

#### Back Cover Copy

For some love lasts a long time, for others a lifetime. Can theirs outlast space-time?

Randi's summer vacation plans? Attending Professor Sudo's Time Travel Academy so she can blast back to 1980 Miami and figure out where her father disappeared to. She's the head of her class until hottie Mitch arrives disguised as a geeky geologist and totally messes up her meditation. Goodbye Soulful in Sedona, hello Yearning in Yoga. So long solo time-travel, hello pushy partner—who happens to be a buff tri-athlete, a sympathetic listener, and an ace FBI agent on a top-secret mission. With his help, she'll conga her way into the Cuban mafia, try not to destroy the delicate fabric of the space-time continuum, dodge a few bullets, and solve The Mystery of the Missing Dad. And maybe fall just a little in love...

A new adventure in women's fiction, with a heroine who boldly goes where no chick has gone before, tons of danger and intrigue, a roller-discoing Granny, life and death betrayal, steamy Miami nights and one hot FBI agent.

## Highlight

Dear Journal,

Note to self: Do not get involved with this man! A troublesome guy is the reason you're here in the first place! Did you learn nothing from your mother's experience with your father? Hmm? In theory, you could safely have a no-strings fling for the first time ever.

Hello? To self: For all you know, that guy could be seriously dangerous, or a wanted criminal at the very least.

Puh-leeze! How could he be working for the government and get in this program if he is a wanted criminal? Your father is likely a wanted criminal in 1980. Who are you to judge? Have you forgotten Mitch's washboard abs?

To wild self: The guy sports the fake tan of an 80's bodybuilder and wears glasses we both know he doesn't need. He's lying about his career and probably self-absorbed, as much time as he spends on his body. And obviously a player, baby. Those smooth moves he used on you? Been done hundreds of times before. By him.

Boring old divorcee, better-safe-than-sorry self: I want him. It's been eight months since my last non-self-administered orgasm. Hello? Are you going to give me the silent treatment now?

by

Autumn Piper

Trouble Under Venus

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# Dedication

To my Mom, for always being there, and for giving me all the answers she had.

Thanks to my lovely critique partners: Felicity Kates, Sutton Fox, Jasmine Black, Maya Blake, and Kimberly Brody. You gals are indisputably the best. And Mary Murray, thanks again for another marvelous edit!

Amanda, friend and reader extraordinaire, thanks again.

Dennis—you've forever intrigued me, recently inspired me, and will likely elude me always. Maybe some mysteries aren't meant to be solved.

#### Chapter 1

Dear Journal,

They all think I've lost my mind.

It's not like they haven't had time to accept my decision to join Professor Sudo as one of the first civilian time travelers. After all, it's been almost a year since my winning essay secured me one of the four spots. And it's been over six months since David filed for divorce because I insisted on going forward with this 'harebrained' idea.

Mom positively did not believe I was going until yesterday when she came over and saw my packed bags. Even this morning when she called, she sounded surprised to hear I'd really arrived in Sedona and stayed the night in the Feng Shui Inn.

Well, I can't blame her for being upset. She's insecure about me traveling back to 1980 to find my father, who was forced to marry her because of an unplanned pregnancy. It was surely no picnic for her, being moved from her little hometown in Colorado to the rushing metropolis of Miami. From her accounts, he spent most of his time running around, partying, and leaving her home alone. No wonder when she flew home for an uncle's funeral right before my birth, she opted to stay. A few months after their divorce was finalized, he disappeared for good. Guess that makes him the Extreme Absent Parent.

After all these years wondering where he went, Grandma hiring PI after PI who could not find him, speculations that his ties to the Cuban Mafia were his ultimate demise...well, I just need to know. I have to know. How can I possibly start a family of my own if I don't know my father? Sure, other people do it all the time, but I am not 'other people'. I can't add my own branch to a family tree when half the trunk broke off and disappeared into thin air! David can't understand. He's got the picture perfect family—or so he thinks. He didn't grow up with a giant question mark in his scrapbook.

Dennis Keenan has got to be out there somewhere. Maybe he went into Witness Protection. Of course there's a chance something happened to him. I mean, back in '80, birth and death records weren't as universally accessible as they are now. If he turned up dead as some John Doe, his dental records could be buried in the back of a dusty county building waiting to be scanned and computerized. In my heart of hearts, I don't believe he's dead. But I really need to know. Nobody has found so much as a trail, other than his last known conversation with a friend when he said he was leaving Miami and heading to San Francisco.

Traveling back to a time before he went missing seems the most logical way to solve the mystery.

Most people think I'm nuts because I'm willing to be one of the pioneer time travelers. Well, hell. Most people haven't base jumped or sky dived or even gone rock climbing, for God's sake. They act like I haven't considered the risks. Of course I have. I just think in this case, the reward far outweighs any risk. Hey, somebody's got to be the first to do it, right? America was built on the pioneer spirit, but now nobody wants to be the guinea pig—aside from the three thousand of us who answered Sudo's ad in the paper and wrote an essay.

Besides, in another six weeks when school starts up for the fall, I'll be the coolest teacher in the district. Maybe in the state!

The Inn is nice, got that calming Asian influence going on. Mr. and Mrs. Sudo own it, though I suspect she runs it while he's traipsing around harnessing the electromagnetic power of Earth's energy vortexes and writing scientific papers. Of course it's approximately a million degrees Fahrenheit here—but what could I expect from Arizona in July?

We have our first yoga session early tomorrow morning. I wonder if the other three travelers have been practicing, too? Hard to tell with those two old ladies, Althea and Rhona. They both seemed eccentric at the press conference in January. And then there's Lonnie. My student teacher kept referring to him as "that tall drink of water Texan". He is good eye candy I suppose, if you're into accents and big belt buckles.

But hooking up with a man is not on the schedule for me. I've got a mission and a plan. And I intend to follow them.

I'm going to meditate for a few minutes—star pupil always comes to class prepared, right?—and then call it a night.

Excited,

Randi

\* \* \* \*

A low-flying plane buzzed in closer, providing its occupants a better look at Sedona's Boynton Canyon Vortex, and like so much muscle tension, the serenity of our early morning yoga session disappeared. The droning engine drowned out our yogi's instructions.

Still maintaining my down-dog position, I stared at the inverted image of a rock formation. Many planes and helicopters had been by during our two sessions the day before. I was learning to ignore them.

"Pssst! Hey, Randi."

Maybe if I acted meditative, I could ignore Lonnie.

"Randi! Hey, how come you didn't answer your door last night? Thought we had a date."

Lonnie's idea of a date was an invitation to join him in the pool after our evening session had ended and everyone else in the Feng Shui Inn had gone to bed. Over dinner, he'd flirted and charmed his way into conversation with me, obviously thinking I'd fawn over him like all the other women did.

"Randi?"

There's no talking in yoga, Hoss!

"I fell asleep with my iPod on." I almost hissed. "My earphones must have blocked the sound."

"I tried callin' your room too," he whined.

Ignoring his complaint, I stood upright and bent from my waist in time with our instructor.

How could I be such a big deal to this guy? The two older women in our group seemed to think he was incredibly handsome and charming. He bragged about how prosperous his huge car dealership in Dallas was. His big muscly body and deep tan made it obvious he didn't spend his days sitting in an office at that dealership. To top it all off, he was a smooth talker—he'd nearly conned me into that swim. After returning to my room, I'd come to my senses. This was no time in my life to be getting involved with a man. Any man.

"One more breath," Yogi purred. "In, let your body speak to you. Out. Hands to side, use your back to stand. Tada sana. Thank you. Tonight, we do two hours."

In front of me, Althea and Rhona moaned. Even for me, this was a ton of yoga. Professor Sudo required it, though. He'd stressed the importance of opening our chakras—certain ones in particular—to channel precious energy from the vortexes. When our bodies and minds were open and ready, he would help us travel through time.

Dear Randi,

Addressing these journal entries to "dear journal" seems weird. And since I'll probably be the only one who ever reads this, I'll address it to my future self. Today was my second day at Camp Time Travel, a.k.a. Professor Sudo's prep course at the Feng Shui Inn in Sedona, Arizona. I forgot to write an entry yesterday. I was totally exhausted.

Today we had meditation practice and learned about the electro-magnetic energy in Sedona's vortexes. We visited two of them, Bell Rock and Boynton Canyon. I can't tell if I'm just brainwashed or I really do feel energized when standing there. It could be all the yoga. Even though I've been practicing it for months, it's amazing what two days with an actual yogi have done for my form. I feel... fluid. Can actually touch my toes, for the first time ever. I make it a point to snag a back spot for my mat now, so Lonnie doesn't look at my ass the entire time. That guy. I can't figure out what it is about him I don't like. Maybe I'm still sour over my divorce. Disillusioned. Or maybe it's because he looked at me like I had a growth on my head when I knew the reason there's only one fish in the tank downstairs. Just because I studied feng shui before coming here.

He didn't write his own essay for the contest. I'm sure of it. He's traveling back in time to see his mom before she went in her coma. Sweet. So why don't I like him? Because he's a dunce?

Someone just splashed in the pool outside. Hmm. Lonnie went into town with Rhona and Althea tonight. Are they back now? It is after eleven. I think I'll sneak out on my balcony to take a look.

I set my journal aside, switched off the lamp and as quietly as possible, opened my screened French door. If it was Lonnie in the pool and he heard me, he'd start pestering me to join him again. And if he was skinny-dipping with one of the older women, I didn't want them to see me spying. Staying close to the wall between my patio and the next one, I stole to the railing.

Out in the pool, a dark form took smooth, nearly silent strokes. Fast. Soft lights around the pool's edge cast a glow in the rippling water. As he reached the end of the pool closest to me and performed a flawless flip to his back, the light caught his dark hair. Not Lonnie. And this body... well. The guy was a swimmer, all right. He had the shoulders to prove it. They rotated and pulled him to the other side of the pool in no time at all. He bumped the side and came back my way doing a crawl stroke.

This time he paused at the edge, possibly to catch his breath. My own breath froze when he seemed to look my way. I didn't breathe again until he resumed his back stroke.

He swam for a long time, his movements in the water as graceful as any choreographed dance. Like his body was made for this activity. At last, ignoring the ladder, he pulled himself up at the edge of the pool. Whoa, then again, maybe that bod was made for something else! Perfect triangular torso, wide shoulders, narrow hips. A very small swimsuit, obviously made for a guy serious about water sports. He stretched, mopped his hair, and for some reason, looked at the towel afterward. Maybe he was checking for hair loss?

Then he went still, and like he wore heat-seeking goggles, his gaze went to me. Straight to me. As if it were the most natural thing in the world for a strange woman to watch him swim, he raised his right hand and waved.

With an audible choke, I shrunk back into the shadows until I bumped against my door, then slipped inside. Geez. How embarrassing. And who was he? A new guest? The Inn wasn't exclusive to Sudo's groups, other guests would be coming and going. I could only hope I would *not* be seeing this guy around.

The patio gate of the room next to mine clinked open and closed. Oh, good Lord. That room had been vacant since my arrival the day before. Now I had a neighbor. Maybe fate would smile on me and it was coincidence, not the swimmer returning.

The sound of the French screen door opening in the next unit came through my still-open door.

*Calm down.* It could be someone else. Still, my heart pounded. It was past time for me to be in bed, but sleep would be slow coming after this excitement.

I had to close my screen to make sure no scorpions found their way in, and moved toward it. Too bad for me, I tripped over my laptop on the way. Landing with an "oomph" on the carpeted floor, I froze.

"Do you always spy on people, or are you an insomniac?" A deep voice came from around the balcony wall.

Standing and rubbing my shin, I was tempted to slam my door shut and take the coward's way out.

Whoever he was, he snickered at my silence.

I would not be the object of his joke. "How did you see me?" My question came out more pouty than curious.

Another chuckle. "You're wearing white. Pretty easy to see in the dark."

True enough. My cotton eyelet shorts and top were new and quite white. "Oh." Against my better judgment, I padded outside to the railing. "Sorry. I…thought you were someone else." It wasn't entirely a lie. I did think he was Lonnie at first.

"No need to apologize. I never complain about a woman checking me out."

Oh, the nerve! "I was *not* checking you out! It's practically the middle of the night and you were out there splashing like, like, like a pack of kids. I came out to investigate."

Laughter from next door. Self-confident laughter. "Whatever."

"What was that you were wearing, anyway? A Speedo? Aren't those, like, totally out?" He only laughed more.

I was in the process of coming up with a scathing remark when Lonnie came stumbling up to my patio.

"Randi!" Without waiting for me to invite him, he opened the gate and walked in. "You're still up."

He reeked of whiskey.

"Oh God. Lonnie. Are you drunk?"

"Sorta. You should a joined us at the bar."

I clucked my tongue, feeling like a mother hen. "Remember what Professor Sudo said? We're not supposed to poison our bodies. Put toxins in them."

"Pfftht!" Lonnie answered, eliciting a chuckle from the eavesdropping neighbor. "Sometimes you just gotta cut loose, Randi."

"Geez. Lonnie, let's go inside, where the whole hotel can't hear us."

He lurched closer. His big hand cupped the back of my head and he breathed alcohol fumes into my face. "You askin' me in yer room?"

"No!" I stepped back, pushing his hand away. "I think you should go."

"You wanta know why I'm goin' back in time?"

"I already know. To see your mom."

His story had tugged at everybody's heartstrings. He'd been only eight when a car accident put his mother in a coma. She'd never come out of it. But I wasn't letting him sweet-talk me into anything. No way. Especially not with Mr. Crawlstroke listening.

Lonnie swayed, caught his balance just in time and thunked ungracefully into a bamboo lawn chair. The pool lights reflected off his face. He knuckled his eyes, then tipped his head back and let out a breath. "There's more than that."

"More?" Resigned that he would not leave until he'd finished talking, I sat in the other chair.

"My mom. She, uh..." His Adam's apple jerked. "It was a suicide attempt in the car. Six months before, in the summer of eighty-two, my older brother drowned. Mikey and me were out at the lake. Playin' on the tire swing. We had an old tin boat we paddled around the lake. When Mikey swung that last time, I saw the boat had drifted out, under the swing. I yelled at him. He looked down right when he let go of the rope. Did this weird twistin' thing on the way down." Lonnie covered his face with his hands and choked before going on. "If I hadn't yelled, he woulda missed the boat. But he hit it, with his head. He never came up. I swam out there but I couldn't find 'im. Don't know if I coulda pulled him up, anyhow. He was twelve and I was only seven."

I got goosebumps. Poor kid, watching his brother die. How awful. And then losing his mother soon after. As dread set in, the goosebumps left. "Lonnie? You're not planning to change anything. Are you?" Of course he was. "You know we had to sign agreements that we wouldn't."

Beside me, he shrugged. But did not reply.

"Lonnie? Oh my God." Didn't Sudo do background checks?

"It was my fault Mikey died." His voice faltered. "And if he didn't die, my mom wouldn't have...well, she'd still be okay."

"Oh God." Could I blame him, though? It hurt my head to think of the changes he might make. How things might be different. "Lonnie. If you go back in time and make Mikey live, you won't need to enter the contest, to travel back in time." He'd become one of those paradoxes.

He sighed.

"Okay. You're drunk. I'm sure when you're sober, this won't sound like a good idea to you. You've got to go now. And I'm gonna pretend you never told me any of this." Messing with your own history had to be the worst possible mistake you could make in time travel. I couldn't fault his motivations, but what would happen if he did it? The teacher in me leapt at the opportunity to correct a wrong course, go to a higher authority if necessary. But the liberalist in me wondered if it really wasn't his own choice to make. Who was I to tell another adult what to do with his life? Mine wasn't exactly following the course I'd planned.

A loud snore broke me from my debate.

"Lonnie? Oh, crap." He could *not* sleep on my patio. "Lonnie! Hey, wake up." The rough shake I administered was probably a bit harsher than necessary, but I needed him gone.

I breathed a sigh of relief when he stirred, but then he stood and staggered toward my door. "Oh no. No way, cowboy. You're going back to your own room."

"This is my room. Gonna go to bed."

"Not in here. What number is your room, Lonnie?" I kept expecting a snort or a laugh from next door, but heard none. I could only hope that meant my neighbor had done the decent thing and forsaken his eavesdropping.

"Seventeen."

"See?" I asked, pointing to the number by my door. "This is room three. Come on, I'll help you find yours." His heavy arm settled on my shoulders and we made our awkward way out around the pool and to the other wing of the Inn. At his door, he fumbled in his pockets until producing a key, which he dropped. I picked it up for him, then unlocked the door, rather than wait for him to connect key with slot.

I swung open his door. "Here you are. Night, then."

He attempted to step closer, but lost his balance and smashed into me, pinning me against the stucco beside the door. Lonnie clearly did not think this was the end of our association for the evening. We played silent tag for a couple of passes as he strove to connect his mouth with mine, until he stopped my head with his hands. The alcohol on his breath only served to make his slobbery kiss even less appealing. In a last-ditch effort to escape, I reached up and pinched a bit of skin on the underside of his arm. Whether it truly hurt or just startled him, I don't know. But I seized the moment when he jumped, squeezing past him to freedom.

Still scrubbing my mouth with the back of my hand, I started across the courtyard—and saw movement in the shadows at the edge of the pool decking! Whoever it was, he or she hid, a leafy rattle in the bushes the only evidence of their whereabouts. What reason the person had for hiding from me, I didn't want to know. So I hurried back to the safety of my room, making sure to lock the door and windows behind me.

#### Chapter 2

On the way to meet the others for our morning session, I rubbed the scrape on my shoulder. "Damn Lonnie." The rough stucco had done a number on my back. I sincerely hoped he had a devil of a hangover this morning. Maybe doing inverted yoga poses with a headache would take all his effort and he'd leave me alone.

In the middle of the tea garden-themed waiting area, Althea and Rhona sat on a small sofa on either side of a man I didn't recognize. Next to the pale older women, his skin was quite dark, as was his hair. Funny how his hair seemed *too* dark. And his skin...why did I get the impression the tan was artificial? Well, guys were entitled to a fake tan, too.

Althea was already tittering small bits of Elvis trivia to the stranger, who listened, nodding, looking somewhat cornered as he pushed Rhona's hands from around his bicep. Substantial bicep too, but right next to it, a pocket in his tee shirt had actual pens sticking out the top! Further down... oh my. He wore athletic shorts, hiking boots, and tube socks pulled clear up to his knees.

As I took a seat in a nearby wicker armchair, he looked over at me from behind small wire-framed glasses. The glasses were cute, if not much else about this nerd's ensemble was. For some inexplicable reason, his eyes narrowed.

"Lonnie!" Rhona called out.

All eyes looked at a point above my head. Lonnie must have been right behind me. God, I hoped it didn't look like we'd arrived *together*.

"Oh dear. You look like you feel terrible," Rhona went on. "Poor thing. I hope you weren't up too late."

Three sets of eyes moved from Lonnie, back to me. I found myself meeting the gaze behind those silver glasses. The chestnut-brown eyebrows rose in mocking, silent question. That eavesdropping, midnight-swimming, overly cocky neighbor of mine! Just what the hell was he doing at our morning meeting?

"Miranda and Lonnie," Althea said, "this is Mitchell Goodman. He's joining us today."

"Joining us?" I echoed. Joining us. And he'd heard me leave with Lonnie last night, seen me arrive with Lonnie in tow. Geez, he probably thought I'd spent the night with the big creep.

"Four not lucky number," Mrs. Sudo piped up, behind the check-in desk. "Four bad. Bad feng shui." She nodded a tad too emphatically. "Five much better number for group." All five fingers on her right hand wagged at us, as if fanning good spirits our way.

How odd. After months of planning and choosing this group, Mr. Sudo suddenly changed his mind and decided he needed five participants instead of four? Either he hadn't done as much advance planning as I'd imagined, or...something was up.

"Everybody ready?" Tim—our driver and Professor Sudo's personal assistant—asked from the front entrance.

In his hung-over state, Lonnie still managed to make it out the door first and claim the front seat of the minivan for himself. I shot him what I hoped was my most disdainful look and climbed in the back. Maybe I'd get some peace and quiet if Mitchell and the ladies rode in the middle. I sat, and in the front, Mitchell also glared at Lonnie. With another nervous look at Rhona, he bypassed the middle seat and joined me.

Compassion flashed through me for him in his attempt to avoid Rhona's advances. Then I remembered him taunting me about checking him out in his Speedo. Instead of popping off a witty comment to help us bond, I turned toward the window and tried not to listen as the other women traded Elvis trivia for Charles and Diana factoids. Smarty-pants geekboy was on his own.

I caught a whiff of his woodsy cologne and then his whisper tickled along the neckline of my tank top. "You should have some Neosporin on that." Whether from his whisper or his fingers tracing just below the scrapes on my shoulder, the hair on my arms stood up.

Damn, but he smelled good. "Um." Why was my heart racing?

As close as he was, he could probably feel it, maybe even hear it.

He leaned in even closer. "That's what you get, carrying on with the wrong kind of men." His words were scarcely more than hot breath against my skin, and then his knuckles skimmed my shoulder, leaving a trail of goosebumps.

"I wasn't carrying on!" I whispered. "I was—"

"Mitchell?" Althea warbled.

"Hmm?" he said, slipping his hand from my shoulder.

"I asked you which Elvis song is your favorite."

I turned in my seat, enough so I could see his face when he answered.

He pushed up his glasses with two fingers before breaking out an attractive, if insolent, grin. With a wink and a pointed look from me to Lonnie and back, he replied, "Suspicious Minds."

My hand itched to slap him. That would do nothing but cause a scene, though. I lifted the hand high enough to catch his eye and flipped him the bird.

"Oh, such a powerful choice," Althea gushed. "You must be a man of unplumbed emotional depths. You can tell so much about a person by their favorite Elvis song."

"Yeah," Lonnie piped up from the front seat, "his woman must've cheated on him."

The day before, we'd learned Lonnie's favorite was Too Much. So fitting.

"I'll catch you up, Mitchell," Althea said. "We'll start in the back seat and work our way forward." Great, I could only imagine the look on Mitchell's face when she told him what I'd said the day before. *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* was all that had come to mind at the time. "Miranda's favorite is."

"A Little Less Conversation," I interrupted.

"Miranda!" Poor Althea's jaw dropped. "Aren't we testy today? Did you have a late night too?"

Beside me, Mitchell snickered.

"Noisy neighbors," I muttered to no one in particular.

"Oh, poor dear," Rhona said. "I understand. I need my sleep too."

Her one-sided conversation about how much sleep humans needed at different ages lasted the rest of the way to our yoga class.

\* \* \* \*

Feeling like quite the tourist, I exited the yellow Feng Shuimobile in the middle of Sedona's "main street" shopping district. We had no classes scheduled today, so I'd seized the opportunity to be alone and talked Tim into driving me downtown before anyone else could offer to tag along.

"I'll be back here at three, or you can phone if you need a ride before then," he assured me as I shut the passenger door. With a friendly wave, he drove away.

Now, which way to go first? The streets were lined with shops selling everything from mainstream clothing to holistic medicine, palm readings to burritos. The single item on my shopping list was a new pair of yoga pants in a light color. I was literally cooking each morning in my black ones, but refused to wear shorts to our sessions, what with Lascivious Lonnie constantly peeking where he shouldn't.

Wanting to do some footloose window-shopping first, I set out down the street. The crowds were an eclectic mix of people straight out of the spa in their velour workout suits and wealthy visitors decked out in Versace, alongside Joe Shmuck tourists in denim shorts and flip-flops.

Hmm. Quite the clientele Mdme. Futuriste had in her Crystal Ball Readings shop. *Put Your Records On* lilted from a sidewalk café with a menu boasting Organic Lemonade. I was free and single and I could damn well spend seven-fifty on ten ounces of lemonade if I wanted. Nobody to harp, since my money was all mine. Resting in the shade of an umbrella table, I sipped my treat and watched the crowds passing. Would heat thin the mid-day traffic?

A cyclist across the street caught my eye. He had great legs, at least what I could see of them above those tall socks.

It couldn't be. But when he pulled over to chain his bike to a pole, I could tell it was. Instead of the nerdy wire frames, he wore stylish wraparound sunglasses. No way were those prescription. He pulled off his helmet and hung it on the handlebars, then looked up and down the street.

Dude might have cool sunglasses, but the short-sleeve button up shirt with the belted khaki shorts weren't the height of sporty. Of course, any guy methodical enough to have written notes on the neatly folded paper he pulled from his back pocket probably would not be worried about fashion.

Mitchell was such an anomaly. Was he a true geek, accidentally athletic and occasionally hip, or was he a cool guy trying to be a geek? He looked again at his paper, then the building before him, and went in the front door.

"Cuts and Crystals," the sign above the door read. A hair salon. Hmm. He didn't look like he needed a trim, but maybe he was anal about his hair length. I'd all but moved across the street to where he'd disappeared, when he emerged, looking at his notes. He went to his right, up the street, moving with purpose.

Well, my lemonade was still holding out. I'd follow along on my side of the street and be inconspicuous. It was hard keeping up with his long-legged stride while still maintaining the window-shopping demeanor, but I worked at it, all the while cursing how short I was. He ducked into Chakras and Curls next, coming back out in seconds. How many hair salons would he case before choosing one? He seemed terribly uncomfortable in that stuffy shirt, and kept rubbing his neck inside the collar.

Next stop for Mitchell, The Dancing Vortex Day Spa. What could he be up to?

Further up the street, nearer the new shops, I finally made the connection between all the places he'd been in. Bronze Bunz. They all offered tanning!

He seemed to stay inside for a long time. I'd all but decided he was inside tanning, but then he came out and crossed the pedestrian walk to my side. I turned my back and concentrated on some Navajo rugs as he passed and entered Sedona Stylin', to my left.

This surveillance game was fun, and I was in no mood for it to end. Which way would he go when he came out of this store? Hoping to not blow my cover, I ducked into an alley on the other side of the rug display. The problem with my new locale was, if he went the other way down the street, I'd lose him. With another slurp on my drink, I stepped forward far enough to poke my head out and peek.

"Why are you tailing me?" Mitchell stood on the other side of the corner, like in a movie, his hands shoved oh-so-casually in his pockets.

The emphatic denial at the tip of my tongue would be pointless. He'd only laugh at me like he had when he caught me checking him out last night. "Why are you wanting to tan more? You're going to look like an Oompah Loompah if you keep it up!" Maybe if I put him on the defensive, I'd win this round.

He pursed his lips, then stepped closer, forcing me back into the shaded alley. "Tell me about it," he said, his voice lower. Again, he rubbed his neck inside the collar, giving me the distinct impression he wasn't used to wearing a shirt like that. With a look left and right, he bit his lower lip. "Which looks more natural, tanning beds, or spray tan?"

"What have you been using? Lotion?" I knew the answer before he nodded. "Damn. I've never seen it go that dark before." I couldn't help myself; I touched his arm, so unnaturally brown, so smooth...and then looked down at his legs, where only fresh stubble marked his skin. "Um. What are you into, cross-dressing or something?"

He yanked his sunglasses off and glared, so I pulled my hand back. "No!"

What a relief! No cross-dresser would sound that offended at the suggestion.

"I shaved for a swim meet. Triathlon. Race."

"Which?"

"None of your damn business, okay? Will you just answer my question and quit following me around?"

"Oh. *I'm* following *you*, is it? How do I know you didn't follow me down here? Where'd you get that bike, anyway? Is that the one you ride in the *triathlon?*"

He groaned and pulled at his shirt again. "Do you have to know everything?"

"Funny how you can spend the morning making allusions to my sex life, but when I ask why you do something obvious out-there like remove your body hair, I'm intrusive!" Didn't serial killers get nervous when people asked too many questions? And didn't they totally check out their victims and learn everything about them first? I was tempted to barrel out of that alley and scream loud and long if he tried to stop me.

"Okay." He stepped closer, impatient but restraining himself, judging by the big cord of muscle twitching in his neck. How could he smell so good after riding miles on a bike in the Arizona sun? "Ms. Reed, I most humbly apologize for teasing you about your nonexistent sexual affair with the rich Texan. Now, will you answer my question?"

"Nonexistent? Nonexistent!" Now I was pissed for sure. Who was he to go around assuming there was no affair? I suddenly wished I'd slept with Lonnie, in case it would bother this jerk. "I'll have you know, Lonnie and I shared a very satisfying interlude last night." I looked away for the lie, but managed an eyelash flutter to disguise it, along with a happy sigh. "He's got the stamina of a twenty-year-old."

Mitchell laughed, actually threw his head back and guffawed! Like he didn't believe a word of my lie. That fleeting shadow... Had he followed us last night? Of course, it would be preposterous to accuse him. And no way would he admit to it.

At last, he opened his mirth-crinkled eyes and looked down into mine. "No guy can perform well when he's that drunk."

He had a point. So maybe that was how he knew. Or else he recognized a bad liar when he saw one. Maybe he hadn't followed a complete stranger across the common area of her hotel in the dark of night and skulk in the bushes. Either way, I looked like an idiot for fabricating the story about my crazy night of sex with Lonnie.

My face grew hotter by the second, and it had little to do with the noonday heat. "The spray tan gives better coverage but tends to fade if you don't keep it moisturized." I ducked under his arm, but without resorting to a pinch as I'd done with Lonnie. "Look, I've got some things to buy. Don't forget, we have a class at four." Without so much as a goodbye, I hurried down the street, hoping to ditch the embarrassment of my fib.

Several flurried blocks later, it hit me.

Althea hadn't given my last name when she introduced me to Mitchell. Yet, he knew my last name. The maiden name I'd only resumed using in the last month.

\* \* \* \*

Dear Randi—this still feels weird, talking to myself, but hopefully it will grow on me.

Day three and guess what? We have a surprise companion who joined us today. None other than the wisecracking nerd, Mitchell, with the body of a pro athlete, a tan like Hulk Hogan, and a wardrobe of Smokey the Bear meets Arvid. Speaking of class, thanks to him and that bonehead Lonnie, I missed nearly all of Professor Sudo's specifics on how this time travel method works. The guys were sitting right behind me talking the entire time. As if they could possibly have anything to say a fraction as important as the Professor! Right in the middle of the lecture, Lonnie asks Mitchell—who told us on the way back from yoga that he's going back in time to study ash fallout from Mt. St. Helens. Note to self: Look up on net later, what year St. Helens blew. Please God, do not let it be in '80. That is MY year, dammit! —"So. You're some kinda scientist?" As if this fact has not been established much earlier in the day. And Mitchell responds, smug as can be, "A volcanologist." Right in the middle of Sudo's explaining his diagram of the vortexes joining forces at a certain point and creating a wormhole into Earth's recent past. Then up pipes Lonnie, who I now know beyond a shadow of a doubt did NOT write his own essay to get in this program, "So, you study guys like Spock?" I could have stuck my pencil through that guy's eye socket! Mental midgets. I kept hoping Sudo would stop lecturing and send those guys to the corner or assign them sentences to write. Anything to shut them up.

All I got out of the lecture was that our yoga practice is going to start focusing on opening the upper chakras to enable deeper meditation. Honestly, if mental strength is required for this time travel, Lonnie doesn't stand a chance of going back in time to ultimately eliminate his own possibility of existence. After the booger of a hangover he had this morning, the moron went out drinking with Althea and Rhona again. Who knows, maybe Mitchell went too. I haven't heard anything from next door in hours. Looks like I'm the odd man out. Sigh.

I could kill for a soda and a candy bar right now. Everybody else is out defiling their bodies with alcohol. Why should I deny myself sugar when I happen to know the maids have vending machines right outside their laundry door?

After grabbing a pocketful of coins from my purse and making sure to lock my door behind me, I headed back toward the laundry room. It was so quiet out, the few other guests must have settled in for the night. Either that, or they'd gone out on the town too. Hell. I hadn't exactly been Ms. Invite Me Out. I probably deserved to be excluded.

By the time I got to the sugar vendors, I felt low enough to purchase a Peanut Roll, Reese's Cups, and a Snickers, besides the big bottle of Pepsi. Not that I intended to eat *all* the candy right then. I'd stash some away and save myself a potentially embarrassing trip next time I had a craving.

A peanut butter cup half in my mouth, I rounded the corner of the building in time to see Mitchell execute a perfect dive into the water. So, he didn't go out drinking with everyone else! When he rose to the surface and began his impeccable breast-stroke, the way his shoulders and back moved mesmerized me. Once again I was struck by the way his body seemed made for this sport. It wouldn't hurt anybody for me to stand here in the shadow of the wall, watch him swim while I ate my candy bar. If he spotted me, I could claim I was on the way back to my room.

He really was pretty quiet when he swam. I'd never perfected any swimming technique. I could save myself and maybe rescue another person, but my strokes were always choppy, uneven somehow. Mitchell's form was a thing of beauty. So was his rear end in that tight little suit, which I got to see every time he dove over at the end of a lap. Thank God for Speedos, now that I'd seen a guy who looked good in one. The idea of him shaving for a race didn't even bother me anymore; it kind of intrigued me.

The next time I pulled my eyes away from him, my Snickers was half gone. Damn. When had I finished the Reese's? And how could I still feel hungry? Maybe it wasn't hunger so much as flutters in my stomach. My racing heart *must* be a sugar rush. Chugging Pepsi, I debated whether to move closer and stand behind that pine tree. I'd never live it down if Mitchell caught me spying on him again, but with its wide bottom, the tree was fail-proof cover. Yeah, my bottom would probably be about as wide by tomorrow, because I'd decided to eat the Nut Bar as well. After all, the calories were the same whether I consumed them now or later.

While he swam toward the other side of the pool, I stole up behind the tree. Our rooms weren't far behind me, so I should be able to slip unnoticed into mine when he got out of the pool to dry off.

I'd just allowed myself to relax and fixate on his very low abdomen as he did a backstroke, when I had to pull my eyes away to open the wrapper of the damn Nut Roll. Off to my left, Althea and Rhona were going into their rooms. And Lonnie, sure enough, was not going to his room, but heading toward mine! If he kept up his course, I'd have no way to keep him from seeing me but to go around the other side of the tree and be found out by Mitchell. That wouldn't do at all. But I didn't want to babysit Lonnie again either. I'd have to hide. The hedge behind me would get me closer to my room, but I couldn't get the door unlocked and make it inside before Lonnie reached me.

Propelled by pure inspiration, I snuck into Mitchell's patio and ducked behind the wall.

Lonnie's footfalls were loud, unsteady, and not far away. In true testament to the time he'd spent with Althea, he was mumbling the words to *Jailhouse Rock*.

"Everybody, let's rock," he sang as he pushed my patio gate open with a bang. "Raaandiii." He knocked on my door.

On my knees, I was already in the perfect position to pray Lonnie would keep it quiet so Mitchell wouldn't hear him. Beside me on the concrete, rectangles of light beamed out through the French doors. As Lonnie continued to knock next door, I allowed myself a glimpse inside. Mitchell might be a pocket-protector kind of guy, but he dumped his clothes on the floor like any other dude. One outfit, anyway. Running shoes and shorts, a sweaty-looking muscle shirt—hey, wait a minute! If he had running shoes, why'd he go around all day in the hiking boots? The guy had been out for a run, not down at the bar. Running, biking, swimming. Maybe he'd been telling the truth about the triathlon.

On the table near the door was a stack of books. What did that one binding say? Erections? Oh. *Eruptions—How Volcanoes Work*. Below that was another entitled, *The History of Volcanoes*, and lower still, *How Volcanoes Affect Our Planet*.

Next door, Lonnie called my name, whacked my door and then muttered, "Shit!" All I could think was, *thank God*, when he left. What did the guy see in me, anyway? Maybe he thought I was playing hard to get.

So what was Mr. Volcanologist doing with all those basic books about his supposed field of expertise?

Was that the pool gate squeaking open? Oh Lord. Mitchell was on his way. I made a mad dash out his gate and thanked God once again because big moron Lonnie had left my gate open. With only seconds to spare, I landed on my knees behind the wall of my own patio this time, waited for him to pass and enter his room. Feeling extremely foolish for my hiding and chasing, all in the name of checking out a fine body, I caught my breath and willed my heart-rate back to normal. When it was safe, I stood, brushed off my knees and dug in my pocket for my keys. In the process, I managed to drop my bottle of soda and the still-wrapped Nut Roll.

Mitchell's screen door banged open.

I froze, holding my breath. Not another late night banter with him! I couldn't take it. "Hey."

I turned. He'd poked his head around the wall between our patios. "Oh. Hey. Just on my way back from, um, getting a snack." The heart-rate was right back where it had been before. I bent to pick up the Pepsi and candy bar, and in the process, the Reese's wrapper fell out of my pocket.

"Looks like you were hungry."

The last thing I needed tonight was to exchange smart ass remarks. "Yeah, well, salad for two meals in one day. No surprise my stomach's growling." I snatched up the Reese's wrapper and stuck it back in my pocket, where the Snickers one should have been. Only it wasn't. Where had I lost it?

"Tell me about it." He vaulted over his wall, then mine, his towel still wrapped around his waist. Show off. "Oh, man. Is that a Salted Nut Roll? Where'd you find that?"

"Um." Here I'd been expecting judgment from him, thinking he only stuck healthy food in that god-like body of his. But he looked envious. "There's a, um, machine out back for the employees."

"I gotta go get one."

"Well, this was the last one."

He looked so let down when he said, "Oh."

I knew then it was a mistake, but I felt guilty for spying in his room, and he was so close to me, dripping wet and almost naked. And *hungry*.

"You can have it. I mean, you've probably worked up an appetite." I had an appetite myself, though not for food anymore. Without waiting for his reply, I held out the bar for him to take. Somehow, I'd expected his hand to be cold from being in the pool. But it was very warm, nearly hot, when it closed around mine. I belatedly noticed my heart was still racing, as it had been since I'd started watching him swim. He stood there quiet and calm after that exertion, and I was the one breathing fast.

"We'll split it," he said and freed the candy, then letting go of my hand, opened the wrapper. After he handed me half, it didn't seem unusual to be standing out in the dark eating a candy bar with a relative stranger who was fibbing about his profession and obviously hiding more, who had somehow found out my last—

"Hey!" I stopped, mid-chew, horrified to have trusted him. "Howth you know my latht name?"

"Your latht name?" he repeated. "Oh." He gulped and swallowed his candy. "From the press conference," came out fast.

I backed away. My last name at the time of the press conference had been Montclair, not Reed.

It would be best not to let him know I was onto him and his serial-killer ways. As calmly as possible, I choked down my mouthful of candy and then said, "I really need to get to bed. Good night." Once again, I locked my doors behind me.

#### Dear Randi,

Oh. My. God. I just narrowly avoided getting caught peeking into Mitchell's room. He is sooo not a volcanologist. He may not even be a scientist, for all I know. He knows things he's got no business knowing. I cannot believe I actually fantasized about him kissing me out there, as I calmly shared what could have been my last supper with him.

It's not true what they say about all the good looking guys being taken or gay. Some of them are highly suspicious characters, lying about who they are, lulling us into complicity with their hot buns and sexy green eyes.

I will find out what this shyster is up to, I vow it. Let this diary be a record: If I turn up dead, investigate the dude in room 4.

Randi.

## Chapter 3

All decked out in my new pink yoga pants and a coordinating green-and-pink tank, I opened my door ready to stretch, meditate, and unravel the mystery one room over. Something was jammed between my doors. My confidence dissolved with a small "Eek!" Forcing myself to stay calm, I let the dark item fall. It hit the floor and moved, or rather, unfolded. My Snickers wrapper. Whoever had put here it knew it was mine, and they wanted me to know they knew. It was so early, I couldn't imagine anyone else up besides those of us required to greet the dawn with a yoga mat on the hillside. Someone had watched me the night before, probably while I was watching Mitchell swim, or looking in his room. Someone in the time travel party. This was not good.

As I dropped the wrapper in the garbage, I noticed something scribbled on the inside with black marker. With shaking hands, I smoothed it flat and read, "Private eyes are watchin' you. They see your every move." Below the writing was a picture of two crossed eyes, each forming the letter 'O', and a 'B' before, so it said "Boo!" A happy little warning, especially with the long lashes on the eyes. Was I being teased, or threatened?

I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

\* \* \* \*

By the time we'd traipsed back from our yoga practice, most of the other guests had already disappeared for the day.

Breakfast at the Feng Shui Inn was a quiet affair. Usually I'd stop by the dining room and load a plate with fruit, maybe some oatmeal, then go on to my room and eat alone. Lonnie and the ladies always went directly to their rooms. I wasn't sure whether they dined together later or not. Nor did I care. For myself, I enjoyed the quiet time with all my senses humming, my circulation improved from the yoga.

Today it did not seem like I'd be calmly reflecting over breakfast. Indeed, my thoughts had raced since I'd left my room. Poor yogi had been frustrated. I was usually his best pupil, but could barely concentrate enough to keep up with him.

It hadn't helped having Mitchell right beside me the entire class, waiting to look me in the eye every time I glanced his way. I really had no idea what to do about him anymore. On the ride back to the Inn, one thing had come clear to me: our every exchange ended with me running from him. From teaching third graders about nature, I knew predators love to chase their prey. If I kept running, I was sure to be chased. Time for me to mix up this game and be the aggressor, maybe.

This lovely morning was the perfect opportunity. We went into the dining room at the same time. The way I figured, if I sat down to eat at the table, he could hardly fill his plate and leave me sitting there alone. And if he sat down first, I'd join him as if I had no choice.

"Join me for breakfast?" he asked, and nearly sent me running.

So much for becoming the aggressor!

Swallowing the sudden urge to retreat, I pasted on a smile, feeling like I had at my first job interview. "Sure."

Once seated across the table from him, I couldn't help but gawk at the huge platter of food he'd taken. Calories out had to be calories in first. It must take a lot of food to fuel his exercise regimen and all that muscle mass. But I needed to keep my mind off those muscles for now, concentrate on discovering the truth behind the lies he'd been telling.

"So," I said, picking at a slice of watermelon, "you probably hear this all the time, but I really love volcanoes. Geology is my favorite science segment to teach. The kids really love them too."

"Yeah?" he answered. "Third grade, that's what you teach, right?" Now that was made public in the press conference. But he hadn't fooled me by changing the topic to me.

I'd change it right back. "So which volcano is your favorite?"

"Favorite? Oh, I think I like them all the same. You know, just another day at the office."

"I suppose," I replied. "Still, I can't help being partial to Mt. St. Helens because she took us all by surprise, erupting sideways like that. And then there's Kilauea, constantly building, growing, creating. You've gotta love her constancy."

"Yeah." Mitchell seemed intent on his food, but behind his glasses, his eyes were moving a lot.

"I'd love to be able to see lava when it's hot. Like at Kilauea, where it rolls out so peacefully all the time. When does it become lava, exactly? What's the other name for it, you know, before the eruption?"

He swallowed hard, then shoved most of a muffin into his mouth.

The answer was magma and he didn't know it. How long should I let him sweat it out? In class, I'd never let a student squirm this long. Unless the little shit came to school claiming to be an expert!

He pushed his glasses up and looked anywhere but at me. Like the kid in class who does not want to be called on and avoids meeting my eye.

"Magma," I relented, snapping my fingers. "That's it. It's magma in the earth and lava outside."

"Yeah. That's what I was gonna say. I mean, I wasn't sure what you were asking. You're, uh, pretty knowledgeable for an amateur."

I wanted to tell him he was pretty clueless for an expert. The smart remark sat on the tip of my tongue, wanting so badly to come out and sting him. But I'd bide my time. And once again he had tried to turn the conversation to me.

"Tell me how you managed to get into the time travel program so late," I said.

"Oh, all in the name of science. You know, with St. Helens showing activity again." He tipped back in his chair and rubbed his fingers through his hair. "It's pretty important to gather this data."

"What exactly are you looking to find out?"

"I don't want to bore you. It's just some ash samples from different parts of the country."

Feigning fascination, I put my elbows on the table and rested my chin on my hands. "Just some ash samples." His eyes stared straight across at mine as I spoke. "Yet it was such a rush, they put you in this group rather than wait three months 'til Sudo goes commercial? Is the scientific community concerned that St. Helens is unstable?"

"I don't—I mean, not to my knowledge—or...I wouldn't be at liberty to say. It's a top secret assignment." He sat forward in the chair again and folded his arms over his chest.

He'd managed to meet my challenge and freeze me in my tracks. I needed time to come up with a new strategy, but there was no way I'd retreat as I had in the past.

"Ah, now you've gone all James Bond on me," I purred. I leaned toward him without so much as blinking, until we were close enough I could smell his cologne over the cantaloupe.

He was the first to look away. And at my breasts.

Words cannot express my satisfaction. Still using my best I-think-you're-so-hot voice, I asked, "If you told me, would you have to kill me?"

He smirked and looked from my chest back to my face. That confident smile was so incredibly sexy, the eyes behind the glasses sure of his appeal. "Bond doesn't kill his women." As he spoke, his hand slid warm and firm over my wrist, up my arm. "But he does always get the upper hand, doesn't he?" And then his fingers skimmed from my shoulder to my neck, raising goosebumps as they went. Breathing got harder as his thumb traced my lower lip. This might be a risky game I was playing and he might be a dangerous man, but at that moment I didn't care. Curling toes, racing heart, parting lips. The signs were all there; I was about to be kissed and I wanted it. I wanted to feel the thrill of his lips on mine. My bottom lip still tickled from his touch. I resisted the urge to bite it, as he smiled and leaned closer.

"Shore hope ya'll didn't eat up all the good stuff! I'm starvin'."

Lonnie. In a microsecond, I was back in my seat, as was Mitch. Hmm. Mitch seemed a much better name to call him.

With my heart still fluttering, I couldn't possibly eat any more of my breakfast.

"If you guys will excuse me, I've got some personal business to take care of."

Mitch did the gallant thing and rose as I did. When I reached the doorway and looked back, he was seated again, but obviously waiting for me to look back, because he winked at me before replying to whatever Lonnie had asked.

Well, he'd won. I'd run off again, but with damn good reason.

Dear Randi,

Note to self: DO NOT GET INVOLVED WITH THIS MAN! A troublesome guy is the reason you are here in the first place! Did you learn nothing from your mother's experience with your father? Hmm?

In re: yesterday's note to self: Internet research confirms 1980 is the year Mt. St. Helens erupted. True enough, it's also the year of your time travel destination. However, this is by no means any indication you will see said no-good fibbing man ever again after leaving here in, say, four days tops. In theory, you could safely have a no-strings fling for the first time ever.

Hello? To self: For all you know, that guy could be seriously dangerous, or a wanted criminal at the very least.

Puh-leeze! How could he be working for the government and get in this program if he is a wanted criminal? And listen to yourself. Your father is likely a wanted criminal in 1980. Who are you to judge? Have you forgotten Mitch's washboard abs?

To wild self: The guy sports the fake tan of an 80's bodybuilder and wears glasses we both know he doesn't need. He's lying about his career and probably self-absorbed, as much time as he spends on his body. And obviously a player, baby. Those smooth moves he used on you? Been done hundreds of times before. By HIM.

Boring old divorcee, better-safe-than-sorry self: I WANT HIM. It has been eight months since my last non-self-administered orgasm. Hello? Do you have anything to say in response? Are you going to give me the silent treatment now?

## Chapter 4

I dropped my room key with a clatter on the table by the door. Dangling by fishline in front of my window, a crystal sent a rainbow arcing through the afternoon sunlight. I may be a westerner, but I'd studied my feng shui enough to know crystals equal romance. This was a very unwelcome intrusion.

I'd had a hell of a time trying to concentrate during the session, with Mitch seated right next to me, smelling like he did. If he'd lay off the cologne, maybe it would be easier for me to pretend he wasn't there. Since that was highly unlikely, I needed to spend some time meditating in private. Sudo had stressed that it was imperative we hone our mind-clearing skills, open our chakras to allow the precious electromagnetic energy from the vortexes to enter. Being distracted by the mere presence of another person was proof positive I needed more mental discipline.

Just as I settled into my cross-legged position on the floor, my cellphone rang. The Linda Ronstadt ringtone meant it was my mom—who I'd spoken to the first morning to let her know I'd made it safe and sound, and studiously avoided since. The guilt would eat me alive if I didn't answer and talk with her before I tried to meditate. With a deep sigh, I rose and opened the phone.

"Hi, Mom."

"Randi. Finally! I've been trying and trying to call you."

"I know. I'm sorry, it's just been bad timing. I'm in and out of the room all day and can't really bring my cell along for our sessions."

"The way they've got you sequestered, it sounds like some kind of cult you've joined."

"Mom." Not the cult argument again. "That's not it at all. I've been busy, and really tired at night. Would they let me answer this call if it was a cult? Huh?"

"They would if they didn't want anybody to know it was a cult! If it's not, why can't you have anybody along? Why can't somebody be there to make sure you make it back okay?"

A knock at my door interrupted the reply I was formulating. I looked through the screen to see Mitch, who didn't even wait for me to wave him in before sauntering through the door.

"Mom." Where was I? "Um."

Mitch's brows raised and he grinned. Such nice teeth...

"Randi? Are you all right? Are they coaching you what to say?"

"No, geez! Nobody is telling me what to say. Maybe your ideas are so wild and far-fetched I'm finally running out of ammo to fight them with! You can't be here because it would be distracting. This is like, like...mental bootcamp. I need to really be able to think hard in order for this to work. To master my own mind—"

"They're brainwashing you!"

"Nooo." Thank God I hadn't said anything about cleansing our minds. "It's really important for me to be able to focus, or I might not make it to the right time or place. Or maybe make it back here."

She started sniffling, and my scare tactic backfired. "I know we already said our goodbyes, but honey, I'm not ready to lose you yet."

"You're not losing me."

Mitch had taken a seat in a chair near the door. Judging by his grin, this conversation amused him.

I sought solace in his company and rolled my eyes at him. "I'll be fine, Mom. I need to know what happened to my father. It's nothing against you." Uncharacteristic silence on the other end told me she was either hurt or disapproving. "You know when somebody on the news has a missing person in their family, and they really need to know, even if the person died? Closure. That's all, Mom. Even if he blew me off and decided he didn't want his daughter, I want to know once and for all."

"Hold on, Randi. I need to take this call."

Leave it to my mom to call me from work, and then have to pause the conversation in the middle of me pouring my heart out.

"Kay," I answered, after she'd already clicked over. To Mitch, I said, "I'm on hold. It could be minutes or hours 'til she gets back to me, if it's a client."

"What's she do?" He wasn't exactly waiting to hear my reply. In fact, he'd spied the Snicker's wrapper on the table, right where I'd left it.

"Accountant. What's up?"

I'd hoped to distract him, but he twirled the wrapper and eyed me suspiciously, leaving no doubt that he was the one who'd left me the message and stuffed it in my door. "Keeping this?"

"No!" Why hadn't housekeeping disposed of it, anyway? Perhaps because they were too busy meddling in my love life, hanging crystals in my window.

"You didn't seem too worried about keeping track of it last night."

I crossed my chest with my free arm, wishing to hell my mom would come back on the line and rescue me from this conversation. "It's trash. I dropped it on the way back from the candy machine." Somewhere. I dropped it somewhere I shouldn't have been, like while watching him swim from behind the pine tree, or...

"Mind telling me how it came to be where I found it?"

"And where was that?" Damn. The offhand, flip question had come out much more curious than I'd planned.

Mitch rolled the paper over again and cocked an eyebrow. "You asking that question can only mean one of two things. A, you're being a smart-ass to stall, which would not be unheard of, or B, you really don't know where you dropped it because you took more than one detour on the way back from the vending machines. Assuming your red face means you're embarrassed, I'm going to guess it's B. So what else were you up to last night?"

A stall tactic was my only ray of hope for getting out of this conversation alive. "You assumed a lot, sticking it on my door, you know. Anybody can drop a candy wrapper."

"Yeah, but you were carrying other evidence of an all-out binge." He stood and held out the wrapper, but I kept my arm firmly against me and didn't accept it. "So what were you up to last night? Huh?"

Mom, where are you when I need you? If only my mental powers were strong enough to will her on the line. "I was hiding out from Lonnie." There, why didn't I think of that before? I could hide from Lonnie anywhere.

"On my patio?"

Oh, thank God. At least I knew for sure where he'd found it, and he didn't know I'd been brushing up my voyeur skills. "Yes."

"Why does he keep pursuing you?" Before I had a chance to be offended, he stepped closer. "That was a bad word choice. I can see why he'd pursue you," he said, taking a sweeping inventory of my body that left me quite warm. "What I mean is, why is he so damn persistent?"

"I don't know." My entire body tingled from having him so close again. "He's probably not used to women ignoring him."

"Mmm." Brushing his finger along my jaw, he smiled, giving me a glimpse of those perfect white teeth. "Maybe we should give him some obvious signs that he should get lost."

With barely enough breath, I asked, "Such as?"

"Such as this morning at breakfast, we shouldn't have stopped what we were about to do when he walked in."

All I could do was nod, knowing that hot look in his eyes meant he had another kiss in mind. My heart did a joyful front flip. He was so close I could actually feel the heat of the kiss to come.

"Randi?" My mom said in my ear. "Are you still there?"

We jumped apart. Again.

"Yeah, Mom. I'm here." Why hadn't I hung up? The few extra seconds for her to redial my number would have been absolute bliss.

"I really hate for you to go to Miami alone. I was terrified the entire time I lived in that nasty city. And what if you can't come back?"

With a chuck to my chin, Mitch stepped toward the door.

"I'll make it back fine, Mom." Dammit, now he was waving goodbye, and I didn't want him to leave! I must have been obvious, because he winked on his way out. With a sigh, I set about calming my mother. "We all saw on the news how Professor Sudo made it back, Mom. We watched

the footage of the Kennedy assassination. You made note of the trees in the background just like the rest of us. We even wrote it down, like he said to when he was on Dateline. And then the next day, we watched the same footage on TV and the right side of one tree was stripped completely bare of leaves."

"I know, but what if it's some sleight of hand trick he pulled on everybody?"

"Mom, it's in the history books now. Because of the tree, and the CD he left hanging there, for years everybody thought Kennedy might have been shot by aliens!" But millions of scribbled notes on sticky pads and the backs of phone bills were irrefutable proof that we all knew he'd actually succeeded in changing history. And the CD, now that it could be read, had Sudo's date of birth, name, and photo on it. It even had a 2007 date stamp on the file. "Anyway, if I couldn't come back to the present, I wouldn't be able to go to the past. It's easier to travel forward than back. I'll be fine, Mom. I love you, you know that?"

Damn, her sniffling made me feel guilty. "I love you too, honey. Just check in more often, okay? And if you get stuck in 1980, come to Colorado. I'll believe you and take you in. Okay?"

Yeah, right. It was hard enough convincing her time travel was possible after she'd seen proof of it. Still...if agreeing would calm her, I was all for it. "Okay, Mom. Bye."

\* \* \* \*

I woke to knocking on my door. "Erm," I mumbled to the carpeted floor, where I'd simply leaned over from my meditative position and slipped off to dreamland. "Yuck." I could not believe I'd slept on hotel carpet, no matter how clean the place looked on the surface.

Summoning the effort to rise, I looked out the window to see the back of Mitch's head. "Hold on," I called. God, I had to look horrible. I could actually *feel* the carpet marks on my left cheek. Maybe if I stood so he could only see my right side...

"Hi," he said when I unlocked and opened the door. "You were sleeping? Sorry."

"Um. It's okay." I folded my arms under my breasts. "I was supposed to be meditating."

He stepped past me and looked around as he entered the room. "Is there homework I don't know about? Or do you love meditating?"

"I want to advance to the level required for travel. I didn't come here just to get away from it all, you know. Besides, didn't you hear the professor today? He leaves in two weeks to test out another vortex somewhere." Although I was still pretty confident I'd be travel-worthy within a few days, the newly imposed deadline weighed heavily.

"Hmm," Mitch mused. "You got any guesses where he might be going? Stonehenge, maybe? Or Easter Island?" Squinting at my face, he started laughing. He'd turned around before I could present my un-marred right side. "What happened to you?"

"I was tired." Geez, how humiliating. He didn't *have* to make fun of me every time he saw me. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Oh, are we grumpy?" He chucked my chin. "Come on, splash water on your face or something. I rented a Jeep. We're going for a ride."

"I'm not sure. There's a yoga class right before dinner."

"That's for the spa people. It's not for the time travel class. Even Sudo would agree the teacher's pet deserves a night off."

It sure seemed like Mitch was always trying to prevent me from furthering my mental mastering. Intentional?

As I slipped on my sandals and went out the door he held open for me, I couldn't help feeling elated, like a teenager playing hooky.

He surprised me by leading me toward the employee parking lot in back, where we climbed in the gleaming red Jeep. "Did you park back here so we could sneak away?" I asked, buckling myself in.

"You didn't seem thrilled to have everybody know about your love life with Lonnie." He started the Jeep and executed a tight turn, then peeled out on the gravel as we left the lot.

Did he mean this ride with him was part of my love life? "Hey! I had no love life with Lonnie." And now, in addition to sneaking away from the lessons we should be practicing, we were running off together *in secret*. Well, not running off so much as... "Where we going, anyway?"

"I saw this road the other day when I was out on the bike, looks like it goes up that mountain." He had to almost shout to be heard above the wind rushing past us. "If you're up for it, I bet the sunset will be killer."

Sunset. He wanted to go watch the sun set with me. How romantic. And stupid of me to agree! As we buzzed down the street toward town, he looked over at me, then leaned closer. "I figured up there, maybe we wouldn't get interrupted."

I couldn't help looking away, but turned back for a long, breath-stealing stare. God. I felt like asking him to pull over right there on the side of the road so we could finally indulge in that kiss we kept missing out on, the Near Miss Kiss.

He didn't pester me for an answer, and we drove on. It probably didn't matter what I would have answered. Mitch had his plan, and intended to stick to it. Right down to stopping at a drivethru to pick up a chicken dinner, which he informed me we both deserved after all the salad and Chinese food at the Inn. Feeling famished, I was hardly in a position to disagree.

Even driving down the road with the open top, the smell of hot chicken wafted up from the back seat and made my stomach growl. That was in between it fluttering around at the prospect of making out with Mitch atop a mountain. By the time we'd started our ascent, I really needed a diversion. "Where'd you get that bike?"

He shrugged as he executed a hairpin curve. "From Tim. Asked him if I could borrow it, when we came back from morning yoga."

"And did you get all your tanning options sorted out?" I couldn't resist giggling when he scrunched his mouth up in annoyance. Or maybe it was embarrassment. His orange tan was already fading. For a fleeting moment, I wished I'd be around long enough to see his natural skin tone. And that was just silly. I didn't need him to be pale in order to have a no-strings fling.

Up ahead of us, an RV moved at a snail's pace, forcing us to slow as well. He was spending more time gazing at my left knee than concentrating on the road.

"What are you looking at?"

"This." Feather-light, his fingers skimmed a scar on my knee, raising goose bumps along my leg. "How'd you get it?"

It was so tiny, I was amazed he'd noticed it. "Um, Rollerblading. When I first learned."

"You didn't wear kneepads." It wasn't a question, so much as a statement of fact, and a judgmental one at that.

"I—well, I had them. But I was practicing in my garage and didn't think I needed 'em yet." In fact, I'd crashed into the plastic milk crate where I'd stowed all my pads and helmet. But I wouldn't share that irony with Mitch. A guy who wore a bike helmet was serious about his safety gear. He didn't need any more evidence to add to his self-righteous arsenal. "You know, every time you talk to me, you piss me off."

"Hey," he said with a laugh. "It was only a character observation. You don't always exercise the precautions you know you should."

Like going off on a Jeep ride with the sexy serial killer next door. Good planning, Randi. Damn. Even he saw my folly. I crossed my arms and watched the brush passing by on the side of the road. How had I become so stupid and careless? Sex versus sense, sex takes all. Maybe I could catch the attention of somebody in the RV and make my escape.

"I'm not saying it's a flaw," he said. "You can't go through life playing it safe all the time. I don't really mean to piss you off. But it is fun sometimes."

I couldn't resist looking at him again. His eyes were so damn sincere behind those glasses. A smidge of spitefulness prodded me. "It would be safer for you to take off those fake glasses and wear your shades."

"Um. Fake?" His Adam's apple bobbed.

"Geez, Mitch. They fall off your head like ten times each yoga session. You insist on wearing them for that, but you don't wear them to ride a bike through a city?"

"Maybe they're for reading."

"God. Then you wouldn't need them now. I can tell they aren't prescription, because they don't make the side of your face any bigger or smaller. I used to need glasses before I got Lasik, so I know." Time to lay it all out there. "Just like I know you're not really a volcanologist. So what are you, really?"

"Not a...?" His voice got much higher. "What are you talking about?"

"Those books in your room? They're all about the basics of volcanoes, stuff any volcano specialist can recite in his sleep."

"Those are—I can't believe I'm justifying myself to a Peeping Tom, but they're for a friend of mine." Not the old *friend* line! "He's teaching a unit on volcanoes to kids. To a...Boy Scout troop. And he wanted me to look over the books and recommend one." With a lurch, he downshifted and took an opportunity to pass the RV.

I didn't buy his story. He wasn't knowledgeable enough about volcanoes, and we both knew it. For whatever reason, he was determined to maintain his cover.

"So," he yelled above the revving motor as he raced up the hill, "you think I'm lying about who I am, but you climbed in a vehicle with me?"

The condescending safety-first tone again.

"I guess I don't always exercise the precautions I should!" After that, I turned as far away from him in my seat as I could.

He slowed, chuckling. "You're safe with me."

I really wanted to believe him. Making out and having a picnic would sure beat the hell out of running away and having to hitch a ride down the mountain in order to escape a killer.

"You don't think the glasses are believable?"

"I really doubt anybody else has figured out they aren't prescription." Why I should be reassuring him, I did not know.

He nodded and looked over at me as if deep in thought. "You're very observant."

"Another character observation?"

"Yep. And you've got great legs, too."

My temperature went up a notch, in spite of my resolve to fear and loathe him. "That's not a character trait. But thanks, for saying so."

"Thanks for having them."

Boy, what a line! Not that I'd complain. Funny how Mitch's lines didn't give me the creeps like Lonnie's cheesy come-ons.

Almost to the top of the mountain, the road had straightened. With his right hand, he pulled my left one from my lap. "I reh—heard you recently divorced."

This last comment hung in the air, awaiting my reply. I'd developed a lengthy explanation to give acquaintances, over the last few months, trying mightily to not place blame in the process. With Mitch, I hoped a simple answer would suffice. "He wanted me to play it safe and I couldn't." When he nodded, I let out a sigh of relief. "What about you? Any failed marriages under your belt?"

He grinned. "Never heard it put that way before. Nope. My job includes lots of travel."

Another simple answer. It felt good. Maybe we could have a simple, no-strings fling and then go on our respective journeys.

Dear Randi,

OH! I am LIVID! That Mitchell is up to no good, I know it. He tricked me into going up a mountain with him for a romantic dinner and parking and watching the sunset, which I was all for. But when we get up there and park, he turns to me and says we really need to clear something up first. And guess what? Because of what Lonnie plans to do when he goes back in time, Mitch wants me to get Lonnie thrown out of the program. I told him it wasn't my business and he actually said if I don't nark Lonnie out, then he is going to. So then I asked him if he was working for the government and he started stammering. I told him I have him all figured out. He's a Fed. Sudo keeps telling us the Feds want to shut him down; they don't like civilians having his kind of ability. Mitchell was trying to find out from me today where Sudo is going next—Sudo specifically told us this afternoon he can't say ahead of time where he is going because he's afraid of sabotage. But Mitchell seems to think I have special privileges with Sudo. So anyway, after I accused him, he actually looked at me, and if you can believe it, said if anybody was putting the operation at risk of being shut down, it was me because I had knowledge a person planned to break every rule and wasn't holding up my sworn obligation to help enforce them. That guy! He turns everything back on me.

Needless to say, we never achieved the Near Miss Kiss. Although I did invite him to kiss my ass in a rather unfriendly tone. We turned around and drove back down here, and when he tried to give me some of the chicken, I told him to shove it.

I am so damn hungry now. I missed the buffet dinner and Tim has gone home for the night so I can't get a ride to town. The vending machines are my only option, I'm afraid.

Shithead just went out his door. Must be all done eating that big old greasy, yummy dinner by now. God, to think I really wanted to kiss that guy.

Okay. I heard him splash in the pool. I'll go get my candy now. But no way am I looking at him swimming. No way.

Note to self: You were right about not getting involved with him.

"Just my luck." Snickers was sold out. Wishing I had enough change on me to buy all the rest of the Nut Rolls in case Mitchell had a late-night snack attack, I settled for the two I could get.

This time, I made sure not to look at the pool as I walked back to my room. "Good night then, Mr. Goodman," I sneered to myself in belated reply to the "Goodnight then, Ms. Reed" he'd issued earlier when I'd left him and the Jeep in the parking lot. Not laying my eyes on the pool forced me to look at his patio, on the way to my own. "Goodman, huh!" Some last name. Hey, that reminded me…how'd he know my last name that first day? Did he have some file on me in his room?

I stopped in my tracks, the Ponderosa I'd hid behind the night before between me and the pool. If he had data on me, maybe, just maybe, he had something else incriminating in there. Proof he was here to sabotage Sudo's program. He must be, since he seemed intent on distracting Sudo's star pupil—me—from making progress. But why hadn't he halted the program that first day, when he got the dirt on Lonnie? Maybe he needed to have irrefutable proof, for me to tell Sudo and Sudo to not disqualify Lonnie before he could bust him.

"Maybe, maybe." I could hear his strokes out in the water, smooth and regular. Going on, doing business as usual, while poised to screw up my lifelong dream of meeting my father. If the program got shut down, I'd never get another chance.

He'd swim for at least thirty minutes. Easily enough time for me to get in his room and find out once and for all what he was really here for.

Rather than chance a squeak by opening his patio gate, I climbed over it, using all the stealthy ability I could muster. Awesome luck! He'd left his door unlocked.

Once inside his room, I could hear my heart hammering in my chest. The overpowering smell of leftover chicken reminded me how hungry I was. And it was all his fault I'd missed dinner, the jerk.

He'd left only the light in the bathroom on, so I had to squint to see. There on the nightstand sat the books he was supposedly reviewing for his friend. Eerie-quiet in here, not so much as the fan running in the wall AC unit. There. On the bed...a closed laptop. In Sleep Mode. I lifted the screen. When it hummed to life without a password, I let out my breath. While the icons loaded, I looked around the room once more. Barring a thorough rummage through his drawers, nothing else seemed snoop-worthy. The laptop was most likely to yield incriminating evidence.

"Shit." He may have left his room unlocked, but not his files. I had no idea where to even start guessing the password.

Maybe his email would open. Hmm. Meticulously empty Inbox, but a message was loading. Anything of interest in his Deleted Items folder? Geez, his computer was slower than mine. Scrolling down, I found he'd emptied his Deleted items. Figured. Not surprising from a guy who'd

actually write down addresses and directions to tanning salons. Naturally, he'd emptied his Sent folder, too. But ahhh, the message was Done Loading. A click back to the Inbox highlighted one message with attachments, the subject of which read: Re: M. Reed, Level 3 bkgrnd chk.

Without thinking twice, I clicked on the message.

Wheels,

Alert: Watch your step around this one, buddy! She won the science fair in seventh grade for a working model of a volcano, still on display at the school. Could be a serious threat to your cover.

Ha! No kidding.

The first attachment was my school ID photo. From the names of the next two attachments, I knew they were photos I did not want to look at: mugshots. The last attachment was labeled "criminal record". I'd leave that one 'til after I read the rest of the main message. Mitch's steady strokes continued to splash outside. Legs crossed under me, I got comfy, tore open one of the Nut Rolls and started munching.

This character 'Speed', who'd sent the message, organized his data in neat columns.

Miranda M. Reed, aka Miranda Montclair, aka Randi Montclair-Reed

DOB: March 17, 1978

Profession: Primary school teacher, Grade 3, same school for 6 years

Address: 710 6th. St.—a small 2 bedroom single family home—7 months

Prior Add: 1259 Cty Rd 8—4 years, with former husband, David Montclair

Marital: Divorced 1 month, separated approx. 7 months

Parents: Mother, Tina M. Reed age 47

Father, deceased, date unknown, declared 1983

Siblings: by stepfather, Joel Reed

Brother—John

Sister—Melissa

Current Lifestyle: Modest. Habitual. Shops at same grocery every Thursday, pays with same debit card, between \$75-\$90. Every Wednesday, \$9.76 at Blockbuster.

*Book-of-the-month member* 

*Fruit-of-the-month member* 

Panty-of-the-month member—yowza!

Member, Curves for Women

Deposits max allowable into teacher pension fund, also Christmas account.

Vehicle: 2002 Toyota Tacoma 4wd., Red, license plate THRLRID—Database suggests "thrill ride".

Credit score: 690. No, she never misses a payment.

Medical: No known conditions. Has annual physical and eye exam on birthday without fail.

Takes one flying lesson the first weekend of every odd month. Holds one-tenth interest in an Ultra-lite Glider.

Driver's License, class C plus motorcycle endorsement.

I paused long enough to take a swig of Pepsi, then ripped open the other candy bar. How invasive for someone to analyze my entire life like this. I should delete it when I was finished. But knowing Mitch, he'd email this contact and have the message re-sent, so what was the point? The laptop fan quieted.

Soft splashes echoed from the pool.

Next up: My school records. God. Good thing I had sustenance in my hands.

GPA upon graduation—3.5

Above-mentioned science fair win in 7th grade.

High school, member French Club, Spanish Club, Cheerleader grade 9 only, Girls' basketball team every year. Honor roll with 4.0 GPA until senior year. Finished American Gov't with a 71%. Received zeros for last 4 weeks of class.

Disciplinary: Suspension, 1 day, senior year, for cutting school. Gone skydiving!

In-school suspension, 1 day, cheating on American Gov't. test. —Note: Subject was providing answers to Swedish exchange student. When asked which questions she helped with so he could be graded on a curve, Reed refused to disclose the facts.

Old news. None of it could possibly be relevant to anything I did now. All that remained was the rap sheet. With a whir, the computer fan started again. I hadn't realized how quiet it had been. Might as well face my history and see what Mitch would soon know about me.

Criminal record, Miranda M. Reed.

1992: Trespassing to build an illegal—

With a rough jerk, my left arm was pinned behind my back, my right thrust tight into my chest. My mouthful of candy lodged in my throat. I hacked and struggled.

"You have the right to remain silent, a right I have no doubt you'll forfeit."

Mitch. If I didn't know the voice, his hairless, chlorine-smelling arm would have been a dead give-away.

At last I got the peanuts swallowed and went lax in his arms. As soon as he loosened his hold, I bucked against him, pinching his belly with my scrunched left hand and trying to duck under his right arm.

"Hold still or I'll pin you face down on the bed," he growled.

After a few more spastic attempts at freeing myself, I stilled.

"I can scream loud enough to get security here," I warned.

Mitch chuckled against my hair. "Go ahead, if you want me to press charges."

"I didn't take anything."

"No, but trust me, you'll be out of this program faster than you can say 'breaking and entering', if I turn you in."

I couldn't, absolutely, *couldn't* get expelled from Sudo's program. I thrashed against him and clutched what felt like the lower end of his six-pack.

"Dammit!" He shoved me face-down against the lumpy bedspread, pulling my right arm behind me and linking it with the left. Wetness from his Speedo soaked into my shorts as he sat on my rear end. I lay pinned with my head turned to the side, catching my breath. My shirt scrunched way up my backside, and judging by the breeze, my shorts had crept down during the fracas. "Why the hell are you in here?"

"You're not a volcanologist."

He pushed against my hands. "Jesus!"

"You work for the government."

"Volcanologists can work for the government too. Ever hear of the US Geological Service?"

"Yeah. That was the lamest story I ever heard of, you needing to go back to get ash samples from the rivers. As if thousands of scientists and meteorologists all over the country didn't already do that in 1980! Please. It was *not* the Stone Age. You're undercover doing something."

"So tell me, Endee, what the clues told you?"

"It's Randi, dork. Not Andi. And I never said you could call me by my nickname anyway."

"Not Andee. En Dee. For Nancy Drew."

"Oh."

"Anyway, you call me Mitch." His grip on my hands loosened as he pulled one of his free and used it to tug my shirt down and then my shorts up. "I wish you'd stayed out of this," he said, sighing.

"What are you gonna do?"

His weight lifted off me. He rolled me over, then pinned my hands over my stomach and sat on my legs. Shaking his head, he looked from my hands to my face, then at my chest. Once again, he adjusted my top, tugging it down toward my shorts. When his hand grazed my bare tummy, I got butterflies. The laptop had gone quiet again and he must have heard my breath catch. His eyes met mine. Without the glasses hiding them, they were a deep green. To my eternal embarrassment, my nipples went hard, tickling against the knit eyelet fabric.

His turn for the rough sigh.

My question as to what he intended to do still hung in the air between us.

I knew what I wanted, what I'd wanted from him almost since the first time he'd spoken to me. That slick body of his pressing mine down into the mattress, his mouth—

His mouth descended toward mine. When his face was directly above me, he broke into a grin I could only describe as confident and boyish. A dimple appeared on his right cheek as he came lower. He let my hands go, leaned on his forearms on either side of my head, and his fingers brushed hair away from my face. He was still hot from his swim, the warmth radiating out from him to me.

His mouth was as smooth and firm as the rest of him. He tasted and smelled of pool as his tongue slipped between my lips, then teeth nibbled my upper lip. Sighing a sigh of contentment yet to be had, I opened my mouth to him, met his tongue with mine, arched my body up to meet his damp-suited area.

He groaned and then sat up. "We're not wearing enough clothes to be doing this," he said.

"Enough? Don't you mean we're wearing too much?" My body hummed with desire it hadn't known in months, maybe in years. I indulged myself and rested my palms on his pecs, which instantly tightened under my touch.

He gave a wry smile and shook his head. "Let's see here..." Still seated on me, he moved his gaze to the computer screen. "...the charges for trespassing and building an illegal rope bridge over the Colorado River in 92 were dropped."

My hands dropped back to my chest. "Don't tell me you're going to ruin this moment by reading my criminal record?"

His smirk told me he intended to do just that.

"God. You've got to be the only man alive who'd pass up guaranteed sex. What's wrong with you?"

"1993. Criminal mischief when basketball team toilet papered opposing team's bus. Miranda was found by investigating officer to be innocent of the act but served community service with the ringleaders for refusing to name the perpetrators." He looked back at me with narrowed eyes for a moment. "1997. Illegal bungee jumping, resulting in a fine. 1998. Unauthorized...rock climbing in a state park?" This time he looked shocked.

"We used a safety harness, okay? I did take the precautions. Can I go now?"

After a couple of mouse clicks and several seconds of reading the body of the message, he turned back to me. "How can a person be thirty years old and have a perfect driving record? Not a single ticket?" He sounded almost jealous. "You bungee, skydive, fly small aircraft, and rock climb, but you've never got a speeding ticket?"

"Hey, I'm careful on the road. You know how many people die in car accidents every year?" "I think there are two personalities in that pretty head of yours."

Though I loved the compliment, I borrowed his tactic of changing the topic back to him.

"So are you gonna tell me why you're checking my background, Wheels?"

"No. I'm not. And you, Ms. Drew, are not going to sneak around and poke into my business anymore. Got it?"

"So that's it? You...you kiss me into complacency, then give me a pat on the bottom and send me off to bed where I'll go to sleep like a good girl?"

"Pretty much. Because if you don't behave, I'll make sure you never get to see how much energy your chakras can hold, shortie. If you jeopardize my case, you will not be traveling back in time. Any questions?"

That anger flaring inside me wasn't productive. I had to channel the energy to help find out what he was up to. "Case. So you admit, you work for the government. Are you with the Space-Time Continuum Agency? The FBI? CIA? DEA?"

"There really is only one way to shut you up, isn't there?"

"Oh, don't even think about kissing me again. I don't kiss blackmailers." Which was rather a bummer.

He laughed at me. "I like to think of it as coercion, rather than blackmail. Come on, N.D. Time to get you back to your own room." When he stood and wrapped his towel around his middle to hide his bulging swimsuit, I couldn't help noticing all the dark smudges on one side of the towel. Were they from his fake tan wearing off? No, those smudges would be orange, like his skin.

"What?" he asked.

"What's your natural hair color?"

"Christ. Of all the broads to get stuck with on this case." With a firm hand on my arm, he led me from his room back to my own. At my door, he cupped my chin with his free hand. "You really are more trouble than I'm prepared to deal with." He planted a soft kiss on my lips, said simply, "Lock your door," and left.

Dear Randi,

It happened. Oh my God. The Near Miss Kiss became a head-on reality, and it was no accident. Good thing for all that Spandex in his Speedo, too, because it was stretching very much when he walked me to my door.

Excuse me while I go and relive it a couple thousand times.

Randi the Thoroughly Kissed

Note to self: I want him—deal with it!

The chilly quiet of early morning seeped through my open door as I put on my makeup. I felt euphoric, despite how late it had been when I'd finally fallen asleep.

This was probably more makeup than I needed for an early morning yoga session, but I couldn't resist trying to look my best.

A rustle at the door caught my attention. A green envelope had been tucked between the doors, and Mrs. Sudo's tiny backside retreated around the corner.

This was highly unusual! Finishing my makeup would have to wait. I had to know what was inside that envelope.

It wasn't sealed. The stationery inside had three bamboo sticks embossed in each corner, and a note handwritten in small, scratchy letters:

Please, come to meeting with Professor before morning yoga. Wear shoes for hiking. Bring jacket. Bring sunscreen.

No signature.

Hiking shoes and an early morning meeting...hmm. I'd never seen Professor so early. In fact, I'd come to suspect that while we were off dragging our arses up a hiking trail to meet the sunrise atop a rocky knoll every morning, he slept in.

Perhaps he thought I was ready for some one-on-one tutelage. Or—and my heart pounded with this thought—I was being expelled for my involvement with Mitch. Maybe Sudo had noticed my poor concentration and was splitting us up. What if Mitch had gone to him about Lonnie, and I was being taken to task for keeping mum? Hell. There were too many possibilities. I needed to get my butt up to Sudo's office and find out.

\* \* \* \*

A half hour later, Mitch and I stood at the edge of a heliport, backpacks at our feet as Tim and the Feng Shui Inn van disappeared around the bend with a tiny squeal of tires.

Besides the shuffle of feet from a coverall-wearing man inspecting a nearby helicopter, we were surrounded by quiet.

"This was *not* in the packet they mailed to me last month."

"Yeah," Mitch muttered beside me, "I'm not wild about choppers, myself."

"I wasn't referring to the helicopter ride. I meant, getting dumped for an overnight backpack trip in Grand Canyon to experience the 'Second level of soulfulness'. The way Mrs. Sudo talked, you and I can't complete the time travel unless we connect." Oh, we connected all right, but not in a spiritual way. Someone clearly didn't want me to go back in time, and that entity had sent Mitch

to make sure I was distracted. "It doesn't make sense. Nobody else in the program is traveling with a partner. With all the prep I did before coming here, I'm clearly the most advanced in the group. The least likely to need a partner."

Mr. Coveralls finished his inspection and disappeared inside the building.

A muscle worked under the skin at the end of Mitch's jaw. "Why do you think they paired us up, then?"

"Truthfully?" No more beating around the bush. "I think you're here to watch me, maybe distract me until the Feds find a way to shut Sudo down."

He shook his head and chuckled. "So it's all a conspiracy to keep *you* from traveling back in time?"

"No. I didn't say that. I think it's a conspiracy to keep *anyone* from using Sudo's methods. And you've got to stop me because I'm almost ready."

"You're not exactly the picture of calm and openness," he taunted. "What makes you so sure Sudo isn't sending me to help you along?"

"Oh! Help me? I'll have you know, I was doing fine before you came along!"

One corner of his mouth lifted in a grin I'd come to know meant he was amused at my expense. It happened all too often.

"You continually piss me off. Everyone knows it's impossible to concentrate when angry." I shook my head and looked northwest, where we'd be headed. "And now this. Instead of assigning more meditation, they send us out *there*."

"You're nervous about this?" He swept his hand to indicate the choppers, his voice softening. "You ever ride in one?"

"Yes. I took the Aerial Tour in Vegas last winter. Twice. Loved it."

"Of course you would." He sounded disappointed. "What are you afraid of, then? Me?"

"Hmmf! You know how many rattlesnakes are out in that Canyon?" Why my voice had to raise to a squeak when I said the word for my greatest fear, I'd never know.

"Snakes? You're afraid of snakes?" He was way too excited to find out about my phobia.

"Not just afraid. It's more like terror. And I swear to God, if you screw with me out there and tease me about it, I will push you off a ledge."

"Hey," he soothed. "When I looked through our packs, I saw a snakebite kit."

"The kit won't be necessary. If a snake gets that close to me, I'll die of a heart attack."

"Hmm." He cupped my face with one hand, and his dimple appeared. "You might need resuscitating if that happens." Before I could sting him with a scathing reply, his grin faded to a soft smile. "You're kinda cute when you're weak and scared."

I'm *not* weak, or scared either. Just nervous about snakes. But my protest parked in my throat when his face came closer. As his lips neared, I murmured, "Are we wearing enough clothes this time?" The corners of his mouth turned up, and I closed my eyes. He smelled of soap and fruity shampoo. A whiff of toothpaste sent my heart racing in anticipation. His warm hand slid down from my face to the side of my neck.

"Goodman, party of two?" chirped a female beside me.

My now-open eyes registered a befuddled-looking Mitch.

"Hi, I'm Brenda. We're almost set for takeoff, but before we're airborne, I need your signatures on a few forms." Bearing two clipboards and a tour-guide smile, the perky blonde carried on her spiel, ponytail atop her head bobbing all the while. "So if you can sign these, near the highlighted 'x' at the bottom of each form, including our list of recommended provisions and equipment for an overnight in the Canyon." She handed each of us a clipboard and pen. As I scanned the standard Release of Liability document in front of me, she rambled on. "You'll be provided one RescueRadio equipped with GPS and a detailed map of the park trails. I have your overnight trip permit, too. I see you've got hats already."

Thanks to good old Mrs. Sudo, I had a floppy-brimmed hot pink hat with an Elvis silhouette patch on the front and *thekinglives.org* emblazoned below. Probably a re-gift, originally bestowed on her from Rhona. While I felt like an unbalanced tourist in my goofy hat, Mitch looked hip in a Cardinals baseball cap. Brenda had also noticed how attractive Mitch was, because she stepped closer to him when she handed over the RescueRadio. Was she actually batting her lashes?

Even in the comfy t-shirt he must've intended to wear to yoga, his wide shoulders were obvious, defined pecs pressed now and then against the fabric when he moved. Though he still wore his 'scientist' khaki shorts, his rear end looked great in them. I'd have to make sure to let him lead whenever we hiked, so I could gawk at it. With the possibility of a rattlesnake at any step, trailing behind seemed best, anyhow.

"I understand you'll be visiting some Havasupai sacred grounds," Flight-check Chick purred. "I highlighted them on your map."

"Er, thanks," Mitch replied.

"At Extremair Tours, we go the extra mile, so you don't have to." She giggled. "Let me know if there's anything else, *anything* at all, I can do for you."

I felt like asking her if she could supply us with a few condoms for our trip. Maybe that would remind her she wasn't standing here alone with Mitch.

"Actually, I think we'll be fine," Mitch said, reaching his arm around my shoulder.

"Of course." Brenda's smile sure didn't seem too sincere. "Is this a special occasion for you two?"

"Honeymoon," Mitch answered. It took all I had to keep my jaw from dropping open. "Come on, Mrs. Goodman. Looks like our ride is ready. You got all your forms signed?"

Amid stunning views of sheer cliffs, sandstone gullies, cedar trees and sage, our chopper lowered. The beautiful blue-green ribbon of river wound below, cascading over falls I'd never expected in the desert. After a four-thousand foot descent, we touched down not far from the water, in a seemingly different world.

Mitch had spent the entire ride gripping his seat belt. Even when I'd pointed out the rising sun to him, he'd only flicked his eyes toward the east and grimaced. Ordinarily, I'd have razzed him. But since he'd been so kind about my fear of snakes, teasing him would have been churlish.

As we stepped out into the cool, bright morning, he heaved a big sigh of relief.

The pilot quickly checked out our GPS radio device to make sure it was operational, handed it to Mitch, and reminded us he'd meet us in the same spot at eleven the next morning.

We gathered our packs and moved away from the aircraft.

When the air had stilled again and the chopper shrank along the horizon, we began our hike to the Indian holy grounds, an area believed to be another energy vortex. Sudo's itinerary suggested we hike there and meditate for two hours, then move away to some secluded area with little chance of meeting anyone else, where we could shade up for the hottest part of the day.

"I can't believe we got gypped out of breakfast again," Mitch grumbled beside me.

"I can't believe you told Checklist Chick we're married!"

He laughed at me. "It was the fastest way to save her life. You looked like you were about to eat her alive, for flirting with me."

I stopped in my tracks. "You! Oh! I-I-I did not look at her like that. She can flirt with you all she wants, you, you, bigheaded lout!"

More laughter.

"So tell me, Mr. Goodman. Why are we here, really?"

"Humans in general?"

"Us! You and I. Why are we isolated out here in the Grand Canyon, using *your* undercover name? Is something going down today in Sedona? Something you're keeping me away from?"

"Nancy Drew returns." He groaned and stopped in the shade of a cedar to catch his breath. "Look. I didn't know we were coming out here 'til Sudo told me this morning, same time as you. I almost think *he* didn't know either."

"How could that be? Is this some impromptu lesson?"

Mitch shook his head and took a long drink from his water bottle. "His wife. Something about her..."

He had a point. Mrs. Sudo did seem to have her own agenda. "Somebody hung a crystal in my window. In feng shui, it's supposed to promote romance."

He grinned, brow raised.

"But surely," I said, "Sudo wouldn't allow her matchmaking game to get in the way of his science."

"Science, hmm? More like science fiction. Sometimes I catch myself wondering if this is really going to work. Maybe he's messing with our heads to see how long we'll put up with it. Maybe that's the real science he's working on."

"God. Now you sound like my mother."

If he'd been a dog, his ears would've been pointing straight up. "She doesn't believe it'll work, huh?"

I sighed and heaved my pack up to my shoulders. "I'd rather not discuss it today. Suffice it to say, she has her personal fears about me going looking for my biological father. So she projects those fears into doubt about the time-travel process."

Mitch fell into step beside me again. "Why do you want to find your father so much?"

"He's the unknown. Well, not him so much, but what happened to him. His fate is the 'x' in the equation of my life."

"The 'ex'? I thought his name was David."

"No, the 'x', as in algebra. X plus seven equals ten."

"X equals three," he supplied.

"Why'd you solve it?" His brows were drawn, and he looked at me like I was crazy. "Isn't it enough to know x plus seven equals ten? Why'd you have to solve the problem and tell me the value of x?"

"I don't know. Because it's there. Because we were taught for years if there's an unknown variable, to solve for it."

"Exactly. So why should I do less when it concerns my own father?"

"Still. You're willing to risk your life to solve it?"

"Risks are relative, Goodman. I seriously doubt I'll die. The worst that might happen is I end up in the wrong year, or can't get back."

"And what will you do then? If you're in the wrong year, you still won't figure out where your father is."

"I'll have to deal with it, then. Or go back to Sedona and do the tele-time-transport thing all over again. Again and again, 'til I end up in 1980."

"You're telling me, if you end up in the wrong year, you'll keep trying to get to 1980 rather than back to your own time?"

"Time is relative too," I joked. "But seriously, I came here for one reason—to find out where my father went. It's my mission." We climbed along in silence. Disapproving silence, if I was to guess. Mitch was taking the same risks, but he seemed to think my cause was not worthwhile.

Double standards! "What's your mission, Goodman? Or, Wheels? That's what they call you back at the Bureau, or the precinct, or wherever you came from. Why do they call you that? What are you really traveling back to 1980 for?"

"So many questions, Ms. Drew."

"Oh, so, what? You get to ask me anything, but I can't ask you?"

"You can ask. Doesn't mean I'm going to answer."

"Fine. Where do you live?"

"Grew up in Boise. Been all over the country in the last seven years, on different assignments."

"Where do you get your mail?"

"Why? You wanna read through it?" He reached over and chucked me under the chin. "I have a P.O. Box in D.C. right now."

"How come you're afraid of helicopters?"

"How come you're afraid of snakes?"

"I asked first."

"I'm not afraid of helicopters." He took a big step up a rock ledge and turned to give me a hand. "I hate being in high places where I can't get down. Like a certain tree at my grandpa's, when I was seven."

"Ah. The childhood scar. You got stuck? Poor kid. Did they call the fire department?"

"It was on the farm. Grandpa drove an old stock truck under the tree for me to climb down on. I remember being so scared he'd whip me, like my dad said he used to whip him. But he must've mellowed with age. Just took me into town for ice cream."

"Did you ever climb another tree?"

"Not for a long time," he muttered, "and then only if I knew I could get down. And your fear of snakes comes from where?"

"Oh, look! There are the Indian ruins! Do you want to stop there first, or catch them on the way back from meditating at the twisted tree?"

"Let's keep going while it's still cool. You were saying?"

"Arg." No getting out of this one. "We spent a week at a ranch when I was fourteen. The rancher was a friend of my step-dad's. One day a bunch of us kids were coming back from a horseback ride across this plateau, so we were riding beside each other instead of following. All of a sudden, my horse shied at something. Slid out from under me like I wasn't even there. I landed flat on my back. Right when I sat up, I heard the rattlesnake. My God, the sound still freaks me out when I hear it on nature shows. Then I saw it, right in front of me, ready to strike. I froze. If you ever thought the phrase 'paralyzed with fear' was an exaggeration, you're wrong."

The memory of it, combined with the steep hill we were climbing, had my heart pumping like crazy. I stopped next to a tree.

Beside me, Mitch waited patiently for me to go on.

"This...older...boy, Billy, threw a rock on the other side of the snake to distract it. It turned away, then Billy pulled me up to my feet." My heart had nearly stopped when faced with the snake. After Billy saved me, it'd raced so fast, I thought it would explode.

"Are you afraid of horses, too? It was the horse that left you in that position."

"No! Falling off a horse is seldom fatal, you know. Besides, she'd never have dumped me if the snake wasn't there." And since the mare I'd been riding had already run home, David let me ride back with him. Riding behind his saddle wasn't comfortable, but by then I had adrenaline pumping through my veins. With the fear gone, all that was left was a natural high. When David helped me down from his horse, he gave me a little hug and asked me to meet him behind the barn later. Thus, from my most fearful moment was born a positive connection with the adrenaline high. And my first love.

"So the horse gets off scot-free and the snake ends up the villain, when it was just trying to defend itself." He looked at me and shook his head. "And judging by that moony look in your eyes, the kid got to be your hero."

"Sure," I answered, "he might have saved my life."

"When you get down to the brass tacks, all he really did was throw a rock."

"Geez, Goodman. Ever hear the term 'everyday heroes'? You can be heroic without being Superman. Not everybody can *be* James Bond. I mean." I clapped my hand over my mouth. Bond was probably exactly who Mitch wanted to be. And judging by his poor disguise on this mission, he'd never become a super-spy. "What I mean is, um, not everybody is fantastic at what they do. I'm sure with some experience, you'll get better at your job." Wow, I'd really stuck my foot in it this time. Not only had I made Mitch out to be less than a hero, but I'd let him know I thought he was lousy at his job. "I'm sorry. That came out all wrong. What I mean is—"

Expecting him to be offended, I braced myself. Instead, his dimple appeared. He threw back his head and laughed. "So you think I'm new at this but I'll improve with experience, huh?" Still chuckling, he started up the trail ahead of me.

I was right; hiking was much more enjoyable with Mitch's rear end in my view.

Around me, birds chirped and a plane flew overhead. Somewhere to my right, Mitch shifted and sent a rock bouncing away. The sounds didn't matter, because inside me was quiet.

I'd been here before, this place in my mind where silence was a thick, palpable sound, where nothingness was all. Upon reaching this place inside, my body relaxed still more, 'til even the backs of my hands resting on my legs felt like nothing. Ahhh. *Not thinking* felt wonderful. Warmth surrounded me, buoyed me as I let myself float. A glow permeated my focus, energy humming throughout my body, growing stronger with each completed circuit. Sleep seemed like the last thing I'd ever need again. Snips of concepts came to me: *comfort. Positive. Happy*. The concepts linked, grew more concrete. *Certainty, confidence in myself.* What I thought, I could *do.* Where I wanted, I could *go.* Tendrils of translucent images swirled, then faded as I—

"Randi."

This sound, too, I gently nudged from my consciousness.

"Randi!"

A firm hand on my shoulder.

A clap of thunder.

I opened my eyes and blew a frustrated raspberry.

"Christ. I thought you'd put yourself into a coma. C'mon! There's a storm coming."

"Where are we going?" I stood and stretched, rubbed the bleariness from my eyes. The western sky had turned an ominous gray-black while we'd been deep in meditation.

"Down would be our best bet. Away from as many rocks as possible, to avoid the lightning. Someplace flat where we can pitch the tent, but high enough to be safe if it's a gully-washer." Mitch settled my pack on my shoulders and took off at a fast clip.

Around us, the wind had picked up. Pinion branches waved maniacally at us as we passed.

He climbed down a ledge and turned to give me a hand. "You're pretty quiet."

I nodded while using both hands and feet to gain holds in the dry moss-rocks on either side of me.

Once I'd safely made it down, he gave me the suspicious eye, but moved on without waiting for further explanation.

As if to herald the coming storm, a condor surfing a wind current above us shrieked.

By the time we passed the Indian ruins—now devoid of tourists—I could smell rain coming up the canyon.

Mitch left the trail and I followed him down, then up, down, then up, 'til he'd found a small mesa he deemed suitable for our camp. Ordinarily, I'd have insisted on having a say in where we camped, but I couldn't find anything wrong with the site. Besides, the first drops were already

falling as we tugged the tent from its tiny nylon bag. It was one of those handy little pop-up tents, similar to the wire-framed windshield shade I had for my car. With the wind tearing past, it took all I had to hold the tent in place while Mitch drove stakes into the sandy soil. Thunder boomed from down the canyon and the raindrops got bigger, more numerous. Colder. God above, the raindrops were freezing here! While I shoved the two sleeping bags inside the tent, Mitch strung the storm cover above me, which formed an awning we could store our packs under.

"Think Sudo could've possibly found a smaller tent?" I muttered.

"After you." He motioned for me to enter the shelter, which would be just big enough for us to lay side by side, with maybe one foot of clearance above.

I toed off my soaked shoes and left them by the front flap, then went in, feet first. When I rolled to my belly to look out, Mitch was squatting, trying to strip off his wet shirt and shorts. I watched, hypnotized, until he noticed.

"Unless you want your bed wet, you'd better do the same." With those sage words, he hung his clothes over his pack.

"Um. Oh." No way would I get naked in front of him. No way. I'd seen him nearly nude in his swim gear, and his bod was a spectacular sight. Mine, not so much. I'd toned up since my split with David, but still wasn't wild about the looks of my body. Somewhere in my pack was a long windbreaker. I scooted back out the door far enough to reach inside the pack and dig for it. "I'm gonna, er, put this on."

His lips puckered and nose wrinkled. Barely nodding, he turned away. God. Muscles rippled across his lower back, right above perky buns stretching red bikini briefs.

I'd better hurry up. Rain beat on the roof and blew sideways under the awning, showering Mitch while I gawked. Once I'd gotten my soaked shirt, shorts, and bra off, I slid the slick jacket on and zipped. While I hung my clothing as Mitch had his, he slid into the tent beside me.

"Nice bra," he teased.

"Shut up." How humiliating to have him see such a utilitarian garment, not some frothy, sexy thing as I'd have liked. "It's a sport bra."

"If I tell you you've got a nice rack, will you say they're sport boobs?"

The flush I felt on my face could have been from his compliment, or from his body being so close. Knowing we'd be like this all night long, and probably all afternoon too, I didn't know whether to bless Mrs. Sudo or curse her.

A flash, almost overhead, and a simultaneous crack of thunder.

"Shit!" I yelped.

His eyes rounded. "Are you scared of lightning too?"

"Of course I respect lighting, as anybody with sense does. But I'm not *scared*, just nervous. Just cautious. Just—"

Bam! The world shook as lightning struck close by. Whether I jumped toward him or he grabbed me, I didn't know. But only his arms kept me from shaking out of my skin.

"That one startled me, that's all," I said. "Took me by surprise." His chuckle in my left ear raised goosebumps down my arm. "I actually like thunderstorms, when I'm at home. Get up in the night to watch from the porch sometimes. They're really beautiful. Really."

"You babble when you're scared."

"I told you I'm not scared, I'm just—"

"Shut up." His mouth covered mine, giving me no choice. He smelled of rain, tasted of the Dentyne gum Mrs. Sudo had thoughtfully included in our packs. His lips were cool, smooth, and then tight when he grinned. "Works every time."

"Yeah," I breathed. Up close, his eyes had flecks of blue sprinkled amid the green. My hand slid up from his pec to brush wet hair back from his temple. Despite the storm raging around us, our tent had suddenly grown warm. With his body pressed full length against mine, I resented my stifling jacket. It seemed the universe conspired to get Mitch and I in bed together. Mrs. Sudo, the weather, our raging libidos. "Wanta try shutting me up again?" I'd start reciting the Declaration of Independence if it'd get him to kiss me.

"Maybe," he said, his voice almost a croak. His woody pressed against my leg. "I think we need to be really careful here. So one of us doesn't get hurt."

I tried to suppress my irritation at his insinuation he might hurt me. "Look, Goodman. I'm not planning on anything serious. Once we leave on our time trips, we'll probably never see each other again." The hand I'd previously stroked his hair with was put to good use as I pushed myself bodily away from him. "I barely know you, so how could you hurt me?" Other women had sexual affairs without attachment, why couldn't I?

"Oh, you think? We'll just blast into the past and never see each other again?"

"What do you know that I don't? Dammit!" All the intrigue, all the secrets...

"I know you aren't gonna forget this whole week!"

"How can you know that?" I demanded.

Under his fading fake tan, his face reddened. His eyes opened wide for an instant. Then his hands wrapped around the back of my head and pulled me close again. His lips, hungry and determined, seized mine. I'd barely registered what was happening when his tongue met mine. I should resist, shouldn't let him prove his point so easily... but what was the point anyway?

Mitchell Goodman, hottie federal agent, was kissing me like there was no tomorrow. If tomorrow came, I'd worry about his point. He rolled over and pinned me under his heavy, hard body. I moaned, and when I squeezed his butt, he let out a growl.

The spark we'd nursed along for days flared bright, hot and ravenous. We fed it with greedy mouths and groping hands, with swallowed sighs and the smooth zip as he opened my jacket. His chest was hard and humid against mine, and then he rolled us again, so I was on top. In contrast to the heat between us, the tent against my back felt like ice as rain pelted it. I gasped and pressed my body into his.

"Cold, hmm?" he murmured. His mouth left mine and blazed along my neck. "I'll keep you warm." His feverish hands slid up and down my back and I instantly forgot the tent fabric.

"I know," was all I could say. I knew I wouldn't get cold with him, like I knew I'd never forget him.

"Randi. Oh, fuck." His words were little more than moans and pants in my ear. "I just... want you."

A thrill coursed through my body at his words. *He wanted me*. "Me too. I mean, okay." In an effort to calm the burning need for his touch, to take him inside me, I pressed against his erection, going for any clitoral contact I could get. This was going to be so good.

"Ohhh." He let out the moan, then put his hands on my ass to still me. "Fuck. I can't do this."

"Yes, you can! You're hard as a rock."

"No. Not on a case."

"Then change cases. Quit this one. Or pretend I'm not part of it. It's not like you have me in custody or anything."

His right hand moved up from my butt and ground against his eyes. "But we have no condoms."

"Oh." A valid point. "I'm not on the pill anymore. Or anything." And I sure didn't need to get knocked up before I'd learned what happened to my father. "Promise me one thing, Goodman?"

"Yeah?" His voice was strained as I rolled off him.

"Promise you won't back out on me tomorrow when we get back to civilization?"

"All right. I promise."

"Geez," I muttered. "What the hell are we gonna do all afternoon, now? The least Mrs. Sudo could've done was pack a deck of cards." With a reluctant tug, I zipped my jacket up again and got comfy on my back.

"Maybe we should perfect that meditation thing we were doing this afternoon," he replied. "You went pretty deep, huh?"

"I guess." I felt cautious. Would he think I was nuts if I told him what had happened to me? "I might've been dehydrated, because I started seeing things. *Visions*."

"I know. I was...there. Didn't you feel me?"

"Um." I hadn't. Not in the least. "Yes." And to divert his attention, "Hey, how'd you come here so advanced at meditation, anyway? Did you have some Special Forces training? Like Judo or Karate?"

"Oh, Drew. Somethin' like that. Quiet down and meditate now. Maybe if we get good at this, Sudo will let us go on our mission soon." His left hand reached my right one and laced around it.

"Okay." I tried but failed to stifle a yawn. Above us, the rain had slowed to a steady, soothing beat. I should be wondering how it was Mitch had sensed me during meditation, but with his warm hand holding mine in our private little world, I was too damned relaxed to worry. Thunder boomed low and increasingly distant up the canyon. At least for now, the storm had passed.

I opened my eyes to find Mitch's face directly in front of mine. In the dim light inside the tent, I made out a soft look on his face, a tender smile. My lips were warm, from—

"Did you kiss me?"

His smile widened. "Had to wake you up sometime."

Above us, the tent sagged, wet and still. All was quiet except for the rushing of nearby water. "When did it stop raining?"

"Not long after you fell asleep. Which was, like, immediately."

His teasing should have miffed me, but he ran his thumb over my lips and that tender smile returned. Something long dormant awakened, fluttered its wings inside in my chest. It didn't matter that I'd utterly failed to meditate and slept away the afternoon, not when I'd awakened with Mitch gazing at me, looking like he was falling for me just as fast as I was falling for—"Oh. My. God."

His hand stilled along my cheek. "What?"

"I, um..." I really needed to be alone to think. "I've really got to go to the bushes." One quick zip and the tent flap opened enough for me to scramble out, no doubt giving him quite a show of my sleep-rumpled behind in the process. It didn't matter. I'd had a huge revelation and needed time to make sense of it. After shoving bare feet into my clammy sneakers, I crawled out from under the makeshift canopy and found a trail up to the trees.

Thank God we were secluded and I didn't have to worry about any strangers seeing me traipsing around in nothing but sneakers and a long windbreaker.

My business finished, a big flat rock caught my eye. Damp, but not exactly wet, it looked like the perfect place to ruminate, so I took a seat.

Falling for Mitch was not in my plans. They didn't include *any* man, at least not until I'd solved my big mystery. This trip was for *me*. Nothing could get in the way of my mission.

Well, it wasn't like he'd tried to stop me. Not directly, at least. Deep down, I didn't want to believe he was out to keep me from using Sudo's method. At least I didn't still think he was a serial killer. Yet, how stupid could I be, falling for a guy I didn't know at all? Maybe I wasn't. Maybe it was infatuation. Lust. After all, a woman my age had biological needs. And it had been so long since mine were met, I could hardly remember the event. Not that David would have done anything particularly memorable...

Sex. That was what I needed.

I stood and wiped the damp sandstone from the part of the jacket I'd been sitting on.

Sex. Tomorrow. I've waited this long. I can surely wait another day.

Mitch had taken down the canopy and folded it, dry side up. He sat on one end of it, our food laid out in front of him, wearing shorts but no shirt.

Only one more day...

"A picnic, huh?" I asked to announce myself.

"There's not much of the sunset left. And this trail mix doesn't look as good as chicken." He stared at our dry dinner, lip curled.

"I'm hungry. So no matter what kind of argument you start with me, you won't get to eat my dinner tonight." Taking a seat opposite him, I looked at the western sky while I re-braided my hair. The sun was long gone, leaving only fading spears of pink and orange behind. Darkness descended around us, along with a chill.

"I, uh, hung your clothes with mine in that tree." His words pulled my attention back to my bare legs, which I folded beneath me. "Hopefully the breeze'll dry them by morning."

Fastening a rubber band around the end of my hair, I said, "Thanks." The pink sky had brightened to red.

"Pretty."

"Yeah. I still don't know whether I like sunsets or sunrises more."

"I didn't mean the sunset," he replied.

His comment disturbed my breathing, gave me that fluttering in my chest again. "Um. You know what comes next, right? Venus." His intense stare made it hard to concentrate. "I guess I like sunsets best, because of Venus. I mean, I guess she's there in the morning too. Venus is misunderstood. Most people assume she's a star—"

"And waste their wish," he supplied.

"It's not her fault! She can't help it that nobody takes the time to figure out what she really is."

"Wasn't Venus a love goddess? Maybe she disguises herself. Maybe she's *pretending* to be a star. Deceptive."

The conversation had taken a decidedly sour turn, especially with the note of disgust in Mitch's voice. *Deceptive*. Why in the world would he be suspicious of Venus? Unless he was suspicious of all females.

Mustering all the conviction I could, I said, "You've been hurt. By a woman who deceived you."

He did not answer.

"Mitch?" Why did the thought of him heart-broken tie my stomach in knots? Usually when one embarked on a fling, one did not worry about how many times the flingee had been hurt. Or so I'd heard. "I suppose you could look at the bright side. I mean, you can always count on Venus to be there. Dependability has to count for something?" My companion chewed his lip and looked at me. What was that serious expression he wore, anyway? Was he thinking of his old wounds, or potential new ones? "And she comes out at the most romantic time of the day. Right after sunset. *Dusk*. I mean, the word 'dusk' is romantic, don't you think?" My mouth was out of

control, delivering a string of barely related sentences for me, keeping my mind busy so as not to dwell on Mitch's serious expression. "Dusk rhymes with musk, and musk is, you know, like the essence, or something used in perfume. Something to do with pheromones, I think."

"Drew!" Thank God he'd halted my nonsense. "You're babbling." At least that grim expression on his face had faded.

So had all the color in the western sky. As the corners of his mouth turned up a bit, I caught my first sight of a small, steady gleam just above where the sun had set.

"That's another thing," I said, hating myself for chattering again. "Her light is always steady. None of that flashing on and off business."

"That's because it's not her light." He laughed. "She's reflecting somebody else's."

"Nobody accuses the moon of not shining, and all it does is reflect the sun's light!" I harrumphed. "She's not pretending to be anything she isn't. Science has known for centuries she's a planet. Everybody wants her to be a star, so they tell themselves that's what she is. All she wants to do is be herself. And they, they—put their wishes, their hopes on her and expect her to deliver something she's incapable of!"

How I could be getting so emotional in front of Mitch, I didn't know. This was ridiculous. My marriage was over. My divorce was over.

"Wanta tell me about it?" Another new addition to the library of Mitch tones. This one I'd call Dr. Sympathetic.

Of course he'd like me to tell him more about me. I, meanwhile, knew precious little about him. Which was as annoying as it was mystifying. "No, dammit! You've probably read all about it, anyhow. Dammit!" I couldn't come up with as many words pissed off as when I was nervous. "I don't want to tell you another goddamned thing about me. How's that? Here's one thing I'll tell you: I don't like perfect strangers knowing everything there is to know about me. What do I know about you, huh? Not your natural hair color! Not your real name! Or your exact profession. I know you don't wear glasses and you aren't a nerd. You distrust women and you're scared of heights. Lightning freaks you out as much as it does me, but you played it cool for my sake. You eat like crazy, swim like a fish, and close like a security gate every time I try to find out who you really are. Next to my father, you're the single biggest mystery I've ever come across. And besides all that, you have a knack for nicknames."

He swallowed hard. "Yeah?"

"Nancy Drew can't keep away from a mystery, and neither can I." I sat there, trembling, waiting for his reply.

"Jesus."

After that tirade, all I got in return was 'Jesus'?

"Of all the times to be without rubbers," he muttered before I could demand that he expand on his thoughts.

And then he pressed me back, his hands cushioning my head as his mouth pushed down on mine. The weight of his body stole my breath as much as his kisses did. My heart raced. Did he intend to go through with sex, even without a condom? Hopefully.

No! Not hopefully! I couldn't muddy the waters of my life with a baby.

"Hey Goodman." I wheezed in a breath, despite his weight bearing down on me. "How do you feel about unplanned pregnancy?"

He choked. And pulled away. "Good one, Drew. Guess it's gonna be a long night, huh?" He sat up and dragged his fingers through his hair, leaving me missing his warm body atop mine. "We better eat, it's gonna get nippy out here."

Half an hour later, zipped safe, warm, and oh-so-demure inside my sleeping bag, I couldn't sleep. The third time I changed positions to avoid the rock between my shoulder blades, Mitch let loose a sigh.

"Sorry," I muttered. "Am I keeping you awake?"

"No."

Quiet settled between us.

I willed myself to meditate and at least make use of the time if I couldn't sleep.

"Her name was Angela, but she was no angel."

My eyes popped open at his words. Fearful of breaking the spell making him talk, I kept quiet.

"She was older. Not *old*, but definitely more experienced. I was a sophomore in college. She'd been around in the bars close to campus. I knew she went to school there and I knew she had money. One night I invited her home from the bar. That was the beginning. Sometimes she'd show up at my apartment at noon, sometimes she'd track me down as I was leaving my last class. A couple days, she came to my door before I'd left for my first class. Those times, we cut school and made love all day. There was always a gift. Cufflinks, a CD, a silk dress shirt. She never slept over. I should have known, when she said she loved me but never slept over. It wasn't like the girlfriends I had before. It was *real*. At least, I thought it was. The sex wasn't good—it was fucking *perfect*. She always had a new trick, a new position she'd read about in Cosmo. She didn't make me feel inexperienced, though. I don't know what I expected. I guess, that we'd go on like that until we graduated and then we'd both get good jobs and I'd propose."

He paused so long, I wondered if he'd continue. Then he drew a deep breath. "One day I got home from class and had this message on the machine. She was breaking it off. *Because she thought she was pregnant*. I went apeshit, tried all night to find her. She had a writing class the next morning, so I waited for her there. She was livid when she saw me. Told me to leave her alone, that the pregnancy was a false alarm, but she couldn't take the chance of it being real next time. I don't know how long I stood there arguing with her and begging her to meet me later, but she wouldn't. Fifteen minutes into my first class, I got called out and hauled down to the academic director's office. Apparently, the school's biggest donor wanted me expelled. His wife had called him sobbing and claiming I'd accosted her that morning."

Good God! "Mitch, I'm—"

"And for the record, that *is* my name. When it's safe, I'll tell you my real last name. My hair is brown. And I'm FBI, but even my supervisor's supervisor doesn't know about this mission, especially since his department is in the process of stopping Sudo. Pretty much the only reason you're going to get to travel is because you're going with me. After us, they'll halt his operation."

"Wow...that's a lot to digest."

"Yeah, and let's hope there aren't any bugs in the backpacks, because I never should've told you all that."

"So why are we out here tonight?"

"Because Sudo sent us, I suppose. In spite of what you'll be calling me tomorrow when I'm rocking your world, I'm not God. I'm FBI."

"Pig!" I laughed. "I suppose I should be grateful you're at least admitting that you don't know everything."

"Almost everything." He yawned. "Just can't remember it all at once. 'Night, Drew. Rest up, will ya?"

Dear Randi,

My God, my back hurts! Sleeping on the hard ground is for kids. And Indians.

I'm back in my posh room at the Feng Shui Inn after a night spent backpacking and all-but-doing-the-horizontal-mambo with the Dreamboat of the Year, Mitchell Goodbody. Er, Goodman. "Dreamboat" is such a 60's throwback word, but it describes him perfectly. And guess what? Today we will get horizontal for real. We agreed on it. He even told me some personal stuff that for confidential reasons I cannot record here and now. But I do feel like we connected. Maybe falling for him wouldn't be such a bad thing, once I'm done with my mission. After all, I've got to get back in the dating game someday, don't I?

Which reminds me... I missed a ton of calls on my cell while we were gone. Mom, Melissa, even David called. God. I cannot face dealing with them right now. I need to shower first.

Hair removal seems imperative when faced with the prospect of being nude with a guy who shaves his body hair.

I wonder if he removed it all? I mean, that part would be covered by his Speedo, so it shouldn't slow down his swim time...

Hmm. I'll have to think on it more in the shower.

P.S. His goodnight kiss turned into a long make-out session. This promises to be the best sex ever. And don't even think of putting me on a guilt trip for not truly knowing him first. You, of all people, know how much I need this.

Once I'd finished showering, it seemed important to get my makeup and hair done, in case Mitch showed up early.

I still didn't feel like listening to my voice mail. Maybe Mitch would like to drive into town and find a drugstore. We could make use of our 'downtime' while we waited for Sudo's summons.

After three knocks on Mitch's door, it was obvious he'd either left his room or was sleeping the sleep of the undead. I could only hope he'd gone out for condoms.

Back in my room, I paced. In an effort to take my thoughts off sex, I picked up the booklet someone had left on my writing desk, entitled, *You're Ready for Time Travel. How to Do It*.

Catchy title. Attention-grabbing. Good way to kill some time, reading it.

Something nagged at me. Something I needed to do...but here in front of me was an explicit how-to book on time travel.

Reveling in the softness of my mattress, I stretched out on my stomach and read.

It is a significant accomplishment to have achieved this level of mental mastery. Kudos to you, my pupil. By now you'll have experienced the Second Level of Soulfulness on at least one occasion. It is this state which will open your door to the space-time continuum.

I must stress the importance of mental imagery. As instructed in your welcome packet, you should be studying a photograph of the precise place and time to which you wish to travel. Without a decisive destination in mind, time travel becomes erratic at best. Due to incorrect markings on photos I studied, my first trip to Dallas took me two months ahead and then one month behind where I needed to arrive. Please be sure, also, to study a current photo of the Feng Shui Inn, as I would prefer that your return trip ends here.

Take some time to understand the schematics of the Time Transcending Radio, a communications device I've had designed to work as far back as 1969. With the TTR, you'll be just a two-way radio call away from help—should you become stranded or lost, or need coaching. The TTR is disguised as a transistor radio and will, in fact, pick up AM stations. However, care should be taken to keep it out of sight during your visit to the past. By now, you've been cautioned enough to know what problems might arise should a device from our time fall into the wrong hands.

Chapter 1: Entering the Wormhole...

\* \* \* \*

The alarm clock wouldn't stop ringing. I opened my eyes and realized it was the phone in my room.

"Erm. Hello?"

"Drew." Mitch laughed. "Were you sleeping again?"

"No. I was...meditating," I fibbed. Shit. I still hadn't called my mom back. She'd be frantic.

"Sure you were. Get some shoes and a jacket and meet me outside."

"God. Shoes and a jacket? Last time I had to get shoes and a jacket, I got air-dropped into Snake Central."

"Do it. You'll want shades too, if you've got 'em."

"Okay. But first I need to call my mom back. I'll be out as soon as I can."

"I tried." I sighed as I stepped out into the late afternoon. No answer on my mom's cell or Melissa's. And no way was I going to have Dreamboat waiting around while I returned a call to my ex. "So what's up?"

Mitch looked rakish in a leather jacket and a grin as wide as his wraparound sunglasses. "You look good, Drew." To prove his point, he pulled me into his arms and gave me a long kiss right there in the courtyard. "Come on." With my hand in his, he led me toward the back parking lot.

"Hey, aren't we supposed to see Sudo today?"

"I talked to him. He'll see us tomorrow." Mitch stopped and pulled me against him again. "I have a surprise. We travel day after tomorrow."

"Really?" I squealed. "Cool." My heart raced with glee. Clear for takeoff.

"That's not the only surprise." He resumed walking, faster than before. When we got to the parking area, he led me to a Harley Davidson Fat Boy. "Can you really drive one?"

"Um. Yeah..."

"Show me." He plunked the little key in my hand and proceeded to settle a bright red helmet on my head, a matching one on his own.

The key chain said, 'Wild Spirits Rentals'. Sounded like my kind of business.

I'd owned a bike for two years in college, a fact my parents had not been aware of. But this bike was bigger, and I'd have a large passenger on back. It would be a challenge, but I was up for it. "Okay, then," I replied, swinging my leg over. "Let me take it around the lot a couple times, 'til I get a feel for it."

Riding through the shadowed canyons north of Sedona with Mitch's arms wrapped around me and his bulk warm against my back, the wind on my front, I felt like two different people in the same body. One half of me dwelled in reality and the other must be dreaming. Even when we got stuck behind a car crawling its way along, wondering what Mitch had planned for us, I smiled.

Highway 89 took us up a switch-backed mountainside and topped out at a scenic overview where we pulled off to take a breather.

"Christ. Maybe that slow-ass truck will get ahead of us, if he knows he needs to put his foot down on the pedal on the *right*," Mitch complained.

I simply laughed.

"Shit. I didn't rent a Hog so we could go slow. Wouldn't you like to see what it's got?"

"You're such a...man. A really cool man, though. And shockingly liberal, willing to let a woman drive his motorcycle." He'd removed his helmet and sweaty chunks of his hair stuck up in cute places here and there. Unable to resist, I ran my fingers over his very smooth face. I wasn't the only one who'd hit the razor since our camping trip.

"So you like the bike?"

"Yeah," I answered over my shoulder as I walked over to the edge of the lot for a better look at the valley below—and since he watched, with a bit more wiggle than usual. "Riding a motorcycle is, like, better than sex."

He growled and then swept me up into his arms, holding me there like I weighed nothing. "I have two dozen condoms in my room." Above the shades, his brows lifted with implication.

"Then what are we doing here?"

"I have another surprise for you." He must have taken my curiosity for impatience, because he said, "I wanted tonight to be special." Setting me down, he still held me close. "It's, uh, the first time I've wanted it to be special in a really long time."

"Oh." Since Angela? The question hovered but I resisted asking it.

"Would it be really un-liberal of me if I drove the rest of the way? Because I'd like to get there *fast*.

"You have a motorcycle license, I take it?" It was silly to ask; how else would he have rented one?

"Yeah. Just wanted to see if you really knew how to ride a bike. You did okay. For a girl."

Riding with Mitch on a motorcycle was a thrill ride in and of itself. He handled a bike in much the same way he did the Jeep. He wasn't unsafe, but he sure went as fast as he could.

The sun set as we continued north toward Flagstaff, through chilly shaded pine forests. Dusk was falling as we hit town and he maneuvered through tourist traffic. My stomach growled with each restaurant we passed, but still he drove. Up a hill, past signs pointing toward the Lowell Observatory.

He killed the engine in a corner of the nearly-dark parking lot.

Already regretting the loss of his body heat, I dismounted.

"What do you think? Ever see Venus through a telescope?"

Off in the west, my favorite planet got brighter. "No, I haven't, actually. Mitch. This is really sweet of you."

"Come 'ere and show me, while we wait for that line of people to get in the front door." He tugged at my hand and pulled me onto his lap, facing backward, carefully hung our helmets from the handlebars and pulled me closer. "Jesus, it's gonna be a long ride back to Sedona." Then his lips found mine and my arms went around his neck. Those flames within flared again, warming us against the chilly air all around. "I want you, Drew. So much." Sitting on his lap, I had no doubt he wanted me as much as I wanted him. "More than you think." He nibbled his way down to my collar bone, then raised his head back up to eye level. His eyes were open so wide. Sucking in a big breath, he cupped both sides of my face in his hands. "It's, well, it's pretty much all on the line with you. I figure, rather than fall, I might as well jump. I trust you. Anything you wanta know about me, ask and I'll answer. Just not about the case. Not 'til after we get back from 1980, okay?"

"Um. Okay." Funny. With our bodies so close together, I couldn't even think of what I wanted to know about him.

"One more thing? You wouldn't consider staying in Sedona and letting me go back to find your old man, would you?"

"Not on your life!"

"Didn't think so, but I had to try."

"Goodman." I sighed, leaning my head against his shoulder. "It's probably my only shot at seeing my father. Ever. If there was a chance he's alive, he'd probably have surfaced after the press conference. And anyhow, would you really want to blast to the past without me, knowing you might never make it home again?" So he'd know I was teasing, I added, "Would it even be worth going on, if you couldn't be with me?"

"You're very full of yourself tonight, Ms. Reed. Come on, let's go look at your wannabe star."

\* \* \* \*

Crickets sang us a welcome in the Feng Shui's courtyard, but I guessed nobody else knew we'd returned. Parking in the back lot had its advantages. My helmet swung from my right hand, Mitch held the other helmet and my other hand. In the quiet gardens, my ears still rang from the prolonged noise of the motorcycle. Aside from a quick "Come here" and a furtive kiss after we'd removed our headgear, Mitch had been silent since our arrival.

The pool water lay still. Tranquil. Ready. I had a brief notion to suggest we go for a swim, but judging by Mitch's steps, he seemed eager to get on with the night's main event. I knew how he felt.

Curling around his body as he drove us home had been exquisite torture. I had to tell myself time and again to not let my hands slip down to his lap. Not while he was driving with such care to make sure we didn't hit a deer or take a canyon corner too fast. It wouldn't be cool to distract him that way, but my fingers had itched for one thorough grope.

Mitch halted without warning. Because of his arm tethering me, I ended up performing a rather ungainly stop, sitcom-style, and righted myself.

Lights were on in my room. The door was open and people moved around inside.

"What the...?"

He covered my lips with his fingertips. "Shh. This way." He tugged me toward that pine tree I'd used while spying on him. "Stay here," he whispered. "I'll get closer and figure out what's going on."

The strangled sobs wafting out of my room caused me to follow him against his instructions. My heart sank. I *knew* those sobs. But what the hell were they doing here in Arizona?

"Mitch, wait!" My stage whisper went unheeded. Not surprising, as fast as he was moving. "I know who it—"

"What are you doing?" He'd ducked behind the bushes in front of my patio. "I told you to stay—"

"It's my family." Not bothering to squat as he had, I looked down at him and shook my head. How long would this delay our horizontal activities?

"What? What are they..."

"Miranda! Is that you? Oh my God!" My mother rushed out my door, her arms extended as if I'd been declared Dead in Combat and just wandered home. "Thank God, thank God you're all right!" She wrapped me in a tight hug. Past my own squished cheeks, I watched Mitch stand up. "You *are* all right, aren't you, honey? Oh, thank God."

I turned my face sideways for air. My sister stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips. She looked comfy in her mommy short-alls, unlike Mom, who was still wearing her accountant clothes. Beside her was none other than David, looking tall, dark, and...

Despicable, if that was my journal in his hands!

"What the?" seemed to be the phrase of the night for me. With a determined shove, I escaped my mother's clutches. "What the hell are you doing with my journal? How did you get in my room? And why are you all here anyway?"

Missy shook her head at me, then put her hands over her eyes.

"What are we doing?" Mom demanded. "You haven't answered a call all week! We thought you'd been kidnapped or forced into this cult. That you were dead, or brainwashed, or—"

"Mom. I talked to you two days ago."

"It was not two days ago. It was five."

"Two," I argued.

"Two and a half," Mitch helpfully supplied.

"And who is this, this...person?" Mom looked at Mitch like he was a worm in an apple.

"I'd have to guess," David butted in, flipping pages in my journal, "Mitchell Goodman."

"Give me that!" I reached for my notebook, but David thrust it behind his back. "Oh, my God." I set my helmet down on a chair. "What are you doing here, anyway? Mother, why did you bring him?"

"Well," she sniffled, "I thought we might need some manpower to pull you from the clutches of the cult."

"Manpower." I didn't even try to hide my anger. "Of all the *men*, you had to bring him? You couldn't get John, or Dad?"

Looking smug, Missy said, "Dad wouldn't take off work because Mom has him convinced you've disowned him, and John is actually pretty mellow about this whole thing. He told Mom he'd go back in time too, if he had the chance."

Times like this, I felt closer to my brother-in-law than anyone else in the family.

Beside me, Mom huffed her indignation.

David cleared his throat. "Didn't you want to introduce us?"

"Not especially." I hadn't meant to voice that sentiment. And the last thing I wanted was to make Mitch feel slighted. "Um. Mitch, Mitchell Goodman, this is my mother, Tina Reed, and my sister, Missy. Melissa. And David Montclair."

"Her husband," David added.

"Ex." I glared at him over his outstretched hand shaking Mitch's. "And how the hell did you get in my room?" Before he'd even answered, I demanded, "In what universe is it okay for you to go through my things? My very private things?"

"In the universe where we think you've gone off half-cocked and joined some group of New Age fanatics, since you don't return anybody's calls." David stepped toward me, shoved the composition book at my chest. "Take it. Trust me, there's not much in there I care to read again." He turned his back on me then, possibly to hide his red face. Or maybe he couldn't stand to look at me. "As for how we got in, you left your window open. Never could remember to lock the door."

I wanted to yell at him and tell him I hadn't left my window open. It was closed and locked when I left with Mitch. But the window was not the point. "The Professor sent us—"

Mom humphed next to me. She refused to believe Sudo was a professor because he no longer taught at an accredited college.

"Professor Sudo," I repeated, "sent us on a backpack trip in the Grand Canyon."

"So he told us." Missy's brows hopped as she looked from Mitch to me. "Did you, ah, get to go really *deep* in the canyon?" For my sister, who I suspected had always despised David, it had to be great fun to watch my ex squirm at the innuendo.

"Pretty much as deep as you can go," I replied with a grin. The double-entendre reminded me what I should be doing right now with Mitch.

Time to get rid of all these extra people. "Sorry to give you all a scare, but here I am." I lifted my arms and spun in an exaggerated circle so they could see all around me. "Safe and sound. So I guess I'll say goodbye and you can all go home."

"Mom called the FBI."

"What?" With a slap, the pages of my privacy landed on the table next to my helmet.

Mom shrugged and wiped a tear—imaginary, or not?—from the corner of her eye. "I reported you kidnapped. What else was I supposed to do? Since the local police found out you were last seen here at noon, they said we couldn't report you as missing until noon tomorrow. But the FBI said they'll be here at twelve-o-one."

"I bet." Mitch didn't sound pleased. "I've got to...do some things in my room." He wouldn't look me in the eye as he scooped up my helmet and left.

My mother must have used any excuse she could think of to get the FBI involved in the hopes of preventing my travel to the past. And judging by the smug look on his face, David was pleased with the fruits of her labor.

My hopes and dreams were on the line. The FBI might pounce on this opportunity and halt Sudo's program. Which would please Mom and David to no end. Fury flared in my veins.

"Did you guys get rooms already?" I asked in my calmest voice. "Because I think I need to be alone now." At the feel of her hand on my arm, I snapped, "Mom! Please. You really need to go. Now."

As they filed out, I could've sworn a shadow moved in closer to the big ponderosa. I took a second look, but saw nothing.

Somehow, I needed to calm my anger and go to Mitch. What was he finding out about the FBI's plans for tomorrow? Maybe he'd contacted his boss's boss or whoever, and told them not to come.

I made a quick stop at the vanity to brush my hair, then my teeth. A little lip gloss and I felt better. With a glare at the heaps of clothing and my open laptop, I rolled my eyes and headed for the door. Getting out of this room was definitely the best thing I could do at the moment.

Lonnie stood directly in front of my screen door. Yet another delay. God!

I opened the door enough to slip out.

"Hey, Randi." His speech was slurred, but not as bad as I'd heard it before.

"Hi. I was just on my way."

"Sure has been quiet around here without you." He smelled like Jack Daniels this close.

I tried to step away. "Um. Yeah, Sudo sent Mitchell and I."

"On assignment. He told us. But I was thinkin' now that you're back, we could go for that midnight swim you promised me way back when." Once again, his arms braced on either side of me to stop me from moving away. He had me backed in a corner, literally.

"Look, Lonnie. I really think you misread signals or something." I pushed against his chest, trying to shove him away. "I'm sure you're not a bad—" His mouth chased mine, left...right... left...until I ducked under his arm—"guy."

He grabbed my right arm as I retreated, yanking me back.

"Look, dude! Do you want me to scream?" Mitch would be there in a second, if I only raised my voice.

Bare feet flapped down the sidewalk, then David came into view, ignored the open gate and just vaulted over the railing and pinned Lonnie against the wall with a bit more force than Lonnie had used on me. I'd never seen my ex fight before, but he looked quite natural there, forearms pressed against Lonnie's chest, one wrist threateningly close to Lonnie's windpipe.

"Who-who are you?" Eyes round, he looked from David to me and back again. He seemed too startled to fight.

"I'm her husband, chump."

I wanted to correct him again and say he was my *ex*, but letting Lonnie think I was married was probably better.

"You need to learn when to take no for an answer. Now, get lost."

"Jeee-zus," was all Lonnie said as he staggered out the gate.

"Jesus is right," David muttered. "God damn it, Randi. What the hell are you doing?"

"Doing?" Some over-amorous guy coming onto me didn't mean I was screwing up my world. "I don't know. Why don't you tell me? You must have been spying on me, to see Lonnie was here."

"My room is right across from yours. Of course I saw when that hulk showed up at your door. And then he...put his hands on you. Man." Gently, he turned my arm to inspect where Lonnie had held me. "It's not very light out here. Let's go inside, where I can see."

"No, I—" I was wasting my breath by protesting, because he'd already opened my door and gone in. No way would I leave him alone in my room. Following, I let the screen bang closed behind me. "I'm fine."

He looked me over, head to toe, then stared at my mouth. "Where were you going, anyway? You've got lipstick on." His eyes accused me, said the things his mouth wouldn't. After what he'd read in my journal, he must *know* where I was headed.

"It's really none of your business," I said softly, because I really didn't want to add to the hurt in his eyes.

"It is my business, dammit. Why the hell do you think I agreed to drive your mother down here?"

I turned my head away, waited for him to answer his own question.

"I married you because I loved you, Randi. What the fuck? Now you're out here with this bunch of freaks on some kinda sci-fi adventure, riding motorcycles in the night with a guy you don't even know. And you're planning to sleep with him? I dated you for six months before you'd let me in your pants!"

"It was *your* ultimatum," I answered. "You were the one who said it was over if I insisted on time travel."

"I thought it would snap you out of your obsession with your father. I thought..." He ran his fingers through his hair. "...I don't know, I guess, that once you saw what this time-travel shit might cost you, you'd give up on chasing the past."

Someone with his storybook family could never be expected to understand how I felt about my missing father. Never.

"But my plan backfired," he said. "You chose the past over me. How do you think that made me feel?"

"It wasn't just this." I sighed. "It was...everything I wanted to do." We'd been over it time and again since the separation. I couldn't go back to having someone run my life. I was a free spirit, and free I would remain. "You didn't want me getting a pilot's license. You put a stop to my climbing. For Chrissake, if I'd conceived your baby, you'd have locked me in a sterile room for nine months. As soon as we got married, you thought everything was going to kill me."

"You know what people used to ask me? If you had a death wish, or what? Why else would a grown, married woman want to try base jumping?"

Old arguments, taking us nowhere. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I do have a death wish. Or maybe I have a wild streak that I got from my *father*. Which is what I intend to find out."

"Tell you what, Rand. If you do get to see the bastard, tell him 'thanks' for me. Thanks a hell of a lot for fucking up our marriage." His head hung low as he turned toward the door.

I felt like such a jerk, seeing him hurt. "David?"

He turned back.

"Thank you. For driving my mom. I know you meant well. And for getting rid of Lonnie for me."

"Yeah. I guess you'll be heading over to Goodbody's room now. The *dreamboat*."

Being reminded of the journal invasion made me seethe again. "You shouldn't have read that journal. It was private."

"Not even a week. And you made me wait six months!" His face was red again, and his chest rose and fell in fast, deep breaths.

"It's not about him versus you." It's not about you at all. You're out of the picture now.

"I wonder if he'd still want you, if he thought you'd been with me tonight?" Before I could figure out what he was talking about, he flopped down on my bed and started bouncing and thrusting. "Yeah, Randi," he called out. "Yeah, baby." The headboard banged obligingly against the wall.

I shook my head at the stupidity. When he started making monkey sounds, I'd had enough. "Knock it off!" I yelled over the racket he was making. "Get out of here or I swear to God, I'm calling security."

He let out one last growl, a stunning imitation of the sound he'd made many times in bed, then stood and smoothed his rugby shirt. "Thanks, babe. You were great."

"Jackass."

"Look me up when you get done playing Lost in Space and come back to your senses." He chucked my chin. "If you make it back."

At my knock, Mitch threw his door open. He stood there with a face as red as David's had been, huffing almost as fast. Then he turned on his heel and walked away. I took this as my cue to enter.

"Hey," I said, when it appeared he didn't plan to speak to me. Still silence. "I suppose you heard the stupid show David put on?"

"Sounded pretty damn real for a while there." Would he never turn around and look at me? "He was being territorial. Or something."

He turned and faced me, arms folded over his chest. "What the hell was he doing in your room, anyway?"

"He showed up when Lonnie was out there, and he just...came in. I guess."

"Lonnie?"

"God. Didn't you hear?" Not very observant, this one.

"I was a little, er, busy." His gaze skipped over to his desk, where, low and behold, my journal sat.

"Jesus Christ on a crutch! Maybe I should publish that thing in the newspaper."

"I needed to know if you compromised my case."

"Of course not!" I'd been careful what I wrote in the journal for that very reason.

"Not with the journal." He glared at me. "But because of you, this case will remain unsolved. As of tomorrow morning, Sudo's being shut down."

I sat down hard on the edge of the bed. One day before our scheduled travel date, the rug was being pulled out from under us. And Mitch was pissed—at me! "How is this my fault?"

"You knew your mother was suspicious, but you didn't bother to call and reassure her."

"I tried to call her back today. I couldn't get her. Remember? And I've been a bit preoccupied. Which you know all about, I suppose, since now you, too, have read my secret and private thoughts." How mortifying. Now even *he* knew I'd been calling him a dreamboat. "You could have asked me if anything in my journal would put you at risk."

"He read it!"

"Oh, nice. It's not like I allowed him to. Are you jealous of him? Is that what this tantrum is about? You're jealous of the man I divorced?"

"It's not a *tantrum*. You really don't get it, do you? Something I've been working on for two years just blew up in my face. Because I divided my attention between my job and, and...you. I shouldn't have allowed myself to be distracted."

"So that's what I am now? A distraction?"

"I was a 'no-strings fling', right? Isn't that what you planned from the start?"

"You can't possibly hold my *private* thoughts against me." But judging by his flaring nostrils, he did. "You've got to know I'd never purposely jeopardize the time travel program."

"Purposely or passively, you sabotaged it."

Sabotaged. Such an accusatory, suspicious word. A blaming word.

"So this is all my fault?"

He nodded. "I'm ultimately responsible for allowing it, though." Despite his anger, his tone was cold. Final.

"I guess this is the end of the road for us then. A very *short* road, I might add." One without so much as a single hump. I scooped up my journal and headed out. But then an idea struck me. "Mitch? What if, maybe, you and I tried to travel on our own? You know, together. We pretty much know how it's done now."

"That's crazy. We could end up in nineteen-twenty. You can't go around breaking rules. Not to mention, it's against the law."

"Not until tomorrow morning!"

"Randi. You've got all those people who care about you enough to drive three states to come check on you. Why can't you be happy with that?"

"You know why. I have to fill in the blank. Find the value of the unknown."

"Well, your window of opportunity just closed. For good."

So did his door, when I slammed it shut behind me.

\* \* \* \*

Back in my room, I locked my door and my window. Then I slumped onto my bed with my journal hugged against my chest. And cried.

In the space of an hour, I'd lost everything I'd been looking forward to. The chance to meet my father, an opportunity to be a pioneer time traveler, Mitch.

*Mitch.* All he'd said about trusting me had been so much bullshit. He hadn't trusted me, or he'd have asked if my journal had any sensitive information instead of violating my privacy. And so much for being special to him. When it came down to it, his work was infinitely more important than me. That stung. It truly stung.

What was that noise? It sounded like a scratch at my door, but when I held my breath to listen, it stopped. Heart racing, I tiptoed over to the door. Silence. And then soft footsteps. On the patio next door. Was Mitch coming to make up?

With a click, I slid my deadbolt and then opened the door a crack. No Mitch. But a dark plastic bag, the kind big hotels supply for laundry dangled from the handle of the screen door.

Sitting on my bed, I examined the contents as I dumped them from the bag. One sheet of Feng Shui Inn stationery with the requisite three bamboo sticks and the words *Time Transcending Radio*.

An Arizona driver's license with my date of birth listed as March 17, 1950. A digital photo of the Feng Shui Inn, with today's date stamped in the corner. A Time Transcending Radio, looking like the crappy old portable player I had as a kid. A key chain attached to a tiny glass turtle with an eight-sided shell. Hmm. Turtles were believed to be good luck in feng shui. So were octagons. Quite the powerful little talisman.

Poor Professor Sudo. He must think he was still grooming Mitch and I to travel. Did he have no idea his whole project would be shut down in twelve hours?

I flopped back on the bed beside the stuff.

How could all of my work, all of my hopes, have come to this?

Defeat did not sit well with me.

Dear Randi,

This is quite possibly the craziest idea I've ever had. But you know, some things are worth the risk. And if I don't at least try it tonight, I will regret it for the rest of my life.

If I make it to the 'other side', wherever that is—hopefully 1980—I'll write again.

Until then,

Randi

Bell Rock towered ahead of me, silhouetted dark against the star-brightened sky. Up close, it always seemed like more of a small mountain than a 'rock'. Still, since it consisted entirely of stone, its name fit.

I paused my hike to catch my breath, swinging the flashlight in an arc around me to watch for creepy things on the ground.

The cab driver had almost refused to leave me at the trail head in the dark of night, but I'd sworn I was meeting my boyfriend there. I probably looked like a stupid girl to him, going off alone. Anything could happen up there. If only he knew what I was really about to do!

With destination in mind, I turned the light back on and resumed my journey. Sweeping the beam in a constant figure eight ahead of me in an effort to watch for snakes, I had little time to worry about encountering other people. Weren't rattlers nocturnal, coming out to hunt mice and such in the cool of night? This scared me much more than the possibility of losing my way in the space-time continuum.

From reading the pamphlet earlier, Sudo's method seemed pretty straightforward. I'd been on the threshold yesterday while meditating with Mitch. All I needed now was confidence and a bit more time. According to Sudo, I'd be able to 'think' myself to a precise time and place after entering the wormhole.

I only hoped I'd be able to master my emotions and concentrate once I arrived at the spot.

Three smallish cedars formed a nearly perfect triangle around a flat, smooth section of rock. Every time we walked past this place on our way to and from daily meditation, I'd felt drawn here, enough to leave the group, come over and inspect it. The stone surrounded by trees looked like unmixed batter of some sort, swirled yellow and red in an unmistakable bull's-eye. I could only guess this was a result of what the locals swore was the earth's massive electromagnetic energy. Even if the rock could be explained by some volcanic whirlpool ages ago, the bent trees around it resulted from the force of something *now*. Something current. And all three of them twisted in the same counter-clockwise directions, trunks and limbs alike. Somewhat intimidated by the elated energy suddenly zinging through me, I'd refrained from stepping between the trees that day.

Tonight, though, it was where I needed to be.

I stepped between the trees, and the hairs on my arms raised. I did feel lighter, but no buzz of energy like I'd expected. It'd been days since I'd done the chakra-opening yoga, and my poor mind had been quite busy this evening. It was a wonder I could feel any energy at all!

After a few minutes doing inverted poses to get the blood pumping, especially in my head, I settled Indian-style in the eye of the vortex pattern. It felt great to be here, alone. Not thinking of...Mitch. *Not* thinking of Mitch. I'd mastered meditation before he came along; I certainly didn't need him now.

Now. What was he doing now? He'd been swimming in choppy, noisy strokes when I'd slipped as quietly as possible from my room. He still looked good out there, even with his style all shot to hell. But I hadn't let myself linger. My vision had been blurred anyway.

No, I wouldn't think of Mitchell Goodman, or whoever he really was. He had nothing to do with my quest now. Nothing.

So why was it much more relaxing to imagine my backpack was really him leaning against me?

I needed to concentrate. Picture my grandma's house in Miami. God knew I'd studied the picture enough times, even remembered the license plate number on the Cadillac parked in front of the garage.

Oops! The actual photo was still back in my room at the Inn.

No matter. The image was indelibly imprinted in my mind.

An owl hooted overhead as I conjured the image. Along the white edge of the photo, printed in deep blue ink, was *MARCH 1, 1980*. On the right, the rear of Grandma's big powder-blue car. To the left of the license plate, a peeling sticker read, 'If you gotta go used, you gotta go to Eugene. Honest Eugene's Used Cars.' Then Grandma's simple little yellow house with blue shutters. Dead center in the photo was a rose bush bearing hot pink blooms. Mom had given it to Grandma for her birthday the winter she spent in Florida.

I had another picture Grandma had taken on that roll of film, too. Trimmed and tucked inside my wallet, it was a photo of my father, the most recent one anybody had. He'd stood there on the front stoop of his mother's house with a cocky grin, his too-long hair slicked back, a pack of cigarettes rolled up in his white t-shirt sleeve. His body language in that photo had always intrigued me. Shoulders thrown back, chin up, hands shoved deep in his pockets. Had he known his mother intended to send the photo to his little daughter for her second birthday? Was he trying to look proud and carefree for the benefit of his ex?

That wasn't my concern tonight. I'd know the answers soon enough, if I could only concentrate on that house, that car, that rose bush. Hot pink blooms, the likes of which I'd never seen anywhere else. Lush green lawn, in early March. South Florida.

The image came to me, but I felt hollow. Bare on one side, like when I'd roll over in the night and some part of me that covered before was then exposed. Something was missing. *Someone* was missing. Mitch.

I would not get emotional over him again. Besides, I'd invited him to come along and he'd declined. If I could mentally transport myself through time, I could damn sure imagine a companion!

Again. Roses, yellow house, blue shutters. Mitch's back against mine. My hands laced with his. Honest Eugene, curling at the edges. Mitch, sharing the most significant trip of my life. The cool stone beneath me softened, or I became lighter. My body slumped against his, warm and strong. My breaths deepened...slowed. Were hardly needed. Deep inside myself, it was still and empty, yet bright. Bright, and tugging me down deeper still. No longer feeling anything, yet conscious of *all*, I let the current of energy, of gravity, tug me along. Then the visions came like a parade. Cars, faces, houses. The White House, a school house, Snoopy's house. Fearful of staring at any one for too long, I shifted my gaze constantly. Airplanes, helicopters, trains. Highway signs galore. More people, here and there a face I recognized, some in color and others in black and white. Suddenly overcome by all the choices and unsure of myself, I reached for Mitch.

He wasn't there.

I panicked, tried to picture his face as thousands of others spiraled past. Attempted to call his name but couldn't speak. Had no breath. I needed something. Pressure squeezed my head like a vice. I needed...who? Wishing I could close my eyes and erase all the images in my mind, I felt suddenly cold. Very cold. And still. Helplessly spinning through space. And time? Time. It was time for me to take control. If I got lost out here, Sudo would be blamed. And I'd never see my... father. Father, yes. That's what I needed. The house in Miami. Yellow. Blue. Hot pink. March first. Yellow, blue...

A jolt ran up from my tailbone to my neck. Then stinging scratches on my arms. I opened my eyes to bushes. A hedge, to be exact. And on through the hedge was a street, and then—I stood to see better—Grandma's house! I'd landed right where the photo was taken.

No, that couldn't be it, because there she was across the street, backing up a little and looking into her camera. Hmm. So this wasn't a terribly precise way to travel, or a comfortable way to land, but at this point I could not complain.

"Dennis!" Grandma called. "Let me get your picture now." Wow. Grandma Bea was a hottie in her day. Too bad I didn't inherit those curves. Although I could definitely see myself planting a hand on my hip when I was impatient, like she must be right now with her son.

He appeared at the front door with a cigarette hanging from one corner of his mouth. "C'mon Ma. Do I look like fuckin' Farrah Fawcett?"

"Nope. Not much like Lee Majors, either."

As he stepped out, he raised one side of his mouth in a half-sneer. "Very funny." When he leaned against the doorjamb and stared off to the side, I couldn't help but compare him to that picture of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Grandma pulled her eye away from the view finder. "Drop the cancer stick and stand up straight. Do you *want* your daughter to see you as a slouch?"

"Daughter," he scoffed. "Like she'll ever know who I am. Fat chance." But he ground out the smoke with the heel of his boot and shoved his hands in his pockets. Some devious thought must have crossed his mind to make him grin, and that's when the shutter clicked. "Hey Ma, you wanta take a picture of my bare ass? We can send it to Tina and she can kiss it!"

Grandma straightened and muttered a mere, "You!"

She walked up her front steps and past Dennis, giving him a firm whack on the shoulder in the process. He shrugged and lit up another cigarette before following her inside.

Sweat trickled down the back of my neck. God, Miami was hot. And humid, too, particularly after coming from Arizona.

I'd done it. I'd really traveled back in time! The realization struck me, and I felt a bit dizzy. Holy hell. I'd actually gone off all on my own through the space-time continuum. Wow. In retrospect, it seemed pretty idiotic. Yet, as sweat formed on my upper lip, I couldn't help feeling exuberant, too. I'd done it! I'd really, truly, done it. Time to get out of the sun, out of *somebody's* yard, and go introduce myself.

My legs shook a bit as I walked across the street and approached the house. It looked the same as I remembered from the trip Mom and I took there in '85. Correction, the trip I *would* take in five years. Oh, man. Was I going to end up one of those time-travel paradoxes now?

Walking up the cracked sidewalk, I struggled to remember the story I'd concocted for this exact moment. I was a relative of Grandma's, come to visit. Her...what? Her, um, niece. With trembling hand, I rapped on the peeling front door.

"Ma! Door!" my gentlemanly father bellowed. So far, he didn't seem the picture of nobility.

The door opened, letting out a whoosh of blessedly cool air. And there stood my grandma —who'd be dead in only another ten years—smelling quite strongly of the scotch and water she'd begin drinking nonstop in another few weeks.

"Mm, hello?" she asked, pushing oversized glasses back up her nose.

"Um. Hi. I'm, er...well, you're, uh...Bea, right? Bea Keenan?"

She nodded. Behind the big, dark lenses, her eyes studied my face.

"Uh. I've come to see you, see, 'cause I'm..." Oh God. Who the hell did I plan to be? All I wanted to do was throw myself into her arms and hug her and get to know her better. "...I'm your niece!" Niece, yes, that was it! "Your niece."

She smiled with those same cock-eyed front teeth I'd had briefly, before braces. "Niece? Are you Celia's daughter? Sally?"

Knowing she had eleven brothers and sisters, I'd hoped she wouldn't be completely familiar with all of their kids. But I didn't want to be a Sally. Or anybody she knew about, for that matter. What was the name I'd planned on? Could I get away with Randi? It would sure simplify things, if I could.

"No, ma'am. I'm..." dying to know what your son is up to right now. Nosey as all hell. Nancy? "...Drew. My name is Drew Williams, and I'm the product of an affair your older brother Edgar had. A long time ago." That sounded stupid. Of course it was a long time ago, since I was looking at thirty-two in another few months.

A rough male laugh drifted out.

Hands on hips, Grandma shook her head. "Well. Edgar always was shifty."

And since he was dead, I didn't have to worry too much about my cover being blown.

"Come on in, honey," she said, standing aside and waving me past.

Dennis's curiosity must have gotten the better of him, because he came around the corner of the hallway the same time I stepped in. We collided with great force and little grace.

"Ooomph!" he grunted. "Holy shit. Watch where you're—" He pushed me away and stepped back for a better view. "Hey Ma, she looks just like you. *Just like you*."

"Yes," she agreed. "So where did you travel from?"

"C—I mean, Arizona." It had to be obvious how nervous I was, standing there with sweat running down between my old middle school Eastman backpack and my Dr. Pepper t-shirt.

"And how did you travel?" she asked, wearing a grin I remembered from when she used to tease me. "From Carizona?"

"Um. I took the..." I wasn't certain how close the nearest Greyhound depot was. The train station, either. And did anyone *take* the train back in nineteen-eighty? I couldn't remember when Amtrak had made their big comeback. "I took, um, well, I hitched."

Silence. Then Dennis chuckled. "Cool."

Grandma clucked her tongue. "That's no way for a woman to go anywhere these days. Not with the likes of that Charles Branson."

"Manson, Ma." Dennis grinned. "And Manson was ten years ago."

"It was just last year that Ted Blondie was here, killing women left and—"

"Bundy. Ted Bundy," he corrected. "Drew here must be an adventurist." He nodded and grinned his approval. "Risky, but cool."

"Well, come on, let's sit down and have a drink and you can tell us all about yourself." Grandma's hand settled soft and warm on my shoulder. She led me to an orange and yellow plaid sofa, clean, but with too many cigarette burns to count. "You have a seat and I'll be out with a drink in a jiff."

I watched her navy and white pantsuit disappear into the kitchen.

"So. Uncle Edgar played the field," Dennis mused over the theme song from *Wide World of Sports* blaring from a console TV.

"I don't know about 'played the field'. My mother, ah, said they were in love."

Dennis got a good laugh out of that one. "Okaayyy." His gaze skimmed upward from my Keds, all the way to my cut-off Levi's. One quick shake of his head, and his eyes strayed back to my calves.

I might have inherited my looks from his mother, but I got my legs from my mom. Would he make the connection?

"Drew, I've got lemonade, or would you like something stronger?"

When in Rome, do as the Romans. "I'll have whatever you're having."

"A hangover," Dennis said, chuckling. "She's having a hangover from last night."

"Oh." What else could I say? I wasn't sure whether he found his mother's alcoholism funny, or it was his way of coping. "So, so you, um, live here?"

"Nah," he answered after a long drag on his smoke, "I store my shit here. 'Til I get another place."

"Oh." For someone who spent her career thinking on her feet and responding to the unexpected things kids say, I was doing a spectacularly bad job of conversing. With my own father.

"Yeah. Machine shop I work for's been kinda slow. So I let my apartment go, while I look for...other work. Didn't need that big a place anyhow." He took another, almost desperate drag.

Was he talking about the place he'd had with Mom? "Wow, it's hot here, for the first of March," I said, rubbing my hand over my forehead. Where was Grandma with those drinks?

"March?" He looked at me like I'd sprouted horns. "It's only February twenty-third."

"Oh." I felt like pinching myself for using that response again. "Right." But how did I end up a week earlier? The picture clearly said March first. That date stamp couldn't be wrong, could it? But the stamp...was the date the film was processed, dummy!

While I was still trying to figure out what day of the week it was, Grandma came in with the drinks. She handed me mine with a grin, saying, "He likes to hang around here to make sure I behave and make it home by curfew."

I managed to restrain myself from saying "oh" yet another time. Taking a swig of my drink proved a horrible experience, as she'd made me exactly what she was drinking: scotch and water on the rocks. Half choking, half gagging, I set the tumbler back on a Miami Dolphins Coaster.

The scowl Dennis shot her made me glad he'd never been around to scold me when I was a teenager.

The idea of my Granny out kicking up her heels intrigued me. Paired with his edict that she was suffering a hangover, it seemed she might be something of a party animal. "Do you, ah, get grounded when you come in too late?" I joked.

"Don't give him any ideas." Googly eyes rolled behind her glasses.

Her son glued his gaze to the TV.

Patting my knee, she took a seat beside me. "You can be my partner in crime tonight."

Dennis's gaze whipped away from the TV to her. "No stew?" He sounded hopeful, and maybe surprised.

Stew? My stomach growled at the thought.

"Of course Stu will be coming along. He's my partner in the contest. Now, Drew, how long will you be in Miami?"

"I'm...a week, maybe. I was hoping you could help me find a hotel close by." Actually, I was hoping I'd be staying at the house, so I could get to know them quicker.

"You'll stay right here," Grandma decreed.

"I really don't want to impose."

"You won't," she insisted. "It'll be nice having some company around. Right, Dennis?"

Dear Randi,

I made it!

I know, I can hardly believe it myself! But here I sit in sweltering Miami, the last Saturday of February, 1980. Of all the surreal things, what seems to bug me the most is it was nighttime when I left Sedona, but I landed in the early afternoon. Hard for my clock to adjust. I should be sleepy, I suppose. Grandma's house is quiet. After downing a couple of hi-balls, she went to "nap" 'til evening.

Dennis took off on his bike before she'd finished her first drink. He gave some obscure comment about looking for work and headed out. I can't tell if he's a putz or what. His room looks fairly neat. Even though most of his stuff is in boxes in the corner, I get the feeling he's been staying here awhile. Maybe he is keeping an eye on his mom. After all, if he's really selling drugs like I've been told, wouldn't he be able to afford a place of his own? And he doesn't look like a junkie himself. I'm sure he's not spending his earnings to support a habit of his own. Appearances can be deceiving, though. So I'll withhold judgment until later.

What I do know is, there are several textbooks on a shelf in his room. He's taking college classes. Trying to do something with his life. That's admirable, isn't it? He's handsome and takes care of himself and obviously cares about his mom, the way he worries over her. And the way they tease each other—At least a few tiers above worst possible monster.

On the agenda tonight? Deep breath. Roller disco! Grandma is some kind of serious amateur roller-dancer. She and this Stu character took the Greater Miami Golden Skates award last year. Now, how could I have never been told something like that?

I wonder if anybody knows what I've done yet. If Mitch knows? Has any time passed on the other end of the wormhole? Probably not. He'd have found a way to ruin my fun, even from across the space-time continuum. Wet blanket. Well, he won't be messing up my fun any more. In fact, I might have to go looking for something crazy to do. I wonder if they have paraskiing here?

*Ta-ta for now.* 

Randi

# Chapter 14

Overhead lights dimmed, while out on the rink floor, twin spotlights merged and a disco ball flashed. In stark contrast to the nautical navy-and-white I'd always seen her in, Grandma Bea Keenan rolled out confidently dressed in red leather shorts and a tight black tank. And she looked *good*. So did Stu. He had to be ten years younger than her, which put him close to my current age. He called himself a landscaper and certainly had the muscles of a manual laborer. Judging by the way he touched Grandma, and the way her face lit when he did, they had a scorching physical relationship.

Dennis probably hated that, but I liked the idea of her having some happiness. After all, she'd been widowed for almost ten years.

"Next up," the emcee boomed, "we have Bea Keenan and Stuart Jones. Skate Fever 4Ever is proud to sponsor them again in this year's Greater Miami Roller-disco Dance-off, coming up this July. Make sure to spend your hot summer nights right here, at Skate Fever 4Ever! Every weekend we have Saturday Night Fever and weekdays, two get in for the price of one. Stu and Bea, take it away!"

The spotlights dimmed. Music pulsed, then the lights came back on and the couple moved in perfect fluidity. I recognized the song as *Working My Way Back to You*, by The Spinners. Around me, the crowd clapped to the beat as the dance moves became more complex.

I shouldn't have been surprised; my forty-something Grandma had faced down a sixteenyear-old in the limbo contest mere minutes before.

"What, no skates?" a voice said at my side.

I turned and Dennis was there, pretending to not watch the pair on the floor.

"No, I, uh..." When the rink had been available for open skating, I'd fibbed and told Grandma I had a knee injury, but really I hadn't wanted to leave my backpack unattended. I couldn't afford to lose what was in there, not the least of which was the fat stack of twenties I'd gotten at the ATM on the way to Bell Rock. "I'm not really into skating."

"So what do you do, anyway?"

Out on the floor, Grandma executed a neat tuck and cruised between her partner's legs. The crowd cheered.

As natural as breathing, my answer slipped between my lips. "I'm a teacher."

At his disbelieving "Yeah?" I turned to look at him. "Then what are you doing here in the middle of February for a week?"

Whoops. "I, uh, took some personal time. To go meet my father's family." At least part of it was true.

His forehead had a way of wrinkling whenever he narrowed his eyes.

"Wow!" Maybe I could turn his attention back to the floor. "They can really skate, huh?"

"Yeah. Ma still hasn't got over being a carhop when she was a teenager, I guess. Used to drag me down here every weekend night when I was a kid."

"It's nice she has a hobby." Great to see another thing that made her happy. Would she give it up when her only son disappeared?

The music wound down, and we joined everyone else clapping.

"So. I've got somewhere to go, and it would look better if I showed up with a date."

Oh, hell. This felt entirely too creepy. "Um, yeah." I slid a step away. "I'm not into the whole kissing cousins scene."

Dennis curled his lip at me and laughed. "I didn't mean I really wanted you to *be* my date. It would be for looks. Jesus. You're kinda old for me anyway."

Great, I hadn't even hit thirty-five yet, and I was too old. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him I had no doubt I'd be too old for him since he seemed to go for underage girls. Luckily, Grandma and Stu came pushing through the crowd to us, halting my retort.

Her face glowed, and not only from perspiration. She hugged Dennis like it was normal to see him there.

The emcee announced the next team, and Michael Jackson's Rock with You started up.

Dennis sneered. "Such a dumb song."

Grandma'd told me the couple on the floor was her stiffest competition.

Grinning appreciatively at the insult to their rivals, Stu looked happy as hell. He wasn't handsome in a way that normally would make women look twice at him, but rolling up with his hands resting contentedly on his lover's hips, he turned plenty of heads. Of course, the stunning physical performance he'd given could have drawn the attention.

"You guys were great," I said. "Really awesome performance."

"Awesome, huh?" Grandma repeated with a grin. "Thanks." All three of them gave me a strange look, while I remembered Valley Girl talk hadn't really come into play yet in 1980. Oops.

"I'm takin' Drew here out on the town," Dennis announced.

Stu seemed relieved to be rid of their third wheel, but Grandma asked, "You'll be careful with her? Not get into any trouble?"

"When have I got into trouble, Ma?" Dennis breezed. He spun in a carefree, silly circle, arms out. "Look at me. Free as a bird."

"That's what worries me," she muttered. "Dear, you take care." With a pat on my arm, she delivered a warning glare to Dennis.

"You know, you're assuming I agreed to go with you," I told him as he led me out the door. "Which I never did."

He dropped my hand and turned on me, jaw set. That was the first time my dad had ever held my hand. And I'd screwed it up with my snide remark. "You wanta come along or not?"

I did want to come along. Very much, in fact. If I didn't seize this chance to get close to him, I might never learn his fate. "Yes." I felt the fool. "I do."

"Let's roll then." He took off at a fast pace across the parking lot toward his bike. "You can use my helmet for now, and we'll stop by the house to pick up my spare. Then you can drop off that backpack."

"Oh. Your helmet?" I hurried to keep up. "Maybe I should take a cab to the house—"

"Now why would you waste money on a cab? I won't get a ticket, if that's what you're worried about."

Actually, I was worried about him riding the streets of Miami with no helmet. It would be my fault if he got killed. And then, would I be a paradox? Get lost in Never-existedness? Tickets aside, it was not safe.

Wait a minute. Tickets? He'd sounded entirely too confident when he made that remark. "Hey! How do you know you won't get a ticket?"

His chuckle almost sounded like an evil laugh. "There's a reason my nickname is 'Keen Keenan'. I always know where the cops are." With a smug grin, he handed me his helmet. "Always."

"Still." I hesitated to put on the head protection he was supposed to wear.

"Oh, for Christ's sake! Put the damn thing—"

"Here." I had a vision of myself trapped for eternity in the hectic space-time continuum. Since I hadn't liked it all that much, the prospect was not inviting. "You wear it."

"Jesus. I'll do it. But only because I've got places to be and people to meet." Throwing a leg over his bike, he snatched the helmet from my hands. "Get on."

I did. And I pressed my face into his back, as much to keep the wind from my eyes as to stay warm. Not to mention, to avoid seeing the world flying past at alarming speeds. I definitely had not inherited my father's penchant for unsafe driving. Clutching at his jacket, I couldn't help compare this bike ride to the one with Mitch. That ride had seemed surreal, like a fairy-tale. Idyllic. I'd been so happy then. And now here I was, living out a lifelong fantasy and remembering my 'real life' with fondness. Surely there were screws loose in my head. That job-worshipping dude I'd known for only a few days was *not* going to ruin this time for me. With that goal in mind, I turned my head to the side and watched the Miami nightscape.

Ten minutes later, I stood looking around Grandma's house, searching for a safe place to stow my backpack. There were too many things in there I didn't want anyone in 1980 to look at. Dennis had gone down the hall to raid his mother's closet in search of a jacket for me to wear. The Levi's one I had on wasn't quite sufficient for riding a motorcycle at night in February, even in Miami.

Having given up on hiding my pack, I decided to shove it in a corner of the sofa. I was digging in the pocket for my driver's license when Dennis appeared with a red leather jacket over his arm.

"Got it," I announced, slipping it into my jeans pocket.

"What's that? ID? No, don't bring any ID along." It wasn't a suggestion, but an order.

My confusion manifested itself in temporary muteness and probably a dumb look.

"You don't need it where we're going," he said in a softer tone, and laughed. "Don't tell me you honestly believe somebody might think you're underage?"

How rude! "You know, I'm not exactly old. Where I come from, the thirties is still considered the prime of life."

"So tell me..." He held out the jacket to me. "...you don't wear a wedding ring. How'd you get so old and still be single?"

I grabbed the jacket from him, but before I could answer, he taunted, "Or are you, like, a butch girl? You know—lesbian?"

"No," I huffed, punching one arm into a sleeve. "I am *not gay*. It just so happens I used to be married. But now...I'm...not."

"Not, huh? Why's that?"

"We just," I shrugged, smoothing the jacket over my shoulders, "didn't see eye to eye on some stuff."

"Lotta that goin' around. I got a divorce decree, too." As if confessing to a felony, "And a kid."

"Yeah?" My voice squeaked, but I strove for cool. "That the baby in the pictures down the hall?" Feeling totally inspired, I added, "The one who's bald as a cue ball?"

"Uh-huh. You ready?" Much more abruptly than I'd have liked, he turned on his heel to leave.

"Yes, I'm ready. So, do you ever see her? The baby?"

"Nah. Lives in Colorado." Then with a degree of finality that truly stung, "Got a new step-daddy a few months ago."

"Oh." Back to my old standby reply. "So. Where are we going, anyway?"

"Just hang on."

# Chapter 15

In a business district of Miami where security bars covered windows and street lights were few and far between, Dennis led me to a door under a sign that read simply 'Conga'. Even before the two large men at the door nodded us through, fading strains of a salsa melody drifted out. As we rounded the corner in a dark hallway, a faster song started amid whoops and whistles.

The dance floor was bright, and quickly filling with fast-moving couples. Men wearing anything from tight jeans and cowboy boots to suits with flared legs or traditional costumes kicked and twisted to the frenetic beat. Their counterparts wore evening gowns or frilly, ruffly dresses, or skintight jeans and tube tops. No matter their clothing, they all moved with practiced ease, at a rate I could hardly follow.

"Colombian dance," Dennis yelled in my ear. "Fast, huh?"

Fast, yes. And more than a few people out there were performing some very stimulating moves on each other. "This crowd makes *Dirty Dancing* look like a church function," I answered.

"Dirty dancing in church?"

"Oh." Whoops. No Dirty Dancing back in '80, either. "Never mind. Just an old movie."

The place reeked of beer and rum, cilantro and cigars. My mouth watered for all but the cigars.

We skirted the dance floor and went straight to the bar, where he found an empty stool next to a hideous plastic palm tree. Quite chivalrous, he waved for me to take the seat.

A bartender in jeans so tight they must have hurt and a white sequined shirt unbuttoned to the waist hurried over.

"Señor Keen! Como está?"

"Fine, Ramón Give me a cerveza and..." he looked at me questioningly.

"Sangría, por favor," I answered.

Ramón left to get our drinks and Dennis raised one brow at me.

"You can't live to be as old as me," I teased, "and not be familiar with a few foreign cocktails."

He grinned in answer, and in that instant, I understood exactly why my mother had fallen for him. My father was devastatingly handsome when he turned on the charm. Knowing he was my flesh and blood gave me a little thrill of pride.

"You know, you really must be a Williams," he said. "You'll fit in fine on Ma's side of the family with that smartass attitude."

Ramón reappeared and slid our drinks across the bar with gusto. "The best sangria en Miami," he proclaimed. Then he stood there, watching, waiting for me to sample my drink.

I sipped, nodded, and murmured appreciatively.

He smirked, then sauntered away.

Beside me, Dennis chugged half his bottle of Schlitz before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I've gotta go look into something. You be all right here?"

"Sure." I turned on my stool and watched him disappear into the constantly moving crowd. What was he up to? Hopefully once we were more familiar, I'd find out.

Settling my back against the bar, I sipped at my drink.

One chick in an orange Charro-esque outfit with her wild, curly hair all pulled to one side seemed to be teaching a guy to dance. He might have learned more if she'd stepped away from him, but then she couldn't have groped him so much. Every time she grabbed him, the poor guy nearly jumped out of his snug white t-shirt. They soon had a small audience, whistling and clapping each time she goosed her victim. When he attempted to escape the lesson-gone-molestation, another woman joined the fracas, amid laughter from the crowd.

"Delicia," Ramón said behind me. "She has found a new...how you say?...toy."

Now Delicia got serious about her lesson, pressing against her 'toy's' backside to show him the masculine moves while the other woman performed the female dance steps along with them.

As his arm swept high in an arc like she'd showed him, his shirt pulled even tighter over a wide, strong-looking shoulder. I pictured the arm doing a butterfly stroke in water, attached to... Mitch. Geez. Even here, in Little Havana, he came to mind. Mitchell Goodman sure as hell was not here and it wasn't likely I'd be seeing him again. Period. To wash away thoughts of him, I guzzled the remainder of my sangria.

"Señorita?" Ramón said with a tap on my shoulder. "For you."

I swiveled round.

He presented me with a drink of a different sort. "From the gentleman," he said, pointing down the bar at a youngish Latino guy with slicked-back hair and a white suit the guys on Miami Vice would have envied. "It is a *mojito*."

"Umm, thanks," I murmured. After a pleasant sip of it, I nodded my gratitude toward 'the gentleman'. A tasty drink, and with any luck, the rum in it would dull my senses and I'd be able to quit thinking of Mitch. The dance student on the floor wore a bandana over his head, bikerstyle, and he was too far away for me to make out his facial features. But I kept imagining his nose looked like Mitch's. His smile, too.

Before long, Ramón was replacing my mojito with another.

I sucked the rum from a lime slice as a guy wearing black jeans and a black shirt unbuttoned to the waist led Delicia's Toy from the floor.

By the time my father returned to escort me from Club Conga, I was on my third mojito, compliments of *Tino*, who stood quite close to me and proved to be an accomplished flirt. In fact, the closer he'd gotten, the cuter Tino turned out be. His nearness made me acutely aware that I was a divorcee in sore need of satisfaction. He'd just asked me to dance when dear old dad reappeared.

"Sorry Tino," Dennis said. "But we gotta roll."

Tino obediently stepped out of the way. "Business first, always. And tonight you train the *new guy*. Señorita Drew, until we meet again," he said with a sexy wink. Clearly, any mission of Keen's held top priority.

I struggled to keep up with Dennis's long strides on the way out to his bike. "Um, where are we going now?" *Very smooth, Drew*. Direct questions were not part of the master plan.

"For a ride."

We'd gotten our helmets on when another bike rumbled up next to us, its rider clad in all black. Dennis nodded to the other rider—the new guy?—and turned his ignition on while I threw my leg over behind him. As usual, he took off like a shot, and I barely remembered to tighten my grip. He wove in and out of lanes, revving his engine and squealing his tires as often as possible when taking off at green lights. Whenever I tried to look back for the other biker who'd left the Conga lot just behind us, I could not see him. Were we racing him or trying to lose him?

Traffic thinned and the air seemed to thicken. Even inside my helmet, I could smell ocean. Street lights became a rarity, bigger buildings a common sight.

Here and there, giant worklights shone on docked ships as cranes or workmen unloaded cargo. Dennis made a series of turns which left me completely confused as to our direction, then he parked in what had to be the darkest corner of the entire port. The other bike purred up beside us and the new guy killed his engine.

The only sounds were the popping and creaking of cooling exhaust pipes.

Dennis chuckled. "Too fast for ya?"

Whether he expected an answer or not, the other rider didn't give one, but unbuttoned his creaky leather saddle bags and handed them over without a word.

Dennis disappeared inside. And we waited in the dark.

Way too quiet for my taste, but I'd had some time to sober up during the ride. Unsure what was taking place around me and even less sure I wanted to know, I seized the opportunity to keep my mouth shut.

Beside me, New Guy left his helmet on, as I had. I could hear his rapid—nervous?—breathing. In–rasp, out–rasp. In–rasp, out-rasp. Lord Vader came to mind, and I struggled not to giggle.

Okay. Maybe I was still more tipsy than I thought, because as he breathed in and out, I kept trying to make the connection between Vader—In-rasp, out-rasp—and his son, only in this case it was Vader—In-rasp, out-rasp—and my father... My father, who thought he traveled with some sort of *force* which allowed him to know where the cops were. *Always*, as he'd said.

In-rasp, out-rasp.

Keen was so cocksure of himself, his ability to avoid the police...oh my hell. Was he using his ability to avoid cops to scout for something illegal? Some kind of delivery?

In-rasp, out-rasp.

My father acted as a scout, probably for drug-runners.

In-rasp, out-rasp.

And here he was, coming back out the door of the warehouse with New Guy's—In-rasp, out-rasp—much heavier saddle bags. Probably filled with weed or coke or whatever was the drug du jour in 1980 Miami.

In-rasp, out-rasp.

I'd unwittingly joined forces with the dark side.

\* \* \* \*

Outside Conga, New Guy pulled up beside us, then handed over his saddle bags, and Dennis dumped the contents on the pavement between us.

New Guy flipped up his face shield and growled, "Sand?"

I may not have known New Guy, but I could tell—as opposed to my own joy at seeing we'd only transported ordinary beach sand across Greater Miami in the deep of night—he was not at all happy.

Dennis shrugged and chuckled. "It was a dry run, to see if you could take the heat."

New Guy laughed, but it sounded empty, forced...familiar?

"If you think you can handle the real thing," Dennis said, "let's roll."

Both bike engines roared to life and we were off again, before I had a chance to excuse myself. Real thing? My head hurt with not wanting to know precisely what that was, but knowing I already did, in fact, know.

The docks seemed even more deserted this time around, warehouses staring down at me with their dark, condemning eyes. If I got arrested for transporting drugs in 1980, would Grandma bail me out so I could run back to Sedona and the future? Would it go on my record?

As soon as Dennis was inside the warehouse, New Guy cleared his throat. "So. You been doing this long?"

So. New Guy talked! "This?" I'd had on the helmet entirely too long. Time to take it off and get some air. I hated to think what my hair would look like. At least it was dark here. Even darker than last time, it seemed.

Beside me, his bike squeaked as he stood up and then settled again. He began jangling what sounded like coins in his hands. "Hanging out in dark and dangerous places."

"Um. No." I fumbled with my chin strap. "Actually, I just got into town today." My thumbnail broke on the strap's snap, and I blew a disgusted raspberry.

"Yeah? Where from?" His voice sounded curious and friendly.

I got this irritated feeling, as if I'd packed for a trip and left some crucial item behind. Still, he waited for my answer. "Arizona."

"Arizona?" Curiosity had changed to incredulity. The coins stopped jangling. "Wh-what part?"

With a nice pop, the snap opened and the strap flopped aside. "Sedona."

Coins clattered on pavement.

The door squeaked open, sending a rectangle of light out as Dennis emerged.

From beside me, "Hell."

"What's that?" Dennis asked, handing over the laden leather bags.

"I said, 'Miguel'," New Guy fibbed. "Your, ah, girlfriend and I were introducing ourselves." Dennis straddled his bike and leaned forward to start it, so I worked on refastening my chin strap. Over his shoulder, he said to Miguel, "Her name's Drew. And she's *not* my girlfriend."

The engine roared to life, cutting off any replies.

\* \* \* \*

I followed my father up the sidewalk toward his mother's dimly lit front door. No lights were on inside, so it seemed he'd been correct in guessing Grandma was sleeping over at Stu's.

I shivered while he unlocked the door. All the late night traipsing around made me wish I could go inside and take a long, hot shower and collapse on the couch for twenty hours or so. Being up the previous night, my wild trip, and all the emotions of the day had really taken their toll on my energy. But once we'd gotten back to Conga and his cargo was safely delivered, Miguel had hinted about being new in town until Dennis had invited him over.

Thus, blocking the wind behind me stood a nice, tall drug-running Latino dude, come to hang out with my cocky cop-sensing Dad and I. Swell.

Miguel's jacket creaked as he fidgeted behind me. In his shadow cast by the street lights behind us, his hands reached up around his head.

I followed Dennis inside, and trying to be inconspicuous about checking on my backpack, sat near it on the couch.

# Chapter 16

Below the bandana Miguel was still retying around his head—the one I'd seen on the dance floor so close to Delicia's breasts at times—was a face I knew I'd never forget.

"You!" I gasped. "You're *the new guy*?" His skin was darker, maybe a bit more sunburned than brown, but at least it wasn't orange. The features were familiar. All except his eyes, brown instead of the pretty green I knew. And judging by the exasperated way he gritted his teeth, he was not pleased at my cover-blowing outburst.

Dennis cleared his throat. "You two know each other?"

"No!" We both answered at the same time. "Um, I meant," I explained, "I saw him dancing with Delicia tonight." Proud of my quick thinking, I went on. "I didn't realize it was the same guy. You know, with the helmet and all."

"Oh. Yeah," Dennis muttered. "Delicia has it bad for every new kid on the block. Enjoy being the flavor of the week while you can, man."

*Miguel* merely grinned as he eased his jacket off his arms and tossed it over the back of the couch near me. How long was he planning to stay? Maybe he thought he'd be chaperoning my entire visit here.

How the hell had he managed to find me?

"You two want something to drink?" Dennis headed for the kitchen. "Think I can scrounge up some screwdrivers, if ya want."

I didn't want a screwdriver. I wanted ten minutes alone with Mitchell Goodbody so I could tell him to hit the road and stop checking up on me. To go mind his own business and see to his all-important case. To not even *think* about trying to come between me and my father.

"Um, Drew?" he called from the kitchen doorway. "Care to join us?"

I entered the kitchen just as Dad topped three tumblers of orange juice with several ounces of vodka. Arg. Could be a long night.

He handed each of us a glass and held his up. "To a job well done," he said, tapping each of our drinks with a flourish.

We echoed his sentiment and drank, our eyes meeting.

I got a mouthful of pure vodka. Yuck! He hadn't mixed the drinks at all.

"Whatsa matter, Cuz?" Dennis laughed. "Hey, you *kids* hang out here awhile. I've gotta run to the little boys' room." Drink in hand, he headed down the hall.

Alone at last. And Mitch looked livid. Even behind what had to be brown contact lenses, his eyes flashed dangerously. I refused to be intimidated. After all, if he hadn't been such an ass about his *case*, I wouldn't have risked my life shooting across the space-time continuum all alone.

At the sound of a door clicking closed down the hall, he stepped closer. "I cannot believe you took off in the night and came here all by yourself."

"What choice did I have?" Trying to play it cool, I took another swig of my drink. Nasty. Definitely in need of stirring. "Besides, it looks like you made it here on your own." How could he chastise me for traveling solo, when he had too?

"I found Sudo and told him what you'd done. He was worried sick about you." He jabbed a finger in my direction, took a swig.

Geez. Poor Sudo! "I didn't mean to worry the Professor." But hadn't he left that bag for me on my door? It had seemed like he expected me to use the stuff in there before the Feds came.

Mitch wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "This is the worst drink I've ever had!"

"Here. We just need to stir them." I pulled open a drawer in search of a spoon. "Somebody brought me a bag of all the stuff I'd need to travel. I think Sudo meant for me to use it."

"So you do have a radio? Why the fuck didn't you call and let somebody know you're okay?"

Wooden spoons and spatulas stared up at me. I closed the drawer and pulled open the one beside it.

"Randi?"

"Drew," I corrected.

He stepped to the doorway and listened. "He's on the phone with somebody. Goddammit, I should be down there listening to what he's saying. Instead I'm in here arguing with you."

A silverware drawer. "Bonanza!" After proudly displaying an iced tea spoon, I sunk it into my tumbler and mixed.

"Sudo did *not* intend for you to run off half-cocked and use his method solo. He probably hoped you and I would take off together. So did I, when I found that bag on my doorknob. The first thing I did was go to your room. Only to find out you'd split." Lip curled, he snatched the spoon from my drink and stirred his. "How do you think that fucking made me feel? Walking into your room and realizing you ran off?"

"How you feel? Pfft! You made it perfectly clear how you *felt*. You were pissed at me for messing up your precious case."

"You didn't say anything..." He rubbed his eyes and took a long, long drink. "You just don't leave like that." He looked miserable. Abandoned.

Damn it, he'd hurt me too. "Oh, you were pretty damn dismissive. There was no reason for me to stay." I met his glare head-on, challenging him to say what I wanted to hear.

"You need a reason?" He set his glass down on the counter, hard enough for some of its contents to slosh over the side. Then his hands held the sides of my face. His lips, hot and hard, told me we'd both been cheated out of our night together.

But I'd still been willing after getting rid of David. I'd gone to Mitch's room ready to pick up where we'd left off. And he'd attacked.

With both hands on his chest, I pushed him away. "That's a compelling reason. But after our argument, I had a choice between waiting for morning and the FBI, or taking a risk to complete my mission."

"Speaking of missions." He shook his head. "You're in the middle of my case. This isn't going to work."

Back to his infernal case. "Go work your case from a different angle," I all but hissed. "I've got one father, one chance to figure out what the hell happened to him. I'm going *nowhere*."

"Jesus Christ, Randi! You can't be in the middle of all this drug dealing—"

"Drew. My name here is Drew. You wouldn't stop calling me that before."

"Look, *Drew*." Again, his finger pointed at me. "You are not getting involved in this drug cartel."

"It's the only way for me to get close to my dad." I stood up taller as I spoke, chin lifted at his attitude.

"You can't rescue him from this."

"You can't stop me from trying."

He stepped toward me. "I could. You know I could."

Why had I stepped back? I should be showing no fear.

"I could haul your ass to my shitty little apartment," he breathed as my back bumped against the fridge, "and lock you in a closet 'til I'm ready to go home." He pressed into the front of me. "I *should* have you picked up and put in protective custody."

"Why don't you?"

"Because I know how damn much this means to you, meeting him. Because I'd feel like a shit. Because..." His eyelids covered those dark brown contacts and his forehead leaned on mine. I felt three fast thumps of his heart and then his lips were on mine again, his hands sliding down from my shoulders to my hips.

God help me, I still wanted him. So I opened, accepting his tongue and offering mine in return. My palms left the fridge beside me and I slid them up to his hard, muscly neck. He tasted of orange juice, smelled of leather and motorcycles, felt so good I thought I'd melt.

His hands slid around, grasped my butt, and visions of him taking me there on the kitchen floor made me moan. He kissed harder, faster. My heartbeat sped up. Fire raced through parts of me he seemed adept at waking. He took my lower lip between his teeth, and coughed.

No, that was not his cough.

We pulled apart and looked toward the door, where my father stood with his arms over his chest.

"You're a smooth operator, Miguel," Dennis snarled.

"Uh." Mitch stepped back, leaving me deprived of his warmth. "You said she's not your girlfriend."

"She's not." Dennis's shoulders opened and his hands hung at his sides as if he was ready to fight. "But she's..." His forehead wrinkled. "...from out of town. I don't want her getting mixed up with the wrong kind of guys."

Was my father actually screening my dates?

He seemed as shocked about it as I did. "No offense, man," he mumbled. "We don't really know you well enough for you to stick your, uh, *tongue* clear down her throat."

Mitch had the decency to look apologetic. "You're right." He reached out to shake Dennis's hand. "I'd better call it a night. See you tomorrow." And with barely a nod in my direction, he left.

Stunned, I watched his bandanaed head as he bent over to retrieve his leather jacket from the couch. His fine ass disappeared down the front hall and then the door banged shut behind him.

"Steer clear of guys like him."

My mouth was hanging open, so I snapped it shut. "What?"

"Don't know what Arizona is like, but Miami is full of douche bags like Miguel, who make a living running drugs or doing anything else for money. For all we know, he could be a junkie."

I'd never seen a junkie in such prime physical shape. Never.

Dennis must have taken my shock as disbelief. "Take it from somebody with way too much experience, Drew. Guys like that can and will fuck up a girl's life, big-time."

God, he looked positively wretched when he said that. And then he started mixing himself another drink. Only there was barely any orange juice left, so he ended up with a glass of faded orange vodka.

This subject obviously hurt him. "It's possible you're not entirely responsible for everything that went wrong," I soothed.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand after taking a long drink, he stared at me like I was nuts. "What?"

"Your relationship with your..." I had to cough as I was about to choke on the word *daughter*, "...little girl's mom. There are two sides to every story."

He stared back at me for several seconds, and then chugged the rest of his yellow vodka. Shaking his head, he put his glass in the sink. "You sure are innocent for a woman your age."

Not the age comments again! I was so sick of him treating me like a senior citizen. "I am not old! I'm—"

"You're a trip, Drew." Oh. He'd been teasing. "Did Ma show ya where the extra blankets and stuff are?"

I nodded and he tweaked my nose on his way out of the kitchen.

"Good night, Cuz. Sleep good." Down the hall, he mumbled something about "....fuckin' guy's got no hair on his arms!"

Dear Randi,

Oh God in heaven. I swear, if I get thrown in prison, ca. 1980 and can never get back to the future, it will be for murdering a certain FBI agent. I was just dozing off on Grandma's couch when the back door squeaked open oh-so-creepily. It could have been anyone—a run of the mill burglar, somebody sent to cap dear old dad, Ted Bundy...

But no. Just as I was about to start my Jamie Lee scream, Mr. Goodbody blinded me with his standard-issue crime fighting flashlight.

It seems he managed to unlock the back door—unnoticed by me or my dad—when he was here earlier.

He gave me hell for still not turning on my TTR. But really! How would I explain it beeping or ringing or whatever it does, to 1980-ites?

And then he asked me if I was still "toting around that diary", which, of course, I vehemently denied. A girl needs some privacy!

He tried to intimidate me into returning to the future—alone!—and letting him solve my mystery for me, plus his own case. Whatever. So far, the best thing about him turning up is that I won't have to attempt solo time travel again. He threatened to have me hauled off to HQ. Thank God Dennis was more passed out than sleeping, because I was certainly not whispering when I told Mitch where he could shove his threats. But it seems Agent Goodman has some priority status here, after having the current FBI director sign certain letters in our time. These papers seem to get Mitch anything he wants. Including smack-dab in the middle of the baddest drug cartel Miami has ever known. He still won't tell me what his mission is, exactly. But I can tell he's looking for someone. Someone he wants pretty bad, because he finally agreed I might help his case if I gave him a full report of everyone and everything I see each day I'm here. Only, now that I think of it, he totally manipulated me! My "helping him with his case" now amounts to me checking in with him via the TTR morning and night. So there goes my freedom to relax and blend in. Now I'll be slipping furtively off to the bathroom to make secret calls on an as-yet uninvented radio to a guy who could quite possibly help put my father away for life, in a year when I'm technically not old enough to put on my own shoes.

Shit.

Signing off now, and hoping for at least a modicum of sleep to come.

Randi

# Chapter 17

I woke to the sound of a tool clanging on the driveway outside the living room window. A string of colorful curses made me smile, despite my aching head.

Since the rest of the house was quiet, it was safe to assume Grandma had not yet returned from Stu's. Perfect opportunity to make a clandestine check-in call to Mitch.

A little devil dared me to defy him and skip the morning check-in. The practical side of me knew such behavior would likely cause him to show up in order to check on me. That wouldn't be good. Right now I had my father all to myself and didn't want any intrusions.

No matter how much I'd like to see Mitch.

Besides, I was still irritated with him. The best way to avoid another confrontation would be to follow our plan and make the call. After I'd showered would be soon enough.

A quick peek out the window showed me Pop's legs sticking out from under the Cadillac, surrounded by greasy rags and an assortment of wrenches.

I postponed my shower in favor of moseying outside for a chat.

Since he didn't seem inclined to greet me after I'd been pacing beside the car for several seconds, I opened the conversation with, "Routine maintenance, or repair?"

"Oil change. *This* weekend, anyhow." A grimy hand fumbled beside his knees and grasped a Fram box—oil filter?—then disappeared with it. "This hulkin' piece of shit seems to be broke down most of the time. Keep tellin' Ma she's got to unload it on some Cuban who doesn't know better, and go get herself something reliable."

"Yeah, it looks like maybe it's seen better days. But I guess she has to, like, make do with what she's got."

"The hell—hey, hand me that crescent by your foot, huh?"

I did, feeling pleased with myself that I'd gotten the right tool.

"Thanks," he grunted. "No, that's bullshit, is what it is. She won't spend the time to go pick out another car. Too busy fuckin' around with Stu." The wrench landed with an ungentle clank beside him. "Meantime, I spend my time off tinkerin' with this rusty shitbarge."

"You seem pretty mechanically inclined."

"Hmph. Hey, do me a favor and get me a refill?" His fingers waved toward a greasy-fingerprinted coffee mug near the tire.

When I returned with his coffee, he rolled from under the car, looking rumpled.

"Thanks." He sat up and took the steaming mug. "You didn't want any?"

Considering how thick and dark the coffee in the pot had been? "Nah, not a huge coffee fan. Cappuccino once in a while is all." My head was screaming though, and some caffeine would have been fantastic. "But I'd just about kill for a Red Bull."

"Red Bull? That some kinda cocktail?"

Oops. "Er, somethin' like that." Saying energy drink would probably confuse him even more.

"And what the fuck is a catchapino?"

Of course, 1980 was before the coffee revolution. "Um. Coffee. Sorta. Italian."

"Arizona sounds like a whole other country, man." He drew his brows down and half-glared at me over his cup, though, as if he thought I was loony, rather than from a different state.

"So. Is Grand—I mean, Aunt Bea, um, coming home later on?" I seemed to remember her saying something about Sunday dinner.

Dennis set down his coffee cup and began wiping his hands on the least-oily rag at hand. "She's wanting to cook fried chicken and shit. But we got a run to make."

I coughed. "We?" Fried chicken sounded mighty inviting. I'd much rather hang out with the lovebirds over an old-fashioned Sunday dinner than be an accomplice to another drug run.

"You're good cover, Cuz." He quit wiping his hands and raised his eyes to meet mine. "You scared, or what? I told you, I never get caught."

"Then why do you need a *cover*?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Such a smartass." He took another slurp of his coffee, then scowled back down at his hands. "Rico likes me to have a cover. And Rico ain't an easy guy to tell no. Not a real reasonable guy. He's more like one of them tapeworms." Both of his hands fisted as he explained, "Finds a way inside ya and then uses ya, so he can get bigger."

The silence between us grew as I realized for the first time, that no matter the cool act Dennis put on, he was trapped. In too deep with a man far more powerful than he.

He blew a raspberry and opened his hands, scrubbed his palms down his jeans. "Good damn thing tapeworms aren't smart, huh? I never met a more stupid Cuban." That winning grin lit his face, and I could tell he was up to something. "So. You ridin' along tonight, or what?"

"Um. Sure." No fried chicken for me.

He nodded as if he'd expected as much. "Four o'clock, I'm due at Conga. I better go study some." After tossing his rags and tools into a milk crate, he headed off to the house, all the while whistling the chorus of *Joy to the World*.

The hairs on my arms stood up. One of the few things I'd known about him, was his favorite song. Unbelievable. I was standing in Miami in 1980, listening to my dad whistle his favorite song. *Joy to you and me!* Unbelievable, but good.

\* \* \* \*

Only three black sedans were parked in the lot behind Conga when we arrived. A large Latino looked accusingly at his watch as we approached the door.

"Rico waits," he rumbled.

Dennis sidled past him, waving me toward the bar.

I felt a foolish surge of warm familiarity when I spied Ramón behind the bar, this time wearing a tight turquoise sequined shirt with sleeves unbuttoned and rolled above his elbows.

He paused in his task of polishing a beer mug. "Ah. Buenos tardes, señorita." His smile was nearly as wide as the opening in his shirt. "Un mojito?"

"Por favor," I answered. "If it's not too much trouble."

"For you? No trobble at all."

I took my first satisfied sip and sighed, relaxing back in my chair.

One corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. Without a word, he resumed his work.

After a few seconds of watching two sports announcers discuss the upcoming summer Olympics in Moscow, I transferred my attention to the brilliant cartoon fish painted along the top of the bar. I'd actually reduced myself to counting the spots on a yellow and orange angel-looking fish when Dennis stormed into the room.

I turned in time to see him call over his shoulder, "Nah, fuck it!" On his way to the front door, he motioned me to join him. "C'mon Drew. I'm taking my talents elsewhere."

"Um?" I muttered, fumbling in my pocket for cash to pay for my drink. Where was that ten I got back as change on my shopping trip this afternoon? Had I paid the cab driver with it? No, I'd given him two twenties. Oh. I must have left it with my ID, back at Grandma's. Oh well.

I placed a twenty on the bar, wondering whether Dennis would wait for me to get change.

From the darkened back hallway, a soothing male voice with a Cuban accent said, "Keen. Come, we talk some more."

I looked back near the entrance, where Dennis stood with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his face scrunched in a scowl. He looked from the door to the form in the hallway and back toward the door. With a quick crick of his neck, he signaled me that we were leaving.

Maybe he'd finally had his fill of Rico. Was this falling-out the cause of his future disappearance? Would Rico retaliate and have Dennis "taken care of"?

I hurried toward the door, where the bouncer's body seemed to be blocking Dennis's exit. This was not good. My father had finally decided to end his career as a drug-runner and he was going to be physically intimidated! I'd all but decided to join him in any necessary tussle in order to make our escape, when the bouncer turned away from us to address someone behind him.

"Is there another way out of here?" I whispered to Dennis.

He grinned in answer, and winked.

"All right, Keen," said the calm—but slightly grudging—voice in the back hallway. "You win. Perhaps we compromise."

Keen wiped the grin from his face before facing his opponent. "My price is my price, Rico. Don't waste my time taking me to your office and trying to get me for less."

I turned and squinted in Rico's direction, curious to see the infamous mob boss.

Rico's chuckle, more hiss than laugh, raised goosebumps along my arms and legs. Though I could hardly make out his rather thin body in the shadows, his eyes seemed to glow, look directly at me. "You see? He uses black magic to see the future, and takes my money for it!"

Magic?

To my surprise, Keen answered with a chuckle of his own. "Yeah. Can it, Rico. It's *my* magic to profit from." With a reassuring pat on my shoulder, he brushed past me toward Rico.

That was weird. It was almost like Dennis *wanted* to keep working for Rico. But hadn't he led me to believe he wanted out? I struggled to hold back my anger; surely Dear Old Dad wasn't yanking my chain. I couldn't be naïve beyond all reason.

As the last bit of his KISS t-shirt faded into the darkened hallway and even Gene Simmons' tongue disappeared, I shook my head. No, I had my eyes wide open and I *would* get Dennis Keenan figured out. That was my mission, after all.

First things first: I really needed to use the ladies' room. Another hallway, lit a bit better than the one apparently leading to Rico's private office, had to be the way, judging by the traffic I'd seen running up and down it the night before. As I headed down the hall, it sounded as if the bouncer was asking Ramón about whoever he'd been keeping out.

This part of Conga was decorated as flamboyantly as the rest. In fact, the pay phone was a fluorescent pink flamingo, the receiver consisting of the bird's neck and head. I couldn't resist stopping to gaze in wonder at it. Like a traffic accident, it was really quite awful but captivated my interest. How much would it bring on eBay? Fifteen cents, the sign read. Oh, for the day. Last I'd noticed, a payphone call would set you back about a buck fifty. My fingers suddenly tingled with the possibility...

For a mere fifteen cents, I could call anyone, and they wouldn't have caller ID. I could call my mom, if I wanted to. Maybe even hear myself, a toddler, singing or chattering in the background. Or my grandma in Colorado. My heart ached with the thought of hearing her speak once more, as I pushed from my thoughts the memory of her in a casket, face stiff with an undertaker's lame version of her smile. I forced myself to think of her in her garden, where she was happiest. Or curled up on her couch with a tall bottle of Dr. Pepper, watching Dallas.

There couldn't possibly be any harm in placing the call.

Fumbling in my pocket for change, I deposited the requisite dime and nickel, then followed the operator's directions and dropped in more coins for the long-distance call.

One ring. I trailed nervous fingers along a flamingo wing. Two rings. Down a yellow porcelain leg above the coin-return slot. Three.

"Hello?"

Grandma! It was my Grandma, speaking on the line. Alive. The flamingo went blurry before my burning eyes. "Um?" I choked. "Um? Is this Jenny?"

"Yes. Who's calling?"

Silence on my end as I tasted the tears, but could make no sound.

"Hello?" Grandma sounded worried, maybe a little freaked out.

"I—it's okay. It's okay. I—um, sorry. Wrong number." As quietly as possible, I hung the receiver up before she could say anything else. My forehead must have rested somewhere against the flamingo's tail feathers as I let the tears run.

And from behind me, "Here I thought you didn't know how to use a phone!"

Mitch. Shit. I'd forgotten to check in with him. Snuffling, I turned to face him and apologize. "I'm—"

"Irresponsible?" he supplied. "Inconsiderate? Or just plain rude?" His artificial-brown eyes narrowed on me with considerable venom.

I felt my neck and face get hot; it wasn't as if I'd *meant* to forget! "Look," I said, trying to remain calm, "it wasn't intentional. I got...busy. And forgot." My chin lifted defiantly, my apologetic mood had passed.

"You seem to do that a lot," he snapped. Oh, how like him to bring up my postponing that phone call to my mom, which brought the FBI to Sedona. "And at the expense of my case."

I let out the closest thing to a growl a grown woman can make. "Oh, Jesus! Everything comes back to your case, doesn't it? Is that all you freaking care about?"

In contrast to my outburst, Mitch lowered his voice, pointing his thumb over his shoulder toward the bar area. "If it was all I cared about, *Drew*, you'd be in protective custody right now." Despite his lowered voice, he seemed to get more angry, advancing toward me until I took steps backward. "And I wouldn't have spent an entire afternoon searching for your ass!" Another step back and I bumped against a door, which seemed to give against the pressure. "You know how many times," he said, as I pushed harder against the door, still not sure what room we were entering, "how *many times* I drove past that house and then parked down the street and slunk through the bushes to come look in the windows like a common Peeping Tom, just to fucking check you were okay?"

The last of the door's resistance gave way and I all but fell into a restroom. A furtive glance around showed no urinals, so I let out a small sigh of relief.

Mitch walked in far enough to let the door close behind him, then leaned against it. He closed his eyes and the back of his head hit the door with a little thud. His eyes merely squeezed shut tighter.

He'd been that worried about me? Maybe an apology was in order, after all.

"And then." His eyes opened as he spoke, but he stared at the ceiling, rather than meeting my eye. "I see the Big Yellow Taxi pull up and out you climb with your arms full of shopping bags."

Telling him I couldn't go around in the same two outfits during my entire visit seemed like a pretty bad idea. "I'm sorry." It sounded so small, so useless, in the face of all the trouble I'd caused him, intentional or not.

At last he looked down from the ceiling, but it was like he looked through me, or maybe wished he could. Did he hate me? My heart sunk. We'd been so close, for a time, back in Sedona. Before I screwed things up. Dammit.

"I've got to be the stupidest man alive."

The door behind him bumped and then shoved inward. Mitch stepped aside as young Tino walked in, looking from me to Mitch and back again. I could nearly see the wheels turning in Mitch's head. His mouth half-opened. He must be formulating some story to explain what he, the "new guy" was doing in the ladies' room with the broad who was supposed to be Keen's woman.

I laughed my meanest laugh. "You got that right. I mean, how can you end up in the ladies' room? Can't you *read*?"

Tino cracked up and said something in Spanish to "Miguel". I didn't catch it all, but I definitely heard "estupido". His eyes had never left my upper body. Apparently, Tino approved of my new outfit: skintight Brittania jeans and a slinky top which fastened behind my neck, leaving my shoulders bare. At the time, it had seemed a fitting ensemble for clubbing and drug-running, but under Tino's gaze it felt entirely too revealing. As he stared, he continued to speak to Mitch. His tone was short and autocratic, his words spoken quickly. I gleaned something about a meeting Miguel was supposed to be attending, with Rico and Keen.

Mitch looked appropriately embarrassed and then skulked out.

He paused in the doorway, though, and waited to make sure Tino left the restroom too.

# Chapter 18

I left the ladies' room intent on downing another of Ramón's wonderful concoctions. Maybe when I'd relaxed, I could figure out how to fix things with Mitch. But did I *want* to fix things with him? Just this morning, I'd avoided calling him because I didn't want another confrontation.

"Tell me," Tino said from his hiding place in the shadows near the end of the hallway, grabbing my arm, "Señorita." He pulled me up against him, looking down into my eyes. "What is your relationship with Miguel?"

"Relationship?" Could he feel my heart pounding against his chest? Hopefully he'd think it was from attraction, not fear.

"The bouncer tells me he followed you. Maybe for a chance to speak with you in private. Maybe you are...previously *acquainted*?"

Not trusting myself to pull off a bald-faced lie, I shook my head instead and focused on the wide lapel of his jacket. "He's my—that is, he's Keen's helper. Partner. You know how it works. Keen is, like, his trainer."

"No more?" His eyebrows raised, as if daring me to lie.

Who was this punk, to think he could manhandle me this way? God. In 2010, he probably wouldn't even be of legal drinking age. I gave a hard shove and freed myself. "What else would there be?" I demanded. "You think because the moron stumbled into the ladies' room, we're carrying on a secret affair? Do I look like the type of woman who's attracted to stupidity?" It took all my high school drama classes to muster enough haughtiness to convince myself I was offended and not terrified. I couldn't let Mitch's cover be blown because of me. I couldn't.

"You look like the type of woman," Tino said with a smile, "who knows much more than men think she does." When he smiled like that, it brought back memories of flirting with him the night before. My heart started beating faster for reasons other than fear. "Tell me, *Drew*." When he said my name, his lips ended in a pucker. "What can you teach me, hey?"

For a moment, the divorced and very sexually deprived part of me fantasized about Tino. But some part of me, deep down, trembled at the immature, yet certain, power he exuded. I needed to tread carefully. He obviously wanted me, which could be used to my advantage; he'd be distracted by his lust. Yet, he distrusted Mitch. Without knowing what his post was in Rico's organization, I'd bet he could have Mitch eliminated. I had to convince him the attraction was mutual, yet keep him from going too far.

His finger brushed under my chin, tilting my face so I couldn't avoid eye contact.

I swallowed hard, uncertain how to proceed. "Er. Keen probably wouldn't approve." Of this, I was reasonably certain.

His nostrils flared for a moment. "Keen?" he asked in a disbelieving tone. "Rico requires Keen to have a female cover. Why would he care if you and I were—"

"There's more to my relationship with Keen than you know." Or than Keen knew.

The nostrils flared again. "I see," he mused, his lips pressed thin against each other. "Keen, and the older woman."

I could have happily hit him, but refrained.

Only then did I realize that in order to protect Mitch and avoid Tino, I'd have to pretend to be having an affair with my own father! Surely my acting skills would fail me. *The older woman*. "Yeah. If you're lucky, one day *you'll* be old too." With that, I turned away from him and headed to the bar for a much-needed drink.

The parking lot was dark and crowded when we set out on our nightly mission. Something was up. Each man had a wary air about him and Keen was being almost benevolent toward Mitch. At least, until it came time for us to get on the bikes.

"So," Mitch, er—Miguel, suggested, "how 'bout Drew rides with me tonight?"

"Nah. She's fine right here." Keen's tone was casual, but firm. He took a short puff from his cigarette and expelled it quick, then drew another as if he couldn't get quite enough nicotine.

"You're supposed to be scouting," Miguel objected. "It's safer for her to be with me, and you can ride faster alone." As Keen put on his helmet, Miguel gestured me toward his bike. Did he expect trouble?

"If anything goes down, she's better off with me. I know more ways around the city." Another quick draw from his cigarette.

"Something's going down?" My voice was barely more than a squeak.

"No!" they answered together.

An uneasy moment passed while they stared at each other, silent and guarded.

Keen shook his head and held out my helmet for me to take. "I told you, nothing ever happens on my runs. Which is why Rico pays me so well for my services."

"You can't guarantee that," Mitch said.

"Look, *new guy*, there's a reason you're the new guy and I'm not. 'Cause I know what the fuck I'm talkin' about, whereas you do *not*." A quick flick and the remaining stub of cigarette landed on the ground between them. With much more force than necessary, he ground out the butt under his heel, casting Mitch the evil eye. "And one thing we don't need tonight is you two playin' touchy-feely while you're supposed to be paying attention. So shut the fuck up and let's get on with the job. Or go inside and tell Rico to get me a replacement."

Mitch fastened his chin strap shut and started his bike with a couple of loud revs. He didn't even wait for us to follow before peeling out of the parking lot and heading down the street. I clung to Dennis as he followed, weaving between double parked cars on our way out.

Sunday night seemed to be a popular time to go out dancing for the Cuban population. The dance floor had been brimming with bodies, to the point that the normal spins and movements were impossible. Salsa hip shakes in such close quarters were nearly erotic in nature, suggestive at the very least. This had turned out to be unfortunate when Mitch found me taking dance lessons from Tino, in what had surely appeared to be a mutually stimulating embrace. If he only knew how long I'd put Tino off, avoiding his advances. But it had been hours, literally *hours* they'd been in the meeting back there. Given the thrusting and humping going on around us, the moves Tino and I had been performing were tame not at all deserving of the scowl Mitch blasted me with. Still. It was one more thing for him to hate me for.

At least he'd wanted to keep me out of harm's way. That was a good sign.

Dennis took little time catching up to and blowing past Mitch. Come to think of it, riding with Mitch would have been much safer. Maybe what really became of my father was a horrific bike accident, so gory the body couldn't be identified...

I closed my eyes tight and pressed my face against his back, distracting myself with memories of the look on his face when I'd taken his hand in mine on the way out of Conga. He'd looked like one of my students the day he was telling his friends about seeing his parents kiss, with their tongues. It was all I could do to keep from laughing. But knowing Tino wasn't far behind us, I'd only been able to say, "Shh. I'll explain later."

We arrived at the warehouse ahead of Mitch. Keen whipped his helmet off and dismounted. "Mind telling me what the fuck the touchy-feely was for?"

I couldn't help having some fun by drawing this out. "What?"

"Actin' like we're some kinda item in the club!"

My chuckle was muffled by the roar of Mitch's bike beside us. When he'd killed his engine, I answered, "That was for Tino's benefit."

"Tino," Keen spat. He looked me up and down, then nodded as if he understood. "Ya know, it's not that I mind helpin' you out. It's just..." He shrugged. And shuddered.

"I know. I'm so damn old." I laughed.

"It's not even that. Somethin' about you. Maybe it's because you look so much like Ma. It's...creepy."

"That's probably reason enough," Mitch said.

"Yeah?" Keen sneered. "What the fuck you sayin' about the way my mom looks? Huh?"

"Nothing, dude." Mitch held his hand up, palms toward Keen. "I just meant, if she looked like *my* mom—"

"First off, I'm not a dude. Dudes live on ranches out west. You talk almost as screwy as she does. Christ. And second, it's none of your fuckin' business what Drew looks like. As far as everybody at Conga knows, she's my woman, so that's how we're gonna play it." He shook his head as he set off to the warehouse. "Creepy or not."

When the door shut behind him, I let loose the wave of giggles I'd been restraining.

"Poor bastard," Mitch muttered. "Got no clue why he finds you so repulsive. Creeped me out too, to see you hold his hand. But I guess if it keeps that hard-on Tino away... He suspects something, doesn't he?"

I nodded, and sobered up. "Yes. So I was trying to, erm, distract him."

Mitch shook his head and looked up and down the alley. "Come're." With a furtive tug on my hand, he led me into the shadows near a corner of the building. Up this close, he smelled strongly of cigars, and maybe marijuana smoke. "Listen to me. Don't be putting yourself in danger." When I started to protest, he pressed warm fingers to my lips. His voice lowered to a near-whisper. "And something might be going down tonight. The Feds have a task force...my supervisor's trying to pull jurisdiction and stop them. But in case he can't, well, you need to stick with me. Got it?"

"What about Keen?"

He shook me, gently, but a shake nonetheless. "Listen. I think he'll be able to get away, he seems to have a knack for it. Rico thinks he's charmed because Delicia gave him some sort of voodoo blessing. But if you're not *with me*, I can't guarantee your immunity. And if you get picked up and locked away..." Neither of us needed the words said. If I got locked up, how would I ever go back through the wormhole? His hands squeezed my shoulders. "Fuck. How'm I gonna get you out of my system, huh? We should've gone for it in the Grand Canyon. Then maybe I could think straight."

"Mitch? I can't think straight when we're together either." I intended to apologize again for all the trouble I'd caused, but my words were muffled by his lips. Hard, hot, and hungry, they stole my breath. Stopped my heart. And then kick-started it, making all my nerves tingle and reach in his direction like plants to sunshine. He tasted of cigars, but it didn't matter. He still wanted me, and the throbbing between my legs said I most definitely wanted him. When his hands slipped down to my butt, I sighed, and when he pressed a hand between my legs, I moaned. A fire burned inside me, and only he'd be able to extinguish it. Without conscious thought, I slid a hand between us and cupped him through his Levi's.

He groaned. "Fuck."

I let out a shaky laugh and then sucked in some much-needed oxygen. "I believe my schedule is somewhat busy tonight, but I'd certainly take a raincheck."

"The hell you will! Get your asses out of the shadows and over here." Now why did that sound so like a dad catching his daughter behind the barn with the milkboy? We stepped apart and returned to the bikes without a peep, where Keen was fastening the saddle bags on Mitch's bike.

"We, er..." Mitch cleared his throat. "...talked about it, and Drew wants to ride with me on the way back."

Keen looked up at us and even in the dark, his exasperation was clear. Before he could speak, the sound of an engine moving down the next alley froze us all. And then the unmistakable crackle of a police radio. "Fuck. We're made. You—go that way," he ordered. "Don't fucking question me. Just do it!" He straddled his bike and yanked my arm.

"Drew!" Mitch started his bike. "Come on!"

Mitch would be fine, I knew he would. But for all I knew, this could be the end of Dennis's association with Rico. I had to know where he ended up. Surely he'd manage to get away, *somehow*. Mitch would know where to find me. I let Keen jerk me onto his bike and held on as we sped away. Over my shoulder, I saw Mitch hesitate and then take off in the direction Keen had indicated.

Keen definitely knew where he was going. Though it seemed there were cop cars down nearly every alley, he found a way unblocked, racing down streets lined with stacked shipping bins and piles of wooden pallets, aisles nearly full of empty semi trailers. Then he pulled behind one of the taller buildings and parked.

"Come on," he muttered. We entered a pitch black building through an unlocked side door and he tugged me, stumbling, up a set of steep steel stairs. At the top, he opened a creaky metal door and led me out into the pinkish city night, across the top of the building.

Below us, four cop cars with lights flashing had parked in front of the warehouse we'd left. Not far away, Mitch sat on his bike with his hands in the air, surrounded by cops with their weapons raised.

My chest tightened up so I couldn't breathe. Regardless of who he really was, all it would take was one trigger-happy cop and he'd be shot. I must have sobbed.

"Shit. See why I didn't want you getting tangled up with a guy like that?" Dennis's tone was gentle, if his words weren't.

"Who-who, are they? Feds?" If they were, Mitch's boss would be able to bail him out.

"Nah," Dennis answered as he lit a cigarette. "City police. Looks like it worked out just like Rico wanted."

"Like Rico—what?"

"He wanted 'em to take the warehouse. Sidetrack 'em while we do the big deal, later this week."

"Surely he didn't want to lose one of his guys." Poor Mitch appeared to be sitting silently, refusing to speak. "L-look. He's not even gonna betray Rico and say who he works for."

"Pffbt! Give 'im time, he'll talk. They all do. Anyhow, Rico don't care. Miguel's the *fall guy*." He took another leisurely puff.

"Fall guy? You mean Rico meant for Mi—guel to get picked up?" And this was the city cops, not Feds. They may not be as friendly with Mitch's department. All I could remember was how mad the guys on CSI got when the Feds came in and pulled rank on them. I couldn't let Mitch get hurt. "It's only his second day!"

"That's how it works, Cuz. Rico uses people for what he needs."

"And what about you? You gonna use him too? Do you think this is fair, huh?" I punched his chest. "Goddammit, we've got to *do* something." Down below, they'd cuffed Mitch and were leading him toward a fifth car. Along the way, one cop kept boxing him upside the head. For no reason. "Look at that! It's not right. How can you let Rico do this to him?"

"What the hell would I tell Rico if I came back with the fall guy?"

"Who cares? You're freaking Keen! Magical Keen, with all the cards up your sleeve." Desperation wrenched sobs from my throat, in between my words. "Tell him you like working with Miguel and you won't work without him."

"Babe. It's too late. Look down there. He's already cuffed, and probably had his rights read. What can we do?"

"Please?" I sunk to my knees on the rough asphalt-shingled roof. If something happened and Mitch couldn't get out of jail, I'd never have the nerve to go home alone. And I needed him. In so many ways. "Please. Help him. This is wrong, and you know it. You've been lucky, haven't you? Lucky that this never happened to you. And you know it! What if he has some, some little girl..." I choked, but plodded on "...waiting at home for him somewhere? You think he has a chance of ever getting clean again if he goes to the Pen?"

"Jesus Christ. Let me think." After casting away the cigarette, he buried his fingers in his hair and mumbled for several seconds. When he pulled his hands down, he made a fist with one and hit it against the other palm. Still muttering, he counted the officers below. "Okay. Don't ask me why I'm doing this. Riskin' a perfectly good thing I've got goin'. You see that car over there, kinda up the slope from the others?"

I listened to his instructions, memorizing them to a tee. If I never remembered another thing, it had to be this.

\* \* \* \*

From behind a corner, I watched four officers enter the warehouse. After looking left and right, I all but stepped out in front of another cop lagging behind the rest. My heart beat loud enough to be heard down at the pier as I pressed my body closer to the building. He started whistling—now why couldn't he have been doing that before he gave me a heart attack?—and then the recognizable sound of a zipper opening followed by dribbling told me he was relieving himself. So. Mr. Cop thought it was all clear, nobody else around. Perfect.

When he'd finished his business and headed into the warehouse, the only sounds were from the group standing around Mitch's bike, tasting the contents of his saddlebags and cackling. Hoping to God my dad knew what he was talking about, I bent low and hurried across an open space to the designated car. As he'd predicted, it was running, but not locked. The headlights of another car across from me dimmed for a second. And I began counting as I quietly slid into the driver's seat. The thudding in my ears became the measure I kept pace with. At twenty, the other car started moving, ever so slowly. I pressed the brake pedal. By twenty five, gravel snapped between tires and pavement. At thirty, three officers by the bike had looked over at the moving car. I shoved my car into drive, jumped out the open door into a somersault Mel Gibson would have envied, and ran to the street behind.

Before rounding the corner, I looked back. All five remaining cops were racing after the two self-propelled cars. And a dark figure had approached the driver's door of the car where Mitch was.

Time to remember the rest of those directions.

Keen's keys rode heavy in my jacket pocket. I dug them out as I ran, knowing if I forgot the way out I'd most likely get picked up and pegged for aiding and abetting in the escape. And the guys would have no one to come pick them up. Out of breath when I reached the bike, I heard a resounding crash as one of the patrol cars hit another. Thank God the bike started easily. Forsaking the notion of keeping the engine as quiet as possible, I sped away down the street Dennis had told me to take.

# Chapter 19

Grandma's Cadillac may have run lousy, but it sure drove smooth. In fact, I almost regretted handing the wheel over to Dennis when he and Mitch came running out of the shadows at a city park down near the docks. How I found the place where Dennis had told me to meet them, I'll never know. By the time I saw them, my hands were shaking and I could barely speak. I'd escaped a drug bust and then helped someone run from the cops, while purposely inflicting damage on a cop car. Maybe Grandma Jenny was right and my dad *was* a bad influence.

Up close, both sides of Mitch's head were bleeding and his wrists already showed signs of bruises to come, making me forget my own trauma. "How'd you get the handcuffs off?" I asked.

"Kimball here," Dennis pointed at Mitch, "found a key in the back seat of his limo." Or in his pocket, maybe?

"Kimball?" I repeated.

"The Fugitive! Jesus, you're the old one." He chuckled, with a slug to my shoulder. "Nice work, Cuz. I bet those goons don't leave their cruisers unlocked anymore, huh? Good job findin' your way around town, too."

"And to think I did it all without Tom-Tom."

"Who the hell is Tom?"

Mitch put his hands over his eyes.

If I was shook up over our little misadventure, Keen seemed inversely euphoric. Mitch was simply quiet. All the way back to Conga, he didn't speak other than to grunt that he was okay. Oh God. Had I managed to make him mad again?

From the time we went through the front door and Hugo the Bouncer's eyes rounded at the sight of us, until Keen gave me what might have passed for an affectionate hug before they went down the back hallway, we got a lot of strange looks.

I hadn't yet made my way through the throngs to the bar when Tino grabbed me from behind. "We must talk."

I clearly had no choice. Hands on my shoulders, he steered me in the direction the guys had disappeared. So Tino must be surprised to see Miguel back too. Which meant he knew Miguel was only a fall guy, intended to disappear from the organization that night. Which, in turn, meant he hadn't really been suspicious of Miguel. Perhaps jealous. Or if he thought we had some prior affiliation, suspicious of...me? My heart pounded for what had to be the thousandth time that night. I could be in an even worse predicament if I'd angered Rico, than if I got arrested.

He guided me through a glossy black door, past a guard and into a new hallway where the music was no longer audible, then into a room with its own glossy door. A raised voice rattled from the next room, but the words were unintelligible. With a gentle shove, Tino pushed me toward a black leather couch. A quick look around showed no other occupants. Perhaps those self-defense classes in college would save me.

Without speaking, Tino popped the cork on a bottle of champagne and poured two flutes. Barely-restrained excitement bubbled beneath his surface as he took a seat, entirely on what I considered *my* section of the sofa. His cologne was fresh as always, his teeth pearly white when he smiled and said, "To adventure."

"Er. To adventure." Crystal clinked and I chugged, conscious of the irony. Only a few days before, adventure would have been top on my list of toasts. It was fast becoming old. A nice evening spent in front of the tube sounded magnificent.

The bubbles burned on the way down. Wow. I hadn't realized I was so parched.

Tino refilled my flute and sat down. "Is it true you can ride a motorcycle?"

I nearly choked on my champagne. "Word travels fast."

"Keen called in while he was waiting for you to pick him up."

"Ah. Um, yes. I ride a motorcycle."

He wore a look of wonder. "And you helped with this...escape?"

"It was nothing. All I did was put a car in gear, really. Anybody could do that."

"I always miss all the action," he complained. "I'm so sick of being inside here. All I've learned about here is cigars and dance steps and sex. Maybe you could teach me." At my intake of breath, he chuckled, then gave me a lusty grin. "To ride a motorcycle. I'd like to get my license." He leaned closer, as if vying for a kiss.

"Oh!" I took a drink, turning my head aside. "No, I'm afraid I won't be here that long. I'm only visiting for a couple of weeks, tops."

"I could pay you." As I made to get up, he blocked me with his arm. "I could pay you *a lot*." I tried to duck under the arm and he said, "In many rewarding ways."

Much to my relief, the door clicked open. "Tino!" said that voice I knew from the hallway. "Please do not make fool of yourself with Keen's *lady friend*." Was that sarcasm in his tone when he said lady?

Tino straightened away from me and managed to flush red beneath his dark skin tone.

"So. Señorita Drew. Tonight you help to save two of my men." Carefully hitching up his expensive suit pants, the tall, almost painfully thin Rico took a seat in the armchair across from us, one leg crossed over the other. Was that smile he wore for real? I tried to remember The *Godfather*. Didn't the Italians smile at people right before having them capped? Was Tino a capper? "For that, I must thank you. *Muchas gracias*."

"Um. You're...welcome?" Feeling suddenly inspired, "De nada."

His smile faded. "For the other..." He snapped his fingers, but apparently came up empty handed. "...thing. Tonight, you pay, how you say—false money—in my bar."

False money. Fake? "Counterfeit? Me? No I did not!" Counterfeit money was a federal offense. No way would I go near that.

"Yes," Rico hissed, "you deed!"

"I didn't!" I jumped to my feet, prepared to argue to the death, which may not be far off. Rico, unfortunately, followed suit. And though I might have outweighed him, he was taller than me by about a foot.

Seeing the confrontation escalate must have spurred Tino to try and intervene. The questions he asked in rapid Spanish, Rico answered in angry bursts. At some point, I became aware of "Ramón" bouncing round in their words, as well as mojito, and rather a lot of "Papi"s, coming from Tino. No wonder he was cosseted and stuck inside running Conga instead of out on the streets!

"Dru," he said to me, making the pouty kiss-face, "my *father* believes you paid Ramón with a fake twenty dollar bill earlier today."

"If I had," I said, crossing my arms over my chest, "how would Ramón know it was me? Are you telling me I'm the only customer who paid with a twenty today?"

Rico, apparently too angry to facilitate any of his English at all, rattled off something to me. The only word I caught was some derivative of "baja".

"It was on the bottom?" I rephrased. "So. Can it not be possible another person paid with a twenty later on, which got stuck on the bottom of the stack?"

Mimicking my stance, Rico crossed his arms too. And stood there breathing heavily in my face. Or rather, *above* my face. I staunchly stared at his bony wrists. Mob boss or no, he wasn't going to falsely accuse me and get away with it.

"You," he said at last, aiming a long finger at my nose, then more Spanish which Tino interpreted as, "are very wise or very foolish." He failed to relay the last part of Rico's message, which I'd heard on the streets enough times to know meant "Don't fuck with me."

I had indeed fucked with Rico. I'd foiled his plan to use Mitch as his scapegoat, maintained Mitch's status as an undercover FBI agent, manufactured an affair with Rico's top guy, and spent the evening leading his son around by the nose. I should, by all rights, be scared out of my platform shoes. Instead, I got a huge adrenaline rush. Somehow, fate was giving me some vengeance. Rico Romero had stolen my father from me before I had a chance to win him over with my babyish charm. And in turn, I was going to fuck with him in every way possible.

"Miguel will need a new bike," I said. Feeling a surge of weightlessness like that first second or two of a bungee jump, I asked, "I assume since he lost his in the line of duty, you'll replace it for him?" Breathless, I waited for gravity to take hold and slam me for my boldness.

One corner of Rico's mouth lifted in a genuine-looking smile. "Juevos. Sí, señorita. One for you, tambien?"

Behind me, Tino chuckled.

I decided to smile back at his joke. "No. I don't plan to be here that long, but thanks."

"Ah. Sí. Then you will return to—"

"Colorado," Tino interrupted. Shit. Had I told him Colorado last night? Too many mojitos.

"Arizona?" Rico asked. I was in a fix this time. If I said Colorado, then it would get back to Keen, and he'd wonder why I'd lied to him. On the other hand, if I stuck with Arizona, Tino's suspicions would be raised.

"I, um, live in Arizona. But work in Colorado."

Like his son's, Rico's nostrils flared when he concentrated. Assuming United States geography escaped him, I had only to worry about Tino. Who managed to look unconvinced and horny at the same time.

"Well." I wiped my palms on my jeans and forced a smile. "It was really nice meeting you, but I suppose I'd better see if Keen is ready to go home. Is he out at the bar?"

After Rico gave instructions to Tino in Spanish, he turned to me and bowed. "Señorita." Then he clasped my hand in his bony one and shook it.

Tino led me back into the hallway. "Before we go in," he asked, pausing in front of a wider black door, "one little kiss?"

I shook my head at the tenacity of youth.

With a sad sigh, he opened the door for me.

Keen and Mitch were seated on sofas, facing one another, heads turned toward the TV. In the typical fashion of men, they were so absorbed by the broadcast, they didn't hear us enter.

"Ahem," Tino said. Once he'd gained their attention, he shot Mitch an evil glare. "Report here tomorrow for your replacement motorcycle. *Buenos noches*." He shut the door with solid bang on his way out.

Mitch's head didn't look so good. "Jesus, Mi-Miguel. Why hasn't anybody cleaned up your wounds yet?" On closer inspection, it appeared his pupils were equally dilated, but he seemed groggy and distant.

"I'm fine." He didn't *look* fine. He looked damn injured. And a bit aloof.

A commercial ended and the newscaster began a report about counterfeit twenty dollar bills. I watched in fascination at shots of the shopping center I'd been to that day. So the culprit had been there, too! "Maybe that's where it came from," I muttered.

"What?" Keen asked.

Some dumbass cashier had probably given me the twenty back in change at the mall. No way in hell I'd admit it to Rico.

"Nothing. Let's go home."

Dear Randi,

This has been one hell of a day. Culminating in an argument with my father—which I won!—over whether we should bring my boyfriend home with us so I could doctor him up. Dennis is determined Mitch is bad news. But hey, what's a boyfriend without a bit of paternal disapproval? Grandma is obviously a much better judge of character. She thinks Mitch is a "nice young man". And I heard her giving Dennis hell for being so rude to him.

Of course, I reckon if she believed Mitch had been up to what Dennis believes he's been up to, her opinion might be different. As it is, she thinks the "boys" got in a bar fight, thus Mitch's injuries.

He's been really quiet—Mitch—and it's stressing me out. Except for chiming in a bit on the way home with lines from 'Ironic' when we were talking about how weird it is for the narrowest man in the world to have such a wide door to his office. I said it was "Like a free ride, when you've already paid." He put in "It's like ten thousand spoons when all you need is a knife" and then I said it was like "Rain on your wedding day". He got really quiet. And then he muttered, "The good advice you just didn't take." I really don't want to think about what he meant by that. I'm sure of it. I'll pretend it's a phone call I'd rather not make, and tuck it away in the To Be Done file.

Right now he thinks I've gone off to be in a spare room somewhere. It was a necessary deceit to get him to take the couch. Dennis, bless his bossy soul, thinks I'm sleeping with Grandma. In reality, I've shut myself in the bathroom to compose this journal entry and then I plan to tiptoe out to the living room and sleep in the easy chair, where I can make sure Mitch is okay.

I seriously don't know what I would have done, if something happened to him. I might be in trouble here. He says he could get me out of his system if we got it over with and had sex. But...what will I do then? I have this really bad feeling I'm in love. With a dude who's going to see me safely home, maybe lay me once, and then disappear back to Washington DC or wherever his next case takes him.

Oh, man, what a day it's been.

Eternally messed up,

Randi

# Chapter 20

I woke to find my father scowling at me as he leaned against the doorjamb and ate cereal from a mixing bowl. Jabbing his spoon in Mitch's direction, he announced, "It's time for *him* to go home."

Mitch roused at the sound, only to be greeted with, "Mighty heroic, takin' the couch and leavin' her the chair."

"What happened?" I snapped at my cranky dad. "Get a roach in your Cheerios?"

"You," he roared back, pointing his dripping spoon, "were supposed to be sleeping in the bedroom, where I told you to."

"Yeah? And who the hell are you, to tell me what to do?"

He stared back at me, then mussed the back of his hair. "How the fuck do I know?"

As he disappeared, muttering, into the kitchen, I turned my attention to Mitch. "How's your head?" I sat on the edge of the couch and examined his injuries for signs of improvement.

He still seemed disoriented. "What are you doing out here, Drew?"

"Sleeping. Watching. In case you needed something." At least he wasn't bleeding anymore, so stitches probably weren't necessary.

"I'm not helpless, Goddammit." He captured my hands and pushed them into my lap.

I scooted back and bumped into his midsection. Where I felt a *hard* protrusion. Raising my brows at him, I tried to suppress the smile I knew would piss him off.

"I was dreaming," he growled.

"I'm flattered." I grinned down at him, wondering whether I could chance a good morning kiss. I'd had a dream or two about him, too.

"You shouldn't assume it was about you." His words stung like the slap he seemed to have intended.

"Oh. I'll just...leave you alone then."

It hurt enough, rushing out of there all emotional, but I got an added burn when he looked relieved that I'd gone.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, where I washed my face to disguise the tears, I flounced past Dennis in the kitchen and went out to the lanai. I seriously felt like crossing my arms over my chest and pouting like a teenager who wasn't getting her way. Carrying on my adolescent persona, I flopped without grace down on the nearest lounge chair.

Grandma looked over her paper and glasses at me and smiled. "Good morning, dear."

The best I could manage was a, "Hmmft!"

She smiled wider and returned to her reading.

"So do you, um, always have Mondays off work?" I asked.

"No." She looked up. "I took today off to spend with my new niece. Dennis has college classes today, and it would be rude to leave you here alone." Back to the paper.

"Oh. So, maybe we should go shopping. For a new car."

She closed the paper and folded her arms over it. As if I'd suggested the most far-out idea ever, she asked, "Why?"

"My d—I mean, Dennis, thinks your old one is more work than it's worth. He says you don't want to take the time with the trade-in, but I bet you haven't done it because you don't want to go alone."

After pulling off the reading glasses, she folded and placed them precisely in the center of her paper. "All right."

"All right?"

"All right, Drew. Let's go buy a car."

\* \* \* \*

Though I'd hoped to leave the house without another word to either my father or Mitch, we ended up having to drive Mitch to an apartment complex up the street from Conga. When he got out, Grandma put down the electric window on my side. He stood there, looking as uncomfortable as I felt, and then leaned down to look me in the eye. "Um. So, I'll...see ya."

"Yeah. See ya."

With a friendly pat on the hood of the Caddy, he stepped back, bike jacket slung over one big shoulder. I felt a pang of heartbreak at leaving him there, all alone. Even after the way he'd acted that morning. As we pulled away from the curb, he put thumb to ear and pinkie to lips, mouthing "call me".

"Call you!" I mumbled to myself as I put the window up. "What the hell for?"

"Ever been married, dear?" Grandma asked.

"Yes. Once."

In the way of the unapologetically old and snoopy, she asked, "How'd it end?"

I bit my tongue on the smart answer that came to mind: divorce. "There was something I wanted to do that he thought was dangerous. I insisted on doing it, because it was really important to me, so we parted ways."

Without conveying an ounce of opinion, she said, "Mmm-hmm," and flipped on the windshield washers. "Ever regret it?"

"Not yet."

"Mmm-hmm." Satisfied her windshield was clean enough, she turned off the wipers. "You won't."

How she could know that, I wasn't sure.

She shoved a cassette in the player and Anne Murray came on, singing *Danny's Song*. "I have a sister who divorced her husband because he bought her a new washer to replace her old wringer model, but wouldn't spring for a dryer."

"So what are you saying? That it's hereditary for women in our family to blow off marriages over trivial matters?" God, this conversation got better and better.

She shook her head. "If it's that easy to let go of somebody over a disagreement, it wasn't meant to be. And don't ever forget, he let you go, too."

That was small comfort.

"Now, on the other hand, if it hurts this much just saying goodbye to somebody temporarily, *despite* a disagreement, then I'd say it's love."

"Maybe it's not. Maybe it's infatuation."

"In which case," she retorted, "you'd be blind to any of his faults and get along famously until the moment you said goodbye."

"-or simple lust?"

"In which case, you wouldn't care about his faults. You'd be too busy doing what you needed to so you could do the horizontal mambo."

"I'm not sure things are meant to be for us. It's...complicated."

"Complicated," she scoffed. "When any young couple has troubles, they think they're the first ones in the world it's happened to. They're the only ones ever to go through it!"

If I bit my tongue any harder, it'd be a goner. "So. What kind of car are we looking for? Another Cadillac?"

"All I'm saying, dear, is listen to your heart. There's a reason you feel so miserable right now. If you want to make him suffer, give it a sensible amount of time and then call him. But don't let your heels sink so long you end up digging them in and letting him go. He's got too cute a tushy to let go."

"Oh my." I cracked up. "Good point. It looks even better in a Speedo, although I'll never admit it to him." Shit. Would she notice I'd all but confessed to knowing Mitch before?

"That's right. Never let him know you worship his body as much as he worships yours. You'll have the upper hand."

What would she think about my "upper hand" if she knew he'd confiscated and read my journal, where I referred to him as Goodbody?

\* \* \* \*

Grandma ended up with hot red '79 Z28 someone had previously owned and put two hundred and seventy-six miles on. She all but stole it from the dealer, for the criminal price she bartered him down to. Maybe that's where I got my knack for bargaining with the vendors in Mexico.

Clinging to the door handle on the passenger side as she raced home, I knew precisely where my wild side came from.

She had dance practice with Stu this evening, and since Dennis wasn't around, I decided to use the TTR to phone Mitch. It took a few minutes for me to figure out how to adjust the channel to the one he'd told me to use.

"Hello? Hello?" No answer. I fiddled with the buttons some more. "Hello? Mitchell?" Maybe it was the switch on the side. Mumbling to myself as I worked, "Calling Mr. Goodbody. Come in, Goodbody..." Nothing. Damn. I'd really hoped I'd get to talk to him. And maybe he'd be over whatever he was mad about. Or at least willing to apologize for being such a jerk that morning. "Big hunk o' shit!"

"Which is it, Goodbody, hunk, or shit?"

"God. How long have you been listening?"

He was quiet so long, I started to think he wasn't going to answer. "At first I was surprised you actually called." Another long pause. "Thought maybe you were giving up on me."

He was probably only talking about the TTR, but I'd try and rally him to the subject eating at my insides all day. "Funny, it seemed that was what you wanted, earlier."

"So. Did you girls buy a car today?"

I sighed at his change of subject. "Yes. Dennis will shit himself, but that's okay. I bet Stu's lovin' it tonight." I could almost imagine him and Grandma up at some lookout point, watching the submarine races from her new muscle car. "She bought a fully loaded, cherry-sweet Camaro. I'd love to hide that baby away someplace safe and dig it out in 2010."

He cleared his throat. "About 2010..."

"Yes?" Was he going to ask me on a date when we got back? Did he want to pick up where we left off?

"I think you need to go there. Like, soon. Because now Rico wants you along for the big deal later this week and—"

"Oh my God! You are so not going to ship me out before I get my answers."

"It's not safe for either of us when I can't trust you to follow orders." His tone brooked no argument.

Mitch and his damned self-ordained authority. "Orders! Are you forgetting I got here all on my own, *not* with the help of you or anybody else? And you do realize if it wasn't for me, you'd have been the victim of more brutal beatings last night, most likely resulting in a hospital stay *if* and when the cops decided to let you go? Meaning you'd have missed out on quite a lot of time on this case, *Mitchell Goodman*."

I heard rustling sounds and immediately pictured him scrubbing his fingers through his hair. "I saw that bitchin' tumble you did on the way out of the patrol car you crashed. Pretty cool move."

My back didn't think it was so cool today, but I'd be damned if I'd say so. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I could hear the smile in his voice. And it sounded almost like he admired what I'd done.

"I, um, had to learn how to fall without getting hurt. For skydiving." Too bad I couldn't figure out how to keep from getting hurt when falling in *other* ways. Speaking of getting hurt, "How's your head tonight?"

"It was just a little bump. No big deal."

Was he being tough for my benefit or was he irritated with me for caring?

"Mitch?"

"Hmm?"

"You gonna tell me how I pissed you off this time?"

"What do you mean this time? You make it sound like I'm always pissed."

"Well, are you?"

"Where's your dad, this evening?"

"Um...I have no idea. Care to come keep me company?"

"I think that would be a really bad plan." When I fumed, rather than beg him to explain, he said, "Father dearest seems rather opposed to us dating."

"Oh, Mitch. I'm sorry. It's because of who he thinks you are."

Mitch answered with a nasty laugh I couldn't interpret.

"Seriously, given the facts, I bet you two would get along and—"

"Let's not bank on it. So I guess you can hang with him later. We've got a meeting tomorrow night...on a boat. Did he tell you about it yet?"

"No."

"You'll have to wait for him to tell you, then. Or he'll know we talked."

"He knows I've got a thing for you and I'm worried about your head. So what if we talked?"

"Not happening. Take care tonight, huh?"

"Mitch? Wait!"

"What?"

"Venus...she's just rising. Can you see her from where you are?"

I heard a clunk as he moved the radio. "Yep." It might have been my imagination but his voice sounded softer to me. "There she is."

Hopefully he was remembering that evening under the stars, like I was.

He cleared his throat. "Enjoy your time with your dad." No mistaking the gentleness in his tone. "I'll see ya tomorrow."

"Thanks. Bye."

A quiet evening with the TV, exactly what I'd longed for the night before.

Just where the hell was that father of mine?

## Chapter 21

Dear Randi,

Life's little mysteries keep getting bigger. Dennis came trotting in a few minutes before midnight. Obviously I'm only his "cousin" so why he'd make up a story for my benefit, I cannot guess. But I believe he did, for he said he'd been at the library. Yeah. 'Til after eleven? Maybe at a college library, but I truly doubted it.

He smelled distinctly like donuts, even had a bit of glaze at the corner of his mouth. And being the nosey wench I am, after he went off for a shower, I found receipts in his jacket pocket. Seems he bought 3 cups of coffee at Dunkin' Donuts, one at 8:05, one at 8:45 and one at 10:00. Someone else paid for his donuts though, unless he tossed that receipt away. How very strange.

He did have a stack of books in his backpack. Well, yes, so I rifled through them too!

Oh hell. Here he comes.

Dennis bestowed his usual half-scowl, half-"you're nuts" look on me as I hastily shoved my journal under my pillow. He appeared wide awake and perhaps a bit wired, rather than ready to head off to bed like I'd expected him to do. Why wouldn't he be buzzing? He'd spent the last three and a half hours consuming caffeine, carbs, and probably quite a helping of nicotine, too.

"News, huh?" He pointed his lit cigarette toward the TV as he settled into the easy chair. "You're a regular party animal, Cuz. So this is what I can look forward to when I'm old." Only his grin kept me from giving him a smart remark. "Where's Ma at?"

"Practice with Stu."

"Not this late, she ain't."

I didn't ask where he figured they'd been. Maybe at Dunkin' Donuts, where *some* people hung out 'til all hours of the night.

More coverage about the counterfeit money started playing, but was somewhat drowned by the sound of Grandma's new car pulling into the driveway.

"That's no Caddy." He rose immediately and headed to the window. "You really got her to trade it off?"

He'd pulled the curtains aside by the time I'd stood to follow him. "It wasn't like I talked her into anything, she—"

"What the hell is that? A fuckin' Firebird?"

As we watched, Stu climbed from behind the wheel and walked to the passenger side.

"It's a Z28, not a Firebird."

"What is she, twenty-one?"

Stu opened the door for her.

"Christ. She's blitzed."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"It's after midnight," he muttered under his breath. Then, looking sideways at me, "Hear her laughin'? That's her drunk laugh. We're in for a treat."

Good thing Stu was there to help Grandma walk in, because she'd never have made it alone, teetering on her high dance heels.

"It looks like he's sober at least."

"One thing he's good for," Dennis conceded, letting the curtains fall closed.

They made a noisy entrance, bouncing the front door into the wall. Stu "Shh"ed her and then whispered rather loudly, "In a minute, baby, one *minute*." With little more than a wave over his shoulder in our direction, he helped her down the hall toward her room. Their walking seemed impeded as much by her amorous groping as by her tipsiness. Her door shut with a bang.

Dennis rubbed his forehead with the back of one hand. "Jesus. I think I'm gonna need a drink. C'mon."

I followed him to the kitchen, unsure whether I found Grandma's current state hilarious or appalling. Or, if it really happened on a regular basis, sad.

He'd started pouring vodka into glasses of 7Up, when someone knocked. Only it was on the wall, rather than the door. Dennis didn't even pause in what he was doing. Oh. It wasn't someone knocking—a headboard banged against the wall. I covered my mouth to stifle a giggle, while my dad shook his head and stirred the drinks.

Poor guy. I'd have been mortified too, if it was my mother.

"Let's get outta here." Handing my drink to me, he made for the lanai. When we'd shut the door and settled in our chairs, city sounds settled around us. Traffic, sirens, a dog barking down the street. Yet, like the sounds from a distant construction site, the noise from within crept out.

Dennis took a long drink and then set his glass down. "Jesus Christ. I have *got* to get my own place."

We sat in silence for several minutes. All the while, his fidgeting and smoking grew faster and faster.

The pounding, while rapid, was steady. Stu had staying power, I'd give him that.

"Fuck this." Dennis rose in one quick, decisive motion. "I'll be right back."

I cringed, fully expecting that he planned to go initiate an argument.

The staccato from within grew louder for a moment as he opened and shut the French door on his way back.

"This'll take the edge off." As he sat, he held up a tiny pipe in one hand, and a bag in the other.

"Oh. I don't know. What is that?"

"Finest weed Mexico can grow. Compliments of our friend Rico and his compadres. And let me tell ya, Cuz, this is some good shit."

"Yeah, but I'm not really—"

"Oh, come on. Don't make me get mellow all by myself!"

Smoking pot with my dad. Now there was a page of my baby book left intentionally blank.

With expert ease, he stuffed the pipe full. He withdrew a matchbook from his pocket, but paused before striking it. Looking over at me, he must have seen my hesitancy. "C'mon. You can't tell me you went to college in the early seventies and didn't smoke ganja! From what I've heard, they practically handed it out with textbooks back then."

It may not have been the seventies, but my college experience had definitely included Marijuana 101. "Well..."

He shook his head and struck the match. "Don't know what you're so fuckin' uptight about." Sulfur fumes drifted my way as the flame dipped into the pipe bowl, drawn by the soft sucking of his breath.

When he stopped sucking in and handed me the pipe, I still hesitated.

Exasperated, he blew out a lungful of smoke. "Fuck, Drew! Hurry up or it's gonna go out."

The smoke was hotter than I remembered. I choked, hacked and nearly retched. Through my watery eyes Dennis doubled over, laughing at me.

"Jesus," he finally gasped between guffaws, "if I'd known it was gonna kill ya, I wouldn't have pressured ya."

"Oh, fuck off," I rasped. A long, soothing sip of my drink, and I was good to go. "Give me another match."

"Maybe you're too old." He held the matchbook just out of my reach, wearing a troublemaker's grin, which was really quite attractive. If I wasn't his cousin, er, daughter...

"Look, dude, give me the match."

He handed the matchbook over. As if prepared to be entertained, he crossed his arms and sat back.

Acting the expert, I lit the match and sucked in, this time getting smoke past my seared throat and into my chest. My throat must've taken quite a burn, for it was mercifully numb.

His eyebrows raised in silent tribute as he accepted the pipe and took another toke.

To further impress him, I held my smoke 'til several seconds after he'd released his.

After a short burst of coughing, I asked, "Aren't you, like, worried your mom will catch you?"

"Fuck. She'll pass out as soon as they're...done."

Not to be outshone, or possibly because he'd remembered what was going on inside, he lit up and sucked in again.

I snatched the pipe from him and took another hit too.

"You got the lungs of a whale?" he asked when I'd finally let out my smoke.

"Practiced holding my breath, part of the training for some of the extreme sports I do."

"Extreme sports," he muttered. "Weird talk. Whattaya, hold your head under water in the Grand Canyon as long as possible? What the hell is an extreme sport anyhow?"

"I learned to hold my breath for cliff diving. But you never know when it'll come in handy." Another sip and my drink was gone. Possibly to my head, since the branches of a certain bush in the yard seemed to be moving with no wind. "Such as..." I waved my hands around me, "...when my long-lost, da—er, cousin challenges me to a pot-smoking contest."

"You went cliff-diving? What are you, fuckin' nuts?"

I laughed and got a step ahead in the smoking challenge by taking the next hit.

"Seriously? Like those guys on *The Love Boat*, you cliff-dived?"

I let out my smoke, quite hopelessly messed up. The bush was still moving, but none of the citrus trees behind were. "Yep. I've been to the same place they always show too, in Mexico. Jumped on my honeymoon, while my husband took pictures from a boat below."

From inside, the banging—pardon my pun—got faster, louder, then stopped.

"Thank Christ!" Apparently satisfied with his buzz, he lit a cigarette. "You want one?"

"Nah. Never touch 'em. Too tough on the body. Besides, where I come from, it's really inconvenient to smoke. It's illegal in most public places."

"Get the fuck outta here!"

"Yep." I nodded, itching to take the pipe again, but knowing it was a bad plan. Instead, I laced my hands around my knees and looked up at the pinkish night sky. Was that Venus over there? It sure was bright, but maybe it was a different planet. Or an airplane. Was it blinking, or was I? And would I ever look at the stars again without thinking of Mitch?

"Jesus, Cuz. You spacin' out already?"

Stalling seemed the best tactic, since he probably wouldn't take kindly to hearing who I'd been fantasizing about. "Hmm?"

"Get it?" He snickered. "Spacin' out? Starin' at the stars, spacing out."

"Oh, yeah. Good one." Not nearly so good as he thought, the way he was giggling like a school girl. But seeing him crack up suddenly hit me as funny too, and for what felt like several hours—though it was surely only minutes—we sat and giggled. When I'd forget what was so funny, I'd bust up again.

Finally, I could laugh no more without crying, my sides hurt so much. Wrapping my arms around my middle, I rocked and moaned, still shaking off the last chuckles.

"Goddammit," he muttered beside me.

Suppressing yet another bout of laughter at whatever had miffed him this time, I was all set to ask him what he was irritated with now, when his fingers wrapped around my right hand. Without waiting for a word from me, he tugged the hand away from my side, sitting forward to examine it.

After several seconds, he shook his head. "No wonder you always fuckin' remind me of her. Your damn hands...they're just the same, you know?"

"Um, huh?" My hands? Oh, shit. They were exactly like my mom's, and so were my legs and feet. As sneakily as possible, I tucked my feet under me, away from his sight.

"My ex. Your hands are just like hers." He'd spread my fingers apart, and pressed his against them, comparing. "Same size, everything." The look on his face was positively dreamy.

"Um..." I forced a laugh. "I guess you were right. This must be some pretty good shit we're smokin', huh?"

Without answering me, his gaze slid past my shorts, down to my legs.

"Feet, too. Same weird long toes. Never seen anybody else with little toes as long as hers. Except for you."

A change of subject was not only in order, but imperative. "Don't you, um, have a girlfriend?" "Delicia's around when I need her," he mumbled, still caressing my hand.

"So." If he'd thought it was uncomfortable holding my hand at the club the other night, it sure didn't seem to be a problem now. "Nothing serious with her, huh?"

"She's not the kind of girl you...settle down with. My ex, though..." He'd turned my hand over to peer at its palm.

And why would he never say her name?

"Your ex?" I prodded.

"Damn good cook. Damn good. Used to make the best chili I ever had."

"Yeah." He was right; Mom's chili rocked.

"Yeah." He must've thought I was asking for confirmation of what he said. "Made a killer chocolate chip cookie, too."

Chocolate chip cookies sounded mighty fine. I could probably put away a dozen of them at the moment. Maybe two dozen of *Mom's* chocolate chip cookies. "Yum."

"And these meatballs she made...man!"

"Ohhh, meatballs." I was so hungry. "Ever have her meatloaf?" She probably used the same seasonings in both, but the meatloaf was my favorite.

"Oh, yeah. Good shit."

"Yeah. I like to get her to make an extra one so I can take it home with me when I leave." Here was one thing Dad and I agreed on. I could see both my parents sitting at a little table for two in their apartment, sharing Mom's wonderful dinner.

"Ain't nothin' wrong with leftover meatloaf," he agreed. Without warning, he released my hand, letting it flop to the chair beside me. "What the fuck you talkin' about? Jesus. Arizona sun must've cooked your brain and cracked your acorn, Cuz. You're goofy as hell."

I shifted uneasily in my chair, realizing how nuts I must have sounded. Another subject change...

"So, you working on a big term paper or what at the library for so long tonight?" Cracked acorn or not, I was determined to find out where he'd really been.

"I was tryin' to find out about patents and stuff."

"Oh." Still with the library story.

"Yeah. Got this idea, see. You gotta swear secrecy; I don't want nobody swiping my idea." Was it paranoia from the weed that made him look all around the yard for eavesdroppers, or was he always so secretive about this subject?

I nodded and crossed my heart.

He seemed satisfied with my oath. "Sometimes when you're workin' under the hood of a car, you need more light. Maybe all over the engine, maybe just in one little spot. So I got this idea for a flashlight you can adjust...bright beam in a specific area, or broad beam all around."

"Oh." Back to my standby reply.

"Yeah, see, you could twist the aperture open and shut like on a telescope, but it would affect the light comin' *out*, instead of how much comes *in* with a scope."

"Ah." I nodded. Sounded like a...Focus Light, a particular type of flashlight David owned in every size made. Did my father invent the Focus Light? Would he go on to patent it, maybe under another name? "So did you, um, find out what you needed to?" And what was he doing at the donut shop?

He let out a heavy sigh. "Looks like I'm about five grand short of what I'll need to get a model made and start applyin' for the patent. I could find an investor, but I want this to be *my show*, nobody tellin' me what to do with my invention."

"Oh." Again.

"But I should have it later this week, after Rico pays me my cut from The Big. I been savin' up for a while now." With an air of confidentiality surely brought on by his buzz, he added, "Got almost twenty grand."

Twenty grand. Nice little nest egg accrued by assisting in drug trafficking. Soon to be twenty-five. Money he probably had hidden somewhere, either never to be found after he disappeared, or he'd taken it with him. When he went...where? Did he go off and start a new life for himself, hiding out from Rico, and become a financially independent recluse who turned his back forever on his family? More specifically, did he make a new family somewhere else and forget about me?

With a start, I realized I'd nodded off, but Dennis was still talking.

"...Yep. Soon as I've got my cash together, Rico can kiss my white ass goodbye."

I sat up straighter, rubbing my eyes. How could I have been sleeping when he was telling me exactly what I'd come here to find out? "Um...what do you mean? You gonna, like, leave town? I thought you said it was impossible to tell Rico no?"

"Let's just say Rico's not all I got goin' on right now, see?" He waved his hand expansively through the air, the tip of his smoke flaring brighter. "Matter of fact, Cuz, maybe I'll have to come out to Arizona and look you up for a little visit. Whattaya think of that?"

I thought he'd probably be looking high and low and never find me, since I'd likely be about twenty-eight years in the future by then. "Er, sure." My mind was spinning with the possibilities though. If I could somehow link him in the future to this invention, I could maybe find him. But I needed names, since he'd obviously be changing his identity. We'd have found him if he was still Dennis Keenan. "How'd you find the companies where you can make this prototype flashlight? Are they local?"

He launched into a lengthy discussion of the research he'd done at the library, but never seemed to name a specific company. Or maybe I just missed that part, when I dozed off. When I woke, he was snoring in deep, regular intervals.

Unaccountably, a lemon had plopped in my lap, and another was on the concrete beside my chair. With no wind, though, it was hard to explain how they'd traveled what must have been thirty feet from their tree.

Maybe I shouldn't dabble in illegal drugs anymore.

I had a mystery to solve.

At least now I knew where to snoop next time I had the chance.

### Chapter 22

I'd landed in some ghastly corner of hell where a clanging bell rang for an eternity. The exertion required to wrap my arms around my ears was in vain, for the ringing permeated, seemed to echo inside my head.

And then the ringing stopped, to be replaced by the sound of Dennis's voice. "Hello? Hello?" was followed by a crash which ended with a tiny ring of its own. Ah, the satisfying heft of an old-style rotary phone. Made me almost wish I'd been the one to bash it into its cradle.

Only that would have required moving my arms from my ears, which I was in no condition to do, not even when trying to hear what my dad was muttering. Something starting with "Son of..."

So maybe I hadn't gone to hell yet. I probably deserved to. Judging by the condition of my mouth, I'd swallowed Santa Claus whole before going to sleep—felt, fur-lined suit included.

Cotton mouth. The bane of the pot-smoker. You play, you pay. The words of a certain good-natured party-loving archeology professor came back to haunt me. He'd been able to spot the spoils of a good high or drunk from a mile away and always made sure to involve me in his lectures more on those days.

I started to doze off, remembering an amorous trip I'd taken with Professor Sexy. Equal parts base-jumping and bone-jumping. Yum. He with his Indiana Jones stubble and the fedora he'd worn as an accessory to his birthday suit...

"Yo! Cuz!"

Nothing like your dad's voice to ruin a sexy dream.

"Huh?" I opened one eye. He looked as disheveled as I felt. Headache? Check. Mouth like the Serengeti? Check. Where the hell was my pillow, so I could bury my head under it? Seemed like I'd dropped it on the floor earlier, when Grandma left.

He laughed out loud, obviously not feeling any ill effects.

I rolled to face the couch back, curled in a ball with my eyes closed tight. "Don't you have classes today?" Maybe he'd be going away soon and I could sleep in peace.

"Nope. Let's go do somethin'. C'mon, I'll take ya to see the sights of Miami." A bony part of his body—foot? Knee?—nudged my backside. "Since the phone ruined a perfectly good sleep."

I had my own opinions as to who or what was currently disturbing my rest. "Who was it, anyway? Wrong number?"

"Who knows. Some fuckin' heavy breather, or somethin'. Wouldn't say a word."

"Nice. Don't they know we were partying late and shouldn't be disturbed at the ungodly early hour of..."

"Ten-thirty."

"Oh." So it wasn't early. Still, an hour more sleep would probably make me feel sooo much better...

"C'mon. Wake up." He tickled the sole of my foot, much to my annoyance,.

"Go 'way."

He chuckled. "Okay. I'll go shower. But when I come out, you're wakin' up."

Once he was gone, I mentally moseyed back to the base-jumping trip for a moment, before sinking toward the blissful abyss of sleep.

The phone rang again. And again.

A bout of temporary hearing loss was suddenly my greatest wish.

Seven rings later, it was clear the heavy breather hadn't had enough. Mustering all the oomph I could, I rose from the couch and hurried over to the phone on the wall between the kitchen and living room.

My vision swam as I picked up the receiver, looking forward to giving it a good slam back down. "What?"

"Randi."

Mitch.

"How'd you get this number?"

"I'm a detective, remember? Using the White Pages was a semester-long course at FBI training."

A smart-ass I did not need, this morning. "Was that you who called before?" Of course it was. As he grunted his reply, I'd already formulated my next question. "Why didn't you talk to Keen?"

"I wasn't calling to check on *Keen*. I was calling to check on you. And I wasn't gonna ask him to let me talk to you."

"So you, what, figured eventually he'd get sick of answering and have me do it?"

"Look, I don't have long to talk before my tanning appointment, but—"

"Are you telling me you found a tanning bed in Miami? Why don't you go to the beach? And what's with the brown contacts anyway? Why can't you just be a white boy like Keen? It's not like you pass as Cuban, with no accent."

"I'm the son of Rico's cousin Maria in Jersey, that's why."

"Oh. That's a good cover, but what if Maria calls him for some reason?"

Even over the phone, his sigh conveyed his exasperation. "Maria's husband Ernie turned state's witness February seventh. The whole family is in protective custody. Maria called—as *suggested* by the Bureau—and asked Rico if he'd put her son, who he's never met, to work while she and her husband go to *Cuba* for a couple months."

"But, if you're family...why would Rico make you the fall guy the other night?"

"His sources discovered Ernie was meeting the cops. It was one of those mob favors that isn't really a favor at all. I'm sure Rico would have been happy if I'd been capped that night. You really bungled up his plan."

I swallowed hard. Rico wanted Mitch dead? "You took this assignment knowing Rico would be trying to off you?"

"No. I went to see my superiors yesterday to find out why the hell Rico would get rid of his cousin's kid."

"So are you gonna keep working for Rico, when he has it in for you?"

"Yes."

"Mitch. I don't think that's a good idea. I mean, why don't you tell me who you're looking to find and I'll keep my eyes open—"

"Jesus. Only you would have such a wild idea. Rico's got to have it in for you just as much as me."

"Okay then. Let's leave." It was suddenly imperative to remove Mitch from danger. "I figured out what happens to my dad. At least, part of it. He invented the Focus Light! All I have to do is find out what name he assumes when he applies for the patent and then I can find him in the future!"

Silence.

"Hello? Are you still there?"

"Maybe you shouldn't believe everything he tells you, Randi."

"What's not to believe? He explained to me how it works, and I don't think it's been invented yet, and—"

"You *know* he wasn't out 'til all hours of the night working at the library. Look, before he gets out of the shower..." Something wasn't right. "...I need to tell you—"

"Shower. How'd you know he was in the shower?"

Silence. Then, "That's what ninety-nine percent of the population does right after they wake up, right?"

"You, you, bugged this house, didn't you?" And now he was trying to deny it? "Oh my God! You totally bugged the house!"

"What the hell else was I supposed to do when you could never remember to check in with the radio? Jesus, Randi."

"You bugged it and you...what? Sit around there listening to my every move? Isn't that illegal or unethical or something?"

"Dennis Keenan is a key operative in one of the most complex drug cartels Miami's ever seen. I bugged his house for the case."

"Oh, what a load of bullshit. I don't need you watching over me, Goodman. Tell me where the bugs are."

"I think you need lots of watching over, *Drew*. You seem prone to getting yourself into situations."

"Such as?"

"Such as getting high and talking about your mom's cooking. And telling Keen it's never too late to be a good dad." Uh oh. "You know what's gonna fucking happen if he decides to be part of his little girl's life? You're history, that's what."

Wait a minute. We were outside for our little weed party. "Did you bug the lanai too?" Silence.

Oh, Christ. "You were watching out there, weren't you?" God. I had no recollection of talking to Keen about being a dad. Or did I? Some foggy memory of him talking about wanting to have kids and do it right one day...burning jealousy over the notion of somebody else getting to be his little girl... "Damn. Do you think he remembers?"

"Considering he passed out halfway through the conversation, I doubt it. But the message might have sunk in, anyway. Look, Randi. I want you to leave before you slip up in a way we can't fix. I'm really afraid you're going to alter history."

"I won't." The fact that he was worried I'd mess up and we wouldn't have a chance to be together helped my headache considerably. "I already decided last night, no more weed for me. From now on, I'm staying sober so I can collect clues. So, about your end of the case. What am I watching for? Do you have a name or a description?"

"You won't even consider it, will you? How the hell am I supposed to protect us both and still solve this? Dammit." It sounded like he hit something. He was worried for me, which meant he cared. Even though he'd refused to come hang out with me the day before, he'd watched over me.

The independent side of me was pissed at his infringing on my privacy but the softer side of me knew he hadn't called me this morning to check on me at all. He knew I was fine, hung over at the worst. Maybe he'd missed me.

"Seriously," he said, his voice much more controlled. "I think you should stay home tonight \_\_\_."

"But Rico wants me in on The Big now."

"If you stay home tonight, you can lay low 'til after The Big, and then we'll get outta here. There's gonna be a bust. It's not a safe place to be."

Not a safe place to be. How irritating that he figured I didn't belong there, but he did! "Look, I came here to find out what happened to my father and I have a feeling I'll know after Thursday night." He'd probably get his cash and the plans for his invention and skip town. Maybe if I was around, I'd be able to find out where he headed.

"You're not coming, Randi. I'll have you picked up and detained somewhere if I have—"
"Oh, here comes Keen. I'd better go. See you tonight!"

With a resounding thunk, the receiver settled in its cradle. Keen was not, in fact, headed my way. But I wasn't about to end that conversation on an angry note, which would have happened if I'd let Mitch finish his threat.

Have me detained! Hmph. Whatever happened tonight on the boat, I needed to make sure there was no way The Big could go off without my presence.

Dear Randi,

Wow, what a day! I'm supposed to be showering and dressing in this slinky little dress from this interesting store my dad took me to today. I guess it's Delicia's favorite place to shop, which means there are tons of very hoochie items everywhere you look. My dress is one of their more conservative garments. But Dad explained to me that this isn't just any old boat we're going on tonight, it's a YACHT. Yep, that's right. Me, Randi, on a yacht, elbowing—or is it rubbing elbows with?—Miami's rich and dodgy underworld.

He insisted on paying for the dress since I'm helping his cause with Rico. Does he really think so, or does he feel guilty because he knows Rico probably hates me and wants me extinguished? He was a bit miffed when I snuck off and paid for our lunch, but I felt bad. He's been staying with his mom to save money; he doesn't need to buy me clothes and take me out to eat too. He needs all the money he can get his hands on, for his patent.

I sincerely hope Mitchell's eyes bug out of his head when he sees my cleavage in this dress. Back cleavage as well as front. Who knew clubwear was so risque back in 1980? I look pretty hot, if I do say so myself. Very Miami Vice, all black and spangly, especially with these tall spike heeled sandals...

Yup, I feel sexy.

Man, what I wouldn't give for my camera phone right now. I know I'll never look this good again. It's like when you've got the best hair of the week going on, immediately before heading to bed. Alone. Sigh. All won't be lost, because at least Mitch will see me like this and hopefully want me again.

So long,

*Randi the Ravishing* <*g*>

### Chapter 23

At one stoplight on the way to the boat, Dennis caught Mitch ogling my thigh, left shockingly bare as my dress rode high while astride Dennis's bike. When the light turned green, Dad jabbed his index finger forward, indicating Mitch could travel ahead of us.

Once we'd parked and I'd spent as much time fluffing my hair as the men would allow, I tugged the shrug borrowed from one of Grandma's dance outfits around my shoulders, hoping to disguise how cold I was by covering my nipples. Somehow, the leather jacket hadn't seemed like a good match for this evening. I sure missed its warmth, though.

A breeze blew off the water lapping at the docks. Hoping to distract myself from the chill, I toddled along on my treacherously high heels, concentrating on my two guys. Mitch had outdone himself by wearing a new pair of quite tight black slacks and a silky red shirt with large lapels. With his new layer of tan and a fresh inky dye job on his hair, he probably appeared Cuban to those who didn't know him. Dennis had on tight white jeans and a plain white t-shirt, layered with a flashy silver suit jacket. And penny loafers, the original red kind. Despite how silly the ensemble sounded by twenty-first century standards, he pulled off the look, managing to be striking and suave at the same time. He'd even shaved for the occasion, something I'd noticed he didn't do with great regularity.

Our 'boat' rocked gently ahead, glowing, festive with what seemed like hundreds of small lights and soft mariachi music wafting out. One couple boarded, while several others chatted and laughed on the bow, all with cocktails in hand.

With help from Dennis, I navigated the final set of steps down the dock. Mitch waited for us at the bottom, where he caught another glare from Pop for gawking at the area around the hem of my dress.

Before we boarded, Dennis whispered in my ear, "Try not to talk so weird tonight, huh?" Whether it was from the cold, the tickly whisper, or his hand resting on my hip as he acted the part of possessive boyfriend, I shivered. Or maybe it was the scowl Mitch shot my way.

A combination butler, deckhand, and waiter met us at the door. In no time at all, he'd announced us to the crowd, handed us each a drink from his tray and whisked away my wrap, leaving me quite embarrassingly nipply. No matter. Even if I hadn't been cold, they'd have been stiff after Mitch's eyes met mine.

One of the females from Conga dragged Mitch inside toward the music, interrupting our mental make-out session.

"Good," Dennis muttered beside me. Taking a long swallow from his drink, he curled his lip in Mitch's direction. "Should've never told that douche-bag you weren't my girlfriend."

"Maybe he's not as bad as you think. I mean, maybe he ended up someplace he shouldn't be...like you?"

"Don't get any stupid ideas about tryin' to reform him. He's trouble. Period." He let out a tired sigh and put on what appeared to be a fake smile. "C'mon. Let's mingle and pretend you're my woman."

We made our way closer to the dance floor. Mitch and the scantily-clad woman danced, but he seemed unwilling to touch her more than necessary. That was a relief.

Clusters of people wandered past us, most of whom Dennis introduced us to, none of whose names I could remember once the next group approached. When it seemed the little room could hold no more people, the band stopped. A singer made an announcement in Spanish, from which I gleaned we would be leaving the port momentarily. Without further ado, the music resumed, as did the dancing. Mitch had a new partner, who he twirled about as if he'd been salsa dancing his entire life. He looked hot and Latin, smooth and dangerous in those tight clothes. That athletic body...hooo boy. How I'd like to get my hands all over it.

The ship lurched and everyone staggered a bit to keep their footing. Dennis's hand went to my shoulder to help steady me. Just then, Mitch looked our way. The pause in his dance was nearly undetectable, but a complete change in his demeanor followed. His friendly smile faded and his mouth set in a grim, determined line. Dance steps which before had been synchronized, nearly professional, became nothing short of provocative. When he pulled his partner—Hey! Was that Delicia?—to his body and held her there as they gyrated, my breath caught. Sweet God, what I wouldn't do to be in that chick's shoes! The defiant look he shot in our direction gave me a sick feeling, though. Then his partner pressed her back against his front and there was no missing his hands rubbing up her stomach, then cupping her hips as they moved. What the hell was he doing, and what had I done to deserve it? And that woman! The same floozy who'd possibly destroyed my parents' marriage, was out there all but having vertical sex with my—Mitch. Well, I didn't have to watch.

"I'm...going to the bathroom," I told Dennis. I set my newly emptied glass on the brass rail behind us and headed down the hall where I'd seen women disappearing.

The females had taken over one of the yacht's suites. Several ladies lounged on sofas, others sat on stools before a long mirror, repairing their makeup. I really wanted to be alone with my temper, but when approached by a woman wearing a dress identical to my own though gold in color, mustered a smile. Great. What were the odds?

She was probably the most beautiful Latina I'd ever seen. "Hello," she said with a warm smile. "You have a lovely dress."

"Thank you." Now my smile was genuine. At least I knew the dress was appropriate for the occasion. "And you have excellent taste."

We giggled together for a moment. "I am Pilar, your hostess. My husband is Armando. You know him, no?"

I shook my head, though I'd heard his name earlier. "Hi. I'm Drew. My, ah, boyfriend works for Rico."

Her smile cooled momentarily, but she quickly regained her composure. "Oh. Business. Always business with men, no? I grow so tired of money talk. Money and politics. Is there anything else for them?"

"Sex." Like, in the middle of a dance floor, with a virtual stranger, while the woman who loved you watched. Shit. I couldn't love him. Look what a player he was, and this after teasing me and leading me on for how long?

"Ah, sex. Sí, that is the first and most important subject," she agreed. "Come, we need a drink." With her hand firm on my wrist, I had no choice but to follow her to the main room. She led me to the kitchen, filled with bustling waiters, where she pulled an open bottle of champagne from a fridge. While filling two flutes, she said, "Only the best for new friends, who understand men." Tapping her glass to mine, she said, "To being sympática."

"To being sympática." The champagne was dry, and judging by the label I'd seen on Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, pricey.

Pilar drank hers quickly, then refilled our flutes. "Come, amiga. We find our men and make them speak of other things. And if they do this for us, then later we let them speak of the most important subject, hey?"

"My wife has found a twin." Armando smiled as we approached. Pilar had only begun introducing us when Dennis sidled up beside me. Not far behind him came a certain figure in a red shirt who I chose to ignore. "Señorita," Armando said with a bow of his head and a kiss to the back of my hand. "Welcome, to our home..." He pronounced the 'h' in the manner most Hispanics pronounce their 'j', "...away from home. Please, tell me how I can make your visit enjoyable?"

"Drew would like to have an evening without talk of business, as would I," Pilar announced. This earned me a brows-down from Dennis and a squinty glare from He Who I Did Not See.

Armando only laughed. "Women. They want all this," he said, swooping his hands around, "but they don't want to be bothered with business." He shook his head. "Join me, gentlemen, where we can talk, ah...of the future. Undisturbed. To the poker room?"

Keen and Miguel nodded and went along with Armando, while Pilar did nothing short of pout, her dark eyes growing glossy with tears.

"Why don't we join them?" I suggested.

"I do not know poker." Her arms crossed under her breasts reminded me how much cleavage we were showing. "Maybe we dance."

I shook my head. "Would you like to learn how to play?"

"You know how?" She eyed me with a mixture of suspicion and awe.

"Sure. Where I come from, women play poker all the time. Find us some cards and a quiet room."

An hour later, Pilar and I emerged from the master suite, ready to put our card-playing talents to use with other players. Since "our men" were still closeted somewhere, she had her manservant set up a table for us in a sitting room, in sight and earshot of the dance floor. Within minutes, she'd assembled four other players, inleuding, much to my chagrin, Tino.

"I see you convinced Rico to let you out for some air," I said as he took the seat next to me. "Is this a night off, or are you working?"

"Working," he answered. "But my job has suddenly become more pleasurable."

"Tch, tch!" Pilar cut him off. "No business talk!"

Though my pupil had taken to the game quickly, and was more skilled than most of the other players, it was easy to tell Tino had more experience than she. Possibly even more than I did, though I prided myself on my ability to bluff. Poker had always been my favorite attraction in Las Vegas. As if I could walk past a sign with the enticing words "high stakes" on it! Though I'd been fortunate in having Lady Luck smile down at me on more than one occasion when I'd really been gambling far more than I should have, I still liked to believe I'd done well in part by skill.

Pilar's expensive champagne was going to my head by the time Armando, Keen and Miguel found us in a heated round of betting. When Armando grinned benevolently down at his wife and asked in Spanish what we were doing, she chirped, "Drew taught me Texas Hold Up."

"Hold 'Em." I giggled. No matter how many times I corrected her, she said it wrong.

"My wife has a new, interesting friend. I like this." Our host cast an amused look at Pilar's pile of cash. "We are off to the deck for a cigar. When we return, we play cards with women."

So, Armando liked me. This was good insurance I'd get to come along for The Big in only two more nights. Pleased with this turn of events, and perhaps too tipsy, I didn't even get that acid-reflux feeling when Mitch's dance partner from earlier—yes, that was certainly Delicia!—ran her hand from his very broad shoulder to his sexy hand and tagged along with them to the upper deck. He was an undercover Cuban mafia family member, after all. Of course he was supposed to be a playboy.

Besides, I had an excellent-looking guy—he wasn't quite a man yet—flirting with me. It was an evening for fun and revelry, drinking and laughing...for bluffing my ass off on a hand where my best bet was on a pair of fours.

Uh-oh. I'd bet nearly all the money Pilar had given me, and now it was my turn again. Everyone else had folded except for Tino. I rested my chin in my palms, thinking whether to bet the rest of my cash, or fold.

"Dru." His mouth posed in that special pucker left by the end of my name. "I propose we raise the stakes."

Uh-oh. *Stakes*. The word echoed in my skull, rattling loose adrenaline with each bounce. Was Lady Luck along for this boat ride, or was I sailing solo?

It was imperative I maintain my bluff, either way. After what I hoped was a suave sip of champagne, I asked, "Such as?"

Conversation around the table had ceased as the other players waited to see if I'd be eliminated from the game.

"If I win, you dance with me." With a furtive glance around the table, he whispered behind his hand, "And after...a kiss."

With great effort, I refrained from choking. "Are you afraid of losing more money? Because you are *not* going to win, Tino." My voice sounded roughly a thousand times more confident than I felt. Too bad I hadn't brought along that lucky turtle Sudo'd sent with me; I'd need all the luck I could get to convince him to accept my plan. "So how about this... We split the pot right now. If you win, a dance. Only a dance. If I win, you dance solo."

"Solo?" His voice squeaked a titch. He glanced out at the dance floor. "You will not win against my hand. I should get all of this money. Still..." With a nervous glance at my somehow-steady hand, and then at the money, he cleared his throat.

I held my breath, knowing if he didn't accept my deal I'd be out of the game. Shot down in flames, for the first time ever.

"I accept."

Whew! No matter what he had in his hand, I was still in the game. When I laid down my cards and he saw how pathetic they were, he laughed. His hand? A full house, tens and queens. He was still shaking his head when he tugged me from my chair to collect his winnings.

"I will divide your money." Pilar winked at me. "Go pay your debt."

Given ample floor space, Tino danced like the wind. He whirled me around that floor so I couldn't be sure whether I remembered the steps he'd shown me, or I simply floated in his arms. The song was so fast we had no breath to talk, the spins so rapid I was dizzy.

When the music ended, I could have collapsed, winded, into the nearest chair. But Tino convinced me to stay on the floor for a ballad. Exhausted, sloshed, and more than a little flattered at how much he wanted my attention, I leaned into him. With my face against his chest, I caught a glimpse of Mitch standing in a doorway as we turned. And then He With the Quite Tight Pants disappeared. Probably off to join *Delicia* for some necking.

I closed my eyes and let my imagination tell me whose strong arms were holding me up, whose hard chest was under that shirt. Who had finally decided to be decent and asked me to dance. Whose large hands had moved down to cup my bottom. Mmm. That felt nice.

Until the chest supporting me jerked away and my father's voice once again intruded on one of my erotic fantasies.

"Hey, Tino. You wanta go back to Conga and tell Rico his number one guy quit because you couldn't keep your greedy hands off his girlfriend? Huh?" Keen's eyes were about a millimeter away from Tino's round, unblinking ones. "Get the fuck outta here and keep your hands *off* in the future!"

Tino backed away without a word, slipping out of sight in the crowd.

"You!" My dad said with a yank on my arm. "Outside."

He'd certainly carried the Possessive Boyfriend Act a bit far. As I trailed him out and countless eyes followed us, I couldn't help but feel irritated. Surely he could have pretended not to notice what his 'woman' was up to. Unless...and yes, there was 'Miguel', standing with a self-satisfied look on his face, watching. He'd gone and tattled to Keen after seeing me with Tino!

Once we were alone on the back deck, Dennis paced around and then turned on me. "What the fuck? You're the one who told Tino we're an item, and now you're playing grab-ass with him in front of God and everybody?"

I opened my mouth in the hopes that a smart reply would come to me, but he had more to say.

"I don't know what the fuck, Cuz. You must be attracted to trouble or somethin'. 'Cause Tino's more trouble than that schlep Miguel."

The schlep had just poked his head around the corner behind my father. Tattling and eavesdropping, all in mere minutes. I narrowed my eyes and said, "Tino's much hotter, though, don't you think?"

Mitchell Goodman actually flipped me off before stalking away into the dark.

"Hotter," he muttered to himself. "Jesus Christ, Cuz. Do you know who he is?"

Actually, I did. "Yeah, I got that in the meeting with Rico the other night." Since he was clearly frazzled, I felt like I should try and soothe him some. "It wasn't the way it looked. I lost a bet, in the poker game. It was just a dance."

"Yeah, sure. *Just a dance*. That's the way it starts with those guys." He practically ground his eyes out with his thumb and forefinger. When he was done, he looked down at me and lowered his voice. "I'm warnin' ya, Drew. Chicks don't start flings with guys like Tino, and they don't end them either. They disappear when their usefulness is over."

"Okay." Best to agree with him, especially since I had no intention of starting a fling with the guy in question. "Point taken. I'm sorry I freaked you out."

He nodded, then crinkled his eyes as if confused. "Guess you're a big girl and I oughtta let you take care of yourself. Christ, you're older than me. Not sure why...well, whatever." Shaking his head, he stepped back.

Poor guy had no idea where these protective instincts were coming from. "Okay. Um, I'm gonna go to the ladies' room. Did you men get all your business worked out?"

"Yeah. Armando wants to join you girls now. Where'd you learn that sort of poker anyway?" "Hold 'Em? It's really popular where—"

"Where you come from?" His brows went up. "Remind me when I wanta see a whole other country to go to Arizona. Okay. I'll see ya inside at the Hold 'Em table."

I headed around a spiral staircase to the side door, which should put me near the ladies' nose-powdering headquarters.

Poor Dad. So confused, and enlightening him was not an option.

An arm reached out from behind the staircase and grabbed the strap of my dress, halting my progress. "Dru."

Oh, hell. How long had he been skulking around?

"Tino. It's rude to listen to other people's conversations." Especially when they are about you.

"It's rude to lie."

"Um, er." When he closed the gap between us, he didn't seem much like the harmless young man-child he had earlier. In fact, he didn't seem harmless at all. That as-yet untapped and untrained power I'd sensed at Conga was out in full force. "Lie?" I'd told Tino a number of untruths during our acquaintance. Not certain which tale he was referring to, I wasn't eagerly admitting to any one.

"Yes. Lie." He grabbed both arms and pushed me back in the cubby he'd vacated, with enough force to tell me he knew he had the upper hand. "For what reason did you tell me you were seeing Keen, if you are his cousin?"

The obvious reason—that I found his advances overwhelming and unwelcome—didn't seem my best reply.

"I just, um, didn't want to get involved with anyone while I'm here. You know, for such a short time."

His hands tightened. "Perhaps there is another man in the way? Miguel?"

I vigorously shook my head, but he ignored me.

"And why would you say to your cousin that I am *hotter* than Miguel? You have a strange way of talking, Señorita. I trusted you. But now...I don't know. Maybe you're a *cop*?"

"No! I'm not. I'm not a cop. I'm...well, I'm coming out of a divorce with a man who came on strong, Tino, and you turned me off the other night by being so forceful." His grip on my arms loosened ever so slightly. "Look, tonight was nice, when we danced. But honestly, I'm leaving town in a few days. You should pursue a younger woman, one who's sticking around." One who watches The Sopranos and worships that sort of raw danger.

His hands slid up from my arms to cup my face, 'til there was nothing in my line of vision but his face, his eyes. "Maybe you could be persuaded to *stick around*." The whisper fluttered past my lips and left goosebumps.

Gut instinct told me I wouldn't like Tino's plan.

In fact, my goosebumps were being joined by hairs standing on end. Definitely time to finish this conversation, if at all possible. My hands were free, so I employed my old standby and pinched the underside of both his arms. Hard.

Tino yelped and swore in Spanish, but I'd slipped past him by the time he reached for me.

I ran. As fast as my towering heels would let me, down the slippery wooden deck toward a door. It crashed against the wall when I jerked it open. Tino was coming my way. Intent on joining a crowd, any crowd, I hurried inside.

Only to have a hand clasp me by the arm again, this time yanking me through a partially open door and into a dark room.

A deadbolt clicked softly into place. The room smelled of cedar and saltwater, and cologne. Motors hummed below us and the person belonging to the hand panted while I refrained from breathing. Outside in the hallway, hurried footsteps, more cursing en español, and someone trying the doorknob. When the footsteps went on past, I let slip a relieved gasp. That was when The Hand clamped over my mouth.

### Chapter 24

Pure panic told me to kick and flail my arms around until my captor released me. Reason told me to cooperate until I could remember where I knew that cologne from.

Panic won over. I gave one good kick to a shin and one knee to a groin before he released me with an agonized moan. "God dammit, Randi!"

"Mitch?"

He brushed past me in the dark and shut the window, which appeared to be only a few feet away from where Tino had cornered me.

"Jesus. If you're going to spy on me, the least you can do is rescue me when I'm in distress. Shit!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he growled, still obviously in pain. "I thought you didn't want my protection. This morning you were pissed off by my surveillance. How'm I supposed to guess what the hell you want?"

"What *I* want?" I tried to keep my voice down, in case Tino came back by the door. "You're the one who's all hot then cold. One day you want me and the next, you won't touch me." My voice cracked and I jabbed an angry finger in his direction, not that he'd see it. "And then tonight you're out there dry-humping Delicia on the dance floor! So what the hell do *you* want?"

"For you to quit making this case more complicated. Why'd you have to go and tease Tino? Isn't there enough danger already, or did you want more?"

Way to blame all the complications on me. He was the one who'd followed me into the ladies' room when Tino found us. "Oh, now I'm a tease? For your information, Tino has been pursuing me since my first night at Conga!"

"And I suppose your idea of eluding his capture is clinging to him for dear life while he manhandles your ass on the dance floor?"

No way was I letting him know I'd been fantasizing it was him out there getting amorous with me. "Look, I've been trying for days to keep Tino from suspecting us. It's been a balancing act, juggling his attention without rejecting him or leading him on too much."

He let out a big breath. "Sure seemed like you were out to prove something. Or punish me." Pot calls the kettle black! "And wasn't that act with Delicia intended to punish me?"

"Not you. Not directly, anyway. It was meant for Keen." Somehow when he said my father's nickname, it sounded like a dirty word. This couldn't be good. "Every time I turn around, he's got his hands on you."

"Oh, good God! He's my father, Mitch. Nothing inappropriate has happened or is going to." What kind of goofy jealousy was this?

"I know he's your father and you know he's your father. But to him, you're just some distant cousin and every time he gets the chance, he's rubbing in my face—I swear he's touching you to piss me off."

"He's been keeping up the boyfriend act to hold Tino at bay. Poor guy's all protective and he doesn't understand why."

"Protective! There isn't another person in this entire operation more risky than him for you to be near and yet he drags you around with him, exposing you to danger. Then he—" He halted suddenly, and I heard him scrubbing his hands through his hair. "I hate him. I really do."

No, no, no. This could not happen. He could not decide he hated my father, who I'd been looking for all my life. This was worse than when David went all insecure over my need to find Dennis! There had to be a way to smooth this over. I stepped closer, reached out to him. "He's trying to save me from 'guys like him'." Against my palm, his heart pounded under his shirt. "I'm sure you don't really hate him."

"I do! Every time he puts his hand on you, he looks at me like, 'She's mine and you can't touch her.' And I can't."

"Yes, you can." To prove it, I searched out his hand and brought it up to my neck.

On his own, he moved his hand and cupped my chin, caressed my lower lip with his thumb. Then he let out such a frustrated, pained groan, I almost wondered if it was residual pain from my well-placed knee.

I stepped closer still, so even our legs touched and then I met his oncoming lips with mine. The kiss was soft only for a moment before he got hungry, nipping at my lips and holding my head with both hands. Desire spread like wildfire, the tingling of my lips sparking aches and throbs elsewhere.

"Jesus," he breathed against my cheek. "This is...I...can't." His lips seemed determined to prove to him that he could, as they took my earlobe. "We can't."

"Can," was my only verbal argument. To make my point, I nipped his neck.

"Oh Jesus..." He groaned and my heart leapt with the prospect of his resolve failing. "I want you."

Magic words. "You do? So I haven't..." I moved my lips under his ear. "...done something to ruin it?"

"No." His hands slid from my head to my back.

Amazing how the heels of my hands fit so perfectly under the edge of his shoulders.

Sliding past my ribs, his thumbs eased inside my dress and along the sides of my breasts. My shiver—or was it a shudder?—sure wasn't the result of being cold.

I could hardly breathe, I wanted him so bad. An arc of electricity between us pulled my body toward his. It made for a burning ache between my legs, an all but painful need to have him... "Touch me."

Another groan and he kissed me long and deep, his tongue doing a rapid, ravishing dance with mine. "I shouldn't." His lips trailed down to my cleavage as his hands found the hem of my dress. The pounding in my chest ceased as his fingers stroked my inner thighs. Streaks of lust shot up my legs like arrows indicating where I should direct his touch. "I swore I..."

I could all but feel the heat of his hand through my panties. Could I possibly hold out another second without writhing against him?

"...wouldn't." But he did. His finger slipped inside the panty, going directly to my center. The effect was immediate.

I'd have screamed, if he hadn't covered my mouth with his. I'd have fallen if he hadn't held me up. I'd have stopped the hands of time if I could.

At last he broke the kiss and chuckled. "Feel better?"

Actually, I felt a tad embarrassed. "My God. That's never happened before, so fast, just from being touched. You probably think I'm some kind of ho—"

"Shh. It was awesome."

"Oh." *Awesome*. Yeah, it was. "Let's see what I can do for you now." Having caught my breath, I was itching to get my hands, and eyes, on what I'd speculated for some time he packed in his pants.

"No. I can't." His answer was as firm as I imagined that member to be. He stepped away, breaking our bond.

"I'm sure you can."

"No. We need to get back out there before we're missed."

I had no idea what to think. Did he not *want* to have sex with me? He'd admitted to wanting me. But now he didn't want me? This felt like Calculus. Things didn't add up.

He'd said he couldn't. But why? I sniffled back my disappointment and maybe some tears too.

"What if we stay in here until we reach port?" I asked. "There's a bed, right?"

"Oh, baby." His arms circled me again. "We can't right now." He sucked in a long, deep breath and I got the distinct impression he was smelling my hair. "But I promise you, when this is all over, I'm gonna take you out on a boat in that dress and drop anchor, and make love to you for a week."

"A week?"

He nodded against my forehead.

"Promise?"

Another nod.

"I'm gonna hold you to it. And I'll try really hard to make sure you don't have to rescue me any more."

Dear Randi,

A yacht, a risky game of poker, and an orgasm. What more could a girl ask for in one evening?

I still have no idea what has gotten into Mitchell but at least I know he still wants me and it's almost against his will that he's been avoiding me.

Texas Hold 'Em was a big hit with the Cubans, even though only Tino was still in the game with Dennis and I by the time we reached port. No wonder Mitch folded early—what with both my dad and Tino watching him like suspicious hawks, he had a hard time concentrating. I almost lost my ass one hand too, after meeting his eyes. God, it was like reliving what we'd just done. Could have kicked everyone out of the room and taken him right there on the table, I tell ya.

Only 2 more days until The Big. For some reason, I'm really nervous. It's probably silly. I mean, Keen always knows when cops are going to be around and Mitch knows too. If something happened to either Mitch or Dennis... I'm going to dig that lucky turtle out of my backpack and keep it with me from here on out.

Dad has school again tomorrow, so I've got a little plan up my sleeve for Mr. Goodbody. By noon tomorrow, he will be mine.

Goodnight and good dreams,

Randi In Love

### Chapter 25

The street outside Conga and Mitch's apartment complex was three stories below my window as I powered up the TTR. From my room at the Holiday Inn, I'd have a perfect view of my Goodbody as he came to deliver us both to paradise. *If* he agreed to come.

The breath hesitated in my chest at the prospect of rejection. Where had all the confidence I'd felt on my way down here gone? Even climbing out of the cab, I'd been certain of success.

Now my palms were sweaty and my mouth was dry. So this was fear. It was one thing to fear snakes, when I had a one-in-however-many chance of getting bit. But the chances of Mitch rejecting me instead of falling for my seduction were more like fifty-fifty. Or maybe less. God, were my odds worse than that? Probably. Oh, Jesus. What was the damn code I used before to call him, anyway? This was such a stupid idea, thinking I could call him and invite him over for a day of sex. If he refused, how would I ever face him again? How would I go on breathing?

He called me 'baby'. True. He had called me baby after giving me that wonderful orgasm. And the way his voice got all raspy when he said it, well, it wasn't just any old endearment. Even now, standing in the clarity of morning light, remembering those two syllables rumbling from him made my toes curl.

*You can do this.* Surely I could. A couple of deep, cleansing breaths and I visualized him laying under me in that tiny tent in Grand Canyon. God, he was hot wearing the Look of Lust.

"Mitch?" Was that the talk button, or was it this one? What a pain, having all the keys disguised. "Hey Goodbody, come in!" It couldn't hurt to start off with some flattery, right? "Mitch?"

"Hey." If possible, the sound of his voice turned me on more. And terrified me.

Unsure whether my voice would betray my nerves, I said only, "Hi."

"Must be a storm coming, if you called all on your own." He snickered, then asked, "You sure this isn't some alien who's taken over Randi's body?"

"Oh, shut up." At least he'd made me smile, so the nerves weren't churning my stomach anymore. Maybe I'd be able to remember my speech. "My dad's got school today again. And then he's planning another trip to the library." That bit of information had given me pause, but I'd been too involved in my plans for a day with Mitch to care about where Dennis was really going after school.

"Hmm. So you called because you're bored?"

That was my cue. *Use your bluffing voice. Be calm and seductive.* "I thought about you all night long."

He didn't answer.

"Mitch? You still there?"

"I'm here. I thought about you too, Randi, but this probably isn't the best topic—"

Before he went and messed up my confidence, I had to issue the invitation. "I'm at the Holiday Inn up the street from your apartment. Room 345. I'll be here all day. If you were to show up, it'd be our little secret." Then, the all-important detail. "I bought condoms." And as my faith wavered at my forwardness, "If you don't come, I'll respect your feelings. I mean, I'll understand. I'll be…" *Crushed. Mortified.* "Fine."

"Fine," he repeated. Did he mean, fine he'd come, or fine that I'd be fine, or was he questioning whether I'd really be fine?

"Fine. So I'll...see ya."

He never came back. *Fine*. What the hell did that mean, anyway? I left the window, paced toward the door, then back. *Fine*. What a strange little word. The more I thought about it, the more irritated I got with myself for using it in the first place. If he didn't show up I'd be mortally, terminally crushed. Destroyed.

*Fine*. Since the distance between the door and window was only a few feet, picking up pacing speed did little more than get me winded and dizzy. I'd watch at the window. Then if he did show up, at least I'd see him coming.

Tiny people far below traipsed up and down the boulevard, their counterparts in cars roaring past, leaving black clouds of smoke behind. Wow, emissions had really come a long way by 2010.

Would Mitch show up on his bike, or walk? It was only a couple of blocks. Or would he stand me up, like the guy in some TV drama or breakup song—

Music, music! I'd forgotten, that was part of the ambiance I'd planned. The TTR still doubled as a radio, so I fiddled with the knobs until I found a somewhat clear station. Wouldn't you know, it was Blondie, singing *Call Me*.

So I listened to her and paced. And checked my watch. Ten minutes. Had it only been that long? Geez. Pat Benatar came on and begged *Hit Me With Your Best Shot*.

"I did," I muttered. "I hit him with my best shot. And what *was* the most seductive remark in my arsenal? 'I bought condoms.' Way to go, Randi. Way to go. Almost as smooth as *fine*."

A few commercials played while I stared desolately down at the parking lot. Not much action there, other than the same yellow taxi parked at Registration since Benatar had started singing.

The DJ announced The Spinners and *Working My Way Back to You* and still no Mitch bike. Maybe his answer was no.

When Queen came on with *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*, I kicked the bed. And decided to put on the swim suit I'd bought the other day and go to the pool. This day would not be a total loss. So long as I kept that pack of condoms out of sight, I'd be able to keep the tears from coming.

The bikini was much more revealing than my usual athletic-type tanks. Since I didn't plan to be cliff-or scuba-diving, it should stay put. Maybe it was time I take a vacation where I could relax and wear a little number like this the entire trip. All my wild adventurous trips seemed to get me nothing but lonely.

With a hotel towel draped over my shoulder, I grabbed my heavy old-style room key and jerked the door open a bit more roughly than intended.

Mitch all but knocked on my nose with his knuckles.

My heart beat a traitorously happy tattoo inside my chest at the sight of him.

"What the? Where you going?" He panted. His face was dark with exertion, droplets of sweat running from the ends of his hair around his face.

"I...nowhere. I guess." Surely Mitch the Triathloner hadn't worked up such a sweat in only two blocks. "Why are you sweating so much?" He had on his running clothes... "It's not that far here."

"I..." He stepped inside past me and I closed the door. Then he bent over, resting his elbows on his knees, gasping to catch his breath. "I, ran..." A couple deep gasps. "...the other way, at first."

The other way. He'd run the other way. "You mean you went the wrong way?"

"No. I knew where I was...going." His breathing was returning to normal. "But then I... changed my mind."

All I could think was *fine*. Fine, in a huffy voice, for him running in the opposite direction. And *fine*, he changed his mind. "Okay."

"Okay?" This time it was certainly a question.

"Okay." I stepped closer to him, to show my okayness with his changing his mind. "Very okay."

He caught my face between his hands. His lips, salty and hot, buried mine. Another half step and we were tight against each other, my hands in the hollows of his shoulders, then sliding down hot biceps. Skipping down his ribs and along his lower back. Clasping his butt like I'd longed to do for a lifetime. When his lips left mine and moved down to my neck, his hair brushed my nose, smelling of sweaty man and shampoo.

"Nice suit," he murmured against my collar bone as he unlatched the bikini top. He was well on his way to groping my breasts, but for my part, I was still content holding his rock-hard butt.

When he pinched my nipples, I groaned. With an impatient flick, he pulled the bikini top from my arms, tossed it aside. He lowered his face toward my chest and I clung to his butt for dear life. The things his mouth did to me... I'd never known the sides of my breasts were so sensitive. He had me whimpering in agonized ecstasy by the time he scooped me up and deposited me on the bed. As he shimmied my suit bottom off me, I couldn't help asking, "When you gonna take off *your* clothes?"

He actually blushed before peeling off his shirt, toeing off his shoes and socks, and then the breathtaking moment of revelation when he ditched those running shorts. With a mere glimpse to admire his package before he was atop me, I conveyed my appreciation in a sigh.

Then he was full-length on top of me, mouth to mouth, chest to chest, key sexual anatomy to just between my legs. Unable to resist, I reached down and touched him, tentatively at first and then with a full grip. He shuddered against me, moaning into my mouth. His body was hot and still

a bit damp with sweat, salty wherever I tasted him. Perfect, in every way. And obviously as eager as I was to get on with intercourse. The tip of his penis was slick and wet under my fingers. Perfect time to initiate penetration. My body fairly screamed its desire, throbbing and pulsing in need for him. I bucked my hips against his to signal my readiness.

But Goodbody had other plans. With one last, tender kiss, he moved his mouth from mine and took it touring south, down between my breasts, for a leisurely, tickly trip across my navel, and on down to Writhing Territory. Oh, holy God, what that man could do with his tongue! True to form, he made me come in seconds, his appreciative chuckle rumbling against my thighs as I thrashed and clenched bunches of bedding in my hands. And then, despite my wiggling and pleading, he took his good, sweet time kissing his way back up my tummy and chest.

When he was even with my face again, braced on his arms above me, I looked long and hard at the green eyes I'd fallen for. He bit his lower lip, closed his eyes for an extended blink, and then smiled with that half dimple.

He slid inside me smooth and deep, taking my breath, halting my heart. On second thought, if I could stop the hands of time, this would be the instant.

"Oh God." I sighed.

"Baby." His hands tangled in my hair, and his face...well, his face told me it felt every bit as wonderful for him. He performed a couple of slow thrusts. "Oh, fuck. Baby." In an instant, his control vaporized and he went for it, pounding hard and fast until my entire body clenched and released in joyful spasms. My orgasm seemed to turn him on, because he thrust deep and then held me tight, his face buried against my neck as he gasped my name, again and again.

Why it felt like the beginning of something, I couldn't say. This moment had been a long time in the making. A tear slid from the corner of my eye, nonetheless.

Wiping the tear away with a knuckle, he asked, "What's that for?"

I wasn't sure. But a bit of fibbing seemed imperative to self-preservation. "I always cry when I—"

"The condom. Goddammit, I forgot the condom!"

"Oh." A not-so-small detail. Only, whether from the hormones and endorphins awash in my body or plain stupidity, I couldn't bring myself to be distressed. I'd just had amazing sex with Mitchell Goodman. I loved him, even if he didn't know it. Nothing was going to mess up this moment.

"I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry." He'd already pulled out and left me yearning to have him inside me again. Half his body weight still rested on my legs, but it wasn't enough.

"It's...okay. I forgot too." I snuggled in closer, to nuzzle his neck. "We'll use a condom next time, huh?"

"Next time," he mumbled. "Christ, that was really stupid of me. After we put it off during the camping trip because we had no protection. And then we just...shit."

Panic threatened to mar my moment. Was he fearing an unplanned pregnancy and feeling trapped? If he felt forced into a relationship, I'd never get a chance to win him over. That would be bad, certainly. My dad came to mind. Maybe he'd been on his way to falling in love with my mom when Grandpa forced them to marry. We'd never know, because the dynamics of their relationship changed forever once that pregnancy—which was me—came into the picture. God, surely history was not repeating itself. I found myself crying again. What should be a happy moment was nervewracking instead, all because of uncontrolled passion.

"Hey. Oh Christ, Drew, please don't cry. If...something comes of it, I'll do the right thing. I'll take care of you."

Was that resignation in his voice, or reassurance?

"I know you will." I wiped my eyes with the back of one hand, determined to change the subject and shed no more tears. "Besides, I'd be all set if I conceived a kid now. It would go in the Guinness Book for the longest-ever gestation of a human baby. I mean, thirty years has got to be a record, right?" My joke fell somewhat flat on my own ears, owing to the likelihood that time travel wasn't entirely safe for the pregnant. Time to leave the subject completely. "So tell me why you ran the other way down the street, when you had secret, no-strings sex waiting for you."

All along my body, I felt him tense. "No strings? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means..." I wasn't sure what I'd meant, except to put him at ease so he wouldn't feel so pressured for a relationship. "Hey! Answer the fucking question, Goodman! Why'd you take off running when I invited you over here?" I glared into his face, waiting for an answer. His eyes darted left and right. "And what made you change your mind and come here after all?"

Smiling in an "aha!" kind of way, he locked gazes with me. "Thinking of you here, so close. Ready. Willing." Apparently thinking of it still got him excited, because he'd gotten quite hard against my leg again. "Looks like I found you just in time, though."

"I wasn't gonna sit around here all day and mope, if you didn't show."

"I'd have been here sooner, but I had to come in through the back door. There was some scene down front with a cabbie and two cops. I wasn't taking any chances of being recognized, since there's an APB out for *Miguel*."

"Oh." Good point, it was probably a bad idea for Mitch to be seen too much. "I guess spending the day in bed with a fugitive is as thrilling as my second choice for the day. Paraskiing. I flipped through the phone book, but it's a pain trying to find specific sports stuff like that without the internet."

"Paraskiing." He shook his head at me like I was nuts. "I'm glad I was first and not second."

"I'd have invited you along." I clapped my hand over my mouth when I remembered. "Oh, right, your fear of heights. Sorry. But you know, you can come down whenever you want, paraskiing." Unable to resist the grin or the jibe, "And I'd hold your hand the whole way."

"Yeah?" In a second, he had my body pinned with his. "How 'bout I give you something better to hold all day?"

He didn't give me a chance to make a smart reply; his mouth had taken mine, stealing my breath once more.

## Chapter 26

In one afternoon, Mitch and I made up for many lost opportunities. Our growing trophy of empty condom packages represented more than mere quantity, though. With each successive round, the quality of Mitch's lovemaking became slower, more intense. All except, I'm proud to say, the bout in the shower. When I sank to my knees in front of him, his staying power vanished.

By the last time, it seemed we'd go on forever, lost in a loop of continual pleasure. We had no need to ever stop. I felt happier and more secure than I had in years, more complete than I had...ever.

Pausing to rest, he lay atop me and looked down into my eyes. "What are you thinking?"

"Mmm. How you make me feel."

"Horny?" He chuckled and nipped my upper lip between his teeth.

"Besides that." With him staring down at me, those drowsy eyes boring into my soul, it wasn't hard to admit, "Whole. You know, like in that movie where they say 'You complete me."

"Ah, Drew." He shut his eyes as if trying to block something out.

"What?"

"Shhh." To make sure I shut up, he used his old tactic of kissing me silent. And resumed thrusting with renewed vigor. The way his hands held me tight was all new, though. So was the way he held us close together, hardly moving as he came, almost clinging as if afraid. The prolonged pressure of him against my center kept the orgasms coming in long, deep waves until I thought I'd die if my muscles clenched one more time.

The single thought in my mind was how much I loved him. I must have said it aloud at some point, because he pressed his finger to my lips.

"Don't. Please. We have no idea what's gonna happen tomorrow night."

"What?" Did he interrupt my proclamation because of his case? Those damn tears made an encore appearance.

"Oh Christ. Not the crying again. You're killin' me, Drew." He scrubbed his fingers through his hair as he sat up, breaking all physical contact. "I thought we'd get it out of our system but we just made it worse."

"Worse?" How could anything be bad after this afternoon, let alone worse? "You can't play mind games with me, Goodman. I've got feelings, you know!"

"I know, which is why I tried to convince you we should keep our distance 'til this whole thing was over." He'd stood and walked to the foot of the bed.

"Yeah, but saying one thing and doing another, all your damn mixed signals, have me more confused than, than..." I was so confused I couldn't even compare it to anything. "Shit. I can't think." He held his head in his hands, shaking it as my voice raised. "Hot, cold, hot, cold. Of all the men, I have to fall for a schizophrenic Don Juan."

"It's not my fault your dad's a controlling asshole!" An instant look of regret crossed his features.

I stood up. "What has my father got to do with this?"

He turned his back to me, but I stepped around him to see his face. *I swore I wouldn't*. Wasn't that what he'd said the night before?

"Mitch? Tell me. Is he the reason you've been acting so weird?"

His jaw tightened, but he didn't reply. To unclamp those lips, I reached out and twisted his nipple.

"Ouch! Damn. Yes, your old man's the problem. The night you guys *rescued* me, he made me promise I'd keep my hands off you."

Silence fell between us. So Keen thought he could control my love life. Correction: he thought he was protecting me from guys like him. And Mitch had agreed. Not because he feared being arrested and jailed, but because he wanted to stay on Rico's payroll. For his case. It always came back to the case, didn't it?

I'd spent an afternoon in bed with a man willing to disguise himself as a nerd scientist with hair dye and contact lenses and fake tans, so he could learn about chakras and yoga and risk his life traveling across the space-time continuum for a case. Of course said case was important enough for him to swear off a girl for a few more days.

Yet, he'd risked it all for our rendezvous.

"But *you*," he said, chucking me under the chin and tipping my face up so I had to look at him, "wouldn't stop trying to seduce me." His face broke into a grin about a mile wide. "Just like in Sedona, since that first night you were ogling me from your balcony."

"Oh! I was sooo not ogling or sedu—"

His kiss was even better than getting the last word.

At last he pulled his lips away. "Still the only way to get you to shut up."

If I started talking again, would he kiss me more?

"So," he asked, resting both hands on my shoulders, "Where'd you say Daddy Dearest is going tonight?"

"I..." What reason would Mitch have to doubt Keen's story? I couldn't keep the suspicion from my voice. "Why do you ask?"

His eyes narrowed. "I *ask*, because I'd like to drive you to the beach and watch the sunset. I wanted to make sure you wouldn't be missed."

Oh. That would be nice. "He's going to the library." I tried really hard to sound nonchalant, but it came out sounding like a lie. Maybe because I doubted it myself.

"The library? You believe that?"

I shrugged. "The other night he was researching stuff about patents for his flashlight idea." "But?"

Mitch had on his case-face. He was serious and for once, he seemed to truly value what I had to say.

"But I don't know. I mean, well, I kinda snooped through his pockets because—"

He shook his head at me and grinned.

"Because he had donut on his face. So he had these receipts in his coat pocket and he'd been at the donut shop all evening long, drinking coffee. *But not buying donuts*." I crossed my arms between us and waited, figuring what I'd learned meant very little, if anything. Any minute, he'd laugh at me.

"Donuts." Mitch let go of my shoulders and paced. His spectacular rearview almost made me forget what we were thinking about until he spoke again. "Uh-huh." He nodded, then turned and gave me the full frontal. "Drew, what do most people think of when they hear 'donuts'?"

I wanted to say "carbs" to harass him. But he was taking me seriously so I'd better play the part. "Cops? You think Keen's spending his evenings off from Conga with the fuzz? So you think he's turning state's witness?" This was good news; maybe Mitch would be able to find out what happened to him.

"State's witness? At this point he's more of a nark. Bet he's using his clout with the cops to increase his stature in Rico's organization. It would explain how he always knows where the cops will be. But these are local cops, not the kind who would relocate him."

"Oh. But maybe they'll turn him on to the FBI. I mean, he could finger some big players, right?"

"Baby, your dad was not relocated. I used the TTR to have Sudo get hold of my partner. There's something I want to show you. Get dressed. We're going for a ride."

\* \* \* \*

Riding behind Mitchell Goodbody on a motorcycle had fast become one of life's finest pleasures.

It was good we left the hotel when we did. On the way out, we'd seen two cops and a hotel employee knocking on doors down the hall from mine. Who knew if they would have recognized Mitch, but better safe than sorry.

After a hurried, incognito walk to his apartment, I'd waited while he threw on some long pants and then we'd ridden off on his bike.

The sun was sinking low as we headed into a neighborhood, rather than the beach. Mitch pulled up in front of a duplex on a street lined with many more exactly like it.

"Wait here, and watch," he said.

With quick strides, he approached the door and rang the bell. I waited and watched. Bored with looking at the door, I pasted my eyes to his Levi's-clad butt instead. And then a man came out. Mitch asked directions to a particular address, coaxed the resident off his stoop to point him the right way. When Mitch moved aside, standing there in jeans and a rugby shirt, was none other than Stu. Grandma's Stu. Not looking in the least like a dancer.

I was still trying to wrap my head around why Mitch would be showing me Stu, when he returned and started the bike.

By the time he'd parked at the beach and killed the engine, I had a million questions for him.

"Before you start," he interrupted, "would you like me to tell you who that was?"

I shook my head. "I know who it was, it was—"

"Steven Miller, future patent holder of the Focus Flashlight, future millionaire, soon-to-beex FBI agent."

"Stu."

He pursed his lips. "Steve."

"Stu gets the patent, for Dennis?"

"Steve gets the patent instead of Dennis."

"Stu, I mean, Steve, is with the FBI?" And then it hit me. "Grandma." I covered my face with my hands. "God. Life is not fair. He's using her, isn't he?"

"Probably. Looks like he's going to steal this invention after Dennis disappears."

"God. No wonder she turns to alcohol. First her husband died, her son's about to vanish, and then, what? She finds out her lover was using her as a means to spy on her drug-running son?" No wonder as a child I'd never gotten wind of this boyfriend. She must have been so humiliated.

"Since he rips off her son's clever idea, I'd bet *Stu* just falls out of her life one day and she never knows why."

It was too much. Too much for any one woman to handle. No wonder all my memories of her were with bloodshot eyes. How had she found the energy to smile in those pictures with me? Did seeing me as a child remind her of losing Dennis and make the wounds hurt more, or soothe her? She was such a kind person, it couldn't be right for her to get such a raw deal.

"Drew, hey." He pulled me to him. I'd started crying again, and tears seemed pretty tough for him to handle. "I'm sorry. I was hoping when I ordered the data search for the patent, I'd find out a new ID for your dad. I'm really sorry."

"So the FBI really doesn't know what happened to him?"

"He was on their wanted lists until Bea declared him dead. I'm sorry, babe, but we're no closer to finding out what happened to him."

"You don't think Dennis knows? That Stu is with the FBI. Do you?"

"He's pretty deep undercover. I only made the connection because I'd seen him going in and out of your grandma's. When I cased the duplex to check out the patent holder early this morning, I recognized him."

"I cannot believe that weasel's gonna steal those plans from her. Kick her while she's down, after her son comes up missing. And to think I was so happy she has him. I'm such a lousy judge of character." I sniffled, and rested my forehead against his nice, hard chest.

"Hey. Check it out." He nudged me and I looked to my right, where the last bit of sun had sunk into the water, casting pink rays up and orange ones across the horizon. "Give yourself a break. You're not such a bad judge of character. You liked *me* right away."

"Sorta," I mumbled, "but I thought you were a serial killer."

Mitch threw back his head and laughed, his chest bumping into my cheek with each gasping breath. "N.D. How could I forget? A brave snoop with a wild imagination." His arms crossed my back tight, pulling me to him. My hands felt so damn *right* resting under his shoulders. "But you know what?" His chest compressed, but didn't refill. "I love you."

I quit breathing myself, thinking hard, wanting to make sure I'd really heard those words and hadn't dreamed them. How could I do it without making a fool of myself? With a big gulp of courage-making air, "Really?"

His chest moved again, in what felt like shakes from a chuckle.

There was no getting around it. I had to look at his face and see what he was thinking.

Relief, plain as day. "Yeah. Sorry I was so hard on you...back in the room." With a soft smile, he squeezed my cheeks. "I really didn't want to, you know, love you. You're gonna be a big pain in the ass, probably your whole life."

"I'll try my best. But don't ever doubt that you're a pain in the ass too." It felt so good to be getting along, teasing but not fighting.

"Look, there she is."

Where he pointed, the first dim speck of Venus was lighting up for the night. "You know what you gotta do now. Kiss me."

"Shit," he groaned, grinning all the while. "Am I gonna have to do that every night now?" Before I could answer, he had.

#### Chapter 27

Knowing Mitch was parked down at the corner on his bike, watching to make sure I made it home safe, I felt like skipping the last half block to Grandma's house. Maybe I wouldn't go so far as to skip, but I could give myself a happy little hug. Mitch loved me. I loved him. And once we were all done in 1980, we could make a life together.

The question of where the heck my dad would disappear to remained, but I refused to let it dim my moment.

For the first time in over a year, I looked forward to the future. Settling down, getting older... God. I even looked forward to having kids with Mitch. Was I finally okay enough with the big question mark dangling from my family tree to grow my own branch?

Yeah. I was.

Busy looking forward, I used the planter key to unlock the front door and walked into Grandma's living room.

Dennis sat in the easy chair, looking quite formidable while slapping a stack of money against his knee, my backpack at his feet. Oops.

I swallowed hard, suddenly thankful I'd never had to face him as a misbehaved child.

"Hullo, Cuz," he drawled. "Been out for some more shopping?"

"Um. Shopping? No, I went to the beach." His calm-before-the-storm expression set off alarm bells. Maybe if I kept on talking, he wouldn't start. "Look, if you're mad about buying that dress for me when I had a stash of money, I'll pay you back."

"With this money?" He laughed without smiling, waving the stack in the air. "Don't even fuckin' think of it."

"Um." Totally at a loss, I sank into the couch and eyed my backpack. This wasn't good at all. "So you snooped through my stuff." Sure I'd invaded his privacy, but he didn't need to know that. I'd given him no reason to be suspicious, whereas he...

Wanted answers. "Mind tellin' me where you get this shit printed?"

Positively bristling at his insinuation I was a counterfeiter, I bit back my temper. This was one instance where I could tell the truth. "I got it from the bank. In Arizona."

"Cuz, you might wanta go pay that bank a visit. Didn't you notice anything funny about this money? Christ, I can't believe you've managed to make it out of a single store, paying with this shit." He tossed the top few bills my way.

As they floated down, I captured two. Standard U.S. twenties, printed on...the new paper. With all the new markings. Bloody hell. "I got these at the bank before I left," I repeated. And then it all clicked. "You don't think I'm the one who's been passing all the fake money on the news?" But I probably was. The shopping center, Rico's bar...

"These bills say two thousand six. Who the fuck prints fake money with a future date on it? On weird-ass paper?"

Who indeed. "Man. I am so hosed, huh?" Maybe I could play dumb. "I can't believe I didn't notice. Thanks for pointing these out, but in the future, please don't dig through my stuff." I stood and tried to breeze past him to the bathroom, anxious to have the conversation over.

Alas, he grabbed my arm on my way past. "Know what, Cuz? I counted and there's four hundred and forty bucks here." He waved my travel money through the air like a banner proclaiming my stupidity. "All but eighty is fake."

"What?" Leave it to me to choose an ATM with all new twenties in it.

He took a worn bill from the stack and called out, "Nineteen eighty-seven." Next bill, "Nineteen ninety-five." *Oh, shit.* Then, "Ninety-eight, ninety-eight, ninety-eight, that must be a big fuckin' year for counterfeits, huh?"

It was all I could do to keep from sinking to my knees. If I hadn't left Sedona in such a hurry, Sudo probably had stacks of money I could have taken. Stacks. Instead, I'd been flitting around Miami, narrowly escaping a federal counterfeiting charge.

"What I wanta know is, where do they get this paper? This is good shit. This is the *real* shit." He eyed me suspiciously, then looked at the money in his hand. "You got any idea the trouble you can get into for possession of these?"

"Lucky for me I'm hanging with the Great and Powerful Keen, huh? How did you get so keen? I mean, don't expect me to believe Delicia's voodoo blessing is the reason you know where all the cops are, all the time."

He actually had the nerve to look offended. "It's not the *voodoo blessing*, it's more like a sixth sense. A skill."

He was so damn proud of himself for fooling everyone. In a way, pulling the wool over so many eyes was a skill.

"But I don't want the Feds breathin' down my neck because they trace some damn funny money back to my house." He grabbed my right hand and shoved the stack into it. "So put this shit away and don't let me see it out again while you're stayin' here."

Half muttering, I squatted and stuffed the money into the bottom of my backpack. "Guess your telepathic cop radar, er, skill, doesn't sense the *Feds*, huh?"

His boot met my butt and sent me sprawling to the floor. Before I could register what he'd done, he'd pinned me with his knee in my lower back. "Don't think for a fuckin' second I don't know when there's a Fed around, *Cuz*."

"What the hell are you doing?" With my face against the carpet, it came out pretty muffled. His hands were everywhere, sliding up and down my legs and taking liberties around my butt. "Checkin' for stuff. ID, guns..."

"Guns?" I squeaked, trying but failing to roll over. "I'm not a cop!" His hands moved up my ribs, making me wiggle from the tickling. When his hands slid back down, I couldn't stifle a giggle. "Geez. And ID? Whaddaya think, I'm a federal agent and I'll be packing around one of those shiny gold badges?" One more try at rolling over to my back. He let me. "That would be pretty damn stupid of me, now wouldn't it?"

If his eyes got any narrower, he wouldn't be able to see daylight.

"I am *not* a cop," I repeated.

"Probably not." He rubbed his free hand over his eyes, while the other held my shoulder pressed to the floor.

"Probably not? I come here, a long-lost relative with a family resemblance, ID I know you found with my money in the backpack, and all you can say is I'm *probably* not some impostor agent posing as your cousin? Paranoia will destroy ya, Dennis. Geez, what finally convinced you?"

"I can't see a lady cop feelin' ticklish when she's bein' frisked."

"Christ. Will you let me up now?"

"No." He chewed the inside of his cheek while staring down at me. "Maybe not a cop, but..."
"Buuut?"

Pressing his mouth together in a small grimace of resolve, he gave the world's smallest nod. "Mysterious. You're not who you say you are, that's for sure." His eyes widened and his brows rose to an exaggerated height. "Mysterious women are a turn-on, Drew."

Um, excuse me. Turn on? "But I'm so old, remember—"

His eyes roamed down to my chest for a microsecond, then he raised one brow at me like some Elvis impersonator. "Maybe age doesn't matter. I think I'd like to," he leaned closer to me, "you know, really get to know you."

He was close enough for me to smell his aftershave. *Too close*.

Did he intend to kiss me? Is that why his face was still advancing? "Ewww! Oh my God!" Somehow I managed to roll away from him, escape his touch, and scramble to my feet.

Just as the front door banged open and Grandma and Stu entered.

My heart was racing faster than an Earnhardt car at a NASCAR track. I hugged my arms around my chest. Did my father just come on to me? If so, why wasn't he offended by my reaction? He looked more like he'd solved the bonus round on *Wheel of Fortune*.

"What's wrong, dear?" Grandma asked, looking from me to Dennis, who still knelt on the floor.

Stu stood behind her, a look of intense interest on his face.

"Um. A, a, roach," I answered. "Yeah, a roach. I... it, went under the couch." No point in telling her there was a giant rat sitting there too, one who'd tried to kiss his own cousin. Make that daughter. Oh, yuck, yuck, yuck!

"A roach?" She looked positively horrified. "Kill it, Dennis. I won't tolerate those vermin. And where there's one, you know there's more. I thought you sprayed for those last week."

Dennis groaned. "Aw, Ma, I need to get to a meet—the library." He shot a glare at me. "Don't have time to go chasin' imaginary roaches." Still, he dutifully lifted the front of the couch and pretended to search. Maybe to avoid looking at my still-curled lip.

"Are you all right, Drew?" Grandma put a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Would you like a drink?" Without waiting for my reply, she headed for the kitchen.

"You don't have cockroaches in Arizona?" that dirty dog Stu piped up.

"Um. It was a nasty surprise. A really, really unwelcome surprise."

Dennis conked his head on the couch frame. "Fuck!" And turned to glare at me for it.

I gave him my best 'serves you right, you sicko' look.

"What's happenin' at the library?" Stu asked.

The couch slammed back to the floor with a bang. "I'm workin' on somethin'," Dennis muttered. "A way to make enough money so I can pay somebody else to smash the goddamn roaches. Time for me to fly."

Grandma walked in with a tray full of rather strong-looking drinks just as her son disappeared out the front door. "And I thought he was at his worst at seventeen!"

\* \* \* \*

Strobe lights flashed across bodies on the roller rink. Grandma and Stu glided past, swaying to Donna Summer's *On the Radio*. I waited 'til they'd gone by, then turned my attention back to the front door.

It seemed ridiculous to hope Mitch had been eavesdropping with his surveillance bug and would follow us here, but a girl could dream. I'd made a special point to have Stu explain in a loud clear voice where the rink was in relation to the house. At least now I knew Mitch could find me if he wanted to.

There were important things I needed to tell him, but mostly I just wanted to see him.

My rented orange-and-beige skates beckoned from their spot on a fiberglass chair.

Still no Mitch. Maybe he'd opted out and was working on his case. Or had stopped for dinner on the way back to his crummy little apartment and hadn't heard where we'd gone. These were chances I'd had to take, but no way was I sitting around Grandma's house, waiting for My Father the Letch to come home and mortify me again.

This was no good, standing around watching everyone else have fun and thinking of that ohso-yucky moment. Sure, I'd had thoughts about how handsome he was; I was proud of him. And weren't daddies the first men little girls fell for? But hey, the idea of him finding me attractive repulsed me. Those thoughts had to *go*. Besides, looking down at those skates reminded me there were no milk crates full of safety gear lurking on the rink to cause me bodily harm. I felt the need, the need for speed. This visit to the rink, my unusable money was stashed safely back at the house, so I had no reason to be a lurker.

The drinks Grandma'd served me might have boosted my courage; as I double-knotted my laces, my confidence soared. Time to show Miami my moves.

The floor was smooth and perfect compared to the sidewalks I'd traveled with my Rollerblades. And the skate wheels were loose. This might take some getting used to.

When Stu passed me—without Grandma, that bastard!—I took it as a personal challenge. Working my way over from the outer wall to the inner ring, I sped up and found my rhythm. There, just what I needed. Speed. No wonder the skates had felt alien to me. I wasn't cut out for leisurely rolling along.

No doubt about it, Stu was going faster. Trying to see what I had. He'd find out.

Teenaged boys got out of my way as I zoomed past. Several onlookers from over in the chairs pointed our way. Soon all the other skaters edged closer to the wall to give us space. Wise of them, since skating at this speed could result in a rough crash.

Still Stu was in the lead. Stu, who would soon break Grandma's poor, fragile heart and rob her blind. And possibly be responsible for my father's disappearance.

Time to take ole Stu down a notch or two.

My thighs burned. But thanks to all the training for Sudo's camp, I could focus above the pain. I pushed my body, using my glutes with each stroke, leaning forward like speed skaters in the Olympics. Closer to Stu. Two more trips around the floor and it was obvious he might be used to lots of skating, but he certainly wasn't acclimated to going so fast, or for so long. *Well, maybe in bed...* 

That pissed me off more. To dangle not only happiness, but a great sex life in front of Grandma, with every intention of ditching her, the louse!

By the time I'd quit seeing red, I was right beside him.

Seemingly surprised to find I'd overtaken him, he put some effort into regaining his lead. But he was sweating buckets, wearing down quite badly. It wouldn't be long 'til he was eating my dust.

My hips and thighs burned. My knees ached. My throat stung and my heart was about to explode.

No time for weakness. Time for phase two. The crowd cheered as I pulled ahead. Stu's labored gasps behind me helped ease the stitch in my side. I just needed him to feel like he had a shot at overtaking me...

Maintaining a lead of only a few feet must have looked foolhardy. Should I fall, Stu wouldn't have time to change his course and he'd surely mow me over, causing me more injury. A smart person might have been afraid.

I considered it a calculated risk.

From behind me came a wheezed, "Drew!"

Could be he was ready to give up. My big chance.

"Huh?" I looked over my shoulder at him and feigned a turned ankle, executing the forward roll I'd learned in sky-diving class. The wood floor was hard as living hell under my shoulder blades. Still, as Stu's body flailed past mine, I had enough sense of direction to plant my toe-stop right between his legs.

Accidentally, of course.

One more flash, blinding pain in the back of my head, and the disco lights went out.

## Chapter 28

The music was off. The disco ball must have been back on, though, because I could sure see stars. And marvelous visions, like that of Mitch's nearly normal-colored face.

"Drew? Jesus, are you okay?"

Seeing him *and* hearing him. Hmm. Either he was real or that searing pain in the back of my head meant I'd lost some marbles in my tumble.

Helmets had merit, after all.

I tried to reply, but ended up groaning.

Grandma's face made a quick appearance in my line of sight. She disappeared after a louder male groan from somewhere off to my left.

Warm hands cupped my face. Mitch. Snapping over his shoulder, "Give us some room. She's still gotta breathe, dammit!"

The room instantly brightened, and I felt a rush of cool air with the sounds of many wheels retreating.

"H—hey," I whispered. "You came?"

He nodded and stared hard into my eyes. "Just in time to see your wipeout." His eyebrows drew together as brown eyes shifted left, then right. "Your pupils look the same. I think."

"What happened?" My fingers found a nice knot smack on the back of my skull. No blood, but it hurt like hell.

Mitch's face came closer and I hoped he'd kiss me, but his lips went to my ear. "Don't give me that. I saw. You crashed on purpose!"

Was it shock or awe I heard in his tone?

"Not that," I mumbled. "My head. It's not supposed to hurt."

"You did an extra half-somersault but Stu's body stopped yours. Your neck snapped back and your head hit the floor. You're lucky you didn't get seriously hurt."

It felt pretty damn serious to me, but since I'd done it deliberately and Mitch knew, complaining seemed a poor choice.

"Stu wasn't quite as lucky." Mitch looked over my body in the direction of the continued moaning. "You caught him right in the sac."

Boy, did I ring ole Stu-boy's bells. I suppressed a smile, sort of.

"Jesus, Randi," Mitch growled. "The guy's just doing his job. For now, anyway."

Working a case. Leave it to him to find Stu's behavior acceptable if it was for the sake of a case.

I lifted my head and glared at him. "Oh, for God's sake! I cannot believe—"

"Shhh!" His finger covered my lips. "I guess you're okay. Thank Christ." And then with one hand cupping each side of my face, he kissed me. Right there in the middle of the crowd, with dear old Grandma and her hopefully-maimed-in-the-scrotum-area boyfriend only a few feet away. The sweet bliss of Mitch's lips on mine was worth ending up with a killer headache. Those strong shoulders on either side of mine shuddered as he held me, and I knew he'd been truly worried. With a sigh of contentment, I parted my lips.

I'm okay, never been better. And I'm yours, babe.

Some wise-ass whistled amid the opening strains of Bette Midler's *The Rose*. Several copycat whistlers parroted him.

Mitch smiled down at me the entire time he helped me up. Wondering why he was standing weird, I looked down. He had on only one skate and had run out on the rink in his other sock. *My hero*.

"Think this should be our song?" he asked. Lost again in the depths of his sexy eyes, I only nodded in response. "Let's go get my other skate."

Deliriously happy, I rolled along beside him as he hobbled to the seats, my head full of images of us floating around the rink. Hand in hand, heart to heart, with *our song* playing. We'd definitely dropped anchor at the port called "Love".

Too bad my head hurt so damn much. I really couldn't complain, though. My objective had been met; Stu had to be helped off the rink by two guys. Mitch hadn't taken too kindly to my targeting Stu's man-parts. It was only a little bump on my head anyway, no reason to act like a baby.

Lost in my own rose-hazed world, I watched Mitch's Levi's strain against his awesome thighs when he sat down. The muscles in his arms flexed and bunched as he tugged on the skate and worked to tie it. So much lean man, and he was mine, all mine.

He stood and wobbled on his skates, leaning on me for balance. Oh, wow. How cool for me to be able to help him with something! His big body pressed against mine was a yummy bonus. I could have stood there like that for hours. But our song still lilted through the speakers.

As I reluctantly stepped back and tested to make sure Mitch was safe on his own, a bunch of hairy fingers appeared over his shoulders and shoved him forward to his knees.

"Uummf!"

Recognizing my father's leather jacket above those hands made my head hurt even more.

"Son of a bitch!" Mitch growled.

Busted.

When he turned around and faced Dennis, he was obviously as pissed off as dear old Dad. Uh-oh.

"We had a deal, you lyin', no-good—"

Dennis's words put me in the Sky High Temper Club right alongside them. "Deal?" His underhanded bargaining had left me suffering for days, wondering why Mitch didn't want anything to do with me. "You and your deal!" Hands planted firmly on his chest, I gave him a good shove.

Too bad for me, Daddio was more stout than I'd expected—he didn't budge. Neither did I, at least figuratively speaking. Staggering back on my wheels, I mounted a verbal attack. "Just who do you think you are, making deals about my love life?"

He snickered and looked at me like I was crazy.

And then Mitch's hands were under my armpits, bodily moving me out of his way.

By the time I'd been put back on the ground and regained my balance, they were standing toe-to-toe-stop, fingers in each other's faces. My head spun. Oh, God. This time they were going to have serious words.

Amid all the growling and testosterone, I caught the words "asshole" and "no good pig", from different sides, then one of them suggested "take…outside" and the other agreed "bet yer fuckin' ass" and they were heading out the door.

"Hey, wait you guys!" Surely we could solve this in a civilized manner.

Neither of them noticed me, but it might have been because the crowd, which had only just given up watching Stu's agony, rushed behind them before I could. I seemed to be having trouble with my coordination. Like, I kept telling my legs to move but they did everything in slow motion. And now they didn't seem to be interested in holding me up at all. Things got hazy around the edges. So I wouldn't fall, I sat down. Hard, on the nearest chair.

To Mitch's credit, he did an excellent job going up the stairs in his skates. *Both* Mitches made it up the stairs and out the door fast, as did both Dads.

Whoa. The old noggin must have taken a harder hit than I thought. After this, I'd definitely never skate without safety gear again. This time I meant it.

I looked around the nearly deserted seating area. Geez, where did everybody go?

And why were the damn lights so bright? What were they trying to do in here, surgery?

Hmm. Wasn't I headed somewhere, too?

"Nice skating," Stu called to me. Several seats away, he had an ice pack on his head, another on his crotch, and seemed to be holding one elbow against the scrotum-pack, too. With the look of intense pain on his face, it was impossible to tell whether his comment was sincere or sarcastic.

The only safe response was a neutral nod.

Outside the front doors, a crowd was yelling, cheering. A fight. They were watching a fight... oh hell. Mitch and Dennis. By the sounds of things, lots of punches were landing.

I needed to go break it up somehow. My legs wobbled, but held me up when I rose.

"I think you owe me an apology, Randi."

"Oh." I looked over at Stu, sitting in a contorted upright fetal position. His wiener hurt. Aw, poor guy. A black eye would have been the perfect compliment to his other injuries. It really was too bad I hadn't hurt him a little more. "I'm sorry." Not waiting to hear his reply, I pushed off with my right foot and headed toward the door.

Wait. I ground my scrotum-kicking toe stop into the floor. "Randi?" When I turned to face him, he wore a smug look I didn't like at all. In fact, I didn't like him at all. He was not attractive when he looked so mean. Surely Grandma had never seen such a hateful look on his face.

"I'll save us both the stupid question and answer session," he sneered. "I read your little diary or fairy tale or whatever it is."

Fairy tale seemed like a really good story to stick with. God, I'd never considered the possibility of Stu snooping through my stuff. But then, I hadn't known he was a cop. I'd figured all the time he was at Grandma's, he was only interested in getting his rocks off. "Do you think it's best-seller material?"

If he did, he'd probably have stolen it.

"I might, if I hadn't also seen your little bundle of money from the future."

Oh, shit. Oh, bloody hell. "I'm surprised you didn't swipe it!" I snapped without thinking. Sticky Fingers looked guilty for a moment, as if he'd considered it.

I could actually hear the punches landing outside, since the last people abandoning the nowempty rink had left one door standing open. "Jesus, I've got to try and stop them." I had to give it a shot. Mitch was so fit and strong, he surely packed a deadly punch. And Dad was street-tough. He would fight dirty.

As I turned and headed toward the steps, Stu called, "Hey, wait! Give me the inside scoop on the future and I won't have you arrested for passing all that *counterfeit* cash."

Dirty, low-down, no-good...I turned to fix him with what I hoped was my most disdainful stare. "I'll tell ya, Steve." His eyes went wide when I used his real name but I plodded on. "In the *future*, people with personal computers can communicate with anyone anywhere in the world. Women keep a big list of assholes like you, accessible via these computers. Kinda like a big Not Wanted poster, with your picture, a list of ways you wronged them, everything. Congress passes a new Amendment that calls for publicly hanging bad cops." I glanced down at his crotch coldpack and got inspiration. "The medical community is unable to find a cure for injury-caused impotence, and on a more personal note..." I leaned down toward him, my heart racing with hatred and anger at this man who would ultimately destroy what was left of my grandma, this man who'd destroy me if he had half a chance. "...I know more about what you're gonna do with the rest of your life than you do, at this point. And I *will* look you up in the future, Steve. Count on it." His nostrils flared for about a millisecond before he was up on his feet, his hands at my throat. "You bitch, if you really are from the future, you're about to die really fucking young!"

The back of my head didn't hurt at all, compared to his thumbs shoving, digging deep into the front of my neck. His icepack clunked against the top of my skate. I struggled against him, but his hands were so strong. And I couldn't seem to get my footing. Tears of pain ran from my eyes. The front of my windpipe smashed against the back, burning like hell. I was sure I'd feel it for the rest of my life. Which might not be long, unless I did something. Unless I...lifted a knee and plowed his crotch.

"Ho-ho-whore!" he moaned, as he crumpled to the floor at my feet.

Wobbling something fierce on my skates, I worked to keep upright and move away, but like some kind of hellish octopus, he wrapped his arms around my legs. I fell. Long, hard, and flat on my stomach. The spaghetti Grandma'd fed me earlier threatened to come back up. It probably couldn't get to my esophagus though, because Stu managed to throw his weight right on my lower back and pin me to the floor, rip at handfuls of my hair.

Jesus, had he always fought like a girl, or was it because I'd crippled his testosterone factories? I scrambled under his weight but found myself utterly helpless to escape. Even groping for the soft skin under his arms proved futile, especially after he resumed his efforts to strangle me. I had to settle for scratching and clawing at his hands and wrists. Maybe I wouldn't live through this, but if Mitch ever saw Stu again, at least he'd be able to tell I'd put up a fight. Oh no, thinking of Mitch made me tear up. Not that it mattered. All I could see was a forest of chair legs and lots of empty shoes.

Things started going dark. This was it. End of the road for Randi the Fearless. So much for my future with Mitch, my chance to have babies. Poor Mom was right. I'd thrown away my life. I wasn't ready to die yet!

A few more attempted squirms and I managed to twist enough to suck in a bit of air. It might be my last breath, but I'd make sure it counted. Gagging all the while, I managed, "Fuckyou!"

Darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Had I died? The pressure on my neck was gone, but my throat still felt like it was permanently crushed. No white light beckoning me to heaven. Only darkness, and quiet. All except for the people yelling. Some ghastly goings-on in the after life. A street fight in hell... Hell? Well, what had I expected? I hadn't set foot inside a church for anything but weddings and funerals in years, and the obscenity I'd chosen as my dying words was hardly the pass code to heaven.

With my luck, I'd end up sitting on a very safe sofa for all of eternity, watching an endless tennis match. Or bowling. Oh God. I should've gone to church! What if I had to sit through cooking shows forever?

The immense weight on my back lifted. Now I heard voices, one of them seemingly Spanish in accent, and sounding quite deadly. My body moved without effort on my part. Oh, thank God! There was the beckoning light, penetrating my eyelids. So maybe I wouldn't spend my afterlife as a permanent viewer of The Boring Channel, after all. In order to see the white light better, I opened my eyes. Huh. The big white light was fluorescent. And there were lots of them.

And right between me and the white lights was, as near as I could tell, a switchblade knife. Held by long, dark fingers. By the person who was speaking those beautifully accented words? The blade turned and glinted in the light, pointing across my body.

Beside it, the animated face of Tino came into view.

Tino. Did he save me from being strangled by Stu?

Sounded like. And now, judging by the smell of urine and the laughter from Tino and some other men behind me, Stu might be a little scared. Alas, turning to look in his direction and witness his discomfort was more than my poor, hurting neck seemed able to accomplish.

So maybe having Tino as an admirer had come in handy. Only, how'd he seen what was going on in here when not another soul had noticed Stu attacking me?

I'd find out soon enough. Tino's associates were lifting me up. Holding me, actually.

While they adjusted their grips, I caught sight of Stu, sitting as he'd been told, on the floor. Wearing an embarrassed glare. Opening my mouth, I prepared to tell him off, but the only sound was a little gagging racket. Still, it was enough to get Stu's attention.

My voice might be out of order, but my middle fingers—though bloody—were still able to convey my sentiments.

Tino and Company guffawed.

Stu seemed to consider lunging my way, then sat back, scraped fists clenched in his lap.

As one of the guys lifted my feet up and they started carrying me away, I couldn't resist waving "ta-ta" to Stu.

Bastard. I was half-tempted to blow his cover and let Grandma know what a louse he was, whether it screwed up the future or not. Who knew, maybe she'd ditch him anyway after tonight. Surely everyone would connect his scratched hands and my bruised neck.

All I wanted was to collapse in Mitch's arms. Maybe Tino's guys could break up the fight. Except they weren't heading toward the front door. Instead, we went toward the restrooms. In the back.

By the emergency exit door.

I shook my head wildly and made grunting sounds, pointing toward the front, but they didn't change direction. Though I'm sure he heard me, Tino kept walking. Maybe this wasn't as good as I'd thought.

On the up side, I was breathing. Alive. Out of Strangler Stu's clutches. On the down side, the son of Miami's most notorious mobster had taken custody of me.

It seemed Tino had finally gotten out of Conga and into the action.

## Chapter 29

From the leather back seat of a large sedan, I caught only a glimpse of the crowd gathered in the front lot as we sped away from Skate Fever 4ever.

No cop lights yet. This was a good thing. Cops meant arrests, which meant Keen and or Mitch missing The Big, which could spell messed-up history trouble.

Although, how long could the two of them keep fighting without somebody getting seriously hurt? The punches I'd heard meeting skin would surely equal lots of bruises. Which meant Keen and Miguel would have to come up with a way to explain to Rico next day, and Armando. No doubt I'd be to blame, since I seemed abnormally adept at messing up undercover activity.

In the meantime, I had bigger worries. Like all my own bumps and bruises, not the least of which was a nasty case of floor-burn on my elbows. I was pretty sure this was the work of Stu, rather than my staged crash. With my throbbing head and injured throat, aching stomach and what felt like a sprained right wrist, I was a disaster.

Worse yet, Tino had turned on the dome light above me and was making it his business to examine all my wounds while we careened down some dark street with his two thugs in the front seat.

"Dru," he tutted, "you've had a violent day."

I bit my lower lip as he skimmed a finger over my raw elbow. Geez, that would take forever to heal. Then he turned his attention to my neck, his touch feather-light along the most tender spots. There must be marks already.

"And why would this man dressed as John Travolta be trying to kill you, Señorita?"

Taking advantage of my out-of-order voice, I shrugged. This was great, I didn't have to worry about my voice giving me away when I lied.

"Can you talk?"

I shook my head and made a pathetic little croak while mouthing "no".

He nodded and shrugged back. And much to my horror, began patting my body from top to bottom. In a most courtly voice, he explained, "I am searching for ID. You see, we believe you are not who you say you are."

You're not who you say you are. Dennis's words came back to me. Looking for ID. Hmm. Tino was out of luck, as much as he was enjoying his overly thorough search. My ID was back at Grandma's, safe in my backpack...where Keen had seen it earlier. Oh! With a mental forehead-slap, a sinking feeling hit. If Dennis had seen that ID, my troubles might be really, really big. The driver's license Sudo had provided identified me as Miranda Reed. Dennis wouldn't forget his own daughter's name was Miranda, and probably knew Reed was her new step-dad's name.

And, oh, holy hell. That other thing in my backpack, the thing Stu had read. The thing I'd told Mitch I didn't have anymore. Shit. Would Dennis have respected my privacy enough to stay out of my journal? Doubtful. Truly doubtful.

Yet...he hadn't mentioned it. What did that mean?

One thing was for sure: Tino did not need to squeeze my butt cheeks to check my pockets for a driver's license.

Since my right wrist pained me so, I used my left hand to slap his face.

He laughed, which was lucky for me. Pissing off a young horny powermill like Tino was pretty stupid.

Geez. I really did need to learn to think before acting. Or speaking, but that was off the table for awhile. For me anyway, but not for Tino.

"You have a hot head, Dru. Like many Cubans. But do not worry. I like it."

How flattering. Was that why he'd kidnapped me? Because he liked me?

He must've read my mind. "Papi will not be happy you cannot speak. He wishes to question you." With a decisive nod, he added, "Not happy at all. The man who did this to you will pay."

Oh, crap. I didn't want them doing anything to Stu. Steve. Whoever. He needed to remain right where we'd left him so when my father or Mitch came looking for me, they could pound the details out of his lying face, and then come rescue me from the clutches of these crazed Cubans. No, much as I wanted Stu to pay, he couldn't, absolutely *couldn't* disappear now. If he did, maybe Dad wouldn't go missing and I'd never come looking for him. Or meet Mitch. Or maybe if Stu never stole Dad's invention, then Dad would hit it rich and during his life of leisure decide to find his daughter. Either way, I'd be history. Not history. *Lost in Space-time*.

"No!" I tried to say it, but all I got out was a gravelly squawk.

Too late. Tino had turned his attention to barking orders at his attendants up front. Sinking into the cushy seat, I could only hope he wasn't giving them instructions to go back and cap the Travolta look-alike. It was hard to tell though—I couldn't follow what they said. Either they were talking much faster than normal or my brain simply wasn't processing. Despite my predicament, drowsiness blanketed me. In the big, comfy seat, it seemed futile to resist. I'd all but succumbed when the car slowed and turned.

The sedan sailed in and parked between a black limo and a newish white Corvette with ttops. The muscle car had Tino written all over it.

As my band of Cuban companions accompanied me in the back door of Conga, I prayed I'd hear motorcycles roaring into the lot. Would Mitch and my dad even know where to come looking for me?

Were they done pounding the snot out of each other yet?

At least by entering through the back door, nobody witnessed how ridiculous I looked, leaning on Tino for support as my skates skipped and caught along the Spanish tile floor.

Nor did anybody but his two helper-thugs see him whisk me into his office and lock the door behind us.

## Chapter 30

Red rock formations loomed on the horizon. A hawk shrieked overhead, its shadow flickering by.

The stones came into focus. Bell Rock.

Sedona. A quieter, less-populated Sedona. The smells of sage and cedar, the sounds of... nothing. Ahhh. No planes, no helicopters. From this spot, no cars.

Only me. And, knowing the hand interlocked with mine, Mitch. So we'd made it back to the vortex. We were going home. Could we just do that? Was it time, already? Didn't we have more work to do in 1980?

"Randi. Come on, you're not focusing."

Focus. I needed to focus so we could go back through time, or forward through time, or whatever. Surely I was supposed to have some image in my head, but I couldn't recall it. Something was gone, something...

"Something wrong? Babe, we've gotta go." Mitch's patience was wearing thin.

I couldn't go, though. I'd forgotten something. What was I missing? Besides my entire left arm. Odd, how I could look with such detachment at my gaping shoulder socket, which incidentally, was neither stitched nor bleeding. Simply empty.

My left hand was gone. How could I ever marry again, with no left hand on which to wear a ring?

"Mitch. We can't go. We've got to go back. I forgot something."

But he didn't listen. He'd resumed meditating, and must be doing it quite successfully, for part of me was being tugged along with him, my right side melting into the oblivion of the wormhole.

I'd never make it. I wasn't finished in 1980, a part of me would remain there. I'd never be whole, unless I could make Mitch wait.

"But Mitch, your case! Did you ever solve your case?"

Thud! His hand was gone from mine.

\* \* \* \*

Around me, semi-darkness. Beneath me, the cool leather of Tino's sofa. I shivered under a cold sweat. That thud echoing in my mind...the door. His office door had just shut. Did someone enter or exit?

If anyone had entered, they sure didn't need much light to get around, and they weren't making any noise. It was safe to assume whoever had been there was gone.

Good. I had enough to worry about with that dream. Would Mitch really try to drag me bodily back to the future? What would happen to me if I couldn't focus, when it came time to transport back? Could I focus, if I didn't solve the mystery of my dad?

These could all be needless worries, since I might never escape Tino and Rico.

Tino's door was locked from the outside last he'd left. I'd feigned sleep until he was gone and, skates in hand, padded over to the door, determined to slip out unnoticed. Only to discover I was locked in. A real, true, prisoner. Good thing I'd collapsed dejected on the couch, because he'd been back with Rico in short order. And Rico had not been pleased when he was unable to "rouse" me. He'd ordered Tino to get a "medico." And left.

The doctor's arrival had been noisy and actually did wake me, though I'd continued to feign sleep. Throughout his exam, I'd had the strong impression he knew as much. Maybe he'd been irritated at being called out for a two AM house call. Or was it good luck?

I had the little turtle in my front pocket. One of its legs had broken off during the tussle with Stu, but surely an eight-sided turtle was still good luck with only three legs?

Around three, Tino had tiptoed out, snicking the lock shut behind him.

What time was it now? Oh, God, my head hurt when I stood up. If the damn doctor hadn't been digging around the knot back there, maybe it wouldn't hurt so much. Pretending to be out cold while he'd poked and prodded had been tough. Sure seemed like the swelling should start going down.

I read my watch by the light of a high window. Six AM.

Who in the hell was running around Conga this early? Not sneaking around, but banging a door shut.

Guess it wasn't Keen or Mitch, since they'd surely have rescued me.

Time for me to figure out how to escape. Which might be as easy as phoning for help...

How foolish of me to imagine they'd leave me a phone.

But the cord was still there. A mighty long cord, too. It might come in handy, if I could get up to that window.

That window wayyy up there. Damn.

Geez, I could actually feel my pulse pounding through that lump on my scalp. Ouch. What I really needed to do was concentrate on what good came out of that colossal wipeout.

Maybe I'd better sit down to formulate my plan. Save my energy for the big escape.

Big. Crap. The Big was tonight. In twelve hours, I was due on La Pilar with Mitch and Keen.

Where were they? Settling back in a corner of the enormous couch, I hoped neither of them had ended up in the hospital.

Hmm. Maybe I could stack the desk chair on top of the desk. Could I push that ginormous desk over to the wall, though?

Made me tired, just thinking about it.

Thunk!

I jolted awake, immediately regretting whatever time I'd wasted by snoozing again.

Another thunk! This was not the door to the office, but a pounding on the wall.

A groan and some fast male talk, possibly in Cuban.

Another groan. Pleading?

Thunk.

Who was getting beat up, and who was the beater? Maybe if I moved closer, I could hear better. Placing my ear against the wall between two velvet posters, I listened. If memory served me right, next door was Rico's office.

Laughter, from more than one man. *The associates*. They must be doing the pounding. But who were they pulverizing? Oh, please, God, not Keen or Mitch.

More pleading from the victim. This time I caught "deal" and again, in a higher pitch, "deal?"

The soft, hissy voice of Rico. I pressed my ear harder against the wall. "...Bee Eye, no, ehStu?"

No reply, then another thunk and a groan. Scratching sounds as the victim slid down the wall. A whiny and familiar, "Yes."

Stu. Shit! Rico had captured Stu. Who sounded quite eager to compromise. Deal. He wanted to make a deal. What kind of deal could he offer Rico? I almost hoped he could pull it off. Because if he didn't, if Rico offed him, the space-time line could get all mucked up. He shouldn't even be here, should he? If it wasn't for Tino seeing him trying to kill me, Stu would be tucked in safe and sound at his duplex or maybe in the sack with Grandma. Not here, in the clutches of the Cuban mob. They couldn't strike a deal, either. That would have never happened if I hadn't brought them together, however unintentional it was. Stu needed to play his regular part in The Big, which would surely be the end of Dennis's comfy game of pull-the-wool-over-the-gangster's-eyes, and then he had to steal the invention idea and skip town. If he didn't, I was toast.

Now, what were they saying? Rico's hiss, something about his son. His son, on the inside. Inside of what? Conga?

Stu. Training, tests. Personal recommendation. Name change?

Uh-oh. Rico didn't like the idea of a name change.

And Stu sounded determined it had to happen.

A name change for Tino? What was Tino's real name, anyhow? Why would he need to change it? If Stu helped him get in...hmm...the FBI? Could he really do that? Was Rico setting his son up to be his inside contact?

Oh, God. He needed a new source to keep him abreast of what the cops were up to. Which meant one thing to me: he wasn't going to need Keen's services any more. And he wouldn't just quit using Keen. Something told me when Rico finished with somebody, when they weren't useful to him anymore, it was curtains for them. What had my dad said to me? Something about how you don't walk away from a relationship with a guy like Tino. Or his dad. When they end it, they end *you*.

Okay. So I couldn't allow Rico and Strangler Stu to strike a bargain. But I also couldn't let Stu come to his untimely—if deserved—demise here, either.

Meanwhile, I hadn't figured out how to save my own neck.

Speaking of necks, mine was definitely not feeling spectacular. The floor-to-ceiling mirror along one wall of the office gave me an eyeful of nasty purple and red marks on my neck. How very lovely. And how conspicuous, if I tried to escape and blend in. There wasn't much to be done for it. Or for all the pretty fuchsia floor burns on my arms.

But I couldn't think about that now. I had to focus on getting away, and no nodding off to sleep this time.

Stu droned on about inventing a background for Tino, a new identity. But Rico remained adamant about keeping the name.

Moot points, boys. It's not gonna happen, if I have any say in it.

And then I could swear I heard Stu telling Rico something about *the woman*, Drew, and how she knew too much. Rico said he'd handle it.

Stu liked that. He felt they had a deal.

Great. A deal that included killing me off?

At last, Rico sounded a bit agreeable. Then, with a wicked chuckle, his voice lowered.

More thunks, his thugs guffawed, a whump which had to be Stu's head hitting the wall, and then a far-away door opened and shut.

I raced back to the couch and forced myself to breathe slow and deep. Somebody quietly opened the door—looking in on me?—and then shut it. With about the same amount of force as last time.

So it had been someone looking in on me. Too bad for them, they'd woke me. Who knows how long I'd have slept if they'd been quiet about it.

Their steps retreated down the hall and eventually car doors opened and shut. Three of them. A low engine sound and then quiet once more.

Conga was truly still and deserted so early in the morning.

All except the noise next door. My God, was he sobbing over there?

*Now or never*. So the window was my best option for escape. But I didn't only need to escape. I also had to break back in and free Stu from the inside hallway. Good Lord. I'd never picked a lock in my life.

Unless...what if I could go through AC ducts and get Stu, then bring him out the window of this office? Would he kill me when he saw me again? Why was I even bothering to save his lousy tail? Oh, right. Because if I didn't, I might become one of those prodigal space-time accidents everyone speculates about. I'd be trapped in non-existence, without Mitch. Reuniting with Mitch was good incentive.

Okay. There was a vent right above Tino's desk. Of course, optimal air flow, right over him while he was working. Probably a must during a Miami summer. I bet I'd find another vent above his father's desk, too.

All I had to do was heft this big old desk chair—the wood was a good thing because it made it sturdy but damn, it was heavy!—on top of the desk. Those wheels were going to make for a risky climb into the vents, but I'd have to give it my all.

This was probably a balancing act best performed sans concussion, but as I wobbled atop the desk and then teetered on the chair, I knew it was my one and only way out of this mess. The only way I'd ever see the safety of Mitchell Goodbody again.

The vent cover was a bit skewed, like it had been jammed into a spot it was too big for. It didn't want to come out, and protested with a loud squeak.

The sobbing next door ceased.

"Heh-hello?" Stu called. "Hello?"

No need to answer the dipshit. Let him sit there and sweat it out until I came to his rescue.

The grate dangled by its hinges, beckoning me up, up into the duct. The opening loomed far above my head. It would be a stretch, but I should be able to pull myself up. If only the ceiling tiles would support my weight.

I grabbed hold and pulled. With twin puffs of powder, the tiles cracked and I landed in a heap on the desk, the chair crashing off the side to the floor.

Well, hell. It wasn't at all like the movies. Come to think of it, there was no way I'd have fit through that duct, anyway, let alone Stu. And my wrist still hurt like a son of a—

"Hello?" My nemesis pounded on the wall. "Who's there? Get me outta here! Hey! Hey?" Bastard.

Mitch. I had to focus on Mitch. Because it'd be really fine revenge to leave Stu the Shit to be disposed of by Rico. Once he'd gotten Tino on the "inside", Rico would get rid of Stu in fine fashion.

Mitch.

I climbed down from the desk and wiped the plaster powder from my hands. Along with some blood. I must've sliced my hand open on the damn grate.

Nice. Time to get out the window. The phone cord went for miles from under the desk, over to a wall, which it followed into a corner. I yanked on it, but it wouldn't come out. I'd have to cut it. Maybe there was something in Tino's desk. It would have been stupid for him to leave me something sharp, but in my experience he wasn't the brightest penny in the bank.

Scissors. Big, gleaming, barely ever used. Perfect.

Quick snip, and I had a handy rope. Bingo.

Feeling very much like Indiana Jones with his trusty whip, I imagined myself looking suave as I looped the cord in a neat roll and slung it around my right shoulder. And stood rubbing my chin and wondering how in the hell to get that behemoth of a desk under the window. I was really weak, and...hmm. Better put the scissors in my back pocket. Might come in handy later on.

Or maybe I could push the couch over to the wall and pile the coffee table on top of it and go out that way. I tried to budge it, to no avail. Good God, did the Cubans screw everything to the floor or had I become the weakest chick ever? No way was I going to give up. If only I had some of those neato furniture sliders like back at my apartment. I'd managed to move all my own furniture around with them. Sliders, wheels...my skates! Could I possibly get the skates under the sofa and then roll it over to the window? I'd need some leverage to lift the sofa in order to shove them under. The coat tree! I could use the coat tree as a lever and—something bugged me about that coat tree. Who the hell needed one in Miami, anyhow? Coat tree. Man, my head hurt. Trees. Trees were for climbing. Maybe I could move the coat tree over there and climb it. It wouldn't be quite high enough. I could push the coffee table over, then stack the coat tree on it.

My poor, aching head. Didn't Tino have any aspirin?

I had to check before doing anything else. Bupkiss, except... In a lower drawer of his desk, one fancy bottle of...Amaretto. Room temp. It was something. There'd be sugar for a bit of energy and maybe it'd help numb the throbbing pain. It took all I had to twist the lid open and break the seal. Swigging straight from the bottle renewed my Indiana self-image. And it felt damn nice going down. I tried to shove it inside the waist of my jeans, to no avail. Way too tight of a fit for anything like that. Kinda made me giggle at my own silliness. But hey, another swig for the road would be fortifying.

Now where was I? Oh yeah, moving the coffee table. It grated and ground and scraped along, causing my neighbor to yell more. Still, I did not answer him.

Next, the coat tree. The easy part. Before I moved it, I'd best have one more drink of Amaretto.

I tripped and ended up on the floor just under the edge of the desk. Whew, lucky I didn't crack my head again. It wouldn't be good for me to knock myself out and not escape. What the heck was that little brass plate on the underside of the center drawer?

Hecho en Havana por Valentino. Amor, Abuelo y Abuela.

Grandpa and Grandpa had sent the desk from Cuba. Cute. Had they known he was fast becoming a mob boss like his dad? And what would they think of him going undercover as an FBI agent?

Man, was I sleepy.

Mitch. I had to get out of here for Mitch. I'd better quit chugging Italian liqueur and get on with my escape. Now. What would Indi do? WWID? I chuckled out loud. If I ever got out of here, I'd make my own bumper sticker. Actually, I could leave the J in WWJD and make it "what would Jones do?" Oh, I cracked myself up. I really did.

"Hey, who's over there? What the hell are you laughing about?"

Oh, Stu. If you only knew.

Back to the coat tree. Hmm. Damn nice silk suit jacket Tino'd left hanging on it., A bit Don Johnson for my taste, but I wasn't above wearing it over my jeans to keep everyone from seeing all my owwees.

With the jacket hiding my weapon—scissors in back pocket—and my whip—handy dandy phone cord—and the itty bitty bottle shoved in the neat hidden inside pocket, I was ready to go. Funny how those pegs intended for holding coats didn't look so sturdy as prospective branches to hold my weight. Especially towering above me on the coffee table.

How the hell was I going to get around outside with no shoes on? I couldn't carry the skates along while I scaled the unscaleable coat rack. Besides, there'd still be the minor problem of getting back into Conga to release the beast next door. Would I be able to find a pay phone with an actual phone book so I could call Dennis and have him come help me? I sure as hell couldn't remember Grandma's phone number. Not to mention, I didn't have so much as a coin on me.

Besides, Keen might not be so keen—haha—on rescuing Stu anyway, if he knew the jerk had tried to kill me.

No, I'd have to figure out the locks myself. When I'd been in Vegas once, my car was broken into. The cops said the vandals had used a plain straight screwdriver and hammer. I didn't have a screwdriver, but I did have scissors. Hammer? Skate. And hey, maybe I could use them to get out of this office, instead of risking my neck by climbing that scary furniture tower! What a dumbass. So much time I'd wasted by trying to go out the window and all I had to do was break an interior lock.

I weaved over to the door, grabbing a skate on the way. Shoved the tip of one scissors blade into the key hole, then held it steady with my left hand and gave it a really sound whack with the skate's toe stop. Stuff rattled inside the lock. Christ, my wrist!

"Hey! Who's over there? Lemme outta here!"

"Will you shut the fuck up, Steve!" Guess my voice was back, if a bit raspy.

Silence truly is golden.

The scissors were jammed in the hole, so I used both hands to swing the skate. With a pop, the blade lodged deep. I tugged my handy-dandy make-shift Slim Jim free, and held my breath as...

It turned. Glory, hallelujah. The scissors went back in my pocket.

Only the emergency lights lit in the hallway, but it wasn't hard finding my way down to the next door.

What condition was Stu, er, Steve, in? If I opened the door, would he come after me? I wasn't in tip-top retreating shape.

I rapped my knuckles against Rico's office door. How hurt was he? "Knock-knock!"

"Uh, who's there?" he called.

Inspiration hit. "Stu."

A long silence. "Stu who?"

"Stupid of you to try and kill me, 'cause I could help you escape now if I wanted." Teehee.

"Funny. Lemme outta here!"

"Nope. And you know what, Steve? As soon as Rico gets what he wants from you, he'll cap you." Silence. "Yeah, I heard it all. Your whole little deal. And I'm reporting you at my first opportunity. Which will be in, oh, about two hours and seven minutes." Silence. "Are you still with me?"

"What do you want?"

"There is another option. You could get out of here, if somebody helped you, that is. There's that nice little retirement plan you've got all set up for yourself, back at Bea's. Pretend tonight never happened. You never met Rico Romero or read my journal or tried to kill me."

Rustling and a few awkward thumps inside. His voice was just on the other side of the door when he spoke next. "And if I don't? You'll be in never-never land forever, won't you, Randi?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. But you won't live to enjoy it for long if you get tangled up with Rico. He can't afford to have somebody like you alive, somebody who could blackmail him down the road and jeopardize his inside contact, let alone his son's life."

His evil cackle made the Wicked Witch of the West sound sweet as the Pillsbury Doughboy. "You're a quick thinker. But you're probably right. Tell me how my 'retirement plan' pans out."

"Better than you can imagine. The idea you're planning to steal from Dennis will be a household name. Just about every American will have one. You'll be rich beyond *his* wildest dreams."

"I like what I hear so far."

I wanted to vomit. Here I was, selling this jerk on stealing from my father and my grandma. But what choice did I have? Was there another way to keep the thread of my existence from fraying?

"Okay. So here's what I wanta hear from you, Stu. Gimp your happy ass back across the office to the opposite wall. And start counting. By sevens. Don't stop until you make it to two hundred and three." Was two hundred and three divisible by seven? Did it matter? "You better shout the numbers, Stewie. 'Cause if I can't hear 'em, I'm not unlocking this door. Ever."

Bump, scoot, bump. "Seven! Fourteen! Um, twenty-two!"

Jesus.

This time I just jammed the scissors blade into the keyhole and twisted.

While he called out, "Twenty-nine, no twenty-eight!" I quietly turned the lock, then checked the knob. Who else but a gangster would have the knobs put on his doors backward so he could lock someone *in* his office?

Running barefoot down the hall, I paused at the outside door.

Like a personal invitation, there hung keys, in a neat row. To bikes and cars alike.

It would be so easy to swipe a bike. But I probably wasn't safe to drive, not with a concussion and the booze too. No way would I get behind the wheel of a big old car like this. No harm in taking a couple of keys to use later. After all, they were going in Tino's jacket pocket, haha.

"Forty-nine! Fifty, uh, seven. Six! Sixty-three!"

The sun was blinding outside. Yowch. Now how was I going to get anywhere with no money and no wheels? And no shoes, of all things?

Mitch's place wasn't far away. Maybe, just maybe, I'd get lucky and he'd be there.

Please don't fail me now, little glass turtle.

# Chapter 31

Maybe my lucky charm worked in mysterious ways. Goodbody was nowhere to be found.

Fortunately, his crappy little apartment had an equally crappy lock on the door and I only had to jam the scissors into the keyhole to gain entry. No attention-attracting pounding necessary.

Where could he be? It didn't look like he'd come home all night. Please, please, please. He couldn't be hurt and in the hospital. Couldn't. Especially since the cops were looking for him. If he got arrested, what would I do? For all I knew, both he and Keen had been hauled in for fighting in front of Skate Fever 4Ever.

Maybe he'd turn up. In the meantime, I seriously needed to rest. Later, if he didn't show, I'd go back to Conga and swipe some wheels to go looking for him and Keen. Surely Grandma would know something.

Grandma. Hmm. Had Mitch written down the phone number somewhere? On a little shelf under the phone, a little ahead of its time, sat a sticky pad. With a phone number scribbled on it. No phone book in sight. Well, it was worth a shot.

I dialed. It rang. And rang. And rang.

It could have been Grandma's number and nobody was home. Or it could have been someone else's number. Time for another approach.

"Information. City and name, please?" Hopefully the FBI wouldn't mind my using their line for a call to Directory Assistance.

"Miami. For Bea Keenan?"

"Yes, ma'am. Hold please."

When she came back and read the number to me, it matched with the one I'd just dialed.

Damn. It was really time for me to sleep. My head hurt even more than before.

I downed a full glass of truly putrid tap water and then sprawled across Mitch's bed to sleep. It could have been the smell of him on the neatly made bed, or the idea of him lying there, naked between those sheets. But my attempts to squelch thoughts of him were futile. It was nearly ten before I drifted off, reliving our little afternoon in the hotel room.

The heat woke me. It was stuffy and awful. And four o'clock! Crap. Since nobody had come looking for me, I'd best go looking for them. Time to commit Grand Theft Motorcycle. But I really needed shoes. Hopefully Mitch wouldn't mind me borrowing some of his, at least until I got back to Grandma's.

Good Lord, his feet were huge. Of course they were, as were other key parts. It took three pairs of his socks to keep his shoes on my feet. And I'm a size ten-and-a-half.

The handful of change on his dresser might come in handy in case I needed to gas up my bike. Just in case, I looped the phone cord over my shoulder before donning the jacket, and shoved the scissors into my back pocket. The cord really hadn't been useful so far, but concealing it felt fun.

I clomped down the stairs and out the back door, getting a couple of strange looks from Mitch's neighbors. Geez, what I wouldn't give for some shoes in my size.

Several more vehicles were parked at Conga now than there'd been at seven AM.

Rubbing the little turtle, I muttered, "Okay, my friend. Help me out here. Don't let anybody be watching."

The keys jangled as I pulled them from my pocket, visually matching makes and keys. Two Harleys parked in the lot.

Another caress to my good luck charm. The Sportster. Please, let one of these keys go to it. I ran as fast as my oversize shoes would carry me, straddled the bike, and stuck the key in the ignition. It fit. And the engine turned over.

As I sped from the lot, I tossed the other keys over my shoulder.

I took a couple of wrong turns trying to get into Grandma's neighborhood, but finally found her house.

The driveway was empty.

It could have been worse. Stu could have been there.

With the trusty key in the planter, I let myself in.

"Hello?" Tomb-quiet. "Hello?" God, now I sounded like Stu-pid had earlier.

Four-thirty. *La Pilar* would be leaving port in ninety minutes and I still needed to dress and try to find my way there. One problem. My entire backpack was missing. Gone. Nowhere to be found. Crap with a capital C! Just who had been here since last night and swiped all my stuff? Part of me hoped it was Mitch, except there'd be hell to pay if he'd found my journal.

Sure couldn't show up on a yacht in dirty, bloody Brittania jeans, head to toe bruises, and men's sneakers.

I'd have to impose on Grandma's wardrobe another time.

She didn't seem to have much in the "elegant and understated" category in her closet. Much more of the "hot pants" variety. I couldn't wear the same outfit again, not when Pilar had that exact dress. Opting out of the Lieutenant Uhura-uniform-with-fringe left tight leather pants in several colors. Crud. Uhura it was.

At least the high neckline and long sleeves hid most of my bruises. The skirt was damn short, but my legs weren't too banged up.

Now I knew where I'd gotten my big feet. Grandma had rows of shoes in my size. After years of Granny Jenny telling me my feet were huge because I ran around barefoot so much, it was certainly vindicating to know how I came by my pontoons, when Mom and little sis both wore a size six.

Hmm. High heels or tall boots? Given the amount of leg I was flashing above the knee and the fact that I'd be driving a hog, boots seemed the better option. My hair was an absolute disaster after riding a bike with no helmet. Next question: was Keen's spare helmet still out in the living room? Yep.

Not much point in spending lots of time on my hair then. I'd give it a good brushing-out and put it in a pony tail when I got to the docks. And since my makeup was gone...well, hell. A clean face was about as fancy as I'd get tonight.

One more item. A jacket. After making fashion a priority for my last ride out to the docks, I knew better this time. But I wouldn't borrow another of Grandma's. Nostalgia had hit and I wanted one of my dad's jackets.

A black leather number, like three others hanging in his closet. Not a man of much variety. Too damn bad he wasn't as loyal to his women as he was to his outfits.

Which was a really lousy thing to think. Was it really fair to think that way after meeting him? At the door, I shook my head and looked back at the living room where I'd first met my father. Sure, I'd met him. But had I really gotten to know him? I'd thought I knew my grandma

before coming here, and boy, had an adult's perspective shaken up that theory! There was so much more to her than I'd known.

The turtle felt smooth

The turtle felt smooth and warm between my fingers as I thought of Bea's skating championships. And knew, without a doubt, I'd seen her for the last time. She had only a couple more happy days left, before her son and her boyfriend disappeared. Forever. And so would I.

The pen with my grandfather's monogram was cool and hard between my shaking fingers. Below, stationery I recognized from letters Grandma'd sent me.

#### Dearest Bea,

Thanks so much for taking me in and giving me a place to stay here in Miami. Words can't express how much it's meant to me, getting to know you. You're an amazing lady.

You've had more than your share of hardships. When times get you down, know that nobody thinks less of you for it. You're the strongest, bravest woman I've ever met. Your little granddaughter is very lucky she has you to look up to.

I apologize, but I had to borrow one of your outfits. I'll try to mail it to you from Arizona. Please don't worry about me. I had to go back home. Thanks to you—God willing—I'll be with Mitch. Miguel, I mean. You were completely correct about him.

I'll love you and think of you always,

Drew.

Was it wrong of me to stick Grandpa's pen in my jacket pocket? Probably. I took it back out and, with teary eyes, laid it across the note.

No point taking another "last look around". I couldn't see for shit anyway.

Once outside, I took a moment to breathe in and out, in and out, smell the petunias in the planter before I replaced the key.

I needed to focus now. Which way had we driven to the dock Tuesday night?

\* \* \* \*

In retrospect, roaring up to the front of the yacht on a stolen hog might not have been the least conspicuous way to make my re-appearance.

Yet, Tino—leaning over the bow along with Pilar and Armando, Mitch and Keen—could hardly re-kidnap me this way. And since the boat had all but left port by the time I boarded, he had no time to call Papi and inform him of my whereabouts.

Lots of dirty looks passed between Keen and Tino. Likewise, between Mitch and Tino. Poor Armando was obviously out of the loop and confused.

Pilar was under the impression I'd been ill and hadn't planned to attend. Now that I'd "recovered", she wanted to talk clothes with me. And I wanted to closet myself in a stateroom with Mitch for a few weeks and hold on to him for dear life. Instead, I had to make small talk with our hostess while Mitch's eyes roamed up and down me, pausing each time he saw another bump or bruise. His brows would raise and all I could do was try to flash a reassuring smile. Besides, he had a few bruises of his own, including a bit of swollen nose.

Before the first round of cocktails, Tino had slid into the shadows.

Pilar kept up the fashion chitchat, mistakenly assuming the outfit I wore was my own choice. God, what I wouldn't do for a minute alone with Keen or Mitch. Not with both of them, though. Keen knew too many things, which I wasn't sure I wanted Mitch to know he knew. And Mitch, well, I just wanted to be alone with him. And *then* tell him about Stu and the deal Rico was trying to make.

At last, Pilar got called to the kitchen to handle some question regarding dinner.

Armando waited until she was out of earshot and said, "Come, Miguel. We go see where is our young Romero friend. We leave Señor Keen and his lady alone for some moments."

Mitch did one impatient neck roll, pursed his lips in our direction, and followed. He was so damn cute. Even in those very high and tight pants.

To my supreme astonishment, my father pulled me into a hard bear hug. "Rico. That fucker. If it's the last thing I ever do, I'll get him."

"How'd you know—"

"He sent one of his guys last night while we were still in the parking lot at the rink and told us he had you. You were his 'insurance' to make sure he got his delivery tonight. He's screwed with me one too many times now. Crossed the line." Dad looked damn scary when he was feeling vindictive. I wouldn't wanta be on his bad side.

Ho, wait. I couldn't have him endangering his life even more by taking on Rico because of me. "Technically, Tino saved my life when he—"

Dennis let me go so he could step back and look at my face. "Saved you from what, and how the hell did you get away?"

Maybe if he'd quit interrupting me and let me talk, I could tell him. "Stu. He tried to strangle me but Tino—"

"Stu! That corrupt piece of shit. What beef did he have with you? And where's he—"

"Corrupt? Wait a minute. You know Stu's a cop?"

"Hey!" He actually pointed his index finger at my mouth, parent-style. "Don't you interrupt me when I'm talking." *Monkey see, monkey do, Pa.* As if! "Yeah, I know Stu's a Fed. I knew it since the first week he started hangin' around Ma all the time."

"Oh. And you're....okay with that?" But poor Grandma was going to get her heart broken. She'd be shattered, crushed.

"Shit. He's not after me, so what the hell do I care? Ma's been havin' the time of her life with him. I heard her on the phone with her sister. He's a fun ride and a good dance partner. A sober driver. What's she got to lose?"

Her heart and your invention.

"I'm not livin' at Ma's house because I need the money." He looked down and scuffed his boot toe against the carpet. "I been keepin' an eye on her so she doesn't get sucked into this mess I'm in. Stu was the perfect solution. He'd make sure she was in the dark about all of it. He needed her in the dark."

"And you knew this, how? How'd you know he was a cop?" His cop-dar was not what he claimed, or he'd never have thought I was one.

He shrugged. "There's a reason I'm called *Keen*. I just knew. Trust me, I probably know more cops than anybody you ever met. Besides, he wasn't exactly subtle when he came onto Ma."

I must've looked doubtful. I still felt doubtful.

"Look," he said. "I made your boyfriend as a cop the night we saved him from the locals." "How?"

There was that handsome grin of his again. "He was easy. When I got in the cop car with him, he had his own key he was trying to get his cuffs open with. Since those morons cuffed his hands in front of him, he'd dug the key out of his pocket."

"Oh, for Christ's sake! So this entire time, you knew he was a cop? And he *knew* you knew?" "It wasn't like we talked about it."

Unwilling to resist, I planted my hands against his chest and gave him a hard shove.

He staggered back, mouth and eyes wide open.

"You jerk! You knew, and yet you told him to keep away from me?"

Out came the dad-finger again. Using it, he backed me into a corner, his voice so low it was almost a growl. "He's a cop. Course I tried to keep you away from him. Who are the most two-faced, lying bastards in the world? Cops! It was a dirty cop got me tangled up with Rico in the first place."

"Mitch isn't like that. He's good and honest and—"

"A liar. You don't think so? What's a cop do when he's undercover? He lies about who he is, what he does, everything."

"D-Dennis. Come on. It's for the greater good. It's like, like spying for your country. And anyway, he's not lying to me. You might as well know, we're in love."

His eyes squeezed shut. "Not lying huh? So when did he tell ya I was onto him?"

Yeah, when was Mitch planning to tell me that little tidbit?

I'd make sure to ask him later. "So you, um, figured I was working with him."

"It was a guess. Off-base, I know. But I was tryin' to make sense where nothin' was makin' sense."

He looked a little green.

Had he read the journal? Maybe he was struggling with the concept of my being his full-grown daughter.

"About that...my stuff. It's all gone from the house. Do you know what happened, where it went?"

He rubbed his hands over his face. "I took it somewhere. Safe. Today, while I was wonderin' if you were gonna come out of this dead or alive." Those hands shook a little.

"I'm fine. Really." This time I gave him a hug. It might make it easier for him if I couldn't see his face when he answered what I had to ask. "Listen. In my backpack, there was this notebook..."

"Dinner is served!" Pilar called at the door.

Crap.

Dennis extricated himself from my hug and backed away, his upper lip curled. Or was it swollen?

Dinner was a painstakingly long affair. Six courses, three hours. It felt like a week. And gave me plenty of time to ruminate over what Dad had told me.

Rico's guy must have interrupted the fight at the rink. And since they always travel in pairs, the other must have gone inside to nab Stu. Yet, I hadn't heard them beating him in the office next door 'til, what? Some time after six. What had they done with him until then? Maybe Rico really was pissed at Stu for roughing me up. If I was his insurance with Keen, he'd be worried about Keen's reaction to my injuries. What were we smuggling tonight that could mean so much to Rico?

I couldn't even make moon-eyes at Mitch during the never-ending dinner. He was seated on one side of me, dear old dad on the other. Once, Mitch managed to get his hand on my knee. The feel of his hot hand against my bare skin lit a burning ache to be alone in his arms, begging God to never separate us again.

Of course, first he'd need to explain why he'd kept me in the dark about Keen making him. And at some point I had to confess to lying about my journal and tell him Stu had read it. And probably my dad had, too. Then there was the issue about the funny money. Which was an innocent mistake. But surely we could get past all that.

Keen really did have a sixth sense. Not only for ID-ing cops, either. I'd swear Mitch's hand was only on my leg for seconds before one of those big hairy hands reached behind me and flicked Mitch's ear. Not the smoothest tack to take, since it inspired Mitch to smack the table and swear. And then try to cover his erratic behavior by saying he'd bit his tongue.

Tino was conspicuously missing from the dinner table. Furthermore, Pilar and Armando did not question his whereabouts.

Made me nervous to think he could be lurking in the shadows *anywhere*, like the last boat ride we took together. All the more reason to stick close to Mitch.

By the dessert course, I'd almost lost my mind trying to figure out if Mitch and Keen had settled their differences the night before. They joked and laughed like any two normal guys would. Keen obviously didn't want me hooking up with a cop. Any cop. Still, several times I caught them making strange faces above my head. Seemed they were deciding on a particular door, for some reason. Were they going to meet somewhere to confer?

Just how far out on the ocean was our rendezvous?

And why in the hell was I always the last to know what was going on?

#### Chapter 32

I really needed to use the restroom. But fearful of a surprise attack by Tino, I held it. And held it. Until all the courses of dinner—and their accompanying wines—were over. It took a true effort to stand, and even then, I hunched over in agony.

"Excuse me, I'm just going to, er, powder. My. Nose." I tried looking meaningfully at Mitch, who I wanted to tag along for safety. Getting him alone seemed more and more important as the night wore on. I had so much to tell him.

"I'll walk you there," Dennis said in a tone brooking no argument.

It was all I could do to keep from rolling my eyes.

But maybe he wanted to tell me he'd read my journal and knew I was his daughter.

When we turned the corner down the hall, Mitch looked every bit as disappointed as I felt.

Later. We had the rest of our lives to be together. Whereas my time with Dennis was nearly at an end.

"I need you to talk to him," Dennis said close behind me. He followed me into a stateroom with its own bath, next door to the one the ladies had used for the party. The door shut with a soft click behind him.

"It'll have to wait. I've really, really, gotta..." The closed door between us would impose a pause in the conversation. Or so I thought.

"It's gotta be tonight. I want in that Protect the Witness Program. I'll help him get Rico and then I want outta here."

I really couldn't wait any longer. He would have to.

When I'd finished and washed up, I opened the door and gawked at him. He wanted in the Witness Protection Program. He'd be a state's witness and go away someplace safe. And with Mitch's help, I could know where he ended up. *Who* he ended up being. This was awesome!

"Seriously?" I asked like a dumbass.

"No. I'm joking. Of course seriously. Rico...Rico's a loose cannon. And that kid of his is gonna be worse. They're goin' down, and they're goin' down tonight."

Uh-oh. Here's where things would get sticky. I got a sinking feeling that had nothing to do with the rocking boat. "Um. Okay. You'll need to like, let us have some time. *Alone*."

"You don't need to go makin' out." His eyes squinted almost shut. "Just take care of business."

"At some point you're gonna have to accept that he's a good guy. Like, you know, when he saves your ass from being sunk in a set of cement shoes by a mob boss!" Which really had to happen. If Mitch saved him, Dennis would change his mind about our relationship. I might be older than him, but his blessing still mattered, for some strange reason.

"Yeah. We'll see. I'm not gonna hold my breath. He'd be the first cop that ever did me any favors."

Geez, what a lousy existence he must lead, working with and around so many cops all the time, and distrusting them all. But I'd turn it around for him. Make his life less bitter.

Everything was grand. I had a lead on my dad's future, a promising romance with Mitch, and an empty bladder.

His hand grasped the doorknob.

"Wait! Would you please tell me what we're going to pick up?"

"Cubans."

"Like, refugees?"

"Not quite. Certain people Castro's shipping off to a safe place for a bit."

Whoa. Funny how he figured they'd be safe here in the U.S. "What's Rico want with them?" He shrugged. "Not sure how Rico found out Armando's transporting them. But he wants 'em intercepted. Wants to use 'em as leverage so Castro will grant *his* parents safe passage out of Havana."

"And you're going to hand them over, these innocent people, to Rico?" All those *thunks* on the other side of the wall last night...I hated to think what Rico might do to the helpless.

"Hell, no! But I am going to collect the twenty-five grand he's paying me to hand them over. And the Cubans are going directly to the Feds."

"Where they become political prisoners?"

He shrugged again. Water off his back.

"And you think cops are two-faced! Do Armando and Pilar know about this?"

"Armando knows he's getting paid to pick up a handful of Cubans in the Gulf. And see them safely to shore in Miami. That's all he needs to know. The Feds will ship the 'refugees' straight back to Havana, where Castro will find another means of protecting them from his political opponents. It's not a big deal. Castro's about to fall from power, anyway."

I couldn't hold back a small laugh. "You think?"

He pursed his lips, for once looking unsure. "Anyway. There's a certain gift comes along with looking out for Castro's family. In the form of about ten million in pure Bogota heroin." My sucked-in breath caused him to frown. "...which Stu is going to intercept. You don't think I'd put that kinda dangerous shit on the street, do ya?"

"How the hell do I know? I thought we were transporting coke that first night."

"Yeah." He laughed. "The sand. Just so you know, weed's as far as I go, when it comes to moving dope. I've seen what drugs do to people."

Comforting. Though I still didn't know whether he was a good guy or a bad guy. Maybe he was both. Maybe we all are.

He reached for the doorknob again.

"Wait!" I had one more question. "What am I supposed to be doing here?"

"Nothing." The devilish grin was back. "You're along for the ride. I figured if you thought it was dangerous, you'd wanta be here. And knowing Rico has it in for you, here with me and Wondercop is the best place for ya." He fairly strutted from the room.

I followed, of course, paranoid about running into Tino.

\* \* \* \*

Alone at last. And in Mitch's arms, if for only a few seconds before he started the inquisition. Where did Rico take me? How did I get away? Did I have any idea how worried he was when he found out I was missing? Who the fuck bruised my neck? Stu? Where was that weasel Steve, anyway? I did what! I let him loose? Oh, well, that made sense, but he didn't have to like it.

"Geez. Will you shut up if I kiss you?" My spirits were high. At last, a resolution to all my problems. Mitch could make nice with my dad by getting him into Witness Protection, dad would give us his blessing, I'd know where dad ended up. And I could safely return home, knowing I'd accomplished what I'd set out to do. No missing limbs.

He responded by giving me the long smooch I so desired, leaving me hot and bothered and giddy.

"God, I love you." I sighed. "And this is almost over. And guess what? Dennis wants to turn state's witness!"

How could Mitch look so bewildered by this? He knew in all my wildest dreams, the best-case scenario, the most romanticized vision I'd created of my father's destiny was that he'd turned state's witness. "Babe. That's not—"

Oh, he was sooo not going to put a damper on this. We could do it. "Yes. We can do this. We just have to keep him from changing, like, mega history. We *can*."

But he shook his head.

"Mitch, dammit. This is the perfect solution. To everything."

"Randi. If he turns state's witness against Rico, that means Rico gets shut down. Which changes *everything*. If Rico was shut down, I'd never be coming back here from 2010. We'd never meet. Not to mention, after all the damage you've done, Dennis would definitely keep in contact with his daughter. So where would you be? We'd both end up pardoxes."

I couldn't agree. Couldn't. "Don't you understand how important this is to me? You're just like David!"

"That was a low blow. You know I've tried to help you all I can. But I can't jeopardize the case, let alone our existence, to make nice with your daddy."

The case. Always back to the case. Maybe we could make a deal. "Speaking of the case, I might have some information you could use. If you were willing to make an exchange?"

One brow raised. "Like what?"

"Like, Rico's trying to strike a pact with Steve to get Tino into the FBI."

"Tino!" He paced to the other side of the room. "Hmm. I can't believe Rico'd actually sacrifice his own son. Clever. Right under the Feds' noses. Of course he'd change his name. And what else? Hair? Glasses?"

"No name change. Rico was adamant."

He shook his head. "There'd had to have been a name change. Obviously we'd know if Tino Romero got a position in the Bureau."

"What if Tino wasn't his name? And have you forgotten the Hispanic tradition of using the mother's last name?"

Mitch rubbed his chin and stared out the window. "Might be worth looking into...If I had access to the TTR so I could have my partner look up the file."

"Mitch. His name is Valentino."

"Valen...Valenfuckintino?" He froze and stared at me. "No. It couldn't be. But it could. No wonder...Randi, do you know the name of the current director of the Bureau?"

"Like, current 1980 or current 2010?"

"Jesus. Val Garcia. Who is bald as an ostrich egg, with a mustache and goatee...Jesus. All the time, right under our eyes. No wonder every time some agent gets close to figuring out who offed that Senator, he dies. Jesus." His grin widened and he lifted me and swung me around. "Oh, babe. You helped me crack it! He's the director of the goddamn FBI! Woohoo!"

Seeing him so happy was awesome. Things were going to work out perfectly.

"So, we have a deal?" I asked against his cheek.

"Deal?" As if it were a word from a foreign language.

"Yeah. Deal. I helped you solve your case, which you came here for, now you help me with what I came here for."

His expression fell.

"Goodman?" Why wouldn't he look at me? "No, seriously! You wanted my info, which I willingly handed over, which means you went for the deal. You cannot double-cross me, Mitchell. You can't!"

"I already told you why we can't. And I never said I'd go for the deal."

"Just like he said. He tried to tell me all cops are lousy, lying, double-crossing..." I could think of no good words. "...louses! Just like he said. God! You've been lying to me for days, ever since he figured out you were a cop. And now you've got a chance to make it all right. To fix everything." My dad had a chance to be a hero who sacrificed his contacts to his family for the greater good, and Mitch wanted to screw that up. "You know," I stuck my index finger in his face, Dennis-style, "if he dies tonight or if I never find out what happens to him, I'm holding *you* accountable!"

Mitch leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, breathed long and slow through his nose and stared off at a corner. And turned red, nonetheless. "Lying." His heel tapped the wall. "Okay, look. It was embarrassing that Keen caught me in the act of trying to run from the cops and figured

out I was one. I should've let them haul me in and then told them who I was. But after they started beating me, I didn't want to spend the whole night dealing with them. It would've been morning before somebody with half a brain showed up at the station and listened to me. So I decided to make a break for it. I never imagined you'd con Keen into coming in for me. So yeah, after all your amateur sleuthing in Sedona, and laughing at me like I was some kind of goddamn beginner at this, I didn't want you to know Keen made me on the second day of my assignment. Go ahead and persecute me for wanting to impress you."

Okay, his reason for keeping me in the dark was *almost* sympathy-worthy. "What the hell am I supposed to tell my dad?"

He leveled me a look to rival the stern ones Dennis had given me earlier. "While we're in confession mode, or at least, while *I am*, maybe you'd like to join me?"

Uh-oh. He obviously knew something I didn't know he knew, which didn't bode well for my stance on the whole Witness Protection issue. "Dennis sorta went through my backpack. And you know all those counterfeit money stories on the news?" This must not be the part he knew, since he looked appalled. "Most of the money I got at the ATM on the way out of Sedona was printed post-1980."

His hands gripped his head. But at least he wasn't looking at me, which made my other confessions easier.

"Stu went through my bag too. And found something else."

Mitch looked up at me.

"Um. You remember my, ah, travel journal?"

His jaws flexed.

"I'm pretty sure Dennis read it too."

He gave me a half-sick smile. "So you failed to tell me about the money, kinda like I failed to tell you about Keen making me."

Didn't sound too bad. I nodded. Getting all this off my chest felt better already!

Then he straightened to his full height. "But you outright lied to me when I asked you about that notebook." Ugg. "You jeopardized everything by dragging that thing around, writing Godknows-what, and you've got the nerve to point your finger at *me*?"

Oh, this wasn't going right. Here we were, fighting again. I hadn't fought this much since I'd been married. Maybe I wasn't ready for another relationship. Mitch was well and truly mad. He'd brushed past me to look out a porthole, and the back of his neck and ears were very red, even through his fake tan. "You know, if everybody would stay out of my private stuff—"

His head dropped. Was he sobbing? His body shook and there was that howling sound...

Then he turned and wiped at his eyes. Laughing.

"The only girl I've ever known who would break into my hotel room and go through all my shit, is indignant because somebody returned the favor!"

He had a point, but it didn't mean I had to like it. So I crossed my arms over my chest and looked away from him, lest I start laughing too.

"Randi. Jesus, you're a pain in the ass." Pain in the ass or no, he took me in his arms again. "Baby. You know, I'd do anything for you. But this Witness thing, I can't. It's not...safe for us. You understand?"

"Back to my question: What the hell do I tell my dad when I go back out there?" He was only going to hate Mitch more. "Do I tell him to call somebody else at the FBI tomorrow morning? What?"

"Let me talk to him."

"So you guys can fight again?"

"I won't beat him up as bad next time."

Ha! He said with his semi-black eye!

"Funny. We'd better get back out there. I'm under strict instructions to not be 'making out' in here."

"Yeah. Better not push him. He might ground ya or something."

I started walking toward the door, but he caught me and spun me to face him.

"Look, Randi. This is important. When we get back to land, stick close to me. I know you don't wanta hear it, but we don't know the outcome tonight."

Some sour part of my dinner threatened to come back up. Anything could happen in the coming hours. If it came between finding out my dad died during this fracas, or being left in the dark about his destiny, I wasn't sure which I'd choose.

"Okay." For once, I'd be compliant. Regardless of what happened to Dennis, there was no way I'd go home without Mitch.

#### Chapter 33

The yacht's wake sunk into the water around, becoming shorter with each second.

Conversation on the deck ceased.

Safe inside a stateroom were five Cuban national women, two old ladies, and three small children. Ten political refugees, caught in the backlash of power and enmity, the turmoil men and money churned. I'd watched them board, seen the fear on their faces. In their world, they followed the orders given by men. Plucked from familiarity and set down in a frightening place of different words, strange values, they must wonder if they'd ever see home again.

I could only hope Keen was right, and they'd be returned safe and sound.

Keen's plan sounded too simple to work. He'd told Armando to dock at a different port, where the nationals' connection should be meeting us. Only, he'd contacted the connection and told him to meet us at another port. And at the dock we'd left from? Rico's guys would be waiting with a van.

But first things first. Somewhere in the shadows of the dock ahead, federal agents waited.

Armando would believe Keen was surprised by the agents too. The agents would take the women into custody and seize the heroin.

Keen had quite a large bottle of sedatives to tranquilize the crew, as well as our hosts. If Mitch and I helped and everything went as planned, they'd all be out cold when Keen pulled his scam on Rico.

Did I feel the least bit guilty for helping Keen bilk Mr. Mob Boss Himself out of twenty-five grand? Nope. In fact, my blood was pumping faster than it had been before my first base-jump. We'd have to sneak, ambush, act, drug, act some more, and then run like the hounds of hell themselves—or several angry mafia men—were after us, to make our big escape.

Oh yeah, I was ready.

What I wasn't ready for was all the terrified shrieks from the women when a band of intimidating men with guns met them at the docks instead of Fidel's friend. Nor was I prepared for the accusing look Pilar gave me when she—far more cunning than her spouse—put two and two together, guessing the mission had been compromised and I knew about it. Luckily while she blurted her accusation, Keen slipped the sedative into her drink. One tiny burst of bubbles and visual evidence had evaporated. One long drink, which I admit to encouraging her to take while I acted shocked and confused by her allegations, and she calmed right down. By the time she settled into the corner of her couch for a little rest, Armando was well on his way to joining her. Thank God, because there was no way he'd have bought Keen's story of being surprised by the Feds.

Especially since not a single one set foot on the boat. They herded the women toward the van, seizing bundles of 'joy' three of the young women carried. And who should shut the door of the van as the yacht backed away, but Stu.

For old time's sake, I gave him the finger.

Good thing Keen had experience driving boats, because he sure didn't have a problem getting the captain to enjoy a cocktail with him. Mitch took care of the cook and I conned the butler-maitre d'into a drink.

Which left Act Three. Rico and Company.

Still no sign of Tino, and everyone had searched the yacht. Somehow, he'd disappeared. Mitch assured me it was probably part of his plan. He didn't remember the case file mentioning Rico's son. If he faked Tino's death, nobody would suspect a new agent. I didn't draw a relaxed breath, though. Tino could still be lurking somewhere on that massive raft waiting to botch Keen's plans.

The intrigue was awesome, though. Intrigue for revenge is *really* exciting.

Another dock, another van. Deep breath. It was almost over. Almost.

Low and behold, the great and magnificent Rico, emerged from his limo, the first and only time I'd see him outside Conga.

Show time.

Mitch took the wheel so Keen could be down at the gate when Rico approached. I stayed above, where I could watch and not be seen. But Mitch had stuck a pistol in my jacket pocket with the scissors.

Below, there were words, heated words.

Keen shaking his head.

I rubbed the turtle, soothing, hoping.

"Fuck it, Rico. I've got two higher bidders. I don't have to deliver to you." And turning his head up, he yelled, "Armando, fire up the engines. We're going to Plan B."

Rico looked anxious. Something about "half" drifted up to me.

Keen wasn't going for half. He was getting all the money up front, before he let Rico aboard. Only then would he walk Rico back to the stateroom where the 'refugees' were. I'd get the honor of turning the key on the outside of the door after Keen shoved Rico in said room.

Rico bitched and complained.

Mitch started the engines.

Rico balked. And paced.

Off in the distance, a freighter blew its air horn. An ominous portent?

Keen reminded him how far back they went, like the good old boys they were, but he couldn't trust Rico to not double cross him. Didn't he remember that other time Keen came through and then Rico shorted him?

God, did I even want to know? Nope.

"Ay, dios mío!" Rico motioned one of his guys down, a bundle of cash under his arm.

"Do I need to count this?" Keen asked. Without waiting for an answer he tossed it up to my deck. "Can you check that for me?"

Um, sure. Duct tape wrapped around a black Hefty bag, which would presumably be the future mode of transport for this heap of cash. I fumbled with the tape, attempting to not tear the bag too much.

Stacks of twenties. I'd seen enough movies to check the bundles and make sure they were twenties through and through, not only at the ends.

Below, Rico had the nerve to ask how I'd ended up on The Big instead of safely tucked away in his custody.

I'd have laughed, if I wasn't so busy counting. How many in a bundle? How many did we need to make twenty-five thousand? Hmm. Five per hundred, fifty per thousand.

Keen told Rico in no uncertain terms to Shut. The. Fuck. Up.

Five, ten, fifteen...twenty-five bundles. Assuming each bundle had the requisite fifty bills, we were in business.

"Christ, she calls herself a teacher!" Keen muttered below me.

"Hey, bite me." I checked a couple more stacks to make sure Rico's guys didn't slip in a bundle of fives or ones. "It's hard to concentrate with you yammering down there. Yeah, it looks like twenty-five g's." Man, me and the gangster lingo. Was I getting cool or what?

From the lower deck, "Geez." Or was it "G's."? Probably. *Geez* didn't really fit in the Keen vocab.

Rico wanted his guy to come aboard with him.

In all fairness, Keen had come up with a good plan, but he should have seen this one coming. After all, Rico wasn't used to going anywhere without an entourage.

More arguing.

I re-bundled the money in preparation for our upcoming flight.

Keen conceded and swung open the gate.

I turned and looked at Mitch in the cockpit. He nodded and followed a few paces behind me down the spiral stairs.

Pilar and Armando were safely tucked in the master bed, snoring when I paused at the bottom of the stairs. Now how were we going to get both Rico and his groupie in that stateroom? I turned to see what Mitch had planned, and he was gone.

*Gone*. Oh, shit. What did that mean? Had Tino reappeared and knocked him out or thrown him overboard? There hadn't been a splash. And Mitch's substantial bod would certainly make a splash. I hadn't heard any thuds or scuffling. That sour part of dinner was returning when I looked to the other end of the hall again. Mitch approached behind Rico and his guy, gun in hand.

Guns. Exciting graduated to scary. Surely the Cubans were packing, too.

I suddenly, really, wanted this night to be over.

Keen opened the door. Rico peeked inside, then turned around in time to see the big hairy hands shoving him in. Señor Thug put up a bit of a fight, which I'm proud to say Mitch handled quite well. I had no idea he was such a badass. And he didn't even need to use his gun, what with all the cool karate moves and stuff. By the time he pushed the oversized, underconscious bundle through the door, Keen's mouth had dropped open. Perhaps he was feeling relieved Mitch hadn't opened that particular can of whoopass on him at the rink parking lot. I was.

Though I did lock the door with a flourish, my part truly paled in comparison to the guys'.

Then we were hustling out the gate, Keen waving Rico's guys down the dock toward the yacht.

"Rico said come on down and help! Arriba! Andalé!"

Most of them hurried past us as we made steady progress toward Mitch's and Keen's bikes. Figuring it'd be a bit over the top to steal Rico's bike right in front of him—again—I grabbed my helmet and kept close to Mitch.

As we reached our wheels, all hell broke loose down on the yacht.

Amid the chaos of Cuban expletives, several brilliant pops rang out, spurring us to greater haste. Following Mitch's orders, I got on behind him and clung for dear life as he took off much faster than I'd ever known him to.

From in front of Rico's limo, another bright flash and Keen screamed, but I didn't understand why. He made a fast u-turn and whipped around toward the car. As Mitch drove on, I looked back and saw one more flash and then Keen's shoulder recoiled. He all but fell off his bike, but the few shots he fired made the bad guys duck and run for cover.

"Mitch! He's hit! Turn around, he's hit!"

Keen was speeding off in one direction, and we were speeding in the other.

"Mitch! I've got his money! I've still got his money, Goddammit, turn around." I pulled the packet of money out to wave it and get his attention. It stuck to my jacket, though. When I'd freed it, I knew why. "Holy shit! They shot the money!"

Mitch slowed and looked down at the bundle, the plastic now rent with a huge hole which most certainly would have been in my rib cage if I hadn't been holding it.

"He thought they shot you!"

And in the process of his vengeance, he'd gotten himself shot. And now he was heading off who-knew-where. Alone. In the middle of the night with a big hole in his shoulder.

God. My eyes blurred.

Mitch took a left down the next side street, another left, and drove like a complete maniac back the way we'd come.

I held on, mentally rubbing the little glass turtle. He was shot, but only because of me. We had to fix this.

Once Mitch got on the main road again, he opened his throttle.

Hopefully we hadn't lost him. We couldn't lose him.

Down on the water, red and blue coast guard lights flashed everywhere.

Surely Dennis would pull over someplace and wait? He had to want his money. I got a sinking feeling. What if he'd deliberately made sure I was holding the money, so he could leave it with me? What if it was some kind of penance because he felt guilty about not being part of my life?

As this black thought hit, a single taillight appeared ahead. I poked Mitch in the ribs and pointed. He nodded and tucked forward. I followed suit, trying to slow my pounding heart. It was definitely my dad, favoring that right shoulder.

We pulled alongside him and he nodded at us. I took it as a good sign that he was still riding, but he had blood flying out the bottom of his jacket. He kept looking over at me, probably at the big hole in my jacket below my left elbow.

At the speed we were traveling, it wasn't exactly safe to let go of Mitch and show my dad that his money had saved my life. But Mitch was a smooth driver and I had really good balance...

I'd never been one to worry about risks overmuch.

Mitch's body tensed in front of mine when I let go of him. As I held the bundle of cash up, Dennis nodded and I could swear his upper body shook with laughter. He gave us a thumbup and pulled ahead.

I wrapped my arms around Mitch, planning to never let go again.

### Chapter 34

My wounded father finally turned into a well-lit gas station and pulled up to the pump as nonchalant as could be.

Mitch parked on the other side of the pump, dug out his wallet and ambled inside to prepay for fuel.

"Um. So...you gonna, like, go to the hospital now or what?" I wasn't sure if it was safe, or if the hospital would call the cops if they saw a gunshot wound.

Dennis laughed. "Relax, kid. I got no plans to die any time soon. Although from the sounds of things, I'm pretty damn good at disappearin'."

The meaningful look he shot me confirmed what I'd suspected all along: he'd read the journal. For once, I said nothing. Not that I could have; there was a really big lump in my throat and my stomach had bottomed out.

"Listen. Tell your boyfriend I changed my mind about the Witness Protection thing. I been thinkin'. I got my own agenda and it doesn't include followin' somebody else's rules for the rest of my life."

"Oh." Was that really why, or had he reconsidered, realized the changes it might make and the possible consequences? Or maybe he and Mitch had talked. He wanted me to believe what was a fairly plausible excuse though, so who was I to question it? "Here." I handed him the bundle.

"You okay to get back to...Arizona or wherever? How 'bout I toss you a couple grand for all your help?"

The lump in my throat grew. Soon Mitch would be back, we'd get our gas, and then part ways. I shook my head, but he dug out two stacks of cash.

When my tears started to fall, he chucked me under the chin. "Hey look, kid—damn, can't believe I'm callin' you kid—but look. Our jackets match." He pointed to his bullet hole and then mine. "We both got somethin' to remember Rico by. Guess I got a little extra, though, huh?"

I'd progressed to full-blown bawling.

"Hey. Damn. Look, I got a cop I can call, he'll get my arm looked at. It's just a flesh wound, anyhow."

"Uh-huh." I could see Mitch inside. He'd long since paid for the gas but seemed to be giving us some time alone. I really needed to pull myself together or I'd miss my chance to say some important things. "Um. Look. You know your invention? It's awesome, and it's a really huge hit in the future."

His face lit. "I'll have to start from scratch with the plans, though. Gotta split town for awhile. I'll have Castro breathin' down my neck now."

I sniffled and wiped my cheeks. "Don't bother." His eyebrows shot up. "I mean, to start the plans over. Stu already stole the idea. He gets rich off it. I hope your money wasn't in the house, too?"

He blew a raspberry. "See what I told ya? Corrupt fucker. Nah, I took the money to that 'safe place' where *your* money is."

"Okay." I looked over at the store, where Mitch was taking his time at the drink cooler. "I gotta do this before Mitch gets back out here. He's something of a stickler for the rules."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah. I've got some advice. Kinda like a cheat for the future. But you have to promise not to change your mind and decide to get in contact with me, like, before summer of 2010." At his nod, I plowed on, knowing Mitch would go ballistic if he knew. "Bottled water. Take all the money you can spare and buy stock in it as soon as possible. Trust me. You might question it once in a while, but if you stick with it, you won't be sorry."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. "Anything else?"

"Don't bet on the Red Sox winning the series for a long time, yet."

He chuckled. "Okay."

"One more thing. I know you're planning to leave town. This is just..." Mitch was heading out the door. "...for good luck. And to, like, remember me by." I pressed the turtle into his palm. "I'd really like it if you'd meet me in Sedona on July seventeenth, 2010. At Bell Rock."

"July seventeenth?"

"Yeah, seventeenth, like my birthday. At nine AM. It'll be hotter than shit later on."

He turned the turtle over in his hand. "It's broken. What kinda fuckin' good luck charm is broken?"

Same old Dennis. "I've got the other leg here. It snapped off in my pocket last night but I've been dragging it around with me."

"You believe it's still lucky, even if you keep the other leg?" He was wearing that shit-eating grin again.

"Do you want the other leg? How 'bout I stick it up your nose, smart ass?"

Mitch sauntered up. "Family feud already?" He hadn't bought a damn thing, after all that time in the store. "I got five bucks on your pump, man." He unscrewed his gas cap and stuck the pump nozzle in.

Dennis nodded, but didn't move. His grin faded somewhat. We stood there looking at each other like a couple of idiots while the gas gurgled into Mitch's tank. It would be full soon, and we'd leave.

As the pump clicked off, Dennis stepped toward me. "Comere." His voice sounded broken, foreign. Cool collected Keen was losing it. He gave me a long, hard hug. "Some guy did a damn good job raisin' ya. Sorry. Sometimes things just...well, sorry." And then he let go and walked into the store. At the door, he stopped and put the turtle in his pocket.

"You okay?" Mitch's voice was gentle behind me, his arms strong around me. No. The hole I'd had my whole life was now filled with a big, throbbing hurt. "Let's...go. Out of Miami. We're done here."

#### Chapter 35

Stars shone bright above us. What remained of the moon cast just enough light for us to see the trail.

I huffed and puffed in an effort keep up with Mitch.

After three solid days on the back of his bike, my legs were truly in pain.

He'd shocked me when we'd arrived at Sedona and found a storage unit to stow the bike in, and prepaid for both the storage and a post office box for thirty years. A gamble, but it would be really cool if the bike was still there when we got back to 2010.

Which had left us to hike all the way out to the Bell Rock vortex, even farther away from town in 1980.

"Wow. Look how tiny town looks from up here." Maybe he'd stop to look and allow me to catch up.

"You all right back there?" He backtracked to where I stood. "Ready?"

I was. I'd done what I set out to do, finished with the past. Now it was time to go home and face my future. Our future.

The trees around my little triangular vortex were just as twisted as I remembered. We stepped off the trail and I felt the power right away.

This would be easy. Not because the vortex had so much energy, but because we were here together.

Instead of sitting back-to-back like we had that day in Grand Canyon, he held me in front of him, safe in his arms, my hands in his. Oh, this was much better.

Concentrating with him so near was hard. It took several minutes for me to quit wiggling and squelch the urge to roll him over and make out. But I had to.

I leaned against him, acutely aware of each place our bodies touched. Those hands of his, if he'd only move them a bit lower...or higher, like he had in bed last night. No, the breasts were for his mouth. Hands lower. We'd been nearly as exhausted as tonight, but easing into a comfy snuggle had ended with drowsy, scorching lovemaking. The kind of lovemaking you think of days later and your heart rate ratchets. Like now, remembering him hot and heavy as a ton of bricks and sliding between my—

"Randi. Knock it off, or we'll end up back in that crappy hotel room again."

And he did mean again. We'd already been here once the night before and only managed to sling ourselves back fourteen hours to the room in that dinky Texas town.

"Oops. Sorry."

With an effort, I thought of the trees around us in their counterclockwise spirals. Focused on how secure I felt with Mitch. Happy. *Understood*.

Ahh. There was the place inside I knew. Silence surrounded us, hemmed by the sound of his heartbeat and mine. I relaxed against him, felt his body melt toward mine. Gravity lessened; our weight seemed like nothing. I conjured the image of The Feng Shui Inn. Mitch joined me. The rocks around us seemed to circle, we spun without moving. Energy hummed and buzzed and lit the whirlpool around us. Not like last time, no extra images to trip me up. Mitch and me and our destination. It felt complete, meant to be. Right.

The Inn loomed before us, exactly like we'd left it. In fact, the same sunflower next to the door was about to open and bloom. A small jolt knocked the top of my head into his chin. Yowch. The Stu-bump was still tender.

The glow intensified. Daylight.

We'd done it!

"That was, like, way easier than last time." Thank God.

"Looks like somebody was expecting us." He pointed to an upstairs window, where a small figure moved aside and a curtain fell back into place.

"Sudo."

He was outside almost instantly, waving us in and herding us up to his office.

I couldn't resist snagging a newspaper from the desk on the way up. Not that I cared too much about the news; all I wanted was the date.

July 12, 2010. Five more days. Would he show up?

"Randi."

"Hmm?"

"The professor asked if you wanted anything to eat."

"Oh. No. We, well, we just had dinner, like an hour ago."

Sudo nodded. "You will be tired. Jet lag is a picnic compared to time-lag, yes?" He pointed out his window across the courtyard. "You just returned from your trip to Grand Canyon." Of course, the picture was taken *before* we left on our trip, so we were actually back a day earlier than we'd left. "I had planned a meeting with you two, but Mitchell came by a few moments ago and postponed it. I believe he had other plans for your day?"

Like a romantic trip to the observatory. Wow, how would things have been different if I'd called my mom that morning instead of procrastinating? Mitch and I would have gotten jiggy lots sooner, for sure. And who knew how we'd have handled arriving in Miami together? I might have really messed things up that day, but maybe it was for the best, knowing how things turned out.

Mitch cleared his throat. "Yeah. So I guess we need to make ourselves scarce until sometime early tomorrow morning, huh?"

True. We might really screw with our own heads if we ran into ourselves.

Sudo smiled. "Get some rest. This key is for the suite in the back wing." He handed it to Mitch. "My wife assures me you'll only want one room? Come back this evening for your post-travel interviews."

"Oh. I apologize in advance," I said, "but my mother and sister will be showing up here later." Might as well give him as much warning as possible. "And they called the, um, FBI. I'm sorry."

He put his hands, palms together, in front of his chest. "It was only a matter of time. Do not concern yourself."

\* \* \* \*

Mitch lay snoring in the bed, but I couldn't sleep. We'd rested all afternoon, interviewed with Sudo, and come back to the room. Apparently all the nights spent keeping an eye on me in Miami had caught up with the Goodbody. Poor guy.

I stood at the suite window, watching as three people I alternately loved and hated ransacked my room.

At the edge of the dark courtyard, two very close figures appeared. He paused, looking toward my window, then moved with caution. She stood up tall and marched straight for the room.

Let the circus begin. I really didn't care to watch and relive all those arguments, so I turned away. And bumped smack into Mitch.

"Hey." His arms captured me, hands kneaded up and down my back.

I refused to watch what was happening out the window, but he'd see it all.

"Man, was I smooth, swiping that journal right from under your nose," he chuckled. "None of you even noticed. It was an awesome read, by the way. Never been called a *dreamboat* before."

Not to his face. But surely some girl before me had recognized what a hunka hunka burnin' love he was. "Don't let it bloat your head."

"Speaking of bloat. Any idea when you'll know if you're, um, pregnant?"

Ah, he must've decided it was time to quit sidestepping the issue. "Not exactly. I'm, like not great at keeping track of that stuff." Which wasn't entirely true. My period ironically came about the same time as my Panty of the Month. Which was around the tenth. Though we'd been steadfast about using condoms since that first time, there was always a chance. Still, I couldn't see the point in needlessly worrying him.

"Oh. You think you'll know before your rendezvous?" Did he sound nervous? "Will you tell *him*, if you are?"

I shrugged, or attempted to. With the weight of his arms resting on my shoulders, they didn't really lift. "It's not like he's in a position to be judgmental."

"I want you to come with me tomorrow."

Leaning back so I could see his face, I asked, "Where?"

"Jesus. Someplace far away from Lonnie." Across the courtyard, our obnoxious Texan friend was singing and pounding on my door. And soon, my belatedly protective ex would pound on Lonnie. "Come with me to D.C. while I button up some stuff with the case. Stay with me a few days. We'll be back in plenty of time for you to meet your dad."

Tempting. "You know I've gotta stick around in the morning long enough to convince my mom and Melissa that I'm not going back in time." Not to mention come up with some story about where I'd be going for the next week, instead of home. Somehow I didn't think Mom would take kindly to me running off with a guy who, in her opinion, I'd just met.

"Fine. I've got a couple things in town to do."

"Like see if your bike is still in storage."

"Our bike. You got it for me, remember? Come on back to bed. If I stand here and watch your ex hump that bed any longer, I'll have to go kick his ass."

### Chapter 36

Eight AM, July seventeenth. This was it.

The hike up Bell Rock wouldn't take a full hour, so I sat in the little parking area at the bottom, savoring the excitement.

A big pick-up truck, three SUV's, a banged-up Civic, and a Jag were parked around me. I couldn't help thinking the Jag belonged to Dennis. If he'd heeded my investment advice, he should be damn comfortable, financially speaking. If there'd been a Harley around, I'd have guessed that was his ride. But he'd probably matured.

My moment of truth, and I was facing it alone. I'd insisted Mitch stay in D.C. for his promotion party. As understanding as he'd been about how important meeting my father was, I couldn't possibly ask him to miss such a big career milestone. In fact, I felt a bit guilty I couldn't be there to share it with him.

My right hand worried a stone in the bracelet on the other arm. Mitch had bought it for me the last morning we were in Sedona together. Though no official commitment had been voiced, he *had* made sure to put in on my left wrist. He'd made a point of playing *The Rose* while he did it, too. So it meant something.

We had a future together, that much I knew. In a few months, my belly would be as round as that half-circle of turquoise. I'd confirmed it last night, alone in a room at The Feng Shui Inn. Some things a girl had to do on her own. Now I wished I'd called Mitch and told him, but over the phone didn't seem right. I needed to see his face, meter his reaction. Of course he'd do the right thing. That was Mitch. But it would be swell if he felt even a tenth as pleased about it as I did. And now, since I hadn't called him, I was faced with another decision. I'd really like to tell Dennis he was going to be a grandpa. But Mitch should be the first to know.

Besides, Dennis might already be a grandpa. He might show up here with a wife and multiple other kids, for all I knew.

He might not show up at all.

Which I refused to ponder. He'd be there. He'd cared about me, I knew it. Not out of obligation, not because he'd bonded with some infant with big round eyes and felt responsible for her care and upbringing. He'd known *me*. As good as said he was proud of me, when he'd given me that last hug.

He'd be there.

I said it to myself countless times during my hike. Repeated it as I rested in the shade of a gnarled cedar and drank water, while watching a couple run down the trail. I *knew* he wouldn't stand me up, when I walked past the triangular vortex.

He'd be there. With the turtle, and that cocky grin. Knowing him, in a leather jacket, only now it would be a pricey Italian one.

A couple of cyclists passed me on the way up, several more hikers heading back to their cars smiled and waved. The day was heating up. The smart people had been out early.

Only a little further, and I'd round the corner. This should be the place, though he might be waiting at another viewing area. Lousy planning on my part, not designating a particular meeting place.

I was nearly out of breath when the trail turned out of the brush.

A couple of teenage boys slumped over their bikes slurping Gatorade. One older lady showing lots of wrinkly skin stretched her quads.

And *him*. His back was to me at first, but then he turned and I knew. He looked the same, minus the leather jacket. He was in running clothes, rather pricey looking ones. Had an L.L. Bean backpack at his feet.

I smiled at him and hurried over.

Why was he hesitant? His smile seemed so...polite. What, no smart-ass grin or comment about me being old? He damn well couldn't make fun of me being old now, since *he* was the old one.

Only, he wasn't. He was, if anything, younger.

What the hell—I looked around for an older man. Where was he? He'd be there. I knew it.

"Hi. I'm looking for..." Who should I say I was looking for? If he'd changed his name, nobody would know him as Dennis Keenan.

"This?" The glass turtle gleamed in his palm.

Not exactly. But partly. "Yes. Where's—" I reached for the turtle, but he pulled his hand back.

"He said you'd have the other leg."

"I do." I produced my evidence from a pocket, one tiny crooked green glass leg.

He nodded, satisfied. "He sent these for you." Out of the backpack, he pulled my journal and a lumpy manila envelope. And one tightly rolled, wrinkled leather jacket. Oh God.

"I don't understand. He didn't come?" I couldn't keep the disappointment from my voice as I accepted the things. Lifting the flap of the envelope, I saw a stack of legal-looking papers and two bullet slugs. And quite a few twenty-dollar bills with holes in them. I had so much to tell him. So much to ask him.

"Our father had a massive heart attack two years ago."

"He..." I really needed to sit. But needed to understand first. "...died?"

"Yes." His voice softened and he kept talking but I couldn't focus. My dad was dead? "... like the picture of his mother."

"Hmm?"

"I said, you look just like the picture of his mother."

"Oh. Thanks. I mean, yeah." He was dead?

"I never knew about his other family until after he'd passed away. He left instructions in his will. There's a provision for you in his estate. However, the trust fund specifically forbade contact with you until this date."

"Oh." So I was the *other family* now. How strange. Silly of me to expect he'd have talked about me after he made a fresh start. I was part of his past. Never made it to his future.

"Do you keep in contact with her?" Though he remained polite, he seemed excited.

"Hum? Who?"

"His mother."

"Um." This would be a disappointing day for him, too. "She passed away in ninety."

"I see." He nodded and did a much better job than me at keeping emotion out of his voice. "Look. I know this is awkward. Here's my card. Feel free to call me as needed."

As needed. I didn't really need a brother, now did I? I needed my dad. He was all I'd ever needed. And now I'd never have him.

He laid the card on top of the envelope in my arms. Clearly sticking around to comfort some strange woman with tears streaming down her face wasn't on *Harley's* agenda.

I watched him jog away.

Dennis wouldn't have been caught dead jogging. Or wearing running shorts. But maybe that was why his heart gave out when he was barely fifty.

My dad was gone. Gone. Not missing, but permanently gone.

Knowing his destiny wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

I clutched the jacket to my chest and sniffed. Old Spice. Sudden and overpowering grief hit, along with blinding tears. Maybe I'd better sit down before I added new bruises to the fading ones.

How convenient for this bench to be here, in the shade. Where I could sit and rest, with my only material links to my dad. The notebook smelled like Old Spice, too. How many times had he read it?

One day I'd have to put in a final entry, tie up loose emotional ends. I flipped through the pages I'd written, to find a few additional ones.

March 17, 1980

Dear Randi,

Today is your 2nd birthday, which is strange to think of. Just wanted you to know I rescued your stuff when I went back to pick up my money.

This book tells quite a tale. It took me a long time to believe it. But at least it explains why you talked so weird. Haha. Can't believe I forgot to clear the air before you took off, but I want you to know, I wasn't really trying to kiss you that night at Ma's. It was a test, you know, to see if this diary was for real.

I'm looking forward to seeing you one day when I'm old and you're not. Sometimes I take this notebook out to remind myself I wasn't tripping and imagining this whole nutty time-travel story.

Dad

\* \* \* \*

March 17, 1991

Dear Randi,

It's been a lot of years since I cracked this open. I keep it hidden from my new wife, so she doesn't get any goofy ideas about getting us together.

You're gonna love the last name I picked out, smart-ass that you are. Dennison. Get it? Perfect to pass on to my son. Wish he could meet you.

Today is your birthday again and I've been thinking of you. Now you're a teenager and I don't even know what you look like.

Your grandma died last year. I've got a P.I. who keeps up on the family back in Florida. He told me about all the P.I.'s she hired to find me. Guess I did a pretty good Houdini act, huh? Castro never tracked me down, either.

I wish there was a way to let you know I think of you. All the time. Not just the little girl in Colorado, but the fearless chick who helped me get the best of Rico Romero, once and for all.

The water biz is taking off, like you told me. Still working on a way to improve my flashlight idea that bastard Stu stole from me, but it's more of a hobby than anything else.

Doc tells me I've got high blood pressure. Lucky me. Guess I should have been carting around that dumb busted turtle more often. Anyhow, I wrote a will and you're in it. You know, just in case.

Love,

Dad.

\* \* \* \*

March 17, 1997

Dear Randi,

It's St. Pat's Day again. Your birthday and also the day your little brother got grounded for life. Stupid little shit took my credit card and two of his brainless buddies and went skydiving.

Guess you two got more in common than my good looks. Haha! Bet you'd hit it off. Maybe one day, huh?

Anyhow, I sent him out to clean the garage and work off the credit card bill. And what does he find but an old box with the Souvenir Jacket from Miami. I said when his brain gets fully developed, I'll tell him the story about the bullet hole.

Happy Birthday.

You'd damn well better be a virgin still.

Love,

Dad.

That last bit was sweet, if downright paternally clueless. One more entry to go. Good thing, because at this rate I'd be dehydrated from the tears alone.

September 22, 2001

Dear Randi,

Yeah, I know. It's not even your birthday. But you will never believe who I just saw on TV! Spouting off about national security. That lousy little fucker Tino. He's with the God damn FBI now. For two cents I'd call 'em up and tell 'em everything I know about him, then watch his bigshot career go down the drain.

But I have a feeling he's the reason your man Miguel or Mitch or whoever he is, ends up coming back in time with you. Guess if I messed that up, you might not ever meet him. Seems wrong, somehow, to be keeping you and a cop together. But in my gut, it feels like the right thing to do. If you're like me, and I think you are, you fall all the way for somebody when it's the right person. Pretty sure you were flat-out in love with him. I'll lay down the law with that punk though. He'd best treat you right or he'll have me to answer to.

And I might be getting old, but I can still kick his ass if I need to.

Love ya,

Dad.

P.S. Only seven more years now.

Oh, good God. To think Keen had passed up the opportunity to get revenge on Tino, Rico, and take a top cop down at the same time, all in the name of protecting my heart.

It was hot as all hell out against the giant rocks. Might as well head back to the room.

I was wiping at my eyes when a runner bumped into me. Was it my half brother back to hug me? No, this guy smelled like Mitch. Felt like Mitch.

"Baby, I'm sorry." Held me tight like Mitch.

"What? How'd you know?"

"My flight was late and I was down in the parking lot. I was gonna give you guys some time. When I saw it was a young guy, through the binocs, I came as fast as I could."

He held me while I cried hard for quite a long time, and sniffled for even longer.

"God. What a shitty break. What are you doing here? Your party!"

"Aww. I got 'em to postpone the party. I wanted to be here for you today."

So sweet of him. Maybe I'd have been better off if I'd stayed in D.C. with him instead of keeping the appointment with my dad.

He held my hand, leading me back toward the parking area. Only, he led me from off the trail to our vortex.

"What are we—"

"Shh." He turned and put his hands on my shoulders. "I know you've got a lot on your mind, but I need to do this today. I came up here as a surprise, because I planned to ask him—Dennis, I mean—for his blessing."

"Blessing? Mitch, it's okay, he understood you're different from the other cops he knew."

"That's not what I mean. Look, I thought it'd win me some brownie points with him if I asked him first." He dug his finger in the tiny little key-pocket of his running shorts. Then chased it around and stretched the waist band away until I couldn't resist peeking at his package. "Shit. I can't get it out. Your fingers are smaller. Can you get it?"

"Cute, Goodman. Nice way to trick a girl into putting her hand in your shorts." But I put my journal and envelope down and reached in to retrieve his key or whatever he was after.

It was a ring. Which he took from me.

Down on one knee, with the diamond sparkling between his big thumb and finger, he said, "I want you to be my wife. Will you?"

"Oh my God."

He poised the ring at the tip of my finger. "Babe, I thought I told you to only call me that in bed." His eyes were brimming. "Um, is that a yes?"

"Yes." Mine were brimming, too.

He slid the ring on my finger.

Goodbody sure knew how to turn around a lousy day.

\* \* \* \*

September 5, 2010

Dear Randi,

They all think I've lost my mind.

Me, Mrs. Mitchell Rawlings—I'll forever be Mrs. Goodbody in my heart. Mitch managed to find a guy to perform our the ceremony on Picnic Attempt Hill, at dusk, with Venus looking on. He's a hopeless romantic, besides an old-fashioned stickler for tradition. When I told him we were definitely pregnant, he wanted to get married ASAP. Heh. As if nobody would suspect Junior was conceived out of wedlock. Silly man. I humor his naïveté because I love him more each day.

But I digress. The most recent way in which I've dismayed my mother? I've quit my secure teaching job. Harley and I opened a business—Keen On Skydiving. For now I'm stuck in the office doing paperwork, at least until after Babyhead arrives. But Mitch is okay with me getting certified as a jump instructor afterward. He even promised to do his first jump with me.

Mitch 'officially' resigned from the FBI right after receiving his promotion. We're living just outside Sedona and he's building a private detective practice. Off the books, though, I know he's working on something with the Feds. Something big. And though the rest of the world thinks Professor Sudo is the only

person to have completed a time-travel mission—aside from those who believe it was all a hoax—I have a feeling Mitch's superiors intend to use his unique skill as a secret weapon of sorts. I've got one thing to say on that subject: he'd better not get any big ideas about jetting off across the space-time continuum alone. We're a family now, and we have to stick together.

Besides, he tends to get into trouble, where he needs my help.

Signing off for now,

Randi

## About Autumn Piper

#### http://www.lyricalpress.com/autumn\_piper

I write contemporary romance and women's fiction/mom-lit. My stories often have a high heat index to match their American southwest settings. Known by my writing buddies as "Angst", I have a penchant for making my characters suffer. My stories may be tributes to the old saying, "No pain, no gain", but my hero and heroine always get the happily-ever-after they so deserve.

I love sunny days, hot bread, the ocean, and that fluttery feeling I get inside at the first spark of a great romance. In between being a wife, mom of two adolescents and writer, I like to read, take morning walks, make people laugh—this probably happens when I break into a jog!—garden, and conquer the beast that is Sudoku. Working as a substitute teacher keeps me on my toes and makes me hope to become a very successful writer!

For me, an excellent book has characters you can sympathize with or hate, sometimes both at once, a story you simply must see through to the end, and realistic dialogue. Give me those key elements, and I'll read any genre or time period, any author.

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