked.

"Actually no, kind of hyper. But I do just want to go home."

Victor hunched. "Can't do that. We have to go down to county."

"For what? I thought all charges were dropped."

"Oh, they were. But we aren't going to county for you," Victor said. "That's where they have your mom."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Meg rubbed her temples. Elbows to the table, still wearing her night clothes, she rubbed her temples. They throbbed. For the first time since she had given birth to Jordan Roy made breakfast. But she wasn't hungry. She just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep.

Prison didn't work for her. Especially county. While there she met a nice woman named Liz, and got into an argument with another. Actually, Meg was threatened. The woman telling her, "Come back, you're dead."

'Yeah,' Meg thought, 'I'm a hardened criminal. I'll be back Right.'

The woman's threats didn't phase Meg at all, even if there was a chance of her returning. Meg didn't frighten easily.

She did however hate the strip search. But better her than Jordan.

She had a long wait. No one could even post bail until she had an arraignment in night court. Which didn't happen until right after dawn.

The attorney Victor had gotten for Jordan showed up for Meg. He was from Cleveland. A nice guy, young, but he seemed knowledgeable. He told Meg first priority was to get her out of lock up and home, then they'd worry about getting the judge to dismiss the case.

Just after five thirty in the morning, the judge set bail.

Did he think he was in Hollywood?

A ridiculous amount was set for one hundred thousand dollars. Her attorney argued that the amount was too high, but it didn't matter. The last thing Meg wanted was for Victor to post bail, but he did. She didn't have enough credit on her credit card, and didn't qualify for an immediate increase.

But she thought her time behind bars was productive. She came up with ways to her revenge on Danny.

Meg was just about to go to bed for a few hours—she didn't want to waste a Saturday—when there was a knock on the door.

She looked at her watch, "It's eight in the morning. Who can that be?"

Roy headed to the door. "I'll get it."

"Thanks."

Roy opened the door. "Victor."

"Hey, Roy, how are you?"

"I'm good. Come in."

"I'm not disturbing you am I? I need to know if Meg is awake, still?"

Roy waved out his hand. "Come on in."

Victor stepped inside. "Hey, Meg, how are you?"

“Good.” Meg stood up. “Victor, thank you for posting bail.”

“Oh, sure no problem.” Victor waved out his hand. “Do you have a minute?”

“I was getting ready to go to bed.” Meg said.

“Oh, OK, then. Good night.” Victor turned.

“Victor, why did you stop by?” Meg asked.

“I got a gift for you.”

Meg blinked. “You got me a gift?”

Victor nodded. “Well, It may not qualify as a gift since I made it. I worked all night on it. It’s not done. OK, yeah, it is, but it has one more phase to go through. Then it’ll be done. It has to leave for that phase, but I wanted you to see it first.”

Meg was still startled. “You made me a gift.”

“Yes. You may not like it. I know you aren’t real big on my art.”

“It’s not your art, Victor. It’s art.” Meg said. “But I’m sure I will love it. Bring it in.”

“I can’t. You have to come outside.”

“It’s that big?” Meg asked.

“More so awkward and heavy.” Victor waved his hand and stepped outside.

Curious, Meg followed, but not before giving Roy a glance that all but asked if he knew what was going on.

Roy shook his head and they went outside.

Center of the front law was what looked like a cart with wheels, on top of it was a tall object covered in a tarp.

“My word,” Meg proclaimed. “Is it a statue?”

“Aw, how did you know?” Victor asked.

Meg slightly rolled her eyes. “The shape, Victor.”

“Oh. Cool. All right. Well, the movers are coming today to take it to a hearth to be finished. When it’s cooled, I’ll finish it, or you can let it be the way it is. Ready?”

Both Meg and Roy nodded.

Victor pulled the tarp from it.

Roy chuckled in enthusiasm. Meg gasped.

She walked slowly to it.

“It’s not typical,” Victor said. “But neither are you. I wanted something that was very different.”

“You made this last night?” Meg asked.

“Yes.”

"It's me."

"Good. You noticed." Victor smiled.

"Holy shit," Roy stepped forward. "This is a hell of a job."

Victor set his eye proudly on his creation. It was a statue of Meg, a bit thinner than she really was, just a bit. She was wearing that winter coat, and it looked as if the pajamas as well. "The plumbing should work."

Meg blinked. "Excuse me?"

Victor snickered. "It's a fountain. I have it all ready; all we have to do it wire it. If you don't want it in your yard, I will totally ..."

"No!" Meg interrupted quickly. "No, I do. I'll certainly be envied."

Roy added. "That is original."

"I was shooting for that," Victor said. "Where most fountains are women holding pitchers and pouring it into a basin. I thought. Hmm. What can I do for Meg? So instead of a pitcher ..."

Meg finished. "I'm pouring from a coffee pot into a giant cup."

Victor looked. "Mug. But that's good. You got the jest of it. OK, well, glad you liked it. I'll let you sleep." He started to walk backwards. "I'll call the movers to let them know it's ready. You don't mind it waiting here, do you?"

Meg shook her head.

"Good. All right. Get some sleep." Victor started to leave but stopped. "Glad you're out of the big house, Meg."

Meg watched him leave. "It's a shame that such a talent can be so goddamn flighty."

"You know what they say about them artists." Roy said.

"Hmm."

"Hell of a job." Roy looked at the statue.

"And you know what, Roy? If he sold a piece of millions, this thing has to be worth a fortune. I'm calling an appraiser." Meg did a turn and headed back to the house.

"Meg, it's a gift. What the heck are you doing?"

"It's for insurance, Roy. Insurance." Meg went into the house.

Roy looked at the statue again and whistled.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The condensation from the cup, dripped at a slow pace down Carl's hand. He didn't notice, and if he did, he certainly didn't care. There was always such a prestige in walking with Fr. Benson at the fair.

He was the man. The king. The pastor of the church at a bizarre that drew in thousands from neighboring communities.

The lights flashed, the weather was perfect, and the bizarre was packed. Jeremy Chrissy's husband nearly sported a 'wanted dead or alive' poster of him at every booth. He won wherever he went.

Carl promised the good pastor that he would talk to his brother in law.

Fr. Benson kept repeating the word, "Amazing," as he walked with Carl.

"The best in years," Carl said.

"I'm going to have to ..."

"Fr. Benson!" Meg called out and trotted to him. "Fr. Benson."

"Meg," Fr. Benson smiled brightly. "I'm just walking with your wonderful son."

"Yes. Anyhow ..." Meg caught her breath. "Ready?" She held up a leather pouch. "Another two hundred dollars. Do you realize this is day one, the night is almost over and we've more than made his salary for the whole bizarre."

"What can I say, Meg." Fr. Benson boosted. "You picked a fine one. I always can count on you to pull through."

Meg blushed and titled her head. She flung out her hand with a 'go on', bashful look. "Thank you. I'm gonna go ..." she lifted the pouch. "Put this in a safe place."

"You do that."

"Enjoy the night." Meg trotted off.

Carl was still waving. "Bye Mom." He shook his head with a laugh, he started walking and paused. "Oh my." He commented when he saw the extremely long line of people waiting for a turn with Victor.

Fr. Benson smiled. "I have never seen anyone line the people up like that."

"That line is at least two blocks long."

"Wraps around the funnel cake booth. Which ..." Fr. Benson winked "Is making a bundle in back lash from this line."

"They can't possibly know who he is. They can't."

Fr. Benson shrugged. "The Lord works in mysterious ways. What can I say."

"How many has he done."

"At least a hundred."

"A hundred!" Carl shrieked. "Has any artist ever doe a hundred in one night?"

"Not to my knowledge. How did your father put it? Victor is shooting them out like Goat poop." Fr. Benson chuckled.

Carl did not. He made an offended face, and just stared at the long line of people.

The last time Max was at a church bizarre he was nine, and didn't like it much then either. He had no luck with the games, and he spent the ten dollars he had saved, in less than ten minutes. Money seemed to be flowing from Max just as fast in Redbird.

He zipped up his leather jacket, and bounced a little to keep warm.

"Oh, it's not that cold," Some woman snipped as she approached him.

"Yeah, yeah. Try standing out here." Max said.

"I did. I was in line. Here you go." She handed him the sketch.

"Thanks," Max handed her a twenty dollar bill in return.

"No thank you." She smiled at the money, placed it in her pocket, and rushed away.

Max saw her heading back toward Victor. "Yeah, go on," he spoke softy. "Get back in line. Wal-Mart has a sale next week."

Jordan snickered as she approached him. "I heard that."

"Sorry. I'm not a Wal-mart fan. Here." She handed her a stack of sketches.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"I'm killing Victor. I've gone through three thousand dollars so far. How many people live in this town."

"I think it would be better o ask how many are getting sketches done."

Max grumbled.

"He has three more days."

Like a puppy, Max whined.

Jordan laughed. "You don't have to buy every one."

"Uh, yeah, Jordan I do. Depreciation. Victor Artulla can't sit around and do five dollar caricatures, and they certainly can't float around."

"I'll take these back to the house."



"Thanks."

Jordan started to leave.

Max called out, "And grab another stack of twenties while you're there."

Jordan held up her hand and continued walking.

Max watched her, but not for long, within seconds another woman was handing him a sketch and extended her open palm for a twenty dollar bill.

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Meg was jovial. She glanced at her watch as she fixed a cup of coffee, then carried it over to Victor.

Despite the rope, people were still lined up.

"Line's closed." She told them. "Come back tomorrow."

A man asked from the crowd. "Will there still be the same deal?"

"Of course, nothing will be different." Meg listed to the man tell his wife they'd get there extra early the next day, and Meg smiled. Please she walked to Victor and set the coffee down from him. "I closed your line a bit early."

"Why?" Victor asked.

"Well, you've worked very hard today. No break. Go enjoy a bit of the festival with Jordan."

Victor finished off the picture, ripped it from the pad, and handed it to the man. "Here you go." He capped his markers. "You know what, Meg, that sounds like a great idea." He stood up. "So you think it went well."

"I think it went very well. I am really looking forward to the Christmas Craft show now."

"I have some ideas," Victor said.

"Oh, me too. Go find Jordan, I'll clean up here."

"Thanks, Meg." Victor stuck his markers in his back pocket and coffee in hand, walked off.

It didn't take him long to find Jordan, she was at a food booth, trying to order something while obviously, having a hard time holding Amy. He hurried to her.

"Need help?" he asked.

"Oh," Jordan sighed out in relief. "Can you take her? She fell asleep."

"Sure." Victor set his coffee down, and took Amy. When he did, Jordan gasped out. He chuckled as a sleeping Amy flopped over his shoulder her arms dangling. "Are we hanging out, or are you ready to go home."

"I'm very ready to go home." Jordan accepted the plate from the woman at the booth. "You?"

"Whatever you want to do. What is that?" Victor asked as they walked.

"Try it." Jordan broke off a piece of cake and placed it in Victor's mouth.

"Whoa." He smiled. "That's good."

"You never had it?" She asked. "It's funnel cake."

"That is really good. I wanna make one of those. But bet me mine is much better design than the squiggling thing."

Jordan laughed.

"Can I have more?"

"Sure." Jordan gave him another piece.

"Hey," Victor stopped walking. "Check out Max. You think he's hitting on your mom?"

Jordan looked "They do look cozy."

"Let's go interrupt before he seduces her."

"Max? My Mom. I doubt that. My mom probably doesn't even know the meaning of that word. Here. Open up." She held out cake. "Have another bite."

"And I have a degree in accounting," Max said. "Thank for the coffee. It's good."

"You're welcome. So ... How wonderful. Your mother must be proud. Law and money."

"Yep."

"Do you have a wife? A girlfriend?"

"Nah, I play the field. Although my mother would like to see that end."

Meg chuckled. "All mothers want to see their children happy. You know, Jordan is a great girl. Attractive. Cooks. Can still give birth."

Max choked as he took a sip of coffee. "You ... don't say."

"A handsome man like you." Meg winked. "You could do wonders for her. And she for you. That is if Victor quits stringing her along. I'm fearful

Max. I mean, I think it's not what Jordan thinks it is. I don't know what Victor wants, but my gut instinct is telling me it's not a relationship."

"You're right."

"I am?"

"Victor sees Jordan as his cause. He wants to help her. He always has a cause. And no matter how different Victor says this is, I know Victor. Like with every other cause, when he's done, he'll disappear."

Jordan heard that. She immediately didn't waste time walking in a new direction.

"Jordan, wait." Victor called out. "I can't move fast, I have Amy."

Jordan stopped, took a deep breath, and turned around. "I didn't want them to know we heard them."

"Don't listen to what Max said. Alright? Please? He's wrong. You really are different."

"Victor ..."

"No. I don't want you to think I'm walking away."

"It doesn't matter. I agreed to be your cause. Remember? I just hope that when you accomplish what you seek, I hope you think about this friendship we started."

"Now, see, I'm going to disregard that." Victor said. "You're hurting my feelings. Not to mention ruining the moment."

"What? What moment?" Jordan asked.

"I was just about to ask you to go to Los Angeles with me. You and Amy. It'll be fun. Out of Redbird a few days. Just us three. No bar fights or citations. What do you say?"

Jordan stammered. "I say you're making my head spin. When?"

"If your head is spinning then ..."

"Victor. When?"

"Next week."

"Next week." Jordan laughed. "Why?"

"The opening was moved up. Can you?"

Jordan hesitated. "What about the trial. I just found out it starts ..."

"All the more reason. Free up your mind before hand. I have to go. I'd rather not go without you. Come on. Look. Amy wants you to go." Victor lifted Amy's slumped head and raised his voice to a high tone. "Come on, Mommy, I want to go with Victor. Please?"

Laughing, Jordan shook her head and started to walk away. "You are one of a kind, Victor."

"Hey." Victor ran to catch up. "Does this mean yes?"

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"All passengers with young children, please proceed to the gate at this time," the woman's voice announced over the speaker at the air[ort.

Jordan looked up as she sat in the private waiting area of the airport.

"Not us," Victor said. "We're the only passengers."

"I know." She nodded.

"You OK? You seem nervous."

"I am. I ... I've never been on a plane before."

"Really? Why didn't you tell me?" Victor asked. "Ok, little advice. The experience you hare having today. Isn't the norm. My plane is decked out."

"I can't believe you have your own plane. Do you travel that much?"

"No. But I wanted one." Victor sighed out. "Anyhow, I'm gonna take Amy over to the window to show her my plane. It should be here any second."

Jordan nodded.

"Are you OK? You sure?"

Again, Jordan nodded.

Victor grabbed Amy's hand and took her to the window.

"It's a psychic feeling," Meg said as she sat down with Jordan. "I'm a nervous wreck. I just saw his plane arrive. Small, Jordan It's small."

Jordan's eyes widened.

"I can't believe you're doing this. You're just up and trotting off."

"Meg," Roy approached. "Leave her alone. She's nervous enough."

"No, Roy." Meg said. "I want to spend a few minutes with my daughter. I mean, God forbid something happens so ..." She handed Jordan to packets of paper. "Sign these."

Jordan looked at her curiously. "What are they?"

"Flight insurance."

Jordan gave a startled look.

"What? Sign." Meg handed her a pen.

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The doors to the penthouse suite opened and Jordan walked through as if star struck.

Her, "Oh My God," repeated every three seconds, rang out as she explored the suite. Occasionally, she would comment, "Amy don't touch anything. Do go near the windows."

But she was completely and utterly in awe.

"Mommy," Amy ran into the living room. "You have to see the tub. It's a pool."

Jordan turned to Victor. "Is this ours? It's as big as my house."

"Not quite," Victor handed the bellman a tip.

"Thank you, Sir." The bellman accepted it. "She really seems to like the suite."

"She's from Ohio," Victor whispered.

The bellman nodded knowingly and closed the door as he exited backwards.

Victor checked out the suite. It wasn't bad. He had better. But he wasn't paying for it, so he couldn't complain. Two bedrooms, three baths, a large living area and dining area, bar.

"Victor." Jordan rushed in.

"We got flowers." Victor pointed to the table "And fruit. Want some. Or did you want to order room service for a snack."

"Room service. I never stayed at a place with room service." Jordan said.

"Really?"

"Comfort Inn usually doesn't have it. Wow, Fruit. Victor. There's a balcony."

"You'll have that."

"Not in my world," Jordan smiled. "Are we eating dinner tonight there, or here?"

"I would say let's have a late dinner here. I don't see the reception having any more than finger food." Victor explained. "Fancy finger food. Where's Amy?"

"Amy?" Jordan called out.

"I'm staring in the empty tub." Her words echoed, then a few seconds later her feet pattered their way in. "Mommy, it would full up too much for me. Oh, fruit." She ran to the basket.

Victor clapped his hands together. "OK, lady grab a snack, we're heading out. I told the front desk to have a car waiting."

"Where?" Jordan asked. "Where are we going?"

"Shopping." He crouched down to Amy. "Wanna go shopping?"

Amy nodded.

"Will you wear a dress?" Victor asked.

Amy nodded again.

"Cool, so will Mommy." Victor stood. "Ready?"

"Victor, I don't think I brought enough money to shop in this town."

"Don't insult me." Victor said. "I got it."

"You don't have to do that."

"Yeah, I do." Victor grabbed Amy's hand and walked to the door. "And really, we'll just return them after you wear them. So no cost."

"Oh, good idea." Jordan said.

"Jordan, I'm joking." Victor opened the door. "After you." He held out his hand.

Jordan hurried, stopped in the archway, and whispered to Amy, "I feel like *Pretty Woman*." She snickered and walked out.

\*\*\*

Roy sat down at the dining room table. After all it was dinner time; he smelled the food and knew they would be eating soon.

Carl sat there, too.

Both of them stared at the centerpiece, which usually wasn't there at dinner time. But on this night it was, perched cent, next to it, the day's mail.

Roy looked at his watch. Five-fifty-five PM.

"This is odd," Roy said to Carl.

"Tell me about it." Carl responded. "Maybe she's just running late."

"Maybe we should ask her, so we don't sit here waiting."

"Good idea," Carl waited. "You or me?"

"I'll do it." Roy cleared his throat. "Meg?"

"Yeah?" Meg replied from the kitchen.

"Is dinner almost done, or should we wait?"

"Finishing now," she said.

"Mom?" Carl called out. "Do you need me to set the table?"

"Nope." Meg emerged from the kitchen. She held a plate with silverware in one hand, a bowl in the other. She spoke as she walked by the dining room table. "I have a nice pot of stew on the stove, and salad, Dishes are on the counter help yourself." She hurried to the living room.

Roy looked shocked. "Is she eating in the living room? She's never eaten in there."

"Mom? Are we eating at the table?"

"You can, if you want. PBS is having a special on Victor I want to watch."

Carl turned quickly to his father, "She's watching a show about Victor?"

"Let's go watch. You want you dinner."

"I'll wait."

Both men hustled to the living room.

"Mom? Why are you watching a documentary on Victor?" Carl asked.

Meg had the chair that faced the television. "Would be wrong not to. Boy would his mother be so proud of him. You know you've made it big when you get a documentary on PBS. Aren't you two eating stew?"

"In a minute," Roy said. "You know, Meg, famous or not. Right or not. It's not you to eat in front of the TV because you don't want to miss something. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you liked Victor."

"I do," Meg replied, "I just can't tell him or Jordan that. Not yet. Oh! It's starting." Meg turned up the television. "Look, it's Victor."

She listened for a moment, extended the remote, and turned off the set.

Carl startled by her actions, asked, "What are you doing?"

"I just decided." Meg said as she stood. "I want to judge Victor by what I know of him, not by this. I'd rather see him as Victor." She carried her food to the table "Let's eat."

\*\*\*

The building looked like a church, when actually, it was a center for the arts. A huge tarp covered the ceiling; a single rope hung down right nowhere the podium. Hoards of people, dressed in tuxedos and gowns gathered around.

Lawrence Hendrix stood at the podium. Microphone before him, he spoke to the people and to Victor he stood at the foot of the newly erected stage.

"And what took Michelangelo nearly forty years to complete, Victor Artulla accomplished in just three months." He paused for the applause, and then continued. "I swear I thought Victor was moving in. He slept, ate, and showered her. He started calling Betty, the cafeteria lady, grandmother because she would bake him cookies. Victor was, uh, how can I put it. A most electrifying guest. So for the unveiling, I'll let you meet him. Ladies and gentlemen .." He held out his hand in a point. "I present to you, Victor Artulla."



Jordan enjoyed the seldom seen Victor of the moment. Instead of upbeat, he was laid back, almost shy. She herself was nervous and held tight to Amy's hand as he took the podium.

Victor greeted the applauding audience with nods of acknowledgements, while mouthing the words 'thank you' a few times. He winked at Jordan just before he began.

"Thank you, again for the welcome. The ceiling, well ..." He glanced up. "It really isn't that big of a deal Larry was just going on about it." He smiled. "I always kind of viewed the project as easy. Michelangelo did all the work. I just sort of followed his pattern in my own advanced paint by numbers."

The crowd chuckled at his comment.

Victor continued. "OK, well, here it is." He reached for the rope and gave a pull. Intricately designed to capture the tarp as it fell, the entire room gasped at the recreation of the Sistine chapel.

Jordan lost her breath.

Victor had done that? She was amazed beyond believe and applauded solidly, her hands hurt.

Accepting the congratulatory nods, and handshakes, Victor kept his focus on Jordan as he stepped off the stage.

"Victor," she whispered out.

"Do you like?"

"Oh, my God, I love it."

"Cool. Amy do you like it?"

Amy gave a look of debate. "It's confusing."

"Even better." Victor smiled and grabbed Jordan's hand. "Let's go get a drink then make a quick escape."

"Where to?" Jordan asked.

"Anywhere but here. This isn't us, Jordan." Victor looked around. "This is so not us."

\*\*\*

Amy barely made it through dinner. Her eyes bobbed in tiredness. Her drive to take bath in the huge tub kept her awake, but her body succumbed to exhaustion before the tub was filled.

Jordan was still wearing the sleek black dress, as she sat on Amy's bed. Amy was tucked in, her mouth pouting in a snore.

She ran her hand over her daughters back, watched her for a few minutes, kissed her goodnight, and then stood.

Amy's bathroom light was on, and Jordan left that door ajar as a night guide for her should she get up. Then Jordan left Amy's room and closed the door.

She looked for Victor somehow expecting him to vie in the main room, but he wasn't. Preparing to call out, Jordan spotted him on the balcony. He was leaning against the railing, staring out as he held a glass of wine in his hand.

She walked to the doors, a table was set up with wine, and she made her announcement as she stepped down to the terrace. "Hey, can I grab a glass?"

Victor turned around. "Help yourself. That's why it's there."

"Thanks." She began to pour.

"Amy all tucked in?" he asked.

"Crashed."

"Jet lag."

Jordan walked to the railing. "I'm surprised she stayed awake as long as she did."

"Me, too. It was that bath." Victor chuckled. "Tomorrow."

"Yeah. She was tired. Are you?"

"Tired."

"Yeah."

"No." Victor shook his head. "You?"

"Not at all. Pretty hyper. That ceiling was remarkable, beautiful."

"Oh, yeah." Victor smiled slightly. "You looked remarkable and beautiful." Quickly, he turned back around to face outward.

Jordan hid her smile as she inched to him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She nudged him. "You looked pretty good yourself in that tux."

"Yeah ... I did, didn't I?"

They both laughed.

Silence.

Jordan looked out onto the city. "It's a beautiful night."

"Warm."

"This is really idle talk."

"I know."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Victor replied.

Jordan played with her wine glass she spoke. "You can choose not to answer me if you want. But why ... why haven't we kissed yet. I thought you were going to try. But it never happened." She fiddled some more with her wine. "I know we talked about being friends, but sometimes ..." she inched closer to him. "Sometimes I feel like there's more. Is there. I feel like there is."

Victor was hesitant in answering. It showed as he, too, fiddled with his glass, and exhaled loudly. "It goes back to the night ... remember. The chair. Your house. The ..." he chuckled. "Shirt. Anyhow ... it goes back to that night when I said being close is an intimate thing. And ... I only share it ..." he paused. "With someone I love."

Jordan closed her eyes. "Oh my God, I am so ... so ... sorry." Stepping back, she set her glass down. "I am so embarrassed. Please forget I said anything. Please." she turned to leave.

"Jordan, no, wait." Victor stepped out, reached for her, and stopped her. "Wait." He placed down his glass. "That came out all wrong. See, I'm not good with this." He looked beyond Jordan then back to her. "I have reached a point with you where I'm scared. I'm scared that once I touch you, kiss you, once I start ... I won't be able to stop." He took a step to her with a chuckle. He softened his voice. "And knowing that I'm a terrible lay, I don't want to put you in that awkward position."

Jordan laughed. Stepping closer to Victor she reached to him. Without saying anymore, she inched against his body; tip toed up and gently pressed her mouth to his.

Victor responded, first with hesitancy, then with intensity. He brought Jordan closer against him, embraced her tightly, and kissed her.

He separated from the lengthy kiss with an exhale. A slow heart beating exhale.

"I thought you wouldn't be able to stop," Jordan whispered, her mouth still close to his.

"I don't want to."

"Then don't."

Victor didn't wait long. He brought her to him again. Out on the terrace, city noise lost within their moment, they resumed kissing.

\*\*\*

The numbers on the digital alarm clock turned. It was three am, and Victor kept staring at the time.

How did it happen? So fast, within a half an hour, they went from kissing to ... bed.

It wasn't as bad as Victor thought. For sure he thought Jordan would be let down. But she didn't appear to be. If she had a problem with it, surely she wouldn't have been able to fall asleep. Then again, by their bodily clocks it was six in the morning.

On his back, propped against pillows, Victor watched Jordan.

He watched as she lay on her stomach, head buried partially under the pillow. Her hair pulled back and her lips slightly parted.

How long had she been asleep? Thinking about it, it bothered Victor. They really didn't talk much afterward. What if she was hating him?

Reaching out he saw a single strand of hair sticking up. He latched on to it and yanked.

Jordan lifted her head.

"Hey, did I wake you?" Victor asked.

"I thought I felt something," Jordan groaned.

"You were out. Snoring."

"Was I?"

"Loud."

"I'm sorry."

"That's Ok. I'm bored."

"You can't sleep?" she asked.

"No. I got an idea."

Jordan rolled to her side. "What's that?"

"No fear, I'm not going to ask you to sleep with me again."

She chuckled.

"No, better. Can you stay awake a few minutes?"

"Sure, why?"

"There's something I want to do to you."

Jordan raised an eyebrow

"Not that. This." He reached down to the side of the bed and lifted a sketch pad.

"It's been a while."

"Yeah, it has." Victor said soft.

"How would you like me to pose?"

"Like that." Victor grabbed a pen. "No wait." He reached over and lowered the covers some. "No, like that." he smiled and began to draw.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Trick or treat!

There were six small children in various styles of costumes standing at Meg's door.

Meg chirped out a big, "Oh my Goodness. Look at you. Oh, you scared me." As she extended an over flowing bowl of candy to the group.

Receiving a round of thank you's, Meg looked beyond the children to the mother on the walk. She waved high, "How's Bruce?" Meg asked. "Good. Be safe."

After the kids disappeared, she closed the door, and looked at her watch. 'One minute after Six'. Shaking her head with a disgruntled look she peered to the powder room door, then to Jordan. "It's six."

"I know." Jordan said as she stood outside the door arms folded.

"Trick or treat started."

"I know."

"Does he know there's a time limit on trick or treat?"

"That ... I don't know." Jordan knocked on the bathroom door. "Victor, come on."

"One more minute, it has to be right." Victor said from the other side of the door.

Jordan turned to Meg, "He says one more minute."

"He's ridiculous," Meg said. "He said one more minute a half an hour ago. Does he have any idea that he has had Amy in the bathroom for nearly three hours." She pounded on the door. "For the love of God, Victor! It's a goddamn Halloween costume. How long can it take?"

Amy giggled.

"Meg, please, it has to be right. My reputation is at stake," Victor said.

Meg rolled her eyes. "We should have just drove to Wal-Mart and got one of those plastic jobs. They always worked before. But no, he has to be effects man."

Jordan smiled.

Meg saw that. "Jordan, I have an idea."

"Uh-oh."

"No, it's serious. Listen." Meg stepped closer to her. "Instead of you taking Amy trick or treating and then to Chrissy's party, let me. Dad can give out candy. I'll take her to the kid bash, and I'll stay with her, and get her home. Why don't you and Victor go out tonight?"

"Mom, I don't leave Amy."

"You know what, Jordan? You can." Meg nodded. "I know you can. You need to do this."

"I don't need to."

"Yes. Yes you do." Meg was insistent. "And ... And I think, I think you want to." She raised an eyebrow. "Things are happening with Victor, really happening. Things that are good for you. I see them. I see the change. And if you want them to stay good, you have to give that man some of your time. Your time. Alone."

Jordan glanced away.

"Don't blow this, Jordan." Meg whispered. "Don't."

"Mom."

"No. The trial starts Monday. Your thoughts are going to suddenly be places you don't want them to be. Take this weekend. Be free. You can do this. It's time."

Jordan stared for a moment. "Maybe ... maybe you're right. I think I will if Victor wants..."

The door to the bathroom flew open.

"Absolutely," Victor said with excitement. "This is great. I'll hurry and take a shower. Get cleaned up. Oh! Dinner and dancing Jordan. A date. I haven't had a date in years."

Meg smirked. "I wonder why."

"I don't know." Victor shrugged. "But, if it's all right with you, Jordan, I'd really rather not miss trick or treat."

"Sure." Jordan said. "I always like that."

"Yeah, I want to walk around with you and Amy and see the reactions." Victor nodded with a grin.

Meg cleaned her throat. "Uh, Victor? If you want to have to time trick or treat, where is my granddaughter?"

"Oh," Victor laughed. "Sorry." He stepped aside. "Ladies and gentleman. Or just ladies. I give to you. Amy ...." He did a trumpet sound with his voice, then handed Meg a picture. "I did my best to pull off the little guy from Star Wars. I think I did good. What do you think?"

Amy walked out.

Meg dropped the picture with a gasp, and Jordan laughed.

Amy was unrecognizable. She was spitting image of the character.

"Good?" Victor asked with a nod to Jordan.

"It's excellent."

"Meg?" Victor asked.

"What have you done to my granddaughter." Meg sighed out. "I will not be the one to wash that make up off." She raised her eyes to the sound of the door bell. "Thank God."

She turned on her heels and rushed to the door.

Victor tilted his head with a pleased look. "I guess it's good."

\*\*\*

They had to drive nearly an hour, because anywhere in Redbird was a deep fryer haven. The place chosen by Victor seemed, to Jordan, elite and more for the over sixty crowd. White table cloths on small tables, a dance floor that perched directly before a four piece jazz band.

Unlike in the bars in Redbird, couple danced and well, too. Jordan found herself clapping as much for the ball room dancers as she did for the band.

The dinner was excellent, Jordan had lamb chops, and really wanted to ask for a 'to go' container, but Victor gave her a look that all but said, 'please don't.'

They had been doing it a lot . Kissing, and they finished a kiss while dancing, just as the band played a different song.

"You surprise me," Jordan said to Victor.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you strike me as the Burger King guy. But even in L.A., these types of restaurants are what you choose."

"I like peacefulness. For as eccentric as I am, I hate noisy places when I eat. Why? Did you want to go to Burger King?"

Jordan chuckled. "No, why would you ask that?"

"You barely ate."

"It was good. But it's so hard being out without Amy."

"I know," Victor said. "I keep looking for her everywhere. How are you with this?"

"I feel good." She paused and looked outward in their dance. "Really good with you."

Victor moved his and to her cheek. "I am so proud of you."

Jordan lowered her head in a blush.

"No, I am," Victor continued. "When I first met you, you were nowhere near this."

"It's you. You've done it to me."

"You've done a lot to me, too. I never thought I'd love any one like ...shit." Victor looked up.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Shit. I can't miss it."

"Miss what?" Jordan asked confused as Victor broke from the dance. She watched him.

Leaving her alone on the dance floor, Victor darted about. Everyone seemed to watch him as he appeared to frantically be searching for something. Suddenly he stopped, said, 'may I' to a couple at a table, and lifted the man's fork.

Catching his breath he returned to Jordan. "Grasp the moment."

Jordan laughed. "What are you talking about?"

"Grasp the moment. I was gonna do it anyhow, but I knew I had to find the right moment. Do you know what I mean?"

"No."

Victor held up the fork before Jordan.

Jordan laughed again. "OK."

"Some would say it isn't creative. I think it is. See, the basis of any great relationship is a great friendship. Some of our best talks have been over meals. Jordan ... I want to dine with you for the rest of my life." He inched the fork closer to her. "Marry me."

Jordan nearly choked. "You're proposing?"

Victor paused, looked up the back to Jordan. "Yes. With no less, an engagement fork. I wouldn't have gotten a ring anyhow. How cliché. I will eventually you know. I have to. You deserve one. Chicks love rings But not to propose. I'm using the fork. Will you?"

Jordan blinked, her mouth stammered before she said anything. "Victor, we haven't really known each other all that ..."

"Oh, so what. What does that mean?" Victor scoffed. "Most couples start out seeing each other a couple times a week. We see each other every day. In couple time that's actually ..." he paused. "Twenty-nine point, something weeks. Well over six months. Marry me."

"Victor, I ..."

"You have something better planned for the next fifty years or so?"

He waited. He stared. He danced the fork in front of her.

"Not that I know of. Yes."

"Yes, as In you have something better to do for ..."

"Yes, I'll marry you. Give me the fork." She playfully snatched it from his hand.



Excited, and happy, Victor leaned down to her, Just as he kissed Jordan, he stopped, stood up straight, and stepped back.

“What’s wrong?”

“Odd.” Victor peered down to this belt. “My pages. Something must be ....” He peered up, turned, and walked from the dance floor.

Jordan watched him for a moment as he went to their table and dug through her purse. She went over to join him as he was dialing. “Victor, what’s wrong?”

Victor held up a finger. “Yes, this is Victor Artulla.”

During the call, Victor blinked several times, until all expression dropped from his face and he looked at Jordan.

\*\*\*

The door to the emergency room slid open and Jordan hustled through with Victor behind her. She moved fast with concern. Victor reached out, stopping her.

“Jordan.”

Jordan pulled away.

“Jordan, please calm down.”

“Calm down.” She spun to him. “My daughter’s been hurt.”

“Yes, I know. But the service said it was a very minor injury.”

“I don’t care.” She barked. “I was out. I wasn’t with her.”

Victor sighed out. “Jordan ... so? So what does that matter?”

“So? So?” Jordan responded with cynicism. “Oh, you would say that?”

Victor shook his head. “I .. I just don’t understand this behavior from you right now. This isn’t you.”

“Yeah it is.”

“No, Jordan. It isn’t. Not the Jordan that I have seen. You’re being out of control. Honey, kids get hurt.”

“And kids die.”

“What does that have to do with what happened to Amy?” Victor asked.

“Everything!” Jordan yelled then lowered her voice. “Everything. I wasn’t watching her. Don’t you understand? I wasn’t watching her just like I wasn’t watching Trevor. But you wouldn’t know how that feels, because everything is a chance to you. A game. Things come easy to you. You have nothing to lose by taking a chance. I have everything to lose. Just ... just stay away from me.” She stepped back.

“Whoa. Wait. Stop this. This is not my fault, Jordan.”

“Oh I beg to differ. You took me from where my focus had to be. That ... that will never happen again. This isn’t your place. Why don’t you leave.”

Victor stared for a second, lifted his hands in defeat, and swallowed. He nodded. “You know where to find me.” Nodding once, more he turned and walked away.

Jordan was watching the double doors close when Meg’s voice startled her.

“You better go after him.” Meg instructed.

After a slight jolt, Jordan turned. “Where’s Amy?”

“Jordan, I’m not kidding. That was wrong what you said. You ...”

Jordan brushed by Meg when Roy emerged carrying Amy. “Amy,” Jordan called and took her daughter in her arms. “Oh my God, what happened.” She ran her hand over the bandage over Amy’s eye.”

Meg answered, “She’s fine. Two stitches. Who called you?” Jordan didn’t answer, so Meg looked to Roy, Carl, and Chrissy. “I am very serious. Which one of you called her? This did not warrant a phone call and this did not warrant her behavior.”

Carl grumbled out, “Mother.”

“You did, Carl, didn’t you?” Meg asked.

Carl lowered his head.

“Well, I hope you’re happy. You set her back the past two months that she moved ahead. Jordan ...” Meg faced her. “Give me the baby, go after Victor.”

Jordan pulled Amy from Meg’s reach and shook her head.

“Jordan, this was a very minor injury. Give me her.”

Jordan cradled Amy. “I will not let go of her again.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Meg,” Roy warned.

“No. All of you hear what she said.” Meg waved about her hand as she spoke. “What she said to Victor was unwarranted. He has been nothing but good for her, and you, Jordan better go after him. Now.”

“He kept me away from Amy.”

Meg growled. “He made you live again!”

“If being alive keeps me from my priorities.” Jordan tried to get by Meg. “I don’t want it. I don’t want to feel alive.”

Before Jordan could get too far, or even out of Meg’s reach, she grabbed a hold of her and pulled her back.

Carl stepped forward to intervene. "Mom, let her go."

Meg ignored him, keeping her focus on Jordan. "Listen to you, Jordan. Listen to what you're saying. You don't want to feel alive? Do you hear how horrible that sounds."

Jordan sneered. "If I was with Amy, she would have never gotten hurt."

Meg dramatically released her arm. "You're right. You are absolutely right."

"Meg!" Roy snapped.

"No!" Meg's voice raised and she went off. "No. Amy wouldn't have gotten hurt if you were there, Jordan. Wanna know why? Because if you were there, she wouldn't have been running around, laughing, and being a child. Being a normal child. Playing. When you're around Jordan, you do something to her. She withdraws. She hides in a shell. She is being what you want ..."

"Mother," Carl interrupted "Stop this."

"No. She needs to hear this." Meg scolded. "This is life, Jordan. Kids have accidents. Whether you are there not, things happen. There is nothing you can do about it. You lost your son. I am very sorry. No pain can be greater. They all can pacify you. Pity you."

"Meg." Roy was strong. "Stop this shit now."

Meg didn't. She ignored Roy, Carl, and Chrissy and stayed on Jordan. "They .. Jordan will let you slip right back into that secluded world. Well, I won't. I won't." She sniffed. "I won't be part to watching you curl up and die right along with Trevor." Tossing her nose in the air, Meg didn't wait for any more responses; she stormed right out of the hospital, leaving them all speechless and stunned.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Victor spent the night in his truck ... parked outside of Jordan's house. He arrived there after three am, and didn't leave. The last he looked at the clock it was pushing six thirty, and he dozed off. An hour later he got out of the truck. He waited long enough. Sleeping or not, Jordan was going to see him.

It didn't take but a second for Jordan to answer the door.

The surprise in her voice came though when she said his name, "Victor."

Victor said nothing. He walked right in, stepped to Jordan, laid his hand on her face, and kissed her. Then he kissed her again.

"Victor, stop."

"Victor!" Amy yelled brightly as she raced into the hall.

Victor moved from Jordan and crouched down to Amy. "Oh man, look at you." He picked her up.

"You didn't come to see me last night. I got stitches."

"I see." Victor gently touched the bandage. "I ... I had to work last night."

"Is that why Mommy is mad?"

"Yep. And that's why I'm here. I don't want Mommy mad at me." He looked at Jordan. "So, listen, do you mind if I talk to her alone. Just a few minutes. Please?"

"OK."

"Thanks." He kissed her and set her down. Waiting until she left, he turned to Jordan.

"Why are you here, Victor?" Jordan asked.

"Jordan what happened last night?"

"I think you know."

"No, I don't." Victor stepped to her. "Do you want me to apologize?"

"No."

"Because I will. I'll do anything right now. I just don't like the feeling I got after last night."

"Victor ..."

"I can't be like this with you. I can't. I'm addicted to you Jordan Wyatt. Do you know what that's like?"

"Yes."

“OK. So tell me last night ... tell me that was all a big misunderstanding.”

Jordan closed her eyes.

“I love you.” Victor moved his hand to her cheek and spoke passionately. “I ... love you. If you think by being with me we have to leave Amy, you’re wrong. If leaving Amy is not something you want to do, we won’t. OK? Just let’s do this together.”

Jordan turned from him.

“You took the fork.”

Jordan’s shoulder raised up and down in her heavy breaths before she faced him again. “I have to give it back.”

“What? No. No. Bullshit, Jordan. You can’t change everything in the snap of a finger. You can’t.”

“Victor, listen to me.” She laid her hand against his chest. His face was red; it was obvious he held in his frustration and anger. “Victor, please don’t think it’s because I don’t love you or care.”

“What am I supposed to think.”

“I do love you.”

“Jordan ...”

“No, hear me out.” Jordan said. “No matter what. No matter how much I love you or how hard we try, you will take my focus away from where it should be. Where it has to be. With Amy. Not with you. She is all I have ...”

“I know that.”

“Do you? If giving her every ounce of my attention can prevent one simple thing from happening to her, then she will get every ounce of my attention.”

Victor shook his head. “Jordan, Amy got hurt last night. It set you back. We can work at it again. Just tell me what I can do. But please don’t tell me to leave you alone.”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Jordan asked.

“I heard you.”

“Then you didn’t listen.” Jordan stepped back “You didn’t listen. She reached for the door and opened it.

Victor slammed it shut. “Don’t.” He stared at her. “This town is too small for a distance to be between us.”

“The maybe you should leave.”

“You want me to leave Redbird? Is that what you want?”

"Victor," Jordan whispered. "Being anywhere near you is going to be hard. For both you and me. I'm stuck here. You aren't."

Victor looked upon Jordan with eyes that no less than questioned her honesty. He was in a state of disbelief. "I can't believe this is what you want. Is it?" he waited on an answer.

Jordan's silence said more than words.

"OK then ..." Victor nodded. "I'll leave Redbird if that's what you really want."

"You're to dangerous for me. You leaving is the way it has to be. It's for the best."

"The best?" Victor chuckled. "The best for who? You. Me? Amy? And what about Amy? Correct me if I'm wrong, but that little girl and I got awfully close. She likes me."

"Well she lived seven years without you, she'll handle this fine."

"That ..." Victor pointed. "Was cold." He grabbed the door and opened it. "Leaving Redbird is not an option until after this trial. Just on the chance you may need me. Just on the chance that this trial puts things behind you. I want to be there. I told you I wouldn't walk away, I won't. Not while you still need me." Victor started to leave.

"Then it wouldn't be typically you." Jordan mumbled.

"What was that?"

Cocking her head with courage, Jordan repeated. "It wouldn't be typically you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means. Your cause. When I don't need you, mission accomplished. Think of it this way, Victor. When I don't need you, walking away will be easier. Just like old times for you."

Victor didn't verbally respond, he gave a cold, hard glare to Jordan, and pulled the door with a slam.

Jordan let out a breath, and then rushed to the living room where she stood slightly out of sight behind the parted drape, watching Victor until he had pulled from the driveway and from view.

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Meg had peeked out her window every five minutes for signs of Victor. She heard him pull out of his house late the night before, and when he didn't return she held high hopes that things were smoothed over with

Jordan. Meg figured he had to have gone there, she hoped he did instead of finding solace and comfort in the arms of some town floozy.

"Get away from the window, Meg." Roy called out his stock verse.

"He's back." Meg looked at her watch. "Shit. It's only nine o'clock."

"So?"

"So that's not a good sign." Meg walked to the phone, picked it up, and dialed.

"What are you doing?"

She waved her hand at Roy. "Hey, Jordan how's Amy?" Meg listened. "Good. No pain? Good. Have you heard from Victor?" A long pause of silence, "And?" Meg's head dropped. "OK, call me if you need me." She hung up.

"I take it not good."

"Nope." Meg grabbed her keys from the table, her purse from the chair, and her coat.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Victor."

"Why are you taking the car keys?" Roy asked.

"I have to run to town for something, I can't go over there for no reason." Meg hustled to the door.

"Meg? Fox News is covering a panel on Trevor's trial, don't you want to watch?"

"I'll watch later. They repeat everything six times a day anyway." She opened the door. "I'll be back."

Meg left her home and headed into town. She knew exactly what she had to get, and it didn't take long to do so. When she returned she parked her car in her own driveway and walked down the street to Victor's with a box in one hand, and a take out cup in the other.

His truck was there ... obviously. She finagled her elbow, and rang the bell ... nothing.

"Victor." She grumbled. "My hands are full." She rang again. Again. Nothing. After setting down the coffee and box, she walked to her left and to the living room window, inched up and peeked. Victor was watching television. She pounded on the window.

He stood, looked, and waved. Then Victor sat back down.

Meg knocked again. When she had his attention she indicated to the door. Waiting until she saw Victor walk from the living room, she went back to the front door and picked up her items just as the door opened.

"Hey, Meg."

"Victor why didn't you answer the bell?"

"I don't know." He shrugged.

"Why didn't you just let me in when I was at the window?"

"I thought you were just saying 'hi'."

Meg huffed and stepped inside. "You can not possibly be that stupid. Here."

"You got me donuts and coffee. Thanks, Meg."

"Yes, I did." Meg took off her coat. "Victor, your home is a mess."

"I know. I'm a mess, Meg." Sulking, he walked back to the living room. He set the donuts and coffee down on the table. "I miss her."

"It's not even been twenty-four hours Victor."

"I know."

"What happened?"

"She hates me."

"She doesn't hate you."

"OK, she doesn't. But she is really being weird with me. Mean."

Meg nodded in understanding. "I wish I could tell you that it's all because she hasn't been taking her medication."

Victor looked at her quickly.

"But that would be lying. I can't tell you why she is being like that. I wish I could. She has issues, Victor. I thought she was getting through them."

"I did too."

"Maybe for your own good you should step back for a while."

"I can't." Victor shook his head. "At least until this ...'" He aimed the remote at the television and turned up the volume. "This is over for her."

The newscaster spoke. "The district attorney is under great scrutiny for his choice of murder in the second degree. And though already convicted of armed robbery, experts are saying, without witnesses, it's going to take a miracle for these three to be found guilty in the first degree murder of Trevor Wyatt. And I'll tell you Bob, if the jury returns a not guilty; they walk in five to ten years. Back to you."

"I have news for you, Victor," Meg said. "If this trial doesn't turn out the way we hope, it may never be over for Jordan."



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Victor wanted to be part of it, the pre first day of trial ritual with Jordan, but he couldn't. He wasn't invited to the breakfast, or church service, he couldn't ride with them. Of course, he arrived at the court house before all of them. He found his way through the media frenzy, answered a few questions, and then went inside. He was early. He found a seat off to the side. One where he knew he'd see Jordan and everything else going on with the trial.

Jordan stopped at Chrissy's house before heading to the court house. She didn't want to arrive any earlier than she needed to. Chrissy lived only a few minutes away. Jeremy would drive them, drop them off, and leave.

Her visit with Chrissy was going to be short. But it was long enough to catch the news coverage that had already begun.

"Surprising all of us in the media is the presence of renowned artist Victor Artulla. Victor what bring you to the trial?"

Victor tired to keep walking.

"Victor, victor, what brings you here?"

Victor stopped. "I've been dating Trevor's mother. I'm here for support because I love her and her family." He started to walk again

"Victor," The reporter continued. "I see you have you art supplies. Will you be drawing at the trial?"

"I won't be the official artist, but yes, I will be sketching. Excuse me."

"There you have it." The reporter faced the camera. "I would love to see those sketches."

Jordan whispered out, "So would I."

"Did you say something?" Meg asked.

"Uh, no." Jordan snapped out of her Television watching daze. "No."

"OK, then." Meg shut of the set. "It's time to go."

\*\*\*

Jordan waited for them, and watched for any signs at all, or even a gut feeling of how the trial would go.

She watched for them to enter.

They cleaned up for the trial. Not at all the vision of what was projected across the American television screens. Gone were the orange

jump suits and chains. The three men, Gary, Josh, and Jed. All wore suits, and had received haircuts for the occasion.

Despite their cleaned outward appearance, Jed and Josh, were thugs, it showed without a doubt in the smug faces. They smirked when they walked in, glanced at Jordan, and took their seats. Gary was different; he was reserved and apparently nervous. His head hung low when he walked by Jordan.

Jordan saw that. She saw the reaction and her gut screamed that perhaps, Gary was the key.

That remained to be seen.

Meg sat behind Jordan occasionally resting her hand on Jordan's shoulder. Her ex husband was there seeking comfort with his new wife.

Amy would have been with Meg, but when Amy saw Victor, she immediately raced to him. Constance was there, and advised Jordan that perhaps it was best if Amy sat near the back with Victor. Jordan reluctantly agreed. Victor was ecstatic.

The trial was about to begin.

The bailiff entered with an, "All rise"

As Jordan stood, her heart sunk to her stomach.

Was she really ready for it all?

\*\*\*

The District Attorney gave his opening statement. Pretty much the first day of the trial would be just that. The opening statements. Jordan didn't listen much to him, her eyes kept shifting to the three charged with Trevor's death. What was going through their minds?

She saw the exchange of looks between Gary and a woman who sat near Jordan, the woman was there when Jordan arrived. Was she his wife? It looked like it. A teenage boy was with her, they huddled, and the woman cried.

As hard as it was for Jordan to believe, Jed and Josh had family there too. It seemed there was a defendant section. Despite what the three men did, their families were suffering for it.

A single attorney represented all of them. All for one, or none for all. The District attorney told Jordan that that was a good defense tactic. He tried to get the judge to make them be tried separately, but it was turned down.

Of course, one trial was better than three for Jordan.

The defense attorney, Ryan was in his forties, and just as smug as the men he defended. Dapper, yet down to earth, and didn't come across as above the modest jurors.

The DA's last line of, "Bring home a verdict of guilty," was still ringing in the air when Ryan exhaled loudly. He tapped his pencil on the table, stood up, walked around, and approached the jury.

"What can I say?" Ryan lifted his hands and then paced to the railing. "They didn't do it." He clenched the wooden rail. "My three clients didn't kill twelve year old Trevor Wyatt. They are not cold blooded killers, they did not set out to harm the boy, it was ... an accident. An accident." He exhaled. "Accidents, we've all had them. Your mind is cluttered, we're rushing, we don't realize then ..." With a clasp of his hand, Ryan whispered. "Bam, something happens. Now, I won't lie to you. They aren't angels. They committed a crime of armed robbery, for that they were convicted. For that they confessed. But ... the sequential events after the robbery were not intentional, they were not down with malice, they were accidents. These three men ..." Ryan walked to the table "Are not killers. Josh Bogart, a manager at a video store, baby on the way. Jed Thompson, he owned his own business for years. Gary Lewis. Gary is the father of four boys. Four." Ryan held up his fingers. "He loves kids, he'll tell you that. Why ... would he kill a child. It doesn't make sense. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury ..." he paced back over to the table. "The broke the law that afternoon, but, the crime they committed wasn't murder."

Jordan insidiously watched the jury's faces while Ryan delivered the opening statement. Were they engrossed? Did he do better than Paul? Only once did her eyes lifted and wander, and that was when he mentioned that Gary was a father.

Jordan got sick to her stomach. A father. His poor wife, she thought. His children. They would have to grow up knowing their father went to jail for killing another child.

The six hour first day of trial, was filled with procedure, introduction of evidence, and opening states. After which, the judge called it a day, stating the prosecution would start to present its case the next day.

Jordan was more than ready to go home. She stood as the judge left, and remained standing while they hurriedly took Gary, Josh, and Jed from the courtroom.

Day ended.

She turned to get her purse, and as she did, a woman was standing there. The woman clutched the teenage boy, her face red, eyes puffy.

The woman was the same one that Jordan suspected was Gary's wife.

"Miss Wyatt," her voice cracked as she spoke. "I know you don't want to speak to me. But if I can have one second. My name is Anita Lewis."

She was. She was Gary's wife. Jordan swallowed. What did she want? The last thing she wanted to hear was how her husband was innocent. How he was a good man.

"No," Meg answered for Jordan. "I don't think that's a good idea. Now do you?"

Anita lowered her eyes.

Jordan sighed nervously. "What is it that you wanted?"

"Jordan," Meg warned "You've only yourself to blame from this moment, if she says something hurtful."

"Oh, my God, no." Anita wisped out. "No. I ... I ... we ... We just wanted to say we are sorry. I'm very sorry. I'm very sorry for your loss. As a mother I ..." she stopped. "Just know I'm sorry for everything my husband has put you through. Excuse me." She shuffled away quickly.

Jordan didn't have a moment to say anything in return. She watched Anita until her daughter's voice drew her attention.

"Mommy."

A smile, the first one all day crossed Jordan's face as Amy ran to her. "Hey, you. I'm sorry this day was long."

"It was fun."

"Fun?" Jordan asked.

"After lunch, me and Victor drew pictures in the hall."

Jordan's eyes shifted to Constance with question.

Constance shrugged. "They wouldn't let us back in."

Amy said, "I had a tickle in my throat."

Meg whispered to Jordan. "Maybe not being here isn't such a bad idea for Amy."

"I don't want her out of my sight," Jordan replied.

"Yeah, well she was today. Wasn't she?" Meg said. "And Jordan, I don't want her hearing the things that might be said. Do you?"

Constance said, "I can teach her right outside in the hall, if you like."

Jordan nodded. "Maybe that's not such a bad idea."

Amy tugged on Jordan's sleeve. "Mommy, can Victor come over tonight and watch movies. I would like him to."

Jordan shivered a breath, she peered around, and Victor was making his way near the door. "Maybe, hold on."

As Jordan moved to Victor, Meg nudged Amy with a wink and a smile. "Way to go, little one."

"Victor," Jordan called out. "Wait."

Victor turned around, stopping to let other leave before him. "Hey, uh, what's up?"

"Thanks for taking care of Amy."

"You're speaking to me." Victor smiled. "I'm glad. How are you?"

"As good as to be expected. Hey, listen, um, Amy wants o know if you want to come over tonight."

The corner of Victor's mouth raised. "Amy huh?"

"Yeah."

"It was Amy's idea?"

"Well ... yes, it was, Victor ..."

"Thanks. But, uh ... tell Amy, I can't. I'll see her tomorrow. OK?"

Jordan nodded, accepted a smile from Victor, and watched him join the train of people waiting to leave. She returned dot her mother and daughter. "Amy, he said he couldn't."

Meg, let out an 'hmpf'.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jordan asked.

"Do you blame him? You were very mean to him. Did you apologize yet?" Meg asked.

"No."

"Then I wouldn't expect him over your house, any time soon." Meg took Amy's hand. "Come on, honey, let's go. Maybe we'll invite Victor to my house and he'll come there." Meg started to leave with Amy.

"Wait. Stop." Jordan called out. "You're taking Amy without ..."

"Jordan?" Paul, the district Attorney caught her attention. "I'll walk with you, incase the media is real heavy."

"Thanks," Jordan felt Paul grab a hold of her arm, and escort her. "Paul, what do you make of Gary Lewis?"

"What do you mean?"

"He seems different than the other two."

"He does." Paul was very matter of fact, "Why are you asking?"

"Well, do you think he could be the key? Maybe he'll confess."

"I doubt it."

"Well, maybe when you have him on the stand."

"Jordan." In the hall, Paul stopped and faced her. "He isn't taking the stand. Neither are the other two."

“What? How? I thought they had to. Can’t you make them. I really think this Gary guy could break.”

“I do too. But ...Nope.” Paul shook his head. “They don’t need to take the stand. Many defendants don’t. They are innocent until proven guilty. They have nothing to prove. We have the burden of proof. It’s not uncommon that after the prosecution rests, for it to go right to closing arguments. We’re largely circumstantial. We’re going on their actions and reactions the day of the murder but unfortunately it may not be enough. And to be honest, without us having any eye witnesses, they may not have to present a defense at all.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"I don't know, Max." Victor paced, as usual, while he spoke on the phone. He was never one to sit still and have a conversation. He would walk, paint, poke the fire, anything. Anything that would make it seem as if he were wasting time on the phone.

"Where are you guys at now in the trial?" Max asked.

"The prosecution is ready to wrap up. I think. Not sure. That's what the DA said. He has two more witnesses, Danny, and the store owner."

"Neither one of them are actual witnesses," Max said. "I was watching FOX."

"Yeah, me too. The panel board said that so far nothing was given."

"Do you agree with that?"

"I'm partial. I think they proved the state of mind of the men and they had the capabilities to do it. I think that's good enough."

"Let's hope the jury sees it the same way."

Victor exhaled. "I don't know how they can see anything but hatred for them. Max, they ... they showed pictures of his body, Max."

"Oh, man."

"Tell me about it. How Jordan is handling it, I don't know." Victor sighed. "The pictures were everywhere on this board. I couldn't even tell it was a kid. Jordan, didn't look. She couldn't have."

"Where was Amy in all this?"

"In the hall."

"What is Jordan saying?"

"Not much."

"You mean you still haven't spoken to her, or is she just being quite." Max asked

"We still haven't spoke, I thought, you know, after the first day of the trial that, things were going to get back to normal. She asked me over the house. I told her no because it was Amy's invitation. I was hoping that Jordan would see that I wanted her to invite me over. But since that day she hasn't. And it seems as if she is drifting further away." Victor walked over to the living room window. "I miss her. It's been two weeks. All I get from Jordan is daily glances, sad smiles, and a half wave goodbye."

"Maybe, Victor, maybe she is waiting for you to come to her. Maybe you shouldn't be so stubborn."

"It isn't a matter of being stubborn, Max." Victor said.

"What do you mean? You not making the first move, you waiting on her is being stubborn."

"No, it's like this," Victor paused to gather the right words. "Remember when you were a kid and your parents used to take you to a carnival or amusement park?"

"Yeah."

"Remember how you used to ride the rides. But your parents, they didn't always ride with you. Sometimes they couldn't. What would they do?"

"They'd stand there watching," Max said.

"Exactly. They'd watch, if there was trouble then they'd jump in. But pretty much they'd stand on the sidelines and wait for you to finish the ride and see what you wanted to do next. Go home, ride more."

"And your point?"

"My point is, this is a ride for Jordan. I can only watch. Like a roller coaster she is up and down through this whole thing. Understandably so. And I don't think it's fair that I intervene in that or interfere. I think, Max, it's for the best if ..." Victor parted the window. "If I act like that parent. Stand back. Watch, and wait to see what she wants to do when it's all said and done."

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"Jordan, get away from the window." It wasn't a line spoken by Roy often. In fact, he almost said 'Meg, get away the window', that phrase he was used to.

"Leave her alone," Meg said as she put items on the table.

"Jordan released the parted drape. She paced her hands in her pockets and with lifted shoulders and heavy heart; she walked to the dining room table. "You need any help?"

"No. Are you OK?"

"I'm Ok." Jordan grabbed an olive.

"Is Victor home?" Meg asked.

"Yeah. I ... I saw him looking out his window."

"For crying out loud, Jordan." Meg whispered "Both of you are going to drive your selves insane. Go talk to the man."

"I can't."

"Why? Why be stubborn."

"It's not stubborn. I think he doesn't want me to."

"Oh, that's nonsense." Meg flung gout her hand. "He loves you."



"I know."

"Then go." She pointed to the door. "Go talk to him."

Jordan really looked as if she were in debate. But sadly, she shook her head. "I can't. I want to. But I don't think it is fair to him."

"Why?" Meg asked.

"Because right now, with all that's going on. How can I straighten things out with Victor, when my head isn't even straight? Maybe after it's all said and done." Jordan returned to the window. "Maybe."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"And what is your position with the Redbird Police Department." Paul the DA asked Danny.

"Actually, I'm a Ashtabula Country Police officer. Redbird doesn't have a full force."

"But you have jurisdiction in Redbird?"

"Yes, sir."

"The Night of April 19th, were you on duty?"

"No, sir, I was not."

"How did you end up on duty?"

"I was actually, getting ready to go to Jordan's house," Danny said.

"Ms. Wyatt."

"Yes."

"Why is that?" Paul asked.

"We were involved. Dating. A serious relationship. We were going to have dinner, like we always did ..."

Danny had just put on the new shirt he purchased, tucked it in, and checked his reflection. The phone rang, catching his attention. He picked it up after checking the ID. "I know I know," he said. "I'm late."

"Yeah, well, so is Trevor." Jordan said.

"What's up?"

"Oh," she sighed out. "He went to Corky's. But he left about a half an hour ago. Can you top by there on your way."

Danny chuckled "Knowing we were having dinner, you know how he is at Corky's."

"I know. I know. Can you?"

"Absolutely. I'll head there now." Danny hung up.

Danny cleared his throat then produced a sad smile "See, Trevor talked to everyone. He always spent time talking to Corky. Always. Corky would tell his war stories, and Trevor would listen for hours."

"So it wasn't unusual for Trevor to hang out at the store?"

"No, sir." Danny replied.

"So you got the call, then what?"

"I told her I'd go there right away, I was on my way out the door. I have a police scanner, and it plays constantly, in my house, one on my car. Always. Just as I grabbed my car keys, I heard the radio call about Corky's."

"What did you hear?"

"That Corky's had been robbed. I few there. Arrived in under a minute."

"What did you find?"

"Police were on the scene. The place had been robbed. Corky was a mess. My first reaction, my first question was .... Have you seen Trevor Wyatt." Danny closed his eyes. "That's when he told me what all transpired in the store."

"Objection." The defense attorney stood up. "Hearsay."

"Sustained," the judge stated. "Please keep your questions and answers only to those things Officer Conner witnessed firsthand."

Paul nodded. "Officer Conner. What did you do next?"

Danny's eyes opened and he stared out.

"All units. All units." Danny spoke on the radio. "Be on the look out for a twelve year old boy. Possibly being pursued by suspects driving a red ford pick up truck, Three males."

Sergeant Bill approach Danny. "Want me to call the mother?"

"No. Not yet. Not yet. I don't want to worry her. Trevor could be hiding somewhere." Danny peered around the street. "Scared, maybe even on his way home. But let's look first."

The sergeant nodded.

Danny jumped in his car ...

It sounded like Danny was ready to gag; in fact, he coughed once, his face flush, eyes watering. "Kaymen Road. And it was very obvious." Danny squeezed the corner of his eyes.

"No further questions," Paul said. "Your witness." He walked back to the table and sat down.

"Thank you." Brad stood; he played with a pencil in his hand. "Officer Conner, how long have you been a member of the Ashtabula County police department."

"Twelve years."

"In your twelve years, how many murders have you personally investigated."

Danny paused. "Investigated?"

"Yes, been on the crime scene. Took in the scene. Took evidence. "How many."

"I'm a traffic officer."

"Answer the question." Brad beckoned.

"One."

"And that one would be Trevor Wyatt, is that correct?"

"Objection." Paul stood. "The number of homicides Officer Conner has encountered is not relevant to what he viewed out this particular day."

Brad added, "I beg to differ your honor. Knowing the difference between an accident and a murder, can sometimes take a skilled eye."

The judge nodded "Overruled."

Paul huffed and sat down.

Brad continued. "So is it correct that Trevor Wyatt is the one and only alleged murder."

"Yes." Danny answered.

"Tell me about Kaymen Road."

"It's a two lane road just on the skirt of town, it actually wraps around, leading to a field path that's a short cut to Jordan's street."

"How many times a week would you say Trevor rode his bike on Kaymen road."

Danny shook his head.

"I'm sorry can you give a verbal response."

"He didn't. Not to our knowledge. Never."

"Why is that?"

Danny only peered outward.

"Office Conner, why is that?"

Danny took a deep breath. "Both Jordan and I told Trevor he wasn't allowed to take Kaymen road."

"And the reason?" Brad asked.

Danny hesitated.

"The reason?"

Danny replied with aggravation and defeat. "It's a winding road. Lots of blind spots. Little traffic. We told ... we told Trevor it was too dangerous and if something ever happened ... to him, it could take hours to find out."

"Like that fateful day. Thank you. No further questions." Brad turned and walked to the table.

The Judge looked at Paul. "Any redirect?"

"No your honor."

"You may step down," the judge said to Danny.

Sadly, Danny stepped from the witness stand. He looked at the faces of the jury then to Jordan. As he passed her, he mouthed the words, "I'm sorry"

Jordan nodded one and shivered a breath.

Paul stood. "State calls to the stand Elwood Victor Brown."

He was an older man, pushing eighty, but tall and fit with snowy white hair. He limped to the witness stand, a result of an old war wound he always spoke of.

He was sworn in, then he sat down.

"State you name for the record," the court bailiff said.

"Elwood Brown. But everyone knows me as Corky. I own Corky's Market."

Paul walked forward. "Morning Mr. Brown. How long have you owned your story?"

Corky looked to the ceiling. "Bout forty years now."

"How many times in the forty years has your market been robbed?"

"Had some shoplifters but never robbed. Redbird is a pretty safe place. We have fine Police officers." He nodded.

"You remember the April 19th, correct."

"Like yesterday. Will never forget it." Corky said.

"Why don't you tell me about it."

"Where do you want me to start?" Corky asked.

"Take us back to just before it happened."

"I distinctly remember it was pushing five o'clock, see Cause Elsa Mathews just came in, and bought her lottery tickets. She always comes in about five minutes to five. No exception that day. I was doing the normal things."

"Goddamn lottery scratch offs." As he sat on a stool behind the counter. "Can't never get a winner."

Trevor peeked out from behind the comic books stand, which was in the back of the store by the freezer. "You get them for free, Mr. Corky?"

"Heck no, got to pay for them."

"You shouldn't be spending your money on gambling."

Corky held up the ticket. "See this here? Top prize ten thousand dollars. One ten thousand dollar winner and I'm a happy man."

"Bet no body wins on them."

"Ain't so. Meg Hawthorn won five hundred just last week. Yep. Got the good batch in here, just gotta find the ticket."

Trevor snickered. "Oh, Cool, you have the new punisher." He disappeared behind the comic book rack.

Corky snickered with a shake of his head, and returned to his lottery tickets.

The old fashion 'ring' of the bell was just a split second warning to what happened next.

The wooden door careened open with a 'bang' and Gary, Josh, and Leo, all with shot guns, came barreling in ...

"And do you see those three men in this court room?" Paul asked.

"Yes, I do." Corky answered.

"Can you point them out?"

Corky raised a hand and pointed to Gary, Josh, and Jed.

"Let the record show the witness has indicated to the three defendants." Paul said. "Mr. Brown, Continued ..."

"Hands in the air old man!" Josh blasted, the older of the three and the one who looked the straggiest. "Now!" he pointed the shot gun at Corky, reached down to the counter, and yanked the phone.

Corky raised his hands high. "I don't have nothing you want."

"You don't think?" Josh laughed. "Open up the register!"

Corky took a drink of water, and set it down.

"And where was Trevor when this occurred. Do you recall?" Paul asked.

"Yes, sir, I do." Corky said. "I remember because I liked Trevor. Used to hang out with me all the time. I remember tying not to be seen, but I was looking for him. Where was he? I kept on saying to myself. Then I saw his magazine on the floor. And I saw those little black sneakers he always wore. The boy was hiding. I kept thinking. Stay hid, Trevor. Stay hid ..."

"Give it up now!" Josh blasted. "What are you waiting for!"

Corky stepped to the register and opened it.

"In a bag!" Josh tossed a bag at Corky.

Corky hurriedly filled it.

"The lottery money, too. Move it." He motioned the shot gun. "Hurry."

Corky scooted over to the lottery machine; he opened up that drawer and dumped the money in the bag. He handed it to Josh.

Josh opened it. "What is this? This ain't all."

"It is. I swear. The wife made the drops and the state lottery safe don't come with a key for me. I don't have any more. That's all."

"Well this ain't shit, old man." Josh turned the shot gun, raised it, revved back, and slammed Corky in the side of the head with the butt of the gun.

Corky dropped to his knees. He tried to keep his strength, hands reaching for the glass counter. He could see the three men reaching for snacks, then he saw something else, Trevor.

Trevor huddled. Hands covering his ears, he curled up tighter with each sound the men made.

Then as soon as the door slammed, Trevor turned. He looked about, checking for a clear coast, and then got on his hands and knees and began to crawl.

At that point Corky dropped to the floor. Blood started to flow from his head.

"Mr. Corky." Trevor crawled behind the counter with him.

"Trevor."

"You need help." Trevor reached up for the phone. He saw the dangling chord. "I gotta get you some help."

"No, stay put. You stay put."

"They're gone. I gotta get you some help. I'll be back."

"Trevor no ...."

Corky stared at his hands. His head shook, and he raised his sad eyes. "And then he was gone. Trevor left."

After a moment of silence, Paul asked. "In your opinion ..."

"Objection," Brad stood. "This witness is not an expert in anything."

"I'll rephrase." Paul said. "From what you witnessed. How were the three men acting?"

"Like animals."

"Objection."

"Wild, animals."

"Objection." Brad spoke out.

"Hell bent on causing trouble. Loud obnoxious..."

"Objection!"

The judge pounded the gavel.

"Sadistic, pathetic animals!" Corky blasted.

"Your honor," Brad yelled. "I object."

Corky scoffed, "Yeah, well, I object too. I object to what them bastards did to that boy."

The judge slammed his gavel four, five times. "Enough. The jury will disregard the witnesses comments. Do you have any further questions for this witness?"

"No, your honor." Paul said.

"Defense, your witness."

Brad lifted for his seat. "We have no questions."

"That'll be all." The judge nodded to Corky, "You may step down."

Corky rose. He didn't take his eyes off of Gary, Josh, and Jed. He walked from the witness stand, in his slow limping manner. With a glare in his eyes, he paused as he walked by the defense table, leaned inward, and spit in the face of Josh.

The court erupted in chaos. Josh jumped to his feet, and the judge slammed his gavel.

"Bailiff, remove this witness from the courthouse!" the judge ordered.

Two bailiffs grabbed hold of Corky who was in a stare down with Josh. After a failed attempt at being gentle, they began to drag him.

"Burn in hell, Bastard." Corky flipped off Josh as he was led out. "All of you burn."

Amidst the moans, chants, laughter, and chattering in the court room, the Judge pounded his gavel insidiously to bring silence.

The commotion subsided. Jordan breathed out slowly through her parted lips; she held an almost amused look to her over the testimony of Corky.

The judge looked frazzled, he wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief, and took a breath. "Call your next witness."

Paul stood up. "That concludes our witnesses. The state will rest on ..."

"Wait!" Gary stood up. "Wait. Stop."

One slam of the gavel and the judge looked at the defense tale. "Counselor control your client."

"What the hell are you doing?" Josh blasted. "Sit."

"No." Gary shook his head. "I want to testify."

Brad tugged at him. "Sit down. Now," He spoke through clenched teeth, and then stood up. "Your honor, my client is ..."

"Your client is frustrated and wants to talk." Gary said with emotions, and then looked to Paul. "Call me as a witness. They won't let me testify. I



want ... No, I need to testify. Please.” He looked at the judge. “Please. Call me as a witness.”

After a moment of thought the judge called both attorneys forward. A covered microphone kept secret what was being said. When Paul and Brad returned to their perspective tables, the judge spoke. “We’ll break for fifteen minutes. Bailiff, take this Mr. Lewis into separate custody until which time the court reconvenes at two PM.” He slammed his gavel and rose.

Reporters fled from the room, and Jordan rushed forward. “Paul, what’s going on?” she asked.

Paul quickly gathered up folders, shoving them into his case. “I don’t know. But I’m gonna find out.” He closed his briefcase.

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Jordan didn’t know how to interpret the look Paul gave her. A wide eyed, flick of the eyebrow look, just before Gary was sworn in.

After stating his name for the record, Gary fidgeted in his seat. He was obviously flustered, he kept ringing his hands, and his voice cracked often.

He made eye contact only with Paul. Barely looking anywhere else but to his hands.

As Paul made his witness stand approach, Brad stood. “Your honor, I would like to object to this. It is highly unethical that a defendant be a witness for the prosecution.”

Upon hearing this, Jordan quickly looked at Meg, and they clenched hands in hopefulness.

The judge responded, and with a monotone sound. “This was discussed in chambers counselor, I don’t appreciate your attempt to sway the jury with objections.”

“But, your honor,” Brad said. “If...”

“The witness will testify,” the judge ruled. “You’ll have your chance to cross examine. Now sit down. Prosecution, proceed.”

“Thank you, your honor.” Paul walked slowly to the witness stand. “Mr. Lewis, I’m going to keep my questions short and easy. OK?”

Gary nodded.

“Tell the court ... what happened to Trevor Wyatt.”

“Where ... where do you want me to start?” Gary nervously asked.

“Take us though your account.”

"Yes, sir." Gary cleared his throat. "See, the store was on this little road. About a half mile outside town. We rode by it a couple times the week before. We knew it was empty about five. No cars. Nothing. So we didn't even expect anyone but the owner to be there."

"You didn't see Trevor's bike?"

"No, sir." Gary answered. "It was on the side of the building, and we didn't see it until Trevor jumped on it."

"Proceed."

"After Josh had nailed the old man, he grabbed a bunch of Snicker bars, cause he liked them and we raced out the store. They wouldn't go. They were pissing around, with the money. Josh was driving, I was in the passenger's seat, and Jed was in the back ..."

"Let's go. Let's go." Gary beckoned. "What are you doing?"

"Count that, Jed." Josh tossed the bag in the back. "And hold your horses, ain't no one round." He started the truck. Just as he did, the door to the store opened and Trevor walked out.

Trevor froze in that doorway; he looked directly at Josh, and then darted to the side of the store.

"Shit. He was in there," Josh said.

"Let him go," Gary told him. "He doesn't know anything."

Trevor sped, on his bike, from the side of the building.

Josh slammed his hand against the steering wheel. "Fuck! He's getting away."

"Go after him." Jed said with a sadistic laugh.

"What are you guys nuts!" Gary yelled. "He's a kid."

"He's a fuckin' witness." Josh threw the truck in reverse and backed out.

"Josh! No." Gary beckoned.

Josh slammed on the breaks. "You want out. Get out. Go on. The cops will be here."

Gary opened the door.

Josh laughed, tossed the truck in drive, and sped forward "Too late." He pulled the truck onto the narrow tree lined road. "Where is he? I don't see him."

Leaning up from the back, Jed pointed. "There. Up there."

Trevor was riding fast. He was on the edge of the road a good distance ahead. But not a safe enough distance when pursued by a truck.

Legs moving top speed, Trevor, glanced back and then turned on Kaymen road.

Josh hit the gas.

Clenching the dashboard, Gary glared at Josh. "What are you doing. Enough. OK."

"Scare him," Jed taunted, and then nudged Josh. "Closer, Scare him,"

"No!" Gary yelled.

"Fuck scaring him," Josh turned on Kaymen.

"Stop this!"

"Faster!" Jed urged.

Josh depressed the gas.

"Enough!" Gary grabbed the wheel and jerked it to the right, careening the truck off the road.

Trevor, in one of his many glances back, smiled when he saw the truck had stopped. He kept his peddling, stead fast, huffing and breathing heavy as he rode on.

"Crack!" Josh nailed Gary. His face spun and slammed into the passenger's window, and Josh pulled the truck back on to the road.

All expression dropped on Trevor's face when one second he's free, the next second the truck is nearing. With a groan of angst he peddled on.

The truck grew closer.

"Asshole! Stop it, you scared him enough!" Gary screamed.

"Shut the fuck up!" Josh blasted.

"Get him!" Jed urged.

"I'm on him."

"No!" Gary dove for the wheel, and was greeted with a backhand.

Through Trevor's view, the truck was a whole, getting larger and larger. He couldn't keep up his speed.

Closer.

Trevor spotted it, a chance to veer off. Not much further. He checked the truck

Closer.

Fifty feet. Right ahead. The side of the road wasn't as deep. He could turn off. Go into Hopkins fields. Not far at all.

Heart beating, breath heavy, a bit of relief bestowed Trevor, when the freedom of escape was less than ten feet.

Over his shoulders he looked again.

Headlights.

Silence.

Total silence engulfed the courtroom.

Gary swallowed harshly, eyes welling with tears. "We hit him."

The exhales rang out in the courtroom, just before the gasps but it was nothing compared to the reaction that followed what Gary said next.

"And then we ran over him ... and backed up to make sure he was dead. I can still hear ... I can still hear the bang. Thump. The feeling." His eyes closed ...

"No!" Gary's one long scream rang out on the empty road. "No!" he cried as he dropped to his knees by Trevor.

They had become almost one. Painted with blood, the bicycle and Trevor's body weaved and mangled together. Blood smeared about the road. A tire was twenty feet up. It was obvious that upon impact, Trevor and the bike went under the truck.

"Get up!" Josh ordered.

"Oh, my God." Gary's hands went to Trevor's neck. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God, we killed him. Oh, my God."

"Get up!"

Click.

Gary looked over his shoulder and faced the barrel of the shotgun.

"Fuck him," Jed said. "Let's get out of here."

"Pussy," Josh shook his head, pulled back his aim, and raced to the drivers side of the truck.

Both men jumped in.

Gary barely got out of the way when the truck screeched forward, going over Trevor and the bike one last time before disappearing down the road.

Crawling on hands in knees, Gary made it to Trevor's body. Then after whispering, "I'll get help," He jumped to his feet and started running.

Josh and Jed glared from the defense table, but they weren't noticed. Sobs filled the courtroom; the loudest of them came from Gary.

“I tried,” He cried. “I tried. I found a phone, I called the police. I gave the truck description. I turned myself in. I tried.” Finally, for the first time during the testimony he looked at Jordan. “I’m sorry. I am so sorry. I didn’t want to kill your boy. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Gary buried his face in his hands, and broke down, crying uncontrollably, while apologizing over and over, even as they led him from the court room, he kept on saying, “I’m sorry.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Fuckin’ yes!” someone shouted.

The gavel slammed.

The court room erupted after the first verdict was delivered for Josh.

‘Of first degree murder .... Guilty.’

Upon the reading of Jed’s, people were on their feet despite, the judge’s warning.

Even though the trial continued for another week, everyone knew it was over when Gary delivered his dramatic and heart wrenching testimony. The defense side was weak, and Josh’s and Jed’s decision to take the stand didn’t help.

They weren’t as sincere as Gary.

They looked like liars.

Justice had been served, and the people and media poured from the courtroom.

Gary plea bargained. He pled guilt to accessory, and wasn’t there for the end of the trial.

Jordan embraced Meg for a good five minutes; a quad hug then ensued with her father, and Carl joining in. She broke the embrace, wiped a tear, and stepped back when she felt the noiseless vibration on her hip.

The text messenger for communication with Constance.

Jordan read the message.

‘I am proud of you. And happy for you. Victor.’

With an exhale, and a smile, she turned around.

She saw Victor buried in the back of the courtroom, and she made eye contact. It was time, she believed to bridge the gap that had formed between them during the two and a half week trial. She took a step but was intercepted by Michael her ex, who embraced her with joy. Breaking away from Michael, Jordan was met with Danny. Danny was a bit more enthusiastic than Michael; he lifted her from her feet when he embraced her.

The problems and juvenile tactics he had with Victor seemed insignificant in the scope of it all.

Set to her feet, smile on her face, Jordan straighten her clothes, peered around Danny to find Victor.

Gone.

Victor was gone

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"And you haven't talked to him, Max?" Jordan asked on the phone. It was evening, let evening, Amy was sleeping, Jordan paced about her kitchen.

"I talked to right after the verdict was read," Max said. "But not since. Have you tried calling him?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling you. Has he said anything ... anything to you at all?"

"Well ... he was concerned, you know, about you during all this. He didn't want to interfere and he was pretty uncertain where your head would be after the trial."

"That makes sense."

"So he just was gonna watch until it was done."

"The trial is done. Max, without him telling me that, I could see that was what he was doing. He would have dinner at my mom's ... when I wasn't there."

"Jordan that tells me he is leaving the lines open. Which is good. I worried when Victor declared his personal offices closed until after the trial. Working together was good for you. By the way I got the insurance forms. With all that was on your mind, you didn't need to send them."

"They were here. I figured I should send them. Where is he?" Jordan asked. "I wanted to talk to him after the hearing. He left. I even went over to his house to invite him for dinner. He was gone. He was still gone when I left my mom's."

"Have you left a message?" Max asked. "A note. Something to tell him you were calling, and trying to reach him?"

"No."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe I should ... thanks, Max." A few more lines of chat and Jordan ended the call. Phone still in her hand she looked at her kitchen table. It was filled with every single sketch that Victor had done of her.

She muttered out what she would say to Victor in the message, and then with courage, she dialed the phone.

After several rings she received Victor's voice mail. She opened her mouth to leave her message ... but stopped.

She lost all nerve and hung up.

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Victor looked at the digital display on his phone. He saw Jordan's number. Shaking his head, he put down the phone and walked into his dining room.

An open box was on the floor. After grabbing a marker, he wrote on the flap 'Jordan's Office Stuff', then grabbed a roll of tape and sealed the box. He lifted it and placed it along side of the other packed boxes.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was just before four in the morning when Victor arrived at Jordan's house. Sketch pad tucked under his arm, he used a key to open the back door, and then he slowly entered without making a noise.

The house was dark. The sun hadn't even begun to make its appearance, and the moon was his guidance, that and the upstairs night light ht was plugged into the wall.

As always, Jordan's bedroom door was ajar, and Victor crept in. He left the door open, and walked to the window opening the drapes.

A hint of light from the hall and the moon was the only illumination.

He paused by her bed as she slept, and watched her lay partially on her side. He leaned over Jordan, and hovered his lips just above hers, failing to kiss her before gabbing a chair and silently sliding it bed side.

From his tee shit pocket he pulled out a pen light and turned it on. He flipped open his sketch pad, grabbed a pencil, and placed the pen light in his mouth as a guide.

Would it be his last sketch?

Something inside of Victor told him it would be.

He began to draw. His eyes moved from Jordan to the pad as fast as his hand moved.

Jordan. Sketch. Jordan. Sketch.

Choke.

Victor coughed and the pen dropped from his mouth, onto the pad as his hand fumbled the pencil. Hand shaking, Victor gripped the light and pencil again, this time, he drew slower.

"Jordan," he called. "Jordan. Jordan wake up." His hand stroked the image slowly. Slower than he had ever drawn. "Jordan ... please wake up."

Jordan opened her eyes. In her shock, she jumped, and sprang to a sitting position. "Victor. What the hell ..."

"Jordan, don't move."

"Why are you ..."

"Don't move." He said firm, hands moving.

"Victor, what the hell is going ...."

"Jordan, Trevor ..." Victor spoke breathy. "Trevor is in the room."

Emotional, loud, and airy, Jordan gasped.

"I can't draw much slower. I don't know how much longer I'll see him."

"Oh, my God, where?" she asked, hyperventilating some.

Victor looked from the sketch; Jordan was swinging her legs from the bed.

"No. Don't move. Back in bed. Stay like that," he said. "Tilt your head back some."

Jordan slowly tilted her head back.

"There. Right there." Victor gripped the pencil tighter.

Jordan's chest rose and fell.

"He's touching you." Victor breathed out emotionally.

Jordan ached out a moan that precluded the tears that immediately streamed down her face. Her body shuddered in her crying.

Victor, too, could barely speak. "He's right above you. You're looking right at him and he's touching you. Oh My God, Jordan he's touching you."

Lips quivering, Jordan tried to catch her breath. "Trevor."

No sooner did she say that, she gasped once more when the vision of Trevor appeared above her.

She saw him

Jordan saw her son.

Translucent to a point, yet clear. His figure not complete, but his face was. His hands glided against Jordan's cheek as he smiled at her.

Shaking, Jordan slowly reached to Trevor's apparition. "Trevor. I miss you. I love you."

A final stroke, hard and pronounced sounded off in the room, and Trevor's spirit vanished.

Jordan released a sob. She brought her knees to her chest, lowered her head, and sobbed.

Drained, and spent, Victor stood. He carried the sketch pad to Jordan, nudging her lightly with it.

When she lifted her eyes to the image, she started to cry again. She brought the pad to her chest and closed her eyes. Victor ran his hand over her head, turned and walked out.

Jordan wept for a solid minute without paying attention to what went on in the room. Never did she expect to be alone. The shutting of a truck door made her cock her head. She looked at the sketch, then to her room. Victor was gone.

The engine sound, made her spring from bed and race to the window. Her hand slammed against the pane of glass as she watched Victor drive off.

In another glance down to the sketch, a tear rolled off her cheek and fell to the image on the paper.

She clutched it close to her chest and watched until she could no longer see Victor's tail lights.

\*\*\*

Barely had the sun risen, and Meg waddled out of her house. "Hurry up, Roy. I wanted to get to the flea market when they opened."

"Don't blame me because you didn't wake up."

"Damn, Alarm clock. Good thing for the truck ..." Her word trailed off as she stared out.

Roy looked to where Meg focused. "Son of a bitch."

Meg shook her head once in disgust. Down the street in front of Victor's was a large moving truck. Movers hustled about at his home. "What is that Ninny up to?"

"Moving?"

Meg backhanded Roy. "Screw the flea market. I'll handle this end." She started to walk toward Victor's. "You handle the other."

"What other?"

"Jordan." Meg said.

"Meg!"

Meg stopped, and turned. "What?"

"What do I say?" Roy asked.

Waving him off, Meg spun on her heels and moved quicker to Victor's.

\*\*\*

The coffee had just finished brewing, and Jordan poured a cup. She was dressed, and looked more ready to go, than some one at seven in the morning.

In fact she hadn't been to bed since Victor's early morning call. Sipping her coffee as she walked, she looked at the time, and then sat at the kitchen table to stare at the sketch.

Her back door opened.

"Jordan," Roy walked in.

"Daddy? What are you doing here?"

"I needed to talk to you." He walked to the coffee pot. "I need a sip of coffee first, your mother dragged me out of bed before I had my cup." He poured some, sipped, and gasped. "Promised me Coyle's but that ain't happening."

"What's going on? Is Mom OK."

"In the health sense, yes." Roy walked o the table. "She ..." he paused when he saw the sketch.

Brightly, Jordan spoke. "Victor did this, Daddy. He snuck in last night. He drew me, he saw him, I saw him He touched me, Daddy. He touched me."

"Who?"

"Trevor."

Roy sipped his coffee.

Jordan swallowed. "I know you don't believe. Do you?"

"Does it matter?" Roy asked. "What matters is that you believe it." He reached over and laid his hand on Jordan's. "Have you spoken to Victor since he drew this?"

Jordan shook her head. "No. He left right away. And I figured he's probably sleeping now."

"Did you know he's leaving?"

"What do you mean?" Jordan asked.

"Leaving Redbird."

Jordan chuckled "Daddy, he's not going anywhere. He hasn't even put a for sale sign on his place. Victor is ..."

"Leaving." Roy said. "Today. Now. I saw the movers."

"What?" Jordan slid her hand from Roy's. "But ..."

"But nothing. Guess he doesn't need to sell the house to move. And if you don't do something right now. You aren't only gonna lose the man who gave you this ..." he laid his and on the sketch. "You are going to lose the man who gave you back life. You love him, Jordan. And whether you believe it or not you . You have moved on into life again. And you'll keep on moving ahead. Just don't do it without Victor."

Jordan stared out. "Moved on." She stood. "I have to go."

"Good."

"Watch Amy?"

"Absolutely."

After darting a kiss to her father with a 'thanks' she flew from the room. "Shit." She raced back in and grabbed the keys. "See ya" she raced out again. "Shit."

Roy had just sunk into his coffee when he heard Jordan moving about, saying 'shit' every other word. "Jordan."

"Shit. Shit." Frantic, she ran back into the kitchen. "Shit. Did I leave my purse at your house?"

"Why do you care about your purse You have your keys. Go."

"No." Jordan snapped. "The fork is in the purse. I need the fork. I have to ... fuck it." She ran to the counter. "Any fork will do." She flung open the silverware drawer, lifted a fork, and held it up with a smile. She as she turned, she paused.

She looked it, almost in a daze.

Trevor's blue cup.

Then with a smile, she dropped the fork, and in her turn, she swiped up the blue cup and, with it in hand, she raced from the house.

The front door slammed, and Roy looked to the empty counter spot.

He grinned.

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For the first time in forever, Jordan drove like a bat out of hell. She got pulled over twice; both times the police left her go. But it was wasted time.

She never let the blue cup out of her hand. Not even when she drove.

She wondered if her father was lying about the movers when she arrived at Victors house. There was no truck. Tossing the car in park, she carried the blue cup by the handle as she raced to the front door. "Victor!" she rang the bell. When she reached to knock, the door was ajar. "Victor!" she called out loudly, running in. "Victor are you ..."

Empty.

The house was empty. No boxes No art. Nothing but silence. Her words echoed.

No response.

She went from a run, to a slow walk. Her boots clicking on the hardwood floors with each step. As she hit the area between the dining room and living room, her arms dropped and her head lowered in defeat.

"Boo."

Jordan shrieked and spun around.

Victor chuckled "I couldn't do it to you. Your mother wanted me to hide for a while. Make you suffer. Have it be a real torture, but when you dad called and ..."

Victor was silenced.

Jordan threw her arms around him, and began to plaster him with kisses. "I'm sorry." She kissed him. "I am so sorry." She kissed him again. "I was stupid. I should have said something last night. I didn't. Thank you. Thank you for last night." She kept kissing him. "Thank you for ..."

Victor laid his hands on her face, stopping her. He took a deep breath, and then lowered his lips to Jordan's for a long kiss. When he was finished, he exhaled loudly. "Wow. That's better. Now ..." he rubbed his head. "Was I just barreled over by your kisses, or did you clock me in the head with something?"

Jordan laughed emotionally and stepped back. "I don't know how to repay you or thank you for what you did for me. Except ... except for this." One more step back, and Jordan lifted the blue cup.

"Oh my God." Victor whispered.

"The goal. Remember you said this cup was my goal. You Victor, helped me reach my goal. I want you to have it." She extended it further to him.

He laid his hand over hers and gripped the cup with Jordan. "Oh my God."

"It has to be with you. The cup is so important to me, and so are you."

Victor, in a rare moment was speechless. But he kissed her softly.

"Victor, I don't want to lose you. Tel me you won't leave Redbird."

Victor caressed the cup as she stepped further back. His head lowered. "I'm sorry, Jordan. It's too late. I got the house. My stuff is there. As a matter of fact ..." he looked at his watch. "Knowing how fussy I am about my pieces, I should have been there ten minutes ago. Hey ..." he snapped his finger. "Wanna go. It's a great house. Huge. Tons of rooms. More than this. You should see your office decked ..."

"Wait." Jordan held up her hand. "Where exactly is this house?"

"Mad ... Mad ..." Victor scrunched his face in thought. "Madison on the Lake, that's it. Or is it Dolly? Not sure."

Jordan mouth dropped open in shock.

Victor continued, "Great piece of property. Right on the lake. Well not on the lake, that would be a boat. But near. Acres, Jordan. Lots of room for Amy to play. Private. Great deal. A foreclosure."

"Victor? Madison on the Lake? It's like two miles from here."

Victor smiled. "Yeah, you ready? The movers are ..."

"You told me you would leave if I wanted you to."

Victor nodded "Redbird, yes. You wanted me out of Redbird. I agreed. However, there was no way Jordan, I was getting out of your life. I was not giving up on you that easy."

Jordan just looked in awe. "Wait. I come here, pouring out my heart. I thought I was losing you. Losing you forever. I gave you the cup. And here, you're moving two miles away."

"Yeah."

Jordan gasped. "You dick."

"You don't think it's funny?"

"Ha. Ha. Ha. No."

"Does this mean you are or you aren't marrying me. Your dad said you left the fork at the house."

Jordan shook her head. "Do you know how crazy you'll drive me?"

"Oh, yeah, that's half the fun." He put his arm around her. "You know, you were so cool running in here. It was like a movie. Hey, come to the new house with me. I really got to get there."

"I would like that."

"Want to stop and get Amy. I know you've left her long enough."

Jordan slowly shook her head as she leaned into him. "No, Victor, I can leave her for a little bit longer. Let's do this, you and me."

Victor clenched his fist. "Yes. You are making progress. He stopped walking with her. "In all seriousness. Can I ask a favor? There is one more memory I want to have with you in this house. Something special. Can you give that to me?"

"With a doubt. Nothing can compare to the memory you gave me last night."

"Cool" Victor gave an ornery grin.

Confused, Jordan glanced at him as she tilted her head. "Victor? What ... do you have in mind?"

\*\*\*

It seemed the sky had turned gray in the beat of a heart. From partially sunny to dark, all in the few minutes Meg put the biscuits in the oven and had taken them out. The temperature dropped as well.

It was time to peek again, and she parted her curtains.

"Son of a bitch." She hoped it was her imagination, that the snow was making it impossible to see. Grabbing her coat, she stormed from her house and out into the street.

The snow fell heavily, and nearly blinding. But it wasn't blinding to block the vision that enraged her and made her stomach flop.

She moved down the street cautiously, yet quickly. She had to do something.

Opening her mouth, snow made its way in, and Meg fluttered her lips to clear the flakes.

"Victor Artulla!" She yelled. "Get my daughter off the roof of that house ... Now!"