

## Prologue

*The sharp pain in her shoulders woke her. Half-light of the moonglow illuminated the space. The trees outside swayed from a light gust casting eerie shadows across the unpainted walls and hardwood floor. Something large rustled in the corner and she heard a light tapping at the filth shrouded window above her head. The wind rustled the brush and off in the distance she heard a boat's whistle, "What the??? Where the hell am I?" she croaked through her parched throat and chapped lips. Her whole body ached, and her head was spinning, "Must have been drugged." Craning her neck, she looked at the window and spied a small bird hopping along the outer sill stopping occasionally to peck at the space between the glass and the frame. She tried sitting up but the pain and nausea forced her back down where she fell asleep again.*

*Sometime later, was it ten minutes or two hours, she wondered as she lay there? She tried to clear the cobwebs from her mind and assess her situation. Her hands were tied with zip-ties and there was a chain pulled tight around her left ankle and secured with a small padlock. Her eyes traced the chain to an eyebolt anchored to the wooden floor. She pulled on the chain but there was no give. Struggling to sit, another wave of nausea threatened to send her back into the darkness. Pausing for a few deep breaths she was finally able to reach a sitting position. Her movement startled the creature in the corner, and it skittered to a hole in the wall where it disappeared, its long tail trailing behind.*

*She searched the dark room and spotted two shapes lying on the floor across from her. Her eyes drifted toward the door when one of the shapes made a slight movement and a low groan pierced the silence. She croaked out a squeaky cry, "Oh my God, someone's here. Hello, can you hear me?" The shape let out another groan and began softly crying.*

*Suddenly the shape rolled over and a dark face stared at her. Her lips pulled back and white teeth reflected the dim light, "Welcome to paradise, honey. I'm Cillia. What's your name? How'd you get here?"*

*The girl whimpered "My name's Maya. What is this? What's going on?" and started sobbing. Cillia sat up with a groan, scooted toward Maya and whispered, "Don't know the answers to any of those questions. The last thing I remember before waking up here I was walking down the street in Tacoma after work when someone grabbed me, jamming a cloth over my mouth. Tried to fight and I think I scratched the son of a bitch before I went out like a light. Next thing I know, I'm tied up here with my little honky bunkmate over there."*

*The other shape rolled over and sat up. The moonlight illuminated a dirt-streaked pale face and blond hair, "I'm Judy. My story's like Cillia's. I was grabbed off the street in Salem and woke up here. Been here about three nights, I think. Not sure where we are, but we're in deep doo-doo! We have to get out of here! I've been working on it and I almost have one hand free." She jerked her arm and gave out a grunt and held up her arm, "Yes, I did it! It's bleeding like hell but now maybe I can work on the chain." She pulled herself to the eyebolt, holding her chain and began working it back and forth, "I think it might be coming loose! Help me find something to pry with."*

*The three women felt around in the dark. Cobwebs brushed their faces as they slid around the floor. Cillia let out a little scream when something she touched bit her, "Oh man that's sick! I may get rabies or something!"*

*Maya shouted from the other side of the room, "Wait, I think I found something! It feels like an iron bar." She slid toward Judy and handed her a short piece of rebar, "Try this. Hurry!"*

*Cillia hissed, "Quiet, someone's coming." Nearby the percussive whop-whop of a helicopter pierced the air and the door swung open. A large shadow cast by the moon fell across the dusty floor and a voice broke the quiet, "Okay ladies, time for a little trip."*

## Chapter 1

I stood at the end of the bar and watched across the smoke-filled room as a group of my fellow agents horsed around at the pool table. Others were hovering around a table of bar flies, chatting them up and hoping to get lucky. The lady agents hovered around the jukebox where indecipherable music and the boom of a beat pounded out of the speakers. Everyone was in a boisterous mood, everyone that is except yours truly, the honoree at this retirement party, “*Damnit*’, I thought *‘I’m not ready to be put out to pasture. I’m going to miss these guys.’*”

Jessie sauntered over, her hips swaying to the beat. Jessie stood six one and was the toughest agent in the room. She was also my direct supervisor at the Albuquerque NCIS office. Her dark face smiled; deep amber eyes boring into mine, “Hey little baby, how about one last dance with your old boss?”

Jessie was the fellow agent I would miss the most. Fifteen years my senior she was the other retiree being honored tonight. She had been my big sister since Sister Kathleen found me abandoned and sobbing on the convent steps so many years ago. Sister Kathleen and Jessie were the family that stepped in for long forgotten parents who tried to drown their demons in a bottle. Life in a convent for a ten-year-old boy would have probably turned me into a priest, but Jessie made sure that I experienced normal boy stuff. Sister Kathleen took care of my soul and Jessie turned me into a man.

The two of them ushered me through elementary and high school and into college where Jessie convinced me to join the ROTC program. During summer breaks, Jessie developed and then finely honed skills in me that colleges never offered and most students didn’t even know existed. Following my graduation and completion of Marine Corps OCS, she arranged for my assignment

to her NCIS unit as a shavetail lieutenant. Six years later I transitioned to a civilian role as a lead investigator.

And here we were ten years after that; Jessie had earned a full retirement and I had earned a medical retirement with a bum leg. That leg had been injured at the same time the bad guys took out my partner, Gibby, after a bust gone bad. Gibby was the only other person that I considered a member of my family and I still blamed myself for her death.

I grinned and stood up, “You know Big Sis, I never was much of a dancer. Something you and Sister Kathleen neglected during my youth. I should probably write a blog about the abuse you two inflicted upon me during my formative years. But if you’re willing to put your feet at risk, let’s give it a go.”

I took her arm and guided her to the small parquet square that served as a dance floor. We danced in silence for a while and she looked into my eyes her mouth turned down into a pout, “What are a couple of worn-out misfits going to do without our badges?”

I couldn’t help myself, so with my best faux-Mexican accent, I held her at arms-length and growled, “We don’t need no stinking badges!” Jessie let out a full belly laugh and punched my arm. She still had a hell of a punch and I was pretty sure I’d never use that arm again. She pulled me into a full hug whispering, “Zeke, my little baby” and just rested her head on my chest for the rest of the dance, both of us giggling.

After the song ended, I migrated back to the bar, grabbed my beer, stepped out the back door and into the alley to clear some of the smoke from my eyes. Leaning against a brick wall, I pulled a joint from a small plastic case and lit it. The tension in my shoulders slowly eased while I watched a rat scurry from one trash bin to another.

Standing there, lost in thought, I was startled when Jessie spoke from behind, “You know, I could bust you for possession of a Schedule I substance.” She walked to my front, took the joint and sucked in a lungful, “But, then again, I’m retired” She leaned back against the wall and smiled, “Seriously, I’m setting up a consulting agency here in Albuquerque. I’ve hired on a couple of other retired agents who will work part-time as cases arise. I’ve already lined up a consulting gig with the FBI. I want you to join me as my partner.”

I took her hand in mine and stared into those sparkling amber orbs, “Thank you Big Sis, but I’m not sure that’s where I should be at this time. Besides, you don’t need a gimpy has-been weighing down your enterprise. She faced me with a scowl and began to protest, but I put a finger to her lips and continued, “You and Sister K own a part of my heart and I will never be far from you, but it’s time for me to spread my wings and see if I can fly on my own. I’m really happy you have this great opportunity. Maybe, if there’s a case that fits, I might do some gig work for you, but I need to see what else is out there.”

I put my arm around her shoulders, and she leaned her head against me. We stayed like that, sipping our beers and taking hits off the joint for a long time.

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It was pushing eleven when I worked the room saying my goodbyes and then hopped into an Uber for the short ride to my apartment. As soon as I slid the key into the lock I heard skittering nails scratching the floor on the other side. Lobo jumped up and spun around with a bark as I opened the door. She sat and held out her paw to me and I reached down to shake it and ruffle the fur on her head. To be honest, Lobo was the final member of my small family. I’d responded to a want-ad announcing free puppies at a ranch on the west side of town. As soon as I’d seen her soft brown eyes looking up at me, I’d been hooked. She’s a border collie with other breeds mixed in.

The rancher thought that a coyote might be in the mix. She's two and a half and whatever her genetic makeup, Lobo was the smartest dog I've ever met. And her loyalty to me was unquestioned. She accompanied Gibby and me on many operations and had put her fifty pounds on the line for each of us several times. She and I would always mourn the loss of Gibby.

After Lobo and I shared greetings with lots of licks and a dog biscuit, I pulled the mail off the floor and sorted through it. Among the bills and fliers was an official looking letter from an attorney's office in Seattle. *Great, just what I need, someone's probably suing me! Well, you can't get blood out of a turnip.*

I started to throw the offensive envelope in the trash before my curiosity got the better of me. I slit the seam with a pen knife, skipped the heading, and started to read.

Dear Mr. Jones,

Our office represents the estate of Mr. Robert Auburn Sullivan, deceased. Our investigation leads us to believe that you are his only surviving relative. It is imperative that you contact us at your earliest convenience to discuss his estate. Please call 206-699-7865 between the hours of 9AM and 4PM PDT.

Sincerely,

Jacob Epstein, Esq.

I chuckled to myself and threw the letter on the coffee table, "Lobo, my girl, I believe they've got the wrong person. Those two reprobates that brought me into this world didn't have any relatives that I'm aware of. Let's go out for your walk before we turn in."

Lobo sat up, put both of her paws on my leg and licked my hand.

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The next morning Lobo and I jumped into Karla, my 1968 Karmann-Ghia and headed across town. Lobo sat in the passenger seat, her tongue hanging out, the wind across the convertible's windscreen ruffling her fur. When she tired of the scenery she hopped into the backseat, curled up and began snoring. We were headed to the 50-meter pool at West Mesa Aquatic center where I had a six-thirty reservation to punish my body doing speed work. I used to alternate running days with swimming, but my busted knee wouldn't allow me to run distance anymore. Now I hit the pool four days a week and mixed it up with karate one or two times a week.

Pulling into a parking space, I reached to the floor and retrieved Lobo's collapsible water bowl, filled it from an old plastic milk jug and set it on the ground where she could hydrate if she woke up. Lobo spent my workout sessions curled up in the back seat of Karla. She's not one to work up a sweat unless she's chasing squirrels.

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My eyes were red and my arms and shoulders were burning as I limped over and climbed into Karla. Lobo jumped into the passenger seat, looked at me, and then pointed her nose straight ahead. She knew we were headed to her favorite part of the workout, breakfast at Jalisco's in Barelas.

As I drove into the parking lot, the enticing aroma of masa and spices made my mouth water. Lobo hopped over the car door and scrambled into the small café before I could turn off the ignition and climb out. *I gotta teach that dog patience and manners someday!*

"Buenos Dias Senior Zeke, welcome!" I was enveloped across my abdomen in arms attached to a pretty Hispanic woman as soon as I stepped into the dimly lit café, "Senior Lobo is already at



your table.” Sonia smiled a full tooth grin that turned into a question and tightened her arms around me, “We haven’t seen you for a while. We missed you and Lobo.”

Sonia and her husband Miguel were the proprietors of possibly the best Mexican restaurant in Albuquerque. They were busy this morning just like every day. The locals kept the secret of this culinary gem to themselves to keep out the tourists, but business was always brisk. I took Sonia’s shoulders in my hands and pulled her back and kissed both cheeks, “Bella Sonia, I missed you too. Is that mean bandido of a husband around or can we sneak into the back and make mad passionate love?”

Sonia giggled and slapped me on my arm. A loud voice bellowed out from the kitchen, “I heard that. You have insulted mi esposa. Therefore, I must exact revenge and inflict punishment on you. Maybe I’ll turn you and that miserable mongrel into Carne Asada!” A short rotund man with a drooping mustache charged out the door and grabbed my hand in a vice-like grip that made me wince, “Zeke, How are you, my friend?” He stepped back and looked me over top to bottom, his eyes pausing at my knee.

While Sonia had immigrated from Mexico as a child, Miguel was fifth-generation American. Born in East Los Angeles, a wise judge had given a seventeen-year-old gang banger a choice - five years in prison or an enlistment in the Marine Corps. Fortunately for the Marines he chose the latter. The regimen and pride of the Corps had worked wonders on him. He turned out to be a natural and earned a bronze star and purple heart in Afghanistan. He met and fell in love with Sonia and the two of them opened their little restaurant after his enlistment ended. Miguel couldn’t boil water when the two met, but Sonia and her sisters patiently turned him into a Michelin three-star chef.

Extracting my hand from his vice-like grip, I massaged my fingers and said, “I’m doing well. The knee is coming along. How are those bambinos?” Miguel and Sonia had a stable of five young ones ranging from three to twelve. They were the most polite and helpful kids I’d ever run across.

“They are all well and eating us out of house and home. They’re constantly hungry and I can tell by the way Lobo is drooling that you two are also in need of nourishment. Please sit down, and we’ll get your specials started.”

My special is Huevos Ranchero with a twist. Miguel topped the eggs with Chile Verde and slices of avocado, rice and refried beans on the side. Just the power breakfast I needed after a hard workout. Lobo’s meal consisted of sauteed strips of beef mixed with rice. We both loved our meals at Jalisco’s, but I would need to add a couple of notches to my belt if we ate there more than once every couple of weeks.

With our tummies happy, we said our goodbyes with bunches of hugs, waddled out to Karla, hopped in, and headed home.

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The letter from the attorney was still sitting on the coffee table taunting me. I grabbed it, scanned it, and crumpled it into a ball ready to throw it in the trash when I stopped. Something was tickling the back of my mind, a vague memory, a conversation between my mother and my father where she mentioned a brother who wouldn’t have anything to do with her. *Well, the guy couldn’t have been half bad. It can’t hurt to talk to the attorney and, worst case, tell him that he needed to keep looking.*

I glanced at my watch and did some calculations. It was nearing nine here in New Mexico making it well within the attorney’s office hours. I hesitated for a minute and then pulled my cell

phone out of my pocket and dialed. After navigating through the office receptionist and then his personal secretary Mr. Epstein answered. He spent thirty minutes patiently describing the situation and letting me know there was no doubt that I had an uncle and that I was, indeed, his only heir.

Mr. Epstein had been my uncle's attorney and good friend for many years. My uncle, Robert (Robbie) Auburn Sullivan, was twelve years older than my mother and, because of the age difference, never very close to her. According to Epstein, she was terribly wild and left home at sixteen. She and my father would show up at their parents every few years to wreak havoc and sponge money. After my grandparents passed away, she did the same with Uncle Robbie. The last time he'd seen them, they were hauling a young child along. Robbie was concerned about the child's welfare and tried to convince them to leave the baby, that would be me, with him, but they wouldn't have it. They needed the welfare money that a child would bring to keep them flush with booze.

Robbie had been a Seattle policeman and following a career that spanned from beat cop to Detective III, opened a bookshop in Oyster Cove on Whatley Island near Seattle. Because of his police background he dabbled in private investigations for Epstein's clients on the island and an occasional wayward spouse or runaway for the locals.

Robbie had passed away, unexpectedly, six months ago from an aortic aneurysm brought on by a two pack-a-day habit. His will had been very specific in excluding my mother and father from any proceeds. Along with some charities, I was the sole beneficiary of the bookstore and a tidy, not so little, savings account. His will did stipulate that I continue to employ Silas McKenna as the bookstore's clerk. Silas had helped Robbie open the store many years ago and was a dear

friend. Robbie wanted to ensure Silas was cared for. We ended the call with my promise to let him know how I wanted to handle the estate within a week.

After hanging up I sat on a chair on the small patio staring at the Albuquerque skyline for a long time. Lobo looked up at me with one of her crazy grins and climbed upon my lap. I scratched behind her ears, “Well, well, well! What do you think of that Lobo? We have an uncle!”

Somehow that, and the fact that he’d cared about me, brought a smile to my face, “What the hell am I going to do with a bookstore? It’s time to get some advice from Big Sis and Sister K.” Lobo woofed and gave me a slobbery kiss as I picked up the phone and told Siri to call Jessie.

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After a lot of thought and much heartfelt discussion, I let Sister K and Jessie know that I wanted to try my hand at being a proprietor. Sister Kathleen had vetted the situation on Whatley Island as only she could. She called the archdiocese of Seattle and got numbers for all the churches in the area. After speaking with the priests and staff at the parishes, these conversations resulted in a tentative approval of my move, but only after she received assurances from me that I would not ever miss Sunday Mass and I would call her twice a week. Her voice broke when she softly uttered, “Ezekiel Jones, you are going to be even farther away. I will miss you terribly! But it may be God’s way to help you get over that terrible business with Gibby. At least you won’t be cavorting with criminals. Please be safe and call from the road every night and as soon as you get there.”

She paused, let out a long sigh and then continued, “Oh, by the way, take down this number for Father O’Rourke. He’s the parish priest at Mary, Mother of Mercy in Oyster Bay. He’s expecting your call and will be reporting back to me.” Sometimes, I thought I was raised by a couple of drill instructors.

Jessie was a tougher sell. She had been my big sister and mentor since that first day at the convent. We had been joined at the hip, so to say, and she wasn't letting go without a serious discussion, "What the hell, Zeke? You're just going to move thousands of miles from me?" She sputtered "And, to run a bookstore? C'mon, get real. What do you know about selling books? And on a friggin' island!" Tears began to form and she blinked hard to dispel them.

I sat down next to her and pulled her to me. She struggled, but then leaned into me, "Big Sis, you are my best and dearest friend. I don't know how my life would have turned out if it weren't for you and Sister K. If you're adamant, I won't go, but I really think this move is what I need. I will only be a couple of hours by plane and there is no distance that can diminish our bond and my love for you. Please understand."

She buried her head into my chest and I felt a slight nod, "Ezekiel Jones, if you don't call me every day from this damn bookstore, I swear I'll drive up there, rip your arm off and beat you over the head with the bloody stump." I knew she was serious, and it filled me with warmth that these two women had so much love for this orphan.

Lobo crawled onto the couch and then onto our laps. She whined and licked the tears leaking down Jessie's beautiful black face until she finally let out a sigh and put her arms around both of us. *Who knew Lobo was a therapy dog among her many skills?*

## Chapter 2

It was two days before I was to leave, and I had just returned from a rather exhausting session at the small martial arts academy located in a strip mall a few blocks from my apartment. The sensei was teaching me new techniques to compensate for my bum knee and had thrown me about like a rag doll. As I prepared to leave for the walk home with Lobo, he pulled me aside to lecture me on the importance of focusing my mind.

When I got back to the apartment, I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and plopped myself down on the patio chair. Thoughts of the move swirled in my head. I started going over the to-do list in my mind when my cell phone rang. It was a Denver area code, and I almost blocked it thinking it was spam, but some sixth sense pushed me to answering.

“Zeke this is Sissy.”

Now there was a shock from the past. Sissy and I had been a thing ten years ago until she had disappeared from my life. At the time, I thought we might even become permanent, but she couldn't adjust to my irregular hours and the potential dangers of my chosen profession. We'd turned to bickering and an impassible distance grew between us. I had hopes that we could patch things up until I came home to an empty apartment and a note. She had taken a promotion at her firm's San Francisco office. It had hurt at the time. Still, it didn't take me long to realize we weren't meant to be.

I guess I got lost in my thoughts until she spoke again, “Zeke, are you there? It's important that I see you. I'm in the hospital and dying with stage IV pancreatic cancer. Can you come to Denver?”

Talk about a sucker punch! My heart came to my throat and tears exploded from my eyes. I pressed her for more information, but she started crying, insisting that she see me in person and wouldn't expand on her reasons. I'm a softy for tears and despite the pain of our breakup, she still held a piece of my heart. I told her that I would be there in two days on my way to Washington. We finished the conversation with small talk and I hung up. Lobo sensed my pain, made a high-pitched whine and licked my fingers. My voice shook as I reached down to pet her, "Well, Lobo isn't that a kick in the ass? Feel like meeting an old lover?" She jumped up, faced toward the Ghia and looked back at me expectantly. I let out a sound between a sob and a chuckle, "Yep, we're going on another adventure, but you need to cool your jets for a couple of days. How about a nice long walk to clear our minds?"

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We were on the road at five-thirty, Lobo's head hanging out the side window, the wind turning her ears into wings. The drive to Denver took almost seven hours. We began climbing shortly after we left Albuquerque, passing through high-mesa country dotted with pinon trees across red earth stopping to top off the tank and grab a cup of coffee in Trinidad. And, of course, Lobo left a calling card behind the gas station. The traffic in Colorado Springs slowed us down a bit and we pulled into the Hospice facility parking lot on the north side of Denver at 12:30.

The Hospice was discretely situated amongst a serene landscape framed by a grove of aspen trees. Gravel paths and tables populated the expansive lawn. Lobo and I made our way to the large doors that opened to a sunny lobby. The lady at the desk gave me Sissy's room number and confirmed that dogs were welcome as love providers to the patients.

As I turned to walk down the hall towards Sissy's room I noticed a young girl sitting in one of the cushioned chairs. Her eyes were red among a face splashed with freckles and she looked

miserable. Something about the girl tickled my brain, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. As I walked past, she looked up with hope in her eyes and then wiped her nose on her sleeve and stared at Lobo and me. *Poor thing! This must be hard on the children of the patients.* Sissy's room was soft-lit and I hardly recognized her. She was emaciated and pale. There were tubes running into her nostril and an IV wound its way to the vein of her left arm. A bandana covered her head. She looked up with tired eyes and smiled when we entered, "Hello Zeke." She reached out a hand on a toothpick size arm. Her voice was so light I had to strain to hear, "Thank you for coming."

I took her hand, leaned over and brushed her sallow cheek with a kiss, "Hello Sissy." I sat on the edge of the bed and tears started pooling in my eyes.

She reached up and brushed the tears off my cheek, "Please don't cry. It's okay. I've made my peace with God and I accept that this is his plan for me." She grinned the lopsided Sissy grin that I remembered, "Even though it pretty much sucks." Glancing down, she spied Lobo, "And who is this lovely girl?" I told her about Lobo, and she put her paws on the bed's rails and lifted her head toward Sissy, "You're such a good dog. Jump up here and give me a kiss." Lobo looked at me, I nodded, and she sprung immediately to the bed and laid her head on Sissy's chest. Stroking Lobo's head Sissy fixed her gaze on me, "I owe you an apology and an explanation.

I'm so sorry for the way I left. Our relationship wasn't working and we both knew it. I knew another heart-to-heart discussion wasn't going to cure it, so I took the coward's way out. The promotion in San Francisco was a great opportunity, both professional and personal. I hope you will forgive me."

I stroked her hand and whispered, "It's alright. There's nothing to forgive. I've had a lot of time to think about it and you hit the nail on the head. We were eventually going to destroy each other.



Your leaving was a blessing in disguise. A nice, quick end where we could heal without always getting the scab continually ripped off.”

Sissy buried her head into Lobo’s fur, shuddered and let out a whimper, “Oh Zeke, you are so levelheaded and understanding, I’ve always loved you for it. There’s a reason I asked to see you rather than putting my apology in a letter.” Picking up my hand she stroked my fingers, “I didn’t realize I was pregnant until a month after I moved to San Francisco...”

My head shot up and turned toward the lobby and that mysteriously familiar young girl. I turned back to Sissy my mind spinning, “Ours? How?” More rhetorical than questioning. That young girl out there was undeniably a product of our love making.

“I thought about reaching out to you but didn’t want her to be the reason we stayed together. It would have destroyed both of us in the long run. And abortion was never an option! That young person growing inside me was a living being and a wonderful product of our time together. She’s been the center of my universe ever since they laid her on my chest in the delivery room.”

I started to speak until she put her finger to my lips, “Please let me finish. That little girl out there is completely innocent of my deception. Her name is Maxine, or Max, and she is everything a parent would want.” She held her hand up, “She’s scarily smart and pure enjoyment to be around. She reminds me so much of you.”

“She’s aware of my condition and she’s come to grips with it quite maturely for a nine-year-old. I’ve always been open with her about us, so she knows a lot about you. She’s anxious to meet you and has been on pins and needles since I told her you were visiting.”

Burying her head in Lobo’s fur she continued, “Zeke, she has no one beside the two of us. My parents passed away a while back and there are no siblings or others in my family. She raised her head and stared into my eyes with tears streaming down her cheeks, “I know it’s all new to you

and it's asking a lot, but please take care of her, Zeke. Give her all the love you have in that huge heart of yours. Please promise me!"

Her words came out as a groan. I pulled her to me and kissed the top of her head, "There is nothing I'd rather do. But, isn't it up to her? I mean I'm a stranger!"

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me softly, "Max knows everything about you because I shared every detail I could while she was growing. She knows I'm leaving and she is anxious to start a life with you. Please?"

I buried my head in her shoulder, my eyes leaking buckets, "I promise that I'll give her the best life possible."

Sissy sat up, emptied her nose into a tissue and smiled, "Why don't you go introduce yourself to your daughter and give me a chance to fix my face. Whenever the two of you are ready, come back in and we'll chat."

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She watched me through red-rimmed eyes as I walked over and knelt in front of her. Blond curly hair framed her face and freckles dotted a pug nose. Her blue eyes were opened wide, and her gaze bore into me, "Hello Maxine, my name is Zeke and I'm your father. I didn't know that I was missing you until today, but if you let me, I promise to make up for lost time."

She put her hand against my face and stared deeply into my eyes for a moment, "You're just like I imagined. I'm glad you're here. But, please, can I call you Dad." She wrapped her thin arms around my neck and gave me the best hug I've ever had. We talked for a long time. She told me about her life, her school and asked me about Lobo. After an hour, we went back to join Sissy and Lobo.

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Sissy died three days later. Scores of people attended the funeral and let me know what a special person Sissy had been. I called Jessie and Sister K and had long discussions with both. Sister K made sure I went to confession while Jessie was completely thrilled at becoming an aunt. They flew up for the funeral and doted on Max to the complete exclusion of Lobo and me. The four of us, and Lobo of course, sat around after the wake eating cold catered food. Sister K and Jessie competed with each other, telling embarrassing Zeke anecdotes and fully absorbing Max into our little family. I sat in a cushioned chair sipping a beer and looked on as they shared girl stories and giggled. Lobo would alternate between them and throw in a lick here and there. A warm feeling filled my soul as I watched the three women that were woven into my heart.