



Book One
The Shaken Series

KG

MACGREGOR

**WITHOUT
WARNING**

Without Warning

The Shaken Series Book One

By

KG MacGregor

© 2008

KG MacGregor

Disclaimer #1: My characters are of my own creation, though they bear physical resemblance to a couple you may recognize. Any references to XWP, Diet Coke or Depends should be considered uncompensated product placement.

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

Disclaimer #3: Occasionally, my characters use bad language.

Disclaimer #4: Occasionally, my characters use bad grammar.

Disclaimer #5: Most of the places depicted in this story are real. However, I took poetic license in the creation of some specific venues and streets. If you happen to be from LA, don't bust a gut trying to figure out where these places are.

Disclaimer #6: There is no number 6.

Disclaimer #7: This is my first attempt at fan fiction. I apologize in advance if you're bugged by my writing style. I wanted to tell a story that's been cooking in my head for a while, and this is the best I can do for now. I welcome your feedback, as I sincerely want to get better at this.

Thanks to my beta readers, especially Tami, who spent a lot of her precious time reading my rewrites. She also served as my fashion advisor. Thanks also to Roz, TF & Linda for their feedback and encouragement.

This is for my Sweetcakes, 'cuz without her, I don't think I could write about love at all (or skyboxes).

Chapter 1

The dark-haired driver of the black 745i puzzled over the words "rush hour." Nobody was rushing, and here in LA, this traffic lasted all day and half the night! Occasionally, the congestion broke up and all five lanes took off like the thoroughbreds at Hollywood Park. A half-mile later, the mass would slam on its collective brake and come to a standstill.

The snarled freeway, as germane to southern California as its poverty and pretense, caused Anna Kaklis Rutherford to dread the regular trips from her Bel Air home to the downtown convention center. But as the new treasurer of the Greater Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, her presence was a must at their monthly breakfast meetings.

This morning's meeting had featured a compelling presentation on community organizations involved with the area's "at-risk" youth. It was, of course, a thinly-veiled plea for businesses to support charities and causes that carried less prestige and opportunity for notoriety than those already in the public eye. The accompanying video had shown children and teenagers in a variety of settings, in classrooms, on sports fields, in hospitals, and even in their own homes. Many of those depicted were minorities or disabled, and all were being guided by caring adults.

For more than 40 years, Premier Motors of Beverly Hills, southern California's top BMW dealer, had lent its support to LA's thriving symphony, its opera, three of its theaters, and no less than a half-dozen art museums. The company was a major underwriter for an afternoon business update that aired on the local public radio station. "After all," Anna's father had reasoned, "those are the people who buy luxury cars." Anna, who at 31 served as vice president of the family's dealership, agreed that supporting the arts was good business, the best advertising their money could buy.

But the car dealer had been moved by today's program, especially by the teenaged girl who told a personal tale of how one organization had helped her overcome an abusive home, poor school performance, and a flirtation with drugs and alcohol to become a college-bound senior with hopes and dreams of one day being a leader in this very business organization. Despite losing her mother at an early age, Anna felt truly blessed by the hand dealt her, and she vowed today that she would do something to help LA's disadvantaged children and youth.

A blaring horn snapped her out of her reverie, and she hurriedly accelerated to close the 30-foot gap between herself and the red Honda Civic with the "Bush Cheated" bumper sticker. *It wouldn't do to leave enough room for another car to squeeze in – that might create good will in the world!*, she thought to herself, rolling her eyes. Spotting the ramp for Endicott Avenue, she slowly picked her way to the exit lane. Endicott eventually dumped into Santa Monica Boulevard, and stoplights and surface streets were preferable to this creeping, growling mass of motorized inhumanity.

This morning's look at the struggles of troubled youth had ironically been a respite from the thoughts that had consumed the dark-haired woman like a cloud for the past three months...no, make that 15 months, two months before she had married Scott

Rutherford. Focusing on the plight of others was an effective ploy for getting her mind off her own problems, and Anna was determined to milk this morning's presentation for all it was worth. But the silver Z3 that stopped in the lane to her left brought that cloud back to bear on her consciousness. There was nothing special about the driver, a red-haired woman of about 20, gesturing animatedly as she talked on her cell phone. It was the car itself, the James Bond roadster, that started the depressive spiral. Her husband drove a Z3.

As days go, today was a bad one, even by Lily's standards.

She had started her day in the family courtroom at the Los Angeles County Courthouse with her client, Maria Esperanza. They were squaring off against ex-husband Miguel for primary custody of the couple's two children.

She'd called Maria the day before, reminding her of what to wear to court and what to tell the judge about her ex-husband's volatile behavior. "Whatever you do, don't get angry," she had advised Maria. "We want the judge to know that you want custody of your children because you're afraid of what Miguel might do, not because you're angry about what he's already done."

As Lily looked back with her near-perfect hindsight, Maria had seemed quite surprised by the call. "I had marked tomorrow on my calendar," her client had said. For a fleeting moment, the attorney too had recalled a Friday court date, thinking that she would have used today to go over next week's filings and four scheduled court appearances. Nonetheless, Maria hurriedly agreed to be ready, and Lily had stayed late yesterday to prep her case.

Unfortunately, the case file that Pauline, the clinic's newly-hired secretary, *should* have pulled was that of Maria *Espinosa*, Lauren Miller's client, whose final divorce hearing was to have been today. It all came to light when Maria *Esperanza* looked across the aisle at Mr. *Espinosa* and asked her attorney simply "Who is that man and why does he want custody of my children?"

Begging opposing counsel's forgiveness—they would tangle many times, so it was always a good idea for either side to be owed a favor—she threw herself upon the mercy of the court and Judge Evans fined her only \$200. She forked over a personal check, and offered to drive her testy client home.

Once in the hallway, she'd called Lauren to give her the bad news – Judge Evans was fining her \$200 too for not having her client in court this morning. Lily held the phone from her ear as Lauren spewed forth a stream of curses that would have had a New Yorker looking at his shoes. "I'm going straight to Tony about this," she shrieked, her reference to the firm's administrative partner. "Jesus H. Christ on a Raft! All we get at this salary are Murphy Brown rejects!"

Lily chuckled inwardly. Often the chief peacemaker in their office, she finally replied, "Lauren, it's partly my fault, too. It's hard to keep all of these names straight and I didn't check it out before calling the client."

Climbing into one of the first RAV4's to come off Toyota's assembly line, Lily gathered up the pile of folders and law books on the front seat, making room for her passenger. "There you go. Sorry about that." She tried to make nice with Maria—they had to go through this again tomorrow. The day was usually warm for February, and without a working air conditioner, Lily thought it best to remove her suit jacket and fold it over the back seat. *Sweat might be sexy, but it's hell on silk.*

Maria had finally seemed to accept Lily's profuse apologies, and it looked like they would have a peaceful ride to Culver City, where Maria was staying with her sister and brother-in-law until she got the custody of her children resolved. Rather than subject herself to yet another briefing on what tomorrow would bring, Maria opted instead to call the sister she would see in only a matter of minutes. Had Maria known that Lily had a pretty good working knowledge of Spanish, she probably would not have said anything to her sister about the "abogados tontos". *Idiot lawyers.* As she merged onto the crawling Santa Monica freeway, Lily decided to take her thoughts elsewhere.

Now racing from one stoplight to the next, Anna checked the digital clock on her instrument gauge. *11:40.* Today's meeting had lasted until ten, then the officers met in closed session to discuss the new membership drive. Passing her hand over the infrared eye on the doorframe produced a dial tone. "Premier Motors," she stated succinctly. A few moments later, her call was answered with the same two words. "Carmen, would you let Dad know that things ran late this morning? I'll be in the office in about an hour." Thanking the receptionist, she started looking for a bookstore along Endicott.

Three months ago, Anna's well-planned life was flung into doubt. *Could she salvage her marriage? Could things ever be the same?* Not yet ready to talk about this with her family—not even with her stepsister Kim, who was her closest friend—she had called her longtime friend and roommate at Cal Poly, Liz Patterson. Liz lived now with her husband and daughter in San Mateo. Anna recounted most of the tale, purposefully leaving out the details of the doubts she had harbored about her marriage even before the wedding. Strong and confident in most aspects of her life, especially in business, Anna had somehow always struggled with relationships and was particularly lost in this current dilemma. The situation left her feeling hurt but also angry that she didn't have complete control.

Liz had listened with love and concern, but was unwilling to guide her friend to a decision she could not reach on her own. She asked all the right questions to prompt Anna to explore her options, and finally recommended a book she had seen reviewed in the *New York Times*.

The distraction of the morning presentation now forgotten, Anna recalled her friend's suggestion. *Playing by Ear* was a rising best-seller about a woman who had left her job and boyfriend to pursue her bliss as a concert cellist. Though she lived now from hand to mouth, the cellist had found her fulfillment in her lifelong dream. Anna wasn't looking to change careers. On the contrary, she loved selling cars. But she needed to find the nerve to make at least a change in her own personal life.

As long as she could remember, 29-year-old Lily Stuart had wanted to practice law. "They help people be happy" was the reason she gave as a young girl when teachers had asked her why. Katharine Fortier had certainly helped Lily and her mom find happiness, by seeing to it that they stayed together.

Lily's birth certificate listed no father. Her birth mother, Lisa Parker, was little more than a child herself when Lily was born, far too immature to care for the demands of a baby. Rather, she left Lily unattended for long hours while she saw to her own social needs. On those occasions when Lily was actually taken along, it was often to places children shouldn't visit, such as bars, pool halls, and parties with alcohol and drugs. Social services stepped in twice to remove the child from her mother's care, once when Lisa was arrested for shoplifting, a second time when 2-year-old Lily was left unattended in a car for over an hour. Each time, Lily was returned after short stints in foster care.

On the third occasion, when Lisa faced certain jail time for assaulting a woman and stealing her car, social services began processing the papers to sever parental rights. Since Lisa's mother had a record of her own, Lily was adjudicated dependent and placed up for adoption at four years old.

In the next two years, the little blonde lived in seven foster homes and attended four different elementary schools in kindergarten and first grade. She was uninterested in school, and very much a behavior problem. She rarely completed her work, and was constantly getting into fights with classmates who teased her about not having any real parents. Lily was small for her age, but she usually held her own in these playground tussles.

Something about this errant child tugged at the heartstrings of her first grade teacher, Eleanor Stuart, who began spending more time with Lily in the classroom. She stuck close at recess to protect the little girl from the other children's cruel taunting. Eleanor saw past the tough exterior Lily tried so hard to create and knew that under this façade was a passionate, creative, and kind-hearted little girl. Suddenly, Lily's interest in school soared as she tried desperately to please the only adult who had ever seemed to care about her. Her foster parents, the Tomlinsons, reported to social services that she seemed to be adjusting finally, and all were hopeful that this would improve Lily's chances of being adopted.

Toward the end of that school year, social services requested her school records yet again, because the Tomlinsons had agreed to take in two brothers, and they would no longer have room for Lily in their small home. When the little girl learned that she would be changing both her home and school, she became hysterical. She had been content staying with the Tomlinsons, but where she lived was unimportant. What mattered was that she stay close to Miss Stuart. She was devastated.

So too was Eleanor, and she immediately contacted her friend Katharine, an attorney who specialized in family law. Katharine was one of the nicest women you'd ever want to meet...and she ate nails for breakfast. With Katharine's help, Eleanor was granted interim custody of Lily. Four months later, as Lily entered second grade, Eleanor began adoption proceedings.

In late October of that year, a paroled Lisa Parker informed the court that she had had a change of heart. Out of prison only three months and already pregnant with her second child, she knew she'd need seven-year-old Lily's help to keep an eye on the baby, lest she find herself back in trouble with the authorities. Of course, the story she offered the judge included none of those plans. Instead, she spoke tearfully of how heartbroken she was at the loss of her child, and how she thought of nothing more for the past two years than how she would make up for her past by doing right by her daughter.

Fortunately, Eleanor and Lily had Katharine Fortier in their corner again, and she was a bulldog in court. By the time she was finished with Lisa and her false promises, the miscreant was lucky not to be going back to jail for perjury. On November 15th of that year, Lilian Lisa Parker became simply Lilian Stuart.

Katharine remained close to the family, and it was she who suggested to Lily at age 17 that she study law at UCLA. Not that Lily needed any encouragement. On that day long ago when the three of them had walked triumphantly from the courthouse, Lily had vowed to be just like Katharine someday. It was Katharine who prepped her for the LSAT, who wrote her recommendation for law school, and who finally pushed her through the bar exam.

When she accepted the job at the Braxton Street Family Law Clinic, she was proud to tell her mentor that she had been her inspiration. "Don't do this for me, Lily," Katharine had said humbly. "Do it for the Eleanors and Lilys who will need you."

Eleanor and Lily were crushed two years ago when Katharine's sightseeing plane crashed in Alaska, leaving no survivors.

Clutching the steering wheel of the RAV4 a little tighter, Lily fought back the emotions that memory always brought to surface. Even though the attractive young attorney now possessed an optimism which seemed to belie her rough start in life, it was this part of her life which had given her empathy for others. She pursed her lips a bit and sneaked a sidelong glance at her passenger. *Maria Esperanza probably doesn't know it, but she's an Eleanor who needs me*, Lily resolved, as they pulled up in front of the small stucco home. With an "adios" Maria dropped her phone into her handbag. *She actually said 'goodbye' to her sister and she'll see her in about 10 seconds!* Mentally rolling her eyes, Lily neatly executed a tight U-turn, and headed back to her office.

Anna had reached an important decision. She wasn't going to languish in this mess another day, just waiting to see what life would hand her next. She was going to take control, make the decisions that had to be made, and live with the consequences.

There was no easy answer. Anna knew that she and Scott would both have to work hard for their marriage to survive. *Do I even want it to survive?* She also knew that admitting the failure of her marriage and walking away would be humiliating and a disappointment to her family, especially her father. *Can I do that?*

It had been easy in some ways to retreat emotionally and act on the outside as though nothing were wrong. She went to work early, and stayed late most nights. She avoided spending time with friends, even her sister Kim. *And it was so uncomfortable being at home with Scott.* But she couldn't keep this up. People had begun to comment on her weight loss and tired features. In truth, though she masked her emotional turmoil from her friends and family fairly successfully, it wasn't hard for them to notice the physical changes. Anna was usually confident and upbeat, and her strikingly beautiful features were noticed by everyone, except perhaps by Anna herself.

What Anna realized she missed most over these past three months, even more than personal happiness in her marriage, was her confidence. She had quietly stepped back from the world, allowing things to proceed as she watched from the outside. Today, Anna resolved to come out of the safe corner she had willingly backed into.

Turning on her blinker, the dark-haired woman pulled into the parking garage of the Endicott Mall. She had decided that today would be the day she would begin dealing with this mess. Getting her hands on *Playing by Ear* was the first step.

Finding a space easily on the ground level, she pulled her long slender frame from her car and straightened her shoulders, as if physically demonstrating the resolve she now felt. She tapped her keychain to set her car alarm, and turned toward the breezeway leading into the stores. Out of nowhere, a battered RAV4 careened around the corner, and continued its rapid climb to the second floor. "Crazy driver," Anna muttered as she rolled her eyes.

At precisely 11:40, Lily's phone vibrated to announce a new text message, calling her to a one p.m. arraignment for another client's abusive boyfriend. These little gadgets sure were handy in court, but the attorney missed the good old days when she actually got to speak to people.

She just had time to pick up lunch at In-and-Out Burger on Endicott Avenue, and to stop by her office to gather the files she would need. Lily placed her order and proceeded to wait for what felt like an hour while the single man in the car in front of her retrieved seven bags of food. *He's obviously picking up lunch for the entire office. Why isn't there a 'two bag or less' rule for the drive-thru?* Lily sighed and pulled up next to the small window.

"\$4.36, please," the woman in the window barked. Lily handed her a five dollar bill and watched in fascination as the woman stretched one arm across the small compartment to top off Lily's Diet Coke and with her other hand punched hurriedly at the cash register.

"Sixty-four cents is your change." Lily quickly put out her hand to catch the change but was a second too late as the rushed and oblivious employee opened her palm and deposited the money onto the ground. As Lily cracked her door open and leaned out to rescue at least the quarters from the pavement, the other woman stretched her arm out of her window with the Coke, bumping Lily's right shoulder with the beverage. As usual, the plastic lid on the cup was not secured. Oops, and that blouse was pure

imported silk, the nicest one she owned. Lily had never understood the appeal of Coca-Cola clothes.

A right turn out of the drive-thru and four quickly-crossed lanes later, she turned into the Endicott Mall. Peeling around the corner to the second floor of the parking garage, the frenzied blonde barely missed a tall, beautiful woman with long dark hair exiting her fancy BMW. "Careful, gorgeous," she muttered.

Squeezing her mini-SUV into a narrow No Parking walkway by the elevator, Lily phoned Pauline to have a runner deliver the needed files to the courthouse. This time, she spelled her client's name, just to make sure there were no mistakes. Grabbing her wallet and jacket, and shoving her briefcase under the seat, she set out to find a cream-colored top to match her olive green suit. *Thank goodness I had taken off the jacket – otherwise, I'd be looking for a suit too!* Little victories were important on a day like today.

Entering the nearly deserted mall, Anna looked about for a bookstore. She scanned the directory at the entrance to the main concourse. "Come on, come on. Every mall has a bookstore," she pleaded with the silent sign. There! Binders Books on the lower level.

It was now a few minutes past the noon hour, and the only other person in the store was Skye, a friendly young clerk with orange hair and multiple piercings. *Ah, youth!*, Anna thought enviously. "I'm looking for *Playing by Ear*. Do you have it?" she inquired.

The girl looked up from a copy of *Rolling Stone*, quickly swallowed a bite of what appeared to Anna to be a peanut butter and banana sandwich, and swiped the back of her hand across her mouth. "Sure, I'll show you where it is," Skye answered with a half-grin as she laid her sandwich on the opened magazine.

"No, go ahead with your lunch. I'm sure you don't get many breaks. Just point in the general direction and I'll find it." From her perch at the register by the shop entrance, Skye directed the dark-haired woman to the Bestsellers shelf located along the left wall.

A few moments later, Skye once again looked up from the magazine. "Are you sure I can't help you find what you need? Those are all mysteries," she called, noticing that her customer had wandered from the left side to the very back of the store.

"Yes, I know. Actually, I've already found what I *need*. Now I'm looking for what I *want*."

Anna loved a good action or mystery book. Her eyes immediately fell on the cover of *Case of the Orphaned Bassoonists: A Cassandra Reilly Mystery*. Though she hadn't played in years, the bassoon might have been Anna's first love. Unlike other bassoonists, she didn't "start" on another instrument and "work up to" the skill required to play the strange instrument. She just picked it up instinctively. *A mystery*

and bassoons...cool!, she thought. She flipped open the front cover and skimmed the reviews.

The *very slow* elevator emptied Lily onto the mall's main concourse. She scanned the directory and located the Casual Corner, a women's apparel store, on the lower level at the far end of the building. She could not possibly have been further from the store than where she currently stood. *Naturally*.

Lily headed for the escalator and got her bearings for a hasty retreat once she found what she needed. She charged past Fredrick's of Hollywood--*Wow! Check out that slinky red number!*—Lawson's Jewelry, Rack Room Shoes, Peggy's Bridal Shop, Binders Books, Foot Locker, and finally entered the Casual Corner.

An online and catalog shopper, Lily rarely set foot in a mall. Though she usually only *hated* shopping, she *absolutely despised* it when she needed something in particular and was short on time. Not believing her luck, there was a rack near the door holding the perfect style blouse in a variety of colors, and on sale! But there was none of any color in her size. "Naturally."

Her size was available however among a new shipment in a slightly different style, and at a much higher price. Out of options, she handed over her debit card and dashed to the fitting room to change. A good yank on the stuck louvered door caught her knee with a sharp crack, and a splinter in the wood neatly pierced her hose. "How could this day get any worse?" she asked the ceiling of the small room...rhetorically.

Art Hanson scribbled a few additional comments into his small notebook. He had just finished an interview with tenants at Casa Del Sol, an apartment building on the edge of Culver City. The story was a public interest piece about the dangerous health risks related to the level of lead in miniblinds. *God, how can I make this story not put people to sleep?*, he mused.

"Hey, Janie! Watch the potholes, will you? I just want to get a few more comments down," he said to the driver of the white and blue News 26 van.

"Mr. Hanson, we're at a stoplight!"

The van began to violently shake and suddenly lurched forward. Both passengers were pushed hard against their seatbelts. Art's coffee toppled out of the holder and splashed onto the dashboard. Camera equipment and video from the back of the van broke their bindings and crashed to the floor. The van continued to tremble and shudder and it seemed to the pair that some unknown force had picked up the back end of the van, thrusting their end vertically downward at a nearly 45 degree angle.

Forty-six seconds later, the news team found themselves still suspended by their seatbelts, though the shaking had stopped.

"Shit! That was a big fucking quake!" Jane excitedly shouted to the reporter. Art knew that a bigger story than leaded miniblinds had just broken, and was already radioing back to the station.

"This is Hanson in van 4. Janie and I are at Endicott and Spruce in Culver City and there was just an earthquake here. Hang on...I'm going to check and see if there's anything big here to report...the van feels like we're sitting on a cliff..." Art put his phone in his shirt pocket momentarily and carefully extricated himself from the seatbelt, pushing against the dashboard for balance. He carefully opened the passenger side door of the van and hopped down.

"Oh my God! That must have been a pretty big one, Dennis," he commented anxiously into the phone to the station manager. Looking around, he continued, "The road looks like someone was kicking it from underneath. The stoplight is lying on the street in front of us. There aren't a lot of people around...just one other car and the driver looks fine." Looking off to his left, Art audibly gasped and his voice was grave as he said, "Holy shit, Dennis. The north end of the Endicott Mall looks like it was bulldozed. Janie – get the camera! Dennis, I'll call you back when we get closer to the mall and have good position."

The reporter slipped the phone into his pocket and looked across what had been the west parking garage of the mall. Cars and concrete were sandwiched together and one entire side of the garage had completely toppled. The pair had been traveling on Spruce Street, which ran along the west side of the mall. The north end of the mall was actually built into the side of a hill, so people parking in this garage on the west side entered the mall on the top floor. What made Art's stomach flip over was this realization that the mall was supposed to be two stories. The north end had completely collapsed.

The inevitable sound of police sirens and emergency vehicles were already invading the eerily silent landscape.

Chapter 2

Nine miles from the Endicott Mall in his second floor office, Scott Rutherford eyed his senior marketing student. The young man had shown a great deal of ingenuity in his earlier work, but Scott was very disappointed with the latest assignment. "Your plan was quick and dirty, just like too many product launches in the real world," he scowled. "Remember Mr. Caldwell, your marketing budget includes research and development. In your project, you designed a product launch without putting your product in front of potential customers. If you guess wrong, you waste a quarter of a million dollars."

Justin Caldwell looked first at his professor, then at the floor. "Dr. Rutherford, I can do better. I'd appreciate the chance to rework this, and resubmit it," he pleaded hopefully.

After a few moments of contemplation, the professor answered. "Mr. Caldwell, what's important here is that you learn to do this correctly. But if I agree to evaluate your project a second time, I want to be assured that it's your best effort." Seeing the relief on the young man's face, Scott continued, "You should review Chapter Four of Paddock's book. It deals with..."

As he reached to retrieve Paddock's book from the shelf above, the professor lost his footing on the shaking floor and fell across his desk as though struck by an unseen force. At the same moment, Paddock's book and dozens of others crashed to the floor as the windows rattled and burst. Practicing what he had learned in his youth, Justin jumped back to brace himself in the doorway as fiberglass panels shook free from the ceiling.

Nearly a minute passed before the tremors stopped. The student, now pale and wide-eyed, stepped forward to help his teacher stand. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks," Scott murmured. He stood up from the desk and looked around at the total disarray in his office.

"That was some powerful shake!" Justin said queasily. "We must have been right at the epicenter."

Looking out the open window across the LA basin, Scott replied "Well, if we weren't, God help the people who were."

His first thoughts were of the safety of his young son. If they were at home, they should be safe, since they lived near the water. Guiltily, he thought next of his wife.

Skye remembered the floor shaking and shuddering, books falling and the shelves being wrested from their bolts and crashing to the floor. A mighty jolt had thrown her from her stool across the counter and after another thrust, the lights in the store flickered twice and went dark. The clerk had scrambled for the entrance, where the last of the natural light poured in from the atrium, forgetting the dark-haired woman at the back of the store. No sooner had she reached the lower concourse than it lurched skyward, hurling her across a rippling plane. Heavy plastic panels floated from the skylight, and she had scurried for the cover of an overturned candy kiosk.

Now, the earth was finally still. Gradually, moans, shouts and a baby cry began to fill the air, and Skye struggled for her footing. She turned instinctively toward her shop, confused and disoriented. Where Binders had once stood, computers and electronic gadgets were strewn about and smashed. Radio Shack had been located directly above the bookstore.

Skye crawled to her feet and began to climb across the piles of debris toward the south end of the mall.

"Annnnhhh!" the woman grunted, struggling against the bookcase that pinned her firmly to the floor. Only minutes before, Anna had been reading the book jacket for *The Case of the Orphaned Bassoonists* when a deep rumbling suddenly consumed the moment. In a matter of seconds, the floor had simply fallen away, and she was enveloped in blackness.

Breathing heavily, the tall woman regrouped for another push. "Unnnnnhhhhhhh!" she groaned again, moving the bookcase only an inch or two from her chest. With every effort, more of the books that were somehow bracing the heavy bookcase fell away, leaving her left knee to bear even greater weight under a lower shelf. Her twisting and pulling had only exacerbated her predicament, and now her knee was throbbing and firmly trapped in a vise.

"Help! Somebody!" Anna heard no one. *Where is everyone? Where am I?* "In deep trouble," she answered herself aloud.

The worst part was that it was completely dark.

No, scratch that. The worst part was the throbbing of her head right above her eye. Rolling onto her side, Lily traced with her forefinger the rim of the wide gash responsible for the sticky mess on the left side of her face. Remembering her earlier lament to the proverbial heavens, Lily muttered, "I was only frustrated...it wasn't intended to be a *challenge!*" But, she had received her answer to the rhetorical question when the floor beneath her began to shake. Lily had reached to brace herself

in the doorway, and was suddenly flung head first into the angled mirrors on two walls of the fitting room. The accompanying boom was deafening, and was followed by grinding and popping, as the drywall crumbled all around into dust and ragged shards and the newly exposed metal supports twisted and bent. A second jolt had rippled the floor and plunged the small space into darkness.

As she had felt the ground give way underneath, her last conscious thought was that the sales clerk had probably already run her debit card, and without moving money from her savings account, her check to Judge Evans was going to bounce.

Lily had no idea how much time had passed while she lay unconscious in the fitting room. She now groped around on the floor hoping to find the top she had intended to purchase earlier. Grasping the cloth from underneath her, the young woman held it to her wound and pressed hard to stop the bleeding. She pulled herself up to a sitting position and reached out to get her bearings. Glass was everywhere. *The mirrors*, she figured. The floor—if it was still the floor—was uneven, and the wall to her right now leaned above her. She knew it was the mirrored wall, as she felt a few of the jagged fragments still attached. Behind her, the place she remembered as the back of the store was a concrete block wall. "Where the hell did that come from?" she asked aloud, not expecting but half hoping to hear a reply. It seemed to Lily that she was still in the fitting room, such as it was. To her left was a wall and she recognized in front of her the splintered texture of the wood from the louvered door. That meant the entrance to the store was past the door and straight ahead.

Where was the light? Hadn't there been an atrium in the center of the mall? She knew she been knocked out for a few minutes, but surely it wasn't evening already.

"Is anybody in here?" Silence.

Louder this time, "Hello! Anybody!" Lily strained to hear another sound. Nothing.

Slowly, she tried to stand. The uneven floor and the low ceiling made it difficult to navigate the darkness, but she picked her way along the edge of the hallway and emerged into what she supposed was the main store. Again, she called out "Anyone here?"

As she continued in the direction of the entrance, the floor became steeper, sloping forward. Racks of clothes had gathered where the floor had buckled, and she lost her balance as her feet tangled in the cloth and metal. The smell of fresh dirt was vaguely present, and Lily realized that the ground had literally broken through the bottom of the store. She knew from 29 years of living in California that she had been near the epicenter of a very significant earthquake. She was indeed lucky to be alive.

Reaching forward, her hand came to rest against a wall of earth. *The mall had collapsed*, she realized, wondering what had become of all the people who been inside. *Was she the only one still inside? Or were the others...* With alarm, Lily acknowledged the truth: The worst part was that she was trapped.

Art Hanson shed his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. "How much time?" he asked into the air. He nodded as the answer crackled back into the discreetly placed earpiece. "I'll do the background, then we can pull in the eyewitness. I'll track down the scene manager for a follow-up," he stated, the latter referring to the area's emergency services coordinator, who had arrived on the scene a few moments ago, sirens screaming. Loosening his tie, the reporter mussed his hair to give the appearance that he, too, had been working frantically to free those trapped in the fallen building behind him.

Getting his cue, Hanson—born Randall Lyzcienski—began his report. "Julie, at 12:04 p.m. today, a massive earthquake shook the Los Angeles basin. We're live on the scene at the Endicott Mall here in Culver City. Preliminary indications are that the mall has suffered major damage, and that the second floor may have collapsed onto the lower level in the north wing."

The camera panned the broken structure, zooming in on the north wing with its crumbled exterior and uneven roofline. "I have here with me Skye Steinberg, a clerk at Binders Books on the lower level. Skye, what can you tell us about what happened?"

"It was awful!" the clerk blurted. "Everything shook and the ceiling started to fall. I was near the door when the shaking started, and I was knocked out into the center of the mall. Glass was falling, people were screaming. I was so scared!" The young girl's forehead furrowed and her eyes became wide as she recalled the images. "When I turned around, the Radio Shack, the store that was right over us, had fallen to where the bookstore used to be."

The reporter lowered his voice somberly, and followed, "Did you see other people in there? Did everyone get out?"

"It wasn't crowded today." Skye's lip began to quiver as she remembered the kind woman in her store. "But there was one customer in the back of the bookstore. She was tall and beautiful and she had long black hair." Tears welled up and threatened to fall.

"Do you know what happened to her?" the reporter prodded. *They were live on the air!*

"I didn't see her again. I...I don't know...I don't think she made it." Skye raised her hand to cover her eyes and started to sob.

Hanson signaled Jane to linger a few more moments on the crying woman, then cleared his throat softly and said "I'm Art Hanson for News 26, and we'll have more later from the Endicott Mall."

Anna was exhausted. She had tried in vain to pull herself from her prison. The shelf now rested firmly on her left leg, its sharp edge digging into the soft tissue around her

knee. Her toes had begun to tingle, and she feared that she would soon lose feeling in her lower leg.

The woman's repeated cries for help had gone unanswered and she knew with a certainty that she was alone. She wondered what had happened to the orange-haired clerk and then shuddered as she acknowledged the likely truth. *It's too soon to panic*, she calmed herself. She'd read that a person could survive for several days without food or water, so as long as she had enough air to breathe, the rescuers would probably find her. *If they know I'm here*, she allowed the thought to creep into her consciousness.

"Help! Help! Somebody! I'm in here!" She yelled until she was hoarse.

"Well, this would certainly solve all of my problems, and all of Scott's too," she sighed. "Worse things could happen." Trapped, and for the moment out of options, Anna closed her eyes and succumbed to the fatigue she felt.

This wasn't Lily's first experience at being trapped in a dark space. Time had a merciful way of stealing memories from her early childhood, but one she clearly remembered was being locked in a dark closet on several occasions when her mother went out. To this day, Lily slept with a nightlight.

Fighting back the urge to kick at the walls and scream, Lily gathered herself for what she knew would be her strongest test. *I'm going to get out here if I have to bore through the floor and dig a tunnel.*

She couldn't reach the atrium here, so she decided to try to reach it from the adjacent store. Where the floor had fallen, she expected a gap between the wall and the partially collapsed ceiling, or between the wall and the floor. She would crawl or climb, whatever it took.

As she began feeling along the dirt wall to guide her towards the next store, the young woman unknowingly passed within inches of the clerk who had taken her debit card. The total darkness spared Lily the image of her crushed and broken body, and her wide, lifeless eyes.

"We're back here on the scene at the Endicott Mall with emergency services coordinator Philip Bertram. Mr. Bertram, what's the situation here?" Art Hanson asked.

"Well," the official began, "we can confirm that part of the second level on the north wing has collapsed onto the lower level. There are about six or seven stores that are affected, and right now, we don't know how many people were in those stores at the time of the quake."

"Do you have casualties?" Hanson asked eagerly.

"Yes, we do," Bertram replied grimly. "There were over 200 people who were injured, some seriously. We've sent about 75 to area hospitals."

"Are there still people inside the mall, or have you gotten everyone out?"

"Our crews have been inside the main areas that we're able to reach to clear out the survivors. We haven't started our sweep yet, but we're talking with people who were in the mall at the time to help us determine how many people might be missing. It's pretty dangerous to be in there right now, but we're going to do all we can with some of listening equipment that we have. With a quake of this magnitude, we're expecting some pretty significant aftershocks. "

"Are there fatalities?" Hanson prodded.

"We have four confirmed fatalities." Bertram paused. "We expect many more."

Two hours and 40 minutes later, Lily had finally found a small opening at the top of the wall and squeezed into what seemed to be a Foot Locker. Athletic shoes, even new ones, had a distinct odor.

If the floor in this new store was even with that of the store she had just left, Lily expected about a seven-foot drop on the other side. Hanging by her fingers, she stretched her toes down to the floor. In truth, she knew that she was still a long way from getting out of this tomb, but even the small progress was exhilarating.

"This would be a good time to change into sensible shoes," she joked aloud. She had lost her own pumps in the fitting room. "My luck, I'd find shoes that fit perfectly, and when I finally crawled out of here with all of America watching my miraculous escape, I'd be wearing two different colors. Mom would be mortified. I can see her now. 'No, that's not my daughter!'" She laughed at the image. "Earthquake survivor arrested for shoplifting. Details at eleven."

Lily rested a moment when she reached a pile of what seemed like sweat suits and t-shirts. She was exhausted, but she knew she needed to keep moving. It was a roll of the dice whether the aftershocks would free her or bury her deeper.

Anna became vaguely aware of someone talking...laughing even. "Hello! Help! Is somebody there?" She was hoarse, and knew her voice wasn't carrying very far. Her left knee was throbbing, and every small movement was met with excruciating pains. She strained to hear a sound, but all was quiet.

Lily groped around the perimeter at the front of the store, finding nothing but earth from the floor to where the ceiling had fallen, a space only four feet high. Crawling along the far wall, she found no gaps between the floor and the wall. Her only hope was that there would be an opening between the wall and the ceiling.

Most likely, the opening would be at the apex of the spot where the floor had fallen so sharply, just as it had been on the opposite wall where she had crawled from the clothing store. To reach the spot, Lily dragged what she imagined was one of those cone-shaped shoe displays to the far wall. It was lightweight, but sturdy, and it had nice little footholds where the shoes usually sat.

Sure enough, the small woman found an opening at the top, but it was going to take all her strength to pull herself up that high. *Those hours on the weight machines are going to pay off after all.* The wall had cracked neatly in two where the earth below the store had jugged through. The opening Lily managed to find was a small triangle made by the uneven portions of the wall and the straining ceiling. On her third attempt, she managed to get her head and shoulders through the hole. "Finally!" she shouted triumphantly. Pulling herself through, Lily tumbled to the floor in a heap. "Shit!" she said as she clutched her shoulder, which bore the brunt of her fall.

"Please, help me," a woman's weak voice called.

Seven hours and 13 minutes after the initial quake, the first aftershock began to rattle the darkened chamber. The shift had caused the shelf to grind against Anna's knee, and she passed out from the excruciating pain.

Chapter 3

Downtown LA had been spared the brunt of the quake, but power was out over much of the city. Tony, Lauren and Pauline were in the Braxton Street Law Clinic, calling clients on their cell phones to check on their well-being and to let them know not to worry about their pending cases, that the courthouse was temporarily closed. "Did anybody reach Lily?" Lauren asked.

"I've called her a half-dozen times. The only times I've gotten through, it's gone to voicemail," said Tony.

"I talked with Maria Esperanza," offered Pauline. "She said Lily dropped her off about 11:30 at her sister's house in Culver City."

"I'm going to call my brother in San Diego," Lauren said. "They'll have TV. They probably know more about everything than we do." Scrolling through the numbers in her Palm Pilot, she dialed her brother. "Damon... Yeah, I'm okay... Jason's okay..." the latter reference to her husband. "Well, we're a little worried about one of our lawyers, though... Lilian Stuart, you know the cute lesbian you wanted me to fix you up with... Listen, we were hoping you might know something. Our power is out..."

She listened a moment. "Are you sure...? Thanks, Damon. Hey, call Mom and Dad and tell them we're okay."

She turned to her co-workers, her face drained of color. "They're saying that it was centered in Culver City. That a mall collapsed. People are dead."

Nervously, Tony asked, "Did she say anything about going to a mall?"

"No," answered Pauline. "She was supposed to come back to the office. She had a court appearance at one. But she called back to say she had an errand and to send her files to the courthouse."

Tony's stomach tightened and an ominous feeling came over him. "I'm going down there." He grabbed his jacket and cell phone. "Call me if you hear anything."

Scott Rutherford stared into the traffic. His handsome face was set in an anxious combination of fear and concern. The muscles in his jaw tightened and he ran his right hand once more through his sandy brown hair in frustration. He glanced in the rearview mirror before signaling to move to the next lane. The brown eyes reflected back at him from the mirror were tired and masked the guilt which he now so keenly felt.

"Kim!" He spoke loudly into the speakerphone as he merged into the next lane. After hearing the obnoxious recording six previous times that "all circuits are busy", he had finally gotten through on his cell phone to his sister-in-law. "Has anyone heard from Anna?" he asked as he inched along the freeway towards Culver City,

"No, she called Carmen about 11:30 and said the meeting had run over and she would be in the office in about an hour. No one's heard from her since." Scott could hear the worry in her voice.

"Kim, I got a call at my office from our housekeeper." He took a breath and stared grimly into the traffic as he broke the news. "They found Anna's car crushed in the garage of the Endicott Mall."

"Oh, my God!" she screamed. "Scott, was she...?"

"No, Kim. The police said she wasn't in the car. A lot of people have gone to the hospital, though." He paused. "They said that part of the mall has collapsed. Listen, I need you to see if you can find out if she was taken somewhere. And somebody has to stay by the phone. I'm headed toward the mall. I don't think I'll be able to get all the way there, but I'll get as close as I can. I'll call you as soon as I know something and you do the same. Okay?"

Kim was frantic and she felt tears beginning to form. Her usually cheerful face was fractured by the deep creases which formed in her forehead. However, she knew this was no time to panic. She knew they needed to find out all they could before the news reached their father, George Kaklis. "I'm on it. If you can't reach me, leave a message."

"Right." Scott ended the call and edged over to the exit for Endicott Avenue. *Please let her be okay.*

Scott loved his wife and was deeply committed to his marriage. But a careless one-night stand with his ex-girlfriend one month before his wedding had produced a child, a beautiful son, and had put his marriage at risk. Anna might never have learned of this breach had they not run into the woman three months ago, now carrying the two-month-old baby boy with Scott's brown eyes. As she had watched the awkward but knowing exchange between her husband and the woman, realization dawned. Anna moved her things into the guest room as soon as they got home and, as yet, refused his attempts to talk about it.

I'll do whatever I can to make it up to her, just let her be all right!

"Hello!" Lily called out. Desperate to find the source of the voice she had heard, she asked again, "Where are you? Are you hurt?" Hearing nothing, she feared the worst for the woman who had cried out. The aftershock had brought the ceiling lower, but Lily was safely crouched at a low point in the bookstore. If the woman was at a higher point, she may have been hurt...or worse. "Talk to me! Where are you?" she yelled. Still no response.

Lily understood the danger she was in. The next tremor might bring the ceiling all the way down, sealing her underground with no hope of rescue. But she couldn't forge ahead knowing that there was someone else trapped here, someone who likely had no chance at all without her help. Her mind made up, Lily started to scramble toward the direction of the sound.

After more than an hour of groping in the darkness and calling out, Lily's hand brushed upon a full head of thick hair, then a warm face. "There you are. I finally found you," she said with relief. Reaching out, Lily discovered that the woman was pinned underneath a bookshelf. The top shelf lay across her chest. She found a strong pulse in the woman's neck, and gently patted the woman's cheek until she felt her stir.

Anna's eyes fluttered open, but in the darkness, she couldn't see who was touching her face. Nonetheless, she felt calmed by the presence of this other person. "Thank god," Anna murmured, shaking her head slowly from side to side. "I'm...the bookshelf is..."

"Yeah, I can feel it across your chest. Can you move?"

"It hurts. My leg...the whole weight of the shelf is on it. Every time I try to push it up off my chest, it presses harder into my knee," she explained. Taking a deep breath, she went on. "That last tremor made it even heavier. I think something fell on it." Lily could hear the relief in the woman's voice, relief she assumed was because someone had come to help.

"Well, let's see if we can get you out of here." Lily crawled alongside the woman. The second shelf lay across the woman's lower abdomen, just above her hips. She ran her hand underneath it, noting that it wasn't pressed tightly against the woman's body.

"Under normal circumstances, I'd buy you dinner first," Lily joked, hoping to ease the woman's tension. "I'm Lily, by the way. I thought you'd like to know who was feeling you up."

Anna laughed at the joke, not minding at all the hands that brushed against her to help free her. "I'm Anna, and I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you! I've been screaming for hours."

"Yeah well, sorry. I was busy trying on a new top."

Anna was comforted by the woman's gentle humor. She caught the small hand and squeezed it. "Thank you for coming to help me," she said sincerely.

"No problem," Lily reassured the woman, returning the squeeze. She then pulled her hand away and reached lower to gently touch Anna's knee where the lower shelf pinched the swollen flesh. "I can see why this hurts so much. This shelf is digging into your knee. Let's see if we can take some of the pressure off."

Reaching around her in the dark, Lily began gathering books into two piles, one underneath the shelf that pinned Anna's knee, the other beside the top shelf that pressed against her chest. When the piles were stacked even with the shelf, she told Anna of her plan. "I need you to get ready to push up on the shelf on your end. I'm going to lift this one up at the same time and slip a couple of books under it. Then I'll put a couple of books under your shelf."

"Just say when," Anna said, gripping the shelf.

Lily double-checked the positions of her stacks of books, and kneeled next to Anna's knee. There was barely enough headroom for her to straighten up. "Ready? Now."

Both women grunted as they lifted their respective shelves. Lily strained to hold the bookshelf with one hand while her other quickly slid two thin books onto the top of the stack. Next, she added one thick book to the stack next to the top shelf. When they released their loads, the shelf was still touching, but not pressing into Anna's leg. The other shelf was no longer resting on the woman.

Anna was so relieved that she could have cried. Her foot began to tingle as the blood once again surged through her lower leg.

"Is that better?" Lily asked hopefully.

"Much better! Most of the pressure is off my leg now, and I can't feel the other shelf at all."

"Think you can do that again? One more time, and I think I'll be able to pull you out."

"Ready when you are," Anna replied eagerly.

They repeated the procedure, this time adding one thick hardback book to each stack. "How's that?" Lily asked as she reached again to Anna's knee.

I'm free! "It still hurts, but at least I can move now." Anna squirmed, trying to no avail to slide out of her prison. "I need to get out from under this thing," the exasperation evident in her voice.

"Let me help." Lily moved up and slipped her hands underneath the woman's arms. "Tell me when you're out." Slowly, she scooted backwards, extricating Anna from the vise that had held her for almost nine hours. It seemed to Lily that she had backed up ten feet. "Good God, woman! How tall are you?"

"About five-ten."

"Amazon!"

"And you?"

"Five-five."

"Pygmy!"

Lily threw her head back and laughed heartily. Anna joined her, and both women felt a little of the palpable tension of the past several hours start to lessen, perhaps simply from the knowledge that they were no longer in this alone.

Once Anna was free, the two women moved slowly to the lowest part of the room. The injured woman's knee was throbbing, and she couldn't support her full weight on it. She followed Lily to the far wall, and sat while the shorter woman felt for a path to the next room.

"Is there a method to your madness, or do we just keep moving any way we can?" Anna asked.

"In the other rooms, I've found a break between the wall and the ceiling right where the floor has sunk the most," Lily explained. "I'm hoping we'll find an opening, maybe some light from the atrium or even outside. If we do, we'll work towards getting out that way. There's no way out back the way I came."

"Sounds like a plan. What do you want me to do?"

"If you can crawl up to the front of the store, try feeling around the ceiling for a breeze, or even air that's a different temperature. If you find something, it might mean there's a way into the atrium."

Anna did as she was told, but after almost an hour, she had found no clue of a break in collapsed walls. Her leg was aching badly, but she kept it to herself. *We have enough to worry about.*

Lily, though, had located another pass-through halfway up the east wall. The weight of the store above them had pushed on the wall and forced it to buckle. A small hole

had formed between the two sliding layers of wall and the two women pushed and pulled one another until they both fell from the gap into the adjacent bridal shop.

"God, I could sleep for a week!" Lily flopped down into the pile of lace and satin lining the crevasse that bisected the store. Racks of wedding gowns had rolled into the gaping hole and toppled, layering the earth which had broken through the store floor with a strange blanket of plush cloth.

"Maybe we should stop and rest few hours," Anna suggested casually, falling beside her savior.

"As tempting as that sounds, I'm worried about the aftershocks. The ceiling dropped during the last one, and the next one could finish the job. If that happens, I'd realize my worst fear."

"What's that? Being buried alive?"

"No, being caught dead in a bridal shop," Lily deadpanned.

Anna laughed and reached across the darkness to elbow her companion jovially. After a moment, she said, "Look, I know it's a risk. But my stomach tells me that it's way after dark, and if we wait, we'll have a better chance of seeing an opening in the daylight."

Lily considered Anna's point, but persisted, "I really think it would be best if we kept moving."

"I can't, Lily," Anna finally confessed. "My knee is killing me. I'm going to have to rest it, at least for a couple of hours."

"Do you mind if I check your knee?" Lily reached toward Anna's leg and ran her hand across the woman's injured knee. She heard Anna's breath catch in her throat as she anticipated the tenderness in the joint. Lily was shocked to discover how swollen it was. "Anna! Why didn't you say something? God, it must hurt like hell!" She groped around on the floor until she found what felt like a small display pedestal. Pulling it over to the tall woman, she piled several cloths—*probably \$3,000 wedding dresses*—on top to soften it, and gently lifted Anna's leg to place it on the cushion.

Anna considered the gravity of their predicament for a moment and finally proposed, "I know it's still dangerous in here. Maybe you should go ahead by yourself. When you get out, you can tell them where I am. I'm only going to slow you down."

Lily didn't hesitate. "We're going out together, Anna. I think we'll be safe here—it's a low point. We'll rest a few hours and move out when your leg's better. Besides, with two of us, we should make good time if we're rested."

Both women leaned back and got as comfortable as they could. A minute or so passed and Anna asked into the darkness, "So why are you so afraid of bridal shops?" She was impressed that this woman could keep her sense of humor at a time like this. It was calming, and she knew somehow that the story behind that phobia would be a good one.

Lily chuckled. "Let's just say that walking down the aisle in a white dress has never been on my list of dreams."

"Wish I'd had that foresight," Anna mumbled. "How did you get to be so wise?"

"Well, it isn't wisdom, exactly." Lily wavered. She was usually up front about her sexuality, but finding herself trapped with a homophobe would be the icing on the cake for a day like today. "It just isn't for me."

Anna heard the hesitation and regretted putting her new friend on the spot. "Sorry, I didn't mean get personal."

"No, it's okay...I just..." *Oh, what the hell.* "I'm gay."

Silence. More silence. *Shit! Should have kept my big fat mouth shut!*

"Oh...so you really were feeling me up?" Anna threw another elbow into Lily's rib, and the young woman let out the breath she'd been holding.

I like this lady! Lily thought with relief as she laughed out loud.

Tony reached the mall long after dark. Between the emergency vehicles and the traffic restrictions, he was forced to park in a residential area off Endicott and walk the last mile to the site. Others had the same idea, and soon Tony fell into step with a tall, sandy-haired man who had left his Z3 on the sidewalk.

"Have you heard anything?" he asked the man.

"Just that the mall has collapsed," the other man responded grimly, not losing his stride.

"Yeah, the radio said it was the north side. I think we can get there quicker if we cut through here," Tony said, indicating a side street that ran parallel to the mall's fenced parking area.

The two men helped each other scale the fence and soon emerged behind the parking garage. By approaching from the north, they had bypassed the police tape that restricted foot traffic in the area.

"One of the lawyers from my office is missing. She was in Culver City when she called in, but no one knows exactly where. We haven't heard from her since just before the quake," Tony related to the man, who seemed extremely focused on getting as close as he could.

"My wife is missing," was all the man said as he began to jog to the rescue site.

"Well, good luck! Hope you find her!" Tony shouted to the receding figure.

Tony was taken aback at the devastation before him. On the lower level of the south wing, the mall opened directly onto the parking lot. But the site sloped upward to the north, thus the lower level stores on one side of the north wing were effectively underground. When the second level collapsed, the new roofline dropped to ground level, making it appear as though half of the north wing had been bulldozed.

Tony scanned the parking lot for Lily's RAV4. Not finding it, he slipped into the restricted garage. He ducked to walk through the lower level, checking carefully the crushed vehicles. When he reached the second level, his breath caught. There sat Lily's small SUV, its 'What Would Xena Do?' bumper sticker confirming its owner.

The lawyer backtracked his route to exit the garage. By the time he reached the parking lot, his eyes were full of tears. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he called Lauren. He got through on the fourth attempt.

"Tony! What did you find out?" Lauren immediately asked, recognizing the number on her caller ID. She stood up from her kitchen table and clutched her husband's hand.

"She was in the mall, Lauren. I found her car."

"Oh God, no!" Lauren gasped. Jason stood and wrapped his arms around his wife. When she calmed, she said simply, "I'm going to call her mom, Tony. She needs to be here." They talked a few more moments and hung up.

At 6:15 a.m. on Friday morning, the second aftershock woke the women from their exhausted sleep. Without thought, they reached in the dark for each other and clasped hands while the earth shook. What previously was the ceiling above them groaned under the weight of the collapsed building. Both women uttered silent prayers that what was left of the walls and supports would hold. They could hear the sound of metal scraping and twisting and smelled the fresh dust and debris loosened by the jolt.

"You okay?" Anna asked.

"All things being equal, I'd prefer to wake to 'Morning Edition'," Lily quipped when the shaking stopped. She drew in a deep breath, and stretched her arms and shoulders as she sat upright. "We'd better get a move on. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get out of here." She pulled the taller woman to her feet. "How's the knee?"

"It's still pretty sore. But I can walk. Let's go."

They repeated the drill from the bookstore. Anna crawled to the front of the bridal shop and checked along the ceiling for a draft. Lily found another gap at the top of the south wall or the bridal shop, and soon they were squeezing through into the shoe store.

"Only two more to go and we'll be at the end," the small woman declared. Left unsaid was the hope that at the end would be a way out. "There's a jewelry store next, then a lingerie store." They sat for a moment and rested against the slanted floor. Out of

habit, Lily reached to straighten her skirt. She caught the irony and laughed. "I picked a great day to wear my favorite suit, huh?"

"Yeah, me too. I had a fancy meeting first thing, so I got out one of my best."

"What kind of work do you do?" Lily inquired.

"I sell cars. What about you?"

Anna's response surprised the blonde. This woman sounded well-educated, cultured. "I'm a lawyer." She paused, anticipating a lawyer joke.

"That figures. You strike me as someone who could be pretty argumentative." Another elbow to Lily's rib followed. Since the darkness prevented either woman from seeing the other's expression, Anna's elbow let Lily know she was only teasing the young attorney.

"Hey, watch it! You ever been sued for personal injury?"

The banter quieted for a moment, each woman mentally sizing up the other. After a few minutes, Lily asked, "Are you afraid, Anna? Afraid that we won't get out of here?"

Anna was quiet for so long that Lily wondered if she hadn't heard the question. Finally, the tall woman spoke. "I've considered that. I thought about it a lot during those hours I was trapped and alone. But ever since you helped me out from under that bookshelf, I haven't doubted for a moment that we're going to get out of here. I just don't think you'd have pulled me out if I had been meant to die in here."

"I hope you're right, Amazon."

Friday morning, Scott attended the briefing for family members at FEMA's Public Information Office, a tent set up near the entrance to the mall. No additional damage was reported after the morning aftershock, and rescue workers were hopeful that they could re-enter the building to search for survivors and victims.

Reaching Kim's voicemail, he passed on the update.

Meanwhile, Kim was consoling her step-father, George Kaklis. She and her husband Hal had driven to her parents' home to let them know what they had learned about Anna.

The patriarch of the Kaklis family was visibly distraught. George Tydeus Kaklis was a first generation American. Born in 1937, shortly after his parents left Greece for the United States, he had been raised during tumultuous times. Though too young to remember the war itself, the values of the World War II generation—loyalty toward his country and a firm belief in hard work—were deeply ingrained in him. Anna was his beloved daughter, the only remaining link to his first wife, Christia. It was Christia's father who had founded Premier Motors as an Oldsmobile dealership in

1951. Working with his wife, George had acquired the BMW franchise in the mid-1960s, and built it into the success it was. Anna's beautiful mother had died of breast cancer when the child was only ten. Three years later, George married Kim's mother, Martine, a widow of six years. Together, they had one son, David, now a high school junior.

The entire family, with the exception of Scott, was gathered at the Kaklis home in Beverly Hills. Everyone understood the special bond between the old man and his daughter, and it was important that they offer their support. As blended families go, theirs was unusually devoted.

Martine had always taken in stride her husband's doting on Anna, as she herself was particularly close to Kim. Over the years, Anna had forged a very loving relationship with her stepmother, made much easier by the fact that she had bonded instantly with her stepsister, only one year younger than herself. Since the first day they met, the girls had been best friends and confidantes.

As the family comforted George, Kim walked out to the patio alone and began to sob. She had spent the entire day feigning optimism. A full day had passed since the earthquake and the fears she had worked so hard to bury had begun to simmer to the surface. Knowing she couldn't just sit by the phone and wait for news from Scott any longer, she hurriedly wiped the remaining tears and went back into the house and grabbed her sweater. "Hal, will you drive me to the Endicott Mall? One of us should be there, and Scott shouldn't be by himself. I'm going to sit with him until we learn something."

"It was probably bad luck for me to say anything about not getting out of here. In fact, the earthquake was probably my fault too." Lily and Anna had been searching the room by hand for more than two hours when they concluded that they were trapped. The shorter woman had found a gap at the top of the wall, but when Anna had scoped it out, she determined that it was only about two inches high and four inches across.

"We'll just have to think of something else," Anna said reassuringly.

Guessing that Anna would be reluctant to complain about her knee, Lily spoke up. "What do you say we rest a few minutes?"

The tall woman was instantly relieved. They sat down to rest and regroup. Anna closed her eyes and soon, her thoughts wandered to the life that awaited her if and when she escaped this tomb. "So who's waiting for you out there?" Anna asked.

"Probably no one," Lily replied. "I'm sure my friends from work have missed me by now, but I didn't tell anyone that I was stopping by the mall."

"So no girlfriend?" Anna tried to imagine what kind of girlfriend Lily might have.

"No. I'm between heartbreaks," Lily joked.

"Yeah, I bet. I suspect that you're the heartbreaker. You seem so confident and in charge of everything else."

"It's a ruse." Lily was quiet for a moment. "Is anyone waiting for you?"

"My husband, I guess."

"You guess?"

"No, I'm sure he's there." Anna grew pensive. She didn't want Lily to think she'd married an ogre, but their current situation was depressing enough without adding to the misery by pouring her heart out to a virtual stranger in the dark. "I...I didn't mean to give you the wrong impression. He's a good man. It's just that we may have rushed a bit in getting married." She paused, and said aloud for the first time, "I'm not sure we're right for each other."

"How long have you been married?" Lily inquired.

"A little over a year."

Lily placed a hand on Anna's shoulder. "If you want to talk about it, I'm not going anywhere. Literally."

"No, that's okay." Anna paused, then added, "I've had a lot of trouble talking about it. It's just one of those things I'm going to have to work out on my own. And with my husband."

Just thirteen months ago, Anna and Scott had stood before their family and friends saying those words everyone hopes to utter only once in a lifetime. Now those promises stood in shambles, and neither was sure their marriage could be saved.

Anna had desperately wanted to hide her situation from her family. *If we can work it out somehow, no one need ever know that this happened.* She had waited so long to find the man with whom she thought she could spend the rest of her life, enduring gentle criticism from her father about her so-called perfectionist standards for men. For years, she had written off dates that she deemed too dim, too self-centered, or too focused on ending up between the sheets.

Scott was none of those. A professor in the business school at Southern Cal, he had been eager to hear how she applied her MBA coursework to the operations of the BMW dealership. He picked her brain for ideas on how to make his classes more practical to build in his students the enthusiasm for business that she so clearly manifested. As they shared coffee and conversation over several weeks, Anna grew to like the handsome 40-year-old with the gentle brown eyes. Coffee became dinner, and dinner became romance. Four months after their first meeting, Scott proposed.

Anna had never been so comfortable with a man in all the years she had dated. Memories of her first—and only other—sexual experience always brought an involuntary shudder. Victor was a grad student at Cal Poly with whom she had gone out only casually for a few months. She hadn't even told the young man that she was a virgin, because that would be acknowledging that he was somehow special, and he

really wasn't. To this day, she regretted sharing that intimacy just to satisfy a curiosity. The experience was fine. "Fine" was really the only word to describe it. The lack of "fireworks" made sense, she reasoned, since in the absence of love, sex itself seemed an empty act.

Scott was an experienced lover, and the physical aspect of their relationship was pleasing. But to Anna, it seemed that sex wasn't exactly living up to its reputation as the be-all-end-all, though she convinced herself that it would get better as they grew closer. But after only a few months of marriage, their lovemaking seemed strained and mechanical, and no matter how hard either of them tried, they couldn't seem to connect on an emotional level when they shared their bodies. Despite the fact that she truly loved Scott, she just didn't feel the passion for him she thought she eventually would.

After eight months of marriage, Scott suggested they start a family. "I'm not getting any younger," he had stated, "and neither are you," he teased. Anna knew Scott would be a wonderful father, and decided that a baby might be just the ticket to bring them closer. Then they ran into Sarah.

Anna was returned to the here and now when a hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet. "Let's see if there's a way to go through the ceiling!"

Chapter 4

The channel 26 news crew was setting up for its live report from the scene for the 26 Noon News. Art Hanson picked up the scene report from the public information officer and scanned the crowd for an anguished face. He found many, including that of a young man in a crumpled suit.

Hanson approached the man. "Hello. I'm Art Hanson with Channel 26 News. Would you mind answering a few questions so that our viewers can get an idea of how serious the situation is here at the mall?" he pleaded hopefully.

"Sure. But I'm just waiting like everyone else."

"That's okay." Turning, Hanson yelled "Janie, over here!" and a tall, forty-ish woman with curly brown hair trudged over to the tent, her camera already shouldered for the news spot. Hanson scribbled on a notepad. "Could you tell me your name?"

"Tony. Anthony LeFevre." He spelled his last name for the newsman.

"Who are you waiting for here?"

"Lilian Stuart. She's a lawyer at our firm. We haven't heard from her since yesterday. Her car was found in the garage by the part of the mall that fell."

Hanson briefed Tony on the questions he would ask, and gave instruction on where he should face and how he should use the microphone. As the taped interview was winding down, the reporter squared his shoulders and looked directly at Tony. "Mr. LeFevre...it's been twelve hours since any survivors were found. What do you think of your friend's chances?" Hanson was hoping for an emotional response, and he was not disappointed.

"If I were trapped in there, I'd want Lily with me. Lily's going to make it out. She's that kind of person." Tony's words sounded stronger and more assured than he perhaps felt.

Scott Rutherford listened in to the final remarks. He wondered if Anna were that kind of person as well. *How could I not know that about her?*

As though reading his thoughts, Kim Philips placed her hand on her brother-in-law's shoulder. "She'll be all right, Scott. She'll fight to hold on."

"I certainly haven't given her a reason to fight her way out of there," he said dejectedly. Turning to walk away, Kim pulled him back.

"You're going to have to explain that comment, Scott."

The pair walked over to the Red Cross water truck and sat on the bumper in the shade. Scott was crying at the end of the awful tale, and Kim had listened intently to every

word. It was all coming to light now—Anna’s long hours, her moodiness, the way she had avoided the family. Kim wanted very much to slap her brother-in-law senseless, but knew that this was Anna’s call. Instead, she said, "I’m in Anna’s corner, Scott. Whatever she wants is what I want." It was their Oath of Sisters, a pact they had made when Anna was fourteen and Kim thirteen. Kim pushed herself up and brushed off her dusty jeans. Looking down at Scott, she could see the anguish in his eyes. She patted him lightly on the back and then turned to head toward the public information tent to await the noon update.

"Damn! This thing is stubborn!" The women had been working more than an hour to loosen a ceiling panel near the wall that bordered the next store. The ceiling at this point was just low enough for Anna to stretch her arms up and reach it. Lily had located a standard plastic and metal chair on which to stand, though it teetered precariously on the crooked floor. Each time they pushed, pulled or pounded, it gave a little but always returned snugly to its place. On one occasion, Lily reached through the opening when it was pushed upward and determined that there was about a foot of space between the ceiling tile and the actual ceiling of the shoe store. That would be barely enough room to maneuver, but first they needed access.

Lily, still trying valiantly to keep their spirits up, had been jabbering on about how they could have picked up souvenirs along the way, emerging from the rubble in dirty white wedding gowns with tennis shoes and diamond earrings. "Just imagine what we could pick up in Fredrick’s of Hollywood!" she joked.

Her companion though, was quiet, lost in thought from their earlier conversation about who might greet them when they exited. "Pardon me, am I keeping you awake?" Lily noticed the woman’s extended silence and tried to inject some levity into the question.

"Sorry. I was thinking about something. What were you saying?"

"I was saying ‘Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?’ It might help if you got it off your chest." Lily continued to tug at the ceiling tile.

Anna sighed, and plopped down on the sloping floor. *It might help. And maybe it would be easier to talk about it in the dark.* "Well, it’s...you see I...I learned recently that my husband had a baby with another woman. It happened before we were married, but we were engaged, and...we had already...been intimate." *Well there, that wasn’t so hard.* She continued, "It was his old girlfriend, and both of them had been drinking. We ran into her and the baby last November, and I’ve spent every night since then in the guest room."

Lily considered her companion. Anna's quiet strength and confidence were obvious and Lily realized it must have taken a lot of courage for Anna to admit this betrayal in her life, especially to someone she had known for such a short time. Lily wanted to kick Anna's son of a bitch husband, even though she didn’t even know him. "That’s a pretty heavy load, Anna. I can see why you’re upset." She didn’t want to pry, but she sensed that the woman needed to talk about it. "What do you think you’ll do?"

"Well, it occurred to me more than once that disappearing under a pile of concrete would settle a lot," Anna laughed quietly.

"Don't even say that!" Lily countered angrily.

"No, no! I'm not being serious," the tall woman backpedaled. "I told you already. Once you helped me out, I knew I wasn't meant to die in here. I plan on getting out of here. And when I do, I have to decide what's next. I'm not going to keep beating Scott up about all of this, or myself for that matter. We'll fix it."

Lily relaxed, relieved to see that Anna still had a fire in her. "I'm sure you will, Anna. I bet you have no idea how strong you are. I can see it, and I've known you less than a day."

With a strong jerk, Lily broke off a corner of the sturdy tile, and reached above it. A metal brace in the center was holding the tile – each tile, probably – firmly into place. To get through, they were going to have to break it apart piece by piece.

"What would you do if you were me?" Anna continued.

"I wouldn't touch that question with a ten-foot pole! I don't really know your history, or how you feel about each other. Besides, you definitely don't want to be taking advice on your love life from someone like me."

"Oh, right. I forgot I was in here with The Heartbreak Kid."

"Noooo. You're in here with The Heartbroken Kid. I make bad decisions. Repeatedly."

"Why don't I take a turn on tearing that ceiling apart? While you rest, you can tell me your sordid tales."

"You'll think I'm pathetic," Lily groaned.

"Me? Who am I to pick on you? Come on, tell me about your heartbreaks, Kid." Climbing up to take her turn at the ceiling, Anna added, "Besides, if you're that pathetic, maybe I'll feel better."

"Great. I'm stuck in here with a comedienne."

"You'd have said the same thing and you know it." She was right.

"Okay, but you're going to think I'm such a loser." She leaned back on the incline and told Anna the tales of Melanie, Becca and Beverly, leaving out the sex parts so she wouldn't embarrass her new friend.

Lily had never been with a man. Her first sexual experience was during her sophomore year in college, with Melanie, a woman she met at a lecture on lesbian health. The sex was fantastic and Lily was sure she had found her other half on the very first try. But it was not to be. The more experienced lesbian wasn't ready to settle down, and Lily was determined not to wear her heart on her sleeve next time.

Alas, the heart has a will of its own, and at the beginning of her senior year, she fell hard for Becca Silby, UCLA's All-American point guard. That lasted nearly two years, until Becca opted out of the WNBA draft in favor of a more lucrative European contract. It was pretty clear to Lily what *that* said regarding their future.

After she landed her job at the law clinic—landed is a funny word, since most young lawyers shunned this work in favor of a little prestige and having enough to eat—she met Beverly, a home health care consultant ten years her senior at 35, with a precocious five-year-old son. Lily moved into Beverly's three-bedroom home and immediately meshed her life with that of her new lover. She adored Josh, and the feeling was mutual. Beverly was definitely The One. That is, until two years into their relationship when Lily suggested that they trade rings or some other token of devotion. Beverly wasn't into commitment, but she didn't want to be the jerk here, especially since it might be difficult to explain to her son. So she began to complain about the things Lily did, little things at first, then eventually, most things. She would pick fights, then lambaste the younger woman for losing her temper. In a final act of cruelty, she asked Lily to move out so that her son would no longer be exposed to Lily's mood swings and unpredictable temper. It took a long time for Lily to stop blaming herself for the demise of the relationship and realize Beverly's game.

"So I'm a three-time loser," she finished. "If I ever do really fall in love, I seriously doubt if I'll be able to tell if it's real. Now you see why I say you shouldn't ask me for love advice."

"Don't be silly. You're not a loser. Sounds to me like you opened up your heart and some people just took advantage," Anna comforted. "Your turn again, okay? My arms feel like they're going to fall off." Anna had successfully removed another portion of the tile.

"Sure," Lily said, scrambling up to the lowered ceiling. Taking turns, the women continued to break the tile apart bit by bit. When Anna found a metal shoe sizer in the pile of debris, they were able to make quicker work of their task, and soon, the hole was large enough for each to squeeze through.

Eleanor Stuart drove straight to her daughter's apartment, hoping against hope that Lily had somehow made it home. She was met by Lily's two closest friends, Sandy, a social worker who collaborated often with Lily on some of her cases, and her partner Suzanne. Without a word, the three women embraced in the entryway, each shedding quiet tears.

Sandy and Suzanne had been partners for 11 years, and Eleanor loved that Lily had such strong successful role models in her life. Two years ago, she and Lily had vacationed with the pair in Mexico, and she got the chance to really get to know the two, individually and as a couple. There were never any secrets between Eleanor and Lily so Eleanor had known from Lily's high school days that she was gay. Though

she would never have chosen such a difficult path for her daughter, Eleanor wanted the kind of happiness she saw between Sandy and Suzanne for Lily.

Those pleasant memories were far removed from the moment. The women saw the dark circles under Eleanor's red-rimmed eyes, and knew how hard this was for her. They pulled her into Lily's apartment, and filled her in on what they had learned from Tony after the six o'clock briefing.

Search crews using dogs had entered the mall shortly after ten this morning. As of six o'clock, they had removed the bodies of nine victims. No survivors had been found. The search was continuing, though the FEMA task force was no longer optimistic.

Tony had been sickened by what he saw, but he was relieved to report that Lily was not among the dead. Eleanor knew Tony from having visited Lily several times over the five years that her daughter had worked at the clinic, and she had passed on through Lauren her appreciation for the role he was playing in learning Lily's fate.

"I need to go down there," said Eleanor, looking around to retrieve her car keys. "It's my job to wait, not Tony's. He's done enough."

"Not now, Eleanor. You need to rest." Sandy put her hands on Eleanor's shoulders. "I'll go down there with Tony. Suzanne will stay here, and you can come tomorrow morning." She searched Eleanor's eyes for agreement. "Really, you need some rest."

Eleanor acquiesced, and walked out onto the small patio for a few moments of quiet contemplation. "You need to come back to me, baby," she said to the night, hoping Lily would somehow hear her.

Suzanne brought the woman's bag in from the car and placed it in Lily's guest room. Hugging her partner, she instructed, "Call me on my cell phone if you hear anything. I'll have it on vibrate so it won't wake her up."

It was well past midnight, but the trapped women had no way of knowing. Both were tired, sore, hungry and thirsty, but they resolved to keep moving as long as they could. Dehydration was their biggest worry now.

Over an hour ago, they had climbed into the narrow crawlspace above the ceiling. The support structure, a series of metal frames and braces, was difficult to navigate, especially in the dark. Anna in particular was struggling, her long legs constantly scraping against the bolts that stuck out from the frames. Progress was slow in the limited space.

When they reached the wall, they were frustrated to find that the metal frames were laid out like a maze, preventing them from moving forward toward the gap in the ceiling. In fact, it seemed that the only avenue for moving from the back of the store to the front was along the row that held the light fixtures. That meant backing up about ten feet and crawling toward the front of the store. They would have to guess which alley led to the gap in the wall.

Two hours later, on the fifth try, Anna found the opening. "The wall is crumbling here, but it still isn't big enough for us to get through. I think we're going to have to break it away like we did with the tile," she reported.

Lily was behind her in the narrow corridor which housed the light fixtures, and opted to return to the store for the shoe sizer. There was no way they could break through the wall with their bare hands.

The crawlspace was filled with dust, bugs and rodent droppings, though these elements were fortunately hidden from view by the darkness. For Lily, the stagnant air and exertion had combined to produce a tickling cough that was always bad news. Prone to asthma attacks when she exercised or encountered certain allergens, Lily carried her emergency inhaler wherever she went. *Almost everywhere*, she lamented, knowing it was in her briefcase under the driver's seat. *Who knew?*

Anna napped while Lily retrieved the tool. She awoke to the sound of violent coughing. "Lily! Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine," Lily wheezed as she crawled into the narrow space beside the tall woman. "I'm having a little trouble with my asthma, but I don't think it's going to get any worse."

Anna took the shoe sizer and began pounding at the edges of the crumbling drywall. Lily insisted on taking over after a few minutes, but it was obvious to both women that she was in acute distress.

"What can I do?" asked the tall woman anxiously.

"Nothing." She drew a shallow raspy breath. "I just need to get out of here and get some fresh air."

Anna took the sizer and began to work feverishly on the wall. She refused Lily's attempts to take a turn, sliding ahead of the smaller woman so that she blocked the wall from her reach. When the hole was finally large enough, she started through head first. Lily strained to hold her feet as Anna lowered herself to the floor of Lawson's Jewelry. Immediately, she noticed the broken glass. First her hand, then her bare foot met jagged shards that drew blood. Quickly, she turned and helped the blonde through the opening, guiding her up the sloping wall to avoid the danger. Lily was taking rapid shallow breaths and coughing profusely.

"It's okay, Lily. We're almost out. The air's better in here. You'll be okay." She desperately hoped that what she said was true.

"I need to...prop up...breathe better."

Anna hurriedly scooted behind her new friend, pulling the young woman onto her chest. She smoothed short strands of hair from Lily's face, and rocked her gently.

For Lily, this was familiar relief. When she was younger, Eleanor had held her close and rocked her while she wheezed. Lily knew she was in big trouble here. Without her inhaler, the attack could get worse. Anna needed to keep moving.

"You need to go on," she rasped. "Send someone back."

"Not a chance, Pygmy. Like you said, we're going out together." Anna hugged her loosely. "Get some rest. You'll get better."

Eleanor arrived at the mall at 6:30 a.m. on Saturday morning. Tony had brought his car to the family parking area, and was asleep in the back seat. He had been at the site since Thursday afternoon. Sandy led the woman to where he slept, opened the backdoor of the car and nudged him gently. "Tony, Eleanor's here."

The young man sat up, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. His sorrowful look as his eyes met Eleanor's nearly broke the older woman's heart. "Thank you, Tony. I appreciate what you've done more than you could ever know." She took the man in her arms as he broke down and sobbed.

The crowd had dwindled this morning to fewer than three dozen. At last count, searchers had removed 18 bodies from the rubble, and no survivors had been found since mid-afternoon on Thursday. The list of missing was down to 11, including the wife of the haggard young man who had come to the mall with Tony. All were concluded to have been in one of the six stores on the lower level, as every other inch of the structure had been searched.

At the seven o'clock briefing, it was announced that engineers were going to come in today to determine the safest way to excavate the lower level. Sound technicians were setting up to scan for stray noises underground. "I'll be honest with you," the site coordinator said. "We're running out of time to help anyone who may be trapped underneath the structure. We don't know what kind of air pockets there might be, or whether there was any gas or hazardous materials in the area. And at this point, dehydration is going to be a problem."

The families looked at one another grimly.

"But be assured that we're going to do everything we can."

Something was different. Anna awoke to Lily's vicious coughing spell. She helped the younger woman sit up and rubbed small circles on her back to comfort her as she gasped for breath. Anna looked around the jewelry store. *There!* A small but definite glow was evident at the back edge of the wall going into the next store.

"Lily! I can see daylight! Look!" Anna turned her friend in the direction of the patch of light. "Let's go!"

Lily was unable to move. Without treatment, her asthma attack had left her depleted of the oxygen needed to make her body work, her muscles move. Between rapid shallow breaths, she pleaded, "Go, Anna! I can't."

Anna was frozen with fear. She couldn't leave her friend. This woman had saved her life.

Lily made it clearer. "Get help." She gasped for breath, then coughed violently. "I...have....to get....an inhaler..." Lily stammered. *Or I'll die.*

With that, Anna squeezed Lily's hands and kissed her bloodied forehead. "I'll be back, Lily. It'll be okay, I promise." Anna stood and hurried toward the faintly lit crack in the wall.

The dividing wall had separated from the concrete blocks that lined the back of the store, but the opening was too narrow to get through. Anna retrieved the shoe sizer and pounded fiercely on the wall until it crumbled and tore away. She easily scrambled under the fallen ceiling into the lingerie store and was elated to see a solid beam of light coming in from a quarter-sized opening at the apex of the room, about nine feet above the floor.

"Help! Help!" She screamed louder than she ever had. Looking about, she spotted an extension rod that clerks used to reach items on the higher displays. Stretching it to its full length, Anna poked it through the hole to the outside. Up and down, side to side. She needed to get someone's attention.

After fifteen minutes, there was no response. She yelled again, but still no one heard. No one came.

Her eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light, and she spotted a mannequin at her feet, dressed in a red satin teddy. Anna pulled the extension rod back inside, and tied the teddy to its end. Pushing it back through the hole, she again waved it up and down, side to side, screaming for all she was worth.

Scott had been staring dejectedly at the crumpled mall as the searchers went about their work. He had asked for the fourth time to accompany them, and was told for the fourth time that he was not properly trained.

Suddenly, a movement caught his eye. "What the hell?" He squinted and walked toward the mall, gradually making out what looked like a red cloth...no, it was lingerie. It was definitely lingerie and it was waving back and forth. "Hey!" he yelled to the site manager, pointing to the spectacle. He started to run toward the spot, but was stopped by security.

By this time, a crowd had gathered around Scott and people were straining to see the first sign of life at the mall in almost 40 hours. Their view was obscured as rescuers rushed to the area.

The pole suddenly stopped moving as someone grabbed it from above. Anna pulled it back through, and yelled again. "Can you hear me?"

"We're here. We're going to get you out. Are you hurt?" the rescuer shouted.

"I'm all right. My friend needs help. She's having an asthma attack. Please hurry."

"You need to stand back. We're going to make the hole bigger. Get as far away as you can. Tell us when you're ready."

Anna hurried back to the passageway. "Go ahead! I'm ready."

The next 15 minutes seemed like hours, but finally, the searchers had widened the hole enough to illuminate the entire room. "It's going to be a few more minutes. We'll need to use some machinery to break through this asphalt," he assured.

"My friend can't wait," she pleaded desperately. "She needs an inhaler now for her asthma. She can't breathe."

A few minutes later, a head emerged through the hole. "Where is your friend?" the emergency medical technician asked.

"She's in the next store, back there." Anna pointed toward the hole through which she had previously climbed.

He disappeared, but soon the hole in the ceiling was filled by another man. "We want you to stay here. It's too dangerous for you to go back there. When we get the hole widened, we'll pull you out and send in one of the firefighters."

Anna was incredulous. *What part of 'she can't breathe' don't they understand?* "Give me the goddamned medicine!" she screamed. "Now! She's dying!"

The man retreated and the EMT reappeared. "I'm going to pass it to you in a pouch. Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes," she lied. She was certain Lily would know, and she didn't want to waste another second.

Moments later, a red pouch dropped through the hole to the floor below. Anna hurried to pick it up and shouted, "I'm going back. You can work on the hole. I won't be in the way." With that, she was gone.

Lily was only vaguely aware of the commotion in the next room as she teetered on the brink of unconsciousness. She felt the tall woman scoot behind her and pull her into her lap. "I've got it," she heard, "the medicine. I need your help Lily." The EMT had assembled the inhaler for immediate use, and Anna figured out how to hold it to her friend's mouth. Lily wrapped her hand around the instrument, and pumping it once into her mouth, breathed deeply. The reprieve was instant. She took three or four deep breaths, and pumped the device again.

Anna smiled widely with relief when she felt Lily sit up. "We're about to get rescued. You ready?"

"You bet," whispered the blonde.

Together, they ambled to the passageway. As they crawled into the lingerie store from underneath the fallen ceiling, they were overjoyed to see a firefighter descending a ladder, carrying blankets and first aid equipment.

"Anna!" Scott shouted as he watched the tall dark-haired woman emerge from the hole in the ground. He pushed past the security guard and broke into a run. Half a minute later, he was holding the bruised and exhausted woman to his chest, feeling a convergence of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him completely. "Thank God, Anna. Oh, thank God!" was all he could say as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Anna returned the hug, crying as well, and raised her hand to take that of her sister, who joined them seconds later. "I'm okay. It's all okay," she murmured.

Their joyful reunion was interrupted by the EMT, who was directing Anna to a waiting ambulance. She turned back to the rescuers to see them bring her friend through the opening on a stretcher, a ventilator affixed to her mouth and nose. Lily was slender and blonde, with cute features that belied her toughness. A nasty gash crossed her forehead above her left eye, which was swollen and black. "Scott, write my phone number down on something. Quick!" Anna ordered.

Anna crouched low to the stretcher and took her friend's hand. Lily opened her eyes to behold the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Anna's sparkling blue eyes leapt out from her dirty face amidst a cascade of shoulder-length jet-black hair. She smiled down at Lily and it melted her heart. Lily reached for the mask and pulled it aside. "Thank you, Anna. I couldn't have made it without you."

"And I wouldn't have made it without you. You saved my life, Lily." Taking the paper scrap from Scott, she said, "Here's my number. Call me when you're better. We're going to be great friends, Pygmy." She stuffed the paper into Lily's skirt pocket.

"Is she going to be okay?" Anna asked anxiously as the EMT inserted a butterfly clip into Lily's forearm.

"Yeah, she looks good. We're just going to get some fluid into her as soon as possible. This is the best way to do it." His voice was reassuring. "You should probably have some too," he added.

"Will I see her again at the hospital?" she asked as she limped toward the waiting ambulance.

"Probably not," the EMT answered. "You're going to Sinai and she's going to Central. Central is closer and they need to treat her asthma right away."

Anna turned back to watch Lily's departure. An older woman now crouched over her friend, crying and smiling, obviously joyous to have her loved one back. Anna liked knowing that Lily was loved.

"Scott, Kim? Will you meet me at Sinai?" Anna stepped up gingerly into the back of the ambulance. She had wanted Kim to ride with her, but she knew that such a request would have been hard on Scott, so she opted just to go alone.

"Of course!" they blurted, as they turned and ran for the car.

The radio crackled inside Lily's ambulance. "Change of plans, Dean. We're taking her to Valley. Central's full."

When the ambulance arrived at Valley Hospital, the triage nurse carefully removed Lily's soiled clothing and tossed it in a trash bin. "She won't be wanting any reminders of this, I bet," she told her co-worker.

Chapter 5

"I'm so proud of you Lionel! Everything you said was perfect. It was just the way we practiced." The blonde lawyer drew the shy four-year-old into her arms and hugged him fiercely. Turning to Sandy, at the courthouse today in her role as Lionel's social worker, Lily went on, "I think Judge Evans will come back with what we want. This kind of stuff really gets to him." What they wanted was the boy's removal from a drug-infested and violent home. Lionel's grandmother had petitioned for custody, fearing he would suffer irreparable harm under her daughter's care.

"You were great too, my friend. As usual, I might add," Sandy responded. Indeed, Lily was a powerful ally for families in trouble. *It was as though she took each case personally*, the social worker thought. She had seen her friend devastated last year when the attorney had failed to win a restraining order to protect a woman from her abusive boyfriend. The boyfriend subsequently killed the woman with a shotgun blast as she answered the door. Lily was sullen and withdrawn for days, second guessing her strategy and beating herself up mercilessly for failing the woman who had needed her.

Lily steered the boy to his grandmother's side. "Look, you two should get some lunch at the café downstairs. We need to be back here by one. I think we'll get a decision then." She turned to her friend. "I've got to make a couple of calls. Any chance I could talk you into grabbing me a tuna sandwich and a bottle of water? *She hadn't had a Diet Coke since the In-and-Out server had doused her silk top on that fateful day last February.* I'll be outside on one of those benches." she indicated the exit.

"Sure, I'll be right there." With that, the social worker and her clients turned for the stairs.

Looking up, Lily caught a glimpse of a tall dark-haired woman. It had been seven months since the earthquake, and still, when she saw the familiar features on women she encountered it triggered her memory of the remarkable woman she had met. Automatically dialing her voicemail, her eyes followed the woman as she walked in her direction, the face obscured by the people in the crowded hallway.

It's her! The sapphire eyes suddenly looked up and locked with her own. *It's really her!*

Oh my God! It's Lily! Anna realized at the same instant, her heart skipping a beat.

Both women stood frozen for a long moment as the recognition settled. Without thought, Lily turned off and pocketed her cell phone. She was the first to find her voice. "Anna?" *Please let it be her!*

"Lily?" the woman returned, her lips turning up into a broad grin.

Both women rushed the final few steps to come together in a tight hug. Neither spoke as they held the other close, each awash in memories of their ordeal. They relished the sensation of holding one another in the here and now, almost unbelieving that the

moment was actually happening. Lily finally pulled back to take in the smiling face of the tall woman, but she didn't relinquish her grip.

"I'd almost given up hope of ever seeing you again." Lily was elated, but she couldn't stop the tears that welled up at seeing her friend again.

Anna saw the sparkling green eyes, and knew that her own were shining as well. "I waited for you to call. I figured you didn't want to...you know, that maybe you wanted to put it all behind you." The blonde discerned the slightest hint of hurt in Anna's statement.

"No, I wanted to call you. I tried, but I didn't know how." She went on to explain how she'd lost her clothes at the hospital, and how she'd tried in vain to track Anna through the Red Cross and the hospital. "They didn't have any records of anyone named Anna."

"Well, that makes sense. My full name is Christianna. That's probably what the records said." Anna then recounted her own frustrations about trying to learn what she could about her friend. "Central Hospital had no record of a Lily or a Lilian, or even a Lilliputian."

"Stop it already with the short jokes! I didn't go to Central. I went to Valley."

"I don't believe it!" said a third voice. Not letting go of one another, the women turned to find Sandy holding two bottles of water and a brown bag lunch. "You have to be the one and only Anna the Amazon that Lily here has been talking about for months."

Still beaming, Lily reached out and pulled the social worker closer. "Sandy, I'd like to officially introduce you to Anna the Amazon. Anna, meet one of my dearest friends, Sandy Henke. Sandy's a social worker and she and I are here today to argue a custody case," she explained.

"Hi Sandy. I'm Anna Ru..." she caught herself. "Kaklis. Anna Kaklis. Pleased to meet you."

"It's great to finally meet you too. I tell you, Lily described you perfectly. I think I would have known you anywhere," she said, remembering how often her friend had used the word 'beautiful.' Anna was dressed in a tailored navy suit, the cropped jacket accentuating her trim waist. A strand of ivory pearls with matching earrings finished the look. '*Stunning*' would have been more appropriate, she thought.

The little blonde blushed and panicked. She shot her friend a look that said, "*Oh God, Sandy! Please don't tell her how I went on and on about how beautiful she was!*"

Anna unknowingly saved her with a quick reply. "Well, I almost can't believe she could remember what I looked like. We only saw each other for a minute, and she was kind of on the edge there."

How could I ever forget you? "Well, you made quite an impression, saving my life and all. What brings you to the courthouse?" Lily asked, hoping to move away from the potentially dangerous subject.

"I came for my final divorce decree," Anna stated with a confidence she didn't quite feel. Her eyes met and held those of the attorney as if waiting for judgment.

They were quiet for a moment until Sandy spoke up, "Listen, I'm going to head outside and look for a bench. Come out whenever you're ready, Lily." Turning to Anna, she added, "Very nice to meet you. I hope to see you again."

"Same here. The pleasure was mine." Anna held her hand out to the social worker, who took it in hers. Sandy was pleasantly surprised by the firm handshake. She had expected the grip to be more...well, *prissy*.

Lily watched her friend and turned again to face the dark-haired woman. She remembered how troubled Anna had been when they were trapped, how determined she was to work through it, and how she had vowed to "stop beating up" both her husband and herself. *What could have gone wrong?* Taking Anna's hands in her own, Lily tried to find the right words to support her friend. "I'm so sorry things didn't work out."

"Who says they didn't?" Anna straightened to her full height and smiled. "I've always believed that things happen as they should. This is better for everyone." All of this was true, she was certain.

"Sweetheart, you can't mean this! You're emotional. This has been a horrible ordeal," Scott had argued, when his wife had stated her intentions to divorce him. The handwriting had been on the wall, though. He had been hopeful that this trial would bring them back together, and was bitterly disappointed when Anna returned to the guest room upon arriving home from the hospital.

Anna had called her lawyer as soon as Scott left for his office the following day. By that afternoon, the details were settled, and she'd announced her decision and presented Scott with an equitable financial settlement. Defeated, Scott refused a scenario that involved Anna moving out, so she requested that he remove his belongings as soon as was feasible. She would stay with her sister until he was relocated.

"I know it seems trite to say this, Scott, but a part of me will always love you. I have forgiven you for Sarah. I don't want you to carry that burden. Your son is a precious gift, not a mistake. I believe in my heart that you belong with him, and perhaps even with his mother, but that's up to you to decide. I only know that I don't belong with you. It just isn't what I want. I'm sorry."

Scott was gone by the end of the week. The large four-bedroom house was quiet, but no more so than it had been for the past few months. Anna slowly reclaimed her life, still working long hours, but spending

more time now with her family. Breaking the news to acquaintances and business associates was sometimes uncomfortable, but it wasn't humiliating, as she had feared.

"Then I'm glad it's worked out for you," Lily said sincerely. *Anyone who would let you get away is an idiot.*

Anna studied her friend's face and found no sign of reproach. "Listen, I'm joining my sister and her husband tonight for dinner to sort of...well, to celebrate a fresh start. How about coming with us? I really want them to meet you."

"Sure! I'd love to," the blonde said eagerly. *I hope that wasn't too eager.*

"That's wonderful! They can finally put a face on the woman I've talked so much about." Anna reached into her Gucci purse and retrieved a business card and a pen. "Here's my number. Don't lose it this time!" she teased, as she jotted her cell phone number on the back.

Lily reached into her own briefcase and passed Anna a card, also scribbling her home number. "Here, my cell phone is on here. So, what are the plans for dinner?"

"We have eight o'clock reservations at Empyre's in Beverly Hills. It's a Greek place, one of my favorite restaurants. If you want, we can pick you up."

"No, that's okay. It would probably be easier if I met you there."

"If you're sure?" Lily nodded. "The reservation is under Philips. That's my brother-in-law."

"Okay, then I'll see you at eight," Lily said. She looked at Anna again, and without a trace of awkwardness, took her again in a mighty hug. "I've got to go. I've got to be back in court soon, and I need to eat first so they don't fine me for making too much noise with my stomach," she joked. Pausing for a moment, she looked happily at her friend and added, "It's really good to see you again, Anna."

"I feel the same way."

"I don't have anything to wear to a place like that!" Lily shrieked. "I'll make a fool of myself. 'I'd like you to meet my friend Lily from Hooterville,'" she mocked herself. Lily had visited Empyre's web site and explored the menu. Entrees *started* at forty bucks, and there was that condescending footnote, 'Proper attire required'.

Lauren watched her co-worker pace back and forth in the cramped office. "You know, you're really getting yourself worked up. It's just dinner with a friend. It's not like it's a date or anything." She waited... "Is it?"

"Of course not!" Lily plopped down in her treasured Aeron armchair and sighed. "I just want to make a good impression." She fingered the embossed business card. "Anna Kaklis. Vice-President, Premier Motors." She was starting to get a grip on who

Anna was. "She doesn't just sell cars. Her family probably owns the place. BMWs, for crying out loud!"

It wasn't that Lily was a stranger to people who had money. After all, she'd grown up in the Silicon Valley, where even teenagers drove expensive foreign cars. But as the daughter of a school teacher, Lily was unaccustomed to such opulence. It was just another thing that separated her from her peers. That said, she wouldn't have traded her comfortable life with Eleanor for all the money in the world. When Lily finished law school near the top of her class, she was recruited by several firms who promised high earnings and a great potential for partnership. Still, she couldn't see herself living that kind of life—taking cases based solely on the amount of revenue they generated for the partners. This young attorney, mentored by Katharine Fortier, "champion of the downtrodden," wanted to give something back, and the Braxton Street Law Clinic was a perfect match. It wasn't that she scorned those who made a better living; she just didn't aspire to that for herself.

So why am I feeling so inadequate all of a sudden? "I'd like to think we could be friends some day," she said to Lauren. "Really good friends. But I'm not sure we have all that much in common." Lily's friends didn't drive Beamers. They were social workers, teachers, nurses, therapists, and other young lawyers like herself.

"Look, it's just dinner, right?" Lauren asked. Lily nodded. "So why don't you go out and splurge a little on a new dress? It's not like you're going to break the bank. It's just one dress. I say go for it."

Lily voiced her doubt but she had already decided that Lauren was right. She really wanted to look good tonight. She talked her fellow attorney into getting a head start on the weekend by taking a side trip to Bloomingdale's on the way home. A mere \$1,312 dollars later, she was slipping on the brand new black heels that matched her new black bag, that matched the simple black sleeveless shimmery dress that she wore under the lightweight black and tan wool jacket. She withdrew from a box under her bed the small diamond earrings she had received from Katharine's estate upon her death. She smiled wryly at the image that stared back from the full-length mirror. *Okay, so I look good!*

Lily almost laughed at the incongruity between her attire and her ride. When she spotted the parking valet at the restaurant, she decided to park the battered SUV in a public garage and walk the remaining two blocks.

It was 8:02 when she entered the restaurant. An attendant traded a small blue claim check for her wrap, and the maitre d' directed her to the bar where her companions were already waiting. Suddenly very nervous, the blonde checked her reflection once again in the foyer's mirror. Taking a deep breath, she walked tentatively through the entry. *It's not like it's a date*, she reminded herself.

The tall woman was seated facing the doorway so that she could easily spot her friend. The three were nursing their first round, having arrived early at Anna's suggestion so that Lily wouldn't have to wait for them in an unfamiliar place. She was taken aback by the elegant sight of the attorney as she entered the dimly lit room. *She looks lovely*, Anna thought. She rose from her chair and waved her friend to their table.

"I'm so glad you could come. I *love* that dress!" Anna said excitedly.

Worth every penny and then some! Lily thought fleetingly about pilfering the money she had been saving for a down payment on a house and spending every last dime on cocktail dresses at Bloomingdale's. "Thank you. I'm glad I could make it too. Thanks again for asking me."

Lily had expected Anna to be beautiful in her evening attire, but she wasn't ready for the sight that beheld her. The stunning woman wore a deep burgundy strapless cocktail dress, the lines of her collarbone prominent against the creamy white skin. She had swept her thick raven hair into a French twist, and her ears sparkled with diamonds that made Lily's earrings look like chips.

"Kim, Hal, I'd like for you to meet my dear friend, Lily Stuart. Lily, this is my sister Kim Philips, and her wonderful-but-stilted husband, Hal." Whenever they were together, the sisters teased the good-natured bean counter about his conservative demeanor, often referring to him as "Hal Gore." He and Kim had been high school sweethearts and had eloped during their junior year at Berkeley. He was the perfect foil to Kim's vivacious personality, and Anna loved him like a brother.

Hal stood to take Lily's outstretched hand, shooting an accusatory glare at his sister-in-law before breaking into a broad grin. "Nice to meet you, Lily. Anna's been talking about you ever since the earthquake."

She has, has she? Lily stored this tidbit to relish later.

"Indeed she has," Kim joined in. The attractive red-head surprised everyone by drawing Lily into a fierce hug. "Thank you for saving my sister," she whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

The blonde nearly lost her own composure when she pulled back and noticed tears brimming in the hazel eyes. "I can see that I'm going to have to set the record straight on who saved whom. Your sister was my hero that day, too."

Dinner was the most fun Lily had had in ages. Following Anna's lead, she ordered the swordfish and a small salad, noting that her entire food budget for the week was going into this meal. *I'll worry about that tomorrow...at Tara.*

The two friends took turns recalling details about their ordeal, each giving credit to the other at every opportunity. Both of them blushed when Kim dubbed the pair "the mutual admiration society." Embarrassed a bit at this obvious truth, Anna redirected the discussion to fill them in on her day in court.

It was the first time she had seen Scott since he had moved out, though they had talked on the phone a few times. It was awkward for a moment, but Anna had initiated a light hug that brought a small smile to the man's face. *"I wish you all the best, Scott. I mean that,"* she had said. He returned the sentiment, sincerely she thought, and the rest was lawyer business. "So if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you to join me in a toast to a really nice guy."

"To Scott," Hal said, raising his wine glass. He had genuinely liked his brother-in-law. The glasses clinked, and the foursome took a sip in unison.

"To Anna," Kim added, "for knowing when to look forward instead of back," raising her glass again.

Anna gave her sister an unmistakable look of love. "Thank you," she said quietly, touching her sister's glass and pressing against it for a long thoughtful moment. Though not related by blood, the two were as close as twins, each seeming to know the soul of the other. As strong as Anna appeared on the outside, Kim knew that her sister struggled with important decisions, afraid of making mistakes that others would scrutinize. Without continuing support from the people who loved her, Kim feared that Anna's failed marriage might seriously undermine her confidence in matters of the heart. She so wanted her sister to find the kind of love she shared with Hal. Kim had kept to herself the fact that she saw no such devotion between Anna and Scott. As painful as the parting was for Anna, Kim was glad to see her sister starting anew.

"To Anna," Lily and Hal chimed in, ending the poignant moment.

As the tuxedoed waiter began clearing their plates, Lily's thoughts were invaded by the irrational fear that she had lettuce stuck in her teeth. Excusing herself, she made her way to the ladies room.

"Your friend certainly doesn't look like a lesbian," Hal started.

Both women stared at the man incredulously, then at one another to see who would bop him first. Kim won, and she smacked her husband's shoulder. "I'm surprised at you, Hal. Just because people could make you as an accountant from across the room doesn't mean that everyone else should fit a stereotype."

Hal realized his gaffe and knew he would soon be getting a second dose of discipline from his sister-in-law. She did not disappoint. "You know Hal, I have several friends who are gay, and I wouldn't have known at all if they hadn't told me. My hairdresser is probably the most flamboyant man on the face of the earth, and he's married with two children. I've heard it said that if all the gay people in the world were to turn blue tomorrow, we'd be surprised to find that those stereotypes don't fit at all," she scolded.

"Stereotypes?" The three were startled that Lily had returned so quickly. *Clean teeth.*

"Yeah, it happens to me all the time at work," Anna covered quickly. "I was telling them about an incident on the lot yesterday. The sales staff was in at 6:30 in the morning for training on next year's features. Just after seven, this guy drove up in a '97 Mitsubishi Eclipse, Special Edition and started looking at the 530i." Anna knew cars. "I walked out and asked if he had any questions, and he said 'No, I already know probably as much as you do about the car.'" Her voice deepened and her head bobbed back and forth as she mocked him.

"Right, like he knows more than my sister with the mechanical engineering degree," Kim interjected.

"So then he said he wanted to make an offer on the car, and asked me to go get the manager. I explained to him that the manager was in a meeting, and assured him that I could handle the transaction. But he insisted, so I dragged Brad—he's our sales manager—out of the meeting to talk to him. They hammered out a price, but Brad said he needed the owner's okay—which wasn't true, but Brad wanted to jerk his chain—then he paged me to his office to look over the deal. You should have seen the look on the man's face when I walked back in."

Lily processed this wealth of information on her new friend, *mechanical engineering degree, owner*. "So what did you do?"

"Oh, I approved it. Brad doesn't give cars away. But we both had quite a laugh about it when the guy left. And I met the guy again and gave him the overview when he came back to pick up his new car. But the fun part was that I told him everything about the engine in excruciating detail, and told him to stop me if he already knew it. Of course, he didn't." Her companions laughed at the image, all wishing they could have been flies on the wall.

The waiter returned at that moment to offer coffee and dessert. He was back soon with four baklava, two black decafs and two espressos.

"So what part of town do you live in, Lily?" Kim inquired.

"Sun Valley."

"Do you have a house? A condo?"

"Uh-oh! Kim's putting on her real estate hat." Hal chided his wife.

"I am not! I just wanted to know," she whined.

"Actually, I live in an apartment. It's in a prime location, convenient to public transportation. I learned after moving in that that means it's directly underneath the flight path for Burbank," she joked. "I've been saving for a down payment on a house, but every time I get ready to look, prices jump again, and I have to save a little more."

"Well, at the risk of being accused of doing business at dinner," she shot a sidelong glance at her husband, "give me a call if you want some help on finding something. I sometimes get a heads-up on new listings before they go on the market." She fished a business card from her purse and passed it across the table.

"Wow, thanks! I will. Hal, I don't suppose you have any ideas for making my modest savings account explode into a fortune in a few short weeks, do you?"

"I wish!" Hal reached over and covered his wife's hand with his own. "I hate to be a party pooper, but I'm about ready to call it a night."

"He has a date with his boat in the morning," Kim whispered conspiratorially.

Neither Anna nor Lily was ready for the evening to end, but both stood and gathered their things. It was then that the party discovered that the car dealer had already

discreetly paid their check. She declined their offers to pitch in, so they thanked her for her generosity.

While the women waited for their wraps, Hal exited to order their car. Kim offered, "Lily, you should give Hal your ticket too. He'll get your car while we wait."

"Mine's in the garage around the corner. There was a line for the valet, and I was worried about being late, so I just parked it myself," she lied.

"How would you feel about dropping me at home?" Anna asked suddenly. "I live pretty close. That way, you won't have to walk to the garage by yourself."

Do I let this beautiful woman see the piece of shit I drive, or do I want this night to be over? Wishing she had time to buy a new car first, Lily answered, "I'd be happy to."

Bidding goodnight to Kim and Hal, the pair began the short walk to the garage. Noticing a slight limp in her companion, Lily gestured toward Anna's leg and asked, "So is that a souvenir from the earthquake?"

"Yeah, it was in pretty bad shape for a while, but I worked with a physical therapist and then a personal trainer. It's so much better now than it was. In fact, I'm probably stronger now all over than I was back in February." Lily concurred, noting the sinewy muscles in the woman's shoulders and arms. "But I'm not the only one with a souvenir." Anna reached out and gently traced the small red scar above the attorney's left eye.

"Well, that's getting better too. It was bright red for a long time."

"All in all, we were both pretty lucky, I'd say," the tall woman said.

"Definitely." *Meeting you was the lucky part.*

Approaching the worn out RAV4, Lily prepared her passenger for the sight. "When I was in the hospital after the earthquake, one of my comforts was that I had heard that the parking garage had collapsed. I was looking forward to collecting the insurance money and getting a new car." Lily unlocked and opened the driver's door, then reached across the front seat to roll down the passenger window. "But as luck would have it," she continued, "mine was one of only three cars that escaped unscathed." She then walked around the car and reached through the window giving the door handle a hard yank as she leaned back. Anna stepped up into the passenger seat, and Lily slammed the door.

"Well, at the risk of sounding a lot like my sister, I sell cars." Anna winked at her, and Lily thought she would melt.

Chapter 6

"I couldn't believe it either! Mom, she is so nice. And she's smart and successful. I hope you have the chance to meet her the next time you come down." Lily had been going on about the car dealer for nearly thirty minutes, recounting as many details as she could remember of her meeting with Anna at the courthouse and at dinner last night. "No, we haven't really made any plans to get together again, but I think we will. I think we just sort of clicked." Lily walked from her bedroom out to her balcony and sat down in the sun. "No, not that way. Aren't you listening, Mom? She's straight. But I think we'll be great friends."

Eleanor had always been both mother and best friend to her daughter. Though she had warded off the cruelty of the younger schoolchildren, she had been powerless to stop the heartbreak when a supposed friend from Lily's high school had broken a confidence and told their classmates that Lily was gay. The vicious taunting that followed had driven a wedge between Lily and her peers and the teenager simply withdrew from social activities. She concentrated on her studies and spent more time with adult friends, like Katharine. It was then that Katharine first told Lily that she too was a lesbian. That revelation was a godsend to the confused young girl as she learned by example to accept and love herself without guilt or shame. And over the years, Eleanor could not have been more supportive, offering her shoulder each time Lily had her heart torn in two.

"I'll come up to see you soon, I promise." Lily stood to return the phone to its cradle for recharging. "Love you too. Goodbye."

Lily loved her work, but weekends were a guilty pleasure. She usually managed to take care of things like cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping and errands by mid-afternoon on Saturday. That left Saturday night for socializing, often dinner with Sandy and Suzanne or with Lauren and her husband, Jason. On Sundays, Lily was outside as much as possible. Her favorite pastime was hiking, and though she preferred long walks alone, she wisely adhered to the adage of safety in numbers. When she couldn't find a companion, she usually opted to hit the popular trails in the San Gabriel Mountains, where she encountered dozens of hikers, bikers and cross-country runners.

Sandy had called first thing this morning to invite her to a cookout tonight at their Sherman Oaks home. She and Suzanne were eager to hear about her evening with Anna and her family, and she was looking forward to the retelling.

Lily was running out the door when her phone rang. Her heart skipped a beat as she recognized on her caller ID the number she had memorized from Anna's business card. "Hello, this is Lily," she answered nervously.

"Hi, it's Anna." *Such a nice voice!*

"Well hi yourself, Amazon. What are you up to? Six feet?"

"Funny girl." Anna didn't mind at all the teasing from her diminutive friend. "I'm still at work. What about you?"

"I'm heading out to dinner at Sandy's. You remember my friend from the courthouse?"

"Of course, the social worker. She seems like a nice person."

"Yeah, we've been good friends for about five years."

"Listen, the reason I was calling was to see if you had any interest in going to the Dodgers game tomorrow. My account manager at the *LA Times* sent me two tickets to their skybox."

"The skybox?" Lily asked, working hard to contain her eagerness.

"Yes, you know. Their corporate suite. We spend a lot of money on advertising, and they pass on tickets to things from time to time."

"Are you kidding? I'd love to!"

"Great! It starts at one. What if I come by and pick you up about 12:15?"

"Are you sure you don't mind? I could meet you somewhere, or I could come by and get you."

"No, that's okay. Just give me your address. I have a GPS in the car, I'll just punch it in." Anna wasn't eager to fold her long frame into the mini-SUV again. If they encountered heavy traffic, her injured knee would protest vehemently at the cramped position.

"A GPS? Cool! If you're sure." Lily gave her address, and told Anna where she should park at the complex to avoid the wrath of the Parking Lot Nazi, the elderly neighbor in the adjacent building who didn't even own a car. "Listen, I've never been in a skybox before. What should I wear?"

"Well, they're a little stiff. Hal would fit right in," the car dealer joked. "I usually wear slacks or khakis and a nice shirt."

Lily's mind immediately went to her wardrobe as she mentally dressed herself six times. This exercise always saved her at least two rounds of tossing clothes about the room as she ruled things out. "I can't wait. See you at 12:15. Oh, and Anna?"

"Yes?"

"It's seven o'clock on Saturday night. Go home."

"Funny girl. Have a good time tonight. Tell Sandy I said hello."

"I will. Thanks for calling." She hung up and dashed out the door, giddy with excitement.

Twenty minutes later, she was pulling into the driveway of her friends' California ranch home. She could smell the burning charcoal as soon as she stepped from her car, so she followed the path around the garage to the redwood deck. Suzanne was tending the grill, and she could hear Sandy in the kitchen. "I brought wine!" she

announced, holding up Sandy's favorite Coppola merlot. Lily greeted her friends in the usual manner, like they hadn't seen each other in months.

As expected, Lily's report on her dinner at Empyre's dominated the dinner conversation. Sandy and Suzanne had lots of questions, and they were genuinely glad that their friend had reconnected with the woman she met during her earthquake ordeal.

When dinner and dishes were done, they returned to the deck for a soak in the Jacuzzi. In the darkness, the three friends shed their clothes and slipped into the warm churning water. "Lily, I sure wish you could meet a lesbian that lit your fire like Anna has," Sandy started.

"You and me both, my friend," Lily replied, realizing too late what she had just admitted.

"She's straight, Lily," Suzanne warned. "You need to be careful, or she'll break your heart."

"She's my friend, Suzanne," the blonde said defensively. "I don't have any expectations that she'll be anything else. It's just that we went through something together that changed our lives. I feel a very special bond with her, and I want to know her better. Does that automatically have to mean a sexual attraction?"

"No, of course not," Sandy reassured. "We just don't want to see you hurt, but it sounds like you've got the right perspective. Neither of us meant any offense."

"That's okay. None taken." Lily was grateful for her two friends, even when they were overprotective. "Thanks for worrying about me."

Soon after they toweled off and dressed, Lily bade her friends goodnight and went home to try on clothes.

The two women showed their tickets at the gate and made their way to the escalator that would take them to the concourse for the lower level suites. As promised, Anna was wearing black tailored slacks and a light blue sleeveless silk shirt. Her hair was pulled back and tied with a thin strip of black leather, and a lightweight cream-colored sweater hung loosely around her shoulders to ward off the chill of the air conditioner in the suite. A native to southern California, Anna *hated* to be cold.

Lily wore Gap khakis with a short-sleeved forest green sweater. It was the sixteenth combination that she had tried. It wasn't that this one was the best; rather it was the one she had on when her doorbell rang at 12:10.

Lily was duly impressed with Anna's luxurious black 745i, especially the global positioning system. From her passenger seat, she assessed the multitude of gauges that gave the appearance that the car drove itself. "You'd have to be pretty smart to drive a car like this," she joked.

"Not a problem," the dark-haired woman replied dryly.

When they entered the suite, they were greeted by a handsome man in gray slacks and a starched white shirt. "Anna! It's great to see you. Glad you could make it!"

"Thank you. Steve, I'd like you to meet my friend, Lilian Stuart. Lily, this is Steve French. Steve is my account manager at the *Times*, and our host for today."

"I'm really pleased to meet you. Thanks so much for the invitation." Lily couldn't help but notice that Steve had hardly glanced her way, his eyes glued to her beautiful friend.

"So Anna, where is Scott today?" *Were the rumors true?*

"That I wouldn't know, Steve. Scott and I have divorced," she said unceremoniously.

Bingo! "I'm sorry to hear that, Anna." He wasn't really. In fact, it was all he could do not to blurt out 'You seeing anyone?'

"Thank you, Steve. I appreciate that. It was a friendly parting." She had learned that sharing that with acquaintances usually put them at ease. Steve led them to their seats on the front row of the suite just in time for the National Anthem.

Anna has a beautiful voice, Lily thought when the song finished. The blonde resisted the urge to pinch herself. Here she was in a luxury suite at Dodger Stadium, sitting beside the most beautiful woman in LA. Her friends' words of caution from the night before crept into her head for a moment, but she reminded herself that she and Anna were just getting to know each other, on their way to a deep, lasting friendship.

Lily was pleasantly surprised to find that Anna knew her stuff when it came to the Dodgers. They talked about players, trades, strategies and statistics, all to the consternation of Steve French, who badly wanted Anna's attention.

"I think someone has his eye on you," Lily whispered.

"Oh yeah? He's a handsome guy, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess," Lily shrugged, feigning exaggerated boredom. "If you go for that trim and muscular, square jaw with deep set eyes thing. Not really my type, though."

"So what is your type, Ms. Stuart?" Anna wasn't sure why she'd asked, but she found herself profoundly interested in Lily's response.

You are—God, please don't let me have said that out loud! "You mean apart from my gender specifications?"

"Well, I'd say that's a given, unless you've decided to swing back the other way."

"Not a chance. I go for smart first, then a sense of humor. Outer beauty means little to me," Lily said haughtily.

"Yeah, and I like ugly cars too."

"Lilian Stuart," the lawyer said, picking up the phone on her desk.

"So how did you know he was going to call?"

"Anna! I'm fine. Thank you for asking," Lily ragged on her friend.

"Funny girl. I just got a call from Steve French inviting me to go to San Diego next Saturday for the first game of the Dodgers' road trip."

Lily knew this was going to happen, and she didn't like it one bit. She had overheard the arrogant prick bragging to his buddy at the game that he could get Anna to go out with him. Something about his tone suggested that he was definitely interested in more than just a date. *But who wouldn't be? Anna is irresistible.* "So what was your reply? I suppose you fell for the line about having the chance to get to know each other better on the drive down." It was meant to be teasing, but it came out as sarcasm.

Anna was taken aback at her friend's response. "What's that about, Lily? It sounds like you don't like Steve much."

I'm so screwed! Lily thought about coming clean about what she had overheard, but it occurred to her that Anna might well be interested in Steve's advances. "No, Steve is very nice. I was just teasing. Welcome back to the world of dating. I always keep my ears open for what lines work best on women," she kidded, hoping that would cover her faux pas.

The women tried to work out getting together one night during the week for a quick dinner, but their schedules wouldn't meet. Lily usually prepped for court appearances the night before and this was a particularly busy week with three cases on the docket. Anna would be with her family celebrating her father's 58th birthday on the only night the lawyer was available. They agreed to reconnect after the weekend to see if they could get together next week.

For his 58th birthday, George Kaklis asked to have his birthday dinner outside on the patio. His very best memories were of the times the family had eaten, laughed and played around the pool in the backyard. He wanted "something simple, like we used to do when the kids were all at home." Trouble was, "simple" to his wife, Martine, was having a caterer shop, prepare, serve and clean up. Even so, she was always happy to do things for her family, and especially glad to help make George's birthday a special one.

The second Mrs. Kaklis now stood in the kitchen, dutifully sorting ingredients for Turkish pilaf and stuffed baked tomatoes. Six top sirloin steaks marinated on the top rack of the industrial model refrigerator in the expansive kitchen. Hal and David had

agreed to do the honors at the grill, while Kim and Anna would prepare the dinner salad. Martine had picked up the large, elaborately decorated cake earlier in the day.

When they finished dinner, Hal and Anna cleared the table and returned to the patio for birthday cake and presents. "So what is everyone doing this weekend?" the patriarch asked. He was genuinely interested in the lives of his family members.

"Going out on the boat," said Hal cheerfully.

"Going out on the boat," Kim groaned.

"Going out on the boat?" David pleaded for an invitation.

"Going out on the boat!" Hal extended it, nodding at his teenage brother-in-law.

"Going out on the boat?" begged Kim, turning to her sister.

"Sorry. Not going out on the boat. I'm going with Steve French to the Dodgers game in San Diego."

"You're going out with Steve French?" George asked, obviously surprised. "I don't think he's for you, dear. Maybe you should consider waiting a while before you start dating again." The elder Kaklis had always been protective of Anna, even overprotective when it came to her dates or friends. He had thought Scott the perfect match for his daughter, and was distressed when they divorced, unaware of his son-in-law's breach.

Through the years, Anna had found it easier to defer to her father's judgment than to deal with his disappointment. Her father's approval of Scott had been the deciding factor when she accepted his marriage proposal. "It's not really a date, Dad. I went last week to their skybox for the Reds game, and he knows what a Dodgers fan I am." *Fine, I just won't think of it as a date.*

He would try a new tack. "I don't know, darling. After all, he is our account manager. You don't want to mix business and pleasure."

"Oh for goodness sakes, Dad! Anna isn't going to run off and elope." *Like Hal and I did*, she left unsaid. "I swear, you'd have us both still living at home if you had your way." Kim rescued her sister with a little levity.

Anna laughed and stood up quickly to gather the cake plates. Kim had created a slim opening and she wasn't going to miss it. "Mother, could you grab those two plates?" Anna disappeared into the kitchen with Martine. "Don't let him worry too much, okay?"

"I'll deal with him if he brings it up again. You just go have fun. It'll do you good to get out." Martine was used to running interference for the girls. She only wished George would pay as much attention to her as he did to the children and that goddamned dealership.

Lily stretched across the couch to grab the phone, not taking her eyes off UCLA's gridiron battle with the Stanford Cardinal. Fresh from her shower after cleaning the house and washing her pathetic car, she now wore an oversized long blue and yellow jersey that boasted her alma mater. Her beloved Bruins were already up 7-0 in the first quarter.

"Hello?"

"So how did you know that Steve French was a creep?"

Football flew right out of her head as she recognized her friend's voice. "Hi Anna. I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"Funny girl." It had become her standard reply. "Let me be your tour guide for the landmark Hotel del Coronado in San Diego. We're here in the mahogany trimmed ladies room off the Del's main lobby, admiring the polished brass fixtures adorning the ornately carved marble sinks."

"What on earth are you doing in the bathroom at the Del?"

"Such a personal question!" Anna said with mock indignation. "Steve suggested the Del for dinner, and I stopped in here to wash up." The rest of her tale left the lawyer in disbelief.

Anna exited the washroom to find Steve standing with his back to her at the hotel's registration desk. Pocketing something from the desk clerk, he walked out to the balcony to wait for her.

With a queasy feeling, Anna approached the counter and asked the clerk, "That gentleman who was just here, did he register for the night?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't give out that information."

Drawing a fifty dollar bill from her purse and passing it discreetly across the counter, she explained to the young woman, "I'm here with that man on our first date, and I would like to know what he has in mind."

A look of understanding crossed the clerk's face, and she gently pushed Anna's hand back across the counter, not taking the bill. "Yes, he got a single room with a king-sized bed. And a bottle of champagne."

Anna lurched on the last remark. "Thank you."

Though already jaded regarding Steve French, Lily couldn't believe how pompous the guy actually was. "What an arrogant jerk!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah. I was going to fake a migraine, but I may not have to fake it after all. I'm thinking about renting a car and driving home."

"You get migraines?"

"Sometimes."

Lily imagined her friend hiding out at the Del. "What if I drove down and picked you up? I could be there in about two and a half hours."

Anna protested, but secretly, she loved the idea of riding back to LA with the woman who always made her laugh. *Even in the tiny RAV4*. Lily further prodded her friend to think about it, even as she walked upstairs to pull on her jeans and change into a rust-colored knit sweater.

"Well, I can't stay in the restroom for two and half hours." Anna had decided what she would do. "So I'll be in the lobby at nine o'clock. Are you sure, Lily? That's a lot of driving."

Lily confirmed her offer, telling Anna that she was ready now to head out the door. The dark-haired woman exited the restroom in search of her date. *The direct approach, right between the eyes*, she decided. Finding the man on the breezy balcony above the restaurant, she began, "Steve, when I was coming out of the ladies room earlier, I saw you picking up a room key."

Busted! "Oh," he stammered, "I thought you might want to freshen up after dinner." *That could work*, he thought stupidly.

Four hundred dollars a night to freshen up? "I have to tell you Steve, that makes me very uncomfortable. I've already called someone to pick me up. And I'm going to be having dinner alone tonight." He protested at first, but when it suddenly occurred to him that he had just offended one of the paper's most important advertisers, he managed to voice a humble apology. It was too soon to tell if this would damage their working relationship.

Lily pulled into the valet circle at 8:50. "I'm just here to pick someone up," she told the young man in the pith helmet who had moved to take her keys. Less than a minute later, she emerged with her tall friend in tow.

On the ride home, Anna confessed that she was nursing a small headache, and requested that Lily carry the conversation. She reclined her seat slightly and asked to hear all about the attorney's family, her friends, her work, and the things she liked to do. Lily answered with the story of her precarious start in life. With the love evident in her voice, she described how Eleanor and Katharine had helped her to become the person she was today. She then went on to talk about the Braxton Street Law Clinic, about Tony and Lauren, and the work they did with underprivileged families.

Anna was fascinated and intrigued by the tale. She understood now that the grit and determination she had seen in this remarkable woman during their underground ordeal was not something Lily had called up to answer their desperate need. Rather, it was an integral part of who she was.

She began to tell Lily about the presentation on youth programs she had seen at the Chamber of Commerce meeting the morning of the earthquake, and about her desire

to do something for kids. As she spoke, though, she realized that her small headache was indeed turning into a full-blown migraine and she begged off the rest of the conversation until another time. The last hour was logged in companionable silence, Anna dozing when she could, and Lily lost in thought about the feelings she knew were growing for the beautiful woman. When she realized where her thoughts were headed, she mentally cautioned herself.

"Anna? We're here." Lily gently shook her friend's arm. *Her arm feels so clammy.* "Are you okay? What can I do?"

Anna sat up and pressed two fingers from her right hand onto her right eyebrow, directly above her eye where her worst migraines formed. She barely noticed her aching leg as she stepped from the car. "It's a big one. I think I'm going to be sick," was all she said.

Lily helped the tall woman into the house, sticking close by all the way to her bedroom. As she had predicted, Anna was sick as soon as entered the adjoining bathroom. Lily wet a cloth and tenderly wiped her friend's face as she slumped on the cool tile floor. "How can I help, Anna? Do you have medicine?"

Anna nodded slowly. "There's a plastic jar on the door of the refrigerator. Can you bring it?"

"Of course." Lily found the medicine and returned to the bathroom with a small glass of water. "Here," she said, handing the jar to her friend.

Anna unscrewed the cap and removed one of the yellow capsules. Despite the awful headache, she couldn't stop the smile that formed when she saw the offered glass. "Um...these are suppositories. They work faster."

"Oh." Lily could feel the heat rush up her chest to her face, and she knew that she was bright red with embarrassment. "I'll just...uh, I'll wait out here." She left the room, closing the door behind her.

When Anna emerged a few minutes later, she sat beside the blonde on the queen-sized bed. "I need to lie down now. The medicine will knock me out cold in about ten minutes."

"Do you want me to stay a while, until you're asleep?"

"No, I'll be okay." Anna withdrew a blue silk nightshirt from the bottom drawer of the nightstand. "There's an extra key in the kitchen drawer under the phone. Take it, and lock up for me, okay?"

Lily nodded. "Can I give you a call tomorrow?" Anna agreed and began to unbutton her blouse. Lily felt her face go red again, and stood. "I hope you feel better." Nervously, she leaned forward and lightly kissed her friend's forehead.

"Thank you, Lily. For everything." It was all she could do to get the words out, but she needed to show the attorney her gratitude for her friendship. It was indeed special, and Anna knew with a certainty that it would get stronger.

Alone in her car, Lily tried to recall if she had ever been more embarrassed in her entire life. *She must have thought I was waiting around to watch her put it in!* The image brought the deep blush back to her face and neck.

Her thoughts turned again to the attraction she was feeling for Anna, but she couldn't bring herself to imagine closeness beyond that of best friends. She indeed wanted to be Anna's very best friend, and to protect her from jerks like Steve French. *That didn't mean it was sexual attraction. They were just friends.* .

Chapter 7

The blonde attorney was fuming! Tony had just told her that they had lost the foundation grant for Kidz Kamp, a community program that sponsored camping trips for children in foster care. What had Lily hopping mad was that the foundation had *increased* funding for the Boy Scouts. As a volunteer for Kidz Kamp, she was jealous, pure and simple. And she took it personally that the Scouts excluded gays from their ranks.

"Lilian Stuart," the blonde barked into her phone.

Whoa! Somebody's having a bad day. "Hi, Lily. It's Anna."

The lawyer sighed with exasperation. "I'm having such a shitty day!"

"Oh, I'm fine, and thanks for asking." *Gotcha!* The line went quiet and Anna wondered if her joke had come at the wrong time.

"Sorry," Lily finally said sheepishly. "I just got some unpleasant news, and my mind was there."

"Unpleasant news? What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's just a funding cut. In our line of work you get used to it. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"It's okay. I was calling to see if you'd be interested in an early lunch. I'm downtown for the Chamber of Commerce meeting, and we'll be wrapping up a little after eleven."

"That would be great! I could use a friendly face." They firmed up their plans to meet at Lily's office and walk to a nearby deli.

Eating lunch on a park bench, Lily told Anna all about Kidz Kamp. She and Tony were regular volunteers, along with staff from the county's social services department and juvenile court. "The kids love it. The foster parents get a break. And all the volunteers get the chance to build trust and have fun with the kids we see on the job."

Anna was impressed that her friend was doing something so selfless and helpful to the community. Thinking back to the moving presentation she had seen, she felt shamed by the fact that she had failed to follow through. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said we've got a trip planned for next weekend if you'd like to join us. Right now, I'm the only female chaperone and we have three girls on the list to go. Please, please, please!" she asked excitedly.

"No, no, no! I don't do sleeping on the ground. Or bugs. Or snakes." Anna was adamant. Camping was not her thing.

"But it's fun!" pleaded Lily.

"Then I hope you have enough fun for both of us. Now if you ever need help taking them to a play or to a museum, sign me up. I'm just not..."

"You're *prissy*," the lawyer teased.

"I'm not prissy, I'm...refined."

"You're *prissy*."

The prissy Amazon had called later that day to invite Lily on a boat outing with Hal and Kim. Now Sunday morning, anxiety about her first boating trip weighed heavily on her mind as she waited for Anna to pick her up. When the long black car wheeled into the apartment complex, Lily stood to gather her things.

"Ready to go?" Anna asked cheerfully.

"You bet," was the excited reply. As Anna had instructed, Lily had filled her daypack with sunscreen, a warm jacket, and a change of clothes. At the bottom of the bag was a foiled-wrapped loaf of nut bread, her contribution to the food supply.

Hal and Kim had spent Saturday night on the boat, so they were ready for launch as soon as their passengers arrived. It was a little on the cool side as they set out, but it warmed up quickly as the sun climbed higher. The sisters sat on the cushions at the back—or stern, as Lily learned it was called—while the first-time boater rode shotgun, getting a lesson from Hal on the boat's features.

"She's a lot of fun," Kim said, gesturing at the blonde. "She's making Hal's day, asking all those questions. Do you think she's just being nice, or is Hal really all that fascinating?"

"You think maybe we've misjudged the guy all these years?" the tall woman joked.

"Nah, couldn't be. I think she's just easily amused."

"Well, I'd worry about anyone who found Hal interesting."

Lily chose that moment to glance their way. When she realized that she and Hal were the subject of their amusement, she stuck out her tongue and turned her back haughtily. Fifteen minutes later, she was proudly driving the boat on her own.

"So what was so funny?" Hal demanded as he slid in beside his wife.

"We were trying to decide if Lily was really interested in your boat lesson or if she was just being nice." Kim slipped her arm through her husband's to ease the potential blow to his ego.

"Well, I think it was both," he spouted indignantly.

Anna rose and moved to the tall "co-pilot" seat alongside her friend. The blonde was standing on her tiptoes, chin up, peering out over the shimmering blue plane.

"Having a little trouble seeing over the bow, Pygmy?"

"Will you still think you're funny when we run a sail up your neck, Amazon?" Lily turned and nearly choked at the sight. Anna had taken off her shirt and shorts to reveal a plum colored two-piece bathing suit...and the most beautiful body the blonde had ever seen. Unable to look away, she took in Anna's long shapely legs, well-toned shoulders and abs, and the curve of her...figure.

Anna was accustomed to being admired, though she had never marveled at her own features. "Good genes," she'd always told Scott. That changed however when she began working with Nikki, the personal trainer who took over after the physical therapy. Now as she stood beside the wheel, Anna was acutely aware that Lily was admiring her appearance. She was proud of her hard work, and liked knowing that her intense workouts had also earned her friend's approval.

For her part, Lily more than approved. She knew she'd been caught staring, so she just went with it. "Wow, you've really been working out! You look great!"

Suddenly shy, Anna could only smile and look away. "The sun feels good. Did you bring your suit too?"

Lily had hers on underneath as well, but in the presence of *this goddess*, she was having second thoughts about sunbathing. *How stupid would that be?* She quickly discarded her shirt and shorts, hoping that she would pass muster in her aquamarine tankini.

Now it was Anna's turn to stare, though the dark sunglasses hid her appraisal. *How was it possible that this woman were actually smaller than she appeared?* Lily had muscular legs, tapering at her hips to a tiny waist. Her shoulders and arms looked strong and lithe, and she was more well-endowed than she appeared in her suits and casual clothes. *Wonder what she'd think if she knew I was looking at her breasts!* For some reason, that realization amused more than embarrassed the tall woman, but she covered with a casual comment on Lily's suit, and a warning not to get burned.

They cruised north along California's picturesque coastline, turning back at mid-afternoon. As the sun began to fade, the two friends donned their clothes and jackets

and Anna wrapped herself in a wool blanket from the cabin below. Seeing Lily shiver as the wind blew through her lightweight fleece, she held her arms open and invited her friend to huddle inside. When the small woman stepped in front, Anna closed the blanket around them both, instantly sparking a memory of pulling Lily close as she struggled for breath in the collapsed mall. A sense of panic suddenly invaded her, and she squeezed Lily tightly to her chest.

The blonde was lost in the sensation. Her rational mind told her that Anna was simply seeking warmth in the embrace, but she enjoyed for the moment imagining that it meant something more. *I could get so used to this.*

Once docked, Lily thanked her hosts profusely as all four pitched in to clean up their mess and wash the sea spray from the boat's surfaces. "You're welcome any time," Kim replied sincerely. She hoped that Lily's interest would encourage her sister to come along more often. Kim couldn't put her finger on why, but she certainly had a feeling she would be seeing more of this blonde.

Pulling up in front of the apartment, Anna exited the black car to help Lily with her things. "Thanks for coming with us. I really had fun, and so did Kim and Hal." With that, the two friends shared a friendly hug.

Something subtle had passed between the women today. Lily knew as she walked into her darkened apartment that she needed to keep her feelings in check. Anna was turning out to be all the things she wanted in a partner—kind, smart, funny...beautiful. Falling in love with a straight woman would get her heart broken for sure.

Driving toward her home in Bel Air, Anna pondered the unexpected feelings that surfaced when she held Lily close under the blanket. The moment had triggered some sort of protective instinct, and Anna enjoyed the sensation of warmth and closeness. It felt like...something had *clicked*, whatever that meant. She liked Lily a lot, and she wanted to get to know her better. She decided then to do something totally out of character.

"Lilian Stuart," the attorney answered enthusiastically, recognizing the number on her display.

"Good morning, Lily. How are you?" came the syrupy sweet voice.

"Hey, good for you, Amazon! You're social skills are really coming along," she praised playfully.

"Don't let it get out. We wouldn't want others to raise their expectations."

"I'll keep it just between us. What's up? By the way, I really had a great time yesterday."

"Yeah, me too. I was wondering if...*hypothetically speaking*, of course...a person were to decide to go, say...camping, what sorts of camping equipment might that person...*hypothetically* require?"

Lily sat up, very excited at where this conversation seemed to be headed. "Well, one would probably need a sleeping bag, a mess kit, some good hiking boots, and a few odds and ends to enhance one's comfort." She paused and added, "*Hypothetically*, of course."

"Of course. So if one were to...*hypothetically*...decide that she needed this equipment, how difficult do you think it would be to get someone's help in picking out the right things?"

"Oh, I think someone might be available on Wednesday night to escort such a person to a conveniently located REI store for said items."

"6:30?"

"6:30 it is. And I'll spring for the pizza afterwards."

"Tony, you got a minute?" Lily stood in the doorway of the managing partner's office.

"Anytime. What's up?" Tony LeFevre was one of Lily's favorite people in the whole world. He and his brother Mike had started the Clinic ten years ago with a grant from the LA Minority Coalition. Lily never knew Mike, who died of AIDS the year before she joined the firm.

Tony was 36 years old, and a respected member of LA's legal community. He wasn't particularly handsome, but he had that charm that most women found irresistible. He treated everyone with respect, and he loved kids.

"I have a favor to ask," she started awkwardly. "You remember my friend Anna, the woman from the earthquake who came by for lunch last week?"

"Are you kidding? A man doesn't forget someone like that." Tony had considered asking his co-worker how she would feel about him asking her friend out.

"Yeah, that's kind of where I was going." The blonde paused to consider her words. "She's going to be coming along this weekend on the Kidz Kamp trip. I was wondering if you'd mind...not flirting with her, or asking her out or anything."

That settles that, he thought. "Of course, if that's what you want. Are you...interested in her?"

"Oh no, it isn't that," Lily quickly assured. "It's just that we're getting to be really good friends, and I wouldn't want anything to...complicate that."

"No problem, my friend."

"Thanks." She returned to her office, knowing that if she had been straight, Tony would definitely have been her type.

The RAV4 picked its way along the wooded road until they reached the campsite. Tony and two other men were working with the boys to unload the tents and set up the cooking supplies. They moved hurriedly, as darkness was falling, and it was important to everyone's sense of comfort to have a hot meal on the first night in camp.

The trip to Silverwood Lake, north of San Bernardino, had taken nearly three hours, most of that spent navigating LA traffic to exit the city. This was their favorite site. It had all of the things kids liked to do—fishing, swimming, hiking, and canoeing. To Anna's relief, there were even restrooms close to the campsite.

The dark-haired woman had grown more and more apprehensive as they drove further from the city. After the shopping trip with Lily, she had come to terms with leaving behind the comforts of home. What had her on edge today were the three girls in the back seat. Rosa and Carlotta were 11-year-old twins who giggled and whispered to each other in Spanish. Lateisha, a nine-year-old African-American girl, kept to herself, staring out the window lost in thought. Lily engaged all of the girls in occasional dialogue, asking about school, their friends, and things they liked to do. Anna, the mechanical engineer who lived in Bel Air and sold luxury cars, couldn't think of how to relate, so like Lateisha, she too retreated in silence.

Sensing her friend's nervousness, Lily suggested that Anna and Lateisha unload the supplies from the back of the SUV while she and the twins set up the tent the five would share for the next two nights. Though hesitant to be alone with this quiet child, Anna was glad to be doing something other than just sitting. "Have you ever been camping before?" she asked the little girl.

Lateisha simply shook her head no.

"Well, this is my first time too. I guess we both have a lot to learn this weekend." When the girl didn't reply, Anna knew she would have to think of something more engaging. "How about giving me a hand with this cooler? It's pretty heavy for just one person." Together, they hauled their load to where Tony had stacked the cooking supplies.

"Who's your helper there?" Tony asked.

"This is Lateisha. She's pretty strong for a nine-year-old. It's a good thing, too, because I couldn't lift this by myself," Anna praised. The small girl finally gave a shy smile, and the woman hoped she might break through after all.

"I can see how strong she is. If you need any extra help from me, just let me know."

"Oh, I think we'll manage," said Anna. They headed back to the RAV4 to finish their task.

Anna met the other leaders, Jack and Matthew, while she worked to organize the cooking gear. Jack was an intake officer from the juvenile detention facility. Four of the six boys on this trip had darkened Jack's door, having gotten in trouble over shoplifting, vandalism or fighting in school. The other man, Matthew, was Jack's

brother-in-law. Lily loved it when these two came along, because they always brought canoes.

Tony's two charges, like the twins who came with Lily, were in foster placement, waiting for their parents to grow up. Lateisha was a special case.

Two hours after they arrived at their campsite, all the campers were relaxing around an open fire. Though their bellies were full with Tony's *excellent* spaghetti, the allure of roasted marshmallows was too strong to resist. Two years ago, Lauren had insisted that the men share the cooking chores to set a positive example for the boys in the group. Grumbling, they conceded that she had a point. Lily and Anna were charged with breakfast for the next two days.

Shortly after ten, the children were sent into the tents to find their sleeping bags and settle down. The five adults planned the next day. Jack and Matthew wanted to take their boys fishing first thing, then hiking in the afternoon. The others opted to explore the nature trail in the morning, and swim in the afternoon if it warmed up. In mid-October, the temperature could go either way.

Crawling into their tent, Lily and Anna discovered that the twins had moved their sleeping bags to right side, while Lateisha had moved hers to the left. That left them to squeeze into the middle, side by side. Lily surprised her friend with a gift of a self-inflating air mattress. It wasn't Grandma's feather bed, but Anna found that the cushion took the edge off the hard ground.

As they settled in, Carlotta spilled her sister's secret. "Rosa's afraid of the dark."

Lily knew what that was like, and she tried to think of ways to reassure the girl. Anna nudged her and whispered into her ear. "That's a good idea," Lily said to her friend. And so it was that Anna and Lily told the fascinated children their story of being trapped together in the mall, and finding their way out in the darkness. "I used to sleep with a light on at night, but since the earthquake, I haven't needed it anymore," she finished.

Getting no reply, the pair realized that all three girls had fallen asleep. "Well, I certainly enjoyed hearing the story again," Anna whispered.

"Me too."

In the night, a small hand shook the tall woman awake. "I have to go the bathroom," Lateisha squeaked.

"So do I," Anna replied. "Will you go with me?"

"Okay," the little girl agreed.

Finding the flashlight and their shoes, the two walked quietly to the nearby restroom. Without a word, they took care of their business and made their way back to the tent. "Goodnight, Lateisha."

Several moments later, Anna heard a quiet "goodnight."

Lily awoke to voices outside the tent. She sat up to discover that she was alone, and the light streaming in through the flapping zipper told her it was morning *whether she liked it or not*. The sleepy camper tugged on her boots and crawled to the opening. She couldn't believe the sight. Nine children and three grown men were lined up with their mess kits, each getting a heaping dose of oatmeal and brown sugar from the Amazon Chef. She hurriedly grabbed her kit and scrambled to the back of the line.

"Wow! Who does your hair?" Anna teased.

The suddenly self-conscious blonde reached up to flatten her locks as her friend presented her with a piping hot cup of coffee. "I suppose you crawl out of bed looking like Cinderella every morning," she challenged.

"Hardly...more like Sleeping Beauty." She winked at the blonde, who stuck out her tongue and looked for a place to sit.

Anna filled her own plate last, and sat next to Lateisha on a fallen log near the edge of the campsite. "You're quiet this morning. What are you thinking about?"

The little girl shrugged. "Nothin'."

"Sometimes when something's bothering me, it helps if I talk about it with somebody else. If you want to do that, I'll be happy to listen, Lateisha."

The woman expected no response, so she was surprised when a small voice said, "My mama died." With that, the child broke down in sobs.

Anna set her plate down and took Lateisha in her arms. She stroked the girl's braided hair as she rocked her slightly back and forth. "I'm so sorry, honey. It must be so hard for you." From her own experience, Anna knew exactly how lost the little girl felt. She was determined to ease the hurt in whatever small way she could. She encouraged Lateisha to talk about her mom, and soon began talking about her own.

The others had noticed that the quiet little girl was finally opening up, and they gave the two a wide berth. Lily was glad that Lateisha had found a friend, but she knew that Anna too would be richly rewarded for reaching this troubled child. These were the treasures that Lily pursued when she worked with children and families in trouble. No amount of monetary compensation was worth the feeling she got when she knew that she was making a difference in someone's life. She was proud that her friend had reached out to this child, and impressed that she had broken through. She doubted that many others from Anna's opulent world could have done that. When the group set out on their nature hike, the sight of the tall woman holding the small child's hand triggered in Lily an emotional groundswell. *Anna Kaklis is a very special woman.*

Lunch that day was hotdogs, chips and cookies, always a hit with the kids. If Lily had worried that Anna might not like the outdoor cuisine, she needn't have bothered. She and Lateisha had piled their plates high and retreated to their fallen log. In fact, Anna was coming off like an old hand with this camping stuff. *This is my world, Anna. What do you think?*

In the afternoon, the boys—who apparently had lost their minds—decided to go swimming, even though the water temperature was more suited to otters and Russian submarines. Lily and Anna commandeered the two canoes for a trip across the lake.

"This isn't as easy as it looks, Lateisha." The pair was struggling to avoid several low branches that hung over the water directly in their path. When Anna paddled one way, Lateisha paddled the other, and now they were hopelessly trapped. From the other canoe, Lily and the twins were howling with laughter at their predicament, and that made the tall woman more determined to get out of this mess. She stood gingerly, reaching for a branch to push them away from the shoreline. Unfortunately, Lateisha chose that instant to drop her oar in the water and push off from the sandy bottom. With a scream, Anna toppled head first into the freezing water.

Lily's first instinct was to laugh. She fought it, however, and rowed quickly to her fallen friend. Barely containing a grin as she watched Anna splash around to find her footing, the blonde asked, "Are you hurt?"

"N-n-n-no!" Anna shivered, as she stood waist-deep in the water.

Lily rowed still closer and leaned over the side, asking in a voice so low that only her friend could hear, "Are you cold, or just glad to see me?"

In a lightening quick moment, Anna reached into the other canoe and grabbed the taunting woman by her waistband and collar. "Oh, I'm glad to see you alright!" Rosa and Carlotta watched in shock as their leader was thrown end over end into the lake. In the next breath, Anna pulled her canoe from the overhanging trees and aimed it toward the campsite. "Row for your life, Lateisha!" She jumped into the back of the canoe and the two paddled feverishly to put distance between themselves and their pursuers. The three girls cried with laughter as Lily screamed her threats for revenge across the lake.

Once they reached the shore, Anna jumped out and dragged the boat up onto the sand. "You'd better hide," she told the delighted Lateisha, expecting the game to continue once their adversaries reached the camp. The little girl ran to stand behind Tony as Anna disappeared inside the tent.

"Where is that Amazon?" Lily bellowed as she raced from their abandoned canoe. Rushing into the tent, she found Anna kneeling topless with her back to the zippered entry. Oddly speechless, Lily stopped dead in her tracks.

"Gotcha, funny girl," the woman said without turning, pulling a sweatshirt over her head.

The game momentarily forgotten, Lily blushed as she recognized the lustful sensations that overwhelmed her as she glimpsed the muscled expanse of the woman's back. Without a word, she moved to her bag to find some dry clothes.

"You're not angry, are you?" Anna asked, suddenly concerned about her friend's silence.

"Are you kidding? I bet those girls haven't had that much fun in years." Talking about the children took the exchange to safe ground. *I'm in such trouble here.*

The ride back into the city on Sunday afternoon took a little over two hours. They dropped the twins at their foster home, and made their way toward the temporary shelter where Lateisha was staying until her father returned from military service overseas. Anna hopped out of the car to help the girl with her things, and they shared a long hug that brought a tear to Lily's eye.

"You were great with Lateisha, you know. Your being with us on this trip was the best thing that could have happened to her." Lily's praise was genuine.

"I liked her. She's a sweetheart, and I understand what she's going through."

"You mean because you lost your mother around her age?"

The woman nodded, a sad look crossing her face. Lily placed her hand on Anna's knee to comfort her, "Thanks for spending so much time with her. You're going to make a great mother one of these days. If that's what you want, that is." She dismissed the unbidden image of the two of them fussing over a baby.

"I'd really like to have children some day. I just hate the whole 'trial and error' thing of marrying a suitable father." Anna went on to tell Lily about the call she had received from Scott last week. He wanted her to know that he and Sarah had gotten married in a civil ceremony. This came as no surprise, as Anna knew that Scott had moved in with Sarah shortly after they had separated. According to his lawyer, this had been under the auspices of being close to his son. "I'm happy for them. Really, I am. But I can't help but envy them both, and I wonder if Sarah has something that was meant for me."

"I think you know the real answer to that," Lily said. "You know, more and more single women are choosing to have children. Have you ruled that out?"

"I haven't really thought about it, but I suppose it's an option."

Lily was in trouble and she knew it. What she now felt for the tall dark-haired woman had slipped past friendship, and she was sure to have her heart broken—it was only a matter of time. She and Anna had gotten together twice during the week following Silverwood Lake, once for dinner at Empyre's and once at Lily's house. Anna knew that her friend lived on a budget, so she always paid when she invited Lily out. They were increasingly comfortable together, poking fun at each other at times, and baring their souls at others.

On Saturday night, Lily picked up Chinese food and made her way to Sherman Oaks to have dinner with her friends. She had reluctantly turned down a movie offer with Anna because she had neglected Sandy and Suzanne for weeks.

"Are you insane?" Suzanne erupted when Lily had confessed that she was falling for Anna. The woman knew she would get an earful of admonition from both her friends, but she hadn't expected this outburst.

"The heart has a will of its own, Suzanne. It's not like I can help liking her. She's smart and interesting. She makes me laugh. She's kind and generous." Lily wanted to add "beautiful" to the list, but knew that would really set Suzanne off on a tirade. "You should have seen her last week with one of our foster children. That girl had hardly said a word in six months, and by the time we dropped her off at home, they were best friends. Anna even gave the girl her phone number, and they've already talked two or three times this week."

Sandy crossed the room and sat down next to her friend. "Suzanne's right, Lily. Anna's going to break your heart all to pieces." Sandy looked at her forlorn friend and added softly, "It's not that she can't be a good friend to you. She obviously already is. It's just that she is straight...and that means she can't return the feelings you have for her. You're only going to hurt yourself by pursuing this, Lily. "

Lily nodded her head slowly as she looked at the floor. On the inside, it was her friends that she wanted to back away from. A few minutes later, she did just that, grabbing her jacket and heading for home.

"I think we're too late," Suzanne said to her partner.

"I think so too. All we can do is be there for her to help pick up the pieces."

Chapter 8

From her office on the second floor, Lily saw the beautiful woman exit the black car and walk briskly toward the entrance to her building. *I'm getting a surprise visitor for lunch*, she thought with amused satisfaction. She quickly reached into her top drawer to check her appearance in the compact mirror. Three minutes later, she couldn't believe her eyes—Anna was walking back to her car...with Tony!

"How could he do that!" Lily demanded. Lauren hadn't seen Lily so mad since the Kidz Kamp funding cut. It was best not to answer, just to let the blonde attorney vent.

"Is something wrong?" Pauline had made her way down the hall to see what the yelling was about.

"It seems that Tony asked Lily's friend out, even though she'd asked him not to," Lauren explained.

"Oh, no. Tony didn't ask her. She called him."

Lily thought she might be physically ill.

One hour later, the BMW with the beautiful driver dropped Tony at the sidewalk in front of the building. The smiling lawyer had a spring in his step as he made his way back inside. In his desk chair, he found a small, blonde, very angry attorney.

"You could have said no!" she growled.

"Not to this." Still smiling, he removed a check from his pocket and placed it on the desk in front of her.

From the account of Premier Motors, payable to Kidz Kamp, in the amount of ten thousand dollars. Signed, Anna M. Kaklis.

Pulling through the open gate at the Kaklis home, the woman in the battered SUV suddenly felt like "country come to town." She had been delighted when Kim called with the invitation to Anna's thirty-second birthday dinner, but as she parked among the BMWs, she couldn't help but feel self-conscious.

"Surprise!" she said when Anna answered the door. The tall woman was thrilled to see her friend, and right away set off to introduce her to her parents and younger brother. She, and now Kim, had told everyone about the petite blonde attorney who had rescued her in the earthquake.

The birthday girl—her actual birthday was the following Tuesday—walked her friend through the majestic house toward the backyard patio. Lily took in the splendor of the fine home, lavishly decorated with art and antiques. Once outside, Anna dragged her to the umbrella table where George and Martine Kaklis sat with David, Kim and Hal. She wasn't surprised to see that the men in the Kaklis family were tall and handsome.

"How's my favorite first mate?" Hal asked enthusiastically.

"Hey, fella! I'm supposed to be your favorite first-mate," whined Kim, backhanding her husband playfully across his stomach. She reached out to hug the blonde, "I'm glad you could come."

"Me too. Thanks for inviting me."

Anna moved beside her stepmother. "Lily, I'd like to you meet my mother, Martine." When her father had married the widow, it had taken a couple of years before Anna felt comfortable calling Martine her mother. George had asked both of them to accept the label as an attempt to build family unity. The teenager had feared at the time that it would betray her own mother's memory, but she complied to please her father. At 32, Anna knew she'd been lucky to have such a good relationship with the woman.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Kaklis," the blonde said politely.

"My brother, David." David was well over six feet tall, with his sister's black hair, but Martine's hazel eyes.

"Hello, David."

"And this is my father, George."

Lily held out her hand. "Mr. Kaklis."

"Mom, Dad, David, I want you to meet somebody very special. This is my dear friend, Lily Stuart."

Somebody very special? Lily relished that thought.

George Kaklis' reaction reminded the woman of her first meeting with Kim. The man stepped forward to embrace her, then stood back and said sincerely, "I can't tell you how happy I am to meet the woman who saved my daughter's life."

"You know, she always says that, but I've learned that she usually leaves out the part where she saved my life. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't raised such a courageous daughter."

Kim leaned over and butted in, "Hal and I call them both 'the mutual admiration society.' It's nauseating."

On cue, the two women blushed slightly, and turned the tables on the always lovey-dovey captain and first-mate, teasing them about their own mutual admiration.

Dinner was lively, with lots of conversation and questions for their guest. "So Lily, I take it you aren't married," Martine started.

"That's right, Mrs. Kaklis."

David jumped in, "Anna told us about something funny that you said when you guys were in the bridal shop at the mall. What was that again?"

Anna repeated Lily's quip about her worst fear, and while everyone laughed, Martine didn't quite get it. Kim noticed the perplexed look and whispered loudly enough for everyone at the table to hear, "Lily's a lesbian, Mother."

A suddenly embarrassed Martine Kaklis looked at her guest with wide eyes. She too whispered loudly, "Oh, I'm sorry." She had somehow been left out of the loop on this bit of information.

Lily just laughed and whispered back "Don't worry. I'm cool with it." She winked conspiratorially.

Everyone then laughed, but Martine went on, still whispering. "No, I mean... why am I whispering?" In her normal voice, she continued, "I mean I'm sorry for being so presumptuous. Now that I think of it, I believe Anna did mention it. I just forgot."

From there, Lily regaled the group with tales from Anna's first outing with Kidz Kamp. Everyone in the room would have given their eye teeth to have seen the usually chic Anna cooking and serving breakfast to the campers, negotiating a sleeping bag, or especially tumbling into the lake. All were especially proud-surprised even-as Lily told of how Anna had broken through to the quiet Lateisha.

None had ever imagined that the serious woman who stood out among LA's business leaders would so easily connect with a troubled child.

Lily was enjoying herself thoroughly. The Kaklis family was fun, and they obviously were extremely devoted to one another. Being raised by a single mother, the blonde had never experienced this type of family life. Not that she was complaining—life with Eleanor had been perfect as far as Lily was concerned—but it was interesting to see the sibling dynamics, as well as the familial interchange between George and Martine. This was the life the young attorney wanted for all of the children she worked with in the foster care system.

George was fascinated by their guest, but troubled by something he saw in his own daughter's face when he watched the two interact. It was unsettling, and he had seen it before when, at 20 years old, Anna had brought home her friend Carolyn from college. George had been certain at the time that Carolyn was a lesbian, and he was glad to learn that Anna and she had drifted apart during the following school year. All of this scrutiny of Lily notwithstanding, George couldn't help but like the young woman, and he could never dismiss his gratitude for her role in their earthquake rescue. Still, he felt the need to send a subtle message to both of the young women. "So Lily, I'm curious. Do you ever encounter discrimination in your work?"

"You mean because I'm so short?" she quipped, knowing well that he was talking about her sexual orientation.

He chuckled, then went on, "No, I was just wondering if prejudice against gays was as bad in the court system as it is in the business world. I don't consider myself prejudiced, but I have to confess that I've always been reluctant to hire people who were open about their sexual preferences because I think our potential customers would rather not deal with someone gay."

Lily bristled slightly, but tried to keep in mind that most people who "didn't consider themselves prejudiced" were simply ignorant of what constituted bigotry. For some reason, it wasn't taboo to be "open about your sexual preferences" if you were straight. She didn't want to offend her friend's father, so she tried not to take it personally. "So are you saying that BMWs aren't appealing to gays?" Lily glanced at her friend to see if she was stepping over any lines with her question. To her displeasure, Anna seemed to be considering the argument on its face, rather than dismissing out of hand the notion of discrimination against gay sales staff.

George was a great businessman and he was certain that his position was best for the dealership. "No, not at all. I'm just saying that it makes better business sense to sacrifice the business of a minority than to risk alienating a majority. It's just a matter of numbers."

For Lily, the worst part of this was the seeming acceptance by Anna to this Neanderthal point of view. Furthermore, that George had mentioned it at all seemed purposive to Lily, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what his motivation might have been.

To Anna, it was all a moot point, since she did all the hiring at the dealership. It had never occurred to her to consider someone's sexual orientation as relevant to the job.

She resolved to talk to her father in private, missing the fact that the conversation had left her friend uneasy.

Abruptly standing, the uncomfortable blonde looked across the table to her friend as though she were a total stranger. "I hope you've had a nice birthday, Anna. I should be going. I've got three cases scheduled for court next week, and I need to prepare." Turning to Kim and Hal, she added, "Thanks for including me in your plans. I know the way out." With that, she turned and left.

The front door closed before Anna could react. As realization dawned on what Lily must have thought, she immediately scampered to the front door to see the RAV4 disappear beyond the hedge. "Dad, that was rude!" she said, returning to the dining room. In all her life, she had never spoken to her father that way, and the shock was clearly registered on all the faces of the Kaklis family.

"Anna, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out that way. If you want, I'll call her and apologize." George was indeed contrite. He had not intended to insult the woman, though it was clear that he had.

"No, I'll talk to her. I should go too. Thank you all for the party."

"Wait up, Anna." Kim rose to follow her sister to the door. "Are you going to Lily's?"

"I think I should, don't you? I just sat there, Kim. I had no idea that she was taking Dad's words to heart, and I didn't stick up for her."

"You need to talk to her. I don't know what's up with Dad, but she surely knows that you don't feel that way." She took her sister's shoulders and looked her squarely in the eye. "You and Lily care about each other, and you need to see what that's about. Don't let Dad decide this."

Anna was struck dumb by her sister's words. *See what it's about? Did she mean...*

The dark-haired woman finally found her voice. "I...it isn't like that, Kim." *Is it?* With that, she was gone.

Lily was furious with herself. *I should have kept my mouth shut!* She was angry at herself for stomping off like a spoiled child. "I ruined dinner. I ruined her party. I've ruined everything. Way to go, Lilian," she said aloud, pounding on the steering wheel.

The RAV4 responded with a sputter, and slowed dramatically of its own volition. Lily slid one lane to the right and exited the freeway. To her relief, she spotted a Chevron station ahead as the car continued to slow, but it was clear she wasn't going to make it. "Damn it! What else could..." She stopped herself suddenly, remembering that the last time she had asked a question like that, the earth had opened up and swallowed her. The RAV4 finally died against the curb, about 30 feet shy of the busy station.

Just great. She's probably gone to tell her buddies what a shitty friend I turned out to be. Anna sat in her car staring at Lily's empty parking space, furious with herself for not voicing her disagreement to what her father had said. Gathering her nerve, she waved her hand across the infrared beam. "Lily's cell phone," she enunciated clearly.

"Three hundred dollars!" The blonde was incredulous. This was not the estimate for fixing the car, but the offering to take it off her hands. "The tires alone are worth a hundred and fifty apiece!"

The mechanic shrugged. He had a friend who would buy the car for parts, but neither was going to make a fortune on the ancient SUV. "Take it or leave it."

Lily groped for her phone when she heard the familiar chime. *Anna!* She would face the music first for her rash behavior. Then, she would deal with her car.

"Hi, Anna," she answered contritely. "I'm sorry I stormed out. I lost my head."

Anna was shocked. *She's apologizing to me?* "No, Lily. You did nothing wrong. What Dad said was wrong, and I should have corrected him. I do all the hiring at the dealership, and I couldn't figure out what on earth he was talking about. I'm the one who needs to be forgiven."

"No, you're not. I was at a party in his house. He has a right to his opinions. I should have just controlled my temper. I ruined your party."

"No you didn't. It wasn't your fault." Immensely relieved that they were back on solid footing, Anna asked, "Where are you? I drove to your house."

"I'm on Henderson Avenue...at a Chevron station...with a dead car."

"I'll be right there."

"Yes, it's a great vehicle. I have no doubt at all that it's the best one on the road, by far. It's just...a little out of my price range. A lot, actually." It was after hours on a Saturday night in the showroom of Premier Motors, but Lily was getting the VIP treatment, looking over the brand new X5. BMW's entry in the SUV market was sweet-leathered appointed, powerful, loaded with bells and whistles. When you tacked on taxes and dealer fees, the price of the lower end model was nearly 43 thousand dollars.

"I can get you a good deal. I know the owner," Anna winked at her friend.

"I'm sure you can. But even with a good deal, it's more than I've saved for my house. I need to be looking at the Suzuki or the Ford Escape."

Anna blanched. "Look, Lily. What if you could get the X5 for the same price as one of those other cars? Say, twenty-two thousand. Which would you rather have?"

"The X5, of course. I'm not an idiot. But I can't let you drop the price on this car that much. This is business." Lily was adamant.

"It's more than business, though." Lily turned to interrupt, but Anna held up her hand. "Hear me out." She paused to choose her words carefully. She didn't want to offend her friend. "I have a little trouble with my leg when I can't stretch it out all the way. If I'm going to spend as much time in your new car as I did in your old car, then I would like to help you get something that's comfortable to me." Lily was almost sold; she could see it in her eyes. She went on, "If you really like it, that is. And if we're going to keep doing things together."

Lily was quiet as her head processed all the things Anna had just said. *Keep doing things together. Yes, we are going to keep doing things together.* She gestured at her friend's knee. "It still bothers you?"

"Sometimes."

She thought about the long trips from San Diego, and to and from Silverwood Lake. She felt awful that the woman had probably been in agony the whole time, but was too nice to say anything. "Okay, I'll do it. But we'll compromise. I can go as high as thirty."

The car dealer smiled triumphantly. This sale was her best one ever, and she was taking a \$21,000 hit. "We'll see." Anna grinned and dragged the blonde through the glass door to the lot. "White, black, silver, or blue?"

"You should probably slow down a little bit," the dark-haired woman suggested.

"Holy shit! I'm doing ninety-five!" The blonde eased up on the accelerator and dropped her speed to a respectable eighty. She was still speeding, but no longer leading the pack on the Grapevine, that infamous twisting, climbing stretch of Interstate 5 north of LA. "I can't believe how powerful this thing is. I love it!" A driver had delivered the brand new silver X5 to her apartment on Sunday afternoon. The paperwork on the front seat told her that Anna had ignored her gesture of compromise, fixing the final price at \$22,000, financed over four years at 0.9 percent annual percentage rate. No one on earth had ever gotten such a good deal.

"I'm not carrying enough cash to get you out of jail," Anna warned, her eyes smiling. "You'll have to spend the night."

Traffic was pretty light for a Friday night. They had left work early to get a head start north to San Jose. Lily was thrilled that Anna agreed to go with her. She hadn't seen her mom since September, and even though she'd be back in three weeks for Thanksgiving, this was a chance to introduce her two favorite people to one another.

Anna was looking forward to meeting Eleanor. It would be fun to hear stories of Lily as a little girl. This also was a chance to see her friend Liz in San Mateo, whom she hadn't seen since the wedding. They'd talked on the phone several times, but that

didn't compare to seeing each other face to face. Anna planned to drive up Saturday for dinner in the city while Lily visited with her mom.

The drive to San Jose was a little over five hours. Anna had suggested they hit the drive-thru at McDonald's in Kettleman City, but Lily overruled. "You're not eating in my new car!" Their quick stop cost them only 20 minutes.

Just before ten, Lily pulled to the curb in front of a small, two-story Victorian. The ladies grabbed their overnight bags and made their way up the sidewalk to the lighted porch. The front door opened, and an unassuming woman of about 60 stepped out. From somewhere in the corner of her brain, Anna remembered the image of this woman standing over Lily's stretcher as she was loaded into the ambulance at the Endicott Mall.

"Hi baby! I'm so glad you're here!" The two embraced and hugged fiercely. Their devotion was unmistakable. A long moment passed before they broke apart.

"Mom, I want you to meet...someone very special." She intentionally recalled the words Anna had used when introducing her to her father. "This is Anna Kaklis. Anna, this is my mom, Eleanor Stuart."

Anna reached out her hand to the older woman, but Eleanor was having none of that. She pulled the tall woman close and hugged her tightly. "Thank you for saving my daughter."

In a now familiar scene, Anna answered, "You're welcome. But I couldn't have done that if she hadn't saved me first."

They entered the cozy house and were met at once by a handsome basset hound. "This is my boy Chester. He's never met a stranger, so he'll probably follow you around the house. If he gets on your nerves, just push him away."

The women set their bags beside the staircase, following Eleanor into the small living room. The comfortable room held a stuffed swivel rocker and loveseat for the house's human occupants, and a sprawling flannel beanbag for the adorable hound. Chester took his place in the center of the room, as the travelers made their way to the loveseat. The pup then changed his mind and came to sit at Anna's feet, locking his droopy brown eyes onto her blue ones. "Hi there, fella. I hear you're easy," she said, reaching out to scratch behind the happy dog's ears.

"Do you want something to eat or drink?" Eleanor asked.

"No, we're fine, Mom. Go ahead and sit. I know where things are if we change our mind."

For the next half-hour, Lily's friend and mother exchanged pleasantries and talked about the attorney as though she weren't in the room. Anna had heard the story of how Lily had come to live with her first grade teacher. She was surprised to learn that Eleanor was now principal of a large elementary school.

Eleanor was excited to hear that Lily was driving a new car. She peered out the window, but promised to get a closer look the next day. Seeing the tired looks on the faces of her visitors, she turned to her daughter. "Why don't you show Anna to your old room, and you take the futon in the office?"

"No, no. I'll be fine on the futon," the tall lady protested. "You should sleep in your own room."

Eleanor and Lily both laughed. Lily explained the house rules. "First of all, your comfort is my reason for living. Second, I don't have a room here anymore. Mom threw my old furniture out ages ago. And third, the futon's barely big enough for me, Amazon. Chester would be licking your feet all night."

"Well, lead the way, Pygmy."

"Wow! You look fabulous! Do you mind me saying that divorce agrees with you?" Liz was astounded at the difference in her friend since the wedding. Anna had always been beautiful, but way too thin in Liz's mind. Even dressed in slacks and a sweater, it was obvious that Anna had put on weight through her shoulders and middle, and the muscles in her neck were evidence of her workout regimen.

"You look great too," Anna said sincerely. Liz had always been on the heavy side, but her Italian features were striking. The olive complexion, the large brown eyes, and jet black hair always earned her a second look. In addition to her usual look, Elizabeth Leandro Patterson had a glow.

"That's because I'm pregnant." Her smile grew wider and wider.

"Congratulations!" Anna was truly happy for her longtime friend. "When are you due?"

"Not until the middle of May. I just found out yesterday. Rick's walking around on Cloud Nine."

"How is Rick? And Chloe?"

"They're fine. They wanted to see you, but I wanted you all to myself." The two women had decided to meet at Stella's, a trendy neighborhood place in San Francisco's Mission District. Through dinner, they caught up on one another, including the story of the earthquake and the remarkable woman Anna had met.

"Do you ever hear from Carolyn?" Liz asked casually. Carolyn Bunting had been one of Anna's closest friends at Cal Poly. During their sophomore year, they were practically inseparable. But when they returned for their junior year, Carolyn was distant, always busy with other things, other people. Anna had been deeply hurt, but assumed simply that Carolyn had developed other interests.

"Not recently. Did I tell you that I saw her about four years ago at the reunion? You and Rick were in Europe, I think."

"How was she?" Liz was fishing. Something about the way Anna had talked about her new friend made Liz think this was the finally the time to have that conversation with her friend that she had avoided more than ten years ago.

"She was great. She's living in Seattle working for God. I mean, Bill Gates," she corrected herself, laughing. "She introduced me to her partner, a woman who works in the Seahawks' front office." Anna let the words settle a moment. "Did you know back in college that Carolyn was gay?"

"Yes, I did...Did you know she was in love with you?"

The tall woman froze. A flood of emotions long buried crept into her consciousness. "How do you know that?" she asked quietly.

"She told me. She called me in Sacramento after sophomore year. She asked me if I thought it was possible that you felt the same way about her." Liz took a deep breath. Her friend deserved to know the whole story. "I should have told her the truth, that I really didn't know how you would feel. Instead, I told her that I didn't think it was possible. That you never talked about her that way. She asked me if she should break off your friendship." Liz was so ashamed of what she was about to say. "I told her yes."

Anna sighed deeply, then leaned back in her chair. "Well, that explains a lot. I never really understood why she didn't want to do things together anymore when we came back in the fall."

Liz reached across the table and took her friend's hand. "Anna, I've always regretted my hand in that. I've...wondered from time to time if you might have...found what you were looking for in Carolyn after all."

A look of sadness crossed the tall woman's face as she processed what Liz had said. "I don't know what to say, Liz. I'm sure you did what you thought was best at the time."

In for a penny, in for a pound. "No, Anna. You're not letting me off the hook that easily. Not until I tell you that I think you ought to step back and take a look at where things might be headed with your new friend."

"With Lily?"

"You should hear yourself talk about her. You should see the look on your face. What is she to you, Anna?" *What was it Kim had said? You need to see what this is about.*

The tall woman grew quiet as she turned the question over in her mind. "Lily is one of the most important people in my life. We've shared something extraordinary, and that will probably bond us forever."

"How would you feel if Lily met someone and fell in love?"

"I...don't know, Liz." She knew, but she wasn't ready to say. *She'd be devastated.*

"Have you told her?" Eleanor joined her daughter on the loveseat to watch for Anna's return.

"Told her what?" Lily was nothing if not evasive.

"That you're in love with her." Eleanor was nothing if not persistent.

The young woman sighed and turned toward the window. "No, I haven't. I'm afraid it would freak her out."

The older woman was worried for her daughter. There was no easy way a mother could protect a child from a broken heart. "She might, Lily. And it might make her so uncomfortable that she wouldn't want to be friends anymore."

Lily nodded in agreement. She could feel the tears starting to form. Eleanor was going to warn her off, just as Sandy and Suzanne had.

Eleanor placed her palm on the side of her daughter's face. With her thumb, she touched the tear that threatened to fall. "But some things may be worth the risk, sweetheart."

The drive back to LA started out quietly. Both women were absorbed in the mental recounting of their respective conversations, each wondering if the other had a hint of her true feelings. Anna leaned back into the plush leather, draping her arm over the console.

Lily looked at the hand near her side. Finally, she reached out and took it in her own. "Thanks for coming with me this weekend. It really meant a lot to Mom. And to me." Anna squeezed the small hand, but didn't release it. They rode in silence like that for more than an hour, both acutely aware of their closeness.

Chapter 9

"It snowed last night in the Sierras." No response. "I know, 'You're fine. Thanks for asking.'"

"Hello to you, too. What's with the weather report?" Lily had finally accepted that Anna preferred to start her conversations in the middle. She would get around to the beginning eventually.

The car dealer cleared her throat and enunciated formally, "I'm calling to request the pleasure of your company for Thanksgiving in Tahoe with the Kaklis clan."

Normally, this would have been a no-brainer for the attorney. An opportunity to spend a holiday with her beautiful friend was not something to be trifled with. "As tempting as that sounds, I always spend Thanksgiving with Mom." She was sorry to miss out on the fun at Tahoe, but Lily was a strong believer in family traditions. She hadn't missed Thanksgiving with Eleanor since she was seven years old.

"Sure," Anna goaded her friend. "You're just afraid of Dad." The two friends had talked at length about Anna's relationship with her father as they journeyed back to LA from visiting Eleanor two weeks ago. Lily surmised that her friend felt an acute need to win her father's approval, though she couldn't imagine that any father would find fault with such a wonderful daughter. "So how far is Tahoe from San Jose?"

"Mmmmm...about four hours. Why? You want to come down?"

"Well, I thought maybe you could drive up and spend a day or two with us. We could ski, maybe go to a show at one of the casinos..."

"That sounds like a lot of fun, but I'm really not much of a skier."

"That doesn't matter. We'll find something to do."

I can think of a few things. "Sure, I'd really like that. I probably should talk with Mom first, though. I wouldn't want to hurt her feelings if she's got something planned. When do you need to know?"

"No deadline really. We're all going anyway, and there's plenty of room. We can play it by ear."

Eleanor had practically shoved her daughter out the door on Friday morning. She wasn't going to stand in the way of advancing Lily's love life. "Stop it, Mom! I still haven't said anything to her. We're just friends."

"That's because you're here and she's there. Now go!"

The drive had taken almost five hours, as fresh snow had narrowed Interstate 80 traffic to one lane at the higher elevations. Lily was fearless in her go-anywhere X5, arriving at the rental cabin just after one in the afternoon. The surrounding woods were a beautiful white, and the smell of wood smoke filled her nostrils when she stepped from the SUV. Two other four-wheel drive vehicles, a Lincoln Navigator that looked like a rental and a Jeep Wrangler with a Cal-Berkeley alumni sticker, were already parked alongside the cabin.

"Lily!" George Kaklis' booming voice could be heard through the door as she made her way up the steps to the broad wrap-around porch.

But it was a grinning Anna who opened the door and pulled her inside. "Get in here and shut the door before all the heat gets out!"

"I had a lovely trip. Thanks for asking," the blonde joked.

"Shhhhh! What'd I tell you about raising people's expectations?"

Lily greeted Martine, then George, who was friendly and polite. David was spending the holiday with his girlfriend's family back in LA. Kim and Hal were on the slopes with their friend Todd, who had arrived earlier that day.

George was still tender from the rare scolding his family had given him about his comments to Lily at Anna's birthday dinner. In truth, he didn't care at all if his salespeople were gay. He had just overreacted to the closeness he had seen between the attorney and his daughter. When Martine suggested privately that his heavy hand might lead Anna to rebel and do something she might not otherwise do, he realized that the sensible thing to do was back off and treat Lily like a family friend. After all, she had saved Anna's life. "Lily, I feel that I really owe you an apology for my remarks at Anna's birthday dinner. I hope you'll forgive me for putting my foot in my mouth."

"There's nothing to forgive, Mr. Kaklis. Reasonable people sometimes disagree. It's what makes the world interesting." Anna was impressed with both her father and her friend at this considerate exchange.

After lunch, Anna and Lily drove the elder couple to the airport in Reno. George was reluctant to be away from the business over the holiday weekend, though Martine would have enjoyed spending more time with her family. More than that, she wanted time with George when he wasn't so completely absorbed in his work.

"I was going to put you in the room Mom and Dad had, but I didn't know that Todd was coming up today." Todd, Anna explained, was Hal's fraternity brother and best man at their wedding. He now lived in Sacramento, but was moving soon to take a city planning job in Orange County. "You'll be stuck with me, if that's okay." Lily followed her friend into a small room, smiling to herself with anticipation.

Twin beds. Rats! "Hey, you put up with me in a tent. I can suffer sharing a room," she winked.

The evening was relaxing and entertaining, as Hal and Todd traded memories of fraternity pranks. The three women simply shook their heads in disbelief. "You guys are so crude," Kim said in disgust. "Lily's got the right idea. I'm surprised more women aren't lesbians."

"There's still time," Anna joked.

If only! "Well, you know what they say," Lily said in agreement. "Better latent than never!"

On Saturday morning, the five friends trudged along the path through the woods to the slopes. Compared to the stylish sisters, the blonde felt like a ragamuffin. The snow pants she wore were from her pudgy days, and they bagged around her hips. Struggling clumsily with her rented boots and skis, she more than once considered

taking a pass, as she could stop short of making a *complete* fool of herself. But with Anna's encouragement, she gamely joined in.

Lily did fine on her first two runs, picking her way slowly down the center of the trail as Anna and Todd crisscrossed one another playfully. On the third trip, just as she was sure that she had the hang of it, *some demon child* clipped her elbow as he raced past. Working desperately to keep her balance, the novice skier teetered first one way then the next, finally ending up sprawled face down in the snow bank at the side of the trail.

Anna gasped in alarm as she watched the accident unfold. Racing to her fallen friend's side, she dropped down and turned the woman over. She was...laughing? Lily's cheeks were red with the cold and her green eyes sparkled in the bright sunlight. Snowflakes clung to her eyelashes and golden hair. *She looks adorable.* Relieved that the woman was alright, Anna too began to laugh. Abruptly, their smiles faded as each recognized something unmistakable in the other's eyes.

"Is everything okay here?" Todd threw a spray of powder as he abruptly came to a stop, shattering the moment.

Godamnedsonofamotherfuckingbitch! Lily had picked that up from Lauren, and it had never seemed more appropriate than right now. "Yeah, I'm okay. Injured pride is all." She glanced back at her friend, who had looked away and was now intent on helping her to her feet. The three started slowly down the mountain.

"Well that was hardly your fault! That kid wasn't paying attention to what he was doing." Anna wanted to bolster her friend's shaken confidence. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Lily wasn't hurt, but the familiar tickle in her chest told her that an asthma attack was on its way. "Actually, I'm fine, but I think my asthma is kicking up. I get this way sometimes when I exercise in the cold. Laughing probably pushed me over the edge."

Anna suddenly panicked, as memories of the earthquake flooded back. "Did you remember your medicine? Do you need a doctor? What should I do?"

"No, no. Don't worry about me," Lily assured. They had reached the lodge and she began to remove her skis. "It isn't bad, and I have my medicine in my locker. As long as I don't do anything to make it worse, I should be fine."

"Then we should stop for the day. We'll go back to the cabin and you can rest."

Going back to the cabin with this beautiful woman sure seemed like a pretty good idea, but Lily was cursed with a "put others first" quality that was annoying at times. "No way! You missed a whole day yesterday because you were waiting for me. I'll be fine. I'll sit in front of the window down there and watch you guys come down. Go on!" She gestured toward the lodge. "I'll be there."

The weary blonde turned in her boots and gathered her belongings from the rented locker. As usual, the medicine took effect right away and she already felt better. She

laughed out loud when she spotted Anna, Todd, Kim and Hal skiing toward the bottom in a makeshift conga line.

"We're gonna kick your ass!" Hal hissed to Lily.

"Aw, you sissies couldn't score if we went home!" The football wars had begun in earnest, as the Cal Bears took the field in Berkeley against the UCLA Bruins for the final game of the season. Hal and Todd had dragged the TV to the center of the vaulted living room, arranging the sofa and loveseat close enough to yell at the refs.

Kim and Hal staked their claim to the couch, and snuggled together affectionately. Todd, wanting no part of the sickening display, took a seat opposite the pair on the loveseat. When Anna entered the room, he gestured to the open space beside him.

"Hey, not fair!" Lily whined when she walked in and found that the only empty seat was at the end of the couch with Kim and Hal. "The Berkeley Bozos should have to sit together."

"Nice try," said Todd. "I'm not getting near those two. The whole couch might spontaneously combust at any moment."

And you're not giving up the beautiful Amazon either, she thought dejectedly.

The game was one of the most exciting contests Lily could remember. The Bruins scored first. *That's good.* The Bears answered back. *That's bad.* The Bruins intercepted. *That's good.* The Bears recovered a fumble. *That's bad.* The Bruins blocked a punt. *That's good.* Todd put his arm around Anna's shoulder. *That's bad. Very bad.*

At the end of the third quarter, the dark-haired beauty suddenly stood. "Does anyone want anything to drink?" She made her way to the kitchen to a chorus of orders.

Lily started to follow her, but stopped when Todd jumped to his feet and padded into the kitchen. An eternity passed in the next five minutes, and the anxious blonde could stand it no longer. "I'll go see if they need a hand." Full of apprehension, she walked quietly toward the kitchen.

The sight of Anna kissing the young man was like a blow to the gut.

Anna,

Thank you so much for the invitation this weekend. I had a wonderful time.

Sorry I missed the end of the game last night. My asthma usually doesn't act up like that, but sometimes it happens when I'm in a place I'm not used to. Anyway, I'm fine now.

I woke up really early and thought I'd hit the road. I've got a busy week in court, so I could use a head start on getting my cases ready. I'll probably be pretty busy for the next couple of weeks, but maybe we can get together after that.

I hope you guys have fun today. Have a safe trip home. Thanks again.

Lily

When Anna returned from the kitchen with the drinks, Lily had already gone to bed. "She said something about her asthma bothering her again," Kim said.

The dark-haired woman made her way up the stairs to the small room she shared with her friend. "Are you okay?" she asked softly, sitting on the edge of the bed. Lily was on her side, facing the wall.

"Yeah, I took some medicine. I just need to get some sleep. I'll be fine," she lied. She might never be fine again. *Please just go away.*

"What an idiot!" the woman exploded as she barreled south on Interstate 5 at 103 miles an hour. "What the fuck did you think you were doing? Why would you think there was a chance in hell that she might be interested in you? You idiot!" Through unchecked tears, Lily berated herself for letting her desires cloud her judgment. "You just saw what you wanted to see."

The X5 driver didn't much want to see those red and blue lights in her rearview mirror. "Fuck! That's just fucking perfect!"

Anna was frustrated. She'd been back from Tahoe a week and a half and had yet to connect with her friend. Each call went to voicemail, and Lily's return calls seemed to come when she too was unavailable. She had no way of knowing that Lily had actually called the dealership five times, only staying on the line when she was assured of being put through to the woman's voicemail.

The Christmas season was a busy time for the dealership. Anna and George worked hard to clear the lot of excess inventory before the taxman counted cars on December 31st. To help with their goal, Premier Motors had a contest each year, awarding the top seller for the month a Hawaiian vacation. Brad and Anna were clearing almost 15 cars a day.

It was never Lily's nature to seek consolation for disappointment of any kind. Rather, she tended to withdraw, by keeping her mind occupied with work, and her body with challenge and pain. The week after Thanksgiving, the attorney went to the weight room every night when she returned to her apartment complex, completing three reps at 80 percent of her max until her muscles burned.

The following weekend, she sought solace hiking deep into the San Gabriel Mountains, more than 17 miles on Saturday to the top of Mt. Disappointment. *How appropriate.* She followed that with a 12-mile climb to the observatory at Mt. Wilson on the following day. Though she carried her cell phone for work emergencies, Lily avoided calls from Anna, and from Sandy and Suzanne.

The attorney reached for the phone on her desk, but stopped short when she recognized the caller. "I need a better plan," she muttered, letting the call go to voicemail. It was after six on Thursday evening, and she was alone in the office. Lily had practiced in her head a hundred times the conversation she would have with Anna, if only the tall woman would read her part.

"I've really had a lot of fun these last few months, but I'm neglecting my work."

Anna would say "I know how important your job is to you. You're one of the most conscientious people I've ever met."

"I wish I had more time to do things with my friends, but my clients really need more of my attention."

Anna would say "I understand. Maybe we can get together sometime when you get caught up with your work."

"I'd really like that. Thanks for being so understanding."

It was a silly scenario, and about as likely as Cher having drinks with the Pope. The hardest part would be facing the woman in the first place. Lily knew in her rational mind that Anna had done nothing wrong. She had no legitimate reason to feel angry or betrayed. How on earth could she explain her withdrawal in a way that was even remotely credible without spilling her secret?

The phone rang again, this time announcing a local pay phone. It wasn't unusual for the clinic's clients to call from a pay phone, so the attorney quickly picked it up.

"Lilian Stuart," she announced.

"Should I be hurt that the calls from my cell phone are getting bounced?"

The blonde froze in her chair as her stomach did "that thing" again, fluttering, then sinking. "I just walked in," she lied. "Have you been calling?"

Anna let it slide. Her friend's voice sounded cool and strained. "Yeah, just a few minutes ago." *And about a hundred other times this week.* "You must be awfully busy. How are you holding up?"

Lily was genuinely touched at her friend's concern. Anna didn't deserve the cold shoulder she was getting. "I'll manage, thanks. My clients have a hard time around the

holidays, and we all usually have too much to do." She relaxed in her chair, beginning to enjoy the exchange. She had really missed this.

"Why are the holidays so hard? I would think it would be a happy time." The car dealer wanted her friend to open up.

"Well, it's kind of stressful for people who don't have money. The kids act out because they're jonesing for things they can't have. Everybody argues. The stress level goes up, and eventually, somebody starts hitting."

"I guess that makes your job pretty hard. I hope you're taking care of yourself." Anna couldn't put her finger on what it was, but she knew something was amiss. The only thing she knew to do was comfort and support her friend. "Would you want to get together for dinner? It sounds like you could use a break."

You are so fucking irresistible. Lily had to buy some more time. She couldn't see Anna in this weakened state. "Sure, but not tonight. I've got tons of stuff to do. Maybe next week... Wednesday?" That was almost a week to strengthen her resolve.

The week passed all too quickly for the anxious blonde. She and Anna had arranged to meet at the Starfish, a casual seafood restaurant in Marina del Rey. Lily had suggested including Hal and Kim to deflect the conversation from her own withdrawn behavior, but her tall friend was having none of that. The lawyer arrived ten minutes late to find Anna already seated by the window overlooking the marina. *She looks tired.*

The site of the attorney walking toward her table brought an immediate smile to Anna's face. *She looks tired.* "It's good to see you finally! You're working yourself to death."

"I'm fine. But I've been neglecting my work a bit over the past few months. It's time to get caught up." *This is the part where you're supposed to say how conscientious I am and how you understand my need to work.*

"Look, you're one of most dedicated people I know. But you're going to have to find a balance. It can't be good for you to work so hard."

That wasn't your line! "Look, what I do is important. If you slack up at work, that's a few thousand dollars less in your pocket at the end of the month. If I do, women get slapped around, and kids get molested by their mother's boyfriends. That's why I work my ass off!" She wanted the words back. She hadn't meant for that to come out so forcefully, and the part about the money in Anna's pocket had never before been a conscious thought in Lily's mind. Now, there was a look of hurt in those beautiful blue eyes, and she had put it there.

Anna was pure class. She gathered herself and went on, "I know that what I do doesn't hold a candle to your work. It shames me sometimes to think about it. You're a real hero to me."

If the earth had opened again and swallowed the humbled blonde, it would have been a fitting ending to the moment. With misty eyes, she reached her hand across the table and covered that of her dignified friend. "I'm...sorry. I didn't mean to...That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

The rest of dinner was an awkward affair, the conversation stilted and superficial. Lily insisted on paying the check this time, and the pair parted with no plans to see each other again.

On December 21st, a florist delivered to the clinic a gorgeous basket of wildflowers in a Christmas arrangement.

Lily,

I hope you have a wonderful holiday. Please give my best to Eleanor.

Anna

Chapter 10

"What did I tell you? Gorgeous, isn't it?" Kim held her arms wide in the foyer of the luxury condominium. Twenty-two hundred square feet, two bedrooms and a loft, a private patio, and covered parking. "It's gated, so you won't have to worry about unwelcome guests. The maintenance fees are only eight hundred a month. That's a steal in this neighborhood."

"I don't know. It's okay, I guess." Anna couldn't seem to get enthused about any of the properties on Kim's list. She knew it was time to give up the house—the one she had bought with Scott. She hadn't been comfortable there since the day she moved into the guest room. Come to think of it, she hadn't been all that comfortable in the master suite with Scott either.

"I wonder what Lily would think about it. She's got a pretty good sense of things." Kim had been thinking for weeks how to bring up the subject of Lily with her sister. Anna was back to working long hours, losing weight and avoiding her family again. And she wasn't spending time with the attorney, who Kim thought had come to mean more to her than any friend she had ever had. "Why don't we call her and see if she'll join us?"

Anna walked away from the realtor into the living room. "Does this fireplace work?" She needed to change the subject.

"Yes. Did you just ignore me?" Sister wasn't going to let it go.

Anna sighed and sat on the low hearth. "Lily and I aren't doing much together these days. She's been really busy at work." That was the party line.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"We had dinner together a couple of weeks before Christmas." She was silent for almost a minute, staring at the floor. "It's like something happened at Tahoe, but I have no idea what it was." The tall woman's voice was sad, but the words were deliberate, as though she had gone over them many times in her head. "It seemed like we all had a good time. Then she got asthma that night and left the next day without saying goodbye. When we got back, she ducked my calls. I must have done something or said something."

"Did something happen in the kitchen?"

"When?"

"When you and Todd went to get drinks for everybody." Kim was straining to remember the details. She sensed that this was an important event. "Lily went in to help, then she came back and said she was sick. Come to think of it, that's the last time I saw her."

Anna's eyes grew wide as she stood and started to pace the empty room. Clutching her head in her hands, the moment came back. "She came into the kitchen? Are you sure?"

Kim nodded.

"I was in the kitchen with Todd. He was telling me how much fun he'd had and how good it was to see me again." She turned and looked out the window. "He asked if we could get together when he moved down here. Then he kissed me." Anna suddenly knew that Lily had witnessed that kiss.

Kim realized it too, and immediately understood the significance. "He kissed you?" She felt anger arise at the thought of Hal's friend being so presumptuous.

"I stopped him, though. I pushed him back. I didn't get angry or anything, I just wasn't comfortable with it. I told him that I didn't think of him that way. He said he was sorry, and everything was okay after that."

"Did you ever see Lily in the kitchen at all?"

"No."

"Then I think we just figured out what changed." Kim put her hand on her sister's shoulder. She couldn't articulate the rest. Anna would have to do that. "Honey, I'm here for you. You can talk to me if you want to."

"Thank you." Anna reached out both arms and hugged her sister. "I...want to think about it all for awhile, but I promise I'll talk to you soon, okay?" She was glad to finally understand what had changed things between Lily and herself, but she had no idea what she would do about it.

The drunken blonde stumbled to the door to stop the incessant ringing and pounding. "Lay off, already. I'm not fucking deaf!" Fumbling with the dead bolt, she flung the door back without checking through the peephole. There in her doorway stood two very angry women.

"What the hell's going on with you?" Suzanne demanded. "You don't return our phone calls. You don't come by. You ignore our invitations without so much as a 'fuck you.'"

"Who the fuck do you think you are, coming into my house and yelling at me like that?" Oh yeah, really drunk. "Get the hell out of here!"

Sandy was shocked to hear the always gentle woman speaking to them in this manner. On the other hand, Suzanne's language never surprised her. She took in the dirty apartment and her disheveled friend. Never in her life had Lily been more in need of a friend.

Without another word, Sandy stepped forward and embraced the woman. Lily resisted at first, trying to turn away, but Sandy was bigger and held on tight. The little blonde finally relaxed. She wanted to cry, but the tears were gone.

"What's this about, Lily? Is it Anna?"

The drunken girl nodded. "You were right about her. And about me. She's straight, and I should have left her alone. But I didn't. I was under some grand illusion that she could fall in love me. Just like I fell in love with her."

"We told you that was going to happen. We could see it coming a mile away." Suzanne would rather be right than president.

"Shut up, Suzanne," Sandy stopped her partner.

Holy shit! That was worth letting them in!

"This is our fault," Sandy continued.

"What do you mean our fault?" Suzanne was stunned. In 12 years, her partner had never told her to shut up. She was certain she should do just that.

"Yeah, what do you mean your fault," slurred the little drunk.

"I mean that Lily has been ignoring us because she didn't want to hear us say 'I told you so.'" Lifting up Lily's chin, she said sincerely, "We didn't ever mean to give the impression that we wouldn't be here for you."

"Even if I decided to wreck my own life?"

"Especially then."

The revelation that Lily had pulled away from her because of Todd made Anna want to simply pick up the phone and tell the woman that it was all a misunderstanding. However, there were several problems with that approach, not the least of which was the fact that Lily wasn't taking her calls. Besides, it was a pretty vulnerable spot for Anna to crawl into willingly, especially if Lily had already moved on. But the main thing that stopped her was the realization that she wasn't prepared for Lily's response, no matter what it was.

"Are you getting excited about our trip?" George Kaklis entered his daughter's office. On Monday morning, the two of them would leave for Germany where they would tour the BMW design center and meet with the engineers. It was something the father and daughter had done every three years since Anna was 17.

"Of course," she replied, but without her usual enthusiasm. "How about you?"

"I always look forward to these trips. Not because we're going to hear about the cars, but because I get to spend time with one of my very favorite people." George hadn't seen much of his daughter lately, and he wasn't sure why. She seemed withdrawn, much as she did before she announced her decision to divorce Scott. "Listen, sweetheart. I know you're working on something in your head. If you want to talk, I'll listen. Who knows? Maybe I can help."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. I look forward to being with you too." She hated being such an open book, but she sure wasn't ready to dump this *melodrama* on her father. "I love you, Dad," she added sincerely.

When her father retreated, Anna stood and closed the door to her office. Pulling from her wallet the business card she had located last night, she dialed the Seattle number. It was time to take a step.

"Carolyn Bunting please." Anna drummed her fingers nervously as she waited on the line for the familiar voice.

"This is Carolyn."

"Hi stranger. It's Anna Kaklis. How are you?" Lily's lessons in social skills were really paying off.

A brief moment passed as the programmer registered the name and voice. *It really was her.* "Anna? Wow, what a surprise! I'm fine. How are you?" Carolyn was genuinely excited to be hearing from her long lost friend.

"I'm fine too. And Vicki?" Anna was glad she was in the habit of writing things down. When Carolyn had given her the Microsoft business card at the reunion, she had scribbled Vicki's name on the back.

Carolyn was very impressed. She had been pleasantly surprised four years ago when Anna had responded so warmly to meeting her partner. She wasn't sure how the beautiful woman would react to learning that someone who had been so close to her was gay. She needn't have worried. Anna was still the kind and authentic person she

had fallen for so hard in college. "She's fine. Gosh, I hope you're calling because you're in Seattle."

"No, I'm in LA. I...wondered if we could talk about something, but it's personal, so I thought we could set a time to talk later tonight."

Personal? Carolyn would explode if she had to wait to hear this. She gave Anna a cell phone number and grabbed her coat. "I'm going for a walk. Be back later," she told the co-worker in the next cubicle. This open corporate culture certainly had its perks.

"Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?" the programmer asked as she slowly walked the grounds of the business campus.

Where to start? How much should I say? "I...I've met somebody, Carolyn." *Here goes.* Deep breath. "Her name is Lily. She's smart, funny, and sweet. She's one of the finest, most decent people I've ever known."

Carolyn was astounded. She had once hoped that this woman would have those feelings for her, but she had accepted then that it wasn't possible. She had never given Anna's sexuality another thought. It seemed perfectly normal when she'd gotten the wedding invitation... "What about...Anna, aren't you married?"

"I'm divorced. It's kind of a long story, but it's not especially ugly. Some things just weren't meant to be."

"So...what's the problem?" Carolyn couldn't complete this puzzle on her own.

Anna sighed deeply on the other end of the phone. "Carolyn, I don't know where to go from here. There was only one other time in my life where I felt anything close to what I feel for Lily...and that was what I felt for you."

The rush of emotions threatened to overwhelm the woman as she walked, and she made her way to a bench. Her love for this beautiful woman had faded years ago, but the memory of how strong it was had not. Giving up Anna without ever knowing if there was a chance for them was one of the hardest things she had ever done. "I don't know what to say, Anna. I take it you know now that I loved you back then."

"I had dinner with Liz in San Francisco a couple of months ago. I talked to her about Lily and she said I needed to see it through. And she told me about talking to you that summer. Looking back on it now, I think she wishes she hadn't warned you away."

In a magnanimous gesture she didn't really feel, Carolyn smoothed things over for the benefit of her friend. "Well, who knows if you and I could have made anything work. Besides, things have a way of working out. I can't imagine my life without Vicki." That much was true. She and the sports communication director were a perfect match.

"Carolyn, I have so many questions. Some about me, some about Lily. We're in a mess right now, and I need to fix it before I lose my sanity."

"Look, why don't you come up to Seattle for a couple of days? I'd love to see you, and so would Vicki. We'll talk. I promise you won't leave more confused than you are now."

It was already late Friday afternoon. "I leave Monday morning for Germany. I'll be gone nine days." That seemed like an eternity to Anna. She wasn't sure how much longer she could take the uncertainty.

"Why don't you come up tonight or tomorrow? Go make some arrangements and call me back. I'll pick you up at the airport. You can go home on Sunday."

And so it was done. Anna would fly to Seattle at 9:31 a.m. Saturday morning. She desperately hoped she would find her answers there.

There was always something instinctively frightening about the phone ringing in the middle of the night. *1:31* read the digital clock. Lily grabbed the receiver as she groped for the lamp on the nightstand. "Hello."

"Miss Stuart! Help me! He's outside and he says he's coming in. I think he has a gun!" The frantic woman spoke with a heavy Spanish accent.

"Whoa, slow down. Is this Maria?"

"Yes, it's Miguel. He's been drinking. He called me and said he wanted to see his kids."

"Listen, Maria. You need to call the police. I'm coming over right now, but you need to call the police. Can you do that?" The blonde tumbled from the bed and started to dress. "I'll be there soon. Call the police now, and whatever you do, don't let him in."

Thirty minutes later, the silver X5 stopped in front of a small white house in East LA. There were already two police cruisers on the scene, lights flashing and radios blaring. Neighbors watched the action from their yards. Lily ran toward the house to see Maria Esperanza being led away in handcuffs. The front door was torn from its frame.

"Whoa! What's going on here? Where are you taking her?" she demanded to the officer holding Maria's elbow.

"Who are you?" he scowled, pushing the woman roughly into the back seat of the cruiser.

"I'm Lilian Stuart, Mrs. Esperanza's attorney. And I'd like to advise you that I don't like the way you just shoved my client into the car," she said angrily. At that point, another officer emerged from the house with a handcuffed Miguel, whose face was bloodied badly.

"Look, Mrs. Stuart. We have our rules. If they're both fighting, we haul 'em both in. The judge can sort it out."

"This is her home! She didn't just rip her own door off! She has a right to defend herself!" This was ridiculous!

"Like I said, it isn't for me to sort out. If you want to help your client, you should come to the station with her." Resigned to wait, she cooled her heels while the officers finished collecting their evidence.

A familiar car pulled into the driveway, and Sandy got out, flashing her credentials to the waiting officer. The social worker had gotten the call only moments after the police arrived to come and collect the children, who would go into protective custody until the incident was resolved and the home deemed safe. "Lily! Is everything alright? What happened?"

"Sandy, thank god you're here. I think everyone's okay. Except Miguel. He's going to have a headache. Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," she muttered sarcastically. "It looks like he broke the door down and Maria greeted him with a two-by-four. The bad news is that she's been arrested too."

"Why don't you come with me inside? The kids know you and they won't be as scared." The two women entered the small home to find two small children sitting with a police officer in a back room. Each was holding a brand new teddy bear, courtesy of the LAPD. Every cruiser on the force held at least one of the stuffed animals to be distributed in moments just like this one. The children lit up when they saw the familiar faces.

"Hi there," Sandy started. "It was pretty scary tonight, wasn't it?" Lily admired her friend for her professional skill and dedication, but especially for the way she interacted with the children in her care. "Lily's going to go help your mom tonight, but I need you guys to come with me for now. Can you do that?"

The girl nodded, and pulled her younger brother by the hand. "Is mommy hurt?"

"No," Lily answered. "Your mother is fine, and I'm going to bring her back soon." She held her anger in check while she was with the children.

Central Booking was the social hub of LA at three in the morning. Prostitutes and their johns, drug dealers, burglars, barroom brawlers *and* all their lawyers filled the hallways awaiting their turn. It was going to be a very long night.

Lily and her client were called in at 4:15, along with Miguel and his lawyer, Pete Simpkins. "I don't want my client spending the night here," Lily said firmly to the booking officer.

"It's out of my hands. The statutes are there to cool everyone off. You can get her out in the morning." The booking officer prepared the forms, and the Esperanzas were escorted through the secure gate where they would be searched and given color-coded jumpsuits, then taken by elevator to the jail's secure upper floors.

Lily knew the statutes well. "Look, this is an open and shut case of self defense. That lunatic broke down the front door. Mrs. Esperanza had a right to defend herself against someone entering her home." Her voice rose, but she was not yet shouting. However, all she was getting was a blank look. "You know as well as I do that the officers had discretion here. They only brought her in because they were too goddamned lazy to do the work on the scene to settle it." Now she was fuming.

"Lily, can we go somewhere and talk?" Simpkins motioned toward the door.

"Not unless you're going to drop the charges and give that bastard up!" she retorted angrily. With that, she gathered her briefcase and jacket and stormed back into the busy hallway.

"Wait! We need to talk or this is going to happen again and next time, somebody's really going to get hurt," he pleaded.

She turned and poked a finger into Simpkin's chest. "Then you need to explain to your client that he blew it big time! He lost custody in the first place because he can't control his goddamned temper. Now he shows up drunk and breaks the door down. What does he expect?" The diminutive attorney stepped back and glared at her opposing counsel. "Talk to me when you've gotten your client into an anger management class. I'm getting a fucking restraining order first thing in the morning, and if he shows up again within a hundred yards of their house, he's going to jail!"

Pete was taken aback by the veracity of the lawyer's threats. He and Lily had always enjoyed a respectful working relationship, but this was not the professional level-headed woman he was used to seeing in court. "Lily, I don't know what's gotten into you, but it wouldn't hurt if you sat in on a couple of those seminars too." He waited to gauge her response before continuing. A moment passed, and the woman physically slumped, as if absorbing his words.

"I'm sorry, Pete," she finally said, almost too low to hear. "I...What can we do? I'm listening."

The tall attorney let out a breath. "Miguel tells me that Maria hasn't been letting him have visitation. She leaves and takes the kids when it's time for him to come over. He hasn't seen them since before Christmas."

"Why didn't he come to the court?"

"He didn't understand that he could. He thought since she was granted custody, it was up to her. That's my fault for not making it clear."

"I'll talk to her tomorrow," she promised. "Can you see about getting him into a class? I really think it will help."

"Sure."

Lily turned to walk away, but Pete stopped her. "Whatever it is, Lily, good luck with it."

"Thanks. I...I'm sorry for being such a jerk."

"I can't believe you're really here." Carolyn looked across the table at her friend. The face was still beautiful, but the stress was evident in the firm set of her mouth and the serious blue eyes. Carolyn had brought Anna to the harbor for lunch, thinking they both could talk more candidly without Vicki around.

"Thanks for letting me come. I...I didn't know who else to turn to. I regret that we didn't stay close. We really shared so much." The years fell away as they talked, each realizing that the other had changed little from the friend they had known in school.

"So why don't you tell me about this woman you've met," Carolyn prodded as they left the restaurant for a walk along the waterfront.

Anna took her friend through the dramatic story of the earthquake, and of finding Lily after her divorce. She recounted the baseball game and the ride from San Diego, the boat trip, "the first time I ever consciously realized I was looking at another woman's breasts! Now I think I probably always have, but the sight of hers in that bathing suit just pushed a button in me or something!"

"I used to look at your breasts all the time," Carolyn laughed.

Anna blushed slightly, but took the comment in stride. "Well, if I had known that at the time, I might have stood up straighter, and worn something skimpier. Who knows?"

Who knows indeed? Though it was gnawing at the programmer that there might have been a chance for them long ago, this was about the here and now. Vicki was the here and now for Carolyn, and Lily was the same for Anna. "So go on. What else?"

Anna told her of the camping trip...

"You? I don't believe you! You're making this up."

Ignoring her friend's sarcastic response, Anna continued with the story of her father's rude remarks, the trip to San Jose, and Thanksgiving in Tahoe, emphasizing the looks they exchanged on the slope when Lily fell. "I swear, if Todd hadn't come over right at that moment, I think I might have just kissed her!" She finished with the story of Todd in the kitchen. "And now, she doesn't want to get together any more. She doesn't say no, she just says she's too busy, or she ducks my calls altogether. I want to talk to her about what's really going on, but I need to be prepared for her answer."

Carolyn was quiet as she digested the tale. Finally, she began. "Well, I agree that she probably has feelings for you that go beyond friendship. You have sort of an irresistible quality about you." She winked at the dark-haired woman. "But if she saw you kissing Todd..."

"I wasn't kissing Todd. He was kissing me!" she said indignantly.

"Lily has no way of knowing that. What she saw was the two of you kissing. As long as she had hope that you might be interested in her, she was going to stay close and be your best friend. As soon as that possibility disappeared, she needed to run away to protect herself." The familiar feelings washed over Carolyn. She was certain that she was reading Lily perfectly. "I'm the voice of experience here, Anna. I know exactly how she feels." She waited for her words to register, then continued. "Lily is a lesbian. Lesbians run the risk all the time of falling in love with straight women. It's not something we can help. But once we see the handwriting on the wall, that self-preservation thing kicks in and there's nothing to do but run."

"She doesn't need to run from me. I'm not going to hurt her," Anna protested. "And I'm not all that certain that I'm straight," she added, almost inaudibly. "But that's an issue for another day. Right now, I just need to fix things with Lily."

Carolyn thought hard about what Anna was saying, pretty sure that the woman had never before considered the possibility of being gay. "Anna, whether or not you're straight is more important than you think. It would be devastating for Lily if you were to wake up someday and decide that you need something else that she can't give you. And if she has to live with that possibility every day, it will be pretty unhealthy for both of you. There's nothing but pain in that." She let the words settle. "You need to think about whether or not you're ready for a relationship with Lily on her terms. She wants to hold you and kiss you and touch you. If you're going to go forward with her, you're going to have to want that too."

Anna grew very quiet as she processed her friend's words. She understood what Lily needed, but she hadn't let herself dwell on those thoughts. It was just too overwhelming. "You know, I really loved you a lot back in college, Carolyn. I might even have been in love with you, but I was pretty naïve about things like that. I probably would have done anything you asked, just to please you."

"Is that how you feel about Lily? That you want to be...physical with her just to please her? Just to keep her as a friend?"

"No Carolyn. I want it for me too," she admitted it for the first time. "I've never wanted anyone this much in my whole life." It was true. The idea of making love with Lily was more exciting than anything she had ever felt.

"Then tell her." Those three words summed it all up, as far as Carolyn was concerned.

"What if she doesn't feel the same way? And how can I make her trust me not to hurt her?"

"Believe me, she feels the same way. But the trust thing is going to take time. What you have to understand—and this is the hard part—is that everything has to come from you. Lily won't act on her feelings. There's too much at risk. She's worried that you'll reject her, and despise her for having those feelings about you. She can't bear that." She saw the confused look on her friend's face. "I know this, Anna. It's the truth. You have to be the one to move this relationship forward."

Anna had thoroughly enjoyed the evening with Carolyn and Vicki. The pair talked about how they met and what they felt for each other. Each told a heart-wrenching tale of coming out, the problems it caused with their families, the friends they lost along the way. Nonetheless, both would go through it all again a hundred times to reach the happiness they now had with one another.

Anna wanted that kind of happiness, and now more than ever, she was certain that Lily was the key. On the flight home, her thoughts strayed to the problems this might cause for her father, but she knew that Kim and Hal would be there for her. David was a pretty cool kid, but it was bound to be weird for him. Martine's acceptance would be crucial to smoothing things at home. Without her support, this could drive a permanent wedge between them all.

Arriving home after seven, Anna double-checked her tickets and travel documents. She unpacked her small bag from the Seattle trip, then began the task of packing for nine days abroad. When she had finished, the exhausted woman set her bags by the door and went to bed. The car would come for her at six in the morning.

Anna had hoped to have this situation with Lily resolved before they left, but it was now after midnight. She had put off thinking about it as she took care of the final details for her trip, but now as she lay in bed, thoughts of the beautiful blonde filled her head.

"I'm coming!" *Who on earth is knocking at this hour?* Looking through the peephole, Lily saw the most beautiful—and unsettling—site she could have imagined. She had already turned on the lights and yelled through the door, so it was too late to pretend she wasn't home. As she opened the door, the dark-haired woman pushed through without waiting for an invitation. Even in a sweatshirt and jeans, the woman was stunning. Lily suddenly worried that something had happened to bring her friend out so late. "Anna? Is everything alright?"

Anna took in the sight of her rumpled friend, dressed for bed in flannel boxers and a tank top. "No, it's not alright, Lily." She wanted just to reach out and pull the little blonde to her, but she held back, fearful that Lily would push her away again. Her confidence now wavering, she said what she had rehearsed in the car on the way over. "I can't stand what's happened between us. We'd gotten to be such good friends, and now everything's changed. I...want us to be close again."

Lily's own need to be close to the dark-haired woman was almost overpowering. She wanted desperately to give in, to accept on Anna's terms the simple offer of friendship. But self-preservation was a powerful instinct. She needed to guard her own heart. Meeting the blue eyes with a steel resolve, the smaller woman answered, "I can't, Anna. I just can't." *Please don't push this.*

But Anna wouldn't let it go. "What can't you do? Please talk to me, Lily. Doesn't this hurt you like it hurts me?" the tall woman pleaded.

"Yes, of course it does. But some things are out of our control. I want very much to be your friend again, but I just can't right now."

Anna remembered again Carolyn's counsel that only she could move things forward. It was time to take a step. "Is it because of Todd?"

She knows! The tears that Lily had been holding back since the day she left Tahoe returned unbidden, not from her eyes, but from her heart. She sank to the arm of the couch and looked blankly into the dark room, unable to meet her friend's eyes. "Yes," she whispered. *There. It's out.* "I know that you'll never think of me that way...or want me the way I want you. But...I can't stand by you as a friend and watch you fall in love with somebody else. I'm just not a big enough person to do that." Lily only hoped that Anna would be able to respect her finally for telling the truth.

The dark-haired woman strode silently to couch. Grasping the small hands, she drew the heartbroken girl to her feet. Locking blue eyes onto green, Anna searched her heart for the right words. "You're wrong, Lily. It's you that I want." Ever so slowly, she lowered her head and captured the waiting lips with her own.

Chapter 11

Leaving no room for doubt that this might only have been a friendly gesture, Anna pressed closer and raked her tongue tentatively across the smaller woman's lips to urge them apart. Staggered by the surge of emotions that welled up in her chest, she moaned into Lily's open mouth.

If I'm dreaming, god help the fool that wakes me up! For Lily, it was more than just a meeting of lips. It was an unmistakable confession from both, and the blonde was completely overpowered by the sensation. Anna's lips were the softest she'd ever kissed, and she pulled the woman's head closer, slipping her tongue inside the warm mouth.

Too soon the kiss ended, both women short of breath. Not willing to give up this intimate embrace, Lily buried her face into the long slender neck. Anxiety simmered underneath as she worried that Anna would suddenly have doubts. The words replayed in her head. *"It's you that I want."* If there was a chance on earth that they could really be together, Lily knew she would walk through the fires of hell to make it happen.

The tall woman pulled her closer, cupping the blonde head with her palm, swaying ever so slightly to keep the sensations alive. She held Lily like that for several minutes, not uttering a sound. Gradually, Anna felt the strain of the last six weeks recede. In its place was quiet, like a settling of her soul. "This is right," she whispered. "I feel so still inside."

"Me too. I want to stay in this...place, wherever it is." They stood together silently for another few minutes, soaking up the calm. Lily would take the next step. Leaning back, she studied the tall woman's visage, looking for signs of awkwardness or uncertainty. Finding neither, she brought her face closer, green eyes darting between

Anna's eyes and lips. Turning her head slightly at the last instant, the women shared a breath as their lips met again.

The second kiss held none of the shyness of the first. It deepened with fervor as each was swept up again in excitement and wonder. Arms and hands remained still, holding firmly to the other. This was not about passion, but about connection. When they broke again, Anna kissed the smaller woman's nose, and rested her cheek atop the blonde hair.

"I have to go. I need to leave for the airport at six." She didn't release her hold, even as she talked of leaving.

"No. I'm afraid I can't allow that." Lily tightened her grip.

"Dad and I are going to Munich tomorrow for nine days. I'd like to go thinking you and I were okay again."

"We're okay, Amazon."

Something is different about Anna this morning. George Kaklis and his daughter boarded the Lufthansa 747 at 7:45 a.m., taking their seats in first class. Anna was obviously excited, more so than George could remember on any of their previous trips. "Are you looking forward to Munich?" he asked his smiling daughter.

"I'm looking forward to being with you. It'll be fun to see the new designs. I just wish they would schedule this in July instead of January," she lamented. Anna *hated* being cold.

"You're in a good mood," her father fished.

"Yes, I am." But she was not forthcoming, so George let it drop for the time being. Breakfast was served over Arizona, and to his surprise, Anna then pulled a blanket over her head and slept all the way to New York.

Lily was running on pure adrenalin. In the office by 7:30, she was smiling and friendly, a welcome change from the surly nature her co-workers had come to expect.

Unable to sleep at all after Anna's late night visit, Lily relived the kisses, the embrace, the soft words of assurance. Truth be told, she feared that if she went to sleep, she would awaken and none of this would have really happened. Her day started off with a thrill when Anna had called her from the limo at 6:15.

"I've only got a minute. The driver has gone to the house to collect Dad's things."

"If a minute's all you've got, I'll take it."

"Thank you for talking with me in last night."

"Thanks for not taking no for an answer. And for coming back after I was so... mean."

"It's forgotten. I understand why you ran."

"You do?"

"Yeah, Kim helped me figure out the Todd part." Lily cringed. She didn't want to think about that. "He kissed me, not the other way around. I told him that night I wasn't interested."

"You're kidding." If what Anna said was true, Lily was responsible for her own misery of the past six weeks.

"Honest. I was already trying to figure things out. About my feelings for you, that is."

"Well, I like what you decided."

"They're coming toward the car. I should go. I...I'll miss you."

"Me too you. Travel safely."

Anna's secretive behavior on the phone made the attorney a little uneasy, but she waved it off. This was all new to the beautiful woman, Lily reasoned with her rational mind. She herself wanted to bang a drum on the street corner and shout that Anna Kaklis had kissed her! But she was determined that Anna would lead the way. *I'm not going to screw this one up with expectations about how she should act.*

Christ! Nine days was a long time! Her only contact with Anna had been three "thinking about you—hope you're doing okay" messages left on her voicemail, once while she was in court, another while she had been in the shower, and the third while she was taking out the garbage at home. Now resigned to let the garbage reach the ceiling, Lily planted herself on the couch all weekend waiting for the phone to ring.

Wednesday afternoon. Four more days! Anna's plane got in at 4:07 on Wednesday afternoon. She would probably be exhausted from her trip, and go straight home. Then she'd want to go to the dealership because she needed to check on things. And she'd probably have to sleep a lot on account of the jet lag. And see her family. *Either way, I'll be lucky if I see her again before next weekend.*

Lily's misery was interrupted by the loud ringing of phones all over the tiny apartment. She had turned all the ringers to the max to be sure that she wouldn't inadvertently miss a call. "Hello...this is she...no, I'm not interested...no, really, the only thing I dislike about my current phone service is that you have my number." With that, she hung up the receiver, immediately noticing the blinking message light.

Shitfuckhelldamnscrew! Another Lauren-ism.

God, this was frustrating! Anna had tried to guess when Lily would be at home or at her desk, but she hadn't been able to get through. The time difference made it difficult, and the seminars left her with little free time. She'd hoped it would be easier to connect on the weekend, but that too went to voicemail.

Or maybe Lily's avoiding my calls again. Anna hadn't wanted to consider that possibility, but it had taken her a week or more after Tahoe to realize that getting bounced was no accident. She couldn't stop the niggling doubts as she replayed in her head the phone conversation from the car. Was it disbelief she heard in Lily's voice when she told her about Todd? Or maybe Lily simply didn't have the patience to deal with someone who couldn't seem to get her head on straight.

Curious George could stand it no longer. Anna had been cheerful and upbeat when they left LA. Now, a week later, she was distracted and withdrawn. Over dinner on Monday night, he gently broached the subject. "Sweetheart, is everything okay?"

"Of course. The seminars are good. The company is absolutely fabulous. It isn't snowing. What more could a girl want?" she answered with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"You know, I'm really enjoying having this time with you, too. We don't seem to spend enough time together. That's why I always look forward to these trips." When he got no response, he knew he would have to be more direct. Something—or someone—was consuming his daughter's thoughts. "It's just that you seemed so happy when we left, and now you're quiet again."

"It's nothing to worry about, Dad." Anna didn't want to have this conversation. "It's just a small personal problem. I'll work it out."

A personal problem? Was Anna seeing someone? She was an extremely private person, not at all quick to share information about the men she dated. In fact, she had been seeing Scott for nearly two months before she introduced him to anyone in the family. *Surely*, George reasoned, *she could use my guidance here*. "Anna, I'm your father. I've been watching you worry about things all by yourself for 32 years. I want to help." She wouldn't meet his eyes. "Please let me in there."

The woman sighed. She could resist almost any force on earth, but she couldn't refuse her father. *What is it they say? Stay as close to the truth as possible*. "You remember my friend Lily, from the earthquake?"

"Yes, of course." *Where was this going?*

"Well," she started hesitantly, "we had a misunderstanding, but I thought we had it cleared up before I left. Now I'm not so sure." Anna still hadn't met her father's eyes. "I'm just worried about losing her friendship."

George weighed the possibilities. His daughter didn't have many close friends, so he knew that Lily was important to her. But he couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it than that, and it made him extremely uncomfortable. His first instinct was to dismiss out of hand his daughter's irrational worry about the state of a casual friendship. He bit his tongue though, remembering Martine's warning about inadvertently pushing Anna into something. Still, he needed to say something to convey both support and caution. "Sweetheart, I understand that Lily is important to you, but maybe it's time to start putting that terrible earthquake ordeal behind you. You can't let things like casual friendships rule your life. Your family, the business, these things are much more important in the grand scheme of things. Don't you agree?" *That was a pretty good argument, if I must say so myself.* But his daughter's response nearly knocked him out of his chair.

Standing abruptly, Anna gathered her jacket and purse. "You know, I think I'm going to blow off the last day." It was a half-day actually, followed by a luncheon, then a cocktail party for the North American dealership owners tomorrow night. "I hope you don't mind. I'm just going to go back to my room and call the airline. If you want to join me, I'll change your ticket too, but I don't mind if you want to stay until Wednesday."

Well, that certainly went well, George thought sarcastically. "No, you go ahead."

Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Tomorrow!

The attorney was drafting an update to the court on her counsel with Maria Esperanza to cooperate with the court-ordered visitation schedule for Miguel. True to his word, Pete Simpkins had enrolled the volatile father in classes for anger management. It looked like all of them were headed for a happy ending. Lost in her work—and mercifully distracted—she missed seeing the beautiful woman exit the white Town Car at the curb.

Anna tried the door at the main entrance, but it was locked for the night. 6:40. The flight from JFK had been delayed 90 minutes, but the car she had arranged had been waiting for her at the airport. Thinking her friend might be working late, Anna took a chance and asked the driver to bring her to the Braxton Street Law Clinic. She grew excited when she saw the light on in Lily's second floor office but without entry to the building, the phone was the only option. If the blonde were ducking her calls, she'd just have to get back in the car and go home.

The tall woman walked back to the limo to retrieve the phone from her carry-on. Nervously, she paced through the menu options and pressed the call command for "Lily's office." Leaning her tall frame against the door of the Town Car, her heart skipped a beat as the blonde appeared in her view.

"Lilian Stuart," she announced formally, slapping the button to activate the speaker phone.

"Hi Lily. It's Anna." She held her breath as she waited for her friend's response.

The attorney was speechless.

This was not good.

"Are you there?"

Lily lunged to grab the receiver, very nearly disconnecting the call. "Anna! Finally! I can't believe it! I was about to leave and I would have missed you again! Oh my god!" To say that the blonde was excited would have been a bit of an understatement. She was nearly hyperventilating. "This has been so frustrating. I'm going to be so happy to see you!"

Whew! The tired traveler was flooded with relief. "Well, then you may want to look outside your window."

Lily made her way to the window and parted the blinds. There in the twilight leaning against the limo was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

I can't believe how easy this is, thought Anna. She and Lily had spent almost every evening together since she'd returned from Germany. They'd slid effortlessly back into their old playfulness, the tension of the last six weeks forgotten. Looking back, Anna realized that she and her husband had never shared this kind of compatibility. In fact, any casualness they enjoyed as they got to know one another seemed to disappear once they moved their relationship to a romantic level. At that point, the woman suddenly became more self-conscious, and she had difficulty with simple conversation. *If it had felt this natural with Scott, I might never have let him go.*

Tonight, Anna was stretched out on Lily's couch reading the current issue of *Car & Driver* while the attorney sat close by on the floor reviewing a stack of legal briefs. Neither needed the other's attention, but each relished the closeness. Their silence was relaxed, and every so often the blonde would reach behind her absently and stroke the beautiful woman's arm, leg or... "You know, I'm not going to let you get your work done if you keep that up."

Lily reluctantly removed her hand from the woman's shapely hip, arching her eyebrows suggestively as she turned. "Then maybe I should just put my work away." With that, she let the papers fall and climbed onto the couch, draping her entire body along the length of the muscular frame. "This...couch...is...awfully...lumpy. I don't know...how I ever...fell asleep here." She burrowed into the now giggling mass underneath her. "But it's definitely...softer in some places."

The kiss that followed started innocently, as just another chance to connect. As it lengthened, it deepened, and soon both bodies were responding to the exchange, moving in a slow rhythm against one another. As Lily's hand drifted up to softly stroke the side of Anna's breast, the taller woman gently caressed the shapely rear beneath her own fingers. This was the first clearly sexual overture of their young relationship, and it was escalating too quickly for either woman to keep her head.

"Oh my...you're incredible," the blonde said as she stilled and dropped her lips to the woman's neck.

"Wow, I..." *never felt anything like that in my whole life.* "Wow," she said again simply. Anna had always felt that she controlled her own desires, that things moved to the next level because she decided it was time. That wasn't the case here. If circumstances were different—that is, if it weren't already ten o'clock on a night before both were due at work early the next day—Anna was pretty sure that she wouldn't have wanted to stop. She had wanted to be certain of her feelings before she gave in to her body's response, but it was her body that seemed to be running this show. This was so different from anything in her past, like a craving.

Lily shifted and sat up beside the beautiful woman. "I could get lost in you so easily." Lily knew that her sentiment meant more than just the physical desire that she felt. She was falling deeply in love.

Anna was drowning in these new sensations, and couldn't think of what to say. She squeezed Lily's hand and smiled.

Well, that went over well. Lily knew she had to give this time.

"Lilian Stuart," the attorney answered crisply. She was due in court this afternoon for jury selection in a housing discrimination case. It was Tony's case, but he always asked her to sit in when he picked a jury. *You have a gift for reading people,* he had said.

"Hi there, sweetheart. How's your day?"

Sweetheart! Lily nearly swooned. "Hi yourself. It just got better. What's up?" She stretched from her desk to push her office door closed.

"I wanted to ask you something. I'm having dinner with Kim tonight. I've been thinking that I'd like to tell her about us, if it's okay with you." They had decided—actually Anna had asked—to keep their relationship secret until they were more certain of their feelings. Lily took it as a good sign that the stoic woman was ready to share this with her sister. On the other hand, it was also a risk. Kim's disapproval would be difficult to overcome.

"Of course it's okay." More tentatively, she added, "Will you tell me how it goes?"

Anna realized that Lily was worried. "Sure, but don't worry about it. Kim likes you, and I think she has pretty good idea what's going on. She'll be okay with it, I'm sure."

Grateful for the assurance, Lily countered, "Well, I hope it goes okay. How would you feel if I talked to Mom?" She felt guilty for keeping something so important from her mother, and she hoped that Anna would acquiesce.

"Go ahead. I know how close the two of you are. I guess it was silly of me to ask you to wait in the first place." Anna really envied the closeness between Eleanor and her daughter. She liked to think that she would have been as close to own mother.

"Not silly at all. I know this is all new for you, and it'll take some time to get used to it." Lily paused before she continued. She didn't want to scare her new love away, but Anna needed to be prepared for some of the problems she might face. "As much as I hate to say it, you're right to worry about what others might think. People have prejudices, and some of the folks that you've known for years might look at you differently if they knew about us."

"Lily, I...how do I say this?" The blonde's stomach suddenly lurched with anxiety. "It isn't you being a woman that scares me. It's...it's making another mistake for everybody to see."

Lily's heart went out to the woman. As they drove to San Jose last fall, Anna had described in detail the humiliation she felt when she divorced Scott after only a year of marriage. Against her own better judgment, George and Martine had staged an elaborate wedding and reception, with more than 400 people in attendance. Anna had been almost embarrassed at the opulent display, made worse by its undoing so soon after. Lily reassured her friend, "We'll take our time with everything. I want you to be sure."

"So what's it like making love with another woman?" Kim was not one to beat around the bush, especially when her sister—to her demented delight—embarrassed so easily.

"I can't believe you went there so fast!" Anna retorted indignantly. "I just told you about this sweet woman who has touched my heart, and the wonderful sense of romance we're enjoying. But no! All you want to hear about is the sex!"

"Yeah, yeah. So? What's it like?" the imp persisted.

Anna sighed and dropped her shoulders in surrender. Kim was incorrigible. "I don't know. We haven't...exactly done anything."

"Well, what are you waiting for!"

"It's not a race, you know. Not everybody gives in so easily to their most basal instincts, like two people I know who shall remain nameless but who can't keep their hands off one another!"

"Don't go changing the subject. We're talking about your sex life here." Kim took special pleasure in tormenting her sister this way, and she was thrilled to see Anna so obviously happy.

"We are not talking about my sex life! I don't even...know what it is that we do," she mumbled the last part sheepishly. Her sister was the only living soul with whom Anna had shared the details of her intimate experiences with Scott. To her infinite embarrassment, Kim then went on and on about the things she and Hal did between

the sheets. She would never look at her brother-in-law—or Al Gore for that matter—the same way again.

"You don't even know what you do? Well how will you know when you've done it?" Little Sister was really having too much fun now. Once she tasted blood, she usually badgered Anna until the shy woman spilled her guts.

"Well, I guess I sort of know what we'll do, but...people like different things." Anna had never thought much about sexual things. She liked to think of herself as more, ahem...cerebral. Now however, her attentions wandered there almost every time she thought of the cute little blonde. "Lily excites me."

Kim was taken aback by the quiet seriousness of her sister's last remark. "I'm really happy for you, Sister. What's it like, the excitement?"

Anna thought of Lily and smiled. "It's like nothing I've ever known. Being with her just makes me so aware of myself, of my own body. I want to feel her hands on me. I want to kiss her and touch her...everywhere. It was never that way with Scott."

"You didn't like to touch him?" Kim needed to tread carefully. She didn't want her sister to think she was still teasing.

"It wasn't that. I just didn't think about it. When I did touch him, I did it because I knew he wanted me to. But with Lily, it's like a hunger."

"A hunger." It wasn't a question, but an understanding. She felt the same way about Hal. "So why don't you feed it?"

The tall woman blushed again. "I think that's going to happen soon."

"Then you'll tell me everything, won't you?" The old Kim was back.

In spite of herself, Anna knew she probably would.

"So she doesn't seem to be afraid of getting involved with a woman?" Eleanor was delighted to hear of the new direction in her daughter's love life, but was trying to determine the source of the faint apprehension she discerned.

"No, she says she isn't. I really don't think that it's an issue for her." Lily had been bursting with excitement to finally have the chance to tell someone about Anna. But as she talked with her mom, she realized that it was also a chance to explore her own feelings about where things were going. "It's just that...well, that's not the same as saying that you're gay. And if she's not, then she'll realize it eventually. And there won't be anything either of us can do about it."

"You know, Katharine had a favorite expression she would use whenever someone worried too much about things that might not happen. She used to say 'Don't go borrowing trouble.' I think that's what you're doing here, sweetheart. You need to be enjoying this time, not worrying about it."

As always, Eleanor was absolutely right. Even if Lily couldn't control her creeping doubts, she needed to savor this time getting to know Anna in a more intimate way. "You're right Mom. I wish Katharine were here to see this. She'd probably get a kick out of seeing me so frazzled. I tell you, it's like nothing else in the world exists."

"So...are things...progressing?"

"What things?" It suddenly dawned on Lily what her mother was asking. "Oh no! No way am I going to talk with my mother about that! I have limits!"

"Okay, suit yourself. But I guess that means you don't want to hear what's new with Bill Mueller and me." Bill was a longtime family friend. In one of life's cruel ironies, the oncologist had lost his wife of 21 years to cancer three years ago. Lily knew that her mother spent a good deal of time with the doctor, but she had no idea that their relationship had blossomed into a romance.

"What's this? You and Bill? Tell me everything! No, on second thought, a girl doesn't need to hear these things about her mom either."

"Well, that's a good thing. A woman's got to have some secrets," she chided.

"It was a very moving service, don't you think?" Hal offered as they left the Presbyterian Church on Endicott Avenue. Kim, Anna and Lily were near tears and unable to do anything but nod their agreement. Tony wrapped his arm around the blonde attorney as a gesture of support. One year ago today, 27 people had lost their lives at the Endicott Mall. Tonight's memorial service commemorated those lives and honored the heroes who had rescued scores of survivors. For Anna and Lily, it also marked the day that they met.

After a quick dinner with their friends, the two women headed to Anna's Bel Air house in the X5. "What on earth did you say to your sister? She kept looking at me, grinning like she knew something I didn't know. I swear she winked at me when you took my hand in the church."

"Oh, I just told her that you were special to me, and that we were having a lot of fun getting to know each other." Anna reached out and took Lily's free hand again.

What does 'special' mean? "So what did she say?"

"She was...inquisitive."

Lily sensed that Anna wasn't telling her everything, and it allowed her insecurities to creep in. Had Kim tried to dissuade Anna from going forward? Pulling into the driveway, she turned off the engine and shifted sideways to face her friend. "You mean inquisitive like 'Are you happy with how things are going?' or inquisitive like 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'"

The tall woman sighed and looked out the window so the blonde wouldn't see her blush. She hoped above all that Lily wouldn't tease her like Kim had. She had never

been able to talk about intimate things openly without getting embarrassed. "No, inquisitive like 'What's the sex like?'"

"Oh." The blonde's stomach fluttered, as it did every time she thought of making love with this beautiful woman. She couldn't see her friend's reddened face in the dark, but she surmised from the turned head that Anna was unsettled by the thought. Her heart sank with the acknowledgment that they might never progress beyond friendship, but if friendship was all that Anna could give, Lily knew she would accept it just to be near her. "Anna, look. I don't have any expectations about that. I just want to enjoy being together. If it happens, I know it will be wonderful. If it doesn't, we'll be okay." *And I will die.*

Realizing that the blonde had misread her embarrassment as apprehension, Anna knew she needed to clear things up. "Come inside for a minute," she invited. They had already decided to call it an early night, since the car dealer needed to be on the lot at seven on Saturday morning. Lily stepped into the foyer, and Anna wrapped her arms around the small body. "Don't read anything into that stuff with Kim. She lives to make me blush, and she's pretty good at it."

"So you were embarrassed?" Lily was confused. *So it wasn't...*

"Yeah, a little. But it doesn't mean that we won't...you know." Anna couldn't hide this growing blush in the soft light of the foyer.

Nor could Lily hide her relief. *Oh god, I'm in love with this woman!* She tightened her arms around Anna's waist and laid her head on the tall woman's shoulder. "Hey, I'm not going to tease you. I'm just glad to know that you're thinking about me that way."

"Of course I am." *Are you kidding?* "You are so special to me. But I get the feeling you don't really know that. Sometimes I don't think I do a very good job of showing you how I feel."

"No, you do fine. You're special to me too." *Very special.* "I think I'm just a naturally insecure person. Probably my birth mother's legacy. I usually expect the worst, then I'm not disappointed." As those words left her lips, she grimaced at how pathetic she sounded.

Anna was gradually coming to understand the fragile state of Lily's heart. All of those people who had walked away from her—her mother, her high school friends, her lovers—had missed the chance to know Lily's capacity to give. She took the small hands and clutched them to her chest, "I don't want you to be insecure about my feelings for you. If you want to make love, I'm ready."

The blonde was so surprised by the statement that she couldn't immediately respond. She was almost ashamed that her admissions of insecurity had elicited such an offer. "Anna, the thought of making love with you excites me almost more than I can stand. But when we make love, and I hope we will, I want it to be because we're both ready, not because I've made you feel like you have to prove something to me. I need to handle my own insecurities."

The dark-haired woman relaxed, resting her cheek against the blonde head. They stood that way for several minutes, both warring with the need to share something. Talk of making love had definitely raised the stakes.

Guarding your emotions is a bunch of crap if it means not being true to yourself. "I love you, Amazon."

Anna's arms tightened firmly around her. "I love you too, Pygmy."

Chapter 12

"I don't understand you George. You've always been pretty open minded about this sort of thing. Why is this different?"

"I don't have anything against gays. You should know that. I just don't understand why she's being invited to our family functions."

Martine had known this wouldn't go over well, but she was glad they were having the discussion this afternoon in their bedroom instead of tonight when everyone was there. "She's invited because Anna asked if she could come."

"But this is a family thing..."

"George, we've always had an open door for the children's friends, too. Is this really about tonight being a family thing? Or is it about Anna having a lesbian as such a close friend?" Martine had been dodging this discussion ever since her husband had returned from Munich alone and in a foul mood, but it was time to finally have it out.

George finally voiced his worst fear. "Has it occurred to you that they might be more than just friends, or have you just decided not to see that?"

"Yes, it has occurred to me, but I don't think that it's any of our business unless she makes it that way."

"So I take it you don't have any problem with your daughter being a lesbian?"

"I care that she's happy." Martine meant that. "If it turns out that Lily is the one who makes her happy—and I'm not saying that's the case at all—but if it is, then I'll accept it."

"Well I'm not going to sit by and watch her make a fool of herself in front of everybody. She just needs to see that it's all wrong for her."

"George, why is it that you think you know best what's right or wrong for Anna! She's 32 years old. Shouldn't she be allowed to make these choices for herself?" Martine was on the verge of anger at her husband's arrogance.

"She made a perfectly good choice when she married Scott. I'd love to know if her little friend was the one who convinced her to walk away from her marriage. You know, it was right after they met during the earthquake that the two of them split up." George hadn't thought of this before, but it made perfect sense.

"Oh, that's nonsense and you know it! Have you ever thought that maybe you were wrong about Scott? What if he wasn't right for her? What if Anna married him because she was more intent on pleasing you than she was pleasing herself?"

The man knew there was at least some truth in his wife's words. He had been lucky enough in this lifetime to love not one but two women with all his heart, and he never once saw the proof of that kind of love for Scott Rutherford in his daughter's eyes.

Martine saw the resignation in her husband's slumped shoulders as he pondered his own role in Anna's failed marriage. Placing a hand on his shoulder, she comforted him, "George, it's time for us to step back and be confident in the way we raised her. Her happiness is all that matters, and it's important that she make those decisions by herself, and for herself."

George was mesmerized by the dynamic between his daughter and her friend. They were definitely...familiar. The women seemed to touch almost every time they spoke to one another, and the man was certain that the hands underneath the table were joined from time to time.

Despite George's reservations, this night's dinner was more fun than anyone could remember. David pumped Lily for the inside scoop on living in the South Bay, since he was eyeing Stanford for his bachelor's in business administration. "Hey, I'm sure Anna can pull some strings and get you into Southern Cal," Kim kidded, her reference to Scott's position on the faculty. The shortest Kaklis—at *five feet ten*—then shocked everyone by sending a glazed carrot across the table at her sister's forehead.

When the laughter finally died down, Martine stood and sternly threatened the next person who threw food at her table. Each member of the Kaklis clan glanced sheepishly at one another, not willing to challenge the matriarch. The blonde guest was quiet as a mouse, almost uncomfortable with the woman's harsh reprimand. As Martine returned to her seat, she startled everyone when her hand unexpectedly tipped a water glass into Anna's lap, sending the tall woman leaping from her chair. Several seconds of stunned silence passed as everyone realized her prank. "Oh, clumsy me," Martine sighed with a wry smile.

Once she'd dried off in the kitchen, Anna returned to the table, her beautiful blue eyes shooting mock daggers at her mother. Martine, however, was the picture of innocence.

Kim's joke was the opening George had been looking for. "So Anna, have you heard anything from Scott recently?" He really missed talking business with his son-in-law, and had held out for a reconciliation until Anna had told them of his second marriage. Neither he nor Martine had any idea of Scott's unfaithfulness.

"No, Dad. I'd say he's gotten on with his life." *And I've gotten on with mine.* Quickly changing the subject, she turned to her brother and told him, "I think Stanford's a great choice, David. Anywhere but Berkeley."

"Hear, hear!" cheered the Bruin in agreement. With a warning look, Martine double dared Kim or Hal to throw any of the food on their plates.

"So tell me again what's in South Carolina." Lily was talking on her portable phone as she got ready for bed.

"It's a BMW plant. In fact, it's where your little X5 was born." She said the latter with an intonation of family pride. She too was preparing for bed. "They're previewing next year's models."

"I thought that's what you went to Germany for." The blonde wasn't whining. She just didn't understand.

"No, the design center in Germany showed us what the next generation of cars will look like, those about three years away. I've already seen these cars in South Carolina, but we get to take a last look at the changes before they roll them out." Anna got excited when she talked about her work. There was a mechanical engineering nerd inside that beautiful casing.

"So when will you be back?" Saturday was Lily's 30th birthday, but her brain had already stored the fact that Anna would not be in town.

"My plane gets back on Sunday around six o'clock. Maybe somebody could meet me at the airport," she hinted.

"But I'll be 30 by then. If I show up at the airport, I'll probably need a skycap with a wheelchair." Now she was whining. "I'm going to miss you. What am I supposed to do by myself for five whole days?"

"Think about me." Anna had turned out the lights in her house and was now getting in bed.

"I already do that." Lily too had finished with her own nightly tasks and was pulling back the covers. "Morning, noon and night."

"What do you think about?" Anna settled between the sheets and switched off the bedside lamp. It was after 11, but her plane for Greenville-Spartanburg didn't leave until 11:30 the following day. She could talk for as long as Lily wanted.

"I think about being with you. About some of the things we've done together, like the boat ride, the camping trip, and the time we drove to San Jose right after I got the X5."

"Not very racy. Well, except for the X5 part, Mario." Anna was feeling playful. Lily had finally fessed up about the \$534 speeding ticket she had received on her way home from Tahoe.

"Oh, you want racy, do you? Well what do you think about?" The gauntlet was thrown.

"Well...I think about a certain cute little blonde attorney. How sweet her kisses are. How she makes me feel inside." Anna's tone lost some of its playfulness. She was thinking about how her body had responded to the woman's touch.

"How do I make you feel?"

Anna had trouble putting such intimate feelings into words, but she wanted to try. She hoped they would be able to talk about these things, especially given her naiveté about what Lily would want from her. She would need Lily's help to take the next steps in their relationship. "You make me feel warm. My heart beats faster and...my body wants to press against yours." *I can't believe I just said that!*

Lily shifted slowly under the sheet. Anna's words had certainly stirred a response in her own body. "God, you can't imagine what it does to me to hear you say that."

"Tell me what it does, sweetheart. Tell me what I do for you." Anna focused her thoughts on the beautiful, slender blonde that set her blood racing.

"You make my stomach flutter. My knees go weak. Everything else disappears." She shifted again.

Anna needed to know more, but the thought of asking for what she needed was terrifying. It wasn't that she hadn't thought about these things at all. On the contrary, she'd been thinking about them more and more every day. She needed to know if she could do this, if this was what she really wanted. "Lily, if I were with you right now, what would you have me do? How would I make love to you?" Anna's voice was low and sensuous.

There went the stomach flutter. "You want me to tell you how I want to be touched?" This was interesting.

"No, I want you to tell me how you envision me touching you." Anna couldn't believe the words that left her mouth. She'd never done anything like this before in her life. With uncommon boldness, she asked, "What are you wearing to bed?"

"I've got on a long tank top and panties. That's all." Lily was becoming very aroused.

"Take them off, baby." Anna listened while the woman removed her sleep shirt and panties.

"Okay, they're off. What about you?"

"I'm taking off my nightshirt too. Now I want to just go there, Lily. Describe it to me." Anna leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. She wanted to be there with her love. How close could they get?

"Okay, we're lying together, naked with only a sheet covering us. I'm on my back, and you're on your side looking down at me."

"Which side am I on?"

"You're on my right side. So you're lying on your left side alongside me."

The tall woman rolled onto her left side and pulled a pillow to her. "Tell me what I see when I look at you."

Oh my god! We're really going to do this! Lily couldn't have stopped now if she wanted to. And she definitely didn't want to. "My eyes. The first thing you see is my eyes. They're full of love for you. And desire." She paused to let the image settle. "I lift my lips to your face, reaching behind your neck to pull you down." Lily closed her eyes to imagine the sensations. "I'm trembling, and so are you."

Anna could picture Lily's green eyes. "I'm going to kiss you."

"Yes, your lips are on mine. Then they travel ever so slowly across my cheek, down to my ear." Lily trailed her own hand softly along the path she described. "I feel your warm breath in my ear. Your tongue and your teeth tease my earlobe, then they wander below to my neck. I love to feel your mouth on my neck."

"Yes, your skin is so soft there." Anna's body began to stir as she imagined her lips and tongue on Lily's neck.

"You raise up on your arm to look at me. You pull the sheet back to my waist. Your eyes take in the sight of my naked body. I'm aching for your touch, to feel your hands on me." She was.

"Tell me what I see." Anna wanted to see it. *Tell me what you look like.*

Lily was tentative, but she knew somehow that Anna needed this. "First you see my breasts. My nipples...they're dark. They're hard, like pebbles. I need you to touch them."

"Yes." Anna was trembling all over. She pictured again the full breasts she had admired that day on the boat. To that image, she added the hard, dark nipples.

"So you cover my left breast with your palm. You squeeze it softly, then stronger, more possessive." Lily's own hand began to squeeze her breast. "Oh, I like that," she moaned.

Anna then knew with a certainty that Lily was touching herself. She was becoming crazy with desire.

"Then you take my nipple with your thumb and fingers, and you start to pinch it. Gently at first, then with more pressure. When you tug on it, it makes me gasp for breath." And she did.

"Ahhh." Anna's fingers pulsed as she imagined them on Lily's breasts.

"I need to feel your mouth on my breasts. I'm lifting my body up to your face. I feel you take me into your mouth, you feel so good." Her fingers closed again around the nipple, but she imagined the beautiful woman's mouth. "Your soft tongue draws circles around my nipple, then your lips close around it and you suck it into your mouth. I can feel your teeth teasing me. Your hand has closed around my other nipple and you're pulling on it with the same rhythm."

"You're so exciting." Anna had never experienced anything so erotic in all her life.

"My hips are pushing toward you now, in the same rhythm as the sensations in my breasts. My whole body needs you."

Anna's body was moving rhythmically, matching Lily's pace.

"You bring your lips to mine again, then you look at my rolling body. I'm hot and I want you so much. Your hands are roaming all over my chest and my stomach and hips." Lily's own hands stroked the heated planes.

"Yes, I need to feel your naked skin. Tell me what I see when I look down at you."

Lily opens her eyes to describe the sight. "You lower the sheet to my knees. You see the patch of hair that hides me from your eyes. It's light brown, thick and curly. It's already damp from what you're doing to me."

Oh god, Lily. "What am I doing? Tell me." Anna was desperate.

"Oh, you're exciting me, sweetheart. I want you so much. And you want this, everything I'm offering you."

"Yes, I want it." Anna's voice was raspy.

"Now I've raised my knee so that I can open myself for you."

"I need to touch you, baby." She needed to be closer.

"And I want you to. So badly I might explode. Your hand crosses my stomach and stops to twirl around my navel. You're such a tease." For Lily, it was no longer her own hand at work. She felt it as though it were Anna's. "Then you brush against that curly hair. Your fingers run through it, lower, until you feel it getting damp. Then lower...there! Right there!" Lily gasped for breath as she touched herself intimately for the first time since they began.

Anna shuddered with anticipation. "Please, baby! Tell me what I feel."

"You find me wet, so wet! And I'm warm and swollen, begging you to touch all of me. So you slide your long fingers through me. Up and down." Lily moaned softly as she mimicked what her lover would do. After several long moments, she began again. "You linger on the outside, circling my opening. Then you slip two fingers inside."

Anna was shaking with excitement. "Oh, yes. I'm inside you now," she whispered.

"You push deep inside, and you feel me clutch your fingers with my walls. You move inside me, in and out."

"Oh god, you're so hot."

"I'm moving with you, rocking against you so you'll reach deeper."

Both women were writhing now, Anna against the pillow, Lily against her own hand.

"Then you slowly pull your fingers out and touch me where I'm hard and swollen. Oh, I need that." Again she grew quiet while she brought herself closer to climax. "Your fingers are making circles, and I'm lifting up off the bed to get closer. To feel more of you." She was drawing deep rapid breaths to keep up with her body's need. "My fingers are digging into your back, showing you the rhythm I want. Harder, you press harder."

Anna closed her eyes tightly as her senses filled with the image.

"And now I'm coming, baby." Lily filled her lungs with a deep gasp, then released it in short, steady bursts. "Yes, baby, so strong."

"Oh god, Lily. Oh god, I love you." Anna shuddered as she listened to Lily's release. Her desire to pull the woman close was overwhelming, far more than a mere physical need. She wanted to look into Lily's eyes to see how the sensation had moved her, to confirm that Lily too had shared her heart along with her body. Anna had never felt such a need to connect with another in her life. She resisted reaching between her own legs, already knowing what she would find. Her body craved release, but she would wait for Lily's touch.

Lily gradually lowered her hips to the bed as the waves receded. Her body was spent, but her thoughts remained attuned to the woman on the phone. What was Anna thinking? Had she felt the emotional connection or was this merely a sexual display? Lily suddenly worried that she had exposed too much. She felt vulnerable, embarrassed even.

Both women were quiet for a long moment, one embracing her feelings, the other anxious with her own. Finally, Anna broke the silence. "Lily?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"I want you to feel my arms around you, my whole body against yours. I'm going to hold you tonight while you sleep."

Lily relaxed and lost herself in the comforting image. "I love you, Anna."

"I love you too, baby." Anna saw herself place a kiss on Lily's forehead.
"Goodnight."

Lily searched among the stacks of paperwork for the file she needed. Pauline had gotten better about keeping her records in order after the incident last year with Maria Esperanza. Maria's now very thick file rested on the corner of the cluttered desk.
"Yeah, Pete. I've got it right here. What do you need? ...Yeah, that's what it says...She isn't?" Miguel had complained to his lawyer that Maria and the children were gone the last two times he went to see his children. "When did that start?
...Okay, I'll give her a call right now...Thanks for the heads up."

Lily placed the call, but got a recorded message that the cellular service had been discontinued. Thumbing through the file, she came across the number for Maria's sister, the one who lived in Culver City. The attorney dialed the number and asked to speak to Serena Whitman. "Hello, this is Lilian Stuart. You may remember me. I'm your sister Maria's attorney."

The voice on the line hesitated. Then formally, "How can I help you, Miss Stuart?"

"I'm trying to reach your sister. Something very important has come up with her case. The number that I have for her is no longer in service. I was hoping you might have a new number, or a way that I could reach her."

"No, I don't know where she is," the woman answered quickly.

A little too quickly, Lily thought. She needed to make the woman understand what was at stake. "Listen, I have an urgent message for her. If you see her or hear from her, she needs to know that there is trouble with her case. Mr. Esperanza's attorney plans to ask the court for custody of the children because she had not allowed him to visit them. I will not be able to help her if she doesn't call me soon." Lily hoped that Serena understood the gravity of the situation and would pass the message on to Maria.

In the meantime, Lily had a hunch that Maria was hiding out at her sister's home. Sometimes she had very little patience for her adult clients, but the children she served needed her to work on their behalf. The Esperanza children were pawns in this battle of wills between their parents. Lily wondered if perhaps they weren't better off elsewhere, but that was the judge's call. She was reluctant to step into the middle of a volatile domestic dispute, but guarding the children's interest was part of her job. She picked up her keys and purse, and stopped to let Pauline know where she was headed.

Driving through the Culver City neighborhood, Lily was suddenly flooded with memories and images from a year ago. Like then, it was mid-morning on a Thursday, unusually warm for a February day. She marveled at how her life had changed since that fateful day. She'd gone from being a loner to being one-half of something that seemed greater than a whole. She could no more imagine her life without Anna than she could imagine it without her work, her mother, her past. The beautiful woman was now part of who she was.

Her daydreams nearly caused her to miss what she was looking for. From her vantage point in the tall vehicle, she could barely see the rear bumper of the old red Ford Escort that was parked behind the Whitman house. "I knew it," she said aloud triumphantly. Parking across the street, Lily set up her surveillance of the home. Neither of the sisters would recognize the X5.

Nearly 45 minutes passed before she observed activity at the home. Maria's children, Sofia and Roberto, emerged from the side door to play in the small yard. "That's good enough for me," the attorney muttered as she exited the vehicle and dashed quickly to the front door.

Serena answered almost as soon as Lily knocked. "I told you, I don't know where Maria is."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I should have been more clear. It isn't really Maria that I need. It's the children. I just saw them in the yard. They're supposed to be with their father, so I'll just call the social worker to come pick them up and take them to his house." She reached for her cell phone, prepared to call Sandy to the scene.

"No, wait!" As Lily had expected, Maria miraculously appeared to head off the call. "Please don't call him. He's been hurting the children. I can't let them go."

"Goddamnit, Maria! I told you to call me if there were problems. He's going to try to get custody again." She was furious that Maria would put her children at further risk by keeping this from her.

"I was afraid he would hurt them worse if I told on him." The woman was nearly hysterical.

"Your children will be safe. But I have to put them in protective custody while a judge considers new charges. You can't just violate the court order."

"No, please don't take them!"

"I have to. It's to keep everyone safe." Maria wailed into her sister's arms as Lily called Sandy. While they waited for the social worker, she helped the children pack a few items for their next placement in foster care. A flashback invaded her thoughts, that of a small child placing her few belongings in a brown grocery bag as a woman waited.

"You wouldn't believe the new models! We're going to have to trade yours in. You would love this edition!" The X5 Anna had in mind would go for \$68,000 next year.

"No way! I'm driving my car until it falls apart." Lily pulled the phone from her ear and shouted her intention into the mouthpiece.

"What? I didn't tell you that yours was on a custom lease that expires at the dealer's discretion when new models become available?"

"Just you try it, Amazon. Besides, the one I have is already smarter than I am. I'd have to go to school to learn how to drive a new one."

"Funny you should say that. There's a school here. We all had the chance to take out the new models and crank 'em up. You could come and do it too if you wanted to. There's nothing quite like the feel of an open course with all that muscle."

Lily loved it when Anna talked about her powerful cars! It was almost...butch.

"So, Birthday Girl, I'll try to call you tomorrow, but it will probably be after seven or eight your time. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, but don't forget, I'm going to dinner at Sandy's and Suzanne's tomorrow." What a bummer that her girlfriend—*girlfriend?*—was out of town on her birthday.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Your real friends are the ones who are with you on your birthday." Anna was chiding Lily about her earlier pout.

"Well, I'll forgive you this time. But I sure hope this 'next model year' preview doesn't always fall on my birthday." *Fuck! I can't believe I just said that!*

Oblivious to Lily's gaffe, Anna warmed at the thought that she would spend more birthdays with the cute little blonde. *Maybe next year, I'll just take you with me.* "Goodnight, sweetheart. And happy birthday all day tomorrow."

Lily's gut tightened as she hung up the phone. *Goddamnit! Why didn't I just drive over to her house with a U-Haul!* She was suddenly afraid that Anna would bolt at her presumption that she'd be with her next year. She had made that same mistake with Melanie, Becca and especially Beverly. She and Anna had been taking things slowly, the older woman needing time to adjust to the idea of being in a new relationship, let alone a relationship with another woman. *Fuck me.*

Lily laughed aloud as she pulled onto the freeway from Sherman Oaks. Her "dinner" with Sandy and Suzanne had actually been a surprise party, attended by 12 of her closest friends, mostly from work or from her socializing with the couple, all dressed in black to commemorate her passage "over the hill." Her gift haul included not one single serious gift. Instead, she had opened such things as wrinkle cream, denture adhesive, and a Lawrence Welk CD. Looking back, she couldn't fault their sense of humor. She was the last one in the group to hit 30, and she had given several of them a box of Depends on their significant birthdays.

Pulling into her covered spot, she gathered the gag gifts and cards from the passenger seat. Despite the darkened apartment, Lily did not feel so alone this year. Flipping the light switch with her forearm, she dropped her gifts onto the kitchen table. To her disappointment, the solid red light told her there were no messages. As if reading her thoughts, the phone suddenly rang. *Anna!*

"Hello," she answered cheerfully.

"Happy birthday to you," the voice sang cheerfully.

God, what a sexy voice!

"Happy birthday to you."

It is now!

"Happy birthday dear Pygmy."

My Amazon!

"Happy birthday to you."

"You just made my day, Amazon."

"Is that so?" Anna could picture the blonde in the kitchen, probably leaning against the counter while she talked.

"Yeah, it's so. Just hearing your voice makes me warm all over. I love you." Lily checked the clock on the microwave. It was after ten, so that meant it was after one a.m. in South Carolina.

"I love you too, baby. I really wanted to make your day. So I started thinking about what I could do on your birthday that was really special."

God, I love it when she calls me baby. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, so when I tried to think of something really special, I started thinking about what we did on the night before I left. Do you remember what we did, Lily?"

Every detail. "How could I forget that?" Her voice grew very small. Do I need to be lying down again?

"Yes, that was very special indeed. In fact, there was only one thing I could think of that would be more special than that."

"And what's that?" *Only one thing.*

"Why don't you come upstairs and find out?"

Chapter 13

It was at that moment that Lily first noticed a glow from the barely cracked door at the top of the stairs. That light hadn't been on when she entered the apartment—she would have seen it from the walkway. Turning off the lights in the kitchen, the blonde nervously made her way up the darkened stairway, trying to envisage what she would see when she got to her bedroom.

No imagination could have done justice to the sight that greeted her as she gently swung open the door. Anna Kaklis sat in the corner armchair by the window, the picture of calm with one long leg crossed over the other, one hand raised so that her fingers rested on her chin. Her features were shadowed by the dim light from the small lamp on the far side of the room. The woman was dressed in dark slacks and a long sleeved white shirt, the black hair draped loosely around her shoulders. Her elbows rested nonchalantly on the arms of the chair and her other hand held a cell phone in her lap. Beside her on the bedside table sat a small wrapped gift.

Lily walked slowly into the room, stopping at the end of the bed. "I can't believe you're really here," she said with guarded excitement. If they both kept their nerve, they would be lovers soon.

"I didn't want to miss your birthday," Anna answered quietly. "A girl doesn't turn 30 every day." Despite her seeming composure, the beautiful woman was quickly losing the bravado she had needed to set up this scenario in Lily's bedroom. Never before had she stood on this end of a seduction.

As Lily's eyes adjusted to the lighting, Anna's features became clearer to her. The woman wore a look of apprehension that bordered on panic. Crossing the room, Lily calmed her by placing a hand on her knee. "Well, just having you here is about the nicest birthday present I could have imagined," the blonde woman said from her heart. It was clear from her presence in Lily's bedroom that Anna had intended for this to be the night that they made love. Yet she had come as far as she could of her own volition. Lily knew that she would have to lead her lover the rest of the way.

Silently, she took Anna's hand and pulled her up into a confident embrace. Looking into the blue eyes, she leaned forward into a gentle probing kiss that quickly became deeper, more passionate. There was no need this time for either to hold back.

Placing the woman's long hand against her pounding chest, Lily told her, "This is only one of the things you do to me." With that, she slid her palm inside the open collar of Anna's shirt, finding a rapid heartbeat that matched her own. Ever so deliberately, Lily's fingers moved to undo the buttons of the shirt, pushing back the collar to reveal the top of a lacy white bra. Pressing her lips against the soft skin between the woman's breasts, deft hands gently tugged the shirttail free.

Without a trace of shyness, Lily stepped out of her shoes and removed her own jeans and sweater, leaving her standing in dark green panties and bra. Anna then matched her movements, finally reaching behind her to unfasten her bra.

"Please, I want to do that." Lily stepped forward and reached around the woman. Releasing the clasp, the bra slipped loosely from Anna's shoulders. Lily lifted both hands to caress the soft naked breasts, then brought her face once again to the woman's chest, brushing her cheek against a hardened nipple. "Beautiful," she murmured, as she pressed her lips to the smooth skin. Kneeling on the edge of the bed, she guided Anna to sit beside her.

Anna was trembling with anticipation as she watched the smaller woman remove first her bra, then her panties. Lily's naked form was far more beautiful than Anna had imagined from their late night telephone interlude. Overwhelmed with the need to touch this woman, she ran both hands up Lily's waist, trailing her fingertips against the sides of her breasts. She realized now that she had wanted this since the day on the boat.

Remembering perfectly the touch that Lily had described, Anna gently pushed her lover back against the pillow. Slowly, lovingly, wondrously, she made love with this beautiful woman, repeating each stroke of the fingers and mouth that Lily had asked her for that night. Every facet of the experience was more incredible than her meager imagination had allowed. When she drew her fingers from the warm cocoon to touch the hardened nub, her whole body thrummed with excitement. Anna watched in wonder as a deep red flush covered Lily's chest and neck as she climaxed. With one arm underneath, Anna pulled her close and searched for the green eyes. "I love you, Lily. I love touching you this way." *Lily, look at me! Yes, that's it.* In her entire life, she had never felt so connected to another person.

Lily looked back into the blue eyes that seemed so desperate to hold her own. In all the scenarios that she had dreamed, none had involved Anna being first to touch her. When her tremors ceased, she gently nudged the beautiful woman to her back and cradled her as she herself had been held, all without breaking the intimate link. "I want to make you feel as wonderful as I do," she said. With that, she covered Anna's mouth with a deep kiss, breaking after several moments for air, but not moving her face from that of her lover. "I want to know you, Anna, every inch. I want to touch you, kiss you and taste you," she whispered. She could feel the shudder underneath her as Anna's mind journeyed to the intimate act of which she spoke.

Lily's kisses and strokes stirred Anna to such arousal that when she finally lowered her mouth to taste her lover, the woman released within seconds, calling Lily's name as she went over the edge. The skilled tongue drew back, barely touching the tender spot, waiting...waiting for the woman to still. Once she did, Lily pressed harder and drew out a second climax, then a third when she entered Anna as her lips once again encircled the sensitive bud.

Anna awoke before dawn and slipped into the bathroom. She and Lily had made love until after one, when both collapsed physically spent. That in itself was remarkable, since Scott had never continued their lovemaking once she had an orgasm. Last night, she had lost count of the times Lily had brought her to climax. Splashing water on her face to clear the cobwebs, the dark-haired woman removed the traces of her lover's arousal from her chin. Now that had been an amazing experience. She surprised herself with her own lack of reservation—she had simply wanted to devour the woman.

In fact, she was astonished at her own need to give Lily pleasure, almost unmindful of her own body's desires.

Almost, that is. It had certainly been the most satisfying physical experience she'd ever had. Okay, it was more than satisfying—it was incredible. Hell, it was mind-blowing. That's what it was. Remembering now the thundering physical sensations, the tender words and intense looks they had shared, and the way they held onto each other as they climaxed, Anna finally knew what all the fuss was about. *It was about connection.*

She had questions, complicated questions for herself about her own expectations for where this all would lead. But right now, she needed to return to Lily.

The blonde in the bed was starting to grow concerned about the length of time that had passed since Anna had gotten up and disappeared into the bathroom. *What is she thinking about? What is she feeling?* A part of her wanted to go see if everything was okay, but another part was too afraid of the answer. Traumatic imaginings tumbled unbidden through her head. She supposed first that Anna had awakened with guilt or disgust at what they had done last night. Or perhaps it was just disappointment because Lily hadn't lived up to Anna's hopes or expectations. Worse, she had come to Lily simply for the experience of being with another woman, and now that they had shared this sexual encounter, she would move on. Either way, Anna was probably in the bathroom contemplating how to dress and leave without a word.

With her imagination running wild, Lily was simply astounded when Anna returned to the bed and turned on her side to draw the smaller woman close. As she began to doze again, the blonde woman noted that the very worst thing about insecurities was that they robbed you of energy that you could be spending on more pleasurable pursuits.

The sun streaming in through the narrow window above the balcony door stirred Lily awake. To her delight, a sleeping Amazon draped over her from shoulder to feet, dark hair splayed across her chest. Unfortunately, nature's call was adamant.

"This is the lumpiest mattress I've ever slept on," the blonde mumbled mischievously as she returned, lifting the covers and crawling across the tall naked form. "Just can't seem to get comfortable," she continued, shifting her head from one breast to another. Finally, she settled in and began a series of obnoxious snores that dissolved the "mattress" into fits of laughter.

"That's a gift you have, finding lumpy things to crawl on," Anna laughed as she poked the woman in her ribs.

"Hey, who are you? How did you get in here?" Lily demanded playfully.

"Isn't this Apartment 12? I was told to wait for the lady in Apartment 12."

"No, I'm afraid this is number 10."

"Does this mean I'm not going to get my money?"

Good one, Amazon! "Sorry, I'm but a penniless champion of the oppressed. You're going to have to take it out in trade."

"That can be arranged," Anna agreed, arching her eyebrow suggestively.

And so began Sunday morning in Apartment 10.

"Lilian Stuart," the attorney answered.

"So what are you wearing?" came the sexy voice over the speaker phone.

Lunging across the desk for the receiver, Lily absently checked the door for traffic in the hallway. "I'm fine. Thank you for asking," she scolded.

"That'll teach you to answer your speaker phone without checking caller ID," the car dealer chuckled. Pausing a moment, she followed, "So? Are you going to answer my question?"

"I'm wearing a suit. Court clothes. I have a hearing this afternoon on an adoption proceeding. What about you? You in your grease monkey clothes?" Lily had stopped by the dealership last Saturday to find Anna working with one of the mechanics under the hood of an early model BMW. She was dressed in a grease-smearred pin-striped jumpsuit, her long ponytail pulled through a Dodgers baseball cap. Lily had never seen a sexier sight.

"Not today. I've got an appointment this afternoon with Steve French. Remember him?"

"Of course. The San Diego Sleaze. Maybe a grease monkey suit wouldn't be such a bad idea."

"But you said I looked sexy in that. Are you saying that I should look sexy for Steve?" Anna enjoyed poking at the green-eyed monster.

"No, I'm saying that I should come down there and sit in on your meeting. If that jerk so much as looks at you, I'll clean his clock with a crow bar." She fingered her birthday present, a delicate gold bracelet from the box beside the bed. The casual observer likely wouldn't notice the series of BMW emblems etched into the small links. It just screamed *Anna!*

"My hero," Anna sighed in a mock swoon. "Can we do dinner tonight, sweetheart? I'll take you out or pick something up and bring it over. I just want to see you." Work and family obligations had gotten in their way this week. They had spent nearly every night together over the last two weeks, but the only chance they had gotten to see one another this week had been lunch on Tuesday, which meant they had none of the private time that each of them now craved.

"6:30? I can stop and get Chinese food." Lily's mind was already way past what they would eat for dinner.

"See you then. Love you."

"Love you too." The attorney wanted to pinch herself every time she heard or said those words.

"I can't believe there was ever a time when I didn't need this," Anna sighed, rolling onto her back and pulling the blonde on top. Dinner had been a blur, both women looking ahead to having one another for dessert.

"Oh, you always needed it. You just didn't know it." Lily trailed her fingers softly across Anna's thin collarbones, down between her breasts and back up again.

"Well, I think you've ruined me."

"How so?"

"Well, I think about this every six minutes, no matter what I'm doing. I think I would have driven through a police barricade to get here." She chuckled, remembering her excitement on the way over. "I love this. I mean, I also love talking to you, or going out, or just sitting around. But this is what I need," the last part emphasized with a squeeze around the blonde's middle.

"Yeah, I need it too, sweetheart. All of those things." The more time she spent with the beautiful woman, the more secure she felt about their relationship. But Lily knew better than to presume anything. She would take all that Anna had to offer, even if it meant losing her in the end.

"Anna Kaklis, you have a call on line two. Anna Kaklis, line two." The normally animated Carmen always sounded so official and reserved when she used the intercom.

The car dealer swung into an empty office to grab the blinking line. "This is Anna Kaklis. How may I help you?" She had been on the lot with Holly, a new saleswoman she had hired yesterday. Holly was one of the top sellers at the BMW dealership in San Diego. Anna was pleased to find that she knew her stuff when it came to the BMW line; it was only a matter of learning the ins and outs of Premier Motors. They were lucky to get her.

"Anna, it's Mother."

Well, here was a surprise. Anna couldn't remember the last time her mother had phoned her at work. "Hi Mom. What's up? Is everything okay," she asked anxiously.

"Yes, of course. I was calling to invite you to dinner on Saturday. I'm preparing a London broil." Anna knew that was one of her father's favorites.

Anna was confused. It was usually her father who delivered these types of invitations, since they saw each other every day at the dealership. Nonetheless, Martine was waiting patiently on the other end of the line for her answer. "Saturday?" That bought her a moment. Saturday evening was Lily Time.

"Yes, about six. Kim and Hal are coming, of course. And David is bringing Heather. It would be nice if Lily could come too." *There!* She'd just told her stepdaughter that the attorney was welcome in their home. She wanted to create a comfortable setting that would allow her husband to get to know the young woman, and to see how happy the two were together.

They know! The car dealer was flabbergasted, to say the least. "I think that would be very nice. I'll call her and call you back. Thank you, Mother."

"I'm not kidding! She called me herself at work last Thursday, and she asked me to invite Lily too." Anna was filling her sister in on the details of Martine's call.

Lily was outside by the pool with the rest of Kaklis clan, telling them all about the plans for the next Kidz Kamp outing, slated for next month. She was trying to sell David on the idea of coming along. Community service looks good on a college application, she reminded him.

"How do you think she knew about Lily?" Anna did not attempt to conceal her accusatory tone with Kim.

"I didn't say anything, I swear. Not like I would have to, though. All anyone has to do is look at the two of you together, or listen to you talk about each other. You're in love, Sister." Kim smiled knowingly. She loved seeing her sister so happy. "And it really looks good on you."

Anna couldn't help but return the smile. "So do you think I should say something? If they already know, it's like an elephant in the parlor."

"Well, I'd just be sort of casual about it if I were you. I don't think it calls for any big announcement. Does it?" Kim was fishing.

"No, of course not! I do love her, but there's really nothing more to say."

"Just remember, you promised to tell me all about the sex," Kim reminded playfully.

"I did not! Just because you asked me to promise doesn't mean I did!" Anna folded her arms in mock indignation, a pose she adopted often when dealing with her little sister. "But since you brought it up..."

Kim's attention was instantly riveted to her older sister. "Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah! God, I had no idea it could be like that," she whispered animatedly, unable to hide her excitement. "It was never like this with Scott. Not even close."

"I told you, Anna. Scott was not right for you."

"I know. I just wish I knew if this was right for me," the tall woman said wistfully. "I don't think I've gotten a perspective on the lesbian thing yet."

"Well, what about it? If it feels right for you, that's all that matters. You don't have to worry about what to call yourself." Kim was open minded and accepting, but she didn't quite understand Anna's dilemma.

"It's more complicated than that, though. I...I feel like Lily has shown me what real love is supposed to feel like. Now that I know, should I be looking for that feeling with a man? Or what if I really am a lesbian? Is Lily the right woman for me? Am I right for her? I'm plowing all new ground here."

Kim recognized the seriousness of these questions, but wasn't about to spoon-feed her own opinion to her sister. "Well, you're the only one who can answer those questions. Do you have any interest in going out with anyone else? A man? Another woman?"

"No, not at all. If I could have this from now on, I'd be happy." The enormity of that struck Anna suddenly. *From now on.*

From now on? Wow! "What do you think Lily wants?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know she loves me, but she's been burned before. I get the feeling sometimes that she really doesn't expect this to be permanent. I doubt she's thinking about anything long term."

"You're already thinking long term? You've got it bad, don't you?"

"No, it's not that I'm already thinking long term. But why keep seeing somebody, especially intimately, if you know that there isn't any chance for a commitment at some point down the road? I'm just not into dating or sleeping with somebody for recreation. That's not me." That was it, she knew. She wanted Lily, but only if Lily also wanted her. Anna wasn't looking to get her heart broken either.

"Well, give it some time, Anna. There's no rush. I think the answers will come to you." Kim was pretty sure that they already had, but that her sister just needed to try them on for a while. "So I take it you've figured out what it is that you do?"

Anna turned red and smiled. "I should have known I couldn't distract you from your mission." Kim smiled triumphantly. "Yes, I've figured it out. Yes, it's wonderful. Yes, we do it every chance we get." That last bit was actually more than she had intended to say. "Now, we'd better get out there. Lily's going to think I've thrown her to the wolves."

George Kaklis was soundly impressed at the way the little blonde attorney had coaxed his son into agreeing to help out with Kidz Kamp. In his father's opinion, David was pretty self-centered, though not unusually so for most young men his age. Padding his college application was certainly a plus, but besides that, he seemed eager to have the chance to work with some of the younger boys that Lily spoke of. The elder Kaklis

found himself genuinely liking the woman, despite his misgivings about her relationship with his daughter. She was obviously a good, decent person.

George followed Martine into the kitchen so that they could have a few minutes alone. Wrapping his arms around his wife from behind, he told her, "Dinner was marvelous darling. You're the best." There was more, but it was going to be difficult to get out. He waited for a moment, anticipating the argument he would get when she voiced his thoughts. "I...I really like Lily, but I just don't want that for Anna."

"George, please. It isn't your choice." Martine wasn't going to put up with this any longer. She had orchestrated this entire evening as an opportunity for her husband to get to know the young woman better—Martine was certain that Lily herself could win him over. "Can't you see how happy Anna is? Are you so selfish that you'd deny that for your own daughter?"

"It isn't right for her," he practically wailed.

Martine hated to do it, but it was ultimatum time. "As long as this is my home, Lily will be welcome here, no matter what her relationship is with Anna. If you can't deal with that George, then you can go spend the day at the goddamned dealership." With that, she turned and headed back into the dining room.

Chapter 14

"I'm sorry Sandy and I spent so much time talking shop." Anna and Lily were headed home in the black sedan from having dinner with Sandy and Suzanne at their home. It was the first time the dark-haired woman had socialized with her lover's longtime friends.

"Oh, it wasn't a problem at all. I think your work is very interesting." Lauren and Sandy were going to court the next day to petition for Sofia and Roberto Esperanza to be removed from Maria's care, and placed with their aunt in Culver City. Maria had not complied with the visitation order for Miguel, and there was growing evidence that the children's abuser was actually Maria's new boyfriend, Jose. The final impetus had been a call from Serena, asking Lily to help her get custody. Since she was already Maria's attorney, she had referred the case to Lauren. "And it's important. I'm very proud of you and what you do."

"That means a lot to me, sweetheart." Lily immediately reddened with shame as her mind flashed back to the scene before Christmas when she had derided Anna's work as inconsequential. She hoped her lover wasn't thinking of the same thing, as some things were best forgotten. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but now that you've spent a little time with my friends, what do you think of them?"

"I think your friends are very nice, and it's obvious that they think the world of you." Anna was especially fond of Sandy, and it appeared that she and Lily shared a unique friendship, reinforced by their working relationship. "Why were you afraid to ask?"

"Well, it's just that Suzanne can be sort of abrasive at times," Lily said meekly. "It took Mom a while to get used to it. She's really a sweet person, but she doesn't always come off that way."

Anna chuckled. Suzanne had cornered her in the kitchen and threatened to break off her arm and beat her with the bloody end if she hurt their little friend. "Yeah, she did sort of warn me that I should treat you well, which I intend to do, by the way. I mean I might have treated you well anyway, but she gave me a little added incentive," she teased.

They were nearing Lily's apartment. "Can you stay tonight?" The blonde was hungry for her lover, especially after the hot tub scene. She had told Anna that they usually had an after dinner soak, but she would beg off if that felt uncomfortable. On the contrary, the beautiful woman nearly stole Suzanne's breath when she pulled off her clothes and climbed into the tub in all her glory. *Eat your heart out, ladies. She's mine.*

"Sure, I'd like that a lot."

Lily had momentarily forgotten her own question as her mind wandered back to the majestic sight of the tall woman standing to leave the tub, water cascading down her sinuous body. Once she realized that Anna had just agreed to stay the night, she reached across the console and laid her hand in the woman's lap.

Anna loved their nights together. Making love was wonderful, of course, but their connection now went far beyond that. The soft words they'd share as they lay in one another's arms seemed to close a circle with both of them inside. Her whole world went still each time she awakened to find herself entwined with the naked blonde. This was contentment like Anna had never known.

A whole corner of the VP's office at Premier Motors was devoted to putting the Chamber of Commerce records in order, as Anna was happily passing the baton to the incoming treasurer. It had been a busy year for the Chamber, and the car dealer had made quite an impression on the members with whom she had dealings. Several were pressing her to run for vice-president next year, which would mean an automatic ascension to president the following year. On the one hand, it would mean a lot of extra work, with meetings, committee work, and special events. On the other hand, community service was something she believed in, and it was good business.

"Anna, do you have a minute for your dad?" George poked his head into his daughter's office.

"I'm sorry, do you have an appointment?" Anna was feeling somewhat overwhelmed by all of the things she needed to finish by the end of the week. This was definitely cutting into her Lily Time.

"I can come back later if you want." It was almost comical seeing the distinguished man pout.

"No, silly. I always have time for you." Anna stood up to move a pile of paperwork from one of her extra chairs.

George sat down and cleared his throat, obviously waiting for his daughter's undivided attention. He had a plan. "I've been giving some thought lately to how I...I tend to interfere sometimes in matters that really aren't any of my business."

Where on earth did that come from? In her 32 years, Anna couldn't think of a time when her father had come to her with such an admission.

"Anyway, I think I may have jumped the gun a while back when you were going out with Steve French." Anna couldn't believe her ears. "I talked with Steve the other day. He really is a nice guy, and I'm sorry if anything I said about him dissuaded you from seeing him again." George reasoned that if Anna just got back into dating, she would surely abandon this fixation with her attorney friend.

"Steve French?" A knot in her stomach told her this wasn't about the account manager at all, but about a certain blonde attorney.

"Yeah, he's really a very interesting fellow. You two probably have a lot in common. I mean, with both of you in sales and marketing and all. Sure, he drives a Jaguar, but we'll win him over in time." He winked at his daughter, but this time, his usual charm fell short. Way short.

"I'm not really interested in Steve French, Dad." That might have been the understatement of the year. The guy still gave her the creeps.

"You should give it a chance, darling. He offered us tickets on Sunday to the skybox. I told him you and I would come together."

"You're right, Dad...."

George let out of a sigh of relief. That was actually easier than he thought it would be.

"You do sometimes interfere in matters that aren't really any of your business," she finished.

What?

"I already have plans for Sunday." Lily Time. "I'm sure David will be glad to go with you," she said coldly, turning back to her work.

George was taken aback by his daughter's tone. There were plenty of times that she resisted his guidance, but never before so...adamantly. "Anna, I'm worried about you." He would try a different tack. "Ever since Scott left, you've stopped dating. It's like you've...given up on...finding someone to love." Actually, it was more like she'd given up on men, but he wasn't going to voice that one.

Yep, this was definitely about Lily! Anna now saw clearly through her father's charade, and was appalled at his obvious attempts to manipulate her. Truth be told, he had always done this, granting or withholding his approval as a way of bending her to

his will. It was time, she thought, to lay her cards on the table. The woman's voice was shaking as she began. "Dad, I think there's something you should know...." She stopped herself. She needed to have this conversation with her mother also. "I was wondering if I could stop by the house tonight, about 7:30. Would that be alright?"

George nodded grimly. He knew it was time to face this, and that his daughter was thinking the same thing. "Sure, I'll call your mother. Do you want to have dinner with us?"

No, we may not have much of an appetite after you hear what I have to say. "No, I'll probably eat dinner later."

When her father left her office, Anna crossed quickly and closed the door. She called Lily first at her office, then on her cell phone. Getting her lover's voicemail, she left a message. "Hi sweetheart. Listen, I need to go to my parents' house after work tonight. It's time for us to have that talk." She knew Lily would know to which talk she referred. "I don't know how long it will take, but I'll come to your place when I'm done. Love you."

Promptly at 7:30, the black sedan turned through the hedges of the Kaklis home in Beverly Hills. George met his daughter at the door and ushered her into the family room, where Martine sat waiting nervously for the fireworks to begin. Anna sat not on the offered sofa, but on the ottoman next to her mother's wingback chair. She could be closer to both of her parents this way.

"I've been feeling like it was time that we talked about Lily," Anna started. A pin dropping at that moment would have been deafening, she thought. Martine looked at her and smiled softly, while her father wouldn't meet her eyes at all. Turning to her stepmother, she continued, "Dad stopped in my office today and told me that he was worried that I'd given up on love. I want to assure both of you that that isn't true at all, because I have fallen in love. With Lily. She feels the same way about me, and I hope you'll be seeing a lot of her in the future."

Martine reached out and placed her hand on her stepdaughter's knee. "I'm really glad to hear that, Anna. Lily's a wonderful person." Anna squeezed the woman's hand and turned to her father, who stared numbly at his lap. As family moments go, this one was pretty uncomfortable.

Finally, George broke the silence. "Anna, I just don't think this is right. I think you're letting all of the emotions from what happened in the earthquake cloud your judgment."

The words were all too familiar. "That's funny, Dad. That's exactly what Scott said when I told him that I wanted a divorce. It pains me that both of you think I'm so weak that I'd give in to emotional moments."

"It isn't that I think you're weak at all. But sweetheart, did you ever consider that maybe Scott was right? I hated seeing you leave him. He was so good for you."

"I hated seeing you leave him." The woman cringed inwardly at those words. *What about what I wanted?* Reluctantly, Anna acknowledged that it was time to knock

Scott off the pedestal her father had created for him. "I had never intended to tell you this because I know how much you both liked Scott. I divorced him because he fathered a child with another woman, the woman that he later married. I probably could have forgiven him for that, though it wouldn't have been easy. But I realized that I didn't want to work that hard for something that had never made either one of us really happy in the first place." She paused to let the words sink in. "I realize now that I didn't know what happiness was until I found Lily."

George was dismayed to hear of his son-in-law's infidelity. Still, he didn't want to see his daughter giving up on men just because of Scott had turned out to be a louse. "Anna, darling, why didn't you tell us this about Scott? We don't blame you at all for leaving him under those circumstances. But all men aren't like that."

"Which circumstances, Dad? His betrayal or the fact that we weren't happy?" No matter how he answered, Anna acknowledged a bitter truth. If her father was happy, that was really all that mattered to him. "I want you to be able to accept Lily as the person I love, as the person that makes me happy. But if you don't, it isn't going to change anything. I don't know where it's all going to lead, but Lily and I are going to play this out." She looked for her father's eyes, but he still refused to look up from his lap.

Anna stood and reached for her jacket, a grim look of resignation on her face. This was one of the most difficult moments of her life, and she knew her heart would break the moment she left the house. For now though, she was determined to stand her ground.

Martine got up and pulled her stepdaughter into a tight hug. "I'm happy for you, sweetheart." The tall woman could have cried on the spot, but she wouldn't give her father the satisfaction of seeing anything he might construe as weakness. "He'll come around," she gestured with a nod of the head to George, speaking as though he weren't even in the room. "He's hard headed and selfish, but he loves you very much."

Fortunately, that much was true.

"I'm sorry it was so hard for you, baby. Maybe your mother's right. Maybe he'll come around." Lily comforted her lover, trailing her fingers under the shirt across the bare abdomen. It wasn't meant to be a sexual caress, just a way to keep contact while they shared their heavy emotions. Anna was still distraught about what had transpired earlier at her parents' home. She had arrived about an hour earlier, eyes red and swollen, unable to talk. Lily sat with her in the darkened living room for long quiet minutes until the woman finally found her voice. When she had finished with her tale, there was nothing for Lily to do except to hold her.

"I meant what I said, Lily." Anna spoke again after a long silence. "I have to see where this will all go."

Her words were meant to be reassuring, but the blonde woman still was unable to accept that Anna could really let herself do this. "Darling, I know this is hard for you.

If..." Lily couldn't believe she was going to say this and mean it. "If it's too hard, I understand. I won't ask you to give up your family." What was that old Indian proverb about setting free something you loved? Lily had always thought that hokey, but at this very moment, she understood just how much you needed to love someone to make such a deep sacrifice.

Anna couldn't believe her ears. "You'd really let me go?" she asked.

"Yes." *And then I would die.*

I would fight my own family for you, and you'd just let me go? Had she been reading Lily wrong all along? Anna was ready to give this woman everything, but Lily didn't seem to want it. Abruptly extracting herself from the arms that held her, the tall woman stood and gathered her things as she moved toward the door. "I need somebody who'll fight for me, Lily." With that, she was gone.

Lily finally got it—Anna was really in love with her. Real love, lasting love, not just filling a gap in their lives. The stoic woman was willing to forsake her own family to see if she and Lily could build something together that would last. Instead of embracing this offering from Anna, Lily had held back, protecting herself against the certainty that Anna would someday leave. The real Lily would have worn her heart on her sleeve and Anna would have had no doubts at all about where she stood. *Fuck me.* She needed to show Anna that she wanted her badly enough to fight for her. How would the real Lily do that?

Anna saw the X5 through her bedroom window when it pulled up. She debated simply not answering the door, doubting that Lily would use her key if it were clear that she wasn't welcome right now. Deciding instead that nothing could happen that would make her feel any worse, she made her way downstairs to answer the persistent bell. She needed to know where they stood.

Despite herself, the sight that greeted the dark-haired woman brought a smile to her face which she quickly covered with her hand. Standing on the doorstep was the love of her life, dressed in a short brown skirt with a ragged hemline and a matching sleeveless top. Across her chest was what appeared to be a series of coat hangers, spray-painted gold and twisted into curly-cues to cover her breasts. Boots and kneepads covered her legs, and her forearms sported black cardboard gauntlets that matched her arm bracers and shoulder pads.

"Who on earth are you supposed to be?" Anna was losing the battle with covering her smile. Her sparkling blue eyes had already given away her delight. Lily looked adorable.

The costumed blonde reached over her shoulder and extracted a sword made of cardboard and covered with aluminum foil. Its business end curved significantly to one side, only adding to the comical effect. In her other hand, she gripped a plate-sized ring, also covered with foil, but painted gold and black. "I am Lily, the Warrior Princess. I have come to fight for you."

"Get in here before somebody sees you and calls the police!"

Lily lowered her sword and stepped into the darkened foyer. The Halloween costume from a couple of years ago had had the desired effect. She had managed to get herself invited in. Now it was time to lay it all out there. "Anna, can I have my words back and tell you how I really feel?"

Anna walked to the foot of the steps, turning to take a seat on the third step. Lily's face was now illuminated by the light from the upstairs hallway. "How do you really feel?"

Lily hadn't practiced this. Somehow she just knew the right words would come out if she only spoke her heart. "I love you, so much that sometimes it just takes my breath away. When you tell me you love me, or when I wake up and find you in my arms, it's almost surreal. I just can't believe that someone as wonderful as you would choose me." She walked forward and kneeled on the bottom step. "What I said earlier about not asking you to give up your family had nothing to do with what I really want from you. Because I want everything you'll give me, Anna, absolutely everything. If you someday decide that you just want to be friends, then I'll want to be the best friend you have. If you want just to be lovers for now, then lovers we'll be." *Okay, here goes. Please don't run away from me.* "And if you ever decide that you want to be partners, then I'll promise myself to you for the rest of time."

The anxiety that Lily expected from within herself never surfaced at all, since Anna's response didn't matter this time. What she'd told the beautiful woman wasn't a question, as it had been with lovers in the past. It was a statement, and whatever Anna wanted wouldn't change a thing about what Lily felt. She was offering everything, and Anna could take whatever part she wanted.

Indeed, Anna did understand what Lily was saying. Her words about needing the woman to fight for her seemed silly now. All this time, she'd been waiting for Lily to feel secure enough to move ahead, and the little blonde had just covered all that ground in one fell swoop. The tall woman shifted on the stairs to touch her lips to those of the green-eyed warrior. "Will you come upstairs and hold me tonight?"

Lily knew that Anna had a mental block about making love with her in this house. "I'll do whatever you want. If you'd rather go back to my place, I'll bring you back in the morning."

"What, and miss seeing you drive home in that outfit in the light of day? Not a chance, Pygmy."

Lily noted the caller ID before slapping the answer button on the speaker phone. Reaching instead for the receiver, she kicked at the door to send it swinging shut. "Lilian Stuart. How may I be of service?" The last time she had answered "How may I service you?" and it turned out to be the service department at Premier Motors calling to schedule her 7,500 mile check-up. She was mortified, and only hoped that she would have the chance to tell Anna before one of the mechanics did.

"Oh, I can think of several ways. But for starters, I wanted to know if you could get off early today." Anna was working hard to contain her eagerness.

"Sure. I can come in a little early tomorrow. I'm prepping for a court appearance tomorrow afternoon." Maria had asked her to help get her kids back from her sister, but Lily had convinced her to petition the judge instead for visitation. That, the attorney knew, was best for the kids until Maria broke things off with Jose. The Esperanza children were going to have a happy ending if it killed her!

"How soon can you leave?"

Lily glanced at the clock. 3:30. "How about 30 minutes? Where should I go?"

"Meet me at my house. I have something to show you."

Traffic was crawling at four, and Lily didn't make it to Bel Air until 5:15. Her beautiful lover met her in the drive and hopped into the passenger seat. At Anna's direction, Lily wound through the back streets and side roads until they reached Brentwood, one of LA's most upscale suburbs. On a quiet street, they stopped in front of a beautiful two-story Spanish-style home, white with a multi-level red tile roof.

"So what do you think?"

"Wow! It's beautiful! Did Kim find this?"

Anna nodded excitedly. "I've got the keys. Let's go take a look." She had seen the house yesterday and again this morning. Lily gasped when they entered the grand foyer. Stained glass above the door played colors all the way up the swirling staircase. Anna walked her lover through the house room by room. Downstairs, there was a small formal living room, a dining room, a family room with a cozy office off to the side, and an enormous kitchen with a breakfast nook. Both the family room and kitchen opened up onto a beautifully landscaped patio and yard. The pool featured dark blue concrete and Spanish tile, with an attached hot tub. Anna pointed out the two-car garage in the side yard. Upstairs, they found three bedrooms, including a large master suite. The suite and one of the bedrooms had balconies overlooking the pool. Lily had never seen such a beautiful home, and she really hoped Anna had decided to buy it.

"So what do you think?" Anna could already tell that Lily loved it.

"Are you kidding? It's wonderful. Are you going to buy it?" she asked excitedly.

"I put a contract on it this morning." Anna paused and watched the smile that started to form on her lover's face. "I wanted to ask you about it first, but it was set to go on the market today and I was afraid it would get snatched up."

"Well, you sure didn't need my help. I think it's a smart move."

"Yeah, it's a great house, but that's not why I wanted to ask you first." She took her lover's hand and brought it to her heart. "Will you live here with me?" she asked hopefully, locking blue eyes onto green.

Lily's stomach did that thing again. Not the fluttering and sinking thing it did when she was nervous or anticipating bad news. This was a fluttering and soaring. The same thing it did every time Anna whispered to her while they were making love.

Anna waited nervously as a long quiet moment passed. Lily seemed to be thinking about it. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

"I don't think I've ever told you before, but I love it when you talk to me in bed."

Okaaay. It was kind of exciting to hear her lover say that, but Anna was certain that she had asked a different question.

"I know, you're probably wondering where that came from. It's just that when you talk to me while we're touching each other, I get this...giddy feeling in my stomach. It's a pretty powerful sensation. It's when I know how deeply I love you."

Okaaay. This was all good news. *But what about my question?*

"I just got that feeling again when you asked me to live with you. That stomach thing."

"So, will you?" *Help me out. I'm dying here.*

"Oh yeah." With that, the Pygmy dragged the Amazon to the floor of the master bedroom for a proper christening of their new home.

THE END