

FATAL  
LOYALTY

*a novel*

SUE DUFFY

*Fatal Loyalty: A Novel*

© 2010 by Sue Duffy

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version or the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

The persons and events portrayed in this work are the creations of the author, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-8254-2594-3

Printed in the United States of America

10 11 12 13 14 / 5 4 3 2 1

## PROLOGUE



IN AN INSTANT, his world collapsed, and no one knew it but him. The giddy chatter of students rushing to and from the cafeteria swirled about him as he felt blindly for something to lean against.

Eyes locked on the overhead television screen, Evan Markham backed slowly toward a post in the crowded student union. Just moments ago, he'd been one of them, a Florida State student preparing for exams and the long-awaited summer break. But what he'd just heard ended it all.

He had only glanced at the News at Noon anchorwoman with the glossy lips as he hurried to class. He caught something about a shootout in Tampa, but kept going. As he reached the door, though, he heard a name that stopped him cold.

“. . . Leo Francini.”

Evan turned suddenly and stared at the screen as the woman switched the broadcast to an on-the-scene reporter. A cold sweat sprang from his brow as he moved quickly toward others gathering before the monitor.

“This quiet residential street in Tampa was the scene today of a bloody standoff between FBI agents and members of a drug cartel run by Miami racketeer Leo Francini,” the somber-faced young man announced. “Before the violence ended about nine o'clock this morning, two FBI agents and Francini's son, Donnie Francini, were killed. It is believed that Leo Francini was in the area, though not involved in the shootout. An intense manhunt by the FBI and local police is now underway. A house-to-house search is being conducted in . . .”

Steadying himself against the post, Evan turned to see if anyone was watching him. *How could they know? No one knows.*

Then another name caught him.

“Florida Attorney General Tony Ryborg, visibly shaken by the deaths of the two FBI agents, just moments ago issued what he calls an iron-clad promise to the people of this state, saying, ‘Leo Francini will be brought to justice and pay the severest penalty for these deaths.’”

Two hours later, Evan was packed and ready to leave. For where, he didn't yet know. He'd removed all his belongings from the apartment and left a note for his roommate, whom he hardly knew. He hadn't allowed himself to get close to many people, switching roommates often during the three years he'd been enrolled. Still, the guy deserved an apology for the sudden departure.

Evan returned to the student union to close his checking account and put a hold on his mail, evading inquiries about why he would do so before final exams.

As he left the building, he saw her. As usual, she didn't notice him. Andie Ryborg seemed as absorbed in a private world as he was. Only hers hadn't just ended in a gunfight.

One last time, he hung back and watched her. Dark hair fell loosely about her face as she sketched beneath a tree, focused on the gurgling fountain in the center of the green.

*They'll find you. Get away!*

## CHAPTER 1



*One month later*

A PRIMORDIAL MIST CLUNG to the River of Grass as the old woman boarded the small airboat. Currents of raw, pungent air rattled the high saw grass, stirring its reptile population awake as the eastern sky announced the first rays of morning. The Florida Everglades was a severe and unforgiving landscape. An unwise choice, and a person could be swallowed up by the simmering sea of sharp reeds, fangs, teeth, and the even deadlier ways of man. But the woman wasn't afraid. This was home.

With quick, confident motions, she cranked the powerful fan engine looming behind her and latched onto left and right control sticks. The sudden roar of the air blades launched a flock of ibis on their escape from the woman and her solo mission, as if they knew where she was headed and wanted no part of it.

The flat-bottomed boat eased away from the dock, parting reeds, skirting cypress, and gaining speed as its path through the marshy grass flayed wide beneath the force. The old woman tensed at the controls, her anger barely contained. "How dare they?" she growled over the drone of the engine.

Thirty minutes later, she eased back on the throttle and scouted a distant hammock of hardwoods. Certain of her destination, she made her slow, deliberate approach.

Even the beat of the rotors couldn't mask the sudden rifle shot off her bow. She immediately cut the engine and waited. When the second shot fired, she hollered to the unseen gunman, "Stop shooting. Tell Leo Francini I'm here!"

Two men in camouflage emerged from the trees, both waving guns and shouting, "Get away!"

"No! Get Leo!"

"He's not here!"

"Are you sure Leo's not here?"

"He's not here! Go!"

"Well, who is here?"

The men seemed confused. Then one of them left while the other kept the woman in his sights. "Don't come any closer!" he ordered.

She could see his taunting smile and knew he recognized her. Moments later, she was waved ashore and led into a clearing of what had once been a fish camp. Now, the crumbling assembly of cabins was just another base camp for a drug cartel run by the man she was looking for. She'd dealt with him once before and believed it would be the last time. But again, she'd discovered his dealers pedaling their wares in her territory. No one encroached on her turf.

The woman disappeared inside a long, low cabin sprouting enough satellite dishes, antennae, cables, and other communications equipment to mount a war. When she finally emerged, she was dogged by a very plump, very agitated young man shouting apparent obscenities at her in Spanish. Finally, she turned and broke into his tirade. "You remind Leo that we had a deal. And this is what you get when you break a deal with me." She took a few more steps and turned again. "Remind him how eager the FBI is to find him after that gun battle in Tampa—and how many eyes there are in the Everglades. It might not be such a good place to stay."

Without looking back, the woman hurried to her boat, clinging to the hope that Leo's order to leave her alone would hold, despite the rage of the man snapping at her from behind. In moments, though, she seemed forgotten as the men plunged into a fury of de-camping. Orders were screamed, equipment dismounted, inventory loaded onto airboats. The young drug boss managed to execute the frenetic evacuation just moments before a Miami law enforcement team bore down on the camp. An anonymous caller had phoned in the tip, told them where to find one of the cartel camps, and told them she was sure Francini wasn't there.

## CHAPTER 2



*One year later*

THE MAN KNEELING LOW over the grave was watched.

"Why would he bury his wife in a cow pasture?" Jimmy Seibels abruptly asked the older man seated beside him.

Captain Warren Jacobs turned a molten gaze on the brash young officer, who fidgeted nervously in the passenger seat of the black sedan. "You see any cows?" Warren asked irritably.

Jimmy studied the sprawling meadow as if ordered to find something bovine wandering there. "No, sir," he reported, "but that don't mean it's not a cow pasture."

"That *doesn't* mean." Warren corrected, scratching the stubble of gray hair ringing the bald crown of his head. "Did you sleep through English?" He turned back to watch the hillside with its lone headstone. Radio transmissions from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement headquarters squawked from the dashboard.

"All I'm saying is it seems like a man in his position would have buried his wife in a normal cemetery with some fancy monument, don't you think?"

Without shifting his focus from the man he'd come to guard, Warren replied grimly, "There are things you don't know and probably wouldn't understand if I told you." He opened the car door and looked quickly back at Jimmy. "I don't like him being that far from us. Get out and stand near the car. I'm moving closer." His words, like the movements of his lean body, were quick and efficient. The young man obeyed without further comment.



On the distant hillside, a bald eagle swooped low over Tony Ryborg, who raised his head in greeting. "Hey there, buddy. It's just me." He watched the great bird lift and dip with the warm currents that stirred that July morning. It sailed far over the meadow, then banked slowly and returned, making another pass over the simple grave.

In eight years, Tony had worn a hard path to that spot beneath a sprawling live oak tree. From there, the land sloped gently away in every direction, leaving the tree and the single gravestone alone on the highest point for miles. It was the place his Jessica had always retreated to when old demons threatened.

He watched the bird circle lazily above him, then looked back at the ground.

"I can't stay long this time, Jess," he whispered. "You're free of it, but I'm not. This battle won't let me go. I just pray it stays clear of Andie. She's so alone down there."

Glancing across the field, he could almost see his wife and daughter laughing in fits as he struggled to stay upright on the old mare they rode through the meadow one summer. The vision made him close his eyes, draw a quivering breath, and release it slowly to the wind.

The brisk flapping of the eagle's wings made Tony look up. "If I believed in such things, Jess, I might think that was you watching me. But even if it was, you still couldn't answer the question that haunts me: Where were you going that day?"

Soon, he rose and walked briskly away from the grave. He turned toward Warren, who now stood nearby. "We'll have to hurry."

"Yes, sir," said Warren, falling in step behind the man who, at fifty-seven, showed no signs of slowing. Warren crossed the field on full alert, eyes scanning in every direction.

As Florida's attorney general and candidate for governor, Tony Ryborg pursued one agenda above all others: to wage a head-on war against drug trafficking in and through his state. Throughout a legendary career as Dade County sheriff, then FDLE commissioner, and now attorney general, Tony had worked relentlessly to apprehend and convict drug growers, dealers, and their overseas bosses to the fullest extent of the laws. When that wasn't

enough, Tony pushed for harsher punishments under new laws. As governor, he would be able to flex even greater muscle against drug cartels from Florida to the Caribbean and South America. He hadn't intended to run for the state's highest office until the law enforcement community, seeing no other candidate with an anti-drug platform, persuaded him to step in midway through the race.

But some people were determined to keep Tony Ryborg out of the governor's office. For years, drug bosses had tried to disarm him with bribes and threats. When that didn't work, they attempted assassination. It was Warren Jacobs who'd foiled that assault, wrestling the attacker to the ground in front of the Ryborg home and taking a bullet to his chest. Thereafter, Tony and his daughter, Andrea, had lived in the shadow of FDLE security.

"Sir, did you reach Manny Alvarez?" Warren asked as Tony settled into the back seat of the car. Manny was the FDLE officer Tony had assigned to look after his daughter, who had recently moved to Miami.

"I did," Tony answered as he opened his briefcase to begin the day's work. "He says everything's okay at Andie's place. But I asked him to step up his rounds down there anyway." As he fidgeted with a sheaf of papers, he added, "It's just a feeling, Warren. An edge to her voice the last few times we talked."

If not for Jimmy Seibel's presence, Warren might have pursued the conversation about Andie. Assigned to protect the Ryborg family during Tony's first term as attorney general, Warren was well acquainted with the playful girl who drew outlandish caricatures of him and taped them to his windshield—the same girl who refused to leave his hospital room for days after he was shot trying to protect her father.

Warren might have reminded Tony that his daughter was undergoing a transition into her new life in Miami. At twenty-six, she was no more the sheltered child, though she had never wanted to be. No more was she in the comfort and security of her family home and the doting presence of her father. The officer might have suggested that maybe the young woman, though passionate about her independence, was just a bit homesick.

As the car bumped along the rugged terrain, Tony put down his papers and stared into the glade of a nearby pine forest. A few early morning rays penetrated the dense canopy and glinted off the cabin's tin roof. Jessica Ryborg's grandfather had built the small home on family land outside Tallahassee, a retreat from his insurance agency in town. But the deaths of both grandparents had left the old place abandoned for many years until Jessica and Tony restored it as their own private getaway. The sight of it stung with memories he could hardly bear.

Tony focused on the front door, tucked in the deep shade of the porch. He wished it to open and the delicate figure of a woman with auburn curls to emerge. *Jessica*, he mourned silently. *Jessica*.

Turning off the rutted lane, the car hit a pothole and jerked Tony back to the moment. Warren sped onto the highway heading to town. *Just like that morning*, Tony still grieved. *Will it ever stop hurting?*

As he'd done so many times before, Tony forced himself back into his work. Without looking up from the surveillance reports in his lap, he broke the silence in the car. "Warren, when we get back to the office, try to reach Manny for me, please. It seems Mr. Francini is on the move again."

Hearing no response, he looked up to see Warren intently studying his rearview mirror.

"Warren?"

"Sir, I'd like you to lie flat on the seat. Right now!" Tony's first instinct was to turn and look out the rear window. But as he did, Warren snapped a command. "Tony, get down!"

## CHAPTER 3



“SWEET CHILD, this is brutal. What are you doing?”

Andie Ryborg flinched at the man's words. “I . . . I don't know what you mean.”

Randall Ivy studied her face. “We seldom know our own madness,” he said as he glanced back at the painting.

*Don't overreact, Andie cautioned herself. He's just toying with me. He always does.*

It had been a year since Ivy accepted the first painting Andie had brought him and displayed it in his gallery. The rich monotone of a mime performing on a street corner had sold in less than a week. Ivy's Coconut Grove Gallery, one of Miami's finest, soon exhibited another Ryborg oil, a portrait of an old, leathery-skinned woman pulling shrimp from a net. It sold in record time, too, and after that, Andie was sure all of Miami would soon clamor for more of her work. But now, the more she brought to Ivy's door, the less receptive he was. In six months, he'd accepted only one other painting, hanging it inconspicuously near the back of the store. It was still there.

Andie gathered her composure. “What do you mean by that, Mr. Ivy?”

He sighed deeply, running bony fingers through his shoulder-length blond hair. “Oh, it's probably a gentle madness. But its toll on your eye is grave. You've lost your seeing.”

*In plain English, please. Can you do that?*

“Do you know you send signals like a traffic light, my dear?” Ivy remarked with amusement. “I can tell by the color of your face whether to stop or proceed. That bright crimson tells me I should go no further. Is that right?”

She'd had enough. “Mr. Ivy, I don't know what you're talking about. But I think it's time I found another gallery to—”

"Not yet, Andie," Ivy interrupted. "You're not ready to move off in any direction until you determine where you are right now." He persisted. "When you first arrived from Tallahassee, you were very sure of yourself and your art. Your talent is powerful, or I wouldn't have taken you into the gallery so quickly. But you've lost that power, that focus. You're not seeing anymore." He picked up the painting she'd just brought in, placed it on an easel, then turned to her.

"Tell me what you see," he coaxed.

She glanced impatiently at him, then at the painting. "Palms on a beach with sailboats in the distance," she said flatly as if the man deserved no answer at all.

Ivy smiled and nodded smugly. "And that's all. It's bereft of feeling. A visual cliché. But it will do nicely in some motel lobby."

Andie abruptly lifted her painting from the easel and turned toward the door. "I'll not impose on you again," she said, her voice tight.

Ivy raised a surrendering hand, halting her escape. "Andie, I've insulted you, and I should apologize. But I think too much of your talent to do that."

When she didn't respond, he continued. "You've changed in the last few months. The attorney general's only child and just like him," he ventured boldly. "That first day I met you, you were full of his force. Sure of where you were going and eager to get there on your own terms. But that force is missing. Gone from your paintings. Gone from your smile. Why, Andie?"

*I won't listen to this.* "I'm sure, Mr. Ivy, that somewhere in your vast knowledge of my personal life, you'll discover some answer that suits you. Goodbye."

Andie's retreat was swift and cold. She walked quickly to her car, the vintage, black 1968 Mustang convertible she'd driven for six years. She stashed the painting in the back seat, pulled down the top and settled behind the wheel. The July afternoon simmered, relieved only occasionally by a gust off Biscayne Bay, which was where she headed.

The village charms of old Coconut Grove that usually buoyed Andie's spirits eluded her. Navigating along the narrow, twisting

lanes of exotic boutiques and cafés fringed by palms, she saw nothing before her but the taunting face of Randall Ivy.

Moments later, she arrived at South Bay Park and eased the Mustang beneath a sprawling banyan tree. She sat a moment, staring into the massive tree's mystifying anatomy. Its low-slung arms reached so far from the mother trunk they had to send down prop roots for support. Those roots could grow as large as the trunk itself, causing one tree to appear as a grove. The wonder of it lifted Andie just enough to see beyond the unpleasant confrontation with Ivy.

She dropped her keys into her pocket and grabbed a sketch pad and pencil from the back seat. Leaving the top down on her car, she got out and walked toward a shaded park bench overlooking a brilliant blue wash of water and sky. Scattered over the bay, sailboats raised their bleached faces to the wind and cut smartly through the swells. *Tell them they're a visual cliché, Mr. Ivy. That they have no business in your world.*

Dropping her paper and pencil onto the bench, she kicked off her sandals and lifted the long, gauzy skirt above her knees, letting the merciful breeze cool her slim, tanned legs. As she turned to survey the park, where wild, mossy oaks shaded a rambling lawn, a sudden impulse overtook her. Barefoot, she walked quickly toward the playground on the other side of the lawn.

A young mother gently pushed her toddler in a low swing. Andie smiled sweetly at them, settled into a swing higher off the ground and pushed off. The same wind that fed the sails on the bay now rushed at her, catching her skirt and pulling her away.

Andie closed her eyes, pumped as hard as she could, and let the pendulum movement rock her back to peace. The air ran through her hair like cool fingers, separating each strand of the dark, wavy mane. After a while, she opened her eyes and looked around in time to see the young mother hurrying her child toward the parking lot, casting wary glances over her shoulder at Andie.

*Don't be alarmed,* Andie called silently after her. *Mr. Ivy says my madness is gentle.* She slowed the swing to a stop and got off.

She was almost light-headed when she returned to the bench and picked up her sketch pad. She gazed at the sailboats and

thought again of Ivy. *How dare he presume to know me? He knows nothing. Nothing about the threats, the horrid notes.*

A restless energy swept through her, and she had to get away. She decided to drive over the causeway for a long walk down the beach. But as she rose from the bench, she saw movement in the tangle of shrubs nearby. Her pulse flew. It was the old sickening throb she'd known far too long. The commands of those who'd trained her echoed in her mind: drop, roll, and run low to the ground.

*But not here. Not now. I'm supposed to be rid of that.* She refused to succumb to her imagination. *There's no one there,* she assured herself.

Slowly, defiantly, she walked to her car, the breeze still cool on her bare arms. She looked quickly behind her. *You see,* she told herself. *No one's there.*

Two hours later, Andie rinsed the sand from her feet and left Key Biscayne's scenic shore. Returning to the mainland over the Rickenbacker Causeway, her hair blowing free inside the open convertible, she felt restored. She cruised back into Coconut Grove, this time savoring its every scented nuance, gliding beneath its leafy canopies, past the old, tile-roofed homes draped in bougainvillea, around the hammocks of salt marsh studded with wild herons. Though the Grove was now her home, it was too far from the father she adored—and not far enough from the threat of danger they both knew too well.

It was Tony Ryborg's job to bring the state's offenders to justice. But it was his relentless pursuit of drug traffickers that had made him a target. Too many times, the cartels had threatened him and his daughter if he didn't back off their operations. Too many times, Andie had been plucked from school and whisked to safety.

The latest round of threats to her father, though, had taken a curious turn, demanding Tony Ryborg withdraw from the governor's race. It was the same demand Andie had recently found scrawled in notes left for her. It was the message of her midnight caller. *They'll stop,* she assured herself. *I've outlasted them before. I will again.*

Not far from the old village was Andie's small, tidy house. Wishing to attract no attention to the move from her father's Tallahassee home, she had hunted alone for the place where she

would begin the rest of her life. She'd found the two-bedroom bungalow tucked in a stand of Royal palms and Australian pines. It was ill-kept, overgrown and exactly what she wanted. The hand-lettered For Rent sign nailed to a tree signaled no real estate agent. Surrounding homes were barely visible through a wild tropical thicket. She'd moved in two weeks later.

Andie pulled into the yard and parked on a bed of pine straw to one side of the house. Before getting out, she paused to admire the sun's final burst through the trees. On the lawn, the play of dazzling light against deep indigo shadows intrigued her. Light and dark so amiably paired. But not so in the world she'd discovered at too young an age. There, light battled the dark. It had to. That's why she wouldn't let her father resign his post, why he must become governor.

But she knew her father's mind: he could dodge threats against his own life but was prepared to withdraw from a battle that threatened his child. He'd already lost his wife to a heart attack when Andie was eighteen. She knew he wouldn't risk losing her too.

But something happened during Andie's junior year at FSU that made him persevere. She had joined a campus ministry to female inmates in a nearby prison. She drew particularly close to a young woman named Claire, whose drug addiction had cost her countless jobs, her home, and worst of all, her child. Claire had been convicted of selling cocaine to support her habit and her two-year-old daughter. Upon the young woman's release from prison, Andie helped her through more drug rehabilitation, found a job and apartment for her, and brought her into the Christian church where Andie and her dad worshipped. There was even hope the woman's daughter would be returned to her from foster care.

Andie thought she had witnessed a miraculous turn-around in Claire's life until early one Sunday morning. On her way to get Claire for church service, an ambulance overtook Andie and stopped in front of the apartment building where Claire lived. Andie watched in horror as emergency personnel rushed into her friend's apartment. She ran in behind them and watched helplessly as they tried to revive the young woman slumped on the floor. But the drug had already done its deed. Claire was gone.

And the dealers who'd supplied her death had surely moved on to other victims.

"Hunt them down!" Andie tearfully begged her dad. "Find them all, and put them away. You can't quit, Dad. I won't let you!"

Andie thought of Claire as she pulled the top over the convertible and turned toward the house. *She would have liked this place.*

The landlord had welcomed and funded Andie's efforts to improve the house. She hired roofers, plumbers, and electricians to make basic repairs and upgrades. A floor refinisher stripped the wide-plank pine floors to their natural color, and Andie repainted all the rooms herself. Dark and grungy interior walls were coated with a soft taupe, then hung with colorful paintings and prints. The dingy yellow exterior became a dusky rose with glossy, black Bahamian shutters.

Her favorite place in the house was the screened-in front porch. She furnished it with second-hand wicker chairs and tables she painted the same glossy black as the shutters. Over the pine floor, she spread a bold Aztec rug of coral, green, and black. Across the ceiling, she strung tiny, star-shaped lights to mimic the constellations.

And everywhere, Andie grew plants. She cleared the tangled yards of weeds, then pruned and coaxed the old growth to new life. On the porch and throughout the house, she draped vines and clustered pots of more plants in different colors and textures.

This was home now. The old place seemed to embrace her, thankful for its rebirth.

Before going inside, she walked to the back yard to check a bed of caladiums she'd just planted in the shade of a ponderous ficus tree. As she suspected, the soil around them was parched from the heat. She started toward the house where she kept a hose coiled near the back door and suddenly stopped. The door was open.

Suspended between denial and flight, she stood motionless, staring hard at the door, not willing to believe anyone had breached the security of her home. Her mind seized the first logical explanation. *I must not have locked the door. Sometimes it doesn't close all the way, so the wind must have blown it open. That has to be it.*

Moving slowly toward the house, she heard nothing stir inside.

She eased up the steps and, with one sudden movement, jerked the door open wide. Her hand shot to the switch just inside the door, and the navy and white kitchen she loved to wake up to was flooded with light. Still no sound. Then she thought of the gun. She kept one in her bedroom, which at this moment seemed miles away.

Glancing about the kitchen, she saw nothing out of place. Cautiously, her heart pounding, she moved into the hallway from where she could see into almost every room of the house. She flipped on more lights. Everything was in place, and the front door was securely locked.

*This is insane*, she scolded herself. *It must have been the wind.* Andie took a deep breath, fighting the nausea of fright. She looked about the house. *God, are you here?*

Since her mother's death, she'd wrestled with her faith. Though her mother had openly praised God for rescuing her from drug addiction, Andie believed it was the ravages of that addiction that had claimed her mother's life at too young an age, just as it had Claire's. For too long, Andie had wrestled with one persistent, angry question: Why did God allow evil to destroy the good?

Yet as she walked through the rooms of her house, she sensed the nearness of him. She still believed that no matter her doubts, no matter what the world flung at her, God was still close.

Steeling herself against fear, determined to salvage her composure, she returned to the kitchen for a glass of iced tea and headed for the front porch. Leaving the door between the porch and living room open, she dropped onto the plump cushions of a wicker lounge. When the trembling subsided, she picked up the phone and called her dad.

"Hello," he answered crisply on the first ring. She guessed he was at the desk in his study, bent over a campaign speech with the cell phone at his fingertips. The primaries over, his strategists were in constant communication with the man opinion polls now placed ahead of the Democrat's candidate, state senator Bill Neiman.

"Governor Ryborg, please," Andie teased.

"Well, he's not in," he played along. "But if you'd like to speak to his boss, I'll page his daughter for you."

"Got that right," she said, momentarily forgetting her fear and resting in the sound of her dad's voice.

"How's my girl?" he asked softly. "No problems?"

She hesitated. *You can't tell him. He's got to stay focused on the campaign.* "Now, Dad, have I reported any to you?" *That's evasion, not lying,* she reasoned.

"I pray you're okay, hon." His voice dropped. "I'm not at all happy about you being so far from me. Things are happening, and I, well, never mind."

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Nothing's wrong. Has Manny checked on you today?"

"Dad, you said—"

"I said nothing's wrong, honey. Now, please tell me about Manny."

Andie backed off. "Well, the less I see of that hound dog body-guard, the better." Even as she said the words, she knew they weren't true. Minutes ago, she would have welcomed the sight of the gentle warrior Manny Alvarez.

"He's a medal-of-honor cop, Andie. Give the man his due."

"Well, he's more like a big hairy nanny with no social graces," she said, intent on keeping the conversation light. "He pops in unannounced, raids my fridge, and prowls through the house, dropping little pieces of food everywhere."

"He's doing exactly what I told him to, except for the food thing. Scouting your place and keeping you safe is his job. Be nice to him."

Andie smiled at the father who wasn't there, wishing he was. "I miss you, Dad. But it's time for me to make my own way. I appreciate your concern. I even appreciate Manny, sometimes. Does he really have five kids?"

"All girls. And now he's got you."

His voice was a salve to her. She imagined him as he spoke—the high round cheeks that squeezed his eyes nearly shut when he laughed, the wild gray eyebrows he refused to trim. "They make me look meaner than I am," he'd once told her. "And some people

need to think I'm real mean." She closed her eyes and tried not to think how close those people might be. As her dad talked, her mind wandered to the park, to the movement in the shrubs.

"Are you listening to me, Andie?" he asked with mild impatience.

She opened her eyes and laughed, realizing her dad had been telling something in great detail and she hadn't heard a word.

"Sorry, Dad," she giggled and turned to look outside. "I was—" The words caught in her throat. Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a scream as she dropped the phone.

A man in a mask stared at her through one of the screen windows.

"Andie?" Her father's voice called from the phone on the floor.

"Andie!"