

Mad Dog

and the
**Sea
Dragon**

LISA DE NIKOLITS



Advance Praise for *Mad Dog and the Sea Dragon*

Here, finally, is a mob story from the moll's perspective. Filled with entertaining twists and turns, and dreamers and schemers up to no good, de Nikolits's zany new novel, *Mad Dog and the Sea Dragon*, proves that life for a mobster's moll may not be all fun and games, but it sure is fun reading.

— TREVOR COLE,

author of *The Whisky King*, *Hope Makes Love* and *Practical Jean*.

—

Lisa de Nikolits has written a darkly funny novel, full of dysfunctional characters—two sisters using sex in the hope of gaining financial freedom; a mob family trying to gain political power and respectability, and an ex-convict, looking for a lost love. Along the way there are plot twists and turns to keep the reader guessing, until the final page.

—LYNNE MURPHY,

author of *Potluck and other Stories*.

—

Beauty. Murder. Hate. Lisa de Nikolits just keeps getting better. *Mad Dog and the Sea Dragon* takes you on a wild ride into the cocaine and blood-fuelled territory of the Mafia through the eyes of a foster child-turned-gorgeous woman who captures the heart of a Mafia leader at an art gallery. Ultimately, this was a beauty and the beast tale that made me wonder who was the beauty and who was the beast in a world where no adult is truly innocent.

— MELISSA YI,

author of the *Hope Tse Series*.

Gangster fantasies, a very odd sibling dynamic, dysfunctional families, and a film-noir-tough-talking-molls-and-mobsters vibe all come into play in *Mad Dog and the Sea Dragon*, a new novel by Lisa de Nikolits that keeps the reader guessing about the next unexpected development. Engrossing, engaging and strongly recommended.

—NATE HENDLEY,
author of *The Beatle Bandit* and other true-crime books

—

Mad Dog and the Sea Dragon is just a great read. It has a captivating roster of the kind of characters we hope to find in a mafia yarn - a cruel ruling matriarch, a simpering yet sometimes violent son, wayward relatives, clueless help, and most of all, a hapless, somewhat trapped, love interest. Her journey to independence from the long reach of a mafia family is defined by remarkable courage and a growing personal insight. This highly engaging book is chock-full of typical mafia exploits involving sex, drugs, money, and murder, all tossing the heroine into emotional chaos. Moment by moment the schemes can be both hilarious and heartbreaking, seesawing between comedy and angst. This book is believable and entertaining; you won't put it down until the last page is turned, revealing a surprise ending. I would highly recommend it to anyone who likes to read fast paced, quirky mysteries.

— SKY CURTIS,
author of the *Robin MacFarland Mystery Series*

—

Lisa de Nikolits is one of the most versatile writers I know. She plays with the reader's emotions like a master musician. This book is a fast-paced noir thriller with a stunning twist ending. Powerful writing that will haunt you - don't read it before you go to bed!

— MELODIE CAMPBELL,
award-winning author of *The Merry Widow Murders*

Lisa de Nikolits has done it again! *Mad Dog and the Sea Dragon* is finely crafted modern day noir fiction starring Jessica Wren: a sassy, vintage loving fashionista who works as a janitor by night and dreams big dreams by day. When she becomes a powerful mobster's mistress, Jessica finds herself thrust into a world that's as dangerous as it is glamorous.

Mad Dog and the Sea Dragon has all of the thrills of your favorite gangster movie (including a tough, gun toting mama to rival Cagney's mother in *White Heat*) but with a feminist twist. Tired of being a bird in a gilded cage, Jessica blows the cage wide open in this exciting tale of reinvention and one woman's quest for independence. The reader will cheer Jessica on every step of the way!

– HEATHER BABCOCK, author of *Filthy Sugar*

–

This edgy and penetrating labyrinthian narrative is laced throughout with lethal legacies ... exploring the resulting seeds of destruction ... deluded, damaged and damned. This frequently poignant and intense story-telling probes the ties underlying the various relationships ... steadily searching and examining, whilst continually questioning whether they are aimed at safeguarding, control, or ensnaring? There are numerous undercurrents of evasion and duplicity, along with the occasional unexpected unity and inklings of potential partnerships of sorts, emerging amidst the unruly unraveling, the blame-shifting and blurring of intentions within these apparently indestructible forces. What end might possibly be in sight to this sinister and ruthless chain of events? Is there any plot that might be deployed in order to break out, a stratagem to possibly outwit and gain advantage ... to outmaneuver and flee from this entrapment and its potentially fatal constraints, in this gripping and tantalizing tale?"

– SHIRLEY MCDANIEL, *Art Explorations*

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1.

Mad Dog Matchup

We met at an art gallery one lazy afternoon. I moved in and out of the shadows, gently laying out the play. *Let him come to you.*

I crossed one ankle in front of the other, making sure he noticed my retro T-strap, two-tone high heels, with their little white leather bows. I smoothed my red silk dress over my curves and let my scarf flutter behind me.

I studied the artwork, seemingly oblivious to the rest of the world, resting my chin lightly on my cupped hand, my elbow tucked neatly into my waist.

I was prepped and ready for him to make the first move. He obliged by doing just that.

“Hey sweetheart, you and me, we could be listening to Frankie singing at The Desert Inn,” he said with a sideways grin. “I always dress like this, what’s your excuse?”

We were standing shoulder to shoulder, and I turned to face him. I let it show that I liked what I saw. He was a handsome guy, with a classic chiseled jaw, hooded eyes, and a sensual mouth. He also had an eerie

similarity to Anthony “Mad Dog” Esposito, who was sneering down at us with a twisted smile from the glossy print on the wall.

This man never really left the jungle. *New York Daily News*, 1941. Picture by Weegee.

“He was crazy,” I gestured to Mad Dog.

“Yeah, but not as much as he would have liked to be. Him and his brother pleaded insanity to try to get off a murder charge. They barked and hit their heads on the table at the trial they howled and cried and behaved like animals for the whole thing.”

“That’s why they called him Mad Dog?”

“Nah. The New York police commissioner called him and his brother ‘mad dog killers’ for what they did. They killed a man in an elevator for a few hundred bucks and then they ran out into the street and started shooting everybody. That’s the nuts part. William, the younger brother, shot a cop. A taxi driver tried to save the cop and then he — the taxi driver — got shot in the throat. He lived and the cab company got him a new car for his troubles.”

He shook his head. “The whole Esposito family were hoods. The father had done time, the third brother was in prison, the two sisters were thieves. But the mother was behind the whole thing. Mothers. The root of all evil if you ask me.”

He fell silent and turned to look at Mad Dog again. I thought I’d lost him. I struggled to think of something to say but nothing came to mind. I panicked. Things had been going well but it had come to a grinding halt. My sister, Glennis, had coached my lines but my mind was a complete blank. My throat closed. I wasn’t up to the task. I was going to ruin things before they even started. To my relief, he picked up the conversation.

“Look at Ma Barker,” he said, turning back to me. “I don’t care what they said, she made her boys and her husband do what they did. She led the gang. And Violet Kray, Ronnie and Reggie’s mother. It was all her fault they turned out the way they did. She used to dress Reggie and Ronnie up like little girls after her baby girl died. No wonder they both became paranoid schizophrenics. Violet killed Reggie’s wife, Frances, and made it look like a suicide. Mothers are behind most gang wars and crime. Women. You can’t live with them; you can’t live without them.”

I knew about both Ma Barker and Violet Kray, having done my homework. Violet Kray was a classic East Ender thug's wife in the 1920's, obsessively loved by her boys. Ma Barker was born Arizona Donnie Clark, and dubbed by J. Edgar Hoover as the most "vicious, dangerous and resourceful criminal mind of the last decade."

He shot a glance at me and gave a shrug as if he was about to leave and I fired a question to stop him.

"What happened to the Mad Dog brothers?"

"Their pathetic attempts to look crazy didn't work. Him and his brother were electrocuted in 1942."

He looked angry about something and once again, I felt like I had ruined the great start to our conversation. I frantically fished around for a way to get us back on track.

"I love these photographs," I said with my most practiced sultry voice. I saw his mood lift. His shoulders relaxed and he smiled an Elvis smile that looked practiced.

"Yeah," he said. "Weegee. Great photographer. His real name was Arthur Fellig. He got his nickname after the board game for his weird way of knowing where to be when a story broke. He said it was just in his blood."

"You're a wealth of fascinating information," I purred. Why couldn't I remember what Glennis had told me? We rehearsed it often enough. All I could think about was cigar smoke and Paco Rabanne. Could you even get Paco Rabanne anymore? Obviously, yes.

"Paco Rabanne," I said appreciatively. He smiled and he straightened his tie. He was wearing a charcoal pinstripe suit with a navy-blue tie and matching pocket square. His shirt was crisp and white, and he shot his cuffs, flashing gold and diamond cufflinks.

"Vincenzo Esposito at your service." He held out his hand. "Everybody calls me Enzo. Classy, like a Ferrari." He smiled, his dental work worth a fortune. "But hey, don't confuse me with Mad Dog over there, even though we got the same name. Makes me kinda fond of the fella, nuts as he was."

"Jessica Wren," I replied. His hand was huge and slightly damp, and his grip was solid. I held on a second longer than I should have. "Never Jess or Jessie, if you don't mind."

"Sure, Jessica. If you don't mind my asking, what's a dame like you

doing in a joint like this?”

I smoothed my form-fitting red dress over my hips again and made sure my chiffon scarf was draped just so. I was in six-inch heels and eye level with his chest. This man was a linebacker.

“I could ask the same of you,” I looked up at him and tried for coy. “You look more like a businessman than an art aficionado.” I figured he’d like feisty, and he did.

“Well, you gotta love Weegee,” he said. “He used to say the easiest kind of job to cover was a murder because the stiff would be laying on the ground. He couldn’t get up and walk away or get temperamental. He would be good for at least two hours.” He laughed like this was the funniest thing. “He also said *murder is my business*. I can relate.”

His last sentence sent chills up my spine, but I forced myself to smile, full wattage, channeling Jessica Chastain as a 50’s movie star.

He grinned and moved closer to me. I figured I was in but there was something I had to clear up first. I didn’t have big boobs. A guy like this, he’d want big boobs. I’m tall, with a round ass, a tiny waist, long legs with slender calves, and a finely turned ankle but there was no getting away from my teacup boobs.

“Wear the padded push-up bra and forget about it,” Glennis had snapped. And she was right. I looked well-rounded but it was a lie.

I gave a small sigh and looked sad.

“Bored of me already?” Enzo asked, one eyebrow raised.

I shook my head. “My boobs are too small for a guy like you,” I admitted. He gave a sharp bark of laughter.

“See, I knew I liked you already. You tell it like it is, no beating around the bush. Hey sweetheart, I wouldn’t worry about it. My wife’s stacked to the max, and I don’t much care for her.”

His wife. I shut the whole thing down with a look and turned away slightly. He grabbed my elbow.

“Don’t be like that.” He took my hand between his and pulled me towards him.

“You and me,” I whispered, my voice breathy like Marilyn’s. “This is nuts. I met you like what, three seconds ago? What’s with the electricity between us?”

He just grinned and pulled me closer.

“Maybe it’s Mad Dog Esposito getting me so excited,” I stood on my tiptoes and whispered in his ear. “I’ll be honest, I crush on bad boys big time. This is the third time I’ve come to see this exhibit.”

He caressed the palm of my hand, and I leaned into him, my eyes shut, my breath coming fast.

“Bad boys aren’t all they’re made out to be,” he said. I only half heard him. The Paco Rabanne, his touch, and the whole situation was making me feel dizzy. I was terrified I was going to faint.

“Oh, we’ll have ourselves some fun, you and me,” he said All I could do was lean on him and hope I wouldn’t fall over.

“You want to go someplace?” he asked. I nodded, just once, and that was how it started. Me, making sure he knew I wanted him, with Mad Dog looking over my shoulder. And Enzo, all big and handsome, with the gallery light throwing shadows like cloaks and daggers.

I thought he’d drive us straight to the Four Seasons, but he surprised me by being a gentleman, taking me to Zibetto Espresso instead. The place was high-end: black and white marble floors, gleaming copper ceiling lamps, and walnut tables and chairs. It was deserted except for us.

“Tell me about you,” he said while I dipped my finger into cappuccino foam and licked it clean with careful precision.

“I was born into the wrong era,” I said, my posture ladylike and my ankles neatly crossed. I hoped he’d noticed my seamed stockings. Glennis sprang for them, calling them an “investment in our future” and telling me to take care, to not come home with a ladder.

“In my real life, I’m a late-night janitor in a high-rise office. Believe me, you’d have a healthy fantasy world if that was your life too. I spend my spare time and money, not that there’s much of either, sifting through thrift stores looking for garments from a better time. I’ve got quite the wardrobe by now; I’ll tell you that for nothing.”

“Girl like you should have new clothes,” he said. “Shiny. You’re styling for sure, but you deserve more than secondhand.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is. No use in complaining. I look at it like vintage, not secondhand. And you? Tell me about you.”

He was silent. “I’ve gotta be careful. My life’s complicated. My work, my

family, it's all complicated. Like I said, I've got a wife but let's not talk about her. She's a piece of work but let's not go there. I've got a beautiful daughter. The apple of my eye."

He dug out his wallet and showed me a picture of a tiny beauty pageant princess with gorgeous dark ringlets, in a miniature ballgown wedding dress and a diamond tiara.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he said. "Maria Angelica. Angie. At her First Holy Communion. My little angel. God help the boy who lays a hand on her. She's only ten years old, so I'm okay for a while. I wish I could lock her up in a tower forever, keep her safe from the world."

"She's a perfect little doll," I said, hoping it was the right response. He beamed.

"My baby doll. But hey, enough about me. I want to know more about you."

Oh God. My mind went blank again. I stalled by taking a sip of my coffee and luckily for me, he looked at his watch. "Aw heck. Listen dollface, I gotta run. Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

"I'm good," I said. "I'll catch the streetcar."

"Nah, you should have luxury. Let me give you a ride. But listen, come here, you're driving me nuts. I'm giving you some warning here, I'm going to kiss you, babe, I can't help myself. It's kismet that we met like we did."

"So, stop talking already and kiss me," I whispered, leaning in, and we were soon locked into each other. I was surprised to find he was a great kisser.

A loud honking laugh broke the moment.

"Get a room, people," the voice said, and we broke apart, startled. The skinny teenage barista was standing there, hands on his hips. "Don't you think you guys are too old to be deep throating it in a public place?" He grinned at us, a goofy smile, not a care in the world.

Enzo stood up and adjusted his suit and next thing the kid was crumpled on the floor trying to breathe.

"What's wrong, kid?" Enzo growled. "You can't handle a punch from a geriatric like me, huh? Come on, babe, let's get out of here."

We left the guy on the floor, and I tottered after my new boyfriend, wondering if I could handle what I had gotten myself into.

2. Sister Act

When I updated Glennis, she seemed satisfied with how it went.

“I told you,” she said. “We’re gonna land the big fish this time.” She clapped her hands together like a little kid. “Beat these guys at their own game. Now that he’s taken the bait, we’ll need to make a couple of plans.” We were drinking coffee at the 70’s yellow and chrome Formica kitchen table I found on garbage day.

“I hate this table,” she said, wedging a folded napkin under one leg to steady it. “You never notice when it’s uneven. Why does it always have to be me who evens things out, huh?”

I shrugged and concentrated on my tea. She was always scolding me about something, and it would feel wrong if her nagging voice wasn’t constantly echoing in my ear.

My sister has always been more like a mother to me than a sister. She didn’t choose it; it just worked out that way because of what happened.

And what happened was never far from my mind.

When I was seven years old, my father came home and there was my mother, passed out on the sofa, dead drunk. He sat down next to her and looked at me.

I was sitting on the floor, waiting for Glennis who was in the kitchen, making my chocolate milk, and peanut butter and jelly toast for supper.

“I can’t take it anymore,” my father said to me. He was, matter of fact, very calm.

I nodded. I was just a little kid, but I understood.

My father and I looked at each other and it was like we came to an agreement. He rubbed his face with his hands as if he was trying to wash it clean and his eyes were red when he looked at me again.

Then he turned to my mother and pressed a cushion on her face, pushing down hard. Her legs thrashed and flailed and drummed against the arm of the sofa and I thought she’d never stop moving.

I didn’t take my eyes off my mother and after a while, she quietened down and lay still. My father took the cushion away slowly and put his face close to hers, trying to see if she was breathing.

“I don’t know,” he asked me. “How do I know if it’s done?”

My mother lay there, staring at me, her eyes bulging. My father slapped her face a couple of times, trying to get her to wake up. She didn’t move.

I wet my pants and sat in a puddle while my father tried to see if he’d really killed my mother. My sister hummed in the kitchen while she made my supper. She hadn’t heard a thing.

“I think we’re done here,” my father said. “Listen, Vickie, I’m sorry you had to see that, but it had to be done. She had it coming to her. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

He straightened up and left me alone with my mother who was still staring straight at me with bloodshot eyes. Not that bloodshot was anything new.

I don’t know how long it was before my sister came in with my supper. When she saw my mother, she dropped everything. The glass with my chocolate milk and the cheap plate fell to the floor in slow motion and exploded. A brown puddle spread into my pee. I looked at my sister and stuck my thumb in my mouth.

“Where’s Dad?” Glennis asked and I shook my head.

She ran to the bedroom, and she was gone a long time. When she came out, she said she’d found him and that she needed to call the cops.

He hung himself, off the bedroom door. I remember I wondered why

she'd been in there so long, with his dead body, but I couldn't ask her because I'd forgotten how to speak.

The cops came and Glennis did all the talking. They took us to a hospital to get me checked out and after that, we went to the first of many foster homes.

They kept Glennis and me together. At least we had that.

But here's something I never forgave Glennis for. She told the cops my dad was a grifter, a con man who made his money in a nickel and dime version of a pump and dump – a stock market con that I didn't understand. Glennis said that Dad had overshot his mark and there was no money left and that was why he killed himself.

I just know Dad would never do that. He wasn't a con man. He sold insurance to protect people when a rainy day came. He always told me he was their umbrella. Dad was one of the good guys and I didn't blame him for killing my mother. I blamed myself.

I didn't talk for a long time after the murder-suicide and during that time, Glennis became my mother, my best friend, and my guardian angel. When I did regain my voice, I spoke slowly, and I wasn't one to waste words. I found solace in books. Words were my friends, and I read anything I could get my hands on. By the time I was twelve, I'd read about six libraries worth of books. I didn't do well at school, but the teachers understood why, and they left me alone. I stumbled through the years, barely passing, but reading a few books a week.

Life at the foster homes was a blur. Too many kids. Fat-bellied father figures smoking and drinking beer. Kids endlessly playing violent games on old computers, full volume, while the house dad watched wrestling or Nascar. And there was Glennis, full of hatred for the chaos, the noise, and the bad food. Glennis, loathing her dumpy figure and her middle-aged appearance, even when she was only a teenager, already jealous of me. I was a lily, slim and lovely.

"If I looked like you, I'd rule the world," she told me time after time, and she studied my face as if trying to figure out which feature had been gifted to me by which parent, as if figuring it out would transform her own bland face. "And your height – what's with that? No one was tall in our family."

Sometimes she was bitter. "If it wasn't for you, I'd ditch this godawful

joint,” she’d say, and fear would strangle me into silence until she told me she was only joking. But I knew she wasn’t. I couldn’t manage without Glennis. She told other people off when they got too close, and she protected me.

“Don’t worry,” she’d say, stroking my long hair until my eyes drooped like I was hypnotized. “I’ve got you. I’ll never leave you.”

Glennis knew how much I hated the foster homes. I hated the filth, the cheap sheets, and the mattresses that stank of urine or worse.

I kept my bed linens clean, washing my sheets and pillowcase as often as I could. I was regularly chastised by the house mother for wasting soap and water. But even through the bleach and detergent, there was no escaping the layers buried deep into the pillow. The stench of unwashed hair and greasy scalps that had soaked into it like old lard.

One time, I saved up my money and bought a brand-new pillow, but the house mother took it from me. She told me that next thing, I’d be putting up my own pictures and choosing furniture for the living room. She never gave me back my money either, for that brand new pillow.

“One day we’ll have our own apartment,” Glennis told me. “It will be spick and span, you’ll see. Everything will shine. None of the crockery will be chipped and everything will match. And we’ll have a little kitchen table all our own with its very own tablecloth.”

“And it will be quiet,” I said.

“Yes. Maybe some music from the radio but no TV, no video games, no shouting.”

“No drinking. No hitting.”

“No drinking. No hitting.” She rubbed my back, which soothed me. She asked me once if I remembered what had happened with our parents, but I lied.

“Not really,” I told her, my heart speeding up as I spoke. I remembered everything but it was safer for me if she didn’t know that.

When I was twelve, my whole life changed. I was helping to clean the basement, getting it ready for three new kids. I felt sorry for them, whoever they might be, because they’d have to live in the damp and dark place underneath the house.

And that was when I found the trunk of old clothes.

The trunk itself looked like a pirate's treasure chest, and it was filled with something more precious than gold: vintage clothes. I opened it and pulled out a chiffon blouse, the likes of which I'd never seen before. It was ruffled and flouncy and the prettiest thing in the world.

Greed flooded my heart and made me feral.

One of the other girls wanted to see what I had, and I hissed at her, covering the trunk with my body. The girl ran off in fear while I scabbled through the rest of the trunk. It held a wealth of blouses, dresses, scarves, and even a dented pillbox hat with a veil.

The girl returned with the house mother, and I backed up against the damp gray brick wall, protecting the trunk and snarling at them. Mine, this is mine, mine.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," the house mother said. "Look at you. Where's Glennis?" she asked the girl who shook her head.

"Mine," I repeated.

"Mine, actually," the house mother commented. "But for all I care you can have that trash. It was my mothers'. I forgot I had it. But girly, don't forget your place now. In fact, you and your sister can move down here, how's that? Since you love the box so much, you can come live down here with it."

You can imagine how happy Glennis was when she heard that.

"Great," she said, sitting on her foldout cot in the basement. "Isn't this lovely? Thank you, Vickie. Yet again, thank you."

I didn't care. I was sorting out my wardrobe, playing with my beautiful, fancy new clothes. I looked across at her. "You said we wouldn't be here much longer anyway," I shrugged.

"Another two years minimum. I have to be eighteen before I can take you away. That's two whole years in this dump. No sky, nothing. No carpet. It's so cold. You can bet your bottom dollar it'll be hotter than hell in summer."

She started crying and I looked at her in horror. Glennis didn't cry. I turned to stone and watched her.

She eventually stopped crying. She blew her nose on an old t-shirt and lay down, folding her hands over her chest like she was an angel, ready to die. She fell asleep like that and still I couldn't move. I was halfway through

folding a blouse and I stayed like that, my hands buried in the floral fabric.

When she woke, she saw me in the same position as when she'd fallen asleep. "We'll make the best of it." She was brusque. "Don't worry, Vickie. I'll take care of us. Let's look on the bright side, you got a big box of clothes you love."

Sunshine broke my heart into a thousand glittery pieces. I rushed at her and hugged her, holding her so tight I was worried I'd hurt her. She patted me on the back. "Family," she said. "You and me are family."

She was sixteen and I was twelve.

I passed the time with my head buried in books, hardly coming out from between the pages. One day, a couple of years later, I told Glennis that I didn't want to be called Vickie anymore. Vickie was a cheap name, a chipped plate name, I told her, trying to explain in a way she'd understand.

"So, who are you then?"

"Jessica. Like Jessica Lange in *All That Jazz*."

"Where did you see that?"

"On TV the other night. I'm going to talk like her too. Carefully. And I'm changing my last name too. I'm going to be Jessica Wren. It's the opposite Vickie Rustad."

"Sounds like a pig in a poke to me," Glennis retorted. "Eventually the cat will get out of bag and the whole world will know what's what."

I had no idea what she was talking about. Later, when I looked it up at the library, I thought it wasn't very nice of her. In one of the oldest cons, farmers fooled people into thinking they were buying pigs in burlap sacks, but they were cats. Then the cat got let out of the bag and the scam was there for everyone to see. But I wasn't a cat pretending to be a pig. I was me, inside and out, and so what if the cat got out of the bag? Just because I was born Vickie Rustad didn't mean I had to stay Vickie Rustad all my life.

Glennis was obsessed with cons. She said crime didn't pay, that you had to be on the square, play it straight and work legitimately. But that didn't stop her from reading about every con man or woman on the planet. The logistics of their machinations fried my brain. It was all so complicated — this person played that person off another person. It was all too much trouble and anyway, most of them ended up in jail, so what was the point?

I was fourteen and Glennis was eighteen. Things were getting better

for me. I had a sense of style, a sense of self and a new identity. Although Glennis was eighteen, we hadn't left the foster home like she said we would. She said it would take more time than she'd hoped. She needed to study for her accountancy exams and get accredited, and she didn't want to take out any more student loans than she had to. She had a fistful of scholarships, and she worked harder than anyone I knew.

Life at the foster home continued as it ever had. There were times I couldn't help but wonder what my life would be like if I didn't have Glennis watching over me all the time. Sure, she was my best friend, a mother to me and more. But sometimes I got tired of being told what to do, what to think, and what to say. I found myself daydreaming about having my own apartment when I was older, where I could watch all the movies I liked and stay in bed all day reading books. And make new friends. Glennis was my only friend. If I ever tried to get even a little bit chummy with anybody else, Glennis was there, herding me away from whoever I was talking to.

"You don't need anybody but me," she'd say, and she'd smile but it wasn't a very nice smile. I gave up trying to swim out of her reach and I lived within my books and my films, without making a fuss. I was just about resigned to my fate forever when everything in the foster home changed.

Joseph Michael Camalleri came to stay.

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