

**The Woman on the Beach**  
*A Callie and Carter Mystery*

By  
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Chapter 1

Carter Jankowski moved through the room, picking up various items of clothing before turning to look at the woman sitting at the desk typing on the keyboard. "We really need to talk about combining households," he said.

"Hmm?" she replied, clearly not listening as she concentrated on what she was writing.

Chuckling, Carter dropped the clothing into a pile near the bathroom door and moved over to her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders from behind. "Never mind," he told her. "What's so interesting?" he asked, looking at the words as they appeared on the monitor. "Ah. Your report for the Oliver case."

"I told Mrs. Oliver that I would get it to her as soon as possible," she said, taking her hands from the keyboard to wrap them around his arms. "Do you need the computer?"

"No, I sent this week's column in this morning." He dropped a kiss onto her head. "And I can wait to work on the book." While it had been six months since the resolution of Jonas Wittlebaum's murder, Carter had been taking his time on the book that would begin with the death of his father and culminate in Steven Maricopa's suicide. The courts were still dealing with the fallout of the case even now, and he wanted all of the details set before he went too far with writing the book.

Callie started typing again. "I won't be much longer," she told him. "Maybe we should think about getting another computer."

He laughed, going over to the refrigerator to get a bottle of water. "For someone who claims not to like working on a computer -"

"I'm getting used to it," she said. "I like being able to edit on the fly. I couldn't do that with a typewriter." Another few clicks, and then she said, "There. Done. Now to save it - and I'll read it over again tonight before I print it out and take it to Mrs. Oliver tomorrow." She pushed the chair back and stood up. "Are you ready to go get dinner?" she asked.

"In a minute," he said, pulling her into his arms for a kiss. "I've been wanting to do that for the last hour."

"I wish you had told me," Callie sighed, her arms around him. "I would have obliged." She kissed him this time. "With pleasure."

"I'll remember that for future reference. Come on. Let's go see what Marty's up to."

"Did you make a reservation this time?" she asked, grabbing her cellphone and putting it into her purse as he opened the sliding door.

"I called. Your dad told me that we didn't need a reservation - that he would make room for us - even if

he had to put a table in the kitchen."

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As they entered the restaurant, Maria started to slip off of the stool beside the podium. "Don't get up, Maria," Callie said, forestalling her movement.

"Callie. Hi, Carter," she said, waving toward the dining room. "We're busy tonight."

"So I see," Callie nodded. "Dad said that he'd find a spot for us if we came in -"

She pointed to a small table in the corner that most customers didn't seem to like. "How about that one?" she suggested.

"That'll be fine," Carter told her.

"You need menus?"

Callie looked at Carter, who shook his head. "I think we can manage without them."

"I'll send Paul over as soon as he finishes with Table Six."

They had barely sat down when Callie's cellphone began to ring, and she winced. "I'd better answer it," she told Carter. "Sorry. Sweet tea and spaghetti with meatballs." Taking the phone out, she pressed the button. "This is Callie Harris, how can I help you?"

"Your agency was recommended by Cissy Wittlebaum," a male voice told her. "She gave me this number. I hope you \*can\* help me."

Callie reached into her purse to retrieve a pen and notepad. "Who am I speaking with?" she asked.

"My name is Derek Linden. I'm the Curator for Special Projects at the Carrington Art Gallery and Museum. I'm sure you've heard of it -"

The museum was world famous, but Callie simply said, "Of course, Mr. Linden. What seems to be the problem?"

"I don't really want to discuss it over the telephone. Is there any way you and your associate could come to the museum this evening?"

"This evening?"

"I'm the only one here, and I need to make sure that we're not overheard - it's of vital importance that no one else knows about this."

"We're about to have our dinner, Mr. Linden," Callie began.

"Oh, I can wait for you to get here. I have things I can do. When you do arrive, come to the back door of the building and call me back at this number. I'll let you in. Thank you, Mrs. Harris. You have no

idea how much this means."

"We'll call as soon as we get there," Callie assured him, making a note of the number on the notepad before putting everything back into her purse.

"So where are we going after dinner?" Carter wanted to know.

"The Carrington Museum," she told him, and saw his surprised reaction. "Apparently the Curator for Special Projects has a problem that he needs us to help with." She picked up her glass of tea. "Cissy recommended us."

"That doesn't surprise me in the least," he told her. "Don't look now, but Marty's on his way over."

Callie, of course, turned to greet her father. "Dad."

He accepted her hug, grinning at Carter. "I hope the table is okay."

"It's fine," Callie assured him. "It's busy."

"There are several conventions in town," he told her. "I had Paul take flyers to all of the hotels in the area and this is the result. It was Carter's idea," he said.

"Now you're in advertising?" she asked, giving Carter a look.

He shrugged. "I thought it might be a good idea that wouldn't hurt to try."

"Worked pretty well, I'd say," Marty told them. "I'd better hit a few more tables before going back into the kitchen. Don't be a stranger," he told Callie. "I miss seeing your smiling face."

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Derek Linden was a middle-aged man with dyed black hair and a thin mustache above an equally thin lip. He greeted Callie and Carter at the back door to the prestigious museum. "Thank you for coming," he told them. "I've been fretting with how best to handle this problem."

"I'm Callie Harris," she told him. "This is my associate, Carter Jankowski." She glanced at Carter, still pleased with herself that she had finally stopped stumbling over the name.

"Mr. Jankowski. Please, let's go this way. We don't have much time before the night cleaning crew arrives. I'd like to get this settled before there's any chance of witnesses."

He led them into a room that he had to unlock before entering. "This is the storeroom for any special showings or projects that the museum is planning," he explained, waving his hand at a collection of paintings set up on easels nearby. "At the moment, we're getting ready to open a showing of paintings by Texas artists."

Callie studied the twelve paintings. "They're very good."

"Surely there are more than twelve Texas artists -" Carter said.

"Of course there are," Linden agreed. "But we looked for the top dozen who have already had successful showings of their work and who have sold at least one of those works for over \$5000."

Callie was impressed. "You're saying that these paintings sold for over \$5000 dollars?"

"Precisely, Mrs. Harris."

"What is the problem that you need our help with, Mr. Linden?" Carter asked.

"It's very complicated," he sighed, turning to a painting of a woman laying on a beach, horizontal to the water, one leg bent, her head back and an arm across her bare breasts as the sun rose over the ocean. "It involves this work - *Belleza al Amanecer* by Mateo Almanzo. It was painted on South Padre Island fifteen years ago."

"It's lovely."

"And, unfortunately, a forgery," Linden told them.

Callie's eyes widened. "It's a fake? How do you -"

"This is where the story becomes complicated," he sighed. "We received all of these paintings for the showing over a week ago. On the day the last canvas - this painting - was delivered and placed in this room - to which I have the only key - I had to take several days off due to a personal family matter. I only returned to work yesterday, and set out to get things in order for the showing. I contacted our staff appraiser to have him verify each one."

"And he found that this painting wasn't original?" Carter questioned.

"Yes. I was shocked. The canvas had to have been stolen from here - but there was no sign of anyone having gained access to the room while I was gone."

"Why did it have to be stolen from here?" Callie wanted to know. "What about the owners?"

Linden shook his head, taking a sheaf of papers from a nearby table. "Each painting was appraised by the owner before it was sent to us, Mrs. Harris." He took the top page and held it out to her. "As you can see, that appraiser found it to be authentic."

"Why would you have it re-appraised if it was appraised before coming in?" Carter asked.

"Our insurance requires that any work of art be appraised on site," Linden explained, "no matter when the last appraisal had taken place."

Callie frowned. "Well, since your insurance -"

"That's another part of my problem," Linden interrupted. "During the time I was away from the office, our insurance for special projects lapsed -something about the wrong bank account, I'm not sure about that part."

"So the museum wasn't insured against theft -"

"From the moment this painting arrived until today," Linden confirmed. "The static exhibits are covered by a separate policy. We purchase a new policy for each special project," he explained. "What I would like for the two of you to do is find the original painting and get it back to the museum before the end of week."

"Have you spoken to the owners?" Callie asked.

Linden looked terrified at the idea. "Oh, no. I daren't do any such thing. If Mr. or Mrs. Donovan knew that we - that \*I\* had lost their painting - I've no doubt that they would file a lawsuit and the reputation of the museum would be in ruin. This \*must\* be handled with the \*utmost\* discretion. Now, I believe that I can convince my employers that I have contracted with your company to handle security oversight of the showing. That will give you access to the museum without question - and the ability to talk to the owners of the painting."

"Tell me, Mr. Linden," Callie said, "why would only one painting be stolen? If a thief somehow got in here and stole one, why wouldn't they take all of them?"

"I have no idea, Mrs. Harris. That's what I'm hiring you and Mr. Jankowski to find out."

"The problem I have, Mr. Linden, is that it would be very easy for someone to say that the painting was stolen on our watch," Callie pointed out.

"I will gladly write a statement that the painting was stolen before I hired your agency," Linden told her. "Will that be acceptable?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

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"How do you want to handle this?" Callie asked Carter as they drove back toward the loft.

"With only a week to find the painting, we might have to divide and conquer. Which do you want? The owners or the museum?"

"The museum, I think. You're better at asking questions than I am."

"Oh, really?" he grinned. "If that's so, I have a question that I'd like to ask you."

"We weren't talking about me, we were talking about the Donovans," she reminded him.

"Look, Callie, I -"

"Would you rather work at the museum?" she asked.

"No, I'll go talk to Mr. and Mrs. Donovan," he told her. "First thing tomorrow morning."

Back at the loft, Carter went to take a shower while Callie said she was going to read the report on the Oliver case prior to printing it out. But as soon as she heard the water running, she grabbed her cellphone and dialed Allie's number.

"Allie, are you - busy?" Callie asked her friend.

"I'm never too busy to talk to you," Allie said. "How's life as a PI?"

"Well, we have a new case," she said. "But it's very hush hush. I can't discuss it."

"Wow. So why the call?"

"I need a reason to call my best friend?" Callie grinned as she heard Carter singing in the shower.

"No, but at this time of night, I tend to think you might. What's up? Trouble in happy land?"

"Everything's great, but - well, I think Carter's going to ask me to marry him again -"

"Well, you already know that I think you should say yes and marry him." She must have heard Callie's loud sigh as she continued. "Callie, sweetie, you're not cut out to just live with someone. Me, I'm fine with it, but you need stability. Someone you know is always going to be there."

"Until he's not," Callie said.

"Once again, Greg's death wasn't your fault - or his. And maybe it was supposed to happen so you could find Carter. Did you ever consider that? Can you honestly tell me that you haven't been happy since Carter's been part of your life?"

"Of course I'm happy. He's sweet and takes care of me."

"The man loves you, Callie. That's the important part. And I think you love him, too, if you'd just admit it."

Carter stopped singing, which meant he was almost finished. "I have to go. Thanks. Any news on your front?"

"I'm happy, too. How about meeting me for lunch tomorrow?"

"I'll try. I'll call you."

"Bye."

Callie hung up the phone just as the water stopped in the shower, glad that she had pulled the report up before talking to Allie. Glancing through it quickly, she sent it to the printer as Carter came out of the bathroom. "Almost done," she told him.

Barefoot, he walked over to the printer, waiting for it to finish. "You misspelled a word," he told her.

"What word?"

"Exemplary," he said. "It's two e's, one a, not one e and two a's."

"I know that," she told him, finding the word in the document. "How did I miss that?" she asked herself as she corrected it.

"Probably because you were talking to Allie on the phone."

"How did you -?"

"I got out of the shower to ask you something, and heard you talking, so I decided not to ask."

She winced. "Oh. Well, Allie called -"

"How's she doing?" he asked, taking the papers from the printer as he waited for the corrected version.

"I called her," Callie admitted, and Carter looked up with a knowing smile. "I needed to talk to her about - something."

He nodded, bringing the report to her. "Here you go."

Callie signed two copies, taking one and putting it into a folder. "I'll drop this by Mrs. Oliver's house on the way to the museum in the morning." Standing up, she said, "I'll go take my shower now."

"See? If you hadn't been on the phone, you wouldn't have to do that," Carter said.

"Tomorrow night," she said, pausing to give him a kiss.

Sitting down at the computer, Carter told her, "I'm going to write til you get finished." As she entered the bathroom, he called, "Or I might call Allie to talk about - something."

"You're funny," she told him, closing the door behind her.

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Callie delivered the report to Mrs. Oliver and then drove to the Carrington. At the door, she told the young woman sitting at a desk that she had been hired by Mr. Linden to check security for a special project. Smiling, the well-dressed woman picked up the phone. "Mr. Linden? There's a Mrs. Harris here -" she paused and glanced up at Callie. "Yes, sir." Hanging up the phone, she said, "He said that you should go to the storeroom - down the hallway. It's the last doorway on the right."

"Thank you, Miss -"

"\*Ms.\* Jamison," she said.

As Callie moved down the hallway, she glanced back to see a man speaking to Ms. Jamison in a rather earnest fashion as the woman shook her head, waving him back to wherever he had been before approaching her.

"Oh, Mrs. Harris," Derek Linden said when she entered the storeroom. "I was thinking about calling to find out where you might be - where is your associate?"



"He's talking to Mrs. Donovan," she told the man.

"Oh, dear, oh dear," Linden said. "I do hope that he doesn't -"

"Trust me, Mr. Linden. Mr. Jankowski can be very discreet. He's going to speak to several of the owners of the paintings under the ruse of needing information for use in the exhibit from them about how they came to own their canvases, why they bought them, and how they feel when they look at them."

"Oh. I suppose that will be all right. It might even be something that I can incorporate into the showing."

Callie hid her smile as she asked, "Why don't you show me the room where the exhibit will be held and answer some questions about other museum employees?"

"Which employees?" he wanted to know, leading her from the storeroom, pausing to lock it behind them.

She nodded toward the front desk. "Ms. Jamison for a start. How long has she worked here?"

"About a year, I think. Yes. She's a college student, studying art history, I believe."

"There was a man who went over to talk to her when I came toward the storeroom," Callie said. "He was wearing a dark blue blazer - dark brown hair -"

"That could be several people," Linden told her. "The blue blazer is part of the uniform for the men who work in the galleries. Most of them are quite taken with Ms. Jamison due to the fact that she's attractive."

"How difficult would it be for me to see the personnel files for museum?" Callie asked as they entered a small room with a skylight.

"I believe I can manage that. I'll have them for you by this afternoon. This is the room where we do the small special projects. The wires from the light fixtures on the wall all go to the hanger. Once turned on, if the painting is removed from the hanger, an alarm sounds."

"What about the skylight?" Callie asked.

"Each panel has a thin metal thread every six inches that is electrified and tied into the alarm system. Cut any one of them, and a silent alarm is activated which summons both the museum security guards and the police."

"Where is the cut off for the alarm systems?"

"In a room near the back door," he told her. "Mrs. Harris, you realize that the -" he looked around and lowered his voice before continuing, "that the painting is already missing -"

"Which is why I want to look at the personnel files, Mr. Linden," she told him. "You were gone, so possibly one of them somehow gained access to the storeroom and switched the original painting with

the forgery. The rest of this is simply - window dressing since I'm \*supposed\* to be looking over your security measures, remember?"

"Of course. If you'll wait here, I'll go to our Personnel office to ask them to gather the information for you."

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Carter drove up to the speaker at the end of the drive and pressed the button. "Hello?" a woman's voice said.

"My name is Carter Jankowski," he said. "Mr. Linden at the Carrington Museum asked me to drop by to get some information about your painting that they're about to show -"

"What sort of information?"

"Just - background information," he said. "I'm talking to all of the owners of the paintings included in the exhibit -"

"Come on up," she said, and the gates began to open.

He parked the car near the front door and grabbed his notebook, studying the white, columned mansion. While the Wittlebaum estate wasn't far from here, this house was far more ostentatious, he thought - something that was confirmed when a uniformed maid opened the door as he approached and ushered him into a marble-floored entry hall.

"Mrs. Donovan is out at the pool," she told him. "Follow me, please."

Penelope Donovan was \*in\* the pool, her arms resting on the edge as she watched them come out of the house. "Thank you, Rose," she told the maid. "That will be all for now."

Rose nodded and returned to the house, leaving Carter alone with her employer. "Forgive me for meeting you here, Mr - "

"Jankowski," he told her. "Carter Jankowski. And it's perfectly all right."

"I always begin my day with a swim," she told him, and Carter realized that he hadn't imagined the heavy southern accent that he'd heard over the speaker. Smiling, she moved over to the ladder, and pulled herself from the water - revealing that she wasn't wearing a bathing suit. She moved - glided, really - toward him, and Carter grabbed the silk robe hanging over the back of a chair, holding it as she slipped her arms into it. The silk clung to her wet body, giving her scant coverage, and she laughed. "I hope I didn't shock you, - Carter."

He smiled as she sat down in a chair beside a glass topped table and picked up a glass of what he assumed to be wine. "Not at all, Mrs. Donovan."

"Oh, please, considering that you've seen me in the - altogether - why don't you call me Penny? All of my friends do." She smiled, sitting back in her chair. "Would you care for some wine? It's from a little ol' winery right here in Texas."

"Not at the moment," Carter told her. "Maybe later. You have a very nice - house, Penny."

"Thank you. I was lucky to be able to keep it. Andrew tried his best to take it from me. He said that I didn't need such a big place after the divorce. But I simply reminded him that I love to have parties. You'll have to come to my next party. I'm sure you'd enjoy yourself."

"I'm sure I would," he told her. "But my partner might not agree."

"Your - partner?"

"She's a homebody, prefers to stay in."

"That's sad. But maybe you could convince her to join us? The more the merrier is what I always say." She punctuated the statement with a giggle.

"As much as I hate to do it, I have other people to meet - if I could get some background on when you and your husband bought the painting in question."

"Oh, well, I convinced Andrew to actually buy it ten years ago. But I'd wanted it for years before that. I'm the woman in the painting, after all."

"You're the woman on the beach?"

She smiled at his surprise. "Andrew and I used to spend our summers down in South Texas. If you were lucky, you could find an empty stretch of sand early in the morning, and I'd go out there and take off my clothes for a quick swim as the sun was rising. One day, when I was laying on the beach after swimming, I saw a man painting. When I moved, he told me not to, that he wasn't finished. Mateo was such a dear man. And *\*very\** Latin." She waved a hand as if she were suddenly hot and grinned. "I told him later that it was a good thing that he wasn't able to paint what happened later. Andrew was jealous enough as it was."

"So your husband -"

"Ex-husband, dear," Penny corrected. "Oh yes, Andrew is quite aware that Mateo painted me in the nude. He was furious when I agreed to let the museum show it. He'd kept it locked away here at the house, where absolutely *\*no one\** could see it. When I get it back, I'm going to hang it over the mantle in the living room for everyone who comes in to see." Stretching her legs out in front of her, she tilted her head back as she had on the beach that day and untied the robe, letting it fall open. "I just adore the feel of the sunlight on my skin," she purred.

Carter stood, closing the notepad. "Well, as I said, I do have other stops to make - I'm not sure how much of this we can use for the exhibit -"

"Use all of it," Penny told him. "I don't care who knows about it. I have nothing to be ashamed of -" she brought her head up and looked at him. "Don't you agree?"

## Chapter 2

When Mr. Linden returned with the personnel files, Callie was standing in the hallway, and pointed to the man talking to Ms. Jamison. "That's the man I wanted to ask about," she told him, leading him back into the exhibit room.

"Oh, let me see -" he flipped through the papers in his hand before handing one of them to her. "That's his file. Jerome has been working for the museum for five years. He mostly hangs and removes artwork - He'll likely help when it comes time to place the canvases for this exhibit." He held the paper out for her to take.

Callie studied the information. "I'll make some checks on these this afternoon," she said, taking the other papers from him. "And I'd like for information about your security company as well."

"You'll be -" he began as he turned to write a number on the back of a business card.

"Discretion is our watchword, Mr. Linden," she assured him. "Who should I ask for when I call this number?"

"Larry Kelso. It's his agency. Just tell him that I asked you for the audit."

"Larry Kelso," Callie repeated thoughtfully. "I'll call him as soon as I leave here," she said. After saying that she would be back later in the day, Callie took her leave. Sitting in her car, she called Allie, leaving a message on her friend's phone that she would meet her at Son Ching's for lunch. Then, taking out the card, she called information to get the address for Kelso Security Systems.

Starting the Jeep, she headed in that direction.

The building wasn't very big, but Callie could see several patrol cars parked in an area behind it with KSS painted on the doors. Inside, she found a blonde haired woman sitting at a desk. "May I help you?" she asked.

"I'd like to see Larry Kelso," Callie told her, not at all surprised by the buxom woman's presence. Larry had always liked blondes with ample measurements.

"Mr. Kelso is quite busy," she said. "May I tell him who wants to see him?"

"Tell him it's Callie Harris."

The woman glared at Callie as she used a pen to press the button on the intercom instead of her freshly manicured long nails. "Mr. Kelso, there's someone out here who wants to see you -"

"Who is it, Margie?" Larry asked.

"Callie Harris," Margie said.

Barely a second later, the door behind Margie was flung open and Larry Kelso appeared. "Callie?" He

came over to take her hands. "I can't believe it!" Neither, apparently, could Margie, who was frowning in disapproval. "You look wonderful! How are you doing? I was really sorry to hear about Greg - And that you quit the force right after -"

"Same old Larry," Callie said, laughing over his comments about Greg and her quitting. "Talking a mile a minute. I still don't understand why you and Allie never got along."

"Maybe because we both like to talk," he said. "How's she doing?"

"You know Allie. She never changes. Can we talk, Larry?" she asked, glancing in Margie's direction.

"Sure." He guided her toward his office. "Hold my calls, Margie."

"\*Sure\*," Margie said, seeming to deliberately echo Callie. Larry paused, leaning over the desk.

"Hey, she's an old friend from the police force. Nothing like that. You know you're my only girl, baby."

"Some things never change," Callie said as he closed the door behind them.

"Right now, she *is* my only girl," he insisted, indicating a chair. "Have a seat. I'd like to hope that you're here looking for a job, but -"

"I had no idea that you had opened a security company until this morning," she told him, taking a business card from her purse and sliding it across the desk toward him.

"HJ Investigations," he read. "So you got your private ticket. Come to think about it, I do recall reading a story about you finding a murderer awhile back. So I'm going to guess this is about a case you're working on."

"It is. For Mr. Linden at the Carrington Museum."

"He told me that he was having our security measures audited by another company." He grinned. "Had no idea it would be you doing it. So what do you want to know?"

"I'd like a full rundown of how you're handling security for the museum to begin with."

"For the entire museum? Not just the special projects?"

"The whole thing," she confirmed. "Just humor me, Larry. I have my reasons."

He stood up and went to a file cabinet. "We keep these cabinets locked at night. I open them up when I get here."

"You have the only key?"

"There's one in a safety deposit box in case I lose mine, but that's it." He pulled out a folder. "Here it is." He sat down again, opening the file. "We have an armed officer on premises every day while the museum is open. After hours, there's an alarm system that is armed by the last person out of the building, and the building is physically checked every three hours - unless there's a special project, and

then we have another guard in the exhibit room at the door, and the patrol is every hour."

"Are the patrols done on a set schedule, then?"

"We try not to, but sometimes it's inevitable. The patrol uses a clock to log their visit."

"Is there any way that someone could get into the building once the alarm is set?"

"Without setting it off and bringing both us and the police out?" He shook his head. "No. Not unless someone knew the code and had a key for one of the doors. And those aren't just given out like candy."

"I didn't think they were," she said.

"If I was a suspicious person, I'd think that maybe something was missing -"

"Just doing what I was hired to do," she told him. "You know that I can't -"

"You can't divulge a client's confidence," he finished. "Okay. I can take you to the security officers who have done the patrols -"

"Speaking of, have you made any new hires in the last week to two weeks?"

"Nope. I haven't hired anyone in six months. I trust all of my employees, Callie. They're good at their jobs. Most of them are ex-cops. They've all been thoroughly checked - no problems in their backgrounds."

"I'll take your word for it, then, Larry. And if I decide that I need to talk to any of them, I'll let you know."

He picked up the card again. "Okay, the H is you. Who is J?"

"Carter Jankowski. He's a writer who helped me with the Wittlebaum case. He already had a PI license in Colorado, and when I decided to go for mine, he agreed to go into business with me."

"Are you and he -?" Callie's smile gave him the answer, and he laughed. "I'm glad. I worried about you. You're not the type of woman who should be alone."

"Really?"

"Some women thrive on being single. Like your friend Allie. Alone, but not alone."

"I could say the same thing about a few men that I know," Callie told him.

"What about your partner - Carter?"

"No, I don't think he's like that. He was married several years ago. His wife died."

"See? You're perfect for each other. Me, I'm still looking for that perfect match. I'm sure Allie is, too."

"I'll ask her when we meet for lunch," she told him, standing up. "Well, I'll let you go so that you can get back to whatever you were doing before I arrived."

"Keep in touch," he said, opening the door for her. "And if you ever need a security company -"

"You'll be the first person I call," she promised, shaking his hand. "Nice to meet you, Margie," she told the receptionist. "Keep him in line."

"That's a full time job," Margie replied, still glaring at her boss as Callie left the office.

Glancing back through the glass door, she saw Larry lean over and place a kiss on Margie's lips. Callie grinned, shaking her head as she got into the Jeep and started the engine. While taking out her keys, she noticed a missed call on her phone and listened to Allie's voicemail.

"Hey, it's Allie. Can't make lunch today. Mr. Johansen called a mandatory meeting. Sorry. Talk to you later."

Sighing, Callie turned toward the loft – hoping that Carter would be there so they could share lunch while discussing what each had found.

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"Hi there!" Carter said as she entered the loft, getting up from the sofa to give her a kiss. "I thought you were having lunch with Allie?"

"She had a meeting and couldn't get away. So you get to share lunch with me."

"I'll get you a sandwich," he told her. "Did you find out anything this morning?" he asked as he worked in the kitchen.

She held up two file folders. "All kinds of things. How did your meeting go with Mrs. Donovan?"

"It was - interesting," he said with a grin. "You're \*not\* going to believe it."

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While eating lunch, Callie listened as Carter recounted his visit with Penny Donovan. Once he finished, she laughed. "I don't doubt a word of it. You should have seen some of the things I used to see when I was working with the department. We got called one time to a house where the couple who lived there was fighting. When we arrived, we found them both naked as the day they were born. They were dedicated nudists, and he was jealous of her having talked to someone at the camp they had visited the day before. She insisted that he was a prude."

Carter chuckled. "At least Penny Donovan invited both of us to one of her parties," he told her.

"No thank you," Callie told him. "Of course, if you'd like to go -"

"Not without you," he said, concentrating on gathering the plates and other debris from lunch. "What did you find out?"

"Mr. Linden is terrified that someone's going to find out about the painting being missing. I'm not sure he trusts us to be properly discreet." She pulled out the personnel file. "The receptionist, a \*Ms.\* Jamison seemed very friendly with a worker named Jerome Billings. And Mr. Billings seemed very interested in my arrival. I'm going to check them both out this afternoon."

Carter studied the employee pages – complete with a photo. "The question is still if he - or anyone else - could have gotten into the storeroom and taken the original, replacing it with the copy."

"According to the security company, no. And Mr. Linden has the only key to that room other than one in his safety deposit box."

"What did you think of the security company?"

"Kelso Security Systems," Callie told him. "The owner is Larry Kelso. He was a good cop - got shafted big time and quit."

"You knew him?"

She nodded. "He was one of Greg's best friends. Larry and I shared a patrol car for almost a year after Greg and I were married. He and Allie went out a few times."

"How did he get shafted?"

Callie took a deep breath as she recalled the incident. "We were on a routine patrol when we were dispatched to a robbery at a liquor store. The store was dark when we got there - and Larry told me to go around back in case the thieves tried to escape that way. I was near the corner of the building when I heard two shots - Entering the back door, I found Larry standing over the dead body of a young man - there was no sign of a gun."

"You said you heard two shots -"

"Larry only fired once - after he was fired upon. The boy was barely eighteen."

"Ouch."

She nodded. "They didn't find the gun - or the bullet that the boy fired at Larry. The store owner said that he hadn't seen a gun - but that there \*might\* have been one in the boy's jacket. He was very nervous, and insisted that it was due to his having been robbed several times over the previous year. With no gun, and a dead boy, and only my testimony about hearing two shots, they gave Larry the option of being indicted or resigning."

"And he resigned."

"Yeah. Greg wasn't happy about it. A year later, the store owner died from cancer - and his wife brought a letter in that he had written and put into a safety deposit box. The boy \*did\* have a gun - he used it during the robbery. When Larry went into that store, another robber was hiding behind the counter with a gun on the man - whispered to him to keep quiet. The boy had tossed the gun away after being shot - and his partner grabbed it and waited until the crowd began to gather to come out and hang around to



make sure the old man kept quiet."

"Did they catch the partner?"

"They did. The old man knew him from the neighborhood. They offered Larry his job back, but he turned it down."

"I'm not sure I blame him."

"Greg didn't, either. It was right after that that I got my gold shield."

Carter reached out to take her hand in his. "Lots of memories from seeing him today, I guess."

"A few. Not all of them are bad, though. I learned a lot from him. And he saved my life more than once."

"Well, then, I'm grateful to him for that." He sighed. "I have an appointment to meet \*Mr.\* Donovan at his office and get his statement about the painting, so I need to go, but -"

"Go. I have research to do and verification of background checks - I'm fine. Really."

He grabbed a sports-jacket from the table, then stopped to give her another kiss. "Gino's for dinner tonight?" he suggested.

"I'll call and make the reservation," she told him, smiling. "Have fun."

"Uh huh," he grunted as he opened the door and then closed it behind him.

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"I'm sure that I don't need to tell you, Mr. Jan-"

"Call me Carter," Carter said as Andrew Donovan paused, obviously not sure about the last name.

"I'm sure that I don't need to tell you that my wife is crazy," he declared, shaking his head. "That is one reason why I'm divorcing her."

"She made it sound as though the divorce was a fait accompli," Carter told him.

Donovan snorted in disgust. "She wishes. She thinks that I owe her all of my property and money instead of just half of it. And half is still more than -" he stopped. "I'm sorry. Penny tends to trigger my anger these days. Please, Mr. J-" He actually smiled. "Carter. Have a seat."

Andrew Carter was the head of a large architectural firm that had designed high-rise buildings all over the world. Raised in the Dallas area, he had chosen to keep his base of operations in the area, even after marrying a former Miss Alabama winner.

"Now, you said that you wanted to discuss how I came to purchase Mateo Almanzo's canvas 'Beauty at Sunrise', am I right?"

"Yes, sir. I'm collecting background material on all of the paintings that are to be shown by the Carrington -"

"I told her that I didn't want her to show that thing. I'm not even sure it was worth the money I paid for it. But when Penny insisted that she was the woman laying nude on that beach, I decided I had to keep everyone else from drooling over the damned thing, if no other reason. It was only after I purchased it that I finally met the artist himself. And what he told me -"

"You met Mateo Almanzo?"

"Yes. Less than a week after I bought the painting, I came home and found him with Penny - luckily for them both, there didn't seem to be anything going on, but - well, even he admitted that they had been lovers." He drew a deep breath, as though trying to calm down. "He also told me - privately - that it wasn't Penny on that beach, but another woman."

"Did he say who it was?"

"No. He said that he would rather that the public believe it was Penny if necessary. When I said I would tell Penny what he'd said, he laughed and said that she wouldn't believe me."

"And he died soon after that, I believe."

"If he died. He walked into the ocean at the place where he had painted his first and best work. His body was never recovered."

\*\*\*\*

Back in his car, Carter read through the notes he'd just taken, including the fact that there had still been a photo of Penny on her soon-to-be ex-husband's desk. Donovan was still in love with her - but he wasn't happy about her infidelity and absolute joy in shocking people. Carter would have suspected him of having substituted the forgery for the real painting, but that wouldn't have done a thing - especially if Penny announced that she was the woman in the painting. There was more to all of this. Something he was missing.

Shaking his head, he went to meet with the owners of several other paintings - just to keep up the fiction that the museum was getting information from them all.

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Callie, meanwhile, found out that Jerome Billings was from Brownsville, that he had come to Dallas a few months before going to work for the Carrington Museum. His employment application stated that he had worked at the university museum in that city.

The university confirmed that information, telling Callie that he had been an art history major, and had graduated with a degree in that field. "So why is he working as a laborer?" she wondered aloud. Mr. Billings had some questions to answer.

Ms. Jamison was still studying for her degree at a local college, so Callie didn't think there was any connection. Besides, if she was any judge, she didn't think the younger woman was smart enough to be

involved in the theft of a painting. But she would talk to her tomorrow morning anyway, just in case the receptionist had hidden depths that Callie had somehow missed.

Carter returned and told her about his conversation with Andrew Donovan. "What time is our reservation at Gino's?" he asked, sitting down at the computer.

"Seven," she answered, watching as he typed something into the search bar. "What are you doing?"

"Seven," he said, glancing at his watch. "Good. I have time to find a number and make a call."

"A call to who?" she wanted to know. "The Brownsville Ledger?"

"I need the number of a contact that Uncle Simon told me about - he might know something about Almanzo's supposed suicide." He pulled up contact information and scanned it. "Ah. There it is." Taking out his notebook, he wrote a name and number.

Callie read over his shoulder. "Tony Garcia. He knew your uncle?"

"I don't think they ever met, but do you remember that story in Simon Says about the drug cartels in Mexico and the havoc they were creating at the Texas border?"

"I think so. It was a warning about what might happen if the cartels moved north."

"That's the one. He got some of the information from Garcia."

Callie's hands fell on his shoulders. "Will you be long?" she asked.

He grabbed her hand and looked up at her. "Hard to say. Why?"

"No reason," she said, bending over to give him a kiss. "It can wait."

Carter pushed the chair back and pulled her around him and into his lap. "You sure about that?" he asked. "The call can wait. You can't."

She put her arms around his neck. "We only have a week to find that painting," she reminded him. "And I *can* wait." But she kissed him again.

"Do you realize what today is?" he asked.

"Um, Tuesday?" she asked. When he shook his head, she told him the date. Another shake of the head.

"Six months ago, we solved the Wittlebaum case," he told her. "And -" he prompted.

Callie smiled. "We slept together," she told him.

Carter shook his head again before giving her another kiss. "We made love."

Taking a deep breath, Callie asked, "Has it been six months?"

"You know it has." He gave her a quick kiss. "Now, why don't you go put on your prettiest dress?" he suggested. "And once I make the call, I'll get ready and we'll celebrate six months of being together."

She smiled and nodded, sliding off of his legs and to her feet. "I'm going to take a quick shower," she told him, moving toward the bathroom.

"Don't use all the hot water," he told her. "I need to take one as well." He grabbed the phone and dialed Tony Garcia's number, only to be told that Garcia was out of the office for the rest of the day. Sighing, he hung up and started unbuttoning his shirt as he went toward the bathroom. Tapping on the door, he opened it, entering the small room.

"What about your call?" Callie asked, looking over the shower door.

"He's out for the day," he told her. "So I figured we'd just share the hot water after all," he told her, opening the door to join her.

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"We need to talk," Carter told her as they finished dessert.

"About the case?" she asked, hearing the serious undertone in his voice.

"No." He leaned forward, reaching over to cover her hand with his. "Not about the case. About us."

"Us?" she repeated, staring at the nearly empty pie plate before her.

"Us. As in you and me. We need to make some decisions - such as where we're going to live. We've been spending most of the time at the loft - so much that the last time we went to your condo, -"

She finally looked up at him with a grin. "I don't think Mr. Grenshaw will make that mistake again. He was very embarrassed when he found out that you were my boyfriend and not someone up trying to sneak into the building."

"The point is, we need to stay in one place or the other. It doesn't matter to me, really. As long as we can find a place for my books, I'm good. And I'm sure you'd be more comfortable at your place -"

"Not really. And I'm not sure that we could put enough bookshelves in the condo for your books."

"You'd have more privacy at the condo," he told her.

"Who says I want privacy?"

"Callie, I'm talking about our moving in together - and once you stop running from any hint of the question - maybe getting married."

"It's only been six months."

"And how long did you tell me you knew Greg before you married him?"

Her gaze fell again. "Six months," she confirmed.

The waitress appeared, asking if they wanted anything else, and Carter said no, then paid the bill. "I think we need to finish this at home," he told Callie, standing up and holding out his hand to her.

She took his hand and let him pull her to her feet before they left the restaurant.

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Carter closed the sliding door, fastening the locks, as Callie wandered over to the sofa and sat down. The drive back to the loft had been quiet, with only cursory conversation about traffic and the weather, as though they both knew any other conversation would take them down an uncertain path.

Joining Callie, Carter said, "I know that you have some reservations about marriage because of the trouble with Greg just before his death -"

"Carter -"

He lifted his hand. "Let me finish, please. I won't pretend to understand why Greg reacted the way he did to your promotion - but I'd like to think I would have been proud of what you had accomplished, and I would have been there to support you that day instead of halfway across town. That choice was what got him killed - not your success." He finally took her hand, lifting her face to look at her. "After Lana died, I resigned myself to never finding anyone else that I could love that much. I was determined to devote myself to my career and follow in Uncle Simon's footsteps. Then I met you. And I realized that all of my plans had suddenly been thrown into total disarray. What I'm trying to say is that I'm in love with you."

"May I talk now?" she asked.

"Please," he told her with a soft laugh.

"Like you, after Greg died and I resigned from the police department, I had decided that I never wanted to get that close to anyone again. That I would live my life working for my dad, spending time with Allie - and be content with that. I know now that I was just - marking time until the next phase of my life. I think that began the day I met you in Jonas Wittlebaum's office. I - I do think that I'm in love with you, too. But - I need just a \*little\* more time. I hope you understand."

"As long as you're not saying 'never in a million years', I'll survive," was his reply. "But that still leaves us with the question of where -"

She reached over and touched his cheek. "Here," she told him. "The lease is almost up on my condo - so it makes sense. Now that we've finished our conversation -" she moved closer and kissed him. "Let's get to the good stuff, shall we?"

"Anything you say, love," he told her, pressing her back onto the sofa.

### Chapter 3

"You're Simon Tate's nephew?" Tony Garcia said, and Carter clearly heard the uncertainty.

"Yes. Carter Jankowski. I've taken over the column."

"So why call my office number? Simon had my private number -"

"I have it as well, but I wasn't sure that you would answer a call from an unknown caller. This isn't strictly a newspaper matter - I need some information about a suicide that took place off of South Padre Island around ten years ago for an investigation I'm doing."

"That statement begs further explanation, but I'll let it pass for now. What suicide?"

"Mateo Almanzo."

"The artist? That was a can of worms. His best known work had just been sold for an outrageous sum of money when he left a note on the beach with his clothing and left footprints leading into the surf."

"His body was never found, right?"

"Not a sign," Tony confirmed. "Let me pull it up on the computer. Okay, here we go. Yes, the body was never found, which is unusual. The tide should have brought it back to the shore at some point further down the coast."

"What happened to his other paintings?" Carter asked.

"You know as well as I do what happens when a painter dies - or appears to die. The price of all of his remaining canvases skyrocketed. The Donovans were lucky to have bought *Belleza al Amanecer* when they did. It's worth at least twice what they paid for it."

"Who got the money from the sale of his work?"

"His wife got the money - minus gallery/agent commissions, of course."

Carter frowned. "Almanzo was married?"

"Margarite. They were separated at the time that he went missing, but still legally married."

"Margarite Almanzo," Carter said, writing the name down.

"You know, this story would be a good one for the column - artist having affair with another woman apparently commits suicide, leaving his wife a widow who inherits the windfall from his paintings."

"I might consider it," Carter told him. "After I finish what I'm doing now - you wouldn't happen to know how I could contact Mrs. Almanzo, would you?"

"Well, it says here that she was going to move back to Matamoros after the funeral. Let me see if I can find Almanzo's agent's name - you ready?"

"Shoot." Carter wrote the name and number down. "Thanks. And I promise to explain what's going on when I can."

"Heck, I was used to Simon's questions. Sometimes they made sense, sometimes they didn't. But the man was good at what he did. And I might as well say that I've been impressed with what you've done with the column since he died. Cold cases and uplifting stories are better for the way the newspaper business is heading."

"Thanks. I'll be in touch."

"Next time, use my private line - I'll make note of your number so I'll know who it is. Good luck with whatever it is that you're doing."

"Thanks."

Carter hung up and dialed the number for the artist's agency that handled Mateo's work to try and get some kind of contact information for Mrs. Almanzo.

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Callie yawned as she entered the front door of the Carrington. She hadn't gotten much sleep, but she was in too good of a mood to let it get her down. Giving the receptionist a huge smile, she said "Good morning, Miss - forgive me - Ms. Jamison." She corrected herself as the younger woman opened her mouth to object. Callie paused and braced her hands on the desk, lowering her voice. "Tell you what - why don't I just call you by your first name and we start over? Mine's Callie."

Ms. Jamison stared at her, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Inez," she said at last. "But everyone here calls me Ms. Jamison."

"Well, then perhaps we'll start something new," Callie suggested. "Why don't we have lunch together? I'm sure we'll find out that we have more in common than you think we do."

"I have plans," Inez told her. When Callie shrugged, the woman said, "Maybe, tomorrow? If - if you're still here then."

"Oh, I'll be around until the Texas artists showing opens, at least. Tomorrow it is, then. Is Mr. Linden in his office?"

"I believe that he's in the special projects gallery."

"Thank you," Callie replied, making silent note of Jerome Billings standing in the opening to the main gallery, covertly watching them talk. At the door into the smaller gallery, she stopped and glanced back to watch as Billings crossed over to Inez's desk to talk to her in a quiet voice. Continuing into the gallery, she found Derek Linden making notes in a small book as he went from one spot to the other along the wall. "Good morning, Mr. Linden," she said, surprised when he jumped. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm just nervous," he told her. "All of this - uncertainty about -" he glanced toward the still open

doorway and lowered his voice, "are you making \*any\* progress?"

"A little. What are you doing?"

"Trying to decide the best place for each painting," he explained. "I had thought to place them in alphabetical order, but when I look at them in the store room, I realize that it would place a still life next to a modern art - the two clash terribly. Did you speak to Mr. and Mrs. Donovan?" he wanted to know.

"Mr. Jankowski spoke to them," she confirmed. "Mrs. Donovan told him a most - interesting story about the painting."

"Indeed?"

"She told Carter that she's the woman on the beach."

"Oh my goodness. Perhaps she had it stolen -"

"No, she's perfectly fine with it being shown - and with everyone knowing about her connection to the artist." She paced across the gallery. "Did you ever meet Mateo Almanzo?"

"Once. At a showing of his work in Houston a few months before his death."

"Ten years ago, then."

"Yes. He got his start by selling paintings of people in parks around south Texas. I'm sure you've seen something similar - an artist, working on a real work, is asked by an onlooker if they can do a painting or a sketch of that person. Most of the time, the work isn't very good. But since his death some of those works have been sold for upwards of \$5000."

"You have no doubts that he really is dead?"

Linden turned to look at her. "Of course he is. He wouldn't have stayed out of the limelight if he were alive." He shook his head. "Mateo enjoyed being the focus of everyone's attention. Especially the attention of the ladies. His name was linked to a good many wealthy women who became his - patrons," he finished, his tone one of distaste for what he was implying.

"So the woman on the beach could have been any one of those - patrons," Callie mused.

"I thought you said that Mrs. Donovan -"

"I said that she \*believes\* that she is - but her husband said that Mateo told him that it wasn't Penny, that it was someone else. He refused to say who the woman was, and said that it was fine with \*him\* if everyone thought it was Penny Donovan."

"Goodness. Yes, I suppose it could be any number of women - but from what I remember hearing, Mrs. Donovan was one of his earliest patrons, around the time that he said he had painted *Belleza al Amanecer*."



"I doubt we'll ever know the truth, since he's dead."

"You're probably right. There's not enough detail in the painting to identify the woman."

"I suppose it's the detective in me - wanting to solve a mystery," she said. "Mr. Linden, do all of the helpers in the galleries have a degree in art?"

"I think a few of them do - art or art history. They're all looking to move up one day, I think."

"Take your job, you mean?" Callie questioned.

He sighed heavily. "That might happen sooner rather than later if you don't find that painting."

"I see. Well, I suppose that means Jerome Billings working as a laborer isn't unusual," she told him.

"He does much more than hang paintings and set artwork in the statuary wing. Do you think that - perhaps - he might have stolen the painting in the hope that it would be discovered and he could take my position?" Linden questioned, sounding slightly paranoid.

"Oh, I don't -"

"He's very bright. And he's the only one who's been here long enough to be able to handle the job."

"Mr. Linden," Callie said, trying again to slow down his slide into full-blown paranoia.

"He watches me, you know. I've seen him -"

Callie placed a hand on his arm to force him to focus on her face. "Mr. Linden. I don't know that Mr. Billings has anything to do with the theft. I have no proof -"

"Of course," he nodded, looking ashamed of his outburst. "Forgive me. This has me more than a little rattled."

"It's going to be okay, Mr. Linden," she assured him. "Why don't you go wash your face and take a few moments to regain control? And then I think I'd like to see the painting itself again, if that's okay."

"I'll be right back," he told her, and left the room, leaving Callie to wander around, studying the walls.

There were lights over the places where the paintings would hang, with a connector from each one that would be fastened to the painting as Mr. Linden had explained the previous day. She reached up to touch one of the connectors when a voice cautioned, "I wouldn't do that."

Callie turned to see Jerome Billings standing in the doorway. "Why not?"

"The bulb in that fixture burned out and hasn't been replaced," he explained, coming further into the room. "It could still be on, and if you touched that connector, it would give you a nasty shock - and probably set off the alarm for the room."

"I would have thought that the bulb would have been replaced immediately," she said.

"We knew that the gallery was going to be empty, so we decided to wait." He held out his hand.  
"Jerome Billings."

"Callie Harris," she told him, shaking his hand.

She watched as he reached up to turn the switch on the fixture. "There. Now it's safe to examine. I heard you were here to audit security for the showing."

"You heard correctly," she told him.

"Kelso Security has been handling our security. Is there a problem?"

Callie smiled. "No. Mr. Linden just wanted an extra layer of security for the exhibit. You'll have to ask him about his reasons."

"He seems a bit nervous lately, so I think I'll pass on that," Jerome told her as Mr. Linden returned.

Seeing who was with Callie, his face hardened slightly. "I thought you were working in the main gallery today, Jerome?"

"He happened by and stopped me from electrocuting myself," Callie told him as she crossed the gallery. "I'll explain later. Shall we go to the storage room?"

\*\*\*\*

Callie stood staring at the painting, taking in every detail on the canvas, glad that she had taken that semester of art appreciation in college to fill in her hours. The focus of the work was clearly the woman, laying back in the sand. Her right arm was raised over her head, while her left arm was across her breasts, effectively covering them from view. Her dark hair was spread out on the sand, and her left leg was bent at the knee in a pretense of modesty. Just above her, the sun was perched on the distant horizon, casting a bright glow back toward the woman, as though it might be reaching out to touch such beauty.

"I'm still not sure why you wanted to look at it again," Mr. Linden said. "There's absolutely nothing there to give a hint as to the woman's identity. As for the location - it's well known that the artist chose that exact spot to take his final walk into the sea - at sunset, by the way."

"Really?" Callie questioned. "So he came full circle, in way. Starting his career with a sunrise, and ending it with a sunset."

"I hadn't considered it that way," Mr. Linden replied, looking thoughtful. "But you're right. Rather - poetic, wasn't it?"

Something finally caught Callie's eye as she continued to look at the painting, and she moved closer. "Do you have a magnifying glass or -"

"I believe there's one in this cabinet," he told her, moving to retrieve the item. "What are you looking at?" he asked.

"There's a boat at sea. A sail boat, I believe." She stepped back, handing the glass to him.

"There is. Funny how I've never noticed before."

"Most people wouldn't - all they see is the woman on the beach and the sun." She took the glass again and examined the small object. "Looks like it's red and white with red sails."

"That's very unusual. I'm not much of a sailor, but I'm not sure that I've ever seen a sailboat with that color scheme." He shook his head. "Do you think it could have something to do with the case?" He paced away from the painting. "Do you realize that the showing begins on Monday? That's only four days and we still have no idea where the original painting is! The publicity for the opening has already gone out - without this painting we'll be crucified in the media! And \*I\* will be out of a job!"

Callie maintained her calm exterior in the face of his agitation as she turned to look at him. "Mr. Linden, you gave us six days. It's only been two. Trust us. We'll find your missing masterpiece."

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Callie waved at Allie as she entered the restaurant. "Sorry," she apologized. "I couldn't get away from the client," she told her friend. Mr. Linden had suffered another meltdown right after Allie sent the text asking to meet up for lunch, and Callie had found herself trying yet again to calm him down.

"And I'm sorry about yesterday," Allie replied. "I was all set to leave when I got that darned memo. I barely had time to send you that text."

"Any problems?"

"No. It turned out that he was promoting someone and wanted to make sure everyone knew about it ASAP. The thing is, most of us already knew about the promotion before the meeting," Allie declared. "The office grapevine is faster than a computer!"

"Who got promoted?"

Allie grinned. "You are looking at the newest assistant to the Accounting manager."

"You? Wow! I'm so glad for you!"

"Doesn't mean a huge increase in salary, but I do get my own office. I won't have to do the day to day accounting work - a lot of this job is double-checking on things for Mr. Devonshire, making sure he has the paperwork necessary for any scheduled meetings."

"Sounds a little like secretarial work - and you hate that."

"I'll manage. Mr. Devonshire is next in line for Mr. Johanson's chair - and if I do a good job -"

"Then you'll move up into \*his\* chair."

"Precisely." The waitress came and took their order, leaving the two old friends alone again. "So, how's

the PI business going?"

"Busy. Oh, I ran into an old friend of yours yesterday."

"Really? Who?"

"Larry Kelso."

Allie laughed, shaking her head. "Wow. Now *\*that's\** a name that brings back a few memories. What's he doing these days?"

"He opened a security firm. Kelso Security Solutions. But he hasn't changed. His current 'friend' is his receptionist."

"Let me guess: she's a blonde with big boobs and a small brain, right?"

"Well, I didn't talk to her long enough to find out about the brain, but the other two are right on target," Callie said, laughing.

"Larry is one of those guys who will never grow up. Even during the time we were seeing each other, he would flirt with *\*every\** other woman when we went out. And I was sitting right there!"

"You flirt -"

"Not if I'm with a guy that I'm dating," Allie insisted. "Unless I'm bored to tears, and then I just don't go out with that guy again and move on to someone else. But as a rule, I don't flirt with every man in the place."

"Are you still seeing your mystery man?" Callie asked.

Allie shrugged. "We took a break - but I called him yesterday, and we're going out tonight."

"To celebrate the promotion?"

Allie nodded. "And how is life in Happy Land?"

"He proposed last night-"

"And what did you say?"

"I - asked for a little more time."

"Oh, Callie," Allie said, shaking her head. "You're hopeless! You have a handsome guy who loves you - he does love you, doesn't he?"

"He told me he does."

"A handsome guy who loves you, and you ask him to wait."

"And what would you have done?"

"Oh, heavens, don't go by what I would do. I am by no means a good example for you to follow. But if I were \*you\*, dearie, I'd have grabbed that man and found the first preacher or justice of the peace or anyone who could marry us." She paused as the waitress returned with their food before she continued. "So what's the problem? Do you love him?"

"I think I do."

"Callie -"

"It's only been six months," she insisted.

"And you married Greg after six months," Allie reminded her.

"Carter reminded me of that, too."

"Callie, trust me, this man is perfect for you. Do \*not\* let him get away. Or are you too chicken to take another chance at being happy?"

"I \*am\* happy," Callie insisted.

"Cal-li-e-e Ca-ant," Allie sang softly.

"You're not going to push me into this," Callie said, picking up her fork. "But - I'll think about it." She started to eat, ignoring Allie's grin.

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Allie walked Callie back to the Jeep, since it was close to where she had parked her own car. "You have a note on the windshield," she told Callie, starting to reach for it before Callie stopped her.

"I'll get it." Allie backed off, looking surprised. "Sometimes people will leave a note on a car trying to get the driver to pause long enough to come over and carjack the vehicle. Or worse," she explained. "Would you walk around the car and make sure no one hit it and left a note?" While Allie did that, Callie opened the note and scanned it quickly before closing it again and looking around the area.

Allie returned, shaking her head. "I can't see so much as a ding. Did you read it?"

"It's about the case we're working on," Callie told her. "Just some information from someone who wanted to remain anonymous."

"Ah. Well, I have to get back to the office. Thanks for buying lunch."

"Next time, you're buying," Callie said. "You're the one making big bucks now," she laughed.

"Okay, you're on."

"Enjoy your date tonight. Tell your mystery man I said hello."

"I will. Bye!"

Callie unlocked the door of the Jeep and got inside. Starting the engine, she opened the note again and read it more slowly.

*"Drop the case. The showing must take place as scheduled. No one will be hurt."*

Glancing around the area where the car was parked, Callie decided she should discuss the note with Carter.

\*\*\*\*

She took the long way to the loft, wanting to make sure she wasn't followed home by whoever had left the note for her. She even drove around the block twice just to be sure before parking beside the Taurus under the covered parking beside the building.

Carter was at the desk and got up when she entered the loft. "This is a surprise," he told her, meeting her halfway to the door. Callie threw her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss before he could say anything else, and he pulled back to look at her. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but what brought this on?"

"You don't think I'm crazy for asking for more time, do you?"

"Well," he mused, "Maybe a little," he teased, smiling, then, seeing the look on her face, he said, "Of course not. It's an important decision, and I want you to be sure before you make it. Who said you're crazy?"

"Allie," she told him. "She said I should have said yes -"

"I think your friend and I need to have a talk," he murmured, refusing to let her go when she would have moved away. "Callie, I'm not going to pressure you. I told you that I can wait, and I can. As long as you're still part of my life, I'm happy." He gave her another kiss. "Now, do you want to hear what I found out this morning?" he asked.

"I do. But you might want to look at this first," she told him, pulling the note from her pocket.

"Drop the case," he read aloud. "The showing must take place as scheduled. No one will be hurt." He looked at her. "Where did you get this?"

"It was on the Jeep when I came out of the restaurant after lunch. Apparently someone followed me from the museum to the restaurant and left it while I was inside. I can't decide if whoever it was meant it as a threat or -"

"I don't think so," he said. "If it had been a threat, it would have read something like: The showing must take place as scheduled. Drop the case and no one will be hurt. Or maybe you won't be hurt. The way it's written - or typed - it's like no one will be hurt if the showing takes place."

"Doesn't look like it was typed on a typewriter -"

"No, it was printed by a dot matrix printer. Most businesses have them these days. Like the one we have," he told her, nodding toward the printer next to the desk.

"I was going to suggest that," she told him. "What did you find out?"

"Well, Mateo Almanzo was married."

Callie's eyes widened in surprise. "He was?"

"They were separated when he died - or supposedly died - and she reportedly moved back to Matamoros. I have a call in to Mateo's agent to see if he can get me more information about how to contact her. He hasn't spoken to her directly since right after Mateo's death. He's been depositing the money from the sale of paintings directly into a bank account in Brownsville for the past five years."

"Interesting," Callie mused. "Mateo supposedly commits suicide, and then his wife disappears into Mexico."

"Did you find out anything new?"

"Well, I'm having lunch tomorrow with Ms. Jamison. Inez," she clarified. "And I spoke to Jerome Billings." She told him about the conversation - and the fact that Mr. Linden was convinced that Billings could be looking to take over his job. "Poor Mr. Linden kept suffering attacks of paranoia and hyperventilating because of it."

"I do think we're going to have a hard time convincing Mr. Linden to allow the showing to happen."

"I think it would be best to wait until the weekend to tell him - just in case we manage to solve it before Monday. I did notice a detail on the painting that I'd missed before."

"What's that?"

"Well, it probably doesn't mean anything, but - there's a red and white sailboat with red sails to the far left side." She went to her purse and pulled out two pictures. "I asked Mr. Linden to take a photo using a Polaroid of that area of the painting, and then of the full painting."

"I doubt it means anything," he told her, and Callie reached out to take the photo back, but Carter kept looking at it, refusing to let it go.

"What's wrong?"

"I saw a photograph of a sailboat just like that one recently."

"You did? Where?"

"In Andrew Donovan's office," he told her.

## Chapter 4

"I don't have much time, Mr. Jankowski," Andrew Donovan said as Carter and Callie entered the office. "Hello, -" he said, smiling at Callie with curiosity.

"This is my partner, Callie Harris, Mr. Donovan," Carter told him.

Donovan shook her hand. "Miss Harris."

"It's Mrs. Harris," she told him. "I'm a widow." She looked at the photograph of the red and white sailboat on a wall. "What a lovely sailboat. I don't think I've ever seen one with red sails."

"I haven't either," Donovan sighed. "Not since I lost that one in a storm off of Padre six years ago. Never had the heart to try to replace her. Penny and I spent the first two weeks we were married on that boat, never hit port once. We took her back down to the coast every year until that day."

Callie glanced at Carter, who took a the photographs out of his pocket. "Mr. Donovan, were you aware that your boat was in the painting -"

"No, I - I never really looked at the painting - well, except for - you know - at Penny. Or what I thought was Penny. I don't remember seeing the boat. It's so small, it would be understandable if someone missed it. Don't you agree?" He shook his head. "Now, as I said, I'm very busy, and am due in a meeting for a multi-million dollar project right now. If you'll both excuse me -" he extended his hand toward the door, his earlier amiability gone.

Callie and Carter had no choice but to leave the office. As they left the secretary's office, Callie told Carter, "I think he knows more than he's saying."

"I'm sure of it," he told her, taking her arm as they left the building. "How would you like to meet \*Mrs.\* Donovan?" he asked, opening the passenger door of the Jeep.

"Penny? I've been looking forward to the experience," she answered with a huge smile.

"Then I'd better drive," he decided, helping her into the passenger seat.

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Callie wasn't surprised by all of the statuary and paintings that depicted people in various states of undress as the maid showed them through to the sun room. From beyond the closed door, the woman's voice was saying, "Oh, that does feel good, Johnny. Your hands are magic," she said with a sigh.

The maid tapped on the door before opening it and stepping aside. A massage table was set up in the middle of the room, and a muscled, tanned young man with white blonde hair was expertly massaging Penny's bare back - which, like the rest of her - was uncovered. "Your guests, ma'am," she said before closing the door behind them.

Penny turned her head to the side, smiling. "You're back sooner than I thought you would be, Carter," she said. "Not that I'm complaining, of course." Her smile moved to Callie. "And you must be the homebody that he spoke of."



"Callie Harris," Callie said.

"Did he tell you that I invited the both of you to my next party? She's lovely, Carter," Penny purred, sitting up and taking her time about wrapping a towel around herself. Reaching out, she touched the massuer's chest. "Why don't you get the sauna nice and hot, Johnny? I'll join you in there as soon as I've finished with my company - unless I can convince them to join us." Johnny smiled, giving Callie a smile as he left the room and went out to the patio. As he walked out of the door, the towel he was wearing low on his hips slipped, leaving all three with a view of his buttocks. "He's such a show off. You should see the front view, dear," she told Callie.

Aware that she was being teased, Callie smiled. "I'm sure. Maybe some other time."

Penny slipped off of the table and moved over to a bar in the corner. "Would either of you care for something to drink?" she asked as she poured herself a glass of something.

"Not at the moment, Penny," Carter said. "I have a question for you about the painting."

"My favorite topic," she sighed, dropping into a chair and indicating that they should be seated as well. "What's the question?"

He pulled out the photographs. "Is the sailboat in the painting -"

"Oh my," she said, handing the photos back. "You finally saw that tiny detail. Most people don't, of course. Yes, it was our boat - The Painted Lady. That was the name of the boat - it was named that when Andrew bought it."

Callie asked, "A bit of a coincidence that the boat just happened to be out there on the day Mateo painted that canvas, wasn't it?"

Penny laughed. "Coincidence? Not at all! Don't you see? That's how Andrew knew I was the one in the painting. He was out there in the water, watching! He knew I went out there early mornings for a swim and to take some sun before the crowds took over the beach. He was there to watch me -" she smiled. "There's no way that he didn't see Mateo painting me - or what happened after he finished working that morning. But then, dear Andrew has always preferred to be a spectator rather than a participant."

"Did you know that Mateo was married?"

"Oh, yes. He told me all about her. She was a poor, repressed little thing who refused to give him a divorce on - religious grounds, I believe. I've often wondered what happened to her after Mateo took his little walk into the ocean that day. He did it on the same beach where we met. It makes me feel even closer to him, somehow." She lifted her almost empty glass. "To Mateo." Finishing the drink, she stood up and went over to the bar again. "Was there anything else you wanted to know?" she asked. "Johnny's waiting for me in the sauna."

"No, I think that was it," Carter said. "We'll see you at the opening of the showing, I trust?"

She squared her shoulders and turned to face them with a smile that didn't *\*quite\** reach her eyes. "I wouldn't miss it. Even though it means I'll have to put up with seeing Andrew again. But I'll survive the

experience. It was a pleasure to meet you, Callie. Take care of this hunk."

"I'll do my best," Callie told her.

Back in the Jeep, Callie sighed. "Such a sad, lonely woman," she said.

"Lonely? Callie, you \*did\* see the guy she's going to share a sauna with, right?"

"And you know as well as I do that just because she's entertaining a gorgeous hunk doesn't mean she's not lonely. Allie's a good example of that."

"You really think that Allie would say that she's lonely?"

"No, I'm sure she would deny it. But there's a lot to be said for having someone, well, special, around to talk to and -"

"And?" he prompted, giving her a sideways grin.

"We'll discuss it when we get home," she told him.

"Promises, promises," he sighed.

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They barely got into the loft when Callie threw her arms around Carter's neck and gave him a long, sexy kiss. "How's that for a promise?" she asked, pulling his shirt from the top of his jeans.

Carter grabbed her hand to pull her toward the bedroom - only to have a telephone start to ring. Sighing, Carter grabbed his cellphone. "It's Mateo's agent," he told her, pressing the button to answer the call. "Hello?... Mr. Patel, yes, do you have the in - ... I see. How long do you think it will take?... I need that information as soon as possible, sir.... Very well. Thank you."

"He can't get Mrs. Almanzo's contact information," Callie guessed.

"The bank wants him to submit the request in writing and they will contact her to get permission."

"She won't give it to him if she finds out why we want it."

"I told him I was a reporter doing a story on Mateo because of the showing here at the Carrington, that I wouldn't use anything she told me without her permission."

She put her arms around him, tucking her hands into the back of his jeans. "\*Very\* smart idea," she told him. "Now, where were we?"

"Almost to the stairs," he told her.

This time, she took \*his\* hand and pulled him to the stairs and up to the bedroom.

\*\*\*\*

"Do you believe what Penny said about her husband being a spectator?" Callie asked Carter some time later. They had moved back down to the living area, with Carter typing on the computer while Callie perched on the sofa wearing an oversized tee shirt

"That's hard to say. Did Andrew give you that impression?"

"I don't know. He did lie to us about not having noticed that boat in the painting -"

"Or maybe Penny was the one who was lying," Carter suggested.

"How so?"

"Well, Andrew told me that Mateo said Penny wasn't the woman in the painting, remember? What if Penny was the one on the boat, watching the beach that morning and saw Mateo painting someone else?"

"What would she have to gain? For all she knew, it could have been anyone on that beach with Mateo - for her to claim she was the woman -"

"Bragging rights?" he suggested. "It would give her a certain cache to claim that she had posed in the nude on a beach for Mateo - Especially with the crowd she claims to be part of. Mateo did tell Andrew that he didn't care if people *\*thought\** it was Penny, remember?"

"Well, I still don't understand why the painting would have been switched. Or *\*when\** it happened."

"Well, as for why - I asked the other owners what painting in the showing they would want if they had a choice. Almost all of them had the same answer."

"*Belleza al Amanecer*," she guessed. "So one of them might have arranged for it to be changed to get their hands on it without having to pay for it?"

"You and I both know that Penny will never agree to sell the painting for any price. It's her claim to fame, as it were. The only way anyone else will get it is to steal it." Callie nodded, considering his words. "Did you get the list of those invited to the first night of the showing?" he asked.

"Yes," she went over and picked up the folder she had been putting things about the case into. "Here it is. All of the owners of the paintings in the show, as well as the museum's bigwigs and financial supporters."

Carter scanned the names. "I have a connection at the local paper here - the society pages. I'll call tomorrow morning and see what I can find out. You know, most thefts like this aren't done by the visible."

"Visible?"

"People who are well known - who have countless eyes on their every move for whatever reason," he explained.

"As opposed to the invisible," she nodded, understanding what he was saying. "Cleaning crews - " she glanced at the list. "Or caterers. I do have a few things to discuss with Mr. Linden tomorrow, don't I? I'm sure the museum uses a cleaning service for the galleries. And that they'll hire a caterer for the opening night. I also think that I might need to talk to Larry Kelso again. I'd like to a blow by blow about the transport of those artworks from their owners to the museum."

Carter pushed the chair back from the desk and pulled her into his lap. "That's tomorrow. Do you have any plans for tonight?"

"Hmm. Let me think about it - I'll probably spend the evening with my favorite fella," she told him.

"That sounds promising," he said. "Any preferences about where to go for dinner?"

"I don't really care. Surprise me."

\*\*\*\*

*"Riing! Riing!"*

Callie groaned as the noise pulled her out of a deep sleep. "Is that yours or mine?" she asked Carter.

"Yours," he muttered.

*"Riing! Riing!"*

Fumbling around on the nightstand, her fingers finally closed around the cellphone, and Callie pushed the button without looking at the screen. "Hello?"

"C-Callie, it's Allie."

The hesitation in her friend's voice woke Callie immediately, and she sat up. "Allie. What's wrong?" All kinds of possible scenarios ran through her mind.

"I-I'm fine, but - Marty -"

"Dad? Something's wrong with Dad?" Carter was sitting up now, and turned on the light beside the bed.

"There was an-an accident," Allie said. "He didn't want me to call, but -"

"Where is he?" Callie asked.

"Presbyterian," she answered.

"I'm on my way as soon as I get dressed," Callie told her, hanging up the phone.

Carter had already pulled on a pair of jeans and grabbed a t-shirt, making note of the time. It was almost two in the morning. "I'll bring the Jeep around to the front door," he told her, slipping his feet into a pair of tennis shoes. When Callie was just sitting on the edge of the bed, he went over to her and pulled her to her feet and into his arms. "He'll be okay. Get dressed."

She nodded, and he watched for a moment as she gathered her clothes before he got the keys from her purse.

Callie deliberately shut down her thoughts as she methodically got dressed, grabbed her purse and locked the loft door as she left. As promised, Carter was sitting in the Jeep, waiting as she came out of the building. "Which hospital?" he asked.

"She said Presbyterian. It's on -"

"I know where it is," he told her. "We went there a couple of months ago to see that friend of yours, remember?"

Callie nodded. "He has to be okay," she said. "I can't imagine what would happen if -"

Carter reached over and took her hand. "Did Allie say what happened?"

"She said something about an accident. That Dad didn't want her to call."

"That's a good thing, isn't it? It means he's awake and making decisions."

"Why wouldn't he want her to call me and let me know?" Callie asked. "And for that matter - why was Allie there to begin with?"

"You can ask both of those questions when we get there," he told her.

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He offered to let her off at the Emergency entrance, but Callie said no, fully aware that she wanted him with her in case things were worse than Allie had claimed they were. When they entered the ER waiting area, she saw Allie immediately. She had a sling around her left arm, and had obviously been crying. But Callie's main focus was on her father's condition. "How is he? What happened?"

"Why don't we sit down over there?" Carter suggested, moving both women toward a small alcove area with seats that was empty, and thought he saw Allie give him a smile of thanks at the brief reprieve from answering the questions.

"Allie -"

"His right leg is broken below the knee," she said. "And he's bruised from the airbag - I'll probably have a few of those myself tomorrow - my shoulder's bruised, and they wanted to do an xray, but I said I wanted to make sure Marty was okay first - and to talk to you."

"What happened? I can't believe that in this big city the two of you would have crashed into each other -"

Allie sighed. "We've been doing that for years," she said. "We were in his truck," she said. "Another car pulled out in front of us when we were leaving the restaurant."

"Dad's restaurant?" Callie asked. "Why were you -"

"No. Antonio's," Allie corrected. Antonio's was an upscale restaurant that catered to the late night crowd.

Callie shook her head. "You said you were going out to celebrate your promotion tonight - with your mystery man. Allie -"

Carter rose to his feet when Callie did, taking her arm. "Callie, now isn't the time -"

"Where's Dad?" Callie asked. "I need to talk to my father."

"He's -" Allie began, but Callie turned and left the alcove, heading toward the desks at the far end of the waiting area.

Carter told Allie, "You wait here. I'm going to try to calm her down before she sees Marty."

"He was afraid of this. It's why we didn't tell her - he was worried that she wouldn't understand."

He turned and followed Callie. A nurse was telling her where Marty was, and they both went through to the room where Marty was laying in a bed, a temporary cast on his leg. "Daddy," Callie said, quickly moving across the room to him. "Are you okay?"

"Broke my damned leg," he said. "Got a few bruises, but I'll be okay. Have you seen Allie? She needs to get her shoulder looked at -"

"I'm not worried about Allie right now," Callie told him.

"Allie's in the waiting room," Carter told him. "Once we know you're okay, I'll make sure she gets seen."

"Thank you," Marty told him, giving Callie a look. "I guess she told you that she and I -"

"I don't want to talk about that right now," she insisted. "Nothing matters but that you're going to be okay."

"Callie, honey," Marty said, his tone firm, "I didn't tell you because I knew you'd react this way -"

"We'll discuss it when you're out of here," she told him. "The accident - you hadn't been drinking -?"

"You know me better than that, honey. I don't drink if I'm going to drive. I had - have a bottle of champagne chilling at the house - We were supposed to be celebrating Allie's promotion, after all."

The nurse entered the room. "We have to take him to have a cast put on his leg," she told them. "You can wait in the waiting area and we'll let you know when we put him in a room."

"I'm not staying here overnight," Marty insisted. "Put a cast on the leg and let me go home."

"You can discuss it with the doctor," the nurse said, "\*\*after\* we put the cast on."

Allie met them as they came out. "How is he?" she asked.

When Callie didn't answer the question, Carter did. "They took him to get a cast on the leg and they want him to stay the night."

"He won't like that," she said.

"Nope. He wants you to get that shoulder taken care of," Carter told her.

"I will - after I talk to Callie."

But Callie walked away, clearly not inclined to talk to her oldest and best friend, leaving Carter to take her arm and guide her back to the still empty alcove, ignoring her angry glare. "I don't think that this is the place for us to talk about this," she said, pulling away from Carter.

"I don't care. Listen, Callie, I've had a crush on Marty since I was sixteen and he escorted us both to the Father-Daughter Dance. But I was also smart enough to know that he was too old for me at that time, so I moved on. Several times," she admitted, and when Callie didn't respond to her self-deprecating smile, she sighed and continued. "Don't blame your father. When I started pursuing him, he fought it - he insisted that I was like a second daughter to him, that you'd never understand, he found every reason in the book to \*not\* get involved with me. Do you remember when I offered to help him get the books in order?" Callie nodded, a sharp, jerky movement. "We were alone at the restaurant that Sunday afternoon and I told him that if he could give me one kiss, and not want to kiss me again, I'd drop it and never bring it up again. We did a little more than kiss that day," she admitted. "What I'm trying to say, if you want to blame anyone, blame me."

"He could have said no," Callie told her.

"You know, Callie," Carter said in a quiet tone, "you once told me that Marty dating women your age didn't bother you as long as he was happy. Do you think he's been happy over the last year or so?"

"Or is it that it's me that bothers you?" Allie asked.

"I'm confused," Callie told them. "Dad's in the hospital - you -" she looked at Allie. "You're hurt - and all of this is just - more than I can process right now. Carter, make sure she gets in to see someone about her shoulder, please?"

"I'm going," Allie said. "I already gave them my information - I was just waiting -"

"Come on, Allie," Carter said, taking her uninjured arm. "I have my orders."

"She can be a little bossy, can't she?" She looked at Callie. "Still friends?"

"Of course," Callie told her. As Allie and Carter moved away, she sat back, still trying to wrap her mind around everything that had happened. Between the convoluted case they were handling, and then finding out that her father and best friend had been - involved for at least a year, it was too much.

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The doctor ordered something to make Marty go to sleep because of the pain in his leg, and in the end, they had decided to keep Allie as well for much the same reason. Her shoulder had been deeply bruised, and it was extremely painful. So Callie and Carter returned to the Jeep and started home once she had promised her groggy father to contact Maria and to open the place up so they could handle the lunch run, since it wasn't likely that he would be there. She had also agreed to call Allie's boss and let him know where she was and what had happened.

"At least neither of them were seriously injured," Carter said as he drove. "I saw you talking to the police officer -"

She nodded. "The other driver was drunk when he pulled out in front of Dad," she told him. "He barely got a bruise. But that's not usual."

"No, it's not," he agreed, reaching over to take her hand. "How are you doing?"

"I wish I knew." She glanced at him in the dimly lit interior. "You knew, didn't you?"

"I suspected," he clarified. "I didn't tell you because I figured one of them would, eventually."

"I was a cop for five years," she said. "We're supposed to be trained observers. But it never dawned on me that Allie's mystery man and Dad's secret lady friend were each other."

"You were too close to it," Carter told her.

"Like the forest and the trees?" she asked. "You're probably right. But - we both grew up with him always there. When we were in college, her car broke down, and she called Dad."

"What did she call him?" Carter wondered. "When you were growing up, I mean."

"Mr. Cantwell until we were, oh, I guess he told her to call him Marty while we were in high school. He and her mom had traded driving us to school every day until her mother started working the mornings, and since Dad didn't have to be at work until we were at school, he took over. Even picked us up."

"You didn't notice the crush she said she had?"

"Oh, I noticed it, and I wrote it off - especially since she was Allie. Every guy in our class was fair game - you heard what she told you. And it was worse after we graduated and went to college. I guess that's why I feel a little sorry for Penny Donovan - if Allie had come from a privileged background, she might have ended up as a younger version of Penny. Or so I thought. Turns out, she's been pining for my father all this time."

"So is she right? That if it had been someone else your age, you would have been fine with she and Marty -"

"Maybe. I don't know," Callie sighed, feeling tears of tiredness and uncertainty behind her eyes. She raised her free hand to wipe them away before they could fall. "I'm tired," she said, glad that they were close to the loft.



They entered the loft and Callie drifted toward the bedroom. Carter was right behind her, waiting for her to climb back into the bed before he joined her and pulled her back against him. "I love you," he whispered.

"Love you," came the reply in a soft, shaky tone.

He smiled. It wasn't much, but he'd take it.

## Chapter 5

Carter made toast and a scrambled egg for breakfast, and took it, along with a fresh cup of coffee - up to the bedroom. "Wake up, love," he said, balancing the tray with one hand as he touched her cheek. "Callie," he said, and she stirred, blinking her eyes.

"What -?"

"Breakfast in bed," he told her, waiting for her to sit up so he could prop some pillows behind her back, and then placed the tray over her legs.

"I need to call -"

"I called the hospital. They're both fine. Marty's threatening a lawsuit if they don't let him out of that dad-blamed place," he quoted. "I also called Maria and Joe, telling them what happened last night - the accident. It's Marty's place to tell them who he was with." She nodded, silently agreeing.

"And Allie's boss?"

"Allie gave me his name and number. So that's taken care of as well."

"You're too good to be true, you know that?"

"Just being helpful. I figured you needed to get some rest after last night."

"Thank you. Do you know when they might release Dad?"

"I figure around lunch time."

She winced. "I'm supposed to have lunch with Ms. Jamison," she reminded him.

"It's not a problem. We can take our cars to the restaurant and you can let me in and get the safe opened - I'll stay until Maria or Joe or Luca get there. Then I'll come back here and try to find out what I can from my contact at the paper, and go get Marty and Allie when they're released."

"You have everything planned out, don't you?"

"Just wanting to be helpful. If you don't agree with it -"

"No, I think it's fine," she told him, setting the now empty tray on the bed beside her. "It makes sense, really. I'm still not sure that I'm ready to see either of them yet." When Carter shook his head and sighed, Callie shrugged. "I know I'm probably over-reacting, but -"

"I understand," he assured her, reaching out to touch her cheek. "Now, I figure that if you go take your shower right now, you'll be able to stop at the restaurant and still be at the museum on time to talk to Mr. Linden about the caterers."

Callie slipped out of bed. "Well then I'd better get going. I'd hate to mess up your well laid plans." Her smile told him she was teasing as she gathered her clothes and disappeared down the steps to the

bathroom.

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"I haven't used this key in forever," Callie told him as she inserted it into the lock on the back door of La Via Roma. "Dad's always here before anyone else." They entered the kitchen area as she continued to talk. "I used to tease him about putting a bed in his office so he could stay here 24/7. He told me that he couldn't very well bring dates here."

"Where's the safe?" Carter asked, aware that she was most likely thinking that the lack of a bed hadn't stopped Allie from seducing Marty in that office.

She gave him a half-smile. "The office," she said, seeming to square her shoulders as she turned in that direction. "I just hope he did the bookwork before leaving last night. Sometimes he waits and does it in the morning -" she opened a ledger book sitting on the desk. "Good. He did. So all I have to do is the money out and put it into the till in the bar."

"I still don't believe that you operate everything out of the one till," he said, watching as she knelt down to unlock the floor safe in the corner behind the desk.

"It makes sense, if you think about it," turning the knob. "Wow. First time in five years and I got it on the first try," she declared. "We have a code for restaurant and another for the bar to keep the receipts separate. The servers present the bills at the tables, then go into the bar to finish the transaction, returning the receipt to the customer. Less money to keep up with." Carter followed her out to watch as she placed the money into the cash register, then closed it. "Okay, that's it."

"Is there anything I can do to help around here before one of the others arrives?"

"I don't think so," she said, looking around the dining room. "They got the tables set last night - Luca will probably get here before any of the others, and he knows how to open the place up almost as well as Dad does."

"Would anyone object if I make a pot of coffee?" he asked, nodding toward the machine behind the bar, sitting beside the soft drink machine.

"They'd probably be grateful," she told him, turning to put her arms around him. "Come to mention it, so am I."

"You can thank me properly later," he said. "If you've a mind to."

"That sounds like your oh so subtle way of telling me I need to get to the museum," she said.

"I suppose we could always go into the office -" he suggested, just keeping himself from wincing as she pulled away.

"No, that's okay."

As she would have turned from him, Carter pulled her back into his arms and gave her a long kiss. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

She nodded. "I really should be going. I'll see you later - at home."

"I'm looking forward to it. Be careful," he told her as he walked her to the Jeep.

"You're sure it wouldn't be better for you to take the Jeep to get Dad?"

"He's wearing a cast, remember? The Jeep's a bit high off the ground for him to get into easily. I think he can manage with my car."

"You really need to get another car," she told him.

"I will, when I find what I want." He gave her a kiss and closed the door, waving as she left the small parking area before going to take his laptop out of the Taurus and carry it into the restaurant. Might as well get some writing done while he waited.

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"Caterers? Why are you asking about the caterers?" Derek Linden asked. "We haven't had a catered affair in at least six months. I take that back. Three months. When we purchased the Monet, we had a small gathering to celebrate the acquisition."

"You mean you didn't consult with anyone from the caterers about the Texas Artists showing? We \*are\* supposed to be auditing all of security measures, and that should include any contractors."

"Of course I consulted -" He drew a deep breath. "We use the same company for all of our catering needs," he told her. "I'll go get the card from my office."

Callie wandered around the still empty gallery while he was gone, making note of the small pieces of paper affixed to each light fixture, with the name of a painting on it. Apparently Mr. Linden had finally decided where to put each of the canvases for the showing.

"Here you go," Mr. Linden said, returning and holding out 2 business cards.

"Cathy's Caterers," Callie read. The second surprised her. "Dallas Cleaning Crew?"

"You don't think that the floors are shiny and there's no dust on fixtures by chance, do you? They handle the cleaning after closing."

"Thank you. I do remember your mentioning the cleaners during our first meeting. I have a few questions about how the paintings were delivered to the museum from their various owners?"

"Kelso's, of course. They have a specially armored van for use in transporting valuable items. They always arrive with new items around the time we open, - I'm sure Mr. Kelso can give you the details."

"I'll speak to him about it," she said.

Linden glanced toward the still open door into the gallery, moving to look into the hallway before coming back to where Callie was standing. "Mrs. Harris, are you at all close to finding that painting?"

"We're close, Mr. Linden," she assured him, knowing that she was lying through her teeth. "Tell me, were you aware that Mateo Almanzo was married?"

"Married?" he repeated, his eyes wide with shock. "No. Are you sure?"

"They were separated, but still legally married when he disappeared into the ocean," she informed him.

"Mateo. Married," he said, shaking his head. "Considering all of his patrons - I would have thought he had no attachments of that nature."

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Lunch with Inez Jamison was an eye opener. The young woman was totally different out from behind that French Provencal desk. She preferred modern music, and told Callie that when she wasn't at work, she always wore jeans and tee shirts and sandals.

They had lunch at an Asian-fusion restaurant that Callie had never heard of before that day, and Inez seemed well-known by the staff. "I worked here when I was high school," she confessed.

"Tell me about the people you work with," Callie suggested.

"Oh, I -" Inez hesitated. "I'm not sure that I should -"

"It's my job to find out as much as I can about the museum's security measures, remember? Part of that is gathering information about employees. Such as - oh, Jerome Billings."

"He's a dreamboat. He keeps saying he's too old for me, but I don't care, you know?" Callie nodded in agreement, putting thoughts of Allie and her father aside. "But I keep telling him that I can help him to get ahead at the museum. I see and hear lots of things because most people overlook me."

"Help him get ahead - how?"

"He would love to take over as Director of Special Projects."

"Mr. Linden's job?"

"Yes. And I think he would be perfect for it. When Mr. Linden decides to retire, of course. He's been there - well, forever and been passed over more than once for a move into the main director's job."

"Why do you think that might be?"

"He's so nervous and jumpy. Hiring your agency for one thing - everything's going along as it always does when he suddenly decided that he needed to have a security audit? It makes no sense."

"I'm sure it does to Mr. Linden," Callie pointed out.

"Jerome's convinced something's going on. I don't suppose you can - tell me about, can you?"

"Mr. Linden's a client," Callie told her. "And that means I'm required to keep his confidences."

"I thought you'd say that," Inez nodded. "I gave it a shot, anyway."

"I'll forgive you," Callie told her.

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Larry Kelso gave Callie a tour of the armored truck that the agency used for secure transportation. "I even accompanied each painting from starting point to the museum," he informed her, showing her the bench seat along one side of the back of the vehicle. "Sat right there every time for twelve paintings. And after the showing, we'll do it in reverse."

"Do you remember anything unusual happening on any of those trips?" she wanted to know.

"They all went like clock-work - except that Mr. Linden got a phone call right after we arrived with the final painting - that sea-scape with the naked lady."

"*Belleza al Amanecer*," she said, and he nodded.

"That's the one, I guess. Reminds me of something you'd seen on the wall of an old west saloon, you know? Didn't leave much to the imagination."

Callie ignored the lewd grin on his face as she asked, "What was the phone call about? Do you know?"

"It was his wife, something about her car having been stolen. She was pretty upset from what I could gather from his side of the call. He kept telling her to calm down, and that he would be home as soon as he possibly could to take care of things."

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Callie's next stop was to the police department, where she tracked down someone in records to find out if there had been a report about a car being stolen from and Mr. or Mrs. Derek Linden. After getting an answer to her inquiry, she returned to the museum.

After suggesting that they go into the storeroom, Callie studied the paintings again before looking at Mr. Linden. "Why didn't you report the theft of your wife's car to the local police?"

His eyes widened and he nearly dropped the clip board in his hands. "Oh. Oh. Well, we were told not to report it," he said.

"I think that statement needs a bit more of an explanation, Mr. Linden. Who told you not to report it?"

"The - the people who stole it, of course." He sank down into the only chair in the room. "My wife was leaving her hairdresser when she saw a young man at her car. Well, he was Hispanic, and she didn't want to go over to the car alone. But another young man came up to her and told her that they were going to take the car - asking for her key. She was terrified, afraid they might have a gun, so she gave them the key. The man told her to wait until they were gone and then get a cab to take her home, where she was to call me, and then wait. That under no circumstances were we to call the police, because we

would never see the car again."

"Is there something - special about the car?"

"It's a Porsche 9-11," he said. "My wife's dream car."

"So she took a cab home and called you here," Callie prompted him to continue.

"As soon as Mr. Kelso and his van left, I let the cleaning crew in and left for home."

"Who lets the crew out?" Callie asked.

"Oh, well. I usually do, but I called Jerome Billings that night, and asked him to take care of it since I was tied up."

"Waiting for the car thieves to call you."

"Exactly."

"And when did he call?"

"Early the next morning. He told me to \*sit tight\* and wait for him to call again. That I wasn't to go to work until I had the car back in my possession."

"How much did they want to return the car?"

"That was the strange thing," he told her, and Callie shook her head. The entire story was more than a little \*strange\*. "He didn't ask for any money. I called in to say that I had a private family problem and I would be back in a few days as far as I knew. They called again and told both of us to fly down to Brownsville and the car would be waiting at the airport for us to drive back."

"That would have only taken you a day at the most -"

"Not with the route they insisted we take. The map was in the car - and we were told the car had a tracker on it. That if we deviated from that route, they would find us and we wouldn't make it back home. It took us three days to get home. Austin, San Antonio, El Paso - After that, I had to settle my poor wife's nerves. She was so upset by what had happened -"

"Why didn't you tell me this before now?" Callie wanted to know.

"I was - embarrassed to admit that I'd been so foolish. And I thought all's well that ends well. The car is back, and our only expense was the flight out and the drive back to Dallas."

"And a missing painting at the end of the drive," Callie pointed out.

Derek Linden sighed and nodded. "Yes, you're right."

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"I spoke to the supervisor for the cleaning crew that came in that night, and she swears that no one else was the museum while the crew was there," Callie told Carter once she had filled him in on what she had discovered."

"I wouldn't have expected there to be. \*If\* the painting was switched at the museum, it didn't happen until just before Mr. Linden returned to work."

"If?" she asked. "When was it switched out if not at the museum?"

"Let me get some more information before I answer that," he said. "Aren't you going to ask about your dad and Allie?"

"I figured you'd tell me when you were ready. I guess you got them out of the hospital?"

"I did. We stopped on the way to your dad's house to get some things from Allie's apartment. She's going to stay with him and take care of him -"

"With a bad shoulder?" Callie questioned.

"It was his idea. Anyway, Marty wants to you call him when you get a chance. And he'd like for you to go over and clear the register and lock up the restaurant until he gets a walking cast on his leg."

"How long will that be?"

"About a week. Give him a call," he said, pulling her into his arms.

"I will," she told him, "Later."

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"The only real information I got from my source," Carter told her, "was the fact that Penny Donovan's parties are the stuff of legend. Most of their neighbors were really hoping that Andrew would get the house in the divorce, if my source can be trusted."

"Can she?"

"It's a he, and yeah, I think he can be. He also told me that the main hold up on the final degree hinges on one \*particular\* item."

"Let me guess: that painting."

Carter nodded. "Precisely, my love. Penny insists that since she's the woman on the beach, Mateo would want her to have it, and it was bought with community property."

"And Andrew claims that if she wants it that much, she should sell the painting and split the proceeds or buy him out."

"With the current value of the painting, for her to buy his interest would have almost cost her the price of the house."



"It's all so crazy," Callie sighed. An idea suddenly occurred to her. "How about this for an idea?" she said, and Carter turned to look at her, "What if Andrew found a way to change the original for the copy \*after\* it had been authenticated and before it was sent to the museum?"

"And then he could sell it and keep the entire amount for himself," Carter continued her thought. "It's a possibility," he nodded. "And along the lines of what I've been thinking -" he was cut off as Callie's cellphone began to ring. "That is probably your father."

She grabbed it and grimaced as Carter narrowed his eyes in her direction, and then pressed the button. "Hi, Dad! How are you feeling?"

"Frustrated," Marty growled. "This darn leg is driving me crazy." Callie managed a smile. Marty had always been an active man, and the idea of him not being able to do anything but sit in a chair or lay in bed had to be driving him slowly insane. "I'm seriously thinking about finding a wheelchair so I can at least go to the restaurant."

"Did the doctors tell you that you could do that?" she asked.

"They didn't say that I couldn't. Callie, honey, you know me. I've been at the restaurant every day it's been open for the last twenty years. Even when your mom was so ill, she insisted I go in and work."

"Because you made \*her\* crazy by hovering," she reminded him. "She knew how much that place means to you."

"And how much she meant to me - how much you both meant to me. I loved your mom."

"I know you did, Dad. And she knew it, too."

"Callie, honey, we do need to talk, and I'd rather do it in person, not over the phone -"

"I'll go by and make sure the money's done and the place is locked, Dad -"

"Thank you. But that's not what I'm talking about, and you know it." She recognized the tone of voice. He'd used it after she had refused to see or talk to anyone after Greg's death. He'd used that tone while standing on the other side of the front door of the apartment that she and Greg had shared. "You can't run away from this. We're going to talk this through and get it sorted out."

"We're working on a case, Dad," she began.

"Carter was able to take a few hours off - this won't take that long. In fact, we could do it this evening - I'll call the restaurant and order some food for all of us - you two can pick it up and bring it over here -"

"Dad, I -"

"Callie, as soon as I hang up this phone, I'm going to make that call. The food will be ready at six. We'll expect the two of you here at six-thirty. Love you."

"Dad -" Callie said, but he had already hung up, and she sighed heavily. "It looks like we're having

dinner at Dad's," she told Carter. "We have to pick up the food at six."

"No problem," he told her, watching her. During the call, he had started typing into the computer, but now, he closed the program and came over to the sofa. "Hey. Cheer up."

"I'll try," she said, resting her forehead on his shoulder. "You were about to tell me your theory about why the painting was switched," she reminded him.

"I need to talk to Mrs. Almanzo before I say anything more," he told her. "But whatever the reason, I think that Mr. Linden's car was stolen and he was kept out of town in order to make everyone \*think\* that it had happened at the museum."

"Well, someone has gone to a lot of trouble to cover it up. If the museum hadn't checked the authenticity for their insurance, no one would have known about the switch." She frowned. "When do you expect to hear about Mrs. Almanzo?"

"Tomorrow, hopefully."

"I think it might be time to talk Mr. Linden into going ahead with the showing," Callie said.

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"You're both insane!" their client declared, clearly not troubled that others might hear him. Callie, however, went over to the door of the small gallery and closed it after looking to make sure no one was in the hallway.

Carter raised a hand. "Mr. Linden, please. Hear us out."

"I cannot put that painting on display -"

"Why not?" Callie asked. "None of the guests on the list that you gave me are appraisers. They're owners of the other paintings, and museum supporters and staff -"

"I'd be a nervous wreck!" he declared. "Terrified that at any moment someone would discover the truth -"

"We'll both be here, Mr. Linden," Carter told him. "As your guests." They had shown him the note that had been left on Callie's car. "This could be our only hope to find out who made the switch - and when."

"When? It was during that week," he reminded them. "The week when I was getting my wife's car from Brownsville after it was stolen." Linden looked from one to the other. "Unless - do you think that it happened before it got here? If that's the case, why don't you go talk to the Donovans -"

"It will be easier for us to do it this way, Mr. Linden," Callie said, taking his arm. "And you'll be \*so\* much help to our solving the case if you agree to have the showing as planned."

Carter put his arm across the other man's shoulders. "You might even be called a hero after it's all said and done."

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"I can't believe that you convinced him to let the showing take place so easily," Callie said as they drove away from the museum.

"Everyone wants to be a hero," Carter told her. "I'm sure that Mr. Linden sees it as a way to keep young Billings away from his job for another few years, at least. Or maybe as a stepping stone onto the board."

"You didn't see that I was crossing my fingers behind my back, hoping that 'all said and done' finds the painting and how it was stolen."

"I guess I need to drive to the back door to collect the dinner order," he said, nearing La Via Roma.

"It'll be easier than carrying it out through the front door," she confirmed. "Dad was talking about getting a catering truck awhile back, but was afraid the food at the restaurant itself might suffer."

He turned into the back delivery/parking area, backing the Jeep up to the door out of the kitchen. "I'll go in and get it," he offered.

"I'll help. I need to see how things are going. Dad'll want to know. And I'll reassure them that I'll be here to lock the doors at closing."

"I have a feeling that Marty's probably already called ten times today to find out 'how things are going'."

Luca confirmed Carter's statement with a wry grin as he supervised several orders. "Every fifteen minutes, he calls," he told them. "I've started having Maria run a register check just before he's about to call so I can tell him what it says and he won't have to wait."

Callie glanced through the doors out to the dining room. "Looks like you've been busy."

"We have been," he confirmed. "Watch that sauce, Toni," he admonished another cook. "I'd never realized how much your father did - keeping an eye on everyone and everything is exhausting. Make sure you tell him that we'll be glad when he's able to come back."

"So will he," Callie said. "Just think of all the experience you're getting in the meantime, Luca! You'll be ready to go out and open your own place!"

"No, thank you," he said, shaking his head. "More likely I'll need a vacation to recover. Seriously, give him my best -"

"And mine," Toni said, her words echoed by others in the kitchen.

Callie grabbed the last of the meal Marty had ordered. "I'll see you later," she told Luca.

## Chapter 6

"We can eat out of the styrofoam, Callie," Marty called out when she went to get real plates out of the cabinet. "No reason to mess up dishes that will need to be washed."

Callie left the kitchen and returned to the bedroom. "I can stay and put them into the dishwasher," she told him. "You're the one who's always told me that food never tastes the same on styrofoam as it does on China. And I for one refuse to use plastic forks for veal or pasta."

He sighed, waving her off. "Very well. Use my own words against me. But I'll hold you to the offer to do the dishes!" he called, grinning at Carter, who shook his head and went to help her.

"Does Marty have any trays or -"

"There are some TV trays in the living room," she told him. "And a bed tray - " she paused, nodding toward the kitchen table. "There. I have to wonder how on earth Allie's been getting that tray into the bedroom with one hand."

"Didn't you tell me she worked at the restaurant in high school just like you did?"

"She waited tables - and she learned how to carry a tray loaded with meals with one hand."

"Some things you don't forget how to do," Allie said as she entered the kitchen. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't think so," Callie said abruptly.

Carter went over to the silverware drawer and took out the utensils. "Think you can carry these?" he asked, holding them out toward her.

"I think I can manage," she said, giving him a grateful smile.

"I'll be right in with the TV trays for the three of us to use," he told her, watching her through the doorway. "Callie -"

"Don't," she said, continuing to put the food on plates. "Don't you think you should take those trays in? I'll have this ready soon - and then I'll just need the drinks -"

"Did we get that gallon of sweet tea?" he asked, looking around.

"I put it into the fridge," she told him.

"I'll come and get the drinks after I take the trays in and get them set up."

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Mealtime was slightly strained, with Marty telling Callie what he needed her to do at the restaurant. "I won't ask you to place the orders with the vendors, honey, but I'll need Luca to do an inventory of things we need and get it to me no later than Monday morning."

"I'll remind him," she promised. "He can probably bring it over here on Sunday."

"And if you'll take the spare key on the rack in the kitchen to him -"

"I don't mind going over - I have to get the money anyway -"

"Luca can bring it over on his way home. He comes this way, remember? He lives in Pleasant Grove."

"That's where Carter's mom and stepdad lived," Callie said.

Carter nodded. "Pop had a construction company out there," he said. "I really need to stop out there sometime and see how they're doing."

"Carter owns the place, but he's got someone else running it," Callie told them

"I remember you mentioning it," Allie said, finally speaking up. "Didn't you tell Callie that you were an architect when you first met her?"

"I let her think I was an architect because I told her I studied it in college. It *was* my minor," he clarified. He looked around the room. "I'm not sure I've mentioned this, Marty, but I really like this place. Do you have any idea who designed it?"

"Nope. Eileen and I bought it when we got married. Just a standard tract home. I've been thinking about selling it," he confessed. "Maybe get someplace closer to the restaurant - an apartment or a condo -"

Callie looked surprised at his words. "I told you that you needed to sell it when I left for college," she reminded him.

"I wasn't ready then," he told her.

She glanced in Allie's direction. "But now you are." The comment was hard to read. "Is this your doing?" she asked her old friend.

"I haven't given an opinion - even though I have been asked about it. It's Marty's decision, not mine." She shrugged, then winced and lifted her right hand to her left shoulder. "Ouch. I have to remember not to do that."

Marty smiled. "It could be worse," he told her. "You could have broken it."

"Don't even suggest it," Allie replied. "Been there, done that."

"You've broken your arm?" Carter asked.

Callie answered the question. "She broke it when she fell off of a jungle gym at school. We were ten. She was hanging upside down by her knees -"

"Wearing a dress and showing my panties to all the boys," Allie added. "When the teacher saw me, she yelled for me to come down. I did. On my arm. But it was my right arm that day, not my left." She held

up her straight right arm. "Mother was \*so\* angry with me." She grinned. "Especially when she found out the details. And Mrs. Dettweiler was only too happy to share those with her."

"The only thing that bothered you about it was that your mother found out. If you could have kept it from her, you would have been quite pleased with yourself," Callie pointed out. "I have to wonder what she would have had to say about -"

"She would have been furious," Allie agreed. "But you know what, I wish she was still here to \*be\* furious." Standing up, she grabbed her empty plate. "Excuse me. I'm going to take this to the kitchen."

"Allie -" Marty said, reaching out toward her, but she left the room without another word.

Carter quickly grabbed his plate and Callie's, putting them onto the bed tray, then picked it all up. "I'll go get these into the dishwasher," he said, aware of the strong undercurrents in the room and wanting to get out of the way.

Once alone with her father, Callie got up and wandered over to the photograph of her and her father, taken at her high school graduation. "Callie, honey," Marty said, "Come here." He patted the edge of the bed.

"I can hear you from over here," she told him.

Marty shook his head. "Stubborn. No idea where you got that from," he said with a self-deprecating grin that Callie returned. Folding his arms across his chest, he said, "Very well. I told you last night not to blame Allie. It was as much my fault as it was hers."

"She told me what happened, Dad," Callie said. "That she practically forced herself on -"

"And at any time, I could have said no. But I didn't. I give you my word, honey, until that moment, nothing had ever happened between us. To me, she was simply your best friend, the person who kept you from hiding away at home. I was always grateful for that - she helped you in ways I didn't know how to. But that day in my office, I didn't see a girl who practically grew up in my house. I saw a desirable woman who was asking me to kiss her. I know that probably doesn't make much sense to you, but, it's the truth." When Callie didn't respond to his words, he sighed. "You know, I think what's really bothering you is the fact that we didn't tell you that we were seeing each other."

"It does bother me a little that the two people that I trusted most in the entire world other than Carter kept their relationship a secret from me," she had to admit. "I feel so stupid - I should have guessed that you were her mystery man."

"I wasn't sure how you would react, honey," he said, holding out his hand again. This time, Callie crossed the room and took it, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Allie wanted to tell you, but I wasn't sure. We even stopped seeing each other for a little while because of it. Then she called and apologized, said that she could wait until \*I\* was ready to tell you. I think she missed me."

"That was the impression I got the other day when we had lunch," Callie told him. She stared at their hands for a moment. "Dad - is, I mean, are you serious about - I mean -"

Marty's laughter made her smile and look at him. "That's something we're still trying to work out. But

now that you know, it might be easier to do that. But first, she and I need to get well. I'm taking advantage of that to keep her here instead of letting her go back to her condo." He moved his hand to her wrist. "Callie, you owe Allie an apology about her mother. You, of all people know how it feels to lose your mother - and even though Allie and Louise never got along, she \*was\* still Allie's Mom."

"I know," she sighed. "And I'll apologize. I shouldn't have mentioned her."

"Well, you had to, once you told that story about how she broke her arm. But you left out the part that I was the one they called before they were able to find Louise."

The soft tap on the door was quickly followed by Carter's head appearing in the doorway. "Just wondering if I needed to find a hat to toss in," he said.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Marty said, "Will it, honey?"

"No. Dishes all done?"

"Yep. And coffee is made - and I have dessert plated up and ready to serve," he told them. "Just making sure you two were ready for it."

Callie stood up. "Do you need some help?"

"Probably. Allie's getting frustrated with me. I refused to let her try to carry four cups of hot coffee on a tray with only one hand."

"Then you shouldn't have left me alone in the kitchen," Allie said, entering the room with the aforementioned tray, which Callie took from her and placed on one of the TV trays. "I did leave the dessert for you to bring in, though."

"Well, allow me to get it," Carter replied, leaving the room.

Callie gave her father his coffee, then took one to Allie, pausing afterward. "Allie, I'm, - sorry for what I said about your mom - I was out of line."

Allie's eyes flickered from Callie to Marty, then back again. "No reason to apologize. I'm fine. Really."

"And -" Callie began as Carter returned with another tray. "Well, I want to tell you that as long as you're happy, and Dad is happy, I'm okay with you two - seeing each other," she finished.

"Seeing each other," Allie repeated with a huge smile. "Is that what we've been doing, Marty?"

"Among other things," was his comment as Carter handed him the plate of tiramisu. They all laughed as Callie's cheeks reddened.

"I wish I could give you a hug," Callie told her friend. "But I don't want to hurt your shoulder."

"Just hug my right side," Allie said, standing up to accept the hug. "Now, Carter, I'm ready for some of that scrumptious tiramisu."

"Coming right up," he assured her, placing it and a fork on her TV tray with a flourish. Then he picked up the third plate, but instead of giving it to Callie, he sat down.

"Carter?" Callie questioned, standing over him, her hand on his hips.

"Hmm?"

"What about my dessert?"

"Oh, it's there on the tray," he told her. "And your coffee is -" he began, pointing toward the other TV tray.

"Really?"

Carter laughed softly, handing her the plate in his hand, then taking the fourth one. "There you go, my love."

Callie quickly glanced at her father and then Allie, then studiously ignored their smiles of approval as she sat down to enjoy her dessert.

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Callie woke the next morning to the sound of Carter's voice on the telephone. "You're sure of that, Mr. Patel?" he asked. She grabbed the teeshirt from the bottom of the bed and slipped it over her head before leaving the bedroom. Carter gave her a smile as he continued to talk to the artist's agent. "Do they have any idea where she might be?... I see.... Mr. Patel, do you by chance have a photo of Mrs. Almanzo?... Yes. Let me give you my fax number."

Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she brought the pot over to refill Carter's cup as he finished the call. "What did he have to say?" she asked once he hung up.

"The bank wasn't able to reach her because she's away from her home in Matamoros. They did give Mr. Patel her telephone number, and he called to talk to one of her servants, who told him that she had gone on a trip to the north. He's going to send me a photo he has of her and Mateo via fax -" the landline began to ring, and the facsimile machine picked it up. "That should be it now."

Callie walked over to machine and waited for it to finish printing the black and white photograph of a beautiful young Mexican couple smiling into the camera. "I can see why Penny spent so much time with Mateo," she told Carter as she brought it to him. "He was very handsome. And she's beautiful."

"Mr. Patel told me that they took it for a newspaper article, but Mateo insisted that they reshoot it with only him - that Margarite was too shy to do an interview."

"Hard to believe she was shy as beautiful as she is. I mean, I guess she's probably still a beauty. It's only been fifteen years." Callie frowned. "Why did you want to see a photo? Mateo's probably dead - and Margarite has no reason to come to Dallas."

"Really? You don't think she might want to see her late husband's best-known work?"



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"I simply can't believe that I let you talk me into this - this insanity," Mr. Linden told Callie and Carter as they watched Jerome Billings and his fellow workers place each of the paintings on the walls of the gallery.

"Relax, Mr. Linden, Carter said. "Everything will be fine."

As she watched Jerome turn the lamp on over each painting, she moved over to him. "I see you replaced the bulb," she noted, nodding toward the lamp over Almanzo's work.

"The same afternoon that I warned you about it," he nodded, giving her a smile.

"Is the security system armed now?" she wanted to know.

"No," Mr. Linden answered before Jerome could say anything. "I have to arm the system. Once it's done, if any painting is removed from the circuit, the alarm will sound." He indicated the wire attached to the frame. "There's a metal strip around the back of each frame that conducts the signal."

"And how is this different from the paintings in the main gallery?"

"Each of those -" Jerome began, then stopped. "Forgive me, Mr. Linden. It's just that I've spent a lot of time with that system."

"By all means, young man," Linden said. "Do continue."

"As I was saying, each of those spaces are set up to an individual circuit. If someone were to remove a painting in there, the alarm would go off with each painting with a code of what painting was gone. In here, the system isn't as detailed, since it's a much smaller space."

"Thank you, Jerome," Linden said, basically dismissing the younger man. "Once all of the paintings are in place, you and the crew can go."

"Yes, \*sir\*, Mr. Linden," was Jerome's reply as he turned back to help with hanging the last canvas and frame, an arid West Texas landscape.

"Impertinent young man," Linden sighed as Jerome and the others left the gallery. "How he thinks he can possibly do my job I have no idea."

Callie exchanged a swift smile with Carter at the comment before Carter asked, "And how do you arm the system?"

Linden smiled and took a key from his vest pocket, carrying it over the light switch beside the door. One side held the usual switches for the overhead lighting. The other was covered and he opened it to reveal a slot which fit the key. Putting the key into the hole, he turned it, removed the key, and closed it once again. "Now it's armed." He flipped the switches, turning the overhead fixtures, leaving only the lamps over the paintings to illuminate the room. "There will be flowers delivered on Monday," he told them. "And we'll place them around the room, but the focus will be these glorious paintings - and one fake. Oh, I don't know that I can do this, Mrs. Harris."

"Buck up, Mr. Linden," Carter said. "Just think about the accolades you'll get for helping us resolve this," he continued, putting his arm around Linden's shoulders. "I can see it now - Derek Linden, newest member of the Board of Directors."

"Oh. Do you really? Oh my, oh my," he sighed dreamily. "I'll do my best," he assured them.

"I knew we could count on you, Mr. Linden," Callie told him. "Now, if you need us before Monday, you have the number. We'll be here early -"

"The showing begins promptly at six p.m.," he said. "And it's black tie."

"You'll be surprised how well she cleans up," Carter said, winking at Mr. Linden, who managed to chuckle, clearly unsure that either of them knew what the term meant. "We'll see you on Monday, if not before."

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After spending most of Sunday helping Marty and Allie, Carter and Callie went back to the loft. "Do we need to call and rent a tux for you to wear tomorrow evening?" Callie asked.

"And what makes you think that I don't already have one?" he asked.

"I haven't seen it in your closet," she told him.

"It's with the books in storage. I've attended a few award ceremonies over the years. And some of them were black-tie. I had it dry-cleaned and stored it in an airtight bag, so it should be good to go. I'll get it tomorrow morning."

"What if it needs cleaned again?"

"That won't be a problem. There are several places around here that offer same day service." He studied her for a moment. "You almost sound as though you're not sure that I can wear a tux."

"I never - I never considered it one way or the other. All I did was ask a question about renting one. It makes sense now that you would own one - I hadn't thought about how your being a journalist would make it necessary." She smiled and kissed him. "I'm looking forward to seeing you all decked out."

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Dressed to the nines, with Callie wearing a jade green floor length evening dress and Carter dressed in the tux, they arrived at the museum at 5:30 so they could observe the other arrivals. While Carter circulated around the main gallery and hallway, Callie remained close to Mr. Linden as he greeted the guests. Most were simply names that she had seen in the newspaper or on local television.

But when the vice-president in charge of art procurement arrived, he wasn't alone. The woman with him was an attractive woman of Hispanic origin, wearing a simple black long sheath. He introduced her to Mr. Linden as an 'old friend' - with no name given.

As the couple moved toward the gallery area, Callie asked Mr. Linden, "Do you know who the woman with Mr. Duval is?"

"No. I've never seen her before. I'm wondering where the Donovans might be. They know that we have to begin at six, and it's six right now."

"I'm sure they'll be here any moment, Mr. Linden," she assured him. No doubt Penny was simply waiting until everyone was there so that she could make an entrance. "If you'll excuse me, I need to speak to Mr. Jankowski."

"Of course," he replied, looking out of the glass doors as though willing the final guests to make their arrival.

Callie entered the hallway, moving to join Carter at the closed door into the gallery. "What's the hold up?" he asked.

"He's waiting on the Donovans," she told him, pulling him away from the crowd while looking for Mr. Duval and his plus one. "I need you to tell me if I'm right about something -" she nodded subtly toward the woman in the black sheath. "Who does she look like?"

Carter took a drink of the sparkling water that he'd asked a waiter for while he studied the woman. "Well, if you add a few lines and some gray hair, she looks like Margarite -"

Callie nodded. "That's what I thought. He didn't give her name when they came in -" Both of their attention was caught by the arrival of the last pair of guests. While every other woman had opted for a floor length gown - Penny Donovan had gone a totally different route.

The dark-haired woman was wearing a bright red dress that revealed far more than it covered. The strapless dress began low across her breasts and ended well above her knees. Even from the back of the hallway, Callie could see Andrew's frustration at his wife's determination to be the center of attention.

She certainly was the object of whispers and lecherous grins as Mr. Linden came down the hallway with the other guests behind him. Taking the key from his pocket, he turned to face the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to this opening of the Carrington's celebration of Texas artists. The twelve canvases in the room behind me were chosen from many wonderful works. And now -" he unlocked the door with a flourish, and opened it, revealing that overhead lighting was off - leaving the paintings on the wall illuminated only by the lamps above them. It was only after all of the guests were inside the gallery that he turned up the overhead lights, but not to full power.

"There's my painting," Penny declared into the quiet murmurs, breaking the spell. She went to the painting. "I never tire of looking at it."

"Keep your eyes on Mr. Duval's friend," Carter told Callie in a quiet whisper. "She's not at all impressed with Penny Donovan, I think."

"I'll be glad when this showing is over and it's back where it belongs," Penny was telling someone, and Callie saw a smirk on the other woman's face that was quickly replaced by a bored expression.

"You're right," Callie replied. "And she's amused by something."

"Penny's antics, possibly?" Carter suggested as Penny posed beside the painting for the museum photographer.

"She moves the wrong way, he's going to be taking x-rated photos," Callie muttered, and Carter chuckled softly.

His laughter faded. "Andrew and possible Margarite just exchanged a look," he told her.

"A look?"

Carter nodded, looking from Andrew to Margarite and then to the painting. "I think I know what's going on," he told her. "I'm just not sure how to prove it."

## Chapter 7

"Explain to me again why we're following Andrew and not Margarite?" Callie asked as she followed Andrew's Lincoln Town Car back toward Highland Park.

"Because I don't think the transfer has taken place yet. At some point, he'll have to meet up with Margarite or her agent before she leaves for Matamoros."

"Transfer?" Callie asked. "Transfer of what?"

"Think about it, Callie."

"Not the painting. Why would Andrew Donovan give that painting to Margarite Almanzo?"

"Maybe he's not giving it to her. Maybe he's selling it to her. Think about it. He switches the original with a fake just before it's moved to the museum, never realizing that the museum will have it re-appraised and discover the switch. We know he wants to sell the thing - it's public record that the painting is the main point of contention in the divorce. So what if he's decided to sell it back to Margarite and make some cash under the table with Penny none the wiser?"

"And what if she has it appraised again at some point?"

Carter shrugged. "By then, it won't matter. He'll give up all claim to the painting and the divorce will be final, and it will be up to *her* to prove he was in any way responsible."

"Oooh, that's good," she said as Andrew's car turned into the mansion's gates. She drove down the road and turned around, parking far enough back from the gate so not to be noticed, turning off the lights. "Keep an eye out for city patrol. They don't usually like cars parking this way."

"I doubt we'll have to wait very long for him to come back out," Carter said. "He wasn't very happy with the way she was acting at the museum. I figure he'll make his apologies and leave to get to his meeting."

"*If* there's a meeting," she told him. "I'm still not convinced -"

"He's coming back out," Carter interrupted.

Callie let the dark car pull onto the road and get far enough away before pulling onto the road and turning on the headlights to follow. "I'm still not convinced that he's going to go anywhere but his apartment."

"We'll see when he gets to Inwood. If he's going to the apartment, he'll make a left hand turn. If he goes any other direction-" When Andrew drove straight through the intersection, Carter smiled. "He's not going home."

"So where *is* he going?" Callie wondered. "We're close to Love Field - I wonder if Mr. Duval has a private plane?"

Carter pulled out his cellphone and dialed a number. "Mr. Linden, Carter Jankowski - Yes, sir ..."

apparently we did get away with it... Yes, sir. The reason I'm calling - do you happen to know if Mr. Duval has a private airplane? ... And where does he keep it, do you -... Thank you. No, we're still working it... We will... Goodnight." He hung up. "He does have a private jet and Mr. Linden said that he mentioned having to go to the airport after the reception this evening. He keeps it in the private aviation area at Love. It's Gulfstream."

"He just made the turn toward the airport," Callie said, still following Andrew.

"That's where he's going, then. Do you know where the private aircraft -"

She nodded. "Yeah. And I might be able to get us in there if I'm lucky." She smiled. "I worked part time as airport security before my promotion. Got to know most of the guys who work out here. If any of them are on duty tonight -"

"I'll cross my fingers," he told her as Andrew made the turn toward the private aircraft storage area. "He's going to see you," he warned her.

"Just keep an eye on him," she said, rolling down the window and turning off the headlights again as she got to the security booth. "Hello, Charlie!" she said. "How's it going?"

"Well, if it isn't Callie - Harris, right? Been awhile!" Charlie said, glancing at Carter, who was focused on the disappearing taillights of the Town Car.

"I really need to get in here, Charlie," she told him. "We're trying to make a flight out on a friend's plane - he said we could use it at the last minute -"

"Who's plane?" he asked.

"Mitch Duval," she told him.

"Then you better get out there. That guy that just came in said he was going there as well. Wish Mr. D would let us know when he's invited people to use his plane -"

"Thanks, Charlie," Callie said, the Jeep already rolling as he kept talking. "Which way did he go?" she asked Carter.

"Around that first hangar," he told her.

Callie headed in that direction, watching for the car and moving aircraft. As they neared the first hangar, she saw that the next one was open, and an aircraft was sitting on the apron. She pulled the Jeep up beside the first hangar and told Carter. "We'll walk from here. No sense in warning them that we're coming." She told him to go around the hanger and come up on the other side, and she would wait for him to get there.

"Don't start without me," he told her.

"Never," was her quiet reply. She watched him move into the darkness and leaned against the side of the hangar, peeking out every now and then to get the lay of the land.

The aircraft was sitting half inside of the hangar, with the door and steps open. Andrew's Lincoln was parked beside it, and when Callie peered around the corner, she saw he was holding a tube like those that blueprints were transported in.

"I want to see it," Margarite was saying, clearing determined to do just that.

"You don't trust me?"

"After all of these years, do you blame me? Ever since Mateo was forced to sell the painting to that harridan -"

"She's still my wife," Andrew reminded her.

"You would do well to be rid of her, señor," she told him. "She is a -"

Callie saw Carter appear on the far side of the hangar and shook her head, signaling that it wasn't time yet.

"I will see the painting before we take off," Margarite insisted again.

"Very well," Andrew sighed, opening the tube and pulling what appeared to be a blueprint from inside.

"What is this? You said -"

"It's inside the blueprint," Andrew informed her, unrolling the blue paper to reveal a roll of what looked like canvas, which he unrolled for them to both look at. "See?"

"I'll take that," Callie said, moving from the edge of the hangar as Carter did the same.

"What is going on here?" Margarite asked, but Andrew was already rolling the canvas up again.

"She's a private detective," he told the other woman. "Mrs. Harris, right? Where's your friend?"

"Right behind you," Carter said, having closed the distance easily, and now grabbed the canvas.

"That's my property!" Andrew told him.

"And it's supposed to be at the Carrington Museum, as you agreed -"

"As my \*wife\* agreed," Andrew growled. "I never wanted it shown. But Penny -"

"It's mine!" Margarite declared at last, clearly upset by things not going according to her plans. "Mateo never wanted to sell it - he promised me that no one else would ever see it. But that - that \*woman\*, she threatened to tell everyone who the woman in the painting really was unless - unless Mateo agreed to sell the painting to \*her\* and her husband."

"Penny claims that she's the woman on the beach," Carter pointed out.

"Basta!" she cried. "How could she be, when she was on that boat in the painting? No one can be in

two places at the same time!"

"Penny was watching the beach that morning from the red and white sailboat with red sails?" Callie clarified.

"Yes! After she became his patron, she told him that she knew who the woman was and told him she would go to the papers and - and everyone would know."

"It was you, wasn't it?" Callie asked in a quiet voice, and Margarite nodded.

"The only reason I agreed to pose for him was because I loved him so much. But I did not want my family in Mexico to know what I had done. Even though Mateo was my husband, they would have been horrified at the idea that I done such a thing."

"Mateo was okay with the painting being in Penny's hands -"

"In my hands," Andrew clarified. "He knew that I had no desire for it to be shown in public because Penny had told so many of our friends that she was the woman."

"And now you're returning the original to Margarite?" Carter asked.

"Margarite contacted me through Mr. Duval and asked if I would be willing to sell the painting back to her. Once I discovered the truth, that Mateo had told her that he wanted her to have the painting, I had no choice but to agree. So I had a copy made, and managed the switch when I knew Penny was out of the house just before they picked the painting up to move it to the museum."

"And when the switch was discovered? What did you think would happen?" Carter wanted to know.

"I knew that Penny had the painting appraised several months ago, so I was sure she wouldn't have it done again for awhile. By then, any number of things could have explained the fact that it wasn't the original."

"Let me guess," Callie said, "You were going to drop your insistence on selling the painting and give her the divorce that she wants."

"Actually, I'm still hoping she'll come to her senses and decide that she doesn't want a divorce, Mrs. Harris. For all her faults, I still love Penny. That painting has had a very detrimental effect on her, ever since she first saw it -"

"Where was that?" Callie asked.

"What?" Andrew asked.

"Apparently Mateo never showed the painting after it was finished out of respect for his wife's modesty. So when did Penny see it?"

"In his studio," Margarite told them. "The first time she went to see him to offer to support his desire to become a famous artist."



"Do either of you really think it's fair to Mr. Linden and the museum to let him show a fake instead of the real painting?" Carter asked the two of them.

"So he did find out it was a fake," Andrew said. "That explains why you two were called in."

"You didn't know?" Callie asked, frowning.

"No. I guess I thought, since he had the certificate from our appraiser, that he wouldn't bother -"

"It was a requirement for their insurance," Callie told him. "But the appraisal was delayed for a week when someone stole his wife's car and got him away from the gallery. Neither of you know anything about that?" she asked. Both Andrew and Margarite shook their heads.

"No, they don't," Another voice answered, as Penny and Jerome Billings appeared around the side of the hangar. Billings had a gun in his hand. Penny smiled, extending her hand. "I'll take the painting, if you please," she told Carter.

As he placed it into her hand, she reached up and touched his cheek. "A pity. We would have had such a good time, I think."

"How did you find out?" Andrew asked.

Penny laughed. "You've never been able to surprise me, Andy," she purred. "The servants told me that you'd been at the house while I was gone that night, and had spent time in the gallery. I called Jerome and asked him to come over and look at the painting."

Callie shook her head. "You have hidden depths, Jerome," she said. "I had no idea that you were able to appraise paintings in addition to your other talents."

"Oh, he has many other - \*talents\*," Penny said, slipping her free arm through his.

"What happens now?" Carter wanted to know, giving Callie a look.

"Well, Jerome and I are going to make use of Mr. Duval's lovely airplane. The rest of you - well, unfortunately, won't be joining us.

"You are a witch!" Margarite cried out, lunging at Penny. "I should have scratched your eyes out years ago!"

"Jerome!" Penny yelled as she struggled to fight off the determined woman and keep the roll of canvas.

The distraction gave Callie and Carter a chance to pull out their own weapons. "Drop the gun, Jerome!" Callie said. The gun clattered to the floor while Carter kept his gun on Penny.

"Andrew, would mind separating the two - ladies, please? And retrieving the painting?" he added as Andrew grabbed Penny around the waist and pulled her away from Margarite's sharp, blood-red fingernails, pulling the painting away at the same time.

"I'll take it, please," Carter told him, holding out his hand. He took it from Andrew, stepping back to

join Callie.

"That painting belongs to \*me\*," Margarite insisted, still glaring at Penny, who had pushed her way out of her husband's clutches. "Mateo only sold it to -her - because of her threats. He had promised me that he would never sell it -"

"Everyone will believe that I'm the woman in the painting if you'll let me have it," Penny told her.

"No! It's my beloved's greatest work - it belongs to me."

"Look," Callie said, getting tired of the arguments. "I don't really care who owns the painting. The fact is that an agreement was made for it to be shown by the Carrington Museum for the next month - and that contract will be honored. Now, this is what's going to happen. Where's the pilot for this aircraft?" she asked.

"He's already in the cockpit," Andrew told her, filing his flight plan and getting things ready for take off."

"Very well. I'm sorry, Mrs. Almanzo, but I have no choice - All four of you are going to get onto that plane and once it takes off, we'll return the painting to Mr. Linden at the museum to put on display as agreed. During that time, I suggest that you all figure out who the owner is so that Mr. Linden can return it."

"I refuse to leave without the painting!" Margarite declared. "And I refuse to share the aircraft with - with \*her\*!" she said, pointing at Penny.

"It's big enough that I think you can stay away from each other. And by the time you reach Matamoros, you might even find out that you're ready to talk. Now, let's go."

Margarite turned with an angry flounce and went up the steps. "Now you, Andrew," Carter said. Andrew glanced at Penny. "She'll be right behind you," Carter assured him.

"Only if you carry me up that gangway," Penny stated, clearly not ready to accept her defeat.

"I can-" Andrew started to say, but Penny rolled her eyes.

"Don't bother. You don't know how to lift a pencil anymore, much less a woman."

"You think so?" he asked, turning around and coming back to lift her into his arms and carry her toward the airplane. "Now shut up." After her initial shock, Penny slid her arms around her husband's neck and smiled as she moved close enough to whisper something into his ear.

"Looks like you're out of luck, Jerome," Callie said to the other man. "You're next."

"What about my gun?" he asked her.

"We'll leave it at the museum," she told him. "I'm sure you'll be able to pick it up when you go back for your last paycheck."

"You're going to tell Mr. Linden about all this, aren't you?"

"I think it's only fair that he know the full story, don't you?" She waved her gun toward the aircraft. "Go on. Once you're up there, get the hatch closed and tell the pilot that you're ready for take off."

Callie and Carter both watched as the Jerome entered the aircraft, then found the mechanism to close the doorway. They waited until the hatch closed, and moved back as the two powerful jet engines began to spin up.

"Now?" Carter asked, and Callie nodded.

"Now."

They put their weapons away and turned toward the side of the hangar, heading toward the Jeep as the plane began to move away and onto the apron. Carter, still holding the canvas, turned away as the jet wash swept across the area.

"Do you really think they'll take off?" he asked Callie.

"I doubt it. As soon as they can, I'm sure that either Penny or Margarite will tell the pilot that they're not leaving after all," she told him as they got into the car. Starting the engine, she said, "I figure we have about ten minutes before the plane gets back to the hangar and they get into Andrew's car to follow us."

"I'll call Mr. Linden and make sure that he's at the museum to meet us," Carter said.

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"This is the actual painting?" Derek Linden asked as he studied the canvas. "You're sure?"

"It was verified as such by Jerome Billings," Callie told him. Seeing his doubtful look, she sighed. "It would seem Mr. Billings has hidden talents. But I don't think you have any reason to worry about him taking your position. He knew that the painting had been switched with a forgery and never said a word to anyone about it."

"Well, except for Mrs. Donovan," Carter clarified.

"Mrs. Donovan? She knew about -?"

"So did Mr. Donovan," Callie confirmed.

"I don't understand."

"It's a long, complicated story, Mr. Linden. Just be glad that you have the original painting back. If I were you, I'd get it put into a frame and into the display gallery before tomorrow."

"Do they know it's here?" he asked.

"Yes," Callie confirmed. "You have the painting for the duration of the contract with them to show it. After that, it's a toss up as to where it will end up. But that won't be your problem."

"Oh," Carter said, pulling Jerome's gun from his jacket pocket. "I told Jerome that I'd leave this here for him to collect when he gets back."

"And if I were you, I'd lock that painting into the storage room -"

"Oh, I shall do just that," he promised her. "Please, send me your bill tomorrow morning and I'll see that it's paid. Even if you were a day late in finding the painting."

"We won't charge you for today, then," Callie told him. "If you think that's fair."

"At the moment, I don't care," he said, looking at the painting again. "I'll get this into the storeroom, and come in early tomorrow to get it into a frame. Thank you both for your help. You have no idea how much it means to me."

Carter tapped the canvas. "Storeroom. Now, Mr. Linden. We're not sure how far the bad guys might be behind us."

"Oh. Oh, of course." He took out his keys and unlocked the door, entering the room. Placing the canvas flat on a table, and the gun alongside it, he came back out and locked the door. "There. All safe and secure."

"You do realize that you'll have to tell your superiors about the painting being switched if you're going to tell them about Mr. Billings' involvement," Callie said.

"What *was* his involvement, exactly?" Mr. Linden wanted to know. "You haven't really explained what happened."

"Well, if we're going to be out of here before someone else gets here, we don't really have time to go into it," Carter said. "But I can tell you that Jerome got caught between the Donovans and Margarite Almanzo, and his fingers caught in the cookie-jar, so to speak."

"So he was - somehow involved in - oh my goodness."

"Go home, Mr. Linden," Callie told him. "And remember to set the building alarm when you leave. It won't stop Jerome from getting in, but there'll be a record with the security company."

Outside, Callie and Carter watched from the shadows as Andrew's limo and a low slung red Ferrari pulled into the parking lot seconds after Mr. Linden's car lights disappeared into traffic. "If we're lucky," Callie muttered, "security will be here soon to make their rounds and find them all in the museum."

"Jerome works here, remember?" Carter pointed out.

Callie pulled her cellphone out and found a number. "Larry? Callie Harris, can you get your guards over to the Carrington for a check?"

"Sure. Why? Something going on?"

"A soon to be ex-employee is about to access the building in an attempt to steal a painting."

"Who?"

"Jerome Billings," she said. "And I'd hurry, because they're about to enter the security code."

"Consider it done," he told her. "But I do expect a full report from you about this."

"See you tomorrow," she replied. "And thanks." She looked at Carter. "He's calling his security officer to get him over here ASAP."

"They must have been around the corner," Carter told her, pointing to the security vehicle that entered the alley and parked behind the museum. "I would love to be a fly on the wall to hear the conversation taking place in there."

"I'm sure Jerome is insisting that as an employee he has every right to be inside the museum after hours - and the guards will agree - but not with the other three non-employees."

"At which point Andrew and Penny will tell the guards who they are, but none of them will be able to explain the reason for their being here. They're coming out."

They watched as the guards locked the back door and had Jerome reset the system. Andrew took Penny's arm, but she shook it off to get into the Ferrari and roar out of the parking lot - alone. Andrew spoke to Margarite, probably offering to see her back to a hotel - or maybe the airport, leaving Jerome alone in the alley. He stood there, watching the black Lincoln pull away before going over to a white Chevy and leaving as well.

"We have company," Carter told Callie as one of the guards approached the Jeep.

Callie rolled the drivers window down as the guard shone his flashlight into the vehicle. "Mrs. Harris?" he asked.

"Yes. I suppose Mr. Kelso told you that we had called."

"Yes, ma'am. He told me that you'd probably be here. They're gone, as you can see."

"Thank you."

"What's to stop them from trying again later?" Carter asked.

The guard grinned, holding up a key. "Because I had the young man give me his key to the building," he told them. "I'll give it to Mr. Kelso and he'll see that it gets back to the museum tomorrow. Thanks for the heads up. Still don't quite understand what those four were up to, but they didn't get whatever they came for. They were standing in the hallway outside of a locke storeroom when we entered."

"Thank you for getting here so quickly."

Another grin. "We were on our way when the boss called. Have a good night - what's left of it," he pointed out, backing away from the Jeep.

## Epilogue

Callie kicked her high heels off the second they entered the loft. "I should start keeping a pair of flats in the Jeep for things like this," she said, smiling when she saw Carter pick up the discarded shoes. She turned to put her arms around him. "Are you sure you'll be able to handle living with someone as messy as I am?" she asked.

"Messy? You? I hadn't noticed," he told her.

"I leave shoes and clothes wherever they are when I take them off," she told him. "I usually go back and pick them up later, but -"

"But now you have me to do that for you," he reminded her. "I think I can handle it," he told her, giving her a kiss. "Now, how about the two of us go upstairs and get some sleep? Do you realize that it's almost four a.m.?"

"Bed sounds wonderful about now," she sighed. "Chasing down bad guys is tiring," she said, turning around. "Unzip me?" she asked. Once done, she stepped out of the dress and left it in a pool on the floor as she drifted toward the stairs, leaving him to pick it up before following her.

The End