

Lacy's Rules

By

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Chapter 1

Nick Giordano sat far back in the shadows on the last barstool next to the wall. He had deliberately picked this spot to remain hidden. If he were caught, they would accuse him of spying. The fact he was spying did not bother him in the least.

The Hideaway Bar was a local hangout, a little upscale place with dim lighting. It was also the location of a bachelorette party for his younger sister, Kristen and her four co-conspirators. Nick loved his little sister, but at twenty-four, he still did not think she was ready for marriage. She was immature, wild, and liked to drink too much. He had spent more time and effort over the years than he wanted to admit trying to keep her out of trouble.

Nick had another reason for being at the Hideaway. Lacy Majors would be there.

He sipped his beer and had to catch himself not to sigh, or moan, or curse aloud. He had done a lot of that over the last couple of months. Until he had met Lacy, Nick Giordano had always gravitated to women who were self-confident, bold and sexy. He liked his women tall, busty, leggy and outgoing. Lacy Majors was the polar opposite. She was petite, delicate, beautiful and quiet. For reasons he still could not fathom, Nick was totally in love with her. She had been his for a little while. Now he missed her so much, he ached.

At first glance, many people often mistook Lacy for a kid. Not until their second look, did they realize she was an adult. At five-foot-one, she was not leggy, but she was shapely. She was not overtly sexy, hiding her compact body in overalls, long skirts, and loose tee shirts. She was a sweet and quiet stay-at-home mom who, except for a few select friends, was very much a loner. She was a natural woman, the original earth mother.

She had a wild mass of strawberry curls, which always seemed to be out of control. She tried tying down her hair or clipping it up, but those springy curls had a life of their own. Nick loved her hair. He never wanted her to control those curls because her hair was as sexy as hell. He could not keep his hands out of it, and he liked tangling his fingers in it, using it to bind her to him. Lacy Majors was the most unconsciously sensuous woman Nick had ever met.

That sweet, quiet, sensuous woman was also stubborn and exasperating. He had nicknamed her *Miss Independence* because she wanted to do everything by herself. She would not ask for help even if she had no clue what she was doing. He had put his foot down a few times, about her overextending herself, and although she initially threw a fit, she did eventually listen.

She was not listening to him now. She wasn't talking to him either. According to his sister Kristen, one of Lacy's few good friends, she was still angry. She would not answer his calls. She refused to accept his flowers, candy or any of the other tried-and-true methods he had used to apologize. Lacy had cut him out of her life.

Still, Nick was trying to watch out for Lacy because she needed someone to watch over her. Her vulnerability appealed to him. Her stubbornness baffled and infuriated him. The closest he had managed to get to her lately was at her son Ryan's softball games. She would have banned him from that contact too, except it was beyond her control. He was the coach of her son's team.

He missed Lacy and he missed her children. Ryan, at eleven, was a terrific kid. The almost four-year-old twins, Grace, and Olivia were adorable and so identical that, even after months of being around them, he still had trouble telling them apart. He missed them so much. He had to find a way back into her life.

Nick had never been happier than during the eight months they were together. It was only after he popped the question that doubts crept in and he began to think they might be moving too fast. He had taken a lot of ribbing from his fellow deputies in the Monterey Sheriff's Office. Most of that teasing focused on his marrying the poster pin-up girl of every horny teenage boy in the late 1990s. At first, he had no idea what they meant until he found her poster image online. That wild mane of strawberry blond curls, the sapphire blue eyes, the Taylor Swift lookalike beauty that she was famous for long before the country queen came on the scene. There was

Lacy nearly naked wearing only three tiny triangles – all dolled up and pouting sexily for the camera. She had been a teenager marketed for sex and titillation.

Nick's Lacy was Lacy Jamison Majors. She had acted in commercials since the age of three. From seven to eighteen years old, she starred in two television series and had major roles in a dozen or more award-winning made-for-TV movies and theater releases. When she turned eighteen, she had quit her last series to pursue a degree at a small university in Michigan. She only returned to Hollywood during the summer breaks of her last two years of college to make two more movies, serious dramas, which won her consecutive Oscars along with numerous other awards. She had two Golden Globes besides the Oscars, and her list of awards were five inches deep on her web bio. While the studios waited for her to decide on her next project, she had quietly dropped out of the industry.

She walked away from her lifelong career without a backward glance. She married, moved to the mid-west, and lived a peaceful life as a minister's wife. When tragedy struck and her husband was killed in a convenience store robbery, she moved to California where she bought a property in Carmel by the Sea. She settled in to raise her son, Ryan, and await the birth of the twins.

Lacy's life was her children, her home and her part-time pursuit of writing. She wrote a popular series of books based on a husband-and-wife team of detectives. Nick had not been familiar with the mystery series before he met Lacy, but now he was a fan. She said she didn't make a lot of money, but it paid the bills. He had never seen any indication that she was financially unstable or needy.

If she had any ambitions to return to the film industry, she did not talk about them. She had never tried to hide her history from him, but there were few traces of it in her home – no homages to golden statues on her mantle, no movie paraphernalia lying around. The only hint of her past was an ever-present stack of scripts piled high on a bedroom side table.

Time had been kind to Lacy. In her mid-thirties, she was strikingly beautiful. Yet, even though millions knew her face, surprisingly very few people approached her. In fact, she was often mistaken for being in her early twenties or even younger. Sometimes she was carded in restaurants by wait staff not paying attention.

At one point, Nick had been included in the short list of favorite things in Lacy's life. He was desperate to find a way back onto that list again.

Nick was a deliberate man. He thought through issues, and generally made sound decisions so as not to make mistakes. That was until he had developed a severe case of cold feet after their engagement and opened his big mouth—that had been a huge mistake. The idea of taking on a ready-made family and the ribbing from his friends and fellow law-enforcement officers took their toll on him. He worried about how he would deal with a celebrity wife. Those doubts made him second-guess his decisions. He went from worry to panic at the speed of light. He reasoned that he needed more time to be sure, so he asked Lacy to postpone their wedding date for a few months. It was not one of his stellar moments and he was not proud of it.

She gave him time. She gave him forever. She threw the engagement ring at him – the ring she had taken from him with tears of joy only a month earlier. Their argument had been loud and angry. He had verbalized all his hidden doubts as they hurled accusations at one another. She threw a cup of hot coffee in his face in anger. He yanked her over his knee and spanked her, hard.

He had kicked himself in the ass several times a day since. One stupid moment had ruined his life. That moment being when he voiced his doubts – not when he spanked her. She had earned that reprisal.

“Living dangerously?” asked Theo, the owner and bartender of the Hideaway Bar. He slid a cup of coffee across the bar to Nick.

Nick shook his head, “No. I’m keeping an eye on my little sister and trying to keep her out of trouble.”

“Kristen isn’t the one you have had your eyes on all evening,” Theo said with a grin. “I don’t see much of Lacy. Barhopping was never her thing. She keeps to herself, but then she always did.”

“Did you know her before?” Nick asked. “In the business, I mean?”

“I knew of her, saw her around occasionally while doing my stint as a stunt man. She was a sweet kid. I heard she married a minister, missionary, or something and took off to live in one of the Bloomington’s-Indiana or Illinois. I never knew which one. I was surprised when she moved back, but Carmel isn’t like most of the towns in California. We have our fair share of celebrities who come here to be anonymous. That’s the way we like it.”

* * *

“Mom!”

Lacy rolled over covering her head with a pillow, only to have it yanked away.

“Mom! Come on.” Ryan, eleven years old and used to his mother’s antics, yanked the covers off and dragged her from the bed with a thump.

“Can’t I take a nap in peace? The girls are napping!” Lacy demanded. “Who is the mother around here?”

“You are, but until I get old enough for a license, you are also the driver,” Ryan said with a grin. “It’s Saturday and I don’t want to be late for the game! Were you drinking last night?”

Lacy groaned. “I had a glass and a half of wine, you slimy toad! That can hardly be called drinking.”

“It is when you aren’t used to it, and you’re not,” Ryan exclaimed in his *‘I’m older and know more than you think,’* voice. “Who drove home?”

“Not I,” Lacy admitted, getting to her feet. She grabbed her son around the waist and tackled him onto the bed and into a hug although she was not much bigger than the boy. “You know I don’t go out very often. I would never take the chance of driving along those cliffs even after only one glass of wine.

“I know, Mom, but Dad said he didn’t let you drink because you couldn’t hold your liquor well,” Ryan said quoting something he had obviously overheard.

“Honey, your father was a Baptist teetotaler who did not believe in drinking alcohol in any form even cold medicine. That doesn’t mean a glass of wine or an occasional beer is wrong for most people. I am not advocating drinking, you know I seldom drink, but you need to understand that the keyword in life is moderation,” Lacy explained.

“Do you still miss him?” asked Ryan, his gray eyes looking so much like his father’s and far too somber for a boy his age.

“Yes,” Lacy said honestly.

“Dad was kind of strict,” Ryan said. “Sometimes, I worry that he wouldn’t approve of some of the things we do now.”

“What things,” Lacy asked. She tugged at her son to get him to sit on the bed next to her.

“Like going to church all the time like we did before, and you working around the house and in the yard. He always said that was a man’s job. You send the girls to daycare. He wanted you to stay home with me,” Ryan said. “You take us to movies and the arcades. Grandma and Grandpa Majors thought that kind of stuff was a sin.”

“Your grandparents were a little strange, Ryan. I hope you realize that,” Lacy said. “It was their prerogative to believe what they wanted, but their beliefs had nothing to do with us. Dad and I did not believe the same way as they did. Yes, your dad was strict, but we had fun too. As a minister, David had obligations to his church and we had to support him in his job. There were times when I didn’t want to go to church as often, but as his wife, I did it to help him. I loved him and wanted to make him happy. I know nearly everything we did was centered on church activities, but that does not mean that everything outside the church is wrong or sinful. Your father didn’t believe that and neither do I. I don’t want you to forget the good times we had with your dad.”

“I know, Mom,” Ryan said.

“I bought this house knowing it would need repairs and it is work I enjoy. As far as the girls go, they need the socialization they get in daycare. It gives me quiet time to write. Before, being a homemaker and a minister’s wife was a full-time job. I enjoyed staying home with you. After we lost your dad, though, life was different. I needed something to take my mind off him. That was when I started taking my writing more seriously. You are happy here in Carmel, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Ryan admitted, “but, I miss Dad a lot, and I worry about you.”

Lacy smiled and kissed her son on the forehead. “It’s okay to miss your dad. I still miss him, too. We always will. You don’t have to worry about me, honey. I’m the grown-up in this house. Your job is to be eleven and to have fun.”

“Mom, will you at least talk to Nick today?” Ryan asked suddenly.

Lacy shifted her eyes so she would not face her son while telling a lie. “Maybe. Go get the girls and wash their faces. I’ll do the same and we’ll go. If we leave now, we won’t be late.”

“Mom, we are always late,” complained Ryan.

“Not always,” Lacy exclaimed.

Ryan gave her his *‘I know better’* look and she blushed. “Okay, we are late a lot, but I am trying to improve.”

“Try harder! Move it, now!”

* * *

Lacy did not speak to Nick. She took the girls to the refreshment stand and to the restroom, and carefully avoided contact with him. She focused on keeping her eyes on her son and his game, and off the handsome Nick Giordano. It was not easy.

Nick was a good-looking man whether he wore a Deputy's uniform or jeans and a tee shirt with a baseball cap jammed on his head backward. He was not a small man, but not too big for a man either, which had suited her. He topped out at six feet and was fit, lightly muscled, and solid. He was not overly muscle bound or *ripped* like so many of the men running around the California coastal beaches. He looked good – dressed, or undressed. His dark Italian looks drew a woman's eye. They fawned over his longish, slicked-back, black hair with curls escaping over the edges of his collar, not to mention his caramel eyes with flecks of green. Add all that to the dark beard stubble accentuating his handsome face at the end of a day, and Nick was one very sexy man.

He had been prime bait for the many single mothers of his little league softball team. He had ignored their advances and diplomatically backed off when they got too close. She liked him, but she had shown him no interest other than admiring him from a distance. He was her son's coach. He was the one who had actively pursued her. She had deflected his hints and then his blatant flirting since she was the mother of three and had no idea why he would be interested in her.

Then he had interceded on her behalf with an aggressive father and fan who apparently remembered her last television show but couldn't distinguish a television show from reality. With her acting career fifteen years behind her, Lacy did not have to face that very often. She had been grateful when Nick stepped in pretending to be her boyfriend so the man would back off. When she thanked him and asked how she could return the favor, she expected to bake some cookies or cook him a meal. Instead, he asked her to go out with him. She agreed reluctantly, but when he called and suggested a family restaurant and a date that would include her children, her heart flipped over. As skittish as she had been about dating, she found it comfortable to spend time with Nick. It had not taken long for her to lose her heart to him.

She knew him, or at least she thought she had known him. She knew she loved him, he still claimed that he loved her. To Lacy though, actions spoke louder than words. She was not so sure now that he loved her with the kind of commitment she needed.

Lacy had enjoyed his company. During the months they had dated, their casual dates had evolved into a serious commitment. That had led to her being in his bed nearly every time they could sneak away for a bit of alone time. In the latter days of their relationship, they ended most dates at his townhouse in his bed. Sometimes they didn't even go out but instead wanted to use that time to be together. She had kids, one old enough to have at least a vague understanding of adult relationships. One of *Lacy's Rules* was that she would not parade a succession of men through her children's lives. She had successfully kept her children separate from her few miserable attempts at dating before Nick.

Lacy was a woman completely aware of what she needed in a man. Responsibility, reliability, and dependability were at the top of that list. If Nick could not handle an engagement, how could he handle marriage? She could not make a mistake when it came to marriage. It was too big and too important.

Lacy had loved her husband, David Majors. She had jumped into their marriage at twenty-two in order to facilitate an easier escape from her previous life. She had desperately wanted to get away from the entertainment industry and, most important, her mother. Lilith Jamison had been Lacy's manager and agent. In a long list of self-indulgent behavior, Lilith's role as a mother begrudgingly came in at last place. Lacy had been desperate for love after her eighteen years of verbal abuse and browbeating by a woman who easily masked her true nature behind a façade of false beauty and elegance.

She had found what she craved with David. He was a stable man of firm beliefs who loved, nurtured and took care of her. Her marriage had worked because David understood her. He had given her the stability and love she needed. Although she sometimes chafed under his strict rules and his beliefs, she loved him with her total being. David had been a devoted minister, and a loving husband and father.

When David had been killed by a gunman in a convenience store robbery, the entire city of Bloomington, Indiana, had mourned his loss. He had been beloved and known for his work in the poverty-stricken areas of the city. She and Ryan were devastated. Without David, Lacy's life in the Midwest held no appeal. Neither did her rigid in-laws who expected her to fall in line with their radical faith and beliefs. David's parents thought she should bring their grandson into their home so they could supervise his upbringing. She had declined the offer, and moved herself and Ryan halfway across the country to escape again.

Lacy had never lived in Carmel, but she had visited there often, tagging along with a good friend, one of the older actresses on her second television series. Jayne Harris and her mother, Marion, had stepped into the breach left by Lilith, who was too self-involved to be bothered with a teenage daughter.

The fates were on Lacy's side that day four years ago when she had driven into the small artistic community of Carmel by the Sea. It was a community of tiny Fairy Tale Cottages, storybook cottages and modern houses built of glass and stone to overlook the sea. Real estate was limited and expensive. Lacy drove into Carmel fully expecting to stay with her friend, Jayne Harris, until she could find a house. She suspected she would purchase something in one of the suburb communities in Monterey County. As the fates would have it, as she pulled over to the side of the road in front of Jayne's house, she noticed a realtor removing a 'For Sale' sign from her trunk. The Storybook Cottages of Carmel rarely went on the market, and there were usually long waiting lists of potential buyers. Lacy temporarily forgot her friend and bought the property on the spot. It was not an original Fairy Tale Cottage designed by Hugh Comstock – only twenty of those extremely tiny and expensive pieces of history were still in existence. She bought a storybook-style cottage named *Luibh Cottage*.

Carmel was foremost an unconventional and bohemian community of artists and individualists. The town had preserved a tradition of eccentric cottages for nearly a century. Built in 1963, Lacy's cottage was much larger than the originals. By the look of the interior, though, no one had updated it since the days of Brady Bunch orange counter tops and shag carpets.

Nevertheless, *Luibh Cottage's* exterior construction had all the quirks and details of the original Storybook Cottages. She loved it. It looked as if someone had transported the cottage directly from ancient Ireland or merry old England, and she could modernize it enough inside to deal with the everyday life of raising a son. The roof was moss covered and the property was in desperate need of repairs, but she did not care. It was the Storybook dream home of her childhood imagination. It took a big chunk out of her bank account, but she never second-guessed her decision. She had plunked down the money and moved in with Jane until the deal went through. She was determined to start a new life.

In the four years since, she and her family had planted their roots in Carmel. She had not known she was pregnant when she left Indiana. As a young widow, pregnant, alone, and raising a small boy, she had been welcomed into her neighborhood. She found real friends in the small

community and among her close neighbors. She loved living in Carmel where only occasionally someone recognized her. Most people respected her privacy. She would sometimes run into the occasional celebrity in the grocery store and be greeted as a friend.

* * *

“Mom, are we going for pizza?” Ryan asked, climbing into the family van.

“Pizza,” Grace and Olivia, the twins, echoed excitedly as Lacy strapped them into their safety seats.

Lacy knew this scenario. The team often held their victory celebrations at The Pizza Factory. There would be a few parents and Coach Nick Giordano present to ride herd over twenty overly excited eleven to thirteen-year-olds. It was something she had enjoyed before her breakup with Nick. It was not something she wanted to be part of now, except she would not deny her son the pleasure of celebrating the team victory with his friends.

“Pizza,” she agreed to three cheering children.

Later, Lacy glanced over at the table housing the large group of boys, her son included. The boys were laughing, yelling and shoveling pizza into their mouths. It was typical boy fun, loud and boisterous and exactly how she wanted her son to remember his childhood.

She sat in a booth with Gracie and Olivia, far enough away not to embarrass Ryan by having his mom there. Pizza sauce completely covered the faces of both her beautiful little sprites.

Nick slipped into the booth beside the girls. They both leaped to greet him with their sticky fingers and sauce-covered faces. He did not seem to mind as he gave both of them a kiss.

“Good game,” Nick said, switching his attention to Lacy.

“Good game,” Lacy repeated, giving him a stare that should have backed him off, but didn’t. She had never been very successful at intimidation.

“We need to talk,” Nick said without preamble.

“We did talk, now we have nothing to talk about,” Lacy said steadily.

“I am about out of patience, Lace,” Nick said ominously. “We are going to talk.”

“It has all been said.” She held up a single finger in warning. “Lacy’s Rules! Do not start something in front of my kids. Go away. You said your piece and got what you wanted. You have nothing to complain about.”

“You are the most stubborn and obstinate woman, I have ever met! I want . . .”

“I don’t care what you want. Not here and not now!”

“We are going to talk, Miss Independence,” Nick said in frustration. He knew Lacy’s Rules, as she had been blunt about them from the start. Lacy’s Rules were things that she would not compromise on, rules she had established mostly to protect her kids. They encompassed everything from limiting sugar to watching too much television. Whatever happened between the two of them, her kids were not to be affected. That meant no arguing in front of them. That was quite the opposite of his own upbringing in a loud, unruly Italian family.

Nick slid out of the booth. Before Lacy realized what he intended, he dropped a kiss on her lips and then turned to give each of the twins another kiss on the cheek. He sauntered off, ignoring Lacy’s splutter of indignation and a death stare.

Lacy took her kids home where they watched a movie, ate popcorn, and she put them to bed. She was restless after her encounter with Nick. When it came right down to it, she missed him terribly. Nick had been her strength for nearly a year. Once they had gotten past that awful period of feeling each other out, they had meshed well as a couple. Lacy sometimes thought she was a throwback to another era. She liked a man with a strong sense of self and didn’t mind the man being in charge. She did not mind a man telling her what to do. She did not even mind being taken to task for misbehaving. She was not a child, she did not pretend to be one, but she loved that Nick took care of her. She liked being around someone who looked out for her. She missed having him around. She missed having a relationship with Nick. Being lonely again was almost physically painful.

After checking on her kids to make sure they were asleep, Lacy went into the second-story tower room figuring she would put in a couple of hours work on the renovations she was trying to complete. Someday it would be her private office space. Over the last four years, she had floated from place to place around the house in search of a dedicated space where she could write. She had used her bedroom for a while, but had begun to feel trapped because she spent so much time in there. Then, she converted the cupboard under the stairs to a mini office. However, she was no Harry Potter and it was too claustrophobic for her. It did make for a convenient place to spend a few minutes writing out bills and Ryan used it to do his homework. It was also a sneaky way to monitor his computer use and time since the door to the cupboard had to be open if you were using the desk or the computer.

The kitchen table was a frequent haunt of hers, and now, most often, the high kitchen bar. With three kids, she spent a lot of time in there anyway. Working in the kitchen though meant she could not shut a door on her computer and her work, and the mess she made. She also had to be extra careful to put her laptop away between writing sessions since anything she told her twin daughters *not* to touch instantly fascinated them. She did not want them accidentally dropping her laptop, destroying it and her latest book.

Originally, she had planned to use a small room downstairs as an office. That was before she realized having only one bathroom in the house, on the second floor, was not convenient or practical for a woman expecting twins. She had hired a contractor to convert the room on the first floor into two rooms, a bathroom and laundry room.

At this point, the only room left to change into an office was the *tower*, a six-sided room with four large windows. The ceiling was falling in and she was in the process of pulling the rest of it down to expose the conical peaked beams. Before their breakup, Nick had wanted her to call a contractor to do the demolition or he wanted to do it himself. After their breakup, she decided she could handle it.

She went into the tower room and climbed a ladder. Her children slept like logs. With the door shut, it was unlikely that she would disturb them.

* * *

Nick sat in his recliner and fumed. He was tired of being the sensitive, politically correct ex-boyfriend. He wanted to storm over to Lacy's house and kiss her until she came to her senses. Alternatively, if that did not work, he would like to set fire to her cute little backside for putting him through this misery. He fumed because he knew his job as a County Deputy meant he had to be above petty grievances and domestic disputes. One report of sexual harassment or stalking and his career would be in the toilet. In this day and age, most people would not view the spanking of his ex-girlfriend lightly. Domestic discipline was contrary to most modern beliefs, even if many consenting adults did practice it.

He took a long swallow of watered-down iced tea and got to his feet. To hell with it! He was going over there to have it out with her. Grabbing his car keys, he headed out the door.

* * *

Ryan Majors awakened to a loud thumping and banging. It sounded as if someone had dropped something heavy. He thought he heard a yelp or cry, yet he was not sure. He stumbled out of bed and walked into the shared Jack-and-Jill bathroom to his little sisters room, but they were asleep.

He wandered into his mom's room where he saw that her bed was still made, so he went downstairs. He could not find her there either. He knew his mom worked late writing most nights, but her computer was off. His mom was a nut about protecting her kids, even him, and he was almost twelve. She would not have left them in the house alone at night. He looked out the window to see if she was sitting outside on the patio with Jayne, her best friend, as they sometimes did. No one was there.

He went back upstairs where he looked in her room again as well as her bathroom. Then he systematically opened the other doors in the hallway. He tried to open the door to the room his mother called the *tower*. The door only opened about three inches before it hit something and he could not push it open any further. He lowered his head and squinted through the opening. He wanted to cry at what he saw. His mother was on the floor with several thick boards lying across her legs. He could not see her face or head, and he could not move the door any further.

"Mom," Ryan shouted, then lowered his voice and called to her again. He did not want to wake up his little sisters and freak them out.

"Mom!"

She didn't answer him. Ryan raced back to his room and fumbled in his jeans for his cell phone. He only had a couple of numbers programmed into it, as it was supposed to be for emergencies only. He called the third number.

* * *

Nick was about five miles from Lacy's quaint old neighborhood when his cell rang. He grabbed it off the seat, saw the incoming number and frowned.

"Ryan? What's wrong?"

"It's Mom," Ryan wailed. "She's in that round room and the door is stuck. I can't get in, and I think she might be hurt because she won't answer."

"I'll be there in a couple of minutes," Nick snapped. "Hang up so I can call 911. Go downstairs and unlock the front door for the rescue squad." Nick stepped on the gas doubling his speed and was in Lacy's driveway three minutes later.

He raced through the front door and upstairs to find Ryan shoving at the door. He lent his weight to the task, but whatever was blocking the door would not budge. Nick ran back downstairs and opened the garage, turning on lights as he went. He grabbed an extension ladder off the wall, carried it outside and maneuvered it to a position directly below the tower room window. He heard the Rescue Squad vehicle approach, turning off their siren as they entered the neighborhood. Not waiting for them, he climbed the ladder to peer through the window and the blood in his veins froze. Lacy lay under a half dozen ceiling joists and there was blood on her temple. The window was locked, but he pushed on it, anyway. Then he whipped off his pullover, shirt, wrapped it around his hand and punched out the window glass. He reached inside to unlock the window and shoved it out of the way.

“Hey, is that you, Nick?” a figure from below called.

“Yeah, I need your help and send the paramedics upstairs, fast,” Nick yelled.

“What is going on?” Jayne Harris demanded, coming through the hedge dividing her property from that of her neighbors.

“Jayne, go upstairs and stay with the girls and Ryan,” Nick shouted down as he squeezed through the window with Stan Reinsworth, a rescue squad member, following him.

Jayne Harris nodded and ran across the small lawn, hustling Ryan inside and taking him into the girl’s room where she closed the door behind her. She didn’t know what was going on, but she trusted that Nick Giordano was a man who would not do anything to hurt her best friend.

Meanwhile, an ambulance arrived and the EMTs unloaded their equipment.

Nick knelt down beside Lacy.

Stan was beside him a second later. “Don’t touch her. Let’s get the door unblocked so we can get the ambulance guys in here.

They moved several short, heavy wooden joists out of the way before opening the door. The paramedics came in immediately and helped lift the fallen beams off Lacy. By this time, she was groaning, however, hands held her in place so she could not move.

Lacy awakened to paramedics strapping her to a spinal board, and a neck collar holding her stiff and straight.

“Don’t try to move,” Les Windell, a paramedic, ordered. “We will have you at Community Hospital in about fifteen minutes.”

“My kids,” Lacy whispered.

“I’ll make sure they are safe,” Nick promised.

Lacy looked into his eyes, blinked and closed her eyes.

“Okay, let’s get her out of here,” Les ordered.

As the ambulance pulled out of the driveway, Stan carried the ladder back into the garage.

Nick knocked on the twin’s bedroom door, and Jayne and Ryan both came out into the hallway.

“They are taking her to Community. I’m heading over there. Jayne, can you watch the kids tonight?”

“The twins,” Ryan corrected. “I’m going with you to the hospital.”

Nick nodded. “Get dressed.”

The boy ran to his room.

“Should he be going?” Jayne demanded.

“He found her and he is scared. He needs to see her,” Nick said quietly. “The girls don’t know anything yet and are probably too young to understand. I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.”

“Will they give you any information?” Jayne asked. “The hospital staff won’t give out that info to just anyone.”

“I have her medical power of attorney,” Nick said. “Remember we did that a couple of weeks after we became engaged. Unless she changed it without telling me, it still should be valid. I was the first contact, you were the second.”

“She did do that, but then you two broke up,” Jayne said. “Shouldn’t I be the one making those decisions?”

“Does it matter,” Nick asked, somewhat exasperated. “She made the decision and signed the paperwork. Everything with Lacy is about protecting her kids. It was something she wanted to do, so we did it.”

“Too bad you couldn’t follow through with everything else you promised,” Jayne snapped.

“I’m working on that. I have to go.”

“Call as soon as you know anything,” Jayne ordered briskly, “Promise.”

“I will,” Nick said, as Ryan came out of his bedroom.

* * *

Nick made a quick stop by his townhouse for the large envelope Lacy had given him after they had been to the lawyer. She had been so serious about safeguarding her children. Now, he understood why it was so important to her. Nick and Ryan arrived at the emergency room where they had to wait until the doctor was free to talk to them. When the doctor finally came out, all he told them was that they had scans and tests to complete. They would have to wait for the results.

Nick filled out hospital paperwork, searching the copies of Lacy's medical cards and papers she had given him to find the information he needed. Ryan stared blankly at a television in the waiting room. After he had turned the forms over to the nurse, Nick wandered down the hall to find the vending machines. He fed them some money and took the snacks back to the boy.

Ryan took the soda but ignored the rest. He seemed despondent. "Why did you and Mom stop seeing each other?"

Nick met the boy's eyes, "Because I made a stupid mistake."

"Did you lie to her?" Ryan asked.

"No," Nick denied quickly.

"Mom hates people that lie," Ryan said fiddling with the tab on his soda can. "That's why she married my dad. I heard her tell Jayne that Dad was the most honest and caring man she had ever met. She didn't think she would find a man as good as him again. That was before you started hanging around. You must have done something awful bad for her to get mad enough to not marry you."

"We had a disagreement," Nick said. "I let it go too long before I made sure we were on the same page again."

Ryan nodded as if he were a wise old man with hidden knowledge. "That was a mistake. My dad said to never to let a woman worry about a problem because that would only make it worse. It is better to fight it out and get it settled."

Nick chuckled. "You were what, seven or eight? Your dad talked to you about your mother?"

"No. I heard him talking to his cousin Lenny after he had a fight with his wife Kay. Lenny and Kay used to fight all the time. Then, Lenny would come over and talk to my dad. He

was a minister so he did a lot of counseling to help people having problems. It was part of his job,” Ryan explained.

“My dad did tell me that our job is to take care of her. Mom’s feelings get hurt real easy. He said she has a hard time dealing with her feelings because she has low self-esteem.”

“Your mom does not have low self-esteem,” Nick disagreed with a chuckle. “She is a very dynamic woman.”

Ryan looked over and met his eyes. “Maybe it was good that you broke up. You don’t know my mom at all. You only know the person she pretends to be. Mom is good at a lot of things, but what she is really good at, besides being a great mom, is acting.”

“Your mom quit acting a long time ago.”

Ryan gave a look over at the double hospital doors, almost as if he were willing someone to come through them. “She stopped doing television and movies, but she pretends to be something she isn’t every day.”

Nick frowned at the boy. “What does she pretend to be every day?”

“That she is a superwoman, that she can do everything by herself. She is a cool mom, but she doesn’t handle the other stuff well. She pretends it doesn’t bother her when people recognize her, but it does, a lot. She pretends she is always happy around us kids, but sometimes she’s not. I hear her crying late at night and I hate it.

“She has cried a lot since you stopped coming around. I know her being sad has something to do with how she was treated when she was a kid, something to do with why she ran away from her mother. I’m not supposed to know about that stuff, but Jayne knows and I hear them talking once in a while. I think Dad knew. That’s why he said it was our job to take care of her.”

“I think you eavesdrop too much. Your mom has a right to her privacy,” Nick said. He got to his feet as a doctor came in their direction.

“Mr. Giordano?” the doctor asked.

“Yes,” Nick responded.

“Dr. Barnes,” the doctor said abruptly. “I’ll speak to you in private.” He walked off, expecting Nick to follow.

“We don’t want to make him mad,” Nick whispered to Ryan quickly. “I will tell you as soon as he tells me.”

Dr. Barnes kept his eyes focused on the chart in his hands, never once making eye contact with Nick. “We will run additional scans in the morning, but right now it looks like a minor concussion. There is also some trauma to the left knee along with swelling. The ACL ligament could have sustained damage. We will know more in the morning. At best, she might be on crutches for a couple of weeks. At the worst, we may have to rebuild the ACL, which will require knee surgery.

“If the scans are clear in the morning, we will release her. If we have to repair the ACL, she will remain for surgery and be in the hospital two or three days. It will be two weeks before she will have any mobility in the knee. Total recovery from a torn ACL is five to six months. She will be in her room in about thirty to forty-five minutes. We are monitoring her overnight because of the head injury.” Dr. Barnes matter-of-factly ran down the symptoms, and the possible scenarios of surgery and recovery, barely acknowledging Nick as he focused on his patient’s charts.

“May we see her now?” Nick asked.

“How old is he?” the doctor demanded, glancing at the boy.

“Old enough,” Nick responded. “He needs to see her.”

The doctor nodded. “All right, go through those doors, fourth bed on the right. Keep the visit short, and don’t let the boy be in there very long. The nurses don’t take kindly to rules being broken. The patient will be moved to her room soon.”

“She has a minor concussion, so she may be a little out of it,” Nick warned Ryan. “She might also have a knee injury, but they don’t know how serious that is yet. The good news is she might be released tomorrow. The worst would be that she needs knee surgery and would be here for a couple of days. If that is the case, she will have a longer recovery time before her knee is back to normal.”

A young doctor was wrapping her knee and placing ice packs around it when they came in. They waited until he was finished before going into the curtained cubicle.

Lacy stirred when she saw them. “Who has the . . .”

“The girls are at home. Jayne is with them,” Nick said quickly. “Everything is okay. You will be in here overnight so she will stay with them. We needed to see for ourselves that you are okay.”

Lacy nodded slowly, making the smallest movements possible. "I'm okay." She smiled at Ryan, motioned him closer and kissed him on the forehead. "Don't worry."

"I told you, you shouldn't be doing that tearing down stuff, Mom," Ryan exclaimed, suddenly close to tears. "That's man work, not girl work. If you hadn't been doing that, you wouldn't have gotten hurt!"

"It was an accident, honey," Lacy said. "You know there are no boy jobs versus girl jobs. Boys and girls are equal, remember."

Ryan shook his head with tears in his eyes. "No, it is a guy's job to protect and take care of girls, and I didn't protect you. It's my fault. I shouldn't have let you do it, Mom."

Lacy opened her mouth to reassure her son, but Nick bent down and put his hand on Ryan's shoulder. "It is a guy's job to protect his women, Ry. This time, if anyone is at fault, it is me. I knew what your mom was planning for that room and I should have made sure it was safe. This accident is not your fault. I'm sure your mom is very proud of you for getting help right away. Now, kiss her good night. That nurse over there is giving us the evil eye. I think she is about ready to throw us out of here."

"Night, Mom. I'm sorry you got hurt," Ryan said.

"Good night, Ry. You are not to blame for my getting hurt," Lacy said again. She tried to glare at Nick but was not particularly successful as her head was throbbing.

"I will see you later," Nick promised as he steered her son out of the emergency room. He had already called his sister, Kristen, and told her what was going on. She was on her way to the hospital to get Ryan and take him home. He called Jayne and gave her the scoop on Lacy's condition.

Once Ryan was on his way home, Nick stepped outside the emergency area, pulled out his phone and did some quick web searches. He accessed a few sites and spent several minutes reading about low self-esteem. Many things clicked into place as he read the symptoms and causes. He checked to see if Lacy was still in the emergency room. When he found out they had not moved her to a room yet, he went back outside to research ACL ligament symptoms of injuries and the treatments. When the nurse gave him Lacy's room number, he turned off his phone and took the elevator to find her room. He would do more research later. He knocked on the outside of her door once and stepped inside. She was in a double-occupancy room, but she was the only patient there.

He pulled the one semi-looking comfortable chair over to her bedside and sat down.

“What are you doing here?” Lacy demanded sleepily.

“Staying with you,” Nick said.

“Why?” Lacy demanded.

“You are my fiancée and my place is with you,” Nick said.

“We broke up,” she mumbled.

“I never accepted that,” Nick said. “I never will.”

“It’s too late. It’s over.”

“It is never too late to right a wrong,” Nick said firmly. “I was an idiot. I made a mistake and hurt you. You thought you couldn’t depend on me, but you can. I will never make that mistake again. I warned you, Lacy, and now I am officially out of patience. I’m establishing *Nick’s Rules* that will become *Lacy’s Rules*. The first one is that we are going to do things my way for a while. I love you and I know you love me. Love like the one we share is rare, and we should not be throwing it away. Close your eyes and quit arguing. It isn’t going to do you any good.”