

Set in the heart of cosmopolitan cities and South American world wonders, Helen's Crusade is a woman's journey to self-discovery, as she seeks to fulfill the wishes of her father and discovers the one that truly matters is her own.

Helen's Crusade

by Trula Michaels LaCalle

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Trula Michaels LaCalle

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64438-334-6

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64438-335-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2018

First Edition

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Chapter One - Conflicting Needs	7
Chapter Two - An Enemy Emerges.....	46
Chapter Three - A Growing Risk	59
Chapter Four - The Andes Plan	81
Chapter Five - The Second Attempt.....	130
Chapter Six - Mistrust and Betrayal	155
Chapter Seven - Caught.....	191
Chapter Eight - Confrontation	254
Chapter Nine - The Road Trip.....	283
Chapter Ten - Lingering	316
Suggested Book Club Discussion Questions.....	328

Chapter One

Conflicting Needs

Javier Valente lowered the pitch in his voice as he stood before a man he never wanted to meet. “Welcome to New York,” he said with polished politeness. He held out his hand, but let it drop to his side when he saw his gesture ignored. “What brings you all the way from California?” he asked, quickly weighing his visitor’s modest appearance and slight stature, as compared to his own. He would get through this awkward moment and stay in charge.

Nonetheless, his chest tightened as he listened to Jim Wilson report that his wife was missing. Jim told him how the Cusco police and the American Embassy in Peru called to inform him that Helen disappeared from her hotel and never boarded her scheduled flight from Cusco to Lima.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Javier responded as his rapid heartbeat rushed blood to his head. But he took hold before showing so much concern that he would indict himself. He gazed momentarily toward his office window, then made eye contact. “And why are you here?”

“You should know, shouldn’t you?” Jim smirked.

“Helen must have told you about me.”

“Enough for me to track you down.”

“We have been working together...”

Jim gestured to stop Javier from continuing. “Her staff filled me in.”

“So, you know I’ve been helping Wildlife Restoration with---”

“Yes, and you’ll explain all that to the Peruvian authorities.”

Apparently, Jim wanted to get to him before the authorities did.

“The Cusco police told me she was last seen with an impeccably dressed Italian man,” Jim went on. “...a business associate, according to the information they had gathered. They only had a first name—Javier.”

“You told them about me?”

“What I knew at that moment. They’ll find you soon,” Jim announced in the most threatening tone he could muster.

Javier shifted his weight and planted his feet firmly. Jim was not the placid husband that Helen had described. The police would ask probing questions, but answering to an angry, distraught husband was a whole different matter. How was he going to explain what he had been doing in Peru and why he had been with Helen? He waited for Jim to state the obvious, accusatory purpose of his surprise trip to Manhattan.

Jim scanned the imposingly luxurious chrome and leather interior of Javier’s office and took a deep breath. Then he turned to Javier, purposefully ignoring Javier’s silk-suited intimidation, and looked him boldly in the eye in an attempt to appear confident.

“You may as well tell me everything because I’ll eventually find out anyway,” Jim said, discomforted by the slight quiver in his voice. “But I may find out too late if she’s in trouble right now.”

Javier knew that Jim was right. She had to be in trouble. Helen would never miss her flight unless something had gone drastically wrong. What should he tell Jim now? He felt a pang of guilt as he thought of the vulnerability in her eyes the last moments they had spent together

and how those same eyes captured his attention when they first met two years ago. So much had happened since then.

*

The Sacramento heat had already permeated the cool, early morning hours in the Wilson's home. Helen quietly rose from the disheveled bed so as not to disturb Jim who was snoring loudly. She had to be at the local airport for a short flight to keep an appointment in Southern California.

Jim rolled over to her side of the bed and was quiet. She tiptoed toward the bathroom, but to no avail.

He mumbled, "You leaving?"

"Yes. Airport. Remember?"

Jim rolled back to his side of the bed and, without another word fell back asleep. During their twenty-year marriage, Jim put up little protest regarding her travel schedule that became increasingly filled with trips over the years. His mild complaints were easy to meet with indifference. She sometimes wished he would object to the amount of time she spent away from home instead of being so complacent, but that's how he was about nearly everything in their lives.

She went to the shelves in her walk-in-closet, pushed aside a carry-on roller bag packed with essentials, always at-the-ready in her closet, and reached for her laptop bag. An under-the-seat bag was all she'd need for a day trip. Turning to her wardrobe of business-casual clothes, the expected daily uniform at her office, she picked neutral colors to be set off with color-accent scarves—a look she thought boring, matronly, but efficient.

*

The Sacramento airport was quiet in the early morning hours as business travelers were starting to arrive. The region's small airport,

devoid of massive crowds and long waits, made the onerous task of air travel more pleasant for her. She headed for the line at the security check point, hoping she could get through quickly to find the Starbucks near the gate. She fumbled in her flight bag to retrieve her laptop for the TSA bin. Feeling awkward as she often did when juggling bags, she accidentally dropped her boarding pass. As she bent to retrieve it, she nearly bumped heads with a man who had stooped to pick it up for her. She tilted her head upward to look at him and peered into the dark, round eyes of a distinguished-looking businessman. She noticed he was dressed in a perfectly cut suit and carried nothing but a leather briefcase with a Tony Perotti logo. He was not the typical business traveler from the Sacramento region. River City mainly attracted jeans-and-sports-jacket travelers.

Their head-to-head proximity made eye contact seem personal. They held the electrically charged glance for a fraction of a second longer than either expected before he pulled away and stood tall. She righted herself and thanked him weakly as she took the boarding pass from his hand. He smiled with a look that enveloped her, and she felt his captivating stare to the core of her being.

“*Prego*,” he said. Then, correcting himself, “You’re welcome.” He lingered with his gaze as he slowly turned away and faced forward when the line began to move.

The intense moment held a feeling she hadn’t experienced in thirty-three years, not since the day she met Paul, her deceased first husband.

The ache in her heart ruffled and surprised her. Visions of a youthful Paul flashed through her memory. She hadn’t grieved for Paul in years. She hadn’t allowed herself to long for the romance she had once felt, a time when love colored her life in vivid hues, not neutral tones.

This Italian stranger had tickled a need for romance-filled nights, a need better left submerged. She pushed the unwanted thoughts back down to the locked place inside her and discredited their brief encounter. She told herself that the stranger had been too intense and brash with his look. Paul would never have been so piercingly bold. The first awareness she and Paul had of each other held a power that spoke of an instantaneous, deep connection, as if they had known each other in a past life. The stranger made her feel rattled, unsettled, self-protective.

Posh! She told herself. *This is nonsense.* And she headed for the Starbucks. While sipping her coffee, she returned to her mental “to do” list, replayed like a looped reel. Once refocused, she pulled a file out of her bag and began to review it when she heard the boarding announcement. As she boarded the small shuttle jet, she noticed that the stranger was on the same flight and had taken a seat one row back and across the aisle from her. *Relax!* But she couldn't. She had the sensation he was watching her. She turned to take a peek. Their eyes met again. There was no ignoring him. She opened a magazine and willed herself to concentrate on what she was reading.

The hour-long flight landed at the Santa Barbara Airport. The wind-blown palm trees that lined the Spanish-colonial terminal signaled that the season of Santa Ana winds had begun. After wasting an hour having to resolve a problem with her car reservation, Helen took the wheel of a Toyota Camry and set its GPS to the rural highway address of the Clipperton's country home. She settled back in her seat, anticipating an enjoyable drive away from the Santa Barbara beaches and plains toward the coastal mountains on her way to a chinchilla ranch in northern Ventura County.

She remembered her father at the wheel and she, the little girl in the seat next to him, as they drove these same roads on route to the Horton chinchilla ranch. Horton had gone out of business since then, and Horton's abandoned ranch stood like a testament to a troubled industry. Her nostalgia was bittersweet. Helen's family's life had

been dedicated to breeding and raising chinchillas for the commercial sale of their pelts. It was a good life but a not an easy one--hard work peppered with reactionary lambasts from animal rights enthusiasts.

When she was a child it was possible to support a family by raising chinchillas, but the whole family had to pitch in. By the time she was in middle school, she had begun to be her father's "little partner" in all things chinchilla. Even back then, she seldom spoke to others about her family's chinchilla ranch because of the public controversy surrounding fur production. She learned to hold back and not voice her opposing opinions for fear of painful responses. She knew that her father didn't deserve condemnation from anyone, let alone from people who were ill-informed and irrational. Culling chinchillas was done humanely, and the use of commercially raised chinchillas had nothing to do with the depletion of their populations in the wild. Still, the average citizen didn't know more than what they heard from protestors.

During her interview for the position of Executive Director at Wildlife Restorations, she hesitantly told the board of directors about her family's chinchilla ranch and was relieved to learn that the people involved in the not-for-profit's work would have no quarrel with her support of the chinchilla breeding industry. Now, long after being hired, her work had brought her full circle to her childhood roots.

She shook herself from her reverie when the GPS indicated she was about to arrive. As she passed through the open aluminum gate marked 2508 and drove down the dusty road to the long, low structure ahead of her, nostalgia caused a lump in her throat. Chinchilla ranches looked very much alike. A nondescript, single story building or two, called barns, graced a flat landscape, but bore no resemblance to a horse or cow barn. If anything, the ranch was more like a chicken ranch, small animals housed in small cages protected from the weather, but the chinchilla barns were built to last and prevent intruders. Like any other ranch, the Clipperton's house

was near their barns and free-range chickens were allowed to roam at will within a fenced compound.

This was her first visit to the Clipperton chinchilla ranch. She wanted a face-to-face meeting to get a clear idea of whether or not chinchilla ranchers would be willing to participate in her nonprofit organization's chinchilla project.

"Our objective is to save the endangered chinchilla species by reintroducing chinchillas to their native habitat in the Andes Mountains of Chile and Peru," she had told Bob Clipperton when she called him a month earlier. "Of course, a lot of research would have to be done to prepare a breed of chinchillas similar to the exact species that are found in the wild."

"Sounds interesting. Sure. Come on down. I'm here most of the time," Bob told her.

She pulled up to the farmhouse residence with its wrap-around porch. Wanting to appear more casual, she took off her navy blazer before stepping out of the car.

Bob opened the screen door to the porch and waved to her. He was a burly older man who slowly came down the steps with an unsteady gait and greeted her somewhat shyly.

"I see you made it alright."

"No problem finding you. I was delayed at the car rental counter."

"Oh. I thought I might have to come looking for you. Folks get lost on these unmarked country roads."

"Your directions were good. Glad I had them. GPS was useless out here, but I guess you knew that."

“Come on in. Let’s have a cup of coffee. Rest up from your trip.”

His wife, Betty, dressed in a simple, cotton print house dress, a throwback to the 1950’s, stood holding open the screen door, waiting for Helen to enter. Bob introduced his wife in passing and Betty nodded in acknowledgment without saying a word. Visions of her mother and father came to Helen’s mind. *This couple is an anachronism.*

“Before we go back to the kitchen, I want to let you know something,” he motioned to her as he stepped into the front parlor and spoke in a low voice. “I’ve invited someone else to be here right now. He’s a pelt buyer.”

“A pelt buyer?”

“You’ll understand in a minute when I introduce you. I needed to hear from the both of you and this seemed like the best way for me to sort things through.”

Helen looked concerned. She hadn’t anticipated anything like this.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said apologetically.

“Whatever works best for you, Bob,” Helen said with a smile to soften her worried look.

“Good. This way to the kitchen.”

Once inside, Helen was taken aback when she saw the stylish Italian stranger from the airport sitting at the antique oak table, his thick hair illuminated by sunlight streaming through the kitchen window. The stranger pushed his chair back and stood up the moment he saw her, and she gained full sight of him for the first time. The room seemed to fill with the power of his presence. She knew what her sudden lightheadedness meant--a long forgotten reaction to certain members

of the opposite sex—and so she dug her heels into the floor to steady herself, took a deep breath, and told herself to keep her mind on business.

Bob introduced the gentleman as Javier Valente, a representative of Tivoli Designs. Helen recognized the name of the design house, known world-wide as an Italian haute couture furrier. He explained that Valente was in the United States to negotiate contracts between Tivoli Designs and the larger chinchilla ranches across the country. Tivoli wanted top-of-the-line pelts.

“Mr. Valente’s contracts keep the pelt brokers and their high commissions out of the deal.”

“And we guarantee you’ll have a sale,” Javier added.

He’s going after the chinchillas I need! Helen thought with alarm.

She hadn’t expected this wrinkle in her plans. Her project’s momentum could be derailed when it barely got started. She was wary of Valente because she considered fur buyers, whether brokers or furriers, to be scamps who were solely out to make a buck off the backs of hard-working chinchilla ranchers like her father. They paid low prices for pelts, even though chinchilla coats have always been the highest priced fur coats on the market. Valente’s purchase on behalf of Tivoli Designs could mean that Bob would not provide her with her choice of live chinchillas she wanted.

He’s holding the aces and not even trying to keep a poker face, she judged as she looked at Valente smiling confidently. They were in a lock-eyed standoff. He kept looking at her, waiting for her reaction to cue his next move. But she was doing the same, waiting to see where he headed.

Javier broke the uncomfortable silence. He had prepared for the meeting with Helen. From the moment at the airport when he saw the

Wildlife Restoration's logo on her canvas shoulder bag, Javier knew that Helen had to be the executive director of Wildlife Restorations, Inc., the woman he was soon to meet. He quickly decided not to present himself. Their fortuitous encounter gave him an opportunity to consider how to deal with her. When he arrived at the ranch much earlier than Helen, he took the opportunity to find out about her from Bob. He learned about the legacy of quality animal husbandry her father had imprinted on the chinchilla industry during the late 1950s and early 1960's. The ranchers knew Helen as one of their own. While Helen was growing up, she accompanied her father to meetings and assisted him while he taught seminars. After she went off to college, she never returned to work in the chinchilla industry. She did, however, put the ranchers on the Wildlife Restorations mailing list as a means of renewing contact with them when she took her role as executive director. She never lost a strong connection with her roots.

"Helen let us ranchers know she never became a veterinarian," Bob told Javier, "...probably a good thing. She eventually found a way--maybe a better way--to use her animal science degree."

Javier found Bob's stories of Helen to be quaint and wholesome, not what he would have expected to hear about the executive-type woman who caught his eye at the airport. He was being told about a humble but capable woman. But what he had witnessed, even in a brief moment that he couldn't set aside, was a woman whose intense eyes and full lips hinted at a vibrant sensuality that was juxtaposed against her gray-flannelled self.

Javier extended his hand., "Pleased to meet you Miss Wilson," he said, ignoring her wedding ring.

Javier was confident he'd complete a successful business transaction with Bob, even if it became awkward because of Helen's competing proposal. As an international business negotiator with clients all over the world, Javier knew he could negotiate just about anything, even a

deal between two opposing forces vying for the same resource. In this case, the prize was the acquisition of the offspring of expensive breeding animals. Tivoli Designs wanted Black Velvet and Dark Standards, the types that produced dramatically beautiful fur coats. Wildlife Restorations, Inc. wanted the healthiest Dark Standards available to be used as breeders for a regressive breed-back program.

“You know, Helen, my Black Velvet breeders have small kits, sometimes only one or two babies, and Dark Standards sometimes have small kits too,” Bob reminded her. “The regular Standards produce larger kits and would be easy for you to find. All ranchers have them--many more than I have.”

“The most skilled ranchers focus on the two types you breed. Better a few very healthy animals than less healthy ones from somewhat skilled ranchers.”

Bob caught the compliment and looked sheepish. “My top breeders were hard to find and I had to pay dearly for them. I start with good stock from other ranchers and I look after them – the way it should be done.”

Bob’s chinchillas were the most disease resistant animals found in the industry. It was his animal husbandry skill Helen wanted and his resultant leadership among other chinchilla ranchers. She knew she’d have to begin with the best-of-the-best in order to get all the chinchilla ranchers to support her mission.

“I’m hoping you will let me have as many animals as possible.”

“Well...we’ll have to talk about that.”

Helen detected a shift away from the positive interest Bob had expressed during their phone call. “I know our wild chinchilla restoration project won’t win you and the other ranchers any popularity contests, but a change in the public’s view of fur ranches

would throw a curve to the extreme animal rights groups. It's the hardcore types that are impossible to deal with. Dissention among them might embolden their more sensible members, especially the younger ones."

Bob nodded, "Yeah, the college kids wise-up sometimes."

"That may happen down the road," Javier intervened, "but right now I am offering you, Bob, an opportunity you shouldn't pass up." Javier was determined to get Bob's signature on a Tivoli Designs purchase agreement for the sought-after high-quality furs.

"Well, you know, there's other people to consider...people I've done business with for years...other ranchers, too...folks who know Helen.

Javier knew that Bob would be wary of circumventing the brokers and jeopardizing their existing business relationships, regardless of Tivoli Design's tempting price for the pelts. He was prepared to outbid any pelt broker's customary offer, but he hadn't anticipated that he'd be competing against a nonprofit organization that wanted live animals. Helen Wilson was forcing him to compete on moral ground. Save the wild chinchillas! An unusual circumstance and unknown territory for him.

Helen knew she would have success if she played to the fact that ranchers were weary of the negative publicity put out by animal rights groups. Ranchers wanted opportunities to present information that showed chinchilla ranching in a different light, and they were tired of being pegged as cold-hearted opportunists who cared little about the extinction of wild chinchillas.

"Those animal rights people are a pain in the neck and have hurt our sales. Some good publicity sure would help us," Bob nodded.

Javier listened intently. His client wanted to cut out brokers who inserted themselves as middlemen on every pelt sold, thus reducing both rancher and furrier profits. And Tivoli Designs didn't just want increased sales in the fur industry. It wanted a monopoly on buying the highest quality chinchilla pelts, most of which were produced in the United States. Tivoli Designs strived to be the premier European furrier by cornering the market for quality American-produced pelts.

“And aligning with a premier furrier, namely Tivoli Designs, could mean even more demand for high-end pelts,” Javier added.

Bob put his hands in the side pockets of his denim overalls, looked at them both, then at the floor, and shook his head slowly from side to side, his eyes following the wooden seams on the floor while he thought. He understood the high stakes on all sides and felt torn between the competing interests of his guests.

Bob wasn't a charismatic leader like Helen's father, Sam. Bob did good work but he couldn't easily win people over to his point of view. He reflected on how animal rights groups had driven a wedge between chinchilla ranchers and other more sensible stakeholders in chinchilla husbandry. Sam could have figured a way to bring all sides together. The health and welfare of the animals was their common goal. If it hadn't been for the negative publicity stirred by animal rights enthusiasts, “wing nuts” as Bob called the fanatics, the fur industry, animal welfare groups, and wildlife preservationists could work together for the overall welfare of the chinchilla, including the endangered species in the wild. Sam had long talked about bringing them together and creating a coalition to preserve chinchillas in the wild, but years passed and Sam grew too old to lead the cause. When Sam died, Bob and others gave up on the goal. They thought that if Sam couldn't bring the stakeholders together, nobody could. New hope had arisen when they heard Helen wanted to fulfill her father's dream. She was so much like her father—determined, hardworking, and intelligent.

Bob looked again at his two guests and wondered how they would resolve their opposing interests and if the resolution would be acceptable to his peers. He needed time to think.

“Well...let me take you on a little tour. By then Betty will have our coffee and some homemade blackberry pie ready for us. Best you see what I’ve got going here before we sit down to talk this out and decide what to do.” He headed for the front door, and they followed him onto the porch and down the wooden steps.

Upon entering the low-flung barn, a cool burst of air swept over them.

“We have to keep the temperature between forty-five and sixty-five degrees,” Bob commented as he switched on the overhead florescent lights in the darkened barn.

The light and sounds of the human intruders woke the animals and their rustling enlivened the quiet. Javier looked down the long rows of wire cages, stacked one atop the other with space for metal trays full of sawdust to be inserted at the bottoms of each cage. Given the hundreds of chinchilla-filled cages, the air smelled much fresher than he had imagined and the soft whirring of exhaust fans helped explain why. He had never seen live chinchillas, but only photos of the cute, gray animals that looked like a cross between a short-tailed, fluffy squirrel and a fat hamster. He was intrigued by how their clamorous jumping soon stopped and the chinchillas went back to sleep, waiting for nightfall and their activity in on the exercise wheels.

“Being here in the barn reminds me of how I spent many hours of my youth helping my father record notes about each of his breeders and their kits,” Helen said wistfully.

Bob explained to Javier how the animals were bred, the hygienic conditions under which they had to be raised, their sensitive gastrointestinal systems that required special feeds and water purity,

the tendency toward a number of illnesses, and the average number of offspring per kit.

“My father and I would walk up and down the aisles, peering into cages or removing animals to take a closer look at their health and quality. He grew attached to many of the breeders.”

“You get to know their individual personalities,” Bob chimed in. “Breeders live for up to eight to twelve years, so you get to know them well.”

“Dad was a master at identifying the genetic traits he wanted to pass on from breeders to future chinchilla generations. But it wasn't until I studied animal science at the university that I came to realize how he knew much more about chinchilla breeding than any of my professors knew. He just didn't know the textbook science behind it.”

Bob looked at Helen knowingly, then picked up the tour commentary. “You see, Javier, the sawdust trays at the bottom of each cage have to be kept perfectly clean and dry in order to protect the animals' fur and keep them healthy,” he said with pride. “Me and my guys spend lots of hours cleaning trays and keeping them this way. And see those metal boxes inside each cage? They are filled with volcanic ash that is replaced each week. The little critters are happiest when they can roll around in their powder baths to keep themselves groomed.”

Bob grabbed a handful of fresh alfalfa from an open bag on a cart and shoved it into the metal feeder that hung on the door of the cage. The groggy male chinchilla easily awoke at the strong smell of alfalfa and moved forward from the back of the cage to eat. Javier took the moment to approach the cage for a closer look.

“Careful! Don't scare him,” warned Helen. “He might stand up on his back legs and spray you. He doesn't know you.”

Javier quickly backed off.

Bob chuckled. “We better head back to the house. Betty is waiting,” he reminded them. On the way back, Bob questioned Helen’s determination to obtain Black Velvets. “It’s too bad you won’t use the regular Standards that most of the ranchers breed. Sure would be easier for you.”

“As I said before, ranchers like you produce the strongest, healthiest chinchillas.”

“So, you need good stock, for sure.”

“Right. Besides, if the top three ranchers in the country support my project, the rest of the ranchers will favor and support my project as well.”

“Can’t guarantee they’ll get on board, but it’s worth a try.”

“I’d like the whole domestic chinchilla industry to join me in saving the wild chinchillas from extinction,” Helen said on the verge of pleading. “I can’t source animals from anywhere else. The ranchers in Argentina and Mexico, even the top ones, aren’t as advanced, in my opinion.”

“Can’t say I disagree on that count,” Bob nodded.

Seeing that he had accepted another compliment, she decided to make him a promise that would elevate his reputation even further. “You’ll have ample recognition for your participation in the program and be credited for the contribution of your husbandry skills.”

Bob shrugged off her play to his ego.

Oh, dear. Wrong move. Shouldn’t play to the vanity of an egoless man. Helen waited, her hope turning to fear she had offended him.

“So how many breeders would I have to set aside?” Bob finally asked as he gestured they take a seat at the table where Betty had set up vinyl place mats and paper napkins. Betty poured coffee for them from a dime-store pitcher, its shiny ceramic emblazoned with a Rhode Island Red chicken.

Helen thought hard about how to make it easier for Bob to join her cause, knowing it meant he'd lose income from sales if he did. He hadn't asked about what he would be paid by Wildlife Restorations. He appeared to know that he'd lose money on the project.

“As you probably have guessed, Bob, we can't pay you now. We hope with future funds, we will be able to buy your animals. But don't forget, Bob, Wildlife Restorations is a not-for-profit organization that receives donations. The value of each animal can be a tax deduction for you.”

“I don't make enough profit to need a tax deduction.”

Wrong move again. “Well, just a thought,” she shrugged. “But to answer your question about how many chinchillas we'd need from you, it may be fewer than you think if you can help me recruit the other ranchers.”

“Not sure I'm any good at recruiting, but I'm willing to talk with other ranchers.”

“We will work with whatever number of animals you are willing to donate to help us get started.” Helen paused to consider what more she might say to convince Bob. “Any step forward is a step toward completing my father's dream,” she said trying to invoke Bob's friendship with her father.

“Yeah, Sam never let up talking about it, did he?” Sadness darkened Bob's face. His shoulders slumped forward as he interlaced his fingers on his lap. “He was a good man, a good friend.”

Javier knew he had to break the nostalgic spell Helen had cast over Bob at that moment.

“Even if Wildlife Restoration begins to pay, you can’t count on nonprofit organizations to be able to have funds even a few months later,” Javier said. “Grants may not come through the next year and you’d be stuck with animals past their prime for top value on the pelt market. Even if they can pay you, it probably won’t be what the animals are truly worth.”

Helen flashed an angry look at Javier. She hated the public opinion that nonprofits were unstable, shoestring organizations that lacked business know-how. *Don’t argue that point. Now is not the time.* Bob would jump at the chance for as much guaranteed income as possible. Any rancher would. At the same time, she could see that she had gained Bob’s attention to a greater cause than his bank account. Javier’s proposal would likely eliminate her own if she tried to argue from an economic standpoint.

“You and my father used to talk about finding a way to showcase the legitimacy of chinchilla ranching and prove you cared about humane animal husbandry, as well as the survival of the wild chinchilla species.”

Javier saw that Helen was winning Bob’s emotional commitment that conflicted with his financial need. He couldn’t let Bob’s donations remove too many young animals from the pool of those being tagged for pelting. Tivoli Designs wanted to buy one hundred percent of Bob’s highest quality pelts. Javier had to be assured that Bob’s generosity and that of other ranchers wouldn’t impinge too greatly on Tivoli’s voracious needs. He concluded that he should offer a compromise position. A small concession on his part could secure the highest possible percentage of pelts produced for his client.

“Tivoli Designs will buy the rights to ninety-five percent of your best production, Bob. That way you could donate up to five percent of

your pelt-ready animals to Wildlife Restorations.” He assured Bob that by cutting out the middle man on the sale of his pelts, he would be able to exceed his current annual income even if Wildlife Restorations paid him nothing. “Will that work for you?” Javier asked knowing it was an agreeable offer, then smiled magnanimously at Helen, as if to prove he was on her side.

Helen looked at Javier in amazement. She didn't know what to think. At face value, the offer was fair enough, seemingly a win-win for everyone. But she would have to count on whatever animals Bob could give her in exchange for a tax write-off or, later on, a small payment. Javier had said “up to” five percent, not a solid five percent. Not exactly the commitment she wanted. With fluctuating pelt prices, there would be times when Bob would offer her less than five percent of his production and it might not be enough for her, and what if Javier made the same offer to the other two major chinchilla ranchers? Worse still, what if he swooped in and cornered the market, shutting her out entirely, a plan he might have accomplished with Bob if she hadn't shown up in person?

Bob looked at her, waiting for her reaction, but no words would come to her.

Undaunted by Helen's obvious hesitance in supporting his offer, Javier asked Bob to take a moment to talk it over with his wife before making a decision. After Bob disappeared into the kitchen with Betty, Javier took Helen aside.

“Helen, you must know that donating more than five percent would put Bob in financial jeopardy if the pelt market prices waivered even the slightest. Even with the guaranteed sales I am offering him, he would be taking a risk.”

“That depends on how much Tivoli is willing to pay for his pelts, doesn't it?” she argued back.

Yet Helen knew Javier was going to win this round. Bob would think her unreasonable if she turned down Javier's idea. Ranchers' profit margins were very small. Brokers and furriers were the ones who made the most money from chinchillas. Tivoli wasn't going to be charitable. Javier's proposal, though not in her plan, would have to be accepted. His strategy had worked. Bob and Betty were sure to accept his solution. She'd have to go along with it.

She resolved to move fast with the other ranchers. Now that she knew about Tivoli Designs and had met Javier, she knew she was up against a formidable competitor. She had no reason to trust Javier Valente. From her vantage point, the salvation of her project and even the survival of the wild chinchillas depended on her quick action.

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The next day Helen returned to her office to work on a pre-emptive strategy to obtain the allegiance of the two other chinchilla ranchers before Javier could make his next move. When she called the ranchers in Ohio and Pennsylvania, she was distressed to find that he had already contacted them, but, thankfully, no dates had been set for an appointment with him. She decided to make immediate arrangements to pay the ranchers a visit.

However, Javier put in a call to her before she could get started with her interference plan. Helen hesitated to take the call. She didn't trust that any good would come of the conversation, but she needed to know why he was calling to determine what he might do next. She brushed aside the fact that he was an alluring European and now thought of him as her opponent with an unfair advantage.

"We should work together on this," Javier advised in a factual manner. "I have no doubt you will be making trips to Ohio and Pennsylvania in the immediate future, as will I. We both run the risk that the other person could end up with a share that's unacceptable to the other. We each know that the scene at Bob's ranch will be played

out again, each of us arguing our case. So why not save time by jointly presenting the plan we've realized works for both of us?"

He was right, Helen thought with reluctant resignation. He held the better cards, no matter how worthy her mission. The ranchers would find Javier's prices very appealing and she could easily end up with none of the chinchilla breeders' annual offspring if he prevailed. Still, she felt resistance welling up in her.

Maybe it was Javier's self-assurance that irked her. Maybe it was her dislike for being the underdog. Maybe it was her disdain for anyone who attempts to buy favor. No, if she was honest with herself, she knew it was her desire to befriend him instead of going to battle with him, a desire she had to resist.

"I see your point," Helen conceded, "but you do realize, don't you, that if Bob had made a bigger commitment to my project, I would not have to look further than his ranch." She wasn't going to let Javier think he was doing her or her organization a favor. Her pride wouldn't allow for it.

"And your project has interfered with Tivoli's desire to obtain one hundred percent of the top- quality pelts on the U.S. market. I don't like failing to meet my client's goals."

"So, you don't think Tivoli will be happy with your minor concession."

"They will be, once I convince my client it's better to join forces with you."

His directness had an appealing ring of honesty. "If we do this..." she hesitated, "how do you propose we explain what we want?"

"It won't be difficult. We'll tell them we want to share the appointment time, just as we did with Bob. We'll each make a

presentation, just as we did with Bob. And we'll show we can respect each other's goals, with the only difference being that the solution will come from both of us at the outset.

Helen thought Javier's last point was an overstatement of where she stood with him. She understood his goal and his role as Tivoli's agent, but she didn't know enough to trust him. She'd check into his background when she got back to her office. For now, she had to rely on her business instinct and go along with his plan.

Javier now understood, having heard Helen's personal story, that he couldn't ruthlessly pursue his client's business goal. He knew he wasn't that cold hearted. Besides, he found her attractive, and he didn't want to upset her by scoring an uncompromised victory when he was beginning to have a personal interest in her. Helen had peaked his curiosity with her undaunted resolve and pragmatism, not unlike the qualities he found in himself. He imagined that if they got to know each other, they would have some powerful discussions, a type of intellectual confrontation that he found appealing in a woman. If given the opportunity, Helen was a woman he wanted to know. He had to create that opportunity.

"I suggest we meet at a restaurant just prior to our presentation to go over it together. We should try to get comfortable with each other," he added, his voice now silky soft. "--if we want this to go well."

Javier's suggestive tone charged through Helen like electricity. "Get comfortable" sounded like a seductive invitation--at least she heard it that way--and her body responded accordingly. Then she chastised herself for the thought. Mixing flirtations with business was a mistake, and a flirtation with Javier wouldn't be an innocent one.

"Excuse me, I need to put you on hold," she half fibbed and pressed 'hold' without waiting for his response. During the stolen moment, she tapped her pencil on her desk the way she usually did when trying to make a difficult decision. His proposal was her only chance

to get what she was after with the other two ranchers, and she was no match for Javier's business acumen. Her plan to preempt him had been torn to shreds. She had to concede.

"Sorry for the interruption," she apologized without excuse. "When do you want to meet?"

Javier took no offense at her abruptness. He had persuaded her to meet and was pleased with himself. His was simply one more polished maneuver with one more vulnerable woman in a string of women.

Not that Javier didn't love his wife. He considered his extra marital affairs a necessity, not a betrayal. Their life together was good enough, for the most part, but she consented to sex reluctantly and certainly not frequently enough for a man of fifty-one. He told himself he was still full of fire and not about to let himself become a sexless old man before it was his time. There were moments when his Catholic upbringing, an integral part of his parent's childrearing methods, made him wish he didn't have to resort to the solution he had chosen, regardless of how entertaining he found his trysts with women. He preferred authenticity in all his relationships, and the duplicity inherent in having affairs struck him as the antithesis of his basic principles. He resolved the paradox by compartmentalizing his feelings, neatly disassociating his set of moral rules from his opposing primal needs.

Helen hung up the phone and found herself pacing back and forth on the industrial carpeting in front of her glass-topped desk. Conscious of her agitated circling, she struggled to make sense of the conflicts stirring within her. She looked about her office as if the framed diplomas and photos of her family would ground her in the reality of her identity. Then she sat down in her high-backed, leather desk chair. Normally, sitting there would be a reminder of her responsibility as an executive, a person who had to be in charge of herself. But she couldn't get hold of what was whirring inside her.

An elusive thought escaped her. In the farthest reaches of her mind lay the knowledge that this phone call was the beginning of something she couldn't handle. She jumped up from her chair and walked out of her office as if movement would dissipate her tension.

*

Two weeks were needed to make arrangements for the meetings at the chinchilla ranches. The time lag helped Helen think through their joint approach and regain her self-assurance in relationship to Javier's slick style of handling business. When they met in Ohio with the second chinchilla rancher, Colin Thatcher, their tag-team presentation concluded swiftly and successfully. However, their experience with the Pennsylvania chinchilla rancher, Hank Hutchinson, was different.

Something seemed to be holding Hank back from making a decision. And Helen didn't want to return to the home office until Hank made up his mind.

She studied Javier's inscrutable, card-shark expression. *What's he thinking?*

Javier turned to Hank. "How about if we leave you alone for a few hours and give you time to think about this?"

"There's nothing much to do around here, you know," Hank smiled weakly. "I don't know where you'd go except the greasy-spoon diner at the highway intersection. But like the signs says, 'Best hamburgers in town.'"

"The only hamburgers in town," Javier quipped.

"Not exactly. There is no town."

"We'll be fine," Helen assured Hank.

Javier and Helen had little choice but to pass time waiting together while sipping brewed Folgers coffee, eating dried-out cake donuts, and sharing hushed impressions of the medley of characters who passed through this stop in the road. The only two booths were full. They had to sit on the counter stools that were placed surprisingly close together. Helen squelched the rising surge of desire as she felt her thigh touch his as they sat on the stools. *Don't be an idiot*, she chastised herself.

The growing attraction between them didn't go unnoticed by Javier, but not even for a moment was he foolish enough to think that Helen would act upon it without patient and considerable effort on his part. She was a respectable married woman, far from the type who would have a sordid fling with a relative stranger. He, too, was never interested in that sort of thing, even if the lustful signals were obvious. He preferred the challenge of chasing classy, hard-to-find women with status earned by their own achievements. Women like Helen had to be courted and wooed. The trappings of prestige and power were not enough. They responded to the charm of little considerations afforded them, the male attentiveness they lacked because men thought of them as too strong to need minor courtesies. He also reckoned he could begin to sway her if he had a chance to meet her in New York City where he had the environment necessary to impress her. A follow-up meeting there wouldn't be impossible given that Wildlife Restorations operated a satellite office in Newark. He imagined himself picking her up at her office in a Ferrari. She would never know it was rented. They'd stop by his towering, high-rise office building in the financial district on their way to his favorite, upscale Italian restaurant in lower Manhattan where he'd place their order in Italian with the head waiter, Antonio. Women he knew enjoyed the allure of Italy, the passion of the culture, and the romance of Italian being spoken. Move slowly, he thought. He would bring Helen to him soon enough when he'd find a reason for her to meet him in New York. At the moment, he disciplined himself to focus on closing the deal with Hank.

The time spent waiting for the chinchilla rancher's decision that afternoon didn't bear fruit.

"I need to sleep on this," Hank stalled. "Why don't I call you in the morning?"

"I don't have a flight out until noon tomorrow," Javier lied knowing he'd have to change his early morning flight. "No problem for me to return in the morning. How about you, Helen?"

Helen needed to get back home, but she wasn't going to let Javier trump her by having time alone with Hank. "I can make arrangements to stay over," she said.

"I get going in the barn around seven," Hank said. "You can come any time after that."

The change of plans meant driving back to Pittsburgh for the night and returning the next day, an inconvenience for both of them, but they were willing.

Javier had a delaying tactic of his own, but it was not in regard to Hank. Javier wanted to give Helen the idea that he wasn't making a play for her. Making himself less available seemed to work with women. He made no offer for dinner in Pittsburg or even breakfast in the morning. He'd meet her at the ranch at 8:30 a.m. His ploy worked.

"We could meet at the roadside diner at seven before we go out to the ranch," Helen suggested while feeling a tinge of disappointment that Javier hadn't made the offer first. "It might be good to review our talking points."

Javier smiled, silently commending himself.

The next morning, over pancakes and coffee, they each received phone calls from the rancher. All deals were off. No explanation. No need to meet face-to-face to talk it over. Puzzled and exasperated, Javier and Helen vowed to get to the bottom of what had just happened.

“I have some people I can call to find out what’s behind this,” said Helen.

“So do I.” And then, within a beat, he took his chance. “Let’s meet in New York after we do a little investigating. We’ll need to fine tune our approach. I can pick you up at your Newark office to make it easier for you.”

Helen peered into her almost empty coffee cup and took her time to answer. She seldom flew to the Newark satellite office, not unless she piggybacked the trip with a conference or some such meeting. She knew that if she accepted Javier’s invitation, the trip wouldn’t be purely business. Whatever it was they had to discuss about their work together could be done over the phone. In order to satisfy her ethics, she’d be obliged to pay for most of the expense out of her own pocket, even if the trip was ostensibly about the chinchilla project. She always was careful about not misusing her organization’s funds. Clearly, a trip to Newark was unnecessary and costly, but she wanted to go. Helen paused much too long for her indecisiveness to go unnoticed.

“Where do you stay when you go to Newark?” he asked as innocently as possible.

“In a hotel nearby the Newark office.”

“Why not stay in Manhattan for a change? My assistant has an apartment with an extra room and a private bath. She rents it out through Airbnb, but she refuses to charge me anything for people I send her.”

“Oh, I couldn’t impose on her.”

“No imposition. I think she considers it job security,” he smiled.

“But I’m not a client.”

“No matter. She enjoys having guests in her nice place. She’s very accommodating and you’ll like her. Much more comfortable than staying at a hotel...and you can’t beat the price.”

“I really—”

“I’ll have her call you. She’ll be enthusiastic. Don’t disappoint her.”

Helen knew she had been persuaded. With a generous offer of door-to-door ground transportation and no hotel costs, it would be almost rude to decline. She put on her most emotionless face, even though she was shaking inside. Any personal involvement with Javier had trouble and heartache written all over it. Time to take a deep breath.

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Javier, but let’s first see what happens with our investigation of Hank’s motive for stonewalling us.”

Within a few days, both of them had checked their individual resources. Javier was the first to discover the reason for the Pennsylvania rancher’s withdrawal from contact with them. They needed to talk. Coming up with a strategy wasn’t going to be easy.

*

“Newark?” Jim looked puzzled as he opened a kitchen drawer. “You never go to that office unless there’s a convention in New York,” Jim said.

Helen uncorked a wine bottle and poured herself a glass of wine. “No convention. Just an individual meeting, but an important one.”

“Seems last minute,” Jim noted.

“It is.”

“Good thing we haven’t planned anything.”

We never do. Helen silently swirled the red wine in her glass.

“I was going to ask you to go to the air show with me. You’ll be missing a good one,” Jim said.

“Hope you enjoy it.” *He knows it’s not my thing.* This time she had an excuse not to go.

“I have the barbeque heated up,” Jim said as he opened the refrigerator. “Want steak or chicken?”

“Chicken. Want to tell me about your day?”

“Just the usual.” Jim seldom had words for the esoteric work he did. Too hard to explain. If he had married someone in his field, conversation would have been easier, especially since Helen had a habit of asking too many questions, questions that seemed irrelevant. She wanted to understand but bringing her along was dissatisfying and made him impatient with her. And she bristled if he implied that his work was beyond her understanding. Jim’s solution was to say only what he felt important.

Helen always asked about his day to be polite and show that she cared. That was enough. Then she’d move on to commenting about news stories or what needed to be done around the house. Jim was fine with that. His needs were minimal. Or so she assumed. *Sometimes one’s work changes a person,* Helen thought in the hope he would be different after retirement. She followed him to the patio and stood beside the barbeque grill as she sipped her wine and the conversation fell into its routine topics.

*

Javier waited curbside at her office in Newark. Helen had told him not to bother finding a place in the office's busy parking lot. When she exited the building, she wished she had known he would drive up in a red Ferrari. As it was, a couple of women staff members at Wildlife Restorations saw Javier jump out of the Ferrari to open the door for her. They paused to gape. She felt an uncomfortable quiver of anxiety at the acute awareness of how exotically handsome he looked, dressed in evening-dark, with a white, wool-silk scarf flung around his neck. She worried about what the two employees must be thinking as she stepped into a Ferrari whose flamboyant color contrasted with the humdrum Chevy Volts and Ford Fusions that filled the jammed parking lot.

Dinner at La Dolce Vita in Manhattan was a luxury Helen could not afford within her travel expense account or the limits of her own pocketbook. Javier's extra bit of gentlemanly attentiveness was the unexpected prom-like frill of the evening. She had forgotten what it was like to have men open doors, pull out chairs, and offer her the better seat at the table. Jim had never done such things, even during his artless version of a courtship. In Javier's hands, these old-fashioned gestures came off as a compliment, not a mark of sexism, as Helen's women friends would label such actions, throw-backs to an era they were glad to leave behind.

Helen assumed Javier's leisurely conversation was a feature of his European style, a cultural way of doing business that began with building a relationship before getting down to business. He was in no rush to talk about the background story to Hank's abrupt dismissal of them. In truth, Javier's primary concern was to know Helen much better and was detoured when she immediately turned the conversation to him.

"You are Italian but speak with an American accent as if you were born here," Helen said.

“That’s because I was born and raised in San Diego. Both of my parents are immigrants. My father is from Italy and my mother is from Spain, so I speak Italian and Spanish. I married an Italian woman. That’s why I live in Italy.”

“*Buena sera, Signor Valente!*” interrupted Antonio, the head waiter.

The two men struck up a short, lively and animated conversation in Italian. Helen noted that Javier’s authentic Italian accent matched Antonio’s. Javier didn’t ask Helen what she would like to order or ask if he could order for her. He self-assuredly ordered several items from the menu, including an extravagant addition of pâté appetizers and glasses of wine paired with the hors d’oeuvres.

After placing the entrée order, Javier switched back to English. “I ordered a little of everything that’s special here. I thought you would enjoy sampling.”

He had brought with him a bottle of Monfortino grand reserve Ceretta wine and the sommelier came to open it. Helen concluded that choosing from the restaurant’s wine list must have been too expensive and the corkage fee was more affordable, even for Javier, but she soon learned she was wrong. As the sommelier pulled the bottle cork and poured the red wine into a decanter to allow it to “breathe” before the main course arrived, he smiled, obviously impressed with Javier’s choice of wine label and appreciating the gem he held in his hand.

“I import my wines directly and keep them at my apartment here. I’m a bit too particular when it comes to Italian and Spanish wines,” Javier admitted without a hint of haughtiness about his preferences, as if his choices were no more out of the ordinary than going to the corner grocery.

“Did you meet your wife in Italy?” Helen continued. “Were you a student there?”

“Yes, for a time. I completed my junior year of college abroad, in Rome.”

“That’s when you met your wife?”

“Yes, in class. We were both very young. Full of dreams. Unprepared for realities.” Javier had set the tone so that she would be willing to talk more candidly about herself. Unless he was able to steer the conversation to a personal level, he’d never learn whether or not she might be open to a romantic liaison. He eased into it.

“Did you meet your husband in college?”

“No. I was older when I met Jim. I was already working at Wildlife Restorations as a researcher, fully engrossed in understanding how we might save animals from extinction.”

“You seem really caught up in saving wild chinchillas. I have to admire your fervor.”

“Actually, I have more concern for other wild animals that are on the brink. Unless animals have some commercial value, people seem to care less about saving them.”

“Not if they are adorable like Pandas or majestic like elephants. But, I see your point. Well taken.”

“Fortunately for chinchillas, they have been bred. That means we still have a chance to save the wild ones.”

“Thanks to people like your father.”

“Yes, as you have seen, I have a lot of passion wrapped up in my father’s legacy and the legacy of the other chinchilla ranchers.”

“So...How did you meet Jim?” He’d had enough about chinchillas.

Helen blushed. "Through a dating service. Even in those days, people seeking partners went to Internet sites, but then matchmaking was conducted through companies that interviewed singles and claimed they knew how to pair people with success."

"Did they get it right for you?"

Helen lowered her eyes to the half full wine glass in her hand. "I wanted to find a husband and the dating service paired me with a forty-year-old who had never been married. My daughter, Leah, was six years old at the time."

"You found a good step-father for your daughter?"

"Good enough."

"And a good enough husband?"

Helen didn't answer immediately, seemingly caught up in unfolding her napkin and placing it neatly in her lap. "Good enough" wasn't something she wanted to admit to herself, let alone him. Instead, she chose to describe Jim's prestigiously important but incomprehensible research at Sacramento's BioCom Laboratories, his hobby with model trains, his skill with crossword puzzles, and his weekend bicycling addiction.

"Our main activities are riding our bicycles along the American River trail and cooking gourmet meals together," Helen answered.

"He's a bit of a homebody?"

"You could say that. He likes reading a good book while sitting in his recliner in front of the fireplace. And he likes to tinker with the never-ending maintenance of our Victorian home."

"And what do you enjoy?"

“I go out with my friends or my daughter. She’s thirty already. Hard to believe. Leah doesn’t mind hanging out with me and a group of my friends, especially when we explore museums, book stores, galleries, and boutiques in Midtown, the only ‘hot spot’ neighborhood in Sacramento.”

Javier suspected that Helen was not as content in her marriage as she tried to depict. There was no joy in her description. Truth lurked beneath the surface of Helen’s portrayal of a superficial happiness that she could safely display on Facebook. If he wanted her to open up, he’d have to take the lead by hinting at his own marital discontent, hoping she would reveal hers.

“My wife, Sofia, wishes I would go into business with her brother who owns a retail clothing store in Milan. Can you imagine me staying in one place that long? Sofia likes to keep things in the family and close to home.”

“No, I can’t imagine you being that provincial.”

“Now that my two oldest children are grown, my absences are less problematic for Sofia-- compared to when all three lived at home. Our rebelliously independent teenage son gives her a little trouble, enough that she wants me to take charge.”

Helen listened intently, wondering if something was missing in Javier’s relationship with Sofia.

“I do my best to be home as much as I can,” he said, as if the circumstances were completely out of his control.

“Me too,” Helen feigned, knowing that it wasn’t true. Being together at home didn’t seem to matter a lot to Jim. And the lukewarm homecomings she received were no incentive to shorten her time away.

“But I enjoy my travels and my profession, even though it demands almost all of my time,” Javier continued.

She intuited they had something in common: exciting work and uninteresting spouses. “My work takes me away from home a lot, too, but Jim doesn’t seem to mind. He has his solitary interests that keep him quite busy. He lives in his own world.”

Javier was satisfied he had learned enough for now, enough to keep the possibilities alive and continue in his pursuit. Pressing Helen for more risked overstepping.

“I suppose the two of you aren’t Sacramento Kings fans,” he offered, moving the conversation to lighter topics that lasted through the main course of their meal.

As soon as the glazed chocolate mousse dessert was served, Helen thought it finally was time to talk about the chinchilla project and wrap up the evening. She had been waiting to talk about why the Pennsylvania chinchilla rancher had backed off so suddenly.

“You were going to give me details regarding what you learned about Hank,” Helen said.

“Certainly. His son is the local veterinarian. Hank received a phone call that threatened to ruin his son’s reputation if Hank went forth with the sale to Tivoli Designs.”

Helen understood immediately. Animal rights groups used one of two tactics: bad publicity or threats to physical safety. They resorted to the second when the first didn’t achieve their ends.

“The caller said they would claim that his son was involved in animal cruelty at the ranch by assisting with the electrocution of the animals,” Javier reported.

“I’ve seen this tactic used in other states. In some towns, criminal charges were brought against the ranchers.”

“Jail time for ranchers?”

“No. District attorneys dismiss charges once they have the facts. In the meantime, a family name is ruined by the media spreading the unsubstantiated claim that electrocution is a cruel form of culling the animals.”

“Pardon my ignorance. I’m a business consultant, not in the fur trade --although one of my clients is a furrier--so I don’t know these animal husbandry details. To an outsider, electrocution would sound inhumane, don’t you think?”

“Electrocution is humane! It’s quick and effective. It’s so fast the animals don’t fight it.”

“Isn’t there...” Javier paused thoughtfully “... some other means that would be more humane?”

Helen shifted in her seat, uncomfortable with the familiar, annoying question. “How do you think other farm animals are killed?”

“I wouldn’t know and haven’t ever thought about it or wanted to think about it. I would suppose they have their throats slit, or, like chickens, their heads are cut off.”

“Doesn’t that sound even more cruel?”

“Yes.”

Helen waited a moment to see if Javier meant “yes...but.” He remained silent.

"I'm sure the caller was with CHAT, Citizens for Humane Animal Treatment," she said, getting to the critical point of their discussion. "That group uses extreme tactics to intimidate." Helen leaned forward to punctuate her warning. "But I can't figure out how they found out about the Tivoli purchases so quickly."

"I'm not familiar with CHAT and its tactics. My client is in Italy and animal rights groups don't have a foothold there—yet. There's a leak somewhere, probably within someone's staff. I know it didn't come from my office, so it might be your . . ."

"Impossible!" Helen balked at the insinuation. "Only my executive assistant and program managers know what's in the folders on my desk or my travel destinations. Besides, I told them the chinchilla restoration project was under wraps until we know how best to manage publicity."

Javier looked skeptical, "I've seen internal sabotage happen in businesses."

"I think we are different. Anyway, what's Tivoli's appetite for pelts got to do with me or my organization?"

"Guilt by association?" speculated Javier.

Helen wasn't sure if she regretted associating with Javier. She had no way of second guessing what would have happened if she hadn't. Besides, she knew she was already too interested in him to curtail their budding relationship. *Am I going down the wrong path?*

"I alerted the other two ranchers that they may get a phone call, "Javier told her. "They don't have any concerns about reputation. They are worried about direct attacks on their ranches."

Helen, too, was most concerned about the welfare of the two chinchilla ranchers that had already signed on with the proposal from Helen and Javier.

“They told me they’ve lived with those concerns for years, so they have several security measures in place. It’s just that the Tivoli contracts have stirred up new trouble,” Javier said.

“You are buying the most profitable pelts and guaranteeing large purchases. More profit for the ranchers means they’ll stay in business longer. CHAT is trying to destroy their industry.”

“I really don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Helen looked firm. “If they can knock off Tivoli’s sales, the smaller furriers will think twice about carrying a line of chinchilla garments.”

“Chinchilla is the softest fur in the world, and its look is distinctive. It always will be in demand and there will always be people rich enough to buy what they want.”

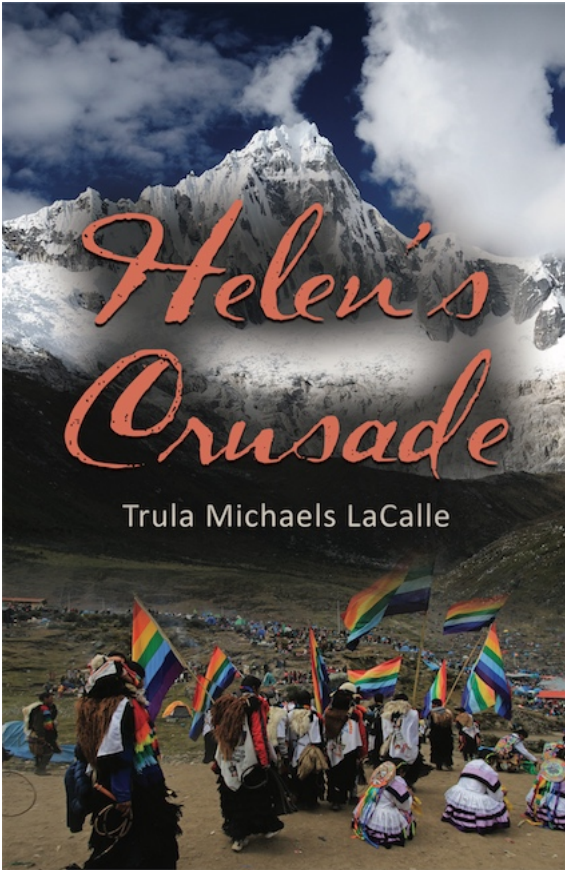
Javier had struck a sensitive nerve. Helen’s resentment toward economic inequality was as strong as her concern for chinchilla ranchers. She couldn’t resist a retort. “Unfortunately, there are more wealthy people in the world than ever before, even as the rest of the world grows poorer.”

“That’s an issue much bigger than we can tackle,” Javier loathed getting into a controversial subject, especially when almost all his clients were among the richest people in the world. “As for you, Helen, it seems to me CHAT would be happy about the work you are doing to save the chinchillas in their native land, even if you must associate with me in order to cut a deal with the ranchers.”

“It’s not only guilt by association, as you said, that could make me a target. If our restoration project is successful, Wildlife Restorations will storm the media with our success and give a lot of credit to the chinchilla ranchers for their participation. CHAT wouldn’t want any public sympathy going toward the chinchilla ranchers because of their support for the wildlife restoration project.”

Javier sat up with interest. This was safer turf and full of opportunity to be in touch with her. “I should get to know more about why ranchers are so eager for good press.” He was sure she’d take the bait.

“If you have any time tomorrow, come by our office in Newark and I’ll show you our file on the kinds of attacks that have been made and the horrible things that have been said about chinchilla ranchers by animal rights groups. Then you’ll understand.”



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