

Blaze a Trail

The Flanagan Sisters # 3

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DEDICATION

To my brothers-in-law, Torben and Howell

Chapter 1

The buzz of people talking about the symposium was music to Zita Flanagan's ears. She smiled. The subject of immigration was definitely a hot topic and one that needed discussing. She took a glass of red wine from the passing waiter and moved toward her mother, who was chatting with a group of migrant advocates.

"The presenters were a bunch of bleeding hearts, believing all the lies they're told." The complaint was loud, with a strong Texan drawl just off to Zita's right.

Her skin tightened and her eyes narrowed. *Keep moving.* It wouldn't do any good to get into an argument with someone like him. Especially not after she was on a high from hearing her sister's impassioned speech about the plight of Central American refugees.

As she walked by the man, he stepped back, bumping into her and she almost spilled her wine.

"Excuse me, Missy." A hand reached out to steady her and she turned to the broad-shouldered man who had more gray than brown in his hair.

Missy? Who the hell called anyone *Missy* these days? "Don't worry about it." She moved forward when he spoke again.

"You look like a sensible American gal. What do you think about the information presented at this here symposium?"

Zita grinned. People often mistook her for an American because she took after her Irish father with her strawberry blond hair, though her skin was the color of a summer's tan. "Actually, I'm a migrant from El Salvador," she said, enjoying the way the man's eyes widened in surprise. "I believe the information presented was informative and accurate, and I can't see how anyone could possibly disagree with it, unless they were a racist bigot."

The man huffed out a breath of outrage and his face went red.

"Bob, everyone's entitled to their opinion," a deep voice said, his tone friendly.

She glanced at the man standing next to Bob. *Hello, gorgeous.* Blue eyes, the color of a tropical lagoon, blond hair styled with gel, and the sexiest smile she'd ever seen.

"I knew there'd come a day when I couldn't tell a foreigner from an American. They're learning to blend in." Bob turned to his companion for backup.

That ticked Zita off. That his comment touched one of her insecurities was like prodding a nest of vipers.

"Dad." The word was a censure coming from the sexy blond. They were related? What a shame.

"Do you agree with him too?" Zita asked, her heartbeat accelerating. "Do you think we should build a wall, stop these refugees from entering the United States, turn our backs on the people fleeing for their lives and searching for somewhere safe to live?" She was annoyed at herself for getting so worked up. There was no point talking to these people. They were too closed off in their bigotry. She moved away.

"Wait." The blond grabbed her arm to stop her and red wine flew out of her glass over his white shirt.

Zita's anger immediately dissipated. "I'm sorry." She winced. There was no point dabbing at it, it was already spreading. His shirt was ruined.

"Totally my fault," he replied, with a smile that didn't slow her heart rate.

"Goddamn it, David. I can't take you anywhere," Bob said.

David chuckled, not at all perturbed. "Let me clean myself up, and then I'd like to talk with you."

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She frowned. It was doubtful that she'd want to hear what he had to say, or that he would be able to find her again in this crowd, so she said, "Sure." Then she went to find her mother.

After cleaning his shirt the best he could, David walked back into the crowded ballroom, scanning the room. The attractive strawberry blonde who'd spilled wine on him was easy on the eyes, and he could use the excuse of wanting to know more about the refugee situation to start a conversation. He smiled. At first glance he couldn't see the woman, but his father beckoned him over.

Bob was talking with his friend, Governor Jesse Harding. "David, listen to this. Jesse's going to be retiring and he wants me to run for governor."

"Your father would be an excellent candidate," Jesse said.

Huh. David frowned. "What about the company? It can't run without you."

"Well, you're almost ready to take over Dionysus anyway. Could give me a new challenge."

"We need a strong leader to deal with the issue of immigration," Jesse said. "You heard the problems today."

"Something definitely needs to be done," David agreed. "I was going to speak with the woman who spilled wine on me."

"Good idea. See if you can find her. We need to gather as much information about the issues as possible," Bob said.

David pursed his lips. Minutes ago, Bob had been complaining about the bias of the symposium and the bleeding hearts, and now he wanted to help? Perhaps Jesse had explained the problems. Well, David wasn't going to miss the opportunity to find the woman again. He nodded at his father and Jesse and moved into the crowd.

It didn't take him long to see that there were far more people in the ballroom than he'd realized. He circled the room twice, keeping an eye out for his friend Carolina, who had been one of the speakers, as well as the mystery woman. Finally, he caught a glimpse of strawberry blond hair through the crowd. *There you are.* He definitely wanted more than just information from her. She was talking with a short, Hispanic lady and a slightly taller

woman, whose red hair was tied up in a bun. David approached the group.

“Sure. Send me a date and time and we’ll be there,” the strawberry blonde was saying.

The people she was talking with smiled at him and the woman turned. She really was stunning. Her chocolate brown eyes widened as she recognized him.

“Excuse me for interrupting,” David said. “May I speak with . . .” He faltered. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name earlier.”

“Zita.”

He smiled. “Zita. Could I have a word?”

The other women were both grinning.

She nodded and took a couple of steps away from the group. “You managed to salvage your shirt.”

“I did the best I could,” he said. “I don’t recommend a small basin and a hand dryer as a regular washing regime.” He winked.

Zita laughed. “No, I can’t imagine it would be very efficient. What did you want to talk to me about?”

He paused. He didn’t want to upset her again. “You seem to know a lot about the Central American immigration issue. Before I got here, all I knew was what I’d read in the newspapers.”

“What made you come today?”

“My father was coming and I discovered a friend of mine was speaking. I wanted to hear what she had to say.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“Carolina Flanagan.”

Zita stared at him. “You know Carly?”

He paused at the familiarity with which Zita spoke about Carolina. “We go way back. She’s my partner in crime at all the gala events. She makes them bearable.”

“You’re David Randall?”

Surprised she knew his name, he nodded.

“Carly’s mentioned you.”

“How do you know her?”

“She’s my sister.”

“Of course. Small world.” He should have realized. Carly often talked about her two sisters, and he’d met Bridget a few months earlier when he’d discovered she worked at one of

Dionysus's oil refineries. But Zita didn't look like either of them.

"Isn't it?" she agreed.

"I was hoping to catch up with Carly this evening, but I haven't seen her."

"You won't," Zita said. "She had to fly to New York straight after her talk. Her partner has an exhibition opening tonight."

"That's great." He needed to get back on track. "Carly spoke about her charity, Casa Flanagan. I guess you'd know a lot about it."

"Yes. I work there."

"So you foster kids who have been allowed to stay in the country?"

She nodded. "But we're also participating in a trial to foster children who are waiting for their applications to be processed. Studies have shown that detention centers suck, in particular for kids. They feel trapped, isolated, and scared of what is going to happen to them. We've got three girls with us at the moment who are part of this trial."

"Who makes the decision?"

"The immigration court."

"How do they decide?"

"One way is for the girls to prove they're in danger if they go home."

"And are they?" From what he knew, the immigrants from Central America were looking for a free ride and preferred the States to their home countries.

Fire sparked in her eyes. "Yes."

"How do you know?" He was curious.

"Because they've told us their stories. Two girls are fleeing from gang violence and one girl is running from her abusive stepfather."

"Do they have proof?"

"Not usually." She glared at him. "When they're running for their lives, they don't usually stop to take evidence."

The sarcasm was clear. "Of course." David smiled agreeably, not wanting to upset her further. "How can you tell they're telling the truth?"

"I've seen their pain and their fear. I've heard their stories.

They're not lying."

"So it comes down to their word?" Perhaps she was a naïve bleeding heart.

"Not always." Her hands were on her hips and her face was flushed. "We get affidavits and gather what information we can. If you want to learn, you should follow a case. Contact a detention center, talk to a child and take the journey with them through the process. Then you'll understand."

She looked like a blond Wonder Woman — sexy, assertive and defiant. "All right." The more information he had, the better he could help his father if he decided to run for governor.

She blinked. "Sorry?"

"It's a good idea. I want to learn more about the topic, and following a case makes sense." And it gave him a legitimate reason to see her again. "You said you had a couple of girls still waiting for their application. Could I follow one of those?"

Zita hesitated for a moment. "OK. We're preparing Teresa and Beatriz for their hearings soon."

"Great. Let me get your number." He pulled out his phone and typed in her details as she dictated, and then sent her a text so she had his. "I'll look forward to your call."

Zita nodded, looking a little suspicious.

"I'll let you get back to your conversation." He smiled and then walked away, knowing she was staring at him.

A week later, Zita drove the familiar route to the immigration lawyer's office where they would meet with Shelly. Teresa was silent next to her. At fifteen, Teresa was the oldest of the girls waiting for her application to be processed, and had been in the country for a couple of months. During that time, she'd opened up about why she'd fled El Salvador and Zita's heart bled for her. There was no way the government should send her back, but there was never any guarantee. She hoped David would realize that when he heard Teresa's story.

"Today's about getting the details down," Zita told Teresa again in Spanish. "Tell us everything and Shelly will highlight what you'll need to tell the judge."

The girl nodded, her hands clenched so tightly her knuckles

were white.

Zita sighed and parked the car. “Remember David will be there, but ignore him. He’s there to listen and no one to be afraid of.” She hoped having David there wouldn’t cause any problems, but she could always send him away.

She’d called Carly after meeting David and interrogated her about him. Though he didn’t seem as antagonistic as Bob, she couldn’t risk it. If he was in any way hostile, she wouldn’t let him anywhere near one of her girls. Carly had vouched that he was a nice guy. He worked in finance at Dionysus Oil and Gas and had been a constant support to Carly while she was finding her feet in the business world. Carly considered him a friend. That was enough for Zita.

They walked into the immigration lawyer’s office together and Zita’s attention was immediately caught by David sitting in the waiting room. He was dressed in a suit again, navy blue this time, and his smile caused her heart to speed up. He was sexier than anyone had a right to be. She acknowledged him and greeted the receptionist.

“Hi Latisha, can you tell Shelly we’re here?”

“Sure, Zita. She won’t be long. Take a seat.”

The waiting room had seats around its perimeter with only a few occupants at this time of the morning. In the middle was a coffee table with old magazines spread over it. Zita walked over to David and sat down. “David, this is Teresa. You’ll be following her case over the next few months.”

“Nice to meet you, Teresa.” He held out his hand to the girl.

Teresa glanced at Zita, and at her encouragement, she shook it. “Hello.” She quickly let go and sat on the other side of Zita.

It was no surprise the girl was skittish. Her trust in men had been lost when her father had handed her over to the local gang.

Worried Teresa might not open up with David there, Zita said, “You should just listen today. Save any questions you have until after the session.”

“Sure. I don’t want to cause any problems.”

“Zita, Teresa, won’t you come in?” Shelly was a short, red-haired woman who had been working in immigration for a decade. As always, she wore jeans and a shirt so as not to appear too imposing to her clients.

Zita stood and gestured for Teresa and David to follow. When they reached the meeting room, Zita made the introductions and they all sat.

“As we discussed after your master calendar hearing, this next hearing is where you get to give the full details of your case.”

Shelly explained the whole process. Zita had heard it all before, but she watched for signs that Teresa didn’t understand, and translated for her when needed.

“Do you have any questions?” Shelly asked.

“If I am accepted, can my mother and sister come too?” Her voice was soft, but hopeful.

Zita exchanged a glance with the lawyer. They’d discussed this already.

“As soon as you’ve been approved, we’ll put in a refugee/asylee relative petition,” Shelly said. “If we can contact your mother in the meantime, we’ll get her to apply for refugee status at the US consulate in San Salvador.”

They’d tried contacting Teresa’s mother Johanna several times over the past few months, but each time, Teresa’s father had answered the phone and wouldn’t allow Zita to speak with her.

“We’ll keep trying,” Zita said.

“There are no guarantees, Teresa,” Shelly said. “But we are doing everything we can to get your family out of El Salvador.”

David frowned. Quietly Zita said, “I’ll explain later.”

He nodded.

“Tell me your story, Teresa,” Shelly continued and Teresa began to speak in Spanish with Zita translating.

“I lived in a poor suburb in San Salvador. *Mara Principal* is influential there, but they never showed much interest in my family. Mama works in a laundry and Papa does construction. As long as they paid their dues to the gang, we were left alone. Until I turned fifteen.” She took a breath. “I was at the laundry waiting for my sister to come back from her friend’s house and one of the gang members came in to take the weekly payment. He wanted me to go outside with him and meet his friends. I knew what would happen if I did, so I refused.”

“What would happen?” Shelly asked.

“They would rape me. There was a group who would often stop a girl who was by herself and have their way with her.” She said it with no emotion at all. As if it was of no consequence.

David cleared his throat and Zita shot him a warning look to be quiet.

“Then what happened?” Shelly asked.

“The man got angry. Said I would be sorry for refusing him, and left.” Teresa took a small sip of water, her hand shaking. “Two days later, Papa was fired. The foreman said the gang had made him do it. Then they put up the rent on our house. We couldn’t afford to live there anymore.” Her voice was full of sorrow. “Mama wasn’t earning enough from the laundry and we had nowhere to live and very little food. No one would help us for fear of what the gang would do to them.”

“Go on,” Shelly encouraged.

“One day, one of the gang members came to my father. He said if Papa gave me to the gang, he would get his job and house back. Mama begged Papa to move, to find somewhere safe to live, but he was too scared. Papa agreed to hand me over.”

Zita wanted to castrate him. How could he betray his daughter like that?

“What did the gang want with you?”

Teresa stared down at the table. “They wanted me for sex,” she whispered. “The gang has a group of girls, they call them their girlfriends, but they’re not really. They give the girls to men as a reward for a job well done and sometimes they sell them to men too.” Teresa clenched her fist.

Zita squeezed the girl’s hand.

“What happened when you went to the gang?”

Teresa glanced at David and then back to the lawyer.

“I can leave,” David said.

Teresa shook her head. “It does not matter. I will have to tell my story many times.” She took a deep breath. “The first day I was there, the man who started it all, the man who’d come to the laundry, forced himself on me. Then he gave me to his friends.” Her voice was dull, but she clutched Zita’s hand as if it were a lifeline. “After that, they sold me to men as punishment for refusing them at the beginning. I had to have sex with all of these men and if they complained about my response, I was

beaten.”

Tears stung Zita’s eyes. She’d heard Teresa’s story before, but it didn’t make it any easier.

“I couldn’t stay there. I had to get away. After one beating, my arm was broken. I was taken to a doctor to get it set and I managed to escape. I ran away, as far as I could and then kept going. I didn’t know how far the gang’s influence spread and I was too scared to stop. Then I met some others who were going to the United States and I joined them. It was better than staying in El Salvador.”

Shelly continued to ask questions, getting more details from the girl. Zita looked at David. His jaw was set and the steely look in his eyes was formidable. She was reassured that Teresa’s story had affected him.

It took several hours for Shelly to record the information, and to update them on the intel they’d received from El Salvador. Fernando, their contact there, was trying to fight the gangs from inside the country. He was investigating how to shut down the sex slave rings, but it was a dangerous job.

“Why can’t he speak with my mother?” Teresa asked, tears welling in her eyes.

“Johanna refused to talk to him,” Zita told her again. “It’s hard to know who to trust.”

Teresa burst into tears and Zita pulled her close. “We’re trying, *niiita*.” Her words were inadequate, but there was little else she could do. She glanced at Shelly, who looked as sad as Zita felt.

“A hearing date has been set for January,” Shelly told them. “We’ll go over the details again before then.”

Zita shook the woman’s hand. “Thank you.”

Teresa wiped her eyes and they walked out of the building. The girl climbed straight into Zita’s yellow SUV, but Zita turned to David. “I’m sorry, any questions you’ve got will have to wait. I need to get Teresa home.” She couldn’t deal with him now. Not when Teresa needed her and her heart was raw.

He nodded and ran a hand down her arm. She closed her eyes briefly, allowing herself to be soothed, surprised he was being so kind.

“Can I call you later?”

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“Sure.” She’d like to hear what he thought, whether any of his preconceptions had been challenged. She got into her car, pushing further thoughts of David aside. She felt so helpless when she sat in the meetings, listening to Shelly plan their case. There was nothing she could do, except be there for Teresa, and that wasn’t enough. She was tired of waiting for things to happen and being the passive attendee. She wanted to fight for her foster sisters, to develop their cases and to secure their freedom. What she really wanted was to be a lawyer.

But it could never happen. Her mother needed her too much at Casa Flanagan. She didn’t have the time to study.

Besides, she hadn’t been a great student at high school anyway. She probably wouldn’t even get into college.

It was all just a pipe dream. One she should probably forget. With a sigh, she drove Teresa home.

Zita drove away and David ran a hand over his face. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting when he’d attended the meeting today, but it sure as hell wasn’t that. His stomach was tied up in knots, and he’d been nauseated as the girl had told her story.

There was little doubt in his mind that she was telling the truth.

But neither Zita nor Shelly had seemed surprised by it. Was it a common story, or had they heard it before and had a chance to take it all in?

He walked back into the office, hoping to get some answers. Shelly was talking with her receptionist.

“David, did you forget something?”

“No. Do you have a couple of minutes to answer some questions? Zita had to get Teresa home.”

“If you’re quick.” She led him into her office and sat down. “What do you want to know?”

“How common is Teresa’s story?”

“Teresa’s is one of the worst I’ve heard in a while, but sexual assault is common among the girls who arrive. If they weren’t abused before they left home, they are often abused by the traffickers bringing them here.”

He felt sick. "Do many get sent back home?"

She nodded. "It depends on the judge and how clear their case is. Most of these kids don't think about bringing evidence with them, they very rarely even have money. They just run. Those who are looking for a better life, but have no real problems at home, aside from the usual poverty, generally get sent back. Those like Teresa, who have a true asylum case take longer to process and we have a good success rate with them."

"But it's not one hundred percent?"

"No. Unfortunately."

He couldn't understand it. How could anyone listen to Teresa's story and not grant her asylum?

Shelly glanced at her watch.

He'd taken enough of her time. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

David walked out and stood under cover in the entrance, watching the rain that was falling in sheets. It was a miserable gray day, and it suited his mood.

How did Zita cope hearing the girls' stories? It was gut-wrenching, and the girls must need counseling. He was a little shell-shocked himself. He'd been friends with Carly for years, and had never known the kind of work she was involved in. Was he completely self-absorbed?

He had a good life. His family was high on the ridiculously wealthy scale, and he'd never gone without. He ran a hand through his hair. He wanted time to process what he'd learned, do some research of his own, check statistics and start putting together some details, but he was due at work.

Exhaling, he tried to clear his jumbled thoughts. He'd take this opportunity to learn about immigration and about those less fortunate than himself. Hopefully he'd be able to help in some way.

Pleased with his decision, he dashed out to his car.

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