

Book Two

The Shaken Series

Aftershock



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MacGregor

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By

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Disclaimer #1: My characters are of my own creation. If you want to imagine that they look like certain people, I won't mess with that.

Disclaimer #2: This story is about women in love, and all that goes with it. If you find that idea offensive, if you aren't old enough, or if you live where reading such depictions is not allowed, this isn't for you.

Disclaimer #3: Angst ahead, heavy at times.

Disclaimer #4: Read Disclaimer #3 again.

This is the sequel to my first story, *Without Warning*. If you haven't read it, this one won't make much sense. I'd like to say an enormous THANK YOU to all of you who took the time to write me after reading that one.

Thanks to Tami, my beta reader. I sometimes forget that she has a life outside of reading my stuff.

As always, this is for my Sweetcakes. She loves it when I call her *Sweetcakes*.

Chapter 1

"I bet this is pretty in the daytime." Anna couldn't resist.

"Don't go there, Amazon!" the driver warned. "I practically lied to a judge to get a hearing postponed so we could leave early and there you are, in the middle of selling a car!" It hadn't actually been a complete lie. Lily had told Judge Johnson that she had travel reservations that would be difficult to change. Since Yosemite National Park closed for vehicle traffic at 10 and the LA exodus was unpredictable at best, the lawyer reasoned that her excuse was sort of true. As it was, they would just make it, slipping into the park at 9:45.

"But selling cars is what I do," Anna rebutted, knowing well that they needed to have this out so they could get on with the business of having a good time.

"No, salespeople sell cars. Bosses boss. Bosses can tell salespeople to sell cars so bosses can leave early." *Couldn't they?*

"Yeah, I guess. But Harry is a really good friend of Dad's."

"What do you want to bet that George sent him by this afternoon just to ruin our trip!"

"Dad wouldn't do that!" *Would he?* "Besides, our trip isn't ruined already, is it?"

Lily didn't answer; she was still pouting.

"Sweet Lips?"

Still no response, but Anna could see the lips in question starting to form a reluctant smile following that endearment.

"Sugar Tongue?"

Sugar Tongue? Lily looked away so Anna wouldn't see the grin that outrageous moniker brought out. "No, it isn't ruined," the blonde finally admitted. "But I'm putting this down in George's book in case he tries it again." Lily and Anna had a running joke about keeping score of the ways they imagined that Anna's father tried to thwart their relationship.

"There it is," Anna pointed to the red 4Runner with Washington plates situated between two giant redwoods. Lily's headlights shone upon a bright blue two-person tent nestled against the underbrush nearby. Two women, both in jeans and sweatshirts, sat in the darkness atop a weathered picnic table, obviously on the lookout for their friends. Lily pulled the X-5 into the space behind the other vehicle, and turned off the engine. The seven-hour drive from LA to Yosemite had been a chore when she last drove it three years ago in her old RAV4, but the power and the luxury of this BMW put those memories to rest.

"I would never have believed it in a million years! It's Anna Kaklis in hiking boots and blue jeans!" Carolyn Bunting beamed at the site of her usually chic friend stepping out of the X-5. "Next, you're going to tell me you brought a flannel shirt!"

Anna gestured over her shoulder to her partner in the driver's seat. "She makes me do crazy things!" Anna crossed the campsite quickly to embrace her longtime friend.

"Then it must be true love!" Carolyn declared.

Lily slowly exited the car and walked shyly to the picnic table where her lover greeted her friends with warm hugs and kisses on the cheek. Carolyn was just as Lily had pictured from her partner's description—almost as tall as Anna, with short curly hair, its deep red tint by L'Oreal, Lily guessed. Vicki was petite, her wavy brown hair pulled tightly into a ponytail. Both women had that healthy "outdoorsy" look. In a way—maybe it was their size difference—they reminded Lily of Anna and herself.

"It is true love," Anna said as she turned and held out her arm for her partner to join her. "Carolyn, Vicki, I want you to meet Lily Stuart, the woman who can make me do absolutely anything on earth."

Except leave work early! "I'm glad to finally meet you both. Anna has told me quite a bit about you." Lily put out her hand, but the redhead ignored it and pulled her in for a hug. Vicki did the same, and Lily's typical nervousness at meeting new people immediately started to recede.

Carolyn was genuinely excited about seeing the woman who had so obviously won her friend's heart. "I've heard all about you, too! Good things, of course." After a 10-year hiatus in which they saw each other only once, Anna and Carolyn had easily renewed their friendship. On the heels of the car dealer's sudden visit last year, they now traded emails or talked on the phone at least once a week. This excursion to Yosemite had been Carolyn's idea.

Vicki offered to help Lily set up their tent while the old friends caught up. The Seattle Seahawks' communication director liked Anna the instant they met five years ago at a Cal Poly reunion. Any lover would feel a tinge of jealousy at meeting their partner's first love, but those feelings passed quickly for Vicki. She couldn't help but wonder if Lily had a similar reaction to seeing Anna with Carolyn. "Look at them." She gestured toward the pair by the fire. "You'd never guess that they went the better part of 10 years without seeing each other."

"I'm really glad they reconnected. Anna thinks the world of both of you. She's glad to see Carolyn so happy." Lily had been looking forward to this rare chance for them to spend time with another lesbian couple. The fact that Carolyn was a special friend of Anna's was an added bonus. Though they occasionally got together with Sandy and Suzanne, both Anna and Lily were relatively shy when it came to socializing, so they hadn't really cultivated friendships with the other couples they had met at parties or outings. Neither of them was really comfortable showing affection around others, even with Kim and Hal, Anna's sister and brother-in-law, whom they considered their closest friends. But with their few lesbian friends, they could be affectionate, flirtatious, even risqué.

Lily hauled their camping gear into the small tent, stacking most of it near the zippered door at the foot of her sleeping bag. Anna would need the extra room on her side for her long legs. Since they weren't backpacking into the campsite on this trip, she had brought along a few luxuries, like extra blankets and pillows. Lily was convinced that Anna's comfort was her sole reason for being on this earth.

"Wow, she's a cutie, just like you said," Carolyn offered. "Got you pretty whipped, huh?"

"You got that right! I swear, she's got my number," Anna sighed dreamily, her eyes following the little blonde as she worked efficiently to organize their things. "Wait till you get to know her. She's amazing."

"Well, she'd have to be to win somebody like you." Despite Carolyn's deep commitment to her partner of seven years, Anna would probably always be "the one that got away." Consciously or not, she knew she would measure Anna's new love to see if Lily was worthy of the prize she held.

"What a sweet thing to say. So unlike you." the dark haired woman teased. In college, Carolyn had used humor to downplay the seriousness of her feelings for the tall beauty. As a result, Anna had never known that her friend had carried a torch for her.

"Very funny. You'll be happy to hear that Vicki has retrained me. She makes me talk about my feelings," Carolyn groaned the last word.

Anna chuckled. "That must be torture for somebody like you. You've always kept things so deep inside."

"Yeah, well, I have to admit being able to talk about things has helped us get through some hard times over the years."

"Hard times? From the looks of you two, I'd have trouble believing you ever had any trouble at all."

"Hey, I think everybody hits bumps. Ours wasn't serious. Vicki's work schedule is pretty demanding during football season, and I had a little trouble adjusting. But we worked it out."

"I'm glad for you. Lily and I talk about everything. She's just so easy to be with." They rarely argued because they rarely disagreed. Sure, there were the occasional skirmishes over little things, like today when the car dealer finished up late at work. The toughest thing they'd dealt with was the disparity in their finances, and Anna had finally told Lily to just get over it.

"Believe me that will serve both of you well in the long run."

"What's this about you two serving us?" Vicki asked. She and Lily had finished organizing the new digs. "I'll have hot chocolate. How about you, Lily?"

"Sounds good."

The taller pair headed off to do their partners' bidding. "Does your woman boss you around like my woman does?" Carolyn sulked.

"All the time," Anna answered. She loved it.

The foursome talked until the fire died down, then Carolyn got up to store their food in the bear-proof bin. "We'll see you two in the morning. Vicki promises her famous breakfast burritos." With that, the two couples retreated to their respective tents.

"Oh, this is nice," Anna said softly as the beam from the flashlight revealed the layout of their small quarters. Lily had spread out their sleeping bags on top of two thin air mattresses, covering both bags with two thick blankets. "So we're not actually going to sleep in our sleeping bags, is that it?"

"We may have to if it gets cold, but this might be enough if we wear sweat pants and cuddle. And if you share the covers," Lily chided. It wasn't that Anna was a blanket hog; rather, those long legs of hers pulled the blankets loose every single night, usually leaving them piled on the floor by morning.

"Oooo, I like to cuddle," Anna crooned. She enveloped the blonde in a hug and brought her down to the blankets.

"Oh no, you don't," Lily protested. "Lose the boots, Amazon! You'll get dirt in our bed." Anna kicked off her hiking boots, setting them under the rain guard outside the tent. "Now put these on." She handed her lover a set of sweats.

"You treat me like a baby," Anna pouted, not minding at all that her partner seemed to take care of her every need.

"That's because you're my baby," Lily purred. Taking advantage of the naked window between the jeans and sweats, she circled her arms around her partner's waist and eased her back against the pillow. The hard kiss that followed signaled Lily's desire.

Anna was hesitant at first, but found herself oddly turned on by the nearness of the other tent and thus the need to be very quiet. It was almost...naughty. Sure enough, after three "oh baby's," each a little louder than the one before, Lily laid her fingers across her lover's lips to remind her of where they were. Anna bit down hard to stifle the cries as she rode out her climax. Twice in the night, Lily woke to pull the blankets across them both, finally tucking them underneath her on the side away from her partner. Snuggled together beneath the covers, their bodies acted as heaters, warding off the chill of the Sierras night.

Saturday was another cloudless April day in California. By eight o'clock, all four women had crawled out of their respective tents, mouths watering for hot coffee and the famous breakfast burritos. "Oh baby," Carolyn moaned. "Will you pass me the hot sauce?" Vicki responded with a scolding elbow to the ribs, too late to stop the twin blushes that rushed to the faces of their friends as they realized her reference.

Lily quickly dismissed her own embarrassment to rescue her partner. "Well, I thought the idea was to be happy campers. I'm certainly happy. Are you happy?" she asked, turning to her lover.

"Oh, I'm definitely happy," Anna smiled and responded with a quick kiss. The awkwardness of the moment was over, thanks to the nonchalance of Lily's reply. Since she and Lily had been together, the tall beauty had loosened up considerably with regard to discussing sexual things. She now talked freely with her lover about her likes and dislikes—*what dislikes?*—even sharing many of her feelings with her sister Kim, who finally blushed herself when Anna told her the details of how she liked to touch Lily. "How about you, Carolyn? Are you happy?"

"If she doesn't behave herself, it's going to be quite a while before she's happy again," Vicki cut in.

"Well, then I'd better start being good, because I really like being happy. Especially when I can make someone else happy too. I mean it's a real drag to make only yourself happy...."

"That's enough!"

"Okay," Carolyn said sheepishly.

Anna couldn't resist leaning over to add her dig. "And you said *I* was whipped."

After breakfast, the four friends set out on a six-mile hike to the meadow beneath Yosemite Falls, the majestic centerpiece of the national park. Lily fell in step with Carolyn on the point, while Anna and Vicki brought up the rear.

Lily found that she had already warmed up to both of the new friends, thanks to the Seattle couple's easy nature, and to her own. "I'm glad to finally get a chance to thank you for steering Anna my way," she began jovially. More than the others, the blonde was accustomed to the rigors of a mountain trail. No longer tied to house chores on Saturday—Anna had a cleaning lady twice a week—Lily took to the San Gabriel trails most Saturdays while her lover was at the dealership. She was going to have to curb her energy today in order to set a pace that was comfortable for the others. Twelve miles was a pretty long day for the occasional hiker. "She told me about her trip to Seattle last year. From what I heard about it, everything you said was right on. I was scared to death she'd freak out if she found out how I felt about her."

"Well, you know how I knew, don't you? Did she tell you that I went through the same thing with her 11 years ago?" The redhead looked back at her partner and the tall woman and smiled warmly.

"She told me a little, enough I think. I know she cared for you a lot back in college. And that she obviously still does," Lily added.

"Yeah, I knew she liked me, loved me even, but not in the way I wanted her to. I was just coming to terms with who I was, and part of that was because I couldn't deny the

feelings that I had for her anymore. I tell you, those were tough times," she said wistfully. "What about you? When did you figure things out about yourself?"

"I guess when I was a freshman in high school. My friends were drooling over guys like Tom Cruise and River Phoenix; but I was thinking about Jodie Foster. I didn't just think about her movies, though. I thought about *her*. I wondered about how she took her coffee, how she kissed, that kind of stuff. I mean, I wasn't going to shoot the president or anything to get her attention," she quipped, her reference to John Hinckley's statement of his motivation for shooting Reagan. "But that's where my teenage fantasies started to go."

"So what was it like being gay in high school?" Carolyn would love to have those years back, knowing then what she knew now.

"Not a picnic, I have to say." Though the sting was long gone, Lily still remembered the painful betrayal of people she thought were her friends. "It was important at my high school to be like everyone else, in every way possible. I think being gay broke the cardinal rule, so I didn't really fit in anywhere. In hindsight, I don't think I really missed anything."

"What about your family? How did they deal with it?"

"It's just my mom and me, and she's always been really supportive. We had a close family friend who was a lesbian." Katharine Fortier was the lawyer who had helped Eleanor finalize Lily's adoption. Lily idolized her, and had followed in her footsteps as a family attorney.

"You're lucky. My parents didn't speak to me for about four years after I told them. It took a brother needing a bone marrow transplant to bring us back together."

"Wow, you donated bone marrow? I hear that's painful."

"Yeah, but I never gave it a second thought. I always loved my family, especially my little brother, even though they all pushed me out for a while. I'd like to think any of them would have done the same for me, but I'll never really know for sure."

Lily was fascinated by the tale. Though she hadn't faced any problems at home, Anna still struggled a bit with her father, who wanted his daughter to have a 'more normal' life. "Are all of you close again now?"

"More or less. They like Vicki a lot, so that's made it pretty easy to spend time with them. But we'll never get those years back."

George needs to hear that, Lily thought. She got along very well with Anna's father, but he still hadn't fully accepted Anna's relationship with her. The two of them had talked privately about it last year, and Lily assured him that she was going to dog him until he gave in. He genuinely liked her, and admired her determination to win him over, but he just couldn't wrap his head around his daughter being in a relationship with another woman. "I wish Anna's dad would give it up. I think it hurts her that he's withheld his approval for so long, especially after we moved in together last year."

"What about the rest of her family? How are they?" Carolyn remembered her visit to the Kaklis home back in college.

"Martine's great. Kim and Hal are wonderful, probably our best friends. And David's pretty cool with it. It's just George," she lamented.

"It's too bad he's like that. But it could be a whole lot worse. I'm sure he'll come around eventually."

"Yeah, that's what Martine says. I hope she's right."

"You two better not be talking about me!" Anna shouted from behind.

"God, what an ego!" Lily turned and rolled her eyes dramatically. "Did it ever occur to you that we might be talking about Vicki!"

The petite brunette frowned and arched an eyebrow at her partner. "And just what were saying about me, Ms. Bunting?"

"I was telling Lily how sweet you are. And how smart you are. And how *happy* you make me!" She winked at the last.

Lily waited for the pair, then tugged on Vicki's arm. "Why don't you walk up here with me for awhile? Let the Cal Poly nerds entertain each other. Tell me all about the Seahawks. Can you believe the second largest city in America doesn't even have a football team?" she groused.

"So we're the nerds?" Carolyn asked her taller friend as they lagged back.

"Pay them no mind," Anna said. "It's good back here. We can watch their butts." A sly grin played across her face.

"Good idea!" They did just that, commenting here and there on the curve and the sway. Both of the shorter women looked fine in their faded jeans. "So Anna, it looks like you've settled into this lesbian thing."

"I suppose. I've sure settled into Lily." Anna really didn't think much about the labels. She couldn't picture herself with anyone else, regardless of gender.

"I can see why. She's a prize." Carolyn admired the little blonde's backside.

She certainly is. Anna had been thinking a lot of late about her feelings for the beautiful blonde. "Carolyn, how did you know that Vicki was the one?" Anna's question was quiet, not only because she didn't want Lily to overhear, but also because the subject unnerved her so. *Was Lily the one?*

"I didn't." Carolyn could sense that her friend was struggling with this one, and she felt honored once again to be the one Anna turned to for help. "If you're looking for some magic sign, forget it. There's no fate. There's no cupid. It's really not something that's pre-ordained."

"I was afraid of that. I'm going to have to do something, aren't I?"

The redhead chuckled at her friend's resignation. "You and Lily both, if you want it to last. And that's the key, wanting it to last. Wanting it badly enough to commit to working for it. I decided one day that I wanted Vicki to be the one. I told her so, and she said the same about me."

"This sounds familiar...in a bad way." She and Scott Rutherford had exchanged vows like these. "What keeps you from throwing in the towel when it gets hard?"

Carolyn knew where her friend's head had gone. "You know the answer to that, Anna. Why did you give up on Scott? You have to want to keep it. Unless you really want it, you won't be able to bring yourself to work through the hard parts."

Anna considered her friend's words. Yes, she'd given up on Scott, knowing that she didn't want it badly enough to work as hard as she would have to in order to get past their problems. "That's the point, though. How do I know that..." She caught herself and lowered her voice so the other women wouldn't hear them. "How do I know that Lily is the one that I'll work for?"

"You're already working, aren't you? She told me about your dad. If you didn't want it pretty badly, I doubt you'd have let her come between you and your family." She watched the tall woman process this bit. "Am I right?"

"Yeah, but even that hasn't really been hard. She's got Dad wrapped around her finger, they just don't know it! Things with us have been pretty effortless."

"But it may not always be that way. Having a commitment of some kind gives you both assurances that the other is going to work through the problems. It's a pretty good feeling to know that somebody is going to love you, warts and all."

"What if she doesn't want it?"

"Then it won't work. Plain and simple."

"So I should ask her?"

"I think you should just tell her. If she feels the same way, she'll let you know. Once you both decide to make a commitment to each other, you'll be surprised at what a huge difference it makes in how you feel about your lives together."

Now there's the rub. Things were going fine with Scott until she accepted his proposal. As soon as that happened, she began to second guess herself. As it was, things were going fine with Lily. What if talking to her about some kind of commitment changed everything, caused both of them to raise their expectations or to start feeling pressure or anxiety about things? That fear alone was enough for Anna to accept the *status quo*. Maybe in time....

They reached the falls just after noon, marveling at its towering magnificence and thunderous roar. Both couples posed for pictures, and a fellow hiker snapped one of

the four together. Though neither knew it at the time, it would be a day Anna and Lily would long remember.

Lily fixed chicken stir-fry on the camp stove for dinner, one of Anna's favorites. As she cooked—rice took forever on a Coleman stove—the others took advantage of the time to rest, putting their feet up next to the fire. Lily was probably the only one in the bunch who wouldn't be sore tomorrow from their all-day hike. "Should I set the table or do you want to just fix a plate and sit by the fire?"

"I'll give you a thousand dollars if you'll fix my plate and bring it to me," Anna called out. She was serious.

"Keep your money, Amazon. I'll fix your plate. In fact, why don't you all stay put and I'll serve you." No one argued. Nor did they jump up later to help Lily clean up the dishes. Lily chuckled discreetly at her comrades' condition. *Wimps! Somebody's going to need a massage later.*

It was dark now, and the couples huddled together by the fire. Lily sat behind her lover on a log, opening her legs in invitation for Anna to lean back. When she did, the blonde promptly wrapped her arms around the broad shoulders and kissed the dark-haired woman softly on the ear. "I love you," she whispered. It was fun being able to show affection in front of others.

"Vicki and I have decided to let you guys in on a little secret," Carolyn announced. She took her partner's hand and continued. "We've gone for a few consultations with a doctor in Seattle about artificial insemination, and when we get back, Vicki is going to start trying to get pregnant." The two of them simply beamed at their news.

"That's awesome!" Lily proclaimed excitedly. Carolyn seemed so proud. She'd make a great mom, Lily thought. *She's so solid, just like Anna.*

"Wow, it sure is," Anna agreed. "That's such exciting news! You guys are going to be great parents." Of that, Anna was certain. The way these two women interacted left her no doubt of the love in their home. Vicki had that nurturing quality so important to raising children. *Lily has that too, Anna thought. Look at how well she takes care of me.*

The happy couple regaled Anna and Lily with their plans for a nursery, baby names, and a part-time nanny—though Vicki would stay home for three months, then Carolyn for the next three. One of the things they were trying to work out was securing the anonymous sperm donor who would be available a year or two later, should Carolyn decide that she too wanted to have a child. That would make their children related by blood.

"Boy, you've really thought this out." Anna was fascinated by their plans. She and Scott had talked briefly about having a baby, but that idea was derailed by their marital problems. Anna knew though that a child would have tied her irrevocably to the man, regardless of their individual differences.

"Yeah, we've been talking about it and making plans for about three years," Vicki said. "We think we've got a lot to offer a child."

"Well, I agree," Anna spouted enthusiastically. She couldn't help but admire her friends for their commitment to one another, and to their decision.

The night air grew chilly as the fire died down. The redhead stood and stretched, pulling her petite partner to her feet. "I guess we should turn in. I don't know about you guys, but I'm really tired from that walk."

Anna and Lily took their cue and stood as well. "Oh, by the way," Lily stopped the Seattle pair as they hobbled toward their tent. "I promised Anna a massage tonight." Anna thought it peculiar that Lily would tell them that. "She, uh...sometimes moans when I do that." With a small smirk, she guided her lover to their tent.

Wriggling in the cramped space, the couple changed into their sweats for the night. "I think it's my turn to make somebody else moan tonight," Anna murmured softly, trailing her tongue sexily across her lover's ear.

"Well, you certainly know how to do that, Amazon." Anna's touch set her on fire. "But you better let me rub the soreness out of your legs first or you won't be able to walk tomorrow."

"I can hardly walk now," Anna admitted. She rolled onto her stomach as Lily kneeled between her feet. Her lover's fingers felt magical as they kneaded the tender muscles of her calves and thighs, rising occasionally to squeeze her tired buttocks. So relaxing....

Lily gripped the calf muscles through the sweatpants and started to squeeze, gently at first, then with more pressure. Her busy hands traveled to the soft tissue at the back of the knee, where she tenderly caressed the spot on the side that was injured in the earthquake over two years ago. Next, she kneaded the tightened hamstrings until she felt them relax, finishing with the firm buttocks. *God, I love this butt!* It was very possibly Lily's favorite feature of Anna's beautiful body, though she noticed that her favorite feature changed often, depending on what she was admiring at the time. "Is that better?" The silence told her that her lover had fallen asleep. *Sweet dreams, Amazon.*

I'm freezing! Anna woke to find the blankets tangled at her feet—*How does that happen?*—and Lily tucked tightly against her side. Reaching down, she pulled the two blankets up to her chin and fluffed them until they covered both women completely. In the darkness, she could barely make out her lover's silhouette, but she had memorized the shapely form.

I can't believe I fell asleep on her tonight. She'd wanted very much to connect with her lover tonight, the feelings of love that she'd voiced with Carolyn still fresh in her heart. Anna stared hard to discern the facial features, and couldn't resist reaching out.

In that instant, she reached a decision that would change her life forever. She wanted Lily to be the one.

"Is everything okay?" Lily had awakened to feel Anna's gentle caress on her face.

"Yeah, it's fine." Anna ran her fingers behind her lover's ear to cup the blonde head. "I love you so much."

Lily recognized the intonation. Sometimes Anna would come to her, her voice low and thick with emotion, seemingly desperate to connect. These were some of her favorite moments. "Show me."

Without hesitation, Anna responded by pulling her close, reaching beneath Lily's sweatshirt, and running the heel of her hand hard across her lover's back. Meeting resistance from the tightened drawstring at the waistband of her pants, she pulled loose the tie, allowing her unfettered access to all that was below. Pushing the material down, she stroked the curve of Lily's hips, cupping her rear as she pulled her still closer. In moments, she was inside her lover, her thumb circling the already sensitive bundle of nerves. "You feel so good to me."

Lily pressed rhythmically against the hand that caressed her, amazed at her own body's rapid response. "Ahhh!" She stiffened and gasped for air as the climax rushed through her body. From zero to orgasm in four and a half minutes!

"I love it when you come for me," Anna whispered, a single tear leaking from the corner of her eye as she felt her lover still. It wasn't sadness; it wasn't joy. It was an undefined emotion that had nowhere else to go.

Anna was quiet on the drive home, lost in thought about the future she wanted with the small woman behind the wheel. So much had changed for the dark-haired woman in the past two years. Looking back, Anna knew that the seeds of love had been planted in the collapsed mall. How else could she explain the longing she felt for finding her friend again?

Anna had learned so much from Lily, especially since they moved into the big Brentwood home late last summer. She'd learned the give and take of everyday life with a partner, no longer needing as much of the private time that she used to crave. She'd learned the value of being able to talk about things openly—all things—and conversely, the senselessness of keeping feelings inside. But mostly, she'd learned about love: how to express it in words, in actions, and with her body; how to receive it without doubt or obligation; and how to nurture it to make it grow.

Don't ask her. Tell her. That was Carolyn's advice. *I will, just not in the car!* She'd plan a candlelight dinner for the weekend, with a long night and lazy romantic day ahead. Maybe next Saturday.

"You're staring at me, Amazon."

"Give me a break! This is Bakersfield. What else is there to look at?" *Lily is so cute!*

"Now there's a compliment! 'You're better than Bakersfield.' Be still my heart!"

"Although Bakersfield *is* quiet...."

"Aren't you funny!" Lily loved it when Anna showed her quick wit. "Did you have a good time this weekend?"

"Yes, I did. I'm really glad you got to meet Carolyn and Vicki. Aren't they great?"

"I liked them both a lot, but the best part of my weekend was being with you." All joking aside now, Lily wanted Anna to know how she felt about their time together. "I really appreciate you coming away with me this weekend. We've both been working a lot and I've missed you. It was special."

"For me too." Anna took the small hand on the console and squeezed. A long moment passed as she remembered her thoughts from a few minutes before. Yes, she definitely wanted Lily to be the one.

"So what did you think of Carolyn and Vicki's news?" Lily was nervous about bringing up the subject, strangely afraid that Anna might think she was trying to drop a hint. Having kids together was a big time commitment, and she and Anna hadn't yet moved past "living together." Not that she wouldn't welcome some kind of commitment, but she'd already spelled out that she wanted "everything Anna would give her," so the ball was definitely in her lover's court. In the meantime, she would relish what they had.

"I thought it was fabulous! Half the fun is seeing them so excited already. I just hope everything goes okay." Anna couldn't help but wonder if children would be in their future as well. "Have you ever thought about having a child?"

If you want children, I'll spit 'em out one right after another until you tell me to stop!
"I don't know. I guess if anything, I always assumed I would adopt rather than have my own. You know, a family tradition," she joked.

"You were seven when you were adopted, right?"

Lily nodded. "And Mom was two when she was adopted."

"Wow, you never told me that before. So Eleanor is adopted too."

"Yeah, so I think she sort of thought about it a lot. Adopting a kid, that is."

"You never wanted to have a child that was part of you?" It was an innocent turn of phrase, a comparison of adoption versus what Carolyn and Vicki had chosen.

Lily was quiet for a long moment. She knew that Anna hadn't meant to say something hurtful, but Lily had been hearing things like this all her life. She needed to have Anna understand how she felt about being adopted. It was fundamental to who she

was. "You know, I'd like to think I was more a part of Eleanor Stuart than of Lisa Parker."

Oh god, what an insensitive thing to say! "Of course you are. Sweetheart, I'm sorry. That was a really stupid thing to say. Of course you're a part of Eleanor, and there isn't a day that goes by that I'm not glad of it." She squeezed the small hand again. "Really, baby, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I know you didn't mean anything bad. It's sort of hard to explain, but it was like Mom and I needed each other. We fit together like mother and daughter from the very first day I moved into her house as a foster child. If I were to adopt a child, I would want to feel that need as much as I did when I was little."

Anna thought of Lily's school picture from her first year with Eleanor. That one, along with subsequent years on up to graduation from law school, decorated the stairwell in Eleanor's San Jose home. "You know baby, any child would be very lucky to find you."

Find 'me.' Not find 'us.' Lily couldn't bring herself to turn the question around for her lover. Everything about this conversation seemed to suggest that Anna didn't see herself parenting Lily's children. What does that say about Anna's feelings for where their relationship was headed? What started as an innocent discussion about their friends having a baby had left her feeling a bone-deep sadness.

Chapter 2

"That's right, a Cinco de Mayo sale, weekend after next. A full color double truck," Anna used the newspaper lingo for an ad that stripped across two pages.

George Kaklis loomed in the doorway, waiting for his daughter to finish the phone order.

"No, just the usual for this weekend. I'll have Brad send you the VINs this afternoon." Anna waved her father in. "Thanks, Steve. So long."

George shook his head in admiration at Anna's professional demeanor. He had finally heard the story of the fiasco two years ago at the Del in San Diego, when Steve French had behaved so pompously. He was amazed that his daughter still spoke to the man, but she had insisted that the Del was personal, and she was over it. This was business, and as long as the *Times* brought traffic to the lot, she had no issues with Steve.

"What's up, Dad?"

"I wanted to ask if you'd join us all for dinner at Empyre's on Saturday night. I have some big news to share and I'd like the whole family there."

"Big news? Do I get a hint?"

"Sure. It's good news. But that's all I'm going to say."

"Okay, what about Jonah? I'm not coming unless Jo-Jo's there." Anna grinned every time she thought about her nephew. Kim and Hal had surprised everyone last year with the announcement in June that she was four months pregnant. After two miscarriages, they had sat on the news until she reached the second trimester. Now five months old, the little man was the center of the entire Kaklis universe.

"Are you kidding? He's the only reason I invited Kim and Hal!" George and Martine were the epitome of doting grandparents.

"And Lily is invited, of course?" This was going to put a dent in her romantic weekend plans, but that would give her a little more time to plan everything so it would be perfect.

The patriarch gave an exaggerated groan. "I suppose so," he pouted. Anna wasn't quite sure when she realized that this was just George's shtick. She hoped he was ready to accept her relationship with the woman, especially now that she wanted to make it permanent. Lily had made it so easy for him, meeting his resistance with her offhanded humor. The little blonde had simply broken him down.

"Sounds good, but let me check with her first."

Business was slower than usual that week, as the LA area collected almost four inches of much needed rain. Anna welcomed the chance to catch up on paperwork, and was feeling pretty good about the state of affairs at Premium Motors.

She, Kim and David had pumped one another all week for clues as to what their father was going to share with them. Finally Saturday came, and the Kaklis family converged on Empyre's. George and Martine arrived last and were shown to the large round table in the corner of the restaurant. Mrs. Kaklis had only learned of this dinner yesterday, and was very annoyed at her husband for planning this behind her back. Furthermore, she had no idea what George was going to announce, and she was hurt that he hadn't told her first in private.

Anna quickly claimed the seat next to Jonah and his mom. In fact, she had arrived early on purpose, knowing that Martine or David would have chosen that seat had either been given the chance. Kim was more than happy to turn the little guy over to his cooing aunt, hoping in secret that he would choose this moment—and not the next—to reject the rice cereal he'd tried for the very first time this afternoon.

George took the vacant chair next to Lily and immediately gestured for the wine list, pointing out his choice quickly to the looming waiter. "Good evening, Lilian," he said formally, turning to face the blonde attorney.

"My, aren't we polite! I'm not moving out, George."

"You keep saying that. But it's going to get crowded when Anna's new husband moves in."

"Have you been skipping your meds again? You're delusional."

George tasted the wine and motioned for the waiter to fill the glasses. "Have some wine, Lilian. It will ease the heartbreak."

The attentive waiter filled their glasses again before taking their order, and at George's signal, brought two more bottles for the table. Chattering with George, the blonde was already getting quite a nice buzz from the merlot.

"He looks good on you, sweetheart," Lily whispered to her lover, who held a smiling Jonah in her lap. *Very, very good*, the blonde thought. "You're a natural."

"You want to hold him?" Anna offered. She really didn't want to give him up, but the sight of the infant in Lily's lap was a tempting tradeoff.

"No, that's okay. I mean I do, but he looks happy where he is." As if on cue, Jonah sputtered and laughed, waving his arms up and down as Lily made exaggerated happy faces. His delighted squeal commanded the attention of the entire table, further evidence that he was indeed the center of the Kaklis universe.

Once dinner was ordered, all eyes finally turned to George. No one had a clue of his impending announcement, and all were growing impatient.

"So what's up, Dad? Spill it!" David said eagerly. He had a date later this evening, but he didn't want to miss out on the big news.

George leaned back and smiled at the expectant faces one by one. "Well, where should I start?" He truly enjoyed and appreciated the devotion of his family, and he sincerely hoped that his news would be something they all would welcome. "I've been thinking lately about all my blessings. I have a wonderful family, a loving wife and a successful business. I've realized that I'd like to start spending less time with that business and more time with my family, especially this beautiful woman beside me and that little fellow over there." He nodded lovingly at his wife and the now sleepy infant. "And who knows, I might even play a little more golf." Everyone turned and exchanged astonished looks. "To that end, I've decided to step down as president of Premier Motors."

Martine was flabbergasted. Was George really giving up the business? No more late dinners, no more distracted conversations, no more sacrificing vacation and family time for the dealership! "George, do you mean it?" She was already out of her chair reaching for her husband.

"Absolutely, darling." They shared a hug and then a kiss so deep that it embarrassed all three of the siblings, especially David.

The patriarch turned next to his daughter, who was equally astounded. "Anna, I think you're ready to move up into the big chair now, but if you'll have me, I'd still like to

serve the company in some lesser capacity. I know that's going to mean a lot more work for you, and I'll help with the transition. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think you were ready."

Martine could hardly contain her excitement. "Does this mean that I can start planning a real vacation?"

George smiled at his wife and took her hand. "Well, I'll have to ask the boss if I can have a little time off, but I'm in pretty good with her, so I think she'll say yes."

Anna was speechless. As Christia Kaklis' sole heir, she already owned all of the stock in the company, so it was no surprise that she would someday take the helm. But now that it was actually happening, she was almost overcome, eager to start planning the changes she would make. If she were indeed calling the shots, she would take the company in a new direction, one that her father would likely oppose. "I think a vacation is a great idea, Dad. Make it a long one. I have to order new furniture and get your junk moved out of the corner office." She handed Jonah back to his mom, stood and walked to the head of the table, giving her father a heartfelt hug.

"Congratulations, sweetheart. You're going to make a great boss." He knew that his stepping down would mean that Anna would be overwhelmed at the dealership until she surrounded herself with the right managers.

Lily beamed at the news, genuinely excited at what this meant for all of the Kaklis family, but especially for her lover, who she knew relished the opportunity. On several occasions, Anna had excitedly outlined her plans for the company if she were in control, including some very dramatic changes. Lily knew too that George would oppose some of the moves, but felt strongly that he would support his daughter in the transition. She took her lover's hand as the new president slipped back into her chair. "I'm so proud of you, honey. This is so exciting!"

Anna's mind was already racing about what she would do first. "Dad, will you be making the announcement public soon? I think we should call our agency and ask them to prepare a press release. You can let the staff know at the end of the day and it will come out in the next day's *Times*."

Kim and Hal were kicking each other under the table trying not to laugh out loud after Hal whispered "What's your hurry, George? Here's your hat."

Dinner progressed as Martine dreamily called out vacation sites for everyone's reaction. "Hawaii."

"Hawaii's a long weekend. If you want the islands or the beaches, try Tahiti or Thailand." Kim's friends traveled a lot.

A long weekend in Hawaii? What a brilliant idea! Anna immediately pondered a romantic getaway with Lily before implementing the changes at the dealership, one in which she would tell the beautiful woman beside her that she was ready to commit her life to their love.

"Okay, Australia then," Martine suggested.

"Now you're talking," said Hal. "I've heard New Zealand is beautiful too."

Anna hadn't offered any suggestions for vacation destinations, her mind obviously elsewhere. She shocked everyone when she suddenly turned to her brother-in-law and out of the blue asked him, "Hal, how would you like to be my right hand man in the car business?" Hal was too surprised to speak. "I've got some things in mind that could be fun for a bean counter. Think about it. I'll call you later in the week."

What on earth is she up to? George wondered. *Surely she wouldn't turn the company on its ear right out of the gate.*

The dinner turned into a celebration for both George and Anna, with each person at the table offering their accolades and best wishes. David was the first to depart, citing his late date with Heather. When Jonah got fussy, everyone decided to take their leave.

George stood and offered his hand to help Lily to her feet. To everyone's dismay, she ducked under his arm and twirled gracefully beside him. "You dance divinely," she said.

"Ha! Wait till you see me dance at Anna's wedding!" He resumed the gag.

"You're throwing us a wedding!" the blonde exclaimed excitedly. Lily was obviously tipsy, but adorably so, and everyone was amused at her antics with George.

The man flinched as though he'd been slapped. "Perish the thought! Anna, perhaps you could lose this woman on the way home!"

The group's departure was typically chaotic. As usual, Hal was sent to order the cars, Lily ducked into the ladies room, and Martine retrieved the raincoats and umbrellas from the coat check. While she waited for Lily, Anna pulled Kim aside to ask how she felt about the offer to her husband.

"Are you kidding? I hope you're really serious about wanting him to work with you? He's going to say yes, I'll tell you right now. He's thought I don't know how many times about asking for the chance to work there."

"Look, I'm going to need somebody smart that I trust. Hal's that guy. It might mean some long hours at first, but I promise not to work him to death."

Lily's timing was perfect, arriving at the door the moment the X-5 appeared. Anna stepped in just as the blonde reached for the keys. "Oh no, you don't."

Lily acquiesced immediately and climbed into the passenger seat. Leaning out, she delivered the parting shot. "Hey George! You better be nice to me. I know your boss!"

Anna pulled out of the drive and turned toward their home. "Buckle your seatbelt, baby."

Lily did exactly as she was told, fumbling a little with the catch. "I love it when you call me baby."

Anna smiled at her lover. "You were on a roll tonight. I swear you're going to wear him down."

"That's the idea, sweetheart. He's putty in my hands," the blonde slurred.

Gosh, she was cute! "You and Dad looked like you were enjoying yourselves. So how many glasses of wine did you have, little pygmy?"

"Little pygmy?"

I can't believe I said that!

"Little pygmy' is redundant, Amazon." Lily loved this game!

"Oh boy, here it comes," Anna groaned.

"Tuna fish."

Anna thought a moment. "Feta cheese."

"Tomato ketchup."

"Puppy dog." The car dealer was saving "kitty cat" and "bunny rabbit" for later contests.

"Kitty cat."

Damn! "Bunny rabbit."

"Hot water heater."

"You're hilarious."

The attorney had been storing these phrases in her brain since she was eleven. She collected them from a variety of sources, but her favorite was sports broadcasts. Usually, if sports announcers didn't outright deliver a redundant phrase—"painful groin injury" and "his x-rays were negative" came to mind—they made up for it by saying the exact same thing three or four times. She guessed their market research had described a largely dimwitted audience that required repetition.

Anna triggered the automatic opener for the garage door and pulled the SUV alongside her brand new cobalt Z8, BMW's sleek two-seater convertible roadster, longer and more powerful than the Z3 or Z4. The car dealer had personally imported it from Germany, as it would not be available in the US until next year. She had cajoled Lily into driving tonight to avoid taking her new baby out in the rain. "Stay there. I'll come around." Anna didn't want to risk Lily hurting herself on the rain-

slickened concrete floor. Together, they huddled under the umbrella and hurried to the side porch.

Before Anna could even slip out of her wet shoes, Lily was covering her face and neck with passionate kisses. Happily accepting the greeting, Anna murmured. "Oh my, somebody's feeling sexy tonight."

Despite the intimacy they shared so freely, both women still harbored a few sexual inhibitions that they hadn't even discussed. Thanks to Lily's four, no five glasses of wine tonight, she was about to lose one of hers. Leading Anna quietly to their upstairs suite, she teased her with promises of a special surprise.

Lily hungrily removed her lover's clothing in a frenzy, kissing and nipping the naked skin as it was revealed. Anna anticipated that she would be taken hard and fast. She was bewildered when Lily abruptly stopped her touches and guided the woman to a lounging position on their king sized bed.

With excruciating stops and starts, Lily took several long minutes to remove her own shoes, her dress, her black stockings, and her black lacy bra and matching thong. Kneeling naked at the foot of the bed, in full view of her lover, the sexy blonde did something she'd never done before with another soul. She closed her eyes and began to caress her own body, her tongue making slow circles around her open lips.

Anna thought she would lose her mind as she stared at the most erotic sight she had ever seen. Unable to control her desire as Lily made love to her own breasts, she reached out and touched her lover's hip. Suddenly, the green eyes opened wide and directed her wordlessly back against the pillows. As Anna watched two fingers slide beneath the curly brown patch of hair, she shuddered as she mentally mapped where those fingers had gone.

Moaning, panting, gasping for breath, Lily climaxed, and within seconds, entered her lover with those same slickened fingers. The blue-eyed beauty was way past ready, and in only moments, it was over.

Anna set her coffee and bagel on the corner of the kitchen table as she spread out the *Sunday Times*. This was one of her favorite things to do each weekend, though she preferred to be out on the patio by the pool. The weather made that impossible today, but the open window in the breakfast nook brought in cool, rain freshened air that more than made up for the change in venue.

A shuffling of bare feet signaled her partner's arrival. "Must have coffee," the little blonde groaned.

"Good morning, my sexy beast," Anna purred. Last night had been a *delightful* surprise.

For no reason that she could understand, Lily was feeling a little embarrassed by her display last night. Even in the light of day, she was uncertain whether Anna was

teasing her or genuinely voicing her approval. *Go with humor*, she told herself. "Yeah well, you've got to pull out all the stops when you're making love with a CEO." She made her way to the table, but stopped herself. "Must have aspirin," she groaned again, clutching the side of her head.

"Poor baby."

Chapter 3

As Kim had predicted, Hal called Anna on Sunday afternoon and accepted her offer to come to work at Premium Motors. The following week was a whirlwind, with George announcing his departure at a special staff meeting on Tuesday afternoon and Hal coming in on Wednesday morning. To everyone's dismay, Anna immediately named her brother-in-law vice-president of finance and set him up in her old office. Behind closed doors, she quickly laid out her plan for growing the business and he was charged with working the numbers to get it done.

Brad, the longtime sales manager, was also promoted to the vice-president level, and would handle the day to day operations as Anna had under her father's leadership. He needed help though, something she knew from how much she had depended on him. Holly Martin, last year's hire from San Diego, was a natural to move up. She knew more about the cars than any salesperson on the lot, and she had a real gift for closing the deal.

"Anna Kaklis, you have a call on line one. Anna Kaklis, line one." If possible, Carmen sounded even more official as she called the new company president to the phone. Anna had been taking congratulatory calls from the business community all week after the press release in the *Times*. Fellow car dealers especially were anticipating bold moves from this up and comer.

"This is Anna Kaklis."

"And this is Anna Kaklis' love slave."

The car dealer couldn't contain the belly laugh that roared up at the image of a leather-clad Lily in chains. It was so *not them*. "Oh, I don't think so, Pygmy. I think it's pretty clear who the slave is at our house."

Lily smiled at her own remembrance of the scene last weekend in which Anna had done exactly as directed. "Maybe we should take turns," she suggested... suggestively.

"I'm for that," Anna said without hesitation. *Anything for you*. She had asked Carmen to track down a few Hawaiian getaway packages for Memorial Weekend, knowing that Lily would have that Monday off. She would choose the one that was most *romantic*.

"Listen, we just got an invitation to Sandy and Suzanne's for dinner. She's fixing something that sounds French. You want to go?"

Anna checked her watch, then the pile of papers on her desk. "You know what? I'd like to, but I've got a stack of deals on my desk that I need to look at. I tell you, we've been turning them over all day long." The sunny weather and the Cinco de Mayo sale had brought the car buyers out in droves. With George already on a golf trip with Martine in Phoenix, Anna felt the need to stick close to Brad and Holly as they adjusted to their new positions. In time, they'd pick it up, and she'd be able to leave them on their own. "Why don't you go, and I'll see you at home tonight."

That wasn't exactly the answer Lily wanted, but she knew her lover was swamped with work this week. "You're sure?"

"Yeah, have fun. Tell them both I said hi, and we'll have them over soon. Okay?"

"Alright, lover. I'll see you tonight."

The car dealer felt a little guilty about not getting home earlier tonight. Saturday nights had always been Lily Time, but she knew things would be back to normal as soon as everyone at the dealership got their groove. The mountain of paperwork kept her at the desk until almost 10. To her chagrin, she had found errors—mostly transposition of numbers—in eight of the contracts Holly had written.

Anna was disappointed to find a darkened house, a sign that Lily was still with their friends. But she didn't begrudge her lover having a good time while she was chained to her desk with paperwork. Truth be told, Lily's being out meant she was having a good time, and that eased Anna's guilt that she hadn't been home before 10 any night this week. This had been Hell Week, and next week didn't look much better. Worst of all, she was trying to think how to break it to her lover that she really needed to be on the lot for most of the day tomorrow as well.

The exhausted woman passed through the kitchen, staring for a moment at the contents of the refrigerator before settling on the old standby: This was her fourth late night peanut butter sandwich this week. Since Lily wasn't here to keep her company in the kitchen, Anna dragged herself up the stairs to draw a bath. She and Lily usually climbed into the hot tub out by the pool when they came home tired, but it wasn't much fun alone.

A ringing phone stopped the tall beauty just as she was about to step into the tub. The single ring confirmed that it was her line, since Lily's line emitted a double ring. Due to the nature of her work, the attorney felt she needed a private line with a professional sounding outgoing message on the voicemail.

"Hello."

"Anna! We missed you tonight."

"Hi Sandy! I'm sorry I couldn't make it. Did you guys have a good time?"

"We certainly did. In fact, some of us had a little better time than others."

Uh-oh! She presumed this meant Lily. "What's my little girl done?"

"Nothing, but we're not letting her drive home. Do you want to come get her, or can we keep her for the night?"

Anna thought about the fun they'd had last weekend when Lily had let herself go, and was momentarily tempted to dash out the door. On the other hand, she probably wouldn't have time to take Lily out to Sherman Oaks tomorrow to pick up her car, so the latter option made more practical sense. "Why don't you keep her for the night? I'm beat. I was just about to get in the tub. Would that be alright?"

"Of course. I'll have her call you in the morning."

"Is she there right now?"

"Yeah, but she's in the bathroom losing an excellent Chicken Lyon."

Out of the corner of her eye, Anna saw the familiar X-5 drive onto the lot and pull around back. No fewer than two dozen of the silver SUVs stopped in across any given week, but somehow the car dealer sensed when her lover was behind the wheel. Excusing herself from Holly's office, she made her way through the customer lounge to the back door, just in time to greet the cute little blonde. "This is a nice surprise," she said excitedly. "I missed you last night."

"Me too you, Amazon." She tugged the car dealer into a recessed doorway so she could steal a hug and a quick kiss. On top of dealing with a formidable hangover this morning, she was more than a little put out at waking up alone in a strange bed. "You should have come for me," she pouted. "I would have made it worth your while."

Of that, Anna had no doubt. "I'm sorry baby. I didn't get home until pretty late, and I was already in the tub when Sandy called." *A white lie.*

"You're not going to work all day, are you?" It wasn't a question really, and they both knew it.

"No," the car dealer acquiesced. She needed time with the blonde as much as Lily needed time with her. "Let me finish up with Holly. I'll be 30 minutes behind you. What do you want to do this afternoon?"

"Just come home, Amazon. I'll worry about the entertainment," her voice was low and seductive.

Thirty minutes turned into 90 minutes, but Lily dismissed her irritation when Anna walked in and immediately pulled her upstairs to the master suite. Today was Sunday, and on Sundays, they took their time with one another, finding many ways to bring pleasure in the bright light of day.

Pauline made her way down the hall as soon as she saw Lily slip into Lauren's office. "Did you guys get a present yet?" The 21-year-old secretary hadn't had much experience in the social graces.

"I got them a set of sheets and towels from the web site where they registered." Lily prided herself on her efficiency and web shopping prowess. As far as she was concerned, the internet was the only civilized way to shop.

"I got them a place setting at Bloomingdales," Lauren added.

All three women kept their voices low so that Tony wouldn't overhear. Come Saturday at four o'clock, hearts all over town would break as their boss ceased being one of LA's most eligible bachelors. Colleen Turner, a young widow with two small children, had applied for an internship at the firm last fall, hoping to get some hands-on experience with the social services system. Colleen was fresh out of law school, and had always aspired to practice family law. Her skills and interests fit nicely with the firm's caseload, but she hadn't yet taken the bar exam. Tony had simply been blindsided when the woman claimed his heart.

"I'm a little confused," Pauline said. "I got them some of the crystal, but I don't know what to do for the shower tonight. Were we supposed to get another gift?"

"Technically, yes," Lauren answered. "Everything around a wedding is designed as an opportunity to give a gift."

"That's what I was afraid of. I'm going to have to rush out of here after work and pick up something else."

Lily knew the secretary lived on a budget, so she glanced at Lauren, who was already on the same wavelength. "We got a tablecloth and dinner napkins. Why don't you just sign our card? It'll be from the office."

"Aw, that would be great! Thanks."

"No problem," Lily said. "Say, Colleen's sister lives pretty close to my neighborhood. Why don't we meet at my house and go in one car?"

"Good idea! Is Anna going to come too?" Lauren really liked the car dealer. Anna had cut them a sweet deal on a 540i.

"No, she's covered up with work right now. Her dad stepped down last week and she's trying to get her new staff organized." Lily was glad for something to do tonight. The house had been pretty lonely these last few days. *Except Sunday afternoon.*

At six o'clock, the three women pulled up in front of Colleen's sister's home in Lauren's BMW. "Are these people movie stars?" Pauline asked, awed at the Brentwood mansion.

"Not exactly. But I think Colleen's brother-in-law is a big shot at one of the major recording companies." Lauren and Colleen had gotten to be pretty good friends, so she knew a little about the woman's family.

The women were greeted by a uniformed servant, who showed them into a lively party, complete with piano music and an open bar. No fewer than a hundred women filled the room, the chatter spilling over onto the patio. Lily spotted Colleen and they weaved their way through the room to say hello.

Pauline was sent to the bar, but came back empty handed. "They have no merlot. The caterer forgot to stock it. What's your second choice?"

"I don't care," said Lauren. "But I don't like sweet drinks."

Lily unconsciously made a face. "Me neither."

Pauline, the youngest of the three, spoke up. "I had a vodka martini once. It was pretty good, and it wasn't sweet."

"I'll try it," Lauren shrugged.

"Me too."

Five vodka martinis later, Lily was guided to the car and deposited in the front seat. "I like vodka," she slurred. "A lot."

"So we can tell." Lauren had watched her friend down three drinks hastily, and hurried to feed her the hors d'oeuvres. Two drinks later, she was smashed. "Your girlfriend's going to kick my ass," she lamented.

"She won't be home," Lily scowled. She was right. Lauren and Pauline helped their coworker to bed, and let themselves out.

Anna arrived shortly before midnight, dead on her feet. The little blonde was sound asleep, turned on her side away from her lover. Anna kissed her softly behind the ear, and drifted off immediately.

Anna was excited to finally have the evening away from her office. Things were going better, but she found that her strategy sessions with Hal were consuming the day, and all the paperwork was waiting for her when the doors closed and the sales staff went home. Holly was doing a great job managing the inventory and getting cars out the door, but Anna was growing more and more frustrated with the errors in her paperwork. She'd finally called her in on Thursday night to talk about it, and Holly told her of her problems with dyslexia. There were ways to get around it, she'd said, and if Anna would be patient, she would come up with a plan. In the meantime, someone would have to check all of her contracts.

"You'd better not be thinking about work, Amazon. You're mine tonight." Lily smiled at her partner's reflection in the long bathroom mirror as they readied for Tony's big day.

"You got it, sweetheart." Lily was right. Anna felt bad enough about being at the office so much lately. She wasn't going to make it worse by dwelling on work things when she wasn't there.

"Zip me?" Lily offered her back.

Anna seized the moment to kiss the back of the woman's exposed neck and shoulder. "This is my favorite dress," she murmured. "I remember the first time I saw this dress." It was the black one Lily had bought for her dinner with Anna at Empyre's on the day her divorce became final.

"That was the first time I wore it. I bought it that afternoon so I'd have something to wear to a fancy restaurant. In fact, there was something scratching me in the rib all night, and when I got home, I found the tag still in it." She chuckled at the memory. "That was also the first night that I knew that I could fall in love with you."

Anna turned her lover in her arms and kissed her deeply. "Well, if I'm really, really honest with myself, I think I felt it that night too. You were so lovely, just like tonight. I've missed you."

Looking into the sapphire eyes, Lily thought fleetingly of shedding the dress and leading her lover back into their bedroom. They hadn't made love in almost a week. "Let's go get Tony married so we can come back here and get reacquainted."

It was a lovely wedding, and Tony had never looked more handsome. "I can't believe you did it! Half of the women here are going into a convent tomorrow!" Lily hugged her boss excitedly then turned to Colleen. "It was a beautiful ceremony."

Lily could tell from Anna's quiet tears that her lover had been moved by the couple's romantic vows, but she had no idea that the dark-haired woman had begun scripting her own. *I want to make those promises to you, Lily.* Anna took Lily's hand as the rings were exchanged. She hoped Lily would want to wear a ring, but that was all dependent on whether she accepted Anna's promise.

The solemnity of the wedding was forgotten when the crowd entered the ballroom reception at the Burlington Hotel. Live bands on either side of the room took turns playing big band tunes and top 40.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Anna asked.

Lily stopped to think a moment. That vodka martini had sure hit the spot the other night. *But you did get shit-faced!* "Sure, merlot if they have it." She went off in search of Sandy and Suzanne, who had joined the buffet line.

Lily polished off her wine before starting on her plate, washing down her meal with sparkling water. When they finished, she volunteered for the next bar run.

"Lily! How are you?"

"Andrew! Wow, don't you clean up well!" Andrew Shively was a sergeant with the LAPD, and Tony's racquetball partner. Lily knew him from Kidz Kamp, the volunteer group that regularly treated foster children to weekend outings in the great outdoors.

"You're one to talk! You look great! What are you having?" He gestured toward the bartender.

"Oh, I need two glasses of merlot," she said to the tuxedoed woman. "On second thought, make that one merlot, and one vodka martini." It was, after all, a celebration.

"Would you like that with an olive or a lime?" the woman asked.

"Lime sounds good."

"You should try a kamikaze," Andrew suggested.

"What's that?"

"It's vodka, triple sec, and lime juice. You can get it on the rocks or as a shooter. Go ahead, try one. I'm buying."

"Okay, I'll try a shooter."

"Make it two." The bartender expertly poured the two liquors and added a splash of lime juice. Lifting his shot glass, Andy offered a toast. "To Tony!"

"To Tony!" Lily agreed. She threw her head back and slammed the shooter, not prepared for the clenching sensation in her chest as the drink reached its mark. "Wow! That was good." Turning back to the bartender, she amended her order yet again. "Okay, make it one merlot, and one kamikaze on the rocks." As the policeman walked away, she ordered one more shooter for good measure. It was after all a celebration.

As the guests were finishing their dinner, Tony and Colleen took to the dance floor for the ceremonial first dance. Gradually, couples joined them on the floor, but the four friends were hesitant, not sure if everyone in Tony's or Colleen's family would be cool with the idea of women dancing together. They finally got their answer when the beaming couple visited their table and encouraged all of them to hit the dance floor.

Lily weaved her way back to her friends just as the newlyweds were leaving their table. She hugged the pair again and took a seat alongside her beautiful partner.

"What have you got?" Anna pointed to the highball.

"It's called a kamikaze. Vodka, something and lime juice. Andrew Shively bought it for me. Want a taste?"

Anna shook her head. "No, I'll stick with my wine, but I doubt I'll drink all this. I hadn't even finished my last one."

Suzanne leaned across the table to interrupt the lovers. "Lily, Tony said we should get up and dance. He thought everyone would be cool with it." She was egging Lily on because she knew Sandy wouldn't do it unless the other couple did.

"I'd like that, baby. What do you say?" Lily wanted this sexy woman in her arms—now!

"I'm yours tonight, sweetheart. You want to dance, we dance." Anna was sure she was here with the most beautiful woman in the room. That skimpy black dress just pushed buttons all over her!

Lily stood up and drained her drink, then led her partner to the dance floor. The first song was fast, but in the spirit of the event, the next two were slow romantic ballads. Her hand pressed firmly into the small of her lover's back, the blonde woman pulled her partner close and whispered up into her ear. "I want to take you home and make love to you all night long. I want to feel your breasts in my face and this silky hair on my thighs." She ran her fingers sensuously through the long black tresses.

Anna loved the sensation of her lover's hands in her hair, but she couldn't help but feel a little uneasy about the reactions of all the people around them. "I'm going to hold you to that, lover girl. But you might want to wait until we actually get home. We wouldn't want to scandalize Tony's wedding," she joked.

The music stopped, and they reluctantly parted, but not before sharing a long look of heated desire. Both women shook it off and headed back to their table. Agreeing to stay for a respectable amount of time—perhaps a half hour more—Lily returned to the bar for one more drink. Of course, there was no reason not to have a shooter while she waited. *What on earth took me so long to discover kamikazes?*

She returned to find Anna and their friends extolling the virtues of big band music. Ignoring their discussion, the blonde leaned into her lover once again and whispered, "I want my tongue inside you when you come." She followed that with a wet flick to the ear.

Whoa! Anna thought she'd explode, right here in front of all these nice people. Of the two of them, she was the talker, though she rarely said anything as...naughty as the words her partner had just whispered into her ear. Taking in her lover's lustful gaze, the tall woman suddenly stood. "I think Lily and I need to be going. We've both got a lot to do tomorrow to get ready for the week." Even Anna realized how lame she sounded. Still, she wasn't going to let something like manners get in the way of what her lover had in mind.

Lily was surprisingly quiet on the way home, positioning herself in the front seat of the sports car to allow her lover's hand to creep underneath her dress and stroke the dampened thong. When they entered through the family room, she went immediately upstairs to get ready for bed. Anna turned out the lights and locked up, then followed quickly, anticipating a long night of decadent lust. Reaching the top of the stairs, she followed the trail of discarded clothing all the way to the king-sized bed. There she found her naked lover...sound asleep.

Chapter 4

"Ugh!" Lily raised both hands to her head as she sat up. Immediately sorry at the amount of fun she had obviously had at Tony's wedding, the disheveled blonde staggered into the bathroom. Yep, there was that telltale "green" countenance that usually accompanied a hangover, the drooping eyes sporting a smeared ring of mascara. And who were those people walking around in her mouth! Through the bathroom window, Lily spotted her lover at the umbrella table by the pool, her favorite place to read the Sunday paper.

"Shower first, then coffee, then girlfriend," she mumbled aloud. Something was nagging her about last night. She felt guilty, but she wasn't sure why. The wedding, the dancing... she vaguely remembered leaving, but nothing after that.

Anna looked up when she heard her lover in the kitchen. Lily was barefooted, dressed in one of the tall woman's button down shirts, the long tail hanging to the top of her brown thighs. The wet hair was slicked straight back, evidence that she had washed away the remnants of last night's celebration. Anna loved this casual look, but she was put out with the blonde this morning.

"Hi," Lily said as she kissed the woman on the top of her head.

"Good morning," Anna responded coolly. "Sleep well?"

Hmm, were we expecting a cold front? "Yeah, how about you?"

"Alright, I suppose."

"Are you ready for a refill?" Lily gestured at Anna's empty mug.

"No, thank you," came the formal reply.

Definitely a little frosty. Lily absently rummaged through the paper, trying hard to remember what she might have said or done last night to warrant this chill. "Listen to this: 'In a 16-hour procedure, a team of surgeons in Johannesburg successfully separated 8-week-old Sudanese twins joined at the hip and thigh. The infants, in critical but stable condition, were rejoined with their parents in the Sudan.'" She waited for a reaction. "Get it? Siamese twins rejoined with their parents?" Still no response. "Like, what's the point of separating them from each other if you're just going to rejoin them to someone else?"

"I get it," Anna groaned. "I guess I don't find it funny."

Lily laid the paper down and looked nervously at her partner. "Okay, what's wrong?" She found herself apprehensive about how the blanks from last night would be filled in.

From behind the sports page, Anna answered matter-of-factly, "You fell asleep on me last night."

Is that all? "And I'm getting the cold shoulder for that?"

Anna sighed. "It hurt my feelings. I finally got some time off and we wasted it."

"Anna, your work schedule isn't my fault. I'm sorry I fell asleep. I guess I partied too much. But if you want more of me, you could always spend more time at home." That needed to be said.

"You know how busy things are at work right now. I don't want to be gone so much, but I have to be, at least until things are running smoothly." There was another issue that was more important, though Anna was hesitant to broach it. "Lily, you've been 'partying' a lot lately. You got tipsy at Empyre's, then last weekend you couldn't drive home from Sandy and Suzanne's, and now there's last night." She carefully avoided using the word 'drunk.'

That wasn't all actually, but Lily was pretty sure her partner didn't know about the bridal shower. She certainly wasn't going to correct her. "Are you suggesting that I might have a drinking problem?" Her defensive tone was unmistakable.

"No, but it isn't like you to drink as much as you have lately. I guess I don't want it to turn into a problem."

"It won't, Anna." *Please let this discussion be over.* It was, thanks to the double ring of the kitchen phone. Without a word, Lily walked back into the house.

Anna felt awful. She'd practically accused her partner of being an alcoholic, and she'd gotten a loud and clear message that her work load was the reason they hadn't been connecting recently. When she heard Lily hang up the phone, she followed her into the kitchen. "Who was that?" She tried to sound more cheerful.

"That was Mom. She wanted to remind us that she and Bill are coming next weekend. He's got that oncology conference in Long Beach."

"It'll be great to see her again. So what's the story with Bill?"

"I get the feeling that fizzled. She doesn't talk about it anymore. They're obviously still friends, but he's going to stay at the conference hotel, and she's going to stay here."

Anna stepped behind the sexy blonde, slipping her hand under the shirttail to stroke the flat stomach. "So how would I go about getting on your dance card today?"

George Kaklis returned to the dealership on Monday morning, boasting brand new business cards that touted him as a Customer Relations Executive. He was now the official "glad-hander," the one who attended community and business functions on the

dealership's behalf, and who handled the "meet and greet" when longtime customers arrived on the lot. He was a little disappointed when he realized that he would no longer have a plush office on the second floor. Anna already had carpenters in carving up her new digs and part of her old office to accommodate both Hal and Brad, moving her father downstairs to a sales office. At least his had a door.

He was more disturbed by the fact that his daughter and son-in-law were meeting for long hours in private. Surely, she would want his advice on the direction for the company. Wednesday morning, Anna finally invited him up to go over their plans.

"We're going to move to acquire two, maybe even three new dealerships," she explained. "We need a line that appeals to the budget conscious, as well as to those who are looking for more fuel efficiency. That's a pretty big pie, and we're positioned well to deliver it at a profit."

George couldn't believe his daughter would do this. He had always been adamantly opposed to diluting their brand, and he didn't see how she could effectively manage dealerships in different locations. They had had this discussion at least once a year for the last five years, each time with Anna arguing that their own resources and expertise were underutilized. Now she was making this her first move as president. "You already know what I think of this, Anna," he said sternly.

"Yes, Dad, I know you're reluctant to do this, but Hal and I think it's a good move for us. I had Walter draft an offer for Sweeney Volkswagen, and we submitted it this morning." She knew this was tough on George, so she sweetened the pot. "I think the Volkswagen line offers a great opportunity for David. If he's interested, that is." She knew he would be. Her younger brother had broken ranks at sixteen when he insisted on getting a Beetle rather than BMW's sporty entry model, the M3.

He considered the possibilities. He liked the idea of his whole family following in his footsteps in the car business, and David had never gotten excited about the luxury cars. "So you said two or three dealerships."

"We're also going over the books for the BMW and Volkswagen dealerships in Palm Springs. Both owners are looking to get out of the business. It's a golden opportunity."

George conceded that his daughter was right. The dealership's finances were strong enough to leverage all three of these acquisitions. Premier Motors was on its way to becoming an auto empire. *Son of a gun.*

"Lilian Stuart." The attorney always sounded so serious when she answered her office phone.

"Raw fish?" was all her lover said.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. Thanks for asking." The disjointed greetings were their hallmark. "Are you inviting me for sushi, or was that a reference to something else?"

Things were smooth again between them. Anna had gotten home by eight every night this week, and Lily had refrained from drinking anything at all, even skipping her usual glass of wine with dinner. Not that she was conceding that she had a problem. She just wanted to prove to Anna that she did not.

"The former, actually. I made the big move this morning. We'll probably hear something from Sweeney in a couple of weeks."

"So is George's nose out of joint?"

"Big time."

"Well, that's worth celebrating," she said mischievously. "What time will you be home?"

"How about seven?"

"I'll be ready."

"Oh, and I have a surprise for you."

Anna honked the horn as she pulled into the drive at 6:50. Lily had changed into a black miniskirt and red top, one of her lover's favorite outfits. The short drive to the restaurant was filled with a detailed description of George's dubious reaction to the offer for Sweeney Volkswagen. Lily delighted in his comeuppance, but not in a malicious way. She knew he deserved a lot of credit for Anna's success, thanks to the values and drive he had instilled in her from her youth.

"Let's see. How about a dragon roll, a spicy tuna roll, a spider roll, four pieces of unagi, two salads with ginger dressing, two hot teas and edamame." Lily looked over the menu at her lover. "You want anything?"

Anna burst out laughing at her partner's playfulness. "No, I'm sure I'll get full just watching you eat all of that."

The attorney chatted about her day as they waited for their order. Finally, she could stand it no longer. "So what's my surprise?"

Anna looked at her and smiled. "Oh yeah. I promised you a surprise, didn't I?" Reaching into her purse, she extracted a folder of travel documents and passed it across the table.

"Maui! We're going to Maui!" Her excited shouts turned the heads of several adjacent tables. The other diners smiled at her delight. "When?"

"Next weekend. We leave Friday night at 7:15 and come back on the redeye in time for work on Tuesday morning. I wanted it to be longer, but I know it's hard for you to get away on short notice. Since it's the holiday weekend, this worked out." Softly, she added, "I thought we could use some time away together."

Lily couldn't contain her glee. Anna Kaklis, the soft sand, the sun, Anna Kaklis, the blue water, the swaying palms, Anna Kaklis. "You're the best, you know."

"Yes, I know." She winked, feeling pretty proud of herself.

It was after 11 on Friday night when Bill dropped Eleanor and Chester at the Brentwood home. "Have fun at your conference," Lily yelled from the walkway, as he slid back into his Mercedes sedan.

"Some conference," Eleanor joked. "They have a two-hour meeting in the morning, then 18 holes of golf tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, it's good work if you can get it." Lily squatted to pet the vivacious basset hound. "How's my boy?" Chester smiled—*Wasn't that a smile?*—and wagged his tail happily. He loved everybody, but especially this familiar blonde woman. At least until Anna appeared in the doorway. Then she became his best friend.

"Chester!" Toenails clacked furiously on the sidewalk as he bounded to the new person. Anna scratched the happy dog on his upturned belly, then stood to greet Eleanor. "You want your belly rubbed too, or will a hug do?"

"Hmmm. A hug I think." Anna complied then grabbed the woman's suitcase.

"Did you bring your hiking boots, Mom?"

"Of course. Are we going out tomorrow?"

"You bet!" Lily got her love of hiking from her mother. While she was growing up in San Jose, the two of them would spend most Saturdays blazing trails in the Santa Cruz mountains. Eleanor loved sampling the new trails in southern California with her daughter.

By 7:30 in the morning, Anna was heading out the door to the dealership. They were swamped on Saturdays and she was giving Brad the day off, since he'd have to cover for her next weekend while she was in Hawaii.

"Don't forget, Amazon. We're going to your mom and dad's for dinner at six, so I expect to see your smiling face by 5:30." Both of them seemed able to work within given parameters, so long as the expectations were clear.

"I'll be here." Their plans made, the car dealer stole a kiss and disappeared out the door.

Lily finished making turkey sandwiches, and filled sealable plastic bags with carrots, trail mix, and orange sections. She filled her two-liter Camelback water bladder, adding three one-liter bottles of water and lifted the pack. *A little heavier than usual, but not too bad.* The weather was perfect, so they wouldn't need any rain gear or extra sweaters. "Mom, are you ready?"

"I am now. Do you have room for my camera in your daypack?"

"Sure."

"I'll take my turn carrying that thing, you know. Tell you what, you carry it until lunch then I'll carry it the rest of the day."

Lily frowned. "But after lunch, it will be practically empty."

"Yes, I know," she deadpanned.

Lily had picked a moderately challenging 10-mile hike for their outing. That would get them home by three, in plenty of time to rest a bit and get ready for dinner at the Kaklis home. Eleanor had met Kim and Hal, but had missed the pleasure of George, Martine and David. *Well, Martine and David anyway, if you're talking pleasure.* She was somehow certain her mother would handle the Kaklis patriarch perfectly.

They parked the SUV at the trailhead and gathered their things. As they started out, Eleanor stopped to adjust her boots, something she did *every single time* they went hiking. Lily had gotten so used to it over the years that she built it into her gait. The hike did not officially start until Eleanor's boots were right.

"So what happened to you and Bill?" Lily didn't mean to get into her mother's business, but she wanted to know if something had gone awry.

"Oh, we just figured out that we liked being friends. Getting closer kind of complicated that, for both of us, I think."

"Is it working out? I mean being friends. I was just worried about you."

"We're fine. I think he still misses Liz, more than he's willing to admit." Bill's wife of 21 years died of cancer almost four years ago.

"Are you okay?" Now that Lily had found Anna to love, she hated to think of her mother being lonely.

"Of course I am. I mean, it was nice while it lasted, but it wasn't an overwhelming need I had. Our friendship is...fulfilling."

Lily could hear the melancholy in her mother's voice, but knew that Eleanor had said all she wanted to say about it. She hooked the woman's arm in hers as they trudged up the wide shaded path.

Two and a half hours later, the women were standing at the pinnacle of Strawberry Peak. From this vantage point, they could see the Pacific Ocean to the west, Mount Baldy to the east, and the entire LA basin. Or at least, they could have seen it, had it not been blanketed in smog. Still, it was beautiful and sunny where they stood, and lunch was divine.

The peak was a stopping point for dozens of hikers and bikers, and Lily couldn't resist asking another hiker to snap a picture of her with her mother, here in one of her favorite places. "I don't think we've had a picture made together since I graduated from law school."

"Then we should get copies made, so we can both have one."

Walking downhill was hard on Eleanor's knees, so Lily chose a longer, more meandering path that wasn't as steep for their descent. "I've had a great day, Mom. I think that hiking with you on the weekends is the thing I miss most about leaving home. You've got to get down here more often."

"And you could come home more often too, you know."

"Yeah, maybe I will. Anna's been really busy with work. Maybe I'll come up in a couple of weeks and we'll do the Priest Rock Trail. Did I tell you that we're going to Maui next week?"

On the way home, Lily told her mother all about their plans for the holiday weekend. Well, not exactly all of their plans.

At six o'clock, Anna, Lily, Eleanor and Bill were piling into the SUV for the short ride over to the Kaklis home. At the last moment, Anna suggested taking Chester too, so the happy fellow proudly positioned himself in her lap in the front seat. They were the last to arrive, finding everyone in their usual spot by the pool. Hal and David had baby Jonah in the pool, squealing with delight.

"Mom, Dad? I'd like you to meet Lily's mom, Eleanor Stuart." Turning back to Eleanor, she went on. "And this is my father, George, and my mother, Martine. That black-haired tree in the pool is my brother David."

Martine addressed the older woman. "We're very pleased to meet you, and so glad you could come. We think the world of your daughter." Martine could have been...southern.

"Indeed we do, but please don't tell her. It keeps her on her toes to wonder." George always had to qualify his affection for the little blonde who owned his daughter's heart, but he couldn't effectively hide it anymore.

"And this is her friend, Bill Mueller. He drives a Mercedes," she hissed the word.

"We can fix that. Have David and Hal hold his head under water."

Bill laughed amiably. "Actually, my lease is up this month and I thought I'd like to drive something different. The 745i is one of the three cars that I've been studying."

"What are the other two?" Anna and George asked their question in perfect synchrony.

"Well, I was looking at the Jaguar."

"They're alien droppings," George spat in disgust.

"What he means," Anna interjected diplomatically, "is that you don't see very many older Jaguars out there. They don't exactly have a reputation for being well-built. What's the other one?" It was the good guy-bad guy routine, but Bill didn't recognize it.

"The other is the Lexus."

"Ah, the Lexus," George remarked. "Well, there's one good thing about driving a Lexus."

"What's that?" Bill was so gullible.

"Tell him, Anna."

"If you're driving it, you can't see how ugly it is."

Bill surrendered, laughing. "So I guess it's the BMW?"

"Look, if you really want one, I'll set you up tomorrow morning," Anna offered. "Just tell me what color you want and I'll have it ready to go by early afternoon. I won't pressure you, but I'll give you the family discount—what I'd pay if I were buying it. That's the best deal you'll get anywhere."

"White."

"Purchase or lease?"

"Lease."

"Three years or five years?"

"You pick."

"Three. That way, I get it back sooner to sell again."

"Then I'll have to turn in the Mercedes at the local dealer first thing tomorrow."

"No, we'll deliver it for you." Anna beamed. "We really like that part."

Eleanor and Martine were fast friends, quickly discovering a shared interest in gardening. They went on and on about their families as they wandered from one flower bed to another. "Jonah's adorable. I bet you're thrilled to have a little one."

"Are you kidding? I can't get enough of him, but I have to loosen my grip when Anna's around."

As if on cue, the little guy squawked his displeasure at being passed from the pool into a towel, despite the loving arms of his aunt. But in mere moments of bouncing

and cooing, he had stilled, enraptured by the smiling blue eyes and long dark hair. *Did someone say long dark hair?*

"Ouch! Somebody help!" Kim pried her son's fingers from his prize, though he kept a sizable souvenir.

George and Lily were having another of their deep conversations. "What part of 'I'm not going anywhere' don't you understand, George? When your daughter puts you in an old folk's home, I'm going to be right there to wipe the drool off your chin." She watched as a small smile played on the man's face. "Don't worry, you'll warm up to me eventually."

"Perhaps if we're cremated together...."

The evening was wonderful, especially for Anna and Lily, who got the chance to watch their families getting acquainted. Anna was filled with admiration for Eleanor. The woman emanated grace and charm, clearly winning over George and Martine.

Lily had expected Martine and her mom to hit it off, and was not disappointed. But the special attention shown to her mother by George touched Lily's heart. She was sure that she had overheard the man say something like "We like her a lot," but knowing the elder Kaklis, he was probably talking about the neighbor's cat, who had wandered into the yard to entertain Chester.

Chapter 5

"Drive carefully, Bill. When Lily got her X-5, I couldn't keep her under 80. And then there was that time...."

"That's enough, Amazon! Are you trying to give my mother a heart attack?" Shaking her head, Lily turned to reassure her mother. "I'm a very careful driver, Mom."

"I know you are. So are you coming up in a couple of weeks, like we talked about?" she asked hopefully.

Lily looked back at her partner to indicate that they would talk about her plans later. "Yeah, I'm going to try to get up soon. I really enjoyed our hike yesterday."

"Me too, sweetie." Eleanor wrapped her daughter in a mighty hug. Next, she broke up the lovefest on the front lawn between Anna and Chester in order to extricate her hound.

"You sure you don't want to leave Chester here at our house? We'll bring him back eventually. Or not," she joked.

"Not a chance! Bill, get my dog from that woman!" Bill guided Chester into his crate, which was strapped to the back seat. Immediately content, the dog settled down with his rawhide chew.

After one last hug for Anna and Lily, Eleanor got in and rolled down the window. "Love you both."

"Love you too," the women shouted as they watched the sparkling BMW pull out.

"You and your mom really had a good visit, didn't you?"

"Yeah, it was too short though. But our hike yesterday was really special. We talked a lot. It was like the old days."

Anna put her arm around Lily's shoulder as they walked into the house. Lily reciprocated with an arm around her lover's waist. "What did you talk about?"

"We talked a lot about Bill. I was kind of worried about her, you know, that she was feeling lonely because things didn't work out."

"Is she?"

"She says no, but I still worry. I wish she could find somebody special." Lily's voice was sad. "I never used to think about that until I found you. Now I want everybody I love to be as happy as I am."

"Are you happy with me, Lily?" Anna thought she knew the answer, but she wanted to hear it.

"I'm so very happy with you." That settled, it was time for a long, loving Sunday afternoon reaffirmation.

Things had calmed down at Premier Motors as they waited to hear back from Sweeney Volkswagen. Anna and Hal agreed that they should hold off on their offer for the dealerships in Palm Springs until they completed negotiations with Sweeney. With that out of the way—at least temporarily—Anna had more time for the day to day tasks of running the dealership. To further reduce her work load, she and Holly had worked with a business forms company to draft a new computerized version of the seller's contract that minimized the possibility of error. Things were looking up.

Lily was thrilled with getting her lover back. Anna was sleeping in until 6:30, and getting home from work before seven. They had a life again!

"Oh, I almost forgot! Kim called me yesterday at the dealership and invited us for dinner tonight. I told them yes, but that I needed to check with you." Anna and Lily were going through their morning routines side by side in the long master bath.

"Sounds good to me," the blonde answered. "Or we could send them out together and stay home with Jonah!"

"I thought of that already. Kim laughed and said nobody pays any attention to her or Hal anymore. You know, she said it like she was kidding, but I think she really might be feeling a little neglected."

"Well, we don't want that. Of course we'll go."

At seven sharp, Anna and Lily rang the bell at Kim and Hal's Encino home. For the first time since Jonah was born, Anna did not bolt through the house in search of the infant. "Hiya, sister!"

"Hi yourself! It's good to see you guys again. We didn't get much of a chance to talk on Saturday." Kim greeted her sister and Lily warmly, and they followed her to the family room. "Hal's got Jonah upstairs if you want to see him."

"We'll see him later. Something smells great!" Anna's fight with her inner self not to dash off upstairs was a stark indicator of how badly she'd been treating the sister she loved so dearly.

"It's Cornish hen. I got the recipe from one of the women I walk with." Kim was the epitome of suburban motherhood, strapping little Jonah into his three-wheeled stroller for a power walk with two other mothers on the wider trails at Topanga State Park.

"Cornish hen's one of your favorites, isn't it honey?" Anna asked her lover.

Lily loved it when Anna called her *honey*! "Oh yeah! Mom used to make it on Sundays. I always called them 'little chickens.'"

Just then Hal walked in with Jonah in his arms, fully expecting to give the little guy up to his aunt. Anna stood her ground, though, resisting the temptation to reach out for him. Lily saw a rare opening for herself and took the baby from his dad, retreating out to the deck with Hal to give Anna time with her sister.

"Mom called and said they really enjoyed meeting Eleanor. She said Dad just went on and on about her."

"Isn't she wonderful!" Anna had come to love Lily's mom. "It scares me to think that she and Lily might never have met. They're just so perfect together."

"It was meant to be, then." Kim grew quiet for a moment. Anna knew her sister well enough to know that she was struggling with whether or not to say what was on her mind.

"What is it, Kimmie?" That pet name was one Anna reserved for the times she felt like the big sister.

"I'll tell you, but I don't want you to go off on me, okay?"

Anna could see that something was really bothering her sister, but she couldn't imagine why she would go off about it. "Okay, tell me."

With great trepidation, Kim started. "I know you guys are really busy at work. I know there's a lot to do, and that it's all temporary." She waved her hands in acquiescence to make the point that she understood. "And Hal loves it. I'm really glad, because I knew he would. It's just that...."

"Just what?" Anna had no idea where this conversation was going.

"He's been gone so much, going in early and working so late. For the first time in 13 years, we have something to fight about. And I hate it!"

Anna felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach. She knew that Lily had been struggling with her time at the dealership, and that it had caused its share of problems for them. Now to find out that it had also caused problems for Kim and Hal—who *never* had problems—made her feel awful. "Kim, I don't know what to say. I'm really sorry this has been so hard on you guys. Hal's been great at work. There's no way I could have done any of this without him, but I promise I won't keep him so late from now on." Whatever it took, Anna would work it out.

"No, I'm not complaining to you because I want you to do that! You have to make the decisions that are best for the company. I understand that, and Hal needs to make his own decisions too." She finished the final preparations for dinner, and she and Anna began taking things into the dining room. "I know it's not going to last forever. I was just wondering how you and Lily work it out."

Well, let's see. I make her feel like it's all her fault. Anna suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of guilt about how she'd treated her lover last weekend. Lily had been a real trooper, her support unwavering, and Anna had behaved selfishly. "We just do the best we can," she said solemnly. "Hey, did I tell you that we're going to Maui next weekend?" she added excitedly.

"You're kidding! You better not make my husband work overtime while you're gone." Her tone was obviously a mock threat, but Anna got her message nonetheless.

"No, I think we're in a calm right now waiting for Sweeney. But what if when we got back, Lily and I kept Jonah for a few days while you two got away." That would make *everyone* happy!

Kim chuckled. "Right. And which one of you is going to breastfeed? So what are you doing in Maui?" They were ready to call Hal and Lily to the table.

"I'm..." Anna hadn't told a soul about her decision to make things with Lily permanent. She wanted Lily to be the first to know. "I'm going to show my woman how much I appreciate her for being there for me."

"Well, that's pretty sweet, especially for a lug like you," Kim teased. With a wink at her sister, she walked out on the deck and announced that the little chickens were ready.

Hal had opened a chardonnay for dinner and was pouring for the table.

"None for me," Lily spoke up. "I'll just have the Perrier."

Anna was once again abruptly reminded of how she'd selfishly turned the tables on her partner last weekend, all because she hadn't realized the impact of her absence at home. "Sweetheart, you should try this. It's good." She was letting Lily know that it was okay without revealing their private conversation.

Lily was definitely confused. She had understood that Anna didn't want her to drink; now Anna was recommending the wine. Or maybe this was a test. "No thanks. The water's fine."

Please don't be stubborn. I'm sorry! "Are you sure? This will be great with the little chickens," Anna encouraged.

Yes, it would. "Okay, you talked me into it." She was relieved to see her lover smiling, obviously glad she'd changed her mind. What Lily didn't understand was why. Oh well, you know that old saying about the gift horse....

The wine was delicious, and midway through the Cornish hen, Lily realized that her glass was nearly empty. Glancing around the table, she noted that the others had not kept pace, so she switched to the Perrier. She was determined not to get a refill, at least not until someone else did. Though the conversation was lively, Lily found herself distracted by watching the others drink. Would anyone ask for more?

"Does anyone want me to open another bottle?" Hal offered.

Neither Anna nor Kim replied, so Lily bit her tongue. She drained her glass after the last bite of hen, and proclaimed the dinner the best she'd had in ages.

When they reached their home, Lily offered to close up downstairs and set up the automatic coffeemaker while Anna went on to get ready for bed. Kim had sent them home with dessert, since everyone was too full after dinner to enjoy the poached pears. As she placed the bowl in the refrigerator, Lily noticed the corked bottle of chardonnay, opened for dinner at home almost two weeks ago. *I wonder if that's as good as the stuff Hal had*, she mused, knowing full well that she was rationalizing her desire for another glass of wine.

"Honey, it's only 9:45," Anna called from the top of the stairs.

That was unmistakably an invitation. Lily closed the refrigerator and turned out the light.

Desperate to connect, Anna poured her whole heart into their lovemaking that night. To Lily's delight, her lover's climax was loud and long, and she immediately rolled the blonde onto her back and filled her. In no time at all, Lily reached her release.

"I love being inside you when you come," the tall beauty whispered, drawing the small woman underneath her even closer. Lily reached between her own legs and

pushed Anna's long fingers deep inside her as she rode out the last waves of her powerful orgasm. All of Anna's senses were heightened with the pulsing clutches, and she was once again overwhelmed by their deep connection. "I love you so much."

Lily was amazed at how close she felt to her lover at that moment, physically and emotionally. Anna needed to talk when they made love, and when she caressed Lily with her loving and intimate words, it seemed to pull them together. "I love you too."

Anna sat in the conference room at Premier Motors, drumming her fingers as she waited for her senior staff to arrive. Her mind had drifted back to her lovemaking with Lily the night before. More than ever, she was convinced of her resolve to making a lifetime commitment to this very special woman. *Should I offer to get her a ring?* Anna knew that many of their lesbian friends had traded rings as a symbol of their love, but Lily had never mentioned anything about that. *Of course, that would require both of us being at the same place in our relationship, now wouldn't it?* Though fairly certain that Lily felt the same way, Anna believed that they both needed to say the words.

"I called the wholesaler this morning to come by for the two Hondas," Brad startled her as he took a seat across from Anna at the conference table. One of the first changes the new president had implemented was to move the weekly senior staff meeting from Monday at 8:30 to Thursday at 10:30. By meeting later in the week, they could better plan for the weekend rush, she reasoned. The change to 10:30 was to allow Holly to come in later, since she stayed until after closing on Thursday nights.

Hal walked in and took the chair next to his boss. Holly sat directly across from him. The seat at the head of the table had remained empty ever since George left. Anna felt funny about moving to that chair after all these years. Besides, her father had an open invitation to attend the senior staff meetings, but as yet had declined. If he did drop by, that was still *his* chair.

"Okay, we're all here. The first bit of news I have for all of you is that I got a call from Walter this morning." Walter was the attorney who was handling their offer for Sweeney. "He said that Sweeney's lawyer had called and wanted to have a look at our financial report. Walter thinks they just want to be sure that we'll make good on our offer. That's your department, Hal, so why don't you give him a call later and...."

"Anna, Bill Mueller's on line one," Carmen's voice followed the beep that activated the room's intercom. The receptionist didn't usually interrupt these meetings, but everyone had heard about Anna and George ganging up on the poor man over the weekend.

"Oh no! I hope his car's okay, or I'll never hear the end of it," she joked.

"Hi Bill, what can I do for you?" she asked warmly.

Hal watched as a serious look came over his sister-in-law's face.

"Oh, no!" Tears rushed to the blue eyes as Anna stood.

Frantically, she groped for a pen. Hal pushed his tablet toward her and placed his hand on her arm. Brad and Holly watched the transformation with dread. Something horrible had happened.

"I'll go get her, Bill. We'll be there. How can I reach you?" Her hands shaking violently, she scratched out the number. "I'll call you when we get there. Thank you for calling me, Bill. You did exactly the right thing."

Anna hung up the phone and rushed from the room without a word. Only Hal had the nerve to follow. "Anna?"

Tears were streaming down Anna's cheeks, her lips and nose already starting to redden. She rushed into her brother-in-law's arms. Through muffled sobs, she finally spoke. "Eleanor's dead."

"Your honor, the defense would like to thank and excuse juror number 23, Mrs. Pedroso." Tony used his fourth peremptory strike on a juror Lily thought had a little too much in common with the landlady at the center of the civil case. Tony handled lots of evictions, and was suing on behalf of an Asian man whose family was evicted to make room for a Hispanic tenant.

People had been coming and going in the courtroom all day as jury selection continued, but something made Lily turn to see the latest arrival. She was startled to find Anna and Hal taking seats near the door. Meeting her lover's eyes, a panic gripped the attorney deep inside. Anna had never come to the courthouse before. "Tony, I need a recess."

Something about her desperate tone caused the man to act without hesitation. "Your honor, the plaintiff requests a short recess."

"Would counsel approach the bench?" Notorious for his no-nonsense demeanor, Judge Anston wasn't about to let an unrelated matter derail this proceeding. "What's going on, counsel?"

"Something important has come up for my co-counsel, your honor, and we'd like a few minutes to see what it's about." Tony gestured at Lily, who remained quiet, glancing back over her shoulder at the ominous pair.

Looking directly at Lily, the judge sternly advised, "Counselor, I'm not going to march the jury out of here so that you can attend to personal matters."

"If it would please the court, then I'd like to be excused from the courtroom until after the next recess. I'm sorry, Judge Anston. Something very important has come up. Mr. LeFevre can direct our case." Lily knew she was speaking the truth.

"Very well, but I have to tell you, Ms. Stuart, I don't appreciate these disruptions."

"I understand, your honor. I won't make a habit of it. And thank you."

Lily walked through the gate and met her lover at the door. Together, they stepped into the hallway. "What's going on, Anna? Why are you here?" She looked back and forth between Anna and Hal for a clue.

Her lover stepped forward and took her hands. The tears were back in the blue eyes. "Something awful has happened, sweetheart. It's your mother."

"Mom?" Lily's knees went weak and she squeezed the long hands tightly for support. "Then we need to go. I have to be with her." She knew from her lover's eyes that her pleas were futile.

Anna shook her head sadly as her floodgates opened again. "No, baby...she's gone."

Inside the courtroom, Judge Anston, Tony LeFevre, the principals in the case, and the 46 remaining members of the jury pool heard the awful wail from beyond the door. "The court will take a short recess," the judge declared abruptly.

Chapter 6

Anna gripped her lover's hand tightly as they boarded the plane to San Jose. Lily was clearly in shock, almost overwhelmed by the crowd and the minutiae that was part of flying these days. Now settled into their seats in first class, Anna retrieved a pillow and blanket for the grieving woman, but Lily was oblivious to her gesture. There was simply no way to render comfort.

Anna realized as they packed that she would have to pull herself together in order to take care of her lover over the next few days. She had dutifully relayed the information she had gotten from Bill. When Eleanor failed to arrive at school this morning, the school secretary called her home. Getting no answer, she called Bill, knowing that the two were close. Bill agreed to stop by Eleanor's house after his hospital rounds. He and Eleanor had exchanged keys for emergencies, so he let himself in after knocking for several minutes. He found her on the floor in the hallway upstairs. From his physician training, he surmised that she had died late last night of something catastrophic, such as a stroke or an aneurysm. Since she died alone, a coroner would conduct an autopsy, the results of which would be known sometime on Friday.

Landing in San Jose one hour later, Anna pulled their rollerboards from the overhead bin and guided her lover through the narrow concourse to the baggage claim area. Bill had arranged for one of Eleanor's neighbors to pick the women up.

"Lily!" A gray-haired woman of about 65 called out. The blonde stiffly acknowledged her as she and Anna made their way through the crowd of people fighting for their bags.

"Mrs. Beck, hi. Thank you for coming. This is Anna Kaklis." Lily was remarkably composed.

"Hi Anna. I'm Charlotte Beck. I live next door to Eleanor." She shook Anna's hand then turned to hug the grieving blonde. "She was my friend, Lily. I'm so sorry." The woman's eyes were sad and kind.

"I know, Charlotte. And you were her friend." To Anna's unending amazement, Lily had magically morphed into the comforter.

Mrs. Beck led them quickly to the parking garage where they piled into a small station wagon for the ride to Eleanor's house. "Just to let you know, Ernie and I have Chester for the time being. We'll keep him as long as you want."

Lily nodded absently then turned toward her lover in the back seat. "I'm going to need my car, Anna," she said with urgency. "I have to pack up Mom's things and bring Chester home." That thought caused the dam to break again, and the tall woman leaned forward and stroked the blonde head.

"I'll take care of it, sweetheart."

When they reached the small Victorian home, Lily thanked Mrs. Beck while Anna extricated their bags. Filled with dread for the sensory assault that awaited their entry, they tentatively climbed the stairs and opened the front door. Anna stood silently in the foyer as her lover slowly ascended the stairs. After a few moments, she followed, knowing that the sight would break her heart. She found her sobbing lover crumpled in the hallway, running her hands along the hardwood floor as though feeling for her mother's touch.

Anna had secured rooms for her family and their friends at the Fairmont Hotel in downtown San Jose, only a few blocks from Eleanor's Naglee Park home. Sandy and Suzanne were the first to arrive, getting in early Friday evening.

"Thanks for coming. I'm sure it will mean a lot to Lily to have you guys here." Anna led their friends into the small sitting room.

"How's she holding up?" Sandy asked.

"It's hard for her, Sandy. We got the results from the coroner this afternoon. It was an aortic aneurysm. He said it happened very quickly, and that was some comfort, I think."

"Has she worked out the funeral arrangements?" Suzanne worked at a hospital and had witnessed that kind of chaos countless times.

"We're meeting tomorrow with the funeral director. Eleanor had already made her arrangements, so it's just to finish the details. I think we're going to try to have the service on Sunday afternoon."

"Eleanor really did everyone a big favor by taking care of all that herself," Suzanne offered.

"She was that kind of person," Anna answered solemnly. "Lily's upstairs. She was sleeping earlier, I think. I hope. But I heard her moving around in the bathroom just a few minutes before you got here."

"I don't want to get in her space, Anna." Sandy had known Lily long enough to know that she usually dealt with difficult things alone. "Listen, why don't Suzanne and I go pick up something for dinner and bring it back."

"That would be great. She needs to eat something. There's a Chinese place over on that main street, just a couple of blocks that way." Anna pointed north toward Santa Clara.

"Okay, we'll be back in a few minutes."

Anna was exhausted. She had lain awake with Lily most of the night, giving comfort as needed. With the help of a sleep aid delivered this morning by an also-grieving Bill Mueller, the blonde woman had finally taken a much needed nap. That gave Anna the opportunity to call her family, who would help with the details. David would drive Lily's car to San Jose tomorrow, in plenty of time to have it washed and vacuumed. Kim and Martine were tasked with finding Lily an appropriate dress for receiving friends on Saturday night, and another for the funeral on Sunday. "Size six, petite. And don't forget the hose. Her shoes are here." Anna had hesitantly asked her father to fill in for her at the dealership next week, as she assumed she would remain in San Jose with Lily. He was more than accommodating, and had been on the lot since yesterday afternoon when Anna left.

Finding the guest room empty, Anna continued down the hall to Eleanor's room. Lily was there, sitting in the bedside armchair, examining the contents of the nightstand. "She was reading Barbara Kingsolver. I gave this to her last year when I finished it."

Anna leaned into the door facing, overwhelmed with sadness for her lover's loss. It was 7:15, and their plane was leaving LAX for Maui without them. She wanted to tell the broken woman what she had planned for their trip, her promise of forever. But Lily must never think it came from pity, or a need to comfort. Her promise would have to wait.

"Your mother was so special, Lily."

"I know, and I'm really glad that you were her friend. I know that meant a lot to her." Lily had the line down cold. It's what all of the people who had come this evening to the funeral home needed to hear, and what her mother would want her to say.

Scanning the room, she spotted Bill Mueller sitting alone by the wall, so she slipped into the empty chair beside him, snaking her arm through his. "Mom really loved you, Bill."

"I loved her too," he said sadly. "I can't help but think I really let her down, though. I just couldn't get past losing Liz. I didn't want to go through that with anyone again. And in the end, I did anyway."

"She was so grateful to have you in her life. She told me so last Saturday when we were hiking." Eleanor hadn't exactly said that, but Lily knew it to be true, and knew also that the words would be comforting. "I hope you know how she felt."

He nodded and squeezed her hand. "And I hope you know that you were her life, Lily. As far as Eleanor was concerned, the sun rose and set on everything you did."

"Moving into her house was the luckiest day of my life." Of all the theorems in the universe, Lily knew this one to be true. She leaned over and placed a small kiss on the temple of her mother's friend. He would always hold a special place in her heart.

Anna huddled near the guest register, on the lookout for her family and Lily's LA friends. Tony and his wife had come, as had Lauren and her husband, and Pauline. They had driven up together, and would return to LA after the funeral tomorrow afternoon. Anna had already taken care of their rooms at the Fairmont.

The entire Kaklis family had stopped by the house early this afternoon before going to the hotel. Lily's two new dresses were perfect, and she thanked Kim and Martine for their trouble. Anna looked over the car and pronounced it perfect also, much to her younger brother's relief. George and Hal, clearly uncomfortable, sat in the kitchen and talked about the Dodgers.

Now everyone was here at the viewing, offering Lily their support. Anna looked around the room, taking in the large crowd of people who counted themselves as Eleanor Stuart's friends.

As the crowd began to dwindle, Anna scanned the crowd for her lover. It was time, she knew, to take Lily's side at the evening's most difficult moment. Slipping an arm around the smaller woman's waist, she whispered, "Are you ready?"

Lily teared up immediately, but nodded. Slowly they walked together to the end of the room where Eleanor lay in an open casket. "Do you have the stuff?"

"Yes, I have everything right here." Anna patted the pocket of her skirt. The blonde woman stumbled slightly when they reached the casket, and Anna got behind her and tightened her hold.

"Gosh, people were right. She really does look good." Lily was genuinely heartened that her last picture of her mother would not be an ashen caricature. She had avoided the funeral director's request to view the body before it was placed on display, asking Anna and Mrs. Beck to take care of that for her.

"She certainly does." Anna swayed slightly as she looked over her lover's shoulder.

After a long quiet moment, Lily raised a hand to her mouth to stifle a sob. "I can't believe she's gone, Anna."

"I know, baby. Me neither."

"She saved me." Another truth. "Everything good about me came from her."

"And I'll always be grateful for that," Anna added softly.

Lily turned and held out her hand, which Anna filled with the objects they had brought. "Okay, Mom. Here's a couple of things to take with you." First was a well-worn rawhide bone. "Don't worry about Chester. We'll take good care of him. He's coming to live in LA, where he'll have his own pool."

Anna chuckled as she remembered Chester's affinity for their pool, as well as the pool at George and Martine's. Eleanor had cautioned that the women were spoiling her dog.

"And here's a little something from me."

Anna nearly lost it as she saw her lover place the card in the casket. They had found it in the bedside table last night. It was made of light blue construction paper, covered with splotchy glue and glitter. The block crayon letters proclaimed, "Happy Mother's Day. I love you. Lily Parker." She had given it to Eleanor when she was seven years old, right after she had come to live with her first grade teacher, but before she was officially adopted. That card meant more to Eleanor than any possession on earth, and she always kept it close.

"Goodbye, Mom." It was barely a whisper. Anna turned her lover away and walked toward the door. It was time to go home. Tomorrow would be another difficult day.

The beautiful sunny day did not go unnoticed. Sandy and Suzanne brought deli sandwiches to the Stuart home for lunch, and set everything up on the deck out back. Whether on decks or patios, Californians lived outdoors. "Gosh, Lily, your mom sure had a lot of friends." Taking over for Anna at the guest register, Suzanne had met more than a dozen people who claimed to be one of Eleanor's closest friends.

"Mom had a way of making everyone she knew feel really special."

"Well I sure liked her. Remember that time...." The stories of their Mexico vacation started, and Lily was cheered by the memories.

"Sweetheart, we need to think about getting ready," Anna called from the kitchen. "The car will be here in a little over an hour."

"That's my cue, ladies. Anna's been so good these last few days." *Solid*, Lily thought. "And I really appreciate you guys coming up."

"I'm glad we could be here for you." Sandy hugged her longtime friend. "We're going to head back when the service is over. Do you need us to do anything?"

"No, I talked with Tony and Lauren a little last night, and they're taking care of my cases. I'll probably be here through the week. There's a lot to do."

"Let us know if we can help," Suzanne offered.

"I will. Thanks."

When the black limousine pulled to the curb an hour later, Anna took her partner's hand and helped her from the couch. "Just one more thing to get through, and you're done with all these people. Are you ready?"

Lily nodded and stood, looking out at the waiting car. Suddenly, she stepped into Anna's arms and pulled her lover's face down for a long, deep kiss. "Thank you, baby. I couldn't have gotten through any of this without you," her voice choked with emotion.

As the pair walked to the front of the church to take their seats in the first row, Anna became suddenly self-conscious. People were surely wondering who she was. She wished she could tell them all; she wished that she had been a bigger part of Eleanor's life so that they would have known. All she could do now was try to be a permanent part of Lily's life.

Of the six hundred people who packed the small Presbyterian church for Eleanor's funeral, only fifty or so attended the graveside service. Each of those people wanted one more moment of Lily's time to convey their condolences and offer their help. Finally, the Kaklis family was all who remained. Lily thanked David first, then Kim and Martine. Jonah had been perfect, and she placed a kiss on his forehead. Next she walked over to where Hal and George stood and hugged Anna's brother-in-law. "Thanks for being here, Hal. It really meant a lot to me, and to Anna."

"I'm glad we could be here too. You know how special you are to us, and we really liked your mom a lot." He kissed the blonde woman on the cheek, and walked over to join his wife.

Lily turned to face a nervous looking George. They had barely spoken to one another since he had arrived yesterday. "I'm really glad you came, George. Thank you."

Wordlessly, George walked toward her and enveloped the small woman in a fatherly hug. After a long moment, he tearfully whispered so that only she could hear, "We'll be your family now, Lily."

"Then tell him to fuck off!" Anna growled, slamming down the phone in Eleanor's kitchen. Not usually one to lose her temper, the car dealer was stressed to the max, and had no patience for people who were jerking her around.

"What's up, honey?" Lily was astounded. Though it was one of her favorite words, she couldn't remember the last time her partner had said "fuck." No, on second thought, she did remember it, but it was under completely different circumstances, and in the privacy of their bedroom.

"Sweeney's being an ass! He wants the deal done by Wednesday or he'll shop his dealership on the open market."

"So what's the problem? Aren't you guys ready to go to final?"

Anna looked at her feet. The last thing she wanted to do was make Lily feel bad. "Yeah, it's just that I would have to be there, and I want to be here with you."

"That's crazy, Amazon! This is all you've been working on for a month." Lily knew she'd need to push the woman out the door. "Go on and get it done!"

"I don't give a shit about Sweeney Volkswagen! I'd rather stay here."

"I'm done with you, woman." Lily had a full week's worth of sorting and packing left, and she needed to meet with a real estate agent tomorrow. She wrapped her arms around her lover's long neck. "You've been perfect, sweetheart. But I'd sort of like to be alone a while. You know, I feel like I'm getting one more chance to be with Mom while I take this house apart."

Anna looked at her dubiously.

"Go!"

"Do you want me to come back when I get finished?"

"I don't think so, hon. You're worn out as it is. If you get finished with work, just try to catch up on your rest."

Anna hugged her lover close. "You're the best, you know."

"Yes, I know."

On Tuesday morning, Lily dropped Anna at the American Airlines terminal one hour before her flight was to leave. To her chagrin, Anna found the security line snaked through the terminal, all the way across the walkway to baggage claim. Missing her flight, she clamored for a seat on the next Southwest departure. Ticket in hand, Anna cleared security *again*, and found herself in yet another line, this one for boarding passes. Hers was number 151, whatever that meant. She found out when she was called dead last to board the plane, the only remaining seat in the center of the next to

last row. Finding no room for her rollerboard, the cheery flight attendant in the denim shirt tagged it and took it away. She would never see it again.

Lily watched sadly through the window as the post hole digger planted the For Sale sign in the front yard. The agent had assured her that the home would sell very quickly and for top dollar, as it had been renovated throughout and was situated in an ideal neighborhood. No matter how much money it brought, it would never equal those intangibles the home had provided her over the years: comfort, security and love.

The week she had expected to be in San Jose had turned to two. It was indeed a formidable task to close out someone's life. She talked with Anna by phone every day, but Lily convinced the car dealer that she should remain at home while she finished up.

Eleanor's lawyer had called the second Monday, asking Lily to stop by for the reading of the will. As expected, her mother had left her everything, setting aside a sum for the care of Chester should her daughter choose not to adopt the dog. "You should give that to Anna," she joked. Handing Lily a small key, the lawyer suggested she collect the valuables from her mother's safety deposit box, and close her accounts at the bank. He also promised to take charge of closing Eleanor's commercial accounts, so she signed the standard forms for the utility companies and credit card companies.

One by one, Lily ticked off the items on the lawyer's list. Eleanor's bank accounts held more than \$300,000, most of that in certificates of deposit paying a mere five percent. At the peak of the bull market, she had fortuitously withdrawn her funds from aggressive growth stocks and placed them in the more conservative, lower yield instruments. Unlike most Americans, she never lost a dime.

Because Lily was not the owner of the safety deposit box, a bank officer was required to accompany her inside the small cubicle as she removed the contents. Inside the box were three packets. The first contained an insurance policy, entitling Lily to \$250,000 upon Eleanor's death. *Wow!* Lily had no idea that her mother had provided for her so generously. The second was Lily's birth certificate and all of her adoption papers. That would certainly make some interesting reading. Inside the third was a card written to Eleanor by her friend Katharine Fortier, dated 1983. Lily was 11 that year.

Dear Eleanor,

Happy birthday, my friend!

I too have come to celebrate the day you were born, ever since we met six years ago on the Kennedy Trail. Eleanor, I've started many times to tell you of my love for you, but somehow I always lose my nerve. I know who you are, and that you are not capable of returning that love. But my life would be incomplete if I failed to let you know what you mean to me.

I wish you life's greatest joys, and it thrills me to see the love you've found with your beautiful daughter. Please know how much your friendship has enriched my life.

Love always,

Katharine

Lily closed the card and held it to her heart, unbidden tears suddenly filling her eyes. *Katharine had been in love with Mom for all those years.* It had meant enough to her mother to save the card for 20 years, and she had fully intended for her daughter to find it. Lily was warmed to know that her mother had been loved so deeply, and she would always wonder if the women had ever acted upon these feelings.

Now sitting in the living room of her mother's home, Lily looked around the room. It seemed barren, all the books and trinkets packed in boxes in the foyer. The truck from the women's shelter was due soon. Lily had gathered her mother's clothing and separated it into piles according to style and use, suits and dresses in one room, casual clothing in another. All of the kitchen wares had been boxed and the guest bed held all the sheets and towels. Lily would stay with Mr. and Mrs. Beck tonight, starting back to LA with Chester on Sunday.

Lily had encountered few surprises among her mother's things, but she'd been overwhelmed with how much of her own life her mother had preserved. Besides the standard refrigerator decorations from her art classes, Eleanor had saved report cards, Lily's high school papers, cards from every occasion, and photographs. Lots of photographs. This box was placed in the X-5, along with a small collection of items that Lily knew meant a lot to her mom. In addition, she had saved most of her mother's hiking gear, and a favorite sweater.

"Thank you for everything." Lily hugged Mr. and Mrs. Beck and took Chester's leash in her hand.

"Will we see you again?"

Lily seriously doubted it, but she couldn't bring herself to close the door. "Sure. I'll be back to visit from time to time. This is still home."

"Well, you always have a place to stay."

"Thanks." She tugged on the basset hound's leash. "You ready to go south Chester?" She picked him up and placed him in his crate. Her back seat was too high for his short legs to jump. "Off we go!" Lily waved with far more cheer than she felt.

The five hour drive home was relaxing, especially compared to the strain of the past two and a half weeks. She had lost six pounds, and felt that she had aged 10 years. Mozart, Vivaldi and Bach played softly on the stereo system, lifting her mood considerably.

Lily was eager to see her lover again, and to be held in those strong, comforting arms. Despite her anticipation, when their Brentwood home came into view, she began to cry.

Anna's car was not at home. Lily suddenly felt very alone.

"I'm so sorry, baby." Anna wrapped her arm around her lover's waist, spooning tightly to the naked form. "I just misunderstood." Anna thought Lily had said she was leaving around four; instead she arrived home at that time. The car dealer had stayed late at the office just to kill time, not knowing that her lover would come home to an empty house.

"It's okay." It really was. Anna's explanation was perfectly reasonable. They had both been under an extreme amount of stress, and a small miscommunication was a minor deal in the grand scheme of things. "Where is he now?"

"Still on his bed, I think," Anna groaned. They had tried first to have Chester sleep downstairs in the family room, placing his familiar flannel beanbag in the corner by the door. After 30 minutes of whimpering and scratching, Anna caved, and brought the dog and his bed to their bedroom. Chester climbed onto their king-sized bed twice, seeking comfort at Anna's feet, but each time, the tall woman marched him back to his own bed. The third time, she stretched out beside him on the floor, petting him until he began to softly snore.

"He misses her," Lily said sadly.

Anna squeezed her lover again, and kissed the bare shoulder. After more than two weeks, everything was still so raw. "I know, honey. I'll show him a lot of attention."

Lily chuckled softly. "I told Mom's lawyer that he should give you the money Mom set aside for taking care of Chester."

"You mean I get to keep the dog *and* the money?" Anna appreciated all of these lighter moments. It hurt her deeply to see Lily's anguish.

"You know, I can't believe how much money Mom left me. When the house sells, it's all going to be about a million three. Even after taxes, that'll be a lot."

"Hmmm...think of all the puppy dogs we could get with that."

"Puppy dogs?"

"Oops!"

"Puppy dogs is redundant."

"Ugh," Anna groaned.

"Hmmm... portable laptop."

Anna thought a moment. It was hard enough to do this when a person was sharp, let alone when one was nearly asleep. "Pouring down rain."

"... outside," Lily added.

By morning, the contented hound had once again claimed the space by the tall woman's feet.

Chapter 7

"That's great news, Colleen! Congratulations!" Tony's new wife had gotten word last week that she had passed the bar exam. Lily remembered the excitement she had felt when she was admitted to the bar almost seven years ago.

"Well, wish me luck. I applied at the PD's office." The public defender had a backlog of applicants, but a high turnover rate. Public service was difficult work, and often unappreciated.

"By the way, thanks a million for taking care of all these cases for me. It was a real comfort not to have to worry about it while I was gone." Lily was relieved to find that Colleen had managed her casework, while Tony and Lauren had covered her court appearances. As a result, she could ease back into the grind, rather than having to hit the ground running.

"I'm really glad I could help. You know, Tony thought the world of your mom. I really wish I could have known her."

"Thanks, Colleen. She was special."

"Lily, you have a delivery!" Pauline called down the narrow hallway.

"Great! Everybody in the conference room, now!" Tony, Colleen, Lauren and Pauline obediently made their way to the meeting room, curious about the aromatic box at the front door. Lily paid the young man and carried the box down the hall, unloading its contents in the center of the table. "Let's see, we have double cheeseburgers for the carnivores, a veggie burger for Pauline, French fries, onion rings, cokes, diet cokes and three flavors of milk shakes."

"How wonderfully decadent!" Lauren was salivating.

"I wanted to show you guys how much you've meant to me these last couple of weeks." Lily's voice cracked slightly. "I couldn't work with a better bunch of people."

"Well it's mutual," Lauren proclaimed. "Now pass the food!"

Lily laughed at her friend's deflection. She really loved these people. "I was going to order something special, like lobster or stone crab, but I thought 'What the hell? Get 'em something they really like.' So now that it's here, you have to eat it to be polite. That should alleviate your guilt."

An hour later, Lily plopped uncomfortably into her beloved Aeron chair. She had eaten more for lunch than her five previous meals combined. If she didn't throw up, it would be a miracle.

The attorney had spent the morning bringing herself up to speed on the status of eight cases whose proceedings were already underway. Pauline had updated her calendar to include court appearances tomorrow morning, and again on Thursday afternoon. Two new case files sat in her inbox, one involving a divorce, the other dealing with a child endangerment defendant. Lily hated the latter, but the right to competent legal representation was fundamental to the justice system. Besides, she'd rather be in the middle of it so that she could advise her client than in a position where she couldn't do anything at all to help the child victims.

The clock on the wall said a quarter after two, far too early to consider packing it in for the day. Lily was distracted. She craved her solitude, no longer used to being around others for such an extended period of time. She wondered what Chester was doing on his first day alone in a new house.

The telephone interrupted her thoughts, its digital display announcing a call from Premier Motors. "If this is about my car payment, I'm going to send the payoff in later this week."

The car dealer chuckled at the greeting. "Hi, darling. How's your day?"

Lily loved it when Anna called her *darling*. "It's going fine. It's all still...I don't know...surreal. It just washes over me every now and then, and I have to pull myself together."

Anna's heart went out to the little blonde, putting up a brave front as she grieved so. "How about we both slip out early and I'll take you to dinner somewhere nice?"

The attorney's stomach churned. "I just ate enough cholesterol to seal the Lincoln Tunnel. I can't possibly think about food right now."

That was good news, Anna thought. Lily hadn't been eating much lately. She amended her offer. "So how about we both slip out early and take a walk on the beach?"

That's so sweet! Lily fought to stop the tears from spilling out. "That'd be great, Amazon."

Two hours later, Anna, Lily and a very happy basset hound were romping in the sand at Will Rogers State Beach in Malibu. The blonde stood lookout for the ranger while

her lover unclipped Chester's leash for a game of 'fetch the chewy.' It was easily the most fun they'd had in weeks.

Eventually, Chester tired of that game and the tall woman hooked the 30-foot leash to his red leather collar. The hound continued his amusing antics, chasing the receding waves, then running like mad when they rushed ashore.

"This was a good idea," Lily said, hooking her arm through that of her lover as they walked along the shore. The mid-June sun was still relatively high, but at 5:30, the heat of the day was past, giving way to a cool wind blowing in from the sea.

"It's good to have you back home, sweetheart," Anna said tenderly. "I couldn't stop thinking about you all day, just sitting in your office not 10 miles away."

"Well, I like playing hooky. We should do this more often."

Anna hoped their afternoon together would cushion the blow of what she was about to say. "We should do it every chance we get, I think. But there may not be many more chances for awhile, at least not for me." Lily didn't respond, so she continued. "With the Sweeney acquisition sewn up, we've started negotiations for the two dealerships in Palm Springs. I'm probably going to have to go down there tomorrow afternoon, maybe stay for a couple of days."

Lily had known this was part of Anna's business plan for Premier Motors, but she wished it wasn't all happening now. "I don't suppose there's any way you could put this off for a couple of weeks, is there?"

"I wish. But now that we've tipped our hand, any delay could get us into a bidding war with somebody else, and we won't be able to go much higher."

"It'll be alright. I've got a couple of appearances in court this week and preliminary motions on the docket for Monday. I won't have any time for you anyway, Miss Wheeler-Dealer." she said haughtily. "Hey, that's actually pretty funny. You're a wheeler-dealer. Get it?"

The car dealer groaned and rolled her eyes dramatically. A change of subject was in order. "Oh, I meant to tell you. I collected your mail. It's on your desk, but I pulled out everything that looked like a bill and paid it so you wouldn't get late charges."

"Well, aren't you handy to have around?"

"You just love me for my money," Anna pouted.

"I've got money now, Amazon! I just love you for your body!"

The saga of Maria and Miguel Esperanza was never-ending. Over the past three years, the Braxton Street Clinic had handled two restraining orders, a divorce, and six different custody hearings for the couple's children, Sophia and Roberto. Today's

motion was a request to return the children from their aunt Serena to their mother, as she and Miguel were making plans to remarry. As she watched the once again happy couple leave the courtroom, Lily couldn't help but think that the reconciliation would only start the destructive cycle again.

"Lily!" The attorney stopped as she heard her name.

"Go ahead, I'll get the next one," she said to the man holding the elevator doors.
"Sandy! Hi!"

"I wasn't sure you were back."

"Yeah, I got back on Sunday. Sorry I didn't call."

"That's okay. I know you've been busy."

"Just trying to get caught up and back into the swing of things." *That and I got really mellow last night on a \$9 bottle of cabernet.* "You know, I really appreciated you and Suzanne coming up for the funeral. I can't tell you how much it meant to have my friends there."

"We were glad to come, Lily." She placed her arm on her friend's shoulder, wanting badly to ask how she was doing, but knowing that Lily would probably lie. "Say, would you and Anna like to come out for dinner? I've got to stop at the store and get some fish to grill. It's just as easy to get four fillets as it is to get two."

"Thanks, but Anna's down in Palm Springs on business, and I still have some work to catch up on." Lily loved her friends, but she didn't really want to be with anyone right now. Except Anna, of course. "Thanks for the invitation, though. How about a rain check?"

"You've got it." Sandy could sense that her friend was still hurting, so letting her set the pace for social activities was important. "Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"Of course." As an afterthought, Lily added, "And you'll call me if you need anything too, alright?"

Sandy smiled and nodded. That was how Lily would get back into things, by coming out of herself to help someone else.

Chester heard the car door first and lumbered to his feet, padding eagerly down the stairs to welcome the new arrival. *Maybe it was the woman with the black hair!*

Lily heard the back door open, and threw the covers back on the bed. Anna's two days in Palm Springs had turned to four, but she was finally home, just in time to enjoy the weekend. Excitedly, the blonde headed for the commotion that always ensued when Anna greeted Chester. "You better save some of that for me."

Anna jumped up from the floor and grabbed the smaller woman, whipping her around and pulling her back into the strong arms. Now secured in a one-armed hold, Anna used her free hand to playfully scratch Lily's stomach. "Is this what you want?"

Lily screamed and tried to wriggle free. "Stop it!" she pleaded.

Instead, the scratching turned to merciless tickling, and the blonde dissolved into a heap on the floor. Chester always interpreted humans sitting on the floor as an invitation for his kisses, so he happily complied. Lily dragged Anna down by her shirttail, which was more than the frenzied Chester's poor bladder could stand. What might have been a simple hello was now all-out mayhem.

"Ewww! Look what your dog did!" Lily shrieked.

"My dog?"

"He's your dog right now!" Chester knew he was the object of their disgust and he sulked away, obviously ashamed of his loss of control.

"Look, you've hurt his feelings."

"He peed in my lap!"

"He's upset."

"I'm upset!" Despite her hysterics, she couldn't keep a straight face. "Oh, alright! Come here, Chester. It's okay boy." The hound put on his best pitiful look and ambled back to the blonde woman's lap. That got him a scratch behind the ears; he was obviously forgiven.

"I'll clean this up. You need a shower. Ewww!" Anna made a face and extricated her long limbs from the pile on the floor.

To her delight, Lily was joined in the walk-in shower by her sexy lover. Anna was usually all business in the shower, but once in a while she would linger as they soaped one another intimately. Tonight, though, was not one of those times, and Anna stepped out after only a couple of minutes. Lily finished up, and then hastily dried her hair so she wouldn't get her pillow wet. Finally reaching the bed, she found her lover sound asleep.

"You can't be serious! You've been gone all week." Anna was rushing around to get ready for work.

"That's the problem, sweetheart. I've been gone all week. I need to go check on things at Sweeney today, and tomorrow, I'll probably have to be in my office at Premier all day."

Lily was trying desperately not to throw an absolute hissy fit. It had been a very long week alone in the big house. Her only salvation had been going to her office every day. Now it was Saturday, and Anna was leaving her alone again.

"Why don't you go hiking today like you usually do?" That was possibly the worst thing Anna could have said.

"You mean like I did with Mom the last time she was here?" Anna really hadn't deserved the biting response, but Lily was hurt and wanted to hurt back.

"Oh sweetheart, I..." Anna tried to think of something she could say to fix things, but there was no use talking to a retreating back. The car dealer picked up her purse and keys and walked through the family room. Chester sat mournfully at the closed office door. Anna started to open the door, but changed her mind and knocked. She would rather not know if her lover had locked the door. "Honey, I'm sorry."

Slowly the door opened to reveal a somber blonde. "PMS?"

Anna reached out and hugged the smaller woman. "You want to come with me today and watch me kick some ass?"

That was a pretty tempting offer. Lily had never seen her lover "kick ass" before, but if she handled problem personnel the same way she handled jerks like Steve French, that would be a sight to see. "No, I'm just being a baby."

"But you're my baby," Anna assured.

"Go on, sweetheart. Get your work done so you can hurry back home."

Anna kissed the top of the blonde head and pulled away. "Chester, be a good boy. No peeing on your mother." And she was off.

"I don't care who she is. I've been working here 14 years and I don't need her telling me how to do my job!" Tommy Russell was the sales manager at Sweeney Volkswagen, a chain-smoking 51-year-old with a quick temper, a heart attack waiting to happen. Given his dedicated service to the Sweeney family, Tommy was understandably angry at being left out of the loop when the dealership changed hands.

"I hear she's done a pretty good job over at Premier," offered Ben Dunlap, the fleet manager. "I'm sort of looking forward to the change. We've only hit quotas once in the last two years." A little dig at the sales manager.

"That was her old man that kept everything running over there," Tommy argued. "She's nothing more than a pretty face."

"Wow, you weren't kidding about the pretty face!" Salesman Terry Smythe stood up and watched the dark-haired beauty unfold from the BMW roadster. "And pretty lots of other things!"

Three pairs of eyes followed the tall woman in the black pantsuit through the double doors, up the stairs and into the administrative offices. Moments later, the knell sounded. "Tommy Russell, please report to the conference room. Tommy Russell, report to the conference room."

Tommy lit a cigarette and strolled casually to the door. "Anybody want a coke?"

"You better get up there, Tommy. You don't want to get off on the wrong foot," Dunlap urged.

"I not worried about it. She needs me a hell of a lot more than I need her," Tommy said smugly. "I can get a job at any dealership in town."

Thirty minutes later, the sales manager walked into the conference room, taking a seat on the opposite end of the long table.

"Mr. Russell, glad you could make it," she began. It looked to Anna as though Tommy Russell was going to be a pain in the ass. "I have a number of charts I'd like to go over with you this morning. Would you mind moving up to this end of the table, or would you have me bring all this down there?" She kept her tone light, but her temper was on hair-trigger at the moment.

Grudgingly, the sales manager moved down the table to take the seat to her right. Anna was overwhelmed by the stench of stale cigarette smoke that seemed to radiate from his pores.

"Mr. Russell, I'll get right to the point. One of the reasons I wanted to buy this dealership is because I believed I could improve the sales performance and the service revenues. Your sales staff has been missing quotas for much of the last two years. New car sales have fallen 31 percent since 1997. Used car sales are off too, probably because you don't bring as many cars in on trade when you miss your quotas."

Through the picture window, Anna and Tommy watched as a boom truck began disassembling the tacky yellow and green Sweeney Volkswagen marker. A nearby truck held the new beacon, a dignified black and white sign touting this dealership as Premier Volkswagen.

Tommy squirmed in his chair. "We haven't had much support. A couple of years ago, Mr. Sweeney pulled all his advertising budget out of the paper and started putting it into cable TV. The only people that come in here are the folks that find us by accident, or the freaks who watch those weird infomercials at three o'clock in the morning."

"An astute observation, Mr. Russell." Anna was indeed impressed that Tommy Russell had connected those particular dots, but she knew he didn't have the whole picture. "I'm going to spend some money here to sell Volkswagens. I can increase the traffic on this lot, but I'll expect to see a sizable increase in closings, and in used car activity."

"You get 'em here, we'll sell 'em cars," he bragged.

Anna wasn't convinced. "I have a small problem, Mr. Russell. Your closing rate is much lower than the industry average, unusually low for cars of this caliber. Your sales staff is writing 15 contracts a week that don't close. That's something I'll expect you to fix. I can send you for training, or I can get a trainer to come in here and pump up the whole staff. But I'm going to expect results, and pretty quickly."

"We don't need a trainer! Just get the traffic. The guys are chomping at the bit to have people walking onto the lot."

"Why don't we come back to that issue in a moment? You've just brought up another point I wanted to talk about. I've noticed that there is not one single female on your sales staff, nor have I seen one single person of color. I'd like to see that change immediately. I want the next eight hires to be women or ethnic minorities, and we'll discuss the distribution again after they've been here a while."

Tommy was flustered. "I wouldn't mind hiring a woman if I had one show up who knew the first thing about cars. All due respect, our customers would rather deal with men. They trust men more."

"Well, we're going to try to broaden the customer base, so maybe we'll find a few out there who aren't so narrow minded." Her implication was unmistakable. "You know, three of the top five sellers at Premier last year were women. I'm sure once we get a little diversity in the sales staff we'll see the numbers go up."

Tommy was grinding his teeth. "So which one of us is going to be in charge of hiring the sales staff? That's always been a part of my job." He reached into his pocket for a cigarette.

"Don't light that," she directed. "Hiring of the sales staff will still be your responsibility. But I'll expect you to do it according to my guidelines. In fact, Mr. Russell, I'm going to expect everything at Premier Volkswagen to be done according to my guidelines."

"Is there more?" Tommy couldn't wait to get out of this room and tell his staff what a bitch they were now working for.

"Yes, there's much more, but I want to make sure I get the chance to talk with all of the senior staff today, so we can schedule another time next week to go over my specific guidelines. But there is one more thing I'd like to take care of this morning." She looked at her watch. "Effective at 9:32 a.m. today, there is to be no smoking anywhere on the property by any of the staff."

"You can't be serious! Not even outside?"

"No, not even outside. It's my prerogative as owner, and I'm exercising it. I don't want our staff and customers exposed to second-hand smoke. Furthermore, the sales staff who smoke will no longer be allowed to get inside the cars for any reason. Not for a test drive, not to show the features, not even to wipe the dashboard. One of the best features of a new car, Mr. Russell, is the way it smells, and I want to leverage that asset."

Tommy spun out the door. He was sorely tempted to light a cigarette right outside the door, but something about the woman's warning tone stopped him. As he stormed down the stairs, the knell sounded again. "Ben Dunlap, please report to the conference room. Bill Dunlap, report to the conference room."

After closing at the end of the day, Anna called a general meeting of all available staff. She had managed to meet most of them, and assured them she would soon learn all their names. Tommy Russell failed to show. "Mr. Dunlap, would you please find Mr. Russell and let him know that his presence at this meeting is mandatory. He'd be well served not to test my patience." She liked Ben Dunlap, and was already seeing an expanded role for the team player.

Moments later, Ben returned to take a position near his new boss. Tommy strolled in nonchalantly and leaned against the wall at the back of the room. "Brown noser," he muttered.

"Thank you all for coming. I'm not going to keep you long. I know you're all eager to get home to your families. I want to thank those of you who welcomed me today, and assure you that I'm really glad to be here. As I told many of you today, you're going to see some changes here over the next few months as we complete the transition of ownership. I'm excited about our opportunities, and I'm confident that if we can work together as a team, we'll all share in the rewards." Applause broke out at that overture. It had been two years since anyone got a raise.

"At this time, I'd like to meet briefly with all of the senior staff in the conference room. Goodnight to the rest of you, and I'll see you next week."

Anna followed the senior staff up to the conference room and closed the door. "Gentlemen, today was a good day for me. Today, I saw just how much potential there is for this dealership. However, the reason for that potential, I'm afraid, is your current poor performance." She paused and made eye contact with each of the men around the table, with the exception of Tommy Russell, who had found something very interesting under the table. "I want each of you to understand that I am not dependent upon you to make this company successful. I am dependent on the competency of a sales manager, a fleet manager, a service manager and a finance manager, but who actually holds those positions is irrelevant to me. I will work with each of you as necessary to turn this dealership around, but I expect nothing short of your complete cooperation."

Tommy couldn't stand it any longer. "Look, I don't care if you do own the place. Threatening us with our jobs isn't exactly a brilliant motivating technique. If I did that with my staff, half of them would quit."

Anna looked coolly at Tommy, sweating him just a moment for effect. "Mr. Russell, let me tell you a little bit about management theory. I do own the place, and it is therefore not necessary for me to prove my abilities to you or to justify my means. You're the one in the grace period right now. If you believe yourself to be incapable of working as a productive part of this management team, I've already got two strong candidates on my other lot."

Tommy would not be humiliated by this bitch! He had some money saved, and now seemed like a pretty good time to sign on with his friend at that dealership in Palm Springs. Those guys didn't have hiring quotas for "people of color," he thought cynically. "Then you should call one of them." He lit a cigarette and calmly walked from the room.

Driving down Wilshire Boulevard, Anna was at a crossroads...literally. A right at the next light would take her to Premier BMW, a left would take her home. She'd been away from her desk for five days, and judging from the backlog of paperwork she'd found upon returning from Eleanor's funeral, she knew the mountain awaiting her attention would be high. It was almost nine o'clock. Perhaps if she just stopped in to review her inbox, that would help her organize her Sunday.

Nah! Lily was a whole hell of a lot more tempting than a pile of paperwork. Ten minutes later, she was pulling into the driveway of the quiet house. A light at the side door guided her into the family room, where Chester greeted her enthusiastically. "Honey?" There was no response as Anna continued to play with the dog. "Lily?" she called, louder this time. Anna walked through the downstairs, finally spotting the unlocked patio door off the kitchen. With the light on inside, she couldn't make out where lover was.

Grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator, Anna walked out onto the patio. The underwater lights illuminated the perimeter of the pool, and she finally spotted Lily in a chaise lounge at the far end. "Hi babe. Everything okay?" Approaching the chair, she warily eyed the contents of the adjacent table: an ice bucket, a bowl of cut-up limes and a bottle of Grey Goose vodka, the latter of which was more than half empty. Lily was wrapped in a blanket, holding a glass in her lap.

"Anna. How nice of you to drop by." Despite her sarcastic words, her tone was low and flat.

The car dealer knew she would have to play this one carefully. It was not about Lily drinking; it was about her being gone all week. "I'm sorry, hon." She made an uncharacteristic decision on the spot. "I stayed a little later tonight so I wouldn't have to go in tomorrow." She'd have to go in at the crack of dawn on Monday, and probably bring work home for two or three days, but Anna knew that Lily needed her more than the dealership did.

"So you're not going in tomorrow?" *Then how am I going to make you feel guilty?* "It'd be nice to have you home...for a change." That last part was slipped in to make her point.

Anna sat down on the chaise and took her lover's icy hand. From this new vantage point, she could see that the woman was very drunk, her eyes closed and her chin dipping to her chest. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Not hungry."

Probably just as well. As it was, Lily was going to spend plenty of time hanging over the porcelain bowl. "Why don't we go upstairs then?" She stood and helped the woman slowly to her feet. Anna took the position closest to pool, thinking ahead to avoid *that* disaster.

Chester bounded about their feet as Anna walked Lily up the stairs. "I'll take you out in a minute, boy." He seemed to understand that, at least the O-U-T word, and ran back to the family room to wait. The dark-haired woman helped her lover undress and put her to bed, where she instantly passed out.

Anna was exhausted, but she needed to take care of several things before turning in. First on her list was a peanut butter sandwich, which she ate while walking the dog. "Eating dinner with you was a bad idea," she grumbled to Chester as she scooped up his business in the plastic bag. He was pleased, nonetheless, that the dark-haired woman thought enough of his accomplishment to collect it, and strutted all the way back to the big white house.

Next, Anna went out to the pool to gather up Lily's carnage, storing the vodka on a high shelf above the refrigerator. She was astonished to see two unopened bottles in the back. They never kept that much liquor in the house.

When she turned off the lights in the family room, Anna noticed a light under the door to the office. Lily's desk was disheveled, an obvious sign that she'd been going through the stack of mail that had arrived while she was gone. As Anna reached across the desk to pull the chain on the green globed banker's light, a manila envelope caught her eye.

Photos. Please do not bend. Anna noted the return address. "I can't believe I missed this!" she whispered to herself. Underneath the envelope was a card, appropriately, Monet's *Water-Lily Pond*. A photo fell out as Anna opened the card, the bright smiling faces of Lily and her mom in their hiking clothes. The younger woman was sitting up high on a rock, both arms around the shoulders of her mother, who stood in front. Anna realized instantly that the picture had been taken only four days before Eleanor died.

Hi sweetheart!

Just had these developed and I wanted to send you this one right away. Aren't we a pair! I have the negative, so I'll have one made for myself too — maybe even a larger one that I can frame for my 'Lily Wall.'

I had such a good time this weekend! I can't tell you how it warms me to see you so happy. Anna is a wonderful person, definitely "worth it," if you remember our talk of long ago.

Take care, sweetie. I look forward to seeing you soon at home.

Love, Mom

Chapter 8

Anna tried desperately to juggle her schedule over the next week so that she could be at home in the evenings. That meant leaving the house each day by 6:30 a.m., and on occasion, bringing work home at night. But it was good that she could be home with Lily. They spent many nights in the family room, buried in their respective work, but close enough to touch and trade occasional kisses. Anna felt like their ship had righted again.

Still, they hadn't made love since the day they went to the beach, their only time since Eleanor died over a month ago. Lily's kisses were loving, but she turned away from Anna on her side soon after they went to bed. Anna couldn't help but think that her lover harbored some resentment over her long hours. She was determined that Premier Motors would not come between them.

"This is Lilian Stuart." Lily had forwarded her calls to the conference room, where she'd spread out index cards outlining the prosecutor's case against her client.

"Two down, one to go!" Anna announced triumphantly.

"You made yourself watch 'Attack of the Clones!'" Lily deadpanned.

"Never! I just got word from BMW of Palm Springs. They've accepted our offer. All we're waiting for now is to hear from Potter VW, and our little empire is complete."

"Congratulations, doll. It's all coming together, just like you planned." The attorney truly admired her partner's business savvy. "When do you think you'll hear from Potter?"

"Hal thinks we'll hear later today, or first thing tomorrow. Once they get wind that BMW accepted, they're going to worry that we'll pull our offer."

"I might have to take you out to dinner, Amazon. This calls for a celebration." Getting into Empyre's on a Friday night could be difficult, unless your name was Kaklis.

"I've got a better idea. How would you like to drive down to Palm Springs with me tonight? I want to be there when they make the announcement to their staff tomorrow so I can talk to them." Anna thought if Lily saw things firsthand, it might be easier to understand the need for all those extra hours. "I really need to win their support, or I'll have to replace people, and that would mean having to spend a lot of time down there, which I don't want to do."

"Nor do I want you to," Lily groaned. "If I go, what will I do while you're at work?"

"You can come with me. You know, lurk in the back and make faces at me while I'm trying to be a bad-ass. Then we'll go have some fun. Joshua Tree isn't far. Have you ever been there?"

Lily was quiet for a moment. "Yeah, Mom and I went there a few years ago...but I'd love to go see it with you. It's beautiful."

Lily's response reminded Anna that her lover's hurt was still very fresh. "I'll meet you at home, then. How soon can you get there?"

"Oooo, are we playing hooky again?"

"You bet."

"One hour. What about Chester?"

"I'll ask somebody here to look after him. Maybe Holly." In the past few weeks, Chester stories had taken the place of Jonah stories at the staff meetings. In response, several had encouraged her to bring the dog to work sometime. Surely Holly would look after him while they were gone.

Anna got the call on her car phone as they passed Riverside en route to the desert resort. "Woo-hoo!" they shouted. The car dealer was three for three.

After sleeping in on Saturday, the pair headed over to the BMW dealership after lunch. Lily was amazed as she watched her lover take charge of the full staff meeting in the showroom. The woman simply oozed confidence and authority. Lily would add this to her inventory of her multi-faceted lover.

There was the family Anna, with the happy girl-next-door persona. This Anna would do anything for her family members, or for the families of her close friends and coworkers. She was there for all of them, especially her sister, and she paraded Jonah around as though he were her own. Lily smiled as she recognized that it was the family girl in Anna who loved Chester so much.

Then there was the grease monkey, the one who donned the grimy jumpsuit to get her hands dirty under the hood of a classic car. Lily found this Anna totally irresistible. It wasn't just the stark contrast from the runway model chic that most people got to see. It was more that the grease monkey symbolized Anna's fascination with all things mechanical. She loved knowing how things worked, and couldn't care less about the mess she made of herself. She had *no idea* she was so sexy!

Next, there was Anna the friend, one of the nicest, warmest people you'd ever want to meet. It was this Anna that Lily had fallen in love with. The friend had gone for help when they were trapped underground, and returned at her own peril. The friend had helped out at Kidz Kamp, and spotted her a hell of a deal on a new X-5 when her resources were tight. It was also the friend who had been a constant source of strength throughout the ordeal of saying goodbye to her mother.

Ah, and there was the lover. Oh boy, was there ever the lover! Anna's touch was as magical as her own response. Never could Lily have imagined connecting so deeply with another person.

And now, Lily was getting her first real glimpse of Anna the executive, a woman with vision and drive, and the know-how to reach her goal. No doubt it was these qualities that had first attracted Scott Rutherford, the business professor at Southern Cal. Lily too found the CEO Anna quite seductive, realizing with great satisfaction that half of the people Anna met in her work—men and women alike—probably found themselves attracted to her. *But she's mine*. The private celebration they had shared in their hotel room last night assured her of that.

"I'm very excited about this new opportunity here in Palm Springs. Over the next few weeks, you'll see some unfamiliar faces in here, going over the books and procedures, meeting with people, generally being disruptive and annoying." Most of the people chuckled, but a few were skeptical. "Please forgive them, and get to know them if you can. They're all really good people and I've asked them to get all of the Premier dealerships in sync." No one knew as yet that Premier was also acquiring the business next door. "We'll probably make a few changes, but given your success, we're just as likely to adopt some of your practices for the dealerships in LA."

Anna tried to make eye contact with as many people as possible as she worked the crowd. When her eyes met those of her lover, at the side of the room leaning against a sporty Z4, she was startled by a tingling that turned quickly to a blush. Lily's look clearly said love, admiration and...lust? Looking away quickly to shake the welcome but distracting image, she continued. "Finally, I want everyone to know that at this time, I have no plans to make any personnel changes. Your positions and salaries will not be impacted, and with more employees now in our workforce, we expect to negotiate a better benefits package for all of you. Your work has brought about this company's success, and I sincerely hope that each of you will plan to stay on under new management. Thank you very much. I hope to meet each of you personally before I leave today. Right now, I'd like to see the senior staff in the conference room."

Lily gave her lover a wink and slipped out the side door. She'd decided to tour The Living Desert, a nearby nature attraction, while Anna finished up. At 7:00 p.m., the CEO walked next door to Potter VW for a repeat performance.

"Oh, shit," Tommy Russell thought as he realized what today's staff meeting was about. Last Monday, he'd called his friend John Turgeon, the sales manager at Potter, saying that he needed a change. He'd been on the staff at Potter for two days when Anna Kaklis showed up to make his life miserable. *Like 114 degrees wasn't miserable enough*.

When Sunday morning came, the two women headed to the national park at Joshua Tree, stopping to see the Barker Dam, and hiking more than three miles to visit the oases. It was certainly beautiful, but difficult to enjoy in the overbearing heat, so they vowed to return sometime in the cooler months. Both women had enjoyed the rare

opportunity to spend time together doing something completely different from their daily grind.

Settling into the sports car for the ride back to LA, they fell into a comfortable, quiet calm. Anna felt reconnected to her lover, even closer these days after sharing Lily's loss. These were the hard times Carolyn had spoken of, and she was grateful that she and Lily had been able to talk throughout the ordeal. More than ever, she wanted Lily to know that she would always be there. Things were going to be very busy for the next couple of months, but she needed to look for another opportunity to make the Maui trip.

Lily too felt closer to Anna. It had been a good decision to go with her to Palm Springs to see how important this was to her lover's sense of accomplishment. Anna was definitely in her element as a CEO, and Lily had to confess, the woman's commanding nature was one of the things that had attracted her in the first place. Seeing how well things had gone in Palm Springs, she was hopeful that things were getting back on track for them.

"We find the defendant 'not guilty', your honor."

"Mr. Foreman, in accordance with California law, was the verdict unanimous?"

"Yes, it was, your honor."

Lily had performed her job nicely, getting her client acquitted of charges of reckless endangerment of a child. She felt like shit. She had demonstrated to the jury probable doubt that Mr. Thuy was aware that his children had access to his gun. The family had narrowly avoided a tragedy when their four-year-old son fired the gun into their mattress as he rushed to place it back under the bed. She wanted to take Mr. Thuy down to the morgue, where on any given day, he could see firsthand the damage a gun could do. Then perhaps he'd trouble himself to get a gun lock, or better still, get rid of the goddamned thing! Lily hated guns.

The attorney spoke briefly with the prosecutor, accepting his congratulations and assuring him that she had already taken steps to educate Mr. Thuy on gun safety and children. Both were hopeful they'd seen the last of the careless father.

Lily trudged back to her office and closed the door. She hated criminal trials, but Tony had assigned her this one when he and Lauren were covered up. They were both behind in their own work, having split her workload while she was gone. With the trial over quickly, she could get back into the divorces, adoption filings and custody hearings that comprised the majority of her cases.

There was a light knock, and her door was opened a crack. "Lily, you got a minute?"

Lily looked up to see Tony in her doorway. "Of course. Anytime." She gestured to a chair across from her desk.

Tony stepped into her office and closed the door. Taking a seat, he began, "So how are you doing, my friend?" Lily was still hurting, he could see.

"It's hard sometimes, Tony." Lily turned and picked up the newly framed picture from Strawberry Peak. "I still miss her. I guess I always will." She couldn't stop the misty eyes, but she held the tears in check.

"I'm sorry, Lily. If we can help you with anything, you'll let us know?"

Lily nodded. After a few quiet moments, she asked, "Is there something else, Tony?"

The lawyer shifted his feet from back to front and leaned forward in the chair. This was going to be difficult. "I wanted to talk to you about your workload. I was wondering if maybe we've pushed you back into things too quickly."

"I don't think so. Is there a problem with my work?" she asked testily.

"I've gotten a couple of calls, Lily. Marty Huffstetler's father said you missed his arraignment. Silvia Flores said you were ill-prepared for her preliminary custody hearing, and she was worried it was going to cost her the kids." He looked across the desk at the blonde attorney, but she wouldn't meet his eye. "It's not like you, Lily."

"It was the Thuy trial, Tony, which by the way, ended this afternoon with an acquittal. You know how I hate criminal stuff. It just takes me longer to slog through it all."

Tony wanted to give his friend the benefit of the doubt. "Okay, Lil. If you need any help, you've got to let me know. Colleen still hasn't heard anything from the PD's office, so she's available to help."

Lily bit her tongue. *So you want Colleen to have my job, is that it?* "If I need any help, Tony, I'll be sure to ask," she said crisply.

Tony returned to his office, leaving Lily to stew.

Not quite four o'clock on a Friday afternoon. *Quitting time.*

Anna had run into trouble with the senior staff at Premier VW of LA. Three weeks after the takeover, only Ben Dunlap remained, the service and finance managers summarily dismissed for failing to follow Anna's new guidelines. She had replaced Tommy Russell with Marco Gonzalez, a 31-year-old dynamo who *loved* Volkswagens. She desperately needed Hal's help with the books, but was reluctant to add to his workload, especially since he was already spending two days a week in Palm Springs. So here she was on a Friday night, pouring over printouts in the conference room, trying to reconcile the inventory with the revenue.

Realizing she wouldn't make it home for dinner, Anna called Lily with a plan. "Hey darling! How was your day?"

"Well, I won my case, but all things being equal, I'd rather have seen my client do a little jail time," she said cynically.

"So, it's too bad you're so good at what you do."

How's that for irony? Lily had already decided that she was not going to tell Anna of her conversation with Tony. No sense in calling attention to your fuckups.

"Listen, babe. I'm going to be stuck here at the VW place for awhile. I was wondering if maybe you'd...maybe...pretty please...pick up a pizza and come by." She listened hopefully for her partner's response.

Don't be stubborn. It's better than being at home alone. "Hmm...Will I get a tip?"

"Definitely!"

"Veggie okay?" Lily drained her glass and stretched to put the vodka bottle back on the top shelf.

"Perfect."

An hour later, Anna saw the X-5 pull onto the lot, slipping into the space beside her own Z8. To her delight, Lily first removed the happy hound from his crate, then a large pizza box. Anna met her lover at the side door, taking the leash and the pizza box as Lily returned to the car for their drinks. Once they were all inside, Anna threw the deadbolt to lock them in.

All alone in the darkened showroom, Anna quickly stole a kiss. As their lips met, she was immediately aware of the overpowering taste and smell of alcohol, and of the breath mints her lover had obviously used to cover it up. This realization that Lily had been drinking set off a few alarms. First and foremost was Anna's worry that something had happened again to trigger her lover's depression about losing her mother. She was also very concerned that Lily had driven herself to the dealership when she likely had no business driving, but she wouldn't bring that up unless she was certain. The last thing on earth she wanted was a fight, acutely aware that her long hours would somehow play into their argument.

As the women ate and played with the dog, Anna watched for any of the telltale signs that her lover was drunk. Lily seemed to be in complete control, but the smell of alcohol was really pronounced on her breath, even as she masked it with the pizza and coke. There was no way around the awkward exchange.

"You know, I don't feel like working anymore tonight. Why don't we head home?"

"That's the spirit! We'll race you home! Come on Chester!"

"Whoa! Why don't we ride home together? Would you bring me back in the morning?" Anna tried to sound casual.

"That's silly. Why don't you just follow me?"

Anna sighed. "Lily, I'm... sure you're fine to drive, but I can smell the alcohol on your breath from all the way over here."

Lily bristled. "Yes, I had a drink this afternoon when I got home from work. No, I am not drunk."

"I know you're not. It's just that...."

"So if you're sure I'm fine to drive, then what's the problem?"

"Sweetheart, anything could happen, and if it does you'd be the one in trouble, so matter whose fault it was." Anna didn't want to plead, but she needed to make her point. "It's no big deal."

Her words were followed by a long awkward silence. Lily wore an angry look, her eyes dark and piercing. Finally, she tossed her keys onto the table and they noisily slid across. "Fine. Let's just go."

Lily grabbed Chester's leash and walked quickly to the side door while Anna tidied up their mess.

Anna kept up her casual demeanor at home that night, and especially when Lily accompanied her to the VW lot on Saturday morning, though her lover was cool and distant. Kim had called earlier, inviting Lily to join her on her walk today through Topanga Park. The car dealer had put the bug in her sister's ear last week that Lily seemed to be avoiding the trails that she had always loved, and hoped that walking with Kim and Jonah would ease her lover back into her weekend routine.

"I'm sure you're getting really tired of this question, but how are you doing, Lily?"

Kim was right. Lily was tired of the question, but she had only briefly seen Kim once since the funeral, so it was fair. Lily lowered her sunglasses into place to cover any tears that might spring up and looked out across the hills. "I'm doing okay, most of the time. It's hard sometimes though, like putting on these boots today. The last time I went out, it was with Mom."

"I'm glad you came with me today. I know how much you like hiking. You're welcome to join Jonah and me any weekend. The other ladies don't walk with me then, because their husbands have *normal* jobs." She sneered the word, knowing that Lily would understand.

"I hear you. I get to watch Anna come home in time to fall into bed exhausted, and she's going out the door again when I get up."

Kim was still having difficulty with Hal's work schedule. "That's exactly like Hal, and now he's gone one night a week to Palm Springs. How do you deal with it, Lily?"

I drink. I pout. I get whiney. "I don't always deal with it, Kim. Sometimes it gets to be frustrating and the next thing I know, we're fighting about it." Lily wasn't altogether sure she should be confiding their problems to Anna's sister, but it would be nice to hear from someone who at least understood what she was going through.

"Hal and I had a few fights at first. But you know, he's really happy with this new job and all the responsibility. And he's really pushing himself to do a good job for Anna."

"Anna says it will calm down soon. What do you think?"

"I think my sister will work herself to death to take the load off everybody else. I hope you're making her come home sometimes and relax a little."

"I... This is important to her. I can't take it away from her. I catch myself making little comments every now and then to make her feel guilty about being gone so much, but I always apologize. I can't deny it's there, though."

Kim understood. "Well, call me if you get lonely in that big old house. Jonah doesn't have a pool, you know."

These days, it seemed to Lily that she was lonely all the time. The loss of her mother had left her feeling like a family of one, especially with Anna working so much. She wasn't even sure that having her lover home in the evenings or on the weekends was the answer. She needed more from Anna than just her presence. She needed to know what Anna saw for their future. Otherwise, there would be no end to the misery she felt.

"Hey, baby. Did you and Kim have a good walk?" Anna found her lover in the kitchen, fresh from her shower. Lily looked adorable. As usual, she was barefooted, wearing one of Anna's large gray polo shirts with the BMW emblem over long baggy shorts.

"It was nice. I'm glad she called." Lily set aside the salad she had been tossing. "Come here, Amazon." She held her arms open.

What a beautiful sight! Anna walked into the smaller woman's arms, surprised by the ferocity of the hug, which she returned with equal strength. "I love you, Lily." There was more going on here than a simple greeting.

"I love you back." That was all she wanted to say about her behavior last night and this morning. She hated having things between them, but dredging through the details would serve no purpose. She hoped Anna would let her leave it at that.

Walking with Kim today, Lily had reached a very difficult decision. Though she had vowed early in their relationship that she wouldn't repeat her past mistakes by pressing the issue again, it was time to ask Anna where she stood. More now than ever, Lily needed a constant in her life. The love she shared with Anna was strong and

still growing, but Lily wanted a promise. She wanted to dream, to look ahead as she grew old, and to know that Anna would always be by her side.

Eleanor Stuart was the only person on earth who had ever made a promise to her, and that vow of love and commitment had always been her anchor. If Anna couldn't do this, Lily knew she'd have to plant her own stake in the ground. Her heart knew that Anna Kaklis would be her last chance.

But this wasn't a good time. She certainly didn't want Anna having doubts just because she'd been such a brat lately. They needed some time away from all the things that pulled at them, time just for one another.

"Sweetheart, whatever happened with the Maui thing? I mean, did we lose that or can we reschedule for another time?"

Great minds! If only she could find the time. "I've still got the tickets. I think all we'd have to do is call the travel agent and try to pick another time we could go." Anna was thrilled that Lily still wanted to go. She had worried that her lover would associate the trip with her mother's death, but apparently she hadn't. "What if we tried for Labor Day?"

That was more than six weeks away. Lily was certain she would be psychotic by then. "Any chance we could go before that? I could really use a getaway," she asked hopefully. "You know, we've never had a real vacation. What if we planned something for longer, like to Fiji?"

"I'd love to, but I don't think I can commit to something like that right now."

Her choice of words was certainly ironic. "Well then Maui would be okay. Do you think we could squeeze in a long weekend a little sooner?" There's a very fine line between asking and begging.

"I'm sorry, babe. The VW place is a mess. Everything else is running fine, thank god, but every time I put a fire out over there, another one breaks out. If we don't stop hemorrhaging money in the next two months, we're going to lose our shirts." Anna had slipped seamlessly into her CEO persona.

"Okay, let's shoot for Labor Day."

Lily wheeled the X-5 into the narrow driveway of the simple house in Hispanic East LA. *Maria Esperanza's old neighborhood*, Lily remembered, thinking of the night she had rushed out to protect her client from her violent ex-husband, now her loving current husband.

Beside her in the front seat was 13-year-old Marga Alvarez, a foster child who had deeply touched Lily's heart. Inside the house, Marga's 33-year-old mother lay dying, in the final stages of liver cancer. Too soon, Lily knew, Marga Alvarez would be all

alone. Sandy had called last week asking Lily to represent the Alvarez family, both as the executor of Mrs. Alvarez' estate and as the guardian ad litem for Marga.

As guardian ad litem, Lily made the decisions about Marga's placement. It was an enormous responsibility, but one she knew she couldn't refuse. Lily had comforted the girl about her ordeal, even talking about the loss of her own mother. She couldn't help but recall how Anna had reached out to Lateisha, the Kidz Kamp girl whose mother had died.

The teenager jumped from the car almost before it had stopped, running eagerly into the house to see her mother. The child had been in foster care since last week, when Lily had deemed the home situation unsafe, the only adult present now almost fully incapacitated, the house teeming with home health care workers, whose job duties did not include caring for a 13-year-old. Fortunately, Mrs. Alvarez had relatives in Chicago, and Marga was welcome in their home. But for these last few days, Lily stood by the girl's decision to stay close to her mother.

Lily carried her briefcase into the house, thinking she might get some work done in the kitchen while Marga visited with her mother in the back bedroom. Just as she settled down with her files, the front screen squeaked, announcing a new arrival.

"Mrs. Alvarez?"

That voice.

"Mrs. Alvarez? It's Bev Adams, from HHC."

Beverly. Lily tasted her lunch in the back of her throat. She had not seen her ex-lover in over six years, since the day she had packed her few belongings and left their home, hurt and bewildered about how things had gone so horribly wrong.

And she did *not* want to see her today. Lily heard voices in the bedroom, and knew that Marga would soon give her presence away. Quickly, she ducked into the small bathroom off the living room and locked the door. She was perfectly content to ride out Beverly's visit counting the small octagonal floor tiles as she sat on the covered toilet seat.

It was not to be. "Are you okay in there?" the home health care nurse asked.

Of all the home health care professionals in LA, Beverly Adams had to be the one seeing Mrs. Alvarez. "Fine," Lily answered, lifting her voice an octave in disguise. "Just something I ate, I guess." *I can't believe I fucking said that!*

"Look, I'm a nurse. I've got something that will settle your stomach," Beverly offered.

"No thanks, I'm sure I'll be fine. I just need to sit here awhile." *Could this possibly be more humiliating?*

"Okay, but let me know when you're out. I need to get something from the cabinet in there."

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck! Where was Lauren when she needed bad words?

Lily waited until she was certain that she heard Beverly talking to the sick woman. Slipping out of the bathroom door, she made a beeline back to the kitchen. "All done! Marga, can I see you in the kitchen a minute?" *Hurry, child!*

The girl walked in to find the lawyer shoving things frantically into her briefcase. "Listen, Marga. I'm going to wait outside in the car. Maybe I'll pull over across the street. Just enjoy your visit with your mom, and come on out when you're...."

"Lily?"

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck! "Oh, my goodness. Look who it is." Beverly looked...older. Much older. She had never really been what most people would call attractive, but something about this woman's charisma was intoxicating. Still, Lily was surprised to see the physical changes that had taken place in only six years.

"I thought there was something familiar about that voice."

"How are you, Bev? And how's Josh? What is he now, 11 years old?" Josh was Beverly's son, whom Lily had adored.

"I'm fine. We're both fine. How about you?"

"Mostly okay, I guess. I lost my mom a couple of months ago. That was hard." Eleanor had always treated Beverly warmly, though she confessed later to her daughter that they hadn't really seemed a good match.

"I'm really sorry to hear that. I always liked Eleanor."

"Thanks."

Unable to just let it go, Beverly's eyes drifted to Lily's left hand. Her own sported a simple band of hammered gold. "I see you still haven't found the one, Lily. I hope someday you do."

"Thanks, Beverly." Lily thought she might throw up, getting well wishes from the likes of Beverly Adams. "Marga, I'll be in the car," she shouted to the other room. With that, she pushed past Beverly and went to wait it out in the X-5.

A sense of panic gripped Anna as she pulled into the darkened drive. Lily's car was gone, and the house was still dark, save the outside light by the side door, which came on when it detected her presence in the drive. She had been calling the house off and on all evening, but assumed that Lily was working late also. It was when she failed to reach the woman on her cell phone that she became concerned.

A rude surprise awaited the dark-haired woman in the kitchen, where Chester huddled against the back door, anxious about the scolding he was sure to get. The puddle in the floor confirmed that Lily hadn't been home at all.

"It's okay, boy. Not your fault." Adding this forgiving response to that he had gotten the other night, the hound unfortunately processed the information that peeing on the floor was not such a bad thing to do after all.

Anna called Sandy, then Lauren, but still had no clue of her lover's whereabouts. Next, she retrieved voicemail from every possible source. As she wandered the house in search of a note, the phone mercifully rang.

"Hello." *Please be Lily!*

It was. "Anna, I need you to come get me."

"Sweetheart, where are you? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I'm at the jail downtown."

It wasn't unusual for Lily to be at the jail. Sometimes, her clients got into trouble and she had to bail them out. A little voice told Anna that this time was different.

"Where's your car? Should I send someone to pick it up?"

Lily took a deep breath and blew it out. "It's impounded, Anna. I was driving drunk."

Forty minutes later, a furious Anna Kaklis pulled to the curb and her waiting partner got in beside her.

"Thanks for coming. I...I'm sorry."

Anna didn't answer, eyes straight ahead as the excess adrenalin from her unchanneled anger caused her to push the tachometer higher than usual. The sports car responded with power, lurching as she cycled through the gears.

"Take it easy, now. It wouldn't do for both of get arrested on the same night." It was a pathetic remark and Lily knew it.

"Please don't talk, Lily."

For the remainder of the trip, the blonde stared quietly out the window. *Don't you even want to know what happened?* When they reached their home, the dejected blonde went straight to bed.

Though she was relieved that Lily was alright, Anna was still furious. She had warned Lily about this, and couldn't imagine why on earth her lover would be so careless. Taking Chester for his nightly walk, she stewed about how they would get through this.

Entering their bedroom, Anna found the blonde already asleep. For a fleeting moment—a nanosecond really—she considered staying the night in the guest room. For her, that single act had been the beginning of the end of her marriage to Scott. She would never do that again. Foregoing their usual intimacy, Anna followed Lily's lead and donned a nightshirt. To be naked was to be vulnerable. Taking her place beside her lover in the king-sized bed, she slowly let her hand drift across the bed, coming to rest on her lover's hip.

Lily needed to stop drinking. *And I need to be home with her more.*

Chapter 9

Lily was very fortunate to have landed in Judge Anston's court, as he remembered with sadness her recent loss. Lauren represented her fellow attorney at the arraignment, where she pleaded no contest in exchange for a 120-day suspension of her driving privileges. Lauren had negotiated an exception for any driving related to her work, so only her home, social and recreational activities would be impacted.

She and Anna had finally cleared the air. Though they barely spoke the day after her arrest, the car dealer had surprised her by staying home the following day. Anna rarely missed a Saturday on the lot, and Lily couldn't help but wonder if trust was the issue.

"If you're worried about me needing to drive somewhere while you're at work, I won't. I have some reading to do."

Anna lowered her paper and reached across the table to take her lover's hand. It was time for them to talk. "Lily, I'm just worried about you in general. I know this had been an awful time, and I haven't exactly been very supportive."

"That's ridiculous. You've been perfect." It was ironic how words meant to soothe could carry such bite. On top of the misery Lily already felt about her spiraling loss of control, Anna was adding guilt by taking the blame herself. "I...I don't know what's gotten into me. I never used to be like this." Briefly, she considered telling Anna about her meeting with Beverly, but even she knew it was no excuse for drinking and driving.

"Honey, you lost your mother," Anna said softly. "And it hasn't helped things that I've been gone so much. I know if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't want to be left by myself all the time." The tall woman stood and walked around the table, her arms encircling the blonde head against her stomach. "I'm going to try very hard to be home a lot

more. I've offered Brad and Holly extra incentives to work the weekends so I don't have to. We'll get through this, baby."

Lily just loved it when Anna called her baby. "I'm so sorry I've been such a pain in the ass."

"Ah, but you're my pain in the ass."

So why do I feel so miserable? Lily lifted up in the chair to tuck a leg underneath. It was almost 10 o'clock on a Tuesday night, and here she was, prepping a case in Anna's office while the car dealer methodically processed the work in her inbox. The hound lay under the desk, sound asleep.

Lily looked around her lover's office. True to her word, she had thrown out her father's cherry desk, with those god awful green leather wingback chairs, replacing them with a Scandinavian motif. Anna's numerous awards and plaques from BMW and the business community hung hidden behind her door, which was closed to keep Chester from wandering around. He had recently developed a very bad habit regarding the tile floors. And he hadn't yet acclimated to the new doggie door at home.

Besides the numerous model cars, two framed photographs were the only obvious personal touches. One was Jonah at six months, smiling and posed in his infant BMW wear. The other was of Anna with Lily, the one taken at the base of Yosemite Falls. Lily too had that photo on her desk. *Happier times.*

"You 'bout ready to call it a night?" Anna's voice startled her.

"Whenever you are." Without a driver's license, Lily was completely at Anna's mercy. For reasons she couldn't understand, she hadn't wanted to stay home alone. Something inside her was disjointed.

Dressed in her black suit for the somber occasion, the blonde attorney directed her youthful charge to the front row of the church, where she would sit with her mother's cousin during the service. Taking a seat at the side several rows back, she noted with relief that Beverly was not among the mourners.

Marga Alvarez was a remarkable young woman. Watching the girl absorb the priest's parting words, Lily marveled at the teenager's maturity and poise in the face of her loss. She couldn't help but wonder where a 13-year old got that kind of strength. She herself had come apart when Eleanor had died. A painful lump formed in her throat as she looked upon this child and saw herself sitting with Anna in the front pew of the church in San Jose. *Had it already been two months?*

Lily had signed all the paperwork earlier this morning to transfer custody of Marga to her relatives in Chicago. The girl was packed and ready, and would leave first thing tomorrow to start her new life. As they walked down the steps from the church, Lily sought out Marga one last time to say goodbye.

"Good luck to you, sweetheart. I'll be thinking about you." The hug they shared was soothing to both.

"Good luck to you too, Miss Stuart. I bet our moms are watching over both of us right now."

That did it for Lily. She turned quickly towards her car as the tears burst forth. It was still so raw. *Is it ever going to stop feeling like this?*

The attorney composed herself in the car for more than 20 minutes before starting back to her office. Digging absently in her purse for her cell phone, she called Anna's direct line. She really needed a friendly voice.

"This is Anna Kaklis." Anna didn't have caller ID on her office phone.

"Hi baby."

"Sweetheart," Anna sighed, knowing from the small voice that her lover had had a difficult time at the funeral. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay, I guess. I just needed to hear your voice."

"You want to have lunch with me? I'll come downtown," she offered. It would be tricky to work that in, but Anna was willing.

Lily would have loved that, but she didn't feel right about asking the car dealer to drop everything and rush down, especially since Anna had been so good about being at home in the evenings. "No, that's okay. Thanks though. I'll probably just grab something at the deli and eat at my desk."

"You sound down, sweetheart. Is everything alright?"

Lily didn't want to get into the business about the funeral over the phone. She had only just gotten her emotions under control. "Yeah, it's fine. It'll be okay when I get home and can see you."

Anna dreaded what she had to say. "Honey, I was going to call you this afternoon. Something's come up at the BMW lot in Palm Springs. Hal found a couple of irregularities in their accounting, and he needs me to come take a look."

"Can't you just fax some things, or send the documents by email? This is the electronic age." Lily was trying desperately not to sound whiney, but she really didn't want to be alone tonight.

"I would, hon, but this is really sensitive. Hal's found a six-figure discrepancy, and we really don't know if it's just a mistake or an intentional cover-up." Her voice was hushed in case others in the hallway might be listening. "I have to leave right after lunch, but I should only be gone overnight. Hal thinks we can clear it up by noon tomorrow."

Lily was quiet. She could hear from Anna's tone that the CEO was very worried about the situation in Palm Springs. It was childish of her to expect her lover to stay in LA when something that serious loomed at her business. "Then you really need to take care of that. I'll be okay. Call me tonight if you get time."

"I'll make time. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Not at all eager to head home to the empty house, Lily worked on her cases until after six, calling clients to get status reports and to schedule appointments. Only her obligation to Chester, who needed a regular walk in the early evening, propelled her from her office. She really dreaded the darkened house.

Anna won't be home. With that realization, Lily detoured slightly from her direct route, stopping less than a mile from her home to purchase a fifth of Grey Goose. She knew she shouldn't, but the idea of being home alone tonight was too much. A few drinks would take the edge off, numb the ache she felt in her bones, and bring her merciful sleep. She and Anna had never actually had the "not drinking anymore" conversation, so it wasn't like she was breaking a promise or anything, and she wasn't going to drive anywhere. Besides, Anna would never know.

At 6:35 that evening, Hal found it—the first evidence that the errors they were looking at were not the result of human deception. But a simple programming glitch in the way their contract forms had computed sales tax meant that they now owed the IRS and the state of California more than \$100,000. Most likely, they could recover at least part of that cost from the previous owner, who had banked the surplus as profits.

With the matter now settled Anna and Hal caravanned back to their LA homes. The CEO tried to call Lily from the car, but the satellite network was apparently down in their area. Rather than waste time by stopping to find a phone, she decided to push ahead and get home as quickly as she could, maybe even before her lover had gone to bed.

Seeing the kitchen lights on, Anna opted to enter through that door rather than her usual route through the family room. As she approached the kitchen, she was taken aback by the sight. Lily was standing at the counter, calmly pouring a drink. A flood of emotions surged through the dark-haired woman as she watched her lover drink from the glass and fill it again. None of these emotions were good.

"Hello, Lily," she announced herself brusquely.

Oh shit. Lily's stomach lurched as she realized she was no longer alone. "You're back early." Nonchalance might work.

"What the hell are you doing?" Anna demanded angrily.

Nope, nonchalance wouldn't work. "What the hell does it look like?" Lily thought it should have been obvious.

"Goddamn it, Lily! It looks like you couldn't wait to have me out of your hair for a night so you could get drunk again," Anna charged. She was angrier at the apparent deception than at the act itself.

"And you were more than happy to oblige," Lily shot back. Whoever said the best offense was a good defense had it backwards.

"I had to go! You know that! This was my mother's business, Lily. It's all I have left of her." Anna grabbed the bottle and began pouring its contents down the sink.

"Goddamn it, that's mine!" Lily screamed, lunging across the counter.

What happened in the next few moments would shake their very core. Anna pulled back, sloshing the vodka over herself and the floor as Lily grabbed for the bottle. A nervous Chester had positioned himself behind the feet of his taller mistress, and she tumbled backwards as Lily watched the horror unfold. The bottle shattered and Anna cried out, blood spurting instantly from a deep gash across her palm.

"Oh my god, Anna! Oh my god!" was all Lily could say as she hurried to the drawer for a clean dish towel.

Anna looked in shock at her injured hand, suddenly pulling it back from Lily's view as she snatched the towel and began to wrap the wound.

"You need stitches. We have to go to the hospital." Lily was starting to panic as she realized what had transpired. *It was an accident, right?*

"No! I'm not going anywhere with you. You're drunk!"

"Anna?" *She can't go by herself!* "At least let me ride with you. I'll keep the pressure on it." She reached out to hold the bandaged hand.

"I'll do it myself, Lily!"

"Please let me help," the drunken blonde whimpered, tears now pouring from her sad green eyes.

"Just...just see if you can manage to clean up this mess before Chester gets hurt." Pushing past her lover, Anna was gone.

Chapter 10

Anna flinched as the doctor on call efficiently tied off another stitch. It wasn't the pain—her right hand was loaded with a local anesthetic—but the sight of the open wound that unnerved her. More than two inches long, the gash had split the meaty part of her palm below the thumb. They were up to 21 now, including nine dissolvable stitches deep inside to reconnect the tissue near the bone. Glass cuts were particularly nasty, leaving jagged tears in the skin that were tedious to close.

Her hand had throbbed all the way to the UCLA Medical Center, more so when she used it to change the gears on her Z8. She was certain it would throb tomorrow as well, and probably several days after. The scarlet towel drew quick attention when she entered the emergency room, where a nurse immediately applied pressure to the wound to stop the profuse bleeding.

"Ms. Kaklis, are you sure there isn't someone we could call to come pick you up?" The nurse had seen the dark-haired woman come in alone. The odor of alcohol was unmistakable.

"No, I can manage, thank you." *I will manage.* Anna couldn't call Lily, and she wouldn't call anyone else. As far as she was concerned, the fewer people who knew about this night, the better.

Dr. Christiansen spoke up. "If there's no one to call, I'm going to recommend that you rest here for a couple of hours. Your blood pressure dropped a bit from the loss of blood, so I don't think it would be wise for you to drive just yet."

"Whatever you think," Anna muttered. She hated not having choices.

"Just for a couple of hours," he assured. Before leaving, he prescribed a mild painkiller, but cautioned her to wait until she arrived home before taking one.

Anna sat alone in the curtained room, unbelieving that things had gone so bad. What misery Lily must feel to have all that anger and need for escape. Anna wondered how on earth she could fix it.

"I need to bandage that." The nurse returned with gauze and tape.

Anna held out her hand.

"You were lucky this time, you know," the nurse volunteered. Her tone was sympathetic, not accusatory.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You got some stitches in your hand. What'll it be next time? Broken teeth? A ruptured spleen?"

Anna was genuinely confused. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Ms. Kaklis, I'm not trying to intrude. We see things like this all the time in here, people coming in after fights with their boyfriends and husbands." She wrapped neat figure eights around Anna's thumb and wrist. "If that's what's going on here, you should know that there's help available."

"It isn't what's going on." Her voice was clipped and defensive.

The nurse sighed. She was accustomed to the denial. "Look, I can smell the alcohol on your clothes, but I'm pretty sure you haven't been drinking. I figure there's a drinker in the house, and you're the punching bag."

"No, I'm not a punching bag. We were having a...disagreement and I tripped over the dog." She met the nurse's skeptical eye. It was important to defend Lily. "Really. It wasn't a fight. More like tug of war...over a vodka bottle," she conceded. "She'd..." Anna caught herself. How much should she say? "She'd never hurt me."

If the nurse was surprised that the other party was a woman, she didn't let on. "Are you really sure of that? These things have a way of escalating."

"Yes, of course." Things already had escalated, Anna thought, but she was certain that it had all been an accident, and that Lily felt awful about it. Perhaps it would be enough to convince her that she shouldn't drink anymore. "She's been under a lot of stress lately," she trailed off. She didn't want the nurse to think her gentle Lily was a brute.

To the nurse, the injured woman's response was typical. It wasn't at all unusual for friends and family members to make excuses for those who drank too much. "Have you talked to your friend about her drinking and how it hurts you?"

"We've talked. But it's hard for her right now. She lost her mother recently, and I've been too busy at work to be with her." She was starting to feel more comfortable talking to this compassionate nurse.

The woman finished wrapping the bandage, taping the ends securely around Anna's wrist. "You're going to need to change this bandage every couple of days, and keep it dry until the stitches come out." Placing her bandaging materials back in the plastic container, she added, "You know, there's somebody here at the hospital that you could talk with, somebody who might be able to help."

"I...I don't know. I think we'll be able to work this out." Anna hated to talk about personal things.

"Look, I'm sure you're both trying very hard. But whatever it is you're doing right now isn't working. Not for you, and apparently not for her either." The dark-haired woman looked reluctant, almost embarrassed. "Having all this happen is nothing to be ashamed about. But not doing everything you can to fix it would be a shame."

Anna thought about the nurse's words. What if she was going about this all wrong? "Is there someone here now? Or would I have to come back?" She was pretty sure that once she left, she'd talk herself out of following up.

"Dr. Christiansen says you need to stay a couple of hours. I can have somebody here before then." Her gentle smile was encouraging. Talking to someone was a very big step.

The hospital's on-call SAC, or substance abuse counselor, stopped by the examining room 45 minutes later to talk. Anna told him all she could remember about Lily's drinking behavior and the things that had been going on in her life. To demonstrate her own support, she also related the things she had done to help ease her partner's sorrow, like taking Lily along with her to the office and trying to be at home more. She almost mentioned the trip they were taking to Maui, but that was for something different, something not related at all to the events of tonight.

Anna learned from the counselor that she was what they called an "enabler," because she accepted Lily's heartbreak as a valid excuse to drink to excess, even going so far as to take on blame herself for her long hours. Lily was exhibiting classic alcoholic symptoms, the counselor told her, and would probably continue until she was forced to face the consequences of her behavior.

"If you truly care about her," he said, "you're going to have to do something very difficult. In fact, it may be the hardest thing you've ever done." He had no idea of the inner strength of the woman sitting across from him. "You're going to have to step back and let her fall. When she bottoms out, only then will she have to take responsibility for her actions, and only she can decide whether or not to do something about it."

"What do you mean 'let her fall'? I can't just kick her out into the street. She's already lost so much."

"That's why I said this would be hard," he explained. "It's painful to see loved ones struggle; especially when we think we can help. But she doesn't need your help right now. She needs your support, but only to help her fight this, not to help her keep it up."

Anna couldn't believe what he was asking of her. Tears filled her eyes as she thought of how hurt Lily would be to face yet another abandonment in her life. "I don't know if I can do that. How will she ever trust me again? Why would she even want to?"

These were old arguments, the counselor knew. His training had prepared him to answer. For a successful outcome, it was vital that people understand exactly what was at stake. "I don't mean to trivialize your relationship with Lily, but it isn't what's important here. Lily's in a battle for her very soul. Stepping back may cost you her love; not stepping back may cost you both everything."

The crimson blood on the white tile floor stunned the panicked blonde into sobriety. *What have I done?* Shaking uncontrollably, she cleaned up the mess, shooing a confused Chester away to protect him from the broken glass. Though she scrubbed the floor as best she could, the blood had stained the grout, leaving the awful image in her mind's eye.

It had been over an hour since Anna left for the hospital. Lily wanted desperately to follow, but her restricted license limited her to work travel only. She wasn't afraid of being caught by the authorities, but of further raising the ire of her lover.

Anna had every right to be angry, Lily thought. In fact, she realized with alarm, Anna had every right to ask her to leave. She'd been nothing but a pain in the ass, always depressed, losing her license, going on and on about how much time Anna spent at the dealership. *And now this.*

But Anna wouldn't ask her to leave. No, Anna was far too kind, far too generous, far too forgiving.... For weeks now, she'd been taking all the blame for being gone so much, when all the time, Lily knew that she'd been hiding things from her. She didn't tell Anna about her trouble at work, or about seeing Beverly the other day. Hell, speaking of hiding, there were two bottles of Grey Goose in the garage right now, behind their camping gear on the second shelf.

No, she'll just come home and not say anything. She'll be angry for a day or two, and then everything will be back to normal. She'll try to be home even more than she already is, and she'll constantly try to run interference or smooth everything over. In two weeks, they'd go to Maui and spend three days together acting like nothing had happened. Hell, she'll probably still have her stitches. *She'll be nice to me, and sweet, and we'll make love.*

And then I'll do something like this again.

Still under the alcohol's influence, Lily's reasoning seemed perfect to her. She needed to leave. Anna wouldn't want her to, and would ask her to stay. For that reason, she needed to be gone when Anna got back. She couldn't risk another incident like this. What if it got worse?

The blonde retrieved the suitcases from the hall closet and hurriedly packed. Underwear, shoes, belts, jeans, shorts, t-shirts, nightshirts all were crammed haphazardly into the rollerboard. Cosmetics went in the smaller bag, and all of her essential papers and books were stuffed into her briefcase. Once these were loaded in the X-5, Lily made three trips to her closet, collecting suits and tops for work, and slacks and sweaters for going out. *Like I'll be going anywhere.* These were laid across the back of the SUV. Finally, she jammed as much of her hiking gear as would fit in her backpack, throwing it onto the back seat.

"Chester," she called the hound. *He needs to stay with Anna.* "You be a good boy, you hear? Anna needs you to be a good boy." Lily had noticed as a child that when people spoke to babies or to animals, they always said things twice. But then she was a redundancy aficionado.

She remembered the hidden vodka as she turned on her headlights to pull out of the garage. Once it was stowed under the seat, she was off.

It won't happen again, Anna. I promise.

As soon as she tapped the automatic garage door opener, Anna realized that Lily had gone. What she didn't yet know was *how gone*. Anna walked warily through the house, finally reaching the open bare closet. Suddenly overwhelmed with sadness, she sat on their bed and began to cry.

"Here are the invoices you asked for, Anna." Marco Gonzalez startled his boss as he dropped the papers on the conference table. "You know, we'll find you an office if you want. You don't have to work in here every time you come."

"If you really want to make me happy, find out where these six cars went," Anna snapped at her VW sales manager.

Whoa! Marco took the list from his obviously angry boss and stepped back. "I'll see what I can do."

"Marco, wait." Anna sighed and looked away, ashamed of her behavior. "I...didn't mean to snap at you. I think you're doing a great job, and I really appreciate it."

"Thanks, Anna. I'll get on this now."

Anna pressed her fingers against her brow, nursing a small migraine that had loomed for the last two days. Since Wednesday night. Since Lily left. She hadn't heard from the woman, and she had no idea where she'd gone.

"Anna, there's a call for you on three." Wanda, the receptionist at the VW lot, was an Alabama native and one of the friendliest people Anna had encountered at this new dealership.

"This is Anna Kaklis." Her stomach knotted as the silence told her that her lover was on the phone.

"Hi." Eight miles away near Playa del Rey, Lily sat in a quiet, darkened hotel room, where she'd been since Wednesday night. She had called in sick the past two days, unable to face her work, her coworkers, or the world in general.

"Hello, Lily." *Are you alright, baby?* Relieved to hear her lover's voice, Anna was tempted just to ask her to come home. Surely they could work through this. But the counselor's warning stopped her. Lily's very soul was at stake, he said. Anna needed to step back and let Lily be responsible for herself. And like he said, it was hard. *But it's the only way.*

"Anna, I'm so sorry about the other night." When Lily had sobered up yesterday, she'd immediately had second thoughts about leaving her home. It was cowardly. Worse, it gave the impression that she didn't want to be there, that she didn't want Anna anymore. "Is...is your hand okay?"

"It's fine," Anna lied. It hurt like hell. Anna had bumped or strained her sore appendage repeatedly. It was amazing how many times a day a person needed to use her dominant hand.

She's going to make me do all the talking. "I thought maybe we should talk. You know, sort of clear the air about the other night?" Anna was quiet. "Anna, I can't believe I acted like that. I feel awful about it; especially that you got hurt because of my...irresponsible behavior. I'd give anything to take it all back." Lily meant every word.

"It's okay, Lily. It was an accident."

Lily sighed with relief. There was more she had to say, but for now, she only wanted to hold her lover and be held by her. Then they'd be able to start the healing part. "I'm sorry I left. I just thought it would be easier if you didn't have to put up with me for a couple of days."

"I understand." Anna fought the tears that were now clouding her eyes. "It's probably a good thing that we not be together while we...work on things."

Lily was sure that her heart had stopped, if only for an instant. "What do you mean work on things? How can we work on things if we're not together?" Her lover's silence was frightening.

Anna took a moment to compose herself, fearing her voice would crack any moment and she would dissolve in tears. Lily didn't need that, and neither did she. They needed reason to guide them, not emotion. Her instructions had been clear: Give no support for anything other than getting Lily help. "You have to work on your drinking problem, Lily. I'll do anything I can to help you, but it's best for us both right now if we're not together." Her heart was breaking.

"Anna...that's ridiculous! I don't need help with a drinking problem! I'm not some drunk who keeps a bottle hidden in my desk!" Hiding vodka in the garage shouldn't count, she reasoned. "I don't drink every day. Not even every week! I don't even have to drink at all!"

Anna recognized many of these arguments as those in the pamphlet the counselor had given her. *Stick to the message.* "Lily, your drinking has become a problem for me. We argue, we hurt each other's feelings. We never used to do that. When I can't be home, I feel guilty. And I worry about you and whether or not you're out driving drunk."

"Anna, if you feel guilty about not being home, maybe you should ask yourself why." Lily needed to make Anna see that always putting her working first was the real problem here.

But Anna wasn't going to be derailed this time. "Honey, there are all kinds of programs and services out there for alcoholism. Even if it's just going to AA meetings. I'll support you in any way I can to get help for this, but you're the one who has to do it." *Please say yes, Lily!*

"So now I'm an alcoholic, am I?" *Fuck! I'm losing it here!* She took a deep breath to calm herself. "Look, if you want me to stop, say the word. I won't ever drink again. I swear it, Anna."

Anna desperately wanted to believe her lover, but there was too much at stake. She simply couldn't risk a broken promise, and another incident like this week's might rip them apart forever. If it were going to last, Lily needed to make this decision for herself, not as a promise to her lover. "It isn't enough, Lily. You have to get some help."

Oh god, this was going from bad to worse. "Anna, you know me! You know I'm perfectly capable of quitting on my own. I don't need some goddamned treatment program!" Her pleas had turned to anger. Anna was being unreasonable. "Do you really think I belong in a roomful of people with the shakes, guys who come home drunk and beat the hell out of their wives and kids?"

Lily was making this incredibly difficult, but she had known that her lover would resist, especially if it meant she would have to talk about things that bothered her. Lily usually kept those things to herself. "Sweetheart, I'll help you look for the right kind of program. Maybe there are places for people like you."

"And just what kind of people are people like me, Anna?" she practically shouted. *God, am I some kind of monster?*

This was the anger that she had only recently come to know. It was not her gentle lover. "Honey, you're just a normal person who has gone through difficult times." She recalled the nurse's words. "You don't have to feel ashamed about it. People shouldn't be embarrassed about needing help."

Defeated, Lily finally surrendered. "If I promise to get help, can I come back home?"

You have to let her feel the consequences. "I don't think that's a good idea right now."

"Then why should I bother?" It was a rhetorical question, so Lily didn't wait for the answer.

Staring at the now silent phone, Anna pressed her throbbing hand to her throbbing temple. She had never felt more helpless in all her life. After all the words they'd exchanged, she sadly realized that she still had no idea where Lily was, and if she was alright. Foregoing the intercom, she dialed Wanda's extension. "Wanda? It's Anna. Do we have a record of incoming calls? I'd like to know where that last one came from."

Once again the earliest arrival at the office—it was a quarter to seven on Monday morning—Lily made the day's first pot of coffee and set the bag of warm bagels on the counter. Eating breakfast out *every goddamned day* meant she could easily bring extras for the others, but she had only done that a couple of times, not wanting to have to explain her change in routine. She had spent 12 nights at the Waterways Lodge, a small hotel near the beach, frequented mostly by vacationing fisherman on the front or back end of their outing. Her small room was pretty basic, but only \$79 a night, and the hotel was within walking distance of the beach that bordered busy LAX.

It had been 10 days since she had talked with Anna. It had been 12 days since her last drink.

A flurry of new clients and filings had mercifully kept her distracted from the anguish that consumed her each night when she returned to her room. Even her long nightly walks along the beach had offered little solace, though the wind and cool air seemed to clear her head somewhat. The walks grew longer each night, as she dreaded the sleeplessness and solitude that caused her to dwell on her misery.

She planned to call Anna again on Wednesday to announce that it had been two full weeks since her last drink, hoping that would prove her resolve. She would even agree to talk with someone about her feelings of depression over the loss of her mother. That was the key, she was certain. Making Anna feel badly about her work schedule wasn't likely to get her invited back home. Besides, if she could just go back home, she was willing to settle for anything Anna would give her. And she'd spend the rest of her life making up for these last few months.

This weekend was the Labor Day holiday. She wondered if they still had reservations for the Maui flight on Friday night at seven.

"Lily, can we talk?" Tony had already entered her office and closed the door.

"It's seven o'clock on a Monday morning. It's too early for me to have done something wrong already," she joked nervously. She hoped Tony hadn't found out about her troubles with Anna. The fewer people that knew about that, the better.

"Look, I don't know how to tell you this, so I'm just going to say it straight out. I'm pulling you off the Esperanza case. I'd like for you to gather up all your files and notes and bring them to my office."

Surely she had heard wrong. "Tony, I've been working that case for more than two years. Why the fuck are you pulling it now?"

Her reaction was exactly what Tony had expected, and feared. "Lily, I've talked with Mrs. Esperanza. She feels that you're resisting her wishes."

"Goddamn right I am! You know as well as I do that it's all going to start all over again, and it's the kids who are going to pay!"

"We aren't social workers, Lily," he admonished. "We're lawyers, and we're supposed to serve our clients."

"Who's serving the kids, Tony? Tell me that!" She was fuming. "Two years, Tony! Two goddamn years! Those kids have been pulled out of their home four different times, twice because of their crazy father, and twice because of their careless mother. Neither one of them deserves to have those children!"

"You're not the judge, either! It's not for you to decide. If they want their children back, it's our job to deliver the best legal services we possibly can. Not to throw roadblocks in their way."

The two glared angrily at each other. Until this very moment, there had never been a day when Lily had questioned her decision to become a lawyer. If she couldn't help Sofia and Roberto, what was the point?

Calmed by his own outburst, Tony finished. "Try to have the files in my office by the end of the day."

For the next hour and a half, Lily meticulously extracted each file, each note, each record; every single scrap of paper or electronic data byte that documented the Esperanza saga. When she'd gotten it all together, she boxed it up and dropped it wordlessly on the corner of her boss's desk.

The next two hours were spent stewing, occasionally turning back to the case she and Tony would handle first thing tomorrow morning, that of Lon Phan, a Vietnamese immigrant seeking a stay of deportation for her ailing mother. Immigration law was complicated, and too often, it swung one way or the other based on political grandstanding or the news of the day. Lily felt certain that they could make their case. Her preparation was solid, and Tony had some experience with immigration hearings.

Satisfied that there was no more she could do with the case in her office, Lily called Lon Phan, scheduling one last briefing for this afternoon. She needed to get out of the office for a while, but she couldn't take her car unless it was work-related.

Lily pressed her intercom button. "Pauline, would you let Tony know that I've gone to do a final briefing with Lon Phan."

The secretary was perplexed that Lily had not simply buzzed through to Tony's office. Nonetheless, she relayed the message as she watched the blonde attorney emerge from the hallway, just as Colleen exited Tony's office.

Anger roiled inside Lily when she saw Colleen enter the closet-sized office she had commandeered in her part-time role. She was carrying the Esperanza box. "Well that certainly explains a lot," she muttered, flinging open then banging the door on the way out.

"I don't think she's walking tonight, boy. Maybe she's watching the Dodgers, eh?" Anna scratched the hound behind his ears as he peered over the dashboard. From their parking space half a block away, they'd spotted Lily on her late-night stroll from the

beach six times in the past 10 days. It was always too dark to see her face, but Anna could tell from the hanging head and slumped shoulders that her lover was sad.

Still, it was always heartening to see that Lily was at least safe and evidently sober. Anna missed her terribly, and worried every day that passed without a call that the distance between them would become insurmountable. Lily needed to know that Anna still loved her very much, and wanted nothing more than for them to be together again and happy. Peering at the silver X-5 as she drove slowly by the lodge, she resolved to call her lover at the law clinic the next day.

Inside the hotel room tonight, the attorney was already asleep. Rather, she was passed out, having given in to the siren's call of the smoky gray bottle.

Chapter 11

Fuck! Goddamn it! "Get out of the fucking way!" Lily screamed at the crawling line of cars in front of her. She had fallen asleep without setting the alarm, waking up only 15 minutes before she was due in court. Thank god Tony was co-chairing! But boy, was he going to be pissed!

The attorney lost another 20 minutes looking for a parking space, finally finding a surface lot three blocks from the courthouse. "Sorry I'm late. How are we doing?" she asked her boss as she slipped into the seat beside him.

Tony ignored her question and continued taking notes. The government's immigration attorney was wrapping up her arguments about why Lon Phan's mother should be deported immediately, so that meant Tony had already presented their side. She was supposed to have done that. *Yep, he's pissed.*

"Counsel, is this a good time for the court to take a break?" Judge Witherspoon's court was considered one of the most relaxed.

"Yes, your honor. We're prepared to call our first witness upon return."

"Very well. We will take a break of 15 minutes, after which the petitioners will call their first witness. The parties are admonished...." His instructions droned on while Lily assembled her own notes for their upcoming witness.

Tony, Lily and Lon Phan exited the courtroom and headed for one of the small attorney-client conference rooms. "Mrs. Phan, I need a word with Ms. Stuart in private. Will you excuse us? You can go get something to drink if you want; just be sure to avoid everybody from the courtroom." He closed the door and turned to his very nervous co-counsel.

"Sorry I was late. Traffic was awful today, and then I couldn't find a place to park."

"Lily, have a seat. We need to talk." The ever gallant man held her chair as she slowly sat. "We were lucky today, because both of us had planned to be here. I don't have to tell you what could have happened if this had been your case alone." They most certainly would have been fined. She may have been disciplined by the bar. The worse case scenario was that their client's case could have been tossed out and Lon Phan's ailing mother deported.

"Yes Tony, I know. I'm really sorry. It was just one of those days. I appreciate you carrying the ball. Did it go okay?" *I'm sorry! Let's move on!*

"And also you smell like liquor," he added softly.

Lily leaned back in her chair and looked away. She hadn't realized that others could tell. "Tony, I admit that I had a couple of drinks last night. Losing the Esperanza case to Colleen was kind of hard to swallow." No reason Tony shouldn't know his own role in this.

"Lily, I know you've been through a lot. And I know the Esperanza kids mean a lot to you. What you need to know is that the Braxton Street Law Clinic means a lot to me. I won't have it tainted by shoddy work...or by a drunken attorney." He let his words sink in then delivered the final blow. "As of right now, Lily...I'm putting you on indefinite suspension. You need to get your act together. I can't take a chance of letting this continue."

The stunned blonde attorney sat in disbelief as he picked up his briefcase and disappeared into the hallway.

Lily was in court today, Pauline had said. The receptionist was her usual cheery self when Anna had called, leading the car dealer to guess that her lover had probably not told her coworkers that she had moved out of their home for the time being. Anna hoped they would be back together before others found out about their troubles. She hadn't mentioned anything at all to her own family, declining invitations over the past two weeks to avoid having to explain where Lily was. She had done the same when things had started to fall apart with Scott. The difference here, Anna knew, was that she wanted to work through this with Lily, no matter how difficult it was.

"Anna, I've got something you're going to want to see," Marco interrupted her thoughts, dropping a folder on the table. "Remember those six cars you asked me about? I asked the LAPD to track the VINs and you'll never guess what I found."

The car dealer sat in fascination for the next 20 minutes as her sales manager took her through his findings. The vehicle identification numbers had shown up in the state's database as registered vehicles, confirming that they had been imported and delivered. The original invoices had obviously been purged from the company's database, but the VINs had shown up on the annual aggregate report from VW. Yet, the Sweeney books had no records of their sales, so by all accounts, the vehicles should still be on the lot. A closer look showed that all six vehicles were at one time registered to the same person, a Sherilyn Richardson, identified by Wanda as Gordon Sweeney's

youngest daughter. Mrs. Richardson—and probably someone else from within the company—had simply stolen six cars over the last two years. Anna directed Marco to turn the information over to their attorney for follow-up. Someone may be headed to jail; at the very least, Gordon Sweeney would compensate Premier VW for the six vehicles.

Marco's discovery was a tipping point for the CEO of this new auto empire. For the first time since she had taken over the business, Anna took stock of all the headaches and problems the ambitious moves had cost her. Besides these looming criminal charges, there was the tax fiasco in Palm Springs. The personnel moves throughout the company had led to ongoing difficulties that arose while people learned new jobs. There were the problems between Kim and Hal that hadn't been there before Anna placed so many demands on her brother-in-law. Then, of course, there were the long, long hours she had logged between all the businesses trying to bring them into sync. The latter she knew was the one that had extracted the biggest price. She was terrified to think that it may have cost her Lily, but even that was incidental compared to the price Lily was now paying.

Anna picked up the phone to call her brother-in-law. "Hal? Listen, something very important has come up this weekend. I need for you and Kim and Jonah to get on a plane Friday night and fly to Maui...that's for three days and three nights on the beach...No, it's very important...If you don't go, you're fired...Thank you Hal. I'll send the tickets over, and have a great time."

That night from her car, she and Chester watched from their vantage point up the street as Lily entered the Waterways Lodge. If possible, she appeared even sadder than she ever had before. Consumed with guilt from her realizations earlier that day, Anna made a move to exit the car and go to her lover. It was the sight of the tall brown bag in the blonde woman's hand that stopped her. *Why am I doing this? Why do I keep coming down here to check on her when she doesn't give a damn about herself?*

Lily couldn't call Anna now, at least not to boast that she had been two weeks without a drink. Fresh off the disaster in court yesterday, she'd picked up a bottle of tonic to wash down another half-bottle of vodka, but when she reached her room, she was no longer interested in the escape. Instead, she'd simply donned her mother's heavy sweater and returned to the beach, where she sat watching the planes roar over the ocean until the wee hours of the morning.

When she exited the hotel, she glimpsed what looked like Anna's car as it rounded the corner and spun out of sight. There were only a handful of Z8s in LA, as they were only available via direct order from the factory in Munich. But it couldn't have been her. *Nah. What would she have been doing down here?*

Lily spent the next day—her first day of unemployment—sleeping in, the 'Do not disturb' sign warding off the housekeeper. Her combination breakfast/lunch came *again* from the vending machines, mostly those so-called empty calories—peanut butter crackers, a chocolate bar and a mysterious fruit punch. She knew that one day

the god whose name she so often took in vain would show mercy and deliver her from this hell on earth, and she would never again eat peanut butter crackers or chocolate bars or drink that mysterious fruit punch.

The beach was too crowded for her tastes in the daytime, so she opted instead to kill the time until it thinned out by finally going through the box she had brought from her mother's house after the funeral. For reasons Lily couldn't explain, Lisa Parker had been on her mind a lot these last few days. Perhaps it was the 'aleness' she felt, like she wasn't connected to a living soul.

Her adoption file was moderately thick, as Eleanor had saved the court report in which Katharine Fortier had itemized the reasons the child should not be returned to her natural mother. Lily sat transfixed as she pored over the testimony and arguments. Growing up, she had talked with Eleanor from time to time about her fleeting memories of living with her mother. She vaguely recalled parties, with smoking and drinking, and even naked people from time to time. More vividly, she remembered the nasty taste and smell of beer on the breath of one of her mother's boyfriends who had kissed her on the mouth. To this day, she hated beer.

Reading the file today gave her a much fuller picture of who her biological mother really was. She had always somehow known the tale of how she'd come to be declared a permanent ward of the state. There was the shoplifting arrest; then the time when Lisa had left her by herself in the car for so long; and the final incident, in which her mother had hit a woman with a bottle and stolen her car. But Lily hadn't really known the extent of her mother's encounters with law enforcement. There among the charges she'd remembered were several others for forgery and writing bad checks, and skipping out on restaurant and hotel charges. But the thing that shocked her most was the discovery of three arrests on public drunkenness. *I am like her.*

Lily rummaged through her briefcase for her Palm Pilot, scanning the directory for Andrew Shively, the police sergeant from Kidz Kamp who had introduced her to kamikazes. *Thanks a lot, Andrew!* She would forgive him, though. She needed a favor.

Lily needed to go to the Bay Area. Andrew Shively had called her back the next day with the information she wanted: Lisa Ann Parker, now Lisa Parker Haney, had a current driver's license that showed her living in Oakland.

Given the path she was currently on, Lily needed desperately to see what her mother had become. But only six weeks into her four-month suspension, Lily was still unable to drive to anywhere other than work. *Which now means I can't drive at all,* she thought miserably.

"Sandy? Hi, it's Lily." It was the first time they had connected outside of work since the funeral. "Listen, I know that I am probably by far the shittiest friend you have, but I need to ask a favor. A big favor."

"What do you mean 'probably', dearie? Remove all doubt. You're definitely the shittiest friend I have." Her tone was teasing, though. The social worker had waited patiently for her friend to come out of her depression and ease back into her friends. She was glad to finally be hearing from her, even if it was for a favor.

Lily told her about losing her license, and about the overwhelming need to find her natural mother. She did not offer that she was living in a hotel. Unless Sandy agreed to make the trip, she wouldn't need to know.

"Lily, why on earth don't you trust me enough to tell me what's going on in your life?" She was hurt that her friend had kept things to herself while dealing with the sadness of losing her mother, a sadness so deep it had led her to uncharacteristic behavior behind the wheel. "Of course I'll take you. We can go tomorrow night after work, or we can leave Saturday morning."

"Thank you, my friend. I appreciate it more than I can say." Lily knew she didn't deserve to have a friend like Sandy. She hadn't really given anything of herself to anyone in months. "I guess there are a couple of other things you should know. One, that I've been suspended at work for missing a court date." *Here goes*—Sandy would be the first to know. "And two, I've moved out of the house and I'm staying at a hotel near Playa del Rey."

"Oh Lily." The news of how bad things really were for her friend brought a tear to Sandy's eye, and instantly raised her ire against Anna, who was obviously was not willing to be part of the solution.

The friends worked it out that Suzanne would drop Sandy at the Waterways Lodge on Friday afternoon, and the two women would head north in the X-5, probably returning on Sunday afternoon. In her current state, it simply didn't matter to Lily that she was missing another trip to Maui. Anna wouldn't want her to go anyway.

Swinging by the Waterways Lodge on her way home from the VW dealership where she now spent most of her time, Anna was alarmed to find the familiar X-5 gone from the lot. Lily wasn't supposed to drive anywhere besides work, and there was no way she was still working at 10 on a Friday night. No longer caring about her cover, Anna parked at a meter directly across the street from the hotel's entrance. She would wait for Lily's return and they would talk.

After more than an hour, Anna decided to abandon her efforts for the night. Chester still hadn't taken to his doggie door, and would likely pee in the kitchen floor. While Anna was willing to deal with it, it wasn't good for the dog's esteem. The little fellow obviously missed the blonde woman, and had come to depend on their nightly rides in the sports car. She would come back tomorrow, knocking on the door if she had to. It was time to talk.

"Do you think I'm an alcoholic, Sandy?" On the way to Oakland, Lily had told her friend all of the gory details about how she had come to call the Waterways Lodge home, unemployed and all alone.

Sandy looked at her friend out of the corner of her eye. The instrument gauge gave off enough glow for her to make out Lily's expression. *Hell, what are friends for if they can't tell you the truth?* She hoped Lily could handle it. "Yes sweetheart, I think you are." She placed her hand over that of her friend and squeezed.

Lily immediately turned to look out the window, not able to face such a pronouncement from her friend. "I don't ever have to worry about sugarcoating from you, do I?"

"Sorry, you know how I am about saying what I think. Suzanne's never forgiven me for going off like I did on that mullet-head haircut of hers."

Despite herself Lily laughed at the memory. Suzanne's hair had looked awful, but Suzanne had liked it. Nevertheless, Sandy's relentless harping and ridicule had prompted another cut and a curly perm to remove all traces of the offensive style.

"Lily, as long as I've known you, you've turned to alcohol when things bothered you. Remember after you left Beverly? You went through a bottle of wine every night in your room."

Lily remembered. Well, sort of. She had stayed with Suzanne and Sandy briefly while she saved enough money for deposits on an apartment and the utilities. When she left Beverly, she just left. "Oh, that reminds me...." She went on to add the tale of running into Beverly Adams to her list of recent woes.

"God, when it rains, it pours! You are such a misery magnet, little one." Sandy always had a way of lightening Lily's mood, either with her humor or with her heart of gold. Tonight, she was using both.

"Beverly was a long time ago, Sandy. I eventually stopped with the nightly wine bottle. Doesn't that say that I have control over my drinking?" she asked hopefully. "Which means I might not really be an alcoholic?"

"It wasn't just that, Lil. You drank again when things went south after the Tahoe incident."

Oh yeah. Lily remembered how devastated she'd been when she'd seen Anna kissing Hal's friend in the kitchen.

"And how many times have you gotten drunk since Anna started working so much? Or since your mother died?"

"I get your point, Sandy. You're piling on."

That was Sandy's cue to back off. Lily needed to digest these facts and answer the question for herself.

The two friends shared a double room at the Hampton Inn in Hayward that night. On Saturday, they would set out to find Lisa Parker Haney. Lily had no idea on earth what she would do when they did.

Sandy located and pressed the button for the X-5's automatic door locks. Though her work often took her to the less desirable neighborhoods of LA County, something about this Oakland neighborhood had her spooked, even in broad daylight. Using a detailed street map, the two women had found the apartment complex listed on Lisa Parker Haney's license. Realizing that they wouldn't be able to get as close as they wanted, the pair found a Target store where Lily bought binoculars. They needed to determine which apartment was F, and neither was willing to simply get out of the car and go see.

Andrew had run a vehicle check as well, and determined that Charles Haney at the same address owned a 1991 Oldsmobile Cutlass, even providing Lily the tag number. No such vehicle was parked at the complex, but the women resolved to watch and wait. And 'no thank you' to the nice young man who knocked on their window, offering to sell them something that was really really good.

The Cutlass appeared at 4:45 in the afternoon and a tall thin man of about 60, wearing jeans and an Oakland Raiders t-shirt proclaiming 'Fuck the Niners', exited and went into the upstairs apartment on the right. "So I guess we've found the place. I wonder if she still lives there," Lily said nervously.

An hour later, the door opened again and a woman came out and headed to the car. From the way she was dressed—black stiletto heels, black stockings, a mini-skirt with a white tuxedo shirt—she obviously was a cocktail waitress, on her way to work. Lily knew at once that it was her mother.

"Follow her, Sandy."

Sandy did as she was told, and soon they were circling the Holiday Inn at the Oakland Airport, driving on so as not to be recognized as having followed the woman. As soon as Lisa disappeared inside the building, Sandy parked near the entrance of the lounge.

"So what do you want to do now? Looks like your mother lives in a dump with an old guy who prefers the Raiders to the 49ers, and she works here in the evenings slinging drinks." Sandy had a real gift for the big picture.

Lily was quiet for a long moment, unsure what more she wanted to know. *What is she like?*

"Thirsty? I mean for a coke or something," Lily amended quickly. Both women got out and walked toward the door. "I might just go for something exotic...like a Perrier and...water." She winked at her friend.

When they entered the darkened lounge, Lily immediately spotted a table from where both of them could view the whole room. Lisa was serving two men in a corner booth.

Turning back to the bar, the waitress shouted in their direction "Be with you ladies in just a minute." Men always tipped better than women, so she wasn't in any big hurry to get their order.

Sandy watched her friend watch the woman with fascination. "What are you thinking?"

"Right then, I was wondering if she'll recognize me. I sure recognized her."

"You recognized her because you expected to see her. I bet you're probably the last person on earth she ever expects to see again."

"Well, I'm not going to introduce myself, that's for sure!"

Sandy was actually relieved to hear that. Lily didn't need another negative force in her life, and the social worker couldn't help but think that Lisa was just that.

"Okay, what can I get you?"

Sandy started, "I'll have a coke, diet coke if you have it." She looked at her friend, who was staring at the woman's nametag: LISA. Well, now they were sure. "And my friend will have a diet coke also."

The cocktail waitress shook her head with...was that disgust? In a moment she was back with their drinks, foregoing the bowl of goldfish that appeared on the other occupied tables. She'd be lucky to get a dollar out of them combined. Some women just didn't know how to drink.

"Think she likes us?" Sandy deadpanned.

"Funny. No, I think she resents us taking up space. If we're not drinking, then we're not running up a tab. And if we're not running up a tab, we're probably not going to leave much of a tip." This all made perfect sense to Lily.

"Well, we're not drinking, right?"

"Right," she assured. "But I don't think the way we're being treated is necessarily a sign that she's a bad person." Lily wasn't sure why she felt so defensive of the total stranger who had neglected her terribly 25 years ago. "On the other hand, I should be used to being ignored by her." It was meant as a joke, but it triggered something she couldn't stop. "I mean, what can she do? Would she lock me in the cooler so I wouldn't make trouble while she waited on the other tables? Or would she just pull my chair up to one of the tables and ask the men there to look after me?" The memories were rushing at her now. "Or maybe she'll just slap me and dare me to move."

"Stop it!"

"I'm sorry I brought you all the way up here for this. I don't even know why I wanted to come here." Even in the darkened lounge, Sandy could see the mist in her friend's green eyes.

"Look, Lily. I'm glad you brought me here. And I'm glad we're both sitting here together watching the woman who *let you go* work like a dog for the tips she can hustle by flirting with strange men. Because you have a choice, Lily. You get to go home and be somebody else." She waited while her friend watched the woman cross the room again, smiling and laughing while she served the men at the next table. "That's what it is, Lily. A choice. You can go home and emulate Lisa Parker. Or you can go home and be like Eleanor Stuart."

Lily nodded. Sandy was right. "Will you take me by the cemetery tomorrow on the way home?" She reached in her wallet and pulled out a 100 dollar bill to pay for their drinks.

"Of course. Are you ready to go?"

"You got anything smaller than that?" The waitress practically snarled. "I just got on. I can't break that yet."

"Keep it," Lily said, locking eyes with Lisa for the first time. The faintest hint of recognition crossed the woman's face as she watched the green-eyed blonde stand. Lily didn't give her time to respond, turning on her heel and heading out into the night.

"Excuse me, do you have a guest by the name of Lilian Stuart?" Finding the X-5 gone again on Saturday night, Anna concluded that Lily had found a more permanent place to live and had left the hotel. But she hoped that her lover had left a forwarding address on file.

"Yes, we do. Would you like me to ring her room?"

Anna was startled by the reply. "No, that's alright. Tell me, have you seen Ms. Stuart today?" Please say yes.

"I can't say as I have. But I'm not surprised. Her car wasn't here when I got in this afternoon."

No shit, Sherlock. It wasn't Anna's nature to be ill-mannered when she dealt with clerks and service workers. And she'd always thought very little of people who were.

"Thank you." Returning to her car, she fished her PDA from the console and located the number for Sandy and Suzanne. Suzanne was working double shifts at the hospital over the holiday weekend to build up vacation time for their upcoming trip to Europe. With Sandy in Oakland, the phone went to voicemail, and Anna left her number.

Anna held out hope that Lily wouldn't drive somewhere in defiance of the court order. Maybe she had to go out of town to take a deposition. That would explain why her car was gone. When she got home, she booted up the attorney's computer in the office to gain access to her contact information. Prompted for a password, Anna couldn't help but smile. When they'd returned from their trip to Yosemite, Lily had changed her password to 'ohbaby' to commemorate her outburst when they were making love. That seemed so long ago.

There it is: Tony LeFevre's home number.

"Hello."

"Tony, it's Anna Kaklis."

"Hello Anna." Tony sounded rather stiff and formal. "What can I do for you?"

This was the hard part. If Lily hadn't told him about moving out, it would come as a surprise that she didn't know where her lover was. Still, their privacy mattered nothing next to the growing worry she felt over Lily's whereabouts.

"Tony, do you have any idea where Lily is?" That launched them into a brief conversation in which they traded crucial information about the missing woman—that she had been suspended from her job and that she was no longer living in her home. Both promised the other that they would get in touch if they heard something.

Her anxiety raging, Anna calmed herself with the only scenario that made sense. Lily had gone away with Sandy and Suzanne for the Labor Day weekend. Perhaps Lily hadn't wanted to leave her BMW at the hotel, and moved it instead to her friends' Sherman Oaks home. Anna resolved to drive out there tomorrow to see.

Sandy watched her friend from afar as she picked at the unruly blades of grass that surrounded her mother's headstone. They had gone together to the gravesite, but she had walked away to give Lily the private time she needed with her mom. Sandy hadn't gone to the graveside service, and was deeply moved when she saw the headstone for the first time:

Eleanor R. Stuart

1939-2002

Beloved mother

Loyal friend

"Hi Mom. Told you I'd be back." It was almost surreal to see her mother's name on the granite slab. *This really happened.*

"Anyway, I wanted to stop in and tell you how much I miss you. I had no idea it would be this hard but I guess I should have known. The one thing I've always known is how important your promise to me was, that you'd always love me and always be there for me, no matter what. I could sure use some of that right now, because I'm really not very lovable these days."

She was ashamed of what she would say next, but the bloodletting was necessary. "I sort of lost control of myself, and started drinking too much. I've been suspended from my job, which by the way, I haven't been doing very well lately. Don't tell Katharine, though." She smiled when she thought of the card she had found in the safety deposit box.

"But the worst part is that I think things are pretty much finished with Anna and me. I did something she probably won't be able to forgive, and she doesn't want me around. I had hoped she was the kind of person who would have been able to work through things with me, but I think this may be too much for her to handle. We'll be lucky if we can just salvage a friendship from it." The hard lump nearly pierced her throat as she fathomed her loss of the two most precious people in her life.

"But that's not why I stopped by today. I sort of figured you already knew all that stuff. It makes me ashamed to think you're watching me screw up like this. I stopped by today to tell you that I've decided that I don't want to be like that anymore. I'm probably going to need your help more now than ever, because I want to get control of my life again. You've always been my anchor, so I hope I can call on you from time to time when I need help."

Lily stood and brushed the grass and dirt from her jeans. "Thank you for everything, Mom. I love you and I really miss you."

Chapter 12

Anna sighed with relief when she spotted the X-5 in Sandy and Suzanne's driveway. The first good news was that Lily was safe; the second good news was that she was with friends. Anna really admired Sandy's strength and maturity, and was sure that Suzanne's direct approach would help guide Lily to the right place.

She needed to see her lover. She needed to hug her, to kiss her, to hold her. She needed to promise her love. Parking behind the X-5, Anna gathered her courage. Lily might not want to see her—her lover's last words had been angry. Still, Anna would make it right, no matter what it took.

Sandy met her at the front door. "Anna, I..."

"Sandy, I'm looking for Lily. I need to see her." *Please, Sandy.*

"She isn't here, Anna. I just dropped her at her place." Sandy was wary of the dark-haired woman and she wasn't willing just yet to give away her friend's hiding place. She needed to know what Anna was up to.

"So she's okay?"

"What do you mean 'okay' Anna? After all she's been through, Lily's far from okay. How can you of all people not know that?" Despite the harsh words, there was no anger in Sandy's tone, just reproach.

Anna stood on the front porch and stared down Lily's stalwart friend. "I do know how hard it is for her, Sandy. It's hard for both of us, but I won't stay away if she's in any danger. Her car was gone and I got worried."

"What do you mean her car was gone? How do you know where her car's supposed to be?"

"She called me a couple of days after she left the house and I tracked down the number. I've been driving by there every night, you know, just to check on her," she added wistfully. "But then her car disappeared on Friday and I've been a nervous wreck ever since. Didn't you get my message?"

"No, I just got in." *So Anna's been with her all along.* That realization warmed the woman and she stepped aside and gestured Anna into the living room. "Lily said she thought things were over for you two."

Anna's stomach dropped. "Is that what she wants, Sandy?"

"Are you kidding? That's the last thing she wants, but she says you won't let her come home." Sandy knew from her social work experience that families of alcoholics were often advised to disassociate themselves from the drinker to force the drinker to take responsibility. She hoped that was the case with Anna.

"Look, Sandy. I love that woman now more than I've ever loved her before. But whether I love her or not isn't what matters here. What matters is her getting help."

"Well, pardon me for being stupid, but how exactly are you helping? You've left her out there to do this all by herself."

Anna knew how it must look to Sandy, but she was more afraid that Lily had taken it all to mean that things were over between them. "I'm just doing what the counselor told me at the hospital, Sandy. He said I have to let her fall, let her feel all the consequences of her behavior. Until she does, she won't do anything to help herself. He says I enabled her to drink by taking the blame, and making it easy for her to keep it up."

Right answer, Amazon! Sandy sighed with relief in knowing that Anna was still in Lily's corner. What the counselor said was right—it really was the only way for an alcoholic to turn around. She reached over and put her hand on Anna's shoulder. "Well she's certainly fallen, Anna. But I think she's ready to start back up."

"You do?"

"I do." Sandy told Anna the story of finding Lisa Parker, and of her subsequent visit to the cemetery. But she didn't share their conversation on the way home, in which Lily told her that she'd decided she was tired of letting everybody down, especially herself.

Anna's blue eyes grew misty as she imagined the anguish Lily must have felt when she saw her natural mother again after all these years, and especially when she stopped at the cemetery to see Eleanor's grave. "I need to see her. I need to go over there and tell her how I feel."

"No, Anna. I think you should wait." Now that Sandy had all the pieces, she could see the big picture in a way that neither Anna nor Lily could. Anna's love was still strong, but she wasn't as certain of Lily's resolve. "I think your plan worked Anna." It took not being able to come home, losing her job, and now seeing the hard woman her mother turned out to be. "Lily's having to face the consequences and she doesn't like it. I think she's ready to do something."

"What makes you think that? Did she say something about getting help?"

"Not exactly, but I think she's hit the bottom. I know this is going to be hard, but I think you should hold off seeing her. She needs to do this for herself, not for you. If she finds out everything's alright with you, she might decide that she doesn't need help after all."

"Redwood Hills. Sounds like a retirement home," Lily grouched.

"Or a ski resort," Sandy added optimistically.

"Yeah, a ski resort for really old people."

Sandy helped Lily stow the last of her things in the small closet. The plain look of the Waterways Lodge was positively gaudy compared to her new digs. The tiny second floor room to which she'd been assigned had a small bathroom and closet on one side, built-in drawers and a writer's desk on the other. Opposite from the door beneath the window was a simple twin bed with a bedspread in institutional green.

"The only thing missing is a cross over the bed," Lily muttered.

Okay, so it did look a little like Sister Bernadette's room. "Lily, you've been living in a motel for a month eating out of vending machines. Surely this is an improvement."

"At least I didn't have to talk to anybody there." The blonde walked over to the window and peered out. "Great. A room with a view. Of a tree."

Using Sandy's computer, Lily had found two day programs for drug and alcohol treatment that she thought might be a good fit. Unfortunately, Judge Anston denied

her petition for extended driving privileges, suggesting in chambers that she look into residential treatment.

"Ms. Stuart, I know how difficult this is for you. But in my days on the bench, I've sent a lot of people into treatment programs for drug or alcohol problems. For some reason, the residential programs always seem to get the best results."

"With all due respect, Your Honor, I've read about these programs. Day programs can be successful too. The key is that the person being treated has to be committed, and I am."

"Ms. Stuart, I believe you. And to be honest, I'd grant a petition like yours in an instant if I thought it was a choice between day treatment and no treatment. But if you're as committed as you say, you shouldn't be looking for the easy way out."

Lily's shoulders slumped in defeat. She couldn't help but wonder if what he said was true, that she really was looking for the path of least resistance.

"Counselor," he continued, "you can stand anything for 28 days. The next time I see you in my courtroom, I want it to be as an attorney. You have a gift for the law, and I don't want to see you waste it."

With her comprehensive health insurance, there were literally dozens of options for residential treatment. She chose Redwood Hills for its setting in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains above Pasadena. On a clear day—if she should happen to be here on that day—one could see the entire LA basin from the front lawn.

Since her admission was voluntary, she was technically free to leave the grounds should she choose to go hiking on the hillside. But in the interest of her treatment, she had signed an agreement to limit her outings, as well as her visitors and telephone contacts. Lily couldn't help but feel as though she were being led to the gallows.

"Sandy, promise me that you'll come get me if I call you."

Sandy chuckled and hugged her friend. "You're going to be fine here, Lily."

"Promise me!" the miserable blonde insisted.

"Okay, sweetheart, if that's what you really want. But you promise me that you're going to try as hard as you possibly can to finish this program, all 28 days. I don't want you calling me the first time it gets hard, or the first time you get bored, or the first time...."

"Alright, I get your point already. I promise to try," Lily said meekly.

"I love you, Lil."

"I love you, too. I don't think I'd stand a chance in this world without a friend like you."

"You're tougher than you think, Lily." One last hug and Sandy was gone.

And Lily was all alone. Again.

"I can't tell you. She made me promise." Sandy knew she'd get a call from Anna as soon as Lily's car went missing again.

"Sandy, why is she hiding from me? Why hasn't she called?" More and more each day, Anna worried that the distance between Lily and herself was growing too vast to overcome.

"Anna, look. You did the right thing not letting Lily come home. It's up to her now. We all need to step back and let her fix it. It doesn't matter whether she's still your lover at the end, or if she's still my friend. What matters is that Lily loves herself. And believe me, that's not the case right now. And I'm pretty sure that's why she hasn't called you."

"Did you tell her that I've been asking about her? That I was coming by every night?" Anna at least wanted Lily to know that she loved her.

"No, I haven't told her anything. You need to be patient, Anna, for Lily's sake. I promise I'll call you if she needs you, but you're going to have to trust me."

Anna didn't have any choice, but she was comforted by the fact that Lily had a friend like Sandy. "I trust you, Sandy. Can you at least tell me if she's alright?"

"She's pretty sad, Anna. But I think she's going to be fine. And in my heart of hearts, I think you're going to get her back once she beats this."

That was the best news Anna had heard since the day Lily left. "I hope you're right, Sandy. She's everything to me."

Sandy smiled to herself. She didn't know exactly how it was all going to come together, but she knew somehow that things would work out for her friends.

If it weren't for a vicious caffeine addiction, Lily would have skipped breakfast. She wasn't yet ready to meet her fellow patients, the other "inmates" as she called them. She'd had no idea how difficult this first step would be.

The information packet in her room contained her daily schedule for the first week:

7:00 Breakfast

8:00 *General meeting*

9:30 *Free time*

10:00 *Individual therapy*

11:00 *Chapel (optional)*

Noon Lunch

1:30 *Step meeting*

2:30 *Free time*

3:00 *Group therapy*

4:30 *Peer counseling*

6:00 *Dinner*

7:00 *General meeting*

9:00 *Free time*

10:30 *Lights out*

That's 12 hours a day I have to spend with other people! Lily wasn't sure she'd make it through Sunday, let alone 27 more days. Hearing voices in the hallway, she peered out to see what the others were wearing. She'd hate to start off underdressed. Comfortable that she wouldn't stand out in her jeans and t-shirt, Lily headed out for coffee.

The dining hall was the largest room at Redwood Hills, doubling as the site of the general meetings. Four long tables, each seating eight diners on each side, were lined up perpendicular to the buffet line on one side and an elevated speaker's platform on the other.

The first person to enter her personal space was a 40-ish man, tall and barrel-chested, sporting a thinly sculpted beard with no mustache. Lily had always thought that particular look odd. "Good morning," he said, placing an arm around her shoulder with undue familiarity. "Welcome to Redwood Hills. My name's Randy. And you are...?"

Lily lifted the large hand from her shoulder, letting it drop behind her where it brushed against her rear. *Great start!* "Good morning, Randy. My name is Lily, and I'm not really a morning person." *Or afternoon or evening for that matter.*

Spotting the industrial sized percolator on a table at the side, Lily navigated her way around the groups of chatting inmates to grab a cup from the stack. As the line formed for bacon, eggs, toast, hotcakes...the usual menu for a breakfast buffet, Lily opted out

just to avoid having to interact. Taking a seat at the table farthest from the door, she could see the entire room. Gradually, all of the tables began to fill with diners and soon, she was joined by a beautiful woman of about 50, her long black hair just showing the first tinges of gray. As the woman briefly flashed startling blue eyes in her direction, Lily couldn't help but imagine that Anna would be as lovely as she aged.

"Hi, my name's Virginia. I couldn't help but notice that you have that 'what-the-hell-am-I-doing-here' look that says it's your first day."

Despite her anxiety about the growing crowd, Lily couldn't help but be warmed by the woman's smile and disarming nature. "Yeah, it's my first day. I'm Lily. Nice to meet you." She held out her hand shyly and Virginia took it.

"Lily. My grandmother's name was Lily. I even considered naming my oldest child after her, but I doubt he'd have liked that much as he got older." That brought a smile to the young woman's face. Sometimes, it was best to talk about anything except why they were all here. Virginia had noticed that many of the newcomers avoided eating, probably because they were unfamiliar with the routine. "Say, why don't we hit the line and grab some breakfast? It's a long time before lunch, and there's no guarantee it'll be something you like," she said with a wink.

She really was hungry, especially after staying in her room through dinner the night before. Lily and her new friend joined the line, and soon both were back at the table eating heartily and chatting about familiar ground: the food, the rooms, the facilities. Neither was forthcoming with personal information, and that was just fine with Lily.

At eight sharp, two men and a woman moved to take chairs on the platform. The younger man, seemingly no more than 25 years old, took the podium and announced: "Good morning. My name is Tyler, and I'm an alcoholic."

"Good morning, Tyler," the crowd responded in unison.

Lily's road back had officially begun.

"God, what a day!" Lily collapsed on her small bed. She had counted 51 other inmates at each of the general meetings, concluding that 'general' was a euphemism for 'mandatory.' Between those two meetings, the step meeting, and the group therapy session, she had heard 19 testimonials, some more than once. For the most part, Lily didn't think her own story was as dismal as those related by others. Alcohol abuse had been a way of life for them, causing them to lose their families, their jobs...*oh fuck!* Well, her story was different. Not one of them had told about losing their mother, or of walking through life sober feeling like you didn't belong to anybody.

She had shared a lot about her mom with Hillary in the individual therapy session, but she didn't feel much like talking about Anna. In fact, the counselor had asked her a couple of times if there was someone she would like to invite on the weekends to take

part in family therapy, but Lily had declined. "I really have no family," she had said, more matter of fact than sad.

Tyler, the young man who started off the morning meeting, was her peer counselor for the week. He was starting his third week in the program, and today was his first day as the more experienced of the two. In her second week, Lily would be paired with someone in their final week of treatment; and by the third week, she would be assigned to a newcomer. Basically, Tyler had spent their hour together talking about the program, about the things he had learned and how he had come to accept who he was and what he must do to turn his life around. "If you're anything like most of us, you're probably thinking you really don't belong here," he had told her. He was definitely reading her mind, or she really didn't belong here and he could tell.

At the evening meeting, all of the newcomers were asked to stand. An older guy named William walked around the room handing out white poker chips. The chip, she learned, was to commemorate her first day of sobriety. Counting back to the night before she was placed on leave, Lily noted that today was in fact her 11th day without a drink.

George appeared in Anna's doorway with an invitation. "Hey, any chance a busy CEO could make some time to have lunch with her old man?"

"I think I could arrange that," she grinned. Not wanting to have to explain Lily's absence, Anna had turned down their invitations to dinner over the last three weeks, citing her overwhelming work load. This would be a good chance to talk with her father again, and to hear how he was enjoying his semi-retirement.

"So how's the golf game?" she asked, knowing that her father had been spending quite a bit of his newfound free time on the links.

"It's getting there, I think. But I'm still kind of rusty, you know. Can't seem to remember all the swear words," he joked.

"Well you should hang out in the service area sometime. It's quite a refresher."

"I'm sure it is." George had a couple of things on his mind. He was enjoying his freedom from work, especially the time with Martine, but it had given him a perspective on how he should have better balanced home and work during his tenure as company president. He didn't want to see his daughter make the same mistake, *and* he wondered if she would allow him to have another go, this time to do it right. He missed his work terribly.

When they'd placed their orders at Visage, a French restaurant near the dealership where they often ate, Anna tried to guide the conversation to comfortable territory. "So what do you and Mom have planned for vacations?"

"Well, if you had come to dinner last week, you would have heard. We're leaving Monday for two weeks in the Greek Isles," he said smugly.

"Wow! That's fantastic!" It suddenly occurred to Anna that she and Lily had not taken a vacation together. Their only trips out of town in the year they had been together were camping in Yosemite and a weekend in Palm Springs, and the latter had been for work.

"And that's one of the reasons I wanted to have lunch with you today. We'll be gone next week, so your mother and I would like everyone to come over this weekend to celebrate your birthday."

Damn! "You know, this birthday stuff sort of loses its charm as you climb up that ladder."

George thought he saw a hint of hesitation in his daughter's face at the mention of a birthday party. "Nonsense! You never get too old for birthdays. Martine suggested Sunday at two o'clock. Does that work? I know, you have to check with what's-her-name first," he teased. He was bewildered to see the tears rush suddenly to his daughter's eyes. "Anna, what is it? I was only teasing, sweetheart." He was devastated to think that his playfulness had hurt her.

Anna shook her head, not knowing what to say, or if she should even answer at all. The worried look on her father's face tipped the scales, though she dreaded giving him ammunition for his arguments against the woman she loved. "Lily and I are...having some problems right now. She's staying somewhere else until we can get things worked out."

"Anna, darling, why didn't you say something?"

"So you'd have another excuse to put her down, Dad?" Her tone was quiet, conveying hurt rather than anger at his persistent opposition to their relationship.

"Oh, Anna," he sighed. The joke had gone on too long. "I thought you knew how I felt about Lily. Not how I put on when I'm with her, but how I really feel. Sweetheart, Lily knows it's all for laughs. I'm sure of it."

It was true, Anna realized, that Lily had stopped complaining about her father long ago, and that she seemed to seek him out for conversation and laughs when they were all together. "I wanted you to tell me, Dad. I wanted to know that you thought I'd made a good choice." She had finally stopped needing her father's approval, but that didn't mean she didn't welcome it.

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry. You did make a good choice. You made a wonderful choice. I've come to love Lily every bit as much as I love Hal. They're both part of our family as far as I'm concerned." George felt awful that he'd withheld his approval for so long. He hoped his lack of candor hadn't played a part in his daughter's problems with Lily. "Can your mother or I do anything at all to help, darling?"

Anna told her father a little about their troubles, leaving out the incident where she'd gotten hurt, as she was still somewhat wary of his convictions about Lily. Mostly, she'd laid the blame for Lily's drinking on losing her mother, and Anna's long hours at the dealerships.

That was the opening George wanted, and he shocked his daughter with a request to take over Premium VW when he returned from Greece. Between the two of them, he assured, they could smooth out all of the operations at the four dealerships, and still have plenty of time for their families.

After four days of casual conversation, Lily had begun to talk to Tyler about the series of incidents that had brought her to Redwood Hills. Despite herself, she had found herself listening to the testimonials of her fellow captives—she no longer thought of them as inmates, but the idea was the same—noting with chagrin the similarities between their stories and her own.

The step meetings had been the most agonizing, especially all the God parts. It wasn't that she didn't believe in a higher spiritual power; it was more that she couldn't bring herself to place expectations on how that power might intervene in her life. These afflictions were her own, she reasoned, and it was unrealistic to think some spiritual being might just take them away. Lying in her bed on Friday night, Lily recalled the "talk" she had had at her mother's gravesite two weeks ago. Hadn't she called on her mother for help? Wasn't it irrational to believe that Eleanor could help her when a higher power could not?

On her seventh day at Redwood Hills, Lily stood at the morning general meeting, speaking to the group for the first time.

"Good morning. My name is Lily, and I'm an alcoholic."

Chapter 13

Lily raised her water glass to toast her two friends. "To friendship."

Sandy and Suzanne joined her. "To friendship," they replied in unison. They had picked up their friend today after four weeks in the alcohol rehab center, insisting that she would stay at their home until she sorted out more permanent arrangements.

Lily though, agreed to spend Saturday night, but implored her friends to take her back to the Waterways Lodge on Sunday. "No offense, guys, but I haven't had a moment alone in a month."

Sandy knew her friend's penchant for sorting things out in solitude, so she acquiesced, but with one condition: Saturday night sleepovers would be mandatory until Lily got a better offer. They had missed their friend.

"Look, I really want you guys to know how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. In fact, starting today I would like to show you by being a better friend to you both. I've been on the receiving end of things too long."

"You don't owe us anything, Lil. That's what we're here for," Suzanne countered.

Lily groaned. "Just humor me, Suzanne. It's part of my program, actually. I'm supposed to make amends to those I've harmed, and you guys are on my list."

Sandy put her hand on Lily's arm. "You haven't harmed us, Lily. But it's good news if it means we're going to be seeing more of you. So who else is on your list?"

Lily sat back and folded her arms. "Well, there's Tony of course, and by extension everybody else in the office who cleaned up after me. I plan to call him on Monday to see if I can come back to work. But it's possible he'll say no. I really screwed up there."

"You're one of the best at what you do," Sandy reassured. "There's no way Tony won't take you back."

"Well, let's hope you're right." Lily had no idea what she would do if she couldn't go back to work at the clinic.

"So will you call Anna?"

Lily grew quiet for a moment at the mention of her lover's name. "I will soon. But I'm just not sure I'm ready. I...I don't know what I'm going to say."

"She loves you, you know," Sandy encouraged. She didn't want to say too much.

"Yeah, I know. And I love her. I just don't know if it's enough anymore." As she had for the past eight weeks, Lily was still grappling with doubts about how they had parted.

"I'm sure you'll work it out." Suzanne had seen them both enough to know that there was plenty of love between them to bring them back together, no matter what the chasm.

On Sunday morning, Sandy and Suzanne deposited Lily and her SUV at the Waterways Lodge, extracting a promise that she would call if she needed anything.

"Are you kidding? I won't know what to do with all this freedom. I'll walk on the beach, read, and eat junk food from vending machines."

"You don't have to do that now, though. There are lots of places to eat within biking distance." Suzanne unloaded the bicycle she was lending the attorney so that she could expand her territory a bit. Lily had located a small Methodist church three miles away that hosted AA meetings at seven each morning. Ninety meetings in 90 days was her commitment to Redwood Hills. *Only 61 days to go.*

Fresh back from his tour of the Greek Isles with his wife, George Kaklis strolled into Premier VW on Monday morning, a man on a mission. At a hastily called general

staff meeting, Anna introduced her father as the new president of the dealership, her own title now changed to CEO of Premier Motors, and president of Premier BMW. George's job was to implement Anna's business plan for increasing sales and service using resources already available at the other Premier lots. In under six weeks, Anna's campaign in the *LA Times* had generated a 30 percent increase in traffic on all of the lots, and a corresponding increase in sales. In particular, used car sales had soared, as the BMW lots now had a lucrative outlet for their more downscale trade-ins.

An on occasion, a young man would relinquish his luxury sports car for a more practical vehicle....

"Say, I hear the Passat wagon is a pretty nice ride for a family car," a familiar voice shouted as Anna walked to her Z8.

"Scott!" There he stood, leaning against his soon-to-be-traded Z3, smiling broadly back. "What are you doing here?" Anna crossed the lot and gave her ex-husband a warm hug.

"I got my orders. Sara told me I needed a car that would hold two car seats." He couldn't hide his proud grin.

"Two?" Anna exclaimed excitedly. She was genuinely happy for him. Despite his one-night stand with Sara, their split had never been malicious or vindictive.

Arm in arm, Anna walked him into the showroom to pull out a contract. She would handle this sale; that way, she could waive the commission, giving him the best deal he could get anywhere. Whipping out his wallet full of photos, Scott told her all about the joys of little Matt, and how they were looking forward to this next one, a girl. As he talked, her cell phone rang but she quickly muted it, making a mental note to check her voice mail later.

"So how about you, Anna? Are you seeing anyone seriously?" His tone was caring, but not patronizing.

"Yes, Scott. As a matter of fact, I am." The dark-haired woman reached into her own wallet and extracted the only photo she carried of her lover, a cropped version of the one taken at Yosemite Falls. She couldn't help but be nervous as she waited for Scott's reply.

His surprise evident, Scott took a deep breath and blew it out loudly. "Wow. I wasn't prepared for that, Anna."

"Yeah, it kind of took me by surprise too," she said smiling softly. "Her name is Lily Stuart, and believe it or not, she's the woman I was trapped with in the earthquake. We got to be good friends after that, and things just evolved."

Scott shook his head, still in disbelief. "Well, I...I wish you both all the happiness in the world." Afraid that she might have taken his surprise as judgment, he added, "I really mean that, Anna. I'm happy you've found someone that makes you feel that way."

"And I'm happy for you, Scott." The uncomfortable moment mostly over, she tugged him in the direction of the administrative offices. "Now if you'll indulge me, I'd like you to say hello to someone who's going to be very happy to see you."

Once she'd deposited the man in her father's office and signed off on the sale of his new VW wagon, Anna walked back to her Z8, smiling to herself at Scott's happiness. Suddenly remembering the muted phone call, she checked the new message:

"Hi Anna, Sandy Henke here. Thought you might be interested in knowing that there should be a familiar car back at the Waterways Lodge tonight. Suzanne and I dropped her off yesterday, and I have to tell you, she seems better than she has in a long time. Just thought you'd want to know. Bye."

Tony closed his office door and turned to face the blonde attorney standing before his desk. Both uncertain of what to say, their deep feelings of friendship won the moment as they embraced without a word. Lily was first to find her voice.

"I've gotten my act together, Tony, like you asked me to."

Her boss smiled. Anna had intimated that Lily was working on her problems, though he had no idea the extent of her efforts. Still, he knew Lily well, and if she said she had her act together, he believed her. "So I take it you're ready to come back to work?"

The blonde nodded eagerly. "I am, Tony. And I promise to never again give you a reason to worry about my performance. I...truly want to apologize for putting this firm at risk. I hope you know how much this place means to me."

Tony nodded his understanding. He was in a bad spot. In the six weeks Lily had been gone, his wife Colleen had taken over most of her caseload, and she'd turned down the recent offer from the public defender's office. Given their small budget at the clinic, there was little for Lily to do without dislodging Colleen. He outlined the situation to the anxious attorney before finally offering a compromise. "How would you feel about coming back part time while we look for some additional funding? Maybe you could even look into writing a grant proposal or two."

"I'll do anything, Tony," Lily answered with relief. "Mom left me in pretty good shape, so the part time thing is okay for now. Thanks."

"It's good to have you back," he added sincerely. "Listen, till we get things sorted out, would you mind using this smaller office?" He gestured toward the converted closet.

Ouch! "Can I at least...have my chair?" She could stomach the loss of her windowed office, but she wouldn't stand for losing her Aeron chair! Hmmm...not stand for losing a chair...there was something odd about that sentence.

Sure enough, the silver X-5 was back at the Waterways Lodge. Anna had left Chester at home tonight, thinking that she might get up the nerve to see Lily face to face. Her courage was slipping fast though, as she went over in her head what she'd say. She wanted Lily to come home.

Come on Amazon. Maybe she's just waiting for an invitation. Her mind made up, Anna climbed out of the sports car and walked nervously inside to the front desk, where she found the clerk absorbed in his nightly paperwork. "I'm here to see Lilian Stuart please."

Getting no answer when he dialed the woman's room, the helpful clerk volunteered, "She usually goes for a walk on the beach at night. I bet that's where she is."

Anna grabbed her jacket from the car and headed toward the beach, looking carefully down side streets so as not to miss her lover. When she reached the water she scanned the beachgoers, looking for a distinct head of bright blonde hair. No such person in either direction, she lamented. With the sunlight quickly fading, Anna thought it best to wait on the path Lily would most likely take back to the hotel. After more than a half hour, she made out a familiar figure in the distance.

I should start to look for an apartment. I need to get the rest of my things from the house. What about Chester? I should probably stay here until I get my license back. In her head, Lily was turning over possibilities for where to go from here. In the last two hours of walking, she'd completely ruled out going back home. That decision followed what she thought was a pretty rational analysis of the facts: mainly that Anna hadn't let her come home when she needed to, insisting that she "fix herself" on her own. That had marked a fundamental power shift in their relationship, with Lily losing all sense of equality. She couldn't build a relationship with someone who unilaterally called the shots, and who had demonstrated that she wasn't willing to work through their problems.

In her periphery, she saw a figure walking towards her, not just in her general direction but definitely on an intercept course. Lily's stomach fluttered then sank as she found herself face to face with Anna Kaklis. *Speak of the devil!*

Even in the waning light, Anna saw the gamut of emotions in Lily's eyes as recognition settled. There was apprehension, joy, anger, love—all but indifference, though it was clear that Lily was working hard to convey that now. Like a knife in the gut, Anna suddenly felt the fear of losing the one she loved.

"Lily." She wanted badly to reach out for a hug, but stopped herself. The green eyes definitely said no.

"Hello Anna." She fought it for a few seconds, but the urge was too powerful. Lily closed the distance between them and gestured for a hug. In moments, she was engulfed in long, loving arms.

"God, I've missed you," Anna murmured above the roar of the surf.

Lily was rapidly losing her resolve to keep her emotional distance as well. "I've missed you too," she confessed. It was true.

When they finally separated, Anna started, "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm good, Anna. Better every day." *This is no time to go weak in the knees*, she admonished herself. Lily steeled herself for the conversation she needed to have.

"Let's go somewhere and talk. I want to hear everything." Anna turned them both back toward the street.

"Let's just walk." The beach was Lily's turf. She felt secure here. Turning back south toward the airport, the blonde pushed both of her hands in her pockets and stepped away a little, her body language saying 'don't get close.' As they walked, she started her tale, beginning even with those hurts she'd dealt with before leaving home: her problems at work, running into Beverly, seeing Marga Alvarez through the death of her mother. It was important that Anna know how bad things had been so she would understand the depth of Lily's hurt.

"Why didn't you tell me these things, Lily?" Anna couldn't believe her lover had kept all this hurt inside.

"You didn't have time for them. You were too busy with work," she answered coldly.

The accusation stung for its bitter tone, but it didn't ring true for Anna. She knew she would have made time for comforting her lover. She also knew that it wouldn't have been enough. Still, if that was how Lily saw things, she'd have to work hard to overcome that.

Lily went on to describe her trip to San Jose with Sandy, relating how she'd found her natural mother. "When I realized that I had become a completely different person—thanks to Eleanor Stuart—I knew that door wasn't open for my natural mother and me to have a relationship. With Mom gone, and with you pushing me away...." She chose those words to hurt the woman walking beside her. "I felt completely alone."

"You were never alone, Lily. I was always there. I never stopped loving you, not even for a moment." *I love you right now more than I ever have!*

"That may be how you see it, Anna, but it didn't feel that way to me. Put yourself in my shoes. Your love had conditions. I had to go—what was it you said—'work on myself' so I'd be worthy of coming home." She couldn't keep the resentment from her voice.

"It wasn't like that, Lily."

"No? Let me tell you what it was like, Anna. I've been living in a goddamned motel room, eating out of vending machines. And walking everywhere I go. I don't have all my clothes, my work things, none of my personal things. I've spent 28 days in a residential treatment center full of drunks. That house in Brentwood was my home

too. You had no right to shut me out." She was practically shouting, her voice shaking with anger.

Anna weighed her lover's words. Was she right? Had it been wrong for her to tell Lily that she couldn't come home? *I was the one who had the problem with her being there.* "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should have been the one to leave," she conceded.

"Or we could have worked on it together. Neither one of us had to leave. At the very least, we should have discussed it. But you made that decision all by yourself."

"Lily, you're the one that left. I didn't get a say in that. I came home from the hospital and you were gone."

"That's right," the blonde retorted sarcastically. "Don't forget to throw that night in my face."

"I'm not throwing anything in your face!" Anna caught herself shouting and struggled to calm down. "Lily, I talked to someone that night...a counselor. He told me that I needed to step back, that all I was doing was helping you drink, helping you hurt yourself."

"So you went behind my back to talk about my problems with somebody else!" Lily was past being rational. She'd made up her mind that Anna wasn't going to say anything right.

"No, Lily. That night I talked to somebody about *my* problems, not yours."

"Of course. I should have known you'd see it as your problem. What an idiot I am! I threw Anna Kaklis' universe out of balance."

"Goddamn it, Lily! Don't you understand? It was my problem because you were hurting and I couldn't help you. No matter what I did—coming home early, taking days off, spending time with you—it wasn't enough to get you to stop drinking and start getting control of your life. I had to stop protecting you from the consequences of your behavior." *Can't you see what a difference it made?* "And I had to stop pretending that it didn't matter to me."

"Well I'd say you took care of your little problem then. Here I stand, Anna, sober now for 42 days. I promise not to cause you any more trouble."

Tears rushed to Anna's eyes as she felt the force of her lover's words. What could she say to make her understand that there was no other way? "If you're sober now, that's what matters. I knew it was a risk to pull away like that, but it was one I was willing to take. I wasn't going to gamble on the alternative, Lily. No matter what happened between you and me, you needed help."

"I hope it was worth it to you, because what we had is gone. You weren't there for me when I needed you, and I'll never be able to trust you again." The finality of her own words brought a hard lump to her throat.

Anna stood quietly for a moment, absorbing the impact of Lily's words. With nothing at all to lose, she added softly, "I did what I did because I loved you. So much that if I had it to do over again..." She took a deep breath. "...I'd do it exactly the same way." The tall woman straightened her shoulders and walked away, disappearing into the darkness.

Lily turned back toward the beach and sat down in the sand, folding her arms across her bent knees. *What have I done?* Recounting her own words, she realized with a panic that she had closed the book on Anna Kaklis. It occurred to her suddenly that if she managed not to have a drink tonight, she was home free.

It was a very bad week for the staff at Premier Motors. Even the affable Carmen had gotten her head handed to her when she joked about someone being grumpy. The boss had in fact been much grumpier than usual.

"Poor Chester," Holly consoled the dog. "You have to go home with the grouch." Holly wasn't intimidated by her angry boss. She had kept Chester twice when Anna had gone overnight to Palm Springs, and was probably the only one at Premier who had figured out that Lily was gone. Even Hal didn't know.

Anna looked up from her desk to see her sales manager scratching the hound's upturned belly. "I can send him home with you if you're worried about his well-being."

"You know I'll take him if you need the space, Anna. Maybe you should head home and relax a little tonight." Her boss usually "relaxed" by covering herself with paperwork, triple-checking every detail, sometimes even finding problems where there were none.

Anna sighed and looked at the clock—half past seven. She had not slept well since her talk with Lily four days ago, so she'd given up trying and started her workday shortly after five in the morning. "Maybe you're right. But poor Chester should have to come with me. He's going to have to learn to take the bad with the good." *And I don't want to be home without him.*

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help, Anna." It was a simple offer of friendship.

"Thanks, Holly. I'm sure it'll all work out." Other than her brief talks with George and Sandy, that was all she'd said to anyone about her situation at home.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about...whatever it is that's got you on edge? You know I can keep a confidence, and it's bound to help to get it all out."

Talking with others was not Anna's *modus operandi*. It never really had been. But she couldn't help but remember how talking with Lily about Scott while they were trapped underground had helped her reach the decision to end their marriage. Maybe

it wouldn't hurt to talk to Holly. "Okay. Would you mind closing the door? I'd hate to be the topic of discussion at the water cooler tomorrow."

"You already are," Holly jibed. "Only it's all a great big mystery."

"Well as far as I'm concerned, it can stay that way." Anna quietly told Holly the gist of Lily's tale, leaving out any details that might paint her lover in an unflattering light. "I went there the other night to tell her that I love her and that I want her to come home. I never even got a chance to say either of those things."

"Well then, you should call her."

"But she's already said no to coming home, and from what she said about not trusting me anymore, I doubt seriously that she loves me either."

"So what? That shouldn't keep you from telling her how you feel. Maybe she needs to know."

"You think I should call her?"

"No. I think you should go home first. You're a wreck, boss. Relax and take this precious puppy for a walk." She reached down again to pet the adorable hound. "Then you should call her."

Maybe Holly was right. *I should at least get my two cents in there.*

Thirty minutes later, the car dealer was at home, reminding herself that eating dinner and walking Chester were not complementary tasks. Anna always got a kick out of Chester's excitement each time she clipped on his leash and led him to the median of their street for his nightly romp. Thinking ahead to her call to Lily, Anna coaxed him impatiently; still the hound painstakingly identified each of the neighborhood dogs who had 'gone' before him and erased their mark. His trips to the median were merely status checks of these territorial signposts.

Now as relaxed as she was going to get, Anna looked at the clock and almost let herself off the hook for the night. It was after 10, and she told herself that Lily might be asleep already. Still, she knew she'd lose her nerve tomorrow, and Holly was right. She needed to tell Lily how she felt.

Dialing the Waterways Lodge on her cordless phone, she paced the bedroom anxiously. *Just tell her.* "I'd like to speak to Lilian Stuart, please."

"Hello." Anna could hear the TV in the background.

"Lily, it's Anna. Listen, I'm sorry to bother you this late, but I left the other night before we really finished our talk. I apologize for that; just the heat of the moment I guess."

The blonde actually had fallen asleep and was startled first by the phone itself, then the realization that Anna Kaklis was on the line.

"Anyway, the reason I called was that I had two things I wanted to tell you that I never got around to saying. First is that I love you very much. And second is that I want you to come home."

Apparently, the dark-haired woman hadn't been listening very well the other night. "Anna, I..."

"No, Lily. Those weren't questions. They don't need answers. That's all I wanted to say."

The now wide awake blonde then found herself listening to a dial tone.

Back at Sandy and Suzanne's on Saturday night after a full week out of the rehab center, Lily took stock of her progress. She'd done the required seven meetings in seven days, and made amends to Tony and the law clinic staff. On Thursday, she'd had the pleasure of appearing—as an attorney—in Judge Anston's court, entering a not guilty plea for a client charged with resisting arrest. The judge had been pleased to see her; she could tell by the way he had said "good morning, counselor" before scolding her to wait for his question before answering.

"Have you talked to Anna this week?" Sandy asked.

"Yeah." Lily's shoulders slumped. "She came by the motel on Monday night. I didn't even know she knew where I was. Imagine that," she said suspiciously.

Sandy wouldn't rise to the bait. "So how did it go?"

Lily groaned. "She asked me to come home."

Sandy and Suzanne exchanged looks, and Suzanne spoke. "So what are you doing still at the Waterways Lodge?"

"I can't go back home," Lily sighed. "I'm going to have to start looking for a place to live."

Sandy didn't like this at all. What was going on here? "What do you mean you can't go back home? Why not?"

"What would be the point, Sandy? Anna wasn't there when I needed her. She didn't help me at all through this. What mattered to her was that goddamned dealership, and I shouldn't have had to take a back seat to it. I was interfering with her work," she sneered. Now on a roll, she continued. "It didn't matter to her that my mother had died, that I had my own problems at work, or even that I couldn't drive myself anywhere. Basically she just said 'Tough shit, Lily. Hit the road and come back when you're all better.' Why should I go back home to that? What if she decided one day that I ought to practice corporate law? Or that I should give up my friends because they aren't fancy enough for her? I want a partner, not a boss."

Sandy couldn't hold her tongue. She'd always liked Anna, and now she had a newfound respect for the woman's strength. "You're wrong about her. Lily. She was there for you all along, whether you knew it or not."

The blonde looked up, her eyes full of doubt. "Sandy, I begged her to let me come home. I promised to talk to somebody, to get some help with my depression about Mom. But she still said no."

"What exactly did she say, Lily?" Sandy knew she would have to lead Lily to the answers here, as Lily wasn't seeing it on her own. She definitely noticed that Lily still hadn't acknowledged a drinking problem.

"I asked her if I could come home, and she said she didn't think that was a good idea. She said she didn't want to be with me if I was going to drink. But then when I promised I wouldn't, that wasn't enough, so I have a little trouble believing it was ever about that. I think it was more about my not being the low-maintenance, happy girlfriend she wanted. But the real kicker was when she said I was making her feel guilty about working so much. That's what it was really about." Lily was getting steamed at the retelling of the story, strengthening her resolve to end things with the beautiful woman who had let her down.

To her surprise, Sandy laughed and shook her head. "No, Lily. You're missing everything here. You may not want to believe it, but it was always about your drinking; nothing else. Anna Kaklis never gave up on you, and she never turned her back on you."

"How can you be so sure of that?" In her heart, Lily harbored a wish that what her friend said was true, but she couldn't see how.

Sandy eyed her friend silently for a long moment, contemplating whether to tell what she knew or to keep Anna's confidence. Lily needed to know, she decided. "Lily, I don't want you to get angry with Suzanne and me when I tell you this. We're your friends and we want what's best for you. Sometimes that means deciding what's best for you when you can't do that for yourself. And just so you know, Anna is that kind of friend too."

The blonde woman was already stiffening at the idea she had been manipulated. "So what are you saying, Sandy?"

"I'm saying that I've been in touch with Anna pretty much ever since the night we got back from San Jose. She came here frantic because your car wasn't at the lodge anymore. She knew where you were almost from the beginning."

Lily couldn't believe it. All that time hiding out and Anna had known all along. "She was watching me all that time?"

"Yep."

Lily suddenly remembered the glimpse of the car she'd seen just before she entered the treatment center. "But why would she just watch me? Why wouldn't she try to talk to me?"

"Well it so happens that when she came by here looking for you, I gave her hell for not helping you, and she told me that she'd talked with a counselor at the hospital who told her that she had to walk away from you, or that everything would only get worse. She didn't want to do it at first, but he convinced her—listen to me, Lily, this is important—he convinced her that you were in a lot of trouble. She didn't want to abandon you, but he made her see that your relationship didn't matter at all if you didn't survive the spiral you were in. It may be hard for you to wrap your head around this, Lily, but what Anna did took more love than you can imagine."

"She could have told me that, Sandy."

"She did tell you that. But she told you in a way that made you do something about it. It made you take responsibility for your own actions." Lily was silent, but Sandy could see that her words were having an effect. "Lily, I've worked with alcoholics before. What she said was absolutely right. You needed to face the consequences."

"Maybe so," she conceded, "but I shouldn't have had to face them by myself."

Sandy dreaded telling Lily the next part. "She was ready to find you and take you home that day, but I stopped her. You were about to enter the treatment center and I was worried you'd change your mind."

Lily couldn't believe Sandy had kept this from her. "Why didn't you tell me this? Do you have any idea how much it hurt me to think that she just disappeared!" She couldn't stop the tears.

The social worker knew she was in trouble with her friend. Her explanation needed to be a good one. She reached out to put a hand on Lily's arm, but the blonde woman pulled it away. "Lily, I'm sorry that I kept things from you. But you'd already made up your mind that you were going to get help, and you were doing it for yourself, not for Anna. And that's the way it needed to be. Can you honestly say you'd have gone into Redwood Hills if you could have gone home instead?"

The answer to that question was obvious to everyone.

Chapter 14

Lily walked the bike out of the storage closet they were letting her use at the Waterways Lodge. It was an expensive mountain bike, and Suzanne had bought it at the urging of a friend who regularly rode the steep trails of the San Gabriel Mountains. Suzanne had ridden it three times on the street in front of their home, the last occasion over two years ago.

It had been a thought-filled week for Lily, first as she turned over in her head the things Sandy had told her a week ago about Anna. Lily now found herself deeply conflicted. She still harbored resentment over what she saw as a power play on Anna's part and her own subsequent feelings of abandonment, but the events that Sandy described were a plausible explanation for her lover's behavior. In fact, when she tried to see things from Anna's point of view, things made more sense. The clandestine watchful eye and now the open plea to return home were all consistent with the woman she loved, while the one who had selfishly resisted her coming home was a stranger.

Besides the revelations from her friends, Lily found even more reasons to re-examine what she wanted with Anna from her AA program. Lily was still attending meetings at the Methodist church. *Only 47 more to go.* Once she'd honored her commitment, she'd set her schedule according to her own needs, attending meetings only when she felt she needed support.

At Tuesday's meeting, they had spoken of amends. In those clear moments when she was honest with herself, Lily knew that she had wronged her lover with her drinking, and needed to make amends. Anna would forgive her, she was certain, but that wasn't enough. She needed to make up for the hurt, for the disappointment, the betrayal, and the blame. No matter where their relationship was headed, Lily knew they needed to reconnect in order to set things right.

An early morning call to her lover went to voicemail, so Lily dialed the BMW dealership, only to learn that the car dealer had gone to Detroit for an auto show. She was due back on Monday night, Carmen had said. Lily had no idea of Carmen's epiphany at realizing what was amiss with her boss.

Lily resolved that she would call her lover in a few days to talk again, but here on Sunday afternoon she found herself pedaling mindlessly toward the Spanish-style house in Brentwood that had been her home for almost a year. She had a right to be there, she told herself. Many of her things were still there; there was her mail, which she hadn't collected in almost three months; there was her jewelry and heirlooms.

Lily pulled the bike around back, parking it inside the gate next to the garage. The pool was sparkling, a sign that the pool service had been by in the last couple of days, and the landscaping was freshly clipped and groomed. The blonde dug out her key and walked back out to the side door, where she entered the house through the family room.

Lily was surprised by the strong emotional response she had to being inside the house. Something in the house told her that this was where she really lived; where she belonged.

The home was full of messages about how Anna had lived her life over these past few weeks. The table next to the couch was stacked high with *Car & Driver*—someone was behind in their reading. It appeared as though Anna had only used the office to collect Lily's mail. A quick perusal through the box on the desk told her there were no unpaid bills; apparently, Anna had taken care of them, just as she had after the funeral.

Uneasily, Lily mounted the stairs to the master bedroom suite. Oddly, she felt a bit like a trespasser, even a voyeur looking in on Anna's private life. Their room was unchanged from when she'd left, neat and clean from the housekeeper's recent visit. She couldn't help but smile as her eyes came upon the framed picture on the nightstand, the one from Yosemite. Lily was touched by the fact that Anna had brought the photo up from the family room to her bedside. What lay beside the photo moved her profoundly: a book she recognized from the library at Redwood Hills called *Loving Gary*, the story of a woman who had guided her husband into recovery after years of alcohol abuse, and how their love had flourished from the shared ordeal.

The last five days hadn't been the respite Anna had sought from the worry and sadness that were now her constant companions. The annual event in Detroit was one of the highlights of the year for auto dealers, especially those like Anna who were as fascinated by the cars as they were with the business of selling them. But this year, not even the most stunning innovations in automotive engineering had held her interest. Instead, she found herself imagining the emptiness of a life without the beautiful blonde that completely owned her heart. She wondered what Lily was doing this week; if she had found a place to live. Soon she would come back to the house to claim her belongings, and Anna was pretty sure she didn't want to be there when that happened.

"Would you like something to drink before we land?" The handsome and wonderfully gay flight attendant in the first-class cabin had been reluctant to disturb the somber woman, so absorbed in her worries that she had barely touched her dinner.

"No, thank you." She turned back to the window, searching the fading red desert below for signs of civilization. They would be in LA soon.

Bored with the auto show and preoccupied with thoughts of her lover, Anna had changed her travel plans to return a day before schedule. She smiled to herself as she acknowledged her penchant for coming home early, mostly engineered to surprise her lover. There would be no reward waiting this time.

At least there was Chester. She planned to call as soon as they landed to ask Holly to bring him to the house. It would be a very long night indeed without the pooch to keep her company.

Distracted by almost three months worth of mail, Lily lost track of time, realizing with irritation that she would be riding back to the lodge in the darkness. She considered leaving Anna a note, but worried that it might make the woman uneasy to realize that she'd been here without asking first. She'd let her know when they talked. Stashing a couple of cards she'd gotten from her mother's friends into her small backpack, she headed out the side door, then through the gate to retrieve her bike.

Again in the back yard, Lily was overwhelmed with homesickness as she looked first at the pool then at the hot tub, where she and Anna spent many relaxing evenings, not to mention many...romantic moments.

It suddenly occurred to Lily that she didn't actually have to go home tonight. Anna wasn't due home until tomorrow night, and with her part-time work schedule, the attorney wasn't due in the office until afternoon anyway. *I could sleep on the couch*, she reasoned, not really feeling comfortable making herself completely at home.

Letting herself back into the house, Lily went into the bathroom off the family room, depositing her backpack and trading her clothes for one of the guest towels. The back yard was dark and mostly private, visible only to any neighbor who was nosy enough to pierce the dense hedge that grew five feet above the half wall surrounding the property.

Wrapped only in her towel, the naked blonde waited in a nearby chair at the far end of the pool while the water in the hot tub was heated to her liking. When the steam started to rise, she slipped into the tub, rolling the towel to tuck behind her neck. She couldn't help but call up those memories of the last time she was out here. It was the night she and Anna had gotten home from Yosemite. Their time together that weekend with Carolyn and Vicki—*hmmm, wonder if they're pregnant*—had been special. It was one of the last occasions she could remember being happy.

The churning water was soothing, the lull of the pump relaxing. Still, it wasn't wise to stay in the hot tub for more than 20 or 30 minutes at a time, and Lily was pushing that now. Stretching out, she threw the on-off levers for the heater and pump that were mounted discreetly under a nearby bush.

Out of nowhere, headlights appeared in the driveway, freezing the blonde in place, half in, half out of the circular tub. *Who the hell...?*

"Go ahead, Ms. Kaklis. I'll bring your bag in," the businesslike tone indicating that this was a chauffer.

Fuck! Anna's home! Fuck! Lily was too surprised to move, and not sure where she would go if she did. She couldn't just waltz through the back door naked.

"Thank you, Henry."

Yep, that was definitely Anna. *Fuck!* Lily saw the light go on in the family room. She had intentionally turned out all but one light in the kitchen so as not to illuminate the patio. She could barely make out the figure through the French doors; Anna seemed to be fussing with her suitcase.

But the naked woman's misery was incomplete. No sooner had the limo left than a second car appeared, this one parking next to the garage and turning off the lights.

"Come on, boy. Let's go see mommy!" The woman's voice was familiar, but Lily couldn't place it. Whoever it was had obviously kept Chester while Anna was gone.

"There's my boy!" It was Anna's voice again at the side door. "Hey fella!"

"I'd say he missed you."

"I missed him too. Thanks for bringing him tonight, Holly. Come on in."

Holly Martin, the sales manager at the BMW place. Lily knew that Anna thought a lot of Holly's work, but she had no idea that they were friends. With a panic, Lily wondered if they were more than friends.

Holly followed Chester into the kitchen, where he checked to see if anyone had thought to leave him a snack. Anna came in behind them and lifted the panel on the dog door so the hound could go check to see if another creature had invaded his territory while he was gone.

The tired traveler would certainly have noticed the unlocked deadbolt on the French doors leading to the patio, but Holly paid it no mind, assuming that Anna had already been through the house. "Look at him go. I wonder if he'll find anything interesting," Holly said.

Oh fucking hell! They're coming outside! Lily slid low into the hot tub, peering toward the house where she could make out two women now sitting at the umbrella table. The night was pretty warm for late October, so who knew how long they'd sit and talk. *Fuck!*

Lily was startled by the sudden arrival of Chester, who was thrilled to see his other mother in the hot tub. "Rrrrrarf! Rrarf!" *Fucking hell!*

"Wonder what he's found," asked Holly, standing up.

"No telling. Probably some rodent that will come running over here to be saved. Chester! Come here!"

Chester bounded back to his main mistress, the one who took him for rides in the convertible so that his ears flapped.

There was indeed a god, Lily was sure.

"I should be going. Are you going to come in tomorrow, or should I pretend I haven't seen you?"

"Hmmm... Let's play it by ear. If I don't come in, you didn't see me."

"It's a deal. Welcome home, boss. So long, Chester." Holly patted the dog's head and walked out through the back gate.

Lily relaxed for a moment, still not knowing how she was going to get into the house to retrieve her clothes. Even if Anna went back inside, she'd have to wait until both the woman and dog were asleep upstairs. To both her dismay and delight, her strategizing was interrupted when the beautiful woman stood and in one fluid motion, peeled her shirt over her head. *Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Oh fuck! She's coming into the hot tub!*

But she wasn't. Anna completely disrobed, and then stepped slowly into the shallow end of the heated pool. Lily craned her neck to watch as the shapely form disappeared inch by inch beneath the surface. Sliding slowly around the rim of the hot tub, she positioned herself where she could watch with a low risk of being seen.

What a gorgeous woman! Lily was mesmerized by the sight of her once-lover gliding through the water. Sometimes they would swim together late at night, or even play and tease one another in the water until things turned suddenly serious. More than anything, Lily wished tonight was one of those nights. Just as she was getting up her nerve to boldly slip over the small waterfall that divided the pool from the hot tub, Anna stood at the shallow end and stepped out of the water. *What a magnificent sight!*

The tall woman—the tall *naked* woman—gathered up her clothing and walked back toward the house. "Come on, boy. Let's go to bed." Chester padded eagerly alongside to the kitchen door.

Oh shit! Oh no! Oh shit! I am so fucked! Lily's house key was in her backpack, inside the now locked house. Gradually, the lights downstairs gave way to those in the master suite. The now very pruned blonde climbed out of the hot tub, retrieving her towel from underneath the bush where she'd thrown it earlier. Tiptoeing to the house, she verified that the kitchen door was indeed bolted, as was the French door leading to the family room.

On the off chance that Anna had left the side door open, Lily slipped outside the gate into the driveway. To her horror, the motion detector on the porch light illuminated her presence for the neighbors or anyone who might be driving down the street. Lily didn't care though, so long as Anna didn't happen to look out her window at that moment. *Fuck!* That door was locked too.

Returning to the back yard, Lily weighed her options. She could start pounding on the door, but then she'd have to explain what she was doing out there without her clothes. And worse, she'd be hard pressed to come up with a good reason for not announcing herself earlier.

The kitchen window was a possibility. Anna usually left it cracked to allow the fresh air in. Lily slinked around the side of the house to test her theory. *Shit!* The place was Fort Knox! The kitchen windows were the only ones on that side, and there were none in the back of the house. Her only other options were the windows along the well-lit driveway or those in the front yard. *Fuck!* Out of choices, Lily started toward the front of the house.

Wait a minute! There along the ground was exactly what she needed: Chester's doggie door! Lily stooped down to feel the opening. Anna had left the panel open so the dog could go in and out at night. It was small, but then so was she.

Tucking the towel in front so that it was tightly wrapped, Lily kneeled down and poked her head through the opening. The house was completely dark downstairs, and she could barely make out the sound of the hair dryer running in the master bath. *Perfect!*

She tried next to get her shoulders through, but it was too tight. Backing out, she started through again with her arms straight ahead. The door was taller than it was wide, so she turned on her side to make it easier. Pushing with her feet, Lily made slow progress. The towel was part of the problem, bunching up and creating a logjam just underneath her shoulders. Again, she backed out.

Pulling off the towel and shoving it through the hole, Lily started again. Arms first, then head, then shoulders...once she got both shoulders all the way through, she would be home free.

"Grrrrrrr! Rrrraaarfff! Rrrraarfff!"

Fuck me! Could this night get any more bizarre?

Chester was upset at first, but calmed immediately when he recognized the woman who used to sneak him food from the table. Still, he was perplexed at the idea of someone coming in through his door. It was exclusively for the four-legged people such as himself; the two-legged people always used the other doors. Always.

Lily's heart stopped about the same time as the hair dryer.

"Chester!" Anna called from upstairs.

Fuck! Oh fuck! Lily squirmed, not sure whether to go forward or backward. Not that it mattered. She couldn't seem to move either way.

"Rrrarfff! Rrrraarfff!" It was that unwritten rule again. When they're on the floor, it's play time.

"Chester!" Anna remembered the panel on the doggie door. The installer had told her that it was a good idea to close it at night, just in case any raccoons or stray pets wandered up. She could hear the struggle in the kitchen. Whatever it was, Chester obviously had it cornered. Filled with apprehension, Anna grabbed her robe and headed back down the stairs. From the hall closet between the kitchen and family room, the tall woman retrieved a broom. Shaking with anticipation, she reached for the light switch.

Nothing on earth could have prepared her for the sight that greeted her. Chester was sitting in the middle of the floor, wagging his tail with glee, barking excitedly at half of a naked red-faced Lily Stuart.

Oh. My. God. "This isn't what it looks like," the woman on the floor quickly explained.

For the life of her, Anna couldn't imagine what it was if it wasn't what it looked like. "It looks like you're crawling in the doggie door naked." She wasn't angry. She wasn't laughing. She was simply flabbergasted.

"Well, see? That's exactly what I mean. I am not crawling in the doggie door. I'm actually stuck in the goddamned doggie door, so I'm not crawling anywhere." Lily knew her face was beet red. If this were a 10 on the Humiliation Scale, she probably never had anything else higher than a two.

"And the naked part?"

"Well...that is actually what it looks like." Lily stretched out for the towel to cover herself. "I can sort of explain all this."

"Should I go get a chair?" She couldn't help herself. Whatever explanation there could possibly be for Lily crawling naked through the doggie door would be forgotten someday, but this image was forever.

"Very funny. Do you think you could trouble yourself to pull me out of here?"

Anna thought about it for a second or two. If she pulled the naked woman all the way through, she'd wrap up in the towel, tell her story, then presumably get dressed and leave. At least this way she was captive. On the other hand, there was probably a naked butt on the other side of that door that Anna wanted to see, and soon. "Well since you asked so nicely," she exaggerated the sarcasm for its comic effect, "do you wish to be pulled into the house, or out of the house?"

Lily squirmed a little to gauge her stuck-edness. "In, I think."

Yes! Here comes the butt! Anna reached down and took hold of Lily's forearms and pulled her gently until she finally cleared the opening. Her left side was scraped a little from the door's edge, but she was otherwise no worse for the wear.

Quickly Lily stood and wrapped the towel tightly around herself. "Thanks." Still red in the face, she started for the family room so she could put on her clothes.

"Oh no you don't! I get an explanation now." This was going to be very interesting.

The blonde woman sighed deeply and leaned against the kitchen counter. "I tried to call you last week, but you were gone to Detroit. They told me you would be back on Monday, but I should have known that meant Sunday to you. It always does." Lily couldn't suppress a small smile; she knew the woman well. "Anyway, I came by this afternoon on my bike. This is the first time I've been here, I swear."

Anna nodded her understanding. *So she'd called last week.* "Go ahead."

"So I went through my mail and it got late. I thought about going home, but it meant riding my bike in the dark, and that's not exactly the safest thing in the world. So I decided to stay the night. I was going to leave you a note or call or something to tell you I'd been by. I've been wanting to talk to you again anyway."

She was planning to get in touch again. And she doesn't seem to be angry anymore.

"Anyway, I was out in the hot tub when you got home. I started to come in when I saw it was you, but then Holly got here. So I stayed down low in the tub waiting for her to leave."

"And then I went swimming."

"And then you went swimming," Lily conceded, looking away guiltily.

"So why didn't you join me then?" She took a step toward the nervous blonde.

"I...I thought about it. But I didn't want to scare you. When you came back in, I just wanted to get my clothes and get out of here. But you locked all the doors."

"I always lock all the doors when I go to bed, Lily. Why didn't you just knock?" Another step closer.

"I was sort of hoping I could get away without having you know I was here," she admitted. "I didn't really want to have to explain why I hid. I'm not really sure why...." Anna was coming toward her and her stomach had started to flutter.

Now close enough to share a breath, the tall beauty whispered, "If you had gone, you would have missed this." The hungry lips closed over those of the blonde woman, and the long arms wrapped around the waist and pulled her tight. This kiss had to say everything, as Anna wasn't sure she'd ever get another chance. Slowly, she slid her mouth against Lily's, pressing with her tongue for entry.

Lily was lost. For this moment, there was nothing else in the universe other than what was going on where their mouths were joined. Parting her lips, she took in the probing tongue which began to dance with her own. Anna Kaklis was kissing her!

We're kissing! She's kissing me back! Anna's own heart was racing as she excitedly noted that Lily was not resisting her. But in spite of the seeming acceptance, she feared the blonde woman would suddenly push her away, still angry about all that had transpired between them. Her body language still said hesitant: she had not stepped closer and her arms hung loosely at her sides.

When their kiss finally broke, Anna ran her hands lovingly across Lily's back. Only then did she feel the smaller woman return the gesture, lifting her hands to rest on Anna's sides. It was a start.

Resting her cheek against the blonde hair, Anna struggled for the right words to ease her lover's pain over their time apart. "I'm so sorry I hurt you, Lily. I only did what I thought was best. Please forgive me and come home."

A long moment—a *really* long moment—passed before Lily gave a hint of her response. She dropped her hands from the robed waist, only to tug at the terrycloth ties that held the garment closed. In no time, the robe fell open and Lily released the tuck that held her towel in place, letting it drop to the floor.

Anna answered by pulling her lover inside the robe, wrapping it around both of them as they burrowed naked underneath. Heart to heart, they reveled in the sensations of warmth and belonging. For Anna, it was a return to stasis, that place where all her world was balanced. The familiar stillness crept over her as her mind slowly emptied of the turmoil that had plagued her for months.

For Lily, it was balm for her broken soul. This was all she really needed in the world. "I love you, Anna."

"I love you too," the tall woman murmured. For the longest time, they simply stood together, awash in the familiar feelings.

"Show me," Lily asked, almost shyly.

Anna turned out the light and led her lover through the darkened house to the master suite upstairs. The robe fell to the floor as the women moved to the bed, already turned down by Anna when she'd come upstairs earlier.

Unlike most of the times when they made love, there was no battle for the top. Tonight, Lily needed to feel her lover's hands and mouth, needed to be held, needed desperately to hear the sweet words from Anna that would connect them at a higher plane. She lay back against the pillows and pulled her lover on top, staring intently into the blue eyes darkened with desire.

Anna lowered her body against the smaller form, brushing her breasts across Lily's as her hips pressed into the top of the thigh that had risen to meet her. Supporting herself on her left forearm, her right hand began a path of feather light touches across her lover's cheeks, chin and mouth. Anna's lips soon followed her fingertips on their route. The trail then moved to the slender neck and across the prominent collarbones, again with the soft lips in pursuit.

"You belong here, Lily. Right here in my arms." Anna kissed the parted lips as her hand drifted lower to softly circle a hardened nipple.

Lily's eyes shot open at the sensation and met again the intense azure gaze of her beautiful lover. Her arms could reach only as far as the curved waist, but she pulled the woman higher.

Anna complied; bending at the waist to bring her hips toward Lily's outstretched hands. Shifting forward, her own breasts were almost even with her lover's face.

That was too much for Lily to resist, and she raised her head to take a full breast into her mouth. Her hands stroked the smooth curves of Anna's hips and thighs, while her teeth teased the taut nipple.

Anna closed her eyes to concentrate on her body's sublime reaction. When she recognized only her own arousal, she pulled away. Tonight wasn't simply for pleasure. It was about connection, retracing the familiar path to Lily's body and soul. She lowered herself out of reach of the searching lips, only to place her own once again over the waiting mouth. Her hand reached lower, trailing through the soft curls at the apex of her lover's thighs. With her fingertips pressed against the inside of a soft thigh, she gently urged Lily to open herself. Anna slipped into the wetness, breaking their prolonged kiss to gasp with pleasure.

Lily fought for breath, shuddering as she drew air deeply into her lungs. If Anna didn't enter her soon, she would die.

As if reading her thoughts, two long fingers probed gently for entry, then spread apart as they were pushed inside. Both women opened their eyes again, reading the deep connection as an unbreakable bond. "Oh god, Lily. You feel so good inside. I want this to be mine."

Lily could only nod, feeling the searing heat begin to build deep within as her lover stroked rhythmically in and out. With each steady thrust, it grew larger, reaching forth from her center. She tried hard to focus on the piercing blue eyes, but she was rapidly losing all control of her senses. Tears came from nowhere to overwhelm her as she exploded in her lover's arms. "Yes! Oh God Anna...."

"That's it, baby. I can feel you coming...so deep." Tears now poured also down Anna's cheeks, her own body climaxing as she rocked her center against the woman beneath her.

Falling together, they hugged desperately as each woman sobbed her emotional release, their connection at this moment the strongest it had ever been. There had been many times over the last three months when they thought they would never share this closeness again.

"I almost lost you," Lily choked.

"No, baby. I never left you. And I never will."

Lily loved it when Anna called her *baby*.

Epilogue

"Lily? Sweetheart, wake up."

"Mmmm...vacation."

"Come on, honey. Let's go watch the sun come up."

The blonde head burrowed against the pillow, willing the persistent voice away.

"Sweetheart, you promised."

Lily groaned. "Not fair...." Anna had extracted the promise during a critical moment in their lovemaking last night.

"Come on, Lily. It's our last day here," she pleaded.

Very reluctantly, Lily pushed herself up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Anna was there with baggy shorts and a pullover shirt. "I hope you appreciate how difficult this is for me, Amazon."

"I do, Pygmy. I appreciate everything about you." She helped Lily get the shirt over her head. "Ready?"

Lily fell back on the bed, but Anna grabbed her wrists and pulled her to a wobbly standing position. "Okay, okay." The sleepy woman fell in behind her lover, shuffling her feet as they walked to the door.

"Do you want your sandals?"

Lily shook her head. She had resigned herself to open one eye slightly so as not to trip over anything. She closed it to a mere slit when they stepped into the brightly lit hallway. Anna led them down the hall to the stairway, and two flights down they emerged onto a path that ran directly to the beach.

The sky was getting its first light, sunrise only about 15 minutes away. When they reached the end of the path, Anna dragged a lounge chair to a secluded spot just beyond the palms that lined the beach. Leaning against the back, she opened her legs for her lover to lie back against her. Lily did so immediately, and closed her eyes in slumber as Anna wrapped her long arms around her middle.

"Lily? Do you know what today is?"

It was still mostly dark, which meant to Lily that it wasn't day at all. "Is this a trick question?"

"No. I'll give you a hint. It's February 6th. Do you remember what happened on February 6th?"

Against her will, Lily was slowly waking up. "The earthquake," she said somberly.

"That's right. Three years ago today," Anna reminded her.

Lily smiled softly and squeezed her lover's hands. "And the day we met."

Anna pulled a hand free to retrieve something from her pocket. "It's a very special day to me, sweetheart. I want us to remember it always."

Lily felt something sliding against the ring finger on her left hand. As she opened her eyes, the sight nearly stole her breath. In the glint of the sunrise, she saw the Cartier tri-colored twist that adorned her finger. Of course, she didn't know it was a Cartier; only that it was the most beautiful ring she had ever seen. And Anna Kaklis had just put it there!

"Lily, I want you to wear this so that you'll always remember the promises I'm about to make." Anna sat up straight and leaned over the smaller woman's shoulder. "Lily Stuart, I promise to be there for you always, whatever you may need. I promise to put my love for you in front of everything else in my life. And I promise that my heart will always be your home."

Lily's unbelieving smile took up her whole face. Anna Kaklis had just committed to her forever.

"And I promise not to let even the most appealing automotive designs distract me from your blinding beauty."

Lily laughed with delight. Anna always had to be Anna.

"And I promise to never, ever tell my father the story about you and the doggie door."

Now fully awake, the grinning blonde pulled her feet up and turned around in the chair to face her partner. Scooting closer, she draped her legs off the sides of the chair so that she was now straddling Anna's lap. "You have no idea what this means to me." Suddenly serious, she looked directly into the smiling blue eyes, now sparkling as the sun peeked slowly over the horizon. "Anna, until this very moment, Mom was the only one who ever said she'd always be there for me. I can't tell you how much I treasure what you've promised me today."

Anna answered with a deep kiss that for her sealed their future.

"Will you wear a ring from me?" Lily asked hopefully. Anna seldom wore jewelry other than earrings and her Rolex wristwatch.

"I would love to wear your ring."

"What kind of ring would you want?"

"I'll wear whatever you like. It's a gift from you; it should say you."

Some people thought matching rings were kind of hokey, but Lily had always dreamed of a shared symbol. "How would you feel about wearing one just like this one?"

"I think that would be perfect. In fact, I sort of hoped you'd say that. Now I won't have to take this one back." Anna reached again into her pocket, extracting an identical twisted band and placing it in her partner's hand.

"You are *sooooo* good."

Yeah, I know.

Lily held the ring alongside her own, confirming that they were exactly the same. "I haven't practiced any words, but I know what I've dreamed of saying to you since the first time I realized I was in love with you."

Taking Anna's left hand in her own trembling hands, she slipped the band onto the long slender finger. "Anna Kaklis, I promise to love you always, and to support you in everything you do. I promise to accept all of you, and to work through everything that life throws at us, just to be with you. I promise to do my best to never let you down." Both women understood that coded reference to Lily's struggle with alcohol.

Anna looked at their hands together. *We're married.*

"And I promise to change the oil every 3,000 miles, no matter what."

Anna chuckled. She had asked for that.

"And you know that picture I took of you in the bathtub when Chester jumped in? I promise not to put that one on our Christmas cards."

Binders Books now occupied space on the brand new single level east wing of the Endicott Mall. At 12:02 p.m., Skye Steinberg announced to her customers that it was time to step out of the store and into the concourse. Having seen the posters throughout the mall today, everyone expected this pause in their shopping day.

The mall's public address system was wired to a receiver at the nearby Presbyterian Church, where at 12:04 the church's colossal bell rang 27 times, once each for every person who lost their life at the mall three years ago in the Culver City Quake.

A moment of silence followed as Skye remembered the beautiful dark-haired woman who had visited their store that day. Anna was her name, she learned, and she had stopped by the mall a month ago to say hello and check out the new store. She was with a blonde woman, whom she introduced as the only other trapped survivor of that day's devastation. The two women were clearly in love.

Seven thousand miles away in Fiji, the two survivors shared a lounge chair as they silently watched the beach come to life. The year behind them had been personally devastating, especially for Lily, but somehow they had found their way home. Today, their hearts had opened wide for the comfort and security only a lifetime commitment could bring.

The End.

Thanks for reading. Let me know what you think. If you liked it, I'll probably save your note and read it over and over again. If not, I'll change a few words here and there and send your note to LA Tucker. ;-)

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Author's note: Just because I didn't write it in excruciating detail, don't assume that Lily simply breezed through a 28-day program and came out cured. If you or someone you love has a problem with alcohol or other substances, help is everywhere but it's going to take an honest commitment every day to win back control. Pick up the phone book, ask your doctor, or ask your minister. Don't screw around; the stakes are very high. And recovery is nothing short of salvation.

KG MacGregor, sober 18 years