

The background of the cover features a dark, textured surface, possibly black or dark grey. A large, intricate pink lace pattern is positioned in the upper left and center, partially overlapping the title text. The lace consists of repeating floral and geometric motifs, creating a delicate, web-like structure. The title text is rendered in a classic, elegant serif font with a subtle drop shadow, giving it a three-dimensional appearance as if it's floating slightly above the lace and background.

Undercover
Love

Lucy
Grijalva

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Send us email at admin@LionHearted.com

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Dedicated to the memory of my husband
Officer Bill Grijalva
who died in service to the
Oakland Police Department
December 15, 1993
Thank you, sweetie, for always believing in me.

With thanks to my favorite emergency room M.D.,
Jon Stanger, and to Sgt. Bob Fitzer of the
San Francisco Police Department.

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Chapter One



April Fool's Day

Lord, please let this be a joke. Julia Newman stood in her entry hall, taking another peek out the narrow window next to the front door. Nothing had changed. It still looked like a bikers' convention, minus the motorcycles, moving in next door. She was appalled but somehow fascinated by the long hair, ragged clothes, tattoos and bare, hairy chests. Despite her good intentions, she stayed at the window to watch a little longer.

The half-dozen men seemed out of place in the quiet, woodsy apartment complex on the edge of San Francisco's Noe Valley. She'd always loved the contrast of the rustic atmosphere in the middle of the big city, but right now it was the last thing on her mind. *All* of them weren't moving in, were they?

No way was she going to set foot outside the house today.

“Hey, Rick! What’d you pack in here? Rocks?” One of them strained to lift a huge box out of the back of an aging station wagon. The man was in desperate need of a shave and a haircut. Julia shook her head. Her own hair fell to the middle of her back when she let it down, but his was longer.

A man with a graying red-gold beard and a bandanna rolled and tied around his forehead stepped over to help. “Rick had to make a beer run. He’ll be back any minute.”

Carrying the box between them, they clambered up the three stone steps to the small porch Julia’s apartment shared with the adjoining one. Then she heard them trooping down the stairs inside.

The complex was built into the side of the hill, townhouse style, with the living areas at street level and the bedrooms downstairs. The unit next door was a mirror image of hers, and with every stomp of feet or raised voice, she could picture exactly where those men were and what they were doing. So far they hadn’t awakened Poppy from her mid-afternoon nap, but Julia didn’t doubt that any minute now the little dachshund would be at the door, barking hysterically for a chance to get out and bite some ankles.

An old but spotless white Porsche swerved into the lane and screeched to a stop among the other cars. Julia was awed by how close it came

to taking out the bushes lining the drive without actually touching them.

The screech of his tires may have drawn her attention in the first place, but the sight of the driver unfolding from the car held it.

She wondered how such a big guy had squeezed into such a small car. He was well over six feet tall and wide through the shoulders. A black T-shirt played up his broad chest and muscular arms. Stonewashed jeans hugged his long legs and didn't leave much to the imagination. Wavy mahogany-brown hair brushed his shoulders. He looked almost secretive, with a full beard covering the lower half of his face, and a pair of Ray-Bans hiding the rest. All she could really see was the hard slash of his nose.

One of his friends poked at a cordovan leather chesterfield-style sofa in the back of an old pickup truck. The couch looked too expensive—and tasteful—for this crowd. “About time you showed up, Rick. You're not paying me enough to move your furniture while you go shopping.”

“Cool your jets, D.J.” Rick's voice matched his looks, rough, rumbling... but somehow soothing, too. “I'm gonna put the beer inside. That's the only pay you're getting, anyway.”

The men laughed as they went back to work.

Long hair, booze, and likely women, too. Julia frowned. This Rick person might be the type to catch another woman's eye, but she knew way too

much about men like him. The neighborhood where she'd grown up was only a few blocks from here in the Mission District, but it was light-years away in socio-economic terms. She'd learned the hard way to recognize trouble when she saw it coming.

Of course, she'd left all that behind. Now she had the security she'd always craved. She was a productive member of society, and she knew enough not to let a man like Rick trip her up. Watching Mama had taught her almost everything she needed to know, and she'd learned the rest all by herself.

Julia swallowed the familiar bitterness that crowded up in her chest. She let the curtain flutter back in place, disgusted with herself for wasting a perfectly good Saturday afternoon. There was laundry to fold, and then she really ought to correct yesterday's spelling tests. But she was back at her post five minutes later when she heard that deep, gravelly voice on the porch.

"Turn it sideways, Steel, or it'll get stuck. Oh, hell, it's gonna stick anyway."

Rick and one of his buddies were trying to maneuver the sofa through the front door, treating it as if it weighed no more than a folding chair. Julia could barely make out the words rippling across his T-shirt: *So Many Women —So Little Time*.

Of course, she thought with grim humor. *How charming of him to share his political views with*

the rest of us.

But she froze as Rick glanced her way and caught her spying. Never taking his gaze away from her, he said something she couldn't quite hear to his friend. Then he shifted his end of the sofa to one hand and raised his sunglasses. Espresso-colored eyes crinkled at the corners, their teasing look belying the solemn expression on his face. Some faithless part of her mind noticed the flat, high cheekbones, the dark tan, the inviting thickness of his hair.

He winked suddenly and dropped the sunglasses over his eyes.

Julia's paralysis broke. She gave a solemn nod of acknowledgement—she knew better than to show any sign of being intimidated—and waited until he moved out of sight with the sofa. Only then did she back away from the window. “*Damn it!*”

That nosy streak was going to get her into real trouble one of these days. But it wasn't exactly nosiness... more like a healthy curiosity about her environment. It made sense to keep her eyes open, didn't it? After all, no one else was going to watch out for her.

She turned on the stereo, trying to drown out the thumps and shouts next door with Beethoven's Ninth. The music's strength and power suited her mood. When she sat down on the living room carpet and lifted Poppy into her lap, the dog snuggled close and grunted in her sleep. Julia ran

one hand over her “baby’s” sleek red-brown back. But her thoughts kept returning to him. Rick.

So what if he was tall, dark and handsome? You couldn’t tell under all that hair, anyway, she told herself.

So what if his eyes had been full of understanding and humor when he’d seen her watching from the window? Her father had had beautiful eyes, too—at least according to her mother. Julia certainly wouldn’t know.

And so what if his rumbling voice sent shivers down her spine? He wasn’t going to get much chance to use either the voice or the eyes on her, because she planned to keep her distance. Polite—yes, of course; friendly—no, no, no.



Julia liked to sleep late on Sunday mornings. Poppy had other ideas. She pushed her cold, wet nose under the covers and nuzzled Julia’s neck.

“Aaack! Not now.” Julia turned away and curled up in a tight ball, trying to ignore the persistent dog. Poppy whined, then tried barking. Finally Julia sat up, pushing her hair out of her eyes and trying to focus on the bedside clock. “All right, all right. Oh lord, it’s not even seven yet.”

Poppy jumped off the bed and ran to the sliding door that led to the tiny, fenced-in yard and patio.

She gave one more shrill yelp and waited for Julia to let her out.

“If you’d let me get dressed, I’d take you for a walk, you know.” She unlocked the patio door and slid it open, letting in the foggy morning chill. Poppy raced outside. “Try to keep quiet out there. It’s too early to be disturbing the neighbors.”

That thought brought a picture of her newest neighbor to mind. With any luck, maybe she could avoid running into him on the front porch.

Sure. Maybe if she just locked herself in the house for the rest of her life.

Now she’d never get back to sleep. She headed for the bathroom, pulling off her flannel nightgown as she went. A pounding-hot shower helped put her brain in gear, and after a few minutes a comforting thought struck. He might not stay long. After all, like everyone else here, he was only a renter, and he didn’t exactly look like the type to put down roots. Men like him never settled in for long.

Julia stepped out of the shower and wrapped a fluffy pink towel around herself. Steam misted the small room. She opened the door, then shivered as a blast of cold air rushed in. The sliding door was still open, and Poppy’s piercing yip sounded in the distance.

“Oh, that little brat.” She raised her voice. “Poppy! Get in here.” Nothing happened.

She stomped to the patio door and peered

outside. “Poppy!”

There was no sign of a fat brown sausage on legs. Where was that dratted dog?

She heard a growl followed by a whine, and her head swung to the left. Dismay riffled through her. The sound had come from the matching yard next door. The yard on the other side of the loosened fence board. That Rick person’s yard.

“Not again. Oh, Poppy, you couldn’t have.” Julia hesitated only a moment, then tucked the end of the towel more securely between her breasts and approached the shared fence, caution pounding inside her head. She just hoped she could entice Poppy back to her own side before *he* noticed the dog was in his yard. She stepped off the concrete patio and tiptoed around her azaleas and fuchsias. Running one foot along the base of the fence, she found the loose board and pushed it aside as Poppy barked again.

Julia had to get down on her hands and knees in the moist dirt to peek through the small opening. Lowering her head almost to ground level, she squinted into the adjoining yard. She could only see a limited area, but there was her baby, calmly settled on the patio. And *there* was an enormous, shaggy, golden... *creature* circling her.

“Poppy! That dog will chew you up and spit you out,” Julia hissed. “Get back here!”

Poppy ignored the warning. She growled at the big golden retriever, whose tail wagged with frantic

joy.

“Get over here, you little—”

“Having trouble with your pet rodent?” The gravelly words were followed by a deep chuckle.

Julia’s hair stood on end.

She raised her head in slow motion. Looking up, she saw Rick, his arms crossed over the top of the fence, peering down at her with amusement in the lift of his straight, heavy brows.

Her first horrified reaction was to reach back and pull the towel as far over her rear end as it would go.

Rick’s chuckle turned into rumbling laughter. Julia closed her eyes, groaning inside. How could she have set foot outside her door wearing only a towel? What had she been thinking of?

As much as she’d like to slink silently back to her bedroom, all she could do now was brazen it out. She pushed away from the fence and sat back in a crouch, squashing her feelings into a tiny box in some far corner of her mind. Then she rose and met his gaze.

Rick Peralta had watched as his new neighbor’s expression raced from white-cheeked horror to a mortified flush to cool self-possession. Now, with growing appreciation, he swept a quick look up and down her form. She wasn’t very tall, but she was, well, nicely engineered. Maybe there’d be an unexpected bonus in getting stuck here for the next month or two. The sagging towel covered all

the strategic areas, but it still gave him a good look at her legs. They were shapely, smooth and flawless, except for dirty smudges at the knees.

“Always was a leg man,” he murmured.

“Excuse me?” Her voice, while gently pitched, was frosty.

“Nothing.” He dragged his gaze above the waist. Her shoulders were slim and elegant, but she wasn’t what you’d call voluptuous. Still, there was an inviting curve under the towel he wouldn’t mind getting better acquainted with. Her face was fresh and rosy from her shower, and pretty without a trace of makeup. Lovely, he might say if he were given to flowery talk, which he absolutely wasn’t. Her damp hair looked like tawny spun silk. Golden-honey ringlets were beginning to form in the wisps around her face.

Unfortunately, her mood didn’t look so good. As a matter of fact, her wide, slate-colored eyes reminded him of a winter sky at dusk. She bit her full lower lip as self-consciousness and annoyance chased across her face.

Rick tried giving her a genial smile. But it looks—hers, that is—could kill...

Maybe he didn’t have it quite right.

She cleared her throat. “There’s a hole in the fence.”

“Yeah.”

“My dog seems to have wandered into your yard.”

“I noticed.”

She took a deep breath and spoke with strained patience. “Do you think maybe you could give her a push in this direction?”

“I could try,” he said doubtfully. But as he turned away from the fence, the little wiener dog snarled and sprang at Shemp, his aging golden retriever. Shemp yelped, then turned and ran. Rick shook his head in disgust.

“Poppy!” cried the babe—*oops, excuse me, the woman*, he corrected himself mentally—on the other side of the fence. He’d had her checked out before he’d moved in, of course, just like the other neighbors, but he couldn’t remember her name this early in the morning. All that came to mind was her occupation. *Teacher. Third grade.* He wished the teachers had looked half as good when he’d been in school.

“What’s he doing to her?” she was saying. “Please, don’t let him hurt her.”

“Not much chance of that,” Rick said. “She has him on the run.”

“Oh.”

Shemp cowered, whining, in the corner of the patio. Rick heard a scraping sound coming from the other yard and wondered what she was up to over there. Swearing under his breath, he approached the little dog—Polly? It was something like that. When he got within a few feet of her, she growled.

“I don’t believe this.” He felt like growling, too.

“She’s just scared.”

Rick turned back to the fence. The woman must have dragged over a deck chair or something, because she now stood head-and-shoulders above the top, still clutching her towel.

“Fat chance,” he said. “And if you think I’m gonna touch her and risk being mutilated, forget it. Come get her out of here yourself.”

She frowned at him in indecision, then said to the dog, “Poppy! Get over here right this minute!”

Poppy held her head at a regal tilt and ignored her owner.

“Oooh!”

Mad or not, the lady looked downright delicious. But he’d have to be very careful in the next few weeks, Rick reminded himself regretfully. Too careful to indulge a wayward flash of interest in a woman he didn’t know and couldn’t trust.



Julia muttered to herself about impossible dogs and troublemaking men as she slid her arms through the sleeves of her velour robe. She belted it tightly at the waist, then caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and had second thoughts. After yanking off the robe, she rummaged in her drawers for jeans and a T-shirt, unwilling to give him another excuse to leer at her.

Fully clothed, she ran up the stairs two at a time, headed outside, then turned to his front door close beside her own and rang the bell. She checked over her shoulder to see if Mrs. McCully, the world's nosiest neighbor, was watching from her kitchen window across the drive. Aha—for once she'd escaped detection. Mrs. McCully didn't miss much of what went on in the townhouse complex.

Rick opened the door right away. *Lying in wait*, Julia told herself. Then she had to press her lips together to keep from smiling. Okay, so maybe she was overreacting to the situation. So he'd leered at her—big deal. How bad could he be? He wouldn't have moved here if he were really the low-life he looked like. It was a nice, middle-class neighborhood. That had been her top priority when she'd been looking for a place to live.

"What's so funny?" Rick's coffee-colored eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Who's laughing?"

"You are. You're just trying not to."

Julia tried for another second, but she couldn't contain the grin that strained to escape. Rick's mouth quirked up in a one-sided smile. He leaned against the doorframe, watching her. His old navy sweatsuit looked like a rummage-sale reject.

She hadn't seen him close-up before, no window glass between them, no fences. He was so big! Nearly a foot taller than her own five-four, she

was sure, and his shoulders looked broad, his arms hard. Probably lifted weights. His size and strength made her feel small and feminine. Drat! She didn't want to feel feminine around him; she wanted to be a genderless, anonymous, barely-on-speaking-terms neighbor.

A flash of glitter caught her eye. The tiny diamond stud in his left earlobe made her think of the drug dealers who hung around the Tenderloin neighborhood where she taught. Her smile cooled. *Not your type, remember?*

"Come on in," he said, opening the door wider. Amusement still sparked in his eyes, but something else was there, too... some kind of observant wariness.

Get Poppy. Then get out. "Thank you."

Julia stepped inside and knew exactly where to go... after all, his townhouse was a mirror image of her own. She went down the stairs and turned right instead of left for the master bedroom. She tried keeping her eyes focused resolutely in front of her, but it was hard not to notice the only piece of furniture in the room, a large bed with disheveled black-and-gray striped sheets. Pillows were tumbled on the mattress and floor. The head of the bed stood against the wall her townhouse shared. Julia's own bed was just inches away, on the other side of the wall. Jerking her attention away from that too-intimate thought, she headed out the patio door with Rick close behind.

Poppy apparently had decided that things were getting dull. She nudged at the big retriever, who lay watching her. He didn't move. Then she backed away a few dachshund-size steps and barked at the larger dog. Finally the retriever reached out with one paw and clouted her on the head. Poppy climbed on top of him, yipping, and he rolled over, batting at her playfully.

“Poppy! Bad girl!”

Poppy stopped cold at the sound of Julia's voice. She scrambled off the other dog and curled her tail between her legs. A pathetic whimper started in her throat as she looked up at Julia, her eyes huge and soulful. Rick laughed.

Julia didn't. “You'd think I was going to beat her or something.” She scooped up Poppy, holding the dog close to her side like a football. Then she turned to Rick. “Sorry we caused all this trouble. I keep complaining to the manager about that loose board, but he hasn't fixed it yet. I'll do something about it myself this time.”

“No problem. I can take care of it in ten seconds flat.”

“Then I'm sure we won't bother you again.”

The retriever rose and lumbered towards her and Poppy. Julia reached out to pet him. “Nice dog,” she crooned. “Big dog... but sweet, aren't you?”

“That's Shemp. He's kind of a marshmallow.”

“Just a big baby.” She rubbed behind his ears. Shemp whined and his tail swished back and forth

happily, until Poppy snarled her displeasure at Julia's interest in him. "Stop it, Poppy. Shemp, don't pay any attention to her. You're *such* a good boy. Oh no, don't start licking me."

Rick folded his arms over his chest, but his eyes gave away his amusement. "Want a cup of coffee before you go? There's a pot on upstairs."

Julia wiped her hand on her jeans while she took a second to think. He seemed nice enough, now that he wasn't leering anymore. The thought of fresh, hot coffee sounded like heaven. The thought of sharing it with him made her stomach flutter. With anticipation? Oh, Lord. "Thank you, but I think I'd better take this little troublemaker home."

His expression didn't change as he turned away. "Whatever."

Julia wouldn't have wanted him to argue with her, but he might have looked a little disappointed, at least. Trudging back up the stairs, trying not to get her feet tangled with the retriever who stuck close to her and Poppy, she watched Rick's broad back. Directly at eye level was a really nice, firm—*never mind that!*

She'd never known walking up one flight of stairs could leave her so breathless.

At the top, he stopped and waited for her to join him, that quirky half-smile on his face again. "Guess I oughta introduce myself. Rick Per—" After pausing to clear his throat, he finished,

“Rick Perry.”

“I’m Julia Newman.” She gave him a tentative smile. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

His seductive drawl caught her by surprise. “Not half as pleased as I am.”

It was the sort of remark she usually ignored. Terry Escalante, her best friend, said she took everything too seriously. But Julia found herself wanting to believe him. That way lay trouble. Instantly wary, she edged toward the door and said, “No, I’m sure I’m not.”

She jumped at Rick’s sudden laughter. “Ouch. Guess that one isn’t gonna work. How about nice-to-meet-you, and we’ll just leave it at that. Friends?” He extended his right hand.

Julia looked at it and tried to feel suspicious, but a smile began to grow deep inside her. “What do you men do, sit around and plan those stupid lines?” Finally she grinned and held out her own hand. *Big brave girl, Julia. He’s just a guy, right?*

It was a mistake. She realized it the moment his large, warm hand enveloped hers. The heat of his touch flowed through her, and she wanted to leave her fingers against his palm longer than could be considered a polite handshake. She watched the humor dissolve from his expression and her lungs tightened.

Then Poppy whined and wriggled under her other arm. Flustered, Julia pulled her hand out of Rick’s grip. He let go easily and looked away.

“So, uh, where are you from?” Her voice came out sounding ragged, but it was the first safe topic that popped into her mind.

“The Eastbay.”

“The Eastbay?” she repeated, still half-dazed.

“I was born and raised on the other side of the Bay Bridge. How about you?” His expression was neutral now, that one breathless moment already forgotten, it seemed.

“San Francisco’s my hometown.”

“Mine, too, now.”

“Right.” How was she supposed to carry on a coherent conversation with the man when her insides were jumping around and she couldn’t put two thoughts together? His rumbling voice vibrated through her and whispered up her spine. She wanted to close her eyes and listen to him talk for an hour.

It must be time to go home.

Before she could thank him and leave, he turned away and stepped into the kitchen. “Sure you don’t want a cup of coffee?”

“I’m sure. Look, I think I’d better—”

“Hang on, I’ll be right there.”

She shut up and waited. Sneaking a peek around, she could see one end of the living room. As far as she could tell from her vantage point in the entry hall, the only item in the room was the leather chesterfield. Maybe he didn’t have a lot of furniture, but what he had seemed nice.

“Ahh. I needed my morning fix.”

Julia jumped at the sound of Rick’s voice and turned back, trying to repress the feeling that she’d been caught snooping again.

He gestured with the heavy stoneware mug in his hand. “I may have been kicked out of my own house, but at least I was smart enough to take the coffee pot with me.”

“Kicked out?” She’d suspected something like this, hadn’t she? He must be some kind of a low-life to get kicked out of his house. And she wondered who’d done the kicking. A landlord? A woman?

A wife?

He started to speak but stopped, a speculative look on his face. Then he changed the subject entirely. “You know, I could leave that fence board loose. Polly could come over and play with Shemp while I’m working.”

“Poppy,” Julia said automatically. Then, through the haze in her mind, the word *working* sank in. Work? The man had a job?

Maybe he was a computer programmer or one of those other jobs where people looked strange. Maybe he was a writer. Or some kind of financial genius.

Maybe he wasn’t what he looked like. Attractive, sure, charming even when he exerted himself, but not what she looked for in a man. Not at all. Not the kind of man you could rely on, a man you could trust.

But maybe...

“Oh?” she said, keeping her tone casual. “What do you do?”

Rick looked her in the eye. “I’m a handyman. The owners hired me to help out the manager for a while. He couldn’t keep up with everything in a big complex like this.”

So much for the genius theory. “That sounds... interesting.”

“Be sure and let me know if you need me to take care of anything for you. In your apartment, I mean.” He grinned, and his eyes shone with an appreciative gleam.

“Sure. I’ll let you know.” *Over my dead body.* As she yanked open the front door, she added, “Nice to meet you. I mean, see you around. Thanks for putting up with Poppy.”

He nodded and stayed where he was in the kitchen doorway, sipping his coffee. The look on his face could have been humor or any number of other emotions. She gave up trying to analyze him and fled.

Smooth, Julia. She shut her own door behind her, feeling more stressed out from a few minutes with Rick than she did after a full day in the classroom. Her body seemed tightly strung. One wrong move and she’d snap.

He had long hair and an earring, for heaven’s sake. He looked like a biker. His friends looked worse.

He probably drank too much and womanized, too.

He'd been thrown out of his house... and maybe he was even married.

His job situation was iffy at best.

No matter what kind of pull she felt toward him, he still reminded her of the men she'd grown up around, the kind she was smart enough to avoid. She'd lived on a street where half the houses were condemned. Most of the rest had been occupied by welfare families whose fathers had deserted them. The men she'd known were ex-cons, boozers, sleazy types who lived off any woman who'd take them in. They never stuck around for the long haul.

Remember how Mama always thought the new one was going to be different? But it never worked out, did it?

Julia had learned to be tough and fend for herself. She'd had to, to survive. But she'd fantasized about life in a clean house, with good food and new clothes and parents who loved her. Now she had it all, all except the loving parents.

And if there was one thing in life she'd learned, it was that a man like Rick Perry was born to drag a woman like Julia Newman right back down to the slums... if not worse.

Chapter Two



Julia checked the clock on the wall and closed her timeworn copy of *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*, then glanced around the room. Thirty pairs of rapt eyes watched her. It should have been thirty pairs, anyway. Not all of her kids had super attention spans.

Several fiddled with stuff in their desks, watched the clock, or made faces at each other. One girl was busy examining the loving-hands-at-school springtime decorations on the east wall. She couldn't really blame them for being antsy this late on a Thursday afternoon.

Two of the boys giggled silently in the far corner of the room when one pushed the other's shoulder. Time to change the seating arrangements again. "André. Michael."

The warning in her voice produced guilty looks from the boys and an immediate cease-fire.

And there was Kathleen, whose head and shoulders were slumped over her folded arms on the desk. Julia frowned for a moment before she

smiled at the class and said, “We’ll read another chapter tomorrow. It’s almost time to go home now. Does anyone have something special to share before the bell rings?”

A couple of hands shot in the air, and Julia let the kids go at it. Carlotta’s parents had allowed her to take in a stray cat that had turned out to be in the family way. The kids looked forward to Carlotta’s daily reports on the kittens’ progress. Her mother had even agreed, in stumbling English, to bring the litter in for a visit once the babies were old enough. As an added bonus, Carlotta’s own fluency with the language improved every time she spoke to the class.

When the dismissal bell rang, the listless Kathleen moved more slowly than the rest of the children. She was on her way to the door, the last one out, when Julia said, “Kathleen, can you wait for a minute, please? I’d like to speak to you.”

Kathleen’s eyes widened in mute alarm. “Uh... I guess so.”

“Don’t worry, you haven’t done anything wrong. Come sit down.” Julia moved to the half-circle activities table at the side of the room, pulled out a couple of chairs, and sat in one. It was child-sized and she didn’t quite fit, but it put her closer to kid level. Kathleen followed obediently. She sat very straight with her knobby knees pressed together.

Lord, how the girl reminded Julia of herself at

the same age: quiet, shy and intimidated by the world. Even the faded thrift-shop clothing seemed familiar.

The girl would need to find some hidden well of strength if she was going to get through life without turning into a perennial victim. But Julia herself was living proof that it could be done. And every time she gave one of these kids a helping hand, her own psyche took another giant step forward.

Where to start? “I’ve really been pleased with your schoolwork lately, Kathleen. You worked hard on learning those times tables, didn’t you?” Actually, Kathleen was one of her most conscientious students... another similarity to the long-ago Julia.

“Y-yes.”

“Good girl. But I hope you aren’t staying up too late doing homework. You seem tired today.”

Kathleen shook her head. “I’m okay.”

“How’re things going? Anything you want to talk about?”

“No. It’s okay.” Her eyes cut away from Julia’s.

With a silent sigh, Julia resigned herself to keeping a closer eye on the child. “All right, but it seems like something’s bothering you. If you ever want to talk about it, you know you can always come to me, right?”

“Right.” Kathleen nodded. Then her expression crumbled and tears started to flow.

Julia's heart broke for her. She couldn't resist the impulse to wrap the child in her arms. "Sweetie, what is it? What's the matter?"

Kathleen sobbed something unintelligible into Julia's shoulder.

"It's okay. You can tell me when you feel better." She smoothed a hand over the girl's hair and back until she quieted enough to make use of a tissue. Then, as Kathleen wiped her eyes, still sniffing, Julia added, "Maybe I can help."

Kathleen shook her head slowly. "I'm just being a baby. That's what my mom said."

Uh-oh, thought Julia. *Step carefully*. "Why don't you tell me about it, and I'll make up my own mind."

"Mommy got a job. She's a waitress at a restaurant. It's a good job, and if she keeps it, we won't have to be on welfare no more."

Julia stilled the automatic urge to correct Kathleen's grammar. "Go on."

"But she has to work at supper time. She don't come home till it's time for me to go to bed. I get... scared, sometimes."

Julia closed her eyes until the dizzying sense of recognition passed. How many nights had she huddled in her bed, lonely and crying, waiting for her own mother to come home?

"Kathleen, tell me, does your mom come home right after work? Does she stay home on her nights off?"

The child's eyes widened slightly. "Yes."

"What do you do for dinner?"

"Mommy makes me a sandwich before she leaves. I'm not allowed to cook when she isn't there."

"What *are* you allowed to do?"

"Watch TV. Do my homework. Color with my crayons. I can't go outside unless it's a 'mergency."

"What are you supposed to do in an emergency?"

"Go to Judy's apartment. She lives next door to us." Kathleen sat up straighter, suddenly coming to her mother's defense. "And my mom calls me every night at six-thirty. That's her break time. My mommy takes good care of me, Ms. Newman."

Julia smiled. "It sounds like she does."

She had a legal and moral obligation to watch out for her students' welfare. Leaving a nine-year-old home alone for hours on end was technically illegal. But how could she argue with a parent who was trying to provide for that child? Where did the line stop blurring and become clear-cut? The mother was obviously doing the best she could with the resources she had.

"I'll tell you what, Kathleen. I'm going to write down my phone number at home for you. Any time you feel lonely or scared at night, you can call me and we'll talk about it. Believe me, I know what it feels like. Would that help?"

Kathleen's face brightened. "Yeah!" Then her smile faded again. "But what if you're not home

when I call?"

"That's a good question. I'm going out for dinner tonight, as a matter of fact. You could try talking to my answering machine. Then I can call you back when I get home, if it isn't too late. Okay?"

"An answering machine? Wow! Can I call tonight when you're out?"

Julia grinned, pleased to hear the excitement in Kathleen's voice. "Sure. Leave me a long message. It'll keep recording as long as you keep talking."

"Wow, this is really cool."

Later, as Julia rode home on the crowded, noisy Muni bus, she resolved to monitor the situation. She wasn't sure she'd handled it right, but she didn't want to undercut Kathleen's mother's efforts to improve their lot in life, either. Julia stared blindly out the bus window. Her own mother had never made the slightest effort to provide for her needs. She'd always been too disinterested, too drunk, or too caught up in her own affairs. Affairs, ha. That was a pretty name for Mama's love life.

The men had floated in and out... men who never stayed long, men who always took, but never gave back. Charmers, snakes, street-wise types like that Rick Perry...

Julia sighed and deliberately straightened in her seat. Somehow, these days, it always came back to him. Rick.

She'd seen him hanging around the apartment

complex now and then in the five days since he'd moved in. But he was usually gone when she came home from school. His car wouldn't roar into their shared garage until very late at night. Did he have another job, too? Or was he just out whooping it up?

The bus stopped with a jerk and nosed around an illegally parked car to get closer to the curb. Julia snapped out of her Rick-induced fog. She glanced out the window, gauging how many stops until it was her turn to get off. Not long; they were crawling out of the Mission District and into Noe Valley.

A seedy-looking bar and grill called Shelby's sat at the corner where the bus had stopped. Julia had never been inside. It was the kind of place that had its windows painted over in black, and motorcycles crowded into the dim, dank alley between it and the next building.

Julia blinked, thinking she must have really gone off the deep end. For a moment there, she'd thought she'd seen Rick himself, stepping from Shelby's side door into the alley. Another man—he looked a bit familiar, too—followed him outside. The one who might be Rick pulled a handful of paper money out of his pocket that looked as if it could rival her monthly paycheck.

With a noisy shudder, the bus pulled away from the curb, and Julia twisted around frantically for one last glimpse into the alley. All she could

see was an arm wearing a navy-and-tan striped sleeve, and a broad shoulder swept by shaggy mahogany hair. Was it really Rick? Or was she just latching his face onto any likely male body?

And if it *was* him, what could he possibly be up to now? Sneaking around alleys... flashing big rolls of bills... driving an expensive car... and not working, to speak of. She didn't want to think it of him, but words like gambling, con games, even drugs, kept popping into her head.

It was getting absolutely scary, this obsession she seemed to have developed for him.



Bigelow, the apartment manager, leaned out his screen door and hailed Rick when he strolled into the complex late Thursday afternoon.

“What?” he said, letting his voice drop to its rumbling deepest. He'd been going all day, and still had a full night ahead of him.

“I got some jobs for you.” The balding, scraggly Bigelow held his usual can of beer in one hand. After a week in the place, Rick had given up trying to figure out when the old guy actually bothered to work. He was damned lucky his brother was part owner of the complex, or he no doubt would have been tossed out years ago. That same brother was Rick's ace in the hole. Bigelow wouldn't dare cross him.

He followed the manager into his cluttered apartment. "Anything for unit B-3? 'Cause if it isn't, you're on your own. I put in three hours this morning. Stuff you should have done months ago."

"I been busy. You don't know how much work there is to do, keepin' up a place like this."

"I don't want to know, either."

Bigelow grinned, displaying a broken front tooth. "But you got to, don't you? To make it look right and all."

Rick shook his head. "You're enjoying the hell out of this, aren't you?"

"Might as well take advantage of my good fortune." Bigelow's grin spread. "Matter of fact, B-3 has a little problem with their bathroom."

"I already told you, I don't do toilets." Rick shuddered. "Not even for B-3."

"You can't afford to be so picky. Anyway, you'll be pleased to hear, this happens to be a backed-up sink."

"Good. I'll take care of it tomorrow. There's no one there right now. I want to get in when Williams is home."

"Just make sure you don't do nothin' illegal in there, okay? I don't wanna get sued."

"Get real, Bigelow. I know what I'm doing." He headed for the door.

Bigelow said quickly, "One more thing. D-6 says there's a short-circuit or somethin' in her

kitchen light.”

Rick stopped. “D-6?”

“Yeah, and since it’s right next door to you, I figured it wouldn’t be no trouble at all for you to take a look at it.”

Rick turned back to the apartment manager. “Is this something that just came up?”

“Well, she mighta mentioned it once before today. Maybe twice.”

“How long?”

Bigelow swallowed and his Adam’s apple bobbed at the look on Rick’s face. He pulled open a kitchen drawer and groped around in it, then came up with a sheet of notepaper. Rick glanced over Julia’s neatly printed note. He looked up at Bigelow, disgusted. “You left a woman alone in an apartment with faulty wiring for *three weeks*?”

“Has it been that long?” His smile was weak.

Rick gave him a long, slow look calculated to strike terror into the hearts of men stronger than the likes of Bigelow. Then he left, letting the screen slam behind him with a tinny clatter, and headed in the direction of the D building. Dusk had already started to fall.

He grinned, his mood suddenly improved as amusement shot through him. So his “neighbor” needed some work done, did she? And she hadn’t seen fit to ask him to take care of it, even though he’d invited her to. Times were truly bad when a woman chose Bigelow over him... especially a

woman like Julia Newman.

She was a babe, all right. He'd started to dream at night about that sultry mouth. Reminding himself that she was off-limits—anyone who lived here had to be—had become a daily exercise. But that ice-princess look she usually wore for him, the one that announced *don't touch me*, was the most effective weapon of all.

His ex-wife had become an expert at that look long before the end had finally rolled around. The thought was enough to wipe the smile off his face.

As he approached Julia's place, Rick glanced in the kitchen window. It was a newly acquired habit, checking her windows whenever he passed by.

This time he stopped and stared.

Julia stood by the kitchen sink, reaching for something from a high cabinet. When she stretched higher, Rick's mouth went dry. She was wearing a pink tank top, a lacy little camisole kind of number, that strained against her shoulders and chest. *Nice view, princess.*

As if she heard the words inside his head, she turned suddenly and met his gaze through the window. Her arms sank to her sides. She didn't smile or turn away... just watched him, an unreadable expression in her eyes.

Rick wanted to walk past with a carefree whistle, but he couldn't. She held him immobile with a shadowed look that pumped him full of longing.

He caught himself wishing he could reach out and brush the stray dark-gold strands of hair from her cheek. A shiver of anticipation shot through him.

Then the light over her head flickered and went out, and she jumped as the room went dim and shadowy. Remembering his mission, the real one and the current one, Rick shook himself and marched up the three stone steps to the porch. He stabbed at the doorbell... twice for good measure.

Before the last note died out, the porch light flashed on and Julia opened the door, her princess look firmly back in place. Her delicate, light-brown eyebrows were scrunched down. He tried to ignore her mouth.

“I wish you wouldn’t look in the window. It gives me the heebie-jeebies to think someone’s watching me,” she said.

“Stand in front of a window in that get-up and I promise you, someone’s gonna look.” He wondered academically if she was wearing anything underneath the tank top. It didn’t look like it. He checked again, and watched, fascinated, as the small buds of her nipples rose against the soft cotton knit.

The line between Julia’s brows deepened and she folded her arms across her bosom as her face turned red. He’d already noticed how easily she blushed. Even her upper chest was pink. He wondered, if he ran his fingers over it, would it feel warmer than the rest of her?

“I knew I should never have bought this top,” she muttered.

“Wrong. It looks great on you.”

But she wasn't listening. Instead, she stared at his upper body, her expression gone suddenly blank. “Nice shirt.” It didn't sound much like she meant it as a compliment.

Huh? Rick looked down. He wore an old long-john style shirt with long sleeves and three buttons at the neck. It was striped in navy blue and tan. Nothing to get excited about.

“What, this old rag?” He waited for her to smile.

She didn't. “Well, now that we've admired each other's clothes, I'll just run along. I have some things to do.” She started to close the door.

Rick laughed. “You planning to cook by candle-light?”

“I'm not planning to cook at all. Besides, there's a light over the sink. It's good enough.”

“Hey, this is your lucky night. Bigelow sent me to check out the wiring in that fixture. Are you gonna let me in, or would you rather wait another three weeks for him to get around to it?”

Julia paused, indecision on her face. He decided for her and stepped inside. She stared for a moment, then shrugged and said, “Yes. *Certainly*. Why don't you just step right in and fix that light for me?”

“Good idea. I think I will.” He headed for the

kitchen, ignoring her muffled groan.

“Gee,” she said from behind him, “it’s too bad you’re so timid and weak-willed. I *hate* having to make these decisions all by myself.”

Rick stopped and turned around. She still stood by the door, a guileless expression on her face. He raised one eyebrow slowly. “Are you making fun of me, lady?”

Her lips pursed as she tried not to smile. “Who, me?”

He felt himself being drawn to her mouth again. *Dangerous territory, buddy.* His gaze swung around her, out the front door and then down the hallway that led to the living room. “Must be. The babe who looked like she was sucking lemons is gone.”

Julia seemed helplessly torn between disapproval and laughter. Finally she grinned, a dimple appearing in her left cheek. “I give up. Go ahead and fix that stupid light. You might as well make yourself useful if you’re going to be hanging around, anyway.”

Rick thought maybe he ought to be offended, but he wasn’t. How offended could a man get when he was looking at that dimple? No matter how hard she tried to maintain her dignity, it never seemed to take long to coax a smile out of her.

And he’d been smiling more than his fair share himself lately. Apparently she was unaware of the

fact that women who didn't know him seemed to find him a bit intimidating. He sure wasn't used to being casually ordered around, anyway. "Okay, teacher lady—"

"Hold it. How did you know I'm a teacher?"

That stopped him for a second or two. He'd better watch his step. "Bigelow must have told me. Now, what seems to be the problem?"

She gave him a funny look, but let it go. "I don't know. It only works when it feels like it. I was kind of hoping you'd be able to figure it out."

"I'll take a look." He stepped into the kitchen.

Julia joined him a moment later as he fiddled with the light switch. "I almost dread asking, but have you seen Poppy today?"

"In my yard, last I saw."

"That's what I was afraid of." She sighed. "You'll never get rid of her now."

"Shemp likes her. He's teaching her to retrieve." Rick looked up. She'd thrown on a shirt over her tank top, and he lost interest in the dogs. Now the cleft above the lacy edge was shadowed and enticing. He doubted she'd planned it that way.

"Mind if I wash my hands?" His fingers felt sticky and he had a bad feeling his palms had been sweating.

"Go ahead. Are you thirsty? There's iced tea."

She took a pitcher out of the refrigerator and set it on the counter, then reached for tall glasses from a nearby cabinet while he dried his hands on

a towel. “Oh—can you grab some ice out of the freezer?”

When Rick opened the door, he couldn’t help grinning at what he found. The freezer was mostly empty. There were a couple of trays of ice, a package of chicken breasts, a small can of orange juice... and four cartons of ice cream, various sizes and flavors. “Guess you’re kinda fond of ice cream.”

She looked up, chagrined. The dimple reappeared. “I have some once in a while. Just hand me the ice, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” As he turned away from the refrigerator, his pager went off. He reached for it, but not fast enough.

Julia looked up. “What was that?”

He yanked the little black box off his belt and glanced at the number on display. Someone downtown wanted to talk to him. “Nothing I can’t ignore for now.”

Her eyebrows started to scrunch down again, but she didn’t ask any more questions. And Rick wasn’t about to offer any explanations.

He didn’t even realize how thirsty he’d been until he slugged back half a glass of tea in one swallow. Julia was doing strange things to his metabolism or something. “Thanks.”

With one foot, he pushed a step stool from the corner of the room into the middle, underneath the light fixture. Keeping up a running commen-

tary, he removed the big glass globe. “So how long were you going to let Bigelow slide on fixing this thing? You should have had an electrician in to look at it a long time ago. Or someone who knows what he’s doing. Don’t you have a father or a brother who can take care of this stuff for you? A boyfriend, maybe?”

He realized he was holding his breath as he waited for her answer, and he exhaled, casually of course.

“No.” She blushed again. “And how would *you* like it if I asked if you have a girlfriend or a—a wife?”

Rick’s fingers stilled and he grinned at her. “I’d be flattered. And I don’t, if you’re asking.”

“I’m not. Besides, I’m perfectly capable of doing minor repairs around here myself. In fact, I took that thing apart once already. It worked for a little while, but then it started acting up again. Maybe I do need an electrician, but I certainly don’t need a *man* to rely on.”

“Right. It might compromise your independence, et cetera, et cetera.”

“I should have known you’d have a sexist attitude.”

He’d started poking around in the fixture and wasn’t looking her way anymore, but he thought he heard laughter in her voice. “No, I don’t. I’m a very liberated kinda guy. But why should an amateur—of either sex—mess with this kind of thing,

when there are so many people around—of either sex—who actually know what they’re doing?”

“Beats me.” Julia laughed. It was a throaty, sexy laugh that made him think of dark nights and rumpled sheets. Of course, everything about her seemed to make him think of dark nights and rumpled sheets. *You’ve got it bad, boy.*

He forced his concentration to stay on the work at hand. A moment later he said, “Bingo.”

“What?”

“It’s real simple. They put in oversized wire nuts. That’s why the circuit keeps breaking. It isn’t anything dangerous. But I’ll have to find some new ones and replace ‘em.”

“Okay.” Julia nodded, looking confused, and Rick wondered why she’d ever bothered trying to fix it herself.

With a laugh, he started to clean up. More to hear her voice again than from real interest in the answer, he said, “So you don’t have a lot of family hanging around, huh?”

“Why do you ask?”

Her expression had closed up so suddenly that his instincts flared. “Just curious.”

“I don’t have any family.”

“Where are your folks?”

“They died years ago.”

“No cousins? Grandparents? Nothing?”

Julia shrugged. Her back was set stony-straight, but her face seemed... unsettled, and Rick decided

to let it go. Now that he'd upset her, he wanted to comfort her, too. His arms itched to wrap around her shoulders. She'd lay her head on his chest and he'd stroke her back, holding her close. He'd kiss her temple, right where the stray strand of silky hair was coming loose from the pins....

Rick blinked. He forcibly derailed the vision in his head, but it wasn't easy. Once he had the glass globe back in place, he glanced around. Julia was gone.

He found her leaning against the open front door, lost in some world of her own. She seemed not even to notice his approach. An unwanted, unfamiliar empathy filled him. He didn't know what her problem was, but he knew that he, too, reacted badly to personal questions. People who tried to discuss certain facets of his private life learned the hard way to mind their own damn business.

He needed to come up with a distraction. Anything would be better than the mental retreat she went on when he mentioned the F-word, Family. And suddenly, more than anything, Rick wanted to see the sparkle return to her eyes. He wanted to see that dimple again.

He raised a hand to her shoulder and she came to with a start. Her eyes focused on his face. "Oh! I'm sorry. Are you done already? Thank you so much. Lord, I'm babbling, aren't I?" She produced a tentative smile.

This was the closest he'd gotten to her. She smelled like something pretty, some kind of flower, and suddenly it was his favorite kind. He'd plant a garden full of the stuff, whatever it was, when he went home again.

"Julia," he said gruffly. When he had her attention, he gave her his best leer, but it felt strained somehow. "Yeah, I'm finished for now. You be sure and call me if anything else, uh, comes up. I'm especially good with bedrooms."

His strategy failed. He'd expected to make her mad, make her laugh, maybe both if he got lucky. Instead, she stopped breathing and stared at his mouth.

Rick forgot all about the dimple and cheering her up. The pounding in his chest slowed and deepened until he could almost hear each beat. He felt the tension radiating from her in waves. He wanted more—he wanted closer—he wanted to run his hand from her shoulder down her arm, around her waist, across her back. Or into her hair, to pull out the pins and weave his fingers in the honey-colored silk.

The sounds of life around them—cars driving by, a dog barking, voices in the distance—faded. Julia seemed taller and he realized dimly that his head was dipping toward hers, while she'd risen onto tiptoes. His hand moved from her shoulder up her neck to cup her cheek. Her skin felt like warm brushed satin.

He met her gaze and realized her eyes were more blue than gray, much bluer than they looked from a distance, the hottest blue he'd ever seen. As he watched they drifted half-shut. His free hand slid inside the shirt she wore over her camisole and played over her back, pulling her just a millimeter closer. Her fingers curled into the mesh knit of his shirt as her lips parted. He thought he felt her merest breath whisper down his spine and to his fingertips. With his mouth just inches from hers, he could almost taste her—

“Yo. Loverboy.”

The cool, masculine voice invaded Rick's sluggish brain. He spun away from Julia before she could react to the interruption, keeping her behind him, shielding her from view. He didn't think about it, he just did it automatically. When he saw who it was, he wondered why he, sharp kind of guy that he was, hadn't even recognized the voice.

His buddy Steel stood at the foot of the porch steps, long and lean, his sandy-blond hair tied back at the base of his neck. As usual, intense hazel eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses belied his casual words.

“Hey, Steel. Nice timing,” Rick growled.

“I work on it, you know.” Steel paused. “Are you ready to go? Or do you want me to come back some other time, like next week, maybe?”

“What I want you to do isn't fit to say out loud.”

Julia peered from behind him. Steel gave her a dry smile. “Hi. Are you the Welcome Wagon lady?”

She tensed. Rick didn’t have to see it, he could feel it. “Lay off, Steel. This is my neighbor Julia. Now get lost.”

“Get lost? We have stuff to do tonight.”

“Wait for me in the car. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Steel shrugged. “Whatever you say. You’re the boss.”

He ambled toward a shiny new luxury sedan standing a few yards away and slid in behind the wheel. Rick was staggered by the fact that Steel had driven up, parked the car, and presumably even slammed the door, all without him noticing. He was always alert—he had to be. When had he ever let his guard down like that?

Never, that’s when.

He turned back to Julia. She rolled a bit of her shirt hem between her thumb and forefinger, not meeting his eye. All of the bristling irritation he’d felt toward Steel evaporated. But with it went the cloud over his brain. He was going to stop this idiotic drooling right now. “You okay?”

She looked up, and he watched as her self-possession slipped back in place. “Yes. Of course.”

“I’ll be back to take care of those wire nuts.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure. I, uh, gotta go now.”

“See you around.” She inched her way inside the house.

“Yeah. Sure.” Rick waited until she closed the door. Then he headed for the car, alternately lecturing and swearing at himself in his mind.

He saw the smirk on Steel’s face and slammed the door harder than necessary.

“Got yourself something new going there?”

“None of your business.”

“She’s a looker.” Steel started the engine and pulled out of the lane into the bigger drive leading to the city street.

“She’s not my type.” It was true. Most of the women he knew, good and bad, were tough as nails. Julia was just as strong, but it was a different sort of strength. And something underneath it seemed to bring out a protectiveness in him that he hadn’t even known he possessed. It unnerved him.

He wasn’t used to vulnerability. It made him think about other people’s feelings, made him think about his own, too, dredging up memories he’d rather forget. Now if he could just remember he was supposed to be working, and keep his damned hormones under control...

“Not your type?” Steel smiled with real humor, something Rick didn’t see him do too often. “You could have fooled me.”

“Shut up and drive, Steel.”

The blessed silence lasted all of about two

minutes. Rick watched the road ahead of them, wishing they were in the Porsche and he was at the wheel. It was just as well. City streets weren't the place to drive off a foul temper, anyway.

Suddenly Steel swerved into a vacant taxi stand on 24th Street and slammed on the brakes. The car jerked to a stop.

“What the—”

Steel cut him off, his voice giving way to uncharacteristic urgency. “Son of a bitch, Rick. You didn't go psycho on me and tell her you're a *cop*, did you?”

Chapter Three



When they walked in the door of Shelby's Grill, Terry Escalante gave Julia a long, hard look, but didn't comment. She remained silent as they found their way from the main room, the bar, to the smaller back room where dinner was served. And she didn't say a word when they sat down at a small, rickety table, after removing an overflowing ashtray and brushing off the chairs.

Half horrified, half-fascinated, Julia took in their surroundings. Shelby's was every bit as dingy inside as it had looked from the outside. Flocked red-velvet wallpaper peeled from the walls, although posters of heavy-metal bands had been tacked up in strategic spots to cover the worst damage. The underlying smell was of age and frying grease.

Finally Terry looked up from her menu and said through gritted teeth, "Tell me again why we have to eat dinner in this hell-hole."

Loud voices, louder music from the jukebox,

and the crash of crockery being slung on tables made it hard to catch her words. She'd obviously kept her voice low on purpose so the other patrons wouldn't hear her. They weren't the type you'd want to offend.

Julia glanced over to make sure the couple at the next table wasn't listening. No, the woman with the spiky blue hair and a ring through her nose was clicking her rake-like fingernails on the table while she glared at the large man sitting across from her. He was so busy shoveling food into his mouth that all Julia could see was the top of his shaved head and the complex tattoos on his bare arms. She turned back to Terry.

"I read in the *Chronicle* that this place is a little-known treasure." Julia blinked, then smiled as guilt nagged at her for telling her best friend such a blatant lie.

"It had better be good. Well, we both have to work tomorrow—at least we're guaranteed an early night. No way am I hanging around here for long after we eat."

They ordered cheese-steak sandwiches from a waitress wearing a "Shelby's—Hog City USA" T-shirt. The food, mercifully, turned out to be okay. Julia hardly noticed the lack of conversation. She was too busy sneaking looks around the place.

After she'd eaten her sandwich, Terry picked up her water glass, inspected it carefully, and took a sip. "Julia?"

“Yes, Terry?”

“The *Chronicle* was wrong.”

“Sorry. But I heard the food was worth the lack of atmosphere.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of atmosphere around here.” Terry wore an amused but impatient frown.

“I guess you’re right.”

Julia’s nerves were shot from worrying that Rick would walk in. She hadn’t considered the possibility when she’d had the brilliant idea of eating dinner here. And it was the last place she wanted him to catch her, especially after what had happened—almost happened—this afternoon. Getting caught snooping around one of his haunts would be so humiliating.

But she’d thought that checking the place out might give her some clue of what he was up to. Actually, she’d thought about nothing beyond Rick since he’d left with his friend Steel. If she hadn’t already made dinner plans with Terry, she might have forgotten to eat.

Terry was watching her carefully. “What’s going on? Something’s bugging you.”

Julia’s first reaction was to deny it. But Terry understood men better than she did. Almost anyone would. Maybe she’d be able to offer advice. “There’s a man.”

Terry’s dark eyes widened. “Finally! I’ve known you for—what? Six, seven years?—and you haven’t gotten serious about anyone in all

that time.”

“This isn’t serious,” Julia said hastily.

“No?”

“He moved in next door to me. He’s kind of different. I didn’t expect to like him, but... I do.”

“Is he a nice guy?”

“No. Yes.” She shook her head, trying to clear it. Was he a nice guy? Life during the past week had been glorious Technicolor, while everything that went before seemed a murky sepia. Rick just moved in and turned it all upside down. “He’s funny—he makes me laugh. And he’s kind of smart-alecky, but then underneath he seems... well, every time I see him it’s an adventure.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“For starters, he has long hair, and a beard, and an earring, and—”

“What is he, an artist or something?”

“He’s a handyman. Or so he says. They hired him and gave him an apartment where I live.”

“A handyman? You’re chasing around after a handyman?” Terry smiled.

“I’m not chasing him. And he seems like an awfully odd handyman, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, he’s gone half the time. He has a lot more money than you’d expect. He just doesn’t act like any handyman I’ve ever seen. It’s weird. I keep thinking he hasn’t been entirely honest with me.” She gave a shrug. “Not that he owes me any kind

of explanations, of course. I hardly know him.”

“Hmm.” Terry tapped her cheek, lost in thought. “What’s his name?”

“Rick Perry.”

“Do you remember my cousin Paul, the cop? I could ask him to check the guy out for you.”

Julia frowned. “Terry, wouldn’t that be an invasion of Rick’s privacy or something?”

“Maybe... I guess. Let’s assume for the moment that he’s okay. Is he interested in you?”

Julia didn’t answer right away. The memory of standing in the shelter of his arms washed over her. She fidgeted in her chair. “Yes. Maybe. It’s hard to tell. I don’t know if I trust him, anyway.”

“You never trust any man you meet, Jules. Sometimes you just have to take a chance on a guy.”

“I don’t have a good track record as a judge of men’s characters, you know.” She’d told Terry about her one disillusioning relationship years earlier. *Danny Spinelli*. The name never failed to remind her of her own foolish downfall.

“They’re not all like him. Or like your mother’s boyfriends. I’ve told you before, you’re letting a few bad experiences haunt the rest of your life.”

“I don’t do that.” Julia looked away. It was an old debate, one they’d never really settled. *Don’t forget how Mama always thought every new man was the answer to her prayers... but you know better now, don’t you?*

Brushing aside the thought, she looked up and

said, "I'm going to run to the rest room. Be right back." Besides the obvious purpose of the trip, it would be a good excuse to look around the place a bit more.

Terry raised an eyebrow, but didn't pursue the subject of Julia and men. "The ladies' room is off the bar. I saw it when we came in. If you don't get mugged on the way, it'll be a miracle."

"I promise to be careful." Julia forced a grin as she pushed back her chair.

"And Jules?"

She turned back to Terry. "Yes?"

"I don't have a sexy neighbor. Keep an eye out for any eligible men while you're passing through, okay?"

"Here?"

"Well, if you happen to see someone who isn't into leather and chains..."

Laughing, Julia turned away and headed for the bar. But her smile faded as soon as Terry couldn't see her any longer. She must have been crazy to come here. What was she looking for, anyway? Some sign that everything wasn't as it should be? Just because she thought she'd seen Rick hanging out in the alley flashing a big wad of bills?

Give me a break.

She stopped in the double-wide doorway leading to the bar area for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the even dimmer light. Scanning the large,

smoky room, she felt hopeless. There was nothing here for her to find.

Her glance skimmed past a broad back and dark, shaggy hair, then darted back again. Her breath caught in her throat.

Rick. Did she think it or say it aloud?

He stood alone at the end of the bar, his elbows resting on the long, scarred wooden surface, a bottle of beer in his hand. One cowboy-booted foot was propped on the rail at the bottom. He'd changed clothes since the afternoon, trading in the casual knit for a plaid flannel shirt. Then, as if it might have been too formal for a place like this, he'd rolled up the sleeves.

Julia told herself to get the heck out of there, and fast. Instead, she watched him in the mirror behind the bar for a heartbeat too long. She knew the instant he saw her, because his eyes narrowed and he swung around.

Lord help her now.

Several different emotions crossed his face within a second or two as he stared at her. The only one she could positively identify was the scowl that settled on his features and stayed. He nodded shortly and pivoted back to the bar.

So that was how it was going to be.

Okay, not a problem. She thought about skipping her trip to the women's room and decided against it—she couldn't let him intimidate her like that. The trouble was, she had to walk by Rick to

get to the doorway where a faded sign pointed out *Rest Rooms*.

His head popped up as she moved past him. When she was about to step into the narrow, dark hall, he said, “Hey, you. Julia.”

She stopped and turned around. He didn’t say a word as she slowly stepped closer to him.

“Are you talking to me?”

“No, I’m talking to the wall. It’s named Julia, too.” His voice betrayed his impatience, though his expression was stony. “You can’t go in there. It’s already occupied.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You can’t use the... uh, the powder room. Someone’s in there.”

“Oh. Then I guess I’ll have to wait, won’t I?”

He shot her a disgusted look. “Look, I don’t know what you’re doing here, but you might want to head out.”

“*What?*” She’d known all along she shouldn’t be here, hadn’t she? But who could have guessed he’d react like *this*?

“Just go home.” He shifted, seeming uncomfortable all of a sudden. “I’m sorry. But you’ve gotta get out of here. Now.”

“Fine,” she snapped, swallowing her mortification. Never let it be said that Julia Newman couldn’t take a hint... okay, a heavy hint.

Rick wasn’t even watching her. He stared past her shoulder. “Great. Just gr—”

“Who the *hell* is this broad, Rick?”

The low-pitched feminine voice brought Julia’s head around. She stared in surprise.

The woman was about thirty, and as hard as they come. Julia could see tiny lines in her face even in the shadowy light. She was tall and wore the shortest shorts Julia had ever seen, with a matching jacket and knee-high leather boots. Her hair was an unlikely platinum blond, long and crimped. Her eyes were heavily made up and she smelled of cheap, musky perfume. This... this *person* eyed Julia up and down, then stepped around her. Resting one hand on Rick’s shoulder, she let her entire length rub against his side. His brows lowered and his jaw tightened.

She didn’t seem the least bit intimidated. “I turn my back for one minute to go to the can and you pick up someone else.”

“Let it go,” he growled, his knuckles white as he gripped the bottle of beer.

It was Mexican beer, Julia noted with new clarity of vision. She wasn’t likely to forget a single solitary scrap of this experience.

“But—”

“I said drop it, Tiffany.”

Tiffany? This is a person named Tiffany?

A few hours earlier Rick had touched Julia with the familiarity of a lover. Now he was rejecting her in favor of *Tiffany*? The woman looked like a streetwalker.

Tiffany shot Rick a petulant look, then turned to Julia, apparently seeking a more receptive audience. “This one’s mine, honey.”

Julia’s throat unlocked. “He’s all yours, if you’re sure you want him. But he isn’t much of a prize.”

“Huh? He takes care of me just fine, ya know.”

“I bet he does. Don’t let me stand in your way.”

“Why don’t you just get lost?” Tiffany tossed her hair back from her shoulders.

Rick’s voice went deep and raspy. “Damn it, Tiffany, I told you—”

Sudden fury exploded inside Julia. It came as a welcome relief. “Don’t worry, I’m leaving.”

She pushed past Rick’s hooker friend. Head up and back straight, she strode toward the door to the restaurant area.

Before she got there, she stopped in surprise. Rick’s friend Steel sat with another man at a small round table in the middle of the room. As she met his watchful gaze, he shook his head almost imperceptibly and nodded toward the exit.

She had to force herself not to run.

But instead of following her instincts and heading straight outside, she walked carefully back to the dining room and sat in her chair across from Terry.

“Oh, my *God*. Was the bathroom that bad?”

Julia folded her trembling hands in her lap. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re as white as a sheet. Are you all right? What happened in there?”

“Nothing worth repeating.” She looked around the room. “But... do you think there’s a back door around here somewhere?”



Julia shut off the alarm clock Friday morning and closed her eyes again. It was way too early to wake up. She’d lain in the dark most of the night, planning torture sessions for Rick, with his friend Tiffany running a close second choice. Through the thin bedroom walls, she’d heard him coming home in the early hours. She’d held her breath, fearful of hearing voices, too, his deep and rumbling, hers higher-pitched, of course. But there was nothing. Still, Julia knew the truth. He was every bit as low-down as she’d feared.

That sparkle, that inescapable magnetism she’d felt from him, had just been a mirage. She was probably right about him being up to no good, too. The whole set-up last night, the wad of bills Rick had been waving around yesterday, even the pager he wore, smacked of drug trade. Lord knew there was no end to the amount of trouble a man could get into if he tried hard enough.

Julia hugged her pillow close to her chest. Worst of all was knowing that beneath her anger lay a heavy vein of disappointment.

She forced herself to get up and take a quick, hot shower. But as she yanked on her underwear, she couldn't help comparing her own small bosom to Tiffany's generous proportions, and she wondered glumly why she even bothered with a bra. She certainly didn't have much to fill it out.

Stupid thought. Bust measurements weren't something she'd paid any attention to in the past. Rick had scrambled her brain in more ways than one.

She fumbled with the buttons on her blouse. Oh, what was the rush? It was so late that she'd already missed her bus, anyway. She'd end up driving to school, having to park Lord-knew-where, and still rush in at the last minute, temper frayed.

Julia wouldn't have thought things could get any worse, until she raced out the door stuffing papers into her burgundy leather briefcase. Then she stopped dead, shock bursting inside her and rippling all the way to her fingertips.

Rick stood in the lane out front, tossing an old tennis ball for Shemp. He looked up, his face going still, when she stepped onto the porch. He didn't even seem to notice that he'd made a wild throw, leaving the dog scrambling through the shrubbery for the ball.

"Julia." His voice was soft and low, nothing like it had sounded the night before, as he started to walk in her direction.

“Don’t you ever sleep?”

“Not much.” Rick shrugged. “I’ve been waiting for you. Can we—”

“You must be joking.” Waiting for her? He had to be crazy to think she’d ever even acknowledge his existence again. She stepped off the porch and brushed past him, walking fast.

He followed her down the lane toward their shared garage. Shemp trotted along beside him. “I just want to talk to you for a minute.”

“We have nothing to talk about.”

“About last night—”

Julia whirled around. “Is there something wrong with your hearing?”

His body stiffened and he stopped, glaring at her. “Not a thing.”

“Then *go away and leave me alone*. Okay?”

“No problem, princess,” he said, his voice cold. “Come on, Shemp.”

Instead of obeying him, Shemp nudged Julia’s hand, trying to get her to take the soggy tennis ball and toss it.

She pushed his nose away. “Aaack! Not now, you.”

The dog dropped the ball at her feet and whined. She looked up to see Mrs. McCully across the way glued to her kitchen window. So much for maintaining a little dignity in trying circumstances. Julia turned around and marched the rest of the way to the garage, swearing under

her breath.

She was late, she was cranky, she had big-dog slobber on her hands. And it was all Rick's fault.



“It’s your own fault, you know. Use a snitch like Tiffany, and she’ll stab you in the back first chance she gets. She always goes for what’s best for Tiffany.” Steel leaned back against the leather chesterfield and stretched out his legs. He raised his coffee mug in a mock toast.

Steel was getting a lot of mileage out of the situation, Rick thought sourly. Good thing he hadn’t been around for this morning’s scene out front. “They all do. Anyway, she’s always come through for me.”

“Only because she owes you.” Without missing a beat, Steel maneuvered the conversation right back to what had become his favorite subject. “So what are you going to do about the babe next door?”

“Nothing. She’s out of the picture.” Rick wanted to kick himself. He’d sat in that damned bar half the night, tuning out Tiffany and her constant whining, worrying about Julia’s feelings. Her *feelings*, for Pete’s sake. As if she were nursing a broken heart. Ha!

“Yeah, right. She looks like she’s sitting right in the middle of it. And I keep thinking I’ve seen

her somewhere before. Are you sure she's clean?"

"Absolutely." He'd stake his life on it. Even if she was meaner than a twenty-year beat man when pushed, he sensed an invisible core of innocence that she wasn't quite as good at hiding as she meant to be.

"Then you'd better keep her out of the way."

"Steel, do you think that after ten years of police work I might—just *might*—be able to handle this on my own?"

"You've been doing a hell of a job so far."

"Butt out. I have everything under control." He took a deep breath and hoped it was true. "Is this what you dropped by for? A lecture? I've got better things to do."

"Nope. I wanted to tell you I found a numbers runner who used to work for Darryl Williams. He's willing to talk to us, but he won't come down to the station. Said he could meet us at a bus stop on Eddy at three o'clock, though."

"Oh yeah?" Julia slid to the further recesses of his mind. "Let's hustle. I can't wait to haul in that bastard Williams."

Steel snorted. "Hey, I thought you and Darryl were getting to be bosom buddies. Didn't he send you a round of drinks last night at the bar?"

"You're just jealous." Rick grinned. "You wish you could be the one who gets to spend sixteen hours a day fixing clogged drains, chasing after snitches and getting cuddly with Darryl Williams."

“You got it, buddy.”

Rick knew this case would be wrapped up soon and he could go back to something resembling a normal life. He'd never spent a whole lot of time at his condo in North Beach, but now the place was starting to look more lonely than usual. Stopping by every day or two to check his mail and messages wasn't enough.

The Williams case was creating an above-average amount of stress in his life. But he suspected it was due more to Julia Newman tripping into his life than to any trouble Williams might give him. “Come on, let's get going. We've got work to do.”



It had been the Friday from hell. Julia pushed away from her desk and swiveled around in the rolling chair. She checked that everything in the classroom was ready for Monday, assignments written on the chalkboard, bookshelf straightened. Then she blew a few stray wisps of hair out of her eyes and stood up. Gathering her purse and briefcase, she headed out the door.

Now where had she parked that dratted car? Oh right, it was way over on Eddy Street. She sighed as she shifted the bags in her hands. Remembering she'd driven to school also meant remembering the argument with Rick this morning, and the scene in the bar last night. As if she could

easily forget them.

When she turned onto Eddy, right away she noticed a group of men, maybe four or five of them, up ahead at the end of the block. They were hanging around the bench next to a bus stop. Her car was parked across the street at the corner opposite the men, and she figured the smart thing to do would be to cross right now. No sense asking for trouble.

Anyway, they made her think of Rick, with their long hair and beards and jeans and T-shirts. She didn't want to think about him anymore. She'd spent too much time thinking about him today—ever since he'd moved in, really—as it was. And he absolutely, positively wasn't worth it.

On the other side of the street, she hurried past a boarded-up storefront with two prostitutes leaning lazily in the doorway, reminding her of Rick's friend Tiffany. They giggled and whispered when she walked by. Then there was a pawnshop that was open, but protected with bars on the big front window and a folding gate at the door. Next came a garish-looking bar and a rundown apartment building. Clothing and bed linens hung from some of the windows. An old woman sat on the front steps, muttering to herself.

But in the alley two girls colored on the sidewalk with chalk, and they looked up and waved. "Hi, Ms. Newman." They'd been in her class a couple of years ago.

Julia waved back with an absent smile. Her mind was still gnawing on the problem of how to avoid Rick for the rest of her life. As she neared her car she wasn't paying much attention to her surroundings, and she missed the approach of three teenage boys, all hard-eyed and tough looking, until it was too late.

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Lucy Grijalva

Lucy has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area all her life. She attended the University of California while working as a waitress at a coffee shop, a job that provided her with a lifetime of ideas for interesting characters. Since then she has worked in the fields of marketing and promotion.

She loves stories about cops. Her husband Bill was a police officer who was shot and killed in the line of duty, and much of her writing has a backdrop of police work. Lucy has two school-age children.

Her outside interests include quilting and needlework, playing trivia games, people watching and of course reading. She reads a wide range of books, with a focus on romance novels and historical fiction and non-fiction.

Undercover Love is Lucy's first published novel, although she has had articles published in trade magazines in the past. She is currently working on another romance and a mainstream novel about a troubled police officer.

Lucy Grijalva may be contacted by email at lgrijalva@ccnet.com.



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