

Zig Zag is Copyright © Max Black Rabbit. Sabrina, Darke Katt and R.C. are Copyright © Eric W. Schwartz. James Sheppard, Marvin Badger, Rhonda Badger, Yohni and Esteban are Copyright © James Bruner. Alex O'Whitt is © Tigermark. The B-Team is © Silver Coyote. Jean LeBrun, Gabrielle Ryder, Colton Twain, Kalen Twain-Ryder, Francis Lopez, Charles Lopez, Timothy Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg, Malcolm Grazer, Peter Spermophilus, Miranda Spermophilus, Dina Spermophilus, Miriam Redtail, Fox Jones, Leo Leon, Lizzy Doe-Leon, Nadia Leon, Emma Grey, William White, Steve Wulf and Pethouse Magazine is © Joan Jacobsen, 2007. All other characters appearing in this story, except where otherwise specifically noted, are likewise © Joan Jacobsen 2007.

Legal Notice: This story is Copyright © 2007 by Joan Jacobsen. This story may not be sold or used for commercial profit in any form or fashion. This story may not be modified in any way. This story may not be posted on a mirror site or any other Internet site without the written permission of the author. This story may not be distributed on print, magnetic, electrical or optical mediums.

Permission to use characters that are Copyright other individuals was obtained prior to the appearance of said characters.

The author, Joan Jacobsen, hereby asserts moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

This is an independent work of fiction with no connection whatsoever to Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, E.S. Productions or James Bruner and is in no way meant to imply any connection with Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, E.S. Productions, or James Bruner. This story contains characters created by Max Black Rabbit, Eric W. Schwartz, James Bruner, Tigermark and Silver Coyote. Events and characters occurring in this story should not be considered part of the storylines for either 'Zig Zag', 'Sabrina Online' or 'Sabrina Online - The Story'.

In fact, as far as 'Zig Zag', 'Sabrina Online', 'Sabrina Online - The Story' and 'Zig Zag the Story' are concerned, this story does not exist. The artists disavow any knowledge of and do not officially sanction the events in this story.

XXVI - Low points

Charles was out of bed before anyone else in the house. He couldn't sleep for nerves. It had hit him somewhere around half past two in the morning, and he had been tossing and turning since, only managing short moments of something resembling sleep until he finally got enough of it and got out of bed. Steve had been snoring lightly, which hadn't helped either. Kalen had just been out of it. Frankly, Charles couldn't blame the equine. They'd all talked that evening, after the visit at Dina's father's place, and clearly that had been an emotionally heavy encounter.

What kept Charles awake was that he knew he had to go see *his* father soon. Not today, though. They'd wait until tomorrow and after that, it was down-hill to the football-match.

He'd gone downstairs and sat in the kitchen, where he'd made himself a cup of tea. He'd never gotten used to drinking coffee. Not in a home which included a mother who refused to touch the stuff as vehemently as his did. Sitting at the kitchen table, he was nursing the cup between his paws, trying to get his worries and concern out of the way, when Frances joined him. A swift look at the clock on the wall above the door told him that it was ten to five in the morning.

His sister looked as haggard as he felt and he got up to get her a cup without a word. She took it, gratefully, and sat down opposite from him, rubbing her eyes wearily.

They didn't speak for a while. It wasn't really necessary. They obviously felt the same, and probably for the same reason. Charles knew how to read his sister's facial expressions and she knew how to read his. Instead of talking, they simply emptied the tea-pot and sat there, letting the early morning light slowly creep up the porch outside and in through the windows.

It wasn't until twenty past five that Frances finally pushed her cup aside and looked at Charles with an expression that spoke louder than words.

"It's tomorrow then," she simply said.

"It is. And we've got to go through with this, but I don't think I've ever had as many second thoughts about something," he answered.

Frances nodded and looked into her cup. "I know what you mean," she said and sighed. "What'll we do? Go there, stare at him through the window and try to somehow make him telepathically understand our disgust without saying a word? I don't know how to go about this. It seemed like such a good idea...before we left..."

"It still is," Charles said and leaned his head back. "It's still a good idea. But I don't know either what we're going to do. I guess all we can do is really flow with it."

Frances sighed and went to refill the electric kettle.

###

It had been a good morning, when Leo arrived at the office. It had been a bright morning, with just a touch of cloud cover, and it had been warm, without being sweltering. He'd walked through the front doors with his jacket slung over his shoulder, whistling a little tune, and he'd generally felt good about life.

Right now, he felt like he'd never be happy about life anymore. He could only remember having felt this dazed once before in his life, and that was right after he came back to consciousness in Afghanistan, after the incident where a mortar-grenade had exploded close behind him.

This time, no physical damage had actually been done but he would rather have suffered the loss of both legs than this. He'd rather have suffered *any* other discomfort or injury than this, short of his family getting killed.

But in a way, that was exactly what had happened again. He was close to breaking down. How could he keep taking this kind of pain?

He stumbled down the halls, nearly bumping into several of his office-workers. Tears were matting his cheeks, and he knew it, but he didn't try to stop it. Right now, he didn't care if the whole world saw him crying. In fact, he *wanted* the whole world to see it. But not just yet. Not now. First of all, he had to get a hold of Michael Cervus. He had no doubt his security-chief had already received the horrible news, but he still had to make sure. And besides, he didn't want Michael to sit there alone with this.

"Excuse me," he muttered after bumping into someone who dropped a whole load of paperwork.

He didn't even see who it was as he turned the next corner and started down the stairs. He didn't want to wait for an elevator, and he didn't want to stand still. He felt pretty sure he'd collapse unconscious.

He'd received the phone-call less than five minutes ago. An FBI-agent had calmly, politely explained the situation to him. Major Cervus had been found that morning, murdered. He'd been shot so many times that his earthly remains had been almost completely drained of blood. The initial investigation had showed that he'd been shot at point blank range, from the front, while he was standing upright. He'd died looking his killer in the face, but that was absolutely no consolation to Leo. At this time, all he could feel was pain and loss and anguish.

And rage. Oh God the *rage*...

He wanted to kill Benjamin Aureus. He wanted to do so himself. He wanted to make sure that the jackal was put through so much pain that he'd scream and weep and beg for mercy...

And he wouldn't get it.

He slammed his head into the wall, trying to clear his mind with the impact. That wasn't the way. He could never sink to that level. If he did, he'd be no better than Benjamin Aureus himself, and he couldn't do that to himself, his family or the memory of the dead.

What was he going to *do*?

He pushed the door open and looked at Michael Cervus. Neither male knew what to say. Both of them were weeping. Both of them looked like their worlds were crumbling.

"Why?" Michael whispered. Three letters and he could only barely manage to get them across his lips.

Leo took a deep breath, forcing himself to stop the tears despite the pain. "Because Ben Aureus is insane," he said. "He needs no valid reason. He just does this because he thinks he's got the right."

Michael shook his head. "No...why hasn't he...been...caught...?" he asked, his face twisting into a grimace of agony as he put his elbows on his desk, burying his face in his paws.

"The feds...just told me..." Leo said and tried to keep from weeping again at the sight of the elk's pain. "They just told me...they have issued...orders to shoot...to kill."

Michael shook his head again. He clearly couldn't focus on any kind of news. Leo felt like an asshole for what he had to say, but he had no choice. This had to be stopped.

"I need you to do two things for me," he said, clearing his throat, trying his best to stay calm. He'd go curl up in his chair in his office once this was all taken care of but for now, Major Cervus would've *expected* him to keep a calm, clear head.

"You...wh..."

"For your father's sake, Mike...please, I need you to do two things for me. I wouldn't ask otherwise."

"What things?" Michael asked, wheezing as he wiped his eyes, looking like a nervous breakdown waiting to happen.

Leo hated himself for asking anything of this fur. Michael Cervus was as strong a fur as anyone he knew, but this wasn't just a matter of his father dying. Major Cervus had been *slaughtered*. He'd been shot seventeen times! It was the kind of news that would make anyone crack.

"First, I need you to take a month off. I want you to go and spend the time with your mother. I will join you there for the funeral, provided you and your mother want me to be present. Secondly, I need you to be present for a statement I am making later today. As soon as I leave this office, I'll go to our press-furs, and send out a message that I'm hosting a very important press-conference this afternoon. If you want to be present for it, I would be happy. If not, I do understand. I have to finish this, and I think I finally know what to do..." he said.

His voice was hoarse and his tongue felt too big in his mouth.

"Wh...what are you...going to do, Mr. Leon?" Michael asked, straining to regain some measure of self control.

Leo swallowed. He closed his eyes for a moment, and pictured Benjamin Aureus for his mind's eye. His face twisted into a brutal sneer, and he reopened his eyes.

"I'm going to call the dog out," he hissed. "And then I'm going to put him down like the rabid piece of shit he is!"

###

Zig Zag put down the telephone and looked at her husband. The look on her face said enough to make him sit up straight.

"There's been another killing," she said, grimly. "Nadia's father is going to hold a press-conference later today. I think we can expect this to hit national news soon."

James sighed and slumped in his seat. "I'd say so. Good God, what's going on? You'd think the FBI wouldn't be dragging their feet like this. How many more will have to die?"

Zig Zag shook her head and sat down across the table from her husband. "I don't know. Hopefully no more. The problem seems to be that he keeps crossing state borders. The remaining members of the army unit he seems to be hunting has long since gone into hiding, but the one who got shot was the old company commander from before Nadia's dad took over. He had refused to hide...and apparently the cops who were guarding him had let him go off to the store for a quick errand, without coming along."

James narrowed his eyes in disbelief. "That sounds fishy," he mumbled. "Either someone must've paid those cops off, or they are completely incompetent."

"As far as I understood it, the Feds are going to look into whether they've been bribed. No matter what happens, they can kiss their jobs goodbye, and if they had been bought off, they can look forward to a long stay in prison for complicity in a murder-case," Zig Zag said and rested her forehead in one of her paws. "James, what the Hell are we going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"About the kids! When they came here, we thought they'd be safe at our place because no one knew they'd be here, but the way this fur is moving around, I'm starting to wonder if they'll be safe *anywhere*."

There was nothing James could do except nod. Zig Zag had a very valid point, but at the same time, what was the alternative? Sending the kids back on the road was certainly not an option, and simply packing up and going into hiding with six kids who were obviously not their own wasn't much of a choice either. They'd stick out anywhere, like so many sore thumbs. Short of getting the kids out of the country, there was little they could do, and that wasn't going to be easy either. Besides, James wasn't keen on the idea of denying Kalen his big moment in the spotlight.

"I don't know what to do in this case," he admitted. "All I can suggest is that we try to make things work as best we can. They are our guests and they need help."

"I'm not talking about sending them back! That'd be putting them in all kinds of danger," Zig Zag said, rubbing the corners of her eyes. "But can we protect them if he finds them here?"

James shrugged. "I don't know, but I know I'll try."

Smiling a little, Zig Zag nodded and looked back up. "We need to tell them about this. They've got a right to know."

"I'll do it. They're outside playing soccer, I think. Kalen wanted to start practicing his throwing arm again, too."

"Alright. You should probably talk to Nadia first. I think she could use the time to deal with this information. We've got to make it clear to the kids that they are still as welcome as always, and that they are still as safe here as when they arrived."

James nodded. "I just hope the cops catch that bastard soon," he said and got up, leaving the kitchen.

Zig Zag remained behind. She didn't say anything, but she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, silently agreeing with her husband's sentiment.

###

Miriam was having a blast. In fact, she was enjoying life more than she had for years, and it was all because of her friends. Because of Jean and Esteban and their wondrous ways of making her feel like she was twenty years old again. And besides their hilarious

antics, she had received good news. The specialist she'd visited had gotten back in touch with her, and the pregnancy was progressing as it should. The aches and pains she had suffered was absolutely nothing to be worried about. It had turned out to be completely harmless backpains. He'd prescribed some medication for it, and the red vixen had taken the first pill that same day. It had worked like a charm. She had no more aches at all.

She got out of the shower and grabbed the towel, wiping herself as dry as she could, before getting under the fur-dryer. It felt great but it tended to make her all fluffy. She'd need to brush her fur down properly or she'd walk around all day looking like someone had asked her to hold onto a one of those Tesla-coils used in High School physics-classes. The sort that made fur stand on end.

Grinning at the thought, she grabbed a brush and got started while walking to the guest room, to get dressed.

She felt great for once in her life. All the problems she and Fox had suffered over the years suddenly seemed to be pushed into the background. When she got back home, she'd have to make sure to tell her husband how much she still loved him, and then she was going to make a real effort revitalizing their marriage.

All because of Esteban's cooking and Jean's wisdom.

Wisdom. It was such a strong word, but she didn't really know a better one to attach to the gray vixen. Jean was undoubtedly highly intelligent, but Miriam had long since come to the clear and uncompromising understanding that intelligence in itself was pretty worthless. If given a choice between the two, she'd go for wisdom any day of the week. Intelligence was cold and...terribly clinical in itself.

If one had both...well...that was pure bonus of course and Jean certainly seemed to have won the lottery as far as Miriam was concerned. She'd always known it, but these past few days had proved it beyond doubt.

It made sense, though, in a weird kind of backwards, foolish way. She had been the first of the group to marry. She had been so utterly in love with her husband then, that she hadn't thought anything could ruin the bliss. But then, as they ran into pregnancy-troubles again and again, the age difference had turned out to be a real problem. And they had blamed one another.

Jean had put it in a rather disgusting, but extremely apt way, by looking at her over the rim of a cup of chai, asking her one simple question.

"If you shit in one paw, and place blame in the other...which paw do you think will hold the most substance, Miriam?"

Apart from the fact that the question had been unusually vulgar for Jean, it had done precisely what it needed to do, and Miriam was happy for it.

It had made her realize the idiocy of placing blame for something neither she nor Fox could be blamed for.

That was the kind of thing she'd needed. Plain talking, a friendly ear and some very solid advice. Not furs telling her what she wanted to hear, but furs telling her what she *had* to hear and what she *needed* to hear.

She put on her clothes and headed downstairs. She'd slept late, but then, they had been up late the night before. And she needed the rest desperately. This mini-vacation was as much a matter of her recharging her batteries as anything else.

The scent of pancakes wafted towards her from the kitchen and she headed out there, giggling as she caught Esteban wearing a chef's hat, flailing around with a skillet as if fighting off some terribly beast, trying to steal the contents of his frying pan.

"What *are* you doing??" she snickered.

Esteban blushed furiously and hurried to take off the hat, looking slightly sheepish. "Hola Meereeam..." he answered and cleared his throat.

"What's with the hat and the fencing?"

"Research for an upcomeeng job, amiga. Notheeng to worree about."

Miriam raised an eyebrow, folding her arms across her chest. "Aha...? What movie will that be then? 'Chef's mania' or 'Night of the Pancake-thief'?"

Esteban's face fell and he muttered something about needing to brush up on his stage-fighting. "Eet ees a project for Spanceesh televeseeon, actualleee. They are remakeeng the entire 'Capitan Alatraste'-series and they want me as chief of photographee. Eet's a huge chance."

"I read some of those! Written by Arturo Pérez-Reverte, right? I remember crying my eyes out more than once," Miriam asked, smiling widely. "When do you start filming those?"

"Si. Eet ees a series of tales of great feeleengs and heroesm," Esteban answered, brandishing his kitchen-ware again in a distinct fencing move. "Oh and eet's not unteell next year..."

Miriam smiled and stretched her back a little. She did need to sit down. It wasn't that she was that far along in her pregnancy yet, but she could feel the medicine making her a little loopy. She'd taken one of the pills as soon as she woke up, since the pill-glass was on the bedside table anyway. She pulled out one of the chairs from the table and sat down.

She leaned back and relaxed a little. "Where's Jean, anyway? I mean...you're making pancakes. For lunch. Really, Esteban, you're a decadent creature sometimes."

Esteban's ears perked up. "Gracias. I try my best. Jean got a call from Gabbee and had to drop by the fellee's place. She should be home soon. Eet always happens thees time of year..."

"Why's that?"

"Eet's Yohnee's birthday soon, and Gabbee ees horreeblee bad at hideeng the presents. Seellee feellee..."

"Ahh, so you usually hide the presents?"

"Exactlee."

Miriam was about to say something again when she felt a sting in her back again. She frowned. That had felt pretty bad, despite the pills. She wondered what was wrong but tried to ignore it.

"She buys large presents I take it then?"

"Gabbee? She would buy half of San Fra...erh...are you okay amiga?"

Miriam blinked once or twice. "I..." she began. Then she narrowed her eyes and scrunched up her face in pain as the mother of all pains wracked up her spine, over her shoulders and down her stomach to her womb. "Oh shit..."

Esteban was through the kitchen door to get the phone to call for an ambulance before the frying pan and skillet had hit the floor.

###

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the press. As you all know, Leon Enterprises doesn't usually call press conferences like this," a young feline femme in a smart business suit said. A number of microphones had been arranged in front of her.

There were quite a lot of newspaper-journalists present in the room, beyond the microphones. A lot of cameras flashed too. Two local television stations were present as well and NBC/KHQ had sent a camera-crew as well, just in case this turned out to be something for the domestic news. After all, Leon Enterprises was a very significant corporation and the owner was a Fortune 500 fur with something of a reputation for being an idealistic philanthropist who spent more money on charity than on himself and his family.

The young femme in the suit waited a moment and made a dismissive paw gesture to the group in front of her. "Not yet. There will be plenty of time to answer questions. Mr. Leon has assured me that he will take as many questions as he can stand, but I also ask you all to understand that this press conference deals with an extremely uncomfortable situation for him and his family. As the summons for this press-conference clearly stated, it pertains to an on-going, criminal investigation regarding several deaths in a number of states over the last week or so. Mr. Leon will make a statement, and after that, he will answer your questions. Thank you."

She stepped back and nodded to the door at the side of the room. Leo was waiting just beyond it, out of sight of the journalists. He had faced crowds before, and he'd answered questions from the press enough times to not be worried about it. But despite that, he was pale and uncomfortable at that moment. His tie felt like it was constricting him and his suit felt like a sweat-lodge. He wanted to get this over with, but at the same time, he wanted to do it *right*.

He closed his eyes. Not for the first time in his life, he felt compelled to open them swiftly again as images from Afghanistan and Iraq flashed across the insides of his eyelids. But this time he didn't indulge himself. This time he kept his eyes closed for almost half a minute as image after image presented itself. Images from his past. Of friends, long gone. He sighed and raised his head. He had been holding some papers in his paw, on which he'd written down his statement. He looked at the words he'd written one last time and shook his head. They seemed so cold. So horrible distant in comparison to the closeness of the pain he was feeling.

He dropped the papers on the floor and stepped through the doorway, adjusting his tie again as he walked up to the microphones. He folded his paws in front of his lap in a gesture of humility and gravity, letting his eyes rest on the floor for a brief moment.

There were flashes from the cameras in front of him. He didn't really think about them as he raised his head again, clearing his throat.

"Ladies and gentlefurs..." he started, "I thank you for coming here today on such...short notice. I realize that I don't usually do this, and I know you probably face furs every day who are far better at giving speeches at press conferences than I am. So be it. I'm not trying to win a prize. That is not my reason for being here. As some of you may know, I am a combat veteran of two campaigns in the War on Terror. I fought in Afghanistan, where I shed blood for the United States of America on two occasions. Later, I fought in Iraq, against my better judgment. I have never kept my opinion of that war private, and it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone here. But I fought nonetheless, and if you look up my name in the appropriate files, you will see that I was decorated. I received the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross for valor under fire. The British Army awarded me a Distinguished Service Order and furthermore, I hold a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, an Army Valorous Unit Award and a Distinguished Unit Citation. But I am not here to flash my medals either. I mention them only because I *need* you all to truly *understand* that when I speak...as I am about to speak...I do so as someone who has faced down Death itself and prevailed. I do so as someone who has commanded furs under the most difficult circumstances, and who's got the scars to prove it. Both emotionally and physically."

The journalists were quiet. There was still an occasional camera-flash, but the gravity of the tone of voice that the lion in front of them spoke with, coupled with the message from the press-office femme that this had something to do with murders committed around the United States, had everyone guessing what would come next.

Leo didn't even think about the furs looking at him. He spoke from the heart, rather than from a pre-prepared speech. This was for those who had died. Not for himself. This was for all of those who had been killed because of him. Because of Benjamin Aureus' hatred of *him*.

"Most of the furs I commanded then have long since left the army. Those of us who came home alive...and not all of us did...went back to live civilian lives. I've been fortunate in my own way, but I know each of those furs out there were just as lucky. Money can't buy happiness, and at reunions, I saw happy, proud faces on each and every soldier I had under my command in the past. They are honest to God, American heroes. Furs like yourselves, who went overseas to fight for what they believed was right. They have their medals to prove it. They have their scars to do the same, as well. But despite their experiences in war, they went back to their own lives as best they could. And now...now, Ladies and Gentlefurs...they are dying. Not of old age. Not of disease. They

are dying because of one fur, who wants revenge for what he sees as a grave insult done to him many years ago. This fur's name is Benjamin Aureus. Formerly a First Lieutenant in the United States Artillery, he was discharged in dishonor and sent to Leavenworth for gross and *deliberate* negligence which led to the deaths of several soldiers under my command. The case is a matter of public record, per the Open Cards Act of 2012. However, Benjamin Aureus never acknowledged his blame in the deaths of five American soldiers. And now he is trying to get even with the survivors."

An excited mutter ran around the room and Leo waited for it to pass before he beckoned to the door. Michael Cervus came out to stand next to him. He too looked like his tie was entirely too tight. Leo turned to look at the journalists again, putting an arm around Michael Cervus' shoulder in a gesture of friendly support.

"Ladies and Gentlefurs, may I introduce you to Michael Cervus, the son of the latest victim in Benjamin Aureus' killing spree. Mr. Cervus works for me, and I am fortunate to have him on my staff. I might not have, had I not been so lucky as to serve under his father in Afghanistan before his and my respective promotions. Major Cervus was the *best* officer I've ever known...and one of the best furs overall. His leadership turned a greenhorn like me into an officer and a leader, and I owe it all to him. Had it not been for him, I would not have stood here today, because I would not have been a CEO of a company like Leon Enterprises. I would not have had what it took, had it not been for Major Cervus...who was found this morning, shot seventeen times at point blank range. Forensic evidence showed that he was standing when he got shot, and he was facing his killer. He died like he had lived, facing down his enemies and not flinching. But he's dead nonetheless. And I can't let his death be just another statistic. I can't do that to him or to any of the others that Benjamin Aureus killed in this quest for revenge. So I am going to address him directly."

The journalists fell silent again. The lion's voice was firm now, but his eyes were glistening with emotion. The elk standing next to him swallowed hard but looked up, a firm look on his face.

Leo took a deep breath before he continued. This was it then. The moment of truth. He closed his eyes for a moment again and saw Corporal Mofeta get hit and tumble to the ground. He saw Specialist Königsberg's mangled form on the ground. The Chinook crew, torn limb from limb in the crash.

He saw Colton Twain...who was even now staying with him and Lizzy...fall down, hit three times by AK-47 fire, and still trying to drag himself to safety. He saw it all. He

heard it all. Smelled it all. Right down to the burning husks of vehicles after the F-16's had come to the rescue.

"I know you will get this message," he said and opened his eyes. He could hear his voice as if it was coming from far, far away. "I don't know if you will see it on the news yourself, or read it in the papers, or if someone will tell you. But I know you will receive it. I want you to stop. I want you to stop killing innocent furs who were never to blame. I am the one you want. It was always me. Ever since I refused to salute you in a hostile zone, it was about *me*. Everything you did, you did to get to *me*. You've spent the years since then in prison, and I have built a fortune. I have a good life, and you don't, and you want revenge for it. And you can have it. If what it takes to make you stop is me surrendering myself to your...mercy...then so be it. No more needless deaths. No more innocent blood spilled. You can have...what you *really* want."

He took another deep breath and looked at the furs in front of him.

"If anyone wants to ask any questions...I will do my best to answer them," he said and let go of Michael's shoulder. He loosened his tie and pulled it off. At least he could breathe a little easier that way.

###

Miriam was out cold. She was so pale her nose looked gray, and Jean was beside herself with worry and grief. What if this had somehow been her fault? What if coming all this way to San Francisco was why her friend now looked like she might lose not only her baby but her marriage as well?

She was pacing back and forth outside the hospital room. Esteban was seated opposite the door, his head in his paws, looking like he would kill for a cigarette and a large drink. Considering that he had never smoked and that he'd always been a very modest drinker, that made no sense but it was the case nonetheless.

"I swear, Chica...I swear I called the hospeetal the second I saw sometheeng was wrong..."

"I know. Don't blame yourself, Love. If it's anyone's fault it's mine. I was the one who should've insisted she stayed at home until after she'd given birth. And all this traveling for nothing? The specialist said there was nothing at all wrong with her..."

Esteban looked like he was one syllable away from a flood of tears and Jean stopped talking. She'd called Fox immediately upon learning what was going on. Esteban had

asked her to, since he was going to drive Miriam to the hospital. There was no time to wait for an ambulance, but at least his phonecall had ensured that a team had been ready to receive her when she came in.

Miraculously, she hadn't actually lost the baby yet, but the doctors were fighting to stop it from happening behind those doors, even now.

And Fox was on his way. He had nearly crumbled on the phone when Jean had told him what had happened and she couldn't recall having ever felt so rotten in her entire life. This was not the kind of message she wanted to give a friend. Gabrielle was talking to a doctor further down the hallway, trying to figure out what was going on. While the filly wasn't as close a friend of Miriam's as Jean herself, they got along famously when they did meet, and as Gabrielle had said, Miriam would need all the friendly faces she could get when she came back around.

From the looks of it, she was actually getting an answer, although not the answer Jean had hoped for. She knew Gabrielle's body-language probably better than any other fur except Yohni, and right now, the filly was furious. Calm, collected, very rational and probably *pointedly* polite towards the doctor, if Jean was to venture a guess.

Gabrielle had this way of being polite towards someone in such a way that they'd beg her to start yelling and screaming at them instead. She wasn't simply *polite*.

She got *civilized*.

It was probably something she'd picked up from her parents before moving away from home and it was a far cry from how she normally behaved, but Jean had seen it a few times and it scared the socks off her every time. It was like looking at a younger amalgamation of Theodore and Roxanne when they were at their worst.

Esteban had noticed it too, from the looks of things. He sighed and looked at his wife. "That does not look good. I guess...she lost theabee..." he said, choking on the last words.

"Don't say that!" Jean snapped. She regretted it instantly, but Esteban seemed to understand why she'd done it.

"You're right. Not unteell we know for certain," he said, quietly.

Gabrielle approached them and looked, for all intents and purposes, like she was emotional equilibrium in the flesh. Jean took a step backwards.

"If you're angry with us for having her come all this way, then blame me and not Esteban," she said, her eyes wide.

Gabrielle shook her head very slowly. "Oh, I'm not at all upset with you and Esteban, dear," she said. Her voice could've cut glass and frozen over the insides of a raging volcano. "In fact, I think you may very well have saved her life, and at least the life of her baby."

The look of confusion on Esteban's face would've been funny, Jean thought, if this had been any other occasion. Right now she could only mirror it.

Gabrielle didn't wait for them to ask. Instead she adjusted her purse and glared angrily down the hallway at the retreating doctor. "It seems someone in Los Angeles made a gigantic...monumental...even *epic* fuckup somewhere along the lines, and it damned well nearly cost Miriam her life!"

"What...fuckup?" Esteban asked as if he was afraid of the answer.

"Miriam is bloodtype O-Negative, and the baby is B-Positive. And I will bet you any amount of money that Fox is B-Positive too!"

Jean's eyes went wide. "WHAT??" she snapped. "You're *kidding*?? They got tested the first time Miriam got pregnant."

Gabrielle shrugged. "That doctor down there just told me this. Want my guess?"

"Let me hear it..." the vixen groaned.

"Someone mixed up the blood-samples during the first pregnancy, and they've just been referring to that test ever since, excluding that as a possibility because they'd already been tested. If I'm right, then someone at a LA laboratory is going to be in big, big trouble very soon."

"Dios mio..." Esteban wheezed. "Weell the babee make eet thees time?"

"They don't know yet," Gabrielle answered. "It's much too early to say. The same goes for Miriam, by the way. She's very sick. She was on heavy painkillers. She couldn't feel the agony, because of it. The only reason she hasn't miscarried is because she didn't cramp. There was no pain to cramp from..."

Jean fell into a chair. She stared at the door opposite the hallway. "This can't be happening..."

Next to her, Esteban looked like someone had punched him. He wasn't weeping, but he looked dazed. Gabrielle was furious and Jean could only count her blessings that the lab-assistant who had made the original error wasn't around, or he'd probably be a case for the coroner.

Fox was en route but what if he didn't make it in time?

No.

This really couldn't be happening.