

A Small Saving Grace

by

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*And now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened*

ee commings

Chapter 1

He stood beneath the dripping canopy, watching the people go in and out the etched glass door of the bar across the street. He hadn't been inside this one for over a year, which was why he'd chosen it tonight. Something different. Though he'd already spotted a couple of possible candidates, he was reluctant to leave his observation post until the rain lightened up. Absently, he rubbed his index finger over a brown, somewhat furry birthmark on his temple.

Just then a young woman emerged from the parking garage. She had no coat or umbrella. For a moment, she hesitated, the wind pressing her filmy skirt against long legs. Then, shielding her head with a briefcase, she sprinted across the street. He smiled. Now that was something worth going out in the rain for.

Outside, the April rain continued steadily. Inside, three women sat at a round oak table sipping wine and looking warm, conspiratorial, teacherly. One woman still had a #2 pencil stuck in her hair. Thick and tawny, it was loosely secured into a bunch at the nape of her neck by a large, faux tortoise shell clamp. With her fingertips, she smoothed her brows, which were full, arched, and a shade darker than her hair. She was pretty and sturdy, and though she did wear make-up on occasion, this was not an occasion.

Every fourth Friday of the month, the women gathered to decompress at the Pancho Villa Bar. One of the oldest bars in town, it had gotten a bit shabby of late, but the old oak bar that ran the length of one wall was still elegant. The mirror behind the bar,

flanked by large crystal sconces balancing on the twin brass heads of naked Nubian maidens, had the slightly quavering quality of vintage glass.

“There, there, there!” Trudy, a mousy blond in a red cotton turtleneck whispered.

“Don’t look. He did it again. He is seriously checking you out.”

“Stop it. He is not.” Trying not to smile, Andy took a sip of her second glass of wine. She rubbed her thumbs nervously over the surface of her stubby fingernails. It wasn’t that she bit them. It was that they simply would not grow beyond the pink, fleshy nubs of her fingers. She blamed the chalk dust. Even in the 21st century, chalk and blackboard were still the never-fail tool of teaching. Today her nails were painted an opaque tangerine, compliments of her daughter Sadie. She knew they looked foolish. So what? Tangerine fingernails and a buck was a cheap price to pay for a weekly manicure and twenty minutes of uninterrupted time with Sadie, who seemed to be sliding prematurely and precipitously into adolescence.

The third woman, Fran, was older than the other two, perhaps forty. She was dressed in a glossy pants suit and heels, suggesting administration rather than classroom.

“Trudy’s right.”

Andy pulled back her shoulders. “So what’s he look like? Is he cute?”

“He’ll do,” said the administrator.

Reflexively, Andy’s hand flew to the back of her head. “Oh lord.” She plucked the pencil out of her hair and dropped it into the large leather tote that was briefcase and purse combined. “I’m such a nerd.”

“Right,” Trudy said, flatly. “I should be so nerdy.”

With fingers to her lips, Fran cocked a well-shaped brow and whispered, “Quiet, you guys. He’s coming this way.”

“Oh no,” Andy moaned. She had not been with a man other than Ben for more than a dozen years. Was she ready to date? Sometimes she thought so. But not tonight. The thought of sleeping with someone who was not Ben held no appeal. Still, a date was not a commitment to go to bed, and until she was willing to date, the idea of sex would never appeal. At age thirty-four, was she ready to become celibate?

“Evening, ladies,” he said, dipping his head. “How’s everybody doing?”

He was several inches taller than she, maybe just over 6 feet, his face pleasant and slightly bottom-heavy. Nice smile, shy and lopsided, but his teeth were kind of crooked and his hair was funny, close-cut and greenish-blond like he’d spent too much time immersed in chlorine. Maybe it was the light, or maybe he was a swimmer. He had the shoulders for it. His T-shirt with its UofA logo, hugged his chest and lean torso. Yes. Probably a swimmer. Other than that, he was pretty average. But average was good. Ben was handsome – eye candy, Fran had dubbed him – – and look how that ended.

“Can I buy you ladies a glass of wine?”

“That would be lovely,” Fran answered with authority.

“Oh.” Andy picked up her wine glass, still half-full. “This is my second, and two’s my limit.” She looked at her watch. “Besides. I’ve got to go in a few minutes.”

“Go?” said Trudy. “It’s only 6 o’clock.”

“I know, but tomorrow’s Sadie’s birthday. I have to pick up the kids at the sitter’s and there’s the cake to make.”

The man smiled. “That’s disappointing. So it will be two glasses of—?”

“Merlot,” Trudy and Fran answered simultaneously. The man nodded and headed back to the bar.

“Sadie’s birthday is next week, April 16, the same as my mother,” Trudy announced flatly.

“I had to say something.”

“Great. Now he’ll think you’re married.”

“Andy, honey,” said Fran. “It’s been months since the divorce. You had a bad fall, but you have to get back up on that horse before that fear thing starts to take hold.”

Andy nodded. That fear thing had not only taken hold, it had moved and set up housekeeping in her chest. “I guess I’m not much of an equestrian.”

Trudy laughed. “Well, Fran’s equestrian talents, as you know, are legend.”

“Sour grapes,” Fran said, lifting the brow again.

The waitress set two glasses of merlot on the table. Glancing around the room, Trudy and Fran raised their glasses to toast their benefactor, but he had disappeared.

“I told you so,” said Fran. “He was checking you out, and now you’ve scared him away.”

The welcome aroma of wet asphalt hit her as soon as she stepped outside the bar. Andy inhaled deeply. The rare scent of rain on any surface was always a pleasant sensation. In the growing dark, the puddles glowed with reflected neon. She hurried across the street on a red light and up the block to the parking garage. Inside the elevator she pressed the button for the third tier. Andy always parked her car on the third tier. She

always had two glasses of wine only, always home by 7:00, and in bed by 9. She wanted to kick herself. Needed to kick herself out of this state of suspended animation back into the land of the living. Fran was right. It was time to get back on the horse.

Andy shook her head. She needed to put Ben aside, but when he picked the kids up for their visit, her stomach still pitched, and she found it difficult to keep the pain and anger out of her voice. How could she put him out of her mind when he was still in her sight? And the kids were crazy about him. Why would they not be crazy about somebody who never said no. By comparison, Ben was the fun one and she the party pooper.

When she stepped into the garage, she realized she'd been in such a rush earlier that she failed to note the exact spot where she'd left the Camry, and of course there were a dozen other small white cars parked on the third tier.

She stood there for a moment beneath the milk-blue of fluorescent lights. She sighed. "Pay attention."

Ever since Ben had announced that he was leaving her – and “no, there’s was no point in going to counseling” – it was as though she were sleepwalking. Even when she realized he’d been seeing someone else for months before his leave-taking, she’d refused to fully wake up to reality. He was gone for good. Rationally, she knew she was better off without him. He’d never approved of either her father or her mother and was never quite satisfied with who she was, always pressing her to lose a few pounds, do something with her hair, leave the classroom for a job that would take less time and bring in more money. All true, but so far, rational thought had failed to prevent daydreams of his return. Well, daydreams were a lousy substitute for real life. It was no way to live, not good for her or the kids.

“Wake up!” she whispered.

Looking from side to side, she walked down the middle of the garage. The swoosh of wheels over wet pavement rising from the street echoed off the concrete walls, and beneath that the sounds of hurried footsteps coming up from behind her. She spun around.

“Lose your car?”

“Oh! It’s you,” she said, hand on her throat.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you. I’m parked just over there.” He waved a hand to the left. “What kind of a car is it?”

Hands shaking a bit, she began to rummage through her tote bag. “A white Camry.”

“I’ll help you look.”

“I’m getting to be an old hand at this.” She fished out an object that looked more like a charm bracelet than a set of keys. “My dad got me a remote key for my birthday. Sometimes I still forget to use it.” Holding her breath, she pressed a button and the lights flashed on a white Camry. “Ah, there.” She pointed and started for the car. “This gadget is magic.”

Ducking his head, he smiled that lopsided smile, kind of goofy and sweet. “I’ll walk with you. He fell into step alongside her. He was wearing some kind of lemony aftershave. Usually she didn’t like aftershave, but this was crisp and pleasant.

She looked directly at him then. Smiled. “Don’t bother. It’s right over th— Well, sure,” she said, taking her first step back into the land of the living. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stay for that glass of wine.”

“It’s OK, I understand. Kids come first.” He reached out his hand. “Matthew Grady.”

“Andy Richards.” She took his hand, noted how lightly he clasped hers as if it were a bird he might easily crush. “Nice to meet you.”

He held her gaze for a beat, then released his loose grasp. “So, Andy. You’re a teacher?”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Pretty much. The big bag, the pencil in the hair. What do you teach?”

“Junior English, American literature.” She struggled to find something else to say, but her mind was in such snarl she could think of nothing. Finally she managed, “Well, it’s nice of you to go to all this trouble.”

“No trouble. Beside, I like teachers who look like teachers.”

Again she smiled, flattered. She noticed then a mink-colored birthmark on his left temple. It was about the size of a dime and looked soft, velvety. She had an urge to reach up and put her finger on it.

“So tomorrow your daughter’s going to be how old?”

“Ten, going on sixteen.”

“Is she as pretty as her mother?”

Andy felt heat race up her throat and spread to her cheeks. “Oh, I... Well... Here we are.” She fingered the remote, then reluctantly pointed it at her car.

“What’s her name, your daughter?”

“Sadie. And my son, Hank, he’s six. My husband and I are divorced, and I have to pick them up at the sitter’s.” There that’s out, she thought, then felt immediately abashed. Too much information. What if he thought she was making some sort of oblique invitation? She held her breath. So what if he did?

“You don’t look old enough to have a ten-year-old daughter.”

She exhaled. “Some days I feel old enough to be the mother of the president of the United States.” She tossed her bag onto the passenger seat and slid behind the wheel, wondering what she might do to encourage him to ask for a coffee date.

She put the key into the ignition, then turned back towards him, a broad smile on her lips. That’s when he punched her in the face.

“Shush, shush, shush,” he whispered, pulling her out of the car, then easing her to the ground. One hand covered her mouth while the other stroked the hair off her face.

“Shush. Just be quiet, Andy, and it’ll be OK.” He punched her again, then dragged her to the narrow space between the car and the wall where it was darkest.

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When Henry walked in the back door, the light on the kitchen telephone was flashing. There was a time when he couldn’t ignore the delicious possibility inherent in that flashing light, but that time was past. Besides, it was late, and he was tired and slightly nauseous. Trying to be good, he’d ordered the halibut, but it’d had been served in a pool of beurre blanc sauce too delicious not to sop up with the focaccia he’d successfully avoided while eating his salad. They’d split the gelato, but then there’d been that little glass of jewel-like black Muscat. Three months of broiled fish, skinned chicken breasts and salads dressed in a scant of canola oil and a spritz of lemon, a diet imposed by Chas, had seriously compromised his ability to digest a fine meal. His 62-year-old stomach

simply couldn't make such radical adjustments without consequence. The worst of it was, despite the fifteen pounds he'd lost, he still had love handles.

He heard a thump as Sheba, a plump gray, formerly feral tabby with a bum back leg, jumped down from her forbidden roost on the counter. She did a figure 8 against his legs, then ran from the room, claws clicking just slightly out of sync on the parquet.

The clock on the range glowed 10:35. Chas had probably left a message earlier, but it was too late to return the call now. He began to negotiate his way through the darkened house, trailing his hand along the back of the black leather sofa that ran almost the entire length of the living room. It had been the first thing he'd bought after the divorce was final. Twelve years later, the console where the pictures of Andy and the kids perched, the couch, a chrome pole lamp and a glass and steel coffee table were still the only furniture in the living room. He brushed the wall until his fingers met the switch to the track lights that illuminated the hallway. Each can pointed to an abstract with great splashes of red, ochre, orange – prints that Chas had bought because the windowless hallway had “needed heat.” Chas was a freelance color consultant. Henry, who could not match socks, was surprised that a person could make a living telling people what color to paint their kitchens. Of course it was much more complicated than that, Chas had explained. You had to understand who your client was, familiarize yourself with their needs and desires, know who they wanted to attract and impress. Were you consulting on a business or an abode? It made a big difference. And of course, there was the question of the client's chi. Chas was a big proponent of chi.

Although Henry hadn't particularly liked the prints, he'd been afraid to say so at the time and now he was used to them. Other than the leather couch, which struck him as

sleekly masculine and just what he'd always wanted, he had no confidence in his own aesthetic. Chas was his first live-in relationship. Oh, there had been Allen, but that had lasted only long enough for his carton of organic, fat-free cottage cheese to sour.

He passed the two bedrooms and a bathroom that opened onto the hall. The smaller bedroom was now his office. Sniffing the air, he was reminded that he needed to clean the cat box that lived in the office closet. The larger bedroom was reserved for his grandchildren on their increasingly rare visits. Six-year-old Hank was still in love with his PaPa, but Sadie, who was about to turn ten, was a budding intellectual and mostly bored with his company. Henry couldn't blame the kid; he was bored with his company too, bored without Chas. He'd gone to San Francisco to settle his 87-year-old mother into one of those assisted living places and wouldn't be back until Tuesday. There was a younger brother who also lived somewhere in the Bay Area. It was a mystery to Henry why the guy couldn't handle the situation, but families were funny. Everyone had a role to play; he figured Chas' role was that of the hard-ass.

When he reached the master bedroom at the end of the hall, he flicked off the switch. The only light in the room came from the red blink of the phone and the city-glow through French doors that opened onto a small, walled patio. He ran his hand over his stomach. In the bathroom, which was tiled floor-to-ceiling in appliance white and looked a bit like a place bodies might be dismembered in the name of science, he unrolled a fresh package of Tums and tossed three into his mouth. He removed his glasses, trifocals, splashed water on his face and through his hair. Just lately, it had grown quite thin on top. Rather than an even gray, it was patched with brown and needed a trim. He always thought men who tried to compensate for thinning hair by growing ponytails looked

foolish, but then he met Chas. Examining his face in profile, he made a note to work on the nose and ear hairs in the morning. What did Chas call them? Gross, or was it disgusting, splinters?

His neck was stiff. His neck was always stiff these days, and when he rolled it, it went snap, crackle and pop, like a bowl of Rice Krispies. He ran his hand over his chest and belly. There was no point in going to bed with this stomach. He pulled a bath towel of the rack. Still crunching the chalky antacids, he stepped out to the patio, the thyme planted between the flagstone pavers by a former owner, spongy and wet beneath his sandals. The rain and the crush of his feet enhanced its pungent scent.

The cat, head hanging over the side of the bed, eyed him with a drowsy expectation. “Sheba? Aren’t you coming?”

She stretched, plopped down and trundled through the open door.

Slipping off his sandals, he ran the towel over one of the two plastic Adirondack chairs, then sat with a sigh. They had debated on what color to paint the chairs. He’d wanted brown, but Chas had persisted with raspberry. Raspberry. He shook his head. The abstract paintings, a set of steely gray sheets, towels, also gray, and a pair of raspberry garden chairs were the current sum of their community property. They’d been living together for less than a year and were proceeding with caution.

Gripping the cool, woolly thyme with his toes, he massaged his right shoulder and leaned back. It had been nearly six months since the surgery to repair the torn rotator cuff, and it was still stiff and achy. The bare branches of the neighbor’s pepper tree traced a satisfying silhouette against the sky, which played back the midtown lights and was therefore only a muffled glow until well past midnight. A tiny bat thrummed the air by

his ear. Sheba jumped into his lap, kneaded his thigh. Henry stroked her into a warm curl, then closed his eyes.

For the first time in a long while, he liked the direction his life was taking, though it was not anything that he had planned the day he decided that he could no longer keep up the pretense of being straight. Andy was engaged and living on her own. Without her to focus on, he and Karen had hardly anything to say to each other. The house seemed empty, life as he was living it, pointless. It was killing him in fact. He was a good fifty pounds overweight, with high blood pressure and cholesterol kissing 300. He thought Karen, despite her alcohol-induced myopia, must have suspected. But no. The day he told her why he had to leave her, the expression on her face was first one of disbelief, then horror, then disgust. It might have been fear, actually. She was a pretty fearful woman, Karen.

He had a clear vision of Andy sobbing when they told her they were divorcing, the sense of utter failure slicing through him. Even now it made his chest tight.

Sheba's cranky meow reminded him to resume his stroking. Oddly enough, it had been Andy, who helped him get through it. He'd just finished assembling a set of cheap bookshelves she'd ordered from some catalog when he finally got up the nerve to tell her why he'd left her mother.

"I already know," she said.

Always sure his straight act was perfect, he was a taken back. "How long have you known?"

Andy managed a little smile. "Mom called me the other day and sort of blurted it out. She was ... I don't know how to describe it."

“Drunk? Angry?”

“Both, I think, and scared, maybe, definitely hurt.”

“Damn.” He picked up a rag and started wiping down each shelf. “I asked her to let me tell you myself.”

“Well, she was freaked. I was too, in a way.” Her voice trailed off.

Nodding, he tossed the rag on the futon that served as couch and guest bed. Under the circumstances, he supposed he didn’t have any right to expect consideration from Karen or acceptance from his daughter.

Andy started to arrange books on a shelf. “Actually, it’s kind a relief, you know.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s a relief to know why you two have been so unhappy. Maybe I was just so self-absorbed I never noticed how quiet things had gotten in that house.”

“We didn’t want you to notice.”

“But I should have figured something was up. Mom drinks too much, and look at you. It’s like you’re trying to—I don’t know—do yourself in ... Anyway, maybe things will change for the better.” She sat down on the futon. “It’s strange to have to rethink who my father is.”

“I’m the same father I’ve always been.”

“The same father, I guess, but not exactly the same man, at least not the same man I thought you were.” Andy shrugged. “And what about Mom? How’s she going to deal with being alone?”

“Same as me, I suppose. Maybe meet someone. She’ll figure it out.”

“Or drink herself to death trying.”

“Maybe you think I should go back into the closet, but it wouldn’t help your mother, and it would probably kill me.”

“I don’t want you to go back, Dad. It’s just ... it’s going to be different, that’s all.”

He sat next to her, put his face into his hands and started to cry. They both cried.

Finally, Andy had put her arms around him. “I love you, Dad, no matter what. And I hope that now you’ll start to do something about your health. Go on a diet; join a gym. I’d like it if you and Mom could be friends.”

“She hates me.”

Andy patted his back. “She hates that you left her, but I don’t think she hates you.”

Her exact words. No scandalized reproach, just sadness. Well, it was a sad time for everyone, but Andy was a brick. And after she had the kids, she never, never kept them away even though he suspected that Ben was homophobic as hell.

It took a long time, but now he was no longer dying of unhappiness. If his stomach weren’t so upset at the moment, he might have added tentatively that he was finally at peace, happy. He’d never liked living alone, but after the Allen debacle, he’d lost his nerve. Just couldn’t make himself get out there and take it on the road, so to speak. But despite his age, the love handles and hair in all the wrong places, he still had a few marketable assets. His teeth were his own. He was more than solvent, owned a home in a good part of town. After thirty years as a recruiter for the university, he was now semiretired. He’d avoided the kind of short-sighted investments that had caused so many of his colleagues’ portfolios to collapse, so he had both disposable income and the leisure to travel a bit.

They'd met in a poetry class, his first, more than three years ago. Chas was attractive in a Bogart-minus-the-overbite sort of way, and they'd had so much in common, magenta chairs and abstracts aside. Life was better than it had been in years, perhaps better than it had ever been. He and Chas liked to travel. Last year they'd spent June in Belize. This year they hoped to escape the worst of the heat with a trip to Costa Rica.

He took a deep breath. Jasmine was blooming somewhere. The warm cat against his belly was having a calming effect on his stomach, and it occurred to him that he was blessed. Who should he thank for that? Certainly there was Chas. There wasn't a day that he didn't think of him and feel lucky, but he was also thankful for his wife. Funny, after all this time, all the animosity, he still thought of her as his wife. Without her there would be no daughter, no grandkids. His life was so much fuller and interesting because of them.

Even on this cool night he was aware of the constant sawing of crickets and above that, the jingle of katydids. A screech owl called from the pepper tree, was answered, called, was answered.

I imagine limbo is like this, he thought. Sitting on the patio, in spring beneath a dome of cloud. All is silhouette. The owl ... An owl called from the pepper tree, a poem in the making. Recently, one of his poems had been accepted in the *Journal of Living Treasures*. His first publication, it would be in the summer issue. He got a little thrill of anticipation every time he thought about it.

Now, the owl called from the pepper tree. And the dome of cloud, he liked that bit. If he didn't get up and write it down, he'd probably forget about the dome. But instead of rousing, he slipped his glasses off, tipped his head back.

When he awoke he was chilled enough to want a hot shower. He carried the cat inside and tossed her onto the bed. Before starting for the bathroom, he decided to put a stop to the winking phone. There were only two messages. The first was some unaccountably happy Jennifer reminding him of Monday's dental appointment. He deleted that.

Immediately, he recognized the weepy, near hysteric voice on the second. Knowing that Karen was probably drunk when she left it, he was about to delete it as well, when he caught the word accident. A knot formed in his chest when he heard his daughter's name.

* * *

He charged through the automatic doors of St. Mary's into the dry chill of the waiting room. It was after midnight. The ER was packed, and it took him a minute to get oriented. Most people were sitting on turquoise Naugahyde chairs along the walls; a few were lying on the floor. Mothers jiggled howling babies; children slumped in laps or twined around the legs of exhausted parents. Finally, he spotted her. She was sitting next to an angular woman who wore a simple navy skirt, white blouse and thick, beige cardigan. She had no-nonsense, cropped white hair, and a redhead's complexion. Because of her lack of adornment, Henry supposed she was a nun. Good God, he thought. Why was his wife talking to a nun?

Karen was clutching a paper in her fist, her eyes were swollen and red. Her usually well-coifed, white-blond hair, hung lank to her collarbone. A thin flannel blanket was draped around her shoulders. As he approached, she just shook her head. The knot tightened in his chest.

The nun stood and offered her hand. “Sister Mary Ann Campau. I’m a chaplain here at St. Mary’s.” A grim smile cracked her too-long face.

“Henry Richards. What’s happened to my daughter?”

“She’s in surgery, right now. There’s a waiting room down the hall. It’s a little quieter there.”

Karen stood. He took her by her thin, loose-fleshed upper arm. They followed Sister Mary Ann, her sensible, black, crepe-soled shoes squeaking on the waxed linoleum, through the double doors, down a dimly lit corridor past a statue of the Virgin Mary and others he had no names for.

Sister Mary Ann glanced around the room, which was already occupied by a young couple slumped in one corner, and an older man, snoring loudly in the other. “Maybe over there,” she suggested.

Karen and Henry sat on a floral loveseat. The sister pulled a chair over and sat across from them, knees almost touching theirs. “I know you must be exhausted,” she said. “Let me know if there’s anything—”

In the smaller, warmer space he became aware of a faint, medicinal scent of lavender, the sister’s soap or hand lotion, he supposed. Impatient, Henry shook his head. “Just tell me what’s happened to my daughter.”

“Of course, as I’ve told Mrs. Richards, Andrea was found unconscious by a passerby in a downtown parking garage.”

“Unconscious?” He took hold of his wife’s hand.

Sister Ann nodded. “I’m afraid I don’t know the details. The doctor will fill you in as soon as your daughter is stabilized.”

“Stabilized?”

“Yes. As I said, she’s in surgery right now.”

“For what?”

“At the moment, I’m unsure of her injuries. But one thing I can say is that this hospital is staffed with the some of finest doctors and nurses in the city. Your daughter is receiving the best care possible.”

Karen started to weep again. He squeezed her hand.

“When can we see her?” Henry asked.

Sister shook her head, hair cropped short for efficiency. “I’m sorry. At the moment I have no idea.”

Then what good are you, he wanted to say. Instead he asked, “So what are we supposed to do?”

“Perhaps you’d like to wait in the chapel.”

“We’re not Catholic, Sister.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re all just people here, and the chapel is quiet and a bit more comfortable than the waiting room. I’ll come and get you as soon as she’s out of surgery.”

He turned to Karen then. “Jesus. What about Sadie and Hank? Where are they?”

Karen opened her mouth then closed it. She shook her head.

“They must still be with Nana Jesse, or maybe with Ben.” Henry concluded.

Sister Mary Ann took up a pen. “Nana Jesse is their other grandmother?”

“No. Their sitter. She’s been taking care of them since they were babies.”

“I could call her for you. And Ben?”

“Our daughter’s ex-husband.” Henry pulled out his wallet. After a bit of searching he produced a card with Jesse’s phone number.

“Is there anyone else you’d like me to call?”

The only other person he could think of was Chas. He would want to know, deserved to know, but at the moment, he couldn’t even mention his name in front of Karen. He shook his head. “Right now there’s no one else.”

The darkened chapel was empty save for a woman praying the rosary in the first pew. Henry and Karen sat side by side, she still clutching the paper.

“What’s that?” Henry whispered, nodding at the paper.

“A list of the things in Andy’s tote bag. A policewoman give it to me.”

He took it from her hand and examined it. “I just want to see if the guy robbed her.” He quickly noted that Andy’s cell phone and wallet were on the list. Thirty-three dollars, her VISA card, driver’s license, and a half-dozen other documents were listed.

“Looks like everything of value was still in the bag.” He didn’t want to think about what that meant. He handed the paper back to Karen, who searched his face, but said nothing.

In the front of the chapel, a nearly life-sized Christ nailed on a wooden cross seemed to reflect their pain. Karen rested her head on his shoulder. Each time she exhaled the sharp, rawness of vodka wafted across his face. He didn’t mention it. What would be the point?

For a moment, he considered the anguished figure, but it did not move him, nor did it occur to Henry to ask for Christ’s intervention on behalf of his daughter, his beautiful girl, his sweet Andy, beaten.

“Did the guy steal Andy’s Camry?”

Karen shrugged. “I can’t remember if the woman said anything about the Camry.”

He washed his hands over his face. So maybe he just wanted the car. Maybe that his motive, or ... He would not allow himself to finish the thought. He closed his stinging eyes.

They’d been married less than a year when Karen announced that she was pregnant. Of course he was happy about it, satisfied. A child would be proof that he’d left the part of himself that he did not want to accept behind. But as the baby grew within Karen’s belly, she became much more to him than simple proof of his “normalcy,” as he’d once thought of it. He’d feel her little arms and legs ripple across Karen’s belly and something in his chest that was always tight and cautious, would relax and expand.

In those early days, he’d truly cared for Karen. She was a lovely woman, back then, with rich chestnut hair caught up in a simple ponytail, perfect skin and lively blue eyes, but this baby he’d loved even before she was born. He smiled as he thought of that moment, the final push that sent Andy shooting into the world and into his hands, his sense of surprise and overwhelming awe.

He could still see the look on his father’s face when he presented him with his granddaughter. Pride joined with relief, perhaps, that one look countered countless other expressions of disapproval. The man, a former Marine from a long line of Marines, was both athletic and masculine to the point of cliché, and Henry hadn’t been the kind of son he’d wanted. Aside from his one season running cross-country as a freshman in high school, Henry never had much interest in sports, and had no intention of joining any branch of the military, let alone the Marines. It wasn’t that they fought. Considering his

father's background, he wasn't even particularly harsh. But over the years he'd conveyed his profound disappointment clearly, as much by what he didn't say as what he did.

Andy's arrival briefly mitigated that.

And they were happy in those days, he and Karen. Love for their daughter had sustained him, and he thought he was going to be able to pull it off. But over the years there was the weight gain, the numbing alcohol—the slow death that came with denial. Things fell apart totally when he finally told her the truth. And then slowly, miraculously things began to fall back together, at least for him. Even after twelve years, Karen still struggled. He was sorry for the part he'd played in that, but wouldn't go back and change it even if he could.

He could feel Karen shiver. "Are you OK?"

"I'm so cold."

"I'll see if I can get you another blanket." It was a relief to have something to do.

The bright light at the nurses' station made him wince. He waited a moment for the woman behind the counter to acknowledge him. When she did not, he cleared his throat. "Excuse me."

She looked up, impatient, or perhaps just tired. "Can I help you?"

"It's my wife. I mean, my daughter. She's been seriously injured and—" He took a deep breath, waited, took another. "She's in the emergency now under going some sort of...I don't know... surgery." A sob was crawling up his throat. He swallowed it back down. "Anyway, we're waiting in the chapel. My wife is very cold. She needs—could I have a blanket?"

When he reentered the chapel, Sister Mary Ann was guiding Karen towards him. He slipped the warm flannel around her shoulders. “Well?”

“Andrea’s been moved into the Intensive Care Unit, and the doctor would like to speak with you.”

He was standing outside the ICU wearing scrubs on which Wile E. Coyote chased the manic roadrunner. They were jarringly incongruent with the stethoscope slung around his neck and the slick dark hair parted neatly and combed to the side. He extended his hand. “How do you do. I am Dr. Singh,” he pronounced in precise, melodic English.

On automatic, Henry gripped the man’s hand firmly. “Henry Richards. And this is Andy’s mother, Karen.”

The doctor nodded. “Mrs. Richards.”

After their divorce, Karen had taken back her maiden name, Beattie, but neither he nor his wife bothered to correct the doctor’s misperception.

“Shall we sit down?” Dr. Singh waked across the hall, peeked into the waiting room. “Ah, empty.” He ushered them in with a wave of his arm, but no one chose to sit. An expression of dismay crossed his face for a moment as if their act of non-sitting were one of defiance. He shrugged then sat down himself. “Excuse me for sitting, but I am very weary.”

He looked at each face, paused. “Well, the easiest way, I suppose, is to just lay it out before you,” he continued. “Your daughter ... you call her Andy?”

Henry nodded.

“Andy has sustained a serious CBI—a closed head injury to her brain caused, apparently, by several fist blows to the head. Her brain then slammed against the inside

of the skull, resulting in a cerebral contusion, or bruise to the brain. The CT scan indicated some bleeding, and there's a slight midline shift. I have inserted—”

Henry held up his hand. “Wait a minute. You're going too fast. What's this mid-line shift?”

“Sorry.” Singh ran his hand, fingers long and tapered, over his dark-shadowed jaw. “A midline shift is when the brain is shoved to one side, off center. It can be caused by a tumor, for instance. In Andy's case the cause is edema—swelling—her brain's response to the initial trauma.”

“So what do you do for that?”

“Treatment is all about management. We will attempt to control the swelling while keeping her blood pressure and chemistry stable. We have given her drugs to reduce the edema and inserted a Monitor Bolt into her brain to measure the pressure levels. If the pressure rises, we can increase the drug levels to try to minimize the swelling. The Bolt has a valve that can be opened to drain the cerebro-spinal fluid, if need be. Once the swelling is down, the midline shift should correct itself.”

“And if the swelling doesn't go down?”

“There are other things we can do if it becomes necessary, but let me assure you, we have done everything that is needed for the moment. She will remain in the ICU, where we will monitor her closely and see what is what.”

“Is she going to be all right? I mean—” Karen's voice was no more than a whisper.

Singh pursed his lips. “I am sorry. That I cannot say. I wish I could be more definitive, more positive, but with this kind of injury you never know, sometimes for days, how much swelling might develop. At this point, it is the secondary injury to the

brain that could be caused by pressure inside the skull, rather than the initial trauma, that we have to worry about, and that's unpredictable."

Oh God, Henry thought. Was she going to die? He could not say that word aloud. "Can we see her?" he asked instead.

"Certainly." The doctor placed his hand on Henry's forearm. "But first, let me say this. In addition to the brain trauma, she sustained multiple injuries to the face. He looked at the clipboard he was holding. "Her right cheek bone was shattered, as was the right orbital bone, that's the eye socket, and her jaw was broken. Her face is badly swollen and discolored, but I can assure you that those injuries, as bad as they look, are relatively insignificant." He paused, then looked at each of them as though sizing them up. Henry held his gaze and he continued. "There is one more thing. In addition to being beaten, we presume by the condition... There is no easy way to say this. We presume that she was sexually assaulted. We won't know for certain until after she's been examined by a forensic doctor."

Karen sagged. Henry gripped her around the shoulders. "We want to see our daughter now."

Dr. Singh rose. "Follow me."

"Would you like me to come with you?" Sister Mary Ann asked.

"Please," Karen whispered.

Sister Mary Ann took her other elbow. "I'd like to add one word of advice, if I may." She paused a beat. "Though Andy's unconscious, it's best to assume that she can still hear you. Reassure her. Tell her you love her. Try not to cry," she said, then led them through the door and into the cold brightness of the ICU.

Andy lay on a narrow bed, a terrifying number of tubes and wires connecting her arms, chest and skull to beeping, blinking machines. The worst was the thick ventilator tube snaking down her throat. Her face was dark and so swollen for a moment Henry thought that there'd been a mistake, that this wasn't their daughter. Then he saw the waves of russet-gold hair, streaked black with dried blood. The ventilator whooshed, and her chest expanded slowly, collapsed, expanded and collapsed.

Karen gasped, then placed her hand tight over her mouth.

Gently, Henry lifted his daughter's hand. Her knuckles were scraped raw, and there was blood beneath her fingernails. "We're here, sweetie. Mom and Dad are here." He turned her hand and kissed the cool, dry palm. "The kids are fine. They're with Jesse, honey, so don't worry."

Dr. Singh picked up their daughter's other hand. When he pressed down on her fingernail, she pulled back her hand abruptly. "See that? She withdraws from painful stimuli. That's good. Normally, when I press the fingernail bed like that, patients tell me to go to hell." He attempted a smile. "Well, now I will leave you with your child."

"Thank you, doctor," Henry said, though he felt no gratitude. As soon as the man turned his back, Henry picked up the chart, read the words: diffuse axonal injury/hypoxic, ischemic encephalopathy. He didn't understand their meaning. At this moment, he didn't want to.

Karen swayed slightly at his side. He placed an arm around her waist to steady her.

"I'll get you a chair," Sister Ann said.

"My God, Henry. Our baby is so hurt."

"Hush," he said, pulling her tight to his side. "She's going to be all right."

“But—”

“She’s going to be just fine.”

Chapter 2

The sun was just rising into a cloudless sky as Henry pulled the Prius under the chinaberry tree in front of the sprawling brick home. Jesse Gamez, a plump woman with smooth black hair caught up in a ponytail, stood in the doorway as he crossed the gravel yard, bare except for a small, pink plastic trike sprawled on its side.

At fifty, Jesse still had flash and even at 6 in the morning, in her tight black jeans and magenta sweater, she looked as if she was ready to step out on a date. This woman had been part of his family for nearly ten years, always there to give advice and support his daughter and the kids, so when she opened her arms, he felt relief when he stepped into them. Standing on her toes, she kissed the air by his ear.

“The kids are still asleep,” she whispered. “I’ll get you breakfast.” She led him through the familiar living room, crowded with potted plants and children’s toys, most of which were corralled in a single, sturdy cardboard box that doubled as a playhouse, and into the roomy kitchen.

Within minutes, she presented him with a plate of scrambled eggs next to a pool of refried beans. She wrapped two warm flour tortillas in a dish towel and set them alongside the plate. “First eat. Then tell me what’s happened to our Andy.”

He thought he wasn't hungry until he took the first bite of warm tortilla. He used it to scoop up beans and egg, took another bite.

“Coffee?”

“No, thanks.” He'd had several bad cups at the hospital. She poured a cup for herself then sat across from him, her hand, with its long sculpted nails, supporting her head as she watched him eat.

As he chewed, he became aware of how tight his back and neck felt. He rolled his shoulders, then rotated his head to get at the muscles of his neck. Jesse got up and began to press her thumbs up his spine, to his shoulders, neck, and the base of skull along his hairline.

He groaned. “God, Jesse, if I were straight, I'd ask you to marry me.”

“*Querido*, you and the kids are like a second family to me. If you were straight, we'd already be married.”

He patted the hand that gripped the muscle of his shoulder. With the last scrap of tortilla, he cleaned up the beans, then got up to clear the table.

“Sit,” she ordered, pressing his shoulder with her hand. “And tell me.”

He sat, shook his head, not knowing where to start or how much to tell. “Someone attacked her in the downtown parking garage. He beat her unconscious, Jesse.” He paused, let out a lungful of air. “There's some swelling of her brain, and they've got her on a breathing machine. I guess that's the worst, but the bastard broke her sweet face, Jess, beat her in the face and then he ... they think he—” His voice trailed off. He could not say the word *rape* aloud, wouldn't even try.

“What are we going to tell the kids?”

The eggs and beans started to roil in his stomach. “I don’t know.”

“Well, you better figure it out. They’ll be awake pretty soon, and you’re going to have to tell them something.”

“Like what?” He folded up his paper napkin, unfolded it. “Think I should tell them somebody beat her senseless?”

Jesse sipped her coffee. “Was she robbed?”

He shook his head.

Jesse took a deep breath. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Was she raped?”

The word caught beneath his breast bone. He hung his head. “Probably.”

She pulled a paper towel off the rack and held it to her eyes. When she looked up, there were mascara smudges beneath each eye. “We’ll tell them she was hit by a car.”

“Hit by a car,” he repeated woodenly. “OK.”

“Tell them that she’s is going to be all right. That part’s the truth.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know, that’s all. I’m a mother five times. A mother knows these things. Besides—” She blotted her eyes again then pointed to the statue of the Virgin Mary resting placidly on a corner table. “She will not allow anything else.”

She said it with such conviction that he almost believed her. But Jesse hadn’t seen Andy there, lying in the cold bright light, attached to all the tubes and wires, and that machine forcing her chest to rise and fall. She looked so frail, so unsubstantial, the fight and fire knocked clean out of her. And the Virgin Mary, where had she been last night? Not with Andy in the parking garage, he thought, suddenly filled with anger.

A toilet flushed down the hall. “Watch out, here comes the mini-tornado.” Jesse blew her nose and busied herself at the kitchen sink.

“Pa Pa!” Hank shouted the minute he stepped through the door, then arms rotating like a twin whirligigs, he slid on stockinged feet across the tiled floor.

Henry easily scooped him onto his lap. The boy was small for six, bird-boned, he seemed, and slender like his grandmother. Unlike Andy’s, his hair was fine and dark, eyes wide and slate colored—his father’s eyes. He nuzzled Hank’s neck, inhaling his warm, nutty scent.

The boy planted a big kiss on Henry’s mouth. “How come you’re here?”

“I came to give you a big hug, buddy.” He tightened his arms around the boy. “Who’s this you’ve got on your PJs?”

“Duh. Sponge Bob, of course.” He gave his Pa Pa three solid pats on the shoulder, then pushed off into a backbend, hands sweeping the floor. “Where’s Mommy?”

Henry felt his mouth go weak and pursed his lips to keep them from trembling. “Bad news, bud. She’s in the hospital.” He paused, swallowed, reset his mouth as he pulled the boy back into a sitting position. “Mommy was hit by a car last night, but don’t you worry. She’s going to be OK.” He turned towards Jesse, who was again blotting her eyes. She nodded her approval.

The boy, suddenly serious, took Henry’s face between his hands and turned it back to face him. “Does she have a broken leg?”

“Not her leg.”

“Her arm?”

“No, her arms and legs are OK. Mostly, she hurt her head.”

“I hurt my head once and threw up.”

“I remember. You fell off your bike and hit your head on the curb. We took you to the hospital, too. Remember that?”

“I didn’t like the hospital. It wasn’t even a little bit fun.”

“Well, people don’t go to the hospital to have fun. People go to get better. That’s what your Mommy is doing there, getting better.”

“I want to go see her in the hospital right now.”

“Can’t, buddy. Right now you have to eat breakfast. Right, Nana Jesse?”

“Right.”

“What happened to your eyes, Nana? You look like a raccoon.”

“A raccoon?” Jesse spit on a corner of the paper towel and wiped beneath each eye.

“How’s that?”

“Good. So after breakfast we’ll go see Mommy.”

“No, *mijito*. After breakfast we have to get ready to go roller skating with Lito and Cassy.”

“We’re going skating today?”

“*Sí, mijito*. Just now they called and asked if you could go to the skating rink with them.”

“Cool. Then we can go see Mommy in the hospital.”

“Sorry, baby,” Jesse said. “They don’t allow visitors under twelve in the hospital.”

Henry was unsure about hospital rules, but he was pretty certain that the rule and the plan to go skating with Jesse’s grandkids had been invented on the spot.

Hank thought about that for a moment. “Well, I better go wake up Sadie so we won’t be late for skating.” He hopped down from Henry’s lap, then skittered out of the kitchen, all arms and legs like a spider on ice.

“So can they stay with you until we get things sorted out?” Henry asked.

“Of course, *querido*.”

From his pants pocket he produced a key on a red twisty. He handed it to Jesse.

“Andy’s house. Just go over there, and get whatever the kids need.” He dug in his wallet, slipped out five \$20 dollar bills. He held them out to Jesse.

She pushed his hand away. “*No lo necesito*.”

“Yes you necesito.”

“I don’t take care of Andy’s kids because I need the money.” She gestured around the well-equipped kitchen. “My Teddy left me just fine, God rest his sweet soul. No, I do it because of what Andy did for Neto. If it weren’t for your daughter, my son might be—” She shrugged. “Who knows, dead maybe. He was all into black and tattoos and pierces, sick of school. Now look at him! He’s an editor for the college what’s-it.”

“Newspaper?”

“No. Not the newspaper.”

“Literary journal?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” She placed three boxes of cereal on the table and a quart of milk.

“The literary journal and he talks about being a teacher. That’s all Andy’s doing. Oh, at first I was so jealous that she could accomplish what I could not. I was thinking this one must be sexy. I admit it. But then I met her, and I understood what it was. She saw things in Neto that his own *mamá* did not.”

Slicing a banana into two bowls, she continued. “Besides, I missed having babies around. My grandkids were all the time too busy. There was soccer, then baseball, violin lessons, folklorico—every day something different, and no time for Nana. Andy’s kids needed a *nana*, and I needed Andy’s kids. It’s been a beautiful arrangement. So put that damn money away.”

Sadie looked at the clock on the bedside table, then pulled the pillow over her head to muffle the voices coming from the kitchen. Though she wondered why Pa Pa and not her mom was there to pick them up, no way was she going to get out of bed so early on a Saturday morning. Her mom was supposed to have been out with her girlfriends from school last night, but when she didn’t come to get them, Sadie suspected that she might have been on a date instead. Caroline Frankle said when her mom went out on a date, she had to stay at the sitter’s overnight. Well, Sadie knew what going out on a date and not coming home all night meant. She didn’t like it, didn’t even want to think about it.

Suddenly the door burst open, and Hank was jumping up and down on the bed.

“Get up. Pa Pa’s here, and we’re going skating with Cassy and Lito.”

Sadie rolled over. “Quit jumping on the bed.”

“Get up,” he said, now jumping from feet to knees to feet.

“Quit it, Hank. If you jump on me, I’ll kill your bony butt.”

“You’re not allowed to kill my bony butt.” He took two more jumps, then sprang off the bed. Slowly he crab-walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Sadie pulled the pillow over her face. Going skating with Nana Jesse’s grandkids was not a good reason to get out of bed all happy and gleeful. Lito and Cassy were cute and

all, but Cassy, who was only seven, would want her to hold her hand the whole time, creeping round and round the rink. Way boring.

The door opened a crack. “May I come in?” Pa Pa asked, as if he couldn’t see that she was still asleep.

Hopeless, Sadie concluded, and pulled the pillow away from her face. “I guess.”

He sat gently on the edge of the bed then picked up her hand. “Got some bad news, pumpkin.”

Sadie sprang up. “Mom? Something’s happened to Mom.”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “She was hit by a car last night. But she’s—”

Sadie threw back the blankets and swung her feet to the floor. “We have to get to the hospital.”

“Sit back down a minute, honey.”

“But Pa Pa—”

When he started to cry, she felt a silent little bomb explode somewhere behind her eyes, and sparks of heat down her arms. “Pa Pa, is she dead?”

“No. No. It’s just—” He picked up the pillow, wiped it across his face, then hugged it to his chest.

Sadie dropped down next to him on the bed. “Just what, Pa Pa?”

“She’s very, very hurt.”

“We’ve got to go to the hospital, now.”

“They won’t let you see her. She’s in intensive care, you know what that is?”

She shook her head.

“It’s the part of the hospital where they take the very best care of people, and they don’t allow children in there.”

Sadie had to think about that for a moment. “But she’s my mother. They have to let me see her. I’m her closest relative, aren’t I?”

He smiled at that, and suddenly she was furious. She wanted to hit him. Instead, she started to cry. “How can you smile?”

“Sorry, pumpkin. It’s just that you sounded so much like your mother just then. And you look so much like her it made me smile. You’ve got her exact hair, you know.”

Pa Pa was such a liar, she thought tugging back the thick, wavy hair that never did what she wanted it to do. Her mother was beautiful. Pa Pa put his arm around her shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

“Come on, Sadie. Don’t be mad at your Pa Pa. I didn’t make the rules.”

She wasn’t so sure. How could they keep a kid from seeing her mother? Was that even legal? “Can I talk to her on the phone at least?”

“Not yet.” Pa Pa took a deep breath. “Your mother’s— The worst injury was to her head. She’s unconscious, and for now there’s a tube going down her throat that helps her breathe.”

Sadie went cold. She got back in bed and pulled the covers over her head. “Is she going to die?”

He patted her back. “No, pumpkin. She’s going to be just fine. It will take a while, but your mother is going to be OK. I promise.”

She didn’t trust his voice. There were things he wasn’t saying. She pulled back the covers so she could look at his face. If her mother was going to be just fine, why were his

eyes so red and his face so sad and tired? And why were his lips pressed into such a thin line?

* * *

He'd taken a quick shower, but hadn't bothered to shave. Now he was perched on a bright red Pilates ball in front of his computer. *Chas*, he typed: *Andy's in Saint Mary's Hospital with a serious head injury. She's unconscious. Call me. All my love to you, Enrique.*

Chas, who spoke all the Latin languages, always called him Enrique. It was like an endearment and made Henry feel sophisticated and attractive. Earlier, he'd tried to reach him at his mother's and then on his cell, but there'd been no answer. She was a feisty old broad, Chas' mother, and cool about the prospect of moving from her San Francisco apartment, with its view of Coit Tower and the bay, to assisted living down the peninsula someplace, Redwood City, Menlo Park, promising her nice weather in exchange for the million-dollar view. It had been a hard sell. Now Henry worried that the old lady might be balking, which could delay Chas' return.

He looked at his watch: 7:40. Karen was still at the hospital, and he needed to spell her if she would allow it. He rummaged through his desk drawers, found a yellow legal pad. Tearing off the used pages, he clipped a pen to it, then grabbed a sweater, and hurried out to the car.

When he arrived in the small, dim waiting room adjacent to the ICU, Karen was still wrapped in the flannel sheet and lying on a couch, the tote bag now under her head. At

first, he thought, good, she's asleep, but then he realized she was simply staring at the Weather Channel.

He touched her shoulder. "Have you been able to nap?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so—maybe. The doctor, what was his name, Sing? Sang? Song?" She pulled herself to a sitting position. "Whatever, he was here a while ago."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know," she hummed, rather than articulated. As was her habit, doubt was always a downward inflected hum. With both hands, she pushed her bottled-white-blond hair back from her face. "It was something about the cerebro-spinal fluid."

"What about it?"

"Oh—" Wincing in concentration, she looked up, faded blue eyes searching the ceiling as if the answer might be written there. "I'm sorry, I can't remember exactly. There's so much going on. He said he'd be back later."

How could she not remember? Henry felt the urge to shake her. He reached up and turned the television to mute.

"I don't think you're supposed to do that."

"Why on earth not? We're the only ones in here." He passed his hands over his face. "Listen." He forced calm into his voice. "You're tired. Why don't you go home for a while, get something to eat, try to sleep?"

"I can't leave her."

"You have to. You can't even think straight, you're so tired." He sat down next to her. "She's going to be in the hospital for a long time, Karen. You can't be here every

minute. Go home. Get some rest, and come back this afternoon. By then, I'll be too tired to think too. We'll work it that way, taking turns so somebody's always here." He patted her hand. "What do you think?"

"I won't sleep."

"So take a shower, grab a bite, put on warmer clothes. See, I brought my sweater," he reasoned as if talking to Sadie or Hank." He thought to tell her not to drink, but that would merely put her on the defensive.

For a few moments they sat in silence, then, without another word, Karen stood up and started for the door. Should drive her home, he thought, but then he might miss the doctor. "Take care," was all he offered.

She turned for a moment as if to speak, but merely nodded her head, then walked out of the room.

He went to the nurses' station. "Pardon me." This time a different face looked up, smiled. Her name was Sherry, he noted, now determined to memorize the names and faces of all the people he would come in contact with while Andy was in the ICU. "I'd like to speak with Dr. Singh."

"I believe he's gone home. Dr. Rubio is currently monitoring the ICU."

"Do you think I could talk to him?"

"I'll tell her you'd like to see her."

"Oh. It's Ms. Dr. Rubio." He tried to make light of his male chauvinist presumption.

The nurse was having none of it. "Just Dr. Rubio."

Duly chastised, he nodded. "Thanks. I'll be with my daughter."

Andy's bed was next to the wall, which provided the only privacy in the ICU. He pulled up a chair. "Hi, baby. It's Daddy." He took her hand, gave it a squeeze. Her hand remained limp in his own. Someone had cleaned most of the blood from under her fingernails. He was grateful for that, but there was still blood in her hair.

"Well, I stopped at Jesse's to look in on the kids, tell them you were in the hospital. They took it pretty well. Sadie, of course, was worried, but I told her—" Once again his mouth began to fail him.