

Seductive Synchronicity



Sage Ardman

Seductive Synchronicity

(a free preview of the first sixteen chapters)

Sage Ardman

Westerley series #3



Portola Valley, California

Books by Sage Ardman



Executive Sweet (Westerley #1)

A Good Little Girl Like You (Westerley #2)

Seductive Synchronicity (Westerley #3)

Seductive Synchronicity

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For more information, please contact: R.L. Ranch Press, 4119 Alpine Road, Suite A, Portola Valley, California, 94028. Telephone: 650-851-2927, Fax: 650-851-9095. Or visit www.rlranchpress.com.



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A special thanks goes to Vicky Debold of the National Vaccine Information Center for long discussions about vaccine safety. I am sorry to report that the vaccine facts in this book are true. Vaccines *are not* adequately tested; vaccine testing *does* use active placebos (the characters in the story elaborate on this); nearly *200 deaths* have been associated with the HPV vaccine, and 20 percent of all prescription drugs *are* eventually recalled or proven harmful. I wish I was making these things up, but sadly, I am not.

Finally, where would I be without Stanley Ardman, who is there for me when I need him most?

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Chapters 17-41 are not part of this preview

To the real Witchy Women, seekers, healers, enchanters.

Chapter 1



Monday, September 17

The dream ended too soon. Constance Westerley looked around her dark bedroom, silently cursing it for being so real and so empty. It was her favorite dream, too, featuring her dream lover, a gorgeous man with a dragon tattoo who visited her sleeping world every few months. They'd even been making love, only seconds ago. Now she was alone again, aroused and frustrated. It took a minute or two to calm her heart.

That was one of the best. They didn't always get that far. Some nights the dream ended after a few kisses. Tonight was as good as it gets, even though it ended in the middle of their passion. She played it in her head, over and over.

Constance got up and stumbled to the bathroom, staring at herself in the mirror. Skinny and tall, her pale face seemed even more plain than usual. It didn't help that her straight brown hair had mostly escaped the hair band and hung limply around her head. Even her two center teeth, hanging farther down than most people's, looked more goofy than usual. What did she expect at 3:00 a.m. after another hot date with her dream man?

She dug out her dream diary from the bottom drawer of the vanity, hidden under rarely-used supplies. Then she sat on the toilet and wrote everything she could remember.

I'm in a strange house, gloomy and uninviting. Each room I enter is more of a mess than the last: a mound of dirt, some broken chairs, even a pile of decaying garbage. In the dim light, everything is gray and unnatural looking. For some reason, none of this bothers me. I move quickly from room to room.

I turn a corner and suddenly everything is different. I'm at one end of a long hall, wide and lined with mirrors. A string of chandeliers runs down the middle. Unlike the rest of the house, this hallway is bright and welcoming. And more than that, it's somehow familiar. Even though I know I've never been here before, I feel like I have. And then I know that he's waiting for me. In the large room at the end of this hall, I know he's there.

I can't wait to see him. I start to run down the hall. After the first step, my feet leave the floor and I float in the air, a few inches off the ground, still heading for the large room. I do an excited dance of joy with my arms and legs spinning about while I glide toward him.

Then I'm standing in the middle of the large room. It's darker here than the hall, and someone is crouched down in the corner, turned away. I'm sure it's him—this person

even has the same build as him. And just like always, he's shirtless.

As I approach, he quickly stands and faces me, arms outstretched. I'm so happy, I can feel my heart leap in my chest. His eyes have that familiar sparkle, but something is different. He seems gaunt, rougher, and more beaten-down. His pants are torn, his beard is growing in, and dried blood runs down his face in a few places. But when he smiles at me, nothing else matters. Even roughed-up, he looks sexy.

We hug tightly, gripping so hard that I feel like we could merge together. Wrapped up in his powerful arms, I am home.

Constance paused and thought about her dream man, her astral soul mate. Even disheveled and bleeding, he was the most intense and mesmerizing man she knew. He had a lean face, rugged and solid with a warm smile. His beautiful dark hair was rarely combed and fell this way and that over his forehead. And those blue eyes! They always sparkled with looks of love for her, bright as a beacon.

Then there was his tattoo, prominent on his broad, muscular chest. Winged and scaly, the dragon had a sparkling blue eye, the same as his. Its fiery breath shot directly over his heart, and the flames actually glowed when they made love.

Constance pulled out another folder from the vanity drawer. It had sketches of the dragon tattoo. Over the years, that dragon had become as much her friend as its owner. In

the long months between their visits, she often doodled drawings of it. She leafed through the sketches then returned to her diary.

As we hug, I know I'm dreaming. I have to be if I'm with him. I'm filled with a sense of urgency—every second is precious. I hug him tighter, submerging myself in the place I love the most, dreaming or waking.

We lean back and stare at each other. His blue eyes flare with delight. Then we are kissing; our bodies swirling together and inseparable, as if we're both ghosts, flowing together in the ether. The ground beneath us is gone, and our energies are merged in the air, a single creature with one breath and one heartbeat. Each moment in his arms feels like a priceless gift.

We float down to a bed, landing in a flurry of sheets and pillows. Our clothes are gone and we're making love, slow and intense. His sleek, muscular body ripples as he glides over me and through me, as exquisite as ever, powerful and secure. I can feel my orgasm approach.

But she didn't have that orgasm because she woke up. Sex with her dream man was better than any sex she'd ever had while awake, but unfortunately it wasn't guaranteed to last until the end. Then again, at age thirty-three,

Constance knew that real men weren't guaranteed to last until the end, either.

At the back of the diary was an index of her astral dalliances—just the date and a few words about each dream. She filled in tonight's summary: "long hall, unshaven and bleeding, ghost embrace, solid love." Anyway, it had seemed solid just minutes before.

How am I going to get back to sleep after this? Definitely not tired, Constance flipped to the beginning of the diary and started to read. As of this month, it had been ten years since she'd started dreaming of him. She reread dozens of previous visits she had recorded, reliving every moment.

After sifting through the imaginary world of her dream lover, she put everything back in the drawer and tried not to dwell on how pathetic it all was. Tonight's dream had been a great visit, better than most. It would carry her through the next few months until he returned to her sleeping world.

Constance laid back down in bed. After spending a few minutes trying in vain to stop thinking about her dream lover, she realized that sleep would be difficult. She was too turned on. She flailed her arms and punched the mattress a few times, annoyed with herself for being more aroused by a dream than by anything real in her life.

Only one thing would help if she expected to sleep again. Her dream man hadn't had time to take her all the way to completion, so she had to finish the journey on her own.

I really need to get a life. Time to find a real man. As Constance finally relaxed into the mattress, she laughed at the futility of her situation. What man could compare to her dream lover?

Chapter 2



Monday, September 17

“We’re just here to give you some helpful advice.” The short beefy man didn’t seem like he ever gave helpful advice. He couldn’t even say the words without making them sound sinister. Anyone who listened carefully could detect the threatening subtext, and Nick was definitely listening carefully.

The thug gave an example of the sort of helpful advice he had in mind. “You run a nice little school. All those cute kids running around the playground.” He said no more, just narrowed his eyes. Nick understood every word he hadn’t said.

I knew something like this would happen. He’d been expecting this visit for weeks. Still, it caught him by surprise when two drug company representatives knocked on his door at home. He expected a visit at school. He also expected them to approach him more professionally, not with film-noir threats. After all, they worked for a pharmaceutical corporation, not the mob.

Few people came to visit Nick in his tiny garage home. He was unprepared for something like this. The three men stood around the folding card table that served as his kitchen table, coffee table, work table, and any other table he might need. They remained standing because Nick didn’t even own three chairs.

The taller man in the nice suit was the “good cop.” He didn’t bother with innuendo. Instead, he stuck to the company line. “We want to give you some brochures about our vaccine.” He held out a fan of pamphlets. Nick took them and set them on the table. Good Cop even offered a business card. His name was Oliver Cardwell, a representative of Phresh Air Pharmaceuticals. Nick dropped it on the pile.

Get these guys out of here. Nick itched to kick them out the door, perhaps with a few well placed punches to make his feelings clear. It amused him to think that he could easily take them both. Good Cop was a soft boy who probably never hit anyone in his life. Even Bad Cop didn’t seem like much of a threat. The guy would have been trouble fifteen years ago, but now his paunch was starting to show. Of course, Nick would have been more trouble fifteen years ago, too. They both could have thrown some hard punches back then. Today, the only stuff getting thrown around was words.

Don was the one who had caused all this trouble. Nick’s brother, now a pediatrician, had gotten him into this situation. Don warned him that the new vaccine was unnecessary and dangerous. And a vaccine against warts certainly seemed more like a joke than a necessity. Still, what did Nick know about vaccines? Nothing. Weren’t they miracles of modern medicine? He didn’t know that they could be dangerous. Still, he did find it suspicious that the company was pushing the vaccine so aggressively that it had partnered with a local health organization to run vaccination clinics at his school.

Regardless of what Nick thought, Don was the expert. He claimed that the vaccine was too new and had been poorly tested. There were even reports of kids who had

become paralyzed after taking the shot. As school principal, Nick had to put his children's safety first. He'd talked to the school's nurse, who assured him that vaccines are thoroughly tested. But given the experimental nature of the program and Don's opinion, he told the nurse to cancel the vaccination clinics. They would wait a year and then decide whether to allow them to resume.

That was three weeks ago. Now the drug company men were here at his home to change his mind. Nick prodded them. "What can you tell me about that boy in Cincinnati who got paralyzed after taking your vaccine?"

Good Cop smiled and nodded his head. "Yes, we heard about that. But it has nothing to do with our vaccine. The boy was sick before he got inoculated. Honestly, Mr. Veseli, our vaccine is perfectly safe."

That's not what Don tells me. He wished his brother was here to talk to these guys. Instead, he tried to explain his position. "I haven't rejected your vaccine completely. Our school nurse should have explained this to your company."

"Oh yes, we understand. But if you reject the program, it sets a bad precedent. Already, two other schools are about to pull out because of your reluctance. Do you know how much is at stake here?" He enumerated the benefits as he ticked off fingers on his hand. "Jobs, our investors, better health, medical science." He looked up at Nick. "My God, man! Think of the damage you could do to our wonderful new vaccine. You're single handedly stopping something of vital importance. That's why we need you to reconsider."

Bad Cop leaned closer. "And we need you to reconsider by Friday."

Nick snapped his head back. "You're threatening me?"

The muscle man looked hurt. “I never make threats.” His pained look transformed into a scowl. “I make promises.”

Nick was surprised to hear someone actually use that line. If it weren't for the fact that this thug was threatening school children, it would almost be laughable. The guy was classic.

Cardwell waved a hand to prevent any real trouble. “That's enough, Frank. Mr. Veseli understands us. Let's go.” On his way out the door, he pointed to his card on the table. “Have your nurse call me when she is ready to restart the vaccine clinics.”

Nick knew better than to engage these guys in any more discussion. Nothing he could say would sway them from their mission to get rich by vaccinating every child. And nothing they were saying reassured him at all. The vaccine was dangerous, and he would not allow it to be given to his children.

He watched them walk away and then threw their brochures in the trash.

Chapter 3



Tuesday, September 18

Constance was the last to arrive, as usual. She had run home after work and changed into a more comfortable outfit: a long brown and gold bohemian skirt with a black knit top. Released from her business suit, she raced to her friend's place for their weekly get together. "Made it! I thought I'd never get free today."

"Get your butt in here already," Serena shouted from the living room. "We've eaten nearly all the appetizers." Serena never actually ran out of food at her dinner parties—that would be unimaginable. But she did like to tease.

I wonder what I missed. The other three were chatting away in the living room. As Constance headed there, May came bouncing out and wrapped her in a hug. "You're just in time. I was about to tell everyone about the talk I heard last week on morphic resonance. So totally radical! If that stuff is true, then we're going to have to rewrite every science textbook." She grinned at Constance. "You would have loved it."

"Then I'm glad I got here in time. I really wanted to go to that talk but I was busy in court." May nodded her acceptance of the situation. Constance didn't have a normal job with sensible hours. She worked as a public defense attorney in the city and had over one hundred clients. Today she had spent hours trying to get deals for some of them. Tomorrow she would be back in court. Her schedule

rarely offered her the time to do something interesting, like attend a talk on radical new ways of viewing the world.

Constance flopped down on the sofa and poured herself a glass of red wine. She raised the glass, and Serena raised hers as well. “Glad you made it, Connie.” May also raised her glass, just as the fourth member of the group, Abby, ran in from the kitchen to join the toast. The Witchy Women were together again.

The four of them weren’t really witches, and they certainly didn’t fit the classic image of hags in black gowns. But they did have a common interest in spiritual phenomena. They called themselves “Witchy Women” as a joke. Their weekly gatherings were an opportunity to unwind and share these interests, which included meditation, energy healing, out-of-body experiences, mediumship, shamanism, and more.

Serena was a psychologist and meditation leader. She also hosted all of their gatherings, since she had the biggest home. May was a medical intuitive. She understood dozens of different healing methods and occasionally worked as a health advisor. And Abby was a network chiropractor and massage therapist who worked in hospitals to help patients deal with surgery and chemotherapy. Constance was the only member of the group who didn’t engage in spiritual activities as part of her work.

She took a few sips of wine and set the glass down. “This has been a very strange day.” She sank back in the sofa.

Abby got up and walked behind Constance, grabbing her shoulders and starting to work out the knots. “Wow, you’re tense. That bad?”

Yes, that bad. But also that good. Constance exhaled and let Abby’s hands work their magic. “Well, my day started off great, but went downhill from there.” She wanted

to say more, but the relaxing energy of Abby's hands prevented her from speaking further. The best she could do was a satisfied hum.

Abby finished working and Constance sank deeper into the sofa. "Ooh. Thanks, Abby." Then she sat up. "I'm afraid I can't stay long tonight. I found out this afternoon that a friend of mine is in the hospital, so I'm going to visit him when we're done with dinner."

May's eyes widened. "Does he have a dragon tattoo on his chest?"

Constance grinned. The Witchy Women knew all about her dream man—she shared each new dream with them. Between last night's visit and May's mention of the man, the air seemed to be filled with dragons.

"Unfortunately, no. He's just a friend I've known since I was a kid." She couldn't avoid talking about her dream much longer, but she took another moment to relax before doing so. Her friends would overwhelm her with excitement.

Serena stood up and waved her arms toward the dinner table. "Well, since you can't stay long, let's eat. Dinner's ready." They gathered at the table and held hands. Serena led them in a prayer of thanks to the people, animals, and plants that contributed to their wonderful meal.

After the first few bites, Constance was ready to tell her big news. She quietly slipped the bomb into the conversation. "I dreamt about him again last night." They all stopped eating and stared.

Serena set her silverware down. "Your tattooed lover visited you? How was it?"

So incredibly good. Constance was getting aroused just thinking about it. She closed her eyes briefly and smiled.

“We made love.” She paused to bask in the memory. “It was wonderful.” The three women sighed in wistful delight.

May pointed a fork. “When are you going to take action here? I think you should try to do a remote viewing and find him. These dreams sound like out-of-body experiences to me, especially when they’re lucid and you’re aware that you’re dreaming. You’ve got to figure out what it means.”

“What it means is that I dream about an imaginary stud muffin every few months who’s better in bed than any real man I know.”

Abby scowled. “I think you’re using him as an excuse to stop dating.”

“No, the reason I don’t date is because of my father. Thanks to him, I have a better sex life when I’m asleep.” Constance let a sad laugh escape. “At least he can’t stop my imaginary lovers.”

Serena reached out and took Constance’s hand. “I don’t know why, but I just got a sense that your dream man is real. Something in my head told me that he’s trying to find you. And I got a sense of urgency about it—this could happen soon.”

As if. Serena often had deeper senses about these things, but after ten years, the possibility seemed slim. “Oh, Serena. . .” Constance whispered. “Don’t I wish.”

They chatted some more over dinner. May told them about the talk she’d attended, and Abby told them about her landlord troubles. Constance chose not to admit her sadness over her latest client, a poor single mother who faced a prison sentence because she kept stealing supplies for her baby, this time a package of diapers. The criminal justice system was often insensitive.

After dinner, they began their yearly pre-Halloween white elephant party, a special tradition among the Witchy

Women. The holiday was still six weeks off, but Abby had insisted they trade presents early this year. She had found an exciting gift and seemed eager to show everyone.

Constance had brought a book on consciousness and meditation, ordered last month after reading an article by the author. She never got around to reading the book, so she figured it would make a good white elephant item. They drew lots and started choosing gifts.

After a brief round of trading, Serena got the book on meditation. She promised to read it and give them a report next week.

Constance received Abby's gift: a pair of red sequined shoes. They would be perfect for her friend in the hospital. He loved *The Wizard of Oz* and would appreciate ruby slippers. She made her excuses and left the party to visit him.

Chapter 4



Monday, September 24

Nick finished his regular rounds of the elementary school to make sure everything looked right. He loved this old brick building, three stories tall and so solid it could survive a hurricane. A few school activities were still going on in some of the rooms, but most of the students and teachers were gone.

It was time for him to go, too. He got on his motorcycle to ride the fifteen blocks to his garage home.

As he got close, he noticed police cars and flashing lights up ahead. Someone in the neighborhood was having trouble. But when he got there, he found the police cars parked in front of his building. Nick's garage studio was on the ground floor. The upper three floors were for his brother and his brother's family, who were away on a cruise ship right now. He hoped there wasn't a problem with their place.

Couldn't be me. Nick walked a straight line these days—he hadn't done anything foolish since he was much younger. So he parked the motorcycle and boldly wandered through the ring of police cars. Before Nick could get very far, a policeman stopped him.

"What's going on, officer?"

The policeman squinted. "Are you Nicholas Veseli?"

"Yes, I am." Two other policemen turned toward him.

“Wait right here, please.” The officer spoke into the radio on his hip. “We’ve got him.” All three policemen stared at Nick with narrow eyes, daring him to try and leave.

This seems ominous. Something bad had happened. Nick tried to find out more. “Is someone hurt?”

A man in a suit came over, probably a detective. “Mr. Nicholas Veseli?”

“Yes?”

“I have a warrant for your arrest.” Nick stared with his mouth open as they read him his rights.

“What am I charged with?”

“Child pornography. We found a large stash of it.”

Nonsense. Why would that be in my place? He snapped his head back and frowned. “That’s ridiculous. I would never do anything like that.”

The officer pointed to the garage. “Is this your residence?”

“Yes. My brother and his family live upstairs.”

“Well we got an anonymous tip and found a large collection of illicit material in your garage. You might want to think twice before you say anything more.”

Nick stared for a second, then closed his mouth. He immediately thought of the drug company representatives. Could this be their doing? Getting dragged off to jail seemed like a pretty serious retaliation for postponing a vaccination clinic.

He looked around carefully. Some of the neighbors stared from their windows as the police bundled him into a patrol car and drove off.

Chapter 5



Tuesday, September 25

The Witchy Women gathered for another dinner party. They snacked and sipped wine and talked about their week. As usual, Constance got the award for the most difficult week. She won with the story of her latest client who had been caught with a dozen stolen cell phones.

“. . .and get this!” Constance wrapped up her award-winning tale of criminal foolishness. “He told me that he knew the law better than I do and could defend himself in court without my help. It took me an hour to convince him that his defense ideas wouldn’t work and he’d end up in prison.” Some of her clients were more than guilty—they were stupid, too.

May chuckled. “At least he’s just a burglar. Consider yourself lucky you’re not defending the pervy principal.”

“The who?”

“Didn’t you see the news? They just arrested a grade school principal here in the city. He had mountains of child porn in his home.” She scowled. “Creepy.”

Serena grunted. “I know! I heard about that. God! What’s with these people?”

I know the answer to that. People do the most foolhardy things. Constance hoped that this poor pervert hadn’t hurt any children. She also hoped she wouldn’t have to defend him.

Abby protested this turn in the conversation. “I have *not* heard about this, and I don’t want to hear about it now. Can we talk about something else? That stuff gives me bad dreams.”

They agreed to change the subject, and soon found plenty of other things to talk about. Before long, they had finished dinner and were sitting in Serena’s living room. She picked up a book and held it up for everyone to see.

“Remember this?”

Abby and May looked at it and shrugged, but Constance knew what it was. “I gave you that book at the white elephant party last week. Did you like it?”

Serena gushed, “I *loved* it. This stuff is brilliant—I think we should all try to do it.”

May looked at the cover. “*Active Consciousness*? What’s it about?”

“It’s a system for manifesting reality through your consciousness. The author writes about how people have been doing this for centuries. She even offers a scientific explanation for how it might work. Then she gives exercises so that anyone can do it.”

Abby shrugged. “Sounds like that book, *The Secret*. The one that tells you how you can become rich simply by visualizing it.”

Serena curled her lip. “I hated that. Too mercenary. As if every problem could be solved by visualizing enough money.”

That’s the way it works in my family. Constance laughed. “My parents don’t need to visualize to get money. And they definitely use it to solve every problem.”

“Yeah, well your parents *have* that much money.” Serena shot Constance a little smile. “But what about love? Will money help you find your dream man?”

Constance let out a light laugh. “Will active consciousness?”

“Yes! That’s the amazing thing about it. You *can* manifest reality.”

Oh come on. Did Serena seriously believe that the dream man could appear through some magical act of consciousness? Even Abby seemed doubtful and propped her hands on her hips. “Yeah? How does it work?”

Serena charged on, eager to explain. “It’s got four steps. We can do the first three right now. The fourth one is where the magic happens. Come on, let’s give it a try.”

Everyone agreed. Even Constance was willing to explore it—she’d reserve her judgment for later.

Serena sat back and leafed through the book. “Okay, here we go. First of all, you have to decide what it is that you want.”

May thought for a bit. “Do we have to keep it hidden?”

“No, this isn’t a child’s game. This is real. Think about what you truly want to happen in the world. I know what Connie wants. Or perhaps I should say *who* Connie wants.” She grinned.

Maybe I should start simple. Constance didn’t want to insult the universe by wishing for something so improbable. And there were plenty of other things she’d like to see happen. Perhaps she should test out this technique with something easy.

“Oh I don’t know. Rather than asking the universe to create a dream man and bring him to me, I think I’ll start small. I just want my friend to lose his bet.” She leaned forward, excited. “This is the friend I visited in the hospital last week. Get this! He’s got so much money that he just made a huge bet. If he loses it, he has to give me a hundred

million dollars that I can donate to charity. Can you imagine what could be done with that much money?"

The other three stared in shock. "He's going to give you a hundred million dollars?" Abby shook her head. "Some people have all the luck."

Constance blushed. "I know. I'm already making plans to start a charitable foundation if I get it."

Abby smiled. "Well then. How about I also wish for you to get the money. And then I'll wish for you to give some of it to me."

May agreed. "And me too."

That's the problem with money. Everyone wants some. Constance hated to make her friends jealous. But as a Westerley heiress, this was the sort of life she lived. At least with the Witchy Women, she knew they were joking about her money.

Serena cut the discussion short. "Yeah, yeah. Everyone wants Connie's money." She shook her head and gave her friend a smirk. "Ignore them, girl."

She turned to the group. "We're each trying to find something we want, not something we want from Connie. Just think of something, okay?" She looked around and waited. "Everyone ready?" Back to being serious, they all nodded.

Serena sat back and studied the book. "Good. Now there are four steps to active consciousness. First, we enter a meditative state using a loving-kindness meditation. The author calls it being in the 'now' with an added joyfulness, so she calls it 'Now Plus.' I'll guide us through the meditation.

"The second step is called 'Pure Goal.' We visualize the thing we want with a certainty that it will happen. You have

to imagine that the goal really is fulfilled, with no doubts at all. I'll tell you when it's time to do this."

She leafed through the pages of the book. "Step three is to put it all out of our mind. The author calls it 'Let Go.' That's all we do tonight."

Abby smirked. "And then it just happens?"

"Well, that's what the fourth step is about. It's called 'Choose Joy.' In the coming days, you must stay tuned to everything that is happening around you. Whenever there is a choice, a decision that you have to make, you choose the one that brings you the best feeling of joy. It helps even more if you meditate on your choice a bit."

That sounds like the right way to live life. Shouldn't everyone choose joy whenever possible? And how cool would it be if the sensation of joy were somehow tied to a greater field of energy? A field that could direct the universe. As far-fetched as it sounded, the whole idea also made sense. Constance suddenly wanted to try it out.

May laughed. "That's just like the good-luck charm in *Harry Potter*. You remember how they drank a Felix Felicis potion, then as they walked around, they'd have urges to take certain actions. When they did, everything turned out right."

Serena jumped in her seat, clearly excited. "Exactly! The author of *Active Consciousness* talks about that potion, too. The truth is, this is just a mechanism to let you tap into a kind of precognitive energy. You make the choices that bring you the most joy. Then everything turns out right. Are you ready to do this?" All of them nodded.

They lowered the lights and settled into meditative postures. Serena smiled radiantly. "Let's hold hands for a bit to get started." They took each other's hands in a circle.

After a minute of silence, Serena spoke. “We give thanks for our good fortune in this world, and we thank the universe for the miraculous powers that each of us holds.”

Thank you. Constance really was grateful for her life. Sure, her only sexual fulfillment happened in dreams. And nobody had ever offered her the kind of love that turns ordinary people into poets. But everything else about her life was good and always had been. She couldn’t complain.

Serena broke the circle of hands, and they all sat back. “First, the Now Plus meditation. As we all know, there are hundreds of ways to meditate. Tonight we aren’t going to use any concentration techniques, where we focus on something to get in the zone. No mantras. No following our breath. We start by focusing on the beauty of the present moment.” She paused. “Clear your mind and be here, now.” She waited a few minutes while everyone got settled.

Serena resumed calmly. “Focus on the joy of being human. . . the gift of our marvelous bodies.” She waited so that everyone had enough time to appreciate her suggestion, then went on. “Our bodies are temples; we are truly grateful for them. Every part of us—from our feet to our head—is a precious wonder, more amazing than any machine humans can build. The search for miracles in life starts and ends right here in our bodies. . . nothing else can compare.”

She paused again to let these ideas percolate, then she took a long breath. “We give thanks for our wonderful bodies, which let us experience life, laughter, love, and all our senses. The entire Earth is ours to explore, and we thank the universe for it. We give thanks. . .”

Serena fell into silence and they all sat in loving-kindness and gratitude. After a few minutes, Serena moved

to step two. “Now, visualize your goal. . . the thing you want is real. You are living it. See it. Believe it.”

He will lose the bet and give me the money. Constance thought about her friend’s massive wager. What would she do with all that money? Everyone would want some of it. The joy of being able to help so many people was suddenly drowned in a sea of worry about those who would want to take the money away from her. Suddenly, she was no longer certain that she wanted her friend to lose the bet. The joy was gone—instead, she was surrounded by the pressures of wealth. Trapped.

Constance exhaled and cleared her mind. She needed to start over. After a few seconds of no thought, she reached out again to find her goal. This time a different image entered her head. A blue-eyed dragon breathed a jet of fire over her heart, and she was swaddled in joyous warmth. She let her thoughts linger on the stunningly alive man who existed only in her dreams. Part of her knew that this wasn’t an attainable goal, but another part of her couldn’t resist trying. She visualized her future self, living happily with her dream man.

Serena closed the meditation with step three. “Now, it’s time to Let Go. No more thoughts about your goal. When you are ready, open your eyes and return to the room.” Soon, the four of them were back, smiling and discussing their experience.

They chatted for another hour or so, then they returned to their own homes. Each of them promised to choose joy in the coming days, and to report back next week on their progress.

Chapter 6



After the meditation, Constance drove home eager to try out the final part of the active consciousness method: to live life choosing joy. She didn't expect to suddenly find the man of her dreams, but she did like the idea of living joyously. It made sense, and she was surprisingly excited by the possibility that it could change her life.

Why am I not worried and fearful? The start of a new exploration like this usually brought out her skeptical side. Her analytical self always tried to find holes in any new spiritual practice. But tonight Constance was anything but critical. Instead, she was in love with the idea, surrounded and protected by the hope that she could make the right choices by following her joy. It made her happy.

This wasn't the first paranormal experiment Constance had endeavored. Over the years, she had tried these kinds of things quite often. As an official Witchy Woman, she and her friends were always testing new ideas and exercises. The meditation that Serena led tonight was no different than dozens they had done before. But now she sensed something else. This one *was* different.

Constance practically leapt through her front door. She ran around her place, preparing for tomorrow and getting ready for bed. Finally, wrapped in her favorite bathrobe, she settled on the sofa and let herself drop into a light meditation. She cleared her mind of thoughts, closed her eyes, and left everything else open. From this point on, she would allow her sense of joy to make all the decisions.

After a few minutes, Constance opened her eyes and rose to her feet. She turned slowly, considering her options. On any other evening, she would check her e-mail, read some cases, make tea, watch a documentary on television, read a book, and go to bed. Her usual ritual.

Why do I do these things? Some of them were not at all joyful. Tonight she would rearrange even the simplest things in her life. Tonight she would change. She brewed some tea, read only those cases that gave her hope, and went to bed.



Wednesday, September 26

Constance woke easily and felt that same light happiness from the night before. She decided to try to find joy at work, even as she was immersed in the joyless plight of the city's poor. This would be a real test—most days she came home beaten down and upset. If she could find joy in these depressing moments at work, that alone would make the exercise worthwhile.

Constance paid close attention to her sense of joy as she went through her morning ritual. She chose her favorite charcoal suit with a three-button tailored jacket and a white wing-collar blouse. Instead of flats, she put on comfortable two-inch heels that made her already-tall body even taller. She occasionally did this on court days like today so she could better compete in the world of men. But today, the extra height also made her feel like she was floating above the mundane.

On her way to work, she stopped and bought a huge soft pretzel. She hadn't eaten one of those street-vendor delights in years, but since they always made her happy as a child, she opted for the joyful treat.

Then, in an even more surprising move, she decided to do something she normally would never do. She decided to call her brother. Robert Westerley was probably busy preparing to take over their father's company, so she knew he'd be awake. Whether or not he would be available to talk was another matter.

Constance didn't speak much to Robert these days. The two of them didn't dislike each other; they simply didn't have much in common anymore, so they didn't have much to say. From an early age, Robert dreamed of running their father's company. And their father, Burton, was more than happy to have a willing heir.

Burton Westerley ran the largest of the family companies: Westerley International. His five brothers and sisters had done reasonably well in life, running smaller companies or pursuing other careers. But they hadn't done as well as Burton. He had grown his piece of the family business into a money-making machine.

Westerley International was a global construction powerhouse that would build anything, anywhere. They specialized in dams, canals, bridges, sea walls, and other projects that dared to mess with Mother Nature. Westerley International could move mountains and could probably divide a sea. The company was a force that could not be ignored in the world. The press rarely did.

For as long as she could remember, Constance was embarrassed by her family's wealth and appalled by the company's reputation. They cut corners on many important issues that were important to local people. Citizens of countries with Westerley International projects were rarely happy with the company.

Over the years, Constance had engaged in a few discussions with her father about this. Burton was an

imposing CEO and just as imposing a father—she almost never got her way with him. In the end, she realized that she couldn't change the company's ways, so she decided to stay as far as possible from the family business. Robert could have it.

Instead, Constance had followed the path of her favorite uncle, Earl Westerley, who was a judge. She even went to law school because of him. Of course, a law degree appealed to her for other reasons. It would help her understand her family's complex system of corporations, properties, trusts, and everything else legal. And it would help with her dream job of being a philanthropist.

Burton and Teresa Westerley were quite proud of their daughter's legal studies. After all, lawyers turn into judges and even politicians. The Westerley family understood the need for powerful people like that, especially those who were on the family's side. How else could the next generation of Westerley businesses thrive? Her parents were prepared to use their considerable influence to make sure Constance's law career was a profitable one.

But Constance soon learned what most lawyers do: they enable rich people to get richer. It sickened her. So rather than follow the power path, she chose to become a public defender. The perfect way for a lawyer to help people.

Of course, her parents were thoroughly annoyed with this decision. They expected her to do "loftier" things, not public defense. Such a career was unthinkable. Spending time with *those* people. Poor people. Homeless people. Drug dealers and gang members. Her career choice was clearly a disappointment.

Standing on the street corner, Constance called her brother. He answered quickly. "Hey, Sis. Been a long time." He paused. "What can I do for you?"

Smooth as ever. Over the years, Robert had matured from a teasing big brother into the up-and-coming CEO of Westerley International, while Constance had matured into the spiritual public defender who stayed as far away from the Westerley limelight as she could. At least Robert wasn't an aggressive bulldog like her father.

Constance deflected his question. "You don't need to do anything for me, Bob. I just felt like calling you. The idea just popped into my head so I did it. Not sure why."

He chuckled. "I get it. Another one of your woo-woo ideas. Well, I'm just sitting here watching the news. More of that ridiculous story about the school principal and his porn. Why do they think we care about such stuff? Honestly!"

The background drone of the news announcer cut out and Robert's voice got serious. "So are you calling about the big event next month? We'll finally be free of those trusts."

The trust funds that their parents had set up decades ago were about to expire. These funds had millions of dollars in them, which Constance had mostly given away. She didn't need it—she had a good job as a public defender.

But when the trusts expired, another round of her father's financial shell game would be played out. And that barely-legal dalliance was not something she liked to think about. Of course she would do what her father wanted. She would show up and sign whatever papers they put in front of her. But she didn't want to talk about that now. "Sorry, Bob. I don't care about those things."

"You might not care, but I do. I finally get to be CEO."

That's what he loves the most. Another change that would be triggered by the trust dissolution was a managerial one. Her father would retire as CEO of Westerley International and hand the reins over to Robert.

“Yes, congratulations.” She took a breath before going on. “Be a good CEO, please. Dad was a tyrant.”

He grumbled. “I know you don’t agree with the company’s policies. You and Dad always bickered. But you can’t impose your liberal bias on everything we do. I have to run this company my way.”

“I understand, Bob.”

“What about that list you’ve been making all these years? Do I have to worry about it?”

The list. Constance hadn’t thought about it recently. But when she was young, the list had filled her every waking moment. It contained all of the human rights violations attributed to Westerley International, along with notes she’d made from snippets of conversation overheard at home. Whenever her father blurted out some gossip at the dinner table, or whenever she read a news story about her family’s infamous company, the list got updated.

I guess it makes sense that Bob’s worried about the list. As CEO, that would have to concern him. But when they were young, Robert was more sympathetic. Only one year older than she was, the two of them had been very close, especially in that loveless home. She often shared choice new list entries with him. But she never showed the list to their father. Burton Westerley would not be happy.

“Don’t worry, Bob. The list is my private record. I won’t use it against the company. But I’m going to hold you to a higher standard than Dad. Don’t disappoint me.”

Robert chuckled. “It won’t be hard to be better than Dad. All I have to do is cancel the company’s contract with Graywater Security. Remember when Dad would sit at dinner and talk about Felix the fixer? Well that guy is still around. He runs a whole team of people at Graywater devoted to solving Westerley International’s most *delicate*

problems. These are the guys who do all the dirty tricks you tracked when we were kids. Unfortunately, the fixer man is not going to be easy to get rid of. He's gathered quite a bit of power over the years."

Robert huffed out a breath of exasperation. "Look, if you want to change the company, help me do it. You're getting a seat on the board. Use it, don't ignore it."

"Sorry, Bob. If you can't change the company when you become CEO, how will I be able to do anything from the board? And you know all that corporate politics makes me sick. I'm giving you my board proxy. Use it as you like—Westerley International is all yours." She grunted. "Go nuts."

He belted out a laugh. "Look who's talking. You're the one who is going nuts. Or should I say *defending* nuts. Trying to save hopelessly damaged street people."

Constance sighed. "You make it sound like so much fun."

"It's just that I don't want anyone to think I stole the company from you. And if you help manage it, you'll be able to get an even bigger piece of the pie."

Just what I need, more power and money. Didn't she have enough? "There's plenty of pie for me, Bob. More than I'll ever need." Across the phone line, he couldn't see her eyes roll, but she did it anyway.

Constance paused for a few seconds while her brother waited patiently. Finally, she went on.

"Bob. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm here, Constance."

"Thanks for understanding how I feel. You'll make a good CEO of Westerley International. I may call you up and complain occasionally, but other than that, you're on your own." She took a long, relaxing breath.

"I love you." Constance hung up and went to work.

Chapter 7



As Constance entered the municipal building, she took a minute to watch the usual crowd of people waiting in line to pass through security. Many seemed tense, and they often brought with them the cause of their tension. Jurors had their jury-duty forms, contractors had their phones and rolled-up plans, and confused citizens clutched the pieces of paper that were making them so confused. Hardly any joy could be found here.

As a city employee, Constance could use a shorter security line on the side. From there, it was two flights up to the Primary Defenders group, her daily grind. The Primary Defenders were nine attorneys whose offices surrounded a large common space. In that common space were sofas and chairs for meetings and a few desks for administrators and investigators. Down the hall was a second group of public defenders, the Alternate Defenders group. The prosecutors were one flight up.

About half of the people in the Primary Defenders group were already there when Constance arrived. She nodded to a few of them as she walked through the common space to her tiny attorney's office. As she made her way, she looked around and tried to focus on everyone she saw. Not just the names and faces that she knew so well. The people. Real human beings, all trying to live their lives one way or another. She smiled as she observed each of them, picking up on their inner essence and listening to her sense of joy.

There's certainly no joy in my own office. Constance could feel the unhappiness as soon as she stepped inside. The pile of paper on the corner of her desk was her most active cases, people with very little joy. And the pile was as large as ever, dwarfing nearly everything else and seeming comically large, especially in this relatively small office. So many people, trapped in the shallow end of the luck pool. It often depressed her.

Today she fantasized about a magic spell that would make the pile grow shorter. Such a spell would be wonderful to have. And just for fun, she made up a spell-casting chant and sang it in her head a few times. Cheered by the fantasy, she grabbed the top folder and set to work.

“Good morning, counselor.” Jack Cummings, a fellow public defender, stood in her doorway. The smoothest public defender in the lot, Jack was tall and handsome and knew how to use his charisma to work a jury. If Constance ever got charged with a crime, she'd definitely want Jack to defend her. They said he could charm the underpants off a jury.

For all his swagger, Jack was a decent man. The problem was that he didn't belong here, and he knew it. Wherever Jack was going, he certainly hadn't arrived yet. He probably expected to step up to a white-shoe law firm someday and escape this pit of public defense. Or perhaps he had his eye on a judgeship or some political office, the sort of aspirations that would make Burton Westerley proud.

Dad would love this guy. She was amused by how well Jack was dressed today in a perfect hand-tailored suit. His clients probably didn't care about such things, so who was he trying to impress? The answer was obvious: he was always prepared for his moment in the spotlight. Like so many criminal lawyers, he preferred high-profile cases and

loved the media. Jack Cummings was a man on the move and gobbled up all the attention he could get.

Jack also hit on every woman he met, including the women in the Primary Defenders group. Too slick for Constance, she turned him down. Besides, he didn't look anything like her dream man. To his credit, he *did* take "no" for an answer. Still, he loved to tease, another aspect of him that would please her father.

Go ahead, hit me with your joke. Constance smiled. "Good morning, Jack." Then she waited for him to deliver his daily zinger.

Jack stepped over to her desk and put his hand on the pile of cases. Something was coming, perhaps a witty remark about torching the pile and freeing all the prisoners. He rapped his knuckles on the big pile. When his face still didn't crack a smile, she sat up. Perhaps this wasn't a joke.

Jack started to look through the tabs in her case pile. "You've got a big stack of cases. And I'm going to make it grow shorter."

Wait, didn't I just wish for that? Had he read her thoughts? Constance shivered.

Jack kept looking through the tabs in her stack. He found a folder halfway down and pulled it out.

What was that case? She read the name and remembered it. A sixteen-year-old boy facing two years in juvenile detention. She'd been working with him for a month now, trying to make deals with the prosecutor. Constance had even visited the boy's home and met his obviously alcoholic foster parents. She wondered if detention might be a better place for him.

She looked up at Jack. "What happened?"

He took a long breath and handed the kid's folder to her. "I hate to be the one to tell you, but he committed suicide last night."

Constance cried out. "Oh no, no!" She took the folder and held it to her chest. "That poor boy."

Who would even miss him? The prosecutor had been treating him rather harshly and his foster parents were probably relieved. The boy didn't have a friend in the world. How sad.

Did I do this? Constance wanted to confess that she had wished for fewer cases. Did that make the boy's suicide her fault? Maybe he somehow heard her plea for one less case and granted her wish? Stranger stories had been told.

But she knew that was wrong, even crazy. Suicides happened frequently; they were a fact of life in the public defenders office. But the timing—the fact that she learned of it so soon after wishing for it—scared her, made her feel guilty. Constance took the boy's folder and stared at it for a long time. She concentrated on the need for more joy in the world. This poor kid never had a chance and had taken the wrong way out. She hoped he was in a better place now.

Jack wandered away without any further interruptions. Even he could occasionally demonstrate small amounts of sensitivity. Constance made the necessary updates to the case and closed the folder. She resolved to send a condolence note to his foster family and said a silent goodbye to the boy. Then she took a deep breath and started to work on the rest of the pile. Few of them were any more joyful. She couldn't tell if the job was suddenly more difficult, or whether her new desire for joy was bringing her down. Perhaps this exercise wasn't the sort of thing she should be doing at work.

Later that morning, Phil Costello came into the common room carrying a pile of paper too big to ignore. Phil was the lead investigator, good at getting to the truth of a situation. But nobody was happy to see him right now—he was handing out new cases. The attorneys dragged themselves out of their offices for a dreaded case-assignment meeting.

As Phil set his pile on the common room table, he was greeted with a few rude names and one balled-up piece of paper that bounced off his shoulder. “Yeah, yeah. Wonderful to see all of you too, *slaves*.” He gave everyone a good-natured sneer.

Phil wandered around the room, handing out case folders. He handed one to Constance. “I heard about that kid. Sorry. Maybe this one will survive the system.” She smiled at him, grateful for his sympathy.

He turned to Jack with a smirk. “You’ll love this one, Jack. It’s got everything you want in a case: high profile and nationwide news. You get the pervy principal.”

Good. I dodged that one. Constance was glad that Jack would deal with it. He was the perfect man for the job. But Jack didn’t seem to agree. He jumped to his feet and pushed the case folder away. “I’m not defending this guy. Don’t even try to make me do it.”

“Oh come on, Jack. We all know how you love publicity. What could land you in front of television cameras more than a case like this?”

“I won’t touch a porn case. You can’t succeed in defending that. If he’s guilty, I become the disgusting defender who made excuses for his actions. If he’s innocent, I’m still associated with kiddie porn. Give me any ten other cases, but don’t make me do this one.”

Poor desperate Jack. Constance felt a pang of empathy for the man. He really had his eye on a bigger goal, every minute of the day. He even thought about the ultimate consequences of each new case he agreed to take, which—she realized—had little to do with the accused person.

Phil pushed the folder back at him. “Sorry, Jack. Someone has to defend him. I picked you.”

“Give it to Gina.” He ran over to where she sat, giving her his best imitation of a puppy dog.

Anxious for someone to take the case, Phil offered the folder to Gina Simon. She scowled. “Screw you, Jack. I took that schoolyard drug dealer from you last week—you can’t unload on me again. Sorry, but Phil’s right—this one’s custom made for you. The media is already making headlines over it.” She stroked her chin in pretend thought. “Tell you what. . . I’ll call up *The Post* and tell them that Jack Cummings is going to defend the pervy principal. They’ll eat it up.”

“No, no, I can’t.” He turned and gave Constance his best shot, this time looking more like a *wounded* puppy dog—a look that he probably worked hard on perfecting. She had to admit he just about had it right. “Please take this case, Constance. I know you don’t like big publicity, but just this once?”

She shook her head and tried not to smile at his desperation. “Don’t even think about it. You know I don’t like to get my name in the news. Besides, I thought you usually dump your *boring* cases on me, not stuff like this. I don’t want it anymore than you do. And I’m up to my ears in work.”

“Oh come on, Constance. *Please.*” He amped up his look with big sad eyes and even escalated his offer. “I’ll take you out to dinner at Top of the Park.”

Leave me alone. A flash of anger shot through Constance as she confronted Jack's pleading eyes. She knew where this was heading. Jack would convince her to take this creepy case, and she'd be forced to save another penniless pervert. The guy was probably guilty and would lose his job as principal. Then she would make a bargain for some community service to get him off, and he would spend the rest of his life marked as a sex offender. Hopefully, the case wouldn't go to trial, because that would mean even more publicity. And the public sure loved to hear about the latest exploits of the Westerley heiress.

Constance sensed no joy right now, and the sooner someone else took the case, the better. "What about Matt?" She pointed to the quiet public defender who was trying to avoid eye contact with everyone.

Matt Belsen grinned at Jack. "Will you take me to dinner at Top of the Park?" He seemed willing, so Constance took the folder from Phil and went to give it to Matt.

What is this? As soon as she grabbed the folder, a sensation washed over her. Like a cool breeze blowing against her skin, as if some of the pages in the folder were fanning her. But they weren't.

She stopped and looked down at the folder, shifting it from one hand to the other. Now her other hand tingled and felt cool. She looked at both of her hands, trying to figure out what was going on. Maybe she was dreaming.

A sudden sense of lightness enveloped her entire body. A sense of calm. A sense of something that she didn't even dare to put into words. But the words floated to the surface in her mind, anyway. The sense she was feeling was joy.

Constance looked at the name on the case folder: Nicholas Veseli. Poor twisted man. The last thing she expected to do was defend him.

I have to do this. Suddenly, Constance knew she was going to take this case. Perhaps she had to do it to redeem herself for that boy who committed suicide. To restore balance in the universe. Anything was possible. Constance refused to rule out forces at work beyond her limited understanding. Regardless of the reason, she had to take this case.

Serena's experiment was about to make her do a very foolish thing. If Jack Cummings was afraid of the media blowback from defending a sex offender, imagine how bad it would get when the Westerley heiress took the job. Her rational mind wondered how she could feel any kind of joy from defending this man.

Still, there was no denying that something was telling her to take this case. She felt positively giddy, just looking at the folder. If ever there was a time to choose joy, that time was now.

She turned and ran into her office, hauling out her stack of cases. "Did I hear you say you'd trade ten cases for this one, Jack? Let's see. . ." She sat down next to him and started to pull her stack apart.

Jack chuckled nervously. "It was just a figure of speech, Constance."

"Oh yes, definitely this one." She slapped the folder into his lap. He jumped a little, then clutched it.

"Wait a minute. I. . ." Another folder dropped onto him. Then another. "Cut it out, Constance."

"I'm sorry, did I miss something, counselor? Perhaps you'd like to defend the child pornographer. I can see you now, standing next to him while a bank of photographers

snaps your picture.” Two more folders got tossed into his unwilling lap.

“Stop this!”

“Stop what, Jack? I heard you offer a deal. Ten other cases if you don’t have to do this one. I think I may have ten cases here somewhere. . .” She gave him a devilish smile and kept sifting through her stack.

This is fun. She was having a great time unloading on Jack. She made it to the bottom of the pile and forced him to take three more cases. “I’m giving you a discount today, Jack. Eight of my most tedious cases instead of the ten you offered to take.” She held the child pornographer’s case out to him. “Which will it be, Jack? This one or those?”

He tightened his mouth and glared at her. “Fine. But I’m not taking you out to dinner.” Everyone in the room laughed at that.

Constance smiled at Phil. “Have you got anything more for me?”

Phil grinned. He and everyone else in the room had obviously found it amusing to see Jack take his lumps. “No, I suppose that’s enough.”

The meeting wrapped up, and people started to leave. Constance couldn’t wait to find out why this case was making her so happy. As she headed back to her office, Phil caught up with her. He pointed to the folder that almost seemed to be glowing in her hand. “Let me tell you about this case. There’s something about it that doesn’t sit right with me. It doesn’t make sense.”

This is encouraging. She continued into her office, and they sat down. “What’s wrong with the case?”

“Well, they found a huge pile of photographs, all marked with prices.” He furrowed his brow. “Nobody actually sells photographs anymore; everything’s gone

digital. Downloads, CDs, DVDs. Nobody buys and sells actual prints these days.” His furrow deepened.

“Also, the pictures were wiped clean of fingerprints. We checked every single one. Too clean. All we found was one partial fingerprint, and it wasn’t this guy’s.”

“Whose was it?”

“We couldn’t tell. There wasn’t enough of it be able to identify anyone. But there *was* enough of it to eliminate Veseli. We also checked to see if the pictures were of kids from his school, but they’re not. And finally, all the parents and teachers at his school have nothing but praise for the guy. He really doesn’t fit the profile.”

“Isn’t that the typical profile? Someone you’d least expect?”

“Well, maybe. But still, it doesn’t seem right to me.” He got up. “I think this guy was framed.” He wandered off.

Constance leaned back at her desk and held Nicholas Veseli’s case folder in her hands. Both hands started to tingle, so she sat for a few seconds to let the sensation soak in. She dropped the folder in front of her and leaned over it. Now her entire body was tingling. Too weird.

After staring at the cover of the folder for at least a minute, she was ready for more. Time to find out why she was so drawn to the pervy principal. She opened the folder to the first page and looked at his picture.

That’s when she screamed.

The office fell silent and people turned her way. A few came to her door with inquisitive looks. Constance sat for a few seconds of awkward silence, completely at a loss for words. Her heart pounded in her ears. Finally, she looked back down at the file folder on her desk.

How can this possibly be? Nicholas Veseli, the pervy principal, was the man from her dreams. In the flesh. Front

and side views, along with full background material. She had found the man with the dragon tattoo. To be sure this wasn't another dream, she pinched herself.

Of course, this man might not have a tattoo—his chest wasn't visible in these photographs. And although his description did say he had blue eyes, the black-and-white prints didn't tell her whether they were the sparkly bright blues from her dreams. She reminded herself that just because he looked exactly like her dream man didn't make him the one. And it was a good thing, too, because fate would never lead her to someone so wildly inappropriate, someone who she could never be with. Her parents would sooner send her to a convent than let her end up with a criminal.

Gina stepped into the office and sat across from Constance, a look of concern on her face. "What's the matter?"

Constance could barely breathe and struggled to reply. "It's. . ." She closed her eyes for a second and exhaled a long calming breath. "It's all right." She pointed at the folder. "I know this guy."

"Conflict of interest? If you have a history with him, get it reassigned. We can send it to the Alternate Defenders."

"No! It's not that." She took a few seconds to make up an excuse. "I've never actually met him. He's just so familiar. I *feel* like I know him. Probably saw his face on the news." She smiled. "I can take this case."

Oh yes. She was *definitely* going to take this case.

Chapter 8



Constance lurked in the hallway outside of the conference rooms, waiting for her client to be brought up from his cell. She made small talk with the desk sergeant—anything to keep busy. At the sound of footsteps and clinking chains, she turned to see him being brought in.

Wow. He looks so much like my dream man. Nicholas Veseli had the same face, hair, and build. Totally gorgeous, even better than in her dreams. If he had the same bright blue eyes and a dragon tattoo, she'd faint.

Scenes from her more erotic dreams played in her head, this time starring her new client. She had to force herself to snap out of it and look away. Even that was a struggle as she kept sneaking peeks. How could this be happening? She finally abandoned her attempt to be discrete and stared openly, her breath caught in her throat.

As he stood facing the conference room door, he turned and fixed her with those exact same blue eyes from her dreams. She might have been able to look away if it weren't for those eyes. But damn! Everything about this guy matched her dream man. What if he had a tattoo? What if he had the *very same* tattoo?

Unable to look away, their eyes drilled into each other. His gaze was hot and proud, and it electrified her body. Completely paralyzed, she couldn't turn away if she tried. After a few seconds, the officer nudged him toward the room. He tore his gaze away from her and glared at the officer. Then he stepped inside.

So much for discretion. Constance hadn't expected to connect with her client like this. She stood there, uncertain how to proceed. She couldn't rush in and seem too eager. So she counted to three—that seemed like long enough. Then she pushed her hair away from her face and entered the room.

Once inside the conference room, she got her first good look at him. With his paperwork clutched to her chest, she let her jaw fall open and stared some more. He stared right back, watching warily. Suddenly self-conscious, she closed her mouth.

He looked exactly like her dream man, plus a little stubble. If anything, his beard shadow made him look the way he'd appeared in her latest dream. Had that dream been a harbinger of this moment?

Of course, the setting was all wrong. In her last dream, they met in a large poorly-lit room. This was a small brightly-lit room. And also, there wasn't much chance that she would fly into his arms and make love right now—not that she wasn't getting a little excited by the idea. Constance ran through her older dreams of him, searching for a setting that looked like a police station. Nothing came up.

Too many erotic dreams made it impossible to see this man in an objective way. Every time she looked at him, her dreams started to play in her head. She wondered if he was as good a lover as her dream man. She also wondered if she'd ever get the chance to find out.

From the look in his eyes, he seemed like he might be interested—she'd seen that heated stare many times in her dreams. She thrilled with the thought that he wanted her. Of course, she had to ignore the fact that he might be a pedophile. And even if he wasn't, she'd have to hide him from her family.

At least I get to meet him. And she wasn't even asleep. She was actually in the same room with her dream man, talking to him. Except that they hadn't talked yet, which reminded her that she was the one who was supposed to do that.

She cleared her throat. "Good afternoon, Mr. Veseli. I'm your court-appointed defense attorney, Constance Westerley." She offered her hand to him.

His eyes widened when he heard her name, and he seemed to be frozen for a few seconds. Finally, he raised cuffed hands, offering them together.

Something is wrong here. Why was he still in handcuffs? They usually released her clients when in conference, keeping them restrained only in extreme situations. Was this case so high profile that even the officers were concerned for her safety?

Constance pulled her hand back. "Wait a minute." She turned and knocked on the door. The policeman stationed outside unlocked it.

"Yes, counselor?"

"Why is this man still in handcuffs?"

"Well, the sergeant thought he might be dangerous, and you're a woman and all, so we decided to keep him restrained."

"This man is *not* dangerous. Uncuff him." The officer hesitated and looked away as if he needed to consult someone else. Constance snapped at him, "Now!" Then she softened and added, "Please."

"Okay." He removed Nick's handcuffs and left the room. Nick rubbed his wrists.

Constance set her paperwork on the table and stepped closer. "Now let's try that again. Hello, I'm Constance Westerley." She held out her hand.

His eyes widened again at the mention of her name. “A Westerley?” He snorted, then held out his hand. “I guess I don’t have to tell you that I’m Nicholas Veseli. Call me Nick.” They shook hands. The touch of his skin seemed to ripple up her arm and across her body. She had to force herself to end the handshake. Why was it that everything about this man seemed so perfect? Well, except for the fact that he might be a creepy pornographer.

Get back to business. Constance sat down, failing in her attempt to avoid staring too much. She shook her head briefly and was then able to focus. “There’s a preliminary hearing coming up soon. I want to talk about your case before we go in there.”

He grumbled. “There’s nothing to talk about. I’ve been framed, and I’m going to rot in jail. We both know that, so cut the bullshit.”

“Bullshit, huh? For someone who thinks he’s been framed, I’m surprised you’re rolling over so easily.”

“I’m surprised you let me out of the handcuffs.” He reached out and curled his fingers into claws, flexing them a few times with an amused snarl that was clearly playful.

Constance smiled at his little feral act. He couldn’t do anything that would scare her at this point. She was even tempted to reach out and claw him back, but she kept her excitement in check.

Instead, while dream scenes played in her head, she tested him, acting as if he really was her dream man. “I’m surprised to see you in a shirt.”

Nick snapped his head back and looked at her. He stared for a few seconds, squinting and working his mouth. “How do you know I hate wearing shirts?”

This surprised Constance. She had never seen him in a shirt in her dreams, but hadn’t suspected it might be due to

some aversion to shirts. “I. . .” She shrugged. “Just a guess, really.”

“No, that didn’t sound like a guess. How do you know me? What’s in that pile of papers? Pictures of me with my shirt off?”

Yes, I’d like one of those. She was dying to know if he had a tattoo, but that would be resolved soon enough. “Sorry, the only pictures of you in here are your booking photos.” She opened the folder and turned it so he could see. “I just get feelings about my clients. I guess I’m a bit of a psychic.”

He chuckled darkly. “Oh great. A touchy-feely lawyer. They’ll send me away for good. And a Westerley, too. Are you one of those fat-cat rich kids?”

Constance frowned. “I admit I come from that ‘fat-cat’ family. So what?”

“Great! The power elite sent their rich sister to make sure I never get out. What a setup!”

“Mr. Veseli, there’s no need to be rude. I’m your attorney. I’m on *your* side.”

“Really, *Miss Westerley*?” He narrowed his eyes. “Why do I have the feeling you’re going to make sure I get sent away for the rest of my life?”

Another angry client. This sort of thing happened all the time. She couldn’t blame him. Most of her clients got angry because of their situation. Some reacted to her last name—it spelled power, which these people had in short supply. So as much as she thanked the universe for bringing her to Nick, she had to wonder why they were meeting like this. And even if he was her so-called dream man, he needed to get off her back.

Constance found it effective to respond to her client’s emotions with similar attitudes. Her father had taught her

this—Burton Westerley knew how to work people. So when her clients cried, she gently empathized with them. And when they got mad at her, she got just as mad right back at them. It helped to assert her control, to show them that she wasn't some demure woman who couldn't handle the situation. She rarely worried that an argument would escalate into violence. Besides, there was an officer just outside the door who would run in if she called for help. And she was definitely not worried about Nick Veseli.

Constance stood up tall and slung his anger back at him. "Look, buster, cut the crap. They found nearly a thousand pictures of naked boys and girls in your place. If the prosecution can show that you're selling the stuff, you're going to prison for as much as *forty years*. And even if you get out sooner, you'll spend the rest of your life living as a registered sex offender. Is that what you want?"

Humbled, Nick wailed out. "No! I never did that! I swear! I don't lust over little kids. I'm a school principal—my whole life is about *helping* kids." He dropped his face into his hands and moaned. "I'll never be able to work with children again, will I?"

This poor man. He seems sincere. She could usually tell when emotions like that were real. But today, her senses were clouded by her own emotions. She allowed herself to believe him, if for no other reason than she wanted him to be an honest man. "I can't really say how this will turn out. But I promise I'll do my best for you." He had no idea how much of a promise that was, coming from her.

Nick raised his face to look up. He took a deep breath. "I really had my life together. Now this." He threw himself back against the chair and stared at the ceiling.

After a few seconds, he leaned forward and gazed at Constance. His mouth curled up in a leer while his eyes

scanned her body with a sizzle that she'd never before experienced while awake. "I can tell you one thing for sure, lady. I like my women fully grown." He tightened his mouth and then whispered, "Like you." He smiled appreciatively.

Constance had heard this sort of talk many times before. As a young female attorney who dealt with the least fortunate members of society, she was occasionally confronted with their inappropriate longings. But rather than upset her, Nick's declaration thrilled her—it told her exactly what she wanted to hear.

How nice, he wants me. The revelation jolted Constance and she sat for a few seconds, immobilized. Even if she didn't like him, even if her family would never accept him, she still lusted for him. And he seemed to be in the same predicament.

She forced their conversation back to the case. "So you're saying you were framed? Someone put those pictures in your home?"

"Definitely."

"Who would do that?"

"The drug company. Their reps came to see me last week and demanded that I resume giving their vaccine at my school. I had stopped it a few weeks before."

Why would a respectable drug company stoop to such activity? Constance wasn't sure she believed this story. But then again, she knew from her very own family that so-called respectable corporations often did reprehensible things. She decided to hear him out. "I see. And why did you pull their vaccine?"

"My brother's a pediatrician. He told me it's no good. He and his partners have seen lots of kids get suddenly sick after receiving that vaccine. Some of them get seriously ill. The parents at my school depend on me, and I *refuse* to

allow some untested new vaccine to hurt their kids.” He slapped the table to emphasize his refusal. “Anyway, these guys gave me a deadline for resuming the inoculations. And I found it a little suspicious that I got busted only days after their deadline passed.”

His passion for the children at his school seemed very sincere, and his story was becoming more and more believable. Perhaps this drug company *was* the culprit. She needed more information. “Do you have any proof of this deadline?”

“No. They visited my home in person, and we talked. Nobody saw them with me, no phone calls, no e-mails. Nothing. One of them gave me a business card, but that’s it. It would be my word against theirs.” He folded his arms.

“An informal visit at your home to deliver a deadline? That’s unusual for a large corporation.”

“I don’t think they’re a large corporation. They have only one product, and it’s just been approved. It makes more sense to me that they’re a small company, struggling for their existence. One of the things they told me is that my refusal to allow the vaccinations was causing other schools to rethink their position about it as well. I may have been a serious threat to them.”

This does make sense. Nick was looking less and less like the pervy principal. “Well then. It seems that I need to call these people.”

“Good luck with that. I doubt they’ll admit to anything.” Nick scowled and shook his head, then slumped back in his chair. “So how long am I stuck in jail?”

Constance wanted him out as soon as possible, but she knew that wasn’t likely. “We’re going to find out about bail at the hearing. But it’s not looking good. Prosecution wants a million dollars bail because of the nature of the case. I’m

going to argue for less. I expect they'll settle for a half million."

Nick shook his head. "I haven't got that kind of money. Can I use a bail bond service?"

"Bail agents charge you ten percent. So even a half-million-dollar bail will cost you fifty thousand dollars to post."

Nick shrugged. "Like I said, I'm staying here."

Bail him out. She could afford it. But it would be a very unusual thing to do and could damage her impartiality. As if she had any left. But the fact was, she had to be neutral and leave him in jail.

"Listen to me, Mr. Veseli. . ."

He cut her off. "Please. Call me Nick, I need someone here who treats me like a person."

She wanted, more than anything, to treat him like a person. A good person, who was innocent of these serious charges. She would be crushed if her dream man turned out to be a dangerous criminal. But so far, her instincts told her that he wasn't.

She smiled at his request. "Fine with me, Nick. And you can call me Constance when we're here in conference. But when we're in a courtroom, please remember to call me Ms. Westerley."

Somewhat buoyed by the personal moment, she returned to business. "Now back to your case. Assuming that we can't get anything more from the drug company, we have to work with the current evidence against you. And the good news is that it's not very strong. None of the pictures have your fingerprints on them. Plus, you have no criminal record and a solid job as a school principal. I feel comfortable taking this case to trial because I think I can cast enough doubt to avoid a conviction. On the other

hand, we can explore deals with the District Attorney's office that will avoid trial."

Nick inhaled noisily. "Of course none of those pictures has my fingerprints. I never touched them. I never even saw them. I'm innocent."

Constance spoke softly. "I believe you, Nick." At this point, she was almost completely sure of it. And as her doubts about his innocence melted away, her erotic dreams started to play again in her mind. Could he really be the man from her dreams?

She tamped down her excitement and resumed her professionalism. "Today's court appearance is just a preliminary hearing. It will go fast, and no conclusions will be reached. Just plead not guilty and we'll work from there."

"Let me see if I understand this. I plead not guilty, then I have a trial, and maybe you get me off. Does this mean that I'm tainted for the rest of my life? Will everyone point at me and say, 'He's the guy who beat the porn rap'?"

"Anything's possible. This case has already attracted quite a bit of news coverage. A trial would be a media free-for-all. That's why I would prefer to reach an arrangement with the prosecutor."

"Which means I plead guilty?"

"Maybe, it depends on the deal. For today, stick with not guilty." Constance reached into her oversized handbag and pulled out a shirt, folded up and neat. "And since you look like you've been living in that shirt, I brought you a clean one. Light blue, matches your eyes." She smiled, wondering if she should have added that last part. "And here's an electric razor, too. Get cleaned up. We're going into court soon."

"Do you bring extra clothes for all of your clients?"

It's so strange to be sitting here discussing his clothing. Constance found it difficult to act like an attorney while erotic dreams of her client played in her head. She wrestled with the arousal that was building, just staring into his amazing blue eyes.

She forced her thoughts aside and answered his question. "Yes, our defense group has a supply of clothes for our clients. When the hearing is over, I'll have the shirt cleaned and ready for someone else."

Nick suddenly darkened. "How about this? Keep your shirt. I'm not kissing the ass of a system that's rigged against me. I'm screwed no matter what I do, so let's stop pretending."

Constance groaned. "Don't be a fool. The 'system' you talk about is made of people, and those people care about your appearance and your attitude. I know it looks bad. That's why I want you to take every advantage." She threw her hands in the air and let them fall to the table. Why did she always have to explain these things to her clients? She picked up the razor and set it closer to him. "Just do it for me."

Nick got up slowly, staring at her the entire time. His eyes burned, but she couldn't say why. Whatever it was, it sliced straight through her, down to her foundation. She stared him down and waited.

With his mouth scrunched tight, he scooped the razor from the table. She pointed to a mirror on the side of the room, and he went to shave. When he was finished, he squinted at the mirror. "This is one of those two-way mirrors, right?" He leaned into it and shouted, "I'm innocent! Fuck you for ruining my life." He flipped a finger at the mirror.

Constance laughed. "This is not an interrogation room. All you did just now is flip yourself off. And don't get any fancy ideas during the hearing, either. No talking in the courtroom unless asked to speak. And also. . ." She grinned. "Try not to flip off the judge. Show some respect."

He stepped back to the table and set down the razor. Then he leaned toward her and shook his head slowly. "Respect? The system doesn't respect *me*. Look, I know when I'm screwed. You may be on my side, but it doesn't seem like you can help me much. All we're doing here is fighting little skirmishes when we both know the war's been lost." He grunted loudly.

She grunted back. "We are *not* fighting pointless skirmishes! Don't give up on me." Some dream man this guy turned out to be. He pushed back, every chance he got, rebelling against the system. A system she had been trained to navigate. She couldn't blame him, but he had to let her do her job.

Constance wanted to cry for him, to hug him, to protect him. She got up slowly and stepped nearer. From this close, she could see a corner of black ink peeking out on the right side of his collar.

Yes, a tattoo. That's what she was looking for. She wanted to see it so badly. What if it was exactly like in her dream? That would be the freakiest thing she could imagine.

Constance moved in to see more of his tattoo. She poked her finger onto his chest. "Are you going to change your shirt, or are you embarrassed to show me your tattoo?"

Nick looked down at his rumpled shirt. "You noticed. Maybe I should just show up in court without a shirt. Let my awesome tattoo defend me."

Constance mimicked him, still trying to goad him into taking his shirt off. “Oh, your ‘awesome tattoo.’ Please! Spare me, and the court, from your tattoo.” She quietly fired her best shot at him. “Probably some stupid dragon.”

His eyes widened. “You know an awful lot about me. But you obviously don’t know anything about my tattoo. There’s nothing stupid about it.”

Unbelievable. He does have a dragon tattoo. Her heart started to do a little dance. She let it do its dance while she forced herself to stay outwardly calm. This might be a very different dragon from the one she’d dreamed of. But what if it was the same? Was such a thing possible? Was any of this really possible?

She continued to push her luck. “Oh, so it *is* a dragon. I figured. Does it look like you? Does it have blue eyes?”

Nick stepped back and stared at her. “Now I *know* you’ve been spying on me. What’s going on here?”

Yes, what’s going on here? What were the chances that this guy would look the same and also have the same tattoo? On the inside, Constance was screaming at the top of her lungs. On the outside, she was somewhat more professional.

“I, uh, see lots of tats in my line of work. You’re not the first, you know. Go ahead and show me—I can tell you’re just itching to tear that shirt off.” She wanted to laugh at that last statement, pure projection on her part.

One corner of his mouth turned up in a grin, but the rest remained firmly unpleasant. “Sure thing. Anything for my lawyer.” He pulled the shirt over his head and revealed his tattoo.

Constance’s head spun.

How can this be? It’s the exact same tattoo. This had to be a dream. A light-headed dizziness flooded her, and she

felt like she'd been dropped into someone else's life. Hers had seemed so real before, but it just kept getting more and more surreal.

Constance had a little trick that she often used when she needed to know if she was dreaming. She stared at her hand, knowing it would distort when the world wasn't real. But no matter how hard she focused on her hand right now, nothing happened.

She looked up at the tattoo. Beautiful scaly wings, an eye as blue as his, and fiery breath shooting straight at his heart. There could be no further doubt; Nick Veseli was her dream man.

What. The. Hell.

"Wow!" Constance stared with her mouth open again. She raised her hand to touch it, but quickly pulled it back.

She spoke through parched lips. "You're right. That tattoo is not stupid." She managed to tear her gaze away from the dragon and connect with the man. She wasn't sure she was breathing, but somehow words came out of her mouth. "Please, Nick. Put on that shirt and let's get this hearing over with."

Chapter 9



Saturday, September 29

“Someone’s here to see you.” The guard unlocked the cell door and escorted Nick to the visitor area.

Is my sexy lawyer back to see me? He’d been having trouble thinking about anything else since they’d met. The surprisingly beautiful Constance Westerley. Probably some distant relation to the notorious Burton Westerley. Still, it was a good thing Nick’s father wasn’t around anymore, because he would never allow the words “beautiful” and “Westerley” to be used in the same sentence.

In any case, it couldn’t be Constance. She wouldn’t come by on the weekend. At least he thought it was the weekend. The days of the week were starting to blur.

Instead, his brother, Don, sat on the other side of the Plexiglas divider. They picked up phones to talk. “Hi, Nick. I’m sorry I was out of town. I came here as soon as I could. How are you doing?”

“Bad. I’m being quietly eliminated.”

“There’s nothing quiet about this. You’re on the news every night. We even heard about it on the cruise ship.”

Nick groaned. “Do I want to know what they’re saying?”

“It’s a huge story. Late night talk show hosts are making jokes about you. They call you the ‘pervy principal.’”

Nick curled his lips. “Fuck that! I didn’t do it. I was framed, Don.”

“So that’s it! I know you didn’t do this. What’s going on?”

Nick blew out an amused breath. “It’s actually your fault. Remember how you told me to refuse that wart vaccine? Well I did it. Last week, two reps from the drug company threatened me. Gave me until the weekend to resume the inoculation clinics. But I didn’t. I think they framed me in retaliation.”

“Shit, Nick. I’m sorry I said anything.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m the one who decided to stand up to them. I always do that stuff, don’t I?” He shook his head and muttered, “Should have known better.”

“Listen, Nick. They told me you’re using a public defender. We can afford a real lawyer. I’ve got a friend who claims to know a good one.”

I’ve got a great one. He didn’t really know if she was good at her job, but she was certainly good for his spirits. He smiled. “I called that guy who settled Mom and Dad’s estate. He told me that my case was too well known to be handled easily. It could cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars. I can’t afford that, even if you help. So I took a public defender. I don’t know what I think of her yet.”

“Why? Does she think you’re guilty?”

“I don’t know. At first, I had my doubts about her—I definitely thought so. But she seems to believe me. Maybe.” He rubbed his hands up and down his face. “I just don’t know.”

Then Nick smiled. “I’ll tell you one thing. She’s hot.”

“Nick! We’re talking about your life here, and all you can think about is your lawyer’s body?”

“I care about what happens to me. I’m just saying. . .”

What am I saying? Only that Constance Westerley, a woman from a completely different world than his, was

powerfully stuck in his head. Tall and willowy, a pretty face, and chocolate brown eyes that flashed when they got angry.

But somehow, he trusted her. He couldn't say why, and he hoped it wasn't just his libido talking. Something deep down told him that she was on his side, not just some representative of the system that was about to plow him under. If anyone could help him, she was the one. Not some friend of a friend of Don, who would charge him more money than he could afford.

“Look, I know you want to help. Let me see what my lawyer can do, and then I'll decide if we should look for someone else.” He might want someone else to get him out of jail, but he wanted Constance Westerley for many other reasons.

Chapter 10



Monday, October 1

Constance stood outside of the conference room, holding Nick's paperwork. In the past week, she had explored his case carefully. More carefully than usual. She had spoken to investigators, district attorneys, and others, hoping to find something useful. Unfortunately, not much had come up.

Nick's life story was spelled out pretty clearly in the various documents the investigators had found. His origins were sketchy, with no birth certificate on record. The earliest document was a transfer into foster care, at age three. The transfer listed his mother's drug problems as the reason, and was further amended to state that she had died from an overdose, soon after he was taken from her. Interestingly, this document had neither a mother's nor a father's name on it. Nick had entered the world anonymously.

Other documents showed his transfer to different foster homes, never lasting more than a year or two. Then, at age seven, Nick was adopted by Konstandin and Rilinda Veseli. A birth certificate showed the Veseli's other child, Donald, three years older than Nick. More documents showed Donald's marriage, and the birth of his daughter, Erin, now nine years old.

Then came a death certificate. Konstandin and Rilinda Veseli, Nick's adoptive parents. Killed in a plane crash on

their way home from the Caribbean islands. Constance swallowed hard when she read the date. Ten years ago—about a month before her first dream of Nick.

School records for Nick showed him to be a good student, although his schooling had been sporadic. But he had managed to finish high school, go to a university, and even get a master's degree while he worked as a teacher. He certainly had drive.

The last page in the folder was a familiar one. A sealed juvenile record locator, full of signatures and stamps. The document stated that Nick's entire juvenile record was no longer available or relevant to other cases. So the homeless boy had been something of a troublemaker. She'd love to know more.

I'm glad his case is sealed. It helped with his defense. Also, it comforted her to know that he'd gotten beyond a rough start. None of it could hurt him anymore. Whatever had happened to him back then was officially irrelevant.

Still, she wished she could see that record. She was hungry for anything she could learn about him. A sealed record could only be opened by a judicial order, which was not a problem for Constance. Her Uncle Earl could always be counted on to help with a judicial favor. And Earl knew how to do these things quietly. If any other judge were asked to unseal the record, word would get out, and that might impact Nick's case.

But Constance didn't want her uncle to interfere. It would be creepy to snoop. If she and Nick ever spent any time together, he would surely tell her about his early life. No, she would leave his record sealed. She wasn't Burton Westerley, swinging her influence around wherever she liked.

And besides, what were the chances that she and Nick would ever spend any time together? The sad truth was that, regardless of the content of that juvenile record, her parents would never accept a poor man who had a long history of trouble with the law. Her father would go to great lengths to keep them apart, fearing that someone like Nick would try to steal the family's money. She wondered why she'd dreamt of someone that she'd have to fight so hard to be with. It made no sense.

Constance shoved the papers into her briefcase. Then, trying to act normal, she breezed into the conference room, sat down, and finally looked up at him. "Good afternoon, Nick."

He smiled at her. "Good afternoon, Constance. You're looking beautiful."

Much better. Her dream man was less angry today. Funny what a week in jail can do. And he still seemed interested in her which was even better. She was suddenly having a difficult time sitting in the same room with him. That stunning build and lusty smile. She *had* to get him out of jail.

Constance took too long to respond, so Nick prompted her. "Give me the bad news."

She focused and managed to speak. "Right. The prosecutor is willing to make a deal. I don't think he has enough of a case that you were selling the pictures, and possession is a lighter offense. If you plead guilty to possession, he's offering a fine, community service, and unfortunately, registering you as a sex offender."

Nick groaned. "And I'll never work with kids again."

I hate to be the bearer of bad news. She knew he would be unhappy about this. And as much as she wanted to snap

her fingers and make it all good, she couldn't see how that was likely. "Not with a sex offender brand on you. Sorry."

"What about the drug company?"

She flipped through her notes. "I saw the business card they left for you. Phresh Air Pharmaceuticals, right?"

Nick nodded.

"I called the man who left the card." She looked down at her pad. "A Mr. Oliver Cardwell. He knows who you are, but he denied having anything to do with this."

Nick scrunched his mouth. "Of course not."

"I also spoke to your school nurse. She verified your claim, but didn't exactly agree with you about pulling the vaccine clinics out of the school. And of course, she doubts that a drug company would do such a thing. Is there someone else I could talk to? Did you say your brother is a pediatrician?"

"Yes, Don. Ask him about that vaccine. He told me it's bad."

Constance noticed something strange in her notes. "Does he really live at the same address as you?"

Nick chuckled. "Yeah. He and Irene and their daughter live upstairs from me. They have the top three floors, I get the garage." He smiled. "The same room I had when I was a kid."

They stashed him in the garage? Suddenly she didn't think his adoptive parents were very nice. She wondered what sort of scars would be left when their real son got a bedroom but the adopted son got the garage. "Why did you live in the garage when you were a kid?"

Nick grinned. "Because it's the best room in the house. And the first room I ever had that was my own. I guess I can't seem to let it go. Besides, it's cozy, just the right size

for me.” He laughed a little. “Have you seen it? Is the news showing pictures of the pervy principal’s hovel?”

She shrugged. “Sorry, I don’t watch the news.”

“Too busy going out in high society?”

Oh, so he’s back to being testy again. “Contrary to what you may think, I almost never go out in high society.” She leveled her gaze at him.

“So you prefer the poor slobs in the city jail? Hardly seems fitting for a Westerley.”

“You can’t be that poor, Nick. You’re a school principal.”

“Well, yeah. I do okay. I even own my home. But I can’t afford to fight this porn charge. They told me that the legal fees would ruin me. So it looks like I’m stuck with you.” They stared at each other for a few seconds.

Nick finally turned away and twisted his mouth. “Speaking of being stuck, I’ve got to ask you something. How come you stare at me so much?”

Constance snapped to attention, then looked away. A hot flush filled her body. “I’m really sorry for staring. You. . .” Now he was on to her—she had to tell him something. “You look like someone who I’ve known for ten years. The similarities are kind of shocking.” She lowered her head. “I’ll try not to stare as much.”

“So what’s this guy’s name, who looks so much like me?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about that person. I apologize for staring, Nick. It won’t happen again.”

A prickly heat started to consume her. She needed to cool off. “Excuse me, please. It’s a bit hot in here.” Constance stood up to remove her jacket. She unbuttoned it and shrugged it from her shoulders. Free from the heavy wool, she already felt better.

Nick smiled. "Nervous? Sorry if I touched on a sore point."

"No, I'm okay." She fanned herself for a few seconds. "I just needed some air." She remembered one of her dreams of Nick, where they were both very hot and stripped off all their clothes. That wasn't going to happen here in a jail conference room.

Nick stared as she stood there in her tailored blouse. She saw his gaze wander up and down her body. "I hope you don't mind my saying this, but you're a beautiful woman, Constance."

Oh, how I want this man. It pleased her that he felt the same way. She smiled at him.

As soon as she smiled, he sucked in a loud breath. "You also have a great smile. You really have to do that more often." If she could get him out of jail, she definitely would.

Chapter 11



Tuesday, October 2

Constance ran into Serena's living room without even shedding her coat. The other three Witchy Women were already there, as usual. She stood for a few seconds, panting, shucking off the coat, and trying to catch her breath.

They are going to be totally shocked. She'd been dying to tell them the news. "You're not going to believe this. . . that meditation worked! I found him!" She bounced like a kid.

Serena looked at her with amazement in her eyes. "You found the man from your dreams? The one with the dragon tattoo?"

Constance nodded, her face as shocked as the other three. A stunned hush fell over the room, then they all started to talk at once. Questions flooded her and their enthusiasm somehow calmed her. She took a moment to pour a glass of wine.

Constance looked up into three sets of probing eyes. "I know I should have told you sooner, but I've been busy working all week." She paused over a sip of wine and started to answer their questions. "Yes, he's completely real. Even the dragon tattoo. And I wouldn't have found him as quickly if I wasn't following my joy."

Serena squinted. "I thought you meditated on getting your friend's charity money?"

"I tried, but Nick's image kept flashing in my mind, so I focused on him instead. Active consciousness is completely amazing! It works!"

Abby went directly to the important question. "Nick, huh? Is he as cute in real life?"

"He's exactly the same. Totally hot. But kind of messed up, too." She reached into her handbag and tossed a newspaper onto the table. The front page had a picture of Nick being arrested, along with the standard large-type pronouncement of his guilt. "That's him." She pointed.

May gasped. "The pervy principal is your dream man? You need some serious dream therapy, girl."

I probably do. What sort of cosmic jokes were her dreams playing on her if they led her to Nick Veseli? The two of them came from such different backgrounds that it seemed unlikely they would ever be together. But what if they weren't meant to be together? What if his purpose in life was merely to release her from her dreams so she could find love elsewhere? If that was so, then why was she so intensely drawn to him? It didn't seem right.

Constance decided to take a positive view of the situation. "I don't know. He turned out to be real, so I can't complain. And get this. I'm defending him."

Disappointment filled all three of their faces. Serena took her hand. "Oh Connie, I'm so sorry."

Constance laughed. "No! Don't be sorry. I'm glad I found him. No matter what happens now, I finally get to know him. And then I get to move beyond a decade of dreams. It's huge. Everything I wanted, really."

"You wanted your dream man to be a sexual predator?"

"Okay, maybe not that part. But I think he's innocent. The case is weak."

Serena pointed to the newspaper. “Doesn’t seem that way from what I’ve read.”

Stupid media, always presenting the most sensational side of a story. Constance knew all about that—she’d spent years trying to evade scandal-hungry reporters. “In that case, stop reading.” She grabbed the paper and shoved it back into her handbag. “Look, I’m getting to know this case very well. I can’t divulge details, but trust me, it’s far from over. Meeting my dream man is definitely good news.” Her friends nodded, clearly not convinced, but in any case willing to leave it alone.

Constance took a long sip of her wine and let relaxation slowly seep into her bones. “I’ll tell you one thing for sure, active consciousness works. I want to do it again. Did anyone else have any luck?”

May spoke up. “I had a good one. You know how my stove has been broken for months with half the burners not working? Well, I visualized a new stove. I was planning on sleeping late Sunday morning, but something made me get up and go out for a run. Guess what was sitting on the sidewalk? A stove! The landlady told me that some other tenant was getting rid of it because they’d bought a new one. I was just in time to claim their old one. And it works great!”

Constance hugged her. “Nice work, May! Isn’t it amazing when things like that happen?” She turned to Serena and Abby. “Did you two get anything?”

Serena shook her head. Abby shrugged. “Not yet, but I’m still trying.”

Serena held out her hands. “Want to do it again, before dinner?” They all agreed. Soon they were deep in a meditative state. Constance forced herself to think about something other than Nick, not an easy task. Today she was

more successful at thinking about her friend's bet and the hundred million dollars she'd be able to give away if he lost. She visualized spending the money to help the world. It really did fill her with joy.

Chapter 12



Friday, October 5

Constance's head was overflowing with thoughts. Too many things all at once. For starters, there was the reorganization of the family business coming up in a few weeks. The last financial trick from good old Dad. He loved this stuff, sweeping huge fortunes around like sand at the beach.

Another thing that had come up unexpectedly pertained to her friend's hundred-million-dollar bet. He had come by yesterday and taken up too much of her time. Time that then got stolen from her public defense work, which in turn got taken from every other moment in her day.

And then there was one other item that filled her head. Nick. Here in the flesh after a ten-year dream. Accused of a scandalous crime and locked in a cell. What kind of bizarre message was she supposed to get from that? First the cosmos hands her the man of her dreams and then it makes him unsuitable for her in nearly every way.

Life can certainly be strange. Whatever meaning these events were supposed to have, she was committed to pursuing them with all of her energy. And that included a lunch meeting with Nick's brother.

Constance arrived at a local café for her meeting with Don. She hoped she would like this man because he might have a role in her life if there was any possible future with

Nick. Collapsing into her seat, she examined him. As expected, he looked nothing like Nick. Don was rounder, less built, and shorter. He was a good-looking man, but like every other good-looking man she'd met over the past decade, he couldn't compare to Nick.

Don looked up at her and stared with huge eyes and an open mouth. "Wow! It's really you." He seemed flustered and quickly went on. "I mean, you're the real Constance Westerley." He closed his mouth and calmed down a little. "I'm sorry, where are my manners. I'm Don Veseli." He offered his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Don." They shook hands.

"Forgive me for snooping, but when you called me to set up this meeting, I looked you up and found a picture of you. I have to admit that I'm shocked to be having lunch with the Silent Sister."

I've always liked that name. Constance laughed at the mention of her moniker. "Yes, that's me."

Years ago, the press couldn't learn enough about her. But since she refused to talk to them and didn't lead a high-profile life, they had little to write. Starved for news one week, they dubbed her the Silent Sister and made up their own stories. Over time, they even got bored with that. What good was an heiress if she didn't do outrageous things with her life? Their interest in her soon dwindled.

Don didn't seem too happy about this. "Why is Constance Westerley defending my brother?"

"I'm a public defender, Mr. Veseli, and a good one. Please don't judge me by my last name."

"But you're rich, right?"

She deflected Don's question with a smile. "Funny that you should ask me that now, while I still have some money in my trust fund." Her dad was about to change all of that.

“You mean instead of a few weeks from now, when your brother becomes CEO?”

“You *have* been doing your homework.”

“So what happens to your fortune when Robert Westerley ascends to the throne?”

I'd rather discuss more important issues. Like Don's brother, her dream man. She gave him a simple answer. “I'll do all right.” She didn't need to elaborate.

Constance leaned closer. “Look Don, can we talk about Nick? I'm trying to build a case for him.”

Don nodded his head. “Okay, you're right. What can I tell you?”

“Nick tells me that you advised him to stop a school vaccination program. He seems to think that has something to do with his arrest.”

“Yeah, it's true. Too many kids are getting hurt by that wart vaccine.” He slumped in his chair. “But I feel terrible that I ruined his life.”

Nick isn't ruined yet. Constance wasn't about to let her dream man be wrongly convicted. And more and more, she was convinced of his innocence. She returned to her inquiry. “Why would an unsafe vaccine be approved?”

“I don't think they tested it enough. A surprising number of my patients come back to me with minor complaints the day after getting that shot. Some even have serious reactions.”

“Then why do you still give it?”

“These days, I spend more time trying to convince parents *not* to give it to their kids. But if they really want it, I'll still give it. It hasn't been recalled yet.”

“And you're expecting that to happen? I'm surprised that you're against vaccinations. Rather unusual for a pediatrician.”

“I’m not anti-vaccine—I think they’re great, but only for life-threatening diseases. When it comes to mild childhood diseases, I think the drug companies have gone too far.”

Don sat up straight, suddenly energized. “Take the chicken pox vaccine, for instance. Like so many others, it doesn’t give the same level of immunity as actually getting the disease, so it leaves people exposed to getting it later in life. And in the case of chicken pox, that can be very dangerous. Adults who get chicken pox are usually much more sick. Not a good thing.”

He stopped to take a breath then went on. “And as for recalls, I’m afraid they’re common. I read a paper that predicted that one out of every five prescription drugs would be recalled or shown to be harmful.”

“Seriously? That’s a surprising number. Has it always been that way?”

“I think it’s getting worse, but I’m not sure. Don’t get me started on ‘Big Pharma.’ I tend to rant.”

She could see that much. Constance continued her questions. “Nick claims that he was threatened by people from the vaccine company. What do you know about that?”

“Yes, he told me that, too. But I don’t know anything more about it.”

“What else can you tell me about Nick’s case?”

“Only that it’s ridiculous.” He let out a derisive puff of air. “I grew up with Nick. We talked about girls when we were younger, and we still like to check out women when we go out drinking. We’re always pointing out the ones who catch our eye. So let me tell you, Nick is not interested in young girls and certainly not boys. He likes ’em tall and grown up.”

He leaned in close to her. “Hell, he even mentioned your good looks when I saw him last weekend. And I can

see why—you're definitely his type. Trust me, he's not interested in kids that way."

I noticed. She allowed a sliver of excitement to run through her. Nick's attraction to her was definitely real—even Don vouched for it. Ten years of erotic dream moments played in her head.

She took a sip of water. "You two really get along?"

"Yeah, we've always been buddies. That's why my folks adopted him; he needed a home and I needed a brother."

For the next half hour, Don told her Nick's story. Their parents had taken pity on Nick and rescued him from a foster home. She found it interesting that Nick and Don still lived in the same place where their parents brought them up. When they were young, the entire building had been one unit. Now, Nick's garage was sealed off from the upper three floors to become a private apartment that he entered at street level.

Don mentioned their parents' deaths, which Constance already knew about. The house had been left to both boys, but Nick only wanted to live in the garage, his personal space since age seven. He let Don have the rest of the building—the garage was enough for him.

Both boys had grown up caring deeply about their community. Don had become a pediatrician and still worked in the neighborhood. Nick had a rougher start and some juvenile issues, but he straightened himself out. He became a school teacher, beloved by the community. Then, with some work and some study, he became principal.

Don had nothing but good things to say about Nick and argued that the charges against him couldn't be real. Sadly, he had no evidence to back up his claim.

But Don did have something encouraging. He brought letters from Nick's coworkers and friends in the

neighborhood. These were not the usual moral support letters that she often encountered—awkward, stale letters that struggled to praise someone without sacrificing the truth. These were different.

Everybody loves Nick. Each letter told another story of how he had helped someone in need. They were so touching that she had to stop once or twice to wipe tears from her eyes. From extra tutoring to giving personal loans that he knew couldn't be repaid, Nick took care of people. He even organized a community garden so that people could grow their own vegetables. As she read the letters, she felt the love that surrounded this caring man.

Chapter 13



Back at the municipal building, Constance came into the conference room to meet with Nick. He was waiting for her, looking amazingly handsome, although somewhat gaunt. Jail takes a toll on people. She wondered if he was sleeping at all. Still, he perked up when he saw her. “What’s the bad news today, gorgeous?”

I love it when he talks like that. Constance reached across the table to shake his hand. He took hers with both of his, wrapping her in warmth. Between his hands and his smile, heat seemed to flow through her entire body. She gasped silently and let go of his hand.

Constance fought her way back to legal business. “Not much has changed. Your brother’s willing to testify, as are others in the neighborhood. They’ve all written very effusive support letters. That will help you. And the prosecution’s case remains weak. I still think you have a good chance if you go to trial. But trials are never sure things, so the best avenue is still negotiation.”

“Looks like I’ll be here for a while. Probably miss Halloween this year.”

“You like Halloween?” She did, too. The Witchy Women went nuts over it.

“Sure, it’s fun. I’ve always liked it. Whatever, it’s not *that* important.” He took a deep breath.

But Constance could see that it was, to him. And that meant it was, to her. She imagined herself going out with him on Halloween, all dressed up. That would be a difficult

trick, but a wonderful treat. She spent a while in the fantasy before returning to the conference room.

“Are you getting enough sleep, Nick?”

“I’m all right. I get some.”

“And have you thought of anything new about your case?”

Nick shook his head. “I’ve got nothing.”

Constance lowered her eyes for a second, then looked directly at him, her mouth tight. “I have a suggestion that might help you sleep and. . . well, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but it might help you find some evidence.”

Nick raised a questioning eyebrow. “What do you have in mind? How can I find evidence while I’m sitting in jail?”

He’s not going to like this. “This will seem like a long shot to you, but I want you to try it. I think you should meditate on your situation and see if you can receive any information.”

He laughed briefly. “You’re right. I didn’t expect anything like that. Pretty weird.”

“Too weird?”

“Hey, I’ll do anything. I can imagine it might help me sleep. But find evidence? I don’t know. And I’ve never meditated before. Jail doesn’t seem like the place to learn.”

“I disagree. Jail is the perfect place to meditate. What else have you got to do here? If you let me, I’ll give you a quick lesson, then we’ll see what you can do on your own.”

“I don’t know, Constance. This seems pretty far off track. You’re supposed to be my lawyer, not my life coach. Do they teach meditation in law school these days?”

Constance chuckled. “No, but they really should. Look, I’m still working on your case, but so far nothing has turned up. This meditative technique has actually worked for me, and I really want you to give it a try. Will you?”

Nick shrugged. “What the hell. Let’s do it.”

Constance took a few seconds to prepare herself. “Okay, the first step in meditation is to clear your head and actually stop thinking. You think too much. We all do. We live in a complex world that keeps us thinking all day long. Most of our thoughts concern the past, fretting about things that happened, or the future, worrying about things that are going to happen. All this fretting and worrying makes us unhappy and can even make us sick.

“So one of the things that meditation can do for you is to stop these thoughts. And when you clear away the past and the future, you’re left with the present moment. The now.”

Nick dropped his head and shook it. “The now that you speak of is no prize either when you’re stuck in a jail cell.”

“Wrong. All the negative thoughts you have about being in a jail cell are still about the past and the future. Forget that disgusting meal they just fed you—it’s in the past. And forget, for a while, about getting out—that’s the future. Think about yourself, right now. You and every other person on this planet are a miracle of creation. Your body has far greater powers than you know. *You* can actually reach out and affect the world with your thoughts and intentions.”

Nick groaned. “Groovy, hippie chick. Are you going to slip me some hallucinogens?”

I wondered when he’d push back. Her lecture was too much for most people, but she needed to teach him meditation and quickly. What were the chances of being able to do that?

Constance stayed grounded. “Some people take drugs to let go of their busy minds. Obviously, you don’t get to do that right now.” She stared at him. “So are you going to take

this seriously, or are you going to bash me for it?" She kept staring and refused to back down.

Nick smiled and shrugged. "Okay. Teach me."

She nodded. "Good. Get comfortable and close your eyes." He obeyed. She wasn't sure she could do the same.

Stop this. Sitting there with his eyes closed, he looked too beautiful to be real. Constance took a moment to center herself, find a quiet spot. Then she returned to the lesson.

"In order to get your mind in the now, let's start with something you have right now, in the present moment. You have your body. Let's start with one part of it—let's start with your feet. Feel your feet. Focus all of your energy on your feet. Concentrate and observe everything about your feet, how they feel, your socks, your shoes, the floor. Stay focused, and keep on observing."

After a few seconds, Nick chuckled. "My feet are tingling."

"Yes! That's good. You're in touch with your feet. Now feel your seat—where it touches the chair. . ."

It took less time before Nick smiled. "Now my butt is tingling, too. This is weird."

"That tingling shows you are in a state of sensation and are entering a meditative state. You can move this tingling about your body, and you can even expand it to your entire body at once.

"Keep concentrating on your body—use it to push thoughts of the past and the future out of your head. Your body is miraculous in so many ways. It breathes for you and pumps your blood and has such complexity that doctors still don't understand it all. Appreciate every breath." She waited patiently while he settled and experienced. When she sensed that he was calm, she went on.

“Someone broke into your home and planted incriminating evidence. Visualize yourself watching this happen. But if you get agitated in any way, return to your body.” She waited for him.

“Now imagine yourself learning more about this person. Their name, their face. . .” She waited again. “You’re going to catch this person, Nick. It is *going* to happen. See it, believe it. Imagine that you found the evidence and you’re free from jail.” She paused to let this notion sink in.

“Now, let it go. Forget about it. The intention has been set. Open your eyes.” She sat back and waited for him to look at her.

Nick’s face mirrored the confusion that was probably raging in his head. He twisted his lips into a frown. “I didn’t see anything. Sorry.”

“You weren’t supposed to. This meditation was just about creating the intention. Over the next few days, do not think about this person anymore. Instead, think only about yourself. Your body. Your spirit. The respect and support you have in this community. Spend as much time as you can in the now. When you’re not meditating, try to pay attention to the sensation of joy and let it guide you. It will not steer you wrong. When I see you next, you can tell me how it’s going.”

Nick stared at her with wide eyes. “Wait! That’s it? I just sit around and try to feel good? I have to tell you, this sounds like bullshit to me.”

It does, doesn’t it? She smiled. “You might think that. But know this: meditation is not easy. You have to keep your mind clear and look for joy. It could be one of the hardest things you ever do. But it *could* save your life. I’ll be working on the case, too. But I’d like you to do this for me. Will you?” His eyes rolled straight up, and she had to laugh.

“Honestly, do you have anything better to do for the next few days?”

Nick’s eyes twinkled. “Other than dream about you? The truth is, I spend most of my time here thinking about you. I get through some painfully boring days by remembering your smile.” He scrunched his mouth. “You probably don’t have as many boring moments in your day. But I have a feeling you find yourself thinking about me sometimes.” He squinted and dared her to agree. “Am I right?”

Of course he was right. She did spend every spare moment thinking about Nick. He even got her attention during those moments when she should be focusing on other things.

“I . . . I’ll tell you what. If I answer that question, will you promise to meditate?”

“Well, that depends on your answer. I’ll meditate either way. But I’ll definitely try harder if you say ‘yes.’”

He has no idea how much I think about him. She decided to admit it. “All right, Nick. Yes. I do think about you. And yes. . . more often than I should.” She bit her lip and whispered a word she longed to say to him, over and over. “Yes.”

Chapter 14



Thursday, October 11

It had been a week since Constance had seen Nick. By now, she was getting good at controlling her emotions when she saw him—her composure was nearly normal. But today she was particularly excited because of his introduction to active consciousness. She wondered if he'd had any success.

“Hi, Nick. How's the meditation going?”

He grumbled loudly. “Awful. I can't get any time to meditate without my cellmate giving me shit. If I try to do it while lying down, I fall asleep. And if I sit up on the side of the bed for too long, my back hurts.”

Stupid me. She hadn't had enough time to explain meditation fully. “Okay, that's my fault. I never told you about proper posture. Let's start over with some simple meditation techniques.”

“Ugh. I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this anymore.”

“Look, I'm still working on your case. The prosecutor is starting to back down from his stance. He's willing to waive the fine. That means you can get out if you accept community service and sex-offender status. I know it's not much, but I think it's progress. It tells me that he's aware his case is weak. I'm going to keep after him.” She wished she had more to report.

“But in the meantime, I think we should refine your meditation skills. Like I said last week, what else have you got to do?”

Nick groaned, “Oh, all right.”

“Good. Now sit straight in your chair with your feet flat on the floor. Don’t lean against the seat back. You don’t have a seat back in your cell when you’re sitting on your bed, so let’s work with that.”

Nick sat forward and Constance continued the lesson. “Now straighten your back. Imagine you’re a puppet with a string running through your body. The string comes out right at the top of your head. Pretend you’re being lifted by that string. *That* is the right posture. Head forward, chin slightly down, not pointed up. Back straight, shoulders relaxed. Got it?” Nick squirmed around to get the right posture.

What a hunk. Sitting calmly but properly, he looked more handsome than any man she knew. Solid, powerful, and incredibly gorgeous. Constance walked around to inspect him further.

“That’s good. Your arms should be relaxed in your lap. You can lay them separately on your legs, or you can touch your hands lightly. But don’t interlace your fingers—that’s not comfortable for very long.” She watched him get into the right position.

“Okay. Now let’s meditate. Here’s another technique you can use instead of focusing on your body. Imagine that your mind is a metal cage and your thoughts are lightning bolts that zap around in it. You can step back and watch your thoughts as they spark through your mind. Every thought is visible to you. But don’t get caught-up in these thoughts—just notice whether they’re about the past or the future, then ignore them. And don’t be upset that you have these thoughts. Everyone has thoughts. Just keep focusing on that cage. Try that now. . .” They meditated together.

Loud footsteps echoed down the hall outside of the conference room. She used it to discuss distractions. “You hear those footsteps, but they mean nothing. Let them go. They’re just a sensation without meaning. Don’t think. A sound is just noise when you hear it. Then when you don’t hear it anymore, it’s nothing. No residual thoughts. . .” Nick made a light grunt of acknowledgment.

He looks so peaceful sitting there. Constance was impressed with the way he had settled. It gave her hope that he might be able to find some information. And it was thrilling to consider that her dream man might be able to join her on a spiritual journey someday. She tried not to think about all the roadblocks that stood between now and any such day.

Constance watched him meditate for a few minutes. He opened his eyes and noticed her watching. “How am I doing?”

“You’re doing very well. But you’re impatient. When you first learn to meditate, it’s hard to let go of thoughts, especially thoughts about whether or not you’re meditating right. You might think that you’ve been sitting there forever, especially when you spend hours doing it in a jail cell. So accept that. Tell yourself that you *will* be sitting there forever, dwelling on your existence.

“The present moment is all that matters now, and it stretches out forever. Seasoned meditators are able to stay in a light meditative state all the time, coming out of it only when called upon to act. Then they drop right back in. Some can even function normally—speaking and moving about—all while meditating. So imagine that you are a Samurai warrior, waiting calmly, but ready to act on a moment’s notice.”

“How can I keep from falling asleep?”

“That won’t happen when you’re in the right posture. Don’t meditate lying down. Sitting up straight takes muscles, it forces you to stay awake. Also, don’t let my posture rules seem like the only way to do it. Feel free to experiment and see what works best for you.”

“Okay, I think I can do it.”

“Good. Let’s try it some more.” They meditated together for a few minutes. When they were finished, she did something fairly impulsive. She reached across the table and took his hands in hers, squeezing him and holding on tightly. They were alone in the conference room, so this was their own private moment. He held her hands just as firmly, prolonging their contact.

Then she let go and smiled. “Just a little something to keep you going when you’re not meditating.” She laughed lightly. “See you next week, Nick.”

His eyebrows rose in a look of peaceful delight. “Thanks Constance. I look forward to it.”

Her sense of joyfulness was growing beyond all bounds.

Chapter 15



“Hey, Buddha boy. Wake up.” Nick opened his eyes and stared at his cellmate. The guy stared back with a nasty leer.

Nick attempted a simple response. “Leave me alone, Holt.”

“Not a chance. I hear you got a hot, rich lawyer working for you.”

Nick narrowed his eyes. “You don’t know shit about my lawyer.”

“She’s that Westerley babe, right? I’ve heard plenty about her. The guards were talking yesterday out in the yard.”

That piqued his curiosity. “And what did they say?”

“Said she’s got so much money that she don’t know what to do with it. One guard told me her family could buy you out of here.”

Stupid thug. “Look, Holt. She’s just a public defender. Maybe not the best lawyer, but she’s all I’ve got. If I had any money, I’d hire someone good to get me out.” He didn’t really believe that but it was the answer he needed to give.

“Aww. Too bad the poor pervert has to sit here while his cute lawyer is out partying with her rich boyfriends.”

That hurt, more than Nick expected. He shot up from the bed and lunged at his cellmate. Before Holt could react, he was face down on his own bed, one arm twisted behind his back. Nick held him down and growled in his ear. “Back off. I told you, she’s just a public defender. Now leave me the hell alone.” Nick let go of him and stepped away. He sat

back on his bed and tried to resume meditating. Instead of closing his eyes, he looked down, staying aware of Holt.

After watching silently for a minute, Holt lashed out again. “What the fuck are you doing?” Nick didn’t answer. “Hey, jerkoff, I’m talking to you!” Nick took a long, slow breath, feeling it move through him.

Holt stepped over and stood close. Nick ignored him right up until he felt a hand grab his shoulder. He looked up. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“Cause we’re cellmates, asshole. When I got something to say, you got to listen.”

“Fine. What have you got to say?”

“I say you look like some sort of monk, sitting like that.”

“And?”

“And I hate monks.” He gave Nick a shove, knocking him sideways to the bed.

He just keeps picking fights. That was okay with Nick. Meditation would be impossible until this guy backed off, anyway. They might as well have it out so peace could be restored. Nick jumped up and knocked his cellmate down.

Holt recovered and came charging back. The two of them started fighting in earnest. Men from other cells started shouting encouragement.

Nick had plenty of experience with thugs. Back when he was in foster care, there were times when he had one or two as roommates. Since he was little, Nick had to fight to survive, and he was good at it. Plus, he was bigger than Holt, so the contest was over quickly—Nick had him pinned against the bars of the cell.

Two guards came running up, and Nick backed off. One of the guards barked, “What’s going on here?”

“He started it!” Holt hopped from side to side, a demonstration of swagger that attempted to make up for the fact that the guards had seen him defeated.

Nick smirked. “Yeah, bullshit.”

The guards drew their guns and unlocked the cell. “Back away from the door.” Nick and Holt retreated to their beds.

One guard stayed outside while the other went in to deliver justice. “Making trouble again, Holt? Do we need to dry you out?”

“No. I swear. This perv wanted to grab my junk. I was just defending myself.”

The guard looked at Nick, who calmly replied, “That’s a lie.”

The guard turned back to Holt with a nasty grin. “On your feet. A week of isolation for you.” Holt got up slowly, scowling at Nick.

Isolation. That’s exactly what I need. He could meditate there and be left alone. If they took Holt away, someone else would show up to bother him. But if Nick went there, he’d have nobody but himself and plenty of time. He had always thought that solitary confinement was a punishment, but right now, it seemed like salvation.

Nick jumped to his feet. “Holt didn’t do anything wrong. Take me instead.”

“He’s always doing something wrong. You don’t need to take the fall for him.”

“I’m not taking the fall for anyone. I want to go to isolation.”

The guard furrowed his brow. “Isolation’s for troublemakers.”

Nick stepped close to the guard and spoke quietly. “You know something? You’re ugly and your mother dresses you

funny.” He gave the guard a big smile. “How’s that for trouble?”

“You really want isolation? Fine. Let’s go.” They handcuffed Nick and pulled him from the cell.

Walking down the halls, the guard leaned in close. “Why’d you do that?”

“I prefer to live alone.”

The guard chuckled. “Well, okay. But just so you know next time, that was a pretty pathetic demonstration of troublemaking.”

“Ah, but it was enough to get me a private room.”

“I don’t know why you think that’s a good thing. Most guys come out of isolation looking like rabid animals.” They stopped in front of a solid door. “Welcome to your new home for a week.” He locked Nick in the cell.

This isn’t the worst home I’ve ever had. Nick could still remember some of the places he’d been forced to live when he was young. And this was his own space, without anyone to bother him.

The isolation cell had no window and no sunlight. The only illumination came from a ceiling fixture that was too high to reach. A spooky silence filled the space. Nick hugged himself for a few minutes as he sat on the bed. Then he resumed his attempts to meditate.

He sat and he sat. Meditation wasn’t any easier in this tiny space. But at least he didn’t have to worry about a cellmate. A non-stop stream of thoughts echoed in the quiet cell. Those thoughts were his only companions here. Thoughts about his life so far, both good and bad. And thoughts about Constance Westerley, a woman so beautiful that it made him ache. Her delicate hands, her beautiful face, her long graceful neck, and her irresistible smile. Little flashes of her appeared in his thoughts.

Too bad he was in jail. But even if he wasn't, could he really pursue her? A Westerley? He doubted it. But one thing was certain: his life had changed drastically in the past few weeks, so he no longer could say for sure what was possible anymore.

Nick kept forcing thoughts from his mind, trying to focus on the present moment. Sometimes he could hold the thoughts at bay for a while, but they always came flooding back in. With no daylight, no clock, and no nighttime reprieve from the bright overhead light, he couldn't tell how long he'd been there. Constance was right: he might as well be in jail forever.

Time dragged on for what seemed like a year. Nick meditated and slept and meditated some more. The thoughts were hard to stop.

When the slot at the bottom of the cell door slid open, Nick opened his eyes. A tray of food slid into his cell. He tried to act civil and rasped out, "Thanks." Nobody answered.

He ate and then sat some more. Now his thoughts turned to his little garage home. He tried to visualize someone else in there, planting evidence. But his thoughts kept returning to those drug company representatives. He wasn't actually seeing anyone; he was just making it all up, fantasizing. His thoughts ran wild, and he cursed himself for his inability to meditate.

Hours of sleep, boredom, and attempted meditation crawled by so slowly that he could barely stand it. Whenever he woke, he had no idea how long he'd been out. Only the delivery of food marked time. After another lifetime in the cell, the second tray of food finally arrived. He ate it ravenously.

Back to work now. Nick sat up straight and returned to his failed meditation. He tried to clear his mind. The stultifying numbness of isolation left him buzzing, and thoughts still invaded his head. But now it was slightly easier to keep the thoughts away and meditate. Time passed slowly as he sat there staring at nothing.

Following Constance's advice, he did his best to appreciate life. After all, his life *was* good. He had come a long way from being an uncared-for baby, warehoused in foster homes that he hated. Now he was grown up and had a real life to live. He had done well. Until recently, that is.

Nick let go of upsetting thoughts and cleared his head again. He actually managed to empty his mind for what seemed like a long stretch. But in the end, the thoughts won and swarmed back in. He took a minute to indulge himself in worry, then he dipped back into the now. The battle for control of his mind went on and on.

A picture flashed in his mind of his desk at home. The desk had belonged to his step father, the only item from Dad that meant anything to him. Unlike all of the other rickety stuff in his little garage that came from discount furniture outlets, the desk was old and solid and well made. It had a stack of drawers on the right side, and a wide drawer in the center. It reminded Nick of the father he had loved so much.

For some reason, Nick kept thinking about the desk. He tried to imagine his father sitting at it in their upstairs bedroom, but whenever he did, he saw the desk in its current location, down in the garage. If the image of the desk was trying to tell him something, the message had nothing to do with his father.

Nick closed his eyes and cleared his mind. After a few minutes, the desk reappeared. This time, his mental picture

was focused on the bottom drawer. It seemed brighter, as if it was lit up from the inside.

What is in that drawer? Junk. The drawer was deeper than the others, designed for file folder storage. Since Nick didn't have any file folders, the drawer had some food in it. He tried to remember what. Pretzels, dried fruit, a loaf of bread, and maybe a bottle of rum. There had to be something else, but nothing came to mind.

What a pointless revelation. Constance would be annoyed with information like that. He continued to meditate.

Food slid into his cell with each passing day. He did sleep, but he woke often. With each hour in the cell, he felt more and more fatigued, drained of life and energy. He wanted to scream, but refrained from yielding to the temptation. Besides, others in the cell block were doing plenty of that.

Nick kept trying to visualize something of importance, but all he could get was that same ridiculous image of his desk. And that stupid drawer. He wanted to kick himself for digging up such worthless information.

Then, when he thought he'd have to sit there and dwell on his desk forever, something changed. Instead of the usual scraping sound of the food slot in the door, a louder sound shook him to full alertness. His cell door was being opened. Had he really counted seven days of food delivery? It seemed like less.

Nick sat on the bed and stared at the guard. His dry mouth croaked out a plea. "Wait. Not yet. I need more time."

The guard gave him a narrow look. "Get off your ass. Your lawyer wants to see you."

And I'd love to see her. But he wished he had more to tell her. Nick struggled to his feet and walked off with the guard. Stumbling down the hall in a daze, he could barely focus on standing up straight. "Have I really been here for a week?" The words came out of his mouth, but they had an alien quality that made him doubt his very existence.

"Nah. Just four days."

"Will you take me back there after I see my lawyer?"

The guard laughed. "Are you kidding? Not a chance. She was super pissed-off that you were in here. And she's got all sorts of connections, too. The sheriff ordered you back to your cell."

"My lawyer knows the sheriff?"

"Her family practically *owns* the sheriff. And the mayor. And just about everyone else who matters." The guard lowered his voice, as if someone was listening. "Don't ever get on the bad side of that woman."

Chapter 16



Monday, October 15

“What were you doing in isolation?” Constance stared at Nick across the conference room table. Straight from four days in a solitary cell, he looked like hell. His hair was a greasy mess, his beard was growing in, and he reeked. But she still couldn’t take her eyes off him. He looked coarse and thin but so perfectly masculine. She wanted to wrap her arms around his solid body and protect him.

“I’ll tell you one thing. . .” His parched mouth smiled. “I get to do *this* in isolation.” He pulled off his shirt and tossed it on the floor.

So gorgeous. She felt unnaturally dreamy, right here in the city jail. He laid back in his chair and gave her a lazy look. She could barely resist the urge to throw herself at him.

I need to change the subject. Without his shirt on, their conversation could easily veer into dangerous territory. “I heard you picked a fight with your cellmate.”

Nick shook his head. “That’s what I told the guards so I could be sent to isolation. I couldn’t meditate in a shared cell.”

Constance sat up straight. “Really? You went there voluntarily so you could meditate?” What an interesting idea. She was impressed.

“Yeah, and you got me pulled out early. The guards seem to think you have magical powers around here. Do you really know the sheriff?”

“I, uh, I’ve got some connections. It comes with being a Westerley. So did you get any information in there?”

Nick exhaled loudly. “Nothing useful. I just kept seeing my desk.”

“Your desk?”

“Yeah. And not the whole desk, either. Just the bottom drawer on the right.”

“What’s in there?”

“Nothing! That’s the thing. Just some food. A bottle of rum. I could use some of that right now.”

“That’s it? You didn’t get any other information?”

Desperation shrouded his face. “Sorry. I really tried. But all I saw was my stupid desk. Sometimes the lower drawer seemed to be pulsing with light. Does that help any?”

He saw a pulsing light? His mind was definitely trying to tell him something. It seemed significant. Constance sat up with big eyes. “Wow! That might actually help. All right, Nick. I’ll investigate it.”

“Really? On the basis of an isolation-fueled delusion, you’re going to go looking for evidence? You’re one kooky lawyer.”

“I’ll admit it. I’ve got it pretty bad.” Of course, she didn’t say *what* she’d got pretty bad. Or more precisely, *who*. But she was pretty sure he knew.



Constance left the conference room and went to find Phil Costello, the investigator. “Phil, I need someone to come with me to Nick Veseli’s place and search for more evidence. Are you free?”

“They picked that place over pretty thoroughly. There’s probably not much left for you to see.”

“Please, Phil. Either you take me there, or I’ll get some other officer assigned. I need to investigate it.”

He checked his watch. “Sure, let’s go.”

When they got there, Phil removed the police tape from the garage door and stepped inside. “Don’t touch anything, Constance. Let me know if you need something done.” He pulled on gloves.

So this is the garage where he’s lived for so long. Constance marveled at the tiny space. A high horizontal window in the garage door let in some light. Other than that, the place was as inviting as a jail cell. The cold concrete floor had a tattered carpet remnant thrown down. A minuscule bathroom had been added in the corner, and a motel-scale kitchen sported a small refrigerator, microwave, hot plate, and sink. No wonder Nick didn’t mind isolation.

His mattress was propped against the wall, and a card table was folded up next to it. The most elegant piece of furniture was definitely the desk Nick had mentioned. She stared at it and tried to imagine a pulsing light coming from the bottom drawer. Nothing came to her.

She walked over to it. “Phil, open the bottom drawer for me. I’m curious about it.”

He pulled it open. “Looks like food storage.” He started to remove the contents. When the drawer was empty, he shrugged. “Nothing interesting here.”

“Might there be something on the back or bottom of the drawer? A false bottom?”

“Let’s pull it out and see.” Phil unlatched the drawer and removed it from the desk. They turned it over and examined every surface.

Still nothing.

Damn. What good is active consciousness if all it shows you is a moldy loaf of bread? Constance sighed and threw her hands up in the air. “All right. Never mind.”

Phil started to put the drawer back in, then stopped. “Hey! Look at this.” He set the drawer aside and pointed. With the drawer removed, they could see down to the floor under the desk. Sitting on the floor was a cell phone.

“An old, lost phone?”

Phil got closer and examined it. “I don’t think so. There’s hardly any dust on it.”

He took a picture of the phone where it sat, and so did Constance. Then he took out a plastic bag and carefully placed the phone in it. The drawer got reinstalled and the food was returned. Once everything was back in place, Phil regarded the desk more carefully. “Look. There’s a gap under the bottom drawer. The phone might have gotten kicked under the desk.”

“Where was the pornography found?”

Phil pointed at the desk. “Right there on top.”

“Could someone have come in here to frame Nick Veseli, then dropped his phone under the desk?”

“Possible. I’ve heard of stupider things than that.”

“This could be our big break.”

“Or it could be Veseli’s phone, lost recently.”

“Come on, Phil. Let’s get it processed.”

End of Free Preview



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