

98,347 words

# THE OAK TREE

By Julie Judish

## Prologue

Director of Security Sarah Johnson flipped through the photos, eyeing them intently. She paused at the third one in the stack, intrigued by the young woman in the picture. She had an average height, average weight, average brown hair and brown eyes. The girl was dressed casually, not flashy like some teens did these days. No rips or tears in the clothing were visible; everything was properly modest and covered. There was no extra skin showing above the waistline as was common with teenage girls. There were no tattoos, no visible body piercing beyond the one stud in each ear, and no shocking green, blue or purple hair. Nothing stood out about the girl who was the target of her scrutiny. As she continued with the rest of the photos, she saw the same girl in various places, with different people. The girl seemed happy. Not joyous, but happy, as if the world was okay around her. She was at the mall shopping with friends, getting on the bus to go to high school, getting in an older model beat up station wagon with her mother and walking into a church. This girl was just... ordinarily; happy.

“Did she see you? Does she suspect?” she asked the two men who were standing in her office.

Dressed in black suits, black ties, sunglasses, and with ear-pieces visible if one would closely look for them, the men could easily be on the cover of “SPY” magazine. This assignment was not their first, and the taller of the two, Roberts, frowned his annoyance.

“No, Director. These photos were all taken within the week as you requested. She never saw us, I am sure of it.”

Director Johnson finished viewing the photos and slipped them back into the large manila envelope the men had supplied them in. She knew what she had to do now would forever change the course of this ordinary girl’s life. She didn’t like that idea. Being normal was a blessing, a benefit, and an advantage. Once she set into motion the next phase of the plan, this girl would never be normal again. Yet the Director had no doubt at all that it had to be done, and the girl must be protected at all costs. The very innocence and normalcy the girl exhibited were her own worst enemy in light of the future she would have. It was Director Johnson’s highest priority to see that this girl live long enough to embark on that future. The young woman’s life was in danger, and if her agents were right, as the Director knew they were, the girl wasn’t aware of it.

“Thank you for getting these to me. Things look just about as I expected, from what little I knew of Miss Becker’s situation. I need you two to select a security team. Six agents should do. I want around the clock surveillance on the home, the school, and anywhere else she goes. Do not be seen. That will come later. We have two weeks until she becomes of age. The people who are threatening her life have implied she will not make that birthday. We need to make sure they are wrong, and see that the girl lives to make her future happen.” The men nodded. Director Johnson continued, “I assume from your surveillance that you are aware of the area and will watch for anything out of the ordinary-“

Roberts lifted his hand, palm towards her as if to stop her, and frowned at her.

“Director, we know how to do our jobs. We will arrange the team of agents immediately and the girl will be safe and sound.”

Director Johnson, tall and poised, looked at her two best agents, and knew they would. She wasn't concerned about the frown from Agent Roberts. Nor was she concerned at the offended look from the other man, Agent Diaz. She remembered that old adage her mother and many, many other mothers over the years have used, that said if you frown long enough, your face will freeze that way. Looking at Agents Roberts and Diaz, she was sure that that was what had happened to these two, but they knew their job -- were the best at it -- and she was confident that Miss Becker was in good hands. She smiled just a bit to herself. She was stalling. They wanted to get to work, and knew she was stalling.

Another heavy sigh. She smoothed down her immaculately tailored skirt and picked an imaginary speck of lint off her jacket.

"All right, let's get to it. I want to hear from someone every four hours."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Roberts nodded to Diaz, and they turned and left the room. The Director locked the manila envelope away in her filing cabinet as she watched them leave, and then, seeing the mounds of paperwork waiting for her, tried to get back to work, but there on her desk she spied one photo of the girl who was her current priority. She had left this photo out when she put the rest away. It was the photo that most clearly showed the girl's face. She picked it up and studied it, paperwork forgotten as this young woman once again stole her attention.

"My poor dear," she spoke to the photo. "You have no idea that your life is about to change forever."

## Chapter 1

The alarm had been blaring its noxious tone for several seconds before Joanna Arianna Becker came out of her slumber long enough to reach out one arm from the warm comfort of her bed and bang the snooze button. Just then, the door to her bedroom opened and her mom came breezily into the room.

“Jo, that’s the third time the alarm went off. I know you’re tired but its time to get up!”

Jo sleepily raised herself onto one elbow, pried open one eye and glared at her mom. Last night had been another late night, but today was the last final of her high school career, the very last test she would ever take as a high school student. She had been studying until early in the morning.

“Mom, can I get a ride to school so I can sleep an extra twenty minutes?” Jo’s eyes pleaded with her mom.

Linda Becker shook her head and sighed, “No honey, I’m sorry but I have to be at work in fifteen minutes. Gail called in sick again and I have to work her shift at the market.”

When Jo sat up straight and began to protest, her mother held up her hand, stopping the objection short. “I know what you are going to say, and I promise I won’t be late coming home,” she said, sitting down on the side of the bed to give Jo a big hug. “This is a big night for us that we have been waiting and planning for years. I wouldn’t miss it, you know that!” She gave Jo a quick kiss on the forehead then stood up and walked toward the bedroom door. “Hurry up now, you have forty five minutes to catch the bus, and you can’t miss it! I love you Jo, have a wonderful last day of high school.”

After her mother had closed the door, Jo drug herself out of the warm bed and stood up on the worn carpeting in her bedroom. She got dressed, walked out of her warm room and turned toward the bathroom. She stared at her reflection. At five foot five inches, she was the same height as many girls at her school. She thought she had too many freckles, and wasn’t totally happy with her straight, mid-length brown hair. She sighed, snatched up a hairbrush and began attacking the tangles in her hair as she continued down the hallway to the rest of the house. Well, not really a house. It was a mobile home, single wide, fourteen or so feet across, she supposed. The two bedrooms where she and her mom slept were ample space for the two of them, though. The living room was small but cozy. The carpet was worn badly, same as it was in the bedrooms, but it didn’t bother her. She always tried avoiding looking down anyway, since she detested the orange carpeting which had been installed when the mobile was created, about forty years ago. The kitchen linoleum was coming up in spots, and was cracked in others. The faucet in the kitchen squealed when you used it, but the water ran clear. Most of the cupboards were battered and closed crooked. The pots and pans were chipped and cracked, as were a lot of the dishes. The furniture was dented and scratched in the living room. The small stereo her mom had gotten at a bargain yard sale for two dollars had only one working speaker. The television was a twenty-inch, not a large screen like a lot of her friends’ TVs, but it was home, and comfortable. She had decent clothes, she was warm, her mom was a great cook, and she was happy.

She thought about some of her friends, and their fancy, modern homes. With large yards, big cars, swimming pools and entertainment centers. Sure, it was fun to visit their homes. She had a good time, they hung out, and they swam and goofed off, but she was never ashamed of her mom, or her house, and would invite her friends home with her just as often as she went with

them to theirs. Her mom told her a few times, “Jo, I’m so proud of you, that you aren’t spoiled like most of the kids today, and how you place your value in people, not in money, or things.” Jo was glad that her friends loved her mom, too.

Entering the kitchen, she got a clean glass from one of the cupboards and poured the last of the milk into it. After popping two pieces of bread into the toaster, Jo removed the butter and jam from the refrigerator and then rummaged in a drawer for a pencil. On the front of the refrigerator was a piece of paper with a shopping list. She added “milk” to the list that already contained “flour, sugar, eggs, hamburger, and tomato paste”.

Toast and milk were staples for breakfast, and she ate them as she sat at the kitchen table, staring out the window into the mobile home park. She saw her neighbor, Mrs. Harper, coming out of her mobile and getting into her car. Mrs. Harper worked as a cashier at a variety store near the supermarket that Jo’s mom worked at, also as a cashier. Beyond Mrs. Harper’s place, she saw young Mrs. Chambers coming out of her home with her baby in her arms. *They must be going for their morning stroll*, Jo concluded. When the stroller opened up and the baby was placed inside, she knew she was right. It was nice to see everyday things happen every day. Jo smiled. She was pretty sure that next she would see the twins, Bob and Mickey, from the other side of the mobile park running by to their bus stop. Their bus came about ten minutes before hers did. It was always her personal alarm clock to see those two go by. When they did, she knew she had to hustle. She cleaned up, grabbed an apple to stuff in her backpack, and closed the fridge door just as she saw the two little boys run past the window.

Back in her room she donned her tennis shoes quickly and grabbed her backpack making sure her keys to the house were in it, and then grabbed her cell phone -- the one luxury she and her mom scrimped and saved to be able to have for them both. She locked up the house and headed down the road out of the park to the bus stop.

As she rounded the last corner to the exit of the park, she looked for the car she’d seen there a few times in the last couple of weeks. Yes, there it was. A black sedan with tinted windows, sitting across the main road and up about two hundred feet. There were a few scattered houses on that side of the street, but the car seemed to be between them, not in front of any particular one. She’d never seen anyone get into or out of it; it seemed to be empty. It was hard to tell though, with the windows so black. She looked up the long straight road for the bus and, not seeing it, decided to go look at the license plate of the black car. She ran across the otherwise deserted road and walked nonchalantly toward the vehicle. As she got closer she could just make out the license plate. It wasn’t a California license plate, she was sure. Even from this distance she could tell the colors were wrong. As she got close enough to start making out the numbers and letters, she could tell there was no “e” or “GOV” that would make it a state or government vehicle. She considered going closer to determine which state it was from when she saw the bus heading her way from up the road. She dashed back across the main road and hurried back to the bus stop. She was NOT going to miss that bus. The car was probably just someone visiting a relative in one of the houses on the other side of the road, and she wasn’t going to worry about it anymore.

Her excitement was displayed in her wide smile as she boarded the bus a few seconds later and found a seat next to her two best friends, Charlie and Alex. Charlie Allen, whose given name was Charlene, was petite, slim, and always decked out in the latest styles. Pretty, outgoing, and constantly chattering, Charlie was the life of the team. However, she often got the other two in trouble when she said the wrong thing at the wrong time. She was very literal, and did not know the meaning of the word “discreet.” Alexis Turner, nicknamed Alex, was tall and slender

and relaxed. She was one of a small minority of African American kids in their community, but Alex's skin color had never bothered Jo. Jeans and a T-shirt was the only wardrobe Jo had ever seen her in. Alex was in all the advanced classes at school and excelled in Math and Science. The two friends were as different as could be; yet today they were bubbly and giddy as Jo sat next to them.

"Jo! Today is the last day of childhood! After today we go forth as educated women of the world!" Charlie was bursting with excitement.

Alex was a little calmer, "Jo, are you staying after school to finish setting up for the sober grad party tonight?"

"Yes," Jo answered, "Aren't you staying too?"

"Yep, I was wondering if you needed a ride home."

Jo saw that Alex was grinning ear to ear, and exclaimed, "You got it?"

Alex nodded her head. "It's perfect, Jo! It's a royal blue color, the seats are charcoal gray, the interior has been totally redone, and it is exactly what I wanted! My dad gave me the keys last night, and told me he was proud of his little girl, and now I am the proud owner of a classic Mustang! My dad is bringing it to school later; he had to get the insurance and title stuff done today with it. I am so excited!"

"I can't tell, Alex," Jo replied sarcastically. "Wow, you got a car for a graduation gift! That is just incredible!" Jo had not a twinge of jealousy in her, knowing what a wonderful thing this was for Alex. She knew Alex would pick up her and Charlie often, and the three of them would have a lot more freedom. She was truly happy for Alex, and hugged her enthusiastically. "Yes, I would love a ride home after the set-up. We won't have a lot of time to get ready for graduation, but it won't take long because we will be so excited."

"How much time do we need anyway?" Charlie interrupted. "Just the cap and gown on top of the mid length dress. Simple, elegant, and -- oh I can hardly wait!"

Jo smiled at her friends, and sat back in the small bus seat with them as much as she could. The seat was too small for three to fit comfortably anymore. The bus ride the rest of the way to school was filled with talk of the party, graduation, and Alex's new car. Excitement was in the air and the weather was perfect as they filed off the bus. It was a glorious day, and she was thrilled.

Once at school, the three friends split up and headed to their last two classes. This high school split up the finals week, making each of the six normal periods last half a day. This was the last day of two, two-hour period finals. Today Jo would tackle physics, one of the hardest classes she had had this year. She would be seeing Alex there, since they were in it together, but first she headed to the Attendance office where she was an aide fifth period, and so had a two-hour break from academics. She knew there was a lot of final paperwork and filing to be done for the end of the school year, and was planning on being busy the whole two hours.

Just as she got to the door of the attendance office and grabbed the handle to open it, out of the corner of her eye she saw a black sedan pull up and park in the teachers parking area. It was far away, so she couldn't be sure if it was the same one, she just thought it was odd to see it there. Maybe a teacher was running late but she didn't remember any black cars ever parking in the teacher's parking area that resembled the one she had seen repeatedly near her home. It was probably just a coincidence. She shrugged and went on into the building.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Jo filed until her fingers were sore, calmed worried relatives on the telephone regarding the time for the ceremony that evening, found a missing class ring in the lost-and-found for a fellow senior, and made herself useful as usual. The physics

test she had studied for was hard, but she was ready, and in the end, felt she had done well. Then it was over and she could sit back and sigh in relief. Done. Finished. All that was left of her time at Central High would be excitement and laughter and fun! Sure there would be some heartache and tears, knowing she would probably not see most of her classmates again, and some of them never. A few were going into the military immediately. Many were going on to various colleges and universities. Some, like Jo, would go directly into the workforce. She wasn't exactly sure where she would try to get a job at first. Her mom had told her several times she could come to work at the supermarket with her. Jo considered that to be her fallback job. She wanted to get something on her own, something that she could do as her own person. Besides, as much as she loved her mom, she didn't want to work with her all day then be home with her all day. People need their space.

It was there, lounging at a picnic bench outside the school cafeteria pondering her future that Alex and Charlie found her a few minutes later.

"Jo! There you are! Lets get this party ready and then we can go out for a soda before I take you home," Alex was always the responsible one. The girls headed into the gym where the festivities were headquartered, and asked for instructions. They were assigned outdoors, setting up a water balloon fight area, and it looked like it would be a blast!

They walked through one of the wings of the English department, and outside, at the end of the corridor, they found a small wading pool filled with water. There were several bags of water balloons, a hose with a tiny adapter on it to fill the balloons, and on the ground, lines and sections divided off for the game. The three girls began filling balloons, tying them off, and placing them in the water-filled wading pool. After thirty or so balloons, Charlie was clumsy and dropped one, it splattered all over Jo, and that's how the water fight began. They wasted every balloon they had already filled, even filled a few more. Alex was soaked to the bone after falling into the wading pool, but had acquired several small squirt guns from the table beside the pool that were for the game later. Charlie was dripping wet, armed and dangerous, the last two un-popped water-filled balloons in her hands. Jo was drenched too, but she was no pushover -- and she had the hose. The head of the English department found out just how strong Jo was with that hose when he came out of his classroom at the end of the hall to find out what all the screaming and squealing was about. He got a stream full force right in the face.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry, Mr. Bowen! I didn't see you come out!" Jo stammered as she saw what she had done. Charlie and Alex dropped their weapons and stood up straight. There was no way the three of them could feign innocence, as the evidence of their guilt was dripping from their clothing.

Mr. Bowen was well-known in the school for being able to take a joke, so the girls weren't too worried -- until he barked in a gruff tone, "Hand me that hose, young lady!"

Jo pulled the hose over towards him, worried, a sinking feeling coming over her. Was this going to ruin a perfect day? Was Mr. Bowen going to be angry with them and possibly get them banned from the party later in the evening? She did not expect what happened next.

Mr. Bowen took the hose from her. "Now, get over there with the other two hoodlums."

Jo retreated back to the other side of the wading pool away from Mr. Bowen. The girls looked at each other, wondering what was going to happen. They were definitely no longer laughing.

Then, so slightly that Jo almost missed it, he winked.

He turned towards the building and yelled out, "Ms. Blake, can you come out here for a moment please. These girls seem to be having some trouble."

Realization dawned on the three girls at what was about to happen just seconds before it took place. Ms. Blake, a recently divorced, very good-looking English teacher who occupied the room across the hall from Mr. Bowen, came out of the corridor at his call.

“What seems to be the problem, girls?” That was all she got to say before she was sprayed from head to toe with a jet of water from the hose Mr. Bowen was now in control of.

“Aaaahhh! Help me girls!” Ms. Blake reached for one of the squirt guns floating in the wading pool and gestured to the three friends. They weren’t too sure about getting involved – until Mr. Bowen turned the hose on them.

An hour or so later, all five of them were sitting in chairs around the wading pool, filling up water balloons. After a short fight in which it was four against one, Mr. Bowen had quickly given up and the two adults joined the girls in filling balloons. The two teachers, whom most of the students in the school counted as friends, inquired into what the girls’ plans were after graduation.

Charlie was going to college. Having grown up in the upscale part of town, she wished to see what else the world had to offer her. Her parents, Brad and Mindy Allen, had spoiled her just a bit, in Jo’s opinion, and let her choose whichever college she wished. She chose to go to New York and see the world. She would be leaving in the fall after an exciting last summer in California.

Alex was going to attend the local college and work full time in her parent’s company. Sam and Kendra Turner owned a travel agency, and Alex had been working with them part time since she was sixteen. Though she was raised middle-class, and the Turner family was one of the few African American families in their small town, Alex admitted she had a good life and was looking forward to continuing on as she had been. She liked things to stay the same.

Jo was going to go to work right away even though she had nothing lined up. Mr. Bowen inquired why she wasn’t going to college as well, and Jo explained that there was no money in her family for college.

“My dad died when I was too young to remember him,” she told him. “My mom and I have been doing okay, but I’ve been getting some kind of Social Security or something since his death. Well, that ends when I turn eighteen, so that will cut our current income in half. My mom works hard, but she doesn’t have a college degree. It’s a menial job, so even though they value her work, she still barely makes over minimum wage.” Jo smiled. “It’s been enough though, all these years. My mom’s been great, and we’ve always had food and shelter and clothing, and lots and lots of love.”

“When do you turn eighteen, Jo?” Ms. Blake asked.

“In three days,” Jo replied dreamily. Besides the graduation ceremony, her eighteenth birthday had been the thing she’d been looking forward to the most. She wasn’t exactly sure why, and couldn’t even begin to tell anyone how she felt. It was just a sense that things were going to change for her, a wonderful feeling that her life would begin once she turned eighteen.

The last of the balloons were placed on the huge pile in the wading pool. Ms. Blake and Mr. Bowen wished the girls luck with their futures, and went back to finish setting their classrooms in order for the summer. It was just after four in the afternoon, enough time for a quick ice cream break before they all went home to make themselves ready for graduation. Alex stood up and went to the fence behind where they had been working. This wing of the high school bordered the student parking lot. She gestured to Charlie and Jo.

“Hey, come here and look at my beautiful baby.” Alex pointed out a beautiful blue classic Mustang sitting in the sparsely filled parking lot. Most of the students were gone. Only



those helping with the party preparations were still hanging around. “Let’s go take a ride!” Alex was excited to drive the car for the first time, and especially to share it with her best friends.

“Wait!” Jo stopped Alex and Charlie as they headed toward the corridor to leave. She had seen something that bothered her, out there in the parking lot. Alex and Charlie came back over to the fence.

“What is it Jo? You see your dream car out there?” Charlie asked, trying to see what was important. Jo pointed two rows over from Alex’s car, and gestured to the end.

“See that black car there? The one at the very end of the lot?” Jo asked her two friends. “Have you seen it before?”

Charlie and Alex eyed the vehicle in question. It was so far away; all they could tell was that it was black with tinted windows. From this distance, she couldn’t tell the make or model, even though Alex really knew her cars.

“Come on, Jo, lets get to my car and we can check it out on our way out of the parking lot.” Alex grabbed Jo’s arm and led her toward the corridor. “What’s the big deal about a black car anyway, Jo?”

Jo didn’t answer for a few seconds. She could feel both Alex and Charlie watching her, questioning her. Did she dare tell them what she thought? She looked at Alex, then at Charlie, considering.

“I think someone in that car is following me.”

## Chapter 2

By the time the three friends arrived at Alex's new car, the mysterious black sedan had disappeared. Jo told Alex and Charlie about how she'd seen it near her home several times, and earlier in the day pulling into the teacher's parking lot. Since there were so few cars left in the lot, it was easy to see that the car she was concerned about had left. Alex wasn't convinced that the three separate sightings was a coincidence, yet Charlie was all for forgetting about it and going for ice cream. Jo was worried, but decided to put on a brave face and a sturdy smile, and not let this day be ruined. After all, the car was gone; it could have been there by chance.

Alex unlocked the car door of her beautiful new car, and all three exclaimed over this and that in the interior, and the color of the blue as the sunlight hit the exterior. They tried out the stereo of course, and then Alex climbed in behind the wheel, Charlie crawled into the back behind Jo, who piled in beside Alex in the front bucket seat. The car rode smooth, and the girls were having the time of their lives! They went to a local ice cream parlor where they ran into even more senior-classmen from their school. The group chattered about the coming festivities, snacked on ice cream and sodas, and realized for the first time that many of them would be leaving shortly. Danny and Rob, both huge cut-ups in Physics class, told them about moving to Montana to live and work with Danny's uncle on a ranch. Lindsay was really quiet in class but was talkative and laughing here in this environment. She was going to beauty school to become a licensed beautician. Others talked of their plans after high school and the group as a whole appeared rather nostalgic to see this phase of life come to an end.

At about five o'clock, the group split up to prepare for the graduation ceremony. Because it was scheduled to begin at seven, the graduates were asked to be in the auditorium by six thirty sharp, with their caps and gowns on. Alex dropped Charlie off at her home on the way to Jo's. Charlie leaped out of the car and danced to her front door yelling and shouting, "We are graduating in one hour!" Alex and Jo both whooped and hollered with her as they pulled away.

Once the two girls were alone, Alex brought up the black car again.

"Jo, when did you say you saw the car the first time?"

She thought for a minute. "I don't remember if it was Tuesday or Wednesday last week, but it was last week. It just sat across the street, in between two of the homes on that side."

Alex seemed lost in thought, and Jo, feeling rather foolish after the car was gone, decided that there were too many wonderful things happening today to worry about a strange car.

"Alex, I want you to stop speculating about what this car means or doesn't mean. We are graduating tonight; this is what we have worked thirteen years for! Come on, drop the worried frown, and stop furrowing your eyebrows. Just forget about the car. It is nothing, I'm positive! I was just imagining things. There's no way that anyone would want to follow me! I am extremely uninteresting!" They both chuckled.

"All right, Jo, but if you see the car again, promise me you will call the police and report it. Maybe your life is boring, but you are smart and pretty, and there are definitely psychos out in the world. Will you promise?"

Alex eyed Jo to see if she was being taken seriously. Jo nodded agreement. "Yes, I promise I will call the police if I see it again."

Alex turned into the mobile home park and drove down the road that led to Jo's house. She stopped in front and Jo got out, thanking Alex for the ride, and again complimenting and congratulating Alex on the beautiful car. They waved, and Alex sped off toward home.

Jo pulled her keys from her backpack and was just inserting them into the lock when it turned in her hands and the door opened. Her mom had made it home from work early, to make sure she was there for Jo's big evening. The two hugged tight.

"My little girl is graduating!" She mumbled in Jo's hair. Jo could hear the sadness in her mom's voice, and pulled away from her shoulder to gaze into her face.

"Mom, have you been crying?"

"It's a mother's right to get all emotional at a time like this." She smiled as she answered. "I'm so proud of you sweetheart." Another quick hug and her mom let go.

"There isn't much time before we leave. I have a sandwich ready for you, and then we need to get you dressed. I would love to help you with your hair, if you want me to."

It dawned on Jo then that she hadn't seen her mom's car outside. "Mom, where's the car?" she asked.

Her mother's smile faded, and she sighed. "Broke down at the market. It wouldn't start when I was leaving to come home. I'm not sure how I'm going to pay for the repairs this time."

"But mom, how did you get home?"

"Oh, you won't believe it!" She laughed. "Our neighbor, Mrs. Harper had run in for milk on her way home, isn't that just incredible! I know she works close by, but had no idea when she would be off, or if I could even get hold of her. To tell you the truth, I hadn't realized I was broke down more than a few minutes before I saw her leaving the market. I hadn't even begun to try to figure out what to do next before the answer just showed up! It was just a wonderful coincidence."

Panic was beginning to set in. Jo could feel the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. She could feel the tingling in the back of her head. Why, oh why today. This was supposed to be perfect! This was a once in a lifetime day! Why now? But she was able to remain calm as she asked her mom, "Mom, Mom listen this is important. How are we getting back to the high school for the graduation ceremony?"

Her mother glanced up at Jo's face, and immediately saw her daughter's anxiety. She placed one hand on Jo's shoulder.

"Jo, honey, calm down. It's all been arranged. I told Mrs. Harper what my problem was about tonight as we were driving home. Well, as it so happens, her great-nephew is graduating tonight as well. She will be going to the high school just as we are, and of course she is happy to take us with her. She even agreed to go early so you can get into the auditorium when you need to be there." Her mother smiled at Jo's sigh of relief. "Tonight will be perfect, just as you had always dreamed!"

Jo allowed her mom to lead her into the kitchen as she chattered about the day's events and devoured the sandwich her mom had left for her. The mother laughed through Jo's description of the water fight with her and her two friends and the two English teachers. Jo finished eating and quickly went to her room to change. While she was getting ready, she asked, "Mom, the sober grad party won't be over until one o'clock or so. Since you can't come pick me up, can I call Alex and see if I can go home with her afterwards? She has a car, by the way. She got it today as a graduation gift!" She briefly described the car to her mom. "I'm sure she will have it there, and then we can go back to her house when we get tired. Would that be ok?"

"Yes, that would work perfectly. I can't see asking Mrs. Harper to drive back to the high school at that time in the morning," she chuckled.

Jo fastened the last button on her dress, and reached for the phone to call Alex. After explaining to Alex about the defective car, and their transportation to the high school, Alex readily agreed to have Jo spend the night. “Yes, let’s do it!” was Alex’s reply.

She had her dress, nylons and shoes on, her hair was shimmering, and her cap and gown were lying on the bed. Everything was ready. Jo watched her mom come into the room, smiling secretly, and wondered what her mom had up her sleeve.

“Jo, I know you and I have sacrificed a lot over the years. Money has always been tight. You haven’t had most of the things you wanted, or some of the things you needed, but tonight is special. I have been saving for this night for about four years. And now, I have something for you, to honor you tonight.”

Jo watched as her worn, tired mother handed her a small oblong box, tied with a ribbon. It looked like a box that would contain jewelry, but her mom had never been frivolous like that before. Jo glanced up to see tears shimmering in her mother’s eyes. “Open it, honey. I really want you to have it.”

Jo opened the shiny white box to reveal a set of beautiful diamond earrings in the shape of a teardrop, and a matching pendant on a gold chain. She drew in her breath sharply; she was stunned. “Mom, these are beautiful! Are you sure we can afford them?”

Through her tears, the mother nodded, and said, “Yes, Jo. I wanted you to have a token, a memento of this night. We have weathered a lot together, sweetheart. Now, soon you will be a woman, legally, but you have already grown into the most beautiful, wonderful woman I know. And I am so very proud of you!”

Jo hugged her mom and squealed over the beauty of the gift. She asked her mom to help her put on the necklace, and then Jo put the earrings in. She looked in the mirror to see the completed picture, and felt like a million dollars. Her smile lit up the room, and Linda Becker was pleased.

It was time to go. Mother and daughter locked the door of the mobile and walked the few steps to Mrs. Harper’s car. Their officious neighbor was just stepping off her porch, and she stopped and looked at Jo. “My, what a beautiful young woman! Congratulations on your graduation, Jo. I’m so pleased I can help in this small way.” They all got in the car, Jo in the back of course, and left for the high school. On the way, Mrs. Harper inquired about the broken car, and then the two women in front filled the rest of the drive with small talk. Jo didn’t even attempt to follow the conversation around her. Her mind was on the evening. She was nervous. The same fears that every high school girl feels as the ceremony approaches also dogged Jo: *will I trip as I walk across the stage?*

After parking, and one last hug from her mom, Jo hurried to the high school gym, which was the staging area for the graduates. The building was flooded with caps and gowns, and excited seniors. Jo found Alex and Charlie waiting for her near the side of the room. Charlie, of course, noticed the diamonds immediately.

“Jo! Those are just gorgeous!” She delicately lifted the pendant to get a closer look.

“My mom totally surprised me with them; I had no idea at all.” Jo explained. “I’m sure she skipped a lot of lunches to get this for me, and I love her for it.” Jo smiled. Alex and Charlie both knew how little luxury there was in their friend’s life, and were happy for her.

“So, Charlie. Alex got a car, I got diamonds. What are your parents doing for you for graduation?” Jo asked.

Charlie grinned ear to ear. “Well, since I’m going to New York in the fall for college, Daddy decided we all needed to go there for a vacation, so I could get acquainted with the city.

He sprung this on me this afternoon! We are leaving day after tomorrow for New York! He wants me to look for an apartment now, so I get one that's close to the University, and in a good area."

Jo's face fell. 'Day after tomorrow' meant she didn't get to spend her birthday with one of her best friends. She sighed, and quickly plastered her smile back on. This was a wonderful opportunity for Charlie, and Jo didn't want to be selfish by wishing it were a different time. No, Charlie didn't need to see how hurt she was. Jo glanced up at Alex, thankful that Alex would be around to have a fantastic day with. Alex saw the look, and commiserated with Jo. With their eyes they agreed not to bring up the forgotten birthday to Charlie, and just be happy for her. Charlie was babbling about the plans, when the flight left, which airports they were doing layovers in, which motel they would stay at, etc., and never noticed Jo's momentary sadness, for which Jo was grateful.

"That's wonderful, Charlie," Jo said, "Take lots of pictures, we want to see where you will be living!" Jo really meant it, too.

Soon Vice-Principal Smith was asking for everyone's attention. He requested the graduates get in a line in the order they had practiced earlier in the day. A hush fell over the crowd as it dawned on them the significance of the next few hours, and they lined up quietly and nervously. Jo was between Alex and Charlie in line, and they would be sitting together for the ceremony. Once all the graduates were in place, Mr. Smith led the students to the auditorium. At the entrance, the girl at the head of the line paused, and waited for "Pomp and Circumstance" to begin. Then they all apprehensively yet proudly marched to their respective seats.

There were several speeches that followed. The Principal, Mr. Wright, congratulated the students on a job well done, and encouraged them to follow their dreams. One of the teachers gave some hilarious anecdotes regarding things the students had done or said over their four years in that school, and wished them well in their future. The last two speeches were from two of the senior class. Their words both moved and inspired their classmates. The procession of the graduates concluded without fault; not one person tripped, no one tried to accept their diploma with the wrong hand, and all students stood and sat together as they practiced. It was beautiful. It was flawless. Jo clutched her diploma to her chest and smiled so big she was sure her mouth would split wide open. Then Mr. Wright announced the graduating class of 2010, and total chaos and mayhem erupted as students tossed their caps into the air, leapt for joy, and cheered.

Following the recession, Jo found her mom searching for her in the crushing mob. They hugged, and cried. "Jo, sweetie, I love you so much, and I am so proud of you!"

"I know, Mom. I love you!"

Charlie and Alex came up then to give hugs to Jo's mom, and there were hugs all around from Charlie's parents, Brad and Mindy Allen, then more hugs from Sam and Kendra Turner, Alex's parents. Finally, with a last hug and a wave, Jo left her mom in the care of their neighbor and the three girls left for the sober grad party.

"We are graduates! High school graduates!" Charlie was ecstatic. She was dancing and leaping as she led the way to the building where the party was starting. Jo and Alex laughed with her, and allowed themselves to be dragged along by their energetic friend. They went to the girl's locker room to change into jeans and T-shirts before they entered into the fun.

The party was a complete success. There were gifts for each of the graduates from the community, collected by a very active Parents' Club. There were games and small prizes for each game. There were unlimited sodas, candy, pizza, hamburgers, hot dogs, and every other kind of junk food teenagers love. The three girls went to check out the water balloon game they

had helped with earlier that day, and got caught off-guard by a few of the boys that were there already. Alex got hit in the legs, and instantly drenched. Charlie saw what was going on, and squealing, turned to run away, and was beamed in her side. Jo took a balloon in the chest, and it splattered all over her.

“Oops,” Danny from Physics class apologized, “I’m sorry Jo, I didn’t mean for it to hit there.” He grinned sheepishly.

“Sure you didn’t.” Jo laughed. Then she nodded to Alex and Charlie, and they grabbed a balloon in each hand. Danny and Rob, the other boy who was on the offensive, were outnumbered, and it didn’t take long for them to jokingly cry “uncle.” Laughing, the girls left them, dripping wet, and went to get some food.

It was a warm evening, so getting wet actually felt good. They went from station to station, trying the games, working puzzles, solving math equations in one place, and having a blast. Charlie was imbibing too much caffeine in Alex’s opinion, but Charlie just laughed and drank another. After several hours of play, the girls began to tire.

“Girls, I think the caffeine buzz is wearing off,” Charlie informed them. “I’m pooped. I’m gonna call my mom for a ride. How much longer are you staying?”

“Not much longer. Jo’s coming home with me. Her mom’s car broke down so she doesn’t have a ride home. I think we’ll head out when you do.”

Charlie pouted. “Why wasn’t I invited?”

Alex sighed, “It was a last minute thing, Charlie. Jo didn’t have a way home, and since we knew we would be late, she asked if she could sleep at my place and get a ride home in the morning.”

“Oh. Ok.” Charlie thought about that for a minute. “Well, can I crash at your place too? Let’s have one last sleepover before I go off to college!”

Jo didn’t want to be the cause of any jealousy, so she quickly spoke up, “Yeah, Alex, lets both go home with you. Then Charlie’s parents won’t have to come get her either, and tomorrow we can hang out all day or something. It will be fun!”

“Ok, Charlie. Call your mom and tell her, and we will go to my house and sleep. I’m ready. It’s been a long day.”

After Charlie made a quick phone call, the girls collected their stuff: the graduation attire, the prizes and gifts they had received, and a few sodas for the road, then went to the student parking lot to get in Alex’s car for the trip home.

The parking lot was well lit, and a lot of students were milling around, saying good-byes to friends. Alex and Jo hugged several girls they knew from a class or two, and Charlie hugged a few of the boys. Alex and Jo looked at each other and laughed. Charlie would never change, they agreed, as they got into Alex’s car and headed out of the parking lot. At the stop sign leaving the school, as Alex was turning onto the main road heading home, she heard Jo’s sharp intake of breath. She quickly looked over and saw Jo staring off at the parking lot where they had just left. Following the direction Jo was looking, Alex turned to see what it was. Then she saw it. The black car with tinted windows. It looked exactly like the one they had seen earlier in the day, and it was backing out of its space to leave, as if to follow them.

## Chapter 3

Jo wanted Alex to leave, but at the same time, didn't want that black car to follow them. She looked around quickly for other friends, other cars, anyone to help. There were a few other seniors getting into cars, preparing to leave, but none close enough to block the black sedan. She saw Alex was pausing too, and searching the lot, as if thinking the same thoughts. Suddenly from the far side of the parking lot, totally opposite where the black car had parked, a small sporty car with a couple in it sped up behind Alex. At the same time and just as quickly, an older model large luxury car pulled too quickly and too sharply into the parking entrance from the main road and lost control. Barely missing Alex's car, the long vehicle smashed into the sports car's rear bumper at a forty-five degree angle, totally blocking the entrance to the parking lot. The exit lane, containing the sports car, was now blocked as well, since the occupants exited their vehicle to have it out with the "gramps" driving the luxury car. That gentleman got out of his vehicle, too, and the girls saw that everyone involved was fine. At a nod from Jo, Alex made hasty their escape. Jo laughed, relieved, as they hit the open road towards Alex's house, and Alex smiled.

"What a perfect time for them to have an accident," Alex was the first to acknowledge their escape.

"I'm sorry that had to happen," Jo nodded in agreement, "But since it did, I'm glad it was right then."

Charlie, completely oblivious to the presence of the black car, sat in the back seat staring dumbfounded at her two friends. "What horrible things to say! I am ashamed of you two!" Jo and Alex burst out laughing. Charlie folded her arms and pouted the rest of the trip.

Totally exhausted, the three girls arrived at Alex's home and climbed into their respective beds, couches, and sleeping bags, and quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, after a long rest, the girls awoke to hot breakfast that Alex's mom had prepared for them -- pancakes, warm maple syrup, bacon, and scrambled eggs. The girls ate ravenously. "Partying all evening makes you hungry," Charlie noted. Once breakfast was finished, the girls quickly helped to put the kitchen back in order, and then they headed to Charlie's house to help her pack for New York.

"I really wish you didn't have to go so soon, Charlie," Jo sighed. "I wish you could just wait a few days."

"Silly Jo! I won't be gone the whole summer! Just three weeks. I will be back before you even miss me, I promise!" Charlie still hadn't remembered her birthday, Jo realized, and she refused to bring it up. It would seem as if she was being petty, or as if she just wanted Charlie around to give her a gift or something. It would be the first time since grade school that the three of them didn't celebrate one of their birthdays together. Jo noticed Alex smiling sadly at her. Alex did remember, and Alex, too, had decided it best not to remind Charlie what she would be missing when she left. Jo sighed. *This is what growing up means*, she concluded.

It was early afternoon when the packing was finished. One of the servants in the Allen's home knocked on the door of Charlie's bedroom and announced lunch was being served on the terrace, so they headed downstairs to another meal together. Delicate sandwiches with the crusts removed from the bread, small bowls of watercress salad, a dish of fresh sliced fruits, and ice cold, freshly brewed tea were gratefully consumed. The girls laughed and joked about moving from one house to the next for food.

"I guess dinner is at your house, Jo!" Charlie giggled.

Jo laughed, too, “Yep, I think mom is making soup tonight, you should all come over.”

Honestly, Jo had no idea what her mom was making for dinner, but soup was a common occurrence at their house. It was fast and cheap, and both mother and daughter enjoyed it. For that reason, more often than not, soup *was* for dinner.

“I love your mom’s chicken soup, Jo,” Alex responded.

“Let me call her and see when she is getting off work, then we can plan the rest of our last day with Charlie.”

Jo pulled out her cell phone and dialed her mom. The cashiers at the market were discouraged from accepting personal calls during working hours, but Jo knew her mom would return her call on her next break, and planned to leave her a message. She was surprised when her mom answered the phone.

“Hi, honey. How was the party last night?”

“Oh, mom! Hi! I didn’t expect to actually get you,” she laughed. “I was planning on leaving you a message to call me on your next break, but this is better! Oh, and the party was a blast! I will tell you about it later.”

“Oh, good! I’m glad you had a good time. What were you going to leave me a message about?”

“Alex, Charlie and I are crashing the house for dinner. Is that okay? And Alex wanted to know if you are by any chance fixing chicken soup.” Jo grinned as Alex tried to wave her a warning not to ask that. Jo’s mom loved that Alex and Charlie liked coming over even though the house was old and ugly. She always told her daughter that people who judged other people by their possessions weren’t worth knowing. It was nice to know her mom liked her friends, and vice versa.

“Yes, I’m sure that can be arranged. Are the girls sleeping over too?” her mom asked.

Jo quickly pulled the phone away from her ear for a moment to ask the girls, “Mom wants to know if you are sleeping over, or just pigging out.”

Jo’s mom could be heard over the phone yelling, “I didn’t say that!” Alex and Charlie laughed.

“No, I can’t. We are leaving early tomorrow for the airport. I’m sure my parents want me at home.” Charlie sighed. “But I want to when we get back.”

“I can’t either. Dad said I had today off since we were out so late, but he wants me to take a shift at the travel agency tomorrow, and I have to open, so it’s going to be early, but Charlie and I definitely will crash at your place after she gets back, and I might while she’s gone.”

Jo put the phone back to her ear, “No, mom, not sleeping, just pigging out.” She smiled at her friends’ glares of exasperation.

“Ok, I will be off early anyway, and it’s fine that the girls can’t sleep over. I took the next two days off to be with *my* girl. I need to talk to you tomorrow about some things.”

Jo raised her eyebrows in question, “Should I be worried?”

“No, honey, its just some things I need to tell you, now that you are turning eighteen. I’ve been putting it off, and I can’t put it off any longer.”

Jo smiled, and chuckled, “Mom, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I already know about the ‘birds and the bees.’ We had that conversation years ago.”

“No, Jo, not about that.” She could hear the smile in her mom’s voice, and was relieved to know that whatever it was, it was not a bad thing.

“My break is almost over, Jo, so I need to get back to work. Bring the girls over whenever; I will put the soup on as soon as I get home.”



“Love you, mom!” Jo listened to her mother echo the words, and then she hung up. “It’s chicken soup tonight, and I’m ordered to bring you piggies along!”

Alex and Charlie pretended to get angry with Jo for that comment and they chased each other around the terrace like small children, laughing and shouting, and trying to avoid falling in the swimming pool. Finally Jo stopped running, breathless, and let the other two catch her and pummel her gently. Then they all collapsed on the carefully manicured lawn and did some cloud gazing. Jo pointed out a bunny with a huge cottontail. Charlie found a puppy that was long and skinny. Alex saw a science beaker filled with a mysterious fluid. Jo and Charlie laughed at that; Alex was always way too serious.

The next few hours the three best friends hung out in town. They did some clothes shopping with Charlie, Alex dragged them through a technology store, and Jo wanted to check out the bookstore. Shopped out, they headed to Jo’s house. As they neared the mobile home park, Jo glanced at the spot across the street where the black car had been yesterday to see if it was there still. No, it was gone. She’d been trying hard not to think about that black car, and had succeeded most of the day. She wished she could just forget about it.

The house smelled like chicken soup when they entered. Jo had noticed her mom’s car parked outside the trailer, and mentioned it after she put down her backpack and other things that she had been hanging on to since the party the night before.

“Mom, you got the car fixed?” she asked as she entered the kitchen and gave her mom a quick peck on the cheek.

“Well, it’s the funniest thing. Today, the car started just fine. Mrs. Harper gave me a ride in to work today, and when I was ready to come home, I decided to just try it, and it started right up. I have no idea what is wrong with it now, but I just drove home and thanked God.”

Jo gave her mom a hug. “I’m glad it’s working, too, mom.”

Jo led Alex and Charlie into her room, and she put away the dress and things from the graduation the previous evening. Then she took off her beautiful earrings and necklace that she had been wearing all day, and put them back in the box they came in. She put the box into a small metal chest where she kept all her treasures. It was a funny, old rusty box, really, but it was large enough to hold many of the pretty little keepsakes Jo had collected over the years. “I want to keep these for special occasions.”

The three girls went back into the kitchen to discuss the party with Jo’s mom. More than the other two girls’ moms, they all three knew that Linda Becker loved to hear every detail about any event they had attended, so they laughed and grinned and told story after story of the evening. Soon, she was placing hot bowls of soup in front of each of them, and one for herself. Charlie was relaying the water fight with Danny and Rob, and paused as Jo’s mom sat down and said a sweet, short prayer, blessing the food. As soon as she heard the “Amen,” Charlie picked up the story.

This kind of day was a favorite for Jo and her mom. Jo loved it that her friends loved her mom, and that her mom loved her friends. It was a perfect ending to a great day.

About nine o’clock, Charlie looked at Alex and suggested she should get home, since she had to leave early for the airport. Alex glanced at her clock, startled. She joked that time flew at the Becker house, and Jo’s mom smiled. Yes, it was a great day.

Jo walked Alex and Charlie out to Alex’s car.

“See you in three weeks, Charlie,” Jo hugged her tight. “Be safe in the big city. Don’t go anywhere alone.”

Jo gave Alex a hug too. “Don’t work too hard tomorrow. Oh, and book me a trip to Hawaii.” Alex laughed. It was a longstanding joke between them.

Jo watched them drive away and went back into her house. Her mom was finishing up the few dishes. Jo picked up a towel to dry.

“Mom, what was it you wanted to talk to me about? About turning eighteen?”

Her mom looked at her, “Oh, honey, we shouldn’t get into it tonight. It will take hours and hours. I have a lot of information to give you.”

Jo began to be concerned. Hours and hours? Was something wrong? Her mother saw the worried frown on Jo’s face and rushed to reassure her.

“Now, Jo, it’s nothing bad. It’s just going to be a lot to process. I want us to have plenty of time to talk. I took all day off tomorrow, so we can discuss everything thoroughly. I want to be able to answer any question you can come up with, but I’m sure you will think of something I hadn’t prepared for. However, I have some papers and things, and a lot of ‘stuff’ as you kids say, and I need to tell you about it.”

“What does it have to do with turning eighteen?”

“Well, I’m not sure anything will happen at all, but if something comes from your turning eighteen, I want you to be prepared.”

“Wait; is this something every girl talks with her mom about at age eighteen? Like a rite of passage?”

Her mom laughed. “No, dear, nothing like that.” She finished washing the last bowl and handed it to Jo, who dried it and put it away. “Let’s just leave it that I need to talk to you before you turn eighteen about turning eighteen, and that it’s important. Tomorrow, you will know everything, but don’t worry about it. It’s nothing bad. There’s just a lot of information you need to be in possession of on your birthday.” She gently pushed Jo towards her room.

“Now, off to bed. Dream good dreams. Don’t let anything burden you tonight. I love you, sweetheart. I’m so proud of you.”

Jo accepted her mom’s hug and a kiss on the forehead, and then headed to bed. She was perplexed about the “discussion” her mom wanted to have with her the next day. Since it was important enough to take a whole day off of work for, it must be big. Her mom rarely missed work. Even when her mom was really sick, she still trudged off to work. Jo knew it was because they needed the money. She sighed. She knew that the day after her birthday she would need to start looking for a job. She had given herself these few days to relax after graduation, but would begin filling out job applications immediately after her birthday. Being eighteen instead of seventeen would help her become eligible for some of the jobs she wished to apply for.

As Jo drifted off, she wondered if the black car was parked across the street once more, but she was too tired to ponder it further. And Joanna Arianna Becker slept. She had no way of knowing that the driver of the black sedan was at that moment standing just outside her window.

## Chapter 4

Security agents Roberts and Diaz and the other four members of their team had kept a diligent watch on Miss Becker for the past ten days. One vehicle followed her when she left her home for school, a different one when she left for home. There was a vacant mobile home a few doors away from the Beckers' home, and they had discreetly rented it, and were using an older model luxury vehicle at that post. An "Old fogey's car" agent Diaz had dubbed it; however, it fit in with the surroundings perfectly. When they saw Miss Becker exit her home to catch the school bus, one or the other was tinkering in the yard in coveralls, or under the hood of the car.

Once the bus was gone, a phone call to a house down the block sent a sporty car chasing after the bus. "Out for a joyride" was the façade that the agents in that car used; a man and a woman, in casual attire, taking in the view. They could have been tourists, or home-folk returning after making it big in the City. They followed the bus, far back, slowing frequently as if to check out a home for sale, or watch a squirrel climb a tree. When the bus completed its route and the students disembarked at the school that couple nodded to a maintenance worker cutting the hedges at the high school and went back to their post.

A janitor at the school walked the hallway behind Jo and her two friends on the way to the supply closet. If Jo had noticed him at all, she would have considered him a hard worker. He was always sweeping, or mopping, or fixing something when she moved from class to class. It never entered her mind to wonder why the janitor seemed to be always there. She didn't notice him. Once the last bell had rung and school was finished, the janitor put away his things and left for the day. The maintenance man watched Jo as she got back on the bus, or, as she did the last day of school, got into Alex's car. Once she was in her chosen mode of transportation, he nodded to a deliveryman in a truck parked across the street, put away his mower and his clippers, and left for the day.

The delivery driver seemed lost, as it took him many turns to find his location, and he always kept the bus, or Alex's car, in sight. Every other day, they switched to a mailman. They worked hard to keep their team invisible.

In short, they had a fleet of vehicles at their disposal, and no two were alike. So on the third day into the surveillance, when a black sedan with tinted windows appeared, they were on their guard.

It was first spotted at the mobile home park. Roberts saw the black sedan with dark tint stop across the main road from the park. He couldn't see through the tinted glass, it was too dark, but no one got out, and after a few minutes, the car drove off. Two days later, he saw the same car again, but this time, after it stopped, he spotted a tall, thin man wearing black slacks and a suit jacket getting out and crossing the road. Once across the road, the man blended into the foliage, and crept in the direction of the Beckers' home. Roberts was wearing khaki shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and tennis shoes. He was walking the dog, part of the cover he'd established at the mobile home park. It was the middle of the day, and Miss Becker was at school, with the janitor and maintenance man watching her. His job here was to wait for her return, when he would once again be her unnoticed bodyguard. The stranger, however, did not belong in the park. This location, as well as its residents, had been under surveillance from the beginning, as part of the initial report he had passed on to Director Johnson. The car and the man both were new entities to be researched and possibly taken care of.

Roberts led the dog back to the rented home and found Diaz already taking stock of the intruder.

“Do you think he’s the one who is trying to kill the girl?” Diaz asked.

“Either the one, or sent by him. Either way, we need to find out who he is and track his movements. I’m going out to his car to get a license plate and see what else I can find. Radio if he heads back to his car.”

Roberts left the dog at the mobile and donned a floppy hat. Looking like an old geezer out for a stroll, he headed up the road toward the exit to the park then, glancing to see where his prey was, dashed across the main road to the unfamiliar car. He quickly made note of the license plate, then went around to the passenger front door. He pulled out a flat rod he had hidden in his clothing, slipped it into the car door along side the window, and popped open the lock. He glanced around quickly to see if anyone was about, then opened the door, and slipped inside. He radioed to Diaz to see if the coast was still clear, and Diaz told him the man was searching the perimeter of the Beckers’ mobile. Roberts opened the glove box to search for any information regarding the owner of the car. Finding no registration information, he felt on top of the visors on both sides of the windshield, and then looked in the pockets on the doors. Nothing. Whoever this guy was, he had no registration in the vehicle. Maybe that could still be useful, he thought. Suddenly he heard Diaz calling him over the radio.

“Suspect headed your way.”

Roberts took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped down any surface he might have touched, then quickly escaped, remembering to lock the door. He went into the bushes of the house nearest him, and watched. The man came back across the street, got in his car and left. Once it was clear, Roberts headed back to the mobile to talk to Diaz.

“What did he do around the trailer?” he asked as soon as the door was closed and he was inside.

“Nothing. He never tried the doors, he never paused long enough to plant a bug or a bomb, and most of the time he just searched the plants. It was like he was looking for something.”

Two days after that, the black car and the man appeared again. It was earlier in the day this time, just after the girl had left for school. Again the man furtively searched the bushes and plants surrounding the Becker’s home.

“Well he couldn’t have dropped anything. We’ve been here a week, and even sporadically before that while compiling the initial information for the Director. Other than the last time we saw him searching the bushes, he hasn’t been here that I’ve seen.”

“Maybe he has a partner that left something for him here, and he came to retrieve it.”

“Well, I don’t like him snooping around. I’m going to scare him off.” Roberts put the dog on a leash, and went out to walk him. He headed toward the Beckers’ mobile first, and, as Roberts suspected, the man melted into the shadows, went back to his car and drove away. Roberts headed back to the rental.

“He got spooked, just as I knew he would. I sure would like to know what he thinks he lost.”

Diaz nodded, then suddenly jumped up, excited. “Wait. I just remembered something,” Diaz said. “Yesterday while you were walking the dog, a guy came and pruned the roses at the Beckers’. Then he did the same at the Harper lady’s trailer next door, but I didn’t see him come here. What if the gardener wasn’t a gardener?”

“Let’s find out.”

Roberts picked up the phone and called the front office. “Hi. Yes this is Mr. Jones in space seventy-two. I was wondering if you could send your gardener to trim the hedges in front of the rental here. It’s really shabby looking, and my daughter is coming to visit tomorrow.”

“No, I’m terribly sorry,” was the reply, “each tenant is responsible for his own yard. We do not have a gardener on staff.”

Roberts looked at Diaz and nodded. “So you don’t have someone to prune the roses either?” he pressed.

“No, sir, I’m sorry. That, too, is your responsibility.”

“Thank you.” He hung up.

Diaz turned to Roberts, “I’ll get my gloves. We need to search that rosebush.”

The two men walked up the road the few feet to the Beckers’ mobile. Diaz donned his work gloves and Roberts stood by and kept an eye out. He asked questions about how to prune, and what was the best tool to use, so that if anyone saw them, it would look like Roberts was receiving a pruning lesson from Diaz. As Diaz answered the questions, he carefully searched each stem and leaf of the rosebush he had seen the fake gardener pruning the day before. Then down near the bottom of the bush, he saw a tiny string, nearly invisible. He followed the string to see where it went and, noticing it went down into the dirt, he pulled on it gently, and then out of the dirt popped a key. They two men looked at each other. This was big.

Diaz cautiously cut the string and removed it from the rosebush. Roberts turned as if to leave, said thank you for the pruning help, and headed back towards their rented trailer. Diaz glanced around. He knew what he had to do. Making sure no one was watching, he took the key and mounted the Beckers’ steps to their front door. He inserted the key into the lock and turned. It opened. The adversary had somehow gotten past their watch and found a way into the house. This was bad.

Diaz re-locked the door and returned to the rented house where he knew Roberts would be waiting.

“Well? Does it open the door?” Roberts asked impatiently.

“Yes.” Diaz sighed. “We’d better notify Director Johnson. Someone got past us and devised a way into the house. Miss Becker is no longer safe.”

“I wonder why the guy who was here earlier didn’t find the key.”

“It was hidden well. We wouldn’t have found it if I hadn’t seen which rosebush the gardener was pruning yesterday.”

“So the first time the fellow came, it wasn’t planted yet. Today, we spooked him before he found it. This could have gone bad, but we know almost certainly now, that that man is a hired assassin.”

They called the director to notify her of the new threat. She immediately demanded a full report. “The black sedan’s license plate was phony,” Roberts began once Diaz was on the line with him. “There was no registration, so no ID on the perpetrator. A man posing as a gardener placed the key we discovered at the location. I do not know how that man got a key to the home, but we were able to verify that the key does indeed unlock the front door of the mobile home.”

“You got a good look at the man from the black sedan?” she asked Roberts.

“We both did, ma’am. Dark hair, dark eyes, he wore black slacks and a suit jacket. He was dressed well. Expensive. The black sedan was a late model, no telltale marks.”

“Any idea about the gardener?” she directed her question to Diaz.

“We questioned a few of the other residents. Apparently there was a pest control company out a week or so ago. The residents who were unable to be at home during the day were

requested to leave a key at the office. Since Mrs. Becker works, and Miss Becker was in school, we can assume they left a key as requested. We are tracking the employees now, and will inform you when we find the one who copied the key. The company is legit, but the assassin must have found out about the planned spray,” he checked his notes, “some kind of ant problem in the mobile home park. What is strange is that this is the first time this Park has ever paid for pest control. We assume that one of the employees of the company copied the key.”

“We are still one week from safety. You cannot let this guy get that close again,” the director emphasized. “Miss Becker is your life right now. You don’t eat, sleep, or breathe for the next seven days, you hear me?” The two agreed and hung up. Even though they knew the key had been copied before their assignment to the case, and that they had seized the duplicate before the assassin got his hands on it, they still felt responsible. They must protect the girl at all costs. They went back to their post subdued, and sent the couple off to meet the bus, which would be bringing Miss Becker home shortly.

“We need better surveillance on the trailer. Can we set up some cameras on the back side so we can see all around?” Diaz suggested.

“We considered that, but there really is no place to conceal them.”

“Well we can at least bug the back of it, so we can hear if anyone goes around back that we didn’t see.”

“Yes,” responded Roberts, “That we can do.” He glanced at his watch. “It will have to wait until tonight, though. The girl will be home too soon to do it now.”

The next few days passed without further incident. The description of the suspect returned no matches in any database the government allowed them to use. The pest control guy had quit work the day after pretending to be a gardener, and had packed up and skipped town. They had a name, but found the man’s real identification in the garbage can of his hastily vacated apartment. That meant he had obtained a new identity. Another dead-end. So the team watched and waited, and became more and more protective of the girl in the trailer.

## Chapter 5

The black car did not appear again for four days. Then, just three days before the girl's eighteenth birthday, it surfaced. The assassin seemed bolder this time. He was out of the car and across the street while the girl was still walking to the bus. It was her last day of school, and she was almost to the bus stop as the man stepped through the brush outside the park and into the yard of a neighboring mobile home. Roberts and Diaz were ready for him. If he made any move toward the girl, they would take him out, but he didn't. He did, however, do the search again. This time, however, when Roberts decided to walk the dog to scare him off, the man didn't budge.

"Excuse me, sir, are you looking for something?" Roberts asked as he came within hearing distance. The dog stopped obediently at his side.

"I lost something in the bushes, old man. Just go on about your business."

"I happen to know that you don't live in this trailer. Maybe you need to move on, sir."

The man looked up. He had heard the threat in Roberts' tone, and was sizing him up. He paused as if making a decision.

"All right. I will. I don't need it anymore anyway." And he casually walked up the road as if he belonged in the park, and out the exit, to his car. Before his engine had even started, Roberts was on the radio to the couple in the sports car.

"Davis, Michaels. Has the girl arrived at school?"

"Yes," came the reply, "we just saw agent Thomas posing as the groundskeeper walk her in."

"Good, I need you to tail the black sedan. He's headed north on the main road from the park; you should meet him if you head back now. I think he's going to try something today."

"Ok, we are on it."

"He might be heading to the school. Regardless, let me know where he is at all times."

"Got it."

Roberts and Diaz straightened up the rental just in case they needed to leave quickly. They were used to living out of suitcases, and this case would actually be shorter than many they had handled, but leaving things behind when you departed a location was always bad. There was no telling how much trouble even the smallest unnoticed item could cause.

The radio crackled, then came to life. "He's at the school. It looks like he's staying put."

"Good. Stay on him. If he leaves the vehicle at all, one of you follow him, and one of you stake out the car."

"Ten-four."

Next followed an intense sixteen-hour wait, observing the black car. Even the tiniest movement of the man behind the wheel put the couple watching him on alert. Late in the afternoon, the two agents spotted Miss Becker and her two friends pointing at the black car in the parking lot, from inside the fence that separated the lot from the school. As soon as Miss Becker walked away, the black car came to life, and drove off. They followed him to a small café where he ate and drank, and used the facilities. Agent Michaels, the female agent, went in to watch him. She ordered two sandwiches as well, since both she and Agent Davis were famished. She stood at the counter and flirted with the help, while observing the assassin unnoticed. She used the ladies room while waiting for the sandwiches, then took drinks and food out to the car.

"He's still in there?"

“Of course, he’s a slow eater.” Michaels handed a sandwich and drink to Davis and they both ate rapidly. Getting a chance to eat was sometimes impossible for hours on end, so they had learned to get food every chance they had. Sometimes they stored food in the car for long stakeouts.

The assassin sauntered out of the café and back to his car. He drove back towards the mobile home park. Michaels radioed ahead.

“He’s heading back your way, Roberts. Not sure what his plan is. Isn’t the girl graduating tonight?”

“Yes, and the mom came home earlier today, so I suspect Miss Becker will be coming home before going to graduation. Yes, the friend just dropped her off.”

“All right. As soon as this guy settles, we will change vehicles and ID’s and meet you at the school as planned.”

“Good. Take two vehicles. We might need them, you never know.”

Roberts and Diaz were alert and ready. They knew the assassin was going to try to make a move within in the next three days. Tonight might be the night. Shooting the girl while she was walking across the stage to receive her diploma was something he might try. It was hard to prevent, as well, unless they knew where he was at all times.

The black car drove slowly through the mobile home park. This was new. He had never entered the park before. He paused near the Beckers’ home, probably trying to see who was home. The agents wondered if the assassin knew that the mom’s car was disabled, and so had gotten home with a neighbor. Then the car continued; pausing at another empty mobile just two doors past the one that Roberts and Diaz were renting. Roberts sent a knowing look to Diaz. The assassin was assessing this location as a possible sniper position. Fortunately, they would instantly know if the assassin chose to enter that site, since they had wired it, and all the other empty mobile homes in the park, for sound. The ones nearest to the Becker’s home, like that one, were also set up with alarms on any entry point, and a computer would notify them if the perimeter was breached.

Within a few minutes, Davis pulled up alongside the entrance to the mobile park, on a motorcycle. He would be following along with the female agent, Agent Michaels, to make sure of the location of the black car and its occupant at all times tonight. Michaels was heading back to the high school in the sporty car to watch for threats before the girl got back. The last two agents, Agent Thomas and Agent O’Brian were still in their roles as janitor and groundskeeper at the high school. They were making sure that anyone working behind the scenes of the evening was who they said they were. It would be easy for the assassin to slip in as a parent helper, or visiting faculty, and they would make sure that didn’t happen.

When it came time for the Beckers to go to the evening ceremonies, Roberts and Diaz discreetly followed them in the older model luxury car they were using as their cover. Davis had already reported that the suspect vehicle had arrived at the high school, and the man they were watching was sitting in the stands with the rest of the friends and family of the graduates. Michaels had found a vacant spot right behind him, three rows back, and was unabashedly flirting with a young college kid. The young man was blushing, and having the time of his life, while Michaels was calculating each and every move the man she was watching made.

Having observed the graduation rehearsal, the team of six knew exactly when Miss Becker would be out in the open. That was the time they dreaded the most. As soon as her row stood to approach the stage, Michaels stopped flirting and focused all her attention on her prey. She watched the man reach into his pocket, and she prepared herself to tackle if necessary, but



all he pulled out was a set of binoculars. Oh, so that was his goal. He wanted to get a good look at the girl. Okay, looking was fine, but Michaels stayed on her guard. Once Miss Becker had received her diploma, and, with the rest of the students in her row, was again seated, Michaels breathed a sigh of relief, and relaxed just a bit. She turned her head to laugh at something the college kid said, and almost missed her man rising to leave the bleachers. She excused herself to the ladies' room, and quickly followed the suspect out. Once she was clear of the crowd she beeped her radio once, to signal the groundskeeper and janitor to pick up as lookouts. They saw the man and were on him instantly.

The rest of the evening was tense. All six agents kept vigil, watching the girl and the suspect equally. Since the girl was staying for the party, the janitor and groundskeeper easily kept her in sight, without being noticed. The other four watched the black car. The man had gotten in it as soon as he left the bleachers, and had not left it since. This was verified every hour by one or the other of them walking in front of his car, and glancing in through the windshield. Although it was tinted, it wasn't black like the sides and back, and the man was clearly visible in the driver's seat.

Late in the evening, with students milling around the parking lot, the janitor radioed that the girl and her friends were leaving. They would be going to the home of the tall black girl, Alex, and staying the night, he informed them. Roberts and Diaz left the parking lot first, and went up the main road a few hundred feet, so as not to be obvious when they followed the girls. Michaels and Davis both got into the sporty car, prepared for anything, and continued watching the black car. As soon as they saw the three girls get into the car, the agents pulled up alongside another car, hidden, ready, and waiting to see if black car would interfere. It would be bad for the girls to have to deal with the suspect this late in the evening, as they had to be exhausted.

The moment Michaels saw the black car back out, she knew they had to prevent a meeting tonight. Nothing should cast a shadow on Miss Becker's graduation day, she determined. "Let's block him in," she said to Davis. She radioed to Roberts, "Suspect on the move. Let's not let him leave. He doesn't know where the girl is headed, so we should make sure he doesn't find out."

"What's your plan?" Roberts asked.

"When I pull up behind the girls, come back into the parking lot. Let's block anyone else from leaving for a few minutes."

"Yes, that will work. Hope you aren't attached to your sports car." Roberts grinned. It was a company car. He radioed to the last two agents. "If you guys are out of your maintenance uniforms and back to your vehicle, I need you to tail the Becker girl. The rest of us are keeping the suspect away."

"We are pulling out of the staff parking lot now, sir. Yes, we see the car. We will update as necessary," they finished.

Davis quickly pulled up behind the girl Alex's car, before the black car could get close. Then they watched Roberts swing into the parking lot from the main road, and braced themselves for the impact they were sure was to come. Roberts squealed his brakes, and impacted the rear bumper of the sports car at the perfect angle to block anyone thinking of leaving. The black car had pulled up behind them, but they got out doing the expected exchange with Roberts, and checking damage to the vehicle, etc. All four agents involved in the "accident" observed the vehicle containing their charge quickly escape onto the main road, and saw Thomas and O'Brian on their tail. Relieved, they continued their ruse as long as they dared, then allowed other people in the crowd to help them move all the vehicles out the way, so the tired graduates could go to

their homes. The driver of the black sedan never got out of his vehicle. He just sat and waited for the exit to clear then burned rubber on his way out to show his irritation at the delay. No one had noticed Diaz furtively leaving the rest of the “accident” victims, and heading to the spare vehicle that Roberts had had the foresight to request Davis and Michaels bring. He quickly jumped on the small motorcycle near the edge of the lot, and within seconds, could see the taillights of the suspect’s car. The team of agents knew that the girls were already under watch, but they did not want to lose sight of the man who wished her harm. Knowing where he went was half of their battle.

The black sedan raced through the local town, up one street, down another, as if searching for something. Assuming it was Alex’s car he was looking for, Diaz radioed to the two agents following the girls for an update.

“They just entered the tall black girl’s house. After just a short while, all the lights were out. O’Brian and I are doing a perimeter security sweep now.”

“Good. The suspect is still in town, and can’t find the girl. I assume he will give up and find a motel soon.”

After another twenty minutes of dashing through streets, the suspect did give up. He drove up to a mid-class motel and went into the office, exiting a few moments later with a key. Diaz watched him enter a room at the end of the row, and reported to Roberts.

“Go into the office and see if he left a name,” Roberts ordered.

Diaz entered the office and sized up the clerk at the desk. Young, naïve - perfect. He pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and lay it on the counter, and with his hand still on it, he asked, “What name did the man who just left the office give when he registered?”

The clerk looked at him, then down at the cash, and said, “We are not allowed to give out that information, sir.” Then he slowly turned the computer screen around, so that Diaz could see it, and reached for the money. “I need to go check something in the back; I will be back in five minutes. Let me know if you need something I *can* help you with.” He took the money, and went into the back room.

Diaz quickly went around the counter, and jotted down the information on the computer screen. Name: John Smith. What a laugh. It was an obvious alias. Address: 1234 Main Street, New York, NY. Probably fake as well. He searched the screen for anything at all useful. Paid by cash, two nights. That was useful. The suspect would be in this motel the next night as well.

Diaz left the motel and returned to the motorcycle. He saw Roberts in the old luxury car parked across the street, and rode over to him to report.

“Fake name, fake address, paid cash two nights stay,” he informed. “Not a lot to go on, but we know he’s planning on staying another night. Do we have enough yet to get a government agency involved? Someone who has a license to kill?”

“I’ve been keeping an FBI friend of mine informed all along, but so far he doesn’t seem to think he can get involved. If we could find a weapon, or anything that shows that man is more than just stalking Miss Becker, then they will take over and protect her.”

“And the threats that came in?” Diaz questioned.

“Director Johnson was never able to determine the origin of the threats, so the FBI thinks the threats were a hoax, and this man is just a stalker.”

Diaz looked perturbed.

“Don’t worry about it, Diaz. If our girl is in peril, we will use deadly force to protect her. It wouldn’t be as easy as it would if the FBI did it, but we are licensed to carry weapons, and

protect our charge. Miss Becker will be safe. We will make sure of it.” And Roberts prepared for a long stake out. He wanted to be sure the man in the motel room never left his sight.

The next day, the suspect emerged late in the morning, and drove directly to the mobile home park. Having no idea where the girl was, he probably figured she would come home at some point. Roberts and Diaz watched him watch the mobile, and enjoyed the show. It was good to know she was away today, at the other friend Charlie’s home in the ritzy part of town.

Early in the evening, Davis informed Roberts that the girls were headed to the mobile park, so the game was on. Roberts donned the floppy straw hat from before and the dog chain, and prepared to take the dog for a few loops around the mobile home park. Diaz put on an electric company uniform, and climbed up a telephone pole near the Becker’s home. From there he had perfect view of any movement near the house. Davis, Michaels, Thomas, and O’Brian arrived back at the mobile park in stages, following the girls. They stationed themselves unobtrusively and sporadically through the mobile home park and surrounding area, as planned earlier. Thomas and O’Brian were to keep the suspect in sight at all times. They were the only two agents the suspect hadn’t yet seen, since they weren’t involved in the “accident” at the high school, but so far, the man hadn’t left his vehicle, even though the girls had been in the Becker home for several hours already.

Finally, Miss Becker’s two friends left in the tall girl’s car. Now there was just the mom and daughter to watch, and the assassin. At about ten o’clock, it was dark, and the two women in the mobile home were moving toward the rear of the home, shutting off lights as they went, as if preparing the house before retiring. Then, the last light was out. Roberts was still out walking the dog. He figured the poor thing was worn out from walking so much, and they had rested here and there as he saw fit, always within sight of the mobile. Then the radio crackled. It was Thomas.

“Suspect has left the vehicle, and is crossing the street. He’s heading to the brush near the road, and will be slipping between two mobiles and into the park within thirty seconds.”

“Ear-pieces in now, and radio silence unless it’s an emergency. Converge upon the mobile,” Roberts ordered the team.

From watching the man previous times, Roberts knew exactly where he would enter the park at, and was waiting there. He considered putting the dog back in their rental, but the dog was so pooped, he most likely would not make a sound, and he might need his dog walking cover if something happened.

The suspect came through a neighboring yard and towards the Becker’s mobile exactly where Roberts expected him. The man was stealthy, and dressed in black. If Roberts hadn’t seen him slip through the bushes, he would probably not have seen him at all. Using night-vision glasses, Roberts watched the perpetrator approach the home. The man searched the bushes briefly as before, but then gave up and softly, quietly climbed the stairs to the front door of the Becker’s home. He reached for the doorknob, and turned. Roberts held his breath for a moment, hoping Mrs. Becker had locked the door before going to bed. She had. Thwarted, the man left the front door and went around behind the trailer. From his towering height up the power pole Diaz, also using night-vision goggles, watched him move. The man stopped underneath a bedroom window and looked up, measuring the distance. The window was inaccessible without a ladder. The man then seemed to inspect the metal skirting surrounding the home, looking for an opening.

After about twenty minutes of investigation of the entire perimeter, the suspect went back through the shrubbery and across the street to his car. Then he drove away, Thomas and O’Brian following him. The other four agents, relieved, quietly assembled back at the rented mobile to

discuss plans for the next day. That would be the final day before Miss Becker's eighteenth birthday, and, from the intense scrutiny of the perimeter of the Becker's mobile, the assassin would be attempting to harm her very soon. Roberts assigned shifts for each of them in turn, and sent them off for rest, taking the first turn himself. The next thirty-six hours were going to be intense. Either they completed their assignment, delivering the girl alive and well to the Director the morning she was a legal adult, or they failed in their duty, and she died. Either way, they were holding Miss Becker's life in their hands. It was a heavy thing to hold, Roberts decided as he settled into his watch.

## Chapter 6

Jo woke up early the next day. She had slept fitfully, unable to shake the feeling that the important things her mom was going to tell her today would change her life. She felt anxious, apprehensive. She dressed quickly and headed to the kitchen to see if her mom was up yet. She wanted to get whatever it was out in the open, so she could quit worrying about it.

Her mother was in the kitchen, having just sat down with a cup of coffee and a piece of toast.

“Jo,” she exclaimed, “I didn’t expect you up for hours. Aren’t you still tired? It has been a busy few days for you.”

“Yes, Mom, but I can’t sleep with this thing hanging over my head. Knowing you want to talk to me about something important is keeping me from resting!”

Jo’s mom put her coffee cup down, and smiled apologetically at Jo. “I’m sorry to make you worry, dear. The only reason I told you at all was so that you wouldn’t plan today away with Alex and Charlie. I would have just sprung it on you this morning if I was absolutely sure you would stay home today.”

“Yeah, I guess you are right. I might have gone off today, not knowing you had taken the day off. Then it would have had to wait another day.”

She looked grimly at her daughter. “I’m sorry, Jo, but this won’t wait.” She sighed. “We may as well get it over with. Grab yourself some toast really fast. There’s juice in the fridge, too.”

While Jo was getting a quick breakfast, her mother excused herself to get something from her room. Jo ate sullenly, the food seemed tasteless. She dreaded this unknown thing. As she stared out the kitchen window, she saw the pest control guy spraying some liquid stuff along the road and around the shrubbery. *Odd*, she thought, *he was just here last week*.

When her mom returned and all the breakfast things were put away, Jo sat down at the table, and waited. “Okay, Mom, I’m ready. What’s going to happen when I turn eighteen? Am I adopted or something and you want me to find my birth parents?” That was one of the theories briefly considered during the restless sleep of the evening before. “Or do I have a horrid disease that begins to become aggressive in adulthood?” Her mom shook her head no to both ideas and sat down in the chair next to Jo. “Then I am actually a princess, and you have been raising me as your own because the evil fairy cast a spell on me, and when I turn eighteen I will prick my finger on a spinning wheel!” Jo announced laughing.

Smiling, her mother asked, “Are you through?”

“Yes, I’m ready. Spill it, Mom.”

She handed Jo an envelope. It was worn and almost yellowed. There was a small rip out of one corner. It had obviously been handled a lot.

“What is this, Mom?”

“That was the very last letter your father ever wrote me. I want you to read it.”

Jo looked up at her mother, dazed. “A letter from Daddy? Why didn’t you ever let me see it before?” She carefully pulled the folded pages out of the envelope, and flattened them out on the table.

“It wasn’t time yet, honey, but now it is.”

“How did Daddy die, mom? I don’t even remember him.”

“It was a car accident, Jo. The doctors say he died quickly, that he wasn’t in pain. You were just a baby. He loved you very much, Jo, and had plans for you.” She motioned to the letter in Jo’s hands. “Read the letter, honey. Maybe it will shed some light on your questions.”

Her mother busied herself cleaning up around the house as Jo picked up the letter. She first noticed the date of the letter – a little less than eighteen years ago. Jo figured she was about two months old when it was written. She began reading.

*My dearest Lin,*

*It pains me to be away from you again so soon. How much I miss being with you and our daughter in our own tiny little home. This will be the last time we will ever need to be separated my love. My business here in New York will be concluded, and I will be free to come home to my beloved family. I know we have been married just over a year now, and I cherish the faith you had in me to wait to tell my family about us. Once this trip is concluded, I will be free to tell not only my family, but also the whole world about you, and our beautiful Joanna. I cannot wait to place my daughter into the loving arms of her grandmother. My mother, in particular, will rejoice with my news! She had been lovingly nagging at me for several years to bring her home a daughter and bless her with grandchildren. It has been all I can do to refrain from telling her about you before it was time, but I must protect you and our baby at all costs, so the family must not know until this last bit of business is complete, and I have returned to you, my love.*

*I love this time of year in New York. The leaves are just starting to fall, the weather cooling. The colors are vibrant. I was wondering where you want to live once I return. You can choose anywhere in the whole world, my darling. Paris, Rome, London, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle, anywhere! Or we can stay in California if you wish, and raise our daughter, and her future siblings, in a small community. I will build you a castle on a hillside overlooking the ocean, or a cabin in the mountains near a stream. Be thinking of where you would want to live, my love. Just as soon as I return, I will grant any wish you have. I will bring you expensive flowers every day, and delectable boxes of chocolates. And I will lavish you with my love and affection. We will get every toy our little girl lays her eyes on, and truly spoil her rotten. We will never be poor again, sweetheart, I promise you that. Never again will we have to choose between milk and diapers. And yet, when I go off on these trips, you never ask me where I went, you never grill me for answers. Your trust is my crowning joy, and for that I honor you.*

*I know that sometimes you must wonder what I mean when I say these things. There are men who I deal with who I do not fully trust, and so for their sakes, I hide away the very thing I wish to shout about – my beautiful wife and daughter, but not anymore! Very soon, I am free from hiding, free to show off my gorgeous wife, free to introduce my baby to her grandparents, and free to never keep secrets from you again. I am oh so grateful for that! How I dread not being able to speak openly with you about this!*

*In three days, I will be coming home. The final papers will be signed tomorrow. I have been requested to stay for a party the evening after the signing, to celebrate the beginning of the business partnership. Then, the following morning, I will be flying to you. I wish it were now! I wish it were today!*

*Let us plan to take a vacation as soon as I return. I will book us a cruise to Hawaii if you wish, or a trip to Europe. Anywhere at all. We will celebrate our family! Celebrate the conclusion of business. Celebrate the fact that finally we can be together, and nothing will ever separate us again!*

*Now I must tear myself away from you, my darling Lin, and get some sleep. I will dream of you holding our little Jo, while standing on the beach at sunset, watching the waves come in and tickle your toes. Jo will laugh and coo and you will look down on her with your angelic smile that I see on you when gazing upon our daughter. I love you, Lin. I love you, love you, love you. And in three days I will shout it from the mountaintops!*

*Give our daughter a kiss for me. I will be home as soon as I can.*

*All my love,*

*Joe*

When Jo finished reading the letter, her eyes were misty. This was the only time she had ever met her father. To know how very much he had loved her and her mother was wonderful. She wished her mother had shared it with her before, but understood why it had been kept a secret. Her mother was still very much in love with him, and it was painful to talk about. Her mother saw Jo put the letter down, and came back to the table and sat down with her.

“He was a wonderful man, Jo. I still miss him every day.”

Jo wiped her eyes with a tissue. “I can see how much he loved you, Mom. I am so glad you had that.” Jo smiled, and hugged her mom. “So, how did the accident happen? He never made it home after this business trip?”

She nodded. “He was on his way to the airport. Apparently fall is wet and messy in New York, and it was raining. He was in a cab, and the driver lost control, and they hit a light pole.”

Jo listened to her mom’s explanation. “But Mom, from reading this letter, it seems that he hadn’t told anyone he was married, or about me either. How did you find out he had died? Did someone call you?”

“No,” She dropped her gaze to the table. To Jo, it looked like her mom was trying to hide tears. “When he didn’t arrive in three days, I called the motel where he was staying. We talked as often as we could on the phone, and he always stayed in the same motel so that I would know how to get hold of him if I needed him. And when I called the motel, he had checked out on time. Then I called the airlines, and asked about his flight. They informed me that he had never gotten on. I considered calling his parents, because I had contact information for them, but I was afraid that if he hadn’t told them about me yet, I could harm whatever he was doing in New York. Finally, I called hospitals and police stations in New York. I found out there are dozens of hospitals, and even more police stations, but after two days of calling,” she stopped for a moment, and a sob caught in her throat, “I found out that he had died at a hospital. They told me his body was at a mortuary somewhere near his parents’ home. I called the mortuary, and was able to find out the service times. I borrowed money from neighbors and friends, and left you with a lady we lived next to that adored you, and boarded a plane to New York. I went to your father’s funeral in secret. I shook hands with your grandparents, just as everyone else did, and I saw my husband lying in a coffin. I had to be sure he was dead, since I couldn’t ask anyone. And that was the only way I could think of to do it.”

By this time in the story, Linda Becker was sobbing openly.

“I know you are wondering why I didn’t confront Joe’s parents and tell them who I was. At the time, I was too distraught to even speak. Once I got back home, I felt that since he never told his family about me, or even you, that he had a reason. I could tell from the way your grandparents were dressed, and other people who attended the funeral, that your grandparents were wealthy. A woman and child showing up on their doorstep would seem like nothing more than gold-diggers so closely following the death of their son.”

“But the letter, Mom! You could have let them read the letter, which would have proven who you were.”

“The thing is, Jo, it didn’t matter to me. I had lost my husband, and had never met his family. There was no reason to expect them to care for us, and that is all that I would be doing if I revealed who we were to them, is asking for them to take us in and care for us. Your father didn’t talk about them often, and even though he told me that they would welcome their granddaughter, I really felt unsure and scared. After all, he didn’t tell them about us for over a year for a reason. And since he had never been able to reveal his reasoning to me, I was unprepared to take my infant daughter into unknown conditions.”

Jo slowly rubbed her mom’s back, just expressing her love. She asked, “Why did you wait until I was eighteen to tell me all of this, Mom. Why eighteen?”

“Tomorrow you are an adult,” she said, “and you can do what you wish. You can look up your grandparents; see if they are still alive. And if they really were wealthy, you may have an inheritance. Even if they are still alive, there might be something from your father. If the business he went to New York for that day concluded, maybe there is money somewhere for you.”

“So you didn’t want to seem like a gold digger when he died, but now you want me to become one?” Jo questioned her mother sharply.

Her tired mother sighed. “No, Jo, it’s not like that. I just want you to be able to have more than what I can provide. You can’t go to college because there isn’t money. You have your license but can’t drive because we have no reliable car. Your father spoke in that letter as if there would be money for us. I’m sure he would be sorrowful to know what we have had to do to survive these last eighteen years without him.”

“Maybe he would, Mom, but I’m not. You did a fantastic job keeping us going all these years. I’ve never gone hungry, I’ve always had decent clothes, and we’ve had a roof over our heads. We are truly blessed, Mom. Don’t you dare tell me you didn’t do enough!” Jo fiercely hugged her mom. “You are an incredible woman. Don’t ever think less of yourself, Mom.”

“But honey, there’s also the social security. Now that you are of age, we don’t get that anymore. I’m not sure how we will get by without it.”

“I’m going to get a job, Mom. I was waiting to turn eighteen because I know some places prefer eighteen-year-olds to seventeen-year-olds. I already have a few applications from some of the places around the market where you work. I figured if I could catch a ride to work with you, then I could save up a little at a time until we could get a second car.” Jo stopped for a second, and then questioned her mom. “Mom, something I was wondering about. How did you get social security for me after Daddy died when no one knew you were married or I was his child?”

“We married here, in California. The marriage certificate and your birth certificate have his name, and mine. It was a legal marriage, and a legal birth. All you need to collect surviving child benefits is a death certificate, which I was able to get from New York. If the government had challenged the claim, they would have asked for paternity test, which I would have agreed to. It’s all done through the government, has nothing to do with his family. In fact, I’m sure his family didn’t even know we were collecting on his social security, since inquiring into something like that would violate privacy laws.”

“Okay. That makes sense. All the paperwork was three thousand miles away from the rest of his life, so there was no conflict.”

“Well, I also had pictures of him and you together, and all of the rent, utilities, and everything was in his name. The only people that didn’t know about my marriage and your birth



were his family. The proper agencies had all the information. If his family had bothered to look at all, they would have easily found us, but they probably never even thought about trying. I mean, why wouldn't your son tell you something like that?"

Jo nodded her head in agreement. "So, the big talk you wanted to have with me today is to tell me I might have rich relatives, if I want them, and I'm welcome to become a gold-digger if I do." She smiled.

Jo's mom playfully smacked her daughter on the shoulder. "That is not why I told you about this. Some day you might want to look up your father's family. I am not opposed to meeting them, or even being friendly with them, if they are still alive. I guess the reason I never did is I still trusted my husband. He wanted us to wait. And I suppose - I am still waiting."

Jo considered that. She thought she understood her mom's reluctance to seek out the unknown relatives. And she secretly applauded her mom's determination to make it without a hand out, considering the fact that there was no way of knowing how the wife and child would have been accepted. Her mom did the safest, most cautious thing by simply continuing the secret.

"Mom, since we are openly discussing this, tell me about my father. How did you meet? I want to know everything."

The mother smiled indulgently. Jo already knew most of the stories, but she would tell them all again. They talked and laughed for hours, not even stopping while they fixed themselves a quick lunch. Jo relished days with her mom; they were rare. Her mom was always at work, and she worked hard. And soon, Jo would be working too. She sighed as she thought about it. It would be nice to go to college. She was intelligent, she knew, graduating fourth in her class, but she hadn't even applied for any of the scholarships or grants offered. She knew there wasn't even money for the gas to drive to college, if she did get the tuition waived.

Late in the afternoon, while Jo's mom was putting a cake into the oven to bake for Jo's birthday, the phone rang. Jo let her mom answer it since she knew both of her friends would be busy. She vaguely heard her mom trying to decline something. She heard, "I really can't" and "No, I don't think it's possible." Finally she heard her mom sigh, and say, "All right, I will be there in an hour." That made Jo sit up from where she was lounging on the couch, watching television.

"You have to go somewhere, Mom?"

Her mother came into the living room where Jo was. "Honey, I'm so very sorry. I planned this day for us months ago, but that was the super market on the phone. Two of the afternoon crew called in sick and then two others had an accident in the store. Something about a pallet fell; I'm not sure what happened. The manager has called in everyone who was available, and so far has only been able to get one other person at home. He begged, Jo. He's never been mean to be, but this was the first time he was actually nice. He told me that I was the most reliable cashier of all of them, and that he was doubling my salary permanently beginning today, whether I agreed to come in or not."

"Oh, Mom, that's terrific! I can see he really values you. It's about time!" Jo smiled. "You should go, Mom. I've had a terrific day with you. I felt like I spent the day with you and Daddy both. And I loved it, but it's ok, you should go. I'm going to hang out here and watch TV and be lazy my last day as a kid." Jo grinned and flipped channels with the remote.

"But, Jo, I just put your birthday cake in the oven!"

"It's okay, Mom, I know how to pull a cake out of the oven when the timer goes off. You didn't raise a nitwit. I can handle it." Jo grinned at her mom. She knew she was getting sassy, but

she felt good, and was happy, and wanted her mom to be okay. She could tell that her mom really wanted to stay, but was torn by “duty” calling.

“Okay. I will go. The timer will go off in about twenty minutes. Just set the cake out, we will decorate it tonight when I get home. I’m only doing about two-thirds of a shift. I will be off at eight o’clock. Can you get yourself some dinner? Oh, that’s so mean to do to you.”

“Mom, stop it! I’m a big girl! There’s soup left from last night, and I know how to use a microwave. I love you mom, but you are treating me like I’m turning eight, not eighteen.”

Jo’s mom sighed, resigned. “You’re right, my intelligent, lovely, *old* daughter.” She laughed at Jo’s frown.

“If I’m old, what does that make you?” Jo retorted.

The smiling mother raised her hands in surrender and went to her room to freshen up. She came out a few moments later, purse and keys in hand. She leaned over the couch and gave Jo a kiss on the cheek.

“I really am sorry we didn’t get the whole day, honey. I promise I will make it up to you.”

“I know, Mom. It’s okay. I will be fine.”

“Yes, you will,” her mom stood up. “Don’t forget the cake, and don’t forget to eat some dinner. I will be home as soon as I can.” Then her mom blew her a kiss and was gone.

It wasn’t for a few minutes that her mom’s last words hit her. Jo sat up straight, stunned. Those were the very last words her father had said in his letter, too.

## Chapter 7

Shortly after her mom left for work, Jo picked up the phone and called Alex. Though Alex had had to work that day, she would be finished and home by this time. So she called her.

“Hey,” Jo greeted her friend when Alex answered the phone, “you won’t believe what my mom told me today.”

“Oh yeah, your mom was telling you all about turning eighteen or something like that. So what is the big secret?”

“She let me read a love letter my dad had written to her right before he died. And she told me that their marriage and my birth were secrets, and that his family never knew. I have grandparents that don’t know I exist! Isn’t that insane?”

“Really? But why didn’t she ever tell them?”

“My dad didn’t want anyone to know until some business thing he was doing was finished. And it was the weekend he went to New York to finish that business deal when he was killed. Mom told me he was in a taxi and the taxi lost control and crashed.”

“So your dad’s parents never knew he got married and had a baby?”

“Right. And after he died, my mom figured if he had wanted to hold off telling them, there must be a reason. And since she had no way of knowing what his reason was, it might still be relevant, and the secret should still be kept, so she never said a word. She even went to New York to my dad’s funeral, and saw her in-laws there, but never said a word.”

“That must have been hard on her.”

“Probably, her parents died right as she was finishing high school, one after the other. Her dad died of cancer, and then her mom died two months later from a heart attack. So maybe she was looking forward to her in-laws being parents to her, too?”

“Yeah, they could have been. Sometimes in-laws get along, sometimes they don’t, but the fact that your dad didn’t want them to know about you guys yet makes me assume that they might not have gotten along. I mean, your dad had to have some kind of reason for hiding you two away.”

“But we will never know what it is.”

“Did your mom suggest that you go find your grandparents?”

“Not in so many words,” Jo answered. “She hinted that they seemed well-to-do, and that if I was to hunt them up, maybe there would be money for college or something, but when I cornered her about why she didn’t want to claim money from them, she told me that she didn’t want to seem like a gold-digger. Having a supposed wife and child show up at the home of a grieving mother and father seemed callous to her, but I don’t want to be a gold-digger either. Besides, if they even had an inkling that there could have been a family, we would have been really easy to find, with me collecting survivor benefits from my dad all this time.”

“But, Jo, if your dad didn’t tell them, why would they even think to look?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Jo sighed, exasperated. “I guess I’m torn. On one hand, I would love to have grandparents. I’ve never had any. On the other hand, maybe they don’t want someone to dredge up painful memories after all these years. Or, maybe they would totally shoot me down, and accuse me of trying to make a claim on an inheritance or something. That would be embarrassing and devastating. After doing okay without their money all these years, to have them accuse me of only appearing to try to weasel money out of them would break my heart.” She sighed. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You don’t have to decide all at once, do you? It’s not like you have an expiration date, and at the stroke of eighteen years, all claims are null and void, right?”

Jo chuckled. “Alex, you say the craziest things. Hey, if you’re not busy, why don’t you run over here and read my dad’s letter. Mom also pulled out a few photos for me to see, and her marriage certificate and my birth certificate. I know they aren’t remarkable, but mom talked more about dad today than ever before in my whole life. I feel like I know him better,” she said.

Jo heard Alex talking to someone in the background. “Okay, Mom said it was fine for me to come over. I wasn’t sure if she needed me here for anything. I will be there in a few minutes.” And they both hung up.

At the sound of a kitchen timer going off, Jo went into the kitchen and turned on the light. It was just getting dim in the house, not even dusk outside yet. In the Northern California summers, it wouldn’t be dark until ten o’clock at night. She pulled the cake from the oven and set it on the counter to cool. She then flipped through the photos again while waiting for Alex. She looked at the photos of her mother, eighteen years earlier. She was still as beautiful today, Jo acknowledged. She was shorter than Jo now, but still as slim as in the photos. Jo smiled at the pictures as she looked at the last one, and set them down on the table.

It didn’t take Alex long to arrive, and once she did, she picked up the letter first, to meet Jo’s dad, before she began looking at the photos.

Alex put the letter down, and her eyes were misty. “Wow, he really loved you guys. That was a sweet letter.”

Jo smiled and began walking Alex through the photos. She had sorted them chronologically the best she could guess. There weren’t many, maybe thirty in all.

“You could use these photos to prove you knew your dad, couldn’t you?” Alex ventured. “I mean, if they doubted your claim, that is. Maybe your grandparents would be thrilled to know you, and wouldn’t question your claim to be their grandchild. I mean, you don’t know how they will react until it happens.”

“I know all that, Alex. I guess what I don’t know is how it would all affect my mom. No matter what I do, she ends up hurt.”

Alex looked at Jo, stunned. “How do you see that, Jo?”

“Well, let’s say they wanted to know me. Once I showed up, and they rejoiced, and bought me presents, they would eventually become justifiably angry at my mom for keeping me from them all this time.”

“Okay, I could see how that would be bad, but what about the other?”

“If I go find them, and they refuse to acknowledge me, say my dad was never married, and deny us even the proof we have here, then my mom would be terribly hurt that she got my hopes up. She would blame herself for my pain.”

Alex pondered a minute. “Hmm. Yeah, I can see what you are saying, but, Jo; you’ve only had a few hours to think about all this. I think you should take more time. Give yourself a week, then decide if you want to find them. And after all, they may not be easy to find. Becker is not a rare name. Search for Becker in New York, I’m sure there are thousands of them. And, they could be dead already. I mean, your mom’s parents are, right?” Jo nodded yes. “Well, give yourself a week. Then make a decision, and follow through. And whatever happens, don’t stress over it. If it’s meant to be, it will happen.”

Jo smiled and hugged her friend. “Alex, you are always so calm and sane. You seem so much older and wiser than me.”

It had started to get even darker in the mobile. Alex and Jo were sitting and chatting in the kitchen, when the phone rang. When Jo answered, her mother was on the line, and let Jo know that two of the other cashiers had finally come in, so she was coming home a little earlier than planned. In fact, she was leaving right then, and would be home in about ten minutes. “Great, Mom, see you then,” Jo replied, and hung up.

Jo pulled the leftover soup out of the fridge and poured it into a big pot to begin reheating it on the stovetop. Alex asked Jo more questions about what her mom had told her about Joe Becker and the business trip. They continued chatting, and soon the soup was hot. Jo poured it into three bowls then set one in front of Alex and one at a place for herself. “We won’t wait for Mom. She should be here any minute, but knowing her, she might have stopped off for something. I can reheat it if she’s too long.”

The girls dug in, Jo not realizing how hungry she had gotten. She laughed. Alex looked at her questioningly. “It’s funny,” Jo told her, “I could hardly eat this morning in anticipation of the ‘big secret’ mom was going to tell me. And I was wondering why I was so hungry.” Alex smiled.

They ate soup, and careful not to soil them, looked through the last of the papers. Birth certificate, marriage license, other important papers regarding her father. Jo decided they should probably be put away so something didn’t happen to them, so she began gathering them all up. She stacked the photos in a neat pile on top of the papers, and grabbed the whole bunch to take to her mom’s room where her mom kept them safely in some box. She assumed the box would be open on the bed, and just as she entered the bedroom, the phone rang again. She stepped over to the nightstand and picked up the phone, expecting it to be her mom explaining why she was delayed, but a man was on the other end of the line.

“Hello?”

“Is this the Becker residence?”

“Yes, may I help you?”

“Is this Miss Becker?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Miss Becker, I’m terribly sorry to have to tell you this,” the man began.

Jo’s heart stopped. She felt it drop and thud into her stomach as she waited for the next words.

“Your mother has been in an auto accident, and she is seriously hurt. Is there any way you can get to the hospital?”

Jo stood, stunned. She was sobbing, and saying “No, no, no,” over and over. Alex ran in to where she was, and took the phone hanging from her limp hand.

“This is Jo Becker’s friend. What is going on?”

The voice at the other end told Alex the same horrible news Jo had just heard. Alex asked pertinent questions, such as, which hospital, when did it happen, would she be okay? Then she thanked the man, and told him Jo would be there as soon as possible. She hung up, ran into Jo’s bedroom and grabbed the shoes from beside the bed. Back in Jo’s mom’s room, she pushed Jo onto the bed, and put her shoes on her feet, and tied them. Tears were running down Alex’s cheeks too, but she knew she had to be strong for Jo. She had to get Jo to the hospital while there was still time. She went into the kitchen to make sure they had turned off the stove from cooking the soup, grabbed Jo’s house keys sitting on the counter, then led the blubbering Jo outside, and locked the door behind her.

It was almost dark outside when Alex pushed and pulled Jo out to her car. She noticed a pungent odor in the air, but didn’t even stop to consider what it was. Her priority was getting Jo

to her mom before it was too late. She shoved Jo into the passenger seat of her beautiful mustang, and Jo collapsed, head hanging down over her knees, sobbing. Even though Alex knew not having a seatbelt on was illegal, there was no way she was going to force Jo upright to belt her in. The police would just have to understand. This was an emergency. Besides, bent over as she was now, you couldn't even tell anyone else was in the car with her, Alex thought.

She drove carefully, though. Not having her friend belted worried her. What if someone hit them? And she was crying, too, so the tears made it harder to see the road, but they arrived at the hospital within fifteen minutes of the phone call.

They entered the emergency room, Alex holding Jo upright. Jo was shocked, but coherent. Still, she let Alex do the talking.

"We are here to see Linda Becker. She came in from a car accident."

The lady at the desk looked through a clipboard. "I don't have anyone by that name," she said as she looked up.

Alex tried again. "B- e- c- k -e -r. They just called fifteen minutes ago, and we were told she was critical. Which department would she be in if not here?"

The lady looked through her clipboard again. "There is no Becker here, and besides that, we have had no accidents all evening. The last one was over four hours ago."

Alex and Jo looked at each other in disbelief. This was the hospital the man had said. Why wasn't she here?

"Ma'am, is there any way you can check the hospital across town for Mrs. Becker? The man said she didn't have long to live, but I was sure he told us this hospital."

The lady was very nice, and agreed to check the other hospital. Yes, they had an accident come in within the last hour, but no, it was two men. They had no record of a Linda Becker.

Jo stood silent. The shock had drained her of energy, and where she should now be feeling relief, she felt empty. And even though these people say her mom was not in an accident, Jo still felt the loss. She reached in her pocket to pull out her cell phone, and dialed her mom. No answer. She looked up at Alex, dumbfounded.

"I don't know what happened, Jo. This was not right. How could someone do that to you? And where is your mom?"

"I wish I knew."

"Maybe we should go to the police."

"And tell them what, Alex? That I got a crank call and believed it? And that it was really mean?" It was then that Jo realized she was gripping something for dear life. Her fingers were aching, but the realization hadn't sunk in that she was holding onto something. She lifted her hands and looked. She was still grasping the photos and important papers that she had gone to put away when the phone call came. She held them out, to show Alex.

"Look what I'm holding, Alex," Jo broke a smile. "Isn't that silly? I'm still holding my mom's papers and stuff."

Alex, relieved to see Jo coming back to herself, smiled with her. "You could have left them in the car." They both laughed, the tension broken, and then turned toward the exit to leave.

"I will keep calling my mom. She has to be home soon."

Jo took two steps toward the exit door, but was stopped abruptly when the double doors on the other side burst open and a gurney was wheeled in with a bloody person on it. The victim was in a neck brace, too, and there were tubes everywhere. One of the paramedics pushing the rolling bed was shouting medical stuff to a doctor that had met them at the door.

“Female, age thirty-nine. BP, 80 over 60, lacerations covering her body, broken jaw, tibia, three broken ribs. Left lung collapsed. Internal injuries as well. She was hit hard. Other driver was drunk. Her femoral artery was nicked; she’s losing a lot of blood.”

“What’s her name?”

“Linda Becker.”

## Chapter 8

Jo watched the hospital staff wheel her mom into a trauma room. She didn't realize she was screaming, "Mom! Mom!" over and over again, until Alex gently shook her.

"Jo, come on, snap out of it. Let's go see what's wrong."

They went down the hall towards the room Jo's mom was in, and stopped outside the curtain. It was drawn open, and they could see people working on the precious woman. Jo sobbed as she stood watching. One of the nurses looked up and saw her, and asked another nurse if the girl was related. The paramedic who was still with them responded for the nurse that the only identification they had found in the wreckage was the registration for the vehicle with Linda Becker's name on it. They hadn't found a purse or wallet, yet, or a cell phone. They did not yet know whom to call to contact the family.

The nurse realized, from seeing grieving family members day in and day out, that the young girl crying ten feet away had to be related, probably a daughter. She got the paramedic's attention and motioned to the girl. "I would guess that there is your relative."

The paramedic left the room and led the girls down the hall a short ways. "Is Linda Becker your mom?" He asked of Jo, since she was crying harder than Alex was. Jo nodded yes. "How did you know she was here? Did someone call you?" Jo nodded yes again. The paramedic looked stumped.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Alex asked. She didn't think Jo was able to ask any questions, but knew Jo would want to know.

"Your mom was stopped at a red light. Once the light turned green, she started going, and a drunk driver going the opposite direction decided he didn't care to stop for lights. He hit her driver's door going about seventy miles per hour, we estimated. He broke a collarbone, and got a lot of cuts, but otherwise he is fine. He is in the jail hospital. He is being charged with reckless driving, driving under the influence, failure to yield, and a lot of other traffic offenses, and waiting to see how your mother fares before those charges are added. If she recovers he will most likely receive a gross negligence charge. If she doesn't he will most definitely serve several years in prison. The police officer that booked him was extremely angry. Officer Peters watched as we used the Jaws of Life to rescue your mom. The car was mangled, very badly. I honestly don't see how your mom survived the crash. And I hate for you to get your hopes up now. She is very badly hurt."

The tears were running down Jo's cheeks. She had quieted down, to hear what the paramedic was telling her. It was hard to stop crying, she realized. She felt like her heart was breaking inside her chest. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to stand, and it hurt most of all to hear of the pain and agony her mom was enduring.

"Who called us to tell us to come here?" she heard Alex ask. "We would like to thank him."

"I don't know," was the bewildered response the paramedic gave. "I would have called if I had known who to contact. Most of the time we find a cell phone in the vehicle, and choose the top few speed dial numbers, but in the flattened car, we couldn't find one."

"It would have been in her purse," Jo spoke up for the first time. "She always puts it in there."

"We didn't find her purse, yet, either. When did you get the call?"



“At least fifteen minutes before you got here. In fact, we were leaving. The lady at the front desk had no record of a ‘Linda Becker’, and she even checked the other hospital. We assumed it was a really mean crank call, and were leaving when we saw you come in with her,” Alex explained.

“So someone called you about thirty minutes ago?”

Alex looked at her watch. “Yes, that seems about right.”

“That was right when the accident happened. Maybe one of the witnesses knew you or your mom?” He asked Jo.

Alex answered for her. “The man we spoke with didn’t give a name. He told Jo first, then I took the phone and he repeated what he told her, that there had been an accident, and her mom would be coming to this hospital, so we came.”

“I don’t understand,” replied the puzzled man. “That couldn’t have been more than a minute or two after the accident. I hadn’t even arrived with the ambulance yet.”

Alex shrugged, and then pulled Jo back toward the waiting room. The sobbing, stunned girl numbly followed. When they reached the lobby, the clerk who had so patiently helped them earlier, came over to them.

“I’m so sorry about the mix-up. I don’t get the names of the patients until they come in. I’m so sorry I made you think it hadn’t happened. Please, if you can, I need some information about Mrs. Becker.”

The lady led the girls to a small cubicle where she asked history information. Jo was in shock, and couldn’t speak. Alex guessed at most of the questions, as best she could.

When the clerk was finished questioning them they headed back into the hallway toward the trauma room, but were met by one of the doctors they had seen working on Jo’s mother. He wanted to update them. He spoke directly to Jo.

“Your mother has sustained massive internal injuries. Those are bad enough, but she has also received a lot of head trauma. The car she was in was old?” he asked. Jo nodded. “There wouldn’t have been an air bag to cushion her head, then. That explains most of the head injury. We are going to need to do surgery to relieve some of the pressure on her brain. I will be back out in a few hours to let you know how it went.” He turned around and left.

Alex led Jo to the emergency room lobby once more. A short while later, a nurse came and quietly told Alex that there was a special room for family of surgery patients in another part of the hospital. It was much quieter than the ER waiting room, and she would take them there, if they wished. Alex looked at Jo, who stared back blankly. Though she had stopped crying, she was still in shock, and couldn’t decide anything. Alex thanked the nurse, and asked her to lead the way.

Once Jo was settled in the surgery waiting room, Alex called her parents who would be worried by this time. It was nearing eleven o’clock, and Alex had been due home for at least an hour. Alex told her parents over her cell phone what had happened, and where she was. They were concerned for Jo, and agreed Alex needed to stay with her friend. They asked if Charlie was with them too, and Alex reminded them that Charlie and her family had left for New York that morning.

“You need to call Charlie and let her know, Alex,” Kendra Turner wisely recommended. “If you were gone, and Jo was going through this, you would be livid when you found out that they didn’t tell you.”

“I guess you are right. I just figured there was nothing Charlie could do from New York.”

“She can support her friend, Alex. That’s all Jo needs right now, anyway.”

Alex spoke with her parents a few minutes longer then hung up. They were coming to the hospital to be with the girls. They had known Jo and her mother for many years, and felt Jo could use their presence. Meanwhile, Alex called Charlie. She knew it was almost two o'clock in the morning where Charlie was, but her mom was right. Charlie needed to know.

Charlie's cell phone rang five times and went to voice mail. Alex left a message, "Charlie, its Alex. Call me. It's important." She hung up and waited three minutes. Then she called again. This time, on the fourth ring, a groggy Charlie answered the phone.

"Alex, it's really, really late. Did you forget there's a time difference here?"

"Charlie, listen to me. Something happened." Alex could hear rustling over the cell phone and, then a thump. Silence for a moment, then the phone was picked up again. Charlie had dropped it, it seemed.

"Alex, sorry, I was trying to sit up and I'm not familiar with this motel bed. What's going on, what happened?"

Alex took a deep breath. "Jo's mom was in a car accident. It's bad. They don't know if she will make it."

"Oh, no!" Charlie gasped. "What happened?"

Alex briefly explained the accident, trying to keep her tears from flowing.

"Oh, why did it have to happen to Linda? Why do all the good people in the world get hurt? Why couldn't the drunk have gotten the bad injuries and Jo's mom only the superficial ones? It's not fair." Charlie was quietly sobbing. She and Alex both loved Jo's mom.

"Thanks for calling, Alex. I'm going to wake Daddy up and get home as soon as I can. Stay with Jo at all times, okay?"

"As if I would leave her? Come on, Charlie, you know me better than that."

"Yes, I know. Tell Jo I will be there as soon as I can," Charlie said as she hung up.

The next hours were tense. Jo hadn't spoken a word, but Alex knew she had to be in shock. Alex mourned for the agony her friend was enduring, as well as for the friend she herself was losing. Jo had no other family other than her mom, unless, of course, you counted the mystery grandparents that may or may not still be alive, and didn't even know Jo existed. Alex brought Jo hot chocolate, and sodas, and snacks from the vending machine, doing anything she could to help Jo. Sometimes, Jo ate, other times, she declined the offering. The Turners had been with them since Alex called them. They were a silent sense of security to Jo, and Alex was grateful for their presence as well. Jo had given them a watery, tearful smile when they first got there, but hadn't even looked at them since.

About an hour after Alex had called Charlie, Alex's cell phone rang. Charlie and her family were booked on a flight leaving New York in a few hours but wouldn't arrive home until late in the afternoon. They had decided to all come home to be with Jo. As with Alex's family, the Allens loved Jo, too, and honored her mother. They had always been amazed that Jo was such a well-balanced girl with her mom being a working, single parent. They honored Linda Becker for her accomplishment, and wanted to be with Jo in her time of need, just as the Turners had. So the whole family was coming home as fast as they could.

Around one o'clock in the morning one of the doctors came into the waiting room, still in his surgical garb, and informed Jo and her friends that the surgery had gone well, and the swelling on the brain was going down. That was as much as could be expected this early. He would come back later and give them an update, he told them. Grateful tears slipped down her face as Jo smiled and thanked him.

A short while later a different doctor came into the room, in a rush. He told Jo that her mom had gone into cardiac arrest, most likely from the injuries her body had sustained, and though they had gotten her heart going again, her mom was no longer breathing on her own, a machine was breathing for her, but she was stabilizing. Jo was devastated. The tears flowed freely as she dropped her head and began weeping once again. She thought she had cried all the tears she had left, but she was wrong. Alex sat next to her, silently crying with her, rubbing her shoulders. Alex was beginning to lose her strength in light of the new information. She wasn't sure how much longer she could be strong for her friend, and looked toward her parents across the room. Her mother saw her look, the fear in Alex's face, and mouthed the words, "You can do it," to Alex. Alex slowly nodded her head. Yes, she could be there for Jo. Later, Alex could mourn for her second mother. Right now, she needed to be strong for Jo.

A nurse came in a later, and asked Jo if she would like to sit with her mother. Jo jumped up, ready to go, and grabbed Alex's hand. "I need Alex too, okay?" The nurse nodded, and led them to an isolated room. Jo went in and saw her mother with tubes coming out of her nose, mouth, and chest. Her mother's long hair was gone, replaced by a hat of gauze. There were cuts all over her mom's arms and face. Some of them had stitches in them. Weeping silently, Jo sat down in a chair near her mother's head, and tried to find her mother's hand in the jumble of wires and tubes surrounding the bed. She sat there, tears streaming down her face, holding her mother's hand. Alex cried with her from a chair on the other side of the bed.

Jo wondered if today was the last day she would have with her beloved mother. She gently touched the wounded face with the back of her hand. Tears welled up in her eyes again and again and spilled down her cheeks as she watched her mother and prayed for some sign of life. The nurse let them stay for about ten minutes, and then told them it was time to go. Jo leaned over and kissed her mom on the cheek, and they went back to the waiting room. When they arrived, Alex's mom asked how Jo's mom was doing, and Alex tearfully told them everything she could remember about the room, the tubes, and the wires. Jo sat on a couch and stared at the wall, trying hard not to hear.

Outside in the hallway, the doctor who they had seen last rushed by. She heard some alarm going off behind the closed doors of the nearby section where her mom was, but tried not to worry. There were a lot of people in there besides her mom; maybe someone else was having a problem. She hoped it wasn't her mother.

She looked at the clock on the wall; it read two thirty-seven. No wonder she was tired. She decided to stretch out on the waiting room couch. She was exhausted from crying, and worrying, and being up late. Using the arm of the couch for a pillow, she closed her eyes and tried to rest.

Alex sat in a chair watching her friend. She felt so bad for Jo. This was the worst thing that could happen to her friend. If her mom died, she would be all alone in the world. Jo hadn't yet gotten a job. And there was no way to get to a job, now that there was no car. Always the practical one, Alex tried to imagine what to do with Jo, if her wonderful mother didn't survive, but she came up empty. Jo would be devastated, she knew, so would she. And she had no idea what to say to her. While Jo was resting, Alex slipped over to where her mom and dad were quietly talking, across the room.

"Mom, Dad, I want Jo to come live with us. We can put another bed in my room. She has no one, Mom, you know that. And even if her mom survives, I've seen her. She will be in here for months. Jo can't live alone way out there in that trailer park. There's no transportation from

there, anyway. The city bus doesn't go out that far. She's like a sister to me. I want her to come live with us," she pleaded.

Kendra nodded solemnly. "Alex, honey, your dad and I were just discussing that very thing. We already talked about pulling the twin bed out of storage, and making you share. I'm glad you want that, too. I know that if it were us lying in a hospital bed, Linda would have taken you in an instant. So yes, I agree. Jo comes home with us." Alex somberly smiled, relieved that her parents had agreed so easily. Alex hugged her parents and went back to sit down across from Jo, to continue her faithful vigilance at the hurting friend's side.

Alex had just sat back down across from Jo, watching over her, when both of the doctors who had worked on the precious mother came into the room. Their faces were grim. It didn't look good. Alex got up and went over to the couch, and sat next to Jo, gently shaking her awake. It had only been a few minutes since she had stretched out. "Jo, the doctors are here."

Jo sat up, and looked at the doctors. Fear settled in her face as she saw their countenance. "What's wrong?"

"Miss Becker, we are very sorry. We have done all we can do for your mother. She is rapidly declining. Between the blood loss, the internal injuries, and the head trauma, your mother cannot survive. She has had yet another heart attack, and now the swelling is increasing in her cranium again. She is being kept alive by machines, but there is not a chance she will ever recover from this." Jo was weeping as she listened. She assumed they were done when they quit talking, but they continued to stand there. She looked up at them.

"Is there more? What is it?"

One of the doctors looked at the other. The second one nodded, and the first doctor gave a really big sigh. Then he spoke. "What I'm about to say is going to be really hard to hear." Alex grabbed Jo's hand, and squeezed it, letting Jo know she was there. "Your mom sustained a lot of injury, as you know, but her liver and kidneys somehow escaped damage. I'm not sure if you had ever discussed with your mom about her wishes to be a donor or not. However, her blood type makes her a perfect candidate for organ donation. And we would like your consent to help your mom save other people's lives, since she cannot save her own."

"I don't understand. My mom is still alive, and you want her organs?"

"Miss Becker, please understand. If there were any hope for your mother at all we wouldn't be here asking you this. I realize it's hard to hear, but your mother is dying. She may live for a week on the machines, but it might be less. Each day that the machines keep her alive, her good organs will become weaker. I know this is a hard decision, but she cannot make it herself, so she needs someone who can legally decide for her." He stopped and looked at her, realizing how young she was. "You are eighteen, aren't you? I didn't think to ask you that."

Jo looked up startled. "No, I'm seventeen. My birthday is tomorrow." As she spoke the words out loud, she realized what she was saying. She dropped her head into her hands and began weeping. Between sobs, they heard her mumbling softly to herself, "Happy birthday to me. Happy birthday to me." The doctors looked puzzled.

"Today is her birthday," Alex explained. "Today is her eighteenth birthday."

The doctors sympathized with Jo, but knew there was nothing that could be done. "I am sorry you have to bear this, but you are legally responsible to make the decision for your mother unless there is another relative. Does she have a sister, or maybe a parent still alive?" one of the doctors asked hopefully.

Jo shook her head. "No, I am all she has. And she is all I have. Can I spend some time with her, please?"

The doctors led the sobbing girl to her mother's room once again. Jo searched her precious mother's face for any sign of life; a smile, a movement, a rising of her eyebrows. She watched for anything that would indicate to Jo that her mom was still in there somewhere. Then she wept silently as she held her mother's hand, noticing that her mother was even paler than she had been an hour ago when Jo saw her.

"What would you do, Mom?" she asked the silent form on the bed. "What would you tell me to do if you could talk to me? I don't want to be alone. Mom, I'm not ready to be on my own. Please, Mom. Please." There was no response from the mother. Jo rubbed her mother's arm, and kissed her hand. She stroked the beloved cheek of the woman who had always been there for her. And she wept. "Mom, I don't want to decide this. Mom, please just wake up. I can't let them kill you."

Suddenly an alarm sounded from the machines surrounding her mother. Several people rushed in, and pushed Jo aside, working on the still form on the bed. Jo stood at the back of the room, silently crying, and watching. The two doctors were there, and a different one she hadn't seen before, as well as two or three nurses. They pushed on her mom's chest, and put some electrical paddles on her body. She saw her mom's body rise up off the bed, and fall back again through her tears. And she knew this was the end.

"Time of death, 3:43 a.m.," one of the doctors said. No one noticed her standing there. They slowly left, one by one. She went back and sat beside her mother. One of the nurses had removed most of the tubes, and she could see her mother's dear face. She laid her head on her mother's still frame, and let her tears flow. It wasn't long before she realized someone was in the room with her. It was one of the doctors who had approached her in the waiting room.

"I am very sorry to have to ask you this, but there isn't much time. Your mother is gone; she doesn't need her body anymore. As a legal adult, and her only living relative, I am asking for your consent to help your mom save someone else's life. Please, Miss Becker, do it for your mother."

Jo realized helping someone else is what her mom would want to do. And she was overwhelmingly relieved that she didn't have to let them kill her mother, as well. Her mother had made that decision herself, and Jo loved her for that. Therefore, the very first legal decision Jo made as an adult was there, in that hospital room, when she nodded to the doctor, and allowed her mother to be wheeled away to another room somewhere, to save someone else's life.

There were a few papers she had to sign. She had never considered her signature before, and it was still very childish, the way she put her name down on the documents they handed her. What a silly thing to think about, she chastised herself, when your mother just died, but she was too tired, too grief-stricken, too numb, to function much longer. Finally, after the last document was signed, she asked Alex if she would take her home.

"You are coming home with me, Jo. I talked to my mom and dad, and you are coming to live with me, until you are ready to move out. They were all for it, so you don't have to think I pressured them. They love you as much as I do, and want you to stay with us. And we won't take no for an answer." Alex smiled at Jo, and they hugged.

Jo was grateful for the love and support, as she leaned on Alex and whispered, "Thank you," into Alex ear. Jo walked over to Sam and Kendra and gave them hugs, and told them she appreciated them more than they could know.

Kendra held her and patted her back, and said, "We will see you girls at the house." Then she and Sam left for home, and bed.

Alex gathered up the paperwork the hospital had given Jo, and the other things Jo had brought in with her. The photos and important papers Jo had unwittingly brought to the hospital were safe and sound in Alex's purse where she had put them. Alex put her arm around Jo, and led her outside. It had been a little over six hours since the dreaded phone call. A lot can happen in six hours, Alex thought.

"I know it's late, but can we go by my house, to get some clothes before we go to your place?" Jo asked as they got into Alex's car. "And my pillow. I need my pillow."

"Sure," Alex replied and backed out of the parking space, heading toward Jo's house.

The ride was a silent one. Both girls were emotionally and physically exhausted. It had been a long night. Jo longed to go home and collapse into her own bed and sleep her life away, but she knew Alex was right, that she needed to not be alone for at least a few days. After she was calm, she would come back to the trailer and decide what to do. She was grateful to Alex and her parents for opening their home, but wasn't sure she should accept their hospitality on a permanent basis. That was something she really wanted to think about, later, not tonight. Tonight – well it was morning really. Today she just wanted to sleep – all day. She was sure that when she woke up she would cry for a while, then sleep some more. That sounded good to Jo; sleeping.

As they neared the mobile home park, Jo remembered things she had left out in their hurry to the hospital. "My birthday cake is still sitting on the counter," she remarked to Alex. "I think I ended up grabbing all of those papers, but I would like to be sure, and put the papers we have back in the box in Mom's room. I need to cover the cake with plastic wrap, and put it in the fridge. I don't feel much like partying anyway."

Alex realized that Jo was just talking to keep calm. She was going to mention the soup they had left out for Jo's mom, but decided against it. Jo didn't need a reminder that her mom was never coming home.

As Alex pulled into the mobile home park and down the lane to Jo's home, she turned her head to look at Jo. "Jo, you don't have to go in if you don't want. I can take care of those things. And I can get your clothes. I'm sure I can match a few sets together; I know what you wear usually. You can just sit in the car and wait for me, okay?" Alex was trying to keep her friend from as much pain as she could, but as they got closer to the mobile, and Alex was talking, Alex saw Jo's face change. Jo's countenance went from numb, to shock, to fear, to horror stricken all in the matter of a few seconds, as Alex watched her stare toward her house. Thinking her friend was just still reeling from her loss, Alex assumed Jo was just finding it painful to look at her now empty house, but then, Jo started screaming.

"Oh, God, Oh God, No! No! Oh God, help me!" Jo dropped her head into her hands, her body wracking with hysterical sobs, she cried out over and over, "Oh, God, help me." Alex tore her eyes away from Jo, and looked towards Jo's house to see what had upset her. She saw nothing. Nothing. There were police cars, and two fire trucks off to the side, but where Jo's mobile home had sat, was nothing but piles of charred rubbish, with tendrils of smoke escaping from it.

The Becker's mobile home had been burnt to the ground.

## Chapter 9

Alex pulled in behind a police car and shut off the engine. She stared at the burnt out shell that was all that was left of Jo's house. *This cannot be happening. Jo just lost her mother, now her house. This is unreal.* Alex tried to comfort Jo, but was at a loss. There was no way to sympathize with what this girl had been through in the last six hours, and now this. In shock and numb, Alex didn't know what to do. She called her parents. Very quietly, she told them where they were, and what she saw. They were dumbfounded. How could two tragedies happen to the same person on the same day? It was impossible.

Alex's mom and dad were on their way, so Alex sat in the car with Jo, rubbing her neck and shoulders, and just being there for her friend. Alex was incredulous at the sight before them. Jo had eventually stopped screaming, and her sobs weren't so heart wrenching. Jo's face was swollen and red from seven hours of crying.

When Jo had herself under control, she took a napkin that Alex handed her and mopped up her drenched face. She ran her fingers through her hair, and took a deep breath.

"Let's go see what happened," she said to Alex and opened the passenger door.

"My mom and dad are on their way, Jo. We can just wait, if you want."

"I can't just adopt your parents, Alex, as wonderful as they are. I have to be an adult. This is my responsibility, now, so, I need to be responsible. I need to find out what happened."

The girls walked over to a fireman who was speaking directions into a radio. He stopped and looked down at them, realizing they wouldn't be out at four o'clock in the morning unless they were somehow connected to the home fire. "This is my house," Jo told him. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"We got here too late to save anything. It went fast. Was there anyone in there or any animals?"

"No. It's just me and my mom," Jo replied.

"Oh, where is your mother?"

Jo couldn't help it. The tears started flowing again. She had no idea how she still had tears left. "My mother passed away an hour ago in a car accident. We've been at the hospital since about ten-thirty."

The fireman they were speaking with was taken aback at the answer. *This poor child has been through so much,* he thought.

"Can you tell me what happened? What started it?" Jo asked.

"There was a lot of accelerant surrounding the skirting, and underneath the mobile itself. Once the fire was lit, it grew very large very fast. It would have totally consumed the entire mobile within five minutes, we speculate. The call came in around eleven-thirty, so you couldn't have been gone long before the fire started. We are ruling it as arson. Do you have any idea who would have wanted to harm you?"

Jo looked up at the man, stunned at his question. "You think someone wanted me or my mom in there when they set the house on fire?"

"Our investigation isn't complete yet, Ma'am. We have no way of knowing what was intended until we solve the case. Can you tell me: did you see anyone suspicious, or hear, or smell anything out of the ordinary today?"

Alex gasped, "Yes! Right as we were leaving for the hospital!" she exclaimed. She turned to Jo, "I noticed when we were rushing out to the car to get to the hospital. There was a horrid

foul smell outside. I didn't give it a second thought, because we were racing to get to your mom."

"I remember that too. I wondered in passing if one of the neighbors was barbecuing or something, it smelled like briquettes, or lighter fluid, or the little lanterns you light to ward off mosquitoes, but it was unimportant at the time, I just got in the car."

The fireman was jotting down the things the girls were saying as they spoke. The Turners had arrived and were standing nearby. Just their presence helped Jo cope a little better.

Jo, hesitant at first, finally dared to ask, "We were in a hurry when we left. Could I have left the stove on?"

The fireman glanced up for a moment then went back to writing. "No. The kind of damage that was done here was intentional. We have not been able to find what actually started it, but we do know it began underneath the mobile, where we found the accelerant evidence, and not inside. There was no way it was a kitchen fire." Someone asked him something in his radio just then, and he listened, and then responded. Then he turned back to the girls again. "Did you notice anyone strange during the day? Or as you were leaving?" He saw Jo close her eyes, and realized she was drained. "I'm very sorry to have to keep asking you questions. I realize you are exhausted and grieving, and now to have this happen on top is just devastating. A house fire or death either one is very hard to get through. Both at once will knock your head off. I understand that, but I have to find out what happened."

"I did see a man this afternoon, right as my mom left for work. It was like a bug guy. He was spraying up the street, and I saw him go back around our mobile, and assumed he was spraying back there too. I didn't see him come out, but I wasn't watching either."

"And why did that seem strange to you?" the fireman asked.

"Because the bug guy was also here last week. And I didn't think our trailer park even paid for bug guys, they had never been around before that I had seen, in all the years my mom and I lived here."

The fireman seemed very interested in the pest control man. He radioed something to someone and wrote a lot more things in his little notebook. Soon he looked up again.

"You obviously cannot stay here tonight, or anytime for that matter. I think I have all I need from you. We were just finishing up when you arrived. I can't release the scene to you until later today, and then you can pick through the debris and see if there was anything left to salvage. I would recommend heavy duty gloves. There will be glass strewn about. Is there a number I can reach you at when I release the location?"

Jo told him her cell phone number, and Alex's home number, too, and then the man told them to go get some rest. Jo realized with a start that losing the house meant losing a lot. For starters, once her cell phone died, there was no charger anymore. She would have to buy one. And there were no clothes except the ones she was wearing. She would have to buy some. Then there was the distinct possibility that someone was trying to kill her. Who would want her dead? Did this fire have anything to do with the black car with tinted windows? She stopped herself from thinking about it, as she began to sway. Grief, fatigue, loss, shock, and horror had taken their toll on Jo, and she felt as if she was going to faint.

"Alex, I need to go sit down." Alex was at her side instantly, supporting her. They went to Alex's car, and left the mobile home park, the Turners following them in their car.

The ride was foggy for Jo. She didn't remember a lot of it. She dozed most of the way, she realized later. She felt Alex and Kendra support her as they led her to a bed, which she gratefully collapsed in. They took off her shoes, and lifted her legs onto the bed, covered her up



and left her alone. They knew she needed sleep more than anything else at the moment. And she slept.

Shortly after noon, Jo woke up to the sound of her cell phone ringing. She was startled at first, wondering where she was. She had stayed over with Alex enough through the years for her surroundings to make sense after a fraction of a second, though, and then all that she had been through came crashing down on her awareness.

“Hello?” she answered the ringing phone.

“Hi, Miss Becker? This is Molly, at the hospital. We need you to come down and make arrangements about your mother’s body. Unless you already have a mortuary lined up?”

“No, um,” she thought for a moment. “I need an hour, okay? Then I will be there.”

Fresh tears began swarming in her eyes, and she hung up the phone. No matter where she turned, all she saw was loss. Jo saw Alex sit up in a bed across from hers.

“Who was it, Jo?”

“The hospital needs to release my mom; they want to know where to send her.”

“Oh. Wow. We have to plan a funeral. I never thought of that.”

“I didn’t either, Alex. There’s just too much stuff. How am I going to pay for it? We don’t have any money. I don’t even know if Mom had anything at all in the bank.”

“Take it one thing at a time, Jo. I’m sure my parents can help you.”

Jo sighed. As much as she hated asking Alex’s parents for help, she realized Alex was right. There was no other way.

“The lady at the hospital didn’t mention anything about the hospital bill. I wonder if I have to pay that too.”

“No, either her car insurance or the drunken guy’s insurance will take care of that.”

“I hope so. I know hospitals are expensive.”

Jo pulled back the covers, and saw she was wearing the same clothes she had worn all day the day before. A few tears spilled down her cheeks, as she realized, this too, was something she couldn’t fix. She had nothing else to wear.

“Jo, come on, it will be ok.” Alex tried to comfort her friend.

“I don’t have anything to wear, Alex. I feel gritty, and I am homeless, broke, and an orphan.”

“Oh, Jo,” Alex sighed as she pulled Jo into her arms for a hug. “You are not homeless. And just think; now you get a whole new wardrobe.”

Jo tried to smile, but it was hard. She left the bedroom and headed into the kitchen where she heard some noises coming from. Kendra was making pancakes, and had just set a plateful on the table.

“Sleep well?” she asked Jo and motioned for Jo to sit where the piping hot breakfast was waiting.

“I slept hard. I don’t feel rested, though.”

“It was a long night. We are all still short a few hours of sleep.”

“I wanted to sleep more, but there is so much to do.” Jo told her about the call from the hospital. “I really need something to wear, at least clean under things. Alex and I are so different in size; I don’t see how I can borrow from her.”

“Do you need some money to buy a few things? Sam and I will help out as much as we can, Jo, you know that don’t you?”

“I told her you and dad could probably help pay for the funeral, Mom.” Alex informed her mom as she came into the dining area where the others were. “I’m sure she can get a job after

this all settles down, and then be a self sufficient, responsible adult, but for now, she's ours, and we are going to help her get back on her feet."

"Of course we can help with the funeral, Jo." Kendra handed Alex a plate of pancakes, then left the room for a moment, returning with a wallet. She pulled out some cash, and held it out to Jo.

"Here, take some money and have Alex drive you to the local department store. Get a couple things to get you through a few days."

Jo thanked her, and took the money. It was hard to do. She had learned from her mother that people earned what they received, and to just be handed money hurt her pride, but she didn't have much choice.

"Thank you, Kendra. And please, keep track of everything you do for me. I really do want to pay you back."

"It is our honor to help you, Jo. Consider us as if we were your parents, honey. We love you, you know, and will do everything we can to help."

Jo nodded. "Yes, I know, but please, I really want to be able to take care of myself. I am grateful for the loans, but please, let me return everything once I can. I don't feel right about accepting so much."

Kendra nodded, understanding, and was proud of Jo for her stand. Jo would never take advantage of them, she knew. It was that reason she was so willing to give.

"All right, Jo, I will keep track," she told her, then sat down with the two girls and ate some breakfast herself. While she was eating, she gently guided the conversation back to the issues Jo would have to face today.

"Did you have a funeral home in mind for the service?" she asked Jo.

"No, I hadn't even considered it. I guess any one of them will do."

"Did she have a lot of friends where she worked who would want to attend her memorial?"

Jo thought for a moment. "Mom was nice to everyone, and everyone liked her. I imagine the people at the grocery store will want to attend. And I'm sure many of our neighbors will."

Kendra flipped through the phonebook and found a funeral home between the mobile home park and the grocery store.

"Okay. Jo, they are going to ask you some hard questions. You need to be ready. Would you like me to come with you to make the arrangements?"

Jo looked up at her, tears again wetting her cheeks. "I'm so sorry to cause you so much trouble. I feel like a burden."

Kendra went over to Jo and hugged her. "That's enough of that. Soon enough Alex will be out of the house, and you will be gone too. I will have nothing to do in my big empty house, and no one to bother me, and I will miss it immensely, so let me help while help is needed. It makes me feel better knowing I am doing what I can to make your circumstances a little easier on you. I love being there for you."

Jo smiled up at Alex's mom through her watery eyes. "Okay," she said. "I would really appreciate it if you would help with the arrangements."

"Thank you, Jo." Kendra gave her an encouraging hug, and then returned to her seat.

"There is one thing you have to answer though, honey. I can't decide this for you. Did you want your mother to be cremated, or buried? Had she ever mentioned her wishes in that regard?"

"No, we never talked about it."

"All right. We can talk to the funeral home director about it."

They didn't talk much more about that, and as soon as the girls finished eating, Alex dragged Jo out to a department store to get some clothes. She hurriedly picked out two pair of jeans, three shirts, and underclothes. It was just enough to get her through a few days. The one hundred dollars that she had been lent barely covered it, so it was enough, Jo decided.

They returned to the house where Jo showered and scrubbed her swollen face. It felt good to be clean. She quickly dressed in the new garments, and, while waiting for Alex to get out of the shower, started making a list of things she needed to do. Today was a Monday, so all the businesses were open. It was after one o'clock by this time, so she was late to the hospital, but it wasn't really an appointment, so she wasn't too concerned.

Once Alex was dressed, the two girls got into the family SUV with Alex's mom and they drove to the hospital. They entered the business area, and after Jo asked to see Molly, they were shown into a small office. Molly was expecting Jo, and was ready. She asked curt questions regarding where to send Mrs. Becker's body, and then there were a few other last minute papers that had to be signed. Jo signed every place that needed it, and then the three left for the funeral home.

At the funeral home, the nice gentleman spoke very plainly then gently explained the difference between cremation and burial to Jo. Since her mother was very badly injured, an open casket was discouraged, so either method was acceptable. Jo decided to go with cremation. She vaguely remembered her mother telling her once that Jo's grandparents, her mother's own parents, had been cremated and that her mother had scattered their ashes. This was the second decision Jo had to make as a legal adult. She was starting to think that turning eighteen was a curse and was wishing she were seventeen again. Yet she signed all the papers they put in front of her, and Kendra wrote a check to cover the costs, a little over three thousand dollars in total.

Once all the arrangements were made, and a service set for Thursday of that week at two o'clock in the afternoon, they left the funeral home and returned to the Turner's house. It was late in the afternoon by that time, and though they had a late breakfast, they decided to have some lunch anyway, and not wait until dinner.

As they munched on sandwiches, Jo reflected on the past few days. It had only been three days since graduation, and it was hard to believe that so much had happened in three days. The final, the party, helping Charlie pack to leave, the long talk about her father, and then, last night: the world coming to an end. Jo sat up sharply, and realized, "Today is my birthday. I had forgotten."

Kendra looked at her sadly. "I'm so sorry you will have sad reminders of your birthday from now on. Life just isn't fair sometimes."

"Yeah, it isn't," she agreed.

Just then there was a knock on the door. Charlie rushed in as Alex opened the door, and headed straight for Jo. Her parents and her thirteen-year-old brother, Kyle, were close behind.

"Jo, I'm so sorry. We got here as fast as we could. I figured you would be here, so we didn't stop by your house first." She was hugging Jo, and crying, and of course Jo started crying again with her.

They all sat down in the living room and Jo asked Alex to fill everyone in, so Alex told the story, from the phone call they thought was fake, through the hospital ordeal, and ending with taking Jo to get some clothes from her house and finding it burned to the ground. Jo sat silently, tears streaming down her face as she relived the evening. Charlie was sobbing, holding Jo, saying, "Oh, No!" at every bad turn of events.

By the time Alex finished relaying the entire catastrophic evening, Bradley Allen, Charlie's dad, an attorney, was pacing. He was angry that so much could happen to such a young, promising person in a day. And, from knowing Jo her whole life, he knew that Jo and her mom were good people, and didn't deserve this. However, he had learned in his line of work that most often it was the good people who were hurt the worst, but he was determined to somehow make it right.

"Did the police give you an incident report?" he asked Jo.

"We never spoke to the police at all," she answered. "We went straight to the hospital."

Charlie looked up at her dad, who had always done everything for her, whenever she asked. She pleaded with him, "Daddy, can you help Jo in any way? This is terrible."

Brad looked at the three best friends sitting on the sofa and replied, "Jo, will you let me help you? At least to recover the costs of your mom's car, and pay for any expenses incurred."

"My mom's car wasn't worth much, maybe a few hundred dollars. And I was hoping that the person responsible for the accident was responsible for the hospital bills."

"Have you contacted the insurance company? Either you mom's or the drunk's?"

"No. I haven't done much of anything. It's all happened too fast."

"Jo, will you let me handle it for you? I would really like to take charge of this part. And I will also find out if there was insurance on your mobile home. Maybe there was, and you can get some of your things back."

Jo, sighed, relieved. "Yes, please. I would appreciate your help with all of that."

Charlie hugged Jo, happy to be able to contribute something to ease Jo's pain. Then Jo's cell phone rang again. She was almost afraid of it by now, since it always gave bad news, but she pulled it out of her pocket, and answered it. Everyone in the room got quiet.

"Hello?"

"Miss Becker? This is Capt. Evans from the fire department."

Jo pushed a button on the side of the phone, and turned the cell phone into a speakerphone. She decided it would be just as easy for everyone to hear at once, rather than have to repeat it. She asked him his name again, so everyone would know who was speaking.

"Hello. Can you repeat that please?"

"This is Captain Evans from the fire department. We spoke at the fire early this morning."

"Yes, okay."

"We have finished our investigation and are ready to release the scene back to you. I realize you are under a lot of stress, but I need to recommend that you go through the debris as soon as you can. There is a problem with looters after a fire. If you don't go through the ashes soon, someone else will. I would hate for you to miss anything that might have survived the flames, Miss Becker."

Jo sighed, and thanked him. "I understand. Where should I meet you?"

"I'm at the firehouse right now, and I have the paperwork and a copy of the report that I sent to the police here. Don't forget also, heavy-duty gloves. You don't want to cut your hands on the broken glass."

"Captain Evans, what do I do with the trailer?"

"I can give you a list of companies that clean up house fires. It's not cheap, though. Do you know if the house was insured?"

Jo glanced up at her newly acquired attorney. He nodded to her so she replied, "I'm checking into that. I will take the list when I come to sign the papers."

Jo sighed as she closed the phone, ending the call. There was so much to think about, so many problems. Why did it all have to happen at once? “Can I get a ride to the fire station, anyone?” she asked pitifully.

After a short discussion, it was decided that Jo, Alex, Kyle and Charlie would head to the fire station in Alex’s car to sign the paperwork, get the police report, and the list of companies that did fire clean up. The two mothers would get some heavy workman’s gloves, and meet them at the mobile home. From Alex’s description, and Kendra’s first hand knowledge of the scene, they didn’t believe there would be much to recover, but they had to try. And if there was anything of her mother’s left at all, Jo wanted it. Bradley Allen headed to his office to start tracking down the accident reports and contact the insurance companies.

Kyle hadn’t seen Alex’s mustang yet, and, as many young boys are, he was awed by it. He asked Alex questions about it on the drive to the fire station, and generally kept the conversation going. Jo and Charlie sat in the back, both drowsing sleepily after a hard night, letting the driver and the ardent boy talk about the car. And for the first time in a week, Jo didn’t watch for the black sedan with darkly tinted windows.

## Chapter 10

They weren't long at the fire station. Jo went in and signed papers. She had never even considered that someone would have to pay the bill for the firemen to put out the fire, but Captain Evans carefully explained that, since it was decidedly arson, and a crime, they wouldn't charge her for the response. He again told her he was sorry for her loss, and they were on their way to the mobile home park.

When they arrived, Charlie's mom and both of Alex's parents were already there. Sam Turner had gotten an employee to take over for him at his travel agency, so he could help Jo out. Jo bravely held back tears as she gazed upon the remnants of her life. The firemen had moved the scraps of roofing that were left, and piled them up off to the side, so that you could see into what was left of the mobile. There was no support structure remaining at all. Just four or five of the corrugated tin siding pieces standing upwards from the heavy metal frame was all that hinted there was a mobile there once. The entire interior wall, studs, supports, ceiling, and insulation had evaporated. The fire was intense. Jo felt there was little hope of recovering anything at all.

The two mothers were standing under where the kitchen had been. They did find a few pots and pans. They were badly burnt, though, and plastic handles on the pots were all melted. Several glass baking pans were also discovered, but the intense heat from the fire cracked and shattered each one. The stainless steel cutlery that Jo had used her entire life was discovered, but was deemed unsalvageable as well. There was just too much damage on everything. The oven and refrigerator had been moved from inside the frame, and placed away from the rest of the debris. Jo tried to pry open the oven door, but it was heat-welded shut. She was pretty sure there was nothing in there anyway. The refrigerator was standing ajar; one of the hinges seemed to have come off. The insides of the fridge were black. It too was a total loss.

The living room area gave much the same story. As with the large kitchen items, the sofa and recliner shells, what was left of them, had been removed from the rest of the burnt out shell. Jo asked Alex and Kyle, who were searching that area, to look for a family photo that had been hanging on a wall in the living room. It was the only photo Jo had ever seen of both of her parents and herself. Jo had been a tiny infant when it was taken, and she was sure there were no others like it. She hoped they could find it, but had little hope that it had survived the flames. Meanwhile, she and Charlie were heading to the area where her bedroom had been.

She couldn't stop the tears from running as she waded through her charred belongings. Her bed frame and box springs from her bed were sitting directly as they had in the room. It was as if the floor below them had vanished, and the bed fell through, and burnt up. From there, she worked her way through the piles, picking up each and every object she could find, hoping for a miracle. A few feet away, Charlie found one.

"Jo! What's this?" she exclaimed, and turned around to face Jo. Charlie held out the tin box of treasures that Jo had had since as long as she could remember.

Jo's face lit up. "My treasure box!" she carefully stepped over to where Charlie was, and took it from her. It took a bit of work, but Jo got the catch to open, to check inside. She gasped, as the contents were revealed. Everything inside was perfectly safe, though it was ash covered and smelled of smoke. The tin box itself was destroyed, but it had done its job well. There was a newspaper clipping she had kept, several photos of her and Alex and Charlie at different stages of their friendship, the tassel from her graduation cap. And at the bottom, was a long thin box that used to be white, but now gray with soot and ash. She carefully pulled it out and opened it.

She inhaled sharply, and then let out a deep sigh. Her diamonds, she had found them. The very last thing her mother gave her was safe, and recovered. She couldn't stop the tears this time, as she hugged Charlie. They were both excited, so of course the others came over to see what all the to-do was about. Everyone oohed and aahed over the find, and Alex hugged Jo too. This was wonderful news!

The group sifted through the rest of the ashes. There was almost nothing that could be saved. Alex's mom found one tin baking dish that had survived the heat but was twisted and bent from something heavy sitting on it. She decided it wasn't worth it, and laid it in the pile with the rest of the rejected items. Alex found a round tin that seemed to have held cookies at one point, but it was sealed tight and wouldn't open. She shook it, though, and heard something rattling, so she showed it to Jo. Jo wasn't able to open it either, but put it with her treasure box to take away with them. The biggest find of the day, besides Jo's treasure box, was from Alex's dad, Sam.

"Jo," he called, "I see you are a lot like Alex. You forget to take your clothes out of the dryer, too."

Jo was a little puzzled at his reprimand, and then her jaw dropped as she realized what he was saying. He had found some of her clothing! She rushed over to where he was standing next to the burnt up washer and dryer.

"It was pretty tight to get open. It was as if the metal had swelled, but once I got in there, I found this," he held out some clothes to Jo. She took them and shook them out, to see what was there. Other than being a little sooty, and smelling badly of smoke, they appeared undamaged. She was grinning as she examined them: three pair of jeans and six shirts. She breathed a huge sigh of relief. This would help a lot!

They worked until almost dusk, and realized they were all tired and hungry. There was nothing else salvageable, it was decided, and they piled up what they could, and called it a day. Mindy Allen announced that she was providing dinner for everyone back at her house, and everyone was to come home with her.

As Jo was picking her way carefully out of the mobile frame to exit the rubble, she saw the funny man with the floppy straw hat from a few doors down was out walking his dog. She had never talked with him before. He was relatively new, had only moved in a couple weeks ago if she remembered right, but it seemed he was headed her way, so, once she was clear of the frame and debris she stopped to talk to him.

"I'm sorry to hear about your mother, miss," he said to her sincerely. "And then to have this happen on top of that is just appalling. Were you able to salvage anything at all?"

Jo was sure he was just being polite, but she was feeling okay for the first time all day, and decided to share her news. "I did find a few treasures that the fire missed," she offered. She didn't even think to be suspicious of how he knew of her mother's death. It had already been in the news that day.

"But this was your home. Where will you live now?" Jo had no idea how genuinely interested he was, or she would have been wary of his manner, but he was a harmless nosy neighbor, she surmised, and answered him honestly.

"My friend Alex and her parents have offered me their home until I am on my own. They took me in last night. They are wonderful people, as are the Allens, my other friend and her family." Alex and Charlie had both come over to where she was, so Jo grabbed each of them with one of her arms, and interlocked herself with them.

"Did you find any pictures in there? I mean, that would be awful to lose your mom, then to not have any pictures on top of it. Just horrible."

“Oh, I have quite a few pictures of me, and my mom and dad when I was a baby. Well, the pictures I have are of my mom and me or my dad and me, all when I was tiny. Oh and there’s a few of my mom and dad together that were taken at their wedding, and on their honeymoon. Things like that.”

The man seemed excited by that. “That’s great news! How ever did they survive the fire?”

“They didn’t,” she replied. The man looked at her puzzled. She went on to explain. “Alex and I had been looking through them when the phone call came to go to the hospital, and I unknowingly took them with me because they were in my hand. I didn’t even realize I had them until later, but now I’m glad I did. They are all I have left. That and my memories. The one photo that I didn’t get was one that was taken of the three of us, a family portrait. It was a studio type picture, and I was barely a month old in it, and it was hanging on the wall in our living room, so it was lost in the fire.”

“I’m so sorry,” the man sympathized with Jo. “Well, I can see you folks are wrapping up here, so I will take Toby on back to our headquarters.” He nodded and touched his hat, as if she were a fine lady and he was bowing to her, and then led his dog back to his mobile. Jo grinned at his funny ways. *What a nice man*, she thought. Too bad she hadn’t gotten to know him sooner. She never would now, since she wouldn’t be living here anymore.

The three groups separated and piled into the three separate cars. Mindy went in her vehicle back to her house first; to make sure everything was ready for the impromptu guests she was bringing home. Sam and Kendra followed her, and Kyle left with the three girls again.

On the drive to Charlie’s house, they went over what they had discovered. Jo got some of her clothing back, her graduation diamonds, and a mysterious round tin container. Other than that, the home was a total loss. Well, the pictures she had taken out before the fire, too. Those were invaluable to Jo. She was very glad they were safe.

Once they arrived at the Allen’s home, and everyone walked in, they all headed to the dining room. They ate ravenously of the roast with potatoes and carrots that the Allen’s cook had prepared. There were biscuits, too, and some kind of fruity salad. They ate until they were full, letting the cook know how wonderful everything was. Mindy presided over the table like a queen, making sure everyone was happy. Once all the dishes were cleared away, the cook entered the room with a large, beautiful round cake. On top of it there were lit candles, and Jo didn’t realize what was happening until the cook placed the cake in front of her and everyone started singing.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Jo, happy birthday to you!”

Jo smiled at them all through her tears. She was so very glad that she wasn’t alone today. She was grateful to have such wonderful friends to stick with her through this time. The fact that it was her birthday today had little impact on Jo. She had totally forgotten about the celebration part, in light of the responsibility. Even though she realized she was eighteen now, the actuality was that she had forgotten it was something to commemorate. There was too much sorrow today to think of the joy, so they thought of it for her. She was thankful.

Jo closed her tear filled eyes to make a wish, then after a moment blew out the candles and everyone clapped. The cook took the cake away to slice it, and brought back small plates and passed them around to each of them. Alex handed Jo a small, colorfully wrapped package across the table.

“I got these weeks ago, before all of this Jo. I hope it’s still okay.”



Jo smiled at her, and opened the box. Inside she found a beautifully bound book of poetry by one of her favorite poets. Jo was pleased and ran around the table to hug Alex.

“Of course it’s okay. It’s better than okay. I lost all my precious books in the fire. This will be the start of my new collection.”

She had just gotten back to her seat when Charlie, sitting next to her, handed her a box.

“I know you think I forgot your birthday when we ran off to New York yesterday,” Charlie explained, “but I hadn’t. Lila was going to deliver this to you today for me.” Jo looked up at the Allen’s housekeeper, Lila, and Lila smiled and nodded at Jo, confirming what Charlie had said. “So now I get to give it to you in person.” Charlie concluded.

Jo took the small box and unwrapped it. She sifted through the tissue paper inside and found a small locket, on a long gold chain. On the face of the locket, between all the flowers and designs in the gold heart, there were the letters “B F F” meaning Best Friends Forever. Jo touched the tiny catch on the side to reveal what was within, and found a picture of herself, Charlie, and Alex, arms around each other, smiling and happy. It was a beautiful picture. She hugged Charlie and thanked her, then passed the locket across for Alex to see. Alex came around and hugged Charlie and Jo together, they then all stood up and made the exact pose from the picture, to make their parents laugh. It worked.

Soon everyone was finished with cake, and Charlie’s dad, Brad, asked if Jo would come into his study; he needed to talk to her; he had some news to share. Jo looked up, surprised, and saw a smile there, not a frown, so, breathing a sigh of relief, followed him to his study.

Once she was settled, he began. “Jo, I’ve been making phone calls today, in the capacity of your lawyer. I have made a lot of headway, and wanted to share it with you. I’m hoping it will ease your mind.” He picked up a paper from his desk. “First, I obtained a copy of the police report for the traffic accident. They found it was one hundred percent the other driver’s fault, so toward that end, I contacted both your mother’s insurance company, and the other driver’s insurance company. The other driver, who is, by the way, in jail awaiting his hearing, had previous convictions for drunk driving. Because of that, his insurance demanded he pay for a higher amount of coverage. They will pay his full covered amount for bodily injury, which was three hundred thousand dollars.” He heard Jo gasp as he continued. “But that has to pay the hospital bill too. If it doesn’t cover the hospital bill, then we could go to court for more. However, I looked into the man’s history. He doesn’t have any money, and his home he was living in was a rental, and a dump. Since he will most likely be going to prison for ten years for vehicular manslaughter, I doubt we will be able to recover any more than the insurance will pay.”

Jo nodded that she understood, and he continued.

“I did contact the hospital, but since your mother only passed away this morning, they don’t have an accurate itemization of the bill. They did assure me, however, that they would stay under what the insurance paid, no matter what. They will write off whatever they need to, to make sure that you aren’t responsible for any bills from the hospital. Because of that, I do not know yet if you get anything from the bodily injury portion of the insurance, and we won’t know for a few days. However, you won’t owe any hospital bills, and that was one concern you had.”

Jo nodded again. She sighed in relief.

“For the property damage portion, the insurance company normally only pays replacement value. The value of your mother’s car was so small, though, that they agreed to a five thousand dollar settlement for that portion. I know we could probably get more if we went to court, but the insurance company has the law on their side in regards to the property damage, and

again, the man who caused the accident has no cash to contribute. I believe five thousand dollars is fair considering the true value of the twenty-five year-old car your mom was driving.”

“There was no way that car was worth five thousand dollars. It was wonderful you got them to agree to that much,” Jo agreed. “Thank you.” This was painful, but necessary, she knew, but she was glad she was going to get at least the five grand. She could pay back the Turners for the funeral expenses now.

“There’s more, Jo,” he told her. “I was able to find out that mobile home, too, was also insured. You got the paperwork from the fire department today, right?” He asked her. Jo nodded, yes. “Once I fax a copy of the incident report to your homeowner’s insurance company, you will be receiving another five thousand dollars from that coverage in a few days.” He smiled at her, and sat back in his chair, signaling he was finished.

“Thank you so much. I am very grateful for all of your help. I wouldn’t have even known where to begin.” Jo sighed with relief that she didn’t have to start her adult life penniless as well as homeless. It was one thing to accept food and board, but she felt bad asking for money to replace her clothing, shoes, books, and stuff like that. And now she could afford to get the mobile home remains cleaned up too. She had been worrying about what to do about that huge bill as well. Her mind was wandering, and she stopped herself short, stood up, thanking him again for his help.

“I’m sure that I can’t afford your help, but I do appreciate it.”

“I was glad to be able to do my part, Jo. And don’t even think about paying. It was my pleasure.”

They went back out to the sitting area where everyone else was congregated, and then Jo ran out to Alex’s car to get the papers she had received from the fire department. She brought them in and handed them to Brad. Alex picked up her purse and stood, preparing to go, and her parents did the same.

“Thank you all for your help today. You are all wonderful friends, and I appreciate you,” Jo told them, once she had returned. “And thank you, Mindy, for a wonderful dinner, and my lawyer, Mr. Bradley Allen, for all the legal help.” They smiled at her as she collected the gifts she had received from her two friends. Then she accepted hugs from Charlie and her mom, and handshakes from Brad and Kyle. With a wave, Jo, Alex, and Alex’s parents left for the Turner home for some much needed rest. And that was Jo’s eighteenth birthday.

## Chapter 11

Agent Roberts was mad. No, he was furious. No, he was livid. He let that punk hired gun get past him, and the moron burnt down the home of the girl he was supposed to be protecting. How did it happen? He had beat himself over the head for a whole day asking that. He failed one important part of the mission. If the mom hadn't been involved in an accident, the girl would have died in that fire. If Miss Becker hadn't left, she would be dead, simple as that. Roberts paced back and forth in his rental, dumbfounded at the audacity of the killer. He hadn't expected his adversary to go to those lengths. Most hired assassins are quick, thorough, and clean. This one is messy and slow. Of course, that too gave him insight into the character of the man he was angry about.

What had happened was this: the day before Miss Becker's eighteenth birthday, Roberts had decided that this was probably the day the killer would try something, so he doubled patrol on the girl, and put one person on the mother as well. It was simple enough most of the day, since they both never left the mobile home all morning. Then the mother left for work late in the afternoon, with Diaz following her. Things were too serious this close to the end; Roberts wanted to be sure there wouldn't be anything to hinder his mission: deliver the girl to New York on the next day, safe and sound.

Shortly after the mom left, Miss Becker's tall black friend, Alex Turner, arrived in her car. So there was another long period of time when the girl was safe inside her home.

He saw the pest control guy during the day. He watched him spray around the house. He knew that the Park didn't typically pay for pest control from the investigation last week when the key was discovered in Mrs. Becker's rosebush, and so he surmised it wasn't bug spray, but wasn't sure what his game was at the time.

Diaz was with the mom, and he, Davis, and Michaels were watching the girl. Thomas and O'Brian were using a state road maintenance vehicle and doing clean up on the road outside the mobile home park, keeping the black car in sight. It had been out there since early morning, when Thomas and O'Brian followed it from the motel.

Toward dark, Diaz radioed in that the mom was leaving for home. Roberts decided to check the perimeter of the Becker's mobile and see what the perpetrator was planning if he could. He had wanted to wait until dark, but with the mother coming home, he couldn't wait any longer.

He put the dog on a leash and headed towards the Becker's home. The closer he got, the stronger he could smell something was wrong. He couldn't quite tell what it was, but there was definitely something amiss. The dog began whimpering as they got closer. He went into the bushes and yard surrounding the Becker home, an excuse that 'the dog got away' ready in case someone tried to accost him. He knelt down and picked up some of the foul smelling dirt surrounding the mobile, trying to determine what the substance sprayed on it was. He sniffed it. Kerosene? No, not quite, but he was guessing it was some kind of flammable liquid. He quickly stood up and left the area, making sure the occupants didn't see him.

"Thomas, O'Brian, what's the status on our suspect?" Roberts asked into his radio once he was clear of the trailer.

"Hasn't moved from his car." Thomas responded.

"We have a situation here. Suspect has sprayed some sort of flammable liquid all around the perimeter of the mobile home. Looks like he's going to try to light up the girl. Do not let him

leave that vehicle. I repeat, keep him in there. If he can't leave, then he can't start the fire. Once the Beckers are asleep, we will flood the area so it will no longer be flammable."

"Ten-four," was the response.

Then Roberts waited for the mom to come home, so the friend would leave, and they could safely and secretly make her safe. He was on pins and needles knowing that house was a matchbox, ready to go at any second, but the mom didn't get home in the time she should have. It was taking too long.

"Diaz, what's the status on the mom."

"Stopped at a store for something, just back on the road now. ETA twelve minutes," Diaz replied.

Roberts left the rental home, and began walking around outside without the dog. Davis and Michaels were scattered here and there around the park, keeping watch. Then, all hell broke loose.

"Oh God! Roberts, come in, this is an emergency!" He heard Diaz over the radio.

"This is Roberts. What's the situation," he immediately replied.

"Mom in car wreck. It looks bad. Her vehicle was t-boned in the driver's door. Other guy didn't even slow down. Call for an ambulance. Corner of East Main and Seventh Street. Signing off to offer assistance." Diaz seemed shaken. It must have been a bad accident.

Roberts immediately called for an ambulance to the location of the accident. He guessed by the street address which hospital they would be going to, and made that phone call that forever changed Jo Becker's life: he called her and informed her that her mother had been in an accident, and told her which hospital to go to. Miss Becker wouldn't, or couldn't respond, so the friend, Miss Turner, took the phone and the information. Once they hung up, Roberts called Davis and Michaels in to go ahead with the girls to the hospital. He would follow behind; making sure the home was secure.

Diaz buzzed in on the radio, "The paramedics are here. They are using the Jaws of Life to get her out. It's going to take a while, and they are not sure Mrs. Becker will make it. It's bad, Roberts."

"Stay with her, Diaz. Follow to the hospital. Is there any way that the driver of the other vehicle was a set up? Does this have anything to do with our case?"

"Negative. Just a drunk driver, a local. The police recognized him from previous offenses. He shouldn't have been on the road. I don't see a correlation to our assignment."

"Okay, Diaz. Keep with the mom, and stay at the hospital with the girl. There's no telling what the suspect will do when he sees the girl leave, since he had his trap laid here."

"I'm with her."

Roberts hung up and looked towards the Becker home just in time to see the tall girl Alex supporting a stunned and sobbing girl to her car, and put her in the passenger side. If he hadn't just seen it, he would say that the driver was in the car alone, since Miss Becker just disappeared. She was not visible at all in the car, and he could clearly see the passenger seatbelt dangling unused. He radioed to the team that had just left, "Davis, I need a verification that Miss Becker is in her friend's car. Do what you need to do to verify and report back."

"Yes, sir."

Roberts went outside and up the road to the Becker's mobile home, and, grabbing a hose, began dousing the ground around the trailer. The longer he stood there, the less intense the odor was. He was hoping he was diluting whatever was there enough to cause the suspect to fail in his

plot. Between this and, hopefully, the other agents keeping the man from getting out, the perpetrator should fall short of his goal.

“Miss Becker is confirmed inside the vehicle. She is hunched over, head between her knees.”

“Thank you. Stay with them.”

Roberts needed to go, too. He felt he should be with the girl. He watered as far as the hose would reach around the back, then left the hose trickling, to continue soaking the ground, and went for his car. He left for the hospital about eight minutes behind the girls.

“Keep that man away from that trailer,” was Roberts last instructions to the two agents left at the site. Thomas assured them they would take care of him.

Once at the hospital, Roberts quickly acquired scrubs and a white coat so he could come and go freely without being questioned. Once he was in sight of the girls, he nodded to Davis and Michaels to do the same; get a cover of some sort. Diaz was already mopping a floor in the waiting area, in a janitor’s uniform. The four were keeping eyes on Miss Becker at all times. Roberts was faced with a dilemma at this point, though. Even if the mother were going to live, the daughter would not allow herself to be whisked off to New York, for any reason, with her mother in a hospital. This was a definite snag in Director Johnson’s plans. He would have to report the problem as soon as he knew what Mrs. Becker’s prognosis would be.

About an hour after the girls had left for the hospital, Roberts heard his radio buzz. He went into a supply closet so he could talk without being conspicuous.

“Roberts here, what’s the status?”

“Sir, this is Thomas. I swear to you sir, the man never left his car. He is still sitting in his car. I swear it, sir.” Thomas was audibly upset, and Roberts could hear anger in his voice.

“What happened?”

“Not sure, sir. We were in bushes behind the black car, watching his shadow move, so we know he did not leave. Yet, there are fire trucks and police vehicles pulling into the mobile home park, and there is a fire where the girl’s home would be.”

Roberts swore under his breath. That was not supposed to happen. “Has the suspect moved yet?”

“Negative. Still watching the fire.”

“Stay on him. If he leaves the car, tackle him. If he drives off, follow him. He got past us somehow.” Roberts swore again. This was bad. Not only did he fail to protect the girl, he failed himself. This girl was facing her mother’s impending death, from what the doctors were saying, and now she will have no home too. How did the killer get past his guys? But no, he never left the car. Did he have a timer? Maybe a cell phone? Ah, that was probably it. Probably called a number and it set off an incendiary device of some sort. Maybe a slowly burning flare. Roberts kicked himself for not checking further once he found the odor. He should have known the man wasn’t going to sneak up and light a match. Someone could see him leave the scene then. Roberts was angry with himself for the oversight. The suspect truly had tried to kill Miss Becker before her eighteenth birthday. And Director Johnson would have his head on a platter for it.

He left the supply closet to walk past the waiting room his charge was in, as he had repeatedly the whole evening. He saw some doctors in there, heard the words “brain surgery,” and knew the mom was getting worse. He dreaded the girl’s reaction to her home being gone. From the short description Thomas gave him, it was obviously going to be a total loss.

For hours he paced up and down the hallway, meeting Diaz and then Davis and updating each in turn on the mobile home fire. Davis went in to update Michaels, who was acting as a

grieving wife whose husband was in surgery at the moment, and was stationed in the surgery waiting room, where Miss Becker and her friends had been moved to. Every so often, Davis would come in to update Michaels on her husband's supposed surgery, and Michaels informed Davis of Mrs. Becker's condition from what she could overhear in the room. This was how they finally found out about the death of their charge's mother.

Agent Michaels was moved to tears by the emotional display Miss Becker tried to hold in once she returned from her mother's deathbed. The girl truly loved her mother; it was easy to see. She wished they were free to kidnap her and take her to New York now, and avoid the horror and pain that was to be hers for the next few days, but she knew that was impossible, and yet, maybe this tragedy she was now enduring would better prepare her for her life to come? She hoped so, for the girl's sake.

She heard the friend Alex declare that Miss Becker would be living with them from now on. That surprised Michaels. Did they already know of the fire? Was this other family somehow connected to the suspect? Something to consider. She mentioned it to Davis at his next status report, and also that the girl would be living with the Turner family for the time being. Davis immediately left to report to Roberts.

Upon hearing from Davis, Roberts decided it was time to call Director Johnson. She would not be happy, he knew. It was still early when he finally made the call, but he knew he could reach the Director at her home.

"Johnson," she said as she answered the phone.

"Ma'am, this is Agent Roberts. I have news."

"It better be that you are boarding a plane with the girl in an hour for New York."

Roberts sighed. "No, Ma'am. That is unfortunately not the case." He paused for a moment, to gather his thoughts. "There have been some developments in the case."

"Is the girl alive?" the director asked alarmed.

"Yes, Ma'am. The girl is alive, but she is grieving. Her mother was killed in a car accident a few hours ago."

"Oh, that is distressing." The director paused. She knew Agent Roberts was asking her what she wanted to do about it. The girl had unfinished business now, and to try to force her to leave now might be detrimental.

"All right, find out when the services are. We will give her the time to bury her mother."

"Yes, Ma'am." Roberts replied. He had figured that was what she would say, but knew she had to be the one to say it. He hesitated before he went on, and the director heard his pause.

"There's more, isn't there Agent Roberts?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm sorry to report that I failed to secure Miss Becker's home. I did not thoroughly take care of a threat that I had witnessed, so I missed the suspect's final intentions. Shortly after she left the home for the hospital to see her mother, the suspect set off a device that engulfed the mobile home in flames. It was a total loss."

"You missed it?" Director Johnson shouted into the phone. "You missed the suspect's intentions? What did you need, a big red 'X' that said, I'm going to kill her here?" The director slowly took a few deep breaths, calming herself. "Tell me how the girl got out undetected, since I'm assuming our suspect thought she was still in the house?"

"When Miss Becker left with her friend for the hospital, she was so distraught that she was collapsed in the seat, head down between her legs. It was dark, and unless you could see inside the car, it looked as if the friend was alone. I did verify that the girl was in the vehicle before I left the home unattended. Thomas and O'Brian were on the suspect, and confirmed he

never left his vehicle. He must have used a timer or cell phone, something that didn't require him to go near the mobile home after the placement of the liquid he had sprayed around it."

"What type of liquid?"

"I was unable to test it. The accident happened shortly after I discovered it was there. I sent Davis and Michaels on to the hospital with the girl, and flooded the area with water as much as I could before I followed them. I saturated the ground for seven or eight minutes, as far as the hose could reach, but my priority was keeping the girl safe, so I left for the hospital."

Director Johnson sighed. "This will affect the girl almost as much as losing her mother will. I do not know how much one eighteen year old girl can stand. Today is the day she turns eighteen, is it not?"

"Yes it is."

The director took a deep breath, and thought for a moment. Then she gave her orders.

"Find out when the funeral is. Let the girl have her time to grieve, but the moment she has things settled there, I want her on a plane with you to New York. Make it happen."

"Yes, Director."

Roberts hung up with his boss, relieved. He was certain Director Johnson was doing the right thing, letting Miss Becker finish up her business here, but now he had another problem. He still had to keep her safe until they landed in New York. And once the killer found out he hadn't killed anyone, Roberts knew there would be even more attempts on the girl's life.

The rest of that day, the six agents took turns watching and sleeping. Since all of them had been on duty overnight, they all needed to get at least some rest, so they did it in stages. Thomas and O'Brian took a room next to the suspect at the motel, and took turns watching him. After the fire, he had returned to his room and had not ventured out, but if he tried, they were ready.

Davis and Michaels took turns strolling down the Turner's street, catching twenty-minute catnaps in between walks. This is what they had trained for, so twenty minutes would last them a while.

Roberts and Diaz were back at the mobile home park, subtly helping the police and fire departments with their arson investigations. Since the people he worked for had no authority to arrest the arsonist, they were trying to help the law find out who the man in the black car was. They gave detailed descriptions of the vehicle and the man, and described the fake exterminator costume as well. They mentioned not seeing the man for hours before the fire, and helped the search through the rubble for the device that set it off. The authorities apparently found something eventually, though they were reluctant to share the find with bystanders. The police finally left, thanking the kindly nosy neighbors for their enthusiastic help. Late in the afternoon, Roberts and Diaz were informed that Miss Becker and her friends would be descending upon the mobile home to search for anything recoverable. Michaels had discovered the date, time, and location of the funeral for Mrs. Becker, and also had acquired a copy of the police and fire department reports regarding the house fire. There was a timing device found in the debris, the report read.

Meanwhile, Thomas and O'Brian were continually babysitting the suspect, who was still sleeping after his hard work. Once the police had left the mobile home park, Roberts had a brilliant idea, and called Thomas on the radio. Then Thomas, at the direction of Roberts, placed an anonymous phone call to the police about a man at the motel that had a black car, and was last seen wearing an exterminator's uniform. They gave a detailed description of the vehicle and the man, and of course, his last seen location. Then they sat back to watch the fun.

While Miss Becker and her crew were combing through the remains of her home, several police cars and a S.W.A.T. vehicle surrounded the motel where the black car was located. They stormed into the man's room, announcing themselves as they busted through the door. Shots were fired. Many of them. An ambulance was called, and the man came out of the motel room in a body bag. The police carried out an exterminator's uniform, plastic gas cans of volatile liquid, and other conclusive evidence. The threat had been eliminated. Or had it? The hired killer was terminated, but who had hired him? And would the person who did send another? If he had lived, he may have talked, but there was no chance of that now.

Roberts felt so good about having rid Miss Becker of the assassin threat that he decided to talk to her. He approached her, as she was about to leave the remains of her home, and made small talk. He told her how sorry he was for her double loss. He asked about her belongings, if anything was salvaged. When she mentioned the photos she had kept from the fire, he got excited. The director would want to hear about this. Then he wished her well, and Miss Becker and her entourage left.

Roberts assigned Davis and Michaels to follow, and called the director. He informed her of all that had taken place that day, from the times of the funeral, to the death of the suspect. She was sorry that the suspect was dead instead of just incarcerated. She really wanted to know who was behind the threats. Roberts agreed, and commiserated with her. She told him to keep up the guard on the girl, as if the threat were still eminent. It was possible that the suspect hadn't discovered that the girl had not perished in the fire, so his report to whoever hired him could still be that the girl was dead. That could work in their favor. However, caution was still advised, so the watch was still to be in place. Roberts also mentioned the photos of the girl with her father that the girl was still in possession of. The director seemed to brighten at the news. Roberts agreed that he would get the girl to New York by Friday evening, the day after the memorial for her mother. The call ended.

Roberts had not had time to consider how to approach the girl about her upcoming trip. He knew she had to go. There was no option, but in light of what she had been through, taking her away from her friends right now seemed cruel. However, once she understood how important she was, that countless people were depending on her, he believed she would willingly be led away. He hoped she would be able to comprehend the imposing power she was granted the day she was born. After all, not every eighteen-year-old holds the responsibility for the future of the nation in her hands.



## Chapter 12

The day after her eighteenth birthday, Jo awoke late in the morning to many chirping birds outside the window. It was not a sound she was familiar with, since there weren't many trees in the mobile home park where she had spent most of her childhood. She got up and padded across the room to the dresser where she had stashed her small supply of clothing. Alex had emptied out two drawers for her use, but her sparse inventory barely made an impression in one.

She gathered clean clothes and headed to a bathroom and changed out of the T-shirt and sweats she had borrowed from Alex. She had to get something else to sleep in today, she pledged. Alex's things were too small for her to be comfortable. Jo quickly dressed and brushed her teeth with a new toothbrush Alex had given her.

She went back into the bedroom where Alex was still slumbering and sat down on the bed. It was the first time she had been alone since her mom's death. She wasn't alone, she knew, but this was the first time she was able to collect her thoughts. She decided to put on her shoes and go outside in the brisk air and walk around in the Turner's garden.

Once outside, she tried to organize her thoughts. So much had happened, and she had been so tired from lack of sleep, that her birthday day had just vanished. It was only four days ago that she had told her English teacher how much she had been looking forward to turning eighteen. Where was that excitement? What had changed? She missed her mother every moment, of that she was sure. The loss of the home was huge, but it seemed petty in comparison to losing her mother. The loss of the birthday day didn't even count. Was she so grown up all of the sudden that she no longer could take childish pleasure in celebrating herself? No, Jo didn't think that was it. She was sure that if she talked to Alex's mom she would be told that she was still in shock, and hadn't finished grieving, but she had no desire to talk to Kendra today. No, today she wished to talk to her mother.

Out in the yard of the Turner's home there were gardenia, lilac, and rose bushes. There were oleander bushes, too, by the scores. Everywhere she looked, Jo saw beauty and life, and it made her miss her mother.

"Mom," Jo spoke to the beauty surrounding her. "I know you are here with me. I know you will always be with me, but Mom, I need to know what you wanted me to do about Daddy's family. We never finished talking. Then you left, and I have no one." Jo failed at her attempt to stop the tears from spilling down her face. "Mom, there's so many things we didn't talk about. And, Mom, you aren't going to believe this, but someone tried to kill us. Someone burnt down the mobile home, and the police think they wanted us in it when they did, or at least wanted me in it. Mom, why would someone do that? You didn't teach me about evil people. I know they exist, but I don't know why they want to kill." Jo wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Charlie's dad became my lawyer when you left, Mom. He fixed up all the insurance stuff from the car and the mobile. I will have enough to pay all the bills, but not much else. Do you think Mr. Wells at the supermarket would give me a job?" Jo actually felt as if she was talking things out with her Mom. It was almost as if everything she asked, she instinctively knew what her mom would say. Well, most things. There was still the huge question of her grandparents. She tried again from the beginning. "Mom, I need to know what to do about the Becker family. You told me about them for a reason. Can you tell me what to do?"

"No, but you can make the decision yourself. You are a woman now, a responsible adult." Jo was startled by the voice she heard, until she saw Alex coming out into the yard. Alex

came over and embraced her. “Jo, you don’t need to make any decisions right away. You have just been through crisis, and it’s still ongoing. Give yourself time to heal. Besides, if there really are any Beckers, they’ve waited this long, they can wait a little longer.”

Jo smiled up at Alex. “I guess you’re right.” The girls walked arm in arm toward the house. Jo was still thinking, and Alex could tell something was bothering her.

“Jo, what is it?”

Jo considered whether she should share her burdens with her already over-burdened friend. Alex was also taking off this entire week of work to be with Jo. That was a burden on the whole family. Jo felt as if she was taking advantage of the Turners, and she did not like that feeling.

“Jo, come on, tell me what’s bothering you.” Alex demanded.

Jo sighed. “Alex, something the fire chief said yesterday is still bothering me. He said that the fire was intentional, and that the person who set it probably wanted me dead. Now, we know there was that black car, but we never saw the guy in it. I don’t know if the driver of the black sedan was the same man I saw wearing the exterminator uniform. Or even if it was a man in the black car. What if it was a woman? But, Alex, why does someone want me dead? What did I do?”

“I can’t answer that, Jo. I’ve been wondering that myself. You and I both smelled that foul smell when we left for the hospital, though. Yes, I believe the investigation was right, that someone tried to kill you.” Alex thought for a moment, and then asked, “Did you ever report the black sedan to the police like you promised me you would?”

“The promise was if I ever saw it again, but the last time I remember seeing it was graduation night, when that strange accident happened right behind us as we were leaving the parking lot. It seems like that was months ago, Alex, but I know it was only a few days ago.” Jo thought back to that night, the fender bender that allowed their escape from the black car. She had never really considered it since then – there had been no free time, but now she remembered the long black car swerving sharply into the parking lot, and into the little sporty car. She remembered the man getting out of the long car to check damage. She never thought of it at the time, but now, hmm. He seemed familiar to her. She tried to place him in her mind.

Jo stopped short right as they were entering the house. “Alex, I know him. I know the man.”

“Which man, Jo? What are you talking about?”

“The fender bender at the high school. There was a man who got out of the old luxury car, the big one.”

“Yes, I saw him. He went to check the bumper of his car, and talked to the couple who got out of the other car too.”

“He was at the mobile home park yesterday, Alex. I talked to him.”

“He was? When?”

“When we were just finishing sifting through the debris; he was an older man in a big floppy hat.”

“Wait, I remember him talking to you there at the trailer. You think he was the same guy who rammed the sports car at the high school?” Alex tried to picture the accident, to see what Jo was telling her. She remembered the couple in the red car. The woman had bright red hair. The man with her was blond and dressed preppie, but the older man? Alex tried to see him in her memory. She glanced quickly at Jo, stunned.

“I think you are right, Jo. They did resemble each other a lot. Come to think of it, wasn’t that big car parked a few doors down from you at the mobile park?”

“It would be if it’s the same man. He lived four or so mobiles down from me, moved in about three weeks ago I think. Maybe it was two. He was constantly out walking his dog.”

“Do you think he was the man who set the house on fire?”

Jo considered that, but shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. He was very sincere when he told me he was sorry for my loss. I think he meant it. It was almost as if he felt guilty, but why would he?”

“Because he set the fire?” Alex threw it out there, but smiled.

Jo smiled too. “No, it wasn’t him, but it is odd that he was the one who prevented the black sedan from following us that night.” Jo tried to remember anything else she could about the man. “No, he is definitely not the exterminator. I remember now that I saw the floppy hat guy walking his dog at the same time the exterminator was heading to my house. So if the exterminator guy is the black sedan guy, then the floppy hat guy isn’t involved with them.” Jo concluded.

“Jo, your life is turning into a mystery novel. Let’s get some breakfast before someone comes to kidnap you.” Alex laughed, and Jo smiled back. They knew it was serious business, and yet they tried not to think about it. It was hard to imagine that someone really and truly tried to kill Jo.

“There you girls are,” Alex’s mom greeted them as they came into the kitchen. “Jo, Brad Allen called for you earlier. One of the insurance checks will be ready by noon today, and he wanted to know if you wanted to go get it?”

“Oh, that would be great, thank you for telling me. I will call him soon. We have to eat first or Alex will keel over.” Jo smiled at her friend, and Alex playfully punched her in the arm, glad to see Jo’s spirits were up a bit.

They grabbed a quick breakfast of toast and juice, and then Jo requested to use the phone. She got the papers that the fire chief had given her the day before and went into a small office that Kendra used when she worked from home. Some of the papers she had given to Brad after the dinner at their house, but she kept the list of companies that did disaster clean up. That was her first chore today, getting the remnants of the mobile home cleaned up.

She dialed the first number on the list, and asked for a quote for removal of debris from a house fire. The person on the other end of the line asked her questions such as what type of home; single story, two stories, modular, mobile, etc. “Mobile,” she answered. More questions followed. Was the site released by law enforcement? Were multiple structures involved? Had the site been picked through for recovery yet? Was there insurance? How large was the structure?

After answering all the questions, Jo was given a quote of four thousand, five hundred dollars. She nearly choked. Well, the home insurance would cover that. She supposed she should be grateful.

Jo called three more places on the list, wasting nearly an hour getting more quotes. All the companies were in the same range, within two-hundred dollars. Then she started over, calling back the first one, and asked when they would be available. She decided to hire the one that could take care of it immediately. After finalizing the details, and giving Alex’s home phone number for a contact number, she hung up the phone.

“Well, that’s done at least,” she told Alex with a sigh as she went back into the bedroom where Alex was reading a book on her bed.

“What did you do?” Alex asked

“I hired a company to clean up the fire. The Fire Chief told me it should be done as soon as possible, so I took care of it. I was hoping you could take me in to see Charlie’s dad at his office and get the insurance check? I will need to cash it, and then go pay for the clean up.”

“Sure. You ready to go now?”

“Yeah, just have to get on my shoes.”

It was just before noon when Jo and Alex arrived at the office of Mr. Bradley Allen, Attorney at Law. He was expecting Jo, and had told his secretary to send her in when she arrived.

“Thank you for doing this for me,” Jo said as she took the home insurance claim check from him. “It would have been hard for me to track down all the information I would have needed.”

“I’m glad I could do it for you. So what are your plans for the money, Jo, if I might ask?”

Jo told him about the disaster clean up company she had hired, and how much it was going to cost. He seemed surprised.

“I’m sorry I hadn’t thought about that, Jo, or I would have taken care of that too.”

“I wouldn’t have known it was my responsibility without the fire chief telling me about it, and giving me a list of companies to call,” she replied.

“So they will be taking care of that tomorrow?”

“The person I spoke with said that if I paid for it today, they would have it cleaned up by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Good,” He replied. “That will be one less thing to worry about. Now, what about the funeral arrangements for your mother?”

“Kendra went with me yesterday morning and made those.” Jo filled him in on the details, and the cost. “I was going to use the money from the auto insurance to pay back the Turners, and use the rest to buy some necessary items that were lost in the fire. At least a dress for the funeral, and some clothes.”

Charlie’s dad was impressed. “You are truly an intelligent girl, Jo. I am actually a little sad that I don’t get to do more for you, but you did it all yourself.” Jo smiled at him. “I am sure that the auto insurance check will come through by tomorrow. I also spoke with the hospital billing department. They will have their itemization complete by end of business tomorrow as well, so I can tell you if you will get anything from that claim.” He glanced down at his desk. “Oh, I almost forgot. Your mother had a bank account with a few hundred dollars in it, so that has been transferred to your name.” He handed her a checkbook that showed a balance of two hundred thirty-seven dollars and ninety-eight cents at the same bank her mother had used. The checks were in her name.

“How did you get checks so fast? My mom always had to wait weeks for new checks when she ran out.”

Brad smiled. “I have my ways,” was his reply. “You do have I.D. to show when you write checks, don’t you?”

“Yes, my mom made me get a California State I.D. card several months ago, when we started talking about me applying for jobs.”

“Good, then there shouldn’t be any issues writing checks on your account.”

Jo smiled and thanked him again; she and Alex then rose to go.

“One more thing, Jo,” Brad rose from his seat and walked the two girls to the door. “I took the liberty of calling your mother’s employer. The manager at the supermarket sends his

condolences, and he will have your mother's final paycheck sent to me when it is complete. So there will be a little more cash for you there."

"Oh, I had forgotten about that. Yes, that will help. Thank you again for all your help, Brad. I know, I keep saying that, but I really do appreciate it."

"And as I said, I'm glad to do it. Go out and buy something frivolous that you lost in the fire. You can worry about the bills later." He smiled and waved at them, then closed the office door behind them.

Jo grimaced at his last words. *Easy for you to say*, she thought, *since you know there is more money coming*. As for herself, she had no idea where she would get another dime after she spent all she had. She sighed. Life was hard.

The two friends left the law office and went to Jo's bank where she deposited the insurance check. Afterwards Alex drove her to the outskirts of town where the company she had hired to clean up the trailer was located, and wrote them a check for the entire bill. Once back in the car, Alex headed back towards town.

"Time to do some shopping."

"What do you mean, Alex?"

"I mean, you have about six hundred dollars to spend, so let's go spend some."

"Alex, I don't think I want to. This is all I have. Once it's gone, I have no more. What if another bill comes in?"

"Well there are some things you have to get."

"Like what?"

Alex hesitated. "A dress," she replied softly.

Jo dropped her head. Yes, she needed a dress. She had never shopped for clothing by herself before or even with friends. It had always been her and her mom. Her mother was so sensible, and a terrific bargain shopper. Her mother could find a deal wherever she went. That was how she had kept Jo clothed so nicely with their limited income. Shopping would make her miss her mother even more, she knew.

Just then, Jo's cell phone beeped at her. She pulled it out of her jeans and flipped open the cover. Low battery, it told her. Ugh. Okay, she did have to buy a cell phone charger.

"All right. Let's hit one department store, but first we need to eat. I'm starving."

Alex pulled into a fast food restaurant that they both liked. Just as they were getting out of the car, Alex's phone rang. It was Charlie.

"Where are you guys?" she asked when Alex answered the phone. "I'm bored."

Alex told her which restaurant they had just pulled into, and Charlie said, "I'll be there in ten minutes. Wait for me!" Jo smiled. Charlie was so vibrant and cheery. She could use that about now, she thought.

Jo and Alex sat at one of the tables outside of the restaurant and watched people walk by while waiting for Charlie. Jo mentally made a list of items she needed to buy, and another list of items she wished she had. She would take care of the first list today, definitely, and check prices on the rest of the items.

Mindy drove up in her Mercedes just then, and dropped off Charlie. Jo and Alex both waved at her as the car drove away, and Charlie came bounding up to them. "Let's eat, I'm starving."

"So were we," Alex laughed. The girls went in and ordered, then sat in a booth inside, sipping on drinks while their order was cooking.

"Where are we going after this?" Charlie asked.

Jo sighed. "Shopping," she replied.

Charlie frowned at her. "Wow, Jo. Don't sound so enthusiastic next time," she told her melancholy friend sarcastically.

"Hey, shopping is just not my thing, okay? I would much rather hang out in a bookstore. You are the shopaholic, Charlie. I've never done the clothing thing before. At least, not without my mom," she finished sadly.

Alex gave Charlie a look that told her to tread carefully. Charlie finally got it. "Its okay, Jo. I can help you. I know all about shopping. I will be your very own personal shopping expert." She grabbed Jo's hand across the table and squeezed it, giving her a huge smile. Jo smiled back in spite of herself and chuckled. It was hard to stay sad when Charlie was around. She was just too happy for her own good, Jo thought.

Soon a server delivered trays of food to their table and the girls dove in. They were all hungry, they realized. Jo was surprised she had any appetite at all considering the stress she was under.

They had just finished eating and were preparing to leave the restaurant when Alex spotted a lady with long, bright red hair, who looked remarkably similar to the lady she had seen in the sports car at the high school three nights earlier. "Jo, doesn't that look like the gal from the red sports car that was behind us as we were leaving the high school after the sober grad party? You know, the car that got hit by the old guy that lives near you?" Alex nodded toward the woman who was eating a hamburger across the room. Jo glanced over at her. The hair was really bright. It was hard to forget.

"It sure looks like her, but really, there are a lot of people here. I'm sure she just likes to eat here, like we do."

"Yeah, it's just weird, seeing so many coincidences."

"What are you two talking about?" Charlie asked, exasperated. She never seemed to know what was going on, and was tired of being left out. Alex explained whom she was referring too, but Charlie grabbed Jo's hand and led her out. "That's just ridiculous. You act as if these people actually are following you around, Alex. I'm sure Jo is right, and she just likes to eat here." Charlie stopped at Alex's car and waited for her to unlock it.

The girls piled into the vintage Mustang and left for the mall. Jo stopped at a booth that specialized in cell phone accessories, and purchased a replacement charger for her cell phone, next they entered a clothing store to search for a dress for the funeral.

Charlie picked five or six possible dresses from a rack and brought them to where Jo was browsing. She showed them to her one by one, commenting on strengths and weaknesses of each dress from the fabric to the design. Jo was dumbfounded. She had no idea Charlie knew so much about fashion. She had never paid attention before when they went into stores with Charlie; she just sat and read a book.

Jo tried on the two she liked the most, and, not liking the fit of one of them, purchased the other. Charlie then hauled Jo over to another section of the store to help her choose some everyday wear. She picked some smart slacks and dressy blouses for Jo to try on, and a business dress suit. When Jo protested that these were unnecessary, Charlie reminded her, "Jo, you said you were going to have to get a job, right? Well, if you dress successfully, then you will be successful. An employer is more likely to hire you if you show up in this," Charlie held up the business suit, "than if you were to show up in that." Charlie pointed to the outfit Jo had on. It was one of the outfits she had purchased with the money Kendra had loaned her the day after the fire. Simple jeans and T-shirt. Jo looked down at her attire, and realized that Charlie was right.

Yes, she would have to look for a job, and soon. She sighed in resignation, took the outfits from Charlie, and went to the dressing room to try them on.

They were in the clothing store almost two hours before Jo finally called it quits. “Enough! I don’t need to replace my entire wardrobe in one day,” she told Charlie. Besides the original dress, she had acquired the business suit, several other business dress outfits, two pair of dress shoes, a spare set of tennis shoes, two sets of sleepwear and some underwear to add to the meager supply she had purchased on her previous shopping trip. She felt she had spent much more than she had wanted to and worried about something unexpected arising.

As they entered the mall parking lot, Alex’s cell phone rang. It was her mother.

“Alex, I just got home from the store,” Kendra said. She called the travel agency that the Turner’s owned “the store”; Alex had never been able to figure out why. “There were three messages on the machine for Jo, all from an Officer Peters. He needs her to go to the police station right away. He mentioned something about a break in the arson case.”

“Oh! Thanks, Mom. I will get her there.” Alex hung up and relayed the message to Jo, and then the three girls jumped into the Mustang and were on their way to the police station.

By the time they reached the Police Station, Jo was a nervous wreck. “I need to see Officer Peters,” Jo made her request of the clerk at the front desk.

“May I tell him who is inquiring?” the polite lady asked.

“Joanna Becker.” Jo figured she had to use her full name here, since it was her legal name. The woman picked up a phone and punched some buttons, then said something into the receiver. She hung up and looked back up at Jo.

“Officer Peters will be right out.”

Jo thanked her and sat down in the waiting area where Alex and Charlie were already stationed. She had wondered on the way here what the break in the case could be. She wasn’t even sure which case they were referring to. Was it the car accident or the house fire?

A tall officer came out then and introduced himself to the three young women.

“Hi, I’m Officer Peters. Which one of you is Miss Becker?”

Jo stood up, “That’s me, Officer Peters. I got a message that you needed to see me?”

“Yes, could you come with me please?”

He turned to lead her into the back area, and Jo froze. This was scary stuff. She had never been in the Police Station before. The officer realized she wasn’t following, and turned back around.

“I have an office back here. It would be better to talk there.”

She still didn’t move.

He smiled at her and said, “Miss Becker, its ok. It’s good news. Why don’t you bring your friends, too?”

Jo’s relief was audible and she quickly grabbed Alex’s and Charlie’s hands and pulled them along after the retreating police officer. She needed her support system.

They followed Officer Peters down a long corridor with offices on each side and into a room around a corner. He sat down at a desk and motioned for them to take a seat in the various chairs surrounding the desk.

“First of all, I wanted to tell you about the accident. I was the first vehicle on the scene after it happened. I was the one who called for the Jaws of Life, because I could tell it would be impossible to get your mother out without them.” Tears were running down Jo’s face as she listened to the officer relive that evening. “Your mother was awake when I got to her, Miss Becker.” That startled Jo. She had never known that, no one had told her. The officer continued,

“She wasn’t awake long, though. The pain was intense, I’m sure, but I told her we would take care of her, and help was on the way. I assured her that I wouldn’t leave her. Then she looked up at me and said, ‘Jo’ just like that. I asked her if that was her husband. She said ‘no, my daughter. Tell Jo I love her.’ And then she fell unconscious. I am glad I am able to deliver her message to you, Jo. I am terribly sorry for your loss. She must have been a wonderful woman.”

Jo was weeping quietly, and the officer handed her a tissue. She dabbed at her face. “She was amazing, Officer Peters. Thank you for giving me her message. I will treasure it always.”

Officer Peters smiled at her. He was a little misty eyed too, but he coughed to cover it up, and went on. “The reason I asked you to come in, beyond that of course, is regarding the house fire. When I learned that it was your home that burnt to the ground, I was just appalled that you had to endure two such horrifying tragedies at the same time. I am so terribly sorry that it happened to you, Miss Becker, and I wish there were a way I could have prevented it. And then once we realized it was arson, I was furious. Another officer and I investigated the possibility that the two incidents were related, but could not find a connection in any way. The man who killed your mother is in jail, awaiting his sentence. He pleaded guilty to all the charges, and will serve many years in prison for his crimes.”

Jo sighed in relief. She was glad that man would not be on the road once she began driving.

“Now as to the other, the fire,” Officer Peters continued, “there was a gentleman at the mobile home park who gave an excellent description of a suspicious man he had seen around your home several times in the days preceding the fire. He described the same exterminator’s uniform that you did in your account to Captain Evans of the fire department, and he described a peculiar black sedan with black tinted windows that had been lurking around the neighborhood for more than a week before the fire.”

Jo and Alex both gasped and looked at each other. The black car! Officer Peters saw their response and asked, “Had you seen this black car too?” Jo nodded and explained.

“I had been seeing it for about a week before the fire as well. It was usually parked across the street from the mobile home park, but it was between homes over there, not in front of any particular one. It just didn’t seem to fit. Then we saw it three times last Friday, our graduation day,” Jo nodded her head at both Alex and Charlie, signifying to the officer that all three of them had seen it. “Once in the morning, right as school started; once late in the afternoon at about four o’clock; then the last time late that night after the sober grad party, about midnight.”

“And you had no idea who this person was?” Jo shook her head, no. “Other than the time he was posing as the exterminator, did you ever see him outside of the vehicle?” Again, Jo shook her head, no. “Hmm.”

Officer Peters flipped open a file folder and pulled out a photo. He placed it on the table in front of Jo. It was a face shot of a man on a silver table with his eyes closed. He was dead. The photo frightened Jo. She was not in the habit of seeing dead people’s pictures. “Do you recognize him?”

“He could be the man in the bug outfit. I didn’t get a really good look.”

Officer Peters took another photo out, and placed it in front of Jo. “Do you recognize the car?”

Jo, Alex, and Charlie looked at the photo. It was the same black sedan with the dark tinted windows that they had seen all those times. They all three nodded and Jo said, “Yes, that’s the car. Who was the man? Is he dead?”



The officer took back the photos and put them away. He leaned forward to make eye to eye contact with Jo.

“The man in the photo was positively identified as the man who drove the black sedan. We have evidence, also, that he was the same person who burnt down your home. So far, we have been unable to discover his name, or the reason he was targeting you. We are almost positive, though, that he was trying to kill you, Miss Becker.”

Jo gasped. She had suspected that, after Captain Evans had told her as much the night of the fire, but to have it proven really frightened her.

Officer Peters continued, “Can you think of any reason someone would want to kill you?” he asked.

Jo shook her head no. “Captain Evans told me the same thing; that the fire was purposely set, and that the man who set it thought I was in there at the time. I don’t know why someone would want to kill me.” Jo’s tears were falling freely now. She was beyond the breaking point. She was at the point where she wished the fire had consumed her. If it had, she wouldn’t have to bear this fear and heartache.

“It’s going to be okay,” Officer Peters patted her hand that was sitting on the desk. Alex and Charlie were crying with her, but comforting her too. This was really bad news. “Miss Becker, really, it’s okay now. Don’t you see? The man is dead. He can’t come after you anymore.”

“But what if he was sent by someone else, Officer Peters?” Alex interrupted. She was upset and angry that her friend was being targeted. “Will they send another person? Why did he want to kill Jo? What can you do to protect her?” She fired the questions at the officer while wiping the tears from her face.

“All of that is still unclear, miss. We hope that we intercepted the suspect before he found out that Jo survived the fire. He was still sleeping when we stormed his motel room the afternoon following the fire. If he didn’t get the news that your mother had died, and you were with her at the hospital, then maybe he still thought he had completed his mission. Although he didn’t seem to be in a hurry to leave town, which he would have done if he was sure he had accomplished his task. We just don’t know.”

“What did you find at his motel room that links him to Jo?” Alex asked.

“Well, the exterminator uniform was in his car. He had a map of the high school and a teacher’s parking lot pass to it as well. He had some mail with your mother’s name on it, too, that we assume he took from your mailbox. The most damning evidence was an array of photos of Miss Becker in various places, with her name, address, home phone, and cell phone number on the back of one of them.” Jo sucked in her breath quickly, shocked. “We confiscated three handguns and two rifles as well; one of them was a high-powered long distance rifle. With all the firepower he had, I don’t understand why he chose arson, to be honest, but that decision saved your life, Miss Becker.”

“So the break in the case you wanted to see Jo about was that the man who burnt her house down was dead?” Alex asked, trying to draw the interview to a close. She saw how shaken Jo was, and didn’t like her pale color. They needed to get out of there.

“Yes,” he replied, “that, and to see if she recognized the man. His fingerprints aren’t coming up in our database. If we assume he is a hired assassin, which all the signs point to, then we need to find out who hired him and why. That’s why I brought you in, to see if you could help with that.”

“I have no idea who he is, who wants to kill me, or why,” Jo replied tersely. She was suddenly very tired, and wanted to leave. Between reliving her mother’s accident and finding out there was a price on her head, she had had enough of this officer’s ‘good news.’

Alex rose, and pulled Jo up with her. She motioned to Charlie to get up. “If you can think of anything else you need to ask, call my house like you did today, Officer Peters. Jo will be staying there indefinitely.”

Officer Peters realized he had pushed the fragile girl too far, and allowed her friends to take her away. He handed Jo a business card, which he had scribbled a phone number on the back of.

“If you see anything suspicious, call me. That is my cell phone; you can reach me anywhere, any time. I am truly sorry about your loss, Miss Becker. There will be officers patrolling the area you live in for a few weeks, or at least until we find out more information about the threat on your life.”

Jo thanked him numbly. She was slipping fast. Alex hurried her out of the office and down the corridor, out into the fresh air. Once outside, Alex made Jo take five deep breaths. It seemed to help, and a little color returned to Jo’s cheeks. The three friends then climbed into Alex’s car and headed away from the Police Station, toward Charlie’s home to drop her off. A few minutes after they left, Jo turned to Alex and said, “Alex, you know what?”

“What, Jo?”

“If that is his idea of ‘good news,’ then I’m glad Officer Peters didn’t want to tell me any ‘bad news,” Jo smiled, and the Charlie and Alex laughed with her all the way home.

## Chapter 13

Wednesday morning, the day before her mother's funeral, Jo woke up early. She showered and dressed, then went out into the yard to absorb the beauty around her. Alex was waking as she left, so she didn't think there would be much time alone. As much as she loved Alex, and appreciated her, she realized she hadn't had any time alone other than the few minutes the previous morning. Jo thought that maybe she should spend some more time thinking about her mother today, so that tomorrow wouldn't be so hard. She remembered there were photos – the ones she had happened to grab on the way to the hospital. They were still in Alex's car, she was sure. Oh, and the treasure box. There were some in there. Jo headed back into the house to see if she could get those items from Alex's car. She met Alex coming out of the bathroom.

"Alex, I need to spend some time with my mom today. It's something I need to do. Can I get the pictures and my box out of your car?"

"Sure, let me throw some clothes on. I'll be right out."

Jo went into the kitchen and helped herself to a quick breakfast. Alex appeared shortly, and they went out to her car. She opened the trunk, revealing the things they had recovered from the fire.

"Oh, my clothes, I forgot about them. I should do some laundry today; I might have to wash them more than once to get the smell out." Jo picked up the clothing, and underneath it she saw the treasure box that had her pictures and the diamond jewelry set her mother had given her. Next to it was the small round tin box that Alex had discovered in the debris from what had been Jo's mother's bedroom.

"Oh, we never found out what was in this tin, yet did we?" She picked up the badly charred box and shook it. Yes, there was definitely something inside. "I wonder if your dad could get it open."

"He's gone to work, but we can try some of his tools. Come on." Alex led Jo to a workshop behind the garage where there was a large assortment of tools. The two of them pried on the container, used a screwdriver on it, then tried to separate it by each of them holding half and pulling away. Nothing was accomplished by the exertion other than it made Alex fly back a few feet and land on her tailbone.

"This isn't working, Jo." Alex looked around for something else and picked up a can of some kind of liquid spray. "Hey, wait. This stuff helps release rust. Let's spray it on, see if it will loosen the top from the bottom."

Jo held and spun the round container while Alex liberally sprayed the degreaser all around the seam. They let it soak in for a few minutes, and then started prying on it again. This time, it budged. It was a small victory, but it got both girls excited.

"Spray some more, Alex. Maybe we will get it this time." So they repeated the earlier application, and waited five minutes this time. Then Alex had an idea.

"Here, Jo, put the bottom part of the canister in a vice, like this," She took the canister and carefully screwed a table vise onto it so it wouldn't budge. "Now you and I can both pry on each side, at the same time. Let's try it."

They each took a thin flat blade screwdriver and positioned themselves equally across the canister. Unable to get a grip into the lip of the cover, Jo decided to place the flat edge against it, and used a hammer to try to loosen the top. Alex caught on to what she was doing, and followed her lead. The lid loosened a little with each blow, and finally, after working at it for almost ten

minutes, the cover popped off and fell onto the floor with a loud clang. Jo and Alex looked inside and saw a folded sheet of paper, and a set of keys, small ones.

“Those look like the Post Office Box keys my parents have for their business mail.” Alex commented.

“They are the same size as the keys for the filing cabinet in the Attendance Office at school, too. They could be anything.” Jo reached in, picked up the paper and opened it carefully. It was a handwritten note, probably to her mother from her father. “Lin, Keep these for me until I get back. Love, Joe.” Jo read the missive aloud. “I wonder what they go to.”

Jo picked up the two keys that were both on one small ring, and examined them. She found a small number engraved on the side of each. One number read 102 and the other key had 103 engraved on it. Whatever they open, it is most likely two things close to each other, Jo surmised. “Well, if these are from my dad, then they are from at least eighteen years ago. There’s no telling what they go to, or where. It could be connected to his business in New York. Maybe a P.O. Box there. It would have been closed long ago for lack of payment.”

“It’s impossible to guess what they go to, Jo. Why don’t you put the keys and note in your treasure box, and we can throw away the canister. Its pretty beat up. I would hate to have to try to open it again.”

Jo agreed with Alex, and they gathered the rest of the things from the car, including all the photos and other papers Jo had mistakenly, though luckily, taken with her to the hospital that fateful night. Jo wiped down her treasure box with a damp cloth, getting most of the soot and char off of it before taking it into the house.

“Alex, I was wondering if you would mind if I had some time alone today,” Jo began, and Alex opened her mouth to protest. Jo stopped her and tried to explain her feelings. “Alex, I really need some time to grieve. I need to think through the last two days. I haven’t been alone or unoccupied for more than a few minutes since the accident. I need to say good-bye to my mother today, before the funeral tomorrow. I think it’s important for me to be okay by tomorrow, for myself. I have a deep feeling in my gut that I need to do this today, and not wait.”

“Jo, I know you need to grieve, but that takes time. There will be lots of time. I’m not comfortable with leaving you alone so soon. Besides, some psycho is trying to kill you, remember?”

“The psycho is dead, Alex, and there was no indication that anyone else is coming. Regardless, that man can’t hurt me anymore, and I need to do this, Alex. It’s important. I’ve been feeling lost, and I need to find myself again. I need some time today.” Alex was frowning, so Jo suggested a compromise. “How about this: I spend some time with my mom today, and I promise to hang on to you and Charlie all day tomorrow, and not leave your sight. You can even go to the bathroom with me if you want!” Jo smiled.

Alex smiled back. She was unsure of Jo’s plan, but realized Jo was serious about taking this time. “All right, Jo, but you take your cell phone with you if you leave the house, and you call me the moment you need me.”

“Yes, Mother,” Jo answered sarcastically. “Oh, Alex, can I borrow a small plastic container? I want to put the pictures in it to take with me when I go. I don’t want to lug around the metal box.”

Alex went and found a suitable container, then loaned Jo a backpack to put it in, so that it wasn’t obvious she was carrying a plastic box. “Do you need a lift to someplace?” Alex asked as Jo got up to leave.

“No, I think I want to walk. I’m not even sure where I’m going yet, but I know I need to go.” Jo gave Alex a hug, grabbed her cell phone, which she had remembered to charge the night before, and left the house. She headed down the sidewalk toward town. She really didn’t know where she was going, but wanted to be on her way. Wherever she ended up was fine.

She had been walking for just a few minutes when a city bus pulled up right beside her. She glanced up and realized she was at a corner where the bus stopped. The bus driver assumed she was wanting on, so had stopped for her. She looked at the bus, and impulsively, boarded it. Why not? She said to herself. After plunking the correct amount of coins from her purse into the toll box, she found a seat with a window.

The unfamiliar streets and houses flew by as the bus headed into the business district. She had visited Alex many times before, of course, but hadn’t paid much attention to the residential area her friend called home. The bus wended its way through several business districts and residential districts. She watched as people got off and on. She saw families board together, and saw them separate at different stops. Life went on for everyone around her. Could life go on for herself as well, she wondered?

The bus pulled up to a large park. There were picnic tables, soccer fields, baseball diamonds, and a playground for the small children to play in. Jo decided to get off. She didn’t stop to wonder why, she just felt like it.

Jo crossed a large lawn to sit under a gigantic oak tree that sprawled to the sky. It was imposing, but it was beautiful. She sat against the trunk of the tree and opened up the backpack. Unsuccessfully trying to hold back tears, she wept as she saw the photos of her mother in various stages of Jo’s life. She studied the beautiful bride in the wedding photo. Her mother was so deliriously happy. It would have been wonderful to know her father, Jo thought, just because her mother loved him so much. She browsed through all the photos, studying them through her tears.

“Oh, Mom, I don’t know how I can keep going. I’m not sure I want to, Mom. Why did you have to leave me all alone?” These were the hard questions she asked of the woman in the pictures.

She looked at the last of them, and put them away. Her tears had dried up. She thought over the past few days and the trials she had faced. She wondered if life was always going to be so hard. She wondered if she was strong enough to face it if it was.

She lay back on the grass and looked up at the tree, using the backpack as a pillow. She noticed that the oak tree had dozens of branches. Many of them were deformed, twisted, curled, and ugly. Countless numbers of smaller branches led off from the larger, bent shapes. Surprisingly, many of the smaller branches were straight. Not perfect by any means, but more uniform than their larger contributors. As she took in the whole picture, a wonderful concept occurred to her. This oak tree was life. You start out with, hopefully, a strong, firm foundation. You grow straight and tall for a while, setting your roots, your character. Soon branches form. Those are experiences in your life, she theorized. Sometimes the experiences you go through are ugly, as the tree clearly showed. Sometimes they left scars. Yet even the ugly branches made the tree stronger. Then smaller, steady branches forming off of the disfigured larger ones could be the lessons learned from the ugly experience you had. It was wisdom, she decided, and those small branches were the ones that had the leaves on them. The leaves represent your spirit – your character; how you relate to others. *The more wisdom you gain from the hard lessons, the more outward integrity you show to people around you*, she concluded.

Jo jumped up off the ground and ran a ways from the tree, then turned around and looked back. Yes! It was just as she thought. If you look at the tree as a whole, as one big tree, you do

not see the large ugly twisted branches, or the smaller shooters. You only see the beautiful green leaves. “Every trial I go through in my life shows in my character, and it’s up to me to decide what the trial shows. If I curl up and cry in the corner, my leaves wither – then all anyone would see would be my large, ugly branches.” She rationalized aloud. Every experience was a lesson, and an opportunity to grow leaves, or choose to allow herself to wither away. More than anything, Jo was positive that her mother would want these trials to help her develop wonderful character, but it was up to her to make that happen. She could not let grief or depression take hold. She could not allow her spirit to wither under the weight of her sadness.

This was what she had needed today. Jo smiled at the tree. “Thank you for showing me that all this was necessary,” she shouted to the tree. Jo laughed. She ran up and hugged the tree. “Thank you, Mom, for helping me become a person with strong character. I won’t let you down.”

Jo wiped the last tears from her eyes, and turned from the tree, walking to the bus stop. She felt good; lighter than she had in days. She felt as if a burden had lifted from her shoulders. Her mother would be proud, she knew. Jo recognized the fact that she was not done grieving. It would probably be years before she would stop missing her mother’s companionship, but this was a huge step. After Jo’s chat with her mother and seeing her life in the tree, Jo understood that she was a strong person, and would be just fine.

The bus pulled up at the corner as she neared it. She boarded it, again putting coins in, and found a seat. There were many more on it this time, so she sat with a child near the back. The little boy seemed full of questions, and Jo entertained him for his grateful mother until they got off several stops later. Once alone, she moved over to the window to watch.

Jo had no idea which bus went where, since she had never ridden on the city bus before. However she was amazed to realize that the route they were on had become familiar to her. They were heading the direction of the mobile home park. She knew that the bus didn’t go as far as her house, and decided to find out where the cut-off was. At the next stop, she quickly moved up to the driver and asked, “How far does the bus go before you turn around and head back?”

“Just another two blocks, miss,” was the reply.

Two blocks would put her about two miles from the mobile home park. Jo smiled and decided to go for it. She would say good-bye to the old home once more.

The bus stopped, and Jo got off and looked around. There was a small grocery store, a gas station with a convenience store on another corner, and a strip of various businesses off to the side. Jo and her mother had come here many times for one or two items missing from the house that her mother had needed to fix dinner. It was the closest store to their home. They had often come here for bread and milk, too.

It was a bit after noon by this time, so Jo went into a small café next to a Laundromat that had seen many years of service. She ordered a cup of soup and a half sandwich, and a root beer. Root beer wasn’t her favorite drink, but Charlie loved it, so she had learned to like it as well. She ate hungrily once her food was served, then left a tip on the table on her way out the door.

The walk was pleasant. It was warm out, but not hot. There was a wide shoulder on the side of the road, so she didn’t have to fear the passing cars. They mostly ignored her. She would have been frightened if she had seen a black car with darkly tinted windows, but she was positive that would never happen again.

About a half-hour into her walk, she was starting to tire. She was sure she was over half way to the mobile home park since she recognized everything she passed. It wouldn’t be much farther.

Just about then, a large older model luxury car pulled off the road slowly, right in front of her. She was a little leery of the man, considering what she had been through, but the car seemed vaguely familiar. Then she realized who it was when a man wearing a floppy straw hat got out of the car.

“Hello, miss. Are you heading to the park?”

“Yes, I decided to say goodbye to the old trailer. I doubt I will come this way much more, and wanted to see it one last time.”

“Well, you know it’s gone, right? Some company came and cleaned it up, and hauled the whole thing away. I watched them myself.” Jo had reached the vehicle by this time, and stopped to talk to the gentleman.

“I wasn’t sure when they were going to clear it out, but that’s probably even better. I can see our driveway and our bushes and things. I just wanted to see it one last time.”

“Can I give you a lift? I was just on the way home myself.”

Jo considered the man’s kind proposal. She felt he was most likely harmless, but her training from babyhood made her cautious about accepting his offer. He saw her hesitate, and hastened to assure her that his intentions were pure.

“I don’t want to alarm you, Miss Becker. Never mind, forget I asked. Have a nice walk, now, and stay clear of the road,” he advised and got back in his car.

“Wait!” Jo called.

“Yes?” the man left his vehicle again and turned to face her, waiting.

“I would like a ride home – well to the mobile home park, if you don’t mind,” she smiled as she walked towards the car. The man smiled back, came around the vehicle and opened the door for her. She was surprised by this small gesture. She had never had a man open the door for her. “Thank you very much, sir.”

“You said you were saying goodbye to the place. Are you planning on going somewhere?” the man asked as he got back into the vehicle.

“No, I don’t think so. I will begin looking for a job next week. I can’t live off my friend Alex and her family forever, even though I’m sure that’s what Alex wants for me right now,” Jo grinned as she replied.

“No college for you?”

“I can’t afford it.” Jo looked up at the man, her face stark and honest. “I couldn’t have afforded it even if my mom hadn’t died or even if the house hadn’t burnt down. There was just no money for anything like that.”

The man looked at Jo, startled. “You didn’t have money for things you needed at home?” He was truly shocked by her response.

“We always had the necessary things. Mom was a careful shopper, and we ate a lot of hamburger and chicken,” she laughed. “It was not easy for her, being a single working mom all those years, but I’m so proud of her for who she was. And I hope I can be half as strong a woman as my mom was.” Jo declared fiercely.

“Your dad died when you were little?” the man asked. Jo nodded. “That’s too bad.” Roberts wanted more information, but now was not the time, and he knew that. He pulled into the mobile home park just then, and rounded the corner toward Jo’s former residence.

Jo looked ahead at the place she grew up. The crew she had hired had truly been there and done their job. No frame, no siding, even the ashes were all gone. The old appliances had been taken as well. All that was left was the roses her mother had carefully planted and cared for

throughout the years, and a few other bushes and plants scattered around. The place where the mobile home had sat was completely bare.

Jo got out of the vehicle once it stopped at her driveway. She thanked the man, and he continued to his door a few yards away. She lovingly caressed the rosebush closest to where the front door used to be. She had bought that one for Mother's Day one year, as a surprise for her mother. Shopping for her mother for birthdays and things had been so hard, since there was no other parent to take her. This one year, she was determined to surprise her mother, so had begged Kendra to take her out one day. That's when Jo picked out the deep red rose bush. She remembered clearly the look her mother gave her once the gift was revealed. It was the very first surprise her mother had ever gotten. Jo relived the precious look her mother bestowed upon her as she said, "This is the nicest thing anyone has ever given me." Jo realized years later that it wasn't the rose bush that her mother had treasured, but the time and effort that Jo had given to getting it for her.

Roberts walked up beside her, still wearing the floppy hat. "It's all cleaned up nice, now. The company did a good job."

"Yeah, they did." She really was pleased with herself. She had done something all on her own, and the company she picked did the job as promised. She had accomplished something as an adult. It was a good feeling.

Jo sensed the man next to her wanted to say something, but was hesitating. He kept shifting his weight and opening his mouth as if to speak, but closing it before he said something. Finally, he stopped stalling.

"Listen, Miss Becker, I will be attending the services tomorrow for your mother. I know we didn't really know each other, but I could tell she was the type of person I would have liked to have known."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. -" Jo paused. She had no idea what to call the man, and looked at him for an answer.

"Roberts," he responded quickly.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Roberts, but really unnecessary. I do appreciate your evaluation of my mother, though." Jo turned from the empty lot as if to leave. Roberts started again.

"Miss Becker, what I mean is, since you implied that you would be looking for a job soon, I would like to speak with you in that regards. You see, some friends of mine own a company that is looking for bright young women like yourself. If you would let me tell you about it tomorrow after the service, I would love to do that."

"But I have no qualifications for a job in business," Jo protested.

"Yes you do, Miss Becker. You are a sensible young woman of strong character, and I can tell from our short conversation that you are intelligent. You are just the person this company needs, I guarantee that. Will you let me talk with you tomorrow?" To Jo it seemed that the man was almost desperate to speak with her about this job. She wondered what his offer meant to her. Was it a real offer? Did he know someone who needed a receptionist or something that didn't require much experience? She studied the man for a moment. Beyond the floppy straw hat that humanized him, he was wearing khaki dress shorts and a casual business type shirt. Having just had a shopping experience with Charlie the day before, she knew that his attire, though casual, was costly. He was for real, she decided.

"All right, I'm sure that there will be something with all of my friends immediately afterwards, but later in the evening, I will be free to speak with you about a job. I can tell you



when and where at the service tomorrow, if that is okay. And thank you for your interest, Mr. Roberts.” Jo shook the hand he offered to her, she then turned to head to the mobile home park office. She wanted to make sure there was nothing she needed to do to move out permanently.

“Miss Becker, do you need a ride to your temporary home? I believe you said you were staying with friends.”

Jo turned around for a moment, “No, thank you. I need to talk to the park manager, and then I’m going to call Alex to come get me. I’m sure she’s worried sick by now. She loves to mother me,” Jo smiled when she considered Alex’s care of her. She was grateful to have such good friends.

“Okay, take care, Miss Becker, and I will see you tomorrow at two.” Roberts turned and headed back to his rented trailer.

Jo dialed Alex’s cell phone as she walked toward the manager’s office. Alex answered on the first ring.

“Where are you, I’m coming to get you right now!” Alex declared excitedly.

“Alex, calm down,” Jo giggled at her friend’s response. “I’ve had a really good day, and found out a lot about myself, but I could use a ride, if you are offering.”

“Finally, you have come to your senses. Tell me where you are, woman.”

“I’m at the trailer park taking care of some unfinished business.”

“How did you get way out there?” Alex was going to lecture Jo, but decided against it. “Never mind, you can tell me later. I will be there in a few minutes.”

Jo, smiling, closed the flip phone and pocketed it. She entered the office and found the manager, Mrs. Winters, at her desk.

“Hi, I can see the company I hired cleared up the mess already,” Jo unnecessarily pointed out.

“Yes, they did a good job. Thank you for being so prompt with that, Jo, and I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am about your mama, bless her heart,” the sweet old lady sympathized. “She was always just the nicest lady I ever dealt with. I’m sorry about the trailer too, honey. I can’t understand why people want to go and set other people’s houses on fire. It doesn’t make sense to me,” Mrs. Winters continued.

Jo wished she would just finish so she could leave. She sighed as she continued listening to the lady list the horrors and woes in the world that touch so many innocent people. Yes, they were all important, but not right now, at this moment, when Jo just wanted to finish her business.

“Thank you for your concern, Mrs. Winters,” Jo interrupted. “I was just wondering if there was anything I needed to do to terminate the space rent. I no longer have anything to put in the space, you know.”

“Oh, of course. Yes, that does need to be done, doesn’t it?” Mrs. Winters went to a filing cabinet and pulled out a folder. She opened it, extracting a single paper that looked to Jo like some kind of contract.

“Here it is. Your mother was on a month-to-month lease agreement. She had paid for the current month just a few days before the accident and fire, so there is nothing owing. I will just cancel the contract now, and you are all done.” Mrs. Winters picked up a stamp and pushed it down on the contract, making that day’s date appear in bright bold red color. Next to it, she wrote, ‘cancelled due to fire.’

Jo thanked the kind lady for her help and left the office. She breathed a huge sigh of relief and smiled. She was going to be okay, she realized. Even though she missed her mother terribly, she was going to make it. It was a good feeling.

Alex pulled up in her Mustang just as Jo stepped down the last step from the office. “Perfect timing, Alex. Thanks!” she said as she climbed into the car and tossed the backpack into the back seat. Alex made a U-turn and headed back to her house.

“You walked here didn’t you, Jo,” Alex asked accusingly.

Jo grinned. “Part of the way, yes. The rest of the way, I took a ride from a stranger.”

Alex gasped. “Joanna Becker, you did not!”

Jo laughed at her friend’s expression and tone. “Relax, Alex. It was the man from the mobile home park. You know; the same one that wrecked into the car behind us at graduation? The guy that lives a few doors from where I did?”

Alex calmed down a little, but was still upset. “Why did you ride with him?”

“He saw me walking and he pulled over to ask if I wanted a ride. I wasn’t going to at first, but I decided I was tired, so I did, and it was fine. In fact, he is coming to the funeral tomorrow, and after that, he wants to talk to me about a job offer.”

Alex looked at Jo skeptically. “What kind of job offer?”

“I don’t know. Just some friends of his looking for bright, young intelligent women to work in their company, or something like that. I agreed to listen to him after the service tomorrow. I told him I would tell him when and where we could meet once I saw him.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? The man is practically a stranger. You don’t know anything about him.”

“Alex, it will be okay. Besides, I’m sure that you will be in the booth or table next to me so you can make sure I don’t get kidnapped. I was going to choose a public place, Alex. I’m not a complete nitwit you know.”

Alex grinned. “Not completely, no.”

Jo pretended to slap Alex on the arm, and they both laughed.

“So he’s coming to the funeral?”

“Yes.”

“And you told him when it was and where?”

Jo looked at Alex startled. She just realized that she hadn’t mentioned a word to the man about where the funeral was. Yet she distinctly remembered him saying as she walked away that he would see her tomorrow at two. She wondered if she had mentioned it to him the day they did the salvage at the trailer. No, she didn’t think she had. So how did he know?

“He’s knows where it is and when, Alex, but the funny thing is, I didn’t tell him.”

## Chapter 14

Once Jo and Alex arrived back at the Turner's home, Kendra had another message for Jo from Brad. The final insurance payments had come through, and he would like Jo to go to his office in the morning before the service if possible.

The rest of the evening passed quickly. Charlie came over, and the three girls sat outside on the back deck laughing and talking like old times. Alex and Charlie both noticed a change in Jo. She wasn't so sad. They were so glad for her that they both decided not to ask what brought on the change.

Once it was dark, Charlie's mom came and picked her up. They were planning on going back to New York to finish the trip they had cut short to be with Jo, and were leaving the next afternoon following the funeral service. Charlie's parents were concerned about their precious daughter getting a place to live in a safe area. They figured they needed to find something quickly before other students took all the decent apartments.

Alex and Jo went into Alex's bedroom to get some rest. Jo was thoroughly exhausted by her tramp through her emotions and physically tired as well. She hoped for a good rest, as she knew tomorrow would be a hard day for her.

After retiring, Alex lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. The whole 'stranger offering Jo a job' thing bothered her. Also, the fact that the man offering the job seemed to be in some places they had been also worried her. What if he was with the guy who had tried to kill Jo? What if he was part of the conspiracy? Even the police were unable to find out who hired the killer.

Alex considered the direction her thoughts were going. No, if the man were part of it, he wouldn't have purposefully wrecked his car to block the black sedan from following them. That made her wonder about the couple in the car that the older man had hit. They had seen the woman with the red hair on at least one more occasion. Was she with the old man, perhaps?

Alex let her mind run wild with conspiracy theories. She was good at that. Everyone was a suspect in her mind, until she could figure them all out. Eventually her brain got tired of chasing after criminals and Alex drifted off to sleep.

Jo woke up the next morning at peace. Though she still deeply felt the loss of her mother, she was glad she had made the effort to say goodbye to her mother the day before. It would be so much easier today to greet everyone who attended the services for her mother with her mind and conscience clear. Also, she knew in her heart that her mother would be dreadfully upset at Jo if she stayed grief-stricken for a long time. Her mother felt that each day was a gift, and should be used to its fullest. She thought back to the analogy of the tree from the day before, and the leaves. She was glad that today she could show forth the bright green leaves of her character, and that she wasn't revealing the scars and ugliness of the tragedy. Her mother would have been proud.

Jo and Alex quickly dressed and ate some breakfast. Jo had asked Alex to take her to Brad Allen's office this morning to finish up the financial stuff. Jo was really anxious to pay back the Turners all the money she had borrowed. She didn't like to feel like she was starting off her adult life in debt. Today that would be wiped clean, and, who knew, maybe the job offer would pan out.

The attorney's secretary was expecting Jo and Alex, and ushered them right in.

"The hospital finished their billing process. Unfortunately, they took the whole amount that the insurance paid. Between the specialist, the brain surgery and all the various machinery, it

was quite expensive. They do say that the first day costs the most, but they included the ambulance bill with their statement, as well; it was over three thousand dollars. I guess if your mother had had additional health insurance from work, then it might have helped, but at least there was nothing owing.”

Jo sighed. She had hoped for a little for a head start. “Yeah, that is a blessing.”

“If the man had been anything other than a drunk, I would have gone after him for more for you, Jo. I just don’t see being able to collect anything.”

“No, its okay, Brad. That man is where he needs to be. He’s where he can’t hurt anyone else for a long time.”

“Here is the five thousand dollars from the auto insurance claim,” He handed her a check. “And I believe you already told me that you were paying for the funeral for your mother with this?”

“Yes. It will completely cover the funeral, and leave me some to replace my belongings. I’ve already purchased a few of the clothes I lost. There were many other things that were destroyed as well, but those will have to wait until I get a job, and I have a potential job lined up.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh really? Where at?”

“I’m not sure where it is, but there’s a man who lived a few doors down from me in the mobile home park who says some friends are hiring in their company. He wants to talk to me today after the funeral.”

Brad frowned. “How well do you know this man? In light of the fact that someone tried to kill you five days ago, you should be extremely cautious being alone with strangers. According to the police, they do not know who hired the man that set your house on fire.”

Alex chimed in, “I told her the same thing. I’m concerned about her interview as well.”

Brad was troubled, but he was leaving immediately after the service to take his family back to New York. There wasn’t much he could do. “Well, be careful, Jo, and listen to your instincts. You are a very intelligent young lady. Meet the gentleman in a well lit, public place if you meet him at all.”

Jo smiled. It seemed to her that everyone around her had begun to mother her since her own mother had left her. “I planned on it, but thanks for the warning. Thank you for handling my finances, I really appreciate it, and I promise to be careful.”

“If there is anything more I can do for you, please let me know, Jo. I am glad to help.”

“Thank you.” Jo shook his hand as her and Alex left, then they drove to the bank to deposit the check Jo had received from the auto insurance company. Then Jo requested to go back home.

“What do you want to do today, Jo?” Alex questioned her.

“I think today is going to be a very hard day, Alex. The funeral home director asked me to arrive thirty minutes early. I am sure that as strong as I am now, I will be transformed into a blubbing pool of tears by then, so I think today I need to just do nothing.”

Alex actually thought that was a good idea. Besides, she liked knowing where Jo was; it eased her troubled mind.

They went back to Alex’s home and Jo reclined on her bed to rest. She took the book of poetry that Alex had given her and perused through it, selectively reading a poem here and there. She was forcing her mind and body to relax, storing up her energy and strength for later.

Just before noon, Kendra brought in chips, sandwiches and sodas to the two girls. “I can’t believe how quiet it is in here,” she commented. “I had honestly thought you had left without telling me for a moment.”

Alex laughed. “No, Mom. We wouldn’t do that.”

They ate the delicious lunch, and then it was time to get ready for the funeral. Jo could feel her defenses being hit, as the time to the service grew shorter. She thought her preparation today and yesterday would help her to stand the pain but now, as the time drew near to leave, she wondered if it was all in vain. Before they left for the funeral service, Jo wrote out the check for all of the money she had borrowed from Sam and Kendra and gave it to her. Kendra tried to protest, but Jo insisted. Then they left.

The Allen family was at the funeral home when Alex, Jo and Alex’s parents arrived. Charlie hugged Jo. Charlie had been crying, so that brought tears to Jo’s eyes. Tears were as contagious as laughter, Jo realized. The Allens and Turners signed the guest book and they all walked with Jo to the front of the room. There was a wonderful flower arrangement at the front in the center, and several smaller ones scattered around. The director of the funeral home had asked for a recent photo of her mother to be the centerpiece of the room, but all of the photos had been destroyed except the few she had in her treasure box, and the few that her mother had shared with her. That was why the photo displayed in the front of the room was her mother’s wedding photo. Jo stood and stared at her mother and father. They were both so beautiful and strong, she thought – so young and vital, and now, both were gone. A tear fell down Jo’s cheek, and she quickly wiped it away.

Many people came to show their respects to her mother that day. The manager of the store she had worked at was there, along with about half of her co-workers. They couldn’t close the store for a funeral, so the employees had drawn straws to see who would attend. Jo was never made aware of that, however. She just greeted each one that approached her, and thanked them for coming. A dozen or so friends from the church she and her mother attended sporadically came as well. They were all very nice people, and of course they all told Jo how very sorry they were she had to go through so much tragedy at once. Jo wondered if they wished all her tragedies were evenly spaced out instead. She smiled at the thought, as she tried in her mind to create an equation using trigonometry to determine the proper spacing between tragedies. The crotchety old lady who was consoling her just then saw the smile, and said to another lady nearby, “Well! That girl doesn’t even show manners at her own mother’s funeral. The nerve!”

Jo tried to concentrate after that. Above anything else, she did not want to disrespect her mother. She knew deep in her heart that her mother would have loved the analogy though, so didn’t feel guilty for it. However, she must maintain the proper decorum; so solemn and silent she became. Soon all the tears around her were hard to take, and some wetness slipped from her bright eyes.

Just before the starting time, Jo witnessed the man she had spoken with yesterday, Mr. Roberts, walk in with a friend. He was wearing a suit and tie, and looked very nice. She also realized that he wasn’t nearly as old as she had imagined. Without the shorts and casual shirt, and minus the straw hat, he looked to be not more than mid fifties, not the sixties or seventies she had taken him for. She took her seat in the front, and the solemn service began.

Jo was not the only one who had noticed the gentleman entering the building. Alex and Charlie were stationed in the back. They had been assigned the task of making sure each person who entered signed the visitation book, so that Jo would be able to look back and see how much her mother was loved. Alex saw the man walk in and recognized who he was. She nudged

Charlie and pointed him out. She had briefly brought Charlie up to date on the mystery man. Charlie had been informed that he was both the man who lived near Jo and the man who had wrecked behind them at graduation, keeping the assassin away. Then Alex told her about the job interview, so Charlie watched the man intently.

Suddenly Charlie gasped. She tugged on Alex's sleeve. "Alex, look over there," she whispered to the bewildered girl. "The woman who came in with the blond man. They were the ones in the sports car, the ones that the neighbor guy hit." Charlie brought the couple to Alex's attention.

Alex observed them, and tried to picture the accident. The woman definitely had the bright red hair. She looked like the woman from the restaurant the other day, as well. It had to be the same woman. The couple was wearing full business attire; expensive business attire, Charlie noted. The girls watched as they walked across the lobby toward the neighbor man who was standing off to the side. The neighbor man said a few words to the blond man, and then the couple went in and sat down. Alex slipped over to the book to see what names they had used to sign in. "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" it read. Yeah, right.

"Charlie," she whispered to her friend, "why would someone whose car had been hit by someone else, walk up to him as if they were friends and talk to him?"

Charlie shrugged her shoulders. "Why would someone who dresses right out of an exclusive New York designer clothing shop be attending the funeral of a woman who was a cashier in a grocery store?" Charlie asked.

Alex for the first time really studied the three. She wasn't up on fashion, but she knew those outfits were exclusive. No one in their area wore clothing like that. It wasn't available here. "The plot thickens," she whispered to Charlie, as the two girls walked quietly to the front to sit with Jo.

The service wasn't long. Several people who had known her mother from her work at the supermarket got up and said some kind words about her. One man was visibly shaken as he spoke of her beauty and kindness. It made Jo wonder if the man had been infatuated with her mother. After it was over, and she had again suffered through the well wishes and condolences of the mass of people, Jo breathed a sigh of relief that she had made it. She took the precious photo of her parents from the front of the room, and gave directions to send all of the flowers to a senior housing facility nearby. They could use some brightness, she had decided. Then Jo went into the lobby where Mr. Roberts was patiently waiting for her. She noticed the couple standing nearby, talking to him. She recognized the woman immediately as the one from the restaurant, as Alex had.

"Hello, Mr. Roberts. Thank you for coming," Jo held out her hand to him as she approached. He shook her hand, and offered his sympathy.

"Have you had time to consider where we can meet, Miss Becker?"

Alex butted in just then. "Jo, I need to see you for a moment, please. It's urgent."

Jo excused herself and told Mr. Roberts she would be right back. She allowed Alex to pull her across the room into the ladies restroom.

"That couple with him is from the accident at the high school, Jo. I recognize them. They were in the red car."

Charlie piped in. "The woman is definitely the same one we saw eating a hamburger with us, too. That accident was no accident. Those three are in cahoots together. Before you take a job with him, Jo, make sure he's not the one who hired the arsonist!"

Jo sighed. Her friends, though she loved them, were being melodramatic. “Guys, it’s going to be okay. You can go with me to the interview. I will make sure it’s a public place. I was thinking of just meeting at the café down the street from your house, Alex. It’s usually busy, but quiet.”

“I have to go, Jo. Our flight is leaving in an hour. Don’t get killed before I get back!” Charlie rushed out to the parking lot where her parents were waiting. Alex and Jo couldn’t help but laugh at her comment, but it was good. The stress level was interrupted.

“Alex, I will be fine. I trust my instincts, okay? I need to do this.”

Alex sighed. “Okay, but I am coming with you. I will be sitting in the booth nearby.”

Jo walked back over to where Mr. Roberts was standing. She apologized for the delay.

“That’s quite all right, Miss Becker. Before I say anymore, I would like to introduce two of my colleagues. This is Mr. Davis and Ms. Michaels. They work for the same company as I do, and will be helping me tell you about the job opening we have. Where shall we meet, Miss Becker? And what is a good time for you?”

“Actually, I would like to meet in an hour, if that is okay.” She handed Mr. Roberts a small piece of paper with an address on it. “This is a small café near the house I’m currently living in. I am anxious to hear what kind of job I can get. You do know that I have no college education, right?”

“Of course, Miss Becker. You just graduated from high school last week, how could you have attended college yet?” Mr. Roberts laughed, trying to ease her worries.

“All right, I will see you in an hour then, Mr. Roberts. I hope I am what you are looking for.”

“I am quite positive that you are, Miss Becker.”

The three people left. Alex noticed then that a fourth person joined them at the car they got into. Jo and Alex headed to Alex’s Mustang and saw two yard maintenance men get into another vehicle as well. Alex gasped. “I know those two men,” she said to Jo.

“Which ones, Alex?” Jo asked.

“The two in the yard care truck there,” Alex pointed to the vehicle pulling out of a parking space. “They worked at our high school the last few weeks before graduation. I remember one in particular. He was always outside of physics class every single time we exited it.”

“Well school is out, Alex. They had to get a job somewhere else for the summer, probably.” Jo surmised. Alex, deflated, sat back in the seat.

“You’re probably right,” she said. “It is a plausible explanation.”

Alex drove Jo back to her house to change clothes, and put away her parents’ wedding photo. Then the two girls got back in the car to head to the café. Alex was driving slowly. She still thought that this job interview was a bad idea.

Jo arrived at the café with Alex a few minutes before the appointed time. They ordered a milkshake each and sat in a booth. Jo really hoped this was real. She loved Alex, but wasn’t happy allowing another family to provide for her needs. She wanted independence. She wanted to make her mother proud.

Mr. Roberts arrived shortly, with the couple from the funeral home, and the man they had seen getting into the car with them, so there were four of them now. They went to a long table that would accommodate more people than the booth Alex and Jo had chosen, and Mr. Roberts walked over to Jo and asked if she would kindly join them.

Alex decided enough was enough and she had to have some answers. She followed Jo and Mr. Roberts over to the table where he had seated Jo across from himself. The other three were already sitting. “Mr. Davis, were you at our high school graduation last week with Ms. Michaels, in a red sports car? And Mr. Roberts, didn’t you run into the red sports car right behind us as we were exiting the high school?” Mr. Davis raised his eyebrows and glanced at Mr. Roberts. Alex saw Mr. Roberts nod his head. There was clearly something going on.

“Yes, we were, Miss Turner. It was a wonderful ceremony.” Alex was taken aback. She didn’t expect the man to know her name.

Just then, the two yard maintenance men from the funeral home appeared at the table. They were now dressed much like the others, in business suits, but Alex positively recognized one as the high school janitor, and the other looked like one of the groundskeepers at the high school.

Jo glanced up, saw the six adults at the table, and knew that she was in way over her head. She became frightened, and thought she should have listened to Alex.

“Weren’t you the janitor at the high school?” Alex asked of one of the most recent additions to the group.

“Yes, I was. I was also the Maintenance man at the mall when you were shopping. I was also the highway worker outside of the mobile home park as you passed.” His honest answer left Alex dumbfounded. She collapsed in a chair next to Jo at the table.

Jo, puzzled at the whole situation, swallowed hard. As frightened as she was, she needed to know, so she asked, “But why were you there? Why were all of you there?”

Mr. Roberts looked straight at Jo. “Because we were following you, of course.”



## Chapter 15

Jo was in shock; frozen in place. She felt Alex grab her arm and pull her up. “Come on, Jo. We’re out of here.”

“Wait, Miss Becker.” Mr. Roberts said. “I apologize for startling you, but what I need to tell you is very important.”

Jo pulled her arm from Alex’s grasp and looked at Mr. Roberts. Then she looked around the café. There were more than a dozen people. If any trouble came, surely there were enough people to help. She looked at Alex, pleading with understanding. Alex sighed, and sat back down. Jo sat back down next to her, Alex at her side ready to grab her. Jo looked at Mr. Roberts. “All right, Mr. Roberts, but I need some answers.”

“I will explain everything.” He began. “First of all, the last of my colleagues. These are Agents Thomas and O’Brian.” Mr. Roberts pointed to the two maintenance men who were the last to arrive.

“Agents?” Jo asked. She looked at the men, then back at the other four.

“I am Agent Roberts, the team leader. These are Agents Davis and Michaels, whom you have already met, and this is Agent Diaz, my partner.

Jo nodded to each of them, acknowledging the introduction.

“We don’t work for the government, or any law agency. We are security agents for the BeckFord Corporation in New York. Our assignment was to follow you and keep you safe until you reached your eighteenth birthday. Once you became a legal adult, our orders were to take you to New York where you would take your rightful place in the company.”

“I don’t understand. Do you mean that you are offering me a job in the BeckFord Company?”

“Actually, Miss Becker, my request is that you allow me to keep my job.”

Jo glanced up, puzzled. “What do you mean, Mr. Roberts?”

Roberts leaned across the table and lowered his voice a little, to keep away prying ears from the nearby table. “What I mean is you own BeckFord Corporation.”

Jo cast a sideways glance at Alex. Alex looked as bewildered as Jo felt. “Mr. Roberts –”

“Just Roberts, please. Leave off the mister. I’m not that old.” Roberts smiled. “We go by our last names, nothing else. I’m Roberts; this is Diaz, Davis, etc. If you choose to keep us on as your security team that is how we would prefer to be referred.”

“Why do I need a security team? What is the BeckFord Corporation?”

Roberts looked around. A few of the other people in the café were watching the excited girls, and trying to listen in to the conversation. He was unhappy about it. “Miss Becker, if you don’t mind, is there some place we can talk in earnest? I’m afraid the rest of what we need to tell you is sensitive. Also, since we know for certain that someone is trying to kill you; I do not wish to invite other people to know your situation.”

Jo looked at Alex. Neither of them was entirely comfortable yet with what was happening, but Jo was intrigued, and so was Alex. “We can use my parents’ store,” Alex suggested to Jo. “There is a small room in the back, sort of like a conference room, and my parents will be there, too.”

Jo smiled. “Perfect. If you don’t mind, we will meet you there, Mr. Rob- I mean, Roberts.”

The group broke up, and went their separate ways. Jo was too nervous to talk to Alex about the little they had discovered so far. The two friends rode in silence the few blocks to the store. Alex and Jo arrived first, with two vehicles pulling in behind them into the parking lot. Jo and Alex went in, Roberts and his team giving the two young ladies time to let the Turners know what was going on.

“Mom, Dad, you know the job offer the guy was going to tell Jo about today?” Alex began as she barged into the travel agency outer office. The parents looked up. They knew immediately that Alex was excited; not in a good way, but in a scared way.

“What’s going on, Alex?” Sam asked.

“They have been following us. There are six of them. They are a security team sent to keep Jo safe from harm. They did stop the man in the black sedan from following us that night, but now they are saying that Jo owns a company and they were sent to get her and take her to New York to work in the company.”

“Alex, calm down. Take a breath,” her mom ordered. “Where are the people you were interviewing with, Jo? Where are they now?”

“Outside,” Jo told her. “They needed a place to talk to me about sensitive things. Mr. Roberts felt that if he told me about the company and my part in it where people could listen in, that I would be vulnerable to more attacks. He said they know that someone is trying to kill me. He didn’t want to discuss things that could make me vulnerable in public,” Jo concluded.

Alex looked at Jo astonished. “Is that what he meant? How did you get that from what he said?”

Jo shrugged. “I told you, my instincts have been telling me all along that this man is okay. I don’t feel threatened by him anymore. I think he was doing his job, and I would like to find out what his job is, and how it concerns me.”

Sam and Kendra looked at Jo, concern evident. “Jo, do you mind if we sit in on this conversation? It would put our minds at rest, and Alex’s too.”

“I would like that,” she replied.

“I will run the store. You go straighten out Jo’s life,” Alex waved her parents and Jo into the conference room, then went outside, and motioned to Roberts to enter.

The six agents in their suits, looking very officious, entered the small travel agency and Alex led them into the back. She then returned to the front office to answer the phones. She was glad her parents were in the room with Jo. As much as she wanted to know what was going on, Jo needed the strength of older, wiser adults, but less than a minute later, Jo came out into the outer office to the front door, turned the sign around that said “Open” and made it read “Closed,” grabbed Alex’s wrist and pulled her back into the back room with her. “I’m not going to be able to repeat all that’s happening, so you better hear it all with me,” Jo explained, grinning ear to ear. This was kind of exciting. She owned a company, wow!

While Jo was out retrieving Alex, the agents had introduced themselves to Alex’s parents.

Jo and Alex settled in the deep chairs, and Roberts began again.

“As I told you at the café, Miss Becker, we are the security team that was assigned to protect you until you became of age. Once you reached eighteen, we were supposed to have this conversation with you, and your mother, and whisk you both off to New York where you were to take your place in the company.” Roberts explained. “Diaz and I were living near you, Davis and Michaels drove behind your bus to school each day, and Thomas and O’Brian took jobs as janitorial and yard staff at the high school you attended.”

“I knew I recognized him,” Alex whispered to Jo.

“The BeckFord Corporation had received a viable threat that you would not reach your eighteenth birthday, Miss Becker, so the Director of Security, Director Johnson, sent us here to make sure that the assassination plot failed. Unfortunately, on the evening that your mother had her accident, we missed an important incident, and let the assassin get through our line of defense. That is my fault, Miss Becker. I failed to protect your home in my rush to secure your well being at the hospital. Once I called you to notify you of your mother’s accident.”

“That was you?” Jo interrupted. “You were the one who told me where to go to see my mother?”

“Yes, Miss Becker. Diaz was her detail that day.” Roberts nodded to Diaz. “He had been tailing your mother since she left your mobile home late that afternoon.”

“Why were you following my mother?” Jo interrupted again. She wanted to know all the details possible.

“With your birthday only hours away, we wanted all of the bases covered. If the killer had wanted to try a kidnapping attempt, he might have used your mother for bait. It was all in the protection protocol.”

“So my mother’s accident?” Jo questioned.

“An unfortunate coincidence,” Roberts answered. “Diaz was at your mother’s side immediately. He could tell instantly that she was badly hurt. He notified me by radio, and I called for the ambulance. Then I called you. I guessed which hospital they would head to by the location of the accident, and sent you there. Diaz was able to get the name and information on the drunk driver. When we researched him, it was evident that the accident was unrelated to the threat on your life.”

Jo breathed a sigh of relief. Although Officer Peters had told her the same thing, that the accident and the house fire were unrelated, it was still good to have it verified.

“What about the fire?” Jo asked. “You said you missed something?”

“Earlier in the day, the fake exterminator had sprayed some sort of flammable liquid around your mobile home.”

“That’s what we smelled when we left for the hospital,” asserted Alex.

“Yes. I was aware of it, but was waiting for dark to try to flood it. Once the accident happened, though, my priority was you and your mother, Miss Becker. I used the garden hose at your home and saturated the ground around the mobile for almost ten minutes. I was hoping it would be enough to douse the fire that I was sure the assassin was planning on lighting. Then I left for the hospital; Thomas and O’Brian stayed to watch the suspect. He was in his car on the road outside the mobile home park the entire evening. We all assumed he would leave his vehicle to go light the fire. What I missed was a timing device that the man had planted somewhere near the mobile. If he had left the car, we would have taken him in, handing him over to the authorities as an arsonist, but since he didn’t leave his vehicle, we didn’t realize that he had already lit the fire. My poor saturation job didn’t stop the mobile from being consumed. I let you down, Miss Becker. I apologize.”

“It’s all right, Roberts,” Jo had trouble not using the Mr. in front of his name. “But why did the man burn the house down even though he saw Alex and I leave? And did you know who was trying to kill me, or why? Did you find out who the man was or who hired him?”

Roberts shook his head. “No, that was never discovered. All we were able to do was turn him in for the arson. The police found the exterminator’s uniform on him, which positively identified him as their suspect. They would have just prosecuted him for that, except he opened

fire on them. They of course returned fire, and the suspect was killed. As for the other, Thomas and O'Brian didn't even see you leave, and they were outside with the suspect. When Miss Turner's car passed the suspect's car, you were hunched over in the seat. To anyone passing, it looked as if Miss Turner was the only occupant. I even had Davis and Michaels catch up and overtake your vehicle to verify that you were in it before I would leave your mobile home unattended."

Sam, surprised at the complexity of the operation, interrupted the story at this moment. "Let me get this straight. Mr. Roberts, you are the leader of a six person security team who was assigned to protect Jo until she turned eighteen. Once she turns eighteen you take her to New York to accept a job. Meanwhile, someone at the company that is hiring Jo decides he or she wants Jo dead, so hires an assassin to kill her. You apprehend the killer, but don't know who hired him. Is that right so far?"

"Well, it's mostly right. The part about Jo accepting a job is wrong."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

"Miss Becker owns the company, Mr. Turner. She is not accepting a job when we take her to New York. She is receiving her inheritance."

"My what?" Jo asked stunned. Roberts hadn't gotten this far in the story before.

"This is the part that I was reluctant to discuss in the café, Miss Becker," Roberts picked up the story. "About eighteen years ago, your father, Joseph Becker, founded a company with a man named Cliff Hartford. They named the company BeckFord Financial Corporation, combining both of the names of the founders. Three days after the company's inception, Joseph Becker was killed in an auto accident."

"Wait," Sam interrupted. He rose from his seat, excited. "BeckFord Financial?" he asked Roberts. Roberts nodded. "The same BeckFord Financial that has more money than the government?"

Roberts chuckled. "In case you didn't realize, the government is six trillion dollars in debt, Mr. Turner. Even I have more money than the government."

Everyone in the room laughed at that comment, even Sam, but then he went on; he wanted to be clear.

"I'm sorry to keep going on about this, but I want to be certain. Jo is the owner of the BeckFord Financial Corporation of New York that has billions of dollars in holdings?"

"Yes, Mr. Turner. Miss Becker is worth about \$150 Billion dollars at last count. Give or take a few billion."

Jo caught her breath, Alex gasped, Kendra fainted, Sam's jaw dropped and he slowly sank into his chair in shock.

"So *that's* why someone wanted to kill Jo, and why you guys were protecting her," Alex rationalized aloud. She turned and patted her mother's cheek a few times, until Kendra, blushing, was able to sit up again.

"Please, tell me more about my father," Jo asked. "And how my mother and I never knew about the inheritance. Why didn't my mother, as his wife, inherit his fortune? Why did she have to slave away at a thankless job when her husband truly hadn't left her penniless?" Jo's eyes were watering. She was devastated to think that her mother could have had a life of luxury all this time, instead of the life of poverty and hard labor.

"The fact that there was a wife and child was not known until about a month ago. Your father had never disclosed to his parents about you, though it is not clear why. His partner, Mr. Hartford, died eight weeks ago of a heart attack. He had no living relatives, and the board of

directors has run the company since his death. It was arranged that BeckFord stock would be split proportionately between anyone who was a stockholder at the time of Hartford's death. The one with most stock would receive a larger portion, the person with the least, a smaller portion. Then, a month ago, Mr. Hartford's housekeeper was cleaning out his desk to prepare it for auction, and she found several letters from Mr. Becker, your father. The letters indicated that there was indeed a wife and daughter left behind after Mr. Becker's untimely death. It has been speculated that Mr. Hartford did not share this news simply out of greed. If he didn't come forth with the information, then he didn't have to share in the wealth," Roberts surmised.

"But what about my grandparents?" Jo asked. "Wouldn't they have inherited my father's shares of the company since there were no dependents?"

"Yes, and they did, for a whole two days. The company was fledgling, remember, when your father died. Mr. Hartford convinced them that they were best served to sign over their son's share back to him, rather than be pulled down in debt if the business failed. Since the senior Mr. Becker was already retired, and they were well enough off on their own, Mr. Becker senior had decided that was best. However, before he could do that, he and his wife were the victims of a car jacking. The man who took their vehicle shot them both, and left them for dead. They both died on the way to the hospital. It was a great tragedy in New York; they were a very well-liked couple."

"And where did their inheritance go? Was there other family?"

"They had left a will leaving everything to their son's estate. You inherit that too, Miss Becker." Roberts went on. "So once the letters were unearthed that hinted Joseph Becker had a wife and child, a nationwide hunt was launched to find them. Then we found you, Miss Becker, and your mother, three weeks before your eighteenth birthday. The transferring of the stocks was halted, and the company was informed that an heir was found. Since your father had left no will, it was not possible to hand over the company to his wife, who was not a blood relative. Then the Board of Directors elected to hold off until you turned eighteen, Miss Becker, and bring you in as the head of the company.

"Your heritage was undeniable. We didn't have DNA from your father to match to you, since DNA profiles weren't invented at the time of his death, so we requested the records of his accident to see what evidence we might be able to use. We found that they used a combination of blood typing, with dental records, for identifying your father's remains, and that they had kept a vial of blood from the reference sample they had collected, so we sent it to a laboratory and were able to have a DNA profile created for your father. After that we collected your trash and had your DNA tested against your father's, and it matched. Joseph Becker was your biological father. You are the only heir to the entire BeckFord Financial Corporation. The photos you have of your parents with you as an infant will help convince the Board of Directors, as well. It is fortunate that those were not destroyed in the fire."

Alex felt there were some things missing, so she jumped in when Roberts paused for a breath. "The partner, Mr. Hartford, is dead, right?" Roberts nodded yes. "So who would want Jo killed? No one else was an heir; there was no one else to get the money. There is no one to take her claim if she dies, is what I'm saying. So why kill her?"

"If Miss Becker had been killed before her eighteenth birthday, then the inheritance would be null and void. Since there was no will, the company would go to her as an adult, but not as a minor," Roberts explained. "It was written that way into the corporate bylaws. I would imagine that was Mr. Hartford's doing, knowing that if the family were ever to surface, they couldn't get anything from the company until Miss Becker reached legal adulthood. If Miss

Becker had died, then the original plan to distribute the stock would have gone back into effect. Director Johnson supposed that one of the owners of a larger amount of stock was behind the assassination plot. There are three in particular that she has another security team investigating. One of them lost three billion dollars when evidence of an heir was discovered. However, now that you are of age, Miss Becker,” Roberts turned to face her, speaking to her directly, “the ownership of the company is yours, legally binding. Yet that still leaves us with finding out who wanted you dead. Because until you make out a will, giving other directions for dividing the company in case of your death, the dispersal of stock plan will go back into effect if you were to die. Therefore, whoever it is that wanted you dead is possibly planning on another assassination attempt.”

Jo listened to Roberts’s story in detail. The story of her father and his partner was interesting. The entire scenario was mind boggling. To think that she, Joanna Becker, was now a millionaire – no, a billionaire, she corrected herself – was unfathomable. She thought of her grandparents – their violent murders so close to the death of their son was odd, in her opinion. She wondered if anyone had seriously considered all three deaths as more than accidents. Maybe she would look into it some day. She pondered the information about the price on her head. To think that she was important enough that someone wished to murder her was also amazing. She was just a poor city girl with no prospects. She had been raised in an old, dilapidated mobile home that leaked, for goodness sakes. Who would consider her a threat? It just didn’t seem possible.

Roberts watched the girl in front of him absorb all he had told her so far. He could see the information bounding around in her head. Her eyes were dancing. He wasn’t sure if it was excitement, fear, or both.

“Was there any other questions you wished to ask, Miss Becker?”

Jo glanced up at him. She looked around the room at the other agents. She looked at her friend, Alex, who was just staring blankly back at Jo. Then Jo looked at Sam and Kendra. Kendra was trying to hold back tears, while Sam was sitting at the end of the table watching Jo, concern evident in his gaze.

“How can an eighteen-year-old girl run an important financial corporation with no business background and no college education? Do you realize what they are asking of you, Jo?” Sam spoke up.

Jo smiled. “I would imagine that BeckFord Financial is like most other huge companies, and is run by a Board of Directors. There is hardly ever one person who single-handedly makes all the decisions.”

Roberts silently saluted her for her response. He was right. This girl was intelligent.

“But even so, Jo, if you take over the head position, you will be throwing away your childhood. This is a heavy responsibility. You need to think about it hard, sweetheart,” Kendra chimed in.

“My childhood left me the moment my mother died,” Jo sadly responded. “I had already informed all of you that I would be finding a job as soon as possible, so I could move out and not sponge off of you.”

“We don’t feel you are doing that, Jo,” Kendra protested. “We love having you live with us.”

“I know you do, and I love being there, too, but I am responsible for my own path now. I have to make my own way. I will not rely on you for spending money or clothing. I need to feel

necessary in some capacity.” Jo tried desperately to let them see her heart. She wanted to make a difference in the world. Doesn’t everyone?

“Why not accept the inheritance and leave the company alone then? Stay with us, and live off of the billions your father left you,” Alex suggested. “I will even charge you rent for sharing my room, if that would make you feel better. I think a million a week should do it,” Alex smiled.

Jo grinned at her friend’s attempt to lift the mood in the room. She considered all the things that Sam and Kendra said. She valued their opinion greatly, but she didn’t feel that they understood her reluctance to throw this opportunity away.

Jo looked up at Roberts. “I don’t think that my friends understand what you came here to tell me today, but I think I get it. Tell me if I’m on the right track,” she spoke directly to Roberts. She looked him in the eyes and held his gaze. “My father didn’t leave me an inheritance, he left me a business; a business a lot like this one we are sitting in, but it was owned by a family that wasn’t allowed to enjoy the benefits that ownership gave. The business employs thousands of people, I assume. Maybe hundreds of thousands of people. Each of those people has a family, and depends on their paychecks to get through the month, just as my mother and I did. The business has been operating for two months without a leader. There is no one to sit at the head of the table and say, ‘no that is not in the best interest of the thousands of people who depend on their paychecks.’ The Board of Directors who is now in charge answer to stockholders who want decisions made that would benefit the stockholders’ pocketbooks, regardless of the employees, because they hold the greatest amount of stock. Am I right so far?”

Roberts was grinning by this time. This girl was just what he had hoped she would be. He nodded affirmatively, and encouraged her to continue.

“The people who sent you to protect me don’t care if I’m eighteen or eighty. They want me to become a leader where my father was denied the chance, and run the company in a moral, ethical manner, with humility and honor. The people who want me dead could care less whether the business dissolves or succeeds, as long as they get their share of the billions of dollars they feel they are entitled to.”

“Yes, Miss Becker. I believe you have correctly captured the intent of the few Board Members who sent me here. I was hesitant myself to see the largest financial institution in New York placed into the hands of a child, but I was mistaken, Miss Becker. You are ready for this challenge, it is evident. I will be pleased to escort you to New York tomorrow morning to be presented to the Board. According to the company bylaws, as the holder of more than fifty percent of the company stock, you will become the Chairman of the Board, and any final decision must be approved by you. This is a heavy responsibility, Miss Becker, and I am pleasantly surprised to be able to say that you are the person for the job, and mean it.”

“Thank you, Roberts. I appreciate your vote of confidence,” Jo smiled. “I do have a question, though. Can I bring Alex with me?” Jo glanced sideways at Alex, who was shocked.

“Me? Go to New York? Are you insane?” Alex shook her head. “I’m a hometown girl. I’m staying right here.”

“Just for the weekend. We can come home after I meet the people who are trying to ‘off’ me,” Jo made Alex laugh with her remark. “If what they say is right, I can afford an extra plane ticket.”

“That won’t be necessary, Miss Becker,” Roberts inserted. “Your private jet is at the airport now waiting on us to take you to New York. It is yours, not the company’s, and you are free to use it at your convenience, of course.”

“I have a jet?” Jo interjected, astonished.

“She has a jet?” Alex asked at the same time as Jo. They laughed.

“Don’t pinch me, Alex. This is a really cool dream, and I don’t want to wake up.” Jo sighed. “Now, if only Mom was here...” she let the thought drop.

“I’m game to go if I’m invited,” Kendra suggested. Jo smiled.

“How about we all go.” Alex was warming to the subject. Maybe it would be okay, as long as Jo was safe, she thought. Alex figured she could keep an eye on her better if she wasn’t three thousand miles away.

“Hey, wait,” Alex jumped up from her seat. “Charlie and her parents are in New York. Maybe you can get an apartment with her since she is there looking for one already.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot that’s what they went there for.”

“That won’t be necessary, Miss Becker.”

Jo flashed a look of surprise at Roberts. “It won’t? I don’t have to live in New York?”

“That is not what I meant, Miss Becker, I apologize. You already own three homes, seven condominiums, and two penthouse suite apartments. You may take your pick, of course. Shopping for a place to live will be unnecessary.”

Jo’s jaw dropped and she stood gaping at Roberts. A sideways glance revealed that Alex had the same expression on her face, as did both Sam and Kendra. For the first time since they entered the room, the other agents came to life. All six security agents laughed at the silly countenance the other four in the room had.

“The homes, penthouse suites, and the jet were all personal purchases by Mr. Hartford. Since there were no heirs to claim Mr. Hartford’s estate; once the letter was found that revealed Mr. Hartford’s duplicity regarding knowledge that your father had a family, the judge granted all of Mr. Hartford’s assets to you, Miss Becker, in probate. That is why the homes and penthouse suites, and the jet are your personal property and not business holdings. You, in essence, became heir to all of Mr. Hartford’s personal property on order from the judge, to compensate you for your loss these last eighteen years. All of your father’s assets had been swallowed into the company years earlier. Your grandparents’ home was never sold, however. It is the only tangible thing that you will receive directly from your father.

“Miss Becker, I suppose you do not realize how very wealthy you are. To put it in perspective, by this time next week, you will have had lunch with the President of the United States, and he will have asked you for yet another loan.”

“We loan money to the government?” Jo asked incredulously, when she could find her voice.

“Just about once a month,” was the reply. “Usually smaller loans, though, in the \$400 million range.”

“That’s a small loan?” Alex snorted.

Roberts smiled. “In comparison of some other loans, yes, but the government is notorious for late payments, so be careful about lending too often,” he advised.

Jo was reeling under the weight of information she had received in the last hours. It was late by now – dinnertime. Jo and the Turners rose to leave, the interview coming to a close. Alex turned to Jo, and commented, “That was some interview, Jo. Do you think you got the job?”

Jo laughed. “Apparently, it’s not getting the job that’s the problem. It’s keeping your head from being blown off.”

“That’s my problem, not yours, Miss Becker. It is my personal mission to ensure that your head stays safely attached to your neck,” Roberts declared solemnly.



“Okay, so I guess there’s no problem then.” Jo smiled, and then turned to ask, “Have you been lurking outside the Turner home while I’ve been staying there?”

“Diaz and I have moved from the mobile home park to a rental two doors down from you. Thomas and O’Brian work as yard maintenance for the street, and Davis and Michaels have been jogging by your door since the day you moved in.”

Sam was amazed. “I never noticed. I always thought I would see things like that, but I never realized.” He shook hands with each agent. “Thank you for watching over Jo, Alex, and Charlie. Alex had mentioned the black sedan several times to me. My wife and I told her she was being paranoid. I am glad you were there to take care of what I was unwilling to see.”

Roberts was unsure how to accept the praise he felt was just doing his job, but he thanked the man. “Miss Becker, when would be a convenient time to leave for New York? The flight will take just over five hours, depending on wind currents, and I was supposed to have you there before five o’clock Eastern Time.”

Jo looked at Alex, then at Alex’s parents. “Will you all come with me?”

Alex looked at her parents, by this time ready to continue the fairy tale. She wanted to see some of Jo’s houses. “Mom, Dad, lets help Jo settle in. You can get Rebecca to fill in like she does when we go on vacation. Come on, it will be fun!” Alex pleaded. Kendra snuggled up to her husband and looked up at him pleadingly as well.

“I guess we need to be at the airport by seven in the morning then,” Sam, outnumbered, gave in. He secretly wanted to go very badly, but was loath to let on.

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Turner. A car will be at your house at six-thirty sharp to take to take you to the airport.” Roberts turned to Jo. “I am glad you are who you are, Miss Becker. I never knew your father, but I am pleased I will get to know you.” He nodded to Alex, and her parents. “Until tomorrow then,” and he left, taking the other agents with him. Jo was sure they were waiting out in their vehicles to follow them back to the Turner home.

Jo sat back down in the chair. “Is this real, Alex? Am I really going to New York? Am I rich?” A thought struck her. She gasped.

“What, Jo, what is it?”

“I’m going to have lunch with the President next week, and I have nothing to wear!”

Alex and her parents erupted in laughter, and the four left the store for home.

## Chapter 16

Jo and Alex, in Alex's Mustang, made it back to the Turner home just before Alex's parents. Roberts and Diaz were following them, not even trying to be discreet any longer. The drive home had been filled with speculation for the girls; excitement, intrigue, wonderment.

"Alex, I just can't believe it. I am in total shock. If I wake up tomorrow and it was all a dream, I won't be surprised."

"Jo, I think it's real. The men following us seem very real, don't you agree?"

"Yeah, I suppose," Jo responded. "What happens when we get to New York? I wonder what the Board of Directors will think of me. Will they accept me as an equal, or treat me as a peon?"

Alex considered carefully. "It's hard to tell, Jo, but if they had any sense, they would be kiss-ups, at least at first. You will be their boss, after all. I would imagine you can replace any Board Member who causes problems, like in any other business."

"I wish I knew more about business, Alex. The economics class we took last year didn't prepare me to run a large company. How will I know which decision is the right one?"

Alex parked the Mustang in her driveway. She and Jo got out of the car and headed to the house. Alex unlocked the front door and the two girls entered. Jo waved to Roberts in his car and he gave a brief wave in response, then she closed the door.

"You remember the last few days, when you wanted to do something and I was stubbornly trying to dissuade you?" Alex asked Jo once they had sat down on the couch.

"Yes, Alex. Like talking to Roberts, and taking time to say goodbye to my mother yesterday. There were a few things you were stubborn about," Jo grinned as she replied.

"I think that your instincts are pretty much on track, Jo, and sometimes, those instincts are all you have. Never make a decision in haste, would be my advice. Call on a trusted friend. You can always call on me, or my mom and dad, you know, or Brad Allen. He would be a valuable source of guidance for most dilemmas."

"I notice you didn't mention Charlie or Mindy," Jo giggled. "I don't suppose for matters of national significance that those two would be much help."

"You are so wrong, my friend," Alex claimed. "You will see just how important our good friend Charlie is this weekend in New York."

"Oh? How will I do that?"

"Because she will be the one to help you find the perfect outfit to wear to meet the President."

Jo made an 'O' with her mouth, as she realized what Alex was saying. Yes, Charlie was just what Jo needed to figure out that important puzzle, but, how was she going to pay for everything? Was there like a checkbook with a billion dollars at her disposal, once she met the Board? Hmm. So many things to think about.

Alex's parents had entered the house by then, and locked it. Now that he knew that Jo's danger was still eminent, Sam was being extra careful to watch her back. It actually helped knowing that they were being watched—because he knew it was the 'good guys' doing the watching.

Kendra quickly threw something together for dinner while Alex, Jo and Sam began packing for New York. Jo was extremely grateful to Charlie for forcing her to get the few dressy outfits Charlie had insisted were necessary to every businesswoman. Although her wardrobe was

still sparse, Jo was glad she wasn't heading into unknown territory at a disadvantage in the fashion department. She would look professional even if she didn't feel it! She packed the few outfits into a small suitcase Alex lent her.

Kendra called everyone into the kitchen for a quick bite and as soon as dinner was finished, rushed them all off with admonitions to brush their teeth and sleep well; she had packing to do. It wasn't every day that the Turners 'did New York' in style. In fact, Kendra had never been there before, and was excited to go.

Jo was almost positive she would not get any sleep that night. There were so many things going through her mind, so many questions she wished she had asked. She wondered if she would get air sick, since she hadn't ever flown before. She wondered what the reception would be in New York. Would the other Board members be supportive or treat her as an imposter? And when should they call the Allens to meet them? She wondered what her homes looked like, and which one she should choose to live in. She tried to picture what a penthouse would be like, but she hadn't ever seen anything that elaborate. She supposed it would be something similar to the Allen home. Most of all she wondered what it would be like to have money to spend on whatever she wanted whenever she wanted. She could definitely replace her music now. She could buy a laptop computer – she had always wanted one. Finally, exhausted, Jo drifted off to sleep.

Alex, too, was excited. She was thrilled that Jo was given this opportunity, and yet sensitive enough to her feelings to know that Jo was petrified of the future. Deep down, Alex sensed that Jo was ready to take on any challenge she faced. Jo's mother had raised her to be strong, and Jo was indeed strong. Then Alex, worn out with her week of deep concern for her friend, also fell asleep.

Roberts and Diaz, watching the house from their car, sat and discussed their future boss. "She took the news well – much better than I had hoped for. I think she will do fine if the old geezers in charge now will give her a chance," Roberts speculated.

"It will be tough on her, but I agree. If they give her time to settle before trying to get her under their thumb, they will be in for a shock. I would estimate that within a week she will have found her niche, and won't back down. That's one courageous girl, Miss Becker."

"Yes. It will be a pleasure to work with her. Not only is she fun, she will also put up a good fight I imagine. I am looking forward to watching her do battle with Fitz. That old man is the one who I would bet was behind the murder plot. He stood to lose the most financially once Miss Becker was located. Since she will actually be the Chair, Fitz will be the one to lose the most power as well."

Diaz nodded at Roberts' representation of Mr. Fitzgerald, a Board Member who held a lot of stock in BeckFord Corp. and had many friends. "Yes," Diaz agreed, "That man will be a problem."

The men checked in with the rest of the team. Davis and Michaels were settling into the nearby house to sleep, while Thomas and O'Brian were slowly patrolling the neighborhood. Everyone checked in, all was okay.

Roberts sighed. "I sure will be glad to get out of this hick town and back to New York. I feel vulnerable here, almost as if we can't protect Miss Becker as well as in New York."

"I disagree. It is much more open here. There are spaces between houses and not near as many people. In New York, anyone could walk up and shoot, and there would be no witnesses. There are so many people that you can't see anything. No, I think our job will get much harder once we get Miss Becker to New York," Diaz responded.

Roberts considered Diaz's assessment of the differences. He was correct about the ease of attack, but then the 'home court advantage' was something to consider, too. He could just about tell a New Yorker's character at a glance. These Californians were a whole different story. "Let's just take it a day at a time, Diaz. Starting with tomorrow." With that, they settled in for their two-hour shift.

The evening passed without incident. Alex's alarm clock woke the girls around five the next morning. They both showered and dressed quickly, and met Alex's parents in the kitchen for some breakfast.

"Well, Jo, are you ready?" Kendra asked.

"If you are asking me if I'm packed, then I will say yes." Jo replied sheepishly.

Sam laughed, "Way to avoid the question, Jo," and he gave her a high-five.

At six-thirty, they heard a vehicle pull into the Turners' driveway. Sam had secured then double-checked all the doors and windows, and there was nothing left to do but pack the suitcases into the waiting vehicle and check out Jo's personal jet. He opened the door to discover that the 'car' sent for them was a limousine. He whistled. Alex, Jo and Kendra went to see what he was impressed with. Alex stared, stunned, at the imposing limo awaiting them while Kendra laughed, grabbed her suitcase, and headed for the vehicle.

Roberts exited the limo and walked up the path to the front door. "Miss Becker, if you could please bring the photos and documents that pertained to your father, I believe it would help the Board accept your position more readily."

Jo frowned, concerned about losing all she had left, but went back into Alex's bedroom to retrieve them. As she pulled the precious mementos from her treasure box, she saw the set of small keys they had discovered in the rusty cookie tin. She grabbed them on impulse and stuck them into her purse with the photos.

"All set," she said with a smile as she exited the house. Roberts escorted her to the limo while Sam locked the front door. Then they were off.

Alex and Jo could not get over the luxury inside the car. "I have never been in a limo before, Alex. Have you?" Jo was attempting to keep her cool, but was having a difficult time. More than anything she wanted to press all of the buttons located conveniently on a console in the center of the roof.

"No. This is amazing," Alex, too, was impressed. She leaned over and whispered to Jo, "Can we check out the buttons?"

Roberts grinned. He saw what both girls were attempting to hide. "Miss Becker, it might be advantageous for you to familiarize yourself with the controls of the limo. You will be spending all of your riding time in a limo very much like this in New York. Yours will be bulletproof, however."

Incredulous, Jo's jaw dropped. "Bulletproof?"

Alex looked up, startled. "Are you sure New York is gonna be safer for Jo? I mean, if you have to have bulletproof cars... Why doesn't she just work from home? You know, telecommute?" Alex wondered if she was too hasty in forgetting the danger aspect in preference to the excitement point of view.

"Miss Becker will be perfectly safe, Miss Turner. I will be with her at all times, I assure you." Roberts quickly reassured Alex. He determined to try not to startle the girls in the future.

Jo tentatively reached out and pressed a button. A platform rose up from the floor and opened to reveal a table.

“Oh! Let me try one,” Alex said as she pressed the next one. Panels slid open on the sides of the limo revealing glasses and bottles of varying refreshments.

Jo and Alex took turns pressing the buttons. Jo tried to be scientific about it, so she would remember which button operated which gadget. By the time they reached the airport, Jo felt confident in her button pushing abilities. “One concept down, four million to go,” she muttered as she was escorted from the limo to the waiting jet. Diaz exited the front of the vehicle, and the other four security agents shortly arrived in another car. They all boarded the aircraft.

Jo climbed the few steps into the body of the plane and was assisted by a tall, thin man in a pilot uniform. He introduced himself as Captain Dunn, and wished Jo and her friends a pleasant flight. She held out her hand, “Thank you, I hope I will. This is my very first flight. I am Jo Becker.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Miss Becker. I hope you find my skills exemplary.”

“Captain Dunn is your permanent pilot, Miss Becker. He will be escorting you across the continent frequently.”

Jo looked up at the Captain. “Oh, do you work for me?” she asked naively. The man smiled and nodded. He was encouraged by her friendly attitude. “I shall look forward to flying in your capable hands,” she declared, and moved past him into the cabin.

The Learjet comfortably seated the ten passengers and two crewmembers. Jo was amazed at how comfortable the seats were. It was better than anything she could have imagined. Agent Michaels asked the group if anyone needed any refreshments, and, receiving a negative reply, she buckled in with the rest as the jet taxied down the runway.

Jo concentrated on the scenery outside the window. Her first flight would be a wonderful one, she just knew. Each moment brought new and exciting adventures. Jo felt her mother’s presence intensely as she embarked upon this new life. Yes, her mother would always be with her, Jo recognized.

The plane rose smooth and fast, and glided through the air. Jo’s eyes were glued to the window, as were Alex’s sitting next to her. “Look at that!” Jo would say, then shortly after, Alex would point and exclaim, “Over there, Jo. What’s that?” After an hour the newness had worn off so they settled back to enjoy the flight.

About three hours into the flight, Roberts announced that it was now after noon in New York. He let them know that the jet was stocked with food and drinks. They had been free to move around for a while, and were invited to eat at will.

Jo and Alex unbuckled and headed to the back of the plane. There was a small refrigerator, which revealed several types of sodas and juices, some sandwiches cut in half and some pudding cups. Next to it was a small cupboard that had packages of cookies, nuts, chips, and jerky in it. The other side of the passageway had liquor of all types and things that probably mixed with them. Neither of the girls was familiar with those items, so ignored them. Jo chose a package of beef jerky and a soda, and then Alex took some cookies and juice. They settled back in their seats to enjoy their snacks. “I could get used to this, you know,” Jo mentioned to Alex. “I think the lifestyle of the rich suits me just fine.” Alex laughed, and Jo chuckled. They were having the time of their lives.

At ten after three in the afternoon New York time, the pilot requested that the passengers return to their seats and prepare for landing. After a faultless touch down, the passengers disembarked into the cooler temperature of the New England climate. Used to the hundred plus degree summers of North Central California, the mid-eighties of New York were a pleasant

change for the new arrivals. As Jo descended the few steps to the ground she was met again by Captain Dunn.

“I trust your flight was pleasant?” He nervously asked.

“My very first flight in an airplane was absolutely perfect,” she assured him. “You are a terrific pilot! Thank you for bringing me to New York.” Jo’s enthusiasm put the Captain at ease, and he readily returned the smile she bestowed upon him as she stepped a few feet away to the waiting limousine.

“Roberts, Captain Dunn seemed to want my approval or something. What does it mean?”

“You must remember, Miss Becker, that everyone you will meet today is an employee of yours. You are their boss, and can fire them at will if you so choose.”

“Why would I do that? Wouldn’t I need a reason?”

“In the circle of society that you are now entering, many of the business people do not have reasons for the decisions they make. Maybe they didn’t like the color of their maid’s hair. Perhaps the butler forgot to empty an ashtray. A pilot hit an air pocket and a drink was spilled mid-flight. Those would all be valid reasons to terminate employment for some of the wealthy New Yorkers.”

Jo gaped dumbfounded at Roberts. “That is utterly ridiculous,” she emphatically declared. “I don’t want to move in New York society if that is the case.”

“I fear you will change your mind, Miss Becker. However, I sincerely hope you do not.”

“I will not,” pledged Jo vehemently. “And Alex, you make sure I don’t. Don’t ever let me become like that. Promise me?” Jo requested of her friend.

“Don’t you worry, Jo. If you start acting all stupid like some of the rich people I know, I will cut you back down to size. I promise I won’t let you turn into a snob,” vowed the watchful Alex. Then both girls laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation.

The limousine left the airport runway and headed to the business district. At the first glimpse of the New York skyline, Jo was entranced. They saw the Brooklyn Bridge rise imposingly over the harbor. They passed the Staten Island Ferry and Jo held her breath as she caught sight of the Statue of Liberty for the first time. The skyscrapers were everywhere, and Jo was certain they had seen a million yellow cabs by the time they had entered the heart of the city. She felt overwhelmed at the bigness of it all, yet also felt safe. It was an odd paradox of feelings.

“Incredible,” Alex murmured beside her. “It’s so big,” she unnecessarily stated.

“And now it is home,” Jo acknowledged, and the thought didn’t frighten her near as much as she thought it would.

## Chapter 17

It seemed like just moments until the group stopped in front of a pretentious high rise. Jo and here three companions were transfixed with their views of Manhattan. Jo could not get over how tall the buildings were. The further into the business district they went, the less visible sky there was, she noted. “No wonder people are not afraid to live here,” she said to Alex. “With no large open sky, it seems tight and close knit.”

A doorman in uniform opened the door of the limousine, and helped the ladies out. It must have been obvious on their faces that they were new arrivals, since the gentleman smiled and said, “Welcome to New York.” Roberts, riding in the front, got out and walked with the small group into the lobby of the skyscraper. They saw a bank of elevators straight ahead, a front desk with security cameras, and other small things that led Jo to conclude that this was an apartment building, not a motel. Roberts escorted Jo and her group to the concierge desk.

“Hello, I am Dalton,” a very well dressed man greeted them. “How can I assist you today?” He asked them casually.

“This is Miss Becker, of BeckFord Financial. She will be inspecting the penthouse to determine if she wishes to occupy it for the present.”

The man Dalton seemed to grow two inches at the announcement Roberts had made. He turned to Jo with a great measure of respect, and bowed, his tone completely different. “Miss Becker, of course. We have been expecting you. This way, please.” He led them to a grand elevator to the left of the concierge desk. Jo glanced back at the other elevators, confused.

“This private elevator goes directly to the penthouse, madam. You will not be subjected to the rest of the inhabitants of the building.” Jo glanced over at Alex with a scowl on her face to see what Alex’s opinion of that statement was.

Alex leaned over to Jo and whispered, “If you ever talk like he just did I will slap you. *That* is what I won’t allow you to become.”

Jo giggled behind her hand. Dalton used a special key to activate the elevator, and then they boarded. Only Roberts and the snobby man went up with Jo and the Turners to the penthouse. The ride up was quick, but not nauseatingly so. The doors opened at the top revealing a hallway with two doors. Roberts took a set of keys and opened the larger, double doors, to unveil a beautiful room. Jo caught her breath at the magnificence in front of her. She touched the delicate fabric of the overstuffed sofa, caressed the kid leather of a large comfortable-looking chair, but was immediately drawn to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. She walked over to them, pushing aside the sheer white drapes, and observed her new domain from the top of the world. It was amazing, and incredible. Jo could only stare at the sight in awe. Then Alex caught her attention.

“Jo, out here,” Alex motioned her to follow to a door leading outside. There was a large terrace scattered with deck chairs and loungers. Potted plants and small tables to place drinks on were placed nearby. There was a patio dining set that would seat eight, and a gorgeous wrought iron bench seated right at the edge of the terrace giving a wonderful view of the entire skyline. Way off in the distance she could see the Statue of Liberty. There was a safety fence surrounding the entire outdoor area, to make sure no accidental falls occurred. Then Jo noticed the gazebo. Beautiful ivy climbed all over the stained redwood criss-crossed slats that formed the exterior. Inside was a large spa that Joe imagined would easily seat six or more people. It was uncovered and steam was rising off of it. Alex, who had walked up beside her, pushed a button on the side of the spa, and it began bubbling rapidly.

“Jo, I think I like this place,” Alex grinned.

“We haven’t even seen the rest of it yet!” Jo playfully tugged on Alex, forcing her to follow Jo back inside. They wandered into each of the three bedrooms at the west end of the apartment. Every bedroom had a private bathroom, which amazed both girls. Each bedroom contained a king-sized bed with satin sheets and luxury evident. Large walk-in closets were also visible in each room, as well as vanity tables with chairs, and a plasma television mounted on one wall. From the carpets to the lamps, every item the bedrooms contained was extravagance personified.

Alex and Jo went into one of the bathrooms. Though each bedroom had their own bath, this one room had a larger bathroom, so the girls were checking it out. A garden spa tub, which seemed superfluous to Jo considering there was a hot tub outside; a standing shower with four different spray nozzles; two sinks underneath a long mirror.

“This is amazing,” Alex commented. “This bathroom is bigger than my bedroom.”

Jo laughed. “Come on, Alex, let’s go see the kitchen.”

They found Alex’s mom already there, opening and closing cupboards and appliances. “This refrigerator would hold enough food to feed an army,” Kendra declared. Jo opened it to see, and agreed with her. She and Alex observed and tested anything and everything, then headed back into the living area.

Alex was the first to find the remote for the entertainment system. She found a power button and the three women watched in amazement as a panel opened up on the wall to reveal a sixty-two inch plasma television mounted there. Jo saw the small speakers pop up out of the floors, the corners of the room, and the walls. She saw eight for sure, but wasn’t sure if she missed some.

“Surround sound?” she asked no one in particular.

“Yes, ma’am,” Dalton came over to where they were. He spoke about some of the features of the system, and explained the basic operations. Alex flipped a few channels. “There are over one thousand channels, Miss Becker. I am sure you will always be entertained.” Jo tried hard not to show her astonishment.

The three women realized at about the same time that Sam was not with them. “Where’s Dad?” Alex questioned her mother.

“I don’t know. I thought he was wandering around outside, but I don’t see him,” she responded as she scanned the outer terrace.

“The gentleman is in the office,” Dalton efficiently informed them. Alex and Jo looked at each other. “Office?” they both mouthed at the same time. “This way, if you please,” Dalton motioned for them to follow down another hallway, to the east end of the apartment.

They were led between the kitchen and dining area, past another bathroom, to enter a large, open room that contained another television, a deep sofa, three recliners, a pool table, and off to the side a large, ornate desk with an executive chair behind it overlooking the room. A smaller bathroom containing only a toilet and sink was located directly behind the desk. Sam was standing at a bookcase browsing the selection of books he had discovered.

Jo was stunned. This was a very large apartment. “Five bathrooms?” She whispered to Alex.

“A pool table?” Alex whispered back.

Jo cleared her throat. “Is this all of the apartment?” she asked Dalton, trying to sound bored. “Where is the laundry room?”



Roberts interrupted her before she could say more. “Dalton, that will be all. We will call you if we need anything.”

Dalton nodded, “Yes, sir.” He retreated down the hallway toward the elevator.

Roberts turned to Jo. “Miss Becker, there are no laundering appliances in the apartment. The owners of most homes of this caliber tend to send out their clothing to be dry cleaned. There is a laundry facility located in the basement that the housekeeping service uses to launder items that are not sent out. You will find hampers in each room, of course. Anything you place in the hamper will be properly laundered and returned. I believe housekeeping collects the soiled clothing each morning and returns it in the evening. She puts them away for you, as well.”

“You mean, someone comes and takes even my underwear and washes them for me?” Jo was a little apprehensive about that idea. She wasn’t used to having strangers handle her intimate wear.

“That is what is normally done, yes.”

“This is going to take some getting used to,” Jo responded.

The group heard a chime coming from the living area, and Roberts headed down the hall to answer it. Near the front door of the apartment was a small display and speaker. Ms. Michaels appeared in the display, and spoke to Roberts. “I brought sandwiches from the deli next door. It is almost time for Miss Becker’s meeting.”

“Thank you, Michaels.” Roberts turned to Jo. “Miss Becker, when someone wishes to visit you, they have to access a panel just like this one in the lobby next to your elevator. They push the button and it chimes up here. That was what we heard from the study. You talk to them by pushing the blue button and, once you have decided they are safe to enter, you press this green button here,” Roberts pointed to a small, green button next to the blue button on the speaker panel. “The only way to get to this apartment is by having the key to the elevator or by someone pressing this green button.”

Jo thanked him for the explanation. Within a minute, Michaels arrived with mouth-watering sandwiches for everyone. It was a bit after four o’clock in New York by now, but for the travelers coming from the Pacific Time zone, it was shortly past lunchtime and they were starved. Roberts passed out sodas from the well-stocked refrigerator to compliment their hasty meal.

As soon as everyone was finished, Roberts ushered Jo and her entourage back down to the lobby and into a limousine waiting at the door. “I will take you to your other homes later. It is time to meet the Board at BeckFord now.”

Jo checked her appearance in a vanity mirror she pulled down from the ceiling of the limo. Still wearing one of the business costumes Charlie had chosen for her before her mother’s funeral, she looked the part she was trying to portray. However, her nerves were tingling and her stomach was knotted. This was the moment of truth.

“You will do fine,” Roberts assured her. “Just keep you chin up and maintain eye contact. Remember that they work for you. Don’t let them intimidate you.”

The limousine entered an underground parking structure and stopped at some glass double doors. A tall, handsome man in suit and tie came out to greet them. He looked to be in his late forties and, his hair was just hinting at silver here and there. He was slim and looked like he enjoyed life. Overall, he looked friendly, yet still businesslike. He smiled at them as they exited the limousine. “Roberts, welcome back to New York,” the man shook Roberts’ and Michael’s hands and looked around at Jo and the Turners, waiting for an introduction to his new boss.

“Mr. Cline, this is Miss Becker, our new Chairperson. Miss Becker, may I introduce Mr. Richard Cline? He is the operations manager.” Jo stepped forward to take the offered hand.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Becker. I hope you had a pleasant trip?” he inquired politely. Jo nodded and smiled. “If you ever need anything that Roberts cannot or will not arrange, please allow me to be of assistance.” The friendly man’s eyes twinkled as he smiled. Jo smiled back. She thought she liked Mr. Cline already.

Mr. Cline led the six new arrivals to an elevator, and then took them to the top floor of the impressive building. Jo had yet to see the outside of the company structure. She knew there was time for that later, though.

They exited the elevators on what Mr. Cline explained was the Executive floor. There was a professionally attired woman waiting for them. She was tall and gave the impression that she knew what she was doing. If she hadn’t smiled, Jo might have been a little frightened of her. The smile, however, made her a little less imposing. The other four members of the security team were there as well.

“Miss Becker,” the woman stepped forward to greet Jo. “I am Director Sarah Johnson. I apologize for the way we had to hide our purpose from you until the appropriate time. I was hoping to avoid any additional risk. The fewer people who knew about you, the safer you would be.” She smiled as she took Jo’s hand and shook it. “Now that you know who we are and why we have brought you here, do you have any questions about your position in the company before I present you to your Board?”

Jo thought for a moment. Though she had a million questions, she realized most would be answered in time. “Are the Board Members aware that I was to arrive today?” she asked. At a nod in the affirmative, she asked another question. “Are they aware of my age?”

Director Johnson nodded again and smiled. “Yes, Miss Becker, and of course they are concerned with your lack of experience. I am sure that you are apprehensive as well. This is a big job you are undertaking. Roberts assures me, however, that you are up for the task.”

Jo smiled at Roberts, and he nodded back at her. He was in his business mode, she realized. She sighed and turned back to Director Johnson.

“Let’s get this over with,” she stated heavily.

Director Johnson nodded. She spoke to the three Turners. “If you would wait here, please. Miss Becker will not be long.”

Joanna Arianna Becker was presented to the Board of Directors of BeckFord Financial Corporation four days after her eighteenth birthday. She entered the boardroom nervously, but instinctively held her chin up and made eye contact with each member as she was introduced.

“You have met Mr. Richard Cline, the Chief Operation Officer.” Director Johnson began the introductions.

Jo nodded to the man as he took his seat.

“This is Mr. Gordon Fitzgerald, the Chief Financial Officer.” Director Johnson continued and indicated the man next to Mr. Cline.

Jo nodded at the man indicated. He frowned at her; it was apparent that he was not pleased to meet her.

“Next to him is Mr. Ian Stafford, the Chief Marketing Officer,” Director Johnson said.

Jo smiled at him, and he smiled back and nodded. Not too bad, Jo thought. Two out of three were tolerating her so far.

“Next we have Ms. Cynthia Grant, who is the Chief Information Officer.”

Jo smiled at her and the woman grinned back and gave a little wave. Jo's face lit up. Maybe this wasn't going to be too bad.

"Then you have Mr. Edward Lawrence, the Chief Technical Officer."

Mr. Lawrence glared at Jo as she looked his way. Her first impression of him was that he looked evil.

"To his left is Ms. Nancy Moreno, the Vice President of Human Resources," the Director continued.

Jo was greeted by a non-committal stare when she nodded to the VP.

Director Johnson led Jo to the head of the table. As Jo stood at the head, there was one man seated to her right who had not yet been introduced.

"Your right-hand man, both literally and figuratively, is Mr. Raymond Sherman, the Chief Executive Officer of Beckford Financial for the past six years."

The man at Jo's right stood and shook her hand. Jo knew from her economics class that this was the man who actually ran the company, top to bottom, and that they would be working together.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Becker," the man spoke sincerely as he gave Jo a firm handshake. "I look forward to working with you." The man sat back down, and Director Johnson indicated to Jo to take the seat she was standing behind. Then Director Johnson went to the far end of the table to an empty chair.

"I am on the Board as well, mostly in an advisory position," Director Johnson explained as she took her seat.

Jo was now standing at the head of the table, eight very experienced businessmen and women watching her. Remembering Roberts' advice, she looked at each one in turn, making and holding eye contact for a few seconds before moving to the next one.

"Thank you for the warm reception," Jo began. She was unprepared to make a speech, but realized they were waiting for her to say something. "I, too, look forward to working with you, Mr. Sherman, and the rest of you as well. I am young, I realize, and inexperienced. With your guidance, I am positive we can keep this company moving forward as you have done under Mr. Hartford. I welcome your candor, and will do my best to live up to my father's potential." Jo was almost quaking by this time, having used up most of her bravado. She wondered if she should sit down before she passed out, but was saved by Ms. Grant.

"It will be fun having someone young to head us up," Ms. Grant rose from her seat to walk to where Jo was barely able to stand. She put her arm around Jo in a sisterly fashion. "I just want to say for all of us that it was dreadful the way Mr. Hartford cheated you out of your inheritance. I am looking forward to seeing you blossom into the woman you would have been had your father lived." The kind woman squeezed Jo's arm. "Welcome home, Miss Becker. Please, let me know if I can do anything to help you get settled."

Jo was truly indebted to Ms. Grant for her kindness. Her delighted smile filled her face and shone from her eyes. "Thank you for that gracious welcome, Ms. Grant," Jo scored more points by remembering her name on the first try. "And I will." A few of the other executives followed Ms. Grant's lead and rose to shake hands with Jo. She smiled and greeted each warmly.

"Let's all convene Monday at ten o'clock for our next meeting, team. I will see you all then," the CEO Mr. Sherman announced. There was a lazy rustle of papers and retrieval of briefcases, and the room slowly emptied. Jo was led back into the anterior area where the three Turners were patiently waiting.

“Jo, were those the Board members?” Alex asked of the group of people that had passed them as they waited.

“Yes, that was them.”

“How did it go?” she persisted.

“Well, they didn’t eat me,” Jo laughed when Alex snorted in disgust. “Oh, all right. It went well. The CEO, Mr. Sherman, seemed really nice. He’s the one I have to work with the most, so as long as he’s okay working with a green kid, I think I will learn fast.”

Director Johnson stepped over next to Jo. “Miss Becker, if I could see you for a moment in my office, there are a few last minute details I need to discuss with you.”

Jo followed her into an office on the same floor, and when she entered, there was a young woman, just slightly older than Jo herself, already waiting on them.

“Miss Becker, this is Miss Tammy Reid. She will be your Personal Assistant temporarily until you find the one who suits you best. She will handle anything and everything, from picking up your dry cleaning to ordering your breakfast from the apartment restaurant. She will also help you keep track of your expenditures, both personal and business related, forwarding the receipts to your bookkeeper, and handle any cash transactions you may require.”

Jo smiled and shook the young woman’s hand. She had no idea why she needed a personal assistant. Why would you want someone else to order your breakfast, she wondered. Is it that hard to buy a box of cereal from the store?

“Call me Tammy,” the young assistant began. “I took the liberty of opening you a bank account, Miss Becker, I hope you don’t mind. I am sure you probably already have one, but you need one for New York, especially if you plan to write checks. Most businesses in New York will not accept out-of-state checks. Don’t worry about balancing your bankbook. Just keep all your receipts and I will make sure your bookkeeper gets them.”

Jo took the checkbook Tammy handed her and thanked her. It looked more like a thick wallet to Jo. It had a place for loose change, and she saw green bills in the area where cash would go.

“I also opened credit accounts at Barney’s, Bloomingdale’s, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman’s, and Tiffany’s. There is also a credit card if you choose to go to a different store,” the efficient assistant informed her. “Just use your California I.D. for now, until we can get you a New York I.D. card.”

Jo looked at her blankly. She had no idea what these stores were. She had heard of Bloomingdale’s and Tiffany’s, but the rest were a mystery. Why would she need a credit account at Tiffany’s? Was expensive jewelry a ‘must have’ in New York society?

“If you need anything at all, I am just a phone call away,” Tammy continued, and handed Jo a cell phone.

It was more like a mini computer, Jo gathered from looking at it. There were many icons on the front screen, and Jo wondered if she would ever figure them out.

“This is your personal planner. You touch the calendar icon to display your daily appointments and meetings,” Tammy demonstrated by touching the calendar. Nothing was listed for today, but she noticed Monday had ‘10 a.m. Board Meeting’ listed. “I am always available if you touch the phone icon on the front that says ‘call Tammy’.” She pushed a little phone icon and within a few seconds, a similar phone in her hand rang. She pushed a button to silence them both.

“Do you have an instruction manual for this thing?” Jo asked, holding up the phone. The bewildered assistant looked at her incredulously.

“I am sure I can find one, Miss Becker, if you wish. I assumed you would allow me to teach you how to use it.”

“Oh, that is okay, Miss Reid—“

“Please, it’s Tammy,” Tammy corrected her.

“Then you have to call me Jo,” Jo responded.

Director Johnson frowned and Tammy gasped. “I’m sorry, Miss Becker. I cannot do that,” Tammy told her. Jo realized that she had asked something inappropriate.

“All right, Tammy. I will wait for you to train me on how to use this. Meanwhile I call you by touching the phone button, and look at my schedule by touching the calendar. Anything else important I need to know right away?”

“No, ma’am. That should do it for now. If you want to go shopping this weekend, call me and I will set it up for you.”

Jo looked at her, puzzled. “Why can’t I just go shopping without it being set up?” Jo asked her.

Tammy looked up at Director Johnson, her eyes pleading for help. Tammy didn’t want to do anything to make her new boss fire her, but she was unclear how to handle Miss Becker.

“That will do it for today, Tammy. We will call you if we need you.” Director Johnson told her. Tammy thanked them and rushed from the room as if she was frightened. Director Johnson turned to Jo. “Miss Becker, I realize that this is not the life you are used to, and you have a lot of adjusting to do. The easiest way to do that is to let us all help you. If you need to do some shopping, Tammy will arrange the limo to be sent, and one of your security team will escort you.” The director stopped for a moment and looked at Jo intently. “I meant to ask, are you satisfied with your current security team? Or would you rather try a different team? I can honestly say that Roberts and Diaz are my two best agents.”

“No, no,” Jo hastened to reassure the director. “Roberts and his team are great. I don’t want a different team.” She paused, and then continued, “I’m sorry to seem so naïve, but I was wondering why I needed a team still? If I stay in the secure penthouse, and ride in the bulletproof limo, why do I still need people to protect me?”

“You forget that you are worth a fortune, Miss Becker. Besides the potential rival wishing you dead, and the potential stockholders wanting your shares, there will be kidnappers, thieves, and random psychos who wish you harmed. I’m afraid that the security team is a permanent fixture in your life. You will be almost as well protected as the President of the United States.”

Jo, stunned by that news, didn’t respond.

“Don’t worry about it, Miss Becker. You will get used to it, I promise.” Director Johnson rose from her seat and led Jo back out to where Alex was pacing impatiently. “Just push the gold star icon on your phone to call your security team.”

Jo looked at the phone and saw a gold star. It looked similar to a police badge. Underneath the icon, the word ‘security’ could be seen in tiny letters.

“Call for a ride always if you leave your home. It doesn’t matter which home you choose to live in; by the way, they all have or will have the best security installed. Just let Roberts know where you are and where you are going at all times.” Director Johnson paused when they reached Alex. “Did you have any questions for me before I go?”

Jo shook her head no.

“Then have a great weekend, Miss Becker, and I will see you Monday.”

Director Johnson pushed the elevator button, and left the bewildered head of BeckFord Financial Corp. standing with her friends and her security team.

“Is everything okay, Jo?” Alex asked.

“I am in way over my head,” Jo whispered to Alex.

Alex smiled. “It will get better, Jo. You just have a lot of things to adapt to. Being rich doesn’t come easy to us poor folk.” Jo grinned at Alex, grateful for her candor. “So what do we do now?” Alex asked. “What’s the next stop?”

“Well, I think it would be fun to find Charlie and crash their party, wherever that is,” Jo responded. “And some time this weekend, I suppose I need to go shopping for a new wardrobe. I was hoping Charlie could help and you too of course.”

“Charlie would be excellent at that, but I would be very little help.”

Kendra interrupted them. “That would be fun, Jo. I would like to help too, if you don’t mind an old lady hanging around.”

Jo grinned. “It would be great if you and Mindy came, too. I suppose we will have to give Kyle and the dads something to do if we go shopping, though.”

“I’m sure I could keep myself busy hanging out in your apartment, Jo,” Sam grinned. Jo and Alex laughed.

Roberts asked Jo if she was ready to check out her other penthouse so she looked to Alex and the Turners. They agreed, so Roberts pushed the elevator button and they headed down.

Alex looked at Jo quickly. “Jo, I don’t mean to pry, but how are you supposed to go shopping? I mean, I know you are rich, but do you have like an ATM card or something to get money?”

Jo held up the wallet and opened it. “They gave me a Visa card, a checkbook and some cash,” she replied. She pulled apart the wallet to look into the money holder, and gasped. “Oh my gosh.”

“What?” Alex asked, and glanced into where she was staring. She too gasped. There were a dozen or more hundred-dollar bills in it. “That’s a lot of cash.” She took the wallet from Jo, and looked inside. “Fifteen hundred dollars. Okay, I guess we are on for shopping.” Alex grinned. She handed the wallet back to Jo.

Jo pulled out the Visa card. It was boring. She put it back in the slot and flipped open the checkbook. The checks were boring, too. “I wonder how much they put in my bank account. I hope I have enough for the weekend,” Jo sarcastically commented.

Roberts was finding the whole elevator ride entertaining, and was having a hard time not laughing, but he couldn’t contain himself any longer when Jo opened the check register to where the bank balance was displayed, and screaming, dropped the wallet as if it was on fire.

“Eek!”

“What, Jo? What’s wrong?” Alex picked up the wallet off of the elevator floor. She flipped open the checkbook register as Jo had done and stared dazed at the numbers displayed. “Oh my,” was all she could say when she eventually spoke.

“What is it, Alex?” Kendra, who had watched both girls’ reactions, finally asked. Alex turned the checkbook so her mother could see what it said. The current balance in Jo’s account was two million dollars.

## Chapter 18

It was shortly after six in the evening when Jo entered the second of her two penthouse apartments. The concierge was busy downstairs, so she was not introduced to him. The private elevator to the top was the same, opening to a hallway with two doors, just as before. “One door is the apartment, the other is a smaller apartment that the security team will occupy,” Roberts explained. “It is the same at both locations.”

Jo entered this apartment expecting to find a lot of similarities, but there weren’t many. Dark colors, heavy draperies, marble countertops and brown leather furniture. The apartment was very masculine, yet still very luxurious.

“This was Mr. Hartford’s residence. He had been here for about eight years before he died. It was decorated to suit him, of course,” Roberts offered in way of explaining the lack of light and color.

There were three bedrooms, as with the other penthouse, but the rooms were slightly smaller. There were three bathrooms in total, rather than the four-and-a-half the other location boasted. The outside deck had no safety fence, and Jo was actually too frightened to go near the edge. It was just a three-foot wall surrounding the deck area. There was a spa outside, but no gazebo for privacy, and it was smaller than the one at the other apartment.

The kitchen was designer quality, but the black marble countertops increased the darkness of the surrounding rooms. There was an entertainment center, just not as elaborate, and the office in the back was simply an office. It contained a desk, a chair, a bookcase, a filing cabinet and nothing else.

“It’s lovely, of course,” she told Roberts, “but not near as nice as the other. What is the difference between the two?”

“This one, as I mentioned, was Mr. Hartford’s home. He had been here for many years. The other penthouse was a recent purchase of Mr. Hartford’s. There was speculation that it was purchased for his mistress, but of course, that was never verified. He had just finished having the other penthouse redecorated about a week before he died, but no one had ever moved in. It is just as the decorator left it, the way you saw it today.”

Jo considered that. Of the two apartments, she much preferred the one she had seen earlier, but if these were the apartments, what did the homes look like?

“Why did Mr. Hartford live in an apartment instead of one of his homes?” Jo asked Roberts.

“The most probable reason is the ease of commute. There is no room for a house in the city center,” Roberts explained, “so the houses are all outside of the business district. This apartment and the other one as well, are within five minutes of the Corporate Office. I don’t believe any of the homes are closer than thirty minutes away, or more, depending on traffic.”

“That makes sense. Did he use the houses on weekends or something, then?”

“I’m not sure Mr. Hartford ever took a weekend, Miss Becker. He worked much too hard, which is probably why he died of a heart attack at age fifty-four. This apartment, in fact the desk in the back room, is where the letter from your father was discovered. When housekeeping came in, they thoroughly cleaned and boxed everything. The letter was underneath the top drawer, between the drawer and its enclosure. When Director Johnson went through the things from his apartment, she found the letter, and the rest you know.”

Alex and her parents were back in the living area, ready to leave. After seeing the first apartment, the luxury of this one was lost on everyone. Jo would not choose to live here.

“It’s almost seven,” Alex announced. “Should we see if we can find Charlie?”

“Oh, yeah!” Jo responded excitedly. “We can drag her along to look at the houses. Or the condominiums, but after seeing the first penthouse, I would bet that any other place will seem trashy to us.”

“Probably so, Jo, but you never know. Simple is good.”

“What is the history on the condos, Roberts?” Jo asked him as the group exited the elevator and once again entered the limo.

“I believe Mr. Hartford purchased them simply as investments. They are all in very good areas of the city. Two are in the business district, I believe. One is in Manhattan, and some others in Brooklyn.”

“Would you recommend any of them for me to live in?” Jo asked honestly.

Roberts hesitated. “They are much less luxurious than the penthouse, of course, but my main concern is your safety. It will be much more difficult for my team to protect you in one of the condominiums.”

“What about the homes? Do they have security risks?”

“Two out of the three homes are equipped with state of the art security systems, including cameras and even heat sensors on the gates. The third home was the one your grandparents owned. It is just an old colonial style house. I would not recommend you live there, for security reasons of course, but I assure you it will be a pleasant place to visit. It has beautiful grounds.”

Jo smiled. She would enjoy seeing the home her father grew up in. “How far away are the two secured homes?”

“One of them is across the river in New Jersey. It was built in the late eighteen hundreds. It is full of antiques, and makes you feel like you are walking through a museum.”

Jo scowled. “Scratch that one. Next?”

Roberts grinned. “The home I would recommend is in Long Beach, but it’s not a close drive to work. It is beautiful, however. It’s on the bay side. One of the condos is on the ocean side if you wish to see it as well.”

“I’m having a blast, Jo, let’s get Charlie and look at them both.”

Jo agreed that was a good idea. “Can we fit four more in the limo, Roberts?” She asked as they headed down the elevator.

“Where will your friends be?” Roberts asked. “I will have one of the larger limos meet us there.”

Jo was trying not to be surprised by anything, but she just had to ask, “Roberts, how many limos are in the company fleet?”

“Currently twelve, but only four of them have security measures in them. You will only be using the four.” Roberts replied as he ushered them to the waiting limo.

“I have to stick with only four limos, Alex. What is this world coming to?” Jo’s sarcastic retort sent Alex into peals of laughter. Jo pulled out her old cell phone because she knew how to use it, and called Charlie.

“Hey, Jo, how are you doing?” Charlie asked when she answered the call.

“I’m okay. You guys having a nice trip?”

“Yeah. We looked at about eight apartments today. No luck so far.”

“Why not?”



“The ones that are in our price range are in questionable neighborhoods, and the one that I liked the most was too expensive.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie. Tell you what, how about I come get you and we can help you look.”

“Come get me? You are in New York? With Alex? You said we, so is Alex here too?”

Charlie was screaming in the phone so loud that Jo had to hold it away from her ear. When she felt it was safe, she answered Charlie.

“Alex and I decided you needed help looking, so we kidnapped her parents, hopped on a plane and came.”

“That’s wonderful, Jo! It will be so much more fun to look with you guys!”

“So you want us to come get you?”

“Is there a taxi big enough for all of us? Dad wanted to rent a car when we got here, but the people drive insanely, so we had to leave Kyle in the motel and just Mom and Dad and I went out in a taxi. How can we four and you four all fit in one taxi?”

“I will take care of it, Charlie. What motel are you at, we can be there in a few minutes.”

Jo could hear Charlie asking her parents something. “Okay, we are staying at the Marriott on West Street. Can you find it?”

Roberts nodded to Jo. “Tell her to be in the lobby in five minutes.”

“Charlie, be in the lobby in five minutes. Oh, and dress nice.”

“Five minutes *and* dress nice? It’s either one or the other, Jo; you can’t have both,” declared the exasperated Charlie. Alex and Jo both laughed. This was going to be so much fun.

“Trust me, Charlie. Throw something nice on, and hurry.”

Roberts radioed to someone to bring a bigger limo to the Marriott, he then instructed the driver where to go.

About five minutes later, Jo and her crew pulled up at a very nice motel with the familiar Marriott logo on the building. There was a second limo just pulling in. Roberts exited the car and went to talk to the driver of the other limo. Then he came back for Jo.

“I was just verifying that I knew him. It’s safe, let’s go.”

He rushed Jo from one limo to the other. Alex and her parents followed. The new car was just as luxurious, but had a bench seat along the side, as well as the back seat, and a backwards facing seat towards the front. There was much more room. Diaz, who had been riding in the front with the driver the whole trip, helped Roberts and the limo driver transfer Jo’s and her friends’ luggage to the larger limo.

“There’s Kyle,” Alex shouted out as she saw Kyle, wearing slacks and a dress shirt, exit the lobby and enter the parking lot. He made a beeline for the limo.

“Whoa, cool,” Jo heard him say, and her and Alex giggled quietly.

“Mr. Allen, please enter on the right side of the vehicle, if you would.” Roberts requested. Kyle looked up at him in shocked astonishment.

“Who, me? I don’t think so.” Kyle responded, and turned to head back into the hotel.

“Kyle, it’s okay. It’s just us,” Alex took pity on the boy and stepped out of the car to call him. He turned at her voice, amazed.

“No way! You got a limo? How did you get a limo, Alex? That is so cool!” He wasted no time going around the right side of the vehicle as requested by Roberts. He bounded in and looked around, touching everything as any thirteen-year-old boy would do. “This is awesome!” Jo and Alex smiled, and watched for Charlie to come out.

A few seconds later, Charlie exited the lobby with her parents behind her. She had changed into a mid-length dress, and her parents were nicely dressed as well, but then, they usually were, Jo remembered.

“Mom! Dad! In here! Alex got us a limo!” Kyle had found the button that allowed a large rectangle in the top of the limo to be opened. He stood up, so that the top half of him was outside, and waved at them. Charlie saw him and stared, her mouth wide open. Jo and Alex watched as Mindy pushed Charlie’s mouth closed and said something to her. They lost it at that point, unable to contain their laughter.

Roberts went to the front of the vehicle to escort the three newcomers to the right side, and helped the ladies in. Charlie stared hard at Roberts. She remembered him from the funeral, but didn’t know what had transpired since then.

“Alex! Jo!” Charlie gave them both enthusiastic hugs as she entered the limo. “Jo, wasn’t that the guy who was going to offer you a job?” she asked.

“Did he offer you a job, Jo? I know we talked about it yesterday morning, but I was unsure if you were really going to meet him.” Brad questioned.

“Forget that, tell me where the limo came from,” Mindy demanded.

“One at a time,” laughed Jo. “Charlie, Brad, this is Roberts, the man I was meeting for a job interview yesterday after the funeral.”

Brad shook hands with the man. Charlie interrupted again. “So you got the job, Jo? And this trip to New York was to finalize the job?”

Jo pondered how to answer that. “Something like that, Charlie. This is a celebration trip for accepting the job. Roberts brought me here, to show me around before I begin at the company, and I invited Alex and the Turners to tag along.”

“But what is the job, Jo?” Brad’s concern was evident.

“I will tell you all about it later, I promise.” Jo smiled. “But we are wasting daylight. Should we eat first or look at a place to live first?” She asked no one in particular. The people looked at each other to get a consensus. The Allen family had only been in New York slightly longer than the rest, so everyone was still on California time. The clocks all read seven-thirty, but to everyone in the group, it felt like four-thirty.

“Let’s see this amazing apartment you are going to find for me first, and then we will eat.” Charlie decided. They all went along, since there was no differing opinion. Roberts asked Jo which place first, she told him to go to the condo, and he gave the order to the driver.

They had about twenty-five minutes to catch up, but Jo was reluctant to discuss all that had happened in the car, so she asked Charlie what she and her parents had done since arriving in New York. Charlie regaled them with horror stories of the apartments they had looked at. She told them about visiting a few historical sites, and how tired and discouraged she was getting about finding a decent place to live.

“California is expensive, and I know that. I was expecting it to be here, too, but what I’m finding is that the apartments that are in decent areas are a long ways from the college I’m attending. So far, we haven’t found even one possibility near the college.”

“Why do you have to be close to the college?” Jo asked. She was beginning to worry that inviting Charlie to live with her wouldn’t work.

“I don’t want to have to drive, and taxis are expensive. The subway scares me to death, so I don’t want to take it, either.”

“Oh, so it’s just a transportation issue? Is that all?”

Charlie looked at Jo like she had grown three heads. “Yes, Jo, isn’t that enough? It would be nice to be able to *get* to the college I plan on attending.”

Jo laughed. “All right, Charlie. Point made.”

The limousine was rolling along a road that bordered the Atlantic Ocean, and everyone turned to watch. Soon they pulled into a parking lot that seemed to belong to a large building that looked like an upscale motel, but at the same time, didn’t. Each small room had a balcony, and a few had chairs. One of the balconies had an outdoor grill, Jo noticed. The view would be beautiful, but would it match the luxury of the Penthouse?

“Miss Becker, this is where the condo is. Would you like to see it?”

“This looks much fancier than anything we saw today, Charlie. I’m quite sure it’s out of my budget,” Brad cautioned his excitable daughter.

“It won’t hurt to look, Daddy,” Charlie rationalized. “Besides, maybe Mr. Roberts knows the owner.”

Jo and Alex looked at each other and ducked their heads to hide their snickering. Kyle saw it, and tried to guess what the joke was. He didn’t see anything funny.

“I do, indeed, Mr. Allen. I’m sure something can be arranged.” Roberts gave Jo a knowing look. They all exited the vehicle, and Roberts escorted the group to the top floor of the high-rise. He opened one of the ten or so doors on the floor, and ushered them into the room. It was a two-bedroom, two bathroom apartment, with a small balcony. There was roof access, as well. On the roof was a community pool with deck chairs and patio furniture scattered around. It was very lovely, Jo decided, but nothing compared to the luxury of the penthouse. She stepped onto the balcony and felt the cool breeze blow off the Ocean.

“This is absolutely perfect, Jo! How did you find this place? Is it available for the full season?”

Alex walked out to the balcony to join Jo and Charlie. “Eh, I’ve seen better,” Alex commented nonchalantly.

“Are you insane, Alex? This is the most beautiful apartment in all of New York!”

“But Charlie, you are like a forty minute drive to school from here! How will you be able to afford the taxi bill?” Jo reminded her. Charlie slumped, deflated.

“But it’s so pretty, Jo. Nothing else we saw was this nice. Nothing.”

“There are other nicer things. I believe Roberts has connections to another apartment Alex and I looked at earlier today,” Jo winked at Alex as she spoke. “It was pretty amazing, and it was right in the middle of the financial district. Much closer to your school.”

“Daddy looked in the financial district, there was nothing available that didn’t take half a year’s salary, he said. I think that area is hopeless.”

“Well, we have one more place to see in this half of town. It’s just a house that Roberts wanted to show me, not far from here.”

Charlie sighed. This was really a beautiful condo. She knew it wouldn’t be affordable, though. It was obviously something even her dad wouldn’t be able to give her.

“Miss Becker, may I have a word with you please?” Roberts motioned for Jo to join him in the hallway, as everyone else headed to the exit.

“I see that Miss Allen has her heart set on this place, but I need to remind you, it will be very difficult to keep you safe here. Please keep that in mind when you make your decision.”

“Don’t worry, Roberts. She only wants this one because she hasn’t seen the other one yet.” Jo thought of something. “Roberts? Would it be possible to have some sort of dinner served

at the house? We could stop and pick up fast food on the way or something, right? Maybe some paper plates?"

Roberts nodded. "I'm sure it would be possible. However this is not my area of expertise. Your personal assistant would know exactly how to arrange it for you."

Jo glanced up at him, "Would it be an imposition to call her and ask her to set up a dinner?"

"As your assistant, this is the type of thing that she would handle for you at all times, Miss Becker. After this weekend, once you take your place at BeckFord, Tammy will be underfoot almost every moment you are awake. It is her job, Miss Becker. She is paid quite well to make sure anything you could dream up takes place."

"Oh," Jo wasn't quite sure she was going to like having a person under her feet all day long, day in and day out. "So I should call Tammy then." She pulled out the very modern cell phone and punched the "Tammy" icon. Shortly, her assistant answered.

"Hi, Tammy, this is Jo Becker."

"Yes, Miss Becker, is there something I can do for you?"

"I was wondering, if it wasn't too much trouble, if you could have some food delivered to the..." Jo looked up at Roberts. "Where is the house we are going to next?" she asked.

"BeckFord house. It was the first home purchased with Mr. Hartford's salary earnings, so he named it after his company."

"And where is it? Do I need to give Tammy the address?"

"I will tell her where it is." Roberts held his hand out for the phone Jo was holding. Roberts gave the directions to the house, and handed the phone back. Tammy inquired what Miss Becker wished to have delivered, Jo told her "Surprise me!" Tammy told her she would let the caretaker know that Miss Becker was on her way with a group to inspect the home, and assured Jo that there would be a meal waiting for them.

Roberts ushered Jo down the elevator to the bottom floor where all of her friends were waiting. He put her into the limo, the Allens and Turners followed her in, and they continued on their adventure.

## Chapter 19

The first glimpse the group got of the house was breathtaking. The drive leading up to the actual house was quite long, well tended, with beautiful trees and a line of delicate flowering bushes along the drive. By the time they reached the house, Jo was beginning to wonder if they had made a wrong turn since it had taken so long, but there it was, in all of its majesty.

The mansion was encased in marble pillars. Jo couldn't tell whether it was a two or three story structure from the outside. She could see it was imposing. The others in the car were gasping and commenting on the magnificent splendor in front of them.

"Jo, why are we here?" Charlie demanded. "We are supposed to be looking at affordable apartments. What's the big idea?"

"Well, I was getting hungry, so Roberts suggested we visit this house and eat here."

Charlie eyed the house dubiously. "This isn't a restaurant, is it?"

Jo laughed. "No, but a friend of Roberts owns it, and told him he could bring his New York guests to dine this evening."

"I must say, Jo, that I'm a bit concerned about this job you are taking on," Brad spoke softly so that Roberts in the front of the limo wouldn't hear. "He brings you to New York to celebrate accepting a job? Then he takes you in a limo to see expensive homes and apartments that even I couldn't afford? Jo, are you sure this job is a good idea? It seems, well, how do I put this," he looked away, as if embarrassed to bring up something that might be painful. "Jo, I think it's out of your league."

Alex, hearing the caution in Brad's voice, decided to join in. "I told her that already, but you have to give Jo credit for trying. Yes, she is taking on a big responsibility, and attempting new things. Yes, she will be swimming with big fish, but it's her life. Jo needs to live it."

He nodded in agreement. "I understand all of that, and I am proud of you for getting a job so quickly. What I don't understand is what kind of job it is. You never really told us, Jo. What kind of employer hires a novice fresh out of high school for a job in New York that takes them from home the day after being hired? It just feels fishy, Jo. Can you go into more details about the job?"

"Yeah, Jo. What is the job anyway?" Charlie seconded her father.

"Brad, Mindy," Alex spoke, "It really is all right. My parents and I were in the room with Jo for the job interview. Roberts is above board. We accompanied her to New York to visit, not to chaperone. I believe Roberts to be a fine person, and you will discover that too." She was careful not to give anything away. Alex knew that Jo would tell them when she felt she was ready.

Jo felt bad about worrying the Allens. There hadn't been a chance to tell Charlie and her family the news of her inheritance, so of course they would all be affected by her total lack of concern regarding the unusual circumstances of her job, but she knew it would take hours to explain everything, and she had no intention of launching that conversation in the vehicle.

"I promise I am listening to you, to all of you. I will get into all the details as soon as we get to the final apartment we will be visiting tonight." Jo looked at Charlie. "It's the one I like the best for both its closeness to work, and its luxury. I think you will love it too." Jo looked out the window at Roberts patiently waiting for them to exit the limo. "But first lets go see this house that Roberts has graciously gotten permission for us to visit. I promise you that I will satisfy all of your concerns before the evening is over."

Jo looked at Brad steadily. He nodded, accepting her promise. “Now let’s go check out this house!” Jo opened the door, and everyone got out.

A man and woman were waiting at the front door to welcome her. “Miss Becker?” The woman asked. Jo nodded at her. “I am Mrs. Standon, and this is Mr. Standon. Welcome to BeckFord House. We are so glad to see you so soon! We didn’t expect it. Mr. Hartford only visited the house on holiday weekends, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. He had no time to take in its loveliness.”

Brad whispered to Sam, “Who is Mr. Hartford?”

Sam whispered back, “It’s a long story, but you will hear about him tonight, too.”

Jo smiled at Alex, who had caught up with her. Charlie and Kyle weren’t far behind.

“Would you like a tour of the house first? Or would you like to eat?”

“The food is ready?” Jo was stunned. It hadn’t been more than twenty-five minutes since she had placed the call to Tammy.

“Yes, Miss Becker. The delivery came just before you arrived. I left it warming until you are ready for it.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Standon. That was very kind of you.” The woman seemed to glow at Jo’s words of praise. “I think we would like the tour first, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, Miss Becker. This way.”

Mrs. Standon led the group of eight into the front room. Roberts didn’t come in with them, preferring to stay outside. The gated driveway to the home, and a twelve-foot wall surrounding the property as well as the high-tech security system gave Roberts some breathing room. He wished the girl would live here. It would be more secured than most of the other places.

The home was grand, and Jo caught her breath. There was a beautiful staircase leading upstairs, and a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room. Exquisite detail and workmanship were displayed in the furnishing. Obvious antiques, obviously expensive. Mrs. Standon told the history of several of the pieces, and then moved them all to another room.

The library was well stocked with close to one thousand volumes, was the proud declaration Mrs. Standon gave as they entered the next room. Jo saw row after row of books. Some were modern, but most were ancient. She assumed many were priceless first editions. On the wall of the library were also several one-of-a-kind tapestries. One depicted a war, another famine. Each had delicate detail.

There was a living room, or ‘sitting room’ Mrs. Standon called it. Besides a large entertainment system equivalent to the one in the penthouse, it had several deep sofas, recliners, and a fireplace that took up an entire wall. “Magnificent!” Jo exclaimed.

From room to room their efficient guide escorted them. Each room depicted a life of luxury and fulfillment. The twelve bedrooms, each with its own private bathroom, had been appointed different themes. Jo loved the tropical room; Alex preferred the lake room. Charlie fell onto the bed in the beach room, and declared “I’ve come home. I’m not leaving.” Everyone laughed at that. There was also a room with an Aztec theme, and some plain, modern accessories in two. Overall, the whole group was impressed by the home.

The gardens outside were equally impressive. There were roses in every color under the rainbow. Jo was thrilled; she loved roses. A large deck led to a beautiful swimming pool fed by a waterfall that cascaded over rocks. There was a gazebo with an outdoor grill and picnic tables as

well. A room off the deck was discovered to be a sauna. There was nothing missing from this luxury home, Jo realized pleasantly.

“This is a beautiful home, Mr. Roberts,” Mindy told him when he joined the party once more. “Please give your friend our thanks for the pleasure of seeing it.”

Alex covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the smile, and Roberts involuntarily glanced at Jo. Then he remembered that the Allen family wasn’t aware of Jo’s role, and graciously agreed to the request. “I will give your thanks.”

The tour ended at the kitchen when, after inspecting each cupboard and appliance, the group was escorted into the dining room to be seated. The efficient Mrs. Standon quickly served a hot meal to the guests.

Mindy, knowing that Jo was without the benefit of motherly advice since her mother was just buried the day before, was troubled over the entire evening. Since the moment Jo had come to get them in a limo, she had been anxious over the new job. Although she had heard Jo’s promise to her husband just an hour earlier, she was unable to let it go. She looked at Mr. Roberts, sitting at the table near Jo.

“It was so kind of you to get your friend to let us see the house,” she told him once she had his attention, “and provide this wonderful meal for us, but I’m still wondering why. Why is our Jo being given the red carpet treatment, Mr. Roberts? What are you planning on doing with her?” Roberts didn’t answer.

“Mindy, I told you I would explain everything tonight. I realize it looks incriminating from where you sit; the whole thing looks like I might be being set up. Sam and Kendra both tried to dissuade me from accepting this position, but I know I need to do this for myself.” Jo stood up. It was time to explain everything.

“Look, I wanted to wait until we got to the penthouse to tell you what was going on--”

“The penthouse?” Charlie and Kyle both interrupted Jo. Alex smiled. This was getting fun.

“Roberts is my bodyguard, not my employer,” Jo began. She decided to jump in with both feet.

“Bodyguard?” Charlie sat up, astounded. “Jo, what’s going on?”

“This is my house, Charlie. I own it, and several others, including the condo on the beach, and the penthouse I wanted to take you all to.” Stupefied, the Allens sat dumbfounded as Jo continued. “I wanted to wait until I had time to get into the whole story before I told you anything. The limo is mine, too. I own four, or twelve, or something. I forget how many.”

“Twelve, Miss Becker,” Roberts interjected.

“Thank you.” Jo realized she was getting ahead of herself. “Let’s go sit in the living room where we can see each other, and I can tell you from the beginning.”

“Good idea, Jo, because I’m totally lost,” Charlie quickly stood up and grabbed Jo, propelling her to the living room. Once everyone was seated, Charlie sat down and demanded, “Take it from the top, Jo. I want to hear everything!”

Jo smiled. “Roberts came to California not to offer me a job, but to protect me until I was able to take my position at the company he works for. He is one of their lead security agents. They had been informed that there was a threat on my life. The arsonist who burnt my home down was a hired assassin, Charlie. I was supposed to die in the fire.”

“That’s what Officer Peters told us that day at the Police Station,” Charlie remembered.

“But what the police didn’t know, and what I found out from Roberts, is that my father left me an inheritance.”

“An inheritance?” Brad looked shocked. “I found no record of anything from him. I searched for life insurance policies for him as well as your mother while I was processing the other claims.”

“Jo, wait. This house is yours?” Charlie asked. Jo nodded. “You’re filthy rich, aren’t you?” Charlie asked accusingly.

“Yes, Charlie,” Jo laughed. “And that’s where you come in.”

“What do you mean?” Charlie asked.

“I need help picking out a new wardrobe,” Jo told her helplessly.

Charlie sucked in a deep breath, and then whooped loudly. “Now we are talking!”

“Hold it, hold it! I want to know about her father and the inheritance!” Mindy interrupted. “Jo, can you please start at the beginning? I will tape Charlie’s mouth shut so I can hear you.” Mindy glared at the exuberant Charlie who was dancing all over the room. Shopping was Charlie’s favorite pastime. Jo, Alex and her parents.

Jo started from the beginning. She told the Allen family everything that had transpired since the day before. She answered every question the cautious attorney, Brad, asked her, and smiled at every whoop and holler from Charlie. It was obvious that Charlie was thrilled that Jo was rich.

“So this morning, Roberts and the rest of my security team brought me to New York on my private jet.” Jo continued the story.

“You have a jet?” Charlie asked, astonished.

“You have a jet?” Kyle bounded out of his seat.

Alex and Jo both laughed. That had been their exact response. “That was what I asked, too, when Roberts told me,” Jo commented.

Jo told them about the penthouses and visiting the company headquarters for the first time. She described the board members she’d met that day, and explained Tammy the best she could. Jo herself was still unsure what Tammy’s role in her life would be.

“So then, I knew you were here in New York as well, so Alex and I decided to come kidnap you, and force you into my world.”

“Jo, what was the company name? I don’t recall you mentioning it.”

“BeckFord Financial Corporation,” Jo replied.

Brad quickly stood at the news. “BeckFord Financial? *The* BeckFord Financial that runs the economy?” Jo nodded, and he slowly sat back down as if in a daze.

“Jo, do you have any idea what this means?”

“I can afford a new wardrobe?” She cheekily responded. Everyone laughed. “Yes, I am coming very quickly to understand what it means, and after consideration, I decided yesterday that I would do this for my father. I would take on the responsibility he left me, and I will become the woman he would have wanted me to be, had he lived.”

“But Jo, that means you are worth millions of dollars.”

“Billions,” Alex corrected Brad. “About \$150 billion, and now we know why someone is trying to kill her.”

“We do?” Charlie asked. “How would killing Jo help anyone? Jo, do you have someone named in your will?”

“I don’t even have a will!” Jo exclaimed. “No, it’s a complex story. Roberts, can you explain?” Jo requested. Roberts picked up the story, explaining about the division of assets if no heir had been found.



“So it’s all about the money then. It’s always about the money,” Brad sighed. “So you are her bodyguard?” He asked of Roberts.

“There are six agents assigned to Miss Becker’s team. Two will be with her at all times, and if she chooses to live in the penthouse we have extra security measures in place at that location.”

“Jo, I’ve got to see the penthouse. It’s in the business district, right?” Charlie asked.

“Yes, and its absolutely perfect. I wanted to show it to you all tonight if you weren’t too tired. And Charlie,” Jo hesitated. She was unsure of her friend’s reaction to Jo’s newfound wealth, but Charlie’s eyes were bright, excited. Jo rushed on, “Charlie, I want you to live with me in New York. Wherever you want is fine, but I really like the penthouse best. Although this place is not bad.” Jo looked around the room at the elegance. It was a perfect mix of modern and antique. The home was lovely, but not practical for just one or two people to live in.

“Yes, Yes!” Charlie jumped up and gave Jo an enthusiastic bear hug. “Let’s go see your penthouse then, Jo. I’m sure Daddy would love for me to be living with someone instead of on my own.”

“Forget Daddy, Mommy is thrilled!” Mindy stood up and hugged Jo. “I am so happy for you, little girl. Forgive me for doubting you for even a moment. This couldn’t have happened to a nicer person, sweetheart.” She stood back to look Jo in the eyes. “And thank you for wanting Charlie. I have been worried sick about her being so far from home, alone. This is the best present you could give me, Jo. Thank you.” Mindy wiped a tear that had escaped.

Charlie was a little stunned by her mother’s words. “Mom, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. You should have told me.”

“No, honey, you need to be able to grow up without me holding you back. I was willing to let you do it, too, but now I feel so much better knowing you are surrounded by top notch security and a best friend to lean on. I will be able to sleep at night.”

Charlie hugged her mom. “Maybe Jo and I can come home on weekends in her private jet,” Charlie laughingly suggested.

“I already planned on it,” Jo replied.

“You did?”

“Yep. I knew we would both need to see our friends and families still. I’m just glad I have the means to make it happen.” Jo smiled.

“And I want to come visit as often as you come home,” Alex declared. “Once you are familiar with New York, of course.”

“And once they find out who hired the assassin and Jo is safe again,” Kendra cautioned. “It will be hard enough for the security team to keep Jo safe, let alone three girls.”

“I assure you, Mrs. Turner, that Miss Becker and her friends, however many she chooses to entertain at a time, will be completely secure. If we doubt our ability to contain three excited girls, then we call for reinforcements. I’m sure it will be quite impressive for Miss Becker and her friends to be escorted by eight security agents at once. No one would dare come near them, frankly,” Roberts interrupted

“No one?” Charlie seemed sad. “What if a guy wants my phone number?” she pouted. The room rang with laughter.

“After the gentleman’s credentials are acquired, and a background check thoroughly completed, then the young man would be allowed to have your phone number,” was Roberts’ straight-faced response.

“I’m sold!” Charlie’s dad stood up and, laughing shook Roberts’s hand. “I’m sure the girls are in good hands with you.”

Charlie was still pouting, but followed the rest as they left for the penthouse.

The drive was filled with last minute things that Jo had forgotten to mention in the rest of the story. She told them how many homes she had, and showed Charlie her checkbook. Charlie came out of her funk very quickly after that, since she realized she would be shopping without having to look at price tags. It was her favorite way to shop, even if the items wouldn’t be hers. The pleasure was in the purchase, she believed, and once Jo informed them of the probable luncheon with the President, Charlie could barely be contained.

They pulled up to the apartment building where the favored penthouse was located, and piled out of the limo. Roberts led the way to the private elevator. He met Diaz just coming down.

“Roberts, I just tried to contact you,” Diaz urgently but silently pulled Roberts aside. He whispered something to Roberts, but Jo couldn’t hear what was being said.

“What’s going on, Jo,” Charlie walked up next to her. “Do we go up in this elevator?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what’s wrong. The man with Roberts is Diaz, his partner.”

“Can you hear what they are saying?” Alex asked as she, too, came closer to Jo.

Jo gave Alex a puzzled look. “Your ears work as well as mine do. Can you hear?” Jo laughed, and Alex smiled back.

“No, I suppose not,” she replied.

Just then, Roberts walked over to them, Diaz right behind him. His face was unreadable, but Jo could sense he was unhappy.

“Miss Becker, I don’t know how to tell you this,” he hesitated, as if trying to decide whether to go on. “Someone tried to break into the penthouse.”

## Chapter 20

Roberts and Diaz rushed the small group toward the elevator to the penthouse. Jo, confused, asked, “Why are we hurrying to the penthouse? Didn’t someone just try to break in? Is it safe?”

Roberts shook his head. “I apologize, Miss Becker. Your other penthouse was the target of the break-in. As far as we know, very few people knew about this penthouse belonging to Mr. Hartford since he had just recently purchased it before his death.”

Jo breathed a sigh of relief, and realized all her friends were doing the same. “So this penthouse is still secure.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Roberts replied. “There will always be two agents with you when you are here, but we secured access even when you aren’t.” Roberts pointed to a camera in the corner of the elevator as it rose to the top of the penthouse. “That camera records anyone entering this elevator.”

The elevator stopped at the top, and opened into the entryway revealing the two doors as before. “That camera records anyone leaving the elevator on this floor,” Roberts pointed to a camera across the hallway pointed at the elevator. “And that camera shows anyone trying to enter the penthouse.” Roberts indicated a third camera mounted on the wall adjacent to the penthouse doors. “No one can get into this hallway without us seeing them.”

“What about a fire escape? Is there a stairwell somewhere?” Sam thought to ask.

“There is a one-way exit from the terrace that connects to the fire escape on the side of the building, but it is locked from the inside, and it is, of course, watched as well. I will show you all in a moment, but first I believe Miss Becker wishes to give the Allen family a tour of the penthouse.”

“Yes! I want to see it!” Charlie pushed Jo to the door of the penthouse. “I can’t wait!”

“Me either,” Kyle said, right on their heels.

Jo laughed. “I don’t have the key. I can’t open it.”

Roberts nodded. “Miss Becker, you will always have someone with you, and therefore, will never need keys. The door will be opened for you by a member of your security team.”

“What about me?” Charlie asked, “If I’m living here with Jo, do I get keys? And some kind of access code to get on the elevator?”

“You will be issued keys, yes, Miss Allen. As for the elevator, it is keyed as well. No code is necessary.”

Jo pondered the information she knew about the apartment, and asked Roberts for clarification as he unlocked the door.

“Roberts, let me get this straight. No one knew about this penthouse, and the only keys to the apartment and elevator are in the hands of the security team and the concierge? No one else ever had keys? What about Mr. Hartford’s keys? Didn’t he have any?”

“No, Miss Becker. The work had just been finished on this apartment when Mr. Hartford died, remember. One of the things Mr. Hartford had done was to have all of the locks changed out, so he hadn’t received a set yet before he died. Even the elevator key was changed. Once the work was complete, all those workers left their keys with the concierge. Three complete sets. None are missing.”

Roberts flipped the light switches and ushered the group into the luxurious living room. Charlie caught her breath. She gasped as she took in the view. Though it was dark out by this

time, the lights of the city took her breath away. Then she rushed from one chair to the next, touching, sitting, feeling the comfort. Kyle headed straight for the remote for the entertainment system. He figured it out quickly, and said “Whoa!” as everything came into its place.

Sam took Brad into the study, and they occupied themselves while Kendra showed Mindy the kitchen. Charlie checked out each of the three bedrooms, then joined Alex and Jo on the terrace. Charlie squealed with delight over the spa and sauna.

“Jo, I can’t believe you own this place! And I can’t believe you want me to live here!” Charlie hugged Jo. “This is the best place I have seen, hands down. The home was lovely, of course, but I agree with you that the distance is a problem, but this is perfect.” Charlie waved her hand toward the city skyline. “Just gorgeous.”

The two mothers joined the three girls out on the terrace. Charlie’s mom hadn’t seen the view yet, and was just as thrilled as Charlie was with the amenities of the apartment.

“Jo, I can’t thank you enough for letting Charlie stay here. This is much more than we could have done for her. You are a blessing, Jo Becker.” She gave Jo a grateful hug. Charlie gave her another one as well.

Soon Kyle ventured out, followed by the two dads. Roberts walked over to a corner of the terrace and, after getting the group’s attention showed them an eight-foot wall that was actually a door. When opened, you could see it led to the fire escape that continued down into the heart of the building. He pointed out a camera mounted above the wall that would capture anyone using the door in either direction.

Brad turned to his wife with a smile. “I’m satisfied if you are, Mindy,” he told her. She returned his smile and then looked at Charlie and nodded.

“Yes! Yes!” Charlie hugged her parents. It seemed to Jo that everyone was grinning. It was a happy day all around.

Jo looked at Alex. Alex was smiling, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. She was sad, too. The three of them had always been together, and Jo wondered if Alex was feeling the separation already. She knew she was, but she was unsure if she even had the right to ask such a thing of Alex – to give up California and working with her parents and move three thousand miles away just so her friends wouldn’t miss her so much. Was it fair to Alex to ask her to do that? She had wanted to all afternoon. Then suddenly Jo thought of something. If Alex’s parents moved to New York, then Alex would too. What if she could get the Turners to move their business to New York? Jo got excited. It wouldn’t matter where a travel agency was located, really. All the business was done over the phone, to airlines and cruise companies. That might work. Also, what if her company, BeckFord, used a travel agency to book company travel? Couldn’t she request they use the Turners’ after they relocated? It was something she would look into immediately. Meanwhile, it was dark outside, and Mindy was already nudging her husband toward the door.

“I was wondering if I could have Charlie and her mom tomorrow? I need some help shopping, and I want the best,” Jo asked Brad. “I promise I won’t keep them more than all day,” she smiled.

“Of course, dear. We would love to help you obtain an appropriate wardrobe,” Mindy responded for herself and Charlie. “I think Kyle wanted his father to take him to a ball game while they were here anyway. It would work out perfectly.”

“Yes, that would be just fine,” Brad replied. “In fact, Sam, why don’t you join Kyle and me, and let all the ladies do their shopping thing?”

Alex’s dad let out a huge sigh of relief. “Phew, I thought you’d never ask!” Everyone laughed. Even Roberts chuckled a little.

Arrangements were made to pick up the Allen family at nine o'clock the next morning and the Allens left in the limo for their motel.

"Since I dragged you all here from California, it is my responsibility to put you up for the night," Jo stated to the three Turners after the Allen family left. "I was wondering if you would mind staying here, in the penthouse. There's plenty of room for all of us, and Roberts mentioned that room service will deliver breakfast in the morning."

Alex looked at her mom and dad to gauge their response, and seeing they were agreeable said, "This would be wonderful, Jo. We would love to stay here tonight."

Roberts saw that his charge and her companions were ready to turn in, so he quietly asked for a short meeting with her before he left. She followed him into the study, and he updated her on the break-in at the other penthouse.

"Apparently, someone had a set of keys to Mr. Hartford's penthouse that we were unaware of. It was reported that a woman used keys to access the elevator and was entering the exterior hallway when a team we had placed there noticed her. They searched the penthouse but didn't find her. She must have exited using the fire escape off of the terrace. The set up there is similar to this penthouse; however, there is no camera on the fire escape door. As far as we can tell, nothing was taken or disturbed. We don't know yet who she was or why she wanted in the apartment. We will continue monitoring to see if she returns."

Jo wasn't sure what to say, but she thanked him, he told her good night and left.

Jo and Alex gave the Turners the room with the extra large bathroom, then they each took one of the remaining rooms and settled in for the night. A few minutes later, Jo left her room and knocked on Alex's door. She couldn't stand it any longer; she needed to talk to Alex.

"Come in," Alex called.

Jo entered wearing a nightgown Charlie had helped her purchase back in California. "Alex, I need to talk to you," Jo began.

Alex smiled, and patted the bed next to her. Jo went and sat down, propping a pillow behind her and blurted out, "I want you to live here with Charlie and I." Alex's eyes danced. Jo realized instantly that Alex had been waiting for this, and rushed on.

"I know you want to go to college back home, and your parents are there, but I have a plan. I want your parents to move here, too. I figured that my company probably has to book a lot of travel for business things, since there are branches all over, and until your mom and dad got their business re-established, I would make sure they stayed busy."

Alex nodded. "I thought the same thing, Jo! And I know that most of bookings only require phone calls. That can be done from anywhere, even New York."

"So you're not mad at me for wanting you here? What about you being a hometown girl and all of that?"

"Well, so far, New York doesn't seem so imposing. Granted, a lot of that has to do with the armed escort, and the fact that I've been riding around in a limousine, but, I got to thinking about it, Jo. There are colleges in New York, and if my parents really have no desire to move here, I'm sure I have a friend in high places that can get me a menial job somewhere," Alex smiled at Jo.

Jo grinned back, then her eyes lit up and she gasped. "That's it! That's perfect!"

Alex sat up, "What? What is it?"

"You can be my personal assistant! They told me Tammy was a temporary one until I find the one I want. She could train you. You already have all the organizational skills and planning from working at the travel agency so long. You could do this easily."

Alex smiled. "I could, couldn't I? And then I could take night classes somewhere."

"I want to do that, too. I want to take as many business courses as I can. I have a lot to learn, and now I can actually afford to learn it."

Alex hugged Jo. "And I can live with you and Charlie here in the penthouse?" she asked.

"Of course, Alex! I want both of my best friends with me as much as possible. If you become my personal assistant we will be together all day every day, though. Will you get bored with me?" Jo asked worriedly.

"Probably," Alex responded with a laugh. "So then we take a day off or go do something fun, right? We will let Charlie be in charge of making our lives fun. She excels at that." They both laughed.

"Okay. We will talk to your parents in the morning. Then, if they are willing to do this, we can have Roberts take us to all the other properties I own and have them pick out a place to live."

"That's a great idea, except we are shopping tomorrow, remember."

"Hmm. I wonder if the guys can hit a few places before their game. Maybe we can ask."

"That might work. Although, you know, neither of the men would pick a place until his wife sees it," Alex pointed out.

Jo laughed. "They wouldn't dare, Alex. You are right. Okay, maybe we can look at some of them in between stores."

Alex nodded, "That would be the best idea."

Jo went back to her room then and climbed into the luxurious bed. She hadn't closed the blinds and could see lights all over the New York skyline. It was beautiful. She wondered if she would get any sleep at all since her excitement level was so high, but she drifted off quite quickly.

In the morning, Jo woke to the brightness of her surroundings temporarily forgetting where she was. The beauty of the room reminded her of her new life, however, and she showered quickly and dressed in the second business dressy outfit that Charlie had chosen for her back in California. She slipped on sensible shoes that would be easy to take off and on, considering she would be trying clothes on all day. She sighed. Shopping was not her favorite thing to do, but she knew it was necessary. Even if her entire wardrobe hadn't burnt up in the house fire, she would have had to go shopping today.

Out in the dining room, Jo found a menu placed standing up in the center of the table. She could hear Alex moving around when she passed her room, and thought she had heard the Turners talking as she passed theirs. She wandered into the kitchen to see what was in the fridge. She didn't expect to see Tammy sitting there.

"Oh," Jo exclaimed, startled. "Good morning, Tammy."

"Good morning, Miss Becker. Roberts let me in. I see you found the breakfast menu. I understand you will be doing shopping today? What time do you want me to have the limo ready?"

Alex joined Jo in the kitchen. "Alex, this is Tammy Reid, my personal assistant. Tammy, this is one of my two best friends, Alex Turner."

Tammy nodded at Alex. "It is nice to meet you Miss Turner." Alex nodded and smiled, then turned to Jo with her eyebrows lifted.

"Tammy is here to order our breakfast and call the limo to take us shopping," Jo informed her.

Alex could tell by the tone in her voice that Jo was uncomfortable with this. She leaned over and whispered, “Why can’t we do that ourselves?”

Jo whispered back, “I have no idea. I guess most rich people don’t know how to use a phone.” They giggled.

“Have you had a chance to look at the menu yet, Miss Becker?” Tammy interrupted the giggling girls, all businesslike.

“No, not yet, Tammy, but I was wondering how you would like to have the day off? I can call in the order myself, since the number is here on the menu. Besides, I know how to get hold of Roberts. He will bring the limo around, he told me, so why don’t you just take the day off today? I have my phone and will call you if I need help with anything.”

Tammy stared, astonished at Jo. “Are you sure that is wise, Miss Becker? It would be most inappropriate for you to do such things yourself considering your position.”

“What position?” Jo asked annoyed. “Three days ago I was a penniless, motherless girl. I’m just me, Tammy, and I want to stay just me. I consider us equals, so anything you can do, I can do, or I will learn to if I don’t know how.”

Tammy seemed unsure of herself. “I am glad you feel that way, Miss Becker. I have never met someone like you, though, and I’m not sure how to do my job because of it.” She stood up. “Please call me if you need assistance of any kind, Miss Becker. Thank you for the time off.” She left.

Jo watched her leave, troubled. “Alex, was I mean to her?”

“No, Jo. I think she just expected you to be a normal rich person, and treat her like a servant. She probably doesn’t know how to handle a person who wants to do things for themselves.”

Jo sighed. “I hope you’re right, and I hope you want her job. She makes me feel like a snob the way she talks to me, and you should have seen her reaction yesterday at the office when I asked her to call me Jo. She about had a fit.”

Alex grinned. “Yes, I can see how she would be disturbed by that, and yes, I can see why you want me to take her job. If you’re gonna have someone underfoot all the time, it might as well be a friend, right?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.” Jo nodded. “I would love to have Charlie work with us too, but I think she wants to do the full time college thing. It will be enough to have her share this place with us.” Jo looked around. “I still can’t believe this is mine.” She sighed happily.

“Let me see the menu, I need to order breakfast for us, Miss Becker,” Alex reached for the menu Jo was holding and avoided the playful punch Jo aimed at her arm.

“If you start calling me that, I will find embarrassing unimportant things for my ‘assistant’ to do for me. You don’t want to go there,” Jo warned playfully.

Alex laughed. “All right. It would feel weird anyway.”

The two girls looked over the menu as Alex’s parents appeared in the kitchen.

“Was there someone else here? We heard a voice we didn’t recognize.” Kendra asked.

“It was Jo’s personal assistant. Jo gave her the day off,” Alex grinned. “She will have plenty of assistance from Charlie.”

“Yeah, way too much assistance,” Jo grimaced.

The Turners laughed and Alex handed over the menu. A few minutes later, after inquiring of their choices, Alex’s mom placed a call and ordered breakfast for all four of them.

“Mom, Dad, can we go in the dining room to wait? I want to talk to you about something.”

Her parents looked at each other knowingly. “Yes, let’s go sit down,” her father agreed.

Once all four were seated, Alex opened her mouth to speak, but her dad interrupted her.

“Yes, Alex. We talked about it. We are okay with it,” he told her.

Alex, astonished, asked, “Okay with what?”

“With you living here in the penthouse with Jo and Charlie. Oh, and working with Jo at her company most likely, but we have one stipulation,” Kendra replied. “You must get a college education. If your day schedule doesn’t allow it, take night courses. Whichever you do is fine, as long as you keep at it.”

Alex and Jo both stared gaping at the Turners. “How did you know?” Alex finally asked her parents.

“Once we saw Charlie’s reaction, we knew you wouldn’t be happy until you were living here with them, Alex. It would be impossible to keep you apart from them. Besides that, since it had already come up about frequent visits home with Charlie, your father and I knew you would be more open to moving here with that available to you.”

“So you talked about letting me move here even before Jo asked me to?”

Kendra looked at Jo with a smile. “I knew it was only a matter of time before Jo decided she needed you at her side, Alex. You two are close, even more so than you are with Charlie. I knew she would be imploring you to move in. Especially since there are three bedrooms.”

Jo smiled. “You know me well. I have to admit. So,” she grinned mischievously, “what am I going to ask you next?”

Sam Turner looked at Jo, a little surprised. “You want us to move our business here to New York?”

Alex and Jo gasped. “No way! How could you know that?” Alex exclaimed.

Her mom laughed, and her dad just shook his head. “You were right, honey. I didn’t believe you, but you were right,” he said to his wife.

“I figured you would want us all nearby, honestly, Jo. This is a huge move you are making, and a difficult responsibility. Being surrounded by your friends is important. We all are your emotional support system. I realized you would want us and the Allens too, if we were willing to move here,” she explained.

“I didn’t believe her when she told me that,” Sam said. “I told her that you just needed your two best friends, and not to expect the request.” He was truly astonished.

“Thank you, Kendra, for knowing how much you mean to me. You have helped me through a lot, both you and Sam, and the Allens, and more than anything I want to be surrounded by people whom I love and trust. Alex and I discussed that since most of your business is telephone calls and Internet orders, it might not be too difficult for you to move.” Jo explained hopefully. “And finding a place to live would be a breeze. I have lots of places for you to choose from.” Jo smiled.

Kendra gazed amazed at Jo. “Okay, that one I didn’t expect. You are offering us a place to live? Just pick whichever one we want?”

Jo nodded, “Well, except for this one. Charlie, Alex and I called dibs on it first,” she retorted.

The Turners laughed, and a buzzing came from the intercom. A waiter from the downstairs restaurant wanted access to deliver their food. Just as Jo was going to buzz them in, Roberts’ image appeared in the intercom screen.



“Miss Becker, I’m sorry to interrupt, but we aren’t in the habit of letting anyone we haven’t thoroughly checked out into the suites. It would be better if you allow one of the security agents to go down and retrieve the order. Maids and room service personnel are the most obvious disguise for a suspect, so unless they have been checked out, or unless you know them personally, we don’t allow anyone upstairs. This is standard protocol.”

Jo, taken aback, replied, “I see. I suppose you are right, Roberts. I’m sorry for not asking you. Yes, do whatever you would normally do here. I really don’t care how I get the food, we just want to eat,” she laughed.

Roberts told her it would be taken care of, and he disappeared off of the screen. Jo went back to the table and sat down. A few minutes later, Diaz entered with a rolling cart containing several trays of food.

While they ate their breakfast, Jo continued her conversation with Alex’s parents. They agreed to consider seriously her offer, and went so far as to consent to look at all the other places they hadn’t seen yet, to choose one to possibly live in. After eating, Jo found the phone Tammy had given her, and pressed the star button to call Roberts.

“Is this the best way to get hold of you?” she asked him when he answered his phone.

“Yes, Miss Becker. Or you can use the intercom system if you are inside the penthouse, but this will reach one of the team always.”

“Okay. I wanted to tell you what I wanted to do today, so you can get the cars ready or whatever you have to do.”

“Thank you, Miss Becker. I appreciate being able to plan ahead.”

Jo considered that. She hadn’t thought about Roberts’s responsibility from his side before. It made sense that the security team had to know her plans. She filled him in on the guests and shopping. She asked if there was a second limo the men could use, and was informed it would be sent to the Allen’s motel. The men and women would separate then.

Roberts knocked on the penthouse door fifteen minutes before nine. Jo opened the door knowing it had to be one of the security team. No one else had access yet.

“I was wondering if you ever get to sleep,” Jo commented to Roberts as he entered the apartment. “You were with me all day yesterday until I went to bed, and now you are here again.”

Roberts smiled. “I assure you I slept last night. While you were sleeping, Thomas and O’Brian were watching the monitors. Diaz and I slept in the apartment down the hall. Since you will be out so long today, there will be four agents escorting you. I will be with you in the limo, the others you probably won’t see very much.”

Roberts went to a small panel on the other side of the doorway from the intercom. He called Jo over. “Miss Becker, I need to show you how to work the security system. Most of the time, the agent escorting you will arm or disarm the alarm system. However, it would be good for you to know how to use it if there comes a time when you need to. It is simply a door and window system, since the elevator and stairs access is already covered. Press this button here to arm,” Roberts pointed to a button with a closed door symbol on it, “and this button here to turn it off.” Roberts indicated a button that showed an open door. “You have to enter a four-digit code after pressing the unarm button. I wrote the code down on a card for you to memorize.” Roberts handed her a business-sized card with a number on the back.

“But why do we even need it if no one can get up here?” she asked.

“It is just another level of security, Miss Becker.”

Jo sighed. “All right, but I think it’s unnecessary since no one can get in the outside hallway without three separate cameras seeing them.” She took the card and tucked it under the water tray of a potted plant that sat directly beneath the alarm panel. “I will never remember that number, but I will remember where I put it if I ever need it,” she smiled.

Roberts frowned but said nothing about it, and escorted the group down the elevator. He hoped the girl was right, but his instincts told him that all the security in the world would be needed to keep Miss Becker safe.

## Chapter 21

As the small group exited the elevators, a tall, distinguished looking gentleman approached them. Jo looked up at Roberts, to see his reaction. She knew that if he were frowning then the man would be considered a threat. Roberts had no expression at all. He noticed Jo watching him, however, and spoke. “That is Mr. Masterson. He was Mr. Hartford’s attorney.”

Jo looked back at the man who had almost reached them. He seemed very businesslike. He was not smiling.

“Roberts, nice to see you again,” the man said. He saw Roberts’s stance and realized Jo was the person the agent had to be protecting. “Miss Becker, I presume?” He held his hand out to Jo. She shook it and nodded. The man was intimidating.

“I am Mr. Masterson. I was Mr. Hartford’s personal attorney and confidant. He discussed everything with me before he implemented it, and I was his sounding board for new projects he wished to pursue. I would be happy to help you in this transition phase to settle into your new life. Since I know all about the company, from its inception, I would be honored to help you achieve the same success he obtained.” He handed her a business card. “I will be at the ten o’clock meeting Monday morning, and look forward to resuming my role at BeckFord. I could even take the meeting for you, if you were to find the business aspect too dull, my dear. Just let me know. I am at your beck and call.”

Jo thanked him politely, and breathed a sigh of relief when he was gone. “Roberts, who is he in the company, and do I really have to work with him? He seems creepy.”

“He was Mr. Hartford’s right hand man. He labored alongside Mr. Hartford for the past six years at least, giving suggestions and guidance. He is an astute businessman, to be sure. However, I’m not so sure he would be the best match for your personal attorney.” Roberts put Jo and the Turners into the waiting limousine, and sat in back with them for the ride to the Allen’s motel.

“I have to have a personal attorney?” Jo asked once they were on their way.

“Yes. BeckFord, of course, has a team of lawyers working in their legal department, but you will need one that works just for you, that makes sure that when decisions are made, they are in your best interest, not just the company’s.”

“And that is what Mr. Masterson did for Mr. Hartford?” Jo asked.

“Among other things, yes. Mr. Masterson oversaw the purchases of all the homes, the jet and the yacht. Basically, anything that involved money or power, Mr. Masterson advised him on.”

Alex looked at Jo. “The yacht?” she exclaimed.

Jo just shrugged. There was too much to take in.

“Why do you think he wouldn’t be a good personal attorney for me, Roberts? Was he inefficient?”

Roberts shook his head. “No, quite the contrary, he did his job well. I wonder, however, if he would be willing to let you do yours.”

Jo looked at him puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Mr. Masterson was so good at advising that the last few months Mr. Hartford didn’t even go into the office very often. He let Mr. Masterson run the company. I’m wondering if the power and prestige he gained from that position would make Mr. Masterson bully you into letting him continue as the head.”

“You mean like the comment he said before he left, that I can skip the meeting and let him handle it?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” agreed Roberts. “He commented to Director Johnson that he was sure you would be open to letting him head up the meetings once you realized how little there was to do at the office. He hinted that your time would be best served spending money and enjoying your newfound wealth.”

Jo pondered that information. “I see. He’s good at his job and knows it, and doesn’t think anyone else can do it as well as he does.”

Roberts nodded. He liked this girl. She truly understood the complex adult interactions that most people her age still insist do not exist.

“Thank you for your opinion.” She hesitated. “How hard would it be to fire him and get a different attorney?” she asked.

Roberts smiled. “Impossible, since he is not hired.”

Jo grinned. “He isn’t currently my lawyer?”

Roberts shook his head. “Mr. Masterson’s contract was with Mr. Hartford, not BeckFord Corporation. Correct me if I am wrong, but the last time I checked, you already had a lawyer, Miss Becker.”

Jo’s eyes lit up, and she smiled. “Yes, yes I do!” She sighed relieved. “Now if only I can convince him to stay.”

Alex laughed. “Jo, you don’t know Mindy very well, do you? By now, she has the drape colors picked out for their new New York apartment she has yet to convince her husband to buy. There’s no way she would let Charlie move here permanently without a plan to join her. She has always wanted to live in New York, so letting Charlie move here was part of her long-term goal. I bet she already found a school for Kyle.”

Jo glanced at Alex puzzled. “I never got any indication from them that they wanted to move here, Alex. Are you sure?” she asked hopefully.

“I could tell from our talks yesterday at the condo and the mansion that she wished with all her heart they were moving instead of Charlie,” Kendra interjected. “She loved the mansion especially. She talked about how wonderful it would be to entertain there.”

“Wow,” Jo sat back in the limo seat, stunned. “I was so involved in the newness of everything that I was totally oblivious to everyone else.” She looked up at Alex’s parents. “Which home did you like best?” she asked, grinning.

Kendra looked at Sam, but answered cautiously. “We haven’t agreed to move here yet, Jo, but both the other penthouse and the mansion are too much for us. We would prefer something much simpler.”

Roberts couldn’t help overhearing the conversation, since he was sitting in the back with them, and told Jo, “If you like, I can arrange a house tour for both the Turners and Allens tomorrow, or even this afternoon. We can visit the other two homes and the six condos that you have not yet seen all in one day, and show the Allens the other penthouse of course, since they had not yet toured it,” Roberts offered.

Jo looked at the Turners, and Kendra nodded. “Okay, Roberts, we accept, and, thank you.”

When the limo pulled up to the motel where the Allens were staying, they saw a second limo was already parked outside. Charlie came out and giddily jumped into the vehicle with Jo and Alex. Sam got out going with the men.

“Wait!” Jo stopped him. “Before you leave let’s all figure out where to meet somewhere for lunch.”

“Good idea,” Mindy agreed as she got into the limo with the other females. “Let’s meet at the ‘Le Train Bleu’ inside Bloomingdale’s at one o’clock. Just tell the driver, he will get you there.” She smiled and climbed into the limo. Alex and Jo looked at each other and grinned. Mindy was definitely in her element. Moving the Allens to New York was going to be a piece of cake!

Jo was taken from one department store to the next, forced to try on an army of outfits, and honestly cared for very few of them. Charlie and her mother picked out things Jo considered flashy and fake. They were dressy and businesslike, but she tried on whatever they handed her, with Alex’s help. Kendra found more sensible items, the everyday things that Jo also needed to replace. Designer jeans, sensible tops, comfortable shoes. Those she enjoyed trying on, and kept many of them.

By noon, Jo was exhausted. Charlie and her mom were chattering nonstop about where to go next as they all piled in the limo. Since it was close to the time they were meeting the men, they headed for Bloomingdale’s. Jo was herded to the ladies business section where once again she tried on outfit after outfit. She kept a close eye on her watch. Once it was a quarter to one she called it quits and suggested they head to the sixth floor for lunch. Both Mindy and Charlie were surprised that time had passed so quickly. They were having such a good time!

The five women entered the restaurant not sure what to expect. Jo hadn’t considered making a reservation, and when she saw the host at the door with a book, she wondered if it was a bad idea.

“Becker party of nine,” Jo said, including Roberts who was walking with them. Roberts touched her shoulder and shook his head. He couldn’t properly watch the people in the room at her table, he whispered in her ear, and would stand at the side of the room. “I’m sorry, party of eight,” she corrected to the maitre’d.

“Yes, I have your table ready,” he replied. Astonished, Jo looked at her friends and saw Mindy’s smile.

“I remembered that we needed a reservation, so I made the call while we were shopping,” she explained.

“I should have thought of that,” Alex commented. She had a lot to learn if she was going to take the assistant’s position for Jo.

They were led to a table where Kyle and the two men were already seated. They all quickly sat and began browsing the menu. Kendra looked at the price list and whistled.

“Expensive place,” she whispered to Alex. Jo heard her though, and spoke up.

“This is my party, so lunch is on me. Order whatever you want.” Jo beamed. She had always wanted to be able to say that, so on impulse, she did. There were advantages to having money, she decided.

Their waiter came around and took their orders. Once he left, Jo asked the men how their day had been so far.

“There were no games playing today that looked interesting. We will have to catch one another time.”

“So what did you do all morning?” she asked curiously.

“We went on a ferry to the Statue of Liberty,” Kyle told them excitedly. “It was awesome!” He went into some details of the history of the landmark that he had learned from his tour.

“I’m so glad you got to do that, honey,” Mindy ruffled Kyle’s hair. He frowned. He hated it when she did that. Charlie, Jo and Alex giggled. His expression was priceless.

Jo cleared her throat. “There’s something I need to talk about,” she began. She looked directly at Charlie’s dad. “Brad, you are my attorney, right?”

Brad looked up, startled. “I was, yes, Jo. I helped you finalize everything I could back at home. Is there something else you need; some advice perhaps? I would be happy to help if I can.”

Jo grinned mischievously. “Are you positive you are still willing to help me?”

Brad nodded. “Of course, Jo. I will do anything I can for you.”

Jo’s eyes twinkled. “Great!” She handed him a list of properties she owned that she had gotten from Roberts. “These are all the homes and condos I own currently. I was wondering if you could check them each out, with the exception of the home and condo you’ve already seen, and of course the penthouse that us girls are sharing. Since you three men have nothing to do this afternoon, Diaz will accompany you with keys to all the homes.”

Brad looked puzzled. “Okay, Jo, I can do this, but why do you want them checked out?”

Jo tried hard to keep a straight face as she answered, “So that you can choose one of them to live in.”

Jo heard Charlie and Mindy gasp. Brad just stared. “I’m not sure I follow you, Jo.”

“You agreed to help me, and give me advice right?” she asked.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I assumed you needed help with something we could discuss now.”

Jo held her breath. This was the moment of truth. “I’ve been informed that I am required to retain the services of a lawyer to manage my personal affairs; someone I would trust to look after my interests and advise me on company matters as well.” Jo paused. “Brad, you were my lawyer in California, and I would like you to continue in that role, here in New York.”

Kyle whooped and Mindy and Charlie stood up and hugged each other, jumping up and down. Attorney Bradley Allen looked at his family, and at his friends. He looked into Jo’s face and saw both the hope and the vulnerability she was openly displaying, and he realized she was serious.

He sighed heavily. “I can see my family is thrilled with your offer, Jo, but I need to think before I make a decision. I have my practice back in California to consider, and all my clients there.”

“You know good and well you can transfer those clients to your partners, Dad,” Charlie reprimanded him. “I remind you that Jo is your client, too, and she needs you.”

Brad was taken aback by that remark. He hadn’t considered the matter in that way, but his daughter was right. Jo needed him.

“And I know for a fact that you are accredited in New York as well as California, because of that large firm you handled two years ago that was headquartered in New York,” his wife reminded him.

“All right. We accept,” he stated blankly. He was still in shock, but knew it was the right thing to do. It was obvious by the way his family was celebrating at his statement that they were one hundred percent behind the decision, but he didn’t see Jo until she was at his side.

Jo put her arms around his shoulder and gave him a sideways hug. Very quietly, she said, “Thank you. This means so much to me.” There were tears in her eyes.

“How can I say no to my favorite client?” He smiled and stood up. He gave her a proper hug. “When do I report for work, Miss Becker?”

Jo frowned. "I'm not sure I like you calling me that. I have to put up with it from a lot of people already."

Brad smiled. "How about Jo away from work, and Miss Becker at the office? Will that work for you?"

Jo grinned. "Perfect!" she exclaimed as she went back to her seat. "I met my Board of Directors yesterday, and our first meeting is Monday morning at ten o'clock. That is when I need you. It will be nice to know I have a friend in the room. From what I understand, Mr. Hartford had his lawyer with him in the meetings most of the time. It would be great for you to be there from the start."

Brad nodded. "I will be there." He picked up the list of properties. "Now about this; I'm sure from the amount you will be paying me that I will be able to afford my own place very quickly," he winked.

"But why bother? Let Mindy spend all your money like she does now." Jo smiled and everyone at the table laughed, Mindy included. "They are all empty, ready for occupancy. You can even keep your home in California as it is. I personally recommend the other penthouse. It's very close to the business area, and very nice

Mindy glanced quickly at her husband. "Why don't I go look at the homes with you this afternoon? Charlie can handle helping Jo with the shopping," she suggested.

Kendra added, "Actually, I need to come, too, since we are most likely moving as well."

Brad and Mindy looked at the Turners in pleasant surprise. "Well I see our Jo is moving her entire support system to New York with her," Brad laughed.

Jo grinned. "That was the idea!"

Just then their lunch was served. Each guest raved about the wonderful food as they dined.

Jo looked around the table at her wonderful friends. She was bursting with happiness to see how much they cared for her, willing to change their lives to help her along with hers. Jo missed her mother terribly just then, but she carried her mother in her heart, and knew that her mother would be thrilled with all of her decisions thus far. Having both the Allen and Turner families close would have been exactly what her mother would have wanted for her inexperienced daughter.

Jo thought back to the oak tree in the park back home. She remembered the vision from far away; when all the beautiful green leaves hid the twisted ugly scarred branches beneath it. She felt as if she were popping leaves out all over her body today, displaying her character. She had the Turner and Allen families to thank for it. Yes, she was happy. As much as she missed her mother, she had to admit that life was good.

Suddenly Jo saw Roberts headed quickly towards her. He got to the table seconds before a tall thin woman, dressed flashily and with an extraordinary amount of makeup on, accosted the group.

"I heard that Miss Becker of BeckFord Financial was at this table," she rudely stated. She looked each one over, disdain apparent in her glance. Her gaze settled on Mindy, who was the best dressed in the group. "You are Miss Becker, correct?"

Mindy laughed. "No, I am Mrs. Allen. I believe you have the wrong table."

The woman seemed perturbed. "I was told by the Maitre' D himself that Miss Becker was at this table. Which one of you is Miss Becker?"

Roberts spoke up. "What business do you wish with Miss Becker?"

The astute woman noticed Roberts for the first time. He was unimportant to her before he spoke, so she had ignored him. However, she saw the protective manner he had toward an average looking girl in dull clothing. She sighed.

“I have much to do, Miss Becker, to get you ready for your position in the company.” The woman walked around the table toward Jo. She reached for Jo’s arm, to pull her up from the table. “Come, we have work to do.”

Before she could touch her, however, Jo jumped up away from the woman. “Who are you, and what do you want?” she asked frightened. She was standing halfway behind Roberts now, with the woman on the other side.

The woman glared back at Jo, stunned. “You do not know who I am? How could you not know me? I am Maricela Zayden, premier shopper to all the rich and famous of New York. No one moves in the city without being attired in something I selected, and now I must make you over into a woman of wealth and power. Come, come. Let us get started.” The woman held out her long slim arm and gestured to Jo.

Jo looked at the arm reaching for her as if it were a snake. She moved further back, and Roberts’ stance became solid. The bold woman tried to step around Roberts, but he did not let her pass.

“I do not need your help Ms. Zayden, thank you. My friends are very efficient in choosing my wardrobe for me. If I ever need your help I will have my assistant call you.” Jo gave a frightened look toward Alex and Alex made a mental note to never ever need this woman’s assistance.

“Miss Becker, Mr. Hartford always had me select his wardrobe. In fact I was at his penthouse once a week to instruct him on which outfit to wear for each event on his schedule. You cannot honestly think that your--,” the woman paused and looked around at the people at the table as if they were leprous. “It is not possible for your simpleton friends to do what I will do for you, Miss Becker. Come, you are wasting my time.”

Again the woman tried to get around Roberts to Jo, and again, Roberts blocked her progress. By this time, Diaz was at her side, and Michaels and Davis were behind the intruder.

“I do not require your services, Ms. Zayden. I will contact you if I do, however I do not expect in the remotest corners of my mind that that will ever happen.” Jo dismissed the rude, obnoxious woman.

Maricela Zayden turned with a huff to leave the table, and ran into the two security agents. “This way to the exit,” Davis informed her, and firmly took her arm. Michaels took the other arm, and the woman was escorted out of the restaurant, loudly demanding to be released. Jo smiled at her discomfort.

Mindy turned to their waiter standing nearby and requested that he bring the Maitre’ D to the table. The gentleman appeared as requested, and Mindy spoke.

“Are you in the habit of giving out the names of customers who are dining in your establishment?” she demanded angrily. “Is this something you do on a regular basis, or is Miss Becker the only one to have received your total lack of professionalism?”

The startled restaurant manager hastened to apologize. “I am so sorry, ma’am. I had no idea she was not a friend of Miss Becker’s. Madam Zayden was with Mr. Hartford many times at my humble restaurant. It was an honest mistake, ma’am, I assure you. I did not know that Miss Becker had not yet hired Madam Zayden as her wardrobe consultant.” The manager was stumbling over his words by this time.



Jo, though frightened by the experience, suddenly lit up. She smiled broadly, “It’s all right. Apology accepted.” He left bowing, and thanking her.

“What are you smiling about, girl?” Alex asked her puzzled. “I didn’t see anything funny in what just happened.”

“Nothing funny, Alex. I just got an answer to a riddle I had been trying to solve.”

“What was the answer?” Alex asked.

“What was the riddle?” Charlie on the other side asked at the same time.

Jo looked from Alex to Charlie. “It’s quite simply, really,” she said to Charlie. “I had been trying to find a position for you, Charlie, to work for me, and now I have it. You started already; I just didn’t know it was a paid position until now.”

“What are you blabbering about, Jo? Spit it out in plain English.” Charlie demanded exasperated.

Alex gasped. “Yes! It’s perfect! You are right, Jo. That is the ideal position for Charlie.”

Charlie glared at Alex. “Just tell me!” She ordered.

Jo turned to Charlie and said, “You are my Wardrobe Consultant, Charlie, and I didn’t even know that job existed!”

Charlie’s face lit up and she gasped. “Do you mean it? I get paid for helping you shop and pick out which outfit to wear?” Charlie hugged Jo. “Yes, I accept! It is the most perfect job in the world!”

Jo and Alex laughed. Charlie was ecstatic. Jo looked around. She was surrounding herself with her friends, forming a tight-knit group that she could depend on. She sighed happily. She knew it was selfish to want them all to be near her, but she couldn’t help it. She needed these wonderful friends to help her get through each frightening new experience and she was very glad that they had all agreed to be there for her.

Jo sighed. Now if only she wasn’t constantly aware that someone was trying to kill her...

## Chapter 22

The three girls waved goodbye to all the parents and Kyle. Kyle wanted to help choose the house they would be moving into, so he went with his parents. Charlie hauled Jo and Alex back to the stores.

“You are going to look like a successful businesswoman if it’s the last thing I do!” she declared vehemently as they entered another store.

Jo wondered how many outfits she really needed. After all, they had purchased a dozen or so business suits already, but Jo was even more amazed when Charlie pulled her into the designer gown section of the store.

“You need three formal gowns and four cocktail dresses immediately. We won’t get more than that because you will buy more next month.”

“Next month?” Jo asked, stunned. “Why can’t I buy more now and be done with it?”

“If you buy too many they will be out of style,” Charlie explained.

“Then why isn’t four enough? How many dinners and parties will I be attending anyway? I can only wear one dress at a time, Charlie.”

Charlie sighed, exasperated. “Jo, you cannot wear the same dress twice, ever. It’s just not done. People will be watching you, taking your picture. They will comment on the repeat dress as if it is shabby the second time around.”

Jo was confused about all the new rules she would have to abide by to fit into this new society. It seemed rather wasteful to her, Jo realized. After pinching pennies for her entire life, she was now supposed to spend – how much? She looked at the price tag on the nearest dress and almost fainted. “Charlie this dress is twelve thousand dollars. That is almost as much as my mom made an entire year at the supermarket, and you want me to buy four of these for a one-time use? What do I do with it after I wear it the one time?” She asked sarcastically, “Am I supposed to throw it away?”

Charlie sighed. Jo had a lot to learn. “Jo, there are many shops that take dresses worn only once. In fact, that’s probably where I will buy the gowns that I will wear, since I won’t be able to afford these.”

Jo turned sharply and looked at Charlie. “Why aren’t you getting some of these?” Jo turned to Alex. “And you too! You guys will be with me constantly, especially you, Alex. You need to be just as well dressed as I am.”

“I don’t have any money, Jo. You just hired me last night, remember,” Alex grinned. “I haven’t gotten an advance on my salary.”

“Same here, Jo. As willing as we are to help you get set up, we are not able to do the same for ourselves until we are officially hired. Besides, Alex and I didn’t lose every stitch of clothing we own in a fire.” Charlie reminded her softly.

Jo looked from one friend to the other. She put one arm around each of them. “The way I see it is this: You two are like sisters to me. We are best friends, and soon roommates. I refuse to allow you to buy a wardrobe befitting your new social requirements out of your not-yet-earned salaries. How about you each find three gowns to go with your wardrobe, and three business outfits, and I will pay for them with the things I am buying.” Jo sighed, relieved that her friends now had to endure the endless trying on, too. “Misery loves company,” she muttered as she grinned at her friends.

Charlie and Alex stared at her, eyes wide, mouth gaping. “You want to buy us clothes, too?” Charlie stuttered.

“You guys are going to have to attend parties and social events with me. Where I go, you have to go. Consider it part of your job. The wardrobe will be one of the benefits.” Jo grinned, happy to have found a solution. She saw out of the corner of her eye that Michaels was really enjoying the discomfort of the two friends. Jo thought she also detected satisfaction in Michaels’ gaze towards herself. Good. She wasn’t the only one who thought this was a good thing.

The rest of the afternoon was a flurry of visits to the changing rooms in one exclusive shop after another. When Charlie finally told Jo that she had enough for today, Jo collapsed in a chair relieved. “I never knew shopping was so tiring,” she told Alex who had collapsed beside her. Alex nodded. Then they both looked at Charlie who was bustling around picking up hangers and dropped clothing. She was humming as she worked. Jo and Alex both laughed until their sides hurt.

“Charlie, sweetie, I think the store people will do that.” Alex told her.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Charlie continued humming and straightening. Soon a store employee came back and shooed her away, and the three girls went to finalize their purchases.

“Was there anywhere else you wished to go today, Miss Becker?” Davis asked as he put her into the limo. Davis and Michaels had relieved Roberts for the afternoon, and Diaz was accompanying the parents on their house hunting expedition.

“I think we want to go back to our place,” she told him. “We might need a nap.”

“Uh-huh,” Alex agreed. “I might not even get that far,” she said, sliding down into the limo seat and closing her eyes.

Charlie looked at the two girls disgusted. “You two are a bunch of wimps. I can’t believe that just a little shopping can wipe you out.”

“I believe that part of the position of Wardrobe Consultant is that I don’t have to go with you anymore,” Jo hopefully suggested.

Charlie had to laugh at that. “All right. I paid attention to which you liked and didn’t like, and I know your sizes now, in almost every brand, so I suppose I can do most of your shopping alone now.”

“Great!” Jo smiled. She would have leapt up and done a cheer but she was too tired, so she gave Charlie a thumbs up.

Once at the apartment building, the doorman met their limo. Michaels made arrangements for all the purchases to be brought up, and they headed for the elevator. Dalton, the concierge that Jo had met the day before, intercepted them.

“Miss Becker. How do you like your apartment? Is there anything I can do to make it more comfortable for you?”

Jo looked at the man. She hadn’t decided if he was a kiss-up or a sincere man yet, so she gave him the benefit of the doubt. “It is lovely, Dalton. I’m sure I will want some changes made, but it’s too soon to worry about that. These are my friends Charlie and Alex. They will be living with me in the apartment.” Jo introduced her companions. “Who do I talk to about getting them keys and access codes, or whatever they need, to come and go as they please?”

“Actually,” Davis interrupted their conversation, “Roberts will want to handle that, Miss Becker. He wants to keep track of each set of keys made so that he is aware where they are at all times. For security reasons.”

Jo nodded, “Of course. I hadn’t thought of that.” She turned again to Dalton. “If I do think of something I will let you know.” He bowed to her and they entered the waiting elevator.

Davis unlocked her door and entered; disengaging the alarm system, then wished them a good evening and left for the small apartment down the hall.

“What’s that thing?” Charlie asked.

“Alarm system,” Alex told her. They walked over to look at it. Alex pulled the small card that Jo had hid under the planter out. “We need to memorize this number so that we can turn it off or on,” she informed Charlie. “I think the security agents will be doing it for Jo. She’s so spoiled.” Jo grinned and Charlie laughed.

Jo and Alex collapsed in one of the deep, fluffy sofas in the living area. Jo laid her head back and closed her eyes, glad to be relaxing. Soon they heard Charlie wandering around the apartment.

“Which bedroom will be mine?” she asked as she came back into the living room.

Jo shrugged. “It doesn’t matter to me,” she said, and looked at Alex. Alex too shrugged.

“Right now Jo and I are in the ones on the right side of the hallway, and my parents slept in the one with the giant bathroom on the left. You can have that one if you want.”

Charlie’s face lit up. “Really? Are you sure?” She waited for a response, and they both nodded at her. “That’s the one I really wanted, but I didn’t want to ask.” She beamed at Jo. “It has an automated closet! You can move a conveyer around and it changes the location of the clothes on the rack!” Charlie headed back into that room, excited.

“Did you notice it?” Alex asked Jo.

“Nope,” she replied. “Guess it wasn’t something I would have noticed anyway,” she smiled.

Alex grinned. “Me neither.”

Charlie came back in to ask some other questions. Which days are laundry days? When does the cleaning lady come? What time of day are the hampers emptied? Are the girls responsible for the dishes, or does a maid do them? How often is the spa water changed?

Jo looked at Charlie dumbfounded. Charlie knew about so much more of her new life than Jo did. She just had to ask, “Charlie, did it concern you when you realized there wasn’t a washer and dryer here?”

Charlie looked back at Jo, puzzled. “Why would a penthouse need a washer and dryer? People who own places like this have other people to do that for them,” Charlie pointed out.

Jo just sighed. Charlie knew so much more than she did. It was a good thing she had convinced her to stay with her. Though it didn’t take much convincing, Jo remembered, smiling.

Alex filled Charlie in on the cleaning schedule that Roberts told them about. “In the hamper and it gets taken. I don’t know what happens if you leave items on the floor,” Alex finished.

“The maid probably folds it and puts it on a chair,” Charlie guessed.

“Is anyone hungry?” Jo asked.

Alex looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost six o’clock. “Should we find out if the parents are done house-hunting yet?” she suggested.

Charlie sat up. “I want to see the other penthouse. I know you said it wasn’t as nice, but I would bet that that’s the one my mom will choose.”

“Call your mom and find out where they are now,” Jo said. She didn’t specify to whom she was speaking, so both Alex and Charlie whipped out their phones and started dialing. Jo laughed.

“Hello, Mom?” Charlie spoke into her phone.

“Hey, Mom, where are you guys at?” Alex asked her mother.

Jo grinned as both girls received identical information. She knew any second that both would blurt out the group's location at the same time.

"They are just pulling up out front," Charlie said.

"They are finished and almost here," Alex said at the same time.

"Great," Jo smiled. "It will be interesting to hear about the other places I own. I only saw four of them, you know."

"I know, Jo, I was with you," Alex laughed.

Jo smiled. "Oh, yeah." She pointed at Alex. "Hey, Assistant-type person, call downstairs to Dalton and have a dinner menu sent up." Alex crossed her arms and glared at Jo. Jo smiled meekly, and added, "Please?"

Alex laughed. "That's better." She headed for the phone.

Soon the room was full of people as Diaz escorted the group into the penthouse. The mothers were both talking about the differences in the kitchens at each location, and the men were discussing the distance to workplaces. Sam had seen an empty commercial building right on a main street that would be ideal for his travel agency to move into. He had even jotted down the phone number on the 'For Lease' sign.

"Well," Jo asked as everyone calmed down, "what's the verdict? Will you all move here and help me settle into my new role of being rich and famous?" Jo tried to laugh it off, but everyone knew she was actually quite terrified of her new responsibilities.

Brad smiled. "You already had my answer, Jo, and I do believe your comment that we would like the other penthouse was prophetic. Mindy loved it, although we were wondering if you would mind if we redecorated it a bit."

"Wonderful!" Jo responded. "And yes, do whatever you want to it. That marble countertop was beautiful, but it made the kitchen so dark."

"Oh, that will be fixed by painting the cabinets white," Mindy had obviously begun redecorating in her mind.

Jo beamed. "I'm so glad you want it. I will even pay for the paint. Just pick out the color and send the bill to..." Jo hesitated. Who handled the cash? "I think Alex will be handling my bills. She just doesn't know it yet."

"Oh, great," Alex responded, but she was smiling.

"What position will Alex hold, Jo?" Brad asked her.

"She is going to be my Personal Assistant. A girl named Tammy is doing it now, but I don't think she likes me very much. She almost treats me as if I'm stupid, and if I'm going to spend sixteen hours a day with someone ordering me around, I would much rather it be Alex."

"That's a good idea, Jo! And Alex has all that experience from working at the travel agency. She already knows about scheduling and organizing, and booking flights for all the business trips you will be taking." Mindy complimented Jo on her choice.

"Which place did you like best, Kendra?" Jo asked next.

Kendra looked at Sam. "We liked the condo on the beach that you showed us yesterday the best, I think. It is not too far from the city, and the view is gorgeous."

"Great!" Jo said. "So you agree to move?"

"Yes," she smiled. "We agree to be sucked into your new life, Jo."

Jo and Alex both laughed.

"We did like your grandparents' home, Jo. You really should go see it some day. It has been empty since their death, apparently." Sam commented.

Jo agreed that she would like to see it. It dawned on her then that Kyle had been quiet since they all returned. She wondered if something was wrong.

“Kyle? What did you think of all the homes? Did you like the penthouse?”

Kyle looked up, surprised that someone was talking to him. Jo realized instantly that he felt left out.

“It was okay, I guess. The TV isn’t as nice as this one, and it doesn’t have a pool table, but it’s an okay place,” he replied nonchalantly.

“Did you like any of the other homes better?” she questioned him.

He thought for a moment, and then shook his head. “No. Most of the condos were totally empty, and boring. The only one that was near the beach was the one we saw yesterday. The other houses were okay but really too big, and I was afraid I was going to break something every time I walked through a door,” he grinned. Everyone in the room laughed.

“You can come over here anytime you want and use the pool table,” she told him. “Or just come over to visit.”

Kyle seemed to brighten at her suggestion. “Okay, thanks, Jo. I will, as long as it’s okay with my parents.” Kyle had seen the raised eyebrows his dad was giving him.

Jo laughed, “Nice save, Kyle.” He grinned back.

A chime sounded at the door, and Dalton’s face appeared on the little screen. “I have the menus you requested, Miss Becker. Shall I bring them up?”

Jo walked over to the intercom and pressed the blue button. “Yes please, Dalton, and thank you.” She pressed the green button to send him the elevator, even though she knew he had a key. A second later, Agent Davis’s face appeared on the display.

“Miss Becker, I know you have met Dalton and he is cleared to enter the apartment. Just make sure that you personally know the person you are allowing to enter. No delivery people, no maids, and no chauffeurs – no one that we haven’t cleared unless he or she is a personal friend is allowed to enter the elevator. I just wanted to remind you of that. After you order your meal, if a waiter from the downstairs restaurant tries to deliver your food, you have to decline. This is very serious.”

Jo was startled at first by his quick appearance on the screen. “Okay, Davis. Thank you for the reminder. I wouldn’t have thought about the waiter.”

“That’s why we are here,” Davis replied with a smile. “After you place your order, why don’t you all come next door to the security suite, and I will show you what we do from here,” Davis suggested.

Jo looked around to see if anyone beside herself wanted to go. It looked to her as if each one was either nodding or saying it was a good idea, so she agreed. “I will call the star button on the phone when we are ready. Or is there a direct intercom to you?” Jo had been pushing the blue button to respond each time, since she didn’t know what else to do. She wondered vaguely if that meant someone in the lobby could hear their conversation. Davis quickly put her mind at ease.

“On the other side of the display is a yellow button. That is a call button, to get our attention. Once we are speaking, the blue button only comes in here, to the security suite, and is blocked from going downstairs. If someone were trying to buzz you at the elevator below, they wouldn’t get through. It’s a one-line intercom only. Buzz me with yellow, and then talk with blue as you are now,” Davis explained.

“All right, thank you for the clarification, Davis.”

“Dalton has entered the exterior hallway.” Davis informed her and then he disappeared from the screen.

There was a knock on the door, and Jo, who was still standing nearby, opened it. She took the menus from him, thanked him, and he left.

Once everyone had a menu, it became silent in the room. Jo was amazed at the elegance of the apartment restaurant. There were items on the menu she had trouble pronouncing.

“What’s ‘Farfalle alla Rustica’?” Kyle asked his mom.

“I think that’s a pasta dish, Kyle. Pasta and veal,” she replied.

Kyle scrunched up his face. “Yuck.” He looked farther down the list. “What’s ‘Pesce Spada alla Griglia’ then?” he asked again.

Mindy browsed the menu to find the item he was asking about. “Oh, it looks like grilled swordfish. It comes with broccoli and potatoes,” she read from the description below the entrée item.

Kyle looked up at his mom. “Where are the chicken strips or the hamburger?”

His father laughed. “Why not try the ‘Frog Legs Provencale’?” he suggested.

“I can’t believe people actually eat this stuff,” Kyle responded glumly and tossed the menu down on the table.

Jo laughed and had to agree with him. She was sure there would be plenty of chances to eat fancy meals. There was no reason to start today.

“How about a cheeseburger, Kyle?” Jo suggested.

Kyle grinned shyly. “Now you’re talking.”

Alex grabbed a pen and a notepad sitting near the phone. “Okay, what does everyone want? This is going to be my job so I’m going to practice on you.”

“Cheeseburger and fries,” Kyle told her. “Hold the onions.”

“Same for me,” Jo said.

“I would like the Yellow fin Tuna Steak Salmoriglio,” Mindy told her.

Alex looked at her blankly. “Can you spell that please?” she asked dryly.

Mindy laughed and pointed it out on the menu. Alex dutifully copied it down.

“Next?” she asked.

“Beef Wellington for me, Alex,” her mother said.

“New York Steak, medium well,” her father ordered.

“Surf and Turf,” Brad ordered, and he placed his menu card on top of all the others.

“What’s a ‘surf and turf’ Dad?” Kyle asked.

“It’s Filet Mignon and jumbo shrimp,” came the reply.

“That sounds good,” Charlie commented. “Order me that, too, Alex.”

“Okay, I’ll make it three. Sounds good to me, too,” Alex finished writing and looked up. “Is that everyone?” Everyone nodded so Alex went to the phone and placed the order.

Jo looked at her lawyer. “Brad, do you have any idea how I go about hiring you and Alex and Charlie? Do I need to talk to the Human Resources Director at BeckFord?”

Brad shook his head. “Actually, no. Well, yes for Alex, but Charlie and I will be working for you personally and that is something I can set up for you.” He paused for a moment. “Should we discuss salary?”

Jo nodded. “I hated to bring it up, but we do need to talk about it. I was wondering if you could find out for me how much Mr. Masterson was paid, and also how much the fashion lady, what was her name?” Jo asked.

“Ms. Maricela Zayden,” Charlie replied. She shivered, “That lady gave me the creeps.”

Jo laughed and agreed. “Me too,” She turned back to Brad. “Find out what fee Ms. Zayden charges. I think we should match it for Charlie.”

Charlie's careful father shook his head. "I'm sure that Ms. Zayden charges her clients based on her expertise. Her fee will be exorbitant, and entirely too much for Charlie."

Jo smiled. "So what? I want Charlie to make as much as the flashy, pompous, degrading Ms. Zayden makes. Besides, she will need it to buy clothes to attend all the fancy parties we will be going to. I know she loves clothes."

Mindy laughed and Brad sighed, but Charlie squealed, jumping up and hugging Jo. "I will earn every penny of it. I will work so very hard for you, I promise!"

"Charlie, do you even have a clue how much money we are talking about here?" her father asked.

Charlie hesitated. "Um... a lot?" she smiled.

Jo laughed, and so did Charlie's parents.

"She got you there, Dad," Kyle commented.

Jo had won, so Brad agreed to find out what Mr. Hartford had paid Mr. Masterson. He commented that the salary was most likely extravagant, and Jo told him that as long as it was more than he currently got from his California practice, she wished he would accept that rate. He grudgingly agreed. He felt as his family was taking advantage of Jo.

"It's the other way around," she replied. "I'm dragging you across the country so I can have you all to myself. I am so very grateful to all of you for agreeing to follow me here." She smiled and lowered her gaze when she found herself suddenly fighting tears.

"We are glad we can be with you, Jo," Alex told her, putting her arm around her. "Now, back to business. How much do I get?" Alex grinned as she asked.

Jo looked up at her smiling. "I think the company pays your bill. I will have to ask how much Tammy gets paid, and what was the salary of Mr. Hartford's personal assistant, whoever that was."

"As far as the actual dispersing of the salaries, you probably need an accountant," Brad told her. "Your personal accountant will handle your employees' paychecks, as well as your personal bank accounts, stocks, etceteras. He needs to be someone you can trust. I'm sure I can get a recommendation from my firm back in California if you wish."

Jo considered a moment. "That will probably be okay. I was just hoping that I would surround myself with people I knew for the important positions. Besides the fact that I am constantly aware that someone is trying to kill me, I have also been made aware that the rest of the world is out to steal from me."

Alex spoke up. "Mom? Don't you have an accounting degree?"

Kendra stammered. "Honey, I haven't done anything with it for years. I wouldn't even know the current withholding rates or the huge array of deductions that Jo would be able to get."

Brad, however, seemed interested. "Kendra, if you can work the bookkeeping and accounts, and handle the payroll, we can hire someone at tax time to help us with that part."

"But I'm going to be working at the travel agency," Kendra protested, although feebly.

Jo jumped in. "I'm pretty sure that doing the payroll for my three employees and balancing my checkbook won't take too much of your time."

Kendra smiled at her. She really wanted to accept, but she hadn't done accounting in so long. Finally she succumbed to the pressure. "All right. I will take it on for a while at least, as long as I'm allowed to ask for help if I need it."

"Absolutely, I will be available full time, since Jo will be my only client from now on," Brad said. "And as for the stocks and bonds, I know a person who I trust very well who can control those for Jo."



Kendra sighed in relief. “All right, then. I will accept the position of bookkeeper to you, Jo.”

Jo smiled. “My employee list is complete!” She turned and saw Kyle looking at her sadly. “Except for the weekend stuff I hire Kyle to do.” He grinned at her and nodded.

The intercom chimed announcing their food was ready. Dalton was bringing it up. He knew that no one else was allowed in the apartment yet, so had intercepted the waiter.

The next day would be Sunday, Jo realized, and that meant many of her friends would be returning home. Alex and Brad were staying, to begin their new jobs with Jo immediately. The Turners, Mindy, Charlie and Kyle were going home to pack up their belongings for the move. Neither family was going to sell their California homes right away. All they really needed from home was clothing and personal items.

While they finished their wonderful meal, travel arrangements were made, and plans concocted. Alex’s parents were taking the Learjet back to California tomorrow, and Charlie would return to New York in the Learjet on Tuesday. The three girls would then head to California the following Friday with Brad and pick up Mindy and Kyle, and give Alex a chance to pack her things. The Turners would need a few weeks to close their business and transfer all their files. They would drive out with a moving van, and would tow Alex’s precious Mustang behind them. Sam decided to buy a new car in New York rather than bring his from California. He wasn’t sure yet how convenient driving would be. Meanwhile, they would be looking online for items they wished purchased for their condo, and would let Alex begin buying them.

The entire group toured the security suite down the hall after dinner. They saw the multiple displays showing streaming video of the private elevator, the hallway outside of it, Jo’s front door, and the front of the apartment building as well. There were alarms on the doors, windows, and the fire escape. The small apartment had a tiny kitchenette, a bathroom, and two bedrooms, each equipped with a double bed. There were multiple computers and monitors all over. Jo was not told what they were for, and she didn’t ask.

Jo waved goodbye to the Allens as they left for their last night in the Hotel. Brad would move into the other penthouse in the morning after he saw his family off, and he would be with her and Alex on Monday.

It had been a long, trying day, but to Jo it was successful. Everything was coming together. She had one full day before she had to face the Board again, and she would have Brad in the room with her when she did.

Jo and the Turners all went to their rooms and to a well deserved rest. Tomorrow she was determined to see some of the sights of New York. She wondered how Roberts would feel about the subway... then smiled to herself realizing he would absolutely freak out, and she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 23

Jo decided that next evening that she absolutely loved New York. After sending Alex's parents home in the morning, Jo and Alex visited the Statue of Liberty, Central Park, the Empire State Building, and the 9/11 Memorial. She had never felt as patriotic as she did that day touching the thousands of names on the American Immigrant Wall of Honor. She had discovered that nearly half of all Americans could trace their family history to someone who had entered America at Ellis Island. It was awe-inspiring. She wondered if the Becker family had come through there.

The Statue of Liberty gave her the same sense of awe. She was just one small person in a sea of people. It made her feel insignificant. Then she looked around and saw all six security agents encompassing her, and knew she was no longer "nobody." They had increased their security today when she had smugly informed Roberts first thing that she would be riding the subway at some point in the day. Roberts showed no expression at all, she remembered, but she was almost certain she saw smoke pouring from his ears.

So after all of their experiences of the day, the girls were back in the penthouse, safe and sound, even after the despicable subway trip. She realized after boarding it that the subway had been a bad idea, but she knew her team would have been watching for people that might have been following her, and Roberts had three limos out. He called the other two 'decoys.'

Brad was moving into the other penthouse today, and she hadn't heard from him. She wanted to find out if there was anything he needed for his apartment. She picked up the cell phone Tammy had given her, and handed it to Alex.

"Can you figure out how to add Brad to the front of this thing, and give him an icon so I can call him when I want?"

Alex took the phone and looked at it. "Do you have the manual?"

Jo laughed. "I asked for the manual, Tammy told me I didn't need it. I think she wanted me dependent on her."

Alex made a face. "Oh well, we don't need the manual. That's what the Internet is for," and she headed for the study, Jo on her heels.

The two girls entered the room and flipped on the light. They both stared at the empty desk.

"There's no computer," Jo stated unnecessarily.

"I see that," Alex retorted. "This is where I come in. I should be able to find a store that will deliver whatever you want in five minutes or less. That will be part of my job, right?"

Jo shrugged. "I suppose, but who is open after six on a Sunday night?"

"A store that caters to rich, spoiled people, I suppose," Alex responded. Then her face brightened. "I know; I'll call Dalton. He will know."

"Good thinking," Jo complimented her.

Alex picked up the phone and dialed the concierge desk. She asked her question and received an answer. She thanked him and hung up.

"There's an electronics store nearby, but they don't deliver. You have to go in and actually pick out the computer yourself, and pay for it. Can you believe what this world is coming to?" Alex threw her hands up in the air, and Jo collapsed on the sofa in peals of laughter.

“No, we are buying two laptops, one for each of us, then one desktop for the study,” Jo decided. “There has to be wireless in here, it has everything else.”

“Okay, I don’t mind getting a laptop if you insist,” Alex grinned. “I assumed you will buy your Wardrobe Consultant one, too.”

“Yeah, but I want her to pick it out herself, like we are,” Jo told her as she pressed the yellow button and called the security team to go out.

It didn’t take long to pick out three computers. Jo looked at the display of equipment, chose a laptop and desktop that had all the features she wanted, and purchased some desktop publishing and word processing software to go with each one. Alex took a little more time, choosing a laptop with a higher grade of video and audio, and chose several software packages that she felt would help her keep Jo more organized. She also found a computer program that would sync with the phone Jo had, and bought it too. She wouldn’t need a manual since the computer would program the phone.

“All set?” Jo asked her.

“I think so.” Alex responded.

“Just a minute,” Jo stopped. They walked past the audio section, and Jo had remembered that she had lost her MP3 player and all her CDs in the fire. She could easily replace them now; so she decided to look at all the available styles choosing a player that had a display and was easy to use. She also chose ten music CDs to replace some of those she had lost, and two new ones she had been wanting.

“You want any while we are here?” she asked Alex.

“Um, no, but you might want to replace your camera, too. Neither of us had one today when we were going sightseeing. It was sad.”

“You’re right, Alex. I need a camera.”

They headed to the video department and Jo chose a high-end camera that doubled as a video camera as well as took still pictures. She selected several memory cards to go with it, and then finally they were ready to leave.

At the checkout, Jo and Alex pushed their shopping cart up to the check stand. As the wide-eyed clerk rang up the thousands of dollars in technology, he eyed the two girls suspiciously then called his manager for assistance.

“What’s the problem,” the manager of the store asked when he arrived.

“These two young ladies are buying over ten thousand dollars worth of stuff. They look rather young and I just wanted you to verify their identification.”

The manager looked at the girls, then at the total of their bill. He snapped his head back to the girls. “Is this a hoax? How are you paying for this?”

Jo stared back at the man, perturbed. “Would you prefer cash, check, or charge?”

Alex quickly tapped Jo on the shoulder. “We don’t have that much cash, Jo, only one-thousand five hundred, remember?”

Jo, deflated slightly, revised her question. “Check or charge?”

The manager stood up straight and asked to see her identification. He carefully examined the credit card and the ID card once they were handed over. The clerk did too. They looked from the picture to the girl, several times. The manager turned both cards over and looked at the backs.

“California, huh? And this credit card is brand new. There are no marks of any kind, no indication that the credit card has ever been swiped before. Both the ID and the credit cards are fakes, and I’m not letting you pull anything over on me in my store. You two con artists stand

right there while I call the police.” The man then called over two of his employees to help detain the girls while he reached for a phone.

“Is there a problem, Miss Becker?” Roberts asked, startling Jo and Alex who hadn’t seen him walk up behind them. His words were directed to Jo, but he glared at the men behind the check stand. The two approaching employees stopped short, afraid to get involved with the imposing man standing next to the girls, especially when they saw the gun holster at his side.

“The manager and his employee don’t think I can make good on my purchase, Roberts. They think I’m going to scam them.” She told him angrily.

“Then we will take your business elsewhere.”

Roberts motioned for Diaz to take the girls out to the limo that was waiting at the door. The manager and clerk stared open-mouthed at the limo, realizing their grave error. Roberts turned to the manager. “You will please inform the owner of this store that BeckFord Financial Corporation will no longer be purchasing any of its equipment from your store or any of its franchises.” At their terrified expressions, Roberts continued, “Yes, you just cost your company billions of dollars in sales. Have a good evening,” and he left, smiling.

Alex and Jo, both hearing what Roberts had said, turned to look at the two men. Jo almost felt sorry for the manager. He was white as a sheet and looked like he was going to faint, but she smiled and waved, and Alex laughed as they got into the limo and left the store for good.

Jo sighed as the car began moving. “Am I going to have to deal with this a lot, Roberts?” she asked him.

“In the beginning, yes, Miss Becker. Very few people know about the new head of BeckFord, and some of those don’t even know your age. It will take time for the city to realize there is a new princess in town.”

“Now back to our original problem. We need computers and stuff. Is there another store nearby? It’s past seven now, and Alex and I are starting to get hungry.”

“Yes, I told the driver the location of another store. It is much bigger than the one we just left, and will have an even larger selection.”

Jo sighed. “Great, I get to get grilled again.”

They entered the second electronics store and were able to pick out the two laptops and desktop, get all the same software they had chosen at the other store, and all the same music CDs. There was even an MP3 player that Jo liked better than the one at the previous store.

Once again they found themselves at the check stand. This time, the gal behind the counter just rung everything up and gave her the total. Jo handed over the credit card, and the efficient clerk asked to see her identification. Once the woman was satisfied that the person in the picture was Jo, she ran the card through, had Jo sign the slip, then they were out the door.

“Much better,” she commented to Alex. “Make sure we remember to buy all of our stuff there, Alex and not at the other store.”

Alex nodded. “I will make a note of it,” and realized she had nothing to make a note on. “I need a little PDA like yours,” she sighed. “I didn’t think about it.”

“Well run back in and get one,” Jo told her. She opened up the wallet, and grabbed all the cash. “Here, just go get one like mine, and then we will have the manual.”

Alex laughed. “Jo, you are a genius. We could have done that to start with and skipped the computers tonight.”

“That wouldn’t have been any fun,” Jo laughed as Alex ran back into the store.

Roberts put Jo into the car and as they waited for Alex to return, she filled him in on the families moving to New York, and their positions.

“The Allens are taking the other penthouse, and the Turners will take the condo on the beach. Alex is being hired as my Personal Assistant, Charlie will be my Wardrobe Consultant, Brad Allen is my lawyer of course, and Kendra Turner will do payroll and bookkeeping for me. Alex’s dad, Sam, will be moving his travel agency here to New York.”

“It is good that you have such supportive friends, Miss Becker. I am truly sorry that your mother isn’t here to enjoy this with you.”

“I am too, Roberts. She would be terrified of all the changes, though, and of the city itself. I’m not sure she would have come with me, if she even allowed me to come myself.”

“Your mother was a strong woman, Miss Becker. I believe you may be underestimating her.”

Jo considered what Roberts was saying. “Maybe you’re right.”

Alex returned to the limo and hopped in beside Jo, victoriously waving the fancy computer phone in her hand. “Now I can add Brad and Charlie and me and everyone else to your phone, Jo, just like you asked.”

They returned to the apartment building, and decided to eat in the downstairs restaurant instead of ordering it sent to their room. The menu was similar, but there were many more choices. Jo was quite hungry, she declared, and ordered a steak. Alex chose a gourmet salad with grilled chicken.

It was nearing nine o’clock when they finally finished their meal. Roberts had left for the night, leaving Davis and Michaels to escort the girls back upstairs. Once they had exited the elevator at the top Davis headed for the security apartment leaving Michaels to unlock the door for the girls and turn off the alarm. She pushed back the door and ushered them in, then went to the alarm box, stopping short.

“Hmm. that’s odd,” she said aloud.

Jo looked up from where she had set down one of the laptop boxes. “What is it, Michaels?”

“The alarm is off. Did Roberts set it when you left tonight?”

Jo looked at Alex, who shrugged.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember,” Jo responded.

“Me neither. Sorry,” Alex too replied.

Michaels herself shrugged. “Maybe Roberts thought you wouldn’t be gone long enough. Well, have a good evening, girls.” Michaels shut the door behind her as she left.

Jo and Alex excitedly unboxed their purchases. Alex went right for the phone, finding a twenty-four hour hotline to activate new service. She plugged the phone in to let it receive its first charge while she was on hold.

Jo was working through the hour-long initial set up that you must endure with a new computer purchase. She had passed the name and registration phase, and was working on the company’s extended warranty plans by the time Alex was off the phone.

“I have a new phone number, and I’m going to put it in right next to Tammy’s name on your phone, Jo. Then when you feel I’m ready to go it alone, we can delete Tammy and I will be top of the list. I will put Charlie next to me, then your lawyer next to her.”

“Sounds great, Alex. Can you do all of that from your computer?”

“Yep,” Alex replied, “as soon as I get it set up.”

The girls quickly found a wireless signal and connected to the World Wide Web. Jo opened a web search page and, just for fun, put her name in. She was shocked when the computer came back with hundreds of hits.

“Alex, I’m all over the Internet!” Jo was a little worried. She read a few of the headlines, as Alex looked over her shoulder.

“This one says ‘child heir inherits billions’,” she read on one. “So people actually do know about me, don’t they?”

“Well, I’m sure some do. After all, Mr. Hartford’s estate went through the court system.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” She read on. “This one says ‘alien lovechild to serve as New York executive’ and it has my name as the executive.” Jo was stunned. “Where do people come up with this stuff?”

Alex laughed. “Don’t worry about it. You are famous now; people will be saying all sorts of things about you.”

Jo sighed. “I know. That’s one of the parts I’m dreading. I like the ‘being rich’ part really well so far,” Jo grinned.

Alex smiled back. “And I like that you haven’t changed, Jo. Granted, it’s only been a few days since you found out you were the wealthiest eighteen-year-old in America,” Alex paused. “But you haven’t turned into a snob, and you better not if you know what’s good for you,” she finished, shaking a pen at Jo.

Jo laughed. “I know, I know, and I’m sure that you will keep me on the straight and narrow, Alex.”

The girls continued tinkering with their gadgets until almost eleven o’clock. Finally, Jo declared she needed a good rest to be able to face the next day, since it was her first official day on the job. Alex rose from the couch with her and, hugging her thanked Jo for all the cool gadgets, then headed for her room.

Jo flipped the light switch in the living room and padded to her bedroom door in the dark. She turned the handle and, feeling on the wall just inside the door, flipped the bedroom light switch. As light flooded the room, Jo felt a hand cover her mouth and pull her head back toward something solid. Panicked, she tried to scream, but the sound came out muffled against the hand. Suddenly out of the corner of her eye, Jo saw the black barrel of a gun pointed at her face. Lack of oxygen mixed with paralyzing fear took over Jo’s body and she slumped to the ground.

When Jo awoke, she was propped up against the headboard of her bed, hands and feet tied with rope. She felt something dry in her mouth and realized she was gagged. Only a lamp on a nightstand next to the bed lit the room. Jo discovered that Alex was sitting next to her, also bound and gagged. Her eyes were open, though, and Jo could tell she’d been crying. That thought made Jo angry as she looked around for their captor.

Sensing movement from the bed, a well-dressed woman stepped out of the shadow so Jo could see her. Jo saw the gun, steadily aimed at her head.

“Hello, Miss Becker,” the sultry voice greeted her. “I am Tatiana Petrova, and you are in my house. This apartment was purchased for me by Mr. Hartford, and belongs to me. You are an intruder, Miss Becker, and so is your friend. All of the furnishings,” the woman waved her free hand around the room, “were hand selected by him for me, not for you. He chose each item with utmost care, knowing my likes and dislikes. The evening before he died, he gave me a set of keys and the code for the alarm system. The alarm code is my birth date, you sniveling witch. This apartment was customized for me! I was supposed to move in the next morning, but my Cliff died that day. Of all the homes you stole from him upon his death, why you chose this one to live in is obvious. You wanted to rub it in my face,” the woman sneered. “But that will not happen. You killed Cliff, and now you must die,” the woman calmly announced.

Jo's gasp was heard even through the gag, and the woman turned to look at her. "Which part surprises you, you vixen? Is it the part where I'm going to kill you?" Jo shook her head indicating no, so the woman continued. "That doesn't surprise you, eh? Then it is the part where you killed Cliff." The woman waited for a response from Jo, and Jo dutifully nodded her head.

"Let me explain it to you then." The woman began slowly pacing across the room, but the gun never wavered from its target. "For the four months before his death, Cliff Hartford told me all about you. Over and over and over I heard the story of you and your pitiful mother, wasting away in some god-forsaken town out on the West Coast. He told me about killing your father, then your grandparents, knowing full well that both you and your mother were in line to take any inheritance from the Beckers. He told me how he had planned to kill you and your mother if she had come to claim what he had stolen and was rightfully hers, but she never came. He waited. For eighteen years he waited. It ate at him, constantly, that he could be exposed as a murderer and a thief at any moment. He became a recluse at the end, never leaving his apartment. He even let his despicable lawyer handle the business, knowing full well that his lawyer was robbing him blind."

The woman stopped pacing and looked at Jo full in the face, glaring menacingly. "It was your fault he died. He worried himself sick over the day you would show up and expose him for the coward he was. Every time his phone rang, he jumped. Each time someone tried to enter his apartment, he sent them away. I was his only solace. I was the only one he allowed near him. Yet all he talked about day in and day out was you. 'Joe Becker's kid' he called you. He said you were haunting him in his dreams. He would wake up from a nightmare, pleading for mercy. 'I'm sorry, Miss Becker, please don't hurt me. I'm sorry for killing your father, Miss Becker. Please leave me alone' he would cry out for hours. I got so sick of hearing about you," the woman sneered. Jo thought she saw her bedroom door opening, but she wasn't sure. It was too dark, and she was terrified. The woman stopped at the end of the bed and aimed the gun at Jo. "I wanted you dead. I hired someone to do it for me when the company finally uncovered your whereabouts, but he was obviously an incompetent fool. Because here you are, in my house, using my furniture, eating at my table, and sleeping in my bed. It is mine, mine, mine!" Jo heard the hammer of the pistol being cocked. "And if I can't have it, neither can you," the woman said, and she pulled the trigger.

## Chapter 24

Agent Michaels was uneasy as she left the penthouse and returned to the apartment next door. It was not like Roberts to forget to set the alarm. She had seen him arm the system for a ten-minute outing before, so why didn't he do it this time? She was going to ask Davis about it when she entered the room, but he was waiting for her with a question about reports they had to finish compiling. It was almost two hours later that she remembered to mention the disabled alarm to Davis.

"Hey, did Roberts set the alarm in the penthouse when the girls left for the store tonight?"

Davis looked up, puzzled. "I wasn't with him, but I'm sure he did. That man is obsessive about things like that. Why, wasn't it on when you took the girls inside?"

Michaels dropped the pile of papers she was holding and shook her head. She suddenly felt ill, and rushed for the bathroom.

Davis followed her in, demanding an answer. "Was the alarm turned off when you took the girls into the apartment?"

Michaels was retching in the toilet. "Yes, it was turned off," she managed. She had let two hours go by leaving the girls in danger and was sick with grief. Michaels forced her stomach into compliance, rinsed and wiped her mouth, and went back into the office area where Davis was already calling for help.

"Yes, she said it was off when she took the girls inside," Davis was talking into the phone, presumably to Roberts. "I didn't check; hold on I will pull it up." Davis turned and asked Michaels to pull the security footage from the time when they left for the store until they returned after dinner.

Michaels steeled her nerves and accessed the surveillance files. She guessed at the time and watched the screen come to life. Davis watched the screen with her, and she fast-forwarded the time. Soon she saw Roberts enter the girls' apartment and leave with them. The agents watched them go down the elevator, and out to the parking garage where they would have gotten in a limo.

They continued watching the screen, Davis telling Roberts on the phone, "nothing yet," every few minutes.

At eight twenty-two according to the timestamp in the corner, a well-dressed woman approached the private elevator in the lobby. Michaels caught her breath and slowed the video to real time. The woman produced an elevator key.

"I thought we had all three of those keys," Michaels commented to Davis.

"There is a fourth, apparently," he commented to her, then spoke into the phone to the waiting Roberts. "We have an intruder. A woman entered the elevator at eight twenty-two using an elevator key. She has a key to the penthouse as well, and entered that door at eight twenty-five." Davis reported as they watched the security video. He waited for instructions, replied with "Yes, sir," and hung up.

"Call 911, Roberts is on his way," Davis instructed Michaels as he pulled a gun from his holster and headed for the door. He was feeling almost sick himself. The girls had been with the woman for over two hours already. There was no telling what he would find when he got in there.

Agent Michaels called the police, giving them all the information she had. They were sending a team to assist, and asked to make sure someone stayed at the elevators to let them in.



Michaels knew that would fall to her. Roberts would most likely fire her for this, but she didn't care. All that concerned her were the conditions of Miss Becker and her friend.

Michaels quietly left the security suite and headed down the elevator to wait at the bottom with the elevator key. She wanted to check identification of the police officers, just to be sure. She knew it would take an extra thirty seconds, but Roberts had trained them for just this situation, and this is what he had ordered her to do.

Two police cars stopped quickly at the front door and four officers rushed in, followed closely by Roberts. "Quickly, let me see your badges," she requested. The four officers complied, knowing it was part of her job. Roberts took the elevator key from her, and held the doors for the officers. He handed the key back to her before the five men disappeared to the top, telling her that there would most likely be more officers soon.

As much as she wanted to assist the girls upstairs, Michaels knew this was her place right now. She hated herself for her blunder, and prayed it hadn't cost the life of the sweet, unspoiled Miss Becker.

Meanwhile, Davis had silently unlocked the penthouse doors and pulled them wide open. It was dark in the room, and he couldn't see any movement at all. He propped open the doors with chairs from the dining room, so that Roberts and the officers could make silent entry when they arrived.

He quietly went down the hallway past the dining room to the study. He searched both bathrooms at that end, and the study as well. He found a woman's designer handbag in the corner of the study. He silently unzipped it and extracted a wallet. Using the flashlight he carried on his hip, he quickly glanced at the photo ID and determined that the handbag belonged to the intruder. She was still here.

Davis left the study, gun drawn, and headed back toward the bedrooms. As he neared the first one, he heard voices. He inched his way closer to the door, listening intently. A woman's voice heavily accented. The woman spoke English well, even using American slang. He heard a quiet noise behind him and turned quickly to find Roberts and the four officers closing in fast. He walked back into the living area toward them to update them.

"I found the woman's handbag in the study. Tatiana Petrova. She is in the first room with at least one of the girls; I heard her talking. Heavy accent," Davis whispered quietly. Roberts nodded, and motioned for Davis to go to the other side of the door. The two men softly moved into place, and Roberts gently placed his hand on the knob. He carefully turned it, hoping the release was silent. It was. Once the latch was cleared, he pushed the door open several inches. He could see the two girls bound and gagged on the bed, and a woman holding a gun pointed at Miss Becker. He turned to the police to make sure they were aware that both girls were inside but found two of the officers peering over his shoulder into the room.

Roberts didn't have but a fraction of a second to think. From the comments the woman was making in the room, he knew time was short, and they had to act quickly. He motioned to Davis and the officers that he was going to push the door open wide, and he and Davis would go in first.

The door swung wide and the agents heard the report of the gun as they ascended on the suspect, the officers at their heels. The woman was startled and was quickly subdued by the officers. Roberts went over to Jo, who was face down on the floor. He panicked at first, seeing blood on her face, but she opened her eyes and saw him, and began crying in relief.

Davis was with Alex, releasing her bonds while Roberts was pulling the gag out of Jo's mouth and pulling the ropes off her wrists and ankles. Once free, Jo gave Roberts a huge hug,

still sobbing loudly. Alex hugged Davis once she was free too, and went over to Jo. The two girls held each other and cried for a few minutes. Their escape was narrow.

When Jo could contain her emotions, she took the tissue handed to her by Roberts and blew her nose. She pulled another tissue from the box at the bedside table and dabbed at her bleeding temple.

“Alex, you saved my life,” Jo said, tears welling up in her eyes again.

“I thought that was part of the Personal Assistant’s job,” Alex joked as she too, wiped her tears.

“Can either of you two tell me what happened?” Roberts asked. The officers had hauled the woman out of the room immediately upon capture, so the girls were alone with just the two security agents for the moment.

“That mad woman tried to kill us,” Jo told him bluntly.

Roberts smiled compassionately. “I had figured that part out, Miss Becker. Who is she and what did she want?”

“She was the girlfriend you had heard a rumor about. She told us this was her apartment and we were intruding. And since she couldn’t have it, I wasn’t going to either, and then she shot me!” Jo felt the tears welling up again.

Alex put her arm supportively around Jo, and picked up the story. “The woman was aiming at Jo the whole time. I actually felt ignored. So while she was talking to Jo, I scooted over to Jo as close as I could. When I saw her pull the trigger, I shoved Jo as hard as I could. I didn’t know if it worked or not, I just know I pushed her off the bed.”

“I felt myself falling over, and then felt the heat at my temple,” Jo told her. “It was like someone held a hot curling iron to the side of my face. It burned, and then I hit the floor. I had no idea why I was falling at the time. It wasn’t until Roberts got to me that I could actually process what had happened and realized you had shoved me,” Jo told her. “You are the best, Alex. I’m so glad you agreed to stay here. If you hadn’t I would be dead.” Jo stated bluntly.

Alex squeezed Jo’s shoulders. It had been close. “How did the woman get in, Agent Roberts?” Alex asked him. “I remember Michaels being concerned that the alarm was turned off.”

“Oh, that was another thing she said, Roberts,” Jo remembered, “She said that the alarm code is her birth date. She was supposed to move in the morning Mr. Hartford died. She had keys to the elevator and the apartment, and Mr. Hartford had selected the code to be something she could remember easily.”

Roberts frowned. “I apologize, Miss Becker, for not looking into the rumor of the girlfriend more diligently. I did check with the people who worked on the apartment, though, including the concierge. I was told there were only three sets of keys, and since everyone involved assured me that no one had moved in, I mistakenly assumed the three sets were all there was.”

“The woman mentioned that Mr. Hartford had made a set special for her. Maybe he did it because all the workers and staff had the other three?” Alex suggested.

“It doesn’t matter, Alex. It’s over,” Jo smiled and dabbed at her temple again. “Oh, she was the one who hired the black sedan guy, too. She called him an incompetent fool,” Jo recalled.

Roberts seemed stunned by that. “I was sure he was hired by...” he stopped himself and smiled. “It is good to know that the immediate danger is over, Miss Becker.” He turned towards Alex. “Thank you, Miss Turner, for protecting Miss Becker when I wasn’t here to do it. She is

fortunate to have you for a friend,” he took Alex’s hand and shook it. She smiled as if that was the best compliment anyone had ever given her. “Now let’s get that bullet burn fixed up, shall we?”

Two paramedics were waiting to have access to Jo, and he let them in. They cleaned the wound and covered it, telling her to change the bandage in the morning and not to get it wet for two days. “You don’t even need stitches. You are a very lucky girl, Miss Becker. This could have been bad.”

“I know I am,” Jo responded, squeezing Alex’s hand.

Charlie’s dad arrived just as the paramedics left, and had to be told the whole story. Michaels had called him as soon as she was free. He hugged both Jo and Alex, and told them he was glad they were okay. Jo held back her tears and watched as one of the police officers retrieved the bullet from the wall behind the headboard. After striking Jo’s temple, the bullet traveled through the solid mahogany wood and lodged into the wall.

“That was a close call, Miss Becker,” the officer told her as he placed the bullet into a small envelope for evidence processing. “I’m glad it turned out okay for you.”

“Thank you.” She was getting tired of being reminded by so many people of how near to death she had been tonight. In fact, she realized she was just exhausted.

Looking up at the headboard with a hole in it, Jo realized she wasn’t going to sleep there anymore. “Alex, do you think Charlie would mind terribly if I take the other bedroom?”

“If she does that’s just too bad, Jo. I wouldn’t want this room either after what you’ve been through,” Brad told her.

“Tonight, I want you to bunk with me. It’s a king-sized bed, there’s room for both of us,” Alex informed her.

Jo nodded, relieved.

“Then I will take Charlie’s room if you don’t mind,” Brad said.

Jo smiled at him and told him to make himself at home.

“I’m going to stay in the living room for the rest of the evening, Miss Becker,” Roberts informed her.

Having settled everyone else, Alex and Jo went into Alex’s room and climbed into bed. They were both exhausted, but sleep was elusive.

“Alex? What would have happened to the company if I had died? I remember Roberts telling me something about it that first day. Do you remember what he said?”

Alex tried to think. “I believe he said it would be divided amongst the stockholders. Some of them would become super rich, too, and he thought those were the ones who were trying to kill you.”

“I need to make out a will. I don’t want the company money to be a bull’s eye on my back any longer. I will make out a will with Brad in the morning, and then if I die, the stockholders won’t get anything. Maybe I won’t feel as vulnerable.”

“It’s probably a good idea, Jo, and if it gives you a little peace of mind, then you should do it. However, right now you need to try to get some rest. Big first day tomorrow, remember.”

“Yeah. Big first day,” Jo grimaced. She was silent for a few moments before she finally remarked, “I guess if I can stare a gun down for twenty minutes and live to tell about it, then I can face mere people who just want my money, not my life. Right?”

Alex laughed. “That’s the spirit, girl. You go with that.”

Alex and Jo drifted off to sleep after a while. They were emotionally spent. Brad, in Charlie's room, had already begun snoring. Roberts, however, was sitting at the dining room table in Jo's apartment having a briefing with his team.

After filling in Thomas, Diaz and O'Brian on the evening's events, he asked Davis to report on the video surveillance. "Why was there no one watching the video while the girls were downstairs eating?" He asked.

"Michaels and I were with the girls, and Thomas and O'Brian weren't scheduled to arrive until midnight," Davis responded.

"So when Diaz and I left, it left you two alone," he understood their dilemma. "We need to have four people on shift at all times, not just two people rotating three shifts a day. This was my fault, tonight. Director Johnson will have my head when she hears about it."

"It was my bust, Agent Roberts," Michaels spoke up for the first time. "I noticed the alarm was off, I didn't notify anyone else, and I didn't check the rooms. I will submit my resignation immediately so you can find a suitable replacement to better watch over the girls."

"Nonsense," Roberts waved her apology away. "You assumed as I did that the apartment was impregnable. Since no one could get into the apartment without two keys that were impossible to replicate, you assumed that I left the alarm off." Roberts surmised. "Besides that, Agent Michaels, this is one mistake you will never make again in your career. That makes you more reliable than a replacement would be."

Michaels was surprised at both the lack of reprimand and the encouragement. She acknowledged his claim and steeled herself. She would make sure that was the last mistake she ever made on the job.

"It comes down to the fact that Miss Becker's life was saved by her friend. It should have been us, and it was to an extent. Once the suspect realized she had missed, she would have finished the job had we not arrived when we did, but this will not happen again. I will bring in six more agents to rotate sitting on the monitors. That means that the primary teams will only be with Miss Becker when she's out of her apartment, and the surveillance teams will be watching the monitors all day, regardless of where Miss Becker is at the time."

Roberts went on with the new strategy and finally the late night meeting concluded. He sent everyone away except Diaz. Roberts stretched out on the sofa and Diaz took a recliner. Before retiring, they blocked the entry. They weren't going to chance another encounter that night. Roberts knew he would get very little sleep, and must be with Miss Becker all the next day, but that didn't matter to him. All that concerned him was the girl sleeping in the room down the hall.

## Chapter 25

Jo woke the next morning to the sound of someone knocking on the bedroom door. She stretched and yawned and gently nudged Alex to wake up as Agent Michaels entered the room carrying a tray. She had bowls of chopped fruit, muffins, pastries and steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

“Miss Becker, I apologize for last night,” Michaels began.

Jo shook her head and put her hand up to stop her. “No, Michaels. This woman would have found me one way or another. It worked out well, let’s just forget about it,” Jo implored her.

“It will never happen again,” Michaels promised.

Jo smiled. “I’m sure it won’t. Thank you for the breakfast.”

Michaels nodded and left the room, after informing them that Tammy was waiting for Jo in the dining room.

Jo gingerly touched the gauze covering her temple. The spot was tender but she would live. She had Alex to thank for that.

“Don’t be getting all mushy on me today, Jo. We have a big day ahead of us,” Alex warned her as Jo got teary-eyed remembering the night before.

Jo laughed and nodded. “Okay. First thing on the agenda is to get rid of Tammy. I’m sure she’s a nice person; I just don’t feel right having her on my doorstep every time I wake up. Between her and all the security, I feel like my privacy is gone.”

“So let’s eat then go have a talk with her,” Alex suggested.

They quickly devoured the meal and Alex ran into Jo’s room to get her some clothes. Jo found it difficult to shower without getting her bandage wet, and ended up holding a bath towel on the side of her face. The girls dressed carefully but rapidly, and Alex changed the dressing on Jo’s wound with the items the paramedics had left for them.

It was half past eight when Jo and Alex emerged in business attire, ready for the day. Tammy rose to meet her as Jo entered the dining room, but Jo just waved her back.

“Tammy, hi. I need to talk to you, have a seat.” Jo sat in a chair across from Tammy. “I seem to recall Director Johnson telling me that you are my temporary assistant. I have found my permanent assistant and was hoping you could train her. She’s quite new but willing to learn.”

Tammy gave a huge sigh of relief. “Miss Becker, I would be thrilled to train your assistant. I have been a nervous wreck since Director Johnson assigned me to help you. The thought of all the parties and social obligations you will be having just overwhelmed me. I don’t have the money to buy the dresses I would need to attend the parties, or the patience to deal with the endless line of business dinners your assistant will attend with you. As much as I enjoyed the opportunity, I believe my fear and dread were winning my personal battle.” Tammy laughed. “So, yes, bring on your assistant. I will show her everything she needs to know to make you a success in New York, Miss Becker.”

Jo herself was relieved, and she saw that Alex was too. Neither of them wanted the responsibility of someone losing their job, and this was a surprising ending to the interview. “Alex is going to be my assistant.” Alex gave a brief overview of her work at the travel agency, and mentioned the phone and software purchased last night.

Tammy smiled at them. “You will be great, Miss Turner, and the fact that you know each other so well will really work in your favor. You will be able to determine instantly which phone

calls to return, which charity dinners to attend, which social events Miss Becker would most likely be interested in.”

There wasn't much more discussion, and Tammy left for the corporate office. Alex would follow them around this week, and Tammy would show her everything she could possibly need to know.

Brad entered the dining room when Tammy left. He had just returned from his penthouse after showering and changing.

“Jo, before we go to the meeting today, I want to update you a bit on your company.” He went into some of the details about the current stock price, the total shares of stock, how much of them Jo held, and other financial details. He discussed the markets, the loans BeckFord gave to overseas firms, and some other general knowledge about Mr. Hartford.

“I found out most of this information by searching your company website, Jo. You should browse it as soon as you get a chance. It might help familiarize you to your company.”

“That's a good idea. I should have thought of that,” Jo responded. Then she looked up at him. “Brad, we have a good forty minutes before we have to leave. I was wondering if you could make out a basic will, just so I feel better about leaving the apartment,” she asked him.

Brad seemed surprised. “We can certainly do that, Jo, but it's not something you want to do lightly. There is a lot of money at stake.”

“I understand that, but I also know that if I die today, the money goes back to the shareholders, which gives them motive for wanting me dead. I don't want to start working at BeckFord wondering which person sitting on the Board wants me dead. If I leave a will, then my death does nothing for them.”

Brad sighed. “You are right about that, Jo, but I hope you know a will is serious.”

Jo touched the gauze bandage on the side of her head. “I know it is.”

He nodded, and sat down. He took a legal pad from his briefcase and started writing.

“If you were to die in the next day or so, how would you want your assets divided?” he asked her.

“Equally between Charlie and Alex. Down the middle,” Jo answered without hesitation.

Brad looked up at her astonished. “Charlie? You want to give your money to Charlie?” he asked incredulously.

“And Alex, equally,” she told him again. She was puzzled at his response.

He stared at her for a few seconds until she finally asked him, “What's wrong?”

He shook himself as if waking from a bad dream. “Oh, not much. I was just imagining Charlie with \$70 billion dollars, let loose in New York.” He grimaced. “It was not a pretty sight.”

Alex and Jo laughed at that. He was right, that would be harsh.

He wrote down what Jo said verbatim, then called in Roberts and Michaels, who were in the living room, to be witnesses. He had her sign and date, and then had them do the same.

“I will make up something more official later, but this will work if something happens in the next few hours.”

“It won't,” Roberts boldly pronounced.

Jo went into her bedroom to retrieve her purse. She softly walked over to the bed and touched the holes in the headboard and the wall. It was still very frightening, and she was startled when she heard a voice.

“It will be gone by the time you return, Miss Becker,” Roberts announced.

Jo looked up at him and smiled. She grabbed her purse and allowed herself to be escorted with Alex and Brad down to the waiting limo.

When the new head of BeckFord Financial Corporation emerged from the elevator on the executive floor, she was calm and poised. With the exception of an inch square bandage at her temple, she looked the part of the professional she was to become.

“Good morning, Miss Becker,” Mr. Sherman greeted her. He led her to a seat at the end of the conference table. Jo introduced her lawyer and personal assistant to the group, and then Alex and Brad took chairs around the perimeter of the room. There were other assistants and businessmen as well, but all the Board Members were present and seated at the conference table.

“Before we begin, I would like to say how glad I am that you are here with us, Miss Becker, considering how close we came to losing you last night. The police have assured me that the woman who tried to kill you is in custody. Director Johnson tells me that this is the same person who hired an assassin and burnt down your home in California.”

Jo nodded. “The security team believes the threat to be contained, for which I am grateful.”

The CEO, Mr. Sherman went into some boring details about the price of stocks, some information about several of their branches, and updates on various projects that Jo was oblivious to. He tried to explain as much as possible any time he saw a blank expression on her face. She was intelligent, though, and could pick up most things very quickly. She took notes, and asked intelligent questions. She gained the respect of many people in the room that day. Some were still hold-outs, but her obvious interest in the well-being of the company as a whole made several of the undecided Board Members resolve to give their new boss a chance to prove herself.

The meeting lasted until almost noon. Once Mr. Sherman concluded the day’s business, he offered to give her a tour of the headquarters, and a little of the history of the company. She gladly accepted, and was surprised when the rest of the Board came with them.

The main headquarters building had been purchased at the same time the company was founded, over eighteen years earlier. It had been a bank, Mr. Sherman told her, and so turning it into a Finance Center was not a huge stretch.

He took her to a large corner office on the executive floor where the conference room was. “This is your office, Miss Becker,” he told her. She was amazed by the elegance of the room. It was furnished with a deep, comfortable office chair, beautiful desk and, bookcases. It was very tasteful and business like. There was a room connecting to it that also belonged to her. Mr. Sherman suggested her lawyer could use that room. Her office had a reception area as well, that Alex would occupy. Overall, she was quite pleased with her small corner of the world. Brad and Alex were also both delighted with their respective workspaces.

Mr. Sherman escorted the group to the other offices on the floor, an office for each of the board members. Then he took the group to one of the middle floors at random, and let her see the hub of activity. She listened in as one young man gave advice to a client regarding his stock portfolio. On the other side of the room, she watched a woman doing a loan interview.

The tour ended at the bottom floor, where the original bank operated. They still had limited banking services; check cashing and transfers between accounts, currency exchange, new accounts, things like that. The lobby was elegant. Jo imagined that it was mostly high-end clients that used the services her company offered.

Jo noticed a large vault behind the counter behind a locked gate. When she asked what it was, Mr. Sherman explained that it was the original safety deposit box system that the old bank

utilized. “We haven’t implemented that part of banking. Most of our business is electronic. We don’t see the actual cash or goods that changes hands, like you might at a regular bank. Once in a while for a particularly special client, we rent out the safety deposit boxes.”

“Can I see inside the vault? I’ve always wondered what the inside of a vault looked like.”

Mr. Sherman smiled indulgently. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Mr. Cline stepped forward. “I can open it for you, Miss Becker. Just give me a moment to find someone with the right keys.”

While Mr. Cline went to find the floor manager, Mr. Sherman told Jo more about what he knew of the history of BeckFord. The only employee that had actually met her father, Joseph Becker, was one of the Security Guards who worked the lobby, and he was called over. Jo asked him to tell her anything he could remember, and the older man indulged her all he could.

“He was a real gentleman, that Mr. Becker. He never was snobbish to me, not like Mr. Hartford was. He always shook my hand every time he entered or exited the building.”

Jo smiled at him and shook his hand. “Thank you for telling me that.”

Mr. Cline returned with another man and the huge vault was opened. Jo expected to see hundreds of shiny boxes lining walls in a well-lit room, but it looked more like a post office box set up. Most of the boxes were small, some were larger.

“We have a few clients who use this currently?” she asked curiously.

“Not right now,” the floor manager told her. “These are rather antiquated. The only real security is the vault door itself, so we encourage our clients to place their valuables in a regular bank, and place their cash with us.” He smiled and a few people chuckled.

“The newer banks have fingerprint recognition or pass codes, things like that. All these take are keys, one key per box.”

“It seems a shame to have all this unused space. Why didn’t you ever just tear it down or do something else?”

The floor manager walked over to the first row of boxes. “Because of these right here. These first three boxes were registered to Mr. Hartford himself, and no one ever dared suggest to him that we get rid of the space. He seemed rather sentimental about them, I believe, so numbers 101, 102, and 103 saved this old vault for posterity.”

“Now that he’s gone, did someone go through the boxes?” Brad asked.

“We considered it, and now that the owner of the boxes is present - that would be you Miss Becker - you can request that we get a locksmith here.”

Alex grabbed Jo’s arm excitedly. “Jo, did you hear the numbers of the boxes?”

“Yes,” Jo answered, puzzled. “What about them?”

“Remember the small round tin that we found in the fire?”

Jo’s eyes lit up, excited. “The keys! This could be the boxes that the keys open!”

Jo unzipped her purse and begun digging around in it. Brad asked Alex, “What keys does Jo have?”

Alex explained to everyone about the small tin box with the note from Jo’s father to her mother, and the two keys with the note. Just as she finished, Jo produced them from her purse. “Found them!” she held them out excitedly to Brad.

Mr. Cline reached for them, “May I?” Jo nodded and Brad handed them over. “They do look like our keys, don’t they?” he asked the floor manager. A few of the other long-time employees also wanted to look, and commented that they did indeed appear to be keys just like those that would open the security deposit boxes.

Exasperated, Alex yelled, “Just try it, already! Open the box!”



Mr. Cline looked at Jo again, asking for permission. She nodded, grinning ear to ear. She was excited to see if there was anything from her father in there.

Mr. Cline used the key marked 102 into the matching box, and it fit perfectly. The lock gave way immediately and the door opened. He slid out a long, thin box, and laid it on a table in the room.

“Moment of truth,” Jo said to Alex as she lifted the lid. Nine board members, some floor employees, Jo’s security team, Alex and Brad all watched as she pulled several documents from the metal container. The very top one was her father’s will. “He did leave a will,” she voiced softly. “He didn’t forget us.” She handed the will to her lawyer.

She pulled out letters from her mother to her father, things he obviously considered precious. She pulled out a photo of the three of them, and gasped. It was the same photo that had hung on their living room wall all the years she was growing up that she was so devastated to lose in the fire. She hugged the photo to her chest, unable to hold back the tears.

There were small keepsakes and mementos that he had dumped into the box in haste it seemed, and meant to retrieve later. Mr. Cline put the next metal box down on the table, box number 103. She opened that lid revealing business documents, including the original contract that formed BeckFord Financial Corporation. The rest of them she didn’t understand, and asked Brad to look into them.

Jo looked up to find Mr. Sherman, to thank him for the tour. It had meant more than he could know, finding these things of her fathers. She instead met the sorrowful glances of Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Lawrence. Both gentlemen were acting as if they wanted to speak.

“What is it, Mr. Fitzgerald?” Jo asked the unhappy man.

“Miss Becker, I must apologize. All these years I believed the stories Mr. Hartford told me, that Mr. Becker was a fake name and that Mr. Hartford was the sole owner and creator of this great company. When Mr. Becker’s child suddenly showed up after Mr. Hartford’s death, I assumed it was a hoax. I doubted your claim from the day that I was told of it, Miss Becker. I was very wrong, and I beg your forgiveness.” The gentleman finished his apology and dropped his gaze.

“I was given the same stories, Miss Becker, and I too believed them. There was never any evidence whatsoever that Mr. Becker had ever existed. I am sorry that you were not given the opportunity to grow up with wealth and riches,” Mr. Lawrence told her.

“Nonsense, you old fuddy-duddies,” Ms. Grant, one of the Board Members interrupted. “Miss Becker grew up loved and that’s more than money can buy. Sure she missed a party or two, but if you consider today’s youth, she is much better off for it. The rich teenagers of the modern world are wild and uncontrollable. I don’t believe you would be the caring, intelligent person you are today if you had grown up differently, Miss Becker. I look forward to watching you blossom into womanhood with the strong, moral background you got. Your daddy picked a good woman to raise you, and I will be proud to work under you, Miss Becker.”

Jo was speechless. Not only had she finally gotten grudging acceptance from the last two Board Members, she got a glowing character reference from another. These boxes were amazing!

Jo thanked Ms. Grant, and turned to her lawyer. “Can you do whatever you need to do to get the first box open? I’m not sure if it was my father’s or Mr. Hartford’s, but either way, they won’t need them anymore,” Jo requested with a smile.

“Well, I must say, Miss Becker that was the best tour I have ever given of these facilities.” Mr. Sherman told her. Laughter filled the air as the group bid her goodbye and went their separate ways for lunch.

Roberts and Diaz escorted Jo and Alex to the waiting limousine. Jo looked up at the tall, elegant building as they pulled away. It no longer seemed imposing or unfriendly. The building, like the people who worked in it, now welcomed Jo to New York. Although she had lost her mother, had her house burn down, and been shot at all within the past two weeks, she considered herself very fortunate. She watched the sun’s rays bounce off the buildings of New York City, and realized she was home.

## Epilogue

It had been nearly three months since she had her first day of work at BeckFord Financial Corporation. The young executive was doing quite well. Jo, Alex and Charlie were taking business courses at a college in New York, working, and attending many social events. Everyone wanted Jo and her two best friends to attend their parties. Jo knew it was some sort of social status, but she didn't care about that. They only attended the ones Alex approved of.

It was Labor Day Weekend, and Jo and all her friends had returned to California to attend an annual celebration in their hometown. Jo had been greeted warmly and affectionately by many of the same people who had snubbed her, Alex and Charlie in high school a few short months ago. For that reason, she avoided those people, and just stuck with her loyal friends.

Today was the last day here. She was leaving shortly to return to New York and her new, hectic, thrilling life. Jo was in the park in her hometown, lying on her back, staring up into the old oak tree. She had bullied Roberts into letting her borrow his suit jacket to use as a pillow, and now he was glaring at her from across the lawn. She had laughed at him as she danced away.

It was just as she remembered with its large gnarly branches lifting away from the main, sturdy trunk. She had been thinking about this tree frequently since her move to New York. Each day brought new challenges, new opportunities for her to prove herself to her peers. She saw new branches forming in her character daily, new, brightly colored leaves blooming forth.

She never made random decisions. Each approval or denial was carefully considered, with much advice from both the Allens and Turners when possible. Alex was instrumental in her decision making process. Though Jo knew everyone was there to help, none of her friends gave her unsolicited advice. They encouraged her to think on her own, and do what her mother or father would have done. Many times, that thought was all she needed.

Yes, her friends had helped her strengthen herself each day. Yet she had to look back at the oak tree. It reminded her that nothing she did or said or accomplished would mean anything, if she hadn't had the firm root system to support her growth. Her mother had nurtured that in her, and even her father, to an extent. Because of them, she knew she had a lot to offer the world. She sincerely hoped that other people would see her like this oak tree, she thought as she stood up. Sure there was ugliness and scarring, but the tree was strong, firm, loyal, and dependable, despite its flaws. The blemishes in the tree were overwhelmed by its obvious strength.

"Beautiful," she said aloud as she wandered back to her waiting limo and headed home.