

# **GUESS WHAT SHE DID**

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To Dan, Robert and Julia, with love

## Chapter One

Georgina Graham inhaled sharply. Mark Weber was sporting a new look—his head was freshly shorn bald, in the vaguely menacing style popular on Wall Street with men with thinning hair. She watched him stride briskly across the forty-fourth floor elevator lobby, expertly elbowing his way through the throng of early morning arrivals. Mark's reputation as a serial destroyer of young careers was legendary at the storied investment bank in Lower Manhattan where Georgina worked, and, of particular concern to her, of late his behavior was becoming increasingly erratic. Georgina took this overnight change in Mark's personal grooming as a sign of (yet another) difficult day ahead. She slowed her pace to avoid encountering him at the firm's high security entrance. Before she had time to settle into her office, Mark's assistant called to summon her. Georgina's shoulders slumped. Not today Mark, she thought. Please, not today.

Waved in by the assistant, Georgina entered Mark's spacious corner office with its expansive cityscape view and lowered herself into one of the sumptuously upholstered club chairs in front of his desk. Purposefully, she sat up straight in the chair and folded her hands neatly in her lap. She fixed her gaze on Mark's mouth, to avoid the appearance of inspecting his scalp. Mark did not greet her. Instead, he took his time as he read through the contents of a thin manila folder laid out on the desk.

Looking up at Georgina at last, he asked what she knew about Rios Capital.

Georgina allowed herself to relax slightly into the chair. This unscheduled meeting was about a new assignment, not a reprimand. "Alejandro Rios," she said. "Buys and sells high tech companies out in California."

"Have you met him?" Mark asked. When Georgina shook her head, no, he went on, "You will, tomorrow. He's planning a takeover, some biotech startup. I'm giving you the deal. You can handle it by yourself, right?"

"Of course," Georgina replied evenly, a shiver flooding from her head to her toes. Ever since rejoining Mark's group she had wanted to get the lead on a transaction, but Mark had been very hands on, watching over her every decision, and second-guessing most of them. "What's Rios like?" she asked. "I've heard some things."

Mark scowled at her. "You know better than to pay attention to what people say," he said. "If Rios wants this startup, your job is to see that he gets it, and at his price. Didn't you major in hardball at business school?"

"No, Mark, I didn't," Georgina replied, coolly returning his gaze. "Everything I know about hardball I learned from you."

Mark abruptly closed the folder and handed it to her. "Here's everything you need to get started," he said.

Georgina recognized that she had been dismissed. "Thanks for letting me have this one," she said. "I'll make it work." Mark had already returned his attention to his computer screen and did not reply.

Georgina walked hurriedly back to her office. She closed the door and called Nick Fitzgerald, but the call went to voice mail. He would be airborne now, she remembered,

disappointed. She was about to leave Nick a message, but, recalling their tense conversation earlier that morning, she decided that she should give him this news in person.

She called Pearl Blumenthal. “You won’t believe what just happened,” she said excitedly. “Mark has done me a huge favor.”

“Hmm. Mark and favor in the same sentence,” Pearl said. “Somehow I doubt that Mark Webber will ever do you, or anyone else, a favor. It’s part of the investment bankers’ code of conduct. No favors, ever. Mark’s idea of rewarding your loyalty and hard work is to not demolish you. Helping you out has never crossed his mind.”

“Pearl, why are you always so cynical?” Georgina protested.

“Because I’m a lawyer and I deal with the species on a daily basis,” Pearl said.

“OK, I get it,” Georgina said. “But it’s all in how you handle them, and I know how to handle Mark. Remember, I’m a banker too.”

“Putting aside your troubling career choice for the moment, what’s this about anyway?”

“Mark has given me a deal! My *very own* deal. Please, Pearl, try to be more positive. This means a lot to me.”

“All right, I’m *positive* that you will be very successful, and you will make a boat load of money. Does that help?” Pearl said, her tone softening. “Look, I’m happy for you, but I have to get back to work. Let’s get together tonight and you can fill me in on the details. I’ll call Millie and ask her to join us.”

Mollified by her friend’s conciliatory tone Georgina said, “Thanks, I’d like that.”

After the call, Georgina sat at her desk and took a moment to calm down. When she was able to focus, she opened the file that Mark had given her. As she read, she learned that the company with the misfortune to draw Alejandro Rios’ attention was called ZIFIX, and it was trying to commercialize a discovery made by its founder, Dr. Nathaniel Carmichael. Dr. Carmichael’s credentials were impressive; he had risen swiftly in the professorial ranks at the medical school located near the startup, and he held a patent on his invention. The contents of the patent were described in the file but Georgina lacked the expertise to understand its significance. Stymied, she called in her assistant. She ordered him to have the bank’s intellectual property group review the patent at once; then, she told him, he was to write a synopsis of its main ideas in lay language, to be in her hands before her flight to California early the next morning. She ignored the young man’s stricken look.

Turning to the startup’s financials Georgina saw that in less than three years Dr. Carmichael had burned through most of the capital that he had raised from a handful of local investors, largely family and friends. The company was running short of money and there was no product in sight. Georgina’s confidence mounted. Dr. Carmichael was clearly a rookie. Skewering neophytes in deals was almost too easy, she thought, but this could not have come at a better time for her. She guessed that Mark had thrown her this plum as payback for returning to his group. In any case, Georgina sensed that Dr. Carmichael’s struggling startup was shortly to be in the more capable—or a least better capitalized—hands of the formidable Alejandro Rios, and that she was on her way to a quick score.

Dr. Nathaniel Carmichael drove up the graveled driveway to his former home, a tidy, low-slung adobe in the style of early California. The house and the two-acre parcel of land on which it stood now belonged to his ex-wife Katy. Nate lingered for a moment behind the wheel, looking out over the garden and beyond to the eucalyptus forest that bordered it. It was the first peaceful moment that he had had all day. He got out of the car and walked up the brick pathway to the front door, already open in anticipation of his arrival. Poking his

head inside he called out, "Is Gordon ready?" He heard the familiar sound of Katy's high heels on the terracotta tile floors.

"Almost," Katy replied from somewhere inside the house. "Gordon, hurry up. Your father's here." The tapping of Katy's heels on tile floor got louder and then she stood before him. She was dressed for an evening out, her softly curled auburn hair and trim figure enhanced by a perfectly fitted, teal-colored dress. Nate thought that she looked beautiful, younger than she had in years and more like the vibrant girl who had attracted his eye in medical school. "Gordon's coming," she said. "How have you been?"

"OK," Nate replied. He detected that Katy was wearing an unfamiliar perfume. "You?"

"I'm good," she said. "So, any news about more financing for ZIFIX?" Nate had continued to keep Katy informed about the startup, even though under the terms of the divorce she no longer had any financial interest in it.

"I've been talking to Rios Capital," he said. "We're close to making a deal."

"Rios?" she said. "Alejandro Rios?"

"You know him?"

"I've heard of him," Katy said. "He lives here in the Ranch. The talk is, he's a very tough customer." Katy was more attuned than was her ex-husband to the goings on in Rancho Secreto. A regular reader of the local newspaper, Katy often saw photographs of Rios' two teenaged granddaughters dressed in full English riding gear, jumping horses at the shows that were a prominent feature of Ranch life. Since Rios himself attended few social events, he was rarely photographed. But as one of the Ranch's wealthiest residents his activities, both business and personal, were a staple of the grapevine on which locals shared gossip with other locals but never with outsiders.

"Rios has cash and I need cash," Nate said defensively.

"Better count your fingers after you shake hands with him," Katy warned. "I mean it, Nate, you need to be very, very careful."

Gordon appeared, backpack in hand. An energetic six year old, he dropped the backpack and reached up to his father, who gave him a hug. Nate gamely wished Katy a "good time tonight." She waved them off.

As he drove to his apartment Nate listened absentmindedly to Gordon's long-winded narrative about events at school that day. His thoughts wandered to Katy. How had it turned out like this?

Nate and Katy had married in their final year of medical school. After surviving grueling residencies and fellowships they had spent their early years on faculty striving to make their marks. But after Gordon was born Katy had changed in ways that Nate did not understand. She had seemed happy in her new role as mother but, at the same time, she had become increasingly out of sorts. Ominously, much of her newly found resentment had focused on Nate. Even though he had been on notice about his wife's unhappiness, Nate had been stunned when Katy asked him to move out. Bewildered and hurt, he had moved to a rental apartment at the beach.

Nate blamed Katy for ending the marriage, but he nursed his bitterness in private. His day-to-day existence and his outward demeanor continued much as before. Consumed with juggling his commitments at the hospital, the medical school and the startup, he was seriously overextended. But he told himself that everything would work out, just as soon as he got an infusion of cash into ZIFIX.

Gordon had stopped talking. Nate looked in the rear view mirror and saw that his son was nodding off. He wondered whether Gordon was troubled by all the changes in his

young life. It was after all Gordon who had first told him about Katy's new man, when he displayed a toy from "Mommy's friend." Katy had confirmed that there was someone in her life, but she had been guarded about sharing much about him. Nate debated whether he should ask Gordon how he felt about this man. Gordon might be confused, he thought. But what would he say to him if he wanted to talk? Nate suddenly came to the disquieting realization that he did not know how he felt about Katy's new relationship himself.

## Chapter Two

Her friends were already seated in a booth near the back of the bar. Narrowly avoiding misadventure with a cocktail attached to an inebriated woman in a designer suit, Georgina weaved her way through the boisterous happy hour crowd.

“What’s this I hear about you going to California to make your fortune?” Millicent Garrett asked Georgina as she sat down next to Pearl. Millie had become friends with Georgina in business school, but lacking Georgina’s stellar connections, Millie had had to settle for a position with a somewhat less prestigious investment bank. Although Georgina’s firm paid considerably more than Millie’s, Millie’s firm competed favorably with Georgina’s in terms of intolerable job stress.

“I’m not going to California to make *my* fortune,” Georgina replied. “I’m going to help someone who is already very rich add to *his* fortune and, while I’m at it, I’m going to ensure that whoever is on the other side of the deal is relieved of any hope of acquiring wealth whatsoever.”

“And why are you doing this dastardly deed?” Millie asked, raising her eyebrows, playing along.

“Because if I do this, the rich man will pay my bank handsomely, and just enough of the booty will trickle down to me that I can continue to live in Manhattan and share life with the two of you,” Georgina said.

“Great attitude,” Millie said. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Stop it, you two!” Pearl interjected, exasperated. “How did I manage to find *two* friends in the same crazy business?”

“You found us because your fancy white shoe law firm is only too happy to take our banks’ money,” Millie retorted, with a smile.

“And we are *so* very grateful to you for keeping us out of the slammer,” Georgina added. Then she turned more serious. “It’s just starting to hit me that this is really happening,” she said.

“You deserve it, after all you’ve done for Mark,” Millie said. “And you’re going to *slay* this deal. You have real killer instincts and that’s what it takes.”

“If you say so,” Georgina said.

“Wait a minute, is that new?” Pearl asked, eyeing Georgina’s handbag. “I don’t think I’ve seen that one before.”

“This?” Georgina said. “Well, yes, it’s new. It’s nothing special, just some low-level retail therapy.” In fact the purse was from a luxury goods purveyor that had recently opened a store near Georgina’s bank. She had been smitten with the bag for the better part of a week before she succumbed to its charms, following a particularly contentious client meeting that had left her nerves raw.

Unconvinced by Georgina’s answer Pearl nonetheless decided not to press the issue. Instead, she leaned forward and asked in a lowered voice, “So, what’s going on with Nick and the job in D.C.?”

“He had another round of interviews today,” Georgina replied. “He doesn’t know where it’s going yet. He’s not even sure that he wants it.”

“He wants it,” Pearl declared. “Would you move to Washington with him?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Georgina said. “He may not get an offer.”

“But he’s keeping you in the loop about the decision, isn’t he?”

“Of course,” Georgina said. “Look, it’s complicated. If Nick decides that this is the right thing for him, then we’ll have to figure out what it would mean for us to live in different cities. I haven’t even begun to come to grips with that yet. Anyway, what I need from you two right now is a lot, and I mean *a lot*, of moral support. Rios Capital is one of Mark’s major clients, and I *have* to deliver this deal for him. And from what I hear around the office, Alejandro Rios is a major league S.O.B. So, you guys have my back, will you?”

“You got it,” Pearl and Millie said in unison.

Alejandro Rios watched impatiently as the ornately framed, antique landscape painting rotated slowly off his office wall. When the painting stopped moving, he punched in the code to the safe hidden behind it. He carefully inspected the contents of a large clasp envelope and then placed the envelope inside the safe. Feeling the need for a break, Rios left his office and descended one side of the dual staircase that lead to his home’s capacious foyer. Spying her employer from her cubbyhole office just off the foyer, Lupe Gonzales, the head housekeeper, scurried out to open one of the heavily carved mahogany front doors. Rios strode through the opened door without acknowledging Lupe and quickly traversed the flagstone-laid entry courtyard. He stopped in front of a large rose garden that sprawled for half an acre on the other side of the courtyard.

Rios was a rose fancier. He admired the flowers for their complexity, especially for how their form and even their colors changed as they opened to reveal themselves to the observer. Roses were a metaphor for life, he believed—by turns elegant and thorny, giving back only what they received in care, and gone too soon. Years ago, when he had first acquired the Rancho Secreto property and set out to build his private oasis, he had instructed the architect to site his office to overlook the rose garden. He often stood at his opened office window, admiring the garden and taking in the sweet air. He had done some of his best thinking standing at that window.

Rios was a man with a feel for the big picture. He bought and sold companies dispassionately, much as traders did stocks. He despised details. To free himself up to act like the bird of prey that he was, spotting firms ripe for the snatch, Rios paid people to take care of the details—people like Mark Webber, who could wring the last drop of blood from the victim and then produce a mountain of paperwork that made it legal. As he walked the gravel path that meandered among the roses, Rios contemplated his conversation earlier that day with Mark. Used to having his way, Rios had been aggravated when Mark told him that he could not come out from New York to help him with the ZIFIX takeover. Now he would have to make do with one of Mark’s underlings. But the deal was small, Rios acknowledged, and Mark had assured him that the young woman he was sending out was more than equal to the task. She would be arriving tomorrow. That was none too soon for Rios, because he relished swiftness in a takeover. Experience had taught him that he made the most money when things went down fast.

Rios was in his late sixties but looked much younger due to a rigorous program of diet and exercise supervised by a longevity clinic in Los Angeles, a not-so-secret retreat for Tinsel town’s many aging celebrities. A man of discipline, he adhered strictly to the teachings of the clinic’s founder, a lifestyle doctor who frequently appeared in the media. Because of his efforts to maintain his vitality Rios was fit and strong. He dressed in form-fitting clothing to better show off his still-muscular physique. Not classically handsome, he radiated a certain masculine air that many women found appealing. He was three times divorced, but his last

split was now many years in the past. As Rios saw it, his lack of success in marriage, which he did not feel keenly, was more than compensated by his outsized success in business. He had discovered that as his fortune grew, so did his access to agreeable female companionship, free from the uncomfortable bonds of matrimony.

Rios left the rose garden and continued along a newly laid flagstone pathway that led to an imposingly large barn. His enviable monetary position gave him free rein to indulge his passion for thoroughbred horseracing. The recent recession had presented him with several gratifying opportunities—frightened, financially distressed companies desperate for a bailout—and therefore profits were up at Rios Capital, way up. To celebrate the good times (for him), he had used the financial windfall to tear down the modest original barn, built on the site at the same time as the house, and constructed in its place a grand new one that was state-of-the-art. He had also upgraded his racing stable with the purchase of three superb young colts, personally acquired at enormous cost at the spring yearling auction in Kentucky, and he had hired a new trainer to ensure that his equine athletes were properly developed.

Once inside the barn Rios walked at a leisurely pace up and down the rows of horse stalls, taking in the sights, sounds and smells that he so enjoyed. He paused periodically to look inside a stall, assessing the condition of the wary animal inside. Refreshed, he was about to return to his office when his daughter, Adela Rios, entered the barn, leading an exquisite bay horse by the halter. A petite, slightly round woman in her mid-forties, she was wearing a black velvet riding helmet cinched under her chin, black leather boots, beige jodhpurs and a black T-shirt.

“Give me a hand with Diamante, would you?” Adela called out to her father. “He’s a handful today. He almost bucked me off.” She motioned with one gloved hand for her father to open the sliding gate to the horse’s stall. Together father and daughter managed to get the balky animal inside. Rios took off the horse’s halter, placed one hand on his neck and nudged him towards the rear of the stall.

Suddenly the horse, whinnying and snorting, reared up on his hind legs. One flailing hoof narrowly missed Rios’ head. Frightened, Adela ran out to the corridor. Keeping the halter in front of his face to fend off the horse’s thrashing legs, Rios calmly walked backwards towards the stall door. As soon as her father reached the corridor Adela slid the stall’s gate shut behind him. The loud clank produced by the engagement of the latch further aggravated the horse, prompting him to pound the gate with his front legs.

The clamor of hooves hammering against wood brought several grooms rushing into the barn to investigate. A minute later the barn manager, Jose Rodriguez, joined them. A paunchy, middle-aged man with a day-old beard, Jose was gasping from the short run from his office in a shed next to the barn. “What’s going on?” he asked as he caught his breath.

“Diamante is *loco* today, and I don’t know why,” Adela shouted at Jose, trying to be heard above the din.

“Did something spook him out on the trail?” Jose peered through the grate in the stall door. The horse was now pacing rapidly back and forth and grunting loudly.

“Nothing that I could see. He’s just all hot over nothing,” Adela said. “What should I do with him?”

“Maybe he needs more exercise,” Jose said. “He’s spending too much time indoors. These stalls are big but they’re dark. In the morning I’ll have someone put him on the line for you before you take him out. For now, let’s give him some quiet.”

The group disbanded. Rios accompanied his daughter to her car. “I’m glad I have Jose to help me with Diamante,” Adela told her father as he opened the door for her. “I don’t know what’s going on with that horse, but I know Jose will figure it out.”

“About Jose,” Rios said cautiously, “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about him.”

“Is something the matter?” Adela furrowed her brow.

“I’m afraid there’s something not quite right with Jose right now,” Rios said. “He’s been making a lot of noise among the grooms about the changes I’ve been making at the barn. He’s not happy. I want you and the girls to be careful what you say when you’re here. Best for you all to keep a little distance from the barn staff, until things settle down a bit.” Adela was surprised by her father’s admonition but she promised to be tactful, kissed her father on both cheeks, and drove off.

Rios walked briskly back along the flagstone pathway to the house. The episode with Adela’s horse had not caused him any distress; in fact, he had enjoyed the excitement. But as he walked upstairs to his office his mood became more somber. He was still impatiently awaiting Detective Samantha Mori’s callback. She usually responded to his calls the same day, but this was already the second day, and he had left *four* messages. What was the problem? Women were so ridiculously unpredictable, Rios mused. But he had to find a way to reach her, and it had to be today. He desperately needed a read from her on his options before his hand was forced. Up until now, his entrée to her had allowed him to pass on information about the murky financial world in which he held sway, without any personal repercussions. Typically these revelations improved his circumstances by clearing the field of troublesome competitors, but today’s matter hit uncomfortably close to home.

He had called again. Flinging the message into the nearest wastebasket, Sam Mori walked quickly past the reception desk and entered her small office, one of more than a dozen that lined the perimeter of the Detective Division. With an ever-so-subtle hint bubbling just below the surface of her dazzling smile, Sam was adept at charming the men she cultivated as tipsters. Typically, her sources enjoyed the flirtatious repartee with her and left it at that. But recently Alejandro Rios appeared to have become overly engaged with her. While she was ready to get together with him for a drink and some friendly banter, she needed Rios to understand the true nature of their relationship—it was strictly a business transaction. And she needed Rios to understand that in this particular business transaction, the only currency was information. Nothing more.

In their last encounter, less than a week ago, Rios had surprised Sam with a present: an over-scaled jade brooch carved into the shape of a leopard, its eyes set with small rubies. Sam had softly demurred, citing police department policy. To soften the blow, and to maintain Rios’ interest, she had let her hand linger for a brief second in his as she handed the brooch back to him. The information that he had given her that day was of little value and obviously a pretext to see her. Annoying behavior of this type cropped up periodically in Sam’s line of work, especially from rich, entitled men like Rios who chose to believe the impossible fiction that a much younger woman would actually be interested in them.

Sam was attractive to men and she knew it. She enjoyed the attention that men paid to her. Although she believed that most men were self-absorbed, and therefore boring, she nonetheless enjoyed exercising her feminine powers over them. It pleased her to create an illusion that sparked men’s less explicit fantasies. She never showed cleavage—she had none—nor did she do anything obvious to call attention to her sexuality. Instead, she focused on making herself into an interesting tableau, an exquisite, if somewhat atypical, walking piece of art. To accomplish this illusion she concentrated on a simple, even stark, wardrobe and flawless grooming. Her jet-black hair, cut short and worn swept back from her face, was held in place by a generous application of gel. She applied makeup with a heavy stroke and trimmed her brows in a line that was almost horizontal. And there was something

else, something that always caught the male eye. Located, oddly, on the back of her neck was an enigmatic lure—a bold, black V-shaped tattoo that extended well down into the nape.

Sam was well aware that, on their first encounter with her, many men were simply intrigued by her uniqueness. But the artifice that informed her outward persona was only the first act in the seduction. She had a way of making men feel that they commanded her complete attention. She left them with the impression that she wanted to know everything there was to know about them; when they divulged more, she telegraphed how much she admired them for their disclosure. Once fully engaged by her intellect, more than a few men found Sam irresistible.

Rios, it now appeared to Sam, was one of those men who had fallen too deeply under her spell. She detested having to titrate her game. If she paid too little attention, the informant dried up, and if she paid too much, things could get personal, and, if not handled properly, unpleasant. But she could ill afford to lose Rios. His access into the upper reaches of fast money was unparalleled among her sources; it would be impossible for her to penetrate that world so completely without him. Whatever her misgivings, Sam knew that she had to keep Rios talking. She would return his call. But first—she would make him wait.

## Chapter Three

The town car was at the curb, waiting for her. The cars and their attentive drivers were one of Georgina's favorite perks at the bank. When she worked late—and that was most nights—she appreciated being driven home through the dark Manhattan streets by a uniformed driver in a well-appointed car. Even though she lived in a doorman building, the drivers would watch until she was safely inside the lobby. Georgina handed her carry on luggage to the driver and slid into the back seat. As the car sped in the light early-morning traffic towards Kennedy airport she tried to focus on the new file that Mark had sent to her apartment by messenger one hour earlier.

Georgina had gone to work for Mark straight out of college. Her position as a financial analyst had entailed tracking down whatever information he needed for his rapid-fire decision-making. She had managed to survive Mark's frenzied pace and overblown expectations, and over time had even gained his grudging admiration. More to the point, every year Mark had given Georgina the largest bonus among her class of analysts. The bonus money had made possible a lifestyle that included beautiful, high-end clothes and bi-weekly salon hair. For the first time in her life Georgina had liked her reflection in the mirror. But the rent on her tiny studio apartment had consumed an inordinate proportion of what was otherwise a considerable income for someone her age. Her net worth hovered precariously just above zero. Eventually Georgina had concluded that she needed to move up to a better paying position. But after several years as an analyst in Mark's group, there was no promotion in sight. And Mark was getting on her nerves.

The next step, Georgina decided, was to get a Master's of Business Administration. An MBA would open the right doors for her; once she had the degree, she believed, her upward mobility would be assured. Squeezing in study time whenever she could, Georgina had prepped hard for the admissions test, and, as soon as the test was behind her, she had written and rewritten her applications until they were polished like a Tiffany diamond. Her efforts had paid off. She was admitted to one of the best business schools in the country. She had learned the good news of her acceptance while at work; elated, that very hour she had walked unannounced into Mark's office and given notice. The look on Mark's face as he digested her coup was her favorite memory from her entire time at the bank. On the day that she left for business school she had vowed that she would never again work for Mark.

Why then was she, MBA now in hand, back in the fold? Mark had reached out to her, asking her to rejoin his group, not as an analyst this time, but in a much better management position. She was brilliant, a natural, one-of-a-kind, he had told her. Georgina could easily have resisted Mark's pitch if the economy had not been in free fall when she graduated. There were other offers, but none from firms with the cachet of the celebrated investment bank where Mark worked. The clincher came when he had promised that he would make her a star. Mark had read her just right. Georgina wanted to be a star.

As the peak performer in the group Georgina was spared the worst of Mark's daily tantrums. But his mistreatment of the lesser-esteemed members of the group had begun to weigh on her, because it fueled the collective angst that churned among her colleagues like a lobster in boiling water. Coming to work each day was for many of them an act of misguided sacrifice, whereby they gave up the last of their dignity in return for compensation packages the size of the overpriced island on which they lived. Working side by side with these

dispirited people depressed Georgina, in large part because she suspected that her eventual fate might not be so dissimilar.

The town car entered Queens. Traffic picked up. Georgina checked the time; there was still more than an hour before her flight. Reading through the new file from Mark she noticed that she was booked into a hotel called the Inn at Rancho Secreto. A quick check through the documents showed that Alejandro Rios' address was in Rancho Secreto. She guessed that the firm's travel office had booked her into the nearest hotel. She used the map feature on her cell phone to see where the titan of industry lived. Rancho Secreto was a few miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, in what appeared to be a semi-rural area. A hotel search showed that the Inn was a luxury resort property. Georgina brightened at this prospect.

At the terminal the driver opened the car door for her and held out her carry on bag. Georgina mentally prepared herself for the mind-numbing airport routine that she had grown to loathe. But today things went smoothly and she soon sank into her first class seat. The airplane rumbled down the runway, gaining speed. Georgina looked out the window, anticipating the aerial view that always pleased her on take off. The airplane lifted off and New York lay below.

Adela Rios rolled up her yoga mat and placed it under one arm. She looked eastwards across the patio, taking in the rising sun and the pink glow that it scattered on the clouds floating above the horizon. The still-cool morning air moved softly over her; she felt its weight. Although the sun's rays were too shallow to generate much warmth, she sensed the light strengthening on her face. Her gaze fell on a small bird sitting on the rim of a stone birdbath at the edge of the patio. The bird cocked its head slightly to one side, fixing a watchful eye on her. Adela stood motionless. Taking a single hop into the bath, the bird sank down into the water; it flapped its wings vigorously, splashing water in all directions. Adela watched, transfixed, as the morning sunlight reflected off the water droplets, creating a shower of color in all directions.

"Hey, what about breakfast?" Adela's daughter Consuelo called out from the kitchen window. "I don't want to miss the bus."

Jolted back into the morning routine by her daughter's voice, Adela left the patio and entered the house through the French doors that led to her office. She put the yoga mat away and then crossed the family room into the kitchen. Reaching up to an iron rack over the kitchen island, she pulled down a skillet. She began to heat corn tortillas on the oversized gas range. Consuelo was already making coffee. "Did you sleep well?" she asked cheerfully as she left the stove to get eggs and salsa from the built-in refrigerator.

"I did," Consuelo replied. Gauging from her mother's tone that she was in a good mood, she went on to ask, "Would it be OK with you if I have some friends sleep over on Saturday? I thought we could stay in the guesthouse."

Adela frowned when she heard the word "guesthouse." Three years earlier the guesthouse had been the site of an impromptu party hosted by Adela's older daughter, Pilar. Pilar was now away from home, a sophomore in college. Returning earlier than expected from an evening event, Adela had noticed several unfamiliar vehicles parked outside the guesthouse. Concerned, she had entered it unannounced. Her discovery of Pilar's foray into a forbidden pleasure of the Rancho High crowd had led her to rule that the guesthouse was strictly off limits to both daughters.

"It's fine with me if you have friends over, but let's have them stay in Pilar's room," Adela replied. "It has a trundle bed. They'll be very comfortable there."

"Fine," Consuelo said, her voice betraying mild annoyance. "Pilar's room, then."

“Do you want *queso fresco* with your eggs?”

“Mom, it’s bad enough that we eat eggs for breakfast,” Consuelo groaned. “Let’s not layer on the cheese.”

“Eggs are good for you,” Adela said. “You need fuel to keep up your energy for riding.” They sat down in the breakfast nook off the kitchen. Adela picked up her fork, and then put it down again. “Speaking of riding, I need to tell you something,” she said. “When I was at the barn yesterday your grandfather told me about some tension there. He wants us to keep our distance from the staff for a while, so please be careful what you say when you go there after school.”

“I haven’t noticed anything unusual when I’ve been there,” Consuelo said. “What sort of tension was he talking about?”

“Apparently Jose isn’t too happy with the changes that your grandfather has been making with the racing stable,” Adela replied.

“Did he say anything about the new trainer?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’ve started to get to know his daughter a little,” Consuelo explained. “She helps out at the barn. Actually, she’s one of the girls that I was planning to invite on Saturday.”

“Hmm. What’s her name?”

“Sonia Rousseau,” Consuelo said. “Her father’s made a name for himself taking small stables and growing them, which is what Grandpa wants to do, I guess. I’ve noticed that there’s a lot more activity around the barn since he arrived.”

“Jose isn’t much used to change,” Adela said.

“Jose’s been great with our horses, but he’s had everything his way at the barn for quite a while. Maybe it’s time to shake things up a bit,” Consuelo said. “But I don’t want to do anything to make Grandpa angry. Do you think that I should still invite Sonia?”

“Does she know about your sleepover yet?”

“No, I was waiting to talk to you before I invited anyone.”

“Then it’s probably best to invite someone else this time,” Adela said. “You can have her over later, when whatever it is that’s going on at the barn has blown over.”

After breakfast Adela walked Consuelo to the property’s gate and waited with her until the school bus arrived. Later she changed into riding clothes and drove the short distance to her father’s barn. She found Diamante’s stall empty. Guessing that Jose had arranged for him to be taken out, Adela went to look for him at the exercise ring. She found Diamante trotting around the perimeter of the ring, guided at the end of a long rope by a girl who looked to be about Consuelo’s age. Adela leaned against the wooden fence that enclosed the ring and gripped the top with both hands.

“Hi, I’m Adela Rios,” she called out to the girl. “I see you’re getting to know Diamante.”

“I’m Sonia,” the girl replied. “Mr. Ramirez asked me to give him some exercise before you came to ride him today. He told me that he was too hot yesterday, but this morning he’s being a good boy.”

“He was a royal pain yesterday, that’s for sure. I almost ended up on my backside,” Adela laughed. “So, your father’s the new trainer, is that right?”

“Yes, we just came out from Kentucky,” Sonia replied.

“You’re a long way from home.”

“Home to us is wherever we happen to find ourselves,” Sonia said. “But I like it here already.”

"I'm glad to hear that," Adela said. "The Ranch is a good place to be if you like horses. Are you in school?"

"I'm at Rancho High," Sonia replied. "I help out here part time, depending on my class schedule," Looking over Adela's shoulder, she added, "Oh, here comes my Dad."

Adela turned to see Jose and another man walking towards the ring. She took a moment to size up the new trainer. He had the weathered visage common among those who worked outdoors, and his eyes were intelligent and open. His upright posture conveyed the air of someone with a purpose. Adela sensed that he was a comer who would make the most of his opportunity at her father's barn. She also sensed that Jose would find this type of person threatening. Jose made a perfunctory introduction of Jake Rousseau.

"I've just had the pleasure of meeting your daughter," Adela said to Jake, offering him her hand. "I must say I'm impressed by how well she has Diamante under control. He's not that easy to handle."

"Sonia's great at reading horses," Jake said proudly, shaking Adela's hand with a firm grip. "I swear she knows what they're going to do before they do." As Jake spoke with her, Adela watched out of the corner of her eye for Jose's reaction. Jose was paying close attention.

The teahouse had only one room. Its thickly plastered, pure white walls were devoid of ornamentation. Filtered through a paper-lined shoji screen at the window, the early morning light cast an amber glow on the room's sparse furnishings: a single bed covered by a white linen duvet, a plain, whitewashed wooden desk and chair, and a long pine dresser on which stood a large doll held in a metal stand. In one corner of the room a low table painted black served as an altar.

Sam Mori knelt in front of the altar. Five white spider chrysanthemums lay in a basket at her side. Slowly, she poured water from a clear glass pitcher into a round, flat black ceramic container on the altar. The container was a traditional *suiban* for the practice of Ikebana, the art of Japanese flower arranging. She then placed a *kenzan*, a heavy needlepoint holder, in the water, locating it off to one side of the *suiban*. Turning to the basket beside her, she picked up one of the chrysanthemums and carefully measured the length of its stem in relation to the diameter of the container, aiming for a particular ratio. When she was certain of the length, she cut the stem, using the type of forged steel loop handle scissors traditionally used for Ikebana. She repeated the process with each of the four remaining stems, achieving a harmony of proportion by careful measurement. She took her time artfully positioning each chrysanthemum in the *kenzan*. When she deemed the floral arrangement to be complete, she positioned the *suiban* next to a group of ceramic miniature bonsai, each one of which represented a departed family member. Sam closed her eyes and began to meditate. She lost herself in the moment.

Sam still lived with her parents on the Rancho Secreto property where she had been raised. Her parents and younger brother, a student at a local community college, lived in the main house while Sam had the use of the teahouse, located across a broad, bricked patio surrounding the pool. Her older brother had moved out of the family home when he found work at one of the realty firms whose offices lined the main street of the Ranch village; he frequently dropped by after work for the evening meals that all three grown Mori offspring enjoyed taking with their parents. Sam found her domestic arrangement very much to her liking. She felt no need to move away from her parents, who respected her privacy. Continuing to live in Rancho Secreto made it easier for Sam to stay in touch with the protected life that she had experienced growing up there; she wanted to stay in touch with

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