

DIFFERENT

DATTA GROOVER



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CHAPTER ONE

Frank sat bolt upright, tangled in bedding. How'd he wind up on the floor? Soaked in cold sweat, senses on high alert, he scanned the room. Something moved around the end of the bed toward him in the barely visible light. He fumbled with the drawer on his nightstand, then relaxed at the sound of Sofia's soothing voice.

"Hey, it's all right. Just a bad dream." She gently rubbed his back. "Same one?" When he didn't respond, she tried again. "Frank? Breathe, *cariño*. Everything's okay."

Frank exhaled. "I can't stand the thought of you and the kids—" he began, then leapt to his feet, startling his wife.

"Frank, they're fine." But he was already halfway down the hall.

She was probably right, but he had to be sure. First the girls. Both Lisa and Jodie slept soundly. Farther down the hall in Sam's room, he stood for several minutes watching their five-year-old sleep. It calmed him and helped soothe the terror of the nightmare. Funny, though. When Sofia put him to bed early that evening, Sam had grabbed his favorite stuffed bear—the one he never went to sleep without—and slipped past her, then ran out of his room over to where Frank sat checking his email at the dining room table. He solemnly looked at his father and put Little Bear in his lap. "Why, thank you, Sam," he'd said, but when he tried to hand the stuffed toy back to his son, the boy shook his head and ran back to his room. As if he knew his dad was about to have a rough night. So Little Bear slept with Frank and Sofia that evening.

When he got back to bed, Sofia greeted him sleepily. "Everything okay?"

"It is now." He climbed under the covers and nestled close to his wife. "What would I do without you?"

“You’d be hopelessly lost,” she murmured before drifting off to sleep.

Frank lay staring at the dark ceiling, thinking about the recurring nightmare, his heart still beating faster and harder than normal. In the past, Sofia had suggested he get help with the dreams, but she couldn’t know some things were beyond help. Those dreams were based on what could never be fixed or undone. He’d willingly give up his own life for the safety of any one of his family. If and when that time came, however, he might not have a choice.

He sighed and rolled onto his side. A minute later, he was sound asleep.

Sofia didn’t mention the dream the next morning. She had only kind and soothing words for him—as usual the day after a nightmare. As if they were like any happily married couple: deeply in love, caring, and affectionate with each other.

Over the next couple of weeks, however, things slowly and inevitably drifted back to normal. The way they always did.

Frank checked his watch and slapped the steering wheel. Damn! Late again. When he’d arrived ten minutes behind schedule last time, Sofia took it as a lack of commitment to their marriage. Wasn’t taking time out of his workday to show up for counseling proof enough of his commitment? She didn’t understand that leaving work wasn’t simply a matter of shutting down his computer. If he had exposed wiring or anything like that, he had to “make it work or make it safe,” as the sign on the wall at the shop reminded everyone.

The day hadn’t gone well. The mistake had been telling his crew about the counseling. Everyone gave him a hard time—even Jason. They teased him all day, and though Frank tried to laugh it off, the teasing bothered him. He even had some ugly thoughts. What if they couldn’t make things right? What if their marriage didn’t pan out? Frank experienced dark moments when his mind went there.

HR had announced another round of updates to their employee handbook that morning, for the second time that year—and it was only February. That meant another useless meeting to discuss all the new changes. Working for Lake Oswego Public Works had other downsides as well. Everything had to be politically correct and checked at least three times, then discussed ad nauseam. Which today put him far behind schedule.

Portland traffic worsened each year, and he hated how much it slowed him down. Especially today. A freezing drizzle and the gray Portland sky made everything feel even slower. Burnside would most likely be jammed, so he'd have to cut across on Fourteenth Street.

No point in trying to explain any of that to Sofia. He'd still get a black mark for being late. Of course, she had to choose a counselor in the Pearl District rather than someone close by. He knew it was for the "greater good of their relationship," as she liked to put it, but still. Getting away from work was never easy. Too many people depended on him.

It'd been over a month since the last nightmare. The subject probably wouldn't even come up. Not that it had anything to do with their relationship, anyway. Digging up the past meant a lot of wasted time. For him, the best therapy meant being home in the garage working on his quadcopter. But if this counseling business helped their relationship, it was a good thing. He just had to keep telling himself that.

After ten minutes of not advancing even a full block, he activated the flashing yellow lights on his roof. With no police in sight, he crossed the solid white middle line into the empty oncoming lane and took an illegal left turn at the next corner. If a cop stopped him, he'd say a utility emergency had just come up. That line had saved him from a ticket on more than one occasion.

When his GPS told him he'd arrived, he saw no place to park save for a public garage the next block up on the right. Better than nothing. He stopped even with the entrance, his right blinker expressing his intent to turn, waiting

for the constant stream of pedestrians—bundled up against the cold and wet—to take their sweet time passing by so he could turn in. Did any of them think to stop and wave him in? No, that would be way too courteous. His irritation increased by the second. Finally, he got a break. He revved the dirty white City of Lake Oswego pickup and made the sharp right into the garage. Unfortunately, the truck slid sideways on the slick sidewalk at the last moment and hit the edge of the entrance full-on. The impact was hard enough to deploy his airbag and slide his .45 auto out from under his seat into plain view. He grabbed the pistol and hurriedly stuffed it back under the seat, moments before some guy in a two-piece suit and holding an umbrella knocked on the window.

“You okay, bud? Want me to call someone?”

Frank waved him off, reversed, and renegotiated the turn. He moved forward slowly and found a parking space without further difficulty. Feeling as though he’d taken a hard punch in the mouth, he checked himself in the rearview mirror. No blood showed, but the airbag had scuffed his cheek and bruised his lip. The yellowish powder on his face made him look jaundiced. He had a slight headache, which seemed normal under the circumstances. He got out and examined the damage to the truck’s front left corner: bent bumper, smashed headlight, and some serious wrinkles on the fender. The office manager wouldn’t be happy, but that was why they had insurance. He locked the truck, checked his watch, and ran for the exit—already ten minutes late.

On his way to the counselor’s office building on the next block, he ran past a homeless man camped on the sidewalk, bundled up against the cold drizzle, a young girl sleeping in his arms. His cardboard sign said “Combat Vet—please help” in black marker. Frank waved encouragement to him as he ran past. Sometimes that was all you could do. He shook his head as he walked across the lobby. Portland had a massive homeless problem that the city

seemed unable to fix. He punched the *Up* button on the elevator and checked his pockets. Uncle Gino had fought in Vietnam and told him horror stories not just of the war, but of some of the things veterans went through when they came home. And this guy had his daughter with him, who appeared to be around Lisa's age. Surprising that Child Protective Services hadn't picked her up. They frowned on children living on the sidewalk.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. He stepped inside and hit the fifth-floor button, but right before the doors closed all the way, he stuck his hand out, opening them back up. Swearing under his breath, he ran back into the lobby and out onto the sidewalk. He handed a ten-dollar bill to the veteran, who looked at him incredulously at first, then mouthed a silent "Thank you."

Waiting for the elevator a second time, Frank noted he was now more than fifteen minutes late. He was definitely going to get an earful about this—if not now, then later.

Grateful for the men's room outside the counselor's office, he ducked in and washed off the airbag powder. He looked at his face in the mirror as he dried off with paper towels. He was ready for this. Tossing the used towels in the trash, he opened the door and took a deep breath.

CHAPTER TWO

Sofia looked up and gave her husband a tight smile as he walked into the waiting room. “Glad you could make it, Frank.”

He did his best to smile back. “Got stuck in traffic. It’s getting worse all the time. And the drizzle didn’t help at all.”

“I noticed that myself.”

“I had to wrap things up at work.” He felt like he was telling his third-grade teacher why he was late to class. “If I just took off and left wiring exposed, that would be dangerous.”

“And I couldn’t just take off and leave Sam. So I gave myself plenty of time. He’s with Nonna Eve, in case you were wondering.”

“Got it.” He motioned toward the inner door with his head. “Any sign of Steve?”

She shook her head slightly. “I told you he’d be on vacation this time, remember?”

He looked through the stack of periodicals on the side table, pulled out a year-old edition of *Sports Illustrated*, and gave her a glance before leafing through the magazine. “When did you tell me that?”

“Couple of weeks ago. I said he wouldn’t be available, but that he had arranged for somebody he trusted to fill in for him.”

He didn’t mind her being right, but her tone of voice indicated she wanted him to know precisely how right she was. And who goes on vacation in February? “Okay then, any sign of Steve’s replacement?” “Not yet,” she answered.

He smiled. “So I’m right on time.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Sure.”

They sat in silence for several minutes before she asked what happened to his lip. Frank rubbed his forehead. "It's a long story." He'd tell her about the truck later. Or not. After another couple of minutes, he looked up from his magazine and sighed. "Do we really need to be here?"

"We discussed this, and you agreed that our session with Steve was worthwhile." Sofia frowned. "Besides, a little help goes a long way."

"Maybe." He glanced at the clock on the waiting room wall. "But I'm missing time from work."

"And *I'm* missing time getting Sam's lessons ready for tomorrow. Besides, we need to—"

The tall, young redhead who opened the inner door caught Frank by surprise. She must be the counselor's assistant.

"I'm Kim." She extended her hand. "I'll be your counselor today."

He tried not to look shocked as he shook her hand. Were they giving out therapist licenses in high school now? "Frank MacBride, and this is my wife—"

"Sofia. Pleased to meet you."

Kim took them to her session room and motioned toward a small sofa and some comfortable-looking chairs. "Please sit wherever you like." Sprigs of fragrant lavender in an enameled porcelain vase adorned a coffee table. French doors provided a view of a small balcony with three pigeons walking across its Spanish terrazzo tiles. The male was apparently trying to impress the two females, who pretended to not pay attention. Frank smiled. Not so different from humans.

Kim adjusted her glasses and wasted no time getting down to business. "So, what brings you in today?" "My wife," said Frank.

She looked at Sofia. "How about you?"

"Well... that's our problem. Or part of it."

“How so?”

Sofia sighed. “He jokes all the time. He’s funny, but sometimes things need to be serious.”

“And how does that affect your marriage?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I mean, how can you have a serious discussion if your husband always makes a joke of everything?”

Frank frowned. “I lighten the mood. Is that so bad?”

Sofia examined her glossy pink fingernails. “It can be. When we talked about you flirting with other women, what did you say? That it was nothing. You made it a big joke.”

They’d had a conflict on Valentine’s Day the week before. Trying to make her happy, he took her out for dinner and a movie, where he might have flirted with the nineteen-year-old who took the tickets. Before that, he’d joked with their waitress. Neither of which was a big deal. The argument that followed, however, didn’t end well.

“*Amore mio*, sometimes it’s good to take some weight off.”

Sofia folded her arms across her chest. “And sometimes it’s good to be serious. For example, when we talk about you flirting.”

“But that’s the whole point. It’s not serious.”

“Not to you, maybe.”

Frank shook his head. She wasn’t getting it. “No, not to me. It is you I wake up next to. You are my chosen one.”

“So why am I not enough for you?”

“You *are* enough for me. I just play. It means nothing.”

“It sounds like ‘play around,’” said Sofia.

“No.” He waved a finger at her. “Not me—never. You could be less suspicious, you know. That would make everyone happier.”

She looked at their counselor. “See? He doesn’t think it’s a big deal,” she said with a quaver in her voice.

Frank frowned and hoped she wasn’t going to play the emotional card. “Because it’s not a big deal.” He turned to Kim. “We go in circles around this. She brings it up a lot.”

Kim nodded and turned to Sofia. “How often does he flirt?”

“All the time. The prettier she is, the more likely it happens. And they always seem to be younger than me.” She paused. “It’s not just that he does it. It’s the whole energy of it.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “Not this again.”

Her eyes flashed. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t that why we’re here? So we can talk about things in front of someone who can help us?”

He gave her a thin smile. “It’s just when you start talking about energy and stuff. I’m not into all that New Age woo-woo lingo. It’s vague enough to prove anything you want.”

Sofia shook her head. “I’m not trying to prove anything. Energy is not something invented by what you call ‘New Age.’ It’s real and has real effects.” “Tell us how you feel when Frank flirts with other women,” said Kim.

She closed her eyes and drew a slow breath. “I feel that he’s not taking me or our relationship seriously. Especially when he does it often.” “Is there any truth in what she says, Frank?” asked Kim.

He said nothing for a beat, watching a starling that had landed out on the balcony railing. “First of all, age has nothing to do with it. She worries because she’s older than me by not even two years, which also means nothing. Sofia is a natural beauty and always will be.”

“But do you flirt all the time?” persisted Kim.

“Not always. I don’t know why she says that.”

“Almost always—at least whenever you can,” said Sofia.

He lifted both hands in a palms-up gesture. "I'm half Italian. It's what we do. It doesn't mean what you think it means."

Kim smiled. "Well, the flirtatious Italian man certainly is a cliché. More importantly, though, are Italians faithful?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Probably most of us. I think no less so than other cultures. Maybe more than some." He frowned and nodded at his wife. "No different from Spain."

"I'm Catalan."

"Catalonia is in Spain, no?" Frank asked.

Sofia shook her head. "It's not the same. We are independent. You know this."

"You mean you *wish* you were independent."

Kim cleared her throat. "Are you faithful?" she asked Frank.

"Of course!"

She turned to Sofia. "Is he?"

She glanced at her husband before answering. "I have no reason to think otherwise."

"Which is not actually answering the question."

"Yes, I think he is sexually faithful—if that's what you meant."

Kim nodded. "That was what I meant. We'll get back to this." She turned to

Frank. "What do you want? What really brought you here?"

He took a deep breath. "Sofia thought we needed help."

"And do you think so?"

"Maybe. I don't know." He paused. "Things can always be better, right?"

"Usually, yes. So are you here because she got you to agree and you're doing it to make her happy, or are you here because you also think things could be better?"

He looked at the ceiling and thought about it. “Maybe both. I want our relationship to be better and I want to make my wife happy.” His eyebrows raised. “And I want what’s good for our family.”

“I get that.” Kim nodded. “You mentioned on the intake form you have a ‘special needs’ child.”

“That would be Sam, our five-year-old,” he said.

Sofia leaned forward. “He’s borderline autistic. He functions well and interacts well—considering he doesn’t speak.”

“At all?”

She took a deep breath. “No. He’s never said a single word, and no one can tell us why. The so-called experts say it has something to do with his autism, but they’re just guessing. He only makes eye contact when he wants to—which is rare—and he doesn’t like being touched. He’s loving, but not in a physical way.”

“Yet you say he interacts well.”

“It’s hard to explain, but yes, he does.”

“Is he challenging?”

Frank said “no” the same moment his wife said “yes.” He recovered quickly, however. “But she would know better.” He motioned toward Sofia. “She spends all day with him.”

“All day?”

“Yes, she teaches him. Homeschooling.” He chuckled. “Home kindergarten, to be more precise.”

“I see.” She turned to Sofia. “Do you enjoy that?”

“Of course. My major at Portland State was education, and I minored in psych. I worked as a guidance counselor at Ben Franklin High before the kids were born. So I have the tools and training.”

“Which doesn’t mean you enjoy it.”

“But I do.” She paused. “It’s not how I envisioned using my training, but it’s a perfect arrangement. They would eat Sam alive in kindergarten. Besides, his math skills are already at an advanced first-grade level, almost second-grade.”

“Do you worry about him being able to interact with peers?”

“Oh, no. He’s quite close to his sisters, and to Frank and me. The risks and dangers of public school overpower the benefits. He’d be way too easy a target.”

“What dangers are we talking about?”

“Mean teasing, bullying. That sort of thing.”

“Sure. And you know peer interaction differs greatly from family interaction, right?”

“I do, but the indicators are there,” said Sofia.

“Indicators?”

“That he could interact well with his peers if he chose to.”

“Yes, but it generally takes lots and lots of practice.”

Sofia frowned. “It’s kind of a touchy topic for us. We’ve had quite a few wellmeaning people give us advice on what we should do with Sam.” Sofia held her hand flat above her head. “I’m up to here with it.”

“Okay. We don’t have to talk about that now—or ever if you don’t want to.” Kim smiled. “What attracted you to Frank?”

“Well, when he’s not getting on my nerves,” she nodded toward her husband, “he’s adorable, confident, and funny. He can fix just about anything. Mostly, though, I love that he has such a huge, sensitive, generous, and vulnerable heart. I’d see him around campus encouraging others, always giving a kind word. He made people feel special. I wanted him to make *me* feel special.”

“Did he flirt then?”

“Even more back then. He was a champion at it! He’d also joke with other guys. Everybody loved him. He was one of the more popular students at PSU during my time there, and for sure more social than academic.”

“In what way?”

Sofia glanced at Frank, who slowly shook his head. “He almost failed his classes. He was enrolled in second-year engineering, going for an associate degree, but he almost didn’t make it.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing, he was quite active socially. Parties, hanging out, fun things.” She paused. “And he had his football. That took a lot of time and kept him in the spotlight.”

Frank frowned. “Hopefully it wasn’t all bad for you.”

“It was great, but I don’t know what would have happened with our relationship if you hadn’t achieved your two-year degree.”

“Wow. Nice of you to finally tell me.”

“Just being honest. She asked for our story.”

Kim nodded. “I did. Anything else you want to say about Frank, Sofia?”

“Well...”

“This is the time to talk. Frank, are you okay to hear what she has to say?”

“Of course.”

Sofia took a deep breath and looked at the floor. “Sometimes I feel like I married my father.”

“What?” Frank’s eyes widened. “You mean your super-critical father who hates me? And everyone else, as far as I can tell.” He looked at the ceiling. “So I’m critical and mean?”

“You’re *not* like him in many ways. You’re not critical. Or mean. Not at all.”

He shook his head. “Then why would you say that?”

“It’s just that he loves being in charge. Like you.”

Frank frowned. “It’s not like I boss you around.”

“Sometimes you do.”

Kim shifted in her chair. “Thanks for sharing that, Sofia. Anything else?”

“Well, sometimes...” She looked Frank in the eye. “It seems to be all about you. Even when you are protecting or providing for us. Or being generous. Just like Papá.”

Frank was stunned, even though part of him could see the truth in what she said. “I guess it’s good we came here. So we can get all the dirt out in the open.”

Kim shook her head. “It’s not dirt, but I do think it’s good to get things out in the open where you can talk about them.” She paused. “Even when it’s not comfortable. It took a lot of courage for Sofia to say that.”

He discreetly checked his watch. Still ten minutes to go. “If you say so.”

Kim smiled. “I do. Now tell me about Sofia.”

He remained silent for a while. “I love my wife, even when she is brutally honest. I love her because she is smart, beautiful, and sexy. I love her because she has given me—given us—three very special children. I love that she lets that beautiful dark blond hair of hers grow long, though I know she would cut it shorter if not for me. I love that her eyes are a shade of green I’ve never seen on anyone else.” He looked at his wife and sighed. “She inspires me to be a better man, and I have to say, she’s kept me happy these sixteen years, challenges and all.”

Kim nodded. “She sounds perfect.”

Frank wagged his finger at her. “Not perfect. But perfect for me.” He paused.

“But she worries too much. She sees all the ways things can go wrong.”

Sofia frowned. “One of us has to.”

“Maybe, but many times that means you think you’re the one who’s right. And I wish you wouldn’t worry so much.” He turned to Kim. “I want to do more to make her happy.”

“That would be nice,” said Sofia. “I mean, sure, you try. But maybe if you tried harder to not pay so much attention to other women—”

Frank raised his hands in exasperation. “I told you—”

Sofia rolled her eyes. “I know, it’s your Italian blood. It’s what you do.”

“That’s part of it, yes.” He looked at the counselor. “You see? This is what happens.”

“What if you paid less attention to other women?” Kim asked.

Frank shrugged. “I don’t know. I can try, sure. But really, that means less than she thinks.”

“Maybe so. But you see it upsets her, right?”

He took a deep breath and looked at his wife, tears welling in her eyes. “I guess.”

Kim sat a little straighter. “Does it upset her or not?”

“Okay, it does. Yes.”

“And you said you want to make her happy, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then I want you to do something. For sixty days, make a conscious effort to flirt less—or not at all. When you come in again, you can let me or Steve know how that went.”

Frank gestured with his palms upward. “Sure, I can try that.” He looked at his wife. “If that will make you happy, *amore mio*, I will do it.”

“That would thrill me, *cariño*.”

Kim glanced at her watch. “We’ve come to a great stopping place. We’re a little past time, but that’s fine. The main thing I want you to take away is the awareness of your love for each other, and the huge amount of commitment

you both bring to this partnership. Sure, you have work to do, but work is what it takes to build a great relationship.” She stood. “Does that make sense?”

They both nodded. She took a thin book out of one of her cabinets and handed it to Sofia, who looked at it with curiosity.

“What’s this?”

“A journal. I want you to write in it at least once a week until I see you again.”

“Thanks, but I really don’t have time.”

“Frank made a concession today, and he’s going to do something that’s hard for him.” She nodded at the journal. “I want you to do something hard as well. Write your thoughts, feelings, and observations. Keep that where no one else can get to it. A locked box would be perfect, so you can write without holding back. Once a week, at least ten minutes, and that’s all. More often if you feel like it. Some people do it every morning when they first wake up and love it. All you need do is to keep that pen moving across the paper.”

“I don’t know.”

Frank smiled. “I know. Let’s switch. I’ll write in the journal ten minutes every week, and you don’t flirt with any women. Easier for everyone.”

Sofia tried not to smile. “You see what I put up with?”

Kim nodded. “Just try it. Do we have a deal?”

“I guess.” Sofia looked uncertain. “Will I have to share this with you?”

“No. You don’t have to share it with anyone. In fact, I strongly recommend that you don’t. The main thing is to write without holding back—which is a lot easier to do if you know no one will see it.” She held the door open. “Steve or I will see you both the last Tuesday in April at four-thirty. Just let us know in the next week or so who you prefer to meet with. We’re not attached either way—we only want what’s best and most comfortable for you both.”

CHAPTER THREE

SOFIA'S diary. THIS IS PRIVATE. CLOSE IT NOW!

...And how did you get past my lock, anyway?

March 3, 2011

Who writes in diaries past the age of thirteen? So she called it a journal. Still, isn't this for preteens? But I gave my word in front of Frank. I will do this once a week as I promised, for two months—more if I feel like it. Not that I will feel like it. Is this what they teach people in counseling school? And when did she graduate, anyway... last week? What if I have nothing to write about? Keep moving your pen across the paper, she said.

Next weekend I get to visit my parents, where I'll have a golden opportunity to hear about all the things I'm doing wrong. Papá has already made a big deal about the fact that they're flying me down to Sacramento. Like it's more than a drop in the bucket for them. Wouldn't it be nice if they'd come up occasionally to see their grandkids? No, Papá is too old to travel, Madre says. She always makes excuses for him. I guess it'll be good to get away, but I wish I was going somewhere nice. Not Sacramento, and definitely not with my parents.

I got to spend quality time with Nonna Eve this week. She's who I want to be when I grow up! She invited me over for coffee and had me drop the kids at my sister's—which she'd prearranged with Maria. And she read me poetry! Nothing deep, but still. I don't know if Madre ever read anything to me, what to speak of poetry.

Sitting across the kitchen table from me, Nonna Eve took my hand and gently stroked the back of it with her other hand. I felt so loved! She then told me right out of the blue that the biggest pain is that of an unfulfilled life. How did she know what

I needed to hear? As if she knew what happened at Ben Franklin. But teaching Sam fulfills me. Sure, it would be nice to be doing it on a grander scale, but at least it's more or less the same work I'd planned on doing. I'm so glad Nonna Eve gets me. I'm blessed to have the best mother-in-law on the planet. Frank better not ever leave me—but if he does, I'm keeping his mom.

Was the session with Kim helpful? I don't know. Maybe. In the past week, Frank has been trying. We went skating with the kids at the Clackamas Mall Thursday evening. They say Tonya Harding practices there, but I've never seen her. Whenever some beauty would walk or skate past, he'd pretend to not notice, even when they noticed him. Which happened a lot. He's trying to make me happy, and that by itself feels way better.

The counseling session went well, I guess. Probably worth going back. As long as she focuses on Frank and our relationship and stays out of all my past family drama, it'll be fine. Will it help our relationship? Maybe. Will it help Sam speak? I don't see how, but time will tell.

Speaking of time, my ten minutes are almost up! That's close enough for me!

The day had gone unusually well. Before work, Frank volunteered an hour at the Southeast Senior Center. Nonna Eve's idea, of course. "We're all going to be there one day," she'd say, "so we might as well rack up credits now." He put in an hour a week, sometimes more if they had extra maintenance issues. He never felt he had the time to spare beforehand, but afterward was always glad he'd helped. The residents there knew him as "Eve's boy," since Nonna Eve volunteered at least three or four times a week and knew everyone on a first-name basis. A lady named Carol had cried when Frank changed her light bulb. She thanked him repeatedly and kept calling him Blake. He gently corrected her the first couple of times, but eventually he gave up. For her, he could be Blake, whoever that was. Or had been.

On his way from the Senior Center to work, other drivers seemed more courteous than usual, and traffic was lighter than normal. His day at Lake Oswego Public Works went smoothly, with things falling into place the way they seldom did. He'd almost made it to quitting time without a single problem. At the moment, however, something was off. Maybe it was the sound of the motor, vibrating at a slightly different pitch. Or the faintest hint of an acrid odor that didn't quite belong with the subtle but familiar mix of water, ozone, and lubricating oil. Maybe it was the sound of the water rushing through the massive pump. Or maybe he was just going nuts.

"Hey, Jason."

"What's up, boss?"

"Come look at pump three."

"Sure." Jason sauntered along the catwalk and squinted at the monitor panel displaying the vitals of a pump-and-motor combination the size of a minivan directly below them. He scratched his head. "Looks good to me."

"I know it *looks* good, but something is off."

"Oh, I get it! You're doing your Pump Whisperer thing again." Jason laughed. "Or is it simply because you're just closer to the action than the rest of us?" At five foot five, Frank received a fair amount of good-natured teasing about his height.

"Funny. You know this is important."

"I do, and I also know the swing shift is coming in at five thirty. If there's anything seriously wrong, they can handle it. I don't hear, see, feel, or smell anything off with it. There's nothing to worry about."

"What kind of attitude is that?"

Jason shrugged. "It's the kind of attitude that keeps me from seeing trouble when there isn't any."

Frank sighed. "And what if over thirty-seven thousand people were left without water? Would you worry then?"

“I sure would, because that would mean both backup pumps would be offline and the entire fail-safe system—that cost the City of Lake Oswego at least fifteen years of both our salaries put together—would have been a colossal waste of time and money.” He studied the digital readouts on the monitor panel. “The vitals are all looking healthy, chief.” He shook his head. “No need to worry. It’s all good.”

“Don’t give me that ‘It’s all good’ crap. It’s my job to worry. You know that. I’m tagging this.” He pulled a *Check or Repair* tag out of his shirt pocket.

Jason buried his hands in the front pockets of his coveralls and frowned. “Seriously? You know that means we’re not going home on time.”

“Yeah, I know. But we can’t take the chance.” He began writing on the tag. “Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I—” His phone rang. He pulled it out and looked at the numbers scrolling across the screen. “It’s my wife.” He watched it ring twice more.

“You gonna get that, or what?”

Frank stared at his phone for another ring before he hit answer.

Sofia smiled and wiped the inside of the dining room china cabinet while Adele sang “*Someone Like You*” on her boombox. She found it funny that when properly motivated, something that would ordinarily drive her crazy became almost fun. The Petersons were driving up from Salem on the weekend for the first time in ages, and here she was getting the house ready as though she actually liked cleaning.

Spring had arrived early, and flowers around the neighborhood were already in full bloom—a rare occurrence for early March. With the open windows letting in a fresh breeze, she inhaled the mixture of fragrances in the air. There had been a brief but intense rain earlier, putting all those negative ions into the air. It was one of the things she loved about Portland. Many days were rainy in the morning and heavenly in the afternoon. Or vice versa.

Sam walked in, his eyes brimming with tears. She didn't notice him at first, but once she did, her heart melted. "*Querido*, what's wrong?" She opened her arms to him, and he jumped in to give her a tight hug, which worried her even more, since he normally avoided hugs. "Sam, what is it?" Tears flowed silently down his cheeks.

"Are you hurt?"

He let her go and slowly shook his head, his tears coming faster.

"Oh, Sam! What happened?" No response.

She took him in her arms again and rocked him back and forth, which used to help when he was a toddler. He smelled faintly of peppermint soap. "Oh, Sam, I wish I could help."

In a strained voice, he said "Moe."

Sofia frowned. She had waited five long years for this moment. He'd just spoken his first word, but she didn't feel the relief and joy she'd anticipated. It was the proof they'd been waiting for that he was a normal boy and would speak and grow up like other people and have a normal life. But something was wrong.

She'd seen him upset, and she'd seen him cry, but not like this. Nothing like this.

"Who is Moe? Do you mean 'more'?"

He didn't look at her or move except for his increasingly desperate sobs. She called Frank and was almost ready to give up by the fourth ring when he finally answered. "Hey, Sofia, what is it?"

"Can you come home now?" She hated how she sounded but had no choice. Frank would know what to do if he could see the situation for himself.

He didn't answer right away. Sofia was about to ask if he was there when he finally responded. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. It's Sam."

She heard his sharp inhale. "Do we need to call 911?"

"No, nothing like that. He just said his first word, but he's crying and—"

“No way!” Frank paused. “So why’s he crying?”

“That’s what I can’t figure out. He said, ‘Moe,’ but he won’t tell me what that means.” She sighed. “Or he can’t. I don’t know what’s going on, but I need you here. Please.” Frank was the rock in the family—great at calming her down and finding the best thing to do.

“I would, but I’ve got a pump going weird on me, the control circuits for an entire section are open, and—”

“Can you come home, please?” She didn’t want to sound desperate, but they really needed him there.

“I have no idea what’s going on except—”

“Me neither. Please just get in your truck and drive. Your son needs you.”

She paused. “And I need you. Something is not right.”

He sighed. “Okay, I’ll have Jason tag this pump and I’ll be there in fifteen.” She hung up and turned back to her son.

Tears still gliding down his face, he looked at her with a sadness a five-yearold shouldn’t be capable of.

She wiped his tears with her palm. “What do you need, Sam?”

He shook his head again. “Moe.”

She’d always known in her heart that the speech pathologists and other experts were wrong. The ones who said he’d never speak. That if he was going to talk, he would have done so by now. She knew he’d speak eventually, and her hope rested on that day. Which was today. But now that it’d happened, she almost couldn’t bear the fear and anxiety rising inside her. Not exactly the happy moment she’d imagined.

She heard Frank’s City of Lake Oswego pickup truck pull up to the curb less than ten minutes later. He almost ran through the front door, then knelt by his son. “What’s wrong, buddy?” he asked, frowning.

“Moe.”

Frank glanced at his wife, who shook her head.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say, Son, but I want to understand.

Can you tell me more?”

“Moe.”

“What’s he trying to say?” asked Frank.

“I have no idea.”

They couldn’t get to the bottom of the boy’s sadness and grief. They’d once had a beagle puppy named Tracker that got hit by a car when he went off following the scent of who knows what. Someone had left the gate to the backyard open. They never figured out who, but the result was that the little beagle had died violently. All three kids were heartbroken, especially Sam. He grieved for what seemed like ages. The family took him to see other puppies in the following weeks, but when they’d ask if he wanted this one or that one, he’d just shake his head sadly. Eventually they stopped asking, as there did not appear to be any replacement for Tracker as far as Sam was concerned.

But she’d never seen anything like this.

“I know,” suggested Sofia, “Let’s call Nonna Eve. She knows him better than anyone.”

“Good idea.” Frank pulled out his phone and dialed her number. After a half-minute, he gave his wife an exasperated look. “She never picks up.”

“Can you leave her a message?”

“That’s exactly what I’m about—Hey, Mamma, call me when you get a chance, please. I think we need your help on this.” Nonna Eve always knew what to do.

After more than an hour of trying to comfort Sam, they’d made no progress either in consoling him or in finding out what was wrong.

Lisa walked in the door, fuming. “Thanks for missing my game, Mom. You promised me you were—what’s going on? Why is Dad home?” She looked from Frank to Sam to Sofia. “What happened to Sam?”

Sam ran to his sister and gave her a bear hug. Lisa frowned and silently mouthed to her parents: “What happened?”

Frank and Sofia simply shook their heads. Jodie walked in a moment later with her cello and a reproachful look on her face. She, too, changed when she saw Sam. Sofia suddenly remembered that she was supposed to bring them home right after Lisa’s game. She shook her head at Frank. “I’m such a bad mother.”

“No, you’re not,” he said, putting his arm around her. “You’re one of the best moms on the planet.” He nodded at Sam, his arms still locked tightly around Lisa. “You saw an emergency and dealt with it. Sam needed your full, one hundred percent undivided attention, and that’s what you gave him. The girls understand. Don’t be so hard on yourself, because you’re amazing.” He nodded at Jodie. “How’d you two get home?”

“We got a ride from Mr. Riley.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Riley, the orchestra teacher. He saw us waiting out front in the pickup zone.”

“You could have called.”

“Not when we don’t have cell phones,” said Lisa.

“Any adult you asked would have been happy to let you use theirs, I’m sure.”

“Whatever.”

Their son was inconsolable. He joined them for dinner, but he wouldn’t touch his food. Everyone tried to cheer him up, but nothing worked. He’d cry, then stop for a while, then his eyes would fill with tears and he’d start again. Frank and Sofia had a short strategy talk about it after the meal, but they couldn’t come up with any ideas or solutions. Just after 8 o’clock, Frank got a call from Beth, one of Nonna Eve’s best friends.

“Do you have any idea where Moe is? She was supposed to meet us for bridge an hour ago and hasn’t shown. That’s not like her to just—”

“Who?” Frank’s heart raced. “I’m sorry, *who* are you looking for?”

“Eve. We call her Moe. It’s our little inside joke. You know, from *The Three Stooges*.” She laughed. “I’m Curly, and—”

He almost dropped his phone. “*Sofia!*” he yelled.

“What happened?” she called out from the other room.

He abruptly got off the phone with Beth and speed-dialed Nonna Eve’s number, but she didn’t answer. “I’m running over to Mamma’s.”

“What’s going on?” But he was already out the door and halfway across the lawn.

CHAPTER FOUR

Frank pulled up in front of his mother's darkened house, where her beloved red Subaru was parked in the driveway. They'd recently tried talking to her about living in a retirement community, but she wouldn't hear of it. She loved her space. Besides, she was healthy, fit, and spunky. She'd had a checkup in the past two weeks. Everything was fine, the doctor said. Her exact words were, "You'll probably outlive us all." And Nonna Eve had been delighted to tell Frank and Sofia that. Just her style: sassy and defiant, with an attitude you'd never expect from a seventy-one-year old. So they let the retirement community idea drop.

His heart beating wildly, Frank ran across her freshly mowed lawn, rang the doorbell, and without waiting, pounded on the door. No answer. Maybe she was out with a friend and just forgot about her bridge game.

He had the back door key in case of emergency, and he walked around the house to unlock it. "Mamma," he called as he came inside. "Mamma, where are you?" He turned on the living room lights, and there she sat in her favorite recliner, a *People* magazine open in her lap, chin resting on her chest.

"Mamma?" Walking across the room seemed to take forever, as if time had ground to a halt. He placed a shaking hand on her cold and stiff shoulder.

He called 9-1-1 and was surprised at how calm and matter-of-fact he sounded when they answered. The woman who took his call was all business, but she was apparently trained to be compassionate as well. "Police and an ambulance are on the way. Will you be okay until they get there?"

When he called Sofia, however, he found himself unable to speak.

"Frank, what is it? Is everything all right? Are you there?"

"Sofia, Mamma's dead."

After a few moments of silence, she finally spoke. “Oh, Frank, I’m so sorry.”

“You know, I was afraid of this, but thought I was being irrational.” He tried to steady his voice. “I just called 911.”

“You wait right there. We’ll be right over.”

“I’m not so sure it would be such a good idea for the kids to see her like this, especially with the police and paramedics here.”

“Is there any chance that she might be—”

“No, definitely not. She’s—she’s been gone for quite a while. At least a few hours.”

“I’ll get someone to watch the kids and be right over.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

Five days later, on their way home from the funeral service, the family rode quietly in their Chrysler minivan. The only sound was the windshield wipers clearing away the pouring rain. Sofia reached over and put her hand on Frank’s arm. “Nonna Eve was such a wonderful soul.”

“Yeah. She was pretty amazing.” He took a deep breath and sighed. “She lived a good but far too short life.” He paused. “Though if she had written her life as a script, it would have ended just that way: a quick heart attack, with no one around her bedside worrying and taking care of her for weeks or months.”

Sofia nodded. “I know. She was always thinking of others.” She closed her eyes. “That was such a beautiful service. I loved how you explained that Evelina meant ‘giver of life’ and was a role she fully embraced.” They traveled in silence for another minute or two. “That is so true. She brought life wherever she went.” She looked at the three sad faces of her young children in the back seat and felt a powerful wave of love. For them, for Nonna Eve, and for Frank. “Sam?”

He looked at the back of her seat with sad eyes.

“How did you know?”

He turned and stared out the window at the houses, cars, and trees they passed. Finally, he simply shrugged.

Frank kept his eyes on the road and slowly shook his head.

SOFIA'S Journal. THIS IS PRIVATE. CLOSE IT NOW!

March 26, 2011

Missing Nonna Eve. The past three weeks felt like three years.

At times I envy Frank. He's so sure about everything. The Catholic church has all his answers. At least most of them. But I don't think it can tell him why God took Nonna Eve away. Was that kind and merciful?

I loved Nonna Eve, but Frank absolutely adored her. I hate to see him so sad.

My parents sent me a card. They didn't call. They sent me—not Frank, not our family—a sympathy card. Signed 'Mom and Dad,' as if it would mean more with those words in English. Of course in Madre's handwriting. Probably Papá didn't even know she sent it. Since he turned ninety, he tries even less to connect. It used to embarrass me that Madre was so much younger. Now I'm glad. He gets crabbiier every year, and I don't know if I'll miss him when he's gone. Should I feel bad saying that?

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How did Sam know about Nonna Eve? He felt profound grief before anyone else even knew she'd died.

Last week he made a drawing for Frank. It was a picture of Nonna Eve's house with her waving from the front porch. Very simple, yet it brought up so much emotion in me. Frank cried when Sam gave it to him. Sometimes our little boy seems so grown up it's scary.

Frank rubbed his jaw. Nothing had gone right all day. In the two months since they'd lost Nonna Eve, so much had not gone right. He and Sofia still had their ups and downs. It'd been more up than down lately, but their challenges had not evaporated. Kim had said it would take time and patience to work things out.

And now the new boss wanted to see him. Not his immediate supervisor. The big boss, Mr. Mathews, the one who oversaw all the hiring and firing. Rumor had it he was quick to do either, and he fulfilled that prophecy when he fired half the admin staff his first two weeks in the position. Frank wondered if he was next.

When he knocked on the opened door, a tall black man with salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed goatee stood up from his desk and smiled.

"You must be Frank MacBride."

"Yes, sir."

"Jim Mathews, and don't call me *sir*." He motioned toward a small sofa and sat back down. "Close the door and have a seat." He muted the soft classical music coming from the speaker on his desk and picked up a

clipboard. “Sorry to hear about your mom. I understand that was unexpected.”

“It was.” Frank paused. “Thank you.”

“And that was around the time you tagged pump three to go off-line.”

“The same day, yes.”

Mathews flipped to the next page on his clipboard. “You played ball for Portland State as a sophomore. Is that right?”

Frank nodded. “Wide receiver.”

“And you turned down a full two-year scholarship so you could come work for us.”

“I was kind of done with the whole college scene by that time, and I wanted to start my real life.” Frank smiled. “My wife was due to graduate at the same time, which made it an easier decision. How about you—did you play?” Mathews tapped a pencil on his desk. “Only in high school. Got some offers to play college ball, but it wasn’t the direction I wanted to go. Something we seem to have in common.”

“Right.”

He looked at Frank over the top of his glasses. “Life is too short to do what we’re not called to do, know what I mean?”

“Definitely.”

“Anyway, I wanted to give you some time before we talked.”

That was exactly what a kind person would say before firing someone. “I appreciate that.” Frank tried to keep a neutral expression on his face. He liked working there, and couldn’t afford to start a new job search.

“Do you know how much it costs to take one of the main pumps off-line?”

“Not exactly. Maybe eight or nine hundred dollars?”

“Close. About nine hundred and fifty dollars. That’s including the tech analysis, but not a biopsy if required.” Mathews tapped his pencil again. “As it was in this case.”

“I noticed they had stripped it down.”

“Correct. So what’s your guess for the total cost of all the tech analysis, strip-down, and off-line time?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it was substantial.”

“Substantial would be an understatement. Our total costs on that unit, including preventative repairs—based on *your* trouble tag—were over sixteen thousand dollars. That’s a lot of money, MacBride.”

“Yes sir, but sometimes I have to make what I feel is the best call in any particular—”

“I heard the nickname around the shop for you is the Pump Whisperer.”

“I may have heard that now and again.”

Mathews leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. “And what do you suppose that twelve-hundred-horsepower motor-pump combo cost the city of Lake Oswego in the first place?”

“To be honest, sir, I don’t really—”

“There we go with *sir* again.” Mathews smiled thinly. “Okay, I’ll tell you. Each one of those high-efficiency pumps cost over ninety thousand dollars, plus installation, mounts, controls, shipping, and so on. That’s well over a hundred and twenty thousand dollars per unit. If a pump goes down, parts of it are salvageable, but the cost would still be, at the minimum, somewhere between seventy and eighty thousand dollars.” He raised an eyebrow at Frank. “You with me so far?”

Frank nodded.

“When you tagged that motor, we took it off-line and tore it down. We found a little micro-arc in one of the windings that burned right through the

temperature sensor. That would have kept it from shutting down and protecting itself when it overheated. Which was happening when you noticed something was off. Anyway..." He waved his hand in the air. "The bottom line is that you saved the life of that motor, and probably the pump itself. If it had frozen up with that volume of water going through it, I'm confident it would have damaged the impeller as well." He smiled again. "So you just saved us somewhere between eighty and a hundred thousand dollars. Maybe more."

Frank breathed a sigh of relief. "You could have started with that and worked backward."

Mathews' laugh was deep and warm. "I know, but what would have been the fun in that? At least we have a happy ending, right?"

"I guess."

"You guess right. But tell me something. How did you know the motor was failing?"

Frank shrugged. "I just knew."

"Jason says if there's something wrong with just about anything, you'll find it."

"Maybe."

"Maybe? What do you think I'm going to do about our little scenario?"

"I really wouldn't know, Mr. Mathews."

"Call me Jim." He walked around his desk and shook Frank's hand. "Effective this current pay period, I'm giving you a fifteen percent raise."

Frank's jaw dropped. Fifteen percent? Did he hear that right? "I don't know what to say."

Mathews laughed. "Thanks' would be a good start."

"Of course, thank you *so* much. That's very generous."

Mathews tilted his head slightly. "It's a matter of paying you what you're worth. Good thing we don't base your salary primarily on your driving skills."

“Very good thing. But those benders weren’t all my fault.”

Mathews grinned. “Sure they weren’t. Anyway, the raise is already yours.”

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that. My wife will be very happy.”

“She better be damn near ecstatic.” He walked over and opened the door.

“Hope you’re happy as well.”

“Definitely.”

“Good. By the way, this Thursday I need you to help Portland Municipal with their signal-control system on the MAX light rail. I’m loaning you out for the day. You know, good neighbor relations and all.” He winked. “Besides, you can bet your booty they’ll have something we’ll want sometime soon. We may have all the talent, but they have the money and material resources.”

“If you say so.”

“Oh, I definitely say so.”

Frank called his wife on the way home—hands-free, of course. “I’ve got some good news for you.”

“That’s great, because after the day I’ve had, I *really* need some good news.”

“Why, what happened?”

“Many things. Jodie was upset because she didn’t do as well as she thought she should have in orchestra. You know how she sets her bar so high. I’m sure she was much better than any of the other cellists—probably better than *any* of the kids in the orchestra. And Lisa had some bad experience with a boy.”

Frank drew a sharp breath. “What do you mean? What kind of experience?”

“I couldn’t really find out. I walked in the room as she said something to Jodie about some ‘stupid boy,’ but then because I’m within hearing range she clams right up. I tried to ask her, but she wouldn’t tell me. You know how stubborn our kids are.”

“Yep. I’m sure they get it from my side of the family.”

“You know good and well they get it from both of us,” she said.

“I do, but I wasn’t going to say that out loud. How was Sam today?”

“He was the most challenging.” She sighed. “It’s been hard for him since Nonna Eve passed away. He’s smart and learns so fast—but only when he wants to. Today, he was mostly inattentive and would just drift away mentally and sometimes walk away in the middle of what I was trying to teach him. And he had a few of his little silent temper outbursts. Nothing huge, but there were at least two or three times when he just got really mad—without any reason I could see. He hid twice. One time I couldn’t find him for twenty minutes. And of course, when he doesn’t look at me, it’s hard. Especially when he tunes me out, like I’m not even there. I know I’m supposed to be okay with it, but some days I’m not up to the task.”

“My sixth sense tells me this is probably not the best time to bring—”

“If you’re about to mention putting him in special needs school next year, then your sixth sense is right. You should listen to it.”

“Got it.”

“Anyway, I’m sure you didn’t call to hear me whine. You said you had some good news. I’m *so* ready for that.”

Frank pulled up to a stoplight a few blocks from home. “I’m only five minutes away. I’ll tell you when I get there. Get the kids together, and I’ll make an announcement.”

“You sure you don’t want to give me a hint? Maybe as insurance that I won’t kill anyone before you arrive?”

“I love the way you’re so funny under stress. I’ll see you in a few minutes.” He hung up and smiled. She’s definitely going to like this.

The announcement didn’t quite go as planned, however. Lisa and Jodie were both sullen and withdrawn. Sam paid no attention to anyone. The first

DIFFERENT

words out of Sofia's mouth were, "That's great, but weren't you due for a raise anyway?"

Frank looked at his family and managed to smile. Some days were simply easier than others.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sofia apologized before Frank left for work the next day. She usually came back around and took responsibility when she'd been moody, and he was grateful for that. It wasn't like he was free from moods, either. Plus, she had Sam on her hands all the time and the girls before and after school. Like Nonna Eve used to say, "All's well that ends well."

He hummed and tightened the last two screws on the control box cover. The day had gone well. The MAX Light Rail people treated him like a celebrity of sorts. He'd just finished installing new fail-safe circuitry at Rockwood Station in Gresham and had completed all his assigned tasks for the day. They'd let him knock off nearly an hour early, though he'd still receive a full day's pay.

Good thing, since a light drizzle had started, and he would've had to stop for safety reasons anyway—finished or not. Working with high voltage while wet was not his idea of fun. It would have increased his level of stress, and of course his chances of dying. Thinking of Sofia and the kids was what usually reminded him to play it safe. Occasionally Jason or one of the other guys would tease him when he was particularly cautious, but Frank didn't care. He wanted to be around to see his kids grow up.

After packing up his tools, he waited for the next Portland-bound train, which would take him to the Lloyd Center so he could get his car and head home. He looked forward to seeing his family, and he had a significant case of what Sofia called "the warm and fuzzies" despite the cold drizzle.

A train going the opposite direction discharged its passengers. As it pulled away, what he saw on the platform across the tracks nearly stopped his heart: a man with a shaved head and mustache, wearing a brown leather bomber

jacket. He seemed to be looking for something. Frank stared open-mouthed, and the hair on the back of his neck stood at attention. He hadn't seen Belgian Pete since Italy.

As Pete walked toward the exit, he glanced in Frank's direction and froze. Just then Frank's train pulled in, breaking the visual connection between them. With his pulse pounding in his ears, he grabbed his toolboxes, boarded the train as quickly as he could, and made his way to the front car. He sat in a forward-facing seat, trying to slow his breathing, and discreetly looked back over his shoulder. Belgian Pete—or someone who looked exactly like him—was nowhere in sight. Moments seemed to take hours before the doors closed, and the train began to pull away just as Pete stepped out onto the platform Frank had occupied less than fifteen seconds before.

With elevated levels of adrenaline still running through his veins, Frank checked his watch at least twenty times in five minutes. He was two stations away from the 99th Street Transit Center. He could change to the red line. That would still get him to Lloyd Center and make him harder to find. Just in case Belgian Pete had phoned ahead. He thought of the ruthless killer and shuddered. What are the odds? He desperately hoped that wasn't really him.

With a growing sense of dread, he watched houses and cars pass by. Maybe it was time to tell Sofia about Italy. He sighed. She'd be furious, and it would raise her anxiety level significantly. Better to get his family to safety first and tell her later.

Frank was adamant. They had to move to a safer place. Thieves had broken into their van twice in three months.

Sofia frowned. "So why is that such a big deal?"

"Because I want my family to be safe. Isn't that a good enough reason?"

"It depends. Apart from this safety issue you're bringing up out of the blue, I thought you liked it here."

“I do. I have a great job, I like the people I work with, and I like Portland and Lake Oswego—I just don’t think this area is safe enough. Too many dangers in the big city.” He told her he wanted to take them south, almost to the California border, to a little town called Ashland. Supposedly more beautiful than Portland, and much safer.

She’d heard of it. Her half-sister Maria had visited there the previous summer. She’d loved the plays but hated seeing all the “ungrounded bohemian types,” as she put it, who aimlessly hung out within city limits. “No way I’m moving to that hippie town,” she said.

“But the schools there are great. The best in Oregon.”

“So you say. And where’s the proof of that?”

“Well, SAT scores, teacher credentials, retention rates, percentage of students who go on to college—I would consider all that proof.”

She shook her head. “I’m not moving to some dead-end stoner town. That’s the last thing I want for our kids.”

Frank frowned. “Do you hear yourself? You see all the negative influences here? You think there aren’t hundreds of times more stoners here?”

“They’re not *all* stoners. Plus, you just got a raise.” She shook her head. “We’re not moving.”

“We need to think about it.”

“I’ve thought about it. Besides, if we moved, I’d want to be closer to Madre.”

“I thought you hated Sacramento.”

“Not that close. Maybe the Bay Area or something.”

“*Amore mio*—my electrician’s license is for Oregon only. In California they don’t pay nearly as much because there’s no license required.”

Sofia folded her arms across her chest. “Which brings us back to where we started this delightful conversation. I say we stay right here.”

Frank struggled to keep his mind on work over the next few weeks. Sofia was dead set against moving—which she’d made abundantly clear. But they had to go. Staying in Portland would be too risky, in case that really had been Belgian Pete looking for him back in Gresham. His first order of business was to keep his family safe. If it was only his safety at stake, he might risk it. But as he’d learned from bitter experience, the Mob sometimes went above and beyond, either to set an example or to not leave witnesses. His only choice was to drag Sofia kicking and screaming out of the Portland area. They were due for a change, anyway. Wherever they ended up, she’d eventually adjust.

He looked at his phone for a long minute before he rang Klamath Falls Public Works. By the end of the day, he’d also called public works and utilities in Bend, Eugene, Roseburg, and Medford. He’d start with the private sector the next week if he didn’t get any bites.

Kim smiled as Sofia sat on her couch. “I’m glad you could make it. It’s fine that Frank couldn’t get free from work. It’s usually better anyway having a solo session with each of you between couples’ sessions. Steve was totally good with you making the switch, and I’m honored that you both chose to work with me. From your email, it sounds like things are a bit up in the air for you and Frank.”

“Well, they’re a little better now, but a few weeks ago he suddenly announced that he wanted to move. Even though we’re all happy here.” She grimaced. “The worst part is that it didn’t seem to matter to him what I thought.”

“Would you like to tell me more about it?”

She explained Frank’s proposal to move and how insistent he was, though he’d finally agreed to stay. As they talked more about it, Sofia offered that when she was sent away to Catholic boarding school, she’d lost all her friends.

She wrote to them, but they all trailed off pretty fast in one of the more painful experiences of her life.

“Why were you sent away to school?”

Sofia shrugged. “Just something my parents thought would be good for me.” “Okay.”

Sofia looked through the French doors at the overcast Portland sky. She could tell Kim didn’t believe her, but she wasn’t about to get into that part of the story.

“Have you been journaling?” Kim asked.

“Not really. I’ve only written a few times since I saw you last.” She smiled with half her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

Kim waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. Look, just write whenever you feel like it. Was it good for you at all?”

“It was good. I don’t know—I just got busy.”

“Anything to do with things coming up that you weren’t comfortable with?”

“Oh no, that wasn’t it at all. I was just busy and then kind of forgot.”

“Sure.” Kim paused. “So getting back to the school thing.”

“Okay.”

“What was school like for you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Somewhere between awful and horrible.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

Sofia paused. Her time in school, both public and private, wasn’t something she liked to think about, much less discuss. And then there was Ben Franklin High and Carl. “Well...”

“Only if you’re ready.”

Sofia stayed quiet for a long while, then sighed. “In secondary school in Barcelona, I had this perv teacher, Mr. Mateu.”

Kim tapped her pen against her hand. “Did he... do anything to you? Touch you in any way?”

“Not exactly, but he had this twisted thing he did. He’d asked this girl named Camila to stay after school. Mr. Mateu told her that her skirt was too short, and to make his point, he tugged on her hem. While supposedly scolding her, he shook it and eventually lifted her skirt enough to get a peek underneath. She told the principal, but nothing happened. Either he didn’t believe her or didn’t care.”

“And how did that affect you?”

“All the girls were upset about it, but I got really worried when Mr. Mateu told me to stay after a month or so later.”

Kim looked at her with concern. “What happened?”

She hesitated. “The same thing that happened to Camila.”

“Did you tell the principal?”

“Of course. I was so mad. But he did nothing about it.”

“That must have been hard for you. Did you tell your parents?”

Sofia swallowed. “No way was I going to tell them. I was afraid my father would go ballistic and that he might take it out on me.”

“Had that happened before?”

“Oh, yeah. To my mom and me, at different times. He definitely liked to shoot the messenger.”

“So nothing ever happened to this Mateu perv?”

“Well...” Sofia examined the ceiling.

“Whenever you’re ready,” prompted Kim.

She took a deep breath. “I waited a few days and went back to the principal, who told me I had an overactive imagination and that Mr. Mateu had been a respected teacher in the Barcelona school system since before I was born.”

“What did you say to that?”

“Well, nothing more to the principal. But I was furious. That night I told my dad, who just looked at me and didn’t say a word. At best, I expected him to get mad at Mateu, and at worst, that he’d hit me. But nothing happened. He just stared at me.”

“He would hit you?”

“Sometimes. Anyway, the very next morning there was a substitute teacher in Mateu’s class. He told us our regular teacher was away on business and he would be taking over the lessons meanwhile.”

“Sounds like your dad had some clout.”

“That would be the understatement of the decade. We never saw Mateu again. A full-time replacement teacher took over two weeks later.”

“I see. How did you feel about that?”

“Scared. I was already afraid of my father. But I also felt protected. Like no one could do me any harm. Or so I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

Sofia turned red. “Oh, nothing. We live in a dangerous world, right?”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“There’s no shame in saying things that happened to you as a child. Even if you think they were your fault.”

“I told you everything.” Everything I’m going to tell you, that is.

“Okay, that’s fine.” Kim smiled and stood. “I see Frank next month, and you both when?” She glanced at the calendar on her smartphone. “Looks like

the last Tuesday in July.” She didn’t notice—or at least didn’t mention—the tears brimming in Sofia’s eyes.

