

*International Award-Winning Author*

DARLENE  
QUINN

International  
Readers' Favorite  
Gold Medal  
Winner of the  
National Beverly Hills  
Book Award

UNPREDICTABLE  
WEBS

Halting midstride, Marnie whirled around, defiance flashing in her deep brown eyes as well as the biting set of her jaw.

Caught in her daughter's cold glare, Ashleigh Taylor found herself temporarily speechless. *When did this precious child become so hostile?* she thought. *It's all my fault.* She had hundreds of questions that needed to be answered, but every one of them stuck in her throat.

"I don't belong here. I never have." Marnie's words split the silence of the room. But in the next instant, her gaze dropped to the kitchen floor, and her voice fell to a level barely above a whisper. "I want to live with my mother."

*I am your mother!* Ashleigh wanted to scream, but she never would. The last thing she wanted to do was to put her angry young daughter on the defensive. Unbidden, the name she dared not speak aloud thundered through her head and hammered in her heart: *Cassie. Oh, my Cassie.*

Taking a restorative breath, Ashleigh willed herself not to slip back in time. If she allowed *what-ifs* or *should haves* to cloud her mind, she'd be immobilized. She had no power to rewrite the past. What had been done could not be undone.

Nearly sixteen years earlier, on the day Ashleigh had given birth to perfect twin daughters, Cassie had been abducted from the cradle beside Ashleigh's bed. That heinous crime had trapped two utterly different families in a heartbreaking tangle of secrets and lies for eight long years.

For those critical years, Erica Christonelli, the wife of Cassie's abductor, was the only mother her Cassie had known. How much easier it might have been if Ashleigh could have despised the woman. But Erica was no less a victim than she and her husband had been. Unaware that

the baby she was raising as her own was Callie's kidnapped twin sister, Erica had named *her* child Marnie.

Ashleigh had never deluded herself with thoughts that the road to making her family whole again would be an easy one. There was bound to be a multitude of treacherous bumps along the path she'd chosen. Yet she never dreamed how difficult it would be to stay that course. Unwilling to deny her daughter time with the "mother" she had known since birth, Ashleigh had turned a blind eye to the obstacles and instead looked into her heart, drawing upon the old African proverb, *It takes a village to raise a child*. In time she had worn down Conrad's resistance. He'd come to terms with what was best for their daughter. They had agreed to make Erica a member of their extended family. But their "family village" was filled with so many pitfalls, so many side roads, so many voices. Far too many voices.

Ashleigh looked past the hard set of her daughter's jaw to her pain-filled eyes and quickly closed the distance between them. "Marnie. I love you with all my heart," she said softly. "If you don't belong here, then neither do I." She reached out to brush the loose hairs from Marnie's cheek.

Marnie stepped back. "That's a lie. I hate it when you say things you don't mean. I know you wish I'd never been born." Dissolving into tears, she averted her eyes, jammed her arms into the sleeves of her parka, and bolted for the kitchen door.

From the pantry, Elizabeth heard every word of the exchange between Ashleigh and her rebellious daughter. Momentarily frozen in place, her mind quickly raced through the options. *Ashleigh doesn't deserve this. She's a wonderful mother. She tries so hard to be fair and do what's right, not only for the twins and Juliana but for everyone.*

Over the years, Elizabeth had become more like a member of the family than part of their household staff. She had grown to love and care for the entire Taylor family as she had for Ashleigh's beloved grandfather. Right or wrong, she could no longer remain silent. "Marnie," she called out, moving swiftly toward the door.

Ashleigh, just a few steps behind Elizabeth, reached it first and placed her hand over Marnie's on the doorknob. "Don't open that door," she warned. Her words came out sharper than she'd intended. *Well, maybe not.* After all, she could not keep tiptoeing around. Marnie was in need of a firm hand.

"What is this?" Marnie spun around, her gaze shifting from Elizabeth to Ashleigh. "Am I under house arrest?"

In the thundering silence, Elizabeth glanced from Ashleigh's troubled expression to Marnie's stormy defiance. If only she could shake some sense into the young rebel. If only she could find a way to help Marnie drink in all the love that surrounded her.

“Marnie,” Ashleigh began, “it’s sixteen degrees outdoors. Even if we didn’t have a lot to discuss, you aren’t entirely dressed for this weather.” She looked down at Marnie’s bootless feet.

“Whatever,” Marnie sighed. “I’m sorry.” Not meeting Ashleigh’s eyes, she added, “I should just totally keep my mouth shut.”

Before Ashleigh could respond, the kitchen door burst open. Juliana called out, “We finished our choreography and we’re ready—”

As she slid to a stop in her soft-soled jazz shoes, her eyes flashed from her mother to Elizabeth before resting on Marnie. “Oops,” said Juliana. “Guess this isn’t such a good time.”

Torn between her unusually perceptive eleven-year-old’s excitement and Marnie’s pain, Ashleigh glanced up at the wall clock. *Quarter to ten*. “How about we come upstairs to see your duet at ten thirty? That will give—”

“Can’t we go up to the studio *now*?” Marnie pleaded, her face suddenly brightening. “I want to see how much of my part had to be changed.”

Ashleigh glanced across the room to Elizabeth for a fraction of a second, but she did not hesitate in making up her mind. Looking straight into Marnie’s damp eyes, which now seemed to sparkle in anticipation, she said, “Sure, we’ll check out the new rendition of your duet. Then we need to talk.”

Marnie nodded and took off toward the broad staircase in the foyer.

As they headed toward the dance studio, Ashleigh’s mind reeled. Marnie’s sudden mood swings were nothing new, and yet they never failed to astound her. Since Marnie’s recent return from spending the last few days of Christmas vacation with Erica and her brother-in-law, Mike Christonelli, Ashleigh felt as if she were tiptoeing though a field of hand-blown glass baubles. As if the emotional turmoil that visit had stirred in the teenager weren’t enough, Ashleigh realized that Marnie’s being eliminated from the upcoming dance competition and forced to give up practice for the past few weeks—to give her twisted ankle time to repair—had taken their toll. And now that Marnie was walking without a limp, she resisted following through with the strengthening exercises she needed to avoid further injury to her ankle. Ashleigh knew the additional blow of handing over her role in the duet with Callie to her younger sister had to be far more devastating than Marnie was letting on.

“Okay, Midget,” Marnie teased as she followed Juliana to the dance studio on the top floor of the family’s suburban home. “Let’s see how many of my pirouettes you had to take out.”

“Only two,” Callie called out from the top of the stairs. “She’s taken on the challenge like a champ.”

Once Juliana had assumed her place on the dance floor, Callie pressed PLAY on the CD player and the two girls fell into their opening pose. For the duet competition, the twins had adapted choreography from Twyla Tharp’s *Sinatra: Dance with Me*.

While Ashleigh joined Marnie as a spectator in the home studio, she wondered how much effort it took for her daughter to plant that smile on her face, when just moments before . . . *How much of who Marnie is today was preordained by DNA, and how much by her environment during those critical early years?* Ashleigh was not alone in her inability to solve the age-old controversy of Nature versus Nurture. She only knew—based on the books she had devoured about the care and development of identical twins—that both genes and upbringing played a vital part.

Good, bad, or indifferent, Marnie had become the person she was through a combination of heredity and environment. To lay blame or attach a label was an exercise in futility. Undeniably it was heredity that accounted for Marnie and Callie having Ashleigh’s brown eyes and Conrad’s smile, but the genetic waters got a bit cloudier when it came to behavior, intelligence, and personality. When Marnie’s moodiness first became apparent, Conrad had blamed her early years away from the family. Her personality, he pointed out, often mirrored that of Erica Christonelli, who confessed to having been diagnosed as bipolar, while Callie’s even temper and optimistic outlook tended to be more like her parents’. Conrad glossed over the fact that Marnie seldom had to be reminded to wash her dishes and pick up after herself—while Callie typically needed to be told more than once. Ashleigh knew that even identical twins brought up in the same household since birth developed different traits and personalities. *So why waste time analyzing?* she scolded herself. *We just have to deal with whatever comes our way.*

## CHAPTER

# 3

The last strains of Sinatra’s “Come Dance with Me” faded, and Callie and Juliana slipped into their ending pose.

“Awesome! Bravo! Bravo!” Marnie clapped her hands and then struggled to her feet from the floor, where she’d been sitting cross-legged. Thanks to her ankle injury, this was no longer a simple task, but she managed and, once standing, threw her arms around Juliana. “Didn’t think you had it in you, Midget.” Turning to Callie, she said, “I guess you really should open your own dance studio.”

Throughout the duet Ashleigh’s attention had been more focused on Marnie than on the dancers. Her heart lifted now as she observed Marnie’s enthusiasm—apparently genuine—for her sisters’ performance. “Great job, girls,” she said. “That was fantastic. If I were one of the judges, I’d be awarding you the platinum.”

“Riiiiight,” Juliana said, a grin spreading across her face. “You’re our mom, so that doesn’t really count.”

“Just because I’m your mom doesn’t mean I don’t know a great performance when I see one.”

“Yeah, but you’re prejudiced.”

“Guilty as charged,” Ashleigh admitted, “but I’m no dummy in the world of dance. I’ve been observing since . . .” Her voice trailed off as visions of four-year-old Callie, all decked out in her pink swan’s leotard and tutu, appeared in her head. Although Erica and Mike had given Ashleigh scores of pictures of Marnie from the years before she turned eight, Ashleigh’s brain had blocked those images of Marnie all alone, never knowing how much she was loved and missed.

Ashleigh felt Marnie's eyes on her now. "Since forever," she said, as if she hadn't drifted off. Although she knew it was irrational, she felt guilty that Marnie had not shared those early years and was not part of those first memories. Maybe that's why Ashleigh couldn't say no when she had been nominated for chairman of the dance team's parent group. It had drawn her even closer to the girls, as she'd hoped it would. But in the past few years Marnie had begun to drift away.

"Mom," Callie said, "is it okay if I have Sam spend the night?" Samantha and Callie had been fast friends from the first day the Taylors had moved into their Greenwich home seven years ago.

"After you clean your room," Ashleigh replied. She hadn't missed the roll of Marnie's eyes when Callie asked about Sam spending the night. The dynamics between the twins and their friends were a constant source of both amusement and concern. When the sisters first came together, they had disassembled their separate bedrooms, creating one sleeping area for the two of them to share and turning the other into a separate computer and study room. But by the time they were in middle school, they had wanted their own rooms, their own space and privacy.

When Marnie turned to follow Callie and the others out of the studio, Ashleigh called out to her. "Marnie, wait. We need to talk. Let's get some hot chocolate and go into the living room."

"I don't want any hot chocolate."

"Okay. Well, do you want anything before we—"

"I don't want anything. And I don't want to talk." Biting down on her lip, she quickly added, "I said I was sorry. Can't we just forget it?"

"No, Marnie, we can't just forget it. I'm not angry, but I need to know why you are so unhappy."

Heaving a heavy sigh, Marnie said, "Please, Mom. School starts tomorrow, and I need to do some stuff on the computer."

*She hasn't called me Mom since coming back from her trip to Chicago to visit the Christonellis.* "Sorry," Ashleigh said, heading to the studio doorway. "First we need to clear the air about a few things."

"Whatever," Marnie grumbled, reluctantly following a few steps behind.

---

On the coffee table in the family room, Elizabeth had placed a tray with two mugs, a pot of steaming hot chocolate, and a plate filled with Marnie's favorite sugar cookies. It looked pretty darn good.

Marnie watched as Ashleigh filled one mug. She was sorry now that she'd said she didn't want any . . . . But without even asking, Ashleigh handed her the mug.

"Thanks," she mumbled, reluctantly taking the cup.

"Marnie, I love you with all my heart," said Ashleigh again. "You *do* belong here with all of us. What can we do to make you feel that you belong?"

"But I *don't*. You and Dad tell me you love me because you're my parents and you think you have to. 'I love you with all my heart,'" she parroted. "Isn't that called a platitude? Something you just say but don't really mean?"

Ashleigh's face fell. She looked as if Marnie had actually slapped her. *Obviously she doesn't know what to say. Maybe she's tired of pretending she loves me.* Building up steam, Marnie said aloud, "Let's face it. I was born second. I am number two." Following a dramatic pause, she continued, "And number two spells *loser*." She'd read that somewhere and practiced it. It felt really good to say it out loud.

"Marnie," Ashleigh said, "tell me everything you feel. I'll just listen until you're finished. I promise not to interrupt, but then I want you to listen to me." She looked deep into Marnie's eyes. "Deal?"

Marnie stared back at her. After a few awkward moments she said, "There isn't that much to say that we haven't said a hundred times before. But now I know for sure that I want to live in Chicago with my mom and Uncle Mike and Bill."

Ashleigh leaned forward; she looked as if she were ready to say something, but instead she sank back in the chair, not uttering a single syllable.

This was great. Marnie was feeling in control—something she had not felt for a very long time. But suddenly her stomach felt as though it were a meat grinder churning away. She knew how hard Ashleigh tried to make her feel loved. *It's really not her fault that she can't love me.*

*It's my fault. I look like Callie, but inside I'm not at all like her. Callie is perfect. She's a better dancer, she has more friends, she gets better grades . . . She likes everyone, and everyone likes her.* “Let’s face it, Mom. I’m an outsider in this family. I’m even on the outside with Callie’s friends and the dance team . . .”

Holding her tongue was getting more difficult by the moment, but Ashleigh knew she must not interrupt. She had promised. Besides, if she wasn’t willing to listen to her daughter, how could she expect to be heard? It took all her willpower not to contradict what Marnie was saying, even though she was one hundred percent wrong.

Finally, Marnie slumped into the cushions of the couch. “Okay, now you can tell me how wrong I am.”

“Darling, feelings are neither right nor wrong. They are what you feel deep inside, but sometimes they come about through wrong assumptions.” Shifting away from the psychological and back to what Marnie had actually said, Ashleigh repeated her daughter’s words. “You’re telling me that you feel less important to us and less loved than your sisters.”

Marnie nodded, but she looked skeptical.

“Marnie. I know words don’t mean a thing when it comes to expressing feelings. I’ll most likely repeat a lot of what you’ve heard before. But I listened to you without butting in, and I hope you can do the same for me. You have been a part of me since before you were born. Number one, two, or three. There are no losers. You are my daughter, and I love you with all my heart. No, you are not like Callie. You are not like Juliana. You are exactly like you. I might not always like the choices you make, but there is nothing you could ever do to make me stop loving you.

“When you tell me you feel like an outsider, is it because we sometimes talk about things that happened before you were returned to us?”

Marnie shrugged.

“I don’t know if you remember or not, but we talked about this while you were still in elementary school.”

Another shrug. But before Ashleigh had an opportunity to continue—to start working on solutions that might help her daughter—Marnie blurted out, “You have two daughters here that you are always proud of. Why can’t I just go to Chicago?” Marnie set the hot chocolate on the table. Then, without meeting Ashleigh’s eyes, she said, “Either today or maybe tomorrow, Mom and Uncle Mike should get the letter about my wanting to live with them. I wrote it on the airplane and mailed it from the airport when I got here.”

Paige Toddman stood in the doorway of the master bedroom in the converted guesthouse, watching her mother and mentally shaking her head. A puzzled expression crossed Helen's brow as she placed another lightweight dress on the bed. She stepped back, cocking her head one way and then the other.

Although Helen had been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's nearly fifteen years before, she was still functioning well beyond expectation—though she forgot things, of course, and she did tend to say whatever popped into her head. In fact, since the death of her husband, Rupert, any trace of her former ladylike inhibitions seemed to have departed with him.

"Mom," Paige said, "we aren't leaving for another couple of days, and it's very cold in Greenwich."

Helen with a blank expression on her face. *Has she forgotten that we will be staying with Ashleigh and her family?* thought Paige.

"Wilma has most of the things you will need laid out in the blue guest room."

Helen looked up and gave her a sly grin. "I know, dear, but Wilma put a bunch of clothes together with necklines up to my eyebrows." She paused, biting down on her bottom lip. "I know she and I are about the same age, but I don't want to look like an old lady."

"I agree. At seventy-four, there's no reason for you to dress like an old lady. But it's below freezing in New York, and those dresses"—Paige pointed with a nod of her head—"are far too lightweight."

"Well, how can I be sexy with suits and dresses covering up my feminine curves?"

Paige laughed. "So, now you want to be sexy?"

"Well, dear, just because there's snow on the roof," she said, patting her beautifully coiffed hair and sliding her fingertips down the length of her torso, "doesn't mean there's no fire in the furnace."

Shaking her head, Paige said, "Don't worry, Mom. Your wardrobe is very stylish: Chanel suits, Ferré, Valentino, Ralph Lauren. And you'll knock 'em dead in the big city with your fitted sable fur coat too."

Her mother's face brightened. "I remember. The coat will be perfect, but if I'm going to be a panther, I need something eye-catching underneath."

"A panther?"

"Yes. I want to attract a nice young man like that sexy lady at the Christmas party did." Her eyes twinkled. "You know, the one with the lovely shop on Fifth Avenue."

Paige could hardly suppress the giggle threatening to surface. Her mother meant Viviana and her boyfriend, who was at least twenty years her junior. Maybe more. "Mom, I think you mean you'd like to become a *cougar*." She smiled, trying to imagine her mother as an older version of Demi Moore or Viviana De Mornay. The image did not materialize.

Conrad Taylor charged up the broad staircase of Trump International Hotel and Tower and dashed through the sparkling, clear-glass doorway toward Jean Georges. It took only a quick glance around the tastefully decorated restaurant to find Mark Toddman seated at a window table overlooking Central Park. He slowed his pace as he approached the table.

With a smile spreading across his tanned face, Mark rose and stretched out his hand. In the next moment, he slowly cocked a thick brow and said, “Appears you could use a time-out.”

Conrad laughed. “Isn’t that the truth? But your timing couldn’t be better.”

After a hearty handshake, both men took their seats. *The timing couldn’t be better, indeed*, thought Conrad. There were so many ideas he wanted to bounce off his friend. Mark, the most respected icon in the world of retail, had been his mentor throughout his years in the business and remained a trusted sounding board.

Looking around the elegant restaurant, Conrad flashed back to the first time he and Ashleigh had joined the Toddmans here with their girls. It was shortly after they had been reunited with their kidnapped daughter. Having discovered that Marnie liked little more than pasta, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and chicken strips, Ashleigh had worried about the menu.

Now, as if reading his mind, Mark said, “I think I’ll pass on Jean Georges’s special sandwich on a stick.”

Conrad laughed out loud. The head chef had concocted a special sandwich dipped in chocolate and served on a stick. And to top it off

was Jean Georges's cherry soda, with that explosive fizzle inside. For parents of younger children, it remained the answer to their prayers.

"How are Paige and the family?" Conrad asked.

A neatly attired waiter in black trousers and a crisp white shirt appeared and then quickly departed with their drinks order. Mark smiled, and as if there had been no interruption, he said, "Well, as I mentioned, Paige couldn't get away this morning, but she and Helen will arrive on Tuesday."

"Paige certainly has no shortage of worthwhile causes to fill her days. She's on the boards of—how many charities, museums, community outreach programs . . . ?" Conrad grinned.

"Yes, and she's this year's chairperson for the Save the Children fundraiser—it's the first of next month, by the way." Mark paused. "Assume you received your invite?"

"On our calendar." Then, after a slight hesitation, Conrad winked. "In ink."

Mark smiled and continued his update. "Since Rupert passed away last year, Helen has become somewhat of a loose cannon."

Conrad chuckled. Ashleigh had kept him pretty much up-to-date on Paige's challenges with her unpredictable mother and had told him about several of Helen's recent shenanigans. "I understand she's become quite the outrageous flirt."

"To put it mildly." Mark shook his head, but there was a tender sparkle in his hazel eyes. "Absolutely no filter." He shrugged. "Thank God, it doesn't seem to faze Wilma." Wilma and her husband, Terrence, had worked for the Toddmans since the mid-eighties and were devoted to them as well as to Paige's mother, who had come into their lives and their household twelve years before. The warm, caring couple were more like family than staff to the Toddmans. But, as Conrad recalled, they were close to Helen in age—no longer spring chickens.

While waiting for their lunch to be served, the two men continued to catch up on personal news. Since the Toddmans' move to Texas, where Mark had signed on to restructure the ailing J. J. Clark's department store chain, the old friends had fallen behind on day-to-day communications, but they had managed to keep up with all the major news and events in

their families' lives. He, Ashleigh, the twins, and Juliana had joined the Toddmans in Los Angeles last year to celebrate April's graduation from UCLA with a master's in communications, which had helped her land the coveted internship at JJQ news channel in Chicago. As for the Taylors, Mark knew the latest news—that Ashleigh was no longer heading human resources for John Stewart's—but he and Conrad had never discussed the real reasons behind her resignation. Conrad knew this was no time to go into it. He had other priorities for today's meeting.

The waiter discreetly vanished after setting the plates of pecan-encrusted red snapper on the pristine white-on-white tablecloth. Mark took a bite of his fish, leaned forward, and in a matter-of-fact tone said, "With all that's going on in your life just now, it's clear you didn't arrange this meeting for idle chitchat. What's on your mind?"

"That obvious, eh?"

Mark took another bite. He didn't respond. He didn't need to.

Since Mark was up-to-date with the retail landscape, Conrad had no need to mention the merger with the Hay's Company that had turned Consolidated Department Stores into one of the largest retailers in the world. It was Mark who had started that ball rolling in the early nineties with his successful bid for the debt-ridden Jordon's Department Stores. He had followed up by engineering the 1996 acquisition of the financially troubled Mainway Department Store chain, which operated eighty-two stores in California. Although Consolidated had been left with a hefty debt of about \$5 billion as a result of those deals, the acquisitions significantly raised the company's profile, making it the nation's largest retailer, with over eight hundred U.S. department stores and close to \$25 billion in annual sales volume.

"We're confident that the merger with the Hay's Company was the right move at the right time." Conrad took a quick sip of water. "But in these uncertain times, the debt factor is of major concern."

Mark nodded. "I hear you. It's a whole new ball game. Three years ago, the U.S. economy was on a roll, with retail rocketing at its fastest pace in more than *nineteen years*. Now that the industry is headed for a slump, we have to take a different approach."

“We’ve managed to chip away a great deal of past debt,” Conrad began, “and we’ve reduced expenses in the noncritical areas. That’s a given. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about. I have some other ideas I’d like to bounce off you.”

Mark interjected, “If I’m to believe what I read in *Women’s Wear Daily*, you’re now the king of private-label merchandising, branding, and localization.”

A wide smile crept across Conrad’s face. “Learned from the master.”

Mark waved off the compliment. “But you hadn’t anticipated the outrage from the fans of John Stewart’s?”

“Bingo. Nothing much slips past you.”

“Not exactly new to the game,” Mark reminded him.

“We weren’t oblivious to the potential for backlash, but the magnitude is mind-boggling. The name change from John Stewart’s to Jordon’s won’t take place until September, but the moment it was announced, an enormous groundswell of protest began.” Conrad swallowed hard. “Grassroots groups formed practically overnight.”

“I’m afraid the negative reaction we encountered with Bentleys Royale in L.A. will pale in comparison to what’s in store for Jordon’s. John Stewart’s is a tourist destination as well as a Chicago icon. Its fans have gathered worldwide support. You’re in for a rough ride.”

Conrad turned defensive. “Granted, Chicago is proving to be one hell of a challenge. But our focus must be on the overall benefit to the organization and to our customers.”

“I’m not suggesting you alter your vision, Conrad—just make sure all your ducks are in order. Excuse the cliché. I know you’ve studied all the obstacles as well as the opportunities. It’s a tough call.”

Conrad followed Mark’s thoughtful gaze, which seemed to linger on the activities outside, in Central Park. A full minute lapsed before Conrad continued. “Even with the support of the mayor, taking on the Windy City, with this number of strong mind-sets—customers, community leaders, the media, and in some cases even the staff—it’s going to take a goddamned miracle to pull off the win-win scenario we’re hoping for. Or anything close to it.”

Meeting his friend's eyes confidently, Conrad spoke the thoughts hammering against his skull. "Mergers and name changes happen. Even in Chicago there was barely a murmur when the White Sox's Comiskey Park became U.S. Cellular Field." But as he voiced his rationale out loud, he realized there was really no comparison. In sports, fan loyalty was all about the team; the location was not what had captured their hearts.

Still, Mark, of all people, would realize why regional store names had to go. After all, he was the *pioneer* of branding in the world of department stores—the first to have recognized the value of a broadly recognizable trademark. Jordon's was known from coast to coast, while John Stewart's recognition was limited to the Midwest and East Coast residents and tourists. It was a no-brainer. The money they could save in advertising alone was tremendous, and just think of the clout that the national brand brought to the bargaining table.

Loyal John Stewart's customers, however, demonstrated no desire to understand that those savings would ultimately be passed on to them. *And as CEO, I've been depicted as the devil himself.*

"On a more positive note," Conrad said, "Chicago's mayor is well aware of our mission and has voiced his support." Assembling his thoughts, he paraphrased the mayor's quote from Sunday's *Chicago Tribune*. "He said something like, 'If you aren't willing to accept change, then you stay in the past, and we're never going to stay in the past in this city.' He also stated that he was really in favor of our commitment to showcase Jordon's, housed in the John Stewart's building, as a tourist destination in Chicago, as it had long been in New York."

"So how huge is this groundswell of resistance that you mentioned?"

"We've already received petitions with tens of thousands of signatures, asking us to retain the John Stewart's name. There have also been threats of boycotts in the Chicago area." Conrad reached into the inside pocket of his Armani suit jacket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. Laying the paper flat on the table, he smoothed it out and slid it over to Mark. "I received a mountain of these less than a week after the official announcement of the pending name change."

Mark's eyes widened as he spotted the name on the third line of the petition. "Erica Christonelli?" His tone was incredulous. "After all you've done for her?"

Conrad himself had done a double take when he had first seen Erica's signature on the petition. The trite old saying *No good deed goes unpunished* shot through his mind. He could think of no way to put a positive spin on this revelation.

Consequently, he had not yet shared this new wrinkle with Ashleigh.