

After twenty years as an outcast, Jossenda Ledesma suddenly shows up at a family gathering. She latches onto Becca Sandoval, a relative newcomer to the clan. To escape Jossenda's grasp, Becca must uncover the reasons for the hostility Jossenda generates, and learn what's behind the cloistered order she has joined.

Relative Danger

by Margaret Tessler

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Relative
DANGER



Margaret Tessler

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Chapter 1

Some people should wear labels:

Poisonous

Dangerous to humans and other living things.

Jossenda Ledesma was one of those people.

But of course she wore no such label, and her toxin was slow to bubble to the surface.

She was a member of my husband's very large extended family. I had never even heard of her until the afternoon I ran across her picture in my sister-in-law's wedding album. Crista and I were sorting out photos to use in a slide-show for their twentieth anniversary party—laughing at the hair and dress styles we'd thought so glamorous back then.

"Who is that?" I asked, pointing to an unfamiliar face in a group photo. "I recognize everyone but her."

Crista stiffened. "Jossenda Ledesma. She managed to get herself in a number of pictures." Crista paused, her face grim. "I threw out a bunch, but—unfortunately—getting rid of *all* of them would have meant getting rid of some of the good ones too. Hmm. Maybe I should go back and cut her out of the few she's in. It would be easier if she wasn't smack dab in the middle every time."

I looked at the picture again, studying it more closely. Apparently a candid shot, it showed six young women standing in line under a canopy of balloons with

matching streamers. A bright mix of autumn colors—gold, rust, dark red.

"Waiting to catch the bouquet," Crista explained.

Five of the six were caught laughing—cheerful and happy. Dressed in cocktail dresses and high heels, their hair black and shiny, they captured the exuberance of the moment, of the event. Jossenda, alone, looked drab and expressionless. She wore a gray matronly dress and no makeup.

"She doesn't look like someone who'd want to be in lots of pictures," I said.

Crista gave a short laugh. "You'd think. Trust me, she enjoyed it—liked spreading her self-righteous gloom around."

"I'm guessing she's a relative?" *One of those people who had to be on the guest list, like it or not.*

Crista shrugged. "Distant cousin. *Very* distant. The family storyline is that she left town years ago and joined a succession of religious cults. After all this time, no one talks about it, or her, anymore."

Crista didn't elaborate, and I knew enough not to press her. I would ask my husband instead.

My name is Rebecca Sandoval—everyone calls me Becca. My husband, Diego, and I are both in our early thirties. We met a few years ago while volunteering for a local animal shelter. Our friendship gradually deepened into love, and we were married the following year.

Diego has gobs of relatives. I have very few: my adoptive parents, a younger brother, a couple of aunts and uncles, one remaining grandparent, and a few

cousins. I'm the only one who lives in New Mexico. The others are scattered to the ends of the earth.

When Diego introduced me to his sister, Crista, she and I became instant friends. I couldn't help thinking of the contrast between the way Jossenda was excluded and I was included in Diego's family circle.

Crista and her husband, Hector, have four children who were delighted to have a new "auntie" when Diego and I were married. His parents, brothers and their families seemed equally enthusiastic. They are a blessing I never take for granted.

Diego and I live in Albuquerque's North Valley in a rambling adobe home with desert landscaping throughout our front yard. A stone patio stretches the length of the house in back. Beyond that is a huge shady garden area where Crista and Hector's anniversary reception was to take place.

* * *

The night after discovering "distant-cousin" Jossenda, I made up my mind to ask Diego about her. We'd finished our after-dinner walk and returned home to relax on our patio. Part of our evening ritual was to sip lemonade or margaritas, as the mood determined.

"Tell me about your cousin Jossenda," I said, setting my margarita on the cabana table between our two cushioned chaises.

Diego tensed, gripping his own glass for a few moments, then shrugged. "I guess there's someone in every family that 'no one talks about.'"

"Do you know why?" I persisted.

He glanced away, a faraway look in his eyes. "No. Not really. She was several years older—Crista's age, I think—and my brothers and I were busy being kids."

"How is she related?"

"Let's see. Tía Lupe's niece...with a few degrees of separation." Diego's brow wrinkled in concentration. "Tía's second husband's brother's daughter. Something like that."

"That *is* stretching it."

"Well, you know how it is. *La familia es la familia.*"

* * *

As it turned out, it was Jossenda who, of her own accord, inserted herself into everyone's lives again.

She chose the afternoon of the anniversary party, which had gone smoothly up until then. The October weather had been on our side—warm, with just a touch of a breeze. Tables and canopies were decorated in autumn colors, reminiscent of the wedding theme. Our garden itself was festive, with an eclectic mix of Michaelmas daisies, dahlias, mums, coneflowers, zinnias, and snapdragons in full bloom.

But as the party was winding down, Jossenda wandered in, looking a little bewildered, as if her appearance was purely accidental. Once again, she looked just short of frumpy. As in the photo, she was dressed in gray and wore no makeup. Her thick salt-and-pepper hair, blunt cut, hung just below her shoulders, reminding me of a whisk broom. Age hadn't been kind to her—she looked much older than Crista. I

assumed life had been harsh, or perhaps jumping from cult to cult had taken its toll.

Jossenda circulated among the guests, stopping at our table to apologize for being late (as if she'd been invited at all). She explained that, even though she'd been out of touch for some time, she hoped to be embraced into the family bosom once more.

I felt somewhat embarrassed by the tepid welcome she received in return. Whatever the circumstances of her earlier departure, surely she deserved a second chance.

I greeted her warmly, invited her to join us, then asked if she'd like some refreshments. She shook her head, then sat down, giving me a puzzled look. I suppose Diego felt impelled to introduce us. He was polite but aloof, if that combination is possible.

"What brings you to Albuquerque?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm planning to live here," she said. "My Order has relocated here."

"Order?" I asked. "Are you a nun?"

"I guess you could call me that. But not Catholic. I'm a Sister of Demeter."

I blinked. *Demeter? Goddess of the Harvest?*

"That's nice." My stock answer when I don't know what else to say.

She looked around at the crowd again. "This is quite an occasion. Married twenty years," she mused. "I never thought they'd...I mean, well, I never paid any attention to the gossip...."

One of Diego's many relatives sitting at our table—Teresa something—voiced what I was thinking. "If you

didn't pay any attention to it, why are you bringing it up now?"

Jossenda flushed. "Oh, I didn't mean anything...."

"I think you did."

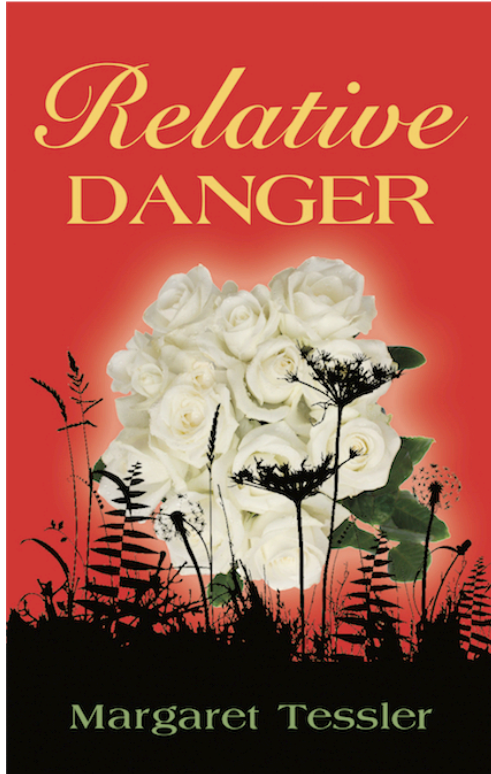
By now Jossenda's face was close to purple, Teresa's simply an icy mask.

I stood and moved away from the table. "You'll have to excuse me," I said, smiling cheerfully, as if good cheer matched the conversation. "I need to help clean up."

Others in our group followed suit, murmuring their excuses as they stacked plates and cups and made their way across the yard. Although the dinner itself had been catered, friends and family had insisted on setting up and taking down everything else.

"Me too," Diego said, leaving Jossenda to collar someone else—anyone else—who wasn't involved in dismantling the tables, canopies, decorations, and assorted paraphernalia.

Yes, Jossenda, the party's over.



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