

A Rose By A Different Name

By

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"Alec?"

"Bill."

"This is unexpected."

"I don't doubt that," Alec replied, leaning casually against Bill's front door frame.

"What brings you out here? I thought you'd be spending all your time on the other side of the lake, where the action is."

Alec ignored the comment as he walked past Bill and into the great room of the impressive mountain log home. He immediately helped himself to a drink at the hand hewn log bar and proceeded over to admire the last of the sunset from the expansive picture window before responding.

"Michael suggested I pay you a little visit this evening. It seems you've let us down."

Bill Deets fixed himself a drink while watching Alec's face. He had no idea of the reason for the impromptu visit, but definitely knew it wasn't a social call. Alec had never been one of his favorite people and he felt nothing but disgust at the thought of spending any time with him, let alone in his own home.

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about Alec. Let who down?"

"Oh, I think you do know."

"Don't play games with me, Alec. Whatever it is, why don't you just spit it out?"

"Fair enough. Where were you three days ago?"

"What kind of a question is that? You know perfectly well I was in London," Bill retorted becoming more annoyed with each passing second.

"London, yes, but your little side trip to Amsterdam is what is of concern to us. Have you forgotten about that already?"

"Oh," he hesitated only momentarily. "That was nothing. I was only there for a few hours, to buy a diamond for Jacque."

"Your diamond broker sure looked familiar to Alan."

"Alan was in Amsterdam?"

Bill's expression changed only slightly as he realized he'd been found out. He'd known something was up the minute he opened his front door. It was common knowledge that Alec did most of Michael's dirty work, but Bill had always found him rather stupid and felt sure he could easily diffuse whatever the present situation. To cover himself, he slowly edged toward the main fireplace of his Tahoe estate and the only weapons readily available, while watching his unexpected guest slip his hand inside his jacket. Deliberately and slowly, Alec produced a gun and silencer and fit them together, never taking his eyes from Bill. He turned the gun over in his hands teasingly before stepping toward his prey.

"I wouldn't reach for that poker or anything else, if I were you Bill. Why don't you come with me instead? Michael would like to have a word with you."

In one swift, well-calculated move, Alec positioned himself between Bill and the fireplace, thrusting his gun into the small of Bill's back. Then he proceeded to lead his associate outside and into the drivers' seat of his waiting Lincoln Navigator where he handed him the keys.

"You'll be driving Bill. You know what they say about idle hands."

With the silenced gun now aimed at his kidney, Bill Deets had no choice but to follow Alec's directions. He glared at his business partner and current captor who only grinned in return.

"Why'd you do it, Bill?"

Seeing the ineffectiveness of another lie and sure of his eminent reprieve from Michael, Bill's voice was filled with sarcasm as he

decided to toy with Alec. "Come on Alec, you know I haven't been able to make it on what I get from Michael. Rose offered me a small fortune and I figured I couldn't go wrong. Why don't you say we forget all this? You let me go, tell Michael I got away, and I'll split the money with you. That'd be five million apiece. We'd both be set for life."

Alec laughed loudly. "And I'm supposed to trust you to do that after the way you sold us all out. I don't think so. I could never do that to Michael."

"Michael. Shit, everyone bows down to my brother-in-law, the sainted Michael, like he's some kind of a god."

"He's done right by all of us Bill, including you. You should never have crossed him."

Bill shook his head thinking how pathetic Alec was, but saw no point in bothering to continue his conversation with him as he drove on through the night, mentally rehearsing what he'd say to Michael instead. The silence in the Navigator wore on as Alec continued to gesture directions to Bill, down through the streets of Truckee and over the winding road toward the split off to Incline and the road to Michael's estate. Once the forest thickened and the stream of traffic thinned, he instructed Bill to pull off to the side of the road.

"What's wrong? Why are we stopping?" Bill responded too quickly, his uncertainty beginning to show. "You said we were going to Michael's estate which is still miles from here."

"Oh, yea. I forgot. I lied."

Bill's face went blank this time. He knew the set up. He'd been part of too many in the past, just never on the receiving end. He'd failed to see it coming this time and the panic was evident in his eyes, although for the moment he remained composed.

"Alec, let me talk to Michael. I know I can straighten things out with him," Bill pleaded.

"It's much too late for that Billy. This is one bed you're really going to have to lie down in. Now let's move," Alec gave Bill a shove as he followed him out of the vehicle and into the crisp night air.

Reluctantly out of the SUV with Alec close behind, Bill was still relatively confident he could make some sort of a getaway. Again he felt the cold steel of the gun pressed into his lower back and in one swift but failed move, tried in vain to twist around and wrestle it away. Infuriated by the feeble attempt, Alec whipped the butt of his gun into Bill's head and watched triumphantly as he collapsed to the ground.

"Not a wise move, my friend."

Without waiting for a reply, Alec pulled Bill back to his feet and pushed him deeper into the misty night through the thick pine trees. They walked on for about a mile in silence before coming to a deep ravine and a large hunting pack, obviously pre-placed for Alec's benefit.

Bill was beginning to let his anxiety show as he turned to face his captor again. "Alec, think this over and give me a chance here. We go back a long time. Forget all this and take me to Michael, I know I can make him understand."

Bill's pleading did nothing more than disgust Alec further. He shook his head as he replied, "I don't think so. Michael'd kill me for doing something so stupid."

"Then think of the five million dollars."

Alec only smirked as he continued to hold his gun on Bill and rummage through the pack he himself had left there that morning. He produced two shotguns and a pile of what appeared to Bill to be hunting gear.

"It was nice knowing you, Bill," he said shoving several items of camouflaged clothing toward him, never breaking his smile. "I always knew you were an ass, but your dealings with Rose really prove it." Seeing Bill's hesitation, he stepped closer and held the gun barely an inch from his head. "Put these on. Knowing your well-boasted passion for hunting alone, no one will even think twice about the unfortunate accident you're about to have."

Watching Bill change into the traditional hunting garb, Alec proceeded to throw one unloaded but previously fired shotgun on the ground near Bill and check the load on his own. With Alec's shotgun open and useless, Bill saw his chance and rushed him. Knocking the shotgun from his hands, the two men fell to the ground, but only wrestled for a moment as Alec's size and brute strength easily won out. He only laughed as he kicked Bill's body over and retrieved his weapon.

"Alec, please, not this way, not now," Bill pleaded, but instantly knew it was of no use. Looking up, he could see the obvious hatred in Alec's face.

"Grab that gun and get down on your knees, old boy," Alec ordered, still laughing as he looked into Bill's face. He couldn't help thinking yet again, how much he hated weak, greedy men.

Bill slowly complied, now frantically trying to find another way out of his present dilemma. On his knees in the deep snow, his final pleas went unheard as the large man pointed his own shotgun and hit Bill Deets dead nuts through the heart without so much as a flinch. Without faltering, he quickly picked up Bill's shotgun and loaded it, before replacing it into his rigid hands and then rolling the dead body down into the ravine below.

"Hunting accidents can be such a shame," he muttered into the crisp night air, and then smiled all the way back to his truck.

He loved his job.

Chapter 1

The casino was busy as usual. Every night during the ski season brought out more than its share of jackpot seekers. People from all walks of life were immersed in the lights, sounds, and games, with winning the only thing on their minds. They were oblivious to everyone and everything else around them, making it the perfect place for an inconspicuous meeting. It was the one place Michael could be well known or remain anonymous. His business reputation, both legal and otherwise, was well publicized, and he commanded and received the utmost respect and the appropriate level of fear that sometimes went with it.

For the past three years, he had based himself here at the lake and the casino, and had devoted all of his time to one project. And now, just as it neared completion, a wrench had been thrown into the works. He eyed the room impatiently as he waited on one of his most loyal.

The minute Eddie Dahlman saw Michael's face, he felt the urgency of the recent request for him to return to Tahoe. He made his way carefully through the crowds in order for it to look as if the meeting with his boss was casual and coincidental.

"Michael?"

The two men quickly embraced and began to meander through the crowds.

"Eddie. It's good to have you back. I have a feeling I'm going to need all of you here this time."

"It's good to be back, Michael. You know how much I love Tahoe, but what's the push?"

"It looks like we've got a potentially explosive situation brewing."

"You mentioned Rose?"

"Yes. Alan has informed me that the 1999 charges against our friend, Mr. Rose, have been cleared and to complete the picture, he said Eric called him from New York yesterday morning to inform us he'd seen Rose at La Guardia the night before."

"What? Why would Rose risk coming into the country now? He's still wanted in connection with that little stunt in Boston in 2002, and it's questionable for a lot of people, including the Feds, about whether or not he was involved in the California Triad bombing a couple of Christmases ago."

"All facts I'm well aware of Eddie, but as near as I've come to conclude, he's found out that Eric and I have perfected 'The Synthetic' and for that, we know he'd risk it all."

"How could he possibly know that much about 'The Synthetic'? We've gone above and beyond to keep it under wraps and within the family."

"Let's just say that no one will have to worry about working with Bill any longer."

"Deets? How?"

"Evidently Bill decided he wasn't getting what he deserved here and was selling us out to Rose. I had my suspicions, so I had Alan follow him to London last week and then on to Amsterdam, a portion of his trip he failed to divulge to us. There, Alan followed him to an out of the way area along one of the less desirable canals where he met with one of Roses' known associates. Alan heard and saw enough to legitimize my fears and I sent Alec out last night."

"I never trusted Deets, you know that, Michael."

"I know, and in hindsight I should have trusted your instincts, Eddie, but he was family."

"All that aside, I still can't believe Rose would come into the country, and that he would risk it all for 'The Synthetic.' He's vulnerable here and secure in Greece, not to mention richer and more powerful than most men's wildest dreams."

"I'm afraid it has everything to do with our past. As you know,

we've been adversaries for years. Since early 1995 when I had no choice but to divert the Feds away from myself and indirectly to Mr. Rose via my former partner, forcing him to flee the country. Since then, he's made no secret of his desire for revenge. At first, it was only a small time threat, but now it is one we must take seriously. Rose has become an incredible force on the European front and we must protect 'The Synthetic' at all costs. It means a great deal to us, not just in dollars, but politically, it's a gold mine. God knows what would happen if Rose gets a hold of the finished product."

"Do you think that's possible?"

"Right now, it's all still uncertain Eddie. We have no idea how much information Deets leaked, or exactly why Rose is in the country, but everything points to 'The Synthetic.' That's why I've called all of you together."

"What can I do?"

"For now, nothing. The disk with the completed formula is locked away in the vault at my estate. Alec has been here all week, and John is due in later today. We'll meet when everyone has arrived."

"What about Eric? He's been pretty close to this for a long time."

"He's on his way in as well. I've arranged for us all to convene at the eight p.m. show tonight. Just ask for my table. You might as well try your luck until then. As I recall, you have quite a fondness for the tables."

"You remember well, Michael. I'll see you at eight then."

"One more thing, Eddie."

"Yea, Michael?"

"Keep your eyes open."

"Always."

Chapter 2

“Hey Bri?”
“Yea?”

“Lindsey’s on her way up the walk.”

“Damn it, Steve. What am I going to tell her?”

“I don’t know, but good luck, dude.”

“Don’t leave, man. I can’t face her alone.”

“Don’t put this on me, old friend. I’ve got to get to class and you’re the one that has to deal with your feelings for her and your job. You can’t have both.”

“You’re right, Steve.”

“I know I am.”

“I hate that about you,” Brian said, looking like he wished he was anywhere else on the planet but where he was standing.

“I know that, too. See you later.”

Steve Larson hurried to gather his things and try to sneak out the back before the inevitable second break up between Brian and Lindsey began to unfold. Brian was a good friend, the best, and even though he’d known him since grade school, he liked Lindsey a lot, maybe too much, and there was no way he was getting involved in any part of this one. Right now he wanted nothing more than to get as far away as possible from both of them. Their attraction was so

strong and so obvious, but their lifestyles were incredibly different. Unfortunately, he knew too well they were never going to mesh in some pretty important areas. Their first break up the year before was tough on both of them with Steve catching the fallout from Brian. But this one promised to be a real bear, especially since she found their substantial stock of goods in the attic the month before. Steve had always known Lindsey had suspected what they did for extra cash, but she must have refused to let herself believe it until that day. Sweet girl, just way too curious. He knew it would be a major factor in this split and shook his head as he slipped out the back door just as the front bell rang. He still got a little shaken up over her unannounced exploration into their attic stash, but knew now she would never cause them any trouble. She was special. He started his car and drove off before the urge to stay and see her one more time won out.

Back inside Brian began to sweat as the old door swung open.

"Lindsey? I wasn't expecting you so early."

"You weren't really expecting me at all, were you Bri? It's okay though, because I only came by to drop off some of your things. You know as well as I do, we can't go on. I guess that's why I haven't heard from you these past few days."

"Lindsey, I'm sorry, I just don't want it to be like this."

"I realize that and neither do I, but I don't want to deal with it anymore. We're on such different pages."

"I think I know what you mean."

"You do know what I mean Brian. This is going nowhere. You're involved with a business that freaks me out but doesn't faze you. One you can't leave and you know me by now. I'm a little too uptight and want things to be..... well, not that. I can't and wouldn't ask you to change and I know you wouldn't ask me to either."

"So where does that leave us?"

"You tell me Brian. I care about you so much and probably always will, but...."

"You're right Linds. I care about you too, but I know we need to let it go. I agree with everything you're saying...." He hesitated thinking how badly this sucked. He really liked Lindsey, maybe more than he'd realized until this moment and he sighed seeing the sadness in her eyes.

He knew what he had to say. "I'll miss you little lady, but we don't mix in some pretty important ways."

"I'll miss you, too, Bri," Lindsey said as she laid down the pile of his things on the worn living room sofa. "I'm gonna go."

She turned slowly and walked across the creaking hardwood floor toward the open screen door.

"Lindsey?"

Lindsey stopped with the door in her hand and turned back to Brian, knowing it was probably a mistake. Part of her liked him so much she couldn't bear the thought of never seeing him again, but she also couldn't bear the thought of their relationship continuing on in the direction it was going.

"Brian?"

"I'm sorry, Linds."

"Me, too," Lindsey replied, before racing down the old cement steps into the humid late spring Nebraska afternoon. She was near tears as she slid behind the wheel of her classic 1972 Camaro and drove home.

Meanwhile, Brian picked up the pile of things Lindsey had brought back to him and threw them all in his kitchen trash bin.

"Damn that little woman!" he yelled out in frustration. He knew he'd never feel the same way about anyone again. So many times he had wanted her so badly he let everything else slip away, but he knew his business, one he truly needed and loved, and his lifestyle made her crazy. In the long run, it would only hurt her and it promised to ruin him if he let it continue on, just like it almost did once before. He flashed back to a day several months back. He'd been out of state and let his mind focus too intensely on their intended reunion instead of on business. He made the stupid mistake of speeding with a confidential load in the back of his ancient station wagon and got pulled over. Luck was on his side when he was only issued a warning, but the scare was part of the reason he knew their break up was eminent. Then there was her attic discovery. He shook the thoughts away, fixed himself a drink and went to his computer, burying himself in his work for the next two weeks.

Lindsey, in turn, cried all the way home in her car. "Damn him," she cried out loud. He could draw her in so easily and she was so attracted to him in so many ways. It was killing her to drive away but she ultimately realized that he would never break away from his illegal business and be the type to settle down, and she wanted that. She couldn't help let her mind wander back to one of the first times they met in the halls of the engineering building in college, while tears still glistened on the rims of her eyes.

The old images replayed themselves so easily. Her long time friend Mark was in her physics class that semester and he and his new friend,

Brian, would be in the halls for a class Brian had very near to theirs every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And it wasn't long after Mark introduced them that Brian would be waiting for her at the end of the physics class and her history class that followed. He'd stand outside the door making faces while watching her sit in lecture, despising Professor Hunt for always talking on past the end of class. She would come out the door fuming until she saw his comical smile.

"It's about time he shut up. How pathetic to get your kicks screwing up everyone's schedule. I wish I'd been around when you registered Linds, I'd have warned you about that windbag."

"I wish you'd been around too Bri. Although, he's such a control freak that I think it's great when everyone thoroughly annoys him by constantly staring at the clock. It actually makes him red in the face."

"He's an ass, and I think you need an adventure," Brian said with a bizarre twinkle in his eye as they walked outside together into the first warm Spring day of the year.

"Oh no. I think I had an adventure last year," Lindsey said, almost annoyed at how carefree Brian could be. She knew he had to work after the chem class he should be going to next, but it wouldn't bother him in the least to miss either of them.

"Oh no, nothing. I was thinking a little excursion to Hummel Park would be in order right about now."

"Now? Are you nuts?"

"Come on, let's go. It'll be fun, I promise. And, it's a great day for it."

"But..."

"No buts. I happen to know you don't have to work for once, so how could this not be the perfect time?"

"Don't you have a chem class and work today Brian?"

"No more excuses, little one. You let me worry about my classes and work, and hand over those car keys."

"I'm starting to think you're a little crazy, Bri, so I'm not sure that would be the best idea."

"Come on, you know I mean well and I'd love to test drive your old Camaro."

With or against her impaired judgment, Lindsey still wasn't sure, but she remembered handing over the keys as they walked through the large parking lot, elated they were going to go do something, anything together.

"Brian, I have no idea how you just talked me into this?"

"Let's just say I'm persuasive."

"Either that, or I'm pretty gullible."

"That's one thing I'm sure you're not Lindsey. Hey look! Here comes Mark."

"Let's ask him along," Lindsey volunteered, feeling less vulnerable with a friend nearby.

"Sure, why not," Brian said, probably confused at the time. "Hey Mark?"

"Hey Brian, Lindsey, I see you're becoming acquainted."

Brian ignored the comment. "Want to go out to Hummel Park?"

Seeing Lindsey's face and knowing her pretty well, he responded slowly. "I suppose I be could be persuaded."

"I have the persuasion right here in my pocket and Lindsey is letting me drive."

"I'm such a great sport aren't I?" Lindsey piped in shaking her head at the two men. "Anyway I don't have any idea how to get this park."

"You don't know how to get to Hummel Park?"

"No, Brian. Remember me? Study, classes, work, a subject foreign to you, and a concern for my GPA? Of course I don't get out enough to know where this park is. Although I think I did go to Day Camp there once when I was in elementary school?"

Brian continued laughing as he walked around and unlocked the passenger side door of the old car for her and then came around to the driver's side, playfully shoving Mark aside.

Inside the car, surveying his surroundings, Brian turned to Lindsey who was trying not to show how nervous she was. Brian smiled and poked her shoulder. "My little friend, you are just way too tortured. I think this calls for an after the park stop at the Howard Street Tavern."

"Brian, the bar too? My mom will flip if I'm gone all afternoon," Lindsey blurted out, unsure of what she had just let herself in for.

"You worry too much, doesn't she, Mark?"

"I think so," Mark said, trying not to laugh out loud.

"Aren't you guys a barrel of support?" Lindsey replied pretending to pout.

"You want me, don't you, Linds?" Brian said as Lindsey was about to lose her breath.

"Just drive, oh sultan of persuasion."

"Yea, sultan, that's me!" Brian said loudly as he threw his head back laughing while he maneuvered the car out of the crowded campus lot.

"Brian, you are incorrigible," Lindsey shot back as she tried with little success to relax and enjoy the ride.

The old memories brought fresh tears back to Lindsey as she remembered Brian's laugh. She could still picture the three of them hiking around in the park on the beautiful spring day, joking and flopping onto the new grass and stopping at the Tavern on the way home. She could almost recapture how excited Brian made her feel and she also remembered Mark's phone call the next day.

"Glad I could help you out, Linds."

"Ok, ok, I owe you one. But I was chicken to go alone."

"As well you should have been old friend," he said with a smirk in his voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You take me way to seriously, Linds. I can see you guys like each other, just watch out little girl, Brian's pretty footloose and carefree."

"That, I think figured out for myself, but warning well heeded, Mark, old friend."

"All the same, take it easy there."

"Yes, sir."

"You're humoring me."

She was, and she didn't care. She had wanted to be with Brian and so badly all caution went by the wayside. And they did have the time of their lives for a while, a little more than a year actually, but then they went their separate ways. It was several months after that first breakup when they'd run into each other again, thanks to Mark, and inevitably got back together, the attraction too strong to deny. The past months had been great too, until now. She'd had to face the fact that what Brian did for a living could actually result in prison time and that scared her. She knew she'd been pretending for a long time that only Steve was involved, but when she climbed into the attic to look for some light bulbs and found a lot more, it was obvious they both were in it. She hated to admit it, but that was flirting a little too closely with disaster for her. She tried, and even wanted to look the other way for months, but the questions, the fear, became too much.

It was definitely over. She didn't see Brian or hear from him again as she finished her junior year of college that month and decided to go out to Colorado and work for the summer. A change of surroundings was what she was sure she needed. Little did she know at the time that this was not the last she would see of Brian.

Chapter 3

“Eddie?”

“John, Alec. It’s good to see you guys,” Eddie exclaimed as he embraced his colleagues. “I’ve been scanning the floor for you occasionally, but I thought you weren’t coming in until tonight?”

“Check your watch, Ed. It’s after seven now.”

Clearing his remaining chips from the card table, Eddie looked down at his watch. “Damn. It is. I guess I was a little preoccupied.”

“Losing?”

“Thanks Alec, but no. I’m actually not doing too badly here,” he said holding up his rather large stash of chips and gesturing toward the gaming table. “I just can’t get over this deal with Rose.”

“I know, blows my mind too, and it gets worse,” John replied as he and Alec followed Eddie over to the cashier window.

After the payoff was counted out, the threesome headed back through the casino and Eddie turned his attention back to John. “You’ve got an update?”

“I spoke with Eric a few minutes ago. He got into town about two and is out at the estate now. His contact down in Reno said he saw Rose at the airport there late yesterday.”

“Now Rose is here?”

“Looks that way.”

"What's going on, Ed? Deets isn't a problem anymore, thanks to some creative hunting on my part. Rose can't get any more information from him, so why is he here?"

"That's not too hard to figure out, Alec. The way I see it, it's obvious Deets laid the ground work for something big to go down and even with him out of the picture, it looks like whatever he and Rose planned is still in place. Not only does Rose know that Michael takes care of most of his serious business up here, he knows what that business is this time. He's obviously here because of 'The Synthetic.' Deets or no Deets, I expect he wants it badly and would do anything to get to it, and to Michael. I'm sure he has help, too. As we can all well imagine, there are more than a few others out there who would be willing to help Rose and take advantage of anything that might bring Michael down at the same time."

"That seems to cover most of it and makes sense Eddie, but Rose risking coming into the country doesn't. The security couldn't be higher and he could be so vulnerable here. I just don't get it."

"I see that too, Alec. Maybe Rose trusts no one but himself where "The Synthetic" is concerned and felt he had no other choice, or something else bizarre. Whatever the story, I don't know, so I guess we'll just have to wait to see what Michael or Eric has for us and try and make some sense of it then. In the meantime, what do you say we head over to the bar for a drink before meeting Michael at the show? I know I could use one."

"Sounds good to me," the other two readily agreed. But as the three men began to make their way away from the gaming tables and over to the bar, they saw their boss and mentor coming toward them. From the look on his face, it didn't take a genius to realize something new was definitely up.

"Gentlemen."

"Michael. We were on our way over to the bar before the show. Join us?"

"Another time, Eddie. Right now, we're going to have to bypass the bar and the show. I apologize for diverging from my original plan, but there has been some additional news that doesn't look too favorable for us. Eric is on his way in from my estate now, so why don't we each take different paths to join in my suite in, say, in about ten minutes? You'll be filled in then."

The men quickly dispersed and were soon easily lost among

the sea of gamblers as they made their way up to the suite to find Michael pacing the front room. His most loyal men had begun to assemble around him and his distress was evident to them all.

Eric was the last to arrive, bolting into the suite before anyone could answer his knock.

Michael looked up immediately, "Eric, I'm glad you're here."

"Michael. It's good to be here even under the circumstances," Eric replied, turning his attention toward the other men in the suite. "I'm glad to see everyone could make this meeting too. There's no time for formalities, so I'll cut right to it. Gentleman, the situation with Rose has gotten bigger than we thought, faster than we thought."

Michael positioned himself in the middle of his men and spoke to all of them. "I believe we all know each other so let's not waste any more time. Eric came in from the East Coast for this one. He's always been pretty close to the subject, so I'm going to let him fill you in."

"Thanks Michael. As I'm sure each of you knows by now, our friend, Mr. Rose is not only in the States, but here in Tahoe. What I'm sure you don't know is that it looks like he has a copy of 'The Synthetic!'"

"What? That's not possible," Alec almost shouted as he came out of his chair.

"I'm afraid it is possible Alec, very possible."

"You know this for sure, Eric?" Eddie questioned as his grip tightened on the arms of his chair.

"Well Ed, we're pretty damn sure," Eric replied harshly, his frustration evident. "What we're not sure of, is if his copy is one of the latest with the completed formula."

"How do you know any of this?"

"It's the chain of command boys. About an hour ago, Dan Buchwald in New York called to inform me that Rose called on Mr. Mondaldo at his estate near Tahoe City late last night, offering him a rather unique purchase opportunity. Mondaldo called Dan to see if it was legit, and Dan in turn, called me. It appears we weren't as thorough as we should have been with our Mr. Deets. We didn't give him near enough credit because he evidently found a way to make a copy of one of the disks. We can only hope he didn't get a hold of the finished product, but we can assume nothing."

"I thought it was supposed to be impossible to copy any of those disks?"

"Almost impossible. Almost being the operative word here, Alec.

There are only two, maybe three people alive who might be able to copy a disk like that and one of them is me. Unfortunately, it looks like Deets, or Rose, must have been able to make contact with one of the other two. I don't know who yet, but my money is on Rose. We really underestimated Deets though and how much he and Rose would do to get to us, Michael in particular. Regardless, that formula means a great deal more than life itself to each of us. We need to find a way to get to Rose and soon. We have to have that copy back. We've all worked too hard to let it fall into such unfriendly hands, especially if it's a copy of the completed formula, or even one of the most recent trial runs. The results could be disastrous if someone gets a hold of it without sufficient knowledge to use it properly. So why doesn't everyone get to work. I know there's not much to go on since our friend has always kept quite to himself and has been alone these last several months, but there has to be something, some kind of weakness we can capitalize on, maybe something from his past. Let's check out everything, contact anyone he used to know here in the States, etcetera."

"Consider it done Eric, but Michael? What about his family or better yet, why don't we just waste him?"

"Alec, Alec. It would be a serious mistake to dispose of Mr. Rose. Although it would solve most of our immediate problems, he's far too powerful in Europe now and we can't risk creating too many ugly situations over there that could come back to haunt us. We must bear in mind that we may need him and those valuable connections someday. As for his family, that information is fairly scarce. All we know is that his parents have passed away, he hasn't been on terms with his sister for years and he and his wife are no longer together. What we do need to find, is a way to show him who is in control here in the states and get that disk back. He must be made to see how foolish it would be to ever go against us in any way. And Alec, you should have gotten your fill last night with Bill."

"Point well taken, Michael, now does anyone know where he's staying?"

"He could be out at Mondaldo's in Tahoe City, even here at the hotel, but Mondaldo's would be a good place to start. We need to pay him a visit to confirm his loyalties to us if nothing else, and he should be able to shed some light on Rose's whereabouts and plans," Eric answered shoving a map into Alec's hand.

"Thanks Eric. John and I will check that out."

"Good Alec. I'll be here with Michael calling in some favors, and Eddie? Why don't you cruise the tables around the strip? I hear Rose is about as much of fan as you are."

"That I can do."

The men each left the room with their separate assignments as Michael continued to pace almost violently. Eric looked to him with some concern.

"You okay, Michael?"

"Yes Eric, only frustrated. I believe I'll change my mind and go down with Eddie for a while, I need some air."

"Sure Michael. I'll page you if needed."

Chapter 4

Lindsey was sitting alone at Denver International Airport and for some reason found herself thinking back to her last visit with her old friend, Mark. After Jim's death, she'd moved back to Colorado to try and push the demons away and had pretty much succeeded in cutting herself off from everyone and everything, but Mark went out of his way to find her. Shortly after she'd settled in to her small cabin, he'd been on a trip out to Greeley to visit his sister and made the time to run up to her mountain hideaway for the day. He tried to console her over Jim's death and ended up revealing an old bit of information which still blew her away. They'd been out to dinner and were having a drink when he had to have seen the sadness in her eyes and changed the subject of their conversation abruptly.

"Have you heard from our mutual friend?"

"And that would be, who?" Lindsey said, the thought of those happier times bringing a smile to her face, knowing full well who Mark was referring to. But she also couldn't help wondering why he would bring up Brian now. She let her mind drift.

The time line was a bit obscure, but it seemed to her to have been about a year after their second break up that Lindsey had run into Brian again. They went to dinner a few times, but it seemed too hard for both of them this time and they lost touch after a few months. She

ended up moving to Colorado and meeting someone seemingly so much more compatible, that it was easy to stop missing Brian. Then the next year, the month before she was to marry Jim and move to California, he called out of the blue. He'd found out from Mark that she was visiting her folks in town and tracked her down to tell her he was leaving the country. Something wasn't quite right she knew, but she was so involved in her own plans, she let it slip. Several months passed after that and then the postcards and letters came, even phone calls from very faraway places and in some way or another they had managed to continue to keep in touch over the last several years, just not so frequently now. She and Jim even visited him and his new wife in Europe, but that was years ago too, and it was the last time they'd actually seen each other. They'd had great fun during the visit and at the time she remembered thinking how funny it seemed that so many things could change so much while others stayed the same. She also knew Mark saw their old friend much more often during the few times he'd come back to the states, but she wasn't sure that happened anymore either. She'd truly cut herself off this last year.

"Hey Linds? Anybody home?" Mark said poking her lightly and laughing at how far away she'd let herself slip.

She shook the thought away and returned her attentions to her old friend.

"You were saying? Have I heard from who?" Lindsey added, pretending she didn't even remember the question.

Mark, of course, saw right through her, "Cut it out Lindsey, who do you think?"

"Mr. Rhoades, of course, and you know I still hear from him, but much more sporadically lately, especially since I've holed up here. You know about that aborted Christmas visit while I was in California in 2002, and that bizarre postcard from Egypt don't you? It looked like it had been hand delivered by the Pharaohs themselves, an email or two, and a rare phone call, but nothing consistent. I have a feeling he's really involved in whatever he's doing now."

"Or that you might be avoiding the world and he might be avoiding ghosts?"

"Very funny, Mark. You know why I've kept out of touch," Lindsey replied somewhat agitated by the comment.

Mark, not liking where the conversation was heading, easily brought the subject back around.

"I do, Linds, and no one blames you so lighten up," he said a bit forcefully. "Hey, whatever did happen with that aborted Christmas visit when you were still in California?"

"Not much," Lindsey replied falling for the diversionary tactic. He called, left a message on the machine that he was on his way to the house, and then nothing. There was a brief apology on that Egypt postcard, but nothing else was ever mentioned?"

"How brief an apology, Linds?"

"You know Brian. He said he was sorry, and that he had an emergency of some sort to follow up on, but I'm still sure there was more to it than that. You know after all the time we spent together, I never did know exactly what he was involved in?"

"You know you were much better off that way, don't you?" Mark said much too seriously.

"I do, but I did know enough about it to break us up. Sometimes, I still wish it could have all been different."

"He did too."

"Somehow, I don't think so," Lindsey replied looking incredulously at Mark. "I do, Linds. Did I tell you he was in Nebraska again, for a couple of days last month?"

"No. At least I don't think so."

"Well, he called several times trying to hook up with me, but his schedule and mine were so bizarre I didn't think it was going to happen. But when we finally met up, I kind of had the feeling the only reason he hunted me down was to check on you."

"Somehow, I doubt that too."

"It is true, Linds."

"Then why do you suppose he keeps so distant anymore?"

"You know, I actually asked him something along those lines and he very apparently can't make himself get close to you again. He's so busy now with business, you know, the one you hated, and I don't think he wants you to know he still checks up on you, but there is something else. Something I never told you."

"Really?" Lindsey interrupted, suddenly becoming more interested now that a secret might be revealed. "What's that Mark?"

"On second thought, maybe it's better left unsaid."

Mark glanced away from Lindsey, becoming uncharacteristically silent clearly regretting his last statement.

"You seriously can't be thinking of saying something like that

and then not finishing the story, because it's mean and I would have to kill you, and in the end the judge would let me off."

"Brian'd kill me too, so either way..."

"Oh, come on, out with it, Mark. It couldn't possibly matter that much anyway. It's been years since we've all seen each other and even though he visits you sporadically, it's not like he's going to find out you told me anything."

"You don't know that. You know it seems like he knows everyone."

"Stop with the excuses and spill it, Mark!" Lindsey said somewhat annoyed with her old friend.

"Okay," he continued, "but this remains between us."

"Yea, yea, anything to make you happy," she answered poking at him playfully.

"You're a pain Linds. Anyway, for what it's worth, he told me right before he left for India last year, that you were the one he shouldn't have let get away. He said he wasn't sure exactly what love was, but the feelings he carried around for you to the day, had to be close, if not it."

"That's insane, Mark."

"I don't think so, Linds. I mean, why else would he go out of his way every time he visits to make sure to find me and to get an update on you."

"Oh, please Mark, that whole spiel is ridiculous. If he was that concerned, why wouldn't he just call me" she said emphatically.

"I don't know, Linds. I think he's scared, and still involved with the business that broke you guys up more than once before."

"Oh, Mark, don't be silly. He was probably just longing for part of his carefree past. I admit I have a soft spot for that time and him too, always will, but we've really grown apart. We all moved on a long time ago. I'm sure it was just a momentary lapse, trust me."

"I don't believe that, Linds. I think he's gone out of his way to keep his distance on purpose because he thought it was better for you. I know he's incredibly involved in his work, but last visit and every other time he's come to my house, or met me anywhere, he always managed to work you into the conversation, saying how he wished everything could have worked out differently between the two of you. After I told him about Jim's unexpected death, he wanted to call, he did pick up the phone and dial, he just couldn't complete it."

"Mark!" she exclaimed, still unable to comprehend what he was telling her or why now. "It's been years since we've actually seen each other and I'm sure it's only a longing for a simpler time. You know you can't come back to your roots and not dredge up old memories."

"Believe what you will, little girl, at least you've heard my version now. You know, I never thought he'd move so far away or leave you. Especially after the third time you two idiots got back together."

"That third time was pretty much a waste, Mark," Lindsey said finally able to smile at that memory, "and such a long time ago. You know, by the time he told me he was leaving the country we'd long since broken up and had been apart for almost a year, if not longer. I admit, part of me was sad and never thought he'd really leave, but both of us had moved on by then and I wished him luck. It was all for the best in the end. He was too wild to settle down like I wanted and Jim turned out to be the one. He also never let his business become more important than me. I couldn't take that, and the fact that I was actually better off not knowing the whole story. I do love that we've kept in touch though, even if it's not quite as often. Sometimes I long for that past and the part of me he brought out and I will always be glad the connection is there no matter how distant, because somehow I think, without the promise of his friendship and yours, I would feel like I'd truly lost a part of my life."

"You always were a little too trusting, Linds, and I hate to say it, but a little naive. I suppose you've revoked your many thanks to me for introducing you guys long ago?"

"No, never. Although I'm relatively sure he never felt as strongly as you seem to think about me. Brian was an experience that changed my life and we did have a great time. He could talk me into doing things I would never have even considered trying otherwise, and he showed me so much. I can't believe he's been gone from the states and I haven't seen him for so many years, or that we've managed to still keep in touch," she said smiling and remembering her vulnerability where Brian was concerned.

"You always were a glutton for punishment," Mark said leaning toward her, happy to see her smiling again, and happy that he'd given her something else to think about. "But I know for a fact he still thinks about you and I can only take so much of the blame for the two of you, kiddo. It has been a long time since all of us were together though. Sometimes it seems like only yesterday, but either way I miss it too on occasion."

"We did have a lot of fun, especially..."

A screaming child bumped into Lindsey while running away from her mother and she was forced to look up and around the airport again, shaking herself back to reality. Thoughts of Jim were trying to invade her mind as Marks words faded away, so she was glad for the interruption. She pushed the thoughts back into the depths of her mind and tried to focus on the present again. Even though she'd seen Mark only a couple of months before, it seemed like decades now. So much had happened for her recently, her head was spinning. Jim's tragic death was over a year behind her and she had finally found the direction she needed in a new job, a few months before Mark's visit. She was still unsure of herself but was finally beginning to feel as if she was at least moving forward. But now that she was off to a seminar in Lake Tahoe, she was even more anxious. She got up and began to wander around the boarding area, staring out the windows at baggage handlers loading the plane and then staring up at the check-in podium.

At first, he was just another one of the masses, but even Lindsey couldn't help notice the tall, attractive man as he walked near the podium for gate B33 and her flight to Reno. He was muscular, almost rugged, and his jeans fit him like a glove. She found herself watching his thick, dark hair and strong jaw line move as he spoke and gestured to the gate agent, and caught herself staring as he turned toward her. Suddenly she realized this was the first time she'd noticed a man since Jim, and quickly turned away. It was also the first time she'd really been away since Jim's accident too, but her thoughts were unexpectedly diverted again when she felt a light tap on her shoulder.

"Lindsey? My god, is that you?"

She spun around, immediately recognizing Jim's old work partner and friend Cody, and his wife Sharon.

"Cody, Sharon! What a surprise. What are you guys doing here?"

"That's right, you wouldn't know. I finally got my transfer here to Denver. We've been so busy getting settled we decided we needed a break and thought we'd spend the weekend up in Tahoe. What about you? Are you ok?"

"Oh sure," she replied with a vague smile knowing he was referring to her coping with Jim's death. "It was tough for a while, but I'm moving on."

"Glad to hear it. I've also been wanting to tell you how glad we all were to hear that the airline wasn't up to its usual high jinks and the hearing went in Jim's favor. There was no way there was any negligence on his part. That fool Phil never secured the floorboards and well, you know the rest. I didn't tell you that Phil left, though."

"Really?"

"Yea. He gave his notice last month after the final hearing and no one has heard from him since."

"I can't say I'm sorry to hear that, there are still a lot of hard feelings."

"I know. Jim was a good friend and I miss him. I couldn't even look Phil in the eye after the accident."

"I miss him too, Cody. For a while there I wasn't sure what to do, but things are better now."

"I'm glad to hear it. Are you on this flight to Reno?"

"Yea, I am," she said thinking what a small world it was, "but basically just long enough to pick up a rental car and head up to Tahoe myself for a business meeting. I'm working with Universe's Colorado office, editing, and they're having their big annual convention up there."

"Really? Well, I hope that goes well. Any chance you're staying near the Embassy Suites?"

"Just down the road..."

"Mr. Sullivan. Mr. Cody Sullivan, please see the agent at gate B 33."

"I better answer that page," Cody responded, "but we should try and get together. Maybe dinner one night? We'd love to catch up. Call our hotel, okay?"

"I'll do my best. It was great to see you guys."

"You too, Lindsey. Don't be a stranger."

"I'll try."

Lindsey watched her friends walk up to the podium in answer to their page, and then found herself glancing around for another glimpse of the stranger. Since he was nowhere to be seen, she found herself another seat and waited for them to announce boarding.

Chapter 5

Eric DePaul had noticed Lindsey, too. It was hard for him not to. His eyes immediately followed her when she walked up to the podium to check-in and then he couldn't help watching her as she walked over and sat across the gate area so obviously lost in thought. He wasn't sure what it was that provoked his immediate attraction to the little lady in the short, blue linen suit dress. Maybe it was her perfectly petite frame or maybe the look of distance she possessed so thoroughly. Nevertheless, he found himself having an overwhelming desire to embrace and protect this small, dark-haired woman. When he walked over near to where she was now standing and overheard parts of the conversation she was having with her friends, he thought he at least understood some of the look of sadness in her eyes.

He also instinctively knew he should bury these and any other thoughts he was having as he continued to watch her. His upcoming business at the lake with Michael would absorb all of his time, and he knew it was always dangerous to become involved with anyone in his line of work.

He walked over to the newsstand to get a copy of USA Today and when he returned to the boarding area she was gone. He had all but convinced himself to concentrate on the business at hand as he made his way on board the Boeing 757 aircraft and began to look

through the first-class overheads for somewhere to store his carry-on. He clicked open the compartment directly above his row and a small, hard case came tumbling toward him. He tried to catch it, but his hands were already full.

"Ouch!"

"Shit," Eric slipped. "Are you all right?" he said almost stammering as he finished the sentence and realized who the case had fallen on at the same time, but smiled instead.

"I'm sorry. That case came out of nowhere. Are you ok?" he repeated.

Lindsey did stammer as the dark, handsome figure loomed over her.

"Ye... Yes, I'm fine," she said softly, trying to regain her composure. "It barely clipped me," she lied.

"You sure?" Eric inquired, still unable to believe what had just happened.

"Really, I'm fine. See," she said looking up into his intent face watching him run a large hand through his dark hair and shake his head. "I'm pretty much still all in one piece."

She couldn't help smiling and feeling a little anxious as she turned away, squeezing the finger the case had fallen on while the man rearranged the overhead compartment and slid past her to take his seat next to the window. Her finger did sting, but she was too preoccupied now to dwell on it.

"You're sure you're ok?" Eric asked again, not wanting to let the chance for a conversation die away.

"Yes, I'm sure. It just hit my finger and it's fine," she lied again as her left index finger began to throb.

"I'd offer to buy you a drink to make some small attempt at amends, but since I can't do that up here, can I at least ask you to join me in one?"

"No thanks. I have quite a drive after we land in Reno and I'm somewhat of a lightweight. Besides, it's not necessary and I don't want to bother you."

"It's not a bother. How about coffee, then?"

"All right," Lindsey replied with some hesitation. "That, I can do."

She began to feel nervous seated next to this gorgeous stranger, and wasn't quite sure what to do, except to accept the coffee and start working on her latest editing project. The memories of Jim were still vivid in her mind and her attraction to this man scared her. She could still hear Cody's voice on the phone.

"Lindsey, honey. I'm afraid I have some pretty bad news. There was an accident in the hanger today. A bad accident. And.... well....," the pause had been deafening to her. "Jim didn't make it."

Her whole world had turned upside down after that call, and even with the help and support friends and family had continued to give her, she wasn't sure she was ready to be a part of any world again for a long time. This new job and its opportunity was one of the things pulling her out, but she was pretty sure she was not ready for an encounter of this kind.

Eric could see she was uncomfortable, if not nervous, sitting next to him, and from what he'd overheard in the boarding area, he was pretty certain he knew why, at least partially. He asked the flight attendant for two coffees and told himself to let her be after they arrived. If she decided to open up, it was more than fine with him, but he knew it would be best for both of them if nothing further happened.

The flight attendant brought the coffee as they waited for the plane to pull away from the gate and Lindsey smiled as she thanked her and the man next to her, who was making her heart race. Unsure of what else to say to him, she began to look through her carry-on as the safety announcements were being made and the pilot came over the intercom, further taking away the threat of immediate conversation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain. Tower says we've a change in line up and we're now number two for takeoff. We'll be talking with you again as soon as we reach our cruising altitude. Thanks again for flying with us. Flight attendants please prepare for takeoff."

The flight attendant came by to retrieve their coffee cups for takeoff as the plane taxied toward the runway and Lindsey stared over and out the window to watch all the cars racing along Pena Blvd. As the plane took off and climbed higher and higher, there was the usual turbulence as they headed over the mountains west of Denver and Eric couldn't help notice Lindsey stiffen and stare straight ahead.

"You ok?"

"Oh yea," she replied managing a small laugh. "I just hate leaving Denver and heading west. It's the turbulence. I know it's silly but my ears pop and my stomach runs the show."

"Could you use a piece of gum? I've heard it's supposed to help? For your ears, anyway," he said with a smile that, to Lindsey, would very likely melt ice.

"Sure," she replied mesmerized for the moment.

Eric watched how tense she was as he searched his pockets for the package of gum he'd purchased at one of the airport gift shops. He found it and handed a piece to her while she thanked him with a pale smile. Against his better judgment, he couldn't help continuing the conversation.

"Is Reno your final destination?"

"Not really, just long enough to pick up a rental car and head up to casino row, Tahoe, and a business deal. You?"

"That same area, myself. What kind of business brings you up that way?"

"Nothing terribly exciting. I work in editing for Universe Publishing and I really think most of the people involved are heavy into skiing, so what better place to hold their annual convention and meeting? They bring me along to actually look like they're getting some work done," she said smiling and almost forgetting her throbbing finger.

"I'm sure it's more than that," he said marveling at her obvious lack of confidence.

Lindsey smiled again, unwrapped the gum, and decided it would be best to open up her laptop and get some work done, if for no other reason than to keep herself otherwise occupied.

The next 10 minutes or so they flew along in silence while Lindsey continued to work on her project, and Eric went over the figures Michael had faxed to him earlier that day. He tried to quell his desire for the quiet little lady next to him who was so intently working away, but was finding it difficult. He looked up and put his papers aside when the flight attendant approached their row.

"Would you care for something to drink?"

"I would," Eric replied thinking a drink definitely would not hurt. "A scotch rocks would be nice."

"Ma'am?"

"No thank you, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"You're right. If I could get a diet Pepsi, I'd appreciate it."

"Coming right up," she replied cheerfully, disappearing for only a minute or two. As she sat down the drinks, Lindsey, still working, absentmindedly reached for her glass and grabbed the stranger's instead.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said quickly, almost knocking over both glasses.

"Not a problem," Eric replied, finding it impossible not to notice the finger the camera case had clipped and how purple and swollen it had become. He motioned the flight attendant back over to their row.

"Could you bring me some crushed ice in a cloth napkin please?"

Both the attendant and Lindsey looked up in confusion.

"I'm afraid I've been a bit accident prone today and there was a little mishap earlier when I dropped a hard case onto this lady's finger. It's looking swollen so I thought..."

The flight attendant glanced over and noticed Lindsey's swelling finger, a look of concern crossing over her face.

"That's too bad. I'll be right back with that ice."

Lindsey looked over questioningly at this stranger next to her, unsure what to think or say. "You really didn't have to do that. It doesn't hurt much and I'm sure this swelling will go down once we land and get out of this pressurized cabin."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of what trouble I go to," he said firmly while smiling encouragingly. "It might look worse than it is, but I'm pretty positive it won't hurt to try the ice. You know," he said smugly, "to be on the safe side."

The flight attendant returned and handed him the ice-filled napkin before Lindsey could get a word in, but Eric knew he'd made the right decision when he noticed her wince slightly as he lifted her hand lightly and applied the makeshift ice pack to her finger. Lindsey cradled her hand and cracked a faint smile as she thanked him again.

"Thank you, again."

"Anytime. I could see it had to be bothering you. Now I'll let you get back to your work, although I'm sure I've hindered your progress. I apologize again."

"That's not necessary, and it hasn't held me back too much since I'm used to a hunt and peck method anyway."

She smiled in spite of how anxious he made her feel and decided again it would be best to return to her work while cradling her hand.

Eric still couldn't help but to continue to glance her way. In his line of work, he'd seen several men suffer, even a woman or two, and felt nothing. But this one little incident, this one little lady was getting to him. He was glad when she quietly returned to her laptop, although it made the rest of the short flight go by relatively slowly for both of them.

In the meantime, Lindsey began to let her work slip away and start to daydream.

"May I speak with Lindsey Mason?"

"This is Lindsey."

"Ms. Mason, this is Ben Pendergraft, up in the front office."

"Yes?" Lindsey replied skeptically, wondering why Mr. Pendergraft would be calling her.

"You've been doing some exceptional work since you've come on board and we've decided it should be recognized. Anyway, you could see your way to attending our annual convention in Tahoe in two weeks?"

Lindsey was completely dumbfounded. She hadn't realized he, or anyone had noticed the work she did or would even care. She was so flattered by the offer, she knew she wouldn't say no, even if it meant leaving the safety of her self-imposed little world.

"Really?" she hesitated slightly. "I mean, sure, I'd love too. Your offer is just so unexpected. Are you sure?"

"Of course. It's all settled then. Gina in the travel department will forward your documents to you the day after tomorrow."

With that, he hung up and Lindsey found herself staring at her desk in amazement. She was so lost in this thought that she jumped a mile when a voice came over the plane's intercom system.

"Good morning, passengers. We are preparing for our final approach into the Reno airport and would like everyone to bring their seatbacks and tray tables into the upright position, check to see their seatbelts are fastened, and prepare to land in Reno and hopefully win a lot of money."

A cheer went up from most of her fellow passengers, but Lindsey had slipped back into reveling in her previous thoughts, still unable to believe she was doing this. She jumped again when the flight attendant tapped her shoulder.

"Can I take that glass, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I was a million miles away."

She reached down to retrieve her glass and then past her to retrieve the stranger's. She smiled as she walked away, and Lindsey began to put her carry-on bag back in order. The plane landed smoothly and taxied up to the gate while she noticed the stranger glance her way again and immediately felt the same nervous twinge. He smiled and gathered his own things before returning his attention to her.

"Can I help you with anything? After all, I am responsible for that finger. How's it doing?"

"No thanks. My finger's fine and I really don't have much to carry."

"Let me see?"

"It's okay, I swear," Lindsey said with some apprehension as they made their way off the airplane.

"You shouldn't swear."

Eric had been unable to resist the comment as they walked off the plane and toward the baggage claim area. Halfway down the concourse, he took hold of her hand and brought it toward his face. He found one very swollen, very black and blue finger and shook his head still finding it hard to believe it happened in the first place.

"I do feel badly about this. I think we ought to make sure it isn't broken. Why don't you let me give you a lift up to the lake? I'm headed there myself, so it's not out of the way, and I happen to know a great doctor there," he offered, inherently knowing this wasn't one of his wiser ideas, but at the same time not wanting to see her walk away.

"That really isn't necessary. Besides, since I'm pretty sure you're not going to give me the loan of your car for the entire week, I better get the one that is reserved for me. Thank you anyway. It was nice to have met you."

"Likewise."

Lindsey turned away with a tinge of regret and relief, and walked up to the baggage carousel to grab her luggage. She quickly looked back and smiled at the stranger, almost reconsidering his offer before seeing the absurdity in it. Instead she found her bag and headed off to find the Hertz rental car counter.

Eric smiled too, watching her leave, knowing it was better this way. He knew he couldn't get involved, even if just for a short time. His business always came first and Michael's recent request for him to return to Tahoe was so urgent, he was promised to be kept incredibly occupied.

Lindsey couldn't shake the uneasy feeling the stranger had given her. She had been overwhelmed by his rugged good looks at first, and then by the attention and kindness he'd shown her, but now she was glad to be alone. She knew it would be worthless to continue to think about him. It just wasn't the right time or place. Once in line for her rental car, she did glance back one more time, but he was gone.

"I didn't even ask his name, but I guess it's for the best anyway," she said to herself and then quickly put him out of her mind as she pulled the rental car papers from her briefcase.

Watching the snow fall softly outside the window, she made her way up the counter to find out what kind of car she'd be braving the roads to Tahoe in.

"Can I help you?"

Lindsey found herself smiling at the stranger in front of her. "I believe there should be a car reserved for me. Here are the papers I was sent. My name is Lindsey Mason."

"Yes, Ms. Mason. I have it all right here. It looks like you have your choice this morning of a Pontiac Grand Am or Ford Tempo. Which would you prefer?"

"I'll go with the Grand Am, if that's okay. Anyway, I can pick the color?" she said jokingly, still thriving on the nervous energy the stranger had given her.

"Afraid not," he said and then hesitated briefly, her mood catching. "Well, unless you want to run out to the lot, pick one, come back here again and hope I haven't rented it out, and then go back out to the lot?"

"Oh all right. Just kidding, whatever is fine," she said as they laughed together good-naturedly while the agent completed her paperwork and motioned toward the doors across the way. Lindsey was about to walk away, but turned back toward the counter to ask him once more question. "Have you heard if this weather is supposed to keep up?"

"The latest reports say the snow should accumulate up to an inch or two down here in the city, but that it could get pretty nasty this evening up in the higher elevations. Are you heading up the hill?"

"I am."

"Well, I'm sure if you're leaving now, you won't have much trouble, that is, unless you're coming back down tonight?"

"No, thank God. I'm staying."

"Skiing?"

"No, not this time. There's a convention up there and from the looks of these papers, I guess I'll be kept pretty busy."

"Well, I certainly hope they've scheduled some time in for fun. Otherwise, what would be the point of having a convention some place with so much else to do?" he said, once again gesturing toward the double doors across from her. "Your paperwork is all set. If you'll sign right here, keep these copies for the return, and go through those doors, our van will take you to your car."

"Thanks for all your help," Lindsey replied, beginning to almost look forward to the days ahead.

Eric walked outside just in time to catch a glimpse of Lindsey boarding the Hertz Rental Car Shuttle and chastised himself for the feelings he was still having. Before doing something stupid, he decided the best thing for him to do right now would be to throw himself into his work. He walked down the sidewalk and found his limo waiting for him, as he knew it would be. He climbed into the back and immediately picked up the phone.

"Hi, George."

"Hello, Mr. Eric. It's good to have you back with us. The suite or the estate?"

"The estate, George. Michael is expecting me there."