

Praise for
South of Justice

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thrillers

“Past secrets test the bonds of family loyalty and a fledgling love affair. The unwavering strength of the protagonists, their commitment to the truth and to each other will have you cheering for *South of Justice*.”

--Melissa Hladik Meyer, Author of *Good Company*

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Joni M. Fisher

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South of Justice

September 17, 2008

Terri Pinehurst believed that happiness, like respect, had to be earned. Being named the keynote speaker at this year's conference of her peers felt like earned respect. The last time she felt sheer happiness, well, that was a few years ago at this hotel. Fleeting happiness at best. But still. She hoped none of the New York Marriott Marquis staff recognized her, especially that kind bellman who hauled her to her room on a luggage cart after an epic bridesmaid's party.

Too caffeinated to sit still, she had an hour to kill before her address, so she headed away from the conference ballroom in search of a ladies room to freshen her lipstick and tame her hair.

"Terri Pinehurst!" a deep voice called from behind.

She flinched then spun around. Justin Cook, her smart and funny flirt of a study partner from grad school, grinned back at her. "Justin!"

He greeted her with a hug. "So great to see you! Hey, I'm moving to New York to be closer to relatives."

For a moment, she forgot how to breathe. "What about your practice out west?"

His smile dimmed by half. He glanced at his hands, twisted his wedding band, and peered up at her. "We need to be near Poughkeepsie to take care of my wife's father. The sooner, the better. I should have called you, but I wanted to tell you in person."

"You're married?"

"Don't be shocked. I got a life."

"So you're here to make contacts?" She aimed for a casual tone.

Justin nodded. He was bulkier in the shoulders than she remembered.

"I'll introduce you around at the mixer after the keynote speech." If she had been in solo practice, she would have hired him on the spot, but she had partners to consult first.

He picked up her left hand. "I thought for sure you'd be married by now."

She sighed. In the eight years since graduation, she had built up the practice her father brought her into, hiring partners, doing her job, managing the business. Her pals called her the queen of delayed gratification, because she put her long-term goals first, which meant putting off her love life until later. Always later. Besides, as busy as she was she didn't have the energy to get out to meet men.

Justin released her hand. "I'm sure your business is going strong, but you need more life in your life. Marriage is wonderful." His enthusiasm lit up his eyes.

"Marriage looks good on you." If she ever got married, she'd resent having to move her practice and start over. Did his wife appreciate the sacrifice he was making to start his business over? Poor Justin.

"How will I find you?"

During her father's generation, this was a male-dominated field. By far, she wouldn't be the only woman attending, but as keynote speaker she would be the most visible. "It will be easy."

His gaze ran up and down her body while he backed off toward the conference room. "Red hair, green suit. Looking good, Pinehurst."

"You too, Cook." She checked her jacket pockets. ID badge, lipstick, pepper spray, car keys, and cash. She strolled down the corridor and around the corner for a restroom.

Up ahead a large, broad-shouldered man in a tuxedo and cowboy boots leaned one arm on a doorjamb. Terri eyed his fine physique and had passed him before she noticed the sign above him. *Ladies*.

He spoke to the door. "Come on out, please." His Southern accent sounded almost foreign in the heart of New York City. Maybe the boots weren't a costume, like the 'all hat, no cattle' men who wanted to impress women by play-acting a lifestyle.

She sized him up. Thirtyish. Six feet, two hundred pounds. Short reddish hair. Clean-shaven. Broad shouldered. Whatever his drama was, he needed to take it elsewhere. With one hand in her pocket on her pepper spray, she would ask him nicely to move out of the way. If he turned aggressive, he'd immediately regret it.

Aramis aftershave wafted from the large stranger as she tapped his firm shoulder.

Startled, he turned. The combination of his size, the aftershave, and his handsome face hitched up her heart rate, then he aimed his green eyes at her. "Please, help me."

She couldn't look away. Maybe it was the suggestion from an old friend that put her in the frame of mind to think of romance, but something about this man woke up her body and clouded her mind.

A whimpering sound carried from the bathroom to the hallway.

The man scowled. "Ma'am, there's a young lady in there I'd like to talk to. Would you please coax her on out?"

"Why did you call me ma'am?" Her tone came out sharper than intended.

He sucked in a quick breath and straightened to his full height as if bracing for a slap.

"Good breeding."

His charm relaxed her. "It's Miss."

He smiled at her while his pupils widened.

Great, Mr. Charmer has his girlfriend crying in the bathroom and now he's eyeing me. "You're not from the city are you?"

"I work in the city. Today, I'm attending a friend's wedding." He nodded toward the noisy ballroom.

"Is that the *bride*?" Terri nodded toward the restroom.

"No."

"Okay then, are you the reason she's crying?"

"Absolutely not."

"You'd say that even if you were." She squinted at him. "No promises."

The charmer stepped aside and opened the door.

Terri stepped through the doorway and eased up to the long granite ladies room counter. Leaning over the sink to apply lipstick, she sneaked a peek in the mirror of a long, lean beauty sitting on a cushioned bench. The way the young woman's head hung, her abundant, brown curls obscured her face. From her deep teal designer sheath dress, down her long, athletic legs, to her sparkling designer heels, the weeping beauty could have been a woman wronged or a spoiled drama queen not getting her way.

"I just met a gorgeous, well-mannered man outside," Terri ventured.

The young woman raised her head, causing hair to part and tumble down her shoulders and back. Her face glistened. Two thin streaks of brown mascara ran from the outside corners of her eyes halfway down her cheeks. She opened her eyes, revealing irises the color of predators—lions, owls, tigers, leopards, and hawks. Amber was rare in humans. Terri plucked a handful of tissues from the counter while she tried to assess the beauty's age. Eighteen? Twenty? No wonder Mr. Charmer was staking out the bathroom. He had to be ten years older than her.

"He asked me to invite you outside to talk." Terri sat beside her on the tufted bench and handed over the tissues.

"Thank you." The young woman dabbed her eyes, missing the lines of mascara, then she blew her nose.

"So why are you crying?"

"Disappointment." Her bottom lip quivered.

Having witnessed the attention-getting pretend weeping that turned men into putty over the years, Terri judged this as genuine grief. The fact she was crying in private spoke volumes.

"Did someone break your heart?"

She nodded. Her eyes welled up, threatening more tears.

"On purpose?"

The girl shook her head and let out a shuddering sigh.

"Is it that man in the tux outside?"

The young beauty stood, unfolding gracefully like a great Blue Heron, much taller than expected. She strode to the sink and wet a paper towel. "No. Blake is one of the kindest men I've ever met."

Confused, Terri looked up at her. It felt wickedly selfish to hope that the gorgeous man outside was just this girl's friend or brother trying to comfort her, but Terri hoped so nonetheless. "Is Blake your date?"

The tall beauty removed the mascara smears from her cheeks. "No. We're both friends of the groom."

“And you’re in love with...?”

“Vincent Gunnerson. He’s Blake’s partner.”

“Partner?” Oh, not another handsome gay man. What a waste. *I certainly can’t let her wait around for that to change.* “That must be quite...a shock.”

The beauty snorted and addressed Terri’s reflection in the mirror. “Not that kind of partner. They’re co-workers.”

Buoyed by the news the young woman had no claim on the hunk in the tux and that he was straight, Terri stuck out her hand. “I’m Terri Pinehurst.”

“I’m Nefi Jenkins.”

A suggestion of recognition tickled the back of Terri’s consciousness. The name Nefi was quite unusual. She’d heard it before, but when? Perhaps this girl was a rising tennis star, or singer, or ballerina. To have such an expensive wardrobe at her age meant wealth from somewhere. Her Louboutin’s closed-toe glitter pumps cost \$700. Terri knew because one of her partner’s wives owned a pair.

After they had shaken hands, Terri asked, “So what are you going to do?”

“Dig a hole and die in it.” Nefi sounded like she meant it.

“Please, not in those shoes.”

A corner of Nefi’s mouth tugged upward for a moment.

Terri felt a big sister kind of protectiveness for Nefi because she had once cried like this in a restroom over a man. “The way I see it, you have a choice. You can hide from the world every time you’re disappointed or hurt, or you can master your feelings and go back to the party.”

Nefi spoke softly. “I waited six years to see Vincent.”

Six years? “Why?”

Her long fingers stroked a shot bead chain that hung on her neck and disappeared under the collar of her dress. “He’s older than me. I turn twenty-one next month.”

So this began as a teenage crush. “And you thought he’d wait for you to grow up?”

Nefi closed her eyes and nodded.

Terri had once been that naïve and full of hope in a relationship that ended in crushing pain and disillusionment. Was Nefi *that* innocent or had Vincent misled her? Terri was not

above shaming this Vincent character if he had. Some men fooled even older, more experienced women.

Don't judge. Get the facts. "Why did you think he would wait for you?"

"He gave me his dog tags." Nefi sniffled. "I was waiting for him."

How could a girl be almost legal age in America and so unworldly? *Uh oh.* "Not that it's any of my business but did anything else happen between you two?"

"No sex if that's what you mean."

Terri sighed. So this guy gave her his dog tags. Oh, the unintended consequences of a good deed.

Nefi dabbed tissues on her eyes. For a moment, she stared at her reflection in the mirror then her eyes closed.

Favoring logic over emotion, Terri decided to nudge Nefi toward considering a healthier perspective of her situation. "You know there are six billion people in the world. Let's say half of them are men. I'd bet most of them would be thrilled to go out with you."

Ever so slightly Nefi raised her chin. "Maybe the boys and the old men."

"So maybe one *billion* in dating age range. Roughly equivalent to the entire population of China." Terri stopped when she realized she was babbling.

The air conditioner *whooshed* gently overhead. Voices in the hallway carried through the doorway.

"I can master my feelings. I refuse to miss this party because Vincent brought a date." Nefi straightened her spine and pulled her shoulders back. Her posture reminded Terri of a rehabilitated eagle the moment it hopped from the open cage door onto the grass and recognized freedom.

"Atta girl." Though it could ruin any chance she had with Blake, she said, "In my opinion, the hunk in the tux must be some kind of friend to wait outside a ladies' room for you."

Nefi seemed to be examining Terri. After a moment, she asked, "Blake?" as if she had never considered him anything but a friend, as if she had not noticed he was a hunk.

"It seems to me that *Blake* cares for you." At the risk of sounding desperate, she whispered, "But if you aren't interested in him, please, please, introduce me."

Nefi laughed. It was a joyful sound.

* * *

What a mess. Blake paced outside the ladies' room.

Twenty minutes earlier, he had made a complete fool of himself. His brothers often told him weddings put women in a romantic mood. With that in mind, and two flutes of champagne in hand, he decided to make himself available for conversation and dancing.

Finding a woman unaccompanied, he braved the best conversation-starter he could think of. "It's a crying shame to see a lovely woman sitting all alone."

In the dimly lit ballroom, the beautiful young lady immediately stood and hugged him. When she released him from the hug, he assessed her with a quick look-see. *Guess my brothers got this right.*

"I'll take that as an invitation." He sat in the chair to her left and stared back at her. She had long brown hair hanging in loose curls to her waist, a fresh face, and great legs. Friendly as a Walmart Greeter, too.

She smiled at him with a look of expectation that put him ill at ease.

"Are you family or a friend of the bride or groom?" Blake asked, struggling for conversation.

"Friend of the groom." She smirked.

She was toying with him. It was a stretch of the imagination that the groom, Ruis Ramos, had friends his little sister's age, but Blake decided to play along. "Me, too. Are you here alone?"

"My aunt and uncle came with me." She nodded toward the empty chairs to her right. A beaded purse left unguarded at the table sparkled in the candlelight.

"So make my day. Tell me you're over twenty-one."

"Next month."

A cartoon plane on fire—spiraling toward the ground—played in his head. Blake set one flute of champagne out of her reach. He took a sip from the other one.

She smiled. "Congratulations on joining the FBI."

Huh? How did she know? “Ah, thank you.” He leaned back in his chair. Searching memories, he came up empty. No name. Then her yellow eyes locked with his. *Nefi Jenkins*. “Oh, man.” He slapped his free hand on his face.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Nefi snorted just like the fourteen-year-old he remembered. “Did they teach you those *keen* observations skills at Quantico?”

Grateful that Nefi forgave him, he relaxed a little in his shame. “I could never forget you. I just didn’t recognize you.” He set down his drink and hugged her.

Senator and Mrs. Jenkins returned to the table. The Senator’s glare led Blake to release Nefi and stand up.

Blake stepped around the table then he pulled out Mrs. Jenkins’ chair. “Good to see you, Senator and Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Uncle, Aunt, you remember Blake Clayton,” Nefi said.

The Senator’s expression softened as he shook Blake’s hand. “Great to see you again!”

Mrs. Jenkins greeted him with a gentle hug. “You look so handsome in a tuxedo. Doesn’t he?” she asked Nefi.

“Of course he does.” Nefi closed her eyes as if to hide an eye roll. “Every man looks better in a tux.”

Blake fidgeted as he stood between Nefi and her aunt. He sensed Mrs. Jenkins was granting tacit approval of him. He traded a look with Mrs. Jenkins to remind her to forget trying to redirect Nefi’s heart from her obsession with Vincent. Before he could prevent humiliating himself further, the DJ announced the arrival of the wedding party.

The DJ announced the attendants, “...followed by Groomsman Vincent Gunnerson and his date Rose Moreno.”

Rose’s red shiny dress looked like the seams were being tested. It was a wonder she could walk in it.

Nefi had let out a strangled sound and high-tailed it out the nearest door. After glancing at Nefi’s aunt, Blake had followed.

So here he was, outside the ladies room, waiting for Nefi to recover. The mystery accomplice he'd recruited to flush Nefi out of the bathroom was still in there. Was she as kind as she was smoking hot or would she tell Nefi that all men were worthless liars, cheats, and low-lives? She didn't have that angry, hairy feminist man-hater look, but who knows what women think?

What a mess. Nefi's torch still burned for his best friend. And then there was the Rose factor. Blake believed Vincent was better off single than with a high-maintenance woman like Rose.

Poor Nefi.

Blake leaned against the wall, waiting. He braced one hand on his hip and combed his fingers on his other hand through his short reddish hair.

* * *

When Terri strode from the restroom, she thought Blake the Charmer looked like a *Gentleman's Quarterly* cover model the way he leaned against the wall across the hallway in a casual, sexy pose. The tuxedo-cowboy boot combo helped. Her heart skipped ahead of her like an eager child.

Blake gave them a double-take and a grin.

Nefi smiled, all dry-eyed and composed. "Terri Pinehurst, I'd like to introduce you to Blake Clayton, a man who didn't shoot me when he probably should have."

Air rushed from Blake's lungs creating an explosive sound between a cough and a laugh. His hand hesitated a few inches away from Terri's hand, but he recovered with a chuckle.

"Now there's an endorsement you don't get every day."

"Is she being melodramatic?" Terri shook Blake's hand.

"Perhaps you'd like to join us for drinks and an explanation?"

"I'm here for a convention." Terri remained rooted in place. "Seriously, why does she believe you should have shot her?"

"I would love to tell you that story if you have the time." He held out his elbow.

Very smooth. Terri glanced at Nefi for her reaction.

Nefi added, "If you come to the reception I can point out Vincent, and you can tell me if I'm wasting my time."

Terri had spent so much of her life saying no to things outside of duty and work, what harm would it do to take a brief detour? "I can't stay long, but I'll take that dare." She slipped her hand into the crook of Blake's large, firm forearm.

Blake offered Nefi his other elbow, then he led the way into the crowded ballroom to a table, triangulated by the dance floor, the buffet, and the bar. After pulling out two chairs, he took their drink orders then headed to the bar.

The instant after he left, Terri placed her hand on Nefi's shoulder. "Is this awkward? Just say the word and I'll leave."

"Stay. Blake is eager to tell you how he rescued me."

Wait. What? "But you said he was going to shoot you."

"He tells it better than I do." Nefi's attention swung toward Blake at the bar. She took deep breaths and squeezed a tissue as if alarmed.

Terri followed Nefi's gaze.

Blake stepped in line behind a taller dark-haired man in a tuxedo as the bartender placed a flute of champagne and a beer on the counter. After the man dropped a bill in the tip bowl, he picked up his drinks and pivoted. He smiled broadly at Blake and spoke.

Nefi leaned close to Terri and whispered, "That's Vincent talking to Blake."

Whoa. Okay then. Terri immediately understood Nefi's attraction to Vincent.

A third man slid up beside Blake and Vincent at the bar.

"The shorter man is the groom, Ruis." Nefi smiled wistfully. "The three of them rescued me."

"I can't wait to hear this story." Fantasies of being rescued by them tickled her consciousness. *Maybe Justin was right about getting more life in my life.*

The bartender plunked a bottle of water and a glass on the counter. The groom twisted off the bottle top. With a sheen of perspiration on his face, he looked like an advertisement for a Spanish men's cologne.

The men laughed at something the groom said.

Blake glanced over his shoulder and waved at Terri and Nefi.

Vincent squinted in their direction, causing Nefi to gasp.

“Keep breathing.” Terri placed a hand on Nefi’s shoulder. She was grateful the dim lights concealed her own open-mouthed gape at the oh-so-handsome trio of testosterone.

Nefi leaned forward, her spine stiff. “What’s he saying?”

* * *

Blake watched Vincent drop a ten-dollar bill into the tip bowl, pick up his champagne and beer, and wheeled around. The ballrooms lights dimmed to near darkness and the music began.

Normally a gentleman, Blake refused to pretend he liked Vincent’s girlfriend Rose. Being a loyal friend meant speaking the truth, whether or not the listener wanted to hear it. He had hinted once he didn’t believe Rose was in the relationship for the long haul by calling her a social climber.

“Getting her drunk won’t help.”

“I could get drunk.” Vincent grunted.

Ruis slid up beside them at the bar. “Water, please.”

The bartender plunked a chilled bottle and glass on the counter. Ruis twisted off the cap and downed a swig.

“I think it’s simply poor form,” Blake said, “when the groom is prettier than the bride.”

“Are you saying my wife isn’t pretty?”

Blake’s hands and feet tingled from a surge of adrenalin. It wasn’t smart to insult a SEAL.
“No.”

“What?” Ruis said.

Vincent muttered to Blake, “Digging your own grave, man.”

“Your wife is pretty. Very pretty. I mean she’s beautiful—”

Ruis laughed. “Go have fun with anyone but my sisters.” He left with his water.

Blake exhaled. His heart rate slowed back to normal.

Vincent laughed.

The DJ announced the first dance for the bride and groom.

Blake glanced over his shoulder and waved at Nefi and Terri. “Hey, got a minute? You have to meet the ladies at my table.”

“Rose will think you’re trying to introduce me to other women.”

"Better women," Blake said.

Vincent squinted at the ladies. "How did you find two?"

"Open bar. The more they drink, the better I look."

"Or it could be the tux." Vincent released his pointer finger from his grip on the champagne glass and aimed it at Blake. "Makes you look housebroken."

Blake told the bartender, "Rum and coke, and a ginger ale, please."

Vincent raised his eyebrows. "Mother and daughter?"

The young bartender snickered.

Blake stuffed a one-dollar bill in the tip jar as he glowered at the bartender. "What are you laughing at?" He said to Vincent, "The women are unrelated, thank you very much. You really *need* to meet them."

"Another time." Vincent waded into the crowd gathering at the edge of the dance floor.

* * *

"I wish I could read lips," Terri sighed. She wanted a warning if they were planning to come to the table. This might be too soon for Nefi to recover from the disappointment of a seven-year wait. Of course, now she had a clearer understanding of Nefi's infatuation. Vincent was manly handsome, the kind who drew second and third glances, and he appeared closer to Nefi's age than Blake. It also made sense that the towering young woman would seek out a tall man.

"So what do you think of Vincent?"

"I wouldn't throw him out of bed for eating crackers."

The men glanced back at Nefi and Terri. The bride and groom stepped to the center of the dance floor and Vincent headed away. Crisis averted.

"What does that mean?" Nefi asked.

Before Terri could answer, Blake placed their drinks on the table and sat between Terri and Nefi. He grinned and draped his arms over the backs of their chairs. "Let the rumors begin." He cupped Terri's shoulder, and gave Nefi's a quick squeeze.

"What does it mean," Nefi asked, "when someone says 'I wouldn't throw him out of bed for eating crackers'?"

Terri leaned forward to see across Blake's chest at Nefi. "It's just an expression." She downed a gulp of rum and coke. Heavy on the rum, it chilled and burned at the same time. Let it go. Let it go.

Blake laughed, raising an eyebrow at Terri before turning to Nefi. Terri looked away toward the dance floor. Blood rushed to her face. *Of course he thinks I was talking about him.* She suddenly envied all burrowing animals. Oh, to tunnel out of here right now.

"It means," Blake said, "a woman would forgive a man for some behaviors to keep him around." He patted Terri's shoulder, leaving his arm draped across the back of her chair.

"Oh." Nefi sipped her ginger ale.

The music swelled as the bride and groom danced.

"Speaking of forgiveness, Nefi, dear," Blake said just loudly enough to be heard over the music, "remember Matthew eighteen, verse twenty-two?" He pulled his arms away from the back of Terri's chair and faced Nefi.

Nefi whispered, "Yeah, yeah. We should forgive others, not just once or twice, but seventy times seven times." She stood and pointed into the crowd. "He's got four hundred and eighty-nine to go!"

Terri chuckled. Blake bowed his head and shook it.

Nefi dropped back into her chair. "I suppose he's forgiven me a time or two." To Terri she said, "Once I knocked Vincent down and threatened him with knives."

Who are these people? Terri leaned forward in her chair. "Why did you do that?"

Blake planted a hand on Nefi's forearm. "Technically, it was a machete and a hunting knife."

Nefi shrugged before taking another sip of her ginger ale.

"It was a simple misunderstanding." Blake leaned back in his chair and said to Terri. "She was distraught. Vincent had something of her father's so she logically suspected we might have been involved in killing her parents in Brazil."

Jenkins. Recognition slapped Terri in the back of the head. She gasped. "Nefi Jenkins. Are you Senator Jenkins' niece?"

Nefi nodded.

"I remember it on the news. Your parents were missionaries. Oh, I'm so sorry."

"And Vincent, Ruis," he pointed to the groom, "and I went down to Brazil to find her and bring her to the states. Our sweet girl was dehydrated, malnourished, covered in leeches, and wearing scary looking war paint when we found her." He patted Nefi's forearm like a protective big brother.

"And none of them spoke Portuguese," Nefi added, "so there we were, with me on top of Vincent, holding a machete to his neck and a knife at his ribs. Blake drew his gun on me while Ruis was trying to look up words in a *Spanish-Portuguese dictionary*."

Groups of men in Navy dress uniform assembled near the dance floor. Terri could imagine the groom blithely flipping pages in a book while a life-and-death drama unfolded in front of him. These men, who probably served together, were all military and all deadly handsome.

Blake rested his hand on the back of Nefi's chair. "Good times."

Terri and Nefi laughed. Their dance over, the groom tugged on the bride's arm and they strolled toward Terri, Blake, and Nefi.

"Happy Brazilian Independence Day," Ruis said, pulling Nefi out of her chair for a hug.

Nefi smiled. "Thank you." Then Nefi hugged the petite bride who looked like a precious doll adorned in crinoline and lace.

Ruis glanced at Terri. His expression was neutral.

"This is Terri Pinehurst," Blake said. "She's here for a conference, but I corralled her from the hallway."

A sudden tingly warmth spread through Terri when Blake said her name.

"Well done," Ruis said. "You're a chemical engineer?"

"I'm with the other convention, next ballroom down." Standing, Terri glanced at her watch. *Yipes. How time flies when you're having rum.* "Congratulations on your wedding. I'm sorry, but I really have to leave." She retrieved her name badge and a business card from her jacket pocket and clipped the ID to her lapel.

Ruis smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor Pinehurst."

Blake placed his hands on Terri's shoulders and spun her around to read her name tag. His touch warmed her down to her toes.

“You’re a doctor?”

“Veterinarian.” She braced for the look of disappointment that often followed when she clarified what kind of doctorate she had earned.

Blake’s pupils widened and a smile lit up his face. His aftershave wafted over her. He released her shoulders with a pat. “And you’re the keynote speaker?”

Nefi and Ruis laughed, but Terri didn’t know why. “That’s why I need to be on time.” She hugged Nefi. “Call me. I would love to know how this works out for you.” She palmed Nefi her business card.

Blake tapped Nefi on the shoulder. “I’ll be right back. Save a dance for me.”

“Wait!” Nefi picked up her camera from the table and aimed it at them.

Terri reached her hand into the crook of his arm and leaned against him. A flicker of hope and friendship sparked within her toward Blake and his friends. She suddenly longed for more time with these unusual strangers.

Nefi took a photo of them and then one of Ruis and his bride.

Terri reluctantly released Blake.

“May I walk you to your meeting?” Blake asked.

Terri sought Nefi’s reaction to the offer. Nefi nodded, her emotions apparently under control.

“Thank you, Blake. I’d like that very much.”

They strolled in silence down the thickly carpeted hallway. Being escorted by a gorgeous man in a tuxedo and cowboy boots attracted the subtle attention of strangers. She lived in the moment, savoring his presence, his cologne, and his attention. There are people who are so uncomfortable with silence they fill every gap with small talk. Blake seemed at ease, and Terri found the silence companionable. At the open double-doors a poster on a tripod announced her as a Specialist in Large Animals.

“Thank you.” Blake lifted her hand and gently kissed it. “You made my evening memorable, and you rescued a young lady from needless depression.”

“And thanks to you, I’ve gone from being a respected professional to wedding crasher.”

Long dormant sensations bubbled up inside her when his warm lips touched her hand. She imagined peeling off his tuxedo to caress his muscled chest and arms, to touch his bare skin. Looking up, she expected to see an amused expression, but his face seemed relaxed.

His direct stare keened her attention. She stared back into his green eyes and sensed hunger there.

Conference attendees eased around them, gawking. Blake seemed unwilling to move away from her. When a fidgety man appeared beside them, clearing his throat, Blake slowly released her hand.

“Doctor Pinehurst?” the man squeaked. “I have your microphone.”

Terri took the small device and hooked it over her ear then she adjusted the thin-wire microphone to the outer edge of her mouth. The technician then held up the transmitter. She clipped it to the back of her waistband with practiced movements.

“And back to the respected professional.” Blake smiled and then gazed at her as if trying to anchor her image in his memory.

She brushed aside her professionalism about avoiding public displays of affection because she had to signal her interest as quickly as possible. If Blake served in the Navy like the other men in uniform at the wedding reception, he would understand her need to seize the day. If she never saw him again, she did not want to regret a missed opportunity. She pushed the mouthpiece away from her lips then planted her hands on his chest, rose on her tiptoes, and kissed him soundly on the mouth. For a moment during the kiss—gravity, time, and place lost their hold on her—nothing mattered beyond his full, warm lips that lightly tethered her to earth.

He tasted as wonderful as he looked.

The sound technician cleared his throat.

Terri reluctantly pulled away. She pivoted on her sensible heels then entered the grand ballroom. She floated across the ballroom and up the stairs. There she stood, waiting beside the podium, while the chairman of the conference, a fellow alumnus, introduced her. She pulled her note cards from her jacket pocket and tugged the mouthpiece back down.

At the back of the room, Blake stood in the center aisle with a trouble-making grin.

* * *

Blake danced with Nefi, and then the bridesmaids urged him to join them in the “Macarena,” a song he remembered from high school. Some of the bridesmaids were Ruis’s sisters, but despite Ruis’s warning, he decided to risk it since they were under the watch of Ruis’s father and Navy SEAL pals. Besides, as Vincent often pointed out, “Blake and dignity were rarely in the same place at the same time.”

He waited until Nefi left with Senator and Mrs. Jenkins before he retired to his room and sat on the queen-size bed. The highlight of the evening had been meeting Terri Pinehurst, a genuine beauty with thick, wavy reddish brown hair, pale blue eyes, and fair, freckled skin. She glowed with health and the outdoors. And a veterinarian to boot.

He sighed. When he dug his cell phone out of his jacket pocket, a business card fluttered to his lap, the same card Terri handed to Nefi. *Sneaky*. Nefi had somehow tucked the card in his pocket without his knowledge.

“Thank you, Nefi.”

So...Doctor Pinehurst’s practice was in Poughkeepsie, New York. *Nice*.

He held Terri’s business card to his heart for a moment, then he opened his phone and pressed the number seven for speed dial.

A woman’s voice answered.

“Sorry to call so late.”

“Blake, honey, are you calling from a hospital?”

“No.”

“Jail?”

“Just called to say you were right.” He fell back on the bed. His feet throbbed in protest of the very long day. He pried off his shoes, letting them fall. *Thump. Thump.*

“And what am I right about this time?”

“You said I would thank you one day. Today’s the day I officially thank you and praise your infinite wisdom for dragging me to ballroom dancing classes.” Tonight was just practice. He intended to impress a Doctor Terri Pinehurst with his dancing skills as soon as possible.

“You’re welcome, son.”

After taming five sons, his mama was used to being told she was right. It had simply taken him longer to admit it. Surely Mama would forgive his thick-headedness, being the youngest of the litter and all.