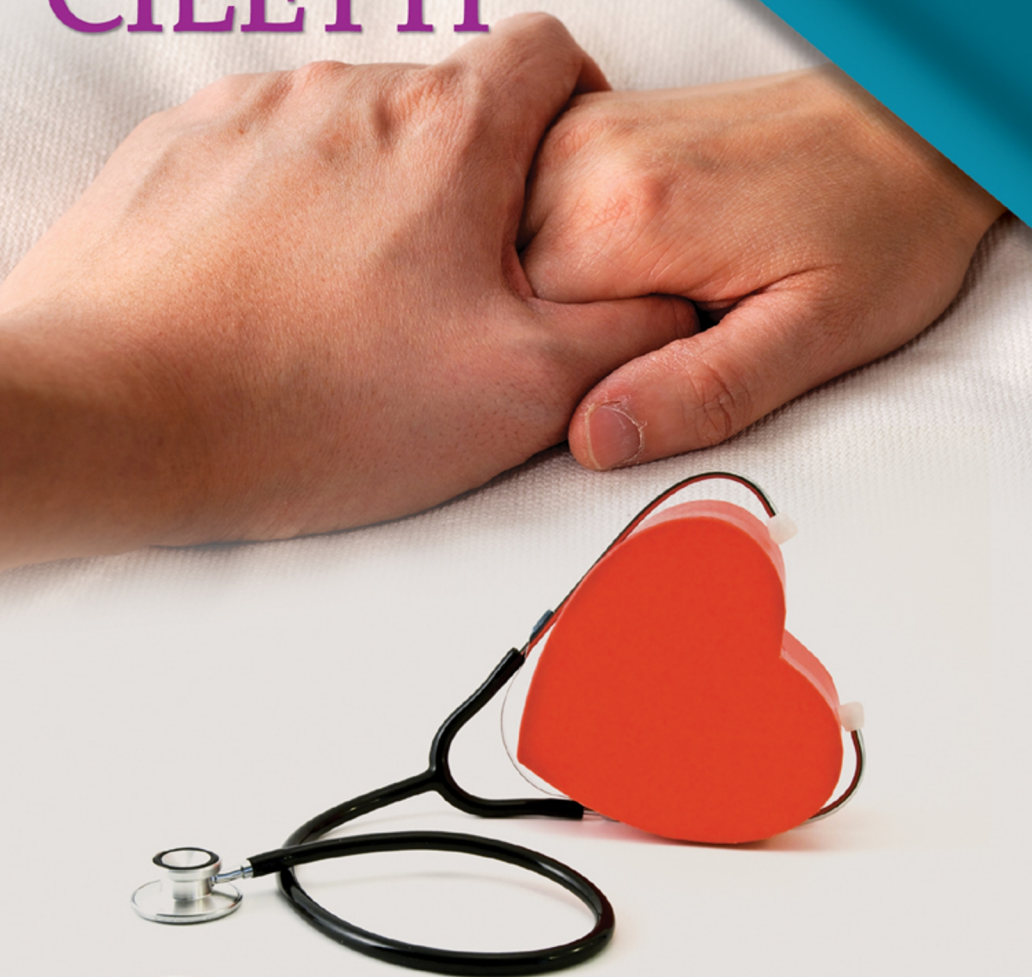


MARIA
CILETTI

*Can this heart
keep a clinical
distance?*



CLINICAL
DISTANCE

Clinical Distance

by Maria V. Ciletti

CLINICAL DISTANCE

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CREDITS

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Dedication

To my aunt Lucille Redmond. It has been such a privilege to have shared my life with you. I have learned so much from you about life, love, compassion, and family loyalty. You taught me how to live with grace, perseverance, kindness, and understanding. Thank you for your support and encouragement. At age eighty-four, you trekked to Las Vegas with me for my very first book signing. I can't begin to tell you how much it meant to me to have you there. And remember, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Acknowledgments

To my Dad, Tom Ciletti, my only regret is that you aren't here to see this. To my Mom, Donna Infante, without you, I never would have gotten this far.

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In special recognition of my partner's mother, Pauline Marsco. You are the sweetest, kindest person I've ever met. It has been such a privilege to have known you.

And last, but not least, to my partner, Rose (my Rosetti). Nine years together and not a minute of it was boring. You are my superhero and truly the love of my life.

CHAPTER ONE

"What is her name?" I looked over at the figure lying next to me. The room was strange, dim, and hazy, much like the state of my mind lately. Stealthily, I slid out of the bed, which was no more than two lumpy mattresses stacked on the bare hardwood floor. The figure stirred. I could see her face now; it was the face of a sleeping angel, and suddenly, I realized that she must be all of nineteen years old.

The red numbers on the digital alarm clock glowed 6:07. I had to be back on duty at the hospital in less than an hour. I rummaged around the room, frantically looking for my Calvin Klein sports bra when I slammed my foot into the blue plastic milk crate that served as a nightstand.

Jesus, I need to start dating women with real furniture. I rubbed the stinging pain out of my throbbing foot. The figure stirred again, turned onto her side, and pulled the crisp white sheet over her smooth tan shoulder. I watched her intently, catching flashes in my mind of the previous night. Remembering the taste of her skin, the softness of her touch... *Sandra, Sara, Sharon...* I just couldn't remember her name.

The glass doorknob creaked as I opened the bedroom door and slipped into the kitchen. Sunlight glinted off the stainless steel of the sink and made my head throb. We drank two bottles of wine the night before, the remnants of which lay in the sink.

I stepped outside into the thick morning air and breathed a sigh of relief. I'd made my escape without the awkward morning-after confrontation.

This was definitely turning into a pattern for me. At least

that's what Rosetti told me.

"I did the same thing ten years ago," Rosetti said one night over coffee and cheesecake. We'd both just finished grueling twenty-four-hour shifts: me in the ER and Rosetti on a stakeout with the police drug task force. "When my first love dumped me, I went on a rampage dating every woman that would have me. Unfortunately, many of my dates were like a lesbian version of 'The Gong Show.' Some of them barely lasted though the main course."

Rosetti was my best friend. Her first name was Rosemary, but she didn't like anybody calling her Rosemary, so I didn't.

"Half the time, I wouldn't even give those girls my real name," Rosetti said. "I was too embarrassed by my bad behavior and didn't want them to find me afterward."

As much as I'd hate to admit it, Rosetti was right. Ever since Regan left me, I'd been on a mission to find with someone else what I'd lost with her. I dated a lot of women, their faces and names all a blur to me.

Regan Martin was the love of my life, but our six-month relationship ended abruptly a few years earlier when my husband found out about our affair. I know that sounds bad, but before I met Regan, I hadn't known I was gay. Well, maybe I knew, but I didn't want to admit it, least of all to myself. I'd been living a lie. Ending my six-year marriage was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do, but when all the shouting was done, things between me and my now ex-husband came to an amicable conclusion.

Unfortunately, I can't say that for Regan. She left the state, apparently trying to get as far away from here and me as possible. She just couldn't handle the lifestyle. She swore up and down that we weren't lesbians but never could come up with a credible explanation as to why we made love like two starving people at an all-you-can-eat buffet. I loved her, I missed her, and I wanted to get back what we had together. It had been over five years now, and in my heart, I knew that the chances of us reconciling were pretty slim. But I couldn't quite give up hope that Regan would come back.

I pulled into the hospital parking lot and grabbed my

stethoscope and lab coat out of the backseat and headed for the emergency room. It was only seven in the morning, but the temperature had already risen to a sweltering eighty degrees. Summer's last hurrah before the cool crisp air of fall would settle in.

"Thank God for air conditioning," I muttered as I swung open the glass door that led down the hallway to the physician's lounge. I hadn't showered or brushed my teeth yet and needed to get cleaned up.

"Paging Dr. Caselli, Dr. Mina Caselli" came over the paging system as I entered the hospital. I grabbed the nearest house phone to answer the page. "This is Caselli."

"Dr. Caselli, would you be so kind as to join us for morning report?" Dr. Morrison's baritone voice boomed over the phone line.

"Yes, sir...I'm on my way...I had a little car—"

"Save it, Caselli. Just get your butt down here."

I got to the ER conference room just as night shift finished giving report. I felt Dr. Morrison's disapproving gaze on me.

Dr. Roy Morrison was chief of emergency services at City Hospital. Although Dr. Morrison was a competent physician, he had the supervisory skills of Attila the Hun. Dr. Morrison had been appointed to the position three years before after the untimely departure of the well-loved chief, Dr. Sam Veritek. Dr. Veritek, a dedicated and compassionate physician, had received his private pilot license and purchased a Cessna Skyhawk airplane. The unthinkable happened during a practice session of touch and gos when the single engine plane clipped a line of treetops with its landing gear sending Dr. Veritek to a fiery death.

"Caselli, here's your patient list." Dr. Morrison handed me a printout of the current patients. "You're covering pediatrics today."

Great. I hated pediatrics. It wasn't that I didn't like kids—I loved kids—it's just that when you're covering pediatrics, your day is filled with vomiting, explosive diarrhea, and high-pitched screaming. I've been bitten, scratched, kicked, and punched by numerous youngsters. And if all that wasn't bad enough, when

something was seriously wrong with one of them, it was difficult to keep your emotions under control. Especially with the abuse cases, those were the toughest.

“Hey, glad you could make it,” Page said as I rounded the nurse’s station on my way to the locker room.

“Morrison’s pissed at me already, and it’s not even eight o’clock.”

Page shook her head and smiled.

Page Burkland and I met in medical school. Like me, she was a non-traditional medical student, a registered nurse who went on to medical school to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor. I spent many nights at Page’s house, poring over textbooks on anatomy and physiology, microbiology, molecular chemistry, and histology, while her three kids and husband buzzed around us.

Page and Steve were great sources of support for me. Medical school was tough. My divorce and losing Regan hadn’t helped matters much, either. If it hadn’t been for Page, I don’t think I would have made it through.

Steve was pretty good about watching the kids during our cram sessions. He made me feel welcome in their home, especially after learning about my divorce from Sean and my relationship with Regan. Although Page told Steve about Regan and me, she was reluctant to share any of the details with him.

“He doesn’t need to know any more than what I told him,” Page said. “Besides, I don’t want him to get any ideas...you know what I mean?”

“Oh, Page, no...I...I don’t know what to say,” I said, feeling like an intruder. Is this how it was going to be from now on? Husbands not trusting me to be around their wives? My heart sank into my stomach.

Page waved her hand in front of her face. “Don’t be ridiculous. Really, everything’s fine. It’s just that men have a different outlook on your situation,” Page said tentatively as she rubbed her face with both hands, trying to cover up the unwelcome blush that had flooded her cheeks. “Steve just has a tendency of putting his foot in his mouth on occasion. I’m just giving you a heads-up.”

Later that week, Page and I were studying at her kitchen table

for our anatomy final. After putting the kids to bed, Steve came into the kitchen with a magazine and plopped it down in front of me. It was *Penthouse*. My heart froze. *Here we go*, I thought as I watched him flip open the magazine to one of the pictorials of two women fondling each other's shaved genitals. "Have you ever done this?" Steve asked with a smirk.

I looked at the glossy photos and cringed at the sight of the women's long red fingernails, thinking, *Ooh...that's gotta hurt*. Embarrassed by the pictures, I mustered up all my nerve and said, "Yes." I knew Steve wasn't doing this to be malicious. He was probably curious and feeling a little insecure about his wife spending so much time with a lesbian. Two can play this game, I thought, then I turned the page. "And I've done this, and this, oh, and this, too. But those fingernails gotta go."

Steve's face turned crimson as he slapped the magazine shut and ran back upstairs. Page and I burst into wild laughter. "He can be such an idiot sometimes," she said.

After that incident, the mysterious veil of my lifestyle came down. I told Steve that he could ask me anything he wanted. I also told him that this lifestyle was still new to me, but their acceptance had made it a lot easier.

"You look like an unmade bed," Page said. "Where were you this morning?" She poured herself a cup of coffee in the doctor's lounge.

"You don't want to know," I said sheepishly as I changed out of my street clothes and into a pair of scrubs.

"So what's this one's name?"

"Sara...no...Sandra...Cindy...?"

"Jesus, Mina, are there so many women in your life that you can't even remember their names? No wonder Steve is in awe of you."

Her comment made me laugh. "You're kidding, right?" I reached in front of her to pour myself a cup of coffee. "I thought he was over that."

Page shook her head. "He's amazed at all the women you... uh...date. It's like you're his hero or something." Page tore open two packets of Equal and dumped them into her Styrofoam cup.

“And especially since he saw you and that dark-haired girl in our swimming pool last week.”

“What? When?”

“Last weekend, when you were house sitting for us while we were in Cleveland for the heart valve replacement convention. We got all the way to the turnpike when Steve realized he left his wallet on the kitchen table. When he went back into the house to get it, he saw you and her through the kitchen window. He said she was really hot. He also said she was leaning back on the edge of the pool buck naked and you were standing in the water below her with your head between her knees.” Page calmly took a sip of her coffee as if we were talking about the weather.

Oh, my God, I thought as I remembered that night. I felt my face turn fire engine red.

“Page, I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

“Caselli, where have you been? You’ve got a new patient in exam room one.” Dr. Morrison burst into the physician’s lounge, interrupting our conversation. “Seven-year-old male with acute gastroenteritis. He’s puking as we speak,” he said with a smart-ass smirk and handed me the patient’s chart. “You look like hell, Caselli. Late night?” Dr. Morrison took the cup of coffee I’d just poured for myself. “Oh, and thanks for the Joe,” he said and left the room.

I turned and looked at Page.

“Just think, only eleven more hours to go,” she said.

“Page, I’m really sorry about the weekend. I thought—”

“Mina, it’s okay. You might want to be a little more discreet, maybe at least wait until it’s dark outside, especially at someone else’s house. But anyway, I should be thanking you. Steve hasn’t been this amorous since before the kids were born. It’s kind of nice.”

Page winked as a mischievous smile broke across her face. She pulled on her lab coat, draped her stethoscope around her neck, and left the lounge. With my head still spinning from our conversation, I tucked the seven-year-old’s chart under my arm and headed out, too. I still felt the flush of embarrassment at having been caught in the act. Thank God Page’s kids were

staying at Page's mother's house that weekend.

I pulled back the curtain on exam room one to find a very sick little boy.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Caselli. What's your name?"

"Timmy," the boy said weakly, curling his body against his mother's large pregnant belly.

"How can I help you today, Timmy?"

"It's been coming out of both ends, Doctor," Timmy's mother said. "He's been throwing up for two days and the diarrhea started last night."

"Any fever or chills?" I asked as I helped her remove Timmy's shirt.

"No, but he threw up in the car on the way over here and just a few minutes ago," she said, looking exhausted and drained.

I checked Timmy's belly, skin turgor, and mucus membranes. He was definitely low on fluids. "He's very dehydrated," I said. "He'll need some IV fluids and we can give him something to stop the vomiting and diarrhea. We might have to admit him overnight."

A flicker of relief flashed over the tired woman's face. "One of the nurses will be in to start his IV, then we can get him started on the medicine." I headed toward the nurse's station to call Timmy's pediatrician to let him know he was being admitted.

I was on hold with the answering service when Amy, one of the nurses, approached the desk. "Dr. Caselli, there's a police officer in exam room five asking to see you."

"Police officer?"

"He's says he's your husband," Amy said, curiosity rising in her voice.

I covered the phone receiver with my hand. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine. He brought in an older gentleman, his grandfather or dad or something. Dr. Burkland is working him up."

Relief swept over me. "Tell him I'll be there in a minute. I need to wrap this case up first."

Amy nodded as she turned and padded down the hall into the utility room.

Timmy's pediatrician finally came to the phone. I updated

him on Timmy's condition, and he agreed that Timmy should be admitted for an overnight stay. I scribbled out the admission orders and went back to give Timmy and his mom the news. Amy followed close behind me with the IV kit. I held Timmy, while his mom stepped out. Amy expertly put the IV needle into Timmy's arm. It was all over in five minutes.

"You're such a brave boy," I said as I helped Amy tape the plastic IV tubing in place.

"I didn't even cry, did I?"

"No, you didn't," I said. "You should be very proud of yourself."

Timmy's mom stepped back inside.

"Look, Mommy," Timmy said, holding up his arm with the IV attached. "I didn't even cry."

"That's my good boy." Timmy's mom kissed him on the forehead and stroked his sweaty blond hair.

"We'll be taking him upstairs to his room shortly," Amy said as she gathered the wrappers from the IV equipment.

I signed off Timmy's chart and handed it back to Amy. "You did a good job in there."

Amy smiled. "Thank you."

I pulled the curtain back in exam room five. Officer Sean Thomas, my ex-husband, was sitting on a metal exam stool; the rest of the exam room was empty.

"Hey," I said.

Sean stood when I entered. "Hey yourself," he said, his voice quiet.

"So what brings you to the ER?"

"Dad's not feeling too well. I stopped by this morning to see him and he could hardly breathe. I wanted to call an ambulance, but he wouldn't let me. He's so stubborn sometimes."

"Like father, like son."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, I'm just kidding. So what's going on?"

"He's been losing a lot of weight, and even though he quit smoking, he has this terrible cough."

Sean was in uniform, a rare sight these days. Since he'd been

promoted to lieutenant, he worked mostly in plain clothes.

Sean always looked great in uniform. What amazed me the most was the effect it still had on me. Maybe I just had a thing for uniforms. I liked Rosetti in hers, as well.

"When's the last time he saw his doctor?"

"Three, maybe four years ago."

I cringed. Weight loss...forty-year history of smoking three packs of unfiltered Camels a day. The words lung cancer loomed large in my mind. "Did they order a chest X-ray?"

"Yes. That's where he is right now. They did some blood work, too. I don't know if any of it's back yet."

"I'll go see," I said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

I went directly to the lab to find Ed Thomas's results. Grief gripped my heart as I read the numbers. Just as I suspected—cancer. By the values on the lab report, what probably started in his lungs had already spread to his liver, kidneys, and bone. If Ed was lucky, he had six months to live.

The one part of being a doctor you never get used to is telling someone they have a short time left to live. In medical school, they taught us that to deal with these situations, you need to develop clinical distance: an emotional firewall to keep your feelings out of the way when treating patients. You can't take care of your patients if you're an emotional mess, so you block or deny your personal feelings and focus on what's best for the patient. No feelings. None. Just medical advice and proper treatment.

I picked up the lab reports and walked over to X-ray to see if they were done with Ed's work-up. The films had just been developed. I slid them from their envelope and put them up on the viewing box. There it was: a huge white mass in Ed's left upper lobe. It was so large that it obliterated part of his heart, totally covering his aorta. This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all. Six months might be pushing it. By the size of his tumor, Ed might only have six weeks.

I left the films hanging on the view box and went to find a radiologist. Dr. Tom Solon was in his office when I peeked in.

"Dr. Solon, I hate to bother you, but could you take a look at a chest X-ray with me?"

He rose from his leather desk chair. "Sure, Mina, let's see what you've got."

Dr. Solon flicked the lights on the view box. "Oh, my," he said, putting on his glasses to get a closer look. He took out a small ruler and measured the white mass.

"This poor patient has a huge lung carcinoma. It's invaded his heart and the major vessels, as well. From this view, it looks inoperable, but you might want to order a CT scan to get a better look."

"Thank you, Dr. Solon. I thought so, too, but I wanted you to confirm what I saw."

"Any time, Mina." Dr. Solon returned to his office.

Paging Dr. Caselli, Dr. Mina Caselli... I picked up the house phone next to the view box.

"This is Caselli."

"Caselli, where the hell are you?" Morrison's voice boomed through the phone.

"X-ray, sir. I'm checking on some films for a patient."

"I know it's not your pediatric patient, Caselli, because he's still in exam one puking his guts out. Just because you're chief resident doesn't mean you can pass off your work to others. They have their patient load and so do you," Morrison said. "You're supposed to be setting an example for the other residents and medical students. I'm afraid you're not doing a very good job."

I wanted to tell him the truth, who Ed was and why I was looking at his X-ray, but was positive he wouldn't understand. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll be right there," I said softly and hung up.

Amy was coming out of exam room one with an emesis basin full of vomit. "The Compazine didn't work," she said, holding the putrid-smelling bath basin out in front of her.

"I'll give him a Phenergan suppository, perhaps that will do the trick," I said. "Can you help me hold him while I give it?"

"Sure, let me get rid of this first, and I'll be right in."

I went to the refrigerator that contained the stock meds and retrieved a suppository. When I got back to the room, Amy was waiting, holding Timmy on his side and stroking his matted blond hair.

“Timmy, I’m going to give you some medicine to stop you from throwing up. This won’t hurt, but it may feel uncomfortable for a minute, so hold real still, okay?”

Timmy nodded. Amy held him over while I inserted the suppository. “There, all done,” I said, holding his butt cheeks together to give the suppository time to work.

Timmy started to whimper. “Oh...I have to go potty,” he said as he squirmed on the table.

“It’s okay, honey. You might feel like you have to go potty, but that’s just the medicine working. Try and hold still a few minutes longer. I held his butt cheeks tighter together, trying to keep the suppository in. Suddenly, as if a dam had broken, feces squirted from Timmy’s rectum. My hand, my arm, and the front of my shirt were covered in thin brown shit.

Timmy started to cry and I wanted to cry along with him. “It’s all right, Timmy. Accidents happen.”

I looked up at Amy, who was trying desperately not to laugh. “I’ll get some more towels and help you get cleaned up.”

“Thanks.” I began to dab at the mess with paper towels.

We got Timmy cleaned up and off to the pediatric floor. I headed for the doctor’s lounge to take a shower and change into clean scrubs.

I had just stepped out of the shower when Page came in the locker room. I wrapped a towel around me. “What happened to you?”

“Explosive diarrhea.”

“Morrison slip something into your coffee this morning?”

“Not me, one of my patients. I gave little Timmy in exam one a Phenergan suppository for his vomiting, and this is the thanks I get.”

“That’s the thanks you get,” Page said, mocking me. “Anyway, I hate to be the bearer of bad news. I’m taking care of Sean’s dad in room five. He came in short of breath.”

“I know...I saw the chest X-ray and the labs.”

“So you know it doesn’t look good.”

I nodded.

“Do you want to be in there when I tell them? It might make

it easier for them with you there.”

“Yes, definitely,” I said. “Let me get changed, then I’ll go in with you. I know Sean, and I know he won’t take this well. Ed won’t, either.”

A few minutes later, I met up with Page at the nurse’s station. “Ready?”

She nodded.

Page carried Ed’s chart into the exam room. I hadn’t seen Ed in quite some time and was shocked by his appearance. What used to be a big, strong, tough retired police captain looked more like a prisoner from a concentration camp.

Sean stood when we entered the room, scanning our faces for a clue on what was going on with his dad. When Ed saw me, his face lit up. “Mina, how are you?” His voice was barely a whisper. My own voice caught in my throat at the sight of how much he had deteriorated in such a short amount of time.

“I’m good, Dad.” I patted his bony hand.

“So what’s the verdict?” Sean asked.

“I’m afraid it’s not good,” Page said.

Sean looked down, preparing himself for the news. “How bad?”

Page turned toward Ed. “I’m sorry, Mr. Thomas, but your tests show that you have a very large tumor in your lungs.” Her voice broke, and I could see she was struggling with this. Page fumbled with the pages of Ed’s lab reports and X-rays.

Ed’s expression was blank. It was like he hadn’t heard a word she said.

“Is it cancer?” Sean asked.

Page nodded. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“What about surgery? Can’t they take it out?” Sean asked.

Page shook her head solemnly. “It’s inoperable. The lab work shows that the cancer has already spread to his liver and kidneys, which would explain the weight loss. And looking at the chest X-ray, the tumor has invaded the heart. The cancer may have even spread to the bone marrow, as well. We’d like to get a bone scan to verify that.”

Sean sat down trying to absorb it all. Ed stoically stared up at

the ceiling. I held his hand, fighting back my tears.

"How long?" Sean asked.

"We can't say for sure. We never try to take away any hope," Page said in her professional doctor's voice.

Sean turned to me. "Meen?"

"Six weeks," I said.

"Six weeks? Jesus," Sean said, running his hand through his hair. "Are you sure? Could there have been some mix-up in the lab or with the X-ray?"

"No, Sean. I pulled the labs myself and went over to X-ray and had the radiologist read it right in front of me. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Page said.

"So what now? What do we do?" Sean asked.

"Well, we need to admit him for a few days. We'll get a bone scan, IV fluids, and pain medication. We'll get him tuned up as best we can. I'll put in for an oncology consult, and someone will see him today or tomorrow morning," Page said.

"Will they do chemo?" Sean asked.

"I don't know. They might. Just for palliative treatment if anything."

"Chemo?" Ed piped in. "What do I need chemo for? I don't have cancer."

"It's okay, Dad. I'll take care of it. You just rest," Sean said, patting Ed's hollow chest.

"This is too much for him to comprehend," Sean said. "I want the best for him, even if you are telling me there's no hope. And I don't want him to suffer...I couldn't bear to watch him suffer."

"Oncology may recommend radiation therapy, as well, especially if the cancer is in his bone. Some folks do really well with it, and it's a good way to control the pain. Again, this will all be for comfort measures only," Page said.

"Then what?" Sean asked.

"Then we'll send him home under hospice. He's not going to be strong enough to stay alone, so you'll have to make arrangements to stay with him or have help around the clock. He's going to get weaker every day. He'll be bedridden in a week or two."

"He'll just have to stay with me. I can set up a place for him

in the front room,” Sean said.

“Hospice can help you with whatever you need. They’ll provide you with a hospital bed, medical supplies, medications, anything you need, twenty-four hours a day,” Page said.

Page waited a few moments to let everything sink in. Sean was deep in thought. “Any other questions or concerns?” Page asked, breaking the silence.

Ed gave no response. He closed his eyes as if he were feigning sleep.

Sean shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“We’ll get him a bed on the oncology floor. Someone will be down within the hour to take him upstairs.”

“Thanks,” Sean said.

Page excused herself and slipped through the exam room curtain.

Ed lay on the gurney with his eyes closed. His thin arms were crossed over his bony chest.

“Look at him. He’s trying to block all this out,” Sean said.

“It was obvious that what Page had to say today was difficult for him to hear.” I hated talking about Ed like he wasn’t in the room, but his body language made it clear he didn’t want any part of the discussion.

“Sean, you’re not alone in this, and neither is Ed. You don’t think I’m going to let you go through this alone now, do you?”

Sean came closer and put his arms around me. I was surprised at how strange his body felt next to mine. Something that was once so familiar now seemed so foreign. He buried his face in my shoulder.

“Mina, I’m scared. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Yes, you can. We’ll take one step at a time and we’ll get through it. I’ll do my best to make sure Ed receives the best care possible.” We ended the embrace abruptly as the orderly from oncology came to take Ed up to his room.

“I’ll check on him during my break,” I told Sean as we got Ed ready to go upstairs.

Sean nodded. “Thanks, Meen. You know I appreciate it.”

The orderly unlocked the wheels of Ed’s gurney. “Bye, Dad,

I'll be up to see you later."

Ed reached up and touched my face. "Bye, Mina, be a good girl." He patted my cheek.

I watched as the three of them headed down the hall toward the elevator. Once the doors closed behind them, my tears let loose.

CHAPTER TWO

Finally getting home well past midnight, I fumbled with my apartment key in the lock. Some days were busier than others in the ER. That night, we had three auto accidents—one fatal—a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the thigh, five cases of viral gastro, three cases of chest pain, two that turned out to be indigestion and one resulting in cardiac arrest, and a near fatal bee sting. The paperwork alone took almost four hours to complete. It was my responsibility to make sure all the paperwork was done and done right. Just one more perk about being chief resident.

I tossed the key on the dining room table, where it bounced and slid off the other side. I was too tired to pick it up. I pushed the play button on the answering machine on the kitchen counter and started rooting around in my pathetically bare refrigerator. Pizza wrapped in aluminum foil from a few days before and a six-pack of Diet Coke were all that occupied the wire metal shelf.

“You have thirteen messages,” the mechanical voice announced.

I passed on the pizza and popped the top off a Diet Coke and listened. The first message was from the figure:

“Hello, Debbie...”

Debbie?

“...this is Sandra.”

So that's her name.

“I thought we could get together tonight. Call me when you get in.” *Beep.*

“Hi, Debbie, Sandra again. Just wondered what you thought about staying in tonight. How about pizza and a video? I rented

Bar Girls and Personal Best... call me when you get in...it's seven forty-five." *Beep.*

The messages got shorter and more clipped until the last one at eleven fifty-three, said: "I don't know where you are or who you're with, but don't bother calling me...so...Goodbye!" I could hear the receiver being slammed down on the tape.

I didn't have the energy to deal with this right now, so I just erased the tape, chugged down the last of my Diet Coke, and dragged myself into the bedroom. I stripped off my clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor and climbed into bed. Unfortunately, sleep didn't come easy. Thoughts of Sean and Ed, little Timmy and the twenty-five other patients I treated during my shift reeled through my mind like the coming attractions in a movie theater.

I thought about Sandra, too. Even though the sex had been great, it felt empty. I didn't feel the need to see her again. It had been a long time since I'd felt anything more than just lust for anyone. Actually, it had been since Regan. Thinking about Regan was still too painful, and I had dealt with enough pain for one day. Just as I was about to drift off, the phone rang.

"Hello...hello?" I answered, my heart pounding in my chest from the adrenaline rush.

"Mina...oh, thank God you're home."

"Mom? Mom...Are you all right?" I pulled myself up in bed.

"Mina, you have to come get me and take me home...I've made a terrible mistake."

I heard a toilet flush in the background. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the Marriott Inn on Interstate 80."

"What are you doing at the Marriott?" I squinted at the clock radio on my nightstand. "It's...it's two o'clock in the morning."

"I had a little too much wine...I shouldn't have let him talk me into this...but he was such a good dancer..."

"Who's a good dancer? Mom, what the hell's going on?"

"It's not what you think. I thought I could...but when I came out of the bathroom and he was wearing horsey pajamas, I couldn't go through with it," my mother whispered.

"Mother, what are you talking about?"

I heard the flick of her Zippo lighter, then the deep drag on her cigarette. "He was wearing horsey pajamas...I couldn't go through with it. You know your father never wore pajamas..."

"I don't want to hear this." I closed my eyes tight, trying to block out the visual of my father and mother "together."

"Mina, you have to come get me."

"Mother, I'm not coming to get you." *Boundaries... Boundaries...remember what your therapist said...* "You got yourself in this mess...you can get yourself out. Tell whomever it is you're there with to take you home."

"Mina, I'm not sure he's even still out there. I've been holed up in this bathroom since midnight. Please, this isn't easy for me...Please?"

I got up and pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Thirty minutes later, I was sitting in the parking lot of the Marriott waiting for my delinquent mother. Finally, she emerged through the glass doors of the hotel lobby. She took one last drag on her cigarette and crushed it out with her heel before sliding into the passenger's seat. Neither of us could look the other in the eye.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue," she said, smoothing the pleats of her floral skirt.

I nodded.

"You're a good daughter." She patted my leg. My body tensed at her touch.

"Mother, since when do you go to hotels with men you hardly know?"

"It's not that I didn't know Zeke...It's just...well...I get lonely sometimes." She stared out the passenger side window. "It hasn't been easy for me since your father died," she said, fishing around in her purse. She pulled out a pack of Salem cigarettes. "Do you mind?" she asked, the cigarette poised between the index and middle finger of her right hand.

I shook my head. She rolled down the window and blew a plume of smoke into the humid night air.

My mother. While most kids would rummage through their mom's purses for treats like cookies or candy, I could always count on finding packs of Salem cigarettes and Beechnut peppermint

gum in the bottom of hers. I don't ever remember a time when she didn't smoke. I remember when I was seven or eight years old, she sent me to the corner store with a note pinned to my shirt that read: "Please sell my daughter a carton of Salem cigarettes. Thank you, Mrs. Caselli."

She was barely forty when my Dad died of Lou Gehrig's disease, which left her to raise me, my brother, and my sister alone. I know it was tough for her. And sometimes it was tough for us, too. But she did a good job. I have to give her that. It was hard for me to imagine that she was lonely and missed that part of her life she lost along with my father. I guess in a way we were feeling the same way, and much to my surprise, I realized that we were coping with it in the same way, too.

I pulled into her driveway and kept the motor running.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked.

"Mom, it's three thirty in the morning, I'd like to go home and get some sleep."

She looked down into her lap. "I'm sorry, Mina. I didn't know who else to call." The sincerity rang loud and clear in her voice.

"I know. It's okay. I'm just tired, that's all."

She patted my leg again. "Go home and get some rest. I promise not to get into any more trouble the rest of the night."

Her comment made me smile.

She got out of the car and walked up the front steps of my childhood home. One of the hardest things we as children learn is that our parents are no different than anyone else. They are people, too. With flaws and needs and desires. Parents are just as vulnerable as anybody else.

It was almost four o'clock by the time I crawled back into bed. My head hummed with exhaustion. Sleep finally came, deep and dreamless. I slept through the entire morning and early afternoon. When I woke up, I stayed in bed a little while longer, luxuriating in the quiet solitude. Then the door buzzer rang.

I pulled on my bathrobe and ran my fingers through my hair in an attempt to look somewhat presentable, then opened the door.

"Jesus, you look like crap," Rosetti said.

"Thanks."

“Rough day at the office?” Rosetti teased, stepping past me and inside my apartment.

I nodded, but Rosetti didn’t see it. She was already in my kitchen, scrounging around in my refrigerator. I loved how Rosetti made every place she went her home. Her mother’s place, where she was staying while her mother convalesced in the nursing home next door to my apartment, seemed almost like hers now. Before medical school, I was an RN at the nursing home. My apartment complex was really a place for assisted living, and the owners gave me a cut in rent in exchange for taking care of the elderly people who lived in the apartments. When I left the nursing home to go to medical school, they insisted I stay, even if I couldn’t fulfill my obligations to the elderly residents anymore.

“What brings you out this way?” I asked.

“I stopped at the nursing home to see my mom before I went to work. They stuck me on these afternoons-to-graveyard shifts for the next month to do a surveillance thing.”

“How is your mom doing? I haven’t been over to the nursing home to see her in a couple of weeks.”

“She’s doing well. They gave her another blood transfusion last Tuesday. It seems to have really perked her up,” Rosetti said, rummaging through my kitchen cabinets. “You know you should try and get to a grocery store every once in a while. There’s nothing in here that’s edible.”

“There’s some cold pizza in the refrigerator,” I shouted from the bedroom where I changed into cutoffs and a T-shirt.

“You want some?” she shouted back. “I’ll heat it up in the toaster oven.”

“Sure, I’ll take a slice,” I said, emerging from the bedroom.

Rosetti came out of the kitchen with two pieces of Briar Hill pizza on flimsy white paper plates. We sat on the floor in front of the television and ate.

“So how was your shift last night?” Rosetti asked.

“Unreal,” I said, taking a bite.

“Because of work?”

“Partially. They had me work peds again. Then Sean came in with his dad.”

"Is everything all right?"

"Unfortunately, no. Ed's chest X-ray showed a huge lung tumor. He's got six weeks if he's lucky."

"Wow, I'm sorry to hear that. How's Sean holding up?"

"Not good. I told him I wouldn't let him go through it alone."

"Mina, you're something else," Rosetti said with a mouth full of pizza.

"What do you mean?"

"You've been divorced from the guy for over five years now, and you're still willing to take on something like this. I've gotta give you a lot of credit. Most ex-wives wouldn't be so gracious."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm all he's got. His only brother died when he was sixteen. He hasn't seen his mother for almost ten years. His dad is his only family, and now he's gonna lose him. I can't let him go through it alone."

"You don't have to convince me," Rosetti said. "I know how you were with my mom when she was really ill. I don't know what I'd have done if you weren't there. Sean's pretty lucky to have you in his corner like that."

My face flushed. Even after all this time in nursing and now in medicine, it was still hard for me to take a compliment. I needed to change the subject.

"So what's this surveillance assignment they've got you on?"

"I'm working with some of the guys at the DEA. They've been watching a couple of crack houses over on the north side of town. The hours suck, but the pay is great."

"Yes, but is it safe?"

"As safe as it gets when you're hunkered down in the backseat of a '72 Firebird, watching drug dealers all night. Sure, something can always go wrong, but it's not like I'm sitting out there alone. There are three other agents out there with me, Steve Templeton, Randy Wilson, and Pam Grier. I've worked with each of them before. Pam has worked a lot of vice and decoy work. I've really learned a lot from her. Each of them has a specialty and knows what they're doing," Rosetti said, trying to calm my fears.

"I know, but I still worry about you. You don't know the stuff I see working in the ER. It's pretty gruesome."

"Did you worry about Sean this much when you guys were still married?"

"Not really. When we were married, he mostly worked crime scenes. He never got called until after the fact. But what you're doing is another story."

Rosetti went into the kitchen to warm up another piece of pizza.

"Let me tell you about the rest of my day," I shouted into the kitchen.

She returned with another slice, this one a little too well done, but that didn't stop her from chowing down. "Go ahead, I'm all ears." She took a bite of the piping hot pizza.

"I get home last night, I'm so tired I can't see straight. I get into bed and finally doze off and the phone rings. It's my mother."

"Oh?" Rosetti asked, taking another bite.

"She wants me to come and get her. She's at the Marriott on the highway with some guy named Zeke."

"What! You've got to be kidding," Rosetti said, spitting pizza crumbs in my direction.

"Would I kid about something like that? I couldn't think up something that bizarre. You're so lucky your mother's in the nursing home."

"My mother's eighty-four," Rosetti said with a laugh. "You're mom is what...fifty-one...fifty-two...and obviously still in her prime."

"I can't take it. You know, there are some things you don't want to know about your parents."

"Mina, your mom is still pretty young. Why shouldn't she have a sex life?"

"Oh, God, don't say those two words in the same sentence."

"What two words?"

"Mom and sex. It gives me the creeps."

Rosetti shook her head.

"What if this was your mom?"

Rosetti laughed. "My mom's way past her prime...Anyway,

my dad always said it was a miracle that my brothers and I were ever conceived. He said my mom got dressed and undressed in the closet every night. I don't think the whole time they were married, he ever saw her totally naked."

"Oh, my God. That's hilarious," I said, laughing at the thought of Teresa Rosetti fumbling around in a closet somewhere.

Rosetti laughed, too.

"My mamma is a good Catholic girrrrl," Rosetti said.

"And I suppose she raised you to be a good Catholic girl, too."

"Absolutely. She sent me to an all girls Catholic school for twelve years, didn't she?"

"And I can imagine the havoc you wreaked there."

We were laughing uncontrollably now, tears streaming from the corners of our eyes.

"What are you saying?" Rosetti asked with mocked innocence.

"You...and all those girls...in uniforms?"

"Sounds like heaven, doesn't it?"

"Rosetti, was there ever a time when you weren't girl crazy?"

Rosetti shook her head. "To be honest with you, I think when I was born, they had to move me out of the regular nursery because I kept trying to get in bed with all the baby girls."

"You're sick." I slapped her on the shoulder.

Rosetti laughed. "See, even all that Catholic education couldn't turn me straight. You know, I bet if the church knew about me, I'd surely be excommunicated."

Rosetti's comment made me sad because I knew in my heart she spoke the truth.

Rosetti helped me clean up the kitchen. "I better get going," she said as she grabbed a Diet Coke from the refrigerator. "We've got a staff commander meeting before we go to the stakeout."

"Please be careful. You're wearing your bulletproof vest when you're out there, aren't you?"

"Yes, Mother Caselli," Rosetti thumped her chest, acknowledging the vest's presence.

"I don't want anything to happen to you, and I'm sure Linda doesn't want anything to happen to you, either."

Linda was Rosetti's on-again-off-again girlfriend. She was one of the dispatchers from Rosetti's old precinct in Cleveland. Their long-distance relationship had taken a few hits over the past few years since Rosetti moved from Cleveland to Youngstown to take care of her ailing mother, but overall, they knew they loved each other.

"Nothing's going to happen," Rosetti said. "I'm a trained professional, remember?"

"Yes, Rambo, I'm aware of all your training and marksmanship awards, but you're not dealing with the most upstanding citizens, you know."

"Mina, you worry too much, and I love you for that." Rosetti kissed me on the forehead. I knew she was fooling around, but I couldn't ignore the tingle of excitement that stirred in my belly.

Suddenly, Rosetti got serious. "I'm very careful about what I do out there so nothing goes wrong. But if something does happen, promise me one thing."

"Sure. Anything."

"Promise me that you'll look after my mother."

Although Rosetti tried not to make a big deal out of it, I could tell by the tone in her voice that she was sincere.

"Of course I'd look after Teresa. I love her like she's my own mother. And after my mother's little stunt today, I wish she was my mother," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Thanks, Mina. You're a great friend."

Friends. That's what Rosetti and I were, just friends.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," I said. "I'm going to Sean's tomorrow morning to get his dad settled and admitted to hospice, then I'm back on duty in the ER at six in the evening for a twelve-hour shift."

"Get some rest. You're gonna need it with that schedule." Rosetti headed out the door.

The smell of burnt pizza hung in the air as I shut off the kitchen light. I sat on the couch and turned on the TV for some distraction. So much was going on. The evening news didn't help

much and “Jeopardy!” was a rerun, so I turned off the TV and lay on the couch. I prayed that Rosetti would be safe, that Ed’s battle with cancer would not be long and painful, and that God would give Sean the strength to get through his father’s inevitable death. And then like every night for the last five years, before I drifted off to sleep, I prayed that Regan would come back.

CHAPTER THREE

The ambulance was already in the driveway by the time I got to Sean's house. The back door of the rig was wide open, but it was empty. As I let myself in through the porch, I could hear the swoosh of the oxygen compressor at work. I peered around the corner to find Sean and two paramedics lifting Ed from the gurney onto his new hospital bed.

Sean kept his promise and had converted his spacious living room into an efficient hospital room for Ed. The brilliant morning sunlight gave the room a surreal glow.

"Good morning," I said as I entered the room. Ed waved weakly from his bed. The hiss of oxygen flowing through the clear plastic cannula attached to his nose filled the room. He looked paler now than he did in the hospital. He could barely hold his head up. I walked over to him and touched his hand.

"How're you doin', Dad?"

Ed shook his head. "Not so good. I feel like I got hit by a truck."

"It's the effects from the chemo and the radiation," I said. "You should feel a little stronger in a few days."

"They gave him a shot of Procrit and two units of blood this morning before they sent him home," Sean said.

"Good. That should help perk him up a little. You gotta eat too, Dad," I said.

"Eat. Who feels like eating? I can't taste anything...what's the use?"

"I brought breakfast." I held up a bag of Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

"You sure know the way to an old cop's heart," Ed said with a weak smile.

"Thanks for your help, guys." I offered the paramedics a doughnut as they packed up their gear. They each took a cream stick, then headed out through the front door.

"I'll get us some plates and put on some coffee." I headed for the kitchen. Sean followed.

"How's he doin'?" I asked as I took the doughnuts from the white paper bag and stacked them in a pyramid on a plate.

Sean shook his head. "I didn't think he was going to make it home."

"He's pretty sick. And with the all the medication he's getting, it's no wonder he doesn't just keel over."

"He's a tough guy. I've got to give him that much," Sean said, taking a bite of a cream stick. "Mmm...these are good."

I poured some coffee into a cup and took a doughnut in to Ed. "Here, Dad, try this," I said, breaking off a piece for him and placing it between his dry cracked lips. Ed chewed briefly and began to cough and choke.

"Sean, quick, get me some water," I shouted into the kitchen as I held Ed forward trying to assist him in breathing.

Ed sputtered and coughed. He took small sips of the water Sean brought and slowly his breathing improved.

"Sorry about that," I said.

"It's okay...not your fault."

"I'll make you some Cream of Wheat or something," I said.

Ed made a face.

"You have to eat, Dad...to keep up your strength," Sean said.

Ed closed his eyes and pretended he didn't hear Sean. I went back into the kitchen to rummage through Sean's cupboards for some oatmeal or Cream of Wheat, something smooth that Ed could swallow. The only thing I found was a mangled opened box of Frosted Blueberry Pop Tarts and a loaf of Wonder Bread that could easily be mistaken for a science experiment.

"Sean, I need to go to the store," I said. "There's nothing here your dad can eat."

"I'll go," Sean said eagerly. "It will give me a chance to get out of here for a while."

I didn't argue with him because I knew how hard being here with Ed in this condition was for him. "Okay. Here's what we need: chicken broth, honey, tea, Cream of Wheat cereal, a loaf of bread, and cranberry juice. Can you remember all that or do you want me to write it down?"

"I'll remember." Sean picked up his car keys. "I'll be back soon. Oh, by the way, the hospice nurse is supposed to come by sometime this morning to admit him. If she gets here before I get back, just start without me. You know just as much about Dad's case as I do. You can catch me up on all the details when I get back," Sean said over his shoulder as he left.

I went back into the living room to check on Ed. He was sound asleep. His respirations were harsh and labored and his skin felt hot. I took his temperature by sticking a thermometer into his armpit. It was one hundred two degrees. Not a good sign.

I went into the bathroom and found some clean towels and the plastic bath basin that was sent home with Ed from the hospital. I filled the basin with cool water and grabbed a bar of soap from the bathroom sink to give Ed a sponge bath to try to bring down his temperature. I gently washed his face and hands. When I removed his hospital gown, I fought back tears of anger and sadness. What a terrible disease this was that it could ravage a strong handsome man like Ed and turn him into a human skeleton.

I soaped up the washcloth and gave him a good bath followed by a relaxing foot massage. As I was putting a clean hospital gown on Ed, the doorbell rang.

"C'mon in, it's open," I shouted as I finished dressing Ed and put a clean top sheet and blanket on his bed. I gathered the dirty linen from the floor and tossed it into the hamper in the bathroom, then headed into the kitchen to greet Sean's visitor.

"Hello," I called out as I entered the kitchen.

My heart stopped at the sight of her, and by the look on her face, her heart had stopped, as well. After all, it had been five years since Regan and I had seen each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

Regan Martin stood before me in my ex-husband's kitchen. I don't know what shocked me more: seeing her again after she abruptly ended our affair five years earlier or her protruding belly. It was obvious that I wasn't the last person she'd slept with.

"Mina, how are you?" Regan asked softly.

"I'm fine...I...can't...I...how are you?" I asked bewildered.

Regan smiled. "I'm good. I bet I was the last person you thought you'd run into this morning."

I nodded.

"When they assigned me this case, I thought maybe Ed was a relative," Regan said. "I wasn't sure, though, they didn't give me much information, only that he had terminal lung cancer."

"Ed is Sean's father," I said.

"I see. I hope it's okay that I'm here. If this makes you or Sean uncomfortable, I can get another nurse to take over."

"No...no...this is fine...you're fine...I mean..."

The wounds that had taken years to heal burst open in my chest. The pain of losing her came rushing back as if it were yesterday. I plopped down onto one of the kitchen chairs. "I just can't believe you're here...Do you know how long it's been? Did you know I tried to find you?"

Regan looked down, obviously not knowing what to say. "Maybe I better go," she whispered.

"No...don't go, please don't go. Here, come here and sit down." I got up and pulled a chair out for Regan to sit on.

"Can I get you something to drink? I just made some coffee."

“No, thank you,” Regan said as she slowly crossed the room. “I can’t drink coffee anymore because...” Her voice trailed off as she pointed at her belly. She sat at the kitchen table and pulled some folders from her briefcase and laid them on the table.

“You’re pregnant...yes, of course...how stupid of me...I should know that...could I get you anything else? Water? Soda?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you,” Regan said with a smile that still lit up my heart now as much as ever.

I reached over and touched her hand. “Regan Martin, I thought I’d never see you again.”

Regan looked up. “I know. I’m sorry.”

As I looked across the table at the love of my life, I noticed her hospice ID badge on a lanyard around her neck: Regan Douglass, RN. There it was in black and white. Not only was she pregnant, she was married, too. I felt the stab to my heart. She seemed to have gotten everything she always wanted—the husband, the family, and the respectable life. All the things I couldn’t give her, at least not in her eyes anyway.

“Hey, that’s great. You went back and got your RN,” I said, trying to hide my sadness.

“Yes, I took my boards last summer.”

“I bet you carried a 4.0 the entire time, didn’t you?”

Regan nodded and smiled shyly, which brought back memories of the time I met her at the nursing home. She was a new graduate nurse, afraid of her own shadow, and I was her mentor. Little did I know what our relationship would become. Back then, she had a mouth full of braces and zero self-confidence, but she turned out to be one hell of a nurse and the love of my life. Now the braces were gone, she’d gone back to school, and obviously gotten herself a husband in the process. Apparently, she was doing pretty well. I was happy for her, as happy as I could be. But I was sad that she had done this without me and sadder still that someone other than me could make her happy.

“And...you got married,” I said, the words barely audible.

Regan nodded. She appeared almost ashamed of it.

“Last April. We met at the hospital. I was a nurse...in Wheeling. I took care of his dad. He didn’t make it...his dad, I

mean. He passed away.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“I went back to school, too,” I said, breaking the awkward silence.

Regan looked at me puzzled.

“I got accepted into the accelerated medical school program. They gave me credit for my RN degree. I’ll finish up my last year of residency in June.”

“Mina, you’re a doctor...wow! I know that’s something you’ve always wanted to do...and you did it.”

My heart fluttered as Regan smiled, a sincere smile that told me she was really proud of me and what I’d accomplished.

“Did you pick a specialty?”

“Emergency room medicine. I like the variety and the fast pace. The shifts fly by usually. I can’t see myself sitting in an office the rest of my life.”

“Mina, that’s wonderful...So now you’re Dr. Thomas. That’s great.”

“Dr. Caselli actually. Sean and I are divorced. I went back to my maiden name.”

Regan looked stunned. “Really? When?”

“It will be four years this November.”

“Wow, a lot has happened since I’ve been gone,” Regan said. “But if you’re no longer married, why are you here taking care of Sean’s father?”

“It was an amicable divorce. We’ve been able to maintain a wonderful friendship. And anyway, Ed was always so good to me while I was married to Sean...how could I not take care of him?”

“I guess I see your point. Sean’s lucky to have you.”

“Thanks.”

“I can’t believe you did it...”

“What, the divorce? A husband doesn’t go with this lifestyle.” I knew full well she didn’t want to talk about my lifestyle at all.

“No, I mean medical school,” Regan said, blushing. “Your mom must be very proud of you.”

“Yes, I think she is.” I paused because I didn’t know how to

ask what I wanted most to know. "I can't believe you did this," I finally said and lightly touched her hard belly. "I didn't think you wanted kids."

Regan looked down at her swollen belly. "I can't believe it either sometimes."

"When are you due?" I asked, guessing that she was about eight months along.

"The end of October," she said, again looking down as if she were ashamed or hiding something.

"How long have you been back in Ohio?"

"We moved back this past May. My dad had a stroke. He became so belligerent from the brain damage after the stroke that my mom couldn't handle him, so I...we moved back here. We bought a house one block over from my parents. Our backyards butt up against one another. It works out well."

"I'm sorry to hear about your dad," I said. "It'll be hard taking care of him and a newborn at the same time." Her pregnancy seemed to be all I could think about.

"I know, but Jim...my husband, Jim, has been a big help. He got laid off from his job so he goes over to my parents' house every day and helps my mom get Dad up and ready for the day. He and Dad get along pretty well. They both like to drink beer and watch sports...you know...guy things. He's good company for my dad and it gives my mom a much-needed break."

I looked across the table at the woman who stole my heart. I wanted to take her in my arms and hold her close. But I knew that would never happen again.

"Are you happy, Regan?" I asked, afraid of her answer because no answer would work for me. If Regan was happy with her current life, it meant she didn't love me, perhaps she never really did. If she weren't happy, my heart would break for her because somewhere in the unselfish parts of my heart, I did want her to be happy despite myself.

She nodded.

"Good, then I'm happy for you," I lied.

Regan looked up as if she had something to add. Her crystal blue gaze scanned my face, searching for something. Our reverie

broke when we heard a car door slam.

Sean shouldered his way through the screen door, his arms loaded with grocery bags. All of the sudden, my heart raced at the reality of Regan and Sean meeting up again. They had only met once, and that had been the night Regan disappeared. I wondered if he would recognize her and what his reaction would be.

“Sorry I’m late. The checkout lines were long,” Sean said. “I’m Sean Thomas, Ed’s son.” He set the bags on the kitchen counter.

Regan got up. “I’m Regan Douglass. I’ll be taking care of your dad while he’s in the hospice program.”

I could tell Sean didn’t recognize her. “I’ll be with you as soon as I put this stuff away.”

By the amount of bags Sean had hauled in, it was obvious he didn’t stick to my list.

“I’ll put the groceries away. You go ahead and get started with the admission. There are papers that will need to be signed and you’re the only one who can do that,” I said, getting up from the kitchen table but never taking my gaze off Regan.

I was surprised Regan didn’t introduce herself differently, like, “Hi, I’m the woman who broke your wife’s heart, remember me?” Actually, I wasn’t surprised at all. Regan was never one to talk about things. She’d always been so much more comfortable with the pink elephant in the room. I didn’t really want to trudge up the painful past, either. At least not now. Sean deserved to think only about his father now.

“Thanks, Meen.” Sean sat at the table across from Regan.

I emptied the grocery bags one by one, pulling out more of Sean’s favorite foods than Ed’s. There were bags of tortilla chips and salsa, which I am positive were not on the list I gave him. Ice cream, doughnuts, Ho Hos, a frozen pepperoni pizza, and a six-pack of Budweiser. I shook my head as I put the stuff away. Finally, I did come across the things I had asked for.

As I busied myself putting the food away, I could hear Sean and Regan going through the admission process. Sean answered Regan’s questions about current medications, allergies, and next of kin. Surprisingly, Sean had listed me, as well as himself, as

Ed's next of kin.

After the paperwork was done, Regan went into Ed's room to examine him. Sean followed her. A few minutes later, they returned to the kitchen. Regan looked up at me as she put her stethoscope back in her black bag. I knew she felt Ed didn't have much time left.

"I'll be back tomorrow morning with more supplies. He's got at least two days worth of morphine left. If he should run out, you can call our twenty-four-hour pharmacy. They'll give you a refill. I can either pick it up on my way in or they'll send it to you by UPS overnight. I wouldn't let it get too low. His bone scan showed quite a few hot spots. Cancer in the bone is very painful. Without a certain level of morphine, your father will be in a lot of pain," Regan said.

Sean nodded and thanked her for coming. I watched from the window as Regan waddled to her car, not the sleek candy apple red Mustang she used to drive, but an older blue Chrysler minivan. Obviously, things had changed.

Sean came into the kitchen just as I put the last of the groceries away.

"She seems nice," he said. "Very thorough."

"Yes, she is," I said.

The silence in the room was heavy. I couldn't bear it much longer.

"Did you recognize her?" I asked.

"Recognize who?"

"The nurse. Do you know who she is?"

"No, not really. Should I?"

"Did you read her name tag at least?"

"Yes, Douglass...So...What's this about? I don't know any Douglasses, do you?"

I was losing patience with him. "That was Regan...Regan Martin...my Regan..."

Sean looked up from his paper. "You're kidding. That was the woman that wrecked our marriage?" He looked at me in disbelief.

"She didn't wreck our marriage."

"She didn't? Well, who did then?" He looked at me, challenging me to a fight.

"Let's not do this."

"What?"

"This. Talk about Regan."

"If I remember correctly, you brought it up." His anger was palpable.

"I'm sorry. I just thought you should know who she is."

"Now I know who she is. But I thought she was long gone from here."

"She moved back a couple of months ago. Her dad had a stroke. She came back to help take care of him."

"Forgive me for not feeling all that compassionate about her, but she has no business in our lives," Sean said.

"Our lives?" Sean's wounded look told me I better stop right there. "When she realized who your dad was, she offered to get another nurse on the case. I told her she shouldn't. I said that our history together wouldn't be a problem."

"Maybe not for you, but for me, it is. I don't want that... that..."

"That what?"

"That...woman in my house."

"She didn't do anything to us...our divorce was not her fault."

"You're telling me that she had nothing to do with breaking up our marriage? That if you and she didn't..."

"If it wasn't her, it would have been someone else," I whispered, sad that we were discussing this painful topic all over again.

"Mina, I'm sorry, but I don't believe that. We were happy, weren't we?" His anger had given way to utter sadness and desperation, both fueled by the fact that Regan was back. Sean didn't do so well with loss, no matter if it was me and our marriage or his father. I knew that, and I wanted to help as much as I could. I owed him that much, if not more.

"But I needed something else. Hiding...that was killing me. Look how things turned out. We still have each other. Don't you

think things are better now?"

Sean lowered his head and nodded. "I just don't think it's right that she comes here like nothing ever happened."

"I told you she offered to have another nurse take Ed's case."

"So why didn't you take her up on it? You still have feelings for her, don't you?"

"No...no, I don't," I lied. "Those feelings were lost long ago."

"Then why did you let her stay?"

"Because Regan is one of the best nurses I know. You just said so yourself before I told you who she was. Give her a chance. Besides, what harm can she do now? I'm still here and I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't care how good a nurse she is, I still don't feel comfortable having her here, Meen. I'm sorry."

"Okay, if you feel that strongly about this, I'll call hospice and have them assign another nurse to the case."

"Thank you," Sean said. He picked up his newspaper, went into Ed's room, and turned on the TV. I stared out the kitchen window at the spot where Regan's car had been parked. What harm could she do now, indeed?

CHAPTER FIVE

"I better get going," I said to Sean, who was sitting in the recliner next to Ed's hospital bed. "My shift starts in a few hours, and I need to get some sleep."

Sean nodded and stretched his arms over his head as he got up from the recliner.

"Will you be okay with him tonight?" I asked.

Sean looked down and shrugged.

"Do you want me to call hospice and have them send someone out to sit with him?"

"No...no...I can do this."

"You can call me anytime at the hospital if something comes up. I get off at six o'clock tomorrow morning, and I can stop by and check on him on my way home if that's not too early for you."

"No, that's not too early," Sean said, shaking his head. "I probably won't be able to sleep anyway."

"You have to take care of yourself, too. You know it's always the caregivers that get burned out the worst."

Sean walked me to the door; his face was clouded with sadness.

"What is it?" I asked, turning toward him.

"I hate watching him suffer."

Tears crept into the corners of his eyes.

"This is probably the hardest thing you'll ever do in your life, but I promise you that when everything is over and done, you'll be glad you were there for him. Just remember, he did right by you after your brother died and things got really bad between him

and your mother. He stayed in a bad marriage until you graduated, just like he promised. Now's your chance to do right by him."

"What if I do something wrong? What if I mess up his medication or hurt him trying to move him?"

"You don't have to move him much. Just turn him side to side using the pull sheet like I showed you. He's on a pretty hefty dose of morphine, so if you keep giving it to him on schedule, he should be fine. If he gets anxious, give him the Ativan, just like I showed you. Slip it under his tongue, it works faster that way, and it will help him relax and sleep. The main goal is to keep him comfortable, and that means keeping him medicated even if you have to slip him a rescue dose."

"What do I do if he has trouble breathing?"

"He's got the oxygen. That will make his breathing easier. You can reposition him, sit him up or turn him on his side."

"What if he..." Sean looked down. "You know...he..."

"Then you call me immediately. I'll contact hospice and they'll send whoever is on call. He has a do not resuscitate order, so no one will perform CPR or anything heroic. The main thing is to keep him comfortable. If you think his condition is changing at all, call me. I don't want you to be alone when he dies." I reached up and touched his face.

"Thanks, Meen. You know I appreciate this."

I looked into those clear eyes I had seen so many times. A twinge of affection fluttered in the pit of my stomach. "I'll call later this evening to check on him." I turned and walked down the driveway to my car. I wiped the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand as I drove across town to my apartment. I knew Ed had only a week or two left to live, if that. I already missed him.

I walked into my apartment and was greeted by the answering machine light flashing again. I pushed the button. *You have three messages. First message:* "Mina, it's Mom. I called to apologize for the other morning. I had no business putting you through something like that. Can I make it up to you? How about coming over for dinner tonight? Call me when you get in." *Beep. Second message:* "Hi, Debbie, it's Sandra. I'm sorry for what I said on your answering machine. I didn't mean it. I didn't know where

you were and I thought you were just blowing me off. I really had a nice time the other night. Please give me a call.” *Beep. Third message:* “Mina, it’s Regan, give me a call. My number is 555-1689. I’ll be home after five, thanks.” *Beeeeep.*

I could tell by Regan’s tone that this wasn’t a professional call. Or maybe it was. Maybe she was just calling to tell me that she’d signed off Ed’s case, that it was too uncomfortable for her to take care of him and be around Sean and me. Part of me hoped that’s what it was. It would save me from an unpleasant call to have her taken off the case. I had no idea how I’d explain that she wasn’t the right nurse for Ed without dragging our private lives into this or giving the impression that Regan had not done well in her duties. It was a tricky issue.

Regan wouldn’t be off work for few hours, so I went into the bedroom and lay down across the bed to get some shut-eye. I’d call her before I went to work. I’d deal with my Mom and Sandra later.

The alarm went off at four forty-five. I stood under the steaming water and couldn’t stop thinking about what Regan could possibly want. As the hot water pelted my body, memories came flooding back about the many times Regan and I had showered here together. Her soft wet skin, the intoxicating smell of her just shampooed hair. The luxuriant feel of it in my hands. I had to stop thinking about her this way. She was a married woman now, a married pregnant woman. I turned the cold water on full blast. That was enough to quell any sexual thoughts I might have about anybody.

I rehearsed my phone call back to Regan as I got dressed for work. “Hello, Regan, it’s Mina” was as far as I got. I loaded my backpack with three cans of Diet Coke, a pack of Twinkies, and a banana. I took a deep breath and dialed Regan’s number.

“Hello,” a male voice answered.

“Hello, is Regan in?”

“Yes, she is. Who’s calling?”

“Mina Caselli.”

“Hold on a minute,” he said and set the phone down. “Regan, phone.”

“Hello?” Regan said.

“Regan, it’s Mina.”

“Oh, hi. I’m glad you called back.”

My heart thumped at the sound of her voice. I couldn’t control my erratic pulse, and in my mind, a crazy mixture of hope and fear swirled.

Silence filled the phone line. Regan waited for the person who had answered the phone to leave. I assumed it was her husband.

She cleared her throat. “Mina, I thought maybe we could... you know, talk about things.”

“Things?”

“I feel bad...seeing you today...I mean, I never wanted to...oh, this is so hard to do on the phone. Are you busy this evening?”

“I’m working tonight, but I get a dinner break at eight p.m. Why don’t you come by the emergency room? We can have dinner together. That is, if you don’t mind hospital food.”

“Oh, I don’t mind at all. Jim will be working at the bar tonight, so this will give me something to do.”

“Great. I’ll see you in the ER at eight o’clock. Just tell the receptionist you’re looking for Dr. Caselli.”

“Dr. Caselli...hmm, that sounds so strange,” Regan said. “But a good strange.”

A warm glow flowed through me. “I’ll see you later,” I said and hung up.

I took a deep breath and picked up the phone again and dialed Rosetti’s number. My insides were churning with excitement, and I needed my best friend’s words of wisdom to bring me back to reality. I got a busy signal. I figured she was sleeping because she was probably still on the graveyard shift. Disappointed, I hung up the phone. *I’ll try her again later tonight.*

I was happy to see Page’s car when I pulled into the physician’s parking lot, and I couldn’t wait to tell her my news. For five years, I had cried on her shoulder about missing Regan, now she would get to meet her.

“Hey,” I said as I entered the women’s locker room. Page was pulling a scrub top over her curly blond head.

“Hey,” Page said, poking her head through the shirt opening.

“Guess who’s meeting me for dinner tonight?”

“With your reputation, it’s hard to guess.”

“Very funny.”

We both laughed.

“Okay, I give up. Who are you having dinner with tonight?”

“Regan.”

“Regan? *The* Regan?”

I nodded.

Page sat on the wooden bench in front of a row of gray lockers and pulled me down with her. “Wow. Details...I want details and don’t leave anything out.”

“I was over at Sean’s this morning, getting Ed settled. We were waiting for hospice to come in and get him admitted, and lo and behold, guess who his hospice nurse is.”

“You’re kidding! That’s unbelievable. What were the chances of you two meeting up like that?”

“I know. But wait, there’s more.”

“What? Tell me.” Page scooted closer to me on the bench.

“Well...she’s married...and she’s about eight months pregnant.”

“Get out of here! No way!”

“Yes, I know. I was just as shocked as you are. Actually, I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw her.”

“Boy, that’s a shocker,” Page said. “Gee, Mina, I’m sorry. That’s probably not how you imagined your reunion with her.”

I shook my head. “No, it isn’t.”

“So whose idea was it to have dinner tonight?”

“Hers.”

“What do you think she wants? Free prenatal care?”

“That’s not nice.”

“Sorry. I just don’t trust this girl. I don’t like what she did to you. She caused you a lot of pain.”

“I know. But I’m over it.”

Page looked at me skeptically. I’m sure she was wondering if I was trying to convince her or myself of this fact.

“I really am,” I insisted. “Anyway, she said she felt bad how

she left things and wants to talk about it.”

“Well, she should feel bad. You didn’t deserve that. You were good to her.”

I smiled. Page was always my best cheerleader.

I pulled a fresh pair of scrubs out of my locker and changed clothes, transforming myself from emotionally mixed-up Mina Caselli to efficient Dr. Caselli, ER chief resident. I draped my stethoscope around my neck and headed to the conference room to get report from the off-going shift.

Report lasted almost an hour. The previous shift had been pretty busy: two major car accidents, a drug overdose, and a full cardiac arrest. They brought the patient back and he was on his way up to CCU. I was assigned to the adult side of the ER with Page.

The last of the car accident victims needed to be discharged. I checked the patient’s chest X-ray to see if any hairline fractures or punctured lungs were missed on the first reading before letting him go. There were none, so I took the paperwork in and signed the patient out.

The ER was eerily quiet that night. It was only seven o’clock and all the patients were discharged or taken to the floors. I picked up a stack of old charts that I needed to review and took them into the doctor’s lounge. I poured myself a cup of coffee and settled in to get my chart reviews done in one sitting. Page joined me a few minutes later with her own stack of charts.

“So are you nervous about your dinner date tonight?” Page asked.

“It’s not a date. Remember she’s married and pregnant. And I had nothing to do with either situation.”

“What are you going to say to her?”

“I have no idea. I guess I’ll let her take the lead.”

“I think she still has feelings for you.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would you think that?”

“Why else would she call you like this?”

“Maybe she feels guilty. If there’s one thing I remember about my relationship with her, it’s that there was a lot of guilt.”

“Really? How so?”

“Regan felt guilty about everything: guilty over her feelings for me, guilty about acting on her feelings, and most of all, guilty about the sex. My God, you’d swear the girl was brought up Catholic.”

Page laughed. “I’m starving,” she said, getting up from her chair and stretching her back. “I’m going to go down to the snack bar. Do you want anything?”

I shook my head. “No thanks, I brought a couple of Twinkies and a banana. I’m good.”

Page left and I returned to my paperwork. A few minutes later, there was a knock on the lounge door. “Dr. Caselli?” Amy called through the closed door.

“Yes, Amy, come on in.”

“Dr. Caselli, I have a patient in exam room one...She asked for you. Twenty-nine-year-old female eight months pregnant. Fell down the stairs at home...she’s got a pretty big head laceration, and I think she’s in labor.”

“Get me the fetal heart monitor and the ultrasound machine,” I ordered as I grabbed my stethoscope and flew down the hall to exam room one. I took a deep breath and said a silent prayer before pulling back the curtain, praying it wasn’t her. I was immediately disappointed.

“Hey, you’re a little early for dinner,” I said, trying to keep the mood light in an unbearably difficult situation.

Regan smiled faintly. Her face was tear-stained. She held a blue and white checkered dishtowel to her head. It was soaked with blood.

“What happened?”

“I fell down the stairs.”

“You fell down the stairs? How’d that happen?”

“My dad went ballistic. He wanted a beer before dinner. When I asked him to wait and said he could have it with his dinner, he flew into a rage. He stumbled into the kitchen where I was cooking and was headed for the basement refrigerator. He’s fallen so many times in the past, I didn’t feel it was safe for him to try and negotiate the stairs, so I stepped in front of him to stop him. That’s when he took a swing at me. When I stepped back to get

out of his way, I lost my balance and fell.”

Regan started to cry. “I feel so stupid. I know better than to argue with him. He doesn’t know what he’s doing.” I held Regan’s head against my chest. Her sobs wracked her body.

“It’s okay. We’ll fix you up,” I said, stroking her blood-caked hair.

“Looks like you’ve got a pretty good gash up here,” I said, removing the towel. I pulled the hair apart and exposed a good six-inch laceration. The gash was still oozing, so I tacked it together with a couple of steri strips. “We’re gonna have to sew that up,” I said. “Does anything else hurt?”

“My back and my belly,” she said.

“Are you having contractions?”

“I don’t know.... The pain comes in waves about every five minutes.”

“Okay. Lie back,” I said, cradling Regan in my arms and helping her lie back on the exam table. Amy was at the other end of the table pulling out the stirrups. “I need to examine you and attach a fetal heart monitor. Are you okay with me doing the exam or do you want me to get another doctor for you?”

“No, I want you,” Regan said, fear in her eyes as she clutched my hand in hers.

“Okay. Take some nice deep breaths and try to relax.”

Amy helped me put Regan’s legs in the stirrups.

“I’m going to touch your leg now. Can you open your knees a little bit wider?” I asked. “That’s fine. Are you doing okay?” I peered over Regan’s paper-draped knees.

Regan nodded and grabbed the sides of the exam table, and I proceeded with the internal exam, exposing my greatest fear: Regan was bleeding vaginally.

“Okay, I’m going to insert my finger to check your cervix now.” I inserted a gloved finger inside Regan’s vagina. She gripped the exam table tighter as I continued to probe her insides.

Her cervix was open, about five centimeters, and I couldn’t feel the membrane sack. *Shit.*

I probed deeper now, knowing her water had broken, to see if I could feel the baby’s head. The head had not engaged yet, which

was good, but there was a lot of blood, too much blood. Even if it was a mixture of blood and amniotic fluid, it was still too much.

“Regan, I can’t feel the fluid sack, and your cervix is dilated about five centimeters.”

“Oh, God, no...it’s too soon,” Regan said, attempting to sit up on the exam table.

Amy helped her to lay back down. I knew she knew full well that if her baby had any chance at survival, she’d have to deliver it soon.

“Is my baby all right?” Regan asked.

I turned on the ultrasound machine. The black and white screen flickered. I squeezed a puddle of ultrasound jelly on Regan’s belly and dipped the wand into it. I passed the wand over the lower part of Regan’s pregnant abdomen. The baby, a girl, about thirty-six weeks gestational age, appeared on the screen. The baby’s heartbeat was strong, but the ultrasound confirmed that Regan’s membranes had ruptured and that we’d have to deliver this baby soon.

“Heartbeat is nice and strong,” I said. “Can you hear it?”

Regan nodded. “Oh, thank God.” She breathed out a sigh of relief.

Amy held the ultrasound wand while I attached the fetal heart monitor. As soon as I got the monitor attached, Regan had a contraction.

“Breathe through it, Regan. Don’t push.” I held her hand and squeezed it tight.

Regan held on tight and breathed through her mouth in short sharp breaths. The contraction passed.

“What was that?” Regan asked, panic in her voice. “I felt a gush of something.”

I looked down and saw the bedsheet under Regan was soaked with blood. I grabbed the ultrasound wand again and moved it over Regan’s abdomen.

“What’s happening?” Regan asked.

The ultrasound revealed that the placenta was pulling away from the uterine wall, causing the excessive bleeding. Instead of having hours to deliver this baby, we had only minutes because

if the placenta pulled away from the uterus completely, the baby would lose all support from the mother.

"Regan, we have to get you up to labor and delivery as soon as possible."

"Oh, God," she cried.

"The baby's heartbeat is strong. We'll do the absolute best we can. I've seen a lot of miracles happen, and I know you have, too."

Regan had another contraction. She gripped my hand tight, almost breaking the bones in my fingers. The fetal monitor alarm went off. The baby's heart was decelerating with the contractions. The contractions were beginning to cause stress for the baby. It was clear if we didn't do something soon, we could lose it.

"Amy, call up to OB and tell them we have a thirty-six-week pregnancy with placenta previa and late decelerations."

Amy ran out to the desk and paged the OB resident. Regan's contractions were three minutes apart. I watched the fetal heart monitor as another contraction wracked Regan's body. The baby's heart rate dropped from 130 to 96—dangerously low.

Amy returned. "Both residents are delivering. They want us to prep her down here, then bring her up to labor and delivery. Once one of the residents is free, they'll deliver her."

"Fine," I said.

Amy quickly did the shave prep while I took care of the other necessities.

"Regan, how can I get a hold of your husband?" I asked.

"He's at Clancy's tending bar. I called there before I came to the hospital, but he wasn't there yet."

Another contraction came over her. She gripped the side of the exam table again, trying not to push.

"I'll call him when we get upstairs," I said, raising and locking the side rails on Regan's gurney.

Amy grabbed the fetal monitor, and we headed up to labor and delivery. The elevator doors slid open, and Amy and I wheeled Regan down the hall to the delivery suites. Both rooms were still occupied. I donned a surgical mask and gown and went in.

"Almost done?" I asked the resident sitting at the bottom of

the delivery table between a woman's surgical green-draped legs propped up in stirrups.

"She's just starting to crown now," he said. "It may still be a while. Try suite two, I think they're finishing a C-section in there."

I pushed open the heavy wooden doors of suite two. There the resident was elbow deep in his patient's splayed open abdomen. "How much longer? I've got a woman out in the hall with placenta previa and fetal decelerations in the nineties."

"Well, this one's got a boggy uterus, and I'm afraid if I can't get it to tighten up, she's gonna bleed out," the resident said as he rhythmically squeezed the woman's uterus, trying to get it to contract down. "You're gonna have to page the attending on call."

I went back out in the hall. Amy was standing guard over Regan, wiping her face with a damp washcloth. "Both suites are tied up. I paged the attending and he'll be here in 10 minutes."

Another contraction hit. Blood gushed again underneath Regan, soaking the bedsheet and dripping onto the floor.

"I need to examine her again," I said, fearing the worst.

Amy and I wheeled Regan into one of the patient rooms. I pulled on a rubber glove.

"Okay, Regan, I need to check your cervix again. This is going to feel uncomfortable. Take some deep breaths."

Regan breathed in. I inserted two gloved fingers into her vagina. She was fully dilated, and this time, I could feel the baby's head.

"The baby is crowning," I said. "I'm going to slip my fingers in and see if I can feel for the cord to make sure it's not around the baby's neck."

I slid two fingers under the base of the baby's head to the neck. I didn't feel the cord.

"Okay, Regan, with the next contraction, I want you to push."

I watched the fetal monitor as the tracing began to rise with the approaching contraction. "Okay, Regan, here it comes...push."

Regan bore down. The tiny head popped through and filled

my palm. "Okay, Regan, good, you're doing fine. Now get ready, cleansing breath and now push."

Regan bore down again, sweat dripping from her reddened face.

"The head is out," I said and suctioned blood and thick mucus from the baby's tiny mouth and nose with a bulb syringe. The baby's face was blue.

"Good job, we're almost there. Here comes the next contraction... okay...push."

Amy stood behind Regan supporting her back as Regan growled and pushed. The shoulders eased out, as well as the rest of the tiny slippery body, but still no cry from the little one. I suctioned the baby's mouth and nose again, while wiping the cheesy mucus from its blue body.

"What's going on? Is she all right? Why isn't she crying?" Regan asked panicked, trying to sit up on the gurney. "Mina, is the baby okay?"

I suctioned the baby again, then turned her over, patting her back to loosen any secretions that may have become lodged in her airway. My hands shook as I flipped her over onto her back and suctioned her again.

I glanced up at Amy who read my thoughts. Not able to bear what was playing out before us, she looked away.

I suctioned the baby again, then suddenly, the most beautiful sound I had ever heard erupted from the baby's mouth. She let out a loud and healthy cry. I looked down. The baby's complexion was turning ruddy. She shook and trembled in my hands as if angry that we disturbed her sleep. My tears dripped on her chest.

"Congratulations, Regan, here's your daughter." I held up the crying baby.

I clamped off the cord and cut it, then I handed the baby to Amy. She expertly wrapped her in a blanket and took the baby over to Regan and placed her on her chest. There is nothing more magical than watching a mother and her newborn child. The look of pure love shows the special bond. I looked over at Amy; we both had tears in our eyes.

"She's beautiful," Regan said, all the panic gone from her

voice as she stroked her daughter's cheek.

"Yes, she is," I said. "We have to get her over to the nursery so they can check her out."

Regan handed the baby back to Amy. Amy clutched the wriggling, screaming bundle to her chest and took her to the nursery.

"You okay?" I asked Regan as I brushed her sweat-soaked bangs from her face. She nodded and began to cry. I held her close.

"It's gonna be all right," I said. "You did a good job. She's a little small, but she'll be fine."

Regan trembled in my arms.

"I'm so sorry," Regan said.

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"Sorry for leaving you like I did."

The attending physician arrived. "Where's the placenta previa?" I hated when doctors referred to their patients by their medical problem instead of their name. It just seemed so arrogant.

"Here, sir, this is Regan Martin...I mean Douglass...she just delivered."

"Who are you?" the attending asked. "Are you on staff here?"

"Yes, sir. I'm the ER resident."

"ER resident? What are you doing up here? Where are my OB residents?" He looked down the hallway.

"Both were tied up with deliveries, sir. I had no choice but to deliver her. The baby was having decelerations."

The attending didn't look pleased. "Where's the baby?"

"The nurse took her to the nursery to put her in the warmer. She was only thirty-six weeks. Apgars were seven and nine."

"How's the new mom?" the attending asked Regan condescendingly.

"Exhausted and sore," Regan said wearily.

"She's lost a lot of blood, but the placenta delivered on its own and it was intact. I'll get a stat blood count and make sure she has a blood count ordered for in the morning," I said. "Oh, and

she has a pretty good head laceration from the fall. I didn't have time to sew it up in the ER."

I showed the attending doctor the head wound. "I'll have one of the plastics residents come up and take care of that," he said, then pulled back the drape I had used to cover the lower half of Regan's body and examined her.

"Everything looks fine," the attending said. "You're gonna be sore and have some bleeding for the next few days. I'll order you something for pain. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"When can I see the baby again?" Regan asked. She looked pale and drained.

"They'll get her cleaned up and draw some lab work," he said. "It shouldn't be very long. They'll keep her in the neonatal part of nursery for the first twenty-four hours. You can see her anytime, though. The nurses are pretty good about that. I'll be back in the morning to check on you. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you, Doctor," Regan said.

The attending wrote out Regan's post partum orders, then handed the chart to me. "Good job...for an ER resident," the attending said quietly and left the room.

A nurse from post partum came over and wheeled Regan down the hall to her room. I stayed and helped Regan get settled. I could tell she was still in shock over the evening's events.

"Jim!" Regan blurted out. "I've got to call Jim."

"Oh, my God...I'm sorry. I forgot all about calling him. I'll go down to the nurse's station right now and call him and let him know where he can find you. I bet he's worried sick."

I went out to the nurse's station and dialed the number she gave me for Clancy's.

"Clancy's."

"Is Jim Douglass there?" I asked when someone finally picked up after ten rings.

"Who?"

"Jim Douglass. He's supposed to be working there tonight. This is Dr. Caselli over at City Hospital. His wife delivered their baby this evening. I was trying to reach him..."

“There’s no Douglass here.” The voice was abrupt on the other end of the line.

“Are you sure? Is this Clancy’s?”

“Yes, it’s Clancy’s, and we got no Douglass working here. The only bartender we have is Clancy. You must have the wrong place. Sorry.”

The phone line went dead.

CHAPTER SIX

“Where have you been?” Page asked as I entered the ER nurse’s station.

“I was up in labor and delivery.”

“What were you doing up there?”

“Delivering Regan’s baby.”

“What?”

Page shook her head in disbelief. “What happened? I didn’t think she was due yet.”

“She wasn’t. Her father, who had a stroke a while back, became combative this evening and pushed her down the basement stairs. He went on some sort of rampage involving beer. Regan’s lost quite a bit of blood, but she’s doing fine. The baby is small, so they’re going to keep her in neonatal tonight.”

“I leave you alone for a second and look what you get yourself into.”

“As if this isn’t bad enough, I’ve got another problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Regan asked me to call her husband. He was supposed to be tending bar at Clancy’s tonight. I called the number she gave me and they told me he wasn’t there and that he never worked there.”

“Oh...that doesn’t sound good.”

“I know. The last thing she needs right now is to find out her husband’s been lying to her.”

“You know, Caselli, your life gets more and more like a soap opera every day,” Page said. “Oh, and speaking of soap operas, while you were gone, you got two phone messages.”

“From who?”

“Sean called. He said everything is fine but to call him if you got a chance. The other call was from your friend Rosetti. She said to call her at home before eleven thirty.”

“Was Morrison looking for me while I was gone?”

Page shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Good. Thanks, Page.” I went into the doctor’s lounge to return Sean’s call.

My eyes burned with fatigue and my head hummed from the subsiding adrenaline rush as I dialed Sean’s number.

“Hello?” came from the other end of the phone line.

“Sean, it’s Mina. Is everything all right?”

“Yes. Dad’s been sleeping, like you said. He only has half a bottle of pain medicine left and I don’t want to run out. I was looking for the phone number for the hospice nurse and couldn’t find it. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, I tacked it up on the refrigerator underneath the “Bad Cop-No Donut” magnet. Oh, and you won’t have to worry about Regan being your dad’s nurse anymore.”

“Oh? Did you call hospice and have her taken off the case?”

“No, I didn’t have time before work,” I lied. “Regan delivered her baby tonight.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“Sean, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Regan came into the ER tonight in premature labor. It’s a long story.”

“I’m sure it is...I better get going,” Sean said, cutting me off, obviously not wanting to hear any more. “Dad is starting to stir. Maybe I can get him to eat something.”

“I made some chicken soup before I left this afternoon. It’s in the refrigerator on the bottom shelf.”

“Do you really think he’s well enough to take on your cooking yet?” Sean kidded.

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s only chicken soup. How bad can it be?”

“I gotta go,” Sean said, not giving me a straight answer. “I’ll

see you in the morning.”

“Okay. Let me know if his condition changes.”

“I will,” Sean said and hung up.

It was ten thirty. I’d missed dinner and was ravenous. The cafeteria wouldn’t be open again until midnight, so I pulled out a Diet Coke and my Twinkies and dialed Rosetti’s number.

“Hey,” I said into the receiver when she picked up.

“Hey, where’ve you been?” Rosetti asked.

“Delivering Regan’s baby.”

“Sure...and I’m the tooth fairy.”

“I know you don’t believe me. But it’s all true, and I have witnesses.”

“How...when...Oh, my...” Rosetti stammered.

“I know. It’s hard to believe. I tried calling you earlier today to give you the scoop, but your line was busy.”

“I had it off the hook so I could sleep. I’m still stuck on this stupid all night stakeout. It’s the only time these druggies come out. So what happened?”

“She showed up at Sean’s. She’s Ed’s hospice nurse.”

“Well, that really clears things up,” Rosetti said sarcastically. We both laughed.

“I know, it sounds weird, but it’s true...she showed up today at Sean’s.”

I went on to tell Rosetti the entire story.

“Married? Pregnant? Oh, my God, Mina, what a mess.”

“Yep, I really need your insight into all this. I’m off tomorrow. Do you want to meet for dinner or something?”

“Yes. Dinner would be good. I’m off tomorrow, too, so that will work out great,” Rosetti said. “It seems like such a long time since we’ve actually spent time together, and with this new event, we have a lot of catching up to do. So how are you doing with all this...I mean with her coming back in this condition and all?”

“I think I’m still in shock,” I said, taking a bite of Twinkie. “Things have happened so fast. It doesn’t seem real...I need time to think about it.”

“I bet,” Rosetti said. “Well, I gotta get going. I have to be at the station for another briefing with the task force. We’re supposed

to take these guys down tonight after we make a couple more drug buys. I'll just be happy when this is all over."

"Be careful out there. Do you have your vest on?"

"Yes, Mother Mina, I have the vest on."

"Good. Call me when you get up tomorrow. We'll make plans for dinner then."

"Okay. Have a good night," Rosetti said and hung up.

I took the last bite of my Twinkie and chugged down the rest of my Diet Coke. I leaned back in the lounge chair and closed my eyes. It was only ten thirty, but it felt like I already put in my twelve hours.

"Express team-neonatal nursery...express team-neonatal nursery" came over the house paging system. That was not good news...

I bound up the stairs two at a time to the third floor, praying that it was not Regan's baby who was in trouble. When I reached the nursery, there were doctors and nurses everywhere. Machines beeped. Alarms sounded. Someone yelled, "Clear." And then I heard the discharge of the defibrillator paddles.

Three white-coated doctors performed CPR on the tiny body. I stood in the doorway of the neonatal nursery, frozen in silence. For the second time that night, my worst fears had come true: it was Regan's baby they were working on. Nurses scurried in and out of the nursery retrieving syringes and medications. Another nurse stood off to the side and recorded everything that occurred. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd done something or didn't do something to cause this. I went over in my mind all the steps I took to deliver this baby into the world.

The defibrillator paddles discharged again. This time, the heart monitor beeped with the beginning of a heart rhythm. The pack of doctors and nurses cheered.

"Get Children's Hospital on the phone so we can have this baby life-flighted to their neonatal intensive unit," one of the physicians shouted. A nurse ran past me to make the call.

The heart monitor continued to beep its normal rhythm. "What happened?" I asked one of the residents.

"She went into cardiac arrest. We think she has a valvular

heart defect, but we won't be able to tell until we transfer her to Children's. They'll do an echocardiogram there to confirm our diagnosis."

"Where's the baby's mom?"

"In her room."

"I'll go back and see her. I'm a personal friend." I knew Regan wouldn't want to rest knowing her baby was in danger. "Anything you want me to tell her?"

"You can tell her that for now the baby is stable, but we have to get her over to Children's for more extensive testing and observation. Tell her we'll probably life-flight her out within the hour."

"When will she be able to see her?"

"She can see her before we leave for a minute, then she can see her tomorrow at Children's once her obstetrician discharges her."

"Thanks, Doc," I said, then headed down the hall to Regan's room.

I tapped on the heavy wooden door and slowly pushed it open.

"Regan, can I come in?"

Relief swept over Regan's face when she saw it was me. "Mina! I heard the call for the express team to the neonatal nursery and now they won't let me see my baby. What's going on out there? Is everything all right? Is my baby all right?"

"Your baby's fine right now, but they need to transfer her to Children's Hospital. Her pediatrician thinks she has a bad heart valve. They need to get her over to Children's so their specialists can take a look at her."

"Oh, God!" Regan cried, covering her mouth with her hand. "When?"

"Tonight. Probably within the hour."

"I want to see her...when can I see her?"

"You can come with me and I'll walk you down. You can only see her for a few minutes, though, because as soon as the helicopter comes, they have to leave."

Gingerly, Reagan got out of bed and put on her robe and

slippers. Regan trembled as she held onto my arm as we walked down the long hallway to the neonatal nursery.

"Is she gonna be all right?" Regan asked, pulling me close.

"She's gonna be fine. She'll be getting the best care from the best doctors in the area over there." I could only imagine what Regan was feeling at that moment. Fear, anxiety, and the worst feeling of all, uncertainty. She couldn't be sure that everything would turn out all right.

"Does she have a name yet?" I asked.

"Yes. Tess. Tess Marie," Regan said. "She's named after my grandmother."

"That's a beautiful name."

By the time we reached the nursery, we found Tess hooked up to so many monitors, it was hard to get close to her. I made way for Regan, holding tubes and wires up, being careful not to dislodge anything. Regan reached out and touched the infant's hand. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"It's gonna be all right, Tess," Regan said, stroking the hand.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Douglass, we have to go now. The helicopter is here," one of the nurses said.

Regan nodded and kissed her daughter's hand.

"Don't worry, we'll take good care of her." The OB flight nurse scooped up Tess and carried her down the hall and out to the awaiting helicopter while Regan and I looked on. Regan's body heaved against mine as she broke down in heavy sobs. I held her close, my heart breaking for her and little Tess.

"Come on, let's go back to your room," I said. "I'll make you some tea or something."

Regan nodded. Once back in her room, I helped her into bed, practically having to lift her. I got her tucked in and turned to go to the kitchen to make her some tea when Regan's mother appeared in the doorway. She looked at me and blinked.

"You? What are you doing here?" Regan's mother asked.

"I..."

"I thought I told you a long time ago to leave my daughter alone," Regan's mother said, anger boiling in her eyes.

"Mom, stop it!" Regan shouted from her bed.

"You have no business being here...get out...get out and leave us alone," Regan's mother shouted.

"Mother! Leave her alone. I want her to stay. She was here when I needed her. She delivered Tess and she was the first one up here when the baby got in trouble."

"What do you mean, the baby's in trouble...Regan, what's going on?"

"They think Tess may have a heart condition. They just life-flighted her to Children's Hospital so a pediatric cardiologist can take a look at her."

Regan looked over at me to see if she had the info right. I nodded.

"Where's Jim?" Regan's mother asked, her face as white as the hospital sheet. "He should be here, not her. Did you call him?"

Regan looked at me. I knew I couldn't lie to her, she'd see right through it. I might as well come clean.

"Regan...I called..."

"Mother, I tried to reach him," Regan interrupted me. "I called Clancy's, and they told me he wasn't there. In fact, they told me that Jim never even worked there."

Regan looked up at me, asking for my compassion. "This isn't the first time he's done this. I don't know where he is, Mother, and to be honest with you...I don't care."

"Well, he's your husband and Tess is his child. Don't you think he has a right to know what's going on?" Regan's mother said.

"Yes, he does. But I have a right to a husband who checks on his pregnant wife once in a while rather than lying to her. I'd love to tell him that he has a daughter and that his daughter is gravely ill, but I have no idea where to reach him." Regan was fierce. "So unless you know where he is, be quiet and let me handle this my way!"

As Regan's mother got ready to respond to her angry daughter, I quietly slipped out of the room. I went to the kitchen and rummaged around for a couple of tea bags and Styrofoam cups. I was lucky and made tea for all of us. Back in Regan's

room, I was surprised when her mother took the Styrofoam cup from me without tossing the hot tea in my face.

“I have to get back downstairs,” I said to Regan. “I’ll be on duty until six a.m., so if you need me, just have the operator page me, okay?”

Regan nodded. “Thanks, Mina. I don’t know how I would have gotten through this without you.” Regan’s eyes were heavy with sadness as she forced a smile and waved goodbye.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Martin,” I said, nodding to Regan’s mother. She didn’t respond.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I let myself into Sean's house with the key he'd given me the day before. The house was eerily quiet; the only sound was the *swoosh, swoosh* coming from the oxygen compressor. Muted sunlight bathed the living room as I tiptoed in and found both guys sound asleep. Ed stirred a little as I checked his vital signs and listened to his breath sounds, but never fully woke up. He was stable and he seemed comfortable. At this point, that was the best we could hope for.

Sean was asleep in the recliner next to his father's hospital bed. I watched him a while as he slept, thinking of the lifetime of events we had experienced together as husband and wife. The next experience in store for us, probably the toughest one of them all, we'd go through together as friends. Strangely, this felt good. I wanted to be Sean's friend, his best friend, there for him whenever he'd need me. I picked the afghan up off the floor and covered him.

"Hey," Sean whispered as he woke.

"Hi, I didn't mean to wake you. Sorry," I said. "I'm just checking in on Dad."

"How is he?" he asked, trying to get up. But I motioned for him to stay in his recliner. I wasn't staying but a minute and he needed the rest, too.

"He's doing fine. He seems comfortable."

"Good. Thanks for coming over and checking on him." Sean pulled the afghan over his shoulder. I touched his arm and said goodbye.

Driving home, I was so exhausted, I could barely keep my

eyes open. Finally in my apartment, I dropped everything at the door. I undressed on my way to the bedroom and climbed into bed, not even bothering to shower. Sleep came quickly, a welcome, thick, and dreamless sleep.

I was awakened by the sound of a couple of blue jays engaged in an act of domestic violence. So much for sleeping in on my day off.

From the comfort of my bed, I picked up the phone and dialed Rosetti's number.

"Hey, are you up?" I asked.

"Yes. Coffee's on and I just made myself some toast."

"You sound bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning. You must've had a good night. Did you catch your criminals last night?"

"Not yet, but we're closing in on them. Pam Grier, one of the detectives I'm working with, made a couple of good drug buys last night, so the evidence against these guys keeps piling up."

"Sounds dangerous," I said. "What a way to make a living."

"It's not like you have the safest job, either. You never know who's going to come through those doors looking for drugs. Those addicts are so desperate to get their fix, they don't care what they do or who they do it to to get them. All they care about is their next high," Rosetti said. "Just last week, an addict walked into a doctor's office in broad daylight and demanded OxyContin. Thank God the office manager acted quickly and pushed the panic button attached to their alarm system. Our guys got there before anyone got hurt."

"It's scary to think that someone can be so desperate for something that they would hurt or even kill another person to get it."

"I hope hospital security keeps you guys safe there in the ER. I worry about you a lot over there, especially on night shift," Rosetti said.

"There's usually an officer stationed in the triage unit all night. They do a pretty good job. And if they get into trouble, they call the city police or sheriff's department for backup."

"Speaking of night shifts, I can't wait to get off this one and

back to a normal life. My social life is taking a beating.”

I laughed. “Rosetti, your social life could use a rest.”

“By the way, how are you doin’ with Regan being back and all the drama that must come with that?”

“Okay, I guess. I’m still numb. So much has happened in the last twenty-four hours, it feels like a bad dream.”

Rosetti’s comments made me realize I had a lot to catch her up on. So I did, telling her that Regan had been Ed’s hospice nurse, that Sean didn’t want her, and that Regan had fallen and delivered her baby early.

“Sounds pretty traumatic. Is she okay?” Her inquiry sounded born more from obligation than true concern. For a moment, I entertained the idea that Rosetti was jealous of Regan, and I had to smile.

“Regan is fine. But the baby got into trouble right after I talked to you last night. Her heart stopped. It was pretty scary for a while, but they got her back. She was life-flighted to Children’s Hospital.”

“She?”

“Yes, a little girl. Regan named her Tess.”

“What about the father? What’s he like?”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t there.”

“He wasn’t there when his wife was giving birth?”

“No. Like I said, everything happened so fast, by the time I tried to reach him...well, that’s a whole different story.”

“What do you mean?” Rosetti asked. “Don’t leave me hanging.” So I told her all about my call to Clancy’s, as well.

“So the entire night, I’m going over in my head how I’ll tell Regan that her husband’s been lying to her. It was really eating me up inside because she’s got enough to deal with. So I’m getting ready to tell her in private after the baby was flown out, but guess who’s there?”

“The husband?”

“No, Regan’s mother.”

“Oh, God...not that psycho. Does she still want to kill you for turning her daughter into a lesbian?”

“Rosetti!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it? I mean, she did threaten you.”

“She never meant that. Besides, Regan put her in her place. But the best thing was, Regan knew that her husband wasn’t at Clancy’s all along. Apparently, she’d tried to call him there, too, at some point. She knows her husband is lying to her.”

“So if she knew he wasn’t there, why did she give you the number to call him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she was hoping he would be there.”

“Wow, what a mess,” Rosetti said. “Makes our lives sound boring, doesn’t it?”

“I like boring.”

“So if Regan’s marriage is on the rocks, you could step right in and rescue her from her miserable life.”

“Rosetti, are you nuts?”

“Well, I think she came back for a reason. Maybe she realized what she left behind,” Rosetti said, crunching her toast in my ear.

“She’s obviously moved on with her life. There’s no room for me.”

“If she has any sense, she’ll realize that you were the best thing that ever happened to her, Mina. She was crazy to leave you in the first place.”

Her comment made me blush. Was she pushing me to try to pursue Regan? Part of me wanted to, but I was afraid I’d set myself up for another heartache.

“You there?” Rosetti asked.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“You okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“I think she might have come back for you.”

“You know, Page said the same thing. How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because I know you, Mina. I know what a great person you are and she’d be crazy not to come back to you.”

“But what if I don’t want her back?”

I think my comment caught Rosetti by surprise. She’d been by my side the entire time I pined away for Regan. I’m sure hearing

that now, when Regan was back, I was having doubts caught her off-guard. It caught me off-guard, too.

“I don’t get it. You yearn for this woman for years because she left you. She comes back and contacts you out of the clear blue, says she feels bad for leaving you like she did, and now, you’re not sure that’s what you want? No, I don’t get it.”

I didn’t get it, either, but something inside of me was throwing up all kinds of red flags. It was almost like it was too good to be true. I didn’t trust it.

We both were silent for a long time.

“I don’t know, Rosetti. Part of me wants to run right to her. Throw my arms around her and never let her go. But part of me is scared to death that if I do, she’ll up and leave again. I guess I wish I could be sure of her intentions.”

“I think we both need a night out to mull this over and over again,” Rosetti said. “I’m off duty until tomorrow night, so I’m all yours tonight.”

I didn’t respond immediately. Butterflies rustled in my belly. Rosetti and I had always been great friends, but another reason I was apprehensive about Regan’s return was that there was a secret place in my heart that flickered a hope that my relationship with Rosetti could be more.

I was attracted to her from the day we met when she admitted her mother into the nursing home where I worked. Her dark Italian looks and perfect white teeth made my heart skip. She was patient and gentle with her aging mother, which made her even more attractive. But back then, my life had been a mess. I was still married to Sean and was in the middle of the rocky affair with Regan, an affair destined for a devastating end. Rosetti helped me through the devastating end of my affair and my marriage. She was stable, kind, and caring, all the things I thought made a person a perfect candidate for a long-term relationship.

Rosetti’s view of herself was quite different. “Any woman crazy enough to get involved with me must be insane,” she would always say, referring to her wild past in her rowdy days in Cleveland. That and the fact that she was still seeing her longtime girlfriend, Linda, helped me push any romantic thoughts about

her to the back of my mind where they belonged. Rosetti and I were friends and that was that.

“Mina, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“How about dinner tonight at the Victorian Restaurant over by the lake?”

“You must have read my mind,” I said. “I’ve wanted to go back there for a long time.”

“The Victorian it is,” Rosetti said. “Be ready at seven. I’ll pick you up.”

“That sounds wonderful. See you at seven.”

I hung up the phone and burrowed deep beneath the bed covers. It felt so good just to lazily stretch out and relax. The only thing better than lounging here alone would be lying here with a lover I didn’t want to escape from in the morning. It had been quite some time since I’d had that luxury.

What if something were to happen between me and Rosetti? Would it be the beginning of something wonderful or the kiss of death to our friendship? Of course, I realized that for anything to happen between us, she would have to share the romantic feelings budding inside of me. And I didn’t think she did. I hated the fact that the two women I cared for most romantically didn’t return my feelings. For better or for worse, Regan and Rosetti were in my life but didn’t seem to want to share it as my partner.

I tried to get these thoughts out of my head, so I picked up the phone again and dialed Sean’s number to check on him and Ed. Sean picked up immediately. His voice sounded tired.

“You okay?” I asked, worried that perhaps this was too much for him after all.

“Yes, just tired.”

“How’s your dad doing?”

“He’s still pretty out of it. Do you think you can come over and check on him? I called hospice and they said it would be a while until they could send someone out. They told me they were having a hard time finding a replacement for Regan.”

“I’ll see if I can speed things up. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Last night after I got off the phone with you, Regan’s baby

suffered a cardiac arrest. Things didn't look so good for a while, but I think she'll be okay. The baby, I mean."

"Why do you think I want to hear anything about that?" His anger rose more quickly than I had imagined. "And why do you have anything to do with all that in the first place? Mina, stay away from that woman!"

"I'm an ER doctor and she came to the ER, Sean. It's my job to deal with her. I can't stay away."

"I know, I know." He paused, obviously trying hard to calm himself. Then he continued quietly. "I hope she's okay. And the baby, too."

"Yes, I think they'll both be fine. Sean, I..." I felt bad for having brought all this up. But I needed to talk about Regan. Sean, however, was not the person to talk to about this. I realized that.

"What?"

"Nothing. I... Let me get up and moving. I'll be there within the hour."

"Thanks, Mina."

I lay back on the pillows and thought about Sean, about how even though we were divorced, we managed to maintain a close and loving friendship despite our disagreements. I wanted to make sure that nothing would disturb that. I thought about Regan and the fact that I spent the past years yearning for her, imagining, hoping for a life with her, unable to truly move on without her. Then I thought about Rosetti, about our friendship, and the twinge of excitement that went through me when we were together. These were the three most important people in my life so far, and I needed to figure out what role I wanted them to play in the life I had yet to live.

I dialed the hospital's number and asked the operator to put me through to Regan's room. The phone rang about seven times. A male voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Is Regan Martin still there?"

"Regan Douglass?" The male voice became gruff.

"Yes, I'm sorry, Regan Douglass. This is..."

"Wait a minute. She's in the bathroom."

I heard him knock on the bathroom door. "Regan.... phone..." he said and waited. He never did come back on the line. Regan picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Regan, it's Mina...is everything all right?"

"Oh, hi, Mina, yes, I'm...I'm getting ready to go home. My OB just released me. Jim and I will be going right over to Children's Hospital to check on Tess. She's supposed to have her echocardiogram this afternoon."

Of course, the gruff voice belonged to her husband. Regan was married. No matter what Page and Rosetti said about Regan having come back for me, she was married and had a child.

"Good. Sounds like the doctors over there are right on track," I said quietly, hoping she wouldn't notice the wave of sadness sweeping over me. "Are you doing okay?"

There was a heavy silence on the other end of the phone line.

"Regan...?"

"I'm okay...I better get going. The nurse's aide is here with a wheelchair to take me downstairs."

"Okay. Please keep me posted. On Tess's condition, I mean."

"I will. And thanks, Mina...thanks for everything."

"You're welcome. I hope everything turns out all right." I really did want her to be all right.

"Thanks," Regan whispered into the phone.

I rubbed my head as I pulled myself out of bed. There was too much going on, too much emotional turmoil, too much to think about; it actually made my head ache and my stomach churn. I poured water into the Mister Coffee and went into the bathroom to clean up while the coffee brewed. There is nothing like the smell of fresh coffee brewing to clear your head.

Halfway through my second cup, the phone rang. It was my mother.

"Mina, I've been trying to get a hold of you for days. Where have you been?"

"Working. I've been at the hospital for the last day and a half," I said. "Oh and Sean's dad is sick. I've been over there a lot, too."

“Ed? What’s wrong with him?”

“Lung cancer. I’m afraid it doesn’t look good.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. Ed is such a nice man. Why does this stuff always happen to the good ones?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I wish I knew.”

“I hope you’re not still mad at me because of the other night. You haven’t returned any of my phone calls.”

“No, I’m not mad at you. I’m just busy, that’s all. Work takes a lot out of me.”

“I know it does. You’ve accomplished so much and not under the best circumstances, I might add.”

“Well, thank you, Mother. Thank you for noticing.”

“I’m so proud of you, and I know your father would be just as proud.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.”

Whenever my mother said these kinds of things, I always wondered how my father would feel about my life if he were alive today. We had been close. Losing him three months before my eighteenth birthday left a deep scar on my heart. I used to skip school to take care of him while he was sick. We talked a lot during those times. He taught me all the necessities for life, like how to balance a checkbook, how to fix a flat tire, and the importance of an oil change every three months. I loved him for who he was because at the time I felt loved for who I was.

I knew he would be proud that his daughter, who had struggled through high school to get Bs, actually made it through medical school. But I wasn’t sure how he’d feel about my lifestyle. Something deep inside told me he wouldn’t be so proud of that. That thought always made me sad. It somehow tainted the closeness we’d had when I was growing up.

My mother was the only one in my family who knew I was gay. I wouldn’t have told her, except when Sean and I were going through our divorce, he threatened that if I continued with the proceedings, he would “out” me to my family. I pleaded with him not to tell, but he was so adamant about it, I did the only thing I could do: I outed myself. I went to my mother’s house, sat her down, and told her the truth. It was one of the roughest nights of

my life. My mother and I sat at her kitchen table and cried. I cried for having to tell her something I knew would hurt her. She cried for all the lost dreams she'd had for me. But it never changed the way she felt about me. She still loved me no matter what. I would always love her for that.

Mom and I hung up the phone with plans for me to come to her house for dinner the following Sunday. She was cooking homemade ravioli, my favorite.

"You can even bring that Rosetti girl if you want," Mom said. "I bet she could use a home-cooked meal, too."

It was four o'clock by the time I arrived at Sean's. Ed was still lethargic.

"What meds are you giving him?" I asked, thinking that perhaps the dosage needed an adjustment.

Sean opened the kitchen cabinet to retrieve Ed's medication bottles.

"Just this." Sean handed me the small amber bottle of morphine. It was almost empty.

"How much pain medicine are you giving him?"

"Two droppers full, ten milligrams."

"Two? That's too much. He's only supposed to get one dropper full. You can knock out his breathing drive with that much narcotic."

Sean turned pale. "Oh, my God, Mina...I could have killed him. See, I can't do this, I almost killed him."

"Of course you can. You made a mistake. It's a good thing we caught it now. Don't give him any more until he wakes up a bit. If he's in pain, crush up some Tylenol and mix it with some pudding or applesauce. Sometimes that's just as good as the hard stuff."

I went into the living room to check on Ed. I still couldn't believe that the man lying there was the same man who danced the chicken dance with me at my wedding a few years earlier. Ed was a wonderful man, a respected police officer, and a great father to Sean—and to me for that matter. I slid my hand into his as he slept. His hand was bony and cool. I took his pulse to make sure he was still with us. He was.

My heart felt heavy and I couldn't hold back the tears. What did this kind, gentle man do to deserve this, I thought as I watched his skeletal chest rise and fall. I guess it is true what they say, that only the good die young. Maybe that means there is something better out there. Maybe the afterlife doesn't have any of the pain and disappointment that this life has.

"He seems to be doing okay," I said to Sean as I returned to the kitchen. "Just don't give him any more morphine until tomorrow. He's resting comfortably and his vital signs are stable."

"Thanks for checking him, Meen. Can you stay for dinner? I could throw a couple of steaks on the grill."

"Thanks, but I can't. Rosetti and I made plans for dinner tonight."

"Oh...I thought she was working that drug stakeout...that case over already?"

"Not quite. She's just off tonight. We're really just getting together to have a few drinks and catch up." I wanted to spend time with Rosetti alone, just the two of us. We rarely got to do that anymore because of our work schedules and I missed it a lot.

"Well, maybe some other night then," Sean said.

"I'd like that." I hugged him goodbye.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rosetti arrived on my doorstep at seven o'clock sharp for our dinner date.

"Boy, you're a sight for sore eyes" I hugged her hello. "You smell good, too. What is that stuff?"

"Nautica."

"Isn't that a men's cologne?"

Rosetti nodded.

"Since when did you start wearing men's cologne?"

"Since I figured out women love it... You liked it, see."

I giggled. "Yes, I guess you're right."

The restaurant was crowded as usual. Good thing we had a reservation. Rosetti ordered us two glasses of wine as we waited at the bar while they got our table ready. I hadn't been in this place for a long time. The last time I'd been here was with Sean. We had had a huge fight, which marked the beginning of the end of our marriage.

When our table was ready, Rosetti and I were disappointed when a male maître d' came to escort us to our seats and not the hot hostess with the Martina Navratilova accent. "Where's Marina?" Rosetti asked as we weaved around linen-covered tables.

"She doesn't work here anymore. Something about her 'being inappropriate' with some of the female customers," the waiter said arrogantly.

Rosetti and I looked at each other, astonished and more than a little let down by the news. We followed the maître d' into the solarium, the most beautiful part of the restaurant with its lush hydrangea plants, babbling stone water fountains, and large, open

skylights. The maître d' pulled my chair out for me, and I sat down. He didn't, however, pull Rosetti's chair out for her.

"I must really be obvious," Rosetti said, sitting across from me at the small table.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, this guy pulls your chair out because you're a woman... obviously a woman. Me, on the other hand... I don't think he's so sure."

"Rosetti, don't be ridiculous."

"You don't think he looks at me and sees dyke?"

"Maybe he was confused by the scent of the men's cologne you're wearing."

Rosetti and I laughed.

"I don't know what he thinks, and for that matter, I don't care and neither should you," I said. "He's a waiter in a restaurant. It's not like he'll be important in your life."

"We'll see what kind of service we get. You know, I've been to nice places like this where they've refused to wait on me and my friends or just avoided us altogether."

"Really?"

"Yes. And it wasn't too long ago. I was out with some friends at a chain restaurant just off the highway. We got seated, but sat there for almost forty-five minutes without a waitress in sight. When I approached the night manager about the poor service, he said they were busy, which was a bunch of bull, because half the restaurant was empty. So we left."

"That's terrible. Who would have thought that in this day and age, this kind of prejudice still existed?"

"I know, it's sad, but true," Rosetti said as she unfurled her silverware from its napkin cocoon.

"Maybe if I grew my hair longer," Rosetti said, checking her reflection in the back of her tablespoon.

"Rosemary, you're beautiful just the way you are."

Rosetti looked up, surprised. "Why, Dr. Caselli, you've never said that to me."

I felt my face flush. Awkward silence hung between us. I fidgeted with my napkin, while Rosetti played with her silverware.

We both seemed relieved when our waiter arrived to take our order. Rosetti ordered the bleu cheese-crust ed filet, and I ordered the salmon. We both ordered more wine.

“You know the last time I was here was with Sean. You were here too that night, with Linda. Remember?”

“Oh, yes, I do remember. Wow, that was a long time ago.”

“How’s Linda been?” I asked, cautiously treading on territory I wasn’t sure I wanted to go into. “I haven’t heard you talk much about her lately.”

“Oh, I think our relationship is finally over,” Rosetti said, fingering the stem of her empty wine glass.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, but my heart skipped a beat indicating that no, I wasn’t the least bit sorry to hear of her impending break-up with Linda. I gathered my wits and quieted my heart and tried to act concerned. “What happened?”

“She went back to her husband.”

“Husband? I didn’t know she was married.”

“Neither did I,” Rosetti said with a chuckle. “But now that I look back, there were so many clues.”

“Like what?”

“Like she could only come here every other weekend...and never on a holiday. I wanted to take her skiing in Vermont over Christmas last year. She said she couldn’t go because she had to take care of her sick grandfather. Sick grandfather...right. I called her on Christmas morning to wish her Merry Christmas and some guy answers the phone...he didn’t sound old or sick.”

“Wow, I had no idea. I thought things were going pretty well between you two.”

“Looks can be deceiving. I guess that’s how it is when you’re doing the long-distance thing. You never really know what’s going on when you’re not around. You know, Mina, for some reason, I can’t seem to break this cycle of being attracted to women who are unavailable.”

“How do you mean?”

“I always seem to go for the women with a lot of baggage or women who are attached to someone else. Why would anyone want to go through the aggravation of sorting through all that?”

The waiter brought our salads and second round of wine.

"I don't know, Rosetti. Obtaining the unobtainable seems a big turn-on for you. I would imagine that it's pretty exciting at first, but frustrating after a while." I took a sip of my wine, wondering if I seemed unobtainable to her.

"Speaking of frustrating..." Rosetti dumped her silver cup of Thousand Island dressing over her salad. "What's up with you and Regan?"

"Nothing's up with me and Regan. Remember, she has a husband and now a kid, too. Where in that equation do you see a place for me?" I took another healthy sip of wine.

"I still think she wants you back. I think it took this long for her to realize what she had."

I didn't respond. Rosetti rapidly stabbed another bunch of lettuce leaves saturated in thick orange dressing and shoveled them into her mouth.

"And if her marriage is on the rocks, who better to step in and rescue her and help raise her kid but you?" Rosetti munched a mouthful of salad. She always ate like it was her last meal.

"Ro, she didn't come back here because she wanted to be with me. She's married...to a man, which tells me that our being together in the first place was a mistake. Anyway, you know I don't want kids. Children are the biggest responsibility anybody can take on. I don't need any more responsibility in my life right now. And anyway, if I wanted kids, I would've stayed married to Sean."

"But what if the reason she did come back was to be with you? Would you take her back?"

Rosetti's frankness caught me by surprise. Why was she being so direct about this? Did it really matter to her that much? I set my fork down and thought about the question. Considering Regan's recent return and the undeniable emerging of my deeper feelings for Rosetti, I really needed to think this out.

"At this point, I don't know. I mean, I know I still love her. Heck, I prayed for five years that she would come back someday so we could be together, but now that she is back, I'm terrified of getting my heart handed to me in little pieces again. It's like the

emotional part of me wants to rescue her from her idiot husband and take care of her and Tess forever, then the logical part of me wants to run away from her as fast as I can.”

Rosetti’s gaze lowered as did her voice. “Regan would be a fool not to try and put things back together with you. She’s not going to find a better person in this world than you,” Rosetti said, her face clouded with sadness.

The waiter brought our dinners, and suddenly, neither of us was very hungry. What had just happened here? Our evening out was supposed to be a break from all the drama we’d been going through, but it seemed to only add to it. First the awkward silence over my comment about Rosetti’s looks and now this. Normally, we could talk about anything and everything. Now there seemed to be a pink elephant in the room that neither of us knew what to do with.

We picked at our dinners and split the house dessert specialty: volcano fudge cake that came with the meal. It was a piece of chocolate cake with a hole cut out of the center and filled with warm hot fudge and topped with whipped cream and a Maraschino cherry.

Rosetti plucked the cherry off the top of the cake and ate it. She held the empty stem between her thumb and index finger.

“You know, I once asked a woman out only because she could tie a knot in one of these with her tongue.”

“You have tremendously high standards, Rosetti.” I sipped my third glass of wine, enjoying the sensuous taste of wine and chocolate and the relaxing buzz it created. “I admire that in you.”

“Thank you,” she said proudly, twirling the stem between her fingers.

Rosetti was quiet again as she sat across from me mashing her piece of volcano cake down with her fork. Her dessert looked more like a chocolate pancake than a luxurious high-end dessert. Her silence was driving me crazy because it was so unlike her.

“Ro, you seem a million miles away. Is everything all right?”

“Huh?” She looked up from her pulverized piece of volcano cake.

“What are you thinking about?”

Rosetti straightened in her chair. “If you really want to know, last night, when I was sitting on that narcotics stakeout, I started thinking about my life and the fact that at any minute, something could go terribly wrong.”

“Are you in some kind of danger you’re not telling me about?”

“No, Mother Caselli, nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Then what is it?”

“I know this might sound stupid...but...I’m afraid I’m going to end up...alone,” Rosetti whispered.

“Alone? You?”

Rosetti nodded.

“There’s no way you’re going to end up alone. You’re a wonderful person. You have too much to offer some lucky girl to spend your life alone.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know you. I know how charming you can be.”

Rosetti laughed. “Charming?”

“Yes, charming. I’ve seen your performances. You’ve had women practically eating out of your hand. And you’re a good person, too,” I said, not wanting to give the impression that I thought Rosetti only had superficial qualities.

Rosetti shifted in her chair. She looked even more uncomfortable now than she did during dinner. “Mina...”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking about this for a long time, and I don’t know if this is the right time to tell you, especially now that Regan is back.”

“Tell me what?”

“When I first met you, you know at the nursing home when you took care of my mom...”

“Yes...go on.”

“I...I had a little...crush on you,” she said tentatively, as if testing the idea.

“You did?” I was excited at the prospect that Rosetti may share the same feelings for me that I’ve been hiding from her.

“Actually, it was more than a crush, but when I found out you were married and who you were married to... then about Regan... I never did anything about it. And I’m glad I never did anything about it because we got to be such good friends.”

“Oh. Yes, friends we are.” My heart sank. Crap, I knew it was too good to be true.

Rosetti nervously played with her butter knife now since the waiter had removed the plate of mashed chocolate cake. She twirled the knife over and over. With each turn of the knife, the blade tip or the handle landed on the table with a rhythmic *thunk*. Finally, she looked up at me. Her gaze was as soft as a caress. “I guess I want to know why after all this time we never got together.”

My breath caught in my throat. “I guess it just wasn’t the right time for us. Like you said, when we met, my life was a mess between Sean and Regan. And then you were involved with Linda...”

“I see,” Rosetti said, disappointment brimmed in her eyes.

My heart pounded. I felt like if I didn’t take a chance and come clean with Rosetti about what I’d been feeling about her, I’d lose the chance forever. I reached across the table and covered her hand with mine. “But, Rosetti, I’m not married anymore and you are no longer with Linda.”

“What about Regan?”

“Regan’s not here. I’m willing to forget about Regan if you are...”

Rosetti smiled, and in that moment, it was settled. She’d come up to my place like so many times before, but this time not as a friend, but as my new lover. And we would see what would happen. The check came and we both went for it. I let Rosetti win only because she was carrying a gun and I didn’t want things to get ugly.

Rosetti held my hand as she drove us to my apartment. Her hand was strong and gentle. I looked at our hands clasped together and felt a tingling in the pit of my stomach. Little was said between us as I’m sure her mind was reeling just as fast as

mine was. In the parking lot of the apartment complex, Rosetti got out and opened my car door, something she'd never done before. It felt kind of weird and kind of nice. But once we got in my apartment, that's when things got really awkward. Rosetti, who used to roam around my apartment freely, as if it was her own, was now suddenly stiff and jumpy. She stood in the center of the living room with her hands stuffed into her pants pockets, appearing afraid to touch anything.

I walked over to the couch and sat down. Rosetti shyly followed.

"Are you okay?" I asked, concerned about her unusual behavior.

Rosetti nodded. "Yep, I'm fine." She nervously looked around the room. I was almost beginning to think that she was looking for an escape route. Maybe this wasn't going so well. The clock ticking above the couch was the only sound in the room. There was so much to be said, but neither one of us knew where to start. Neither of us had expected this to be so hard. What had felt so right in the restaurant and in my mind suddenly didn't feel right at all.

The phone rang and we both jumped.

I let it ring. This moment was crucial, a turning point in our relationship, and I didn't want anything to interrupt it.

"Aren't you gonna get that?" Rosetti said, fidgeting with a crease in her slacks.

I looked over at the phone. "No. Let the machine get it."

"What if it's something important? What if your mom's sick or if Sean's dad's in trouble?"

The answering machine clicked on before I could reach the phone.

"Mina, it's Regan. I'm sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could..." Her crying interrupted her words. "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind coming to the hospital. Tess is in surgery...Jim left...I don't have anyone I can count on. I'm so scared she's not going to make it."

As I listened to Regan, I looked up at Rosetti and clearly saw the disappointment in her eyes. Rosetti nudged me to answer the

call before Regan hung up.

"Regan, I'm here. Can you hold on a minute?" I then covered the phone receiver with my hand. Before I could say a word, Rosetti spoke up.

"Go, Mina...you know you have to go."

"Come with me," I said. "We have a lot to talk about."

"Don't you think me being there would make things a little uncomfortable? She never did like me much."

"But..."

Rosetti reached out and touched my face. "Your friend needs you. Go do what you do best. I'll be here when you get back. That's if you want me to be here."

"Yes, I do."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded.

Rosetti smiled.

I lifted my hand from the receiver. "Regan, I'll be there in about fifteen minutes," I said and hung up.

"I'll just crash here on your couch." Rosetti pulled the red and white afghan off the back of the couch. "Wake me up when you get back, okay?" she said as she snuggled in.

"I will." I hugged her goodbye. Our hug felt different this time. More intimate, no longer just a hug between friends. "I'll be back as soon as I can." I kissed her on the cheek. Rosetti took my face into her strong, capable hands and kissed me gently on the lips. Fireworks exploded in my head and heart. The kiss was slow and sweet, and I knew that nothing between us would ever be the same again.

"Is that okay?" Rosetti whispered as her gaze met mine. Her dark brown eyes were gentle and contemplative.

"It's more than okay," I said, stroking her soft cheek. "It's great."

CHAPTER NINE

I stepped off the elevator onto the second floor of Children's Hospital and found Regan sitting alone on one of the vinyl green waiting room couches. Her once shiny hair now hung in dull clumps around her pale face. It looked like she hadn't slept in days.

Regan stood when she saw me. "Oh, Mina, thank you for coming." Regan hugged me hello. It felt strange to have her so close to me again. Almost like a dream.

"How long has Tess been in surgery?" I asked as I broke our embrace.

"About two hours now."

"What happened? I thought they were just going to do an echocardiogram."

"They did the echo, then an angiogram and found that Tess has a hole in her heart. He said it's not uncommon in premature births, but they needed to surgically close it."

"Yes, that's right. I know it sounds scary, but she should be fine."

"I hope so. I don't know what I would do if anything happened to Tess."

"Where's your husband?"

"He left. He couldn't stand the waiting. He doesn't like hospitals anyway. His dad had a big heart attack a few years ago and died in the emergency room. That was his only experience with hospitals, up until now."

I sat next to Regan on the waiting room couch. "I really appreciate you coming here," she said.

“No problem. You sounded so upset on the phone. I know this is a hard thing to go through.”

Regan nodded. “You know, I always knew I could count on you.” She paused for a minute. “Even when I treated you so badly. I am so sorry.” Regan reached out and took my hand into hers. Suddenly, the last five years slowly started to melt away. It felt good to be close to Regan. It felt good to be here for her. But most of all, it felt good to hear her apologize for leaving like she did. Her apology validated what I thought we’d had together.

As time ticked by, I was beginning to wonder if they had run into a complication during Tess’s surgery. I couldn’t shake the feeling that although I wanted to be here for Regan, it felt like a big inconvenience having to leave Rosetti to come here. I thought about Rosetti and what she might be doing since I left. I wondered what she might be thinking, and I hoped that she wasn’t worried about me being here with Regan. After all, I was here as Regan’s friend and nothing more. I needed to be realistic about this. Regan had her life, and I needed to move on with mine. And after tonight, I hoped it included being much more intimate with Rosetti.

I looked over at Regan. Although she looked exhausted, she showed no signs of giving up this vigil until she got word that Tess was okay. I’m sure she was running on pure adrenaline from fear that her child would not be all right. I on the other hand was finding it hard to stay awake. It was getting late and my eyelids were getting heavy. I needed some caffeine.

“I’m going to get some coffee. Do you want anything?” I yawned.

“A cup of hot tea would be nice.”

“Wait here, I’ll be right back.” I headed down the hallway to the vending machine area.

I returned a few minutes later with my coffee, Regan’s tea, a package of Ho Hos, and a PayDay candy bar.

“Here, it’s not the best nutrition-wise, but it’s something.” I handed Regan the tea, the Ho Hos, and the candy bar.

“Thank you.” She offered a weak smile. She set the Ho Hos aside and fingered the orange and white wrapper on the candy bar.

“Do you remember the weekend when we existed on these alone?” Regan asked.

“Yes. PayDay candy bars and Seagram’s Citrus Wine Coolers. It was the weekend we snuck down to Charleston. I told Sean we were going to a bridal shower for your cousin.”

“That was some weekend. I don’t think we ever left that room.”

“Only long enough to buy more candy bars and wine coolers.”

The automatic glass doors of the surgery suite swooshed open. A young man dressed in surgical greens and a white lab coat emerged.

“Mrs. Douglass?” the man asked.

Regan stood. “Yes.”

“Mrs. Douglass, I’m Dr. Wright. I’m one of the surgeons who operated on your daughter.”

“How is she? Is she going to be all right?” Regan asked.

“The surgery went well. We were able to repair her heart valve and close the foramen. We did experience a few problems getting her blood pressure back up after the surgery, so we need to monitor her closely. She’s going to be in intensive care for a few days, then once she’s stable, we’ll move her to the regular floor.”

“When can I see her?” Regan asked.

“Give us about thirty minutes to get her settled. I’ll send one of the nurses out to get you once she’s ready.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“It sounds like Tess is going to be okay,” I said.

Regan started to cry. I put my arms around her and she sobbed into my neck. The closeness of her sent a shiver through my insides.

“I was so scared that there was something wrong with her that couldn’t be fixed.”

“I know. I bet you were. But it looks like she’s going to be just fine.” I stroked Regan’s hair.

“Get your hands off my wife!” came from the elevator bank.

Regan and I turned and saw Jim walking toward us. We broke our embrace. The fear I saw in Regan’s eyes told me this could get ugly.

“What do you think you’re doing here with my wife?”

“Jim...Don’t. I called her. I didn’t know who else to call. Mom’s home taking care of Dad...you left...remember you said you couldn’t take it anymore?”

Jim stepped closer. So close I could smell the Jack Daniels on his breath. His eyes were bloodshot. His entire body trembled when he spoke.

“Well, we don’t need no lesbian doctor here, so I suggest you git,” Jim said in his slow Southern drawl.

The lump in my throat made it impossible for me to speak. Jim looked me up and down as if sizing me up like he was going to hit me. Slowly, I stepped back.

Regan broke the deadly silence. “Jim, the doctor said Tess is going to be fine.” She was trying to divert his attention.

“My little girl is going to be...fine?” Jim repeated.

“Yes. The doctor was just here. He said we could see her in half an hour.”

“Praise the Lord,” Jim said, hands folded across his heart and eyes gazing skyward. Regan took Jim by the arm and led him to one of the waiting room chairs.

“Honey, sit here a minute. I know this has been hard on you,” Regan said.

Jim complied like an obedient child. Tears streamed down his unshaven face.

Glad that the attention was diverted from me, I slipped into the ICU to see what progress they were making with Tess. They had her in a cubicle with wires hooked to monitors and tubes coming out of everywhere. You couldn’t tell what Tess looked like for all the medical hardware covering her tiny body. Relief swept over me as I watched her heart monitor flashing a normal rhythm.

“Can I help you?” One of the nurses approached me when she found me standing next to Tess’s crib.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Caselli from City Hospital,” I said. “Tess’s mother is a good friend of mine, and I told her I’d check on her. So how’s she doing?”

“She’s stable right now. They had some problems with her blood pressure in surgery. It dropped dangerously low, but Dr.

Wright was able to get it back up. She'll be with us a couple of days, but by the looks of things, I think she'll do fine."

"That's good news. Thank you. Do you know when her mom can see her?"

"In about ten minutes. I have to get one more set of vital signs."

"Do you mind if I hang out a while? I just want to keep an eye on her until her parents have seen her."

"No, not at all. There's a chair in the monitor room behind the glass partition." She then went about checking Tess's vital signs.

It was past midnight before Regan and Jim were brought in to see Tess. I stood behind the partition and watched as the nurse led them to Tess's bedside. Jim stood next to Regan, obviously very drunk. I could tell by the look on Regan's face she was trying to be brave about the whole thing, listening intently as the nurse went over Tess's care and condition. It doesn't matter how much medical education you have, when it comes to your own child, you're just as vulnerable as any other parent; sometimes it's worse because you know what can go wrong.

The nurse cradled Tess in her arms and offered her to Regan. Regan held her daughter as tightly as the wires and tubes would allow. Jim stood at the bedside and looked on. Without warning, Jim fainted and crashed to the floor. Regan leapt out of his way, protecting Tess from her drunken father's fall.

Three scrub-clad nurses rushed into the cubicle to see what had happened. One nurse checked his pulse, another checked his blood pressure, while yet another waved a pledget of smelling salts under his nose. Once he regained consciousness, they hoisted his one hundred eighty-pound carcass into a wheelchair and wheeled him out into the hall to give him some air.

Once Jim was gone, I stepped out from behind the glass partition.

"How's she doin'?" I asked Regan.

"Mina, where have you been?"

"I slipped into the ICU while you were trying to talk Jim down."

"I was afraid he was going to hurt you."

“Does he get that bent out of shape all the time?”

Regan shook her head and looked down at Tess. I didn’t believe her.

“Mina, she looks so helpless,” Regan said as she stroked Tess’s forehead, the only part that wasn’t attached to wires or electrodes.

“The nurses say she’s doing fine. The surgery went well, except for the blood pressure drop, but by the look of her monitors, that’s under control.”

“Do you think they’ll let me stay with her tonight?”

“I’m sure they will. I’ll ask one of the nurses to get you a recliner or something brought in here.”

I turned to leave, but Regan grabbed my arm. “Thank you... thank you for everything. I know this isn’t easy for you and I know...”

“It’s okay. You’ve got a little girl to worry about. She needs you more than anybody right now.”

Regan’s red swollen eyes welled up with tears again.

“It’s going to be all right,” I said.

I went to the nurse’s station to arrange for Regan’s overnight stay at her daughter’s bedside. They brought in a recliner and placed it next to Tess’s crib. Regan sat down, still cradling her new baby daughter.

“I better be gone by the time Jim feels well enough to get back in here. Will you be okay?”

“Yes, I think so.” Regan forced a smile.

“All right then. You know you can call me anytime. I’m back on duty tomorrow afternoon at the hospital, but please call me and let me know how she’s doing.”

“I will.”

I left the ICU and took the stairs to the first floor. The regular entrance was closed and wouldn’t reopen again until six the next morning. I slipped into the back of the emergency room and exited through the physician’s entrance. Out in the cool night air, I remembered that Rosetti was waiting for me in my apartment, asleep on my couch. I pressed the pedal to the metal and made it home in record time.

I was so caught up in fantasizing about what would happen when Rosetti and I would finally be alone together that I didn't notice that her car was gone when I pulled in. I went up the stairs as quietly as I could and gingerly unlocked the apartment door. The couch was empty, the afghan folded neatly and put back in its place. My heart sank.

I flipped on the kitchen light and found a note propped up against the microwave: *Got called out to work. I'll call you when I'm done. Love, RR.*

Sad and disappointed, I folded it up and held it in my hand as I curled up on the couch and pulled the afghan to my chin. The scent of Rosetti's Nautica cologne lingered on the afghan. I breathed in deeply, inhaling the scent for as long as I could, then drifted off into a deep and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

The late morning sun streamed through the front window. I rubbed my eyes and looked at the clock. It was almost eleven. I got up and stretched, and headed to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. I clicked on the TV for some company.

As the coffee brewed, a local news bulletin interrupted Hollywood Squares: *Three police officers have been shot, one fatally, in a drug bust gone bad early this morning on the west side. The officers are being treated at City Hospital. Their identities are being held pending notification of their families. Two suspects are still at large and are considered to be armed and dangerous.*

My body froze and my mouth went cotton dry. In my heart, I knew one of those officers was Rosetti. I picked up the phone and dialed Rosetti's number. After four rings, I got the machine.

"Rosetti, are you there? Ro, if you're there, please pick up. Rosemary...Rosemary..." When there was no response, I started to panic. My hand shook as I hung up the receiver. I called Sean, hoping that perhaps he'd know more.

"Hello?" Sean answered.

"Sean, it's Mina. Did you hear about the shooting?"

"Yes. I saw it on the news."

"Do you know if Rosetti was involved?"

"I don't know for sure, but it sounds like that was her unit out there. I called the chief, but he's keeping things pretty tight-lipped until the families are notified."

"Did he say anything about who the officers were?"

"He didn't. Like I said, he's not talking about anything. I've got the feeling that somebody screwed up somewhere, and that

screw-up cost someone's life."

Oh, God. The fear set in, the fear that no one talks about but is always present when you are the spouse or loved one of a police officer.

"I'm going over to the hospital," I said to Sean, unable to hide the panic in my voice.

"Let me know what you find out," Sean said. "And if I find out anything, I'll call you."

I shut down the Mister Coffee, threw on some clothes, and headed to the hospital to find Rosetti.

The ER was chaotic. Alarms going off, doctors, nurses, technicians, and paramedics running about trying to attend to the sick and wounded. I caught sight of Amy.

"Amy!"

"Hi, Dr. Caselli."

"Did you guys treat the police officers that were shot in the drug bust this morning?"

"Yes, two male officers, both with gunshot wounds. One got hit in the chest. The other was a shoulder injury. Both are up in surgery now," Amy said, brushing back loose strands of blond hair from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Do you know their names?"

She shook her head. "Everything was so crazy. We were just trying to get them stable enough to move them to the OR."

What about the third officer?

Amy looked down. "She was DOA."

"She?" My knees buckled and I felt faint.

"Are you okay, Dr. Caselli?" Amy lunged toward me and guided me to one of the desk chairs.

"I'm okay," I said. "It's just...a friend of mine was working last night...and I can't find her." My voice trailed off. "Did you see what she looked like...the DOA?"

Amy shook her head. "No. They took her to the morgue as soon as Dr. Morrison pronounced her." She paused, looking at me with obvious concern. "Doc, you don't look so good. Why don't you sit here for a few minutes? I'll go get you a glass of water. Okay?"

I nodded. As soon as Amy went to the kitchen to get the water, I ducked out of the ER and over to the service elevator. My body shook as I rode the elevator down to morgue in the basement. In my heart, I feared that I would find Rosetti lying there, cold and lifeless. All the things I never told her were racing through my mind. Why did I waste so much time? I loved Rosetti, why didn't I ever do anything about it? What if it was too late? How would I tell her mother? The news that her daughter was shot and killed in a drug bust would surely kill Teresa Rosetti, as well.

The hallway leading to the morgue was stone quiet. The only sounds were my footsteps and wildly beating heart. The closer I got to the morgue, the harder it became to breathe. Finally, I stood in front of the gray steel doors that led into the morgue. There was no attendant on duty, so I swiped my ID card through the electronic security system and punched in my number code. The metal doors unlocked with a click. My hand trembled as I turned the latch and opened the door, letting myself into the frigid vault. There in the middle of the room was a solitary gurney containing a body shrouded with a green surgical sheet. The bare feet were exposed, and a toe tag had been placed on the right foot. I walked over to gurney. I felt as if I was suffocating. Tears welled up in my eyes, and my throat closed off as I read the vital statistics off the tag: date of death, time of death, and gender of the deceased: female.

The anguish of fear over losing Rosetti hurt like a physical pain. Like someone reached into my chest and ripped out my heart and lungs. Tears streamed down my face as I finally found the courage to lift the green sheet from the body.

Grief and relief crashed into each other. When I saw the blood-clotted blond hair that cascaded over the green pillowcase, I knew in an instant that it wasn't Rosetti. The fatal gunshot wound was visible, in the right temple of the victim's head. By the distribution of powder tattooing, the shot looked to be fired at close range, possibly an execution-style killing.

The body under the sheet was Pam Grier. Detective Sergeant Pamela Grier was a six-year veteran of the drug task force. She worked undercover most of her career and was responsible for

bringing down some of the biggest drug operations in the area. All I could think about was that she was so young, not even thirty, and that she would be deeply missed by her family, her friends, and her colleagues in the department.

I gently touched Pam's face, then respectfully covered her body with the sheet and tucked it in around her tightly. As I walked out through the gray metal doors, the morgue attendant arrived with the chief of police and an elderly woman who walked with a cane. I nodded my hello to the chief, knowing that the woman with him was probably Pam's mother.

My heart ached for her. The thought of losing a child, no matter how old they were, was just devastating. Pam was the youngest of four children and the only girl. Pam's brothers were much older than her. They were very protective of her, as well. As the metal doors slowly closed behind me, I heard the woman's sobs echo in the hollow halls of the morgue. I broke down, as well. I cried for Pam. I cried for her mother, too. No one should have to bury their child, no matter how old they are or how heroic the circumstances of their death.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was two thirty in the afternoon and still no word from Rosetti. I called her home again but got the machine. I had just enough time to call Sean before I had to leave for work to let him know the wounded officers were still in surgery but were going to be fine. He took it pretty hard when I told him Pam Grier was the officer who was killed.

"Pam was a good cop. I'd worked with her on a few cases. Very professional and a nice person, too," Sean said, his voice practically a whisper. "Our dads were on the police force together. Her dad retired when he was sixty and died of a massive coronary at sixty-two. It's funny, but Pam was the youngest of four kids, the only girl, and the only one that went into law enforcement."

"I was in the morgue when the chief brought her mom in to identify her. It was the saddest thing I ever saw," I said as feelings of grief came flooding back.

"The funeral will probably be on Tuesday."

"Are you planning on going?"

"I'd like to. I need to get someone to stay with Ed, though."

"Hospice should be able to get someone for a few hours or maybe my mom would be up to it."

"Your mom?" Sean asked, surprised.

"Yes. Anyway, she owes me. I got her out of a jam last week."

"What kind of jam could your mother get into?"

"Don't ask," I said. "It's much too complicated and bizarre to even think about."

Sean let it drop, so I continued. "I'll call her and see if she's

free. She took care of my dad all those years, I'm sure she won't have a problem with it."

"Okay. Let me know. Did you want to go to the funeral with me?"

"I'm scheduled to work the dayshift on Tuesday, but I can see if I can trade with someone or take it off all together."

"You know, those two guys are still out there," Sean said.

"I know. I hope they find them soon. Seeing one dead police officer was enough for me. They have to stop them before we lose any more."

"Oh, they'll find them. I wonder what shape they'll be in when they bring them in," Sean said. "Cop killers don't fare well in the streets or in prison."

When I got to the hospital, I was disappointed to find that Page was off and Dr. Morrison was filling in. Morrison stuck me in pediatrics again, and he took the easier assignment of caring for the adults. The ER had cleared out considerably since I'd been here earlier that afternoon. Delores, our ward clerk, handed me the chart for my first patient of the day: Courtney Blakeman, a seven-year-old who had fallen off her bike and suffered a broken arm. I read the chart, then reread it. It was difficult to concentrate on work when all I could think about were Rosetti's whereabouts.

I went though the motions and examined the girl who pulled away from me each time I tried to touch her arm. The girl's mother, dressed in Armani from head to toe, wasn't much help and seemed totally put out about having to be here.

"I need to make a phone call," Courtney's mother said, fishing around in her Louis Vuitton purse. She excused herself and stepped outside of the exam room curtain.

I asked Amy to step in and give me a hand with the examination. Amy comforted the shy girl by stroking her platinum blond head while I examined her.

"Doctor, look at this," Amy said, holding Courtney forward, exposing two huge bruises on either side of the girl's neck.

The bruises were old, probably about a week or two.

"Courtney, did you fall...another time...not off your bike like

this time?"

She looked down and shook her head.

"Did someone hurt you or hit you on your neck?"

No response.

"You have another boo boo here," I said, touching the area on her neck where the bruises were. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Courtney shook her head.

I stepped out behind the exam curtain to speak with Mrs. Blakeman.

"Mrs. Blakeman, Courtney has two large bruises on her neck. Any idea how that happened?"

"Probably when she fell off her bike," Mrs. Blakeman said, annoyed that I'd interrupted her phone call.

"These bruises are old...maybe a week or two. Do you remember anything happening then?"

"Not especially, she gets hurt a lot...kids...you know."

I ordered X-rays of Courtney's arm, neck, back, and chest, and sent her off to radiology with Ricky, the orderly. The girl's mother followed behind the gurney, her stiletto high heels clicking on the linoleum floor.

"Was that your friend...in the morgue this morning?" Amy asked as she pulled clean table paper down on the exam table to ready it for the next patient.

"No...no it wasn't," I said, feeling a bit embarrassed at my behavior earlier. "She was from my friend's unit, though." After a pause, I added, "She was only twenty-nine."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks...and thank you for—"

"Dr. Caselli," Delores interrupted. "You have a call on line one." Delores stood at the desk holding the receiver out to me.

"Hello?" I said, anxiously praying it was Rosetti on the other end of the line.

"Meen, it's Sean."

My hope slowly deflated.

"Hi, Sean, everything all right?"

"I just thought you'd want to know I found out where Rosetti is."

“Where is she? Is she okay?”

“She’s out on special undercover assignment with her unit. They’re trying to track down the guys who killed Pam. There aren’t a lot of details because they’re undercover, but I thought you’d want to know.”

“Thanks. It means a lot to me,” I said, feeling a little better, but then realized Rosetti was out there tracking down the cop killer.

“Do you think she’ll be all right? I mean, this is a pretty dangerous situation, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s dangerous, but Rosetti is a good cop. I gotta tell ya, if I was out there in that situation, I’d definitely want her there with me,” Sean said. “She’s smart and doesn’t take chances.”

Sean’s comment made me proud of Rosetti, but it didn’t help me to worry less. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dr. Morrison approach the desk like he was on some sort of mission.

“Sean, I better—”

“Dr. Caselli...” Morrison cut in.

“I’ve got to go...thanks for the info. If you hear anything else, let me know.”

“I will,” Sean said and hung up.

“Caselli? Everything all right?” Morrison asked.

I nodded. I didn’t want him to know what was going on; I knew he wouldn’t understand or even care for that matter.

“All the nurses are busy with other patients, and you’re the closest thing to a nurse that’s available. I need help doing a spinal tap on a heifer of a woman in exam room one.”

I hung up the receiver and followed Morrison into exam room one. On the table, lying on her side was a three hundred-pound woman. Her color was gray and ashen. She didn’t look good. I was fuming inside. Not only was he disrespectful toward me, he was disrespectful to his patients, as well. If one of us residents spoke that way about a patient, we’d be out of the program before we knew what hit us. But because this guy was the head honcho, his behavior went unchecked.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Caselli. I’m going to help Dr. Morrison with your spinal tap.” I tried to conceal my anger at Morrison.

The woman nodded and clutched the thin white sheet that covered her rotund abdomen.

“Can you hold her on her side while I prepare the site?” Morrison asked.

I nodded, still fuming over his condescension. I took my place on the side of the gurney. I helped the woman stay on her side, then pulled the woman’s neck and knees forward and held her in the C position, to open up her lumbar vertebrae and allow Morrison to slide in and get his spinal fluid sample without hitting a bone or piercing a nerve. Morrison sat on the exam stool and wheeled over to the table. He gloved up and cleaned the woman’s back with disinfecting solution. I watched over the woman’s fleshy hip as Morrison put the syringe and needle together and palpated the woman’s back to find the correct anatomical structures to insert the spinal needle.

“Fuck...” Morrison muttered as he withdrew the needle. The wheels on the stool screeched as he pushed himself away from the patient, holding his right hand with his left. Morrison opened his left hand and exposed a bloody right index finger. Apparently, the idiot had stabbed himself with the spinal needle.

It took everything I had not to burst out laughing. Not a word was spoken as I handed Morrison a couple of gauze pads to wrap around his injury.

“I’ll get another kit.” I slipped out of the exam room. Once convinced I was out of Morrison’s earshot, I burst out laughing just as Amy came into the supply room.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Morrison stuck himself with a spinal needle doing a tap.”

“Again? He stuck himself last week while trying to inject a knee.”

I shook my head in disbelief.

I found another spinal tap kit and headed back to room one. The patient was still curled up on the gurney as Morrison sat on the metal exam stool nursing his still bleeding finger. He stood when I walked in with the kit.

“I’ll get a nurse to help you with that,” he said, brushing by me, then disappearing through the curtain.

A few minutes later, Amy appeared. We smiled knowingly at each other. Amy took her place in front of the patient, cradling her in her arms and talking softly to her all the while I did the procedure. I inserted the big bore needle into the woman's back and successfully withdrew the straw-colored fluid from her spine. I held pressure for a few minutes with a sterile gauze pad until the trickle of spinal fluid stopped.

"You'll need to lie flat for a while so you won't get a headache," I said as I labeled the specimen and packed it up to send to the lab for testing.

Amy helped position the patient on her back. She removed the sheet stained with Morrison's blood and covered her with a clean sheet. "Do you have family or someone waiting for you in the waiting room?" Amy asked. "They could come in now if they liked."

The woman closed her eyes and shook her head, I'm sure trying to blot out the whole experience.

I took the specimen out to the desk and charted that the spinal tap was successful.

"Where's Dr. Morrison?" I asked Delores as I slid the patient's chart in the lab rack.

"In the lounge, nursing his wound," Delores said with a long, exhausted sigh. "You have another patient in exam room four and your girl with the broken arm is back from X-ray. Her mother has been out here three times asking when she can take her home."

"Let Dr. Morrison know the tap is done and I sent it to the lab," I said, thinking that his patient does have something going on with her. It could be meningitis, encephalitis, or even a brain abscess, but whatever it was, he needed to get out here and take care of her.

I picked up Courtney Blakeman's chart. "I'll be in X-ray," I said. "And then I'll see the new patient."

"Could you see the new patient first and do us all a favor?" Delores asked, peering at me over her half glasses as she handed me the chart. "Looks like another gastro. He's been puking since he got here."

I saw the new patient, read Courtney's X-ray, which showed a

fracture of the distal ulna and old fractures of her fourth and fifth rib. I called the pediatric orthopedist on call to cast her, then went in to discuss the results with Courtney's mother.

But Courtney and her mother were gone.

"Anyone see where my girl patient went?" I asked a group of nurses and orderlies at the nurse's station.

Delores spoke up: "The mother signed the girl out AMA while you were in X-ray. She said she couldn't wait any longer and would be filing a complaint with administration, then stormed out, dragging the kid behind her."

"And you let her go?" I asked Delores. "Her arm is broken. She needs it set and casted."

"That mother was hell bent on leaving, and I wasn't about to get in her way," Delores said, her head weaving back and forth like Flip Wilson's Geraldine.

"Give me her chart. I'll give them some time to get home, then I'll call. This kid needs a cast, and her mother has a lot of questions to answer."

Delores handed me Courtney's chart. I dictated Courtney's X-ray results and updated the charting, noting that the patient had left against medical advice. I wrote admission orders on my gastro patient and dialed the Blakeman's number. Anger welled up in me when I heard: "I'm sorry, the number you've reached has been disconnected."

"Damn it!" I said.

"Address they gave is probably bad, too," Delores said matter-of-factly. "Apparently, these people have done this before."

"Now what do I do?"

"All we can do is file a police report and hope they show up again. I can notify the other ERs in the area. We can give them a description of the girl and her injuries."

"Good idea, Delores, thanks."

"Police report? Who needs a police report?" Dr. Morrison asked, stealthily emerging from the doctor's lounge, his index finger wrapped in fresh white gauze.

"My pediatric patient. Mother brought her in with a broken arm. Child fell off her bike. The X-rays showed some old

fractures. When I went in to talk to the mother about it, she was gone. Signed the little girl out AMA,” I said.

“Before you go jumping to conclusions, give the mother the benefit of the doubt. Give her a chance to get home and call the residence. Tell her to bring the girl back so we can treat her,” Morrison said.

“I tried that already. Phone’s disconnected.”

“Then I guess we have no choice,” Morrison said. “Delores, call the city police, tell them we need to file a report. Also, have them send an officer to the patient’s residence to see if they can locate the girl so we can treat her. You might want to notify social services, too.”

Delores let out a long weary sigh and dialed the phone.

Two more patients arrived in the ER—a three-year-old boy with a bee sting allergy and a kid who had swallowed a quarter. It was six thirty by the time I got them taken care of and discharged. It was time for a break.

The adult side of the ER was extremely quiet that night. Morrison still only had one patient. He was standing at the nurse’s station, trying to look busy.

“I’m going on break,” I told Morrison as I passed him at the nurse’s desk.

“Knock yourself out,” he said, never looking up from his chart.

I took the stairs down to the cafeteria, stopping at the payphone at the entrance. I dialed Rosetti’s number, only to get the answering machine once again. “Rosetti, if you get this message, please call me as soon as you get in. I’m at work and will be here until midnight. Please let me know that you’re—” The machine cut me off. I hung up the phone, frustrated and weary.

The dimly lit cafeteria was practically deserted. Only one worker was on duty, and a handful of medical staff was scattered throughout the shadowy dining room. When I felt anxious, I craved sweets, so I scanned the stainless steel counter for something to calm my nerves. I poured myself a cup of coffee and chose a piece of Boston cream pie to take the edge off. I paid for my coffee and pie and found a booth in the no smoking section of the

dining room. The first fork full of pie tasted like heaven: spongy, sweet, and creamy. I was halfway through the pie when Regan appeared.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I asked as Regan approached my table.

"The ward clerk said I might find you here. I hope you don't mind."

"No...not at all. Here, have a seat." I scooted around in the booth, making room for her to sit next to me. The scent of her freshly shampooed hair stirred memories in me that were better off forgotten.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?"

"No, nothing, I'm fine."

"What brings you to this hospital? Is Tess okay?"

"Tess is doing well. They let me feed her last night and again this morning."

"That's great. It sounds like she's going to be just fine."

Regan nodded. "I wanted to thank you again for coming to the hospital last night."

"No problem." I took a sip of my coffee. "I'm glad Tess is going to be okay. By the way, how's Jim doing? He didn't look too good when I left."

Regan looked down.

"I'm leaving him," Regan whispered.

"What?" I asked, not sure I heard her right.

"I'm leaving Jim. Actually, I'm going to ask him to move out."

"Are you sure you want to do that right now? What about the baby?"

Regan nodded. "I'm sure. He's been having an affair with some waitress from Clancy's. I guess telling me he worked at Clancy's was his way of trying to cover it up. He was with her at her apartment the night Tess was born. That's why we couldn't reach him to tell him about Tess."

"Oh, Regan, I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "How did you find out about the affair?"

"He told me. Apparently, he made a deal with God that if Tess

was okay, he'd come clean with me. He swears he'll never see the other woman again and wants to start over, but I can't, Mina. I don't think I can ever trust him again."

"Yes, trust is a hard thing to get back." I knew about that. That was exactly the thing I was struggling with regarding my feelings for Regan.

"But you have a baby now, and she needs a mother and a father. You don't think your marriage is worth saving, even for Tess?"

Regan paused for a moment. "There was never anything solid between Jim and I to begin with," Regan said, looking down at her hands twisting in her lap. "We only got married because we had to."

Things were starting to fit into place. But the one question that remained unanswered was why Regan chose now, after all this time, to seek me out. Was she here that night because she needed a shoulder to cry on or was there another meaning behind her coming back into my life?

"Mina?"

I looked up. "Huh?"

"You looked a million miles away."

I smiled, hoping she couldn't see my bewilderment.

Regan reached over and touched my hand, sending sparks of old emotions through my heart. Her gaze met mine, and I saw what I had wished for since the day she left. My heart pounded. Regan spoke: "Mina, I was wrong. I never should have left when I did." She shifted closer to me in the booth. "I got scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Scared of what I was feeling. Scared of how I felt about you. Scared because I knew it wasn't normal to feel that way about another girl."

"But you knew I loved you, wasn't that enough?"

"Caselli!" Dr. Morrison's voice boomed from behind me. Regan snatched her hand away from mine, burying it under the table.

"What?" I answered, irritated.

"I've been paging you. Are you ignoring me?"

I looked down at my pager. Sure enough, there were three unanswered pages. I had the thing on vibrate, but because my lab coat was so big, I didn't feel it when it went off.

"No...I'm sorry. I told you I was going on break."

He placed both hands on top of the table and leaned in toward me. "Well, break is over. The police are here to take your statement about the girl with the broken arm and there are two new admissions waiting for you. This isn't a lesbian pickup bar. This is a hospital," he snapped.

My face reddened with embarrassment and anger. "I'll take care of it," I said, meeting his rueful gaze but cowering inside.

Morrison's face was a glowering mask of rage. He pushed himself away from the table and stalked off toward the elevator.

"I'm sorry...I probably shouldn't have come here," Regan said.

"No...no...I'm glad you came...that guy can be an asshole sometimes. Anyway, we need to talk...I mean, we have a lot to talk about. I get off at midnight. Can you meet me somewhere?"

Regan looked relieved. "Yes, anywhere."

"Okay. Meet me at my apartment, say around twelve thirty?"

Regan nodded. "If for some reason I'm not there, don't worry. It doesn't mean I don't want to be there. It only means I can't get away. I'll call you...please don't call me..." she said, embarrassment evident in her voice.

"I understand," I said. Regan stood and let me out of the booth. Our bodies brushed against each other. I felt a familiar ache in my lower belly. "Hope your night gets better," she said and turned to walk away.

Officer Mike Zucco was waiting for me at the nurse's station when I entered the ER. Mike was a friend of Sean's. When Sean and I were still married, we'd sometimes go out with Mike and his wife, Mary. It seemed strange to be around Mike under different circumstances. I wondered if he felt the same.

"Hi, Doc, how's it going?" Mike asked in his easy, casual way.

"Good, Mike, busy as usual," I said. "Sorry to make you wait.

I was downstairs having a cup of coffee.”

“Oh, too bad I didn’t know, I could have joined you down there. I could use a cup of coffee,” Mike said as he flipped open his notebook.

“There’s some coffee in the lounge. I could get you a cup.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m getting off in an hour, anyway.”

Mike took my statement and had me sign the bottom of the report.

“Were you here when they brought Pam in?” Mike asked solemnly.

“No...No, I wasn’t.”

“Sad that such a tragic thing happened to her. She was a good kid.”

“Yes, that’s what Sean said. I never got to meet her. I feel bad about that.”

“If her old man were still alive, this definitely would have killed him,” Mike said, his voice cracked with emotion.

I touched Mike’s arm. “How’s Mary doing?” I asked, changing to a more comfortable subject.

“She’s fine, the kids are good. The twins are in sixth grade and Mike Jr. starts college next year,” Mike said proudly.

“That’s great.” Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Morrison watching us. “I better get back to work. It was nice seeing you again.”

“You too, Doc.”

“Tell Mary and the kids I said hello.” I waved goodbye.

I watched as Mike Zucco’s hulking frame lumbered through the automatic doors. Although his appearance could be intimidating, Mike was a sweet guy. If he had an opinion regarding the reason Sean and I divorced, he never let on about it, nor did it seem to bother him that his friend’s ex-wife was now a lesbian. I wish I could say that about more people.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Twelve thirty came and went. As I watched the end of *Saturday Night Live*, I felt myself doze off. The door buzzer rang, sending me bolting off the couch and over to the intercom. I pressed the button.

“Who is it?” I asked, still foggy from sleep.

“Regan. Is it too late to come up?”

I pushed the button to unlock the door. I could hear Regan’s footfalls as she climbed the three flights of stairs to my apartment and wondered if being here brought back memories for her like it did for me. In fact, my heart fluttered at that very moment, and I could hardly wait for her to step in the door. Finally, there she was. The woman of my dreams for so many years.

“Hi,” she said, her smile warm. “I was afraid it might be too late.” She closed the door behind her.

I looked over at the clock on the VCR: two fifteen in the morning. “How did you get out of the house at this hour?” I asked, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“I waited until Jim fell asleep. I left him a note telling him I was going to the hospital to see Tess.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll wake up and come looking for you?”

She shook her head. “He’s had so much to drink he probably won’t wake up until noon.”

An awkward silence hung between us as we stood in the living room precisely in the same spot where our relationship started. This was the same room where we slow danced in bare feet to Madonna and couldn’t keep our hands off each other.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked, breaking the silence. Unable to bear the tension.

“That would be nice.” Regan walked over and sat on the couch. “What do you have?”

I opened the refrigerator knowing that I had stopped off at the 7-11 on the way home and restocked my supply of Diet Coke. I had also picked up a six-pack of Seagram’s Citrus Wine Coolers, Regan’s favorite. Not only were they Regan’s drink of choice, I had a sentimental attachment to them, too. Regan and I used to drink them during our courtship. They were liquid courage for us in the beginning, when our whole beings were filled with desire but neither one of us knew what to do with it. Her choice of drinks always gave me a sign as to how the evening would go. If she chose Diet Coke, I knew there would be no sex that night. But if she chose a wine cooler, I knew that a passionate night lay ahead.

“I have Diet Coke and Seagram’s wine coolers,” I shouted from the kitchen.

“Wine cooler, please” came from the direction of the couch.

My insides tingled as I pulled two bottles from the rack, popped off both tops, and went into the living room to join Regan.

“Boy, it’s been a long time since I had one of these,” Regan said, taking a long pull. “Ah...that’s so good.”

I took a sip, too. The sharp citrus taste flooded my mouth.

“Brings back memories, doesn’t it?” Regan said as she took another sip.

I nodded, wiping my lips with the back of my hand.

Regan and I sat on the couch. The only light in the room came from a distant street light across the parking lot. We talked well into the night as she answered my questions about why she left, how she left, and where she went. She said the night Sean found out about our relationship, she went home hysterical and confided in her mother about our relationship. Her mother was so distraught over the fact that her daughter was a lesbian, an abomination in the eyes of God, that she sent Regan away. She sent her down to Charleston, West Virginia, with a suitcase full of clothes and one hundred dollars in cash to spend time with her aunt, who was

supposed to drum some Christian sense into her. Regan stayed at her aunt's home and was required to attend church services with her every day to chase the demons of lust out of her heart. Regan's aunt also set her up with a Christian counselor who told Regan he could cure her of her homosexual affliction, but it would take many hours of work at two hundred ten dollars an hour.

"After the third counseling session, I never went back," Regan said. "It was getting too weird. He'd stand right over me, so close I could feel his cigarette breath on my neck. And then he'd ask me the same thing over and over, about what we did sexually. He'd ask me to go into detail about who did what to who and how things felt. He said it was necessary for him to know every detail or else he couldn't help me, couldn't extract the demons inside of me if he didn't know exactly what acts fueled the demons' lust, and I wouldn't be saved. After that, he'd make me get down on the floor on my hands and knees and pray out loud for God's forgiveness. While I prayed, he'd leave the room. When he came back, he'd look different...all disheveled. I don't know, but it gave me the creeps."

"Nice. You trust this guy and tell him your most intimate experiences and he leaves the room to get his rocks off. That guy sounds like a real perv."

"I know, just the thought of what he was doing in the other room makes my skin crawl."

"I've heard of therapists like that but never came in contact with one. How terrible that must have been for you."

Regan nodded. "The only thing that really saved me was going to work. I got a job at a small hospital in Charleston that offered to pay a portion of my tuition to nursing school, helping me to get my RN degree."

"I'm glad you continued your education. I always thought you were a good nurse."

"I know," Regan said. She lowered her gaze. A blush like a shadow touched her cheeks.

"So what happened after graduation?" I asked, aware of Regan's growing uneasiness.

"I transferred from the general medical floor up to the

intensive care unit. I got a big pay raise and was able to work only three twelve-hour shifts a week. It was great. With the pay increase, I was able to move out of my aunt's house and into my own apartment." Regan's face beamed with pride. Then suddenly, her expression changed. "I was really feeling good about myself, but something was missing. Even though I didn't want to admit it, it was lonely being way from home."

"So what did you do?"

"I tried to bury myself in my work. I'd work extra shifts and the money was great. It seemed the most sensible thing to do. But the feeling of loneliness wouldn't disappear," Regan said. A look of tired sadness swept over her features. She breathed in deeply, then let out a heavy sigh before she continued. "Then six months after graduation, I met Jim at a church picnic for singles that my aunt had dragged me to. Jim seemed like a nice guy and a good Christian man. He was shy at first and very good looking, so when he asked me out, I went. Another reason I went out with him was to prove to myself that I wasn't gay." Regan looked down, uneasy in her own comment.

"I see." I took a swallow of my wine cooler. "So what did you find out?" Regan didn't answer right away.

"Jim was very patient with me. We dated for two months before anything happened sexually," Regan said.

That was pretty admirable, I thought, but didn't say anything. I didn't want to dissuade Regan from telling her story.

Regan looked down at her hands, which were knotted in her lap. I could tell this wasn't easy for her.

"But being with him that way wasn't what I thought it was supposed to be like."

I felt a tiny kick in my heart and found it hard to suppress a knowing smile. I was thankful the room was still dim.

"It was more or less something I thought would get better over time," she continued. "And it did, I guess. But there just wasn't any—"

"Spark? Chemistry?" I interjected.

"No," Regan said, her voice barely audible. "No spark."

Regan's gaze met mine. I could still see pain flicker there.

“Then why did you stay with him if you weren’t happy?”

“I honestly thought things would change. That I didn’t give our relationship the chance it deserved. So I stuck it out determined to make it right, but by the time the holidays were over, I knew Jim and I were over, too,” Regan said. “So at the end of January, I broke up with him. I gave him the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech. He was devastated, but I had to tell him the truth. It wasn’t fair for me to hold onto him if in my heart I knew this would never work out.”

“I don’t get it,” I said, confused. “You gave it your best shot, it wasn’t working out, you broke it off with him, and so you got married?”

“Last Valentine’s Day, Jim surprised me at work. He showed up at the ICU nurse’s station with a dozen red roses. He asked me to meet him after work for a drink. He said that just because we weren’t seeing each other didn’t mean we had to spend Valentine’s Day alone. He looked so sad and dejected. I couldn’t turn him down. So after work, I met him at the corner bar where he liked to hang out. When I got there, I could tell he’d already had a few. I thought to myself I’ll have one drink, then feign tiredness and make my exit. But it didn’t work out that way.”

“What happened?” I asked, tucking my legs underneath me on the couch.

“Jim wouldn’t hear of me leaving after only one drink. After three Cosmopolitans, I felt pretty woozy and didn’t feel safe to drive home. So Jim took my car keys and drove me to my apartment. Once we got there, he insisted on helping me inside. I turned to thank him, and the next thing I knew, he was all over me. I don’t remember much of it, just that he had me pinned to the floor and was on top of me. He pulled my nursing uniform up over my hips. He stuck his hand in the waistband of my pantyhose and yanked them off, practically shredding them. Then I felt him enter me. After a few quick thrusts, it was all over.” Regan paused and looked at me with a sad smile. “Unfortunately, we didn’t use any protection. You know the rest.”

Anger bubbled up inside of me. I hadn’t liked that guy to begin with, but now I really didn’t like him. I was shocked at what

Regan was telling me. Shock yielded quickly to fury.

"Regan, he raped you!" I blurted out the words before I could stifle them.

Regan looked down, ashamed. I reached over and touched her arm.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you. You deserve better than this...much better."

Regan nodded solemnly.

"What were you thinking marrying him?"

"It was the respectable thing to do."

"Respectable thing? A man who rapes you doesn't deserve any respect."

Regan looked down. It was clear that the misery of that night still haunted her.

"It wasn't his respectability I was concerned about at the time. I was pregnant, Mina. What else was I going to do?" Regan looked up at me; her eyes were red rimmed with fatigue.

"Nothing, there is nothing you could have done."

"I had to do the right thing," Regan said. I don't know whether she was trying to convince me or herself of that fact.

"I know you did," I said. But the thoughts that went through my mind said that sometimes what we think is the right thing to do may not be after all.

"After that night, I didn't see Jim for several weeks. He kept calling and leaving messages on my answer machine apologizing for what he did, but I never returned his calls. I didn't want to see him again, not after what happened."

It was obvious that Regan needed to tell me the whole story, so I let her.

"One day, I was two weeks late getting my period. I was working the morning shift in the unit and was doing trache care on a patient, something that had never bothered me before, but all of the sudden, I was overtaken by a huge wave of nausea. I barely made it to the patient's bathroom, where I vomited the entire contents of my stomach. I felt better afterward and figured I was just coming down with a bug. Well, the next morning, I was fine until dietary brought up the patients' breakfast trays. Once I

got a whiff of that buttered toast and Cream of Wheat, wham, off I went to puke again.”

“Oh, my God, you poor thing,” I said, thankful I never had to experience the horrors of morning sickness.

“I guess in my heart I knew what was going on. I just didn’t want to admit it because the last thing I wanted was a baby,” Regan said. “Especially a baby with Jim as the father. I finally got up the courage to go to the drugstore and buy a home pregnancy test. The entire time I sat on the edge of my bathtub and waited for the results, I prayed to God that it wouldn’t be true. But then, right before my eyes, that little white stick turned blue.”

“You must have felt so alone.”

Regan nodded. She leaned her head against the couch cushion and closed her eyes. “At first, I wasn’t going to tell him about the baby. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought it wouldn’t be fair to the baby to have to grow up and not know its father. So I told him.”

“How did he take the news?”

“He was ecstatic. Asked me right then and there to marry him. Said he would do right by us, me and the baby,” Regan said. “I really thought things would work out then. Jim seemed really dedicated. A few weeks later, Jim moved into my apartment and we started getting the place ready for the baby. Things were good for a while. Then Jim got laid off from his job at the stamping plant. He couldn’t find a job right away, which left him home alone all day while I worked. That’s when he started drinking more. He went from a beer or two in the afternoon to a twelve-pack every night. It seemed that drinking was all he did from morning to night. When we moved back here, I thought he’d do better, you know a fresh start...I guess I was wrong.”

Regan put her arms over her head and stretched. “My gosh, it seems like we’ve been sitting here for hours.” She tried to stifle a yawn. “My body has been so stiff lately. I think it’s all the stress. I need to stretch.” She stood, now bending and twisting at the waist.

“Here, stretch out, I can move down.” I slid to the end of the couch.

Regan sat back down and stretched out her long legs, resting her well-manicured feet in my lap. Instinctively, I took her feet in my hands and began massaging them.

“Mmm, that feels so good,” Regan purred, relaxing into the massage. She tossed back her head and closed her eyes. Her soft moans were affecting me in a way I was no stranger to.

“You know I always thought you had magic hands,” Regan said with a little laugh.

I couldn’t suppress a smile.

Silver streams of first light filtered in through the slats of the blinds in the living room. Regan finished her fourth wine cooler and set the empty bottle on the coffee table.

I continued the foot massage, then extended it to include Regan’s tight calves.

“Oh, my God,” Regan moaned, lying flat on her back now, arms extended, surrendering to my touch. I worked on her legs a while, kneading tight knots from her calf muscles.

“Turn over,” I commanded. “I’ll do your back if you’d like.”

I didn’t have to ask Regan twice. She flipped onto her stomach in a flash. I looked down at her. I blinked to make sure this was indeed real and not a dream. Regan tucked her head to the side and hugged one of the throw pillows. I sat on the floor next to the couch and slowly kneaded the tight muscles in her shoulders and neck.

“My God, you’re tight,” I said as I massaged Regan’s shoulders, then moved down to her mid- then lower back.

In the dim morning light, Regan lay there peacefully, eyes closed with a smile on her lips. This was as relaxed as I had seen her since her return. I continued with the massage, working my way down Regan’s back, kneading and rubbing the thin layer of muscle that draped her ribs. Using a technique we were taught in nursing school, I ran my hands up both sides of Regan’s back, then grasped both trapezius muscles and slowly and methodically, worked the muscles that I knew simultaneously moved her pectoris muscles, manipulating her breast.

Regan let out another soft moan, which shot through me like a bolt of electrical current. I didn’t know how much longer I could

keep this up without removing both of our clothes and making love to her right here. I yearned to caress Regan's soft skin, instead of her clothing. I composed myself and got my hormones back in check. I continued with the massage. My hands glided over Regan's back and down her hips, exploring the soft lines of her waist and hips. I kneaded her thighs, taking each leg in my hands and rolling the muscles until they loosened. Slowly, I moved my hands up the inside of Regan's thighs. She opened her legs wider, allowing me more access. My heart pounded with excitement. I slid my hand underneath her pelvis. Regan raised her hips to accommodate my hand, silently giving me permission to continue. Heat radiated through the crotch of her cotton pants. I massaged her in circular motions, feeling in my hand the heat of her arousal. Regan ground her pelvis into my hand. Her moans coincided with the rhythm of our movement. I could feel she was getting closer and closer to release. Regan's body began to vibrate with liquid fire. Her release was pure and explosive.

"Oh, my God," Regan said, her voice muffled by the pillow. Her breathing had not yet subsided. She collapsed, limp as a rag doll.

My heart hammered just at the sight of her. "You okay?" I gently stroked her back.

Regan nodded into the pillow. She turned over and threw her arms around my neck, pulling me down on top of her. "I've missed you so much, Mina." Regan held me close. "I've tried to forget about you and what we had together, but I can't," she said with her bright blue eyes clear and direct on my face. Regan held me as if she were afraid to let me go. Her Avon Soft Musk perfume brought back even more memories of another time, and I felt my insides begin to stir.

"This feels so good," she said, her voice a low murmur. "I always felt so safe in your arms."

I lay next to her and pulled her close and our bodies pressed together. She did feel different to me, softer, more Rubenesque, than the hard lean Regan I remembered holding, coveting, craving. I guess that's what pregnancy does to a body.

Our first kiss in five years was soft and familiar, yet new and

exciting. Our kisses became more fervent as Regan's sweet tongue sent shivers of desire racing through me. She took my hand and placed it on her breast. Her nipple hardened against my palm. Her breast was heavy with milk. Instinctively, I ran my thumb over her rock hard nipple. A soft moan escaped her lips. The passion in my groin grew hotter by the minute. Regan slid her cool hand inside the front of my jeans. Her touch was divine ecstasy.

"My, my, my," Regan said, feeling the flood of wet heat. She plunged one, then two fingers inside of me. My body began to vibrate, hungry for release.

"Please..." I whispered into Regan's neck. "Please..."

Waves of ecstasy throbbed through me with every movement, every touch, finally exploding in a downpour of fiery sensation. Regan and I lay together, shutting out the rest of the world.

Before succumbing to the numbed sleep of satisfied lovers, a pang of guilt chipped away at my present state of bliss when thoughts of Rosetti surfaced in my mind. Being with Regan was wonderful, but I couldn't ignore the heartrending voice in the back of my mind warning me that I had just made a big mistake.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Regan left my apartment that morning, it was with the promise that we would get together again soon. That was a promise I was beginning to regret. When I closed the door behind her, a wave of relief swept over me that she was finally gone. What had I been thinking the night before? Am I that immature that I can't keep my hormones in check for one night? I must have been crazy to want to get involved with that woman again. Considering the circumstances, getting back into a relationship with Regan would be disastrous. I sat on the couch with my head in my hands, trying to sort all this out.

And then there was Rosetti. It had been two days and still no word from her. This fact really intensified the guilt I had felt the night before. Rosetti had asked me to take care of her mom if anything should happen to her. Although I didn't want to believe that anything had happened to her or ever would, for that matter. I had some spare time before I had to be at work, and I felt I needed to begin fulfilling that promise. Maybe it would relieve some of the guilt, too.

I walked over to the nursing home and rode the elevator up to the second floor. This is where Rosetti and I had met. Teresa Rosetti came here to die, as she had terminal cancer that had spread throughout her body. That was over five years ago. Her cancer was in remission, and if I hadn't believed in miracles before I met Teresa Rosetti, I surely believed in them now.

"Hi, Mrs. Rosetti. How are you?" I walked over to Teresa's bed and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Mina, it's good to see you," she said, grabbing my face

with both hands and kissing me on both cheeks. Teresa was a tiny woman with a thick Italian accent. Her short curly gray hair and thick lensed glasses, which were too big for her face, always made me think she looked like Sophia on "The Golden Girls."

"Sorry I haven't been here in a while."

"I know...I know...you're a busy girl...big shot doctor and all," Teresa said, pride beaming in her voice. "Have you seen that crazy daughter of mine? Three days, she no come to see her mother. What the hell is wrong with her?"

"She's working, Mrs. Rosetti."

"Working? She's always working. She works too hard...like a man...always working."

"She's working a special assignment, so I told her I would check in on you. Is that okay?"

"Sure, okay."

"So how are you doing?"

"I'm a good...except for a little crease pain every once in a while...I feela pretty good," Teresa said, gesturing with her hands as she spoke.

"Crease pain? What's crease pain?"

"You don't know about crease pain? What kind of doctor are you?" Teresa laughed.

"Crease pain is here," Teresa said, placing her hands in her groin where her legs joined her hips. See...in a the creases...crease pain."

"Oh, now I see," I said, holding in the laughter. I loved this woman's logic. I could see where Rosetti got her way of thinking. "I never thought of that area of the body that way. You know, Mrs. Rosetti, I learn something new every day."

Teresa smiled proudly.

"So can I get you something for your...crease pain?" I asked. "I'm sure the nurses have some Tylenol or something that might help."

Teresa shook her head. "No, I'm okay. The pain...it comes and goes. I don't worry about it so much."

"Nothing else hurts?" I asked, giving Teresa a quick medical look over. "No chest pain, no trouble breathing?"

Teresa shook her head.

“Good,” I said. “I’m glad you’re doing okay. I’ll let Rosemary know you’re doing well.”

“Where did you say my daughter is? You know I haven’t seen her in days,” Teresa said.

“She’s working on a special assignment for work. She should be finished in a day or two. I told her I would check in on you.”

Teresa nodded.

“Have you had any other visitors?” I tried to make conversation.

“The Girl Scouts came the other day. They were dressed up for Halloween and went around to all the rooms and gave us candy. I feel bad I didn’t have anything to give them.”

“Oh, I don’t think they expected you to give them anything. I think it’s nice that they came to visit.”

Teresa nodded. “I gave my candy to Otis. You know that crazy guy that rides around in the wheelchair with the cowboy hat. He thinks he’s John Wayne or something.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I knew Otis. He was quite a character. When I worked here, the Girl Scouts came one day to sing to the residents. Otis, not wanting to miss the concert, came out of his room dressed only in his cowboy hat and scared the crap out of the troop and their leader. I remember dropping his hat in his lap and wheeling him back to his room to get him dressed.

“Have your sons been up to see you lately?”

“No. My boys...ay...” she gestured with her hands, “they live a too far away.” Sadness clouded Teresa’s face.

“So you must miss your sons.”

Teresa nodded. “I miss my Gianni. He’s a good boy. You know he calls me every week. That’s a big deal for a boy...to call his mother like that.”

“I see.” I knew all too well about the bond between an Italian mother and her sons. The boys in an Italian family were treated like kings. Their mothers shined their shoes, ironed their clothes, cooked their meals, and basically took care of them well into their thirties and forties, until they got married. An Italian mother would stick up for her son no matter what. I remember

reading an article about a mobster who was convicted of killing and maiming several people over a weeklong crime spree. After the trial, they interviewed his seventy-four-year-old mother, who defended her son by saying that he was a good boy and they must have the wrong guy. When the interviewer told the woman what her son had done, she sat quietly for a moment as if letting the reality of her son's crimes sink in. To the interviewer's surprise, the woman's only comment was, "Oh, I wondered why he didn't show up for Sunday dinner that week."

"Do you hear anything from Tony?"

"Ay, Tony...mister big shot. He's too busy to call his mother." Teresa waved her hands in the air, obviously upset at the mention of her eldest son.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said, wishing I'd never brought up the subject. I always wondered why Rosetti never talked much about her brothers. Seeing Teresa's reaction to asking about Tony made me think there was more to it than a lack of communication on their part.

"Even that wife of his...you'd think they'd want to know if I was alive or dead...nothing, not a phone call or a letter...nothing."

"Well, I'm sure they think about you. After all, you are their mother. Being so far away, it can be hard for them to visit." I tried to smooth things over.

Teresa leaned back against her pillow with her arms crossed across her chest. She looked like a stubborn kid sulking. I couldn't help but smile.

"I have some errands to run before I go into work. Do you need anything at the store?" I asked.

"I don't know...I'm outta that stuff for the teeth." Teresa tapped her crooked arthritic finger on her front teeth. "I usually get it at the gift shop downstairs, but they ran out."

"Okay, so you need toothpaste?"

"No...no...not a toothpaste. You know that glue stuff," she said, baring her dentures at me. I heard her loose dental plates click together.

"Denture Grip?"

“Yeah, yeah, that’s it.”

“Okay, I’ll pick some up for you. Anything else?”

“I need a birthday card. Get a nice one, those ones they sell in the gift shop here are cheap. And maybe some decent food. The chef they got here knows nothing about cooking. Her spaghetti sauce tastes like watered-down ketchup.” Teresa made a face.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said. “But you know, I’m not that great a cook, either.”

“I know, Rosemary told me.”

Her comment made me chuckle. Rosetti had a lot of nerve talking trash about my cooking because she was no Julia Child herself.

“When I get outta this place, I’m gonna teach you girls how to cook. How do you expect to catch a man if you can’t cook?”

That comment made me laugh even more. If only Teresa knew neither one of us was interested in catching a man.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing...I’ll be sure to tell Rosemary about the cooking lessons. It will give us both something to look forward to.”

“You tell that daughter of mine that it wouldn’t kill her to take a day off once in a while.”

“I will, Mrs. Rosetti. And I’ll stop back with your Denture Grip before I go into work this afternoon.”

“Tank you, Mina. You a good girl,” Teresa said, cupping my face in her hand.

I kissed Teresa on the cheek and said goodbye. I loved visiting Teresa. She could always make me laugh, just like Rosetti. It was one of the reason’s Rosetti and I were such good friends.

Another pang of guilt thumped in my heart. I quickly banished the thought. I couldn’t deal with this now. Anyway, Rosetti was nowhere to be found, and that in itself was unnerving. Had we really started something before she left? Given what had happened between me and Regan the night before, the budding romance with Rosetti seemed so far away and unreal. Being with Regan again had brought back a lot of memories. It felt so right being with her, so why did I feel so guilty? Why when the more Regan became available to me did I want to push her away? In my heart,

I knew Regan wasn't good for me, but for some reason, I couldn't let it go. Would I choose Rosetti over Regan? Would I even have a choice? Were both relationships nothing but an unreachable dream?

As I drove downtown to the store, I was wondering why Rosetti, the out and proud lesbian that she was, still found it impossible to tell her mother she was gay. She always told me how lucky I was to be out to my family. She said she envied that, especially since my family seemed to be doing okay with it. She said that even though her brothers knew about her, she could never tell her mother. When I asked her why, she said it would probably kill Teresa to know her daughter was a lesbian. Rosetti said Teresa would blame herself for her daughter's choice of lifestyle. She didn't want her mother carrying that guilt around with her the rest of her life, so she never told her. Knowing Teresa, I don't think her feelings for her daughter would change one bit if she knew Rosetti was gay, but I could understand Rosetti's hesitation. We always fear losing those we love the most.

I stopped at the Rexall drugstore and picked up Teresa's Denture Grip, then headed over to Giuseppe's Italian store to bring back some good Italian lunch to Teresa. Giuseppe's reminded me of the mom and pop grocery stores my grandmother used to take me to on Saturday mornings. Giuseppe's had the long glass deli counter where orbs of provolone cheese hung by thick twine overhead. Freshly butchered chickens lay next to trays of mozzarella balls that floated in milky water next to bowls of olive and roasted red pepper salad. The smell of fresh baked bread and pasta sauce was making me hungry. My stomach rumbled. I ordered a cavatelli and meatball dinner for Teresa and a "Dino" for myself. "Dino"—named after Dean Martin—was one of the names Giuseppe gave his sandwiches. Other Italian delicacies were the "Frank Sinatra," which was a rib-eye steak sandwich with hot peppers, and the "Godfather," which was filled with cabacole, pepperoni, hot peppers, tomatoes, and smothered in provolone cheese. The "Dino," my favorite, was a turkey and roasted red pepper sandwich on a fresh Italian roll. The roll it came on was so fresh, it was still warm. I couldn't wait to dig in,

so I ate the sandwich on the way back to the nursing home.

“Hey, you back already,” Teresa said, looking up from “The Price is Right” on TV.

“Yes, here’s your Denture Grip, and oh, I brought you a little surprise.”

I took the aluminum foil lid off the warm pasta. “These are from Giuseppe’s. I thought you might like them for lunch.” I handed Teresa a white plastic fork.

Tears formed in Teresa’s eyes. It was like someone gave her a million dollars instead of a \$2.99 pasta lunch. Teresa dug in, moaning with each forkful.

“This sauce is pretty good. It’s not my sauce, but it’s a pretty good,” she said between mouthfuls.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Aren’t you gonna eat?”

“No thanks. I ate a turkey sandwich earlier.”

“Look at you...you’re too skinny. Here, take a taste.”

Teresa stabbed a few cavatellis on her fork and offered them to me. I took a bite.

“Yes, that is good. But I’m still pretty full from my sandwich.”

“Too bad,” Teresa said. “But that only means more for me.” She laughed.

I watched Teresa as she ate. I couldn’t stop thinking of Rosetti. About how I missed her and how I may have damaged our friendship by what had transpired the night before between me and Regan.

Teresa finished off the entire meal in ten minutes. She dabbed at her orange sauce-stained lips with the white paper napkin that had come with her meal.

“Why the long face?” Teresa asked.

“Oh,” I said, surprised that Teresa noticed. “I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. You know, work and stuff.” I tried to gloss over the issue.

“Like what?”

“Things have been busy at work.”

“Yeah, what else?”

Reluctantly, I went on. "A...friend of mine...I haven't heard from her in a few days, and I'm worried about her," I said, not sure Teresa would catch on that I was talking about her daughter.

Teresa made the sign of the cross. She reached over to her nightstand and picked up her crystal rosary beads. "I'll say a prayer for your friend," Teresa said. "Sometimes it's the only thing we can do for the ones we love."

What if something did happen to Rosetti? Would I be standing here someday telling Teresa what the chief had to tell Pam Grier's mother? The possibility of that happening seemed too real at this moment.

"I better get going." I headed toward the door of Teresa's room. "I'll stop in tomorrow to see how you're doing."

Teresa looked in the bag the Denture Grip came in. "Hey, what about the birthday card?"

"Oh, Teresa, I'm sorry. I forgot the card. I can pick one up tomorrow if you like."

"That's okay. I don't need it right away," Teresa said. "Thank you for the cavatellis, Mina."

"You're welcome." I made a mental note to pick up the card for Teresa.

As I walked down the hall toward the elevator, I realized how much I missed working at the nursing home. I missed the people I took care of here. Some were still there and some were gone. In all my years as a nurse and even now as a resident, this was the one place where I felt I made a true difference in people's lives.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The ER was hopping when I reported for work. Ambulances were double parked, and the walking wounded milled around in the waiting room.

I needed to ask Morrison for time off to attend Pam's funeral. I was sure he wouldn't make it easy on me. Morrison had assigned me to pediatrics again, but I was beginning not to mind so much. I treated three patients in the first hour and five in the second. I finally had a few minutes to sit down and catch up on my charts.

Morrison was working the adult side and sat next to me with a stack of his own charts. I figured now was as good time as any to ask Morrison for the time off.

"Dr. Morrison, I'm going to need some time off. The police officer who was shot and killed was a good friend. I want to attend the funeral if that won't be a problem."

Morrison didn't respond. He continued his charting, flipping pages back and forth, signing a few, then closing the chart.

"Dr. Morrison?"

"What is it, Caselli?"

"I need some time off Tuesday to attend a funeral. I'm scheduled day shift and I want to—"

"I heard you the first time, Caselli," Morrison snapped. "Look, being a physician is not a nine-to-five job. We work long hard hours for a reason. It makes us strong and we learn to make difficult decisions under great amounts of stress. Being a physician also means making personal sacrifices. Sometimes we don't always get what we want. Sometimes our jobs take precedence." His voice was stern without a trace of sympathy.

I was fuming inside. A simple yes or no would have sufficed, but this gas bag insisted on giving me a lecture. "So what you're saying is I can't have the time off?"

"Well, is the deceased a close relative?"

"No."

"Then I don't think your situation falls under the hospital's policy," Morrison said smugly.

"Couldn't someone cover me for the few hours during the funeral?"

"Caselli, your priority and obligation is with this hospital and completing your residency. I'd hate to see something as trivial as this prevent you from doing that." Morrison returned to his charting.

I swallowed hard, trying to conceal my anger at Morrison, but it was no use. Anger abducted my reasoning, and I let Morrison have it.

"Dr. Morrison, what I'm asking you is not unreasonable. No one is more dedicated to this profession than I am. I've worked my ass off to get to where I am today, and I've taken a lot of crap from you. I left a comfortable marriage and a job I loved to take a chance on living my dream of becoming a doctor, and I'm not going to let someone like you stand in my way," I blurted out.

The entire emergency room fell silent as if frozen in time. My anger had brought me to my feet and I stood over Morrison, trembling, waiting for his reply.

Morrison stood, leveling the playing field. "Dr. Caselli, this is neither the time nor the place to air your personal grievances. We will discuss this matter further in my office at the end of the shift." Morrison closed his last chart, slipped it into the chart rack, and walked away.

Slowly, the ER came back to life. Everyone within earshot was trying to look busy, acting as if they hadn't heard what had transpired between Morrison and me. I sat at the desk with my head in my hands. I was exhausted, emotionally and physically, and I felt like I couldn't go on any further.

"Honey, don't let that angry little man get to you," Delores said.

“What?” I lifted my head, not sure where the comment was coming from.

“Dr. Morrison’s been giving everyone a hard time since his wife left him last year,” Delores said.

“His wife left him? I didn’t even know he was married.” I turned to Delores in surprise.

“Mm-hmm. They were married almost ten years when she up and left him for someone else.”

“Wow, that had to be a big hit to his ego.”

“You bet, and rumor has it, not that I’m in the habit of spreading rumors, but rumor has it that the person she left him for was a woman.”

“You’re kidding!”

Delores smiled. “But you didn’t hear it from me,” she whispered, picking up an arm full of old charts to take down to medical records.

That explained a lot of why Morrison was such a bear toward me. If his wife left him for another woman and he knew I was gay, surely anything I did would rub him the wrong way.

I didn’t see Morrison the rest of the night. My relief came on at eleven thirty. Things had calmed down considerably since the beginning of the shift, so report only took ten minutes. I headed over to Morrison’s office, feeling like I was about to face a firing squad. His door was closed, so I tapped gently, hoping he had forgotten about our meeting.

“It’s open,” he shouted through the heavy oak door.

Slowly, I turned the knob and let myself in. Morrison sat behind his desk, shuffling through a stack of papers, probably my expulsion papers. He looked as tired and weary as I felt. “Have a seat, Caselli,” he said, without looking up, gesturing to one of the red leather chairs that sat opposite his desk. His voice was a low shallow drone.

The leather crinkled as I sat and waited for my punishment.

“Dr. Caselli, your behavior tonight was inexcusable,” he began his reprimand. “I can understand you being upset about not getting something you’ve asked for, but the manner in which you

handled it was extremely unprofessional.”

“Dr. Morrison, I am very sorry for the way I handled things. I was wrong and regret my actions greatly.”

“You were wrong, Dr. Caselli. Insubordinately wrong,” Dr. Morrison said. “And unfortunately for you, insubordination is a serious offense. I have no choice but to discipline you for your actions.”

Here it comes, I thought. He’s going to boot me out of the program. I clenched my fists and hung my head, feeling beat down and defeated.

Morrison continued: “The residency program has specific protocols regarding how disputes are to be handled between residents and supervisors. Your outburst today was totally out of line. You’ve embarrassed me, as well as cast yourself in a professionally unfavorable light.”

I didn’t know what to say. He was right. What I had done was unprofessional. My reaction to his denial of my request had been more emotional than professional. And one of the first things they taught us in medical school was to check all emotions at the door, as they will surely impair a doctor’s judgment.

“Dr. Caselli, you and I have had some disagreements in the past and I know I’ve been hard on you, but that’s what makes good doctors. If this job was easy, everyone would do it.” He paused for a moment. I’m sure he was enjoying this, putting me in my place. But his next statement proved me wrong.

Dr. Morrison looked across his desk at me. His gaze caught mine. “Caselli, you’re a good doctor and you have the potential to be a great doctor, but you need to understand that respect for one’s colleagues is crucial if you want to practice medicine successfully.”

Morrison looked down at his folded hands that rested on top of a pile of papers on his cherry wood desk. A look of tired sadness passed over his face. “I may have forgotten those principals, as well. I have been hard on you, but sometimes perhaps due to personal issues that are entirely out of your control and none of your concern.”

Shocked by his admission, I didn’t know what to say. I

wondered if I should mention that I'd heard the rumors of his wife leaving. I was worried I'd be overstepping my boundaries as his employee.

Awkward silence hung in the air between us. Finally, Morrison spoke. "You may have heard that my wife...left." His voice was unsteady and wavering.

I nodded. "Yes, sir. I have. And I'm sorry." I felt terrible for the guy.

"She took our children and moved to Colorado."

"That must have been very hard for you. Colorado is pretty far from here."

Morrison nodded. "That's not the entire story."

A warning voice whispered in my head; here it comes.

"Dr. Caselli, my wife left me to be with another woman." By the look on his face, saying those words took all the courage he could muster.

"I see." The leather chair creaked as I changed positions. "Again, I'm sorry this happened to you and your family."

Morrison nodded. "I thought because you are..." Morrison hesitated.

"A lesbian," I finished for him.

"Yes, that maybe you had some insight into this. Like how can you be married to someone for ten years, then all of the sudden realize that you're gay? How can you be married and have three children with someone and have this happen?"

"Well, sir, it happens. It happened to me and my husband. We were married for almost six years when I met someone. But you have to understand that it doesn't just happen. It's something that I struggled with for a long time. I'm sure your wife has struggled with it, as well."

"But if this is something she was struggling with, why did she get married and have children?"

"Probably because she met you and fell in love with you, in spite of her inner conflict. Probably because she was taught it was the right thing to do. We all want to do the right thing, even if it conflicts with our innermost feelings or desires."

Dr. Morrison sat back in his leather desk chair. He seemed

more relaxed now. More relaxed than I'd ever seen him.

"Just remember one thing," I said.

Dr. Morrison looked up. "What's that?"

"That none of this is your or your wife's fault. Being gay isn't something that's done to someone. You didn't make her gay. But you need to accept the fact that she is. She can't change who she is. It's not a choice to be gay. Trust me, I don't know of too many people that would choose this for themselves. Accepting that you're gay is a difficult thing. You risk losing your family, your friends, and sometimes your job. But it also can be a wonderful thing."

"How's that?"

"When you finally admit to yourself who you are and that it's okay to be who you are," I said. "It was hard, but the people in my life that mattered most to me stood by my side. And that's all that matters. And today, my being gay is not an issue anymore, personally or professionally. I have yet to have a patient request another doctor because of my sexual orientation."

Dr. Morrison nodded. He arranged the papers on his desk in a neat pile and looked up at me. "I'm sorry we got off track, Dr. Caselli. It's getting late and I guess we should finish up the business that brought you here in the first place." Dr. Morrison visibly slipped back into his professional persona.

I sat up in the leather chair, awaiting his decision on my punishment.

Dr. Morrison cleared his throat. "Dr. Caselli, if you can assure me that you have learned an important lesson from this and that it won't happen again, I think we can amend this issue with as minimal punishment as policy allows." He paused for a moment. "Can you assure me that this will never happen again?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir, I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again." Any anger I was harboring toward him had evaporated. I felt sorry for him because I knew he had a long way to go until he'd reconcile with his situation.

"Fine," Dr. Morrison said. "The minimum punishment for insubordination is a three-day suspension without pay. Because this is your first offense, I will reduce it to a one-day suspension."

Your suspension will be in effect Tuesday morning at zero six hundred hours," Morrison continued. "I would have started your punishment tomorrow, but I need you to report for your regular shift because I need you to be in charge while I'm out of town at a meeting."

When I looked up at him, our gazes met, and I could see he knew exactly what he was doing.

"I will, sir, thank you, sir."

"Don't take my lenience as a sign of weakness. You mess up again and you'll be in big trouble."

"I understand, sir. It won't happen again." I stood to leave. Morrison stood, as well, and followed me to the door. He reached for the doorknob.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mina."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I'm sorry for you loss, too. I hope things work out for the best."

"Thank you." Dr. Morrison opened the door. I quietly walked out into the hall, stunned at what had just transpired. This made me rethink my impression of Dr. Morrison considerably. Maybe Morrison wasn't such a bad guy after all. Maybe he was just going through some tough times, and just like the rest of us, trying to hold on to whatever we can.

The next morning, I met up with Page in the women's locker room.

"Hey, I heard you and Morrison got into it yesterday. What happened?" Page asked as we changed into scrubs.

"I went off on him in front of the entire staff."

"Oh, my God, are you crazy? He could've kicked you out of the program for that. What were you arguing about?"

"I asked him for time off tomorrow to attend Pam Grier's funeral. He denied me the time, saying I wasn't a dedicated enough doctor and that I needed to put medicine first. I couldn't take it anymore, so I let him have it. It just wasn't the most appropriate time or place."

"So what happened?"

"He suspended me."

“Oh, my God, you’re kidding.”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “He suspended me for insubordination.”

“So if he suspended you, what are you doing here this morning?”

“Well...he said he’s at a meeting today and he needs me to hold down the fort here. The suspension won’t start until tomorrow.”

Page finished dressing first and walked over to the coffeepot and poured each of us a cup of coffee.

“Wait a minute...isn’t that the day you wanted off originally?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, my God, Mina...how did you manage that?”

“I didn’t manage anything.”

“I think Dr. Morrison likes you.”

“Page, please.”

“Mina, he could have kicked you out of the program. I think he has a crush on you,” Page teased.

“Page!”

“Sorry, I just think it’s funny. All this time you think the guy has it in for you and the opposite turns out to be true.”

I shook my head in disbelief at Page’s logic regarding the situation. I thought about telling her what had happened in Morrison’s office. But I didn’t. What he and his wife were going through was a private matter. I truly wished the Morrisons all the best. I hoped that they could come to an amicable conclusion to their marriage and move on with their lives. No one deserved to be trapped in an unhappy life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brilliant morning sunlight illuminated the stained glass windows of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. The solid mahogany pews were filled row after row of stoic uniformed police officers wearing black bands across their gold and silver badges. They had come from all over the country, some as far away as California, to pay their respects to their fellow fallen officer.

Sean and I took our seats in the back of the church. We had been married in this church. Looking back, it seemed like a lifetime ago. Haunting organ music floated over the congregation as more people filed in looking for seats. The music stopped and the church became deadly quiet. Six police officers in blue dress uniforms and white gloves stood at the entrance in the back of the church carrying Pam's casket. Two of the pallbearers were the other two officers who had been with Pam the morning she was killed, Randy Wilson and Steve Templeton. Wilson's shoulder was wrapped in a sling.

The six officers silently carried the white pall-draped casket down the center aisle of the church as the organist played "Amazing Grace." Seeing Pam's casket reinforced the fear wives and husbands of cops keep hidden in their hearts on a daily basis, the fear that someday their loved one will be lying there.

The church was silent as Father Mathew walked over to the lectern to give his sermon and Pam's eulogy.

"Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but to be fearless when facing them to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. Pam Grier was fearless, a brave soul who confronted danger daily and

who risked her life so that the rest of us may be protected. Pam's death has touched many of us in a deep and profound way. Pam's death will not only touch those of us who knew her and loved her, but it will also affect the lives of many who have never met her."

When Father Mathew was finished with his sermon, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. There was nothing that pulled at my heart more than seeing strong, otherwise stoic police officers with tears in their eyes. Being a police officer is probably one of the most thankless jobs on earth. They help so many and are appreciated by so few. And when something like this happens, it can really rock their world.

Sean sat silently beside me. We attended many funerals together and even buried a relative or two while we were married, but nothing was this emotional. I looked over at him, and he too had tears in his eyes. I reached over and slipped my hand into his. He squeezed my hand gently, brought it to his lips, and softly kissed it. I brushed away the tears that had leaked onto his cheeks. He thanked me with a quiet smile.

When the service was over, we followed the other mourners out of the church and to our cars to participate in the procession from the church to the cemetery where Pam would be buried. The funeral procession was two miles long. I looked out the window of Sean's car as we crept along. The outside world seemed frozen in time. Store parking lots were empty. Businesses, usually busy at this time of day seemed abandoned. It was like the entire town shut down to mourn this officer's death. Not only were there police cruisers in the procession, but they were also stationed along the roadside the entire route to St. Mary's Cemetery.

I couldn't help wondering where Rosetti was while all this was going on. The funeral procession ended in front of St. Mary's chapel. Several cruisers moved ahead and parked along the side the road that led to the gravesite. Because of the amount of people attending the funeral, it would be a graveside service. It was a clear warm day, with a cloudless cornflower blue sky. I had forgotten how hard it was to walk in grass wearing high heels. Sean took my arm and helped me maneuver the five hundred-foot hike to the site where the interment would take place.

Four green velvet-covered chairs were placed close to the gravesite for Pam's mother and brothers to sit in during the service. Sean and I stood with the other officers from his department and their wives as people gathered around the gravesite. Being with these people again after all this time seemed strangely normal to me. I guess because we still shared that common bond of loving a police officer and knowing that losing any officer was like losing the one we loved.

It suddenly became clear to me that I loved Rosetti. I still had no idea whether these feelings would go anywhere, but I knew they were real.

Father Mathew spoke the rights of interment and sprinkled holy water into the open grave and onto Pam's casket. When the chief presented the folded-up pall that covered Pam's coffin to Mrs. Grier, the pain of what that woman was going through made me look away.

When the service was over, an announcement was made over the police radio that could be heard throughout the gravesite.

"To all units and departments monitoring this channel, Detective Sergeant Pamela Grier has reported her final 10-7," indicating out of service. "We will miss you, Pam."

Tears brimmed my eyes. After the final dispatch, there was a twenty-one-gun salute by various police departments. The sound of the gunshots was deafening, and it disturbed me to think that this had probably been the last sound Pam ever heard.

"You okay?" a familiar voice asked behind me. I spun around.

"Oh, my God!" I said, my voice trembling as I threw my arms around Rosetti's neck. I held her close. We were both shaking.

My face was soaked with tears—tears of sadness and tears of relief. "Where have you been?" I held her tight, afraid of letting her go.

"Working," she said quietly as if it were normal for her to be gone for days without contacting anyone. "Actually, I'm still on duty, but I couldn't miss this. I had to pay my respects to Pam and her family. I was hoping you'd be here, too."

"I'm so glad to see you."

“Wait here a minute, okay?” Rosetti walked over to Pam’s family and knelt in front of Pam’s mother, who was still seated in front of her daughter’s casket. I couldn’t hear what she said to the woman, but it was quite evident that they connected on some level. Mrs. Grier touched Rosetti’s face, and they both wiped away tears.

When Rosetti came back, her face was stained with tears.

“My God, I was afraid I’d never see you again,” I said as Rosetti and I walked back hand in hand toward Sean’s car. Sean glanced over at us uncomfortably. I wondered if he would ever get used to seeing his ex-wife in this way.

“I’m fine, Mother Caselli. You worry too much.”

“Sarge, how are things going?” Sean asked.

“They’ve got us on twenty-four-hour surveillance of these guys. We did find a weapon in a Dumpster that fit the ballistics report on the slug that killed Pam. It came back to one of the dirt bags we were watching before everything went down. Now it’s just a matter of getting them pinned down and arresting them without any more casualties.”

Sean nodded.

“Do you have to go back right away?” I asked Rosetti.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. I’ve been gone too long as it is. Hopefully, this thing will come to an end within the next few days.”

“I stopped to see your mom. She’s doing well. She’s mad at you because you haven’t been over to see her,” I said.

“I bet. Did you tell her I was working?”

I nodded. “She says you work too hard.”

Rosetti smiled. “Thanks for taking care of her for me. It means a lot.” Her eyes filled with warmth and tenderness. “I do have to go, Mina. It was good seeing you.”

We hugged goodbye and I kissed her on the cheek. The closeness of her body felt so good. I never wanted to let her go.

“Bye, Sean,” Rosetti said. She turned and waved as she headed over the grassy hill of the cemetery.

Sean opened the car door for me and I slid into the seat.

“What was that all about?” Sean asked as he started the car.

“What was what?”

“What’s going on between you and Rosetti?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s obviously something more going on between you two than just friendship.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me.”

I didn’t know what to say. This wasn’t something that you discussed with your ex-husband.

“Meen...It’s okay.”

I looked up at Sean. He smiled.

“Rosetti is a great person. I’m glad you and her...”

“But...we’re not there yet...I mean...before the shooting, we were going to talk about things...how things have changed between us. But we never got the chance.”

Sean pulled the car into the parking lot of the apartment complex and killed the ignition.

“Mina, sometimes you just know if something’s there or if it isn’t. I think you and Rosetti both know that there is. You’re great friends already.”

“Yes, I know, but what if we try and make something more of it and we end up ruining everything?”

“That’s the chance we all take. But if you don’t take it, you’ll never know, will you?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t used to Sean being this insightful.

“I’m just scared. What if something happens to her...like Pam. I’m almost afraid to let myself fall in love with her.”

“You fell in love with me once. You knew the risks of being married to a police officer. You must have felt I was worth it.”

“Yes, I did.”

“If you think Rosetti is worth it, you gotta take the chance.”

I nodded.

“Thanks for going with me,” Sean said as I reached for the doorknob and opened the car door.

“You’re welcome.” I gently closed the door behind me.

Sean waited for me to get inside the front door before pulling away. He rarely asked to come to our old apartment since he moved out. Memories of our life together were still too tender

for him.

I got undressed and put on something more comfortable than a dress and heels. I peeled off my pantyhose and hung up the black dress, hoping I wouldn't have to wear it again for a long time.

I was restless, not used to all this idle time. I flipped on the TV, just for some noise, but it didn't calm me down. I tried to take a nap, but I couldn't stop the thoughts of Regan and Rosetti running through my mind.

Regan was back and we appeared to be picking up where we left off. But then there was Rosetti. I betrayed her by being with Regan again. Ugh! My head hurt with all the things that were knocking around inside it. Maybe a change in scenery would help calm me down.

It was time to take a drive out to the lake. Regan and I spent a lot of time out there when we were together years ago. It was our sanctuary. After she left, I continued to go out there. Walking along the shore always seemed to help clear my head. And that day, I was in need of a good clearing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Golds, greens, and reds sporadically spotted the shoreline in the most perfect of detail as the leaves of the oaks, maples, and birch trees had started their fall transformation. Sweatshirt weather would be arriving soon as summer took its final bow. Emerald-headed mallards flew overhead in their V formation, landing in concert on the tranquil slate gray lake.

I walked along the sandy shoreline. In the distance, a couple walked arm in arm, stealing kisses behind a tree. Oh, to be in love like that again when things are fresh and new and exciting. That seemed so long ago. My love life now seemed so out of whack.

I walked farther along the shore, not wanting to intrude on the couple. I found an old picnic table stuck in the side of a sand dune and sat down. I picked up a few rocks and skipped them across the lake's shimmering surface.

"I hoped I'd find you here" came from behind me. I spun around at the sound of Regan's voice.

"Hey, what are you doing out here?" I asked, sliding down on the picnic tabletop, making room for Regan to sit.

Regan climbed up and sat next to me. "I drove by your apartment and your car wasn't there. So I took a chance thinking you might be here."

"Everything okay? How's Tess doing?"

"She's doing great. She's been off the oxygen for five days, so they're going to let me bring her home tomorrow."

"That's great," I said. "She must be doing really well."

Regan nodded while looking out over the lake. She had pulled a few strands of beach grass and was shredding them between her

fingers. "I'm a little nervous about bringing her home."

"I bet," I said, knowing how quickly things can change in a newborn's condition with a compromised heart. "They'll probably send her home with an apnea monitor to alert you any time her breathing or heart rate slows down. That should give you some piece of mind."

"Yes, it does. I'm supposed to pick up the unit later today. I just don't have a whole lot of experience taking care of sick kids," Regan said, now tossing the beach grass strands into the water.

"You'll do fine," I said. "Anyway, Tess's doctors wouldn't be sending her home unless they thought she would do well."

Regan nodded.

I looked over at Regan. I could see where this entire ordeal was taking its toll on her. The once glossy, perfectly coiffed hair and smooth skin were showing traces of stress. Regan's caramel hair was hastily pulled back in a ponytail and was at the longest I'd ever seen it. Her face, once smooth peaches and cream, now revealed tiny spiderweb lines that fanned out from the corners of her eyes and not a stitch of the perfect make-up she once would never leave the house without. Her eyes were puffy, I'm sure from lack of sleep. It's amazing how life can change you—how life's events can change everything.

"How do you think Jim will do with Tess coming home?" I asked.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since I asked him to leave," Regan said, looking down. "Anyway, I didn't come out here to talk about Jim, I came out here to see you." She slid her arm through mine and pulled me close. She rested her head on my shoulder. For Regan, this was big. She used to be so homophobic that any display of affection in public was not allowed. This was a sure sign that her feelings toward being gay were changing.

"Boy, being out here with you sure brings back a lot of memories," she said.

I looked out over the lake. "Yes it does, doesn't it?" I said, remembering that it was here that I finally found the courage to tell Regan how I felt about her, that I was falling in love with her.

“What did you think that day when I told you how I felt about you?” I asked.

Regan tightened her hold on me. “At first, I thought you were crazy. I knew we cared about each other, but never in a million years did I think about it that way... That was until you kissed me. I guess that’s when things changed for me.”

“I was scared to death that day, but I knew if I didn’t do something, I’d lose you forever,” I said, remembering that warm summer evening so many years ago.

“Those feelings in you must have really been strong for you to act on them,” Regan said. “I don’t know if I would have been that brave.”

“I know what you mean.” I turned to Regan. “They were strong. And for the first time in my life, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be with you.”

Regan looked up at me and gently kissed me on the lips.

“Wow,” I whispered. “Things really have changed since the last time we were here. Now you’re the aggressor.” I was unable to contain my smile.

Regan’s face blushed. Suddenly, tears streamed down her face.

“What’s wrong?” I feared that I might have embarrassed her.

Regan shook her head. “It’s just that I wish things weren’t so complicated.”

“How do you mean?”

“My marriage, Tess, my dysfunctional family...”

“Everyone has a dysfunctional family,” I said. “You should have seen the stunt my mother pulled a few weeks ago.”

“Your mother?” Regan asked, surprised. “Your mom seems so normal. What kind of trouble could she get into?”

“She called me at two in the morning to come pick her up at the Marriott,” I said. “She ended up there with a guy she barely knew.”

“Oh, my,” Regan said with a smile.

“The one thing I’ve learned in all this is that nobody’s situation is perfect. No matter how hard we try to control the outcome of things, they seem to have a way of working themselves out.”

"I hope so," Regan said. "I don't think I'm strong enough to make all these decisions. So much rides on them. I'm responsible for another human being now. When I look back on it all, I can't believe this is what my life has become. This isn't what I planned on."

"Nobody's life turns out the way they planned it." I thought about what had happened the other night with Regan and my feelings for Rosetti. "Look. There's something I need to tell you."

Regan looked up at me. Her eyes widened with concern.

"What is it?"

"The night we were together...that was a wonderful thing."

Regan nodded. Uncertainty of where I was going with this clouded her face.

"But..."

"But what?"

I could hear the anxiety in Regan's voice. A fierce wave of apprehension flowed through me, and I couldn't continue. I couldn't tell her about Rosetti. At least not now. She had enough going on in her life and I didn't want to add to her stress.

"But nothing," I said, taking the coward's way out. I wasn't sure how Regan would react if I told her about Rosetti. That's not quite true. I knew exactly how she'd react. She would be upset and would probably leave. And for some reason, I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready to give her up yet. Something inside me needed to hold on to that old dream of mine that had Regan and me living happily ever after. I'd had the dream for so long that I had to test the possibility of making it real for just a little while longer. Even though I realized right there and then that I had started dreaming a different dream.

Regan stared at me. She studied my face.

"Come on, let's go for a walk," I said in an attempt to break the heavy tension between us. I held out my hand to help Regan off the picnic table. I took her hand and walked along the beach and headed toward the boat docks and the parking lot. As we got closer to the docks, we could see the couple I had seen previously walking on the beach. Excitement rippled through me when I

realized that the couple I had originally thought was a man and a woman was actually two women. The world was changing. Same-sex relationships seemed to be becoming more and more visible.

I pointed this fact out to Regan as we watched the young couple embrace, then hold hands as they walked down the beach. As they came closer, one of the women, her short blond hair blown in disarray by the wind, looked familiar. Excitement turned to anxiety when I realized that the blonde was Sandra, the girl I had sneaked out on and never returned her phone calls.

I panicked. Could I make my escape without causing a scene? How would I explain this to Regan?

"Debbie? Debbie, is that you?" Sandra asked as they approached Regan and me.

Regan glanced over at me with one eyebrow raised. She stood by without saying a word.

I smiled weakly, remembering that I was so uncouth with this girl that I didn't have the decency to give her my real name. This was a game Rosetti and I came up with a long time ago, but now, it just seemed so mean.

By the look of things, Sandra had moved on.

"How have you been?" Sandra asked as she unlatched herself from her new love and pulled me into a huge bear hug.

"Fine," I said. "And you?"

"I'm doing great. Oh, this is Devon," Sandra said, introducing me to her new girlfriend.

"Hello," Devon said, extending her hand to me.

I shook her outstretched hand. "It's nice to meet you," I said, an odd sensation of déjà vu coming over me as I felt Devon's gaze upon me.

"This is Regan," I said, completing the introductions. I could tell by her demeanor Regan was very uncomfortable with the situation. But she nodded her hello. The other two women responded in kind.

This is where things got more awkward.

"You look familiar," Devon said, turning her attention back to me. "Have we met before?"

"No, I don't think so," I said, shaking my head but knowing

full well I'd met Devon before—a long time ago.

"Sandra, I'm sorry I never called you back," I said, hoping to rescue the situation. "It was really rude of me."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm over it." Sandra giggled, pulling Devon closer to her. "You know, if you hadn't treated me so badly, I never would have met Devon. I guess I probably should thank you for that."

I felt the sting of her comment as if she'd slapped me in the face. "Well...it's good to see you and good to see that you're happy and doing well," I said, hoping this conversation would end soon.

Sandra locked arms with Devon and they said their goodbyes. As they continued down the beach, Devon looked back at me, I'm sure wondering where or when she'd met me before. Maybe she recognized my face but couldn't place the name; after all, it had only been one dance.

I remembered melting into Devon's strong arms, swaying to the music when Sean walked into the lesbian bar, looking for me. He was determined to bring me home and stop all this nonsense about being gay. I often wondered what Devon thought that night when I ran out of her arms and off the dance floor without an explanation. That was the night Sean and I decided to end our marriage. When I went back into the bar to explain what had happened, she was gone.

"What was that all about?" Regan asked as we watched Devon and Sandra saunter away arm in arm.

"Uh...it's a long story." I hoped Regan would just drop it. She didn't.

"You apologized to that girl for not calling her. Did you go out with her?"

"Uh-huh." I started walking toward the boat docks.

"Did you sleep with her?"

I paused before answering. What did it matter who I dated or who I slept with while Regan was gone? After all, she left me. She'd made it obvious that she wanted me out of her life at the time, so I had nothing to be ashamed of.

"Yes, I slept with her, but it was only once." Like that was

supposed to make it any better.

“What about that other girl? She kept looking at you like she knew you. Did you sleep with her, too?”

“No,” I said quickly. “I didn’t sleep with that woman.”

Regan looked at me skeptically. “Why did the blond girl call you Debbie? Is there something else about you I need to know?”

I looked down at my Docksidors, which were dusty with sand. The heat of embarrassment colored my face. “It was a game Rosetti and I played. It wasn’t very nice, and I regret doing it.” I was unable to meet Regan’s gaze.

We walked in silence for a while, then I spoke. “I was really hurting,” I said. “And was trying to find a way to cope...you know...because you left. I was trying to find what we had with someone else.”

Regan stopped and turned toward me. “Did you find it? Did you find what you were looking for?”

I hesitated before I answered Regan’s question. Her eyes probed my soul and I was afraid she could see what I couldn’t say to her. I thought I’d found what I was looking for with Rosetti, but the timing was all wrong. Rosetti went away and Regan came back seemingly fulfilling what I had wished for during the last five years.

“No, I didn’t.”

Regan let out a small sigh. She slipped her hand into mine and we walked back toward the parking lot. I walked Regan to her car.

“I’ve got to stop over Sean’s and check on Ed,” I said.

“How is he doing?” Regan asked as she leaned against the driver’s side door.

“I’m afraid he’s pretty close to the end.”

“It’s hard to let the ones we love go, isn’t it?” Regan asked.

“Yes it is.” I knew she was talking about Ed, but in the back of my heart, I felt like she was talking about someone else. Who, I couldn’t tell.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I had come out to the lake to feel better. But now I felt worse. I felt empty inside, ashamed of my past behavior and uncertain about my future.

I started the car and headed over to Sean's. As I turned on to Sean's street, fear snapped through me as I saw the red and white lights of an ambulance flashing in Sean's driveway. I pulled up to the curb, threw the car into park, and ran up the front lawn.

"What's going on?" I asked Sean, who was standing at the sink looking out the window to the backyard.

"He's gone," Sean said, still looking out the window.

"What?" I asked, my mouth dry.

"He's gone. He died about a half hour ago. I called, but you..."

"What happened?"

"He was in a lot of pain. Your mom said he was moaning a lot while we were at the funeral. She gave him some morphine, but it didn't seem to help, so I gave him more when I got home."

"How much did you give him?"

"One dropper full."

I looked up at Sean and he looked away. Something inside me told me he wasn't telling the truth.

"He was suffering, Meen...I couldn't watch him suffer like that." Sean was shaking and tears sprung from his eyes.

"I know, Sean...I know..." I pulled him into my arms, praying he didn't do what I think he'd done, what so many others have done as they watched their loved ones be ravaged by horrible terminal diseases.

Sean and I walked into the living room. Ed lay lifeless in his bed with a clean white sheet pulled up to the middle of his chest. His bony fingers were laced together and rested on his concave chest. Two paramedics were at Ed's bedside. One packed up their equipment while the other filled out paperwork on a clipboard. Recognizing both paramedics from when they brought patients into the emergency room, I nodded hello to them as I walked over to Ed. His skin was waxy white, but he looked peaceful for the first time in many weeks. I kissed his forehead, feeling the coolness of death on my lips. "I love you, Dad," I whispered as I stroked his head.

The paramedics stood by as Sean and I said our goodbyes to Ed. When we were done, they lifted Ed onto the gurney to take him to the hospital. There the physician on call would pronounce him dead.

I watched from the living room window as they loaded the gurney into the back of the ambulance and closed the doors. Just before they pulled away, the driver shut off the flashing red and white lights, always an ominous sign—the sign that there was no hurry to get to the hospital. Nothing more could be done. Ed's life was over.

Sean and I sat at the kitchen table. The house was eerily quiet. No more hissing sound from Ed's oxygen compressor, now just solid quiet. I poured Sean a cup of coffee and set it in front of him. I poured myself one, as well, and sat in the kitchen chair opposite him. Sean took a small sip of coffee and looked up at me.

"I'm sorry, Mina, I couldn't watch him suffer like that," Sean said, his voice barely a whisper as if there was someone else in the room that might hear this confession.

I hung my head, hearing what I feared was true.

"Mina, what would be the point in letting him suffer like that?" Sean pleaded. "He couldn't eat, he wasn't sleeping, and he was half out of his mind in pain." Sean tried to convince himself, as well as me, that he did the right thing.

"You told me you gave him the correct dose of morphine, and I'm gonna believe that's what you gave him. That you did the right thing."

Sean looked up from his coffee cup.

I reached across the table and covered his hand with mine. I wanted him to know that although I didn't condone what he did, I understood the helplessness and the hopelessness one can feel when watching a loved one suffer.

Ed's calling hours were the next evening. What Ed lacked in family, he made up for in friends. Morelli's Funeral Home was packed as a line of mourners ran out the front door and on to the sidewalk. Sean remained stoic during it all. He greeted each person who came expressing their condolences. I sat with Sean as retired police officers, firemen, and friends filed through. Some people Sean knew well, others he didn't know at all. They all mentioned what a great guy Ed was and that he would be sadly missed. Some of the same people who attended Pam's funeral attended Ed's, as well.

After the calling hours, Sean and I went back to his house, where more friends and neighbors waited with casseroles and pasta and every type of comfort food you could imagine.

Around eleven o'clock, the crowd began to thin. The last one to leave was Mrs. Isabella, Sean's next-door neighbor. She brought over homemade nut and apricot Kolachi for breakfast the next morning and made sure the kitchen was tidied up.

There was no question that I would stay that night. There was no way I could leave Sean alone on the night before he'd bury his father. I called Rosetti's house again, just in case her assignment was done and she was home. The machine picked up, and I left her a message letting her know where I was and to call me as soon as possible when she got in. Any normal person would think leaving a message for someone you know isn't there was stupid, but it was comforting to me. It gave me some connection to Rosetti, and that was something I desperately needed.

Sean brought out a pillow and blanket and made up a sleeping area on the couch.

"You take the bed," he said as he spread out the blanket over the couch.

"No, don't be ridiculous. This is your house. You sleep in

your bed. I'll be fine out here."

"Mina, the couch isn't comfortable...I'll sleep out here."

"Fine, then I'll sleep out here with you." I pulled one of the pillows off the couch and set it on the floor.

"This is ridiculous," Sean said. We both laughed.

For the first time in four years, I shared a bed with my ex-husband. Nothing in the world could have felt weirder or more like the right thing to do. Just because you can't be married to someone doesn't mean you stop loving them. There was nothing sexual about that night. I lay next to Sean while he reminisced about special times with Ed: how Ed let him sit on his lap when he was little and steer the car or how Ed attended every Little League game even when he was working. Sean remembered how great it felt to see the black and white cruiser parked off to the side with Ed cheering him and his brother, Buddy, on.

"He was a good dad," Sean whispered. "He was tough on the force but gentle with me and Buddy. When Buddy was killed in that car accident so young, just two weeks before his sixteenth birthday, the light seemed to go out of Dad. He kept to himself mostly but still managed to be there when I needed him."

In the veil of the deep dark night, Sean finally let go. He cried in my arms, out of pain and guilt. My heart ached for him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Deaths come in threes, isn't that what they say? Were Pam's and Ed's death a premonition to what was going to happen to Rosetti? Was she next? Work kept my mind off worrying about her, but when I got home at night, Rosetti was all I could think about.

Not only was I worried about Rosetti's well-being, I couldn't shake the guilt I felt about not telling Regan about my feelings for Rosetti that day at the lake. It wasn't fair to her, and it wasn't fair to Rosetti. I felt disloyal to both of them. I was torn between the two of them and had no idea what to do. I had even made one of those stupid lists where you take each one's qualities and liabilities and see how they measure up. When I did the lists, they came out even.

Regan brought Tess home the day after our walk at the lake. She called to let me know that they had gotten settled and that the apnea monitor was working fine. Regan set up Tess's cradle in the living room so she could keep an eye on her. Tess was fussy and had not been sleeping more than an hour at a time during the night. Regan lay on the couch next to the cradle, trying to sleep when Tess did. She said she was exhausted. This wasn't an easy thing to do, especially alone.

On the day of Tess's first visit at her new pediatrician's office since coming home from the hospital, Regan asked if I'd mind driving her to the doctor. Jim was nowhere to be found, and her mom couldn't take them because she couldn't leave Regan's father home alone. Regan argued that she would normally take Tess herself, but there was so much to carry and it was her first

time with this new doctor, she'd like the company.

Hesitantly, I agreed. I wanted to help Regan out, but somehow this didn't feel right. After all, Regan was still married to Jim. He could show up at any time. Judging by our last encounter, it wasn't a good idea for me to be around when he surfaced. Also, Regan's mother still had her reservations about me, even though Regan made it clear to her how she felt about me being around. There were so many signs that I had no business being in Regan's life. It only seemed to cause more frustration than good, so how come I couldn't let it go? Was I trying to prove a point, that Regan should never have left in the first place? Was it the amazing sex? My head hurt just thinking about it.

I pulled into Regan's driveway and tooted the horn. Regan appeared at the back door holding up her index finger giving me the one-minute sign. Her hair was tied back in a loose ponytail again. And even though her jeans and shirt were impeccably pressed, it was still obvious that the effects of motherhood were taking their toll on her. Her skin was dull, she wore little make-up, and she looked like she hadn't slept in days.

I got out of the car to help Regan load the backseat with what looked like a shopping cart from Toys "R" Us. Regan pushed her way through the screen door lugging a Dora the Explorer diaper bag, an umbrella stroller, and a child's car carrier with Tess embedded somewhere inside. Tess was covered by multiple layers of clothing and blankets. Tiny pink mittens were clipped to the sleeves of her tweed car coat. I thought the coat and the mittens were a little much; it was early October, and the temperature had barely gotten below forty degrees. I should have known that Regan would be an overprotective mother.

"Geez, Regan, how's this kid gonna breathe?" I helped her get Tess situated in the backseat. I loosened the blankets to expose the little one's face. Tess had soft creamy skin with eyelashes so long that they brushed her cheeks. She was sound asleep. Her breathing was easy and her color looked good. I helped Regan anchor the plastic base of the carrier, then clicked the car seat into place. Finally, the carrier was secure, with Tess facing the backseat. Regan sat in the backseat, as well to keep an eye on Tess.

The parking lot of Dr. Zachary Martin's office was packed. Dr. Martin was an attending pediatrician who admitted patients to City Hospital, so I'd had many opportunities to take care of his patients. Regan made a good choice when she picked Zach Martin. He was one of the best baby docs in the area.

I helped Regan remove Tess's carrier from its base. Regan picked the carrier up and slung it over her arm like she was carrying a large purse.

"I'll wait here," I said as I handed her the diaper bag.

"Aren't you coming in with us?" Regan touched my arm. "I was hoping you would."

"Oh," I said, surprised by Regan's request. Regan had always been so secretive about our being together, especially in public, so this request caught me off-guard.

Regan handed me Tess's carrier and I followed her into the doctor's office. Tess peeked at me over a corner of the many baby blankets Regan had her wrapped in. She wriggled her head up and flashed a watery toothless grin. My heart fluttered and I couldn't help but smile.

Even though Tess only weighed six pounds, the carrier was heavy. This and the diaper bag and the stroller and the toys, I wondered how anyone could do this alone.

Dr. Martin's office was practically standing room only. Toys, coloring books, crayons, and *Highlights* magazines were scattered everywhere. Mothers sat with kids with runny noses, coughs, and fevers. One boy sat on the cracked green leather couch that I'm sure had seen better days with a bucket between his knees. I made sure we sat far away from that kid.

Regan signed Tess in immediately, but it took an hour and a half until they were called back to the exam area. Although I still felt uncomfortable, I didn't hesitate this time. I picked up Tess and followed Regan down the hall to the exam area. Once in the exam room, the nurse, a young woman dressed in Blue's Clues scrubs, took Tess from Regan. She set Tess on the exam table. Then she removed Tess's coat and blankets and sleeper, unwrapping her like she was a Christmas present down to her diaper and onesie, and weighed her on the tabletop scale.

"Six pounds ten ounces," the nurse said as she rewrapped Tess in the blankets and handed her back to Regan. Regan immediately wrapped Tess up again in her layer of blankets and cradled her in her arms.

"Hey, she's up almost another pound," Regan said excitedly.

"See, you must be doing something right," I said.

A few minutes later, Dr. Martin came into the room.

"Hello," he said, reading Tess's chart, I'm Dr. Mart...Dr. Caselli?" Dr. Martin looked up. He flipped over the chart to check the patient name. He extended his hand toward me and I took it. "This is a pleasant surprise. Is Tess your...?"

"No, I'm a friend of her mom's," I said. "This is her mother, Regan Martin...I mean Douglass," I said, stumbling over my words.

"It's nice to meet you," Dr. Martin said and extended his hand to Regan.

Regan smiled and took his hand. Was it my imagination or did Regan hold onto Dr. Martin's hand a little longer than what might be considered professional? What a ridiculous thought.

"So how's Tess doing?" Dr. Martin let go of Regan's hand.

"For the most part, okay. I can only get her to take two or three ounces of formula at a time," Regan said.

"Is she able to keep it down? No regurgitation?" Dr. Martin asked.

"No regurgitation. And she's usually fussing to eat again in two hours."

"Sounds like she's right on track," Dr. Martin said. "I know it can be scary bringing a newborn home, especially one who's already had to go through open heart surgery. I think you're doing a great job, Mrs. Douglass."

Regan smiled and I could see a flicker of relief in her tired eyes. There was something else there, too, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"So how are things at City?" Dr. Martin asked me as he took Tess from Regan and laid her on the paper-covered exam table. He peeled off the layer of blankets and lifted the tiny white T-shirt Tess wore and placed his stethoscope on her chest. The dressings

were off of Tess's surgical wound and the suture lines were a healthy bright pink. It always amazed me how anyone could operate on someone so tiny.

"Busy as ever," I said as I observed Dr. Martin examine Tess.

"Day off today?" Dr. Martin asked as he put the earpieces of his stethoscope in his ears.

"No, I'm working second shift this afternoon."

Dr. Martin nodded as he listened to Tess's heart.

"Her heartbeat is nice and strong. Color and skin turgor are good. Suture line is healing well. She looks well hydrated, too," Dr. Martin said as he turned his attention to the diamond-shaped soft spot on top of Tess's head. He continued with his examination, tugging on Tess's arms and legs. She was wide awake now.

"Mrs. Douglass, Tess is doing very well. I think she's strong enough to get her first series of vaccines today. Since we're in the middle of RSV season, I suggest we give her that vaccine, as well. That will give her a little extra protection against any respiratory infection that these little ones are so susceptible to.

"I bet you see a lot of kids in the ER with RSV, don't you, Dr. Caselli?"

"Yes, we do. Many of those cases could be avoided if the parents just wouldn't expose their kids to cigarette smoke."

"Well, Mrs. Douglass, everything checks out fine. I'd like to see Tess in two weeks for a follow-up. I'll have Sally, my nurse, come in with the vaccines if that's all right with you."

Regan looked over at me. I nodded my approval.

"Okay," Regan said.

Dr. Martin left the room, and a few minutes later, Nurse Sally came in with a plastic tray and two hypodermic needles.

"Two shots?" Regan asked.

I knew all too well what was coming and that this wasn't going to be pleasant.

The nurse smiled a sympathetic smile. "Mrs. Douglass, if you'll just lay Tess on her back, I can hold her leg and give her the injections. I'll give one in each leg."

Regan leaned against the exam table and laid her hand across

Tess's chest and stroked Tess's nearly bald head to comfort her. The nurse secured Tess's leg and jammed the first needle into her skinny thigh. It took a moment for the pain to register, but soon Tess scrunched up her face, then the wailing began. Tears leaked from the corners of Tess's blue-gray eyes. I had to blink back my own tears. It doesn't matter how much clinical experience you have, sometimes you can't help but have a tender heart when it comes to your patient's pain.

After giving the injections, the nurse placed two Looney Tune's Band-Aids over the injection sites. Tess's legs were so small that the Band-Aids practically wrapped all the way around. Once the nurse was done, Regan picked up Tess to comfort her. Nothing was helping. Tess wailed all the way out to the reception desk, out into the parking lot, and halfway home, finally falling asleep three blocks from Regan's house. When I went to pull into the driveway, Regan stopped me.

"You can't stop now. If we stop now, she'll wake up and God knows when I'll get her to sleep again. Can't we go for a little ride?" Regan asked, desperation flickering in her eyes.

"Sure." I kept driving. After we passed Wal-Mart for the third time, I asked Regan how long she wanted to do this. When she didn't respond, I looked over and found her sound asleep curled up against the passenger's side door. With a sigh, I headed out of town and out toward Amish country, where it was peaceful and beautiful this time of year. I looked over at Regan and remembered a time when just the sight of her had made my heart rev into overdrive. It was an exciting time back then, a time of novelty, exploration, and of pure joy. It was like we had our own secret world that consisted of only Regan and me. And it wasn't until other people entered that it so easily fell apart. That wonderful time seemed miles away now. When I looked over at Regan now, things seemed so different. I did love her, and I was still attracted to her, but both of those feelings seemed muted now. Although my body yearned for her, my heart didn't.

My heart yearned for someone else.

Now that I admitted this to myself, I was shocked. I had longed to be reunited with Regan for so long that it never seemed

possible that it would be my feelings that could change. I knew it was natural for love to change over time. That breathtaking intensity of attraction is supposed to grow into a solid, more stable emotion. But with regards to Regan, without that sexual heat, I felt empty. Like I had so many times before.

Even though my feelings for Regan had changed, I knew I couldn't abandon her, especially when it was so evident that she needed someone to help her through all this. Maybe this is why when lesbian couples break up, they don't necessarily end their relationships. Maybe because we are women, there will always be that common bond of wanting to be there for each other no matter what.

After two hours on the road, Tess began to stir. I'm sure her belly was telling her it was time to eat. Regan awoke, almost automatically upon Tess's first whimper of a cry.

"Oh...I must have fallen asleep." Regan rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands. "Where are we?"

"Almost to your place. I think Tess is getting hungry."

Regan straightened herself in the passenger's seat. She rubbed her neck as I'm sure it was sore from the awkward position she'd been sleeping in.

Tess let loose with a good hearty wail. Regan reached back and found Tess's pacifier and plopped it into her mouth. Tess sucked noisily on it for a while, but then wailed again, probably realizing that it was only a substitute for the real thing.

"Hang in there, Tess," I said, glancing into the rearview mirror. "We're almost home."

Regan smiled and reached back to comfort her. Anyone looking at the scene would have thought we were just one happy family out for an afternoon drive. I guess looks can be deceiving.

I helped Regan unload Tess's things and carried the baby into the house. My breath caught in my throat when we were met by Regan's mother who was sitting at the kitchen table nursing a cup of tea. I set the carrier on the kitchen table. Regan immediately began to unwrap Tess.

"What are you doing here?" Regan asked her mother. "Who's watching Dad?"

"Nobody. He's taking a nap at home." Regan's mother took a sip of tea. "I was getting worried. I called several times and there was no answer. So I came over and let myself in, thinking something was wrong." Regan's mother directed her comments solely at Regan as if I were invisible.

"Nothing is wrong," Regan said. "We just went for a little ride after Tess's doctor's visit. She fell asleep in the car, and I didn't want to wake her."

"I see," Regan's mother said. "So what did the doctor say?"

"He said Tess is doing well. She's gained almost another pound." Regan unbuckled the safety belt and lifted Tess from the car carrier.

"Does she have to stay on that monitor?"

"Yes, until her doctor tells us otherwise," Regan said.

There was a distinct chill in the air, and it wasn't coming from the fall weather outside. "I better get going," I said, wishing I could slip away unnoticed. "I've got to be at work in an hour."

"I'll walk you out," Regan said as she handed Tess over to her mother and followed me onto the back porch.

"Thanks again for all your help," Regan said. "I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I'm glad Tess is doing better."

I turned to leave and Regan touched my arm. "When do you think we can be together again?" Regan asked. "I really miss you."

I felt a terrible tenseness take over my body. "My work schedule is pretty tight for the next few days."

"Oh," Regan said. Her face clouded over in disappointment.

"Regan..." I began. She looked up. Her eyes met mine. I looked away.

"Mina, what's wrong? I know being around my mother makes you uncomfortable...I didn't know she was going to be here."

"It's not that. Your mother has every right to be here. I'm sorry...it's just that..." I wasn't sure what to say. Should I tell her my heart was beginning to believe what my mind had been telling it all along? That we really weren't meant to be together?

"Mina?" Regan said, breaking my reverie.

“Huh?”

“Where were you just now?”

“Oh...I don’t know...caught up in...never mind.” I said.
“What were we talking about?”

As Regan and I stood on her back porch, we could hear Tess start to fuss. Mrs. Martin cooed at her granddaughter, trying to calm her, but whatever she was doing wasn’t working.

“Mina, are you all right?” Regan asked.

“Just tired, I guess.”

“Regan, I think Tess is hungry. Can you come in here and feed her?” Mrs. Martin yelled through the screen of the back door.

“I’ll be in to feed her in a minute,” Regan yelled back.

Regan took my hands into hers. “I know this isn’t easy, but please give it a chance. Give us a chance,” Regan said. “You know I care about you. I know things seem crazy right now, but it won’t be like this forever.” Regan eyes were moist with worry. “If you weren’t in my life right now, I don’t know what I’d do. I need you.” Regan was unable to hide the desperation in her voice.

That’s when I realized Regan had not come back because she wanted me. Regan had come back because she needed me. That was a huge difference, a difference I was starting to understand.

I nodded at her comment, acknowledging I had understood what she was saying.

“I do have to go. I’ll be late for work and I don’t want to get on the wrong side of Dr. Morrison again.”

“Will you call me later?” Regan asked, brushing a loose strand of hair from her eyes.

“Sure, it might not be until late, though. It depends on when I get a break.”

“That’s okay. I’ll probably be up with Tess anyway.”

I left Regan’s house with a lead weight still sitting on my chest. There were things I needed to deal with but was too much of a coward to do so.

That’s when my mind began to backpedal. What if Regan really did love me? If I stuck this out a little longer, would my feelings mature and intensify over time? The truth of the matter was that although I thought I loved Regan, it was more accurate

to say I was in love with the thought of being in love with her. Not only that, but it appeared Regan was trying to convince herself of the same, that she was in love with me, when it was more accurate to say that she needed me to get through a difficult time in her life. Were we just holding onto something that never would be?

My head pounded and my stomach clenched from the turmoil as I pulled into the physician's parking lot. I had to tuck all this away for now, at least for the next twelve hours. My patients needed all of me, including a clear head, even if my heart was banged up.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Since our talk, Dr. Morrison had been quite cordial. He even scheduled me with Page on the adult side that night, which to me was an indication we had made amends.

It was good to see Page again. I had a lot to tell her. In between cases of congestive heart failure, chest pain, and pneumonia, I gave Page the details of the past few days. I told her about Ed's death, about Rosetti's continued absence, and Regan's return. I told her about our reunion and about the little voice inside of me that was expressing doubt that Regan and I could get back what we'd had before she left.

"I can't believe you're having doubts about being with Regan," Page said. "You pined for her for years. She comes back and tells you that she wants to be with you, and you tell her thanks but no thanks."

"I didn't tell her that."

"Well, from what you are telling me, you might as well. What's going on with you?"

"It's just not the same. We've both been through a lot since we were together. It feels like we're not the same people."

"Is it because she has a kid now?" Page asked. "I know you've said you never wanted kids of your own."

"No...not at all. Tess is a beautiful baby. I feel so fortunate to have been able to help her into the world. And believe it or not, being with them today felt like the right thing to do. It's just that things between Regan and me don't feel the same. I think I had her return so built up in my mind that when it finally happened..."

"It wasn't what you expected?" Page finished my point.

I nodded. "There's still some spark. Actually, we had an amazing evening just the other night," I said, remembering the night in my apartment. "But once that fizzles out, what do you have left?"

Page smiled and flipped the chart that she was working on closed. "Mina, you know the answer to all this. I just think you're having trouble admitting it to yourself."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if you admit your true feelings, you're letting go of your dream. You've held on to that dream for a long time, and let's face it, if we don't have our dreams, what do we have?"

Page was right. It was hard for me to let go. But it would be worse to hold on to a dream that might never materialize.

"To have a meaningful relationship, you've got to get past the spark."

"What do you mean?"

"You realize that the first few months of a new relationship are always the most exciting, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"And why wouldn't it be? I mean, everything is new and intense. You can't keep your hands off each other and you think you have stumbled onto the most wonderful thing. That feeling can be addictive, can't it?"

I nodded, wondering where she was going with this.

"But that's when being in a relationship is easy," Page said. "All those things are wonderful, but the foundation of a good relationship is in the ups and the downs of everyday life. It's the taking care of each other and surviving. And perhaps not only surviving, but thriving. It's hammering out a life together and holding on to the desire for each other, as well."

I nodded.

"You and Regan had the lust and the passion of a new relationship, but when things got rough, she took off. You never got a chance to see if the relationship would survive the mundane details of everyday life. And I think you're not so sure that if the going gets tough, she'll stick around."

Page paused for a moment. "I don't think it's lack of love

you're worried about, I think it's lack of trust. I also think that a lack of trust has stood in your way of ever having a long-term relationship with any woman, including Regan."

"What do you mean?" I asked, not quite willing to accept responsibility for my haphazard love life. "I'm capable of having a long-term relationship. I was married for almost six years. That has to count for something, right?"

Page smiled. I knew she knew I was grasping at straws. "Sure it does, but let's face it. You get involved with people who you know aren't good for you."

"Now, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." I was upset that someone was dissecting me like that.

Page laughed. "Don't get all bent out of shape about this. You wanted my opinion and I'm giving it to you. No sense in me sugarcoating it. It wouldn't do you any good then."

"So what you're saying is that I'm not capable of having a healthy relationship, that I'm defective in some way?"

"No, not defective exactly."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"What I'm saying is that you pick women who you know you're going to leave or will leave you, once the heat dies down."

"That's crazy," I said. "Why would anybody do something like that? You set yourself up for failure from the get-go. That makes no sense."

Page flipped open her last chart of the night. "Oh, my dear, but it does. You see, if you already know the relationship will never work out, you don't have to be emotionally invested, so you have nothing to lose and you don't get hurt. That's why for the past five years you've moved easily from one woman to the next and to the next. You give yourself physically to these women, but you keep your emotions inaccessible so you don't get hurt. Remember what they told us in medical school about clinical distance?" She stopped for a moment before continuing.

"They told us we must keep our emotions in check to be effective as a physician. By keeping an emotional barrier up while treating your patient, you're able to make clear unbiased

clinical judgments for them. You can't help your patients if you're an emotional wreck, so you protect your heart by not getting emotionally involved. You're using the same coping mechanism to protect your heart in your personal life, as well. You keep your emotions tucked away so you can make a clear judgment about when it's time to end these relationships."

And that's what I'd been doing with Regan all along. I never recovered from when she hurt me. I sure as hell wasn't going to give her another chance. Page was right.

"So what you're saying is that I'm hopeless?"

Page shook her head. "In all our years together, I have watched you go from one woman to another. I knew none of those would ever develop into anything, except for..."

"What...except for what?" I asked, suddenly feeling a bit of a reprieve.

Page's face clouded with uneasiness. "Never mind. I'm sorry I brought it up." She pushed away from the desk. "I'm gonna get some coffee, do you want some?"

"Yes." I followed her into the doctor's lounge.

"Sorry you brought what up?" I handed Page two Styrofoam cups.

She filled both cups with steaming hot coffee.

"Page, come on. What were you going to say?"

"Nothing." She headed back toward the desk.

I set my coffee cup down and plopped down next to her. "Page..."

"Okay," Page said, reluctance steeped in her voice. "You're going to think I'm crazy, but there is one person I think things would work out with for you."

"Who?"

"Your friend Rosetti."

I looked up, surprised. "Why would you think that?"

Page smiled. "Because I've seen you two together. It seems like you two truly care for each other. I think there's some real potential there."

My face flushed. "I've been thinking that, too. Rosetti knows me and I know her, warts and all. But I'm scared that if

I pursue my feelings for her, I'll lose her, and I'm scared that if I don't pursue them, I'll lose her."

"Mina, you have to let your guard down and tell Rosetti how you feel. I have a feeling she feels like you do and is just as scared."

"But I'm also scared that if she finds out about my recent fling with Regan, she'll be hurt and that will be the end of things before they ever start."

"If you want any chance at having a relationship with Rosetti, you have to tell her the truth, no matter how difficult. Tell her how you feel, go with your heart. That's where your answers are."

"Dr. Caselli, you have a call on the outside line," Delores said as we approached the desk and she handed me the phone.

"This is Caselli," I said.

"Mina, it's Regan. Would you mind stopping over here on your way home from work tonight?"

"Is there something wrong?"

"It's Tess. I changed her diaper about an hour ago and noticed a fine red rash on her belly. I thought it might be diaper rash, so I put some Desitin on it. I just checked her again and noticed that the rash is all over her now. What do you think it is?"

"It might be a reaction to the vaccines she got today. Is she running a temp?"

I heard rustling at the other end of the phone, then a *click*. "Ninety-seven point six, with the ear thermometer."

"She's not having trouble breathing, is she? Can you hear any wheezing?"

Again, more rustling of blankets. "No, she sounds clear."

"Good. Then it might just be a little systemic rash from the shots." I looked at my watch. "Because Tess is so small, we can't give her anything unless the reaction gets severe. If her symptoms should worsen, call me immediately. I should be out of here in an hour. Do you think you'll be okay with her until I can get there?"

"Yes, I'll be fine."

"Okay, see you in about an hour."

"Thanks, I don't know what I'd do without you."

I hung up the phone and was surprised to see Page looking at

me. "What?"

Page shook her head. "You're hopeless, Caselli."

We finished our shift around eleven o'clock. Steve was waiting for Page at the emergency room entrance in their Country Squire station wagon. Todd, their six-year-old son, was asleep in the backseat. I envied them. They were a family and their love seemed so easy, so natural. How do you get to that point with someone? How can you trust someone enough to let your guard down and love them unconditionally?

I pulled into Regan's driveway. The house was dark except for the over the stove vent light in the kitchen. I tapped lightly on the screen door as I didn't want to wake Tess if she was sleeping. Regan appeared at the door. She raised her index finger to her lips, letting me know to keep quiet because Tess was asleep.

"How's she doing?" I whispered.

"Fine," Regan whispered back.

"How's the rash? Is it any worse?"

"No, actually, it's almost gone."

"Gone? Really?" I asked, surprised.

Regan nodded. "I feel bad about having you come all the way out here for nothing."

Her gaze met mine, and I knew right then that Regan's phone call had an ulterior motive. Her hair was freshly washed. She wore a pair of snug-fitting jeans and a white tank top. It was obvious that she wasn't wearing a bra underneath it. She took me by the hand and led me into the darkened living room, where Tess was sound asleep in her bassinette.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Regan asked as I peeked in at Tess.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks." I didn't quite like how things seemed to develop, and I wanted to leave as soon as possible.

Regan returned from the kitchen with one wine cooler. She sat next to me on the couch. The scent of her perfume and the closeness of her began to erode my resolve, and I found myself starting to weaken in my position to keep this platonic. I cleared my throat.

“So when did you notice that the rash was gone?”

“Just a few minutes before you arrived. Tess spit out her pacifier and was fussing. When I went to check on her, I lifted her undershirt and saw that the rash was already beginning to fade. I knew kids could get a reaction to the vaccines, but I wasn’t sure how serious it could get.” She took a long pull on her wine cooler.

“Yes, sometimes it can be very serious. We usually give them a shot of Benadryl or epinephrine if it’s a real serious reaction. But if her rash has already started to fade, I wouldn’t give her anything right now.”

“Thanks again, Mina, for all that you’ve done for Tess and me. I can’t begin to tell you how much it means to me, but I’d like to show you.”

My heart pounded as Regan reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I can’t believe we’re really here,” Regan whispered. Her soft warm hand brushed my cheek. She kissed the tip of my nose, then my eyes, and she captured my mouth in a slow and satisfying kiss. She slipped her soft wet tongue between my lips and I could taste the citrus of her wine cooler. My body began to melt beneath her as her hands slid under my scrub shirt and explored my sensitive breasts. Regan removed my shirt and hers and tossed them onto the floor.

“Mmm...you feel so good to me,” Regan cooed as she gently laid me down onto the couch and slid her soft supple body on top of me. Regan’s soft curves molded perfectly into the contours of my body. She grabbed my wrists and pinned my hands over my head, then lowered her mouth to my breast. Her mouth sucked my nipple with tantalizing possessiveness. I groaned as the intense pleasure shot through my body.

“Shush...” Regan whispered. A smile graced her lips. I had forgotten that Tess was only a few feet away, asleep in her bassinette.

Instinctively, I slid my thigh between Regan’s legs as we gently rocked together. Regan tugged at my swollen nipple with her teeth, intensifying the ache that was growing between my legs.

Myriad feelings flooded my senses, longing and lust grabbed my body, yet guilt screamed in my head as our passion grew. My head was telling me to slow down, to stop this altogether, but the rest of me wanted to charge full steam ahead as Regan's supple body rocked above me. I ached to touch her. Needed to touch her. I finally got my hands free and held Regan at the waist. I tugged open the buttons of her Levi's 501 jeans and slid my hand inside. There I was greeted by her slick heat. Regan moaned as my cool fingers made contact with her hot swollen flesh.

"I want you inside of me," Regan whispered. She covered my hand with hers and guided it inside. I slid one, then two fingers deep inside of her. Her insides quivered around my fingers, and I knew she was on the brink. Being with Regan this way brought back memories of our first time together, when Regan was a virgin. I didn't know that until we had gotten to this point the first time we made love. I remember looking into Regan's eyes and asking her if she was sure she wanted to go through with this...that I knew it was her first time. She nodded and I proceeded gently, lovingly being careful not to hurt her. But now things were different. There had been other lovers since then and I couldn't help but wonder how this compared.

"Please, Mina..." Regan's raspy voice tapered off. With two fingers inside of her, I caressed her swollen clitoris with my thumb, sending her over the edge with a few short strokes.

Regan collapsed in my arms as the tremors of ecstasy subsided. Regan lay on top of me as I listened to her breathing return to normal. The room was quiet. The only light came through the living room window from a street light in front of the house. Regan's breathing deepened and I knew she had fallen into a satisfied lover's sleep.

I closed my eyes as I lay there on her couch, panic welling up inside of me with a sudden intensity that took me by surprise. Fragmented thoughts of Regan and I together were interrupted by images of Tess and Jim. And then there was the strongest image of them all—Rosetti. What was I doing?

I sat up abruptly, practically dumping Regan onto the floor.

"What's wrong?" Regan asked, startled from sleep.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this," I choked out.

Regan steadied herself, sitting back on the couch.

"Mina?"

"I can't...we can't do this."

Regan hung her head down and ran her hands through her hair. "I don't understand. I thought this is what you wanted."

"I thought it was, too. But things are different now. You have a husband...and I'm in love with someone else."

"What?" She sat on the couch, looking bewildered and weary. Dark circles under her eyes conveyed many sleepless nights.

"I'm in love with someone else. Although that may not matter anymore since I've probably messed up that relationship, as well. But, Regan, I'm sorry. This isn't right for either one of us."

Regan nodded. Her expression was somber.

"I better go." I stood and head toward the door.

"Wait." Regan grabbed my arm.

When I looked at her, I could see that something was gone from those crystal blue eyes. The fun, the laughter, the joy I once saw there was replaced by sadness and regret.

"I know what we had before was good. I just wanted to try and get that back. I thought you wanted the same thing."

"I thought I wanted it, too. But it's not real. I'm sorry."

Regan shrugged and turned away. I reached out and cupped her face in my hands.

"Regan, I love you, I always will. But I'm not in love with you. We're not the same people we were five years ago. Maybe that's a good thing."

Tears formed in Regan's eyes. I pulled her close.

She broke our embrace and wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

"There is one thing I want you to know. Even though we're not together doesn't mean I'll abandon you. You can always call me if you and Tess ever need anything."

Regan nodded.

Tess let out a short cry and began to fuss in her bed.

"Sounds like someone is getting hungry."

"Right on schedule," Regan said.

"I'm sorry this didn't work out." I touched Regan's arm.

She nodded. "Me too."

I found my discarded shirt and pulled it over my head as Tess cried out again, this time a longer high-pitch cry.

"You better go," Regan whispered, then walked me to the door.

I walked to my car into the cool clear night. As I backed out of Regan's driveway, tears blurred my vision. Letting go of Regan was harder than I'd imagined. But in my heart, I knew it was the best thing for all of us.

As I drove down Regan's street, a black pickup truck recklessly turned the corner, practically side-swiping my car. When I caught a glimpse of the driver, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. The pickup turned into Regan's driveway. I knew Jim had returned.

Torn between being afraid for Regan's safety and knowing my presence would only make the situation worse, I drove around the block, then parked on the street one house up from Regan's where I would have a clear view of what was happening. If Jim started trouble, I could call 911 on my cell phone.

I watched Jim get out of the truck. He staggered toward the door and pulled on the knob and tried to open it. It was locked. He took his keys out of his pocket and kept jamming them into the lock, but the door still wouldn't open. "Fuck," he said, then stuffed the keys into his pants pocket. Frustrated, he knocked on the door. After a few minutes, when there was no answer, he started to pound on the door with his closed fist.

"Regan! Open the door," Jim's voice pierced through the quiet night. The house was dark and there was no movement inside. Jim pounded on the door again. "Goddamnit, Regan! Open the fucking door!" Jim relentlessly pounded on the door. I admired Regan for her resolve in not letting him in. I kept my cell phone close at hand in case things escalated.

Jim kept the pounding up for close to twenty minutes. When it was evident that Regan wasn't going to let him in, he gave up and got back in his truck. Jim slammed the truck in gear and screeched out of the driveway. The tires squealed as Jim drove

away. I didn't want to leave until I knew he was really gone, so I waited and watched him reach the corner where he blew through the stop sign. Then as if someone's prayer had been answered, a police cruiser appeared with red and blue lights flashing. The cop pulled Jim over to the side of the road. By the time I drove by, the police officer already had Jim in handcuffs. I was sure he was arrested for DUI, an offense that would at least keep him in jail overnight. What a loser.

After all the drama at Regan's, I was too wired to sleep, and I really didn't want to go home to an empty apartment again. So I drove across town to my old hangout, the Other Side Lounge, the only lesbian bar in the area. I hoped a drink would calm me down enough to go home and sleep. The parking lot was packed; many of the cars were from a nearby college in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. The girls from Slippery Rock would come to Youngstown every weekend to party. They were beautiful, athletic, and educated, and in my partying days, everyone looked forward to seeing them. As a matter of fact, getting a Slippery Rock girl to go home with you was a big deal. It was a conquest any respectable lesbian would be proud to boast about.

I slipped in the back entrance of the bar. It always amazed me how anyone could find these places. There was no sign, only a colored light glowing over the entrance. There was no cover charge, which meant there was no drag show that night. That was okay with me because I wasn't in the mood for off-key singing, six-foot-two Whitney Houstons or chubby Alexis Carringtons sporting a diamond tiara and a five o'clock shadow.

The bar was smoky and loud as Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus" blared over the sound system. The only bar stool available was between two bull dykes dressed from head to toe in black motorcycle leather. I squeezed between them and sat on the stool patiently waiting for Sonny, the bartender, to take my drink order. Sonny was a burly guy, short and stocky, and dressed in his usual Cleveland Browns apparel. He wore a brown and white jersey with the block number nineteen, Bernie Kosar's number, stretching across his barrel chest and a brown corduroy Browns baseball cap—not your typical flamboyant gay bartender.

“How’re you doin’, Doc?” Sonny wiped the warped mahogany bar with his dingy bar towel and placed a white paper napkin in front of me. “What’ll it be tonight?”

“Michelob Light,” I said, pushing a five-dollar bill toward him.

Sonny snatched up the five and lumbered over to the cooler. He pulled out a brown bottle of Michelob Light and ran the bar towel over the bottle, wiping off the dripping ice water, and twisted off the top. He set the bottle in front of me along with my two dollars and fifty cents in change.

“Thanks, Sonny.” I pushed the two fifty back to him.

“Thanks, Doc.” Sonny winked as he picked up the tip.

I took a long pull on my beer. It was icy cold and felt good going down. It was just what I needed to calm my frazzled nerves.

“Hey, Doc, where’s Rosetti been? No one’s seen or heard from her in weeks.” Sonny stocked the cooler with cans of Budweiser and Miller Light beer.

“She’s on a stakeout. It’s been almost a week since I’ve seen her, and that was for only a few minutes last week at a funeral for one of her colleagues.”

“Was it Pam Grier’s funeral?”

I nodded.

“Did you know Pam?”

“Yeah, she used to come in here every once in a while,” Sonny said. “How sad she died that way, she was so young.”

“Pam used to come here?” I asked, surprised.

“Uh-huh. She used to come on the nights Rosetti was working security. I think Pam was just coming out at the time. And since she and Rosetti were both cops, I think she enjoyed talking to her.”

“Really?”

“At first, I thought Pam had a thing for Rosetti. But I don’t think anything ever happened...you know between them. I think they were just friends.”

Astounded by this news about Pam Grier and Rosetti, I ordered another beer. They were going down easy...way too easy. Sonny

attended to his other customers while I pondered this shocking information. So Pam was gay. Rosetti must have known but never said anything. I wondered why.

The music changed to a slow song. Couples climbed up on the elevated dance floor, holding each other close, swaying hypnotically to the music, carrying them off to warm romantic places. Butches danced with femmes, one arm circling their waists while the other arm held their hand close to their heart.

I drained the rest of my beer and was about to leave when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Cautiously, I turned around. A beautiful young woman stood there wearing a green and white Slippery Rock sweatshirt and a form-fitting pair of Calvin Klein jeans. She appeared quite nervous. She was obviously one of the girls from Slippery Rock University, and she stood before me smiling a perfect smile that must have cost her parents a lot of money.

“Hi, I’m Jessie, would you like to dance?”

“Oh...thank you...but no. I’m not much of a dancer,” I said, trying to be as gentle as possible since I knew it took a lot for this girl to get up the nerve to ask a stranger to dance.

“Can I buy you a drink then?” Jessie asked, stepping closer. So close I could smell her perfume. It was a clean scent, not flowery or spicy like most perfumes, but fresh like soap. She smelled like youth. The closer Jessie got, the more I could see that she was at least ten years younger than me.

I knew by the look in Jessie’s eyes that this could be easy, that I could have this girl if I wanted her. She was beautiful, and the old Mina would not have thought twice about taking advantage of this young woman. My body was weakening at the thoughts of what might happen with her, but my heart protested loudly and my head finally listened. I looked down at the floor and shook my head. “Thank you, but I really have to go.”

Jessie looked down, disappointed. I reached out and touched her arm.

“Thank you for asking. But I’m kind of in the middle of something right now.”

Jessie looked up and gave me a weak smile. “Are you seeing someone?”

“Not exactly, but there is someone in my heart.”

“I understand...maybe another time...you know if things don’t work out.” Jessie slipped a folded piece of paper into my hand.

We said our goodbyes, and Jessie turned around and disappeared into the crowd. I waved goodbye to Sonny and headed for home. On my way out of the bar, I unfolded the piece of paper Jessie had slipped me. Seven digits of a phone number and the letter J. I crinkled it up and tossed it away.

The apartment was pitch dark as I opened the door. I was exhausted, both emotionally and physically, and just wanted to go to bed and forget about everything for a while. I flipped on the light and stared at the couch in disbelief. Rosetti was curled up under my grandmother’s afghan, sound asleep. The very place I had left her almost two weeks earlier.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Rosetti stirred when I sat next to her on the couch. She opened her eyes, blinked, then rubbed them with the heels of her hands. She glanced over at the clock on the wall over the television.

“Jesus, Mina, I thought you were never gonna come home,” Rosetti said. “Busy night at work?”

“What are you doing here?” I asked, shaking inside, afraid to move because maybe this was a dream and I’d wake up.

“It’s all over,” Rosetti said. “We got them.”

“You caught the guys who killed Pam?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded.

I threw my arms around Rosetti’s neck and hugged her tight. “What happened?” I asked, still amazed she was here in my apartment.

“We had the place surrounded with close to twenty units. The SWAT team was even there with their armored truck. There must have been police officers from two counties securing the perimeter. After about twelve hours of trying to talk them into surrendering peacefully, one of the SWAT guys tossed in a tear gas canister.” Rosetti said. “Tear gas is a wonderful deterrent.”

“So they gave up after that?”

“Not without a fight. Two guys came out with their hands up. The last guy came out staggering and choking from the tear gas. As he came through the doorway, he raised his gun and fired several shots at us.”

“Oh, my God...” I reached my hand to my mouth.

“The shift commander and I took cover behind my vehicle door and were able to get a couple of shots off each. We both hit

him. He died at the scene.”

“Oh, my God, Rosetti, how awful. Are you all right?” I studied her eyes, looking for what might be there that she wasn’t telling me, looking for any signs of post traumatic disorder.

“Right now I feel kind of numb. Like it hasn’t sunk in yet,” Rosetti said. “Of course, we won’t know whose shot killed him until the ballistics report is in. Internal investigations had us both in post-event interviews all afternoon and evening.” Rosetti rubbed her temples. “Until they finish their investigation, as per protocol, the lieutenant and I are off on paid administrative leave. They had us talk to the department’s psychologist before we punched out this afternoon.”

“What a terrible ordeal. You could have been killed,” I said. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” She stood and stretched her arms over her head, still groggy from sleep. I stood, as well, facing her, studying her body language, trying to read what she was thinking. She reached for me, her hands slipped up my arms, leaving a sensuous tingle in their wake.

“I can’t believe you’re here...and you’re safe,” I whispered and pulled her close, burying my face into her neck. “I was afraid I’d never see you again. I had all these visions of having to tell your mother that you were killed...”

Rosetti kissed the top of my head. “Shh. I’m fine.”

We stood in the middle of the living room and held each other. Rosetti rested her chin on my head. I could hear her heart pounding in her chest and wondered if she could feel the intensity of mine.

“You know you’re the one that got me through this,” Rosetti said, lifting my face toward hers. Her dark brown gaze captured mine. “All those long hours on the stakeout, the only thing that kept going through my mind was what we never got to say to each other and what we never got to finish.” Rosetti pulled me close. Her soft lips touched mine, tentative at first, then with a passion that took us both to new heights. Her probing tongue sent spirals of ecstasy through me.

“Wait...wait...” I pulled back and stepped out of our embrace.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to mess this up.” I tried to think rationally through the haze of lust. “I don’t want to ruin what we have together and I don’t want to lose you.”

Rosetti looked at me, confused. “What are you talking about, Mina?”

“What if we’re not meant to be? What if we’re supposed to be just friends and by pursuing this we end up destroying everything we had? I did that once before...”

“I’m not Regan. I know who I am and I know what I want and I’m not going anywhere,” Rosetti said. “I’ve wanted to be with you from the very beginning. From the day we met, when I first brought my mother to the nursing home, I thought you were the most beautiful, smart, most compassionate woman I’d ever met. I’ve never wanted to be with someone as much as I want to be with you.” Rosetti lifted her hand to my face, gently stroking my cheek. “But I knew when we met, you had a lot of unfinished business, so I never acted on my feelings. I knew it wasn’t the right time. But this feels different, this feels right.”

I nodded. “Me too,” I said, surrendering to the undeniable desire that burned inside me.

Rosetti pulled me into her arms again. “Does this feel like ‘just friends’ to you?” Rosetti pressed her lips to mine again, this time caressing my mouth more than just kissing. Her hands gently explored the soft swells of breasts over my scrub shirt. My knees went weak and my body removed all doubt. This felt right indeed.

Rosetti lifted my shirt over my head and gazed down at me with a look I had never seen before. “You are so beautiful,” she whispered as she smoothed her hands lightly over my shoulders and down my bare and trembling arms.

I wanted Rosetti to touch me everywhere. I ached with need for her hands to release the passion that had built up for so long.

Rosetti reached around with one hand and expertly released the hook on my bra, freeing my breasts. A low moan escaped my lips when she bent down and engulfed each rosy tip into her mouth, sucking gently at first, then tugging on my taut nipples

with her teeth. The sensation sent a direct message to my clitoris, causing it to swell and twitch in response.

Breathing rapidly with excitement, I reached down to undo the button on Rosetti's jeans. With one trembling hand, I deftly fumbled for the zipper and lowered it. The sound of her zipper going down fueled the fire of the passion that was building between us. A low growl came from Rosetti's chest as I dipped my hand into the front of her jeans and found her in the same warm, wet state I was in.

"We better move this to the bedroom," Rosetti said, her voice a gravelly whisper. She scooped me into her arms and carried me into the bedroom. She laid me on the bed, then tugged off my scrub pants and soaking wet panties and tossed them aside. I pulled Rosetti's T-shirt off over her head and was surprised to find her naked beneath it. I reached up and cupped her voluptuous breasts in my hands and kissed them, lingering over her nipples. She let out a low moan and pulled away just long enough to slide out of her jeans. She pulled them down over her legs and stepped out of them, kicking them into the corner.

Rosetti lowered her body over mine. Our bodies fit perfectly together as we melted into one. Her firm thigh muscles pressed into my warm, swollen flesh. Our rhythmic breathing came in deep soul-drenching drafts as Rosetti braced herself with her arms on either side of my shoulders and thrust gently in answer to the rise of my hips. She bent down and kissed my swollen sensitive nipples, sending me closer and closer to the edge. My body stiffened, catching me by surprise as waves of ecstasy throbbed through me. The pleasure was pure and explosive.

Rosetti straddled my stomach now, and I could feel the hot wetness our passion had produced. Her hips bucked as she moved faster and faster toward orgasm. Rosetti shuddered and collapsed on top of me. I pulled her close, never wanting to let her go.

We lay in each other's arms; peace and contentment swirled all around us. Before succumbing to the numbed sleep of a satisfied lover, I said a little prayer, thanking God for bringing Rosetti safely back to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The smell of bacon frying wafted into the bedroom before I could get my eyes open.

I got up and wandered in the direction of the smell only to find Rosetti standing at the stove, naked except for a “Kiss the Cook” apron that hung around her neck and a spatula in hand.

“Nice outfit,” I said, slapping Rosetti’s naked backside, which peeked out of her apron.

“Hey, I didn’t think you were awake yet,” she said as two slices of toast popped up from the toaster. “I was going to serve you breakfast in bed.”

“You can still do that.” I turned to go back into the bedroom.

“Hey.” Rosetti grabbed my arm before I got away. She tugged her apron forward so I could see its message. She pulled me close and kissed me, stirring feelings that had been asleep only a few hours.

“If you keep that up, we’ll never leave this apartment.”

Rosetti smiled.

I climbed back in to bed. A warm glow of calm and satisfaction flowed through me. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt this much at peace. Rosetti came into the bedroom carrying a tray with two plates piled high with bacon, eggs, and toast, along with two steaming mugs of hot coffee and a perfect red rose in a crystal bud vase. My stomach growled with hunger.

“Smells delicious,” I said as Rosetti set the tray between us. “Where did you get all this food?”

“I slipped out to the Giant Eagle downtown. It’s open all night,” Rosetti said, taking a bite of toast and sipping her coffee. “You know, if you expect me to stick around, you might want to

keep your refrigerator better stocked.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” I said, saluting her. “Heaven knows I wouldn’t want you to starve.”

Rosetti nodded in appreciation as she crunched her toast.

I looked across the breakfast tray at her and still had difficulty grasping the changes in our relationship.

“What are you thinking?” Rosetti asked as she stabbed at her scrambled eggs.

“I just can’t believe you’re here...that we’re here, like this.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I’m...I’m ecstatic...I never thought I’d ever feel this happy.”

“Me too. I can’t believe that after all this time, we ended up here. I feel like the luckiest person on earth.” Rosetti leaned over and kissed me. Her kiss was slow and sweet and tasted like coffee.

After breakfast, Rosetti and I lounged in bed. It had been so long since I’d wanted to do this with someone. My usual instinct to bolt seemed gone for good.

I lay in Rosetti’s arms as the bright October morning sun warmed the bedroom.

“So what’s been happening since I’ve been gone?” Rosetti asked.

“I got to visit with Teresa while you were away,” I said, recalling how good it was to spend time with Rosetti’s mom.

“I was going to stop over at the nursing home last night, but it was so late, I knew she’d be asleep. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to stop over there later. It feels like I haven’t seen her in a month.”

“Sure. It’ll be great to see her again and I’m sure she’ll be excited to see you.”

I couldn’t help thinking about what Sonny said to me the night before about Pam and Rosetti. Would this be an appropriate time to ask Rosetti about it? I surely didn’t want to spoil the mood, but I figured now was as good a time as any.

“Hey, Ro. Can I ask you something?”

Rosetti shifted her position in bed. My head rested on her chest and I could hear her strong steady heartbeat. "Okay. What?"

"There's been a rumor going around that you and Pam Grier were more than friends. Is that true?"

Rosetti looked down at me. The expression on her face was of total surprise. "Where did you hear that?"

"Sonny, the bartender from the bar."

"When did you see him?"

"Last night after work. I was too keyed up to go home, so I stopped for a beer. He asked me how you were doing since he hadn't seen you in a while. He mentioned Pam. He said you and her used to hang out at the bar sometimes. He also said he thought she had feelings for you. Is that true?"

Rosetti shook her head. "No, we were just friends. Pam had a girlfriend. Her name is Jenny. She's a firefighter for the city. "Let's see...they were together at least five years or so."

"I didn't even know Pam was gay."

"Yes, Pam was gay, but very, very closeted. No one in her family knew. It was sad because when Pam died, Jenny came to the funeral, but she couldn't take part in it the way a straight officer's wife or girlfriend would. Just because you're in a relationship with someone doesn't give you any rights. No rights to be with Pam, no rights to grieve openly for her."

"She was at Pam's funeral?" I tried to remember seeing anyone who would have set off my gaydar.

"Yes, she was there, but you wouldn't have known it. I didn't see her myself, but I hear she came with some of the other firefighters from her precinct. I'm sure to everyone there, she appeared to be just another friend or coworker of Pam's, when in fact she was so much more."

"That's terrible." I pulled Rosetti close. I was afraid that the same thing may happen to us someday.

"I haven't seen Jenny since Pam died. Maybe we should look her up and invite her over sometime. You can never have too many friends at a time like this," Rosetti said.

"Yes, that sounds like great idea."

"Speaking of friends, did you hear any more from Regan

while I was away?"

My body stiffened. I wondered if Rosetti would pick up my tension. I knew I had to tell her about my affair with Regan. I was scared to death I would lose her forever once I told her. But I had to take that chance. If we had any chance of making our relationship work, I had to get this out in the open so we could deal with it and put it behind us once and for all. I owed her this much and so much more.

"Yes, quite a bit actually."

"Oh?" Rosetti said, curiosity steeped in her voice.

I sat up and sat cross-legged. "Ro, I don't know how to say this."

Rosetti sat up, as well, all concern tinged with trepidation.

I looked down, guilt making it difficult for me to maintain eye contact with her. I averted my gaze.

"Ro...while you were gone, Regan and I...got together." I glanced up at Rosetti, testing the waters.

"I see." Her voice was calm and even.

"I think it was something I had to do...do you know what I'm saying?"

Rosetti was silent.

"I know this is hard for you to hear, but—"

"But what?" Rosetti interrupted. "Damn it, Mina, I thought you were done with that. You even told me that you were over her. If you hadn't, I wouldn't have—"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Of all the people in the world, I don't want to hurt you. I'm just..." Hot tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes. "I'm just sorry, Ro. I don't want to ruin this...I don't want to lose you."

Rosetti sat up at the side of the bed with her back to me. A sound of frustration escaped her lips.

I hated myself. My heart ached for her. I knew she felt betrayed. And I couldn't argue with her. I had betrayed her.

"If you and she got back together, what are you doing here with me then?"

"Regan and I are not back together. I ended it. I told Regan that being with her was not what I wanted."

“Really?” Rosetti said. She didn’t seem to believe me. “So when did you end it?”

I paused for a moment, knowing that the answer was going to sound bad, but it was the truth and the truth was all I had. “Last night.” I braced myself for Rosetti’s retort.

“Last night! Jesus, Mina, what did you do, fuck her, then jump into bed with me?” Rosetti’s accusing gaze was on me. I felt the sting of her comment, but that wasn’t the worst of it. I could not answer her because what she said was true.

“First you tell me you don’t have feelings for her, then you tell me you’re still sleeping with her? I don’t know, Mina, I don’t know what to believe.” Rosetti jammed her hands into her hair and scrubbed her scalp.

“I’m so sorry. But you have to believe me that Regan and I are through. I know you feel betrayed, and I know you’ll have trouble trusting me...but I don’t want to lose you...I don’t want to lose us. It’s taken us too long to get here. I don’t want to ruin that. You’re the one I want to be with. It was because of you that I ended it.”

“I don’t know...I need some time to think.” She got up from the bed and wrapped the sheet around her to hide her nakedness. “I’m going to take a shower.” She left the bedroom.

I heard the bathroom door close behind her and my heart cracked open. When Rosetti turned on the water, I picked up the breakfast tray and carried it to the kitchen. As I squirted dish soap into the sink, the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Is this Mina Caselli?” a voice on the other end asked.

“Yes, this is Mina.”

“This is Karen Brenner for St. Michael the Archangel Nursing Home. I’m calling about Teresa Rosetti. You’re listed as one of her emergency contacts. I tried to reach her daughter, but I couldn’t.”

“What is it? Is Teresa okay?” I felt my heart sink and feared the worst.

“She’s had a stroke.”

“Oh, God...is she? Where is she?”

"She's on her way to City Hospital. The ambulance just left."

"All right," I said. "I'm a resident at City. I'll notify her daughter and bring her with me to the hospital. Thank you for calling."

My knees shook as I paced back and forth in the kitchen trying to decide the best way to tell Rosetti that Teresa was gravely ill and that she may lose her. I heard the water shut off in the bathroom and knew I was running out of time. The bathroom door opened. Rosetti stepped out wrapped in a towel.

"Rosetti, I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"Now what?" Rosetti asked, studying my face, fear and anxiety flashed in her eyes.

"The nursing home just called...It's your mom. She's had a stroke."

Rosetti's face went white. "Oh, God," she said, burying her face in her hands. "I knew I should have stopped at the nursing home last night to see her before I came here. It was so late, though...I didn't want to wake her." Regret filled her voice. "Is she...?"

"No...they sent her to City Hospital by ambulance. If we hurry, we can get there while she's in triage."

Rosetti and I dressed quickly, still not a word passing between us. Rosetti stepped into her jeans without wearing underwear. I gave her one of my T-shirts to wear as she had come over directly from work the previous night and didn't have a change of clothes. I insisted on driving to the hospital because I wanted to get there in one piece. Surprisingly, she didn't resist.

Thick anxiety hung in the air as we headed toward City Hospital. I looked over at Rosetti, who was gnawing on her cuticles until they were almost bloody.

"How you doin'?" I asked, stopping for a red light.

"Fine," Rosetti snapped. "Go through the light."

"What?"

"Don't just sit here, there's no one coming...go through the light."

I stepped on the gas and blew through the red light feeling

like a felon.

My mind reeled with all the possible conditions Teresa would be afflicted with.

I pulled into the physician's parking lot and barely got the motor shut off before Rosetti was out of the car. I hurried to catch up with her. I grabbed her arm and led her through the physician's private entrance, which led us into the back of the ER unit. We found Teresa Rosetti in exam room one, lying on a metal gurney. A plastic oxygen mask covered her nose and mouth, and wires and tubing were going in and out of each extremity. I was glad to see the glass bottle of the miracle clot-busting drug TPA hung overhead and flowing through the plastic tubing into Teresa's fragile veins. The drug would at least minimize the damage the clot in her brain had done. Teresa didn't move. Her skin was pale and cool, and if I didn't hear the rhythmic beeps of her heart monitor, I'd have thought she was already gone.

Tears streamed down Rosetti's cheeks as she cautiously walked over to her mother.

"You can talk to her," I said. "She can hear you."

"Ma..." Rosetti said. "Ma, it's me Rosemary..." Rosetti stroked her mother's hand.

Page appeared in the doorway of exam room one. "Mina, what are you doing here on your day off?" Page asked. Then she saw Rosetti.

Relief filled my heart. "Oh, Page. I'm so glad you're here."

"Hi, Rosetti. I thought maybe Teresa was a relative," Page said.

Rosetti smiled a weak smile "She's my mother. How is she doing?"

Page flipped open Teresa's chart. "Well, she was unresponsive when she came in. Her blood pressure was pretty high. We sent her straight up to CT scan to see what was going on with her. Her CT scan showed she has a big clot in the right side of her brain. We got the TPA started immediately. We have a call into the neurosurgeon on call. He'll probably take her to surgery this afternoon to remove the clot."

"What are her chances?" Rosetti asked Page.

"It's hard to say. It's too soon to tell how much damage has been done. The neurosurgeon needs to get in there and see what he can do before we can come to any conclusions."

Rosetti nodded, then turned back to Teresa. She took her mother's hand in hers, careful not to dislodge the IV needle that was inserted into the back of her hand.

"Dr. Burkland, Dr. Goodman is on line one" came over the intercom.

"That's the neurosurgeon. I'll be right back," Page said and headed down the hall to take the call.

I walked back over to Rosetti and her mom. I stood behind Rosetti and put my hand on her shoulder. My heart swelled as she reached up and covered my hand with hers.

"I'm sorry I was short with you in the car earlier," Rosetti said. "The last time I was called to the hospital like this, it was for my dad. He died before I made it to the hospital. I didn't want to be late this time."

"There's no need to apologize. I understand. You must be scared to death...I know I would be." I smiled what I had hoped was an encouraging smile. "She's in good hands. Dr. Goodman is one of the best neurosurgeons in the area. And your mom's a pretty tough little lady."

Rosetti nodded. "I just feel so guilty," she said, tears brimming again in her eyes.

"Guilty? Why do you feel guilty?"

"Because I wasn't there when she needed me."

"Rosetti, you've got to be kidding. You've always been there for her. You took care of her at home until it wasn't safe for you or her to do it any longer. You took care of her when her leukemia was so out of control, she was getting blood transfusions every couple of days. You got her to St. Mike's where she was safe and well taken care of, and do I have to remind you that they threw her out of the hospice program because she outlived it?"

"I know...I know," Rosetti said. "But it never feels like what I've done was enough."

"That's the Italian Catholic in you," I said. "You've done more than enough. You've taken excellent care of Teresa. I know

it, you know it, and Teresa knows it. You know if your mom heard you talking like this, she'd kick your butt."

For the first time since we got to the hospital, Rosetti smiled.

"I'm back," Page said, stepping through the curtain. "Dr. Goodman wants to take her to surgery within the hour. Amy will be here in a few minutes to get her prepped. Do you have any questions?"

I looked over at Rosetti. She shook her head.

"Okay," Page said and left the exam room.

"Now what?" Rosetti asked after Page left.

"We wait. We can wait upstairs in the OR waiting area. After the surgery, Dr. Goodman will come out to talk to you—"

"And you too," Rosetti interrupted.

"Yes, and me too."

"I don't want to go through this alone, Mina," Rosetti said, sounding more fragile than I'd ever heard her.

"I'd never let you go through this alone." I wrapped my arms around her neck.

Amy appeared at the doorway with a bath basin, towels, and a disposable razor in her hand. "I'm here to get Teresa ready for surgery."

Rosetti and I broke our embrace. "Okay," I said. "Teresa, we'll see you after surgery." I bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "You hang in there and get better. Your daughter is very worried about you, so you have to pull through this."

I looked up at Rosetti. A lump in my throat formed as I watched her struggle with her emotions. She bent down and kissed her mother on the lips. She stroked her mother's salt and pepper hair as she gazed down at her sleeping face. "I love you, Mom," she said, her voice wracked with sadness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lunch and dinner time came and went, but neither of us was hungry. Teresa had been in surgery for close to six hours and no word yet on her condition. Unfortunately, the burden of our conversation that morning didn't make the waiting any easier.

"What could be taking so long?" Rosetti asked as she paced back and forth on the already worn carpet in the cramped surgical waiting area. "Oprah" was on the TV that was bolted to the wall overhead. The show was about protecting your children from child predators.

"It's a delicate surgery," I said. "The fact that it's taking a long time doesn't necessarily mean that it's not going well."

"I know, but you'd think they would at least let us know how she's doing." Rosetti plopped down next to me on the cracked leather couch.

"What are they doing exactly?" Rosetti asked.

"Teresa's stroke is caused by a blood clot that formed in her brain. Dr. Goodman has to go in and take out the clot." I tried not to get too technical. Not that Rosetti wouldn't understand what I was saying. I just didn't want to scare her with the details.

"So what's the surgery called that they are doing?"

"It's called a craniotomy."

"That doesn't sound good. What is it?"

"A craniotomy is a cut made into the skull, also known as the cranium. The doctor cuts a hole that allows him to get near the blood clot. This hole reduces the pressure inside the brain that would otherwise build up as the pool of blood got bigger. It also allows doctors to drain the blood from the brain."

Rosetti held her head in her hands. I'm sure it wasn't easy for her to hear that her mom was having her head opened up, even if it was in an attempt to save her life.

"So how successful is this surgery?" Rosetti asked.

"It all depends on how much damage the clot has done already. They started your mom on TPA pretty fast. That will greatly increase her chances of pulling through the surgery."

Rosetti nodded.

What I didn't tell her was that although Teresa might make it through the surgery, a full recovery was pretty slim in someone Teresa's age. But I needed to be positive for Rosetti. Telling her that wouldn't do her or Teresa any good.

I stood and stretched my legs and raised my arms over my head to stretch the kinks out of my stiff back.

"I'm going to go down to the cafeteria to get some coffee, you want some?"

"Yeah, that might be good, but get me decaf...I don't need anything else that will make my heart pound any harder."

"You got it."

I walked over to the elevator bank and pushed the call button. The elevator doors yawned opened and I stepped on. A few moments later, I was deposited at the cafeteria entrance on the ground floor. I walked over to the coffee kiosk and poured two large cups of decaf coffee. I dumped four Splendas into my cup of coffee and three creams into Rosetti's. I handed the cashier three bucks and headed back toward the elevator.

When I returned to the surgical waiting area, Rosetti was nowhere to be found. Teresa's surgery must have been over and Dr. Goodman must have come to talk to us about the outcome.

Panicked, I hurried down the hall looking into each conference room, searching for Rosetti. I stopped at the nurse's station of the surgical step-down unit and asked the receptionist if she saw Dr. Goodman or Rosetti. She said no one had been by.

Angry that I'd screwed up again when Rosetti needed me most, I headed back to the waiting area.

"Jesus, I thought you were never coming back," Rosetti said as I rounded the corner to the waiting room.

“What do you mean? Where have you been? I came back here with the coffee and you were gone.”

“I went to the bathroom,” Rosetti said, whispering so no one but me could hear her.

We both laughed.

“Oh, my God...I was afraid I’d missed being here when Dr. Goodman came out of surgery. I was so afraid I’d let you down.”

“Mina, it’s okay,” Rosetti said. She smiled as she peeled the plastic lid off her cup of coffee and took a sip. “I just had to pee.”

“Ro, I a...I’m sorry about this morning.” I was unable to leave alone the six hundred-pound gorilla in the room anymore.

“I’m sorry, too.” She reached out and touched my knee. “We’ll have to work it out.”

I nodded, blinking back the tears welling up in my eyes.

We sat on the leather sofa and drank our coffee and watched the remainder of “Oprah” in silence. The local six o’clock news came on the TV.

“Local police ambushed. Drug dealer shot and killed.” That was the lead story.

“That’s your bust.”

Rosetti nodded and watched intently as the sophisticated news anchor with the perfectly coiffed hair reported on the details of the shootout.

I watched her as she listened to the news report.

“You okay?” I asked, laying my hand on her leg.

She nodded. “Not much I can do about it, anyway. What’s done is done.”

“Yes, that’s true, but how would you feel if you knew it was your bullet that killed him?”

Rosetti looked down. “I don’t know...sad, I guess...guilty that I killed someone. I mean, even though he did some pretty bad things, taking someone’s life...it just isn’t right.”

“But what if by taking his life you spared someone else’s?”

She shrugged and took another sip of her coffee.

“Rosetti, if that’s the case, think of all the people you saved from this guy. He’s off the streets, not selling drugs anymore.

Heaven knows the people this guy hurt or even killed.”

A scrub nurse dressed in surgical greens and a blue surgical mask dangling from around her neck entered the waiting area. “Rosetti family,” she said.

Rosetti and I sprang up.

“Dr. Goodman will meet with you in conference room B in fifteen minutes,” the nurse said. “Let me show you the way.”

Rosetti and I followed her down the hall toward surgery. She opened the door to conference room B and flicked on the light. “You can wait here. The doctor will be with you shortly,” she said, then disappeared down the hall and through the automatic doors leading to the surgery suites.

Rosetti and I sat in two chairs in front of a small oak desk situated in the center of the cramped room. The room was furnished sparsely and lit dimly by a single banker’s lamp on the corner of the desk. On top of the desk were a telephone, a black leather-bound Bible, and a box of Kleenex, all well within reach of the chairs Rosetti and I sat in.

I heard the metal doorknob turn as Dr. Goodman entered the room. Rosetti and I stood as he entered.

“Hello, Dr. Goodman.” I extended my hand to him. My heart pounded in my chest as I tried to read the expression on his face, hoping it would give me a clue as to whether Teresa’s surgery went well. “Dr. Caselli.” Dr. Goodman shook my hand, obviously surprised I was here. “Is Mrs. Rosetti a relative?” he asked, flipping open a manila file folder he was carrying.

“No, sir, I’m a friend of the family.”

“A close friend of the family,” Rosetti said. By the sound of her voice, I knew she was afraid that maybe the doctor would ask me to leave since I wasn’t family.

“Dr. Goodman, this is Rosemary Rosetti, Teresa’s daughter,” I said.

Rosetti shook hands with Dr. Goodman, as well. “I asked Dr. Caselli to be here as I know my mother would want her here.”

“That’s fine.” Dr. Goodman walked around to the leather desk chair and sat down.

He took a pair of gold wire-rimmed glasses from the pocket

of his lab coat and put them on. He flipped open the file folder he was carrying when he came in.

Unnerved by Dr. Goodman's tentativeness, Rosetti spoke up. "So how is she?" Anxiety peaked in her voice. "Is she going to be okay?"

"She survived the surgery, but to be honest with you, I don't know if she'll fully recover."

A tense silence filled the room.

"What does that mean?" Rosetti asked.

Dr. Goodman closed the file folder, removed his glasses, and laid them on the oak desktop. "It means that although she made it through the procedure, the outcome may not be what we hoped for. The clot was very large. And even though the clot-busting drugs were started right away, it looks like she'll have some permanent damage."

"What kind of damage?" Rosetti asked.

"It appears she's lost the use of her entire left side. Also, because of her advanced age, rehabilitation can be difficult."

"What do you think her chances of recovery are?" Rosetti asked.

Dr. Goodman looked over at me before answering, silently asking permission to proceed with the truth of Teresa's condition. I nodded.

"Poor," he said.

Rosetti hung her head as the impact of the news she had dreaded hit her square in the chest. I reached over and touched her arm. "Rosemary, all we can do is wait and see how she does. You can't give up hope just yet."

"Yes, that's true," Dr. Goodman said. "Even though the statistics show that she has a poor chance of recovery, I can't begin to tell you how often my patients surprise me and beat the odds. Actually, in more cases than you think. There are good and bad aspects of your mother's condition. The good aspect is that she survived the surgery and is stable for now. Her heart is strong and that's a big hurdle in itself. Most people your mother's age don't make it through such extensive surgery, but she did, so we go from here.

“Best case scenario is this: She’ll be on a ventilator in intensive care for a few days. If she does well, we’ll wean her off the ventilator and move her to the surgical step-down unit. If she does well there, she’ll go to a regular floor. And if she does well there, she may be able to go back to the nursing home. But that’s a lot of ifs, Ms. Rosetti. You have to understand that it’s just as possible that your mother will never be able to return to the nursing home. I just want you to be prepared for what may or may not happen.”

Rosetti nodded. She looked like the stuffing had been beat out of her.

“Do you have any questions?” Dr. Goodman asked.

Rosetti shook her head.

“Dr. Caselli? Any questions?”

“When can we see her?”

Dr. Goodman looked at his Rolex watch. “She’ll be in recovery for at least an hour or two. I can have the ICU nurse page you when she’s admitted.”

“That would be great,” I said. “Thank you. Also, would you mind if I reviewed the chart from time to time while Teresa is an inpatient?”

“Not at all. I’ll write the order giving you permission.” He stood up to leave.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for my mother, Doctor,” Rosetti said as Dr. Goodman prepared to leave.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give you better news.” He shook Rosetti’s hand. “Dr. Caselli, if you have any questions, feel free to page me at any time.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Dr. Goodman left the room. I closed the door behind him and took Rosetti in my arms. For the first time since I met her, Rosemary Rosetti cried.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Teresa Rosetti was unrecognizable in her ICU bed. Her face and hands were bloated to almost double their size. The right side of her head was shaved and a four-inch incision with metal clips in it showed where the stroke had taken place. The hulking ventilator next to her bed inhaled and exhaled for her with a *swoosh, swoosh* as her body lay motionless amongst the tubes and wires that kept her vital organs going. Rosetti stood in the doorway motionless. Gently, I took her by the arm and guided her through the room to her mother's bedside.

"Oh, my God," Rosetti whispered. "Mina, she looks terrible."

"I know...but she just got out of surgery. The swelling is from the medication she's getting. That will go away in time."

"Is she in pain?" Rosetti asked, not taking her eyes off her mother's swollen face.

"No, I don't think so. By the readings on her monitor, I'd say she's pretty comfortable."

Rosetti reached down and touched her mother's swollen hand, then leaned close to Teresa's ear.

"Ma, it's me, Rosemary," she whispered. "I'm here Ma...Mina is here...you made it through the surgery. Ma...you're going to be okay," Rosetti said as tears formed in her eyes. She looked away to hide them from me.

I pulled a chair out from the hall so Rosetti could sit at her mother's bedside.

"I don't know what to do." She looked up at me. "I feel so useless."

I crouched down next to her and laid my hands in her lap. “You’re doing everything you’re supposed to do. It’s out of your hands now. Sometimes doing nothing is the hardest thing to do. You’re so used to being in control all the time, and when something like this happens, you feel lost. It’s normal to feel that way, Rosemary. You just have to hang in there and hope for the best.”

Sylvia, one of the ICU nurses, came into Teresa’s room with a syringe of medication. I immediately jumped to my feet feeling self-conscious of my physical closeness to Rosetti.

“Oh, Dr. Caselli, I didn’t know you were here,” Sylvia said as she walked over to Teresa’s bedside, lifting one of her IV lines and swabbing the port with an alcohol pledget. “Dr. Goodman ordered forty of Lasix to keep her pressure down and reduce some of the swelling.” Sylvia pushed the medication slowly into Teresa’s vein.

I nodded in agreement with Dr. Goodman’s order and watched the monitor as Sylvia gave the medication. Nothing changed, no big drop in her blood pressure. Just enough to keep her safe from having another stroke. Her vital signs looked quite good considering she just had her head cut open.

Sylvia removed the needle and tossed the used syringe in the red container that hung on the wall next to the bed. “I need to change her position in bed,” she said. “You’re welcome to stay if you’d like.”

I looked over at Rosetti who was still holding Teresa’s hand. “Thanks. We’ll stay.” I knew that it wasn’t normal protocol to allow family or anyone else for that matter in the room while the staff was working on a patient. “I’ll help you.”

We took hold of the draw sheet that lay underneath Teresa and hoisted her up in bed. Then Sylvia pulled the draw sheet over, positioning Teresa on her side and took a pillow from the bottom of the bed and placed it against Teresa’s back to support her.

“Hey, her eyes are open!” Rosetti shouted. “Ma...Ma...” she said, bending down, putting herself in Teresa’s line of vision.

Teresa’s eyes were open but not focused. “Ma...” Rosetti said again and shook her by the arm. Teresa closed her eyes, falling

back into a deep sleep.

"That's a good sign, isn't it?" Rosetti looked up at me, desperate for some positive news.

"Yes, it is," I lied, knowing that probably the only reason Teresa opened her eyes was in reflex to her being turned in bed.

"She's scheduled for a CT scan this evening," Sylvia said as she pulled a clean top sheet over Teresa and tucked in the corners. "We'll probably take her down about eight o'clock."

"Okay, thanks for letting us know," I said.

Sylvia left the room. Rosetti sat again and held her mother's hand though the side rail on the bed.

"Is she in trouble? Is that why they're doing another CT scan?"

"No, not necessarily. Some neurosurgeons do a repeat CT scan routinely just to keep tabs on the operative site."

At seven forty-five, Sylvia returned with two orderlies. "They called for her in CT scan," she said. "You can wait here or in the surgical waiting area. The procedure should only take thirty minutes or so."

"We'll wait in the waiting room," I said. "That okay?" I asked Rosetti.

Rosetti stood and stretched her arms over her head. "Yes, that's fine. I need to stretch my legs anyway." She bent down to speak into Teresa's ear. "They're taking you for a test, Ma. You'll be okay," Rosetti said. I'm sure she was trying to reassure herself, as well as Teresa. "We'll be right here when you get back." Rosetti kissed her mother on the forehead.

Sylvia disconnected Teresa's endotracheal tube from the ventilator and attached an ambu bag to the end of it. She squeezed the black rubber bladder, breathing for Teresa while they transferred her to the CT scan unit. She unlocked the brakes on Teresa's bed with her foot and with the help of the orderlies, pushed Teresa's bed down the hall to the waiting elevator.

Rosetti and I left Teresa's room and headed down the hallway to the waiting area. It was deserted now, unlike earlier when it was packed with families waiting to hear the outcomes of their

loved one's procedures. The lights were dim and the TV was off. Even the reception desk was empty. I dug in the front pocket of my jeans and pulled out a crumpled dollar bill. "You want to split a Diet Coke?" I asked Rosetti.

"Sure," she said and sat on the couch where we'd sat earlier that day waiting for Teresa to come out of surgery. I popped the top off the Diet Coke can and offered Rosetti the first swig. She took it from me and took a big gulp and handed it back to me. I took a sip. The cold soda felt good going down. It had been hours since we'd had anything to eat or drink.

I had just opened the first page of a discarded copy of the newspaper when I heard the familiar chimes, then the ominous overhead page: *Express team, first floor, radiology.*

In my heart, I knew it was Teresa. "C'mon." I grabbed Rosetti by the hand. I pulled her up off the couch and down the hallway through the automatic doors that led into surgery and a stairwell that would take us directly to the CT scan suite.

"Mina, what's going on?" Rosetti asked, her voice trembling.

"Those chimes you hear are the signal that there's been a cardiac arrest in CT scan. I'm afraid it's your mom."

"Oh, God."

We exited the stairwell and entered the radiology unit. Doctors, nurses, and technicians were circulating in and out of the CT scan unit. "Wait here," I said. "I'm going in to see what's happening."

Rosetti nodded. She leaned against the wall trembling. Her face was white as a sheet. I slid between the wooden doors entering the unit. My stomach clenched as my fear was confirmed. I could see the cardiac arrest express team performing CPR on Teresa's fragile body.

"What happened?" I asked one of the radiology techs who was recording the incident.

"Her BP dropped and she arrested in the scanner," she said.

I checked the monitor to see if they were making any progress with her, but it was hard to distinguish between the heartbeats the CPR was producing and what Teresa was able to do on her own.

"How long has she been down?" I asked the tech.

She looked at the clock overhead. "About ten minutes. They

had a nodal rhythm a few minutes ago but lost it. Dr. Fitzpatrick is on the second round of cardiac meds.”

I stood at Teresa’s head next to the anesthesiologist who was monitoring her breathing and vital signs.

“Doesn’t look good, does it?” I asked.

The anesthesiologist shook his head.

I bent down close to Teresa’s ear. “Teresa, it’s Mina. Rosemary is here and she wants you to know that she loves you very much. I know you’re tired and I know you don’t want her to see you like this,” I whispered as hot tears streamed down my cheek. “It’s okay Teresa...it’s okay to let go.”

After two more cycles of CPR, Dr. Fitzpatrick called it: time of death 8:45 p.m. The flurry of activity stopped. The express team personnel slowly left the room to return to their regular duties. Dr. Fitzpatrick, the doctor in charge of the express team, went out to talk to Rosetti. I walked out behind him.

Rosetti stood in the hallway, her back pressed firmly against the wall. When she saw me come out with the doctor, she bolted toward us.

“Is she all right? What happened in there? Mina?” I knew she knew the answers by the look on my face.

“Ms. Rosetti...” Dr. Fitzpatrick began. “I’m sorry...we did all that we could.”

Rosetti’s face went blank, like she didn’t hear or refused to hear what Dr. Fitzpatrick was saying. “Mina? Is she going to be all right?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m sorry. She didn’t make it. They did all they could to bring her back, but nothing worked.”

Rosetti shook uncontrollably. I held her close.

Dr. Fitzpatrick looked over at me. I nodded at him, releasing him of his responsibility of staying with the deceased’s family members until they were strong enough to go.

I stroked Rosetti’s hair as she quietly cried in my arms. “Would you like to see her?” Rosetti nodded, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. I pushed open the heavy wooden doors and escorted her into the radiology suite. Only one nurse remained in the room. She switched off the droning cardiac monitor and began

removing the tubes and wires from Teresa's limp body.

Hot tears blurred my vision as we walked over to the gurney where Teresa lay.

Rosetti's body shook with grief as she took her mother's hand and placed it over her heart. Tears streamed down her face. I put my arms around her and held her tight. "I'm so sorry, honey."

Rosetti collapsed in my arms. Her body convulsed with deep sobs. I stroked her head.

"It's okay, let it out," I whispered.

"I wasn't there with her and I never got to say goodbye." Rosetti sobbed. "I let her down."

I kissed the top of Rosetti's head and gently stroked her cheek. "Rosetti, listen to me. You didn't let her down. She fought long and hard, and like I told you before, it was out of our hands."

Rosetti pulled away from me. I handed her a tissue. She dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose.

"Everyone did everything they could do. It was her time. She's in a better place now. No more pain. I mean, who knows what damage the stroke did. Your mother hated to have people wait on her, imagine the agony she would have gone through if she was contracted and bedridden."

"But what if she was scared, Mina? What if she knew she was going to die and she was scared and I wasn't there to comfort her?"

"Rosemary, I don't think Teresa was scared of anything... Gee, that sounds familiar, doesn't it? I think you got a lot of her genes."

Rosetti forced a smile through her tears.

"If it's any consolation, I was with her when she passed. I whispered to her that you were here, too, and that you loved her and that it was okay to let go. She's at peace now. Try and take some comfort in that."

Rosetti bent down and kissed Teresa on the forehead. We stood there with our arms around each other, afraid to let go, afraid to let this moment end.

Before we left the room, I bent down and kissed Teresa goodbye. "Teresa, I'm sure going to miss you," I whispered. "I just want you

to know that I'll take care of Rosemary and that I'll be with her always...if she'll let me," I said, unable to stop my tears.

Rosetti nodded and pulled me close.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Rosetti's two brothers, their wives, and kids arrived from out of town late the next morning. Tony, the oldest, his wife, Kathy, and their sons Anthony Jr. and Michael drove in from Cincinnati, where Tony had been transferred a few years before when the steel plant he'd worked for as a foreman closed down. He was one of the lucky ones. A lot of the guys he worked with were still unemployed.

Gianni, the middle brother, and his wife, Ellie, and their daughters Katie and Sara lived in Akron, where Gianni worked in maintenance and Ellie worked as a nurse's aide at Akron City Hospital.

It had been a long time since they'd all been together under the same roof. Although Rosetti seemed happy her family was together again, she seemed uneasy, too.

She introduced me to her family. Gianni seemed nice, a quiet man, who had trouble making eye contact with me when we spoke. I couldn't help but wonder if he sensed the nature of my relationship with his sister and it made him uncomfortable.

Tony was a different story. When Rosetti introduced us, I felt his gaze roam all over me. By the look on his face, it was obvious what was on his mind. It felt like an assault.

Gianni seemed uncomfortable at best and I was afraid to think what Tony might be feeling. The vibe I got from him wasn't good.

"This house hasn't seemed this alive for years," Rosetti said as she watched her nieces and nephews run and play in the dining room and parlor. "Mom would have loved it."

Teresa's house was your typical Italian home. It was a home that had housed three generations of Rosettis at one time. The front door led into a small foyer where you were greeted by an eight-by-ten framed picture of President John F. Kennedy, the only Catholic president the U.S. ever had. Stuffed behind the picture of JFK was a bouquet of dried palms from Palm Sundays many years ago. The foyer led into the living room, or parlor, as Rosetti called it. You could almost hear the theme from *The Godfather* playing in the background. Heavy pleated gold muslin drapes hung from black wrought iron curtain rods over a large picture window. Thick clear plastic covered the gold lamé couch and chair, both in as good a shape as the day they were purchased in the 1950s. The late morning sun glinted off the ornate gold framed mirror that hung over the back of the couch. Gold picture frames of the brothers' wedding pictures sat on top of the Zenith console TV.

The kitchen was large. A mahogany breakfast set sat in the middle of the room flanked by mismatched gold and avocado appliances and mahogany cabinets. The harvest gold Formica countertops indicated when the kitchen was last renovated.

A swinging door off the kitchen led to an even bigger dining room, which I'm sure hosted a lot of Sunday pasta dinners. On the dining room wall were pictures of Rosetti and her brothers at various milestones of their lives: baptisms, first communion, and high school graduation. On the opposite wall were framed photographs of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Pope Paul VI.

"I get the picture of the pope, but what's the deal with Frank and Dean?" I asked Rosetti as she rummaged through one of the drawers in her mother's china cabinet.

"They were my parents' favorite singers. Every Sunday, they would listen to the Italian program on the radio. That station would play polkas and a lot of Sinatra and Dean Martin. When that song about the moon that hits your eye like a big pizza pie came on, they used to sing it to each other. My dad loved Dean Martin. 'Dino's on tonight,' he'd say, and he never missed one of those Dean Martin roasts that were on in the seventies. You could hear him laughing at those shows all the way out to the garage."

I looked at Rosetti, and I could see those were good memories for her.

"I wish you would have met my dad. He would have liked you."

She removed a small gray box from the sideboard drawer. We sat at the long dining room table where she manipulated the tiny combination lock. "When he and my grandparents were still alive, there used to be fifteen of us for dinner every Sunday. Everyone would talk at the same time. It was crazy. Boy, how I miss those days." The box popped open and she removed a small silver key.

"This key goes to her lockbox. Her will and other important papers are in there. She kept it hidden under her bed upstairs," Rosetti said.

She looked down and I could see just how hard this was for her. I slipped my hand over top of hers. "C'mon, I'll help you."

Rosetti looked up and smiled. Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I just can't believe she's gone."

"I know this is hard, but Teresa trusted you to take care of things for her because she knew you would do it right and be fair to everyone involved."

Rosetti nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands.

"C'mon." I stood and mussed up Rosetti's always perfect hair. "Let's go upstairs and see what needs to be done. We still need to pick out something for her to be buried in."

While Rosetti's family sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and greeting friends and neighbors, who had already started the Italian tradition of coming over with food, Rosetti and I went upstairs to find the lockbox and to pick out a dress for her mother.

Teresa's room was small and neat. The double bed and dresser took up most of the space. On top of the dresser sat Teresa's wedding picture.

"Wow, your mom was gorgeous," I said as Rosetti filed through her mom's closet looking for an appropriate dress for her mother.

"Yes, she was a looker." Rosetti pulled dresses out of the closet and laid them on the bed.

“Teresa must have been taller in her younger years. She and your dad look like they were the same height,” I said as I looked at the sepia picture.

“Actually, she was taller than him. He’s standing on a wooden tomato crate in that picture. See, you can see it here.” Rosetti pointed out a corner of the wood slat on the box behind Teresa’s silk train.

“Oh, my God.” I started to laugh.

Rosetti took the picture from me. “Yes, they were something else.”

Rosetti wiped the dust from the glass with her hand and returned the picture to its place on the dresser.

“You know, the last time I visited her in the nursing home, she told me that when she got out of the nursing home, she was going to teach you and me how to cook.”

Rosetti smiled and opened the top dresser drawer. “Let me guess. She thought we needed cooking lessons to catch a man, right?”

“Yep, it was hard for me not to laugh,” I said, remembering the serious look on Teresa’s face when she told me this revelation.

Rosetti removed a white slip from the dresser drawer.

“I can’t begin to tell you all the times she told me that. I’m sure my lack of interest in men drove her crazy.”

“So how come you never told her you’re gay?”

“Because it would have killed her. No matter how I explained it, she would’ve blamed herself. I didn’t want to put her through that.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but she was a great mom. I can’t help but think that she loved you so much it wouldn’t have mattered to her.”

“I wish that was true,” Rosetti said. “But when it came to things like sex, my mom didn’t say a lot. She was very modest. Remember what I told you about her dressing in the closet?”

Rosetti and I laughed. The vision of Teresa Rosetti dressing and undressing in this tiny closet was hilarious. Apparently, there was more than one Rosetti who had difficulty coming out of the closet.

"My mother is a real hoot...I mean was a hoot..." Her smile faded.

"Your mom was great, Rosetti, and she raised a great kid." I put my arms around her.

"God, Mina, I just feel so terrible." Her voice quivered. "I can't shake this feeling like I let her down by not being there when she died."

"But you were there...she knew you were there..."

"But I wasn't right there, you know at her side."

"Did you ever think that maybe she wanted it that way?"

Rosetti sat on the edge of the bed. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe she wanted to spare you. Teresa was like that... always looking out for others. Maybe it was the only way she could go." I sat next to Rosetti and took her hands in mine. "You know, people do have control over when they go. I've seen it many times, especially with elderly or terminal patients. It's not uncommon for them to wait until their loved ones are out of the room to let go."

"Really? I never heard of that."

"Yes. It's pretty common. Your mother loved you and you were the best daughter anyone could have wished for." I looked into Rosetti's deep brown eyes and all I saw was pain and guilt there.

"Rosetti, you have to stop beating yourself up over this. This isn't what Teresa wanted."

"I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you to look out for her while I was gone." Rosetti pulled me into her arms.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Rosetti's brother Tony yelled from the bedroom doorway. Rosetti and I jumped back, breaking our embrace.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing in our mother's bedroom?" Tony demanded.

Rosetti stood up. "Back off, Tony."

"What if one of the kids came up here and saw that? What am I supposed to tell them? That their Aunt Ro is a big dyke?"

"Tony, shut up!"

"Look, I don't care what you do behind closed doors, but I

don't want to see that and I don't want it around my kids," Tony said, his round face red with anger.

"Well, you better get used to it," Rosetti said as Tony disappeared into the stairwell.

"What?" Tony asked as he reappeared in the doorway.

"I said you better get used to it," Rosetti said. "Now that Mom's gone, there's no one I have to protect. This is who I am, and this is who I love. You better get used to it."

Tony's face was on fire now, and I was positive his head was going to explode from the pressure.

"All that Catholic education Mom and Dad paid for didn't teach you that what you're doing is a sin?"

"When the hell did you get so religious all of the sudden?" Rosetti shot back.

"Hey, I go to church every Sunday. I bet you don't...you're out there doing God knows what to God knows who."

"Cut the crap, Tony, you're no saint, either. Does Kathy know about the little press operator you've been having 'coffee' with after work? Didn't think I knew about her, did you? People talk no matter how far away you move. You should be more careful if you're gonna keep a *puttana*."

Tony barged into the room. His body heft made the floor boards squeak in distress. Tony's face was inches from Rosetti's, but she didn't back down. I sat on the bed helpless, my heart pounding with fear in my chest.

"Go ahead, Tony, you want to hit me, big man that you are, that you *think* you are," Rosetti said.

"Shut the fuck up," Tony said.

"I don't want to hear your holier-than-thou crap. Where were you when Ma needed you? Huh? Mina took better care of your mother than you did. You couldn't even come to see her when she got sick, even when she'd ask where you were. I'd have to make up excuses on a daily basis. Didn't it even occur to you that someday she might not be here?"

"Are you trying to say I wasn't a good son? You don't know what my life is like. You don't know the crap I gotta put up with every day just to make ends meet."

“All I’m saying is don’t fuck with me. Ma is gone. I did the best I could for her and I don’t need you dumpin’ your shit on me and judging me about the way I live because I got stuff on you that will turn your life upside down. You got that?”

Tony backed away. Slowly, the crimson color drained from his face. He breathed heavily as he looked at me, then back at Rosetti. He lumbered back downstairs.

Rosetti let out a big sigh.

“Jesus, what was that all about?” I asked.

“Ever since we were kids...he walks around here like he’s king shit,” Rosetti said. “He’s been holding this stuff over my head for years now, and I’m tired of it. He’s not going to tell me how to live my life.”

“I’m proud of you, Rosetti, proud of how you stood up to him.”

“Well, he has no room to talk,” Rosetti said as she got on her hands and knees and felt her way under Teresa’s bed. A few minutes later, she pulled the fireproof box out from under the bed and laid it on the bed along with Teresa’s dress, under things and shoes that Rosemary had picked out to bury her in.

Rosetti sat on the bed beside me and rested her elbows on her thighs. Her hands shook as she cradled her head in her hands. “Would you mind if I stayed at your place tonight? I don’t want to be here. As much as I love my family, I just don’t want to be around them tonight.”

“Sure, no problem.” I picked up Teresa’s clothes from the bed. “We can drop these off on the way back to the apartment.”

Rosetti nodded, but before we left Teresa’s room, she stopped and looked around as if looking at the room for the last time. I’m sure a lot of memories lingered here. This was the room her parents shared for over forty years. This was the room her mother carried her to when she was sick in the middle of the night or had a bad dream. This is the room where she and her brothers were conceived. Yes, at one time, this room was full of life. Now all that remained were faded memories.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Teresa looked beautiful in the floral dress Rosetti had picked out for her burial. The receiving line at the funeral home snaked down the hallway and out the front door of Morelli's Funeral Home. I stood next to Rosetti at her insistence, even though the funeral director cautioned that it wasn't normal protocol to have non-family members in the receiving line.

"You are my partner and I want you here," Rosetti said.

"I know, but what will your family think? I'm sure Tony isn't thrilled about this."

"Screw Tony. I don't care what he thinks. Look at him over there, trying to act like the big shot."

"Let it go, Ro. You know he lost his mother, too."

"Yeah, I know...It's just that he's such a..."

Just then, Peggy and a couple of the other nurses and nurses' aides from St. Mike's came through the line.

"Hey, hi, oh, my God, it's so good to see you," I said to Peggy, sweeping her and the crew up in a big group hug.

Peggy broke our huddle and stepped over to where Rosetti was standing and took her hand. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Your mom was a great person. We'll miss her a lot."

"Thank you," Rosetti said. "And thank you for taking such good care of her. I really appreciate it."

Peggy and the aides stayed for quite some time, which helped Rosetti cool down. We got to talking about how the other residents at the nursing home were doing and how much they were going to miss Teresa, as well.

Sean walked into the funeral home with some of the other

police officers from the station, including the chief. They had come to pay their respects to their coworker. By the look on Rosetti's face, she was happy to see them.

So much loss had taken place in such a short amount of time. It seemed a short time ago that I was standing in this same spot during Ed's calling hours, with Sean at my side.

"Hey, Rosetti, how 'ya doin'?" Sean asked as he came through the line. "Sorry for your loss," he said and awkwardly hugged her.

"Thanks, Sean, thanks for coming," Rosetti said.

"Hi, Meen, how you holdin' up?" Sean asked as he bent down and kissed me on the cheek.

"Fine," I said. "Thanks for coming. I know it means a lot to Rosetti that you and the guys are here."

Sean filed through, as well as the other officers, family friends, and relatives. Finally after three long hours, Teresa's calling hours were over. After the Novena to the Blessed Mother, everyone but the family filed out, then with Tony in the lead, one by one, the family walked by the casket to say good night to Teresa. The funeral service was scheduled for the next morning at the church, then the burial in St. Mary's Cemetery.

As Rosetti approached her mother's casket, I could see the tears well up in her eyes. She reached out and touched her mother's hand and kissed her forehead, just as I had seen her do so many nights at the nursing home. "Bye, Ma, see you tomorrow," she whispered.

A motorcade of cars pulled up in front of Teresa Rosetti's home. The lights were already on in the kitchen, dining room, and parlor when we pulled up to the curb. Rosetti turned off the motor and sat in silence.

"You okay?" I asked.

Rosetti rubbed her eyes and nodded. "Mm-hmm...just tired. It's been a long day."

I reached across the front seat of the car and touched her face. She looked at me and smiled wearily.

"You're holding up very well," I said. "Your mother would

be proud of you.”

Rosetti let out a sigh and shook her head.

“Why do you beat yourself up so much?”

Rosetti shrugged. “I don’t know...Catholic girl guilt, I guess...you know, never feeling you’re good enough.”

“But you are good enough, Rosetti, you’re the best.” I took her face in my hands.

Rosetti smiled a halfhearted smile and looked away.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“I don’t want to go in there,” Rosetti said. “I know they’re my family, but it doesn’t feel right. Tony’s in there acting like the put-upon son. He acts like he took such good care of her, when in reality he hasn’t seen our mother since last Christmas. You know, come to think of it, neither one of my brothers was there for Mom when she needed them. But look at them now. I just can’t take it, Mina.”

“Okay, then don’t. Let’s go back to the apartment. We can order a pizza and just relax. Just you and me,” I said, settling back in the passenger’s seat.

Rosetti’s face brightened. She turned the car on. As we pulled away from the curb, I could see Tony watching us from the dining room window. I didn’t mention it to Rosetti.

The quiet apartment felt like a sanctuary. It felt good to be home. I drew a warm bath for Rosetti, then went into the kitchen to order the pizza. When I returned to the bathroom with fresh towels, she stood before me naked. My breath caught in my throat. I wondered if I would ever get used to seeing her this way. She stepped closer to me and began unbuttoning the buttons on my blouse one button after another. Slowly, my insides began to simmer. Rosetti pushed the silk blouse off my shoulders, then reached behind me and unfastened my bra. It floated to the floor and lay in a pile at my feet with my discarded blouse. I closed my eyes as I felt her caress my chest and cup both breasts in her hands.

“You are just gorgeous,” Rosetti whispered. “What did I do

to deserve you?"

I pulled her closer and kissed her full on the mouth. Her strong hands caressed my back, then slipped into the waistband of my slacks. Fervently, her hands worked on the button and zipper. Rosetti slid her hands inside the front of my pants and into the warm wet invitation her nearness had created.

"See what you do to me," I whispered, my breath coming in short gasps.

Rosetti groaned. She tugged my slacks and panties down around my ankles. As our bodies pressed together, I felt her enter me, one finger, then another, then another. My thigh pressed between her legs, and we rhythmically moved together, climbing until our passion peaked. Rosetti's breathing became ragged and my legs buckled as wave after wave of orgasm pounded through me. We sank to the tile floor, gasping for air, and held each other close. We lay there, lost in the sensations of surrender and tranquility of the moment.

The door bell rang, startling us from our reverie. Rosetti stood up, legs still wobbly, and lumbered out to the kitchen wrapped in my pink bathrobe. She came back a few seconds later and rummaged through her pants pocket. She pulled out a crumpled ten-dollar bill and stuffed it into the pocket of the robe. She returned to the bathroom with a steaming hot pepperoni pizza and two cans of Diet Coke.

We moved our party into the bedroom, where between bites of pizza, we made love into the early hours of the morning and collapsed into each other's arms for a much-needed, but fitful, night's sleep.

The morning sun blazed into the bedroom, illuminating the remnants of leftover pizza crusts and flat Diet Coke cans. I peeked at the alarm clock, and it wasn't even seven thirty yet. Rosetti was still sound asleep. I slipped out of bed and into the kitchen to make some coffee and something to eat for us before we had to leave for the funeral home. We had to be back at Morelli's by nine thirty. The service would start at ten.

As the coffee brewed, I rummaged through the cupboards

for something for breakfast. I found some bread that had turned moldy at least a week earlier, a can of tuna and, bingo, a box of blueberry Pop Tarts. I kept the tuna, tossed the bread in the trash, and popped the Pop Tarts in the toaster.

“What are you doing?” Rosetti asked as she stood naked in the doorway of the kitchen and rubbed her eyes like a sleepy little kid.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“No...I was awake. Although you were making enough racket out here, I’d be surprised if anyone in the building can sleep,” Rosetti joked.

“I was trying to make you something to eat before we had to leave for the funeral home.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. The coffee smells good. What else are we having?” Rosetti poured herself a cup.

Just then, the Pop Tarts popped up in the toaster.

“Ta da!” I exclaimed.

Rosetti shook her head and smiled. “You are really some gourmet cook.”

We laughed as I gingerly removed our extremely hot breakfast pastry from the toaster and tossed them on a plate.

“I hope those are blueberry,” Rosetti said, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Today is your lucky day.”

But in my heart I knew, all kidding aside, that today would be one of the hardest days she had to go through. I was glad I could be here with her. I wanted her to know that I would be there always, no matter how tough it might get.

We sat at the dining room table and ate our Pop Tarts in silence.

“You okay?” I asked, breaking the melancholy silence.

Rosetti nodded. “I just want to get this over with. I don’t want Tony, or anyone else for that matter, causing any trouble. I just want to bury my mother.” She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin, stood, and headed for the kitchen with her coffee cup and plate. She kissed the top of my head as she walked by.

“Thanks for breakfast,” she said. “It was delicious.”

“You knew going in that I’m no Julia Child,” I teased.

“Yes, I did. I think I can live with that.”

Rosetti and I were the first to arrive at Morelli’s. I held her hand as we walked over to Teresa’s casket. Rosetti bent down and kissed her on the forehead, then gently touched her hand before kneeling on the velvet kneeler in front of the casket. I knelt beside Rosetti and we said a silent prayer. At least I did anyway, the act of contrition and a Hail Mary, my standard prayers for funerals. When I was in second grade at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School, the nuns taught us to say the act of contrition and a Hail Mary upon entering any church and at funerals. Sort of like utility prayers—good for any occasion. After a few minutes, Rosetti stood and I followed her to the line of chairs against the wall in the area designated for the family of the deceased.

Slowly, the remainder of Rosetti’s family trickled in. First, Tony and his family arrived, then Gianni and his family. They all paid their respects to Teresa before coming over and silently taking their places in line next to Rosetti.

Friends of the family trailed in and quietly took their seats. And then Father Mathew began the prayer service.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

My mind wandered as the service continued. *Where do we really go after we die? Is there a heaven and a hell? I wonder what you have to do to end up in either place.* Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Rosetti. She looked stoic, her way of dealing with all this.

The prayer service concluded and it was time to say our final goodbyes to Teresa. Friends and family filed by the casket. Then it was time for the immediate family to say goodbye. Tony went first, followed by his family. Gianni stood and guided his family through the line. One by one, they leaned over the casket to kiss Teresa goodbye. My throat tightened as Rosetti stood and took my hand. We walked over to Teresa one last time.

“Goodbye, Ma.” Rosetti broke down. I gently took her arm and handed her a Kleenex.

Tears streamed down Rosetti’s face as she bent down to kiss her mom for the last time. I reached out and touched Teresa’s cool

stiff hand. "Goodbye, dear friend."

Rosetti and I walked out of the funeral home and to the waiting limousine, where the rest of the family waited. It was cramped in there until Ellie suggested that the kids sit on the adults' lap. During the entire ride to the church, I could feel Tony's heavy gaze on me. I tried not to let it bother me.

We piled out of the limo and went in the side door of the church. The entire Rosetti family sat in the first three rows of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. Two altar boys dressed in red and white vestments walked down the center aisle of the church, one carrying a heavy gold cross as the other carried two crystal flutes, one containing water and the other containing wine for the communion consecration. Father Mathew followed the altar boys down the aisle and up to the altar where a high Mass was said in honor of Teresa.

After the burial in St. Mary's Cemetery, the entire congregation was invited back to Teresa's house where friends and neighbors had prepared a special luncheon. The house was packed. You could smell the tomato sauce and fried peppers from the driveway. Many of the mourners had filtered out onto the front and back porch, just to find somewhere to sit and eat.

As the day went on, the crowd dwindled and only a few close friends and family remained. Rosetti was sitting in the dining room talking with one of her cousins. I started clearing some dishes from the dining room table and carried them into the kitchen to wash them. In the hallway to the kitchen, I ran right smack into Tony.

"Oh, excuse me," I said, feeling my face heat up with embarrassment.

"That's okay, I should have been looking where I was going," he said as he looked me over. "You know, I'll never understand why my sister is the way she is, but I can understand what she sees in you." His cold dark gaze roamed over my body. I felt violated again.

I pushed past him and made my way into the kitchen, set the dishes in the sink, and turned on the faucet.

"Was it something I said?" Tony asked, still standing in the

doorway.

I shook my head, unable to come up with a reply that would defuse the situation.

I busied myself with washing the dishes, hoping he would just go away, all too aware of his presence behind me. I turned around to reach the dirty plates that were stacked on the kitchen table and found Tony close enough for me to smell the Crown Royal on his breath.

"Are you sure you're a dyke? You don't look like one and you don't act like one." His speech was thick from the alcohol.

"What's a lesbian supposed to look like?"

"You know...like my sister in there..." Tony nodded toward Rosetti. "Short hair, masculine...hell, when we were kids, people thought she was a boy until she hit puberty. She was always like that...tough and hard. I don't get it. What does a pretty thing like you see in her?"

My heart pounded and I was starting to feel trapped.

"Different people have different tastes." I picked up a glass and dried it. I reached to put the glass away when I felt him press his massive body against me.

"Well, maybe you just need to be with the right man," Tony whispered in my ear as he leaned into me.

"I don't think that has anything to do with it." I pushed against him, trying to squeeze free from between him and the kitchen counter.

He caught me around the waist, and I could feel his hardness press into my back. "But how do you know if you don't try it?" The stench of liquor and garlic on his breath made me nauseated.

"Get off of me!" I said through gritted teeth. Perhaps I should have screamed, but I didn't want anyone in the living room to hear us and find out what was going on. With all my might, I tried to push the tub of lard away from me, but I couldn't budge him. He grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me around so we were facing each other. When he pinned my hands down on the kitchen countertop, I instinctively raised my right knee to his groin. Tony's eyes bulged and his face turned crimson as he slowly lowered himself onto the floor, clutching the family jewels.

“Dyke,” he gasped.

I stepped over him as he lay on his side on the kitchen floor.

I joined Rosetti and her cousin in the dining room.

“You okay?” Rosetti asked. “You look upset.”

“I’m fine. Just taking a breather before I finish cleaning up.”

It was seven o’clock in the evening when the last of the guests left. Rosetti looked drained as she sat at the kitchen table nursing a cold cup of coffee. Gianni and Ellie were packing up to head back home that night. They were scheduled back to work and their girls had to be back at school in the morning. Kathy was upstairs packing for their return trip, as well. There was no sign of Tony.

I was scheduled in the morning, as well, and needed to get home and get some rest. As I put the last of the dishes away, the doorbell rang.

“Who could that be?” Rosetti asked as she wearily got up and went to answer the door.

I heard Rosetti open the door and a male voice, which I recognized as the chief’s.

“Come in,” Rosetti said and gestured Chief Watkins toward the kitchen.

“Why, hello, Mina,” Chief Watkins said, surprised to see me in Rosetti’s kitchen. I’m sure this confirmed the rumors he tried to ignore about me and Rosetti.

Rosetti and the chief sat at the kitchen table.

“Can I get you something? Coffee? Something cold to drink?” I asked.

“Coffee would be great,” Chief Watkins said.

I put on a fresh pot and pulled out some pineapple squares one of the ladies from the church had made and set them on the table. When the coffee was finished, I poured Chief Watkins a cup and warmed up Rosetti’s.

“I know this has been a tough day for you, Rosetti,” Chief Watkins said as he pulled a sheet of paper from the manila envelope he was carrying. “But the ballistics report is back on the shooting, and I thought you’d want to know the results.”

Rosetti took a deep breath and ran a hand through her thick

black hair, resting her hand on the back of her neck.

"The coroner's report shows that the suspect was killed with a nine-millimeter bullet that came from your gun."

Rosetti looked down at the table and rested her forehead in her hands. She let out a long low sigh, then looked up at the chief.

"So now what?"

"You report back to work first thing in the morning," he said, sliding the sheet of paper across the table toward her. "The ballistics report and the internal investigation report both concluded that the shooting was justified. It was a clean shoot, Rosetti."

Rosetti looked up at the chief. Her exhausted eyes smiled at him.

"You did a good job out there, Sergeant. I'm proud to have an officer like you in my department. Now we have the records to prove it. And there's one less drug dealer on the streets because of you."

Chief Watkins drained his coffee cup, then stood to leave. Rosetti stood, as well, and extended her hand to him.

"Thank you, sir, thank you for coming by tonight," Rosetti said.

"You're welcome, Sergeant. I'm glad things turned out the way they did."

Rosetti walked him out as I set the coffee cups in the sink. I met up with Rosetti on the couch in the parlor.

"Well, I bet you're glad that's over," I said.

Rosetti nodded, I'm sure too tired to speak.

"I wonder how much of this came from Teresa."

"What?" Rosetti asked, surprised. "What does my mother have to do with this?"

"Sometimes when someone close to us dies, they give us one last gift before they go to heaven."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not. I've seen it before. I have no doubt that Teresa had something to do with this...one last gift to you before she passes on."

Tears welled up in Rosetti's eyes. She lay her head in my lap and I stroked her hair until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

My first day back in the ER was unbelievable. My first patient of the day was a fifteen-year-old with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the abdomen. We got him up to surgery just in time before he bled out. Then I treated a schizophrenic who was off her meds wearing a silver-studded leather bustier and lace gloves singing “Like a Virgin” at the top of her lungs. This was followed by two heart attacks, a stroke in progress, a groin laceration from a boating accident, and two DOAs. And all this was before noon. The entire staff worked through lunch, and before I knew it, it was almost six o’clock, time for the new shift to come in.

It was Rosetti’s first day back at work, as well. When I came home that night, I was greeted by the delicious aroma of simmering marinara sauce and fresh baked bread. I looked at the number on the door to make sure I was in the right apartment. I was.

I walked in and found the dining room table set with a white linen tablecloth I didn’t know I owned and matching dishes and glasses. Rosetti stood in the kitchen stirring a pot of tomato sauce.

“Hey,” Rosetti said. “How was your day?”

“Getting better. What’s all this?”

“I thought you’d like to come home to a nice meal for a change.” Rosetti tasted the tomato sauce from a wooden spoon. “There’s wine in the fridge...you want some?”

“Yes, please.” I kicked off my Nike Cross Trainers and sat at the table, watching her work.

Rosetti brought me a chilled glass of Riesling. “What’s the occasion?” I took the glass from her and took a sip.

“Can’t a girl fix another girl dinner and it not be an occasion?”

“Okay by me.” I took another sip. The warmth of the wine seeped into my tired muscles. I immediately felt myself relax.

I watched her as she proficiently moved about the tiny kitchen. She opened the oven door and removed a freshly baked loaf of bread.

“Wow, you even baked bread. What other hidden talents do you possess that I don’t know about?”

She laughed. “Baking is the least of my talents. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Rosetti took the bread out of the oven and wrapped it in a warm tea towel. Clouds of steam rose above her as she drained the pasta and dumped it into a large pasta bowl, another domestic item that I didn’t remember owning, and ladled on the thick tomato sauce.

“My God, that smells good,” I said as Rosetti set the bowl in the center of the table.

“Teresa’s recipe. Best spaghetti sauce this side of Bella, Italy.”

Rosetti refilled my wine glass, then sat opposite of me at the table.

“I gather you were busy today.” Rosetti ladled a large portion of spaghetti onto my plate.

“Insanely, we never got a break. The entire staff worked straight through.” I twirled some spaghetti onto my fork.

“I saw Sean at the station this morning,” Rosetti said as she poured herself more wine.

“Are you working together again?” I asked, my mouth full of pasta.

“No, we were at a staff commander meeting to get our assignments. I’ll be on day turn for at least another month. He’s going to be back on rotating shifts for the next few weeks.”

“Oh, I bet he’s not going to like that,” I said, twirling another forkful of spaghetti. “Mmm this is so good.”

“We talked a little after the meeting. He told me he was glad you and I...hooked up.”

“He what?” I asked, surprised Sean would say anything about my relationship with Rosetti, especially to Rosetti.

Rosetti sopped up her remaining spaghetti sauce with a thick slice of Italian bread and took a bite. “He also said if I broke your heart, he’d kill me.” A big grin lit up her face.

“I can’t believe he said that to you.” I was embarrassed by Sean’s comment.

“It’s okay, I know he was kidding. He really cares about you, Mina. I don’t think he ever stopped, whether you were married to him or not. He also said he was glad you were with me now and not ‘that other one,’” Rosetti said. “I’m going to assume that’s Regan.”

“Yep.” I wiped my mouth with the cloth napkin Rosetti had laid out. “He doesn’t like Regan. Never did. He flipped when he found out she was Ed’s hospice nurse. He was so upset he asked me to have her replaced. But then she delivered Tess early and all that changed.”

“Almost seems like things happened for a reason, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“What didn’t he like about her?”

“He blames Regan for breaking up our marriage.”

“Did she?”

I looked across the table at Rosetti and saw she was serious about this.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Ro, you and I both know that if it wasn’t her, it would have been someone else. If you had come along a few months earlier, it might have been you. You know you can only hide your true feelings for so long. Don’t you think?”

Rosetti shoveled in another forkful of pasta. “I guess you’re right. There is just something about her that I don’t trust.”

“It’s because of what happened while you were away, isn’t it?”

Rosetti nodded.

I set my fork down. “I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am

about that. But it wasn't totally Regan's fault that what happened, happened. It was my fault, too. I could have stayed away from her, but I didn't. But do you know one thing I learned?"

"What?"

"I learned the truth. I learned that spending the rest of my life with Regan wasn't what I wanted. Although I still care for her and for Tess, our being together just wasn't right. And the gift in all that is that there is no question in my mind or my heart about being here with you. I'm totally sure this is where I want to be for the rest of my life."

Rosetti looked relieved. She stood up to clear the table.

"Here, let me do it. You cooked, I'll clean up." I took her dish from her.

She poured herself some more wine and headed for the couch to read the paper. It was amazing at how right this all felt.

I cleared the dishes and filled the sink with sudsy water when the phone rang. Neither of us made a move to pick it up. I let the machine get it.

"Mina, are you there?" the voice sent icy shivers up my spine. "It's Regan...can you call me when you get in, nothing important I just need to ask you something...thanks...bye."

I peeked around the corner to see Rosetti's reaction. She didn't look amused.

"What?" I asked.

"What do you think she wants now?"

"I don't know. It didn't sound urgent."

Rosetti neatly folded her newspaper and set it in her lap. "Mina, your exes seem to have trouble letting you go. Is this something I need to worry about?"

I walked over to Rosetti and sat on her lap. "No," I said firmly. "I can't help what those people do or say, but I do have control over what I do or say. The only person I have feelings for is right here." I poked Rosetti in the chest with my index finger. "I have big feelings for you, Rosetti...bigger and stronger than I've ever known, and I wouldn't dream of putting that in jeopardy ever again." I kissed her full on the mouth. Garlic and onions never tasted so sensual.

The dishes soaked in the sink while Rosetti and I soaked in the bathtub and finished the bottle of wine. The phone rang again. Neither of us made an attempt to get out of the tub to answer it.

“Do you have another ex out there I don’t know about?” Rosetti asked, capturing my mouth with her soft lips.

A few seconds later, the machine picked up. “This message is for Mrs. Caselli. This is Stanley Steamer calling, we’d like to offer you a—” The machine cut him off.

“Oh, thank God,” I said. Rosetti and I laughed.

A few days after the funeral, I went with Rosetti to the nursing home to collect Teresa’s personal effects. It was hard entering room 216 and not seeing Teresa’s cheery face greet us. Teresa’s bed had been stripped and a small cardboard box with her personal belongings sat on the bare mattress. The tube of Denture Grip I’d bought her a few weeks earlier stuck out of the top. The sight of it made me sad. Peggy walked by Teresa’s room pushing the med cart. She stuck her head in the doorway.

“You doing okay in here?” she asked.

Rosetti nodded and flipped the lid open on the box.

“Hi, Peg, yes, we’re doing fine. Just here to pick up Teresa’s stuff,” I said.

“Oh, I almost forgot. When we were packing up Teresa’s things, we came across something. Wait here, I’ll go get it.” Peggy disappeared from the doorway.

Rosetti went through the contents of the box. Among Teresa’s underclothes and nightgowns, Rosetti found Teresa’s denture cup, a small silver framed picture of the Rosetti family taken sometime in the seventies, a plastic yellow back scratcher, and several holy cards from Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church.

A few minutes later, Peggy returned with a white envelope. Rosemary’s name appeared on the front of the envelope in Teresa’s shaky handwriting.

“I found this under Teresa’s nightgowns. I kept it at the desk for safe keeping. Peggy handed Rosetti the envelope. Rosetti’s hands shook as she held the envelope in her hand. She looked up at me as if asking permission to open it. I nodded, urging her on.

Rosetti opened the envelope and removed the card. On the front of the card were the words: To My Daughter, on Her Birthday. Rosetti sat on the edge of the bed and read. When she was done, she handed me the card with trembling hands.

I looked at it. Next to the birthday greeting, Teresa had written a personal message. It read:

Dear Rosemary,

Thank you for taking such good care of me. What more could a mother ask of her daughter? Perhaps that she settle down and have some grandchildren, but I know for you that is not your way. I know you have tried to hide your feelings from me, but a mother always knows. I've known for a long time that a family isn't what you wanted. I was sad about it for a while. But you are my daughter and I love you. No matter what. My only wish for you is to have a good and happy life. I am very proud of you, and if your father were here today, God rest his soul, he would be, too. Happy Birthday.

Love, Mom.

PS: Sorry I only got you this card for your birthday. The gift shop downstairs didn't have the nice Hallmark ones like the drugstore downtown.

A shiver of remembrance went through me. The card I had forgotten to pick up for Teresa had been meant for Rosetti.

I closed the card and handed it back to Rosetti. Tears slowly found their way down my cheeks. "She knew."

Rosetti nodded and smiled through her own tears. "Yes, she knew."

EPILOGUE

I finished my ER residency on June 30 and started my new job as assistant director of City Hospital's emergency room on July 1. Rosetti, Sean, and my mother were in attendance when Dr. Morrison presented me with my certificate of completion.

Dr. Morrison resigned his position at City and took a job in Denver, Colorado, where his ex-wife had relocated with his son and daughter. Page stayed on at City Hospital and worked part time in the ER and part time as an instructor for first-year medical students.

Regan returned to work at hospice and filed for divorce from Jim. He disappeared a few weeks later, running off to West Virginia with the barmaid from Clancy's. Regan's father suffered another major stroke and died, ending his battle with cerebral vascular disease ten days before Tess's second birthday. After her father's death, Regan sold her home, and she and Tess moved in with her mother. Tess continues to do well after her heart surgery and has turned into a vivacious and active toddler. Regan and I still keep in contact, although purely on a platonic level. Especially since Regan had recently hooked up with Dr. Zach Martin, Tess's pediatrician, also recently divorced.

Sean has moved on with his life and started dating. I have to admit I was a little jealous at first, but deep down, all I really wanted for him was to be happy. He says he hasn't found "the one" yet, but he enjoys looking.

After three months of working mind-numbing desk duty on day shift, Rosetti returned to undercover work where her unit exposed four crack houses and seized \$750,000 in drugs, guns,

and cash. No shots were fired. Six months after the drug bust, Sergeant Rosemary Rosetti was promoted to lieutenant. She was the first female lieutenant in the history of our city's police department. No one was prouder than I was as I stood next to her while she was presented with her lieutenant stripes.

To her surprise, Teresa had made Rosetti the executor of her will instead of Tony. Tony wasn't too pleased with the setup but that didn't seem to faze Rosetti. She settled Teresa's estate and sold her mother's house without incident. Tony and Gianni took their share of the proceeds and quietly returned to their lives.

From Teresa's estate money, Rosetti and I bought a beautiful old farmhouse just outside of town on three acres of land that butts up against St. Mary's Cemetery. On our evening walks, we visit Teresa's grave every day. Working in the ER is still hectic, and Rosetti's new responsibilities have kept her busy and on her toes. But we have each other now, and the greatest gift we have given each other is our ordinary, extraordinary life.

About the author

Maria V. Ciletti is a registered nurse working as a medical administrator.

Her writing credits include “Don’t Sing: Growing up Lesbian in Catholic School,” which was published by Taylor & Francis in their Queer and Catholic anthology in July 2008. A non-fiction story, “Taking Care of Ellie,” was published in the anthology *Voices of Caregiving* by La Chance Publishing in 2009, edited by the Healing Project.

Her first novel, *The Choice*, a 2007 Lambda Literary nominee for debut fiction, was published by Haworth Press in May 2007. *Clinical Distance*, the sequel to *The Choice*, was published in May 2009 by Intaglio Publications.

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by Kate Sweeney

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Release Date July 2009

With the serum now in her bloodstream, Dr. Alex Taylor must find a suitable laboratory to continue her work to help the woman—well, vampire—she loves, Sebastian. Together they travel to Devon, England, where Sebastian hopes her old, old, friend, the flamboyant vamp Gaylen Prescott will assist them. All the while, they try to keep one step ahead of Nicholae, the elder in the hierarchy, who wants Sebastian destroyed.

They find themselves deep in the catacombs of Guys Hospital in London and to Kendra, a sultry vamp who knew Sebastian quite well a century before, too well for Alex. Kendra is conducting similar experiments of her own.

Alex becomes a reluctant comrade to this sexy vampire, and together they find a way for Sebastian and her world to survive the dawn

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