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# THE LAW GAME



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**ARCHER SECURITIES**

BY JOVE BELLE

**DAUGHTER OF BAAL**

BY GILL MCKNIGHT

**EVOLUTION OF AN ART THIEF**

BY JESSIE CHANDLER



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# ARCHER SECURITIES

BY JOVE BELLE



# CHAPTER 1

The clinking of a fork against a wine glass sounded from the back deck. Laila stared at the kid, Logan, refusing to look away just because her uncle Samar had decided to make a speech. They'd been at it for almost three minutes, and the kid was going to crack any second. A small trickle of sweat worked its way down the side of his face.

"Thank you all so much for joining us today. We have happy news to share with you all, our friends and family." Samar's voice swam in the back of Laila's mind.

She already knew about her cousin Sia's engagement. That was the whole reason they'd gathered here today. She didn't need to forfeit her contest with Logan in order to watch Uncle Samar. And, since Logan was the thirteen-year-old son of the groom, he already knew and didn't really care either.

"Laila, what are you doing?" Christine stepped into Laila's peripheral view and tugged on her arm. She huffed out a sigh. "Come on."

"Can't." Laila refused to be the first to blink. She'd told the kid she could go five minutes, and while she was many things, a liar wasn't one of them. Christine yanking on her arm was annoying, but not enough to break her concentration.

"Are you seriously having a staring contest with a twelve-year-old?"

“No. He’s thirteen.” She was staring to prove a point. Not because of a contest. “And it sounds silly when you say it like that.”

“That’s because it is silly, no matter how I say it. He’s a kid.”

“So?” Laila still hadn’t blinked, but it was getting harder not to look at Christine.

“As you know, my daughter has been dating Desmond for over a year now,” Samar continued his speech.

When Christine darted a hand out and cuffed Logan on the back of the head, he yelped and flinched. Laila won their not-a-staring contest by default.

“Beat it,” Christine said.

With his hand clapped over the spot where Christine had smacked him, Logan said, “This doesn’t count. You didn’t win.”

Christine sighed, and Laila held the kid’s gaze. She still hadn’t blinked.

“I said get outta here.”

Logan sulked but finally turned away. “Fine. You suck.”

“Why did you do that?” Laila loved to win, but hated to win unfairly. When she beat someone, she wanted that person to know she was better.

“Because you’re ignoring me, and I’m sick of it.”

Laila looked at her date, finally letting herself blink. Her eyes itched. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you brought me to your family barbecue, and so far, you gave someone a black eye, slammed a ball into that lady’s nose, and now you’re having a staring contest with a kid.”

“Rafael asked for a sparring match, Maurine was blocking the net, and it wasn’t a contest.” Laila ticked off

the points. Her cousin Rafael studied Jui Jitsu and had asked about Krav Maga, which Laila practiced. Of course they'd compared styles. If he were better, she'd have the black eye and he'd have bragging rights instead of the other way around. And their family volleyball games were never friendly. Everyone played aggressively, including Maurine—a distant cousin Laila didn't really know—whose nose got slammed. Maurine had paused long enough to check that her nose wasn't bleeding, and then she'd slapped Laila's outstretched hand to let her know all was good. The game had resumed.

"The point is, you've been ignoring me." Christine was beautiful, with long blond hair that she wore swept up in casual ponytail today. There was an ethereal quality to her beauty, and when she was pissed—arms crossed over her chest, body tensed and ready to spring, and glaring resentfully at Laila—she looked like some sort of goddess raining fire on a poor village that made the mistake of worshiping her on the wrong day. Divas usually weren't Laila's thing, but Christine was good in bed and willing to participate in some pretty kinky scenarios. The orgasms generally made putting up with Christine's weird social demands worth it.

Laila waited, unsure how to respond. She shouldn't have brought Christine here.

"Desmond is on track to become partner at his law firm in the next few years, and his son, Logan..." Samar droned on in the background, talking about Sia's bright future with Desmond and his son.

Christine looked at her, clearly waiting for something. Somehow, Laila went from having a staring contest with



Logan to having one with Christine. Except, she was pretty sure there was no way to win this one. Christine had a bad habit of using sex as a weapon, and based on the exasperated expression on Christine's face, Laila was dangerously close to the relationship equivalent of being put in timeout.

"That's it. I'm leaving." Christine stomped away, her heels sinking into the grass as she crossed the yard and made her way through the gate that separated the front from the back. Laila tried to decide what a normal person with normal emotions would do in this situation. Follow and apologize? Let Christine cool off on her own?

Sia slipped up beside her. "Think she'll come back?" she asked mildly as she sipped her beer.

Not sure what else to do with her hands, Laila scratched the back of her head. "I don't know." She shrugged. "Should I go after her?"

"You should." Sia nodded thoughtfully. "But I'd rather you didn't. She hit my future step-son and acted like a pouty brat in the middle of my engagement party."

Logan, Sia's future step-son, as she put it, went out of his way to aggravate people. But, he was one of the only people at this party Laila actually liked. "Sorry about that."

Sia shrugged. "It's okay. Besides, I've never really liked her."

"Really?"

"Nope. She's not right for you."

Sia had acted friendly toward Christine, but never particularly welcoming. Finally, at the Memorial Day picnic, she'd asked if Christine was really good in the sack or something. Laila confirmed that she was, and Sia had

nodded the same way she was now, as if a piece of the puzzle had fallen into place.

Laila frowned. How upset was Christine? She wasn't sure, but it was possible that they'd just broke up. "She has a key to my place."

"So? You don't keep anything there that's worth stealing." Sia put her arm around her and drew her from the shade of a mature cottonwood tree toward the deck.

"What about my TV?"

"You don't watch it anyway."

"That's true, but what about sex?"

"You can still have sex."

"But not with her." That thought almost made Laila chase after Christine. She was really good at sex.

"No. You'll have to find someone new for that."

"I guess I could do that."

"To Sia and Desmond." Samar raised his beer in a toast, and Laila realized she didn't have a drink of her own.

Sia neatly pulled a bottle of water from an ice chest as they passed, twisted the top off, and handed it to Laila. She urged Laila up the stairs to stand with the group gathered there and spun her around to face the family and friends on the lawn. Laila, self-conscious about being dragged into the focal group, took a long drink of water just as Sia bent down and whispered to her, "Now, my maid of honor, drink to my wedding."

"What?" Laila sputtered. The drink she'd just swallowed was halfway down her throat, and Laila sprayed the people gathered to listen. Between the water and her confusion over Sia calling her the maid of honor, it took Laila a few moments to realize that she needed to apologize. People

didn't like to be spit on. "Sorry, everybody." She smiled uncertainly at her aunt and two cousins as they wiped their faces with paper napkins.

Sia threw her a small glare as she hugged her dad. "Thanks, Daddy." She raised her bottle in a small toast. "And thank you all for coming. Desmond and I are so glad you could be here to share in our happiness. Now, everyone eat up. And have fun."

Desmond dropped his arm around Sia's shoulders as she spoke, a wide, proud grin on his face.

As soon as people stopped focusing on Sia, Laila grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her back down the steps toward the lake. Sia veered toward the boathouse, as was their ingrained habit. Once they were inside, Laila took a deep breath to calm herself before she said, "What the hell, Sia? Maid of honor?"

Laila didn't even believe in the whole idea of marriage. She thought long-term monogamy was unnatural, and Sia knew it, so why would she expect Laila to participate in the ceremony? This had to be some sort of sappy, sentimental request, and Laila sucked at both sappy and sentimental.

"Yes, maid of honor." Sia crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm getting married, Lai. Did you really think I'd ask someone else?"

Laila paused. She hadn't thought about it at all.

Sia sighed. "It has to be you. You're my best friend."

"Sia, I hate this stuff." Her understanding of emotions was mostly academic. Not that she didn't feel things. She did. But where most people's emotions were like a TV with the volume turned up, hers were muted and fuzzy in the background. They never came into focus long enough for

her to really grasp them. “The maid of honor does a lot of important stuff, like giving a speech, planning stuff, and... and...” Laila’s shoulders slumped. She couldn’t even talk about it properly. How the hell was she supposed to *do* it?

“I know.” Sia nudged her with her shoulder. “But you’re still my best friend. This is what friends do, Lai.”

Laila thought about that for a few moments. Sia was the only member of her family who made any sense to Laila. Her first clear memory was of Sia, her face scrunched up, red with anger, mouth open with the biggest screech that Laila had ever heard. She had been tiny and so loud. But when Laila had brushed the back of her hand over Sia’s face—her skin had been the softest thing ever—Sia had stopped crying and looked at her with a broad, curious smile. Her mom had told her it was just gas, that Sia was too young for it to be a real smile. Laila knew, though, that her mom had been wrong. She and Sia just went together. Cousins. Partners in crime. Best friends. And now, apparently, her role in Sia’s life had expanded to include maid of honor.

She dropped onto the wooden bench that skirted the inside front wall of the boathouse, and her shoulders slumped. “Are you sure?” Laila would do it. If it was important to Sia, she had no other choice. But Sia really deserved someone who would be better at it. “I won’t be good at it.”

Sia sat next to her. “Are you kidding me? Name one thing you’re not good at.”

There were lots of things Laila wasn’t good at. Understanding people was pretty high on the list. Normally, she didn’t care, but this was different. “You’ll have to give me a checklist. Or maybe I’ll buy a book.” If she had a

guide, she would be okay. “Do they have books about how to properly bridesmaid?”

Sia squeezed her in a sideways hug. “You bet. There are entire websites devoted to this kind of thing.”

Of course! She could learn everything she needed to know on the Internet. “Yeah. I’m going to kick maid of honoring’s ass.”

“Yeah,” Sia agreed, “you are.”

“You really never liked Christine?” Laila didn’t particularly like her either, but she always assumed her lack of attachment had to do with her own inability to relate. She’d never considered that Christine might actually be unlikeable.

“No. She messed with your head too much.”

“She did?”

“She did. No matter what, she tried to make you think everything you did was wrong,” Sia said.

“Huh.” Sure, Christine bitched about everything from the toast being too toasty to the line at the movies being too long. Laila had just tuned her out and rolled with it. Most of the time, she was running through her list of objectives for the next day, or visualizing a new self-defense move she’d just learned. “I guess so. I didn’t really notice.”

“I know. Because you’re too accepting. But it irks me when people take advantage of you.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Laila always told Sia what she thought of her boyfriends. Maybe this was one of those social rule things that she constantly screwed up. Maybe she wasn’t supposed to tell Sia if she liked her dates or not. Not that it mattered now that she was marrying Desmond. Laila loved him. He was great at brainteasers and just laughed and tried harder any time Laila beat him.

“You weren’t really into her. I knew it wouldn’t last, so I didn’t see the point in ruining your fun.”

“Yeah, she was fun.”

“No, she wasn’t.”

Laila laughed. “Maybe not with you. But I had a *lot* of fun with her.”

Sia sighed. “We need to discuss this habit you have of mistaking great sex for a great relationship. It takes more than a regular dose of orgasms to lead to happily ever after.”

Laila tried to picture another way to be happy for the rest of her life but came up blank. “I’m pretty sure you’re wrong about that. Orgasms are awesome.”

“They are. But they won’t take care of you when you’re sick, hold your hand when you’re sad, or stick around long enough to grow old with you.”

Laila wrinkled her nose. “That’s what I have you for.”

“True that, cousin. Now come on. My dad was telling me about a problem at work. He thinks someone might be stealing, and I know how much you love a good mystery.” Sia stood and pulled Laila to her feet. Sia’s dad, Uncle Samar, was the president of US operations for a multi-national conglomerate called Archer Securities.

“He’s right. A company that size, someone is definitely stealing. Several someones, actually.”

“True. But this is more than missing pens from the supply closet.”

As they made their way out of the boathouse, a couple of kids Laila vaguely recognized as cousins tried to make their way in. She caught one by the collar and spun him around. Sia pointed toward the house.

“Not today, boys. The boathouse is off limits during the party. If you want to take the bowrider out, ask Uncle Samar.”

The boys ran off ahead of them, and Sia said, “I don’t even know those kids. I swear, my dad invited everyone he could think of, from family to the guy who loads his groceries at Whole Foods.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re related to them.” Laila locked the door, just in case. They normally left it open, but clearly that wasn’t the best idea today.

“So, what are you going to do about Christine?” Sia asked. She stared straight ahead, and Laila appreciated that. She always did better with emotional stuff when people didn’t look at her.

“I don’t know. What do you think?” She scratched the back of her head and glanced at Sia out of the corner of her eye.

Sia shrugged. “You don’t love her, do you?”

“No, of course not.” Laila shook her head. She might love having sex with Christine, but that probably wasn’t the same thing.

“Then you let her go,” Sia said it in the same easy way that she ordered coffee in the morning.

“That’s what you’d do?” Laila nibbled on the edge of her thumb, the skin right next to her nail.

Sia finally looked at her, one eyebrow raised. “I have no idea.”

That was fair. Sia fell in love too easily. If she were like Sia, Laila would have married Christine months ago, and they’d be making lesbian babies together by now.

“I’ll change my locks when I get home.”

“Good idea.”

On their way past the pool, they were both hit by a stray splash of water. One of the guys, a friend of Desmond, stood just a little straighter and smiled dashingly. Water dripped down his torso, and his hair fell in dark, wet curls over his forehead. Laila returned his smile.

“He’s single, you know.” Sia nudged her in the side.

“Yeah?” Laila turned her head and held his gaze a fraction longer. “What’s his story?”

“Just ended a three-year relationship. His girlfriend complained he wasn’t available enough and said she felt emotionally disconnected from him. He’s an architect. Started his own firm last year and has pulled some major contracts since then.”

“Workaholic. One who obviously puts in the time at the gym.” So far, he sounded perfect. Someone who was that busy wouldn’t make demands that Laila had no interest in fulfilling. “What’s his name?”

“Gabe. He and Desmond went to school together. Want his number?” Sia paused at the base of the stairs.

“No thanks. I’ll get it from him later.”

“Christine who?” Sia shoved her arm lightly.

“Uncle Samar,” she took the stairs two at a time, “your daughter tells me that you have a thief at Archer.”

Samar raised his eyebrow and looked pointedly from Laila to Sia, who was a few steps behind her. With a shake of his head, he looked at the group of people he’d been chatting with. “Excuse me, folks. I need to have a conversation with my girls. Laila’s got a quirky sense of humor, doesn’t she?”

He turned and went into the house. Laila and Sia followed him through the kitchen and down the hall to his



office. Once there, he poured himself a Scotch neat and stared at Laila as he sipped his drink.

It took her a moment to realize that this was his way of signaling she'd done something wrong. He was good like that, patient about her lack of savvy, and probably wasn't really upset. Just as Sia did, her uncle Samar took the time to explain when she broke social rules or misread emotional cues, and it really helped her to navigate future situations better. She thought back. She'd interrupted his conversation. That was rude.

"I interrupted. I'm sorry." Or, rather, she was pretty sure she would be if sorry was in her emotional arsenal.

"I appreciate that. Do you know what else you did?"

She shook her head.

"I work for a securities company, Laila. Every person I was talking to is an investor in Archer. Telling them we have a thief is bad for our public image."

"Oh." This was one of those subtlety things that Laila would probably never understand, where the truth wasn't always better. "I'm sorry about that, too."

Uncle Samar nodded toward the decanter. "Pour yourself a drink."

Sia beat her to it and poured one for herself and another for Laila. They settled on the black leather couch opposite Samar. His office was old-school classy, with a dark mahogany desk, floor to ceiling bookshelves to match, and a leaded crystal service for his liquor. When she was little, Laila would sneak into this room, curl up on the couch, and recite all the words that went with the office. Sumptuous. Luxurious. Decadent. Fancy. Stylish. The list went on and on, and over time, those words became just as

closely associated with Uncle Samar as they were with the office.

As an adult, she still loved this room, and anytime she was feeling especially disconnected from herself, she would recite the list, very quietly under her breath, because people looked at her funny when she talked to herself out loud. Some day, she would have an office like this. Maybe not exactly—she wasn't crazy about the dark wood—but one that felt like this one. Laila sipped her Scotch. It was smooth in a fiery-apocalypse-in-her-mouth kind of way.

Laila waited politely for Uncle Samar. She hated the inaction, but he liked to ease into a conversation. Sia put her hand on Laila's knee and pushed down to stop her jiggling it up and down, something Laila wasn't aware she was doing.

“Dad?” Sia prompted her dad.

“Right. Archer. I haven't been able to pinpoint it exactly, but our figures are just...off. We expect a certain amount of loss, as you know, but the shrink in certain areas is well over the allowed amount.”

Calling Archer a securities company, as Uncle Samar had, was an extreme understatement. Yes, they did some work in finance, including divisions in banking and commodities trading. But that was a drop in a very large, diversified global bucket. Archer Securities was an international conglomerate with interest in everything imaginable, from the US commodities market to overseas production of silks. Laila grew up listening to stories of Archer and still couldn't nail down what they did in precise terms.

Laila leaned in. This was something she could understand. “Which areas?”

“Home goods, food products, and electronics.”

“Home goods and food? That’s weird.” Electronics was an area that invited sticky fingers, so that didn’t surprise her. “Are they real losses, as in actual inventory disappearing? Or is it all on paper?”

“Neither. So far, everything I’ve looked at balances. The margins are just off.”

“Can I look at it?” Laila tried to sound cool, but it didn’t work. Stuff like this, solving a puzzle, buzzed through her like a live current. Always had. Sia called it excitement. Laila called it nirvana. Regardless, she was able to see patterns that other people missed, and it gave her a charge like no other.

Uncle Samar raised his eyebrows. “Do you have time?”

Laila owned and operated Hollister Investigations, a small private investigations service that had been funded almost entirely by Uncle Samar’s capital investment. Without him, she would still have been able to start the business, but the outlook would have been much different. For instance, she would have been working out of her car rather than a small suite of offices downtown. And she would have worked alone rather than having two employees.

“Uncle Samar,” she shook her head, “of course I have time for you.” She’d paid back his startup loan within a year of opening the doors, but she certainly hadn’t forgotten his generosity.

“All right. Come by Archer tomorrow. You’ll have to work on site.” With that, Samar finished his Scotch and set the tumbler on the low coffee table between them. “Now, come on. We have a party to get back to.”

As they walked out of the office, Sia nudged Laila with her shoulder and said, “Never fear, Laila Hollister is on the case.”

It was an old joke, left over from a childhood spent chasing down clues in the neighborhood as if she were a real life *Encyclopedia Brown*. Laila laughed. There was a lightness in her chest that she rarely experienced. It came from being able to do what she loved and help her family at the same time.

“That thief won’t know what hit him.”

## CHAPTER 2

The shipping manifest showed twenty cargo containers arriving via barge from The People's Republic of China. Trinity tapped her pen against her teeth. Twenty containers full of soft goods—mostly pillows and those plush blankets that were really comforting when it was cold out—destined for a local chain store.

How many could she divert without being obvious? Typically, she worked with smaller quantities. A pallet here or there. When a company such as Archer was moving ten thousand pallets, the loss of one or two was written off. It took more resources to search for it than the value of the product.

But an entire shipping container, which was what she was contemplating at the moment, would throw up some red flags. There would be an investigation. No, it was better to siphon off a smaller amount than to go for the big haul only to have in-house security track it down and reclaim it.

That decided it.

She made a mental note of the delivery schedule. The entire container would arrive at the distribution center tomorrow, be inventoried, and then be routed to the retailer. Except for two pallets, one of pillows and one of blankets, which she earmarked for Open Doors, a local homeless shelter where she routinely volunteered. They would be delivered by the end of the week via a local transport company, along with an invoice for zero dollars.

After entering the information needed to generate a second manifest and execute the order, her work extension rang. She toggled her screen and tapped the button on her headset to answer the call.

“Computer services, this is Trinity. How can I help you?” Trinity kept her voice light, playful. People in the tech industry were notorious for being snarky and impatient. She was okay with snarky to a degree, but being impatient was simply rude. There was never a good excuse to be rude.

“You gotta help me. My boss needs this report for a meeting that starts in ten minutes. I’ve printed it at least twenty times, but it never comes out of the printer.” The man, *George Harper* according to the readout that popped up on her computer screen, spoke with the unhinged desperation that colored the voices of most of her callers.

“Okay, George, I’m accessing your system now. Give me just a few moments.” She typed in the commands that allowed her to control his computer remotely and then scrolled through his settings. “George, where is your desk located?”

“What do you mean?”

Like most of her callers, George worked locally, at the monolithic Archer Securities building that housed several divisions of the US operations. There were smaller regional offices throughout the country that stretched out from the main location like a spider web over the landscape. Archer’s software, which sometimes moved with the speed of a hobbled elephant, provided Trinity with some basic information, such as which office a person was based out of, which department he worked in, and where his desk was located. It also indicated which printer his computer

was set to send material to. In George's case, his location and the printer's didn't match up. Before she changed any settings, however, she always verified the data in front of her.

"Which floor are you on? Which side of the building?" Trinity didn't understand why some people let themselves get so frazzled before they called her. Sure, print the document twice, just to be sure it wasn't working, but twenty? Seriously?

"Oh, the fifth, next to the R&D lab," George said. His description matched the information in the computer. She changed the printer router to the correct location.

"Good. Could you try printing another one for me?" Trinity waited, twirling her pen like a drumstick between her fingers.

"Sure." George sounded skeptical. A printer whirred to life in the background. "Holy shit! It worked! Thank you!"

Trinity laughed.

"Oh crap, I mean..." George stammered. "Sorry. You didn't record this, did you? My boss would totally fire me for swearing."

Of course she'd recorded it. That was part of the protocol for working remotely. Any time her phone rang, the digital recording activated automatically. George would have known that if he'd paid attention to the recorded message that played while he waited for her to answer. "Don't worry, George. Your secret is safe with me."

"Great. You totally saved me."

"It's my pleasure. Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

George paused. "Oh, I...I don't think so."

“Great. Take that report to your boss, and then you might want to head down to the second floor and check the printer in the southwest corner. I suspect you’ll find a stack of reports just like the one in your hand. Take care, George.”

Trinity signed off. When she started with Archer Securities in the IT department, she’d worked five days a week at the main site. Her desk sat in the middle of the bullpen, and she was surrounded by sweaty, competitive tech guys who acted as if they’d never seen a real live girl before, let alone talked to one. Now, almost nine years later, she was part of Archer’s work-from-home program. It was perfect.

“Trinity?” Carol stepped into her office. “I’m going to take your mom to the park. It’s a beautiful day, perfect for a picnic. Care to join us?”

At fifty, Carol was a robust woman with smooth, dark skin and a lyrical Jamaican accent. She grew up in Kingston with Trinity’s mom, Ornella Washington. She’d moved to the US two years ago when Ornella’s memory started to slide. Now, she worked full time as Ornella’s primary caregiver.

“I wish, but I need to stay by the phone.” Trinity could move about her house freely, but in order to venture outside her home, she needed to notify Archer. It was simpler to eat at home and remain available. “Do you need anything from me before you go?”

“Nope. Your mom is having a good day.” Carol gave her a thumbs up. Ornella suffered from early onset Alzheimer’s. A good day for her could mean she remembered who Trinity was or that she remembered to chew her food without reminders. Lately, her good days were becoming less and



less frequent. Together, she and Carol had started the initial groundwork for moving Ornella into a dedicated care home, but Trinity wanted to hold off on that as long as possible.

Trinity slipped off her headset and stood. "Think she'll know who I am now?"

"It's possible." Carol squeezed Trinity's arm gently as she passed on her way to the living room.

Ornella sat by the window, her face turned up toward the sun, eyes closed, and a peaceful, easy smile just teasing the edges of her lips. In that moment, she looked like the mom of ten years ago, back when Trinity was still in high school and Ornella was still in charge of all her faculties.

"Hi, Mom." Trinity reached out and stopped just short of touching Ornella's shoulder. She waited, suspended mid-motion as she waited to see how Ornella reacted before she made physical contact.

Ornella inhaled deeply as she opened her eyes. She studied Trinity for a moment, a slight crease in the middle of her forehead, and then her clouded expression cleared. "Hi, baby. You look beautiful today."

Trinity let her hand drop onto Ornella's shoulder and exhaled. The moments between, when her mom had seen her but hadn't decided if she knew her or not, were the toughest for Trinity. She held her breath every time, as if waiting for permission to continue. Once, before they had really realized what was happening with Ornella, Trinity had touched her mom in a moment when she hadn't recognized Trinity. Her mom had cried out and jerked away. Now, Trinity knew to wait. Without the spark of recognition, touching her own mother was the same as touching a stranger without consent.

“No, I look like a computer geek. You, however, are very beautiful.” She stroked Ornella’s cheek with the back of her hand. She had the softest skin, two or three shades darker than Trinity’s and free of makeup.

“Aren’t you sweet.”

Carol entered the room carrying a light jacket and a collapsible cooler. “Here we are, Ornella. Are you ready?”

“Oh, are we going somewhere?” Ornella slipped the jacket on and looked from Carol to Trinity and then back to Carol.

“Carol’s taking you for a picnic lunch.” Trinity tapped the cooler. “It’s such a beautiful day. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

“Oh, yes. I remember now.”

Carol led Ornella to the door. “We shouldn’t be more than an hour. I have my phone if you need anything before we get back.”

Trinity waved as they left.

Early in her teens, Trinity had decided that she’d probably never have children of her own. She’d watched her own mom struggle as a single parent and didn’t want to ever feel like she had to give up her own needs for someone else. Around the same time, she also tripped into her first relationship with another girl who made Trinity feel all sorts of things that her boyfriends never did. The realization that she was a lesbian simplified the decision to forgo having children. Yet, here she was, shaping her whole life to fit around the needs of another. What’s more, she was happy for it, because a day taking care of Ornella was another day she got to spend with her rather than without.

Trinity’s phone rang, and she jogged back to her office. This time, instead of work, it was a personal call via Skype.

She pushed the button to initiate the video, and Yvonne, her sometimes friend, sometimes lover from high school, popped up on her screen.

“Hey, babe!” Yvonne wore a beat up army green jacket with the sleeves rolled up, and her hair stuck out at funny angles. It was a stark difference from the way she looked before she ran off to Costa Rica with her environmental activist boyfriend. She used to be all lipstick, perfect makeup, and runway outfits. A few months after she moved, she’d sheered off her signature long blond hair and had kept it that way ever since. Now, she was relaxed, a little undone, and even more beautiful than ever.

“Hi. What’s up with you?” Sometimes, when Trinity let herself think about it, her body ached with the loss of her friend. But that wasn’t often because, if nothing else, Trinity was aces at blocking out those kind of emotional twinges.

“Adam is away on a secret mission involving some rare sea algae and several yards of that chain they use for the anchor on ocean liners.” She waved her hand dismissively. “And I’m stuck here, alone and bored. Wanna fool around?” Yvonne waggled her eyebrows. They’d done that a few times, hooked up via the magic of a kickass Internet connection and video calling, but Trinity was working, and Yvonne didn’t really look like she was into it.

“Nah. I’m on the clock.” Trinity settled into her seat and kicked one leg up on her desk. “How’s Central America?”

“Really, really good. I’m almost done with my next novel. Oh, and Adam’s cousin, like, fifty times removed, is staying with us for the summer. She’s this cute thirteen-year-old with nerd glasses bigger than yours. Seriously, she taught herself how to code. You’d love her.”

“Oh?” Trinity cherished being able to talk to Yvonne, no matter the topic. But the idea of a geeky young teen who loved computers as much as Trinity hit a special place in her heart. The world of programming needed more female energy. “What’s she working on? Any idea?”

Yvonne laughed. “I knew you’d be into hearing about her. You’re so predictable in your dedication to all things geeky.”

“Does that mean you don’t know the answer?”

“She tried to explain it. Something super smart for some summer school project. I don’t know. I mentioned you, and she got even more excited than you just did. She asked if she could email you.”

While they were talking, Trinity pulled her lunch from the mini-fridge in her office and spread it out on her desk. Earlier, while on her morning run, she’d stopped at the co-op down the street and picked up a Greek yogurt, two of those delicious little oranges, and a chef salad made with organic veggies. She hated the yogurt, but her body liked her to eat it, so she did. As a special treat because she’d spent an extra fifteen minutes on yoga that morning, she’d also picked up a gourmet cupcake from the bakery.

“Sure, did you give her my email address?”

“Not yet. I wanted to check with you. What are you eating?” Yvonne leaned in toward her computer screen, bringing her face close, as if that would help her to better see Trinity’s food.

“Go ahead and give it to her.” As she spoke, Trinity held up her oranges and yogurt. “Plus salad and dessert.”

“What kind of salad?”

“Chef, from the co-op.”

“God, I miss that place. Remind me again why I moved here.” Why, indeed. The cottage Yvonne shared with Adam was situated on a pristine beach, and Trinity had an excellent view of the surf in the screen behind Yvonne.

“Sex,” Trinity deadpanned. Prior to moving to Costa Rica, Yvonne had shared Trinity’s bed more often than not. Then she’d met Adam, fallen hard and fast, and three weeks later she followed him to Central America. She’d been there for two years and was still just as crazy about him as she’d been when she moved. Love sometimes worked like that.

“Oh yeah. That.” Yvonne got this far away, blissed out expression on her face.

Trinity made a gagging noise, but she was smiling on the inside. “Stop it. I don’t want to throw up on my lunch.”

Yvonne laughed. “Sorry.” Her expression sobered. “How’s your mom?”

“She recognized me earlier. Carol took her to the park for lunch.”

“Have you figured out what you’re going to do?”

“Nope. Trying not to think about it.”

“You have to eventually.”

Trinity took a bite of her salad and crunched as loud as she could on the crisp lettuce.

“Stop it. You know I’m right. I wish I could help.”

“You’re right. Of course. But right now, in this moment, everything is fine, and that’s enough.”

Yvonne sighed, and Trinity’s work line rang again.

“I have to go, Vonnie. Work.” Trinity loved her job, but the timing sucked this time. “Love you. Miss you.”

“Come visit.”

Trinity sighed. “You know I can’t. And I really do have to go.”

"I miss you." Yvonne made a kissy face and then disconnected the call.

She always made the same plea for Trinity to visit, and Trinity always made the same excuse. With things as they were with Ornella, Trinity was grounded indefinitely.

The day passed in more or less the same manner as always. She answered calls, helped people, and left them with a smile in their voice instead of a frown. Between calls, she logged into an encrypted message board to see if her friends had posted anything new. There were two new threads.

The first read: *Housewarming 1208 S Hampton Ave Shreveport 7.22 BYOB*

Several people had responded, and she added her RSVP to the rest. *I'm in for a fifth of Vodka. The good stuff.*

The second message was similar, except this time it was an invitation for a baby shower. She agreed to supply an economy-sized package of diapers.

Then she set about researching who she'd just agreed to help. Obviously, she wasn't going to an event in Louisiana. A housewarming was code for a family on the verge of losing their home, and the bottle of vodka was her pledge of nine grand to the cause. But before she could fulfill her promise, she had to determine exactly who lived at 1208 S Hampton Avenue in Shreveport and, just as importantly, figure out which bank held their mortgage.

She'd stumbled across this group years ago when, arrogant and careless, she'd encroached on an Anonymous project. Rather than shutting her down, they'd put her through the paces and then turned her onto this collective of hackers who were dedicated to righting the balance of wealth in the US. This way, working together to save people

from financial ruin, they were able to keep their banking transactions below the ten grand mark that automatically triggered an IRS notification. Collectively, they paid off some significant debts.

“Oh, hello there.” Trinity’s mom stood in the open doorway to her office. “I didn’t realize I had company. How nice. Can I get you something to drink?”

“That would be nice. How about a nice glass of lemonade?”

“That sounds lovely. I’ll be right back. My name is Ornella, by the way.”

“I’m Trinity.”

“Trinity? I always thought I’d name my daughter that, if I ever have one. It’s nice to meet you.” Ornella smiled in that soft, puzzled way that said she knew something was off but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. She tapped the door frame and then walked away, toward the kitchen. With any luck, she’d be back in a few with a couple of tall glasses of lemonade with chunks of ice.

Trinity turned back to her computer and was able to transfer the money from an off-shore account to the family in Louisiana before Ornella returned, this time with Carol. Trinity would finish with the baby shower later.

“Looks like I have two visitors today. How fortunate am I?” Ornella set a tray on the small coffee table and took a seat on the sofa that sat along the same wall as Trinity’s desk. Carol sat in the armchair opposite. “I also found a lovely key lime pie in the refrigerator. I thought we might enjoy a piece with our drinks.”

Trinity smiled, took the drink Ornella offered her, and spent the rest of the afternoon letting her mom get to know her all over again.

# DAUGHTER OF BAAL

GILL MCKNIGHT





## THE ARRIVAL

“You know, Jones, much as I love the slicky city thing, there is something to be said for the rustic idyll. Oh, to be an English peasant, haymaking and wassailing all over this green and pleasant land.” Lady Margo Quince-Patrick gazed dreamily out the window of her Bentley Speed Six tourer. “A simple but exemplary life. Roaming over the rolling hills with lambs a gambolling, geese a flocking, and cows...cows...”

“A cudding, ma’am?” Jones supplied. She flicked a quick glance to the rear view mirror.

Her employer, Lady Margo, sighed, clearly enchanted by the barley fields and neat farmland passing by. She certainly looked the perfect country lady in her Lewis tweeds, tailored to the latest cut by Saville Row. The delicate Persian pearls at her throat and earlobes set the ensemble off beautifully.

“I hear the laughter in your voice,” she said. “You’re incorrigible. I suppose, compared to your United States, this is all very tame.”

Jones took in the landscape flitting by. It had its charm, but it was all so tiny—so fenced in and toy-like. “On the bright side there are no bandits, marauding Injun’s, or rattlesnakes, ma’am,” she said.

“Oh, you’ll find snakes aplenty where we’re going. My uncle Wesley is especially slippery. Despite its surroundings, Clamp House is far from bucolic. You’ll

definitely have your eyes opened. I think London has been too sweet on you, Jones. It's time you saw the underbelly of English aristocracy, and Uncle Wesley's leaves grooves in the ground."

"I'm sure to be agog, ma'am."

"The only decent Clamps are my cousins, Betsy, who's seventeen but really not much more than a child, and of course, Melisandrine, and she'll be heading for Scotland once she's married. Perry will want them to reside in London of course, but his father will demand they spend the first year of their marriage on the home estate in Argyll."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Poor Perry. There'll be no one from his family there. He's the only one not in the army. Even his father, Lord Gladbeck, can't get away from the Somaliland campaign to attend the wedding. And his mother is dead these past ten years." She tutted at the perceived injustice. Then, "Oh dear, we're almost there." Lady Margo sighed. "And to think, if it wasn't for this beastly family wedding, we would be on-board the Queen Mary on our merry way to your old stomping ground."

"New York? Hardly, ma'am. You'd need to go much farther south-west to find anything I've stomped on." Jones turned right, and the mink coloured Bentley sailed through the imposing gateway into the grounds of Clamp Park.

The tall iron gates were flanked by impressive stone pillars, each crested with the Clamp family coat of arms—a cartouche bearing an emblazoned sun poised over crossed palm fronds, supported on either side by rearing crocodiles. The heraldry clearly indicated that the family fortune had been made in the Middle East and Africa.

Jones drove on through the parkland, flatter and less pretty than the surrounding countryside, though the open acres and wooded areas provided for a reasonably sized deer park before the more formal gardens began. The Bentley rounded the final curve of the half-mile driveway, and Clamp House finally appeared. After the suspense-building drive up, the house itself was a disappointment. It was an ugly, squat building at odds with the grounds in which it stood. Its Palladian facade was built in the latter part of the previous century, with little architectural merit. The proportions were wrong, and the addition of crenulated ramparts at some later date only added to the cramped, brooding feel of the place. Not even the huge marquee dominating the front lawn could lift the gloom. The house glowered at the visitor, and despite the gay bunting that zig-zagged overhead from tree to tree, twirling in the June breeze like a thousand welcoming handkerchiefs, the overall effect was disagreeable.

Jones swung the car into a majestic, gravel-crunching halt before the granite steps, and she was out of her seat to open the rear door for her illustrious passenger.

"Ma'am," she murmured smoothly and offered her hand.

A slender leg, tapering down to a dainty ankle and a stylish lady's leather brogue first emerged from the vehicle, soon followed by the rest of Lady Margo in her tweeds and pearls. A cloche hat in pleated bronze silk adorned her platinum bob. She looked a delight, and Jones very much approved.

Above them, the impressive oak front door opened, and a solemn faced butler emerged. No doubt, he had seen the Bentley's approach from some vantage point or other. He cleared his throat and began to descend the steps when—

“Quincy!” The door burst open, startling him, and a young girl flew past him almost toppling him over. “Quincy, you’re the last to arrive. I’ve been waiting for you all day!”

“Betsy! How wonder—oof!”

Lady Margo, or Quincy to friends and family of a certain age and demeanour, was caught up in an enthusiastic hug that pinned her arms to her sides and set her elegant hat askew over one eyebrow.

Jones suppressed a small smile and removed herself to the rear of the vehicle to begin to unpack the weekend luggage.

“All the old fogeys came yesterday or earlier this morning. Gosh, it’s good to see you. You look as spritzer as ever, Quincy. Oh, sorry. Did I squeeze too hard?”

Margo gently unravelled herself from the hug and corrected the tilt of her hat. “Not at all. Your hugs are soft as eiderdown and twice as warm, just like always.” She gave Betsy a brilliant smile, and the girl blushed wildly, right up to the roots of her auburn hair. “And I’ll wager all the old fogeys galloped over here in time for lunch,” Margo continued. “While we took it easy and had a picnic along the way.”

“What fun. I wish I had been there with you instead of stuck here greeting boring guests.” Betsy threw a surreptitious glance at Jones, who tapped the peak of her chauffeur cap politely. It made her blush even more violently. Jones pretended not to notice and went back to work.

She was used to the undisguised curiosity of Lady Margo’s friends and acquaintances. Which only heightened once they realised she was female as well as American Indian.

She had met Betsy before at another family gathering, though the girl had been several years younger. They had played cricket together on the lawn in an impromptu staff versus “the family” game to celebrate Armistice day. She remembered Betsy had a mean right arm. It had been a fun afternoon, but Betsy was no longer a child. Now her attention was keener and a little more cumbersome.

“How are things,” Margo linked arms and skilfully redirected Betsy towards the stairs. There was a twinkle in her sea-foam green eyes as she sauntered past that let Jones know the moment had not gone unnoticed. Lady Margo quite liked the effect her tall, stately Navajo “personal aide cum chauffeur” had on her set. Ladies in britches caused enough of a sensation, but chauffeur britches with knee length black leather boots? London town was already atwitter, and to be sure, Lady Margo would have her fair share of disapproval from the older, staidier guests over the weekend—and she would enjoy every minute of it.

Jones became aware of the butler poised at her elbow, waiting to grab the bags and return to the house. Contrary to his young mistress, his beady, birdlike eyes shone with disapproval at her exoticism. Jones was used to this, too. Above stairs, the curious rich could afford to prod and poke. Below stairs, they pinched.

A faint whiff of whiskey drifted off him. She didn’t drink herself, so her nose was sensitive to the smell of alcohol on others. It was an unpleasant, sour smell, and she concluded the man imbibed regularly. She straightened to her full height of six foot, which gave her considerable advantage over him. She kept her face cool and hard edged. He grudgingly moved back a pace, giving her more room to

manoeuvre, but not before he exchanged a scornful look of his own.

“Forcep,” Betsy addressed him in passing, suddenly becoming a lady of the manor. “See to Lady Margo’s things. She’s in the Peacock room.”

“Yes, Miss Betsy.” Forcep took this as an opportunity to lean in and try to snatch a bag from near Jones feet. Weekend luggage to Lady Margo amounted to a small mountain of leather and brass, monogrammed Louis Vuitton, and none of it was light. With satisfaction she watched as Forcep reddened and grunted as he tried to move the small trunk she had easily lifted clear of the boot and set by the rear fender. She left the last of the luggage before him, dusted down her hands and closed the Bentley’s boot. Her part of the job was done; he could see to the rest. She hoped the Peacock room was up many, many flights of stairs.

“The garages are around the back, beside the stable block,” he muttered. “Mrs Mallory will show you to your quarters. Go on through to the kitchens; you’ll find her there.”

Without a backward look, she slid behind the steering wheel and threw the chauffeur cap onto the seat beside her. Her ink-black hair tumbled down her back in a thick plait. She wore it that way when in uniform, but itched to release her hair from its confines now. It had been a long and tiring drive despite the picnic interlude which had been very pleasant. A bubbling brook in a field of wildflowers and meadow grass, a Harrods picnic hamper on a tartan blanket, and Lady Margo, hat and jacket discarded, sipping sparkling cider and nibbling on a watercress sandwich.

In moments such as that, Jones let down her guard. Her cap and jacket had also been discarded, and a ginger

beer substituted for the cider. They had lain, relaxed on the blanket and chatted amicably, and Jones remembered why she had accepted the bizarre job proposal in the first place. Lady Margo had charm and humour, mixed through with a certain vulnerability. In her own aristocratic way, she was as exotic to Jones as Jones had been to her.

Circling to the back of the house, she slid the huge motorcar silently towards the stables and the large garaging facilities adjacent. As she drew parallel to the main stable block, a flicker of movement caught her eye. A large chestnut brood mare was being rhythmically groomed by an equally well-oiled stable lad. The sweat from his effort shone on the well-tanned shoulders and biceps popping up from his baggy dungarees. Little wisps of sun-bleached hair escaped from an old flat cap. Dust motes leapt and danced around this sun-lit scene; it looked to be hot, sticky, and tiresome work. Jones was grateful for the cool breeze rolling through the Bentley's open windows and the buttery leather of her seat. The sophisticated luxury of the car reflected her new life well. She had travelled worlds and liked the one she lived in now.

It was a short stroll from the garages, through a small herb garden to the open kitchen door. With her chauffeur jacket unbuttoned and a small travel bag over her shoulder, Jones entered the unique sweltering hell of an English manor house kitchen in June. The heat hit her like a slap in the face. Not as warm as New Mexico but welcome. Its swirling heat was full of steam, aromas, and frantic human voices. About a dozen aproned staff were running round in a state of pandemonium that could only indicate a professional kitchen or a mortar attack.



Overseeing this mania was a mountain of a woman in starched white. She trumpeted out instruction and admonishment in equal measure. In one fist, she held a huge bowl of cream clutched to her bosom. Her other was wrapped around a whisk, which she occasionally shook vigorously at some ne'er-do-well. Her staff scuttled around like agitated beetles, and it took Jones a moment of quiet observation to understand that this was a synchronised performance in which every player knew her role by heart.

She also surmised this must be Mrs Mallory, head cook of Clamp House. All the rest of the hoo-ha must be preparations for the wedding. Mrs Mallory looked as if she thrived on the challenge; her staff did not. They were wilting like day-old lilies.

Pushing into the fuggy blanket of heat and cooking odours, Jones approached the matriarch de cuisine and said, "Mrs Mallory? I was told you could direct me to me my room. I'm with Lady Quince-Patrick's party."

"Party! Party! Don't tell me there's more than one of 'em. I was distinctly told Lady Margo would be unaccompanied. I can't go changing all the dinner arrangements now. It's bad enough as it is, what with people sticking their noses in left, right, and centre, without unexpected guests popping up everywhere like...like...prairie dogs!"

"It's still a party of one; no changes there. I'm the staff," Jones said calmly. Mrs Mallory looked her up and down, taking in all she needed to know in one glance.

"Are you now." Then she turned and hollered to one of the girls over by the huge cooking range. "Sarah, show..." She turned back to Jones, "I'm sorry but I've forgotten your name already."

"I never gave it. It's Jones."

"Show Mr Jones to his room." Mrs Mallory completed her instructions, not registering the gender of her guest correctly. This was another anomaly Jones was familiar with. It didn't matter to her; it would merely be tedious later on when Mrs Mallory finally realised her mistake and either apologised for or huffed over it.

Sarah approached, wiping her hands on her apron and looking relieved at having a distraction. She was young and sassy and already had a gleam in her eye on seeing her charge. Jones kept her face an impassive mask, though Sarah's hip sway of a walk was hard to ignore.

"Follow me." Sarah's voice had a cheeky lilt. Her pretty face glowed from the kitchen heat, and her eyes sparkled flirtatiously as she led Jones out through the bedlam into the cool, tiled back hall. "The staff quarters are in the attics, so we have to take the rear stairwell. You don't mind the rear, do you?" It was a suggestive, silly question. House staff would use no other stairway. Jones ignored the blatant flirtation and nodded, letting Sarah take the lead.

"Is it always so manic?" she asked, watching Sarah's undulating rump as she ascended the narrow staircase a few steps ahead of her.

"We've got this bleedin' wedding, ain't we? And Cook's got herself in a right old pickle," Sarah answered over her shoulder. "Doesn't help that one of the guests is a celebrity chef and keeps pushing his snooty French nose in. Has her in a proper spin, he does." Her backside mamboed its way up the narrow stairway, inches from Jones's face. Sarah knew more about sauce than Mrs Mallory had ever taught her.

"How many staff are there here?"

“About twenty, including the groundsmen and stable hands. I’m full time in the kitchen with Whimsy and Gladys. Though Whimsy sometimes helps with the housekeeping, cos between you and me, she’s useless for aught but pot scrubbing,” she said. “Today, we got several women come in from the village to help out. Good thing too, what with John taken ill. He had to go to the hospital this morning—oh, and there’s Mr Forcep. He’s the butler, but you probably met him already. Leery old boozer!” She snorted in derision. She was puffing now. Not as fit as she was spirited, Jones thought.

“Blow me down. I swear these stairs get steeper.”

“I wouldn’t fancy running up and down these several times a day. Especially not after a stint in the kitchen. That looked like hot work,” Jones said. “Do all the house staff room up here?”

Sarah shook her head. “Only the junior staff and visitors like yourself are up here. Mr Forcep, Mrs Mallory, and Miss Bloom, the Housekeeper, are on the floor below.”

She led Jones down a gloomy corridor. “That’s my room there.” Her fingers trailed across the brown, chipped paintwork of a closed door. “You’re further on down, on my side.” Here she flicked Jones a sly sideways glance.

She swung open the guest door to a cramped but scrupulously clean little bedroom and stood back so Jones could enter first. It had a small washbasin in one corner, a narrow bed with fresh but worn bed linen, and a wardrobe of dark wood.

“The bathroom is third on the left.” Sarah came into the room after her. “Need any help unpacking?” Their eyes locked—Sarah’s brazen; Jones’s bemused.

"I've only got this bag." Jones swung it off her shoulder and dropped it onto the bed with a thump. The rusty bed springs squeaked convulsively. Sarah started at the suggestively squeaking bed, then turned her gaze sharply onto Jones, and for the first time, seemingly took her in. Jones knew the effect she had. Her black uniform jacket lay unbuttoned against a crisp linen shirt, startlingly white against a dark column of throat. Her chauffeur jodhpurs stretched taut over her thighs and were tucked into soft black leather boots. Her Navajo heritage gave her a dangerous, sexy broodiness that pulsed from her and was stifling in the little room. She watched as her gender hit home and a deep blush scorched the young maid's cheeks. Sarah glanced away, as hot and bothered as if she'd stayed in the kitchen after all.

"Well then, I'll leave you to sort it out on your own," she said tartly. The mischievous look immediately re-entered her eyes. "But never let it be said I didn't offer to help...or raise a finger." With that she flounced out, calling over her shoulder. "There'll be a cup of tea at four o'clock, after the nobs have had theirs."

Bemused, Jones watched her leave. It was refreshing how quickly she had bounced back after she'd discovered her gaffe. Sarah's room was five doors down from hers. That maybe was something worth remembering.

## AFTERNOON TEA

Lady Margo sipped Earl Grey from her china tea cup but waved away the cake plate Betsy lunged in her direction. Beside her, Mrs Ford-Hughes happily helped herself to a second fondant. Mrs Ford-Hughes was a rotund woman who had delivered her esteemed—and unfortunately now deceased—husband of several sons and felt it her duty to indulge herself a little in her widowhood. This involved eating as much as she liked and keeping a firm eye on her many daughters-in-law and grandchildren. She had informed Margo of all this within seconds of her taking the seat next to her. After several comments of feigned interest, Margo felt it time to circulate. After all, there were many other guests to greet, some she had not seen for at least a year, if not more.

Most drifted around the room, idly chatting with each other. Some examined the various antiquities which had been unearthed in some foreign clime and returned to England for scholarly research and then auction. Every room in the house was full of scarabs, fragments of tablets inscribed in hieroglyphics or runic scrawls, statuettes, and votive charms. Two full-size Egyptian mummies, complete with sarcophagi, stood upright in the main hall. One already sold to the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, who at this moment, was having a sherry with an officer of the Coldstream Guards.

“Quincy.” Betsy was at her side, looking harried. Her father, Sir Wesley Clamp, had decided to take his afternoon refreshment locked away in his study, leaving Betsy to oversee any remaining introductions, a task she was not best suited to. “May I introduce you to the Reverend Tupper. He’s officiating at the wedding.”

“How do you do, Reverend Tupper.” Margo shook his hand. He was a small, swarthy gentleman with sharp, intelligent eyes and a quick handshake. The palm of his hand was as dry as rough sand, and his greeting clipped.

“I’m very well, thank you, Lady Margo.” He gave a small bow and moved away.

“I don’t remember him from my last visit. Is he new?” Margo discreetly asked Betsy once the good Reverend was out of earshot. “I thought Reverend Michaels tended your parish?” She had a warm spot for the tender-hearted minister.

“Tupper’s a replacement. He’s just come in for the service,” Betsy informed her. “Reverend Michaels had to go to Chichester to see his poor mother. She took a bad fall at her local library.”

“How awful; I do hope she is well. So, who is here? I recognise a few, but some are entirely new to me.”

“Like Mrs Ford-Hughes?” Betsy giggled and linked arms as they moved across the drawing room. “Father invited her. Apparently, she’s some sort of hob-nob on the museum board.”

“Oh dear, don’t tell me he’s filling up Melisandrine’s wedding with business contacts?”

“Between you and me, I think Melisandrine is beyond caring. I’ve never seen her so disinterested in anything

before, especially something where she's supposed to be the centre of attention."

Her cousin Melisandrine had always displayed a prodigious, if dubious, talent for drama and the arts in general. Surely her own wedding would be a wonderful opportunity to take centre stage?

"How unusual," Margo said.

Betsy steered her towards a suave, foreign looking young man with an engaging smile and oiled slicked black hair.

"Alexandro, may I present my cousin Lady Margo Quince-Patrick," Betsy said, with a twitter of excitement in her voice. It seemed Jones was not Betsy's only weekend crush. "Margo, this is Señor Checa. He's come all the way from South America to be Perry's best man."

Alexandro raised Margo's hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across her knuckles.

"Enchanted," he murmured in a voice as smooth as melting molasses. His gaze never left hers, and she felt the definite pull of his magnetism. Señor Checa had charm and knew how to use it. Margo smiled divinely, the smile she reserved for socially awkward moments, and carefully removed her hand from his grasp.

"It's a pleasure to meet a good friend of Perry's. And where is the man of the moment?" she asked.

Simultaneously, both Betsy and Alexandro turned towards the sideboard where Perry Gladbeck stood refilling his crystal whiskey glass. Perry was tall and blond and exceptionally good looking. The brilliant afternoon sun poured through the west window and shone on the masculine column of his throat where his Adam's apple gently bobbed as he downed his drink in one swallow. A

faint sheen of perspiration dampened his forehead, causing a golden lock of hair to curl in a pleasing, rakish manner. As if aware he was under scrutiny, he turned towards his onlookers and gave a charming smile that could have graced the face of a Renaissance angel.

“Quincy! Well, I’ll be damned.” He strode over and gave Margo an overeager hug, enveloping her in a fug of whiskey fumes and stale cigar smoke. “When did you arrive? Alexandro, this is Margo, Melisandrine’s cousin and an old pal of mine from way back when. Eh, Margo? Remember that year we all went to Cowes for the yachting and you fell in?” He talked non-stop, not seeming to need an answer to any of his questions.

Margo smiled tightly. “That was Jane Fortescue who fell in at Cowes, not me,” she corrected. Beside her, Betsy sighed quietly. A conversation with Perry took a lot of patience, and poor Betsy was stuck with him as a brother-in-law. Lord only knew what Melisandrine had seen in him. News of their Christmas engagement had shocked Margo, and now she was as confused as ever as to what they saw in each other. She couldn’t think of two more mismatched people.

“We’ve just been introduced.” Alexandro took the opportunity to cast Margo another scorching look. She decided that once his natural flirtatiousness abated, he could be good fun. She would wager that behind the searing glances lay an intelligent humour and dry wit, unlike Perry who seemed a trifle put out at the attention she was garnering from his good friend.

“And what about St. Moritz? Are you for St. Moritz this winter?” he continued, brashly assaulting the conversation,



though his attention had strayed to the drinks tray again. “Can I get you a drink? What will you have, Margo?”

“I’m thinking of the Caribbean this winter. And I’ll finish my tea, thank you.”

“Pish pash.” He made a face at her teacup. “I’ll get you a gin.”

“You need to meet with the Leakeys, Margo.” Betsy gently drew her away. “And you’re seated opposite Timothy Arbuthnot at dinner this evening, so it’s best to say hello now.”

Margo gratefully followed her, pleased at Betsy’s quick thinking. The Leakeys and the Arbuthnots were the most dreadful bores, but anything was better than Perry when he was on a toot.

“Good gracious, Betsy. It’s not even four o’clock, and he’s ossified. He’s like a man in the depths of despair. Whatever’s happening?”

“You wait ’til you see the bride,” Betsy said glumly. “I swear, Margo, this is a rum do if ever there was one. No one is happy. Perry has been zozzled since before he got here. Father is in such a stink because of a sale that fell through, I can barely look at him sideways, and as for Melisandrine... Well, see for yourself!”

The door opened to a chorus of welcoming coos and trills as Melisandrine Clamp, the bride-to-be, entered the drawing room. Her afternoon dress of cream silk floated around her slim, waif-like figure as she drifted across the floor. Melisandrine never failed to look as if she’d been born into the wrong century by about two thousand years. A faint, rueful smile played upon her lips, and Margo fully expected her to announce a tragedy of worldly proportions

like some ancient actress in an amphitheatre. She duly greeted her guests. Perry, who should have been among the first to meet her, was ensconced in some heated debate with Alexandro and had not even noticed his bride's entrance.

Then Melisandrine was before her, a vision of impalpable loveliness.

"Darling, Margo." She reached for her with outstretched arms and pulled Margo into an embrace as warm and welcoming as a cobweb. "So wonderful to see you." Melisandrine stepped back and gazed deeply into Margo's eyes. "I must talk to you as soon as possible."

"Of course." Margo was so disconcerted by the intensity of the stare that, after Perry arrived to claim Melisandrine and they moved off, she realised she had not congratulated them both on their upcoming nuptials.

"See what I mean?" Betsy hissed in her ear. "It's as if *she's* in a stupor, and *he's* upset about something."

To be frank, Perry was always drunk, and Margo saw little difference in Melisandrine's outward demeanour. It was only the intensity of that gaze that had discombobulated her. She had the distinct impression Melisandrine was in trouble. And it was more than the nerves of a jittery bride.

END OF SAMPLE

EVOLUTION OF AN  
ART THIEF

BY JESSIE CHANDLER

## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to Ursula Thieboux, who, as a result of bullying, took her own life at the age of 13.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Astrid and Jae of Ylva for taking on this collection. Jove Belle, thank you for your editing wizardry. Also for your cover-making prowess.

To my first readers, Lori L. Lake, Judy Kerr, DJ Schuette, and Devin Abraham, thank you for everything. You're my backbone.

I played footloose and fancy-free with established dates of some places and organizations within the story. One of these is the Museum of Jewish Heritage, which actually opened in 2003. If you have a chance to Google the Museum and The Garden of Stones, do it. It's amazing.

Lastly, thank you Betty Ann—you're my love and my light. Your patience as I peck out words and form them into something sort of readable is nothing short of extraordinary.

## FOREWARD

If you're an LGBTQ teen, or any teen who's being bullied, please, *please* know it gets better. Check out the It Gets Better project: **[www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org)**. Reach out to family, to an elder, to a school counselor. Tell them what's going on and who the perpetrators are. It might feel like you're alone in dealing with this, but you're not.

If you're a parent, a sister, a brother, a friend of someone who you think is being bullied, talk to them. Check out the It Gets Better project together. It'll provide ideas on how to help and how to cope.

We are losing way too many kids way too early. We need to step up, speak up, and speak loud.

# CHAPTER 1

“Mikala Ana Flynn, get your caboose in gear. It’s almost five thirty.”

“Coming, Tubs.” I pasted a reluctant smile on my face even though she couldn’t see me through the wall dividing the living room from my bedroom.

My grandmother—Tubs to me, Tubby to family, Leah to friends, and Leahlabel Flynn to the rest of the world—was a clock hawk. We were due in an hour to the 2001 Goldsmith Foundation dinner at the Museum of Jewish Heritage near Battery Park. We had plenty of time, but even if we were Johnny-on-the-spot, we were late in her book.

Probably where my father got his sense of punctuality. Ah, crap. Why did my mind have to go there now? The thought of him dropped me right back into a boatload of morose memories, exactly the state my grandmother was trying to shake me out of. I knew she meant well. And I knew she was struggling too. Today was the one-year anniversary of my father’s death. Her son’s death.

Death?

Oh, hell no. It wasn’t just a death. Might as well call it what it was. Murder, plain and simple. Cold-blooded homicide.

And as yet, unsolved.

Three hundred and sixty-five days ago, my fourteen-year-old self walked into the house my father and I had

shared in Key West, Florida—the same place we’d lived since I was six.

It looked like a World Wrestling Federation cage match had rolled through the place. Lots of broken glass. Trashed furniture. And blood. So much blood.

I’d freaked the hell out when I found my strong, tall, capable father—an Army officer—sprawled on the kitchen floor, bleeding from a gash in his neck. He’d been a West Point grad and then an airman. After that, he’d transferred into Special Forces. Special Forces, dammit! He trained people to kick ass. How had someone gotten the better of him?

That day, terror had chased itself down my spine and made my legs weak. Even now, a year later, when I thought too hard about it, that exact feeling shot through me like lightning and left me shaking and spacey.

I’d pulled myself together and called for help. Then, I’d desperately tried to stop the unstoppable with a dishtowel. I’d begged my dad to hold on, pleaded with him over and over and over again. Eventually, emergency responders had dragged me away.

Military police had ruled it a burglary gone bad and then promptly closed the case. Even though the place had been tossed, all that was taken was an old puzzle box made by my great-grandfather. Suddenly, my secure world had been blitzed—completely demolished. I was thoroughly confused and pissed off. I hurt so much I couldn’t think straight.

My grandmother—my dad’s mom—came to Florida from New York and helped sort everything out. She brought me back to Brooklyn—to the house where I’d spent my “formative years,” as my dad used to say—from the time I



was eighteen months until just after I turned six. But that was another story entirely.

Three hundred sixty-five days was a long time. Yet it was the blink of an eye. What a paradox.

I sighed, rolled off my bed, and tucked my white button-down shirt into my jeans. Under the shirt, I wore a white tank top. As soon as this fiasco was over, I planned to lose a layer. Thanks to years of living in the tropics, I hated being constricted by clothes. Too claustrophobic. Summers in New York City were almost always hot, but the daylong drizzle that fell from the battleship-gray sky upped the humidity and reminded me of everything I'd lost in the Conch Republic.

I trudged into the living room.

Tubs waited by the front door, arms crossed. Where the nickname "Tubby" came from, I had no idea. My grandmother was lean, fit, ready to go—everything but chubby.

She looked me over. "You're damn lucky this isn't a black-tie affair. Jeans? Honestly. Kids these days. At least your shirt is clean."

At five eight and still growing, I could finally look her in the eye. With a one-sided smile that took some effort, I said, "And I buttoned my shirt. Besides, it's not like you're all dressed up."

She wore faded black Dockers, a blue blouse with a bunch of flowers on it, and a well-worn pair of shit kickers. Her reading glasses rested like a permanent growth on top of her head, ready to be whipped off and put to use at a moment's notice. She devoured three newspapers every morning and read fiction like a bookworm on steroids.

“Is this a western-themed evening?” I asked.

“What?”

“The boots.”

“Oh, those. No. Figured, if the rain came again, I could stomp through the puddles with you.”

I laughed. That woman could always make me smile. She possessed a great sense of humor, and her mind was always busy calculating something or another. Her Romani ancestry had given her dark skin, twinkling deep-chocolate eyes, and salt-and-pepper hair that she wore in a braid halfway down her back.

While I’d inherited Tubs’ russet coloring and bone structure, the added olive tinge to my skin came from my Italian mother. Thanks to the two of them, I usually didn’t burn in the sun—a really good thing when I’d lived in Florida. The nod my genetics gave to my dad’s half-Irish heritage was green eyes and a mess of dark-brown hair that glinted red in the sun.

When I looked back, I realized how amazing Tubs was. She had been a child of the Holocaust, incredibly lucky to have made it out alive. She was a survivor in so many ways. Before I was born, my granddad had been killed in a construction accident while building the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers. Tubs had rallied and worked multiple jobs to take care of my dad. She managed to put herself through college and then grad school. She was nothing if not stubborn, a trait we shared in spades.

All that crazy perseverance of hers led to an appointment to the President’s Commission on the Holocaust back in the seventies. The Commission did its thing and came to the conclusion that it was high time the US did something to

honor victims of the Third Reich. Eventually, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC was built, and when I was a little kid living with Tubs, we visited every year.

After that, she helped get the ball rolling for Manhattan's Museum of Jewish Heritage. She still worked there as one of the exhibition coordinators, and that's where we were headed today.

"Come on, then." She grabbed my arm and manhandled me out the door. "Time's a-wasting."



We exited the subway at Bowling Green. Battery Park was soggy and quiet as we scurried through the rain toward the Museum of Jewish Heritage. The building was lit up with amber light, softening the sharp edges with the mist that hung heavy in the air. Clouds pressed low to the ground, bringing twilight early and threatening to dump even more rain on our parade.

The damp in the air mixed with scents that are uniquely New York—an unsettling combo of bus exhaust, food aromas, and rotting garbage—were a world away from the sun and salt water of Key West. Once in a while, I had to remind myself that this was my new reality, not a recurring nightmare I'd eventually wake up from.

"Thank you," Tubs called to a man who held open one of the museum's huge glass doors for us. We scooted into the lobby, better known as the Grand Foyer. This was where Tubs would mingle, and I would be bored as hell until we went up to the Events Hall for dinner. There was sure to be plenty of gossip about the Goldsmiths, their foundation,

and whatever fancy-schmancy award was being given out tonight.

While she wasn't Jewish, Tubs' family name was Lautari. Her tribe of Romani made the mistake of briefly settling in Poland near Lodz, about seventy-five miles from Warsaw. Her family had been rounded up by Hitler's war machine, and Tubs had been born in the Lodz ghetto. She was the only one in her family of six to make it out alive. Her father bought off a couple of guards and somehow managed to smuggle Tubs out just before mass deportations to the Chelmno concentration camp began.

Whenever I thought about that, I felt physically sick at how close Tubs came to death. I was lucky to be able to escort her to these pain-in-my-ass events. My father sure would have gotten a kick out of the fact that his impatient, moody, restless, and yeah, sometimes reckless kid would do something so civilized. That thought brought me full circle, and I sighed heavily.

Tubs tightened her hand on my arm. "Mikala, would you please find me a beverage?" It was crazy, but somehow she always sensed when my thoughts were headed for the shitter and did her best to distract me from myself.

"Sure," I said. "What do you want?"

A woman I recognized from another city museum said, "The servers have those cute little pink drinks with Hawaiian umbrellas."

"Music to my ears," Tubs said. "Mikala, will you please find me a glass of that pink concoction?" She patted my arm, and I put my hand over hers. We'd been through a lot together, and there wasn't much I wouldn't do for her, no matter my mood.

As I meandered through the sea of overdressed humanity, the roar of voices grew exponentially louder as more people arrived. This was so not my style. It wasn't Tubs' style either, but she got a kick out of bringing highbrow society down a couple of notches by simply being in attendance.

She always told me never to underestimate the power of place and presentation. Thanks to her association with the museum, I'd been able to take the entrance exam to Stuyvesant High School late last summer. By the time we'd gotten back from settling my dad's affairs in Florida, the normal testing window had been closed. I'd scored well, and the school had accepted me. Only later had I found out how hard the place was to get into. Personally, I didn't get what the big deal was, but it made Tubs happy, and *that* mattered to me.

Tuxedo-wearing waiters skillfully navigated through the crowd, holding trays of appetizers and flutes filled with champagne. I didn't see any special little pink drinks, though.

My stomach rumbled, so I snagged a bite-sized turnover from a passing tray. It was pretty good. Next, I grabbed a tiny triangle of bread with a white smear of cream cheese topped by some gelatinous goop that looked like black beads. What the hell. I popped it in my mouth, and just like that, my mouth was filled with the nasty fish guts they rinsed off the dock every morning. I chewed and swallowed in a hurry. So gross. I grabbed a glass of bubbly off a waiter's tray and downed it before he could stop me. He gave me the evil eye, and I faded into the throng before he could do anything about it.

Halfway across the space, I zeroed in on someone carrying a tray of pink beverages with multi-colored paper

umbrellas. Bingo. Now I just needed to get from here to there before the server's tray was emptied. I zigzagged and weaved my way around the Goldsmith Foundation donors and groupies who liked to hang around the Goldsmith Foundation donors. Focused on the drink tray, I didn't notice the girl until it was too late.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to sidestep and, of course, plowed right into her. She was shorter than me, with a solid build, which was probably a good thing, or the impact would've sent her flying right out of her black high heels.

"I'm so sorry!" I grabbed her arms to steady her. The pink drinks and their umbrellas disappeared from view. "Shit," I muttered under my breath and refocused on the girl. It took a second to realize that I knew this person in the fancy black dress. Embarrassment bubbled up from the bottom of my stomach, making my cheeks hot and my ears burn. I'd nearly flattened the daughter of the head of the Goldsmith Foundation.

"Kate! Oh my God. I'm so sorry."

The corner of her mouth lifted, and two dimples creased her cheek.

My stomach did a weird flip-flop, a cross between horror and something else. Kate Goldsmith went to Stuyvesant, too.

Last year, we'd been in the same Intro to Bio class. She'd sat a desk ahead of me but had a different lab partner. We hadn't shared more than a periodic hello and goodbye. Even though she didn't seem overly snooty, she ran with a crowd I tried to steer clear of. She was born into money, and I worked for mine. That drew a pretty clear delineation in our social strata.

Kate narrowed her eyes and gave me a sideways look, the half-grin still in place. “Mikala, right? From Bio. You ought to slow down. I think the speed limit is thirty in here.”

I laughed. I was so out of my element. Why hadn't I stayed home, where I was safe with my books and Walkman and it didn't matter what embarrassing comments might escape my lips?

I said, “Just call me Flynn. Otherwise you'll sound like my grandmother.” I glanced around again. “Speaking of, she sent me on a mission for one of those obnoxious pink beverages people are drinking, and I was hot on the trail when I nearly took you out. Gotta run.” I took a step away, and she grabbed my elbow to stop me.

“The ones with the umbrellas?”

“Exactly.”

“Come on.” She slid her hand down my arm, grabbed my hand, and gave it a tug. “Let's see if we can find that for her.”



Fifteen minutes and much giggling later, we'd chased three different waiters through the crowded Grand Foyer and finally caught up with one. We each nabbed a Jersey Girl—stupidest drink name ever—and found Tubs. She'd drifted away from where I'd left her and was talking to a couple of people who looked vaguely familiar.

Tubs lit up when we handed her the glasses. “Why, it's a twofer. Thank you.” She looked Kate up and down. “Who's this pretty lady?”

“Kate, meet my grandmother, Leahlabel Flynn. Kate and I go to Stuy together.”

“You can call me Tubs,” my grandmother said.

Kate shot me a weird look and then said, “Nice to meet you.”

“And you as well.” Tubs beamed. “It’s nice to see Mikala with a friend. It’s a rare occurrence.”

Oh my God. I loved Tubs, but sometimes I wished she’d keep her mouth shut. My ears got hot again.

Kate said, “You’ve got a sweet, smart granddaughter.”

It was my turn to give *her* a weird look. An entire semester of casual greetings, and in fifteen minutes, she decided I was sweet and smart? Wow.

“I certainly do,” Tubs said. “Since I can’t check my watch without dumping my beverages, Mikala, can you stop gaping long enough to see the time?”

I closed my mouth and glanced at my watch. “A little after seven.”

“Okay. We’ve still got forty-five minutes before they begin seating. Would you mind running down to my office and grabbing the *Faustian*? If it’s not on my desk, it should be on the bookshelf under Petropoulous.”

“Yeah, sure.” Perfect excuse to get the hell out of Dodge and enjoy some peace and quiet for three seconds.

Tubs handed me her key card and dove back into her conversation.

I gave Kate a quick shrug and rueful grin. “Sorry to run, but...”

She took my arm again and steered me away from Tubs and company. “What’s the *Faustian*?”

“It’s about art the Nazis looted in World War II.”

“I’d love to see it. Can I come with you?”

Come with me? *The* Kate Goldsmith wanted to come somewhere with me? Was the world about to end?



Kate gave my arm a squeeze. “Has anyone ever told you you’re cute when you frown?”

What was happening?

“Sure,” popped out before my brain had a chance to catch up to my mouth. “I mean no.” *Jesus Christ, Flynn.* I tried again. “Sure, you can come, and no, no one’s ever told me that.”

“Well, they should’ve. Come on, let’s go.”

Apparently, Kate not only had a good sense of humor, but she was bossy, too. Of course she was. Her dad was the head of a multi-million-dollar foundation. Probably had to be bossy to make that work.

Man, I was so out of my league. What was I doing? I plowed our way through the foyer. Kate clung to my belt, practically plastered against my back so we didn’t get separated. Five hundred people had to be packed in this foyer. The more the space filled, the hotter it became, and the more I wanted out.

The security door at the rear of the Grand Foyer led to a warren of business offices. By the time I passed Tubs’ card over the black security box, I was sweating. The box beeped, and the red light turned green. I wrenched the door open, and we slipped inside. The door shut behind us with a thud, and I paused to let the cool air and silence swirl over me.

“Whew.” Kate fanned her flushed face with a hand. “I hate these events. We all know Dad appreciates the support, but I’d sure rather be doing anything else.”

“Who’s we all?”

“My brother Will, my mom, and me.”

“Aren’t they going to wonder where you are?”

She lifted a shoulder. “I don’t care. They probably won’t notice unless I’m not at the table when they seat everyone for dinner. Wily Will snitched a whole bunch of those Jersey Girls and is probably puking in the bathroom, and my mom is probably still talking to the award coordinators. Too many ‘probablys’ for me. I was trying to escape when you ran into me.”

“Uh...” I was such an idiot. “Sorry about that.”

She glanced at me, her ice-gray eyes penetrating. They kind of reminded me of the storm clouds outside. “Are you kidding?” she said. “You saved me from a slow, painful death. Now, where’s that book?”

I led the way through a maze of hallways and found my grandmother’s office. Sure enough, the book was on her desk. I grabbed it and turned around.

Kate stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling bookcase, running her finger slowly along the shelf and reading titles aloud. “*Salt Mines and Castles: The Discovery and Restitution of Looted European Art. Nazi Looted Art. Art Treasures and War. Hitler’s Art Thief: Hildebrand Gurlitt. The Nazis and the Looting of Europe’s Treasures.* Wow. What does your grandmother do?”

I had a general idea, but no clue about the particulars. “She researches art provenance and coordinates exhibitions.”

“Provenance?” Kate echoed. She slid the *Faustian* from my hands and turned it around so she could read the cover. “*The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany.* I knew the Nazis looted art but didn’t realize there was an entire library on the subject.”

“Yeah.” I’d been surrounded by the topic my entire life, so it didn’t seem as foreign to me as it might to others.

“Provenance is the history of a piece of art. Ownership is traced back to its origins.”

“Who knew I’d actually learn something tonight.” Kate looked up from the book.

Her gaze was intense enough to scorch a hole right through me. My stomach flipped again. I blinked in an effort to buffer the connection and occupied myself by retrieving the book from her. “Come on, we better get this to Tubs.”

Kate followed me out of the office. “Oh, yeah. Why do you call your grandmother that?”

Boy, she asked a lot of questions. “Don’t know. Just always have. Her real nickname is Tubby.”

The rest of the short trip back to the Grand Foyer was taken up discussing nicknames. Once we exited the offices, Kate took off to find her parents, and I hunted Tubs down and delivered the book. Before too long, dinner seating began. Hopefully that meant we were at least half done with this fiasco.



“Thank you,” I said to the server after he’d removed my plate. All around me, people chowed down on their main entrees. The chicken hadn’t been too bad, but the mixed vegetables were mushy. Yuck. I laid my napkin on the table in front of me and wished I could fast-forward time. Although, I had to admit, thinking about Kate Goldsmith was a strangely pleasant distraction.

Now, dessert still needed to be delivered, and somewhere along the way, the award ceremony would begin with the inevitable speeches by too many people who thought they were a lot more entertaining than they were. I blew out a painfully bored sigh.

Tubs paused momentarily in her conversation with an art donor to give my leg a pat. That was something I appreciated about my grandmother. She always checked to make sure I was okay, no matter where we were or what we were doing.

We were seated toward the back, and that made me happy because, when this was over, we could make a quick and easy escape. Waiting for five hundred people to filter out after the presentation had ended was no fun. Idly, I swirled ice in my water goblet and willed the freak show to get on the road.

Someone poked me in the back, startling me out of my attempt at mental telepathy. The pocker poked again, and I turned around to see who it was.

“There’s that frown I like,” Kate said with a smirk. She lightly settled her hands on my shoulders.

Smack me with a feather. Kate Goldsmith was speaking to me again. And touching me. It was almost too much to comprehend.

“Hey,” I managed. Yeah. Lame.

She said, “Come on. I know just the place we can go.”

“I, uh—”

Tubs elbowed me. In addition to all of her other tricks, she had a weird ability to hear two conversations at the same time and keep track of both. “Go on,” she said. “Just come back before nine thirty so you can escort me home.” Yet another thing I loved about her. She twisted reality and somehow made doing things with her an honor instead of a chore.

I grinned. “Okay. Thanks, Tubs.” Before I thought too much about it and balked, I followed Kate out of the Hall. She led me to a set of fire stairs, and we went down to the

Garden of Stones, my favorite place in the museum. After school sometimes, I'd wait there for Tubs to finish work.

The Garden was finished last year—a memorial to those who perished in the Holocaust and for those who survived. The Garden's creator, Andy Goldsworthy, was a British dude who specialized in combining sculpture with living things. He'd arranged eighteen boulders outside of the museum in a rectangular area that was maybe half the size of a basketball court. It faced the Hudson River. Then, he'd drilled holes in the rocks and planted dwarf oak saplings in them. The trees were still little, but as time went on, they'd grow tall and strong. They were supposed to somehow merge with the rock. It was a pretty cool idea, a reflection of how life could survive in the most unlivable of places.

I trailed Kate down a series of steps to the crushed gravel that made up the base of the memorial. The rain had stopped, but the concrete benches installed along one side of the garden were still puddled with water. A waist-high Plexiglas wall hemmed in the far end, and Kate pulled me through the stones and stopped at the wall.

"I love this place," she said.

"Me too. It's...peaceful, I guess."

"Yeah." She shifted to lean a hip against the Plexi. "You're interesting."

Interesting? Was that good or bad? "What did you expect?"

She looked across the black, open expanse of river. The lights of Liberty State Park and Jersey City, with its jagged landscape of skyscrapers, apartment buildings, and row houses, were softened by fog. It looked kind of like one of those impressionist paintings we learned about in art class.

“You’re different than the kids I usually hang out with.”

Probably because I didn’t have dollar signs after my name. “How so?” My fingers curled around the drippy handrail attached to the wall. I was unsure I wanted to hear the answer.

“You’re not trying to one-up anyone here, and you obviously don’t care how you look.”

Ouch.

“Oh crap. Wait,” she backtracked. “No. That didn’t come out right.” She released what sounded like a frustrated breath and faced me. “What I meant was, you...you do what you want. You don’t follow the crowd. I respect that.”

Well, jeez. That wasn’t so bad. I breathed out a laugh. I’d figured she was going to say that with me she was living dangerously by hanging out with trash from the other side of the river.

“And,” she said, “you’re kinda...cute.”

What the hell? I ripped my focus from the blurry reflection of lights on the water to look at her again. My mouth opened, but I couldn’t make anything come out.

“For a girl. You’re cute for a girl, I mean.”

Holy shit. My heart double-timed. Was she coming on to me? Hadn’t she dated one of the lacrosse players last year? I wasn’t sure about which team I batted for, but I knew kissing a guy made me want to hurl. Self-consciously, I tucked a few loose strands of hair behind an ear. “Thanks, I think. You’re not so bad in that skimpy dress yourself.”

The darkness muted the power of her gaze, but I felt its weight anyway. Kate finally released me from her devastatingly intense scrutiny and mirrored my stance, hands resting on the railing, staring off into the distance. “I suppose we should get back.”

“Suppose so.”

In silence, we backtracked through the garden and up to the Events Hall. At the entrance, Kate stopped.

Inside someone droned on in the midst of a speech. She said, “You made this night bearable. Thank you.”

I gave her a roguish grin. “Anything for a damsel in distress. Although, I think I was the one in distress, trying to get my hands on those Jersey Girls. Thank *you*.”

“Anytime.”

I inhaled, about to ask for her phone or pager number. Just to touch base. Before I could open my mouth, she pressed her finger in the divot in my chin, smiled, and spun around to thread her way between the tables to her seat.

Tubs glanced at me as I sat and scooted the chair closer to the table.

“Have a good time with your girlfriend?” she asked.

My stomach flopped again. Stiffly, I said, “She’s not my girlfriend.”

A delighted smile lit Tubs’ face. “Relax. It’s just a turn of phrase. That’s how we referred to friends of the same gender back in the last century.” Differentiating between Tubs’ teasing side and her serious side sometimes took more work than I was prepared for.

I bared my teeth in a faux grin and prayed for the night to end.

## CHAPTER 2

“Hey, Flynn!” A familiar but unexpected voice startled the crap out of me. The pizza dough I’d been whirling hit the edge of the counter and then dropped to the floor with a heavy thud.

“Bombs away!” Joey of Joey’s Pizzeria hollered. “Dough is money, ya know.” He scrunched up his sweaty, red-cheeked face to let me know he was mostly kidding. Joey was a family friend, a beefy guy of maybe fifty, jovial, and always shiny from the heat of the huge oven that dominated the tiny boxcar-shaped store. The pizzeria might have been small, but we produced some mighty tasty pies when the dough didn’t land on the floor.

Kate Goldsmith stood by the cash register at the end of the red-laminate counter that divided the minute kitchen from the equally minute waiting area.

I’d died when she’d said my name, and now, as she looked around at the aged interior of my part-time job, I died again. She wore a black choker, a rhinestone tank top, and designer jeans with artful frays that probably cost more than I made in a whole month.

I had on Levi’s 501 jeans that were ripped, but that was because I’d worn them out and didn’t feel the need to buy replacements until school was back in session. A flour-dusted, sauce-speckled apron covered my T-shirt and thighs, and I knew there had to be white smudges of flour on my face. Just the way I wanted someone like Kate to see me.



“Joey,” I said, “can I take five?”

“Yeah, sure, kid.”

I peeled the dough off the floor, tossed it into a garbage can, and approached the girl I hadn’t been able to get out of my mind for the last week. On the way, I grabbed a damp rag, wiped my hands off, and then rubbed them dry on the inside of my apron.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Well,” she drew the word out, “I meant to ask you for your number last Saturday, but things happened too fast. So, here I am.”

I leaned against the counter and crossed my arms. Might as well be direct. What’s the worst that could happen? “I was thinking the same thing.”

A smile spread across her face.

“How’d you find me?” I wondered if I was being chick-stalked and didn’t even know it. Where was the fun in that?

“My mom talks to your—Tubs, and Tubs talks about you all the time.”

“Awesome.” Just what I wanted to hear. “So—”

“So,” she echoed and, for the first time, looked somewhat uneasy, “I was um...wondering...if you might be interested in a date—no!” She slapped a hand over her mouth, and I raised my brows. Her words came out in a rush. “Not exactly a date, I mean...er...wanna hang out sometime?”

This time, I couldn’t stop grinning. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

“When do you get off?”

“Off?” My voice actually squeaked. “Off, as in today?”

“Yeah. Why not? I have nothing but time to waste.”

Holy shit. A not-exactly-a-date sounded great after I’d had some time to panic and sweat and worry about what

I was going to wear, and in a perfect world, it wouldn't be my pizzeria duds. But then how often is the world perfect?

I glanced over my shoulder at Joey, who was working a new batch of dough to replace what I'd fumbled. "Hey, Joe."

"Yeah?"

"I'm done in an hour; you care if I bail early?"

"Nah. Go ahead."

"Thanks, man." I untied my apron and glanced at Kate, still stunned she was standing in front of me. "Give me five, and I'll meet you out front."



I snagged two slices of pepperoni pizza as we left the shop, and we munched on them as we meandered up Henry Street toward the Brooklyn Bridge. The pizza allowed me to keep my mouth busy so I didn't have to speak. I had no idea what to say.

It was unbelievable that Kate had sought me out. Me. The kid who tried to remain aloof, who hung on the fringe, who stayed as far away from the drama and bullshit that came from running with the "in" crowd as I could. I'd never been a follower. I was content to do my own thing. Moving to an uptight, one-upping environment hadn't altered that worldview.

Kate finished before I did, probably because she wasn't trying to delay the inevitable. She said, "I hope you don't mind me showing up like this."

I stuffed the last of the crust in my mouth and shook my head. Once I swallowed, I said, "No. Not at all. Bit of a shock, but a good one."

Her dimples dimpled again. "Whew. I debated for three days on whether or not this was a good idea."

“Good idea. Definitely a good idea.”

We stopped at the corner of Henry and Cranberry. Ruffino’s, one of my favorite corner stores, had its door propped open to let in the fresh air. It’d been a nice day—all blue skies and puffy white clouds, mid-seventies, and not so humid. At half past seven, the sidewalk cafes, bars, and eateries were in full swing. The pace of the neighborhood ebbed and flowed—unlike Key West, where things started slow, wound up through the day, and stayed crazy long into the night.

“Hey,” I said, “want something to drink?”

Five minutes later, we exited Ruffino’s with a bottle of Surge for me and a Diet Coke with Lemon for Kate and wandered down Cranberry toward the waterfront. She twisted the lid off her soda and took a swallow.

“How’s that furniture polish?” I asked.

She gave me a nudge with her shoulder. “Smart-ass. I like my furniture polish just fine, thank you.”

I tried to downplay the thrill that shot through me at her touch but couldn’t think of anything more to say.

Thankfully, Kate did a better job of small talk. “So, I hear you’re from Key West.”

Wow. I shot her a sideways glance and downed some of the green stuff. “You’ve been busy, haven’t you?”

“You’re...intriguing. All tall, dark, and moody.”

That did summarize me pretty well. I laughed. “Okay, then.”

Kate’s presence made my thoughts scatter, and I struggled to pull my head together. “Let’s see. I actually lived here, in Brooklyn, with Tubs from when I was little until just after I turned six. My dad was in the military,

and his position kept him moving around a lot. Once it was time for me to start school, Tubs convinced him he needed to settle down and be a real dad. He accepted a permanent post at the Naval Air Station in Key West and brought me down to live with him.”

“He hauled you from here all the way to Florida? That must’ve been hard.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think about the transition as being either easy or hard. Just the way it was. But when I look back at how things played out, it certainly wasn’t always fun in the Florida sun. But I adapted. Sure missed Tubs a lot, though. My dad was pretty good about bringing me to visit.” I went silent for a minute, thinking about that last trip I’d made with my father. It was just after school let out for the year, only a couple of weeks before that shit-ass day when my life blew up. When all our lives blew up.

Kate’s gaze was glued to me, and I wondered just what she’d found out playing private eye. My best guess was, at some point, Tubs had told her mom and dad why she was suddenly taking care of her granddaughter again. What had gone down wasn’t a secret, but also wasn’t something I talked much about.

“Can I ask you another question?”

I gave her the slit eye. “Maybe.” *Please don’t let it be about my dad.*

“Where’s your mom?”

Whew. That was an easy one. “Early in my father’s first deployment, he’d been stationed for a while in western Italy. As the story goes, a pretty Italian girl from the town of Terracina worked in a café near the base. He fell for her long black hair and kind eyes. She fell for his charm. Nine

months later I came along. Apparently, things were great for a while until she drowned while swimming in the ocean when I was about one and a half.”

Kate’s eyes went so wide it was almost comical. “Flynn. Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. I never would’ve asked—”

I held up a hand. “It’s okay. I don’t remember her, and it’s a little like she was never there in the first place.” Deep breath. “All right. Enough about me.” I let that hang for a second. “There’s an ice cream place off Water Street, near the piers. Then, it’s your turn for the inquisition.”

Those gray eyes searched mine. Once she realized I was good, she lit up like a sparkler. God, she was adorable.

She said, “Lead the way, my shiny knight in chocolate syrup. I’ll tell you anything for a hot fudge sundae.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were seated at a table on the patio of Dumbo Creamery with a bowl filled with enough ice cream, fudge, whipped topping, and cherries to choke an elephant—that’s what my dad used to say every time he brought me here. When I was a lot younger, I thought Dumbo the Disney elephant made all the ice cream in the world. Much later, I learned that Brooklyn’s DUMBO meant Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass and regular old humans churned the cream. This had been our special place, and frankly, I was a little amazed I was sharing it with Kate.

Across the East River, the lights of Manhattan were beginning to twinkle, and the sight always sent a thrill down my back. “Your turn, Miss Goldsmith.”

Kate licked ice cream off her lip. “What do you want to know?”

I tilted my head and regarded her. “It’s Friday night. Why on earth are you slumming with me when you could

be out with your friends? I'm sure they'd provide a hell of a lot more excitement."

Her eyes softened. "I've been watching you. In school, I mean. Not in a weird way."

"You have?" News to me. Interesting news. I'd had an eye on her too, somehow drawn to her energy. She was bubbly and cheerful and could change the tone of a classroom just by walking through the door.

"You're not like the kids from here." She spooned up some chocolate. "You're intense. You're really nice, even when others aren't."

"Tubs and Dad drilled that into me." I corralled one of the two cherries and popped it into my mouth.

"I saw you just before the end of the year helping that homeless person after a couple stupid football dickheads knocked her down in front of the school."

I remembered that incident vividly. We'd had a freak spring blizzard. Fat, heavy flakes deluged the city, and it was icy cold. Those two jerk jocks rampaged down the entire block before lumbering through the front doors of Stuyvesant.

A tiny elderly lady had been shuffling down the sidewalk, pulling a shopping cart through the snow. One of those idiots shoved her out of his way as they'd steamrolled past. She toppled in slow motion, like a bowling pin barely nicked by the ball. Her cart tipped over with her, scattering her belongings across the sidewalk. I helped round up her stuff and gave her the money Tubs had given me for lunch. She'd needed it way worse than I had.

Then, over the course of the next couple days, I'd hunted those two idiots down and made sure they'd paid for their

thoughtlessness. One showed up to school with a black eye and the other a split lip. Neither talked about the fights they'd obviously been involved in. There were some benefits to being the daughter of a Special Forces soldier. Before my dad died, he'd taught me a lot about defending myself. "Just in case," he'd always said. "Better to know and never use the knowledge than find out you need the skill when it's too late."

I lifted a shoulder self-consciously. "It's what anyone would do."

Kate leaned toward me, her eyes intense. "No. It's not what anyone would do. I didn't see anyone stopping to help but you." She looked away. "I walked right by and did nothing."

How did this conversation become so serious? "Hey." I reached over and put a hand on her tightly clenched fist. Her skin was warm, and my stomach did its anticipatory flip-flop thing that I was beginning to associate with Kate. "Next time, I bet you'll be the one giving the assist."

"My friends laughed. Laughed at her and laughed at you for helping her. I told them to fuck off."

Holy shit. Kate Goldsmith told someone to fuck off? That made me feel...good? I scooped up a blob of whipped cream and swiped it on the end of her nose.

She laughed and grabbed a napkin to wipe off the white goo.

Time for a redirect. "What about you?" I asked and took another bite. The coolness of the ice cream soothed the not entirely unpleasant sensations that ping-ponged around inside me. "Hopes? Dreams? Big plans for the future?"

The smile that had tugged up the corners of her mouth vanished, and the playful twinkle in her eyes faded. Maybe I shouldn't have asked after all.

I opened my mouth to retract my words, but she said, "I have hopes and dreams, all right. But not so much big plans." She fixated on the napkin in her hands, twisted it, and huffed a sigh. "There's the great divide between what's assumed I'll do and what I want to."

"What do you mean?" This was the first time I'd ever seen such a serious look on Kate's face. Not that I'd studied her facial expressions up close before now.

She flipped her twisted napkin aside. "My father expects both my brother and me to follow him into the family business. The Goldsmith Foundation." She deepened her voice. "The Goldsmiths always do what's expected of them."

I raised a brow. "Your dad speaking?"

"Yeah," she said morosely and scooped up another bite.

"So, if you could do what you wanted, what would it be?"

In a heartbeat, her expression shifted from almost sullen to vital, animated. She leaned toward me. "I'd join up with International Volunteer HQ."

Okay. "Is that like the Peace Corps or something?"

"Kind of, but better. Check this out. It's based in New Zealand, but they do stuff in something like thirty countries. You can get involved in some crazy cool things. What I really, really want to do is go to Sri Lanka and help with a project involving wild elephant conservation. Or, if I can't get into that, they have another group working on Buddhist temple renovation and restoration." She practically bounced in her seat. The table shook as her foot vibrated like a jackhammer. "Animals and architecture. My two favorite things. Once I volunteer for a year or two, I want to go to architecture school so I can create spaces that



mean something to people. I want to meld concrete and rebar and wood and glass into something that speaks to the heart. Maybe incorporate animals into it somehow. Or not.”

Holy crap. I felt like I was watching a flower open in the summer sun. “Wow, that sounds cool.”

“A friend of my mom’s volunteered last year and had the most amazing experience. She went to Costa Rica and helped with a turtle conservation project. She said it was life changing.”

“So why don’t you do it?”

It was as if the power source she’d been plugged into was suddenly cut. She literally shrank into herself, and her voice dropped. “My dad would never okay something like that. He practically forced Will into a business degree. That’s the same route he expects me to take.”

I took another scoop of rapidly puddling ice cream and pushed the bowl toward her. “Finish it.”

She slowly scraped her spoon against the bottom of the bowl. “I think that might be why Will parties as hard as he does. To block out reality.”

That would suck. To know exactly what you wanted to do with your life and not be able to do it had to seriously bite. “Can’t you explain how you feel to your dad?”

Kate licked her spoon off, tossed it into the bowl, and sat back with her arms crossed, gazing at a ferry on the river for a few beats. “I’ve tried. Mom’s on my side, but he doesn’t want to listen to her either.”

I’d grown up under both Tubs and my father’s expectation that I give my all to whatever I chose to do, but it was always clear that the actual choices were mine to make. Maybe that’s why I felt so adrift now—lack of expectation?

Actually, knowing me, if anyone tried to force me onto a path I didn't want to travel, I'd fight tooth and nail anyway, so expectation probably wouldn't matter. I'd never be able to follow a predetermined path. I was way too stubborn, too independent. The thought of being told how to run my life made me feel antsy. And from watching Kate's personality shift now, it was easy to see the prospect of filling her dad's shoes drained the life right out of her.

"Can't you just say no?" I asked. "Tell him you're not going to do it? What's the worst that would happen?"

She ran a hand through those golden locks and pulled her hair away from her face for a second before letting it drop. "I don't think he'd pay for architecture school. And I obviously can't fund it myself."

"What about loans?"

"I don't even want to ask. I can't stand the thought of another lecture about the importance of our Jewish heritage and keeping the Foundation going."

"Couldn't someone else take over?"

"Not in my dad's eyes. It's Will and me." She thumped a fist against the table, and the empty bowl jumped. "Enough about my boring life. What about you? What's your future look like?"

My own prospects paled in comparison to either Kate's probable reality with the Foundation or her wishful future in architecture and animals. Yeah, Flynn. You're the one with choices. What are you going to do with *your* life?

It was my turn to stare blankly across the water.



"That you, Mikala?"

I rolled my eyes, closed the front door, and bolted it before tossing my backpack onto the recliner a couple of steps away. “Who else would it be?”

The top of Tubs’ head was barely visible across the countertop separating the galley kitchen from the combined dining/living room. “You hush,” she said.

The two-bedroom apartment wasn’t large. In the living room, an old twenty-seven-inch TV that probably weighed a hundred pounds sat on a stand against one wall. A well-used green recliner and a couch—with pillows perfect for propping up one’s head while reading—faced the TV.

An ancient quilt was folded over the back of the couch. It’d been there as long as I could recall. My great-grandmother had made the quilt from cloth scraps she’d collected in the ghetto, and baby Tubs had been swaddled in it when she was sneaked out of Lodz. In fact, a number of items harkening back to those dark days were scattered throughout the apartment.

In a tall hutch on the dining room wall was a collection of World War II memorabilia that went right along with Tubs’ view of education. In her house, a broad range of knowledge and a solid understanding of history were, as she often repeated, “The keys to civilized society and insurance that history’s mistakes aren’t repeated. It’s imperative we never forget the mistakes of the past.”

When I was little and in the “why, why, why” phase, we’d take excursions to whatever location she thought might help illuminate her explanations. She knew staff at most of the museums throughout the city, and boy, did that open doors to places the general public rarely got to see. When I took the time to think about all the crazy things she’d done to indulge me, I realized I’d been a damn lucky kid.

In contrast to the heavy history behind some of Tubs' keepsakes, she'd decorated the walls with colorful Georgia O'Keefe prints, making the place a lot less museum-esque. While I missed my life in the Keys, this tiny apartment was home now.

A chest-high bookcase filled with the strangest mixture of books I'd ever seen, sat across the room from the hutch. The shelves contained tomes on looted art, the history of Hitler and the rise of the Third Reich, some Stephen King, Patricia Cornwell, Clive Cussler, and Sue Grafton mysteries, a few Harlequin romances, and my favorite, three collections of Snoopy cartoons.

I made a beeline for a bowl of peanut M&Ms that was ever-present on the round dining room table and scooped up a handful.

"Are you hungry?" Tubs asked from the kitchen as she set a hot casserole pan on the stovetop. "I made Sarmi."

"I am now." Ice cream or not, I'd eat her Sarmi—a Romani recipe for stuffed cabbage rolls—any time.

As a baby, when Tubs'd been smuggled out of the ghetto by her father's uncle, his family had taken her in, and they'd fled to Ireland, where she'd been raised in the Roma tradition. That's where she'd met my grandfather, Harlan Flynn, and left the wanderer life when she was seventeen. Luckily, she'd filed away in her head some of the ethnic recipes she'd learned as a child, and when she felt the need for comfort food, that's what she fell back on. After living with Tubs, those recipes had become my go-to comfort foods too.

Ten minutes later, we were both settled at the table, snarfing down the cabbage rolls and sopping up sauce with thick slices of homemade bread.

“So,” Tubs said after she swallowed a bite, “you’re home late tonight.”

She was right. I was supposed to have been off at eight, and it was now a quarter past nine. “A friend showed up at the pizzeria, and Joey let me leave a little early. We went to Dumbo’s.”

Tubs surveyed my now almost empty plate. “You’re full of ice cream, and you still managed to fit three cabbage rolls in that belly?”

I grinned.

“You.” She gave my cheek a love tap. Her fingers were gentle, and I leaned into them. “Was this friend the same one you ran into at the Goldsmith ordeal last week?”

My ears flushed with heat. They were goddamn emotional beacons.

A delighted smile spread across Tubs’ face. “It’s about time you find someone your own age to hang around with.”

“But I love you and your evil cronies.”

Tubs had an inner circle of six close friends, and they called themselves the Art Squad. Each of them worked in different positions within the art world. They got together every other week or so for coffee and gossip. When that crew got going, holy cow, you never knew what stories you might hear.

Rich was an artwork conservationist who stuttered when he got nervous; Beni Higuchi was a police sketch artist—what a totally cool job, plus she told great stories; Anton, the walrus-mustachioed gallery director, was super nice and super boring; Elizabet, a special effects makeup artist at the Jewish Theatre of New York, could transform anyone into anything. It was amazing. Then there was Char,

a crackerjack art historian and one of the kindest people I'd ever met; and Sahl Hadad, an Arab estate appraiser who could've doubled as a comedian.

A couple of weeks earlier, Char, the art historian, had told me about a painting that had been missing for something like twenty years. Stolen from someone's collection during a burglary in Philadelphia, it eventually turned up in the living room of an art collector in the Bronx. He'd unknowingly purchased it, along with a number of other pieces, from a crooked dealer who'd falsified provenance documentation.

Not long after the purchase, the duped collector had thrown a big party to show off his recently acquired prizes. The Art Squad had been invited, and Char recognized the piece. Beni brought it to the attention of the FBI's Art Crime Team. Thanks to their intervention, it was eventually recovered and turned over to the original owners, who now lived in France. The family had given up ever seeing the artwork again. That was freaking awesome. The collector had lost the money he'd paid for the piece. Definitely not awesome.

Tubs took a sip of coffee. "I know you like the gang, but one of these days, you'll appreciate a more youthful outlook on life."

I stuck my tongue out, and she whapped my knuckles with a fork. We finished eating, and I cleared the table while Tubs happily filled the sink with hot dishwater.

"Thank you, my dear." She bopped me with her butt, nudging me out of the narrow kitchen. "Wipe the table and go relax. I'll finish up." She was so weird. She actually liked doing the dishes.

"Thanks, Tubs. I'll take care of cleanup tomorrow night."

“Deal. Oh, wait a second.” She wrung out the dishrag and tossed it to me. I snagged it from midair, and she hefted the dishes into the soapy water and began humming.

I headed for the table but paused, as I often did, at the bookcase. On the very top, all by itself, rested a wooden puzzle box made in the shape of a house. It was maybe five inches tall and three inches wide. Two windows and a door were inlaid on one side, and two more windows were inlaid on the opposite. Various pieces of the box shifted, sliding back and forth. If you did it in the right combo, the house opened up.

The wood was worn smooth, darkened with age and oils from fingertips poking and prodding and attempting to uncover whatever lay within. Once, years ago, Tubs’ aunt managed to break the code and open the box. Inside were three photos of Tubs’ family, a locket, and a letter written by her father outlining the horrors they’d had to deal with after they’d been relegated to the Lodz ghetto.

When Tubs was spirited from the ghetto, this and one other puzzle box were smuggled out with her, all wrapped up tight in that quilt that lay over the back of the couch. Tubs’ dad had been a woodworker, and he’d made puzzle boxes in the evenings after grueling ten and twelve-hour shifts in one of the many Nazi-run factories. We were never sure why he’d sent these two boxes with his daughter, but family legend held that they were supposed to stay with her, no matter what. Speculation about the contents of the second box had been rampant.

Tubs kept hers on the bookshelf and had given my father that second, unsolved box. He’d kept his on a dresser in his bedroom. Occasionally we’d take the box, which was

about the size and shape of a hardcover book, out to the living room and work on opening it. When I shook the box, whatever was inside rattled just enough that I could hear it.

Three sides of my dad's box were concave, maybe two or three inches high. The top and bottom of the box hung over those sides by about a quarter inch. The fourth edge bowed out like the spine of a book. Inlaid on the top was a brown, upside-down triangle surrounded by four diamonds, and between the diamonds were four spades. On the outside perimeter of the diamonds and spades were six hearts. We'd surmised the hearts represented Tubs' family. And the rest? Who knew.

I could picture that box so clearly in my mind's eye, and its loss speared me in the gut. Whoever stole my father's life had also taken that puzzle box and, along with it, whatever secrets were hidden inside.

"Honey," Tubs said, "let it go. Wipe the table and get a good night's sleep. You work tomorrow at eleven?"

"Yeah, I do." Sometimes it freaked me the hell out how Tubs knew what I was doing even when she couldn't see me. I abandoned the box, carefully wiped down the table, then swung back into the kitchen, and tossed the rag into the suds.

Tubs rinsed a handful of silverware under running water. "I'm working tomorrow, so if you need me, you know where I'll be."

"Okay." I threw an arm over her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. "Love you."

"Love you too, sweetie."

Once I was settled in bed, memories of Kate and the time we'd shared washed over me, making me thrum with



a feeling that was absolutely foreign yet eerily familiar. I was still in shock that she'd come all that way to see me. To see *me*.

My head sunk into the pillow. I was exhausted and wound up all at the same time. I closed my eyes and replayed the exact moment I'd heard Kate's voice in the pizzeria. The thrill of the memory zipped down my spine again. It was a feeling that would be all too easy to become accustomed to. And that was a problem. What would happen when school was back in session and all her snooty friends surrounded her? Did I think for one minute that her summer distraction with me would mean anything then?

Fat chance.

Fat chance or not, I drifted to sleep with the vision of Kate sitting across from me at the ice cream shop with that dollop of whipped cream on the end of her nose and a giddy grin as wide as the East River plastered across her face.

END OF SAMPLE

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# THE LAW GAME

BY JOVE BELLE, GILL MCKNIGHT,  
AND JESSIE CHANDLER

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