

*I embark upon a journey in this year of our Lord 1539 with Father Marcos de Niza. The priest will lead an expedition through uncharted lands north of New Spain where we will search for the Seven Cities of Cibola, the Cities of Gold. I have heard that compared to these cities, Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital destroyed by Cortés, was a village of paupers. My life began in poverty, but it will not end the same way. The Spaniards can have the land. I will have the gold.*

## *Chapter 1*

An almost forgotten child's face startled Jackie as it appeared through the haze. "I'm asleep," she muttered, basing her hunch on decades of experience with the unconscious state. That knowledge failed, however, to explain the ghostly image. If it meant to resolve a real life problem, as dreams often did, understanding the message might require a course in dream analysis or code breaking.

Pale yellow hair, soft as corn silk, flowed over the young girl's shoulder as she knelt to wave a reproachful finger. The air around her moved in a suggestive flutter, like gauzy curtains at the first hint of a storm. It gave the scene a fairytale quality and reminded Jackie of a fable she'd read long ago. In it, an evil witch imprisoned three maidens in a cave and forced them to spin flax into golden threads. The spun gold hair of the child fit nicely, but her voice sounded harsh beyond its years. "You weren't

supposed to come here anymore. Don't you remember what happened last time?"

Other senses stirred. Noxious fumes of rubber and oil stung Jackie's nostrils to gain entry and cast doubt on the sleep theory. For as long as she could remember, rose and lavender scented the air of her bedroom, not petroleum products. There were noises, too soft and muffled to identify, but they echoed as if in a small space. *Maybe I'm in the garage*, she considered through the mush. *Why would I be on the garage floor?*

Jackie stretched, or tried too, only to find vague unresponsive lumps where she remembered arms and legs. Something flickered—a memory—or perhaps a movie she'd seen. A woman stepped from her car searching her purse for house keys when a noise distracted her. Before she could react, a thick arm wrapped around her neck and pressed a hand over her mouth. The scene fast-forwarded and a needle punctured her sleeve. Almost at once, her vision darkened and the house blurred. *They drugged me. Why? Where the hell am I?*

The slab beneath her began to vibrate and she recognized a new sound. *Oh, dear god, no. I'm in the trunk of a car. This isn't happening.* She renewed her struggle to break free—not from a dream, but from a nightmare even sleep would not allow.



"Geez." Pat smashed the remote's power button in disgust and tossed the control to the coffee table. Her limited budget allowed her to watch only those stations attracted to the television's archaic rabbit ears. Even more depressing was that after dutifully attaching the analog-to-digital converter box, it failed

to improve the content of a single show. “How bad does this crap have to get before I stop watching?” She cleared a space on the table for her glasses and shifted to face the couch’s coarse fabric. Anything was better than the offending screen.

At one hundred and eight pounds, Pat’s five-foot-two-inch frame defined petite. Her lack of body fat had little to do with watching what she ate. She simply didn’t think about food. A tap on the top of her head drew her attention from the drab green upholstery to the pushy black paw of her cat, Zodiac. The feline stretched across the back of the couch in a potentially hazardous pose with Pat directly in striking range. One of Zodiac’s many duties was to remind her distracted human when they needed to eat. Sometimes a quick swat proved the most practical solution.

She lifted the cat to her stomach. “Hi, Zoey, did my whining disturb you? Sorry.” At fifty-three, Pat had a comfortable grasp of her priorities. When the phone rang, she closed her eyes and scratched a furry black ear to wait for the machine to retrieve the call and identify the caller. Only a rare voice could tempt her to move once she’d snuggled in with Zoey.

“Patricia, pick up. It’s Gwen. Pick up the phone. It’s important.”

One of those voices belonged to Gwen, a person who seldom sounded anxious or upset. Pat sat up and placed the cat on her perch to dig around the coffee table for the phone. “This better be important,” she told Zoey and pressed talk. “Hi, Gwen. What’s up?”

“Jackie’s missing.”

Patricia Sexton, Dr. Gwendolyn Garcia-Wilson, and Jacqueline Tracy co-owned ‘Zodiac’s Rare & Used

Books', named after their not always silent partner. The meager profits didn't support any of them, but they all loved books and somehow kept the doors open.

Gwen, a semi-retired psychiatrist, continued to see a few patients and do the occasional lecture. She and her husband enjoyed a comfortable life and it calmed her to putter around the bookstore. Jackie worked in finance, an occupation equated with witchcraft by the other two women, and Pat and Zodiac made their home in an apartment above the store. Pat managed day-to-day operations and supplemented her slim share of the profits doing freelance computer graphics. When in the proper mood, Zodiac graced book buyers with her stately presence. Opening the bookstore had been Jackie's idea, and her friends knew why. Besides offering a space to nurture her lifelong love affair with books, it gave her an opportunity to help someone she loved.

"What do you mean she's missing? We saw her less than four hours ago. If she stopped for dinner or had some other business she might not be home yet."

"No, she went home to change and planned to come back and pick me up for dinner. She never showed. Pat, that's not like her."

Gwen was right. Jackie's nature did not allow for bad manners. She was punctual to a fault and expected the same of others. If she found herself running late or saw she'd be unable to make an engagement, she notified the waiting party as far in advance as possible. "It is a little out of her norm, but what can we do, Gwen? I don't think the police will even look into it until she's been missing twenty-four hours."

“The police?” Pat pulled the phone from her ear at Gwen’s louder than normal response. “Should we call the police? Do you think she’s in trouble?”

“No, I didn’t say we should call the police. You tried to reach her at home, right?”

The doctor took a breath. “Yes, I’ve been calling for an hour. I keep getting a notice that they can’t connect to her voice mail.”

“Maybe she had a family emergency or one of her business associates had an urgent situation and she’s been in a conference.”

“I suppose anything is possible in that business, but Beth is her only family and she’s in Europe. Patricia, I have a terrible feeling.”

Gwen’s near hysterics convinced Pat to share her concern. “Why don’t you pick me up and we’ll take a drive to Evanston and see if she’s home. Maybe she spaced out dinner and turned the phones off to take a nap.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Pat rubbed Zoey’s neck as she retrieved her glasses. “Madame Zodiac, I need to step out. Your Aunt Jackie has gone missing. You’ll stay out of mischief while I’m gone, I trust.” The cat stretched, directed two yellow eyes in her mom’s direction, and blinked. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Late November in Chicago meant cold temperatures, although not cold enough to warrant the heavy down coat Pat grabbed from a hook as she left the bookstore. Along with no cable TV, her unfortunate financial situation did not allow for an additional lighter coat during those weeks between denim jacket weather and heavy coat season. Pat decided long ago, if the choice were hers, she would rather be too warm than cold. The chill she felt as she

waited had more to do with her missing friend than cold temperatures. She tried not to consider that Gwen had good reason to panic. Jackie would never forego dinner without a call.

The previous day, Pat and Nicole arrived at her house ten minutes late for Thanksgiving dinner and had to listen, hushing growling stomachs, as she gave her ‘the importance of punctuality’ speech. Luckily, they heard a shortened version because their catered dinner waited on the table and Jackie had indulged in a glass of wine.

When Gwen pulled to the curb, Pat put a gloved hand on the door handle and decided not to worry until she knew a problem existed. Her confidence deteriorated when she opened the door and found the drive had done little to calm Gwen. “This is so not Jackie.”

“It’ll be okay,” Pat reassured her as she buckled her seatbelt. “Huh. How’s that for role reversal? Me telling you it’ll be okay.” The doctor’s warm smile reflected off the windshield as she merged into traffic. She’d helped Pat through a difficult time of her life, and in her eyes, Gwen Garcia-Wilson was part woman and part angel. If Jackie was missing, Pat couldn’t think of better company than her friend, Gwen the psychiatrist, except maybe her friend Nicki the detective.

*I am Amate Jayn. My skin is as fair as that of a Spaniard, but I am a Moor and therefore became their slave. When the ship on which we sailed crashed in New Spain, I freed myself from the shackles in the galleon's hold. My good fortune continued when I found a dead priest and took his robe, prayer book, and his name. My servitude in the monastery before the voyage has proved useful. I know the ways of the order and deception is easy. The pompous Spaniards thought their slaves too dull to understand, but I listened and learned of the Seven Cities of Cibola. When I heard of Marcos de Niza's expedition, I offered my services as a humble priest. Amate Jayn, for now, Pedro Fernando*

## *Chapter 2*

A man with an insatiable desire for wealth needed brains and commitment to feed that hunger. Samuel Barnes enjoyed intelligence and passion beyond even that of the conquistadors he revered, but unlike the Spaniards, he served neither king nor god. Personal gain motivated his every action.

His interest in the explorers began as a youth, but his enthusiasm soared upon seeing an exhibit at the Field Museum shortly after his arrival in Chicago. Intrigued by the conquerors and their conquests, he taught himself Spanish and studied everything written about their search for wealth and power. One of his

champions was Hernán Cortés who had a reputation for military prowess, shrewdness, and a distinct lack of morals. His knack for making enemies of powerful people almost cost him his commission as commander of the army chosen to invade Mexico. He avoided capture by sailing out of Cuba before troops from his own kingdom arrived to arrest him. When he conquered the Aztec Empire, the success of his victories changed his political position and history.

The more Barnes learned about the conquistadors, the greater his appetite for artifacts of the warriors he considered kin. That well-known passion recently led to a phone call from an antique dealer in Phoenix about the discovery of an ancient journal. The book identified the location of Cibola and the Seven Cities of Gold. It, Barnes believed, held the key to the only thing on earth with the power to satisfy his thirst.



The drug's grip on Jackie lessened and her brain cleared enough to consider the situation. The horrible tasting stuff over her mouth was duct tape and it might have covered her eyes as well. That would explain the lack of light and her inability to produce a noise louder than a groan. As feeling trickled into her limbs, she found they'd met the same fate. She had no idea how long she'd been there and the restraints and limited space kept her from changing positions. Her right shoulder pressed against the cold floor and alternated between a sharp pain and complete lack of feeling. When the frigid temperatures registered, she shivered.

She'd left home that morning wearing a navy blue wool pantsuit and a calf length lined trench coat. The coat, she remembered, was on the passenger's seat of her car. When she returned that afternoon, she'd planned to run in, change, and come right out, but someone altered her plans. *Gwen and I were meeting for dinner. She'll know there's a problem and call Nicole. I'll be safe at home in no time.* The car left smooth pavement and bounced along a road, jarring the comforting thought from her mind.

Moments after the vibrations stopped, two doors slammed. She tried not to move as the trunk opened, or as the owner of the thick arm picked her up and placed her over his shoulder. At six feet, Jackie never considered herself a lightweight, which meant the person tossing her around was enormous. He carried her inside a structure and laid her surprisingly gently on the floor where she remained as unmoving as her trembling body would allow. Her hearing, one of only two available senses, told her nothing about her surroundings. No one spoke and she heard no other noise. Her sense of smell, however, perked when she sniffed cigarette smoke. She'd quit the soothing vice a few years earlier and still had the occasional craving.

A voice broke the silence. "Why don't I just yank that tape off her mouth? That'll bring her around in a hurry." The floor rumbled beneath her as the lighter of the two men approached. She imagined an old black-and-white cowboy movie where a scout put his ear to the ground and listened for horses. She wasn't expecting the cavalry, but a small posse would be nice—a small posse and a cigarette.

"Ow. Shit." She shouted in astonishment and pain when he ripped the tape from her mouth. "Who are you? What do you want?"

“Keep your mouth shut,” said the man who removed the tape. “Put her on the couch and take those boots off her feet. They look dangerous.”

Thick Arm lifted her from the floor and carried her to the couch. With her hands still taped behind her, she perched on the edge uncomfortably and in increasingly bad temper. “What do you want? You know, you can’t just pick someone up off the street and take them home.”

“Trust me, lady. You wouldn’t be my first choice to bring home. I don’t want to hear nothing from you except where to find that journal.”

She hesitated for the briefest moment to wonder what he found unappealing, but decided at her age there was nothing to consider. The sound of a Zippo lighter lid flipped open and she lifted her head. She heard the small wheel scratch against the flint and the soft whoosh as the wick ignited into a flame. Seconds later the intoxicating fragrance of lighter fluid mixed with fresh burning tobacco awoke an old craving. She sighed and responded more sharply than she’d intended. “I have no idea what you want. Release me at once.”

The unexpected slap surprised her as much as it stung and knocked her backward into the couch. It also frightened her enough to stop further comments. Thick Arm removed the tape from her boots and pulled them from her feet. She knew why the kidnapper thought they were dangerous. The dagger thin three-inch heels would have made an impressive weapon. If she could have kicked him, she would have found an excellent place to plant one or both of those heels.

“Tie her on the bed and belt her if she says anything except where she put the journal.”

“Why would you tie me to a bed? Do you think I’ll just mosey on out the door?”

“Shut up. Get her out of here.”

Thick Arm laid her on her back and taped her hands to the headboard. When he finished, the man who wanted the journal joined them. “I’m a patient person, Ms Tracy. You’ll tell me where the book is before you leave this place, dead or alive. It makes no difference to me.”

She stiffened and tilted toward his voice. “How do you know who I am? Who are you?” He smacked her again and her head dropped to the mattress. The ‘keeping her mouth shut’ plan needed work, but in a short time, a pin pricked her arm and numbed her body. When she tried to call him a few choice names, the most venomous thing to escape her mouth was drool.



The headlight beams bounced across the open gate as Gwen turned into the Tracy’s driveway. Both women gasped and Pat’s hand flew to her mouth. It didn’t muffle her scream. “Oh god, the gate’s open. The gate’s not supposed to be open.” She tried to remain calm, but the gate should not have been open. Any lingering composure dissolved when they drove between the pillars and saw Jackie’s Mercedes in the drive with the doors and trunk lid open.

Gwen pulled behind it and jumped out. “That’s why she hasn’t answered her cell phone.” The device lay crushed next to the car.

“Gwen, call the police.” Pat knew from her visit the previous day that the cook, Maria, had resigned

because her baby was due. She also knew that the housekeepers were off for the holiday and Jackie considered wasting electricity a crime punishable by a lengthy jail sentence. “The lights are on and there shouldn’t be anyone here but Jackie.”

Jacqueline and her aunt, Elizabeth Tracy lived in Evanston, a suburb north of Chicago, in a fourteen-room brick home. The Colonial style structure, built in 1925, sat hidden amid rows of ancient trees on a two-and-a-half acre lot with a private beach on Lake Michigan.

Pat found the front door slightly open and gripped the handle. It swung wide when she pushed and her eyes took a second to adjust to the bright interior. Every light burned, illuminating the turned over, emptied out, and tossed aside furniture. Curtains, ripped from the windows, covered the floor along with stuffing emptied from shredded chairs, couches, and cushions.

“Jackie, are you here?” She ran up the curved oak staircase to the second floor, slowing at the thought of what she might find. “Jackie?”

As Pat disappeared to the upper level, a voice startled Gwen. “Stay right where you are.”

She spun to face a police officer at the front entrance with a gun pointed in her direction. “You almost gave me a heart attack,” she shouted. “Please, put that away.”

The policemen did a quick scan of Gwen’s short sturdy body and slid the weapon in its holster, satisfied she posed no immediate danger. That might have been his first mistake. “Did you call about a missing person?”

Gwen continued to clutch her chest and was about to answer when Patricia flew down the stairs.

“She’s not here. She’s not anywhere. The entire house was torn apart.” She stopped when she almost ran into the dark blue uniform.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Patricia Sexton, that’s Gwen Garcia-Wilson and we’re,” she waved her finger between them, “friends of the woman who lives here, Jacqueline Tracy. She’s missing.” Pat stopped and gulped in air.

“How did you get in?”

The officer probably thought it was a reasonable question, but Gwen was in no mood to be reasonable. “For heaven’s sakes, the door was open.” She spread her hands. “You can see that someone tore this place apart.”

“Why are you here?” Although the officer was a man of few words, Gwen wasn’t. She explained her dinner plans with Jackie in detail. “Okay. I get the picture. Give me your names and phone numbers and you can go.”

Along with their contact information, Pat and Gwen made sure he understood how important punctuality was to Jackie. When they were ready to leave, Gwen saw the squad car in the driveway. “You’re blocking the gate.”

“Then maybe you’ll have to wait until I finish my investigation.”

The evening’s events had left the doctor in a rare nasty mood and the prospect of waiting until he finished was not an option. “Be serious, Officer. You want two menopausal women to hang around here with nothing better to do than help you with your investigation?”

Pat snorted as the young man processed the implications of Gwen’s remark. He dropped his

notebook in a pocket, pursing his lips at Gwen's crossed arms and spread feet. She was a big-boned gal and knew how to carry those bones to her advantage. Without another word, he left through the front door.

Two minutes later, Gwen and Pat drove out the gate. "What could have happened? I didn't see a ransom note, and she doesn't have family except for Beth, who is just about unreachable when she's on vacation."

"Have you noticed Jackie acting strange lately, Pat? How was she yesterday at dinner?"

"As hyper as ever, but that's normal behavior for her. Her brain's always going a million miles a minute."

"No, I mean, different strange."

"Not that I remember." The line of red brake lights they trailed hypnotized Pat. Even at eight o'clock at night, every street in or out of Chicago had bumper-to-bumper traffic. She sighed. "I'll call Nicki. She'll find her." Nicole Jordan, longtime friend of both Patricia and Jackie, was a retired Chicago police officer turned private investigator.

Gwen agreed. "Good idea, Pat, and I'll see what Hugh thinks."

"Hugh's an accountant."

"Accountants are detectives. They detect numbers instead of crimes. Sometimes they detect numbers that are crimes." She grinned. "Besides, he loves puzzles."

"We should try to remember what's happened in the last few days or weeks, Gwen. Maybe that'll give us a clue about why someone tore her house apart and why she's missing. Outside of money, what could Jackie have to make someone kidnap her?"

The unsettling silence returned and Gwen glanced at the passenger's seat. "I don't think they're after money and that scares the hell out of me."



Pat recognized Nicki's voice on the phone and began shouting. "Nicole, Jackie's lost. Her house is a mess and someone dumped everything out of her car. We found the gate open and the lights on."

"Calm down, Pat. I heard your message. What do you mean she's lost?"

"I mean as in not anywhere to be found. She and Gwen had dinner plans, but she never showed up and didn't call. We found her cell phone smashed in the driveway."

"That's not good. Do you have any idea why they trashed her house, or what they might want? Did you call the police?"

"Yes, we called and they came right over. And no," Pat groaned. "Besides money, I can't imagine what they want. If it's money, how can we come up with it for them?"

"We can't do much until we know who it is and what they want. Let me make some phone calls and put some notes together. If I don't find her tonight, I'll come by the store in the morning. Try not to worry, Pat."

Nicole had not switched on the lights when she entered her office. A streetlight just outside the grimy uncovered window provided ample illumination of the depressing room—a room not a great deal larger than her desk and two mismatched chairs. As she ended the call, her eyes followed the halogen intruder out the window to the surrounding neighborhood

and stopped at the building across the street. She studied the recent additions to the gang graffiti decorating the otherwise dull brick. The signs and symbols of adolescent power mongers appeared only hours after the city's 'Graffiti Busters' departed.

When she'd first decided to open the agency, she'd considered working out of her home, but discovered that people weren't comfortable hiring a detective without an office. Most people didn't trust a private investigator unless they looked and sounded like Bogey. On some mornings, she could manage the voice, but she was a fair-skinned redhead without a trench coat or a hint of five o'clock shadow.

The first time Jackie visited the office she opened the door and frowned. "You can't stay in this neighborhood, Nicole. You'll spend your time chasing the crooks who stole your computer."

"It's what I can afford. Once I'm on my feet, I'll rent a space in a better neighborhood."

"Aunt Beth and I use investigators to check out our potential deals and the people involved. Why don't you work for us and move."

"That's a generous offer and I'd be delighted to work for you, but I'll keep the office until I'm sure I have a productive agency. If you were my only client, what would I do if something happened to you?"

"If you were my detective and wanted to keep your job, you'd make sure nothing happened."

Something had happened to Jackie. Nicki turned off her computer and leaned back eliciting a groan from the chair. On those occasions when she echoed the groan, she wondered if the agency would make it. She'd spent twenty years on the Chicago Police force, but two years earlier, a near fatal shooting started her thinking about change. Opening the

agency was exciting. Establishing it was another challenge. Except for Elizabeth and Jacqueline Tracy, work was slim.

Her last birthday, ‘the big five o’, had an emotional impact that surprised her. She also recognized that the physical part of the job was a greater challenge than a decade earlier. She worked harder to chase a crook down an alley and throwing herself over a six-foot fence no longer fit in her job description. Maybe it was time to take life easier, but before that happened, she had to find Jackie.

*We leave in the morning. February is a good month to travel and everyone is excited that the journey begins. Father Marcos told me he believes his new priest can help save the soldiers souls. I bit the inside of my mouth to keep from smiling at his words. I want to save no one's soul. I carry two daggers under my robe and a lust for gold in my heart to match that of any Spaniard.*

## *Chapter 3*

Jackie grew up on stories from her aunt's vast repertoire of interests. One memorable tale was of Huitzilopochtli, the sun god from Aztec mythology. Many considered him the greatest Aztec deity because every morning he used his rays of light to defeat the night sky. His worshipers paid tribute to his daily victory over darkness with human sacrifices.

Most mornings, she watched from her comfortable bed as Huitzilopochtli's barge lifted from the glistening waters of Lake Michigan to begin its journey. It soothed her to observe the subtle shift from dark to light on her bedroom walls. To watch monstrous black shapes around the room become pleasant recognizable objects. As she opened her eyes, she knew something was different. There were no familiar objects or cheerful rose-colored walls. The only light that dawned was the memory that she was a prisoner. Images swirled through her brain and

demanded attention. Images she ignored in a struggle to stay focused. *Today, think about right here and right now. They're looking for a journal, but what journal?*

Soon, another need required immediate attention. She turned to where she thought she'd heard sounds. "Hello. Is anyone here? I need to use the bathroom."

Heavy steps approached. She didn't know why, but she felt relieved that it was Thick Arm. He cut the tape from her wrists and lifted it carefully from her skin as he helped her stand. To her astonishment, her legs failed and she collapsed at the giant's feet.

"Get up." The other man entered the room. She tried to push herself to her feet, but had no strength and made it only as far as her hands and knees. Her entire body shook with the struggle, but instead of sympathy or assistance, he shoved her hip with his foot and returned her to the floor. "I told you to get up."

She couldn't and didn't bother trying. Instead, she hugged her knees and laid her head down and whispered, "I can't."

Thick Arm wrapped a pair of giant hands around her waist and helped her to her feet. She concentrated on staying upright and gripped the now welcome bulky extremity.

"The bathroom's right behind you. The door stays open. Do what ya gotta do and get out." The man who wanted the journal was still the only one who spoke. She wondered as Thick Arm turned her toward the door, if he had a handicap that made him unable to talk. He held her while she felt for the doorframe, letting go when she gripped a solid piece of wood to inch her way inside. She never considered

escape, guessing they could walk faster than she could crawl.

She flushed the toilet and felt around for the sink to splash water on the exposed portion of her face. When she couldn't find a towel, she shook her hands and ran damp fingers through the parts of her hair not covered with tape. For a brief moment, she pictured her graying blond head in the mirror over the sink and sighed. *I'm a sight*. "Finished," she said, and made her way out the door.

Thick Arm led her to a different room where he edged her into a recliner. Although she didn't think she'd be going anywhere, he taped her ankles and wrists.

Minutes later, Jackie's nostrils widened at the smell of something cooking, a smell that overpowered even the cigarette smoke. Although she couldn't identify the specific food, she wanted whatever it was. Her stomach growled as a reminder that she hadn't eaten since breakfast the previous day. At least she thought it was the previous day.

When Thick Arm placed a plate on her lap, she identified its contents with her fingers. "Pancakes," she said in delight and shoved a piece in her mouth. Eating pancakes with her fingers was a new, but not totally disagreeable experience. At another time in her life, a sticky face and fingers might have embarrassed her, but as Thick Arm took the empty plate and wiped her hands and face, she rested her head on the back of the chair satisfied.

She could have used a cup of coffee, but didn't feel in a position to make demands. "Could I please have some water?" A minute later, she gripped the glass pressed into her hands and emptied half the

contents. With her hunger and thirst satisfied, Jackie rallied a small amount of courage. “If you tell me what journal you mean, maybe I can help.” Her brave front faded when no one responded and she braced herself for another slap. Instead, the kidnapper answered a cell phone.

“Nothing, huh? You checked the whole place. Okay, thanks, Bill.” Jackie wondered what place Bill had checked and if it had anything to do with her. It did. “You know about a used bookstore in Chicago called Zodiac?” He asked as the phone snapped shut.

*Oh, shit, Patricia.* “I don’t know anything about a book or a bookstore, and I’m sure whoever owns this Zodiac place doesn’t know me.” She didn’t realize he’d risen and stood in front of the chair until he slammed the footrest down. The glass of water slipped from her fingers to her lap and the situation degenerated further when she felt an object press against her forehead.

“Do you know what that is?” She gave him a cautious nod. “That’s right, it’s a gun. I won’t shoot you in the head cause then you won’t be able to tell me where you hid the journal. I’ll just shoot another body part. If you tell me, we’ll find you some help. If you don’t, then you’ll bleed to death right here. What’s it gonna be?” He pushed the gun into her thigh.

“I told you, I don’t know anything about a journal.” The raspy high shriek of her voice surprised her, but it didn’t stop her screams. “Please don’t shoot me. I don’t know what you’re looking for.” She felt Thick Arm draw near and the gun lift from her leg.

“Shit.” The man shouted and Jackie heard the door open and slam closed. Her body slumped in

relief and tears that had gathered under the tape flowed. The child's voice returned to taunt her and sneer at the grown woman who had behaved like a frightened little girl.



“Zodiac, you lazy bum. Are you ready for work? It’s almost ten and I’ll bet Nicole will show up any minute with Jackie.” Zoey agreed and followed Pat down the steep staircase. They stopped at the bottom step where a sense of dread replaced Pat’s good cheer. The door between her apartment and the bookstore usually swung open with little effort, but something blocked its path. She gave a hard shove and froze, staring at the obstruction—books. Books that belonged on shelves covered the floor. After a few startled blinks, she ran to the desk and grabbed the phone. “Gwen. No, I haven’t heard from the police, but you’d better come down here right away.” As she hung up, a shadow appeared outside the front door and she froze until she recognized Nicki and hurried to let her in.

“Why aren’t you open? It’s after ten.” Nicole pointed at her watch while inspecting the scattered books. “Are you doing inventory?”

Neither remark pleased the crabby shopkeeper. Pat pointed to the large white wall clock that said it was a minute before ten. “I just came down, but your watch is fast, and no, we’re not doing inventory. This is how Jackie’s house looked.” She waved at the disarray. “They must have decided to look here, too.”

“Look for what?” It took a minute for Nicki to realize by Pat’s anxious voice and hysterical waves how terrified she was. “Take it easy, Pat. Have you heard anything from the Evanston Police?”

“No.”

“Have you called the police for this?”

“I just came down.” Nicki’s unruffled calm helped Pat regroup and the volume of her voice along with her heart rate dropped. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but it’s too much of a coincidence not to be related to Jackie’s disappearance. Do you want me to make the call?” She retrieved her cell phone.

“Would it do any good?”

“Honestly? No, it wouldn’t do much more than create paperwork, but we should still call. If you do find something missing, you’ll need a report for the insurance company. If it isn’t related, the department will need to know for neighborhood crime stats.”

“But you think it’s related to Jackie’s kidnapping, right?”

“I do, but officially Jackie hasn’t been kidnapped. No one has claimed to have her or asked for ransom. The Evanston police are treating her house as a simple break and enter. Someone will have to turn themselves in before they’ll pursue it. CPD will do about the same with the store if you don’t think anything valuable is missing.”

“I don’t think so but let me check the cash drawer. I made a bank deposit yesterday and left fifty dollars in there.” She opened a drawer in the desk and frowned. “The cash is gone. Surely, they wouldn’t have broken in here expecting to find thousands of dollars.”

“I doubt it. The cash wasn’t the reason they broke in, but it would have been hard to resist. Was there anything else of value missing?”

“I keep my computer upstairs and the few rare books we do have are there if that’s what they wanted.”

Nicki followed her shaky finger to a pile of books by the front window. “I doubt they’re worth enough to break in.”

Nicole pushed a few buttons on her phone, had a brief conversation, and put it away. “They’ll send someone to fill out a report.”

The women turned and watched the front door open and Gwen’s smile turn to alarm. “Oh, my god.” She grabbed Patricia. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Nicki’s said she’d find Jackie.” The detective waved her fingers.

“Do you have any idea what any of this is about, Nicole?”

“A friend of mine with the Evanston Police sent me what they have, which isn’t much. I’m going to talk to the neighbors and find out if anyone saw anything suspicious at the house. You might want to do that here.”

“I’ll talk to the other shop owners. Those are big windows. Someone walking around in here with a flashlight would be visible. The problem is that they’re all businesses and no one’s there at night. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Start talking to your neighbors and I’ll head to Evanston. You guys know Jackie. If the kidnapper doesn’t have impeccable manners, he might be sorry he ever took her. My Evanston police friend agreed to take me to her house to look around. Try not to worry. We’ll find her.” She hugged them.

“Nicki sounded encouraging.” Pat commented as the detective let herself out.

“She always does. I’ll start putting books away.” Gwen turned in a circle to take in the fallen stacks. “We were due for a re-shelving anyway, Pat.”

“I suppose, but I would have preferred taking them down in a more orderly fashion. I guess we should be glad Jackie’s not here to see this. She’d have a fit.”



A frown wasn’t uncommon on the face of Samuel Barnes, but as he sat at his desk squeezing the phone, his scowl exceeded its usual contempt for humanity. The person he’d sent to buy the journal had screwed up. The only news was a message that said he would call when he found the book. Samuel spent two weeks and a great deal of money trying to discover his whereabouts. When he finally called, the news wasn’t much better. “Where the hell have you been and why didn’t you return my calls?”

“I’ve been after the broad with the book. I didn’t figure you’d want to talk to me until I had it.”

“How did she get the journal in the first place? I told you to top any bid.”

“There was a huge accident on the Kennedy and I didn’t make it to the auction. By the time I got there, it was over and she’d bought the book and taken off.”

“How did you find her?”

“I paid a guy five bills and he let me see the list of buyers. It had her first initial and last name, but no address or phone number.”

“People buying at those auctions don’t just carry the goods out. She probably had it shipped. Did you find out where it was sent?”

“I asked about that, but the kid didn’t know.” Stan explained that it took him a while to track down her address, and that she’d showed up while they were searching her house. “We didn’t find anything at the

house, but I found a business card for a rare bookstore and had a buddy of mine search it.”

“What bookstore?”

“Hang on a minute. Here it is, Zodiac Rare and Used Books. It’s on Halstead, but he didn’t find it there either. What do you want me to do? I have her at a cabin in Wisconsin.”

“Give me the address. I want to make sure I know where to find you.”

Stan gave him the location. “Look, Mr. Barnes, she says she don’t know nothing about a journal and I think she might be telling the truth.”

A lesser man would have screamed and smashed the phone on the desk, but patience and control were useful tools to Samuel in the building of his empire. “Find the journal.”

Stan didn’t have an empire. Nor did he have the patience or control to build one. He cursed and dropped the phone in his pocket as he entered the cabin. When he stood in front of the chair, Jackie stiffened, feeling his anger even before he shouted. “You got five seconds to tell me where that journal is. Four, three, two, one.”

She heard his warning, but it wasn’t possible to prepare for the blow. When it struck, a flash of light exploded in her brain and shock and pain nearly dragged her from consciousness. Something heavy on one of his fingers landed on a tooth and might have cracked her new crown. Her nose either ran or bled and her heart felt ready to explode. How could she make him believe she didn’t have what he wanted?

As she leaned forward to wipe her mouth, he grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back. She felt the gun on her forehead. “Where’s the

journal? Just tell me where you put the damn book and I'll let you go."

"I don't know what you want." She screamed and tried to prepare for another blow. Stan didn't answer, but she heard the front door open and felt Thick Arm approach. She couldn't see him take the gun or grab the hand that clenched her hair, but she knew he did.

"What are you doing?" Stan shouted, but it wasn't at her.

"You're hurting her, Stan." Thick Arm spoke. His gentle voice surprised her.

"Damn it." Stan shoved her against the chair as he released his grip. "Put her in bed, Chuck. I'm going out."

Jackie let out a breath. Thick Arm, also known as Chuck, never struck her. He might even have been defending her. He left the room and seconds later returned to wipe a soft damp cloth on the corner of her mouth and under her nose and then helped her stand. "You should use the bathroom," he told her and led her to the door. Five minutes later, he reattached her to the bed. "I shouldn't have left you alone with him. I went for a walk. I'll stay here from now on."

"Chuck, I don't know what he's talking about."

"He says you have a book he wants."

"But what book? I own hundreds of books. He can have it, whatever it is. He can have them all."

*Before joining the expedition, I wandered lands north of New Spain and listened to villagers describe trading centers filled with gold. They spoke of gold paved streets and buildings covered with jewels that sparkled in the sun. I tried to convince them not to repeat their stories, but they did. That is why Viceroy Mendoza has ordered Marcos to look for the Seven Cities in the north. Their King believes even God wants the gold for Spain.*

## Chapter 4

“Hi, Pat. Any luck?” Gwen saw the answer to her question as Pat entered the store, her face bleak.

“The neighbors didn’t see anything, but like I said, no one’s here in the middle of the night, except burglars. How’s the shelving going?”

“Not bad. I agree that it would have been nice to reshell the books on our terms, but I’m grateful there’s something to keep me busy. Listen, a delivery person came by earlier and dropped off a box. He said he found it wedged under a shelf in the truck and according to records, it’s been there for a few weeks. He was apologetic and begged me not to tell his boss at the book auction house. You know the one Jackie uses. Did she say anything about it?”

“She didn’t mention a book order to me, but that’s not unusual. Did you open it?”

“I wanted to finish this section first. I thought I’d open it when I took a break.”

“Since when do we take breaks?” Patricia retrieved box cutters from the desk and slit the carton. They wore white cotton gloves to examine the contents and saw immediately that Jackie hadn’t lost her touch for making unusual finds. Pat lifted a volume with a hand-carved black leather cover. “Gwen, look at this.”

Gwen repositioned her glasses as she took the book from Pat and gingerly separated the cover from the first page. “This isn’t a book, Pat. I mean, it’s a handwritten journal. If it’s real, it belonged to a person who traveled with Marcos de Niza in 1539.”

“Who’s Marcos de Niza?”

“He was a priest who traveled with the early Spanish explorers to the New World.” She stopped with a strange expression on her face. “Do you think...?”

A knock interrupted Gwen’s question and without turning, Patricia yelled, “We’re closed for inventory.” She flashed Gwen a smile. “I’ve always wanted to say that.”

“Maybe not this time.” Gwen rose and opened the door for Nicki. “Any news?”

“Some. Do you have coffee made?”

In the excitement of the morning, Patricia hadn’t made coffee and suggested they go to the diner next door. Gwen agreed, but wanted to take the journal along. She wrapped it with care in a towel and placed it in a heavy envelope.

Once inside the restaurant, they took off their coats and climbed into a booth. Nicki and Patricia sat opposite Gwen who shared her seat with their bulky outerwear. Mike Duran, the tall African-American owner of the establishment, brought a

carafe, three cups, and a look of concern. “Any word on Jackie?” Their negative response sent him away shaking his head.

“What’s your news?” Pat asked as she watched Nicki fill the cups.

“The estate next to Jackie’s uses a security company. They have guards on the grounds around the clock, seven days a week. She might want to consider that when she comes home. The guard on duty yesterday afternoon saw a car pull out of the Tracy drive in a hurry. It was an old Lincoln with Wisconsin plates and he caught a glimpse of a few numbers as it drove off. I have a friend running it through the system for a match.”

“Didn’t the Evanston police talk to the neighbors?” Gwen asked.

“No. Right now, it’s a low priority case. Gwen, what’s in that envelope you’re hugging like a newborn baby?”

“Don’t touch it without these.” Laying a pair of cotton gloves on the package, Gwen slid it across the table. Nicki kept a pair or two of latex gloves in various pockets, but didn’t argue. She slid the wrapped journal from the envelope and lifted the towel to admire the intricate carvings on the cover looking impressed, but confused. “It’s remarkable, but what does it mean?”

“It’s a journal from a person writing about his travels with Marcos de Niza in 1539. They explored land that today is Arizona and New Mexico.”

“How do you know so much about these explorers, Gwen?” Pat asked.

“I did my doctoral thesis on the psychological consequences on the indigenous people overthrown

by the conquistadors. In my research, I read about the priest Marcos de Niza. He led the first expedition to land north of Mexico in search of a place called Cibola and the Seven Cities of Gold.”

Nicki rewrapped the journal and slid it in the envelope. “I’d like to hear more about your research and these Seven Cities of Gold, Gwen, but what does any of it have to do with Jackie?”

“This might be a little far out, but Jackie purchased this journal from a book auction house several weeks ago.” Gwen hesitated. “What if someone knew she bought it and thought it was authentic? There are people who believe stories about the Seven Cities are true, and buried treasure sights still draw visitors to the Southwest hunting gold. If a person thought this journal could lead them to unimaginable wealth, which is what the myth claims,” she shrugged and tapped a finger on the envelope, “they might do any number of things to get it, including kidnapping.”

“Didn’t the delivery guy say it’s been on his truck for a few weeks?” Pat asked.

“Yes, he found it stuck under a shelf. Why?”

Nicole understood why and wasn’t pleased. “That would explain why they ransacked her house and the bookstore. They didn’t find what they were looking for because it hadn’t arrived. Hell, knowing Jackie, she forgot she bought it, especially if it happened a few weeks ago. If her kidnappers want to persuade her to tell them where it is, she might not have a clue what they’re talking about.”



A door slammed. At first, Jackie thought it was a dream, but then realized it was the front door of the cabin. Her brain cleared further when Stan stomped

into the bedroom and spoke to Chuck, who must have been sitting somewhere nearby. “Feed her. Maybe it’ll help her remember where she put the journal.”

The aroma of greasy food filled the room. Although not big on gourmet dining, she found nothing redeeming in meals served in a paper sack. Chuck cut the tape and helped her lean against the headboard. As soon as he placed an unwrapped sandwich in her fingers, she took a bite, surprised at how good it tasted. She attributed that to hunger and the fact that she couldn’t see the gray meat or soggy lettuce.

The first bite went down without a problem. She chewed slowly and swallowed. The next mouthful wasn’t as cooperative. The grease soaked bun slid down her throat and a slight intake of air wedged it in her windpipe. She couldn’t breathe. Chuck, realizing what happened, pushed her forward and slapped her back, but didn’t dislodge the food. Her face grew bright red as she struggled for air. The big man slid behind her, wrapped his arms around her chest, and squeezed, forcing the food from her throat. She fell back gulping air to make up for the lack. When her breathing slowed, he carried her to the recliner.

Nothing in the room moved until Chuck returned with her sandwich. He placed it in her lap and put a glass of water next to her on the table, guiding her hands so she could take a drink when she wanted. She wanted. As she drank, she thought about how lucky she was that Chuck proved the gentler of the two. His hands were gigantic.

“You should eat,” he told her as she drank most of the water.

She set the glass on a solid piece of furniture to keep from wearing it and found the cold burger in her lap. Her hunger had vanished with the choking experience, but she felt too weak not to eat. Although the tasteless sandwich had grown even less appealing, she ate and wondered what the two men were up to in their silence. She had no idea of the time, or even the day, and her brain seemed unable to calculate how long she'd been there. When she'd eaten and drained the water glass, Jackie leaned back in the chair and waited for whatever came next. That wasn't easy for a take-charge person who made things happen.

"I'm going out. Put her in the bed. I don't want her leaving here if you fall asleep." Stan barked.

As Chuck retied her to the bed, she heard the door to the outside close and thought Stan left. "Chuck, what day is it?"

"Saturday."

"What time?"

"Almost ten at night. He's gone to have a few beers in town. You're tall."

That made her smile. "You're no runt yourself, fella. How tall are you?"

"Seven four."

"Wow. I'm a shrimp next to you, I'm six feet." She was impressed and not accustomed to anyone that much taller. His kindness impressed her too. He didn't strike her as your typical kidnapper, although kidnappers didn't often make her list of top ten personal acquaintances. She sensed that Stan was more typical, a jerk.

"You should go to sleep."

"My eyes are closed." She smiled in his direction, but wasn't sure if he understood her joke. In a short

time, exhaustion, dehydration, and pain hurried her into slumber land.

A noise and someone putting tape over her mouth jarred her awake. She smelled alcohol and stale cigarette smoke, and thought Stan had come to ask her for the journal. How could she tell him anything with tape on her mouth? Before she realized what was happening, he had pushed open her suit jacket and was unbuttoning her blouse. She stiffened and yelled through the tape, twisting and turning against her bonds. Suddenly, she felt the weight of his body drop on top of her, but he didn't move. She wondered if he'd passed out.

She heard more noise and felt Stan move from the bed. After a few minutes of muffled sounds from the other room, someone approached. To her great relief, it was Chuck. He buttoned her blouse, closed her jacket, and lifted the tape from her mouth. "Chuck, what happened? Was that Stan?"

"He's asleep. He won't bother you again. There's a chair in here, I'll stay in it tonight, but you should go to sleep."

"Thanks, Chuck." She wouldn't sleep, but she didn't tell her gentle friend. Her nightmares persisted awake or asleep.



When Gwen walked into the bookstore and saw a large number of wayward books returned to their shelves her jaw dropped. "What time did you start this morning?" Pat slid another book into place without answering. "You worked all night, didn't you?"

This time she answered with a groan as she clenched a bookshelf to rise from her knees. "I

couldn't sleep. Every time my eyes closed I'd picture Jackie scared and god knows what else."

"I know what you mean. I couldn't sleep, so I didn't let Hugh sleep. Listen, Pat, since we're not open, why don't we leave everything for now and grab a late breakfast or early lunch, my treat."

"That's my favorite kind of meal. Let me put Zodiac upstairs." Pat persuaded Zoey that no one would be there to bathe her in attention and she could go home. As she returned to the store, she heard Gwen talking to Nicki.

"Have you had any news?"

"No, but I'm sure I will soon. We don't know the exact year of the car, and without a complete plate, it will take a while to run through all those records even with computers. Has Jackie mentioned any messy business deals she's been involved in recently?"

"Beth taught her to be smart, not cutthroat." Gwen was about to continue her response from a nearby chair, when the song 'Stayin' Alive' interrupted from Nicki's pocket.

She supported the phone on the right shoulder of her leather jacket and found a pen and paper to take notes. "Thanks, Peter. I appreciate your help. I'll let you know what happens."

"What is it, Nic?" Pat asked.

The detective exchanged the cell phone for a set of keys, which she jingled in the air. "Would you two care to join me for drive to Okauchee, Wisconsin?"

"Shouldn't the police go after her?" Gwen stopped and waved a hand in front of her face. "Never mind, I know what you're going to say. They won't look for her because she's not missing. Okay, but we'd

better find someplace safe for this if we're going after these people." Gwen grabbed the envelope with the journal.

"I'll put it in my office safe. We can take the VW van up instead of the jeep. That way there'll be room if Jackie wants to lie down on the trip home." Pat and Gwen agreed, grateful for Nicki's confidence. The threesome hurried out the door for a Sunday afternoon drive to Okauchee, Wisconsin to save their friend from kidnappers.

*Last evening I overheard soldiers rolling dice. They invited some of the young Indian guides to join them to learn about the treasure. The soldiers convinced the boys to drink from their wine skins and let them win with the dice. The more they won, the more they drank. One of them became stupid, bragging loudly in his native tongue that the white men were fools because it was not seven cities, but seven caverns filled with gold. His brothers sobered quickly and sent him away. This morning I found the young man and asked him about the caverns. Because I am a man of God, he told me of a treasure buried by the Aztec people before Cortés and his men destroyed Tenochtitlan. He also asked me to pray for him because he thought a serpent must have bit him in the night. He felt poison in his veins. I advised him not to partake in the wine of the soldiers.*

## *Chapter 5*

Over the years, Samuel Barnes took great care to build a reputation as a civic-minded member of the community and a smart businessman. He had no need for fame and knew it often proved detrimental to success. He kept his name out of the public eye whenever possible, except on the rare occasion when the payoff outweighed the risk of exposure.

He discovered early the advantage of having connections. In his readings of Cortés, Barnes learned

methods of attracting that support. While Cortés planned his overthrow of the Aztec capital, he heard that the Governor of Cuba had sent a group of Spaniards to arrest him for treason. To disrupt the plan, he went to the coast to meet the arriving forces. He took only a few of his own men and recruited local natives with the promise of defeating the Aztec, their enemy, and sharing victory and wealth. By the time he reached the coast, his troops far outnumbered the force and they were easily defeated. Eventually, the natives who'd joined him became his slaves. Like Cortés, Barnes found it easy to buy support. Everyone had a price.

His patience with the idiot he'd hired to get the journal had run out. He made a phone call and gave another of his employees the address of the cabin in Wisconsin. "Remove Stan, and find that journal. I'll let him know you're on your way. Maybe it'll help the moron come up with a plan. Call me when you're finished."

Stan didn't wake until almost one in the afternoon. He told Chuck he didn't remember coming home from the bar the previous night. Chuck shrugged and grunted without interest. "Man, it feels like I got hit with a board."

"Maybe you were lucky you didn't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, but you said you were too drunk to remember what you did. Maybe you said or did something to make a guy angry enough to clobber you." Chuck spotted a syringe by his shoe and kicked it under the chair.

"Yeah, I guess. Listen, Chuck, I'm going to pick up some food. I doubt I'll eat, but I gotta clear my

head.” Stan used the drive to shake the fog from his brain, but a phone call from Barnes as he returned to the cabin took his headache to an excruciating new level.

“You have an hour, Stan, or you can forget the whole deal. Your replacements are on their way. They’ll finish the job and make sure you’re well compensated for your inept blundering.”

Stan dropped the phone. “Shit. This was supposed to be a cinch.” He stormed from the car and into the living room. “Put her in the chair,” he yelled and flung the bag of food. Fear gripped Jackie as Chuck cut her free and led her out. She didn’t like the tone or the volume of Stan’s voice.

Chuck’s back was to Stan as he put her in the chair. He didn’t see him pull off his belt and double it in his hand. When he stepped away, Stan swung a vicious shot across the side of her face. Jackie screamed and Chuck’s massive hand ripped the belt from Stan’s grip. He grasped his elbow and pushed him toward the door. “That’s it, Stan. It’s over. Go outside. I’ll be out in a minute.” He handed him the belt and made it clear that it wasn’t a suggestion.

Stan shoved his chin at Jackie. “You’d better tie her up if we’re both going outside.”

“She’s not going anywhere. Wait outside and I’ll be right there.” Chuck put the bag of food on her lap and handed her a glass of water, which she immediately pressed against the red welt on her cheek. He shook his head before joining Stan outside. “You told me no one would get hurt. What will you do with her if you don’t find that book? What if you do?”

“The guy that hired me called. He sent somebody to get rid of me and get the dame to talk. She don’t

know nothing.” He waved his cigarette at the cabin. “No one can act that good or put up with that much shit for a lousy book.” He rubbed his hands together as the icy temperatures registered. “I don’t know what to do, Chuck. I don’t have a way out of this and we can’t let her go.”

“Sure we can, Stan. She’s never seen your face and can’t describe you. Take off. If I can’t figure out another plan, I’ll call the cops to come before the other guys get here. I’ll tell them I kidnapped her. I’ve never been in trouble with the police. It won’t be that bad for me and nothing else will happen to Ms Tracy.”

“You’d do that for me?” Stan’s shoulders relaxed at Chuck’s nod. “You’re all right. I’ll take off and in case you need help with those other guys, I’ll call the cops when I cross the state line.”

“This means you and my dad are square, Stan. I don’t want you ever showing up to bother him again.”

“You got it. Tell your old man we’re even.”

Chuck watched the Lincoln pull from the drive and up the road. “I’m not doing this for you, Stan.” He didn’t notice the white Volkswagen camper van parked on the hill. When Stan was out of sight, he went inside and found Jackie in the chair with her lap and the bag of food soaked. “What happened?”

“I tried to put the glass on the table and hit the arm of the chair. It slipped from my fingers. A mess, huh?” She sensed his smile. “Where’s Stan, Chuck? I thought I heard a car.”

“He left. He’ll call the police when he crosses the state line and they’ll come for you. You’ll be safe, Ms Tracy. Let me take off the tape and you can dry yourself.” He removed the soggy items from her lap

and hesitated. “Maybe we’d better not wait for Stan to call the cops. He said some other guys are coming from Chicago. We have to figure a way out of here and we don’t have a car.”

The compassionate giant took out his knife and knelt at her feet. As he cut the tape from her wrists, the front door flew open. “Down on the floor,” screamed a voice.

“Nicki, is that you?”

Chuck dropped the knife, gave Nicki a smile, and fell to the floor face down with his hands behind his head. She relocated them behind his back and squeezed the cuffs around his thick wrists, surprised and grateful that he didn’t resist. “It’s me. Pat and Gwen are here too. Is anyone else in the house?” Jackie shook her head and Nicki holstered her gun and gripped her friend’s shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay now that the cavalry is here. Stan just left and you interrupted my pal, Chuck. He was cutting me free.”

“Jackie.” Pat and Gwen screamed in unison from the doorway. Pat almost popped in as the two women squeezed through together and hurried to hug her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’ll be even better when someone takes this tape off my eyes.”

Gwen gave a light tug on the tape affixed to Jackie’s hair and watched her flinch. “Maybe we should wait until we can figure a way to get it off without hurting you.”

A taste of freedom drained Jackie’s remaining patience. “Okay, take the tape from my wrists and I’ll take it off my eyes.”

Nicki finished cutting the tape from her wrists and Jackie shook her hands before she pulled the tape away from her face. She opened her eyes slowly to adjust to the light and was unaware that Nicole had gone around to the back of the chair. Seconds later, she felt the remaining tape ripped from her head with one quick tug. "Ow, you shit head. That hurt." Jackie moved her hands from her green eyes and rubbed her head. She half grinned and half grimaced as Nicki gave her a hug. "Thank you."

"I'll call the police. Where's the phone?" Gwen scanned the room, but Jackie grabbed her arm when she saw Chuck. He really was big.

"No, don't do that, Gwen." The large man had taken care of her and she didn't want him to go to jail. Jackie made a quick and unpopular decision. "Chuck, will you be my bodyguard?"

If the question surprised him, he didn't show it. He lifted his head and faced her with a smile. "Yes, I will."

"Jacqueline Tracy, are you out of your ever loving mind? He kidnapped you." A younger Pat might have jumped up and down as she pointed to the hulk on the floor, but the fifty-plus Pat took a step back. "Why would you hire him as a bodyguard?"

"Chuck didn't kidnap me. Stan kidnapped me. Chuck took care of me."

Nicole lifted Jackie's chin to examine the bruises. "If this is taking care of you, he'd better not quit his day job. You're face is a mess and you look like hell."

Chuck groaned and Jackie waved her hands in the air. "I'll tell you everything later. Right now, we need to get out of here. Some thugs are on their way to take care of Stan and we don't know when they'll

arrive.” She saw the blank faces. “I promise, I’ll explain later. Chuck, who owns this house?”

“A friend of Stan’s. The guy who owns the Lincoln he’s driving.”

“Nicki, would you take the handcuffs off Chuck so he can earn his pay.”

Nicki reluctantly opened the cuffs and helped him to his feet. He headed straight to the window. “There’s a car coming off the highway. That might be those other guys. We should make them think Stan took off and left you here. We can surprise them when they don’t have their guns out.”

“Good idea.” Nicki pointed to a back room. “Gwen, you and Pat hide there. Chuck, we’ll tie her again and wait in the bedroom. Do you want to do this, Jackie?”

“No, I don’t, but I guess I’d better. Please don’t wrap tape around my hair again.” When the kidnap victim was once again secure, Nicki and Chuck went into the bedroom leaving the door open a crack.

Seconds later, a car crunched on the gravel drive next to the cabin and two doors slammed. Their voices carried inside. “I don’t see a car. I wonder if he split. Hey, Stan, why don’t you come out here so we can talk?” One of the voices yelled.

Jackie tried to appear lifeless as the door opened. A job she accomplished with relative ease. “Hey, the dame is still here. I’ll bet Stan took off after Barnes called. He musta beat the crap out of her before he did. Is she dead? Shit, she ain’t gonna tell us nothing if he killed her.”

A split second after the men put away their guns and stood in front of Jackie, the bedroom door burst open. “Put your hands in the air where I can see

them.” When one of them reached inside his jacket, Nicki fired a bullet an inch from his shoe. The noise sent Jackie two feet off the chair and the second-string kidnappers quickly turned toward the door.

To Nicki’s surprise and annoyance, the shot brought Pat and Gwen running from the back bedroom. “Don’t either one of you ever consider a career in law enforcement.” She shook her head and told them to help Jackie, then returned her attention to the intruders. “You two lay down on the floor with your hands behind your back. Now.” Chuck joined her. “Take their guns, and remind them to behave.” Once he secured them with duct tape, Nicki instructed him to carry Jackie to the van while she ran through the house for a last check. She grabbed a pair of high-heeled black leather boots from the corner, doubting that they belonged to Stan or Chuck, and followed the group to the van.

Initially refusing Chuck’s offer to carry her, Jackie reconsidered and decided she might not make it on her own. Chuck put her in the seat, Gwen buckled her belt, Pat covered her with a blanket, and Nicki put on her boots. The VW’s heater lacked power even on warmer days. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, Jackie offered no further resistance. She leaned the side of her face on the cold window and closed her eyes wanting to organize things in her head before she talked about what happened. Confusion, fear, and anger filled her, but it was the complete sense of helplessness that scared her the most. She just couldn’t be sure if it belonged to her or an eight-year-old girl.

Gwen’s hand touched her shoulder. “Do you want to go to the emergency room?”

“No. I don’t have any major injuries, except for my broken crown. They wouldn’t do any more than I can at home and that’s where I want to be.” She closed her eyes and felt someone place a cloth on her face—cold, as if filled with snow. She hoped her friends could wait until she sorted through her thoughts enough to talk about them. She hoped she could sort through her thoughts.

*The little girl heard men shouting and told herself not to be afraid. Someone came in and said her name and she felt him untie the cloths. “You’re safe now, Jacqueline. No one will hurt you.” She heard another voice. “Hi, honey, how do you feel?” She was glad her aunt had come, but wondered why her mommy and daddy weren’t there. “Everything will be okay. The bad men won’t bother you anymore.” Aunt Beth had been wrong.*



“What do you mean captured? Did Stan capture you?” Samuel’s legendary calm and patience disappeared as he shouted into the phone. If the developers who built the exclusive high-rise he called home hadn’t considered privacy a priority and soundproofed the entire building, residents on the tenth floor and a few floors on either side would have heard his screams.

“We walked in and found the lady tied in the chair, but didn’t see Stan or anyone else around. I went to pull the tape off her mouth and another lady shot at us and told us to hit the ground.”

“What did she look like?”

“What did who look like? The lady with the gun? She was shooting at me. I paid more attention to what she had in her hand. I think she might of had red hair, but I didn’t take a picture.”

Barnes applied more pressure to his temples. “No, Mark, not the lady with the gun, the lady with my book. Could you describe her to a police artist?”

“I can’t describe her at all. She was an older lady, but like I said, when I went to pull off the tape, the other lady yelled. She had some big guy tie up me and Benny and he took our guns.”

Barnes unclenched his teeth enough to ask another question. “Where is my book?”

“The guy must have been a boy scout because we tried for an hour to get loose and couldn’t. The cops showed up and we had to come up with a story about who we were and what happened. We told them....”

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear your problems or your excuses. Where is the woman with the journal?”

“I don’t know. They took her and we didn’t see anything around to tell us who she was.”

“Listen to me. Go to the book auction house tomorrow as soon as they open and find out who and where she is. I want that journal.” Barnes slammed the phone down and cursed. If it were anything but the journal, he’d call the owner of the auction house and demand the information, or use one of his political connections. He couldn’t do that without letting people know he was interested—people who would wonder why Samuel Barnes wanted an old journal. He picked up the phone. “Yeah, there’s been a delay. I don’t know when I’ll need you. Be available.”